The North Remembers
by qqueenofhades

Summary

In the ashes of war-torn Westeros, the fate of the remnants of House Stark - and that of their lovers, allies, friends, and foes - hangs in the balance. Has turned into my best attempt to complete the entire ASOIAF saga. ***COMPLETE***

Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I was very hesitant to upload this story, both because I know that GRRM disapproves of ASOIAF fanfiction and also because it will be competing for time with my job, my blog, my original projects, and other such real-lifey things; I haven't written fanfiction in several years. But the plot bunny finally grabbed me around the ears and threw me into the wall at about 2:00 am a few days ago. So I'm going for it.

This is post-A Dance With Dragons, and you'll need to have read all five of the novels to know what's going on here. SPOILERS therefore abound. As with any ASOIAF book, it does not take place in strict chronological order. I can sympathize with GRRM and the "Meereenese knot," as it's definitely a pain to work out who would be where when and what news they would have received by then. As a general rule of thumb, please assume that every new viewpoint chapter picks up with wherever the character left off in canon, and that the storylines are not necessarily happening simultaneously.

I'm going to be very careful about playing in GRRM's sandbox, but I hope it'll be fun. This
story is rated M (it's ASOIAF after all. . .) and may include strong violence, language, or sexual content. It was supposed to only focus on the Starks and friends, and then got way, WAY out of control. So this has become my humble attempt to complete the entire story of A Song of Ice and Fire. I own nothing, I regret nothing.

Happy reading!
Prologue

The darkling sky reeled with ravens, and dead men stirred in the trees below.

The ranger stood watching the skittering and rustling, the shadows half-seen before vanishing again, the movements that seemed no more than the brush of the sighing wind. It had snowed before dawn, and would do so again before the next one. The air was laden with the bone-deep chill of the coming blizzard, but the ranger did not feel it, no more than he felt pain, or hunger, or love, or fear. For close on three moons' turns he had guarded this gateway in the side of the hill, though perhaps he did not need to. The cleft was woven thickly about with old wards, workings of great power, bronze and iron and blood, that kept the dead men out. That kept him out. He still had his speech and wits and faint fragments of his soul and memory — but nothing from before he was born again in the snows. Nothing from when he had been a living man.

Nothing save his duty.

They were under there, all of them. The broken boy and the giant and the two green-eyed crannogmen, the ones he had led so far across the wild northern wastes, first on his elk and then when the elk had died, afoot. Further beyond the Wall than even he had ranged, back when he'd been alive. To see the man under the hill, this hill. The greenseer, the three-eyed crow, and the children. The children of the forest, the guardians that kept the barrow warded against things like him, and the things that lurked in the woods below.

The ranger laid one cold black hand on his sword. This he remembered the most clearly of all: before the snows, his duty, his life, his vow was to kill these things. Slow shambling wights that could stagger up the length of a man's greatsword and twist his head with their soft pale hands, twist until his neck broke and warm blood gushed out. You could cut the arm off the thing, and still they'd keep coming. The only way to do for them was fire.

Yet wights were simply reanimated corpses, ordinary men. It was their necromancers who were the true horror. Sword-slim and graceful as knives, armor of milkglass and starshadow, ice-blades that shattered every mortal steel, tall as terror and eyes, blue blue eyes that held no earthly soul. The white walkers. The Others. The very reason the Wall had been raised, imbued with spells and wards a hundred, a thousand times more powerful than these. The shield that guards the realms of men. It had never been to guard from the free folk, the wildlings, though many of his brothers had thought so. The wildlings were only men. Rougher and more uncouth than the usual, but still men.

It was wights and Others both that gathered below, the ranger knew. Night after night they sought to see if the way was still barred to them, and night after night — thus far — it was. The power of the children was the only thing as old and implacable as the power of the Walkers, still too green, too living to suffer the touch of death. The children had endured the coming of the Andals and the Faith and thousands of years of persecution by free folk and northmen alike. Surely they had the strength to endure thousands of years more.

Yet the barrier was weakening.

The ranger did not know how, or why. Even when he lived, he had not been a man for dusty scrolls and the quarreling of long-dead maesters. He did not care from where or whence or why the Others came; it was only his duty to hunt them. Yet every day, he could stand slightly closer to the cleft in the rock than before, no longer as violently thrust away. The power of the children was strong, aye, and in the Long Night they had been fronted with attacks ten times as savage, ten times as long. And held.
But this was a different age of the world. And the cold winds were rising.

By long habit, the ranger pulled the tattered remnants of his black cloak around his shoulders, adjusted the scarf that he wore always over his nose and mouth. Any living man would be shivering violently, arms buried in armpits and ice encrusting the muffler from his breath. But no mist gusted from the ranger's breath, for he had none. For the best. No living man could stand here as sentinel. No living man could stand.

Above, the ravens continued to screech, winged shadows against the oncoming twilight. The ranger did not want to believe half the things they told him. They whispered of dragons in the stormlands, of dead men in a red castle, of a dying man in a cell of ice, of a sword of fire quenched and two kings in cages, of a monster in human skin that stalked the stone halls of winter. Darkness, they called. Darkness and death.

There was one. . . the dying man in the ice cell. For no reason he could articulate, the ranger felt that he was supposed to remember something about that. Who was the man? Why was he dying? And ice, a cell of ice – did he dream it, or had there been such places on the Wall? Aye, there had been. They were reserved only for the lowest of the low: oathbreakers, attempted deserters, captured wildling raiders, turncloaks and traitors. Yet the dying man wore a cloak as black as the ranger's own.

Treachery, the ranger thought, but could not say how or what he knew. The bloated crimson sun was almost gone, and then the assault would begin in earnest. He had no fire; he could not kindle it; it would consume him as readily as them. Yet he still had his longsword, and his courage. And his bone-deep conviction that he could not allow the dead to pass. That the boy and the giant and the crannogmen, down there in the hill's heart with the children and the three-eyed crow, must be defended at all costs.

The ranger drew his sword. The wintry steel caught a flash, bright as a beacon. Well, no worry about giving away his position. Every day the sun came later and left earlier, and partly he was glad for it. For it hurt him as well, though not as much as the wights. I cannot last forever. If even the Others could be destroyed – by fire, or by dragonglass – then the ranger was under no delusions that his afterlife would be eternal. By the sun or by fire, by blade or by sorcery, by strength or by treachery, the unholy animus that knitted his bones and sinew would unravel. And the wards would weaken, and shatter. And the hungry dark would swarm under the hill, and all would be at an end.

Not while there is breath in my body, the ranger would have thought once. Yet there was not. He knew nothing of his resurrection, why he had come back like this and not as a wight. That had never been his task.

The twilight faded to black. The wind began to pick up. A keen, and then a howl. Heavy anvils of cloud closed over the waning moon. The first flakes began to fall, mounding on the ranger's shoulders and hood. He brushed them off, though not from any fear of the cold. When he was a living man, he'd known that if you built a shelter deep in the woods, a heavy layer of snow would hold the warmth in, save you from freezing to death. It had been so long ago.

The stars began to come out, and so did they. Rank upon rank they scrambled up the hill, black fingers clawing into the fresh snow. Blue eyes gleamed like sapphire stars. Here and there they could see the silvery sheen as an Other rippled like silk, undulating up the rocky spur with fey and lethal beauty. More and more they came. There seemed to be no end, climbing blindly over each over, bare feet pad-pad-padding. Ice swirled and lashed and bit, thousand-year-old trees bent and groaned, and of the grove of weirwoods above only the faintest blood-red stain of their leaves were visible. This storm would kill an army of living men, and it is still only autumn.
When the first ones reached him, the ranger began to fight. He could hear the thrumming of the wards in the stones, took care not to come too close himself. Those wights who did were thrown bodily back down the hill. Soon there was an array of disembodied limbs crab-walking undaunted up the hill. Frozen black blood coagulated on the snow.

The ranger never needed to stop for a respite, felt no thirst or hunger. *The watcher on the walls, the sword in the darkness.* He had said those words once, and others, before a weirwood much like the ones towering above him. *Old gods. North of the Wall, the only gods.* The ranger did not now believe in gods. Which was understandable, considering. What sort of gods would make this? Make him? Nay. He'd stay here until the dawn, and fight. His sword was not ordinary steel, could shear through the fell weavings which held the creatures together. *My duty.* Not even death could stop him. Another memory, too faint to be put in words, something his brother had said once. But had it been a black brother or a blood brother? His blood brother, there had been two, something he must remember – but no, he must fight –

And then he saw the direwolf.

The broken boy's beast. *Warg.* Skinchanger, that was what he was. Could cast aside his body with its useless legs and run as one with his great grey golden-eyed wolf, the wolf that was called – the ranger found it ironic – Summer. Summer had not gone down into the children's barrow with his master. Part of his soul he might be, but only part. The rest was as wild as the wood, and the children ate no flesh, only berries and roots and the water of their secret spring. A wolf could not live on such fare. And children were meat.

Not that there was much up here. Barely so much as a squirrel. And so the great direwolf grew gaunter and hungrier and wilder all the time. The ranger could not tell if the boy was in him, if the link still endured, if the wolf remembered – any more than did he.

But now, Summer was enclosed in a ring of wights. And more were coming.

The ranger saw the wolf snarling, baring slavering jaws, wrenching at the dead men that pressed in on all sides. His golden eyes shone near as bright as their blue ones. Then he rose on his mighty hind legs, and met one full on. Wolf and wight crashed to the snow together, dead black fingers grappling in the thick grey fur at Summer's throat. The direwolf snapped and reared and wrestled, but could not dislodge its attacker. Over and over they rolled, fighting madly. The wolf was as strong as old iron, but it was still a living thing. It could be killed. And if it was, and rose again undead, as the wights did to every animal that they could –

It would end the broken boy. It would end the ranger. It very well might end the children, and the fading hope of spring.

*I have to go to him,* the ranger thought dimly. *I have to save him.*

Yet going to Summer meant leaving the door, the gate, where he had been standing for three turns of the moon –

The wolf's kicking was starting to lose strength. Its snarling was turning to a strangled whine, and froth ran down its jaws.

*Now or never.*

The ranger gathered his legs under him, and threw all his strength into one almighty leap. Over the heads of the seething wights he soared, and for a moment he believed he could fly. Then he was crashing down, landing and rolling, and running.
His sword took the wight clean through the back of the skull. An explosion of rotted brain matter, a turgid gush of black blood, broken pieces of bone. Even a wight could not fail to notice when half its head was taken off, and it flailed apoplectically, twisting backwards like a speared fish. Summer skidded to his feet and opened his jaws, snarling. Yet now the nearly-decapitated wight was bearing down on the ranger.

He raised his sword. *Come for me.*

It did. The next moment they were at blows, and the ranger's sword tore through the wight's pale belly and a rope of frozen entrails slithered out. Still it did not stop. Cold hands clutched cold hands, wrenching and ripping and tearing, throwing and grappling and grinding. Head to head they went, and the ring of dead men watched in silence.

And the ranger's sword shattered. He heard only a keening screech, shivering and buzzing like a nest of furious hornets. Then his longsword was nothing but shards, the hilt a stump, and he thrust his arm forward and drove the remnants into the wight's eye up to the pommel. Still it did not stop. The stench of carrion gusted into his face. He twisted.

The eye burst. Ran out in black jelly that hissed and steamed and scarred the steel like acid. Yet the other still glinted. It saw.

The ranger lost his footing. He fell into a snowbank hard as rock. The ghost of pain lanced up the leg he'd caught beneath him. Above him and around him and over him, the wights clambered greedily for the gate.

*The wards...* The ranger could not see if they were still burning. *Fire drives them away.* But there was no fire. * Darkness. Darkness and death.* The ravens had told him so.

Ravens.

They were diving out of the trees, pecking and flapping and screaming. Curved dark beaks dug wildly at ensorcelled flesh and staring eyes. The snow came down faster.

The broken sword fell from the ranger's hand. He could not rise. A glittering moonshadow fell over him. Steps soft as a mother's kiss on the snow.

No moonshadow. No mother.

The Other stood above the ranger. This close, the coldness that flowed off it was paralyzing. Deep in its skull its eyes gleamed with monstrous, sentient light. It reached down with one elegant hand, and lifted the ranger up by his throat.

He was dead, there was no air to choke off. Yet the coldness took him like a lance, like fire. Blue frozen fingernails sank into his neck.

*Death,* the ravens screamed. *Death.*

*There are things darker than death,* the ranger thought. His strength was at an end. *The shield that guards the realms of men.*

Aye, and hadn't he? Past death? Past fear? He was no oathbreaker.

In the darkness a wolf howled savagely. *Summer.* But summer would never return again. *Winter is coming.* Those words, they had meant something else once. But now they were only stark and immutable truth.
The Other opened its fingers. The ranger fell silent into the snow.

Atop the hill the wards guttered, and died.
Everything was chaos. She elbowed through it one way and then another, but as soon as she'd cleared a path it closed, and more kneelers went pelting past in their steel smallclothes and their absurd helmets. One of the kneelers was pleading that they must look to the queen, who'd collapsed at the news of her husband and had had to be carried away. Someone else wanted to know where the red witch was, wanted her head for her lying fires that had led His Grace to his end in the ruinous northern hinterlands. And louder than them all rose the bellows of Tormund Giantsbane, demanding to be let at the crows that had done for Lord Snow, demanding to know if they were men or cockless cowards to do this thing.

In all the madness, nobody had a thought to spare for Val. It was nearly dawn, but the eastern horizon was veiled in brooding fog. No sun this day. It was cursed, she'd known so. Even before the young crow lord had been struck down by his own, and reflexively she glanced at the place where Jon Snow had fallen. There was nothing left but a great smear of blood – someone had carried off the crow himself, whether he was a corpse already or just turning into one. Gods, what have they done?

Val was wildling born and bred. She was no crow wife, and would have opened the throat of anyone who suggested otherwise. Though she'd been prisoner here at Castle Black ever since the crows had defeated the wildlings in the battle before the Wall, she'd taken on no taint of southron heresy, found the kneelers as ridiculous as ever, them with their bowing and scraping and their "m'lord"-ing and their little cloth animals stitched so proud on their teats. And the Night's Watch, the crows in their black cloaks, were her people's nemesis.

But Jon Snow was no ordinary crow. The nine hundred and ninety-eighth Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, he was – or had been. Like as not the youngest; he couldn't have seen more than three winters, and all of them short. And like as not, too, the first Lord Commander since Night's King – the one who had been stricken from all the rolls, the one whose name was not spoken – who actively sought to make alliance with the wildlings. Who had ridden as one of them, for a time. Who had sent Val out into the wilds to find Tormund and the free folk, had opened the massive gates to allow them safe passage to the other side. Who had raised some to the black cloak, had formed companies of raiders and spearwives to garrison the abandoned castles along the Wall, had housed their women and children in his own halls and on his own coin. Who had formed a fleet to sail to Hardhome, to rescue the nearly four thousand wildlings fleeing from the white hunters in the woods. And who had, not even two hours past, paid for that decision with his life's blood, spilled by his own Sworn Brothers.

Val's mouth tightened. She knew that the kneelers loathed her and hers, just as she loathed them and theirs. But by killing Jon Snow, they had proved themselves even stupider than her direst estimations. The great part of the Night's Watch felt that their boy commander had betrayed them unforgivably, by granting amnesty and friendship to savages when for so much of their long history they'd fought them with all their strength. When they still had strength. If the crows thought they could hold on their own, against the cold and what came with it... Fools. Bloody fools.

And mayhaps not even with her free folk, either, but Val pushed that thought away. She was conscious suddenly of an emotion she hadn't felt since her sister died bringing Mance's son into the world, in the midst of the battle: fear. She hadn't realized how much she was counting on Jon Snow until he was gone. He was the one who ordered her fed, sheltered, guarded from the queen's men who thought she was some sort of princess, and accordingly were convinced that she, as a woman, must belong to one of them. Had trusted her to find Tormund. It is not only the kneelers who have
long memories and old prejudices. When she'd first told her people of Jon Snow's plan, the general reaction had been to ask which of them was lying or mad. Why did they need the southerners for anything? The ones who had built the Wall so high and fed it on the blood of their kin for centuries?

But we do. Val knew what was out in those woods. Knew why Mance had been trying to rally the clans together, flee from the winds of winter. Force the crows at knifepoint to let them pass the Wall. And Jon Snow had offered it freely. No ordinary crow.

And now... all gone. The turncloaks who'd killed Snow would take over the Watch, force the free folk back into their "rightful place." The queen's men would march to the castle called Winterfell where their king was supposed to have been taken, captured or dead. Val would be glad to see the back of them, but the damned fools couldn't even grasp that if the king was dead, there was little purpose in rushing to join him in his freezing grave. They must attack nonetheless. For their honor. Of all the kneelers' peculiar concepts, that might be the one that had cost them the most in blood.

The chaos was slowly acquiring a semblance of order. Queen's men were shoving aside crows and free folk alike as they made for the great staircase that switchbacked, half-finished, up the great icy face of the Wall. Once they had reached it, one unslung his horn and blew a mighty, echoing blast. A queasy silence fell over the bailey.

"Men of the Night's Watch," the designated spokesman began. "Brave retainers of King Stannis, and... free folk. A great miracle has taken place this night, by the providence of the Lord of Light. The false Lord Commander has been struck down, and so will lead no – "

That was as far as he was allowed to get before a booming voice interrupted. "Lord Snow!" The squat, massive, white-bearded form of Tormund Giantsbane shouldered through the crowd. "Who murdered the crow lord?"

"That is no concern of yours, old man. You do not wear a black cloak, and thus by rights should still be on the other side of the Wall. Where you will soon arrive, once – "

"Pah!" Tormund spat a great gobbet of phlegm into the mud. "Who murdered the crow lord, you southron bastard?"

"I said, that is no concern of yours." The kneeler had to raise his voice. "But with the Lord Commander dead, the mantle of leadership passes to the Lord Steward, Bowen Marsh, until such moment as a choosing may be held. We trust that this time you will not have it done by a old blind man while Snow's fat friend hovers at his side. And we trust as well that the Night's Watch will recall their debt to King Stannis and choose a Commander who – "

"Shut up!" This shout did not come from Tormund, but from Snow's squire – the former boy whore named Satin, the foppish dark-eyed youth who grated on the Watch's old guard nearly as much as Snow had himself. I find it a wonder he too still draws breath, Val thought. Close that pretty mouth before they decide to make it clean.

Too late; Satin was storming forward. "Shut up!" he shouted again. "How dare you tell us what we must do? We are men of the Night's Watch, we take no orders from any save our own, and as for your king, word is that he's the Bastard of Bolton's prisoner or dead before the walls of Winterfell, his magic sword pissed out and his quest over and done! We owe nothing to dead men! We fight dead men!"

An agreeing, angry rumble began to rise. There will be more blood in the mud before much longer. Val slid her hand to the haft of her bone knife, sheathed in her boot.
"Have a care of your words, Satin of the Night's Watch." Another new voice spoke, this one a woman's. The red priestess herself, the red ruby winking at her throat, her long red sleeves swirling, stepped lightly up onto the stair. "Stannis Baratheon is Azor Ahai reborn. No matter where he has been taken, by which man, he lives yet. The flames have shown me."

"Bugger your flames," one of the crows shouted. "Those lying – "

Lady Melisandre turned her red eyes on him. "The flames never lie, ser. If errors are made, they are mine own. But I saw the knives in the dark. I warned the Lord Commander. If he did not take my words to heart – "

"Then it's the fault of the craven bastards that did for him!" Satin screamed.

Tormund Giantsbane seconded this in a roar that shook the towers of Castle Black, and the horde of wildlings behind him thirded it. Free folk raising their voices for a crow lord. And that was not even the strangest thing Val had seen recently.

"Be that as it may," Melisandre went on, "every leal subject of His Grace must pledge their sword at once to march on Winterfell, to spring him from the clutches of the foul usurper Ramsay Bolton. Only once is this done can we begin to hope to clarify our mutual debts and obligations to the Night's Watch. But if we leave King Stannis in the hands of this beast who makes cloaks of human skin, we will certainly – "

"What about Mance?" one of Tormund's chieftains broke in. "Did you not hear the rest of the tale, you pink whore? It's said that the Bastard of Bolton has Mance hung in a crow cage – aye, and gave him a cloak of the skins of the spearwives that were with him! But how could this possibly be? For did you not burn the Mance before all our eyes – or did you? Southerners and kneelers are all liars, bloody damned liars and witches!"

More bellows of assent went up, cracking the sullen dawn sky. And for a moment, Val thought she glimpsed the same uncertainty, almost fear, in the red priestess's eyes. Melisandre nodded to the man beside her, who winded his horn once again, but not even this was sufficient to secure silence. Then to add to the commotion, Wun Wun the giant, one of Castle Black's more exotic recent boarders, came blundering out from his lair beneath Hardin's Tower, looking confused and upset. "NOISE!" he bellowed. "WUN WUN NOT LIKE!"

The castle master-at-arms, Leathers – formerly a wildling, now a crow, and Wun Wun's unofficial handler – lunged to head him off. A whole rank of queen's men had strung their bows or drawn their swords, and once more it was Satin who put himself between them. "You will not touch him! He is our guest, in the north the laws of hospitality still – "

"We don't take orders from Lord Snow's arseboy," one of them sneered. "Look at it. It's a filthy beast. All of you! You're not worth the price of – "

"Hold your tongue, kneeler." Tormund's son, Tall Toregg, stepped forward and unlimbered his great stone axe. "Unless you want to lose it."

The mood was getting uglier every moment. Val's fingers went white on the hilt of her knife. If it went completely sour, she wondered if she could get up the King's Tower steps in time, fetch out the monster and his wet nurses, find somewhere to run – but where? Back through the Wall? Three women and a babe? That was suicide.

"We will have no bloodshed." Melisandre's voice seemed to have grown deeper somehow, colder. "It would be an affront to the new morning that R'hllor has made for us – in these days of
darkening winter, will you profane the dawn this way? Stand down!"

The queen's men listened to her unquestioningly, and this was the first time that Val had ever been grateful for it. Slowly, grudgingly, they slung their bows back on their shoulders and sheathed their swords, though with expressions that said quite clearly that they thought the free folk would be much improved by some profaning. As for Tall Toregg, he put his axe back just as angrily, restrained by Tormund's huge furry paw on his shoulder.

"Now then." Melisandre smoothed her skirts. "Any of the free folk who wish to reaffirm their loyalty to King Stannis, and reap the benefits of his gratitude, are welcome to come with us to Winterfell and rescue His Grace and Mance alike. If so – "

"But Queen Selyse said he was an usurper," one of the kneelers interrupted. "That that Gerrick Kingsblood, he's descended from Raymun what's-his-name, the true heir – "

Fools, Val thought, yet again. Her sister's husband hadn't been King-beyond-the-Wall because his father was, because someone smeared oils on him or because he tied ribbons around his lance or made witty conversation or smelled like a rose when he farted. He had been King because he had the strength, the wit and cunning and daring to stitch together the disparate wildling tribes, to turn them to their true foe – the crows' true foe. Mankind's true foe. It had been thought the red woman burned him at her fires. It seemed that someone had lied. For if Mance was also a prisoner at Winterfell, he could hardly be the one who died screaming beforehand. We'd best pray so. Without Mance the free folk would be doomed. And it might be even worse now that we are on the right side of the Wall.

"Yet again, this is a question that can only be answered once we rescue King Stannis," said Melisandre. "And thus – "

"You kneelers won't be choosing no king for us," Tall Toregg broke in heatedly. "We're the free folk. The free folk."

Melisandre's red gaze lingered on him. "Not here, ser. No longer. When you placed the protection of the Wall between you and the servants of the Dark One, you became bound by the acts of fealty and the rule of law that hold the rest of men. Any of you who does not wish to acknowledge R'hllor as the one true god and Stannis Baratheon as the one true king is, of course, free to return from whence you came."

"I'm not no southron ser. Piss on your kneelers' tin titles."

Tormund tightened his grip on his son's shoulder, and Tall Toregg reluctantly subsided once again. Combined with Leathers' successful insertion of Wun Wun back into his den, the ambient turmoil dipped slightly, but Val did not let go her grip on her knife. She wondered if Lord Snow was dead. She was forced to admit that it was certainly likely. But even if he is, that doesn't necessarily mean we've seen the last of him.

"Acting Lord Commander Marsh," Melisandre said. "What is the will of the Night's Watch in this matter?"

Bowen Marsh, the man Val had heard mocked as the Old Pomegranate, struggled forward. He was sweating profusely despite the cold of the morning, and his face was nearly as red as the priestess as he climbed up beside her. "The Night's Watch," he began. He swallowed, licked his lips and had to try again. "The Night's Watch was formed thousands of years ago to shield the realms of men from everything that lies beyond the Wall. I advised Lord Snow to seal the gates with ice and steel and stone. He did not. I advised him not to let the wildlings pass. He did. And now it has – "
"Murderer!" Satin roared.

Bowen Marsh flinched. "I did not. . ." He licked his lips again. "I breached my vows in no part. It was no more murder than what Lord Snow did to Janos Slynt --"

Another angry babel. Val inched to her right. She had no doubt Satin's accusation was true, though she could scarce picture that one as a murderer. Yet it was true, and she had cause to know, that desperation drove men -- and women -- to unimaginable lengths.

Marsh plowed forth. "I will certainly take into account the wishes of my Sworn Brothers," he said, in a tone which implied that that was precisely the fault which had occasioned Lord Snow's recent demise. "I am not an unreasonable man, and I have no wish to create more enemies. But it is not and has never been the responsibility of the Night's Watch to shelter and feed and arm wildlings. We have little enough, and winter soon on us."

"We're not going back through the Wall, crow," a wildling shouted. "You'd better bloody get used to it."

"You will if I order it." Marsh glared at him. "Nor can I permit your people to squat in the castles along the Wall. They must be garrisoned by my men --"

"Harr!" Tormund this time. "What other men do you have?"

*He's right, crow.* Bowen Marsh struck Val as dull and conservative and frightened out of his wits, and that spelled doom for the lot of them unless someone did, quickly, for him as he'd done for Jon Snow. It was a choice between letting the wildlings garrison those castles, or abandoning them as they'd been for so many years. And with the Others growing stronger every night, what sort of fool would leave so many blind eyes and blank spaces in the first line of defense? *Your hatred for the free folk is going to kill you as dead as us.* She had to get out of here. *But where? Where?*

Behind her, Val heard another wildling say, "And our folk stranded at Hardhome? What for them? What for the mothers and children and greybeards?"

"It is -- regrettable." Bowen Marsh cleared his throat. "But half the ships that Lord Snow sent have been lost already. Sending more would be a waste we cannot countenance."

"Because they're wildlings? Is that it? Would you be leaving them there if they was southrons? I don't think so."

*The Night's Watch is the enemy of the wildlings!* How many times must I say it?

The silence went on so long that Val had to turn and look. Tall Toregg's fingers were visibly quivering with the effort of not drawing his axe. The rest of Tormund's band was just as roused, and the crows too had their hands hovering over their longswords.

At last, Tormund Giantsbane was the one to speak. "It's a grievous thing you've done to your brothers and ours," he informed Marsh. "And don't you worry, it were Lord Snow we took to friend, not you. But though you stabbed him in the belly like a craven, you won't be getting rid of us the same. You want to send us back through the Wall, crow? Very good, you try it. But I'll warn you now, you'll have to fight us every step of the way. We'll bleed, aye. We're men. And I can promise you this: so will you. And when them blue-eyed bastards come marching on you and the snows pile up a hundred foot deep and you're shitting your breeks for fear, who fights next to you then? Which of your men garrison them castles, crow? Who wears your black cloaks? Or is that they're dead and either you're eating them to survive, or wondering when they rise too?"
Marsh stared at him, jowls aquiver, in a way that reminded Val of Janos Slynt, the black brother Lord Snow had shortened by a head. He appeared to have no answer.

"Or," Tormund went on, "you could bend them stiff southern necks o' yours and do your best to save them. It damned well might be the only way you will. Me and my men, we'll fight with you or we'll fight against you, but either way we're staying. We'll be making our homes in the Gift and the Wall castles and everywhere else Lord Snow promised. And let me beg your fancy courtly pardons if I have this wrong, but you don't seem the sharpest sword in the scabbard. Didn't you just say that you didn't want to create no more enemies? We aren't right now, crow. But by all the gods, we will be if you want it."

Again, Marsh seemed to be at a loss for words. He looked wildly at Melisandre as if expecting help, but the red priestess said nothing. The crows won't even make it to winter with this one leading. For their sake, they'd best hold that choosing quickly. Gods, was Jon Snow really gone? The frangible peace between crows and free folk already at an end?

"So," another wildling growled. "You not saving those at Hardhome? You saying they dead?"

"They led themselves there. Perchance they can lead themselves to safety. The Night's Watch will have nothing further to do with it. We must look to ourselves."

Fool. Val began to walk, turned a corner, picked up her pace. Fool, fool, fool. They'll die, all right. All four thousand of them. And with white walkers in the hills, every one will rise again. And where will they come? Will the crows look to themselves then?

Aye, so they will. With eyes blue as cornflowers, and cold as the abyss.
In the dark of her cell that night, she dreamed the wolf dream.

It was different than usual, fainter, more distant. It was the first time she'd had it in a fortnight, mayhaps more; time became a blur here, in the bowels of the House of Black and White. She had her eyes back, but there was not much to see. Just flames burning far away, like torches, yet if she walked down the serpentine corridor toward them, she would never come any closer. They would be always receding around the next corner, and eventually she would know that something was in the dark with her, and she would turn and run.

The waif told her that the something was only in her head. Memories given shape and form. "You call them," she said. "You make them. In your heart, you are still someone, for only someone can have ghosts. Who are you, child?"

And as always, the girl would answer, "No one." And the waif would call her a liar, and the lesson would be at an end for the day. Yet that was not the only lesson. She had learned to walk light and soft as a shadow, move only feet beyond a whole party of men and them never knowing she was there. She had learned how to change her face, in that room with the sharp red cut of the knife taking away her skin. And she was no longer anyone.

Except she must be.

The wolf dream began as it customarily did: her stalking with her pack brothers as a waning moon rose, padding among the trees and breathing the scents of blood and loam and spoor. The distant clash of manclaws was never far away, as always, but it was a dead deer they were feasting on tonight. Once or twice fire licked the distant horizon, and she had a girl's thought, wondered if there was something in the dark. But now the something was her. Wolf. Wargwoman. Northqueen. She ruled this realm in the forest, and her paws dug into the soft earth as she ran.

Little sister.

That voice was not part of her dream, nor part of the wolf's thought. It pulled her far enough from it so it was as if she had been caught halfway between one skin and another, the same pain as when the kindly man had first sliced off her face. The dark woods grew strangely distorted, and the wolf, sensing the tension, stopped and whined. No, she thought muzzily, aware of herself as a girl, dreaming on her small stone bed in her cell in the House of Black and White, in Braavos—and twinned with the awareness of herself as wolf in the forests on the Trident, in Westeros. And split between them, red eyes. Whether they belonged to man or woman or wolf, she could not say. All and none at once.

Little sister.

The voice did not belong to No One. That voice was Arya Stark's ghost. Something in the dark. Was it him in those corridors, was it him she'd been fleeing from?

No, she whispered. I'm faceless now, I don't have any brothers. Not you. No. You have to go away.

I have gone away, the voice answered. So far away. And so have you.

No, I'm still here. Yet it was a lie; the waif would have felt it in her face at once. Valar morghulis. She tried to tell herself that it was nothing. Death was death, the gift of Him of Many Faces. In her time here, she had learned that at least.
The voice was growing fainter now, as if it too was receding down that corridor, the corridor with
the light at the end, the light she was always too frightened to reach. And then she was in the
corridor, and yet still in the wood, and roots snarled her paws, and fragile mud broke underneath
her weight, and cold water swirled around her fur as she galloped across the water. And mantalk on
the far side, flares of torches –

"There! There she is! There's the murderous bitch! Get her!"

And she knew she had to run. But she was no longer in her wolf; she couldn't. She could only
watch, helpless, a passenger to her own execution.

The wolf went onto her hind legs and snarled. The men raised their long curved tools, the ones that
spat iron-tipped sticks. Bows. Arrows. The wolf and the girl both knew they could kill her. And
pain, pain like nothing she'd ever known, as there was a whiz and a smack, as arrows pierced the
thick fur and she writhed and growled and snapped in agony, nets thrown at her, claws still tearing
as the hunters came down on her –

And the girl thrashed awake, screaming. "JON," she cried. "JON, FATHER, NYMERIA – RUN –
NO, NO –"

So clear and vivid were the sensations of the dream that she could still feel the ache of arrows in
her own flesh, see the wolf struggling in the dark waters of the Trident as the hunters bound her
with nets. She can't die, she wouldn't. She was queen of the riverlands, she led a pack a hundred
strong, and no mortal steel could slay her. But I left her.

The girl curled up on her uncomfortable bed, sniffing. She shouldn't; she was near a woman
grown. She was still as skinny as a spear, and her face – her real one – was still too long and too
solemnn and her eyes too dour and grey, her hair straight and brown and unkempt. But she had
curves where she had not before, and there were red blotches on her cheeks, just the thing to make
her look less pretty than ever. Sansa was always the pretty one.

But No One had no father. No brothers. No sisters. No wolf.

She couldn't get the images out of her head. Nor forget that voice, calling to her. Red eyes. Ghost
had red eyes.

And again the waif:

"Only someone can have ghosts. Who are you, child?"

"No one," she whispered to her thin flat pillow. "Valar morghulis." And tried to sleep again, but
lay awake instead till dawn.

At breakfast the kindly man asked, "Why were you crying out last night, child?"

"I didn't cry out last night." Before, she would have chewed her lip, but now she did not. My face is
my servant.

"A lie," the kindly man sighed. "The names you called. There were three."

There were three names before, too. She remembered those ones as well. Chiswyck. Weese. And
Jaqen H'ghar. She had killed them, the same as she had killed the stableboy in King's Landing and
the guard on the gate at Harrenhal, and the singer who had deserted from the Night's Watch and
that old man who wrote the false bills of insurance. Except for Jaqen. I can kill the kindly man too,
if I want.
The kindly man smiled. "You think too loudly," he told her. "You must learn to guard them as closely as your words. There are men who may look in your eyes and read your feelings, who will draw them out and use them against you. The red priests may see you in their flames. Who are you?"

"No one."

"And still you lie." The kindly man peeled an egg and took a bite. "Child, if you will continue farther in the House of Black and White, you must stop dreaming these wolf dreams. You must forget everything. To be only a tool of Him of Many Faces, you must have no soul, no heart. You forsake all your yesterdays and any dream of tomorrows. What happens beyond these walls is no longer your concern. Stop it. Stop your heart."

How do I do that? She had drunk a potion, and it had stolen her sight, until she drank another, and it returned. Would she drink another poison, and freeze her heart?

"No," said the kindly man, answering her thought. "No poison can do that for you. No one but you can kill your loves and your hates. You do not have to do this, child. You are twelve, near thirteen. Soon you will flower. Soon you will be a woman. It is life you can bring to this world, not death. Even for Arya of House Stark, there must come a time when revenge is not the only dish served at the lord's table. And besides, you will never be free of who you are. You want the gift of the Many-Faced God, but you want only to give it to those whom you hate, have done you wrong. How does that prayer of yours go?"

Ser Gregor, the girl thought. Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei. "I do not remember."

"You lie. And poorly." The kindly man plucked a bunch of grapes from a bowl. "You have been Cat of the Canals, who sells Brusco's oysters and mussels. You have been Blind Beth the beggar girl, yet these are only acts, only masks you change like the mummers. Beneath you are always Arya."

"No, I'm not."

"Then prove it." The kindly man bit into the grape. "It has come time in your training that you must do something of great... importance. There is a certain man who has come to this house and prayed for the death of a certain other. You must do this thing."

"I already did. I killed that old man who wrote the bad scrips."

"Child," said the kindly man. "Did you breathe yesterday? Did you eat? You did. Must you do these things again today?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"That is what it is to be in the service of the Many-Faced God. Can you do this, Arya of House Stark?"

"Yes, I can."

"Just so. Then you will."

Arya hesitated. "Who is this man?"

"Someone has prayed for his death. Perhaps he has prayed for it himself."
"Is it someone I know?"

"Who do you know, child?"

I know lots of people. I know Brusco and Brea and Talea and Captain Terys and his sons, and Pynto who let me beg from him, and the merchants of Ragman's Harbor and Merry and the whores of the dockside. I know my family who is dead, and my brother Jon on the Wall, and Hot Pie and Gendry. It would have been good to see Gendry's stupid face again. She'd hit him with her sword and call him stubborn. She wondered if he was still a smith for the Brotherhood, under the hollow hill. They'd made him a knight, too.

The kindly man was still waiting for an answer.

"I know no one," she said.

He smiled. "Then it is no one whom you know."

"Is he important?"

"Every man is important in this house. Every life. Every death."

"What is his name?"

"Only a sound, child. Only a word. It lies upon the surface of his soul as does his face, or yours. It does not mean him."

He is not going to tell me who, the girl realized. It is no matter. There is no one in Braavos who means anything to me.

"When will I do this?" she asked.

"As soon as you are ready. You will wear a new face for it." The kindly man finished his breakfast. "Come."

"When will I return here?"

"Not until this thing is done." He led her across the chamber and opened a door, led her down a narrow staircase. The stone walls were damp, the air was close, and she found herself unconsciously rubbing at her arms, as if to chase off a thousand small insects. Down and down they went, past the cells where the acolytes were bringing those who had drunk at the fountain the previous night. Down to the room where the faces were kept.

"Sit," the kindly man told her. "Now, close your eyes."

She did. This had happened once before, and so she was more prepared for the prick and twist of the knife, the hot blood that slid down her cheeks and tasted coppery on her lips, the press of fingers into skin as if it was clay, and the new face being fashioned for her. "What does it look like?" she asked the kindly man.

"It is a good face for an innocent girl. It is sweet and pretty, but not so striking that one would look twice at it, or remember it long after glimpsing it in a crowd. It is a trustworthy face. Does it have a name?"

Cat, she almost said, before remembering that Cat was dead. Sansa. But Sansa was dead too. The Imp had killed her, or the queen. And she could not be no one, not outside this house.
"Lyanna," she said. "Her name is Lyanna."

"Your name is Lyanna, you mean. And that is a Westerosi name, a northern name. . . but though you speak far better than you did before, no one would mistake you for a native Braavosi. Who are you, child?"

"Lyanna Snow." Jon can't be hurt, or dead. I would know.

"So be it, then." The kindly man did not sound as if he altogether approved of the choice, but demurred no more. "Open your eyes. It is done."

The girl opened her eyes. Her face still felt tender, and stung slightly. When the kindly man handed her a looking glass, she saw blue eyes, a tawny braid, round cheeks with a light dusting of freckles. I do not look like a northerner. Her father had always told her that she favored her aunt Lyanna, but this Lyanna was not that one. No more wolf dreams.

She rose to her feet. "Where am I going? Do I need things?"

"Not many. Now, listen closely. You must find a courtesan named the Summer Maid. She will take you to the man to whom you are to give the gift."

"A courtesan?" the girl repeated skeptically. The courtesans of Braavos were legendary: elegant, jeweled, mysterious figures flitting behind curtains, who rode carved swan boats down the canals at dusk, with gondoliers and fools and dancing girls all dressed in finery. The Black Pearl, the Merling Queen, the Poetess. . . they were all beautiful, all accomplished in two or three tongues, and played the high harp and wrote poems of courtly love and danced like a dream and adorned the arms of highborn lords and kings from across the entire world. Even one night with them was said to cost a man half his life's savings.

"Aye," the kindly man confirmed.

"And where will I find her?"

"There is a mummer's show today, at the Orb. She will be in attendance."

The girl nodded. She knew the Orb; it was a playhouse near the great Westerosi sept. They had a resident troupe of actors and a man who wrote their tragedies and their farces. The three things she had learned one day were about him. His name was Willym Vere, and he drank too much and was usually in debt to the Iron Bank. But he was a brilliant bard.

"And what should I do, when I find her there? What should I say?"

The kindly man gave her an enigmatic smile. "I do not know. What should you?"

And on that note, she took her leave of the House of Black and White.

Rarely for Braavos, the sun was shining when she stepped outside. Usually it was cloaked in fog, but today it was clear for miles, and she could see the Titan and the galleys in the harbor. A maze of canals threaded among the buildings, some of them as wide as any thoroughfare and filled with merchant gondolas, their owners poling up and down and crying their wares: silk and lace from Myr, ivory and glass from Volantis, wine and wheat from Norvos and jewels and spices from Lys. One or another of the Nine Free Cities were usually fighting, so it was always a wager as to what would be for sale at any given moment, but Lyanna Snow had not come to buy. She used one of her precious copper coins to take passage on a gondola going toward the sept. All the faiths of man were honored in Braavos; there was the sept of the Seven, the red temple of the priests of R'hllor,
the House of Black and White, the Cult of Starry Wisdom, strange shrines for the gods of Summer Islanders and Qartheen, the harpies of the old Ghiscari cities. The only one she had never seen was a godswood, for there were no trees on Braavos. It was surrounded on all sides by water.

The old gods can't see me. The girl wondered if that would trouble Lyanna. She had come to have a queer affection for Braavos itself, over the course of her time here. It had been founded by slaves who had broken their chains, and to this day no man was permitted to be bought and sold for coin. A city for free men. She too was free. She could go anywhere she wanted. But she was going to the Orb.

The show had not yet started when she arrived. Lyanna paid another copper for a seat in the creaking gallery, then sat and watched the mummers strut and stretch and fart and jest and drink, rehearsing their lines and complaining about their costumes. One of them wanted to know where Vere was, and another snorted and said that he would be lying low for the time being, the Bank apparently being of a temperament to send a collector in regards to a loan the playwright had deferred three times already. If these farces did not put arses in the seats, apparently, Willym Vere was destined for some time as the Iron Bank's especial guest.

I wonder if it's him I'm supposed to kill. At first, Lyanna thought it quite likely, but the Iron Bank must certainly know that it was even harder to get money from a dead man than a live one, and besides, she did not think they needed the God of Many Faces to strike terror into the hearts of chronic debtors. The Braavosi might be a fair people, and by and large a kind one, but their memories were long, and they did not suffer thieves.

The audience began to filter in, and the mummers retired to prepare for the show. Lyanna kept a sharp eye out, but could not see anyone who might be the Summer Maid. There were urchins scrambling through the gallery and the rafters, selling hot pasties and sweetmeats and other delicacies, and she wanted to buy one, but scolded herself for thinking of wasting money on trivialities. Briefly she wondered if any of them were acolytes at the House of Black and White, masquerading under a false commoner's face as she had, learning secrets. Three things each time.

At last the Orb's doors were shut, the lamps around the stage were lit, and the master of the company strode forth to announce the evening's entertainment. It was both farce and tragedy, he said; a drama, a new form of performance. He begged that they would most wholeheartedly enjoy it on behalf of their dear friend Willym Vere, whose unavoidable commitments had kept him elsewhere tonight. As he said this, he glanced sidelong at a pair of tall, weedy gentlemen in mildly ludicrous hats, sitting in a private box, and Lyanna did as well. Envoys of the Iron Bank. They'll be looking for him.

And then she looked to the next box, and caught her breath.

The woman sitting there had to be the Summer Maid, even though Lyanna had not seen her come in. She had expected her to do so in the typical fashion of courtesans: the awed hush, the train of sweet girls and beautiful youths, flower petals scattered and perhaps a delicate touch of bells and cymbalos. Instead, this woman sat all but alone in her box, attended only by a handmaid veiled like a silent sister. She herself wore a fluttering scrap of silk over her mouth and nose, so only her eyes looked out above it, and a high-necked dress of some deep blue fabric. Her thick, honey-colored hair was plaited intricately in bands and jewels, and her hands were folded sedately in her lap.

I have to get to her somehow. Mayhaps at the interlude. Lyanna settled back in her seat and prepared to watch the drama.

It began intriguingly enough, with a girl washed up from a shipwreck and forced to dress as her twin brother. There were comic episodes as she struggled to maintain her disguise, but it took a
darker turn as it was revealed that she was the daughter of the lion lord, and had run away from home rather than submit herself to a marriage with some blustering sot of a stormlord. But he needed her – or rather, her father, who bankrolled his less than savory activities – and sent his men after her, to catch her and drag her back. The first act ended with their marriage in the sept, a remarkable reproduction of the real one next door, and then he threw her on the floor and enthusiastically had down his quilted breeches in order to properly fornicate. The audience watched intently, torn between laughing and shouting ribald suggestions, and others turning their heads away at the look on the girl's face.

Lyanna bit her lip. *I know this story.*

At the interlude, she climbed down from the gallery and looked around for the Summer Maid, but the box was empty. The Iron Bank envoys were attempting to gain entrance to the rooms behind the stage, but a mustachioed Norvoshi bodyguard with an incomprehensible accent was busily thwarting them.

The Summer Maid reappeared just before the start of the second act, which took a furtherly darker turn. The lion's daughter and the blustering stormlord were trapped in an increasingly loveless marriage, while the twin brother – who, it turned out, had survived the shipwreck by murdering the captain – began to strut about, proclaiming what a cunning warrior he was and the number of captains he'd killed. His soliloquies were funny at first, but by the time the stormlord grew weary of his follies and set off to fetch his old friend, the frozen-faced wolf lord who took everything extremely literally, Lyanna did not know if she wanted to watch any more. *I have to, though. I have to wait for the Summer Maid.*

She found herself covering her eyes as the play moved into its third act. The lion's daughter became more and more bizarre and imperious, trying to get her horrible son to steal his father's authority and rule the stormlands. Her husband died, suspiciously. Her father and brother made nuisances of themselves. Everything she tried failed, with increasingly blacker humor, until the wolf lord announced to her that he had deduced the cause of her woe: she had been born a woman. For this outrage, she ordered his prompt execution.

Lyanna shut her eyes. It was just a play, she told herself. It wasn't the same as it had been. She heard the audience booing and hissing, and sat there trembling until the play ended, which it did more or less happily. The interfering lion lord met an undignified end, the lion's daughter was shut up in an asylum for the insane, and the wolf lord's heir, played with stolid uprightness by a square-jawed young Lysene, set to rights all the various upsets and drowned the horrible son in a barrel of malmsey. The only one who escaped was the twin brother, who found religion and went about asking the audience if they could spare a moment for the Seven, holding out his hat for donations.

The Braavosi applauded enthusiastically, agreed that it had been a fine drama indeed, and began to disperse into the chilly evening. Lyanna waited by the stairs to the courtesan's box, heart pounding; she still hadn't entirely recovered. At last, there was a whispering of silken skirts, and the Summer Maid descended, trailed by her servant. They were speaking, Lyanna realized to her considerable surprise, in the Common Tongue of Westeros.

"... had known, my lady, I would not have suggested it – "

The Summer Maid laughed bitterly. "What are you apologizing for? Now that I know, I may go back tomorrow night, and the one after."

"What is it you see in it?"

The Summer Maid paused. "Revenge."
So do I, Lyanna thought. She followed them into the damp night. There were a pair of bravos loitering ostentatiously outside the Orb in their particolored bloomers, fingering the hilts of their slender swords and looking for challengers, but since the women wore no weapons, the bravos ignored them. Colored lanterns bobbed among the canals and bridges, and the sound of music and laughter drifted from a pleasure house. A wind had come up off the sea, and in the distance, the Titan's shoulders were cloaked in a falling fog.

Lyanna wondered where courtesans lived. Perhaps she would soon find out. As the Summer Maid and the servant started down to the pier to hire a gondola, she knew it was time. Without giving herself a chance to think further, she stepped out into their way.

The Summer Maid stopped. "Who are you, child?"

No one, she almost answered. Lyanna Snow, she could have said. Arya Stark, she could have said. But instead, without stopping to question where it had come from, she blurted out the first answer that came to her. "I'm the Wolf Maid."

"Ah." The Summer Maid regarded her for a long moment, and then, beneath the veil, she smiled. Her eyes crinkled, but the sadness in them remained as deep and silent as a pool in a cave. She reached out and touched Lyanna's chin, brushing one finger along it. "So you are."
Jeyne

They were nine days north of Riverrun, and still Ser Brynden would hear of no letup in their pace. He let her snatch only a few hours of sleep at most, in trees or brambles or thickets or once a deserted tower on a tor. Sometimes he went foraging in the dark, returning with a stringy squirrel or a handful of withered apples, and they would scoff them down in the gloaming, never daring to risk a fire or any unnecessary conversation.

Jeyne had asked where they were fleeing half a dozen times, and the only answer the Blackfish had given her was that he hoped to make Oldstones in a few more days. She was frightened of the gruff old knight, but knew as well that she was completely dependent on him. And he would not fail her. He had sworn it by earth and iron, by ice and fire, by the very Tully words: Family, Duty, Honor. For the niece and great-nephew he had failed. Her husband, her king, dead so long now. Oh, Robb.

The memories of the escape from Riverrun were still a blur in Jeyne's head, and she thought it best not to dwell on it too much. She had first thought they would follow the Tumblestone to the westerlands, and had even entertained a foolish fantasy of seeing the Crag again, just in passing. But of course they would not, must be as far away from Casterly Rock and Lannisport as possible. The Blackfish was well known in the riverlands, and since it was equally well known that he'd never taken a wife, Jeyne could hardly pose as his daughter. But since Ser Brynden had disguised them both as a pair of poor cottars, that difficulty was removed. Their ruse would never withstand close scrutiny, and all it would take would be one wrong pair of eyes glimpsing them to seal their fate. Secrecy was their only hope.

Oldstones and then . . . where? The Neck was full of bog devils and ironmen, and the North had been placed under the lordship of Roose Bolton and his son Ramsay, as bannermen to the Lannisters. Beasts in human skin. Robb had never entirely trusted them, Jeyne knew. And since the Westerlings had changed their wager once more, the Lannisters were no longer a sanctuary for her. There is no place for me, or any Stark. She wondered if she'd ever been a true Stark, even for a moment. She'd wanted to be, more than anything. She had thought her family did too, but it had all been a grotesque lie, fashioned by her mother. Even the part Lady Sybell had played in sending Jeyne on this road was not enough to exonerate her. I hate her.

This had been her mother's notion, as always. Lady Sybell was furious with the late Lord Tywin for not informing her of the true extent of the Red Wedding; if she knew, she had said, she would never have sent her son Raynald, Jeyne's brother, to die at the Twins with the rest. Combined with the rest of the Lannisters' suddenly crumbling fortunes – Queen Cersei grown ever more mistrustful and erratic, the Imp pausing only to murder his father before fleeing Westeros with a price on his head, Ser Jaime a cripple, and King Tommen a boy of eight – Lady Sybell had decided that the only hope for their family's survival lay elsewhere.

Jeyne had thought it was a trick when the torch appeared at her door in the middle of the night, and her mother's voice ordered her to dress warmly and darkly. Jeyne had thought she meant to hand them over to Ryman Frey, Lord Walder's heir, who commanded the thus-far totally ineffectual siege of Riverrun and threatened to hang Ser Edmure daily without result. But the Kingslayer had arrived to personally bring an end to it, would storm the walls with fire and sword if need be. One way or another, it would have been my death.

But instead Lady Sybell had escorted her downstairs, lips as tight as if she was sucking on a lemon. Jeyne's questions had gone unanswered, until at last they reached the shadowy hall, and Ser Brynden Tully was waiting.
Panicked, Jeyne glanced between them. "What – I don't –"

"There's no time for talk, child," the Blackfish said brusquely. "We're leaving the castle. Tonight."

"Leaving the castle?" Jeyne repeated, baffled. With a Lannister and Frey host in arms to every side? What were they supposed to do, grow wings?

"Aye. Come." The Blackfish took her by the arm.

Lady Sybell inclined her head, so stiffly her neck might have snapped. "Take care of my daughter, ser."

The Blackfish stared back at her with undisguised loathing. "I will, but not for your sake. Come," he said to Jeyne again, and picked her up off her feet, carrying her down the serpentine steps to the Water Gate. The night was black as coal, moonless, and the wind tugged at her cloak and hair, rippling the dark water beneath the portcullis.

A shadow loomed up nearby. "Hurry."

To her shock, Jeyne recognized the voice. It was Ser Edmure himself, freed from his long vigil on the gallows by Ser Jaime, and sent back with orders to surrender the castle to Lord Emmon Frey and his ubiquitous parchment. He beckoned to the portcullis, and Jeyne clutched at him. "What's going on?"

"Shh, my lady. No noise. You're going with my uncle. Do what he tells you."

"But the castle. . . they'll notice we're gone. . ."

"My uncle, yes. Naught can be done about that, but no matter. As for you. . ." Edmure hesitated. "Your sister will pose as you."

"Elenya?" Jeyne did not want to ask what promises or threats had been used to get her little sister to agree to this plan. Elenya was two years younger, but they looked enough alike that those who did not know them well oft mistook them for one another. Yet Elenya was still a girl, with narrow hips and small breasts, and even if Ser Jaime had never seen their faces, surely there would be a Lannister lordling or man-at-arms who remembered the Westerling daughters. "But I don't –"

"Listen." Edmure put his hand over hers, squeezed tightly. "This is my only night of freedom. On the morrow, when Riverrun is surrendered, I will be given into the Kingslayer's custody and sent as a prisoner to Casterly Rock, likely for life. And you. . . They told me. . ." He seemed to be groping for words. "You have not had your moon blood since the Red Wedding. My lady, if there is the faintest possibility, the slightest. . ."

Shock lurched through Jeyne like a freezing dagger. Suddenly the thought was there, and it was too horrid even to contemplate, if only because it would make her weep with how much she wanted it. Her mother had brewed possets of herbs and ale and milk, claiming they were to help make her fertile, but they had actually been intended to stop her from conceiving. But while effective, they were not foolproof, and if she was, against all odds, with the Young Wolf's child, the survival of the north rested on her.

"Oh," she whispered, heartbroken. "I understand."

"We have no time," the Blackfish broke in. "Edmure, is the portcullis raised?"

"Aye, Uncle. Swim under, stay low for as long as you can. You have Robb's will? If my lady
should not be with child after all, the crown must go to. . ."

"His heir, I know. It will be seen to." The Blackfish splashed down the steps. "Jeyne. Come, girl. Now."

Jeyne paused, looking at the towers of the castle around her. They seemed warm, light, safe compared to the perils of the black river, but that was all a lie, as so much of her young life had been. Then she flung her arms around Edmure Tully's neck and kissed him clumsily on the cheek, tasting the salt of his tears and her own. "Gods be with you, ser."

"Aye," he said, voice breaking, and gave her a hand into the water. "Go, my lady. Go. And Uncle – farewell."

"Farewell, my lord." The Blackfish pulled up the hood of Jeyne's cloak and tugged her against him. "Now," he said in her ear. "We have to get under the portcullis and swim out away beyond the machicolations on the walls. There are Frey soldiers who will see us if we surface too soon. You must hold your breath for a minute, mayhaps longer. Can you do this?"

"Aye." She had no idea.

"Good." The Blackfish waded up to the Water Gate, which still appeared to be closed. "Dive down, swim fast. After me, child. Now."

With that, he took a few quick breaths, then one deep one, and slipped beneath the surface with barely a splash. Jeyne watched him – and then, at Edmure's signal, she gulped a raw lungful of air and dove.

The river was so cold that it felt like knives. Eyes closed, she kicked hard, feeling slimy stones and soft sediment. She had to make sure she was deep enough not to snag on the teeth of the portcullis. When she was a girl, she had splashed gaily about in millponds and creeks, and once the sea off the Crag when Raynald dared her, before their nursemaid found out and shrieked at them. So far removed from this, swimming for her life. She couldn't think how long it had been. She couldn't risk surfacing yet. Surely someone would take notice. . . she braced for an arrow in her back. Robb was shot with a crossbow, twice or thrice, before his head was hacked off. I will die likewise, perhaps.

She swam harder, lungs beginning to strain for air. She opened her eyes, and saw only swirling darkness. At last, when spots were reeling in her vision, she stroked upwards, and tried to breach as softly as she could. The water now felt warmer than the night air. Behind her, torches pricked the darkness, but there was no outcry of alarm, no muster to arms. Only distant voices, laughing and cursing without a care in the world.

A hand grabbed her wrist, and she swallowed a scream just in time. No matter; the other hand was pressed to her mouth. Soaking wet, a lacework of waterweed draped over his shoulders, the Blackfish looked more a river demon than ever. He pressed a finger to her lips, and she nodded, quaking. Then he beckoned her to cling round his waist, and she did. With strong, graceful strokes, he paddled them downstream, and before long, Riverrun had vanished entirely in the night.

That was how they'd made it up the Red Fork, swimming whenever they could. They kept off the river road, and when they finally reached the Inn of the Kneeling Man, Jeyne was so footsore and tired that she begged Ser Brynden for a halt, but he would not hear of it. "Too many men of uncertain loyalties come through here. We'll press onto Fairmarket."

And so they did. That night was the most dangerous of all. The Blackfish glimpsed men from afar,
and at once ordered them deep into the brush. The party passed so close to their hiding place that Jeyne was able to catch a glimpse of them. There was a thin grey-haired man in red robes, and a big sour brute in a cloak the color of lemons, and a smiley freckled youth with a longbow. Then a Tyroshi sellsword with a beard dyed green, and any number of disreputable-looking others.

Ser Brynden tensed. *"It's them,"* he hissed. *"Outlaws. Beric Dondarrion's men, nay doubt. They'll kill us both if they find us. Don't move. Don't breathe."*

Jeyne, taking him at his word, lay still as a corpse. The outlaws did not appear to be staying long; they were only taking a short respite, talking and laughing. Their voices drifted on the wind. *"... those Frey sons of whores, old Lord Walder will piss his breeks when he hears. ..."*

"Nay," someone else grumbled. *"He bloody hated Ryman, why should he..."*

"...what you will about the ancient bastard, he tends to his own..."

Jeyne turned her head fractionally, straining to hear more. Ser Jaime had sent the Freys, under the command of the stout-hearted Ser Ryman, back home to the Twins; had the outlaws caught them up? And if so, what had –

Only one outlaw did not speak. He sat alone on a rock, eating nothing, swathed in a heavy cloak that hid any hint of face and form. The other outlaws gave him a respectful berth, glancing edgily in his direction and minding their tongues when he glanced in theirs. But Jeyne was the most shocked of all when the lout in the yellow cloak said, "Should we press on now, m'lady?"

The cloaked figure rose to his – her? – feet, and made a sharp gesture to the rest. They took final pisses and gulped the last of wineskins, and fell in promptly behind her. The trees were thick enough that Jeyne soon lost sight of them, but she did not dare to move, even after they were long gone.

"Hsst!" Ser Brynden tugged at her, and she scrambled after him through the underbrush, through slippery, muddy boulders, out to a narrow animal track. Twilight was falling, and Jeyne was starved.

"We'll stop briefly," the Blackfish said, "but eat fast. We've had an unimaginably lucky escape. That must have been Stoneheart herself, the one they call the Hangwoman. And to judge from what we heard, she found some Freys to bestow her honors on.'

"Dondarrion's lover? Isn't that who she's supposed to be?" Jeyne began to gnaw on the inedible wodge of jerky Ser Brynden handed her.

"Gods alone know." The Blackfish cast a glance over his shoulder, but the darkening woods were empty. "I don't want to sleep anywhere near here tonight. Come."

Jeyne choked down the last of the jerky, then rose wearily to her feet. She followed.

They reached Fairmarket late the next morning. The Blackfish hadn't wanted to risk entering the town itself, but Jeyne was so faint with exhaustion that he had to carry her the last mile. So they bought a room at the first no-account, ramshackle inn they could find, and Jeyne lay on the foul-smelling bed, too tired even to sleep. Robb's face kept floating before her.

*I said goodbye to you thrice. Would I never had. I should have died with you at the Twins, and we would be together again.*

No, no. She was still alive, and there was still the faint possibility that she bore his heir. She must be strong for them both, must revenge him however she could. But that was the last coherent
thought she had the strength to form, and she fell into a dreamless daze.

Ser Brynden returned in late afternoon. He had been sitting in a corner of the inn's common room, listening to all the gossip he could, and he had much and more to report. Ryman Frey and his men had indeed been hanged just six miles south of here, and it was universally believed that Lady Stoneheart and her outlaws were responsible. Queen Cersei had been arrested on charges of treason, and Ser Jaime was on his way to Raventree Hall, to take the castle from Lord Blackwood. Once that was accomplished, the Trident would be pacified, and the sundering of Robb's short-lived kingdom complete.

"Gods be good," Jeyne murmured. "The queen has been...?" If half the tales were true, Cersei Lannister was the Mad King with teats, an incestuous, scheming, murderous devil's daughter entirely deserving of her new home in a prison cell in the Great Sept of Baelor. All Jeyne's life, her family had been bannermen to Casterly Rock and the Warden of the West, and it was odd to now think of them as her implacable enemies, but she could not summon a single drop of grief for the golden queen she'd once so admired. It was Robb she wept for. Robb and his poor lady mother Catelyn and her brother Raynald.

"Arrested, aye," Ser Brynden confirmed tersely.

"Then who rules the realm?"

"Mace Tyrell has been appointed Hand. And Ser Harys Swyft and Kevan Lannister are Tommen's regents." The Blackfish snorted. "The Fat Flower, the Chinless Wonder, and the lesser Lannister. Seven save us all."

"Oh." Whoever governed in King's Landing no longer seemed to matter nearly as much. "Could we... stay here? A time? Just a day or two?"

Ser Brynden frowned. "Child, I know you're dead on your feet, but there is no safe haven for leagues and leagues. We must reach Oldstones as soon as we can. And after..."

"And after?" Jeyne pushed herself upright with a grimace. "Where are we making?" *Nowhere is safe in this world anymore. "Tell me."

The Blackfish cast a suspicious glance at the walls. They were very far from the Red Keep, where such things were well known to have ears, but Fairmarket was still a busy trading town. He gestured her to come closer, and she did.

"We make for the last of your lord husband's loyal vassals," the Blackfish whispered. "They will help us get to where we must go."

"Which vassal? Where?"

"My lady, you will trust whatever I say?"

"Yes, my lord."

Ser Brynden paused. Then he said, "Greywater Watch."

"In the Neck? The crannogmen?" Jeyne had heard all sorts of frightening stories about the green men who lived in the bogs, and the castle that moved. "Why?"

"Howland Reed was Eddard Stark's most loyal friend. You are still as yet Queen in the North, widow of the Young Wolf, Eddard's eldest son. If we can reach the Neck with our own necks
intact, he will be honor-bound to help you."

Jeyne had a markedly less idealistic view of honor than might otherwise be expected of a fifteen-year-old girl. She had once been so, aye, but that was before the Freys had slain Robb while he was their guest, at their board, at his uncle's wedding. "He will?"

"Lord Reed is to be trusted with our very lives, I am told."

"And do we mean to stay there forever?"

"No." The Blackfish ran a rough, callused hand through his shock of silver hair. "There is your lord husband's will to execute. As I said, if you are not with his child, then – "

Jeyne put a hand to her stomach. It might have been more rounded than it was before, but it was impossible to tell. She hadn't bled, it was true, but she'd had no morning illnesses or other symptoms. "Robb's heir," she breathed. "But his brothers are dead."

"No," said the Blackfish. "Not all of them."
Davos

Even from offshore, the isle of Skagos was the most forbidding place Davos Seaworth had ever seen in his life. And for a man who'd grown up in Flea Bottom, trafficked the dimmest and most disreputable corners of the world during his years as a smuggler, been given a keep on the wind-scorched cliffs of Cape Wrath, gone to the smoke and salt and sulfur of Dragonstone to serve his king, and seen the Blackwater Rush turn into a murderous green inferno, there was a good deal to compare it to.

Davos kept well out to sea, studying the horizon intently. Rocks lurked just beneath the breakers, waiting to tear his hull out, and a pack of seals occupied the bleak bare beach ahead, making such a racket that he could hear it even over the similar efforts of the gulls. Stacks of basalt sculpted the great cliffs to either side, and the crashing waves had carved a cave, a gaping black chasm that made a sort of music with the whistling wind, a savage, skirling air. Further inland, the ice-clad terrain rose into jagged peaks, their snowbound summits shrouded in desolate clouds. Gouts of mephitic steam geysered from blowholes, and crags of salt-splattered schist tottered like old men. And that is not even to mention the flesh-eaters. No one knew for certain if the wildling tribes of Skagos were actually cannibals, mainly because no one ever went to Skagos. But that was in part why Davos was here.

He turned away. "Reef the sail," he called. "Unship the oars. We'll row the rest of the way in, make landfall – his shortened fingers sketched the spit of sheltered sand between the seals' beach and the sea cliffs – "there. We'll have to hide the boat, continue on foot."

His companion nodded but did not answer. Davos had not expected him to. Wex was ironborn, a boy of twelve or thirteen, who had provided the intelligence which sent them here. But it had all been by pantomime and a few laboriously written words, for the lad was as mute as a stone. Theon Turncloak's squire, and now mine. It made him think of his Devan, in the north with his king. Davos could not recall if Devan had stayed at the Wall with the red woman, or accompanied Stannis on his march. Each was fraught with its own dangers.

As for the fact that Wex could not speak, this was more boon than curse. "It would not do at all for you to be seen, onion knight," Lord Wyman Manderly had told him, just before they slipped out of White Harbor. "You will recall, your head and hands have been mounted on my gate, and for the purposes of the realm, you are a dead man. It will be very unfortunate for us both if that is discovered not to be so."

"I understand, my lord," Davos had answered quietly. He was no stranger to outrunning the authorities, to departing on dark moons and high tides, giving false names to customs masters and port factors. He somehow doubted there would be much bureaucracy to evade on Skagos, but if he did find Rickon Stark and the wildling woman with him, he would have to bring them back to civilization, to men, men with eyes and tongues alike. Davos Seaworth, Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, and Hand of the King, would be known to many. And Davos Shorthand the onion knight, to more.

But he had no choice. That was the price Lord Manderly had set. "Smuggle me back my liege lord," he had said, "and I will take Stannis Baratheon as my king."

The last living Stark. Or one of the two living ones, at least. The crippled boy, the simple-minded giant, and the crannogmen had gone one way, Wex had conveyed, and the wildling woman and the younger boy had gone another. Either of the sons would serve, so long as he had his wolf to prove his identity. Only a trueborn scion of Eddard Stark could liberate the North from the monstrous
Boltons, and Lord Manderly – one of the bravest men Davos had known, for all that he looked old, fat, and feeble – intended to see him placed on his ancestral seat in Winterfell. *While my king fights the Boltons too.* Often Davos wondered how Stannis Baratheon fared, faced with the fury of the wild. *It makes no matter if he is winning or losing. I am sworn to do my duty for him, always. And if, gods forbid, he should be hurt or dead, he would want me to carry on, to press Shireen's claim. Any abomination born of incest can never sit the Iron Throne.* At times, it made Davos more weary than anything. *To be sure, we overlooked it in the Targaryens for three hundred years.*

They were entering the treacherous tide race, and Davos needed his attention on the oars. He pulled one, Wex the other, nosing the narrow currach through the rocks. It was twenty feet long with one mast, built of skins and planks and wicker ribs, a hide lashed over the stern to create a cramped shelter where they took turns sleeping. It had been a voyage of a fortnight from White Harbor, sailing with the coastline just in view, putting farther out to sea if a watchtower was sighted. The currach had proven much sturdier than it looked, even though a freak squall off the Grey Cliffs had nearly swamped it. *Not my Black Betha, but not a bad little craft.*

Davos touched the sword at his hip. His adventurous life had furnished him plenty of practical experience in fighting his way out of tight corners, but he had never had to live off the land before; hunting was either a nobleman's pastime or a peasant's necessity. He prayed that Wex was a good shot with that curved horn bow he'd brought. In this place, that might well be the difference between life and death.

Resolutely pushing away the thought that the Skagosi might eat human flesh only because there was no other meat to be found on the island, Davos began to untie the cargo lashings. There was a whole plague of seals, to be sure, and seabirds as well. Of the multitude of ways in which they were likely to die here, starvation was hopefully not one, and Davos folded back the hide, then pulled out two canvas rucksacks, one for him and one for Wex. He was already wearing the heavy wraps Lord Manderly had given them: a cloak and hood of double thickness, lined on the inside with fur and on the outside with waxed leather, fur gloves and three woolen surcoats, boots that laced up past his knee, and a fox pelt that could be fastened across his nose and mouth with a bone pin. But the rucksacks held their food, their bedrolls, their flints and whetstones, a sealed scroll, and something Lord Manderly had given Davos especially: a knife with a blade of glittering black glass, seeming to hold its own fire deep in its heart.

"What is this for, my lord?" Davos had asked, startled. "I have weapons enough, and surely this is very valuable – " He had tried to give it back.

The fat lord caught his hand, hard. "Take it, onion knight. I beg you. It could be that some stories
are merely stories, but I will not run the risk, not with my lord's life and my own fate at stake. No man can doubt that the cold winds are rising." His eyes met Davos' unblinking, his face grim and solemn as a statue. "Long the Manderlys have been considered to be not quite proper northmen, but we know the tales too. At night, keep this blade on your person at all times. Or the boy's, if he's standing the watch."

A cold chill had run down Davos' back then, and now, just to think of it. He sheathed the black glass knife alongside his own dagger, and checked the sky to see how much daylight was left. Not more than three hours, by his reckoning. Night came earlier each time, especially this far north. Soon, the sun would not rise at all, but remain below the horizon, casting only an uncertain blue twilight. And in a winter that could last for years, men must wonder if they had only dreamt its light and warmth, its very existence.

Another chill ran down Davos' back. Seven save us, how does anyone ever live here? He helped Wex drag the currach into a fissure in the cliff face and heap it over with the few scrawny, stunted bits of brush that were at hand. Then he hoisted the rucksack up on his shoulders, and took a deep breath. "Come," he said to the mute boy, his breath puffing silver on the air. "We've a few hours in hope of finding a sheltered spot for a camp. If we haven't found one by the time dusk is falling, we'll make do. On no account will we blunder on ahead in the dark."

Wex nodded, hitching up his own rucksack. He made a gesture inviting Davos to lead the way, and the onion knight did so. He skirted a tidepool, bouldered up a scatter of glacial moraine, and gained the steep, narrow path that led almost vertically upwards. He and the boy both had to use their hands, and Davos avoided looking down. Although the rock walls to each side prevented the route from being too exposed, it was still a heady fall, and he'd take out the boy on his way.

At last, the couloir opened up and leveled out to an alpine meadow. Monolithic cliffs rose to each side, the last of the sun gilding their spurs a fiery gold, and an eagle circled in the updrafts. Davos could hear running water somewhere in the tundra. There must be a hot spring around here; that was good, as it meant they could potentially keep warm without a fire. Who knew how many far-sighted eyes might already have caught a glimpse of them?

"We'll not find any better ground for our camp," Davos said to Wex, and the boy nodded agreement. They both pulled off their rucksacks, and Davos scouted about until he found the rock under which the hot spring bubbled. The warmth was delightful on his cold face, and he beckoned Wex over to share it. The water would be no good for drinking, Davos knew, but there was snow and ice enough.

The shadows grew longer and deeper. The sun receded from the clifftops, but the eagle remained, wings outspread. A fine thing, to have wings. He could still hear the seal colony faintly from here. Wherever she is right now, whether at the Wall or victorious with His Grace in Winterfell, the red woman will be lighting her nightfires. Davos had to admit that up here, it was easier to believe in Melisandre's Other, the mortal enemy of R'hllor, the Lord of Night and Terror. But her faith had never seemed more heretical to him than it did now. I have seen a heart tree. It will only ever be the old gods who rule in Winterfell.

Davos did not know if the Seven had any power in this desolate hinterland, but that did not stop him praying to them anyway. To the Warrior for courage, the Smith for strength, the Mother for mercy – and also on behalf of his wife and two little ones, so far away, whose faces he might never see again. Lastly he added a short invocation to the Crone. She lifts her lamp of shining gold, and sees our fates as they unfold. Aye, the gods were here, so long as they were in his heart.

It was very dark by now, and the stars were coming out. Davos felt wistful, sad, suddenly wishing
that his companion could talk after all. It would have done him good to hear another man's voice in this place. "Which gods do you worship, Wex?" he asked.

The boy pointed toward the hot spring, then motioned as if pushing his head under.

"Ah – the Drowned God?" Davos did not know much of the faith of the ironborn, but suspected it to be as hard and cold and barren as the place which had given it birth. An apt choice for a seafaring people, he supposed, and a man who'd spent as much time aboard a ship as he had well understood the nearly mystical power of wind and water. He did know a bit of their prayer. What is dead can never die, but rises again, harder and stronger. Thinking of that, and the look in Lord Manderly's eyes when he had given him the black glass knife, made Davos shudder. No, he decided, this god is not for me.

He reached into the rucksack and pulled out their supper. It was a pastry coffyn filled with mashed neeps, spiced sausage, and diced carrots, chunks of white lard, and he broke it in two and gave one to Wex. The first bite was so good, it almost brought tears to his eyes. Father Above, watch over Manderly. Lord Wyman had gone to attend Ramsay Bolton's wedding, and considering how dangerous weddings were in the Seven Kingdoms these days – not even to mention the character of the bridegroom – and if he did not return alive, it suddenly became thrice as dangerous for Davos to be risking his neck in the back of beyond.

At last, nodding with exhaustion, he stretched out on the hard ground, and gave Wex the glass dagger. "Wake me at midnight," he instructed the squire. "I'll watch until dawn. Don't let that out of your sight."

Wex cocked his head quizzically.

"I don't know what it's for," Davos admitted, "but Lord Manderly was firm on it."

Wex shrugged, then nodded. He smiled reassuringly, and Davos mustered up a smile in return. Then he closed his eyes, and almost at once fell into a murky dream of seals.

They survived that night. During his watch, Davos found himself starting at every small noise, every changing shadow, but nothing sallied forth to molest them. More than a few feet away from the hot spring, the cold was tear-inducing, and Davos thought he'd frozen himself solid when he stepped off to take a piss. It froze before it hit the ground.

Seven hells. He was relieved beyond measure when dawn came, but surprised and slightly unnerved to see that the eagle was still overhead. Just stories, he reminded himself. It can't be watching you, it's just a bird.

He woke Wex, and the two of them had a quick breakfast, fragile pearly light spilling down into the meadow. Then it was time to choose a new route, and Davos could only see one option: straight ahead, where the ground slanted up into an ice field. There were bone axes and bear-claws in his pack, and while they would get them up the ice, they certainly wouldn't get them up the cliffs.

It was a cloudless day, and the sun was incandescent. Davos squinted his eyes almost shut as he climbed, hacking out steps with his axe, periodically glancing behind him to ensure that Wex was still following. Fool, he's more surefooted than you are.

At last, near midday, they summited the glacier and stopped for a bite; both of them were ravenous. From here, it was possible to glimpse the cavernous interior of Skagos, which spread out to all sides in white mountains and barren valleys. There was no sign of human habitation anywhere, not even a rising column of smoke.
"Onwards," Davos said with a sigh. "How about you lead for a time, lad? I'm almost blind from the glare."

Wex shrugged his agreement, and steered them across the outlay of the glacier and down into a rocky ravine. The snow came up past their knees, so they had to swing from boulder to boulder like a pair of mummers' monkeys. *That eagle is still overhead.* Again Davos told himself to ignore it, but he had not lived so long by ignoring the bristling on the back of his neck. *We need to find cover somewhere.* But where? No trees grew here, and the gods only knew where going foraging would end them up.

Finally, they reached the terminus of the ravine, and Davos heard a thundering ahead. As he and Wex picked through the last strew of stones, he caught a whiff of spray, and knew what they would see when they stepped down into the basin. A giant waterfall, some hundred feet high, poured down the cliff face in front of them, exploding into a plume of freezing mist and slicking the rock like lace. The roar was deafening.

*Where from here?* Davos thought they were traveling in a more or less straight line, but no one could tell him about any villages on Skagos – something he wasn't sure he wanted to know anyway. It was only habit that had brought them this way. If they went far enough, eventually they had to meet something. Or someone.

Wex clapped his hands.

"Aye?" Davos asked, jerked back to attention.

The boy pointed at a narrow stone keyhole some fifteen or twenty feet above. Tied to a rock, clearly hanging down for climbers to use, was a frozen hemp rope.

"Mother have mercy," Davos muttered. The keyhole led out onto an equally narrow path, but one that had clearly been chiseled out of the mountainside by man, not nature. More ropes were strung up along it, providing a more or less safe passage for a strong man with a head for heights. Where it led was another question altogether.

Nothing for it. "I'll go first," Davos told Wex. "If you see anything at all amiss, you should – " *Should what? Run and shout for help?* "Just don't follow me."

Wex nodded again, and Davos, gritting his teeth, wound the rope around both arms. It would be possible to essay a cautious ascent by leaning back, bracing his weight, and crab-walking up. His shoulders complained as he crawled off the ground, hideously conscious of how vulnerable he was. If there was an archer somewhere above, he was a sitting duck.

After a painful climb, observed all the while by Wex and the eagle, he made it to the top. He let go of the rope with relief, wondering if he'd chafed blisters even through his gloves, and signaled for the boy. *Well, it seems likely that we won't have another quiet night.*

Presently, Wex's head emerged over the brink, and Davos offered a hand to pull him up. "I hope you have a drop of goat blood in you, lad."

Wex made a rattling noise that might have been a laugh, and Davos was startled; he'd never known the mute boy could make any sounds at all. But it made him smile in return, and he grasped the first of the ropes to start the traverse.

He lost track of how long they crept forward. At one point they were almost directly above the waterfall, and his heart stopped in his chest when the ropes skidded in his hands. He would have
taken off his gloves in hopes of a better grip, but that would surely freeze them solid. He kept nervously glancing at the sun. *And that bloody eagle.*

The shadows were beginning to thicken by the time they emerged in another meadow, this one much smaller and lined with sentinels. They wore strange, rough faces, tooled out of the rock with adze and awl, and they gave Davos a cold, unpleasant feeling. *I do not want to sleep here tonight. How far will they let us walk in, before they spring the trap?*

He took a step forward, hand falling to his sword. *Will I even see anything there to fight, or will I be grappling with ghosts? Or mayhaps –*

Wex screamed.

Davos spun around. It was a choked, almost animal sound, not half as loud as it might have been, but it was definitely a scream. And in an instant, he saw why. The boy was on his knees, clutching at a grey-fletched arrow sunk halfway up the shaft in his shoulder.

Davos snatched for his sword, but it had barely gotten clear of the scabbard when something punched him very hard in the back. He staggered, did not quite lose his footing, and managed to get his blade up in time for it to shriek against the stone-headed axe a howling shadow had just swung at him. He could see dark, furious eyes, stripes of blue paint, teeth bared. Blow followed blow followed blow, and then Davos' foot skidded out from under him, a searing pain flowered in his ankle, and he went down, still fighting.

The Skagosi had found them at last.
When she threw back the shutters, the air on her face was as cold as winter's kiss. Giant's Lance, distantly visible through the window, had its brows buried in frowning clouds, and a fine trellis of frost climbed the pane. Below, the courtyard was almost deserted save for a mongrel hound digging in the mud for scraps. The Gates of the Moon was a much larger and more lively castle than the Eyrie, and such tranquility was not normally in its nature, but the feast last night had run into the wee hours. The household would be late and lazy in rising today, complaining of ale head and sour bellies.

Everyone but me – and Father. Alayne shivered. The feast as been full as magnificent as any half-grown girl could dream. The lush valleys of the Vale were unspoiled by war, and the harvest had been good. The hall lit with torches in sconces and candles in rings, servants scurrying, countless platters of food and flacons of wine, everything made rich and flavorful with spices, stews, savories, creams, sauces, garnishes. Myranda Royce had been in her element, conversing with every guest, from the villeins of humble smallholdings to the Lords Declarant themselves; all save Ser Lyn Corbray were in attendance. Alayne knew why. Publicly, Corbray continued to play Lord Petyr Baelish's most dogged foe, but privately, Baelish had him in his back pocket, giving him all the gold and boys and opportunities for murder his heart desired. Like the rest of us. Littlefinger pulls all our strings.

Alayne shivered again. The feast had not been held only to celebrate the bounty of the harvest, but also to introduce young Harrold Hardyng, Lady Anya Waynwood's ward, to the gathered nobility of the Vale. And my betrothed. To be sure, that was a secret she barely dared to think as yet. But her father had laid out the entire plan. With little Lord Robert sickly and failing fast, Harrold, the last distant remnant of Jasper Arryn's bloodline, stood to become Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale some time in the very near future. And when he does, I will be married to him, and my true identity revealed. And Father promised that when I emerge in the sept with my auburn hair flowing loose and a maiden's wolf cloak on my back, every lord will swear on the instant to win me back my birthright.

Alayne turned away and crossed the room, more than half tempted to seek sanctuary in the fading warmth of her quilts. She had not found Harry the Heir disagreeable – far from it, in fact. He was tall, lean, and rangy, with a mop of thick fair hair, blue eyes, a ready smile, and a familiar way with everyone, particularly the serving maids. He had kissed Alayne's hand and told her that she was beautiful, and for the better part of two hours sat next to her at the high table, relaying amusingly dirty stories about the various eminences who were present.

He seemed genuinely both friendly and funny, and for that time, she had almost allowed herself to be seduced, believing he might truly be the knight in shining armor that Joffrey never was. But he had a ridiculous, jaunty wisp of a beard and mustache, and whenever she looked at it, all she could see was Lancel Lannister, the queen's cousin. He too had had that same cocksure swagger, the confidence of youth and good looks, until he had taken a wound at the Battle of the Blackwater so grievous that he became a frail, broken, white-haired wraith. Lord Petyr told her that he had subsequently turned fervently religious, to the point of refusing to become Lord of Darry and consummate his marriage. "Understandable," he'd added, with Littlefinger's sly smile. "If I was wed to Gatehouse Ami, I can't say I'd be in any hurry either."

The knights of summer. That was all Lancel had been, and it was all Harrold Hardyng was either. And when Sansa went to bed that night, it was not Harry that she dreamed of. She dreamed of the Blackwater as it had been for her: green flames leaping like towers from the river, supper with the
queen and the ladies and knowing that Ilyn Payne lurked in the corner to snick off their heads if the battle turned in Stannis' favor. And then when she'd climbed to her rooms, another shadow had been there, waiting.

*I'll have that song you promised, little bird.* So she had sung the Mother's hymn for him, at the point of his knife. *They're all afraid of me. No one would ever hurt you again, or I'd kill them.*

He had wanted to take her from the city with him. She had refused. *So he took only a song and a kiss, and left me a bloody cloak.* It was that kiss she'd dreamed of the most, her hand on the terrible scarred half of his face, the caked dried blood and the wetness that was not blood, his eyes that lived with flame, his mouth on hers. *I could keep you safe.*

Sandor Clegane was no knight of summer. He hated knights of any stripe, in fact. *But perhaps he was as much a liar as the others.* After fleeing King's Landing, she had heard, the Hound had turned rabid, butchering the innocent villagers of Saltkaps with terrible ferocity, raping every woman and girl he happened across, burning and sacking every poor crofter's cottage. *If I had gone with him, would that have happened to me too?* Yet no matter how many stories she heard of that distinctive dog's-head helm being spotted at the site of this atrocity or that one, Sansa could not entirely believe it. *A dog will die for you, but never lie to you.* And it was Sandor's elder brother Ser Gregor, the Mountain that Rode, who was the real monster in House Clegane. *It's said that he is dead too, slain by the Red Viper of Dorne as they dueled for Tyrion Lannister's life.* The Viper had died first, but by his poisoned spear, the Mountain had died slowly, and agonizingly.

Tyrion. The Imp. Still – for the moment, until they received definitive word of his death – her own lord husband. She would have been arrested alongside him on suspicion of King Joffrey's murder, if Ser Dontos and Littlefinger had not spirited her out of the city that night. *And Littlefinger repaid Dontos with a quarrel in the throat.*

Alayne did not want to think about these things. She knelt before her trunk, pulling out smallclothes and shift and dress and mantle, all a sober dark blue and brown. It matched well with her hair, but she knew that it showed auburn at the roots; she'd used the last of the dye a fortnight ago. With winter setting in and the Vale remote and forbidding at the best of times, there would be no merchants arriving for the gods only knew how long. *Best hope I become free to marry before then.*

She found Lord Petyr in the hall, breaking his fast on fried fish, potage, and black bread with preserves. Upon seeing her, his face split in a broad smile, and he tugged out the chair beside him. "Sweetling! I've always said that those who rise early are those who will eventually rule the world. The sorts who can't lie slugabed when there is always so much to be done. Have you a tender tummy this morn? What can I have brought for you?"

"I will have what you have, my lord." She glanced nervously about, but they were alone save for the servants at the far end. Lowering her voice, she asked, "Does Harrold know who I am?"

Petyr gazed back at her, grey-green eyes all feigned innocence. "Of course he knows, sweetling. You are Alayne Stone, my natural and so very lovely daughter." He put one hand on her collarbone, just above her breast. "You are all the time, aren't you? In here."

"Aye." She tried to slide out from his touch. "But I meant – "

"Shh." Littlefinger placed his other hand to her lips. "Since you ask, the answer is no. Not yet. But he does know that there is a mysterious beauty who may not be entirely what she seems, who is being bruited about as his potential bride. And he might just have put two and two together last night, which is bound to make him feel very clever indeed." He smiled. "That's how you do these
things, sweetling. No one will ever praise Harry's brains, I'm afraid, but with so much else to recommend him, why should it matter?"

"I suppose not," Alayne murmured, nodding her thanks as the maidservant set her breakfast before her. "But my lord – "

"Father, sweetling."

"Father." She'd somewhat fallen out of the habit during his absence. "How much time do we really have? Lord Robert was not at the feast."

"Taking our poor dear Sweetrobin to a feast would be like taking a bear to a baiting, don't you think? I suspected we might all find it easier to enjoy ourselves without him flying into shaking fits atop the cheese and attempting to suckle on Randa's teat – though yours are infinitely finer, I must say. But don't fret. I had Maester Colemon serve him his supper privately, in his rooms."

*Maester Colemon,* Alayne thought. Something about that disturbed her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. It occurred to her again how much he appeared convinced that her little cousin's demise was an unquestionable certainty. "Does he fare better this morning?"

"Doubtless not. Ever since Marillion killed his mother, may the gods assoil her sweet soul, I fear our Sweetrobin is a nestling without wings."

*You killed Lady Lysa.* Sometimes it sickened Alayne that she had to be grateful for it, seeing as her aunt had been trying to kill *her* at the time. And by now she had told the lie so often that sometimes she too thought of it as Marillion's fault. For nights and nights afterwards the blinded singer had played the harp and sung laments from his sky cell, haunting them all with his music. Sometimes she wondered why Lord Petyr had not had Marillion's tongue torn out. *Did he never fear that he would spill the truth?* It was just one of the things that Alayne Stone did not understand. Still more, why Marillion had confessed most eloquently to a crime which he had never committed.

Littlefinger, looking at her face, smiled again. "No one cares for my stepson's health more than I do, sweetling," he said soothingly. "But it would look awkward if he expired the moment we left the Eyrie, so let us hope he has the decency not to do so. Speaking of which, it was rather inconvenient of Cersei to take herself out of the game so prematurely."

"What?" The sudden shift in topic left Alayne bewildered. "The queen?"

"Do you know another unstable golden-haired Lannister wench? Thank the gods, neither do I. I did mean for her to be about some while longer – for one, it would ensure that whenever the Imp's ugly head does turn up, there will be no mistaking it. But I daresay that with a fugitive of such infamous stature, so to speak, we'll see it paraded on a pole from Dorne to the Wall nevertheless."

"But. . ." She still did not understand – entirely. From what Littlefinger had told her, he and the Tyrells had conspired to murder Joff at his wedding feast, with one of the black amethysts from Asshai in her hairnet. And he *had* manipulated Ser Dontos into rescuing her while ostensibly miles and miles away. But as Lord Protector, he hadn't left the Vale since they first arrived. How could he be so sure that he could have ousted Cersei whenever he wanted, with barely a finger lifted?

Petyr, reading her expression once again, leaned over and lightly kissed her nose, then her mouth. "Let me give you a clue, my darling. The queen is accused of fornication, incest, murder, and treason. Whose was the testimony that inspired the High Septon to order her seized on the spot? Why, the puissant Osney Kettleblack's, of course."
For a moment it remained a mystery – and then, as Alayne thought of the fierce old man named Oswell, one of Petyr's tenants on the Fingers, the one with the three sons, the Kettleblack – it suddenly fell into place. She looked back at Littlefinger with a start. "So was it – on your orders, did he – ?"

"He did confess to carnal knowledge of her all on his own, I will have you know." Apparently to emphasize the point, Petyr dipped his head and kissed her again, deep and lingering. "Not the most militant sparrows in the world could get him to say otherwise. Queen Margaery stands accused as well, but with her lord father presiding as Hand, I imagine she'll get off with her head still on her shoulders."

"Margaery?" Alayne was shocked. Margaery had been kind to her. "What is said of her?"

"Why, what is always said of queens – that she spread her legs for those whom she should not. Some fop named the Blue Bard, which doubtless underscores further why one should never trust singers. A few others, I misremember – Horror or Slobber, one of the Redwyne twins, and her own brother Ser Loras. Though whoever came up with that fable will be buggered in the afterlife by Lord Renly's shade, if the gods are just." Littlefinger chuckled. "As for Loras, he is sadly unavailable to defend either his own honor or his sister's. He was horrifically burned with oil while storming Dragonstone for Tommen, and is said to lie hourly at the Stranger's door."

Ser Loras? For a moment Sansa could not speak. He had given her a red rose once, and she had been dazzled by him, young and sword-slim and graceful as a dream, with the lazy smile and the tumble of mahogany-brown curls and the perfection of his flowered armor. She had once, however foolishly, dreamed of wedding him. Life is not a song, sweetling. In life, the monsters win.

She pushed back from the table. "I'm finished with my breakfast, I think. May I be excused, Father?"

He glanced at her slyly. "Of course, my sweet. But you ought know that Harry has requested to go riding with you this afternoon. If he attempts to squirrel you off to some romantic spot, I suggest refusing. We don't want him relieving you of your maidenhead before the wedding night."

Scarlet-faced, Alayne fled. There were too many thoughts swirling about inside her right now; she wanted peace and quiet more than anything, wanted just an hour where she could be alone and weep and not have to act every moment. But she could not. There was still too much at stake. So instead, she turned her steps toward Lord Robert's rooms. She pressed her ear cautiously to his bedchamber door; no sound came from within but squeaky childish snoring. A pang of pity gripped her. She knocked on the adjoining door.

After a moment, a flustered-looking Maester Colemon stuck his head out. "My – my lady! What may I do for you?"

"Might I come in?" Alayne asked quietly.

"Of course." The maester stepped back and pottered ahead of her, nervously plucking things up and putting them down. During the few weeks they'd had to settle into the Gates of the Moon, he'd already succeeded in building a veritable rat's nest in his solar. "What is it?"

Alayne paused. At last, she decided that the only way was to cut to the heart. "Who makes Lord Robert's meals?"

The maester blinked, startled. "Why, the kitchens, of course. Lord Robert's digestion has been of a delicate disposition this last fortnight, it is true. . . more so than usual, but I imagine that is down to
the fact that the cooks at the Eyrie knew precisely what he did and did not care for, and what upset him. Lord Nestor's servants will soon learn the – "

Alayne held up a hand, and Colemon fell silent. Then she leaned close and whispered, "I think he is being poisoned."

The maester's eyes went very round. "But – but who would ever? Robert Arryn is just a boy, a sad small boy who is unwell to begin with, who scarce remembers his father and lost his mother – he would not – "

For me, Alayne thought, sick at heart. He is being poisoned for me. If Harrold was ever to inherit the Eyrie, marry her, and take her back to Winterfell, then Robert had to die. If she had had any doubts, they were gone. "That sad small boy is Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale. Men have done thrice as much for half the prize."

"That is so, my lady, but . . ." Colemon shook his head. "I will not believe that, even of – who is it, do you know? The Lords Declarant swore to protect the boy's rights at all costs, but I suppose it would have been a most convenient pretext for one who meant ill to smuggle himself among them. . . is it Ser Harlan Hunter? He already had his own lord father Eon murdered, it is whispered, it would be naught for him to do it again. His elder brothers still stand between him and Longbow Hall, it would behoove Gilwood and Eustace to take care. . . but how would Harlan Hunter profit from Robert's death?"

Alayne locked her fingers in her lap. "I do not believe it is Ser Harlan."

"My lady, then who?"

How can I tell? If I name Petyr, everything will collapse to pieces. Bronze Yohn Royce, at least, would take the accusation seriously, though he might be opposed by his cousin Lord Nestor, Randa's father, on whom Petyr had bestowed this very castle in order to buy his support. But then the Vale would break out in swords, and Harry would be heir to nothing, and I would never go home, but remain Alayne Stone for whatever little of my life there should be left. What was one small sick boy, against that?

"I do not know," Alayne lied at last. "But there are things I have heard. . . from my father. . ."

"Should I employ a food taster, my lady?"

I do not know that that would do much good. Sweetsleep was a gentle, kind poison, tasty as honey, and little Lord Robert loved his cakes and puddings and pies. And Maester Colemon had already become suspicious of how much he had taken, even though a pinch stopped Robert's shaking fits and kept him safely sedate. "I do not know what to tell you," Alayne said finally. "But have a man question the cooks. Are there any men left in Robert's household who are not in Petyr's pay? "Make absolutely certain of what goes into his food. That is all I dare say for now."

Maester Colemon nodded, eyes wide. "Aye, my lady. It will be done as you wish."

"Thank you." Alayne rose. "And one more thing. It would be wise that no one else learns of what has passed between us."

"Of course not." The maester bowed her out.

Alayne stood in the corridor a moment, irresolute. Then she quietly lifted the bedchamber door on its latch, and went in to visit her cousin.
He was tossing and turning restlessly beneath the quilts, but upon hearing her, he sat up so fast that he startled her. His fine, unkempt brown hair fell in his eyes, which occupied much of the available room in his thin face. "Alayne? Is that you?"

"Aye, Sweetrobin. It's me." She sat down on the foot of the bed, just out of his reach.

Lord Robert, ignoring this, scrambled out and crawled toward her eagerly, twining his arms around her neck and giving her a damp kiss. "Did you go to the feast last night? I wanted to go. I wanted."

"My Sweetrobin was sick last night, I heard."

Robert Arryn pouted. "It wasn't fair. I would have gone and sat in my high seat, like I used to do with Mommy. She would have let me go."

Doubtless she would have; she had let him do everything else as well, part of the reason for their current difficulties. Robert had now laid his head on Alayne's chest and was already in the process of attaching to her like a barnacle; gently, she loosened the grasp of his fingers on her dress. It was hard to tell if he felt any more rickety than usual. He always felt rickety and waiflike.

"I was sick," the little lord of the Eyrie said. "Maester Colemon purged me. I don't like it when he does that. You should make him stop."

"Sweetling, Maester Colemon wants only what's best for you. One of the few remaining men who does, I fear."

"But he's mean," Robert whined. "It hurts."

Alayne sighed, turning her head away from another attempted kiss. Between him and Littlefinger, it seems that is all I do anymore. Must I now add Harrold to the mix? "Sweetrobin, please. Can you not—"

"I want to go back to the Eyrie," Robert announced. "They know how to be nice."

"I've told you before, we can't. Not until spring comes. The snows have begun in earnest now, it's a cold white tomb."

His lip quivered. "But I want to!"

I want to go home too. More than you will ever know. "My Sweetrobin promised he'd be brave. Remember how brave you were coming down here? For me?"

"I was, wasn't I?" Robert said, pleased.

"Yes, you were," she said, and he gave her a gap-toothed smile of such shy sincerity that for a moment she almost forgot what a brat he could be. Just a little boy, as Maester Colemon said. Scared and ill and alone. This might not engender in her the sudden desire to become Lord Robert's permanent nursemaid; in fact, it only deepened her dilemma. But she gave him a quick embrace. "Are you well now?"

"Sort of," Robert said dubiously, and, snuggling closer, hastily emitted a cough. "Sing to me, Alayne."

It will take more than a song to cure what ails you, sweetling. "I will, if you'll get up and dressed. Take some air with Ser Lothor. Or Mya, you know Mya, don't you?"

"If you bundle up well, you won't feel it. Some fresh air will make you stronger." The bedchamber had a stale, shut-up smell to it, as if a detritus of spilled medicine and spoilt food and unwashed linens had combined to turn it into a beast's lair, not a small boy's. "And I'll get Gretchel or Maddy in here to clean this and make it nice."

"But I don't like them."

"Aye, but you are the Lord of the Eyrie. You should live as befits you, don't you think? Come." Alayne made an effort to pull him out of bed, but he resisted, stubborn as a hermit crab camped in a choice shell.

"I don't have to do what I don't want."

"Shall I tell your lord stepfather you said that, Sweetrobin?"

As always, the threat of Petyr Baelish exerted a profound incantation upon the boy. He is terrified of him, and with good reason. He even submitted meekly to having the maid Gretchel wash and dress him, or at least as meekly as Robert Arryn ever did anything. Then Alayne led him down the corridors in search of Ser Lothor Brune. Just leading Robert a few turns around the bailey on his pony would qualify as the most exercise he had had since they arrived at the foot of the mountain.

Ser Lothor was not in the kitchens; he might not yet be up, but if that was so, he should not be lying abed even longer than his lord. But as they were stepping into the courtyard, Robert's mittened hand clutched in her own, someone bumped into her. "Pardons, m'lady."

Alayne glanced up, and had to hastily quell her surge of alarm. Petyr's hedge knight Ser Shadrich, elsewise known as the Mad Mouse, was shorter even than her, with a profusion of orange hair and a narrow, leering face. But he was no joke with the blade he wore, and she did not at all like the way he looked at her. Nor was he making any especial effort to get out of her way. "Ser. Excuse us, if you'd be so kind."

Ser Shadrich grinned. "Taking the little lordling out of doors? You're a braver man than I am, my lady."

"It is for his health."

"His health. To be sure. Well, we all do care greatly about Lord Robert's health. I'd even teach him calisthenics, if there were a few silver stags in it."

"Have you seen Ser Lothor Brune about, by chance?" Alayne was not about to trust the Mad Mouse with unsupervised custody of Robert's person, even for an instant. Hedge knights were a notoriously fickle lot, and Ser Shadrich worse than most.

"That one? Likely still sleeping off his wine and his frustrated lust. Give him to me, get your father to settle the difference later. Then he can – "

"Then I can what?" Petyr's voice completed from behind them, and Alayne jumped. "Sweetling, Sweetrobin, and Ser Shadrich – shall I attempt saying that three times fast? What a surprise to see you all together."

Lord Robert, spotting his stepfather, shrank behind Alayne's leg. The Mad Mouse himself looked nonplussed, or as close to that as such a creature could ever come. "M'lord. I was attempting to assist your beautiful daughter in location of Ser Lothor, but I fear it defeated even our combined
abilities. I'll bid you a good morrow." With that, and a clankingly insincere bow, he sidled off down the corridor.

Lord Petyr gave Robert a curious look. "What are you doing up?"

"Alayne got me," the boy said, somewhat less emphatically than usual.

Littlefinger's glance raised to Alayne. "Did you, now?"

"Aye."

"Well, I think it best if we did not test Lord Robert's constitution unduly. I'll fetch Maester Colemon to see him back to his chambers."

"But I want to ride," Robert peeped, despite the fact that he had wanted no such thing just a quarter-hour previously.

Lord Petyr paid no attention. When the maester had arrived to lead the protesting Lord of the Eyrie back to his room, he turned to Alayne and slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her close and kissing her hair. "That was a kind thing you did, as I know my daughter has a tender soul. But you'd not want Lord Robert having a relapse, would you? You do want to go home, don't you?"

Yes, Alayne thought. But not like this.
Asha

Chapter Notes

Before reading this, please read the excerpt from The Winds of Winter:
This chapter starts immediately after it.

Asha stumbled outside and threw up.

_Gods_, she thought bitterly, _this is the last thing I need, Ser Clayton will be along to enjoy the view, or Ser Godry or Ser Corliss or any of the bastards_ – but even as she was thinking, she was retching, and she dropped to one knee in the snow, her shaggy black hair falling in her face. Balon Greyjoy's daughter was no hothouse flower, no fainting lady in an ivory tower, but even so, she wished she could unsee half the things she had seen since Deepwood Motte was taken from her. _And unhear almost all._

Her brothers had never mattered much to her. Rodrik and Maron had been drunken boors who liked to torment their little sister whenever she had the misfortune to stray across their path, and if she thought of them at all, it was to hope that the Drowned God had a few minions ramming sharp three-pointed tridents up their arses. Nor was this at all uncommon among the ironborn. With her father dead, the only man who had maintained the fragile standoff between her uncles Euron, Victarion, and Aeron, Pyke and all the rest had gone up in flames. _So to speak._ Brothers were always more a burden than a boon.

And lastly, Theon. They were the closest of Lord Balon's offspring in age, but Asha could not recall if they'd ever played together much as children. Besides, Theon had been only nine when Lord Balon rose in rebellion and was promptly smote down by King Robert and Ned Stark, resulting in the Greyjoys' last living son being carried away to serve as ward and hostage for the latter.

When they met again on the shores of their homeland, Theon had been a callow, arrogant, insecure, impetuous, lean, dark youth of twenty. Asha had not revealed her identity, had told him that she was Esgrid the shipwright's wife, and he had nearly wet himself, in more ways than one, in his eagerness to get into her breeches. She had learned everything she needed to know of him on that ride back to Pyke, while he was attempting to grope her breast and boasting of how he'd come to be the prince again. _And how much woe and strife has come of that? There was no way to make him see what foolery this entire plot was, not until it was too late. Not until he'd bled for it himself._

Yet to be sure, there could be absolutely no doubt that her brother had paid the ultimate price for his folly. _I told him not to. I told him to leave Winterfell and retreat to the Motte with me, but he would not hear it, he had to have himself a castle, he had to play at being a prince._ And take the heads of Bran and Rickon Stark, and mount them on their very own gates. _And when the Boltons fell on him there._

She could hear Theon's cracked, whispering voice, as he stammered and spat through broken teeth. Telling ghoulish tales of what had happened to him in the Dreadfort, of Ramsay Bolton and flayed fingers and dogs named for dead girls and much more besides, half of which she couldn't understand and all of which she would rather not. _He saved Lady Arya from the Bastard, though._
He did. He risked what little is left of his life to fly her from the walls. And now he is chained as he was before. Asha jerked once more, but brought up nothing but a few dribs of bile.

Footsteps crunched above her, and she instinctively recoiled, trying to shield her humiliation. A woman, grieving as a woman does. Who was it? Ser Clayton Suggs, nay doubt, come to call her cunt a few more times in case she had missed the point before. Or another. They were all the same, these oh-so-honorable servants of King Stannis.

"My lady." The voice was not Suggs'. Nor were the hands that reached down and pulled her, with surprising gentleness, to her feet. "I'd come to bid farewell to you."

"Massey," she thought. "Well then. You've bid it."

"That is not all," said Ser Justin. "I am taking the honorable Tycho Nestoris with me, to assist in gaining gold for His Grace's war from the Iron Bank of Braavos."

"Perhaps you ought try gaining gold from the Lannisters. I am told that is a deal easier."

Ser Justin laughed. "That would be the deuce, wouldn't it? Get the Lannisters to pay His Grace for fighting them? Though to judge from the vigor with which they've shot their own feet as of late, anything is possible. But it's not just that, my lady. I will hire sellswords with this gold, many thousands. And then return to help put an end to this war once and for all. . . and marry you."

That Asha had not expected, but she was not surprised. "I am wed."

"To whom? That old man, who cannot even stand on his own? Wed by proxy on the orders of your uncle Euron, so that you dare not go home lest you be forced into your marriage bed?" Ser Justin casually fingered a lock of his thick white-gold hair out of his face, and gave her one of those charming smiles. "Truthfully, my lady, I am rather insulted."

Don't try your droll little gibes with me, ser. On a purely carnal level, Asha was forced to admit that she would rather have Ser Justin in her bed as husband, rather than the ten-ton corpse of Erik Anvil-Breaker, but if all she wanted in a man was long fair hair and a strong body and tender caresses, she had Qarl the Maid for that. He has never presumed to think that I belong to him, either.

"I thought you had a ship to catch to Braavos," she said instead, stepping away from his arm. "And tides are never known for waiting."

"We do. Eventually. But I have orders to deliver Lady Arya and Alysane Mormont to Castle Black first. Lord Commander Snow will be glad to receive his little sister, no doubt, and remember everything that King Stannis has done for him. Then we continue to the garrison at Eastwatch, inform them of the plan, and navigate south of the island of Skagos, before turning to Braavos."

"There is no one better than you at posing as the champion of damsels in distress the world round." Asha tried to spit out the lingering foul taste in her mouth. "Goodbye, then."

Ser Justin bowed, kissed her hand before she could stop him, then strode away. Asha would be more grieved to lose the company of the She-Bear rather than Massey, truth be told. But to judge from the state that Lady Arya was in, she could use at least one caring female companion, and Alysane Mormont, for all her gruffness, had a blunt, honest soul. Jon Snow will shield her too, at least. We Greyjoys may have killed your little brothers, Lord Commander, but we saved your sister from a monster's clutches. That must count for something.

Asha stood in the mud in the middle of the camp. More snow was swirling out of the dim sky.
Theon thinks the Bastard of Bolton will fall on us at any moment. So why were the Baratheon forces, such as remained of them, not yet at muster? Why no call to arms, why only Ser Justin sneaking out the back with his highborn girls and his Braavosi banker, and not –

"Cunt!"

Asha grimaced. She turned, suddenly wishing that Massey hadn't hared off so quickly after all, and met the eyes of three of the worst: Ser Clayton Suggs, Ser Corliss Penny, and Ser Richard Horpe. They were staring at her as they customarily did: as if she was a half-rotted but still choice slab of meat they'd found hanging in a smokehouse somewhere. Ser Clayton and Ser Corliss were, at least. The only thing she had ever known Ser Richard to care about was death.

"Aye?" she said, icily regal.

Ser Clayton smirked at her. "We've had a thought, the three of us. And you'll be coming with us to present it to the king."

Asha almost came back with the retort that this must surely be due to the fact that even the three of them together were unable to manage one thought, but restrained. She had no wish to lose as many teeth as Theon, and she might, if she gave Ser Clayton a chance to start hitting her.

"As it please you, sers," she said, and grimaced as they turned back toward the holdfast. The king will not enjoy this. But then, neither will any of us.

Her brother was still dangling in his chains when they entered, Stannis still sitting at the table with his parchments. Sure enough, he glanced up with a thunderous frown. "What is the meaning of this? Did I summon you?"

"Your Grace." Ser Richard took a knee. "You did not. But we had a notion. The turncloak will be given to the fires before we march on the Bastard, is that not the arrangement?"

"Ramsay," Theon's voice hissed, small and distant as the wind through trees. "Ramsay Bolton. Call him by his name."

Ser Richard paid no attention. Neither did Stannis. The king rose from his chair, glared around at the knights and Asha. "What I do with my prisoners is mine own concern."

"Take his head off, if you must kill him," Asha blurted out, even though she had asked Stannis this same favor not an hour before and had it just as cursorily rebuffed. "By your own hand, before the old gods. The old way. He says. . ."

"He says much and more. None of which I am suffered to listen to, if it does not please me." Stannis ground his teeth. "Since you ask, Ser Richard, yes. I did intend to burn Theon Turncloak as a sacrifice, to ask the blessings of R'hllor upon our attack. And it will hearten the northmen back to my side after they saw me deal with the treacherous Karstarks, remind them that I have no quarrel with any loyal man."

"It won't, Your Grace." Asha could have bit her tongue as the king's eyes trained stonily on her. "Not if you give him to the red god. The Flints and the Liddles and the Wulls, all the mountain clans. The only gods they bow to are the – "

"The trees. Yes. I was not born yesterday, Lady Asha, nor do I recall asking your counsel. What matter? God is god. And if the northmen will continue to follow me as king, they will accept R'hllor as their own."
Never, Asha thought. Not even if the Long Night should come again tomorrow. She had learned something of the ways of the north, during her time in Deepwood and from the Glovers, and from Theon's various disastrous mummeries in Winterfell. "My lord, you need every man against the Boltons. Do not give them any desire, not even a glimmer, to turn away from you at the hour of the wolf."

"As to that, my lady." Stannis turned away, went to a trunk, and pulled something out of it, wrapped in dark cloth. "I intend a subtler gambit for this Ramsay."

"Aye, Your Grace," Ser Clayton said eagerly. "And that was our idea. The kraken whore here, she's pleaded for her brother. Said she'll pay a ransom. He himself has sworn to serve you, if you let him down from his chains."

"Did you mishear at the first, Suggs? He is for the flames."

"But – Your Grace, listen. Let the Greyjoys prove that they are no traitors. Let Asha take Karstark's place."

Stannis turned to stare at him. "What madness?"

"It was Arnolf Karstark you intended that bracelet for, wasn't it? If he was so eager to become Ramsay's man, you said, you'd see to it that he was sent back to him. But if Asha was willing to submit herself instead. . . demonstrate their loyalty, if they have a shred of it. . ."

"You rave, Suggs." Stannis set down the cloth-wrapped object. "Firstly, Lady Melisandre was quite clear on this matter. It is not a sorcery, nothing that can change a form entirely. Only glamour and bits of shadow and flame, a suggestion, so that a man sees what he is told to see. Strong enough for a working, but nothing that would convincingly disguise Lady Asha as myself. Secondly, it was Arnolf Karstark who did the crime, and Arnolf Karstark who must bear the sentence. I will not send Lady Asha to die in his place for sins which are not hers. And besides, I need her. I must show the northmen that all the ironborn have been broken, crushed under my power."

"You'll do that quick enough, if you lop off the Turncloak's head or toss him shrieking on a pyre."

"No, I said. It is not just. And I promised Ser Justin that if he did me good service in Braavos, he could have the woman to wife. I will not sunder that word with him not yet even sailed."

"Her?" Ser Corliss gawked. "Give Massey a tumble with one of those Braavosi courtesans, he'll forget about the Greyjoy cunt quick enough. Your Grace – "

"I will hear no more from any of you. We waste time in this fool's palaver. Horpe, bring me Lord Karstark."

Ser Richard bowed and retreated. The rest of them were abruptly left with naught to do but wait, and try to avoid looking at Theon in his chains. Asha felt a sudden wateriness in her stomach. She was not entirely certain what fate she had just avoided, but she did know beyond all doubt that it was a horrible one. What was that about disguising myself as the king? What is in that cloth?

At last, Horpe returned with Karstark. Having had a few hours at his leisure to contemplate his poor life choices, Lord Arnolf was even more disheveled and wild-eyed, and he fell to his knees on sight of Stannis. "Your Grace, I've thought it all over, I'll be your liege man, I'll never waver my course again – spare me, spare my life, the others, the one who was stabbed, he's dying slow – please – "
"To your feet, my lord."

Arnolf Karstark remained a puddle. Horpe helped him up, not gently.

"I have a different fate in mind for you," Stannis said grimly. He reached for the cloth, and opened it to reveal a bracelet of hammered black iron, set with a dark cabochoon ruby. "Your arm, my lord."

Karstark quailed. Horpe presented it.

Stannis took the bracelet, and snapped it around Lord Arnolf's wrist. "You will be at much leisure to discuss this over with your fellow prisoner, my lord. As we have of late been informed, the Bastard has made prisoner Mance Rayder, formerly King-beyond-the-Wall, and killed and flayed the six washerwomen with him. Mance has been hung in a crow cage, but a gentler fate may await you – or it may not."

Asha opened her mouth to ask – the gods alone knew what. But instead it caught in her throat. Lord Karstark was changing. Flesh seemed to melt away, and hair, and he grew nearly half a foot at once. It was hard to look at him straight; there was a black mist undulating up his legs and face, making all hard and sharp and brittle, and coiling about his temples in a sparse fringe. Hollow cheeks and eyes like punctures in a deep blue sky beneath the strong brow. And in a moment more, it was King Stannis himself who stood there, staring back at King Stannis with a completely blank expression of shock.

Ser Corliss whistled. Ser Clayton took an involuntarily step backwards. Only Ser Richard did not move.

"Lady Melisandre knows her craft well." There was a quiet pride in Stannis' voice as he regarded his doppelganger. "Now, we must do this quickly. Ser Richard, escort Lord Karstark back, and give him command of the decoy host."

"But Your Grace – he's – I mean, he won't – "

"The ruby binds his thoughts and his tongue so well as his flesh. And no man's knife or forge can remove that bracelet – only the one who sealed it there. Karstark will only do as commanded, has no ability to say anything that might betray his true identity. He will act as myself until it kills him. Which it very well might, when he falls into the Bastard's hands."

Even Ser Richard looked briefly boggled at that, but recovered apace. "Very well, Your Grace. And the host – ?"

"Is to meet up with Mors Umber and his green boys. Remember, take the ragged, the sick, the oathbreakers, and any man who was caught feasting on the flesh of a fallen brother and who has not yet been given to the flames. In his lust for blood, I do not expect the Bastard to be looking closely. Lord Karstark, the decoys, and the Umbers will meet his attack."

Ser Richard hesitated. "Your Grace, if this is done, rumors of your demise will spread across the Seven Kingdoms. Your own supporters might – "

"I suspect altogether that they will." The king finally turned his eyes from his own face, and the false self which stood before him. "That is what one might call the point. Once I – which is to say, Lord Karstark – am fallen into Ramsay Bolton's hands and my so-called army is destroyed, there is no reason for the Bastard to think that aught else remains to conquer in the north. But there will be. There will be."
"What is this, Your Grace?" Ser Corliss broke in. "I beg you, help me understand."

Stannis gave a thin, hard smile. "That might be beyond my talents, Penny. But listen. If my loyal men at Castle Black receive word of my capture and likely death at Winterfell, what do you think they will do?"

"March on it at once?" Penny ventured.

"One can dearly hope. And so – with one army coming from Castle Black, and another coming from Eastwatch once Ser Justin delivers the signal, and then a third, led by myself, while the Bastard of Bolton is flaunting Mance and myself in the crow cages and threatening the Night's Watch to return his stolen bride – "

And then, Asha saw. Gods save us, she thought. This madness might actually work.
Chapter Notes

This is one of the prime examples of the non-chronological nature of the story. We saw Stannis plotting his deception in Chapter 7, but the Night's Watch already heard about its results at the end of ADWD and Chapter 1 of this story. Therefore, while this chapter covers events that were obviously referred to in the previous one, they do not take place back to back.

Above his head, the sky turned grey as the hoary stormclouds raced in. Below his feet, the Wall itself seemed to shiver as the sledges loaded with stone were dragged across the courtyard, and chisels bit off slabs of ice as old as any weirwood. There was as well flotsam and jetsam from the battle; Satin thought he saw one of Mance's turtles, the great wood-and-wicker contrivance meant to shield the battering ram so the wildlings could get it flush against the gate. It had been turned to rubble now though, shoved into the passage, where it would be frozen with the rest, sealing off the way now and for eternity.

**Madness. Madness and stupidity.** It was not chance that had chosen Satin's perch up here, with the ruins of the straw sentinels and the wind whisking at him so hard that he felt unbalanced, about to fly or fall. He slept with a dagger now, and did not even dare to bed in the barracks at night, choosing a disused cellar or crumbling tower room instead. He changed it every time. *I am next.* *They want me dead, and they know that I know it.* Castle Black was almost at boiling point. The new choosing had been held a few days ago, and since there was no one else left who was even half fit for the job, the Night's Watch had wound up with Bowen Marsh in permanent command. *All the Seven together, and the red woman, might not be enough to save us from that.*

Hammers rang like swords. *This would make you sick if you were here to see it, Jon.* Satin rubbed his hand hard across his eyes. He had asked if he might be granted the Lord Commander's body, to take it beyond the Wall and bury it in the weirwood grove as he knew Jon would have wished, but that was before the new Lord Commander conceived his plot to seal the gate shut; Marsh had grudgingly accepted that it would in fact be idiocy to try to force the wildlings back through. Also, nobody seemed able to tell Satin exactly what had happened to Jon's corpse. *Ser Alliser would want to piss on it, most like.* But Ser Alliser was gone, and Grenn and Pyp and Dolorous Edd and Iron Emmett and everyone, sent away on Jon's own volition lest his friendship with them (notably excepting Ser Alliser) cloud his ability to command them. No one had seen Ghost, Jon's direwolf, either. *Did he die as well?*

With the wildlings still demanding the castles Jon had promised, and Marsh still refusing, it felt like a matter of not days but hours until the swords came out in earnest. In fact, no matter the imposition that the presence of the Baratheon host and the queen's men had been, they were the only thing barely keeping the peace. And now that the last of them had departed to save the king from Ramsay Bolton, leaving only a skeleton garrison to guard the queen, Princess Shireen, and the red woman, the tension was worse than ever.

As well, several of the wildlings who'd sworn to follow Jon to Winterfell had decided to embark there on their own accord, including Tormund Giantsbane, his son, and warriors. In their way, they genuinely seemed bent on avenging him. But they flatly refused to march with a kneeler host, and
they had no love for Stannis; he was the one who'd arrived to break their great attack on the Wall, after all. Thus it was a subject of wager as to whether they'd ever actually reach Winterfell, or get distracted en route and happily occupy themselves in pillaging, robbery, and rape. *At best, we have sent out a fierce army who will make life hell for the Bastard of Bolton. At worst, we have unloosed a pack of ravening wolves.*

Satin sighed, staring down the kingsroad, which this far north was only a single muddy track that sheared in and out of the trees. It had not seen use in many months, save for Stannis' men proudly departing down it on their rescue mission. Satin hoped they'd be wise enough to get off it by the time they reached the Gift. If the Baratheon men wanted to trumpet their presence to all the eyes in the trees, they could just go right the bloody blazes ahead and –

Hold up. Satin frowned and jumped to his feet, peering over the snow merlon. His eyes might have been deceiving him; he was seven hundred feet up, after all, and they were naught more than tiny moving specks. But he thought he saw three horses. No, four for sure, and then what looked to be half a dozen more close behind. An escort, guards? *They're coming fast.*

At that moment, Satin decided that he wasn't doing the least bit of good hiding up here. *The Wall is only as strong as the men who defend it.* And no matter what anyone said, he was one. That was why he had stood up for them in that scene with Melisandre and the queen's men and the wildlings and his own Sworn Brothers, with Jon's blood still red in the snow.

Satin almost ran across the slick path to the winch cage, shut himself in, and gave the rope a sharp tug. There was a moment, then he began to jerk and bump downwards. His heart was pounding by the time the cage hit the bottom, and the sweating winchman saw on just whose behalf he'd been working so hard. He made a disgusted noise and muttered, "Lady Snow, would it be? Wouldn't it, just."

Satin paid him no mind. He wrenched open the cage and darted across the courtyard, just in time to see the riders – there were in fact ten of them – cantering across the bailey. The leader, a tall well-fleshed knight with long white-gold hair, reined in. "Ho," he called. "I will speak to the Lord Commander."

Satin stepped forward. "Massey?"

Surprised, the knight turned to look, and blinked. "Ah, yes. Snow's little... squire. Yes. Fetch him, would you?"

"I cannot." Satin ignored the unfriendly stares from all the black brothers, who were laboring to seal the gate and grumbling that he had been shirking his share of the work. "Jon Snow is dead. It is Bowen Marsh who now claims the mantle of Lord Commander."

Massey went blank, then stared. "Seven hells," he said, forgetting the red god completely in his astonishment. "Seven buggering hells. Snow's dead? How?"

"Murdered." The angry murmur grew louder when Satin spoke that word, but he refused to palliate the truth. "By his own Sworn Brothers, in this very courtyard."

"Why don't you tell him what Snow was doing!" one of the builders burst out. "That wild beast he kept denned up beneath Hardin's – it bloody pulled the legs off that Ser Patrek, Snow was trying to defend the cursed thing, and that was the least of his crimes. We'd have done for the giant too if that damned wildling hadn't gotten in the – "

"Leathers is your brother now," Satin snapped. "And fighting Wun Wun would have ended you up
just as dead as Ser Patrek."

The builder gave him an appropriately murderous look. Ser Justin Massey still appeared to be blindsided. "Where is the queen? I must speak to her, at least."

"In her apartments," Satin said. "She is afraid to come out."

"I wonder why that might be," someone muttered, not quietly.

_I do not blame her._ For that, at least. "Ser, I am afraid that that is not all we must tell you. There was a letter from the Bastard of Bolton. King Stannis is –"

"– captured?" For some unfathomable reason, Massey was bloody smiling.

"Yes," Satin said, discomfited. "What remained of the king's men have already marched south, with thoughts of seeing Ramsay's head on a pike. But you did not know, surely, and so –"

"Jon Snow is dead?" A faint, forlorn voice came from Ser Justin's right. A girl who looked like a ghost was bundled in a cloak three times too big for her, haunted brown eyes staring out of her thin face. The tip of her nose was deadened with frostbite, and she slumped in her saddle as if sitting upright was too painful. "Truly?"

Satin moved toward her, but one of the guards viciously checked him. "Keep away from the lady, sodomite."

"The lady is our guest." Satin pushed past and offered a hand to the girl, who stared at him in apparent bewilderment. "What's your name?" he asked gently.

"That," said Massey, "is the reason for our coming. Part of it, at least. This is the Lady Arya Stark, sister of the late Lord Commander, recently rescued from the Bastard by none other than Theon Turncloak himself. I'm depositing her and this one –" he nodded at the rider next to her, who appeared to be another woman, short and stout and bundled in furs – "as your wards, before continuing to Eastwatch."

_What? Arya?_ The irony almost made Satin choke. Fear for his little sister was what had driven Jon to these extremes in the first place, why he had planned to leave the Wall and go south to Winterfell himself. Melisandre had said that she had seen in her flames a grey girl on a dying horse, and Jon had taken it to mean Arya, but it wound up being Alys Karstark instead. _What does this mean? Was the red woman right after all? _And if Arya had now just turned up here, saved from one nightmare only to walk into another –

_We can put her with Val, perhaps._ The wildling princess became ever more agitated and anxious every day, however, and had recently been apprehended attempting to steal a horse and escape. Now her guard was twice as heavy, as many men as the black brothers could possibly spare.

Just then, the fourth rider edged his horse forward, and Satin recognized him as well. Tycho Nestoris, the Braavosi banker. "Your pardons, Ser Justin, but while we are here, there is one other matter. I am saddened to learn of Jon Snow's untimely demise, but I require to speak with the new Lord Commander in his place, as regards the status of a loan taken by the Night's Watch from the Iron Bank."

_Marsh won't like that. Mayhaps he and Nestoris can count each other into oblivion._ "Would someone be so kind as to fetch the Old Pomegranate?"

"You do it, arseboy. You're a squire, you run and get him."
Icily, Satin turned on his heel. *It's not worth a fight.* So he climbed up to the rooms that had so recently been Jon's, and knocked crisply on the door before opening it. "My lord, you must come. Ser Justin Massey has returned, and brings with him Arya Stark and Tycho Nestoris."

Bowen Marsh stared at him with queasy dislike. "Who?"

"The Iron Bank envoy. He wants to know about the loan Lord Snow obtained." It made Satin almost sick with rage to sit here speaking of these things so calmly, to Jon's killer.

Marsh made a derogatory noise. "Even from beyond the grave he devils us," he muttered. Louder he said, "Very well. I will be down in a moment."

"Now, my lord."

"Very well," Marsh said again, nettled. He pulled on his cloak and followed Satin back down the twisting stair, to the courtyard where the party was still waiting. Someone had had mercy on Lady Arya and gotten her down off the horse; she was staring about as if not entirely sure who or where she was.

"Ser Justin," Marsh said stiffly.

"Lord Commander." Massey inclined his head, with just a hint of mockery. "I see we've interrupted you in the middle of some great industry, so I'll be brief. But my friend here would have a word."

"I would." Tycho Nestoris trotted forward. "My lord will recall that the Night's Watch requested a loan from my order, a sizeable one. Do you still intend to honor the terms of repayment?"

Bowen Marsh was still a steward at heart, and haggling about money was one of the things he did best. He inflated. "That folly was Jon Snow's doing, none of my own," he snapped. "We would have had sufficient coin and provender if half the wildlings beyond the Wall had not been invited to make their home here."

Halder, another of the builders and one who'd known Jon as a recruit, slammed down his hammer.

"Yes?"

"I call this near as stupid as your last idea," Halder said heatedly. "Last ideas, that is – first killing Jon and then telling us to seal the passage through the Wall. Aye, we might have had what we needed, but we don't. And are you going to get on the Iron Bank's bad side now? Truly, my lord? Truly?"

Ser Justin gaped at the Old Pomegranate. "*You* killed Snow?"

Marsh's ruddy face went pale. "If I must answer to any man in the whole of the Seven Kingdoms for my actions, I will do so. I will not dodge responsibility. But in regards to your question, my lord, you will see that the Night's Watch is currently in a state of... flux. I can give you no answer."

Nestoris inclined his head. "Your dilemma is understood, Lord Commander. I shall return at a later date to clarify."

Bowen Marsh looked hideously relieved. *He does not even know that he has not been saved.* "Thank you, Nestoris, thank you. We will consent to house Lady Arya and this – " He glanced at Lady Arya's purportedly female companion, failed to think up a suitable adjective, and waved a hand. "For the time being. And this work... the gate must be sealed, I ordered it..."
"We're making as much progress as we can," Halder said. "Maybe if we're lucky, Cotter Pyke will build another at Eastwatch."

"Mind your tongue. What is the point of sending out rangings now? Lord Snow considerately allowed the wildlings through the Wall already. And if, gods forbid, our men should chance upon wights or Others, they'd all be slaughtered anyway."

"Don't you think we might like to know where they – "

Marsh cut him off. "Squire," he said to Satin, "take the women to the princess' chambers. Massey, you will be continuing onwards?"

"Shortly." Massey dismounted. "Squire, take me to the queen while you're about it."

Satin agreed. With the three of them in train, he hurried to Queen Selyse's apartments. He barely heard the expected comments from her guards, as the sight of Ser Justin was enough to shut them up quick enough. Best not to even attempt to see the queen himself, knowing what she thought of him. With that done, he took hold of Lady Arya's arm. Her eyes were glazed as she looked at him. 

_Gods, what has the Bastard done?_ Jon had not spoken much of his little sister; the subject must have been too painful. But he had been forthright about his fear that she would fight Ramsay Bolton like a wildcat, and that he would irreparably damage her in retaliation. _He has, but inside, where it does not show._

"What's your name, squire?" Lady Arya's handmaid asked. She was square and strong, no beauty, but had a tough, weather-beaten look to her.

"Satin, my lady."

"Satin?" The woman emitted a most unladylike snort.

"I have never had another." None of her business where he came from, who he'd been. A man put aside everything when he took the black. "I am taking you to Val, the wildling princess, along with her nephew and his wet nurses. You will be safe there."

"Wildlings have no princesses," said the handmaid. "Or sers or lords neither."

Satin glanced at her in amused surprise. _She is northern born, this one._ "I fear I have not been very mannerly, my lady. What am I to call you?"

"Alysane Mormont." She gave a shrug of her heavy shoulders. "Though there's some that call me the She-Bear."

_A Mormont?_ Satin had not known Jeor Mormont, the Lord Commander prior to Jon, but had heard tales of the Old Bear's bravery and dedication to his duty. _Does it make you easier at heart to know that Arya is being watched over by one of them, Jon? Wherever you have gone._

They reached the King's Tower chambers, and Satin knocked. "My lady? I have brought some companions for you. It is our hope that you will – "


Satin hesitated, then pushed the door open. As he had known he would, he saw Melisandre standing before the fire, and Val backed into a corner like a treed cat. "My ladies. Am I interrupting?"
"Not at all." Melisandre glided forward and offered a graceful hand first to Alysane Mormont, who stared at her suspiciously, and then to Lady Arya, who did not move. "I was merely having a brief discussion with the princess about that escape she tried, and seeing to it that she understood. She does. With that so, I will withdraw." She smiled, the ruby in her collar pulsing, and did so.

Val remained where she was, and the look she cast on Satin was wild-eyed. "Next kneeler sets foot in this room without my leave, I'll cut their throat. She's always sniffing about, that one. Asking me questions about the babe again, the wolf –"

A slow, peculiar chill crawled down Satin's spine. "What about the babe?"

"The monster," Val muttered. "She knows what Jon did, I'd swear to it. But it was the only way – Dalla wouldn't have forgiven me otherwise –"

Satin did not know what she meant, and it seemed to be falling to him to make introductions, which could hardly have been more awkward at the moment. "My lady. . . this is Alysane Mormont and Lady Arya Stark. They will be sharing your quarters for the time being." The suite of rooms was amply spacious; surely enough for all three of them to avoid each other, if they wanted. "And this is Val, good-sister of the King-beyond-the-Wall."

"M'lady," Alysane said gruffly. "Pleasure."

Val stared at the She-Bear with a glassy, feverish look somewhat similar to Lady Arya's. "You're not a spy, are you? A spy for her?"

*What has Melisandre been doing?* And there was something else Val had said. *What about the babe? The wolf? What did Jon do?*

"My lady," Satin began cautiously. He caught Alysane's gaze, and somehow she understood what he meant and began to tow the unresisting Lady Arya away. "I must ask you. The wolf. . . do you mean Ghost?" It was a shallow and silly hope.

Val did not answer immediately. In fact, she remained completely silent, and he had just started to turn, disappointed, when her fingers caught his arm. "The white wolf. I saw it with her last night."

This time, it was definitely a lightning bolt that struck. "Where?"

"Outside my window. Crossing the courtyard. No one else but them. It limped. It was hurt. There was blood on its fur. I saw no more. She would have known. In her flames."

Melisandre, Satin thought. *She has known where Ghost is this entire time. And I'll wager a fortune that she knows where Jon is too.* "Thank you, my lady." His voice sounded strange: queer, thick, hoarse. "I'll not disturb you further."

Satin's head was in a whirl as he descended the steps. *I should have guessed.* Melisandre had taken a particular interest in Jon even before his death. The interest was not reciprocated, so far as Satin knew; in fact, Jon had kept her at arm's length, hungry for what she might be able to prophesy about the future and steadfastly mistrusting it all the same. But there were many strange tales about the priests of R'hllor, and Satin, like all the others, had learned not to doubt the red woman's power. *What is she doing with him? What does she want? Can she not even let him rest in peace?*

In the Oldtown brothel where he'd been born and raised, Satin had had a number of aspiring maesters as clients; many of them had chosen to attend the Citadel in order to escape pressure from their families to wed, and did not feel they had the temperament to be a septon. *Or they could have*
joined the Night's Watch. But to a man, the acolytes liked to talk – to prove to him, the pretty dark-eyed boy whore they'd bought to suck their cocks – what power they had, all the things they knew. Some of them ought to have watched their mouths more carefully. Especially one, who was forging a link for his maester's chain out of Valyrian steel, studying the higher mysteries. Satin had heard too many strange things there, and seen too many of them here, to disbelieve anything anymore.

I must find the red woman and speak to her alone. Satin's mouth set into a grim line. And I must do it soon. I will not let her have Jon. I will not.

The way under the Wall was sealed fast by dusk. The snow started to fall by dark.
"There are dead men in the halls above." Leaf sounded more sorrowful than scared. "Their cold hands grasp at root and branch and tree, bringing with them ice and fear and darkness. The night is very hungry, Meera Howland's daughter. You must come."

Meera leapt to her feet. "What are you talking about? You said this hill was warded, that the ranger would stay to guard the gate. How can it – "

The child of the forest merely gazed back at her with her wide green-and-gold eyes, giving no answer. Then she said again, "Come. We must go under the hill."

Under the hill. There were always stories about the folk who stumbled into faerie circles and were gone a hundred hundred years, who emerged still fresh and youthful to find that everyone they loved was dead and all the world was changed. And the tale of Gendel's children, forever searching in the dark for the way out and never finding it. Meera had tried to make the best of life in this fey barrow; they were warm, they were safe, they always knew that they would be fed, and they had leave to explore where they would, provided they went carefully. Leaf had warned them that not even the children had found the end or the bottom of some of the passages. But the fact remained that the deeper they went in, the longer and more distant the way back became.

Yet now, if Leaf meant to tell her that the children's wards had broken, this was no time to consider such things. With a light touch, Meera roused Hodor; the big stableboy had been curled up snoring on the far side of the fire. He woke, blinked at her worriedly, and said, "Hodor?"

"Get up, hurry. We must go deeper into the cave. There are dead things inside."

Hodor grunted and hauled himself to his feet; Leaf had to duck as his arm swung over her head. Then Meera went to the pile of furs containing her brother, knelt and shook him gently. "Jojen, Jojen, hurry. We're going down under the hill, to Bran and Lord Brynden."

It was a long time until his mossy green eyes opened, and he stared at her wearily. "What is it now?"

"We have to go." Meera beckoned Hodor closer. "Hodor, quickly. Carry him." Jojen was too weak to walk these days, and spent much of his time asleep, plagued by greendreams which he refused to share. What was happening to him? Why was he the only one not healing?

"Why bother?" Jojen murmured, as Hodor scooped him up. "I am doomed nonetheless. Leave me."

"Don't say things like that." Meera trotted across the cave floor, following Leaf, with Hodor and Jojen bringing up the rear. They ducked through into a narrow, lower passage – or rather, Hodor ducked, as Leaf and Meera were small enough to walk upright. Stalactites hung down in fragile forests, and gypsum sparkled faintly in the walls. Once or twice they passed a pool, still and clear as a mirror. Hodor spotted his own reflection and attempted to splash it, barely keeping hold of Jojen as he did. But Leaf turned sharply, said, "Do not touch the water!" and he immediately jerked back, chastened.

Finally, they stepped down into the subterranean hall where Lord Brynden held his court, tangled in his weirwood throne, roots growing around him and through him. The children were gathered around, talking nervously in their olden tongue like leaves and wind and water, but Brynden's one red eye blinked open as Leaf led the humans closer. "Good," he said softly. "Sit. We are still safe
Meera did not sit. "Where is Bran?" she asked. "Where is the ranger? What happened?"

The lord of the hill gave her a wry, weary look. "Bran is with the trees. Soon I will be as well. The roots grow strong and deep. They will not suffer this evil to pass unchallenged."

"But the wards," Meera protested. "You said."

"Only one defense, child. All workings are fragile. All sorcery is a dangerous wager. It is a blade with no hilt. The dark is rising."

"Have the wards broken before?"

"They have," Lord Brynden said, with the eclipse of a smile. "Long before my time, or yours, long beyond the memory of any living man – but not the memory of the children."

Meera went cold all over. "The Long Night?"

"I did not say that, child."

"Beyond the memory of any living man. . ." Thoughts were coming to Meera suddenly, pieces of songs and stories, histories and tales and gossip and a growing, freezing certainty. "Lord Brynden," she said impulsively. "If you were a mortal man, how old would you be?"

The eye closed. He appeared somewhat amused. "Younger than the youngest of the children," he said. "I am but a babe myself."

"Please, answer the question."

"Very well." A root snaked around his chest. "I would have counted my one hundred and twenty-fifth name day not long ago."

"One hundred and twenty-five. . ." A brother I loved, a brother I hated, a woman I desired. A royal bastard, a soldier, a sorcerer, Hand of the King, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, a three-eyed crow. A Targaryen. Ice and fire.

"Bloodraven," Meera breathed. "You are Brynden Rivers, Lord Bloodraven, a Great Bastard of Aegon the Unworthy. The brother you loved was Daeron the Good, when you fought for him during the Blackfyre Rebellion. The brother you hated was Aegor Rivers, Bittersteel, who took your eye. And the woman you both desired was Shiera Seastar. You are a dragon. A dragon in a cage of ice."

Brynden lifted two white hands and gave a single, slow clap. "Are all crannogmen as clever as you, Meera Reed?"

"I know the stories. I know the songs."

"So you do." A rustling seemed to sweep through the chamber, a wind where no wind could possibly blow. "There must always be three. Three heads of the dragon. . . Aegon and Visenya and Rhaenys, Balerion and Vhagar and Meraxes. Fire and blood. There is another story you once told, Meera Reed. You will recall it. You sing your own part in this great Song, you know."

"I have told many stories, Lord Brynden."

"Ah," he sighed. "You have. But this one. . . a mystery knight, the Knight of the Laughing Tree, a
dragon prince with purple eyes who sang such sad songs, and a wolf maid who was queen of love and beauty. A young lion clad in white... a false spring... a tourney."

Shock rippled through Meera to her toes. "I told the story of old Lord Whent's tourney at Harrenhal, yes. When Jaime Lannister was named to the Kingsguard and Rhaegar Targaryen won the joust. To my prince."

"And why did you tell him this?"

The question caught her further off guard. "I was surprised that he had never heard it. And I – Bran asked for a story, he likes stories well. And he is a Stark, he should – "

"A Stark, aye," said Bloodraven, "and so, ice. Fire burns trees, even weirwoods. But it cleanses so well as it destroys. Omens of smoke and salt and flame. Each man sees it in his way, each man knows... the Prince who was Promised, Azor Ahai, a comet of blood and flame... open your eyes, child. Unstop your ears. You are a hunter. You breathe mud and fly through water. You know."

Meera felt suddenly very small, and very young, and very frightened. "What do I know, Lord Brynden?" she heard herself say. "What do I know?"

Another root coiled around Bloodraven's throat. "Summers that last for years, winters for lifetimes... it has not always been this way. There was a time when spring and summer and fall and winter would come each in their turn, all in one year, and pass away. What is that story, Meera Reed? Do you know it?"

"No," Meera admitted. "I do not."

"The Others." Bloodraven's eye flared open, transfixing her. "That is what moves in the halls above. That is the remnant and the revenant of What broke the balance. How do you kill them, Meera Reed?"

"With fire," Meera said uncertainly. "With dragonglass."

"Dragonglass." Bloodraven smiled. "But could man face all the count of Others that now wake from the ice? Even with a torch in both hands, every man and woman and child, could mortals bring them down?"

"No," Meera said. "No, they couldn't."

"It is so." A root slithered lovingly into Bloodraven's mouth. "Dragons," he whispered, and then he was gone. Empty, his body slumped in its chair, his spirit fled into the flesh of tree or bird, gone to join the clash above. He was master of many skins, the three-eyed crow.

Confused and unsettled, Meera glanced around. It was only her and a simple-minded giant and her ailing brother, the only things warm and human in this entire place. Ageless eyes stared back at her from every side, eyes of bronze and gold and wheat and umber, leaves and water and stone and snow. Snow. In life, as she recalled, Brynden Rivers had risen to become Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, part of the escort that brought his kinsman, Maester Aemon, to the Wall. Surely in that time, a dragon faced with a great vastness of dark and cold, he would have learned much and more about the Others, about a coexistence of fire and ice. A bastard son. Not a Targaryen by name, but by blood. And if one was the offspring of Aegon the Unworthy, one might well choose to distance oneself from that fact anyway.

But Brynden Rivers is dead. Only Bloodraven remains. Meera shuddered. How did he leave the Wall? When? He has no life, he cannot counter a rising tide of death. Only shift into the shapes of...
others, while his body's shell grows ever more into the trees.

She glanced around again, but there was no sign of her prince. Is that what will happen to Bran? Suddenly she was possessed with an urge to find him, to wake him from his dreams. He becomes a greenseer and casts aside his broken form, even as his teacher does. The power of the old gods goes into him... ice and fire, a balance, a greenseer rises...

And Jojen fades.

All of a sudden, Meera knew. Knew what Jojen knew, why he had been so sullen and withdrawn, why he grew weaker, why they had all come here, to the barrow under the hill. She whirled and ran to him. "No," she cried. "No, Hodor, put him down, let me look at him. Now. Please, please."

Hodor gently put Jojen on the ground. Her brother gave a small sigh of pain, head lolling to the side, and she put a hand on his cheek and frantically slapped at him. "No, no. Jojen, look at me, look at me."

After an even longer moment than before, his eyes cracked halfway. They were dull and filmy, had trouble focusing on her face. "Leave me be, Meera," he said, pale lips barely moving. "It is too late. It is done. It is over."

"No," she gasped again, horror-struck. She pulled his furs aside – and stared, helpless and sickened, at what they revealed. Jojen's pale, sunken flesh was covered with scars, livid and red, eyes weeping blood. The color of weirwood sap, the very color. Gods – Bran was fed on the sap of weirwoods every day –

Greenseer. Sorcery, a blade without a hilt.

A queer madness took hold of Meera. We must get out of here. Too deep, we have gone too deep, and now our task here – mine and Jojen's – is done. But above us – the trees wake, the roots take hold, and dead men step foot in the halls of flame.

"Hodor?" Hodor sobbed.

Meera opened her mouth, then closed it. She had nothing to say.

At that moment, every child in the cave rose to their feet. Light with no earthly source glittered in their eyes. And they began to sing.

Hodor shrank back and curled into a ball, big hands gripping his knees as he quivered. The song – the chant – was strong and deep, spine-tingling, here and there a voice rising above the others high and clear. They swayed. Roots began to rise and writhe. And Bloodraven on his throne seemed to become larger and more terrible, shining like the moon. The rocks themselves sighed sad regret, and the song burst and swelled in Meera's heart like a breaking wave. A lament.

"Stop," she screamed. "No, no, stop!"

She might as well have told the sun to rise in the west and set in the east, for mountains to turn to dust and blow in the wind like leaves. Shaking, sobbing, she crawled back to Jojen and cradled his face in both hands. "Look at me," she wept. "This is not the day you die."

"Oh, Meera." He smiled. His fingers reached up to touch her cheek, and fell. His eyes remained open, the color of leaves, of moss, of greensight. "Yes. It is."
The call of bells broke the deepening evening, and the setting sun splintered colors from the leaded-glass windows of the sept. It was time to cease from labor, to go within and hear the fifth of the seven offices sung by the proctor whose turn it was to speak today. There would be one more after supper, and then the last just before retiring. The brothers would then rise at midnight for the first of the next day's offices, candles burning in the darkness and prayers made as quiet as their souls.

Some of them, at least. The gravedigger wiped his big hands on his plain brown robe, and, leaning on his spade as a crutch, stumped up the hill. Other brothers passed by, some offering a nod or other small acknowledgement, but no one offered to help him. They had learned by now that he would never accept it.

The gravedigger paused to catch his breath and look out over the Bay of Crabs, the mudflats quickly being swallowed in water as the evening tide rushed in. The Quiet Isle lay just offshore, in the estuary of the Trident, and to the north, he could see the distant peaks of the Vale. South, the riverlands. East, the bay, which eventually opened into the narrow sea. And west, Saltpans. But he never looked west.

The day had been short and the air was full of chill. His breath steamed as he resumed the climb, wincing and occasionally cursing his bad leg. But out of a certain respect that he always mocked in himself whenever it arose, he did it quietly. It was another idiosyncrasy which the brothers had learned to excuse in him, along with the fact that he only ever lit his candles to the Stranger. And the fact that you're an ugly bloody dog with a face that not even the Mother could love. You think, Clegane?

Yet it was true that the brothers, whatever they may think of him in their private hearts, had never allowed it to overlap into their public behavior. He was still entirely unsure what to make of that. It could have been argued that it was more difficult for a man to be impertinent when he did not speak, as the novices, postulants, brothers, and proctors of the Quiet Isle were the Faith's male equivalent of the silent sisters. They tended not only the dead, but also the sick, hungry, wounded, and alone, and swore holy vows not to let words pass their lips unless utterly needful. But the deepest wounds were ones that could be inflicted without words. From the day he finally woke, and walked out among them in a humble brother's robe, he waited for their stares, their horror-struck expressions, wondering what such as him was doing in their pristine refuge. He waited for them to make the sign of the horns whenever he came near, to whisper in his ear the name he had left behind in the Elder Brother's arms, dying on the banks of the Trident: Hound. But they never did.

Considering that the brothers were only mute, not blind, they could not have failed to see the scars on his face, and the ginger way he walked on the lame leg, from the wound Gregor's men had given him at the inn. On his orders, the little wolf bitch had poured boiling wine onto it and bandaged it, but it quickly festered. He had been reeling with fever, swearing, gasping, struggling to stay on his horse, but, finally, fell.

His mouth twisted. She could have done me a bloody favor and killed me. She owed it to me. I saved her life, not letting her run into the Twins while the Freys were murdering her precious mother. The gods alone knew why. He'd taken it into his head to sell Arya Stark off for ransom, had some half-baked notion of collecting the gold and going – where, exactly? Likely nowhere. He would have just gone to the first tavern he found, bought all the wine they had, and happily drunk.
himself into permanent oblivion. But instead, she had told him that he didn't deserve the gift of mercy. Maybe you'll find out what wolves do to dogs.

"Maybe I have, at that," he growled aloud, reaching the top of the hill. He then glanced around guiltily, in case someone had heard, but the brothers were filing into the septry, paying him no mind. So he returned the spade to the shed, and followed them.

The small, plain sanctuary was dimly lit with candles when Sandor Clegane stepped inside. He dipped his fingers in the ewer of water and touched the seven-pointed star on himself. A mindless little thing, but he had to admit that it comforted him.

Soon after the proctor entered, swinging a censer, and ascended the pulpit. This particular one had a better voice than some of the others, and he sang the evening office well. There were times when Sandor listened eagerly, truly hungry to experience one fucking aspect of forgiveness or grace, let alone seven. There were others when he couldn't wait for the bloody charlatans to shut their mouths and get out of his sight. This time was neither. His mind was still drifting, not quite here or there.

At last the office concluded, and the brothers decamped to the refectory for supper. Sandor limped behind them, feeling more of a cripple than ever; his leg had been acting out today. Four patients had died last night, an old man and a little boy and two women, and he'd had to bury them all. But there was a bowl of brown and a chunk of bread, and he was hungry. No wine, but that couldn't be helped. The brothers did brew their own ale, a rich dark yeasty stuff you could practically chew, and kept a buttery and smokehouse where they stored their wheels of cheese, strings of onions and apples and carrots, and sides of meat and barrels of salted fish. And it had snowed today, and the day before, and the one before that. Not much, just a frosty dew on the fields in the morning, but it was a harbinger of worse to come. Soon what was in those stores would become crucial.

Sandor finished his supper and rose awkwardly, intending to retire to his bed. No one had ever obliged him to attend any of the offices; he could go or not as he chose. But he had just taken a step in the direction of the door when he saw the Elder Brother rise from the table at the front, catch his eyes, and beckon to him.

Surprised, Sandor made his way over, and the Elder Brother led them out into the cloisters, their robes swirling and snapping at their ankles. Then he turned, lifted a gate on the latch, and led them down the hill, past the terraces and the windmill and the sundial, down to the Hermit's Hole. It was dark inside, and smelled of earth and water, but when the Elder Brother lit the candle on the driftwood table and closed the door, it was warm enough.

"Sit." The Elder Brother spoke at last, gesturing to a chair. "It has come time that we discuss your future, Sandor. I understand that mayhaps you will not want to remain a gravedigger for the rest of your life – that is not much for a man like you."

"A man like me? I think you mean a dog. A broken-down old dog who didn't have the sense to die when he should have."

"I think not. That part of you is already dead. You know that."

"I will always be a bloody dog."

"Only if you choose to be." The Elder Brother took the seat across from him. "After the amount of time you have spent here, it would be customary either to make your vows as a postulant, or heal and become strong enough to leave our care. You are of course welcome so long as it is your will to stay. But you are not who you used to be – for better, for worse."
Sandor ran a hand through his lank black hair. "So what do you suggest? Go take up service as a hedge knight somewhere, and when the mobs come after me, tell them they've got it wrong? I'm a different hideously burned bastard? They all think I'm dead – either that, or the butcher of Saltpans. I'd not get more than a mile before I ran into the torches and pitchforks."

"Leaving your helm behind was a mistake I deeply regret." The Elder Brother's voice remained quiet. "And I desire to make it up to you how I can. I remember what you cried out, when you were delirious and raving with fever, and what you told me after. There is no joy in service for you, only bitterness, yet you bite the hand of anyone who tries to hurt your masters. Is that truly what you want?"

"No." Bloody hells, what do I want?

"I see there is still a great deal of rage in you. I do not blame you for that, but if I was to offer my counsel... Sandor, you cannot stay like this, halfway between one life and the other. Join our order, and you can remain here forever, healing from everything that has been done to you. Even you, sad, angry, broken, and lonely though you are. The Mother's mercy and love knows no limits."

Sandor did not know what to say to that. He had never believed in redemption, never believed in forgiveness. Everything piled up, one after the other, sin upon sin, darkness his only comfort, wine his only friend, his sword his only stalwart, his nights full of drunken dreams and old demons and fire, fire, fire. I crawled deeper and deeper into the barrow, and never found the way back out.

"I know you do not want my pity," the Elder Brother said at last. "But I have never met a creature I grieve for the more."

Sandor shifted his position, trying to ease the pain in his leg. Suddenly, it dawned on him. "You know something," he accused. "What?"

The Elder Brother hesitated. "I did not mean – "

"Tell me."

The other man looked into the Hound's eyes. Whatever he saw there was enough to decide him not to play games. "Very well. First, I am told that the she-wolf, the man-killing terror who stalked the Trident with her savage pack, has finally been caught. She has been chained half a hundred times, tied down, and confined in a cage; she cannot escape, no matter how she howls and struggles. She is to be sent south to King's Landing, as a prize."


"Aye. We will all sleep easier of a night, it is true. And as for the other news... Sandor, I do not think I should, this will lead you to madness – "

"Too late."

The Elder Brother sighed, and chose each word carefully. "Queen Cersei has been imprisoned this last moon's turn in the Great Sept of Baelor, for her crimes against gods and men. She finally agreed to confess, and submitted to a walk of penance through the city. She was stripped of all royal authority, allowed to rejoin her son the king in the Red Keep, but her formal trial still awaits. She will be brought before a council of the Faith, and the full weight of her misdeeds judged. If found guilty, she must die."

Sandor shrugged. Cersei Lannister was nothing to him. Not anymore.
"But," the Elder Brother continued, "there is more. The queen has always been cunning, and surely knows that she can never hope to prove her innocence before a court – the evidence of her guilt is simply too overwhelming. It is widely believed that she intends instead to exonerate herself by combat."

"What, that one? The only weapon she has to hand is her cunt."

The Elder Brother looked briefly scandalized, but chose to overlook the vulgarity. "Sandor... before I say this, I must stress that there is no proof. But Ser Arys Oakheart was killed in Dorne, defending Princess Myrcella. Ser Balon Swann has gone to Sunspear to repair relations. Ser Osmund Kettleblack has been caught up in the intrigues against the queen. Ser Loras Tyrell is said to be horribly wounded and dying. And Ser Jaime Lannister has gone missing in the riverlands. And since Queen Cersei is a member of the royal family, her cause can only be championed in battle by one of the Kingsguard."

"Which leaves what – Blount or Trant?" Sandor had once been a member of the Kingsguard himself, the only one that was never a knight. With that sort of shit for his Sworn Brothers, he had never felt the need. Paint stripes on a toad, he does not become a tiger. He had said that to the little bird, once.

"Not entirely." The Elder Brother lifted his head. "Sandor..."

"Just bloody tell me, would you?" His patience was fast running short.

"Very well." The Elder Brother let out a long sigh. "Two things. First, Ser Kevan Lannister and Grand Maester Pycelle are dead. No one knows how, or by whom, but they were found in Pycelle's chambers, Pycelle with his skull split open and Kevan with a crossbow bolt in his chest."

"Dead?" Seven hells, Lannisters were falling like flies these days.

"Aye. And the High Septon and the Most Devout have taken it as a further sign of the family's guilt, a divine judgment from the Father upon the foulness that has festered so long in Casterly Rock. Furthermore, there are whispers that Lord Jon Connington has returned to Griffin's Roost... it sounds so absurd that I hesitate to say it, but the tale is that the Golden Company, a sellsword brotherhood founded by Aegor Bittersteel after the Blackfyre Rebellions were – "

"I know what the Golden Company is."

"Of course you do. My apologies. The point is, the tale is that the Golden Company is in Westeros, led by Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name."

That did throw Sandor badly for a loop. "Bloody hells, what? Rhaegar's whelp? The brat is dead. Had his head smashed against a wall. My dearly beloved brother raped his mother while his brains were still leaking from his skull. He made a sound that was half a laugh and half a snarl.

"So everyone thought." The Elder Brother's fists closed tightly. "Of course, it is impossible to know if this is so, or if it is merely another royal pretender. But it seems certain that it is in fact Lord Connington."

"Another dead man. Drank himself to death in exile. Which you might well have done, given half a chance, and yet here you are."

"There are tales and tales, my friend."

"I'm not your bloody friend. And there's something else you're not saying."
"Yes. About the Kingsguard, the dragons, the sins of House Lannister... and dead men, Sandor. Dead men that walk."

"I don't like riddles, you bastard."

"Sandor, please. Hear me out before you decide to do anything."

"That depends on what you have to say."

"Just this. You will know that the Faith has been arming again, that Warrior's Sons and Poor Fellows alike clamor to make the realm pay for its sins. And the High Septon, as I said, demands the queen's trial take place immediately, but King's Landing is in chaos. The Tyrells are all that stand between us and total anarchy, and Queen Margaery still must be tried as well. If, gods forbid, they were to fall too..."

"We'd be dead. It happens to everyone. Some more than once, it seems."

"Yes. But if this is indeed Rhaegar's son, the one supposedly killed by Lannister men, his mother Princess Elia raped and murdered by Gregor Clegane..."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN?" Sandor roared, lurching to his feet. He immediately regretted it, his leg cramping worse than ever, and sank down, wincing. "Stop bloody babbling!"

"Sandor. With Ser Arys' death and Ser Jaime's disappearance, there is an open place on the Kingsguard. And there has been a Ser Robert Strong named to it. For the sole purpose of serving as Queen Cersei's champion in a trial by combat."

"Ser Robert Strong? Who in the seven buggering hells is that?"

"No one knows. No one has ever heard of him. He does not eat, drink, sleep, use the privy, or speak. He never takes off his armor. He is never seen in company. He is eight feet tall and clad entirely in plate and mail. He is a giant. A Mountain."

Sandor was suddenly glad that he'd sat back down. When he could speak, he said, "Oberyn Martell is still dead, isn't he?"

"So far as I am aware. Dorne is in a ferment."

"Good, otherwise I'd be the first in line to kill him again. He had never been so angry as he was that night, never. The thrice-fucking-damned Red Viper had taken from him the only thing he had ever wanted... well, almost the only thing. But if this was true... if "Robert Strong" was who the Elder Brother seemed to be implying..."

Seven hells. Sandor wished he could think of something stronger. His breath was coming short, his chest was tight. For a moment he actually thought he was going to faint. His blood was roaring in his ears, the world was possible again and terrible and unholy. How many men of that size are there? No proof. But who needs proof?

"Please, don't do something stupid," Elder Brother urged. "You can still barely walk, you've not swung a sword in months - "

"Why did you tell me this, if not for me to do something about it?" Sandor crashed back to his feet. Anger swept over him in a blackening torrent, and he almost launched himself across the table at the middle-aged monk. "She's accused by the Faith, you said – my bloody undead brother is standing as her champion, Aegon Targaryen is fucking returned from the dead and the Lannisters
on the brink of destruction – so fuck them! *All of them! Bloody fuck them all to seven fucking hells!*"

He picked up his chair and threw it. He was making a terrible sound which belonged to neither man nor dog, a noise of pain and betrayal and utter agony, and he sank to his knees, pounding the floor, wishing he could tear it up, wishing he could tear his heart out, anything to make it stop, make it stop. Then Elder Brother was kneeling beside him, trying to put an arm over his shoulders, but Sandor ripped away. He flung himself against the wall, screaming.

Prudently, Elder Brother did not attempt to come anywhere near again until the tempest had run its course. He stood silent, saying nothing. At last, when Sandor knelt motionless, gasping raggedly, the monk moved closer. "Sandor, I apologize."

"Fucking strange way to make it up to me." Sandor meant to shout, but his voice was strangled in his chest. It sounded hoarse, thin as a thread, shattered.

"You are right. I did know what you would think if I told you. If Ser Robert *is* your brother, then he is a creature from the deepest and foulest of the seven hells. A reanimated corpse, in a half-life meant only to serve the Lannister woman, to kill anyone who challenges her. . . or him."

Sandor tasted bile in his mouth. Clumsily, he struggled to his feet. "If this was so, the Faith could never allow it to live."

"This would be so. True, Queen Cersei has attempted to get around that. The false maester, Qyburn, claims that Ser Robert is a most devoted champion of the Faith. Indeed, this abomination wears the seven-pointed star on his armor, and, according to Qyburn, has taken a holy vow not to speak until the queen's name is cleared. But I find it rather more likely that he does not speak because he has no head."

"What the –"

"Ser Gregor's skull was sent to Dorne, a token of vengeance for the Martells. Only the skull. And Ser Robert, apart from being mute, never lifts his visor."

"Gods," Sandor muttered involuntarily. He had lost whatever scrap of naïve childhood faith he had when half his face was burned off, when he saw his sister lying with her neck broken, blood on her skirts and terror still frozen in her eyes. The day Gregor became lord of the Clegane lands and keep, the day their father died (supposedly in a hunting accident) was the day Sandor left home forever and journeyed to Casterly Rock to swear his sword to the Lannisters, when he realized that his brother was in fact the Stranger made flesh. *And death will not have improved his temper any."

An unhinged laugh burst from Sandor's lips, and the Elder Brother looked at him, startled. Then he said, "Sandor, so much as I dislike it, it may yet be that you could have what you want. But for the sake of your soul, listen to me. This. . . thing has been woven together by the most terrible and blasphemous dark sorceries. Ser Gregor was invincible while he lived, and with this now possessing him. . ."

"Someone has to stop him, then." Sandor showed his teeth. "Isn't that a job for a knight in a story?" *Tall handsome heroes and fair maidens.* "But the knights are the monsters and all there is on the other side is me. The Hound."

The Elder Brother made the sign of the star. Quietly he said, "If you choose it. You know there will be others who could stand as the Faith's champion. Warrior's Sons, Poor Fellows, any number of sparrows. . ."
"He'll kill them." Sandor was certain of it. "Eat them up and shit them out. Tell me, monk. You ever seen a bird beat a mountain?" *Little bird.* Gods, no. The last thing he wanted was to think about her.

"I have not."

Sandor lurched toward the door. Just then, he would have taken on any number of undead abominations in exchange for a flagon of wine. "Would you let me go? If I wanted it. I could, you know. My bloody horse is still in the stables. No use turning him into a beast of burden."

"Driftwood does have a terrible temper."

"Driftwood? Bugger that. His name is *Stranger.*"

The Elder Brother made the sign of the star again. "Not here."

"Well then, maybe I'll have to be somewhere that isn't here." At last, Sandor realized what this feeling was, tearing through him. He was alive. He had a purpose again. It was kindling in his stomach, heating him, searing him. *Burning me.* Like fire. Damn it, he hated fire – and yet he loved this just the same.

"Sandor. Listen to me." The Elder Brother galloped after him. "You were saved for a reason. And so you must – "

"Shut up, monk. Unless you're willing to admit that *this might have been the fucking reason?*"

The Elder Brother had no answer for that. At last he allowed, "It would be a noble thing to do. *If* it were done. If it was even possible."

*And would I be a hero then? Would you think so, little bird?* Seven bloody hells, who cared about her? She was dead by now anyway, raped by some outlaw scum and left to bleed to death in a ditch, or hauled back for Cersei fucking Lannister to hang by the hair above the gates. *Or with the Imp.*

Hating himself, Sandor nonetheless forced himself to ask. "Monk. One other thing. Where is Tyrion Lannister these days?"

"Nobody knows. He has fled Westeros."

"With his bloody little wife?"

"It is not believed so." The Elder Brother regarded him shrewdly. "There is no word of Sansa Stark, in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't," Sandor snapped. "Fuck you."

"If you say so. You did call for her quite often in your delirium, so I understand the girl means something to you, but all you can do for her now is pray to the Maiden on her behalf. Well, then. If you must leave us, I advise you do so quietly and anonymously. Perhaps I will accompany you a way, so we are seen only as two humble religious men, traveling without arms or armor."

"What? Where are you going?"

"To the Vale, as it happens. I have been summoned by one Maester Colemon, who is in service to Lord Robert Arryn. The little lord is... most unwell, and my skills as a healer are well known in
"The Vale." Sandor had once thought of ransoming the wolf bitch to her aunt there, he recalled, but that was before some piss-drunk singer pushed Lady Lysa out the Moon Door. "Fine, then. You bloody do that. But I'm going to King's Landing. Maybe I'll take that she-wolf they trapped on the Trident, tell the lordlings I was the one who did it. Think that would make them rush to kiss and pardon me?"

The Elder Brother bowed his head, and opened the door of the Hermit's Hole into the night. Beyond, it smelled of snow and sea and salt, and the stars were coming out above. "Let be it as you wish," he said. "May all the Seven save you, Sandor Clegane."
Gales of violent firelight flickered beyond his blindfold. The air smelled wet, and his footsteps echoed. By reflex he reached out to grope for his bearings, but his golden hand only banged into something that felt like dirt. Yes, they were definitely underground. *Which of the hells, though? There are seven.*

The blindfold had been on Brienne's insistence. "There is no time to explain," she had said. "We must go at once. Otherwise – " she gestured to her bandaged cheek, the livid rope scar on her neck, the bruises that covered face and jaw and throat – "the Hound will do worse than this."

*How?* Jaime wanted to ask, but didn't. *Gods have mercy, she's even uglier than before.* What had happened to her, poor dumb stubborn strong brave wench, tooling around the riverlands with a gold-and-ruby sword and a parchment signed by King Tommen, searching for Sansa Stark until it seemed like to kill her? *It appears it has, at that.* And for a moment, Jaime felt horrifically guilty. *She is incapable of taking orders anything other than absurdly literally. If I told her to jump off a bridge, she would.*

Briefly, Jaime wondered what on earth he would do with Sansa, making the considerable assumption both that she was there and he was able to rescue her from the Hound. *Or rather, if Brienne is able to rescue her from the Hound.* His participation would likely not amount to much more than waving a handkerchief and cheering. But he could scarcely tuck Sansa into his saddlebag to take back to King's Landing, and sending her north would play utter havoc with the Bolton alliance. Whatever nameless girl Littlefinger had conjured up to play the part of Arya Stark would then lose all value as heiress, if her legitimate elder sister abruptly appeared, and Jaime was fairly sure that entrusting so much as a houseplant to Roose and Ramsay Bolton was a dangerous idea, far less a prize of the magnitude of Sansa Stark.

*We could always run away together, the three of us. Build a cottage somewhere.* The notion entertained him, if for no other reason than its sheer ludicrousness. *Aye, a useless knight with golden hair, green eyes, and a missing hand, a big ugly swordswench with half her face eaten off, and a beautiful young noblewoman who just so happens to look exactly like the kingdom's most coveted bounty. There's no way anyone would notice us, not at all.*

Jaime lost track of how long they walked, but it wasn't more than a day, as Brienne had promised. Then the air had grown cool and damp, and she said that they were drawing near. He felt the tension ripple up her muscled arm; he'd been obliged to avail himself of it periodically, stumbling down the dark earthen warren with no eyes. *I ought as well cut off my right foot, at this rate. Or both of them.*

The smell was changing. Jaime took a deep whiff. He could make out leather, and old sweat, and steel. Over it all, the burning. That was when he saw the firelight, heard the voices and the hush that fell when he and the wench appeared. And that was when his suspicion, hereunto only distant and lurking in the back of his head, was thrust horribly to the forefront. He stopped dead. "Brienne. . ."

"I'm sorry." Her voice broke. "It was the only way. I'm so sorry, Jaime."

Jaime made a clumsy grab for the blindfold. Her hands, stronger and surer than his, caught them out of the way, and untied the knot at the back of his head, trembling. *Brienne is afraid.* Somehow, that thought unnerved him more than anything else that could possibly follow, and that was more than enough. Every animal instinct he had was screaming at him.
Brienne pulled away the blindfold, and Jaime stood blinking owlishly in some underground chamber. Roots writhed through the walls, the floor was mud, and fires smoldered dimly in the peat. And waiting for him, standing in a half circle, silent and stone-faced, was the outlaw brotherhood.

*This was much more amusing when it happened to the Freys, Jaime thought. "Goodmen. What a surprise. If I'd known this was a court appearance, I would have brought my nice clothes."

"Spare us, Kingslayer," growled one of them, a big brown-bearded man in a stained yellow cloak and patched ringmail. "You're here on trial, all right. But everyone knows what the outcome is."

"It's not much of a trial then, is it?" Jaime glanced around disdainfully, trying to disguise just how taken off guard he had been. Brienne had – *Brienne* had done this to him, played this trick? But to judge from the way the wench was hunching her big shoulders, staring fixedly at the ground, this hadn't been any more to her taste than his. *It does suddenly stop me feeling guilty, however."

"My lord," said another voice. "It does pain us to bring you here in such uncivilized fashion. Indeed, the loyalty of your companion is admirable – she almost suffered hanging rather than choosing to kill you. But the Lord of Light must judge your sins."

Shock jolted through Jaime's belly. He squinted. "Seven hells, Thoros, is that you?"

"It is." The red priest stepped forward. During his time in King's Landing, as a hanger-on at Robert Baratheon's court, Thoros of Myr been a fat, bald, merry fraud of a holy man, wading into tourney mêlées with flaming swords and drinking his winnings afterward. Now he was thin and hard, with a mat of grey hair. Pink rags were the only remnant of his red robes, worn beneath plate armor. He offered Jaime a smile that was apologetic without being sympathetic. "Please, do not blame the lady for bringing you here. We would have found you sooner or later. And she claims that she set out to find Sansa Stark on your orders. Therefore, we must uncover the source of this pernicious delusion."

"So I see. *Before* you hang me, like a proper gentleman." This was bad, this was very bad. "The Stark girl isn't here at all, is she. Or the Hound?"

"There you're mistaken," said yellowcloak. *"I'm* the Hound now. The wench killed the last one."

"What? Clegane?" Jaime was almost sorry he'd missed that.

"No. Rorge."

*Indeed? How sweet that must have been, before you bastards strung her up.* "If that's the case, Pisscloak, you're proudly upholding the tradition of the Hound being ugly as sin. But as for the rest of this..." Jaime actually failed to think of a suitably scalding epithet, a mark of the seriousness of the situation. "My lords, I give you my word, on my honor, that Brienne of Tarth is telling the truth. I did give her the sword. I did bid her to keep Sansa Stark safe."

"What in seven hells would you know about honor, Kingslayer?"

"I named a horse after it." Jaime smiled thinly. "But it does seem passing strange, doesn't it, that the wench would risk dismemberment and death on my behalf if I'd just lied to her? I do lie, after all. I'm known for it."

"So we've gathered," yellowcloak said grimly. "And I speak for all of us when I say that that fable makes even less sense coming from your mouth than it did from hers. King Tommen is your... nephew, your family runs this bloody kingdom, and Sansa Stark is the sister of the Young Wolf,
Ned's daughter, heiress to Winterfell if she managed to escape you thrice-damned lions. Why would you ever want to save her?"

"Why, indeed? Tread carefully. Very, very carefully. "I know it sounds ridiculous," Jaime began. "But this – " he held up his golden hand – "should show beyond any argument that I am not the man I was. That was the hand I killed Aerys Targaryen with, and quite frankly, I never knew that anyone loved the Mad King so much until he was dead. If anyone thinks that he would not have gladly slaughtered the whole of King's Landing, the whole of the realm – "

"Aerys had to die. No one denies that. But you – "

"Were sworn to serve him for life." Jaime suddenly felt old, and sad, and tired, and angry. He'd spent almost the last two decades having this argument – with others, with himself. "Am I here to answer for the Mad King? Truly?"

"No. We were just trying to guess what it was in you to possibly claim this story."

"If nothing else, it's too improbable to invent, isn't it?" Jaime smiled again. I will not beg, I will not apologize. "Tell me, my good outlaws. Has it always been your experience that a man's character is formed at birth, never to change by anything that happens to him afterward? Or do some of you know," he went on, pointedly catching Thoros' eye, "that the flames of life will sear us all, transform us, destroy us, rebirth us from the ashes? Has that not happened before? Or am even I beyond the reach of your Lord of Light? Such eloquence, Lannister. Assuming you survive this, you should become a lawyer.

The outlaws exchanged confused, frustrated looks. "You speak well, Kingslayer," Thoros allowed. "But then, you always did. Your tongue is as glib and golden as the rest of you, and nay doubt you've had time to think over what you meant to say. But if you – "

"Thoros, if it's you and your lot's intention to hang me no matter what I say, then just bloody get on with it. I've always hated waiting."

"That decision is not within my purview." Thoros turned. "My lady?"

For a moment Jaime was confused, thinking he was addressing Brienne. Well, that would be a good thing, assuming she doesn't hold a grudge for me getting her into this mess in the first place. But then he saw a cloaked, hooded figure approaching from the back of the cave, and the outlaws respectfully cleared aside to make room for – her?

Jaime had just a moment to think that whoever or whatever this was, he was not going to like it one bit. And then two bandaged hands reached up to lower the cowl, and even he – Jaime Lannister, who had loved his sister, killed his king, thrown Bran Stark out a window, and seen Brienne of Tarth in pink silk and Myrish lace – was stunned into speechlessness.

Beside him, Brienne herself made a faint noise of pain. This was likely even worse for her the first time around. "Lady Stark," Jaime said at last, feebly, his voice sounding ridiculous to his own ears. "It's – good? – to see you again. . .? I – never properly thanked you for setting me free – "

The thing that had been Lady Catelyn Stark merely gazed at him. Her flesh was pudding-white, her face shredded, her hair gone, blotches of brittle decay splotched across her cheeks. Under the baleful stare of those sunken, inhuman, hating eyes, Jaime had never wanted anything in his life so much as he wanted to turn and run, but made himself stand his ground. To Thoros he said, "You should have let the poor woman rest in peace."
"It was Dondarrion's notion," the red priest replied. "She was already three days dead when we found her body outside the Twins, and I had never bestowed the kiss of life at such a late time. But the Lord of Light would not have sent her back if there was not yet still a purpose left for her."

_Hanging me, apparently._ Yet for once, Jaime kept his witicisms to himself. It suddenly struck him how absurdly they were in danger. _We are going to die, both of us._ He wanted to be angrier at Brienne than he was, but what use would it be?

"My lady?" Thoros said to the dead woman. "What is your decision in this?"

Not-Catelyn reached to her throat, underneath the bandage she wore, and pinched the ghastly slash closed. A succession of halting, spitting, hissing words emerged, of which Jaime could understand no more than one or two.

Thoros turned to her. "She says that you will have a chance to prove your innocence, Kingslayer."

This was more than Jaime had expected. "How?"

"By the sword."

_Oh_. There went that happy thought. Despite his practices with Addam Marbrand and Ilyn Payne, even a moderately good squire could have torn him apart if they were fighting in earnest, and for all that this lot wasn't about to win any beauty competitions, he had no doubt that they could do the same. They were broken men, men with nothing to lose, led by a corpse and schooled in the hard-bitten prowess that was this never-ending war, and it was good money that all of them had a particular hatred for Lannisters. _It is hard to blame them._

While Jaime was still struggling for something to say, Brienne stepped in front of him. "By all the laws of the land, a man can name a champion to stand in his stead, if he is unable. I claim that right. I will fight for Ser Jaime."

_Oh, gods. _"Brienne, no."

She gave him a stubborn look. "I brought you here. I could not do anything less."

"No one asked you to butt in, wench," yellowcloak said. "He just refused your help, didn't he?" To Jaime he added, "So, Kingslayer. Answer for your crimes in your own stead, or condemn another to die in your place, just like you have always done."

"Bloody just... All right. I am not about to be mistaken for a member of the Most Devout any time soon, I confess it. But what crime? And don't give me the rot about the Mad King. Why do you buggers want my blood so badly?"

"There's an oath you swore. Never to take up arms against Stark or Tully. Strange the wench should fish you out of Riverrun and Raventree Hall, isn't it?"

"I never broke my oath." Cold sweat was beginning to trickle down the back of Jaime's neck. "Not that one."

"And it so happens, Kingslayer, you're wrong again." Yellowcloak beckoned to another of the outlaws, a small man with a pointed nose and thinning brown hair. To his further shock, Jaime recognized him. _Seven hells, the singer._

"Tom?" said yellowcloak.
"Thank you, Lem." Tom of Sevenstreams drew out a melancholy note on his harp. "I had the pleasure of meeting Ser Jaime at Riverrun, 'tis true. He was having a small discussion with Lord Tully, in which he told Edmure that if he did not command the castle to surrender, it would be stormed with fire and sword. And that when Lord Edmure's wife should give birth to their child, it would be sent to him with a trebuchet. Then Ser Jaime instructed me to play The Rains of Castamere, in case the point was missed."

Jaime winced. "I was hoping not to."

"Your lies get more shameless every time, Kingslayer," Lem snarled.

"Call me Jaime, please. Or Ser Jaime, if a sudden fit of civility should happen along."

He almost didn't see the big man's backhand coming. He threw up his right arm, half-caught the blow, but couldn't turn it entirely. Then he was falling, there was blood in his mouth from where he had bitten his tongue, and Brienne was standing above him with her hand on her sword hilt. I truly do appear to be the maiden fair in this scenario, Jaime reflected, which seems to make her the bear. She's big and stubborn and stupid enough, if not quite sufficiently hairy. And brave and loyal enough too, Warrior defend her.

"Jaime," Brienne whispered. "Jaime, please. Let me do this."

Do what? Jaime got to his knees, working his jaw gingerly to be sure that nothing was broken. "So say I was to accept the wench's offer," he said, as conversationally as he could. "What bold champion would stand for the Brotherhood without Banners?"

"Don't say our name, Kingslayer."

"Only if you'll stop saying mine." Jaime turned from side to side. "Well? Who?"

Not-Catelyn gestured, and once more the outlaws moved aside to let another of their number pass through. Jaime briefly feared another corpse, but instead it was another face that was much too familiar for his liking.

Not a corpse, a ghost.

Tall and broad and muscled like an aurochs, with thick, shaggy black hair, blue eyes, a square, stubborn jaw. Robert. Except it wasn't.

"Ser Gendry of the Hollow Hill, our blacksmith, will have that honor," Lem announced. "Since it was the wench who volunteered."

Brienne had suddenly gone stiff. "No," she said, barely audible. "No, I will not fight him."

Why not? Jaime was puzzled. Aye, the lad was big and strong and tough-looking, but to judge from the way he wore his sword, he'd not been wearing it that long; a smith wielded a hammer, not a blade. Furthermore, Brienne was as good with that longsword as any man he'd ever known. And why did this Ser Gendry matter enough for them to choose him for Brienne especially – Oh. Understanding hit in a sickening revelation. He looks like Renly. Damn him, he must look just like Renly Baratheon.

Still, if that was really the champion they chose, he might stand a better-than-even chance of getting out of this with his head on his shoulders – assuming the outlaws honored the verdict, that was. Yet somehow, Jaime found himself sidling toward the lad, offering a friendly smile. "Gendry – Ser Gendry, was it? If you're interested at all in living long enough to whelp some little smiths, I'd advise not taking on the wench. She's as strong as Ser Gregor Clegane, and can be just as bad-tempered if she chooses. She'd make a mummer's work of you, and then you'd all be forced with letting me walk free, which would certainly grate horribly on your constitutions to the point of – "
"Be quiet, Lannister." The boy shoved him aside.

It's better than Kingslayer, if barely. Jaime suddenly wondered if it had been like this for Tyrion all those years. Take pride in what you are, then they can't hurt you. And it seemed he was about to share another unpleasant parallel with his brother, if he was forced to watch a duel for his life. But he did not want to think about Tyrion. If he ever saw me again, he'd kill me, and not without cause.

Briefly, Jaime saw his dwarf brother's face in his head, heard once more the last words Tyrion had ever spoken to him. Those words had scarce stopped chasing each other around his thoughts ever since. Very well, Cersei is a lying whore, she's been fucking Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know. And I am the monster they all say I am. Yes, I killed your vile son.

Jaime shook his head, hard. I told them not to bring old crimes into this. He moved closer to the wench. "Brienne," he whispered. "You don't have to."

She lifted her eyes to his. Her big blue maiden's eyes, which went so incongruously with the rest of her. "Jaime, I have to. But not him. . ." Imploringly, the eyes turned to Lady Catelyn. "My lady. . . any other champion you name, I swear it. But please. Not him."

The dead woman pinched her throat together once more, and spoke.

Jaime knew what the answer was, even before Thoros provided it. "Well then," the red priest said. "She says, Lady Brienne, that you will fight Ser Jaime himself."
Davos

Drums beat and skinpipes wailed. In the firepit the flames leapt and swirled, snatching hungry bites out of the sky, and Davos did not want to know what was roasting on the spit above it. A scatter of rude low huts, built of snow and draped in pegged-up sealskins, were connected by a chaos of muddy paths, and every one of them was running riot with feral-looking dogs, shrieking children, young boys in blue face paint, and women in heavy cloaks, hauling cauldrons and dung for the fires and babes in cradleboards, shouting questions at the returning warriors. As they were marched closer, every step burning in Davos' twisted ankle, he turned his head this way and that, in some misbegotten hope of catching a glimpse of anyone who might potentially be Rickon Stark. Lord Manderly had told him that the boy took after his lady mother in his Tully coloring, blue eyes and auburn hair, rather than the dark hair and grey eyes of his lord father. But it was worse than impossible.

Davos' back still felt as if someone had torn a hole in it, which in fact someone had. The boiled-leather gambeson he wore beneath his cloak had prevented the arrow from penetrating more than a finger or two, but he could feel blood trickling beneath his smallclothes. Wex was considerably worse off; a burly Skagosi raider had slung him negligently over his shoulder, and the limp way in which Wex dangled suggested that he was unconscious. Not that he would have been a great deal of help if he was awake, but Davos felt utterly alone, a captive in a sea of hostile and savage peoples.

As they entered the settlement, the skinpipes stopped, but the drums continued to keep a low, ominous time. Then a big man clad in horn and fur and bead and bone, seabird feathers and chunks of amber braided into his wild grey mane, rose from his place by the central fire. He strode forward, saying something in a booming voice, the language he spoke as old and rumbling and primal as an avalanche. The chieftain's eyes were yellow, his teeth brown and broken, and his breath smelled overwhelmingly of fish. He grabbed Davos' chin and barked what was unmistakably a demand for him to explain himself.

"Stark," Davos said desperately. "Stark!"

It was impossible to tell if the chieftain understood. He snorted, turned away, and spat copiously, then snatched Wex off the raider's shoulder and smacked him briskly on the cheeks until he came to, eyes blurry with pain. The big Skagosi then asked the same thing.

"He can't talk," Davos shouted, and when the chieftain glared at him, he pointed to his mouth and shook his head. If they killed Wex, he was a dead man too.

The chieftain clearly did understand that, however. He gave another grunt, this one of surprise, and pried Wex's mouth open to peer inside. Apparently finding nothing to his interest, he spat again and pushed through the curious crowd back to Davos. He made a brusque gesture, and the two raiders holding the onion knight's arms dropped him unceremoniously on the ground.

Davos spat out a foul mouthful of mud, ice, and shit. He struggled to his knees, but was prevented from rising any further by the chieftain's huge horny hand on his head. The wildling matter-of-factly pawed him all over, yanked Davos' dagger from its sheath, admired it, thrust it through his own belt – then came across the black glass blade. He said something that sounded like an oath at the top of his lungs, and as he held it aloft, silence fell across the entire camp. Women clutched their children close, even the dogs seemed to cease their barking. The Skagosi turned it about as delicately as if it was made of crystal, staring.
He knows what it is. That did not outstandingly benefit Davos, as he himself was still unsure, but if it was something that could prove of any use, he was going to cling to it for all he was worth. Metaphorically speaking, that was.

At last, when the chieftain turned back to Davos, his voice was quieter and more urgent. He prodded a finger in his chest, asking insistently, but Davos could only shake his head in complete incomprehension. Seeing this, the chieftain growled and beckoned to a boy nearby, who vanished into one of the hovels.

Shortly he returned, leading a tall, tough, sinewy-looking woman. She was dressed in the same fashion as the others, furs and skins and leathers, two ocher stripes painted on each cheekbone and her long hair plaited messily down her back. Then she opened her mouth and said, in perfectly understandable Common Tongue, "What's your name, southerner?"

It actually took Davos a moment to remember. "Davos. Ser Davos Seaworth." He debated on whether or not to add his titles, and decided against it. The Skagosi were the last people who would be impressed by it, and on the very, very off chance that some of the others spoke the Common Tongue as well, he wanted to give them no chance to connect him to Stannis. Not so long as his king remained in the north, entangled with the affairs of Boltons and wildlings.

"Davos," the woman repeated, with a faint smile. "Well then. Hjalmarr Bjornsson here wishes t' know where you're coming by that pretty black knife."

Davos struggled momentarily for a lie, but his innate honesty, combined with his desperation, won out. "Lord Wyman Manderly, of White Harbor, gave it to me."

Something flickered in her eyes at that. He could almost have sworn that she recognized the name, but the wildling woman said only, "Why?"

"I've come here on his behalf." Davos hesitated, wondering if he dared to take the risk. The continued drip of blood down his back, and the agonizing ache in his ankle, made up his mind that he did. "I'm looking for Rickon Stark."

"Who?" the woman said blandly.

"Rickon Stark, the youngest son of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn. All his brothers are dead, and so he is heir to Winterfell. Lord Manderly has a vested interest in seeing him restored to his rightful seat." And so do I. Stannis' path to the Iron Throne became a virtual certainty, if the north was won and the Boltons overthrown.

"Well, it'll be a disappointment, m'lord, you coming so far and all. But we don't know who you're talking about." The woman shrugged. "Hjalmarr does like him that dagger o' yours, though."

"She is lying. Without knowing from whence the thought came, Davos was nonetheless certain of it. He could hardly have been in a weaker bargaining position: hurt, alone, and in danger of having his heart and liver eaten for supper, the only thing he had that they wanted already in their hands. He was going to have to improvise.

The woman conferred with Hjalmarr Bjornsson, as the chieftain's name seemed to be, in an undertone. Then unexpectedly, she smiled. "You and that boy o' yours seem a bit the worse for wear." Her eyes lingered on Wex. "Follow me, there's the crones will patch you up."

Davos tried to get to his feet, but nearly fell when he put weight on his ankle. The woman caught him before he could, however, and draped his arm over her shoulders, taking most of his weight.
Clutching her, he hopped and skipped to one of the tents, someone presumably following with Wex. As he did, he noticed that the warriors were walking the surrounds of the village, lighting a triple palisade of torches. The sun had slipped behind the icy sawtooth of mountains about half an hour ago, but from the terse, abstracted way in which the wildlings went about their task, Davos did not think they were doing it merely for light or for warmth. I must understand what is going on here. It was his only chance of gaining any currency with Hjalmarr and his tribe, of finding out what the wildling woman knew about Rickon. She could be the one Manderly mentioned, his guardian. Her name, what was her name?

They reached the tent, and Davos and Wex were deposited on a bed of scratchy furs. The crones, a gang of wizened old women, their skin seamed and brown with wind and weather, gathered around. They wore their grey hair long and straight, pinned with bone and bronze clasps, and Davos closed his eyes as they tended him; he could not understand their talk but found it comforting nonetheless. Their hands were wrinkled but deft, and they cleaned him up, applied some foul-smelling unguent to his ankle, and wrapped it tight in strips of skin. He only screamed once, when they dug out the fragments of the flint arrowhead that had broken off in his back. Afterward, they gave him a cup of some strong, bracing broth, chunks of fat bobbing in it, and Davos slurped it gratefully. Nothing more appeared to be required of him, and he lay with his face against the furs, listening to Wex’s guttural whimpers as the crones tended to him.

Outside the tent, the drums started up again, and the skinpipes; it sounded as if the entire village was gathering around the fire for supper. WHATSOEVER that may be, Davos was at least grateful that he constituted no part of it. A voice that did not belong to Hjalmarr spoke, and he wondered if it was the shaman. Asking the gods who these intruders truly are, perhaps.

Finally, it began to grow quiet. Wex's breathing deepened from pained whimpering to ragged snores. Davos himself was equally exhausted, but he lay just under the surface of a doze, waiting for the interpreter to return. She would, eventually. And then... 

It felt close to midnight when she did, pushing aside the heavy flap and admitting ghostly moonlight. She stepped over the patients, said something in the Old Tongue to the crone tending the fire, and both of them laughed softly. Then the crone closed her eyes, and the woman turned to go. But as she passed, Davos reached up and grabbed her mukluk. Taking a chance as terrible as any he had in his smuggling days, he whispered, "Osha?"

She froze. He felt it beyond doubt, and vindication surged through him. She tensed as if considering whether to make a break for it, but the only way to keep him from asking again was to kill him. And she couldn't do that, not with Hjalmarr having taken such a proprietary interest in Davos and his weaponry. She expelled a hard, angry breath through her nose and said, "Aye?"

Slowly, deliberately, Davos sat up, keeping hold of her. If it came to any sort of scuffle, he was likely to wind up on the short end of it, but for now, she didn't appear inclined to wake the entire camp on his behalf. "You," he whispered. "You lied. You know where Rickon is."

Osha swatted his hand off. "Did I, ser southerner? Well then, fair's fair. You did too."

"What?" For a moment, Davos was afraid that she meant something to do with Stannis.

"Him," Osha hissed, pointing at Wex's slumbering silhouette. "I know who he is. He was there at Winterfell when the squids took it. He was the smiley squid prince's squire, hisself."

Davos saw no point in denying it. "Yes, Wex was Theon Greyjoy's squire. But Theon himself is a prisoner in the Dreadfort, paying for his crimes, and Lord Manderly's intentions in seeking Rickon are sincere."
Osha snorted. Kneeling down, she leaned close and whispered, "It wasn't the Greyjoys what burned and sacked Winterfell and put all its people to the sword. Oh, they didn't do no good, t' be sure. But it was them Boltons who did the rest. Bran said so. From seeing with his wolf. And we saw it as well when we climbed from the crypt."

"Bran is alive?" Would he have to choose between one Stark son or the other?

Realizing she had made a mistake, Osha tried to shrug it off. "He was, a long time ago. Now, there's no telling."

Davos saw his chance. "Lord Wyman knows the crimes of the Boltons as much as you. It is only by bringing Rickon home that we can conquer the north back from their foul rule."

It was hard to tell what Osha thought of this. Finally, abruptly, she said, "That black glass o' yours. Is there more of it somewhere?"

"I imagine so. Why?"

"Hjalmarr and t' rest of us. We have what you might call an interest in knowing."

"I could certainly never bring more of it unless I returned to White Harbor," Davos said. "And I will not return to White Harbor without Rickon and his wolf."

Osha gave him a faint, sardonic smile, acknowledging the gambit. Then without another word, she rose to her feet and slipped out, a gust of bitterly cold air swirling through the flap when she opened it. Shivering, Davos closed his eyes and slipped under into fitful sleep.

In the morning when Osha came to fetch him, she gave absolutely no sign that anything whatsoever had passed between them in the night, and Davos followed her example. She led him to another tent, this one larger and somewhat more grandiose, where Hjalmarr, the crones, and the shaman were awaiting his presence. The Skagosi chieftain greeted Davos genially if still incomprehensibly, and offered him a drink from a curved horn filled with a strong dark brew. Then he bid him sit on a quilted patchwork of pelts. With Osha serving as translator, the meeting began.

Hjalmarr's demands were simple: he wanted more of the black glass, and he wanted it now. He was not inclined to listen to any of Davos' explanations or evasions, and at one point became so overwrought that he stormed around the tent bellowing and waving his arms. Davos, who had faced down every sort of fit or temper tantrum from clients, criminals, cutthroats, authorities, pirates, fellow smugglers, priests, and noblemen, was not intimidated, but still knew that he had to be very careful with the Skagosi. In turn, he simply and stubbornly repeated that he wanted something as well, and they too knew what it was.

Finally, discovering that he could not browbeat his prisoner into a bargain, Hjalmarr changed his tune. It was essential, he conveyed through Osha, that Davos be proved as a strong man, and his black glass as the true totem, not the false – if that was so, they would consider further terms with him. To uncover if this was so, he would be performing the clan a certain service tonight, on the slopes of Mount Vinterben beyond the bounds of the camp.

Davos was not at all sure he liked the sound of this. "Service? What service?" he pressed, but Hjalmarr and the others remained unforthcoming. They would fetch him when it was time, he was given to understand. In the meantime, it would be wise to make any prayers or sacrifices to his gods that he had in mind. This was just the thing to make Davos dislike it even more, but he could not see that he had a choice. That answered quite clearly what the price of failure was, then. He had no idea what he would be doing, not exactly, but a horrible suspicion was slowly beginning to
germinate.

He spent all afternoon in the crones' tent, doing little. At dusk, a pair of maidens came to him, carrying new clothes sewed of sealskin, and one of them carefully painted blue lines on his unshaven cheeks. Her touch made him sad; he wondered what it would be like to have a daughter. *Mayhaps if I ever get home... it grows fainter every day, but still... my Marya and I, we are not yet in the winter of our age...*

The sun was going down when he was brought outside. Four young warriors waited, unsmiling. One of them handed him the black glass dagger, and he fell in with them. *It might well be that I go to my death tonight. Weep for me if you will, my lady. But be strong for Devan and Steff and Stanny.* Quietly, he touched the seven-pointed star on himself.

The village occupied a sheltered spot in the lee of the hills, and they quickly climbed above it, to a broad, steep, sprawling snowfield. Ahead, the sunset inked shadows like thumbprints on the white shoulders of the mountain. There was an exposed outcrop of rock about halfway up, and it was there that they seemed to be making. The young men were picking up speed as they climbed; it was plain that they wanted to be out no longer than they absolutely had to be.

At last they reached the rock, which proved to in fact be a cave, no more than a few yards deep. From here, Davos could see for hundreds of miles to the south and east and west, the glimmering icy sea and the mountains and even, away on his right in the very far distance, something on the mainland that might have been the Wall. His guides bowed to him in turn, and said something that might have been a prayer. Then, with no further instructions, they turned about and departed down the mountainside, leaving him sitting in the shallow, frigid cave with the black knife, one torch, one flask of the bitter dark brew, and some sort of roasted meat wrapped in skins. He was very hungry, but afraid to touch it.

It grew darker. Far below, the torches around the village were lit. The cold made him drowsy, but he knew better than to sleep – even if it was the only foe he had to contend with tonight, a man who fell asleep in this weather was liable never to wake. It was said to be a comforting death, peaceful, that you felt no pain at the end. Davos, who had witnessed men burned alive in the red woman's fires, would take it nine-and-ninety times of a hundred, but not today.

The mantle of full night unfolded on the mountain. Still it was quiet; the wind was blowing away from the settlement. His back and ankle still hurt, and his belly was twisting into knots with starvation. So finally he gave in and took a mouthful of the brown greasy delicious flesh, trying very hard not to think about it. *A bite, just a bite,* but he was so hungry, and soon it was gone. *I will prove whatever I must prove. I will not fail my king, or Lord Manderly or Rickon, I will not –*

Davos caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

A shock of unpleasant surprise coursing through him, he snapped his head around. Nothing.

Suddenly that supper – whatever it might have been – was sitting like a rock. Mouth dry, he took a drink from the flask to wet it, and gathered his haunches under him, ignoring the rasp of pain.

Whatever it was, he'd not –

There it was again.

This time, Davos looked as fast as he possibly could, but there was still nothing – only something that looked like a white silk scarf, rippling along the snow for a few moments before it vanished. There was no wind, no breath, no reason for it to look as if there was a shadow stealthily moving up the slope toward him.
Davos' fingers were nerveless on the hilt of the knife. "Mother have mercy," he whispered, and made the star again. "Mother, Mother, Mother have mercy."

But it was not the Mother's carved, serene face he saw. It was Melisandre's. The red priestess seemed to hover in the air before him, the ruby at her throat winking. *The night is dark and full of terrors, ser onions,* she whispered. *Do you believe me now?*

"No," Davos said aloud. His voice was choked and painful in the cold air. There were more shadows moving now, he was sure of it. He remembered another shadow that brought death, in the passage beneath Storm's End, Melisandre *shining*. "No!"

*It is fire you stand against them with, and dragonglass. The gifts of R'hllor, the strength of the Lord of Light. Reach out your hand and take all the power you desire, Davos Seaworth. Rise, and become great and terrible. Rise, and become a worthy Hand to your king. Rise! Drive out these servants of the Great Other! Rise, and be victorious!*

"No," he was still saying, over and over. Terror turned his stomach to water. One of the shadows lifted its head. Then another. Snow crunched under no mortal feet, and no print was left, as they began to crawl, then rise, then glide, then charge. He had never seen eyes so blue.
Braavos at night was a labyrinth of mystery and enchantment. Cat and Blind Beth knew every step, every wynd, every stone of the poorer districts, the pleasure-houses and winesinks and mummers’ dens, but Lyanna Snow was a stranger to the places they now passed, the gondolier poling them through broad canals with colored lanterns, delicate bridges, painted friezes and golden domes and tiled roofs. The manses and villas grew more opulent the further they traveled, until Lyanna could not help but wonder where they could possibly be going. She had not expected a courtesan to be sleeping on a sack out back of a tavern, but this canal led through the heart of the city, to the island that lay at the northern edge of the lagoon. The Purple Harbor.

Lyanna glanced covertly at the Summer Maid. For the entire journey, she had tried to riddle out why the courtesan had not betrayed more surprise at her appearance, had merely led her down to the gondola and paid for her passage too. But there was only one possible answer. She was expecting me. She knew someone would be meeting her at the Orb. Which led to the next realization: She must also know who it is I have to kill.

If that was so... had the Summer Maid herself come to the House of Black and White? The kindly man had said it was a certain man who had prayed for the death of this certain other, but that meant nothing. Syrio, back in King's Landing, had always called her "boy," when he meant that she should guile others into seeing what was not there. Male and female lie on the surface of our souls, Lyanna reminded herself. A courtesan certainly would be able to afford the services of the Faceless Men, and by no means did the Summer Maid need to have gone in person. She could have sent a trusted servant.

Pleased with herself for working this out, Lyanna sat back. Look with your eyes, hear with your ears. The gondola took a few more turns, passing under the great triple-arched aqueduct that carried water from the mainland, then slid to a graceful halt in the star-flecked water, against a swaying jetty.

Lyanna looked up, and had to bite her tongue. She recognized the domes and towers that rose above her, the forest of slender spires, the hanging gardens and the walls of mosaics. But she had only ever glimpsed it from a distance. This is the Sealord's Palace. And the Sealord, Ferrego Antaryon, had been frail and infirm for as long as she had been in Braavos – surely it couldn't be him she was meant to kill, when he would die just as soon on his own. Someone else here, then. And she could hardly go asking around the household.

"Come." The Summer Maid's voice startled Lyanna, and she jumped, scrambling out of the gondola so clumsily that she scraped her knee. Then she straightened up and followed the two women down the quay, to a barred door set in a high stone wall. The handmaid called some Braavosi word that Lyanna did not know, apparently a password, and they stepped through.

Beyond, there was a garden laid out in precise geometric angles, paths and flowering shrubs cultivated to grow in a natural maze, and a marble fountain topped by a slim naked youth stood at the center. The palace itself was lit with many candles and torches, and open arches fed into cloisters, columns, balconies, and windows, all molded of creamy stone. Then they passed into a high vaulted corridor, and Lyanna was pleased to note that her own footsteps were as soft and silent as the Summer Maid's.

She tried to look unobtrusively as they continued deeper into the palace. The floor was done in chequy of black and white marble, seamed with gold in the joins. Splendid carpets lay in alcoves, beneath the serene carven feet of previous Sealords, and flames burned in bronze salvers.
suspended by chains. Then the handmaid opened a series of lacquered wooden doors, all leading inward like a puzzle-box to a small, intimate room, hung with tapestries depicting great scenes from Braavosi history. A fire crackled in an iron brazier, and four velveteen settles were placed about it. Two of them were occupied.

The man nearest the brazier had to be the ailing Sealord himself. A sweet stink of sickness rose from him, and he had a gaunt, wraithlike look, as if someone had put him in a cauldron and boiled all the spare flesh from his bones. He sat with a quilt wrapped around his shoulders, occasionally sipping from a goblet. When he glanced up at their entrance, his grey eyes were worn and wan with pain. "Dear heart," he said, smiling wearily at the Summer Maid.

"Ferrego." She bent to kiss his forehead. "I did not know you were entertaining your guest so privily, else I'd not have interrupted."

"Nonsense. You are no interruption." The Sealord coughed. "Besides, my good Qarro knows that you are always to be admitted. Sit. Did you enjoy the play? I thought you might."

A cynical smile twisted the Summer Maid's mouth. "Ferrego," she said mildly. "A less forgiving woman might have wanted your blood, for not warning me beforehand."

"You are justified. But I am shamefully uncouth. Please allow me to present my guest, Ser Justin Massey. Ser Justin, my sweet lady."

"I am enchanted." The moment the man opened his mouth, Lyanna knew that he was from Westeros. He was tall, well built, and not ill-favored, with a sheet of white-gold hair and an easy smile. "After the voyage we suffered through, my lord, I must say your palace looks twice as much like paradise."

"A trial, was it?" the Sealord said noncommittally.

"Exceedingly." Ser Justin accepted a goblet of ambrosia from a page. "First there was getting to the Wall to deliver the Lord Commander's little sister, only to find that some of his men had taken it upon themselves to murder him a fortnight previously. We left Lady Arya there anyway – poor girl, after being wed to the Bastard of Bolton, even a Castle Black crawling with wildlings is a refuge. And then the storm struck that night, we almost killed our horses trying to outrace the worst of it to Eastwatch. But with Jon Snow dead, the Watch garrison there was not terribly interested in helping us find a – "

Arya gasped.

Both Ser Justin and the Sealord swung around to look at her. Until now, they'd taken no more notice of her than they would have of a piece of furniture. "Who are you, child?" Ferrego Antaryon asked.

"Ly – Lyanna. Lyanna Snow." Her voice sounded faint and unconvincing even to her. Ser Justin had to be lying, he had to, he was just stupid, Jon couldn't be dead, he couldn't be! And who was this "Lady Arya" – why had they taken her to the Wall? Why were there wildlings there, and who was the Bastard of Bolton? No, I would know if Jon was dead, I would, I would. . .

Yet that dream last night where she'd been with Nymeria as the hunters caught her, that dream where she'd been torn from her wolf –

At that moment, it took every single drop of Arya's will and training for her not to burst out in a flood of desperate questions. She chewed her lip until she tasted blood, and then noticed that the
man in the corner – whom she hadn't seen this entire time, not until he moved in the shadows – was staring at her intently. Stepping out, he asked, "You are called Lyanna Snow, child?"

"Yes," she said, in a small voice.

"This is the girl, Qarro," said the Summer Maid. "The one I told you I would bring."

"You are saying you would be bringing someone, yes. But you did not say that it would be a girl."

"You are too suspicious. Ferrego will tell you that this was in the offering for several days."

"It was," said the Sealord, "and you will know that my sweet lady has what she wants. Now, Massey. I am given to understand a portion of your requests, but it is best we have them all. Gold, was it? And some number of swords?"

"You are correct, my lord," Ser Justin said, with a self-deprecating shrug. "I speak to the Iron Bank on the morrow, assuming I remembered who to bribe and how much to bribe them. Tycho Nestoris was useful on that accord, yet not even he can open doors that the Bank wishes to remain closed. But I was told that by far the easiest way to hire twenty thousand sellswords at a swoop was to talk to you."

The Sealord sipped his drink. "It might be."

"Otherwise, I would be forced to collect them one by one, and winter might come again by the time I was finished." Ser Justin smiled, first at the Sealord and then the Summer Maid; he seemed to sense that he was getting a far warmer reception there. "I've noted you have a great deal of young rogues – bravos, they are called? – who spend their time enthusiastically murdering each other in alleyways. My king has a great use for any good sword, and it would solve some of the disruption in your city as well."

"Bravos are not soldiers," the Sealord said. "They have no discipline, no sense of self-sacrifice. And – your pardon, Ser Justin, but you speak of leading them into a desolate northern wilderness, to face the teeth of winter and fight this Bolton abomination. Mayhaps there are one or two men who are weary of life and willing to oblige you, but even sellswords are not so desperate for gold as that. They'll take contracts escorting rich merchants between the Free Cities, or fighting in the Disputed Lands. Some will sail the Jade Sea trading routes to Qarth and the Summer Isles, but none of them have ever claimed suicidal courage. It is northmen from Westeros you need, not silk-clad boys from Braavos."

Ser Justin did not blink. "Does Tormo Fregar share that view, my lord?"

There was a pause just long enough to turn uncomfortable. Then the Sealord said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Tormo Fregar. It is widely rumored that he will become the new Sealord when your eminence is... at rest."

"When I am dead, you mean. Well, I am not yet, and do not intend to be so for some time, even though I cannot say that I currently enjoy it much. Since you ask, you must already know something of Fregar's temperament. He is a more violent man than me, yes, and more idealistic. He dreams of raising Braavos to new heights, so we should once and forever eclipse the Valyrian Empire that enslaved our ancestors. But you will also know, Ser Justin, that his ascent is no sure thing. Each faction must fight it out first."

"That seems quite wasteful, my lord." Ser Justin was still unfazed. "In which case, would you
happen to know the employment status of the Golden Company?"

"I am surprised you do not, ser."

That did cause Massey to blink. "What do you mean?"

"Are they not in Westeros?"

"Are... they?" the knight echoed. He was no longer smiling.

Ferrego Antaryon was about to pull a trump card, and he was clearly enjoying it immensely. "You and Lord Stannis were in the north, it is understandable that you do not know. But here in Braavos, we have been hearing the whisperings for some time. Daenerys Targaryen has vanished in Meereen with one of her dragons, while her nephew leads the Golden Company to the shores of Westeros and his rightful throne."

"Nephew – " Ser Justin looked as if someone had just swung something very heavy into his face. "Who in the seven hells – "

"Aegon Targaryen, son of Prince Rhaegar and Elia Martell. If you think it a fine feat for a dead boy, ser, rest assured that so did I. At first."

"This – this – " Ser Justin had absolutely nothing witty to riposte to that. "This cannot be. . . if it was so. . ."

"Stannis Baratheon would not be the rightful heir to the Iron Throne after all." The Sealord leaned back in his quilts. "Now do you understand why I am not eager to send my swords to roast in dragonfire?"

Ser Justin opened and shut his mouth three times in a row, rather appropriately considering that the subject was the Targaryens. "If there were once more dragons in the sky above Westeros, we would know it, even if we were beyond the Wall. That sort of tiding could not be kept quiet for an instant. Or are they still with Rhaegar's sister in Meereen?"

"You said you would know it, ser."

Apparently sensing he was in danger of being badly outwitted, Ser Justin tried a new angle. "If that is so, Aegon Targaryen is merely a blue-blooded beggar with a horde of mercenaries in tow. And it seems convenient, doesn't it, that he has supposedly been alive all this time and no one's heard a peep of – "

"You are welcome to disprove him, of course," the Sealord said. "That would be a greater service to your lord than any number of Braavosi swords."

"I endured trial upon trial to get here. My king placed his hope in me, and in you."

"I think, however, that I have heard enough for tonight. Remove him if you will, but gently. I must speak to my lady."
Qarro – he must be Qarro Volentin, the First Sword of Braavos – marched Ser Justin out. The instant they were gone, the Summer Maid rose from her settle, crossed to the Sealord, and took his papery hands in hers. "Ferrego, reconsider. Ser Justin has the right of it. Without dragons, Aegon Targaryen is nothing. Stannis Baratheon is a man grown, a warrior. He would be –"

" – a terrifyingly just king. I know."

"He would kill the Lannisters!" Color climbed the Summer Maid's face. "He has an army – or he will, if you give him one! Why would you honor that old treaty? It arranged for the marriage of Viserys Targaryen to Arianne Martell, and Viserys is dead and Arianne her father's prisoner, if the tales are true. I know you stood as witness to it, but that is over, Ferrego. Done. For your life, reconsider."

The Sealord raised his eyes to her face. "Who are you, dear heart?"

"You know who I am." The Summer Maid raised a hand to her face, pulled away her silken veil and her golden braids, her jewels and clasps and pins. She stood before him in her blue dress, bare-headed, long dark hair tumbling down her back where moments ago it had been the color of honey. "You know, Ferrego. Give me the one thing you have denied me, and I ask nothing more."

Arya, who had been standing in the corner with the Summer Maid's servant, was astonished and horrified. _She changed her hair. She might be able to change her face too. Who is she? Who am I?_ And with that, the horrible revelation. _The Summer Maid wants me to kill the Sealord. He might die of his illness, but not quickly, and she needs him dead now. He won't give swords to Ser Justin, and she wants him to. With him dead, Tormo Fregar will become Sealord instead, and he'll do it._

Arya was petrified. _The Sealord's just an old sick man, she told herself. And King Robert was Father's friend, Father would have supported Stannis to be king._ Yet she tried desperately to push it away. _No One doesn't have a father._ Yet encroaching on every thought, every image, every instant, was the memory of Ser Justin so casually saying that Jon Snow was dead, and it wasn't, wasn't, the stupid stupid stupid –

"Now," Ferrego Antaryon was saying. "I have heard enough from you as well, my sweet. Take your girls and go to bed, and summon my physician. I will have more poppy to help me sleep."

"Poppy." The Summer Maid's voice was cold. "Of course, my lord."

He reached toward her. "Do not scold me. The Targaryens will not fail us."

"If you say so, my lord," the courtesan said, with remote civility. She beckoned, and her handmaid stepped forward, Arya hastily following. They stepped through the tapestries and the doors, out into the hall. Her heart was pounding.

_Tonight, I could do it tonight. He'll have taken poppy, he won't wake._ She had a knife with her – it wasn't Needle, but it was good enough. After that, it would only be a matter of outdistancing the Sealord's guards long enough to get back to the House of Black and White and change her face. They would be hunting for Lyanna Snow and her blue eyes and sandy hair and freckles, and Cat and Blind Beth knew the hidden ways, the secret ways. _I can do it. I have to._

She made up some excuse, begged the Summer Maid's pardons, and began to run. _Maybe I should kill Ser Justin too. He's lying about Jon and that girl called Lady Arya. I'm not a lady, and it's not Arya._ But she knew that the kindly man would be sorely wroth if she did. _Only kill those whose deaths have been prayed for._ No one else. And Ser Justin was nothing. Not to No One.
Tears stung her eyes. She halted in the middle of an upstairs corridor, furiously scrubbing at them with her grubby hands. *Jon... Nymeria...* Kill the Sealord first, kill him and prove how faceless she had become. . . the kindly man was wrong, they were all wrong. She was a wolf maid for true and she could do anything she had to. *Ser Gregor!* she thought, with something approaching madness. *Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei!*

More tears leaked out from beneath her lashes. Angrily, she slapped them away, and took a step.

A step was as far as she got. And then – there might have been a sound in warning, but she was not sure, never would be. For that was when a hand descended on her shoulder from behind, clasping it in a hold like iron. The other clapped over her mouth, choking off her scream aborning. And a soft, familiar voice said in her ear, "And what is a girl doing in this place? A girl alone, with a knife? I am wondering."
All he remembered was red.

Red snow. Red eyes. Red blood, red hair, red ruby, and the red of the flames that devoured him, wrapped him as tenderly as a mother with her babe. But he had never known his mother. Perhaps he had been born there, in the smoke and steam and snow, except he knew that he had died. Or was meant to, at any rate. It was impossible to recall, to form any coherent thought. There was only light. Red light.

He had one distant, fragile memory, and he struggled to hold onto it, for it reminded him who he was. Watching Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun tear apart Ser Patrek of King's Mountain, shouting at the queen's men to put the blades away before they provoked the giant further, turning to see Whit Whittlestick slashing at his neck. . . fumbling for Longclaw, more shouts, screams, Bowen Marsh standing before him with tears on his cheeks, and the dagger in his belly, the one in his back, the one between his ribs. The way the wound smoked in the frigid night air, and the roiling darkness that crashed over him like a tidal wave. Cold. He remembered that too. It was in him to his bones, if he even still had them.

He drifted. He was not awake, he did not know how much time had passed. Time itself existed at a far remove, something at the other end of that light, and he was scared to go much deeper into it. Yet if he went too far away from it, he began to become aware that he was waking up, and the pain that hit him then was almost indescribable. I cannot wake and live. He was certain of it, without knowing how. Whatever flesh awaited him was too damaged to house his soul.

I have become a ghost, then. It would have made him laugh, but he had no mouth or breath with which to do so. He was not at rest in the hereafter, and he was not alive; he was caught halfway between. At times he felt as if both sides were in battle for his soul, as if they would rend the flimsy thing like the silk of a lady's gown. But my lady wore fur and skins and leathers, and killed an old man for building a fire. Then as if Ygritte had been summoned by the words, he would see her hovering above him, but he could never touch her no matter how hard he struggled. Sometimes she looked angry, other times merely sad. You know nothing, Jon Snow, she would whisper, and vanish, a grey-fletched arrow sprouting between her breasts and turning her to ashes.

He saw many things, for that matter. There was Lord Eddard, headless, and Lady Catelyn, eyes burning like corpse-candles in the shredded ruin of her face. There was Robb with snowflakes melting in his hair, as he had looked on the day they said goodbye for the last time, and then there was Robb with his head savagely hacked off, his mutilated body oozing blood as he looked up with Grey Wind's mournful dead eyes. There was Sansa trapped in a castle of ice, with a huge burned shadow with the head of a dog looming above her, and a black-blooded shadow the size of a mountain towering above them both. There was Bran entangled in the roots of some monstrous tree, his own body growing fainter and more distant every day, and then there was baby Rickon surrounded by a thousand blue-eyed specters in a land of always winter. Snow. All of them. Snow, snow, Snow.

And then there was one he did not see. Where is Arya? Even in his delirium, he knew she was not there with the rest of the shades of his dead family. Instead, he flew into a land of red mountains, the sunlight as brilliant as the edge of a spear and the sand blowing in the wind. There stood a man with a sword as pale as milkglass, and two more, one with a helm forged in the shape of a black bat and the other who wore the device of a white bull. And behind them all, a faceless woman who wore a crown of blue roses lay in a bed of blood. Promise me, Ned, she cried, and crumbled away.
The red beat against his skull. *I am burning in a cage of ice.* Then he was twisting and struggling, and faintly, through a haze of pain, he caught a glimpse of Winterfell. He knew it was Winterfell, even though it was burned and desolate and half in ruins, sacked and soot-stained, forty-foot drifts of snow climbing its towers. He flew above it to the godswood, where the hot pools bubbled and the red face stared up at him, ancient lips moving. *Jon,* it whispered. *Jon, Jon, Jon.*

He tried to speak, but the words were only dust. The tree became Bran's face and then someone else's, with long white hair and one red eye and a red birthmark on its hollow cheek. *Red. Always red.* The tree lifted a trailing branch. *Smoke,* it said. *Smoke and salt. A thousand eyes and one.*

Jon Snow did not know the face, yet somehow it seemed part of him nonetheless. *Who are you?*

*I am you,* it answered. *But you are more.*

And the darkness began to close in, swallowing him, until he began to panic. *Don't go,* he wanted to scream, at whatever phantoms were walking the netherworld with him. *Don't leave me!*

His only answer was a faint and fading whisper. *Kill the boy,* it told him. *Kill the boy, and let the man be born.*

Something that might have been harp music sounded far away, in sweet, low, mourning chords. *A song so sad the dead would weep.* Then the entire world went black, and Jon recognized that he was about to wake. He struggled violently, but he had no choice. He rose upwards. *What am I waking into?*

And then he contorted, gasped, choked, and opened his eyes to find himself curled up on a sheet of ice.

Jon merely lay there for several moments, exhausted by even that simple effort. The world would not stop spinning, and the walls of the cell were translucent, veiled with hanging draperies of icicles. The cold was like nothing he had ever encountered, fierce and painful as being hit in the chest. Yet it was queerly bracing as well.

At length, he attempted to get to his feet. Yet something was wrong. He could not stand up straight, was on hands and knees, moving about on all fours. Claws clicked on the ice, and he tried to look around to see what was behind him. But his head did not move as he was accustomed to. His nose was keener and his eyes... what was wrong with his eyes? And then he looked straight ahead, and got the most horrid shock of all.

His own body lay in front of him. The grey Stark eyes were open and staring vacantly at the ceiling, the hands folded on the chest in preparation for a tomb-carver, the long brown hair lying untidily around the solemn, gaunt face. It was naked but for a light shroud draped over it, and the half-healed knife wounds showed through the cloth, vivid weals on throat, side, belly, the one in its back obscured only by virtue of the fact that the corpse was lying on it. Its chest did not rise and fall. Its flesh was cold and pale and hard, bloodless.

The shock was so titanic that Jon's head went light. *I am dead after all,* he realized. There could be no denying it, not with the proof so paramount before him. *But then what am I? How can I be thinking, how can I know who I am, if I am not –*

Then he looked down. The legs beneath him were four in number, not two. And they were covered with heavy white fur, ending in broad paws, not feet. He had been more correct when he knew, when he said that he had become a ghost. *My wolf. I'm in my wolf.*
Understandably, all things considered, Jon went slightly mad.

He began to gallop in frantic circles, skidding and sliding, tearing gouges out of the ice with his claws. He could feel something rising in his head, something that did not belong to him and yet did, something that must be Ghost's own soul, buried deep when Jon had invaded his body. *Wildness, wolfblood.* It grew stronger and language vanished only ice fire ice fire ice fire, burning always burning –

A door opened, and the red woman stepped inside.

On sight of her, every one of Ghost's hackles rose and stood, bristling. He bared his teeth, backing protectively toward Jon's body. If the female came too close, if she tried to touch him – he would rip, teeth dig deep and taste the flesh and blood as red as the ruby that pulsed at her pale vulnerable neck –

Slowly, carefully, the red woman knelt. She held out both long-fingered, elegant hands, a gesture of pacification. "You do not need to be afraid of me, brother," she said, in that voice rich and mellifluous with the accents of Asshai. "Please, be calm. In time, all will be as it was meant to be."

*Melisandre.* It was Jon who knew that name, and while he quelled Ghost's desire to tear out her throat, this did not engender any sudden desire to trust her. In fact, it made him leerier than ever, and he had already discovered one of the signal disadvantages of his new body: he had no voice. For a brief, completely ludicrous moment, he found himself wondering if a wolf's paw could hold a quill.

*What did you do to me?* That was the first and most pressing question of all. *Where am I?* That was the second.

The red priestess smiled. "You are safe, Jon," she said reassuringly. "You are in a place where no one will find us. Not until you are ready."

Ghost pawed the floor threateningly, attempting to secure a more specific answer. But the cold, the ice, the sense of both protection and malevolence... he knew, somehow. *The Wall. We are inside the Wall itself.*

"As for what has been done to you, it does not come from me," Melisandre went on. "You may thank god for his gift of good healing light, for the fire that flooded your lungs. Elsewise, you would have gone to the ice and dark of the Great Other. That is what awaits if you deny R'hllor's power once more, Jon Snow. You must know that."

Jon did not care about her red god now that he was a wolf, any more than he had when he was himself. *I want my body back,* he thought at her angrily. *I want my men. I want my little sister. Arya. Where is Arya?*

Either Melisandre did not understand this, or chose not to. "You were saved for a great purpose," she said, her red eyes gazing intently into his own. "But there is more trial before you yet. This is only halfway. Only death may pay for life, Jon Snow, and this is a life dearly bought. You have not yet burned. You must."

*What in damnation is she talking about?* All Jon could remember was burning. When Melisandre reached out a hand toward him, he backed away. *She will make me into some sort of sacrifice if I let her. But what? For what?*

"A great storm began four nights ago," the red priestess went on. "It will not cease until Castle
Black and all else is veiled in drifts fifty and a hundred feet deep. You are finally in your wolf – it took many spells, many fires, many workings for me to find you, but some of it was your own, for you are a skinchanger in truth now. And not a moment too soon. The servants of the Great Other are very strong. They march on the Wall in a force not seen since the Long Night. In less than three weeks, they will be here – and the snow will not have stopped. Think of what that means, Jon. Think."

How do you know? Jon had too much bitter experience with Melisandre's so-called foretelling to swallow this without several spoonfuls of salt.

This question the red priestess opted to answer. "I have seen it in my fires," she said. "Beyond all doubt. I know that I have erred before, but there was no mistaking this. The very heralds of winter and woe. The ancient evil." Her ruby flared and winked, pulsating like a heart. "Whether it takes them an hour or a day or a hundred days, they will attack the Wall, and they will break it. This is no undisciplined rabble of wildlings, Lord Snow. This is a more-than-mortal foe with a strength that your crow brothers, led by Bowen Marsh as they now are, can never hope to match."

Bowen Marsh? Of all the men? Ghost wheeled around, as if there was somewhere else he could possibly go in the cramped ice cell.

"The wildlings who fled to Hardhome are all dead," said Melisandre levelly. "As you feared. Their wights march down Storrolf's Point even now, and some are said to have made it across the bay to Skane and Skagos. Eastwatch-by-the-Sea will soon be under attack as well. And what's more, your sister is here at Castle Black. Ser Justin Massey brought her before he fled to Braavos. When the Others breach the Wall, she will be the foremost of their victims. Think of her, Lord Snow. Think of what she's suffered. Is this the end you would write to her story?"

Arya. Jon's stomach did a flip. Was that why he hadn't seen her in his hallucinations, was it truly a portent of her death at the hands of the Others? How is she? Is she well? Has someone thrust a sword through Ramsay Bolton's black heart yet? At the moment, there was nothing he wanted to do more than run out and do it himself. In lieu of a sword, which customarily required hands to wield, Ghost's teeth and claws would more than suffice.

Once again, Melisandre did not deign to provide an answer. "So, Lord Snow," she said, sitting back on her heels. "The predicament is clear. As currently constituted, the Night's Watch will be torn to shreds, the Wall will fall, and the realm and all of mankind with it. You and I as well. Unless..."

Unless? Ghost bared his teeth again, and Jon had to shove him back down. Have you warned them?

Yet as Melisandre continued to gaze at him, the truth became unthinkably clear. Ghost tensed, desperate to spring, and only half of Jon wanted to stop him. You didn't tell them. How can you possibly not have told them?

"Because." Melisandre slid closer. She even smelled red, like the heart of a brazier. "There is no point in telling them, not if you do not agree to save them. You can, Jon. There is a sacrifice you can make."

A sacrifice? More than this one? Jon cocked Ghost's head, hoping to convey ironic skepticism without the service of eyebrows. Nothing good ever followed when the red woman began to talk this way, but trapped here, he had no way to gainsay her or prove that she was lying – if she was. Do I dare run the risk?

"You must give yourself to R'hllor." Melisandre's voice dropped to a croon. "You must walk to the
end of the path you have already set out upon. I know you are strong enough, Lord Snow. One man
could turn the tide of this battle. Just you, against the lives of all those you know and love. You do
not have to lose still more."

Unwillingly, Jon saw Arya's face again, and Robb's, and Ygritte's. And Sam and Grenn and Pyp
and Dolorous Edd and Satin and Val and all the others. They seemed to be gathering around him,
as if they were paying court. Then, one by one, they began to fade.

*What is this?* All of Jon's suspicions appeared to be bearing out. He was aware of a dull panic
buzzing in the back of his head. *She saved me only to sacrifice me. She saved me as a bloody gift to
R'hllor, asks me to give whatever I am left to her fires.* Yet if it was the only way to save the Wall. . .
take Melisandre's word for it and trust that all would take place as it should, if he did not want to
remain in Ghost for the rest of his afterlife. . .

*I am no oathbreaker.* No matter what Bowen Marsh or Mance Rayder or Janos Slynt or Alliser
Thorne or anyone had thought, Jon intended to keep his vows even with his own body lying not a
dozen feet from him. It was entirely possible that he had never woken at all, and this was only an
increasingly unhinged fever dream. He could even still be lying in the bloodstained snow in the
bailey, and when his heart struggled out its last beat, everything would go dark. Silent. At an end.
Forever.

"This is no dream, Lord Snow," Melisandre said. "But all will end soon, if that is truly what you
wish."

Jon turned back, suddenly terrified of what might come next. Her face was utterly devoid of jesting
or levity, her red eyes unblinking. She reached out, and somehow he found Ghost walking toward
her. As if mesmerized, the white wolf reached the red woman and lowered its head.

Melisandre touched his fur, with one hand and then the other. Her fingers burned. Her hair fell
loose in long scarlet waves, she whispered a prayer or invocation or incantation in a language he
did not know. Then her fist closed, and when she opened it, she drew out a knife made of some
strange dark stone, with runes that smoked like the ruins of Valyria.

An unholy terror seized Ghost. All of Jon's carefully crafted rationalizations fled, and all he knew
was that he had to be thrown back into the ravening darkness, the fevered visions, with a return that
grew twice as dangerous and uncertain – if at all. It occurred to him dimly that Melisandre had said
nothing about a rebirth.

The spell was broken. He wrenched away. He went up on his hind legs, scrabbling at the
unyielding ice. *Jon Snow, the Twice-Murdered.* It lacked a certain something as an epitaph.

"Be calm," Melisandre ordered. A hot crimson darkness lapped at his vision, and the ice suddenly
became too hot to touch. He collapsed back.

"There is a tale," she said. "About a smith and a sword and his beloved wife. I told you. Only death
can pay for life. Only sacrifice can beget victory. Only light can hold back the darkness."

*Azor Ahai,* Jon thought dimly. *Fire and blood.*

"Think of your sister, who is here," Melisandre said. "Think of your brothers, who are gone. Think
of what you know yourself, what you have seen in the darkness beyond the Wall. And trust. And
*burn.*"

Still he tried to flee, but now she had him firmly by the scruff. Wolf and woman struggled, red eyes
and red eyes, one with knife and the other with claws. The ice blazed with flame. And outside, very far away, a voice that might have been Satin's, screaming. "Jon! Jon! JON!"

Then the bite, as hard and dark and cold as it had been that night in the snow. And at last, Ghost made a sound: a strangled, gasping whine as the rune-graven knife pierced him to the heart. The wolf scrabbled and fell, sides heaving. Blood stained the ice.

_You know nothing, Jon Snow_, one voice said. The other whispered, _Kill the boy, and let the man be born_. And, agreeing, he died.
He lay chilled and feverish in a corner of the holdfast tower, a heap of ragged straw his only bed and an old dirty blanket his only cover. It was so good, it was so fine, he wanted to clutch the ground to him and disappear into it sooner than be taken from it again, hung up in chains on the wall. He barely dared to believe that Reek had earned something so wonderful, but then he would remember. *Theon, my name is Theon. It rhymes with nothing but it is mine own.*

Theon was still unsure why he had not burned. He had been meant to, he knew, offered as a sacrifice on a flaming pyre before Stannis and his unruly northern clansmen marched out to give battle to the advancing Bolton horde. *Lord Ramsay is leading them. He wants his pet. He wants his Reek.* And then he would curl up tight and shiver under the blanket, like a child hoping the monsters under the bed would go away, if he only shut his eyes and wished upon a star. *Has Lord Ramsay discovered by now that the king he captured was a fake? Does he think his war is won, or does he know it only begun?* The thought of what Ramsay would do when he realized this was enough to make Theon shrivel in his skin. *What I still have of it.*

The last thing Theon remembered with any certainty was Stannis' men clomping into the room with broad, evil grins on their faces, telling him that the scouts had reported a vanguard of Freys not three leagues distant. Therefore, the honor of his presence at his very own auto-da-fé was now required. "We've a bet, Turncloak," Ser Clayton Suggs said, as he unlocked the cuffs around Theon's wrists, causing him to fall several feet straight down to the floor. "Whether you start screaming to your wet little squid god when the fire kisses your toes, or if you'll hold all the way out until it gets its whore's mouth around your cock and balls." He hauled Theon upright and gave him a hard slap. "Just be the coward you are, and squeal. I could use the five golden dragons."

Bizarrely, Theon's first reaction had been abject relief. *Ser Clayton doesn't know, they didn't take off my clothes, they didn't see.* He was so grateful that he mustered no protest as they half carried, half dragged him down the tower steps and out into the icy wold. Hairy northmen in skins barreled past on all sides, spoiling for a fight. Through the fog, Theon could faintly glimpse Stannis' banner, the crimson heart on a sheet of gold. *Flying it openly? Foolish, foolish, foolish.*

He looked from side to side as Ser Clayton and a few henchmen shoved him toward the pyre. King Stannis himself stood beside it; he was wearing a heavy hooded cloak, but that tall stature, those dark blue wounds of eyes, and that furiously grinding jaw could belong to no one else. At least he had not been quite so mad as to display Lightbringer, which was also supposedly in Lord Ramsay's custody. Theon supposed they had done something similar to the illusion they had worked on Arnolf Karstark.

He did not see his sister, or Qarl the Maid or Tristifer Botley or any of her other men. *I was a fool to place any hope in Asha.* To be sure, she had tried to talk Stannis out of burning him alive, but only to suggest chopping off his head in its place. The clansmen hissed and jeered at him as he stumbled through their ranks. "Vengeance!" they shouted. "Vengeance for Bran and Rickon! Vengeance for the Young Wolf! Vengeance for the Starks! Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!"

*There is no way out of this.* Theon was, again, perversely relieved. After being flayed inch by inch in the bowels of the Dreadfort, let the fire flay him all at once, make an end of it. He smiled as they lashed him to the bundles of kindling on the pyre.

"Lord of Light," one of the knights began, standing before it with a flaming torch. "Look down on us in your favor, and accept this sacrifice to your fiery heart. Give us strength to defeat your enemies, and lead us through the night of the Great Other, to the dawn which has no end. And so,
purify us in the flames, give us justice for the ones this traitor has killed, and in all things, know
that you are master of us and our – "

At that moment, a horn called in the woods. Once, and then again. A northern horn.

The knight stopped his prayer abruptly. He looked wildly to his king for instruction, and Stannis's
head snapped up like a hound on point. He knew what that meant, the same as every other man.
Then three horns winded at once, very nearby in the fog, and the northmen abandoned every
pretense of loitering about for a ceremony dedicated to a god they did not believe in. They
unlimbered their stone axes and greatswords and claymores, thrust their arms through the straps on
their targes, and seized more knives and dirks in their free hands. And then before one could say
"R'hllor" they were charging away, and there was nothing for Stannis to do but give his men the
signal to join them.

Theon swayed. He's there, he's out there, it was a northern horn, not the Freys, the Boltons,
Boltons, Boltons. Mad panic seized him. He turned his head and started to gnaw his bonds with his
broken teeth, but the pain was excruciating and he could tear off no more than a few hempen
threads. I will burn myself sooner than let Ramsay have me back. He strained and struggled, but
could not quite reach the torch; the knight had dropped it when he ran. It was guttering in the
falling snow, but still burning. He reached out with his mutilated foot, felt the heat sear through the
filthy rags wrapped around it. He sobbed, and his courage almost deserted him. Fire is a horrible
death – but Ramsay Bolton was worse.

And then he saw shapes, three shapes, appearing out of the fog at a run. They struggled through
the snowdrifts, sprinted flat-out across the clearing, and reached him. One of them pulled out a
knife and sawed through the ropes, and Theon fell headlong. He lay there, tasting mud and shit.
Memories crawled through the scarred darkness of his mind. Yes, Lord Ramsay, of course I'll eat
it. I'm sorry they didn't laugh enough. Your Reek wants them to laugh. . . no, don't whip me, I'll eat
it and be funny, I swear I swear I swear. . .

Hands were under his armpits, pulling him to his feet. Not Ser Clayton. He looked up under the
hood, and didn't believe it. "Qarl?" he rasped.

"No time. You have to get out of here before they find out they've been tricked." Qarl the Maid
hefted him by the shoulders, and another figure – Tris Botley – lifted his feet. Slinging him
between them like a sack of meal, they hustled him to a thoroughly disreputable-looking horse that
a third cloaked shadow was holding nearby. Asha. It can't be.

But it was. His sister swung into the saddle, and reached down to grab him by the waist, hauling
him up in front of her. "Qarl," she said. "Tris. Come with us."

"There's only the one horse, m'lady," Qarl answered softly. "And we both love you too well to
think of going in your place. For your lady mother's sake. Run."

"Follow me, at least." Theon had never heard Asha sound like that. "On foot, or on mule. . .
whatever you can, just don't stay here. Promise me you'll follow."

"We'll follow." Tristifer Botley did not sound at all like the mooning boy he customarily was
around Asha Greyjoy. "We swear it."

"Now." Qarl slapped the horse's rump, and it whinnied and reeled away. The last Theon saw of
him and Botley was their silhouettes vanishing in the fog. They are going to die. He had no idea
what had just happened. Did Asha arrange that? Was it her and Qarl and Tris who blew the horns,
fooled the northmen into thinking the attack was already come. . . when Stannis finds out that he's
been deceived and his prize has escaped, he'll be furious. . . when Ramsay finds out that he's been deceived and his prize has escaped, he'll be worse. . .

He lost track of how long they rode. It all blurred into agony. The ironborn were no saddle-bred knights, preferring to stride the deck of a ship rather than straddle a horse, but Theon had learned to ride passably well during his years with the Starks. He thought of racing Robb across the highland meadows, then of going out wenching and drinking with Benfred Tallhart, and had to abandon both. They hurt too much.

The horse floundered and plunged through the frozen underbrush, and they ducked under low-hanging branches laden with snow. *We must be leaving a trail a blind man could follow.* Asha's breath was hot on his neck, and he tangled his maimed hands in the horse's mane. *Gods, don't let me fall.* He wondered if Stannis would hunt them down, or not waste his waning strength on a pursuit of two escaped prisoners when so many real enemies awaited. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

It was near dusk when they finally stumbled across the abandoned holdfast, tottering in the shadow of a bare, upthrust spur of rock. Asha reined in, snow spraying from beneath the horse's hooves, and dismounted, glancing nervously to all sides, but nothing moved in the darkening woods save for their shadows. Then she held out her arms and permitted Theon to fall into them, which he did.

Asha sat him on a boulder, then found a sturdy branch and banged on the rotted wood of the holdfast door until she broke the latch loose. Inside, it was dark as an Umber's armpit and smelled near as bad, icicles sheeting through the cracks in the sagging roof and unmortared stone walls. Frozen cobwebs hung like veils of lace, and broke with a tinkle when Asha knocked into one. But it was warmer than the air outside, if barely, and a wooden ladder that was still mostly intact climbed to a loft above. *Ghosts. I am the ghost in Winterfell.* But no longer. He would never see Winterfell again.

Asha led the horse into the lower room, shut the remnants of the door and barred it with some of the fallen masonry, then boosted Theon up the ladder and crawled in after him. The floor in the loft was made of stone and strongly fixed, and they discovered the pile of straw and the moth-eaten blankets in the corner. Asha had made him his bed there, his bed on sweet flat ground. She used a flint to light a smoky, struggling fire, and huddled close to it, a formless wraith in the darkness. They could hear the snow still coming down outside, scratching on the shutters.

Theon had now been lying there for most of the night, sometimes dozing but always waking; every time he slipped into sleep, he saw Ramsay's face, with his long dry hair and his smirking plump lips and pale soulless eyes. Finally, he pushed himself up on an elbow. "Asha?" he whispered.

"Where is. . ." Theon paused. "Where is Arya? Lady Arya. I saved her. Where is she?" *Jeyne, her name is Jeyne. Jeyne Poole, she was Sansa's friend. Her eyes are brown, not grey.*

"Ser Justin took her to the Wall," Asha said at last. "The northmen were against it. They thought one of them should be granted the honor of keeping her safe, send her to one of their castles. But Stannis was adamant."

*Yes, he said he would send her to Castle Black. Theon remembered now. Jon Snow will know she's a fake, he'll know.* If anyone found out that the girl wasn't Arya Stark, they would lose their interest in her well-being. There was no time for altruism in the grips of a northern winter, or in a clash of kings.
He rolled over, staring at the ceiling. He had questions, he had so many many questions, but he couldn't start to think of how to ask them. He was so hungry he almost couldn't stand it, but the actual thought of food turned his stomach. "Where are we going?"

Again, Asha did not answer immediately. Then she said, "There's no safe haven in the north for any ironborn right now, and I wouldn't call the south any better. We can't go back to Pyke, so long as Euron sits the Seastone Chair. So we make for Harlaw. Our nuncle Rodrik will protect us, if we can get there with no word whispered of our arrival."

"What... Rodrik? Rodrik the Reader?" Theon had hoped for something a bit more tactically sound than this. He couldn't even imagine what it would be like to return to the Iron Islands, and wasn't sure he wanted to. They'd be shocked and repulsed and scornful, they'd account it a mercy to slip a knife between his ribs and end his miserable jape of an existence. It was only the soft and foolish greenlanders who let such weaklings live.

Asha blew out a breath. "I know it's not much," she admitted. "But short of setting sail for Valyria, it's the only place I could think of. And our lady mother will be there." Her voice briefly caught, but she tried to disguise it as a cough.

*Mother.* Theon couldn't remember what she looked like, and for a brief, panic-inducing instant, he couldn't remember her name either. "Mother," he repeated, like a talking raven.

"I'm not doing this for your sake," Asha said quietly. "Not all of it, at any rate. You were vain and stubborn and stupid, and you dug your own grave thrice over. But you've paid for it a hundred times, and you are my brother. I will bring you home for Mother to look on one more time before she dies. I swear it."

She swore it. A chill ran down Theon's back. *And after that, I might as well die too. And her, and Mother. We can all die together.* He took a short, shallow breath, and began to sob.

Asha looked at him with an expression somewhere between startlement and disquiet. She seemed to be hoping that he would stop on his own accord. But when he didn't, when his skeletal shoulders racked with shaking and he clutched his clumsy hands with their missing fingers to his face, she crawled across the floor and pulled him into her arms.

Theon buried his head in her chest, tasting snot and salt on his tongue. He cried as if he couldn't stop, while she awkwardly rocked him. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. No, Lord Ramsay, your Reek isn't crying, your Reek is happy, so happy... no, please, please don't, please... no, anything but that, take my finger, take my hand, no, no, Lord Ramsay, don't, I'm a man, I'm your man, no, my lord, my... no... NO... NO!*

After an eternity, his tears were finally spent. He hiccupped, gasped, and fell silent, eyes glued shut and throat as dry as sand. *Mayhaps the snow will wipe our tracks away.* But how then could they hope to run? How could they make it to the coast with the drifts rising higher every day, without succumbing to the cold, the fear, the hunger, the wolves, or any of their uncle Euron's monsters? *She's right. I should never have tried to take Winterfell, should have gone to the Red Wedding, should have died with Robb.* But at that moment, Theon Greyjoy was beyond all caring. He only wanted to lie in Asha's arms and listen to her hum. It was some nonsense song for children, about wings on a fish and toes on a cow. He liked hearing it. He felt happy here in this broken-down tower in the snow. They had all the straw they needed, all the blankets. They could just stay here and she could sing to him.

Some time went by. Theon didn't know how much. Asha didn't let him go, just sat silent with her chin resting on his head. Then at last, grey light began to seep through the broken shutters,
throwing thin shadows on the floor.

Asha roused herself and stood up. "I'll be back in a moment," she said. "I need to see how much snow there is."

Theon peaceably acquiesced, and watched as she swung the ladder through the hole and disappeared down it. He listened to her jump the last few rungs to the bottom, move around and give the horse a few pats, then move the stones away from the door, swearing in a conversational tone as she did so. He felt the sudden blast of cold air. . . and then, utter silence.

"Asha?" he called nervously. What if she'd gone away after all, what if something in the snow had gotten her? What if Ramsay had been waiting outside all night?

Still silence, for a further few heartbeats. Then his sister's quick, sharp strides crossed the floor, and she pulled herself up and over with one angry thrust. "Fucking hellfire," she said. "There are men outside."

"Men?" A cold grue swept Theon from head to heel. "How many? Where?"

"Fifty at least, a hundred at most. Just distant, on the other side of the outcropping. I heard them talking, but I didn't understand any of it. I don't know who they are, but I don't think they're Boltons, Freys, or Baratheons."

"What do we do?" Theon shivered.

"We have to stay here." Asha was already pulling the ladder back up, muscles straining in her wiry strong arms. Ten fingers, ten toes. "There's at least two feet of new snow, trying to blunder away would only alert them to the fact that we're here. Stay down. Stay quiet."

Theon did not need to be told twice. Trembling, he covered himself in his blanket and lay there listening to his heart pounding in his ears. Once or twice he peeked out, and saw Asha sitting on her knees by the window, tense and motionless. He had just started to wonder if he should join her when his sister said, "Oh, bugger. They're coming this way."

No. No! It wasn't fair, he just wanted them to leave him alone. But then Asha scooted backwards as fast as she could and threw herself flat. And then he heard the door below rattle, once and then again. A deep, booming voice called, "Who's a-hidin' in there, now? Come on out! Har!"

Go away, Theon prayed fervently. Go away go away go away.

The speaker and his companions didn't. Instead, there was a rending crash as whatever remained of the door was broken anew, and footsteps echoed heavily in the lower room. The horse gave a startled whinny at the entrance of intruders, and a different voice said, "That's the worst-looking horse I ever did see in my born days. I'd barely bother stealing me a horse like that, not even if some knightly knight pranced up to me and begged I take it off his hands."

"You're not far wrong, Soren," said the deeper voice with a snort. "Makes me feel happy that with me member the size it is, I can't ride a horse besides."

"Ah, Giantsbabe, you great sack of shite. Best make sure first you'd have the chance." The second man raised his voice. "You'd best come out wherever you're lurking, kneelers. This is Soren Shieldbreaker and Harle the Huntsman, the Wanderer and the Great Walrus. Oh, and Tormund Thunderfist, but he don't count."

Wildlings, Theon thought. His experience with the free folk had been thankfully limited, but
anyone who had spent any amount of time in the north knew the tales. But what are wildlings doing so far south of the Wall?

Still, at least it wasn't the Bastard's boys. Theon didn't want to be shot, didn't want them to come up here and kill him and Asha both, and some courage he didn't remember having in a god's age moved him. He threw off the blanket and crawled toward the loft hole. "We're up here," he called. "Please don't hurt us."

The wildlings jumped, jerked, and—upon catching sight of him—swore nearly in unison. "What in the hundred howling hounds of hell is that?"

"Thought it was a ghost."

"Bloody for sure looks like one." The second man, the one who had called himself Soren Shieldbreaker, beckoned to Theon sharply. "You, thing. Get down here so we can take ourselves a proper look at you. Slowly, and nothing funny."

Theon obediently clambered down the ladder. He made no attempt to come any closer, and pretended not to notice the glances of horrified fascination they were all giving him. At last Soren said, "What's your name, kneeler?"

"Theon. Theon Greyjoy." He liked that question. It always made him feel better, more secure.

"Greyjoy. . ." The wildlings exchanged frowns; the name was only a sound to them. Then the big white-bearded one said, "Har, isn't that the one took Winterfell in the first place? The one Lord Snow said killed his brothers?"

A stab of panic went through Theon like a blade. "No," he begged. "No, I didn't, I never did, I didn't kill Bran and Rickon. The heads. . . they weren't theirs, only the miller's boys, I never wanted. . ."

"Then you still killed you some miller's boys, kneeler," Soren Shieldbreaker remarked. "There's that."

"What?" a voice said from the loft. Before Theon could tell her not to, Asha vaulted down with a thump, and the wildlings, recognizing that she posed much more of a potential threat, immediately reached for their weapons. But she held out her hands, showing that she had none, and they grudgingly stood down. Besides, all her attention was on Theon. "What did you just say?"

"I. . ." He struggled to speak it again. "I. . . didn't kill Bran and Rickon. I never."

Asha just stared at him for a never-ending moment. Then finally she said, "Gods," and turned away with a jerk. "For all you've suffered for it. . . you didn't?"

"No. I didn't. I don't know where they are."

The wildlings exchanged more astonished looks. "Mad as a Thenn, this one," Tormund Thunderfist said at last. "And I'm sure knowin' that will be a great comfort to Lord Snow in his cold grave. But if you were the one that did it. . . I think we have ourselves a prize, lads."

"No. . ." Not again. Anything but that. Not that. "I'm not a prize. I'm just Theon. I . . . I was Reek, but I'm not anymore. Please. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Hold with your blathering, boy," Tormund said, not unkindly. "We came south to fight on Lord Snow's behalf, since he's no longer about to be doing it himself. Free Winterfell and Mance
Rayder, though no sooner we'll do that then he'll start kinging it over the lot of us again." He flashed a gap-toothed grin. "So that's what you'll be helping with."

"What?" Theon wanted to weep for the loss of his home here, the tower in the snow where Asha had sung to him. "What do you want me to do?"

"Well, I'd not say it's a matter of wanting, seeing as you're coming with us no matter what you think." Tormund scratched his beard. "Back to Winterfell. Telling us what we'll need to know. To blood and bugger wi' King Stannis and his sort. That's not what we're here for. I'll tell you what is." The wildling reached out and put one massive paw on Theon's shoulder. "Victory. Freedom. Vengeance."
Alayne woke sometime in the night to the sound of worried voices outside the door. She rolled over and listened closely, heard someone asking if the maester had been fetched yet and another offering assurances that Colemon had come straightaway. The little lord was resting easy enough at the moment, but both the duration and the severity of the fit had given everyone concerned a right turn.

Robert, Alayne thought. She pushed back the heavy quilts – carefully, so as to not wake Randa – and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Ordinarily she would have been in her own chambers, but Randa had insisted on hearing every scandalous detail of her latest outing with Harrold Hardyng. They had now gone riding together thrice, and Harry was nothing but charm, gallantry, tenderness, and wit, hanging onto her every word and laughing even when her jests weren't particularly funny. He leapt at any chance to perform silly little romantic courtesies, and he was extremely difficult to say no to. Alayne could well see how he'd already left at least two other girls with bastards in their bellies.

Nonetheless, she mistrusted every moment of it. *I was told to win him, was he told to win me? Joffrey could be the perfect knight when it suited.* And with Petyr's admonitions about the wedding night firmly in mind, she had consented to do no more than chastely kiss him a few times. Strangely, this had not dampened Harry's ardor in the slightest, but rather increased it, which Randa told her sagely had a very simple explanation. "He's used to girls falling all over themselves to please him. Yet here you are, mysterious and beautiful, and you won't leap to his bidding or give him what he wants. It's enough to drive him mad with desire, wanting to prove what a man he is to win you. Very clever, sweetling. Did you come up with it on your own accord, or did your dear father instruct you?"

Alayne had not answered. She was always leery when Randa invited her to gossip. She knew that Lord Nestor's cunning daughter had already seen what many others must have as well: that Harry the Heir would not be expending this much time and energy paying court on a no-account bastard girl, even if she was the Lord Protector's daughter. Yet when she voiced her concerns to Littlefinger, he had assured her that this was all part of the plan. "Men must have a glimmer of suspicion in their minds by the time the wedding day rolls around. That way, they will feel clever and vindicated when you appear."

"But," she'd said, "the Lannisters. . ."

"Will trouble us no more, sweetling. The lion has lost both its claws and its roar, I'm afraid. They've made such an utter farce of things that if you walked outside the Bloody Gate right now and revealed your true identity to the first person who passed, they'd be a deal more likely to heartily sympathize and buy you a drink, rather than attempting to slither back into King's Landing to wring a few miserly dragons out of an insane, imprisoned, and universally loathed queen. No, my lovely daughter, we've already won. We only need wait on tidings of the Imp's death. Now go and enchant Harry some more – but since you won't give him a proper kiss, I'm sure you have one to spare for me?"

Alayne had managed to dodge away, claiming that she was already late. She liked kissing Harry somewhat more than she liked kissing Petyr, but that was hardly anything to go by. *He is only kissing Winterfell, even if he does not yet know it. The only man who ever protected me with nothing to gain from it was the Hound.*

Now, Alayne pulled a furred mantle over her shoulders and quietly eased Randa's bedchamber door.
"No, I was already awake," Alayne lied. "But I heard something about Lord Robert. Is he well?"

"For the moment," Gretchen answered carefully. "But it was a terrible bad fit, m'lady, not even Maester Colemon had ever seen the like of it. We woke the Lord Protector, and we would have woken you – Lord Robert was calling out for you in his throes, but Lord Baelish said you should be spared the pain of seeing him like that, that you could comfort him better in the morning."

He didn't want to run the risk of me interfering, you mean. A flash of anger burned through Sansa. "What is being done for my – for Lord Robert?"

"Maester Colemon made him a sleeping draught, and had me and Maddy clean his room so it was more healthful." Gretchen shook her head; most of the Eyrie's servants alternately pitied or were exasperated by their fragile, flailing boy lord. "He said also that he sent for a healer, one of the best in the riverlands. The Elder Brother, from the monastery on the Quiet Isle."

A holy man. The sudden hint of a plan occurred to Alayne. If she spilled her fears and suspicions to him under the seal of confession, he could never reveal to anyone from whence he had learned them. And then he could . . . and then he could what? Formally charge Littlefinger with murder? Annul her marriage to Tyrion? He was only a brown brother, not a septon, and he was already unwittingly putting himself in enough danger by getting in the way of Littlefinger's pet plot. If the Elder Brother finds out what I already know – that Robert is being poisoned – and announces it to the Vale at large, then what? Littlefinger will arrange some tragic accident to befall him on the way back to his monastery, remind everyone how dedicated he is to his wife's memory and his stepson's welfare, and stop having sweetsleep slipped into Robert's food for a moon's turn or so. Without it, Robert's shaking fits will get worse, until he dies on his own accord.

The thought made Alayne shake a bit herself. I have to meet the Elder Brother when he comes here, I have to warn him. She forced a smile. "I was raised in the Faith for the early part of my life, though I ultimately chose not to become a septa," she said sweetly. "I would so much welcome the chance to converse with the good brother. Can you see to it that I am notified immediately when he arrives?"

"Aye, m'lady," Gretchen murmured. "Now, you best be getting back to bed yourself. It's cold out here, and we wouldn't want you taking a chill as well."

No, we wouldn't. Least of all Petyr. Alayne thanked the maid and slipped back into the bedchamber. She very much doubted she would sleep a wink for the rest of the night.

She was right; she didn't. She just lay with her eyes closed, chasing a thousand potential plans around her head and discarding them just as quickly, and yawned, blinked, and pretended to be groggy when Randa tickled her nose with her braid and said, "Wake up, sleepyhead! Your lord father is having Belmore and Templeton to breakfast this morn, and he's requested that you do them the honor of attending."

Belmore and Templeton. Two of the Lords Declarant whom Petyr had announced his intentions to assiduously butter up, Alayne recalled – Belmore by bribery, and Templeton by befriending. It seemed Littlefinger had also noticed that Lord Robert was expiring more swiftly than he had calculated, and was moving to shore up his defenses against any charges of misconduct. With them, the Corbrays, Lord Nestor Royce, and Lady Waynwood, that left only Bronze Yohn Royce as Littlefinger's last opponent. Lord Horton Redfort was elderly and ill, and Ser Gilwood Hunter, the late Lord Eon's heir, was too busy looking over his shoulder for his kinslaying little brother
"No," Sansa said, without giving herself time to talk herself out of it. "I'll not be attending the breakfast. Have one of the servants send word that... that my moon blood is come." That was sufficiently feminine enough to frighten all but the most determined men out of asking any further questions.

Randa gave her a curious look. "I thought you had your moon blood a fortnight ago, that day you wouldn't go riding with Lord Petyr."

_I did._ That at least had not been a lie, but she had never been more grateful for it. That had been after the first time she'd let Harry kiss her, and she had not at all liked the deceptive casualness in Littlefinger's voice when he suggested that she show him where Harry had taken her. His hand was resting on her back, in fact rather lower on her back than protocol dictated for a father and daughter, and she felt as naked as she had that time when Ser Boros Blount stripped and beat her before King Joffrey's entire court. _Tyron made him stop, and the Hound gave me his cloak to cover myself. And later he left it in my room, stained in blood and smoke, when he fled the Blackwater._ It made her wish she'd been able to bring it with her before escaping with Ser Dontos, but that was madness.

"If you must," Randa said at last, with a shrug. "I daresay Lord Petyr doesn't need your help cozening anyone, and if he's uncouth enough to enquire, I shall tell him ghoulish tales to his heart's content." She flashed a teasing smile, but her eyes were sharp. "Where are you really off to, then? Eloping with Harry?"

Sansa flushed. "No. I... I only didn't want..."

"My dear, no one needs to apologize for not wanting to spend a beautiful morning like this with men like that. Lord Benedar Belmore would sell his aged grandmother if he saw a profit in it, Lord Symond Templeton is an amiable imbecile, and Lord Petyr Baelish, well..." She considered Alayne closely. "If I were you, I'd be concerned about him getting to your maidenhead first, rather than Harry. Not all of us are blind, sweetling. Littlefinger lusts after you so loudly it's a wonder it doesn't give the High Septon nightmares in King's Landing. Surely you don't feel it's proper, from your own father?"

_My father was Lord Eddard Stark._ But that was too dangerous. No matter how sanguine Littlefinger was about their apparently certain victory, the Lannisters were still dangerous – and not her only enemy. _I must still be Alayne, always._ "My father... means well." She almost choked on the lie.

Randa continued to eye her. "So does my father, but you don't see him grabbing my arse or fondling my breast or wheedling kisses every chance he gets. Come on now, love, it's just us girls, naught to be afraid of. Has anyone ever told you that you look very like a Tully? Lady Lysa was one, of course, and her sister, Lady Catelyn. . . you could venture into the riverlands right this instant and they'd bend the knee to you, assuming the outlaws didn't get you first. Blue eyes, and your hair is growing in quite red at the roots. And of course, your beauty. . . a young maid, four-and-ten, while men of every breed and character search for Sansa Stark, of the same age, coloring, and uncertain whereabouts?"

Cold horror swam down Alayne's spine. _She knows,_ she realized. _Randa knows, and most like has known for a while. What was she saving it for? When did she plan to spill it?_

"Oh, sweetling," Randa said, seeing the expression of numb shock on her face. "Don't look at me like that. This changes nothing between us, you know. It's plain you're none of Littlefinger's blood,
Sansa was so relieved that someone finally knew who she was that she was almost tempted to confess everything, but she held back. If anything, she would have to be even more careful with Randa now that the cat was out of the bag, not less. "That is far in the future," she said. "Anything can happen."

"Can, or will?" Randa shrugged. "Well, Alayne. Whatever it is you truly intend to do, no one shall hear of it from me. But if you mean to make this a habit, I'd advise –"

However, Sansa did not hear what she would advise. At that moment there was a knock on the door, and Gretchen's voice called, "M'lady, the monk is here. You said to be told when he arrived."

"I did." Alayne scrambled out of bed. "I need to dress. Tell him I will attend him shortly in..." It would not do for her to beg off Littlefinger and then be spotted absconding to some other mysterious appointment. "Bring him to my solar, and quietly."

"As you will, my lady." Gretchen departed.

Alayne dressed in haste. She chose her favorite dress of modest brown wool, braided her hair in a long rope down her back, and judiciously added a necklace with a silver seven-pointed star. She would have to play the devout ingénue with the Elder Brother, and where anyone else could see.

Heart in her throat, Alayne hurried through the corridors, expecting every moment to be accosted and dragged off to breakfast, but all appeared sedate. She reached her own rooms, opened the door into her solar, then twisted the key in the latch behind her.

"Lady Alayne," a deep voice said. "I am honored that you chose to receive me so promptly."

Alayne swallowed hard. Then she turned and smiled. "Brother. It is my pleasure."

In the flesh, her potential accomplice was tall and strong-shouldered, with a bald head, big hands, and a broken nose; he looked more like a sellsword than a monk. He was midway through his fourth decade or so, and his eyes were searching and shrewd. "I understand you wished to see me even before I examined Lord Robert."

"That is so." Alayne moved closer. "I can both save you some time, and give you a warning. Brother, Lord Robert is not merely sick. He is –" She looked around, lowered her voice, and leaned as close to him as she could. "He is being poisoned."

The Elder Brother stared at her in shock. "You're... you're sure?"

"Extremely."

"But by whom?"

Alayne hesitated. "If I tell you, it is under the seal of confession. You must go back to your monastery and only then reveal it. But never say who gave it to you."

"Of course not, my lady."

The words almost died in her throat. But that little girl was long ago. This time, her hesitation lasted
only an instant. "Lord Petyr Baelish, Brother."

That truly shocked the monk, but there seemed to be no question at all that he believed her. "My lady... you are his daughter? Child, the danger..."

"There is more. The world believes the singer Marillion killed Lady Lysa. He never did. Little – Littlefinger did it. He pushed her out the Moon Door. I saw it with my own eyes. And before..." Alayne's heart fluttered in her chest like a dying bird. "Lady Lysa was... not in command of herself, and she spoke at length of a plot the two of them had devised. To murder her first husband, the Hand of the King, and frame the Lannisters for the crime, and write to my lady mother and tell her that it was so..." At the end she realized what she had said, but by then it was too late.

"The Elder Brother was transparently floored. He raised his free hand to his face, and dropped it. "Lady Alayne..." he said at last. "But then that would not be your true name..."

"No." She dug her fingernails into her palm. So long holding this so close, and now divulging it to two people in the same day. She must be mad. "It's S-Sansa. Sansa Stark." The name felt almost queer on her tongue, like a favorite dress she had worn as a child and now could not quite slip over her head.

Something flickered in the Elder Brother's eyes. For a moment he seemed about to speak, to tell her – what? Then he shook his head and said, "The murder of Lord Jon Arryn was the spark that started the War of the Five Kings. If it can be proved that Lord Baelish, not the Lannisters, was the one who struck it..."

"It can't. Only he and Lady Lysa knew."

"And now you as well," the brown brother said. "My lady, think of what that means."

"But it can't. It would be my word against his, and he would say that I was lying, that Lady Lysa was mad and raving with jealousy, and that I myself swore that Marillion murdered her. And he... he saved me from King's Landing, I can't..." Her words trailed off as she realized that she in fact could, was doing it right here, right now.

The Elder Brother put both hands on her shoulders. "Child," he said. "Listen to me. The moment I return to the Quiet Isle, I will send a letter to the High Septon and the Most Devout. They have their own extensive intelligence network, and with the Faith armed again, there will be no shortage of volunteers to see justice done for these sacrilegious crimes. The Faith will send inquisitors here to the Vale, and if Lord Baelish cannot satisfactorily and completely account for himself, he will be placed under arrest and called to stand trial for his life."

Sansa's stomach was rioting with butterflies. *What have I done?* Petyr had saved her life, arranged her marriage to Harry, he was going to give her back the North... but Littlefinger had done at least as much ill as the Lannisters ever had. Mayhaps more. And she could not, not in any conscience, step aside and let him add the murder of Lord Robert Arryn to his list. The decision had been made as sharply and completely as turning a key in a lock. *Whatever it may cost me.*

"Child," Elder Brother said, reading her face. "By the time these accusations do come to light, Lord Baelish will know that there is only one person who could have made them – anonymity or otherwise. And I do not think he will suffer such a betrayal meekly. You would do well to come with me. The Quiet Isle is a refuge for all those who have no other place to go."

"I..." Sansa tried desperately to keep her thoughts straight. "No... he'd know, they'd all know too early that something was wrong, if I vanished..."
"Better too early than too late," Elder Brother urged. "The Faith will keep you safe, Lady Sansa. Stay here, and you will fall deeper into Lord Baelish's power than ever – and he will use you as a pawn against us, when the time comes."

Sansa knew he was right, but she could not possibly see how they would ever make it back to the Quiet Isle, the instant Littlefinger had even an inkling that she was gone. But how on earth could she simply ride out of the Gates of the Moon with him, when he'd only come with an escort of four men, all of them Warrior's Sons? Panic threatened to overtake her, and she closed her eyes until it receded.

The Elder Brother touched the seven-pointed star on her necklace. "Be strong but a short while longer. I must still examine Lord Robert and see if there is anything that can be done to slow this, but I will do it as fast as I can. At midnight tonight, meet me in the Small Hall. I will manage the rest."

"Yes, Brother," she said. Louder, and somewhat more steadily. "I will."

Sansa felt as if she was in a dream as she floated out of the solar. She went back and forth at least a half dozen times as to whether she actually dared to do this, thinking over and over of that note brought to her room in King's Landing: *Come to the godswood tonight, if you want to go home.* She did, and she had, and it had been Ser Dontos, who had brought her not home but to here.

She did her best to behave innocuously for the rest of the day, and ate but little at supper. Then she returned to her rooms and tried to sleep as she waited for the castle to go to bed, but it was sheerly impossible. So she got up, dressed warmly and darkly, and slipped a dagger inside her bodice. She pulled her heavy cloak and boots on over it, and, soft and silent as a ghost, stole down the tower steps. The moonlight splintered witchy shadows on the floor. She could see the doors of the Small Hall just ahead. The bells would be calling the midnight hour soon. And then she'd go – she'd be free, she'd fly –

She was aware of footsteps behind her an instant too late. Then a hand shot out of the darkness and clapped over her mouth. An arm thin and strong as an iron cord linked around her waist, lifting her almost off her feet, and the point of a dagger kissed the nape of her neck, giving a lazy turn just deep enough to send a hot drop of blood rolling down her back.

"Sansa Stark, is it?" Ser Shadrich whispered in her ear. He had taken the liberty of donning leather gauntlets, and laughed softly when she tried to bite him. "I thought so. You'll not be going with the monk tonight. Oh no. You'll be going with me."

Sansa tried to scream. It came out as a gurgling choke, and he pressed his hand harder over her nose and mouth, making spots dance before her eyes as she fought to breathe. With one arm locked across her chest, he used the other elbow to force her head down so far that she gagged. Then, her feet skimming the floor like a broken puppet, he maneuvered her quickly and quietly out a side door and across a dark, narrow yard. His horse was waiting.

"Now, my dear," he said. "Do understand that this isn't personal. In fact, I'm doing you a tremendous favor. You want to go back to Winterfell, don't you? Of course you do. Well, I'm going to take you there. The tale is that Lord Ramsay Bolton has let the younger Stark girl slip through his fingers, so he'll pay a king's ransom to get his hands on the elder and have his claim to the north confirmed beyond all questioning. You can be his lady. Just like you want."

Sansa began to struggle in earnest. The Mad Mouse sighed. "You could have made this much easier, you know. But if this is the way you choose. . . so be it."
Sansa had just enough time to try to bite him once more, to claw him, to fight the way that Arya 
would have fought. *I am a Stark, a Stark, I am a wolf too.* Then something struck her a smart blow 
across the temple, and the world turned upside down into darkness.
The Neck was the nearest thing to hell that Jeyne Westerling had ever seen in her life. She knew that the septons customarily preached about the seven hells as places of fire and sulfur and torment, but if the Neck was what lay between the north and the missionaries of the Seven, she was not at all surprised that the old gods still held such deep sway up here. As a child, she had practiced a sort of earnest unformed faith, attending the sept on holy days and lighting a candle to the Maiden every so often and memorizing parts of the *Seven-Pointed Star*, but she had never contemplated it much beyond that. Yet during her brief marriage to Robb, she had seen for herself how the deep-rooted, unswerving belief of the northmen in their silent trees formed a fundament of who they were, a very part of saying that they were Stark or Karstark or Flint or Umber or Mormont or Glover or Cerwyn. To keep to the Old Ways, and to stand strong, were the bones and blood of the north so much as its snow or stone, and Jeyne often found herself mouthing quiet prayers to her husband's nameless gods.

They had reached the first fringes of bogland about a week ago, after a harrowing, back-and-forth zigzag past the Twins and the kingsroad. The countryside was crawling with heavily armed Freys, frothing for vengeance on account of the outlaws doing in Ser Ryman and his men; the Blackfish thought it was far more the principle of the thing, the slur on the family name, rather than any personal grief for Ser Ryman himself. "As if that's even possible," he growled. "The stain of the Red Wedding will never be scrubbed out. And considering now that only Edwyn Frey stands between Black Walder and the Twins, I'll judge there's a deal more staining to come."

*My stain.* Time and time again, Jeyne had tried not to blame herself for the Red Wedding. But the fact remained that it was incontestably her involvement which had driven the elderly Lord Walder to such bloodstained extremes. When the Stark army had stormed and taken the Crag, the last thing she or anyone had planned was to find the Young Wolf himself injured by an arrow in the victorious aftermath, though he insisted it was nothing. Yet from the very moment he looked at her she had been struck through the heart, and ordered him taken to her own bed for care. *My fault. I knew all the tales about beautifully romantic star-crossed lovers, and I thought we would be the same.*

Their attraction had bloomed quickly, conducted at first only in shy touches and tender glances. He was a young man, she was a young woman. Neither of them were uncomely. He was hurt, she was caring for him, and the forbidden nature had appealed to both of them, children that they still were. Even in the face of her mother's first, relentless disapproval, Jeyne could not have cared less. She lived for the hours she could sneak away to spend with Robb, fussing over him when he no longer needed fussing, trying to decide if she should act mature and worldly or innocent and sweet, and finally only able to act like herself.

And then, that night. When Robb received the news that his friend Theon Greyjoy had betrayed him, taken Winterfell, imprisoned and mistreated its men and women, and slaughtered his little brothers, mounting their heads on their own front gate. He and his lady mother had trusted in the strength of the walls of Winterfell, the ironclad loyalty of its lifelong household, the sword of Ser Rodrik Cassel and the counsel of Maester Luwin, to keep the boys safe. It had not been unwise or irresponsible in any way – Bran and Rickon would be in far more danger on the field with him. And it was Robb himself who'd ignored Lady Catelyn's counsel not to send Theon as emissary to his father.

Robb was unable to speak, so great was his agony. Jeyne really, truly had only meant to comfort him. But from the moment she had sat down beside him and put her arms around him, and he had
turned to her with savage unthinking need and crushed his mouth to hers, they had both known that this was something different, that there was no going back. Soon her hands were beneath his tunic and his were on her breasts, and he pulled her down beneath him to the bed.

She had given him her maidenhead that night, and gladly. The blood on the sheets had only been its seal; she could never have known how much more blood it portended. When they were finished the first time, his seed still wet on her thigh, she'd held him as he sobbed so hard she thought his back would break, and then later he'd slid inside her again, shaking, clawing her, almost hurting her, though she knew it wasn't her that he wanted to hurt. It was himself, even more than Theon. They had drifted off to sleep at last, naked and entangled, her hair loose in clouds and his arms tight around her. But when they woke in the cold light of morning the dream was over, and he was his father's son again, aghast at what he had done. Grim and solemn, he told her that he would have never dishonored her that way if he had been in his wits, and offered, if it was her will, to marry her at once.

The deed had been done that very day in the Westerling family's small sept, with the aged septon who had consecrated Jeyne at her birth presiding. He had been so shocked that he could barely proceed through the nuptial liturgy. *Robb married me in the name of my father's gods, not his own.* For her, he had done that. And afterwards, while Lady Sybell was storming with rage, he was the one who stood before her and quietly accepted all the blame she could throw at him.

*I should have known something was amiss when Mother turned meek as a kitten,* Jeyne thought bitterly. *When she came out of her solar looking so pleased, and said that it wasn't what we planned but now the milk was spilled, so we should attach ourselves to House Stark with all conscientiousness and loyalty. I did, I did.*

She tried to remember if she knew that Robb had already been engaged to marry a daughter of Walder Frey. The shameful truth was that even if she had, she wouldn't have cared. The nameless daughter was far away in the Twins, and she was here, she was with him, and their naïve young love would prevail over every obstacle. As for Lord Walder, well, he was the *Late Lord Walder* after all. If he hadn't been so perfidious and untrustworthy in his earlier days, mayhaps he wouldn't have had so much trouble marrying his children off.

*No one could have known that the old man would slay the King in the North, his wolf, his mother, and all his court at his liege lord's wedding, while they were his guests. No one. And Lord Walder will experience the deepest of the seven hells, with all the fire and sulfur there is to offer.* Jeyne's grief these days had turned to a simmering, soul-deep rage. It gave her the strength to hide out with the Blackfish and sleep in some of the most desolate places imaginable, to be exposed to the cold and wind and weather, to eat only when they could find it and to lie tensely low whenever the Frey patrols passed nearby. She still did not know if she was with Robb's child. She still had not bled.

They had seen their first snow just north of the Cape of Eagles. They were clambering along the rocky shore, keeping a sharp lookout for any ships of the Iron Fleet that might be circling the mouth of the bay, when Jeyne felt the frosty kisses on her hair and nose. The Blackfish had stopped, eyed the sky dourly, and finally lowered his head and continued on, without saying a word. No words needed to be said.

There had been Lannister patrols as well, and one had come perilously close to finding them. Apparently word had spread that they had escaped from Riverrun – or at least that the Blackfish had, as Jeyne had no idea if her sister had maintained the deception well enough to deflect suspicion. But her mother had said that both she and Elenya would be married off to lords, and the time would come when they realized that there was only one Westerling daughter to hand. *It would have been several years for me, to avoid any child being claimed as Robb's,* Jeyne tried to reassure
herself. *We may have time.*

And now, the Neck. Jeyne supposed she ought to be grateful that they had even made it this far, but the place unnerved her completely. Marshweed and ghostgrass grew thickly in the reeking bogs, there were no trees for cover, and the rocks were slimy with evil-looking lichen and sprawling vines. Food was even harder to come by than before, and a misstep would send them to the bottom of a fathom of sucking quicksand. Strange creatures croaked and cried at night, and Jeyne had woken up more than once in panic that a snake was slithering into her bedroll. The air was cold enough to see their breath, but it never snowed, merely froze, leaving thin, dangerous veneers of ice for them to slip and slide.

Even the Blackfish was unfamiliar with the myriad perils of the Neck, though he bore it as stoically as ever. "Your lord husband sent Galbart Glover and Maege Mormont to find Greywater Watch, before the Red Wedding," he reminded her. "It could well be that they are with Lord Howland even now. They also carried a copy of Robb's will, so matters should get much easier for us soon."

*Or they could be dead and rotting in a swamp, their bones gnawed by lizard-lions and crocodiles.* That was another of the dark thoughts she was having a harder and harder time banishing. The constant fog of the Neck acted as an enervating force, a grey miasma over the memories of everything that was good or beautiful or worthwhile in the world. No matter how bad the nights were, Jeyne rarely wanted to get up when they were over. Just lie here, and perhaps soon it would start to snow. Cover her, wash away her mistakes and her impurities and the ultimate price she had paid for her dreams.

It was Ser Brynden Tully who kept her marching onwards, as always. He was never other than gruff and determined, but he seemed to sense how much she was struggling. Sometimes, if they had met no one for days and the going was not too rough, he would tell her stories as they walked. Some were of the amusing foibles he'd gotten up to in the days of his youth, all of which seemed to end with his elder brother Lord Hoster pulling his hair out, and others were tales of adventures he'd had during his years in the Vale of Arryn, fighting the wildlings of the Mountains of the Moon and matching wits with Corbrays and Royces. The Blackfish was not a natural raconteur, but he had a dry wit and an eye for detail, and in time she shyly shared a few anecdotes from her youth at the Crag, the mischief she had made with Elenya and the times they stole cakes after feasts, crawled under the covers together and whispered until dawn. Tales of valiantly idiotic things that Raynald had done, or funny things that little Rollam had said. But no matter how hard she tried, eventually she had to stop speaking of her family. It was too painful.

Now they were deep in the crannogs proper, and the challenges had changed yet again. They sometimes saw flayed corpses of ironmen dangling from trees – there were trees now, stunted slimy black things with stripped branches. Narrow waterways snaked through the glades, and sometimes Jeyne would think she caught a glimpse of a little skin boat vanishing through curtains of vegetation. They had to be extremely careful where they put their feet and hands, and where they slept at night. She couldn't remember the last time she'd washed or been warm.

The Blackfish had woken her that morning with a treat: a chunk of roasted meat apiece. Jeyne didn't know what it was – one of those great hairless rats, most like – but she was so hungry that she didn't ask. It was stringy and not very flavorful, but it was better than the tough roots and mashed acorns they'd been subsisting on until now. She thanked Ser Brynden sincerely, and asked when he thought they would reach Greywater Watch. A question she had asked a hundred times before, and which she knew still had no answer.

The Blackfish shrugged. "It shouldn't be long now," he said. "Come on."
"How can it move?" If that was so, they'd meet the fate of every other army who tried to conquer the Neck: wandering around in circles until they went mad and died, one way or the other.

"I'm not clear on the details, but I believe it's built on stilts. It's not a castle as you and I would think of it, but huts constructed over the marsh, with nets and bridges to connect them. I do not think we'll find it on our own – they'll have to find us."

"Will they?" Jeyne both desired and dreaded that.

"Child," Ser Brynden said, with a half smile. "The crannogmen are known for seeing things. They call it greensight. It's not a skill particular to them, but they are oft the ones who show it the most strongly, for they live the closest to the land, the nearest to the Old Ways. It is said that those who develop it are struck with the greyfever in early childhood, and lie as if dead, before awakening as if much older than they are. Such power drains a man. Their lives are short."

"Greyfever?" Jeyne knew of grey plague and greyscale, but not this.

"Marsh fever, it's otherwise known as," Ser Brynden explained. "Not everyone who does get it develops greensight – in fact, most of them die. But it seems to be a constant. Those with it can see the past, the present, the future."

Who would ever want to see the future? Jeyne was uniquely poised to appreciate the lost bliss of ignorance. Yet her mother's grandmother had been a witch from the east, a maegi, who was rumored to see morrows in drops of blood and wisps of smoke. She had never met the old woman, who had died before she was born, and her mother had always tried to curtly downplay her origins as some Essos spicer's get. Yet it was terrifying to think that this disease might be somewhere in her as well.

The morning was grey, as usual, and Jeyne fell a few lengths behind Ser Brynden as they toiled through a broad, marshy plain. Dark peaty water squelched around her boots, and her hair unraveled from its braids, curling madly in the damp. She had long since given up trying to hold her skirt out of the mud, and tied it away as best she could with strips torn from the hem. There was not a breath of wind, so despite the cold she wondered if she was sweating; the air was thick and close. Her own breath felt like a dull, rhythmic stab under her breastbone. She wondered if she would die and keep on walking.

She skirted a tangle of suspect-looking weed. She began to count steps, wondering idly how many she would have taken by now, but quickly lost track. Anything but –

Ser Brynden uttered a short, sharp outcry.

Jeyne looked up wildly. She could only think of the tales of will-o-wisps and marsh ghasts and other fell creatures that sucked the life from a man, but the Blackfish was beating something with his knife. "Jeyne!" he shouted. "Get out of the water!"

Petrified, she instinctively clambered up onto the nearest rock, getting clear of the peat. The Blackfish continued to struggle, then swore violently and kicked the water. She thought she saw something shooting off just beneath the surface, leaving a ripple, and her heart shriveled in her chest.

The Blackfish cursed again, then took a few swaying sideways steps and sat down hard. "Well, seven hells," he snarled. "That's just the thing, isn't it."

"What?" There were only a few yards separating them, but the last thing Jeyne wanted was to climb
back into that water and confront whatever had attacked him. *Be brave, damn you. Be brave.* Gritting her teeth, she jumped in and struggled over to him. "What happened?"

"Viper. Moccasin, I think. It got away before I got a good look."

"Did it... bite you?"

In answer, the Blackfish pulled away the cloth of his breeches. Sure enough, two neat fang wounds perforated the flesh just below his knee, already dripping blood. "Get my knife. Here." The old knight struggled to draw it with his left hand. "Now cut. Deep, child. A cross."

Jeyne placed the edge of the blade to Ser Brynden's leg, but could only think of how this was very like to cripple him; cut the muscles and tendons of the knee, and he would be done for. She stared at him in horror.

"Cut, girl. *Now!*" The Blackfish put his hand over hers, and forced the knife into his own flesh. "Both ways!"

"Aye." She was almost in tears. Robb wouldn't have reacted like this, he would have been able to do what must be done. She reoriented the knife the other way across the Blackfish's knee and pressed it in. More blood welled around the blade.

"Now... I'm sorry, girl, it's the only way. Put your mouth to it and suck."

This time Jeyne did not hesitate, even though the task was the most gruesome of all. She put her lips to the wound and drew a mouthful of the Blackfish's blood. It tasted tangy, metallic, with a faint burning bite to it that must have been the venom. *This will help, this will help.* She turned her head and spat on the mossy sward, then took another.

She repeated this twice or thrice more until the Blackfish said, "Enough, that will have to suffice. Here, tear me a bandage off – " His hands were not as deft as usual as he fumbled out his dirty cloak. "Bind it."

"Not that." Jeyne finally had a sensible thought, discarding the cloak and reaching down her bodice to tear off a swath of comparatively cleaner cloth. She bandaged his leg up, but it turned red within instants. "Here, I'll help you." She crouched, pulled him heavily to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"I'll do." The Blackfish's face was pale, and cold sweat was starting on his brow. "We have to keep going. There's a path there, it will be easier."

Jeyne started toward it, looking back every few moments to be sure that the Blackfish was following. He was, but so gingerly and slowly that she had to stop and wait for him after every dozen yards. His teeth were gritted, but he made no word of complaint.

Some interminable time passed after that. She took the lead, doing her best to assess potential obstacles and guide them around. She had to go back and help Ser Brynden through a jungle of boulders, when the gorge fell off on either side into a tree-choked hell, and he groaned, a small sound that frightened her more than the accident itself. Afterwards, he did not take his arm off her shoulders, and she half-carried him through the next portage. He insisted on clearing the way for the next few miles, but by then, he was tottering so badly that they had to stop.

"Jeyne," the Blackfish said, in between gasps. He beckoned her closer. "Take this. In case..."

She didn't want him to say it. "No. We'll rest some." The afternoon was ending, and the marsh had grown wilder and more impassable than ever, tangled to all sides like a giant spiderweb. She heard
splashing, saw ghostly lights bobbing in the near distance. Someone is watching us. Someone knows that we are here.

"No," the Blackfish said stubbornly. He groped in his filthy surcote and handed her a sealed roll of parchment. "Here. Your lord husband's will. The Reeds will find you, if you can survive a few more days. As for me... the water, the river, as House Tully has always done..."

"No! You're not going to die, you're not! We didn't come so far and endure so much just for some - some snake to kill you!" She would suck out all his blood and all the poison if it came to that, die herself instead, but she was the one he had risked this for. "I'll make you something. I don't know what, but I will. I'll carry you. I will!" She was sobbing.

The Blackfish stared at her for a long moment, then sighed. "Jeyne," he said at last. "My lady. I've lived a long life, and if I can see you safe, perhaps I too will feel somewhat less as if I have failed Robb unforgivably. We share that burden, you know. Do not stay with me. Go. Go."

"No." She was not going to leave him behind in this place, in hell. "We'll go together."

"I can't go any further," the Blackfish said simply. "Take my sword, knife, cloak, anything else you think you'll need. Jeyne..." He grimaced in pain, and shifted his leg, now discolored and swollen beneath the stained bandage. "Please."

She hunched in misery, looking at him in a wordless plea, but he looked right back. So at last, she got up, accepted the swordbelt he handed her, buckled it around her waist and had to pull it tight to prevent it from slipping off. Then she took his cloak, which was thicker and warmer than hers, and tied it around her neck. She was almost blind with tears.

"Go," the Blackfish said. "Don't look back."

Jeyne nodded. She bent down and kissed his cheek. The weight of dagger and sword were unfamiliar, clumsy, but she felt better for wearing them. Then, keeping her promise, she stepped down from the rock, left him, and plunged into the night. She did not look back.

The path was comparatively straight, though she lost it a few times in the heavy growth, and the strange faraway lights meant that she did not stumble into anything she would rather not have. She clambered on hands and knees through the densest thickets, catching occasional glimpses of the horned moon through the thorns. I am a Stark, she told herself, even if she didn't know if she was or not. I am strong.

At last, the path dipped down into a soft, muddy lowland. Starlight glimmered on the waterways. And ahead, something that was not shaped like a tree or a scrub or a rock rose above the marsh. Stilts. She saw stilts, she was sure of it. And huts, certainly huts, rounded, woven of grass and driftwood and chinked with mud, a golden light in the middle of the depths of the blackest, foulest despair, so that the breath went out of her and she whispered prayers to all the gods she knew, Robb's gods and her own, and clutched the swordbelt as she began to run.

She had found Greywater Watch at last.
Brienne

The trial began as most trials did: with a prayer. She and Jaime stood stone-faced, though Thoros urged them to kneel, as he implored the Lord of Light to judge whether their hearts were fair or foul, their souls black or white. *No man is solely one or the other.* Long ago she had thought it so, that the heroes were tall and handsome and valorous, the maidens beautiful, the villains hideous, and the endings happy. Back when she was a big ugly girl, when she was serving in King Renly's Rainbow Guard, she might have been considerably attracted to the red priests' worldview. Now, not by half. *And that was even before they tried to hang me.*

Brienne still did not understand what had possessed her, still less how it had actually worked. She had been prepared to meet her own death honorably, though she could scarcely bear the thought of failing Ser Jaime, of leaving Sansa Stark out in the world alone and unprotected. But when the rope lashed around her neck, when her air cut off, when the world dwindled down to one bright roar of blackness, she had a sudden incentive to reconsider. Pod and Ser Hyle Hunt were going up next to her – it was Pod, who had followed her so loyally, and no matter how inconvenient and unchivalrous Ser Hyle was, she did not have the stomach to condemn him to die for her. *Ser Goodwin would despair of me,* she remembered thinking blindly, and then she screamed, "Sword."

For a wrenching, gagging moment, she was not sure if the outlaws had understood – or if they had, if they intended to do anything about it. *The sword or the noose.* Her service and survival, or her denial and her death. Then Lady Stoneheart rasped a command, a knife sawed through the rope, and suddenly Brienne was falling. She collapsed into the wet grass, thrashing and gulping and retching, and two neighboring thumps informed her that Pod and Ser Hyle had been correspondingly liberated.

Brienne felt too weak-kneed to even attempt to rise, fearing what she would see when she did. Then she smelled a strange cold scent, rolled over, and to her horrid shock realized that the thing that had been Catelyn Stark was standing directly above her. The corpse's unblinking eyes stared down into hers. Then it nodded once, stepped away, and said something to Thoros in its parched rattle.

*No,* Brienne thought, *no, this is not her, Lady Catelyn was brave and sad and strong. Not this monster.* She reeled to her knees, tasting bile, and remained there, hunched over, as Pod and Ser Hyle performed similar wheezing reparations.

The corpse and Thoros spoke a few moments more. Then the red priest turned to her and said, "Lady Brienne, n'lady has chosen to allow you the chance to demonstrate your sincerity. You will be given back your sword and things, and allotted the span of one week to find Ser Jaime and bring him here to answer for his sins. One week, until sundown on the seventh day. If at that time you have not returned, or have not brought him, these two – " he gestured at Pod and Ser Hyle – "will be hanged at once. So shall you and Ser Jaime, no matter in what day or year or age we should find you. Do you understand?"

Brienne had tried to speak, but her own voice was a strangled gasp. She nodded instead. *Jaime, it's better that I get Jaime, he'll tell them that I was telling the truth, they will, they'll see.* . . . Up until even a few moments ago, she had still believed that Jaime would somehow talk his way out of it. He had convinced the Brave Companions not to rape her during their captivity, by lying to them that she was worth her weight in sapphires, and had kept up the pretense even when they had trimmed him short a sword hand. It was hard to remember how much she had loathed him then, with his cruel gibes and his casual lack of remorse and his disheveled golden arrogance. To the outer eye, nothing had changed save that missing hand, but Brienne knew better.
She looked at Jaime, standing across from her. It was impossible to tell what he thought; his face was a mask. *How can this possibly be a fair trial, if one of us is meant to die?* Thoros had been very clear that honor would only be considered satisfied when there was blood in the mud. *It is not too late, I could still agree to fight Ser Gendry. I would very likely kill him, and then we might walk free.*

Yet even as the thought crossed Brienne's mind, she knew it was hopeless. If she could not let the likes of Ser Hyle Hunt perish on her behalf, then she could never look into the eyes of Renly's ghost and drive the sword through him herself. Not after she had watched him murdered in front of her. Only time and distance and bitter experience had allowed her to fully comprehend what had happened in his camp, but Renly himself remained untarnished. *I wonder if I would have continued to worship him so much, if he had lived.* Yet she did not want to think about that. Ser Gendry might not be Renly, but it made no matter.

Thoros had apparently finished his prayer. Turning to Brienne, he said, "My lady, I feel it only fair to warn you. If at any moment you step aside, or pull your blows, or otherwise attempt to let Ser Jaime off, we have Lem and Harwin waiting to take over in your place." He nodded at the big yellow-cloaked Hound, then at a dark-bearded young man with the look of a northerner. "Both of them will be . . . eager to come to grips with a Lannister."

"Oh, good," said Jaime. "Normally I'd request one for each hand, but if those two are the ones you chose, I won't mind making an exception."

Lem glared at him. "I'll fuck you with those words the way your sister does, Kingslayer."

Brienne saw a spasm of both rage and agony pass across Jaime's face, the first overt emotion he had shown since their ordeal began. But he shrugged it away, and in an instant the mask was back. With an exaggerated, grandiose courtesy, he reached with his left hand to the sword that hung at his right hip, and drew it across his body. The movement looked more or less smooth, but Brienne could only think of their first fight, over Ser Cleos' broken body just before the Brave Companions captured them. Even chained, rusty, and clumsy, Jaime had fought like the lion of his House's sigil. Indeed if he *hadn't* been chained, he would have killed her.

*I only pray I do not need to kill him now.* Brienne reached for her own scabbard, and drew her sword in a shivering hiss. Not Oathkeeper, but her own; she might well be forced to kill Jaime, but she would not do it with the precious blade he had given her, the emblem of the task that she had failed him in. *Sansa Stark is my last chance for honor,* he had said. They eyed each other wordlessly, as the outlaws cleared away to leave them alone.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jaime said. "Eleven-year-old squires everywhere fear to face me, you know."

It was so like him – to crack a mordant jest when both of them were faced with almost certain death – that it almost made her weep. "No," she whispered. "I don't."

"That makes two of us, then." Jaime shrugged. "Brienne, you don't have to. Let me fight Ser Pisscloak and his friend. That way, the one who runs me through won't be the one weeping over my corpse later. Even dead, I might find that awkward." Another strange expression crossed his face, and she wondered if he was once more thinking of his sister. Brienne remained as repulsed by the revelation of the Lannisters' incest as anyone, particularly the lengths they had gone to in order to conceal it, but she knew in a dark part of her that if she was willing to pardon it in Jaime, she must also pardon it in Cersei. The queen was not a good woman, and had sunk deeper and deeper into depravity and madness as her grip on power grew ever more tenuous, but the twins truly were part of each other.
Lem drew his own sword, an ugly heavy thing three feet long and razor sharp. "I'm more n' willing to oblige you, Kingslayer."

Harwin the northman wasted no time in following suit. "And so am I."

Jaime threw them a withering look. "You smell marginally less bad, you potentially have better table manners, and you're more likely to be mistaken for the hind end of an aurochs rather than a goat, but for the life of me I can't see how you're different from the Bloody Mummers. At least they only had the decency to take my hand, but you won't be satisfied with anything less than my soul. Haven't you thundering imbeciles worked out that there's nothing to give? Kill the Kingslayer, very well. Then you'll be a hero. Will that make you immortal, or set to rights the wrongs you're supposedly avenging, or do anything besides make you just as much a murderer as me? I don't care what god you pray to or what high-and-mighty purpose you claim. You still think you're the only ones to lose in this war, and that makes you as blind as my sweet sister. Drop those breeches, Pisscloak, grace us all with the delightful aroma of your shit."

Lem's face altered to a truly alarming color, but he didn't answer. Harwin threw a confused look at Lady Stoneheart, but the corpse woman similarly held her silence. It was only Thoros who seemed capable of mustering a response. "Ser Jaime," he said, "our brotherhood fights to defend those who cannot defend themselves. And those are the smallfolk, the common people, those who –"

"Those who suffered thanks to my family, you mean?" Brienne had never seen Jaime so angry. "True, I was born highborn and good-looking and wealthy and talented. If I am on trial for that, I most sincerely confess my guilt. And now look at me. If Pisscloak wants to cut me to bits and call it justice, he's welcome to it. I recall my lord father took a similar approach with Prince Rhaegar's children. What crime are you defending the smallfolk from, by hacking apart a cripple? What does it give them back? All those dead dogs I personally killed, I suppose?"

"Vengeance," one of the other outlaws said. He didn't sound quite as convinced as he might have.

Jaime laughed. "I had delusions of grandeur once too," he said. "Every man does. Yours just happen to be more delusional than most. Now, I'm bloody tired of wasting my breath on you arseholes. Come on and kill me. If you're worried about your chances, I'll have the wench cut off the other hand first."

Lem moved almost before Jaime had finished the sentence, and Brienne dove out of the way just in time as the big man lunged. Lem's first cut clanged and slid off Jaime's blade, and Jaime's parry was decently placed but clumsily executed. Then the swords leapt up at each other's faces, and her stomach was in her throat as they tangled. Lem had the advantage in height, weight, and sheer brute strength. Jaime seemed to be trying to avoid running straight into his blows, deflecting or misdirecting where he could and ducking where he couldn't. It was plain that he'd had some training fighting with his left hand, as he hadn't yet been reduced to bloody ribbons, but he was forced to retreat every time Lem ramped up the attack. One or two of the outlaws tried to raise a cheer for the Hound, but it died miserably in the heavy, dusty air.

Brienne shot a glance at the thing that had been Lady Catelyn. Her eyes burned malevolently beneath her hood, but still she made no move to interfere. Lem and Jaime were locked together like a pair of rival stags, swinging and grunting and swearing at each other. Blood was running down Jaime's sleeve from a shallow cut near his shoulder, and it made her heart stop to see it, but – and no doubt he found it very amusing – it was the right shoulder. He awkwardly twisted away from Lem's next blow, went low, and feinted to the side. Lem failed to fall for it, however, and his next cut took out a chunk of Jaime's left thigh.

No! Brienne had never grown used to sitting on the sidelines during a fight, and it took everything
she had not to run out then and there. Jaime was losing ground fast now, clearly flagging, unable to put weight on the wounded limb. He tried to use his golden hand to brace one of his blocks, but it was ripped away, unable to close its lifeless fingers around the sword hilt, and his foot went out from under him. But even as he was falling he was twisting like a cat, and he landed flat on his back and got his sword up in time to stop Lem's vicious downward bludgeon. "Sure you don't want to call in your second?" he panted. "The wench gets cross if you leave her out."

Lem made no response to this, not even a grunt, but Brienne's sixth sense chirped at her just in time for her to duck as Harwin's sword lacerated the precise spot her head had occupied a bare moment earlier. She spun around, got her blade up, and threw his blow back in his face with a teeth-jarring clong. He was quick, strong, and clearly no amateur, but even half-hanged, half-eaten, and half-ruined, she was still the warrior who had won the melee at Bitterbridge, who had come out the last standing above a hundred and sixteen knights. A hundred and sixteen men.

Out of the corner of her eye, Brienne caught Thoros of Myr looking somewhat alarmed; evidently the trial had not been supposed to take this turn. But she had no time to spare for him. She even lost track of Lem and Jaime. All she could see in her mind's eye was Red Ronnet Connington sneering at her and throwing the rose at her feet, Lord Randyll Tarly telling her that she would benefit from a good hard raping, all the gawking and condescending and disgusted looks, the mockeries and the japes and the outright abuse. Poor Harwin had given her none of them, was only fighting for what he believed in, the same as she was, but he had come after her with a sword. Enough. It is enough, all of it.

They traded fierce and furious blows for twenty, thirty, forty heartbeats, possibly more. It all was a blur. Then Harwin went low when he should have gone high, and Brienne saw her opportunity. She sliced him deep in the arm, ripped a bloody slash across his chest, and put a matching dent in the other arm. I did not hesitate, Ser Goodwin. Wherever you are, mayhaps you saw that. She had not hesitated against the Mummers, but they were truly terrible, scarce worthy to be called men. Harwin was no Mummer.

Harwin's sword dropped from his suddenly nerveless fingers. He staggered backwards, pressing a hand to his stomach, and Brienne lowered her sword into a defensive, jousting guard, not willing to swoop in and finish him. Her point was made, and he wasn't about to be striding back into the fray any time soon.

The outlaws made a communal, rumbling noise of distress. Harwin fell.

Breathing hard, Brienne finally dared to look up. Lem and Jaime were fighting in and out of the roots — or rather, Jaime was trying to use as many of them to absorb the blows meant for him as possible. There was a spreading crimson stain on his other leg now, but blood was running in Lem's eyes from a deep slash across his forehead. It was clearly blinding him, and his blows were coming slower and more raggedly than before.

"Finish him, Lem!" one of the outlaws shouted. "This won't be like it was with Lord Beric and Clegane!"

Lord Beric and Clegane? Had the man formerly known as the Hound had his own run-in with the outlaw brotherhood?

There was no time to ponder the potential ramifications of that question. Lem's last, roaring backhand caught briefly on one of the roots, and Jaime twisted like an eel — the wrong way. Lem wrenched his blade loose and buried it through Jaime's ribcage.

Brienne's scream choked to a death rattle in her throat. It is Renly, it is Renly all over again. It was
a nightmare, she was frozen, she couldn't run, she couldn't – but then Jaime gave his body half a
twist, trapping Lem's blade inside him before the big soldier could pull it out. And then, with the
two of them close enough to kiss, Jaime swept his own across. Hard, fast, level, and utterly without
mercy.

Lem Lemoncloak's head hit the ground with a squishy thud, and rolled away. His sword grated out
of Jaime with a horrible sound, and his body folded slowly to its knees – then fell, blood gushing a
dark, feral scarlet in the leaves.

Jaime went to a knee as well. His breath sounded like a man drowning. There was presumably just
as much blood on him as well, but the Lannister crimson of his tabard made it hard to tell. Her
paralysis broken, Brienne rushed forward.

Jaime fell into her arms just as she reached him. She ripped the sodden cloth away, and was horror-
struck to lay eyes on the ruin of his lower chest. *An inch or two higher, and it would have struck
the great artery of the heart.* And to judge from the size of the stain, it wasn't entirely certain that it
hadn't. "Jaime," she sobbed. "No. I'm sorry."

"No... matter..." Jaime's voice was as contorted as his face, but there did not appear to be overt
fear in either. "I can't die... while Cersei lives."

*That's just a fantasy,* she might have said, and nearly did. But without it, what was she? What were
any of them? *I have lived my life in a fantasy, while all around me the world spit and howled and
did its best to destroy it, that I dared to think I had the faintest worth as a person, as a soul. Except
I never did, I never thought so. I was only my father's or Renly's or Lady Catelyn's or Vargo Hoat's
or someone's, anyone's. Until now.*

There was a rustling behind them, and Thoros of Myr moved forward. Before Brienne could stop
him, he knelt next to her and took a vial of some dark brown physic from his sleeve. "Ser Jaime,"
he said. "Drink this."

"Only... if it's poison." The defiant flash in Jaime's eyes belied his words. But with shocking
compliance, he choked down a few swallows, and Brienne felt a shudder run through his entire
body. He settled back in her arms, boneless.

"What did you do?" She lifted her gaze angrily to Thoros'.

The red priest raised his hands. "Do not look at me so accusingly, my lady. I asked R'hllor to bear
witness to this trial, and while it would not be an answer that we like, there can be no doubt that he
has. There is no more that we can in justice do."

"There is. Where are my companions? I will have them set free."

Thoros inclined his head, turned away, and vanished through a drape of hanging leaves. After the
loudest and longest silence of Brienne's entire life, broken only with the sound of Jaime's shallow,
stertorous breathing, he returned with Pod and Ser Hyle, both of whom looked considerably the
worse for wear. One of Ser Hyle's eyes was swollen shut, the rope weal around his neck was even
deeper than hers, and his hair was stained and clumped with blood. Poor Podrick looked more
furtive than ever.

"Here, my lady," Thoros said. "I will have you know that if this brotherhood was under my
command, matters would have transpired quite differently." He shot an elusive, sidelong look at
Lady Stoneheart. "But we will honor the agreement."
Agreement? That's a kind word for it. "Pod," Brienne said. "Ser Hyle. Walk out of here. Take the first horses you can find. Perhaps you will succeed where I have failed." She hesitated agonizingly; how could she commend Sansa Stark, assuming the girl was even still alive, to the ilk of Hunt? But the man she saw behind his haunted eyes was not the one she had known before. "Find Lady Sansa. Keep her safe. I will join you when I can."

"You." Pod coughed; it sounded as if he was bringing up a lung. "Where are you going? Ser. My lady."

Brienne looked down at the unconscious man in her arms. "To the Quiet Isle," she said. "I pray it will not be for long."

She rose to her feet, awkwardly hoisting Jaime's dead weight. Meeting the eyes of Lady Stoneheart, she said, "My lady, I'm sorry. Sorry for leaving you, sorry for not doing better, sorry for not bringing your daughters back, sorry for what you've become. But whatever you believe, I did not break my oath. I never betrayed you. I never would have."

The corpse woman did not react for several moments. Then she made another gesture, and Thoros stooped and pulled something out from the roots. It was dented, stained, battered, and rusted, but Brienne still recognized it. Anyone who had heard tale of it, or the man who wore it, would have. "Here," Thoros said, holding out Sandor Clegane's helm. "I urged Lem to be rid of it, when he first took it from Rorge." He shot another sidelong glance at the former Hound's headless body, sprawled in the dirt. "I thought it boded ill, which apparently it did. But Ser Jaime killed Lem, so it is his, if he wishes to claim it."

"Keep it." Brienne had no use for hollow tokens. She had encountered enough woe and trouble as it was, without a symbol universally associated with the unconscionable crimes committed across the riverlands. "I imagine Ser Jaime could give less than half a damn. Perhaps you can use it to fetch water."

She turned, hefting Jaime into a slightly better position. He was still breathing, that was good, and the flow of blood appeared to be slowing; something in the potion Thoros had administered must have had that effect. It could be that he is right, he cannot die while Cersei lives. But what if the queen was being called to stand trial for her life even this very moment?

Pod and Ser Hyle, moving slowly and painfully, vanished up the tunnel. Carrying Jaime, Brienne was about to join them, when she heard Lady Stoneheart speak. Dreading it, she nonetheless glanced back one last time. She owed her that much, at least. "My lady?"

"She says that you must go," Thoros supplied, after a reluctant moment. "Even she cannot gainsay the revealed will of R'hllor. But she says that even unto the uttermost ending of the world, she will remember, and she will hate."

So she will, Seven save her. She has nothing else left, this creature that she is, this thing, of my lady that was so clad in grief and tears and loss. And at that moment, Brienne felt her heart break.

"Gods-speed, goodmen, my lady," she said formally. It is almost due east from here to the Quiet Isle, a ride of a week or so, faster if I can find a skiff to take us down the Red Fork. She thought of her first journey down the river with Jaime. This will be different. By the old gods and the new, I swear it. The Elder Brother will heal him, and then we will decide where it is that we will go next. "Goodbye."

The climb to the surface was breathless and wearisome, cumbered as she was. When she emerged
aboveground at last, the sky was full dark, kissed with stars. The moon was beginning to rise, and Jaime shifted slightly. "Wench. . ."

"Shut up." She got a better grip on him. "Please."

He shook with something that might have been an agonized laugh. Then, seeing no horses to hand, she did the only thing she could. She swung one arm under Jaime's knees, the other under his shoulders, and began to walk. Before long, she had vanished into the night.
Avoiding recognition had thus far been easier than he'd expected. He'd had the notion in his head that the instant he stepped off the boat onto the mainland, children would hide and maidens would faint from coast to coast. *About the only bloody way they're ever like to faint for you, dog.* But all had proceeded uneventfully, save for the Elder Brother making a final plea for him to change his mind. "Come with me to the Vale," the monk urged. "You need time to adjust to the world again. Then afterwards, if you must, continue onto King's Landing. That way you can – "

"Can what?" Sandor snorted. "Wipe little Lord Robert's arse? Give the rumors of my resurrection time to reach the wrong ears? No. You've done what you can for me, monk. Depending on what happens in the capital, I may even thank you for it. But I'm going it alone from here." And with that, he had mounted up on Stranger – he would not hear of leaving his big black warhorse behind, despite yet more objections – and turned his head for the south.

However, the Elder Brother had been right on one accord. Everything about the world felt strange to him. He rode with his hood up and his sword hidden in the saddle-ties, with a brown brother's robe over his roughspun jerkin and breeches. What few souls he encountered, for the most part, left him well alone. No one could be trusted these days; the war had made murderers, rapists, and thieves of otherwise ordinary men. Sandor wondered if some little pisspot would attempt to rob him, and almost hoped so – he wouldn't mind a chance to do some recreational disembowelment. *Aye, Clegane. If you hone your skills on a few snot-nosed cutpurses, you'll be perfectly prepared to take on your bloody undead brother.* Failing that, this was the riverlands, and he had a few scores to settle with the outlaw brotherhood. He'd killed Lord Beric Dondarrion himself, but Gregor had done so twice or thrice, and a few other of House Lannister's pet curs could claim credit for the feat as well. But the Elder Brother had said that Dondarrion was truly dead now, and this woman Stoneheart commanded the Brotherhood in his place, hanging any Frey she happened across. Sandor considered this an inestimable service to the whole of mankind. *It's a damned good thing I don't look like a weasel, then.*

In times of peace, the riverlands were the cradle of Westeros, lush and fertile and pastoral, but it was a very long while since anyone anywhere had known any peace. Sandor saw more corpses on the first day than in a month on the Quiet Isle, and for bloody certain no one had thought of burying them. The charred countryside was scattered with wattle cottages, deep ploughed ditches, clear-cut woods, broken fences and tumbledown walls. Smoke was often rising from the horizon. Yet from here, it was a more or less straight shot down the kingsroad to the capital.

Sandor, however, did not want to take the kingsroad. It was marginally safer than it had been in the heat of the war, but the closer he got to King's Landing, the harder it would be to conceal his identity. The place was in turmoil following the deaths of Ser Kevan and Grand Maester Pycelle, and Mace Tyrell – not the sort of leader to inspire outstanding confidence in anyone – was grappling as hard as he could to keep the peace. It was keeping for the moment, but barely. And if word spread that the infamous Hound himself, the coward of the Blackwater and the butcher of the riverlands, had returned for the express purpose of re-murdering the Mountain and sentencing the queen to death, the gods alone knew what sort of inferno would follow.

Sandor's mouth twisted, pulling the burned side of his face up into a leer. *I might walk through an actual inferno, if it brought me the chance to come to grips with Gregor.* There had never been a moment in his life that was ever free of Gregor.

The Clegane family keep lay in the Reach, south and east of Lannisport, about forty or fifty miles
from Casterly Rock as the raven flew. While not a great castle, it was nonetheless a handsome
manor house of stone suitable for a landed knight, and the forested hills were rich with game, the
river bountiful with fish. Crofts, coppices, terraces, and orchards chequered the golden fields. Yet
Sandor had to reach back almost to a moment before language, before conscious knowledge, to
think of it without seeing the chilling and unnatural place it had become under Gregor. His
memories were of being hunted through those trees, thrown into that river, locked in that manor's
attic until he sobbed with hunger and begged to be let out, apologizing for things he had never
done. They called it harmless fun, they said he was a growing lad, they excused everything they
ever could, even when the burns were already on my face. Father told the world that my bedding
caught fire, and I myself mouthed the lie like a pretty talking bird. No one saw what Gregor truly
was, or chose not to. No one except me and Alienor.

Sandor had been visited by the ghost of his sister more than once as he lay burning with fever on
the Trident, and then later in the septyr. Every time, she always looked exactly as she had on the
day she died: thirteen years old, wearing her thick black hair in two long braids and that mint-green
dress she'd loved, still spattered with bloodstains. Father said it must have been outlaws when the
men found her in that gully, that she must have gone too far alone again like she always did. That it
was outlaws who beat her with a riding whip until there was no flesh left on her back, who raped
her so violently that her cunt and arse were torn apart, who broke her neck and threw her body at
the bottom of the rocks to make it look like an accident. I was ten years old and I knew it was
idiocy, and yet men thrice my age never asked any questions. She died for defending me, for
helping me, for standing up for me. For loving me. No matter how often he was told that he must
leave it all to the Father Above for judgment, Sandor could not forgive his own father for that.

Strangely, Ser Theodor Clegane had not been a particularly violent man. He had always been
remarkably tall and strong – five fingers over six feet and eighteen stone of muscle – and he had
bequeathed this commanding physique to his sons, but the spirit within was placid, unimaginative,
fearful of change, and desperate to maintain appearances. The Cleganes were new enough as
knights bannert to Casterly Rock that Ser Theodor was always fretting about what the old western
houses would think of them, those who dripped in gold from Lannisport and silver and gems from
Silverhill. His father had been the one to save Lord Tytos Lannister from the lion in the fields that
day; he envisioned a similarly upright and honorable life for his sons, and envisioned it so well that
he saw nothing else. He'd hoped for Alienor to marry a Marbrand or a Swyft or a Stackspear.
Instead he wound up with a monster, a dog, and a corpse.

And then there was Sandor's lady mother. Alyx Clegane had been a Crakehall by birth, and while
she too was big, strapping, and broad-shouldered to look upon, she was peculiar, fragile, and
sensitive inside. Yet she had been the only one who tried to constrain Gregor, which explained why
he tormented her so unceasingly that her death when Sandor was six, a year after the incident, was
widely rumored to have come at her own hand. He could barely remember what she looked like, or
if she was kind to him, or if he'd missed her. Yet sometimes a specter that might have been her had
come to him as well, as he lay in that hallucinatory borderland between sleeping and waking,
between sickness and health, between death and life. He was never sure, for it never had any face.
Only a sense of great joy and melancholy mingled, and a pale hand, holding onto his in the
darkness.

What Sandor did remember was the day Gregor had become a knight. Upon hearing that the Prince
of Dragonstone himself was set to do the honors of dubbing, he had conceived a feverish, half-
baked plan to get him alone and tell him everything. Rhaegar Targaryen would listen, would be
horrified, would immediately agree that there was no way such a... thing could ever be accorded a
loyal retainer of House Lannister and the Iron Throne. Sandor had loved knights as much as any
little boy, as any little girl loved princesses. Everything he knew had told him that Gregor was as
unfit for this high honor as were the Others. Whatever the false maester Qyburn had made him
into, he could not possibly be more of a demon.

Yet Sandor had not been allowed to meet Rhaegar personally, let alone speak to him. Gregor entered from his vigil spent overnight in the sept – Sandor still couldn't understand how the place hadn't burst into flames – and Rhaegar listened to his vows, tapped his dragon-hilted sword on Gregor's shoulder, and said, "Arise, Ser Gregor."

And, watching from the back, Sandor lost everything he had ever believed in. Almost that quickly. He heard the rush of air as gods and knights and honor and goodness and kindness and hope and healing all at once fled out the door, never to return. He had joined the Lannisters as soon as he could after that, when Ser Theodor had that oh-so-convenient hunting accident. And soon began to hate them as well, guarding Joffrey Baratheon because it gave him money to drink, seeing in the crown prince a sadism to rival anything Gregor could have conjured, aware sometimes that Joffrey wanted him to be the father that Robert had never been, and becoming still more scornful as a result. And further and further down and down, nothing he ever cared for even a fraction, until . . .

But no. He wasn't going to think about her.

Sandor arrived in Maidenpool four days later. At once, he could see that he was going to have to be very careful. Not only was Maidenpool the first village of even comparable size, it was swarming with Tarly men, busily rebuilding it after the brutal sacking and burning that had befallen it near the end of the war. *Another of my alleged crimes, no doubt.* There were still ashes and broken beams, and the hillside was pocked with graves, but order did seem in the process of being restored. In his professional capacity, Sandor wondered how many of those graves had been dug *after* Lord Randyll arrived. The Lord of Horn Hill might be the only man in the Seven Kingdoms whose idea of justice was even more inflexible than Stannis Baratheon's.

There was a guard on the gate, inspecting all entrants into the village. Sandor kept his eyes down and mumbled "*ser*" and "*m'lord, *" and was shooed through with only a cursory glance. He recalled schooling the little wolf bitch on that accord – right before they'd nearly faffed into the middle of the Red Wedding, if memory served. He might not have risked entering Maidenpool at all, but Stranger had cast a shoe a few miles back, and was limping on the rocky road.

Sandor tracked down the smith, who was already beset with more orders for pegs, stakes, wedges, cotter-pins, adze blades, and banging out dents in tools than he could possibly satisfy, and thus was not disposed to be polite when a big hooded man turned up with a bad-tempered destrier. Nonetheless, something must have warned him not to complain overmuch, and he set to the task, albeit with surly bad grace and a price that was twice what the same smith would have charged in King's Landing. Sandor paid it without comment, and held Stranger firmly by the bridle as the smith got grumbling to work; kicking the man in the face would certainly be detrimental to their aims of avoiding attention. The stallion did not, though he snorted and laid back his ears and bared his teeth in a way that made the smith eye both of them more sourly than ever. Stranger was clearly too good and too expensive a horse for this apparently penniless ragamuffin to have come by innocuously. *Maybe he'll fetch Lord Tarly and have me hanged for thievery. *It would be ironic, if unfortunate.

The smith got the bellows going, hammered out a shoe, and plunged it into the rain barrel to cool it. "Hold his hoof while I put this on," he ordered Sandor through a mouthful of nails. "Bad enough they've got bloody wolves on show, I don't need to contend with the likes o' him to boot."

Sandor knelt and pulled up the hoof in question, the left rear one. There were sundry pebbles and dirt embedded in it, which he economically cleaned out, then held it out for the shoe. He knew he should keep his mouth shut, but his bloody curiosity got the better of him. "What wolf on show?"
The smith grunted. "I forgot, you just fell off the back o' the turnip cart. Lord Randyll's got that she-wolf caged up on the village green here, the one they captured on the Trident. He thinks it serves a good firm lesson. Me, I just think it queer how many brave men there are now that weren't before, who go off to point and jeer and throw stones now she can't hurt them. Not that I entirely blame them, mind. The Fat Flower will bloody shit hisself when that monster arrives in King's Landing."

The wolf bitch. Yes, the Elder Brother had mentioned that during their conversation in Hermit's Hole. He'd briefly entertained the notion of taking her south himself, before deciding that if it was hard enough to remain anonymous with half his face burned off and a riotously ill-tempered black warhorse, it would be several orders of magnitude worse with a man-killing fiend in tow. If I do what I intend to, they should all be bloody thanking me on bended knee anyway.

Still, something about it made him want to go and see. I don't like wolves. I hate wolves. Maybe he'd throw a few stones himself. Or maybe he wouldn't. I know something about being stared at, spat at, stoned, and cursed for a monstrosity. Seven hells, I do know something about that.

The shoeing job was completed without loss of life or limb on anyone's part, and Sandor thanked the smith with a grunt and tossed him an extra coin. Then he led Stranger out to the horse pickets, tied him well away from any of the others, and gave him a withered apple from his pocket. Once the destrier was munching more or less contentedly, Sandor headed for the green, which wasn't hard to find. Maidenpool was not that large of a town, and besides, a steady stream of people were making in the same direction. There, just as promised, Sandor finally laid eyes on the feared, fabled Terror of the Trident.

It was smaller than he expected. That was his first thought. All the tales had given the creature monolithic proportions – the size of a pony, the size of a cow, the size of an elk. While it was the largest wolf he'd ever seen, to ordinary wolves what his brother Gregor was to ordinary men, it still fell somewhat short of the grandiose expectations. It lay awkwardly in its chains, twisted and tangled, froth dripping from its mouth. Every so often it would lift its head and snarl, usually causing whatever jeering party of youths had approached to backtrack precipitately, but its strength appeared to be mostly at an end. Tattered red wounds showed through its thick fur, and sticks, stones, and missiles of all sorts lay scattered around the bars of the cage.

Bloody hells, they're killing it. The last thing Sandor had expected to feel was pity – an indignation felt by one monster of the riverlands on behalf of another. I know, he thought at it. I know what it is like to be mocked by fleas, for not one of them dares to face you on equal ground. I know what it is like to wear chains.

The wolf lifted her head. Golden eyes met his grey ones. She stared at him.

It's just an animal, Sandor reminded himself. It doesn't understand you, it doesn't know who you are. Don't be bloody ridiculous.

The wolf kept staring at him. People were glancing around to see what it was looking at. "Seems she fancies you, brother," one remarked. "Fancies you to eat, most like. Seeing as she's come up straight from the seventh hell, and snacks on a septon every afternoon."

Sandor grunted again and turned away. It was late afternoon by now; the sun was going down and the air was fast getting colder. He was going to have to decide whether to press on, or spend the night in Maidenpool. It was folly to linger around other folk any longer than he had to, but he didn't like the purplish-black clouds mounding up in the western sky, and his bad leg had started to give him trouble again after five days of hard riding. When he pulled down his breeches this morning to take a piss, he had seen a faint yellowish discharge oozing from the corrugated scar tissue, and
knew he'd have to bind it up quickly. Otherwise it might break open again and fester, and that would just be a fucking deuce of a way to end things.

I'll have to stay here tonight, Sandor decided. There had to be some bed he could buy with a few coppers. He trudged back to Stranger, untied him, and set off through Maidenpool's narrow, muddy streets. Lord Randyll's soldiers were marching through as well, calling curfew; anyone caught outside after the last evenfall bell had sung would be subject to arrest and possible execution. Keeping the peace for the rest of us, bloody hero that he is.

At last, Sandor located a suitable inn, which also had the distinction of being the only inn that was even remotely habitable. The keeper didn't ask questions, which he appreciated, and even gave Sandor a place in the back by the kitchens that was warm and mostly dry, if slanted so steeply overhead that he had to wriggle in like a greased pig. After he'd clumsily tended to his leg, he lay down with a heavy sigh and stared at the rough-grained wood above him. He was so tired that he might sleep soundly through an army of cooks and banging pots, but he couldn't stop thinking about the confounded wolf.

Will you give it up? Either you'd be hanged by Tarly's minions or get the other half of your face eaten off by the bitch. Sandor owed nothing to anyone, only cared about getting back to King's Landing and taking the revenge a lifetime in the making. Yet there alone in the darkness, he was forced to admit that he was scared stiff of returning to the capital. He hadn't exactly departed in the best of circumstances, it wasn't how he'd wanted to go, he hadn't intended to go alone... but with the Blackwater Rush belching green flames a hundred feet high, there was no way he could have made himself walk back into it. You're coming back the same way you left, dog. And there's no one but yourself to blame for that.

Sandor turned over. The thin, straw-stuffed mattress was scratchy and uncomfortable, and he wasn't getting anywhere by lying here. He opened them and sat up, cautiously, to avoid braining himself on the low beam. The place was quiet, save for the snoring of the servants who slept in the kitchen. He slithered out, testing the floor for creaks. The coldness of the air under the door suggested the clouds were in the process of disgorging their contents.

It was even colder when Sandor crept out the back door. Flakes swirled like icy needles out of the dark sky, and the thatched roofs of the cottages were already glazed in snow. He could see a brazier burning several alleyways over, but Lord Tarly's soldiers were apparently more concerned with staying huddled close to it rather than hunting potential curfew-breakers. Like as not they didn't expect there to be any.

Sandor turned away from the light, and stole down a narrow side lane. He had a heavy iron implement from the kitchen in hand, as well as a flask of cooking oil, and with every step he cursed himself. Undoubtedly the bitch would start running roughshod through the whole village, attacking every soul in their beds. Well, then she might tear out Lord Tarly's throat, and that would certainly be amusing. And the chaos would give me a chance to escape without being seen.

The village square was as black as pitch when Sandor reached the wolf's cage. The bitch's fur was caked with snow, and icicles of slaver had formed beneath her opened, lolling jaws. Her eyes turned as bright as two flames when she saw him coming.

"Don't you make a sound, or I'll just kill you here," Sandor warned her in a hiss. "And hold still."

For all the world as if she understood him, the bitch continued to watch him with those evil eyes of hers. She held still. He raised the implement high, and brought it down.

The noise was horrendous, shivering and scraping, so much that he thought doors would fly open
and outraged householders in their nightclothes would come swarming out to string him up on the instant. But they didn't. Another grunting, two-handed blow, and the front of the cage hung halfway off its hinges. A final blow, and it fell into the snow.

"I can't believe I'm bloody doing this," Sandor muttered, not for the first time, as he unstopped the flask of oil and poured it on the beast's front paws. They had grown gaunt enough during her captivity that it was surprisingly simple to slip them through the fetters. The instant he loosed her rear ones, she would leap on him and tear out his throat first, but that was the only reward he deserved for his stupidity. But it transpired that he could not do the same at the back, as these cuffs had a key turned into them that had embedded into the wolf's lower leg, leaving a pustulated, oozing wound. Sandor fumbled and twisted, swearing under his breath, until finally it came free, coagulated with frozen blood. One, and then the other.

The she-wolf climbed out of the cage with sore, stalking grace. She lifted her head and regarded Sandor calmly, then – as he held out his hand for some damned-fool reason, just so she could more conveniently rip it off – she padded close enough to give it a quick, rough swipe with her tongue. Then she gathered her hindquarters under her, limping but moving fast, with purpose, and vanished like a grey wind between the houses into the night.

_I would do very well myself to be out of Maidenpool by the time they find she's escaped._ Sandor glanced in all directions for approaching torches and pitchforks, then ducked low and scrambled back through the labyrinthine wynds. He didn't stop until he reached the stable, slid in and untied Stranger, saddled him, and led the two of them out toward the muddy ground that bordered the palisade. Still Lord Tarly's soldiers did not leave their braziers. The snow continued to fall. _He might hang them as well, once he discovers that they sat on their arses while the she-wolf got away._

He was out of Maidenpool and pelting hard down the road to Duskendale by the time dawn began to perforate the cold horizon. Then he had to stop; his leg was cramping savagely, and there was more pus on the bandages when he unwrapped them. He changed the dressing and built as much of a fire as he dared, stretching out and warming a little of his cold food. He doubted that any man would be in a great hurry to hunt down the wolf bitch on his own.

Nonetheless, after he had been at rest for an hour or so, he noticed two riders coming hard from the north. He considered hauling himself back up on Stranger and trying to outdistance them, but the banners that he could pick out were not blazoned with the striding huntsman of House Tarly. Rather, it was the rainbow sword of the Warrior's Sons. _What in damnation are they doing here?_ Then again, they were nearly ubiquitous these days. Four of them had gone to the Vale with the Elder Brother, and he would have sent some with Sandor, but Sandor had refused. _Knights are bad enough, but these knights think they're the Seven made flesh._ Still, having a few prickly religious zealots along might help him out of any future tight corners. Or get him into them, but no matter.

Yet they were closer now, and then closer. And as they crossed the bridge a few stone's throws away, he recognized to his complete shock that they were in fact two of the Sons who had accompanied the Elder Brother. _They must be going to King's Landing – to do what? Report at the Great Sept? What bloody happened in the Vale that the High Sparrow needs to know about so badly that they're trying to kill their horses?_ In that case, Sandor might do well to find out himself. He rose to his feet and stepped out from beneath his tree. "And where are you scuttling off to?"

Both of the Sons reined in so hard that their horses almost sat down. They knew who he was, as much as he knew them, and shot him twin looks of searing displeasure at being interrupted in their
vital errand, particularly by a half-clad, half-wild-looking ex-traitor dawdling in a river bottom. "You," said one of them. "What are you doing?"

"The same thing you are, by the looks of it. I'll challenge you to a race, if you want."

"Get out of our way, Clegane," said the other. "We have to reach the capital as soon as possible. Elder Brother learned certain details of crimes against the gods, and we were supposed to be taking the girl for refuge to the Quiet Isle, but something went badly wrong. She never turned up as she was supposed to, and it took until the next morning to realize she was gone."

"Girl? What girl?" Sandor could care less about some bloody girl. "Will there or will there not still be the queen's trial for the Faith to pay attention to, once you louts get there with your precious news?"

The rainbow knights stared at him coldly. Then the first one said, "I don't think you really deserve to know this, Clegane. The Father Above only knows why, in fact, but Elder Brother said that if by some wild chance we did happen across you, we should tell you. The girl who gave him the evidence, the girl who's now gone missing – like as not in the company of one Ser Shadrich, a hedge knight in Lord Baelish's service who's also mysteriously unaccounted for – was Sansa Stark."

For a moment that lasted forever, the world ended.

For a moment that lasted even longer, the world began.

Seven. Fucking. Hells.

The second Son smirked at whatever expression was on Sandor's face. He couldn't even begin to imagine what it was. His heart was roaring in his ears, he felt even more flattened than he had when the Elder Brother had broken the news about Robert Strong. I'm not sure how much more of this I can bloody take. The only two things he had ever wanted in his life, the only two things that defined him any more. Choose one, and forsake the other. Do it.

If I had gone to the Vale as the Elder Brother asked. . . This hedge knight could count himself unfathomably lucky, for the time being, that Sandor hadn't. If I was there, I would have ripped his cock and balls off and made him eat them raw. But he hadn't been. You dog. You utter useless dog.

At last, Sandor found his voice. "And you poncing bloody cunts just let him ride off with her?"

"Of course we didn't," the first one snapped. Nothing was like to insult a religious crusader more than the suggestion that he was a woman. "As soon as we realized she was gone, the Elder Brother sent the other two of our number to track her down and rescue her, while we were to ride for King's Landing with all speed. Your interference will neither be needed nor appreciated, Clegane. Either go kill your demon brother, or crawl back to the Quiet Isle and leave whole men, godly men, to handle this affair properly."

Not a broken, bitter, burned bastard, you mean? He had always been hideously aware of who he was, what he was. But he could just as well stop breathing rather than turn his back now.

You're the gods' greatest fool, dog. First the bloody wolf bitch and now the little bird. What did it say of him that he knew what utter, consummate lunacy it was, and yet he still went ahead and did it?

With no further remarks, Sandor lurched about and limped back to Stranger. He did not even care what the news was. Hopefully it was good and scandalous, get the Faith's smallclothes in a knot.
long enough so that the queen's trial was pushed back a moon's turn or two. He didn't need long. Only long enough to make Ser Shadrich eat his vitals for breakfast, and see her face once more. So she can curse you for the mongrel you are, and run. He wouldn't blame her. Perhaps I can't take on my bloody brother just yet, but I think I can manage some pissant hedge knight.

"Where are you going, Clegane?" one of the Sons said, as he mounted up. "You'd best not be thinking – "

"To hell." Sandor snapped the reins across Stranger's nose. "I'm sure I'll see you there." And with that he galloped past, kicking up the fresh snow, and turned his face to the north. He did not once look back.
Val

The snow had now been falling for over a fortnight. Some days it was only a light, lacy dusting, others it dumped out of the heavens like the smiting of an angry winter god, but it never stopped entirely. The crows had shoveled, stoked, and chinked unceasingly, but the cold still found its way in. Fires in hearths were apt to be blown out with a gust of wind down the chimney, and even in the King's Tower, with its stout stone walls and studded oaken doors, Val could see her breath in the air more often than not. Rather than the bed, she had taken to sleeping under a pile of furs on the floor, shivering and drifting through murky half-dreams. *I am going mad in here.* Wildlings were not meant for cages.

When she looked out her window, she could still see black brothers in the courtyard, but fewer every day. If Bowen Marsh was to order his men to dig out the castle all the time, they'd be doing nothing else, and they were increasingly driven underground to the wormways. But Marsh, with his usual artlessness, had been quick to emphasize that the wormways were *only* for crows; he didn't want the wildlings to know anything additional about Castle Black's defenses.

Almost every wildling who could still ride, walk, or crawl had departed, gone to squat in the fortresses along the Wall or south to fight with Tormund Giantsbane and Soren Shieldbreaker at Winterfell, but some who were too dense or too stubborn to leave remained, along with countless old women, wounded men, children, and babes. Marsh had done his utmost to banish them to Mole's Town or anywhere else, but they kept drifting back, and last night a one-eyed spearwife had put a knife through the arm of a black brother who tried to stop her. The spearwife had been thrown in an ice cell, the black brother was already starting a fever, and nobody had a thought to spare for him; they were too busy trying to stop the rescue attempts by the other wildlings.

Val wasn't sure how much longer she could stand this. The sole saving grace was that at least there had been no more talk of marrying her to a kneeler, not after her last prospective bridegroom had been dismembered by the giant. She'd given Leathers a treat to take to Wun Wun, after that service. But the chambers a few stairways above her were still occupied by Queen Selyse and the princess, the unclean child with her grey stony face, and the queen had grown so fearful for her safety that she had a double garrison of guards posted on the King's Tower doors day and night. Unless Val proposed to learn to fly, or uncover a hundred-foot-long rope, there was no way she would get past them. And the red priestess had already warned her of the consequences of attempting to slip the noose again. *There is no way through the Wall now,* she'd said. *And it is best that there is not. The dark is rising. It will be here very soon.*

Mad and dangerous the red priestess might be, but she was not wrong about that. Val could feel it in her bones. Tonight she had hammered on the door of her gaol for an hour, screaming for a crow to come and take her to Bowen Marsh at once, but when one finally appeared, it was Sweet Donnel Hill, the pretty boy with his yellow curls and red lips and winsome smiles. He told her that if it was a man she needed, he'd be happy to help, but he feared losing his cock. He'd heard that wildling women were known to bite them off and roast them for delicacies.

*Stupid, this one, either half or twice as stupid as the others.* "Take me to Bowen Marsh," she ordered. "I don't care what ser pomegranate is doing! Take me! Now!"

Sweet Donnel only gave her a disgusted look. "I don't know where you get off, woman. Just because you got long hair and lovely eyes and truly remarkable teats, you think you can order the rest of us around when you haven't done nothing we wanted?" He took a step forward and grabbed her wrist.
She ripped it free and hit him across the face. "Touch me again, kneeler, you won't have anything to want with."

"Savage little wench." He took another step. He was wearing both a longsword and a poniard, while she was permitted no weapons. "It's past time you learned to respect your betters, now that you're not in the wilderness no more. Lord Snow was too good to you by half, letting you have this place, never throwing you out with the rest of your sort like he should – or was that it? It was, wasn't it? He must have been sneaking up here to fuck you every night. You going to whelp a little Snow, slut? Seems we have enough of that stuff around here just now. But once a man's gotten a taste for wildling cunt, apparently, there's nothing else that can satisfy it. I'm of a mind to find out, and if you don't want to be thrown in an ice cell yourself, princess, you'll oblige me." He seized her, this time by the throat.

"Crow," a voice said from the doorway. "If you're not leaving, it'll be you that gets thrown in that cell."

Startled, Sweet Donnel let go of her and took a quick step backwards, before looking around and realizing that the intruder was the short, squat, fur-clad form of Alysane Mormont. He brayed an incredulous laugh. "What in seven hells is that?"

"It doesn't make matter what I am," the She-Bear said. "You'll be going. Or else." Her hand moved, revealing her grip on the haft of a bone-hilted knife.

Taken off guard, Sweet Donnel changed tack. "The both of you are cruel as woe, depriving a man of comfort on a night as cold as this. You must be tired of this solitude, this imprisonment. Be good to me, princess. I'll see to it that you speak to Marsh. I'll see to it that you're let out."

"For where? Your barracks? You forgot about those vows of yours? You think I'd ever warm your bed? You best make do with thoughts of your mother."

The appealing smile fell off Sweet Donnel's face. "Fine then. You can rot in here, for all I bloody care. And you can forget about talking to Marsh, too." He moved for the door.

"Your own heads be it, crow," Val shouted after him. He was foolish and blind and worse, but it was more than him that was at stake, even more than the black brothers and the Wall, even more than her own people. "Can't you see what's happening?"

"Of course. It's snowing. I'm not bloody blind." Sweet Donnel banged the door open, just in time to reveal one of the queen's men standing outside.

"Her Grace wishes me to enquire whether or not the wildling girl's ungodly racket is now at an end," the kneeler said coldly. "She says that it was better befitting an animal, and that Princess Shireen was scared by all the shouting and banging. If the girl wishes to continue, Her Grace kindly requests that she do it in the privacy of a cellar somewhere."

Sweet Donnel leered at Val. "See. I'm not the only one who'll be throwing you in the dungeons, if your manners don't get a sight better. Good night, princess." With that, he sauntered away down the stairs.

"I repeat," the queen's man said. Kneelers had never had an outstanding sense of humor, and Selyse Baratheon's creatures were worse than most. "Are you through with your howling and pounding?"

"I am," Val said, as cold as he was. "You may go."
The man bowed and retreated, leaving her alone with the She-Bear. "What was that about?"
Alysane asked, with her customary bluntness. "It wasn't only Shireen you scared. Lady Arya was
crying too."

A cold finger of guilt touched Val's neck, mixed with pity and anger both. She was about to say
that Lady Arya was always crying, that she had never met a girl who cried so much, but she had
seen the scars on her back when Alysane helped her undress for her bath last night. Val had also
never met a girl who washed so much, almost obsessively, causing the black brothers no end of
trouble to heat the cauldrons of water in the kitchens and haul it slopping up the steps. But when
she'd tried to suggest to Alysane that Lady Arya occupy her time in some other fashion, the She-
Bear had given her a stony look. "The girl was wed to the Bastard of Bolton," she said. "Small
wonder she can't scrub his touch off her."

I know about monsters. Yet Lord Snow had spoken of his little sister's tenacious spirit and fierce
independence, and it seemed strange to Val that this girl would do nothing but shake and cower all
the time, no matter who she'd been wed to. Part of her considered Lady Arya to be as unclean as
Shireen, yet somehow she had not gotten around to saying so. The girl was terrified of any male
company, even Satin's; the dark-eyed squire was the only one who visited them with any
regularity, who cared if they were eating well or if they were warm enough. They weren't, but no
one was these days.

And Satin has much else on his mind, too. He had made one visit in private, to ask Val if she'd
again glimpsed the white wolf. When Val said that she had not, Satin cursed and hit the wall. "I
followed the red priestess yestereve," he confessed breathlessly. "There's still a passage left under
the Wall, not large enough for an army, but big enough for her. It leads into the Wall itself, I lost
track of her, I didn't dare to follow her too closely... but there's a cell down there, in some kind of
den... I heard her talking to someone, and..." He hesitated, looking at her as if terrified she was
going to call him mad. "She said, Lord Snow. And that only death could pay for life. And that he
must think of his brothers, and he must burn. I don't remember it all."

"That is enough. You were foolish."

"I know." Satin looked wretched. "I shouldn't have, but I... I cried out for him, I thought he might
hear me, but I only heard something falling, and then she emerged, I didn't want her to see me, so I
ran, but... there was blood on her hands. There was, I swear it."

"I believe you." Val's stomach shrunk to a small, cold fist. "So even if Jon Snow was not dead
before, he is now?"

Satin nodded wordlessly.

"That is so?" Val said. "Then we must kill her."

"Shhh!" Satin hissed, looking panicked. "The red woman, she... she always knows when someone
means her harm, she sees it... she's impervious to poison, she knows of hidden knives..."

"Then she is as unnatural as the Others. She must die. Find a way, or we have no more to say to
each other."

Shame-faced, Satin fled. Later, Val had regretted speaking to him so ungently; he was one of the
few, crow or queen's man, who treated her like a person, and not a prize, a piece of meat, or a
witless animal. He cared about their well-being, had tried to come to her for counsel, and had
risked his life to follow Melisandre down into the ice warrens. Still, she had to put aside these soft
southerner emotions. There was no leisure for that now.
We still have the monster. Val had not wanted to think about it, which surprised her. The babe was no kin to her; her sister Dalla's son had been sent south with fat Samwell Tarly and the wildling girl Gilly, who had been the late Craster's daughter and wife. It was Gilly's bastard boy who'd been left here, posing as Mance Rayder's son. Another attempt to save something from the red woman's greedy clutches. And of late, Val had begun to suspect that Melisandre knew about the subterfuge too. But still. The reason Gilly had had to escape Craster's Keep, the reason there'd been her baby to switch with Dalla's, was because it had been a boy. And while Craster had many daughters and wives – nineteen, when he'd been murdered by the crows fleeing the Fist of the First Men – he had no sons. No boys of any kind. He gave the boys as an offering to the white gods of the wood. And it must have worked. Craster and his wives and chickens and pigs and onions and shit had lived in his longhall north of the Wall for years and years, and none of them had been carried off by the Others.

If I could get hold of him... But the gate had been sealed, and there was no other way through the Wall. The only other option would be to take him up to the top and drop him seven hundred feet into the snows below. And even if the boy was a bastard born of incest, Craster's blood and not hers, some part of Val still shrank at the idea. And she would have to be mad herself to think that the white walkers, after biding their time for thousands of years, would be content with such a niggardly sacrifice. It was only a desperate hope, a fool's hope, and Lord Snow had instructed her firmly to see that the babe came to no harm. "The boy is dear to Gilly, Gilly is dear to Sam, and Sam is dear to me," he'd said, fixing her with those cold grey eyes of his. "I will not ask you to love him, but I do ask that you keep that in mind."

Now, Val sighed as she followed the She-Bear into the bedchamber. She was wishing more every day that Jon hadn't been murdered – though whether by Bowen Marsh or by Melisandre was now uncertain – but she was irritated with herself for it; wishing was never known to return the dead to life. We see too damned much of that sort of thing around here anyway. And if it was, it wasn't Jon Snow she would charm back, but her sister Dalla. The two of them had survived a rugged and brutal childhood in the foothills of the Frostfangs by always relying on each other, and Val missed her more than she could say. Though at this rate, it would be resurrecting her only to tell her that Mance is hung in a crow cage in Winterfell, that their babe has gone south with another woman, and the Others draw very close now. It would be kinder to just kill her again.

Lady Arya was huddled under the quilts in the trundle bed that she and Alysane shared. From the looks of her, she had been crying again. "What's wrong?" she whispered. "I heard shouting."

The She-Bear shot a recriminatory look at Val. "The wildling lass wanted to speak to the Lord Commander."

"Oh. I... it... frightened me."

"That's past and done, child," Alysane said. "Three-Finger Hobb sent up a mutton stew for you, he says you need to be eating more. Come on out of that bed and sit here by the hearth. It's warm. I'll fetch you a good bowl and some bread."

Lady Arya hesitated, her big brown eyes looking hollower than ever in the wraithlike shadows of her face. "I'm not hungry."

"Of course you're hungry."

"My stomach... it's in knots, I couldn't..."

"Come on." Alysane lifted the lid from the pot, and a heavenly smell drifted through the room. "Just a bite, now."
"Best do it, girl," Val said. "No sense wasting food. You don't know if there will be any on the morrow."

Still Lady Arya looked as if she wanted to dive back under the covers, but finally pushed them down. She swung one leg over the side of the bed, then the other, then tottered to her feet. She still moved slowly and clumsily; she'd suffered a broken rib when she and the turncloak leapt into the snow from the top of Winterfell's battlements. And that was when Val and Alysane noticed the spreading crimson stain on the crotch of her nightdress.

"Child," the She-Bear said. "You come over and I'll clean you up."

"What?" Lady Arya flinched, clapping her arms across herself. "Where?" She looked around, looked down, and saw the blood. She stared at it. Then she burst into tears.

Val was exasperated. "It's just your moon blood, girl. I'll get a cloth. Stop wailing, otherwise the kneeler queen will be worrying at our heels again."

Alysane gave her a sharp look. "Of course she knows it's her moon blood. That's why she's crying. It finally proves that she's not with child by the Bastard of Bolton."

"Oh." Val had to admit, she hadn't thought of it that way. Morbid curiosity made her ask. "Is he so bad as all that?"

Lady Arya's face was a mask of fear. "I... he... no, Ramsay Bolton is my trueborn lord and husband, the rightful Lord of Winterfell and the Dreadfort... and I... I love him with all my heart. . ."

"There's nobody here you need lie to anymore," Alysane tidied the girl's dark brown hair out of her eyes. There was a blotchy black patch where her nose had been frostbitten, which still might come off. "You tell us both. Do it, now."

"He..." Lady Arya stared at them, dazed, like a deer in a trap. "Sometimes he... would want me to bring him off with... with my mouth and my hands... and his... his dogs... and lick it up... and other times he wanted... wanted the dog to... to... while he watched..."

Alysane swore softly. Val was thinking she'd rather not have asked. "You should have been born a wildling, girl," she said. "Then you could have cut his throat for him, and his tongue, and his balls. But that's over now, done. That turncloak there rescued you, and – "

"Theon," Lady Arya whispered. "His name is Theon. He's good, he was so brave, he saved me, he was Lord Ramsay's Reek... but he saved me. And now he's for Lord Stannis' fires, he saved me but he's going to die still, they'll burn him, and I won't ever see him again." She began to sob.

"Come on, now." Val was afraid of being flooded out if this kept up. "You're Arya Stark. You are the north. Your brothers died right brave, you can be brave too. Hush. Stop crying. Enough."

Yet instead of this impelling the girl to find some hidden steel within her, it seemed to undo her completely. She collapsed to the floor in her bloody nightgown, sobbing so hard that she started to retch, until the She-Bear gruffly scooped her up and began to rock her. Val stood there uselessly, wondering what on earth she could do.

"What's the thorn in there, child?" Alysane Mormont asked at last, when some of Lady Arya's gasping crying had subsided. "What's that the lass said?"

"I..." Lady Arya lifted red, heartbroken eyes. "I'm... not... Arya... Stark."

"I..."
The silence following this pronouncement was complete. It was so absurd that Val felt certain she had misheard. That wasn't even possible, it couldn't be. Fear for his little sister was what had driven Jon Snow to arrange the rescue, why he'd been planning to leave Castle Black on the night he was murdered, what ended Mance up in that crow cage. Everything hinged on this, everything. And if the entire time they had been suffering and flailing and bleeding for an impostor...

"Why you little..." Val growled, and took a step forward.

"You stop right there," the She-Bear growled right back, looking more like her nickname than ever. "Whoever the girl is, this isn't her fault. None of it. You..." She glanced back at not-Lady Arya, as if also hoping for an eleventh-hour retraction. "You're not?"

"No," the girl gasped. "No, I'm... I'm Jeyne, Jeyne Poole, my father was Vayon Poole, he was the steward, the steward at Winterfell. Sansa was my friend, we used to eat lemon cakes and gossip... they killed Lord Stark's household in King's Landing, they took me away... Littlefinger kept me, I mean Lord Baelish, he sent me to one of his brothels for t-training, I was told... told I would be sent north to marry R-Ramsay, I had to be Arya, Theon said that too, he said I always had to be Arya or they'd just throw me aside as a whore, leave me to die... they said I'd lose part of my nose, but he said a hundred men would still want to marry me if I was heiress to Winterfell, but I'm not, I'm Jeyne, I don't want to marry anyone but Theon now, I'm not Arya, Arya's dead. She's dead."

Alysane raised a hand to her face, then dropped it. "Gods," she said at last, in the mother of all understatements.

_Could be it's a good thing Jon is dead too, Val thought. Finding this out would kill him all over again. And the red witch has lied once more, has tricked us all into acting on her shadows, her might-bes and never-wases. It made her blood boil. Not even you can stand against the Others, Lady Melisandre. Your reckoning might be the most deserved of all._

At last, by much coaxing and cajoling, Alysane managed to get Jeyne calmed down, and sat her by the fire with a bowl of mutton stew. She combed Jeyne's thick dark locks through her fingers as the girl ate, and braided it up neatly. "You're a good girl," she said. "Neither me or Lady Val, we won't be telling your secret. You're safe here now. You're far away from all that. Now, let me get you a clean shift, and we'll be changing the linens on the bed. Then you --"

_Ahoaaaaa.

"What was that?" The She-Bear's demeanor changed immediately. She clambered to her feet, looking around; the sound was faint and distant, coming from outside the window and well above. _Coming from the top of the Wall._ "That sounded like a horn. Sentinels' horn. One blast for rangers returning, but there haven't been no rangers. It can't --"

_Ahoaaaaa.

"Two for wildlings," Alysane counted. "But there can't be... they came through... Lady Val, they all came through, didn't they?"

_They did._ Val's stomach turned to ice water. "Change and go to bed," she said to Jeyne. "Alysane, you'll go with me."

The She-Bear scowled suspiciously at her. "And what will we be doing there, out in the cold and the night? I'm a fair hand with a crossbow, it's true, but --"

_Ahoaaaaa.

"They killed Lady Arya, Val. They killed her. And they're going to kill me next."

"No," the She-Bear growled, "I won't let that happen."

Alysane and Val exchanged a look. They opened their mouths, then shut them.

"Snow, child," Alysane said at last. "Three is for snow. Now, you go to bed. You go like a good girl."

"Yes," Jeyne whispered. "I'm a good girl. I am. I'll go."

Val's stomach was falling past her foot. "Bar the door when we're gone," she said. "Keep the fire stoked. The... the storm will be bad tonight."

"I will," Jeyne said again. "I'll... you'll come back? I... I'll sleep, but I don't... I'll have terrible dreams, Alysane, the She-Bear, she..."

Yes, child, Val thought. You will have terrible dreams. And then you'll find that they are no dreams, and that you will never wake.

And so, with that last, unholy horn-blast still shuddering the foundations of the earth, she fled.
Edmure

Edmure Tully had never hated a place in his life as much as he hated Casterly Rock. To look at it, one would not have imagined that to be the case. He had his own quarters, a comfortable and expansive suite with a solar, bedchamber, and private courtyard, and in the still of the mornings he could hear the waves of the Sunset Sea beating against the cliffs a hundred feet below. Just to the south lay the bustling harbor of Lannisport, a lovely walled city with cobbled streets, stone towers, and countless merchants selling fine goldwork, and if he was so inclined, he could call a guardsman and enjoy a ride through it. But he never did. I will give them no groat of my money, even if it is already theirs. He had been provisioned an allowance of fifty silver stags a month for his personal expenses, and that was more than enough. Anything else he needed, a servant would bring at once. He slept in a featherbed with a heavy counterpane and curtains to keep out the chill, and he ate three square meals a day. And he hated it. He hated all of it.

I almost wish I was back on my gallows. As torturous as it had been to pass every day on the scaffold with the noose chafing welts on his neck, knowing that Ser Ryman was too stupid or too gutless to actually hang him while Riverrun held out, at least he had known exactly where he stood. Literally. And now I have become, again literally, a fish out of water.

He hated the arrogant looks, mingled with well-bred pity and dislike, and the way the gossipers would always pretend not to have seen him. The hypocrisy of their condescension grated on him still more – he did not think the Lannisters had any shred of moral superiority to enjoy, not with the way their fortunes were taking similar disastrous downward arcs. Casterly Rock was a house without a master; Lord Tywin's putrid corpse had been interred in the Hall of Heroes after arriving from King's Landing, which Edmure considered a rather grandiose resting place for a man who'd been murdered on his privy by a dwarf. Ser Kevan was dead as well, Queen Cersei under house arrest in the Red Keep, and Ser Jaime not heard from in weeks. As for the Imp, nobody ever spoke his name.

I suppose eventually I'll get used to it. After all, it's only for life. Sometimes Edmure wondered what sort of existence he could ever have, if he would remember what he was and who he was. Would his blood still run mud-red and cerulean blue, or would he turn into every other sort of toady who spent his life on a silken leash, praising his masters for their goodness and their strength? No man can truly become a slave but that he chooses so. The only, only reason Edmure had been far happier than he should have been as he left for Casterly Rock was because he knew that his uncle and Jeyne Westerling were safe away. He'd watched them scrupulously garrison her little sister Elenya with guards, intent that the Young Wolf's queen not elude their clutches, and wanted to laugh in their faces. The only worthwhile thing I've ever done, but gods, it was a good one.

Edmure had always been the baby. Arriving nine years after Catelyn and seven years after Lysa, when Lord Hoster had begun to despair of having a male heir, his birth had been greeted with unanimous rejoicing. When his mother died not two years later, and the second son with her, he became even more precious. While his sisters dutifully prepared to mind their manners and take other men's names, he was allowed leave to behave nearly as he wished. When he did take the game too far, it was usually Utherydes Wayn or Desmond Grell who rebuked him, not the doting Lord Hoster. But he was a charming and good-hearted lad, if occasionally hot-headed, and malice was not part of his nature, so forgiveness always followed swiftly. The only man with whom he had ended up on permanent bad terms was that bloody singer. Floppy fish, my arse. It still scorched Edmure to think about. How in seven hells had Ser Jaime tricked up the very man to serenade him with The Rains of Castamere, to make sure he knew very well what would happen if he did not
order Riverrun to surrender? I'll strangle you one day, Kingslayer. I have two good hands, and you only have one.

Yet as Edmure had grown older, he became increasingly aware of – and increasingly dissatisfied with – how little his life actually amounted to. His sisters had been married to Ned Stark and Jon Arryn and become great ladies in their own rights, but he was still loitering about Riverrun, drinking and wenching and watching his father fall into the grip of an illness that ultimately robbed him of memory and dignity as well as life. When the war began and Jaime Lannister was imprisoned in their dungeons, Edmure had hoped that this would give him the opportunity to prove himself; his first attempt to meet the Kingslayer sword to sword had ended up with Robb having to rescue him. But then his own sister Catelyn had released Lannister, taking the word of a man with shit for honor, and the men Edmure sent to recapture him had come slinking back in ignominious failure.

Then he thought he had his shining moment of triumph, beyond all doubt, when he defended the Stone Mill crossing against Gregor Clegane, annihilating any man in Lannister colors who managed to reach the western bank of the Red Fork. Ser Addam Marbrand was repudiated thrice, Lord Lefford drowned, Strongboar Crakehall taken captive – the victory had looked to be complete. Only for Edmure to be told later that he had in fact inadvertently hamstrung the entire campaign. The Lannisters were supposed to cross, Ser Brynden and Robb informed him angrily, so they would be trapped between the two armies, Stark and Tully. He would have helped them just as much if he'd attacked Robb's forces himself.

And it was to make amends that I agreed to marry Roslin, and because of that, no wedding in Westeros will ever be looked at the same way again. It still baffled Edmure that he and his wife had become fond of each other, considering the unfathomable way in which they had come together. During the consummation, he'd been as gentle with her as he possibly could, and didn't understand why she kept crying. Or why she began to cry harder when they were finished, and begged him to forgive her. He was just telling her that she had nothing to be sorry for, when the bedchamber door burst open and half a dozen armored Freys marched in, grinning.

Edmure had bolted upright angrily at the intrusion, telling them that he had a right to expect privacy in his own marriage bed, even under the spectacularly peevious Lord Walder's roof. But they only grinned wider. And then – even now, his stomach turned over at the memory – as Roslin sobbed and screamed and almost fainted, they reached behind them and produced the severed head of his nephew. They dropped it on the bed, and it rolled, blood leaking from the stump of its neck, as Edmure stared into Robb's stunned, empty blue eyes with a horror that no nightmare could ever even hope to touch.

Everything after that was a blur.

His subsequent imprisonment and the siege of Riverrun felt almost trivial by comparison. He had nothing to nourish him but his hatred, and that kept him going once the numbness wore off. When the Freys mockingly informed him that Roslin was pregnant, and congratulated him on his prowess at doing the deed while the Stark cause went down in flames around him, he had thrown himself at Black Walder and made a deadly serious attempt to tear out his throat with his bare hands. But the only thing he had gotten out of it was an almighty clout that knocked him senseless for the better part of an hour. The next day was his first on the gallows.

And now, Casterly Rock. The only way Edmure could even get to sleep at night was by fantasizing about murdering his captors, inch by inch. Yet while the anger still had him in its teeth and claws, the grief followed as well, and the love. He had put the cloak of his protection around Roslin's shoulders, and even considering the mockery her father had made of the protection of guest right,
he had to keep his word. She carried his child. If it was a boy, his life would hold less value, but he
couldn't see how it held so much to begin with. When it is born, boy or girl, it and Roslin will come
to live with me here. Or so Ser Jaime had promised, but Edmure would grow wings from his arse
before he put any trust in a Lannister's oath. Or a Frey's, or a Bolton's. He hated them all, so much
that it sometimes made him physically sick.

Today, he had woken before the dawn again, and went to walk in the courtyard, watching the sun
climb up from behind the great bulwark of the Rock. It had frosted again, and hard; the gardens
and the twining vines had gone dry and dead, and, everything was varnished in a delicate sheen.
Edmure's breath made misty billows in the air, and he sat to catch his breath on the lip of the
empty stone fountain. He wondered where his uncle and Jeyne were now. If the gods were good –
which they never were – then the two of them were safe with Howland Reed, and Jeyne knew
conclusively that she was carrying a little wolf pup. But even if she is, the succession to the north is
wide open. So we can have another war to sort that out. Robert Baratheon's death had
demonstrated to even the densest citizen of the Seven Kingdoms of the perils of expiring without
an adult, unquestionably legitimate male heir.

But Edmure did not want to think about politics any more. Roslin, Jeyne, and the Blackfish were in
fact the only things keeping him from getting up and hurling himself off the cliff right now. If I
wasn't such a coward, I would have done it already. As his title, Lord of Riverrun, no longer meant
anything whatsoever, it wasn't as if he had lands or vassals he needed to worry about abandoning.
Aye, and Roslin will likely have a boy, because that's the sort of jest the gods would find terribly
amusing. And then the Lannisters will have no use for me, and will think of some appropriately
terrible way to get rid of me anyway. It's best that I end it on my terms.

Now that the idea had been planted in his head, it was quickly acquiring a ghoulish romance. He
got up and crossed the courtyard, boosting himself onto the merlon and gazing down at the rock-
strewn shore far below. Vertigo and cold air pulled seductively at him. The impact would almost
surely break his neck, and the tide would wash his body out to sea – he would lie with schools of
fish as his last attendants and mer-children gaming with his bones, as a Tully should. End this. End
it now.

Edmure inched forward on the merlon. His hand slipped out over open air, and he instinctively
snatched it back, a surge of adrenaline burning through him. He stared at the drop, suddenly aware
that the prospect was considerably more nerve-wracking than it had been a moment ago. But no, he
had to do it. Jeyne and the Blackfish were far beyond anything else he could do for them, and as
for Roslin . . she would grieve, undoubtedly, and it was certainly unkind to make her entire
marriage a farce from beginning to end. But she deserved a better life than the one she'd have as a
gentle prisoner here with him, the reminder of their demons staring them in the face every day.

Edmure sat down and swung both legs over the side. Now all he needed to do was push off, and
that was it. It would be over quickly. Unwillingly, he thought of his sister Lysa, who had been
murdered by some singer chucking her out the Moon Door. Was it a long way to fall? Were you
afraid? What did you think, or could you even, as the great white mountain rushed up to catch
you?

Edmure closed his eyes and began to pray the Invocation of the Seven, more commonly done by a
septon at an individual's deathbed. "Father, judge me justly. Mother, grant me mercy. Warrior,
defend my soul. Maiden, give me the innocence I have lost. Smith, carry me to the halls of summer.
Crone, cut the thread of my fate and grant me the wisdom of the dead. Stranger – "

"My lord? Lord Edmure?"
Startled, Edmure's eyes flashed open before he could utter the last stanza of the prayer – *Stranger, wrap me in your dark wings, and may your sleep come soft and gently.* He turned just in time to see an alarmed-looking maidservant, hovering at the periphery of the courtyard. Annoyed at being interrupted at such a pivotal moment, he snapped, "Aye?"

"I... you'll come down from there, won't you?" The girl looked at him nervously. "There's... there's a visitor. Ser Addam Marbrand, my lord."

If Edmure had to suffer the intrusions of any Lannister lapdog, he was more willing for it to be Ser Addam than another; he had always found the tall copper-haired knight to be chivalrous, courteous, and conscientious, moderate in temper and action. *Then again, among the Lannisters, that is akin to saying that one whore has more morality than another.* Grudgingly, he slid down from the merlon and followed her across the courtyard. *I can always kill myself later.*

Sure enough, Ser Addam was waiting when the maidservant showed him into his rooms. After she had left, he inclined his head. "Lord Edmure. I apologize for disturbing you at this early hour."

"No matter," Edmure said. "I was awake." *I should be shouting at him. Something.* Ser Addam was not responsible for the indignities of his imprisonment, but he was conveniently at hand – and also wearing a longsword. His cloak was damp with snow, and more flakes were melting in his long hair. It was that which first wakened Edmure's suspicion. *A man does not leave a warm bed and journey all the way here without bloody good reason.* After the search parties under Ser Addam's command had failed to find the Blackfish, he had returned to his family's seat of Ashemark, rather than his post as Lord Commander of the City Watch in King's Landing (apparently he had loathed it heartily, the City Watch being the den of vipers and lickspittles that it was). And Ashemark to Casterly Rock was not a ride that could be made in a day; Ser Addam was furtherly unlikely to have ventured here on a lark. *Something is wrong. Very wrong.*

"Sit, if you would," Ser Addam said. "Have you broken your fast?"

"I'm not hungry." Edmure had a feeling he might not want to have anything to do with food, once this confrontation had run its course.

"Very well." Ser Addam folded himself into the window seat, but Edmure obstinately remained standing. There passed a hideously uncomfortable several moments, until Ser Addam must have finally seen that Edmure wasn't about to give him any help. "My lord," he said. "I paid a call at the Crag this last fortnight."

"Did you?"

"I did. As you know, it is not far from Ashemark, and I was acquainted with the Westerlings in my youth. I was saddened to hear of Ser Raynald's demise at the Red Wedding, and of Lady Jeyne's grief for her husband. So I thought it only mannerly to visit them, to see how they were settling back in after all the disruptions. Only..."

"Aye?" Edmure was beginning to gain a hideous sense of where this might be going.

"Only to find," Ser Addam said evasively, "that Lady Jeyne's grief might not have been as genuine as I thought. Oh, I've no reason to doubt that she mourns the Young Wolf. She has a sweet heart. But when Jaime met the girl in Riverrun and ordered her sent her back to her father at the Crag, I was already afield, leading the search for your uncle. It was not until I saw her just recently that I had reason to suspect anything amiss."

"Oh?" Edmure attempted to look surprised.
"Aye." Ser Addam hesitated. "My lord, I must be frank. The girl I met at the Crag was not Jeyne Westerling. It was her little sister. The girls have always looked alike, it is true, but my questions about Elenya were avoided, deflected, or ignored. And since you were allowed back into Riverrun prior to ordering it to surrender – an interlude which you used to secretly liberate your uncle – I can only think that you know where the real Jeyne is too."

Edmure said nothing.

"My lord," Ser Addam repeated, less patiently. "You know what having the Young Wolf's widow safely in custody means for the future of the war, and the fight for the north. You know what the terms – "

"The Lannister terms."

Ser Addam exhaled sharply through his nose. "Edmure," he said instead. "My lord of Tully. I cannot blame you for your hatred. I would feel the same, in your position. But you were commanded to surrender the girl, and you did not. By any man's metric, that is not only a crime, but a serious one."

"Prove it," Edmure said flippanly.

"I have all the proof I need at the Crag," Marbrand snapped, temper sparking at last. "If I ask Lord Gawen to produce both girls on the instant, give him a writ signed by King Tommen demanding it – and tell him that the pardons issued to the Westerling family by the Iron Throne may be at stake – he will, I assure you, be unable to do it. Jeyne got away with your uncle, my lord, and don't try to tell me any differently. Where did they go?"

"I don't know," said Edmure. "Go ahead and kill me."

Ser Addam looked at him lividly. "Much as the idea has its attractions, I fear I must decline. I am no Frey."

Edmure shrugged. He almost wanted to laugh. What could Marbrand threaten him with? "Have you shared your concerns with – I'm afraid I don't know quite who it would be, these days?"

"I have sent a letter to King's Landing, informing the small council of my suspicions," Marbrand admitted. "As yet, I have received no reply. Likely they have larger issues at hand just the moment. I do not know if you heard, but Storm's End fell last week."

Edmure hadn't heard, in fact. It was impossible to think of Storm's End being taken; hence its very name. "What?" he blurted out, too surprised to dissemble. "To who?" Last he'd heard, Mace Tyrell had abandoned the effort to reclaim it for Tommen after his daughter Margaery was arrested by the Faith, and the fortress continued to hold stoutly out for Stannis.

Ser Addam paused again. "To the pretender calling himself Aegon Targaryen. It was a slaughter nearly on the order of Dragonstone. There is no denying the pretender's courage, but he spent the Golden Company's blood as if it was mud, not gold. Lord Stannis remains unaccounted for in the north, and winter is setting in there with teeth and claws, so it might be that we shall never hear him from again."

"Not bloody likely." Even if he had to crawl on hands and knees, Stannis Baratheon would make it back.

"Be that as it may," Ser Addam said crisply. "The appearance of a Targaryen pretender on one hand, and the Young Wolf's widow on the other, would once and for all break the Seven
Kingdoms apart. The south burns, the north freezes. And my lord, there are... tales."

"What tales?"

"The sort that I wish could be dismissed as campfire ghost stories." Ser Addam looked at him straight. "And lest you think I exaggerate, Jaime knew how important Jeyne Westerling was. He was willing to have her killed sooner than risk her escaping."

"Coming from the Kingslayer, that surprises me exactly not at all."

"Jaime has been my friend since childhood," Marbrand said quietly, "and contrary to all appearances, he has never been a monster. He's gone missing as well too, you know. He vanished from the village of Pennytree in the riverlands, and hasn't been heard from since. So if it's revenge you want to salve your heart, there's that."

Edmure shrugged again. "So," he said. "Let me ascertain whether I am following you. You are asking me to do a kindness, to help recapture my nephew's wife and my own queen, in order to hold the poor broken realm together?"

"If you insist on putting it like that," said Ser Addam, "yes."

Edmure laughed. He couldn't hold it back this time. "Bugger you," he said. "Bugger you. How do you propose to make me obey? What can you possibly take from me that you haven't taken? Kill my wife, would that be it? Launch my son from a catapult? Your precious Jaime threatened that already. You sent my household into exile – Ser Desmond Grell, my master-at-arms, he was old when I was born and you bloody Lannisters sent him to the bloody Wall. Lord Tywin plotted to make my wedding infamous from coast to coast, to murder my nephew, my sister, and all their companions. And yet you still seem to think that I somehow owe the poxiest beggar among you a favor. If that's the case, my lord. Kill me. You'll do everyone a favor."

Ser Addam shook his head. "I will not," he said again. "It may interest you to know that I mean no harm to Jeyne. But if you do not come with me, I will be forced to recruit help from elsewhere. Men who will have no such concern for the girl's well-being, or your uncle's." He took a step. "Listen to me. You are still a young man, with much life before you, and I doubt you want to spend it here. If you serve us well in this matter, Jeyne and the very Seven Kingdoms may be saved, and you will no longer be a prisoner."

He has me. Even before Edmure said a word, he knew that that was the case. Ser Addam had offered the one thing he wanted, rather than threatening to take away what he no longer had. I could be free again one day, I could go back to Riverrun, I could raise my sons and daughters and live with my wife in the walls of my own castle. True, it required making the colossal assumption that Ser Addam would keep his word, but he'd recognized himself that Marbrand was made of finer stuff than the others.

He tried to sound neutral, offhand. I must not agree too quickly. I must not show him how much I want this. He had been on the brink of throwing himself from the walls not an hour previously; he was stunned by the reversal of fortune. "I still don't know that I would be of help. I don't know where they went."

"Oh," said Ser Addam. "I think you do."
On the northern horizon, Meereen lay like an open wound, broiling in the midday heat. The stepped pyramids shimmered, the golden domes of the Temple of the Graces flashed like molten sunlight, and even the brown water of the Skahazadhan had turned to glass, though it reeked more pungently of shit than ever. Not that anyone was like to notice. The Yunkish camp was strewn about with corpses, victims of the pale mare, whom nobody had troubled or lived to bury. Feral dogs roamed free, gnawing on brown-stained bones and other, more recognizable extremities. Altogether, the smell would have felled an aurochs.

Inside Brown Ben Plumm's tent, the air was better, but not by much. The Second Sons were all trying to breathe through their mouths, and Jorah thought they would not face much difficulty in convincing the sellsword company to abandon this hell. The question remained very much up in the air, however, as to whether they would then turn their cloaks back to Meereen. Brown Ben had already deserted Daenerys once before, when he heard that she could neither control her dragons nor consent to unleash them against the Yunkai'i, and Jorah, who lay awake nearly every night replaying the memory of his own confrontation with her after his treachery had been unmasked, very much doubted that she would welcome him back with the kiss of peace and a pat on the head. Dany. The thought was with Jorah every morning and every night, a brand more painful than the demon's head that Yezzan zo Qaggaz's overseers had burned into his cheek. I was already ugly enough before, there's no looks to worry about spoiling. No, she would not welcome back either him or Plumm gently, assuming that she lived to do so at all. The gossip from Meereen overflowed with lurid tales of how she had flown away on the back of the black dragon – or fallen, or been burned to death, or assassinated by her new husband, the noble Hizdahr zo Loraq, who as yet balanced atop an ever more teetering rule of the city. And the thought of every moment that that preening bald bastard spent prancing around and styling himself as the Dragon Queen's loving consort made Jorah want to murder something. Preferably Hizdahr.

The big knight shifted his position. Sweat dripped down the scarred flogging welts on his back. While he and the Imp and the dwarf girl were still the property of Yezzan zo Qaggaz, he had been beaten a hundred times for resisting them, for fighting back, the same insubordination that had won him the brand on his cheek. But when he had heard that his queen had remarried, all of the spitfire had gone out of him, all the life. They had whipped him to blood and raw meat afterwards, and he had never felt a thing.

I was a fool to think that she would love me. I was a fool to think that she would take me back. In one rational moment, which had nearly died of loneliness before the next happened along, Jorah had tried to reason with himself that Dany deserved a wealthy, powerful husband, a man who could give her actual armies and land and peace. Not a penniless, ragged, disinherited, branded former slaver and spy, who could offer her not so much as a pot to piss in. Only my protection. My loyalty. My heart. My soul. But what would the queen have need of that for? And if half the tales were true, Daenerys had not kept a cold bed before she married Hizdahr, had been taking her ease of the flesh with that obscene blue-haired sellsword. Naharis. Jorah remembered him. By the time he was done, the Tyroshi would wish that he'd never laid hands on any woman who wasn't the naked golden one on his sword hilt.

I could do it, too. Daario remained a prisoner here in the camp, some looking should turn him up. True, it would be a delicate matter to murder the man while the Yunkish hostages were still trussed up in Meereen, but provoking the city into an open attack on its besiegers would likely break the last feeble remnants of Yunkai's power. Then the Second Sons, if Dany had not returned and
demanded their heads, might feel justified in rejoining their original employers at once.

The one fly in this otherwise very soothing ointment: Jorah very much doubted that King Hizdahr would be in outstanding haste to bestir himself on behalf of an amoral sellsword captain who'd been fucking his wife. We need to get inside Meereen and steal a better hostage, but we can't get inside Meereen until we break Yunkai. And we can't break Yunkai until we persuade Meereen to attack, which we can't do until we get inside Meereen. It almost drove Jorah mad. At this rate, all we can do is hope that the shits get the rest of them before the ghostgrass gets the rest of us.

To achieve even part of this plan, therefore, Jorah was dependent on the others sitting around the table. And seeing as he trusted not one of them further than he could throw them, that was a problem.

He and Brown Ben had known each other back when both were working for Daenerys, but Jorah was not like to forget that Brown Ben had attempted to buy him as a slave – thankfully being outbid by Yezzan – in order to cut off his head and give it to the queen as a wedding gift. (Whether because he thought Dany would genuinely enjoy it, or because he merely wanted to loose a final parting shot, remained unclear.) Kasprio, Ben's second-in-command, and Inkpots, the company paymaster, were more likely to side with Tyrion, who had at least the ability to promise them vast riches when he (theoretically) became Lord of Casterly Rock. And as for the Imp himself, although Jorah could throw him the furthest, he trusted him the least.

Tyrion had saved his life by persuading Qaggaz to buy him as the "bear" for the dwarfs' mummmery, and they were working together (again, theoretically) to get the Second Sons back onto Meereen's side, but Jorah knew the saying as well as anyone. A Lannister always pays his debts. And he had kidnapped Tyrion, dragged him across half the world, been inadvertently responsible for getting them sold into slavery and fetched up in this miserable reeking sty of a Yunkish camp, rather than safe within the walls of Meereen – though considering what Dany was likely to have done to them, or at least him, that was for now a dubious mercy. But the Imp would pay that debt, with interest. If Daenerys does not first. Jorah was unsure who didn't want him dead, rather than those who did. Struggling, as usual in vain, not to see her face in his head, he turned his attention back to the debate.

"No," Brown Ben was saying. "I don't care if the little queen is gone, those monsters will be even worse without her. And I should hope the lot o' you have heard the stories coming from the Windblown. They tried to capture one of them dragons for some Dornish lordling, and the beast roasted him like a harvest-day goose. I'm not going near them again, not for all the gold in our little friend here's shit."

"I believe you're confusing me with my lord father, Plumm," Tyrion Lannister said with a twisted smile. "And I can attest from personal inspection that that particular legend is a grievous fallacy. But as for the Dornish boy, perhaps the dragon was merely curious. Dornish flesh is known to taste most exotic, after all."

"Nobody cares about your whores, Imp," said Kasprio, instantaneously raising Jorah's estimation of him by several notches. "Or where they bloody go, for that matter."

Tyrion raised one brow in mock surprise, but his mismatched eyes were savage. "I don't recall saying anything about that."

"You talk in your sleep," Kasprio informed him. "Don't he, Ben?"

"I've never been after noticing, myself," Brown Ben said shortly, irritated that the conversation had been dragged back to whores when they were attempting to hammer out a plan of action. "And as
commander of this company, I've made my views plenty clear. I'm more n' willing to abandon these mooncalf Yunkai'i who don't know which spear you use for pissing and which for fighting, but I've burned my bridges with the little queen. And our bear here could tell you a certain something about hopin' for her forgiveness once you've wronged her." He shot a cold, challenging look at Jorah. "I've a drop of Targaryen in me, I know how that goes."

"Yes, we all mistook you for Aegon the Conqueror reborn," said Tyrion, which was his favorite rebuff whenever Brown Ben started going on at any length about his purported dragon blood. "But one would think if that was the case, Plumm, you could charm the beasts for us. Or did you piss out that drop with last night's wine?"

To his credit, Brown Ben laughed. _He does laugh often, and well._ It made Jorah mistrust him still more. "Be that as it may," he said. "I've decided we'll go back to Volantis. There'll be the new triarchs to choose soon, there'll be plenty o' work for any sellsword with a sharp blade and a stout heart."

"Which would exclude you then, Ben," said Kasporio.

Brown Ben laughed again, but the merriment never reached his eyes. "I've always said it's better to be old than bold, but if the tigers win the election, there'll be even more. And if so – "

Tyrion cleared his throat.

"Did you have something to say, Lord Lannister?" Plumm asked, with exaggerated courtesy.

"I did, in fact. And that is: While Ser Jorah and I would be delighted to renew our acquaintance with the charming city of Volantis, the tigers and their warmongering ways have not elected a majority to the triarchy for over a hundred years. Which means that while we would have every kind of debauchedly good fun for ten days or so, we'd eventually wake up with the mother of all headaches and realize that the elephants were still in power. Thus meaning we would be back to looking once more for gainful employment."

"Maybe we might, Imp," said Kem, a swaggering young sellsword who'd joined the Second Sons before he was old enough to grow a beard. "As for you, I'm sure the mummers are always hiring."

Tyrion smiled. Or at least, he bared his teeth and pulled back his lips. "Falling off pigs is not the sort of thing a man can grow old doing. Especially not around here. I heard lions are often involved."

Kem feigned surprise. "But that would be you, wouldn't it?"

"Thank you very much, that was precisely the caliber of wit I expected from someone from Flea Bottom. Alas, I am as much able to tame lions as our friend Ben here is able to tame dragons. Now, as I was saying. The elephants will win the triarchy elections in Volantis, and if I never see that place again, it would be too soon. So – "

"You did just say you'd be delighted to see it, Imp," Kem pointed out helpfully.

"That's called sarcasm. Ask Kasporio to explain it to you one day, he'll use smaller words than I will." Tyrion turned to Brown Ben. "May I remind everyone here that the rewards I promised to you – which you will get, due to that saying which I needn't quote at you all again – are contingent upon us rejoicing Meereen. The queen still could return, you know, and if she finds the Second Sons have cleaned out the Yunkai'i, located the Harpy, and maybe decorated the solar and cooked a nice dinner, even her flames might be appeased. Ser Barristan Selmy is the captain of her
Queensguard, and even if he doesn't think the Second Sons are worthy to scrape off his boots, he will be in our debt if we find out once and for all if Hizdahr zo Loraq is a villain or merely a pawn."

"Selmy is an honorable man?" said Kasporio, sounding leery.

"Yes, it's a disease some of us have to suffer with. Not me, fortunately. But if Ser Barristan is half the man I knew, he'll have to put in a good word for us. And Brown Ben, I'm sure you still have all sorts of contacts within Meereen. Rats. Or as a friend of mine used to call them, little birds."

"Where are you going with this, Lannister?"

"I should think it's obvious." Tyrion shrugged. "Yunkai offers us little. Volantis offers us less. Meereen, conversely, offers us the gratitude of the dragon queen... some of us, at any rate." He too shot one of those oblique looks at Jorah. "Unless the Volantene elephants self-immolate before our eyes, or whatever other drastic event it would take for them to lose power, we have no choice but to – "

"We could always kill them," Kem suggested. "The elephants. If we wanted the tigers go to war with the rest of the Free Cities, that'd keep us busy for a – "

Tyrion gave him a wintry smile. "That's a remarkably cynical sentiment even from a sellsword. I used to know this man named Bronn, the two of you would get along famously."

"Enough," Brown Ben interrupted. "The dwarf does have a point. I'll think on it, and don't nobody make no jokes about how I'll strain something. Get out, see if you can find a bit o' bloody shade."

Grumbling, scratching, swearing, and sweating, the Second Sons dispersed. For lack of anything better to do, Jorah followed Tyrion out into the full fetid blast of the camp, but barely noticed it; his stomach had of necessity turned to iron. He scratched at the chafed raw skin where his collar had been. Oftentimes he woke—if he had slept at all—still feeling its weight. A bear there was, a bear, a bear. All black and blue and covered with hair.

"If your lord father was here, he would think this rivaled the Wall for the amount of dead men spotted walking," Tyrion said, as they ducked through the ragged remnants of picket lines. "Or so the tale goes, at any rate."

"Don't talk about my lord father, Imp. Not unless you want me to talk about yours."

"Touché." Tyrion waddled cautiously around something that was too red to be mud and too brown to be blood. "But as I've told you before, I respected the old man and was saddened to hear of his death. Truly."

"Is this the part where you remark on how at least I didn't kill him?"

"Try being a bit more surly, Mormont, I don't think I got your point the first time. And if you keep this up, I won't see any reason to tell you the news I didn't share with our friends in the meeting just now." Tyrion took several large steps backwards, out of Jorah's range. "It's about your maiden fair."

Jorah almost lunged. He restrained himself, barely. "Talk, Imp," he growled. "Or you can join your – "

"– precious father down in hell? You do need to learn a few new withering putdowns, I'm sure you've used that one before. But I didn't want to bring it up before the Sons because it's only rumors. But so far as I know, the tale is this. Khal Jhaqo's khalasar, in the Dothraki sea, has
supposedly captured a silver-haired woman and a bloody big dragon. Well, I don't know if captured is the right word to use in this instance, but it is undoubtedly a dragon. The identity of the woman is up for debate."

"Daenerys," Jorah breathed. "It has to be her. The dragon – the black one, Drogon, its name was Drogon – it wouldn't let them – "

Tyrion eyed him curiously. "I do hope you're not thinking of doing anything stupid. More so than usual, I mean. There's still the Second Sons and – "

"The Others can take the Second Sons."

"There's still me."

"The Others can have you too. Especially you."

"I'm wounded," Tyrion said. "I don't like you, Mormont, and I expect you know that, but we're far from home and we're not among friends. I know you know it as well as I do, especially seeing as you've had prior experience with the Second Sons and their ironclad loyalties, but they'll agree to everything I say so long as the gold is in play, then the instant I give it to them, stab me in the back. Or shoot me in the belly, if Kem ever grasps the concept of irony. And you will notice, I hope, that I was doing everything I could to argue us into Meereen back there."

"I did." Even that was given grudgingly.

"I have no desire to return to King's Landing unless it's on a dragon's back," Tyrion said flatly. "And I can't decide whether I'd want said dragon to roast my sweet sister and my gallant brother to a crisp first, and then eat them, or merely skip the preliminaries and get down to business. My reasons for wanting to join Queen Daenerys may not be as noble as yours, but they're full as valid. And she does have the dragons. Young Griff only has the Golden Company."

"Young Griff," Jorah repeated skeptically. "You've mentioned him before. Who is he?"

"No one who needs to concern us." Tyrion turned away, sweeping his thin fair hair out of his eyes with one blunt-fingered hand. "So, then. I'm not as mad to ask for your friendship, but I doubt it would be beyond all fathoming to hope for your cooperation. If we can get into Meereen – "

"It will still take too long." Jorah's big hands closed into fists. "I should go to her. Find her. I speak Dothraki, I know the land, I am not entirely without friends. I might –"

"I've heard it said the Dothraki only kill their friends, for a frothing horde forty thousand strong has no enemies."

"Is that the number of Jhaqo's khalasar?"

"Twenty thousand, if it makes a difference. There's still only one of you. And it's bloody presumptuous to assume Daenerys needs rescuing, don't you think? There's the dragon. If you're lucky, it will have made a few thousand corpses for you already. Then you only need kill eighteen thousand of them yourself."

"I would not kill them. All."

"Charm them with your wit and culture, would that be it? If you intended to follow that plan of action, you'd need me. And I'm not going."
"Why?"

"Because it's lunacy. That's why."

"And that's stopped you before?"

There was a very long pause. Tyrion stared up at Jorah with his head cocked, so still that the knight could see the heat moving around him. Then the dwarf said, "You know, you're absolutely right. I am perhaps the least qualified individual in this world to tell you not to suffer pangs of horrible guilt for a young and beautiful girl whom you loved long ago, subsequently savagely betrayed, and so turned into a vagrant, drunken exile whose only hope for redemption rests on performing spectacular acts of public idiocy in order to capture back the beauty of a lie. But this is a bit more than falling off a pig."

"Yes," Jorah said. "I know."

"And you don't care." Tyrion's voice was the closest thing to gentle that he'd ever heard. Sympathy from the Imp? He must be imagining it.

"No," Jorah said. "I don't."

"Have it your way. Suicide by khalasar is one of the more inventive methods out there; mine own, I fear, only involved a flagon. If you will permit me to offer advice which you will speedily disregard, stay with us. I know the current situation has nothing to recommend it, but you might actually achieve something for your lady love if you help sort out the mess here in Meereen. Hare after her, her dragon, and a very large khalasar, and you'll die. That's all there is to it."

"I don't – "

"And you're under contract to the Second Sons, you know. You can't desert whenever you like."

"I joined the Second Sons for Daenerys. That was all."

"Seven save you," Tyrion said, not unkindly. "You're even more demented than I am."

Jorah turned on his heel. He was tired of listening to the Imp's barbs, wanted to hit him again but felt that that would somehow prove Tyrion's point. If only he could push away this great formless agony that always enveloped him, eating him alive. It had shrunk his own soul down to a small pale thing in a cage, an ugly naked wingless butterfly that someone had stuffed into a cocoon and left to turn back into a caterpillar. He started to walk away.


"What?"

Tyrion paused. "Go, if you must," he said at last. "At least your lady lives. At least you know where to start looking for her. But I'd advise doing it quietly, after dark. I won't see you again, so I hope you get the heroic death out of this you so badly seem to want. I intend to enter Meereen with the Sons, do for the old man what I can. Even if Daenerys never returns, there are still the other two dragons."

"They are hers by rights."

"And if you should come flapping valiantly up on Drogon's back with her swooning in your arms, we'll all be in a great haste to congratulate you and hand them over. Goodbye, Mormont."

He didn't wait for the dwarf's answer as he strode away.

The hours until nightfall were the most excruciating of Jorah's life. He did his best to act nonchalant, until realizing that this was in fact suspicious behavior for him; he could hear Tyrion's voice in his head asking if he'd been surly enough the first time. He surreptitiously packed what things he could, made sure his sword was sharp, and gave it a few practice swings. It still felt lively in his hand. It could still sip the blood of a man or two or three or twelve. *I don't care any more.*

When Jorah stepped out of the tent, the evening was still hot enough to instantly stick his clothes to his skin. The sunset was a streaky crimson like an infected wound, Meereen had been swallowed in veils of shadow, and the stink had become almost sweet. He began to walk. There was one service he could still perform for his queen before he fled.

He found the stockades after only a brief search. Naharis did not see him approaching. The sellsword was chained so he could neither sit nor stand, his blue hair gone limp and faded and his gold tooth missing, his fine clothes stained and ragged with dirt and sweat. But at the sound of Jorah's approach, he looked up, stared blankly, then landed (so to speak) on his feet like a cat. His mouth twisted into an unpleasant smile. "The last time I saw a face uglier than yours was in a back-alley whorehouse in Qohor. I am thinking it must have been your mother."

Jorah had not come to trade insults with the Tyroshi. Silently, he put his hand to his longsword. Daario's eyes flicked to it. He shrugged. "It was not me who made you hideous and a traitor, Mormont. Nor was I the one who made it so that Daenerys did not love you. It was me that she wanted up her cunt, so go ahead and kill me now, and I'll close my eyes and think of it."

Jorah stared at the sellsword with a hatred he would never even have thought existed, if he had not spent his bitter days and broken nights haunted by it. His queen had asked about his feelings for Lynesse, after he'd told her their sordid history. *Do you hate her?* Dany said, horrified. *Almost as much as I love her,* he had answered. *Pray excuse me. I am very tired.*

*I have no luck with women.* But Dany was more than Lynesse's ghost, more than anything, or anyone. *She lives, I know she lives.* No matter what it took, he would find her. Even if to lay his sword at her feet and let her smite him through the heart with it. But first, Daario.

"Courage is also one of your virtues, I see, that you only dare to approach me when I am chained," Daario went on. "In truth, I am tired of being kept on show in this reeking mire, though I am luckier than poor Groleo, whose head they already chopped off. Yet you are still standing there. I offered to take your head when the queen banished you, but she would not permit it. A pity."

*Daenerys stopped him from killing me?* It was a vanishingly slender consolation, the only kind that existed any more. Jorah drew his longsword a few inches clear of the scabbard. He could do it, and do it quickly, before Naharis had time to cock anything up by shouting and alerting the camp. He would delight in it. It would be some small, small revenge.

"I am growing bored standing here and watching you struggle with your conscience," Daario said. "Please, get on with it."

Jorah drew his blade another few inches. A swift stroke. To the heart, or the head. A cleaner death than the shitstain deserved. *Now.*

"Perhaps you should bring me a cup of wine," Daario prodded, when he still did not move. *After
all this, I am thinking we will be friends."

After one long, unending, agonizing moment, Jorah slammed his sword back into the sheath. "I hate you," he informed the sellsword captain. "More than anything or anyone, and I know how happy it makes you to hear that, and so I hate you more. I hope the Stranger racks and flays and rapes you, and I hope you die screaming and shitting yourself. But I will not be the one to kill you. Because for some day, some moment, you made my queen happy, and she cared for you. Think of it all you want. Take it or leave it. It matters all of a brass dam to me."

"You are a very funny bear." Daario's lips peeled back like Tyrion's had, but this was even less of a smile. It barely looked human. "Don't worry, the favor is not returned. I will still kill you the instant I have the chance."

"You're welcome to try." Jorah pulled his hood up and turned his back. You're mad, you're bloody mad. Corpses sprawled in the light of the rising moon, flies gathering on them so thickly that they looked almost black. The air smelled of blood and shit and despair and death. Torches were being lit on the walls of Meereen. Do they pray for their queen's return? Or does Hizdahr plot her demise even now? Briefly, he found himself hoping that Tyrion and the Second Sons would succeed, infiltrate the city and stop the attacks. Selmy never needs to know about me.

He reached the edge of the Yunkish encampment. It couldn't be this easy, it couldn't, but he knew that it wasn't, and wouldn't be. But somewhere out there in that great dark world, his queen still, for the moment, drew breath. And that, for now, was enough.

"Valar morghulis," Jorah murmured. It was a Braavosi saying, and for a moment he thought of how Dany had longed for the house in Braavos with the red door, the closest thing she had ever known to a real home. Kill me if you will, my queen. My life is yours, my death as well. But I will die with a prayer for you on my lips, and my eyes full of you, and my heart given to your praise. And I will die happy.

Considering what his life had become, even that sounded like a miracle to Jorah. He tightened his swordbelt, allowed himself one last moment of regret for not killing Daario, and struck out into the wild.
"You." She should have said something else, but she was so numb with shock that she couldn't think of it. No, it couldn't be. It wasn't Cat or Beth or Lyanna or any of those faces that knew that voice, but Arya, Arya, Arya. He couldn't be here, he couldn't stop her from killing the Sealord, he was one of them, he knew how it was, it wasn't fair!

"Me?" There was mock confusion in his voice. "A man does not understand. Surely we have not met before. Have we, wolf girl?"

"Yes, we have." Arya squirmed, but his grasp on her shoulder remained like iron. She couldn't get around to see his face, if it was the handsome one with the red and white hair, or the one that he had changed to at the end, after the weasel soup – the one with the tight black curls, the scar on his cheek and the golden tooth. "You – in Harrenhal, you –"

"A girl is no one. A girl and a man both died in Harrenhal. A girl would know this, if she had been to the House of Black and White."

Arya squirmed harder. He's right, I don't know him, I don't, I shouldn't. . . but all her training had been blasted away in the disbelief. "You gave me the iron coin," she said weakly. "You were the one who told me how to come here. You helped me, you killed Chiswyck and Weese and helped me set the northmen free –"

"A girl killed those men, with a whisper. Three deaths and more you had, selfish child. The red god was paid and paid. A man died last of all. A man owes nothing."

"But – " Arya hated how small her voice sounded, how plaintive. "You were my friend."

"A man has no friends. Neither does a girl." He clasped hold of her other shoulder, jerking her backwards into a dark alcove. "Did you forget that too?"

"Jaqen . . ." She had nothing to offer him. He knew who she was, he knew why she was there. He told me that if his father was alive, and if I knew his name, he would kill him on my command. She realized all at once that he was truly what she had always claimed to be: faceless. Jaqen H'ghar is not his name. Whatever face he is wearing, it is not his own. Maybe he doesn't even have a real one any more. She wanted to ask him who he truly was, but he would give the same answer she had always offered to the kindly man. And he would mean it. "Are you here to kill someone too?"

"I could be here to kill you," he said silkily. "What would a girl do then?"

Her heart lurched. Again she tried to turn around, but he held her fast, two fingers touching the pulse in her throat. He is a sorcerer as well as an assassin, Weese had that dog since it was a pup and Jaqen made it tear his throat out. She wondered if he was going to bewitch her as well, tried to remember if Old Nan had ever mentioned what to do when captured by a sorcerer. But she couldn't remember what Old Nan had looked like, and all her tales were fading as well.

"A man will tell a girl a truth," Jaqen said. "A man knew that a girl would be coming. Do you understand why, Arya of House Stark?"

"No," They knew, they all knew. "Who is the Summer Maid?" she blurted out. "Is she faceless too? The kindly man said women couldn't be faceless, I mean not usually, but she changed her hair – " She doesn't even have to be a woman at all.
"That was only a drop of woman's magic," said Jaqen. "A courtesan's tricks, a play for pillows, for sweet words and soft sighs, to give men what they dream of. She is not one of us. She does not know anything beyond the truth that she wishes a man to die."

"But why?" Spots were starting to appear in front of Arya's eyes. She writhed and wriggled her head, trying to get away from the pressure on the vein.

"Valar morghulis," said Jaqen. "Why else?"

"Yes, but she. . ." Arya looked around frantically for anyone else in the hall, but it remained empty, save for her and the man behind her. "The Sealord. . . that knight, the one who talked about Jon. . . he wanted swords, and the Sealord didn't want to give them, but the Summer Maid wants him to –"

Jaqen gave her head a sudden hard wrench. She gasped, then tried to kick him, but her foot flailed out harmlessly. "Are words only wind?" he growled. "Do you spend them so cheaply, Arya of House Stark? Do you?"

"No! No, I didn't, I'm not –"

"And still – you – lie. " Each word was accompanied by a hard jab of his thumb into the back of her neck. "You practice like a mummer's monkey, without knowledge, without understanding. You copy them as a man who cannot read writes his letters. For months and months now you have done this japery, playacting and pretending, and lying, lying, lying. A girl angers the god when she does this. It has come time that a girl grow up, or die."

"So. . . why. . . why am I here?" She finally got free enough to suck a breath of air. "The kindly man said there was a man to kill, that I had to do this thing. . ."

"The kindly man did not lie. But he did not tell you all of the truth."

"Are you the kindly man?"

Jaqen laughed. "A girl must ask better questions."

"Why does the Summer Maid want the Sealord dead?"

"That is not a better question, but for the sake of a girl who saved a man's life, a man will answer. The maid was also a girl once, a girl who loved the lions before they tore her limb from limb. The girl saw her children bedded down with pigs and dogs, and scorned and mocked by men for what they were. The girl sang to her children, but still she lost them. And so the girl has come here, for where else could she go?"

"And k-killing the Sealord will help the knight? Ser Justin?" It was worse than trying to understand what the two strange men had said, that time so long long ago when she'd hidden in the dragon skulls under King's Landing. "So a new Sealord will give the sellswords to him, and he'll fight the lions for her?"

"So she believes. It is a slender hope, but her only one." She felt Jaqen shrug. "But that is so far as she knows. A girl could have done this job for her, or a man. Any man. It did not have to be you." Another hard jab into her neck.

Arya gagged. She would have tried to bite the hand that still held her shoulder, but some instinct held her back. "So why was it me?"
"A girl asks a better question. You heard what the knight said. You heard the stories from Westeros, of a black brother murdered by his own and a girl with your name taken refuge at a great wall of ice. You heard these things, not a girl. And it has proven beyond all doubt that you will never be one of us."

"That's not true!" she cried, stung. "I've been here so long, I – "

"Being is not doing, you foolish child. If you were capable of doing, the news the knight told would have been no more than a flicker to you, a beat of a moth's wing across the narrow sea. It had come time to put you to the test once and for all, and you have failed. You cannot be faceless, and you know too much of our art to leave. Do you understand what that means, Arya of House Stark?"

No, she thought, horrified. Desperate to escape the subject, she grasped at the first one that came to mind. "What have you been doing?"

A low, mirthful laugh resonated in her ear. "Are we friends, who sit at a tavern together and trade tales of things done and times past? But once more, for a girl's sake, a man will answer. A man has been to the Citadel and opened all doors with a key. A man has met a big fat man in black, a fat man that a cat knew as well, and seen the black glass candles burning and the white ravens of winter. A man has heard stories of dragons and wildfire and fell sorceries from the east, and blue-eyed murder from the north. A man has seen a dead man die again, and a white wolf bleed. A man has seen all these portents, and a man knows." He paused, seemed to shrug once more. "And now a man is here, guarding his Sealord as always."

Qarro, Arya thought. He is known as Qarro Volentin now, I saw him in the room with the Summer Maid and the Sealord, he was the man who asked me if I was called Lyanna Snow, but he already knew the answer. He is the First Sword of Braavos – in this face. She heard everything his words were telling her, but she did not want to believe. "Jaqen – "

"Jaqen H'ghar is dead," the man said. "A girl killed him. A girl was proud."

"I didn't, I never did." She felt the tears bubbling up again, and struggled to force them back down. "I said I wouldn't kill a friend, and you said a friend would help, if a girl unsaid it – "

"Sweet girl," the man who was not Jaqen said, almost tenderly. "A wolf is far from you. A face is foreign to you. And you want as a child does – unformed, greedy, selfish, the skill only for yourself, for your old grudges. But it is true that a summer maiden has prayed for the death of a certain man, and the god must have his due. So you must do this thing. You must go and kill the Sealord."

Arya couldn't believe her ears. "You'll . . . let me?"

He laughed. "I am nothing if not a faithful servant. To the Sealord, yes – but to the god first. And Ferrego Antaryon is an ailing man, old and ill. The Many-Faced God has answered the prayer, so he must not be cheated. Yes. You must kill him."

Arya tried to run forward. He still had her by the neck. "But there is the one small thing," he added casually. "Afterwards, you must die yourself."

Arya froze. "I . . . I don't want to!"

"Sweet girl," not-Jaqen said. "Sweet, sweet girl. All this time, and you have learned nothing. Did I not tell you? You know too much, and you cannot leave. And you will never relinquish yourself to
the god as you must, save that you are made to."

"The kindly man said – said that only me could give up my loves and hates – "

"Again, he did not lie. But again, he did not tell the entire truth."

"Then I won't kill the Sealord," Arya said defiantly. "You can't make me."

"So I cannot," not-Jaqen agreed. "And you will have learned less than nothing, and I must only kill you here." A knife touched the back of her neck, oh so gently.

"No!" She wrenched away again. "For – for a girl's sake. You – "

"I answered your questions. Why would I not give you the ultimate answer? It is the gift of the dead, you know. That is the essence of our worship of Him of Many Faces. Our service. Valar morghulis, Arya Stark. Valar dohaeris. They are two halves of the same coin, two faces. Now if you will not die, go and kill the Sealord. His room is to the right of the first hallway, three doors down. It will not be guarded. I will wait here."

All of a sudden his grip was free of her shoulder, and she stumbled forward, putting out her hands to catch herself. Then – not daring to look behind her – she picked herself up and ran. When she reached it, the hallway was slender and cool, with fluted columns of marble and a window casement opening over the Purple Harbor. The third door was made of white wood, cross-barred with bronze. A glyph was carved into the middle. It saw.

"Valar morghulis," Arya breathed to it. It opened.

Inside, the Sealord of Braavos lay on a chaise, covered with heavy silken quilts. His body looked wasted, wracked and thin, deep bruised shadows under his eyes and his hands folded as if he was already in his sepulcher. He made the slow, rasping sounds of someone deep in poppy-induced stupor. A window was open. A breeze filled the room, and slowly, stealthily, Arya crossed it. Quiet as a shadow. She reached him, looked down.

He is just an old man. An old sick man. But killing him would have titanic consequences – for Braavos, for the Summer Maid and Ser Justin and his king and his sellswords, even maybe for Jon and that girl who wasn't Lady Arya on the Wall. And for me. No, Jaqen couldn't do that, he was lying too. Or not telling the entire truth. They are very different things.

Arya drew her knife. This isn't really fair, it's only an old man asleep. But maybe if she did do it, if she did not hesitate, she could make it back to the House of Black and White and – and –

He will be there. The House of Black and White was no sanctuary from this hunter. But she had nowhere else to go in Braavos, unless she wanted to find Captain Terys and his sons, or Brusco and his daughters, and a Faceless Man would see through any guises at once. Maybe I'll do it and they'll see that I can kill anyone they want me to, it doesn't matter if I'm Arya or not. But that was, she knew, a vain and foolish hope. I have to get back and get my own face and escape. Where, she had less than no idea. Jaqen said he'd wait back there. I'll run.

Her hand was shaking. Arya clenched it angrily. She wanted to close her eyes, but would not let herself. This is a girl's work. A girl should see. Then she took one step, two steps three steps, and slashed the Sealord's throat from ear to ear.

Ferrego Antaryon convulsed, scarlet staining his bedclothes in an arterial gush, but he never made a sound. His body continued to thrash, fighting instinctively for air. His eyes moved madly back and forth beneath closed lids, then fell still. His head lolled, blood still spurting, but slowly now, in
erratic pulses. It was over in moments.

Arya took a running head start, and threw herself out the window. Sky and palace and stars and ground whirled crazily around her. There are no trees in Braavos, she had just enough time to think, before the black face of the harbor was rushing up toward her. She hit it and went under like a stone.

Everything was chaos. She choked and kicked to the surface, aching as if she'd just been stabbed, her bloody hands parting the choppy cold water. She started to swim, sobbing, as the lights of the Sealord's Palace still shone behind her. She looked wildly over her shoulder, but could not detect any hint of pursuit. Ser Justin will have his sellswords, and the Summer Maid her revenge. And as for Arya Stark, she was only a rat in a gutter, running away. I am a wolf. A wolf, not a rat or a mouse. But she could no longer feel Nymeria. I've gone too far.

After a quarter-hour of crazed swimming, she hauled herself onto a stone quay, rolled over and lay on her back, gasping. I don't dare stop, I have to keep going. Every part of her shrank at the thought of returning to the House of Black and White, but she had to, even if it was only long enough to find her face and run. I'm not a coward. I'm not. I killed the Sealord like I had to. I did.

She pushed herself to hands and knees, then to her feet. I wish I had wings, I could fly like a bird. It would be a fine thing to fly. Once she'd asked the kindly man if Faceless Men could become animals, and he had only laughed at her. "What do you think we are?" he had answered. "Wargs or skinchangers? We are only men, the servants of god. It is Arya Stark who is a skinchanger. If you wish to be her, say so, and leave. Are you Arya Stark, child?"

"No," she had said. "I'm no one."

Liar. The word pulsed in her head as she scrambled down into the first gondola that pulled up in response to her hail. Liar, liar, liar. She leaned over the edge as the boatman paddled, as if she could make it go faster. The first fingers of dawn were starting to sear the eastern horizon, throwing ghostly shadows onto the grey warrens of Braavos. She jumped off the gondola halfway there, paid the man what she had left, and plunged into the underworld. Cat and Blind Beth knows all these paths. Still he wasn't following her. Maybe he had thought she'd come back. She wondered if they'd found the Sealord's body yet. Maybe they'd think that that Ser Justin had done it, out of anger for Ferrego Antaryon so deliberately thwarting him. A girl named Lyanna Snow, with fair hair and freckles and blue eyes. She caught a glimpse of her borrowed face in the canals, and hated it. I have to get this off.

The sun was well up by the time the House of Black and White finally came into view. Arya broke into a sprint. She had a horrible stitch in her side. They always said I could leave, if I wanted. But they never told me what that meant. Not all of the truth.

The hall was cool and dim as always, candles burning in the shrines and the bodies slumped by the fountain, the ones who had come and prayed and drank in the night. She stood in the middle, rocking on her toes. She knew her way around. She would get down to the room with the faces, take off this one somehow. Then she would get Needle out of its hiding place in the stones by the canals. Maybe Ser Justin will take me with him. Back to Westeros. But what if Jaqen disguised himself as one of the sellswords and came along? I'll never be free, never. I'll always be looking over my shoulder.

She took a step.

A door opened at the far end of the hall.
She skidded to a halt, fumbling madly for her knife. But it was only the kindly man, staring at her with an expression between shock and horror. At last he said, "Gods have mercy, child. What have you done?"

"I killed the Sealord." She drew herself up defiantly. "Like you told me."

"As Arya Stark," said the kindly man. "With Arya Stark's thoughts and Arya Stark's beliefs. Surely you understand that you have failed."

"I didn't." She took a better grip on her knife. "That's a lie."

"Perhaps. But neither is it the truth." The kindly man held out a hand. "Come. You must give back that borrowed face, and take your own. And leave."

That's what I want. She inched forward – and stopped. Jaqen said I can't leave. That I know too much and yet not enough, that I have learned nothing.

"No," Arya said. She took a step backwards. The kindly man sighed. "Child," he said. "You could have left us long before, without doing this to yourself, to us, to the god. Why did you persist, but for your lies? You have told them so often by now that they should be second nature, but they are not. You are a girl. An infant."

A girl who must grow up, Arya thought, or die. She took another step backwards.

"I can make it as painless as falling asleep," said the kindly man. "Come now. Come."

She drew her knife. "I won't."

His eyes flicked to it. He appeared amused. "A girl will have her way," he said, and then, even without what happened next, she knew. His shape began to blur as he stepped forward, and he passed a hand over his face, shook his hair out red and white, the face charming, the mouth smiling and the eyes blue. He isn't the kindly man, he just stole his body. He went straight back here and waited for me.

"Wolf girl," said Jaqen H'ghar. "You are nothing if not stubborn."

She backed up. She began to run. But the instant she reached the door, it slammed shut, and all the candles in the shrines leapt up like devouring dragonfire. She saw herself reflected a hundred times, a thousand, in the shards of mirrors in the black walls. He was advancing on her, only now there were a thousand reflections of him as well and no way to tell which was the real one.

Arya looked around desperately. And then, again, she knew. There is only one way out of this.


I won't. I won't. The only thing in the room that was not reflected was the black fountain. To be only a tool of Him of Many Faces, you must have no soul, no heart. You forsake all your yesterdays and any dream of tomorrows. No poison can do that for you. No one but you can kill your loves and your hates. You do not have to do this, child. You are twelve, near thirteen. Soon you will flower. Soon you will be a woman. It is life you can bring to this world, not death.

She scrambled up onto the rim of the fountain.

Little sister, Jon's voice said in her head. I have gone away. So far away. And so have you.
I have, she thought. I have now. There was only one way to kill her loves and hates, or birth them again. To give herself as a sacrifice and see if she would be accepted, or if the false face would be flayed from her and the god unmask her as she was. The only way to escape the knife and the man who wielded it. The only way, maybe, to ever see Nymeria and Westeros again. To know that Ser Justin was a liar, not her, and that all of this, all of it, had not been in vain.

Arya seized a cup from the fountain and plunged it into the dark waters. She brought it dripping to her lips, closed her eyes, said a prayer, and drank.
Bran

The darkness under the hill was a pure and perfect darkness, as if no such darkness had existed before and never would again. It was inky like a stain, crawled into your lungs and breathed for you, made it hard to hold onto even the memory of light. Whenever he opened his eyes in his own body, he would always put his hand in front of his face and try to see it, but he never could. Sometimes it made him wonder if he had woken at all, or if his spirit was still up there in the trees, roaming on the cold winds and the red leaves and the falling snow. It was getting harder and harder to tell.

When he'd woken this time, however, it hadn't been gentle. It had been forceful as a blow, pummeling him from sky and moon and stone and stars and cold, cold, down into the nest of roots where he practiced his skinchanging. The air was warm and still and earthy. He could hear running water. It was hard to think about winter, or time at all. In Old Nan's stories, people always went into faerie hills and emerged two hundred years later. And in Meera's, too. Maybe it had been two hundred years out there, and everyone was dead. He hadn't been able to reach Summer for a while now, his last memory of blue eyes and cold hands and dead men fighting in the snow, wards breaking, guttering out. And the ranger – something about the ranger. But Bran couldn't remember what.

Thinking about Meera made Bran want to see her. He rolled over and pulled himself across the dirt floor with his arms, then monkeyed up the weirwood roots, wondering where the children were. It is very quiet. They did not keep hours like mortal men, could go for days without sleep, and besides, day and night were very alike underground. So where did they all go?


No answer.

"Hodor!" It was too far to crawl up to the high chamber by himself, and he didn't like that there was nobody nearby. It made him feel small and scared. Bran the broken. "Hodor!"

" – odor, odor, odor. . ." the cave sighed back at him.

Bran cast about until he spotted a glimmer of light, far at the end of the tunnel. He considered warging into Hodor's body and walking him down to fetch him, but Lord Brynden had told him not to do that anymore. "Hodor is not a skin you can wear as it suits you, like a raven or a wolf or a weirwood," he had said. "He is a man. If you do that too often, it is called possession, and you begin to disregard whether or not the sentient soul wishes you there."

"But Hodor knows me," Bran had objected. "I wouldn't hurt him."

"Be that as it may, you are not to do it again, and if I find out that you have, I will be wroth." The three-eyed crow only had one real eye, but it was red and piercing as a flame. "You are a skinchanger, Bran, not a demon. Do you understand me?"

Grumbling, Bran had no choice but to accept Lord Brynden's judgment. He still didn't think it was very fair. Maybe Hodor was scared, but by now he'd learned to go away inside and hide until Bran was gone, and he never used Hodor for anything except to go exploring with Meera and Jojen. When Jojen wanted to go, that was. These days, he was so listless and uninterested that Meera even had a hard time waking him up to eat.
Thinking of them, Bran crawled faster. He hauled himself up, panting from the exertion, and thought he could make out two forms silhouetted against the uncertain, witchy glow. One of them was Hodor beyond all doubt – there was no one else even close to that size, especially among the children. Annoyed that the stableboy hadn't come to help him, Bran called again, "Hodor!"

Hodor's head lifted slowly. He appeared confused. "Hodor?"

"It's me." Bran waved at him. "Hodor, come get me."

Still Hodor did not move. He looked at the other, motionless form, and it was only then that Bran recognized Meera. She was huddled on the floor, clutching something that looked like a bundle of rags.

Bran's heart lurched. "Meera?"

She looked up at him even more slowly. Her eyes were red, her face was pale. At last, in a voice dull and heavy with grief, she said, "Hodor. Go get him."

"Hodor," Hodor puffed, getting to his feet and trudging to the end of the tunnel to retrieve Bran. He scooped him up and carried him back, then set him gently down next to Meera. "Hodor."

"Meera?" Bran wished more fervently than ever that he was big and tall and strong, and could hold her in his arms and comfort her. She looked so sad. "What – what's wrong?"

Meera didn't answer. She only used her chin to indicate what she was cradling against her.

Bran's breath caught in his throat. What he had taken for a bundle of leaves or rags was neither. It was Jojen. The younger Reed's green eyes stared open and sightlessly at the ceiling of the cave, head lolling. His skin was cold and waxy to the touch, his limbs heavy. To judge from the way his body had begun to stiffen into the shape of his sister's embrace, he had been dead for a while.

"Jojen?" Bran felt like he had been hit. It wasn't really real, this wasn't happening. Choking back tears, he said, "Why?"

Again Meera did not answer, absently stroking Jojen's untidy hair. Then in a dreamy voice, she said, "I resented him so much, when we were little. I was the firstborn, son and daughter both to our parents, and they taught me how to string a bow and spear frogs and weave a net and paddle a skinboat before I was old enough to walk. They sang me to sleep to the sounds of the marsh every night, and told me all the stories. Then Jojen arrived, sickly and so early that nobody thought he'd live. Everyone wanted to care for him, to know how he fared, to brew potions and simples to make him strong. Crannogmen are a tightly knit folk. The bonds of blood alone are not what make us kin. But to me, it seemed as if I had become an utter outsider." She looked up at Bran with a quivery, heartbroken smile. "I was three," she said, as if that explained it.

"Hodor," Hodor said sadly.

There was a horrible big lump in Bran's throat. "Meera. . . I'm really, really sorry."

She sighed, looking down at Jojen again. "When he was three, he caught the grey fever. Everyone thought he would die for certain this time, and my mother sat with him day and night. I sat outside, and nobody thought to look for me. Especially when he woke, and said he had dreamed dreams that were green."

Water dripped steadily, far away in the cave.
"I was so jealous," Meera said, anguished. "Your Old Nan called him 'little grandfather,' and it was so even back then. Grown men would ask him what it was he had seen, listen gravely to his answers. I nearly died with wanting it, until our father told me that my gifts were different, but no less precious. And as Jojen grew up, I began seeing him less as an usurper and more as flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood. He struggled with his fate as much as I did mine. And now . . . and now he's met it." With that, her hoarse voice gave out. She lowered her head and began to sob.

Bran was dumbstruck. This was Meera, Meera whom he had never seen cry before, brave clever cheerful Meera whom he loved, and all he could do was scooch up next to her and timidly put his hand on hers. She clutched it with both of hers, her slender body wracked with weeping, loose tendrils of hair falling in her face. She seemed to be trying to say something else, but couldn't get the words out.


"Hodor, be quiet, no hodoring." Bran's own voice sounded cracked and whispery. He awkwardly patted Meera's head with his free hand, hoping it would help. It hurt him to see her hurting this way. I could slip into her skin, comfort her that way, my mind and hers – but then he remembered Lord Brynden's admonition. I don't want to go into Meera's body if she doesn't want me to be there. But he still didn't understand. "Why?" he asked again. "Why did Jojen die?"

"For you, prince of the green," said a soft voice behind them. "He died for you."

All of them jumped a foot, particularly Hodor, who let out a "HODOR!" loud enough to wake the dead. But Jojen didn't sit up. Instead when they looked around, they saw Lord Brynden himself, standing above them. His long white hair hung loose, his hands looked more like roots than fingers, and one branch still draped across his chest, almost in it. Leaves showed through the tatters of his black robe.

Bran swallowed. The three-eyed crow frightened him a little – well, more than a little. But he had to look strong in front of Meera. "What – what do you mean?"

"For you," Brynden said again. He sat down on a boulder, more roots slithering out and tangling around his feet. "Ice and fire, Brandon Stark. One against the other. There must always be a balance. For you to become the greenseer that you were born to be, Jojen Reed had to die. The strength, the sight, the power, the blood that was in him has gone into you. The old tales all know it, in whatever mystery they embrace. Only death can pay for life."

Meera gave a muffled sob. Bran tried to put his arm around her. "But Jojen was my friend!" he cried. "I didn't ever want to do that – to take it away from him! It's not fair!"

Brynden smiled bitterly. "Fair?" he repeated. "What do you know about that, summer child?"

"I'm not really a child. I'm almost a man grown."

"You are younger than the youngest of any gleam in any child's eye. The children of the forest, Brandon Stark. Jojen knew the end that awaited him, you may be certain. Why else do you think he came along?"

"But he. . ." Bran faltered. "He never. . . told us."

"Should he have?"

Bran was quiet. He didn't know what to say. I never asked Jojen to die for me. And then he thought back to that paste with the stuff in it that looked like blood, which the children had told him was
only weirwood sap. *But it was blood too. Jojen's blood.* He had been eating away his friend's waning life, day by day. It almost made him want to be sick.

"He wanted to go home," Meera said. "To Greywater Watch. Lord Bloodraven, if our part here is done, I want to go."

The three-eyed crow gazed down at her with something that might have been pity, or might not. "The way is closed, Meera Reed. The wards are broken. The dark rises. The dead men are coming."

Bran stiffened. "Where's the ranger? Coldhands?"

"The ranger is dead, child."

"He was dead before."

"So he was," Lord Brynden agreed, with a faint, mirthless smile. "He died some time ago. But now he has done that which the children charged him to do. He has found the horn. He has found the dragonglass. And he saved you and your wolf from the Others – because of his sacrifice, Summer was able to get away and make south. What must be done from here is the province of the living."

"Who was he?" Bran asked. "Why were his hands black?"

"There are questions and questions, summer child."

"He said he was once in the Night's Watch."

"And so he was." Lord Brynden considered Bran closely. Then at last he said, "Come. There are things you should know."

Bran was excited at the thought, but he didn't want to leave Meera by herself. "Can't you just tell me?"

That appeared to entertain the tree-man. "Brandon Stark," he said, "in the days to come, there will be times and places to merely tell. But you are a skinchanger. *Come.*"

"Hodor," Bran said reluctantly. "Take me with Lord Brynden."

"Hodor." The big stableboy smeared his tears away with his big furry hand, lifted Bran up, and ducked down the passage after Brynden, who did not seem to walk so much as glide. Bran craned over his shoulder, but could only see Meera sitting as still as a statue, head bowed over the body of her brother.

"Will you let them go home sometime?" he asked the three-eyed crow. "When the fighting is over?"

Lord Brynden did not answer. Instead he raised a gaunt, graceful hand, and beckoned for Hodor to put Bran down in a writhing knot of weirwood roots. Hodor did so, and departed with something that looked like relief.

"Now," said Lord Brynden. Bran wondered why Meera had called him *Bloodraven.* "You will remember what I have taught you, how to see what the trees have seen. I suggest that you ask them your questions."

Bran was puzzled. "What should I ask?"
Lord Brynden gave him an enigmatic smile. "Whatever it is you wish."

This didn't sound very helpful to Bran, but he was eager to prove that he had grasped the essential point of the exercise. So he closed his eyes and reached for the roots and then... . . .

... he was in the trees. Everything was formless and shapeless and dark, and he only could catch glimpses of distant faces and places, rustling and shaded through a veil of blood-red leaves. Again he thought he saw his lord father, and maybe his lady mother as well. And there was Winterfell as it had looked before the Greyjoys took it, and those children he had seen earlier whom he did not know, and many others. The faces in the trees, the watchers on the walls. But he had no idea what he was supposed to be looking for.

"Show me what Lord Brynden meant," he whispered. "Show me what the ranger did. Show me what's happening."

For a moment more, the darkness lingered. Bran held his breath, hoping to see the mysterious black-cloaked man who had escorted them so far north on his elk. Something about a horn, Lord Brynden had said, and dragonglass. Mayhaps more snow, or what was taking place outside the hill. Or Summer; he wanted to see Summer. But when the image grew clear at last, it was in a vast grove of weirwoods that Bran did not recognize. It seemed to be a small island. It lay in a lake green and clear as emeralds, and sunlight daggered through the white branches. On the distant shore stood a vast black castle, with five towers that slumped and tottered and rolled, yet still were the most massive edifice known to man. Harrenhal. But why on earth was he seeing Harrenhal?

The faint gauze that edged the scene made Bran think that it had happened a long time ago. Confused, he tried to push it away and find something more useful, but it remained. And then he noticed a beautiful young woman, fourteen or fifteen, walking among the trees. She had long dark hair and grey eyes, and wore a white dress and blue roses in her hair. I know her, he thought, but from where?

The young woman reached a clearing and sat down before the largest of the trees. She seemed to be speaking, but Bran could not make out the words. He watched her from one side, slightly to the right and behind her, and thus it was that he caught sight of the other intruder before she did.

A jolt went through him to his useless legs, far away back in his own body. He had never seen a Targaryen, as they had all been killed or exiled by the time he was born, but he had no doubt that this was one. The man was tall, clean of limb and fine of feature, with streaming silver hair and sad purple eyes, dressed in black and crimson with a three-headed dragon worked in onyx and garnet upon his tabard. He stood with one hand on the bole of a tree, watching the woman, and when his mouth moved, Bran heard the words he spoke. "Lady Lyanna. Your pardons."

Startled, the young woman leapt up in a whirl of skirts, fumbling for the knife that hung in a fashionable baldric by her side. Then she saw who it was, and dipped a flustered half-curtsy. "Your Grace. I – I did not know that you were here."

"So I see," said the man, with a flickering smile. "You needn't worry, you can put that knife away. Though after hearing what you did to those squires, I should mind my manners nonetheless."

The young woman bristled. "Howland Reed is my father's vassal. The louts had no cause to torment him as they did."

"True enough, and he seems to have repaid the favor in kind." The sunlight threw shimmering icy shadows from the man's hair. He had a way of remaining very still, intent, almost unblinking. "I was hoping to speak to you more, my lady."
The young woman loosened her hold on her knife, but did not relinquish it entirely. After a moment she said, "Your Grace, I am honored, but the entire realm is already talking, and I desire not to be known as the slut who tore Prince Rhaegar away from his good and gentle lady. You should have crowned your own wife the queen of love and beauty. Not me."

"A tourney champion has a duty to choose the fairest maid." He took another step. "Elia has a goodly heart, as you say, but she is frail and unwell. No longer a sun to shine out above all others."

"You speak as befits a poet," the young woman said. "Fair maids this and shining suns that. You are nothing if not a dreamer, Your Grace, but we should not be having this conversation at all. I am betrothed to Robert Baratheon. I do not intend to dishonor him."

The man smiled faintly. "I see they call you the she-wolf with good reason. It has been a long time since anyone, lord or lady, spoke me so frankly."

"I do not intend to apologize for it."

"No, it is welcome. No one can speak openly in the Red Keep any more, under the shadow of my father's madness." His eyes were deep wells of violet, still trained on her. "You bewitch me quite. Come closer. I neither bite nor breathe fire."

The young woman remained where she was. "If Your Grace held regard for me, Your Grace would have more care of my reputation."

He smiled again. "My lady, I apologize. You must think me terribly ill-mannered. But... there is no way to say this other than bluntly. I need your help."

That took the young woman aback. "What? How?"

"There is a prophecy. The song of ice and fire, and the prince who was promised. A dragon with three heads. Elia is with child, and a comet was seen in the sky on the day I believe the babe was conceived. The maesters say it will be a boy, but... Elia is already frail, and was bedridden for a year after giving birth to Rhaenys. If she lives through this one, it will be a miracle."

The young woman had been edging closer to him, almost unconsciously, but at this the spell was broken. She turned away, disgusted. "Your wife is ill and pregnant, and you disgrace her in this way for hopes of -- of what?"

"Lady Lyanna. Please, hear me out before you say more." His voice was low and urgent. "My father and mother were wed after a woods witch, Jenny of Oldstones' confidante, predicted that the Prince who was Promised would be born of their line. Even if this child is borne to term, and lives, he will still be --"

"A boy. Your own trueborn son, heir to the Iron Throne. And you have a small brother too, if I recall."

"Viserys is but a child, and... I should not say this of my own flesh and blood, but he is too much our father's son. It must be me."

The young woman looked at him with slitted eyes. "You think quite highly of yourself, don't you?"

"Please." The prince spread his hands helplessly. "I know how utterly distasteful it sounds. But the song is of ice and fire. Elia is a Martell, and Dorne is the last thing to ice. I am a Targaryen, fire made flesh, and you --"
"No!" The girl drew herself up in a rage. "I don't know what you're asking of me, and I don't care! I am not a prize for you to win, a whore for you to have as you like! Is it Rhaegar the Unworthy you wish to be remembered as? Go and dream and plot and brood of prophecies somewhere else, and leave me out of it!"

That stung his own pride. In a few swift strides he had crossed the godswood to her, and had both of her wrists in his hands – not fiercely, but very firmly. "My lady," he said. "The dragon has three heads."

"I don't care how many bloody heads it has! At this rate, it might be better for it to have none! There's more than three Targaryens, and I don't care if it's ice or fire or rain or piss! Your songs are pretty and sad, and no one could accuse you of less than an absolute devotion to duty, but you have no fathom of what you're asking of me. I don't care what you read in some book! Let go of me!"

He let her go, but remained watching her. "My father would have your tongue out for those words," he said softly. "Fortunately, in this holy place, he's not like to hear."

She threw him a withering look. "Is that supposed to frighten me? We all know what your father is, and if that is what the Targaryens have become, I have no wish to attach myself to you in whatever way you seem under the delusion that I might. Fare-you-very-well, Your Grace. I intend never to see you again."

With that, she turned on her heel with a flounce, storming out of the wood down to the shore. And as she did, man and woman and trees and isle and lake and castle all began to fade out and grow dark, and dark, and darker, and darker, until they were gone in the distance of many long years. All that remained was a crimson glow the very color of blood.

The darkness under the hill, Bran thought, finally aware of himself again. He was confounded and upset and confused, not understanding what he had just seen or why it mattered. He remembered Meera's tale of the tourney at Harrenhal, and the wolf maid and the dragon prince with purple eyes, and the crannogmen who'd jousted as a mystery knight – Howland Reed, the young woman had said something about Howland Reed, and he was Meera's father – but what did that have to do with –

He opened his carven eyes, and lashing snow stung his face.

He stood as one of hundreds of trees, in a circle of weirwoods almost as vast as the one that had covered the island in the lake by Harrenhal. But this was not Harrenhal, or even the south. Far in the distance, a vast wall of ice scraped the heavens. It was barely visible through the night and the snow, and the thousands upon thousands of white shadows who thronged on it, blue eyes burning with fey and malevolent light. There was no end to their numbers.

Others. Bran's stomach shrunk and his heart seized up. And not just Others but wights as well, slow shambling creatures, trailing black blood and entrails. The dead men are assaulting the Wall. Jon, his brother Jon was there, he had to find a way to warn him, but the weirwood grove stood too many miles distant.

But before he could find words or a tongue, the scene dipped out and changed. The snow and the Others vanished, and within the circle of weirwoods, there was a man cloaked in black whose face he could not see, frantically digging a hole. A plain dirty horn, banded in bronze and carved with old runes, lay on the ground next to him, and as Bran peered closer, he saw with another shock that the man was not wearing gloves. It's Coldhands. What is the horn and why is he hiding it in the weirwood grove?
The ranger finished his hole and buried the horn in it. He touched it as if it might poison him if he held it too long. His hands glistened blackly in the cold queer light, a bruised lilac and deep gold, but there seemed to be a flame deep in their heart.

*Dragonglass*, Bran thought, with no way to explain how or why he knew. *His hands are made of dragonglass. The children of the forest gave them to him, when they woke him from his first death. That's why he could keep the Others away – for a time. But Lord Brynden said he's dead now for good, that his duty has been discharged. That he saved Summer. But –*

He stared at the scene, just as uncomprehendingly as before. Watched the ranger glance back longingly at the Wall, just visible in the deepening sunset. Watched him walk out of the grove to where his great elk waited, breath steaming. But none showed from the ranger's nose and mouth. *He is already dead.*

It made a cold slimy chill go down Bran's back. Suddenly he didn't know if he wanted to find out anything more, willed himself to return to his own body and leave the trees. It was harder every time. *Maybe I'll get branches growing through me too. Maybe that's why I'm here. Maybe I'm supposed to take Lord Brynden's place.* He didn't want to. Like the Reeds, he wanted to go home. He wanted to see his brother Jon again, and Rickon, and his sisters Arya and Sansa if they were even still alive. He knew that his lady mother and Robb were dead, murdered by the Freys at the Twins, and of course his lord father had died long ago. *I want to be a Stark,* he thought urgently. *I want to see Winterfell again. I'm not dead, I'm not.*

And then he was falling. A golden man stood very far away at the top of a broken tower. *"The things I do for love,"* he murmured, and ravens rose up and wheeled, screaming for corn. A wolf howled.

*Summer,* Bran thought, and then he hit the ground and woke up again in his own body. But the darkness was different this time. Even more complete, unending, and *cold.* Lord Brynden was nowhere in sight. He was alone again. There was one frozen, unbalanced moment where all the world seemed to shiver and fold in half, and then – from not very far away, in fact from very near at hand – high and sharp and desperate, he heard Meera start to scream.
Sansa

They had been riding for almost a week, and still Ser Shadrich refused to unbind her hands or tell her where they were going. "I might, if I thought you were like to be a tender maid," he said mockingly. "I thought you were fair and gentle and sweet, but after that clout I had to give you to get you to come, I'd fear for my virtue if I did."

I am not a tender maid. Sansa had been a frightened girl once, but not any more. Her time in King's Landing and then playing Alayne had burnt away all but shreds of it, betraying Petyr had done the last, and now knowing that she was reliant on no one but herself to find a way out of this had left her no leisure at all to be fair, or gentle, or sweet. She had already tried that, attempting to make conversation with Ser Shadrich, or flatter him, or ask him cordial questions, but he flippantly disregarded any and all of her attempts. "Was I a few years younger, and not so utterly skint broke, I might well consider marrying you myself and coming into your castle," he said, and laughed. "Shadrich Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. It does have a ring to it, now I think. But as for crossing up Ramsay Bolton... even if they call me the Mad Mouse, I'm not so mad as that. I'll gratefully accept the mountains of gold he'll pay for you, and get the buggering hell out of his way."

We will never get there. Not if I have anything at all to say about it. Surely their absence had been marked by now – Littlefinger at least and likely the Elder Brother as well would have sent men after her. But Ser Shadrich, who had eked out his living by possessing a hedge knight's cunning, opportunism, amorality, and caginess, had taken them on a looping, roundabout ride through the barren northern foothills of the Mountains of the Moon. He always stayed where there were trees or underbrush for cover, never venturing out into open country, and once when they spotted riders in the colors of House Arryn, Sansa took a deep breath and prepared to scream at them, but the Mad Mouse gave her another clout that left her head ringing. "That," he said, "was not very wise. And not very kind either, considering the service I'm doing by taking you back home. Next time you try, I'll gag you so well as bind you. Your choice."

And besides, that night, he let her in on a much darker secret. "Doubtless you'll be wondering how all your plans went downhill," he said, as he roasted a scranny squirrel, casually tore it in half, and threw it in her lap, still leaking blood. "That would be thanks to Petyr Baelish himself. He was the one who told Lords Belmore and Templeton about the minor upset in the north. I just happened to hear about it from a maid who heard them."

Belmore and Templeton. Sansa remembered Randa telling her that Littlefinger was having breakfast with them, on the morning of her abduction. He'd wanted her to come as well, and she'd made up the excuse about her moon blood to steal off and visit the Elder Brother in private. I was supposed to hear as well. She didn't want to beg Ser Shadrich for anything, but she couldn't hold back. "You said that – that it was Lady Arya who escaped from the Boltons." My sister. My little sister. She could barely imagine Arya marrying anyone, or even exactly what she had looked like.

"Actually, as per my trusty informant, it wasn't. Littlefinger told Belmore and Templeton that the girl he sent north to wed Ramsay Bolton wasn't Arya Stark at all. He thought they should know, for their position as wealthy and influential Lords of the Vale would, he intended, come into play quite soon. For he had a certain plot in train to restore the North to its trueborn heiress, and hoped he'd be able to count on their support."

Sansa couldn't eat that well with her bound hands – not that the greasy, half-charred chunk of squirrel was so appetizing anyway, but she was so desperately hungry that she didn't care. Yet at
that, her appetite deserted her. *He is not lying about this.* It was too sheerly Littlefinger, to the bone. "It – wasn't – Arya?" she said at last. "But then – who?"

"Who knows?" Ser Shadrich shrugged. "Some steward's brat, he said. No one of consequence. No wonder Ramsay Bolton is so irritated."

*Some steward's brat.* Sansa's heart sank into her stomach. There was no proof, nothing – nothing but the fact that her best friend, Jeyne Poole, had been taken from the rooms they shared soon after the massacre of her father's household. Taken away and never seen again. And Jeyne was a northerner, daughter of Winterfell's steward, who in a grey dress and white cloak could conceivably pass as Arya to those who hadn't met her before. And if Littlefinger *had* sent her to marry this monster, it stood to reason that he would then be keeping very, very close track of what transpired afterwards. *His little birds are everywhere, just like Lord Varys'.* How else was he to know when to stage her wedding to Harry, have them march in glory to liberate the North from the Boltons?

*My friend. Littlefinger did that to my friend.* Sansa felt even sicker. *He would have done the same to me, if I wasn't born who I was. If my brothers were still alive... he would merely keep me for his own, he would not need to bother with this plotting and scheming.* She remembered vividly what Petyr had confessed to her aunt Lysa, before he pushed her out the Moon Door: the only woman he had ever loved in his life was Catelyn Tully. *And I look very like my lady mother.*

Sansa's gorge rose in her throat. Hungry as she was, she knew she would vomit if she chanced even a bite. Clumsily, she threw the squirrel away from her into the dirt.

Ser Shadrich's eyes flickered after it. "Wasting food? I call that foolish. You never know if there will be any on the morrow. Eat."

"No." At that moment, Sansa made up her mind. She would starve herself to death before allowing Ser Shadrich, or Ramsay Bolton, or Petyr Baelish, or Harry the Heir or *anyone*, to claim her as a prize. That decision, at least, was still within her purview.

The look on the Mad Mouse's face had turned ugly. "I said *eat*, girl."

"No."

Ser Shadrich shrugged. There was a long, frozen moment, as he and Sansa stared at each other. He started to turn away, and she let out half a breath. Then, fast as a snake, he lunged.

She didn't have time to deflect it. He hit her twice as hard as his size would suggest, wrenching her tied hands up and over her head, slamming them into the dirt. He threw a hip into her to pin her down, then smashed one hand over her nose, cutting off her air. With the other, he slammed the squirrel halfway down her throat. *"EAT!"*

Sansa gagged and thrashed, trying to steal a breath, but he rolled with her, lithe and strong as an eel. She saw red, retched and struggled, was dimly aware that she was on the verge of blacking out, and, sobbing, tore off a bit of stringy raw flesh with her teeth. She gulped it hard, felt it start to come back up, and forced it down again.

"Better." Ser Shadrich removed the meat, just long enough for her to suck an agonized breath. "Now, again." He shoved it back.

"No!" She could barely speak; her chest was beginning to heave in panicked spasms like a frightened bird. "Plea – please – st-stop, I'll – eat, please...!"
"Coming around to me, are you?" He put the meat down, but remained heavily on top of her, elbows digging into her shoulders. "I knew you would. But I've had a thought, now. It really doesn't seem quite fair for me to go all to this trouble to cross the North and take you home, without the slightest reward for it. And while I still don't intend to marry you, I've never known that to stop a man before. Bastards aren't found under cabbage leaves, after all." He smirked.

At first, Sansa didn't understand what he meant. And then, horribly, she did.

Ser Shadrich unsheathed his knife and cut her bodice open, and the freezing night air stung her bare skin. Don't think about it, don't think about it, it's nothing. She had been stripped half naked before, and that with the entire court of King's Landing looking on. Now he was fumbling at the laces of his breeches, and he breathed in her ear, "It doesn't matter if you're a bit ruined, does it? From what I hear, that's how Lord Ramsay likes them. And don't tell me that Lord Baelish didn't get up your slit a time or three. Any man could have seen the way he looked at you." He got an arm underneath her, jerking her up hard. "Now lie still like a good girl, and this won't hurt."

His breath was coming shorter and shorter with excitement. "Ah – you're not even struggling at all, are you? You slut, you must have been hoping this would happen from the moment I took you – what maiden doesn't want – to be carried off and ravished – by her fair knightly savior? Yes, you're a slut, a little girl with a head full of empty dreams, and now you're about to get them all – "

No, Sansa thought. No, I'm not.

Ser Shadrich had his breeches down around his knees, and was fumbling under her skirts with his free hand. He wasn't paying attention to holding her own hands, and she managed to swing them down to her side. The knife he had dropped was almost in reach. Her fingertips batted the hilt, and she heaved to one side, dragging Ser Shadrich with her. He muttered something in an annoyed tone and got hold of her braid, yanking it so hard that she thought he'd torn her scalp off. He was between her legs, but she didn't even notice, she didn't care. Nothing mattered but that knife, and now it was in her hands.

Sansa saw the trees above her, the sky, the stars, Ser Shadrich's flushed, leering face. She closed her fingers on the knife. The ropes were tied around her wrists tight enough to chafe, but that didn't matter either. Clumsily, but very calmly, she brought the blade up and stabbed Ser Shadrich in the neck.

He jerked. The expression in his eyes transformed from greedy lust to shocked rage. She hadn't gotten it very deep; skin was stronger than she'd expected, she had to shove hard to break it, without hesitating. But the knife was still there, and she had only instants before he'd roll off her and grab his longsword. It doesn't matter if you're a bit ruined. . . that's the way Lord Ramsay likes them.

This time, all the rage of betrayal, abandonment, abuse, isolation, terror, murder, lies, and fury was behind her blow. I am the north. And the north remembers. She slammed the knife into Ser Shadrich's jugular vein so hard that it exploded out the back of his neck.

This time when he convulsed, it wasn't a pained and irritated thrash. His eyes were already glazing over, his blood pulsing hot into her skin and clothes and hair. He collapsed on top of her in a grotesque simulacrum of the act of lovemaking, and died.

Sansa lay under his corpse for several moments, still feeling queerly, bizarrely calm. It was only after that that the shock set in. She twisted out from beneath him and sat huddled and shaking on the ground, dripping in blood. The wolves will smell me here. But why should she fear them? Father killed Lady so long ago, but I am still a wolf. I am Sansa, Sansa Stark.
The words sounded so good in her head that she had to say them again, after so long playing Lady Lannister, after playing Alayne Stone, after lies and lies and lies. "I am Sansa Stark," she said out loud, wonderingly, and started to cry.

It didn't last long. It was a spurt of released emotion like a cloudburst, hard and shattering and quickly over, as she wiped her eyes on her sleeve and sniffed and gasped and choked. Then, with an aghast awareness of what she was doing at once subsumed by acceptance of the practical necessity of it, she knelt at Ser Shadrich's side and began to loot his corpse.

There was barely any money – he was, as he had said, utterly skint broke. Only one silver stag, and a handful of copper pennies, but she tucked them into her pocket nonetheless. There was the longsword, which she briefly considered taking, but it was too heavy for her and she had no training to wield it. There was the knife with which she had killed him, which was better, and his heavy cloak. His horse had reared and shied at the scent of blood, but its hobbles had held.

The next order of business was to get her hands untied. Sansa twisted and pulled at the ropes until they were almost rubbing her bones, but could not loosen them. So finally she wedged the dagger under a rock with the blade pointing up, slipped her hands over it, and began to saw back and forth. She winced every time it nicked her skin, until her palms and knuckles were covered with small weeping eyes by the time the last fibers parted. She tore a few strips off Ser Shadrich's tabard and looped them around as makeshift bandages, then tied them in place.

Sansa was still so fragile and euphoric that her new reality only then became apparent. She was utterly alone in the dark woods, with not the remotest idea of where she was or where she was going. There was no way she intended to continue meekly on to get bought by Ramsay Bolton, yet she was equally sworn not to go back to the Vale. She could always try to find her way to the Quiet Isle, and likely should. The Mountains of the Moon were filled with wolves and wildlings and winter, and she had few provisions, no way to hunt, and she was still the kingdom's most sought-after prize. Perhaps more so now, if Littlefinger had leaked the word of her true identity in order to recruit help to search for her. She did not know if he would have or not.

_I am free._ It was a dizzying thought. From the moment she left Winterfell so long ago, with Father and Arya, she had not been free. King's Landing had been a dream that turned into an unending nightmare, and then the mummerly of the Vale and her growing awareness that she was just as caught as she had been before. She wondered if there was anywhere in Westeros that was safe for her right now. _I could try to make it to White Harbor, take a ship across the narrow sea._ She couldn't be far from the coast, could hire a boat to cross the Bight to Lord Manderly's seat, and Lord Manderly had always been a staunch friend to her father and to her brother Robb.

_What awaits me across the narrow sea, though?_ As a girl she had been enchanted by the tales of the exotic splendors of the east: the canals and courtesans and bravos of Braavos, shadowbinders from Asshai, the striped zorses and the moonsingers of the Jogos Nhai, the basilisks of Yi Ti, seas of Dothraki ghostgrass and the paradise of the Summer Isles, the smoking ruins of Valyria. . . all of it had seemed both too wonderful and too frightening to be true, to a little girl growing up in the grey walls of Winterfell. She knew no one, spoke none of the languages, had no money, and would only be able to trade on the faint and fading hope that some adventuresome soul would want to involve himself in the mucky politics of Westeros for a smile and a kiss. _Or more._

Unable to riddle out an answer, Sansa untied the horse and led them as far away from Ser Shadrich's body as she could, hoping not to blunder down some unseen cliff and break her neck in the dark. She pitched the small tent, fumbling the knots with her bandaged hands, and crawled inside and lay down. She still could always starve herself out here in the wilderness, but that idea had already lost its savor. _I have to live, I want to live._
Using Ser Shadrich's cloak as a makeshift blanket, she slept, woke, and dreamed fitfully, startling awake half a dozen times certain that she heard intruders in the woods. Finally, too sore and cold to sleep anymore, she crept out in the greyness before dawn and ate a few crusts of hard bread that she found in the saddlebags. Then she washed off the blood in a frigid spring, gasping and spluttering at the icy needles. After that, there seemed to be nothing to do but get up on the horse and find out where fate would take her.

_I have to do something, I'm too recognizable the way I am._ She considered returning to Ser Shadrich's body and taking his clothes, but couldn't bring herself to do it. She tied his cloak around her neck, then pulled her long braid free and unsheathed her knife.

Sansa had always loved her hair. It was long, thick, and lustrous, dyed brown when she had been Alayne but starting to show through with the true Tully fire. *My lady mother's hair.* But for that very same reason, it was much too dangerous. Gritting her teeth, she slipped the blade up beneath the back of her head and cut it all off, then dropped the braid on the ground. Her head felt oddly light. It looked as if she'd left a limb behind, and she grimaced and turned away from it. She grasped the bridle of the palfrey, and awkwardly clambered astride. She'd never ridden a courser by herself, in rough country.

_Only one of the things I have not done, and must._ She pulled up her hood over her newly shorn hair, and spurred away.

The day passed slowly. She went downhill where she could, following the river. *It has to reach the sea eventually.* Once she left the trees behind, she continually glanced over her shoulder for any signs of pursuit, but the countryside was utterly deserted. It was beautiful in a cold, bleak way—the Mountains of the Moon serrated the distant horizon behind her, summits shrouded in gauzy haloes of windswept cloud. Before her, the land tilted and rolled in terraces and fields, but the harvest had come and gone, and they all lay dry and dead.

Past noon Sansa had to stop and get down; her legs were cramping badly, and she walked as bowlegged as an old knight. She nibbled a bit more of her remaining food and watered the horse. The sun was pale and ghostly, drifting in and out behind thin streaky clouds, and there was a lacerating chill in the air. *I must find shelter before nightfall. It will snow, and soon.*

Afterwards, she wearily hauled herself back up. *I should think of a name to give, in the event I meet someone._ Yet all her invention was deserting her. *I could be a girl on her way to a motherhouse, no one asks too many questions of a would-be septa. Petyr told me that._ She did not want to think about Littlefinger, perhaps even less than she wanted to think about all the rest, but she knew that she would have to take his lessons to heart, have to remember her poise and polish and secrecy and lies, if she wanted a hope of surviving and ever seeing. . . the gods alone knew what she would see again.

At last, as dusk was falling, she came in sight of the coast. Far out to sea she could glimpse what were unmistakably the grey rocks of the Sisters, and her heart gave a horrible wrenching hoping leap. *I know where I am, it isn't far._ White Harbor might be her best hope. *I could stay there until the trouble is over, the Manderlys would shelter me._ It might not be nearly far enough to deter Littlefinger, however.

There was a small village built around the Bite ferry port, and Sansa rode down into it with every nerve on edge. A girl on a knight's palfrey was bound to attract attention, and not many of them were likely to be altruists. But her belly was gnawing itself out with starvation, and she was exhausted, cold, frightened, alone, and finally beginning to feel everything that had happened to her in the last fortnight alone. She would have to risk it.
As might be expected of a seaport, there was a small inn, and the pockmarked stable boy took the horse without asking any questions. Nervously fingering the few coins in her pocket, Sansa ventured inside.

The inn wasn't very busy. The low beams were blistered black with peat smoke, there was a pervasive smell of fermented ale and unwashed man and dirty cloth, but nobody leapt up at her entrance, and nobody looked like a murderer – only tired fisherfolk and the lower class of merchants, who followed the circuits through the highlands of the Vale and the small towns on the Bite and the Fingers. An innkeeper in a stained apron was making a fussy perambulation through the common room, but he detoured over when he spotted her. "Yes?"

Sansa swallowed. "I – could I buy a room for the night?"

"Two stags," the innkeeper said offhandedly.

"I – have one stag." She held it out like a peace offering. "And – some pennies." She spilled them out, cursing Ser Shadrich's impecuniousness.

"What do I want with pennies, girl? Two stags, I'm running a business here, not a charity. Be quick about it, now. I've paying customers to serve."

"Please. I've ridden a long way, and – and I'd gladly – "

"That's what they all say. Either that or they have some old mother who's dying, whom they're trying to get back to see for the last time and they hope that by the gods' mercy I'll do them this one kindness. You have a dying mother too, girl?"

*My mother is dead.* "No."

The innkeeper snorted. "That makes you twice as honest as most. If only you had twice as many stags. Get out. Run along. Hurry up, go."

"Please – "

"*Go,* girl. Out!"

Helplessly, Sansa backed away from him. Mayhaps there was another inn in town, smaller and meaner and less-reputable no doubt, but for one night she ought to be safe enough. *I have my knife. If another man tries what Ser Shadrich did, I'll kill him too.*

The small, muddy courtyard was as black as pitch, though the moon showed a sliver from behind a cloud. Cold kisses of snow were already starting to fall; it would be another very uncomfortable night outside if she couldn't find sufficient accommodation. She stumbled forward, hands outstretched. *I'll have to get my horse back.* Then she'd just –

And at that moment, she walked very hard into a big, cloaked man, who'd been proceeding across the courtyard in the opposite direction, toward the inn. Hard enough to knock her hood back, and send him retreating a few reeling steps, with a snarled curse.

"I'm – sorry, ser," she blurted out, seeing the hilt of a longsword protruding from beneath the cloak. "I didn't see – "

Strong fingers seized her beneath the chin, forcing her head back. For a fathomless, endless moment, there was nothing but silence, and shock.
"I'm no ser," the rasping voice said, like stone and steel. "Bloody hell, girl. You know that. I'm just a dog without a kennel. And now – " he got her by the arm, half-carried and half-dragged her back toward the inn, even as every bone in her body was screaming, _no, it can't be him, I'm dreaming, he's dead, it can't be, don't make me believe this_ – "you're a bird without feathers. So it seems to me – " he slammed the door open, and a rush of snowflakes followed them inside – "that now – we're – bloody – even."
The further north they foraged, the harder the snow came down. Theon had known that this would be the case, had seen everything of a northern winter that he cared to and then some, but all his protestations and all his warnings went blithely disregarded by the wildlings. "We come from beyond the Wall, turncloak," Tormund Giantsbane snorted. "There, we don't have no comfortable stone castles and nice warm fires and kneeler servants to kiss our arses. In fact at home, they'd call this a lovely spring day! *Har!*" And so they barreled on full bore ahead.

It was true that the snow did not daunt the wildlings in the slightest, and neither did anything else. Theon was horrified by their habit of singing shanties in the Old Tongue as they marched, always at the top of their lungs; the stone kings in the crypts under Winterfell were waking to complain of the noise, he imagined. But when he'd stammered to Tormund that this would bring Ramsay down on their heads at once, the white-bearded wildling had replied, "Aye, and I would damned well hope it does. There's a gulp or three of the Bastard's blood that my axe needs drinking, turncloak."

"But Ramsay. . . Lord Ramsay. . ." Theon fumbled to find the words. He'd already tried to tell them about the fingers, had even showed them his mutilated hands, he couldn't understand why they wouldn't listen. He tried to get Asha to explain for him, but she told him that they knew perfectly well. She was no happier about being caught than he was, she said, but it could have been far worse.

That Theon could not dispute. The wildlings called him "turncloak" instead of his name, which he didn't like, but there was no real malice in it, only a matter-of-factness and at times a drop of pity. He feared to know what they intended for him, however. They'd said that they were making for Winterfell, to free Mance Rayder, and the only way Theon could conceive of how they would accomplish that was to barter him back to the Boltons. Ramsay might be afield, hunting Baratheons, but Roose had remained behind to hold the fortress and ensure that the Manderlys minded their manners. Theon was unwilling to clutch too closely onto this as his potential salvation, but it was true that the elder Bolton disapproved of his son's sadistic games with "Reek," and would likely not release a prisoner of Mance Rayder's importance in exchange for a used-up plaything. The fact that he was putting his hopes in Roose bloody Bolton, Theon thought, was an indication of just how dire his prospects really were.

His one solace was Asha. The wildlings set a hard pace, and Theon would have fallen behind in a matter of hours if she hadn't taken it upon herself to carry him when she could, or put him up on one of the wildlings' shaggy ponies when she couldn't; she had haggled it out of Soren Shieldbreaker yesterday, an episode which had left the wildling with a disgruntled and confused look on his face for some time afterwards. (Their own horse had proved as disreputable as advertised, and collapsed and died in the snow not long after they'd left the holdfast.) But Theon seriously doubted that she'd be able to contrive a second miracle escape for them – a third, for him – and was likewise forced to admit that abandoning the wildlings would do them, at this point, no good at all. *Leave and die now,* or *stay and die later.*

The landscape grew more and more forbidding. They hadn't seen the sun in days. Theon tried to judge where they were, but everything looked different when it was buried in white. *We can't be far.* It put his remaining teeth on edge. Even the wildlings, for all their bravado, had adopted a cautious approach; there was no more singing, no more swaggering. The world had become silence and snow and searing cold, and to his horror, Theon caught himself thinking longingly of how warm it had been to bed down with Ramsay's bitches. *It would have been plenty warm if Stannis burned you to death,* too.
That night, the snow falling so fast that they couldn't even build a cookfire, Tormund announced that the time was in fact at hand. "We're less than three leagues off from Winterfell, lads, and we'd all best be ready to do our part on the morrow. My boy Toregg here — he nodded at the tall young wildling who'd been serving as their scout, running across the tops of the drifts with bearclaws strapped to his feet, miles and miles every day without ever seeming to tire — tells us that the Boltons still hold the castle. They've got that little pink girl o' theirs flapping off the towers, at least. And there's a pissing lot of dead men piled up a few miles from here. Some with the Boltons' badge on 'em, some with that bloody stag. Which means King Stannis, long may he reign."

Tormund spat, as the wildlings tended to do at any mention of Stannis. "As for where Stannis or the Bastard might be in their lordly selves, well, Toregg couldn't tell us that. So we'd best be prepared for anything."

"Toregg was able to get close enough to the castle t' see where Mance is hung," Tormund went on. "He's in a crow cage suspended from the outer wall on the northern corner. He's alive, but he isn't looking so well, not at all. We'll steal up that way, give us time to cause the distraction and for the turncloak to shimmy up the tower and break him out."

For a moment, silence. Theon was utterly sure that he had misheard, and prayed fervently that he had. "What — what did you say?"

"I only told as what's going to happen, boy. Weren't you paying attention?"

"Yes — but — " Theon's horror almost overwhelmed him. "I can't do that, I can't climb — the, the missing toes, the fingers — I can't — they'd see me, they know who I was, they'd kill me on sight — "

"Thunderfist," Asha broke in. "He has a point. I'll do it, I'll climb up there. If Mance can't walk, I'll have to carry him down. Theon can't do that."

"Sorry, lass, but that isn't how it'll be," Tormund said. "The turncloak knows the castle inside and out. None of us do. And we have the rope ladders that our folk use t' scale the Wall, we'll throw the grapnel-hooks over them — what d'ye call 'em — crenels, and it'll be quick as that. We plan on causing a very big distraction, don't you worry. And if it should go cat-a-wampus. . ." The wildling shrugged. "He's the one we can most afford to lose."

"Not to me," Asha said. "Not to my mother."

Tormund shrugged again. "Your mother's a bloody long way away, lass. And besides, your brother's the one got us all into this mess in the first place. Seems only fair he should help to make it right."

"He's done enough. He's endured enough. They'll kill him if they take him."

"Seems to me they'll kill us all, if they can." Tormund broke icicles out of his beard. "It isn't us that are the monsters here. Your ancestors built that bloody Wall as high as they could, but it wasn't us they was trying to keep out. Aye, we don't bend the knee and we don't pander and grovel and none of us are no pretty knightly knights, but we know what's at stake. Here." He unsheathed his rune-
engraved knife, and offered it to Theon.

Theon took it clumsily. He couldn't grasp it quite right, but he liked the feeling of it nonetheless. It was a long time since he'd been armed, a long time since he'd been the predator instead of the prey. But still... "If they catch me, I'll never be able to hold them off, never..."

"Nor did I think you could," Tormund said. "If it comes to that, at least you won't have to go back to them. Every man makes a choice, turncloak. Whether to die, or live. There's yours."

A chill even colder than the snow went down Theon's back. My choice. He stared at it intently. It was pretty, with the bronze blade and the bone hilt. Ramsay will never have me back. One way or the other. Nor would Stannis. All that was left to him was to live.

He did not sleep that night. The wildlings had given him and Asha a big furry robe to share, which kept out the worst of the weather, but it was still impossible to get very warm. He peered through the dark trees at the sky. He wanted to see the stars, or the moon; he'd begun to forget what it was like to look at them, in the horror of his imprisonment in the bowels of the Dreadfort. But all he saw was snow.

It was not yet dawn when the wildlings roused them. No torches were lit, no sound was made. The air was so cold that it was almost crystalline, as if he could put a fist through it and shatter it. His hands were even clumsier than usual. I'll fall, I won't be able to climb, they'll catch me. They'll see.

He struggled to recall the moment of clarity he had found last night. I am the ghost in Winterfell, he reminded himself. I flew from the towers with Jeyne.

The snow was almost over their head in places. Tormund and the Great Walrus went first, clearing a path that the others could follow. Theon came in the middle, holding onto Asha. The sky was pink, printed starkly with the black wet stamps of trees. The storm is over. And, perversely, right at the wrong time. If it had kept snowing fit to beat the band, at least it would have given them some cover.

It was almost light by the time they finally caught sight of Winterfell's massive grey battlements, looming out of the whiteness of the world. Its gates were scarred and soot-stained, drifts climbed the curtain wall almost halfway, and windows stared like empty eye sockets. A few of what were unmistakably bodies lay half-buried in the lee of the towers, and the Bolton banners hung still and lifeless from the merlons.

A frisson of shock went through Theon. I'm back here, after everything, I'm back here, I'm seeing it. There were small figures patrolling the tops of the wallwalks, but the wildlings were well hidden in the tangled trees. The last he'd set foot here, the old gods had whispered his name, and he thought he'd glimpsed Bran's face. I am far away from the sea, the Drowned God has no sway here. These are the gods of the north, the gods of the Starks. "Theon," he chanted under his breath. "Theon, my name is Theon." And I carry my own fate in a sheath.

Up ahead, Tormund signaled for a halt, and the raiding party gathered around him. Through the thick trees and the jagged veils of icicles, they could just make out the shape of a crow cage, dangling dizzyingly high from the Broken Tower above the north gate. Theon felt nauseous. I will never climb that far.

"Right," Tormund whispered. "We're as close as we can get. Turncloak, what's that big round tower just behind the broken one, the one with the gargoyles?"

"That's..." Theon had to think a moment. "The First Keep. It's ruined. Nobody uses it. The – Lord Ramsay, he didn't –"
Tormund waved a hand, cutting him off. "No matter, I didn't need its bloody history. On the signal, myself, Soren, and Harle the Huntsman will cause the distraction. Toregg will take you along the walls and throw the ladder. All you have to do is climb it and unlock the cage, then climb down. A blind babe could manage it. If by mischance something should go wrong, Toregg will meet you in the northwest corner, by the godswood."

Theon nodded dumbly. "It's by the glass gardens," he said to Toregg. "And – " Suddenly panicking, he turned to Asha. "You won't leave, will you? You won't leave me."

His sister's face was very still, unreadable. "No," she promised. "I won't leave you."

"Hurry now." Tormund unslung a great horn from his belt, beckoned Soren and Harle around toward the eastern side. "We'll give you what time we can, but it's best you didn't linger. Get Mance down and get into the trees."

"Aye," Tall Toregg said, clapping a strong hand on Theon's shoulder and nearly knocking him off his feet. "We'll see to it."

_He thinks I can do it._ Theon was absurdly proud of that thought, and for that one brief moment, he forgot to be afraid. Then Tormund raised his furry fist and brought it down, the woods exploded in a cacophony of winding horns and eldritch shrieks and stone axes clashing together, and the wildlings were sprinting and scattering like someone had poured water on an anthill. And there was something else he should have said to Asha but he couldn't remember, and then he and Toregg were running for their lives underneath the frowning stone brows of the Broken Tower.

The snow must have been almost thirty feet deep here on the windward side, giving them a head start up the eighty-foot outer curtain wall, and it had frozen almost as hard as rock. _No wonder Jeyne broke her rib when we leapt._ Theon was aghast at how horribly exposed they were, but Tall Toregg kept pulling him on, until they were almost directly beneath the crow cage dangling overhead.

_Where is the one with Arnolf Karstark?_ Theon wondered, but decided he would rather not know. If there had been battles between Boltons and Baratheons, it was possible that Ramsay had discovered the deception by now, though Theon did not know how either. _And would rather not know, as well._

Tall Toregg, kneeling lightly on the cavernous drifts, pulled the rolled ladder from his pack, attached the rope and grapnel to each end, and swung it over his head. Theon watched it go up and up and up, and somehow catch on the crenel of the wall. One and then the other.

"Go, turncloak," Toregg said, and handed Theon some sort of strange iron tool. "That should break the lock well enough. He's not chained inside the cage, I saw. Climb."

_I can't, I can't,_ Theon wanted to cry, but somehow he was putting one foot on the ladder, and then the other, and he was off the snow and climbing, and the grey stone walls were all around him, laced with hoarfrost. Toregg grew small and then smaller beneath him, and his toeless feet slipped and stumbled but he didn't fall. _I can fly._ He'd leapt down these walls before, surely he could go up them.

The crow cage grew steadily closer. No arrows hissed down. He could hear the clamor made by Tormund and the others, somewhere down below, but it didn't matter any more.

There was a wallwalk at the top of the ladder, and Theon swung one leg onto it, then the other. From here, he was no more than five feet from the crow cage. _I will have to climb down onto it._
Oh, gods.

Inside the frozen iron bars, a man huddled underneath a cloak of skins. The sight of it turned Theon's stomach; he fell to his knees on the narrow wallwalk, hideously aware of the equally vertiginous drop down to the courtyard on the other side. The skins were still recognizable as having belonged to women; the hair remained attached, and one of them had an arm and dangling fingers. Theon tasted vomit in the back of his throat, clutched at his face with his own damaged hands, did not dare to look behind him. They see me. They're coming. Gods, I can't do this.

Still the distant uproar continued. I'm not caught yet, he thought dumbly. He clambered up onto the merlon, grasped the chain, and dropped.

It was only five feet, but it was the longest five feet of his life. The world opened up below him. He fumbled the implement off his belt. He slid sideways and the lock was in his hand. I'm going to fall, I can't do it. Then he was hitting it, and crying, and hitting it again, and his limbs were as weak as water and it was too far to fall, too far, and he was hitting it a third time and wrenching for everything his miserable flayed skin had ever been worth.

The lock was frozen through, and on his fourth blow, it split like a crack in the surface of a lake. He pulled it off, and watched it drop out of sight into the snow below. Then he got his seven fingers into the crack between cage and door, and yanked it wide.

The man in the cloak of women only then seemed to take notice of him. His hair was brown, heavily streaked with grey, and his face was ravaged with frostbite, a strip of skin missing from his nose and cheek. Whether Ramsay had taken it, or the cold, Theon did not know. "Get out, climb up," he hissed. "Onto the top. Come on." If Mance was not able, then their only choice would be to leap again.

The wildling blinked at him with eyes dull and mazy from pain and confusion. A gust of wind caught them, sending Theon's heart into his throat, and Mance slid precipitously toward the open side of the cage, barely stopping himself from plunging out. "Turncloak. What in hell are you doing here?"

"No time. Come on." Theon clambered back up the chain, toward the dubious safety of the wallwalks. He wasn't strong enough to pull Mance over if he couldn't do it, hated his own frailty, hated it. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with weak. But then he got one leg back over the crenel and then the other, and lay flat, gasping.

After a nerve-rending moment, Mance's hands appeared, gripping white on the stone. He struggled over the edge with an audible grunt of agony and collapsed next to Theon. "You should have stayed away," he said, eyes closed. "You got away."

"I... did, but they... they caught me." Theon knew he wasn't making much sense, but the Others could take sense. "There's the ladder. Right there. We just need to climb down it. Tormund. The wildlings. They're here. They brought me."

"Tormund?" That appeared to amuse the King-beyond-the-Wall. "Of all the men? The great growling bag of wind? Well then. It would be uncouth. To waste all this work." He seemed able only to speak in brief punching bursts, and as he got up and staggered along the wallwalk, Theon could see the dried blood on his stomach and chest. "So, turncloak. We have. To pay him a call."

Theon got to his knees, then pushed to his feet. "Abel," he said. "You were Abel, and I was Reek. Why did... why were you here?" He couldn't possibly imagine.
"Later." Mance crawled up onto the merlon. "Down here?"

"Aye." Theon peered over the edge. He could just see Tall Toregg below, waving furiously at them to hurry. "I'll tell – you'll tell, and then we can – "

There was a hissing *whiz* and *thump* from somewhere very near at hand. In his life before, Theon had been an expert archer. He knew what that was. And he had just enough time to know it before Tall Toregg froze, then slowly reached to touch the arrow sunk to the fletching in his shoulder.

Theon looked from it, up to the merlon thirty yards away, where a man in Bolton colors was standing with another already nocked to his bow. And looked back down as the second arrow was loosed. This one took Tall Toregg through the stomach, and he grunted, staggered, and fell.

Theon ran. He somehow dragged Mance's arm over his shoulders, and the two of them lurched along the wallwalk like a pair of drunken cripples on the lam from the sheriff. *A blind man leading a blind man.* He was almost carrying Mance; the wildling king seemed unable to put any weight on his right leg. *Jump, turncloak. Jump.* But below him were only the grasping fingers of trees. *I can't really fly. I can't.* The fall from here would kill one or both of them.

There were shouts in the courtyard below. An arrow flew over his head, then another one. *They know we're here. It was too easy to get up to the cage, it was too easy.* Yet somehow they were still running. They must be nearly above the eastern gate by now, and still he was supporting Mance. *His washerwomen gave their lives for me and Jeyne, I will die for him if I have to.* Then all at once, the tower of the Great Keep was in front of him, and a window, and a door.

Theon threw his weight against it. *"Help me,"* he cried at Mance, and somehow the wildling king did. The two of them crashed into it, icy splinters digging into neck and shoulders, and then fell through into almost complete darkness.

The door slammed shut above them. Theon tasted blood and bile, lay there unmoving, could hear Mance's gulping gasps. And then something else, another voice he knew, said, "*Who's there?*

Theon rolled over. He struggled forward. "Lord Wyman?" he croaked. "Wyman Manderly?"

"Who's that? Who's there?"

"It's – " *Me?* Wyman Manderly was not like to be overly enthused by the sudden appearance of Lord Ramsay's flayed monstrosity. "It's . . . Theon."

Silence. Then the Lord of White Harbor said only, "Gods."

"I know. We . . . it . . . we have to get out, I was . . . the wildlings . . ."

"Lady Arya," Wyman Manderly interrupted. "Arya Stark. Seven hells, Theon Turncloak, tell me the girl got away. Anything else, I don't care."

"She . . ." *No, I can't tell, I can't tell him that she isn't Arya.* "She . . . did."

He heard the fat man exhale shakily. Then a candle was struck, and Theon Greyjoy gazed onto the face of the one soul who might look worse than he did.

Manderly's throat had nearly been slashed open by Hosteen Frey after the murder of Little Walder, and it was still healing, slowly and badly. He had lost a good deal of weight after being confined as a hostage, and his skin hung on him in bags and wrinkles. His eyes were hollowed out of the formerly vast terrain of his face, and at least half of his chins were gone. His clothes were unkempt
and dirty, and while not quite as bad as Reek's had been, his smell was nothing to appeal. He sat on his bed, staring at them.

"You," he said at last. "You and Abel. But it wasn't Abel, was it?"

Mance Rayder had made no move to get up off the filthy, rush-strewn floor of Manderly's prison. But at this, he looked up at the Lamprey Lord. "No. It wasn't."

Wyman Manderly shook his head. "You're fools, both of you. Fools. Particularly you, Turncloak. If you fled, why on the gods' earth would you come back?"

No reason I could explain. Nonetheless, he opened his mouth in a futile attempt to do so. But before he could, they all heard angry footsteps coming fast and hard, up the corridor outside the door.

Lord Manderly snapped out of his paralysis. "Into the bed!" With greater dexterity than Theon could ever have imagined, he jumped up from the disordered covers and herded them both onto it, half-lifting Mance when the wildling king almost collapsed again. Then he flung the quilts over them just in the nick of time. The next instant, Theon heard the door open.

"Manderly," the voice said. "See if you can haul yourself out of your own shit and get dressed. M'lord of Bolton wants a word with you about the fates of our friends of Frey."

"I have already informed Lord Roose," Manderly replied, in the same cold tone, "that the deaths of Rhaegar, Symond, and Jared, while regrettable beyond all doubt, were nothing to do with me."

"My arse. You see, there's some things Lord Roose has been thinking about, going over. Some things which are making a certain sort of sense, now he sees them twice. Three great pies. Three missing Freys. And you asking the singer for songs about the Rat Cook. That ring any bells, you bloody sack of suet?"

Beside him Theon felt Mance, who'd been that singer, convulse slightly.

"I am afraid," Manderly said, "that it does not."

"Liar. Well, we'll find the truth of it soon enough. The trap was finally sprung, so his lordship has returned. He'll be the one helping question you."

Trap, Theon thought. Trap. Trap. Trap. He stuffed a fist into his mouth to keep from crying aloud.

There was a fathomless moment. Then Manderly said, "Yes. I see. We would not want to deny Lord Ramsay the pleasure of my company. Or me of his. I will come."

One word. Theon's world stopped turning.

Ramsay.

Ramsay was here. Had come back, had actually been lying in wait, had been hoping for someone to try to rescue Mance. Had known, had known, had known. Might have seen him scaling the walls toward the cage. The world shut down around him, hidden there in the fetid heaps of Manderly's bedclothes, and he was only Reek again, Reek keening in the dark, Reek who wasn't even a man. No, he thought, no, I'm Theon, I'm Theon... but he was shaking so hard that surely, surely the Bolton man would notice.

"I need a moment to prepare myself," Manderly said coolly. "I will attend you then." And Theon
heard the door shut with a snap.

Lord Wyman let out a slow, shuddering breath. He knows, he knows what this means as well as I do. Yet even facing the unthinkable, Manderly did not abandon himself to despair. He made a great show of rustling about and causing a racket, and then bent low to the bed; Theon could just see his broad shadow. "The Kings of Winter," Manderly breathed. "Bael the Bard. The rose of Winterfell. They dare not go there. Run there. Run."

"The kings of winter. The ultimate Stark place, and I am no Stark. Yet Theon seized it, clutched at it the way he'd clutched at Tormund's knife. Bael the Bard. Mance must know the tale. It was faintly, vaguely familiar, but he couldn't pin it down.

The door opened. Manderly walked through it. It closed.

He is dead, Theon thought, he is a dead man and I soon will be as well. But somehow, the same as he had climbed the ladder, he was crawling out and pulling Mance with him, and waiting until the corridor had gone silent before he opened the door. Manderly had left it unlocked. Our only chance. To cross a castle with Roose Bolton in it, Roose and Ramsay, Ramsay, Ramsay.

If he gave himself even a moment to think about it, he would lose all heart. They toppled out into the corridor, scrambled down the stairs. Theon's arms ached and burned with Mance's dead weight, and his feet almost went out from under him. Still he did not stop. I have the knife. I have my choice.

They decanted into the bailey in a mad scramble. Torches flared, terrifyingly close. They reversed course and fetched against a locked portcullis, scrambled back, dodged around the bulwark of the guards' hall. Behind them Theon glimpsed the East Gate opening, had just the briefest glimpse of the heads of Soren Shieldbreaker, Harle the Huntsman, and Tall Toregg mounted on spears. Not Tormund. Not Asha. The gods alone knew what that meant. Run. Damn you, Greyjoy. Run.

The ironwood door that led underground was broken. He threw it aside with the last of his strength, and fell headlong down the twisting steps, still clutching Mance. The Kings of Winter. The rose of Winterfell. Something is down here, something Manderly wants us to find. . . he said the Boltons don't dare go here, the old gods know, they know. . .

He lay at the bottom, crumpled and gasping and bleeding. Bael the Bard comes home. The darkness before them was complete, and the stone breathed the freezing breath of the Long Night.


Theon struggled to his knees. There was not a part of him that did not ache as if he had been bludgeoned. But then it was Mance's arm under his shoulders, Mance pulling him up as he had carried Mance, and it was no longer Abel and Reek, it was Mance, Mance and Theon, and they struggled to their broken feet and fled into the darkness of the crypt.
Davos

For almost three days afterward he lay in a nightmarish haze of dreams and reality and cold that burned like flame. Sometimes he saw the red woman, other times his Marya, and the four strong sons he had led to a watery grave on the Blackwater. There was his Devan, at the Wall with Melisandre, but for some reason Davos could never see his face, and when he finally turned his eyes were as blue as death. Little Steff and Stanny flashed by like phantoms, and then last of all he saw his king. Stannis was grinding his teeth, as usual, and the face he turned on his Hand had all the aspect of a death mask. What takes so long, onion knight? he growled. Do you think I have forever to wait?

"No," Davos muttered feverishly, "no, you don't." Guilt twisted in him like a blade. Sometimes he would wake almost all the way and hear the whispering of the Skagosi crones, and he would remember where he was, that he was still alive, that he'd been saved. And then the darkness would rise over his head again, and all his dreams would be of snow.

Of the rescue itself, he recalled almost nothing. Only stabbing, stabbing with the black glass knife, seeing some of them melt and puddle away into icy smoke and suddenly understanding everything Lord Manderly had told him about the dagger, but at the same time he was atrociously aware that there were simply too many of them and he'd soon be overwhelmed. For a fleeting moment he thought of Stannis, and wanted to weep. How could any mortal man, even one who was said to be Azor Ahai reborn, possibly prevail against this foe?

He had been quite sure that that thought would be his last one. But then he caught a flash out of the corner of his eye, and a blaze of light. And while he was still staring dumbly, the wildling woman came charging up the mountainside, torches in both hands, and beside her the big black wolf that could only belong to Rickon Stark. Both of them plunged without hesitation into the middle of the wights. An instant later the night was awash in flaming, stumbling dead men.

Davos went down on one knee, barely aware of the coldness in his lower back, thinking madly that the Seven had heard, that they had answered his prayer. And then he remembered that the Seven had no power here, that he had never seen anything so primal as the way the big direwolf tore a wight almost in half and the unholy blaze of fire, Melisandre burning the Seven on the beach at Dragonstone, the torch in the cell where he'd been imprisoned after he'd tried to kill her, Porridge and Lamprey, down and down and down.

The next time Davos was aware of anything, he was naked under the furs in the crones' tent, his back still burning with cold. He remembered that he had taken an arrow there during their initial capture, but this was a different pain, far worse. Unconsciousness came as a blessing after that, but there was no respite in the things he saw. In his lucid moments, he tried to comfort himself with the fact that surely since Osha had not merely let him die out of hand, she must be willing to at least consider a bargain. If not, she could just have stayed safe within the circle of torches, and come to take the glass knife from his dismembered corpse in the morning.

At last, on the evening of the third day, he woke for good. One of the crones who had a few words of the Common Tongue came to tell him how long it had been, and to warn him not to overexert himself. He had been wounded by one of their blades, which was why he had diced so precariously with death, and no potion or tincture they used had been able to remove the ice from his flesh. It was a crusted cold slash, and when Davos put a fumbling hand to it, he pulled it back with a hiss. The crone shook her head at him reprovingly, said something in the Old Tongue, and then produced a gnarled, dirty stub of ivory which she brandished in his face. After much confused
sign-language, Davos was finally given to understand that this was a unicorn horn, renowned for its healing properties, and that several young men of the tribe had been dispatched to kill one of the creatures and see if it would have any effect on this fell injury.

Davos was once more heartened by this, as it seemed a queer lot of trouble to go to on behalf of someone they intended to kill out of hand, and wondered how much the Skagosi and Hjalmarr Bjornsson knew about Osha and Shaggydog's part in his rescue. Perhaps he was now worthy of some honored station due to surviving the night on the mountain, and he wondered how on earth to explain it in a way that would not completely shatter this useful delusion. But he had just begun to concoct a barely plausible cover story when the flap was pushed aside, and Osha herself ducked into the tent.

She dismissed his caretaker with a few brusque words, and poured more seal oil onto the brazier, making it spit and hiss a foul-smelling smoke. But Davos was shivering even under the piles of furs, and he moved as close as he could. He waited until he was absolutely sure that they were alone before he spoke. "Thank you."

All that won him was a sour look. "If I had a lick o' sense I'd have left you to die out there." Osha took a seat on the crone's stool, watching him with eyes as hard and keen as a hawk's. "Instead I run into the middle of a pack o' bleeding Others as if I was some sort o' bleeding hero."

"But you did," Davos said. "Why?"

The wildling woman cocked her head. "Why indeed? You're a kneeler and a southerner and you have absolutely no sense turning up here after us. But for all that, you did, and I was none so sure I wanted t' see you perish at the hands of them dead bastards. And it's true as well that I've been thinking. The boy shouldn't have to spend his life entire on Skagos, and the gods know that the Boltons could use some sorting out. But no matter if that's so, Rickon is happy here, and – "

"Safe?" Davos finished wryly. "How long have the wights been coming at night?"

"He's a deal safer than he'd be back there, provided he don't wander beyond the torch ring after nightfall. But what I was going to say is that whether there or here, he's still the youngest of Lord Stark's sons. By your kneeler laws, that don't give him no claim unless all the rest are dead. Really dead, not hiding out like he is. And there's the other thing. You might eventually get Rickon onto a boat – aye, maybe, if you didn't mind being bit some. But I'd like to see you do it with Shaggy. That beast is as wild as this place, and it isn't only seal flesh he's developed a taste for."

Davos absorbed this in some dismay. In any other circumstances, he would have elected to hang the wolf and just take the boy, but in this case, the wolf was equally important, if not more so. Otherwise, no matter how much Rickon Stark looked like his lady mother, there would be no way to prove his identity beyond all question.

Still, Davos certainly did not intend to let himself be defeated by such trifling logistics. "Will the wolf do what the boy tells him?"

"Might," said Osha. "Might not. Or you might want to take up them old gods, smuggler."

Davos looked at her in startlement. "Why?"

She grinned crookedly. "Because a piddly seven gods won't be enough t' save you, if Shaggy decides he's not having it."

So I will take a half-wildling boy of five years, and an even wilder direwolf with an appetite for
human flesh, on a dangerous voyage in a small currach back to White Harbor, on the frail and fading hope that Lord Manderly still lives and is in a position to make good on his offer. For a moment, Davos entertained the disloyal notion that he could not for the life of him see how this was going to work. But after coming this far and enduring this much, he would have brought back an Other itself, if that was what was needful.

"Well," Davos said at last. "I would hope that the fact we're having this conversation at all means that there is at least a chance. May I be permitted to meet the lad?"

Osha gave him a lingering, shrewd look. "You're stubborn, ser shorthand. No denying it. Here." She tossed him a long woolen robe, a sealskin mantle, a pair of furred mukluks that laced up to the knee, and his tattered leather breeches. "Get yourself dressed, and we'll see about it."

Davos did his best, but his hands were as clumsy as blocks of wood and his back was still on fire, so it took some time until he had managed even these simple garments and was stumbling after Osha into the cold, clear day. It seemed impossible that he could still be here, could be watching something so mundane as two old men sharing a bone pipe, a woman beading a dress, another matter-of-factly skinning and disemboweling a mountain goat. After all the images he had built in his head of the Skagosi as savage, bloodthirsty, unreasonable and witless cannibals, he was slowly coming to realize that they were no more and no less than human. *I have seen the face of the true enemy.* It made him wonder how Stannis' knights, as notoriously prickly of their honor as was their king, had fared in their new lodgings at the Wall, surrounded by crows and wildlings. Assuming there was that which remained to be lodged in. As he did about every other moment, Davos deplored how little he knew of Stannis' fate or plans or movements, and realized with a start that his king might well believe he was dead. Lord Manderly had prominently mounted that tar-dipped head and those shortened hands on the gates above White Harbor, after all, and there would be no one to inform Stannis that it was a fraud.

This thought made Davos quicken his pace, even though every step was clumsy and painful and he had to constantly grab Osha's arm. She gave him tolerantly irritated looks but did not order him to stop, until at last they reached a broad snowfield where several children, both boys and girls, were playing some sort of violent ballgame. Even as Davos watched, one of the older boys knocked flat one of the younger ones, who bounced up and began spitting a fluent stream of curses (or at least if they were not curses, they certainly sounded like them). He was tall for his age, compact and strong, with a tumbled mane of hair that glinted almost as red as Melisandre's in the sunlight, and Davos was not at all surprised when Osha called, "Rauður mínn. Here."

Startled, and clearly somewhat annoyed at being interrupted right in the middle of teaching the bully a lesson, Rickon nonetheless broke off and trotted over. Davos inclined his head. "My lord of Stark. Good morrow."

The child studied him suspiciously, eyes blue and frowning beneath thick brows. After a moment he turned to Osha and asked something in the Old Tongue, to which she replied, pointedly, in the Common. "This is Ser Davos Seaworth, who's come on behalf o' Lord Wyman Manderly, of White Harbor. You'll recall him."


"Not only him." He had to tell them, Davos decided. "Ultimately on behalf of my king, whose Hand I am. Stannis Baratheon, the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, who fights in the north against the Boltons who sacked your home of Winterfell. If you are returned to it as your rightful seat, Lord Manderly will accept Stannis as his king. I hope... I hope that in your gratitude, my lord, you will see fit to do the same."
"Nuh-uh," Rickon said forcefully, shaking his head. "Robb's the King in the North. Robb, not Stannis."

"Your brother is dead, my lord." Davos took care to keep his voice calm and level. "I am sure Lord Manderly told you. He lost a son at the Red Wedding as well, and so – "

"No!" Rickon's own voice rose stridently. "You're a liar, you're a lying fat liar! You're just like Theon. Theon was a liar too, he lied and killed everybody in Winterfell and he betrayed Robb too, I hate him! I hate him!"

Davos fought the urge to take a step back, reminding himself that he was quite foolish to be cowed by any display of emotion from a five-year-old, no matter how vehement. He thought again of what Wyman Manderly had said to him. The north remembers, Lord Davos. The north remembers, and this mummer's farce is almost done. Rickon had lost everything he had ever known in the world, no matter what faint solace he had found here on Skagos. Small wonder his cynicism far outstrips his age.

Still, Davos did not intend to let it carry on indefinitely. "My lord. I understand your anger, but I am not Theon Greyjoy. Nor is Stannis the sort of man who means – "

"NO!" Rickon screamed, fists clenched and face crimson. "NO, I WON'T!" And with that, he bounced forward and kicked Davos soundly in the shin.

At that, Davos' patience abruptly evaporated. The rightful Lord of Winterfell Rickon Stark may be, and the pivot on which Stannis' cause turned as well, but he was also a headstrong, spoiled brat, and at the moment, he was acting full like it. Besides, being a father to seven sons had taught Davos a few things about dealing with misbehaving boys. He reached down, snatched Rickon by the shirt, and bent him smartly over his knee. Then, while the lad was still too astonished to struggle, Davos smacked him hard, twice, on the bottom.

Osha observed this with a sardonically amused smile. "Can't say you didn't have that coming, rauður mínn," she remarked to Rickon. "And he'll do it again, if you vex him."

"I have not come to play games, no," Davos informed him. "I intend to leave as soon as I can, and you, your wolf, and Osha – if she so wishes – will be accompanying me."

"Won't go," Rickon said, with somewhat less conviction than before.

"I am not terribly interested in your opinion, my lord. Only your cooperation." Davos looked back at Osha, trying not to think too closely about what she'd said about cooping up Shaggydog on a small boat for over a fortnight at sea. "I will agree to whatever I must, with Hjalmarr and the others. You will take me to them?"

"I suppose I might," Osha agreed, after a moment. She gave Rickon a push. "Go back to your friends for the moment, child. Try not to give any of them cause t' kill you, if you wouldn't mind."

Then she turned and strode briskly away, Davos following her at what could best be termed a valiant hobble. His shin ached where Rickon had kicked him, and that only fueled his grim determination. I am through with games.

The chieftain and the shaman were huddled together, talking in agitated voices, when Osha pushed into their tent with never so much as a by-your-leave. They looked up with narrowed eyes, then caught sight of the resurrected party behind her and stared openly. The shaman made a sign to ward against ghosts, and Hjalmarr said something to Osha that sounded both accusing and dumbstruck. She shrugged and answered, utterly unfazed.
Davos moved forward. "You will consider any tests passed, I trust?" He could not blame them overmuch for their stupefaction. After all, when you threw a man out into a desolate wilderness at night, in cold and snow, not even to mention the stalking dead things all around, you did not necessarily expect to see said man strolling into your tent three days later, looking only minorly the worse for wear. At least, not alive.

"Hjalmarr says he remembers your demands," Osha said, after the chieftain had held forth at some length in an emphatic, guttural voice. "He says he is pleased that the knife has done so well. And he says that you will remember that he wants more of the glass. Soon."

"When my king's victory is won," Davos answered, "I will be glad to fulfill my promise." He meant it, too. If taking Rickon home won Stannis' war in even the barest measure, he would come back to Skagos with a whole hold of dragonglass.

"That is too late," Hjalmarr said, through Osha. "They grow stronger every night. Soon the fire will not be enough to keep them away."

"My king's war is as grave as your people's." Davos refused to be swayed. He could not fight his way through the entire clan to take Rickon away, if Hjalmarr decided to be difficult, but he somehow had the feeling that he was already out of time. "I will be at his side, come what may. Then I'll return. I swear it."

"You will." Osha's voice captured the same threat as Hjalmarr's. "You will swear it. You will leave the boy here as your bond, and make your oath in your own blood. Then, and only then, you will have leave to go."

"Boy?" For a moment, Davos was afraid that they meant Rickon.

"Wex. The squid squire. He will stay with the tribe until you bring the black glass."

"Wex is an innocent," Davos protested. "A mute. It was thanks to him that I knew to come to Skagos at all. Keep him if you must, but do him no harm. This is not his quarrel."


If the route to Skagos is even still passable by then. There were a thousand possible eventualities between this day and that one. The only way to know was to start turning some of them into fact.

Davos drew the black glass knife from its sheath; he had been astonished to find it beside him when he woke. Like as not the wildlings had feared to take it from him, without knowing the true nature of his battle on the mountain. "As is asked," he said, "I will swear in my blood. Hjalmarr will do the same, yes?"

The wildling chieftain's yellowed, bloodshot eyes were fixed on him, narrow and shrewd. Then he grunted, drew Davos' own dagger from his belt, and slashed his hairy palm.

A man trying to do his best to save his people, against an invincible foe and impossible circumstances. This insight bred a sudden, almost crippling empathy in Davos. He lifted his own hand and cut it with the black blade.

At once, he was forced to his knees by the stomach-turning pain that ripped through him – not from his hand but from his back, and the icy wound dealt by the Other's blade. In fact it was so bad that for a moment Davos was temporarily dislocated from his own body, and when he looked into his eyes, they were blue. Before he had time to consider this or what it meant, he was back as he
should be, gasping. And then, it hit.

The dragonglass kills them, and now there is something of them in me. If I die, I will become a wight – or I may yet become one nonetheless, with this slow poison spreading inside me. Horror rendered Davos momentarily speechless. In his head he could hear the red woman whispering of fire, of how fire was the only cure. A disease like greyscale, proliferating slowly and invidiously, until he was turned not to stone but to ice.

Neither Hjalmarr nor Osha appeared to have reached this conclusion with him. Rather, their expressions were of puzzlement and mild concern, waiting for him to stand up and complete the oath. He would, he knew. Whatever it cost him – from his fingers to his sons to his freedom to his life – Davos Seaworth always kept his oaths.

That night, he received his very own unicorn horn; apparently, the young hunters’ quest had been successful. The crones bestowed it on him with much gesture and grandiloquence – this was a talisman which he was not to let out of his sight, would ward him against evil in the days to come. And there will be much and more. The unicorn itself, a shaggy goatlike creature with fur that smelled like overripe cheese, a jagged knob of bone on its sloped forehead showing where the horn had been broken off, was eaten for supper. Davos found the meat gamey and dry, but it was beyond all doubt preferable to the alternative.

Nonetheless, he was not hungry. His stomach churned. He still felt weak enough for even a modestly sized gust of wind to knock him over, but he had decided against spending any more time recuperating on Skagos. The gods alone know what I am turning into. All was set, and he, Osha, Rickon, and Shaggydog would leave at sunrise tomorrow, to give them the maximum chance of reaching the currach before nightfall. It would be a hard, dangerous slog in the best of circumstances, even though Hjalmarr had agreed to provide ponies to make the going somewhat quicker. In exchange, he’d wanted Davos to leave the glass knife right then and there, but Davos had finally haggled him out of it. If he was killed en route, he impressed upon the big chieftain, it would completely undo all their hopes of seeing another fleck of it.

When he finally retired to the crones’ tent afterwards, Davos slept badly and shallowly; he kept having nightmares of Lord Manderly with his face skinned off. When that wasn’t so, he lay looking at Wex and wondered what the boy thought of him, for so casually bartering his freedom away. Wex had bravely done his best to reassure Davos in sign language that he would be fine until he returned, but Davos could not shake the guilt.

As for Rickon, he had been transparently much more displeased, and it was not until Davos threatened to spank him again that the young Stark heir grudgingly subsided. Davos had no wish to mistreat the boy, of course, but he also had no interest in being his friend. So far as he could tell, Rickon – having literally been raised by wolves for the greater part of his young life – was in sore need of good firm paternal discipline, and mayhaps a dose or two would help stress to him the importance of the cause he was returning to champion.

At last, completely unable to sleep, Davos lay awake in the small hours and thought about what might be walking even now, just beyond the ring of torches. His back still throbbed. It frightened him almost as much as it had to see them swarming the mountain in the first place.

Yet dawn came, somehow. Groggy, hurting, and sad, Davos stumbled into his clothes and wraps, buckled his swordbelt around his waist – he had managed to talk Hjalmarr into returning it too – and wondered if he should wake Wex to bid farewell, then decided against it. Lingering on any of this would only make it the harder. I cannot look back.

He stepped out of the tent and found Rickon and Osha already waiting. Shaggydog was pacing
back and forth, hackles raised and teeth bared, but at least he did not immediately go for Davos' throat. The three ponies, stolid square creatures almost as hairy and ill-smelling as the unicorn, were pulling nervously at their tethers, discomfited by the presence of the big wolf, and Davos could not fault them for it. "My lord," he said to Rickon, "if you will let him run ahead?"

"Shaggy stays with me," Rickon said stubbornly.

Deciding not to start their venture off with a quarrel, Davos did not press the point; he would need to win other, more important arguments later. The ponies were untied, and the three of them mounted up. Davos had been on the verge of asking if Rickon could ride alone, but upon seeing the deft way the child scrambled up, he swallowed the question. Indeed, as they set out from the village, Rickon went frisking ahead like a centaur, Shaggydog bounding at his side.

"Not too far, rauður mínn," Osha called after him. "The sun hasn't cleared the valley wall."

Rickon was either too far in front to hear – or, more likely, judiciously pretended that he hadn't. Davos made a mental note to bring it to the boy's attention later, as obeying their orders would prove absolutely critical if they intended for Rickon – or any of them – to survive the voyage. He was going to have to call on every last one of his old smuggler's tricks to get them back down the coast without detection, and then invent a few new ones to slip safely into White Harbor. He wondered if Manderly was back from Ramsay Bolton's wedding yet, and had no idea why there was a sickening sinking sensation in his stomach at the thought.

Osha knew a way through the mountains that was safer and more sheltered than the harrowing traverse Davos and Wex had blundered through, and they made better time than Davos had dared to hope. But it was still early afternoon after they'd stopped for as quick a meal as they could. Rickon had wandered off in pursuit of something interesting Shaggydog had smelled, and was sulking again after Davos scolded him for the delay.

The sun was nerve-rackingly close to the horizon by the time they finally cleared the rocky gulch and skidded down onto the beach; the last section had been so steep and narrow that they'd had to dismount and lead the ponies. There was no chance of bringing the animals on board, save for Shaggy. They'd have to turn them loose and trust their ancestral instinct to find their way home.

Davos and Osha ordered Rickon to stay close while they clambered into the rock fissure where the currach had been hidden, and began pulling the branches off. As they did, Osha said quietly, "You'd bloody well better know what you're about, ser."

"I do." Davos would freely admit his poisonous doubt to himself, but never to her. "I promised to Hjalmarr, and I will promise to you as well, my lady. I will see you delivered safe to Lord Manderly in White Harbor, and then Rickon to Winterfell, or die in the doing."

"My lady?" That seemed to amuse her. "But I almost think you mean it, shorthand. If only you could. The boy's nobody's savior, just a child, and his brother might still live. If you bring us back and then that's so, we should have stayed here."

"Might," said Davos. "Could. Should. If. These are dangerous words."

"So they are, at that," Osha acknowledged, pulling the last of the brush free with a grunt and staring at the revealed currach incredulously. "Bloody hells, that's your boat? I could break it in half with my own hands and pick me teeth with them twigs."

"It's stronger than it looks," Davos untied the bowline and paid it out. "Help me."
Silently, Osha did so, and the two of them dragged the boat through the sand to the water. It rolled up and down on the ice-white breakers tumbling into the beach, and she beckoned to Rickon. "On board, rauður mínn. Now."

"Here, Shaggy." Rickon whistled, and the black wolf leapt over the gunwale with such vigor that a wash of cold saltwater followed him in. Then Rickon himself clambered over, crawling under the hood of skins at the stern and peering out with a broad grin, having forgotten his earlier objections and now thoroughly ready for a new adventure. For a moment, Davos found himself softening to the boy. He missed his own sons so much.

Osha swung on board too, and Davos pushed the currach the rest of the way into the sea before climbing in himself. There wasn't much wind, so he slid the oars into the oarlocks and began to pull. For an instant, despite everything, he almost felt hopeful. Considering what he had faced five nights ago, for him to be here at all was a miracle, far less with the Stark boy in his custody.

Osha took the other set of oars. She rowed more strongly than Wex had, and even stronger than Davos himself; his ordeal had taken its toll. He couldn't resist glancing over his shoulder for one more look at Skagos, the island silhouetted spectral in the deepening twilight. Its cliffs were as black as ink, the bloated sun blood-red. The water was paved in an even darker color, tracking out to the uncertain horizon. But nonetheless he'd done it, he'd gotten them away, and then he would find Lord Manderly and –

Something nudged the boat from underwater.

Davos' attention immediately sharpened. It could have been a rock, or a seal, but. . . he was letting his imagination run too far away with him, he knew it. He firmly told himself not to be ridiculous, and kept on rowing. Once they got into the tide race, they'd be able to –

Something else knocked the boat. Once, and then again. They yawed sideways on the choppy waves, and Davos caught something moving out of the corner of his eye. Something too slow and clumsy to be a seal.

"What's that?" Rickon peered interestedly over the side. "There's faces. Faces in the water."

"Get away," Osha said, in a low urgent voice. "Get away from there, rauður mínn."

"Why?" Rickon frowned at her. "Are they mermaids? Mermaids aren't really real, they're just stories. And – "

Shaggydog bared his teeth. He started up a low, rumbling growl in his throat.

"Get the sail up," Davos ordered Osha. "I'll make all speed I can." His back throbbed and froze and burned. If he let himself acknowledge the panic, it would devour him, so he rowed faster.

Osha sprang up and ran out the canvas. It wasn't much; the currach only had one mast. But it snapped out and sang in the rising wind, and she fumbled a few clumsy knots. Wildlings were no seafarers. "You might want t' be checking it, ser," she said breathlessly. "Hold on, I'll take the oars, you can – "

At that moment, the first rotted hand burst from the water.

Rickon shrieked, reeling backwards and falling hard into Shaggydog, who grabbed his master's collar with his teeth and dragged him away. The hand was followed by another and then another, and then the wights were bursting up all around the boat, necrotic flesh gleaming wetly, bone glinting among torn tissue, opaque eyes staring and mouths working like a school of sharks. Some
of them bit into the frame and the skins, others began crawling up the prow. Dead things in the water. Gods have mercy, have mercy, have mercy.

"Wildlings," Osha gasped, trying to knock one off the forecastle with her oar, "they was wildlings in their lives. In t' village – we heard tell – of four thousand wildlings and more – making for Hardhome – on the coast of the land beyond the Wall – "

And now they are all dead. Davos could not even allow himself to think, could only react. He still had the glass dagger, but it did not work on wights so well as it did on Others. Fire, they needed fire, but on a frail boat in the middle of an icy ocean, their enemies all around and behind and below, it was utter madness. But they had to drive them off somehow, had to –

One of the wights groped blindly for Rickon. The boy shrieked again and smacked it away from him, and Shaggydog lunged so far over the side that he nearly capsized them, clamping the struggling wight in his jaws while it thrashed and lurched horribly like an insect driven through with a pin. Osha was still fighting the one on the forecastle, and Davos stabbed one that came pawing up over the stern with its eyes hanging half out of its head and a gaping gash in its throat. It fell back with a heavy splash, and the ripples went on for dozens of yards on either side. There are hundreds of them. It's not fair. It's not fair!

But there was no leisure for that. They rocked and splashed and wallowed, and more hands pounded at the boat from below. If they ripped out the bottom, they were done for. Yet one was falling back, and Davos slashed another, and Shaggydog tore apart a third, and they were still struggling forward, the wights hadn't stopped them entirely, the currach was stronger than it looked, and –

And Osha was gone.

One moment she was still balanced precariously in the bow, fighting off the dead wildlings for all she was worth, and then there was a stifled shout and a heavy splash. Rickon flung himself at the place where she'd been, and Shaggydog dragged him back once more, though this time Rickon was fighting tooth and nail. "Osha," he screamed, "Osha, Osha!"

She is dead, I can't save her, she's dead. Yet Davos found himself wondering – knowing – where he would be right now if Osha had taken that same approach with him. And before he had time to tell himself how suicidal it was more than once, he jumped overboard.

The water came up to hit him broadside. It was so cold that he almost went into shock, and his heavy clothes pulled him down. He opened his eyes, feeling the sting of saltwater, and saw Osha some ten or fifteen feet below him, trapped in the arms of the wight pulling her down. Her eyes were open as well, and a panicked, futile stream of bubbles issued from her mouth.

Davos reoriented himself and plunged. He kicked like a madman, green haze and white corpses all around. Wights loomed up grotesquely, leering. He dodged them, eyes still fixed on Osha, stretching out both hands. A man couldn't survive more than a quarter of an hour in water this cold, and he certainly couldn't hold his breath that long. But he would not let her go.

He kicked harder. Osha's struggles were getting weaker, her eyes rolling back in her head. But one more almighty stroke brought him into range, and then he had hold of her, ripping her away as black spots began to fizz and choke in his own vision, and then up and up and up and up.

Davos breached the surface with a gagging, wheezing gasp, heart shuddering like mad and breaths high and whistling. For a moment he couldn't move, despite the exigency of the situation, and then he grabbed and shuddered and struggled over.
Osha was still alive when Davos dragged her onto the deck, but barely. Her skin was dead white, her eyes closed, her breath a slow, gurgling whistle. He rolled her over and clasped his fists in her stomach, expelling as much of the water from her as he could, but she flopped, limp as a rag doll. Shaggydog was now their sole defender from the wights, who – it might just have been Davos’ desperate imagination – seemed to be falling back. Rickon was cowering under the hides in the stern. No matter how brave a five-year-old he was, this was an utter nightmare.

Davos laid Osha back down and pressed his mouth to hers, trying to blow a breath into her lungs. It was no good; the air just seeped uselessly out when he pulled away. He tried again, refusing to concede defeat, and again. They were definitely picking up speed. Overhead, the stars were starting to come out.

"She can't be dead," Rickon's small voice said. "She's not dead."

*How little you know, summer child.* Davos tried one breath, and then another, and then another, and compressed her heart, as he had seen his fellow sailors do on more than one occasion to jolt back to life those who appeared to have drowned. But it was still useless. Osha let out one watery gasp, and then another. Then her head lolled back, and she lay still, staring up at the sky with eyes as blank as the face of the rising moon.

*She is gone.* Davos sat back on his heels, stricken by grief for a woman he had only just met. *But she saved my life, and I could not even save hers.* Silently, he promised Osha's spirit that her sacrifice would not be forgotten, that Stannis would number her among the heroes when he came into his throne.

"Osha?" Rickon said again, hopefully. "Osha?"

"She is dead, lad." Davos' voice sounded thick and clumsy. He was shivering violently in his wet, icy clothes. Still more, they would have to throw her overboard, and immediately. She had been touched by a wight, she would rise beyond all doubt.

"No. No, she isn't, I won't let her!" Rickon got to his feet and attempted to rush to his guardian's body, but another wave caught them and he stumbled. Davos caught him, and Rickon struggled violently, beating his small fists, screaming at Osha to wake up, wake up. But she didn't, and she didn't. And he started to sob, a sound as sharp as the wind itself, and collapsed against Davos, kicking and beating his fists, furious at the world for what else it had dared to take from him.

Davos could do nothing but hold the boy tight. *The night is dark and full of terrors,* Melisandre whispered seductively. *It is not too late, ser onions. Save yourself. You need not become one of them. You need not sacrifice the boy."

*But you would have,* Davos said back to her, silent, heartsick. *You would have sacrificed Edric Storm if I had not sent him away.*

*There is power in a king's blood,* she responded, as always. For a moment he could almost see her eyes, as unnaturally red as the wights' were blue. But then it was only the moon and the stars, and Rickon sobbing and Shaggydog howling, as the wind belled the sails, the dead men and Skagos faded behind them, and they sped into the heart of the falling night.
Brienne

The wind had been steady for almost five days now, a stroke of good fortune that Brienne had not dared to hope for. It drove the skiff along the Red Fork at a blustering clip, and the few times it slowed or vanished, she pulled the oars until her arms ached. She had rowed Jaime down this river before, in a different situation, in almost a different life, and that time, even though she had hated him, she had saved him from Robin Ryger's archers. For Lady Catelyn's sake, not his. Now even the thought of Lady Catelyn seared like a brand, and as for Jaime... He was alive, at least. She had stopped at one of the small towns along the river and bartered her last few coins for some clean bandages and a pot of sticky dark ointment that the merchant said had come from a healer in the east, someone called a maggy. Jaime had revived enough to complain about the smell when she applied it, which was heartening, but only the endless hard work of handling the skiff kept her from abject panic. The Elder Brother will heal him, he must.

She'd contrived as comfortable a berth for Jaime as she could, with her cloak and his in an impromptu hammock. Guilt drove her on harder than any goad. She was always careful where she anchored them for the night, only stopping when it was too dark to go any further, and no matter how she yearned to give Jaime the luxury of a proper bed and care, it was too dangerous. They would be known anywhere.

The shock of everything was starting to sink in, and Brienne was haunted awake from her fitful dreams by the memories of Catelyn Stark's ruined face and hating eyes. She slept sitting upright; there was not enough room in the bottom of the skiff for two to lie abreast, and she would not disturb Jaime. A permanent dull ache had settled in her muscles, and her throat was as coarse and dry as sand. Sometimes she sipped river water to quench her thirst, but the taste was brackish and rotten. They had almost no food, and she gave to Jaime what they did, lifting his head and holding the bread to his lips until he swallowed. Occasionally he tried to refuse, but she wouldn't let him, coaxing and pleading and even threatening him until he muttered, "Stupid stubborn brave wench." He smiled at her once, told her that he wanted to eat some dog with lemons when they got to wherever they were going, then murmured that it wouldn't be Dorne after all and lapsed back into half-consciousness.

By Brienne's reckoning, they should reach the Quiet Isle in only a few more days. The Red Fork drained right into the Bay of Crabs; all they needed to do was follow it. If Jaime had not expired this far, glued to life by Thoros' potions and the maggy's, it seemed likely that he was no longer in mortal danger, even if his wound still turned her stomach whenever she looked at it. In those unformed hours, Brienne found herself mouthing prayers for the welfare of both the Lannister twins. She scolded herself for her insincerity, knowing that she only hoped for Cersei's preservation out of that ridiculous fantasy that it would also somehow save Jaime, but she could not help it.

She had known it for a while, but had avoided confronting it directly, due to the tangle of delicate and treacherous emotions that it brought up. She was at least as in love with Jaime Lannister as she had ever been with Renly Baratheon, perhaps more, and sometimes it made no sense – and then it made all the sense imaginable. For she had loved Renly for his charm and chivalry and polished courtesies, his handsome face and his winning smile and his good manners, the only man who had ever looked past her ugliness and ungainliness and the mail and leather she wore and the sword that she could beat any of them with. It was true as anything, and owed nothing to be excused or explained away, but it was still a girl's love, a perfect model of the courtly archetype, to chastely long from afar without hope of consummation. I fight like a knight, and I love as one as well. Yet still she could never be a "ser."
Jaime was utterly different. It would have been difficult to find another man in the Seven
Kingdoms who was so utterly Renly's antithesis. Like Renly, Jaime outwardly resembled the
perfect knight, but ironically, it was his most knightly act – slaying the monster that Aerys
Targaryen had become – which had set the stage for he himself to become known as the monster. *I
called him it myself, the last we passed this way.*

Yet for all the things, good and bad, that the Kingslayer was – and they were legion – he was no
monster. And Brienne had seen so many of them, known the weaknesses as well as the strengths,
that Jaime had become a real man to her, a whole one (missing hand notwithstanding) in a way that
Renly never had. He made no bones about what he was, did as he damned well pleased and dared
the world to challenge him, yet at the same time, some dark small scared part of him feared that it
would. And the parts of him and the parts of her had become mixed up together, until she could no
longer say what belonged to the girl she had been before, and what to the woman she was now.
And if Jaime Lannister – *Jaime* thrice-damned Lannister – wanted any of it, he had only to ask.

But she could never escape the shame of loving the man whom Lady Catelyn had so despised,
and with equally as good reason. When the two emotions collided in her chest, Brienne wanted to cry
out with the force of it, as if it was truly tearing her in half. The only relief was to row faster and
faster, until the skiff rocked with their speed and she ached from head to toe. Physical pain at least
she could bear, though her half-eaten cheek sometimes hurt enough to press silent tears out of her
eyes. Once or twice, she came to the brink of confessing her feelings aloud, just to find a shred of
relief, but she always restrained. Jaime went in and out of consciousness, and she was horrified at
the idea that he might overhear her. And since she was largely responsible for the fact that he was
lying there as he was, he might not take it seriously, think it was only a fit of guilt. Or pity her. Or
make some flippant Jaime jest that would break her heart.

With this maelstrom brewing in her head, Brienne was genuinely shocked to look up on the sixth
day and see the Bay of Crabs opening blue-grey in the near distance. The mountains of the Vale
were visible to the north, white scarves of ice gusseting from frosty summits, and she was
reminded again of just how long it had been since she had seen any scrap of green, anything fair or
flowering or fertile. Even the lower slopes and terraces were laced in snow, and in Lord Harroway's
Town – which she'd given as wide a berth as she could – smoke drifted from the crowded
chimneys. Jaime had started to shiver, so she pulled off her own cloak and tenderly covered him
with it.

An hour's hard rowing finally got them out of the estuary, and up onto the beach of the Quiet Isle.
Brienne jumped overboard to haul the boat clear, staggered, and went to a knee in the cold, briny
water; after close to a week without setting foot on dry land, her legs were cramped and unsteady.
There were already a few brown brothers gathering on the hill above, looking down curiously, but
in deference to their vows, none of them called out to her. Instead, they waited while she hoisted
Jaime in her arms, then labored up the path to them. Gasping from the exertion, she said, "I need to
see the Elder Brother. Immediately."

The brown brothers glanced at each other. Then in unison, they shook their heads.

"What?" Alarm lanced through Brienne like a blade. It was his skill, his care, his healing, that
she'd staked all her hopes on. "Has he taken ill? Is he dead? Please, I know you are not meant to
speak, but I am *Brienne*, Brienne of Tarth, he knows me, I met him the last time I came here, with
Septon Meribald and Hyle Hunt and Podrick Payne – please, I beg you, let me know what has
become of him – "

One of the brothers held up a hand, stemming her desperate tide of words. Then he beckoned for
her to follow him, and she did, shaking. Jaime's head had sunk against her chest, but she still heard
him whisper. "Brienne. . ."

"Aye?"

"Where in seven hells. . . have you brought me this time? I'm not sure. . . I can survive a visit. . . with any more of your friends."

"You will," she said fiercely. "You will."

A faint smile curled his lips. He muttered something she didn't understand, and she resumed the climb. At the top of the hill, they passed the rows of neat graves, and by reflex, she looked instead for the big lame gravedigger who had been there last time. But he was gone as well.

The brothers led her into the septr, and motioned for her to wait. She did, leaning against the wall for support, until a door opened at the far end and the proctor who had greeted her before, Brother Narbert, stepped through. He was plainly not expecting to see her, and his mouth dropped open, though he recovered with aplomb. "Lady Brienne, this is an honor, of course. Though. . ." His eyes flickered to her burden. "It is likely that you would not have wished to return in this fashion."

"No." Brienne shifted Jaime, trying to ease the ache in her arms. "Please tell me where the Elder Brother is. Please."

Brother Narbert weighed his words before he answered. At last he said, "The Elder Brother has gone to the Vale, to attend the health of Lord Robert Arryn. But while he was there, he seems to have. . ."

"Has what?" Brienne pleaded. "When will he return? What happened there?"

"My lady, it is not my place to tell you. Two of the Warrior's Sons who went with him returned on their way south, and. . ." For a moment the proctor seemed to teeter on the verge of spilling all, but composed himself. "Come with me. I can doctor your companion in his stead."

Brienne was burning with desperate curiosity, but forced herself to swallow her questions. There were other and more important things to see to, and she followed Narbert through the cloisters to a dark low room. The brother lit a torch and gestured for her to put Jaime on the bed. She stepped aside to allow Narbert to inspect the damage; he did so, then said, "You may stay, if you wish. I could use your assistance in keeping him still."

"They cut off. . . my wrist before," Jaime rasped. "This time. . . you'd best not cut off my chest."

"Be quiet," Brienne told him, and moved to hold his shoulders as Brother Narbert gathered catgut and needle and a cloth and basin, a strigil and a candle and a small knife. She felt as unready for the ordeal as if it was she who was about to undergo it.

It was even worse than she had imagined. Brother Narbert had to cut, drain, clean, and cauterize the wound, and the gush of pus when he broke the scab made Brienne retch and Jaime swear. He kept on swearing in violent, rambling bursts, so inventively that even Brienne, who had spent the vast majority of her life among men, learned some new vocabulary. Brother Narbert trimmed the torn edges back, dug out a splinter of Lem's blade, used the candle to sear the seeping hole, and finally began to hem it closed with catgut, each stitch accompanied with a rhythmic sobbing gasp from Jaime. The monk's hands were admirably steady about his gory work. Brienne imagined that during the war, he had seen much more, and much worse.

"Your ointment was a godsend," Brother Narbert said at last, as he was bandaging Jaime up. When informed of its origins, however, he frowned and said, "The maegi of the east are dangerous and
subtle creatures, and have no love for the Faith or the Seven. It would be better if you did not meddle with such things in future."

"It kept... me alive," Jaime commented. "They can worship... the god of baked beans for all... I bloody care."

Brother Narbert threw him a slightly reprimanding look. Then he crushed some powder into a cup of water, and held it to Jaime's lips. "Willow bark, for the pain, and a pinch of poppy to help you sleep."

"Oh, good," said Jaime. "I was so worried about my sleep."

"I'll stay with him," Brienne told Brother Narbert. "Thank you."

"My lady, you are dead on your feet," the monk replied. "And you will recall that in this house, men and women do not sleep beneath the same roof unless they are wed."

Jaime snorted. "I can't tell... if you mean to insult my morality... or compliment my virility. Either way... you're safe."

Brienne could feel her face turning red. Foolish. You foolish girl. "I will stay on the floor," she said. "Only for if he should have need of me during the night."

"I will have one of the novices keep watch over him." Brother Narbert put a hand beneath her arm; clearly, the discussion was over. "If there is aught to know, you will be told. Now, my lady, let's find you a bed. Come."

Brienne dawdled behind as they left, constantly glancing over her shoulder. She was possessed with an unhinged urge to go back, as if she might miss something vital, then told herself that a week in a boat, looking at Jaime as he had been destroyed by her deception, had truly stripped her of every sense of perspective and reason and restraint. Ser Hyle asked me to marry him, she thought furiously, even though she would have slept in a bed of nettles sooner than Ser Hyle's. He had been blatantly candid about the fact that he was only doing it in order to inherit Tarth through her, as Lord Selwyn had no other living child, but while she'd been repelled by his matter-of-fact skullduggery, she'd almost been attracted to it, as well. Because... Because it reminded me of Jaime.

Brienne shook her head. She still did not know what changes nearly being hanged would have wrought in Ser Hyle, whether they would be permanent or merely expedient, and she had already taken enough of a risk by sending him and Pod after Lady Sansa. For all she knew, Hyle would grab the girl and hie straight off to Lord Randyll, who would then be at leisure to dispose of this prize however it pleased him.

I will have to join them. Brienne did not consider herself in the least excused from her vows to either Lady Catelyn or to Jaime, and she was unlikely to do any amount of good hovering over the latter. Jaime would be safe enough on the Quiet Isle as he healed, and while his identity could not possibly remain a secret, it was difficult for gossip to spread in the absence of wagging tongues. And besides, she could not believe that he would belong to her for a moment, could not even pretend. She had done what she could to atone for her betrayal, had gotten him to sanctuary and care. Now she had to go. She had to.

Brienne's exhaustion was so vast as to almost be a physical thing, but nonetheless she could barely sleep. She told herself that she could have two days, no more, to gather her strength and reassure herself that Jaime was out of the woods, then press on north. She had no scrap of proof that that
was where Sansa had gone, only an intuition she couldn't quite shake. She tried not to think of what
the girl had been forced to endure by her failure, then made herself do so. **Jaime is not the only
person in the world. And finding Sansa and keeping her safe is the only way I can ever reconcile
him and Lady Catelyn in my heart.**

Yet that first day passed, and then the second. Jaime slept through both of them, but Brother
Narbert assured Brienne that his wound was knitting extraordinarily well. "I do not think that
putrefaction has set in," he said, "and while I do wonder what the Seven think of such a man, it is
true that he has a . . . I would almost say invulnerability about him, as blasphemous as it sounds."
He hurried to mark the star on himself. "He believes that this cannot kill him, so it will not. I
cannot explain it."

"You do know who he is, then." Brienne was not surprised. Even thin, ragged, dirty, bloody, and
comatose, the Kingslayer was recognizable from one corner of the kingdom to the other.

"I do," Brother Narbert acknowledged, "and . . . forgive me, my lady, but I have seen the way you
look at him. I know the Maiden has fashioned you for love, as She has for all others of your gentle
birth and sex, but Ser Jaime is not worthy of it. I will not deny that the man may have been
misunderstood in his life, but can you truly think that if he still had his hand, he would have been in
such haste to do any of this for you? Like as not he would have given you to his guards for their
sport, as his father did with that whore the Imp wed in his youth. This is the man who killed the old
king, who cuckolded the new king in the bed of his own sister, who tore apart the realm to keep it
dishonorably secret. . . My lady, his misdeeds – "

"I know them." Brienne was weary of hearing them. "As for the rest, I would have expected a
godly man to know better of questioning the hand dealt to us by fate. If I had been born a male, can
you truly think that I would be in such haste to do any of this?" Her voice was sharper than she
intended.

Brother Narbert inclined his head. "My lady, forgive me. I meant no offense. But the Elder Brother
has told me some of what you have taken upon yourself. Do you not think it would have been more
chivalrous, more truly evident of a redeemed nature, for Ser Jaime to set out on the search for
Sansa Stark himself?"

"How could he possibly?" Brienne had pondered this question before. "A Lannister, her House's
sworn enemy, when his father had her brother and lady mother murdered, and married her off to
the Imp for the purposes of obtaining her claim to the North? Do you think his quest would remain
a secret for one moment, do you think anyone would ever believe that he meant only to keep her
safe out of altruism, with no ulterior motives whatsoever?"

"This is true," Brother Narbert admitted again, "but my lady, I think this appeals to you the most
because you see it as something from a tale. You have been given a legendary sword, charged to
fight monsters and save a beautiful maiden. But you – "

"You need not tell me that I am no knight, brother. Nor that Jaime is no hero." Brienne turned
away, swiping the back of her big, freckled hand across her face. "I am not so naive as you think. I
do it fully of my own will and desire. What would you counsel for me? That I wed Hyle Hunt and
return meekly to Tarth, so that I may become Sansa Stark myself – a pawn valued for my father's
lands, dependent on a true knight to save me? By your standards, neither Jaime nor myself are true
knights, yet we are all she has. And I must find her, whatever it may cost me."

"Then go," the monk said quietly. "Find her."

"On the morrow. I will go on the morrow." She ought to be able to buy a horse from one of the
trading outposts on the Trident, Brienne judged. "But now, I will see Ser Jaime."

For a moment, Brother Narbert looked as if he was thinking about thwarting her, but finally gave a grudging nod and stepped aside. Brienne opened the door and ducked into the dim, stuffy sickroom.

Jaime's eyes were closed, but they flickered open at her approach. "Wench. Give me a hand, would you? Or you know what I mean."

She bit her lip. "Aye." Moving closer to the bed as carefully as if she expected to break something, Brienne slid an arm under Jaime's shoulders and helped him sit up. She was relieved to see that there was no new blood or pus on the bandages, and he felt much stronger than he had when she carried him out of the hollow hill. The gods have heard my prayers.

"I'd kill Lem again for something to eat," Jaime said. The whistling rasp in his voice, while still present, was much less noticeable than before. "I don't suppose brown brothers believe in food?"

"I'll fetch something for you. Stay here."

"Bugger that." Before Brienne could stop him, Jaime swung both long legs over the side of the bed and stood. He then staggered as if about to collapse, and she lunged in at once and caught him. It was only when she saw his irreverent smile that she realized he'd done it on purpose, and tears stung her eyes. Partly because she was so glad that he was recovered enough to commence making an arse of himself as usual, partly because she couldn't bear the thought of leaving him tomorrow, and partly because she simply felt far too fragile for jests right now. To her total horror, the tears overflowed and trickled down her cheeks.

"Brienne?" Jaime's voice was different. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" she gasped. "I trick you, take you to be killed by the outlaw brotherhood led by the corpse who was once my lady, because I would not do it myself and was nearly hanged, had half my face eaten when I've never been a maiden fair to start with? Then watched you be stabbed for the charge you made of me and which I utterly failed at, broke my back for a week trying to get you here to safety, was tormented by my shame, have to leave tomorrow to try once more to find my lady's daughter, who might be alive or dead or undead, and you jape me like that and ask what's wrong?" And with that, completing her mortification, she broke down entirely. She sank to her knees, bent double with sobbing.

Jaime looked stunned. He opened and then shut his mouth, thus marking one of the blue moons where Jaime Lannister had nothing clever to say. Then he knelt beside her with a muffled grunt of pain, and pulled her into his arms. He rested his real hand on her back, his golden hand on her hair, rocking her clumsily and muttering small nothings under his breath. Most of it was nonsense, but Brienne could have cared less. This was never the way she'd meant to come to him, to show her need bleeding all over the place. Just like a woman.

"Shh," said Jaime. "I'm sorry. You did everything that you could. Gods, woman, you saved my life again! You're going to have to jump into a few more bear pits, just so I can even up the score."

"But I haven't," Brienne hiccupped miserably. "I haven't found Lady Sansa, I don't even know where she is or where to start looking. I did this to you, all this, I did it – "

"It would have happened nonetheless. You heard what Thoros said. They would have caught up to me eventually."
"Yes, but – " Brienne shuddered with another sob. "It's a ruin, Jaime. It's all a ruin. I don't – I can't stand it. I really can't."

"You have," Jaime said. "You will."

Brienne had no answer. She cried a short while more, then let her head fall with a thunk against his uninjured shoulder. Jaime let her lie there for some while, until her gasping had quieted to slow, deep breathing. Then he said, very gently, "Get up, wench. Let's walk a bit."

Brienne did not want to, but he had asked. So she struggled to her feet, throat sticky and eyes swollen, wondering how much of a freak she looked now, and accepted Jaime's offered arm. Which of us is holding the other up? They made such a pathetic pair that a forlorn giggle choked out of her.

Slowly and ungainly, the two of them stumped through the cloisters and out into the day. It was fine and fair, though a pervasive chill laced the breeze. A few of the brown brothers were out, but with the harvest past and winter setting in, there was no more work to be done in the fields. Instead, they were repairing the wall and outbuildings, chinking cracks against the cold and cutting firewood. Jaime and Brienne's appearance did attract a few sidelong glances, but nothing more.

They walked away from the septry, down to the beach on the far side of the isle, where high piles of rocks shielded them from any view save the gulls overhead. It was warmer here out of the wind, and the Bay of Crabs glittered in the sun. Brienne could feel Jaime flagging, but he made no complaint, and finally drew her to sit down next to him in the fissure of a cliff. The soft sandy space was small and private, almost intimate, and Brienne felt the heat begin to return to her cheeks. She glanced away again, afraid that too many of her thoughts showed.

"Wench," Jaime said. "Brienne."

Unwillingly, she shot him as quick a look as possible.

Jaime put both hands on her face. "I won't stop you from going to find Sansa," he said, "and you shouldn't feel guilty about doing it. I wish I could help you, but I'd be as much use as – "

" – nipples on a breastplate," she finished.

"Exactly." Jaime looked surprised, then smiled. "But truly, I want you to. I don't think I understood precisely what I was putting on you, and I'm sorry."

Brienne wanted to think of something, to say something, anything, but he was still touching her, looking into her eyes, and it was too difficult. She nodded dumbly.

"As for the unpleasantness that happened with the Brotherhood," Jaime went on, "well... we can just call that fair's fair. You wouldn't have been there at all if I hadn't sent you, and you..." He suddenly seemed to be having trouble getting the words out. "You never broke your oath. Not to me, and not to her."

Brienne closed her eyes. She did not want to cry again, she did not, and the emotions exploding in her chest made words impossible. She had said that herself to Lady Catelyn's corpse, before leaving, but Jaime had been unconscious at the time and hadn't heard. Instead, she did the sole thing that she was capable of doing. She turned her head and kissed Jaime's fingers.

She heard him suck in his breath with a start. But he did not pull away. His hand moved convulsively up her cheek, and around the back of her head. Then while her eyes were still closed, for she knew that opening them would end the dream, she felt his warmth on her skin, his mouth
on hers.

Shock obliterated Brienne's thoughts. *Your lips were made for kissing*, she heard Ser Hyle saying jauntily, and remembered him offering to steal into her room and prove the truth of his words. She had threatened to castrate him if he did, but she had never once actually thought that this would happen in its place. *I can't do this, I can't, I must be mad, I can't* – but it was useless. Both of her hands tangled in Jaime's shaggy golden hair, her lips opened for his tongue, she turned her head so they could move closer without knocking noses. She was horrified at the thought of how inexpert she must seem, how alien this must be for him. *With Cersei he must have always known how to kiss her. Two halves of a whole, meeting in the middle.*

At last, Jaime broke away. "Brienne," he said, sounding slightly drunk. "I – I'm sorry. I didn't – "

"I – " She fumbled to gather herself. All she could think of to do was to apologize in return: for not being prettier and more womanly, for not being more knowledgeable, for being only her tall ugly strong freakish self. "I – know I'm not your sister, I can't be Cersei for you – "

Jaime flinched. "Gods," he said. "I hope not. And in return, I can't be Renly for you."

"You – you're not." Her tongue was tied in knots. "I – don't want you to be." Briefly it seemed as if there were four people present and not two, his past love and hers, Cersei watching with furious green eyes and Renly with amused blue; there would be no jealousy on his part. *I loved him, but he only pitied me.*

For an instant more the ghosts remained, almost tangible enough to touch. Brienne wondered if Jaime could sense them, and could not fathom how on earth not. Then of a sudden both of them were reaching for each other, the real living thing among all the memories and shades, and she fell back on the sand, Jaime on top of her, kissing with hunger and grief and savagery.

Brienne could no longer think straight. *His wound. . . he might break it open. . .* It kept receding away before she could catch it, like waves breaking on shore. When they pulled apart the next time for breath, she stammered, "On the Quiet Isle. . . can't sleep together under the same roof if we're not. . ."

"I don't see a roof." Jaime glanced up ironically at the sheet of pale blue sky above them. "Do you?"

She gasped another shuddering laugh. *This is only a madness, he feels sorry for me, he merely thinks he owes it to me.* Yet even that was not enough to get her to stop. Jaime's left hand was fumbling at the laces of her jerkin, he mumbled, "I've never taken men's clothes off someone else before," and she trembled as his cold fingers cupped her small breast. Her own hand groped at his tunic, slid under; she could feel the sharp outlines of his ribs. She skimmed across the small of his back, light and timid. *I am touching a man. I am touching Jaime.*

"Brienne," he panted. "Brienne, if you don't want me to – make me stop. I will. Tell me."

"No." She sounded twice as drunk as him. "Don't."

She could not remember distinctly what followed next. But the end result was that their clothes were unlaced and rearranged, and the wind off the sea nipped at her bare skin, and she could not get her breath at all. Then Jaime grasped her awkwardly with his good hand, muttered, "Seven hells, what am I doing?" and met her eyes, questioning. Unable to speak for her life, she granted permission with a nod.
Jaime lowered himself on top of her, and just the barest breath into her. Brienne grasped her cloak very hard, trying to acclimate to the novelty and intensity of the sensation. Her nurse, on the few occasions she consented to speak of the marriage act, had told her that the first time would hurt badly, but Brienne had heard elsewhere that it would not be as bad if the woman wanted the man. It was not quite painful, if not exactly pleasurable either.

"All right?" Jaime mumbled. "Fine?"

"Fine," she said faintly. No matter what, she didn't want him to stop now.

Jaime let out a ragged breath, hitched himself forward and down, and claimed her maidenhead; Brienne felt it break with a sharp sting. She grimaced again, and he held still. Then she lifted her knees up, braced her heels, and eased the length of him inside her.

They lay entangled like that for several moments, breathing as if they had been chased by a herd of stampeding cattle. Brienne was obliquely comforted that both of them appeared to be at a loss as to what to do next. I have never lain with any man, and he has never lain with any woman but Cersei. Who was, in essence, himself. This must be as odd for him as it was for her.

At last Jaime began to move, slowly and deliberately. She arched her hips, wrapping her arms around his back, taking care not to jostle them too much. It was growing less foreign to have him there; she felt less as if she had been invaded, though it remained raw and exquisite at once. It seemed so simple and almost undignified, hardly worthy of all the mystique attached to it. She seemed to be existing half within herself and half without, watching with some bemusement. The sand scraped her back, sunlight was in her eyes. Winter will never come here. Even if the snow should close in over them at this very moment.

Jaime began to move faster, his real hand holding onto her hip, fingers pressing into the hollow of the bone. They squirmed sideways, Brienne's feet jerking apart, unable to imagine how she would bear the culmination, not wanting to break him, not wanting to hurt him. She felt a wetness on her thigh that must have been blood. It had still not quite tipped over into pleasure, but she did not want him to stop.

He didn't. He pulled her up into him, thrust once and then twice and then three times hard, and gave a hoarse, catching moan as he spent himself inside her. There was a new heat in her, strange slickness and seed. She felt a small pop in her chest, hot and bright, causing her to shake all the way down to her toes. Crying out, she clawed back against him, saw white, and forgot her own name. After that, for the longest time, there was no sound but their gasping and the screeching of the gulls.

At last, Jaime heaved himself upright and slid out of her. The look on his face was one of confusion and guilt and dazed disbelief. "I," he said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have – have finished inside you."

"It's – fine." Her voice didn't sound like hers. "I'll – I'll drink moon tea."

Jaime awkwardly laced himself back up, one-handed. She had two hands, but both of them felt just as clumsy as she tried to cover herself, suddenly and absurdly embarrassed to be naked in front of him – even though they had both seen each other in naught but their skins before, in the bathhouse in Harrenhal when he had climbed into the tub with her. He looked half a corpse and half a god. He looked much the same now, come to think. They sat silently side by side, staring out to sea.

At last, when the sun slipped behind the headlands, Jaime groaned and got to his feet, offering his golden hand for her. She took it, and the two of them retraced their steps across the island, heading back toward the septry.
They sensed the disturbance before they saw it. Then there was a flare of torches, the distant sound of raised voices, and the sight of the cream-and-blue banner of House Arryn, flapping in the gathering dusk. The brown brothers were all gathered on the garth, and Brother Narbert appeared to be arguing vehemently with a tall knight in armor.

Jaime stopped short. "Seven hells," he said. "We might want to be careful about walking into this."

Brienne concurred. They edged closer as cautiously as they could, straining to hear the gist of the disagreement, but the wind was blowing away from them. Then as they stood on the terrace, several dozen yards distant but otherwise in plain view, the tall knight looked up and caught sight of them.

He stared for a moment, then shoved Brother Narbert aside contemptuously. Another of the brown brothers tried to block his path, but the knight knocked him away as well. He raised a hand, and Jaime and Brienne spun around just in time to see more men advancing from behind. Most wore the moon and falcon of House Arryn on their tabards, but there were several other sigils from the nobility of the Vale as well: Corbray, Belmore, Templeton, and more.

"Kingslayer," the leader said. "You're under arrest."

"Really," said Jaime. "What in the devil for?"

"Don't play the fool. Lord Petyr said that if we followed the monk to his lair, we'd find the true source of the plot, and damned if he wasn't right."

"The monk? There's several right here, if you're in the market for one. But I'm afraid I don't follow the rest."

"Horseshit. Does the name Ser Shadrich mean anything to you?"

"The Mad Mouse?" Brienne blurted out involuntarily, before the silence warned her that she had just made a terrible mistake. "Why?"

Satisfied smiles crossed the faces of all the Vale men. "You," said one of the Belmontes. "Since there can't possibly be two women as ugly as you, you must be the one we heard about when we stopped to make a few enquiries. There's plenty of tales about you in the riverlands. Looking for a little lost sister? With blue eyes and auburn hair, aged three-and-ten?"

Sansa, Brienne realized, her stomach doing a sickening flip. They know something about Sansa. And Brother Narbert said that the Elder Brother went to the Vale, but would not reveal why, and . . . "You can't be looking for Ser Jaime," she insisted. "Did Lord Baelish tell you that you would find him here?"

"He didn't," said one of the Corbrays, "but he'll shit himself with glee when he hears. He just didn't believe that the Elder Brother would have offered to spirit the girl away all by himself, that there must be another mover behind the plot. As we said, your whore there is said to have been searching for the girl for some time. And she knows Ser Shadrich. Care to explain that?"

Jaime cocked an eyebrow. "There are enough holes in that logic to ride a dragon through, but I have spent an extraordinary amount of time recently being accused of crimes which I did not commit. It must be something in the water."

"Shut up, Kingslayer." An ugly look had come across the Vale knight's face. "You and your cunt conspired to plant Ser Shadrich in the Lord Protector's household and steal Sansa Stark. No, don't deny it. Tell us where she is, and we might forget we saw you."


Brienne was briefly certain that she was going to faint. "Sansa Stark... was in the Vale?" Lady Lysa Arryn had been her aunt, it was not altogether implausible, but if there had been even the merest rumor that the girl was there, it would have been across the Seven Kingdoms in hours. Lord Baelish must have smuggled her out of King's Landing in disguise. ...but how? Why? The man who was now the Lord Protector and Robert Arryn's de facto regent had been desperately in love with Catelyn Tully once, she knew. But was that enough to cause him to do such an altruistic kindness? It was horribly obvious that Ser Shadrich, her brief companion on the road, had somehow found his way to the Vale, taken up in Lord Baelish's service, worked out Sansa's identity, and then absconded with her. The Elder Brother, what does he have to do with this? And now Littlefinger will think it was all on Jaime's instigation. It was not, of course, but the coincidence could not be more perfect, or more horrid. If Jaime had not been injured, we would never have come here, would never have been caught in the middle. And now... 

This entire day had been like something out of a dream, for good and ill. Sansa Stark is alive. Kidnapped by Ser Shadrich, but alive. Suddenly Brienne's redemption was within her grasp. Yet to chase Sansa meant betraying Jaime all over again, leaving him in the hands of those who would hang him full as gladly as the Brotherhood... No, I was supposed to keep him here, he was supposed to be safe!

"Don't sound so surprised, cunt," said the big knight. "Of course you knew she was in the Vale. That's why you sent that pissant Shadrich. It worked perfectly, no one ever suspected him."

Jaime's hand dropped down to where he would ordinarily have been wearing his sword. "Her name," he said, pleasantly and dangerously, "is Brienne."

"Shut up, Kingslayer."

"Oh, don't worry. I just got through rehearsing this song, I'm only too glad to sing it. This is the part where it does me absolutely no good at all to inform you of my innocence. I'd fight you for it, but alas, I only have one chest, and it was wasted on the last one."

I can. As if in a dream, Brienne laid a hand where her own sword would be. Was this what she was supposed to do? Offer to stand as Jaime's champion again? But where would that end her up but in the same estate as him, wounded and helpless, to be imprisoned as they pleased?

And besides, before she could do anything, Jaime spoke up. "I'll make you a bargain. You can put me under arrest and take me where you please, provided you give the wench a horse and some provisions, and send her to save Lady Sansa. That's what you want, I trust?"

"And why would we make a bargain with you? There's two of you, two dozen of us, and a few monks who don't look like much."

"Maybe because it's tidier." Jaime shrugged. "To be honest, I can't see anything wrong with it, for any of us. If the wench does find Lady Sansa, Lord Petyr gets her back as he pleases, my innocence is proven, and Ser Shadrich, ideally, gets a good hard boot up the arse. Aye?"

The Vale knights exchanged disgruntled looks. Brienne stood petrified. No, she wanted to scream at him, no, don't do this. I don't want you to feel sorry for me, I don't want you to feel as if you owe it to me – this, of everything –

"Fine, Kingslayer," the captain said at last. "It's a bargain. If Sansa Stark is found, if Ser Shadrich comes before us and swears on his mother's grave that he had nothing to do with you, you may be allowed to go free. If not..." He grinned.
Jaime's face was as still and remote as an icy lake. "Very well," he said. "I consent."

"Hear that, lads? He consents!" The captain chortled. "You'd better tell your whore over there to start looking. And hope she has better luck than last time."

Sansa Stark is my last chance for honor. Brienne thought that Jaime had never known how true that was. Except it was more. Sansa Stark was now his last chance for life. I always knew I would have to go. But not like this. Not like this.

Brienne did not trust her voice a bit. She nodded stiffly to Jaime, who nodded stiffly back. Then she had to stand aside and watch him be put in irons, watch and do nothing, only watch as if every part of her didn't want to rush in there and kill them all. I knew not to pretend that he belonged to me, I knew it. That was how the world was, especially for her.

This changes nothing. Yet that was a lie, a hollow and contemptible lie. It changes everything. To save Sansa. To save Jaime. The maiden and the monster both.

Queerly, Brienne was not afraid. She had gone far beyond being afraid. The night air caressed her face, the torches and the banners and the knights and Jaime dwindled into the darkness. She stood there until long after they were out of sight, then turned on her heel and went inside to gather her things.
Jeyne

Ser Brynden Tully died that evening. Jeyne had stayed with him until the end, wiping his brow and holding his hand and praying for a miracle, but he'd been only half conscious when they carried him into Greywater Watch, and never woke fully again. Lady Jyana Reed had exhausted every one of her medicines and potions trying to save him, but she warned Jeyne that there were vipers in the depths of the swamps that even the crannogmen feared. To judge from the mottled fury of Ser Brynden's leg – the veins black, the fang holes livid crimson, altogether so hideous that it barely resembled a human limb – she thought he had been bitten by one. After that, all that was left was the unholy waiting.

When it became apparent that the Blackfish was gone, Jeyne choked on a sob, and pressed her knuckles hard to her mouth. When she'd reached Greywater, when she fell onto Howland's doorstep in utter disarray, she'd felt sure that it wouldn't end like this. She had been unable to do anything besides stammer out her name and pray that he'd think there was no way she could be lying about this. Howland Reed was not much taller than her, with threads of silver in his brown hair and beard and startlingly green eyes. He had listened with an expression of polite, guarded skepticism, then turned and raised a hand. A tall northern lord – Galbart Glover – and a short stout woman in a green-and-black tabard – Maege Mormont – came forward. They looked down at Jeyne, looked at each other, and nodded once.

"That's her, sure enough," Glover said.

"The Young Wolf's queen," Lady Maege confirmed.

"We thought you were in Riverrun, my lady." Glover eyed her curiously. "How on earth is it that you come to be here?"

Jeyne had managed to gasp that it did not matter, that they had to go back at once and save Ser Brynden. It was astonishing that she'd made any sense at all, but a period of great confusion resulted, culminating in Brynden being located and carried in, and Jeyne being taken to the main keep for a restorative drink and hours of frowning interrogation. She'd told them everything thrice over, struggling for the details, until she nearly went face-first into the table and Lady Maege insisted that she be sent to bed. So she collapsed into it and slept for two days straight.

That had been three days ago. According to the Reeds, Ser Brynden had already demonstrated astounding fortitude for holding out for almost a week, but not even the Blackfish's legendary stubbornness could best this foe. Jeyne knew that she had been unforgivably naïve by even hoping for his recovery in the first place. Had she not learned over and over that in this world, evil prospered and good perished? Ser Brynden had done what he was charged, by seeing her safe to Greywater, but somehow she had been audacious enough to believe that that should merit some reward apart from a gruesome, painful, lingering death.

Jeyne was so distraught that she did not even want to move, to look up, to think or breathe or be. If it wouldn't be such a dishonor to Ser Brynden's memory and the sacrifice he had made for her, she might have walked out into the swamps this very moment and waited for the same serpent to bite her. She desperately envied him. He was at rest now, his watch ended.

Lost in the wilderness of her grief, Jeyne jumped a foot when a hand touched her shoulder. "Your Grace," Lady Maege said. "Howland will send someone to keep the vigil for Ser Brynden. Come, have a bite to eat."
After so long with the Blackfish, who had called her nothing but "girl" or "child," or occasionally "my lady," Jeyne could not readjust to being addressed as a queen. It made her even more uncomfortable now than it had when Robb was alive. But she was too weary and sick at heart to quibble, and she was hungry; she had been eating as ravenously as a horse, as if to make up for all she had been deprived of during the escape. So she drew the sheet over Ser Brynden's face with hands that somehow did not shake, and followed the Lady of Bear Island out into the night.

Greywater Watch was indeed the queerest place she'd ever been in her life. It was an intricate spiderweb of domed huts and longhouses, rope bridges, narrow piers, tied-up skinboats – a castle without walls or stables or bailey, that could be ported from place to place merely by pulling up the stilts on which it was built. It did have all the moat that could be desired; even by day the air was dank and dim, the sunlight fighting through trailing veils of moss and vines, huge old trees of hard black wood. It was no wonder that Ser Brynden had said that they lived so close to the land, that they could see the future in the sward. Howland's own son was said to possess a particularly strong incarnation of the gift, but Jojen and his sister Meera had been gone for gods' years now.

The main keep was really more of a long low hall. It sat at the center of the web, branching out bridges like the veins of a heart, in the shadow of a tree so large that ten people could have stood abreast behind its trunk and still be amply hidden. Inside, it was divided with woven screens and hanging tapestries, partitioning it into Howland and Jyana's private rooms, a solar, a hall for dining, and more. Light spilled out of the windows, dancing eerily on the dark water. Crannogmen were a tight-knit, social, and fiercely loyal people, as Jeyne had discovered, and upon hearing that Ser Brynden's death was imminent, many of them had come paddling up to share in the vigil and wake. He would be honored in the old way, sent to his rest as he would have wished. More tears burned her eyes.

Sensing her anguish, Lady Maege laid a hand on her arm, and Jeyne clutched it hard. Here We Stand, the Mormont words said, and indeed they did. She had rarely known a family more suited to its motto and sigil.

They stepped off the swinging bridge and into the hall. The men and women gathered around the carved table rose to their feet, inclining their heads; it was a respectful gesture, but Jeyne did not want to be looked at, could scarcely stand it. Did they think she had come to give a speech, some rousing words, some call to arms? She was just a girl, and she had never asked for any of this.

"Sit, my lady," Howland said, indicating a stool. As always, the Lord of Greywater Watch spoke in a soft voice, and that, combined with his unassuming physical presence, made it easy to dismiss him – until you realized how closely he paid attention to everything, enmeshed himself in the fabric of every moment, learning and filing away any scrap of information. "It was not meet to do this while you were preoccupied with Ser Brynden, and I pray you will not think me horribly unmannerly by asking you to do it now. But there is no time to waste. Everything is changed."

Jeyne nodded. From what she had gleaned from Lady Maege and Lord Galbart, they had arrived at Greywater a week after the Red Wedding, and been forced to hide in fear of their lives as the Stark cause disintegrated overnight. With the Boltons backed by the Lannisters, and no way of knowing which of Robb's other bannermen were alive, dead, imprisoned, or traitors, they had in their possession the decree which named his successor, but no way to even begin to go about enacting it. The ironmen had still been squatting in Moat Cailin and Deepwood Motte, so there was no way for them to get north to their own lands; Motte was the Glovers' own holdfast, after all. They had
foreseen nothing but a very long visit with Lord Howland – not until Jeyne had fallen from the sky into their laps. Now they had a reason. Now they had a cause.

*I am still Robb's queen,* she reminded herself. They called her "Grace" and stood at her arrival and paid their respects because of that. She must use it for strength, must pull herself together, could not drown forever in self-pity. She took a seat and accepted the warm goblet that Lady Jyana handed her.

"My lady." Howland and the others sat as well. "I know you carried a copy of your lord husband's will, but in all the upsets, you may not have had a chance to read it."

"I have not." It was still stashed unopened in her cloak pocket. In the trauma of losing Ser Brynden, she did not think she would have been able to bear seeing Robb's seal and signature, his words left as a ghost upon the page.

"Very well." Lord Galbart took over the conversation. "We will make it simple. With his brothers Bran and Rickon murdered by Theon Greyjoy, his sister Sansa a prisoner of the Iron Throne and forcibly wed to a second Kingslayer in a family that already had one, and his sister Arya missing and almost undoubtedly dead, His Grace's wishes were very clear. In the event that you bore him no trueborn son, my lady, he wished that the title of King in the North, the lordship of Winterfell, the Stark name, and the inheritance of himself and all his forefathers to pass to his bastard half-brother, Jon Snow."

"Snow is of an age with Robb," Lady Maege put in. "He is a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch, and last we heard, had been elevated to the rank of Lord Commander after my brother Jeor's death. He will have to be absolved from his vows, but what man would refuse, when he is offered at a stroke everything he has desired all his life but never been allowed to have? And he is Eddard Stark's last living son, even if born on the wrong side of the blanket. He knows the lessons of duty."

Howland Reed moved as if to say something, then subsided.

Jeyne shot him a curious look, but she was the only one who seemed to have noticed his reaction. "I... understand, my lord, my lady," she said at last. "What part is it you wish me to play in this?"

Lord Galbart and Lady Maege exchanged glances again. It was the latter who answered. "Myself and Glover have thought this over, and agree it is the best. Aside from Jon, you yourself are the continuation of His Grace's claim, the queen he chose and crowned – "

The queen who cost him everything, Jeyne thought –

"– and so," Lady Maege concluded, "you too must do your duty. When Jon Snow is made Jon Stark, when he takes the crown of bronze and iron, you will marry him."

Jeyne opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, and closed it. She should have expected this. It only made sense. *It was Robb's duty to marry a Frey, and failing that was literally the death of him.* She was no longer a girl, with a head full of giddy dreams and desperate first loves. *Queen in the North.* It might mean something more than mere words. It might be true vengeance.

"I... my lady, I am... flattered," she said faintly. "Is... Jon Snow of... a good character? Robb must have thought... most highly of him... ."

"No brothers were ever closer," said Lady Maege. "Robb loved him very much and always spoke well of him. I do not doubt you would do the same."
"He is said to be a solemn and honorable young man," Lord Glover added. "He would not mistreat you, and this match would, it is worth noting, thumb the Freys thoroughly in the eye once more. Any resentment any true northman might have had against you – not that I thought they did, mind you – vanished in the abomination of their crime. And if you were got with child quickly, many would gladly believe it to be Robb's."

Jeyne put a hand to her stomach. She hadn't yet confessed her suspicions to them, could not confess them to anyone. But it took her aback that they could be sitting there so matter-of-factly discussing her potential pregnancy as an affair of state, even though she knew full well that it was.

"I . . . I will do as my lord and lady think wisest." The words caught in her throat. "I will wed Jon Snow and accept my place as queen."

"Good," said Lady Maege, "but there's still the problem of getting you to the Wall, and raising an army to boot. Offering a crown to the lad won't do us a bit of good if we don't have swords to fight for it, and the only way to rally the north is to reveal your identity at a loyalist stronghold. We had hoped for White Harbor, but . . ."

"Lord Manderly has betrayed us," Lord Galbart said bitterly. "Fawning on the Freys and gulping down whatever nonsense they fed him about the Red Wedding – and he lost his own son there, as my lady of Mormont lost her daughter Dacey! I always knew he would be the weakest link. A true northman is as hard as bone and stone and steel, not that jiggling sack of pudding. I am told he went to Winterfell to attend Ramsay Bolton's wedding. Gods be good, he'll get a taste of that Frey hospitality he seemed so to crave."

"Wedding?" Jeyne flinched at the word. "To who?"

"To a girl who is said to be Arya Stark," Lady Maege supplied. "But forgive us if we all doubt it. For Arya to be completely unaccounted for and then turn up just in time to wed the Lannisters' handpicked lord . . . it reeks of convenience, to say the least. And even if it was so, you are still the queen, Robb's wife, and Jon is still Robb's brother. Your combined claim will supersede hers."

Jeyne nodded. She was shrewd enough to know that they would be singing a song of a very different key if Robb's younger, trueborn brothers were still alive. Then she would be only the westerlands whore, the downfall of House Stark, worthy to be pitied and packed into dignified retirement in a motherhouse, but no more. Yet Lord Galbart and Lady Maege, like most of Robb's bannermen, had given everything for the Young Wolf. Northerners did not do things by half measures, and she was all they had. They needed to know that it had not been utterly in vain.

Nonetheless, Robb's brothers were dead, and it was in large part due to that that he'd married her. And by imagining Jon Snow as some lesser version of Robb, she could even work up a faint desire to marry him in turn. There was just one small thing to consider.

"My family was pardoned by King Tommen," she said timidly. "Once they find out that Elenya is not me, that we deceived Ser Jaime at Riverrun . . ."

"That is a point," said Lady Maege, "but not a problem. It will only demonstrate how resoundingly Lannister power has been brought down. As for your father, he knew nothing the entire time, so his ignorance will excuse him again – he's a highborn lord, after all, and with the noted exception of Ned Stark, such creatures are generally immune from the sufferings of us lesser mortals. Your brother Rollam may be kept as a hostage, if the Lannisters can sort heads from arses long enough to even do that, and Elenya will be married off to the first hedge knight who will take her. No, Your Grace. The only member of your family who will truly suffer for this is your mother. And from what you've told us, you have hard feelings against her to say the least."
Jeyne was quiet. No matter the number of angry fantasies she’d cherished against her mother since the Red Wedding, it was true that it was Lady Sybell who had, at considerable personal risk, chosen to change the Westerlings' wager to the northmen after watching the Lannisters crumble. It was Lady Sybell who'd arranged for Jeyne to be smuggled out of Riverrun, Lady Sybell who'd forced Elenya to pretend to be her sister. She cleared the way for this to happen. It did not outweigh the heinousness of her mother's previous behavior, but it had to be considered.

At last, Jeyne opened her mouth – though to say what, she had no idea. But then Lady Jyana Reed, who had been sitting quietly beside her husband, leaned forward. Like all the crannogmen she was small and slender, her long brown braid well streaked with grey, but she too had a natural, intrinsic authority. "Excuse me, Lord Glover, Lady Mormont," she said. "While you lay your plans, there is the one other matter I fear you have overlooked."

Lord Galbart looked half curious, half annoyed. "Aye, my lady?"

Jyana Reed shot a brief glance at Jeyne. "I am sorry. I thought you knew. The queen is pregnant."

Silence. Utter, absolute, unyielding silence. Galbart and Maege both looked as if they were about to fall off their stools, for which they could not well be faulted. Even Jeyne's head went rather light, though she at least had had the preparation of suspecting it beforehand. How can Jyana know for sure? She wanted to believe, but it had been so remorselessly beaten out of her.

"Pregnant?" It was Lady Maege who recovered first. "How is that possible? Her Grace confessed to us that her mother gave her teas intended to stop her from conceiving. Yet now –"

"I did," Jeyne blurted out. "But I did not tell you all of it. I . . . I have not had my moon blood since the Red Wedding, and that . . . that was why my mother chose to send me with the Blackfish." The words came hard to her. "The herbs are effective, but not . . . entirely. Sometimes I forgot to drink them in the morning. And Robb and I, we . . ." She was blushing crimson as a maid. It was none of their business how often she and her husband had lain together, how they had taken such shy delight in discovering the other's body, a marriage made by duty but forged by passion. "It is . . . not unthinkable."

"More than that," said Lady Jyana, "it has happened. But Your Grace, a word of caution. It is true that the draughts were not sufficient to stop you from conceiving altogether. Yet with the herbs your mother likely used, and how much of them you unwittingly consumed. . . my lady, the child might well not be born alive."

"No." Jeyne flinched. "He has to be. He must be." How else could Robb truly avenge himself, but by the sword of his son and hers? Briefly damped down, her hatred for her mother came rushing back up again.

Lady Maege Mormont, meanwhile, was still blinking like an owl. Finally she said, "If this is so, then King Robb's will – the proposed marriage –"

"I see no reason to call it off," Lord Glover insisted. "Queen Jeyne cannot rule on her own or with only an infant prince, and lest we forget, the child could be a girl. Jon Snow is a man grown, and His Grace's chosen heir. What better solution than to have him rule now, then pass the crown to Robb's trueborn son when he should come of age?"

"It is a fine plan, on parchment," Lady Maege allowed gruffly, "but very risky. . . though no more than the entire endeavor, it is true. Yet that is to presume that the child will be a boy, and survive his birth and youth, and that the sons Her Grace will have by Jon Snow shall take kindly to being deprived of their inheritance. We all know the histories of the Blackfyre Rebellions. If we mean to
go ahead with the marriage, it may be wiser to hope the child does not live."

"No," Jeyne said, panicked. "This is my baby, my child, Robb's child, I won't let you take him, I won't let you kill him, I'll die myself first! I won't marry Jon Snow if that's what you mean to do, I won't — " She was verging on the brink of hysteria, but Jyana Reed put a hand on her arm.

"As for that," the Lady of Greywater Watch said, "I have had disturbing dreams about a young man with the head of a wolf. Daggers in the dark, blood on the snow, a red sword and a shattering wall of ice. I cannot see his true face, but he wears the black of the Night's Watch, and the word whispered to me is snow. A fire rages in the near distance, an inferno to melt all ice and end all days. The horn that wakes the sleepers. He draws very close to it now."

Both the stolid northerners frowned at the slight crannogwoman. "Beg pardon, m'lady," said Galbart Glover, "but you're not making a lick of sense."

"She is." Howland Reed's voice startled everyone even more than had his wife's. By the flickering rushlights, his face was hollowed in shadow, eyes washed into two black pits. "I apologize for springing another monstrous shock on you so soon after the first, but... I must know. Is this talk of wedding Queen Jeyne to Lord Snow, and rebuilding the Kingdom of the North, mere wind? Or is it a vow?"

"By earth and iron." Galbart Glover drew his dagger and laid it on the table.

"By ice and fire," Lady Maege added, and drew her own.

"Very well." Howland Reed seemed to have aged a dozen years in the span of moments. "I meant to take this secret to my grave, but... Ned will forgive me, I pray. We were the only two men who knew, and now Ned..."

"Is dead," Lord Glover said, somewhat shortly. "What is it, man?"

Howland took a long breath, then exhaled. "Jon Snow is not Ned Stark's son."

If Jeyne had thought that the silence was tremendous following the announcement of her pregnancy, it was nothing compared to this. Both Glover and Maege were making small choked noises, and even Jyana Reed looked blindsided; evidently her husband had not confided this to her. Jeyne herself was stunned, didn't understand how such a secret could be kept for a decade and a half, and immediately felt outraged on Robb's behalf, that he should have known Jon as a trusted and loved brother, and instead he was - who on earth was he?

Lady Maege and Lord Galbart clearly shared this question, and had somewhat more concrete methods of expressing their disbelief. "Bloody..." Glover started, but couldn't get the rest of the oath out. "What are you talking about? Of course he's Ned's son, he looks more like a Stark than His Grace did – may the gods assoil him," he added hastily, as if afraid of being caught speaking some blasphemy about his late liege lord. "By the wet nurse Wylla, or by Ashara Dayne – "

"Ashara Dayne's child was a girl, and stillborn." Howland was having trouble meeting their eyes. "And it was never Ned's, but Brandon Stark's. Ned was infatuated with her, it is true – and he was far from the only one, my lady of Dayne was as beautiful as the dawn after which her brother named his sword. The brother that I... that I killed."


"I do not look like a villain, I know." Howland Reed gave a terse, agonized smile. "But if the world had any justice, I would have been pilloried for it the same way Ser Jaime was for killing King
Aerys – and Aerys truly was a monster, whereas Ser Arthur was truly the finest knight the realm has known. But aye. It was Ned's elder brother who seduced Lady Ashara, took her maidenhead, and got her with child."

"But..." Glover was blinking like a concussed ox. "Lord Brandon was betrothed to Catelyn Tully, he..."

"Betrothal vows are not marriage vows, and Brandon Stark would never have considered himself unduly bound by either. He had the wolf's blood in him, and he scorned Ned's obstinate refusal to bed the woman he clearly wanted – Ned insisted it would not be honorable. Brandon told him that he would demonstrate where to stick his honor, and did. The relationship between the brothers was... never the same thereafter."

"So it was not Ashara Dayne who birthed Jon," Glover said, "but surely..."

Howland Reed sighed. "The story of how I killed Ser Arthur is the story of who Jon Snow is. I... my lord and lady have heard the tale, I do not doubt. Of how we were seven against three, and met below the eaves of the Tower of Joy, in the Red Mountains of Dorne?"

"The seven..." Lady Maege's mouth hung open. "Let me see if I recall them. It was you, Eddard Stark, Ethan Glover, Willam Dustin, Martyn Cassel, Theo Wull, and..."

"Mark Ryswell," Howland finished. "Loyal men all. Good men all. We had ridden for days on end to reach the Tower, when we heard the rumor that Lyanna Stark was hidden there. The Trident had already been fought, King's Landing had been sacked, Rhaegar was dead, Aerys was dead, Robert's Rebellion was for all intents and purposes both concluded and successful. But Ser Arthur, Ser Oswell Whent, and Lord Commander Gerold Hightower, the White Bull, were waiting for us there. Ned begged them to bend the knee, told them that they were good men and true, said that they need not die. But he must have known that he was wasting his breath. And so... we fought."


"You will." Howland passed a hand over his eyes. "Well... Whent and Dayne and Hightower were some of the best there have ever been. Even outnumbering them by four, we were hard pressed. Mark Ryswell was the first to die, and Theo Wull followed next. Sword to sword we danced there in the dust and sun and wind, and from the tower window above us we could hear Lyanna screaming."

The memory clearly pained him even now, and his wife put a hand over his. He squeezed it, then forced himself to continue. "Yet Cassel and Glover took on the White Bull together, and he was not quite as fast as he had been, or as agile. They killed him quickly, at least. Still Lyanna screamed. I have never seen a man as possessed as Ned was, then. He fought as if nothing else in the world mattered to him. Whent killed Martyn, Martyn who had been Ned's dear friend and compatriot, and even that could not throw him aside. That left him and me and Willam and Ethan, against Ser Oswell and Ser Arthur. Four against two, now, and the blood... I dream of the blood."

Jeyne bit her lip. *So do I."

"Ser Oswell died next," Howland continued. "Ned and Willam killed him. But Ser Arthur stepped up from behind and killed Willam, and killed Ethan as well when he tried to make a break for it. That left only myself and Ned against Ser Arthur, and the two of them crashed together like titans. I suspect Ser Arthur knew all about what Lord Brandon had done to his sister, the tales that were already being spread... truly, their fight was like something from a legend. Yet Dayne was not accounted the Sword of the Morning for nothing, and he soon had Ned bloodied and reeling. I
knew I would never stand against him alone, so like a craven, I... I used a crannogman's oldest trick. I unslung my blowpipe, and shot a poisoned dart into the back of his neck."

"And he..."

"He staggered," Howland said dreamily. "Dawn dropped from his fingers. And Ned raised his own sword in both hands, and made an end of it."

Silence hung over the room, palpable as a shroud. Then Lady Maege said, "Lyanna?"

"Lyanna." Howland sighed. "Her screams were already fading by the time Ned broke down the door, crazed in his grief, and the two of us bolted up the steps to the chamber at the top. We found her in a bed of blood, with the blue roses she had so loved scattered about her... her hair and the curtains blowing in the breeze, and... the baby... the boy..."

The silence prevailed a final moment. Then Lady Maege said, "Jon."

"Yes." Howland paused to compose himself. "Lyanna was bleeding to death from childbirth. She had no woman companion, no midwife, no help of any sort. She managed to tell us that the babe had not been expected for another fortnight, which was why she was alone but for the Kingsguard below. She beckoned that Ned should take the lad, and he did. And begged, pleaded with everything that was left of her, that he claim it as his own, that he never reveal the boy's true identity."

"Gods," Galbart Glover whispered, as realization struck at last. "Gods. Are you saying – gods have mercy, man, are you saying – "

"Aye," Howland Reed said simply. "Jon is a Stark. But he is Ned's nephew, not his son. Lyanna knew what such a deception would cost her brother, how terribly it would wear on him to be unable to reveal this secret even to his wife, or to his best friend and new king. But can you blame her? For Robert's very throne rested on it, and Robert would never have stopped the war if he had even the barest inkling that Rhaegar Targaryen's son was still alive."

"His... son..."

"Aye. There have been more tales as well, these days. Tales of the other son, and his own miraculous survival. Aegon. You remember?"

"I thought them stuff and nonsense," said Lady Maege. Even the redoubtable warrior mistress of Bear Island sounded flattened. "If Aegon Targaryen can be alive, why not Robb Stark?"

"He may yet be a pretender, aye. But he is the son of a Targaryen and a Martell, and thus could claim the south. Jon, the son of a Targaryen and a Stark, could so claim the north. And there are stories of Aerys' daughter in Astapor and Yunkai and Meereen, of dragons and wonders and bears and sellswords and slaves with broken chains. Don't you see?"

"Even if this is true," said Lord Galbart, clearly scrambling for any semblance of normalcy in this conversation, "Jon would still be the younger, and bastard-born – that much does not change. And then – "

"Unless Rhaegar secretly wed Lyanna," Howland interrupted. "It would not be unprecedented by any means. Aegon the Conqueror himself had two wives."

"I would kill the bastard myself again now, if I could. Why did he do it? By all the gods, why?"
"I cannot explain the prince's deepest heart. But I believe, I truly believe, that he thought one of his sons, or both, would be the Prince who was Promised. The dragon has three heads. A Targaryen of Martell blood – fire. A Targaryen of Stark blood – ice. The ones who would balance the broken world and defeat the ultimate evil. Prince Rhaegar thought to a fault, you know. He was introverted and bookish and serious and above all, dutiful. He read the ancient prophecy, and he must have felt that he must do anything in his power to fulfill it."

"Even ripping apart a kingdom, destroying his marriage and Robert Baratheon's betrothal, causing a rebellion to be started that ended in his father's sacrilegious murder, the deaths of thousands of innocents, and the overthrow of his House and dynasty?" Glover sounded angrier than before. "I'd say we can do without that nonsense. Small wonder prophecies are such bloody chancy stuff."

"Rhaegar was not a monster," said Howland. "Nor evil, nor cruel. In that respect, he was never his father's son. I believe that Lyanna, for all that she was kidnapped by him, came eventually to care for him after a fashion. She begged on his behalf as well as Jon's."

"Be that so, but the Prince who was Promised is a tale we've been telling for centuries. A fable. Something to make us feel better in the worst of times. I'd like to believe there's a place somewhere where money grows on trees and beautiful maidens cavort in naught but their skins, and wine flows like water and the summer never ends, but it doesn't make it so. There's no hero come to save us now."

"The hour is late," Howland agreed. "I do not say the prophecy was true. I only attempt to fathom what drove Rhaegar to it."

"The hour is now." Yet again, Lady Jyana's voice made everyone start. She clutched the table, and tears started in her eyes. "You do not understand. The horn will sound, and the Wall will break. And now the Others come. This is it. There is no leisure for grief or manipulations or time or chance. All of mankind hangs by a thread. The Long Night has begun."
 Appropriately, he woke in the snow. For the longest time he merely lay there, unable to move or think, or know anything beyond the fact that somehow, impossibly, he was alive. Yet he was not even sure if that was true. There was the snow below him, and a pane of stars above, and a slowly coalescing sense of himself – but different somehow, cold as stone, a memory of being stabbed and stabbed again, frozen flame and red eyes. There was something he had lost, some part of who he was, and it took a small eternity to recall the name. Ghost.

Remembering that gave him spur to remember more. But everything was dim and filmy in his head, as if it had taken place thousands of miles away and thousands of years ago, shadowed revenants of an ancient life. He knew that his name was Jon, and that he had been prisoner in a cage of ice. He knew he was oddly naked. And then it came to him at last: he was no longer a wolf, no longer had a wolf, and had no fur to shield him from the cold.

Clumsily, painfully, Jon pushed himself to his feet. Feet. I have two, not four. His hands, for that matter, felt strangely stiff and hard and glassy, but in the darkness he could not see why. For the moment it was enough to know that he wore a man's body again. But whose?

His head was light and his legs were weak. Touching his chest, running his fingers over it, he felt the raised ridges of scar tissue where he'd been stabbed by Bowen Marsh and Whit Whittlesticke. But only by shape alone; there was still no sensation in his hands. This body felt intimately familiar, like clothing worn so many times as to become soft as butter, but it was so cold, both inside and out. No breath steamed in the air before him. And that was when Jon Snow lifted his head and saw the Wall looming before him, bathed in frigid moonlight. The wrong side of the Wall.

Have I woken at all? A sudden, crippling doubt seized him. He had no way to tell, nothing to do but grope desperately for any knowledge of what had happened after the rune-graven blade had pierced his – Ghost's – heart. The pain had been as bad as if it had been his own. He was aware of struggling, of trying to flee this collapsing body before it perished, even as some unknown voice whispered in his head, A skinchanger may die a dozen deaths and more. And another voice, screaming his name: Jon, Jon, JON!

But he had burned, as the red woman had instructed him to. He remembered that part clearly. He had fled upwards in a scream of smoke like some demon sorcerer in a tale, and his last sight had been of ice starting to hiss and turn to steam around his body, his true body. He saw the red woman moving to leave, not running but at a speed that suggested she would prefer to be gone before the process continued any further. Then there was a wrenching snarling choking annihilating darkness, and he struggled against it with every fiber of his violated being, and the next thing he knew was – flying.

The episode had been so brief that Jon was not at all sure that he had not imagined it – or dreamed it within the dream that he still might be in. But he had emerged from the darkness within some great monstrous creature, had been the creature, all scales and sinew and great leathery wings pinioned with bone, a triangular head and scything claws and deep-set eyes and flame. flame that had scorched some faceless boy to ruins, scales that winked green and bronze in the light of the torches that lined the steppes of some great brick pyramid. Yet he had been only there for flashes of a broken instant before an animal mind – something larger and far more wild and alien and
unfriendly than Ghost's – caught hold of him and flung him out, as easily as a dog might fling a rat.

Dragon. I was in a dragon. How or why or where Jon had no fathom, only that it was so. He clung to it like a drowning man, as if that would somehow force it to make more sense. I have to get back to the Wall. I have to get back to my post.

Yet the closer he struggled toward the massive edifice of ice, the stranger he felt. It was almost as if he was being forced back, warned off. He didn't understand what was going on, still less how he had ended up on this side of the Wall in the first place, but he knew that he could not come any closer. There are powerful spells woven into the Wall. The dead cannot pass.

And that was when he turned his head, and saw the wolf.

Ghost, memory cried for a moment, but even as it did, he knew that it was not. Was this all just a dream after all? But then why was the big grey direwolf with its golden eyes padding toward him as if it knew him, as if it was . . .

"Summer." The word came to his lips almost as a prayer. He'd seen his brother Bran's direwolf before, when it leapt down among the Thenns and caused enough chaos for him to steal the old man's horse and flee to Castle Black with an arrow in his leg. But Bran himself was dead, had been dead for months, and was already dead when his wolf had come to Jon's aid. But I lived on, in a way, in Ghost. Bran might have lived on in the same way in Summer.

The thought almost made Jon's heart break with wanting. He held out a hand, which was oddly black even in the thin bladed light of the moon, and Summer licked it. Then he fell to both knees and buried his face in the direwolf's neck.

Summer tolerated this attention for a few moments, then pulled away from Jon's embrace and tugged on his cloak in a clear signal to get up and follow. In the unreal state that Jon was in, it made as much sense as anything. He forayed cautiously after the wolf, snow crunching beneath his boots, and only then noticed that there was no steam of his breath on the air. Yet since it was the least bizarre of all the things occurring at the moment, he ignored it.

It was a long way, though Jon could not have said how long. Then at last he recognized the darkness of the forest that began a mile north of the Wall, and soon they were ducking among the skeletal trees. He could just see the spectral shape of Summer ahead, the wolf occasionally stopping and turning back to ensure that he was still behind. Jon had just started to wonder where they were going when he saw the flash of red leaves ahead, and knew.

Summer padded into the weirwood grove and paused to sniff the ground. He prowled around, lifted a leg, raised his hackles and growled at something that Jon couldn't see, then turned away. Eyes luminescent in the darkness, he crossed to the tree at the center and sat down, waiting.

Curious, Jon peered at the trunk with its eerie face, the slashes of weeping eyes and the broad mouth, the leaves like a lady's hair. In the uncertain shifting shadows, he thought he'd seen –

No, he had –

Bran's face was gazing at him from the tree. His eyes moved to meet Jon's, and if Jon had had any doubt whatsoever that he was dreaming, this erased it beyond a trace. He must be, for Bran did not live in the real world, and he merely stared at his brother, stretching out an involuntary hand. Bran?

You're not imagining me, Jon. Bran sounded shy. I'm under the hill, with the three-eyed crow. Coldhands took me here. I'm not dead, but I don't have time to explain how. Summer found you – I
didn't know where he was. But I need you to warg into the trees. You need to know.

"Warg into the trees?" Jon repeated aloud, baffled. "Bran. . . am I awake?"

No, you're not awake, Bran answered. It was too dangerous to bring you that way.

"But am I still here? In the grove?"

Of course you're here.

"Why was it too dangerous?"

There are wights and Others swarming on the Wall in the thousands. In the tens of thousands. In the waking world, the path you just walked is impassable for any living man.

The news took Jon like a blow to the gut. For any living man. "Tell me," he said. "Am I alive?"

Bran paused a moment. Then he said, You have to do this, Jon. Even the children of the forest can't hold off the Others much longer. They're. . . they're coming. Even down here. We don't have much time. I need you to do this. Please.

"I don't know how," Jon admitted. "Show me."

I will. Bran's eyes shot a glance at his wolf, and Summer moved closer from behind. It's easier than it sounds. You're already a fully fledged skinchanger, all you have to do is ask. The horn's hidden here, but I don't know which one it is.

"Horn. . .?" A terrible suspicion took root in the back of Jon's head.

You can see what the trees have seen. You need to find out. I. . . I can't. I tried. There's something about you that's different. I see fire about you, I see a red sword, I can't touch it, I don't know what it is or where it is, but you need it, Jon. You need it!

This engendered a whole new flood of questions for Jon, not least who on earth "Coldhands" was and if that had something to do with the strange stunted state of his own hands. But then some other inchoate memory pricked at him. . . something Sam had mentioned, long ago and far away. And there was something else about Sam and a horn, a broken horn Jon had found on the Fist of the First Men, he'd given it to Sam for a keepsake. . . that was also where he'd found the cache of dragonglass, wrapped in a Sworn Brother's black cloak. . .

All the thoughts were flapping just out of Jon's reach like exotic birds. It was maddening. He pulled himself together, decided that warg ing into a tree couldn't possibly be any more ludicrous than it sounded, and jumped.

For an endless moment, everything was as jumbled and indistinct as if he'd taken a blade and cut his own mind to shreds. He could see Bran and he could see Summer and the trees and the Wall and the night and the moon and even a brief flash of the numberless white phantoms gliding serpentine across the snow. He was aware of branches in uncomfortable places and a humiliating sense that if he was still in his body, he would be turned upside down and kicking. It was the first time he had ever attempted to warg into something that had no life of its own – the first time, in fact, he had ever warged consciously into anything. With Ghost it had always been natural, something half-formed in dreams or drifting thoughts, and he'd only slowly begun to become more aware of it just before his first death. And Ghost had always been part of him. This was a battle, struggling against the unyielding wood, feeling the warmth of the sap like blood. Then with one final jolt and shove, he was accepted into the weirwood.
For a moment he was gulped down into the darkness, like a stone falling down a well. Among the tumult, he focused as hard as he could on the Fist of the First Men; it seemed as good a place to start as any, if he had understood Bran's instructions in the slightest. Then he was pulled about very hard, turned around, and opened his eyes in a different place, in a different time.

It was the Fist, Jon knew that at once. He recognized the rocky promontory that gave the landscape its name, bunched bare knuckles punching through a scree of sliding rock and scrubby trees. But it was devoid of the staked palisade and the fortified camp that the black brothers had set up on it – and the horrifying ruin that that camp had become, when the wights came on them in the night. He had the tale of it from Sam. The ringwall was still intact, the sun low and streaky in the sky. And that was when Jon caught sight of the lone figure in black, carrying a shrouded bundle.

The grade was steep and the climb must have been hard, but no breath showed before the man's mouth. He reached the top, looked around, then struck off into the woods. Along a route Jon recognized as well; Ghost had led him along it when the Great Ranging had reached the Fist. And suddenly, with a shock, he knew what was in that bundle.

He was right – almost. The black-cloaked man knelt by the massive fallen tree and began to dig in the loose, stony soil. His bundle lay next to him, and when he had finished his hole, he untied the fraying rope that held it together. Inside was the great stash of dragonglass that Jon himself had found in that very spot, and not one warhorn, but two. Made of aurochs' horns and banded in bronze, they were outwardly unremarkable. One was intact, the other broken. It was the latter that the man laid in the bundle with the dragonglass, then pulled off his cloak and folded it all up together.

Jon watched in paralyzed apprehension. *Did he know we were on our way? Did he hope we would find it there?* But even as he asked that question, it was answered. The Fist served so well as a watch-post due to commanding a view of the surrounding territory to all sides, and far in the distance, he could catch a glimpse of small dark figures, torches and outriders. *That's us. We are coming now.* Lord Mormont had wanted them to advertise their presence as much as possible, in hopes of drawing back the lost rangers who had gone out with his uncle Benjen. *Alive, or dead.*

Straightening up, the man – his face still hidden – quickly filled in the hole. *I knew it had been buried soon before, but even I did not guess how soon. We barely missed him.* Hurrying through the tangles of trees, the ranger reached a waiting elk, which matched Sam and Gilly's description too unnervingly for it to be anyone else. He swung astride and galloped away down the hill, a flock of ravens flapping after him; he had taken the second horn, the intact one, with him. And in the back of Jon's head Bran's voice said, *He buried that one in the weirwood grove where you are now. I saw him do it.*

*But why are there two horns?* Jon asked. *The broken one I found on the Fist, the one he buried with the dragonglass, I gave it to Sam. He brought it south when I sent him to Oldtown, to the Citadel. He –

*Sam took me through the Wall,* Bran interrupted, sounding somewhat like his old self, a boy rather than the thing, the Old God, that he was becoming. *At the Black Gate in the Nightfort. Coldhands was waiting there, he'd rescued Sam and Gilly from the wights, and then he took Meera and Jojen and me north on the elk.*

*Sam?* Jon was staggered. *Sam knew you were alive, and he never told me?*

*I made him promise not to,* Bran said sadly. *But there was part of the black brothers' vow that Sam said to open it. The Gate, that is. It only opens for a brother of the Watch.*
What part? What part of the vow?

Bran paused. Then he said, *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. I am the shield that guards the realms of men.*

And suddenly, in a horrible burning moment of clarity, Jon Snow had it.

*The horn that wakes the sleepers.* It was more than a word, part of a rote vow. It was a truth. Among the wildlings, Jon had heard everything of the Horn of Joramun, the Horn of Winter, which when blown would break the Wall and summon giants from the earth. *That's why there were two horns. Coldhands found them both.* One was the Horn of Winter, the one that would destroy the Wall, the weapon of the Others. *Tormund told me that Mance never found it, that the one Melisandre burned was a fraud. That they had bluffed the entire time. And the other...*

*But which?* Jon was almost panicking, which was a feat when he was a tree and still had no breath to speak of. *Which horn did I send south with Sam? And which one is still buried in the grove right here, with wights and Others merely fathoms away?*

*The trees,* Bran whispered. *They stood here even in the Age of Heroes. Look.*

That couldn't *possibly* be what he meant, but –

No time –

With a sensation as if he was pelting headlong toward the lip of a thousand-foot cliff, Jon gathered his mind underneath him and leaped.

This time, the fall was endless. He crashed and struggled in the dark, barely able to hold onto the wisp of his own mind, as the tree shrank and contorted around him, growing smaller and smaller until he feared that Bran was wrong, that the tree was no more than a sapling and then a sprout and would soon be gone entirely – and him with it, unless he could shift to another skin in time. But then the fall stopped, and he gazed out across the horizon to where the Wall should be –*but there was no Wall.*

The image was so faint and hazy, summoned up from such immeasurable depths of memory, that Jon could make out no more than one detail in five. But that was enough. On the one side there was a swarming tide of men in black, led by a charging figure with a sword of fire, and on the other, the merciless ranks of Others. Frost-white and sky-blue and braced with thousands upon thousands of slender icy spears. The two armies tore together beneath a counterpane of black, black sky.

*The Battle for the Dawn.* Jon had heard enough of Old Nan's stories to know that. *The Long Night.* Of how the children of the forest and the First Men had battled against the Others, but been repulsed and repulsed until it was at last discovered that dragonglass could kill them. But then – he had heard all of *these* tales from Stannis' men at the Wall, discussing the prophecies that surrounded their king, and what the red woman had claimed of him and his purpose –

*Azor Ahai. The hero who led the battle against the Others with his red sword called Lightbringer, forged by the heartsblood of his beloved wife.*

Another piece fell into place. And another.

*I shall take no wife, father no sons,* the oath ran. Maester Aemon had told him that it was so because love was the death of duty, that no man could truly be forced to choose between his kin on
the one hand, his blood family, and his black family. But it was more.

The oath, the oath they all swore, they'd never known the meaning of it, not in truth –

*I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn.*

*Lightbringer.*

Jon's head was reeling. He couldn't keep hold of the vision of the Battle for the Dawn, and it swirled away into the dust of centuries. *Azor Ahai gave up his wife to forge the sword that defeated the Others, and that is why we take no wives. It is more than a duty, it is a remembrance of who we are.* After their victory in the Battle for the Dawn, Azor Ahai had founded the Night's Watch to defend against the Others, and Brandon the Builder had raised the Wall to keep them out. *Azor Ahai was fire, Bran the Builder was ice.* And Azor Ahai was an eastern hero, an eastern name . . . a Valyrian name.

*Valyrian steel. Dragonsteel. Dragonglass. Dragons.* And in the long history of the world, there had been only one House so intimately associated with the embodiment of living fire.

*I was in a dragon. For a moment before waking.*

Azor Ahai was a Targaryen. Brandon the Builder was a Stark.

*Fire and ice.*

And they met again in . . .

*Me.*

Jon lay in the darkness of the weirwood, struggling to comprehend. If he'd had breath, he would have been gasping. Azor Ahai had been the first Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, he knew that now beyond a doubt. It was the Night's Watch itself that was Lightbringer now, and they had fallen so far as to become a colony of refugees, of prisoners, of broken men and bad eggs and the hungry and the lame and the useless – oh gods, his friends, Satin and Pyp and Grenn and Dolorous Edd, the men he'd fought with to defend the Wall, they were no heroes and no knights but they'd still fulfilled their charge –

And there was that face he'd seen after his first death, the one with the single red eye, that whispered to him. *Smoke,* it said. *Smoke and salt. A thousand eyes and one.* And when he'd asked who it was . . .

*I am you,* it had said. *But you are more.*

And that was the moment when Jon Snow realized that he was not Jon Snow.

In the darkness above him, around him, through him, he saw a blue rose growing from a wall of ice, and reached up to pluck it. It filled the air with its sweetness, and in its petals he saw a woman's face. *Promise me, Ned,* she cried. *Promise me you'll take him, please, never tell. . . never tell Robert, never anyone. . . not even Cat, I'm sorry. . . no one can know. . . Rhaegar's son. . . no. . . must be peace, he must live, he must he must. . . *

And his father's voice – no, not his father's – Eddard Stark's voice, choked and cracking with agony. *I promise, Lya,* he whispered. *I promise.*
But I didn't live, Jon thought, heartbroken. I'm not alive right now.

But he was thinking somehow, still –

Which horn? he begged the impervious darkness. Which horn?

It endured for a brief eternity longer. Then, faint and faraway, he caught sight of the horn he had sent with Sam, lying in a great seven-sided room in what had to be the Citadel in Oldtown. It should have cheered Jon to know that Sam and Gilly had made it safely there, but he was too desperate for that. The horn was stored with what must be the treasures of all the other novices, everything they gave up when they relinquished their family names and their pasts and took the chains, as a brother of the Night's Watch took the black. Kept safe in the archives, for study and memory and –

One of the seven doors opened, and a man stepped through.

Jon did not recognize him, even in the tree's memory. He was young, with full cheeks and the stubble of beard, a scar on his right cheek and a dense mat of black curls. His nose was hooked, and he wore the garb of a Citadel alchemist; he was playing a coin between his fingers casually, which glinted iron with one spin and gold with the next. In his other hand he held a great skeleton key. The alchemist glanced around the crowded shelves, and selected a few pieces at what appeared to be random. He secreted them in the small bag he carried, was about to leave, and then spotted the horn.

He went motionless. He looked a long moment, then almost ran to it and lifted it up in his hands, turning it from side to side and examining it from all angles. It was as broken as it was when Jon had found it, though somewhat less dirty. But the alchemist stared at it, checked one last mark, then shoved it into his bag with the rest, muttering something under his breath. Jon caught it only in snatches. "...Ferrego won't believe... intends still to hold with the Targaryens..."

Thievery done, the alchemist turned on his heel. He hid the bag under his cloak, then ran a hand over his face, and it changed. From the dark curls and roguish scar and hooked nose, it took on the appearance of a boy, doughy and unremarkable and plain, the sort no one would look twice at. He slipped the key back under his robes as well and left the room of treasures, and when one of the maesters passing in the corridors beyond caught sight of him, he scolded "Pate" for leaving his lessons again.

Pate, Jon thought. Like the hero of the stories of Pate the pig boy. But this was no pig boy. He sauntered out of the Citadel, down the labyrinthine streets of Oldtown, changed his face back to the scarred one in the darkness of an alley, and made for the quay. Among the usual colorful forest of ships, there was one which was unmistakably a Braavosi galley, and it was this one that the man made for.

Jon was losing track of the vision by now; it was not something the tree had personally witnessed. He struggled and clawed to keep it, but it was already splintering away. Braavos? Did he go back to Braavos with the goods he stole? How did he get that key... the theft must have happened after Sam arrived, if the horn was there to be taken... The irony of it almost made him want to laugh. He had sent Sam and Gilly and Maester Aemon to Oldtown by route of Braavos, and now it seemed they should have stayed there after all. No matter if this was the Horn of Dawn or the Horn of Winter, it was too terrible to remain in the wrong hands.

The spell broke, with a feeling once more as if he had been kicked. Then he was back in his man's body, lying sprawled on the ground in the moonlit weirwood grove. Bran's face was still visible in the trunk above him, but it was starting to fade as well. If he was alive or if he was dead, he
seemed shortly to find out. "Bran! Bran!"

"I'm sorry, Jon. Bran's voice broke. I don't think I'm coming back. I'm going to stay here under the hill. I'm going to replace Lord Brynden. I'm the prince of the green. The god."

"What are you. . . no. . ." Jon pushed himself to hands and knees, dazed. "You can't, I need to know more. . . don't leave me now, not again. . ."

"I love you, Jon. Bran's voice was starting to echo, the tree was changing, losing its form, becoming old and cold and rough again. You have to do it. You have to."

"Do. . ." Yet in that moment, as he had before, Jon knew.

*Only death can pay for life.* That was why he had lost Ghost, why he was here in this half-world of dream and memory. *When I wake, if I wake, I will be here in this weirwood grove in this body, and the wights will be all around me. And I will not be able to get back through the Wall with the red sword. I will not be able to fight them alone, one against ten thousand. A hundred thousand.*

The red sword. Jon fumbled at his side. *Longclaw.* It was there. This must be his body after all. *The Night's Watch is Lightbringer, and Azor Ahai is the Lord Commander. And there was a sword then, there must be a sword now. Dragonsteel. Longclaw was a Valyrian blade. It would serve.*

Azor Ahai had forged Lightbringer with heartsblood. And this was a red sword too. It was red with the blood of Prince Rhaegar, of Lady Lyanna, of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn and Robb, of the black brothers who had died in the snows of the Fist, good men and bad men. All the brothers of the Night's Watch who had suffered and bled through the centuries. Lord Commander Mormont's blood, his uncle Benjen's blood, and his own. The price had been paid and paid and paid. For a moment more, Jon remained frozen. Then he turned and ran to the largest tree at the center of the circle. Flung himself to his knees and began to dig.

It was there, as Bran had told him it would be. The plain dirty horn, the unbroken one. And it was that, by virtue of the very fact, that told Jon which horn this was.

*The Horn of Winter is intact. The Wall yet stands. Keeping them out. Keeping me out.*

The broken horn had been winded at the end of the Battle for the Dawn. Winded in victory, wakening the sleepers, bringing the light; that was how it had broken in the first place. It was that one which Coldhands had hidden on the Fist with the dragonglass cache. *The Night's Watch would have had it in their hands again if it wasn't for me. I gave the Horn of Dawn to Sam to take to Oldtown, as a souvenir, a trinket. I sent it away, and the alchemist stole it and took it to Braavos. The Targaryens. . . he said something about the Targaryens. . .*

There was only one solution now. Complete victory or utter destruction. Nothing in between.

Jon briefly thought he saw red eyes reflected back at him in the Horn. Whether they were Melisandre's or Ghost's or Bran's, he could not tell. None of them were truly here. He doubted that he was truly here.

*The horn that wakes the sleepers.*

All or nothing.

Bring it down, and bring the dawn.

Jon Snow grasped it in his cold black hands. Then he lifted it to his lips.
The weirwoods gazed on with their carven red eyes. The cold breath of darkness fell heavy on the world. And from a fire, a warrior drew forth a blazing sword.

Jon Snow sounded the Horn of Winter.
Between the bars of her cage, the sun was rising over the Dothraki sea, welcomed by a strident chorus of birds hidden in the long grass. For the moment the morning coolness lingered, but Dany knew that it would soon be scorching hot. She wondered where Drogon was; the black dragon ranged far afield during the night, hunting, but he usually returned no later than a few hours after dawn. At times she could sense it when he was close – not only by the way his shadow would sweep over the plain as if a cloud had veiled the sun, and the khalasar would look up and point with superstitious pride – but as if she had reached in and touched his mind, a son speeding home to his mother. Though of late Dany could not tell who was the parent and who the child.

She stretched her legs and sat up. Her cage, for a cage, was as luxurious as they came; she had woven mats to recline on, a hrakkar pelt that reminded her of the one her sun-and-stars had given her, sandsilk draperies to keep the sun off, and more – in fact, if not for the bars, it was more of a lady's palanquin than a cage. The generosity, she imagined, was entirely due to the presence of Drogon. Khal Jhaqo's men feared and hated and were in awe of her all at once; this purple-eyed, silver-haired whore of the sunset lands, who was known to have set a witch on Khal Drogo, who had meddled in matters far beyond her comprehension, and refused to take her proper place among the crones of Vaes Dothrak. Yet she had come to them in company of a massive black dragon, fire made flesh, and it was from both hatred and awe that they had put her into the cage, bringing her food and drink so that she never hungered or thirsted, and sometimes making sacrifices of animals or incense. No other khalasar would dare trouble them with Drogon lurking nearby, and it had undoubtedly occurred to them that him not burning the lot of them to cinders depended on how well they treated Dany. She was sure that Drogon, if he had been so inclined, could have stopped them from putting her in the cage at all, but when they'd done it, he merely looked at her with his great slitted eyes and flapped off into the twilight. I chained his brothers in the darkness, she thought with a stab. **He will teach me what it is to be a dragon behind bars.**

The camp was beginning to stir. Slaves ducked out from the tents and trudged off to fetch water or start breakfast fires. Despite the fact that this was not how she had envisioned it happening, part of Dany was genuinely happy at once more living among a khalasar. She expected that it had to do with being freed from the bear trap of Meereen, all the plots and counterplots, of looking over her shoulder for the Harpy, of wearing her floppy ears, of hearing the pleas to reopen the fighting pits and resume the slaughters, of wondering who to trust and who intended to kill her on the morrow, of enduring Hizdahr's carnal attentions and wondering if he was the most dangerous of them all. In fact it was only now, when she was not scrambling to keep her head above water, that Dany was able to absorb how much of a nightmare Meereen had truly been. She had wanted to rule, and rule well, but all she'd wrought was a mummer's mess.

Even now, the thought of returning left her deeply ambivalent. She had to, she knew – her loyal Ser Barristan and Grey Worm, and her not-so-loyal subjects, not to mention two of her dragons and her noble lord husband, all awaited to be dealt with. **And Daario.** Yet while she had thought of the sellsword captain several times a day at first, the remembrances were growing farther and farther apart. She'd tried to picture his face in her head, but all she could come up with was the sheaf of blue hair and the twinkling golden tooth.

Dany was no fool. She knew far better than to hope that Daario would mount some valorous rescue. **He is not a good man, he is not a hero, he is not trustworthy.** She would have to do something about him too when she returned to her city, though perhaps the Yunkai'i had taken it upon themselves to solve their dilemma by beheading him as they had Groleo. Then she would be duty-bound to execute her own hostages, but her stomach still turned at the thought. They were but
children, and she had become fond of them.

*This is how you made such a farce of Meereen,* a voice whispered in her head. *You learned there that a ruler can be strong or a ruler can be kind, but only rarely can a ruler be both.* Yet that still was a deep hook in her. *Men will always leap at the first opportunity to call the Mad King’s daughter a monster.* Ser Barristan had tried to shield her from the uglier tales in circulation, but Dany had heard them all. How she was a whore, a murdereress, a sorceress, a shape-changing fiend who took a hundred men to her bed each night and supped on their blood to break her fast, a daughter of demons and a harpy herself. *I am the queen, I cannot leave my business there undone.* Yet when would it ever be done, she did not know. If it had been such an ordeal that she was happier here in a comfortable cage, she did not know either what should be said of her instead. *I will not have it said that I failed here. I will not.*

Dany wondered where the *khalasar* meant to take her. Dothraki were a nomadic folk both by culture and temperament, and rambled for months on end in their great grassy sea, challenging other *khalasars* and emerging to menace cities, either being bought off with treasures and slaves or rejecting the tribute and enthusiastically sacking it nonetheless. Even her brother had had to admit that the Dothraki had no equals in the open field, which was why he had badgered Khal Drogo so relentlessly to get aboard a ship to Westeros that it had ended with his crown of molten gold. Yet as she herself had learned, they had no discipline, no sense of the future, and certainly no desire to spend months overseas in a foreign campaign to seat her on some iron chair. They would have followed her if her sun-and-stars had commanded it, but that was long ago and long done. *And after the fighting was done, I would have been hard-pressed to get them to stop.* She did not want a kingdom of cooked bones and charred ashes.

Once or twice, Dany had toyed with the idea that the gods had brought her back to the Dothraki in order to avenge this galling failure, to redeem herself for the choice she had made to allow Mirri Maz Duur to work her sorcery on Drogo. Jhaqo, after all, had been Drogo's *ko,* and the second to declare himself a new *khal* after Drogo's death. *He should be thanking me.* But she had not forgotten how Mago and Jhaqo had seized the lamb girl Eroeh, raped her, cut her throat, and staked her up. And the vow she had sworn then, how Mago and Jhaqo would plead for the mercy they had showed her up. And the vow she had sworn then, how Mago and Jhaqo would plead for the mercy they had showed their victim.

Dany pondered where she would do it, and when. The how of it was fairly self-evident, assuming Drogon consented to play his part, but she had to be careful. Once he was fully grown, Drogon would cause men to stare and shake and mutter that Balerion the Black Dread had been made flesh once more, but as of yet, he was still adolescent. And while his fire would be sufficient to dispose of one so-styled *khal,* the other twenty thousand riders would be more than enough to throw ropes and chains, to drag him down from the sky, to cut him to pieces. They might lose a good few in the effort, it was true, but that made no matter to Dothraki. They would throw themselves against a barrier again and again, with no heed for losses, if even one of them remained to walk through it at the end; Dany recalled the tale of the Three Thousand of Qohor. To call themselves dragonslayers would gild their laurels from the farthest corner of the grassy sea to the Horse Gate of Vaes Dothrak. And a dozen new *khals* would spring up where there had been only one before, a dozen new foes, assuming they let her live to witness it. *I am only a woman. I have no fire to breathe, no scales to shield me, no teeth and claws to fight with. I am blood of the dragon, but not its flesh.*

And there was that other matter. *You cannot set to rights all the ills in this world, my queen,* a voice that sounded disturbingly like Ser Jorah Mormont's whispered. *Eroeh was only one girl. Thousands like her perish every day, even now. And your father too was fond of burning folk to death.*

Dany stirred angrily at the reminder. *Go away,* she ordered him, but her heart was only half in it.
Her bear, her tireless brave bear. She had heard him before, as she wandered alone in the high plains, delirious with fever, bleeding and shitting. Viserys had said that dragons were impervious to the ailments of lesser men, but like so much else, he had been wrong about that. She had seen him there as well, an unquiet ghost with his molten crown and half his face scorched away. She wished that she would have seen Jorah too, had longed with an ache beyond words to turn and bury her face in his big hairy chest, but she had known that if she turned, he would fade away on the breeze. *I sent him away.* He, like Eroeh, was another old wrong she must avenge. She would have done anything to look on his ugly face again, he had always given her wise counsel and steadfast love. . . but he had come to her a spy, a liar, a whisperer, had been promised a pardon for murdering her and her unborn son. . . *But in the end, it was me who killed him.*

No, Dany thought, suddenly and sharply. Mirri Maz Duur had made the healing poultice first, had told Drogo to wear it, but he had ripped it off. And after. . . *that was my fault, I asked for the spell, I had no idea what I was asking, I was but a girl.* . . but it was on Drogo's pyre that she'd hatched Drogon and Rhaegal and Viserion, where she'd become the Mother of Dragons in truth. *I will not regret it, I will not call it back.* Drogo and Rhaego were dead. Part of her would always miss them and wonder what would have been if they had lived, but at that moment, Dany felt a door firmly close inside her. *Stormborn, the Unburnt.* She had been fashioned for greater things. There might come a day in the far future, as impossible as it seemed, when old mad Aerys Targaryen was remembered only as Queen Daenerys' sire.

But first she had to get out of this cage.

Her cogitations about killing Jhaqo could wait, Dany decided. *I broke the chains of countless slaves, now let me break my own.* She had lost track of how long she had been in here – it had been a fortnight at least, closer to a month. And she had no useful implement to batter her way out by brute force. By listening to what scraps of conversation she could, she knew that Jhaqo did not mean merely to cart her off to the *dosh khaleen* as a public service and have done with it. Why allow this sunset-lander to infect the wisdom of the ages, incite the crones to the gods knew what mad actions? No. Her fate would be more spectacular.

The *khalasar* rode hard that day, and Drogon did not return. As she always did when this was so, Dany worried. Nor could she erase the memory of little Hazzea's blackened bones, or the look on the father's face. Dragons were no tame creatures to wear a leash, but how could she not at least try to restrain them, when flying free might lead to countless more Hazzeas? *I should have trained them better,* the queen thought. *I should have accustomed them to my face and voice and mastery, yet I was too busy struggling to rule Meereen. A city of deceit and dust and slaves and Harpies. I should raze it brick by brick when I return.*

That night when they stopped to make camp, Dany was very sore from the constant rattling and jouncing of the cage, and her dwindling patience had reached its end. "You," she called in Dothraki, to one of the female slaves whose job it was to attend her. "Come here. I want a word."

Shamefaced, avoiding her gaze, the girl shuffled closer. *It will behoove me to be careful,* Dany realized. *If she is seen conspiring with me, she is the one who will suffer for it.* She smiled. "Don't be frightened. What's your name?"

The slave flicked frightened dark eyes up at her face, and then just as quickly back down. "I. . . this one's name is Zari, *Khaleesi.*"

Dany was pleased that the girl still addressed her by her old title. "Zari. Where do you come from, child?"

"My father was *ko* to Khal Quoro," the girl said. "Now dead. Khal Jhaqo defeated him two moons
past." She shot a panicky look to either side. "It is not wise for me to speak to you so familiarly. It is known."

"You need not fear," Dany said, thinking with a stab of how she had made the same promise to Eroeh, and all the other innocents she had tried in vain to save. "I am Mother of Dragons. If I order it, my Drogon will hurt any man who tries to hurt you." Would he? But this was no time to confess her doubts.

The mention of Drogon rendered Zari temporarily speechless. Finally, "The beast... Khaleesi, it is said that he is a demon that you raised with the witch's blood sorcery, that you killed Khal Drogo to give him life, that he..."

"Is that known as well?" Dany asked wryly. It is not far wrong. For all that they were nearly unmatched in martial prowess, the Dothraki were as superstitious as children told one too many ghost stories round the supper-fire. Viserys' fatal impatience had been driven in large part by his disdain for their never-ending cavalcade of omens and foretellings. "But whatever he is, he is mine. Now, sweetling. Do you know where we are bound?"

Zari hesitated again. She couldn't be much older than Missandei, back in Meereen; Dany missed her little scribe, sweet and brave and clever beyond her years, almost as much as she missed Jorah. But at last the girl crept up to the bars, lowered her voice to a whisper, and breathed, "In the tents of Khal Jhaqo, tale is made of a land of shadows. Of old mysteries and priests in red. The khal believes that if he gives you to them as a gift, they will give him untold riches and power in return."

Asshai. For everything, Dany could not say she was entirely shocked. What was surprising was the fact that a Dothraki, who mistrusted sorcery full as much as he mistrusted the sea, was willing to approach the red priests of Asshai, and even to strike a bargain with them. As the last Targaryen, Dany would be of immense interest to the flame-worshiping sect, and if she came packaged with one of the three living dragons in the world, her value would rise beyond price. Khal Jhaqo would indeed live as a wealthy man to the end of his days, would be healthily feared by his kith and kin for daring to do commerce with the spawn of shadows. And if he was brave enough to risk Asshai, he might also be game to get on a ship and sail for Westeros.

Dany pushed that out of her head. Too soon, too soon. Yet the moment Zari had made mention of it, her thoughts had returned to Quaithe in her red lacquer mask, the woman who had ridden from Qarth with Xaro Xhoan Daxos and Pyat Pree. To go forward you must go back, and to touch the light you must pass beneath the shadow, Quaithe had whispered, when she mysteriously appeared in Dany's cabin in the dead of night. And Dany had thought that the seer was telling her to go to Asshai. Should I then allow Jhaqo to do this?

Yet Quaithe was an utter enigma, completely unknown to her – she had never seen the woman's true face, after all. She warned me against Daxos and Pree, but I would have had to be a simpleton to trust them. When she had reappeared to Dany in Meereen, it had been to warn her against the pale mare and Reznak mo Reznak, and a horde of others as well... kraken and dark flame, lion and griffin, the sun's son and the mummer's dragon. The pale mare came, true enough, and the sun's son, Quentyn Martell who would have wed me... but was that enough to put stock in the whispers? Quaithe was a red priestess herself, she might well be eager to bring the Mother of Dragons into her order's grasp, to cut her apart and claim her flames for their own. If sorcery was a blade without a hilt, then prophecy must be even worse. Men had driven themselves mad trying to create their foretold fate – or to avoid it.

A chill ran down Dany's back. No, she thought. I will do nothing merely because one or another
mysterious figure decreed that I should. I am a Targaryen, the last Targaryen, I answer neither to
gods or men. Her gallant brother Rhaegar had been born on the night of the tragedy of Summerhall,
as her House had turned to the fell arts in an attempt to fulfill their inheritance, and Dany had drunk
her fill of it in the bloodmagic of Mirri Maz Duur, and in the House of the Undying. But what if it
is the only way? What if in her deepest destiny, she was meant to pass beneath the shadow and
learn its darkest secrets?

Zari was still watching her nervously. "By your leave, Khaleesi, I can go?"

"You may," Dany told her, and watched as the girl fairly fled. She leaned back against the side of
the cage, head whirling. How much farther can it be? She doubted that the rest of the khalasar
would share Jhaqo's resolve to visit the Asshai'i, even if they had no objection to the profit, and so
he might dispatch his bloodriders to finish the job and take her the rest of the way. She knew better
to think that they would be moved by pity for her predicament, but they would be moved by fear
and impatience and greed. Her best hope might be to terrify them so thoroughly that they
abandoned her on the side of the road, but then who might retrieve her in turn?

It would be useful if I was as monstrous as I am rumored to be, Dany thought ruefully. If only
Drogon would return. If she could only trust that he would obey her once more; she had never truly
believed that he would harm her, but it had been a harrowingly close thing, there in the fighting pit.
She knew as well that Asshai was a haven for dragonlore, and it suddenly increased her desire to
go there – there was so much she did not know. Dragons were sentient creatures, at least as
intelligent as men, and all but unstoppable once mature, but her House's entanglement with them
had brought at least as much grief as glory. Every time a new Targaryen is born, the gods toss a
coin to determine whether madness or greatness is in the offing. She recalled Ser Barristan telling
her that her grandfather Jaehaerys had once said something to that effect. But how can any more be
born? I am the last, and I am barren. My only children will be the dragons.

Around her, she watched the riders picket horses, build supper fires, exchange rough jests and take
casual pisses. In the middle of a horde some twenty or thirty thousand strong, she was utterly
alone. My chance will present itself, it must. Dany angrily wiped away the tears that had gathered
under her lashes, and waited until her supper was brought. She was almost tempted to throw it back
in their faces, just to make a point, but she was starved with hunger, and she stood to gain nothing
from antagonizing them now. She accepted the hunk of bloody horse meat and silently began to
gnaw.

Supper was almost over by the time a shadow darker than the twilight swept low over the rising
moon, and a murmur traveled among the Dothraki. Drogon furled his wings and came in for a
graceful landing, wisps of steam rising from his scales and some charred corpse still clasped in his
jaws. He dropped it in the grass, much like a hound presenting some choice morsel, and Dany saw
that it was an unknown animal, not a man or a child. She let out a shuddering breath of relief.
"Drogon," she called. "To me."

The dragon lifted his head on sound of her voice and looked at her with his slitted eyes. He was
still recovering from the wound the Meereenese handler Harghaz had given him in the arena,
though it had almost knitted and did not seem to trouble him unduly. But he took a few flaps across
the camp, scattering Dothraki to either side, and halted by her cage, gazing through the bars. There
was another murmur, this one angrier, and a few of the younger, brasher riders unslung their
arakhs. "Call him off, witch," one of them warned her. "Do it, now."

Dany shot him a cold look. "I will do as I see needful. Fear not, he seems to have supped for the
night."
The young rider mumbled something highly unflattering, but subsided. The glare of hostile eyes did not, however, and hands remained at arakh hilts until Drogon lifted off again. Dany had to fight a lurch of disappointment, as always. She could yet call dracarys to him, and sow a new Field of Fire, but now that she knew what Jhaqo intended for her, she was dangerously tempted to let it come to pass.

But even if that is so, I will not appear before them a captive, caged and tame. She and Drogon had killed the Undying of Qarth in their palace of dust, when they would have consumed her; let them do the same if the red priests of Asshai should try. From the tales Dany had heard, the worshipers of R'hllor were keenly fond of human sacrifices for their rites. I will teach them what it means to burn to death. The Targaryens had adopted the Faith of the Seven when her ancestor Aegon had conquered Westeros, forsaking their pagan Valyrian religion, though it had taken the subsequent uprising of the Militant to secure them as its staunchest defenders. Dany's desire to see the red priests atone for their actions owed nothing to religious fervor; she had not seriously thought of gods in years. Only to the Targaryen words themselves. Fire and blood.

The night grew darker. The Dothraki pitched their tents and retired within – the sound of talk drifted out, or quarreling, or lovemaking. All of it only undergirded Dany's own loneliness. Once more she tried to picture Daario's face, but could not. I never should have been so fool as to take him into my bed, let alone my heart. If Daario had survived his episode as a hostage, he was well away from the hellhole of Slaver's Bay by now, en route to gainful employment elsewhere. Far elsewhere. Yet she had found solace in his arms for a time, had felt like the girl she was and not the crone she had to be, had delighted in his touch and his kisses. Is that such a crime? I did my duty, I set him aside when I wed Hizdahr... though in truth she might not have been so strong if Daario had not left on his own accord.

It does me no good to pick over this again. She should not be thinking of anything but how to get out of this cage – now, while the khalasar slept. Jhaqo had not put a guard on her, correctly surmising that she was no threat on her own, and that offering men up to be roasted by Drogon would be actively counterproductive. And she was not mistreated, so why should she have any motive to break out and wreak revenge?

Why, indeed? Dany thought grimly, digging her fingers into the gap between cage and door. The Dothraki had no forges beyond those to smelt arakhs or horseshoes, and ironmongery as an art had therefore never advanced beyond the essential. Her prison was crafted of woven wicker and crosshatched branches, varnished in some sort of shellac that made it as hard as rock. Mayhaps by working up enough momentum, she could tip it over and smash it on the ground – but it was soft and squashy, would wind her and bruise her but not liberate her. She cursed Drogon's recalcitrance as she continued to labor. I would be out of here in the blink of an eye if he would so much as singe their braids.

It was not working. She sat back on her heels and cursed under her breath. Zari was the closest thing she had to an ally in the entire camp, and that very remote; the girl would never put herself at such risk as to loose Khal Jhaqo's prized prisoner, and nor should she. Eroeh's fate would indeed look desirable by comparison. Mercy had never numbered among Dothraki virtues. And once they discovered that she'd contrived to free herself, they'd –

Wait.

The torches and cookfires had been extinguished, so Dany's only source of light was the uncertain moon, but she could still make out a burly figure in a hooded cloak, moving through the camp directly toward her. Her breath seized up, and for a mad moment she thought that Daario had come after her after all. But he was more elegant, slender, flamboyant. Not like this... this...
Heart in her throat, Dany watched the hooded figure reach her cage – almost close enough to touch, if she stretched her arm through. He unsheathed a long bronze-bladed knife, and for another instant she thought he meant to kill her, but instead he started to saw at the wickerwork. His breathing was low and harsh, almost familiar, and she had to tell herself that this might not truly be happening, and that if it was, Jhaqo and his bloodriders would subject them both to some horrible fate. But one of the bars was cut away, and then another.

*I know his smell.* It came to her almost from the blue. His smell, and his breathing, and the coarse black hair that tufted his scarred, callused hands. This could not be real, she did not want to believe it. The *khalasar* could not be difficult to follow, and seeing Drogon in the skies, returning to the camp, would give anyone who was dense enough to need it a blazing beacon of her location, but –

*I sent him away. I sent him away, this is a dream as before.* Or it wasn't, and Dany did not know which frightened her more. Three bars had been cut away by now; the man was grunting, sweating with the exertion, and no one had yet arrived to investigate. Then one more was removed, large enough of a hole for her to slip through, and the man held out that hand. She took it, and knew at once.

Daenerys Targaryen stumbled from the dragon's cage, and into Jorah Mormont's arms.

For an endless moment she could do nothing but sob breathlessly, hanging onto him with both hands, her legs so weak and sore from the imprisonment that they could barely bear her weight. It was her bear who bore her weight instead. How could he be here, like a true answer from a prayer – how could he be here, before her, now, not now –

Dany wrenched herself backwards and almost fell. He caught her, but she wrenched free again. Gasping, almost blinded by her tears, she slapped him so hard that his head turned with a crack.

Instead of trying to catch or avoid the blow, he absorbed it with a grunt. Then he went straightaway down to one knee, and laid the blade he'd used to free her at her feet. "My queen." The voice was his, but so hoarse and choked as to sound almost unrecognizable. "Do as you will to me."

Dany was such in a state that she almost took him up on it. "How dare you!" she hissed. "How dare you. . . come back to me, like this, how dare you think – "

"That you were in need of rescue?" Beneath the hood, she saw his eyes flick ironically to the cage. "If that was not so, my queen, I apologize."

"Be quiet. I did not give you leave to speak." Dany clenched her fists, wanting to hold him, wanting to hurt him, wanting to kiss him, wanting to kill him. Always he had been too presumptuous, had dared too much of her. *My bear.* How was it even possible that he was here? Did he not have the sense to stay in exile where she'd sent him? But everything in her life, in her reign, had been follies and disasters since she had done so. Ser Barristan was a brave man and true, and he did his best, but Jorah, *Jorah* –

The knight bowed his head. "My tongue is my queen's, to do with as she will."

Dany whirled away. Her legs nearly gave out again, but she caught onto her erstwhile prison to steady herself. To walk about was a rare luxury, to feel the night wind on her skin, to stretch out her arms and bend herself in half, to pull out all the kinks and knots. *Freedom.* The world was possible once more. She was nonetheless irritated that she'd not been able to do it herself, felt as if she might have failed some crucial test. *Where is Drogon?* She ought to flee to him right now and fly off, leave Jorah in the camp. He would be known to most of them from the time when they had ridden with her sun-and-stars, they might remember him with friendship. Or they might not. *It is*
naught to me.

But he had come for her. Not Daario and not Ser Barristan and certainly not her noble lord husband, Hizdahr zo Loraq. None of them but Jorah, foraging across the depths of the Dothraki sea on his own, tracking the khalasar, watching for the dragon. *You mad sweet fool. What have you done to us?*

Jorah was still motionless on his knees. He had not spoken. He seemed to be awaiting her word.

*I could pick up this knife and kill him.* Dany took a step forward. "Pull back your hood," she said instead. "I would look on your face."

Jorah seemed to tremble slightly, as with contained emotion he would not or could not stand to voice. Then he reached up, and obeyed.

Dany recoiled. The basic arrangement of the features was the same as ever, but so masked with bruises and scars and weals that it barely looked human. She briefly thought that she had slapped him hard enough to leave a mark, but realized instead that it was a brand on his cheek, in likeness of a hideous demon. "What have they done to you?" she blurted out. "Whose hand did this work?"

"Yezzan zo Qaggaz's, a Wise Master of Yunkai," Ser Jorah answered. "Or rather, his overseer's."

*The mark of an unruly slave.* Dany had learned everything she cared to know of slaves in Astapor and Yunkai and Meereen. The irony almost made her choke. *Ser Jorah was banished from his homeland for selling to a slaver, and now he has been sold by one.* No one could ever say that the gods were not mercilessly just. She thought again of how men would struggle with all their might to meet or avoid the fate foretold for them, and was forced to conclude that fate had never stood a chance against Jorah Mormont. If he was fool enough to blunder all the way back here, then he might just be fool enough to pull it off.

Still, Dany's anger was hot in her, searing, and she was determined not to forgive him too swiftly. Even at night, surrounded by a khalasar who would murder her as soon as barter her, with a dragon of uncertain temperament on the loose nearby. If Drogon thought Ser Jorah a threat to her, even she might not be able to stop him from unloosing his flames.

*I have missed him so much.* She took another step. There seemed to be no doubt that her bear had genuinely suffered for his crimes. *Ser Barristan said that my father never forgot or forgave a slight.* She was struggling so hard not to meet the destiny that had been written for her, desired so greatly to walk her own path. *I am more than Aerys Targaryen's get, Viserys' little frightened sister, the daughter who killed her mother to come into the world. I swore it.* She had left that part of her behind long ago, but some ghost of the small scared child would always remain. The house with the red door and Ser Willem Darry's big paws. *My first bear. My lost home.*

"Rise, ser," she said. She sounded strangely choked herself. "You will be well rewarded for your service."

His eyes burned two holes through her. He looked at her as if nothing, no man or woman or child, had existed in the world before or since. It made her want to turn away, and it made her want to move closer. "Daenerys," he whispered hoarsely.

She wanted to run to him then, wanted to cling to him, but she was still his queen. He must never presume to touch her as a woman again. If he was to be reconciled to her service, he must learn that. "Your Grace," she corrected him, as she had on the ship on the night that he had kissed her. "We may leave together – " to Asshai? To Meereen? To Westeros? – "but I have not forgotten your
misdeeds. If you ever transgress in the slightest degree again, all the gods of your forefathers and mine will not stop me from giving you to the flames. *Do you understand me?*

"I . . . do," he said. "Your Grace."

"Good." Dany's strength was returning. She felt light-headed, almost invulnerable. "Then we can go to –"

"You will go, *Khaleesi,*" a cold voice commented in Dothraki, from the stand of grass just beyond. "Where a whore such as you is fit for, no more."

Ser Jorah was on his feet so fast that she almost didn't see him move. He put her behind him, one hand tense on his blade. He had always done this, had always shielded her, from everyone except himself. "Come out, Jhaqo," he answered in the same language, matching the coldness. "You must have missed my ugly face as greatly as I missed yours."

Dany heard a laugh. Then the grasses rustled, and Khal Jhaqo emerged, flanked to both sides by his bloodriders. "You," he said. "Jorah the Andal. You will again steal my prize, is that so? The whore is for the red priests. Do you see how brave I am become, since I hear of the witch burning to death? Fire kills them like us. Fire kills us all."

"You are wiser than you know," Dany answered him. All her fear was gone, all her doubt. She stepped out from behind Jorah's arm, stood alone between them, her old life and her new. And she saw the dark shadow gliding low in the night, no longer knew anything but her resolve – *I am blood of the dragon, its mother, its soul* – as she called out to her child. "Drogon," she sang. "*Dracarys.*"
Cersei

From the high window in Maegor's Holdfast, the queen could watch the barges laboring up the Blackwater, riding low and heavy with the cargos of freight, food, and weaponry they were bringing from Highgarden. For each barge there were at least two armed escorts, as it couldn't have escaped even the Fat Flower's piercing recollection that to bring so much largesse to a starving, panicking city would be an exercise in sheer calamity otherwise. And the gods only knew how much of it went astray anyway. Even Mace Tyrell would not be wasting this much charity on gangs of pestulant guttersnipes if not for the fact that his precious daughter was still awaiting her trial by the Faith. Polishing up his pious bona fides in the interim couldn't hurt, and in addition, it reminded the sheep of King's Landing how much they loved House Tyrell, who had saved them from Stannis in the battle and who fed and cared for them, while the lions stayed disdainfully shut up in their towers.

Fools. The queen turned sharply and began to pace across the floor. Stripped of her royal apartments and garb and authority, she had been granted only these cramped, bare rooms, a plain brown dress of homespun, and the company of one cloying septa. Though Cersei did consider Tyene something of an improvement over the sour old cunts Moelle, Unella, and Scolera; she at least seemed to have half a brain, though she was so sweet and simple that it oft put the queen's teeth on edge. But when she had angrily informed Tyene that the Tyrells were perfumed traitors prancing about the court and practicing their villainies in plain sight, the girl had gotten a queer smile and nodded. After that, scarce a day had gone by without Tyene bringing her another piece of gossip about some trickery, some ill-doing, some threat or bribe or underhanded coercion that the roses had dared to carry out, and on Cersei's request, she brought as well a parchment and quill for the queen to keep record of them all. The Tyrells have stolen my sons, my kingdom, my father and my uncle. I will see them burn.

Cersei felt little personal grief for her uncle's inexplicable demise. Ser Kevan had been useless since Lord Tywin's death anyway, rejected her offer of co-rule and tried to pack her back off to Casterly Rock, made no effort to free her from the Great Sept of Baelor, and had even been so treasonous as to appoint Mace Tyrell Hand himself. The queen considered it suitably ironic that the Tyrells had subsequently been the ones to murder him; there was no proof, but she did not need proof. Those are the wages for your sin, my lord. You betrayed my son, your rightful liege lady, and House Lannister itself. You got what you deserved.

The discovery of her uncle's body with a crossbow bolt in the stomach, the same way her father had died, had erased any doubts Cersei ever had (not many) that the Tyrells and her repulsive little brother were in this together. Tyrion had killed Joff, he had killed Mother and Father, he'd killed Uncle Kevan, and he'd kill Tommen too, as soon as he got the chance. They told her that the dwarf had fled across the narrow sea, but the queen did not believe a word of it. He is here, hiding in the walls. The Imp was a small man, after all. No one but Maegor the Cruel had known all the secrets of the Red Keep, though Varys might run a close second. And since no one had seen the eunuch either, the Tyrells must either have enlisted his cooperation or arranged his elimination. No loss. She had Qyburn for that now. Qyburn for everything.

Cersei desisted from her pacing and sat down on the settle. Of all the plots of hers that had been knocked off their trivets by the events of the last few months, she most greatly rued the failure to assassinate Trystane Martell. It had been so simple, so neat, and though Ser Balon Swann was not the catspaw she would have chosen – he had a troublesome streak of honor that surfaced at the most inopportune moments – he was equally honor-bound to obey. The queen had found it deliciously ironic, again, but Swann must have made a botch of it, spilled all to gouty old Prince
Doran and his sluttish daughter.

_Tyrion forced the Martell match on me, I had no choice._ Cersei was aware that Myrcella had conceived a youthful passion for her swarthy little betrothed, but the Martells had repaid that trust by slashing off her ear, scarring her permanently, and using her as a pawn in their vengeful schemes against Tommen. _And Oberyn fought for Tyrion._ Before she died, Cersei intended to see every stone torn from Sunspear and cast into the sea. A few servings of wildfire would not go amiss either. _See how you like that heat, you seven devils._

There would be ample time to do it. Qyburn had promised it. As soon as the Faith got around to remembering her – there was so much else to throw hypocritical sanctimonious fits over, just now – her trial would take place, and her innocence proven. _Ser Robert Strong cannot be killed by any man,_ the queen reminded herself. She knew what Qyburn was, she knew what he did – well, some of it, she did not need her supper ruined by all the grotesque details of what went on in the black cells. But she did know that Ser Robert was not human, that there was no face or voice or soul remaining in that monolith. No matter. _One Robert caged me, and this one will set me free._ Even Tyrion would be out of luck trying to bring Strong down before the trial.

Cersei had to smile. With the brave Ser Robert on her side, it mattered less that Jaime had abandoned her and – reportedly – run off with some ugly wench he’d chanced upon in the riverlands. All the use had deserted Jaime with his sword hand; at the rate he was going, he should join their cousin Lancel and paint a seven-pointed star on his shield, wear a chafing cilice as his smallclothes. _He could even be the champion for the Faith._ It amused the queen to picture Jaime and Ser Robert squaring off against each other at her trial. It may not please her to see her twin die, but it would certainly please her to see him good and suffer. _I needed you, I begged for you, I bled to you and told you how much I loved you, and you still betrayed me. Even you._

Jaime had always been like that. A fool. Perhaps only now she was truly able to see it. Cersei remembered a summer afternoon in Casterly Rock when they were seven years old, one of the days they had decided to exchange clothes and play at being the other. She had laced Jaime into her green damask dress, giggling, and insisted on brushing and braiding his hair and tying it with ribbons. She already had on Jaime’s tunic and hose and boots, the golden lion emblazoned proudly on the front, and shook out her curls in a wild tangle, as Jaime always looked as if he had fallen headfirst into a thornbush no matter the state his clothes had been in prior to being inflicted on him. She belted on his cherished toy sword as well, despite his objections, and had to remind him to walk with delicate small steps, so as not to trod on the Myrish lace hem of the dress and tear it off. When he complained, she told him that it was like that for her every day, and galloped down the hall, jumped off the stairs, and bolted into the sunshine.

Outside in the courtyard, her father had seen her and smiled. Mother was alive back then, that was before Tyrion arrived to destroy all their lives, and so Lord Tywin Lannister still smiled. "Jaime, lad," he’d said, and ruffled her hair. "Addam tells me that you were the chief culprit in a food fight in the nursery last night. You do know that is rather undignified behavior for a lion, do you not? Lions needn’t fight their food, only eat it."

She gave an easy shrug, because that was what Jaime would have done. He and copper-haired Addam Marbrand, whom she had resented bitterly until Jaime reassured her that he still loved her better, had indeed chased each other around the room with fistfuls of supper, until the horrified ingress of the nurse put an abrupt end to the jollity. "It would turn out bad for the food," she said. "Lions like to kill it beforehand."

Lord Tywin chuckled. "So they do. Well, run along – and if you see your sister, the septa wants to speak with her. I have to ride back to court tomorrow, Aerys was reluctant to grant me even this
much time away, but stay out of trouble and make me proud. I hear you're becoming a fine touch with a sword."

"I am," she said, hoping he wouldn't ask her to demonstrate. She'd gotten another smile and scampered away, and by the great hall, spotted Jaime pulling awful faces as the selfsame septa upbraided him for forgetting to memorize the Maiden's Book yet again. But when she ventured around to the armory, she stumbled upon three guardsmen sharing a leisurely cup of wine and crude jests about the late Lord Tytos' brazen mistress, and her walk of shame through the streets of Lannisport. *If only I had known.* She had stood there listening as they casually insulted her House and her grandfather, until one of them finally looked up, saw her, and blanched. "Little Lord Jaime. You... you'll keep this a secret between us lads, won't you? You won't mention this to your father?"

"I won't," she said, because Jaime wouldn't have. He never took anything seriously, would have laughed right along with them. *He never understood what it meant to be a Lannister.* Trying very hard to sound adult, she added, "That must have been the first time a lion was beaten by a pussy. A pussycat, I mean."

They'd roared with laughter and sent her on her way. That night at supper, when she and Jaime had gone back to being themselves, she told her father anyway. Lord Tywin summoned the offenders on the instant, asked if it was true, and upon hearing that it was, threw them out of the Rock right then and there. He came close to sentencing them to walk naked through Lannisport as well, but Lady Joanna intervened. Afterwards she told Cersei that while it was right and proper to uphold the honor of the family, it was not ladylike to eavesdrop, bear tales, and lie, and she must not do it again.

Even later, when Jaime was curled up under the covers with her and they were playing at kissing, she told him what Mother had said. Jaime had only scoffed and said that nobody could be expected to understand. As for him, he reported, he'd spent an excruciatingly boring day pretending to be her and getting scolded by annoying women, and appeared honestly perplexed when she hit him over the head with a pillow and told him to go back to his own room. That was only a few months before the maid caught them together, and Mother banished him to the other side of Casterly Rock. *So much I should have known.*

Lost in memory as she was, the knock on the door startled the queen considerably. Angry at herself for it – and even more for hoping that her thoughts of Jaime had brought the real man back to her – Cersei straightened her skirts and called regally, "Enter."

The door opened, and Tyene slipped through, immaculately garbed and groomed as always. Cersei was sure that vanity was one of the septons' favorite sins to harp on, but she rather appreciated the young septa's wordless defiance. Tyene looked as innocent as – well, not a blooming rose, but so much so that no man could ever chide her with a straight face. *Though a humble sister of the Faith should not dress more richly than a queen.* One of these days, she might hit Tyene over the head and steal her gown, even if she would then have no one to talk to.

"Your Grace," the young woman said, dipping a curtsey. Her luminescent golden hair was tucked away beneath a linen wimple, but the tip of her braid emerged from the hem. "I'm so sorry, I'm much later than I meant to be. There is simply so much happening right now. I do hope our dear Lord Tyrell can manage."

"Exquisitely, nay doubt." Cersei fiddled with a stray thread on her sleeve. "And I'm sure, my dear, you don't plan to leave me in suspense."

"Never, my lady." Tyene looked at her with eyes so blue and guileless that Qyburn should have
made a note of it. "Well, I suppose there's nothing to do but go for it. There was an envoy from the Quiet Isle to the Great Sept of Baelor yesterday, and they said..."

"They said what?" Cersei snapped.

"Oh, my lady, I so do not desire to hurt you." Tyene reached forward and took the queen's hand, and Cersei did not pull back. "I pray to the good and just Father that it is nothing but lies. But the man from the Quiet Isle told the High Septon that your brave brother was arrested there a week ago."

Cersei's stomach turned. "Tyrion? Dear gods, dear gods, tell me it was Tyrion."

"No," Tyene said. "Ser Jaime."

Cersei glanced away. She was not quite sure what expression had just crossed her face, and did not want Tyene to see until she could regain command of herself. Mayhaps Jaime had never abandoned her after all. If he too had been placed under arrest on false accusations, they could once again share their fates. They might bring him here. He would go on being utterly useless once returned, aye, but... Still, she was infuriated that the Tyrells had once again set new records for effrontery. "How dare they?" she raged. "Lay hands on the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, and on what charges? Who do they intend to elevate to his place – Ser Loras' charred corpse?"

Tyene sighed. "I wish I knew, my lady. They seemed to be under the impression that Ser Jaime is harboring Sansa Stark. I would not speak such unthinkable words if it was not precisely what the man said, but it is so. Ser Jaime and T – the Imp must have been scheming together, if Ser Jaime has protected the girl. He even gave his own Lannister sword to that wench from Tarth, and offered to allow them to arrest him if they would only let her go."

Cersei stared at her. "You... you must be lying. The Stark girl and Tyrion conspired to kill Joff together, Joff was Jaime's... was Jaime's nephew and king, Jaime wouldn't shield her..."

"I'm so sorry, my lady. I heard it with my own ears." Tyene cast her gaze down. "Isn't it terrible of the Tyrells, truly? They seemed to be under the impression that Ser Jaime is harboring Sansa Stark. I would not speak such unthinkable words if it was not precisely what the man said, but it is so. Ser Jaime and T – the Imp must have been scheming together, if Ser Jaime has protected the girl. He even gave his own Lannister sword to that wench from Tarth, and offered to allow them to arrest him if they would only let her go."

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"I'm so sorry, my lady. I heard it with my own ears." Tyene cast her gaze down. "Isn't it terrible of the Tyrells, truly? We knew they had no shame, but after they killed sweet Joffrey with Tyrion's collaboration, now they're taking his little wife away from him. Make no mistake, they'll find Sansa and wed her to Willas, and unite north and south to march against the capital."

"Yes... it's the Tyrells, it is." Cersei was scrambling at straws, heart pounding. "They must have lied to Jaime. Is there nothing they will not stoop to? These... these creatures... I'm surrounded by them on all sides, is it not yet time for me to suffer some regretfully fatal accident before my trial? Or Tommen? When do they mean to kill Tommen?"

"Trust me, my lady, I listen assiduously to any scrap of rumor, any whisper." Tyene raised those innocent eyes back to the queen's. "They mean no less than utter conquest, and the only thing keeping them from going ahead with their foul plans is the continued absence of Sansa. If you love your son, if you love your brother, pray that they never find her."

Cersei nodded numbly. She could not recall the last time she had truly prayed. Mayhaps in childhood, or mayhaps one of the nights when Robert crawled into her bed, dead drunk, and pawed his brutal way into her. She certainly had felt no inclination to sing praises to the gods while the sparrows and the septas degraded her. But by the expression on Tyene's face, she could tell that there was more to come, and wondered if she wanted to hear it.
"Well?" she said brusquely. "What else has this cabal of thieves and murderers been hiding?"

"Be strong, my lady. But Ser Jaime's involvement in this plot may go even deeper. Before he purportedly disappeared and then reappeared, he was sent to settle the siege of Riverrun. We did know that he somehow contrived to let Ser Brynden Tully, the Young Wolf's great-uncle, slip through his fingers – so to speak." Tyene smiled faintly. "But we did not know that he seems to have lost the Young Wolf's queen as well."

"What?" The shocks were coming far too fast and furious for Cersei's taste. "I swear, if you are lying, you'll die by inches, I'll give you to Qyburn, you'll. . ."

"What sort of talk is that for a godly woman?" Tyene shook her head reprovingly. "You know I'm your only friend, don't you? My sweet queen. It makes my heart hurt to hear the things they say about you. And I have the High Septon's ear, I do try to make him understand that they are lies, but he is a devoutly religious man, and so will believe the worst of women whenever he can. I tell you this only so you will be prepared to defend yourself against any charge they might make against you of involvement with Ser Jaime's crimes. It was his own childhood friend who revealed his treachery, would you believe it? Ser Addam Marbrand sent a raven to tell us all that the Jeyne Westerling in the Crag is a fraud."

"Jeyne Westerling. . ." Yes, Cersei remembered, that was the name of the chit Robb Stark had fucked and married, fortunately in that order. "She was supposed to be surrendered with Riverrun. Dare you tell me now that she was not?"

"Aye. The wickedness of men is truly enough to make the Maiden weep." Tyene looked very like the Maiden herself, and apparently in illustration, a crystalline tear gathered at the corner of one deep blue eye. "Ser Jaime supposedly met the girl and confirmed her identity before sending her back to her father at the Crag. But Ser Addam has established beyond doubt that it was her younger sister, and the real Jeyne has gone missing. My lady, this could never have happened without your brother's cooperation."

"But letting the little queen escape. . ." Suddenly, terrifyingly, Cersei wondered if she had been wrong. She had dwelled so obsessively on Margaery the entire time, but what if this Westerling girl was also a younger and more beautiful queen? She was said to be pretty but not stunning, nothing to lose a kingdom over, but it was Robb Stark's honor that had killed him, as much as the Freys. Yet Jeyne was a queen, she was younger, she had mysteriously slipped out when her survival could mean rejuvenation for the broken northern cause. . . she could even be with child. Sansa Stark wed to Willas Tyrell on one hand, a wolf pup and a heir for the crown on the other. . . it would forge together an almost invincible spearhead against Tommen, and Jaime had been privy to this. . .

"Did Edmure know as well, then?" Cersei said at last. "Lord Tully?"

"He did." Tyene looked troubled. "Sweet queen, I know this is terrible, but. . ."

"Terrible?" Cersei almost laughed. "He lied, he lied, and I want him dead. Him and Roslin Frey and all the Westerlings. It may not smoke the girl out altogether, but it may frighten a few informants into finding their tongues. Lord Gawen, Lady Sybell, the sister and whatever the younger boy's name is, I want them dead. Tell the High Septon, Tyene. Justice will come from the Faith or not at all." She had to take a moment to gnaw on the overwhelming irony. "The small council must be packed with Tyrell creatures by now. Don't tell them. Only the High Septon. I am relying on the High bloody Sparrow to carry out my vengeance. Seven hells, I am become an utter farce indeed.

That queer smile touched Tyene's lips again. "The Iron Throne is currently at pains to prove its
devotion to the Faith. If the Most Devout were to draw up the warrants for the Westerlings' executions, King Tommen would have no choice but to sign them. Especially if they came directly from the High Septon, with no time for the Tyrells to intervene."

"Yes," Cersei said eagerly. "With any luck, it will be done before they even know anything is amiss. You are a true friend, Tyene."

"Your Grace is one of the few women who understands what it is like to struggle in a man's world." The girl lifted Cersei’s hand and kissed her fingers. "I can only imagine how lonely it must have been."

"It was," Cersei said, absurdly gratified. It suddenly occurred to her to wonder what it would be like to use Tyene as she had used Taena Merryweather. *Even their names sound alike.* And Tyene had golden hair, whereas Taena had been as dark as night. *It would be more like it was with Jaime.* And the ultimate insult to the Faith would be to seduce the beautiful, vulnerable little septa they'd set to keep tabs on her moral fiber. *What could they do about it? Arrest me again? I still have Ser Robert waiting for the trial.*

Not yet, though. Not yet. She was too reliant on Tyene's influence with the High Septon to make a move too fast and send it crashing down. Instead, she merely kissed Tyene’s hand in return. "Sweetling, you are too kind. Don't forget, I want Roslin Frey and Edmure Tully dead as well. Tell whatever fable you have to in order to get the Faith to approve that, but it would be better if it did not appear to come from the Iron Throne. Who can we get Lord Walder most profitably enraged at? Another Red Wedding?" She had not felt this invigorated in days. *A tame lioness, am I?*

"You are positively primeval, my lady," Tyene said, with a giggle. "As it happens, I have just the culprit. I do hope you are prepared for yet another shock, after I have already set so many on you, but... you know of all the disruptions in the stormlands? And that Storm's End itself has fallen, suddenly making Stannis Baratheon's base of support rather precarious indeed?"

"I had heard," Cersei acknowledged. "Stannis is freezing his arse off in the north, isn't he?" Nobody had told her anything beyond that.

"He is, my sweet queen." Tyene smiled. "But you must be wondering who took Storm's End. I am here to tell you. My lady... it is the season for men to reappear from the dead. A boy accompanied by Lord Jon Connington and the Golden Company has landed on the shores of the stormlands. He is raiding along Cape Wrath, has taken Griffin's Roost and now Storm's End as well, and is said to be preparing for an attack on the capital. Sooner rather than later."

Cersei blinked. "Lord Jon Connington drank himself to death."

"Such a sad fate for the hero of the Battle of the Bells, don't you think? If only it was true. And it would be a curious but minor development, if not for the identity of the boy who is with him. He must be lying beyond a doubt, but he... he is said to be Aegon. Aegon Targaryen."

In an afternoon filled with unpleasant surprises, this was undoubtedly the worst. "He..." Cersei failed utterly to have something to riposte to that. "You... you're right, he's lying, he must be. My father presented him and his sister all wrapped up in red cloaks to my valiant husband. *Rhaegar's son, the son I should have given him. But the Martells took that from me as well, little frail stunted Elia who could not even stop him from looking to the Stark girl.* Once her mother had thought of wedding Elia to Jaime and her to Oberyn. *Instead I was wed to Robert, and Rhaegar was turned to ash, and Oberyn took Tyrion's side.* Suddenly she did not care so greatly about the splendid revenge she was preparing for the Westerlings and the Tullys. She wanted to scream and run from the ghosts.
Tyene squeezed her hand. "Your Grace? You look so pale."

"I was merely overcome at the thought," Cersei said between frozen lips. "That was the last shock you have in store for me, I pray?"

"Aye. I am so sorry to cause you this distress, when you have endured enough." Tyene's face was a mirror of sympathy. "But if it could be arranged to blame the pretender for the murder of Lord Tully and his little wife, it would give Walder Frey someone else to breathe flames at – how apt a fate for a new Blackfyre, don't you think? And then with the Freys in arms, the Westerlings dead, Ser Jaime's crimes exposed, and the search for Sansa Stark proved fruitless, the Tyrells will be on their heels and badly on the defensive. Stannis Baratheon freezes in the north, and the smallfolk have no love for him besides. Who else can they then turn to, but your brave son?"

"Tommen is a sweet boy." Joffrey was the brave one. The true lion. But the rest of Cersei liked Tyene's plan very well indeed. Then I will rip out the septas' tongues with hot pincers, just as I planned, and throw Jaime into my old cell when I return as Tommen's regent. She could almost taste it. With the scale of the Tyrells' treachery unmasked in full, the Faith would have no choice but to sentence Margaery to death. If we can get this done in time, I may not even need Ser Robert. . . but no. It was best to have it, make a spectacle where all men could see, prove her innocence so dramatically that it need never be called into question again. "Sweet Tyene, it seems almost unfair of me to ask more of you when you have done so much already. But you will see that Jaime is brought to the city, from whatever miserable bolt-hole the Tyrells have squirrelled him down? I want to deal with him myself."

"Of course," Tyene said. Shy dimples bloomed in her cheeks. "The Faith has taken a great interest in Sansa Stark and the role Ser Jaime played in her disappearance. Believe me, if you ask him about anything I've told you, he will not be able to deny it. And if Sansa ever is caught, you can rest assured that she will suffer the full fate of a kingslayer."

"Good." Cersei imagined that girl, that stupid little ingrate, with her empty head and her harlot's smiles. I would have wed my Joff to her, I would have taught her how to be a queen, and she repaid me with this. She would have sweet dreams of Sansa on the rack tonight. And perhaps if we find her, we can unravel the thread that leads to my little valonqar. I will never stop hunting you, Tyrion. She still did not want to believe that Jaime could have been complicit with him to the degree Tyene was implying, but it seemed hideously apparent that he was. Next she'll claim that Jaime freed the dwarf from his cell, that night. And she might well be right. Her other half no more, Jaime had become Ser Kevan, betraying everything their House had ever stood for, her entire career as queen, their son, their love, their shared soul. After I have his confession, I will send him to Qyburn. Mayhaps Qyburn will hurt him as much as he's hurt me.

After Tyene had taken her leave, Cersei sat by the window, staring down at the streets. Twilight was starting to creep over the unquiet, hungry city, and she could see countless small, dark figures. More sparrows, more street preachers, more mobs, more peasants with torches and pitchforks. They were nearly a nightly occurrence now, appearing no matter how heavily Mace Tyrell applied the City Watch, and their tempers were unlikely to be improved by the dread news that a resurrected Targaryen was plotting an attack on them from the stormlands. Cersei had not been permitted to see Tommen in almost a fortnight, but she yearned to tell him not to be afraid, that she had helped save his kingdom in just a few hours this afternoon. I have done good work. I am fortunate in Tyene. She could see her plump sweet boy with his blonde curls and his green eyes and his endearing smile, his kittens. I love you. Be strong.

And as for the Tyrells, the Martells, Jaime, the false Targaryen, and everyone else who had ever spurned her and destroyed her, their reckoning was coming as well, faster than they'd dream. The
queen smiled, truly smiled, for the first time in what felt like years. Then she poured another cup of wine, sat back, and happily watched Flea Bottom burn.
Cape Wrath had earned every bit of its name. It was the cauldron where the storms that rolled up Shipbreaker Bay to test their mettle on the walls of Durron Godsgrief’s mighty castle were brewed, and there was scarce a day, if ever, when the surf did not roar like thunder, the sky piled with iron-grey anvils of clouds, the wind keening so shrilly that even ordinary conversations had to take place in a shout. Hundred-foot cliffs unraveled in a dizzying spiral to the sea, and clammy mists threaded the towering pines of the Rainwood, which proved almost hourly why it too was well named. Mud sloughs up to their knees were apt to appear at any given moment, and it was an utter bloody nuisance to keep fires burning, leather dry, and steel from rusting.

To be entirely honest, Jon Connington would not have gone this way. Rather, he would have taken advantage of their ever-tightening grip in the stormlands – they held Storm’s End itself, after all, though only with a skeleton garrison that would be in serious trouble in the event of a determined counterattack. But it almost all the castles further inland were well guarded and wary of their approach, and an army that stayed on the coast was much harder to pin down than one that marched straight in and stuck itself between King’s Landing on one hand and Highgarden on the other. Connington was scrupulously careful to wear his gloves at all times now, else it was not merely the prince who would notice that half his hand had turned to stone. It would have done so even somewhere far away from this misty, blustery spit of land, and it was time to let the lad stretch his wings not just as a soldier but also as a commander. Besides, after his stunning victory at Storm’s End, it was becoming increasingly difficult to say Aegon Targaryen nay in anything. At the age of scarce eighteen, he had taken a castle that had defied even the gods themselves, and from the slight swagger he now walked with, it was plain that it had gone directly to his head.

Lord Jon supposed it was not much use to point out that Storm’s End had been nowhere near its full strength and power, that the Golden Company had done almost all the fighting and still suffered heavy casualties, and that this was another reason they were forced to adopt a defensive position moving down the coast toward Dorne, rather than preparing to stage an attack on the capital itself. The prince had wanted to do just that, in fact, but Connington had managed to talk him out of it. The prince was young and bold and hungry for his throne, whereas Connington was much more inclined to rely on the cautious instincts that had kept them both alive and safely incognito for so long. And lost me the Battle of the Bells, of course.

Nonetheless, they were not entirely bereft of advantage by going this way. After they had sent Lady Lemore secretly to Sunspear to treat with the Martells, the family of Prince Aegon’s late mother, Prince Doran had become quite convinced of the boy’s legitimacy and comforted in his grief over the loss of his son Quentyn, whose body had just returned home with only two of his five companions. Apparently, he had risked the long and dangerous voyage all the way to Meereen to offer his hand to Daenerys, hoping to renew the matrimonial alliance originally intended for his elder sister Arianne and her elder brother Viserys. But the queen had turned him down, and he had met his end by not being wise enough to take the hint, and attempting instead to tame dragons.

When Lord Jon first heard Lemore’s report, he was torn between relief and fury. Relief that Daenerys had rejected Quentyn’s proposal – the queen had to wed Aegon, if there was any hope of hammering together a new Targaryen dynasty. And fury that still she loitered in Meereen – had even gone missing, if the rumors were to be believed – rather than taking her three priceless dragons and flying west to join them. Aegon had not wanted to present himself to his powerful aunt as a beggar at the feast, had been certain that the instant she heard of his presence on the shores of their homeland, she’d up stakes and set sail quicker than one could say "usurper." Yet if she was vanished, dead, or merely unwilling, the game suddenly became far more dangerous and uncertain.
Therefore, the Martell alliance was the best wager they had. If worse came to worse, Aegon could marry his cousin Arianne, but without the dragons and Daenerys, a cloud of suspicion would always hang over his claim to be Prince Rhaegar's trueborn son, the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. The south might well crown him, but the north would hold out beyond a doubt. The Seven Kingdoms can only be forged back into one by dragonfire.

These were the sorts of thoughts Jon Connington had to occupy himself, as they sloshed further down Cape Wrath. They were just south of Estermont, which Marq Mandrake of the Golden Company had already taken, and their next objective was the Weeping Tower. Prince Doran had promised that a Dornish vanguard would sail from the Tor to meet up with them there, and it was even under consideration for Aegon to pay a visit to his lord uncle in person. For while Doran had quietly become their devoted ally, it was understandable that he wished to look on his sister Elia's son with his own eyes before agreeing to prosecute an all-out war. House Martell remained superficially loyal to the Iron Throne, but writs of muster were going out through the whole of Dorne, and forges rang day and night with the song of steel. The false peace will not hold much longer, but best to playact while we can.

Prince Aegon himself, however, was considerably less keen to observe the social niceties. "Lady Lemore has already assured my lord uncle that I am who I say," he complained. "Does Prince Doran then feel the need to count my teeth? There will be time to loll about in his Water Gardens when the fighting is through. If Dorne is already risen for me, we must look to the westerlands and the riverlands instead – and the north, let us not forget. Trap the false Lannisters from coast to coast."

"There is more to winning a throne than fighting, my lord," Connington answered. "Your father knew that well. If Doran wants this courtesy, grant it. He is an old and sickly man, and his heart has hungered too long for vengeance. Do not throw it back in his face by refusing him this boon. The Golden Company and I will be able to handle the campaign in your stead. It will be a fortnight, no more."

"A fortnight too long." Aegon turned away, tousling his silver-blue hair out of his eyes. "I've waited eighteen years, I do not mean to wait a day more."

"Go to Dorne," Connington said, in the voice he had used in Aegon's childhood, to discipline him. Aegon noticed, however, and another scowl flashed over his lean, handsome face. It was then that Jon Connington thought for the first time that as well as being the scion of Aegon the Conqueror, Aemon the Dragonknight, and his own silver prince, Aegon was also of the blood of Maegor the Cruel, Aerion Brightflame, Aegon the Unworthy, and Mad King Aerys. But he pushed that thought away at once, feeling disloyal. Aegon was neither cruel, sadistic, unworthy, or mad, and a streak of petulance was to be expected from any adolescent lad, far less one with such a great destiny on his shoulders. But I will not allow him to gainsay me in this. He is not king yet.

The issue remained unresolved when they reached the Weeping Tower the next evening. There was no battle to be fought – Ser Franklyn Flowers and his companions had reached it first, cleaned out the underwhelming defenses, and garrisoned the castle stoutly from all approaches. They were thus enjoying a spot of well-earned rest within its walls, along with the captives they'd taken from half a dozen minor keeps and holdfasts along Cape Wrath. None of them were expected to be significant prizes, but one or another might have some gold stuffed away down a root cellar, and since their ancestral loyalty was to the Baratheons, they were the first potentially treasonous weeds that needed to be uprooted. Their feelings for the bastard boy on the Iron Throne were likely to be equally as antagonistic, especially considering what the Lannisters had done to Robert, but too much sordid history lay between the stags and the dragons to allow them to be left to their own
devices.
"Treat them gently," Connington urged, as he and the prince made their way into the great hall. "If you dispense blood and brimstone on them for the great crime of remaining loyal to their liege lord – especially when no man yet believes you to be Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name – all they will think of is the Mad King come again. In this case, you would do well to take a cue from Robert. He was known for changing enemies to friends."

All that won him was an incredulous look. "Take a cue from the man who slew my father at the Trident and stole his crown?" Aegon asked. "A drunk, a glutton, a lecher, who beggared the realm and only surpassed his failures as a husband and father with his failures as a king? I will not deal harshly with smallfolk who played no part. But these lords will have to choose to follow me soon or late, and it will be the wiser for them if it was the former."

With that, he pushed brusquely through the doors. Connington sighed, flexing his stone fingers in their glove; he had no feeling in that hand at all now, which made swordplay chancy. He had not participated in the fighting at Storm's End, and had pried Aegon away from leading the attack as soon as he possibly could. It was wise. If the boy dies, we are all ruined. Yet he feared that Aegon was beginning to bitterly resent him for keeping such a heavy hand on the reins. Young Griff slipped further and further away every day.

Inside the spare, drafty hall, Franklyn Flowers was lining up the captives for the prince's inspection. They were indeed a thoroughly underwhelming lot, ranging from a few quaking greybeards to a scrawny man-at-arms to a plump woman with two young boys hanging onto her skirts. They did not even look worth the effort to intimidate, in fact, but they couldn't be allowed to flee for help and spread wild tales.

As Jon Connington entered, Flowers was speaking with Aegon in a low voice, indicating the plump woman and her sons. Whatever he was saying was clearly of interest; the prince was listening with narrowed eyes. Then he whirled off and addressed the woman directly. "What's your name?"

For a moment, the woman did not answer. But the clutch of the boys onto her skirts must have reminded her that she must protect them. "Marya, my lord."

"Marya what?" the prince pressed.

"Marya the carpenter's daughter. I have no other name."

"That's a lie," said Flowers. He produced a scrap of cloth: grey, worked with the device of a black ship, an onion emblazoned on its sails. "Here, Your Grace. Take a look. Ignoring the fact that we certainly wouldn't have found her as lady of the keep if that was so, there's more. Ask her what her sons' names are."

"What are your sons' names, my lady?" Aegon asked, with somewhat exaggerated courtesy.

She hesitated.

"I'll tell you what they are." Flowers was clearly enjoying the reveal. "Steffon. Steffon and Stannis. Your Grace will recall who they're intended to honor. And this flag..." He handed it to Aegon. "It's the sigil of House Seaworth."

"House Seaworth?" The prince frowned. "I have never heard of it."

"You wouldn't have, m'lord. It was founded at the end of the Usurper's war, when Davos the
smuggler broke the Redwyne and Tyrell cordons in the sea around Storm's End, and delivered food to the starving garrison inside. The starving Baratheon garrison, while Lord Paxter and Lord Mace were besieging the castle for your family and House.

Aegon's gaze sharpened. "I see." He lifted his blue eyes to Lady Marya. "Do you deny this?"

"I don't, my lord."

"But it doesn't end there," Flowers persisted. "Her husband is now Lord Stannis' Hand of the King. Stannis Baratheon, the Usurper's brother. Your Grace's most formidable foe."

"I... see." Aegon's voice was slower this time. "And then if so – "

"My husband is dead," Lady Marya interrupted. "Lord Wyman Manderly has mounted his head and hands on the gate above White Harbor. I am no use to you, my lords, and no threat. Let me return in peace to my home, and raise my sons to be good men, and you will have no trouble from me."

"That's what she says, at any rate," Flowers commented.

Aegon's scowl deepened. To Marya he said, "My lady, I am not unwilling to grant your request on principle. But if I did it for you, I would then be obliged to do it for these others. And we all desire things which we cannot have. You will stay here. Treated gently, so long as you behave, but prisoners nonetheless."

Flowers looked disappointed. "M'lord, are you sure? There's uses could be had for them. Such as – "

"No," Aegon snapped. "I am not the Lannisters, to murder a defenseless woman and her two children. As I said, what goes for one must go for all. And if you think I am killing every soul who stands in this room, you are sore mistaken. Take them away, I will question them later."

"He has taken my words to heart after all, Jon Connington thought proudly. My prince, I wish you could see him now, our son. You made him and I raised him. It had gone against every one of his own instincts to counsel mercy for the Baratheon vassals; he hated Robert with a passion that Aegon, who knew of his history only through what others had told him, could never hope to match. But for all that, these ragged frightened folk were not Robert, and converting them from their old loyalties into staunch Targaryen supporters was a more elegant solution than merely killing them. Yet something told him that he'd have to keep an eye on Marya Seaworth. It would have been easy to dismiss her as a dead traitor's widow, but her expression as she gazed on her captors had been anything but harmless. She has already lost her husband, and likely older children as well. There comes a time when a soul decides they have endured enough.

As the prisoners were cleared out of the hall, one of Flowers' serjeants tugged on the prince's sleeve. "M'lord. Beg pardons, but there's a visitor waiting to see you, in the antechamber. Said only you were expecting him."

"Must be Dornish, then," the prince mumbled, but beckoned for Connington to follow him. They were shown through a door into a much smaller and more intimate room, drowned in a miserable twilight only barely repelled by the rack of candlewax gremlins. A stout, hooded figure waited by the window, projecting a suitably mysterious aura.

Aegon stopped in his tracks, so abruptly that Connington almost ran into him. "Lord Varys."

The figure emitted a sound of surprise. "Your Grace," he said unctuously, proving that Aegon was
Indeed correct. "I confess, I am impressed. I look so little like myself."

"You can look like anyone you choose. Others see what they expect." Aegon must surely have noticed the eunuch making hopeful movements toward the settle, but he remained standing. "Why are you here?"

"To serve you, my king. I fear I am past the age to enjoy travel for its own sake." Varys tittered. "And with such news as I bear... my lords, I thought it best not to wait an instant. Our little Dornish bird in King's Landing has disclosed a plot to deliver the westerlands and the riverlands to our cause. Bloodlessly."

"Bloodlessly?" Jon Connington repeated skeptically. Such a thing did not exist, not in this world.

"My lord, you have caught me out. Not quite bloodlessly." Varys whisked a pomander out of his sleeve and took a bracing snuffle. "But against the terrible carnage of this war, what are six deaths, truly?"

"Six deaths," Aegon looked even more leery than his mentor. "There are a fair few leagues of difference between six knights of the Kingsguard and six crofter's brats."

"You've seen six Kingsguard knights? Do tell me where, they are such a rare species just the moment. But no matter. Your Grace needs not to lift a finger. The Lannisters will kill them for you."

"Whose deaths?" Aegon demanded. "Answer me!"

"Such a suspicious mind, Your Grace. Very well. Lord Gawen Westerling and his lady wife Sybell, and their children Elenya and Rollam. Then Lord Edmure Tully of Riverrun – currently and most conveniently a prisoner at Casterly Rock – and his lady wife, Roslin Frey."

"And how will this work? Exactly?"

Varys' surprise appeared to be genuine. "Why, when Edmure Tully suffers a mysterious and fatal accident while the Lannisters' prisoner, how long do you think it will take the river lords to get off their knees and in arms against Tommen Baratheon? How enraged will the Freys be – and Your Grace has surely heard of what the Freys do when they are enraged. And if the Westerlings, bannermen to Casterly Rock for gods' years, are seized, arrested, and executed without trial, that might cause hard feelings among the rest, don't you think? The Faith and Queen Cersei will take care of it all. We only need sit back and watch."

"How?" Aegon said. "Why on earth would the Faith do this?"

"Why, because your charming cousin has the High Septon wrapped about her little finger." Varys giggled again. "He won't know what is in those warrants she has him sign – oh dear me, no. They will appear to be matters of a different sort entirely – something to do with the sparrows, no doubt. I do love little birds. And then your cousin will smuggle them to Queen Cersei, tell her gaolers how delightfully well she has behaved, and surely she deserves a visit with her son. Whereas the warrants will be presented to the king, and Tommen, who is such a dutiful boy and does so love playing with his royal seal, will sign them forthwith. Do you see how politics work, my lord? So intimate, so familial, so personal. Naught more than a loving mother sharing a tender moment with her son. And then your cousin will take the signed warrants directly to the Lannister guardsmen, before the Tyrells have a chance to intervene."

"That is a brilliant plan, yes," Aegon said. "It is also utterly dastardly and dishonorable. Lie to the
High Septon, to the gods themselves? Execute six innocent people without charge or justification? If I gave my assent to this scheme, it would be as if I had gone back out and killed my prisoners myself."

Varys giggled again, but something about it didn't reach his eyes. "That's the catch, my lord. They are guilty. I am unsure how much you know about the fall of the short-lived Kingdom of the North. . . but suffice it to say that Robb Stark's unwise decision to marry the eldest Westerling daughter was a major factor, as well as Lord Walder Frey's singularly vengeful nature. The daughter was supposed to be surrendered when Ser Jaime captured Riverrun, but it has lately come to light that we have all been grossly deceived. She has escaped to parts unknown. A grievous treason against the Iron Throne. If the Westerlings and Lord and Lady Tully were merely held for questioning, I imagine many would support King Tommen in so doing. But this arbitrary, absolute, unlawful and extreme action will remind many of. . . dare I say. . . the Mad King."

"Do not mention that name to me." It must still be raw, considering that Connington had already done so earlier.

"My apologies, Your Grace. But men will mention it, you know. I suspect as well you are still thinking of yourself as a hero, and you know that heroes do not kill children. Which is what stays your hand with Marya Seaworth and her sons, no doubt. But only six deaths, the death of those who have worked to undermine the strength of your crown and insist on the North's independence. . . my lord, will you be king of a broken realm?"

Aegon hesitated. "No," he said at last. "I will rule seven kingdoms. No less."

"So you give your assent to this plan?"

"Are you certain it will work?"

"How can it not, I ask?" Varys gave a one-shouldered shrug. "The Lannisters are so determined to shoot themselves in the foot, I say we let them. This is a gift from the seven heavens, Your Grace. Do I have your assent?"

Aegon hesitated even longer. Finally he said, "Yes."

"Marvelous." Varys beamed at them and sidled toward the door. "I've had such a long wet ride, I think I'll take a drop to refresh myself. If I have Your Grace's leave to go – "

"You do not."

Varys paused, hand on the latch. "Have I given offense, Your Grace?"

"That depends." Aegon took two quick strides across the floor, positioning himself between the eunuch and the exit. "On the answers you have to give to me."

If there was uneasiness in Varys' face or voice, it was invisible. "I am Your Grace's humblest servant."

"Good." Aegon had at least half a foot of height on the spymaster, and was using it to his advantage. "Why didn't you give me the dragons?"

"I. . . beg pardon?"

"Don't play the fool," the prince snapped. "It will not serve. I have been wondering, my lord. Wondering intently. You and your fat magister friend claim to be the most devoted supporters of
my House and my claim. Why then did you permit my aunt and uncle to wander for years in the Free Cities, homeless and hungry, when you could have hidden them safely away as you did me? And on that accord, why did you arrange my aunt's marriage to Khal Drogo and give her the dragon eggs?"

Varys was starting to perspire. "My dear boy... the nature of politics, as I explained... no one ever truly expected them to hatch...

"I am not your boy." Aegon seemed to grow even taller as he stood there in the wretched, sodden twilight. "I am your king. If you had expected them to hatch, you would have given them to me, wouldn't you? And yet I still cannot understand why you did not. You had to know the value they possessed even symbolically. What role were the Dothraki to play? You'd best tell me, my lord. Tell me now."

"We..." Varys wrung his plump hands. "We did need both a male and a female Targaryen. And Viserys, well... it was plain that he... that he was rather..."

"So you would have killed him yourself, if the Dothraki had not attended it first? I am older than Daenerys, I am Rhaegar's son, the dragons are mine! If you had given them to me, we would be mounting an attack on King's Landing right now, not playing hopscotch along the narrow sea! Now she's sitting in Meereen with them, where they're no bloody use to anybody, and still you play your little games. Perhaps you think I am still a boy, my lord? I am not. I am a man grown, and I want what is mine."

Varys shot an appealing look in Connington's direction. "Patience, Your Grace, patience. Everything will yet be fulfilled. As soon as Daenerys hears of your successes - "

"You still have not answered the question, my lord. If all this time you have intended them for me, then why not - "

"Perhaps no man should think he has a birthright to so much power, my lord."

"No man, but a woman?"

Varys paused once more. Then he said, "Your Grace, whatever you may believe, the dragons will be yours one day, and so will Daenerys. Now, I do believe that a spot of refreshment is in order, after everything I've accomplished for you of late. I hope to see you again before I depart, but if not, then be assured that Illyrio sends his greetings as well – you do so remind him of his beloved Serra, he plans to have another ten thousand golden dragons at your disposal by the end of the month. Not the fire-breathing sorts, alas, but still useful in their way. Now, my lord, your leave?"

"You have it," Aegon said coolly. "Get out."

Varys hastened away. Aegon and Connington stood there in silence as the room grew darker, until at last the latter spoke. "That was not wise, my prince."

"I am sick to seven hells of being wise." Aegon wrenched away from the hand his adoptive father tried to put on his shoulder. "And I'm none so sure that I trust either of them. Too much doesn't add up. What's in it for them? The satisfaction of knowing that they pulled off a deception of nearly twenty years to bring down an usurper, root and branch, and nobly restored the true heir to the throne? Illyrio Mopatis has all the money that money can buy, and Varys... if he was a real man, I might think he wanted women, or gold, or lands, or renown, but he's not. Am I to believe that I will become king, and he will happily go on being the master of whisperers as he has always been? He's pulled every string of any significance in the Seven Kingdoms for the gods know how long, he
bloody well doesn't need me for that."

*He is not wrong,* Jon Connington was forced to admit. "My prince, when you are crowned, it will be in your power to demand whatever answers from them you like. But for now, whatever their reasons, they are working night and day to bring you there. Let them do so, then move against them, if you must."

"I need those dragons." Aegon's hand closed into a fist. "I am no fool, and I heard what befell my cousin Quentyn. But I grow weary of waiting on my aunt's initiative."

His words seriously alarmed Connington. "My lord, you cannot possibly be thinking of leaving Westeros again and. . .?"

"No," Aegon said, and Connington tried to disguise his breath of relief. "My fight is here, my throne is here. Meereen is many thousands of leagues away, and plagued with war and death. But I ought as well be dressed in motley and standing on my head, if Daenerys does not come soon. And if she does not come at all, then. . . this plan of Varys', it is just mad enough that it might work, but. . ."

"We must be – brave," Connington urged. He had nearly said wise. "Attend to what we can control, bind Dorne and the stormlands to our banner and yes, the westerlands and the riverlands if all plays out. *The boy is right, it is a disgusting and vile trick.* He had not captured Robert in the Battle of the Bells for the thought of slaughtering all the innocent townspeople. Yet what had that led him to but dishonor, ruin, and exile? Mayhaps, however little he liked it, he must make his heart as hard as his fingers. *I am slowly turning to stone, after all.* But a dying man stood that much closer to the judgment of the Seven, and he did not want to reunite with his silver prince in the afterlife and tell him that he had put his son on the throne at the cost of becoming his father.

"Dorne," Aegon said, slightly sardonically. "Dorne and prudent old Prince Doran. I can read a map. That is still only the south, my lord. Storm's End is not King's Landing. Nor is Sunspear."

"I understand your sentiments, my prince, but we must move with care – "

"Yes," Aegon said. "Piece by piece, square by square. As the gamemasters would have of us. If only we knew who they were. But I am not going to Dorne."

"You're not?" Connington had feared this. "My prince, you must – "

"I must do as I will. It is my throne. And I mean to win it. Now."

"So you – "

"Yes," Aegon said again. He smiled. "I will give Varys and my cousin time for their scheme to be accomplished, but no more. Then we march on King's Landing itself, and the westermen and the riverlords will fall into train behind us, while their blood is still up. And if my aunt should finally bestir herself and return with the dragons, she will find me seated on the Iron Throne. Those who object, I shall give a taste of flame. How is that for a bargaining position?"

*It is formidable,* Jon Connington thought. He could not elucidate why he felt faintly, ever so slightly, uneasy. *You ought have stayed, Varys. Then you would see that the boy is a true Targaryen indeed.*
Sansa

"You." She ought to have said something else, anything else, but she was too numb with shock. How could it be, it couldn’t be, but in defiance of every odd that had ever existed, it was. "You."

"Me," he agreed, with a grin that bordered on the grotesque. He still had hold of her arm, had hauled her back inside and demanded two rooms from the innkeeper, and thrown four stags to bounce and roll off the desk. Then he’d dragged her upstairs – from what it looked like, Sansa expected a brigade of would-be heroes to follow with candlesticks and carving knives in hand. But instead it was still only the two of them, and the wall he’d pinned her against.

Her feet were dangling off the floor, and her heart was racing. She was still too stunned to have anything to say. Her true-knight-who-was-no-true-knight, miraculously come to save her after all – yet it had taken only this, him manhandling her and terrifying the others, to utterly strip away the glamour she had built around him. She had remembered him, romanticized him as her guardian and protector, dreamed of a kiss, fallen in love with the memory. Had longed to see him again, fancied to tame the rage within him. But that had all been in absence. The harsh, blunt, brutal, ferocious, dangerous man stood before her in the flesh. She wanted to look away, but remembered how he’d always snarled at her for doing it. So she held his gaze as best she could, trembling. If I can manage Ser Shadrich, this is nothing.

"Seven hells, girl," he said, after the silence had become equally as hideous. "What do you think you're bloody doing? I ran across a pair of Warrior's Sons who said you'd been kidnapped, and instead I find you gallivanting about, as if you were out for a bloody picnic! I didn't think even you were so --"

"I was kidnapped." She couldn't stand to hear him call her a stupid little talking bird again, not now, not here. "B-by a hedge knight. Ser Shadrich."

The Hound snorted. "And I suppose he just let you slip out of your cage for a few flaps, did he?"

"No! I killed him! Now put me down. Stop. You're scaring me. Why are you still so awful?"

Sandor Clegane flinched. For the first time he seemed to actually focus on her face, to see the way he’d thrown her against the wall, her dishevelment and dirtiness. He muttered something unintelligible. Then without a word, he set her on her feet.

"Th-thank you." Her voice was starting to shake. The gods answer your prayers, but never the way you expect. Once upon a time, the Hound had sworn to kill anyone who hurt her, albeit while drunk, fleeing the inferno of the Blackwater, and holding a knife to her throat. But he wept when she sang him the Mother's song, and afterwards he kissed her. She'd kept his white cloak, dreamed of him climbing into her bed on the night of Petyr and Lysa's wedding... he'd said that he heard she was kidnapped, he must have come after her... It cannot all mean nothing. And she very much did not want him to go. She was utterly on her own otherwise, and no matter how much of a dog Sandor Clegane demonstrably still was, she had never once believed that he would hurt her.

They stared at each other for an unbearably uncomfortable few more moments. Then the Hound, for all the world as if he was trying to break the silence, grumbled, "So what in blazes have you done with your hair?"

Sansa barely restrained herself from groping self-consciously at her head. "I – I cut it off. After I... I dealt with Ser Shadrich." It was so odd to refer to killing a man in that casual way. She still
wasn't sorry that she'd done it, but it had certainly made her think.

"You killed him?" There was something in the Hound's voice that she couldn't make out, like pride and anger and grief and guilt all at once. "Bloody good for you. About time the little bird grew some claws. You do in the Imp too, I hope?"

Sansa gaped at him, then shook her head. "No. I . . . haven't seen my – seen Tyrion since the night. . . since the night I escaped from King's Landing."

"Turn into a sparrow then, did you? Or a she-wolf?"

"No. I . . ." Sansa hesitated, wondering if she should tell him about Petyr or not. "I was in the Eyrie," she said evasively. "Until Ser Shadrich kidnapped me."

"The Eyrie? You were there when Lady Lysa decided to practice her flying? Hellfire, girl, if I had known – " But with that, he stopped abruptly.

Would he have come for me? It crossed Sansa's mind that she did not know who he was working for at the nonce, if he had taken up service as a sellsword in the aftermath of his shameful exit from King's Landing. And even if not, they could not stay in this inn forever, and her destination had suddenly become twice as nebulous. I could ask him to escort me to White Harbor. . . but if he had met a pair of Warrior's Sons who had informed him of her abduction, word must be running rampant, and reaching the gods knew whose ears. No safe places.

Finally, she took a timid sideways step. "I'm – I'm very hungry, I'll. . ."

The Hound made a move toward the stairs. "Stay here. I'll fetch something."

"No." Sansa impulsively laid her hand on his arm, and was surprised to feel the muscles tense. "They'll think you hurt me if they see you alone."

The Hound gave her an extremely surprised glance, but stepped aside. She could feel his eyes on her back as she descended, wondering what the reaction would be after all, and the hush when she entered the front room was certainly palpable. On seeing her, the innkeeper immediately busied himself behind a stack of plates and could not be retrieved. It was finally his wife who came to attend to her.

Sansa paid a stag for the leavings of supper, and carried it back up the stairs. She was not sure which room the Hound had bought for her, but a door stood ajar at the end of the dark hall. The entire night was feeling more and more like a dream. She might awake and find herself back in the woods with Ser Shadrich, or even back in the Eyrie, awaiting another day as Alayne. But I'm not, and even if I am dreaming, I remember. "I am Sansa," she whispered. "Sansa Stark."

She was quiet enough that the Hound hadn't heard her. He was kneeling in front of the draughty hearth, striking a pair of flints against a pile of kindling and swearing when the sparks failed to catch. "Seven hells," he mumbled. "I hate fires."

Sansa cleared her throat. "Here," she said. "Don't mind that. I . . . I know you don't. . ."

The Hound scowled at her. "Were you going to tell me it's not actually that dark and not actually that cold? It will snow tonight, and it won't be a pleasant little dusting. What's coming. . . it's one of your northern storms, little bird. It's in the air. I can smell it."

Snow, Sansa thought. It gave her the strangest feeling, like something she should remember but couldn't. Shyly she brought the food over, and crouched beside him. He'd managed to coax a
passable fire, and they sat side by side, not looking at each other, gnawing on the gamey meat. At last, when nothing remained on the plates but bones and a few crumbs, she looked back at him. "Where have you been? I thought you were dead. I thought you were. . ."

"The butcher of Saltpans?" he finished. The burned side of his mouth twisted. "You can thank the bloody monk for that. Found me after your little wolf bitch of a sister left, and didn't have the decency to finish what Gregor's men had started. It was him who left my helm behind, when he carted me off to the Quiet Isle. It's there I've been. Digging graves. Something I'm good at, wouldn't you say?"

Sansa struggled to absorb this. There was only one thing that leapt out at her, that clutched her around the throat. "My sister? You know something about my sister? You. . ." In her mind's eye she could see the two of them, but Arya's face was nothing more than a featureless blur. "What did you do to her? What did she do to you?"

She had thought the Hound would laugh at her, but instead he was motionless. The fire dwelled deep in the pits of his eyes, he did not seem entirely human. She wanted to back away from him, fearing the end of that stillness, the explosion of rage and energy that must follow. But he only said, "I wanted her to kill me. Very badly. She didn't. She got up and rode off. That's all I know. She could be downstairs, she could be in bloody Sothoros. I have no damned idea."

"Why was she with you?" Sansa could barely get the words out. Arya. She'd lived so long thinking that every single member of her family was dead, had heard that her sister had gone to marry the monster whom Ser Shadrich would have sold her to, then found out it was her best friend instead. "Did you. . ."

"I kidnapped her," the Hound supplied matter-of-factly. "From the bloody outlaws. They were going to sell her for ransom too, I just got there first. No, don't look at me, I don't know how she was still alive either. Girl was such a bloody nuisance, it makes no sense."

"My sister. Sansa almost wanted to cry. She could see her father and her lady mother on a summer's day in Winterfell, the snows glistening, Jon and Robb fighting in the bailey and Theon making some sardonic comment, little Rickon trying to join in. Bran running after them. It hurt almost beyond believing. Arya was her only link back to that, her only living blood kin. She sat mute, stricken.

Sandor coughed. Then he said gruffly, "Mind, I would have deserved it, if she'd killed me. I tried to get her to. I. . . told her, I confessed. . . but she hoped it would be slower, I think. Fierce as that bloody she-wolf in Maidenpool."

Something about that pricked at Sansa's memory. "The. . . wolf? The man-killing one on the Trident?"

"That's the one," the Hound confirmed. "They finally caught her and caged her up to send to King's Landing as a prize. Would have gotten there too, if not for me and my delusions of grandeur. Don't look so scared, little bird. The bitch wanted a bite of Randyll Tarly, not you. Aren't you a wolf too?"

I am. Sansa got hold of herself. There were two more questions she desperately had to have answered. "Where are. . . were you going? Before. . . me."

The Hound glanced at the black window. "It's late."

"Please."
He considered her a long moment. She had always found his eyes to be the most frightening thing about him, and in a way that was still true now. There was not the same deep, abrading core of rage that she remembered; they seemed older now, tired, sad, still slightly angry, guilty perhaps as well. Then he said, "King's Landing."

"What?" Next to the Wall, that was the last answer she had expected. "Why?"

"No point in telling you." He glanced away.

"Please," she said again.

"No." The flash of temper resurfaced. "You should know better than to ask questions that aren't good for you."

"Such as this?" she shot back. It occurred to her that she had no idea what to call him to his face; she called him the Hound in her head, but could not utter it aloud. He was no ser, as he'd always told her, and no lord either. Sandor seemed strange, too close, too familiar. "When we were up on the wallwalks, after Joffrey ordered my father k-killed. . . he wanted me to look at the heads and I did, but I looked at the courtyard as well and there was no wall, he was standing right there, all it would have taken was a shove. . . it wouldn't have mattered if I died too. I would have, and then it would have been over, there was nothing more they could have done to me. Why did you do it? Why did you stop me?"

"I was the prince's sworn shield, girl. Of course I couldn't have let you kill him. If I'd stood by and watched, it would have been my own head too."

"Yes, but. . ." Sansa struggled for the words. "You could have said something, you could have told Joffrey, the queen. . . any of them. But you knelt in front of me and you wiped the blood off my lip from where Ser Meryn hit me. . . all of it, you gave me your cloak after Ser Boros stripped me, you saved me from the riot after Princess Myrcella was sent to Dorne, you said you'd kill anyone who tried to hurt me, you. . . you kissed me. . ."

The Hound stared at her. "Kissed you? Seven hells, little bird, I never kissed you. What in blazes are you talking about?"

"You. . . what?" Sansa's face was burning. This was a conversation she'd imagined a thousand times, but always with the safety of believing that Sandor was dead, that she could romantically confide these fantasies to his loving memory. That way her recollection of him would remain untarnished, not this shock back into a realization of lies and more lies. "You promised. . . I sang for you. . ."

"Sang with my knife at your bloody throat." The Hound made a sound that might have been a laugh, if it wasn't so choked with pain. "Bloody hell, girl. Is there anything that isn't knights and ladies and pretty stories with you? You never gave the song, I took it, I stole it from you, I would have stolen more, all those days standing by mute and watching the royal shit do what he did. . . I'm not a knight, I've told you and told you, and what have you made of me now? The Hound died, but the dog remains. That's all I am. Ever."

"No," she said. "No, you're wrong."

Sandor Clegane growled, low in his throat. The silence could have been plucked like a harp string. Then in one rough motion he got to his feet, and she could see that he heavily favored his left leg. Limping, he crossed the room and left without another word. The door creaked shut behind him.
Sansa sat on the floor, shivering. She could hear snow scratching on the windows. She had been right about it snowing, could hear him telling her that this would be one of the northern storms. *But I have never seen a true northern storm.* She had been born a Stark; winter was in her blood, her tears had turned to ice, her skin to ivory and steel. But for all that, the stone walls of Winterfell had always risen high to shield her, the furs and quilts warm on her bed, the hot springs beneath the castle, knowing that her father would keep them all safe. *I always knew that I could come in out of the cold.*

Sansa was briefly possessed with a demented urge to get up and walk outside, to run out into the storm and greet it as a lover. *Old Nan told tales about men who had lived past their time, who would dress their best and say they were going out to hunt, while the wind screamed and the snow piled up above the roof.*

She was cold. She clumsily added more kindling to the fire, which sparked and snapped and smoked, and crossed the room to the bed. It was narrow and dirty, but when she crawled beneath the sheets, she was weary enough not to care.

Sansa slipped under quickly, but her dreams were fitful and sporadic. The coverlet on the bed was thin and tattered, and she woke in the black of night to find the fire gone out and the entire room as cold as ice. Shivering so hard that her teeth rattled, she tiptoed across the freezing floor, stumbled to relight the fire in the hearth, and only took the skin off her knuckles with the flint. She sucked them, tried again to light the fire, could not produce more than a miserly spark or two, and mumbled an oath better suited for Sandor's mouth than her own. Then she crept back to bed, suddenly thought that she spotted a shadow in the corner, and was so frightened that she dove under the quilt, burrowing into the mattress. *Like a child. A child willing the monsters away.* Still shivering, she closed her eyes again.

It was not quite dawn when she woke for good. She was warmer than she'd been, and her first thought was to look to the fire. It was still out, the embers grey and cold, but another covering had been laid over her. Reaching out to touch it, she realized that it was Sandor's mangy old robe. It was of the coarsest weave imaginable, a brown brother's garment, and it must have to do with that story he hadn't finished last night, about the monk and the Quiet Isle – and then a second revelation followed. The Elder Brother was head of the septry on the Quiet Isle, must have known that Sandor was still alive when he'd spoken to her. *He didn't tell me.* But what reason would he have had to? Yet he must have sent the Warrior's Sons after her, the ones who'd told the Hound where to –

It was too much to sort through all at once. Her feet so cold that she could scarcely feel her toes, Sansa went to the window and scratched out a peephole. She could only discern rough outlines of the outside world, but it was enough to tell that everything was blanketed in white. Regardless of whatever plans she might have made, it was obvious that no one was going to be crossing the Bite in this weather. *But I was never sure that I wanted to go north anyway.*

Sansa pulled back on what few clothes she had taken off, laced up her boots, and ventured across the floor, blowing on her fingers. She could see her breath even in the dim air of the room, and knew that it must be even colder outside. She opened the door, took a step –

– and nearly fell headlong over the Hound, who was sitting outside her room with long legs outstretched, head tipped forward and lank dark hair falling in his face. His sword lay half-drawn in his lap; it looked as if he had fallen asleep with one hand wrapped around the hilt. Faint puffs of silver rose from his nose and mouth, and he was only in his jerkin and shirtsleeves, having sacrificed his cloak for her. *But he bought two rooms. He could have slept in his.*
It was just another of the things she did not understand about Sandor Clegane. Sansa edged away, wondering if she should reconsider going outside. *I will be quick.* She hastened down the groaning stairs, through the deserted common room, and opened the door into the narrow, muddy street.

The cold hit her in the stomach before she'd gone a dozen paces. The Bite was invisible, socked in a frozen beading mist, and icicles hung in jagged sheaves from roofs and walls. It was still snowing, heavy flakes circling down from the smoky metal clouds, and everything was so grey that it looked washed out. No man or beast moved in the street, and the only sound was of the distant wind. Sansa tried not to imagine what might have befallen her if she had still been abroad with Ser Shadrich when this had struck. *He would have ordered me to keep him warm.* Worse, she might have done so.

No. *I do not want to think about him. He is dead and frozen, and it was certainly not his spirit I saw haunting me last night. It was a dream.* Yet in one of the thrashing, shallow dozes before sunrise, she'd seen fire and blood and a cascading avalanche of broken ice. *Shadows. Ghosts.* If she was staying here for the foreseeable future, and it appeared that she was, the snow would be good for her. All the others hunting her would have the deuce of a time tracking her down now. I have seen what I needed to. Sansa turned to go back and quickened her pace, hoping that the Hound hadn't woken in her absence and thought her fled again. She still had a thousand questions to ask him, though no guarantee that he would answer them. Last night had been strange, both of them sharing more than they'd meant to, and today, the walls would be back up. She wanted to go with him, she wanted to give him a chance to prove his word, but she could hear his voice in her head. *Is there anything that isn't knights and ladies and pretty songs with you?* Perhaps it was, if she'd invented the kiss from – what, exactly? She knew that she had changed forever, since they'd last met. Now she could only wonder if he had too.

The inn was still quiet when she returned, and there were no affronted roars from above, which she took to mean Sandor was still asleep. When she mounted the stairs, she found out that he was. He looked uncomfortable and cold and unhappy, and she was moved by a sudden pity. She knelt and quietly shook him.

He must have been deep in the throes of a dream, because it took several. Then at last his eyes blinked open and stared at her without seeing. It took another few moments until recognition set in. "Girl," he said. "What time is it?"

"Early." She sat back on her heels. "It's still snowing."

"It won't stop." The corner of his mouth twitched again, in that way he had. "Remember the stories your nurse must have told you? The Long Night. Others and pale spiders and knights shitting their smallclothes and dying like everyone else."

Sansa was surprised, seeing as she had of course just been thinking of Old Nan the previous night, but she was hurt that he seemed so bent on throwing it back in her face. *Of course he would say that. He was still awful, in a way.* "I'm sorry," she said stiffly. "I should have let you sleep, ser."

He appeared set to snarl at her again, but the gleam in his eye that appeared, and then vanished just as quickly, seemed to acknowledge the subtle insult. Instead he snorted once more and hewed upright. He swore, sheathed his sword and buckled it around his waist, as if he expected to have to duel someone over breakfast, and stalked down the hallway.

Sansa followed him a few paces behind. Snow was still sifting out of her cloak and hood and hair, melting a trail down the stairs, but the inn was starting to wake up, the smell of frying bacon drifting up the chimney so appetizingly that it made her mouth water. It wouldn't be so bad to be
snowbound here, mayhaps. So long as it did not last forever. The food would not hold out forever. Nor would her money. 

She reached the bottom and hurried into the common room, wondering if her fistful of pennies would suffice for another meal. With a lurch, she realized that she would now be dependent on Sandor's purse; if his funds ran out, so would she. *He won't want to pension me forever, he'll insist we make a run for it* – but where? Back to King's Landing? What had he left in King's Landing that called to him so strongly? So far as he knew, the one thing, the only thing, he had ever wanted in life was to kill his brother, and now that the Mountain had fallen to the Viper's poisoned spear, there was naught left for him but –

At that moment, Sansa looked up. And almost ran into the Hound again, for a very different reason.

He was standing stock still, staring at the men at the table across the way. Sansa hadn't seen them when she'd come in last night; they must have arrived later, just before the snow set in for earnest. Looking for the first lodging they could find, following whatever clues they could – she'd *seen* them, they must have still been tracking her, it was only that night that she'd killed Shadrich –

Three men in the moon-and-falcon of House Arryn, and two Warrior's Sons. All of them had hands on their sword hilts, and all of them were staring at Sandor with red murder in their eyes. "You," said the leader. "Bloody hell, dog. We *told* you that you weren't wanted, that we as godly men would rescue the girl. What part of that did you fail to comprehend?"

Sandor Clegane, for once, utterly failed to have a smart-arse retort to hand. The silence was horrible. Then at last, he spoke.

"Oh," the Hound said. "Bugger."
Meereen was the most putrid, festering shitpile of a city that Tyrion Lannister had ever set stunted foot in, and considering it was up against King's Landing as competition, that was a lofty crown. Once upon a benighted time, he might have thought that this was where whores went — that they'd have to, in this place with the rest of the refuse, the gutters literally running with blood, the dead and dying huddled along alleys and plazas. It was difficult to tell who had happened along in the course of nature and who had been launched over the walls by the Yunkish catapults; they tended to be equally stomach-turning. The bricks baked a visceral red-brown, and flies buzzed like plague. The Volantene fleet was blockading the harbor to all sides, cutting off trade and food — he should refrain from gambling for a while, seeing how sorely he had mistaken their temperament. He had been sure that the elephants would retain power in the triarchy elections, but somehow, the tigers had pulled off a stunning upset. Freed to wage war for the first time in a hundred years, Volantis had then flexed its might, wanting to establish itself as a Free City to be reckoned with, and hence sent the great part of their naval power to interfere with the affairs of Slaver's Bay, a name more apt than ever. And the sad part is, this is genuinely preferable to the alternative.

It hadn't been as hard for the Second Sons to enter the city as Tyrion, who had heard ghoulish tales of sewers and giant rats, had feared. He had jested that if worse came to worse, they could always strap themselves to the catapults and hope for the best, but mercifully, such drastic expedients had proved unnecessary. Instead, the Second Sons had merely taken a look about the Yunkish camp, realized that the pale mare had all but done their work for them, and busily hacked the head off any Wise Master who was not too rotted to be recognizable. Macabre trophies in hand, they presented themselves at the city gates and sued for admittance. Ser Barristan Selmy had vigorously opposed it, and as the Queen's Hand, one would expect his opinion to carry some weight. About as much as half a damn. Hizdahr zo Loraq and his stooges still ruled the city, and as they were sorely in need of anything more or less male and more or less breathing, they agreed. The only way I would have qualified, Tyrion thought sourly, though it does leave Penny somewhat a mystery.

Therefore, here he was in bloody Meereen at last, with a lot of unruly sellswords and one dwarf girl. Pity Jorah ran off to get killed. Now we'll have to find another bear. His services at falling off a pig would be required again beyond a doubt. And real bears have claws.

Tyrion did hope that he would not have to defend the decision to Selmy in person. He'd grown up hearing tales of Barristan the Bold in the same breath as Prince Aemon the Dragonknight and Serwyn of the Mirror Shield, and was not surprised that the man had now cropped up here, serving Aerys Targaryen's daughter. He has a bloody good reason for it, I hope. As one of the Mad King's chosen seven, Selmy had been intimately privy to his downward spiral and destruction. If only Aerys had asked the other Lannister son to kill their father, he might be cutting himself on the Iron Throne to this day. Now there was a thought too horrible to contemplate.

Nonetheless, Tyrion's reasons for wanting to avoid an audience with Selmy ran decidedly more to the pragmatic. For one, it would probably result in him being launched out of Meereen in every sense of the word, and second, he was hoping to keep as low a profile as possible. They were far enough from King's Landing by now that he no longer considered Cersei's wrath a real threat, but tales traveled, and he was far from the world's most inconspicuous fellow. Aye, and you helpfully identified yourself to half the bloody city, watching that folly in Daznak's Pit.

At the moment, Tyrion's duties supposedly consisted of helping the Second Sons locate the Harpy, a task which was almost impossible due to numerous excellent reasons. First and foremost, their continued presence in the city hinged on the forbearance of Hizdahr and his minions, and if they
began to sniff too closely about such delicate matters, Tyrion had no doubt that he would wake up to find the Harpy under his bed. After not quite two weeks in Meereen, he was beginning to suspect strongly that the queen had had the right of it, jumping aboard her dragon and buggering off to parts unknown. The only mystery was what had taken her so long about it. Secondly, while it seemed increasingly certain that the queen was in fact alive and in the custody of some large khalasar somewhere, the Second Sons had to manage the neat trick of convincing Hizdahr that they were on his side, while simultaneously being able to prove to Daenerys, when and if she should return, that they were not actually bald-faced traitors and therefore not meritorious of instant execution by dragonfire. Personally, Tyrion thought the error lay with the queen, for expecting anything else from sellswords. He had paid Bronn handsomely, given him a knighthood and a far more comfortable life than he'd ever have had knocking heads and cutting throats, but he had never deluded himself that the man was anything else than what he was. Well, maybe slightly. But it was nothing compared to my others.

To furtherly snarl the skein, they had learned that the queen's other two dragons had taken happy advantage of Quentyn Martell's idiocy in order to escape their chains. They now made their roost in the ruined Pyramid of Hazkar, which was shunned religiously by the Meereenese as a result. Tyrion was surprised to hear that the sundry Dornish lordling roasted to death had in fact been Prince Doran's whelp – the presence of a Martell vying for the hand of a Targaryen queen raised all sorts of fascinating questions about what they might really be up to down in Sunspear. Tyrion fervently hoped that his niece Myrcella was still engaged to marry Quentyn's little brother Trystane. That would be the perfect stab in the heart for Cersei. As for Quentyn, it wouldn't be the first time a Martell wed a Targaryen, and look how well that ended up. Mayhaps Daenerys had the right idea, refusing him.

There was, alas, only one solution that Tyrion could see. Ironically, it was the exact one he had hoped to avoid. But if Ser Barristan Selmy had a drop of brains in his head, he would claim that the dragons would grow increasingly restive the longer their 'mother' was gone, until they would break loose for good and destroy the entire city. It could only be an improvement. Even Hizdahr zo Loraq and his bloody Harpies might balk at calling that bluff. And if Selmy hasn't thought of it, someone will have to tell him. Someone short and ugly, missing a nose and other parts of lesser importance. And who will soon be gracing the Yunkish camp with his short, ugly, noseless corpse, if this should go amiss.

It seemed that he was going to have to renew old acquaintances after all.

The Second Sons had taken lodging in some shabby, seedy hostel on the far side of the city from the Great Pyramid, and Tyrion's legs were aching before they had gone halfway. He'd taken Kasprio and one other serjeant as his bodyguards; if he was going to die, he did not intend to do so while having to listen to Kem making some terrible jest about flying pigs. It was early morning, but the sun was already at full roar. A few servants were tottering about their errands, trying to find merchants who still had goods to sell, and buckets of uniformly noxious fluids were emptied at random from second-and-third-story windows. This is a city of dead men. Present company certainly not excepted.

At last, having avoided some sort of gruesome disaster merely thrice, they arrived at the Pyramid. The seneschal was not happy to see them, and even less so to hear their names and business, but a few rattles of Kasprio's sword, along with a casual mention of dragons, induced him to cooperate. Mumbling undoubtedly frightful oaths under his breath, he departed to fetch Barristan Selmy.

Tyrion glanced around. The endless steps up the pyramid's colossal interior had been brutally painful for him, and if he hadn't been told that this was just the antechamber, he would have taken it for the audience room itself. It was high and vaulted, decorated with hideous statues on bronze
plinths; a heady incense burned in clay pots, and elaborate glyphs were worked into the pale stone walls. It was cooler here than outside, but not by much, no matter the exertions of a few loincloth-clad beercakes in the corner, waving palm fans as if their lives depended on it. In this place, likely they do. Tyrion had just started to wonder if this might be hell, when a voice behind him snapped his reverie with a start.

"My lord of Lannister." Possibly Barristan Selmy could have sounded more shocked and annoyed, but Tyrion was hard put to see how.

He turned, offering as elegant a bow as he was capable of. "Ser Barristan. I'm on the tour of Essos and the Free Cities that my father never got around to giving me. I'm confident he wouldn't have approved. Is there somewhere we may speak privily?"

Selmy studied him without answering, blue gaze cold and guarded as a frozen lake. Tyrion had to admit that the old man still looked as strong and fit as ever; his white hair was cropped close and there was a stubble of unshaven beard on his chin. In deference to the heat, he was not wearing his full mail and leather, but rather a lighter hauberk of copper scales, with a white chainse below and a black tabard above, emblazoned with the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. He risked his own life to save King Aerys during the Defiance of Duskendale, the dwarf recalled, and then nearly died again fighting for Rhaegar on the Trident. Doubtless he feels that he has only come home. As with sellswords and warhorses, truly honorable men were a dangerous breed that had to be approached with eyes wide open and a lump of sugar in hand. So watch me clap shut them both and somehow cock this up.

"Kasporio," Selmy said at last, addressing Tyrion's left shoulder. "I had not heard that the Second Sons were returned to Meereen." Which was transparently a lie, as he was the one who had supposedly forbade them entrance, but Tyrion could hear what he meant by it. Not on my warrant.

"Seems you haven't heard a deal of things, Ser Grandfather," Kasporio replied jauntily. "No wonder your record of failing to protect your monarch is still intact."

Ser Barristan's hand dropped to his sword hilt. "I have not come to be sported with by an insolent –"

"Kasporio," Tyrion interjected hastily. "There are any number of other folk in Meereen for you to practice your wit on. You may both find them, if you please. I suggest one of the dead ones."

For a moment, the two sellswords looked as if they might refuse, but offered identical sardonic nods before turning and marching out. Tyrion watched them go, hoping that he hadn't been too hasty in dismissing them. Ideally, it proved to Ser Barristan that his intentions were sincere, but if the old knight didn't believe it, he would shortly be an undersized red splotch on the flagstones. Better that than the catapults.

"My lord," Ser Barristan said again, in a voice barely this side of civility. "As you doubtless are aware, the Second Sons will find no welcome in Meereen so long as Queen Daenerys rules here. And since you have presumed to enter with them, you must –"

"You see, that's just it. Kasporio's phrasing was a touch indelicate, I grant you, but his point was sound. Queen Daenerys doesn't rule here now. And if you're interested in altering that fact, and saving all your lives, you'll listen to what I have to say."

Selmy's patently dubious expression did not alter. "So you're here on my side, is that what you mean to tell me?"
"Well... yes. But I suspect there are unwanted ears everywhere. As I said, a moment? Alone? You're quite safe, I have no crossbow."

"Crossbow?" At last, Ser Barristan's face changed slightly, showing confusion. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'd tell you if you wanted to know, but rest assured, you don't. If you would, my lord. I've taken a great risk coming to you, and I do so much crave your sage counsel." That was only more or less true, but men like Ser Barristan, whose entire function in life was to dispense sage counsel, might be more susceptible to it.

The old knight hesitated, then finally turned, jerked up a hand, and led them though a set of inlaid wooden doors to a walled garden beyond. A few browning trees kept the worst of the heat off, and there was a modestly shady spot by a dried-up fountain. It was here that Tyrion saw that despite the death, ruin, and destruction, Meereen must have been a beautiful city once. In its way. If one is fond of harpies and slaves. He admired Daenerys' noble intentions, but could have told her that it was useless. There are no chains so strong as the ones men forge for themselves.

"Sit," Ser Barristan said, indicating a stone bench. "I must say, my lord, you were rather low on the list of men I expected to turn up here."

"Where was I?" Tyrion hoisted himself up. "Somewhere between Ned Stark and Baelor the Blessed?"

"Somewhere." Ser Barristan's mouth twitched, as if briefly threatening to smile, but he mastered himself again at once. "The only way your name will ever be mentioned in a sentence with those two, I imagine."

"Oh, I devoutly agree. For a start, both those paragons of honor and virtue are as dead and rotting as the stiff in your streets, whilst I am still about to plague the realm." Tyrion gingerly stretched his cramped legs. "I cast a large shadow for such a small man. Westeros itself was not enough to contain me."

"So I see," Selmy said noncommittally. "Somehow I doubt this tour you speak of was of your devising, or your father's."

"Your mind is still sharp as your blade, Ser Barristan. My father will be devising nothing now. He's looking up at Stark and Baelor from below."

Selmy's surprise was apparent. "Lord Tywin is dead?"

"Yes. That was where the part about the crossbow comes in. I killed him."

It was impossible to tell exactly what the old knight thought, but Tyrion thought the smile might have slipped free. Should I tell him now that my lord father succeeded in arranging the deaths of Rhaenys and Elia, but not Aegon? No, it was far too risky, even if the prospect was vastly intriguing. What would a man like Ser Barristan do, faced with such a choice? Abandon the queen he had loyally served in this rat's nest to travel to the rightful heir, or convince himself that Aegon was a fraud, and his Daenerys still the hope and future of the dynasty? I shall have to find out someday.

"Your lord father gave many years of service to the realm," Selmy said, which was doubtless the most cordial epitaph he could think of. "I am sure the Father will judge him justly."

"My lord father was a shit in silk, Ser Barristan. You need not temper your words around me. Even
"Be that as it may," Selmy answered crisply, "I am far more interested in your own purpose here, Lord Tyrion. We had heard that King Joffrey was dead, and – "

"He is, and he deserved it even more richly than his grandsire. It was just my luck to be born into such a loathsome family, don't you agree? But since you've heard it, you'll have heard as well who was blamed for it."

The old knight paused. "Aye."

"Are you going to ask me if I did it?"

"Did you do it?"

"Would I tell you if I had?"

"You have not changed at all, my lord."

"Aside from the nose and the drinking problem, but those are trifles." Tyrion gave an airy shrug. "To date, I've either committed or been accused of matricide, patricide, regicide, and fratricide, and for some time I was considering suicide, just to make it neat. But for some unfathomable reason, I have decided that I'm not ready to die just yet. If you're not either, you'll listen to what I propose."

"And that is?" Selmy was curious, despite himself.

"Just this." Tyrion told him.

When he was finished, the old knight sat in silence for several moments, digesting. It was clear that he was relieved beyond measure to learn of his queen's survival, but relief was tempered by the fact that he had, after all, heard it from a Lannister. Then he said, "My lord, this is all very interesting. But if Daenerys is alive, it is my duty to go at once and find her. I know not about yours."

Tyrion had been afraid of that. "Actually," he said quickly, "you needn't bother. There's already one well-intentioned fool out there blundering after her, a second would be of no appreciable use at all."

Selmy hadn't expected that either. "Who?"

Tyrion hesitated, but there could be no harm in telling that the bloody bear hadn't brought upon himself. "Ser Jorah Mormont."

"He's back as well?" Selmy's lips went tight. "The man who sold slaves, who bartered Her Grace's secrets for coin, who would have murdered for a pardon – "

"I understand the air is quite thin up where you're sitting, Selmy, but it seems to me that Ser Jorah is out there actually attempting to rescue the queen, whereas you are stuck being outsmarted by a dwarf. And let there be no doubt, Mormont's feelings for her are genuine. Only true love would lead to a man destroying himself like this."

Ser Barristan appeared to be on the brink of a sharp comeback, but something occurred to him, and he went quiet. Tyrion eyed him interestedly, wondering who his ghost was. There must be one, even for brave and valiant Barristan Selmy. "Well," he said. "Even if Mormont's attempt meets its likely end, there is still the dragon to consider. Is Daenerys the sort of woman who gets herself out of the messes she makes? Judging by the result of Meereen, it's hard to be sure."
"Her Grace has done her best here," Selmy said coolly.

"Gods, I hope not." The time was past to worry about insulting him, Tyrion decided. Ser Barristan was no fool; he must see that he was sitting inside an abattoir while a powerful and unknown enemy skulked about and continued to target his fellows at random. "Why did the queen stay? It is a real throne that awaits her in Westeros, and there's enough competition for it as it is. Including from some with remarkably familiar faces."

Selmy hesitated. "If the decision was mine, we would have made for Westeros," he admitted. "But Queen Daenerys did not feel that it was just to simply sack Meereen and move on, that she must learn to rule one conquered city before she could hope to hold a conquered kingdom."

"There's a sort of noble logic in that, I suppose. But from the looks of the place, it would have been kinder to leave it sacked."

Ser Barristan sighed. He suddenly looked every one of his almost seventy years. "I hold King Hizdahr technically a captive, but I cannot prevent him from making decisions and continuing to rule the city – decisions such as allowing the Second Sons back inside the walls, it would seem. He is Daenerys' consort, however little I like it. And since it was learned that I presumed to lay hands on him and slay his protector, the Harpies have begun to kill two or three men a night. Sometimes more."

"I have heard." Tyrion had seen the bodies of some of them as well: Shavepates, freedmen, Unsullied, all with the distinctive Harpy sigil daubed in blood on the nearest convenient surface. "Ser Barristan, I understand that this will come hard for you, but if you have Loraq as your captive, you need to make an answer to the murders. He is as good a culprit as any. Kill him. Your queen will be freed from an undesirable and useless marriage, and the Meereenese may finally begin to believe that your western threats have teeth. Harpy is as harpy does."

Selmy, as Tyrion had expected, looked revolted. "This... this foul work... you would have me sink to their level..."

"You can only begin swimming once you've gone over the edge. Otherwise you're apt to be dragged to the bottom and drowned by a stone man. That was just one of the life lessons I learned aboard that boat in the Rhoyne. Would you like to know the others?"

"You speak like a madman. If you think you can convince me with this –"

It was no good, Tyrion saw. He was going to have to pull the trump card. "Ser Barristan."

"My lord of Lannister?"

"There is one very good reason why your queen's occupation of Meereen should be ended, and her person, preferably with her dragons, making all good speed to Westeros at once. If not, she's like to find the Iron Throne whisked out from beneath her, and not by my nephew. By hers."

Selmy stared blankly at him. The magnitude of what he was suggesting must be too much to take in at once. Finally the old knight said, "I am afraid I do not possibly understand. Prince Viserys died unwed, there is no indication that he fathered a bastard anywhere, and Prince Rhaegar's children –"

"Rhaenys is still dead. Aegon is not."

"You..." Selmy couldn't get the barest fragments of a sentence out. "This..."
"I'd like to say it's a lie. It would be a deal safer for everyone. Alas, I have looked on the lad with my own eyes. I traveled with him a way, before Ser Jorah kidnapped me. And while he may eventually have decided to go to Westeros by himself, I first suggested the idea to him. It was more equitable than him turning up here as a pauper to beg at Daenerys' door, never a wise idea to start with. I heard what happened to Quentyn Martell."

"You..." Ser Barristan's face was performing all sorts of remarkable contortions. "You mean to tell me that this so-called Aegon is in Westeros?"

"Assuming no storms or shipwrecks, yes. With the Golden Company in tow, and his father's old dear friend, Lord Jon Connington. Do you see now how a bit of urgency would greatly behoove your absent queen? And what's more, if you kill Hizdahr, Daenerys would then be free to marry Aegon. A restoration of the Targaryen dynasty, just as you must have dreamed about. Don't tell me you haven't dreamed about it, Selmy."

"This..." Poor Ser Barristan was still knocked for a loop, but a sudden fire had come into his face. He wants it. Of course he does. He wants to believe it, just like Connington did and all the rest. "Prince Rhaegar's son... how is this even possible..."

"The tale I was given was that our puissant Lord Varys switched him with a peasant's babe, which was the one Gregor Clegane subsequently brained on the wall. It's no more impossible than, say, Lord Tywin Lannister being murdered on his privy and failing to shit gold. Do it, Selmy. Give us fair warning, and I can deliver the Second Sons to your side. Brown Ben will join you quick as spit if you look like to win – he's a sellsword, after all. And the last time I looked, there was a Volantene fleet besieging you on one side, a plague-ridden Yunkish camp on the other, while you sit on your hands and hope your queen will come home. I'd say the time when you could afford inaction is long past."

"Murder Hizdahr, and the entire city will rise against us."

"Then." Tyrion smiled thinly. "Then you unleash the dragons. You see, my lord? The best lies always contain a kernel of truth."

"You are despicable, Imp."

"I'm aware of it. And we'll all be dead unless I stay that way."

He could see the indecision on Selmy's face, warring with the anger and the evolving awareness that there might indeed be only one course of action. "If Her Grace was to return," the old knight said at last, "and found that by my actions, I had undone everything she had ever labored to achieve..."

"You wouldn't enjoy it, I imagine. I've seen from Ser Jorah how well she forgives such offenses. But if that's going to stop you from doing what must be done, I'm wasting my time and we can all throw ourselves off the walls right now."

"This..." Selmy wanted one more reason not to, Tyrion could tell. "You are certain that this boy is Aegon? Truly Aegon?"

"I'm certain of nothing but winter and taxes. And that whoever he is, he's going to take the Iron Throne if he can. He can do it with Daenerys as his queen or without her." Tyrion shrugged. "The former would be preferable, of course. Do let us know if we can still call you Barristan the Bold, or if Barristan the Old will have to become permanent."
Selmy took a deep breath. "You are correct, my lord of Lannister," he said, in a voice that sounded as if he was agreeing to be infested with hookworms. "Action must be taken. It will be tonight. Return to your hostel, you shall be of no use here."

"Gladly. I've said my piece." Tyrion hopped to his feet. "I hope the Harpies haven't gotten to Kasporio and his friend during our chat. I'll see you anon, ser?"

Selmy gave a noncommittal grunt in reply, which Tyrion took for assent. Daenerys should grovel at my feet in thanks, for what I've done for her. He thought of how Aegon the Conqueror had taken both his sisters to wife, and that saying the Targaryens had always been tediously fond of, how the dragon had three heads. She might marry Aegon, but mayhaps she can marry me as well. I'll serve her as well as any consort, fuck her until she moans, and never call her Tysha unless I'm exceedingly drunk.

It was a very long walk back to the hostel.

Thinking of Ser Barristan's plan made Tyrion as restless as a caged cat for the rest of the afternoon. He made a brief stop to Brown Ben Plumm to inform him of the scheme, and that it would be unwise to be abroad tonight. The sellsword captain grunted in what might have been amusement, but he had deserted Daenerys' cause after hearing that she could not control her dragons, and his mistrust of them had not waned in the least. Nonetheless, he was far from grieved to hear that something was finally going to come of the long stalemate. "Burn a few o' them Volantene ships at anchor, mayhaps," he remarked. "I still say we could have done well for 'em, but if not, better to leave no temptation behind."

"Quite," Tyrion agreed. "Well, all we have to do is hope that Ser Barristan's scruples do not overwhelm his desperation. He'll kill Hizdahr at the second bell – he'll feel that he has to take on the responsibility himself, the thundering noble fool, and send Grey Worm and the Unsullied to release the dragons. They know him, so theoretically we won't have a repeat of the Quentyn incident. Then we stay low, and wait to rise from the ashes. You could always change the sigil of the company to a phoenix, you know."

"Oh, bugger off," Brown Ben said. "There's a deal could go wrong, but it's a risk I suppose we'll have to run. Very well. I'll tell my lads to stay low. You do the same with your whore."

"She is not my whore." It was useless to tell him, or any of the Second Sons. They all remained vastly amused by the idea of two dwarfs fucking.

"Whatever she is, keep her out o' the way. I'm not responsible for her if those beasts decide to get carried away. How much of Meereen d'you think they intend to burn?"

"I hope for the lot of it, personally."

Brown Ben grunted again. "Couldn't hurt. You'd still best be thinking of how you're going to get me all that gold, mind. Go on with you."

Tyrion reverenced sardonically and took his leave. He had, after much grief, managed to get a private room for himself and Penny, as much to stop her wittering on about Pretty Pig and Crunch as anything. It was only by a miracle that they hadn't been turned into supper yet; food was at an eye-wateringly high premium and most of it would not have been out of place in those pot shops in Flea Bottom, the one where he'd sent Symon Silver Tongue. Tyrion made it a point to avoid eating anything remotely meatlike, which meant he made do with a revolting mash of grubs and tubers, but it was better than the alternative.
Much to his surprise, therefore, Penny was absent when he entered. The pig and the dog were tied up in their usual places, and also as usual, Pretty Pig had shat over everything remotely nearby. Penny was too frightened to take them out into the streets, but by now, the aroma was so familiar to Tyrion that he barely noticed it. He was more concerned as to what could have possibly induced Penny to leave the safety of the room (at least, safety compared with the rest of Meereen) right when she was supposed to stay out of sight. Typical, he thought. I should leave her to it. Yet somehow he was already turning and heading back, out the back door and into the cramped courtyard.

It was starting to get dark. Torches burned sullenly, but left vast pools of shadow between, and Tyrion couldn't help but glance over his shoulder for any stray Harpies. There were none. Looking up, he could just make out a small figure huddled atop the walkways, staring out to sea.

"Penny?" he shouted. "Gods be good, girl, get down from there."

She jumped and looked over her shoulder, saw him, and cringed. "Tyrion," she said nervously. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing? What are you doing? There's nothing out there but a bunch of bloody Volantenes on boats – and you can't see their tattoos from here, I tried. Now get down."

Penny continued to gaze out over the darkening water. "In a moment."

Tyrion sighed exasperatedly. "I don't care what you're doing," he ordered her. "I told you to get down. Otherwise you'll be meeting Oppo again sooner than you'd wish."

That was cruel, but it startled her enough to look around again. "What – what are you talking about? You said there wasn't anything but the Volantenes. . ."

"Right now, no. That makes no allowances for, say, two hours in the future. It's going to hot up here tonight. Take it from me, I have an inside source. You don't come down, I'll tell Brown Ben to roast Pretty Pig and Crunch."

Penny looked aghast. "You wouldn't!"

"Watch me." Tyrion took a threatening step toward the hostel.

As he'd hoped, that brought her scampering down quick enough, so fast that she fell off the bottom of the ladder and scraped her hands and knees. Feeling vaguely guilty, he offered her a hand to her feet. "What were you doing, anyway?"

Penny's cheeks flushed. "I had a dream about my mother."

"Your mother? Does she live under the water?"

"No. She. . . I don't know where she lives. Or if she does." Penny's cheeks went deeper in color. "It was just. . . strong. Like she was calling out to me. I thought maybe if I went up and looked. . ."

Tyrion knew he should say something pithy, but it was deserting him at the moment. Penny was so bloody young, in more ways than one. Naught more than thirteen or fourteen. When I was thirteen, I married a whore. "Your mother?" he commented, trying to be pleasant. "You've never said much of her. You told me only that she had dark hair like you, and she sang to you sometimes."

"She did." Penny glanced away. It was clear that she was dying to go back up to her perch, and Tyrion grudgingly decided that as the first bell had not yet sounded, far less the second, they were
in no immediate danger unless Ser Barristan lost all sense of time or the dragons took matters into their own hands. Huffing, he followed her back up the ladder. The hostel was built crookback against the city wall, meaning that they indeed possessed a splendid view of the blockaded harbor. Lanterns burned distantly on the Volantene ships, turned to wraiths in the advancing twilight.

"She loved us," Penny said after a moment, unexpectedly. "I know she did."

"What about your father? Bloody idiot, you don't care about her father. Ask her that, and you'll have to talk about yours."

"I never knew him. Mother didn't mention him." Penny pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. "She raised us, me and Oppo, until we were six, and then... I don't remember what happened exactly, but she said she had to go to Braavos, that she could make a better living there, that soon we wouldn't be so hungry and poor all the time. She said we'd stay with a neighbor until she came back, so she... she left. And the neighbor died a few months later, and we tried to get to Braavos, but we never made it there, and we fell in with a troupe of mummers. That was when we learned to joust."

"Until you were six," Tyrion repeated. "You and Oppo were twins?"

She looked surprised. "Yes. Why?"

"You never mentioned that."

"I... I'm sorry." Penny fiddled anxiously with the piece of hair. "I didn't... I thought I did, it's no matter now."

"You're right, it's no matter." Tyrion looked out to sea as well, which suddenly seemed preferable to meeting her eyes. They killed her brother because they thought he was me. He thought he'd escaped it, but the guilt still rose up to assail him periodically. Damned if I know why. It wasn't my fault.

Staring hard at the horizon, however, he thought he saw something strange. Shadows. Moving shadows. Ship-shaped shadows. Almost how another fleet might look if they were approaching with all lights doused and black sheets run up in place of ordinary sails. Almost how a fleet might look if they were attempting a stealth attack, and Tyrion frowned and leaned forward. Below him, the Volantenes appeared to have noticed nothing.

"What?" Penny asked, seeing his scrutiny.

"Nothing," Tyrion lied unconvincingly. "This night is destined to be eventful one way or the other. Which reminds me, we really should be getting down."

"I... suppose." Penny didn't move. "Do you... do you think Ser Jorah will come back with the queen?"

"I gravely doubt it. Valiant idiocy is all very well for poets. For spurned lovers, it works less well. Why?"

"Only... they're like the song, I thought. The Bear and the Maiden Fair. And I was thinking of my mother singing to me, and it seemed... important, somehow."

"I think of someone singing to me as well," Tyrion said. "All it means is that I must drink more, immediately."
Penny looked at him reproachfully. She *does* have beautiful eyes. "It was the song she always sang. It was from Myr, I think."

"Was your mother from Myr?"

"No. From Westeros. The westerlands. She was... poor. Nobody."

"My singer was from the westerlands as well." For no discernible reason, Tyrion's heart was starting to race. "And poor. Nobody. Dark-haired. What – " Gods, Lannister, don't ask, don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to – "what song?"

Penny paused. Then she slowly, shyly, hummed a few stanzas. And Tyrion Lannister felt everything he ever knew crumple up and fall onto his head like an anvil.

*I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair.*

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. Everything was falling away, he briefly wondered if he'd toppled off the parapet. *It's not, it's not*, he tried to tell himself, but every stunned, shaking particle of his body gave it the lie. Dragons seemed inconsequential, the Iron Throne even more so. Aegon and Daenerys and Targaryen and Lannister, Martell and Jaime and Cersei and Myrcella and Trystane and poor burned Quentyn, Ser Barristan's willingness to go ahead with the murder of Hizdahr zo Loraq – everything. All he could hear was the thunder of his blood in his ears.


Somehow he was on his knees, though he did not remember falling. Then there was bile in his mouth, and everything he had eaten was coming up. He grasped at the merlons, and his hands almost slid off. *Leap. Jump. Do it.*

Tyrion did not trust himself to stand or speak. In fact, he was not sure that it would ever be in his power to do so again. And that was when the first explosion shredded the night.

*Dragons*, he thought madly, *Ser Barristan forgot the signal*. But it did not come from the direction of the Pyramid of Hazkar. It came from further out to sea, the darkness lit up by lurid streaks of flame. Red flame. The ghost ships were no ghosts. They were coming almost at ramming speed. Fifty or ninety or a hundred. Another explosion, and one of the Volantene ships disintegrated in a flying maelstrom of splinters, spilling dark shapes into the waves like rats. The howl of warhorns sundered the air.

Tyrion Lannister stared incoherently. He could taste the searing flame, could only think how much more of it would engulf Meereen tonight. His timing, it seemed, could not have been more diabolically perfect. This mystery fleet would attack on one side, the dragons on the other – the citizens would think the lot of it summoned up from the deepest of the seven hells, or whatever their Ghiscari equivalent was –

*I loved a maid as red as bloodshed, with inferno in her hair.*

And then, only then, as the fleet surged into the middle of the stunned Volantenes, he saw their banners. Gold kraken on black field. And understood. *Greyjoys. Bloody, bloody Greyjoys.*

Tyrion did nothing. He said nothing. He stood there like a lamb for the slaughter, rooted in place. Did not even duck as a mangonel above him started to launch with a *whump* and a thud, and the battle of Meereen began.
The beacon of the Hightower burned bright as a jewel, and the rising moon was big and orange on the horizon. Oldtown always looked twice as much like an enchanted city by night, lanterns flickering in the elegant stone warrens and spires and minarets prodding at the stars. The Starry Sept itself was particularly beautiful on its high hill, looking like a subtlety spun out of sugar, the sevensong services being conducted within its great walls even now. Out to sea, the ocean lay as black and tranquil as a coat of paint.

In some ways, it reminded Sam of Braavos. But he was not up here either to take the air or enjoy the view – he had an entire star chart to plot and fill out between now and morning, and since he was almost as terrified of Maester Tycho as he had been of Alliser Thorne, nothing less than total devotion to the task would do. Of all his courses at the Citadel, he liked this one the least – though it would be immediately superseded whenever the dread day arrived for him to cut up corpses. It was not that the work was uninteresting or useless, but calculating endless geometric angles and vertices made his head hurt, one star was bloody hard to tell from another, and Maester Tycho was reliably on hand to deplore the results. As Sam did not expect to be navigating any ships in the near future, and was already sufficiently familiar with the theorem that the world was round, not flat, and traveled around the sun instead of vice versa, he had hoped to be excused from any further discourses in the subject. But no luck.

Being Sam, he did not dare to actually say so. He was already in a delicate position; he was a novice of the Citadel, but he was still a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch, not to mention Randyll Tarly's exiled, disinherited son. He had to watch his every step, and he had felt no urge to befriend any of his fellow novices – their taunts were all too familiar to him from his childhood. They were as cruel as only adolescent boys could be. And while Sam had lost several stone of weight, largely thanks to the dubious food of the refectory and a fortnight spent tramping up the banks of the Honeywine in search of plant and animal specimens, he was still "Ser Piggy," and he knew it. But if he was to make a maester as Jon wished, he had to endure it.

It was not all bad. Sam had taken to the studies of history, philosophy, and theology like a duck to water, and would forge his copper link in record time. He had helped to restore an ancient manuscript copy of the Gesta Aegoni, a chronicle of the Targaryen Conquest, and argued with Maester Willem if the Field of Fire had been the only way to convince Rock and Reach to bend the knee. But most of all, Sam was hunting for records of the Others. The Citadel's library was the most wonderful place he had ever seen: not dark, mildewed, and dusty like the Castle Black archives, but vast, sunlit, and soaring, with polished ogives and fluted columns, endless shelves reached by ladders and guarded by grilles, with a costive old maester who sat behind a high desk and evil-eyeballed every sticky-fingered novice who happened by. Books could not be taken out of the sacred precincts; they were signed out, perused in a reading room, stained with even a single blot of ink on pain of death, and then returned. Thus whenever he had a free instant – he had no interest in the extracurricular activities of his fellow students, namely getting shite-faced drunk on the fearsomely strong cider of the Quill and Tankard – Sam could be located in the reading room, puzzling through some long-dead scholar's cramped handwriting and interminable digressions on the nature of evil. The Others came from the Land of Always Winter, they woke either when it was cold or it was cold because they woke, and fire, dragonglass, and dragonsteel could kill them. But since Sam had learned this all already in Castle Black, he was praying for a breakthrough.

He'd had no luck until he left the straight historical texts behind, and branched out into the arcane. Here he found the prophecy of Azor Ahai that Stannis Baratheon had claimed of himself, and the
tale of the Battle for the Dawn. Sam did find it curious that in this account, Azor Ahai was referred to as being a "Taergaryyn." In fact the further he looked, the more sharply the focus seemed to resolve on dragons.

Dragons. Sam remembered the tales told by Xhondo, the gossip running rampant, the fact that Archmaester Marwyn had left on the instant to travel to the rumored Targaryen queen who had risen in the east with three of the creatures. But this was a very touchy topic to broach in the Citadel. Sam had done enough reading to believe that the claims of maesters poisoning the last dragons were not entirely without merit. The Citadel desired to forge a new world, one of science and logic and reason, cleaned of sorcery and superstition, and anyone even halfway familiar with the line of dragonkings knew that they had always danced too close to madness.

Sam had attended a lecture yesterday where one of the maesters proposed a new theory: the Targaryens' Valyrian custom of wedding brother to sister was detrimental not just religiously but physically, magnifying their suspect mental traits and reflecting them back on each other, so madness was passed down in the blood along with their distinctive silver hair and purple eyes. It was noteworthy, the maester concluded, that in the event of a Targaryen marrying outside the family – when Daeron the Good wed Myriah Martell, or when Prince Rhaegar wed Elia Martell, for that matter – one or both of these characteristics seemed to be muted. Both Daeron and Rhaegar's firstborn children had taken after their Dornish mothers in appearance, and while Daeron's grandson Aerion Brightflame was a Targaryen in the worst sense of the word, the madness had not otherwise resurfaced in the line until the infamous Aerys.

But what if dragons are the only way? Sam thought now, struggling to set up the Myrish eye he had brought to observe the sky. I could never go back to Jon with so little. Mayhaps I should follow Marwyn's lead, go to find Queen Daenerys and her dragons. The idea made him shudder. But if a Targaryen had been the one to lead the Night's Watch in the last full-scale battle against the Others, and afterwards Brandon the Builder, a Stark, had raised the Wall to keep them out... And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter, and woke giants from the earth. Sam shuddered again. That was another of the things he did not want to think about, on this pleasant if chilly night in Oldtown. Painstakingly he dipped his quill, recorded the position of the Ice Dragon's blue north star, and twiddled with the lens of the Myrish eye in hopes of getting a better look at a dusty patch that might be a nebula. At least up here he could have some peace and quiet; up here he could think about Gilly and wonder how she and little Aemon – which was what Dalla's boy would be named when he turned two – were settling in at Horn Hill. Sam longed to write to her, but Gilly could not read, and he would be far too embarrassed to commit half the things he wanted to say to parchment anyway. With his luck, it would be intercepted by Leo Tyrell or another of the particularly obnoxious ones, and posted up across the Citadel for every soul to – "Slayer."

Sam jumped a foot, knocked over his inkwell, and had to make a lunge to catch it before it dropped forty feet over the parapet. Heart pounding and hands stained, he wiped them on his robe, leaving two fat black stains. He whirled about to find Alleras the Sphinx, the slender Dornish youth, watching him with amusement.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" Sam stammered, trying to tell whether any of the ink had splashed onto the parchment. "You scared the life out of me."

"Sorry." Alleras moved to the Myrish eye, readjusted its lens, and expertly swung up it to gaze at the heavens. "Gods, I remember doing this when I first arrived here. I wanted to claw Tycho's eyes out, and that was after I got over wanting to strangle him. But tonight..." There was a pause as he...
squinted. "I'm in search of something different."

"What?"

Alleras didn't answer immediately. Then he said, "From the looks of you, Tarly, you're a man who never misses a meal. But I didn't see you in Hall earlier."

Sam flinched. "No. I was in the library again. Why?"

Alleras straightened up and met his gaze. "Did you hear the news from the Wall?"

"No." I don't want to. Not here, not in front of him. I don't want to.

"Sorry," Alleras said again. "I lost my father not long past, I know how it feels. But your friend Jon Snow is dead. Has been for some time. His own men killed him in the Castle Black courtyard, and it's the one who did it – I misremember his name, Baden or Bowden, the steward – that's Lord Commander now."

Sam felt as if he'd been punched very hard. As if he himself had been thrown out into thin air, falling. "That's... not so..." he managed. Bowden Marsh? Bowden Marsh a murderer? "Jon can't be dead, he wouldn't have..."

Alleras shrugged. "I thought the same of my father. It happened nonetheless. The gods are never just, Slayer."

Sam's legs had turned to water. He sat down heavily, sucked in a cracking breath, and started to cry.

Alleras eyed him uncomfortably for several moments. If this got out, it would be all over the Citadel by the morrow. But the Sphinx did no such thing. Instead he sat down on the crenel next to Sam, and rested a light hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," the Dornish boy said. "You were close to him?"

"He..." Sam struggled for the words. Why indeed would the gods take Jon Snow, whom the Night's Watch so desperately needed, and leave him here? At the moment, a hatred like nothing he had ever known leapt up in him, to see Bowen Marsh's blood on his blade, make him pay and pay dearly. "Jon was the first person who was ever kind to me. I would have died myself if not for him. He protected me from Alliser Thorne and the others. . . he got me the post with Maester Aemon, he wanted me to take his place. . . Aemon's, not Jon's, I could never take Jon's, I don't think I can take Aemon's either." He gulped air. Stinging tears kept rolling down his cheeks. I plotted to make Jon Lord Commander. Is this my fault? "So what am I here for after all, if the man who s-sent me is dead?"

"Likely the Night's Watch still needs a maester," Alleras said, clearly trying to be comforting.

_The Night's Watch needs far more than a maester_, Sam thought. _I was beyond the Wall, I saw them, I saw them on the Fist. . . I should have died, hundreds of braver men than me did. Jon gave me a dragonglass dagger and that broken horn he found. To remember it by, he said, but I don't want to remember it, I want it to go away. . . The horn he had yielded with the rest of his personal possessions, when he was officially accepted as a novice, but of a sudden Sam wanted it back. It is the last thing I have of Jon, and it's only a broken horn. How can it be a threat to anybody?"

"Slayer?" Alleras said. "You have that look in your eye that means you're thinking of something. Should we all stand ready for action?"
"Don't call me that!" It hadn't been so bad when it was his friends, back at the Wall. But the novices had picked up on it after he'd been cadged into telling the tale, and in their voices Sam could hear the sneering disdain of educated and worldly men, who thought there was no mystery that a theorem could not explain and that those who clung to any sort of "primeval" beliefs were hopelessly naïve and out of touch. They didn't believe in Others any more than Sam's own Sworn Brothers had, and his explorations in the library were the cause of further ridicule. Sam's forbearance was stretched quite thin just now as it was, and the rage was in him in a way it hadn't been since he'd punched Dareon the singer in that brothel in Braavos. Blindly, furiously, he lashed out.

Alleras made a startled noise and skipped out of the way, but couldn't dodge entirely, and Sam's blow clipped him and sent him sprawling with a surprisingly feminine squeal. The Sphinx rolled over and sprang to his feet, but made no attempt to hit Sam back. "Bloody hell, Sl-Samwell," he panted. "I didn't mean it that way. I'm not Leo Tyrell or any of those sorts."

"No," Sam said abashedly. "You're not." Then he thought about Jon being dead, and him hitting Dareon because he'd spent all their money on whores, and Maester Aemon calling him Egg and dreaming that he was old, and Gilly far away, and Jon being dead, and started to cry again.

It took some time for Alleras to calm him down after that, and Sam was mortified at the thought that one of the maesters would pop up to chastise them for the ruckus. "I'm sorry for your friend," the Dornish boy said. "Truly. But you'd best finish your star chart – you have to hand it in to Maester Tycho in the morning, don't forget. Here, I'll help you."

Sam wiped his nose on the sleeve of his robe and miserably dipped his quill again. The last thing he wanted to think about right now was his star chart and Maester Tycho, but with Alleras confidently jotting down calculations and telling him where to look in the sky, it was easier. Sam wondered what he had been sent up to look for, but decided against asking. Alleras was well on his way to becoming a maester, and it was an open secret that he was currently forging his link of Valyrian steel. The higher mysteries. If anyone could be expected to understand about the Others and the dragons, it was Alleras, and it suddenly occurred to Sam that he would do very well to recruit the Sphinx as an ally in more than just astronomy. Alleras knew all sorts of things about the Citadel, from the mundane to the weird – which dish never to eat in the refectory, to the hallway supposedly haunted by the ghost of a young novice, and even how to get into the room where the glass candles were said to burn. This entire time, Sam had been approaching his education the same way he'd approached his whole life – by putting his head down and running for cover, meekly absorbing whatever abuse those stronger than him doled out, and only daring to flourish when he was certain no one was looking. They have no link to represent what it is to learn to be a man.

"Alleras," he said, and saw the Sphinx's head turn in surprise. "I. . . need your help."

He'd half-expected the Dornish youth to laugh at him, just because Samwell Tarly had been laughed at so often in his life. But instead Alleras was quiet, studying him with the thoughtful black eyes of his Summer Islander mother. Sam had almost begun to fear that he would not answer when the other boy said, "Doing what?"

Sam swallowed. "Jon Snow may be dead, but . . . but my duty to him is not." The words came hard. For a few moments he'd wanted nothing so much as to use this an excuse to run away, away from star charts and Maester Tycho's acid tongue and the mockery of his fellow novices, away from bad food and haunted corridors, away to Gilly and find a little place for them to settle down and finally be safe and happy. But if he did, it would betray Jon's memory unforgivably. Bowen Marsh does not understand what he is up against. The thought of returning to the Wall to join forces with Jon's killer almost made Sam choke, but if every oaf in the world called him Sam the Slayer, it was
because he had seen such things with his own eyes. It is more than pettiness and rivalry. It always has been.

Alleras was still watching him. Then he said, "Where do you want me to take you?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "I just need help. I don't want to let Jon down."

"Come." Alleras beckoned him across the top of the tower. "I think I know where to start."

Sam hurried after the slim, light-footed youth as quietly as he could. Down the trapdoor and the twisting steps, the dark corridors and the maze of turns. Novices and acolytes alike were strongly discouraged from wandering the Citadel by night, though there were always those out enjoying the carnal delights of Oldtown; very few men had it in them to actually keep a vow of celibacy, Sam had found. Including me. In some ways, it was good that he likely would not see Gilly again for years, if at all. If she was closer, he might be more tempted to transgress again, and he wanted with all his heart to hold fast to his word. The need for maesters to remain chaste was somewhat harder for Sam to understand than the need for the Night's Watch to remain chaste – the maesters were not the only thing standing between the Others and all of humanity, after all. But he did not consider this any sort of excuse.

"Here," Alleras said softly, startling him. "We've arrived."

Sam looked up with a jerk, expecting – hoping – to see something grandiose and helpfully overflowing with information. But it was not. It was the weathered wooden drawbridge that led to the little island containing the Ravenry, the oldest building in the Citadel. When they crossed it, they emerged into an unfamiliar courtyard, woven about with moss and vines. It was late enough by now that the night's chill had grown stronger – growing up in Horn Hill, he would have thought it uncomfortably cold, but that was before what he knew what cold was. The moon was clipped halfway behind the cloisters on the far side, casting a ghostly bone-pale light on the ground, the red leaves, the white branches of the weirwood.

Sam stopped short. There were one or two riverlands lords who kept the old gods, he recalled, but other than that, a heart tree was neither a common nor a welcome sight in the devoutly Seven-worshiping south. He did also recall hearing about it on his first arrival, that the ravens liked to perch on it, and it was not surprising that the maesters had one. Aside from their study of the northern culture and iconography that had built up around the silent watchers, Sam knew that the weirwoods were believed to possess a vast store of communal knowledge – that the faces carved into them were not merely ceremonial, that they were truly animated by some life force that enabled them to see and remember everything that had taken place before them. And since weirwoods could live for thousands of years, that made them a source more valuable than any scroll could match. If you can coax them to speak.

"Aye," Alleras said, seemingly reading his thoughts. "I've spent a goodly amount of time here recently. If only Marwyn the Mage had not left. My education in these mysteries will not be complete until he returns, but there are times when I almost grasp the knack of it. I will confess, I lied to you. Tonight I heard the word that Jon Snow was dead beyond all doubt, but I had already suspected it, from what I had seen here."

Something about his voice made Sam turn sharply. What Alleras was doing was both forbidden and dangerous – the idiosyncratic few who decided to forge their links of Valyrian steel were supervised extremely closely, to ensure they did not latch onto some dusty dream of sorcery and start wreaking bloody havoc to see it brought to life. It went against everything the Citadel stood for, everything that was good and proper. They did not wish to restrict knowledge from those who had a genuine and conscientious desire for it, but they were expected to learn just enough to see
how perilous it would be to learn more. With the Mage gone, however, it was not surprising that his pupils had the chance to delve much deeper. *Not surprising, and not wise.*

"You should not," Sam said, aware of how hollow it sounded when he was the one who had asked Alleras for help. "You don't know what it is, it's dangerous."

The Sphinx cocked an eyebrow. "Indeed, you are correct. Ignorance is the greatest poison the world has ever known, particularly when it is accounted as a virtue. Surely you've noticed that men fear and hate you when you know too much, Samwell. Only the very strong can overwhelm that stupid animal soul inside, screaming at them to shut up, sit down, and be ordinary."

*Sometimes he speaks as if he was a maester chained forty years, and not the stripling of nineteen that he is. And he is right that we oft mistake what we subjectively believe to be objective truth. It made Sam feel very tired, suddenly. All his life he'd been mocked and tortured for being fat and weak and craven, but he had always known uncompromisingly that it was true, which made it harder to disregard. He searched for answers in his scrolls, pondered the theoretical and abstract in hopes that he might one day find an explanation of human nature, and yet he never had. If I was a different sort of man, I might want to the Wall to break, and the Others to take everyone who has ever hurt me. But I don't. It's strange.*

And besides, the Wall was thousands of years old, imbued with spells of untold potency and power, wards and weavings. It would never come down, Sam reassured himself. So long as it still stood, the Others could not pass, and so this was a moot question anyway. *Someday they may come in their legions, but the fire of Azor Ahai and the ice of Brandon the Builder still holds.* And on that day, no matter how craven he was, it would be his duty to stand alongside his brothers and defend it. Gods be good, it would be long after he was dead – or better yet, never. But in the interim, he was still here in Oldtown. Safe and –

The weirwood opened its carved, sap-crusted eyes, and stared at him.

Sam let out a strangled yelp and leapt backwards, narrowly avoiding flattening Alleras for the second time that night. He thought, or mayhaps only imagined, that the face in the trunk was changing, that it was no longer merely the tree's flesh but knitted with another, that it was – no, he was only making believe in his grief, no, it wasn't – it wasn't, it* was*–

Shock coruscated down Sam's body to his toes. There was no mistaking it: it was Jon's face that looked back at him. His lipless wooden mouth moved, shaping words, but all Sam could hear was howling wind.

"Jon," he said weakly. "Jon, I can't understand you."

The eyes flashed. Sam felt a blast of ungodly cold on his face. This time, however, he was able to make out a word. *Horn*, Jon whispered. *Horn.*

"Horn?" Sam repeated. "What horn? The horn you gave me? I don't have it anymore, I left it behind when I became a novice – why? What is it? Why?"

*Find,* Jon said, and something else, something like *fire.* Sam was almost cracking apart with disbelief, euphoria, and anxiety all at once – this was not truly Jon, only some kind of distorted, echoing shadow. *He is still dead,* Sam realized. *But what horn?*

Jon's mouth shaped one final word. *Stolen.*

And then he was gone, winked out like a candle, quenched by wind or water. Sam was left staring
at the weirwood so hard that his eyes crossed, not entirely sure if he was still in possession of his full complement of sanity. He wanted to turn around, grab Alleras by the scruff of the neck, and demand, "Did you see that?" but one glance at the Sphinx's face confirmed that he had. If we're both mad, at least we have company.

"The horn," Sam croaked. "I don't know why, but I need to get it back. I need to see it. Now."

Alleras shook his head, slowly as a stunned ox. "Even I can't get into that room. The only key that opens it belongs to the archmaesters."

"Jon said it was stolen." An unnameable panic was building in Sam by the instant. "Do you think Archmaester Marwyn took it, mayhaps – but he was gone before I took my vows as a novice – " He sounded a blibbering fool, so alarmed over what a tree had told him. It could have been just his – but no. It was real, he'd stake his soul on it.

"If it was stolen," Alleras said, weighing each word deliberately, "then whoever stole it stole the key first."

"Would they be mad enough to stay here?" Sam could not fathom it.

"I doubt it," the Sphinx replied, "and nobody has left us in at least the last six months, but – " He stopped.

"But?" Sam pressed.

"I must be mistaken," Alleras said. "But do you recall Pate?"

"Pate?" Sam had in fact met him briefly upon his first arrival at the Citadel, he recalled. A pale, soft youth whom for no discernible reason he had misliked. Pate had – oh gods, he had been gone for at least a fortnight, and the common assumption was that the maesters' patience had finally run out, that it was plain that the boy would never make a member of their order, and it was therefore time to cut bait and attend to the ones with actual talent. But if not –

But if he was no maester material, how on earth would he have had the wit to pull off such an audacious theft, and why would he have taken the broken dirty useless old horn anyway, unless –

Who is Pate? Sam wondered frantically. Who is Alleras? Gods, who are any of them?

Too much. It was too much. He had to focus on one thing at a time. Sam turned and said, "Did Pate steal it, do you think?"

Alleras gazed back at him inscrutably. Then he said, "I thought nothing of it at the time, but I did see a man who very much appeared to be Pate, leaving the Citadel some weeks ago. I tried to follow him from curiosity, but lost him. And Pate – beforehand – was the assistant to Archmaester Walgrave, who's gone so senile that he wouldn't know his own mother from a hole in the ground. If he was so inclined, it might not have been difficult to steal the skeleton key."

"But would he have ever done it on his own? Someone must have put him up to it. Must have manipulated him. Think, Alleras. Think."

For another moment there was nothing but silence, as the Sphinx wrinkled his brow so hard that it looked painful. Then at last, he opened his eyes.

"Aye," he whispered. "And I think I saw him too."
The anticipation was always the best part. He could see it in their eyes, smell it too, watch them thrash and flail and shit themselves, as the knife came closer and closer and all they knew was its inevitability. They usually came up with some excellent excuses, right about now. Most times they offered him gold, or a full pardon, or that they'd leave House Bolton in peace for perpetuity. The more desperate they were, the more creative they got. If words were anything more than wind, he would in fact be the master of the world right now, and it was mildly aggravating that he wasn't, but no matter. Half the fun lay in getting there.

This particular prisoner, however, wasn't squealing as much as Ramsay liked. Which was odd, given how greatly he resembled a pig. Lord Too-Fat-To-Sit-A-Horse himself, stripped naked and marked with whip-weals that showed livid on the blubber, courtesy of Damon Dance-for-Me. Mayhaps that was the problem, Ramsay speculated, sizing up the scene with a professional's discriminating air. All that padding, he couldn't yet feel what they were doing.

"We need to cut him open and drain him, m'lord," Damon urged. "Winter's here, all that whale oil burns right nice in the cold and dark. And we always knew there was a skinny man inside him somewhere, screaming to get out."

"Did we?" Ramsay remarked, casting an eye at the doubly reinforced rack they'd been obliged to strap Manderly to, for fear he'd break a lesser one. "The only way to shut him up must have been with food. Let's assist our fat friend in his noble struggle to lose weight, Damon. Take another tooth."

"Just so, m'lord." Grinning, Damon thrust his knife into the brazier, while Ramsay paced up to Manderly and began to circle him consideringly, trying to judge where the fat man's confounded courage came from. Like as not it was no courage at all; he must be dead inside already. But though his mouth was torn and bleeding from where they'd already assisted him a half-dozen times previously, and the little finger on his right hand was a weeping red stump, Manderly still refused to plead or beg or snivel. That was a very serious affront to Ramsay's talents, and Lord Piggy would regret his defiance long before the end, but at the moment, while Damon heated the knife and Manderly got a good look at it and what it meant, it was time to try honey.

"It doesn't have to be this way, you know," Ramsay said softly, in his best imitation of his father's sibilant tones. "Tell me what you did to those three Freys. Tell me where Mance Rayder went. You're no longer fooling anyone by pretending to be on our side."

Of all the baffling things, Manderly smiled.

"Gone stark mad, this one," said Skinner, another of Ramsay's lads. He started to chortle. "Get it? Stark mad? Us here in the dungeons of Winterfell, and I'm saying that he's gone stark – "

His explication of the properties of humor was cut joltingly short as Ramsay, without even looking around, casually backhanded him into the wall. Truth be told, he was quite irritated that this had been necessary in the first place. After they'd smashed the jest of an Umber host and taken King Stannis captive, the war looked to be all but done. Stannis had been hung, drawn, flayed, and finally quartered, and Ramsay had had the skin lined with wolf fur and sewn into a blanket for his bed, but the skirmishes with northern clansmen and Baratheons continued. And most sinisterly of all, some of his scouts reported catching glimpses of another Stannis out in the woods, still very much alive and un-flayed. Since to the best of Ramsay's knowledge both Stannis' brothers were dead, and he had never had a twin to start with, this opened the possibility of some dark trickery.
And Ramsay Bolton did not like being tricked. He did not like it at all.

He'd thought to draw this Stannis duplicate out of hiding by making a calculated exit from Winterfell, in search of his stolen bride. But the girl had already vanished into the snows, peeving Ramsay exceedingly, and he'd quickly thought of a better trap instead: leaving Mance Rayder's crow cage in plain sight. The wildling king had outlasted the stag one, but then again, he did have his cozy cloak of spearwives. And since Ramsay had tortured it out of him that he'd been sent on the behest of Stannis' red bitch, it was logical to expect that the Baratheons might have themselves a stab at rescuing him.

Only they hadn't. It was a bunch of wildlings who turned up instead. Ramsay had never expected the free folk to display such loyalty, but he'd either underestimated them or overestimated the Baratheons. The trap had worked quite well to start, but one of their number had actually managed to scale the outer curtain wall, open Rayder's cage, and abscond with him. Ramsay had latterly learned that they might have crashed into Manderly's room en route, and he was certain that the fat lord was covering for them. The castle had already been searched top to bottom, and the heads of at least a dozen wildlings mounted on pikes, but Rayder and his rescuer were still eluding them.

The knife was hot. Now it was time to see if Manderly's resolve would withstand another round. Ramsay held out his hand, and Damon put the knife into it, the hilt well swaddled against the cherry-red glow of the blade. Then he lowered it above Manderly's maimed hand, just close enough to hear the lard sizzle.

"Did they ever tell you what happened to my first wife?" Ramsay asked conversationally, watching sweat break out on Manderly's forehead. "Lady Hornwood? Honest mistake on my part, I swear. Coincidentally, I've always wondered how one would actually go about eating one's fingers. You'd have to get your mouth around them without gagging, to start. Really dig your teeth in. Gnaw the skin away in shreds, bit by bit. The tendons would be harder. And you know there's so many nerves in the hand, the pain would be excruciating. The only thing keeping you going is the madness of your hunger. Damon, show him."

Damon gleefully bit down on Manderly's middle finger, at the same time Ramsay pressed the searing blade to his wrist. The fat lord gasped in agony, twisting his head back, flab jiggling as he fought to get away. As Damon really set to work, Manderly uttered a choked gasp, his other hand fluttering ineffectually where it had been strapped to the rack. He was gurgling on the beginnings of a scream by the time Damon snapped the bone in two with a crunch. He held up the severed digit triumphantly.

"Roast it," Ramsay told him. "Mayhaps some apples and cloves, don't you think? Fear not, my lord of Manderly. You won't starve, so long as your fingers hold out. They're practically legs of lamb."

"You..." Manderly's eyes were rolling back in his head, he looked to be on the verge of a faint, but the voice that emerged from the thickness of agony was furious, not broken. "You want... me tell you something? Very well... I will. The Starks... are alive, bastard. And I intend... living long enough... see their wolves tear you... just as many pieces."

"Behold," Ramsay announced, turning dramatically to his audience. "The traitor confesses. You did give it a good run, my lord Lamprey. I daresay we nearly believed you. Now tell us what you know, and we'll merely cut off the next finger. When you beg us to."

"Burn in hell." An ooze of blood and vomit dripped down Manderly's chins.

Ramsay laughed, to disguise his growing rage. As impossible as it sounded, even he was starting to run out of ideas. They could always ram Manderly up the arse with a hot poker, but they did need
him in enough shape to talk. *I will not have it whispered that even Lord Too-Fat could withstand my tender attentions. I will not!*

The finger was almost ready, crackling nicely on the brazier, and Ramsay pulled it off the spit and took a bite of it himself, to demonstrate. Not bad, if a little rubbery. "There," he said, and swallowed. "Damon, give the rest to Manderly. We've put him through so much, we can't deprive him of a spot of – "

"Lord Ramsay!"

Ramsay and his boys all turned in unison, annoyed. What they beheld was clearly an iron-constituted serving man of his father's, who took in the ghoulish scene with palpable distaste. Eyes fixed straight ahead, he addressed his target alone. "Your lord father wishes to see you in the Great Hall. Immediately."

"Immediately?" Ramsay did not appreciate that Lord Roose had presumed to use that word. "You'll have to tell him that I'm busy. Gathering important intelligence for our future strategy."

"He said you might say that," the servant replied. "He said also that I was to ignore it out of hand. Immediately, if you please."

*I will flay you in your sleep, little man.* Seething, Ramsay shoved through his minions and made a viciously obsequious bow. "I am at my lord father's service."

It was a considerable climb from the dungeons to the Great Hall, and it was snowing again. There was not a nook or cranny of Winterfell that was not smothered in white; icicles bearded every eave and barrel, and the wildling heads had been reduced to featureless lumps. Ramsay's breath huffed silver, and drips of blood fell from his clothes and hands, leaving a vivid trail across the bailey. *This interruption had damned well better be worth it."

Lord Roose was waiting alone in the dim, grey Great Hall when they entered. He nodded the servant out with his customary frozen courtesy, then turned to his son, sized him up, and without a word, struck him across the cheek.

Ramsay raised a hand to his face, too surprised to be upset. "The seven devils was that for?"

"Have you gone mad?" The fury in Lord Roose's whisper was withering. "As Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North, you torture the Lord of White Harbor and then boast about it for any man to hear? You already botched your marriage, you botched retrieving your wife, you botched capturing Stannis, you botched Mance Rayder, and now you do this? Hellfire and brimstone, are you mad?"

Ramsay regarded him mutinously, a lock of long dry hair falling in his eyes. "I suppose now you prate a peaceful land, a quiet people at me, is that it? It's bloody rich of you to tell me not to gain intelligence from a treasonous vassal, when you bloody killed the King in the North! Or did that escape your – "

This time, he didn't even see the blow coming. He went to one knee and almost tumbled headlong down the dais steps, tasting blood in his mouth. Above him his lord father stood with a face like a mask, one fist still upraised.

"That," said Roose Bolton, "answers my question beyond a doubt. You have gone mad. As you and every soul in the country is aware, the Freys treacherously murdered His Grace King Robb, in breach of the sacred laws of hospitality – and as it happens, there has just today been a bird from
"Dead?" Ramsay growled. *He will be soon. Just like you, old man.*

"Not yet," Lord Roose said indifferently, "but he is quite lost to speech and sense. Edwyn Frey is now the *de facto* Lord of the Twins, though I daresay Lord Walder's corpse will not yet be cold when Edwyn joins him, thanks to Black Walder. It will be best for Lady Roslin to leave such a place beyond a doubt."

"Lady Roslin?" Ramsay could give a damn about her. The little cunt they'd foisted off on limp-dick Tully at the wedding that started it all, so what.

"Indeed." Lord Roose's pale eyes transfixed his bastard son. "A company of Lannister guardsmen arrived to escort her to her husband at Casterly Rock. Edwyn did not feel it wise to refuse."

*No wonder Black Walder sharpens his knife even now.* It seemed to Ramsay that he might just feel a kinship with the man who would soon be head of House Frey. *We both have relations blocking us from our rightful inheritances, relations who have lived too long.* If Lord Roose ever chastened him like this again, it was the end. As for his pregnant little stepmother, also a Frey, Ramsay intended to use her for the hunt, as soon as this snow cleared out some. It would be so amusing to see Fat Walda bouncing through the woods, but the chase was not apt to be a long one. His bitches would rip that tender bit out of her belly quick enough; they'd like that. *Mayhaps I'll put her corpse down with Manderly for company.*

"Now," Lord Roose said. "About this latest folly of yours. You will desist from it immediately and return Wyman Manderly to his rooms. I shall have to think of some explanation for his injuries, no thanks to you. Then you will make yourself useful in some fashion, whether it is leading a party down into the crypts to sniff out Rayder, or –"

"The crypts?" Ramsay was still more annoyed. "What makes you think he'll bloody be there?"

"Because," Lord Roose said, "when he was here, he masqueraded under the alias of 'Abel,' which if I assume correctly, was an anagram for 'Bael.' There is a story of Bael the Bard, which I do not expect you to know, but the long and the short is that Bael and the daughter of Winterfell that he kidnapped hid in the crypts for years. It's just the sort of low cunning that would appeal to the wildling mind. And besides, no search of the castle can be considered complete until it has included the crypts."

"Search them yourself, if you're so fucking sure he's down there."

"I do not recall volunteering. I recall informing you to do it. If that is not to your liking, you will alternately lead the war bands out to capture any wildling stragglers who escaped. As well, I expect you to provide a conclusive answer as to whether you have bungled the Baratheons as badly as it looks like."

"It was Stannis! It was bloody Stannis! That's who it looked like!"

"Appearances can be deceiving. So, then. Which will it be?"

"I'll show you what it bloody will be." This wasn't quite how Ramsay had envisioned it, but he wasn't about to let the opportunity pass him by. Without another word he lunged, and had just gotten his hands in a very satisfying grip around his father's neck, when he was brought up short by the kiss of steel.

"That," said Roose Bolton, sounding aggrieved, "was foolish of you, Ramsay. Extremely foolish.
You've recently become more of a liability than even I anticipated, and I do have quite enough pride to resent the shame you have brought upon House Bolton. The day I raped your mother was the day I – 

"Too late!" Ramsay snarled. "You already legitimized me! There's no way to turn me bastard again, old man!"

"Yes," Lord Roose said chillingly, "and how acutely I regret it. You've become a mad dog, Ramsay, and mad dogs are destroyed for the benefit of themselves and everyone around them. Alas for the taboo of kinslaying that holds my hand in check, otherwise I'd have done so long ago. But there will come a day when I will most ardently desire to make peace, and you shall be the perfect scapegoat to hand over as proof of my sincerity."

Ramsay spat at him. "You'll be dead long before that day ever dawns. I'll kill you."

"Yes," Lord Roose said again, a queer little smile flickering up his lips. "You'll try, at least. As you just did. Now get yourself out. I sicken from looking at you."

Massively tempted to give his neck a wrench instead, Ramsay nonetheless let go and stormed out. Regret me, do you? As if there had been any doubt before, but Lord Roose had just sealed his own fate with those words. You won't always be so quick with that knife. And battle is dangerous. Not to mention that other little plot he had in reserve, just in case.

Ramsay's preoccupation saw him almost all the way back to the dungeons, and later he would wonder what he might have discovered, if he had been less distracted. As it was, he became aware of something out of place, and slowed, still scowling. The quiet was unusual; Manderly should be moaning and groaning at least a bit, and if not, he was going to be eminently displeased with Damon, Skinner, and Sour Alyn for failing to do their jobs properly in his absence. To bugger with everything and anything his father said; Manderly was going to scream until he pissed himself, and then until he –

Ramsay rounded the corner – and stopped short.

There was blood, all right, but not the way he'd expected. His three men-at-arms were sprawled out, slashed throats gaping, a look of affronted surprise still frozen in Damon's eyes. Only Sour Alyn had any sort of steel in hand: the pliers with which they'd been prying out Manderly's teeth. Skinner was facedown as if he'd fallen there, and the rack formerly containing the Lamprey Lord was empty. The bonds were also cut through, clearly by a knife, and a trail of blood and fluid spattered the ground. Ramsay immediately ran along it, but it dead-ended in a stone wall.

He stood there staring at it, then exploded. "Fuck you!" he roared, and kicked it, achieving nothing of measurable use. He whirled around and raged back down to the three corpses, threw himself to his knees beside Damon, and began to stab him, over and over. The dead meat absorbed the blade with inoffensive slurps, which provoked Ramsay still further. He ripped Damon up from the floor, snatched Skinner's knife from his belt, and took his face off. Then he crumpled the bloody flesh into a ball and flung it at the wall, as hard as he could. "Fucking hell! Fucking damning bleeding hell!"

For the first time in his life, Ramsay felt an unformed, nascent fear. The ghost in Winterfell, he thought, then immediately pushed it away, furious with himself for ever entertaining such claptrap. There were no ghosts; whoever was responsible for this was very much alive. But not for much longer.

Nonetheless, with this and the recent threat to his life made by his bloody father, it seemed wise not
to linger down here by himself, with only the dead for company. Ramsay got to his feet and stalked back to the stairs, and emerged aboveground still as furious as ever. *I wish it would stop the damned snowing.* But if not, there was no way he intended to oblige Lord Roose's order to hunt down the escaped wildlings. *What do I care about them? Sheep-fuckers, the lot. And he'd be just as pleased if I never came back.*

No. He had a better plan.

Ramsay changed course and made for the armory. Before returning to Winterfell for his wedding, he had done a certain amount of thinking about how he had failed to properly bring down the castle, the last time he'd sacked it. He'd burned as much of it as he could, but it was stone, and too strongly built. His first trap *had* worked with moderate success; he was sure that the perpetrators were still in the castle somewhere. And once he set *this* little spark, all the rats in the rushes would be emphatically flushed out. *Then the only one of us going down to the crypts will be my own beloved father.*

Ramsay opened the armory door and brushed past the empty shelves; every scrap of even barely usable steel had long since been claimed. The forge was long since disused, cobwebs crawling over the anvil and the windows broken with rocks. Drifts of snow had swirled in to pile on the floor, but behind the heavy sandbags, his cache of niter was still intact.

Ramsay stood just looking it at all, delighting in its sheer destructive power. It had been no small bother to get it up from the Barrowlands; Saltspear and Flint's Finger had the best available deposits in the north. Supposedly there was an even finer quality to be found in the Dornish Marches, but Dorne was too fucking far away and this would serve his purposes just as well. But Lady Barbrey Dustin, for all her suspicions and sourness and evil looks at him – why yes, he *had* killed her precious nephew, his own half-brother Domerice, and he'd do the same to her ladyship if it pleased him – had repaid him more than she could ever imagine, by mentioning this. *She might never have done so if she knew that I was listening.* What with her tiresome grudge against the Starks, she ought to be glad of it.

Ramsay ran a loving finger down one of the barrels, then turned and went out, shouting for his remaining men-at-arms. These were merely loyal to House Bolton in general, none of his special boys, but they would serve for the purpose at hand. He had to tell the numskulls not to jostle it too much; at least with all this snow, there was not much worry of it going up accidentally, but it was best to be sure.

On his instruction, the men-at-arms planted the barrels all along the outer and inner curtain walls, in the bailey, outside the Great Hall, and several lengths down into the crypts. Ramsay was briefly tempted to order them to put one in his father's bedchamber as well, but seeing it there would certainly tip Lord Roose off beforehand. *And I have a longer end in mind for him.* He touched Skinner's knife.

When the placement was finished, the barrels were all carefully concealed, and lengths of twisted, oiled hemp were laid from one to the next. They would need almost hourly checking, so long as the snow kept up, but while they were waiting for the Baratheon army to attack them, there wouldn't be much else to do. *Time to see how much you really like fire, my lord.*

Twilight was falling by the time all was prepared. They must have had at least an inkling of what was in those barrels, but they had been well-trained; nobody said a word. Supper was an understated affair, Ramsay moodily throwing bones to the bitches and the rest of the men trying to pretend they had naught on their minds. At least his father wasn't there, having apparently decided to take his meal privately. *Good. I might be sick myself if I had to listen to Fat Walda squeak about*
names for the babe one more time. It won't live to be named, I'll see to it myself.

When he stepped outdoors afterwards, the snow had almost stopped, and a ghostly moon peered from between layers of frosty clouds. Ramsay turned his face up and grinned. The gods must love me after all. Come now, Stannis, whether you are truth or lie. You know you want to. Come. Order your attack. You'll be amazed how easy it is to get inside the castle. There will be no mistakes this time.

The warhorns woke him in the night.
The Dead Girl

She woke to the strident ruckus of seagulls overhead. For endless moments she merely lay there listening to them, the sound passing through her head and departing without leaving the ghost of meaning behind. She could smell salt and sea breeze, hear the babel of traders' argot, feel the slickness of damp stone and tangled weed, and some part of her whispered harbor. Once the words began to resolve into meaning, and not merely a stream of distant noise, she could understand some of it.

_The Sealord's dead_, one said. _Killed in the night in his own palace, with all his swords about him, how bloody queer is that?_ And another replied, _In these times of war and woe, a man is not safe even within his own walls – but I'd not look far for the culprit. It was that smiling knight, sure as winter. My niece, she's a maid there, she tells me the Sealord turned him down flat. Small wonder he was maddened to murder._

_Braavos_, the dead girl thought. Even that came hard, echoing back to her as if through the constant crash of waves. She was slowly beginning to realize that she still had a body, and a black bitter taste burned in her throat and stomach. But that was not the one she remembered – this rickety hairless two-legged thing. She had been in a cage in a little village square, bound front paw and rear, with a hundred jeering men and cubs surrounding her to point and laugh and throw things. _Wolf bitch. Man-killer. Freak._ And it had grown dark, and the snow came down harder, and she’d tried with all her might to gnaw her chains off, for she knew that if she stayed in here much longer, she would die. But it was useless. She couldn't.

And then he was there. It bedeviled the dead girl beyond belief that here, in her waking body, she could not remember who he was. The wolf had known him when she'd seen him, and the recognition had not been pleasant. But somehow she'd not truly thought he'd meant to hurt her, and she watched as he labored and cursed in the cold night, breaking apart the bars of her cage and using some sort of oil to slip the cuffs off her paws. He stepped back, and she waited for the catch, but none came. Then in acknowledgement, she licked his hand and galloped away into the night.

_Dogs and wolves._ Something, something about it pried at her, but the memory, like the rest of them, had been blown past recall. _He saved me._ The dead girl could not entirely explain her certainty, but she knew that she never would have woken here if the wolf remained in her cage. _That's why I survived when I drank from the fountain_, she realized. It had been an awful gamble, not even made consciously. But since so much of her was preserved in the wolf, she had been saved – and so when the wolf was freed, so was she.

Groggily she reached for her face, fearing what she might find. She had drunk while still wearing her borrowed guise, she recalled, and that was another reason she had risked it – she was not inviting the gift of the Many-Faced God on her true self, but rather on the face and form that she had called Lyanna Snow. Everything had now been stripped from her but who she had always been. _But who is that?_

There was skin beneath her hand, not blood. She touched it fumblingly, finding the nose and the eyes and the mouth. She must have passed as dead convincingly enough for even them, the impresarios of death, to believe it. _But why am I here? Why didn't they take me down into the depths of the House of Black and White, and skin my face off and add it to their legions?_ That must be what happened to all the other acolytes who failed their initiation. _You cannot be faceless, and you know too much of our art to leave. Do you understand what that means?_

Only then did it occur to the girl that they very well might have. That they might have taken
something much more important – that perhaps that was why she could not remember her own name, or what her real face should look like, or why she was in Braavos to begin with. All she remembered were those last frantic moments, knowing there was only one escape, and the burning of the black water as it went down.

She shifted position, painfully. The sounds of the harbor continued above her. Nobody was paying her especial attention; bodies in the canals were not an uncommon sight after a night of bravos challenging each other, and if the Sealord really was dead, the opposing factions would be scheming and throat-cutting to line up their candidate for the succession. It was odd that someone had actually bothered to kill sick old Ferrego Antaryon. He would have died soon enough in his turn, and –

No. No, there was something about that which she had to remember. Everything about her had not been erased – it was only just out of her reach, still inside her wolf, running free in Westeros. *I have to try to slip into her again, I have to.*

She clutched, struggled. It was as painful as if she'd tried to tear herself in half for true, thick and clumsy as clawing into heavy wet wool. For a moment a hazy sensation came to her: running through heavy trees, paws gouging out half a foot of new snow, while the blue eye of the Ice Dragon sparkled coldly overhead. *North. I am going north.* Then the vision disappeared, and she sagged back. After some time spent recuperating, she opened her eyes. Her real eyes.

Sunlight stung them like a spear, and she clapped them shut again at once, only opening them in small increments until she could stand the pain. She was lying on the lower docks of the Ragman's Harbor, where she'd traded often before, and how and whence she had come there was a mystery that would have to wait for later. At least she seemed to be mostly intact, but there was no telling if Jaqen would –

Jaqen. The girl froze as a sudden burst of memory ripped through her. He'd been the one hunting her in the House, the one she'd been trying to escape from when she drank from the fountain. The one who had told her that she had no choice but to die. *He was my friend, I thought he was my friend.* But he had been no one. *Really* no one. The most dangerous of all. Thinking of it made her glance nervously around, but no malevolent magical assassins of nonexistent identity were to be conveniently spotted. Shaky as a newborn foal, she pushed herself to her feet. Then, thinking of something, she knelt back down and peered at her reflection in the grimy green water.

A long, solemn, vaguely horsey face looked back at her. Grey eyes, shaggy unkempt brown hair, a few pimples on the underside of her skinny jaw. Irritated, she popped them. It wasn't a pretty face, really, and it looked more like a boy's than a girl's, but there was something comforting and familiar about it. It would do, until she remembered.

It was even harder to get back up, but she did. She wasn't dressed in the fine garb that Lyanna Snow had worn to the theater at the Orb, but rather a few scraps that looked like a burlap sack. When she stepped on a seam, it tore, and then it dawned on her. *A shroud. I was sewn into a shroud.* Wincing as her bare feet hit the sun-baked cobbles, she began to hobble as fast as she could. She wondered how long she had been dead. It could be the next morning, or a week hence, or months. But she did not think it had been quite that much, if they were still discussing the Sealord's assassination with no mention of a replacement.

She wished she knew where she was going. The House of Black and White was out of the question, as was the Sealord's Palace, and she had no other permanent lodging in Braavos. Captain Terys and his sons were unlikely to be in port, and her only remaining option was to seek out Brusco the mussel-seller and his daughters. But if the Faceless Men discovered her survival and were angered
They wouldn't, the dead girl told herself. Whatever else the Faceless Men might be, they were ruthless about only killing those whose deaths had been prayed for, and their devotion to their calling was absolute. Since she had lived, they might well see it as proof that the Many-Faced God had not accepted her as a servant. And how could she tell their secrets, when she remembered none of them? Try as she might, the entirety of her time there was naught more than a blur. It would have to be one of the inns where she had plied her trade as Blind Beth, the girl decided. There was nothing else.

Nonetheless, even with this decision made, it was no small ordeal to accomplish it. She had no money to pay for passage, and since as much of Braavos was water as it was stone, she had to creep from quay to bridge to covered walkway, sometimes dipping into the canals and swimming when that was the only way. Her relative lack of clothes was an advantage in that case, even though she had to look sharp in the crowded thoroughfares; the gondoliers swore at her in gutter Braavosi as they poled around her. Yet by and large the folk were kindly, and one or two of them even allowed her to ride on their boats for a spell. Sometimes they would ask if she had been hurt, but she could only shake her head and hold her silence. She had no name to give them, not even a false one.

At last, limping and hopping with every step, she reached Pynto's inn and ducked inside. On an ordinary workday evening, it would have been doing only sparse custom, but the shocking news of the Sealord's murder had packed it full to bursting. Pynto and his daughters were overwhelmed trying to pour ale and serve supper, and as she wove through the crowds of gossipers, the dead girl saw her opportunity. "A few coppers," she said, "if I work the night?"

The proprietor looked at her and snorted. "You won't be working in Pynto's tavern in those rags, no. This is a reputable establishment – but it so happens, we could use an extra pair of hands or three. Carella! Run upstairs and grab the waif here one of your frocks, she'll be helping us tonight."

He does not know me. Then again, he would not have – she had come here as Blind Beth, wearing Blind Beth's face, and she did not know herself either. There was something he had said, something about a waif – she should remember, she should. It came in flashes, like beacons from a lighthouse, but she still remained far offshore, in the darkness of the waves.

Carella returned with the dress, and the dead girl hastily shed her rags in the back room, then pulled it on and waded into the thick of things. She poured and carried and cleaned, avoided pinches from a few of the drunke ones, and vaguely recalled that she might have been something similar, a cupbearer perhaps, a long time ago. The work was hard but straightforward, and she got to keep whatever coin the patrons left – and listen to their talk.

"It was the Sealord's visitor," one man insisted. "The Westerosi. Had to be."

"No, it was Fregar. Everyone knows he's tipped to succeed Antaryon, he just decided to hasten it. Wouldn't be the first time, or the dozenth."

"Be that as it well may," a third voice interrupted, "they've taken Antaryon's courtesan in for questioning. The Summer Wench, something like that."

"Summer Maid, fool."

"Someone female, that's the point. Rumor has it – " the man glanced around and lowered his voice – "rumor has it she sicced a Faceless Man on the poor old duffer."
"Volentin, the First Sword, he swears he didn't let no man near the Sealord."

No man, the dead girl thought. Somehow that seemed significant.

"I'd wonder what that would do to the courtesan trade, I would," said another. "No man wants to spend his life's savings to bed a woman, even one such as that, then fear that she'd turn around and send one of those demons after him."

"Please, friend. Not so loudly."

"What else would you call them? They steal souls so well as faces, they only worship death, and they know a dozen different ways to do you in without breaking a sweat. They've long been part of Braavos, it's true, and no sane man would risk going after them, but with this evil festering in our midst for gods' time... there's only one way to bring it out."

"And that is what, Isaveus?"

"The same it's been, for all of man's days." The speaker paused pregnantly. "Fire. Fire and blood."

"Oh, don't tell me you're in with those mad fables – "

"They're not mad, and they're far from fables – "

Voices were being raised. Other patrons were looking around, and Pynto, the old pirate who relished a good dust-up, put down his tray and rolled up his sleeves. But then, just as everyone was preparing to choose up sides and get into it in earnest, the door banged open, bringing with it a gust of the rainy evening and a tall fair-haired stranger who, the dead girl knew at once but could not pin down how or where, was no stranger at all.

"At your ease, goodfolk," the newcomer said, in accented Braavosi. This was not uncommon; Braavos, a port city and center of trade, was richly diverse, and the low register of the language, which he spoke, had acquired a whole mongrel host of inflections, conjugations, and vocabulary. But from his coloring and his pronunciation, he could only be from the Seven Kingdoms. He looked no different from any of them – in fact, more disreputable if anything. His cloth was shabby, his long hair windblown, and the horn on his belt old, dirty, and broken. But he held up a coin and twirled it, and one of Pynto's daughters moved to pour him a tankard.

"Thank you." He flashed her a dazzling smile, and she giggled; he clearly considered himself to possess a soft touch with the women. An awkward silence ensued for several moments, nobody quite clear where to pick up after the aborted brawl, until the man finally put down his drink and glanced around at them. "I was told," he said, "a man could find anything he needed in the Ragman's Harbor, if he looked long enough. I've paid call on several taverns already tonight, but I heard as well that Pynto would be of particular use in my project. Would this be true?"

"What project?" said Pynto, looking startled to be called upon.

"Hiring sellswords." The man gave another, drier smile. "You used to be a pirate, or at least that's what the hearsay makes you out as. I'll be very disappointed if you only had a boat and an eye patch."

"I did my fair share of hell-raising in my day," Pynto admitted. "I'm a law-abiding man now, run a business and I'm raising my girls. Why's it you ask?"

"Just so I can answer." Looking around again, the man raised his voice. "I am Ser Justin of House Massey, in service to His Grace Stannis Baratheon, true king of Westeros, and I will not return to
him without twenty thousand swords at my back. Swords for which − " he turned another coin between his fingers, this one stamped with the distinctive sigil of the Iron Bank − "good gold will be paid, and in plenty."

"Strange way to go about it, ser," a voice remarked from the crowd. "If you're trawling the taverns of Ragman's, by night's end you'll have perhaps two dozen decent men, and more drunkards believing themselves heroes than you know what to do with."

Ser Justin grinned. "It's a way to kill some time whilst I wait for Tormo Fregar to win out as Sealord. I have reason to believe he'll be a particular boon to me."

A pause, and then the penny dropped. "You," one of the men said, and it was echoed at large. "You must be the one who came to visit Antaryon just before he died. You must have − "

"I did not," Ser Justin interrupted, apparently sensing where the conversation would be speedily headed otherwise. "And I have an excellent alibi, elsewise can you truly think I'd still be walking the streets as a free man? The old man was already dead by the time I knew anything had happened at all. The Sealord's guards asked me all the questions they could think of, but they had nothing to charge me with."

"The woman. The Summer Maid. Did she do it?"

"Bloody unlikely," Massey answered crisply. "But she is, after all, a woman, and a courtesan to boot. She'll have a deal more difficulty clearing her name."

"So nobody knows who it was?"

"Does it even matter at this point?" Massey leaned back in his chair. "Antaryon was going to die soon as it was. Conveniently, someone slashed his throat to make sure. The matter will be all the rage for a few days before the attention turns to Fregar. You're lucky, goodfolk of Braavos. When King Robert died, Westeros went up in flames."

"Which leads you back to your point."

"Which leads me back to my point, yes," Massey agreed. "I need swords and men, and I have no intention of ending up as a corpse in a gutter, whether from a bravo or anyone else. If anyone believes they may be qualified, I invite them to speak to me on the morrow. I've taken lodgings by the Purple Harbor, in the villa once owned by the Darrys. The one with the red door. I'll see you there."

With that, he polished off the last of his ale, gave another smile to Pynto's daughters, and turned to leave. And the dead girl, knowing only somehow she must remember who she was, who he was, ran after him.

She caught up with him in the street outside, in between the shadows cast by the lamps lining the canals. He jumped when she tugged his cloak, and his hand flashed to the blade he must have hidden carefully beneath it, so as to avoid being challenged by a bravo. Then he caught sight of her and scowled, though he quickly tried to change it to a more pleasant expression. "What is it, girl? It's late."

"You..." She fumbled for the words. "Back there. In Pynto's. You..." She could not ask if he knew her. Even if he did, it was not likely to be in this face. "You're from Westeros. In service of Lord Stannis."

"King Stannis," Massey corrected her. "I need swords, girl, not skinny serving wenches like you.
Hurry back, your father will be missing you."

"Pynto's not my father." She wondered if anyone was her father, or if she had been born anew there, on the docks. "I – I'm from Westeros too." That was all she knew.

"So you are." Ser Justin looked surprised. "You speak the Common Tongue with that accent. What, are you here to tell me that you're actually the daughter of some lord who's intended to pledge for Stannis all this time, but has merely been awaiting the opportune moment?"

"I don't know." She could swear that she'd met him somewhere before. She needed to go back there somehow, she needed to find her wolf and regain her memories, and so long as she remained in Braavos, she was vulnerable to whatever revenge the Faceless Men might decide to exact. I am not safe in Westeros either, she reminded herself, but that was a difficulty to be dealt with later. She took a step closer, into one of the pools of amber light. "I can't remember."

Ser Justin squinted at her. "Can't remember? How on earth would that have happened?"

_I drank at the fountain of forgetfulness_, the girl wanted to say. _I am no one now_. "I don't know."

"Stranger things have happened," the knight allowed. Clearly he wanted to move on, but innate curiosity prompted him to take one last gander at her. "You _do_ have the look of a northerner about you. A Stark, almost. But that wouldn't be, they'll all dead. Or half-wolf, if the tales be true.

_Half-wolf._ Desperate to grasp onto anything that made even the slightest bit of sense, the girl hastened into the opportunity. "I had a wolf once," she said. "I still do."

"A wolf?"

"Aye. She was in a cage, but she's not anymore. Her name was Nymeria." Where the last part had come from the girl could not be sure, but as soon as she said it, she knew that it was true.

"What are you even. . ." Ser Justin's words trailed off. A completely dumbstruck expression began to dawn on his face in its place. "Seven hells," he said. "Seven bloody hells, it can't possibly be."

"What?"

"It _can't_ be. I took the girl to the Wall myself, on King Stannis' orders. There's no way they'd have risked so much if they had even the slightest reason to believe. . . but it was so convenient, and nobody to say otherwise. . ." Ser Justin's mind was galloping far ahead of his mouth as the shocking truth unreeled before him. If only she knew what it was. "Girl," he said. "Come with me."

She hesitated. "Why?"

"Why? Because I think I know who you are, and if I'm right, it blows to pieces everything we thought we knew about the fate of the north, and the battles of my king." Ser Justin took her by the arm. "Don't worry, I won't hurt you. You'll be safe with me. Come on."

Seeing no alternative, she allowed him to steer her down toward a waiting gondola, ready to snatch out his dagger and bury it in his belly at the first sign of unseemliness. He paid the man, and they moved out into the dark swift current of the canal, the lights gliding by. _Braavos at night is beautiful_, she thought, and then, _I have done this before_. Recently. But when?

It did not seem to be that long later when they fetched up at a private pier. She wondered if Pynto had noticed she had fled, had suspected the worst of her, that she was some spy or sneak. _I never collected my wages_. But she still had that faint, disturbing sense of circularity. There was one other
person she needed to speak with, at once, though she could not for the life of her have explained
why.

"Where's the Summer Maid?" she insisted, as Ser Justin offered her a hand out.

"Safe," he said. "For now. Why do you care, my lady?"

"My lady?" She frowned.

"Believe me, it's true. Come on." He made to lead her up toward the villa, but she dug in her heels.

"Come, girl," he said, somewhat less patiently. "I'm not going to let you see her, be sensible. The
woman is accused of arranging murder."

"Back in Pynto's, you said it didn't matter."

"Not to me. And it shouldn't to you. You're safe now, you're safe with me. Don't throw it away."

She crossed her arms. "You have to tell me who I am."

Ser Justin stared at her, then his mouth twitched. She had time to hear the sheer ludicrousness of
her request echoing back at her, but was determined not to give in so quickly to this stranger.
"You're someone very important," he said, "and for the life of me I can't understand what you're
doing here, but you're stubborn enough that you must indeed be who I think. Now –"

"Where's the Summer Maid?"

"If I tell you, will you leave off this folly and come along like a good girl?"

"I'm not a good girl." That was another truth that had become clear in the speaking. "But you can
tell me."

Ser Justin sighed, sounding aggravated. "She's here," he said. "In the house. I managed to talk the
Sealord's guards into releasing her to me, said I'd keep her under polite confinement until they'd
turfed up a few more details. It will be hard to press a case against her one way or the other –
they'll not risk public outrage for hurting a courtesan, especially on such scant evidence. I don't
think the woman murdered Antaryon by her own hand, but she certainly didn't mind it much. All
the better for me, I won't complain. And see if there's any way to help her get off. She's done me a
great favor."

"Why?"

"You're asking too many questions." He took her by the arm again.

The dead girl squirreled free. Fast as a snake, some distant shred of her murmured, and it was so.
She twisted away from his lunge. Then she was running, pelting away through the immaculately
kept grounds, jumping a low stone wall and hurtling down a maze of airy corridors, thinking again
that she must have run like this somewhere else. But this was just a villa with lemon trees and a red
door and it was something and it was everything and she had to run faster.

Behind her, she could hear Ser Justin vainly attempting to give pursuit, but he was a big man,
strong and broad but not fleet of foot, and she was a shadow one among many. He was swearing
and shouting at her to stop being a little fool, but his voice grew fainter and fainter as she kept
running. Yet he would catch up to her eventually; the villa was walled in. I must find the Summer
Maid before that happens.
Panting, the girl finally skidded to a halt in one of the corridors. Old memory told her to pay close attention, to look with her eyes and listen with her ears. And before her, she saw a door, another red door, and briefly wondered if she had woken at all, or if this was all a dream and she still lay crumpled on the docks, a soulless and abandoned shell.

She put a hand on the door latch. It opened.

Inside, the room was cool and mint-scented. Moonlight speared through a latticed window, and it was very dark in the spaces between. Briefly she thought she might be blind again; she remembered another bitter taste on her tongue, and the vision it had taken from her. Everything I drank there was meant to steal me away from myself. But she stretched out her hands and kept moving forward. Someone is here.

"Girl," a soft voice said, very nearby. "What have you done?"

Once more she screamed to a halt, heart starting to race, knowing those words, knowing that question. But after the panicked jolt, she realized that it was not Jaqen who had spoken, but a woman.

"I don't know," she said. "What have I done?"

There was a long sigh, slow and fraught with pain. Then an elegant hand struck a light, and as a flame blossomed out, the girl looked onto the face of the captive courtesan.

It had to be the Summer Maid, her dark hair undone and coming down around her shoulders. There were lines under her eyes and she wore no cosmetics or jewelry; the mask of ravishing, mysterious enchantment that hung around all the courtesans had cracked, dropped on the floor like a broken porcelain plate. She wore a gown of rich dark blue silk, but it was torn and stained.

"You are the one, are you not?" the Summer Maid said. "Your face is different, true, but their foul taste still clings to you, and I greatly doubt there is more than one stripling girl in service at the House of Black and White. Well, you have done what I bid you, and now we will both be the ones to suffer for it. That is the lot of women in this life. To be used and discarded and torn apart, whenever they should presume to rise above their station."

The dead girl blinked. All it once it made her wonder if the Summer Maid had thought that becoming a courtesan was the only way to gain power on whoever it was that had hurt her. A woman who men will give their life's savings to bed, who can bewitch them with her beauty, and then send a Faceless Man after them, if she should so desire. It must be a raw and carnal and beautiful and terrible revenge indeed. And the only question on the girl's lips, bursting, overflowing out of her, was not who she was, but –

"Who?" she whispered. "My lady... who are you?"

The silence was living, breathing, all-consuming, and in the far distance she thought she heard glass breaking. Somewhere in this city men dream of glory, and another one still hunts for me. And in Westeros, near and yet so far, a wolf still ran north.

Then at last, the Summer Maid spoke. Her voice sounded quiet, rusty, almost disused, as if she was reaching into the depths of grief and shame and pain. The word fell into the silence like a stone. Just one word, just a name, just a simple name.

"Tysha," the courtesan breathed. "Tysha."
The third, terrible horn blast was still hanging in the air when Val and Alysane pulled down the last bar on the door and ran out of the King's Tower into the courtyard. As a result of the crows' constant exertion, the snow here was only ankle-deep, but even Val, the daughter of the wild, to whom summer, warmth, and the south were only dreams and stories, felt the cold take her broadside. It was a queer wrong cold, seemed to slick her very bones with ice, and neither stars nor moon were visible in the vast black firmament overhead. She wanted it to be a mistake, she prayed for it to be a mistake, but every instinct was confirming what the horns had already told her. Gods be good. Gods be good.

Doors were opening on all sides, spilling black brothers outside and into the winch cage – orders were bellowed, torches lit, and steel snatched. You could say this for the crows, they were admirably unencumbered by original thoughts. When summoned to muster and battle with their order's most ancient and dread foe, they obeyed without a flinch. Or mayhaps that was because Lord Snow had sent all the halfway intelligent ones away, and those that remained were too stupid to know what awaited them.

Val would not have blamed any brother for being scared spitless. Her knees felt watery, and her heart was going like a kettle-drum. Her only weapon was the bone knife – did she truly think she would climb to the top of the Wall with the crows, and help them rain fire arrows down on the enemy below? The Others completely aside, she would be in more danger up there; they might well do to her as she'd thought of doing to the monster, and throw her into the snows as a sacrifice. Even the most stalwartly godless of men would lose his convictions in moments like these. And if it came to hand-to-hand fighting, they were every one of them dead and damned, and the rest of the kneelers' kingdom to boot.

Nonetheless, Val would throw herself over the edge sooner than meekly return to her prison and sit and wait. She was no sharpshooter, but she could bend a bow passing well, and that was all that was necessary. They need every breathing soul they have.

"Come on!" Val shouted at her companion, and the two women, slipping and skidding in the snow, pelted across the bailey. Val had no doubts about Alysane's ability to fight; she was a Mormont of Bear Island, almost as good as one of the free folk. As for the girl who wasn't Lady Arya, and the monster and his wet nurses... well, they already knew what was nigh if they had to defend them in person.

Val did not want to think about that. She and Alysane reached the armory, which hadn't been properly stocked in days – queen's men, wildlings, and crows alike were sleeping with their steel. But among the dim warrens, there were still a few tattered black cloaks, and a pile of long-hafted axes, which would not be of appreciable use atop the Wall. Still, it was better than nothing, and Val, the taller of the two, fetched down a pair and ordered Alysane to prospect about for bows. But the She-Bear needed no telling; she was already on her hands and knees, in search of any the black brothers might have overlooked on the lower shelves. While she was hunting, Val braided her hair out of her face, tucked her skirt into her girdle and laced up a pair of waxed-leather braies and boots. Then with only a moment of instinctual revulsion, she grabbed a black cloak and shrugged it on. The wool was good weave, lined with fur, double-thick and resistant to wind and water, and it had more purposes than just warmth.

"Here," Alysane said, as Val was casting madly about in search of gloves. "Take these. And this." She held up what was unmistakably a wildling's bow, left there no doubt in the chaotic business of
getting the lot of them through the Wall.

Val accepted the familiar weapon with gratitude, as well as the threadbare gauntlets Alysane had also located. She had just tied the hood of the cloak under her chin, and swung the half-full quiver onto her shoulder, when an aghast voice behind them said, "What in the name of the gods are you doing?"

Swearing under her breath, Val spun around. They had in fact been caught, and by the worst imaginable party. Bowen Marsh, his normally ruddy face gone sickly white, was staring at them from the doorway, apparently at a loss for words.

"I would think it's obvious what we're doing," Alysane cut in, as Val opened her mouth to make a heated reply. "The same you should be doing. Get out there and fight. Don't be standing in here counting up how much you still have left."

"Are you mad?" Marsh did not appear to have heard a word she'd said. "I need everything I have for my men, I can't be minding two women! Get back inside and take shelter with Queen Selyse, and don't do something you'll regret. I am the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, and that is an order!"

Alysane stared at him for a long, mulish moment. It was plain she was thinking exactly what Val was: that riding out the battle with Selyse Baratheon might be worse than being gotten by the Others. Then she said, "You need all you have for the Watch?"

"Yes, I bloody do!" Marsh was getting agitated. "Now take that off, for the gods' sake, do the duty you were ordered and either go to the queen or guard Lady Arya. What can you possibly know about — "

"My lord uncle was the Old Bear," said Alysane Mormont. "I am the north and the Watch and the wild so much as he was. Lady Val. Hand me that black cloak there."

Surprised, Val did so. She expected Alysane to merely put it on and see how much Marsh liked arguing to the business end of a longaxe – at least, that was what she would have done. But the She-Bear donned it carefully and reverently, then knelt.

"Hear my words, and bear witness to my vow," she said, her voice echoing in the deserted armory. "Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It will not end until my death. I shall take no husband, hold no lands, bear no more 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."

The silence resounded thunderously after she had finished. Marsh appeared to be totally speechless. Finally he managed, "Are you... women can't..."

"I know the tales of Danny Flint." Alysane rose to her feet. "And of Night's King, and all the rest. And of the Long Night too. Get out of my way, m'lord."

Marsh looked like a sparrow in a serpent's eye. If he hadn't been so determinedly oblivious, and if he hadn't murdered Lord Snow, Val might almost have felt sorry for him. Instead, she shouldered him aside and emerged into the night.

The last carload of black brothers were just about to bang shut the winch door and start the ascent.
Alysane broke into a run, and Val followed her. They squeezed in just in the nick of time. Someone was praying to the Mother in a hoarse panicky voice, and another's garlicky breath bathed Val's face as the chain jerked and shuddered into motion. The ground fell away beneath them, and each grating rotation brought them closer to the top, and whatever waited there.

The wallwalk was alive with shouts and torches. As they piled out, Val noticed a few other wildlings, hauling out barrels of pitch and running from crenel to crenel. Some mercifully clear-headed individual had organized the brothers into battalions, each armed with a longbow; all Lord Snow's insistence on their practice would not go wasted. Val felt an oblique pride in his foresight.

"Notch. Draw. Loose." Flaming arrows hissed into the falling snow on either side. Oil-soaked rags were tied around the shafts just behind the head, and a few of the crows were solely responsible for keeping the brands lit to kindle them. Val followed Alysane to a spot right on the brink, on the first row behind the snow walls, looked down –

And saw them.

Gods have mercy. She wished at that moment that the old gods had some prayers like the fancy formal ones of the Seven and the red god, just so she could utter them. What she glimpsed amassing before the Wall was nothing short of a nightmare made flesh, the Great Other unleashed. Thousands on thousands of rippling white silken things, eyes that burned like blue coals, and icy blades that reaved through darkness and flame alike. There seemed to be no end of them. Those that had reached the foot had already begun to climb.

"Notch."

Val reached into her quiver and fitted the first arrow. She felt as if she was moving very slowly, almost dreamily.

"Draw."

Val pulled the string back to her ear. A crow with a brand lit the arrowhead.

"Loose."

Another shivering hiss, and the arrows flew like vengeance. It seems as if the stars themselves are falling. They soared down and scattered among the crawling white shapes, and the eerie silence in which the Others tumbled was more frightening than if they'd screamed. Men would have screamed. For a fleeting instant Val thought of her late lover Jarl, what must have gone through his mind as his stakes came loose and the slabs of ice rumbled down to take him out. She thought of what it had been to watch the battle from the other side of the Wall, as crows who'd stood exactly where she was standing now had rained down barrels and burning oil and rocks and spears and arrows on the free folk swarming below. And now we brace together. Shoulder to shoulder.

Dimly Val caught sight of Leathers, bawling orders in the Old Tongue to a flank of jittery young wildlings, Lord Snow's hostages. Suddenly it occurred to her to wonder, no matter how strange it sounded, just why they were bothering to fight the Others, for every legend had always told her that they could not pass the Wall. As she reached for the next arrow, lit it, notched it, drew it, loosed, Val saw her sister in her mind's eye. In labor with the babe that would take her life, the babe that had gone safely south with Gilly and Fat Sam. But once the Wall is fallen, what will stop the Others?

It was not the true Horn of Joramun we found. Only a bluff, a lie, a trick. Val notched, drew, loosed. Her fingers were freezing even through the gloves, stiff and cramped. The gods only knew
what ills they'd brought on themselves, digging in the deepest and most remote regions of the
Frostfangs, valleys that had never known a human foot. Opening graves and releasing a thousand
unquiet shades into the world. It may be they are marching against us even now. They might have
been her friends in life, those with whom she'd shared food or fire, or her sleeping skins of a time.
Among the free folk it was no shame to come together, to couple, to while away the long cold
nights. She had not lain with a man since Jarl, yet had not much missed it. All the kneelers would
have fucked her as they pleaded for her pretty face and what they thought they owned of her. Now
it mattered nothing.

Val lost track of how long she shot. Her first quiver ran out, but someone replaced it with another.
The Others kept climbing, and the snow fell so thick and fast that it was all they could do to keep a
spark alight. She was no longer aware of anything, no past or present or future. The ice of her
breath encrusted the muffler across her nose and mouth. If she died right here, right now, she may
well remain upright and shooting. We will dismay them. Dawn has to come. Yet Marsh, the bloody
fool, had sealed the way below. There would be no way to run out and retrieve the arrows and
missiles and barrels they'd already spent. And the Others would return the next night, and the next.

Briefly, Val felt one of her old surges of hatred for King Stannis. Since he had broken the free
folk's back, there was no line of defense remaining against the Others save for the Night's Watch
itself. She tried not to think of the countless blind spots along the length of the Wall, in all the
unmanned castles. Dead things in the snow. Dead things in the water. Yet still, this gang of
cripples and idiots and savages and women, they were holding, they were holding –

Val did not know if she heard the first man die, or merely sensed it. There was a choked gargle
near at hand, and then a crow was pawing confusedly at the ice spike embedded in his chest. Then
the air was full of exploding shards, one raking Val across the cheek so deep that she felt the skin
tear away, and she looked into the dead opaque eyes not ten yards from hers, and knew.

Wights. Bloody, bloody hell. The Others themselves could not pass the Wall; there was something
intrinsic in their nature that the spells within it repelled. That part was truth. But wights were
merely dumb dead flesh, could cross like any mortal man. And there were hundreds of them,
thousands, as the Others lifted them up and up and up. Gods. Be. Good.

The first of the necrotic things stumbled onto the wallwalk.

"To arms, men of the Watch! To arms!"

There was a scraping rasp as the crows drew their blades all at once. Val unslung the axe, though
she barely knew why. No, no. If they met the wights like this, they'd be slaughtered.

There was another whistling sigh and shattering explosion. More frozen spears bladed the night,
and suddenly black brothers were going down on every side, stumbling to a knee, blood gushing
from the splinters in throat or chest or stomach. Steel rasped and screeched, jarring against the
unholy milkglass weapons of the enemy. Steel sobbed as it broke and failed. Men cursed and
screamed and died in the Common Tongue and the Old alike, but Val still felt almost numb,
trancelike. Then a wight was on her, coming out of nowhere, hewing with a hatchet that had
certainly been wildling-made in its life. The refugees of Hardhome. She wondered how many of
them were coming across the Wall now in silent vengeance, to make the crows and Bowen Marsh
pay for their willful ignorance.

She hauled and hacked away with the longaxe, desperately keeping the dead fingers from closing
around her throat. The blade made the wrong noise when it buried in the pale white flesh, a
hideous wet squelch, the ruin of rotted tendons and bones showing in its wake. It was bigger than
her, and stronger. It was backing her up against a snow merlon, soon there would be no escape but
And then another contrail of fire split the night, and the wight crashed in a heap of flailing limbs, as Alysane Mormont wrenched her burning blade out of its back. The fire took it like greased paper; it turned to an inferno, hissing and steaming the great blocks of ice. Other wights were down and burning, but more were shambling over every instant.

"Retreat!" The voice of the commander shattered the chaos. "Into the cage, get down, get down, it's lost, get down! Hold the castle, fire the perimeter! Down!"

Those of the black brothers who still had enough of their limbs to obey did so, scrambling for the winch cage in such numbers that they almost overloaded it. Val knew that they would not live to see its return journey, so she seized hold of Alysane's hand – the She-Bear still fighting off another wight with the other – and the two women threw themselves onto the half-finished stair. It switched seven hundred feet down the icy face of the Wall to the ground, vertiginous even in daylight, and almost unthinkable under the conditions in which they now attempted it.

Val got to her hands and knees and crawled. Her fingers slipped out over empty air more than once, she had to jump from one section to the next. There were men coming behind her, but living or dead she did not know, and slowly, agonizingly slowly, Castle Black petered into sight below. She could hear the distant sound of Wun Wun roaring from under Hardin's Tower. The giant was wasted this side of the Wall, but might be their savior if the unthinkable happened. No, that will not, it will not. Daring a glance above her, Val could see nothing but flames and blundering black figures. The screams were ungodly.

The ground came up at her so suddenly that she fell the last ten feet headlong, and barely had enough time to curl herself into a ball and roll. There was a thump and a plume of snow as Alysane hit beside her, and they stumbled to their feet, dizzzy and gasping. Looking up, they could see that their decision to avoid the cage had in fact saved their lives. Wights were crawling down the winch chain, thrusting their pale hands through the bars, breaking the necks of the men inside, so that it would be naught but corpses when they reached the bottom. And then those corpses will rise.

"If I die," Val panted to Alysane, "burn me. At once, burn me."

"So I will." The She-Bear was staring up at the slaughter above, mesmerized. "But you realize we're all going to die, don't you?"

Yes. Of course she did.

"It won't be long until the wights make it to the bottom." Alysane wiped the snow out of her face. "You get Wun Wun out of his lair. Do it, now."

Val nodded once, put her head down, and ran. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see – of all the bloody well-meant heroes – Satin the squire, the boy whore, hefting a crossbow from where he was perched on the stairs and taking out the wights assaulting the cage, one by one. But their little flames were useless, so useless, and now they would –

And then Val spotted Melisandre.

The red priestess emerged from the King's Tower, her stripling squire Devan Seaworth racing after her. She walked at a brisk but unhurried pace, as if she was out for a morning constitutional, and the ruby at her throat glowed incandescently, throwing dazzling refractions across the snow. The look on her face was fierce, almost exultant – yet then again it would be, for this was the very culmination of her moment, the battle she had whispered about, foretold before the nightfires every
evenfall as she prophesied of daggers in the dark and blood on the snow, a hero come forth with a blazing sword.

More of the crows, seeing the fate that had befallen their fellows in the cage, had decided to risk the same path down as Val and Alysane. The wights were hard behind them, though, and their descent seemed certain to end in utter calamity. Until Melisandre began to sing. Her voice was rich and sweet, the words in what must have been the tongue of Asshai. And the shadows stirred, and sniffed, and danced.

The next moment, as Val was fumbling with frost-deadened fingers at the latch on Wun Wun's cage, the shadows were undulating upwards on all sides, spurred on by the blazing figure of the red priestess. A great chunk of ice broke off on the Wall above, slamming into the wights; disembodied parts flew everywhere, ropes of entrails. Val tasted ichor on her lips as she wrenched at the door. Melisandre was shining behind her, burning. The heat pounded on her back, the cold tore at her front.

The latch gave, and Wun Wun needed no further encouragement. He lumbered into the courtyard and met the first wight as it slithered off the winch chain, tearing it in half and launching the torso at its swarming fellows. The bailey was turning into a mess of living and dead and undead, as wights skittered and clawed and fell down off the Wall like a river. Some of them exploded on impact; the rest pawed over them. Some others, with the hoary fragments of their living memory, were making for the gate.

No. Val's heart turned to water. If the wights dug that out – if they opened the way back through –

_The Others cannot pass, the Others cannot pass_ –

The hand-to-hand fighting she'd feared was in full evidence everywhere. She looked around madly for Alysane, but couldn't find her – until the She-Bear exploded out of the throng at the door to the King's Tower, caught Val's eye, and beckoned to her.

Cold hands groped at her as the wildling woman fought across the bailey toward Alysane Mormont, fought with everything that had ever been in her. Hardin's Tower was burning now, a great funeral pyre, and she saw Satin lying with his neck at a strange angle, eyes open and staring at nothing. Two half-disemboweled wights still lay twitching beside him. Ravens were appearing from nowhere, diving from the sky, shrieking.

The door gave, and Alysane and Val toppled through. They snatched up the bars they'd ripped down earlier in the night, and slammed them back in place, undead hands thrusting through the jamb even as they did. Black blood oozed beneath the threshold, and their footsteps sounded like thunder in the stairwell as they ran. Snow sloughed off their hoods and cloaks and piled in dripping trails, and the door crashed behind them. The bars would not hold for long.

Val could hear the monster crying when they reached their rooms. Lady Arya – well, not Lady Arya – for once, was not. She stood in the dark solar in her bloody nightdress, a pale frail ghost, eyes the size of trenchers. She looked at them in mute appeal.

"I'm sorry, child," Alysane said, breathless. "So sorry. But they're coming."

The door crashed again, distant but not distant, in proof of this.

"I'll fight for you to the end. You know that." The She-Bear took better hold of her gory blade. "But . . . go, child. Go. Run up to the queen."
"No." Jeyne Poole remained motionless. "I'll stay with you. You were kind to me. I'll die with you."

"Gods, lass." Alysane stationed herself by the door, back to the girl, as if she could not bear to look. "This is your last chance. Hold fast, and mayhaps some of you will live to see the dawn."

"I don't care." At last, Jeyne sounded almost serene. Then again, how frightening could this be, if half of the tales she told of her marriage to Ramsay Bolton were true? "I'll hold fast here. I'm a northerner too."

"You're a brave girl," Val said. "Both of you." She looked to Alysane. "It's not what I wished to say, but I'll be honored to die alongside you both."

"Be it so." Alysane didn't turn from the door. The heavy slopping footfalls of wights could be heard climbing the stairs.

Val's childhood in the wilderness had left little time for gods. Yet still she prayed now with all her heart, thinking of her sister and the parents she barely remembered, of Jarl, of Mance, of Tormund, even of Lord Snow, all the good men she'd known. And the good women. She threw her shoulders back, and waited for her death as a free soul should: with a smile on her lips, and a song in her heart.

The smell of decay wafted up. The uproar and shouting from the bailey was starting to die down. There must be too few alive to scream. She had wanted the Others to take Lady Melisandre for her lies and deceptions, wanted them to tear her limb from limb, but now she found herself straining for any sight of the red priestess' glow. She could almost say the words herself. The night is dark and full of terrors.

Val planted herself beside Alysane and braced her feet. The terrors were not the only thing there was. I pledge my life and honor. . . the sword in the darkness, 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. Somehow, irrationally, she was. I am at peace now.

Jeyne Poole remained stock still behind them, waiting.

Dead eyes gazed up at them. Dead feet broke into a run. Dead hands reached out. And the wildling and the She-Bear began to fight.

This is the dance I was made for. She would have stuck out like a sore thumb at any southron court, yet some small part of her was sad that she would not live to see one. Only from curiosity. And to meet Dalla and tell her that I had. Val slashed and hammered and hacked. The fire in the hearth had been just enough to light a pair of torches, and she and Alysane thrust them into the wights' faces, smashing rotten teeth.

Out of intellectual inquiry, Val wondered if Bowen Marsh was still shut in the armory, counting until the end. She was past being afraid. She was only fighting, she would die so. The spreading pain in her shoulders made it hard to lift and swing her axe, and she could feel blood and sweat running into her smallclothes. But it was nothing. They were untouchable, they'd be sung of for years to come. Just as sad a song as Danny Flint's. Mance had sung it, sometimes. And now –

Alysane Mormont gave a small, muffled grunt. She sounded almost surprised. Then she slowly went to her knees, touching the ice spear that had driven her through from belly to backbone. Her sword fell from her hand.
Fumbling, the She-Bear picked up her torch and swept it in a fast circle. She grabbed her blade from the floor, but couldn't hold it. Blood was rapidly staining her black cloak, but she managed to take off the head of one of the wights crawling for Jeyne. Then another. "Gods, girl," she panted, more blood frothing on her lips. "Run!"

"No," Jeyne Poole whispered. "I'll be brave. Theon was brave too."

Val intercepted a wight stealing up on Alysane from behind. Standing over her, she kept on battenning them off, as fast as they came. From her knees, Alysane was still fighting, trying to pull the ice shard out and gasping in agony with each wrench. Dead men closed from every side, impervious.

Alysane's breathing was rasping, slowing. "Val. . ."

"Aye?"

The She-Bear looked up at her fiercely. "Here We Stand."

Heartbroken, Val reached down to squeeze Alysane's hand. Neither of them let go, but kept on holding on. This was it. There was no way out. And now our watch is ended.

Alysane shuddered. Val felt the strength slip away from the callused paw still closed so tightly in her own. "No," she begged. "Don't. Don't leave me here with them."

"No fear," Alysane whispered. "Served well. Remember. Burn me. Scatter me to a strong north wind."

"I will." Fire was starting to spring up the walls from where the wights had fallen. This will be a pyre for all of us.

The She-Bear sank down. She was trying to form one last sentence, but could not get it out. Then she smiled, and died as well as she had lived.

Jeyne Poole gave a wail of despair. All was at an end.

And then Val heard the horn.
It would have been faster for them both to fly. Khal Jhaqo's bloodriders were still hot on their trail, and there were countless leagues of rugged country between them and any reliable shelter or succor. Dany did not intend to venture remotely near the crones and broken gods of Vaes Dothrak, and there were no other cities in the depths of the Dothraki sea. Jorah said that they were close to its southeastern terminus, where it bordered Lhazar and the sandstone mountains, and they would have to keep striking east with all speed to escape their pursuers.

Thus, it would have been much quicker to wing the miles away on dragonback, together. But Jorah and Drogon were equally mistrustful of having anything to do with each other, and besides, Dany was none so sure that she wanted to permit such intimacy when she still had not entirely forgiven him. If she was in the air and Jorah riding below, on the fine blood-bay stallion they'd managed to steal from Jhaqo's herds, she could always give Drogon the spur, fly off and leave him behind forever. Mayhaps she would do it, too, but not today. Not yet. Of course, the downside to the plan was that on a clear hot day, such as they all were, anyone within a hundred miles could track them at leisure, and Jhaqo's kos were closer than that. With their khal dead, it was their duty only to live long enough to avenge him, then follow him joyously into the night lands.

I should have killed them too. But there had been no time, not with Jhaqo already screaming as he burned. Jorah had sustained a minor wound as he held Jhaqo's two bloodriders off long enough for Dany to mount Drogon and take to the air, but nothing bad enough to slow their escape – though Dany did suspect that it pained him more than he wanted to let on. He will never admit to weakness before me.

She wondered what she'd left behind in that camp. Jhaqo's mighty khalasar would splinter as fast as had her sun-and-stars'; power was always an illusion, but never more so than among the Dothraki. If there was any way to hold them to fealty, she might have led them to Westeros by now, but instead there were merely another dozen khalasars where there had been one, who would roam and fight and decimate each other in turn. It almost made Dany consider if she'd been too hasty in burning Jhaqo. True, the circumstances had not permitted time for reflection, and there had been no doubt that he deserved his fate. But a khal who had become nearly as powerful as Drogo, who'd been willing to travel to Asshai.

It was no matter, Dany told herself. Jhaqo betrayed my sun-and-stars while he lay dying, I could not dishonor his memory by then turning to such a man. Yet in her head, she could hear Ser Jorah's voice, as she had so often heard it after she banished him. Drogo is dead and gone, Princess. You owe him nothing. And once you swore that you would never turn to slaves either.

Angrily Dany shook her head, aware of how absurd it was to be arguing with Jorah in her thoughts when the flesh-and-blood man rode just below her. You told me to do that, she accused him. You told me to make for Slaver's Bay – of course you would, you were a slaver when you fled Ned Stark's justice. You told me to buy Unsullied, you sold me, spied on me, kissed me... you... She shook her head again, dug her heel against Drogon's side, and had to clutch for dear life as the black dragon shot forward as if launched from a catapult. Wind screamed through her hair, the horizon twisted and turned as they rose and plummeted. Dany held on until her knuckles were white, laughing and screaming all at once. She had ridden Drogon long enough to know that he did it for his amusement as much as hers, but also to remind her that this was his domain, that she always touched him at her peril. Three mounts must you ride, one to bed and one to dread and one to love... if Daario was the first and Drogon the second, then who was the third?
Ser Jorah reprimanded her for her carelessness that evening. They had pitched camp near the only fresh water they could find, a spring that had carved out a sandstone cave just large enough for two. Despite which, Dany had insisted Jorah bed down in the grass, and he had not gainsaid her – in that, at least. "My queen, it is too dangerous for you to cavort like that. There are eyes everywhere, and no khalasar rides blind. You have many enemies among the Dothraki, and have just made – "

"A dozen more. I know." Dany knelt in the mud and scooped a handful of the lukewarm, gritty water to her mouth. She had not yet told Jorah where she intended to make – he would undoubtedly be good for a barrage of more objections. Nonetheless, she did not want to visit the feared shadowbinders of the east without at least one stout sword at her back. Mirri Maz Duur told me that she learned her craft there, and if the Asshai'i truly mean me ill, Ser Jorah will not be enough to stop them. But every time she thought of it, the calling grew stronger. When the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. Likely it was but another mad hope, but might she also find the answer to the bloodmagic she had paid for, the cure to her barrenness?

Ser Jorah, meanwhile, was scowling at her. Dany splashed the water on her face and arms, and rose to her feet. "I have told you. I am not your fragile, fainting lady, for you to shelter and coddle. If and when I require your counsel, I will ask for it. I have Ser Barristan, I have not lacked for good advice."

"Is that what Meereen was?" Mormont squatted down, a brutish powerful figure in the gathering dusk, and began to skin a rabbit he'd caught. "Good advice?"

His arrogance still rankled her beyond belief. "By which you mean to say that if I had not been so female and imprudent as to exile you, none of this would have happened?" Dany snapped. "That you alone would have found the Harpy, stopped my dragons from killing children, placated all those who wanted the pits reopened, and known the locusts were poisoned, is that so? Say that is so, Jorah Mormont, and I will name you liar and order you from my sight forever. Do not dare presume that there will be a third chance."

"I do not," he said hoarsely. "The only thing I know for certain is that you would never have had to marry a man who desired to kill you, take your dragons and your crown and everything you have ever stood for, and brazenly rule in your name."

"No man but you, in other words?" Dany was not mollified in the least. "I wed Hizdahr for peace."

"What peace?" her bear asked. "What peace, my queen?"

To disguise the fact that she had no answer for him, Dany turned away. She went to sit by Drogon, who lifted his head and gave her the same look he had when he had allowed Jhaqo to put her into the cage. He blew a languorous gust of smoke from his nostrils, then with a few beats of his wings, lifted off. He looked fiercely primordial against the blue-and-peach shadows of the setting sun, and the chorus of birdsong and small animals in the grass went silent almost immediately. He is not even half grown, if the tales are true.

Dany stood there watching as he banked and soared out of sight. It was wise for him to go; Jhaqo's bloodriders would certainly follow him, and if he led them a merry chase, he could buy her valuable time. Conversely, it also meant that her only protection was Jorah's sword, and she had none at all from Jorah himself. She had so much missed the memory of him, but the man was so contrary, so stubborn, so proud, so... real. My bear. But she was no maiden fair.

"You have always given me good counsel," she said at last. "You always protected me against those who would harm me. From everyone except yourself."
Ser Jorah flinched. Without a word he continued skinning and roasting the rabbit over the small cookfire he'd built, with slightly more attention than necessary. Then when it was dripping with crackling, he held it out to her. "Here. You must be hungry."

Dany hesitated, but she was. She accepted the rabbit and began to gnaw; her stomach was still slightly queasy from Drogon's aerial acrobatics and the last traces of the illness that had claimed her in the plains. Yet there was only the one rabbit, she realized when she'd already eaten most of it, and she tried to quash a flicker of guilt. She tore the last leg off and gave it to Jorah.

He looked at her, startled. *It is the first gift he has received from my hands since before I knew of his treachery.* She hoped he would not make overmuch of it. *She had meant to be more gracious to him, more queenly, but his continued refusal to humble himself vexed her. If you had but begged my forgiveness in Meereen, after you and Selmy took the city for me, I might have pardoned you then. But you would not, you would not see.*

Yet watching him as he ate, the slaver's brand on his cheek was the only thing she could see. And it made her wonder how much lower she wanted him brought, so she could inspect his wounds at leisure and determine whether they were as painful as her own. She did want to know where he'd been and what he'd done. *He has been made a slave, but what sort of chains has he worn?*

"Why did you come here?" It sounded harsh again, too harsh. "Why did you come back?"

He finished the rabbit and tossed the bone into the grass. "Call me a fool."

"You are a fool," Dany told him. "Beyond all doubt. What have you done that you thought I would change my mind?"

He glanced at her again, then away. "I was going to bring you the Imp."

"The Imp?" Dany repeated, voice rising in astonishment. Of all the strange things she had seen across the wide world, all the grotesqueries and menageries both man and beast, the slaves, the pyramids, the harpies, the horses, the weird and the wild and the savage, there was only one man that that name could refer to, a man so infamous that his legend spanned the narrow sea. Jorah had told her about his perversions: Lord Tywin's deformed, debauched dwarf son, a kinslayer and a kingslayer and a rogue, the worst of all the Lannisters if half the tales were true. And her bear, her sweet blind bear, thought that she would welcome the company of such a man as an incentive to forgive him? It was so ludicrous that she could only blurt out, "Why?"

"Tyrion Lannister has had a particularly putrid run of luck recently." Jorah's mouth might have twitched. "His sister the queen offered a lordship and a full pardon to any man, no matter how lowborn or heinous in misdeeds, who brought her his ugly head. If all I wanted was to go home – that would have been sufficient to retire me to Bear Island in peace for the rest of my days – I would have done it."

"Offered a lordship because he killed her son," Dany said, "the boy king, at his own wedding feast. Joffrey Baratheon was a monster and an usurper, and no one grieves his death save his mother, but I still cannot account this to Tyrion's credit."

"Can you not?" Jorah's fists clenched. "Can you understand, then, how fortunate I was to find the Imp in a brothel in Volantis, a chance any exiled, broken man like me would dream of? I could have taken him straight back to King's Landing, I would have had my home, my forgiveness – but I didn't. Can you understand that, my queen? That I came back – that I would have given you the prize – because to go home would have meant nothing without you?"
He was beginning to frighten her. She had never seen her bear angry at her before, not like this. "I do not belong to you," she said weakly. "I am not owed for – "

"No, Daenerys," he said. "Gods, you're not. If all I am to you is a traitor who cannot be redeemed no matter what, I beg of you, make an end. Slit my throat here and now, fly away on your dragon, and be the queen you are meant to be. But for the sake of your vengeance, if nothing else, do not leave me to exist like this."

With that he dropped to his knees, as he had on rescuing her, and laid his knife once more before her feet. "I have wronged you. How many times must I acknowledge it? What other humiliation do you desire of me? When we return to Meereen, you may dress me up as the bear and watch me play out the mummers' farce with the dwarfs. Tyrion and the girl we found, Penny. They joust and ride pigs and dogs. If that is what you want, say so. Laugh. Laugh and be satisfied."

Dany took a step back, unnerved. Yet that jarred something uncomfortably in her memory. *Jousting dwarfs.* The spectacle at the fighting pit, just before Strong Belwas took violently ill from the poisoned locusts. Hizdahr had told her that lions were meant to be unleashed on the dwarfs, and horrified, she had stopped it. The realization that it must have been Tyrion Lannister whose life she had saved – from being torn apart by a lion, the sigil of his House, in the most monumental of all the literally murderous ironies – almost made her choke. "I have no need for jousting dwarfs," Dany said instead. "What role do you then imagine Tyrion could have possibly fulfilled for me?"

"Any one you wished." Still on his knees, Jorah shrugged. "From the state he's in, I doubt he'd have scrupled any more than me. All he wants now is to kill the rest of his family, and his family are those whom you could use to be killed. Not that I trust him a brass dam."

Dany flinched, though whether from the rawness in his voice or the bluntness of his words she did not know. She could indeed see that the path had been clear for Ser Jorah to take the Lannister queen's pension and pardon, to have back the life he'd spent so long hungering after from afar, and yet he had not. *Mayhaps we can never go home again.* In her mind, Dany saw the house with the red door, in Braavos. "Leaving aside the rest," she said, "how on earth would Tyrion Lannister have happened to turn up in a brothel in Volantis? The brothel part I can well understand, given what is whispered of him, but Volantis, somewhat less."

"He told a fable of traveling up the Rhoyne with a motley band – some surly sellsword named Griff, his son, a septa, a maester, and two orphans of the Greenblood. Possibly others, but I can't recall. Our fat friend Magister Illyrio hid him at his mansion in Pentos, apparently, before sending him off with those folk. I think there must be more to them than meets the eye; the dwarf let slip that they've hired the Golden Company."

Dany frowned. The Golden Company had been founded by Aegor Rivers, Bittersteel, who had lost everything in the Blackfyre Rebellions and fled Westeros to keep the rebel cause alive in exile. They regarded all the Targaryen kings after Aegon the Unworthy as usurpers, a fact which did not presently endear them to her. Sellswords would be sellswords, a lesson she had learned bitterly from the Second Sons, but the fact of this unexpected connection unsettled her. "Does the Imp know who they are?" She could suddenly see a use unfolding for him after all. "Aye," Ser Jorah answered grimly, "and he's not saying."

"He will." For a moment Dany considered turning back to Meereen, instead of continuing to
Asshai. But no, she could not. To go forward you must go back. Everything she endeavored to accomplish would turn to mishap and disaster, unless she faced down her fate at last. And then, then she would –

Jorah's stolen horse, which was picketed nearby, pricked up its ears, tossed its head, and pawed the ground.

Jorah himself was instantly on alert. No longer the supplicant, he picked up his knife and came straight to his feet. There were movements in the dark nearby, and Dany's heart stopped. In the distraction of their argument, she had not even stopped to consider that instead of following the dragon as she expected, Jhaqo's bloodriders might well make for the spot where they'd seen it take off instead.

"Quick!" Jorah, plainly wising to the same thing, undid the hobbles, swung astride, and hauled her up pillion behind him. After almost a week of riding on Drogon's scaly bare back, everything about the horse and saddle felt alien to Dany, but she swallowed her protests. She clutched on tight around Jorah's burly chest as he kicked the stallion, and just in time. No sooner had they leapt the stream and galloped into the steppes than a fleet of arrows rattled onto the rocks where they'd just been sitting.

Dany hung on desperately as they careered and swerved through the long, tangled grass. She could hear shouts and curses in Dothraki, the hiss as another fall of arrows hailed down around them, and craned her head back, looking frantically for Drogon's shadow against the horns of the bloody moon. Undisciplined, inchoate, she tried what had always happened almost without her noticing: reaching beyond her own mind, her own skin, searching for him, searching.

The bushes exploded in front of them. Dany screamed, Jorah swore, and he veered the horse away just as the tongues of whips licked out like snakes, followed at once by three of Jhaqo's hard-charging kos. They unslung their arakhs with howls and hoots, and lunged.

Somehow, Jorah got his own longsword out in time. He awkwardly deflected the first blow, badly hampered by the need to protect Dany behind him, the four horses wheeling in a furious, tangled circle. Steel sang over Dany's head, so close that it would have shaved her hair away if it had not already burned. She ducked, struggled once more to reach Drogon, thought she had him, lost him again –

And then suddenly she was the only one on the horse's back, as Jorah vaulted down and came about to plant himself directly in the riders' path. "DAENERYS!" he roared at her. "Ride! Go! Go! Go!"

Is he mad? She recognized two of the kos as the ones who'd wounded him last time; this time, they'd bind him and drag him behind their horses in the dust, as had happened to that wineseller he'd stopped from poisoning her in the Western Market. Which was only necessary since he went tale-bearing to the Usurper that I was carrying Drogo's child. But it was her command that had incinerated Jhaqo, her command that meant they were pursued now. With or without Drogon, I am still a Targaryen. The blood of the dragon does not run.

Instead, she charged.

The three bloodriders were still preoccupied with Jorah. She had not ridden so fast or hard or well since her silver had given her wings for the first time. I am mad, said one voice in her head. Madness and greatness are but two sides of the same coin, said another. And then she smashed into the hindmost rider, whose back was turned to her, at a dead gallop.
He shouted, flailed, and lost his seat, crashing overboard as his *arakh* went flying out of his hand. He rolled over and tried to get back to his feet, but Dany brought the bay around and rode him down. She could feel the stallion's hooves crush bone and split vital organs, saw the dark glistening pool of blood in the moonlight, hear the horrible convulsive gasping noises he made. *I have killed him.* It made her want to exult, and it made her want to weep.

Behind her, Jorah was still hard pressed by the two surviving bloodriders, who had now noted that she was not such a negligible threat after all. "You are as much a monster as the great black one, whore," one of them spat, in Dothraki. "When we stake you up in camp, every frothing wood-hound will mount you high and low, and their seed and your westerlands blood will spew from your naked cunt like piss."

Jorah, who had also understood that, responded by charging him. The bloodrider smiled, jumped from his saddle, and crossed blades with the big knight in midair, flipping his *arakh* from hand to hand and slamming it down. A spray of blood followed, but Dany couldn't tell which of them it came from. Heart in her throat, she edged closer, knowing that she couldn't ride down the *ko* without riding down Jorah, considered if she should, cursed her hesitation, *where was Drogon, gods damn it –*

She had only a split second of warning. The first sign was all the hairs on the back of her neck standing cold, in ancient animal instinct. The second was the abrupt look of panic in the other bloodrider's eyes, as he had started to race toward her. He reined up, screaming something to his partner, still grappling on the ground with Jorah –

And then the next moment Dany was on the ground herself, pain exploding in the small of her back, gasping from where her wind had been thoroughly knocked out of her. She was only conscious of the great shadow that had bounded over her, the stallion fallen and screaming in agony, and the young bloodrider backing up and babbling some invocation in Dothraki, his eyes so wide that she could see their whites.

*Drogon,* she thought for a terrible moment, *Drogon's gone mad* – but it was not. As it skidded around, snarling, she saw instead.

It was a *hrakkar,* the monstrous white lion of the Dothraki sea, like the one her sun-and-stars had hunted, killed, and proudly given her its pelt. It stood as high at the shoulder as a good-sized pony, had claws half a foot long and scything, saber fangs. Dany watched it spring in what felt like slow motion.

The bloodrider fighting with Jorah rolled away and tried to cover his head, screaming. Too late. The *hrakkar* bit into his neck so violently that it almost ripped his head off, and a gush of arterial scarlet dyed the fur on its muzzle. The bloodrider's lips were still moving in agonized prayer when the *hrakkar* flung him aside like a toy.

The last of Jhaqo's *kos* was clearly thinking that running away, and thus leaving his *khal* unavenged, was a far more preferable fate than facing down that beast, the mangled bodies of his fellows lying sprawled and leaking in the grass. If so, he didn't have time to do anything about it. The *hrakkar* gathered its mighty muscled haunches under it, and leapt.

Man and lion soared, beautifully, then came down to earth with a crash. The bloodrider was trying to wrestle his arm between the snarling jaws and his neck, but so precisely had the *hrakkar* judged its pounce that his terrified horse was galloping away, riderless, into the brush. With the stallion mortally wounded, it was Dany's only chance. She put her head down and sprinted, trying to block out the horrible cacophony: groans and screams and roars and squelches. She did not dare look to see if the *hrakkar* was coming for her – dragon, where was her dragon, where was her child –
The horse was still fleeing away from her. She couldn't run fast enough to catch it. Sawgrass and
cordweed tangled around her ankles, and she fell headlong again. She heard an unmistakable roar,
caught a heart-stopping glimpse of a massive white specter, charging toward her – and then heard
Ser Jorah bellow, "BEAST! OVER HERE, BEAST!"

The hrakkar burned to a halt, turned, and took him up on the offer. Dany's heart shriveled in her
chest as she pulled herself up again, muddy and sobbing. She could just see the indistinct shapes of
her bear and the lion, coming to primal grips in the grass – strong, he'd always been so strong, but
no man was that strong. Utterly beyond any semblance of knowing what she was doing, Dany felt
around in the darkness, got hold of a nicely sized rock, ran as close to the fight as she dared, and
hurled it.

The rock – praise the gods, praise the gods – struck the hrakkar hard and squarely between the
eyes, with a sound like a dropped fruit. It rolled off Jorah, leaving him prostrate and bloody on the
ground, and turned back toward Dany with murder in its golden eyes.

She stood frozen, empty-handed. Jorah did not appear to be quite dead, but he wasn't getting up.
His sword lay at least fifteen feet away from her – she'd never reach it in time, never. She waited
for the inevitable. She wanted to close her eyes and pray that it would be over quickly.

And then at last – her mind was not quite her own, was darker and stronger and scaly, alive with
flame and a restless, searching intelligence. She could see herself from above, a girl standing before
the lion – and am I not indeed? – with the bodies of the three dead bloodriders and Jorah as well.
She knew, and she heard, and she answered.

Drogon folded his wings and dove. The hrakkar stood its ground, roaring a challenge, and the
dragon's jaws – Dany's jaws – opened in turn. They closed around the thick ruff of the hrakkar's
mane, and Dany tasted acrid fur and flesh in her mouth, felt the pain as the lion clamped down on
Drogon's vulnerable, leathery wing. Like two titans, the beasts crashed and thundered against each
other, talon against claw, Drogon's barbed tail lashing furiously against the hrakkar's back paws.
Then she wrenched her head back, and spat flame.

The hrakkar yowled in agony, but its fur was too sodden with the blood of Jhaqo's kos to catch.
Snarling, it tightened its grip on Drogon's wing, tearing at the membrane, and Dany, in her own
body, knew a sudden, rising panic. If the dragon was too hurt to fly, she was done for.

Somehow, though, she was still one with him, and she gave him what of her strength she could.
Drogon blew another gust, hot as the seven hells, and the night was seared with black flame.
Blackfyre, she thought inanely. The mud she was lying in felt almost cool. Then the hrakkar was
screaming, sounding almost human, and she remembered nothing more for a very long time.

It was Ser Jorah who finally came to lift her up. He was limping horribly, blood staining the cloth
he'd tied around his slashed left shoulder, and Drogon himself was keening from the pain of his
torn wing. The corpse of the hrakkar was smoking, dawn was turning the eastern sky a pale pearly
grey, and Dany felt as fragile and raw and new as if she'd been reborn there in the darkness.
Without a word she accepted Jorah's hand, then flung her arms around him, buried her face in his
chest, and began to weep.

He held her hard, though the effort of standing upright was clearly excruciating, and did not utter a
word until she was through. He offered her a corner of his tunic to wipe her eyes, and she did. Then
he said only, "Can Drogon still fly?"

"I – don't know." They had to find somewhere to tend their wounds, that much was plain. But she
could not go to Qarth: Xaro Xhoan Daxos had left a bloodstained glove on a pillow before
departing Meereen, indicating that he and his noble Qartheen brethren – the Pureborn, the Thirteen, the Tourmaline Brotherhood, the Ancient Guild of Spicers – had declared war on her. *It may be the first time they have ever stood together.* It had saddened Dany then, and she felt it the more keenly now. *All because I struck off the chains of the slaves, and would not set sail for Westeros when he asked of me.*

"Where is it we make, my queen?" Ser Jorah asked urgently, reading her mind. "Where now?"

*To go forward you must go back.* The choice had not changed, nor the need. If Drogon could still fly, they would simply have to do it, as far and as fast as possible. On dragonback for as long as they could stand it, night and day, over the Red Waste, east to the lands under the shadow, they could make it in perhaps a fortnight.

She lifted her eyes to his, wiping the blood out of her eyes. "Asshai," she said. "We must go to Asshai."

For a moment he did not answer, and she feared that he thought she had lost her mind. Then he nodded once and did not ask questions.

Drogon could in fact still fly, it transpired. Dany crawled onto his back; the *hrakkar* had clawed her, rendering her fully as damaged as the other two, and the wounds throbbed excruciatingly. But she grimaced and settled herself, then beckoned Jorah to sit behind her.

He paused, eyed Drogon with utmost suspicion, then climbed up. He was not immune to the heat emanating from the dragon the way Dany was, would be burned and scabbed from even a few hours' riding, but that could not be helped. He had already taken what supplies they had left from the saddlebags, and he hooked his legs over Drogon's pinions. The dragon huffed and snorted and snapped, but Dany, who had not yet left his mind entirely, calmed him with a touch.

Burdened with the extra weight and his own injury, steaming blood caked on his scales, Drogon flapped into the air. The ground fell away beneath them, the rolling plains of the Dothraki sea turning to nothing more than a blur. And Dany felt her breath or Drogon's, fire and blood, and turned them to the east and struck out for the Shadow.
Sandor

"No swords! No swords!"

That was the first thing Sandor heard in the moments following the revelation, as every one of his old instincts had kicked back in and he was hauling at his longsword, suddenly assailed by memories of his brawl with his brother's men at the crossroads inn – and he even had a Stark girl with him again, but it was the little bird, not the wolf bitch. That thought, along with the pissant innkeeper flapping at his side in a panic, made him hold back when he wanted so badly to do something intemperate. He shoved the blade into its scabbard and bared his teeth at the Arryn men and the Warrior's Sons in the hideous approximation of a smile. "There," he said. "No swords."

"You are still as much a mad dog as ever, Clegane," one of the Arryns said angrily. "The seven hells themselves must not have been enough to contain you. And now you're back to your old villainies, taking the girl and – "

"Fuck your mother, you slack-jawed heap of sheep shit. I never laid a finger on her. From what she's been telling me, that would have been you lot."

That was an utter bluff. The little bird had been as close-mouthed about her time in the Vale as he'd been about his time on the Quiet Isle, but Sandor wagered she hadn't spent it embroidering tapestries and chirping love songs. Though she always chirps love songs, this one. He had seen it in her face: older, harder, haunted, out running by herself like a fool, her and that tale she'd told about killing Ser Shadrich. He had no doubt that she'd done it, but the fact that she'd had to at all, that she'd faced that and everything, that he'd failed to protect her yet again, that whatever had passed between them in that room – whatever in damnation she'd made of it, wittering on about him kissing her, when it really was just the drunken idiocies of a dog – it made him want to hit something, hard and fatally. And there were the wretched buggers, standing right there. It was practically inhumane.

"Lady – Alayne," another of the Arryn men said at last. "We've been searching for you for almost a fortnight. Your lord father has been most concerned. You must have suffered unimaginably, but you're safe now – and unspoiled." His look turned questioning. "Are you not?"

Alayne? Sandor thought suspiciously. It was bloody obvious that not even the little bird would be stupid enough to moonlight in the Vale under her own name, but for anyone who'd seen the girl even in passing... He would have known her anywhere, even with her hair shorn off, and so, he assumed, would they. That little hesitation before "Alayne" told the tale. Gods only know what fables Baelish is feeding them, but they're somewhat smarter than they look. Only somewhat.

As for the rest... he didn't want to think about it. If the girl had been successively wed to the Imp, shut up with that whoremaster Littlefinger, and then abducted by the enterprising Ser Shadrich, she must be more used than Lollys Stokeworth, more scarred than his own ugly face. Sandor had heard all the tales from the Lannister guardsmen as to the horrific fate that had befallen the dwarf's first wife, and there was no way that that creature would have had the decency to keep his breeches laced with such a young, timid, beautiful replacement. Whatever he'd not had, Littlefinger would have taken, as the price for her safety. And Shadrich – What do you think he was doing when she killed him, dog?

Sandor could hear his own voice, sobbing to the wolf bitch as he lay dying on the Trident. I should have fucked her bloody and ripped her heart out before leaving her for that dwarf. If being raped and ruined by a dog was a kinder fate than the one he'd cravenly abandoned her to, then... then...
Preoccupied with his brooding as he was, he almost missed the little bird's answer. "I have not suffered any worse than cold, fright, and hunger," she said, with an odd sidelong glance at him. "Thank you."

The man held out his hand. "Come now. We'll take you home. Just give the word, and the dog dies."

"I'd like to see you try, old man." Sandor rattled his sword in its sheath, sending the innkeeper into a renewed fit of conniptions.

"No!" Sansa blurted. "No, that is not my wish. It is as he said, he never laid a hand on me. But... I cannot go back with you. Not without telling you."

The Arryn man looked impatient, but apparently decided to humor her. "Tell us what, my lady?"

"I..." For a moment, the little bird's courage almost failed her, but she swallowed and drew herself up straight. "It's about Lord Robert," she said. "He... I swear it. The Lord Protector is having him poisoned."

The innkeeper dropped a tankard. The clatter was the only sound.

"Lord Baelish?" From the looks the Arryn men exchanged, Sandor could tell that they didn't find it entirely implausible. "And how would you know that, exactly?"

"You know who I am. I am Lord Robert's... close companion. For... for Lord Baelish's plans. Sweetsleep, he's using sweetsleep, I swear! You have to stop him, you have to defend your lord, ask Maester Colemon or Gretcel or Maddy or any of the maids..."

The Arryn men now seemed to be listening intently, nodding and frowning in apparent concern. But Sandor, who was watching them like a hawk, did not miss the glance they exchanged. He tightened his grip on his sword hilt.

"Is that so, my lady," the man said. "Sweetsleep. And Maester Colemon."

The little bird was nodding eagerly. "Aye, it's so. It started not long after his mother's death, and his mother – Marillion didn't kill her, he never did, it was –"

The rest of her sentence would remain an eternal mystery. For that was when, all at once, the three Arryn men lunged.

Sandor hadn't taken his eyes off them for an instant, and he timed it almost perfectly. Even as their swords were singing from the sheaths, and the innkeeper's heart just about gave out on the spot, so was his, and he met the first blow with a teeth-jarring clang. Savage joy flooded him to the marrow. After so long, after so much doubt and agony and confusion, after the days spent digging graves and the nights dogged by ghosts, this he still understood. This he knew. This was killing, and he had always been good at that.

The inn's few patrons abandoned their breakfasts and fled en masse, screeching like a flock of geese, as Sandor and the three knights cut and battered and hammered their way back and forth across the common room. He was definitely not at the height of his abilities; if he was, he would have already chopped this gang of muttonheads into conveniently steak-sized portions. But it was queerly easier to fight three at once than it was to fight two or one; the trick was to keep those two always crossed up, while he handled business with the third.

The Warrior's Sons had apparently not decided on whose side they were going to intervene. Sandor
was well aware that they loathed him, but hopefully the little bird had let slip enough to cloud their certainty somewhat. And besides, however badly or heretically, he was one of their own. He was not formally godsworn, and in fact had difficulty picturing the High Septon waking up from his faint long enough to accept him as one, but they knew that the Elder Brother had trusted him, and cared for him. He told the other two that if they came across me, they should tell me that it was her. And they did. So much, at least.

Sandor ducked as one of the Arryn knights cut wildly at his face. The last thing he needed was any more scars, but he was lucky that this lot had more piss than prudence. He wrenched his blade up, thought that if the Seven were watching then they were laughing themselves breathless, and took the man's head off. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the little bird blanch. Did you forget what I am, girl? Did you forget what I do? The corpse was down and convulsing, a wash of blood spreading across the innkeeper's nice clean floor, and both the surviving Arryns were redoubling their blows in protest.

Sandor ducked again, but couldn't stop the first one's blade from scything across the top of his left shoulder, taking a long piece of skin with it. Nothing, that's nothing. He grinned ghoulishly and took his revenge in much more lasting fashion. No one could ever argue with three feet of steel through the gut. Only one left to go. The little bastard could just start saying his prayers now, with luck he'd have finished them by the time he went howling off to the Stranger and –

Sandor only caught it in a flash. One of the Warrior's Sons had, smartly, decided that the moment to act was now. He swooped in, got Sansa around the waist, and carried her toward the front door. It opened and shut, swirling snowflakes, and they were gone.

Every other thought in Sandor's head vanished in a trice. He had to let the Arryn bugger go, had to jump over the table they'd overturned and break into a full-out run, ignoring the pandemonium spreading through the inn. He slammed the door back open with his shoulder, spun in all directions, and caught sight of the Son swinging Sansa up onto a horse as she struggled with him. After taking a moment to apologize to the Elder Brother in his head, Sandor charged. The Son turned just in time to see fifteen stone of very, very angry dog launching at him. He snatched out his longsword and just managed to catch Sandor's blow, snow swirling onto their cloaks and hoods. "Are – you – mad?" he panted. "I'm taking the girl to safety – well away from you and Baelish – "

Sandor did not care. He really should have killed that last Arryn man, but there was no time to regret that – though he would later, when the bastard ran back to tattle on them and unleash the Vale on their heads. As for the Sons, he didn't have to kill them. Just prevent them from following long enough.

His foot slipped in the ice. Sansa was screaming something at him, but he didn't hear it. He twisted away from one blow and then another, took a second jarring cut, and bullrushed the smaller man, knocking him flat and dazed in the muddy, snow-torn ground. In the mere instants of time this bought him, Sandor wasted none of it. He hauled Sansa down from the Son's palfrey, threw her over his shoulder like a sack of beans, and sprinted.

Shouts were spreading from house to house. Well, we've blown it to bloody bugger-all. It seemed they would be forced to venture out in the wild after all, though where that entailed was an utter mystery. Their only hope was that the weather would abate as they ventured further south, but the thought of riding back into King's Landing with the little bird in tow was more of a macabre jest than even Sandor could laugh at. He ought to be returning with the Imp's head. Then his bitch sister could make me a lord. Lord Sandor of House Clegane. With Gregor dead, by rights the
house and lands were his, but he'd take a bath in wildfire sooner than setting foot in that cursed place again. And Gregor wasn't dead, which was the problem.

Sansa was beating at his wounded shoulder with both fists, which he did not appreciate but could not tell her to stop. He blasted into the stables. They'd have to leave her horse behind; they could call it favors repaid for all the trouble they'd caused. They just couldn't stay here.

Sandor threw Sansa into a pile of hay, yanked down his tack and saddle, and got the destrier fitted out just in time to see the surviving Arryn and both of the Sons loom up at the stable door, a scatter of civicly minded individuals belting along behind. None of them, however, had any interest in standing their ground as Sandor pulled Sansa up, jumped into the saddle, and kicked the big black warhorse hard enough to make him rear. They thundered out into the narrow, snow-choked wynds, men diving away to both sides like ninepins.

Sandor didn't dare look back. He needed all his wits to deal with Sansa, Stranger, and the snow, kicking up feathery spumes as they plunged and swerved through the cottages, out toward the open country. It still hadn't stopped coming down, but at least there was a lightening in the sodden clouds. Briefly he wondered if he should have just stepped aside and let Sansa be spirited off by the square-jawed, thumpingly righteous rainbow-sword knight; mayhaps she would have liked that better. Then he wondered if he should have just chopped off his own head and had done with it.

He lost track of how long they rode. Stranger was far superior in endurance to the lighter palfreys of the Arryns and the Sons, and while the small figures behind them spasmodically appeared and disappeared, before long they had vanished for good. Even then he didn't dare to stop. With all this fresh snow, they were breaking a trail that a blind man could follow. Their only hope was distance, and speed.

At last, Sandor had to rein in when Stranger started to blow, froth showing on his sawed mouth and his eyes rolling back in his head. If the horse died it would be quicker to just chop off his head, and Sandor had discovered that he didn't have the taste for that, just yet. They had reached a sparse, windblown coppice of trees, nestled in the shadow of snowy foothills, and that would do for shelter right now. Barely remembering how, he nonetheless swung down and offered his hand to the little bird. But instead of taking it, she stared back at him with eyes as blue and cold as the winter sky.

"You..." Her voice was choked, but with rage, not fear. "How could you?"

"How could I what, girl?" he snapped. "Save your life?"

"Do – do the same to me as Ser Shadrich did – grab me and scare me and drag me away! And how could you kill them – I wanted them to go back and save Lord Robert – that was the reason I asked Elder Brother in the first – "

"Seven hells, girl." How could he have forgotten how naïve she was still, so innocent and so bloody high-minded and so young? "You see what happened in that inn back there? That look like a bunch of men eager to go put their necks on the line for a boy? You really think that with winter coming, the folk of the Vale want to be shackled to Lysa Arryn's nurseling brat? You can bet your bloody life that if they knew about it, they'd be down on their knees thanking the gods that Petyr Baelish had the gall to do it. They'll want a man. Aye, they may hate him, but you can bet that when Robert wheezes his last, they'll remember that he poisoned Lord Jon's own flesh and blood, bring him up on charges, and turn him over to your bloody warrior friends. Can't think of anyone who deserves such a double cross more."

"My warrior friends?" Her voice was a hiss. "I thought you were different! I thought you had changed! And then you kill those men and make it impossible for them to – "

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"First rule of survival, little bird. When someone pulls out a sword and charges at you, you'd damn well hope that you have the wits to do the same. Or me. I'll do it for you, if it turns your stomach so much. And we'll have plenty of trouble from the one I didn't have time to kill, mark my words."

"You're awful," Sansa said. Tears were starting in her eyes. "Awful."

"You seem to have forgotten that I always was, girl. I never lied to you. There's no time for weaklings in this world, and sharp steel will always win out over a soft heart. If you'd rather that next time I meekly hand you over to Baelish's minions, say so. It'll save us both a deal of trouble. Or do you remember what I said to you, the part you were so breathlessly repeating back at me? That I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt you? What did you think I bloody well meant?"

Instead of answering, Sansa turned her face away and struggled down from Stranger's back. She floundered off through the thigh-high snowdrifts, to a relatively cleared spot beneath a tree, and sat down, pulling her knees to her chest and the cloak of her hood over her face. She sat so motionless that Sandor almost began to wonder if she had fallen asleep, when he saw her shoulders silently shaking.

Annoyed and guilty all at once, he turned away and tried to occupy himself in leading Stranger under the low-hanging boughs, breaking off the dead growth and trying to build a fire. He might have just acted like an utter bloody ass to her, but at least he didn't intend to let her freeze. Why did she have to cry? The knife was already twisting in his gut. If he considered himself to merit it in the barest measure, he might have asked for her forgiveness, but he knew it was useless. No amount of singing septons and sermons on the Quiet Isle could teach him, or her, the kind of mercy needed to reach each other.

He kept looking edgily over his shoulder as the woods darkened, waiting for the pursuit. Even as it was, it might be wise to sleep a few hours and then press on by moonrise. All around them, the forest had a ghostly, porcelain cast, the shadows dark as ink between the lines of the bare trees. There would be little to eat tonight, and less on the morrow.

It will have to be south. Sandor was still ambivalent, to say the least, about making for King's Landing straightaway. But it would only be suicide to make north, and once they skirted the foothills of the Mountains of the Moon and picked up the Green Fork, the going should get easier. He wished he could think of where the Arryns would expect him to go. Not back to the Quiet Isle, that was bloody certain, but he would be lucky to escape without every knight of the Vale and the Faith hunting him down. So much for being inconspicuous, eh?

He managed to produce a scanty fire from the wet wood, which hissed and smoked and choked as much as it burned, but was sufficient to keep the worst of the cold at bay. He fished some squashed jerky out of his saddlebags and offered it to Sansa, feeling guilty again, but it turned back to anger when she pointedly spurned it. "What? You want to starve?"

She flinched. "Are you going to force me to eat?" she asked, remote.

"What?"

"Ser Shadrich did. Held me down and shoved the squirrel down my throat."

"Ser Shadrich can roast in seven hells. I wouldn't even piss on him as a courtesy." Sandor whittled a stick with his knife and shoved it into the coals. "And besides, I'm not him."

"I couldn't tell." She stared at him across the fire, her eyes red.
Sandor prospected about for something to say that could make the situation better, but, seeing none, gave up again. *Women are the most maddening creatures on the gods' green earth.* Even her. Especially her. Why couldn't she see that he'd done the only thing he could, that he was trying to keep the promise he'd made to her, after so much of his life had been a miserable failure? He'd kept the spirit of his promise to the Elder Brother too, if not quite the letter. But she was different.

Supper, to say the least, concluded awkwardly. Sansa lay down on the far side of the fire, pulling her cloak over her head; the roof of branches above her did passing well at serving as a shelter. But the wind was still biting, and Sandor, after a moment's reflection, added more kindling, then lay down next to her, using his body to break the worst of it. A dog's place was at his mistress's side, after all.

He drifted off eventually, but was pursued by lurid dreams. Half of them ended with him sitting bolt upright with a snort, fumbling for his sword, but the attackers always turned out to be in his imagination. He checked on the little bird, making sure she hadn't frozen solid, and stoked the fire. Thinking of the wolf bitch that he himself had loosed in Maidenpool, he couldn't help but peer twitchily into the woods; it would be just exquisitely ironic if she decided on them for a snack. Or him, rather.

Morning came at last, grey and pale and cold. Sansa stirred, murmured something, and rolled over, almost into him; he moved away quickly, before she could. She rubbed her eyes in a surprisingly childlike gesture that tore at his heart, then sat up.

"Good morrow," he said, deciding it best to find out if she was still wroth with him.

"Good morrow." It was given correctly, but very coldly. Sure enough, she was.

Sandor sighed, thought about apologizing for the lack of breakfast, then decided not to waste his breath; if he got started, he'd never stop. He doused the fire, scuffed snow over it in hopes of hiding what tracks he could, then untied Stranger and lifted Sansa up. She went without a word of complaint, and he climbed up behind her. They had many miles to make, many to go before they slept again.

That was how it went for the next several days: riding by day, a chilly and uncomfortable camp in the wilds by night. But by the evening of the third day, the snow was starting to thin, and they ate properly at supper for the first time in who knew when. Sansa looked a regular urchin, thin and filthy and flyaway, and he certainly was no better. She hadn't yet asked where they were making. She knew damn well that she was in his power, that without her own horse, she couldn't get up and ride away. He was reminded ever more strongly of his sojourns with the wolf bitch through the riverlands. When he'd finally realized that there weren't enough damned members of her family left alive to get a decent ransom, and they had more or less wandered aimlessly. He'd stopped watching her at night, then. She could have left him, and eventually she had, after the crossroads inn and the Tickler and Polliver and the fight. But before...

Sandor couldn't help but wonder what had happened to her. She at least had known how to fight from the first day, whereas in the little bird it was still only appearing by exigency. If the girl was as canny as he'd thought, she'd have gotten aboard the first ship leaving Westeros and never looked back. Somewhere warm, somewhere that winter never came. The Summer Isles would have been a wise choice. Mayhaps, if that was where she'd gone, they should follow her. *But I can't. I can't leave so long as Ser Robert Strong lives on. It will always draw me back.*

With the snow cleared, they made a better pace south into the riverlands, keeping a vigilant distance from anything that looked remotely like a Frey. There were a few harrowingly close calls, but he never stopped long enough for anyone, weasel-faced scion or outraged Arryn headhunter, to
catch up. Sansa was exhausted, running ragged, and he was feeling the strain himself. He was going to have to do something about his leg, and soon, but the instant they stopped, they were dead.

It was on the morning of the sixth day since they'd fled the Bite when the sun finally came out. Looking at it, Sandor could almost fool himself into believing that winter had not truly come, not yet. But he knew that that was a monstrous lie; this was only a spirit summer, a brief respite before the jaws of the trap closed for good. Relations between him and the little bird had become correspondingly less frosty, but they still didn't talk much aside from the necessities. Now they were riding down a narrow, treed glen, the Green Fork gurgling somewhere off to the right, and boulders and bracken hemmed them in on every side.

_Only another fortnight to King's Landing._ If he was brazen enough to prance down the kingsroad, it might take half that. Assuming he made it this time, and didn't –

Sansa clutched hard at his arm.

"What?" he said, startled out of his reverie. "What?"

"There." She pointed at the hazy woods. "I saw something."

Sandor shaded his eyes. "I don't."

"Over there." She pointed again. "In the underbrush."

Sandor scowled, unable to keep his heart from picking up a notch or two. _Not another bloody Frey._ He'd nearly ended up having to fight the last one, and he didn't intend –

And then the air was full of the slash and sing of arrows.

Sandor yelled, ducked, grabbed Sansa by the cloak, and bundled them off Stranger's back onto the ground, trying to drag her to the shelter of a dead log. He could hear shouting, thought automatically, _Bloody outlaws_ – and then, _then_, it struck him, as hard as if one of the arrows had flown true to his heart. Above him, Stranger was rearing and snorting in pain, shot twice in the withers and once in the arse – no, bloody hell, he liked that horse, if they had, if _they_ had –

"There!" a voice was shouting. A familiar one. "Get him!"

_Oh, seven hells. Seven thrice-be-damned fucking hells._ And at that moment, Sandor Clegane understood. The gods had let them get away just to bring them back to this. Never let it be said that they lacked a sense of truly diabolical humor. In his head, he saw a hollow hill and a flaming sword, Beric Dondarrion's empty eye socket, a clash and wrench of steel. _I fought for my life once, but I somehow doubt you bastards are going to let me keep it._

He never saw where it came from, was still too busy trying to shield the little bird. That proved to be his fatal mistake. Something hit him, hard, in the back of the head. He felt a crunch, and then a roaring, spiraling nothingness. _And so they make their valiant return,_ Sandor thought, as the darkness dragged him down. _The Brotherhood without Banners, the bloody bastards, are going to get me after all._
Jaime

King's Landing could always be smelled long before it was seen. Even on a day like today: cold and sour, with forbidding clouds piling up in the sky and the threat of snow hanging tangibly in the air. His captors had refused to tell him where they were going, but if they really wanted to keep him in suspense, they should have cut off his nose. Besides, Jaime was sufficiently familiar with the back roads and byways of the crownlands to be sure of where they were – when they took off his blindfold, that was. It all reeked of a petty, purposefully obnoxious use of power, the sort he'd seen a thousand times before and always to no good end: because he was there, he was available to torment, and that was it. For all the fussing the maesters and septons did over the problem of war, in Jaime's opinion and experience it boiled down to something far simpler. *Men like to hurt each other. That's it.*

By Jaime's reckoning, it had been just over three weeks since his arrest on the Quiet Isle. He found the pretext for his seizure flimsier every day; they'd asked him barely half a dozen questions about Sansa, to which his genuinely ignorant replies seemed to amuse more than vex them. Like as not they'd already turfed up the girl somewhere else, were busily packaging her back off to the Vale and cackling at their ingenuity at framing him for the crime. As for Brienne... even if the gods had been so unwontedly good as to let her find Sansa, the wench wouldn't have known when to stop fighting, pigheaded brave bitch that she was. If that was the case, she was rotting in a ditch somewhere even now. *Quests only have a happy ending in the songs.*

Brienne. Jaime had tried to avoid thinking about her, a task which was akin to attempting to stop eating, breathing, or shitting. His wound had patched up enough that he hadn't yet bled to death, but he still felt Lem's phantom sword stabbing him with every mile – matched only by the pain in his head.

He hadn't meant to have her there on the beach. Hadn't wanted to, really. She was still the ugliest wench he'd ever laid eyes on, and some part of him had been proud of the fact that while Cersei backstabbed and whored her way to power – *Lancel and Osmund Kettleblack and Moon Boy for all I know* – he was going to remain defiantly chaste, hold to his vows from now on. Aye, Kingslayer, that's you. *Pure as the driven snow.* And besides, assuming this war ever ended, Brienne might want to take a husband someday. Even if she was the heiress to Tarth, it had been difficult enough for her father to find her a match with her maidenhead intact. Now that it had been given up to no less an infamous personage than himself, the odds went from steep to almost impossible. But in the need of the moment, neither of them had been able to do any differently.

Several times, Jaime found himself wondering if it had been similar for Robb Stark. Within limits, of course. Robb Stark hadn't been the best swordsman in the realm at the age of fifteen, named to guard a mad king with the aims both of spiting his lord father and staying near the twin sister who was, until recently, the only woman he'd slept with. Hadn't later killed that king, been disinherited by that father, caught in flagrante with that sister and forced to pitch an eight-year-old boy out a tower window. None of that. But Robb Stark's need in the face of calamity, in Jeyne Westerling's bed, had had, even Jaime was willing to admit, far more cataclysmic consequences. Stark had been a rebel and a traitor, but he hadn't deserved the hideous fate which had befallen him.

In the rare moments he could manage not to think about Brienne, Jaime ended up thinking about the Young Wolf's widow instead. He very much hoped she hadn't tried anything foolish; those archers he'd set around her wouldn't miss. Mayhaps she was back at the Crag, and the memories were starting to come less frequently. Mayhaps she no longer woke in the night, looking for him. Mayhaps. Jaime would have dismissed it as a youthful passion, if nothing else than to assuage his
guilt, but he too had been in love at fifteen, and that love had forever shattered the world around him. *Rest in peace, Stark. Wherever your soul ended up.* Knowing the northerners, in a tree.

Jaime's only solace about his impending arrival in King's Landing was that he would shortly have a whole new host of things to worry about. It made sense that they hadn't taken him to the Vale – there was no surer way to cast a blaze of light on whatever in hell Petyr Baelish was doing, which Petyr Baelish doubtless preferred to keep safely in the dark – and if he knew the man at all, this was going to be spun off somehow as someone else's crime. In all likelihood, the Tyrells. His sweet sister had already done everything except attack Lord Mace with teeth and claws, and an outrage such as this would sunder the foundations for good. For years, nobody had given Littlefinger much notice – a man of such modest birth, charming and friendly to all, and a crack shot at getting the king gold when the king required it, a talent which might have excused crimes greater than Gregor Clegane's. Only now was Jaime realizing that that must have been his plan all along. And perhaps he understood more of that man, as well, than he thought. *The things I do for love.*

Winter's first snow had not yet fallen on the capital, but it looked as cold and forbidding as if it had. The high towers of the Great Sept of Baelor were buried in fog, and the usual raucous commerce on the docks had dwindled to a miserable trickle. Squinting, Jaime could see that Tommen's banners, the counterchanged stag and lion, still flew atop the Red Keep. He could also hear – faint, but growing louder – shouting.

"What would that be, do you think?" he asked pleasantly. "Might we potentially be about to ride into the middle of a mob?"

"Mobs are a damned near everyday occurrence in this city, thanks to your fucking family," one of the Corbrays snapped. Not that he looked like a Corbray; the lot of them had carefully removed every bit of regalia that identified them as being from the Vale, confirming Jaime's suspicions that this was all an elaborate piece of theater staged under Littlefinger's orchestration. "Are you frightened of a few peasants, Kingslayer?"

"I tremble in my boots. When there's hundreds of them and only one of me, that is, and especially when there are a few pitchforks thrown in the mix. Don't be a fool. Take us into the streets now, and they'll drag you down and stone you. Or you'll be raped half a hundred times and end up with a bastard in your belly, like Lollys Stokeworth."

That got him another cuff, which Jaime could not quite dodge. Reflecting that his resolve to hold his tongue almost never outlived the first few moments of an encounter with a pompous windbag, he tried another tack. "I'm not going to be much use to you with my head smashed in, am I? You'd not be able to put it in your chamber pot to piss on – very unaesthetic. On the other hand, if – "

The Corbray man drew his sword and pointed at the city gates with a grin. "You first."

Bloody hell.

Slowly, loathingly, gritting his teeth at the hot jars of pain in his chest, Jaime spurred forward. They had given him a halfway decent horse, if only since it would have been too much of a bother to cart him hog-tied on one of theirs. For a moment, he entertained a ridiculous thought of trying to lose them in the streets, making his way to one of the other gates and absconding that way. Where to, he had no idea. Casterly Rock. Tarth. Hell.

With death before him and steel behind him, Jaime Lannister made his triumphant return to King's Landing.

Inside, he was surprised to discover that the frothing mob he'd pictured was in fact nowhere in
evidence. The streets were almost deserted – the shouting all seemed to be coming from one place, and as they switchbacked up the sprawling closes of Flea Bottom, Jaime was unsettled to realize that it was the Great Sept of Baelor. What is this, Ned Stark all over again? Or mayhaps someone exceptionally stupid had decided to end the sparrows’ occupation by force of arms, and the sparrows had perforce fought back. At Baelor’s, it wasn't going to be a disagreement over the price of a loaf of bread.

Seven hells. Jaime's stomach sank. It's worse than I thought.

Not waiting for his captors, he urged his horse into a gallop, its hooves echoing off the filthy stone. They were shouting at him, cursing, but they'd told him to go first, and he was damned well going to. Jaime climbed madly through the streets, nearly riding down a pair of grubby children who appeared from nowhere and attempted to inveigle for alms. He let the horse stretch its neck out, ducked an effusion of piss upended out a window, and could hear nothing but the rising pitch of the shouts. From the sound of it, the whole city was there, watching – or protesting – what?

Jaime tore through the last cluster of stone townhouses, swearing nonstop under his breath. Then he turned a corner, emerged in the broad plaza before Baelor’s – and saw that it was, in fact, worse than he'd ever imagined. So much worse that his mind boggled trying to comprehend it.

A great scaffold had been raised in the plaza, watched over by the same serene statue of Baelor that had presided over Ned Stark's demise. But this time, not one but five people stood on it, bound and blindfolded. A middle-aged lord, a woman who must be his wife, a pretty brown-haired girl, and a young boy. He knew them. He knew them in an instant. The Westerlings.

And beside them –

Another pretty brown-haired girl, slender and milky-skinned, heavily pregnant. Her gown was muddy red and blue. Roslin Tully. Lord Edmure's wife. Supposed to be delivered of her child and then to her husband at Casterly Rock, as he'd ordered. Not this – not this –

Jaime recognized the men standing guard around the prisoners: Boros Blount and Meryn Trant. One of the Kettleblacks to boot. And dozens of Lannister guardsmen and gold cloaks – seven hells, where was Ser Addam? Marbrand would have recognized the idiocy of this at once. There was a swarm of sparrows clamoring at the foot of the scaffold, held off brutally by more gold cloaks, and it was just possible to hear a herald struggling to read a writ of execution at the top of his voice: these traitors had transgressed unforgivably against King Tommen Baratheon, the First of his Name. They had spit on the pardons offered for their previous misdeeds, and for that, by order of the Faith and His Grace alike, they were here and now to die.

Another of the sparrows was howling that the High Septon had never signed any such thing. The herald held up a piece of parchment, apparently aimed at proving him wrong. The Westerling girl – Jeyne, it was bloody Jeyne – began to scream hysterically as Meryn Trant forced her father, Lord Gawen, to his knees at the block.

And Jaime Lannister went mad.

"DON'T YOU FUCKING DARE, TRANT!" He kicked his horse and plunged into the plaza, taking not the barest notice of the citizens scrambling to get out of the way. "GODS DAMN YOU, DON'T YOU DARE!"

Trant looked up with a start, saw Jaime, and hesitated. Then after a glance back at the herald, he drew his sword. No Payne. Where the fuck was Ilyn? Had even the King’s Justice thought better of carrying out this order – a man whose unquestioning obedience was as terrifying as his scarred face and sliced tongue – because he too knew that it was –
The sword came down. Lord Gawen's legs jerked furiously, then went still.

Jaime had never known such devouring fury in his life. He vaulted down from his horse, riding over a gold cloak as he did, and wrenched the corpse's longsword out of its hand. Lady Sybell was going to her knees now, the entire city was screaming like the maw of the beast, bells were sounding, a sparrow was praying for the gods to rain down their wrath and end the world right now, for this sacrilege could never be scrubbed out. Cersei. Without any other need of proof, Jaime could see her hand at work in this. And that if nothing else sent him up the scaffold steps, swearing and screaming.

Too slow. He was too fucking slow. His chest throbbed as if it was about to burst open. If I had my right hand, I'd be on that platform now. Nobody could have stopped me. As it was, however, he had only his left and a golden mockery. Which is what I am. Goldenhand the Just. Goldenhand the Lie.

He thought Lady Sybell might have been whispering a prayer as the blade came down.

Jaime's view was partially blocked, but he saw Jeyne faint, crumpling to her knees as her mother's head rolled after her father's. He slashed back and forth, roaring. "FUCK YOU – I'M THE LORD COMMANDER – BLOODY FUCKING STOP! NOW!"

Blount and Trant glanced at each other again, then at the slender, golden-haired woman in septa's robes, standing nearby. And carried Jeyne to the block after her parents.

Jaime, however, was finally free. He raced onto the scaffold, reached Trant with the next step, and killed him with the third. Then Blount on the other side – gods, that had been a long time in coming. They'll have to change my name now, but Kingsguardslayer doesn't quite roll off the tongue the same way. No matter how this played out, he was done for, but he no longer had it in him to care. Just give me one chance at Cersei before the end. One chance, that's all I ask.

The gold cloaks were scrambling after him like locusts – those that weren't already preoccupied trying to fend off the crowd and the sparrows, that was. Whichever Kettleblack it was, Jaime killed it. He hoped it was Osmund. The blade was alive in his hand in a way it hadn't been since before he'd lost the other. Let me stop this. Gods, let me stop this. Just that, that and Cersei.

His head was going light. Black static swam before his eyes. He shouldn't have exerted himself like this, he was going to pass out. All he could hear was his heart resounding like a drum, and taste the salt of tears. Then the sky was closing in on him, and the ground, and the swords, and everything was down, down, down into nothing but hell and darkness.

It remained that way for what must have been forever. He had, somewhere, a dreamy realization that he must finally be dead, and couldn't even summon up the wherewithal to give a damn. Blood and fire tore at him, screaming. Brienne, he tried to whisper, Mother, but the words incinerated on his lips. It was like the fever that had gotten him after he'd lost his hand, but worse.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying in a white bed in a small spare white room. My room. The Lord Commander's chambers in White Sword Tower. But what in seven hells was he doing here?

Jaime lay motionless. Everything hurt too much, he couldn't breathe, his throat and eyes and heart were hot and sticky and sore, and he was resentfully forced to conclude that he was still alive. Someone must have saved him from the riot, and –

The riot. Gods be good, the riot. What about Jeyne and her brother and Roslin? He'd checked out of the proceedings before finding what had happened to them. He'd killed Blount and Trant and
Kettleblack, but that wouldn't have been enough – he hadn't been able to save Lord Gawen and Lady Sybell –

A knock on the door scared him out of his abused wits. Jaime tried to say something, but it wouldn't come out, so he made an indistinct grunting noise instead. Apparently taking this for assent, the door opened. And into the room, accompanied by the same beautiful golden-haired septa to whom Blount and Trant had been looking for orders, walked his royal son.

"Ser Uncle!" Tommen's round face was full of concern. He ran to the bed and planted a tremulous kiss on Jaime's unshaven, dirty cheek. "I've been so awfully worried about you! Lady Tyene says you were really brave and fought really hard, but they had to carry you up here and you almost died. Here, I brought Ser Pounce to make you feel better." Plump hands carefully cupped around a ball of fur, he deposited it under Jaime's nose. It was apparently a kitten.

"Now, Your Grace," the young septa said. "We don't want to overexert your poor uncle. He was so brave trying to hold back those who would have spared the traitors, wasn't he? But he – "

"You." Tommen jumped, and Jaime startled even himself with the word. "Get out."

The septa looked down at him with an expression that was all solicitous sweetness, but Jaime caught the foul taste of poison underneath. Something in her eyes, unsettlingly, reminded him of a serpent. But in case she'd missed the point, he repeated it. "Get out. I will speak with my – with the king in private. Now."

"As you wish, Lord Commander." Whoever she was, she was good at this. With only a curtsey and a sidelong smile at Tommen, she glided out.

"Who is she?" Jaime rasped, when he and Tommen were alone. "Bloody hell!"

"That's – that's Lady Tyene." Tommen looked nervous. "She's the septa who has been keeping Mother company. She's good, don't worry. She likes kittens too."

Aha. Jaime sank back into his pillow with a long, shuddering sigh. A connection to his sweet sister, but bugger him if he could see what exactly. "I don't care who she says she is or what sort of kittens she likes. Henceforth, you are never to be alone with her again."

Tommens's lip trembled. "But I like her. Why would you say that?"

*Because I'm your father, gods damn me.* Never in his life had Jaime been so close to blurt it out. "Because unless I very badly miss my guess, she just helped cost you your kingdom yesterday. Are you insane? Are you that bloody stupid? Why did you sign those warrants? Who told you it was a good idea?" He tangled his golden hand in Tommen's tunic and dragged him closer.

"Who?"

Tommens's big green eyes filled with tears. "Ser Uncle, you're scaring me."

"Good." No way of telling how much time they had until that pretty murderess burst back in. Both or either of them. "You're the king. You *can* read what's put in front of you, you know. I know you dutifully sign everything, but – "

The futility of Jaime's anger almost overwhelmed him. He was accomplishing absolutely nothing by shouting at Tommen, he knew. The spinners of this foul web had only taken advantage of the boy's meek, trusting nature and position of power. *If I had a king under my control who'd do whatever I said, I might abuse it too.* But his sister had been imprisoned, stripped of her authority, had sent that desperate letter which he had burned in the fire. How in *hell* had she then managed this, and for what fucking purpose?
In a coat of gold or coat of red, a lion still has claws. And mine are long and sharp, my lord, as long and sharp as yours.

Jaime's head was about to split open. He let go of Tommen and fell back in the bed. Not wanting to hear the answer, he said, "What became of Jeyne and Rollam Westerling, and Roslin Tully?"

Tommen hesitated, and that awful silence was all the proof Jaime needed. Finally the king said in a very small voice, "They're dead."

Dead. His suicide charge up the scaffold had been utterly for naught after all. Tears boiled under his closed lids. Finally he said in a guttural rasp, "Tommen. Leave me."

The king didn't need to be told twice. He gathered up his kitten and fled.

This is the end, Jaime thought. How could it not be? The westerlands, the riverlands, and the Freys would revolt the instant the ravens reached them. They were all prisoners here in the Red Keep, the Faith would be breathing fire, and Tommen had brought him a damned kitten in hopes of making him feel better. He did not at all envy Mace Tyrell just now, and that was saying a deal. The Fat Flower's authority, if he ever had any, had just collapsed beneath him like a tide-scoured sandbank, and he may very well have just condemned his daughter to death. The Faith might be inclined to believe his pleas that he'd had nothing to do with this atrocity, but it would be a poor man indeed who wagered on it.

Jaime did not want to move, think, breathe, or exist, now or ever again. He just lay listening to a life's work and a family's legacy come crashing down around him. And still the rains weep o'er his hall, with not a soul to hear.

The room was starting to be shadowed in twilight when the door opened.

He knew who it was at once. He always knew when she was near, the other half of him calling out to be completed. She still smelled the same, had the same sound to her breathing. As long as he kept his eyes closed, he could see the golden girl of fifteen, sneaking off to meet him in Eel Alley dressed as a maidservant, and the love they'd made that night that had set the world afire. As soon as he opened them, he'd see what she had become. And worse, what he had.

"I heard what you did," Cersei said at last. Her voice echoed in the silent room. Which one? Jaime kept his eyes closed.

"You got what you deserved." He heard her take a few steps closer. "How dare you try to stop them from lawfully executing the traitors? The Westerlings broke their word and betrayed Tommen. That girl who died wasn't the little queen. It was her sister, Elenya. The real Jeyne got away from Riverrun, with Brynden Tully. And I know you helped her do it. Tyene told me."

Jaime had not thought he still possessed the capacity to be shocked, but that did the trick. His eyes bolted open, and he saw her standing across from him, hair as short as a boy's from where they'd shorn it for her walk of penance. She always wanted to be a man. Her dress was brown wool, her face pale and puffy, green eyes glittering with what he'd seen in Aerys Targaryen's purple ones and known well enough. He thought of her burning the Tower of the Hand with wildfire, and his golden sword stained with blood.

"Cersei," he said. "You're mad."

She smiled. "Maybe. But you're dead, my love. You don't betray House Lannister as unforgivably as you have, and walk away without a scratch."
"I have scratches aplenty. "What House Lannister? Where? Cersei, you've destroyed it. All of it. I don't know how you arranged yesterday, but you mad, dangerous, deluded – "

"I've destroyed it?" Furious tears filled those lovely, lunatic eyes, reminding him stomach-churningly of Tommen. "How dare you? What do you call what you've done? Hiding away Sansa Stark and Tyron, who killed Joff? Letting the Westerling girl escape? Deserting me when I needed you so badly? I'd slap you, but from the looks of you, it might kill you straightaway, and your dying will be slow. I vow it."

Jaime's breath caught. Does she know? How does she know? Does she know it was me that freed Tyrion that night, before he went and killed Father? That I tried to protect Sansa and hide her away – but Riverrun, not at Riverrun, I didn't – how could it not be Jeyne – dead, all dead –

"I'll tell you what will become of you." Cersei turned on her heel. "You'll be the champion for my trial. For the Faith. They'll be slavering for it, after seeing what you did."

Trant and Blount were always your creatures. "For the Faith," Jaime repeated woodenly.

"Aye," She smiled again. "I have a champion of my own, you see. His name is Ser Robert Strong, and there's no man alive who can beat him. Particularly not a wounded, crippled traitor like you. He just needs to hurt you enough to stop you getting up, which won't be hard. Do try to give the masses a show. After which, I'm handing you over to Qyburn. Mayhaps you too will be more use to me dead than you ever were alive."

Jaime just stared at her. Everything he could have said in response to that shriveled up and died like a rose in frost. "Cersei – gods be good, Cersei –"

"You chose your path." Her voice was remote. As she stood there, drowned in dusk, she looked part queen, part goddess, and wholly demon. "I am done with you. Now and forever, I am done with you."

The door closed behind her with a gentle click.
The thunderheads were starting to break up, and columns of weak sunshine towered down between the cracks. It cast the restless iron-grey sea in a golden luster, a balm like oil on the waves, and the gulls soaring overhead embroidered shifting shadows alongside their own. Away down the coast, off their port side, White Harbor rose proudly snow-covered on its hilltops, but Davos for obvious reasons did not dare to approach too closely by that route. For all he knew, that tar-dipped head and those shortened hands were still rotting on the gates, and it was good money that there was at least one Frey skulking in the city – hadn't Manderly said something about wedding a granddaughter to one of them? While Davos was fairly sure that that too had been part of Lord Wyman's bluff, breaking a marriage pact with that lot was something which should only be attempted by an expert.

Instead, he steered them into the tide race, through the jungle of white-frothed boulders that outcropped the headland. He was making for the entrance of a fiord that slashed across the back of the city – inside it was a long and vertiginous stairway carved into the rock face, which at the top linked up with the path to the Wolf's Den, the ancient castle where Davos had been held prisoner. Getting a truculent five-year-old and a bloody big direwolf up that was going to be, to say the least, a significant undertaking, which was why Davos had dared to risk a daytime approach. The thought of climbing those stairs by night, in his current company, was enough to start a cold sweat.

Davos hauled in the mainline to reef the sail, wincing as the pain caught him across the small of the back. His wound had not been done any favors by the need to handle the currach alone on the hair-raising return from Skagos; at least on the outward journey he'd had Wex to assist, and only himself to mind. Now, trying to play sailor, soldier, navigator, lookout, captain, deckhand, nursemaid, and kennelmaster all at once, Davos was more exhausted and ill-tempered than he'd been in years. Rickon was still traumatized by Osha's death, but not enough to do anything Davos said without putting up an endless argument first.

Small wonder, Davos thought, tying the last knot and laboring to take his place at the oars. Rickon was curled up in the pile of furs at the stern, Shaggydog lolling next to him. The boy's eyes were blue, the wolf's green, but otherwise their mutinous gazes were identical. There was something intrinsically intertwined about the pair of them, something primal, and of late Rickon had begun to mention things he had no way of knowing, things that only the wolf could have seen.

Davos eased the currach into the narrow neck of the fiord. Indeed it was so narrow that a tall man, standing up and spreading his arms, might have grazed with his fingers the great walls of glacier-roughened rock. They rose overhead to a height of nearly a hundred feet, opening up in a way that reminded Davos of the prow of a ship. But only a vessel this size could fit through this natural sea gate; it was the way he and Wex had originally departed. Inside the fiord the water was calm, closed off from the pounding surf, and the near absence of wind made Davos, in his motley garb of oiled leather, fur, and sealskin, almost too hot. The tidal current was against them, running out to sea, and he had to pull even harder to keep them moving forward. As he did, he peered up at the stout stone towers of the Wolf's Den, just visible on the heights, praying for a sight of Lord Wyman's merman banner or any other signal. But there was nothing.

Foreboding was congealing sourly in Davos' gut by the time they reached the trickiest part of the approach. But they bumped up unmolested against the broken finger of rock that thrust into the blue water, acting as a natural quay, and the steps stood there before them. Nothing. No guards.

Davos flung out the line and made them fast, then sat back on his knees, debating with himself. Of course Lord Wyman could not be expected to know the exact day and hour of their return, but after
the amount of time which had passed – and the sensitivity of the cargo that he was awaiting – it would have been only prudent for him to have posted a constant guard. While it was better than the alternative of strolling straight into the teeth of waiting Freys, this confirmed beyond all doubt that something was very wrong, and left Davos faced with a monumental dilemma. He did not know if Lord Wyman had entrusted his son or any of his household with his plans – and what reason would he have had to? *The more who know, the more can tell.* Ser Wylis Manderly might well be in residence, but he would think Davos either a madman or a traitor. *There is Shaggydog, though. That would give him pause at least. He served with the Young Wolf, he knows what they are.* But all three of them were supposed to be dead – him, the boy, the wolf. All it would take would be one wrong word, one . . .

On the other hand, he could always choose the even riskier option of trying to get as far up the White Knife as he could; one of its tributaries ran just a few leagues away from Winterfell. But if he thought he was in any sort of shape to survive a penetration that deep into the north, with the sort of supplies they had and the shape they were in, the land covered with snow and crawling with Boltons, on the threadbare hope that Manderly was there and still alive . . .

He was going to have to throw the dice on Ser Wylis, Davos realized unhappily. *Mayhaps Robett Glover is still here.* But he had likely returned to his family's seat of Deepwood Motte after hearing that the ironborn had been cleaned out of it. And if the Manderly heir was a puppet of the Freys, then, well . . . best not to think about that. Davos gave the moorline a final, nervous tug. "Come, my lord," he said to Rickon. "We're going to climb up there and visit your friends."

"That?" Rickon cocked his head skeptically, looking at the stairs that clawed back and forth against the spur of solid granite. "That's a long way."

"Are you frightened, my lord?" It was not the tack Davos would have chosen, and he felt like a buffoon every time he employed it on a five-year-old, but with Rickon Stark, one must use the leverage one could find. And the one thing the boy could not stand was any intimation that he was a coward.

Sure enough, it worked just as well again. The boy scrambled pugnaciously out of the boat, Shaggydog hard on his heels. "I'm not afraid. I'll climb up it even faster than you."

"Not so fast, my lord," Davos said hurriedly, snagging Rickon by the collar as the boy attempted to make straightaway onto the stairs. He found his hand seeking instinctively at his neck, for the little bag of fingerbones he had lost at the bottom of the Blackwater. *My luck.* Well, considering that he and they had already survived this much, what were a few mad gambles more?

The steps were steep, laced with ice, and horrendously exposed. Knowing that he was the only expendable one, Davos had arranged them thusly: Shaggydog in front, Rickon in the middle, and himself bringing up the rear. That way even if by some malchance he did fall, Rickon and Shaggy could theoretically still make it to the top. What on earth would happen then, if the boy had the ability to explain what had gone on and if there even *was* someone he could explain it to . . . no, Davos decided. It would be in his exceeding best interests not to fall.

The fiord dwindled underneath them as they climbed higher. *Manderly will certainly not be returning by this route.* Davos edged along, groping at the rock with his hands, not looking down, not looking down. He kept his eyes on the Wolf's Den instead, with occasional split-second glimpses only to ensure that the steps hadn't broken or crumbled. Shaggydog was a good indicator of such things. At one place where a rockfall from above had blocked the route, the wolf managed to shift them away; they fell over the edge with such a tumult that Davos winced. But still nothing.

At long last, legs cramped and back screaming worse than ever, he hauled himself up over the edge
of the abyss. Not that the danger was any less; they were in full view of the Wolf's Den now. But with the successful ascent of the sea stair behind them, a sort of mad daring was creeping in. "Come," he said to Rickon again. "They'll be waiting for us."

Rickon, chastened for once, nodded meekly. Davos gave thanks that the boy had been born a Stark and taken refuge among the Skagosi; he wasn't sure that even his own sons would have managed so well at the age of five. That thought prompted him to take the boy by the hand, and Rickon did not pull away. Shaggydog gallivanting ahead of them without an apparent care in the world, they set off toward the Wolf's Den. An appropriate name after all.

"I like you," Rickon said abruptly. "You're like my father a little. You still shouldn't have kidnapped me, though."

Davos was extremely surprised, considering that not so long ago Rickon had been calling him a lying fat liar and blithely ignoring everything he said, but also touched. Gently he asked, "Do you remember your father, my lord?"

"Course I 'member him!" Rickon turned back with a scowl. "He was big and he wore furs and sometimes he'd toss me up really really high, and I wouldn't be scared, I'm not ever scared. He'd catch me and then Bran would want it too and he'd make us fly. And he was a good lord and he didn't ever break his word and he. . . and he. . ."

The child's voice trailed off. Finally he squinted up at Davos and asked softly, "Do you look really like him?"

"I. . . do not know, my lord." Ned Stark had been shorter and plainer of face than his elder brother Brandon, Davos knew, and he too was only of brown hair, beard, average height, and nothing much to glance upon. Davos had spent his life navigating the waters of the oceans, Ned the waters of politics, but for all the world knew, it had wound them up with the exact same fate. And speaking of which—

The portcullis of the Wolf's Den loomed uninvitingly in front of them, closed and chained. The gatehouse and barbican stood above, equally deserted. The sun was just about to slide behind the cliffs of the fiord, and while Davos did not imagine that the same terrors lurked in the darkness as they had on Skagos, there was no call to tempt fate.

"I dunno," Rickon said skeptically. "There's not nobody here."

"Not anybody here," Davos corrected. While he'd certainly done his share of breaking out of prisons in his time, breaking into them was a much rarer occurrence. Fear was beginning to battle once more against his relief. What if something truly terrible had happened – an outbreak of plague, a visit from the Boltons or the Lannisters? The place wasn't burned or scorched, but what if – the worst thought of all – the visitors had been of quite different provenance?

At that moment, startling both Davos and Rickon, Shaggydog stopped in his tracks, sniffed, began to growl, and ran around the gatehouse tower, vanishing on the other side. Davos strained for the sound of men, dreading it and half-praying for it as well. But there was nothing, only another yip from the wolf.

"Come on," Rickon said, tugging at Davos' hand. "Shaggy found something."

Not currently possessed of a better plan, Davos ventured cautiously around the curtain wall, ready to push the boy behind him and draw his sword at the first hint of anything untoward. But it was only a narrow path that led to a wooden postern gate, beside which Shaggy was standing. The
expectant attitude of the black wolf, head cocked and ears pointed, made it clear to Davos that he was supposed to open it – or break it down.

"Don't suppose you'd help me, would you?" he muttered to the direwolf, thinking of how easily it had cleared the rocks off the cliff stairs. Shaggydog only whined, pushing his muzzle against the latch.

Davos sighed, reached for his sword, and decided that he would have to abandon any hope of doing this inconspicuously. But he had just drawn the blade and prepared for the first hack – this was going to ruin the steel, something he'd have to quickly attend to – when a hoarse, furtive voice breathed, "And who in all the hells would that be?"

Davos tensed with shock. "Ser Bartimus," he whispered back to the one-eyed, one-legged old castellan of the Wolf's Den, one of the very few men to whom Manderly had trusted the secret of his continued existence. "It's me. Ser Davos Seaworth, returned from the mission on which your lord sent me."

There was a silence long enough to make Davos fear that Ser Bartimus was having heart failure behind the door. Then it rattled, a key twisted in the lock, and the castellan hissed, "Inside! Now!"

Davos did not need telling twice. He whisked Rickon off his feet, and as the door opened a few inches, squeezed through, following Shaggydog – who, if the aghast sound from its far side was any indication, really had sent Ser Bartimus into heart failure. When Davos emerged, the old knight was plastered against the wall of the inner ward, making the sign of the horns over and over as fast as he could.

"It's just Shaggy," Rickon piped up, observing the old knight bemusedly. "He'll only eat you if I tell him to."

Oddly, this did not have the effect of calming Ser Bartimus down, but as his eye roved over the wolf and the boy, it nearly dropped out of his head. Convulsively, he fell to his knee. "My lord," he said. "My lord of Stark."

Rickon glanced around, clearly confused, in search of who he could be addressing.

"It's you he means," Davos reminded him. "It would be mannerly to acknowledge Ser Bartimus' words and thank him."

"But he's not very smart," Rickon said. "He thinks I'm – "

Davos gave up. "You are, but perhaps now is not the time. Ser Bartimus – " to the castellan, urgently – "is Lord Wyman here? Gods be good, is he here?"

Another, horrible pause. This time, Bartimus made the sign of the star.

"Gods be good," Davos said again, feeling sick. "Is he – ?"

"I don't know for certain, but it's all but a formality. He never returned from Winterfell, and we had a raven not a fortnight past. From Roose Bolton. Telling us that Lord Manderly had been revealed as a traitor, and that we would soon be dealt with by him and that vile bastard o' his, the 'lawful Wardens of the North.' You... you wouldn't have seen, if you came in by the fiord, but the harbor's blockaded. The Lannisters dispatched north half their remaining fleet, to assist in teaching us that lesson."

"Seven hells." Davos swallowed something foul-tasting. "Roose sent word to the Iron Throne,
"Must have. The captains are meeting with Ser Wylis – Lord Wylis, I suppose I should say – even now. He's telling them it's all wrong, it's a terrible mistake. I don't know if he means it or not." The castellan's face was ashy with the strain. "If they don't believe him... I'd not wager on half of White Harbor surviving the night. When those lion bastards sack a city, they bloody sack it."

"Does Ser – Lord Wylis know of his father's understanding? With me?" Davos was feeling sicker by the instant. If not... if the younger Manderly found out he was still alive, he might well hand him over to the Lannisters to spare White Harbor from the torch and the sword. But that would entail revealing that he had never been dead at all, and that was singularly unlikely to put them in a merciful temperament.

"Come with me," Ser Bartimus said, as Davos teetered on the brink of panic. "I'll take you inside the keep. There's the woman there, but she won't be saying a word."

What woman? Davos wondered, but there was no time to ask. With Rickon still clinging around his neck and Shaggydog loping along behind, they hurried after Ser Bartimus, who was making considerable speed on his one real leg, into the shadows of the fortress. It turned Davos' stomach to see it again, after the interminable time he had spent shut in there, fearing for his life and for his king, not knowing what Manderly meant for him after the mummery he had put on for the Freys in the Merman's Court. Father Above, help Lord Wyman, help him. Yet if he had fallen into the Boltons' power, and they had learned the truth, prayers were almost laughably ineffective now.

They ducked into a stairwell and clattered up it, this one far preferable to its cliffside counterpart. Dim, smoky torches guttered in rusted sconces; the walls here were still as thick and well-wrought as they'd been when the King in the North, Jon Stark, had raised them hundreds of years before the Conquest. With every step Davos thought of the Lannister fleet anchored in the harbor, wondered how many Freys were present with Lord Wylis, kept hoping by some mad chance that Robett Glover had waited for him. And then they were inside a narrow hallway, Ser Bartimus was unlocking the cell door at the end, and shooing Davos and Rickon inside. "Hurry," he hissed, "hurry, hurry."

Speculating if "the woman" was one of the six washerwomen who'd lodged here before – mayhaps the mother of Therry, the young turnkey – Davos stepped into the cell. It was not his old one but another, though appointed comfortably enough as his had been. And he only had time to think that the figure seated by the window looked far too large to be a woman, when the door shut and locked behind them.

Davos turned with an exclamation, suddenly and horribly suspecting that Ser Bartimus had just decided to make his lord's mind up for him, and tugged at the latch. No good; the oak was as strong as steel. Shaggydog pulled back his teeth and growled, but they could hear Ser Bartimus' mismatched footsteps fleeing away down the corridor. Too late.

Davos put down Rickon and moved his hand to his sword, thinking of Garth the torturer, and the "ladies" he'd kept sharp and cruel. "You," he said. "Show yourself."

There was a pause. Then it – she – moved out of the shadows, and he could see that it was a woman after all. And not just any woman, but her.

She was indeed taller and stronger than most men, with broad muscled shoulders, sinewy arms and big freckled hands. A thatch of dirty blonde hair had grown long enough to tangle into something approximating a braid, and her eyes were as blue as the Others' had been. There was a festering scab on one cheek where the flesh appeared to have been torn off, and a profusion of more freckles
across the intact one and her nose, which must have been broken at least twice. When he’d heard the tales of her, Davos had been given to understand that there was no way she could get uglier, but it seemed they’d all been wrong. Poor creature.

"Ser," said the Maid of Tarth. As she spoke, her eyes were fixed on Rickon and his wolf. "I am afraid I do not know you."

"You do not," Davos acknowledged, "but I know you. You are Brienne the Blue, the warrior woman named to Renly Baratheon’s Rainbow Guard."

She tensed. "How do you know that?"

"There are not many like you in all the kingdoms, my lady," Davos told her gently, "and I was near enough to hear your tale. I served – serve – his brother."

This startled her enough to take her eyes off Rickon. "Stannis? Lord Stannis?"

"The same." Davos hesitated, recalling the tales of Renly Baratheon's abrupt and unnatural death – and what his king had said of it to him. Of candlelight dancing on green armor, and a shadow blown in through the door of the tent, and an unearthly blade slicing through solid steel. *She was with him when it happened. She saw it with her own eyes.* And he remembered his own part in Cortnay Penrose's demise, of rowing Melisandre under the bowels of Storm's End and seeing what had been brought forth from her. There were a deal of other folk he had expected as more likely cellmates than the woman who had served Renly as loyally as he'd served Stannis. *She did not kill him. I know what did.*

Brienne's bruised jaw set stiffly. She turned away from him, looking out the window, but was unable to stop from turning to stare at Rickon once more. Finally she blurted out, "That wolf. . ."

"His name is Shaggy," Rickon informed her. "Short for Shaggydog."

Davos, who had been watching her closely, saw a pallor steal over her abused face. She swallowed visibly. Then she whispered, "You are Rickon Stark."

"Aye," Rickon said, puzzled once more.

"Tell me." Brienne rose suddenly to her feet; she overtopped Davos in height by at least half a foot, and he noticed her sword lying in a corner of the room. "My lord. . . I think I must know you as well. The onion knight, missing the tips of his fingers. Davos Seaworth."

"I am."

"Where did you. . ." Brienne paused and had to start again. "You. . . the boy was said to be dead, but clearly he was not. . . how in the name of the gods did you find him?"

"It's a long story." Davos bore the woman no grudge, but until he found more about what had led her to be confined here in the Den with him, he was not about to reveal the least bit of how vital Rickon was to Stannis's cause. "Why do you ask?"

"I seek a Stark child as well," Brienne said in a rush. Her eyes met Davos', blue and pleading. "Sansa. If I do not find her, then –"

"Sansa?" Rickon interrupted. He seemed to perk up. "I'd like to see Sansa. And Arya and Bran and Jon Snow and Old Nan and Maester Luwin. But the Boltons killed Maester Luwin, they killed him. They should have killed Theon too."
"I would that you could," Brienne said to him, before turning back to Davos. "The girl was until recently in the Vale with Lord Baelish, under an assumed identity. But she was kidnapped some weeks ago, and I have reason to believe that she is still alive. I thought that I might find her in White Harbor, or at least a word of her. If she took ship north, she would have had to come here. And yet perhaps it is better if she did not, if Lord Wylis means to bow to the Lannisters' wishes. . ." A look of something close to torture crossed her face. "If I can't find Sansa, then he. . . then they will. . ."

Davos regarded her in curiosity and sympathy alike. "Sansa Stark?" If indeed she could be found, that drastically undercut the Boltons' claim to the north, secured until now with Ramsay's marriage to the younger sister. Not that diplomacy was ever going to uproot those wretches; only a sword would do. Stannis' sword, gods be good. Sansa had immense value as a pawn, as everyone concerned must know full well, yet something about Brienne's expression made him think that that was not who she had in mind. Renly has been dead a long time now. Whose service has she taken up in, if anyone's?

His back was starting to hurt agonizingly, and his legs were letting him know in no uncertain terms that they had been badly put upon by the climb. Davos sat on the nearest available surface, which happened to be a trunk. "Did they tell you anything?" he asked. "Did they say they meant to kill you too?"

"I don't know." Brienne was too restless to join him; she began to pace by the window, a distance so short that her long legs covered it in a stride or two. "I came here to ask Ser Wylis about Sansa, but he would not receive me. I was told that I would be given all hospitality, and yet I was billeted here."

"They've not mistreated you, have they?" Davos thought again of Garth and his axes.

"No," Brienne admitted, "but what sort of hospitality is it, in a prison? I sit here uselessly, while Jaime's time runs out and wherever Sansa goes is further from me, until –"

"Jaime?" That, to say the least, Davos had not expected. "The Kingslayer? It's a Lannister fleet that sits in the harbor now, that has allied with the Boltons, that would take Sansa and Rickon and all their kin and cast them to the –"

"I know." Brienne looked more agonized than before. "I know."

Davos eyed her, his curiosity more rampant than ever, but he could already tell that Brienne had never meant to say that and was already regretting that she had. If he was not about to divulge his errand, it seemed rather ill-mannered to pry into hers. Yet he could not help it. "Tell me, my lady, how in creation Jaime Lannister's welfare could matter to you, if it is Sansa Stark you seek so devoutly."

"They'll kill him." Brienne's lips trembled. "They'll kill him unless I can find her and prove that he didn't do it, he didn't take her. He's a different man now, I swear it. He gave me his own sword and asked me to protect her."

Jaime Lannister, defender of Stark children. That ranked among the strangest things Davos had heard in over forty years of a highly eventful life. Furthermore, death was no more than the Kingslayer deserved; it was his unholy affair with his sister that had seated his bastard get on Stannis' rightful throne. The thought of him relinquishing a chance to take Eddard Stark's daughter into his custody, to break the North's spirit once and for all –

"It is. . . extraordinary, my lady," Davos said guardedly. In truth, he felt sorry for her, wondering
what lies Lannister's gilded tongue had spun to her, a young and idealistic woman reeling from the loss of her king. "But one would think Sansa Stark better off far away from him and his family, and all the loss they have wrought on hers."

Brienne looked at him miserably. She was about to say something else when Rickon, who had been sitting with suspicious quietness in the corner, uttered a small, muffled yelp. Davos swung around in concern, wondering if the boy had happened upon one of the less pleasant aspects of the cell. But Rickon was staring fixedly at what appeared to be empty air, concentrating so hard that his face went red, until at last he sat back with a grunt.

"They're out there," he said, to neither of them in particular. "I saw them. They're out there."

"Who's out there?" Davos asked. "The Lannisters? Aye, that's why we need to – "

"No! Not them! Them! The other ones! I saw fire and the trees are breathing and they're coming out of the snow. The monsters, the big ones. They're waking up."

"What's waking up?" Davos tried not to think of what they had both seen in the water off the coast of Skagos. "What monsters?"

"I don't know." Rickon shook his head fretfully. "Giants, maybe. They were big. It was too hard to see them for long. I didn't get to learn all of it. You kidnapped me before I could."

"Learned? Learned what?"

"In the village," Rickon said, and added something in a fluent rattle of the Old Tongue. Then, rolling his eyes at Davos' evident incomprehension, he said, "The shaman. When I came there, he told me I was a... was a warg. That I could learn to see things that weren't in my eyes, that the north was strong in me, the skins could be changed..." He frowned again. "It's hard to practice by myself, but that time I just saw it. I did."

"I am sure you did," Davos said, frowning. He had just turned back to Brienne, wondering if their only hope for getting out of here was going to be to forge some sort of alliance, when they heard footsteps in the hall again – but not Ser Bartimus'. These were a heavier, slower, more deliberate tread.

Garth. Davos gathered his feet under him. This seemed to serve as proof positive that Ser Wylis had been unaware of his father's arrangements, had decided to give them over to the Lannisters and hope to spare the city –

The lock rattled. Brienne reached for her sword, and Davos for his. For a moment as their eyes met, he felt a distinct kinship with her, knew that in this at least they were on the same side – yet how could that be, if it was Ser Jaime's life she held in such high esteem, and the Lannisters were the ones who awaited –

The door opened. Without another word, the two of them lunged.

"My lady! My – my lord!" The figure on the other side threw up his arms and awkwardly twisted away, as Davos and Brienne checked their blows just in the nick of time. Panting, flushed, bushy mustache crooked askew, Ser Wylis Manderly himself ducked into the room, preceded by his girth. He turned, straightened his robes, and slammed the door shut behind him, leaving them both flabbergasted in equal measure.

"My lord." Brienne did not drop her blade. "What is the meaning of this?"
"My lady, I apologize profusely. This was . . . necessary, I fear." Ser Wylis brushed himself off once more, his face haunted and solemn. He flinched as he laid eyes on Shaggydog, who had the full complement of teeth bared, but the black wolf restrained from leaping for the fat man's throat. "We do not have much time. Are you well?"

"I ask leave to continue my journey," Brienne said. "I will not be well until I find Sansa Stark."

Ser Wylis shook his head. "I cannot help you. I have told you, the girl did not pass this way. And . . . my lord of Seaworth." He turned to Davos. "I would that my father could be here to greet you in my place, but it was his brave deception that brought me home at all. You have done well. And I intend to honor the agreement. But first, you will wish to know the news of your king."

Davos nodded, not trusting himself to words.

"He lives," Ser Wylis said, and Davos had to clutch hard to the table. "But that is not widely known. No one but myself, in fact, and now you. There was a raven from . . . if it was not my lord father, a most convincing reproduction, who knew all our secret codes and signs. He made mention of injuries too grievous for him to hold a quill, that the letter was dictated. He did not dare say much, for obvious reasons, but from reading between the lines, I am utterly convinced that he is both alive and taken refuge in the camp of Stannis Baratheon. I do not know how this was achieved, for last I knew he was captive in Winterfell under threat of execution from that frothing dog Ramsay Bolton, but if it was indeed true. . . my House would indeed owe Lord Stannis and yourself a debt past all paying."

It was only then Davos discovered he was shaking. "So will you then. . . if your father is alive and so is my king. . . if you honored the promises made. . ."

"I shall," Ser Wylis said again. "I will, here and now, swear to take Stannis Baratheon as my king, the one true lord of Westeros. But you will not forget, you shall never forget, that we are Stark men, always Stark men. If a day should come in future when the choice is between your southern king and our northern lord, be under no illusions as to where our loyalty will fall."

"I will not." He cannot say he did not warn us. "But – "

"And so." Ser Wylis put both great hands on his shoulders. "The strength of White Harbor is yours, effective immediately. This is what you must do. The Boltons are still tied down in Winterfell with the great part of their strength, awaiting Stannis' attack. You will lead my men up the White Knife, and. . ."

"And?"

"The north has been on its knees too long, Lord Davos. Too long. Whether to the Lannisters or the Boltons or the Freys – false kings, turncoats, traitors, murderers. No more. An end must be written. To wed Baratheon and Manderly and Stark together, to defeat those who are our mutual enemies, you will take the Dreadfort, and you will raze it to the ground."

Davos was speechless. Finally he managed, "The Dreadfort. . . it held for four years under siege once. . . I have fought my share of battles, but I am no vaunted commander. . ."

"I am aware. I am aware as well what is at stake here. But as I said, there is no other choice. You survived the Blackwater when few, highborn or low, could claim the same. You will have all the men and supplies I am able to give you, and the Boltons and their power, as I also mentioned, are still in Winterfell. They took the Starks' ancestral seat out from beneath their noses. What do you think will happen when the same befalls them?"
"My lord. . ." Davos was still lost for words. *I was a fool to ever underestimate any of Lord Wyman's blood.* "I understand catching them in the jaws of the trap from both sides. . . but there is a great Lannister fleet anchored in your harbor even now, and fighting through them will certainly not leave me and your men in any shape for this undertaking."

Ser Wylis smiled an odd little smile. "Is there?"

"Aye."

"Come with me. You too, my lady."

Davos and Brienne exchanged a confounded glance, but along with Rickon – a glance from Ser Wylis making it plain that Shaggydog was to remain – they followed him. The labyrinthine corridors of the Wolf's Den were dark and deserted, but torches burned on the parapet ahead.

"Here." Ser Wylis held open the door, and they stepped onto the tower. The fleet was just visible in the harbor, snapping sheets of crimson against the advancing dusk. Brienne had come over queer again; she turned away, but Davos remained watching.

"My lord father told the world that he would open his harbor to the boy king's ships and the Lannisters' wishes," Ser Wylis said, staring at the horizon. "I stammered and whined and played enough of a browbeaten fat fool that they have no reason to regret their confidence in sailing in and assuming nothing had changed."

"My lord," Brienne began, and hesitated.

"Aye, my lady?"

She shook her head, unable to speak. Ser Wylis paid her no further mind. He seemed to be counting under his breath. "Please," he said. "Watch."

Davos and Rickon craned forward, making up for Brienne's inability. Davos thought he saw small figures moving among the towers of the city, and a flare, as of something catching fire. He thought of the sailors on those ships. He thought of advancing up the Blackwater and the chain raising spectral behind them. He thought of men crashing and blundering, water turning to torches, and gouts of green fire that blazed across the heavens.

*The north remembers,* Davos Seaworth thought, and knew that it was so.

He heard only the distant thumps as the catapults launched. He wondered how long Ser Wylis had had, to arrange this welcome. *He must have known they were coming, from the moment the raven did."

Davos watched as the fireballs crashed down. Heard the faint splinter of shattering wood, the far-off howls. Saw the citizens of White Harbor crowding to the city wall. Wondered where the ships' captains were stranded, watching futilely, only now realizing the magnitude of their mistake.

Burning, the ships were eerily and starkly beautiful, masts showing skeletal, ropes crashing down in flaming coils. The orange light dyed the darkness for miles, smoke rising wraithlike against the moon. One by one, as each ship burnt to the waterline, it was transformed into a shapeless hulk, steaming and hissing and snarling, until at last even the most fearless demons plunged into the dark ocean and perished in its depths.
Not a dozen yards ahead of them, the road washed out in a sucking, boggy slough, and Edmure Tully manfully resisted the urge to say, "I told you so." The air was thick and dank and sullen, smelling of peat and moss and rot, and the horizon was breasted with the shadows of twisted trees. Boulders as misshapen as ogres were clad in veils of white lichen and slimy weed, and Edmure held his nervous horse firmly in check, refusing to evince anything but the utmost smug confidence before his companion. He'd taken them as far as he could, and nobody could say he'd not kept his word. After a few sniffs about this place, Ser Addam would abandon his delusions of grandeur, call off the search for Jeyne, and flee back to King's Landing, which had the advantage of looking like a veritable paradise next to this.

Beside him, however, Marbrand was studying the landscape with an intent, thoughtful look. During their weeks on the road together, Edmure had learned to mistrust that look; it meant Marbrand was about to do something that he wouldn't like. The man had already seen through all his previous attempts at ignorance or evasion. If he was entirely honest with himself, Edmure was surprised that Ser Addam hadn't yet strangled him in his sleep, but he knew far too well that desperation, combined with misguided acts of valorous idiocy, would drive even a member of the Most Devout to extremes. And unlikely bedfellows. Due to their at least incidental resemblance, largely thanks to the hair, he was posing as Ser Addam's kinsman: Ser Cristofer Marbrand of Nunn's Deep, a lie that stuck in Edmure's craw every time he had to utter it. Ser Addam said that as it happened, he did have a cousin named Cristofer from Nunn's Deep, but he had buggered off to the Free Cities years ago and nobody had spared a thought for him since. There had been at least half a dozen times when Edmure was on the brink of blurring out his true identity, but he decided against it. His usefulness to Ser Addam, perceived or actual, was the only thing keeping him from being whisked back off to Casterly Rock on the instant – and this time, his accommodations would be far dirtier, darker, and colder.

Besides, he had to at least look as if he'd tried to find Jeyne. Edmure was aware that his prospects of obtaining a full pardon and going back to Riverrun with Roslin someday were entirely tied to actually doing so, but he had. He'd led Ser Addam here, to the Neck, with Howland Reed's mysterious holdfast lurking somewhere in its depths. The man could decide for himself if he wanted to take the gamble.

"I've heard the stories of this place," Marbrand said at last, his voice breaking the unnatural quiet and making Edmure jump. "You did well to hide the girl here, my lord. Any man who ventures into the Neck, whom the crannogmen do not want there, can eat his supper at sunset and be attracting flies by sunrise."

Edmure gave a noncommittal grunt. He was grateful that he would not be of appreciable use in this situation; House Reed were bannermen to the Starks, not the Tullys, meaning that not even he would be guaranteed safe passage through the fens. Assuming that Jeyne and his uncle had, they would have been enjoying Howland's hospitality for quite some time now. He tried to calculate the dates in his head. If Jeyne had been with child when they fled, it would not have been born quite yet; it could not have been conceived but a few weeks before Roslin's at the most, and his wife was still pregnant. If it is a boy, we will name him Robb. Let the Lannisters take that how they would.

Still, Edmure supposed he did have call to be grateful to Ser Addam for letting him stretch his legs a bit. In fact, he had been surprised by how much respect the knight accorded him; he had agreed to let them share the watches at night, and had never raised his voice, let alone a hand. I could kill him one night and ride off. It had tempted Edmure, considerably. But the life of an outlaw on the
run, with the full might of the Lannisters against him, was going to be nasty, brutish, and short.

"Well," Marbrand said. "It's plain we cannot venture into the Neck as is. So we must find a holdfast of suitable size to have a ravenry, and you will write to Lord Howland from there."

*And then I forget. He's a bloody thinker.* Edmure gritted his teeth. "What will I say? That he has to send out Queen Jeyne, or begin to wonder how the chorus of *The Rains of Greywater Watch* might go?"

Marbrand raised an eyebrow. "I don't doubt they have dozens of songs about rain already. As for the letter, surely you'll work out what to write. From here, the nearest town of any size would be Oldstones – or White Harbor, if we wanted to cross the Bite and approach the Neck from the north. I hear that Moat Cailin has been taken from the ironmen, so we may find some way in from there."

*He is not going to give this up.* All of Edmure's optimistic prognostications began to wither on the vine. "Moat Cailin is a reeking shithole regardless of whose banner is flying over it. And I still don't see how either of us can possibly – "

"I'd hoped to do this secretly," Marbrand conceded, "and I am not about to lead a great army into the Neck, but a few more swords at our back wouldn't go amiss. We're well north of your lands and mine, we can't call on any minor vassals or men-at-arms, but perhaps among your wife's kin – "

Edmure stared at him. "Are you mad? Go begging to the *Freys* for help rescuing the woman who drove them to the bloody Red Wedding in the first place? The Freys who slew my nephew and my sister, who playacted at hanging me every day for weeks, who cast down and shit on my house and my honor and my life? If that was a jest, it wasn't funny."

"I apologize." Ser Addam looked embarrassed. "You are correct, I was not thinking of it from your point of view – only from mine, as a Lannister bannerman. They are an utterly despicable lot, it would be better not to involve them. Pray forgive me. White Harbor might be wisest, in that case – there will be no dearth of northmen eager to swear their swords to win back the Young Wolf's queen. Combined with the letter you will send to Lord Howland, we will – "

"He might not answer," Edmure interrupted, knowing it feeble even as he did. "We charged him to hold Jeyne safe in the face of every threat or coercion. If he does not wish to give us safe escort to Greywater, we could have one sword or a thousand. They'd still end up rotting in the bogs or in the belly of a lizard-lion."

"And then you will have to return to Casterly Rock," Marbrand said mildly. "Alone."

Edmure flushed hot. Marbrand was so courteous and well-spoken that it was rare for him to make threats, even indirectly, but that had been the whip hand and no mistake. "And how do you think you'll get the northmen to believe that you only have her best interests at heart?" he snapped. "Even I won't tell that lie for you, not for all the gold you and your lion friends could possibly shit."

"Will you?" Marbrand's tone remained mild; he was not rising to the bait, which was even more infuriating than his pragmatism. "Whether it's gold or shit, you'll get what you merit. I should tell you that if Lady Jeyne is with the Young Wolf's child, I will take her back to Ashemark with me and allow it to be born there. If it is a boy, he will be trained as a knight; if a girl, a suitable marriage arranged."

"Noble sentiment. But if there's any hope of a Stark heir, the north will fight for it."

"Will they? A mere babe?" Marbrand gave a small smile. "I know not if you're attempting to goad
me into killing your own blood, but I don't intend to. If King Joffrey and the Queen Regent had been more moderate in their policies, they might not have had to deal with quite so many insurrections."

Edmure could not deny that. "Joffrey was a vile little shit from the day he was born, and Cersei. . . the gods only know what they intended her to be, but it wasn't a woman. You're a halfway decent sort, Marbrand, if one steps back and squints hard. You can see there's no future with the Lannisters. Why not – "

Ser Addam was already shaking his head. "Fair try, my lord of Tully, but clumsy. King Tommen will grow up to be a good man, if by providence he lives to do so, and I intend to live to serve him."

"Tommen is no true Baratheon and no true king, the entire realm knows that by now. How can you continue to be such a dear friend of Ser Jaime, and close your eyes to what he's done? Or does it not bother you in the least that you're serving a bastard and usurper?"

This time, Marbrand hesitated before answering. Finally he said, "Tommen is the best of a bad lot. Not the king I would choose for winter, it is so, but even winter does not last forever. When spring comes, he will be a man."

With that, he turned his horse and began to canter back the way they'd come, along the meandering, rutted track that served for the kingsroad here. That left Edmure with little choice but to follow sullenly.

Understandably, conversation lagged for the next several days, as they rode out of the fenlands and down toward the Bite. Little fishing villages scattered the coast, and they should be able to hire a scow to take them to White Harbor – if the way was still passable. It was colder every night, snow cloaked the distant mountains of the Vale, and while soldiers often shared blankets for warmth, Edmure determinedly shivered himself to sleep every night, alone. He kept entertaining feverish fancies of what might await them in White Harbor. If he was given access to a ravenry, parchment, and quill. . . he could send letters to his bannermen, he could tell them. . . tell them what? But it was said that Lord Manderly had turned traitor and craven, had pandered and groveled to the Freys and gulped down their monstrous lies about the Red Wedding. If that was so, Marbrand would indeed have no difficulty rustling up a flock of willing co-conspirators. He warned me. He said that if I did not help, he would be forced to recruit from elsewhere. But I did, damn it!

Edmure was consumed in his unquiet thoughts for the rest of the journey. Finally, they reached some no-account little tavern, situated on the Bite and heavily clad in snow. But the innkeeper, on account of some recent incident he was stubbornly close-mouthed about, did not appear inclined to accommodate them or anyone. And at last – apparently to get them to go away – he divulged to them that there was a royal fleet anchored just off the Sisters.

"A royal fleet?" Ser Addam said, when they were unhappily back on the street. "What on earth. . .?"

"They've come after me, of course. You think my sudden disappearance from Casterly Rock would go totally unnoticed?"

Ser Addam shook his head. "They have enough to mind right the moment, and if they should take it into their heads to object, I will explain myself to any man's satisfaction. This fleet is here for some other purpose, and it would behoove us to find out what."

"Suit yourself. I'm not going near that many bloody Lannisters."
Ser Addam gave him that look which reminded him of the circumstances. Exasperated, Edmure yielded.

Looking out to sea, it was plain that the innkeeper was not mistaken. Even in the quickly falling twilight, the distant shapes of at least a dozen ships were visible, moored off the rocky cape of Longsister, and King Tommen's banner flapped on their masts. Torches flitted on the decks, and Edmure's stomach sank into his foot at the thought of imminently making acquaintance with the lot of them. But his hair had grown out, he was wearing a tabard in the Marbrand colors, and men would expect to see the unremarkable Ser Cristofer with his well-known and well-respected kinsman, not Edmure Tully on the lam. As long as you can restrain from doing anything stupid.

It was a chore to find a ferryman willing to make the voyage out at this hour, but Ser Addam had learned from his masters well; he rattled a fat purse of gold until he found a willing taker. Still, it was full dark by the time they set sail, and the wind bit like a whip. Edmure huddled in his cloak, watching the stars come out and occasionally cursing Marbrand under his breath. It wouldn't do to get out of practice.

The moon was rising when they finally reached the anchored Lannister fleet. Marbrand shouted up at the foremost of the ships, and the end result of a period of great confusion was that a longboat was lowered for them. They were taken aboard, the ferryman set back off for port with much grumbling and a few extra coins for his trouble, and Edmure, as they were helped over the rail, was suddenly fronted with his first real test.

"Marbrand?" said the captain, emerging from his cabin. "What in seven hells are you doing out here, ser? They send you to command the attack?"

"Attack?" Ser Addam looked equally blank. "I've been occupied in the westerlands, with my cousin." He made a cursory gesture at Edmure. "I've not been in court. Who are we attacking?"

The captain scratched his beard. "You ask me, it's pouring pitch on the blaze. After the executions, we should be preparing to defend the capital at all costs, whether it's from the river lords, the Freys, or this bloody rumored Aegon Targaryen. You're lucky you've been gone, ser. Madness and stupidity won the day. Though Manderly is a traitor, apparently, so gods know what we'll find out if we prick him and make him squeal a –"

Ser Addam held up both hands. "Slow down, for love of the Mother. What are you talking about? What executions? Why in creation would the river lords or the Freys be planning an attack on King's Landing? And Lord Manderly proved his loyalty by executing Stannis Baratheon's onion knight, his son was returned to him by the queen and the –"

The captain's face wore a look of dawning horror. "Seven hells," he said again. "You don't know any of it?"

Edmure experienced a rapid sinking sensation in his stomach. River lords and Freys. After his wedding, he could not imagine what sort of calamity it would have taken to knit the two together on the same side of any conflict. What could they have done, why would they have raised their gaze to King's Landing, why would they –

The captain looked furtherly confused. "Thought you would have. You were the one who sent the raven. About the Westerlings."

"Was I?" said Ser Addam, with a casualness that sounded distinctly strained.

"Horrible? Why?"

"Ser, I hate to tell you, but it's already done. And that is... Lord Gawen and his family are dead. Executed on the plaza of Baelor just about a seventeenight ago. And Lord Tully's wife too, the Frey. Punished for their collusion in letting Jeyne Westerling escape from –"

A roaring filled Edmure's ears. The captain was saying that the king had personally ordered it, and Ser Addam retorted that no, this could only have come from the queen, and the captain protested that Cersei had been deposed of power and authority, was shut up in Maegor's awaiting her trial – but none of it made any sense to him. He was on his knees, but he couldn't remember falling. All he could hear was the wrenching, shattering roar that was bursting up his throat and rattling against his teeth.

There was talk in concerned voices. Someone enquired of Ser Addam if his kinsman was well, and Ser Addam asked if they could kindly appropriate the captain's cabin for a moment, thank you. Then hands were pulling Edmure to his feet, he was blundering ahead, a door shut behind them, and he exploded.

"How – dare – you!" Words were totally insufficient for the inferno inside him. "Go get me – drag me off – diversion, was it, so you Lannister cunts could get the others – to think I almost believed you when you said you wouldn't harm them – fuck you! Fuck! You!"

Ser Addam, from what Edmure could see through the haze of red, was as white as a sheet. "My lord, I swear, I swear that I never meant for that to happen, never. It's lunacy, sheer screaming lunacy. The more I think of it, the more I think that not even Cersei could have given such an order –"

"Could she not?" Edmure snarled. "When her own beloved lord father thought up my wedding?" It always came back to that. Always and forever. The mistakes he'd made and kept on making, to culminate in the most monstrous one of all. And now it did not even matter. Roslin was dead too. And there is officially nothing in this world that can stop me from killing them all tonight.

Edmure threw himself at Ser Addam.

The knight was still reaching out, trying to comfort him, and so Edmure was able to take him squarely off balance. However, Ser Addam was not one of the Lannisters' most celebrated battle commanders for nothing, and it took him only a bare instant to react; his body was too well-trained, even if his mind might sympathize. Grappling, struggling, they hit the captain's table and went down with an almighty crash. Edmure began to punch every part of Marbrand he could reach, as Ser Addam caught half the blows with one arm and tried to duck, with varying results, the others. But he wasn't hitting Edmure back, save for defensively. He must consider himself too bloody noble to literally kick a man when he was down.

Dimly, Edmure could hear running footsteps, shouting at the door. If they were caught rowing like this, it would take a great deal of fast talking on Ser Addam's part to keep the disguise intact, and that wrought a split second of indecision in him. For all that he was bitterly furious at Marbrand for tricking him like this, for hearing what had happened as a direct result of his meddling in the Westerling affair, the fact remained that the knight was his only protection. Any and every Lannister man-at-arms, on finding out his true identity, would see him only as an escaped traitor, deserving of the same fate that had befallen his wife and the Westerlings. If so, Ser Addam could prate of noble purposes and the preservation of the realm until his face turned blue, for all the good it would do him.

That moment of indecision was enough. Ser Addam rose up underneath him, flipped them over,
and pinned Edmure flat on the floor, just as the cabin door opened. "What in damnation is going on?" the captain complained. "We had enough of that sort of thing in King's Landing, I don't need it on my ship."

"You're right." Blood was trickling down Ser Addam's chin from where one of Edmure's punches had split his lip, and a sheaf of copper hair was hanging in his face, but aside from that and being rather short of breath, he had suffered no lasting damage. It made Edmure feel worse than ever; even his rage was futile. He wanted to rend Marbrand from limb to limb, cave his face in, chop off his sword hand like his beloved Jaime, but all he had ended up with this sad pathetic little spectacle.

"You're right," Marbrand said again as he climbed to his feet – keeping a wary eye on Edmure, apparently to see if he would do the same and attempt to continue where they had left off. "My cousin was enraged to hear of the unlawful executions of the Westerlings. As a boy, he was good friends with Ser Raynald, and the Red Wedding haunts him still."

Even beside himself as he was, Edmure had to admire the skill of Ser Addam's cover; he had lied by telling the truth. And Ser Cristofer Marbrand might well have been acquainted with the eldest Westerling son – there was certainly no one to say that he was not. That would also explain his grief-stricken reaction. Pray the gods the Lannisters hadn't noticed that he had not gone berserk until Roslin's death was mentioned.

*Her and my child both.* He would never know if he had lost a son or a daughter, what they would have grown up to be and to do, the joys and the heartaches they would have brought to him. In his head he saw a vision of three figures, walking down a long white beach. He could tell that one was him, and the other Roslin, but the third was unknown to him. It had the Tully hair, but it was neither male nor female in its likeness. As he watched, the one that was him stood still, but Roslin and the other kept walking, farther and farther down the sand into the light. Just before she stepped into it, she turned, but he could not hear what she called to him; the shade that was his unlived child never looked back. And he knew beyond all doubt that they were truly gone.

Edmure lay flat on the floor as the image faded. His surge of rage-fueled violence had deserted him; he felt utterly dead himself. It occurred to him to wonder, in a vague incurious sort of way, what on earth Ser Addam was going to do now. Jeyne was, as it stood, the last living heir of the Westerlings of the Crag – otherwise, their old and noble House had been exterminated as thoroughly as the Reynes of Castamere. In that regard she had additional value, but if Howland Reed got wind of this, he'd have to be beyond an idiot to entrust her to the custody of Ser Addam Marbrand, bannerman to Casterly Rock and bosom companion of the Kingslayer. Besides, Ser Addam might not be able to keep her safe regardless of whether his intentions were good, and most of his leverage over Edmure had vanished – he could hardly grant him back a family life when the family had been wiped out. He *could* still theoretically secure a pardon and a return to Riverrun, but at the moment, Edmure could care less.

"Mind you," Marbrand was saying, somewhere above him, "I stand by my belief that it was dangerous lunacy. How dare the crown arbitrarily seize and murder a vassal of the standing of Lord Gawen – *and* his entire family, who were pardoned? And the Freys... gods be good, have we not learned what they do when spurned? The Late Lord Walder will just as blithely change sides again if we wrong him – "

"The Late Lord Edwyn, it would be now," the captain interrupted wryly. "It's said that the old man, who was already stricken after his apoplexy, perished directly on hearing the news."

Still on the floor, Edmure let out a gurgling, agonized bray of laughter. It *would* be the most unholy
jest if that rotten old bastard – may he burn in hellfire for all eternity – had expired on receiving word of the treacherous murder of his child, but Edmure took it well salted. Besides, to make it so would mean that he had to rejoice in Roslin's death, and while the world was certainly perverted enough to think up something like this, he had to cling to whatever solace he could.

"The point is," the captain continued, diplomatically overlooking this interjection, "is that Lord Walder's dead. Edwyn rules the Twins now."

"For a fortnight," Ser Addam said, with uncharacteristic cynicism. "If that."

"Be that as it may. Aye, this business with the Westerlings was madness, but – "

"But what?" Marbrand slammed a fist onto the table, which had only just been restored to its proper place after he and Edmure had knocked it over in their brawl. "Why was the order carried out without question? The king is nine, the queen is mad, the Hand is a Tyrell. Surely somewhere along the line it must have occurred to the men tasked with it that it was folly. Did no one try to stop it?"

"M'lord, you know that soldiers are trained to obey. Forgive me, but the queen and Lord Tywin in particular. . . they always let you know that the consequences would be even worse from them, if you failed."

"I know." Marbrand suddenly sounded very old. "Cersei has never been known for mercy, it is true. When I first came to Casterly Rock to serve as a page, she hated me so openly that I used to feed my supper to the dogs for fear she'd poisoned it, and sneak to the kitchens later. She begrudged every moment I spent with Jaime, until he soothed her jealousy somehow. I know the woman she was, and the queen she became. But this is so utterly flagrant, so contrary to even the barest scrap of political sense or personal decency, that I cannot help but suspect another hand at work in it. Some ulterior motive. I can't say what. Seven hells, did no one try to stop it?"

"One did." The captain had a strange expression on his face.

"Who?"

"Jaime."


"Apparently not. Or he's been found. Can't say why he was there, or what possessed him, but he charged the scaffold single-handed, killed Boros Blount and Meryn Trant and Osmund Kettleblack. Likely would have killed more, but it seems he's taken some horrendous wound in his adventures, and it felled him before he could. He's arrested and under guard in the Red Keep. Addam. . ." The captain hesitated. "Addam, he's a dead man."

"Jaime has always wanted to be a hero," Marbrand murmured. "And he deserves a commendation for killing Blount and Trant, just as he deserved a commendation for killing Aerys."

The captain nodded somberly. Neither of them said anything until Marbrand finally spoke again. "Where are we bound – White Harbor? Why?"

"To teach the Manderlys a lesson, as I said. Lord Roose Bolton sent word that they've turned traitor. We were dispatched from King's Landing the same night as the executions."

"Murders. Call them what they are. And. . . truly? After the result of the last order that was blindly
obeyed, you're about to do it again?"

"I don't like it, no. But Tommen is the king, and the heir of House Lannister. You and me, Addam, we're westermen. We have to do what he says."

"Doubtless Lord Gawen thought the same."

Something in Ser Addam's voice made Edmure start. He saw the captain and the knight staring at each other, and the realization crossing the captain's face. "Seven Above. You'd have us turn traitor?"

"It would only be traitorous if these were Tommen's orders. They're not. I'm not entirely sure that they're Cersei's, either. If we attack and burn White Harbor in the wake of the murders, that would forever alienate any lone northerner who's not already revolted by the vile lords we forced on them. Let's do some simple arithmetic. With the south, the west, and the north in arms against us, and the east in arms for the Targaryen pretender, where does that leave us?"

The captain paused only briefly. "Dead."

"Exactly. Now, listen to me. When we arrive in White Harbor, Ser Wylis will offer parley – he is an honorable man, and a timid one. Keep quiet and listen, but afterwards, when you return to the ships, you must make the other captains understand. If we want any of the Seven Kingdoms reconciled to Tommen's rule ever again – I think it rather more likely that the Long Summer will come first, but that cannot stop us trying – we must show ourselves to be something other than fiends, fools, children, and madmen. I'll speak for you, if need be, until we convince them. Then we will raise our banners and take the fleet to battle. Against the Boltons."

"You're... sure?" The captain looked tempted, but still hesitant. "The Boltons are the lawful new Wardens of the North... the son, he married the Stark girl..."

"Ramsay Bolton is an abomination and the Stark girl is a fraud. Believe me, I've heard it from very reliable sources. And what do you think would give the northerners more cause to love us? Ridding them of beasts who torture women and make them into cloaks, or burning White Harbor and killing those women ourselves? Finding the Young Wolf's widow and returning her honorably to them, or seeing to it that she joins her family in death?"

The captain's eyes went wide. "You're a wise man, Addam," he said at last. "Aye, I'll do it. My fellows will listen, I know it. Nobody liked that business or this one. I've got a son I haven't seen in three years. I want this war to be over."

"Good man." Ser Addam took him by the hand, and the two men clapped each other on the back. "You and everyone."

Edmure remained on the floor, and watched them leave. He lay gazing at the ceiling, feeling calm and empty and completely drained, destroyed and remade and undone all in the span of an hour. And outside the door, orders were shouted, anchors were weighed, and the fleet set sail for White Harbor.
Asha

All around her, snow scythed relentlessly out of the iron-grey sky, turning the trees to wraiths and the world to shadow. She tasted it scouring in her mouth when she breathed, like sand, and it squeaked frigidly beneath her sodden boots. Asha Greyjoy was no expert on snow; her world was wrought of salt and stone and steel. Snow she left to Theon, the Starks' plaything and now the Boltons'. But it did not require a maester or a northerner to tell her that winter was coming, had come, was here, might never end. She'd had a bellyful of it on that march with the Baratheon host, but as a hostage of some importance, she'd been spared the worst of it. Now it was bent on killing her, would seep through her skin and stop her heart, would always find her, would always catch her – if Ramsay Bolton did not first.

She'd long since lost any idea of how long they had been running. Tormund would not let them halt or barely even slow, breaking trail in the massive drifts, always looking over his shoulder in a way that grated on her nerves even though the baying of hounds, the screams of men, and the clash of arms had long since faded. They had to get as far away as possible, as fast as possible, and Asha could not think about it, not if she wanted to keep going. It was hard to wrap her head around how quickly the whole thing had fallen apart. One moment she had been waiting below, hidden in the trees, watching Theon labor his way up the great stone walls toward Mance Rayder's crow cage. Her heart had been in her throat the entire time, and she gasped when the wind almost pitched them off into the snows far below.

Tormund, Soren Shieldbreaker, and Harle the Huntsman had already been absent, in charge of causing the diversion at the eastern gate, and when the two tiny figures vanished over the outer curtain wall, that was cue for the rest of them to follow suit at the main one. But something in Asha's instincts had been chirping at her, even as she watched Tall Toregg standing at the foot of the rope ladder, head craned back as he waited for the fugitives to reappear. Something is wrong.

And so, as the next vanguard of wildlings sounded their horns, bolted from cover, and rushed the gate, Asha had sprinted in the opposite direction. Away around the Broken Tower, toward the encroaching fringes of the wolfswood. It was a pissantly craven maneuver, to be sure, but Asha had always thought that extolling the virtues of a heroic death was all very well and good for some soft southron singer, sitting on his plump arse in a warm safe castle. The ironmen had always taken a harder and more practical look at the necessities of life, and the driving need to survive.

It was possible to pinpoint the moment that she knew the trap sprung for certain. The unholy racket the wildlings were making in the distance changed tenor somehow, and she looked back just in time to see Tall Toregg get shot, felled by the barrage of arrows hissing off the battlements. She glanced up to see the pink banners with their flayed men, flapping over the merlons – and, horribly, understood.

After that, everything turned into a free-for-all. Suddenly she felt Theon's terror, his broken voice whispering of Ramsay Bolton come hunting in the dark, and she struggled through the grasping dim trees, twisting her ankle but not caring, only fleeing. She was alone, alone, she'd die out here, and worse, she'd lost Theon. Sundered the promise she'd made to him and to herself and their mother. For a moment, the grief and the guilt were so overwhelming that she stumbled to a halt, seriously considering the idea of lying down and waiting for the end. Death by cold was said to be a gentle one; gentler for certain than fire, and gentler in spades than Ramsay Bolton. It would be better than any of the alternatives, and at least she could say she'd chosen it on her terms.
Then, like a good hard cuff across the face, sense returned. Hadn't she just been deriding the bards of foolish paean for heroic deaths? Bad they very well might be, but a coward's death was lauded by no singer that bestrode the earth, greenlander or ironborn. And she was a Greyjoy, Lord Balon's blood and seed, the rightful heiress to the Seastone Chair. I cannot die and let the Crow's Eye win. Him and his motley gang of mutes and monsters, crawling over her homeland and choking it as blue as her dearest uncle's lips. And his eye. That smiling mad eye, blue as blue. . . there are tales of other creatures with such eyes, and he is said to have known that which no other mortal man would have dared. . .

And that was when, with diabolically perfect timing, a hand grabbed her shoulder.

Biting a scream, Asha spun around, scrabbling for her dagger. She'd thought all sorts of things in that instant, and it took several instants more for her surging adrenaline to subside long enough to recognize Tormund Giantsbane. They stared at each other in paralyzed incomprehension, and then he grabbed her arm in his great paw and dragged them away into the wilderness.

That had been hours ago. At first Asha had held out a forlorn hope that other survivors might straggle in. She'd stopped hoping that by now.

Twilight was shrouding the woods in hoary violet by the time they simply had to stop. In fact, Asha's ankle had begun to give out several miles earlier, and Tormund was carrying her on his back. The old wildling was stout and strong and steely-hearted, but she could feel him shaking with exhaustion as he put her down. Her feet were numb, her fingers useless, and her very blood felt chilled and sluggish; she could no longer even shiver. Dully, Asha knew that this meant she was dangerously close to freezing.

"What's our plan now?" Even the soft words sounded as loud as a shout in the darkening forest, her speech clumsy and slurred. She thought of the ruined holdfast, singing to Theon as the snow scratched at the walls. "Where are we going?"

"I'm not after having a plan just now, lass," Tormund admitted. Great spears of hoarfrost clung in his white beard, giving him the look of some vengeful winter god. "After all, the last one didn't quite go as expected. Har."

"No. No, it didn't." Hugging herself, Asha tried to get back to her feet and walk a few paces, but her legs wouldn't hold up, and she collapsed again. She watched as Tormund struggled to make a fire, brushing snow off bent tree branches and piling them up at the center of the clearing. "Are you sure that's – ?"

"It's death for sure without it, lass." Tormund fumbled in his voluminous skin cloak, extracted a pair of flints, and produced a spark in one go, a skill that Asha had to admire. "But you're right. The wolves will be hunting tonight, and not all of 'em on four feet."

Asha absorbed this in an abstract sort of way. "We're dead out here," she said. "Even if they don't catch us. Unless we find some sort of shelter, we're dead within two days."

"Ah, lass. Nonsense. You and I could make it for a week." The grimness in Tormund's eyes belied his attempted jest. "Nothing we meet is like to be our friends, though. The Bastard's boys, or Stannis, or –"

"Stannis." Asha suddenly felt the cold again, riving through her to the heart. She started to shiver uncontrollably, her frozen sweat melting in the heat of the blaze Tormund was now industriously kindling. "My brother was left behind in Winterfell."
"So was my son." Tormund's booming deep voice was the closest thing to soft it could ever come. "And men I've hunted with, drank with, bled with, all these many years. You know what's become of them, lass."

"They could still. . . some of them could have. . ." She was clinging to delusions, Asha knew, but she could not entirely shake the hunch. "The Boltons still hold the castle, but Stannis is tightening the noose. And aye, if he found them, he'd kill them. But not if . . ."

Tormund frowned at her. "I'm not seeing where you're leading wi' this, lass. You and your brother scarce escaped from Stannis once with your skin. You try again, in hopes of getting your brother's flayed corpse out to kiss goodbye, your arse will be toasted for that demon god o' theirs before you can say —"

"That's it." It felt as if there was something stuck in her throat. "We know we'll die out here alone, and we certainly can't go back to the Boltons. Theon and I were valuable pieces to Stannis. He needs us. If we found his army, it might be he'd agree to march on Winterfell in all his strength at last."

"Why?"

"Because of me." The coldness Asha felt now was one the fire could not touch. "If I offered myself back to them, Stannis might agree to let Theon go. I . . . I have several different uses. I could marry Ser Justin, I could burn to death, I could tell everyone how decisively he defeated the ironborn. . ."

"If they find us out here, lass, they'll have us prisoner whether we agree to it or not."

"I. . . I know." Her leverage was indeed horrendously flimsy. But she had to hope that Stannis Baratheon, lord and master of all things law and order, might just hold to such an arrangement. *If I told Stannis that I was his to do with as he wished. . . returned forever to his power and sworn not to try another escape, to become Lady Massey and bear half a dozen blonde smirking sons. Sons who would wear the Baratheon stag on their breasts, and worship the Lord of Light.*

As a woman of the Iron Islands, who had captained her own longship and killed men in battle, whose blood was salt and whose god held court in the great halls of the sea, who bedded the men she chose and drank moon tea afterwards, this sounded to Asha a fate almost worse than death. And yet once more she thought of Theon – desperate to know his name, his identity, a prize lost since that scared scrawny nine-year-old had stepped onto the ship with Ned Stark and left his home forever, and beaten almost beyond recall by Ramsay. *I have to.*

Tormund was watching her curiously. He must have mirrored her thoughts uncannily to their conclusion, for he spoke suddenly, surprising her. "There was a time when I could never imagine having the least bit to do with a crow. I knew they were black-hearted devils and thieves and tricksters, and they'd rip out me heart and have it to supper, as quick as I'd do it myself. But then, the rum thing happened."

"What?" Asha asked, confused.

"I met one." Tormund guffawed. "Truly met one, that is, not on t' other end of a blade. And I learned what he was, and he learned what I was. And then the day dawned, it should happen, when Mance Rayder's good-sister rode up to me on behalf o' that crow, and said that he'd agreed to let us pass the Wall to safety. I'll tell you, it sounded as full as queer to my ears as this idea o' yours sounds now. Crows and wildlings, you and Stannis Baratheon. . . they go about as well together. But in the end, lass, it was the only way."
Asha blinked. "The crow? That would be... Jon Snow? What happened?"

"They killed him," Tormund said sadly. As Asha was about to protest that this seemed to undo the entire point of his story, the wildling went on, "Not my folk, his own. Stabbed him in the courtyard. It was for his sake as much as mine that I came south to Winterfell. And no matter whether it's with Stannis or without him, I'll not be crawling back home like a cur and a craven."

Asha was quiet. It was an atrociously dangerous gamble to make, on the threadbare possibility that Theon was still alive. But if he was dead, her value to Stannis increased tenfold. She was his last chance to prove how he'd brought down Greyjoy power, and it would be wiser to keep her alive, always around to display, than waste her blood on a nightfire. She even imagined that if she was allied to Stannis by dint of marriage to his loyal knight, he would feel honor-bound to assist her in the fight for her inheritance. Indeed, he'd have to. It would bring the Iron Islands under the purview of his crown, the same Iron Islands that had once risen up against his brother, and rid him of a dangerous enemy in Euron Crow's Eye. And if when it was done, I should find marriage to Massey too intolerable, the bridges of Pyke are known to be dangerous. My own lord father died by falling from one.

At that moment, Asha made up her mind. "Tormund," she said. "If you sleep a few hours, may we leave at moonrise?"

The wildling squinted at the sky. "Could be moonrise now, for all I can tell in this muck. And Toregg – " his voice caught briefly at the mention of his son, but he coughed and went on – "Toregg said that the Baratheon men were in the woods all around Winterfell. It's dumb luck we haven't struck on them yet."

"Dumb luck favors the wise." Asha got to her knees, then tried her ankle again. Blinding pain promptly lanced through it, and Tormund had to catch her. "And if that's so, how hard can it be?"

Tormund looked at her a long moment, then sighed, put his hands under her legs, and lifted her up. She clung to him pig-a-back, like a small child, and held tight as he wearily lurched into motion once more. Apparently sleep would have to wait.

They'd been traveling for another hour at least, the woods dark as ink and a thin crescent moon scoring the clouds, when they spotted a witchy halo of torchlight not that far ahead. Voices drifted after it, muffled by the wind, and Asha found herself holding her breath. It could just as well be Freys, if not Boltons, and then it wouldn't matter how many plans she or anyone had in mind. They'd still be –

"Halt!"

Asha had never been so glad to see the wrong end of a longaxe in her life. Two longaxes, actually. They were heavy dark steel, crossed in their path by a pair of short, squat, fur-clad mountain clansmen who looked half bear themselves; it made her think of Alysane Mormont, and wonder if she'd ever made it to the Wall with Lady Arya. These two were not Mormonts, however, but Flints or Liddles or Wulls. Stannis.

"Har," Tormund said. "Cold night, is it, lads?"

The clansmen peered at him suspiciously. His cloth was in no better estate than their own, and in fact Asha would have been hard pressed to tell the difference between any of them, but they seemed to know that he was a wildling. They would; they'd grown up in the wilderness of the far north, skirmishing with the raiders who happened along periodically to filch their livestock and
womenfolk. Both of them took a firmer grip on their axes, and Left growled, "You come to join up with us after all?"

"I'd chop both me feet off first," said Tormund, with admirable if ill-advised honesty. "It wasn't my own idea. The woman's. Where's the king?"

The clansmen exchanged a startled look. "None of your business. What woman?"

"Me," Asha rasped from Tormund's back. "Fetch Ser Clayton Suggs. He'll confirm that I am, in fact, a cunt."

"You?" Left nearly dropped his axe, while Right's jaw fell open and stayed that way. "The Greyjoy chit? Piss and damnation, you gave Stannis the bloody slip! What are you doing here now?"

"I can always go back, if you like. But I won't. Where's the bloody king?"

The two glanced at each other much longer this time before they finally answered. "Camped a mile distant," Right said. "We'll take you."

Asha had never thought that she would ever in her life have been grateful to hear that Stannis Baratheon was in the vicinity, but she was. Tormund put her down, and her arms were immediately taken by the corresponding clansmen. They were both shorter than her, but wiry strong, and her feet skidded the snow like a broken puppet's as they hustled her through the fortified ring of tents and sentinels. The army seemed a deal smaller than the last time Asha had seen it, and she wondered just what Stannis had managed to pull over on Ramsay. She had no intention of underestimating him. After watching Arnolf Karstark transform into the king's double, she had known for certain that something more than merely mortal gave weight to his claim, that it wasn't only his tenacity and rock-headedness that had gotten him this far. It was easy to dismiss scurrilous gossip when it was only that, gossip.

Stannis' tent flew no banner, and was staked to all sides with a double palisade of sharpened sticks and torches. Two more clansmen stood on guard outside, and did not succeed in disguising their astonishment on sight of Asha. But at a brusque nod from their fellows, they pulled the flap aside without a word.

Inside, a skeleton clad in fur was bent over a brazier, scratching out a letter by the dim, smoky light. He had to periodically move the inkhorn closer to thaw it out, and the shadows caught in his gaunt cheeks like depthless pits. But when he lifted his head and regarded her with eyes that were still as blue as cornflowers, Asha knew that it was him beyond any doubt.

Why is it that all my foes have such eyes?

If King Stannis was shocked by her return, he gave no sign of it aside from a blink. Then he inclined his head half an inch. "Lady Asha. The hour is late."

"It is, Your Grace." Asha went to a knee, partly from a desire to hedge her bets and partly because her ankle had just given out again. "I would parley with you."

"Parley?" Stannis snorted. Laying aside his quill, he rose to his feet. "Is that what you call what you did? Trick my men and fleeing with your traitor brother? By law, you forfeited the right to parley then and there."

Speak quickly. And carefully. Asha prided herself on having a way with words, but those were always glib witticisms and sarcastic rejoinders, the sort of banter exchanged at the helm of a ship or in the hall at drink. Nothing to treat with this man the way she now needed to treat with him. "I
have just arrived from Winterfell, it may interest you to learn. Mance Rayder has been freed and Ramsay Bolton has returned."

Stannis's eyes, if possible, narrowed further. "I am aware. Of the latter, at least. I suspect he will not find his homecoming as triumphant as he expects."

This was not welcome news to Asha. If Stannis already had a plan in train to deal with the Bastard, that severely lessened the chances of his departing to rescue Theon, Mance, or any of the others. "What do you mean?"

A thin smile curled Stannis' fleshless lips. "All the feints and attacks we made on him were not in vain. There are several of my clansmen gone down beneath the castle; they were able to sneak in while he was out hunting us. Your turncloak brother told me of how a spate of mysterious murders gripped it before, how it sowed division and mistrust among Manderly and Bolton and Frey. I see no reason not to continue."

"There are clansmen hiding under Winterfell?" Asha repeated, startled. Mayhaps the prognosis was not so dim after all. Or more dim than ever, who bloody knew. "And my brother. . . Your Grace, I have come to make an offer to you."

"Have you?" Stannis' tone did not change. "What can you possibly give me, Lady Asha?"

She took a deep breath. "Myself. As bride for Ser Justin. And the Iron Islands."

Stannis laughed, a sound like breaking icicles. "The Iron Islands rightfully belong to me. You have no authority to give them or withhold them."

"Aye, but you will still have to take them. And the blood in the sea will be yours and your men's, if you intend to do so by force. I can make it much the easier."

"Why would you do this?" Those pitted eyes trained on her. "I understand how bargains are made, Lady Asha. Favors are given for favors paid. What do you want?"

Another breath. "My brother's life."

That startled him. He opened his mouth, shut it, then turned away. "Your brother – "

"Rescued Mance Rayder from his crow cage, and may yet be alive in the dark places beneath Winterfell. May even have met up with your clansmen, if they are still down there. But neither he nor they will be able to get out, with Ramsay Bolton returned. You will lose them all, and for what purpose?"

Stannis' jaw clenched. "I mean to burn your brother for his crimes."

"Your Grace." Asha took a step forward. "I . . . after we fled, Theon told me a peculiar tale. He said that Bran and Rickon Stark are still alive, that it was not them he killed but a pair of common miller's boys. I do not understand it myself, but I do not believe he was lying. I don't know where the Starks would be if it was true, but he never did it. I swear."

"Still alive?" Stannis could not dismiss that out of hand, she could see, but he was plainly unwilling to place much weight on the tale of a shattered, more-than-half-mad creature like Reek. Not Reek, Theon. "Your brother was raving."

"Aye, he was. But not about this."
"Even if it was so, he still killed two innocent children. And my clansmen all believe that he –"

Nothing for it. Asha looked the king straight in the eye. "Fratricide is a mortal sin, Your Grace."

The silence in the wake of those words was crackling. For an instant she thought he was going to jump at her, that he might draw the supposedly magic sword that lay in its sheath on the table, cut out her heart and bring a prompt end to anything she had dared to suppose about him. But she’d heard all the stories from his men as they labored north. Stories of shadows and swords and what they knew, or suspected, of how Renly Baratheon had met his end in the tent that night. She thought of the ruby glimmering as it glamoured Arnolf Karstark. *I know.*

"You. . ." Stannis had not been prepared for that. "You dare lay that charge at my feet, as if it was.
. ."

"Theon is my brother as Renly was yours. Whatever I have thought of him in the past, he is my own flesh and blood. Leaving him to die at the hands of the Boltons would be the same as killing him myself."

Stannis’ face was as pale as if he was a corpse himself. *He does look one.* "I – when my brother died, I was sleeping in my tent. I dreamed of shades, and blood on green plate, and a woman screaming. But when I woke, my hands were clean. I did not – " He gave his head an angry shake, as if he could not believe that he was wasting his time by vindicating himself to her. "He was a traitor. A traitor in arms. It was just."

"Justice is not all there is in the world, Your Grace," Asha said, knowing that to Stannis this would sound as if someone was informing him that there were other things besides air to breathe. "This is my bargain. I will marry Ser Justin with no word of complaint, and when I am Lady of the Iron Islands, swear to you as my liege lord and king. In return, I ask that you grant me military support in claiming it from my uncle Euron, and that you bring your army back to Winterfell and clean the Boltons out of there for good. And that if and when my brother should be found, you spare him and return him to my keeping, after having him tell your clansmen what he has told me."

"The clans. . . they grow restless." Stannis turned away again. "They increasingly dislike the Lord of Light and they increasingly dislike me."

"I should imagine that has something to do with the Lord of Light’s fondness for burning innocent folk to death on pyres, Your Grace."

"Your brother is not innocent, Lady Asha," Stannis snapped. "And the Lord of Light has chosen me for his champion, I cannot –"

"I never claimed that Theon was innocent." Asha took another step forward. Her voice was growing heated. "Only innocent of what you would kill him for. You already did away with your own brother, but no matter what you tell yourself, that does not give you the right to do away with –"

"Silence!" Stannis roared, his voice smashing the air like a fist. "Your insolence most badly becomes a woman in your place, Lady Asha. Everything you offer is mine already. Everything you want is within my power to grant or take away already. What do you give me but words and wind?"

"I give you peace, Your Grace." Asha spread her hands. "Forgive me for saying so, but I see no peace about you now."
Stannis stared at her for a nerve-racking moment. She wondered if the guards were pretending to play deaf. Then he said, "The attack is almost prepared already. I do not intend to let Ramsay Bolton sit in the Starks' seat an instant longer than I must, you may believe that."

"I am gladened to hear it, Your Grace. But my part in this is not the battle. You promised Ser Justin my hand. I know you did not mean to break it."

Stannis was plainly discomfited. At last he said, "You haggle like a fishwife, which I suppose is fitting for a Greyjoy of Pyke. I must – consult." By the way his eyes slid toward the burning brazier, she knew who he meant with.

"Must you, Your Grace? Or should you remember that you are the king, and as you were just telling me, no woman masters you?"

"Your tongue is your own worst enemy. Mayhaps I should order it cut out." Stannis lowered one hand just above the glowing coals. "Yet it does seem... strange. There are times when I feel almost that I am walking in a dream, that I never woke when I went to sleep that night before Renly died. I do not expect you to believe this, Lady Asha, nor do I much care if you do, but I loved my brother as you love yours. If I should not have a son, I would have had him follow me. It was his right, inasmuch as the throne is my right now. If he had but waited, if he had been more prudent..."

Renly Baratheon couldn't have found prudent with a dozen bloodhounds. Nor a woman's bed, as the tales would have it. There had never been much affection between the Baratheon brothers, Asha knew, even as there had been little between the Greyjoys. Yet something in Stannis' voice told her that he was not lying, that he was barely even capable of doing so. "I am sorry, Your Grace. You will have had enough of me for the nonce, I am certain. May I find a bed?"

Stannis continued to look at her with those unsettling eyes. Then he nodded once, dismissing her.

Stumbling out into the night air, which felt more frigid than ever after the stifling closeness of the tent, Asha hunted among the hodgepodge of disreputable-looking shelters until she found one that looked marginally less likely to fall on her head. There were furs enough inside, and sleep was already clutching at her like a murky black well. She fell headfirst and, fittingly, drowned.

She had no idea how much later it was when her sticky eyes finally opened. A day, perhaps more. Grey light sliced across her face, and there were shouts and crunching footsteps outside. It took her a small eternity to remember where she was, and then it all came crashing back. Heedless of her grogginess, her uncertainty, her likely betrothal and potential sacrifice, she pulled her cloak and boots back on and staggered out into the camp. It was alive with a riot of activity, clansmen scooting here and there like furry beetles and shouting at each other. And a sledge hauled by several more of them was just edging through the snow, and on it lay some immense motionless... Man?

Asha hadn't expected that. As she came closer, however, she saw that it was: a great fat man pale and wan with pain, blood soaking through the furs and bandages that he had been clumsily swaddled in. His eyes were closed, but they fluttered slightly at the noise. Someone was shouting for Stannis.

The king emerged a moment later, glanced around, stopped short, and stared. Then he turned his attention to the clansmen pulling the sledge. "Goodmen," he said. "I left you in Winterfell."

"Sorry, Y'Grace." One of the men shrugged. "We had to come back. You'll be pleased, though. Three of the Bastard's boys killed, and this one here saved. Bravest man I've ever seen, 'specially considering what they done to him. We heard him say as well, when we were hiding... we heard
him say the Starks, that they was alive."

"I heard something similar last night." Stannis did not look at Asha as he spoke. "And there cannot be two men in the Seven Kingdoms of the same. . stature. Lord Wyman Manderly?"

The fat lord's eyelashes fluttered again, weakly. "My lord of Baratheon," he whispered. "I am most indebted. To you, and your clansmen."

Stannis acknowledged the words with a curt nod. "They have served their purpose. But I do wonder why they've chosen to save you. Were you not the very one who mounted Ser Davos's head and hands over White Harbor? If that is so, nothing you can possibly say will stop me from killing you here."

At that, Lord Manderly's pain-bleared eyes opened fully. "My lord," he said. "Davos Seaworth is alive. I know. I saved him myself."

Asha watched Stannis' face closely. Even that man could not disguise his emotions entirely, and it took him a moment to get himself back under his usual impeccable control. He said only, "How?"


"I am your king," Stannis said, but without some of his usual asperity.

Lord Manderly smiled, agonized. Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and the clansmen put their shoulders back to the harness of the makeshift travois and clipped away. Stannis watched them go, wearing an expression not dissimilar to one he might have worn if he had just been hit very hard in the face.

Asha wanted to remind him that she had told him, but it was plain that he already knew. He whirled on her, his heavy cloak trailing in the snow, and scrutinized her until it felt almost painful. Then he said, as if merely concluding the conversation they had been having last night, "It seems there are yet a few surprises left in store after all. Very well, Lady Asha, you have your bargain. You will marry Ser Justin, you will take the Iron Islands back in your name and then swear fealty to me, and you will have your brother's life. For then, as soon as aught is prepared, we will march on Winterfell once and for all, and make an end of every Bolton that walks this earth."
In the searching dark, pressed up against him like a child with its nose to the window, he could hear the staggering footsteps and the ragged breathing of the ghosts that stalked him. Even knowing that the footsteps were his own and that ghosts did not breathe made no difference. In this place they walked beyond a doubt, dripping blood and sighing sadly. The swords are gone, the swords that kept them in their tombs. I saw when I came down with Barbrey Dustin. Shades beyond count, Starks both long gone and terrifyingly present. The nearest thing I have left to kin, all dead. Them and Asha, but he would never see her again.

There had been a time, in the first few years after Theon's arrival, when he had imagined himself here one day. That Lord Stark would wed him to Sansa, and he would somehow contrive to inherit the castle in her name. That then he would lie here, in death as worthy as any of them. Lord Greyjoy, the squid wolf. Even just thinking it made him realize how utterly impossible it was. A boy's foolish dream. I could never have ruled the north through Sansa. Not unless Robb and Bran and Rickon all died without issue. . . oh Robb, I didn't, I never. . .

The one thing Theon was grateful for was that Robb himself was not down here. He did not think he could have stood to set eyes on that tomb and everything it represented, all the ironies, all the disasters. And yet at the same time he craved it, would have gone there so he could fall on his knees and beg the absolution that Robb could never give. Would have laid peacefully on the stones, waited to die with his king – or use the knife that Tormund had given him, if he thought his courage would fail. I would. I would. The Stark dead might still come for him. My dreams turned to flesh at last.

It made Theon want to laugh. It made Theon want to weep. But as it happened, Theon could do neither. He had Mance to save.

Yet the deeper they foraged into the crypts, the less certain Theon became of whether he was saving them or killing them. It was true that Lord Manderly had told them that the Kings of Winter were their only hope, but winter, as Theon had cause to know, made for a cruel bedfellow. Time vanished entirely in this dark freezing warren, so it was impossible to know how long it had been, but Mance was in such bad shape that they had to stop often. They slept and woke fitfully, curled up together on the hard stone and shivering until their teeth rattled. Both of them had the same nightmares.

It unsettled Theon considerably to realize that of the two of them, he was in fact the stronger. It was him who, with his clumsy lopsided gait and frail stooped shoulders, had to almost carry Mance down the endless narrow steps, steps that not even Stark feet had trod in generations. The vaults down here were ancient and cramped, the ceilings barely above their heads, the walls glittering with hoarfrost and webbed with some hardy winter lichen. It was edible, as Theon discovered when he broke off a crusty patch and forced it down. The only feast in these halls was the one laid for the dead, and they had to lick the dampness off the stones in an effort to wet their parched throats. They had to find a way out, or starve. The state they were in, it wouldn't take long.

Manderly said there was something here. Something to find. For the life of him Theon could not imagine what. Unless he was somehow to master the Stark spirits and lead them up to do valiant battle, to defend their ancestral home from these foul intruders, an idea that choked a demented giggle out of him for its sheer ludicrousness. Gods, Robb, where are you? You should have killed him. Robb Stark and Ramsay Snow, the two halves of his life. They shared the same initials, and both had wed women named Jeyne, which had undone them in different ways. But Stark was not
Snow, and Snow was not snow. One a king, the other a monster. \textit{I am trapped between them more unfathomably than ever before, but I'll find it, I will, gods have mercy, have mercy. . .}

Theon only dimly recognized the names graven on the tombstones they passed. Kings in the North from long before the Conquest, their deeds had doubtless been drilled into him by Maester Luwin at some point, but all had fled now. Sometimes Mance knew, however, and would tell their tales, as much as he could before his strength gave out again.

They were very deep under Winterfell by now. When Theon looked at the stones that surrounded them – when he could see them – he could make out no mark of mason or chisel, only smooth unbroken blocks far too large for even the strongest scaffolding to lift. He thought of the legends surrounding Winterfell's raising, that giants had laid the foundations under the direction of Brandon the Builder. He had always dismissed that as just another Stark invention, yet he had been perfectly willing to believe that his family's hall in Pyke was built on the bones of the largest kraken ever to wash up from the deep. Yet looking around him now, Theon was hard pressed to deny it. \textit{But how did Brandon master the giants?} Whenever she wasn't scaring Sansa and Bran and Rickon with tales of how giants ground the bones of little northern children to make their bread, Old Nan had told of how they were wild and proud, a race and a law unto themselves, a remnant of a time when magic was strong in the world. \textit{But they are no more.}

"They're gone," Theon said aloud, as if to confirm it.

"Who?" Mance's breathing had begun to whistle in the past few day-nights. Even opening his eyes was plainly a trial.

"Giants." Theon swept a hand at the barrow. "They must have built this. But they're gone."

Mance laughed, cutting off with a grunt of agony. "No, turncloak. They're not. You should have been. At the battle for the Wall. Lord Snow and his men. Feathered themselves half a dozen at least. And Mag the Mighty. Died in the tunnel. With Donal Noye the one-armed smith."

"Battle?" Theon was startled. He'd heard talk of it among the Boltons and the northmen, and from Stannis as well, but all of them had given the impression that it had been a mere hiccough, an ill-mannered backwoods assault beaten off by the superior numbers and divine right of the more civilized folk. Likewise, the wildlings had had their own opinion of it, but a factual word coming out of Tormund Thunderfist's mouth was almost as rare as an honest Frey. Yet it seemed he'd been closer to the truth in this instance.


"I. . . I did. Once." The only song under the Dreadfort was the screaming.

Mance was quiet a moment. Then he cleared his throat and, in a hushed, cracking voice, began to sing.

\begin{verbatim}
"In stone halls they burn their great fires  
in stone halls they forge their sharp spears  
Whilst I walk alone in the mountains,  
with no true companion but tears.  
They hunt me with dogs in the daylight  
they hunt me with torches by night  
For those men who are small can never stand tall  
whilst giants still walk in the light.
\end{verbatim}
Ooooh, I am the LAST of the giants
so learn well the words of my song
For when I am gone the singing will fade
And the silence shall last long and long."

"Don't." Theon shivered, looking over his shoulder nervously. He didn't need giants joining ghosts. "Please don't."

Mance shot him a mischievous look and kept on singing. At the chorus he gave the last of his strength to it, roaring, "OOOOH, I AM THE LAST OF THE GIANTS," until the very stones seemed to shudder, to wake and answer. And as Theon stood on edge, straining, he heard Mance's singing echoing away down the vault, echoing in a different way, not on rock but something... open.


Theon thought he felt a movement of air; the stillness down here was otherwise profound. Knowing that, he knew as well that the time had come to face whatever was lurking in the shadows. Taking a deep breath that rattled to his missing toes, he hitched Mance's arm tighter around his shoulders and started to lurch down the hall. If they ever lost the direction, all Mance had to do was sing again.

Both of them were gagging with the effort by the time they finally ducked under a low stone lintel and into a small, circular chamber. They'd always been at the mercy of torches before, burning what few there were left and blundering and groping in the dark until they found another one, but this place had a faint reddish glow of its own, enough to throw bloody shadows. A tall statue stood at the end, above a carved sepulcher. It was there from whence the light came.

Every hair on the back of Theon's neck stood up. He didn't know what it was, what this strange stain on his bones was, or the taste of quicksilver and flame in his mouth, but he did know that this was something utterly beyond his or anyone's comprehension, something that had endured until a thousand generations now of people had passed by. Some force moved in him, brought him closer step by step, until he was looking down at the effigy of the tomb. No face he'd seen before, no name he'd heard. The runes were unreadable to him besides, a language long beyond the use or memory of man. It was foolish to think that Mance's song had called to them somehow, woken them — but he knew of uprisings, of resurrections, of monsters that wore familiar faces — Mance whispered an oath and stopped dead.

"What?" Since Theon was still carrying him, that entailed him to stop as well. He looked anxiously at his companion. "What is it? What does that say?"

Mance didn't answer. Then he let go of Theon and hobbled forward. He reached the tomb and put both hands on it, spreading his battered fingers on the stone. He too had less than ten, but this was the first time Theon had noticed which ones. The wildling king was missing the thumb on his left hand, the little finger and the middle finger on his right. Considering what he did to Ramsay, he's lucky not to miss a hand. But Ramsay's torture had always been as excruciatingly slow and detailed as possible. Likely he would have seen just taking a hand as an insult to his craftsmanship.

Theon shook his head hard. No, I have to be strong. "What is it?"

Still Mance was silent. He lifted his left hand and traced the runes with his intact fingers, shaping them out, his mouth working as some epiphany apparently struck him like a charging aurochs. Then he said, "Ahai."
"Gods bless you." Theon giggled weakly.

"No." Mance looked up wildly, his greying hair falling over his face. "Ahai. Is this what your fat friend meant? It must be. Though even he must not have known for certain. Just rumors. That whatever was in the crypts. Might be worth it. Whispers. Ahai."

A finger colder than death itself touched the back of Theon's neck. That was another word he had heard uttered in the camp, among the northerners and the Baratheons. Something that went down to the very reason Stannis was there to capture him in the first place, why he had been able to glamor Arnolf Karstark and trick Ramsay with the red witch's sorcery. Tales of a hero reborn and a magic sword. If all the time that had been some trick, a fraud and a flummery . . . but it was possible he had misunderstood what Mance had said. Anything was still, in this instant, possible.

"Ahai," Theon said stupidly. "Azor Ahai?"

Mance gazed at him for a long moment, then nodded.

"I . . . no." This was too much. Why, of all the many halls of hell, would Azor Ahai be buried here, in this one? Besides, that was just another old story, a tale as improbable as saying that the Swan Queen or some other fairy-tale creature was buried here, as improbable as saying . . . as saying that giants built the walls of Winterfell. Theon didn't know much of the legend, and had forgotten what little he had been told, but he did seem to recall that Azor Ahai had been the hero of the Battle of the Dawn, the commander who led the Night's Watch against the Others and drove them back into the far north. The Starks had always had close ties to the Night's Watch, but why in the name of . . .

Brandon the Builder did not only raise Winterfell. He also raised the Wall.

But . . . it was Stannis who was said to be Azor Ahai reborn. . . though if Theon thought of it, that did not preclude the original man from still being buried somewhere. Assuming he is still dead. One never knows these days. And the entire matter could be written off as a fascinating historical question but of no practical application whatsoever if it wasn't for that glow. That light.

Theon had seen it, of course. Lightbringer, the magic sword that served as proof of Stannis' claim. While he was hanging in his chains on Stannis' wall, hearing Stannis' conversations, learning intimate details of his strategy and inclinations. He meant to burn me to death. He would never have allowed me to be present if he ever thought there was any chance I would escape. Then again, Theon Greyjoy knew something about madness these days. Any man who was in his wits, and even one who was not, could have recognized the growing insanity in Stannis, the last living scion of the Baratheon line. With Robert dead and Renly, neither of them leaving any trueborn issue, Stannis stood further and further alone. It was entirely possible that Robert had some baseborn blood running around somewhere that Cersei Lannister had failed to eradicate, but no one would ever know. And as for Stannis . . . his actions were increasingly bizarre and underhanded and desperate, unreasonable, stubborn and proud beyond all sense. But once he had been told that he was the true king, and a messianic hero come again, he would beat himself to death sooner than yield his ground.

Lightbringer. The weapon that Azor Ahai had forged and tempered by plunging through the beating heart of his beloved wife. The red sword of heroes. Stannis did not have it. Had never had it. His sword, his weapon, his mantle of prophecy. Every bit of it a seductive lie.

"We have to open that tomb," Theon said hoarsely. "We have to –"

He was cut off as Mance seized him from behind. Theon was opening his mouth to shout, for all the bloody good it would do – who did he think would hear him? – when Mance shoved his head
against the cold stone. The awareness of the dead thing within, the nearness of it, the strange heat – and Mance's hands, mutilated but still with desperate strength, pressing him to it. He will give me to them, to it. And it will consume me. He was... now, he was...

Terror unknown even to Theon flooded him. He wrenched and jerked like a hooked fish on a line. "No," he wept. "No, please, please, don't. I'll smile, I'm happy, please don't kill me, I'll serve you... Reek... I know how, I know my place... Reek..." No, don't forget, don't, you won't remember, you're Theon... but his remaining strength collapsed like an eggshell crushed in a fist. He will kill me here, and no one will find my body, not even the ghosts.

His face was mashed so hard against the tomb that he could feel the wetness of his tears, taste them running against his broken lips. Salt, he thought inanely. Stinging in the raw places, dripping onto the stone. This was it, the end, he would –

Then out of nowhere, the pressure leavened. Mance released him, gasping as if the effort had taken all his strength as well, and Theon stumbled backwards, choking. He rose to his feet, turning on the wildling king furiously, nearly lost his balance – and forgot everything he had been going to say, or even think.

The lid of the tomb was moving. Before Theon's imagination could get too swept up in vivid fevers of undead corpses raising withered hands to cast aside flesh and stone, he realized that it was far more graceful than that, more measured. There appeared to be no visible force animating it. Only as easily as if it had been meant to do this all along.

The red light grew stronger, flickering weirdly. Mance's hand was clutching him again, but this time on his arm, as if to hold both of them up. And without knowing what was come over him, Theon stepped forward and looked down into the sarcophagus.

It was empty – of a body, at least. Nothing remained in the bottom, not even a scrap of bone or cloth or dust, so that Theon was suddenly and terrifyingly unsure whether Azor Ahai had lain there at all. What is dead may never die. He tasted salt on his lips again, but this time only the memory of it, from when his uncle the Damphair had baptized him upon his return to Pyke. But then that was cleared away, everything but the shock.

He knew at once that the sword could be made of no ordinary substance. Otherwise there would have been nothing left of it either, only the rusted stains that showed where the ancient Starks had grasped their steel. But it was still intact, from hilt to crosspiece to fuller to tip. It glowed only faintly, like a banked fire or one long smoldering in the peat. All the colors of red and gold seemed to breathe on the surface of the not-steel, to undulate beneath it, to linger on an edge still sharp enough to slice the air itself, or a scrap of silk tossed aloft. A thing of perfection, of consummate artistry, a weapon for a warrior fit to wield it.

Theon backed away. He couldn't look on it without hurting his eyes, as wan and dim as its light was. He wanted it, he hungered for it, he knew what it was: life, salvation, light, a chance. The knife Tormund had given him was nothing but a child's toy in comparison. My choice. So was this, but in a way that it terrified him even to begin to comprehend.

Mance was staring. He made some sign on himself that must have been a wildling's way of warding off evil. Beyond the Wall they must need a great deal of it, but none so much as you'd need with Ramsay. Then, while Theon was still paralyzed, Mance staggered forward, reached down, and grasped Lightbringer by the hilt.

At once, the noise that came from him had Theon fleeing wildly for the door, not daring to look back. Mance fell to his knees, clutching the sword; Theon could smell the char of his flesh. He is
burning, he thought, panicking. *You cannot lay hands on it without the sacrifice. You have to pay the price. You have to know who you are. You have to know your name.*

Mance’s screaming haunted him all the way down the dark corridor beyond, as he tried to run but fell again. He flashed madly back to his escape attempt with Kyra, running in the woods outside the Dreadfort and hearing the barking of the bitches and the laughing of the boys. *And Ramsay, always Ramsay. It was Ramsay that awaited him back there.*

Theon stopped in his tracks, shaking from head to heel. Little subterranean shivers continued to run through him even after he forced the larger ones to stop, but he ignored them. He turned, far more calmly than he felt. With a literal death grip on his knife, he advanced back into Azor Ahai’s tomb.

Mance was still on his knees, holding the blade. His screaming had stopped, though his breathing was so hard and heavy that his shoulders were shaking. Lightbringer continued to flare on and off, like a torch guttering in the wind. There was one more effervescent cascade of brilliance that punched a strangled sob from Mance, then it subsided. And as Theon’s dazzled eyes readjusted, he could scarcely believe what they were showing him.

Mance looked... *whole.* The fingers were still missing, and the wounds still scarred and gaping, but the flow of blood had stopped. Some of the fragility had vanished from his face, his skin was smoother, his eyes devouring with the heat of the flame. Smoke wreathed his fingers and drifted lazily into the rock-ribbed ceiling of the vault. And as Theon continued to stand there, disbeliefing, he heard another scrape of stone.

The statue of Azor Ahai that stood above the now-bare coffin began to turn slowly on its plinth, as if some hidden catch had been triggered. When Mance had dared to take out the sword, most like. *No one would have come here unless they were at the uttermost end of need.* And no one would have taken the sword and then been able to wield it unless there was –

Theon’s breath caught so hard in his lungs he thought he’d been hit –

– a way out.

The statue completed its rotation, as stately as a dancer at a harvest ball. But where it had stood was a dark narrow path, a tight spiral staircase leading into the gods only knew what. It was barely wide enough for one man to walk upright; they’d have to crawl. An earthy smell of mildew breathed from it, but no rot or ruin. Just the very beginning and end of darkness.

Mance heaved himself upright, employing Lightbringer rather basely as a crutch. It continued to glimmer and flash and gleam; Theon was mesmerized by it. Not only it, but what he thought it had done to Mance. *Fire cleanses so well as destroys. It was a healing of some sort. How he wanted to be whole again, when he had been broken his whole life – but he was far too terrified to grip it, to put that theory to the imminent and likely fatal test. I am too weak to stand it.*

"Turncloak." Mance’s voice was a smoke-thickened growl. "Do you see a scabbard?"

Theon was about to answer that this was the least of their concerns, but then decided it was actually very sensible. They could scarcely go slithering up a tightly enclosed space with a sword that was not only glowing but also lethally sharp, after all, and he busied himself fumbling about the catacomb in hopes of just such a useful object. It was to his vast surprise when one such actually appeared. A dull leather thing, perfectly ordinary-looking, but when Mance slid the blade into it the room was plunged into almost complete blackness. Silence reigned but for his continued gasping.
At last, it was Theon who spoke. "We should go."

"Aye," Mance agreed. His shadow tottered forward, still unsteadily but with far more purpose than when Theon had all but carried him into this room. He gestured to the narrow staircase. "You first."

Swallowing his objections, Theon obeyed. He went gingerly across the floor and ducked in; the ancient steps were steep enough that he grasped them with his flayed hands for better purchase. On all fours, he began to climb.

Once more, time seemed to melt away. There was nothing but this, nothing but here, and it had always been so. Mance came after him just as stealthily; his art must have been perfected by years with the free folk, evading the patrols of the Night's Watch and anything else that roamed in the wild. It made Theon feel obscurely better to know that Mance was guarding his back. He still did not understand the purpose of the attack in the tomb, but at least Mance did not seem inclined to continue it. And it had opened the lid, which their frail strength would never had had a prayer of otherwise.

Up and up. As far up as they had gone down. Theon kept waiting for the stair to be blocked, or for some other reason to present itself to stop this madness, but he thought of the crypts and shuddered. Whatever little there was like to be left, and at last, he felt the frigid kiss of winter on his face. Air. Outside air. The top.

Just ahead, Theon could make out the spectral shape of a grate. He thought he wouldn't be able to move it, but it broke aside easily, rusted through, when he pushed it. He crawled through, into a culvert jagged with broken ice and stone, and emerged in rustling trees.

The godswood. He knew it at once. He had become a man here, had seen Bran's face here, had let Jeyne marry Ramsay and known it for the lie. Around him, the trees stood thick and black and stooped, weighed down with crusted ice. Torches burned distantly on the walls of Winterfell; the godswood was enclosed within the castle, three acres. It was not snowing at the moment, but the air was pungent and sharp with chill. The hot pools smoked like Stannis' nightfires.

Mance emerged behind him, and pushed himself to his feet. He stood inhaling and exhaling gusty breaths, silver steaming from his nose and mouth in a way that made Theon nervous. They will know we are here. The only way out of the godswood was past the heart tree, to the gate that led into the main keep. And he somehow doubted that Mance intended to linger here forever.

The wildling king placed one finger to his lips, and Theon nodded. I will not be a coward, at least. Moving low and quickly, they scrambled through the thick trees toward what would be the western wall, near the Hunter's Gate where he had departed to find Bran and Rickon. I never did. Thank the gods, thank the gods.

Here, there was a tower walk that the Boltons had mercifully left unmanned. And as Mance began to scale the steps for a better look — something that he certainly would not have been able to do in his previous state — Theon noticed something odd. A barrel lying along the wall, with a length of oiled hemp running it to another some several dozen yards away.

A cold suspicion clawed at his mind, but fled before he had the words to voice it. He gazed up nervously at Mance, who had attained a position of some prominence and was staring out at the forest beyond. How he could hope to see anything Theon did not know; the moon was barely a crescent, the stars faint as clouded glass. Yet how good it was to lay eyes on them, the night air caressing his face. For the first time since he had fallen into the Boltons' power, Theon Greyjoy almost felt like a man.
A howl cut the night. Once, and then again.

"Gods," said Mance, very low.

"What?" The weight of the fear returned.

"There are wolves out there." Mance turned and started to hasten down. "More than one. And I could be mad, but I thought I saw. . ."

"What?"

"Not just a wolf, but a big one. Bloody big one. Leading them."

Theon clenched his fists. "There were tales. . . of a huge wolf bitch with a great pack in the riverlands, but that's the riverlands. She can't be here. Not really."

"Can she?" Mance's smile twisted. "Stranger things have happened. Giants, for instance. Now, before we lose any advantage entirely, we must --"

Another howl split the night. But this was no wolf. Once and then again, and a third time. A long low cold rumble, a sound that Theon knew intimately as well. Warhorns. Northern warhorns. And rising above them, a sharper, skirling wail of pipes. Clansmen.

Mance went stiff. Abandoning his half-completed descent, he whirled around and began to climb to the top again, so fast he almost slipped off the crenel. He reached the wallwalk on hands and knees, a hunched feral shape in the darkness, and stared so long that Theon knew, as if there had been any doubt, that he was not mistaken. They are coming.

"Men," the wildling king breathed. "An army. We're under attack."

"No." Theon felt almost brave. "They are."

The warhorns ripped the night again. Now there was shouting, more torches flaring, the pounding of armored feet and distant cursing, stamping, screaming. The Boltons had been made aware that their enemy was on them, and Theon could not help but wonder if Stannis was leading the attack himself. The false one was rotting away in a cage somewhere, but that had all been a lie. If he takes me, he will kill me. But no, even that was no longer true anymore. He had the knife.

Theon inhaled a reckless breath. He threw his arms out to either side and laughed. Salt and iron. And snow, snow, snow. Mayhaps he had never been a true Greyjoy after all. His father had said so, at least. But with Stannis Baratheon's men surging on Winterfell, and the Boltons scrambling to meet the attack, and the red sword in Mance's hand and the bronze knife at his side, he was finally made perfect again. Eternity. In his mind's eye, Robb turned to him and smiled.

Don't go, Theon whispered. Stay with me. Just a little while. It won't be long. Then I'll be with you.

Robb's smile withered. Only sorrow remained, crushing. You left me, he answered, and began to walk away. His head was no longer on his neck; it was gone, and Grey Wind's mournful golden eyes lifted to him instead. Robb crumpled to ashes and Theon's scream died in his throat.

But the night was still around him, and he was standing yet.

Theon began to run. Skipped through the snow, kicking up trails. Flung himself down and scrubbed his arms out to either side, rolled in it like a child, a dog let off the collar. His laughter turned to sobs and back to laughter, and he listened to the first hiss of arrows, the distant thud of a
trepbuchet. It seemed the Boltons were not entirely as unprepared as one might hope, but no matter, no matter. He lay spread-eagled in the snow and laughed.

"Are you mad?" That was Mance, behind him. "Get up, turncloak. Get up. It'll be now, the only chance we have. They're coming from the Hunter's Gate, if we can make it back to the eastern side there may be a way through. And then we can –"

"No." Theon sat up suddenly, snow falling from his hair. If only he could work out what was vexing him about the barrels, and that thought he'd had. Something about how Ramsay had failed at bringing Winterfell down when he'd sacked it, that the stones still stood deep and strong. Something about an insult to his craftsmanship. Why he'd not merely taken a hand from Mance, or a foot, and had done. He took everything from me, but I am still here. The greatest insult of all. But it continued to flap just out of reach, maddeningly.

Theon rolled over and got to his feet. "The barrels," he said to Mance, who stared back at him blankly. "We have to get those barrels away from the walls."

"Suit yourself, turncloak. I'll be running for the eastern gate while you do."

"And get out how?" Theon's anger flared. "Gnaw it down with your teeth? I saved your fucking life, damn you. I think you owe me this."

Mance stared at him, then began to laugh. It sounded nearly as hysterical to Theon as he imagined his own did, and he realized it was the first time he had risked talking back to anyone in almost too long to remember. *Mance can't take a finger for it.* Well, he could, he had Lightbringer while Theon only had a knife, but he was no Ramsay. Theon had almost forgotten how liberating sarcasm could be. "You owe me," he said again, this time with a desperate vehemence.

"Could be I do. But I still don't see what this is about."

"Ramsay... you don't know him, not the way I know him. You were just a traitor, but I was his... pet." *Yes, Lord Ramsay, of course I want to please you... you can do as you wish with me, everything I am is yours... if I bleed I'll welcome it... please, Lord Ramsay... of course I love you, on me and in me and through me, everything about me... "He's going to... I don't know what he's going to do, exactly. But that's his trap. If Stannis' army breaks in..."*

Mance shook his head. "Both of them will kill us. Baratheon or Bolton."

"I... know. But Winterfell. My place. My place. Can't... I can't fail one last time. Not Robb. Not like this."

"Robb's dead. We will be soon, unless –"

"Now. Turncloak."

Mance stared a moment longer. Then shook his head again, muttered something in the Old Tongue that Theon guessed was not terribly complimentary, but he did not care. The sounds of combat were louder now, pounding on the gates. Trebuchets launched with a whump and a thud. Steel beat on steel in a rising tide. "Stannis!" the call came, blown on the freezing night wind, and the ungodly crunch of shattering wood suggested that the Baratheons and the clansmen had broken down at least one gate, might be pouring into Winterfell even now. "*R'hllor and Stannis!*"

"If the Lord of Light was any god, he'd call down lightning now and smite the lot of them," Mance remarked, with apparent unconcern. "Blow them all to kingdoms come."
And with that, Theon knew.

_Knew._

He turned and began to sprint. But they had traversed almost the entire length of the godswood, and he knew in the pit of his stomach that he'd never make it back in time. He battered through the trees, unable to breathe for the solid wall of panic in his throat. _Old gods!_ he screamed. _Help me!_ And his father scorning, saying that a Greyjoy had no business calling on the gods of the Starks – but his father had worshiped the Drowned God, and drowned.

The trees were thinner up ahead. He knew there was no time; Ramsay might be lighting the torch even now. Must have a plan to get safe away – he was no martyr, diabolical or otherwise. _Must be a way_ –

The curtain wall lay before him. The sounds of the battle were getting nearer every moment; the Baratheons were definitely inside the walls. _Blow them all to kingdoms come._ Aye, indeed.

_I am not too late,_ Theon Greyjoy thought, and thanked the gods. He gathered his haunches under him, preparing to make a break for it. It was only then that he realized something was amiss. He would never have noticed if he wasn't so hyperaware.

The silence was just a split second. Only long enough to break on him in cold terror.

And then, the explosion.
Tyrion

The first volley thundered off the bricks with a roar – fittingly, he suspected – like a dragon. The second and third followed right on its coattails, searing the sky a burnt orange and sending a hammerhead of smoke towering aloft. They couldn't be coming from the Yunkish catapults; the dark figures swarming ashore had already turned them into so many tokar-clad corpses. As for the Volantene fleet, it was sinking or sunk, torrents of flame belching from the spars while motley-faced sailors swam desperately for their lives. The krakens had always been adept at such things; they'd burned the Lannister ships in harbor during Lord Balon's rebellion, after all. Which of the bastards is it? Lord Balon himself had had a misadventure with a bridge, his sons were dead, and of his three surviving brothers, Aeron had gone religious, leaving either Victarion or Euron. If it's Victarion, we're bloody fucked. If it's Euron, we're bloody fucked and damned to boot.

Tyrion had to think about these things, think about getting himself and Penny off the battlements and back toward the risible safety of the hostel. Elsewise he'd think about what had just passed between them, what he'd learned, and he was quite sure that to do so would evict his last fragile remnants of sanity permanently. He half carried, half dragged her across the courtyard, hearing the scream and flare as another fireball struck directly overhead. We're not going to need the dragons at this rate. They'd be the first to die, trapped here right by the city walls, which were due to be breached in a matter of minutes. The only incentive the Second Sons had to save him would be all that gold he'd promised them, and they had none whatsoever to save Penny. Not unless I tell them to.

Tyrion hurled himself against the hostel door with a grunt of pain. Luridly he thought of the last battle he'd had the bad fortune to get mixed up in, complete with burning ships. But they had been burning on his command then, which was quite different. At least there's no Ser Mandon to look out for this time. Pod had saved him from that; shame the boy was probably dead. He thought of Sandor Clegane turning craven and refusing to lead another sortie into the fire, and how he'd vowed to do it instead, which led to his meeting with said Ser Mandon. Thought of – seven hells, dwarf, bloody shut up, shut up, and get through this fucking door!

It opened from the inside just as Tyrion was taking a running start. As a result, he flew magnificently within, surely a trick that would have met with boisterous applause if he'd performed it off Pretty Pig's back, and sprawled flat, utterly winded, at the startled feet of Brown Ben Plumm. It's not as if I had any dignity left to lose. Wheezing, tasting blood, Tyrion pushed himself to hands and knees. "Ben. We need to get out of here. Now."

"Where?" the sellsword captain asked practically, just as a flushed and gasping Penny sped in. "Run to them dragons, maybe?"

"I don't care where. We may have just enough time to get farther into the city. Not that we're much more likely to survive there, but an arseload of bloodthirsty Greyjoys are going to come bursting through that wall – " Tyrion pointed – "any moment now. You can stay for the party if you wish, but I'd rather not. And remember, the sooner I die, the sooner you die a poor man."

Brown Ben hesitated, then nodded. He hoisted Tyrion under one arm, Penny under the other, and barreled through to the front room, where the Second Sons were already strapping on their swords. "Change of plans, lads. Any of you that wishes is welcome to bugger off and fight the squids or the Yunkai'i or whatever bloody else is out there. If you survive, come on back, your contract is still binding. If you die, I didn't need you anyway. As for me, I'm on dwarf-sitting duty. See you when the fighting's done."
It was a mark of the singular nature of sellswords, Tyrion thought, that none of them blinked an eye at this version of a motivational pre-battle speech. *I like it rather well myself.* No blathering on about gods and crown and country, no appeal to nonexistent altruism, no promising that their deaths would be glorious and long-remembered in songs. It made him miss Bronn. *The only man who was my companion, I paid for it. The only woman who was my lady, I paid for it. But then again, I am a Lannister. And now I've –*

No. Bloody no.

As the Second Sons began to disperse in haste – sellswords would have the devil of a time sitting and waiting, even if it meant risking their necks in a clash they had no financial stake in – Tyrion felt a new pair of arms remove him from Plumm's grasp. He twisted around to see Kasprio. "If you don't mind, Ben," the second-in-command said, "I'm joining you in the dwarf-minding duty. And as this one's the more useful, he's the one I'll be taking."

Brown Ben opened his mouth to protest. But at that moment a deafening shriek was followed by a sickening crunch, a flaming meteor punched through the roof not ten paces from where they stood, and it was made abundantly clear to all of them that they were out of time. Someone jammed the front door open, and the lot of them fled into the hellish streets.

Tyrion clambered onto Kasprio's shoulders like a child begging a ride from his father, and, ignoring the sellsword's curse of protest, clamped down on his ears. Heard again the song the crossbow had sung as it killed his own father, but this time it was no memory. Panicked Meereenese thronged around them, a few who must have been pit fighters climbing up on the wallwalks and taking the full brunt of the attack as they attempted to defend the city that had enslaved them. The rich and idle were undoubtedly cowering in their villas, praying for it to be over. For the briefest of moments, Tyrion felt pity for them. It was scarce as if they had asked to be sacked and occupied, turned into pawns and plagued by murders. *And now they get the bloody Greyjoys. Seems a bit unfair, really.*

Then he thought of those same citizens packed into Daznak's Pit, eagerly waiting for him to die being torn apart by a lion, and his sympathy vanished. He and Kasprio dodged and wove through the human tide, trying to keep Penny and Brown Ben in sight ahead. He wondered where they could possibly be going. The Great Pyramid was the most dangerous option, especially if Ser Barristan had actually been able to bring himself to kill Hizdahr, and anything less would likewise be only the illusion of safety. *When I said that the whole city would profit from being burned down, I didn't mean when I was –*

A firmament-shattering crack went off, and the world disappeared in flames. Tyrion could hear stone and bricks falling, ducked but not fast enough to avoid having his cheek lacerated by the flying shards, choked on muck and blood and char. Kasprio staggered, nearly dropping him, and dwarf and sellsword stumbled down the alley beyond as fast as they could go. Tyrion could hear someone burning; their screams ripped out even over the chaos of the collapse. *Gods, don't let that be anyone I know.*

Coughing and gagging, Tyrion clung at Kasprio's heels as they switchbacked erratically among the labyrinth of side lanes. If they were separated again, he was done for. *I'll damn well make him treasurer of Casterly Rock if he gets me out of this.* He had seriously considered killing himself, tried to become the monster everyone had always called him, done enough wrong that the Father was going to have to find a second roll of parchment to read his judgment, but Tyrion Lannister still wanted to live.

Up ahead, as the smoke cleared in the wake of another explosion, he caught a glimpse of a high
golden dome, columns and cloisters crowned by minarets and mosaics. The Temple of the Graces. Just as Tyrion finished deciding that it looked like a splendid place to be reduced to rubble, Kaspiorio hauled him back up and made a break for it.

"What in the seven hells are you doing?" Tyrion bellowed, kicking futilely. In mainland Westeros, septs and godwoods and other holy places were revered as refuges and sanctuaries, where not even the most reprobate criminal would dare to spill blood. But if this was Euron, he'd march in there and find himself a pretty young White Grace to rape on the nearest altar. If it was Victarion, he'd just sack it stone by stone. Bugger all Greyjoys. Bugger, bugger, bugger all Greyjoys.

Tyrion was still thinking this as vehemently as possible, considering it his humble contribution to the cause, when Kaspiorio wrenched at the heavy carved doors and then they were inside, in the soaring, silent halls of the temple. The noise of the assault still rumbled outside, but distantly. The statues and screens trembled just slightly, as if the gods had reached down a finger and pushed them like a top.

"This is madness," Tyrion complained again, weakly, as Kaspiorio set him down. "They're going to – "

"You want to go back outside, Imp?"

"No."

"Well then. Besides, some of those Graces – the black ones, I think – they'll have a lusty welcome for the squids. Magic or dark arts or some such. We can be bloody cowards and hide up their skirts."

"Oh good," said Tyrion. "I'm just the right size to hide up a woman's skirt." But the jape felt poisoned. He thought of that whore in Volantis, of Shae, of all his bedwarmers over the years – in other words, exactly what he did not want to think about right now. He broke into a trot to keep up with Kaspiorio's longer strides, their footfalls sounding loudly on the tiles. Whether or not any Grace of any color intended to have anything to do with the matter, Tyrion was all for finding some convenient alcove and stowing away for a day or three. With any luck, they'll look right over me.

But he did not have luck, as the gods delighted in pointing out again and again, and he certainly should not expect that to change here in some pagan Meereenese temple. As they retreated further into the corridors that led off the sanctuary, it did occur to Tyrion to wonder just what sort of gods these people worshiped. Likely the same as any – ones who wanted fear and fealty and filthy lucre, and who could be made to look suitably divine and wrathful when done up in bronze or painted on a frieze. If this religion does have as many nubile young girls as it appears, they'll have no trouble converting me. It was certainly a place of women's power; the veiled Graces in all their tapestries of color, the hanging crystals that quivered in the distant explosions, and the statue of a . . .

. . . harpy.

Tyrion stopped dead in his tracks. No, he hadn't mistaken it: the fountain ahead, set in the center of a small reflecting room, was crowned with the golden likeness of a harpy, water spurting from her open mouth and her claws tearing at the broken chains beneath her. Tyrion told himself not to make too much of it. The harpy was the sigil of Meereen, after all; by this time tomorrow, there might be two dozen statues of it pulled down in the smoking wreckage. But to find it here, coupled with what Kaspiorio had said about the Black Graces giving the Greyjoys a lusty welcome. . .

"You." Tyrion snatched the sellsword's sleeve, his hissed whisper nonetheless sounding as loud as a shout. "It's just occurred to me that we might be wise to get out of here after all."
"Scared of a statue, Imp?"

"Not the bloody statue, the fact that a bunch of so-called Sons of the Harpy have been killing every foreigner and collaborator they can get their hands on. And that statue, in case it escaped your notice, is a harpy."

Kasprio shrugged. "True, but the high priestess – what's her name, the Green Grace – was one of the little queen's closest advisors. Tell her that we're on Daenerys' side, and we'll have all the skirts to hide up we could want."

"I don't think I will." Tyrion took a step backwards. "And if this priestess was the Harpy, where better for her to hide than in plain sight, posing as Daenerys' most trusted counselor, hearing her strategies, easing her fears. . . was it not on this Green Grace's advice that the queen wed Hizdahr zo Loraq? I seem to recall hearing that it was."

"That's so," Kasprio allowed. "Far as I know, at least. But they're called Sons of the Harpy. . ."

"Aye. But that is because the Harpy is a woman. Gods, I should have seen it. I know something about murderous vengeful queens. It never had to be a man. Never at all." And now we're in the Harpy's den, right when I ordered Ser Barristan to murder the Harpy's catspaw. His timing had been bad before, but never quite that bad.

With this falling horrifyingly into place, Tyrion was not inclined to waste further time in cogitation. But there was the one small problem which had driven them here in the first place – namely, that the entire city was on fire outside, and that no matter the problems afforded by their current location, it at least had the distinction both of being built of stone and staffed with stout-hearted fighters. Of course, they'll kill us too if they can, but what's that, now? If the Green Grace did put in an appearance, he might just talk her into believing what a good Son of the Harpy he would make. Then he could bide his time undercover, assuming Kasprio didn't do anything stupid, and reveal the secret precisely when it would profit him the most. Mayhaps in front of the queen's entire court. If Ser Barristan had a thimbleful of theatricality, he would then hold up Hizdahr zo Loraq's severed head to the accompanying dramatic clash of cymbalos.

This was admittedly a flimsy plan – for one, it assumed that there would even be a court once the Greyjoys got through with it – but Tyrion liked it by far the most of all his present options. He opened his mouth to inform Kasprio of the decision, then stopped at the look on the sellsword's face. He heard the gentle rattling of beaded curtains behind him, smelled a scent like palm and mint. Speak of the devil.

"My friends," said a woman's voice, in Meereenese-accented Common Tongue. "You will answer me what brings you here, I trust?"

Tyrion swallowed. Then he turned, affecting his most winning smile. "Gladly, my lady. I daresay you did not expect to find a pair of grubby intruders in your lovely temple. It is lovely, by the way."

The Green Grace – for there was no one else it could be – studied him without answering, in a way that reminded him of Ser Barristan. She was much older than he'd expected, seventy or eighty, but a tall and dignified woman, her tokar edged in gold and a brooch of emerald and jade clasping it over her left shoulder. Her silver hair was styled in the Ghiscari fashion, bound with coils of wire. She certainly did not resemble the apocryphal shrieking murdereress he'd pictured, but then, in his head, they all looked like Cersei.

"My apologies," Tyrion continued. "We were only seeking refuge. Meereen is burning."
"I know." The priestess' eyes were green as well, a startling color in her dark bronze complexion. "The krakens are come at last. The pale mare has ridden, the sun's son is dead, and you, unless I am much mistaken, would be the lion."

Tyrion was taken aback. "Whatever gives you that notion?"

The Green Grace smiled. "It is what the seer Quaithe told the queen. My powers of foreseeing cannot match the art of those trained in Asshai, it is true, but I am no blind old crone. Would you deny it again, Tyrion of House Lannister?"

It did him no good to play stupid, Tyrion realized. "No. I am charmed to make your acquaintance, Your – Grace?"

That made her smile again, but strangely. "No need. I am called Galazza Galare."

"Galazza Galare, the Green Grace. How wonderfully alliterative. Did your parents do that on purpose?"

The priestess merely stared back at him, and Tyrion told himself fiercely to mind his tongue. He'd proven that he wasn't afraid of her, but there was a fine line between familiarity and flippancy – a line which he perpetually ended up on the wrong side of. *Runs in the family.* Instead he cleared his throat and said hastily, "You needn't tell me I'm a vile little man, for I know it well. But if you know who I am, then certainly you know that I could be useful to you. Grace has never been one of my virtues, true, but I make up for it with – "

"With what?" The Green Grace took a step closer. There was another explosion outside, much closer. "Your fair face? Your glib tongue? Your belief that even now, I am a silly old female who will lap up your poisoned patter? I told you I was not blind, do you think me deaf instead?"

"No, my lady. Of course not." This was not going as well as Tyrion hoped. "I only meant to say that – "

"It is unsurprising." Now she stood just across from him, on the far side of the fountain. "Women are like that to you, dwarf. Virgins or whores or monsters. You pay them and pay them, with one sort of false coin or another. But still you never fathom them, and you never respect them. And now you set foot in here and compliment me on my lovely temple, as if it was what my meek lady's heart wished to hear? That is why you will never serve the queen, either the earthly or the heavenly. You'd think of fucking her and you'd think of fighting with her – but only to destroy the other queen. Your golden sister. Your only wish to rape and kill her."

Tyrion was utterly discomfited. *There is no way in creation for her to know that.* He had said that at some point. . . to Magister Illyrio, he thought, but the whole of his sojourn in Pentos was a wine-soaked blur. "If you. . . if you knew my sweet sister, you'd agree that it was merited. That she – "

"No!" the Green Grace exploded. "It is not! You hate your sister because she is the only woman you have ever feared, whom you could not defeat. And so – "

"No, I hate my sister because she's a heinous murdering bitch – "

"See, you make it plain again – "

"One question, my lady." This was going to induce her to try to kill him beyond any doubt. Pray the gods Kasporio had his blade at the ready. "If you so venerate your own sex above mine, then why are the Sons of the Harpy murdering Queen Daenerys' men by your command? Would it not serve you better to actually secure her rule, as you pretended to be doing? She has a cunt too, you must
like that."

The Green Grace went white to the lips. *I have her.* For a moment Tyrion allowed himself to feel a grim exultation; clearly she had not anticipated that he would have riddled out her identity, for all her proud prattle about what she had foreseen. She took half a step back. Then, in a voice so vibrant with rage that it could have been plucked like a harp, she said, "Yes, dwarf. You are correct. I am the Harpy. Who else? Who else would care that these men had betrayed their Mother, their city and their goddess?"

"I was wondering when the gods would enter into it. They always do, at some point. And it was just men you killed, but there were surely women who entered the queen's service as well. Or were they somehow exempt from divine wrath?"

The Green Grace looked at him with eyes slitted with hate. "Women suffer enough in this world. Why kill them myself, when there are so many of you willing to do it for us?"

"And so, the queen – was it holy purpose when you tried to have her poisoned?"

"I never did." She was furious and on the defensive, but something about her voice made Tyrion think that she was telling the truth – she'd already copped to being the Harpy, after all. "That was Hizdahr's own notion. Vainglorious, empty-headed fool that he is, he does have a certain amount of influence among the city's nobility. If Queen Daenerys took him for husband, if she devoted herself to becoming truly Meereenese, there would be no traitors and no need to kill them – do you think I wanted to? But I swore an oath in my own blood the day I was consecrated, to defend the city and all she is and will be. And Hizdahr decided that it was better for our purposes to remove the foreigner entirely, to take her dragons, and rise again, harder and stronger. Rise unbreakable."

The echo of the ironmen's prayer to their Drowned God made Tyrion shudder, especially with the flesh-and-blood lot of them reaping and pillaging outside this very moment. "That's your problem, there. You believe in some ridiculous celestial cause larger than yourself, conveniently undefinable, until it gulps up common sense and reason and restraint, and any horror you can dream up becomes automatically sanctioned. Then – "

"No, dwarf. There's your problem. You believe in nothing larger than yourself and your own selfishness. Then you see no need for sacrifice or dreams or charity, because what does it matter in the end?"

"I ordered Ser Barristan to kill Hizdahr. You'll be glad to know that we're on the same side of that."

"No," the Green Grace said, with absolute finality. "No, we're not. I have heard enough of you, my lord. It is time your lies were brought to an end."

That did not sound promising. Tyrion whirled, having some notion of sprinting for the door, but it slammed shut of its own accord before he reached it. He looked wildly around for Kasporio, suddenly realizing that he hadn't heard from the sellsword in some time, but he was gone. "What did you do with him?"

"The Black Graces came to give him a lusty welcome," Galazza Galare said, with a twisted smile. "Just as he wanted. They're women, after all. Rapacious sluts, the lot."

*Seven hells. I didn't even hear them.* Kasporio had vanished off the face of the earth with no more sound than a whisper, and now it struck Tyrion that he was truly alone. There was no way out of this. His only hope was to go down fighting, die like a Lannister – *not on the privy, Father, see, Father, I'll be in hell with you in just a few moments, Father, and with both of us and both the*
Cleganes down there, the Stranger will be put out of business for the rest of Westeros –

The Green Grace drew a knife. He didn't see from where, but suddenly it was in her hand, a long leaf-shaped bronze blade. Then, far faster than one would expect of such an aged lady, she swooped at him – so fast, in fact, that he thought she'd sprouted wings like her namesake. At least she doesn't have my nose to aim for. There was no doubt, however, that she was going for his neck, and that was somewhat less replaceable.

Tyrion threw up his arms, feeling a searing pain as the edge skittered off them. Blood splashed on the pale stone. She'll draw that harpy in it as soon as I stop twitching. He thought briefly of how he'd wanted to die – in bed, at the age of eighty, with wine and a woman conveniently to hand – and decided that this was not at all an acceptable alternative. No – I don't – bloody hell, I knew I'd talk myself into the grave – kept grappling with her, trying to bat the knife away from his face –

And then, the high window above them exploded.

As the shards of leaded glass hailed down around them, Tyrion was able to wrench free. The noise was deafening, cracks spidering through the stone, and he thought in sheer madness that he'd never known the Greyjoys were able to fly. Then the temple shook again, the shadow fell over them, and he saw what it was instead.

Dragon. It thrilled to him to the core, to that old abused part of him that was still a little boy, that had dreamed of fire made flesh when he'd snuck down to see those skulls beneath the Red Keep. On a dragon's back I would be taller than all of them. He'd known they were here, that they were real, had told Ser Barristan to unloose them, but nothing could compare to that first sight. The beast thrust through, its blunt snout peeling back to reveal a jungle of teeth. It shook itself like a dog, shattering the remnants of the window, and crawled in the rest of the way, leathery wings and curved pinions and smooth ivory scales. Hanging from the ceiling like a great bat, it reared back and breathed fire.

Galazza Galare screamed. Tyrion could feel it searing his back, could hear all the water in the fountain hissing and turning to steam, the crash as the harpy statue came thundering down. The flame was gold and red and umber, catching in the draperies, burning through the silk. Smoke stung Tyrion's eyes and throat. He could still hear the Green Grace screaming, couldn't see her through the inferno, wondered if the other dragon had been sicced upon the Greyjoys and how well the soggy bastards liked that. There was always the possibility, of course, that they were too soaked with seawater to burn.

There is only one way out of here. The absurdity of what he was going to have to do occurred to Tyrion only faintly. With how roasted I'll be, they can put an apple in my mouth and serve me with a nice wine and cheese. But he, luckily, had been born absurd. And a Lannister, gods help us all.

If he had any prayers to say, now would have been the time to say them. He didn't. Instead, he charged.

Galazza Galare's screaming had changed to a choked whimper. He smelled crackling flesh, could dimly see the priestess dragging herself backwards on the floor. Her tokar was smoking, her burning hands curled to claws, as the dragon – with a certain relish that made Tyrion think it knew exactly what it was doing – prepared for the coup de grace. It was the image of death in that moment, stark and terrible, a predator reigning over its prey and prepared to wreak blood with fire.

Instead, it got tackled by a dwarf.

I don't think this is exactly what the Targaryens had in mind. Tyrion clamped hold of the smooth
strong scales on the dragon's back, clutching with all the strength in his stunted arms, as the dragon snarled, thrashed its head, and tried in vain to pick him off. At last, it comes in handy to be small. He was neatly located just out of the range of its snapping jaws, and since it could not reach him, its only remaining option was to try to pitch him off in midair. Which was exactly what it did. With the Green Grace gasping in agony as the flames closed in around her, the dragon flapped upwards with a few effortless strokes. Through the crack of his eyes where his face was pressed against its hide, Tyrion saw the temple growing smaller and smaller beneath him. I'm riding a dragon.

They writhed and undulated upwards, battling through the smoke. Tyrion felt a blast of fresh air as they won free of the broken temple and surged above the golden dome, the fiery chaos of the sanctuary ust visible below. The higher they climbed, the further he could see across the rooftops of Meereen, but he was in no position to appreciate the view. He thought the sharp scales were about to slice through his fingers. Not to mention the heat, searing into him; he could feel the blisters rising. The dragon was an immensity of muscle and talon and scale and sinew, each beat of its wings propelling it forward at unbelievable speed. Tyrion's strength was fading fast, but at least he could say he'd done this. At least he'd lived so long as to see dragons returned to the world. Then he could die with head high, not –

And that was when, slashing through the smoky air, the darkness punched with the wounds of a thousand fires, he heard the horn.

It jarred through him like a blow, all the way down to his bones. A thousand voices seemed to be screaming in it, straight into his ear; a thousand souls in torment. It rose and fell in a skirling wail, eeeEEEeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEeee. No one in all of Meereen could hide from it. And yet Tyrion Lannister knew, somehow, that it was not calling to him. It was calling to the dragons.

The white dragon tossed its head as if trying to chase away a bee. Huffing and snorting smoke, it performed one final loop-the-loop and fell like a rock, to the accompaniment of full-throated screaming from Tyrion. Then it caught itself and began to flap almost drunkenly, still pursued by that terrible sound. It is stalking him. It will bind him if it can. What exactly “it” was, Tyrion was unclear, but it confirmed all of his worst fears as to which of Balon Greyjoy's brothers had ventured all the way to Meereen on the gods knew what errand. The Silence is known and feared in ports across the world. It is only Euron that would seek to wreak this fell sorcery. Only Euron that would know how.

Aloud, he wheezed, "Bugger."

The white dragon – he seemed to recall hearing that the little queen had named them after her late brothers, and also that the green-and-bronze one was Rhaegal, which must make this one Viserion – seemed to be losing his battle against the sway of the horn. Bloody fantastic, I'm riding a dragon named after an idiot. If only Rhaegal had been so obliging as to be the one to burst his way into the Temple of the Graces, he might – he might – but Tyrion couldn't think of what it would be, exactly. Viserion rose and plunged again, the echoes of the hornblast still thrumming in the smoke-scarred sky. Then the dragon banked, swerved, and took off like a shot toward the Great Pyramid, from whence the sound was emanating.

Wind whistled in Tyrion's ears, and his eyes watered furiously. The heat pierced him through; he was shaking with the strain. But somewhere along the way he had decided that falling off was simply not a possibility, and now he intended to at least live long enough to see Viserion give the Crow's Eye a faceful of flame. See how well he relishes that. But if this was some spell, bending the dragons to his will. . . Euron Crow's Eye was terrifying enough on his own. Euron Crow's Eye with two dragons at his command was bloody unthinkable.
It might be a wiser idea to pitch myself off instead. But now his fingers were frozen, he couldn't even if he had wanted, and so he remained dumbly clamped like a barnacle as Viserion winged his way toward the dark ziggurat below. Isolated fires smoked, small figures scuttled, screaming rose above the clatter of stones and arrows. They were making for the very peak of the pyramid, and the origin of the horn.

Tyrion saw them then, most running for cover as the dragon soared down. One of them – two of them – were not. One was a great dark shadow, standing in sooty grey armor chased with gold, a kraken spreading its eight arms on the bullock's chest. The hair was black and long, the eyes pits, the nose a vulture's beak. Not Euron, who was as comely as he was deadly. Victarion. Seven hells.

The other – Tyrion recognized him as well. There could be no two men with that same white ruff, coal-dark skin and tattoos inked around his face. He was wearing a robe sewn from a kraken banner, rather than the red of his order that he had last been clad in. But he had last been seen going overboard on the Selaesori Qhoran during the great storm that had broken them up – bloody hell –

"Come," Moqorro called in his deep dark thunderous voice, raising his hands toward the sky. "Come as it is willed. Come to the man who is soon to rule the skies and bind the flames to his service."

No, Tyrion thought uselessly. No, let's not. Too late. Viserion was teetering down, closer and closer, and it was then that Tyrion saw the other two unfortunates who'd been invited to this demented party. One looked to be a Greyjoy man, clutching a twisted black horn in his smoking dead hand. Blood was oozing from his mouth; Tyrion did not need to see the way his eyes stared to know that he was dead. Winding that cursed thing could only come at such a price.

The other was on his knees, head bent, hands bound, blood seeping down his face from the torn wound on his scalp. Taking him could not have been any easier. Ser Barristan, what have you done? Only what I told you to. Somehow, even though Selmy was no friend to him, that thought hurt.

No one seemed to have noticed that Tyrion had stowed away on Viserion. He debated whether or not to alert them. It didn't look to be a wise idea, but –

"The dragon is here." Moqorro turned to Victarion. "You must bind the horn to you with blood, elsewise the other one will not come and this one will not stay. Once you are its master, the dragons shall be yours, and you will be spared the need to sacrifice a man each time you would have them do your will. Remember. Remember what I told you."

For a moment, Victarion remained motionless. Then he flexed his fingers – Tyrion had thought he was wearing a glove, but his hand was black as onyx, seeming to smoke slightly. . . yet that might only have been the reflection of the countless fires. Then from his side he drew a blade.

It was not even meant for him, and yet Tyrion had had quite enough of people pulling knives before his face. Especially as it hit him what the iron captain meant to do with it, as he took a step and then another and then stood before Barristan Selmy.

"You are an honorable man," Victarion said. "You fought bravely. But now you will serve a greater purpose. When the queen and I are bound together, my Iron Fleet and her dragons, we shall rule the whole of the world. It is by your sacrifice you shall make it so."

"No." Selmy coughed, splattering blood. "No. If you would take mastery of the dragons from her,
you would take – "

Victarion Greyjoy laughed, the sound like the distant thunder still ringing out across the sacking of Meereen. "I take whatever I can. We Do Not Sow. At my right hand, the fair queen will finally learn the truth of her own words. Fire and Blood. We will burn every city that stands in our way, we will write our names in fame and legend. I heard you have already made her a widow. I thank you. In your death you will give her life."

"I would sooner live to serve her." Selmy's blue eyes met Victarion's dark ones unflinching. "And you will find this a grievous error. But I will not beg."

"Nor did I expect you would." Victarion raised the blade in both hands. "Moqorro."

The red priest stepped forward. Sparks trailed off his sailcloth robes; his eyes had likewise turned to flame. He began to speak in some arcane language, spreading his hands, and Tyrion, still clinging in stupefaction to the dragon's back, knew that the beast might yet be under the horn's spell – but he was not. Victarion had said that Barristan had killed Hizdahr... on my orders... and now the Harpy was burned and it was the squids who had come instead... fire and blood... he could hear Galazza Galare screaming, and he could see Penny's face just before that wall had crashed down between them.

I get these queer fits of being a hero. But what, after all, was he doing on this dragon, if not to burn what stood in his way?

Tyrion opened his mouth to shout.

Victarion Greyjoy drove the blade home.
Even from afar, the land under the Shadow made its presence grimly felt. Maesters and mages alike had written countless manuscripts speculating on what precisely had befallen it in the early days of the world, whether it was something akin to the Doom of Valyria or if it was merely how the gods intended for it to be wrought. The city of Asshai itself had scratched out a foothold in the only habitable part of the coast, surrounded with treacherous black sands, rumbling volcanoes, and boiling sulfur geysers. There were rumors of dread creatures that lived in those dark mountains as well: spiders the size of horses, lava snakes with eyes of flame, all manner of demons and specters and seemings. It was Jorah's skeptical opinion that such tales were put about by the shadowbinders themselves, to discourage anyone who might have a mind to pay them unwelcome visits, but to be sure, he had no desire to go looking.

From his perch on Drogon's back, Jorah estimated that it was least another fifty miles, as the dragon flew, to their destination. Fifty miles too far. They'd managed less travel today than yesterday, and yesterday less than the day before that. Only coming down to earth when they absolutely had to, they had remained airborne for the better part of two weeks, and it was taking a brutal toll on all of them. Drogon's wounded wing had started to show angry red streaks where the hrakkar had torn it, the claw marks on Dany's back were turning rancid as well, and apart from his own injuries dealt by the beast, Jorah's arse and thighs were burned to a raw, pustulated crisp from the endless days of riding a dragon bareback. Blood and pus crusted his breeches, the pain when he shifted position was almost unbearable, and the cooling poultices that Dany made for him, of mud and weed and wet rags, wore through almost at once. Then the gods only knew how long it would be before they dared to land and make another one.

That was assuming they could even find water. They had been forced to fly across the southeastern expanse of the Red Waste, which was even more inhospitable than Jorah remembered, and their lips were cracked and bleeding with dryness and thirst. Jorah dozed sporadically, when the pain relented enough to let him slip under, but he was afraid that Dany might not be able to pull him back up if he started to fall. There was nothing to tie him in place with, so his eyes were as gritty as sand and his wits wandering, muzzy.

Dany slept more than he did. In the weeks since she had fled Meereen, living in the wild with Drogon, she had become half-animal herself – and then during her captivity with the khalasar, she'd had little other way of whiling past the hours. Yet Jorah did not mind. Nor did he grudge her the rest which so eluded him. For when Dany was sleeping, it was the only time – the enforced rough intimacies of their situation aside – when she willingly permitted him to touch her. He'd hold her tight with both arms, balancing her weight as well as his own, and sometimes she'd sink against him, or bury herself in his chest. In these all-too-brief moments, Jorah was taken back to the days when she had looked to him for comfort and counsel, a scared fourteen-year-old already wed and already widowed. He would never want to trap her back in that box – she had been born to be a queen, to ride dragons and rule kingdoms. But the bittersweetness of it cut him to the heart, especially in contrast with the guarded, polite coolness Dany continued to treat him with in the waking hours.

He supposed that he should be grateful that she was no longer shouting at him, that she had by choice or by necessity entrusted him with her life, and he was. But his fear of losing her again caused him to walk on eggshells with every word, every deed, every gesture, and so he had not yet told her that he could not fathom why they were risking themselves like this at all. He would have seen her safe to Braavos, to Pentos, to Westeros – anywhere she cared to go, anywhere far away from that devil's mire of Meereen, where they could mend their hurts in peace and comfort. But she
had obstinately insisted on Asshai, and her maladroit handling of diplomacy with Qarth meant that
they had to give a very wide berth to the only known safe city in the Waste.

Jorah was in no haste to renew acquaintances with Xaro Xhoan Daxos, he of the jewel-encrusted
nose, copious tears, and dancing boys in silk, but Qarth had saved them from the desert once
before, and Daxos had even been willing to purvey ships to sail them home. It was much too easy
to say that negotiations would have been far better handled if he was still at Dany's side, but
observing both the shambles of Meereen and their own suffering out here had finally stripped away
the gloss of romantic idealism in which Jorah had always clothed her. She truly meant well, had
often chosen to do what was right instead of merely what was easy, but in some ways she was still
that naïve, stubborn child.

Now, however, none of that mattered. They'd gambled everything on reaching Asshai, whatever
uncertain sanctuary it offered. Jorah – ignoring the sand in his throat, the ever-present agony of his
broken blood blisters, and the fact that he was so hungry that it felt as if his belly was devouring
itself – expelled a long, weary sigh and nudged Drogon back into motion.

"How much further?" his queen asked, when they had been flying for a few hours. Her voice was
cracked and rasping; they'd had no fresh water for two days. Once they started to drink seawater,
the end was nigh, but they'd been able to scavenge enough brackish gulps from tidepools that that
was not yet so.

"Not far." Jorah tried to sound encouraging. "There, see – that's Asshai itself, just there on the
horizon." He pointed into the hazy heat, praying that his rude calculations were accurate, that
they'd gone far enough north and east, and that it wasn't Qarth instead. No, it couldn't be; those
black sandy mountains could only betoken one thing. "We'll be there by nightfall, at the latest."

Dany glanced at him, her violet eyes dark with concern. "Do you think Drogon can make it?"

They could both see how the black dragon was laboring, how his wings convulsively beat at the
broiling air, and how erratic gusts of smoke spiraled from his nostrils as he fought to stay aloft.
Jorah did not need to be the one intricately entwined with the beast's mind to know that the outlook
was grim. "Any mount rides faster when he smells hearth and home."

She smiled faintly and put her hand on Drogon's neck, closing her eyes as she silently urged him
on. There seemed to be something more to it, something beyond the bond that she had had with
Drogon and his brothers since she'd birthed them in the flames of her husband's funeral pyre, but
Jorah was not surprised. He only hoped that they found enough dragonlore in Asshai, and whatever
else it was she wanted – though he suspected he could guess – to make it worth what they'd
sacrificed. Yet this was part of the lesson he must learn: to let her go, to not leap in front of her and
 gainsay her and shelter her.

And betray her. That thorn would never come out of his own heart. Aye, she'd lost her grip on
Meereen and made enemies of Qarth and Astapor and Yunkai and all the rest, but to think that he
alone could have changed it was monstrously futile. He'd proposed marriage to her once, and
would still wed her tomorrow if she'd ever allow it, but he would only be asking the queen, not the
woman. There were times when Jorah wished that she would let go of her dream of reclaiming the
Iron Throne, that she would find even for a day the childhood and the peace she had been so
brutally deprived of, but he had to let go of that as well. A lesson he had always been unable to
learn; he was too proud, knew who he was too well, a sin he shared with her. What I want her to be
or to do or to become is not important. He must have realized that in some nascent way, when he
refrained from killing Daario. He loathed the man she'd chosen that was not him, especially such a
noxious peacock as that. He loathed everything that had come of Dany's decisions since she exiled
him, in fact, but he no longer had the right to judge her. He loathed everything that had come of his own decisions, as well. Mayhaps Asshai was likewise his only chance at redemption.

At that moment, Jorah was jolted unceremoniously from his ruminations as Drogon shuddered, swerved, and began to lose altitude, fast. They were two or three hundred feet up, which did not leave a great deal of margin for error, and to make matters worse, they were approaching the bay at speed. Jorah could see the ships riding at anchor – Asshai was an important trading port on the Jade Sea route, for those merchants who dared to do business here – and the city itself on the bluffs above, an elegant labyrinth of towers that brought to mind Oldtown.

The comparison seemed strangely fitting, but Asshai was multitudes more exotic than even that. Many colors, indeed every color that existed, not at all the foreboding universal black that he'd imagined. Hanging gardens and menageries, bells and arches and filigrees, the red monolith on its high hill that could only be the seat of the faith of R'hllor. Palm trees lined the cobbled wynds, and tangles of dark moss thatched the ancient ringwall that defended the city. It looked to be built merely of weathered stone, but Jorah knew the stories of spellsingers and aeromancers and warlocks – not to mention the shadowbinders themselves. He briefly and devoutly prayed that the whole unnatural lot didn't interpret a bloody big-arse dragon flying directly toward them as a clear and present threat.

At any rate, Jorah's observations both of the city's beauty and its potential to blast them clean out of the sky were irrelevant. They were now slewing and plunging barely fifty feet above the waves, and it was clear that they were not going to make it across. He could hear distant shouting, supposed that they'd been spotted and that there was nothing for it, and madly unbuckled his longsword, tore away his cloak and kicked off his boots. He'd already left the rest of his scanty possessions and armor in the Red Waste, so as not to burden Drogon with the extra weight, and felt oddly at peace. In nothing but the clothes on his back, he would go into the water and be reborn, or drown.

"Look out!" Dany screamed, as the harbor loomed up straight in front of them. Possibly Drogon's momentum would carry him to a landing on the docks – hopefully a dry one, as dragons were for obvious reasons deeply antithetical to water – but the impact would be much worse for the two of them on the stone. There was nothing for it.

Jorah grabbed Dany around the waist and jumped.

For a moment they seemed to hang in freefall. He'd tried to wait until they were as low as possible, but hadn't dared to wait too long; otherwise they'd plow into a ship. It was, therefore, a good twenty feet down, and Jorah sucked in a desperate breath as the emerald-green sea raced up to catch them. In the last moments, Dany twisted around, pressing her face to his neck and aligning her body against his, so they would go in together.

They were lucky that it was moderately feet-first. Still, Jorah felt it crash up his legs like a blow, and then they were underwater. He'd deliberately kept his eyes open, but all he could make out was white froth and the shattered shards of sunlight piercing the murky depths. They stung excruciatingly, but that was nothing compared to the pain that ripped through him when the sea lapped at his open wounds. Rubbing salt in it was a phrase which Jorah had never known the truth of until now. It was all he could do not to scream – if he did, he would start to drown.

He could feel Dany clawing and kicking desperately for the surface, and joined his efforts to hers. It was further than he thought; their dramatic entrance must have plunged them several fathoms down. His chest strained, his wounds burned. Then his head breasted a wave, he began to tread water furiously, and sucked in breath after grateful breath of hot palm-scented air. The ocean was
pleasantly cool, though the agony itself remained acute.

Dany surfaced beside him, gasping, her soaking silver hair darkened to a dun grey and pasted to her shoulders in a way that made Jorah think of a mermaid. He rolled over, still spitting. "Here, my queen," he panted. "We'll have to swim for it."

He saw fear in her eyes, and realized that of course, Daenerys Targaryen did not know how to swim, daughter of air and fire that she was. He wondered if he could make it for both of them, but there was no choice. "Here. Grab onto me. The sea's salty, we'll float."

Dany took two fistfuls of the thick black hair on his back, which made him wince further, but he didn't suppose there were many other options. Thinking of frosty mornings where he had stripped buck naked and charged into the waves of Bear Island with his cousins, Jorah shifted her into a better position and broke into a laborious crawl stroke. Between this and the sinking of the Selaesori Qhoran, he'd had utterly bloody enough of the ocean for a good long while.

Up ahead, he could see a splintered, smoking ruin that had plainly very recently been a ship. The reason for its demise was equally plain: Drogon was tangled in the rigging, wings still outstretched, the vessel half-capsized under his weight as the shouts and screams of trapped sailors gurgled out from underneath. The black dragon was screaming as well, a high ululation of primal pain and fear, and seawater hissed to steam wherever it doused his hide. The noise made Dany moan in empathetic distress, all the more so since Jorah doubted there was anything she could do to help him.

Broken spars and debris bobbed in the water around them, and the shore looked impossibly far away. Jorah could feel his muscles beginning to cramp, tried fervently not to think about that. The pain from his lacerated, salted wounds was making him lightheaded, and he pulled one stroke and then another, his burly arms clenched and quivering. Each breath checked him in the sternum like a fist. It was dawning on him horribly that he could not make it after all. Someone might come for Dany, but then she would be alone, at the mercy of not just the red priests but the whole of Asshai. And he would not – not –

"Mother of Dragons!"

Jorah's head snapped up. He looked madly in one direction and then another, and then he saw it: a longboat rowed by four ebon-skinned Summer Islanders, coming fast from one of their swan ships. It was too far distant to read the full name lettered on the prow, but Jorah thought it was Cinnamon-something. And he could not believe it – a memory, Quhuru Mo, the captain who had brought Dany news of Robert Baratheon's death, who had said to her in Qarth that he was leaving to sail the trading routes of the Jade Sea – yes, he had been the captain of the Cinnamon Wind out of Tall Trees Town –

Dany recognized it as well. Jorah felt her stiffen, and then she hauled herself upright and began to scream to them. They screamed back, and after a further few moments that felt like the longest of even Jorah Mormont's eventful life, the longboat rode over the crest of the nearest wave and surged to a halt beside them. One of the rowers extended an oar and Jorah, with the very last of his strength, grabbed hold of it. There was a hard jerk, and then he was lying prone in the bottom of the boat without remembering how he'd gotten there, hacking up seawater and teetering on the very edge of blacking out.

Due to this, Jorah missed almost all of the following interlude, in which they were presumably conveyed to the Cinnamon Wind and taken on board. When he opened his eyes again, he was lying in some narrow ship's bunk, late afternoon sunlight was lacing golden across the gently rocking floor, and Dany was nowhere in sight.
Grimacing, Jorah pushed himself into a sitting position, remembering just in time to duck to avoid cracking his head on the low ceiling; after the day he'd had, he didn't need any more punishment. Blood rushed in front of his eyes, but when it faded, he felt able to hazard standing up. Someone had taken the rags of his old clothes, and flung one of the brightly patterned caftans favored by the islanders over the bunk instead. Jorah shrugged it on, unused to the sensation of swinging in the breeze, and bumbled his way to the door. His wounds had been bandaged, and there was some unfamiliar slick shine on his skin; an unguent of sorts, apparently. He was as thirsty as a thousand deserts, but he needed to see what was going on. On hands and knees, he clambered up to the deck.

The first thing he looked for was Dany, and he saw her almost at once, standing by the stern in the company of a tall, slender, dark-skinned girl. Deciding that this was as logical a place to start as any, he stumped over to join them.

"Good bear." It was the girl – the captain's daughter, he thought – who turned to catch him, putting one strong hand under his elbow. "You should not be up."

"There will be time to rest later." Jorah steadied himself on the deck rail and glanced around. They were a mile or two offshore from Asshai; the city sparkled alluringly in the gathering twilight, and even from here they could see the glow and smell the smoke of the massive nightfire that burned before the temple of R'hllor. Likely the appearance of a real live dragon had sent them into transports of religious furor, and Jorah supposed that at least they'd be spared the need to make introductions. He should find out about the dragon itself, so he opened his mouth, looked down – and shut it.

Drogon was moored behind the *Cinnamon Wind*, in an impromptu sailcloth sling that at least kept him mostly out of the water. Some wizard with knots had expertly strung it up to alleviate the drag on the keel, and the black dragon was curled up in the fashion of a sulking child, glaring at them balefully from one cracked red eye. Threads of smoke emerged from his nostrils, but his normally gleaming scales were dull and matte, and the injured wing was held at such an awkward angle that it was apparent that he had almost no use of it. It really was a miracle that he'd borne them so fast and so far.

"Thank you," Jorah murmured to the beast, who snorted a cascade of disdainful sparks, then turned to its mistress. "How in the blazes did you get him free?"

"Literally in the blazes." Dany's mouth quirked. Nodding to the tall girl, she went on, "It was Kojja's idea. The – the ship was sinking, and he was still trapped, so she had her crew set it afire."

Aye, Jorah thought, that would do the trick. But he could see the tears in Dany's eyes, the way her chin quivered, and knew that she had hated condemning the innocent sailors of the doomed vessel to die on her behalf. Her paradoxes always caught him off guard – that she had, without a hint of hesitation, commanded Drogon to set Khal Jhaqo on fire, yet mourned the lives it had cost to rescue him, lives of men she didn't even know. The times when she could be so... so Targaryen, and the others when she was still that deeply compassionate young woman, born and raised in hardship yet never defined by it. The compassion which had cost her Meereen, it could be argued, but Jorah did not want to. He turned to Dany, trying to show her that he would comfort her if she allowed it, but she remained distant. So he fought his disappointment and turned instead to Kojja. "We owe you and the crew our lives. Thank you."

"No matter, good bear. But the Mother of Dragons tells me you would still go to Asshai. Why? From here, we make home to Tall Trees Town. My father has a hold full of ore and jewels and amber and dragonglass, will be a rich man when he sells it. Come with us. On the Summer Isles you will rest beneath palms and blue sky, on white sand beaches, and never know pain or cold
"I would if I could," Dany said softly. "But that is not what remains for me. It must be Asshai."

"As you say, Mother of Dragons. But the red priests will take you and your child, and they will change you. Do you not wonder how they have flourished here so long, here under the shadow?"

She gave the last three words a peculiar emphasis that caused a chill to crawl down Jorah's back. She is trying to warn us, he realized. "Tell me, Kojja. You must have been here often. What is the shadow, and why is Asshai under it?"

The tall Summer Islander hesitated. Then she said, "That is not a question I can answer, good bear. But the red priests are fire, utter fire, and it is fire that casts the darkest shadows."

Dany laughed. "If they think to burn me, they will learn more of fire than even they care to."

Still Kojja seemed reluctant. Then she said, "That would be so, but will you know how they say that all the world is two halves, constantly at war, constant opposites? And the opposite of fire is ice. The Great Other, they call it... but it is not so other as all that."

Something in the way she said it made Jorah think of frightening stories told by the hearthfire, as snow pelted down outside in one of the early winters of his boyhood. Made him think of his own father, the nine hundred and ninety-seventh Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, and the rumors of what had attacked him and his men in their great ranging into the wilds beyond the Wall. He tried to dismiss them, but he had not lived so long by ignoring the faint bristle on the back of his neck, and that brought to mind something else. "In Volantis, there was one of them – Benetto, his name was, or Benerro – who preached that D... that Her Grace was Azor Ahai returned, the fulfillment of their ancient prophecy. He even tried to send a red priest to her. Moqorro, the man's name was. We were on the same ship, but he likely drowned in the wreck."

"Likely not. They don't die easily." Kojja considered them intently. Then she said to Dany, "We had your kinsman on board. When we were taking him, Fat Sam, and the wildling girl from Braavos to Oldtown. He thought the same of you."

Dany looked blank. "I have no living kinsman."

"Not now, you don't," Kojja agreed, "but he wasn't yet dead when we had him. Maester Aemon, the old man from the Wall. He had counted over a hundred name days. We celebrated his life and mourned his death. Few men are blessed with such a mortal span."

"Aemon... Targaryen?" Dany went pale. "The maester? But he was brother to Aegon the Unlikely, who was father to my grandfather Jaehaerys. Which would make him... my great-great uncle?"

"Something to that accord. He too thought you were Azor Ahai come again. He was determined to see you and your dragons before he died, yet the gods were not quite that kind." Kojja smiled sadly.

Dany flinched. Jorah could again see the grief in her eyes, that such a vital link to her family and House, the keeper of over a century of its tumultuous history, had been snatched away from her at the last instant after making it so long. "He will be remembered well when I come into my throne. But... Azor Ahai, you said? I am not familiar with the legend."

"Go to the red priests, and you will be. Again I tell you that you need not. The Summer Isles – "
"I have indeed heard much and more of their beauty," Dany said. "One day I may travel there on my dragon's back, when he is again hale and healthy. But not now. We will spend the night here on the Cinnamon Wind, and if there is anything that I may do or give to express our gratitude, you will have it. But come the dawn, you will put us ashore in Asshai."

Kojja's eyes flicked to Drogon. Jorah got the distinct impression that if it wasn't for the dragon, the captain's daughter would have refused. Yet at last she sighed and said, "As you will, Mother."

Supper was eaten on deck, beneath the brilliant stars. The crew were in good spirits, and laughed and sang in the liquid-gold tongue of the Summer Isles, but neither Jorah nor Dany could keep their eyes open for long. Before they could retire, they had their wounds inspected and the bandages changed by the ship's surgeon, and Jorah gratefully guzzled an entire waterskin when one was handed to him. But even when he was lying down below, no matter how wonderfully welcome it was, he could not quite bring himself to sleep. He half-thought that the Cinnamon Wind would weigh anchor in the night and sail away, be miles out to sea by the time they rose in the morning and discovered the deception. While the Summer Islanders were clearly pleased with the commerce they'd done, they were also evidently terrified of going back, or near the red priests. Why?

The questions chasing their tails in Jorah's head finally pushed him under into an uneasy doze, despite all his resolve. He panicked when he woke in the cool predawn, but a peek out the porthole revealed Asshai still off to starboard. Kojja Mo had kept her word.

Groggy and drained, Jorah swung out of his bunk. Someone had left Westerosi clothing for him, tunic and breeches and boots, apparently guessing (correctly) that he would soon grow tired of swanning about in something that resembled an elderly lady's bedgown. They were a bit too short in the leg and a deal too tight in the shoulder, but he donned them without complaint and went up on deck.

Once again, Dany had preceded him. She was clad in a lovely delicate dress of seafoam green, with twining ivory bracelets on both arms and a gilted choker around her neck. Catching Jorah staring, she colored slightly and cast her eyes down. "They only thought that I should not appear before the red priests as a beggar."

"You look no beggar," he said. "You never have."

Dany gave him a thin smile. "You are a sweet liar, ser. But then, you always were."

The implied rebuke felt like a slap, and Jorah turned away, smarting. Neither of them spoke a word as the Cinnamon Wind began to move, gliding through the morning mists toward the harbor. He did wonder how they proposed to get Drogon out of his sling and up to the temple; the idea of walking him through the streets like a dog was patently ludicrous, and he was in no shape to fly. But that was another bridge to cross when they came to it.

Before long, the Cinnamon Wind bumped up against one of the deepwater quays. Jorah helped the mate – Xhondo, he thought his name was – muscle the gangplank into place, no matter how much his abused body complained, and then stiffly offered his hand to Dany. She took it just as stiffly, and they disembarked side by side, not looking at each other.

"We'll wait here with the dragon," Kojja said. "The red priests will have a way to bring him."

This utterance, casual as it was, nonetheless made Dany glance warningly over her shoulder at them. But she said nothing, merely inclined her head. Then she took Jorah's arm, and they set off through the maze of swaying piers to shore.
Jorah did not think it was his imagination that everyone was staring at them as they passed. Nothing had exploded in their faces, thankfully, and yet as they gained the harbor gates and climbed into the steep streets beyond, something did feel different. There were the same scholars, clerics, shopkeepers, merchants, soldiers, nobles, serfs, beggars, thieves, and murderers as in any city, the same twisting side alleys and leaded red-glass lamps that heralded brothels – even dread sorcerers liked to fuck, it seemed – but with every step, the sensation of drawing near to a great Something grew stronger.

If he could feel it, surely Dany could as well, and her grip on his arm grew tighter. He found himself wishing that he still had the longsword he had ditched in the sea. Not that he thought anyone was going to openly attack them, not that he thought it would be much use if they did, but he was a knight. Wearing and wielding a sword came as naturally to him as breathing, and he felt naked without it. He thought of Drogon, wounded and left behind. *We both go unarmed.*

The great temple of R'hllor was a wonder of forests of stone like frozen lace, serene statues, flying buttresses and vaulted ribs. Torches burned all around it, pale in the daylight. But the great archway was cool and dark, leading through to the portico, the cloisters, and the way in.

Dany let out a shuddering breath. She stood still for several moments, merely gazing at it, then plucked up her courage. "Are you with me, Ser Jorah?"

He looked down into her eyes, and felt a bit of his heart break. "Now and always, Khaleesi."

She smiled, truly. Set her shoulders, took his hand, and sounded the great bronze bell.

It pealed out through the quiet morning air, resounding in the courtyard beyond. The echoes lingered so long, in fact, that Jorah briefly thought there would be no answer. But then the carved sandalwood doors cracked down the middle, and opened onto a long corridor of perfect darkness.

Dany was shaking, and Jorah did not feel all that steady himself. He smelled something like quicksilver and earth and fallen stars, red heat. *Red. Red. Red.* And then, at his queen's side as he belonged, their fingers knotted tight as a protection from whatever lay within, they stepped across the threshold and entered the very heart of shadow.
The first thing she heard was the Hound. He was saying something in a low hard voice that rose sharply to a pitch, and she realized with a lurch in her stomach that he was pleading. Not that she'd ever known Sandor Clegane to plead, only to be gruff or melancholic or drunk or angry, but there was more to him than that, she knew it. The tenderness in him was muted, almost shy, ashamed of itself, but this was the man who had saved her from Joffrey when he could, the man whose memory she had fallen in love with. Then all her romantic illusions had been shattered in one fell swoop when he'd gleefully killed those Arryn men at the inn, wrestled her up onto his horse the same way Ser Shadrich had and galloped off without so much as a by-your-leave. She did not thank him for that, but when the arrows had started to fall, when he pulled them both down and sheltered her without a second thought, she'd known that he was still him, that he'd not lied, that he'd never lied, that the outlaws –

Outlaws. Sansa's eyes flew open. She had a jumbled recollection of them appearing like ghosts from the wood, clad in patched cloaks and rusted ringmail, the thin freckly one voicing disbelief that none of his shafts had found their mark, and another one telling him jauntily that they'd have to cut off his thumbs in punishment. The Hound had still been lying over her, but the peculiar slackness of his big body and the way his head lolled told her that the blow had found its mark; he was unconscious.

Sansa herself had hit the ground hard enough that her vision was reeling, and her breath wouldn't come back no matter how much she gasped. She'd been picked up and slung over the shoulder of a big one-eyed lout in a green cloak, and he hit her again when she started to struggle. Then there was the blurriness of marching, crossing a creek, the trees thick around them, the flare of a torch, the screams of Sandor's wounded horse fading away behind. Then the smell of dirt and wet and moss, and now –

Pressing a hand to her aching head, she sat up carefully. They were holed up in some earthen cave, bare roots coiling through the walls, and she appeared to have been dumped directly in a slick of mud, but after the rough weeks she'd already endured, this was less than nothing. The outlaws were standing with their backs to her, converging on the lone man at the center of their circle. In the glow of the torch one of them was holding very close to him, Sansa could see the fear in the Hound's grey eyes, and that frightened her more than anything else. In stories, outlaws were usually good-hearted rogues who stole from the rich to give to the poor, and thumbed their noses at the bumbling authorities who tried in comical vain to thwart them, but they had ridden far enough across the ravaged riverlands for her to know that as in so much else, this was no story. And the way they were talking to Sandor made it plain that they at least knew him, and at most intended to kill him, here and now.

Locking her knees so they would not tremble, Sansa pushed herself to her feet. Her throat was dry, and her pulse beat fast and short, but however little she had thanked him for it, Sandor had saved her life – again. Her voice sounded faint when she spoke, barely more than a whisper. "Leave him be."

The outlaws startled around and took shrewd stock of her. They exchanged looks. Then the big one-eyed oaf said, "This is no business of yours, girl."

"Aye," said a second, the freckly archer. "We mean you no harm; we know you must be another one of the morsels this bloody dog stole off the table for hiself. Got a bad habit of that."

"Mean me no harm and hit me on the head?" Sansa flared. "And he didn't – he hasn't –"
"Aye, he did," a third voice cut in. From the look of the young man, he could only be a Baratheon – but how? Thick black hair fell tousled into steely blue eyes, and he was as tall and muscled as an ox. "He stole Arry and rode away with her. Didn't you, dog? We gave you your life and you pissed on us."

The Hound grinned. "Dogs do that. As for the brat, it's not my fault you didn't look after her better. As for my life, I don't recall 'we' giving me anything. I bloody won it back from you at the point of a bloody sword. Where is Dondarrion, by the way? They said he was really dead this time, but I wasn't wagering on it. Doesn't he want to come give me a kiss?"

The outlaws exchanged looks again, these much more guarded. Then One-Eye said, "The kiss was given elsewhere, and no concern of yours how. Tell us, Clegane, why didn't you have the bountifully good sense to stay dead?"

"I've asked that question a few times myself. Comes down to the fact that maybe you never killed me." Sansa momentarily thought he was going to say something else, but he caught himself, with a sidelong glance at her.

"Saltpans – " One-Eye began.

"Will everybody bloody shut up about Saltpans!" Sandor Clegane roared, making the black-haired boy, who had his hand on his sword and seemed inclined to further grievances about Arry, take a quick step backwards. "I'll tell you why I didn't do it – especially you, Ser Gendry of the Hollow Hill. It was because I'd been left for dead on the banks of the Trident by your precious wolf bitch herself, after I got into one tavern brawl too many. I asked her to kill me, I begged her to kill me, but she didn't, as you can see. A monk found me there but left my helm behind. Send a raven, send a raven right bloody now if you think I'm lying. To the Elder Brother, on the Quiet Isle."

He means Arya, Sansa realized, her stomach turning a flip as she remembered the story he'd told her at the inn on the Bite. But how did the black-haired boy – Ser Gendry – know Arya? And would he help her if she told him that she was Arya's sister, or even believe her? With her hair shorn, her clothes filthy, cold and underfed, she did indeed resemble a sundry village waif carried off by a ravishing brute.

Ser Gendry, having recovered from being briefly daunted, got in the Hound's face again. "You said she didn't kill you. So then where did she go, dog? Where did she go?"

"Bugger if I know. Why? You going to make her your forest lass?"

Gendry flinched. "Shut up, Clegane."

"What? Did I guess?"

"Because you have the devil of bloody nerve coming in here and claiming that, after what you did to her." Gendry's fists clenched. "Don't know where she is, my arse. You finally found someone who would pay her ransom – you sold her off to the fucking Bastard of Bolton and don't deny – "

"Sit down before you hurt yourself, boy. Whatever poor whelp the Boltons have, it isn't her. How do I know? Because the little wolf bitch was right next to me in the tavern when Gregor's men told us they'd found Arya Stark and she was on her way north to marry the leech lord's hellspawn. They seemed to think it was insulting when I laughed. Things went downhill from there."

Sansa glimpsed uncertainty in Gendry's stubborn blue eyes. He wants to believe it, she thought, and prayed that it would be enough. Then the young outlaw said grimly, "That may be so, and it may
"Now, lad," said another of the brotherhood, a slight man with a large nose and a somewhat fatherly air. "You know that's m'lady's decision, not yours."

"Why?" Gendry cried, confusion and grief and anger naked on his face. "We know what's she going to say – the same as she always does, and the last trial lost us Lem. We don't need a trial this time, the dog's confessed, and when m'lady hears what he did to her – "

"Confessed to what? That I didn't hand Arya over to my brother's pack of pissants and vermin the instant I had the chance?" The Hound's voice dropped to a growl. "I see you lot can't tell your heads from your arses any more than last time. Where is this dread lady of yours, anyway?"

"Out," the small man said. "With Thoros and a few others. We heard that Edwyn Frey was leading a pack of the weasel-faced bastards from the Twins. Something about the Literally Late Lord Walder's daughter Roslin being murdered in King's Landing, when the Lannisters claimed that they were taking her safe to Casterly Rock."

"Then the Lannisters have lost their fucking minds," Sandor said succinctly. "But then, we knew that. What's this bitch of yours going to do, hang Edwyn? Black Walder will be delighted."

"Hang Edwyn and Black Walder, and every Frey she can." The small man – the harp slung across his back suggested that he was a singer – smiled oddly. "And the boy's right. A pinch more civility wouldn't go amiss. You're not the only one who didn't stay dead."

"The seven hells does that mean?" The Hound spoke with his usual scornful bravado, but Sansa again saw the flicker of fear in his eyes. Her belly knotted like a fist. There had been tales in the Eyrie that the infamous outlaw brotherhood of the riverlands had a new leader, a woman, who had embarked on a savage campaign of retribution on any Frey or Lannister she could get her hands on – even those only tangentially associated with them. Sansa didn't know what the singer meant, but she didn't like it.

"You'll see," One-Eye said. "Soon, I promise. Mayhaps the two of you can swap stories. About being dead and all. Then – "

"I was never dead. Gods damn it, you have to let me go."

"We have to let you go." The words were redolent with sarcasm. "Do we?"

"Aye! Look, in King's Landing – the queen, haven't you bloody heard who the champion in her trial's going to be?"

"Should we have?"

In that moment, it hit Sansa sickeningly. She'd never asked where they were going after they fled the inn, but she'd trusted him. Partly since she had no choice, but mostly since she still didn't think he'd hurt her, no matter how angry she had been with him. One night when she'd woken to find him snoring beside her, one hand protectively clutched around his sword and the other stretched out as if to shield her, she'd imagined that perhaps he was taking her home. Not to her home, ruined and ravaged in the snowbound North, but to his. With his elder brother dead, he was its rightful master, and it was the only place left in the world that he could call his own. She'd thought of going there at his side, and realized that she did not mind. Almost that she wanted to, and many more strange deep adult feelings that allured and alarmed her in equal measure. But if he never had – if he had
been taking them back to *King's Landing* –

"Why?" Sansa blurted out, heartbroken.

They all looked at her again. "Where'd you find this one, dog? You don't have anything better to do than kidnapping girls?"

The freckly archer moved toward her, grinning. "Can't fault his taste in this one. Clean her up a bit and she'd be a rare fine beauty."

"Archer." The Hound's voice stopped the boy in his tracks. "Lay a hand on her, and I'll rip your head off and stuff it up your skinny freckly arse."

Archer – Anguy, she thought she'd heard one of the others call him in the confusion of getting here, wherever *here* was – raised an eyebrow. "Bit territorial, dog? I won't blame you. Or is it because –"

"Because she's my little bird, you son of a Dornish halfwit, and since I've once more failed her outlandishly by getting her captured by you stinking pricks, I'll be damned if I'll stand here and watch you rub it in. Not to mention, she said she was hit in the head." Clegane wheeled in a circle, snarling. "*Which of you bastards hit her in the head?*"

"He did," Gendry said, pointing at One-Eye.

"I'll fight you over it," the Hound promised. "Surely such a brave man wouldn't refuse. But since I see you're notably lacking the idiot in the piss-colored cloak, you might want to think of discretion and valor. Or just bloody cowardice."

"You talk quite a bit for a man with no sword."

"You talk quite a bit for a man with one ball and no brain."

One-Eye looked at Gendry. "You're right. Let's kill him."

"No!" Sansa stepped in front of the Hound. "If you – if you touch him, you go through me."

The outlaws, astonishingly, didn't break into uproarious laughter. Even though by rights they should have – there were a dozen of them, grown men, heavily armed, not a one about to be mistaken for Prince Aemon the Dragonknight or any other paragon of chivalry any time soon – and she was just a girl of not quite fifteen years, scared and scrawny, without so much as a sewing needle for a weapon. But she held her ground. Her impetuous and emotional actions had gotten them into the fracas with the Arryn men back at the inn, but she had meant well, had wanted to save Robert. Sandor was much more than Robert.

"M'lady," One-Eye began mockingly. "Your bad-tempered friend has –"

He stopped, gaze flickering over her shoulder, and dug the singer industriously in the ribs. Sansa sensed someone standing behind her, and tensed. But she didn't dare to turn and take her gaze off them.

"M'lady," One-Eye said again, in a much different tone. "There's a pair of prisoners for you here. A dog and his bitch."

Sansa went stiff. *This must be her. The Hangwoman*. The one it was said was neither living nor dead, the *thing* that had replaced Beric Dondarrion as leader of the Brotherhood. *I don't want to see
it, I don't want to be here, I don't. She could smell an unmistakable whiff of decay and bone, old blood and festered flesh, and had to swallow the gorge that had come racing up her throat.

Without a word, the hooded woman swept past. Her mantle was of torn and stained sable velvet, the heavy folds concealing everything except the awful hot eyes and the elegant bandaged hands. She was followed by a grey-haired man in faded red robes, but from the way the outlaws cleared silently away, Sansa knew whose appearance struck more fear into them. Lady Stoneheart. The name floated to mind from a distant corner of memory. She stood fast in place, petrified.

"Thoros," One-Eye said, addressing the man. "Good hunting?"

"Aye." The man, the red priest, sighed. "Edwyn Frey and all his party hanged, seven or eight miles west of here. Thus leaving Black Walder officially master of the Twins, god help us all. A muttonhead Edwyn may well have been, but still a better lord than that."

Lady Stoneheart reached under her hood and seemed to grasp something on her neck. An almost unintelligible, croaking rattle emerged.

"Aye, my lady, he was still a Frey," Thoros – it couldn't be Thoros of Myr, that fat jolly priest from King Robert's court? – said reluctantly. "But Black Walder's not going to be half so stupid as to go riding into our territory with only two dozen men-at-arms at his back. And you can be certain that now that we've obligingly got Edwyn out of the way, he'll be hunting us like the Lord of Night and Terror himself."

"Piss on Black Walder Frey," said One-Eye. "We'll hang him too if he troubles us. The Bull and I were wondering if we'd have leave to hang the dog here first."

Lady Stoneheart turned slowly. She studied the two of them for what felt like a small eternity. Then she reached up to her throat and rasped another question.

"Your name, girl," Thoros said. "What is it?"

Their only chance. Hideously and unspeakably dangerous, but the alternative was worse. "Sansa." Her voice was a breathy squeak. "Sansa Stark."

The silence that followed these two words was absolutely thunderstruck. Sansa didn't understand why the outlaws looked so singularly stunned, or why they all turned to stare between her and Lady Stoneheart. She didn't – it made no sense, why were they –

Unless. A nauseating chill laced down her back and took her in the stomach like a blow from Ser Boros Blount's mailed fist. The foul taste of vomit choked her throat. She's dead, it can't be, it's not, the Freys murdered her and Robb at my uncle Edmure's wedding, they threw her naked into the Green Fork – but what the singer had said about Sandor not being the only one to stay dead, and who else would have the unquenchable desire to hunt down and murder all the Freys and Lannisters she could –

No, the logical part of Sansa's mind screamed, but it was no use. In a horror colder than anything she had ever imagined, she knew who was beneath that hood.

Shaking from head to foot, Sansa began to sob. It was punched out of her over and over without her volition, a horrible thin sound like a wounded animal. Her stomach seized up and she began to retch in earnest, but she'd eaten so little that it was only bile. One or two of the outlaws reached for her, but it was only the Hound she wanted. He picked her up off her feet and hissed in her ear, "Gods, little bird. What? What is it?"
Sansa could not answer him. She wrapped both arms around his neck and wept so hard that she did not make a sound, her back almost breaking with the force of it, and then she let go of him and turned around. Legs as unsteady as a newborn foal’s, chest still shuddering with gasping sobs, she walked as if in a dream across the cave to Lady Stoneheart, raised both hands, and lowered her hood.

For the longest moment, she simply stared. Those Tully blue eyes, almost unrecognizably bloodshot and furious. The torn fingernail tracks on her cheeks, the bone visible beneath. The auburn hair gone white and thin, the flesh turned to pudding. The bandages that hid, but only barely, the ruin of her throat.

"Mother," Sansa whispered. The word shattered her, the sound of a small child left alone in the dark. She merely looked and looked, mesmerized and revolted and destroyed. And then at last, not caring a brass dam that this was the fearsome Hangwoman, the unliving nightmare huntress, she began to kiss the ruined cheeks, tracing the clawed flesh with her own fingers, crying so hard she could no longer see. Love is stronger than death.

The corpse woman stared back at her with that haunted, haunting gaze, neither responding to her touch or attempting to stop her. This was not truly her mother, Sansa knew, but only a jumbled resurrection of the fury, terror, and agony of Catelyn Stark's last maddened moments. Not the woman who brushed her hair, who taught her the prayers in the sept where they knelt together, who let Sansa crawl into the great lord's bed one winter night when she'd had a bad dream, who cuddled her close and told her that with Papa gone to Karhold, she was scared of the howling northern winds too. Sansa had fallen asleep again in her arms, and that was a memory she had sometimes returned to during her long, and real, nightmare in King's Landing. And then the Red Wedding had happened, and every hope of ever regaining that safety had vanished. The last of the Starks. But Arya was alive, or had been, and this. . . The Brotherhood feared her and respected her, but her undeath had become revenge alone, cold and furious, nothing to touch the monster she had become.

The outlaws and Sandor were silent. Sansa closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against her mother's ruined one. "I love you," she whispered, choking. "I love you so much. Please, remember that. Remember me."

She thought Lady Stoneheart's bandaged hand might have lifted, touched her hair gingerly and then pulled back as if she was aflame. Somehow Sansa's fear and horror had vanished, and there was nothing left but the catharsis of grief. She just wanted to hold the corpse close to her, as gruesome as it was.

Time became a blur. Sansa merely stood there, undone. Then at last, Lady Stoneheart pulled away and said something in a soft, gurgling rattle.

"She asks that you go," Thoros supplied, very gently. "Please."

"I. . ." Sansa lifted her head. "I don't. . ."

"Child, she remembers, but this. . . seeing you, and knowing that she is past the point of giving you any help or counsel. . . it breaks her, and there is nothing left in this frail ruined shell to break. Have pity on her. Go. Leave her."

"No," Sansa whispered. "I can't – "

"Don't be a fool." Sandor pulled her off. "We need to get away while we can."
"No!" Sansa screamed it this time. But Sandor hauled her down the long earthen passage, the torches fading behind them, the shadows of the outlaws stretching and vanishing, as he ran for the surface. Roots tangled around them, she pushed him helplessly, his breath was harsh in her ear. He was too strong for her, she couldn't let him –

Fresh air slapped at their faces. A ghostly moon was rising above the dark, skeletal trees, and the night was especially frigid after the cloistered warmth under the hollow hill. Sandor put her down at last, but glanced to all sides and didn't let go of her wrist. "Leave it, girl," he said wearily. "Thoros is right. You can't help her. Well, that's something else we have in common. We both have to deal with our bloody undead relatives, just in different –"

"What are you." Sansa tilted her head back to stare at him. "What are you talking about?"

At that, the Hound realized he had been decisively caught out. "Oh," he mumbled. "Oh, bugger."

"What are you talking about?" The only relative of his that she knew of was the Mountain.

"Look, girl." He dragged a hand through his lank dark hair. The unburned half of his face was almost as white as Lady Stoneheart's, the scarred half more twisted than ever. "I should have told you. The rumors... that false maester's done something unspeakable. In King's Landing. For the queen's trial. My brother..."

"No." Sansa said it instinctively, but the same horrifying realization was sweeping over her as when she'd known her monster. She'd always known what Sandor wanted when it came to his. "You can't. You can't!"

"Yes, I can. I have to." He was pleading, not the way he'd pleaded with the Brotherhood, in snarls and sarcasm, but really pleading. "If it's him... I can't, I'll never rest, I'll never heal unless... the only reason I left the Quiet Isle..."

Sansa stepped away from him. Numbly, she made the sign of the star on herself. And then, ignoring his roar, she turned and fled back down under the hollow hill.

To say that the Brotherhood had not been expecting to see her again was too much of an understatement. She actually thought they might expire on the spot; Gendry in particular was staring as if he'd been cracked on the head. Lady Stoneheart had not moved from where Sansa had left her, but she looked up, just a hairsbreadth.

"I'm sorry." Sansa gulped for breath. "I can't go. Not like this."

"Child," Thoros said, unutterably weary. "Don't –"

"No. Listen to me." Sansa drew herself up. "I... I know. Why I came here."

"Why is that?"

"You have to go with me. Back to the Vale."

The instant she said this, as it was still hanging in the air, Sandor crashed back into the cave after her, cursing. "Seven buggering hells – the Vale, are you –"
Sansa turned on him. "Yes," she said, slightly unnerved by her own steely calm. "There's someone there she needs to see."

The Hound blinked. "Littlefinger? Hellfire, you nearly succeeded in making me feel sorry for that whoremonger. Just for a moment, it's gone now."

Yes. Sansa felt herself changing almost moment by moment, transforming as if she was emerging from a chrysalis, a caterpillar no longer after months of cold and dark. She had to go back; she should have realized that long before. Too much was undone there. But not alone.

Lady Stoneheart had gone very still at the mention of Petyr Baelish. But the expression in her eyes was truly nightmarish, and Sansa knew that she was not mistaken. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she turned back to Sandor. "Please. Come with me."

He stood looking at her, just as tormented. He promised. He promised to keep me safe. And he has, he's done so. But she finally knew what hung on the other half of the scale: the only thing Sandor had wanted for most of his miserable life, a demon that she could not even fathom. How can I ask him to give that up? Yet he would die if he went to King's Landing to take on Gregor, and that, of everything that had happened to her since she had left Winterfell, she could not stand.

Sandor went to his knees in front of her. "Little bird," he said. "I can't."

"But you..." She would not need him to keep her safe, not if she had the Brotherhood at her back when she returned to the Vale, but if she let him go now, she would never see him again. "Sandor..."

He bent his head. He said nothing.

"To the Vale?" Thoros said. "With you?"

"With me." Sansa turned to him. "Will you agree?"

He glanced at Lady Stoneheart. It was plain what she thought.

"I'm up for it," One-Eye said.

"You would be, Jack," said the singer.

"Speak for yourself, Sevenstrings."

Sansa barely heard their byplay. They would follow where they were led, and in the Vale, they had a far greater purpose to accomplish than hanging Freys, as useful a cause as that was. All her attention was on the Hound.

After a silence that yet again went on forever, he got to his feet. Silently he came to her, took her face in both his big hands, and stared at it as if trying to memorize it. She seriously thought he was going to kiss her, and she very much wanted him to, could feel the heat in her stomach like nothing she ever had before, utterly unlike the slimy unease when Petyr forced his affections on her. But Sandor Clegane did nothing of the sort. In a voice barely above a whisper, he said, "Kill the bastard."

"You too."

He grimaced as if she'd stabbed him. He seemed to be trying to say something else, but couldn't get the words out. Then he shook his head, turned away, crossed the cave floor, and vanished up the
passage beyond, walking like a blind man.

Sansa watched until she was sure that he was not coming back. Not this time. Not ever. As gutted as she was, she nonetheless had no more tears left. Only duty. *Porcelain and ivory and steel.*

She turned to the Brotherhood. "Come, my lords," she said. "We too must leave without delay. One more hard snow and the Bloody Gate will be impassable."
Meera

She had begun to forget the feel of wind on her face. Sunlight dappling in trees, running water, blue sky, the good warm sun, what it was like when she moved through the marshes as one with the mud and moss, flying on her feet. All of it might have been some dream, vivid at first but now beginning to inexorably fade. Even Greywater Watch, where she had been born and spent her life, was blurring. Her mother’s smile she could only guess at. And sometimes she would wake, lie in the darkness, and realize that she was not entirely sure of her own name.

This was the price. Jojen had never told her if he’d foreseen her fate, and now of course it was too late to ask. But Meera did not need to be a greenseer to understand what was becoming of her. Blood and bone and bronze. Dreams and more than dreams. And then Leaf with the knife, cutting into her flesh and drawing a new ward. The protection would hold out only so long as Meera did, and they were very deep under the hill by now. The darkness was living, tangible, Meera’s only true companion as she lay awake in the witching hours, too sore to sleep. She made crude dressings for her wounds, but the makeshift wards needed more than blood to hold. They needed strength, soul, memory, and Leaf’s knife took that as well with every new cut.

No, it was not Jojen who had told her of this fate. It was Lord Bloodraven. Bran had barely gone with Hodor, leaving her with her brother’s lifeless body, when the three-eyed crow reappeared out of the darkness, silently as a shade. In fact he had given Meera a terrible turn; she had looked up and there he was, watching her with an utterly inscrutable expression. He inclined his head halfway, apologizing for her fright. Then he said, "I grieve for your loss, Meera Reed."

Meera had wanted to ask angrily if he was mocking her – for what else could he be doing, Jojen only hours dead by the children's hands, sacrificing him bit by bit and drop by drop, to bleed out his greensight into Bran? But there was no levity in Bloodraven's face, no smile or even a hint of one. Then he seated himself with a rustle of leaves, fixed that fey red eye on her, and said, "He died too soon."

"He did," Meera agreed tightly. "Is that what you have come for, my lord? To mourn with me? There are songs of the crannogs I meant to sing to him. I doubt you know them."

"I imagine not," said Lord Brynden, failing to bridle at her bitterness. "Though I will gladly listen. Yet in truth, that is not what I desire from you. The Others push deeper under the hill with each passing moment, and there is no time to lose. With the battle that looms nigh, your prince's eyes and skins may make the difference, if he can master them in time. The wards must be forged again."

Meera frowned. "You said they had broken."

"So I did. The children's wards."

"I... I do not understand."

"In this great game we play, of ice and fire and children of the forest and skinchanger and Other, we oftentimes forget that there remains a strange power in simple mankind. Your blood will, for a time, work to hold the defenses. Jojen might have served that purpose for us, but now he is gone. You are the last hope that remains to all of us."
Meera opened her mouth, then shut it. She was astounded at his effrontery, furious at his presumption that she and her brother were nothing but opportune mortal pawns, sickeningly aware that he was telling the truth, and feeling a cold breath on the back of her neck that seemed to whisper at the inevitability of her doom. In that instant she loathed fate and all its quackery, that the days of every man and woman's life could somehow be written in the stars. Was this truly why she had been born, why she had learned what she knew and done what she did – to lead her here to death in the darkness?

"It is a noble purpose," Lord Bloodraven said, still watching her face. "And we do not intend to let so much go to waste. But the wards will be much stronger if they are made by your will."

Meera took a deep, ragged breath. She heard very well what he had just told her: that they would have her blood one way or the other. To the children, who lived for centuries and centuries, it must not seem even that much of a loss; humans came and went like leaves on the wind, changeable as tides. Bran was a skinchanger, prince of the green, in the process of becoming one of the very old gods to whom his family had always prayed, and so he was accorded the benefit of their knowledge and protection. She and Jojen were merely the victims he had chanced to bring with him. Only death can pay for life.

Meera looked up. "Will it hurt?" she whispered. A foolish question, a child's question. "Will I survive?"

Lord Bloodraven glanced down at her. "Anything is possible in these days, Meera Reed."

Still she had sat motionless. Silent sobs shook inside her. I want to go home. I want to go home. But she knew in that moment that she would never see Greywater Watch again, nor hear the crickets shirr on a summer's evening, or paddle her skinboat among the trailing willows. She must merely hold it to her heart in memory, must hold her head high and keep her word. I swore it at Winterfell. By bronze and iron. By earth and water. By ice and fire.

She lifted her head. In a voice that barely sounded like hers, she said, "So be it."

Lord Bloodraven nodded again, once. Then he beckoned to the darkness, and then Leaf emerged with the curious graven blade in hand. Then it cut her flesh and heart and soul, and Meera Reed screamed.

How long it had been since that first sacrifice, she could not say. She never saw what became of her blood once it had been taken, or how the children worked the wards. They had not all been devoured by the Others yet, so she had to suppose it worthwhile, but aside from that it was a complete mystery. The children fed her honey and sap and leaves, but remembering what they had fed Bran turned Meera's stomach. She wondered when her strength gave out, if they would turn to Hodor instead. Lord Bloodraven had said that Hodor was a man, that Bran could not enter in and out of him as he pleased, but there was no way for the big stableboy to understand what was happening, or to give his consent to it. At times Meera felt that he was the greatest victim of all. At least she and Jojen had known full well what they were in for when they had chosen to venture north of the Wall with Bran, but Hodor had only done what he was told to.

She had not even seen Bran, the reason for her sacrifice, since he had gone to the trees. It was enough to make her wonder, suddenly, if she ever would again. She had dreamed of something last night that might have been home, a dream sharp enough in its clarity to make her think that some of the fraught foresight of this place had trickled into her. It hadn't been much, but she had seen a young brown-haired woman growing heavy with child and cold with sorrow, tears freezing on her cheeks as blood crept across the floor. In the dream Meera had known the young woman's name, and why she was crying, but both had fled on her return to waking. She was merely left to lie in the
darkness like a thousand sunless days before, listening to it turn to dust and shadow.

It was now, whenever now was, that there was finally some change in the half-life that she had fallen into. She had been almost asleep but not entirely, pursued by demons with her brother's face, when a hand grasped her by the shoulder and shook her.

Meera looked up muzzily, expecting to see Bloodraven or Leaf; they were the only fleshly entities who visited her anymore. But neither of them human. It was to her vast surprise, therefore, when she saw her prince's face pale and fragile in the dark.

"Bran?" Meera's tongue felt clumsy around the name. She could see the concern in his eyes; the light was the strange pale glow that the weirwood roots gave off periodically, and in it she must look even more a corpse than she felt. "What's wrong?"

"I wanted to see you." He looked embarrassed. "I had a dream about you. That you were. . ."

He mustn't know. Meera pushed herself upright, feeling the tremble in her arms and the dancing reel of blood in her head. What I still have of it. "I dreamed of you too, my prince," she said, which was true. Seen him farther away than even he was, his eyes turning red and his hair turning white, calling in his turn to another broken boy. "It has been a long time."

"I know." Awkwardly, he reached out and fumbled for her hand. "I don't know how long. Lord Brynden wants me to shift into all his ravens at once and he says that the great breaking is near, that I must be with them by then. . . I went into the trees and I saw them, who you told me the story about. The wolf maid and the dragon prince with purple eyes, at Harrenhal. It wasn't just a story, they were real."

"Surely you knew that, my prince." Meera's voice sounded disused and rusty. "Stories always contain at least a kernel of truth, even the strangest and most fantastical of all. Men see, and then men dream."

"But I asked about Coldhands, and what was supposed to happen." Bran's voice, by contrast, sounded small and frightened. "I saw him too, I saw him in the weirwood grove with a horn, and. . . Meera, the Wall is under attack. By the Others. There are thousands of them."

"We are under attack here as well." Meera coughed, tasting blood in her mouth. She ran her fingers through her tousled brown braid, but the knots were too tightly pulled to loosen. "Every night and every day that passes in the world above, the Others come closer to us here in the hill's heart."

Bran looked at her with anguished eyes, and she was reminded suddenly of how young he was. She had seen sixteen years herself, almost seventeen, a woman grown, but he had not yet ten, and was being asked the impossible. "What will stop them?"

I will. But that was not an answer to give him. "You'd do better to ask your friend, my prince. Or learn to see farther in the trees."

Bran balled a fist and hit his useless leg. "I'm trying! I can see pretty well, when I'm there. . . but I never know how to control it. And Jon. . . I think Jon. . ."

"Aye?" Meera said wearily. "Your brother is at the Wall, I know, but – "


"Many men are dead these days." She lay back down.
"No. . . listen to me!" His hand grasped her again, urgently. "They said the ranger's dead too. For sure. I need to know who he was, why he was hiding the horn there, in the grove. And the Others, all of them, we can't just let them. . ."

"You're the skinchanger, my prince. You're the one that all this is for." She wanted to comfort him, she did, but she was so tired, and no longer strong, and the secret on her shoulders was riding her down to the depths. "I don't know the answer to this. I don't know how. I don't remember anything anymore."

"Meera?" His hand touched her forehead; light, darting, a boy's hand still, not a tree's or a spirit's or a demon's. "You're so cold. I know. . . I know this. . . that Jojen. . . I'm sorry. I want to take care of you and Hodor, I just don't know how either, and it's hard to come back when I've been with them so long. When I've been up there in the trees, I. . ."

"You never wanted to come back when you were with your wolf," Meera said, eyes still closed. She had forgotten the wolf's name. "We always had to pull you back, feed you, smear honey on your lips and trickle water down your throat so you would not starve. Told you a thousand times and one that you could not live on what he killed. To learn how to change your skin, you must learn which one is your own. Who you are."

"Lord Brynden said that as well." His fingers closed around hers again. "Meera, what's wrong?"

She did not want to worry him. She had already been too harsh. "Nothing, my prince. Nothing."

"Meera. . ."

"The girl is weary," a voice said, near at hand. "She would rest. And you are needed, now. The children have almost fetched him back from the death of his wolf. You must show him where to find the horn."

Bran looked up with a start. "What? I don't understand. Who?"

Towering above them both, Lord Bloodraven looked more eerie than ever. "You know."

Bran remained blank for one, two, three moments, then his look turned desperately hopeful. "You mean he's not dead after all? What I saw. . . I thought. . ."

"Oh no," the tree-man said. "He is dead. No living man could set foot where he must go. He dreams. You must meet him there. In the grove. Show him the horn."

"Why?" Bran asked. "I don't – "

"Because this darkness is only a pale shadow of the darkness that will cover the world, if they find it first. He is what I was, what I am. A son of the dragon not by name, but by blood. A crow. Come, boy. Now."

"Jon's a Stark," Bran said. "Not a – "

Bloodraven smiled oddly. "He is. But not that alone. And the only one who can do what must be done. Tell me, child. What do you know now of the Others, that you did not know before?"

Bran hesitated. "That they march on the Wall in all their numbers."

"Very good. And what do you know of the counterbalance to all that ice?"
Bran looked blank again. Meera said, "Fire."

"It is so, Howland's daughter. There are Others of flame so well as Others of ice, and they are no less dangerous. Both sides would take the world for their own, mold it in their image and sweep over any dissenter in a flood tide. They speak of a battle that constantly rages, two forces at work in the world and seeking always for its domination, and they are not wrong. . . but what becomes of a battle when it is over? They created each other. They feed into each other. One can never die while the other lives."

"I. . . what Others of flame?" Bran wrinkled his brow. "Old Nan never told stories about those."

"It is another half of the world, my lord. And they think themselves champions of all that is, but they are wrong. Night and day. Good and evil. Pain and pleasure. There are no shades of grey for them, only absolutes. We will burn and we will freeze. That is why the seasons are as they are, Lord Stark. That is why the Wall was raised, why the Others endure still, why they come now – Others of flame and ice alike. Both of them must be destroyed."

"But without. . ."

"The balance is tipped too far. It must be broken completely if it is ever to rise again. Your kinsman must do it. That is why he was born. Rhaegar Targaryen may have been a noble fool in aught else, but he saw clearly in this. Show Jon Snow the horn."

Yet again, Bran hesitated, but Meera began to feel a horrible thread of sense forming in her head. She had never had any occasion to make acquaintance with the worshipers of the faith of R'hllor, but there were stories and stories about the red priestess that had come mysteriously from across the narrow sea, from Asshai, to champion Stannis Baratheon's cause as a mystic hero reborn. No one ever knew why, no one has ever been able to work out the sway she holds on him, why it is that he has given himself to her. . . and what lies in it for her. No man, or woman, with such power at their disposal was ever mistaken for an altruist. For what it was worth, the red priestess was supposedly sincere in her convictions, but how would she be able to fathom a dread secret that lay at the very heart of her order, veiled even from its masters by now? Even the greatest of all the sorcerers in Asshai might not know, or only guess at it. A secret that went back to the founding of the world and the unbalancing of the seasons. The Others grow too strong. Both of them.

And Jon Snow. . . Meera had long known that he was no brother to Bran, but it had never been her place to tell him. Their father had said very little about the mysterious origins of Ned Stark's supposed bastard, but Jojen had said that it was plain that Jon was no seed of the Lord of Winterfell. He'd said that he dreamed of the wolf maid and the dragon prince, the very ones that Bran had told her he'd seen in his vision. He asked to see what was happening. He did. By all the gods, he did. Coldhands and the horn and Lady Lyanna and Prince Rhaegar. The end and the beginning.

But who was Coldhands? Did it even matter? The children had saved him from death to carry out the task of finding and delivering this horn. Just as, unless Meera was very wrong, they had now saved Jon Snow: to finish what was begun. Jojen died too soon, she thought, and once more heard Bloodraven asking her to take his place. But in this case, Coldhands was only ever meant to lay the path.

"Lord Brynden," she said. She had to cough again. "And with all this so, why does it matter to you?"

He smiled faintly. "You told me who I was. Before."
Meera had a vague recollection of doing so, but could not pin it down. It took her another moment to be sure. "A Great Bastard," she said at last. "A thousand eyes and one. Once the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. A black dragon."

"A black dragon," Brynden agreed, "but still a dragon."

Bran started. Apparently he had not worked out the identity of his tutor as expeditiously as she had.

"Would you then not want fire to sweep over the world?"

"Gods, no." His chuckle was dry and papery, bare branches whispering in a rising autumn wind. "I am gone far beyond that. Look at me. Do you think it would be any concern of mine at all who raises their standards in the world of men, what cloth animals were sewn on a banner and raised to flap above hollow suits of armor, with the black blood leaking from beneath their visors? Red dragon or black, both of them live – for now. Fire cannot kill a dragon, but ice may yet."

Meera's head hurt with a dull, pounding throb. But she noticed that her knife lay not that far away, and suddenly she was seized in the throes of a terrible plan. Inch by inch, her body screaming with every motion, she moved as unobtrusively toward as it as she could.

"I still don't –" Bran was saying.

"Then you have learned little and less, summer child, and we are all dead."

"No." He bristled. "Please. Just tell me what –"

"Lord Bloodraven." Meera spoke over both of them. Her hands felt so shaky that it was a wonder she hadn't stabbed herself on accident, but this was her only chance. Their only chance. "Do as he says. Elsewise I'll end it for all of us, now."

Bran looked at her, aghast. "Meera! No!"

Meera paid him no mind. Hearing her own breath rasp in her ears, she gave the knife another twist against her stomach, letting a few fat drops of precious blood run down and absorb into her tattered leathers. "I swear it," she said, half a sob. "I will."

Lord Bloodraven looked caught off guard. This, at least, he had not foreseen. "Don't, girl. What is at stake is more than all of us, and the wards –"

"What do I care? Not any more."

He was caught. If she killed herself, their protection would last only as long as the last ward held out, and that would not be nearly enough. Whatever flimsy shield was keeping out the dark, keeping the Others away from Bran, the only way to show Jon Snow where to find the horn... but what horn?

Bloodraven divided a cold, deliberate glance between both of them. He does not like being tricked. Fine, then. Neither had she. "My lord. If you'd be so kind?"

"What is it you wish to know?" Brynden Rivers snapped.

"Who is Coldhands?" Bran blurted out. Not the question Meera would have chosen, but the circumstances left little time for reflection.

"Another kinsman of yours. He found the two horns far beyond the Wall, but did not know what
he was killed by the Others. To let the horns fall into their hands was unthinkable, so the children were forced to intervene. Preserve him long enough for him to reach the Fist of the First Men, to leave the Horn of Dawn and the cache of dragonglass there in hopes they'd find it, and take the Horn of Winter to where he thought it never would be."

"My kinsman, you said it was my kinsman..." Bran paused. "Was he in the Night's Watch as well? Like you, and Jon?"

"He was."

"Then it must have been..." Bran suddenly looked much younger than his years. In half a whisper, he said, "It was my uncle Benjen."

"He was a Stark. He was Ice. Your own lord father's greatsword was called that, after all. Always it has been part of you, but his part is done. He is dead. At rest. Leave even the thought of him behind. We have already had enough of the dead that rise."

"But the Wall... the Others..."

"I came to you first in your dream directly after you fell," Lord Brynden said. "I taught you to fly, so that you would not die. You are my heir as well. The three-eyed crow changes from fire, to ice. Always in balance. Tell Jon of the horn. Tell him to warg into the trees, to see what he needs to know, to find out once and for all who he is. Do you doubt me now?"

"I didn't fall. I never fell."

"It makes no matter now. That life is gone so much as your uncle. Come. You as well, Meera Reed."

This unexpected inclusion put Meera's hackles up. "Why?"

"It is best that you should be together," Bloodraven said, with the eclipse of a smile. "At the end."

"The end?" Bran demanded. "Which horn am I going to show Jon? Which horn?"

Bloodraven did not answer. Instead he clicked his fingers, and the roots writhed up to ensnare them both, propelling them up into the high seat at speed. They wrapped around Bran's arms and withered legs, snaked across his shoulders and burrowed into his flesh, and he opened his mouth to cry out in pain, but his eyes were rolling back into his head. Then with a gasp and a jerk, he was gone.

"He goes to meet his cousin in the weirwood grove," Bloodraven said, intercepting Meera's shocked look. "And to find his wolf. Summer is bringing us to Winter even now."

*Bringing us to Winter.* Dread coiled in her stomach like a snake. "Don't," she whispered. "It's the Horn of Winter in that grove, isn't it? Not the Horn of Dawn."

"Ice and fire," Bloodraven said, for mayhaps the thousandth time. "It is never solely one or the other. It will not be long."

Meera waited, heart racing, but indeed it wasn't. Bran's eyes opened again with another gasp, and he sat up slowly, dazed. "I did see Jon. I told him what you said... and Summer was there, Summer brought him to me. Is he dead too?"

"Your wolf lives as long as you do," Bloodraven said. His voice was beginning to grow... strange
somehow. Coarse and rough, like bark. "And now we wait."

Questions raced through Meera's head hard enough to leave bruises, but she knew there was no point in asking them. Instead, she convulsively reached for Bran's hand, and he grasped back. She could feel the tremor in his cold fingers, matched in her own, could *hear* the darkness. And for the first time, she knew the white walkers who waited at the gate. Could feel their coldness boiling out into the hill's heart. They were only a few hundred yards away. In the gathering dark, she saw their eyes burn blue.

"They are here." Bloodraven sounded sad, even almost amused, but not frightened. "We must hope your kinsman is quick to understand what he must do, otherwise..."

*Otherwise we are dead, all of us.* Meera squeezed Bran's hand harder. "Hodor," she whispered hoarsely. "Where is he?"

Bran's voice shook like his fingers. "I don't know."

Time both seemed to speed up and go horribly slowly. She gasped a sob, could hear Bran's in answer, felt the warm salt tear fall on their interlocked fingers. *The last warmth I will ever know.* The pain was driving through her like a spear, as the Others beat on the wards drawn in her blood, trying to tear their way through. *When the horn sounds...*

She couldn't stand it, she knew. She was going to die. It would be a relief now, a welcome. It was said every soul found its way home in the afterlife.

"No," she found herself saying aloud. "No..."

"No?" said Bloodraven, even more softly. Like the rustling of leaves – except it was leaves. And she understood, then. "No. Now."

And then the horn sounded.

Like the icy blast of winter itself, it tore through the hill's heart and echoed in every chamber, every space, every darkness, even though it was leagues upon leagues away. Every thing that ever was or would be heard it, Meera imagined. Calling to powers ancient beyond knowing, rising now, wakening to the command of the one who'd called. The Horn in the hands of Jon Snow – but he was no Snow, nor Stark.

*Fire,* Meera Reed thought. *Ice.*

To every side, the Others were swarming – but away from them, not towards them. Then Bloodraven uttered a sharp scream, half in agony and half in ecstasy, and before her very eyes, his mortal body, long-lived past its time, cracked and collapsed to ash. It swirled around the roots, up into them, Brynden Rivers taking his place among the old gods. His red eye was the last to go, drifting up into the flame that lit the cavern in unholy visage around them. Crackling up toward the ceiling, flame beyond anything she had ever seen. *The old powers unleashed at last.*

In her bones she could *feel* it coming down. The Wall she'd once climbed at the Nightfort, step by harrowing step, out into the abyss. Feel the unraveling of the spells and the breaking of the guard. Hear the crack directly above her, as the barrow split like a dropped fruit and the searing cold of winter rushed in. Starlight showed, unfathomably distant. *Wind on my face.* The memory returned at last.

"Meera," Bran gasped in her ear. His other hand felt out for hers. Two small human things, in the middle of the end of all things. "I love you."
She wanted to say something back to him, but the time for words was so ludicrously gone. Instead she let go with one hand, grasped him by the chin, and fleetingly, tenderly pressed their lips together.

Bran paused a split second, then leaned back into her. It was a boy's kiss, one small human thing. Light and dry and desperate, tasting of salt and snow and starlight. And for all that she could feel herself fading, going down with it, silken ribbons of soul blown on the breeze, it was the sweetest thing she'd ever known, and the last. Then she was falling, never landing only falling, never hitting the ground, only in midair, shattered darkness, and all she heard was screaming.
Even in the final gasps of autumn, on the very verge of swooning into winter, there was no place on the gods’ green earth more beautiful than Highgarden. The castle was a sprawling manor house, airy and rambling, built of pale white stone and mewed about with marble colonnades, beds of flowers, groves and coppices, fruit trees, sculptures and fountains, murals, tapestries, private corners, cobbled walks. From its roost at the crown of the hill it gazed down on the sullen silver pane of the River Mander, almost devoid of the pleasure boats that plied their trade in summer, and the ocean road and the roseroad branched out in opposite directions to the horizon. The village was likewise immaculately groomed: red tiled roofs and whitewashed cottages, neat stone streets, lord and smallholder alike protected by the stout ringwall that hedged the rolling green hills of the Reach. It grew thick with roses of every color, a veritable tapestry of sight and scent and lush seduction.

When he was younger, before he had ridden into that joust against the Red Viper and left the yard a cripple, Willas Tyrell had played with his siblings among those roses, running and shouting, pretending to be any number of famed heroes. But now Garlan was gone to take the Shield Islands back from the ironborn, Loras dying or dead, Margaery under arrest for fornication and adultery, and Willas here by himself, watching as his family battled through waters that rose higher by the day. He tried to resist the urge to gainsay his lord father, reasoning that he could not reckon exactly what he would have done instead, but somehow they had gone, almost overnight, from having a secure grip on the rule of the Seven Kingdoms and Margaery's exoneration all but assured, to desperately pleading with the furious Faith that they'd had nothing to do with the monstrous deception, the sacrilegious murders. Worse, the riverlords and the westermen did not believe it either, had decided that Tyrell and Lannister alike had conspired to bereave them.

There had been no raven from Lord Mace in over a fortnight, and Willas was bracing himself for the worst. Without his father's account, he had no choice but to try to disbelieve the horrid tales trickling out of the capital. He had thought that Ned Stark's fate would have schooled any prospective ruler in the utter folly of ordering public executions on flimsy pretenses, especially on sacred premises, but once was never enough for these sorts of things. We can only call it the War of Two Kings now, since two are all that are left: Tommen and Stannis. Soon there will be less.

The thought saddened Willas greatly. Tommen Baratheon was no Baratheon, born of fraud, lies, incest, and murder, but he was not responsible for that; he was by every account a sweet boy, guileless and kind, without a drop of his family's poison. We should have foreseen this, as soon as Joffrey wheezed his last breath. It made Willas wonder as well about the wisdom of sending his grandmother from King's Landing. While he was very fond of the conniving old harridan, she was House Tyrell's most shrewd and formidable political operator, might have been able to forestall or at least mitigate the whole tricked-up trial laid to ensnare Margaery. Then again, with the city all but in flames, it is for the best that we removed her from harm's way. As she would say, she is over eighty years old, so she keeps far off from anything that looks likely to kill her.

Willas was under no illusions about the game his grandmother and sister – and to a lesser extent, his father – were playing. From the moment the Tyrells had offered Margaery's hand to Renly Baratheon and named him King, the whole family had known that they were starting down a road to which only victory or death would bring an end. Willas himself had had severe misgivings; if it were left to him, he would be content with his horses and hounds and hawks and books, live a long life and die well in his bed with his wife and children beside him. But he was clearly in the minority, and his father had been suitably agog at the thought of seating a grandson on the Iron Throne. Why? It's a damned uncomfortable chair, and it takes its price in more than merely blood.
Yet the lure of power sunk its hook once more, and his sister wed his brother's lover and swept them all out to sea.

The one good thing that had come of it, Willas supposed, was that they had rid the grateful world of King Joffrey Baratheon, the First of his Name. Neither his father, Garlan, nor Loras had known of the plot; Lord Mace because he was an oaf, Garlan because he was honorable enough to see it as shameful and unchivalrous, and Loras because he would have begged them to dispense with such trivialities as poison, would have ridden a white horse into the throne room and flung a gauntlet in Joffrey's face. But of the three Tyrell sons, Willas had always been his grandmother's favorite, and Joffrey's unlamented demise had involved him in its implications as well. Lady Olenna had promised him that before she dropped that black amethyst from Asshai in the wedding chalice, she would find a way to spirit Sansa Stark down here, ostensibly for a social visit, and have them wed in secret. Once that was done, Joffrey dead, and Margaery reattached to his younger and far more cooperative brother, they were supposed to have a queen, a Hand, a claim to the north, and the Lannisters safely distracted and subdued.

Having drawn up the plan in its broad swaths, the family had then enlisted the master of courtly intrigue himself, Petyr Baelish, to attend the fine details, but in Willas' estimation that was another perilous maneuver. For a start, the gods only knew what the man actually wanted, and since not a whisper had been heard from him since he had conveniently departed to the Vale, he must have had, as always, another scheme boiling under the surface. Whether that was the one which had appeared to frame the Tyrells for Lord Tywin Lannister's murder, Willas was unsure. It was a wonder Baelish could keep them straight.

Margaery, of course, had known of the regicide plot from the start, from the instant Lady Olenna had pried out the truth of Joffrey's nature. She would never have been his meek lady, and Loras would never have stood by and watched her beaten. Margaery was her grandmother's pet and protégé, and from what Willas had heard of the latest lordly wedding to go catastrophically amiss, had played the part to perfection. Not that it has saved her now. And mayhaps I should be glad that I did not marry Sansa, considering that my odds of surviving until the bedding were poor and poorer.

Yet he was sad, Willas had come to realize. He had never met the Stark daughter, but as the heiress to Winterfell and the north, she was one of the few eligible young ladies with the pedigree required for such a match. Combined with his position as heir to Highgarden and Margaery's marriage to Tommen, it would have reunited the kingdom again at a stroke – but more than that, his sister had sent him letters describing Sansa Stark, her beauty and courtesy, the quiet bravery that even unending months of Lannister nightmares had not succeeded in beating out of her. That these letters had been purposely sweetened to win his approval Willas did not doubt, but his sister was an excellent judge of character, and she had no reason to privately play him false.

Willas was likewise aware that his own charms as a bridegroom were not as extensive as his younger brothers, though Garlan was already wed and Loras had no interest. While he had his share of the Tyrell comeliness in his curly chestnut hair and golden eyes, he was twice Sansa's age and crippled to boot, and his reputation as a gentle, pious, boring fool had somehow scared off all the men who otherwise should have been slavering to marry their daughters to the scion of the richest, wealthiest, most powerful house in the South. Indeed, Willas' remaining unwed at the age of nearly thirty had given rise to pernicious rumors, but part of that had to do with his grandmother, who had told him that she'd never see him saddled with some poxy hedge knight's get, would find the finest bride that the Tyrell name could conjure. Sansa was not only beautiful, she told him, but truly had the making of a queen, though she was still as silly and shy and foolish as could be expected at her age. And coming from Lady Olenna Redwyne herself, that was an endorsement of significant weight.
And so, Willas had allowed himself to dream of what she would bring to him, and what he would give to her. No one would call him less gallant than Garlan, or less valorous than Loras, the dimmest star in the glittering Tyrell constellation. When he was wed to Sansa, they could recapture some of the magic of the stories that had been lost for them both. He would show her the songs and silks and pageantry of Highgarden; she would have adored it, he felt quite sure. *I would have loved her, I know, and she would have borne me sons and daughters both.* If that was too romantic an appraisal in this ugly world, Willas did not intend to apologize. He knew that being born wealthy and well meant that he was one of the few who had any leisure for romance, but considering that there had next been talk of wedding him to bloody Cersei Lannister herself, Sansa looked an even more desirable fate by comparison.

Yet she was only one of the losses of these ruinous latter days. *The higher the climb, the harder the fall.* House Tyrell's words were, "Growing Strong," but every day Willas wondered how much longer they could survive being ripped up by the roots.

At the moment, he was wandering aimlessly through the cloisters, making even slower time than usual on his crutch and staring out over the fog-shrouded grounds. His father had had a rolling chair built for him, after Willas had once suggested it (never seeing the need to tell Lord Mace that the idea had come from Oberyn Martell, with whom he was still in correspondence, as the Red Viper had mentioned that his brother Doran used such a contraption). But he had grown to mislike the way everyone looked at him when they saw him in it, and it was important to exhibit as much strength as possible. Even if it was only a cripple and an old woman.

Speaking of which, Willas could always go back to the warm solar and get out of the freezing rain, but even he had had enough of his grandmother's company for the nonce. Forced to watch from afar as her family and her plans spiraled into oblivion, the Queen of Thorns was thornier than ever, and of late, since there was no one else conveniently to hand, she had taken to sticking Willas with them. Lady Alerie and Lady Leonette were off at Brightwater Keep; their men-at-arms still had to defend against periodic Florent attempts to recapture it, but Willas nonetheless was presently rather jealous of them.

Standing at the end of the cloister walk, the sleet slashing the courtyard, he could see the glow of the mullioned library windows. As always, he was tempted. House Tyrell's collection of books, rare manuscripts, treatises and codices, romances and histories, songs and stories and sagas numbered into the tens of thousands, and Willas was still nowhere near reading them all. A smile spread across his face at the idea of once more fleeing from the inhospitable world into some dusty page. Mayhaps he'd read the Young Dragon's account of the conquest of Dorne, that had always been a favorite, and he certainly did not want to spend any more time turfing through the mind-bogglingly boring legal opinions of long-dead maesters. None of that was going to help his family, none of it was going to fool him into thinking that he could undo what had already been –

"My lord?"

Willas turned with a start, almost losing his balance on the slippery flagstones, and had to grab at the column to steady himself. Standing at the other end of the cloister, clearly ready to proceed down it at speed if he showed any further symptoms of falling on his arse, was one of his grandmother's guardsmen – Left or Right, he couldn't tell which was which any more than the old lady. Whichever one it was, he blinked apologetically and said, "M'lord, I'm sorry to disturb you. But you're wanted at once in Lady Olenna's apartments. There's been a raven, and a visitor."

Willas groaned to himself, repressing the urge to say something uncharitable; he'd only gotten away from her a few hours ago, and now he had to go back? The fact that word had finally come, however, was more than enough to outweigh such petty considerations. "Is it from my lord father?"
There was an odd expression on Left's normally magnificently inscrutable face. "It is not, my lord. As I said, it is a matter of utmost urgency. Shall I send for your chair?"

"No need," Willas said. "That would take longer. If you would be so kind?"

Right blinked again, but obligingly hoisted Willas up, like a father giving a pig-a-back ride to a child – though Willas was tall like the rest of his siblings, he was slender and thinly built, without the bulk of Lord Mace or the brawn of Garlan. And as he held on as Left went galumphing off down the hallway, he felt a pit opening like a crater in his stomach. Margaery. It must be Margaery. The Faith are done with their deliberations and declared her life forfeit. Willas knew that his father and his family had had nothing to do with the executions of the Westerlings and Lady Roslin Tully, or the murders of Grand Maester Pycelle, Ser Kevan, and Lord Tywin. But it was far too late to plead ignorance or innocence. Lord Mace was Hand to a gullible boy king, and the Tyrell influence at court, with Queen Cersei imprisoned and disgraced, was known to reign supreme. Hoisted by our own petard.

Entangled in these dark thoughts as he was, Willas was almost relieved when Right ducked under the gilded lintel and into his grandmother's firelit solar, where she was sitting regally in her high-backed chair. She looked up, eyed him perched on Right's back – it was Right, as Left was still stationed in immobile square-jawed splendor – and said, "Well, it took you quite long enough."

Since this was exactly the greeting Willas had expected, he did not waste his breath in telling her that he had come as fast as he could. Instead he directed Right to deposit him in the chair facing his grandmother's; the guardsman did so, before resuming his industrious looming alongside his twin at the door. Their safety thus assured, Willas looked urgently at her and said, "What? What? It's not the – ?"

"Not the Faith, no." Lady Olenna's wrinkled hands clasped a curl of parchment, which she now unrolled for her grandson's benefit. "It's worse. A Targaryen."

For a split second, Willas was not sure he had heard correctly. "What?"

"Don't you 'what' me, Willas Tyrell. You sound like a talking crow. And as crows are disagreeable enough birds without teaching them to talk, there is nothing I can presently think of that would vex me more. Except for this." The Queen of Thorns brandished the parchment in his face. "A missive from Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name, sent to every major house in Westeros. Officially declaring his return to claim his crown and inviting all of said houses to join their banners to his for his march on King's Landing. Nothing good ever comes of all these letters to every major house in Westeros. First we had Stannis and all his miserable taradiddle about incest, and now we have another purple-eyed muttonhead faffing here and faffing there and lording it over the lot of us. Did you know that a flock of crows is called a murder? Of course you did, you're much cleverer than you look sitting there with your mouth hanging open like that. I knew there was a reason I disliked crows, apart from the talking."

Willas was in fact gaping undignifiedly, and he succeeded in remedying that, but not his astonishment. It seems I was wrong about the number of kings left to contend with. He almost blurted out, "What?" again, before remembering that this was not an acceptable response. Choosing to forego all the obvious questions about how on earth Aegon Targaryen could not only have survived but found himself in Westeros at this portentously opportune moment, Willas said instead, "Where does he send this letter from?"

"Storm's End. It seems those fables about it falling to the Golden Company weren't fables after all. He has Dorne firmly behind him, which upsets my digestion altogether, and there's a king in him, all right. Vengeance this and victory that and you're up to your eyeballs in it before you can blink."
Kings are such a dreadfully predictable and self-righteous bunch, don't you agree? It's enough to make me suspect that the lot of them have very small cocks."

"Grandmother," Willas said weakly.

"Aye? I was wed to your late granddolt for a good few decades, I know plenty about cocks and what they're good for. Rather more than you, I imagine. In fact, I should hope so. We all love Loras dearly, but one of those is enough in a family."

Willas decided that no good could possibly come of this. Instead, he held out his hand. "May I see that letter?"

The Queen of Thorns snorted, but passed it over, and Willas perused it intently, a frown knitting tighter and tighter between his brows. Finally he looked up and said, "Whoever this boy is or claims to be, this is no dullard's work. There's a baited hook for every one of the Seven Kingdoms dangled before them. To the west he promises justice for the murdered Westerlings, which he spins off to the north as respecting the ancient legacy of House Stark and the King in the North's short-lived, abandoned queen. He already has the stormlands and Dorne, he vows to the riverlords to free Edmure Tully and make full recompense for all that he's suffered, and for us..."

Willas had been careful to read that part twice or thrice over. "He says he remembers how valiantly House Tyrell fought for his father Rhaegar during Robert's Rebellion, and that he knows the accusations against Lady Margaery are vile and untrue. If we wed our strength to his, he promises to see her pardoned without the need even for a trial."

The Queen of Thorns snorted again. "Your oaf father's valiant fighting for Rhaegar consisted of getting pissed on at Ashford until Randyll Tarly arrived to save the day, then sitting and stuffing his face with Lord Paxter at Storm's End while that onion knight of Stannis's weaseled through the siege lines. Then, of course, he surrendered to Ned Stark the instant the man showed up. I daresay Stark hadn't even gotten his armor on yet, was still in his tent talking strategy, and up pelts your lord father, wheezing like a grampus, white flag waving. But it's a pretty sentiment to be sure, and there are a good deal of great lords who will hear it all as sweet music to their ears. You have a plan, I trust?"

Willas blinked. "Me?"

"No, you idiot, I was asking my cheese." Lady Olenna took a delicate nibble. "While the Lord Oaf of Highgarden bumbles and blathers us all to further calamity in King's Landing, it's you that the Tyrell levies look to for orders. What are we intending to do? Raise our banners and declare for a well-spoken stripling who may yet be an impostor, or stay the course and try to reason with the Faith? They tried to marry me off to a Targaryen once, I doubt I'd like being ruled by one again any more than I'd have liked bedding with one, but once again, it comes down to cocks and where men are sticking them. Aerys was mad, Rhaegar was a fool, the Beggar King a jape, and the daughter, Daenerys... she'd be something to be reckoned with, for certain, but she's not helped herself by remaining fast across the narrow sea. And if it should become one Targaryen claimant against another, we'd damned well make sure we pick the one with the dragons. Otherwise they'll happen along one day and roast us all, even poor half-daft old ladies like me, and those horrible Florents will help themselves to Brightwater Keep and Highgarden in one fell swoop. Do you think the Targaryens would roast the Florents for us first, if we asked nicely?"

"Laugh in our faces, more like," Willas said. "When they had their dragons before, they answered neither to gods nor men."

"Yes," his grandmother answered crisply, "and they've not become known for doing it since, either. This being the Targaryens, I do suppose they could always marry each other. Perhaps they
should, in fact, but sensible and well-reasoned actions is another thing the family has never been known for. Why should anybody use their brains or listen to their mothers when they can whisk out their swords and inventively kill each other? Though it does make me think that the reason everyone's smallclothes were in a knot over Joffrey was because he was a horrid little beast, not necessarily because he was born of incest. If he hadn't been so rotten, he might still be sitting the Iron Throne today. Seven save us all."

"Stannis Baratheon would have begged to differ."

"Stannis Baratheon would beg to differ on the color of the sky. And merely getting out of bed in the morning ties his smallclothes in a knot. It's a miracle the man has any balls left – or mayhaps he doesn't, that would explain a great deal. If he's still in the North, he certainly doesn't. But we are getting rather appallingly off track. There's that decision."

Willas did not feel remotely up to making a decision of such magnitude just at the moment. "Right said something about a visitor, as well as a raven."

"Ah," said Lady Olenna, a brief strange smile paying a visit to her lips. "Well, yes. About that. I suppose that this would be the time. Left, Right, show him in."

Willas had a few moments in which to be even more stupefied than he was currently, which was difficult. Then the twin guardsmen bowed, pulled aside the door, and ushered in a hooded figure, the hem of his cloak dripping rain and his boots clapping sharply on the parquet floor. He came to a halt just inside the threshold and offered a short bow.

"Now, now, my dear," said the Queen of Thorns. "There's no need for such formality. Your brother hasn't seen you in months, after all."

Willas blanched. He stared at the figure – could recognize the familiar way of standing, a hint of the old arrogance, the tilt of the head and the hilt of a longsword emerging from beneath the fall of the cloak, the pommel set with a golden rose and the grip wrapped about with fawn leather. He knew that sword. He knew that man. And then he struggled to his feet, and for the first time in years, Willas Tyrell ran.

"Loras!" He flew across the solar and flung himself into his youngest brother's arms, laughing and crying. "Gods be good, Loras! What are you doing here? Where have you been? Why did no one tell us you were still alive? Was it all just a ruse, then, but – but – why? Is Dragonstone still taken? Were you truly – "

"All right, all right, don't strangle me," Loras's voice answered. "I regret the necessity of lying to you and Margaery and Father and Mother, but secret plots tend to work better when fewer people know about them. Grandmother and Garlan knew, but not anyone else."

"So – so you weren't burned? At all?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then Loras said bitterly, "No. I was."

"May I – ?" Willas' hands hovered awkwardly at the hood.

The Knight of Flowers gave an irritable, one-shouldered shrug. "If you must."

It had been so long since Willas had gazed on his brother's face, thinking him horribly maimed or dead, that it would have taken a Targaryen and a dragon crashing through the ceiling to stop him. Carefully, he took hold of the rain-soaked hood and put it down.
He sucked in an involuntary breath, trying to keep his shock from showing. Loras had always been the handsomest member of a handsome family, but now his right cheek and down his neck and shoulder had been burned and blistered away. He was missing a chunk of his glossy brown curls, and his ear was melted and disfigured. It was not serious enough to incapacitate him, as had been widely reported, but he would never regain his old looks again. To someone whose fame and appeal was so carefully cultured by his youth and beauty and talent, this would have been a crushing blow.

"I... you look much better than I expected," Willas said encouragingly. "But do you think we should start calling you the Hound?"

Loras' golden eyes blazed, but he answered in a neutral tone. "I should hope not. You can understand, however, that there was significant advantage in the Lannisters thinking that I was too destroyed to be of further use. Now that the Bastard of Driftmark has invested me with the fleet that Cersei Lannister paid for out of her own pocket, we are finally prepared to strike. It should have been sooner."

Willas blinked. "The Bastard of Driftmark? Aurane Waters?"

"Aye." Loras turned on his heel. "The arrangement was that as soon as the dromonds were funded and built, he would join me at Dragonstone and we would either guard the coast against the ironborn, or be prepared to counter any further attacks the Lannisters made against us. My being burned was not part of the plan, but it turned out to be useful. I suppose." The anger in his voice made it clear how much he resented having to own to it. "For a while I wanted to kill him for having fought for Stannis at the Blackwater, but he's just a sellsail, his loyalty up for the highest bidder, and the Tyrells had the deepest pockets after Cersei stupidly spurned the Iron Bank. It was Cersei's own idea to make him Master of Ships after he was pardoned."

Cersei Lannister's ability to shoot herself vigorously in both feet had become a topic of some amazement for Willas, but that was currently secondary. "Garlan already went to defend the Shield Islands from Euron Crow's Eye. I sent messengers to Lord Leyton telling him to strengthen the defenses in Oldtown, and his son, our uncle Humfrey Hightower, went to Lys to recruit more help. Our aunt Lynesse is the concubine of some or other merchant prince there, and he thought she would help him get a good rate on sellswords."

"Our aunt Lynesse is by all repute a grasping bitch," Loras said. "I wouldn't wager on it. But yes, Garlan was forced to take over the lion's share, shall we say, of the campaign against the Greyjoys when I had my little encounter with boiling oil. That was when Aurane and I decided that the fleet could be saved for other uses... too late, as I said. By then, Margaery was already under arrest, and I was still laid low. I became well enough to travel only a fortnight or so ago. There's plenty more you can't see."

"I believe it." Willas could see the slow, stiff way Loras walked, quite unlike his usual catlike grace. "And now --"

"And now," his brother finished, "we've a mess of truly epic proportions on our hands. Whether or not Father had something to do with that folly at Baelor's – not that I think he did, not even he is that stupid – I do not intend to leave Margaery to her fate. I don't care a damn about Stannis or Aegon or the Lannisters or any of them, we're getting her out of there. Even if I have to face them all down myself."

At that the Queen of Thorns, who had been remarkably quiet until now, scoffed noisily. "It's a pity your pretty face has burned away, lad, because you're still not getting anywhere in life with your brains. King's Landing is soon going to be under attack from every mother's son in all of Westeros,
and you think to go in there blazing, fish Margaery out single-handed and swoop her back here. It's not going to give you back who you were, you know that. It may only succeed in killing you properly this time."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Grandmother," Loras said in a chilly tone. "But I do not intend that, in fact. As it said in the letter, Aegon Targaryen or a very good simulacrum of him offers us the hand of friendship. We would be fools not to take it."

"So you think – " Willas began.

"I don't care whether he's real or not." Loras opened and closed a gloved fist, clumsily enough that Willas knew it had been burned too. *His sword hand.* That must have been the greatest insult of all. "I don't care about any of it, really. All I care about is the fact that Stannis Baratheon somehow still draws breath. That dishonorable hypocrite, that sanctimonious bloody bastard, who has less sense than he has humanity and would not be the worst king that ever sat on the Iron Throne only by virtue of the fact that a few of the Targaryens and Joffrey the Inbred got their arses there first. If Aegon will save our sister and permit me to kill Stannis, he can call himself the Conqueror reborn for all it matters to me. Sometimes I feel that I've already lived too long."

Willas winced at the raw agony in his brother's voice. Loras had loved Renly Baratheon from the time they were striplings, and while he'd hoped that Loras might someday find it in his heart to heal, to forgive the world for taking Renly away from him, he oftentimes feared that he never would. Moving closer, he tried to put an arm around Loras, but Loras twisted away. He crossed the room and stood in front of the hearth, gazing into the fire.

"So," the Queen of Thorns said. "Is that the decision? Mind you, the Lord Oaf might find it awkward if he's protesting that he's little Tommen's most loyal servant, and then we crop up in the background swearing fealty to a dead boy, so we'd do well to have all our dragons in a row. Loras, you'll sail with this Waters – if he can be trusted – to Storm's End and give our oath to Aegon. Willas, you'll call the banners. As for Garlan, it would be best to let him carry on with what he's doing, as I do so dislike Euron Greyjoy. The sooner he goes to visit his nasty little damp god, the better."

Willas turned to look at his grandmother. "And what of Margaery?"

Lady Olenna smiled. "Why, my dear. If we pull this off, she'll be safely back in Highgarden with us before she knows it. And if Daenerys never arrives from wherever she's squatting, this Aegon will need a bride or two."

"What did he ever do to you that you want to kill him?" Loras said cynically.

"A point fairly placed, lad, but you'll not want to scowl so much now that you're not so pretty as you used to be. Yet since when have the stakes ever been the slightest bit lower, since Lord Puff Fish puffed up and got us into this mess?" The Queen of Thorns leaned back in her chair. "If this should go wrong, weddings – even murderous weddings – will be the very least of our worries."
"You must go," her father said, late-afternoon shadows gauzing his face as they sat on the terrace, water splashing from the fountains and bells sounding distant in the hot still air. "I had hoped that he would accept the invitation, but I suppose I cannot be too surprised that he has not. Why would he sit about sipping ambrosia with an old man like me, when he has enemies to fight and a crown to win?"

"If he had better sense." Arianne adjusted the black sandsilk veil across her nose and mouth; the household was still in mourning for Quentyn, and Prince Doran might well be wearing it for the rest of his life. It made Arianne terribly guilty, and as such she had not confessed it even to her cousins, but she was almost relieved by her younger brother's death. If Quentyn had survived, if he had been successful, he would have become consort to the Dragon Queen, King of Westeros in all but name. If she had been allowed to rule Dorne at all, it would have been as a pitiing emolument from him, an appanage, whereupon she would have to kneel at his feet and swear him homage.

Moreover, while she now knew that the Martells had been intending to support a Targaryen restoration ever since the death of Elia and her children – well, child – the mere existence of the plan to promote Quentyn cast continued doubt on her father's repeated assurances that she would have her birthright. When he arrived home in a shroud, escorted by Arch Yronwood and Gerris Drinkwater, only then had she learned the full tale of Quent's misadventures in Meereen, and the end it had made of him. Not even when her uncle died had she seen Prince Doran grieve so openly. You should have spent your tears on Oberyn, my lord. The finest man in Dorne, not my poor overmatched little brother.

Yet nonetheless, the unexpected emergence of a male Targaryen gave things the chance to be put right. And not just any male Targaryen, but her cousin Aegon himself, the Golden Company and Jon Connington at his back. As of Prince Doran's most recent intelligences, he had been raiding along Cape Wrath, reaching as far as the Weeping Tower on the Sea of Dorne, where he had received the Martell envoys and politely but firmly informed them that there would be plenty of time to visit after the fighting was over. With his control secured along the cape by the taking of castles and hostages, he had then returned to the stormlands to prepare for his assault upon the capital.

Prince Doran, however, did not intend to be thwarted so easily, and also saw it as a useful opportunity to teach the lad a few lessons about diplomacy. From the moment they'd received Aegon's first, secret ambassador, Lady Lemore herself, there had been no question that Sunspear meant to declare for him, but that did not mean they had to do it cock-a-hoop. They held all the leverage. Princess Myrcella was still in their custody, and with Tyene Sand whispering in Cersei's ear – her cousin had been born for the task, Arianne imagined – they were in position to pull any number of well-placed strings. As evidenced by news of the plot currently fomenting, they might in fact be able to deliver the Seven Kingdoms to Aegon wrapped up with a bow. It had been foolish of him to deny Doran this modest boon in exchange, which was why the prince was now deputing his daughter to travel in his place. One way or another, they would see him.

"What am I to say to him?" Arianne asked. "What am I to promise? You told me once to make Ser Arys Oakheart most welcome. Am I to do the same with Aegon?"

Prince Doran shot her a wry, weary look. "You are not to attempt to seduce him, no. Nor to convince him to crown Myrcella and cause us another fiasco. You did not much enjoy your captivity, as I recall."
"That stung like a whip, but she had left herself open for it. "Fear not, Father," Arianne said stiffly. "Aegon's virtue is in no danger from me and my wanton ways. But since you spend such a deal of time thinking, has it occurred to you that we would do very well to have him marry me? I understand that he holds out hope of his aunt Daenerys, but he's a Targaryen named Aegon. Two wives are quite within his purview."

"It has occurred to me." Prince Doran rearranged the blanket over his lap and grimaced. "It has also occurred to me that we would do very well to consider the larger picture. As my sister's son, Aegon already has a strong command of the Martell loyalty; he need not marry you to secure it. It would be wiser instead to find him a northern bride – Lady Arya Stark, perhaps, assuming both that she is genuine and can be rescued from Lord Bolton. Otherwise Robb Stark's widow, the Westerling girl. Either one might serve to bring an entire half of the kingdom under our – "

"That seems remarkably cruel of you. I am aware of what Tyene and Lord Varys have devised – and Nym will doubtless be in on it, since she's on the small council now. Murder the Westerling girl's entire family, then force her to marry the beneficiary of it? If I were Jeyne, I would claw his eyes out."

"It is distasteful," Prince Doran agreed with a sigh. "But there are few enough options as it is. Do not look at me so stonily, my child. I know you think that I wish to prevent you from becoming a queen, but I only want what is best for our entire family and House."

"Who did you intend me to marry, then? After all the greybeards and greenhorns you mocked me with? Viserys Targaryen has been dead for several years."

Her father turned to look at her. The deepening shadows made him look very old indeed, a frail gouty man, all but bedridden, a man likewise in the twilight of his years, a man with nothing more to gain from lies. "Why," he said. "I thought you might choose for yourself, when you sit crowned as ruling princess in my stead."

Arianne flushed even more deeply and looked down. She had heard quite clearly what he had just told her: that her chances of actually claiming her inheritance might hinge on how satisfactorily she carried out this mission to Aegon, minded her words and manners. It made her hate him, briefly. But he still had her too firmly by the short hairs, and for now, she must dance to his tune. She was certainly coming to have a grudging respect for her father's quiet political acumen, but his meticulous, slow movements were chafing her more sorely than ever.

"Yes, Father," she said, choking. "When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow morning, first light. I have arranged a ship to take you to Griffin's Roost. There you will present my compliments to Lord Jon Connington, then, if Prince Aegon is not there, continue onto wherever he is now billeted."

My compliments, Arianne heard. Not even our compliments. She dipped her head and got to her feet, sorely tempted to rip the mourning veil off her face and fling it into his. Let him take that how he would. But instead she pressed a kiss to his gouty fingers and took her silent leave.

As Arianne hurried through the columned walks, she noticed a confusion of horses and torches on their way up the road toward the palace gates. Even from here, the dusk painting purple shadows, she recognized the tall figure riding at the head, goading her steed more angrily than ever with her spurs. Obara. Obara is returned. The eldest Sand Snake had been sent with Ser Balon Swann of the Kingsguard to hunt down Ser Gerold Dayne, Darkstar, the man responsible for removing Myrcella's ear and leaving her with the ugly scar that now marred her face. What her cousin had actually done, especially as Doran had revealed that Ser Balon was supposed to take her brother
Trystane and accidentally get him assassinated on the way to King's Landing, Arianne had no idea.

Thinking of that, she quickened her steps. She ducked through one door and then another, sprang off the inner ward's wall, and shouldered through the onlookers to the courtyard, just as the portcullis was being raised to admit Obara and her party. They wore halfhelms and scaled copper armor in the Dornish style, but as Arianne's eyes swept the crowd, she glimpsed neither the white cloak of Ser Balon Swann or the distinctive black-streaked silver hair of Gerold Dayne. She had no particular love for the man; he was cruel, unpredictable, and vainglorious, and it was her own foolish fault for including him in her conspiracy, giving him a chance to cause this mess in the first place. Yet nonetheless, she hoped they had not killed him out of hand. Obara Sand's notion of justice was somewhat different from the norm.

"Cousin." As if called by her thoughts, the eldest Sand Snake loomed above her, the torches carving shadows of her close-set eyes. "What a surprise to see you still here. I thought you were destined for greater things."

"On the morrow. Did your venture go well?"

Obara grinned. "Passably." With that she turned in her saddle, unbuckled one of the heavy-laden bags, and grasped something inside. And in that moment Arianne Martell knew what it was, knew and felt her heart turn over, remembering Ser Arys and his valiant self-destructive charge into Hotah's waiting longaxe, imagined what he'd say on beholding this, what he'd think of him and her, as Obara negligently flicked Ser Balon Swann's severed head to the ground. It landed in the dust and rolled, cracking dried blood.

Arianne stared at it silently, then raised her eyes to her cousin's face. "You had no orders to kill him."

"And no orders not to." The Sand Snake shrugged. "Justice, I was told. Vengeance. Why then would I put a blade through Darkstar, whose only crime was missing a stroke that should have landed in Myrcella's neck? Why would I let Ser Balon learn the barest measure of what was truly going on here, then rush back to King's Landing to spill it to his queen? Between you and me, cousin, Dorne is a hazardous place for knights of the Kingsguard. You already got your little princess to lie that Darkstar was also responsible for killing Oakheart, so the Lannisters remain in ignorance of the failed plot to crown her. Well, now we've tried your method. It's time we tried mine."

Arianne told herself not to flinch. "You let Dayne go."

"Of course I did." Obara removed her helm and ran a hand through her ratty brown hair. "If he has any sense at all, he'll wander the Free Cities for a few years, work as a sellsword and make himself a rich man, then come back to Westeros when Aegon's on the throne and buy a lordship and a pardon. He was right, as I said. About Myrcella."

"No." Arianne bristled. "She is only a little girl."

"So was Rhaenys. Truly, cousin, you should be sitting up here in the saddle, and I standing below, so you could prate at me from the high horse. What did you think you were doing with that fool business of yours, but condemning her to death? Given your ineptitude at pulling off secret plots, she wouldn't have survived much longer even without Darkstar's contribution. The instant we openly declare for Aegon, Myrcella has no further use as a claimant to the Iron Throne. Let the Lannisters make the first move against us, then kill her. As an example."

"No, I said." Arianne was hideously aware that there was nothing she could do to ensure Myrcella's
safety from Griffin's Roost or Storm's End or wherever her path would lead her. She had loved her uncle, and still loved her cousins, close to her as the sisters she had never had, but now was one of the times when she was uncomfortably reminded that they were called vipers for a reason. With that so, she was forced to deal one of the feeblest threats of all time. "If you do, I will inform my lord father to ensure that you see the inside of that cell atop the Spear Tower again, and this time for good."

Obara Sand barked a scornful laugh. "The day I fear the puissant Prince Doran's wrath is the day I put on a dress and take up embroidery. Hand me back my prize, cousin. There are a deal of men I mean to show it to, men who may understand what it means."

*I understand full well.* With precise, icy dignity, Arianne picked up Balon Swann's head by the ear and returned it to Obara. Then she turned without bidding her cousin farewell, and strode across the courtyard with every drop of composure she could muster. It was only when she was alone in the roofed passage beyond that she allowed herself to start to shake. *Arys, my white knight... I never meant that to happen, I never...*

But was Obara right? Had she?

Hating everyone who walked the face of the earth, herself foremost among them, Arianne scrubbed her tears away with the heel of her hand and mounted the serpentine stair up the tower. *Everything here speaks of snakes.* At the top she turned left and then right, passed the heavy guard that had been placed on the apartments since all the calamities, and tapped on the cedarwood door.

There was a moment of unpromising silence. Then Myrcella Baratheon's voice called, "Come in."

Hoping that she did not look as rattled as she felt, Arianne opened it and curtsied herself into the other princess' presence. As usual, Myrcella and Trystane sat to opposite sides of the *cyvasse* table, and also as usual, Trystane appeared to be losing. Yet he had remained so steadfastly at his betrothed's side during her convalescence that it was apparently quite immaterial, and Arianne at once noticed the glance of cold annoyance he was shooting at her. Nonetheless, doing her best to ignore it, she made herself smile at her youngest brother. "Trys. Could I have a word with Myrcella, please?"

"Why?" he said, challenging. "So you can cut off her other ear?"

*I deserved that,* Arianne reminded herself. "No, certainly not. It will only be a moment."

Still he lingered, glaring at her, but at a murmur from Myrcella he stood down and departed. Arianne was heartened by his evident protectiveness of her; it would make it that much harder for Obara to carry out whatever she had in mind. *I know what she has in mind.* Pushing that thought away, she smiled at the girl, this one unfeigned. "Are you feeling better, sweetling?"

Myrcella simply gazed back at her. Not a hint of relief or warmth or pleasure showed in those cool, guarded green eyes. "Why are you here?"

*She is learning how to be a queen after all,* Arianne thought sadly. "I'm leaving on the morrow. I wanted to make sure that you were safe."

"Safe?" Myrcella's lip twisted, and for a moment she looked very like her mother. "I hope so. Your lord father gave me these guards. I do not know why they did not stop you."

Always the princess had been so dewy and sweet, so open and trusting, that these words sounded twice as cold in her mouth as they would have in any other. Arianne held up both hands. "My dear,
"I never – "

"Please be quiet," Myrcella said. Her high cheekbones were beginning to burn white. "You lied to me."

"Who told you all this?"

"Trys. What really happened and why you were imprisoned. I lied for you that Darkstar killed Ser Arys, but he didn't. All along, you told me that you were my friend and that you wanted the best for me, but you only wanted to name me queen so your family could start a war with my brother."

There was nothing for Arianne to say to that; it was, after all, quite true. Still, she tried. "Your Grace – no, that was not all of it. You are in Dorne, and Tommen's elder. By our laws, you have every right. You would be a fine queen, and – "

"No." Not once had Myrcella raised her voice. "It was for you. Or did you expect I would not work it out?"

It was foolish to feel so tongue-tied before a girl who had not yet even flowered, but Arianne was. Myrcella was as smart as a whip, and with Trystane at hand to relay everything he heard from the household and Prince Doran, it was no wonder that she had been fed a steady diet of damaging information. *I only do want to keep her safe, but how can I expect her to believe that now?* Indeed, it was not Myrcella that she truly wanted to crown, but herself. It was her fault, and Myrcella's accusations were justified.

"Your Grace," Arianne began, helplessly.

"Please go," that polite little voice said. "I'm not angry at you anymore, I don't think. But I don't care to ever look on your face again."

Between this and her father, Arianne had spent a good deal of the evening making ignominious exits. But there was once more no other option, so she nodded and left, passing a glowering Trystane on the landing. *They all hate me now.* In their shoes, she very well might hate her too. She thought of her friends, imprisoned or exiled or hastily married off, and of picking Balon Swann's head out of the dirt for Obara. Then it all came boiling up, her regret and her grief and her uncertainty and her futility, and Myrcella's rejection and Arys' death and even Quentyn's, and what she'd done, what she'd wrought. She grasped the wall as her knees gave out, and slid down it bonelessly, sobbing.

Arianne did not know how long she wept. She was mortified that someone would come into the corridor and see her, but she couldn't stop. She remained on her knees, hunched over, black curls escaping their bronze bands and tumbling into her face. She gulped for air and kept crying, ugly heaving retching sobs, and when a light hand touched her back, she jumped nearly out of her skin.

She looked up wildly, expecting for that one mad moment to see her mother – even though Lady Mellario hadn't lived in Sunspear in years, had returned to her native Norvos after becoming estranged from her husband. But it wasn't, of course. It was the woman who was as good as her aunt: her uncle Oberyn's beloved paramour Ellaria Sand, dark gaze full of concern.

"Oh, my dear," Ellaria said. "Here, to your feet."

Arianne's legs felt as wobbly as water, but she allowed Ellaria to help her up and offer her a handkerchief. She mopped at her eyes, sniffed, and tried to think of something to explain her tears, but Ellaria asked no questions. She merely stood patiently until Arianne had regained command of
herself, then said, "You'll be leaving tomorrow."

It wasn't a question so much as a statement, but Arianne nodded nonetheless. Almost incidentally, she found herself wondering what tale her cousin had told her father regarding the pursuit and purported capture of Gerold Dayne. Prince Doran's intentions to bring him to justice had been fully genuine, and Arianne herself was certainly of no temperament to let him abscond to the Free Cities without a scratch; in fact, she resolved to inform her father personally before the dawn. Yet then she caught sight of a crumpled piece of parchment in Ellaria's hand, scribbled with something that looked very like her cousin Tyene's elegant script, and her curiosity got the better of her. "What is that?"

Ellaria hesitated, clearly weighing up whether she wanted to trust her with the information. It might be about the Westerling plot, as that seemed to be going forth at speed. But then Ellaria sighed and said, "Something which I very dearly pray is not true."

"Why?"

"Because," Ellaria said, measuring out each word as carefully as a miser, "it would make mock of uncounted pledges and promises alike, and the very law of nature. Because if it was so, it would send Obara racing up the Boneway breathing fire. All of Dorne will rise, and all of it will bleed."

Arianne felt her stomach sink into her foot. With Nym and Tyene in King's Landing, one in the council and the other with the Faith, and Sarella occupied with her little charade in Oldtown, that left Obara dangerously renegade – and, as proved, she was desperate to fan the flames of war. The four youngest Sand Snakes, Ellaria's daughters, had a few more years yet before their fangs grew in all the way. "All of Dorne is in the process of rising already," she pointed. "For Aegon."

"Yes, but . . . this is different." Ellaria glanced away, and Arianne thought she had decided the better of telling her after all. She was just about to press when her uncle's lover said, "According to your cousin, Ser Gregor Clegane is not dead after all."

There were a multitude of responses Arianne had expected, but that was not one. "What?" The Sand Snakes had been completely sure of it, knowing the poison their father had applied to his spear, and Ser Balon had come down here in the first place to deliver that skull, a skull of such distinctive size and heft that it would have been extremely difficult to find another of its like. But if not . . . they would have lost the Viper for nothing and Obara's plot to kill Myrcella would find countless enthusiastic volunteers. If it was even possible – but it wasn't –

"She may yet be mistaken, she says," Ellaria said, reading Arianne's face. "But she does not think she is. She has succeeded in earning Cersei's confidence, as you know, and the queen is boasting of the invincibility of the champion who will fight for her in her trial. Supposedly he is called Robert Strong, but an eight-foot-tall giant in full plate and mail, who never raises his visor or speaks or eats. . . Tyene has asked some pointed question of the nature of the false maester Qyburn's experiments, and has learned that Ser Gregor was in Qyburn's personal care, in the black cells, when he died. Also, that Qyburn is known to dabble, and more than dabble, in necromancy and the dark arts."

"Gods be good," Arianne muttered involuntarily. "And that is all you have to say? The monster who killed your Oberyn lives again, and you will not even —" 

"When I heard it, I dreamed of riding to King's Landing and shoving a spear through this abomination myself," Ellaria said, a slight quaver in her voice. "And then burning it to ashes to be sure it never rises again. But from what is said of it, what good would that do me? I would only die in the trying, and then my girls for thinking to avenge me. I have said it before, but it is so. I am
heartsick and sore of war, and everything that goes with it. If that makes me the only one in this realm that cries out for more blood, so be it. We are a society where to be a patriot and to take pride in one's homeland means to kill as many of the men, women, and children standing across from you as possible. If you refuse, you are vilified as weak and foolish and traitorous, too naïve to understand the cost of glory and sacrifice. Yet what if I do? What if I understand the cost too well? In the Seven-Pointed Star, in the Mother's Book, it is written that the very spirit that holds the world together, that gives the deepest meaning to our souls, is not might but mercy. That we so very often worship our men for being brave enough to hate, but revile our women for being brave enough to love. And I am nothing if not a mother, and a woman. Leave it. It is over."

Arianne opened her mouth, realized that she had nothing to say, and closed it. She handed Ellaria her handkerchief and silently began to walk away. However, she had not gone ten paces when her aunt's voice stopped her in her tracks. "Arianne?"

She glanced back. "Aye?"

Ellaria Sand fixed her with a calm, level stare. "You have done enough damage already," she said. "Please, say naught of this to anyone."

It was all Arianne could do to remain expressionless. She had no armor left now. So she numbly bobbed an acknowledgement, and for the third time that night, took her shamefaced, stinging leave.

She left the next morning, as planned, after a night of much restless thrashing and almost no sleep. Unable to face the prospect of another confrontation with her father, she finally decided that she would instead send him a raven with the truth about Darkstar when she reached Griffin's Roost. Regardless of Prince Aegon's whereabouts, that was her first destination; Lord Jon Connington had returned home after the campaign down Cape Wrath. It was vital to hold it as a first line of defense against potential attacks from the crownlands, and the Martell envoys had reported that his health was rumored to be deteriorating from some unknown malady. It was Arianne's task too, if she could, to find out why and what this was.

The voyage was all a blur. She wondered if Tyene's schemes had come to fruition yet, if the executions had been carried out and the tide turned in Aegon's favor. The weather was certainly changing; it took them far longer to get up the coast than expected. The wind was perversely and constantly contrary, and they were caught in the straits of Estermont by a gale so violent that the mainmast broke in two, so they had to put in at the unpeopled northern spit of the island, cut down one of the bountiful trees, and fashion a new one. Then a Lyseni pirate galley was spotted in the offing, requiring them to remain in hiding an extra day, and the wind yet again would not cooperate when they were ready to set out again. It was a full three weeks since their departure from Sunspear when they finally were hailed by the longships patrolling the sea off Griffin's Roost, flanked to either side, and escorted into shore. Once their errand and identity had been confirmed, they were promised an audience with the prince that very night. Apparently he was here, but only briefly; he would presently continue onto Storm's End, raise the Targaryen banners over the captured castle, and send letters announcing his return to every corner of the land. The executions had taken place just a few days ago, in King's Landing, and he intended to seize the moment.

Arianne was seasick, sore, tired, cold, and hungry, and would have much preferred a hot bath, a good supper, and a featherbed before making such an august royal acquaintance, but all she had time to do was rebraid her hair and change into something that wasn't salt-stained and windblown. With her father's admonitions about seduction in mind, she chose something high-necked and long-sleeved, a plain dark blue; in fact, she looked as demure as a virgin septa. She would resort to breasts later, if necessary. Not that they were liable to sway Connington. He'd never married, and there were all sorts of rumors in Dorne that his ill-concealed jealousy and dislike of her aunt Elia...
had had a far more personal bent to it. But it was not Connington she was concerned with. She and her men were bowed into the dim, torchlit hall as ceremoniously as could be managed with the Roost's threadbare household. Lord Jon and friends had had to fight a battle to clear out the previous tenants, and there was still evidence of it everywhere. But they were greeted hospitably enough, given cups of warm wine to take the chill off, and assured that Aegon's decision to forego a Sunspear visit in no way meant that he now held the loyalty of House Martell in cheap esteem. They were just getting the third or fourth encore of this performance when a door opened at the side of the hall, and two long shadows swept in.

Arianne would have known at once who it was, even if she hadn't been expecting them, by the way the servants all sprang to their feet and bent their heads. She did likewise, looking out from under her eyelashes, as Prince Aegon and Jon Connington made their entrance, exchanging a few cursory pleasantries with those of the Golden Company present, before catching sight of the Martell delegation. Clearly they had been informed; there was no overt surprise to be noted on either. Then Aegon moved forward directly to Arianne, clasped her by both arms, and said, "Welcome, cousin."

"Thank you, my lord." Her first sight of him, for all her plans and her father's, left her slightly dizzied; he had the look of a Targaryen, all right. His long hair was blue on the ends, but a silky silver-gold at the roots, the tendrils twisted out of his face in two thin plaits so they did not fall in his dark indigo eyes. He was tall enough to nearly double the slight, short Arianne, and his shoulders were broadening with muscle from the several months spent fighting. The first hint of pale stubble grazed his chin, and he had a ready, unforced smile. But since he would have been instructed to be as welcoming and charming as possible in this initial encounter, she decided to reserve judgment on his character for later.

Jon Connington regarded her more opaquely. He was weathered, clean-shaven, blue likewise still showing in his grey-red hair and a webwork of lines framing his pale blue eyes. But he too offered a short bow and a "My lady," taking her hand in his gloved one and impressing a brief, correct kiss to it.

"Lord Connington." Arianne nodded. She thought something felt strange about his fingers, almost more like stone than flesh, but disregarded it. "May I present you the compliments of my lord father, Prince Doran of House Martell." There. Just as instructed.

"They are returned," Connington said cordially. "The prince begs his uncle's most abject pardons for failing to come to Sunspear. He promises that when he is come into his crown, Dorne will be the first to receive the honor of a royal visit, and other gifts and tax remittances."

From the look Aegon shot his adopted father, one eyebrow raised, that must not have been exactly what he had promised, but he did not gainsay it. Instead he smiled again. "It is doubly cruel of us to make you be the ones to come so far, and then neglect to feed you. Sit. I'll have supper brought at once."

This was an order Arianne was glad to obey, and she moved up to the high table, following Aegon's gesture, to take the place of honor at his right hand. He was attentive and engaged throughout the meal, his manners impeccable and his graciousness unstinting. Whether or not it was an artifice, it was at least plain that he genuinely enjoyed meeting them and hearing their tales. After hearing all their names once, he forgot none of them, and urged them to sing him some songs of his mother's homeland. They started with the traditional but inevitably segued into the ribald, whereupon Aegon stunned them all by repeating back one particularly bawdy chorus note-perfect. At their looks, he shrugged and said, "What? I am eighteen."

Jon Connington harrumphed, which might have been intended to conceal a grin, and said, "If your
education is finished for the moment, Your Grace, I suggest you let your guests retire. We will have much and more to speak of on the morrow, and they have been traveling for weeks."

"Of course." Aegon rose to his feet and offered a hand to Arianne. "My lady?"

She took it, unable to stop herself from shooting him a quick, sultry look, and a slight color touched his fair cheeks as he apparently took her meaning without need for words. Well, as he'd said, he was eighteen, and likely a maiden. It would be just one of the things to speak of in the morning.

Arianne, however, had no intention of going straight to bed, even though she was yawning so hard that it felt as if her jaw might detach. Instead she made a conspicuous exit, waited in the shadows of the antechamber until the rest of the Dornishmen had dispersed, then edged quietly forward as she heard Aegon and Connington emerge at last. At a discreet distance, the sound of their boots on the stone muffling her own small slippered feet, she trailed them down the corridor, allowed them into the room beyond, and once she heard the latch click, sidled up to the keyhole.

"Well, my prince," Connington was saying. "I still hold that you should have gone to Sunspear."

"So I gathered," Aegon answered wryly. "At this rate, you'll have Dorne excused from paying taxes to the crown for the first decade of my rule, which is certain to go over well with the other six kingdoms. But for now, no harm done. What did you think of her?"

"Your cousin, my lord? She was most. . . Martell."

"Which coming from you is not precisely a compliment," Aegon retorted, and Arianne could not help but be impressed by his perception. "My lord uncle Doran, did, however, warn us to go wary of her. Why is that, I wonder?"

Arianne had to quickly repress another stab of exasperated anger with her father. *He does not even trust me to do this properly.* She wished she could say it was a surprise.

"Likely because she and the Sand Snakes nearly pulled Dorne apart at the seams, if the messengers' tales were true," Connington said. "Having heard what your cousin Tyene has now achieved in King's Landing, I do not doubt it."

"Tyene." For an instant, Aegon sounded more like a stripling of twelve than a young man of eighteen. "It was. . . efficient, to be sure. And I am grateful for what it will achieve for me. But ever since the news came. . . I feel soiled, my lord. I can't stop thinking about it. It was wrong, at its deepest dark heart it was wrong, and neither you nor anyone can tell me differently. I wish I'd never agreed to it."

"It was not your crime, Your Grace. It was Cersei Lannister's. Tyene merely. . . gave her the means to carry it out. It was far less bloodshed than it would have been otherwise, as Varys said." Jon Connington sounded as if he was trying to convince himself.

"Mayhaps," said Aegon, "but the greatest danger in the world is apathy, not hatred. Standing aside and letting the unthinkable happen – because we believed it was simply not our place to give a damn, or we assumed it would change nothing if we did. And yet, I cannot confess that it was done with my knowledge and consent, for that will lose me all the support that was bought with it. I pray that the Westerlings and Lady Roslin may somehow rest in peace, and that the Father will one day judge me justly. And the next of Varys' plots, whatsoever it may be, I feel we should refuse."

"Varys – "
"Is a spider. Anyone you ask, including himself, will happily tell you so. Spiders have their uses, to be sure. . . but even that, as in so much else about him, is a lie."

Jon Connington's voice was startled. "What?"

"I've thought it through." Aegon paced close past the keyhole, making Arianne reflexively jerk back. "I asked some of the longer-serving members of the Golden Company – who, you recall, are all descended from banished rebels. I theorized why he shaves his head, and if it may just be similar to why I dyed my hair blue. I weighed up why he would have done this, stolen me away as a babe, remained planted in the Usurper's court for all these years learning absolutely everything, and concluded that the man has no drop of altruism in him. He may not even know the word. And him and Illyrio meeting across the narrow sea, when Illyrio was a handsome fair-haired youth. . . known where to find the eggs they gave my aunt. . . it becomes clear, my lord. So clear, in fact, that I marvel at not seeing it before."

A long pause. Then Connington said, "What is, my prince?"

"You see. He's a dragon too. Him and Illyrio both."

"I – what. No. Yourself, Daenerys, and Viserys were the only remnants of the bloodline, I scoured and scoured in those years of our exile to be sure –"

Aegon's shadow shook its head. "Not a red dragon," he said, almost too softly to be heard. "A black one."
Grenn

If it would just stop fucking snowing, everything would be all right. That wasn't much of a hope to hold onto, but he didn't think the night was going to end, and he didn't think the battle was going to stop, and he didn't think the stabbing pain in his shoulder was going to let up, so it was the only one that had a prayer of coming true. It had been swirling out of the charblack sky for what felt like forever, guttering the torches they were struggling to keep lit, crusting in their cloaks and hoods and in his beard, so he breathed the ice with every rattling gasp. And through the snow they kept on coming, blue eyes burning as they clawed up the face of the Wall, black fingers ripping out ice with a high keening sound like a sobbing child. Ahead of them were the wights, their eyes not blue but blank, dead, and horribly staring.

For a demented moment, when the three blasts first sounded, Grenn had thought they were safe. "Others can't cross the Wall," he'd panted to Pyp, as they were struggling up the terrifyingly rickety remnants of Long Barrow's switchback stair. "They can attack, but they can't cross. Everyone knows that."

It had been a mark of how utterly dire the situation was that even the mummer's monkey had no jape about how "everyone" must be a broad category indeed, to include Grenn. Instead he said, "Others can't cross, no. But wights can. Otherwise, Jon would never have had to kill that one in the Old Bear's room."

Jon. That was yet another thing Grenn could not hope for. When that unthinkable news arrived, when they were told that Bowen Marsh had been rewarded for his murder and treachery by being named Lord Commander, Grenn had wanted to ride to Castle Black in hell and fury and repay the villain back in kind. Pyp had seriously suggested that they all secede from the Watch and found their own order, with Long Barrow as their headquarters, a squashed pomegranate as their sigil, and Dolorous Edd as their Lord Commander. The wildlings had been almost as furious, though for varying reasons. Most were genuinely outraged at Marsh for leading the mutiny against the only Commander who'd ever treated them with respect, let alone as equals. Others felt it was simply further proof that every crow was rotten to the core, and a few of the most suspicious were sure that it had been planned all along—allow the free folk this side of the Wall, grant them castles, and huddle them together so they'd be easier to hunt and kill. Those ones had immediately vanished into the wilderness of the Gift, vowing never to return. If they were Sworn Brothers, we'd hang them for desertion, but we barely have enough resources to hold together, never mind hunt for traitors. They should start at Castle Black, if so.

Long Barrow – or Whore's Barrow as it was now so-cleverly called, thanks to its spearwife garrison – was no fortress. A tumbledown tower with a few stones of a curtain wall, a slagged keep, a thatch-roofed longhall for the women and a draughty stone cell for Grenn, Pyp, Iron Emmett, and Edd. The latter two were the Barrow's commander and steward, and the former two had arrived when Jon made fast the decision to send all his friends away. Pyp had joked that they shouldn't have picked the castle housing Edd, for he'd always dourly predicted he was certain to die first, but Grenn had thought it was a stupid idea altogether. If you banish your friends, who's left to guard your back from your enemies? Even he knew that too, and Jon had legions of them beyond a doubt. Yet Grenn had not said that to Pyp. They'd already agreed that Jon had been changed by the choosing and not for the better, that he was not their friend anymore but only Lord Snow for true. Such as at the moment, it was one of the few times Pyp was not jesting.

Don't look down. At Castle Black the wallwalk was level, strewn with salt and gravel, and merlons were built solidly waist-high of packed snow. At Long Barrow it was a wilderness, a frozen
labyrinth, ice blocks as big as the mammoths they'd shot during the last battle for the Wall. But it was only men we were fighting then. Some of the spearwives had made bone climbing spikes for their boots, but it took steely courage, strong hands, and a head for heights to ascend the broken stair up there even in the full light of the too-short day. And now... 

Grenn didn't need to think about that, though. Not that or anything. They'd found a place where the footing was better, where they could rain down pitch and barrels and boulders on the wights. Two of the spearwives, a pair of tough old cunts who might even have scared Alliser Thorne, had climbed up there countless times in the preceding fortnight, on Iron Emmett's orders, to prepare them for just such a potential assault. In other times, Grenn might have been astonished that the women so fearlessly attacked a task which daunted every man he knew, but he wasn't. They were just the folk he fought with, who did what must be done. Since they'd filched the spare black cloaks for warmth, he noticed nothing different about them now.

_We will all die the same, besides._ Their perch was becoming horrifically treacherous; not necessarily due to the undead things, but because their torches were melting the ice around them, turning it slick and clear as glass. One of the wildlings, one of the spearwives' sons, had already plunged to his death without ever taking a hit. Grenn wondered how it felt for them to defend it now, to give their lives for it, when their people's entire purpose had been to break it or climb it or defeat it. But this was it. This was why they'd being fleeing. Coming south with their tails between their legs, to get it between them and those things below.

_I never thought it was anything like this. I thought grumkins and snarks were just stories._ Grenn had been born and raised in a humble croft in the riverlands, sharing a straw mattress with his six siblings, though sickness had carried off his two littlest sisters and his mother had lost at least three more babes before birth. They worked dawn to dusk, raising potatoes and pigs and tilling the fields and chopping firewood and mending their wounds and of a time joining with the other tenants for a wedding or a harvest, or to rebuild a barn that the fire had gotten, or to await the traveling septon Meribald to consecrate their children and shrive their sins, kneeling in the tiny, muddy, straw-roofed sept. There was no thought of privacy; to survive in this world, you needed each other. The first time Grenn had ever known that a bedchamber meant for one person alone existed was when he came to Castle Black. But once when he was no older than the boy who had just fallen to his death, he had seen a tall proud lord on a high horse, with flowing auburn hair and impossibly white straight teeth, wearing the badge of a fish on a blue-and-red doublet. Then his mother had pulled him to his knees and hissed at him to bow his head and cast his eyes down. That was Edmure Tully, she said, the young heir, son to Lord Hoster himself. He lived in the great castle of Riverrun, and one day he'd rule over them, so they'd best do what he said and stay out of his way. When Grenn had asked why, his mother boxed his ears. When he persisted and said that he didn't think it was fair, she boxed them again, harder, and told him that that sort of talk would get him killed one day.

_She wasn't that far wrong._ Grenn thought miserably, his frozen fingers fumbling to nock and loose another arrow. He was so cold and weary, he was so sick of fighting, they couldn't possibly stop this enemy or even slow it. If the wights were here at Long bloody Barrow, they must be overwhelming the Shadow Tower, Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, and Castle Black. And since Marsh, continuing his run of brilliant decisions, had sealed the passage under the Wall to prevent any more rangings, there was no way the Watch could have known they were coming. Only here, where Emmett had insisted that they prepare as if they would have to fight for their lives on the morrow, had they instated all the supplies and lookouts. It was what Jon would have done, he said, and no one had the heart to argue.

It seemed doubly strange to Grenn that they – Emmett, the spearwives, a mummer's boy, a crofter's brat, and Dolorous Edd – were the ones here, facing down the Others unleashed. _Where are all the_
heroes now? Where are the men they sing songs about? He hadn't had a chance to look closely, but he thought they were running low on arrows. That was the only reason they had thus far dismayed the wights. Once the arrows were gone, so was the fire. And once the fire was gone.

I'll die well, though. I'll die a man of the Night's Watch, and a knight. That was an honor Grenn could never even have imagined. But when Emmett summoned them to arms, he told them that with the enemy at the gates, every breathing soul in this castle was a knight if they said the words. And so they had, all together, sworn a knight's vows, as if they'd spent all night fasting in a sept and walked barefoot to be dubbed with a fancy sword by a highborn lordling. Just as Pyp had opened his mouth for some stupid jape about "Ser Grenn," and Edd beat him to it by remarking morosely that the word "Ser Edd" made him think of was "screwed," the first of the horn blasts sounded.

No rangers returning. They hadn't sent any out. No more wildlings, or certainly not any in enough numbers to matter. Thus when the second blast winded, they'd all known, known and only waited for it, as the third howl, Ahoooooooooooooooooooooooooo, tore the night air like a scrap of fragile silk. In an instant Grenn had been back at the Fist of the First Men, and the dead things were coming up the hill, and Sam's ravens were fleeing from their cages and Chett's hounds going mad, and the bear, the dead bear . . . and torches, torches, burn you dead bastards burn, and trying to save Sam when Small Paul couldn't carry him anymore, and then seeing him kill that Other with the dagger Jon had given him, the dagger he'd found in the cache with the old broken horn . . . but to hear it at the Wall, at the Wall and not in the wilderness of the Frostfangs –

Grenn didn't even realize that he'd gone to his knees until Pyp was hauling him back to his feet. "Come on," the smaller boy was bawling, "come on, Aurochs, we've got to get up there, let's go. Come on, you're a bloody knight now, you're not going to go down in the songs as Ser Grenn the Groveling. You're too stupid to be afraid, remember?"

Grenn had wanted to protest, to tell him that he was stupid, he was afraid, but somehow he didn't do either. Instead he tightened his swordbelt and shrugged up the hood of his black cloak and shouted, "It'll be Ser Pyp the Prick, more like." And then he was pleased because he'd finally made a good jape, and sad because of course it came right when he was about to die anyway. And then suddenly he wasn't scared anymore, for there was nothing left to be afraid of.

He and Pyp had climbed the stairs on hands and knees together, and in that time, Grenn was happy. Happy that he'd been born, happy that he had lived, and happy that he wasn't going to be alone at the end. Happy that the end hadn't come in that hut in the riverlands, ignored out of hand. He hadn't wanted to join the Watch; what man did, these days? But the holdfast lord had said that Grenn had broken his forest laws, had poached that hare on his lands without his leave, and for that it was the black or losing a hand. His mother had cried when they took him away. Grenn remembered her toothless mouth calling after him, calling his name, how she was so worn down by endless work and endless pregnancies that she looked to be a hundred, but Conwy had him firm by the shoulder, and he already knew that if he ran, they'd kill him. It wasn't fair, but what in life is?

Ser Grenn. His shoulder was turning numb. He couldn't hold the longbow proper anymore, and blood was freezing in his smallclothes. There was a rending crash as a great chunk of ice broke off above them and thundered down, missing Iron Emmett by a hair and plowing into the dead men. They scratched and flailed like pale bloated spiders, disembodied black limbs writhing. But they still didn't stop. They wouldn't, they never, until –

Hold on. Grenn looked up sharply, his snow-blind eyes straining. Mayhaps he was just imagining it, driven mad by the need to believe that something, anything, was coming to save them, but he thought there was a faint reddish glow on the horizon. It was enough to eerily backlight the
scattering wights, and throw bloody shadows from them all. He'd never been so glad for it in his life.

"Sun!" His voice was harsh and husky and raw. "Sun's coming up! Night's over!" It would mean an even worse attack on the morrow, but he wasn't going to think about that right now.

Pyp was staring at him with a strange expression. Blood ran down his forehead, almost sticking one eye shut. "Grenn. Grenn the Gormless."

"What?"

"The sun doesn't rise in the north."

It took a moment to sink in. Then the cold seemed to punch him twice as hard. Pyp was right. No. No, it didn't.

"Joramun," one of the spearwives said hoarsely. "Gods ha' mercy."

Even the Others seemed to have noticed it by now. They turned from where they had been preparing to continue the climb, and stared back into the glow as if transfixed. In it, Grenn could make out winged shapes overhead. Ravens. More ravens than he had ever seen, diving and darting and cawing. For some impossible reason, he thought they were screeching a word, a name, like old Lord Mormont's raven had. Bran, they were saying. Bran. And something that almost sounded like Jon. But Jon was dead. Marsh had killed him, and Grenn and Pyp had been at Long Barrow and unable to do a damned thing about it. He couldn't –

Another of the spearwives seized his elbow. "Get down, boy," she croaked. "Gods be good, get down off this Wall."

"Why?" Grenn tried to ask, but she was already turning away, dragging him with her. The ravens continued to wheel and scream, flooding down to peck and tear at the Others.

"Now!" The spearwife cuffed him headlong onto the stair, and he almost fell off it. His useless hands groped at the steps, he had to go faster as the rest of the ravaged Long Barrow garrison stampeded after him. The ground was too far away and he was never going to make it, never –

It was ten or so feet below when Grenn heard the horn.

It was like thunder in his head. Cold and shattering as winter itself, the ruin and the wild. It rolled out clear and deep and mournful as if he was standing right next to it, skirling a lament like the northerners' great skinpipes, howling and howling until it seemed it would never end, would fill their skulls and thoughts and souls. And yet then, with a crack like lightning, it did.

One blast for rangers returning, Grenn thought madly. But they had sent no rangers out.

While he was still dumbstruck, the spearwife grabbed him by the scruff of the cloak and jumped. The ground smashed up to meet them, hard enough to knock his wind out even through several feet of snow. Pyp came tumbling after him, Dolorous Edd said almost cheerily, "Well, we're all dead now," and executed a nearly flawless swan dive, whereupon he was promptly piled on top of by the following spearwives. Grenn didn't see Iron Emmett. He had a confused memory of the young ranger covering their retreat, defending the stair against the wights; without fire arrows to daunt them, they were swarming greedily into the breach. He's dead, he's dead. But there was no time to stop. The echoes of that horn were hanging unearthly, resounding and magnified in the Wall itself.

A yard-long icicle broke off, nearly coring a wildling through the belly, and then another. Grenn
again thought it was his imagination, *prayed* it was his imagination, but he saw fine splinters appearing in the millennia-old ice, cracks racing up it. Broken like a dropped mirror. He'd seen one – a mirror – at a traveling fair once. His mother and sisters had sighed over it and longed to buy it, but real glass was an unimaginably rare and costly luxury.

"Move! Move! Move!" Pyp screamed, and for once Grenn needed no further telling. Behind him, he heard the Wall make an utterly unholy sound, an almost human scream, and he dared a glance over his shoulder and wished he hadn't. The cracks were widening like veins of ore, and a heavy block crashed down not a dozen yards away, scattering splinters. The red glow had gone so bright that he almost thought it *was* dawn, but it wasn't. There was no way in his life that he could run fast enough.

They didn't stop at the castle. There was no time. Long Barrow would become their barrow in truth if they did. There were all sorts of cracks and pops now, more blocks and slabs falling, and in dumb blank numb screaming horror, Grenn was forced to acknowledge that what he had always dismissed as ghost stories and old wives' tales, the unthinkable and unsurvivable, was actually unfolding before his eyes. The Wall was coming down.

The woods began about a mile distant. There was a moderately cleared trail that led there, again by Iron Emmett's orders, and the spearwives, Grenn, Pyp, and Dolorous Edd ran as if the demons of all the seven hells were on their arses, which in fact they were. The ground shook with distant explosions, and flying shards stung Grenn's face. The snow was heaving as if the earth itself was trying to throw them off, as if it was breathing, as if things were awaking in its cold bones that had been slumbering for eons. By now, Grenn was too terrified to even feel terrified any more.

The trees loomed up in front of them, a jungle of dark pines half swallowed in white. They gasped and retched and cursed as they tried to flail through, beating with fists and blades and axes. Needles and broken branches clawed at them, snagging on cloaks and quivers, and they stumbled forward without any notion of where was sky and where ground. Behind them, the Wall was scored with jagged gashes almost all the way to the top. The stairwell hung skewed and broken, and Long Barrow had taken several direct hits from tower-sized sleds of ice; it resembled a spider trodden under a man's boot. The roar was deafening; Grenn could not even hear himself think. As if there was anything that could possibly be thought when you were watching the world end.

Swaying and screaming, shattering, the Wall began to collapse. It went down like a shipwreck, plunging madly to the ground as if beneath the storm-wracked waves, its prow driving in first and kicking up a bellowing thunder of blackness that raced across the ground in an avalanche of snow and ice and gravel. The trees bent almost in half, thrashing and snapping like matchwood. It was no use. There was nowhere left for them to run.

"Lads," said Dolorous Edd, in the instant of silence before the storm. "Ladies. It's been good to know you all. And may I take this moment to apologize. If I wasn't here, none of this would have happened."

Grenn glanced toward him, intending to say something in return. To him or to Pyp or even the spearwives. But all he could do was watch the avalanche. The sky itself had been eaten up, and distantly he saw wights and Others being thrown away like toys. Everything was red, and the ancient spells that warded the Wall, freed from their confinement at last, were taking fire. He smelled licking at the sky; he had never known until that moment that ice could burn. He tasted salt on his tongue, or perhaps that was the tears freezing on his cheeks. It was lunacy and supremacy and magnificence, all and none at once.

The trees moaned and seemed to take a desperate grip with their roots. A single red weirwood leaf
drifted down from nowhere. And Grenn closed his eyes, thought of the Stranger's face chalked crudely in charcoal in that sept back home, and prayed.

He felt it when it hit them. He was ripped asunder, broken trees and boulders and ice and wood slamming into him from every side, pummeling his body, his puny mortal vessel. Pain came too fast and furious for him to process, from every pore and nerve and breath at once. Blood tasted crimson in his broken mouth. Over and over he was swept, kicked aside contemptuously, down and down and down. He could no longer breathe, for there was no air left. Smoke and snow hissed around him, ashes falling in a soft grey rain and broken icicles littered among the snapped branches. Yet in in his head Grenn could see the summer's sun on his family's fields, and the flash of the milkmaid's smile. He could even remember, for an instant, what it was like to be warm.

And so he lay there, cherishing the thought. The shaking didn't stop, but the avalanche finally did. Agonizingly, he opened one battered eye, and saw... nothing. Nothing but the ruin of broken trees and motionless bodies, and the inferno where the Wall had been. Nothing on the face of the earth.

The silence after that was deafening. Then at last, nearby, Grenn heard a voice. A man's voice. Mayhaps the last one that ever was or would be.

"Oh," Dolorous Edd said resignedly. "Of course it would be me." And died.
Ramsay

He opened his eyes among the rubble, coughing. Stone dust choked the frigid predawn air, and everything was a shattered, groaning hinterland, collapsed and broken, the distinctive scent of burned niter still pungent. The gate was in splinters, the windows blown, leaving a glittering trail of glass over the soot-stained snow. Isolated fires still smoldered, and then and odd there was a moan and a crash as another gutted foundation gave out. Twisted beams jutted out of the wreckage like scolding fingers, and the massive curtain wall was slumped and tottering. Columns of smoke glissaded elegantly skyward, the perfect finishing touch to another signature piece.

Ramsay steadied himself on a broken merlon and got to his feet, grinning. Fuck, that had been a good one. When the warhorns had sounded in the night, when his men rushed into his room to inform him that Stannis had Winterfell under attack right bloody now, he had seen the naked panic in their eyes. After all, the blanket on his bed was supposed to have been sewn from the skin of that very king, and they'd watched him blubbing and pissing and spitting and shitting himself in the dungeons as Ramsay expertly applied the flaying knife to places even the red bitch might not have gone. All in all, it was a massively disappointing show, not in the least what Stannis Baratheon's reputation would suggest, and it had quite vexed Ramsay that he was unable to get that iron cuff off the king's wrist, no matter which implement he used. There was a ruby winking on it, doubtless some trinket from the red bitch – or so he had assumed at the time. But after all the reports of sighting another Stannis, Ramsay had come to suspect that it in fact served a much more sinister purpose. Hearing that the unflayed and genuine article was now at large in the woods seemed to confirm it, but no matter. It had bloody better be far more satisfying to kill him again.

Therefore, Ramsay had gotten up, dressed, and belted on his sword without the least appearance of alarm. Then he informed them that they were to leave the south gate unprotected, that they were to allow the Baratheon army to pour in, as many of their number as they could. Then, and only then, were they to set off the barrels of niter, and they knew damned well what would happen to them if they failed. One of the countless benefits of being Ramsay Bolton was that no one ever dared to disobey you.

Shrugging on his cloak, Ramsay had exited his chambers and made haste to the bailey. He had arranged to leave a postern gate just that bit ajar, meant to slip through and lie low in the wolveswood until Stannis and his cunts had literally had a blast. Next he would take his horse, the supplies he'd laid by, and ride home to the Dreadfort, inform them of Lord Roose's tragic death, and raise reinforcements. Then they would march on the Wall, destroy Jon Snow, and take back Ramsay's little wife. Winterfell would never be rebuilt in man's living memory, a stark (so to speak) testament of what became of those who crossed him up. He and his would rule the north from the Dreadfort for all time, and anyone who objected... well, it was a draughty castle, and had great need of hangings to keep the cold out.

It was such a simple and delicious plan that Ramsay could practically taste it. But the first wrench had been thrown into it the moment he set foot in the bailey: his fucking father caught sight of him among the crowd, demanded to know why he was not with them at arms, and why the south gate had been left undefended. If he, Ramsay, was under the impression that he, Lord Roose, was going to condone such a shamefully slipshod defense of the castle that he had held whilst Ramsay was off on his misadventures –

No. No, he wasn't. It was Lord Roose who was under any number of stupefying delusions, and suddenly Ramsay couldn't wait any longer. Couldn't trust that a stupid fucking building would properly take care of business; it would be just like the Starks to somehow cock it up. And if he let
the chance go by, he'd kick himself for the rest of his life.

Ramsay had gripped the flaying knife under his cloak. Waited until Lord Roose turned to shout orders to a flank of panicking men-at-arms – then lunged.

Unlike his clumsy attempt at the deed in the Great Hall, this one was perfect. In an instant he had his father by the cloak, and in the next he'd driven the flaying knife into his neck, so deep that it burst out the other side. Gave it a twist, was dimly aware of screams and curses and someone bellowing at him that he was mad, they'd needed Lord Roose to command the defense against Stannis, but cared about none of it. Savaged the knife back and forth, grating against bone and the cord of the spine – as Lord Roose collapsed, Ramsay ripped the blade up far enough to scatter bits of pulped brain into the snow. Who's fucked who now, Father? Then he leaned forward and licked up the hot blood pulsing from the wound, wanting to know how it tasted. You always loved being leeched, bloodsucker that you were. Fair's fair.

At that moment, some idiot with a death wish had intervened and dragged Ramsay off the body; otherwise, he'd have followed it up by eating the brain, see what good his father's vaunted cleverness had done him in the end. He was deeply tempted to remedy the lack on the idiot instead, but the continuing howl of warhorns reminded him that he still had an escape to make good. To judge by how close the shouting and screaming and clashing of steel was, the Baratheon host had made quick work of the unguarded gate, were swarming in like maggots on rotten meat. And that meant the place was going to blow any moment.

Electing to keep it simple, Ramsay bull-rushed the onlookers. The presence of that gory blade in his hand and Lord Roose's still-twitching corpse had immediately decided all of them against trying anything unwise, and he belted through them at a sprint, weaving past the armory and under the covered bridge, up toward his exit. Who knew, what with that little delay, someone might have had time to find the postern and shut it. Then he'd be angry. Very angry. And now he was going to –

Just as Ramsay reached the gate, the castle went up.

The sound of the explosion was deafening. Fire erupted into the pitch-black sky from every side, the great towers of Winterfell turned into wounded beasts that heaved and roared in pain. Rocks thundered down, cutting him off, and Ramsay mouthed a few choice curses – before deciding that it was not so bad after all. The wall of rubble would handily prevent anyone from spotting him here, and he'd just climb over it when the tumult was over. So he took what shelter could be had, watched the place come apart at the seams as it should have the first time, thought of Lord Roose dead in the bailey, and congratulated himself on a job flawlessly done. He was just furtherly lauding himself for being so flexible and resourceful when the falling gargoyle hit him in the head. That accounted for the ache currently present behind his eyeballs, stabbing him in the temples, but Ramsay paid no attention. He looked around, grinned again, spat on the pieces of the gargoyle, and set off at a lope. Before he left for good, he had to be sure that everything was attended to.

Ramsay clambered up one of the debris piles, careful of his footing on the unsteady, sliding pieces, and dropped down like a cat on the far side. Winterfell was almost unrecognizable – wracked and roared in pain. The sound of the explosion was deafening. Fire erupted into the pitch-black sky from every side, the great towers of Winterfell turned into wounded beasts that heaved and roared in pain. Rocks thundered down, cutting him off, and Ramsay mouthed a few choice curses – before deciding that it was not so bad after all. The wall of rubble would handily prevent anyone from spotting him here, and he'd just climb over it when the tumult was over. So he took what shelter could be had, watched the place come apart at the seams as it should have the first time, thought of Lord Roose dead in the bailey, and congratulated himself on a job flawlessly done. He was just furtherly lauding himself for being so flexible and resourceful when the falling gargoyle hit him in the head.

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Ramsay clambered up one of the debris piles, careful of his footing on the unsteady, sliding pieces, and dropped down like a cat on the far side. Winterfell was almost unrecognizable – wracked and gutted, a giants' graveyard, a great carcass of stone. And Ramsay Bolton was quite fond of the sight of carcasses, particularly ones as flayed as this. Those of a more human provenance were heaped to every side: Boltons, Freys, wildlings, and Baratheons. As much pride as Ramsay took in his achievement – it gave him nearly as intense a thrill as it had to watch the dogs fucking his little wife – there were only three of them that he cared about right now.

He found Lord Roose first. The body was missing an arm, torn off by the ferocity of the blast, and splashes of gelid blood crusted red and black in the snow. The hideous wound in its neck was
gaping like a second mouth, and the wind whistled forlornly through it, a high eerie sound that when combined with Lord Roose's still-open eyes was pleasantly diabolical. Ramsay stood above it, licking his lips, then undid his laces, got out his cock, and enjoyed a well-earned piss on his father's corpse. He would have taken much longer, in fact, but it was cold enough that he had a proprietary interest in not freezing it off. He finished, stashed himself away, and was just turning to hunt down the second of the bodies when a fluttering squeak from the remnants of the dooryard informed him that she was, in fact, not one yet. How in hell? Must have been all the blubber.

"Ramsay..." Fat Walda Frey was stained in soot and ash, bleeding from a long ugly gash above her eye, shivering under the pale pink cloak she'd thought to throw on over her bedrobe. As if that alone will make her a true Bolton. "Ramsay, please... help me..." Her eyes flickered to the dismembered remains of her husband, and she shuddered. "Anything you want. I'll name you heir to the Dreadfort, I'll take the babe and go back to the Twins, I won't challenge you ever again, I'll encourage Edwyn or – or Black Walder or any of them to be friends with you, I promise, I swear it, please, help me, help me..."

"Oh, really?" It was amusing to picture Fat Walda galloping back to the riverlands on her equally fat little mare, even more amusing to picture the outlaws getting her on the way and stringing her up until her butterface turned black and her shit ran down her leg. "You swear it?"

"I swear it," she whimpered. "The Dreadfort's yours. On my life."

Oh, good. He held out a hand. "Well, come on then."

"You will?" Her watery blue eyes lit up with desperate hope. "Oh, Ramsay... I knew you weren't all what... what everyone says about you... you... your father would be proud... thank you, thank you so much..."

My father will lie here until the crows get him. Or the wolves. Ramsay preferred the latter; it was more poetic. He smiled as Fat Walda rushed to clutch his arm, then turned away, escorted her across the courtyard, and listened to her babble on about what a good man he was, how strong, how she'd always known he was better than any trueborn son that was or could be. It was obliquely flattering, even if it did come from her empty little head, and he made no attempt to stop her. Then they ducked into a broken rats-nest of stone, and he said, "Wait here, I'll fetch the horses. Sit, you look exhausted."

Fat Walda obligingly perched on the nearest chunk. "Aye. I'll never forget this. As it was when I and your dear lord father were wed, Bolton and Frey will be fast friends and staunch allies until the end of – "

The rest of her touching speech was cut off in a gurgle as Ramsay swung a jagged, fist-sized rock into her head. She screamed and kept screaming, threw her arms up in a desperate attempt to turn the blows. But he got on top of her, a knee on her chest and the other on her shoulder as he kept on battering her. It took longer than he expected; even after what must have been twenty or thirty hits, she was still convulsing and jerking, her sausage fingers beating at him like the wings of a broken butterfly. So he slid the knee over to her throat, until her breath choked into a thin, asphyxiating whine. Blood bubbled and broke on her lips. She seemed to be trying to say, Why.

When she had finally stopped moving, Ramsay slid off her and got to his feet. "Think of it this way," he told her. "If I was feeling cruel, I'd have walled you up in the rubble. Let you starve to death – from the looks of you, that's always been your worst nightmare. But as it is, I don't have time. I find it rather pitiful that you thought you could give the Dreadfort to me, as if it mattered what came crawling down your cunt. It was always mine. Everything was mine. You and the old man just learned that."
She gave one more twitch. Words sputtered bloodily in her throat. Then her head fell back, and her eyes stared at nothing. A tear trickled down her dead cheek.

Ramsay considered taking her skin as a trophy, but then remembered that he was, after all, on a schedule. So, leaving her where she lay, he made swift tracks through the bailey, past the ruins of the Library Tower; there was so much old paper and dried leather crammed into it that it had burned the hottest, leaving the Starks' ancient collection of books and manuscripts as so much dust and ash. He must remember to check on the godswood, as only when that was burned down would the subjugation of Winterfell be complete. But here, between the smithy and the stables, was where the blast had been centered, and accordingly almost all the bodies were wearing Stannis' flaming heart on what remained of their tabards. *How did you like that fire, you whoresons?*

Ramsay turned one of the incinerated corpses over with a foot. It stared up at him with a vaguely accusing expression – an *old* vaguely accusing expression. Making rounds on the others confirmed the same thing. All the dead men were of a particularly decrepit variety, whether old or rickety or knock-kneed or sickly or half-dead of cold and terror already. What was more, there were not nearly as many as he'd hoped. It was almost as if Stannis had purposefully chosen to send in his weakest men first, in anticipation of sussing out a trap. The king himself was nowhere to be found, not even a copy of him.

A black scowl began to grow on Ramsay's face. He hadn't thought it was possible for Stannis Baratheon to get on anyone's nerves to a greater degree than he already did, but it seemed the bugger had managed. What was he, fucking immortal? This must be at least the third death he'd dodged, and he might be camped outside the walls right now, waiting for Ramsay to emerge.

*Change of plan.* Ramsay made an about-face and walked briskly back toward the Hunter's Gate. Stannis' little cretins were likely infesting the wolfswood as well, which lay just beyond it, but he needed a peek on the godswood. Then he'd leave to the east, toward Winter's Town. He could make it on foot a few hours if he had to, but he expected to find a horse to steal before that.

The wall around the godswood was caved in and buckling. Ramsay took a running start and bouldered up it, vaulting down on the far side in a thump of snow. He was still spattered in blood from improving Fat Walda's looks, and it dripped down crimson around him. He knew there were wolves nearby; he'd heard them howling outside the walls before the blast, and his men wittering on about one they thought was a direwolf, a massive grey bitch, mayhaps the very bitch they all heard whispers of. Ramsay considered their eyesight to be as poor as their intelligence. *That* bitch was shitting out crofter's whelps in the riverlands, every damned fool knew that.

The godswood was dim and ashy, piled with splinters, more debris floating in the hot pools and bare roots exposed like writhing snakes. And Ramsay was just approving it when he became aware, by a faint tingle on the back of his neck, that something was watching him.

*Not* something. *Someone.* Peering through the branches, he saw the great white weirwood that stood at the godswood's heart – and the face that was staring from its trunk. He couldn't put a name to it, but it had a definite Stark look to it. A boy, no more than ten or eleven years. Ravens were roosting above it, black inky smudges against the paleness, and they all seemed to be staring at Ramsay as well.

No matter. He wasn't scared of a bunch of buggering birds. Nor the face either, whoever it belonged to. He'd married Arya Stark before this very tree, and if the so-called gods objected, they'd had the perfect opportunity to smite him down then. Of course the girl wasn't actually Arya, but still. The gods had thus far had no impact on anything he cared to do, so he wasn't about to fuss over them now. Hence Ramsay grinned, made a succinct and obscene gesture at the tree, and
started to leave. There were sounds outside the castle walls, distant but not distant, that meant it would definitely behoove him to do so now. Aye, he would, everything was –

"You."

Ramsay halted dead in his tracks. For a brief ludicrous moment he thought it was the tree, before reminding himself that trees didn't talk. And he knew that voice. He was more familiar with its screams, but still.

He turned. "Rayder."

"Bastard." The wildling king had no shortage of balls, one had to give him that. He was standing not a dozen yards away, so silently that Ramsay had not seen him until he spoke. He was still as tatty, skeletal, tortured, and mad-looking as ever, but something seemed a bit more... substantial about him, somehow. And he had –

A sword. Where in damnation had he gotten a sword? Still, as unexpected as the sight was, Ramsay wasn't terribly concerned. Rayder had no thumb on his left hand and lacked two fingers on his right; his grip wasn't liable to be all that good. He'd do for him as he'd done for his father, take the sword and get out of here. In fact, it was fortunate that Mance had turned up.

"Who rescued you?" Ramsay asked, glancing around for an accomplice. "One of the filthy little wildlings? I've killed them all."

Mance grinned. "It was the ghost in Winterfell. Your ghost. That was a brilliant thing you just did, Bastard. Destroy the castle, destroy your own army, but only take out the ones Stannis didn't need anyway. And now, I'll finish the favor off by killing you. Do you think he'll make me a lord? If you can be one, there's hope for every steaming kettle of shit in the privy, but the shit is more a man than you."

"Talk all you want." Ramsay reached for the flaying knife. "I'm not scared of a man who can't stand up. Did you like your cloak of slut skin, Rayder? This time I'll give you your own."

Mance held out his hands to either side. "You're welcome to come take it."

That was all the provocation Ramsay needed. He let out a gleeful roar and charged, swinging his knife like a cleaver, chortling that the halfwit thought he'd ever stood a chance. He was just going to –

Ramsay realized it an instant before Mance struck. Clumsily but with great precision, the wildling king drew his blade and swung it like a viper, with the same sort of animal brawling instinct that had kept him alive so long among the savages. And as a dazzling red-gold spray of light burned the air, a blow which Ramsay just barely arrested his momentum in time to duck, the truth hit him broadside:

That is no ordinary sword.

As much as he hated thinking about anything to do with his father, Ramsay remembered just then that Lord Roose had been certain that Mance had hidden in the crypts. But he'd even sent some men to sweep the place, and they'd turned up nothing. Meaning either that Mance had gone somewhere else entirely, or he'd gone down into the very deepest levels, hundreds of feet below, where the Kings of Winter from the dawn of time lay entombed. And down there he'd found – what?

No matter. All that mattered to Ramsay now was that he got his hands on it. He was right, Rayder
was having trouble holding the sword, but he was not to be approached lightly. Ramsay backed off a few paces, cocked his elbow back, and threw his knife. Rayder tried to twist away, but the snow made his footing treacherous, and it took him deep in the meat of the calf. With what was presumably a blistering curse in the Old Tongue, he fell hard.

Ramsay leapt on him like one of his bitches taking a kill on the hunt. With one hard punch, he knocked the sword from Rayder's broken fingers. They grappled in the bloody snow, slamming and grunting and swearing, the sword lying just out of reach a few feet away. Then Mance reached down, pulled the knife out of his leg with a meaty slurp, and stabbed Ramsay in the throat. Or tried, at any rate. With all the fur and leather he was wearing, it didn't do much more than break the skin. Then Ramsay crushed an elbow into Mance's nose, threw a handful of snow into his eyes, and in the ensuing melee, regained possession of the blade. He grabbed hold of Rayder's hair, stretched his neck out, and drew a scarlet smile on it from ear to ear.

Ramsay kicked and jerked, drowning in his own blood. Ramsay watched him with grim satisfaction, then rolled off and got to his feet, gazing gloatingly down into the wildling king's eyes as they glazed over. You really thought you were going to kill me? So much for that. If you'd never spoken, I'd never have known you were there. This is all your own fault.

Ramsay waited until Mance Rayder had stopped moving, just to be sure he wasn't getting up again. Then he bent down, and picked up the sword.

Ramsay Bolton prized himself on pain. He knew all the nuances of it, inflicted it, used it, relished it, grew strong from it, ruled by it. But nothing in his experience had ever prepared him for the lightning bolt that ripped through him now, from head to heel. It was shriveling, searing him away, tearing him to pieces – almost as he imagined it felt to be flayed, in fact. He was shaking all over, he couldn't let go of the burning hilt, the light that pervaded into him, unstrung him. But nor would he.

At last it abruptly cut out, and Ramsay went to his knees beside Mance Rayder's body, gasping, choking – and grinning, grinning wildly, euphoric and demented with his victory. His hand was black and blistered where it closed around the hilt, but he refused to relinquish it. Anyone less accustomed to pain would have, but not him. He was master of the north and everything that came with it.

After a few more wheezing breaths, Ramsay got up. He went to Rayder's corpse and took the scabbard, shoved the sword back into it, and belted it around his own waist. The reverberations of power were still coruscating through him, an agony almost too exquisite to bear. He loved it, he loved it, he felt almost drunk off the glow and glory. No standing against me now.

Once more he looked around. Someone had rescued Rayder, after all, and might still be on the loose. He, in fact, had briefly had the impression that Mance was trying to move him away, which meant they could even yet be alive nearby. But he did have to leave here. Now.

Ramsay sauntered away across the godswood, climbed the wall again, and dropped down. This time he looked neither right nor left, ducked through the shattered mouth of the gate, and under the ruins of the portcullis. Out across the moat, through the curtain wall, and finally into the snow beyond.

The she-wolf was waiting for him there.

Ramsay barely had time to catch a glimpse of the great grey hulk, hear the thunder of paws, before she was top of him. Even that look had confirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt that his men weren't quite idiots after all – at least, in that. It was a direwolf beyond any doubt, a huge one, a
bitch. Whether it was the one who had led the pack on the Trident he could not say, but it damned sure could have been. No matter. He drew his new sword and swung with everything in him.

He felt the blade bite deep into flesh and fur and muscle, felt the jolt of power as it flared like a burning star. Heard the wolf fall back with a choked whine, though he himself had been ripped up badly; blood was trickling in one eye, and he could feel a flap of skin on his cheek hanging loose. But she was wheeling around for a new attack, and he was game so long as she was.

Her leap this time was not nearly as hard or brutal, but still succeeded in knocking him off his feet. She almost succeeded in prizing loose the sword, too, which would have been the death of him, but he wouldn't let it go. She was a savage bloody wench, and he slashed at her again. The only way to stop her would be to kill her, and her heavy pelt would keep him warm on the ride back to the Dreadfort. Truly, everything had been provided for him, almost as if the world wanted him to succeed. That should have the rest of Westeros shitting in their smallclothes.

Ramsay took a better grip on the burning hilt. He and the bitch eyed each other evilly, but this time neither of them appeared to be in a hurry to make the first move. He'd gouged her front leg and shoulder almost to the bone, and she didn't seem able to put weight on it. Her muzzle was torn off as well, exposing her teeth all the way to the back of her skull, and her jaws were dripping with bloody slaver.

Panting, Ramsay leveled the blade at her, its blazing colors scattered like living fire across the endless white world. She snarled at him, and he snarled back. This was it, it was going to start snowing again before long, and if he hadn't found a horse by then... it didn't make it impossible, nothing was impossible for him, but it might be somewhat more inconvenient than he liked. He thought the bitch was tensing to spring, and he crouched in response. But then she froze, pricked up her ears, and took a deep sniff of the cold, silent air. She whined. Then she turned, more blood spattering the ground, and ran off, limping. In moments she had vanished among the tangled trees.

Ramsay's first reaction was jubilance, followed by annoyance that he would not get hold of her pelt. Only after that did it occur to him that if the wolf had gotten wind of something that was enough to daunt even her, it would also be useful for him to be aware of it. He sniffed the air as she had, but didn't smell anything aside from the snow and the remnants of the explosion, niter and soot and...

...rot.

Ramsay sniffed again, hard. No, he was not mistaken; it was another scent he had intimate acquaintance with. But the dead men inside Winterfell hadn't been that way long enough to stink, and in weather this cold, it would be a while yet. The smell was faint but distinct, and he thought something was moving among those trees. Something coming closer step by inexorable step... but at a strange lumbering pace, much too clumsy for warriors. Especially Stannis' bloody clansmen, who'd lived in this wretched fastness all their lives, been born and bred for snow and rock and forest. Which meant that –

Fucking hellfire. He wasn't imagining it. There were dozens of them, maybe hundreds. And Ramsay suddenly found himself thinking of something unexpected. Previously, the only time the Night's Watch had crossed his mind was for him to curse it, for him to send that letter to Jon fucking Snow warning him what he'd dared to trifle with. But now Ramsay recalled instead the fact that of the fifteen or twenty castles along the Wall, only three or four were actually manned. Thus leaving all sorts of blind spots for things like these to climb and cross. But Winterfell is not that near the Wall. If they're here, there must be hundreds of them... thousands.

For a moment, Ramsay felt even his incomparable brain locking up. He did have a nicely flaming
sword, which would take care of most of them to start, but if more and more turned up. . .

And then he thought of something else he'd heard about wights, and the countless freshly dead bodies that lay within the castle —

Yes. It was imperative that he get back to the Dreadfort immediately.

From all sides, the wights swarmed up the broken walls of Winterfell. The ravens took flight from the ruins of the godswood, screaming.

Ramsay Bolton put his head down and ran.
Daenerys

She could not yet see where they were going, nor hear any sound other than the drip of water, but she could smell a faint, pleasant scent, like sandalwood and palm and sunlight, so different from the apocryphal den of horrors she’d pictured after hearing Kojja Mo’s warning. The red priests were certainly naught to be trifled with, and she had learned every hard lesson there was about how a fair face could hide foul intentions, but she went forth unafraid, as befitted the blood of the dragon.

However, it was a lucky thing that the path seemed to be straight and smooth underfoot, otherwise they would be tripping and blundering along like a pair of fools in a farce. It was not plain darkness; it was the complete and utter absence of light, rubbing up against them like a dockside whore, until it seemed ridiculous to even think of the sun. Even when Dany had her free hand directly before her face and wiggled her fingers, she could not make out the meanest shape of it. All she had was Jorah's fist clutched tightly in her other one, to remind her that she was not lost alone here forever. She hoped they were still going in the same direction. Otherwise they could be making a great circle, until they either buckled of exhaustion or the red priests grew bored of toying with them and deigned to grant them an audience. But of what sort, who can say?

Once or twice, Dany felt wind on her face from high above, but still no glimmer of sunlight accompanied it. Since there was nothing to fill her eyes in this void, she began to imagine it instead, and if she turned her head just slightly, she glimpsed a fearful specter: a carpet of ragged silver-gold hair, mad purple eyes, fingernails that were cracked claws almost a foot long. She had seen him once before, in the House of the Undying. The Mad King, it whispered in her head. Your own royal sire.

Dany averted her gaze, not wanting to look, but she could not escape it. It grew clearer and clearer, until she knew she was no longer hallucinating but seeing it in truth: a great throne room, crackling flames, a man screaming as he burned, a younger man strangling himself trying to reach him... and then a golden youth in gilded armor and a white cloak, a golden sword stained red... that cracked shrieking voice asking, "Whose blood? Whose?" and another voice which she had never heard but knew to be Ser Jaime Lannister’s: "Rossart's."

Then the mad king fled, and the golden youth charged after him. And before her eyes Daenerys Targaryen watched her father die, at last.

She uttered a short, sharp scream, pulling on Ser Jorah's hand like a filly fighting the bit. The blood from the body spilled across the tiles almost to her feet, soaking her slippers, and she twisted and struggled to get away as he held her fast. "No – let me go, please – he killed him, just there, I saw – didn't you – "

"I see nothing, my queen," her bear said, very low. "Only the dark."

It is a vision, only a vision. I could not have changed it, it happened years ago. And yet even as Dany thought that, a new pair of ghosts glided out, above the stiffening ghastly corpse of Aerys Targaryen, the Second of his Name. Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.

One of these ghosts Dany had also seen in the House of the Undying. He was tall, silver-haired, violet-eyed, handsome and melancholy, with long elegant fingers that cradled his harp. The other hand held a blue rose, and he seemed to be offering it directly to her. Their gazes locked. His mouth moved, but whether he spoke the words or she merely imagined them, she did not know. "Little sister."
"Rhaegar," she whispered, stunned. Again he held out the rose to her, but when she tried to take it her fingers only passed through dusty nothingness. "What is – "

"The prince who was promised," he said sadly. "I did my part, little sister, and it cost our family everything. You must do the same, and it will cost you no less. Fire and blood will raze a kingdom, but not raise it. Father never learned. You must not become him again. You must not."

"I will not," Dany promised. "In Meereen, I – "

"Meereen is nothing," her gallant brother said. He's dead, he died too, at the fords of the Trident Robert Baratheon put a warhammer through his chest and killed him. Then had him burned, so his tomb could never be made a place of honor. . . but Ser Barristan, Ser Jorah, all of them called him the last true dragon, and fire cannot kill a dragon. "And you have lost even more than you know."

"What?" Dany leaned forward urgently. "What has transpired in Meereen?"

Rhaegar was beginning to fade. His voice came as if from down a long tunnel. " . . . bound to his will. . . poisoned gifts. . . made a bargain with them. . . call him Crow's Eye, but not for that. . . dragon horn. . . cursed. . ."

"Brother!" Dany screamed. "Stay with me. Please!"

"It is too late," a second voice said softly, near at hand. "He was never yours to know."

Dany's heart had already been in her throat; at this, it almost jumped out of her mouth. Then she turned and looked upon the one member of her family she had never before beheld, either in flesh or in dream.

Rhaella Targaryen was small, barely taller than her daughter, clad in a hooded mantle of black with the three-headed dragon of their House burning on the breast. Her silver-gold hair was neatly plaits, her purple eyes haunted in her thin face. She glanced at the place where Rhaegar had stood, then back to Dany. Her voice was as ethereal as she looked. "My little stormborn girl. What has become of you?"


Rhaella did not answer immediately. Then after a moment, her hands floated up to the collar of her mantle. With one deliberate gesture, she pulled it away, baring herself to the waist.

Dany stared. Her mother's torso was slender, the ribs sharp and the breasts small, and pale and white as a stripped beech – save for where it was scarred with livid bites, scabs, and bruises. Without a word, Rhaella removed the rest of her garb as well, until she stood as naked as her nameday, so close that Dany ached to reach out and take her hand. But she could not take her eyes from the horrific abuse made so plain on that thin fragile body. Wanted to ask who had done it, wanted to demand – but already knew.

"Fire and blood," Rhaella said bitterly, drawing her mantle closed again. "Is that the queen you will make, my child?"

"No." The word seemed stuck in Dany's throat. "I tried. . ."

"He is right." Rhaella's eyes flickered in the direction of her departed son. "Rhaegar did as he must. You now, child."

"But. . . Mother, no, please, Mama. . ." The word was utterly foreign on her tongue. She had been
called *Mother* in every language that was: Mother of Dragons, Mother of the slaves whose chains she’d broken. But never once spoken it to another, as it was meant.

"*Go,*" Rhaella whispered. "Be strong enough. No other choice. They come. Burn them. As a Targaryen should. One last time. Burn them, and then burn you."

"I don’t –"

And Rhaella was gone, as completely as if a candle had been snuffed. Dany turned in all directions, hoping and fearing another visitation, but nothing stirred. She was alone.

She was quite alone.

"Jorah?" She turned again, groping at the solid wall of darkness. "Jorah!"

No answer.

"*Jorah!*" It was useless to cry out. If he was anywhere nearby, he would have answered. She had no idea when his hand had gone from hers – she’d been trying to touch the shades of her dead family, but she knew that they were still dead, and that she, somewhere here under the Shadow, was not – or was she? For a brief, horrifying instant, Dany found herself unsure. *They will change you,* Kojja had said. But she was Mother of Dragons. She was no use to them dead.

Dany wheeled in a panicking circle. She touched her mouth, her breast; she was still breathing, her heart still beat. That took the edge off somewhat, and as she squinted down the long vault, she could just make out a pale, formless glow at the end. Likely Jorah had seen the same thing while she was preoccupied with her phantasms, and gone to investigate. It did seem strange that he’d leave her side to do it. But as she’d just learned, one was not always the master of one's own will in this place.

Curious but still wary, Dany started forward. After only a dozen yards or so, slants of sunlight began to burnish the mosaic-inlaid path beneath her feet, and she could hear birds singing. She sped up.

Yet again, she’d erred in her estimation of the red priests. She had pictured some vast audience chamber, sculpted threateningly in dark stone, a great bonfire between hangings of red silk and smoking iron braziers. But what she emerged into instead, blinking her eyes hard against the summery glow, was a small, informal cloister garden. Water trickled invitingly from an elegant fountain, and the air was green and gold, buzzing with insects and iridescent butterflies as big as Dany's fist. The ground was soft white sand, and shade spread out deep veils beneath the gauzy leaves.

It was so swooning and seductive, in fact, that Dany had to stop in her tracks to savor it; so as you lost memory of light in the darkness, so too in the Red Waste you lost memory of luxury and fertility. Nonetheless, she resolved not to be gulled by any part of it, no matter how attractive. For all she knew, this was an illusion. She had seen something similar in the House of the Undying.

Dany glanced cautiously from side to side, but saw neither Jorah nor anyone else. A tray with two golden goblets sat on a stone pillar at the center of the garden, but though she was very thirsty, she knew better than to accept some potentially sorcerous beverage in a place like this. So she merely took a few more steps in, glancing around for one of the red priests. Likely they intended on making an entrance.

She had only been waiting a few moments when the foliage rustled, and a tall man who had not
previously been in evidence stepped gracefully through the trailing vines. He was clad all in red, a fluttering belted robe with dagged sleeves and a gilded collar, a red beyond even the word: crimson, scarlet, cerise, cardinal, vermilion. The points danced like flame around his wrists, a ruby winked at his throat, and his skin was a deep rich gold, honey-baked brown. His eyes were liquidly black, his head shaved close in a fashion that briefly reminded her of Xaro Xhoan Daxos. On impulse she looked to see if his lips were blue like Pyat Pree's, but they were not. *Blue lips speak lies.* . . yet that did not mean that this one had any more disposition to be truthful.

He came to a halt facing her, his long bare feet making no noise in the sand, and offered a grave nod. "Mother of Dragons. We have waited long for you, and thought to see you sooner. Yet of course, you are most welcome."

Dany inclined her head in return. "I thought it would be sooner as well." That was not a lie, but not entirely the truth; she had not decided to go to Asshai of her own will until hearing that Khal Jhaqo proposed to sell her there regardless of her opinions on the matter. Yet perhaps if she had heeded Quaithe's counsel sooner. . . No matter. It was done. "You know me by repute, I see, but I do not know you. How shall I call you, my lord?"

"I am no lord, only a humble priest. And I have been called many things in my time, but I presently content myself with Fintan."

"Those who claim many names and no lordship usually lie," said Dany. "Where is my companion, my lord?"

Fintan looked confused. "Companion?"

"The one who entered this temple with me. We were separated in the darkness."

The red priest shook his head. "My lady, I saw you in my fires approaching this place, but there was no one with you. You walked alone, while rain the color of blood lashed about you. Such a color. . . indeed, I have never seen its like."

"I rather imagine that you have, my lord."

That made him smile. "You are a clever one, Mother. But whatever you may think, you came to us alone and unarmed, as indeed was the only way you could. Look about you. Here is the goodness, the richness of light and truth and beauty, more real than you could ever imagine. What if you have been asleep your whole life, and only now have woken?"

"Or perhaps I now dream, my lord."

He smiled again, but this time it did not reach his eyes. "The hour is late, my lady. Too late. Your delay might yet cost us everything. What kept you?"

"Folly," Dany said. "The folly of mercy."

"Just so." Those black eyes lingered on hers. "Meereen? What is in Meereen to keep you from your true destiny? How many nightfires burn there?"

"Many, to keep the Harpy away."

Fintan waved a hand. "Any fool can build a fire. It was the first gift god gave to us, and the greatest. But without the aid of R'hllor, it is only a feeble spark in a hungry darkness. Tell me, my lady, did these sparks of yours keep the night's terrors away?"
"No," Dany was forced to admit.

"No," he repeated. "So then, my lady. There is much and more I could tell you of Meereen, if I had a mind. I could tell you who the Harpy is, and who you love that is dead. Could tell you that you are only the mother of dragons, and no longer their mistress."

A cold chill went down Dany's back. "My... my brother came to me. Rhaegar. Back there. He said _""

"All he said was what we know, what we have seen in our fires. Yet perhaps you begin to understand. In this great heart of god, there is nothing that cannot be done or known, no spell beyond our abilities or comprehension. Even life and death are but two sides of the same coin here, a coin which we throw, and if you stand with us, we will become so strong as to break the Great Other forever. That is death's side of the coin. And like anyone, Mother, I imagine there are many whom you would have back again."

Dany's mouth was dry. She was familiar with the bitter price of bloodmagic, would not rush to grasp at it as she had so disastrously the first time. But in her head she could see them: Khal Drogo, her sun-and-stars, and Rhaego, the son they'd made together who had never drawn a living breath. *The stallion who mounts the world.* Even Doreah, her handmaiden who had died in the Waste, and faithful Groleo who'd lost his head in Meereen. And those two ghosts who'd just visited her... her splendid brother and her poor lady mother... a thousand wrongs put to right, a might and power that no one would ever doubt again... to live forever... 

Yet even as she thought it, Dany saw other faces as well. The wild-eyed, shrieking king, his heartsblood bright on that golden blade. The Usurper, who'd sent knives after her through all of the Free Cities. Her brother Viserys, and his fits of rage and abuse and vitriol, the small scared girl she'd been that he had kept so remorselessly under his thumb. *If none of them had died, I would not be standing here. I would not matter. But they did. I do."

"Will you, my lord?" she said at last. "A coin is a coin only by virtue of having two faces. Otherwise it is merely an abstract, a drawing, and no longer real."

"It is so," Fintan agreed. "As we presently understand the world, at least. But that is no longer enough for what we must do, Mother. You know this, elsewise you would not be here. We are the only ones who can restore what has been taken from you."

"What has been taken from me? I lose patience with riddles."

"Your dragons," Fintan said bluntly. "Drogon languishes even now, wounded and angry, better suited to carry out the reaving and burning of his namesake than anything else. Viserion, the weakest of the three as Viserys was the weakest of your brothers, has already been bound under the spell of that unholy thing from Valyria. He serves a new master now... and that master serves the Great Other. And Rhaegal. . ."

"What?" Dany's heart was beginning to pound. "What about Rhaegal?"

"It seems that no one can find him," Fintan said, with an odd, twisted smile. "Just as no one could find your brother – until it was discovered that he'd run off with Lyanna Stark and become a tipping point for the rebellion that cast your House from the throne of Westeros. You see. It has a certain... symmetry."

"Yet you know," Dany said. That smile had told her as much. "You saw him in your flames. Where?"
Fintan gave a light shrug. "I could be mistaken. We have been in the past."

"And yet you do not think you are."

"No, I do not think I am. But you must forgive me, I have been dreadfully discourteous. Here we stand speaking of such matters, and in the day's heat. Permit me to offer you a cup."

Dany accepted the golden goblet he handed to her, but made no move to take a sip. "My companion told me that your order has begun to preach that I am some hero returned. Azor Ahai. Yet during the months I ruled in Meereen, countless travelers told me that Stannis Baratheon, the Usurper's brother, is still laying claim to the Iron Throne. Not only that, but he believes that he is Azor Ahai reborn, complete with a red priestess of your faith and a flaming sword. Which is it, my lord Fintan? It cannot be both. Unless your folk equip every potential candidate with one of your own, so you come out on top regardless of which of us does."

"So cynical for a young girl," Fintan mourned. "As for Melony. . . my lady, let us be frank. She has a certain amount of low skill, and a devotion to the Lord of Light that would put many of us to shame, but she is wrong. When she speaks, she is wrong. When she foretells, she is wrong. When she acts, she is wrong. She took it into her head from looking into her flames that Lord Stannis was the one, I misremember how, and from that moment on there was no getting it out. Yet by now it must have become apparent even to her that she is wrong, so she must continue to contrive and dissemble and pretend. Her mistakes have ensnared her, you see, and so become lies. She even procured a false Lightbringer, or perhaps she truly believed that if she burned simple wooden idols, R'hllor would anoint a suitable replacement. That should tell you all you need to know of her. If she was ever to return here to Asshai, she would be made to answer for her heresies, and to pay the price for them. There is no leisure for such ill-done work when the fate of mankind hangs in the balance."

"Lightbringer," Dany said. "Azor Ahai's sword. You said most clearly that the one Lord Stannis holds is false. Where then is the true one?"

"Do you think that if I knew, I would be standing before you?" Fintan spread his hands. "It is the one mystery that remains closed to me. Some say that it was lost for good millennia ago, at the end of the first Battle for the Dawn, but I do not believe that. It will be found, and when it is. . ." "It is?" Dany prompted.

"It will forever remake our image of the world. That is where you come in, Mother."

"I see." Dany had expected this. "Yet if the sword is false, than Lord Stannis's claim to be Azor Ahai must therefore be false as well. Is it then me?"

"It certainly could be interpreted that way. But I know that you sought us out for another reason. To fulfill the charge laid on you by the shadowbinder Quaithe, and to undo the blood magic wrought by Mirri Maz Duur and cure your barrenness – among other things. Is that not so?"

"It is," Dany said guardedly.

"There is no antidote to what has already been done, but everything is changeable. That is the nature of fire. Our sister Quaithe wished you to open your eyes. From the beginning she has foretold numerous morrows which then came to pass. Now hear me. You must win your dragons back with blood, and then you must take them to Westeros, so they may join in the last battle against the servants of the Other. Afterwards, when all is burned clean, so too will the scourge on your womb be lifted. But only, as before, at a price."
Dany did not like the way he said it. "What price?"

"Your dragons are your children now. If you ever wish to bear children of your body, they must die. And if you still think to win the Iron Throne, you will need to give it an heir. This great War of the Five Kings came about because of Robert Baratheon's failure and Cersei Lannister's treachery in that matter. And dragons cannot sit that throne, my lady. Nor listen to petitions nor wrangle about taxes nor govern a people."

Dany was shocked. "So you would have me choose between my children? That I shall have them of fire or of flesh, but not both?"

"Precisely."

"But I could not conquer Westeros without dragons, and I could not hold it without an heir. I need both."

"So you do. But you may not have both."

"Will you tell me that all this time I have been fooling myself?"

"No. Not at all. But many ordinary men have taken crowns without the aid of dragons, and bred many sons. For all the Targaryens talk of being exceptional, it seems strange that you cannot do the same."

Dany's fists clenched. "Do not mock me."

"Your pardons, my lady. But your dragons are needed in Westeros. Win them back and lead them there."

"They will die if I go to Westeros, you said." There was always a chance that he was lying, or at least not being entirely forthcoming, to find a way to keep them for the devotees of R'hllor. But Dany had a sinking feeling that he was not. It was too unholy, too dementedly and blackly perfect, Mirri Maz Duur's last curse from beyond the grave. Any mother would sooner see the sun rise in the west and set in the east, the mountains turn to dust and blow like leaves in the wind, before choosing to sentence one of her children to death.

She turned away. She could not bear to contemplate the magnitude of the decision fronting her. It seemed it should be simple, but it was not. It was anything but. To stay here and to be Queen of Essos, to have her dragons live, to never bear a child, to let House Targaryen die with her. Or return to Westeros, fight the Other, see her dragons die even if she won, and yet perhaps one day birth a living babe, to grow the withered branch fresh again. If she was to become queen, to sit the Iron Throne as she had always said she should and must, she would have to give up the very thing that had brought her ancestor Aegon there three hundred years ago, the sigil of her House, a weapon beyond cost or price. Mother of Dragons. Without them, she deeply and shamefully feared that she was nothing after all. Only a girl who had not yet seen her eighteenth name day, no warrior or seasoned diplomat, a girl whose father had been...

A queen who would sit there, if she did at all, only on her merits, and no other. And if she did not go, left Westeros to its fate, selfishly kept her dragons for herself. The Great Other grows very strong now. . .

The garden was brilliant, warm and sun-kissed, but Dany suddenly felt very cold. She did not know that Fintan was to be trusted, she did not know where Jorah was, she did not in fact know if she was asleep or awake, and she did not remember how long it had been since she entered. She
dearly wanted to be dreaming, and was terrified that it was so.

At last she said, "It seems you feel that I should think of my duty. My family, my line. Since I am
the last Targaryen, I must –"

"Oh," Fintan said mildly. "This would be the time. As a matter of fact, my dear... you are not."

"What...?" Each new revelation took Dany furtherly off guard. "Kojja Mo told me of Maester
Aemon, but said he passed before he –"

"He did. But it is not Maester Aemon to whom I refer."

"Then..." Dany almost dreaded to hear the answer, considering how unsettled she had been earlier
by his proposal of resurrecting the dead ones. "Who?"

"Why." Fintan smiled thinly at the expression on her face. "The one who awaits you in Westeros.
Your brother Rhaegar's son. Your nephew."
She woke from a violent dream of blood and snow, gasping and clutching her shoulder as the pain tore through it. It was still so strong that she fumbled frantically at it to chase away the ghost of the burning blade, but there was only the bed, the cool morning air, the sparse room of the villa and the lemon tree outside the window. Beyond the latticed pane, Braavos was buried in a sea fog as usual, but it could not quite muffle the distant shouting. The canals were always noisy, but it was different this morning.

She rolled over. The immediate sensation of agony was beginning to fade, but it left an awareness of a much deeper injury in its place. She'd been Ser Justin's captive for at least a fortnight – though he preferred to palliate it by calling her his "guest" – and this was the first wolf dream she'd had in that time. If she tried very hard, she could dimly recall the one she'd had in the House of Black and White, before they'd sent her to do . . . whatever it was. The one where the hunters on the Trident had finally been able to capture the she-wolf, bind her in chains. Because I left her.

But the wolf was free now, the girl knew. That was the reason she herself had survived. In the darkness after she'd drunk from the fountain, she'd seen the big hooded man freeing her. . . last knew her to be running north, north to snow and stone and some of her pack brothers, north among the trees. North to the great man-den – no, the castle – that now lay in ruins, and the swaggering man-monster with the blazing sword. She hated him, hated him and meant to kill him, rip out his throat in pieces, but there was no way to withstand the bite of that supernal steel. She still meant to do it, refused to die without taking him with her – but then she had smelled it. Felt them near. The wolf was bleeding all over the cold white ground, but that was not what had brought them. It was something much deeper and more terrible. And the castle was nothing but massive jumbles of broken stone; there was no sanctuary to be found there. It reeked of corpses even now, and the dead – the wights – were swarming on it. The wolf had seen a pink banner with a red flayed thing on it, dangling torn from the tower. Known that it meant something, but could not stand to stay. Could barely stand at all. Ran off among the trees, the pain growing until she could smell her own flesh and fur burning. She'd tried to roll in the snow to quench it, but nothing stopped it. She knew they were coming. Knew there were thousands and thousands of them, and only one of her.

In that moment of animal panic, that was when the girl woke.

The name she sought had been on the tip of her tongue. She thought again of what little she did know: that her memories, herself, were somehow still living in the wolf. That if she could just get back home and find her, they might come back to her. But if the wolf was grievously wounded and on the run, with dead men and that monster behind her. . .

The girl chewed her lip. It was something she hadn't done in a while, but it was part of her that had been briefly close, while the wolf still lingered in her mind. Winterfell. That was the other thing she remembered. It was Winterfell that she'd seen, blasted and desolate. She wished she knew why it hurt her worse than the sword. There was no telling now. Not until – if – she had another wolf dream.

The girl got out of bed and dressed. She would be expected at breakfast. Ever since he'd caught her with the Summer Maid – whose real name was Tysha, whatever that meant – Ser Justin had been pulling the "captive" reins considerably tighter. As for the courtesan herself, her fate remained uncertain. It had not taken long at all for the high tribunal of Braavos to find her guilty of arranging Ferrego Antaryon's death, but as half of that tribunal was in the official or unofficial employ of Tormo Fregar, it was debatable whether they were going to actually punish her for it. There was no
chance of getting the Faceless Men to cop to their presumed part in the affair, but it had set off a new plague of street preachers from all the varied houses of worship in the city, proclaiming that if they were willing to serve as a nest of such evil, they could not be surprised if their own Sealord was so shockingly done away with. According to Ser Justin, however, they had all missed the point. One of the reasons that Braavos, a haven for escaped slaves and a bastard offshoot of Valyria, had survived for as long as it had was precisely because it had embraced the assassins' guild. Their art had come with them from the ancient Empire, and while it may well have been a key factor in the gods' decision to unleash the Doom, it was also heir to the greatest power mankind had ever known. Such fame, repute, and fear was worth tolerating a few scabrous charlatans.

Ser Justin told her the reason for the shouting outside, at breakfast. "Tormo Fregar was officially confirmed as the new Sealord last night." To judge from his smile, he himself might have been joining in the celebrations. "I'm expected to an audience with him this very afternoon, and Nestoris has gotten me an invitation to a party hosted by the chancellor of the Iron Bank. We'll be sailing home with gold and an army before you know it."

The girl did not answer. Ser Justin had kept her fed and clothed and sheltered, but he could clearly see that she still did not remember who she was, and so had scrupulously avoided telling her. Mayhaps he thought that as long as she was beholden to him for the information, it would discourage her from trying another escape. He kept saying that he and his king would do right by her, but the girl had long known that words were wind, and she trusted no one. For that matter, she did not think Ser Justin made a particularly impressive envoy. He could certainly smile and flash his white teeth and toss his long blonde hair, but he was only some sundry knight from a minor house in the stormlands, his clothes looking quite worn and his cloak and boots always wet from his long hours spent prowling the alleys and canals of Braavos. That horn she'd seen on his belt in Pynto's – he never seemed to be without it – was still old, dirty, and broken. The runes graven in the bronze were almost rubbed out with age, and the aurochs ivory was stained and brown. It was such a deliberately shabby thing, in fact, that the girl had started to become suspicious of it.

It was the one time she'd dared to ask Ser Justin about it directly, the knight had told her that Ferrego Antaryon had given it to him as a gift, before the obvious outcome. But it seemed strange that Antaryon would honor his guest with something so outwardly unprepossessing, even if it could have been meant as a veiled insult, and if its abilities did belie its appearance, that Antaryon would bestow it on a man whose king's cause he'd had no interest in furthering. There was another memory there, strong enough that the girl felt almost certain she'd met the late Sealord before someone murdered him, but as always, she could not put her finger on it. The only certainty she could grasp at was that Ser Justin was lying.

In any event, she was pleased that Ser Justin planned to be absent from the villa in the near future. He had a guard on it, of course, but she was becoming adept at outwitting them, climbing the lemon trees in the courtyard and peering out over the high stone walls. If she squinted, she could just make out the towers of the House of Black and White in the distance, and the feeling was growing ever stronger that she had to go back. That there were still matters unfinished. That she had already given them everything she had, and so there was no need to fear. I killed her for true, by drinking at the fountain. All her dreams and loves and hopes and hates. By my choice and by my hand. Almost as if she was truly faceless now.

But there was still the wolf. And the broken castle in the snow, and the burning sword. At the mere memory of it, her shoulder seized up and she grimaced, suddenly forced to hold back tears. She can't be dead. I would know if she was dead. And something there for the briefest instant – how she would know if he was dead, the one who finished her sentences, the one who had given her the sword –
– but he was dead, Ser Justin had told her.

Just then, Massey himself noticed her boggled expression. "What, girl?" He peeled an egg and grinned, for there was nothing in the world so serious that he could not grin at it. "You look as if a castle just fell on your head."

"It did," she said. "Almost. All of it came down, I saw it."

She watched Massey's face closely. It looked startled for a moment, but quickly resumed its usual cast of amused nonchalance. "The Sealord's Palace is still standing, I assure you. Though Fregar very well might decide to – "

"Not the Sealord's Palace, stupid," she snapped. "Winterfell."

That genuinely did take him aback. The grin vanished, and this time it didn't reappear. "What makes you say that?"

"I saw it in a dream. It's in pieces. Like someone ripped it all apart. And there was a man with a burning sword, he hurt me, I mean the wolf, he hurt me and – "

"Girl," said Massey. "Your wolf had bloody well better not have attacked King Stannis, or there's going to be hell to – "

"It wasn't Stannis!" she shouted at him. She knew what Baratheons looked like, King Stannis was a Baratheon, Massey had said so countless times. There was a face in her head, a stubborn face with shaggy black hair and blue eyes and bull's horns. But that made no sense; men didn't have horns. "It wasn't Stannis, he was..." There were no words to describe the wrongness the wolf had felt in him. "All wearing furs and covered in blood and there was a red or a pink man on his cloak. He had long dark stringy hair and wormy lips and pale pale eyes, he had a burning sword and he almost killed me with it."

"That was part of the glamour," Massey said, but a sudden hesitance had crept into his voice. "To work the illusion. . . to make the Bastard think that he had Stannis' sword too, when he. . ."

"The Bastard." Massey had mentioned him too. Something about how a turncloak had rescued someone from him and taken her to the Wall. Her. . . it must have been a girl. . . a name, know your name. . .

"Ramsay, the Bastard of Bolton," Ser Justin confirmed tersely, "and there's no more vile sack of shit to ever bestride the earth. He thought he got his hands on Lightbringer long ago, but that was just the red woman's work. He thought he got Stannis too, but it was only Arnolf Karstark." He paused. "You said though, there was a red man on your attacker's cloak?"

"Yes, but it was hard to be sure. There was blood everywhere."

"That's the sigil of House Bolton," Massey allowed. His frown had started to deepen. "But I told you, he didn't truly – "

"The sword." The girl spoke through clenched teeth; the pain had become eye-watering again. "It was burning. Like this."

And with that, she pulled down the sleeve of the stupid Westerosi dress that Ser Justin had been under the delusion she should wear. The light had been too bad for her to see it before, but now it was plain. A thin black scar lacerated her flesh from collarbone to shoulder blade, still smoking faintly. When she touched it this time, it scorched her fingers, and she had to jerk her hand away.
"I told you," she said, taking some pride in Ser Justin's stupefied expression. "I don't know what it is, but the sword isn't fake. It couldn't have cut me otherwise. What's happened to the wolf hasn't really happened to me, until now."

"This..." Massey shot to his feet so fast that he knocked his chair over. "Bloody buggering hellfire, this... it can't... what else did you see in this dream of yours, girl? Tell me – tell me!"

"Dead things." She shrugged the collar back up. "Everywhere."

Massey wracked a hand through his hair, then grasped at his face. "Did you see anyone in gold and black? Wearing a stag, mayhaps?"

"A few. In the snow. They were all dead."

"Anyone else? Anyone?"

The girl opened her mouth – then shut it.

"Well?"

"I don't have to tell you." She crossed her arms and met his eyes defiantly. "You won't tell me what you know."

Ser Justin was clearly on the verge of a heated riposte – mayhaps something about how he would never be outmaneuvered by a twelve-year-old girl, paragon of manly virtue that he was. Then he appeared to realize that that was in fact the case, and so it died on his lips. Instead he glared at her, all his smugness utterly evaporated. "We will speak of this more when I get back, girl. And you'll tell me everything, or you'll wish you had."

The girl remained in her seat even after he had stormed out. She eyed his abandoned plate of breakfast, then reached out, plucked a grape, and popped it into her mouth consideringly. She thought of another breakfast, then, and another man eating grapes. The names you cried out. There were three. She could almost see his face. The kindly man. And another man who'd only worn that guise. You cannot be faceless, and you know too much of our art to leave.

She thought she had failed her initiation, but that was before she drank the water and killed herself –

As the truth began to sink in, the girl felt lightheaded. She could almost piece together the events that had led to her drinking, as well. How Jaqen H'ghar had found her... found her in the Sealord's Palace... I knew I've been there, I knew it! the very night that Ferrego Antaryon had died. And how that man in Pynto's had said that Qarro Volentin, the alias Jaqen had used while posing as the First Sword of Braavos, had sworn that he let no man near the Sealord –

No man –

I did it, the girl realized sickeningly. It was me. I killed him and then I ran. Because Jaqen wanted to kill me too, because he would have... . . . if I did not drink.

That was it. That was the initiation.

They never lied to me, but they never told me the full truth.
The girl stood up almost as fast as Massey had. Felt anew the burning of the black water as she'd swallowed it, and the burning in her shoulder as well. A reminder that she still had a link back to her old self, that that life was not yet entirely dead. Some thing and some truths rooted too deep. A lone wolf before the sundered walls of Winterfell.

The girl turned and ran.

This time, she wasn't seeking the Summer Maid, and Ser Justin wasn't chasing her, but she ran twice as fast as she had. She raced into the still, quiet courtyard and shimmied up the wall, grabbing onto a low-hanging branch of the lemon tree and tearing away the stupid skirt. It was easier than she'd dared to hope. She dropped down on the other side, almost into a canal, and one last time, began to flee back to the House of Black and White.

Memories nibbled at her like biting fish, or a swarm of exotic birds, so that she caught glimpses of their colors even as she could not trap them in her hand. She did seem to recall that she'd spent a great deal of time trawling across Braavos recently, always with death – her own or someone else's – as the chief motivating factor. But unlike all the times before, she was no longer afraid. Indeed, she could not get there fast enough. She sped as if on the wings of the wind. *I know you.*

As before, she swam the last of the distance. The water in the canals was bitingly cold, raising gooseflesh on her skin, but cold made no matter to her; she was a wolf, not a scared little girl. She slipped out onto the sea stairs, dripping and shivering, and began to climb. She couldn't remember if she tried consciously, but if she let her mind remain blank, she could almost sense it. The sword she'd hidden. *Stick them with the pointy end.*

Her small, dirty hands scrabbled at the loose rocks. Here, it was here. The one thing she hadn't thrown away when the kindly man told her to. *Needle.*

She moved another slab. Peered into the mossy depths, and finally spotted the glint. Trembling, she reached in to pull it out. It had not gone to rust during its long imprisonment; it was castle-forged steel, it was *her* steel. Her cold fingers knew it, knew the shape of the hilt, the balance of the blade. Knew that, even if nothing else.

*Little sister,* the wind whispered, and ruffled her hair.

*Who are you?* she wanted to cry out. *Come back to me. I miss you. I love you. What's happened to us? Where have we gone?*

But the wind had no tongue, and another reunion awaited. Standing up, she thrust the sword through her belt and climbed the stairs to the top, to the weirwood and ebony doors. Something about the fact that it was weirwood drove her half mad, as if she was supposed to know this, to see something. But perhaps she already did. She did not have the iron coin, but she did not need it. And she knew the words.

"*Valar morghulis,*" she said, barely above a whisper.

The path when the doors swung silently open was as black as a crow.

The lost wolf entered with a slow, measured stride, her footfalls echoing across the stone-flagged floor. Flames burned far off in the temple's countless shrines, and she could hear the distant splash of the fountain. An ancient art, Ser Justin had said. Born in the Valyrian Freehold itself. A cousin, perhaps, to the countless mysteries that were said to endure even now in Asshai. *Black and white.* One half and the other. *Death and life. Ice and fire.* *Valyria was built on the power of dragons,* the girl recalled. Three names. Three heads.
Quiet as a shadow, she reached the deserted atrium – deserted, that was, except for the bodies of those who had drunk at the fountain and merely died. They held no terror or mystery for her now. She climbed up on its edge, and peered down.

The face she'd seen in the harbor, after she'd first woken, was the one which looked back at her. The horsey one, with the unkempt brown hair and solemn grey eyes. But the reflection did not remain fixed. In the ripples her nose looked different, or her face or her expression, or sometimes her whole face altogether. Sometimes she had no reflection at all.

_I could change it if I wanted. If I knew how. I have that power now._ And she finally understood what she had to do to complete it. As Jaqen had done, and every fully fledged Faceless Man had done. She had to drink from the water one more time, and the last of these shadowed fragile memories would burn away forever. The bond with her wolf would be broken for good; live or die, Nymeria would no longer have any effect on her. She could be wounded with all the magic swords there were, torn apart by bastards and wights alike, and it would not touch the girl. She was almost safe. She was so close.

The girl reached down and trailed her fingers through the glittering black water. Why _should_ she remain so dangerously linked with the wolf, when she might die at any moment from her wounds or from the cold or from any number of other things? When she could not remember, when she might not ever again, when she was taking an awful risk in even hoping to see Westeros ever again? Better to do what she had come for. Remaining in this limbo would only bring her pain. She knew her memories still existed, but they were too burned out and far away to reach. No reason. No reason but the sword in her belt, and the shattered castle in her dreams.

"Drink, child," a voice murmured from the darkness. "Complete your death and rise as whoever you want to be. No man can choose how and what and where he is born, but now you can. A power beyond price. Do it."

_Stick them with the pointy end_, memory whispered again.

The girl lifted her head. Shadows moved and breathed around her. _They are here. They are waiting to see my choice._

Snow, snow, _snow_.

Slowly, clumsily, the girl stood up on the edge of the fountain. Her hand sought out the hilt of Needle, and she drew it. Firelight danced in splinters on the blade. _Almost as skinny as you are._

"Come to us, girl," another voice said, from a different direction. She knew this one beyond any doubt. "A girl will not leave this place alive again. A man awaits her. A man will teach her every art of life and death. A man chose her. And the Red God will have his due."

_Three names_, the girl thought. It had always been three. _Chiswyck. Weese. Jaqen H'ghar._ But that had been the weasel soup instead. _Nymeria. Jon. Father._

And now –

"Ramsay Bolton," she said, loud and clear and unafraid. "Jaqen H'ghar. _No one._"

A pause. They rang away into the vaults.

"You will not live, girl," the voice warned her. It had turned darker, dangerous. "This is your last chance."
They were moving. They were coming for her now. She knew nothing, but she knew her names. *Ser Gregor,* she thought. *Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei,* and spoke her three again. "Ramsay Bolton. Jaqen H'ghar. No one."

Hands came out of the darkness, snatching at her. She slashed at them with Needle, and they retreated. Eyes all around her. The wolf had run from the dead men. But she was not going to run.

"A girl belongs to a man," the voice said again, silken and pitiless. "A girl will come."

"No!" she shouted. And when the hand grabbed her by the shoulder, she stabbed with a violent, maddened strength.

She heard a surprised breath, almost a sigh, and looked up to see the kindly man's eyes glazing over. Saw the spreading red stain on his robes, and the wry, knowing smile he gave her. Then she wrenched the blade out, and he fell.


"*Valar morghulis!*" she roared back. "*VALAR MORGHULIS!*"

The kindly man's body hit the ground with a thump. And she reached out, snatched one of the torches from its bracket, and threw it into the fountain. If it had been ordinary water, it would have hissed and quenched the flame. But it was not ordinary water. There was a breath like someone had been punched in the stomach, and then black flames roared up to all sides. *Fire is the only way.*

Distantly she could hear Jaqen shouting, then screaming. *I saved him from an inferno once,* the girl remembered. And there would be no way of being certain that he was dead, not now and not ever, unless she killed him herself. Unless she put that blade through him and watched him turn to dust, for he had already died long ago when he sacrificed his true self and his true face to the waters of the fountain. Elsewise she would always be looking over her shoulder for him, for all her life. He had said that it might take years, but he would always kill those names that had been named. And he would never let her go. She was his.

Except she wasn't. She was hers. And neither he nor any man alive owned her, or any other woman.

Coughing and crying, the girl began to run. Flames bellowed around her, ghosts leered up madly. Stones broke and thundered down, and the House of Black and White shuddered and tottered on its ancient foundations. Jaqen was still screaming.

"*Valar morghulis,*" she wept, beating at the door with her fists. The heat seared her like the sword, but a thousand times worse. "You told me that. It's true. I have to. All men must die, even you. And the Red God *will* have his due."

The weirwood splintered. Ash and soot rained down around her. She fell headlong, hit water, and went under.

She surfaced after a black, blinding, terrifying moment, and looked behind her. The House of Black and White was well and truly aflame on its rocky atoll, the flames gulping greedily at the fog. *The Doom come again. And so the art of Valyria perishes as one.*

Her only hope was to reach the harbor, and pray that Ser Justin would as well. That they could run back to Westeros, that Westeros would ever be far enough. For she would be hunted for the rest of her short life. By Jaqen, if he survived, and any other of them. They meant to kill her, but she had killed them first. She knew now the choice she'd made.
The girl began to swim.
The Exiled Hand

Jon Connington had never been so proud of anything in his life as he was of the sight of the Targaryen banners flying above the massive black towers of Storm's End. The prince had kept his promise to raise them once the fighting was done and the fortress made fast, and the three-headed dragon capering above the ancestral seat of House Baratheon felt like the first scrap of justice. He would not, however, have long to savor it. Their time there was intended to be brief, a staging point for the attack on King's Landing, and reinforcements had arrived in the nick of time – three of the truant shiploads of the Golden Company had finally turned up, along with their elephants. Their tale was that they'd gone off course and gotten blown to the Summer Isles, where they'd then availed themselves of all the free-flowing wine and beautiful women conveniently to hand. Mercenaries were in fact rather susceptible to such things, but Connington scorned them no less for it. In his half decade of service in their ranks, still smarting about the tale Varys had spread about him drinking himself to death, he'd lived as celibately as a septon. We have a realm to conquer and a king to crown, and they're off sticking their cocks into the nearest warm hole.

Nonetheless, he could not reprimand them too much, as at least they were here – though he made sure they felt his displeasure good and properly before they were admitted back into the prince's war counsels. As it currently stood, Aegon was planning to lead the first attack north to the capital, while the fleet followed in stages. Chastened by Stannis Baratheon's bad example of sailing his ships bang down Blackwater Bay, sitting ducks for the wildfire-belching catapults on the walls, they did not intend to commit all their number all at once, and had to maximize the effectiveness of their most powerful land weapon: the elephants. Such large beasts were a bloody nuisance in heavy forest, and even more so on the water, but they were impossible for even the finest warhorse to stand against. Once Aegon and his small force had provoked the boy king into fighting outside King's Landing's high walls, the Golden Company would have moved their men (and elephants) up the coast and would be lying in wait just offshore. And as soon as it came to open battle, the Lannisters were done for. They'd dispatched half their remaining fleet north to sort out some trivial provincial dispute in White Harbor, and it had not been seen again.

The general strokes of the plan had been devised by the prince, and Connington had raised no significant objections; it was a remarkably coherent and effective strategy. Additionally, Aegon's crop of letters was beginning to bear fruit: half a dozen western houses had declared for him, along with a few of the riverlords. Edmure Tully was said to have gone unaccountably missing from Casterly Rock, fanning local outrage further, and combined with the Dornish support, Aegon would have backup from all directions. Once King's Landing fell, the rest of the country would topple like dominoes.

Jon Connington could, at last, almost taste it. He had not by any means forgotten that disturbing conversation with the prince back at Griffin's Roost, when Aegon had intimated that Varys and Illyrio were both descended from the illegitimate line of Targaryen pretenders, but he had decided to put it aside for the time. Gods knew that he had no love for the mincing eunuch and his lies, not to mention the bloody cheesemonger and his consistently useless schemes, but whatever game they were playing would soon come to an end. After all, it was true that the Golden Company itself had been founded by a Blackfyre, and they were lugging Aegor Rivers' gold-dipped skull about in their baggage; perhaps the chance to restore a dragon, any dragon, to the Iron Throne outweighed hoary old dynastic rivalries. If Varys had wanted to extinguish the line for good, all he had had to do was to sit back and let Ser Gregor Clegane enter that nursery as it was. Or let one of Robert Baratheon's assassination plots succeed against Viserys and Daenerys. It was far too much coincidence for Connington to swallow that all the hired knives had been so inept.
Soon. It had to be soon, and it would be. The bells tolled ever louder in his head every time he closed his eyes. And behind them all stood the specter of the stone men on the bridge, and his own grey dead hand.

At the moment, Connington was sitting in the capacious lord's solar, poring over a heap of jumbled maps and attempting to make sense of the various annotations Aegon had scribbled on them. The table was accessorized with quills, inkpots, half-fletched arrows, half-finished meals, wooden ships, and a jeweled brooch, which Connington was displeased to see. It belonged to Arianne, and its presence here could only mean that Aegon had been attempting to impress her by showing off the breadth and depth of their plans. The princess was no threat to spill them to the wrong ears, but it was in everyone's interests to prevent the acquaintance from getting much more intimate. Not to mention that another of Arianne's bastard cousins, Elia Sand, had arrived at Storm's End a few days ago with a second train of Dornish, and there was no doubt that she viewed the personage of the prince as an added inducement to the cause.

It is unfair of me to nip his heels too much. He is a young man, and knows little of leisure or luxury or pleasurable company. Yet for that very reason, Connington could not approve of Aegon's liaison with the Dornishwomen, innocent though it may be at the moment. The Golden Company's ease of the flesh in the Summer Isles could have cost them the campaign if they'd stayed much longer, and with at least Elia and likely Arianne as well toying with the prince's affections, a misstep could result in a fiasco similar to Robb Stark's. Additionally, it fueled Connington's old resentment of the Martells, and yet he knew that as the one advising Aegon sternly not to insult Prince Doran and lose their support, there was no room for him to make a mistake either.

Lord Jon sighed and turned to the next map, running a gloved finger up the line of supply that snaked up the gullet of the stormlands, almost to the Wendwater. Once they had the river, they would not need to send any more ships around the dangerous sea cape of Massey's Hook, and that was where the alliance of the Mootons of Maidenpool and the Rygers of Willow Wood, riverlords both, would come in handy. The Mootons and the Rygers had remained loyal to House Targaryen even during Robert's Rebellion, and the current slate of Lannister insults against their liege lord and homeland had been all they needed to flock to Aegon's banner. Apparently Lord William Mooton had just married off his daughter Eleanor to Dickon Tarly, given Lord Randyll many thanks for rebuilding his town after its destruction, and then sent his pledge in secret to Aegon, the moment Tarly had taken his reign of terror south after receiving word of Margaery Tyrell's arrest and imprisonment.

A weak man, Lord Jon thought, marking down the position of the caravans. Which from what he'd heard, was something that had oft been said of Lord Mooton before; he was scorned as cowardly, fat, and feeble. He'd spent much of the war locked in a tower cell and letting his lands burn, so it was understandable that he'd see this as a chance to redeem himself. Connington had hoped for House Darry to join the riverlands contingent as well, as they had been the stoutest royalists alive, but with the fact that they now consisted of bastards, women, and Freys, perhaps it was less of a loss than he thought. And Lancel Lannister had been at least nominal Head of House, making that an end of that.

Yet with so much movement in so many directions, the Iron Throne must know the attack was coming. And they were not without pieces of their own to move, though they grew slimmer every day. The Faith must be thoroughly out of temper with Cersei Lannister's heresies, and as for the Tyrells –

"My lord?"

Connington looked up in annoyance. "I'm busy."
"Not so busy that you can't come down and pay court to our new arrivals."

"New arrivals?"

"Aye. A pair of them. The Bastard of Driftmark and the Knight of Flowers."

*That* certainly got Connington's attention. "Loras Tyrell is dead."

"Is he? Well, there can't be that many who look that much like him, burned face notwithstanding. They sailed up about an hour ago, must have talked their way past the harbor guards, and Aegon's receiving them right now. *With* the girls."

Well, and that was just a recipe for disaster.

When Connington flew down the stairs and into the hall, expecting to see Tyrell and Martell already clawing each other's eyes out, he instead was presented with a remarkable scene. The prince, with Arianne and Elia flanking him, was speaking cordially to a silver-haired young man – who, from the side, looked so much like Rhaegar that it stopped Connington's heart. While he was trying to recover, he took note that the second young man, while cloaked and hooded, was in fact wearing the Tyrell rose on his doublet. But the talk of burns... 

"My lord." Prince Aegon glanced up and smiled. "We have had a massive stroke of good fortune this day. May I present Aurane Waters, the Bastard of Driftmark and former Master of Ships for the Lannister queen, who just announced that the fleet of dromonds she funded for him have now been placed at my personal and express disposal."

"Have they." No matter how much Waters reminded him of Rhaegar, Connington had to feel out this offer carefully. "Why?"

Waters shrugged. "I'm a sellsail, m'lord. The Tyrells paid me more after Cersei took her little tumble."

*Aye, you are.* There was no room to complain about men whose loyalty was purchased for gold, considering the very name and temperament of the company who formed the chief part of their army, but Connington longed for the day when they would find men who owed allegiance to Aegon alone. "And the Tyrells, family of Tommen Baratheon's little queen and the holder of the Handship, gave you leave to do this?" He glanced pointedly at the second man.

"They have." Ser Loras Tyrell took a step forward and shrugged down his hood. "Lord Connington. As dead men, you and I should have much to discuss."

"Ser Loras." Connington inclined his head. "I was under the impression that boiling oil was considerably more mortal than wine."

"My lord will see that unlike yours, it was not merely rumors." Loras indicated his scarred face bitterly. Shooting a challenging look at the princess and the Sand Snake, he added, "I would prefer to discuss it privately."

Both Arianne and Elia gave him defiant stares right back, but Aegon nodded. "Of course, ser. That is only a courtesy to be expected after you have traveled so far." He gestured to his cousins. "Leave us, if you'd be so kind. I'll sup with you later."

Arianne curtsied and made her exit more or less compliantly, but Elia lingered to give Aegon a kiss that was somewhat more than sisterly before doing likewise. As much as he did not like seeing that, Lord Jon was quite proud of the deft touch Aegon had displayed in handling the long-standing
antipathy between Highgarden and Sunspear; to be sure, it was a skill that would serve him in good stead as king. *If only we could get the bastard girl to stop prowling about him. The prince will never take a baseborn bride, and she bears his own mother's name.* Elia. Always Elia.

"Your Grace," Ser Loras said, when he, Aegon, and Connington were the only ones left in the room. "It is... good to see Storm's End again. How on earth did you take it?"

Aegon smiled modestly. "The Golden Company is mostly to thank for that. And you will not have come to hear me prate of my own accomplishments."

*Clever,* Connington noted. *He divulges no word of a key military strategy without it seeming an insult.* He was, however, rather chafed that he had not been sent for immediately upon Waters and Ser Loras' arrival, that Aegon had seen perfectly fit to deliberate on the offer and then inform him later, if at all. *But I must grow used to it. If he consults me when he is king, it is a privilege, not a right. And I am not likely to live long enough to see much of his reign, besides.*

That thought made Lord Jon sad. There were days when he was mostly resigned to his impending demise, and others when he wanted to kick and swear and claw the grey poison from his flesh. So much time that he was losing. So many deeds by Aegon he would not see done. *Perhaps it is not so bad, though. Rhaegar awaits me in the afterlife.*

Connington shook his head hard, and returned his attention to the parley. He had not missed much. Aegon was offering some inconsequential condolence on Ser Loras' disfigurement, and Ser Loras was mouthing something equally inconsequential in return. But neither of them being known for their patience, they soon got to brass tacks. "You have not come merely to relive fond childhood memories, I imagine?" Aegon asked.

"Indeed not," Ser Loras said tightly. Connington had originally taken the stiffness of his demeanor to result both from his burns and an arrogant, wounded young knight's inherent prickliness, but at this it suddenly dawned on him that Ser Loras was in fact trying very hard not to break down. He had squired here for Renly Baratheon in his youth, and Varys had delighted in including scurrilous court gossip in his quarter-yearly reports from the Red Keep, miserable little cockless voyeur that he was. But this... *He loved Renly as I loved Rhaegar,* Connington realized abruptly. It made his heart twist painfully in his chest – first in sympathy for a fellow comrade in arms, and secondly in jealousy that Loras at least had had his love, that Renly had by all Varys' accounts most enthusiastically returned it. But that was another thought to put aside.

"No," Ser Loras was saying, composure now restored. "I've come on behalf of my brother Willas, my lady grandmother Olenna, my sister Margaery – and my lord father Mace, of course. Your Grace will surely know that my sister, thrice wed and twice widowed, stands under arrest and likely condemnation by the Faith. Also, that my father has fallen under blame for the Lannisters' ludicrously ill-judged executions of Lord Gawen Westerling and his family, and Lady Roslin Tully. If you uphold the promise you made to us in your letter, to clear Margaery's name and prove to the world that we are blameless in that affair, I am here and now prepared to swear you the fealty of our family, with all the strength of Highgarden and the Reach behind it."

Aegon jerked slightly at the mention of the Westerlings, but he did not give the game away. "Ser Loras, I thank you and House Tyrell alike, which has always been a true and stalwart friend to mine. You have my bond upon my soul that your kinfolk will be exonerated, and our alliance made as strong as it was when our fathers fought together."

"Your Grace speaks well." Ser Loras knelt. "I will ask one other boon."
"Anything."

"Give me leave to visit the grave of King Renly tonight. I buried him here. In a private place he showed me once."

A touchier man might have commented that Renly Baratheon had been a king only if dressing a whore up in a wimple made her a septa, but Aegon Targaryen smiled generously. "I know you loved him well and would never betray his memory. The castle is yours to go where you will, ser."

"I thank you, my lord," Ser Loras said, his voice huskier than usual. Then he bent his head rather quickly, took Aegon's offered hands, and recited the oath of fealty from a vassal to his liege lord.

Aegon, in turn, echoed the lord's part back to him, then raised him to his feet and kissed his burned cheek. "When Tommen Baratheon is dead, the place of Lord Commander in my Kingsguard will firstly be offered to you."

The ghost of a smile flickered across Ser Loras' face. "Tomm is a good boy, despite his blood. I will be grieved if he meets a bad end. As for the Kingsguard, I will accept only if Your Grace does not wed a Martell."

"I will marry Queen Daenerys alone," Aegon assured him, with enough conviction to sound reasonably convincing. "But the Martells are my close kinsmen and staunch allies, and such old rivalries must needs be put aside in my court. The Seven Kingdoms must not be broken apart in war again."

"As Your Grace says." Loras lowered his eyes. "But I am sure you have many cares to attend to, and I would rest a time after my journey."

"As indeed you shall," Aegon agreed. "And I do. I'll speak to you and Waters both more extensively on the morrow. Ser, my lord." With a nod apiece to Loras and Connington, he swept out.

There was silence for a few moments. Then Ser Loras said, "He must look very like him. Rhaegar."

His own throat suddenly rather tight, Connington nodded.

"It must have taken singular devotion to get him out. Also singular skill." Despite the ruined housing of his face, the Tyrell boy's golden eyes were sharp. "Unless I much misremember my maester's history lessons, you had already been exiled and Lord Chelsted burned alive by the time of the Sack of King's Landing, which means that..." Rossart? would have been King Aerys' Hand. Getting back into a city about to fall to the Lannisters must have been a miraculous feat indeed."

"History," Connington thought. "That is what I am to him, an old man sprung from the dusty pages of a book. He must have been still in swaddling clothes when Robert and Rhaegar faced off on the Trident. "I... did not supervise the prince's rescue personally, ser. I was already abroad, having taken service as a sellsword with the Golden Company."

"Helping to explain why they are here fighting for you now, then. But do they not regard all the Targaryen kings starting with Daeron the Good as usurpers?" Ser Loras shrugged. "Queer choice of occupation for Prince Rhaegar's dearest friend."

Connington bristled. "If I'd ventured back to Westeros, Robert would have shortened me by a head."

"And did, many others," Loras commented. "It was a lean time to be a Targaryen loyalist, which
was why my lord father changed allegiances as soon as it was prudent. But then, you had something else to live for. Surely Prince Aegon's bold rescuer hastened him straight from the ruins of the royal nursery and into your arms?"

Connington hesitated. "No. I spent five years with the Golden Company."

Loras cocked one eyebrow. "Meaning you did not even become aware of the prince's survival until a full half decade after the fact? It seems queer, again, that you'd not do something sooner, if you knew."

*Be careful, damn you.* Ser Loras was clearly prospecting for information, and he'd made a good start at getting it. "No, I did not know of Aegon's survival immediately," Connington was forced to admit. "Not until I received a missive from V – our mutual friends, and was invited to Pentos to inspect him for myself. My questions were answered to my satisfaction, Lady Lemore vouched for his identity, and I agreed to raise the boy as my own in hopes of leading him back to his rightful throne."

"Noble of you," said Loras. "Who's Lady Lemore?"

Connington hesitated again.

"Never mind," said Loras, seeing his expression. "What I meant to say was that she must be a remarkable woman indeed, if after five years these sly friends of yours were able to present a fair-haired little boy out of the blue and have you accept him as Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name, Prince Rhaegar's trueborn son and lawful king of Westeros. But then, you wanted to believe it, didn't you?"

Connington's hand strayed toward his sword. "Guard your words. You have sworn your fealty."

"Put up your steel, my lord. I yield." Loras pushed a fall of brown curls out of the unburned half of his face. "Indeed I have, and believe me, it's not a vow I mean to break. But your lad can call himself Florian the Fool if it pleases him. It matters not a mummer's fart to me whether he's a Targaryen, a Blackfyre, or a scullion's bastard. All I care about is what he intends to do as regards the kingdom's enemies."

That confused Lord Jon. "The Lannisters? I assure you, the prince will – "

"Them too," said Loras, "but more than that." He paused, then said, "I had a raven from my brother Garlan just before I left Dragonstone with Lord Aurane. He had... certain tidings."

"What sort of tidings?"

"Curious ones. He's leading the defense against the ironborn attacks on the coast, you know. Those Greyjoy sons of whores will kill anything that moves and fuck it afterward, but that was not what concerned my brother. He wrote of strange things supposedly glimpsed in the north, along the Stony Shore and other places where the Crow's Eye's pet monsters have come reaving. If the rumors are to be believed, a different sort of reaver altogether."

A chill ran down Connington's spine. "Old wives' tales."

"Are they? Garlan will be relieved to hear it." Loras' mouth turned up strangely. "He has also seen certain... things which defy explanation on the enemy's ships. Fell shapes. Fires without a source. Heard voices. And the most ungodly screaming."

"Fighting does that to a man."
"What, sends them mad?" Loras laughed, low and harsh. "I've not seen such things with my own eyes, admittedly. But Garlan thinks..."

"Thinks what?"

Loras was the one to hesitate this time. Then he said, "Garlan thinks, however improbable it sounds, that Euron Crow's Eye has sold his soul to the Others."

Another cold finger touched the back of Connington's neck. "The Others need not concern us, even if they do exist. The Wall has stood eight thousand years, it has another few thousand left. And besides, even if not, they would never come so far south. They are given life by cold and snow. They cannot survive here."

"One would suspect the entire point of it, if Garlan is correct, is that now they do not need to. The Crow's Eye is doing their work for them. So you see, my lord, that is why we need a Targaryen more urgently than ever. But those three rumored dragons – "

"Are in Meereen," Connington said grudgingly. "Another plot by our friends."

"But if Aegon is the rightful heir, it seems strange that they were not given to him."

Remembering the prince's confrontation of Varys over this exact issue, Connington had no immediate answer. "She will come," he insisted, far more certainly than he felt. "She must. And when she does, there will be no shortage of foes to – "

"Burn alive?" Loras suggested. "She'll want to tread lightly with that. But again, I care not. If you leave Stannis to me, you have my blessing to charbroil the rest."

"Lord Stannis will never return from the north."

"You apparently don't know him very well," Loras said, with a twisted smile. "Now, my lord, I'm done vexing you for the nonce. I beg your pardons."

And with that, he went.

Connington stood behind, now the only one, as dusk began to slant through the high vaults. It was nearly time for supper, but he was not very hungry and Aegon would be entertaining the Martell girls throughout, which was certain to deprive him of his appetite further. Ser Loras had doubtless gone to visit Renly's grave, and Connington did hope that he would be left in peace to do so. If Robert had even granted Rhaegar the decency of a final resting place... but the whoreson had burned him and cast him to the winds, taken his throne and his inheritance. But not for much longer.

At last, finding himself with no other option, Connington wandered restlessly upstairs, back to his chambers – Storm's End was vast enough that he had only now managed not to get lost while doing so, and they would soon be leaving anyway. He would be glad to go. Even though it had just fallen to an enemy for the first time in its long history, this place was still Baratheon to the bone; Connington had only felt comfortable sleeping in his bed once he had burned the black and gold hangings. Even then, the bells still tolled more deafeningly than ever.

He shut the door and built a fire in the hearth. It hadn't yet snowed this far south, but the air was colder every day, another incentive to complete the invasion of King's Landing before the weather prohibited it. Time was beginning to loom impassably before him.

Lord Jon poured himself a goblet of piss-poor wine, stripped the glove from his stone hand, and
gingerly immersed his fingers in it. There was not much hope of slowing the infection now, as the crusted grey-black scales had almost reached the last knuckles, but he would try to keep it functional for the great campaign. He reached for his maps once more, tracing his free hand over the inky black swoops that demarcated forest, river, coast, castle. As soon as they turned it into real gains, not merely scribbles on parchment.

His attention wandered as he stared into the flames. He felt so weary. He wished it was done already. Elephants and dragons, stags dancing before the high black walls and leering skulls dipped in gold, skulls with terrible blue eyes, blue and blue, and blood in the snow that was just as red –

"My lord?"

Connington wrenched upright, heart pounding, not realizing that he'd fallen into a waking dream until that moment. He ripped his hand out of the goblet and thrust it under the table just as the door shut behind a bemused-looking Aegon. "I'm sorry," the prince said. "Were you sleeping?"

"No. I mean, yes. Not meaning to." Connington's adrenaline was still roaring in his ears. Gods, that had been close. "What are you doing?"

"Coming to see how you were getting on with our plans." Aegon pulled up a stool. "And hoping to add Aurane Waters' dromonds to our calculations. Either they can support the Golden Company at sea – or they could attack somewhere else."

Connington knew the look in the boy's eye. "Casterly Rock."

"Indeed. I've taken one unbreakable castle, I think I can manage a second," Aegon said, with all an eighteen-year-old lad's blinding arrogance. "And besides, wouldn't it be ironic to send the fleet Cersei Lannister paid for against her family's ancestral home?"

"Aye, it would. But you would not be leading that attack as well, would you?"

"No. I'd still make for King's Landing. But it would cut the Lannisters off from being able to retreat to safety, and likely deliver the rest of the westerners to my cause. Though I can't imagine what keeps them now."

"Some men are bolder than others."

"And some men are the Freys." Aegon shrugged. And then, to Connington's utter horror, the prince picked up the goblet of wine in which his diseased fingers had been soaking, and took an absent-minded sip. Then spat it out at once, pulling a disgusted face. "Eeurgh! You'd better not be drinking that swill!"

"I – " Lord Jon could feel himself starting to panic. "It's – a bad vintage, I know. Something to help me sleep. Though mayhaps I did not need it, as you came in and startled me – on the morrow, you said, speak to Ser Loras and the Bastard of – "

Aegon eyed him curiously, but made no comment on his undignified babbling. Taking the unspoken hint, however, he rose to his feet. "I'll leave you for the night, my lord?"

"Aye, Your Grace." Connington's heart felt as if it was about to rip out of his chest. "Gods, no, he doesn't have greyscale, he won't get it, he spat it out straightaway, thank the gods he spat it out. Nonetheless, the instant Aegon had made his departure, he collapsed back into his chair. Gods, what a fool he'd been, a bloody, bloody fool. He'd been hoping just hours earlier to keep his hand useful enough to join the attack on King's Landing, but now it seemed that he should accompany Aurane Waters' fleet to Casterly Rock instead; he would be spared the need to do much fighting on
the deck of a dromond. *And if so...* it did not matter. He should have done it long ago. He'd stuff the glove, something. Invent an excuse about an accident. Anything.

For a moment, he wavered. He could ask Haldon Halfmaester to do it. Then he put it aside; he would tell no one, no one must know. Before he could talk himself out of it, before he could make any excuses as to how he could have just cost them everything, Connington drew his dagger, and laid his stone hand flat on the table. He took a deep, shuddering breath. Then he positioned the blade underneath the contaminated fingers and cut, hard.

The pain was instant, intense, and blinding. He'd had to go below the progress of the greyscale in order to remove it entirely, and the nerves were not yet dead here. Blood splashed crimson, bone showed white in the flesh. He was heaving quick, sobbing breaths, but gritted his teeth and cut again.

Connington had to close his eyes for the final part. He wished he could stop his ears to the sound of the knife sawing into the bones, but it was useless. He jerked so hard that his cutting hand almost slipped, crying like a babe; he'd seen grown men brought to their knees by the pain of a shattered finger. He could see static, dimly registered that he was on the verge of blacking out, and heard a horrendous squelch and crack as they finally came off. His vitiated hand pulsed blood.

He had to put his head between his knees, retching, until the waves of agony subsided enough for him to struggle upright, swaddle the maimed limb in linen, and clumsily throw the dead fingers into the fire. Then he washed the stumps until the water in the bowl turned crimson, and braced himself for what had to come next. He knelt by the fire, heated his dagger, then took a whimpering breath and clapped the red-hot iron to the open wound.

This time he did pass out; he was not aware of anything except the agony. In the darkness, he could hear the Mad King laughing. Remember how it had always smelled in the Red Keep back in those days: exactly like this, the stink of burning flesh. *Rhaegar, forgive me, forgive me...* The bells clanged madly. *I should have been with you on the Trident, I should have died there, I should have burned the town...* 

But then it all would have smelled like this. Forever.

Groaning, Lord Jon opened his eyes. Tears still trickled down his cheeks, and he could taste vomit in his mouth, but the stumps had sealed a burned black. He would have to tend it vigilantly against infection (what a bloody joke) and someone would notice no matter how cleverly he disguised it in his glove, but at least the pace of the greyscale would slow. He might have bought himself a few more years. And need not fear, for now, what he had so nearly done.

He bandaged his hand properly and dragged himself to bed, but could not sleep, only drift in a fevered doze as it throbbed. Time trickled past. The light turned blue and then grey. Morning was on its way.

Connington sat up, dazed and ill, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. His head reeled when he took a step; his legs were as weak as water. But his prince needed him. It was almost time.

He dressed, hoping that no one would enquire about his conspicuously corpse-like pallor, and stumbled down the stairs of the drum tower to breakfast. He felt less appetite than ever, but no matter. So close. So close.

When he stepped into the hall, he found Aegon, Arianne, and Elia already there. But for once, they were not sharing in the flirtations and coquetries he found so worrying. Instead, Arianne was holding a letter that had clearly arrived in the night, saying something to Aegon in a low voice. Ser
Loras and Aurane Waters were not presently in evidence.

Connington cleared his throat painfully. "My lord."

"You?" Aegon glanced up with a start, then stared. "You look like walking death. What's amiss?"

"I was going to ask the same of you. I – didn't sleep well."

"Clearly." But Aegon was, thankfully, too distracted to further press the issue. "Well... if we were in any doubt that this war is started in truth, I think that question was just settled."

"Was it?" Connington cast an eye at the letter. "What is that?"

Arianne Martell herself looked almost as bad as he did, which made no sense – wasn't anything that was good for Aegon good for her? Then the princess put it down as if it contained a snake (which it very well might, knowing her kin) and looked somewhere past him, at the wall beyond his shoulder. In a dead little voice, she said, "It's about Myrcella."
Sansa

They left the hollow hill in the dark before dawn. The Brotherhood was well used to moving in the shadows, to waking while the rest of the world slept, to making their stealthy way through the forest with no more sound than a hunter stalking a deer, and Sansa had to do her best to match them. She had been given a heavy black cloak both to conceal her and to keep her warmer than the rags of the clothes she'd left the Vale in; she would sooner not ask where the outlaws had come by it. As she wrapped it tightly against the bone-deep winter chill, she couldn't help but think of her half-brother Jon, so far away on the Wall. He had always liked Arya better than her, but back then she'd been a silly little girl who reminded him constantly that he was a bastard. *I have become one now too. You are my only living kin. It would be good to see your face again, so good.*

Living kin, aye. . . and there was the *unliving* kin, which Sansa was still having a hard time wrapping her head around. It was better not to try. Lady Stoneheart walked at the head of the party, and with her hood up and the horror of her face hidden, Sansa could almost make believe that it was her mother, her **true** mother and not this tormented revenant. The Brotherhood had been almost painfully courteous to her, as if to make up for their boorishness beforehand, but she could not help but wonder what was going through their heads. Broken men, men whose own lives must have become half a dream to them, hiding underground and occasionally emerging to hang another Frey high, men whose allegiance was owed to a dead woman, men hunted by every would-be hero there was – if there were any true heroes left in these ruinous latter days. Now they were following Sansa to the forbidding fastness of the Vale, to bring about a reunion decades in the making, a reunion that could only end in blood and steel.

For that matter, Sansa herself was not in the least certain of what she felt. The knowledge of her destiny awaited her, but what was that? Her resolve to return was the only thing guiding her, of knowing there was so much left undone, but not what or how or when she would do it. As for that, . . .

There were times when Sansa found it impossible to think of Littlefinger with anything other than boiling hatred. That he'd conspired with her aunt to kill Lord Jon Arryn for their own selfish reasons, then involved her father and mother and family and the rest of the kingdom. That he was still deluded enough to think that Cat would turn back to him after those long happy years of being a Stark, when it was not even truly her that he loved but only his dream of her. That he'd betrayed Lord Eddard, that he'd sent poor innocent Jeyne Poole into a monster's lair, that he'd saved Sansa herself but only to foist his kisses and his fondles and his leering looks on her. That he had no honor and no decency and barely even any humanity, that all he loved was himself and all he took joy in was manipulating the lesser pieces around him to demonstrate how clever he was. In those moments, if the Brotherhood decided to hang Littlefinger on sight, Sansa would have happily knotted the noose herself.

Yet other times it was not so easy. He *had* saved her life, was going to give her back Winterfell and her birthright. Free her from her farce of a marriage and raise her to the heavens. . . but at what price? Littlefinger's gifts were more costly than dragons. Did he want to marry her off to Harry and have them inherit the Vale as the final move in the long game of *cyvasse* that was his life? Just show that he could? Or to eventually take her for his own, to love her as yet another makeshift replacement of the woman now lost to him for all time?

On this side of the coin, Sansa felt sorry for him. For whatever had happened to Petyr Baelish, a poor common boy from the Fingers, to drive him so unceasingly to match wits with the world, to constantly prove that he deserved to exist even though he was not beautiful or highborn or wealthy.
That a society that prized such things was somehow accepted as the natural order without question, that the eldest boy inherited everything and left nothing for the other children, that women had value only inasmuch as they wed and bred to satisfy male demands, that sickly little Lord Robert was still entitled to rule the Vale instead of hardy Harrold Hardyng merely by virtue of whose seed had made him. What was wrong with playing a game against such a world? The only alternative was to go mad.

Once or twice, Sansa had entertained the thought that she might return and actually marry Harry, wait for Robert to die and then take what was theirs. She did not love Harry or even much desire him, though it had been pleasant enough to dally with him, but he would be a competent husband and it would be a respected, sensible match. As for Robert... he was weak, he would die, and perhaps Sandor had been right, that the folk of the Vale would thank the Seven that Baelish had had the balls to poison him. It was a kinder death than he was likely to have otherwise, and when she and Harry ruled the Vale, they would be in a far better position to protect it from war and winter and woe. All that stopped them was a sad small boy with two feet in the grave already.

And yet then, Sansa would run across the one fact she could not excuse or explain away, the simple truth that had led her to tell Maester Colemon and the Elder Brother, to remember that her name was Sansa and not Alayne, and that she was a wolf of Winterfell, the daughter of a man who had died for honor and not a man who lived because he had none. And that was: if Petyr Baelish deserved to exist, then so did Robert Arryn. It was as simple as that. Both Sansa and Littlefinger had been powerless at one point in their lives: Sansa when she was the abused hostage of a sadistic boy king, Littlefinger when he'd tried to challenge the social conventions of a world in which everyone was larger and stronger and better-born than he was, and been sliced nape to navel by Brandon Stark for his trouble. But how they'd chosen to react to it stood in drastic opposition.

It was not excusable or necessary or vindicated to kill Robert merely because he was powerless. If that so, Ser Meryn or Ser Boros should have slit her throat during one of those countless beatings, and no one should have cared a whit. It had not been excusable or necessary or vindicated for Ser Gregor Clegane – oh gods, Gregor, Gregor and Sandor – to ravage the riverlands and kill the smallfolk horribly because they were powerless. And if Sansa must be called naïve for it, weak and female, then so be it. But she’d seen for herself, lived for herself, the horrors that resulted when one person’s existence was deemed of more inherent worth than another’s. Littlefinger had chosen the other path. She was sorry for him, but she did not need to become him.

And then there was the other reason she couldn't marry Harrold. Not with that memory in her head. Not with the way it had felt to watch Sandor Clegane leave for the last time. I could keep you safe.

But he had gone to die, and Sansa's fate was a dark glass. When she remembered how it was like a fist had reached into her chest and torn out her heart, when she'd lost him to something utterly out of her control, she had almost forgiven Petyr everything. Only Cat.

Almost.

They'd brought a memento of him, though. The distinctive dogs-head helmet, which through some mad fluke of chance had wound up in the Brotherhood's possession. Thoros of Myr had told a story of Lem Lemoncloak taking it from Rorge, the vile criminal who'd stolen it from the place on the Trident where Sandor had lain, but Sansa had not been listening; she was too shocked to see it. She had not met Lem Lemoncloak due to the fact that he was dead, a revelation which had led to an even more fantastic tale of him being killed by the Kingslayer, Jaime Lannister himself. Sansa did not understand half the details, but apparently Ser Jaime had claimed that he'd sent a woman to find her and guard her, a woman named Brienne. This had surely been another of his lies, as she could think of no reason why the Kingslayer would want to protect her, but it might be moot besides. Lady Brienne had had to carry him unconscious and sorely wounded out of the hollow hill; Lem
had given as good as he'd gotten.

This was all a mightily sore spot for Lady Stoneheart, however, and Thoros stopped the story there before Sansa could ask any more questions. She was grieved that her mother had once more been betrayed – Lady Brienne had sworn an oath to serve her, but had been beguiled by the Kingslayer instead. She might still be looking for Sansa now, but the gods only knew to what purpose. She was big and freakish strong, Thoros said, and as good with a sword as any man. Sansa hoped fervently they did not come across her.

The Brotherhood traveled for the morning and took refuge in a cave while the sun was highest overhead. If they were forced to go on foot all the way to the Vale, the next winter might arrive before they did, but Jack-Be-Lucky – which was the one-eyed lout's real name – was confident that they'd soon be able to steal horses. From here, it couldn't be more than sixty miles as the crow flew to the Bloody Gate, a hundred at the most, and if they did find horses and the snow held off, they could potentially arrive in a week. A *week*. As if that was enough time to work out the question of life or death.

"What if the Bloody Gate is closed against us?" Sansa asked Thoros, when they'd set off again that afternoon. "It might well be." Petyr must surely know by now that she'd sicced the Faith on him, and combined with her own disappearance at the hands of Ser Shadrich, it would be understandable if the entire Vale had battened down the hatches to ride out the storm, as it had during the war.

"We'll have to climb through the Mountains of the Moon, I suppose," Thoros answered, breath gusting silver. It wasn't snowing, yet, but the horizon was cold and murky and low, and even his faded pink robes stood out like a stained thumbprint on the grey air.

Ser Gendry snorted. "Aye, and get gutted by the wildlings? That will go well."

"Don't tell me you're frightened of a few goat-fuckers, lad," Jack-Be-Lucky grumbled. "Me, I'd be more worried about that climb. And being caught out by a snowstorm in there wouldn't be nothing to laugh at neither."

"At least there's one of us can't die," Anguy the Archer japed, after first checking to be sure that Lady Stoneheart was out of earshot. "The lot of us can freeze solid and have our ears chopped off for necklaces, and she'll just keep on going. Though I'll be sad if I don't get to see Baelish shit hisself when she turns up on his doorstep."

*Ears chopped off for necklaces.* That suddenly reminded Sansa of Chella, the wiry hard wildling woman who'd been part of her little lord husband's tail in King's Landing. She would have been a Black Ear, then, and Painted Dogs, Burned Men, and Stone Crows had also numbered among the Imp's minions. And while Sansa had never been entirely sure what Tyrion had done to command their loyalty, they certainly had in fact been remarkably loyal to him, in their own uncouth way. *And I am still, as yet, Tyrion's wife.*

The glimmers of a plan occurred to Sansa just then, but she decided against mentioning it. There was always the off chance that they might not need it. If she strolled up to the Bloody Gate and announced herself, she would certainly be granted admittance, but that would entail revealing the presence of the Brotherhood as well, which was liable to be significantly more complicated. And while she might be utterly undecided about what she wanted to do to Littlefinger, it was he himself who had taught her that a hidden knife was worth much more than a dozen ones in plain sight. The Brotherhood was her weapon, and Sansa did not intend to arrive unarmed.

It got steadily colder, and Sansa could not help but think of the Hound. Had he made it back to
where the Brotherhood had captured them, where they'd shot his horse? He might be afoot in the bad weather too, wounded and alone, with wolves stalking in the forest. *Why didn't he come with me? Why didn't I go with him?* Yet she knew the answer. *Because neither of us could do any differently. Because we will never be free of our ghosts unless we face them down.* Only time would tell if it was worth the price they'd paid.

After a while, Gendry dropped back to walk beside her. He was good enough company, if taciturn and usually scowling, and Sansa desperately wanted to ask him about her sister but couldn't think how to start. She was spared, however, when he said abruptly, "You're not much like her. Arya."

A pang went through Sansa. "No, we never were. She's much . . . wilder than me. So much braver."

Gendry considered. "So she was," he agreed at last. "Wild, that is. But if you weren't brave too, I don't think you'd still be alive."

*Am I brave?* Sansa had tried so hard to be, yet so often she only felt scared. "Thank you," was all she said. "How did you – how did know Arya?"

The Bull shrugged self-consciously. "I was on the road with her. Yoren was going to take us both to the Wall. Or me at least, I don't think Arry – Arya would have done so well there. He'd have left her safe at Winterfell if the lions hadn't caught us up."

"But you –"

"After Yoren died, we ended up at Harrenhal together," Gendry continued. "We escaped after she did the weasel soup with that terrifying Lorathi friend of hers, the one she saved from the fire. Us two and the baker's boy. She slit the Bolton man's throat and stole us horses and we escaped." He still sounded more than half in awe. "Hot Pie took up at the Inn of the Kneeling Man, and I took up with the Brotherhood. Only, so soon as I was knighted, *your* terrifying friend turned up and killed Dondarrion again and made off with her. Bloody fucking dog."

"Don't talk about him like that," Sansa said. "Please."

Gendry shot her a look that was equal parts surprised and defensive. "I'll talk about him how I like. When I saw he had took her. . . I may be a bastard and an outlaw and some stupid smith's 'prentice, but I wouldn't ever have let anyone hurt her. I don't know if you believe that, m'lady, but it's the truth. And instead the dog carried her off – to turn her over to them Bloody Mummers we just escaped, for all I know. . . I ran after her, I ran as hard as I could, but it wasn't enough. I still don't know where she is now, if she's alive or dead after she didn't slit Clegane's throat for him like she should have, and that's not something I'm going to forget. Not now and not ever."

Sansa did not answer. Finally she said, "But he never did hurt her. He told me he was going to ransom her back to my – our lady mother. Before."

Gendry gave her a stubborn look. "He *said* that, but he never did."

"If he had. . . Arya might have been at the Red Wedding." *And I might have been as well, if I had been freed from King's Landing earlier. If Robb had come riding in to save me as I prayed every night that he would.* The thought made Sansa nauseous.

Gendry had nothing to say to that; his face became almost as troubled. Conversation died after that, and Sansa had an ache in her chest from how much she wanted to speak to her mother. How much she craved the comfort of her embrace, how cruel it was to have her here but not here. But finally, since it was all that was available to her, she went up to where Lady Stoneheart walked alone
among the frozen trees, silent as ever.

"Mother," Sansa said softly, and reached for the corpse's bandaged hand. "I love you." She was always aware of how ludicrously little those words could soothe the damage already done, but she refused to stop saying them.

As always, Lady Stoneheart neither accepted nor rejected Sansa's touch, merely endured it. Perhaps it was only Sansa's imagination that whatever was left of Catelyn Stark the living woman was a bit closer to the surface when she saw one of her daughters whole and well and present, but it was a delusion she was in no haste to shatter. Just the two of them, while it grew so cold and dark.

Earlier they'd had to get down in haste after spotting a Frey patrol, a sharp reminder that there were still many dangers to face long before they even got to the Vale, and Sansa had seen for herself the way Lady Stoneheart had become utterly a stranger to her, the way hatred had been strung in every withered sinew of her broken body, how it had colored the air almost black. Sansa had tried to imagine then what her mother's last moments had been like, tried and shrank from the horror. The rage, the madness, the sheer screaming betrayal, seeing Robb stagger, seeing his blood, her last son, her last child, the babe they'd laid in her arms. How she must have thrown her head back to scream, how a scream could never be enough, how her soul screamed even now. The tatters of her cheeks and the red tears. Grief and dust and death. Make it stop hurting. Make it stop.

It began to snow that night as they pitched camp, in the heaviest underbrush where they could not be seen. Sansa shivered under her cloak, alone; Lady Stoneheart was the only other female member of the Brotherhood, and she did not feel comfortable sharing blankets with one of the men even for warmth. It had been different with Sandor, the times she'd awoken to find them lying close together after the fire had gone out and the wind came up. She had taken shelter against him, and once or twice his arm had fallen over her and she buried her face in his chest, careful not to wake him for knowing he would pull away. Then, she had not been afraid. Not at all. But it was done. Over. For good.

Sansa slept fitfully, and had strange dreams whenever she did slip under. They were rousted out well before sunrise again, and her belly gnawed dolefully with hunger. It had been three or four days since she'd eaten anything substantial.

Anguy was certain that there was a place nearby where they could find horses, and as the fresh snow was deep enough to slow them down, it was finally agreed that he, Jack, Gendry, and Harwin could go try to obtain them – licitly or otherwise – before the sun came up. A rendezvous point was arranged so the others didn't have to stand and shiver and wait while this operation was carried out, and the four outlaws slipped into the trees.

Sansa watched them go nervously. She had been comforted by the discovery of Harwin among the outlaws, even though she had not known him well at Winterfell; he was the son of the master of horse, and she had never much enjoyed riding. Yet her happiness at seeing him had been doused by the revelation that he too was suffering from fairly serious wounds. The traitor Lady Brienne had dueled him in defense of the Kingslayer, and left him badly cut up. Sansa shivered, and not from the cold.

The eastern sky was beginning to turn hoary pink, the air still and crystalline, by the time they reached the designated meeting place. It was an unbearably tense wait, none of them sure how long they should expect the horse thievery to take or when they could reasonably assume it to have had an unsuccessful or fatal outcome, but at last hooves and boots crunched in the snow and the four men emerged. They had even secured horses, if the motley collection of mules, nags, swaybacked stoats, and other such specimens they presented could be dignified with the name. Still, they did
have four feet.

"Good work, lads," Thoros said. "You weren't seen, I trust?"

"Course not," Anguy retorted, looking miffed at this insult to his professionalism. Then he paused and added, "Least I think not."

"You think not?"

"Well, there was this one." Harwin presented the most reputable-looking of the lot. "Might have been we nicked it off a sleeping knight, and Anguy nearly had his hands full with the squire standing watch."

"I did not. That's a filthy lie." Anguy sniffed. "And I didn't even need to kill him, his eyes turned the size of boiled eggs when Ser Bull grabbed him. Probably he's still squeaking."

"Dolt," Thoros said exasperatedly. "Don't you think he'll wake up his master and tell him?"

"That would be why it's best for us to be away. Soon." Anguy glanced at Harwin. "Who gets the good one, you'd say?"

"Milady, of course," Harwin answered without hesitation, offering the reins to Sansa. "Here." He made a step of his hand for her to mount up.

It felt good to have the freedom of her own horse again; she had tutored herself quickly in the essentials after she'd killed Shadrich. Mounted, the Brotherhood made remarkably better time, as Harwin had a gift for coaxing unexpected speed out of even their shabbiest acquisitions. They rode hard, emerging from the dales of the riverlands and greeted with the awe-inspiring sight of a wall of white mountains. Clouds were torn on their distant, lofty pinnacles, and the trees were thinner, turning to scrubs and frozen underbrush on the beginnings of a glacial moraine. The wind howled like a vengeful spirit.

"We can't stay here," Thoros shouted over it, a fact which had already become apparent to all of them. "We'll have to ride farther before we can stop for the night."

Sansa pulled her hood tighter and successfully ignored the fact that she could not feel her fingers. In fact, they might break off if she snapped them, but she was not inclined to try. She glanced edgily over her shoulder instead; she had not been able to shake the feeling all day that they were being followed.

Twilight was falling thick and fast as the snow by the time they finally found a sheltered copse of trees. Sansa was shivering so hard that her teeth were banging together, and did not protest when Harwin told Thoros that they had to have a fire or freeze. The red priest must have truly had some supernatural skill indeed to get one going in the rising tempest, and Harwin put his own cloak over Sansa's shoulders and urged her to sit the closest. She did, her face burning and her back freezing, as he attempted to unthaw some jerky to the point of edibility. The very night was howling now.

"Winter's here," Harwin said, face intent. "Not just coming anymore."

Sansa nodded. She chewed on the jerky gamely; it was tough and tasteless, but she was so hungry that she would have eaten her own boot-leather. A few of the Brotherhood were walking back and forth, partly to keep warm and partly to keep watch; they were close enough to the outskirts of the Vale by now that it would not be at all surprising for them to run across a vanguard of Arryn outriders. Maybe that was who had been following them. But if so, they would have attacked by now, not just –
At that moment, a flurry of movement caught Sansa's eye. She heard a yelp, a bellow that sounded like Gendry, a brief and intense period of scuffling, and then another yelp. While the Brotherhood were still snatching for their swords, the black-haired Bull came marching through the snow, hauling by the scruff of the neck a scrawny boy whose eyes were, in fact, the size of eggs. Plates, actually.

"Caught him," Gendry announced disgustedly, dropping the interloper in a heap. "I knew it was him. Quite a trick to follow us all day – where's your master now, eh? Where?"

"H-h-h-he." The boy's throat was scarred, his cheeks showing a scatter of pimples, his hair mousy and flyaway. He couldn't have been older than thirteen. "He's not. My master. Ser was. I mean my lady. Before she went. And sent me with ser. Not my lady. Ser Hyle. Hyle Hunt."

Anguy was staring at the boy. "Gods, I knew I knew you from somewhere, this morning. Was it Hunt's horse we took off him, then? Didn't get a good look at him wrapped up in those furs. Bloody good thing if so."

Sansa stared wildly between Gendry, Anguy, Thoros, and the sputtering youth. "What on earth?"

At that moment, the boy spotted her. This did absolutely nothing for his overwrought state, and it took almost a minute before he could finally speak properly – somewhat. "L-l-lady S-S-S-Sansa?"

The penny dropped. "Podrick?" What in the world was her little lord husband's shy squire doing out here in the godsforsaken wilderness, looking utterly the worse for wear himself? "Podrick Payne?"

He went a crimson brilliant enough to be spotted at twenty paces. "I... I was looking for you. With ser. I mean, my lady. I thought if I found you... I'd find him. My lord. Lord Tyrion."

"Aye," said Jack-Be-Lucky cynically. "We know all about you and your lady. She hared off with the Kingslayer to the Quiet Isle, and you're bloody welcome to go find her."

"What?" Sansa was having trouble keeping up with the revelations. "Lady... Lady Brienne? But she... Podrick, what were you doing with her? She broke her oath, she isn't someone to -"

"No!" Podrick insisted. "No, she didn't. She never did. She's looking for you. She wants to keep you safe. For my lady." He shot an utterly terrified look at Lady Stoneheart. "And ser. Ser Jaime. Both."

Someone else promised to keep me safe. I want him, not Lady Brienne. "You mean to say that the Kingslayer was sincere in what... whatever he promised?"

"It seems he was, bizarrely," a new voice said from behind them. "I offered to wed the lady myself, but her wench's heart was already given elsewhere."

The Brotherhood spun around almost in unison, which might have been comical in other circumstances. Another man stepped out of the snow-laden trees, his face almost obscured by a scruffy chestnut beard and a rope scar equally livid on his throat. "I can't say I expected to see you lot again," he rasped to the outlaws, "and didn't much want to, either. But my lady – this to Sansa – such a pleasure."

"Ser Hyle," Thoros said. "What in the name of god...?"

"I want my horse back, you bastards." Ser Hyle, as the newcomer's name appeared to be, stopped...
to cough. "We rode double on Pod's all day trying to catch up to you, it's dying in the snow back there for our trouble. You already tried to hang me, you don't need to add insult to injury."

"We didn't recognize you," Anguy protested.

"Would you still have taken my horse if you had?"

"Likely," said Jack-Be-Lucky. "Does us more good than you."

"That's what you think." Ser Hyle shrugged. Flicking his eyes at Pod, who was being held quakingly at knifepoint by Harwin, he said, "Let the lad go. He's no threat to you. Neither am I, for that matter."

"That so." Harwin didn't lower his blade. "You were one of the men planning to find Lady Sansa and sell her for the biggest profit you could. Don't deny it."

"What should I do instead?" Ser Hyle rubbed a hand through his untidy mane. "Randyll Tarly's gone south to entangle himself in Queen Margaery's trial, the tale is, and I left his service anyway. Now... well, I might still be tempted, but as it happens, I owe the big ugly wench my life. I don't have much choice but to go find her and tell her where I saw the lady she's been seeking so valiantly this entire time. Let her decide what to do about it."

"If we let you get there." Anguy reached for his dagger.

"Try it on me, Archer, and you wish you didn't," Ser Hyle snapped. "You bastards gave me my life back after Ser Jaime did for old Lemoncloak. Me and Pod both. Going to kill me now?"

There was a dangerous pause. Anguy shot an unhappy look at Thoros.

"He is right," Thoros said reluctantly. "We cannot in honor take his life when the Lord of Light gave it back to him and his companions."

"But he's going to tell – !"

"What guarantee that he finds her?"

"Please," Sansa interrupted. "Ser... please don't."

Ser Hyle glanced at her with a strange expression. "My lady, Brienne the Beauty is about as pigheaded stubborn as you can get, not to mention tedious, rigid, cold, and charmless. But for all that, she's brave and loyal and strong, and utterly incapable of deceit. She wants to find you with all her heart, it's the only thing she has left to hope for, poor wench. And she'd die sooner than hand you over to your enemies. You could do worse."


"But we still need your horse," said Anguy. "We need to get to the Vale."

Sansa shot a clandestine look at her mother. Lady Stoneheart's rage at the mention of Brienne and the Kingslayer was palpable, but though her eyes burned like two coals under her hood, she said nothing.

"You have a good half-dozen other horses here," Ser Hyle commented. "I don't. Though they are the worst-looking horses I've ever seen, I'll give you that. Is that one a cow?"

"I said, you can't – "
"No," Sansa said suddenly. "You may have it. If you give your word that this is not some trick or trap, that Brienne's motives are as you say and that alone. If not, then you are forsworn, and the Brotherhood is justified in striking you down here and now."

"I'm a good deal of things, my lady," Ser Hyle said softly. "But not a liar."

"Liar," said Anguy.

"Not now." Hunt shot an angry look at the freckly archer. "Let us spend the night here, with your fire. We can't make it anywhere anyway in this freezing piss. Then we'll go in the morning. Trust me, it's not to our liking either."

This elicited suspicious looks and harrumphs from the Brotherhood, and Ser Hyle and Podrick seemed in absolutely no haste to get any closer to any of them, particularly Lady Stoneheart, but the bargain was finally agreed to. Swords were kept close by everyone, and Sansa wished she had steel of her own, but it transpired that it was not needed after all. She woke unmolested, the entire camp clad in a further half foot of white.

Ser Hyle and Pod claimed back the palfrey, as arranged. They swore to ride directly to Brienne and nowhere else either coming or going, to give her and her alone the word of Sansa's whereabouts. They swore well, all things considered. And then, with a sense of distinct relief all around, they trotted off into the still-falling snow.

Lady Stoneheart hissed something; this time, Sansa could almost understand it. "Liars," her mother said. "Traitors."

"Gods be good, my lady," Thoros answered, looking weary, "the elements will get them before they can find her. But he was right. We couldn't kill them." And with that, he turned to Sansa. "My lady, time has suddenly become twice as pressing. If they are lying, it would be altogether to our advantage to have the Vale between us and them by the time they return, with or without the Lady Brienne. Are we to make for the Bloody Gate?"

Sansa paused. Then she said, "No. We are not. That is not the way in for us."

"But then where?"

"The Mountains of the Moon."

This provoked an instant barrage of complaints, particularly from Jack. "What? Are you mad, woman? We couldn't – "

"I am your lady now," Sansa said coolly, "so do not think to insult me. Aye, the Mountains of the Moon. The wildlings there knew Lord Tyrion well, and served him. We do not have Lord Tyrion with us, as Podrick hoped. But we have someone else."

"Who?"

"Why," Sansa said. "Me. The Halfman's lady."
"He is coming." In the drowned light slanting through the high window, Tyene looked more ethereal than ever, a nymph born out of the rain. "The entire city whispers of it, Your Grace. They say the pretender's strength grows by the hour, that riverlords, westermen, and stormlanders alike rush to cleave their banners to him, and that very soon he will be unstoppable. You are outmanned, outwitted, and out of time, sweet queen, and there are thousands of willing traitors inside the walls. King's Landing will fall within an hour of Aegon coming ashore."

"Let him come." The queen was unimpressed. "How many men did Stannis Baratheon have? How many ships? Was it not said then that we would all be dead by dawn? Forgive me if I do not rush to grovel in fear now."

"Surely Your Grace does remember," Tyene enquired sweetly, "that we would have in fact lost that battle disastrously if not for the Tyrells? And I seem to recall a chain playing a part as well."

Cersei flared. "How dare you mock me to my face, you simple little fool? We won that battle because of wildfire, and it was I who ordered the Pyromancers' Guild to brew more of it. As for the Tyrells, their treachery was more rank than Stannis' – at least he had the courtesy to declare it outright. You told me just the other day that this so-called Aegon could not possibly have taken Storm's End alone, unless Lord Mace secretly left someone there to assist him."

"So I did, my lady," the young septa said, with one of those sly, kittenish smiles. "And now a little bird tells me that the Tyrells have openly pledged their loyalty to the pretender. Our dear brave beloved Ser Loras is not quite so dead after all."

"Nothing those rose-wearing whoresons do surprises me anymore. But tell me, my dear. Not so very long ago you were also assuring me that Aegon would be blamed for the murders of the traitors. How is it that those very westermen and riverlords are now, as you say, flocking to support him?"

"Alas." Tyene gave an innocent shrug. "Who am I to understand the wickedness of men? It may have crossed Your Grace's mind that to kill the Westerlings and Lady Roslin in Baelor's plaza looked somewhat... shall we say... blasphemous?"

"The High Septon himself signed those warrants before Tommen did. If it offends him, he has my leave to prattle on about heresy in the deepest of the seven hells."

"It did most mightily rouse the smallfolk, not just the Faith."

"Kill them all too, then. Anyone who grieves a traitor is a traitor too. If they will not recognize the king's protection, they are welcome to be excluded from it."

"It would be chasing after the wind, Your Grace," Tyene said with a sigh. "And would certainly dispose the rest to open the gates even wider when Aegon makes his –"

"Have we no gold cloaks?"

"We have many. But they are at present under the command of some sundry hedge knight who can barely write his name, let alone keep order among such a fractious force."

"Where is Ser Addam, then? He told us about the false Jeyne, he can bloody well deal with the repercussions. Send a raven to Ashemark, tell him to return immediately and take up his post as
"A raven has been sent to Ashemark. It would seem he is not there. And if you deprive Lord Damon of his son and heir, one of the finest and final battle commanders that His Grace has left – "

"Ser Addam's place is in King's Landing, at Tommen's side. Anywhere else, in these days of war, is high treason. He too has decided to betray us, I'll wager all the gold in Casterly Rock. If he is found, I want him seized and arrested."

"The kingdom will be quite small indeed by the time Your Grace is through," Tyene said, with a breezy laugh. "Is there anyone you do intend to survive?"

Once Jaime told me he'd kill the entire world, if needs be to protect us and our family. That, like everything else Jaime had been too weak for, had fallen to her. "Myself," the queen said. "Tommen and Myrcella. The rest I can take or leave."

At that, she caught the briefest flicker in Tyene's eyes, almost as if the simpering chit was genuinely disturbed at whatever she was beholding, whatever monster she had set loose. But at once, it was gone. "That reminds me," the girl said. "If His Grace is in the city when it falls, the rebels are singularly unlikely to deal gently with him. He's but a boy, and worth a goodly ransom, but with their blood up, they won't care. They'll kill him on sight, a Lannister child's life as revenge for a Targaryen child's, so that this pretender may walk to the Iron Throne over the bodies of babes such as Robert did. Give custody of King Tommen to me, and I will take him safely from King's Landing while there is still time."

"Take him where?" Cersei sipped languidly from the goblet at her elbow. It was a bad vintage, as supplies were becoming scarce in the capital as the pretender closed in from the stormlands, but she cared not. "Stash him away in some motherhouse, I suppose?"

"I will keep him safe," Tyene said, eyes limpidly blue. "Forever."

The queen smiled. All of King's Landing was indeed in an utter moil at the moment; Mace Tyrell had organized no meaningful defense, which was only to be expected, and it was falling to the smallfolk to prepare to fight for their home, with their pitchforks and their clods of dung, against an army rumored to be tens of thousands strong. It will indeed be a red slaughter, and how sweet the sight.

Additionally, with everything male and breathing already claimed to fight elsewhere, Cersei was not guarded as closely as she might otherwise have been. Thus, she had more or less the run of Maegor's Holdfast again, and given enough time, she'd have the knock-kneed young pisspots conscripted for replacements under her spell as well. Hair grows back. It was said the poor were eating each other in Flea Bottom, that the sparrows were rioting, that a mob had broken into Baelor's and raped all the septas, but the queen was not moved. She was a lioness of the Rock, and they were paying the price for what they'd done to her; she hoped the mob had gotten Moelle, Scolera and Unella first, second, third, and hundredth. Best thing ever to happen to them, most like.

"I find myself rather bored presently, sweetling," she said instead. "Your request about my son would be best considered with some air. Shall we take a stroll?"

"Oh, we shall," Tyene said, rising to her feet from where they had been perched on a chaise together. Offering a hand to Cersei, she led her down the long, empty colonnade, through the heavy wooden door beyond, and outside onto the wallwalks, which were draped in fog. Flakes were fluttering in the air, too light as yet to settle.
The queen stopped. "Snow."

"Yes, Your Grace. Winter's come at last."

"Ned Stark must be rattling his bones in delight." Cersei tipped her head back to feel it kiss her face. Clean, she thought, it makes me feel clean. It had been too long since she'd breathed good air, stretched her legs, looked down on what little of King's Landing she could make out through the murk. Smoke mingled with the frost, a dark smudge twisting gently skyward. Somewhere out there, Aegon Targaryen was on the move. Not Aegon, the queen reminded herself, just another of Varys' lies. She had Tyene to thank for that information as well. The plump spymaster had apparently nursed this little deception of his for years, which explained everything about him, and now she knew what he truly wanted: his puppet on the throne. Just like everyone else, for all he pretended so loftily to be above the game. You should have had a cock, but you were much more interesting when you didn't. So I will be victorious over you as well. There were no words for how happy that made her.

At the end of the wallwalk, looking out over the moat, Cersei could see the pale shape of White Sword Tower. A sudden desire seized her. "We should pay a visit on my sweet brother. I hear he's not faring so well these days."

"It would be better if they remembered to feed him," Tyene agreed. "They were unsure whether Your Grace would allow."

Cersei scowled. "Have they gone mad? Of course I want them to feed him. He needs to survive until my trial, not die like a rat in the rushes." She was eagerly anticipating that as well; she intended to see that it happened even if King's Landing was going down in flames while it was. My sweet Ser Robert will be so disappointed if he never gets his chance.

Tyene spoke a few quiet words to the guards on the gate, and Cersei carefully crossed the bridge after her. It was the first time she'd left Maegor's since her house arrest began, and she had to resist the urge to skip, to twirl about and laugh like a girl. She was happy, she realized. Happy for the first time in what felt like years.

White Sword Tower was all but deserted. Since Jaime had murdered Meryn Trant, Boros Blount, and Osmund Kettleblack on the scaffold, there had been no word from Ser Balon Swann in Dorne, Ser Loras was off conspiring in whatever treason his family was up to now, and Ser Robert Strong had no need to eat or sleep, it had been turned into a prison for its Lord Commander. Tyene had the keys, of course, and it occurred to Cersei that when the time came, she might just have to help herself to them, in whatever fashion presented itself. She would have to be witless to escape now, with the city in such a state – Maegor's was keeping her safe until she was born anew in the flames. But after that. . .

At the top, the Lord Commander's apartments had some of the few real guards left, by which was meant a pair of gold cloaks not quite as outrageously useless as the rest. At first it had been Lannister men, until Cersei had learned of that and feared Jaime would attempt to trade on their old loyalty to him. These men had both lost kin to Ser Gregor's raids in the riverlands, however, so they were in no danger of sympathizing with Tywin Lannister's get. Ser Gregor. . . it makes the irony all but perfect.

There was no sound from inside the room, and Cersei gestured to Tyene to open the door. But while the young septa twisted the key, she did not reach for the latch right away. "Take care, Your Grace. He may be maddened, seek to attack us."

"Jaime can't attack anyone now. He lost his hand and his balls a good long time ago." Cersei
She had to blink several times to adjust her eyes to the fetid gloom. No one had changed the rushes, turned the chamber, opened the window, or otherwise appeared to enter in at least a fortnight, and it must be nearly as charmless as his accommodations under Riverrun. A few bones and crumbs of bread sat on an empty plate, which meant that it might not have been so long since he'd been fed after all, and a sweet stink of unwashed man perfumed the air, along with a rancid undertone that might have been pus. Well, he need not worry about that wound of his. Qyburn would be glad to take care of it, soon enough.

"Brother," Cersei called sweetly. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

"Do be careful, I said." Tyene laid a hand on her arm. "You don't know – "

Her twittering was cut off, however, as Jaime emerged from the dimness, suddenly enough to startle both of them. His shaggy golden hair was filthy and unkempt, a scruffy beard failing to conceal the hollowness of his jaw, and his roughspun tunic was showing spots of blood on the chest. His green eyes, however, still burned like emeralds, and the queen had to smile. He was always such a beautiful boy. Stupid, but beautiful.

"Your Grace," Jaime said hoarsely. "To what do I owe the honor of this company?" Every line of his body was strung in wariness, waiting for some trap to spring.

"You may kneel," Cersei told him, holding out her hand as if in anticipation of a kiss. "It's expected when you greet the queen. You needn't fumble at me with those golden fingers of yours, though."

Jaime flinched as if she'd struck him. Then his eyes moved to Tyene, and resolved into an altogether terrifying expression. "I see you have the... septa in your confidence still."

"Tyene has done more for me in a few months than you did your entire life."

"Is that why you've come, sister? To gloat at me?"

"Gloating at you is far too easy these days, you sad pathetic little thing." Cersei glanced around at the cell, one eyebrow arched. "Aren't you the Lion of Lannister? Doesn't it vex you to be kept in this cage? Should you not be fighting your way out, tooth and claw against the stone?"

Jaime was silent.

"No," Cersei finished for him. "You won't. Because you were never strong enough. It's me now. And when I rise, you won't even be – "

"Your Grace," Jaime cut in. "I hate to interrupt your moment of triumph. But I would request, should you allow, a private word with your companion."

Cersei laughed. "You'd request. Go ahead, try to win Tyene away from me. Ask her to set you free."

"I don't intend to ask her to set me free. If I agreed to stand as the Faith's champion at your trial with no demur, would you allow?"

"You will be their champion whether you demur or not." Gods, what a groveling wretch he has become. "Tyene, can you think of anything this creature would need to say to you?"

"No, Your Grace," the girl said, honey-sweet as ever. "But a man as close to the Father's judgment
as he must surely feel the desire to speak with one godsworn. Do not worry. Having seen him now, I know there is nothing more to fear from him."

"If he's intending to confess his crimes, it will take all day. Do give her the abbreviated version, my sweet." Cersei turned on her heel. With that, she stepped outside the cell, realizing as she did that apart from the guards who shut the door behind her, she was alone. I could make a run for it right now. Though where to was problematic.

She stood at the narrow arrow-slit, peering down at the bay below. The height made her pleasantly dizzy; she wondered at that moment what it would be like to fly. To unfurl wings and climb above this dirty, used, disgusting world. If it would be more beautiful seen from up there, if the cracks would go away and all would be made new. Higher and higher, almost to touch the sun. I would burn, but it would be beautiful. And then –

A muffled thump from inside the room caught her attention, and Cersei turned sharply. Oh gods, don't tell me Jaime is making some tedious attempt at freedom after all. Though she would think better of him if he at least tried, rather than continue placidly to marinate in his own filth. He would –

Another thump, and something that sounded distinctly like a scuffle. She heard a low, vicious voice that could only be her brother's, a high squeal from Tyene, and then a final thump and squelch. Followed at once by an utterly foreboding silence.

"You imbeciles!" Cersei screamed at the guards, heart in her throat. "Get in there! Are you blind? Are you deaf? Get in there!"

The gold cloaks exchanged looks – and remained exactly where they were. No loyalty to House Lannister. It had never been meant to backfire on her like this. Instead she shouldered them aside and grasped wildly at the latch again, cursing herself madly. I shouldn't, I never should have –

Cersei jerked the door open and almost fell back through into Jaime's cell. And then laid eyes on it, on what was within, and screamed again.

Tyene was sprawled facedown on the floor, a slow pool of blood staining her halo of golden hair. Jaime was rocked back on his heels next to her, looking equally shell-shocked, a blunt knife of some sort – a supper-knife, the queen thought – clutched in his good hand. At his sister's entrance, he merely looked up and stared at her.

"What have you – " Cersei's voice sounded wild, keening. "What have you done?"

Jaime shoved to his feet. "I just saved Tommen's life. It came too late to save his kingdom."

"You blind – you vile – " Cersei flew at him, intending to claw his eyes out, but he jerked the knife up, still stained with Tyene's blood, and she had to back off a pace or two. "How dare you!"

"What? Save Tommen? Do you know who your precious friend was? Do you?"

"I know!" Cersei pulled out the folded parchment she always kept in her bodice, the one chronicling all Tyene's tales of the Tyrells' murders and abuses. "She was the only one who told me the truth!"

"The truth!" Jaime let out a sound that was half a laugh and half a scream. He snatched the parchment from her and read it briefly, then flung it down. "There isn't a bloody word of truth on here. Lies and more lies, after she manipulated you into killing the Westerlings and was intending to take Tommen with her and kill him too. I haven't been sitting here like a tame lion after all. That
was Tyene Sand, a Sand Snake, the daughter of Prince Oberyn Martell. *The Red Viper who fought for Tyrion! The same Martells who nearly murdered Myrcella and are going to make Aegon king! You mad bloody bitch!"

"Liar. You bloody liar." Cersei couldn't look at the girl on the floor. "And now you – you –"

"For all intents and purposes, I've murdered a young virgin septa in cold blood." Jaime was breathing like a bellows as the twins circled each other, lions at the kill. "That might just make it unlikely that the Faith will accept me as their champion, yes?"

Cersei blanched. She hadn't even considered that, but now she saw Jaime's apparently desperate and suicidal action in an entirely new light. He'd not only killed her one true friend, he'd destroyed her grand plan to have him face off against Ser Robert. *I am truly too weak after all. I should have ordered him beheaded on the spot.*

Instead, she leapt at him.

Jaime hadn't been prepared for it, and she was able to take him hard and squarely. He had managed to finish off Tyene thanks to the element of surprise, but starving, gaunt, and his wound suppurating, he wasn't in any state for an extended confrontation. Cersei slammed a palm into his chest, feeling the scab break, and watched in pleasure as his eyes rolled back into his head. On top of him, her skirts tangled with his legs as they thrashed and jerked, she couldn't help but recall when they'd fought like this but turned their blows to kisses. She wanted to have him. Do what had always been done to her.

Cersei tangled her fingers in his hair and nearly ripped out a fistful. *Good, good.* She pressed her mouth to his, biting at his lips. Gods, it had always been so sweet to kiss him. She could not remember a time in her life when she had not kissed him, from their first innocent explorations to that night when they were fourteen, the night they'd finally turned from innocence to madness. She remembered his hands on her breasts beneath the blankets, him asking nervously what they were doing until she finally told him to shut up and fuck her. How clumsy he'd been getting into her, she far more terrified than she pretended, too tight and too dry, but somehow they worked it out. The pain of her maidenhead as it broke had been the sweetest pain, but she had enough time to be scared that her future husband would be able to tell, that he'd not want her, would put her aside, or worse. Then it seemed ludicrous to be thinking of any other man at all but the one inside her now, still asking if he was hurting her, and how she kissed him to make him quiet. *If the maidservant had heard. . . if any of them had heard. . .* there in the Rock they made it their own, and from then on they were done for.

*Lyanna. Lyanna. Lyanna.* Whispered in her ear on her wedding night. And then every so often Robert had done this to her. Taken her whether she willed it or not. *I screamed for him to stop, and no one ever raised a finger. Jaime told me what Darry said, when they heard Aerys raping Rhaella. He might have heard me screaming as well, but he never stopped Robert either.*

Jaime was struggling violently underneath her. Cersei began to cry as she kissed him again, then grasped hold of his balls and dug her fingernails in hard enough that she hoped they bled. *I am stronger without you,* she meant to tell him, but when had that ever been true? I am lost without my other half. But you left me first, and I will not suffer betrayal.

Jaime's golden hand cracked her across the face. She hit his scab again, making him convulse, and snatched his wrist and pushed it away. She pulled at her skirts with her free hand, straddling him, grinding down hard. Fumbled at the laces of his breeches, got his cock out but could not get him into her. Tore at him with her nails, beating her elbow over and over into his face, until at last he rose up like a whirlwind, with a mad unthinking strength, and slammed her off into the floor.
Cersei landed hard, barely missing Tyene's stiffening corpse, and skidded, sobbing. She lay there curled up, gasping, shaking, almost retching with the force of her grief. Lyanna. Lyanna. Lyanna. And Jaime, stupid bloody thrice-damned Jaime, who she hated so much that she could never stop loving him.

"You... gods, what did I do?" She got to hands and knees and crawled to him, begging. "Jaime, I'm so...." The apology would not form in her throat. "Jaime... my sweet, my sweetling, I hurt you, I know I did, I'm... please, Jaime, my love... my darling boy...."

Jaime had fallen back, spread-eagled and bleeding. His eyes as he looked at her were nothing human. His voice was a savage whisper. "Get away from me."

"Please." Cersei reached for him. "I'll get you out of here. Say you love me, and you can walk out with me even now. I'll forgive you everything. Lancel, Osmund, Taena, Osney, all of them, they served me as they could what little they could, but none of them were you. Oh gods, Jaime, I know you did it to protect Tommen, our sweet boy, our last son...."

Jaime fumbled himself into his breeches and laced up. He backed away from her. "Get out."

"Jaime, no," she wept. "Please. I'm so sorry. For everything. You never knew what it was like, I never wanted it with anyone but you. Marry me. I'll forgive you. We can live or die together, as we were meant to."

Jaime kept backing toward the door.

Seeing him, watching him, knowing that he was leaving her forever, shattered Cersei completely. He killed her. He killed Tyene, he killed Trant and Blount and Kettleblack, he killed them all. I hate him too.

Struggling, blind, she got to her feet, almost slipping in Tyene's blood. No one must know. No one. She crossed the room and opened the door, then dove through it and slammed it in Jaime's face behind her. It felt like cutting out her heart, and she sank down against it, pressing her hands against it, gagging on her sobs.

Someone must have heard her screaming, for when Cersei opened her eyes at last, it was to find a concerned, fatherly face hovering in the advancing dusk. Qyburn. "Your Grace? Are you well?"

"No," Cersei said. "Yes." She began to giggle. "No." She began to cry.

"My lady, come with me." Qyburn tried to help her up. "You should not be out of your chambers."

"Is the pretender come yet?" Cersei asked as he lifted her. He was stronger than his size would suggest. Though gods know what he came to grips with in the black cells. A man as large as a mountain, for instance. She clung to him; her legs were on the verge of giving out.

"Not yet. But the bells begin to sound." Qyburn indicated the window. Sure enough, Cersei could faintly hear their deep, doleful song, calling through the mist. They ring for woe. War and woe. And the death of kings.

"My son," she said numbly. "Tommen. Is he safe?"

"The king sleeps peacefully," Qyburn assured her. "No man, be he Aegon the Conqueror reborn or merely a false Aegon, will breach the walls of Maegor's Holdfast."

Cersei let out a shuddering breath. She glanced warily at the door of Jaime's cell, but it was utterly
silent beyond. Turning to Qyburn, she said in an undertone, "It comes time that we put our other plan in train after all." Tyene was not her only ally.

A slow smile spread across the chainless maester's face. "As it so happens," he said, in the tone of an academic contemplating a particularly vexing problem, "I have long wondered what would have happened if King Aerys had succeeded the first time. Wildfire is such a fickle substance, after all. And with a boy calling himself a Targaryen at our gates, it would be a moment long remembered in the world."

"No," Cersei said. "It would be the end of it."

"Of the city, at least," Qyburn agreed. "Your Grace, I will find some errand to take me to the Pyromancers' Guild this very night."

"Good," Cersei said. "Tell them that I desire all their wildfire. Tell them that I desire it most ardently."

"I shall." Qyburn took her arm, leading her back down the stairs. Her head felt as light as a bauble of glass. "And if I understand Your Grace's intentions. . ."

"Wait for Aegon to breach the city walls," Cersei said. "Wait for them all to come inside, then do what has to be done. The Red Keep will not burn, of course, but the rest . . . cleanse it entirely. Cleanse it once and for all. I need you in this, my lord, as I yet need Ser Robert. You will not fail me."

"I shall not," the defrocked maester agreed. "And this time, there will be no mistakes."

No, the queen thought. Green flames danced in her head, belching a hundred, a thousand feet high. She only hoped the pyromancers had enough time to lay in a decent cache before the pretender came calling. No, there will not.
It was hours until the screaming stopped. Even after the ships had burned to a twisted maelstrom of blackened wood, debris drifting on the ash-choked water, the men were still drowning. Those who might have been able to swim for safety were trapped in the wreckage, and the archers Ser Wylis had posted along the walls had child's play of it in taking out the exceptions. Crimson and gold-clad corpses bobbed in the tide, and torches pinpricked across the beach, as the folk of White Harbor were making their way down to have their choice of the loot. If a man had not been charred past hope of even his own mother knowing him, he was likely to have a few gold pieces sewn into his boots, a knife or a dirk of good steel, a cloak to guard against the cold. White Harbor was a prosperous port city, and the Manderlys' deception of the Iron Throne – the extent of which Brienne was only beginning to realize – had prevented it from being sacked like Maidenpool, but the poor were the poor and winter was winter. In the north, it mattered naught whether a blanket had a lion or a wolf stitched on it.

Yet Brienne could not stop her ears to the screaming. It was worse than the animals Ser Goodwin had made her butcher to toughen her hands and heart. They deserved it, she tried to tell herself, but could not make herself believe it. Had they deserved to die for doing as their liege lords bade them? She could not forget the tale Septon Meribald had told, as she traveled to the Quiet Isle for the first time with Pod and Ser Hyle. It was when her ironclad idealism in the justness of the cause and the rightness of white knights had truly cracked down the middle. There had been no monsters aboard those ships, only men who had wanted to do their duty, kill who they were instructed to, and then sail home to their families. And still the rains weep o'er his hall, and not a soul to hear.

Brienne had found a village wisewoman on her way north, and for the first time in her life, asked for moon tea. Yet she had had to talk herself out of a ludicrous last-minute urge not to take it. She could all too easily envision a future when Jaime died thousands of miles away, when they never laid eyes on each other again. Even one where Jaime turned back to the clutches of his sister and his family and his legacy – it was the only thing he had left now, the only chance he had at surviving. And then if he had gotten her with child, it would be the only thing she had left of him. Yet Brienne of Tarth, Brienne the Beauty, Brienne the Blue, had not become who she was by waiting on the whims or the approval or definition of men. She closed her eyes and drank it.

The burning she’d felt in her belly afterwards was kin to the burning she witnessed now. When it was finally through, Ser Wylis made a noncommittal noise and turned to go, as if he’d watched nothing more remarkable than an exhibition in the training yard. But Ser Davos still looked stunned, and Brienne knew that it must be written tenfold on her own face.

"Come, my lady, my lord," Manderly said. "The hour grows late. Ser Davos, you will set forth as soon as you are recovered from your ordeals. The boy will remain here, in my custody."

"In the Wolf's Den?" Ser Davos asked. "There must surely be many Freys left in White Harbor, and if they were to learn he was here. . . As well. . ." He shot a glance at Brienne.

Belatedly, Brienne realized that by their joint imprisonment, she had become inadvertently privy to damaging details of Stannis Baratheon's strategy and inclinations. Not all of them, but she had already learned that he was still alive, that Lord Wyman Manderly had somehow been rescued and taken into Stannis' camp, and that Ser Wylis intended to send Ser Davos to attack the Dreadfort, in hopes of pulling the Boltons out of Winterfell. Not to mention the minor fact that House Manderly now had the last living male heir of Eddard Stark's bloodline in hand, to which they intended to declare for Stannis. Thereby likely prompting the rest of the north to follow, when the boy's
identity was revealed.

_Vengeance for Renly or life for Jaime?_ She had sworn an oath, three times, to kill Stannis for what he had done to his brother. But even now she had seen men dying like dogs, for the mere crime of what lord they owed fealty to. Renly was not a dog, would not ever be a dog, but he was dead and in the ground. There was nothing she could do to win his love or his smiles or his service, his existence, his breath. And while she had yearned her life long to be a proper knight, it was at that moment, even more so than from Septon Meribald's tale, that Brienne felt the true horror of war in her bones.

"Have no fear, ser." The words felt sticky in her throat. "Do for your king as you must. I will not betray you."

Ser Davos shot her an extremely startled look. He seemed to be on the verge of saying something else, but Ser Wylis turned back. "It is cruel of me to ask yet one more service of you. But I must go down to the hall to treat with the Lannister captains. They have a right to know what was done to them, and why. If you would come with me?"

They would serve as trophies, Brienne realized. Ser Davos was intended to finally reveal how badly the Iron Throne had been played for fools, and as for her, she was the infamous ugly wench who had escorted Ser Jaime to King's Landing, and was later spotted sniffing after Sansa Stark from Duskendale to Crackclaw Point. With Stannis's onion smuggler at hand, there would be a certain underscoring resonance to Ser Wylis' declaration for him. And as for whatever Freys were still squatting in White Harbor . . having seen what fate had just befallen the royal fleet, Brienne did not doubt that they were finding their own unpleasant bride gift this very moment. _After what they did under the banner of hospitality to my lady, no punishment could be more fitting._ She had heard Manderly's men japing of the Rat Cook and of pies, certain pies served at Ramsay Bolton's wedding, and knew that Lord Wyman and Ser Wylis felt the same.

She and Ser Davos trailed several paces behind the fat lord as they descended into the Merman's Court, and Brienne found herself looking to him for strength, only to find him glancing back at her. It was an unlikely alliance to be sure, but there had been unlikelier ones, and she would need any there were to hand. It had not escaped her attention that while Ser Wylis had promised to provision Davos with an army, he had been silent on her fate.

"My lords." Ser Wylis' voice was remarkably calm as he surveyed the collection of stunned Lannister captains. "Shall we parley?"

Silence as loud as a thunderclap reigned over the court. None of them seemed able to speak. Then one of them, a tall copper-haired man in a smoke-grey doublet, stepped convulsively forward. "My lord of Manderly," he said. "You have no idea what you have just done."

"I know quite well." Ser Wylis seated himself on his father's cushioned throne. The fishing nets hanging from the rafters looked almost spectral in the low light, torches burning in sconces in echo of the firestorm dwindling to embers outside. Brienne and Davos stood in the shadows to his right and left. "It is called war. The north remembers, my lord of Marbrand, and the sand runs from the glass for good."

Brienne jerked. If that was who she thought – she now recognized the device beneath the dirt and grime, the burning tree of House Marbrand – then she knew him to be a man far from home, and a friend of Ser Jaime's. Perhaps Jaime's only friend, indeed.

"Aye, the north remembers," Ser Addam said vehemently. "And with good cause. It is not only Stark and Manderly who mourn the atrocities of these mad dogs it has pleased the crown to call
your new lords. Any right-thinking man should feel the same, and if the Iron Throne had but given up its grudges earlier, much and more could have been mended. My lord, it was my intention, before you burned those ships, to take them to war against the Boltons."

At that, Brienne jerked harder, watching Ser Wylis’ face intently. The fat lord revealed nothing; he had been better schooled than her. "When you and your fellows came here, I heard naught of any plans to fight the Boltons. The captains ordered me to surrender, under pain of death."

"The other captains did not know. It was mine own idea, but I had no chance to speak with them before we came ashore in White Harbor – I was but one man, aboard one ship. I meant to broach it to them once we returned from our audience with you."

"Against the Boltons?" one of the captains interrupted, while a second said, "But it would be treason, Addam, treason against the throne, the king made the Boltons the Wardens of the North," and a third added, "You should have said, you should have said!" and a fourth bellowed, "Bloody good you didn’t, we’d all have been hanged for liars on the spot!" Others joined in.

As Brienne's eyes sketched restlessly over them, they came back to one particular man standing at Ser Addam's side, slightly behind and to the left. A fiery beard covered most of his face, which was thin and gaunt and heartsick, and he too was wearing a doublet in the Marbrand colors. She must be mistaken, then, but the blue eyes were hauntingly familiar. And while she'd not known him well, she had certainly seen Lord Edmure Tully more than once while in Lady Catelyn's company at Riverrun.

Don't be mad, Brienne told herself, seeing ghosts in every shadow. Edmure Tully is long leagues away from here, a prisoner at Casterly Rock. Jaime ended the siege of Riverrun himself and sent him there. Yet as the red-bearded man looked up, his gaze caught hers and he started noticeably. What in seven hells Lord Edmure was doing here, in the company of a Lannister delegation – she could think of no person more likely to gleefully strangle the lot of them the instant he got the chance – she could not possibly say, but it was him beyond a doubt. I will not betray my lady's brother. It was horrendously difficult, but she forced her eyes away from Edmure, affecting nonchalance.

"I grieve to hear this," Ser Wylis said calmly. "If indeed it was true, which I sorely doubt. But when the battle was done, the fleet would still owe allegiance to the Lannisters. And there is no power on earth that will bring me to bend my knee to them again. Indeed, my lords, it is time you learned the truth. I will here and now honor my father's pledge, and take Stannis Baratheon for my king."

Ser Davos shifted his weight nervously, but the captains did not notice; they were still too busy reeling. Save for Lord Edmure, who had the trace of a sardonic smile on his face. He realized his danger quick enough and changed it to an appropriately blank expression, but he and Brienne caught each other's eyes again. But while she was still racketing through her head in search of a proper plan to help him, Ser Wylis gestured her and Ser Davos forward. "Here, my lords, you will behold the Kingslayer's errand-woman and Stannis Baratheon's onion knight. Both of whom are currently enjoying my hospitality full as much as you, and serve as proof that this is no hasty decision on my part. Ser, my lady?"

For once, Brienne was not the recipient of a roomful of men's jaw-dropped disbelief. That was reserved for Ser Davos, who looked nearly as uncomfortable. He shot an entreaty look at Ser Wylis, as if wondering how long he was required to be on display. To which the answer seemed to be: as long as it took for the shock to have the proper effect. Fortunately, it wasn't very.

"Lord Davos has performed a great service," Ser Wylis said, when it became apparent that nobody
had anything to offer. "Which is why I take his king for mine. Ser, if you would tell them?"

Davos cleared his throat. "My – my lords. I have returned the Stark heir to the north. From the lands of the wildlings."

"Which heir?" Marbrand cut in. "Which heir, ser?"

"Eddard Stark's last living trueborn son." It was Ser Wylis who answered. "If you doubt his identity, I am pleased to bring his direwolf in for your inspection."

That got a communal flinch from the Lannister men. They surely knew of the wild tales of how Robb Stark had been a warg, of the slaughter at Oxcross and elsewhere, and Brienne, having seen the big black beast for herself, could not blame them. But Ser Addam was not defeated. "My lord of Manderly, it is kind of you to offer some surety besides your own word, as that has just proven entirely unreliable. Yet there is something else you ought to know. By now, Robb Stark may have a son."

That made everyone in the hall snap to attention once more. Even Ser Wylis looked thrown, before recovering with aplomb. "First the one about the Bolts, now this? You certainly have your masters' talent for lying, Marbrand."

Ser Addam glared back at him. "Precisely what would it avail me to lie of that now, my lord of Lamprey?"

"Everything. If you could prove that Robb Stark had an heir besides his brother, an heir of his body, you could hope to stop me from swearing fealty to Stannis on those grounds alone. Can you prove it?"

Ser Addam hesitated. "No," he admitted. "But I can tell you where the Young Wolf's widow is right this moment – and it is not the Crag. She is at Greywater Watch, with Lord Howland Reed, after being smuggled there by Ser Brynden Tully. Nor can I think of any reason for the Westerlings to take such an absurd risk, unless she was with child. And if so, it will soon be her time."

Manderly blinked. "It would be foolish of you to lie about something so easily disproved, I'll grant. All I need do is send a raven to Lord Reed."

"Aye, you would," Ser Addam retorted. "And if you ask any of these men, they will tell you that Lord Gawen and his family are dead, were killed the very day the fleet left King's Landing. An utterly foolish, short-sighted decision by the queen, and chief among the reasons that I no longer wish to carry out her commands."

Ser Davos appeared to be getting more and more anxious as this conversation unfolded, as well he might. Ser Addam had pulled a solid trump on them, and the Manderlys' declaration for Stannis was not quite sealed yet. It suddenly supplied to Brienne a most plausible reason for Edmure Tully's unwilling presence here, but while she felt an instinctive protectiveness toward Lady Catelyn's potential grandchild, she was grateful that it did not further fray her tattered allegiances. She had sworn to Catelyn, after all, not Robb or even House Stark. Her life now was for Sansa and Jaime.

"Very well," Ser Wylis said at last, a small smile playing on his lips. "I'll give you the same challenge my lord father set to Ser Davos. Bring Queen Jeyne and her child, if in fact she should have one, back to me, and..."

"And what? You will take Tommen back as your king?"
"No, I will not execute the rather important hostages I happen to have in my possession." Ser Wylis swept a plump hand at the captains. "They are some of the last commanders the Iron Throne has left, and if the blizzard of ravens over the previous fortnight has told me anything, it is that King's Landing shall soon have to fight for its life, very likely against an attack by sea. Your little Tommen might have need of these men then."

Ser Addam had gone bloodless to the lips. "Well struck, my lord of Manderly. For my task, I will request that my kinsman accompany me." He gestured to Edmure Tully. "Ser Cristofer?"

"My lord." Edmure's voice was utterly flat, unrevealing. His gaze flickered up to Ser Wylis, then back down. "I would be honored to help my... cousin in the search for Lady Jeyne."

Calling her lady instead of queen had been wise on his part, Brienne thought, even if his pause before "cousin" fairly screamed out the deception to her. But no one else appeared to have noticed, and while Ser Wylis' eyes narrowed as if trying to work out where he knew Edmure from, he let it pass unchallenged. He nodded. "Very well, Ser Cristofer. You will have leave to travel with your... cousin to Greywater."

This one is dangerous. As if burning the Lannister fleet was not enough to prove it. It did relieve Brienne of the obligation to think of a way to spring her lady's brother from their clutches – even if it was debatable how safe Edmure would be either during this quest or after it, that was no longer her concern. Ser Wylis must have already dealt with the Freys if he dared to reveal Ser Davos, even to a small group of men who were very likely to be escorted off to the dungeons post-haste. It was a question which also occurred to the onion knight, for he blurted out, "My lord of Manderly, the Freys still in White Harbor – "

"Will trouble us no longer," Ser Wylis answered composedly. "They were told they were invited to supper, which indeed they were. It lacked something of the elegance of my father's pies, but my lord of Stark's direwolf did not appear to mind."

Brienne flinched a bit herself at that. Again, she could not argue either with the brutal efficacy or poetic irony of Ser Wylis' punishment, but it made her wonder if feeding the beast's appetite for human flesh was altogether wise – especially when his master was a boy of not quite six, just returned from a long and savage sojourn. If he is truly to be Lord of Winterfell, he will need to know a life much different from that. Though depending on how Ser Addam and Edmure's mission ended up. . .

Ser Wylis clapped his hands. "Guards. Please show my guests to their chambers."

At once, armed men emerged from behind the heavy tapestries, crossed the floor, and began to tie the captains' hands. As they were being removed, still too numb from the accumulated shocks to struggle very vociferously, Ser Wylis beckoned to Brienne. Hesitant, she came closer.

"My lady, it grieves me to do this," he said simply. "I bear you no ill will, but I cannot trust you. If you found Sansa Stark, you would – what? Take her to King's Landing and try to use her life to save Ser Jaime's? I cannot allow that. Therefore, you will be residing in the Wolf's Den until such time, if such time, that I decide to release you. Men, take her."

Brienne clawed at her side, at the place her sword should be, but both of them, Oathkeeper and her own, had been left behind in the cell. And so she began to fight with her bare hands as a squadron of Ser Wylis' biggest and burliest henchmen – he had not at all underestimated her – closed in on her from all sides. She ducked, threw a punch, kicked a man's legs out from under him, and as he fell, wrested his longsword out of its scabbard. Steel shivered through the air, the henchmen dropped back a pace, and hands fell to their own blades. "You don't want to fight us, woman."
"No, I don't." Brienne made no move at them. "But I cannot consent to imprisonment and defeat. I am no enemy of yours, my lord of Manderly."

"Are you not?" said Ser Wylis. "Yet you seem an unusually stalwart friend of the Lannisters."

"Not the Lannisters. Ser Jaime."

"I fail to see the difference."

"He is not who he –" They will try to take me now, while I am distracted. She could see Ser Davos signaling that one was attempting to sneak around behind her. The unexpectedness of it both touched her and made her wary, as she was so thoroughly used to mistrusting any apparent altruism from men. But she had sworn that he could leave without fear that she would attempt to sabotage him or –

The force of the blow almost split Brienne's skull in half. Choking, seeing stars, she crashed to hands and knees, the blade falling from her fingers. When she made to rise, another blow sent her spinning. Through the forest of fists she could see Ser Davos grasping Ser Wylis' arm, trying to ask him to stop – she thought. It may just as well have been to urge him on, to be sure that there were no mistakes in preserving Stannis' campaign. I told him – I promised –

Vows, so many vows. To Renly, to Catelyn, to Jaime, to Lady Stoneheart, to Ser Wylis, to Ser Davos, to everyone. She could hear Jaime's voice sardonically disdaining the lot of them. The taste of blood in her mouth and she was losing sense of the world. And then, she was falling.

When she opened her eyes the gods only knew how much later, it at first was impossible to tell; the darkness pressed up against them as solidly as it had in her unconsciousness. Bruised and aching, ears ringing, she just lay there, trying to ascertain whether her lungs were still present in her body. I must be back in the Wolf's Den. I have to get out of here. But how? Break the door? Gnaw it with her teeth? It was far too much to ask that they had put her in the cell with her sword.

They hadn't. The door was solidly barred, and the only narrow window gazed down steeply on the harbor below. Away toward the east a line of livid crimson heralded sunrise. The burned ships were still smoldering, a field of wreckage across the sea.

Brienne spent at least a quarter hour ferreting around, trying to uncover any weakness or any potential weapon, but finally had to conclude that there was nothing. She had been shut up as solidly as a rat in a trap. She sat back on her knees, her hair falling into her face, big hands hanging uselessly, shoulders hunched. Now she'd just –

Her head snapped up. She was not entirely sure, but she thought she had heard a bolt creaking in the door. Not that it was anything or anyone to welcome, there would be gaolers beyond a doubt, likely torturers as well – Manderly had nothing to lose –

It wasn't. The bolt croaked and complained as volubly as an old man getting out of bed in the morning, until Brienne was sure the noise would attract someone. Then she heard a muffled curse, and the heavy oak door of her prison cracked open. Davos Seaworth's voice hissed, "My lady?"

Brienne scrambled to her feet and almost fell; the blow she'd taken to her head was still making her dizzy. "Ser?"

"Come. Now. Hurry!"

Brienne took him at his word. She ducked low and slithered out, and tumbled in an undignified heap at the onion knight's feet. He was wearing a new hauberk and a tabard in the black and gold
of House Baratheon; it gave her an instinctive, painful swoop of memory to see it. He held a sword in one hand, a sack in the other.

"My lord?" she said stupidly.

"Hurry," Davos repeated. He opened the sack and pulled out a helmet with a visor, a tabard emblazoned with the merman of Manderly, and handed them to her. "I couldn't get your sword. I'm sorry. This one will have to do."

"It's all right," Brienne said by reflex, even though it wasn't. *I will return one day and take Oathkeeper back. So the world may know that that vow at least was kept.* But when she had pulled the tabard over her head and buckled the swordbelt around her waist, taken the helmet and the sack – to judge from the weight, there was food in there – she turned to him directly. "Why?"

He seemed as uncomfortable as he had when Ser Wylis unveiled him in the Merman's Court. Finally he said, "You are brave, my lady. And loyal, and good. There are too few sorts like that in this world, man or woman. And I know what it must have cost you to turn away from your vengeance. For Renly. When it is my own king whose life you otherwise would have taken."

Brienne did not know what to say to that. Fortunately she was spared the need; there was a noise at the end of the hallway, warning of someone coming, and Ser Davos took her by the wrist, leading her back down to a narrow gate. "Your helmet, my lady," he whispered. "Cover your face, and you will ride out of White Harbor among my force. When we are clear, drop back and get away. Do what you must."

She nodded, throat tight, and pulled her visor down as she followed him down the steps and out into the bailey. There were countless other Manderly soldiers present, but none of them possessed the skill to see through solid steel, and no one challenged her identity. Someone gave her a horse, and a brief speech was made by Ser Wylis, who had appeared on the porch to oversee the leavetaking. He told them that they were not to return until the Dreadfort had been pulled down stone by stone, exhorted them to obey Lord Davos as they would himself, and reminded them of the unforgivable crimes of House Bolton against gods, men, and Starks alike. The Boltons were not to be negotiated with, pled with, coaxed with, cajoled with, or reasoned with. They were to be flatly and completely destroyed.

The cheer this ultimatum received was thunderous, and Brienne was tempted to join in, but could not risk someone noticing her voice. They were not an army in the fashion of the Lannisters, golden and impressive and thousands in number, but a horde of hardened northmen prepared to ride fast, cold, and rough. Their strength would come in their ability to withstand the mounting winter, to reach the Dreadfort before the Boltons knew they had left, and to live on less than a minimum of creature comforts. Brienne wondered how many would come back.

They left within the hour, while the sun was struggling to surmount the cliffs, and crossed the stone bridge spanning the White Knife, which was still running here but rumored to be frozen fast just a few dozen leagues further north. And Brienne knew then that she had to make a decision, and make it fast. Where was Sansa more likely to have gone: further into this magnificently forbidding, bleak, bitter, empty realm of ice and snow, or south? The girl was no fool. She would know that she could not survive up here alone. *South it is.*

Brienne could not break away too early, or any place they could easily see her and track her down, but she could not wait too long, either. Finally, when they were entering the rough, hilly country that the White Knife cut through, she was able to slip behind, turn around, and disappear like a fey creature of the fells. She galloped the horse with scarcely a letup for an hour after, terrified of pursuit, but for once the gods were good. She was free.
Her route would have to be down the coast. It would be quicker to take a ferry across the Bite, but that would entail returning to White Harbor, and Brienne was not quite so mad as to wager her luck twice in such a short span of time. The kingsroad was the most direct route, but Lady Sansa would not be on the kingsroad. Or anywhere else, potentially, but Brienne put that thought out of her head.

She did not get out of the saddle for the next day and night. There was enough food to tide her by, and a waterskin, but sleep and rest seemed as immaterial as they likely did to Ser Davos and his men, riding into the teeth of war, winter, and Boltons. *I would still be rotting in the Wolf's Den if not for him.* Mayhaps there were still good knights, true knights, as she had always believed before. Even if their sigil was an onion and their king was Stannis.

Brienne plowed steadily southwards, just outracing the snow that came creeping at her heels. She was passing through the fringes of the Neck now, and it made her think as well of Ser Addam and Lord Edmure. She hoped Marbrand had been telling the truth: that he meant to turn against the queen. She wondered why he had not revealed Edmure's identity to the rest of the Lannisters, and if it proved his sincerity. Then she remembered Jaime's belief that he could not die as long as Cersei lived, and her feelings turned back to confusion. She tried not to think. It was easier that way.

It was verging on a fortnight since her escape from White Harbor when she finally knew herself to be below the Bite, the highlands of the Vale beginning to shoulder up the horizon on her left. The mountains were white from flank to summit. She slept cold every night, when she dared to sleep at all.

At last, the snow began to fall that day. Lightly at first, then thicker and faster. Soon Brienne was holding her hood under her chin, trying to keep ice from crusting in her eyelashes, as it stung and bit her face. The world vanished in grey gloom, and it was soon impossible to judge which direction she was making. But there was no shelter to be found in the high prairie. *Keep going. Keep going.*

The storm kept going as well. The wind was howling, swirling, shoving, and Brienne bent almost double as freezing knives drove through her battered clothes. Ice whirled up into her throat, choking her breath. The horse was spooking and slipping, tossing its head and trying to bolt; she hauled on the reins with all her strength. At last she had to dismount and walk.

Her feet were the first to turn numb. Then her hands, and her legs, and her arms. She could feel the cold seeping through her like poison, even as she struggled to take a breath that did not lacerate her lungs. She couldn't keep on, she couldn't. But she did. Long after it felt as if she had two rocks in place of boots, walking until suddenly the world was abruptly gone beneath her, and she fell.

Brienne screamed as she went down, the horse stumbling after her, crashing through a madness of gorse and boulders and broken ground. For one heart-stopping instant she feared that it was a lake, and if they went under the ice, they were both dead. But the punch of it was reassuringly if agonizingly solid, and she could not arrest her momentum, rolling faster and faster. *Make it stop. Make it stop.*

It did stop, at last. She lay in a crumpled heap and could not summon the desire or ability to get up. She had heard that freezing to death was almost peaceful, and she lay there, going in and out of consciousness, until she began to hear Jaime's voice again. *Get up, gods damn you. Get up, you stupid ugly brave strong wench. Bloody get up, you're almost there!* "Almost where?" she muttered, wiping blood and snow out of her eyes. But she trusted him, so she gathered one leg under her, then the other. And stood.
That's it. Come on. There's no way a snowstorm is more stubborn than you. I've never known anyone more stubborn than you.

"No," Brienne told the air, taking a step and then another. "You're not here." Snow crunched under her nerveless feet. "I wish you would shut up."

No you don't, Jaime said, sounding too smug as usual.

"Shut up." Brienne began to walk faster, lurching and staggering like a drunken sailor. A thousand voices seemed to scream in the wind. Gods knew where the horse was. Broke its neck, more than likely, and it was only sheer luck that she hadn't done the same. Step after step after step –

There, in the near distance – she'd thought it was a tree, but it was moving – it wasn't something, it was someone, and her heart stopped –

"Jaime?" she pleaded, knowing how mad, how mad and hopeless it was.

It's not me, he said sadly. You're imagining me.

"I know," she breathed, heartbroken. But still it was coming, galloping, a person, a figure, blundering toward her in the snow. And if she could just get a little closer, she would meet them, she would be there, where Jaime had said. Almost there. Oh, wench.

Brienne broke into a clumsy run. Not caring who it was – and then, when they were just a few yards apart, not believing it either. Her brain shut down, her legs stopped churning, her breath gusted silver, and her mouth shaped around a name like a prayer.

"Podrick," she said weakly, and fell into his arms.
In the shattered, starving silence after the echoes of the blast had faded, all he could hear was the absence of his own heartbeat.

His hand dropped to his side. The horn, a great crack scoring it even as he watched, fell into the snow, smoking. The grasping weirwood branches overhead made it look as if the face of the moon had been shattered like a dropped plate. It was only then that he realized he was on his knees, that his smallclothes were soaked with blood – his wounds must have broken open with the force of putting that thing to his lips. Longclaw lay a few feet away, half-buried in the drifts.

"Bran?" Jon croaked. The ground trembled beneath him, like the thunder of a far-off avalanche, and when he tried to stand, he fell again. "Bran!"

No answer. But the trees continued to quiver, the roots beginning to slither and untangle, and it suddenly occurred to Jon that there was one other person he could try to reach, had to try to reach. The one to whom he'd given the Horn of Dawn, all unknowing. Which Sam had then taken south to Oldtown – and which had been subsequently been stolen by the mysterious face-changing thief. Need to tell him. Need him to know. It was far too much to hope that Sam would somehow put the pieces together, not only identify the thief and find out where he'd taken the horn, but bring it back north as well. If it was not for Jon, it would still be on the Fist of the First Men where the ranger had hidden it with the cache of dragonglass, waiting to be sounded after the Horn of Winter had spoken its piece. But no.

Jon was already out of time. The rumbles and roars were growing louder, and the weirwoods swayed and moaned. But he had been able to see the Citadel, after Bran had told him to go into the trees before. If enough mad luck remained to him, he might just be able to reach Sam in that way now.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Jon jumped.

It hadn't been easy the first time, and that had been under Bran's direction and protection. Almost as if he had only been able to do it because his brother – no, not his brother, yes his brother, he could not think about that right now – had opened the way for him. It was only the greenseers who were able to enter the weirwoods and learn the secrets they knew, and Jon was no greenseer, merely riding the coattails of one. The sheer brutal pain of this was all the proof he needed, and he clawed blindly through the tangled darkness of the roots. Everything was screaming, howling and tearing at him, as he tried to shrug on the bark skin he had worn long enough to catch a glimpse of the thief stealing the Horn of Dawn from that locked room in the Citadel. There must be a weirwood there. . . He would know it when he touched it. If he could enter it. . . if it made any difference. . .

"SAM!" he roared into the ravening dark. "SAM!"

For long moments more, there was nothing but the keening wind and the clashing void. Then he opened a tree's eyes and stared, impossibly, at his friend, standing pale and stunned only a few yards away – but in a vine-clad courtyard on a cool pleasant night in Oldtown. Thousands and thousands of leagues from here.

"Sam," Jon groaned. "There are two horns. The Horn of Winter and the Horn of Dawn. The Night's Watch oath told us that all along." He could feel himself being torn out of the tree's consciousness, and knew he would not be able to enter it again once he lost it. "One horn to bring the Wall down. One horn to bring the dawn. I have one. I need the other. The horn! The one I gave to you!"
Still Sam remained rooted in place, staring. "Jon," he said weakly. "Jon, I can't understand you."

Jon wrestled against the wood with all his might. "Horn!" he screamed. "Horn!"

"Horn?" Sam repeated. "What horn? The horn you gave me? I don't have it anymore, I left it behind when I became a novice – why? What is it? Why?"

"Find it. Ice and fire. There are always two!" He was being torn apart. "Stolen!"

That was it. A roaring blackness came surging up and knocked Jon broadside, clean out of the Citadel and back the trackless distance to where he lay now, in the grove beyond the Wall. The sky was turning an unearthly color. Red sky in morning, sailor's warning.

At his feet, Longclaw was hissing and burning, a thin tongue of flame licking up the Valyrian steel. And as Jon moved to pick it up with his black cold hands, he thought he saw bronze eyes and green scales reflected in it. He remembered after Ghost's death, when his spirit, uncaged in any body, had briefly woken in the flesh of a –

Above him, ravens were taking flight. Bran, they screamed. Bran. But even as Jon opened his mouth to ask for his brother again, he turned to the south – and saw.

The ancient spells burst from the Wall, burning. The ice collapsed and rendered and screamed, thundering down and exploding. The weirwoods shook and the ground bucked, and the monstrous spectacle was almost beautiful. Redness seared from the sky like flaming meteors, and Jon Snow knew that it was now or never. I am with you, said a voice that was Bran's but not Bran's. It was much older and colder and wiser than Bran's had ever been, the echoes of a thousand other voices resounding behind it. It is time. Wake up, Jon. Wake up or die.

Promise me, Ned, cried the woman with blue roses in her hair.

And then suddenly, Jon could see or hear nothing but that screaming emptiness. He had a sensation as if he was rising, and a burning pain. Longclaw remained clutched tightly in his unhands, light still flickering dimly along the blade. And then wind blasted his face, and shards of broken ice, and he staggered and gagged, and he opened his eyes and saw.

He stood exactly where he had been before, but now in the real world, not his mind. The Wall was still coming down, booming and breaking. But Jon saw now what had not existed in his dream: the thousands upon thousands of wights and Others that Bran had told him of. Remembered that if he had not sounded the Horn of Winter, he himself could not have crossed back, that he was not necessarily alive even now. The dead cannot pass the Wall.

Ashes sifted down, pocking the snow with sizzling embers. Ravens soared, silhouetted against the scarlet glare, and Others burned like matchsticks as the force of the Wall's destruction enveloped them. Yet for some reason, though he was as much ice as they were, Jon did not fear the flame. Promise me, Ned! the woman screamed.

Fire cannot kill a dragon. Jon could not process the weight of it, the depth of the deception, his every thought and belief of his own identity crumpled and scorched away with the rest. And then from the snows, shaped from stone and bone and soil, they rose. And Joramun blew the Horn of Winter, and woke giants from the earth.

Master them! Bran shouted. You are the Hornblower now. They are yours. Master them!

Jon raised Longclaw with both hands. It was still rippling reflections of the firestorm that had destroyed the Wall, but at that moment, a fork of lightning flashed incandescently down from the
heavens and scored a direct hit; if Jon had been alive, it would have killed him all over again. It cracked and seared down the sword, burning off the leather and exploding the ruby eyes in the carved direwolf pommel. And the giants, beating their chests with their boulder-sized fists, roared in echo of the thunder.

Jon picked the broken Horn of Winter from the ground and slung it on his belt. Then he stepped to the front of the throng of giants, and began to run.

Wights blundered past him, burning. Silken shimmers in the air and pools of liquid blue crystal on the ground showed where Others had done likewise – but not all of them. Jon could see a whole pack directly ahead. He had just enough time to actually be glad that he was not alive, and then they hit.

The pale milkglass blades of the Others clanged and slid and screeched and hissed off the burning steel of Longclaw. Jon ducked and shoved and slashed and spun, unearthly cold hands grasping for him, blue eye burning to all sides, as his blows sluiced white-hot sparks in the air. He was not immortal, nothing was. But he had almost reached what had been, not long ago, the gate under the Wall. Castle Black lay just on the other side. If there was still a Castle Black.

Jon intended to find out. With the giants still dismembering Others at his back, he took a running start and hurtled up the vast, tumbled blocks of ice. He had to take care of his footing on the abyssal cracks, his black fingers scraping up shards. Still a fire seemed to linger in their lucent depths, and it was then that he understood how he had battled his way through the Others and not fallen, why his touch was as inimical to them as his blade. *Dragonglass. My hands are made of dragonglass.*

He climbed as hard as he could. Had to sling Longclaw across his back so he could grasp better. At least he could see well; the sky was so bright that it looked like dawn. But it wasn't, and might not be ever again. *Find the stolen Horn, Sam. Find it.*

Jon pushed off and leapt the final few feet to the ground. Castle Black was in utter chaos. Whether from Melisandre's spells and shadows, Bran's ravens and trees and whispers, some combination of both, or something else entirely, it had managed to mostly survive the Wall's collapse, but this was by no means a universal fate. Half of the towers were ablaze, wights were everywhere, and slabs of broken ice kept thundering down, crushing living and dead alike beneath. Screaming like Jon had never heard it, women's screaming, sounded from the King's Tower.

**Val.** Jon whirled. And Queen Selyse and her daughter and ladies too. Not that he had any personal liking for Stannis' prickly, haughty wife, but no man or woman deserved the fate which now faced them all. He drew Longclaw again, and charged.

Everyone was too preoccupied with saving their own skin to pay Jon the slightest bit of heed. Even the blaze of his sword attracted no second looks; everything else was burning too. Grunting and hacking, he cut his way through the swarming press of wights at the door and pelted up the stairs beyond, following the screaming. He thought he heard a baby wailing as well. It must be Gilly's son; he'd sent Mance's away. *Where are you, Rayder? You owe me Arya's life. You owe it to me.*

Jon crashed through one last door and into the room beyond, a chamber he at once recognized as Val's. The fire was out, blood soaked the rushes, and wights closed in from all sides, blank eyes staring. There was already a body on the floor, short and stout, and then two women on their knees. One was Val beyond a doubt. And the other looked briefly, horrifyingly familiar – *Arya?*

No matter. Jon swung Longclaw in a searing arc. Undead flesh hit the floor with ripe thumps, and an awful smell of ichor choked the room.
Val jumped to her feet, wild-eyed. She was wearing a black cloak, breeches, and boots, and was as
disheveled as if she too had been fighting atop the Wall – knowing what he knew of wildling
women, Jon did not doubt it. She thinks me some new devilry. "What," Val shouted. "Who are –
what's going – "

Then she caught sight of his face beneath the hood, his glass hands and flaming sword. And
screamed loudly enough that if it was necessary to wake the dead, she certainly would have done
so.

Jon just got Longclaw out of the way in time as Val, completely undone as he had never seen the
icily cool, composed wildling princess – then again, it was likely that she had never seen anything
like this either – flung herself into his arms. Sobbing, she kissed him on the mouth once and then
again, and clung to him with a strangler's grasp for several extremely jumbled moments, before she
was joined by the girl who looked so hauntingly like Arya. "My lord," the girl shrieked
hysterically, "my lord, it's me, it's Jeyne, Jeyne Poole, we were at Winterfell together, I was Sansa's
friend, don't hurt me, you saved us, you saved us, please don't hurt me, don't hurt me!" Her voice
was almost animalistic in its terror.

"I won't hurt you," Jon said rather stupidly, interrupted halfway through as Val kissed him again.
But there was still screaming from upstairs, and he couldn't attend to it with both of them attached
to him like barnacles. He detached them as gently as he was capable of, and made a break for it.

It was definitely Selyse screaming. Jon accelerated. Not that Stannis was coming back for her, not
if half of what the Bastard of Bolton had claimed in his letter was true, but she was still his guest,
under his roof. He vaulted up the last few steps, passed a pair of queen's men with their heads
turned all the way around to stare at the ceiling even though they were lying on their stomachs,
and flew through the broken door.

Selyse was on her knees, hair tumbling out from beneath its stern coif, screaming and struggling
and trying to pull that lackwit fool with the tattooed face off the small figure he was hunched over.
A wight was burning in the middle of the room, and a disembodied arm was slithering across the
floor toward the queen, but neither was responsible for the wet slurping, crunching sound that Jon
heard. He slashed the arm with Longclaw to be sure; the noise did not stop, though the limb did.
Then he realized that the small figure was Princess Shireen, and that the fool was eating her face.

Revulsion almost stopped Jon cold. That creature is dangerous, he remembered Melisandre
saying. Many a time I have glimpsed him in my flames. Sometimes there are skulls about him, and
his lips are red with blood. The poor mad thing must have cracked entirely when the dead broke
down the door, but Jon could not feel pity for more than an instant. He wrestled Selyse out of the
way and swung, and Patchface's patchface went rolling away across the floor, scraps of grey flesh
clutched in its teeth.

Shireen was still alive, but barely. Her diseased cheek and part of her throat had been ripped away,
and her blood spattered the rushes. The child is unclean! Anyone who came into this room now
was at risk of contracting greyscale, and Selyse, clamoring frantically over her daughter, might
well have already been infected. I should burn them both. What little remained of the Watch had
not survived the Wall falling and the end of all things just to succumb to the grey plague instead.

But while Jon was still hesitating, Selyse crawled toward him and clutched his legs with her bloody
hands, gasping. "Ser... brave ser... you have my gratitude, my eternal gratitude... you'll be a
lord, I swear it, a lord."

"Let go of me," Jon did not think that he himself could catch the disease, but everyone around him
could. "Now, Your Grace. Now."
Selyse recognized his voice. She looked up. Stared. Blanched. And collapsed backwards in a dead faint. For which, all things considered, Jon could not entirely blame her, but he stepped over her and knelt next to Shireen. Selyse had already touched him, after all; it was too late to avoid exposure entirely. The girl was slipping away in pain and fear, but when she looked up and saw his face, she smiled. "Lord Snow," she whispered shyly. "It's you. You saved me."

"Yes, my lady." There was nothing he could do for her, Jon saw that at one glance. Wordlessly, he took her little hand in his black one.

Shireen shivered. "That's cold." Her skin was as white as chalk, her eyelashes fluttering. "Why are your hands so cold, Lord Snow?"

"My name is Snow, after all," he teased gently. Except it's not.

"Will I?" The trust in those blue eyes almost broke his heart. "I... I miss Dragonstone. It's always warm there. And we played. Me and Edric. In the garden." Her breath was coming shorter and shorter. "And sometimes with Devan too. It was light there. And good. And Patches didn't hurt me. Not now. He didn't mean to. Under the sea... I'll have a gown of silver weed... and the rain falls up... ."

"Yes," Jon said, barely keeping his voice calm. "It does."

Shireen smiled at him. "I'm glad you were here, Lord Snow. I'm glad."

"So am I, my lady." It felt as if Marsh's knife had plunged into his gut again, and torn.

Shireen smiled once more. Then she removed her hand from his grasp, folded them on her chest as if saying her prayers before bed, and closed her eyes. And so, neatly and quietly as if she was in fact merely going to sleep, she died.

Jon remained crouched beside her for several moments, motionless with grief. Yet Selyse was starting to stir, and she did not need to see this, not now. He got to his feet, lifted the queen, and carried her down the steps beyond. Fool. You should be burning her. But he was not Melisandre.

The eerie quiet rang in his ears. He left Selyse in an unobtrusive corner, glanced around for any wights he'd missed, but that seemed to be all for the moment. He knew better than to pray that it was over. He knew that it had only begun.

As if he was still in his dream, Jon emerged from the King's Tower into the courtyard. The sky remained lit up in reds and golds and oranges, swirling like a dancer's skirt. That was the only light. The only sound was the crackling of the flames.

Melisandre herself was kneeling a few feet away from him, by a fallen body. She was not eating its face, however, but closing its eyes – an unholy blue light was just fading from them, and to judge from the smoking shadow blade beside her, she'd had to kill him herself. Again, that is. So many corpses, and all of them will rise. Jon knew this one. It was Devan Seaworth, Melisandre's young squire, who had been so devoted to her. He hoped the boy was running in the garden with Shireen even now.

At the sound of Jon's approach, Melisandre looked up. When she saw him, she remained on her knees and bowed her head. "My lord," she said, her rich voice only a whisper. "My king."

"Your king is gone." Jon came to a halt, resting the smoking point of Longclaw in the frozen mud. "And you killed Ghost."
"For you, do you not see?" Melisandre was spellbound, entranced. "Only death can pay for life, and you would have remained trapped in the wolf's body forever if I had not. I see now. I see perfectly why R'hllor brought me to the Wall. I see why my flames and foretellings were wrong. All along, I was certain, certain, that Stannis Baratheon was Azor Ahai reborn. . . but no, Lord Snow. It is you."

"I care not what you call me," Jon said. "The Wall falling destroyed the hordes of Others before our gates, but more beyond count will come. And I myself destroyed the very thing that kept them back. Tell me, my lady, if you know so much of this, what do we need?" He would not tell her what he already knew about the Horn of Dawn. Time to find out once and for all if she was anything more than a fortunate charlatan.

"Lightbringer," Melisandre said. Her eyes flicked to Longclaw, which was still glowing faintly, but the steel was beginning to turn back to steel. "That one served for a time, but Azor Ahai must wield Azor Ahai's weapon."

"And where is it? With Stannis?"

"No," Melisandre said, red eyes still fixed on his. She raised one graceful hand to her throat and touched the ruby that winked there, and it went dark as suddenly as if she'd quenched its flame. "Stannis has fought for the Lord's cause admirably enough, but now I am at an end with him. I only serve you from this moment on. My king."

Jon turned away. "I am no king."

"But you are." He felt Melisandre's warmth at his back, his own coldness. "Rhaegar Targaryen's son."

"No. Eddard Stark was my father, no matter whose seed made me." He turned back, suddenly furious. "Did you see that all along?"

"No, Your Grace. I erred in that." "You erred in everything."

"Because my conviction was faulty, as I said. The fires did not lie. I asked them to show me Azor Ahai, and all they showed was. . . snow." She smiled. "It was only tonight that I saw the dragon wake."

I saw a dragon too, Jon Snow thought, remembering the reflection in his sword. But he was a Stark, a Stark. Winterfell was his home, Robb and Bran and Rickon his brothers, Arya and Sansa his sisters. And Lord Eddard. . . why did you not tell me? Why did you not tell even Lady Catelyn, so she might have known that you never dishonored her? Jon was still too numb to appreciate all the details, but he did know that if Robert Baratheon had had even an inkling that a child of Rhaegar's was still alive – a child with Lyanna Stark, Robert's own adored fiancée – he would not have hesitated the briefest moment in putting him to death. I see no babes, the new-made king was supposed to have said, when Lord Tywin Lannister presented him with the corpses of Princess Rhaenys and Prince Aegon. Only dragonspawn. Dragonspawn. It went through Jon like a knife. "Where is Lightbringer?" he repeated. "Where?"

Melisandre's eyes remained on his. "I do not know."

"Stannis never had it. Did he." Jon remembered something someone had said once, perhaps Maester Aemon, of how Lightbringer truly burned, and Stannis' sword only shone. "And you lied
"I did not," Melisandre said. "Your sword there had some of the power when it was needed, after all. I thought to do the same for Stannis when I burned the Seven."

"You failed." Jon glanced around at the ruin of Wall and Watch. The Horn of Winter was still on his belt, but the Horn of Dawn was the gods only knew where, wherever the thief in the Citadel had taken it. We need Lightbringer, and we need the Horn of Dawn. And fire. True fire. He remembered how during the first Battle for the Wall, against Mance and the wildlings, he'd ludicrously wished for a dragon or three. Knowing what he knew now, though. . .

No. It was still impossible. And they had neither the sword nor the horn they needed to win this battle, and dawn was not breaking.

Jon turned grudgingly back to Melisandre. He was about to ask her something else when the door of the armory cracked open. And Bowen Marsh, who had been valiantly hiding out the battle within, took one step out.

"Greetings, my lord," Jon said. "The Others are burned for now, but the war has only just begun. I hope you'll be of more use then."

Marsh stared. And stared. His eyes almost burst out of his head, while his face went a color livid enough to put even a pomegranate to shame. Then it all hit and thus proved to be entirely too much. Choking, he toppled into the snow, quite literally stone-dead of shock.

Another brother down. Jon glanced around. Too many corpses, he thought again, and while most were wildlings, far too many were wearing black. He thought he saw Satin; his squire was clearly dead as well, neck broken.

Another spasm of grief grasped Jon's heart. No. No use grieving now. The rest of them, and the Seven Kingdoms as well, will die as well if we cannot fight, if we cannot find Lightbringer and the other Horn in time. Still no light, no dawn. And Jon Snow, or Jon Stark, or Jon Targaryen, or any of the names which he was no longer sure belonged to him, knew suddenly that there would not be. In the ruin, the Wall in pieces and Castle Black burning, a grey menace infiltrating the King's Tower, wights waiting to rise, and the full fury of the Others not yet even unleashed, Jon wondered if he would ever see the sun again, or live, or breathe.

Melisandre read the look on his face. "Yes, my king," she said softly. "It is here. It is now. The Long Night has begun."
I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair, Tysha sang, and took him by the hand. Outside the hovel the night was dark and cold; inside it was dim since they'd let the fire go out again, but warm enough for anyone. Her dark hair was tangled across the pillows, her eyes were wide and trusting as they gazed into his, and he felt worthy for the first time in his life, not the ugly little boy who was tormented by his sister, barely tolerated by his father, and here and odd thrown some scrap of affection or kindness by his tall strong heroic elder brother. Here he was as big a man as any of them, not the glorified drudge of Casterly Rock's drains and cisterns. He'd gladly stay here the rest of his life. How he'd come back he had no notion, but that made no matter. He was here, and so was she. That was all he needed.

Yet it was already darker than it had been, and now darker again. He couldn't feel her anymore, and in a sudden panic he reached out. “Tysha – ?”

I loved a maid as cold as winter, with snowflakes in her hair. The singing echoed back at him, echoed and echoed, and then behind it he heard the screaming. Saw instead that dark hair spilled across the floor of the great hall of Casterly Rock, heard her sobbing and pleading and one of the guardsmen laughing. Saw the bloodstains beneath her, her thin girl's legs convulsing and jerking, and heard another voice telling her that she'd get more than a fucking if she fought. The silver coins slipping through her unresisting fingers as another man forced into her above and below. The way her breathing had turned to an awful shivery whimper at the end; she'd been screaming before, but now she was hurt too badly to cry. How she just lay there, crumpled, as Lord Tywin Lannister calmly ordered the men who'd been raping her moments before to get her up and take her out of his sight. Wherever whores go. And while Tyrion wished that he'd been half as brave as he'd been before, that he'd killed his father instead of obeying him, crawling on all fours to Tysha and forced to take her one last time. Paid for with a golden coin. Because I was a Lannister, and worth more.

The thought choked a mad laugh out of him. I got it back. Fourteen years too late, but I got it back. You should thank me, my lord. You couldn't move your bowels until I put that crossbow bolt through them. You already knew I could drain well. Rot in hell, you bastard. And Lord Tywin had. Someone along the way, Tyrion misremembered who, had mentioned the fact that the former King's Hand had decomposed disgustingly on his bier even before the sevennight vigil had ended. All that bile will do that to a man.

The darkness was gone, and so were Tysha and his father. Harsh sunlight was beating on his face. Groaning, Tyrion opened his eyes.

He was not in that hovel, or in Casterly Rock, or in his lord father's privy. He was lying in some alley in Meereen, rather appropriately bedecked in mud and shit. The last thing he remembered was falling. After Victarion Greyjoy had driven that sword up to the hilt into Ser Barristan, and the old knight's blood had poured out to stain the stones, it had all gone fuzzy. Tyrion did recall Moqorro drawing some sort of sigil in the blood, daubing it on Victarion and that twisted black horn, then holding his hands aloft with a pale flame blossoming between them. Here and now, the red priest proclaimed, the iron captain was made master of the horn for perpetuity, and of all the dragons bound by it.

The only dragon to whom that currently applied had thrown back his head and roared, gusting another gout of flame into the smoke-scarred sky. Tyrion was a breath from losing his grip at this point, hands cut up and seared with blood blisters, and with Selmy's body exsanguinating in the dust, any slim chance of protection he had was gone. And so, the dwarf had to chance his absurdity
to save him one last time. He let go of Viserion and plunged into the darkness.

That had, apparently, wound him up in his current location. The ziggurat of the Great Pyramid was visible directly above him, which meant he was literally still in the line of fire. But he could think of nowhere else to go. Galazza Galare and Kasporio were certainly dead in the ruins of the Temple of the Graces, and Brown Ben, the Second Sons, and Penny were who on bloody earth knew where. There couldn't be many folk left alive and unmolested in this city, after the Greyjoys had had their way with it.

Well, then. Tyrion pushed himself to his feet. He would do unspeakable things to any man of Victarion's choice if the bastard would just give him a cup of wine, and since he had spent much of his time recently switching sides at blinding speed in order to save his miserable skin, it couldn't hurt to try again. Legs screaming with pain, he began to trot.

The configurations of the Great Pyramid were unfamiliar to Tyrion, but the advantage was simple: all he had to do was go up. The disadvantage: he had to go up. The stairs were steep and endless, switching back and forth through what once had been shaded gardens, airy halls, and sprawling colonnades, where Meereen's elite had sipped nectar and been fanned by their slaves. Now it was all a wasteland, palm trees splintered and columns tottering; one good breath of wind could knock it over, a spoiled giant flinging aside his playthings. Tyrion wondered how much of the devastation was attributable to the Greyjoys, and how much to the dragon.

He found his answer, somewhat, at the top. Through a broken screen of filigree he could see the place where Victarion and Moqorro had stood: it now contained only Viserion, flapping his wings and restlessly snorting smoke, talons clicking on the mosaics. Tyrion wondered suddenly how secure Victarion's control over him was. He could see no chains, at least, so the captain seemed not to fear that the dragon would fly off.

As he surveyed the scene, Tyrion could also see a charred corpse that had undeniably once been Barristan Selmy. To judge from its patchwork state, it had been left as an appetizer, something which Tyrion was suddenly uncertain that Victarion had approved. The whoreson might be every sort of murderer there was, a reaver and raper of the bloodiest order, but he was also said to be a religious man, who would give due respect to your body after he'd put an axe through your brains. This was not comforting to Tyrion – nor anyone else who'd ever had the misfortune to encounter the Iron Fleet, he imagined – but it did lead him to reason that Selmy must have been left there on Moqorro's bidding, mayhaps to be sure that the blood seal bonded fast. It also gave Tyrion a sense as to what he might truly be dealing with in the person of the red priest. Surviving that shipwreck should serve as another warning. *I always thought fire was drowned in water, but this is no ordinary fire.*

For an unnerving moment, Tyrion found himself seriously tempted to turn around and go back to Viserion's cage, go back and throw the dice. *I already rode him once and lived to tell the tale. I soared above a city in flames and if they hadn't blown that bloody horn, who knows what I might have managed? A slow smile spread across Tyrion's face. I've dreamed of dragons so long. Now it's here. Right here. I could win the beast and fly away. And then how could they stop me but with –*

"Imp!"

He spun around. Not fast enough. Halfway there his face connected with a mailed fist and he went spinning promptly in the other direction, tumbling arse over heels and given just enough time to think that he really bloody should have expected it; the world delighted in pissing on his every aspiration and feeling and cherished dream. And there was no one in Meereen who would call him
that except for someone who knew what he was worth.

The blow rang in his rattled head. He cracked open one swollen eye and glared up at his assailant with as much gravitas as an ugly little man could muster. "That would be Lord Imp to you."

"Not any more, I don't think." Some cocklicker in a kraken tabard stood above him, grinning. "The dragon will roast you nice if you ask, but you're more valuable elsewhere. Come now."

"I'd rather not, if it's the same to you." Tyrion thought just after he'd said it that this may be another of the situations in which it would best behoove him to keep his mouth shut. But I'm a Lannister, I never learned how. And his tongue was the only weapon he had. Oddly, he almost wished it was Euron here after all. The Crow's Eye was known for his collection of freaks and mongrels; he might just see Tyrion as a prize specimen. Likely he'd cut off something I'd miss later, but what of it? Victarion, on the other hand . . . if he'd taken up with the red god as it appeared, it only meant that Tyrion had a choice of whether he preferred to be burned or drowned. And Euron at least could have been bought – likely not with the gold promised to the Second Sons, as he'd have been fully confident in his ability to sack Casterly Rock if needs be, but something. Victarion was a great dark monolith of a man, salt and iron and stone, immovable. He believes, and he obeys, and that is it. And if it was the Crow's Eye whose tune he was dancing to, however unwillingly . . .

Tyrion, however, had no more time for reflection. The ironman scooped him up and carted him off, through a labyrinth of winding stairs and glowering statues into a long vaulted hall. It might have been luxurious at one point, but it was difficult to tell. The Greyjoys had already commenced stripping out the gilt, the jewels, the inlay, the ivory, and anything else worth half a groat, and Tyrion's disquiet was not assuaged by the great bonfire burning at the far end. Moqorro stood in front of it, gazing into the flames. Just beyond, Victarion was seated on a stone bench, watching the red priest like a hawk.

"M'lord," Tyrion's captor announced, after a brief, frightened glance at Moqorro proved that the man was too deep in his trance to pay any attention. "You'll never guess who I found looming about the dragon."

With that he spilled Tyrion unceremoniously to the floor, an action Tyrion had been more or less expecting, and he managed to turn the fall into a sort of stupid bow at the last instant. He very much doubted that Victarion had the barest interest in trotting back to King's Landing and asking Cersei to pay a ransom for him, and it was the first time that he'd ever been remotely grateful for the fact that the bloody ironborn felt entitled to steal whatever they could lay hands on. "My lord of Greyjoy," he said, as smoothly as possible. "Your man does me wrong. I was not looming. I'm too small to loom effectively. If he was to accuse me of skulking, or lurking, or larking, that might be more accurate, but in any event – "

Victarion raised a mailed fist. "Hold your tongue."

Give it a try, you bloody little fool. "I had no intention whatsoever as regards the dragon, in case you were wondering." A lie, but there was no other choice.

"Every man has an intention for the dragons." Victarion's deep-set eyes were stony. "In all the world there are but three, and I am now master of one. The second and third have not come to me, even though the red priest promised." He shot an angry look at Moqorro.

Apparently the bugger was not too deep in his ecstasies to take notice of that. Without turning, he answered. "The green one had flown before you sounded the horn, master. The black one is with the queen, but sorely wounded. I have seen it. Fear not, they will belong to you. One way or the other."
Victarion snorted. But Tyrion took note of the glance he shot the red priest, awed and angry at once, and decided that there could be profitable ground to excavate there. The ironborn worshiped the Drowned God, after all, and once they got over their terror of the man, they should recognize that they should either douse the flames, or turn away from this foreign heretic altogether. How that would help him, Tyrion was presently unclear, but information was always a virtue. He found himself rather pitying Daenerys Targaryen. No sooner does the Harpy turn to dust than the kraken rises from the sea.

"My lord," Tyrion said instead. "I may appear to be of rather... little... use to you, but I do ask you to look deeper. I turned the Second Sons back to Meereen's side, I made my way back into the city, I killed the Harpy, and I have ridden the dragon." It was all true, enough. "I'll even wield a battle-ax if you put one in my hand, but that would be a waste of my other gifts. I warn you, you'll find no better acceptance from the Meereenese than Daenerys did, and if you think to rule here, you'll have to make —"

"You are a fool, dwarf." The threat of Victarion Greyjoy's smile was almost as terrible as Tywin Lannister's. "I have no intention of ruling. Do you take me for my weak reed of a nephew, bowing and scraping? I am ironborn. I take what is mine – the queen, the dragons, I will have them all. As the horn belongs to me, so must they."

"And see," said Tyrion. "That's where your otherwise very admirable philosophy of life hits a snag. I am not quite sure what you think a Targaryen is like, my lord, but it might be something for you to look into. Daenerys will never belong to you, and neither will her children, no matter how many horns you have and how many gallant old knights you slay. You're a Greyjoy. Your home is the sea. Have you ever heard of a dragon who was fond of swimming?"

Victarion was unmoved. "With her as my rock wife, I will be master of sky and sea, wind and water both."

"So, then." Tyrion smiled faintly. "You do want to rule."

"Careful, dwarf."

"I am the soul of caution." Tyrion took a few steps backwards, even so. "And it's not something to be ashamed of. Everyone else in the world dreams of it at some point in their lives. Usually all their lives. Truly, I'm trying to open your eyes to what you're getting yourself into. But from what I've always heard of you, you were your brother Balon's most loyal servant. Moving to the deserts of Dorne, far away from the sea, would be easier for you than not obeying. So how comes it that you're here with the Iron Fleet in this far corner of the world, while another brother sits the Seastone Chair? Is it Euron you toady for now?"

That, at last, was enough to get a rise out of the bugger. In two steps Victarion had closed the distance between them and hoisted Tyrion up by the scruff of the neck. "I am no man's toady, and certainly never the Crow's Eye's! He gave me the horn and sent me here to bring back the fairest woman in the world as his bride, but that is a mistake he will sorely rue. Euron's gifts may be poisoned, aye, but this one will poison him. When I return to scour him and his godless abominations from the face of the oceans."

Excellent plan, Tyrion thought. The Crow's Eye was a nasty piece of work, and he knew something himself about having a sibling who would look best covered in flames and screaming as they burned. Still, that bit about Euron's gifts being poisoned, and the sinister unholy reputation of the man... even with all that so, Victarion had decided to go ahead and use the horn on an actual dragon? Plainly he was fully confident in either his own ability or Moqorro's to undo whatever curse lay upon it, but that was just no good at all. Euron Crow's Eye had been as far as Asshai, had
studied arts darker than even those of Oberyn Martell. *Something is very wrong here.* But if Victarion did not leave go of his throat in the next few moments, it would prove moot after a –

"M'lord!" With, in Tyrion's estimation, absolutely impeccable timing, an ironman came pelting through the great carved doors. Ignoring his fellows at their looting, he made straight for the captain. "The lookouts on the walls have spotted an army moving out of the sandstone mountains, from the Khyzai Pass. All mounted. Ten thousand strong at least. They think it's a Dothraki khalasar."

Victarion dropped Tyrion in a heap and glared at his man. "Savages with bells in their hair. Do not quake at me of such things like a greenlander."

"A Dothraki horde of any size is nothing to sneeze at," Tyrion croaked from the floor. "And Meereen has no defenses, my lord of Greyjoy. Not after you burned them all. Ten thousand screamers will go through this city like a crossbow bolt through my – "

"You are an utter fool, dwarf," Victarion growled. "The dragon is under my command. All I need do is unleash him."

"Far be it from me to gainsay someone of your vast terrorizing experience, but that is an even worse idea. Aye, the dragon might burn a goodly lot of them, but he's no Balerion the Black Dread. He will die. They'll kill him. Believe me."

"And how do you know so much of dragons, dwarf?"

"Far more than you," Tyrion snapped. "I read of them all the time as a boy. I saw their skulls in the Red Keep. And as I mentioned, I rode that very dragon out there and lived to tell the tale." He held out his scarred, burned hands. "See."

Victarion stared him down, but Tyrion stared right back. "Besides," he added. "I may be a fool, but it's only an idiot who meets the Dothraki in open battle. Not even to mention the last and very good reason why you shouldn't. Queen Daenerys was taken captive by Khal Jhaqo, once a *ko* of her late husband. It is not at all out of the realm of possibility that *this* is Jhaqo's khalasar, and she is with them right now. And if that is so, they will have the big black dragon with them. They'll also be in search of the other two."

Victarion's scowl deepened. "Have me crouch behind high walls like a coward, is that what you advise?"

"The Dothraki have no talent for sieges, and even they might be hard put to get at you inside the walls of the Great Pyramid. What it lacks in glamor it makes up for in survival. Otherwise your only chance would be to see if your ships can float on the – "

"No," Victarion interrupted. "You speak on and on of how you will be useful to me, and how much you know of dragons. It is more than time that you prove it. Ride him out and give to me a report of what you see – which man leads this army, how vast their numbers, whether or not the queen is among them. You are small, the savages should not see you on its back. If you do this, I may think you less a liar."

*Oh, bugger. Did a bloody Greyjoy just outwit me?* The sinking feeling in Tyrion's stomach rather pointed to that being the case. Technically, Viserion *was* under the horn's control, and thus should have no choice but to accept him as a rider if that was what Victarion willed, but that was not even to mention the thousand other things that could go wrong. If Victarion *did* want to kill him out of hand, there were certainly easier ways to do it without risking the priceless dragon. . . but as it
stood, there was no way out of the trap.

"Very well, my lord," Tyrion said, in the best imitation of his father's cold haughty tone he could manage at short notice. "I would be glad to do you this service."

As if his wishes entered into it at any point, he thought bitterly as he was marched out onto the pavilion by a – if it was a posse of turkeys, a drove of bullocks, an implausibility of gnus, and a shiver of sharks, than what did one call a large group of squids? A tangle? A torrent? A disaster? One or all of them seemed quite apt, as the ironmen opened the gate into Viserion's prison, then shoved Tyrion through and slammed it unceremoniously behind him.

Tyrion threw the lot of them a black look over his shoulder. *I might be a nose less than half a man, but I still have more dignity than you.* Though it might be hard to fault them for fearing the dragon, he did not intend to let that stop him. With his moment of hollow self-righteousness duly accounted for, to make himself feel better about his imminent flaming demise, he edged very, very gingerly toward Viserion.

The cream-and-gold beast lifted his head and snorted, wisps of smoke purling from his slitted nostrils. But there was a certain glazed quality to the eye that stared evilly at Tyrion, enough to make the dwarf think that he was in fact still under the horn's spell. *And what else did they kill poor Selmy for?* With Ser Barristan, Hizdahr zo Loraq, and the Green Grace all dead, there was in fact no one in Meereen capable of challenging either Victarion or the Dothraki. The stakes just kept getting higher and higher.

Every muscle tense, ready to throw himself flat if the dragon so much as twitched, Tyrion continued to move closer. He could feel the heat radiating off the shining scales, and winced; even if he didn't get parboiled to a crisp, he'd still have a new crop of burns to add to his collection. *Why can't the damned thing just have a saddle?* Yet he suspected that that was the point. No man should touch or master or use the power of this beast without sacrifice.

Tyrion was now close enough to the dragon to touch it. Viserion yawned lazily, peeling a lip back over one long gleaming incisor, and Tyrion froze, but when he was satisfactorily reassured that this was not the prelude to torching him alive, he reached out one stubby hand and laid it on the dragon's golden ruff.

As before, a thrill speared through him, taking away some of the fear. Waking the ugly little boy who had dreamed of dragons and magic and flying away from the misery and abuse of his childhood. *You should see me now, Tysha.* Though she'd spit in his face, not without cause.

Tyrion grasped hold and swung astride. Viserion snorted and tossed his head, but the enthralment, mercifully, held. Tyrion would have liked to straddle him, would have liked to have been Jaime with Jaime's long strong straight legs, but as it was, he had to make do with how he'd managed before: lying flat, wrapping both arms tightly around the sinewy neck, so he was attached like a barnacle. He took a deep breath and whispered, "Fly."

For a moment, Viserion remained motionless. Then the energy in the coiled spring of a body released all at once, and the dragon barreled across the pavilion. Just as the courtyard wall loomed up before them and Tyrion was terrified that they were about to run straight into it and tip over for a very long fall down to the street, Viserion somehow converted it into three quick, flailing strokes that took them effortlessly airborne. The Great Pyramid dwindled at once beneath them, and the charred ruins of Meereen as well. *I am flying.* He would never be used to it. It was wonderful. He found enough breath for a gasping giggle.

Earlier the sunlight had been blinding, but a dense low fog was starting to roll in off the
Skahazadhan. This was, so far as Tyrion was concerned, all to the good. If he was a clear shot above the *khalasar*, the Dothraki would waste no time trying either to take him out with arrows or throw up nets and chains. Now, with Viserion being white and the fog turning thick, he might just be able to get by unnoticed.

Tyrion held on tightly as Viserion banked and wheeled over the harbor, the sunken hulks of the Volantene fleet breasting the dark water. The Greyjoy ships rode at anchor nearby, and the broken pieces of the Yunkish camp looked like toys. As the hot humid breeze whispered at his face, Tyrion was seriously tempted to see if he could turn the beast and fly away, fly across Slaver's Bay and back to Westeros. *I swore that this is the only way I would come home. I could. Perhaps, I could.* But it was much too likely that Victarion would command him to be dunked in the Smoking Sea off Valyria, assuming he even got that far, and he could not help but think, however little he wanted to, of Penny. Wherever she was down there, if she was still alive and under Brown Ben's dubious protection. *I loved a maid as soft as springtime, with petals in her hair.*

Grimacing, Tyrion steered Viserion toward the distant, murky line of the sandstone mountains. He sent them high enough that the ground dwindled to a distant speck below; sometimes he lost sight of it altogether. But he *could* see the riders filing out of the pass, even if only as tiny small shadows. And he could hear them.

Viserion seemed to know what was expected of him, and silently turned and soared on the updrafts like a great scaly hawk. Tyrion could make out scraps of conversation, which sounded oddly close in the fog, but as all of it was in Dothraki, he could glean no pertinent intelligence. He brought them down as far as he dared, so they must have been only a few dozen yards overhead, so close that he almost thought he could reach out and yank a horse's tail. He must still be burning, but barely noticed.

Here, Tyrion finally deduced that the *khal* leading this horde was named Mago, not Jhaqo. He listened closely for any word resembling "Daenerys," and did think it cropped up on several occasions, but if the black dragon was here, he certainly would have known by now. It was possible that Jhaqo had met some sticky end and Mago had claimed his riders for his own, which was how the Dothraki generally operated if Tyrion recalled correctly, but the queen herself did not appear to be here either. *Mago is no fool. He knows where to find two other dragons without tangling with their mother.* Well, not quite. Rhaegal was still missing, which was not the worst thing in the world. Victarion Greyjoy with one dragon at his beck and call was bad enough.

His mission complete, Tyrion tugged on Viserion's ruff and sent them climbing skyward again. The fog was starting to thin, rather conveniently now that it occurred to him, and the memory of Moqorro with the flames in his hands stood out sharply. That one was no charlatan, and just as dangerous as the iron captain. If not more so.

Tyrion risked a glance back and below. The Dothraki, having reached the open flat ground before the city, were picking up speed. Apparently Mago had decided that there was no point in even asking if the Meereenese were interested in buying them off with plunder; there was no plunder, or much of anything, left. *Seven hells, by the time everyone gets through ravaging this place, it will be less than a smear of shit on the map.* He should fly back and hole up in the Great Pyramid – no matter Victarion's low opinions of siegecraft, Tyrion intended to remain there until the Dothraki had good and spent their fury on the krakens. If the gods were good, which they weren't, Victarion would be killed and his mastery of Viserion broken. *And I rode him before the horn was sounded.*

Just as what was going to have to be Tyrion's only plan was taking further form in his head, he heard an echoing ululation from the *khalasar* below. They were spreading out, starting to gallop, arrows hissing as their archers drew and loosed. Distant yelling from the Greyjoy men on the walls
met it.

Go back to the Pyramid. Go back.

Instead Tyrion tightened his death grip on Viserion, and dove.

The sacked towers of the city punched up around him, monoliths of slagged stone and broken bricks, corpses visible sprawled in the mire as he veered madly through the streets. Everything was a calamity. The Dothraki were coming, life or death looked equally unappetizing, and either way he was doomed for the latter – but not yet. "PENNY!" Tyrion roared, smashing through what had once been a thriving bazaar. "PENNY!"

They flapped down on the other side, dodging and weaving. There were too many bodies to take notice of them all. His eyes raked among them, searching for one small and dark-haired, which meant he only had half of them to consider. Mostly children. Tysha was screaming again in his head.

Tyrion tried to retrace the path back toward the hostel, but there were so many fallen buildings as to make it impossible. The city wall was caved in and reeling like a drunkard, shattered by the Greyjoy rams just as he'd predicted. What was he doing – she must be dead already, and even if she wasn't –

A voice, so faint he thought he'd imagined it. Until he heard it again. "Tyrion!"

Tyrion's heart stopped. He jerked Viserion to a halt in midair, spun them around completely, and winged back in the direction of that sound. It must have just been a ghost, it was, he was out of his mind, but he was too far gone to turn back. Soaring down, the dragon's shadow casting across the ground, he dove and dove and dove until they were hurtling and spinning along the narrow lane, a hairsbreadth from crashing. And then he reached down, clamped hold of his daughter's hand, and jerked her madly up onto the dragon's back with a strength he had never known was in him.

Penny was filth-faced, bleeding, and clearly in shock, but otherwise in one piece. That was all that Tyrion had time to appreciate as they whirled back into the air like a dervish; her eyes were the size of saucers, and she opened her mouth to scream, but he shook her violently. "Hold on, damn you!" he bawled in her ear. "Bloody fucking hold on!"

Penny, weeping, nonetheless managed to claw out a hold on the slick scales, pressing herself flat to the joint of Viserion's wings behind Tyrion. With its two dwarf passengers aboard, the dragon began to climb, up and up and up and up. The screams of the khalasar turned almost to the calling of birds, so far, so very far below, until all Tyrion could see was the burning eye of the sun, and all he could hear was the sobbing song of the wind.
In the flickering flame of his dark lantern, the library was transformed into a strange witchy haunt of shadows, paths twining away through the high shelves and the columns vanishing into the vaults. The leaded-glass windows showed none of the intricate colored designs visible by day, and Sam told himself firmly that it was his imagination that the air was whispering, that the books and scrolls and manuscripts breathed their secrets in dusty voices. His hand was slick with sweat, so much that he almost dropped the heavy bronze key he was carrying, but he ignored it as best he could, along with the pounding of his heart. It was just reading. He was good at that.

He had Alleras to thank for the key, as well for standing watch. The section which Sam intended to access was strictly off-limits for novices; it was only for the use of those acolytes forging their Valyrian steel links, and then only under the close supervision of the archmaesters. But the Citadel had received a raven yesterday, and the news it bore was literally earth-shattering. At least, so the rumors held.

Thus, Sam had decided that it was time to take full advantage of the opportunities his new alliance with Alleras presented. They had already tried to uncover who "Pate" had really been, or who had put him up to the theft, or where the horn had gone after it was stolen, but met dead ends at every turn. Their one whisper of a lead – that Alleras had seen a dark-haired man with a hooked nose emerging from an alley where he thought Pate had been as well – proved fruitless as well. Now, with the vision of Jon in the tree and the Citadel whispering of terrible things, the two had no more time for delay.

Therefore, they'd chosen tonight for their scholarly heist. It had several good reasons to recommend it. First and foremost was the fact that the maesters were going to be shut up in an all-night conclave, debating on whatever news the raven had brought, and thus ideally would be unavailable to catch them. Secondly, Alleras had told his tutor that he would be working late in the library anyway, thus supplying a plausible reason for his presence if things did go sideways. Sam was still nervous, but he always was. And Alleras said that the maesters expected some students to look, to go where they were not allowed, to ask new questions, to challenge the status quo. Intelligence and progress were only gained that way.

Breathing though his mouth in hopes of making less noise, Sam edged around a shelf. He did not feel at all cut out for this business – a great big fat man, even if clad in his Night's Watch blacks and proceeding as furtively as possible, was not the ideal candidate for surreptitious midnight missions. He'd tried to talk Alleras into doing it, as the Dornish youth could disappear in broad daylight, but stationing Sam inside to tell him which books to fetch would defeat the entire point anyway. Alleras learned quickly and effortlessly, but seemed to do it by osmosis, without so much as touching pen and ink. He could get Sam where he needed to go, but it was up to Sam up after that. And so, as he reached the gate that guarded the forbidden books, Samwell Tarly yet again found himself assigned to a task that some other man, any other man, seemed better suited for.

"Mother have mercy," he breathed, before glancing around in sudden terror that someone had heard him. The upper-level acolytes were known to live in the library at all hours, building cocoons of food and parchment and sleeping on their desks. If one such apparition loomed out of the darkness now, Sam would be as scared as he had been when the undead bear lumbered up the Fist.

But none did. So Sam lifted the key, inserted it into the lock, and turned, hearing the gears clicking. Once the grate had swung silently open, he left it there. Alleras needed to be able to reach him in the event of an emergency; he said that he knew a back way out. Sam would have preferred
to take the key with him, but the thought of being trapped alone in the restricted section, a sitting duck for the maesters to nab in the morning, was even worse. Some of the Citadel's darkest and most closely guarded secrets were buried here, potentially including the one he was after.

Doing his very damndest not to imagine Maester Tycho marching in after him, Sam stepped inside and rested the grate closed behind him. He looked for something to prop it with, to make certain it did not shut and latch, but the only options at hand were books and he was mortified by the very idea. Besides, time was very dear right now. He had to get in, confirm or deny his theory, and get out.

Holding his dark lantern as close to the crowded shelves as he dared, Sam began to walk. He cast an eye along the spines, pleased that many of the titles and authors were at least tangentially familiar. Then again, they wouldn't keep the most dangerous books right in the front. There were numerous urban legends about students who had supposedly never returned from the deepest archives, and a shiver ran down Sam's back. *They're just stories. Books can't kill anyone.* Men who cared what books you read, and what thoughts you had, and what actions you took, though. ..

Just ahead, the aisle forked, vanishing down a row of shelves to either side. On instinct, Sam chose the right. The smell of print and parchment and leather suffused the dark air, and for the first time since hearing of Jon's death, Sam felt a little flowering of hope. A maester's education was never through, and if he did well here – and was not thrown on his ear after the events of tonight – he had a lifetime of it to look forward to.

Then he remembered what the rumors had hinted, and his courage and conviction almost deserted him on the spot. If it was true, if it had happened. . . the Wall and the Watch alike were no longer extant, and very soon the rest of them as well. ..

Sam swallowed thrice in a useless attempt to wet his dry mouth, then kept going. Soon the aisle split again, this time in three directions, and he chose the left-hand path. *A puzzle. It's a maze.*

Alleras had warned him of that. If you were clever enough to tackle this old and esoteric knowledge, you were clever enough to literally navigate your way through it, down here where nothing might be as it seemed.

Not that Alleras was everything he seemed, either. Sam was increasingly sure of that, and it made him wonder if he was mistaken in putting so much trust in the Sphinx. After all, sphinxes were sly creatures that spoke in riddles, masters of disguise, and once or twice Sam had seriously considered the possibility that Alleras himself was the thief. What better way to keep Sam, the only person who knew the horn was missing, from ever finding it than by leading him in circles? And if Alleras knew a secret way out of the library, he could just as easily know a secret way into that room. Sam had actually gone back and sat hopefully in front of the weirwood for hours, on the utterly off chance that Jon would reappear and tell him more, but no good.

Then and odd, Alleras would let something slip, such as a few days ago. Sam had been working on a catalogue of poisons and antidotes, part of his studies for his silver link, and was nearly banging his head on the wall in frustration until it occurred to him to ask Alleras for help. Whereupon the Sphinx had blazed through it with such careless ease that Sam almost suspected if a few of the Citadel's least favorite archmaesters should not employ tasters for their food. "Where did you learn all that?" he had asked, uncertain if he wanted to know. "I thought you hadn't decided to study for your silver yet. ..?"

"I haven't." Alleras shrugged. "I learned that from my father when I was scarce more than a babe in breechclouts."

Alleras' father was dead, Sam knew. That was one of the times when he wondered how. "But all
these poisons, knowing them and everything about them – like this one, widow's bane –"

"Widow's blood," Alleras corrected. A crooked, sly smile touched his lips. "My father was always passing fond of that one."

Sam squinted at his scribbled annotation. "Named for the color," he read. "A dangerous and subtle venom, and a grievous one. It shuts down a man's bladder and bowels, until he drowns in his own poisons. After death, putrefaction is swift and pronounced." He grimaced. All this talk of murder made him think that the day was coming when he would have to dissect corpses. "Your father sounds to have been a dangerous man."

"Oh," Alleras said, almost cheerily. "He was."

All Dornishmen are vipers, Randyll Tarly had told his son once. Some merely more than others. Sam could not dispute it, glad as he was for Alleras' assistance. But thinking of snakes and poison and murders and corpses was decidedly not the sort of thing to give him comfort in his current predicament, and he tried to put it from his head. Ahead the aisle split again, and he had to keep his path straight. That way he would only have to –

Sam stopped short, blinking hard. For just an instant, the dark library had been lit up by a faint blue flash, casting everything into stark relief and turning the shelves to lurking monsters. He had no idea from whence it had come, as he was well away from the windows, and it certainly hadn't been his lantern. What else is down here?

He could feel his knees quaking. It might just be the glass candles. There were said to be more of them down here, and every acolyte with half a chain had been jabbering on about how they were in fact truly burning. It was a herald of dragons, and with a prince calling himself a Targaryen on the shores of Westeros – the Citadel had also received that raven recently, sparking an intensely partisan debate among even the supposedly unpartisan body of the Conclave – Sam could work out the logical reason why they might be. But the pretender (or not the pretender) was certainly never going to attack Oldtown. His ancestor (or not his ancestor) Aegon the Conqueror had been anointed in the Starry Sept, and it lacked the same strategic value as King's Landing. They were safe here.

All of this running through his head, Sam blinked once more to restore his night vision, cocked his head to listen for pursuit, and finally satisfied himself that there was none. The darkness was cool and peaceful, and he moved deeper into the warren of shelves, which rose to every side, a forbidding wall of knowledge. Sam suspected that what he was looking for would lie at the very center, and also that if trouble did arise now, it would be impossible for Alleras to reach him. He repeated the turns he'd made in his head. Right, left, right, right again, left. And he had a serviceable memory of what they looked like, and what books had been shelved there, so he ought to be –

The flash. Again, much brighter and much closer. Sam stopped dead, swinging his lantern in all directions, heart hammering like an irate dwarf with a pickax. The eerie blue glow didn't fade as quickly this time, and after a petrified moment, Samwell Tarly finally did the one thing that Samwell Tarly never wanted to do. He turned and began to blunder down the aisles toward the source of the light.

Finally, he emerged into a small, circular open space, hemmed in on all sides by shelves. A pedestal stood at the center, and upon it an iron candelabra. Its dusty arms clutched three slender stems of dragonglass, and each stem was lit up with coruscating blue fire. It gave off no heat, was silent except for a sound like rushing wind, and seemed to wax stronger as Sam watched. And indeed, that was not the strangest thing. A beard of icicles had begun to frost the foot of the candelabra, at first small as nubbins but slowly growing larger. He felt a breath of cold wind on his
face, where no wind should possibly blow.

"Mother have mercy." Sam muttered again, and clumsily marked the star on himself. He backed up, not sure if he dared take his eyes off it, knowing that it must serve as an alarm, intruders in the archives, and next moment half the conclave would barge in here breathing fire –

He took another stop back, and almost knocked it over.

Swallowing a shriek, Sam spun around. A heavy mahogany rostrum stood directly behind him, in the shadow of the first wall of shelves, and a vast book with gilded pages was chained to it. The light given off by the dragonglass candles was bright enough for him to read the name embossed in the chocolate leather cover: *Chronicon*. He'd found it.

Barely daring to breathe, Sam stared at what was, for him, the holiest of holy, the grail that the Maiden had sent Ser Galladon of Morne questing after when she'd given him his mighty magic sword. If Sam recalled the legend, Ser Galladon's grail had been a cup, but this book was his. He'd pinned all his hopes on the *Chronicon* actually existing, hidden in the mysteries of the library. It was said to be enchanted, a book that recorded the entire history of the world. But when Sam had mentioned that, Alleras scoffed and told him that there was no enchantment – only an archmaester of unusual talent, who sent out ravens and conversed with weirwoods and peered into flames and read old manuscripts and listened to the wind, who devoted his life to keeping a comprehensive account of the world's events. And the current author of the *Chronicon* was either Marwyn the Mage, who had been gone from the Citadel for months, or another archmaester who would be away at the great Conclave tonight.

*It's here. It's real.* Sam wiped his hands on his robes half a dozen times before he reached out for the cover. In his grasp, removed from his pocket, he had Alleras' link of Valyrian steel. There appeared to be no clasp or lock on the book, but he knew that it would not open for him alone.

Sam felt a sudden warmth in the metal as it touched the *Chronicon*. A flare of blue leapt up from the dragonglass candles, and that sourceless wind kissed his face with frost, a faint spark running around the pages. Then with a soft rustle, the book fell open.

Sam, who was most certainly having a religious experience by now, touched it in reverent awe. They were covered with cramped handwriting, cross-marked with numbers, places and names. The first entries in the book were dated from the two hundredth year after Aegon's Landing – which was a hundred years before this present day, when Daeron the Good had been King of Westeros and the Blackfyre Rebellions were raging. Whoever had been keeper of the *Chronicon* in this era had done a remarkably thorough job, and Sam almost forgot his fear in fascination as he read, lapping up details of betrayals, alliances, battles, and treaties. This must be only the most recent of many volumes, and he ached to find the rest of them. How far back did they go? All the way to the coming of the Andals? Farther?

Belatedly remembering what he had really come to find out, Sam skipped ahead, toward the back of the book. But as he flipped through the section headed *209 AL*, the year of the Great Spring Sickness, he noted something curious. Where there should have been a tally of the dead and an explanation of the nature of the illness, only three words were writ in a shaky hand, faded with age and underlined sharply. *Gods forgive us.*

Sam frowned. He remembered that the Great Spring Sickness, which had wiped out King Daeron along with tens of thousands of others throughout the Seven Kingdoms, had been followed only a few years later by the first epidemic of grey plague, which had started in Oldtown. Lord Quenton Hightower had been pulled off his horse and had his throat slit for the harshness of the quarantine he'd imposed, but if he hadn't, it might have taken the entire country. *Half of Oldtown died*, Sam
recalled, and almost three-quarters of the Citadel. So of all the victims of the Great Spring Sickness and the grey plague, the greatest proportion of them were . . . here.

Another cold chill ran down his back. Forget about it. That was almost a hundred years ago, it matters naught. He had always read that the grey plague and its cousin, greyscale, had arrived in Westeros by means of infected rats stowing away on ships from Essos. But as he looked back at those words, Gods forgive us, a faint and formless suspicion floated into his head. No. Not possible.

Unsettled, Sam turned the page. Here, however, he found a further mystery. There was a rough sketch of what he recognized as the battlements of Dragonstone, the ancient seat of House Targaryen, with its stone monstrosities: gargoyles, dragons, chimeras, more. Underneath, a different hand had written, Fire made flesh. Flesh made stone. The way.

The way. Disconnected bits of information eddied about Sam's head: how greyscale turned a sufferer to stone. How fire could not burn stone. Gods forgive us, scrawled in the account of the worst plague Westeros had ever known – a plague that had, at least once and possibly twice, broken out at the Citadel. How it had happened in the reign of the Targaryens, while they were actively trying to hatch their last dragon eggs: whether by praying over them as Baelor the Blessed had done, or by drinking wildfire as Aeryion Brightflame had, or dying in the tragedy of Summerhall as King Aegon V and Prince Duncan the Small had. And how it had always been whispered that the maesters had played a significant role in the living dragons' demise. How some of the earliest victims of the Great Spring Sickness had been Daeron, Valarr, and Matarys Targaryen. The king and both his eldest grandsons, the first and second in line to the throne.

Sam felt faint. He tried to tell himself that it was a mistake, or else the most dastardly coincidence in the history of time, but cold certainty sank like a bad meal into his belly. He just stood there, unable to turn the page for fear of what horrible truth might leap out at him next. The maesters created greyscale to kill the dragons. To turn them to rock like the ones atop Dragonstone, king and beast alike. But what is strong enough to kill dragons is strong enough to kill any ordinary man, and instead they unleashed a plague that they could not control. A plague that killed three quarters of their own number, that was only stopped from Westeros and the world by Lord Quenton. Though it had done its intended work. If the last Targaryens had had healthy dragons – if Aerys had had healthy dragons, gods forbid –

*The realm would lie in ashes even now.* Sam could not quite contemplate the magnitude of what he had just put together. But if the gossip was true, if the Conclave was meeting because the Wall had fallen, and from his own research he knew that dragons were the only thing that could save them now –

Sam began to flip madly through the book, to the pages at the very end. Here it might be recorded if the Wall was in fact down, and if so, how. *Mance Rayder said they found the Horn of Winter, that Tormund Giantsbane would blow it if Jon didn't let the wildlings through the Wall. . . but Mance was soon to be a dead man when Sam left Castle Black, sentenced to burn by the red woman, and Jon was a dead man, but somehow still alive in the trees for that one moment. The Others. The Others must have come in all their legions, and the horn Jon gave me, the one that Alleras and I are looking for after it was stolen. . .

It was there, the pieces of the puzzle on the verge of falling into place in Sam's head as he'd solved the riddle of the grey plague. And then the glass candles exploded.

Sam heard a high whistle, a crack, and threw himself flat as razor-sharp shards of obsidian laced through the air, throwing twisting tails of blue flame that writhed like serpents before burning out. Pieces of icicles had been scattered as well, and an unearthly glare lit up the room. Just as Sam was
quite truly convinced that the world was ending on the spot, he realized that it had come from a
distant window.

Sam wanted nothing so much as to flee, hide in the labyrinth. He'd be safe among the books, his
friends, and no one would ever find him there, perhaps not even himself. But he had to be as brave
as Jon, he had to be. There was no one left to do this but him.

Picking up his robes, he ran. Sam's running was about as swift and elegant as a charging milk
cow's at the best of times, but some unexpected speed propelled him forward now. He dodged
among the shelves, charting a wide path around the smoking ruins of the dragonglass candles and
up toward the window. It was taller than he was, opening out of the library tower, and the light
here was almost bright enough to blind. Screwing up his dazed eyes, Sam realized that it was the
Hightower, and it was flashing the emergency signal that Oldtown was under attack.

"Mother. Have. Mercy." Sam's nerveless fingers groped at the window latch. Then somehow he
was pushing it open and ducking onto the wallwalk beyond, into the cold breezy night. The height
pulled at him, he dared not look down as he raced across to the bell tower. There was a low door at
the base of it, and Sam wrenched it open and puffed up the mossy steps beyond. He could hear
other bells starting to clang across the city, a thunderous deep-throated song of danger, danger,
danger. But it could not be. It made no sense. The pretender Aegon would never attack Oldtown,
ever, and neither would little Tommen. So who –

And then Sam, wheezing, scrambled up into the lookout, and saw.

Spanning the horizon, visible only in flashes as the Hightower beacon continued to pulse, was a
fleet of approaching longships with black sails and golden krakens. Distant came the booming of
drums, from all of them save the slender, single-masted, red-hulled, black-sailed vessel at the
forefront, an eldritch glow crackling up its rigging and its iron-maiden figurehead. The Silence,
Euron Greyjoy's infamous lover herself.

Terror turned Sam's bowels to water. The ironmen had made an attempt to blockade the mouth of
the Honeywine before, and to take the Oldtown harbor, but they had been run off by the city's
defenders – though not without difficulty, and the Silence had not been part of that initial raiding
party. Afterwards they'd received a message from Willas Tyrell urging Lord Leyton to strengthen
his defenses in anticipation of a probable return, but Lord Leyton's only response had been to send
his son Ser Humfrey to Lys to hire swords and sails, while he continued to stay shut up in the
Hightower. Ser Humfrey had not returned, and now the city was facing the very seventh devil
himself.

Sam stared for a moment more, then broke out of his reverie, wheeled around, and seized hold of
the rope. He began to ring it for all he was worth, almost deafened by the tumult of the great
bronze bells at close range. Then he dodged out, grabbed the torch from the sconce, and threw it
onto the beacon atop the lookout. It went up at once, and answering fires began to sprout in the
darkness, across the vast stone maze of the Citadel. Attack. We are under attack. Prepare to stand
and fight.

Glancing in every direction, Sam suddenly realized that he did not know where to go. The
wallwalk would lead him back into the library, which might be the safest place to hide out, but that
was fraught with its own perils. There was no stairway down to the ground from here, and that was
the last place he wanted to be with Euron's monsters about to land. Mayhaps he could try to get
back and find Alleras, but the Sphinx would want to go and fight; he was deadly with that Summer
Isles goldenwood bow of his. Sam could bend one passing well too, but only in the training yard.
Trying to take out an assaulting swarm of ironmen, while fell things spat fire at him and Euron
Greyjoy stalked in the darkness.

*Make up your mind, you bloody coward.* He was far too exposed up here on the wall, and would do no one any good, least of all himself. He stumbled back along the narrow stone wynd, *don't look down don't look down*, and reached the library window, squeezing back through. It was lucky he'd lost all that weight tramping along the Honeywine, otherwise he never would have fit. Panting, he wormed through the shelves, back to the pedestal and the *Chronicon* and the candelabra with its shattered candles.

The blue fire was almost burned out, but glittering splinters of obsidian had fallen on the floor like lethal black snow. On some instinct Sam doubled back, picked up a piece that was blunt on one end and sharp on the other, and clutched it tightly; it felt good to have a weapon, any weapon, in hand. Then, after taking a moment to review his path back, he plunged into the labyrinth of books.

The shelves looked much more alike than he'd hoped. He was mostly certain of his turns, but kept having to reverse them in his head, and most unsettlingly of all, he could hear shouts and screams, not near and not far. Outside the window, the night sky turned brilliant crimson in flashes, the bells continuing to sound and sound and sound.

At last, at long bloody last, the bronze gate came into view. Sam, utterly winded, had to spend several moments wheezing before he advanced on it. In a demented way, he supposed, it was good that the attack had come now; the maesters would have had to leave the Conclave directly to defend the Citadel, and with luck would never realize that anyone had been in the library. The explosion of the glass candles had clearly been an omen to warn of the approaching danger of the ironborn, not Sam himself. And there was no enchantment on the *Chronicon*, it was only a book, so —

"Alleras?" Sam pushed open the unlocked gate and rushed through, in enough haste to disregard caution. "Alleras, where are you? You heard the bells, they're coming, we're under attack, we have to go now. Otherwise we – Alleras?"

No answer. He swung his lantern from side to side, but it only cast towering shadows. The reading room was empty, the place where the Sphinx had stood deserted. He was completely alone.

A queer giddiness took hold of Sam. He was in that moment quite unsure if he had exited through the correct gate after all – there could be dozens of them. Hundreds. More. Real or unreal. *I could be deeper in the maze than ever.* Lost in the archives, like those tales. *They're just stories. Just stories!*

He turned around and tried to pull the gate open again, but it was stuck fast. *No key.* He had left the key in the gate he had entered through, he knew. Unless Alleras had taken it and fled – but he'd promised to stay here, he'd promised, it wasn't fair! But not even Euron Greyjoy could take the Citadel without a fight. It was defended by countless artifices both mundane and miraculous, and the maesters had many weapons of their own. Some of them had been soldiers before they'd come to study for their chains. Some worked magic.

*I'm safe here,* Sam reassured himself, as he had been doing all night. This could just be another way out of the library. He had dragonglass and fire in hand, he didn't need to be afraid.

He began to walk. He didn't recognize the shadowy corridor outside. *The Citadel is huge, I couldn't see it all in ten years, I needn't worry.* Bloody moonlight striped the floor. *See, I'm out of the library. It'll be fine. There's no one here, that's better than having to run for my life. The Chronicon does exist, and mayhaps I'll be able to go back and read it later.*
Whenever there was a stairwell, Sam went up. *The higher I am, the safer I'll be.* Unless Euron had catapults or something else unpleasant. *Fool. He has all manner of unpleasant things.* But he had to remember what he'd learned. *Fire does not burn stone.*

The light of his lantern was beginning to wane, and the hallway was very dark. If the Hightower's beacon was still burning, he couldn't see it. He could feel that chilly wind again, like a finger on the back of his neck. The windows were opaque, and when he let out a breath, he saw it silver in the air.

*I am lost.* Sam came to a halt. He'd heard that the best thing to do when you were lost was to sit down and stay put, rather than continuing to wander and getting furtherly lost. But the idea unnerved him, and it was so cold here. Cold enough that he could see icicles forming on the windowsill, as they had beneath the candelabra. The pane was glassed with frost. And the rest of the corridor was drowned in absolute, inklike shadow.

*I want to wake up.* Sam opened and closed his eyes several times hard, just in case. No luck. *Please.*

The flame in his lantern was making a rattling noise. The wick collapsed, the oil went dry, the iron was freezing cold to the touch, and he dropped it with a clatter. Embers spilled across the stone, then went out. And down the end of the hall –

Blue fire.

Blue eyes.

"Mother," Samwell Tarly whispered. "Mother have mercy."
Of all the things he'd done in his life that had firmly convinced him he was an idiot, Sandor Clegane was in no doubt whatsoever that this was the crowning achievement. If he'd been even the barest bit wiser, or the barest bit less stubborn, or the barest bit less broken, he would have thumbed his nose at Gregor whether live or dead or undead, likewise at the Brotherhood, then grabbed the little bird and gotten the seven hells out of there. Where, he had no notion. They couldn't go north to winter and wolves, east to that skulking whoremaster Littlefinger, south to the pretender's advancing attack, or west to his cursed family lands. *We should have left Westeros altogether, when we had the chance.* Now it was gone forever, and that was his own bloody fault. The gods had miraculously given her back once, it wasn't fair to ask them to do it again. And he himself had turned the opportunity down. Just like before.

As Sandor climbed out of the hollow hill and into the dark woods, he kept having the urge to turn around, charge back, and bodily haul her away with him. What in buggeration did she think she was going to accomplish, leading a ragtag lot of outlaws and her bloody undead mother off to the Vale, aside from (admittedly something he'd be very sad to miss) causing Petyr Baelish to wet himself on the spot? Even if she did survive, he'd never see her again. Littlefinger would turn the key in her cage and throw it down a well.

Then, however, Sandor realized that he had no leeway to criticize. His survival prospects were even dimmer. From the moment his brother had shoved his face in that brazier, he'd never been strong enough for Gregor, and the Mountain's long, agonizing death and subsequent resurrection were singularly unlikely to have either improved his temper or diminished his brutality. And... and... *I should have taken her.* Gods damn me, *I should have taken her.* He'd thought that once before, during the Blackwater, when – drunk, desperate, angry, and afraid – he'd gone to her room with some unclear notion of bringing her with him, springing her from her trap. But it had been entirely selfish. He wanted her under his protection, wanted her safe, but also wanted *her,* even though she was a child, half his age, and Joff's scared little chirping empty-headed bird. *When I told her that I'd have a song from her, she never knew what sort of song I really meant.* He'd manhandled her, threatened her, thrown her on the bed – and in all honesty could not say what he might have done next. Wanted to rub her face in this blood and death and fire and terror, shatter her once and for all from her delusions. But then somehow, with his knife at her throat, she'd sung the Mother's hymn. Reached up to touch his cheek, and must have felt him crying. As he knew that to do that, to take her away against her will, would turn her into him, and him into them. And even a dog knew better. Even a dog had more pride.

And so Sandor Clegane broke. Broke, and fled. He hadn't even realized he'd left his white cloak behind until later. He wondered what she'd done with it. Burned it on the midden, most like, and who could blame her? He'd put her in enough danger already, and with the later reports of his supposed treachery and violence, the little bird would want no reminder of such a man. So he told himself, at least. But then. Seeing her again, at last, like a dream. Still so bloody young, nearly getting them both killed at that inn, but brave, no denying that, and beautiful. Yet knowing what she must have gone through at the hands of the Imp and Littlefinger and Ser Shadrich. . . How could that hope still burn in her? How could she still believe? *Too good for the world.* His mother and Alienor had been the same, and he learned what the world did to them before he grew the first hair on his balls. The world did Gregor.

One of the many ironies which had occurred to Sandor recently was the fact that while his elder brother had first destroyed him, it was the Elder Brother who was charged with putting him back
together. As well, if he did what he intended, he would be responsible for sentencing Cersei Lannister, his old mistress, to death. It no longer meant much, if anything, to Sandor on a personal level. Especially since he knew why Cersei had been so eager to avail herself of his services: with Gregor already Lord Tywin's pet hellhound, Cersei grasped onto the younger, second-rate Clegane in hopes of enjoying similar results. All her life had been spent being a poor shadow of her lord father, and nay doubt she'd have been perfectly pleased if Sandor was just as deranged as his brother. But as in all else, she failed at that.

Sandor had been grateful for her, though. Once. When he'd left home after his father's death, he would have been sleeping out in the kennels if Cersei hadn't taken notice of him. And she had as well looked at his scars, even if only to measure up how fearsome he was. Sandor had first gotten his nickname when Jaime made some lazy jest about how he was Cersei's faithful hound, but if he expected (or hoped) Jaime to be jealous, he was utterly mistaken. Jaime was young and brilliant and golden and handsome and wealthy and talented and whole, adored by Lord Tywin and Cersei and Tyrion and everyone, and a big ugly man-at-arms was less than the ghost of a threat to him. Jaime had never been jealous of anyone in his life, except perhaps Robert Baratheon, and yet he'd let the man go on whoring and drinking and raping and beating Cersei for years. If Robert was Joffrey, and Cersei was Sansa, and Sandor the one standing between them, he didn't think he'd do the same.

But he had tried, at first. Before. For Cersei. When he fucked into his hand at night, he often as not pictured her face, if only because there was no other halfway desirable option. Then there were the times he'd found her on the floor, or soaking the blood and wine from her nightdress, or attempting to cover a bruise with paste and powder. He asked if she wanted him, her dog, to protect her, but she'd only given him a bitter look and told him that he would never understand. Robert was king. In the eyes of the world, that made it her crime, not his.

I understood perfectly bloody well. That that fat drunken whoreson was king, and that soon enough Joffrey would be king after him. Sandor could pinpoint exactly when he'd realized just how bad Joffrey was. It was the day Tommen was born, another royal child with golden hair, when Sandor knew very well that all Robert's bastards were black as coal. But that was another thought he'd never given the time of day to; it was not for him to concern himself with. He'd been assigned to guard Joff by now, as Cersei doted on her little shit of a son beyond all reason, her spoiling and coddling alternating with Robert's barbs and blows and general disinterest. Small wonder Joff was such a seething jumble of confusion and sadism and cynicism, even at age five. On being told that he had a baby brother, he had quite calmly asked Sandor to kill him. "I don't want a brother," he'd said. "And I don't need one. I'll be king one day, that's enough."

Sandor had gone out that night and gotten very drunk, even more so than usual. After his first, feverish plans of revenge had gone awry, here he was doing the same thing with his life as Gregor: serving the Lannisters, scraping the shit off their boots, terrorizing their enemies, drinking his wages, doomed to go in circles. He remembered how he'd wanted Jaime to take notice of him, or Robert, or any of them, to prove that he was a man and worth being seen as one, respected as one, not just their hound. He had craved Jaime's jealousy, then. Wanted to go back to the Red Keep and pick a fight with him. Kingslayer. But he wore it almost proudly, the tarnish somehow only adding to his brilliance. He'd killed a monster as a true knight should, but he was reviled for it. Even though true knights, as Sandor knew, didn't exist.

Cersei was wrong. Again. That was the one thing he would never understand.

Preoccupied with his memories, Sandor might have kept stumbling through the frozen woods forever, but the blazon of sullen sunrise finally caught his attention. Glancing around, he thought he did recognize the riverbank he'd been following when the Brotherhood started raining arrows
down on them, but it was hard to say how far north or south of that precise point he was. Though there was that deadfall over there the little bird had pointed out, where they'd been hiding – she had spotted the danger before him, and he didn't know whether that made him feel proud of her or bitterly ashamed of himself. She might just manage better without him after all. Though if one of the fucking outlaws so much as laid a finger on her, if that freckly Dornish son of a whore even –

Hold up. Sandor's eyes narrowed. As he had been turning in search of a skinny tree to hit that looked sufficiently like Anguy the archer, he'd caught a glimpse of thick splashes of blood on the rocks. The ground here was icy, churned and torn up, and he recognized the print of iron-shod hooves, clawing through the mud and away into the underbrush.

Sandor's heart turned over. He shoved aside a branch, ducked under it, and began to move fast – fast as he could on that blasted leg, anyway. "Stranger?" he hissed. "Where are you, lad? Stranger!"

He felt a bloody fool. Even if his horse had fled off this way, it had been almost a day since he was wounded, and there were wolves aplenty in these woods, including some that Sandor himself had put there. Why, oh why didn't I just leave the bitch in her cage in Maidenpool? Another for the idiot tally. Though Stranger was as pighead stubborn and headstrong as his master, so he might likewise have refused to die from sheer cussedness. If not... Sandor would have to find another one somewhere, which would be a feat with no money. He'd had a few dragons and a dozen stags in his saddlebags, but –

Sandor leapt over a frozen creek, one of the countless offshoots of the Green Fork that watered these lowlands, and crossed into a copse of slender leafless trees. The ground dipped down, cold leaf-rot and mulch crunching under his boots. And then, half-hidden among the trunks, he spotted something. Something black, too big to be a wolf.

"Stranger!" Sandor skidded down the hillside. "Bloody hell, bloody bloody hell –"

The courser lifted his head weakly at his master's voice. But he was down on his side, flanks heaving. More blood had dried where he'd fallen, and froth showed on his muzzle. He made a noise almost human, a sound of pain and fear, as Sandor lurched across the clearing and went to his knees next to him.

"Easy, boy," Sandor murmured, stroking the horse's silky black ears. "Easy. I'm here. Come, lad, let's have a look. Here, it's all right. That's it now. Up."

It took much more cajoling and occasional threatening, but at last Stranger rolled clumsily upright, gathering his forelegs under him. This presented Sandor a chance to inspect his back, and he grimaced at the damage. Two broken arrows jutted out, and the flesh was badly torn where Stranger must have tried to pull them out with his teeth. The arrow in his haunch was broken as well, sunk deep in the muscle, and it was clear that his left rear leg would be unable to bear any weight. Horses were regularly put out of their misery for lesser injuries, and with it in Sandor's best interests to get to King's Landing as quickly as possible, it would be utterly stupid for him to nursemaid the stallion down the road with his own leg in the state it was. He would do best to end Stranger's suffering, give him to the god he was named for, salvage his money and buy the first serviceable mount he could find.

He would do best. Sandor's hand moved to the hilt of the knife at his side. The Brotherhood had taken his weapons when they'd captured him, but no one had tried to stop him when he took them back before leaving. He felt unwarrantedly clumsy as he drew the blade.

Stranger's eyes rolled to it. He had served long years with his master in countless skirmishes and scuffles and battles, he knew as much of death as any man. He didn't struggle or try to get away,
but lay silent, trusting, the pulse in his sleek neck bumping faintly under Sandor's thumb.

_Do it. You fool, he's just a horse, do it._ Sandor took a firmer grip on his knife; his hand had started to shake, and he refused to make a botch of it. A quick death. The wolves could have him after. _See, bitch? See what I did for you?_

_Do it, girl_, his own voice begged him, in memory. _You remember where the heart is?_

Sandor raised the knife. _I hate liars. I hate gutless frauds even worse._

Stranger waited. The Stranger as well. Sandor might see him if he looked over his shoulder now, a shrouded specter in the grey woods. He raised the knife higher –

And with something between a roar and a sob, he brought it down in Stranger's back, carefully cutting into the proud flesh around the sunken arrowhead. The courser did snort and scream in protest at this, but Sandor grabbed a fistful of the reins with his free hand and held him hard in check. Fresh blood gushed from the incision, staining Sandor's already shabby jerkin, but it was easier than he thought to reach in, grab the blood-slick stump of the arrow, and ease it out. It fell onto the rocks with a clatter.

"Two more, boy," Sandor rasped, starting to cut out the next arrowhead. He remembered just how much it had hurt when the Elder Brother found him, dying, and began to tend his wounds. _Why did he do that?_ Sandor still could not comprehend the mercy and the cruelty both. _Why not just let me die? He was a bloody holy man, and I must have been the blackest sinner he'd ever seen._ Why had the monk lifted into him into his arms and given him a drink of water, singing the Invocation of the Seven as the Hound passed away? Not afraid, not calling him a monster, it hadn't been since. . . since. . .

"The maester says you're going to live, Sandor." Her hand touched the side of his face that wasn't swaddled thickly in bandages, crusted with unguents and salves and potions, anything to help heal the red seeping ruin. _Isn't that good? Soon we can play outside again. Florian was ugly too, it doesn't matter, you can still be him. And Papa gave me a new doll of Jonquil. I think it's for me not saying what I know._ Her voice cracked. _I know your bedding didn't catch on fire. I know Gregor –"

"Quiet," his terrified five-year-old self begged. _Alie, please. Don't say anything. He'll hear you. He'll hurt you._

_He already hurt you,"_ his sister said. _"And one day he'll pay for that. You'll live, see. We can play Jenny of Oldstones and the Prince of Dragonflies too, like always. The prince didn't care that he had to give up his crown for Jenny, so I won't care if you're burned. In the songs, the common boy always slays the beast. You will too. So –"

"Shut up." She was only eight, she was no lady or champion or queen, no protector or prophet. _Alie, it's a lie. It's just a stupid song. I don't want to any more._

_"But you're going to be a knight one day." She sounded sad. "Then –"

_"I don't want to be a knight._"

_"You love knights._"

_"Gregor's going to be a knight. Everyone says so._"

_"No."_ Alienor tried to sound reassuring. _"He won't be. When it comes time, you and me, we'll tell
the king or Prince Rhaegar or any of them that he's horrible. Then they won't do it. He's not a true knight, he's a monster. You and me. Sleep now, Sandor. Sleep."

You and me. The words rang down the years, a mockery. *She was dead when it came time.* Sandor squeezed his eyes shut, had to stop his work until he had his composure back. Then he began again, finished, and stanched the bleeding with strips torn from his brown brother's robe. It was a horrible effort, and his own leg almost gave out from the effort, but at last he got Stranger to his feet. Two fore and one aft, at any rate.

"Come on, boy," Sandor muttered shakily. "We've got a long way to go."

Stranger nickered, whuffed in Sandor's missing ear, and consented to hobble with him out of the grove. They made almost comically poor time; the sun was well over the trees by the time they found the path again. By now, however, Sandor was able to get a better fix on where they were – he had spent enough time in the riverlands, first as a fugitive and then with Arya. They couldn't be more than a few leagues north of the Crossroads Inn, which was another haunt of the Brotherhood if he recalled correctly, but also where the Green, Red, and Blue Forks of the Trident joined up and drained out to the Bay of Crabs. *I could go right back to the Quiet Isle, if I wanted.* Or otherwise take passage on a merchant vessel heading around Crackclaw Point and south to King's Landing, an option which saved him having to ride the wounded Stranger down the road. But that presumed that any merchant in his right mind would be making for the capital now. It was a shorter voyage by land too, if a more painful one.

*Road it is.* His last chance to talk himself out of it. Unsurprisingly, he failed. He took a better grip on Stranger's reins, led him down the hill, and did not look back.

The next few days crawled by almost as slowly. Sandor did manage to cross the Trident by posing as a wounded and destitute holy brother, a pretense which was not at all difficult, though his ruse was almost caught out when the ferryman asked him to say a prayer to bless their passage. Fortunately, he had attended enough sevensong services on the Quiet Isle to put something passable together, and it seemed to be appreciated. Even Stranger had been rendered docile enough by his wounds that he caused no incidents, and the ferryman seemed almost sad to see them go when he put them ashore on the southern bank. "You can't be meaning to carry onto the capital, friend?" he asked. "It's in flames, or soon enough will be. You've a strong back and great broad shoulders, you may be a begging brother now but I wager you can swing that sword you carry. Stay with us a bit. These days, a man needs someone to stand watch while he sleeps."

Sandor shook his head. There should be a market at Darry, he reckoned, and he'd already wasted enough time. But he couldn't make himself regret what he'd done.

"No," he said aloud, curtly as usual. "I'm going south."

"Your funeral, ser." The ferryman caught the coins Sandor threw – lucky for him he hadn't said *ser* earlier, or he wouldn't have gotten any – and turned away. Bloody good riddance, then.

There was a market at Darry, in fact, though the only horses for sale were priced twice what Sandor could afford to pay and his attempts to haggle it down were only met with scorn and suspicion. Nobody saw the need to be charitable these days, not if they wanted to eat, and finally Sandor had to consent to being robbed fucking blind. If he gave up Stranger, along with all his dragons and half his stags, then he could have the best palfrey there was – best being a relative term, but the horse was reasonably swift and sound of wind. If he wanted Stranger back, he'd have to return with six more dragons in hand, twelve if he got the palfrey killed too, and buy him again. Assuming that he hadn't already been sold.
"You sell my horse, and I'll hunt you through seven hells," Sandor promised, flinging his money onto the table. "And he'll bite the face off anyone who tries, so I don't advise it besides. You get him better and keep him for me, though, and I'll pay you a hundred bloody dragons. Your choice. Hopefully you aren't quite as stupid as you look."

The horse merchant was indeed a fleshy, stupid-looking fellow, but apparently appearances were deceiving. He inclined his head stiffly. "We'll see, ser."

Would everybody bloody stop calling me that? Sandor almost bellowed, but he was too tired to actually do so. He took his leave of Stranger with an apple and a lump of sugar, and reminded himself again that he was an idiot when he found himself too choked up to speak. Instead he grunted, tossed another stag at the merchant just to see the fat bastard scuttle for it, and swung up on his new mount. From here, the kingsroad could have him at the walls of King's Landing, besieged or otherwise, in about a week.

The palfrey was not bad, as horses went, and they were soon cantering briskly south, a pace which felt unimaginable to Sandor after all his detours. He was not used to riding any horse but Stranger, however, and had to keep whipping the palfrey's nose with the reins when it tried to slow down or wander off. His courser had been trained, used to going hard for hours, and this was a lighter horse for pleasure riding, not a weapon of war and Sandor's only friend in the world. But he could not complain. His life, and his death, was finally within his own grasp. His own man at last. It had only bloody taken until the end of it.

Six days out of Darry, it started to snow. Sandor had never seen snow this far south before, except for once when he was very small, one of the few happy memories of his childhood when he'd played and run and squealed and built castles with Alienor. It was before he burned, so he couldn't have been older than four, and it was so hazy in his head that he sometimes wondered if he'd dreamed it. But for once, it was not the bitterness and pain that welled in him, but an acceptance of the joy he'd felt then. I may be seeing you again soon, sister. He wondered if there was snow in the afterlife. Better that than fire.

And then at last, at last, he saw it. Still far in the distance, but visible nonetheless: the sprawling bounds of the city, clad in fog and smoke and snow, the spires of the Red Keep snagging on the underside of the clouds. It looked hunched and defensive and vulnerable even from here, and seeing it sparked a rush of unpleasant memories, but at least the bloody river wasn't on fire. If he rode hard, he could be at the gates by nightfall. He hoped he could lose himself among the flood of refugees. As bad as the prospect of being penned up in the capital sounded, slowly starving and awaiting the pretender's arrival with fire and sword, it was infinitely preferable to being stranded out in the open, without the high city walls. They've never been breached. This so-called Aegon can't get in unless he has bloody giants.

Sandor's mouth set in a hard, grim line. The dog comes crawling back for scraps. Muttering a curse under his breath and ignoring the throbbing of his leg as usual – his breeches were mottled with blood where the scab had scraped away – he kicked the palfrey back into motion and set off.

The light was almost gone, and more snowflakes were eddying out of the cold purple sky, by the time he finally passed beneath the shadow of the looming walls and drew rein in front of the Dragon Gate. If he climbed Rhaenys' Hill and took the Street of Sisters, it was a straight shot to the Great Sept of Baelor, and as he wasn't about to go faff into the castle and ask for his old quarters back, it was the best hope he had for a bed that night. With all the sparrows packed into it, no one would notice one more disreputable begging brother. And besides, if he intended to stand as the Faith's champion at the queen's trial, it would behoove him to start playing the part.
There were no gold cloaks visible on the walls, however, and Sandor had to shout himself raw before he finally got a response. A slovenly-looking man-at-arms banged open a window and peered down at him suspiciously, one hand clutching a drinking horn. "Wha' d'you want?"

"A cup of wine, a good fuck, and the Long Summer, what do you think? Now let me in."

The man-at-arms scratched his beard. "Past curfew."

"It's not curfew until the evenfall bells, arsehole. Now."

"That's no way to be speaking to me. We have enough o' your sort inside the walls already. We don't need – seven hells!"

The man's abrupt change in attitude was entirely due to Sandor, who had shrugged down his hood and was glaring up at him with great feeling. To judge from the way the man looked as if his eyes were like to pop out of his head, he knew very well who was standing below. Finally he croaked, "You're dead, don't you know?"

"No, I'm not. You will be, though, unless you open this fucking gate."

It had been too long since anyone had scarpered so fast to obey him, and Sandor had forgotten how much he liked it. There were worse things in life than to be feared by a pack of vermin, and he trotted through the creaking portcullis and up into the steep cobbled wynds beyond. King's Landing looked just as he remembered. The manses and townhouses and slums and alleys and arbors and gates and granaries, shops and grocers and taverns and brothels and inns, built of timber and brick and wattle and stone alike. He'd been familiar with most of the less reputable sections of the city in his time, and he knew where the cutpurses and cutthroats most liked to ply their trade. But even the lowlifes were not much in evidence. Everyone was hiding in whatever scanty bit of shelter they could find, and the place was almost ghostlike.

It was full dark and very cold by the time he'd climbed the Street of Sisters and dismounted, staggering, in front of the Great Sept. He could barely put weight on his leg at all now, and thought grimly that he'd make quite the spectacle indeed, hopping around on one foot. Aye, and what reason would they have to accept him anyway? There were plenty of able-bodied Warrior's Sons available, all of whom stood an infinitely better chance of obtaining the verdict the Faith wanted. Bloodthirsty little fuckers, the lot. Not that he was complaining.

Leaving the horse, Sandor limped up the broad marble steps. He didn't care if it got stolen, aside from the fact that it would then cost him double to buy Stranger back, but in his heart he knew that he wouldn't be returning anyway. The palfrey had done its job. Now he had to do his.

There were a few Poor Fellows standing watch, and Sandor had to surrender his sword and knife before they'd let him enter. They would have forbidden him if they could, but he helpfully reminded them that all men were welcome in the house of the gods. Wondering what he'd find within, he went inside.

It was dim, flickering with the lights of a thousand candles, and the shadowed shapes of septas, septon's, Most Devout, begging brothers, silent sisters, Warrior's Sons, Poor Fellows, sparrows, and more moved around him like the tide of a great grey sea. Some sang devotions or performed flagellations, others prostrated themselves on the cold marble or drifted off into side naves to pray. Having some idea of finding the High Sparrow himself and pouring out his tale of woe, Sandor headed for the main sanctuary, but he hadn't gotten more than a dozen painful yards when a voice called him by name.
Badly startled, he whirled around – and then felt himself quite certain to be dreaming, as the Elder Brother emerged from the sacristy and strode toward him. The look of astonished disbelief on his face must match Sandor's. "My friend," he said quietly. "You come late."

"I know." Sandor caught onto a statue to steady himself. "What are you doing here?"

"I came as soon as I fled the Vale. After what transpired there, I did not think it safe to return to the Quiet Isle for the time being – and I had sensitive and dangerous intelligence for the highest orders of the Faith alone to hear." Elder Brother paused, and frowned. "You're hurt."

"Just my leg again. I'll need you to see to it before the family reunion. Do you have any idea of when that might be?"

"Randyll Tarly is marching ten thousand men from Horn Hill as we speak. He's the new Master of Laws on the small council, and as Margaery Tyrell and her cousins are in his legal custody, they cannot be released to stand trial until he returns. He hopes to break the pretender's attack, and quickly, but warfare keeps its own time. Queen Cersei might be tried sooner, but it is unlikely."

"Shit. So we have to wait until Aegon Targaryen's cock is halfway down our throats before the Faith bestirs itself?"

The Elder Brother looked at him reproachfully, and Sandor supposed it was a good thing that the flock of septas nearby hadn't heard that. "Sorry," he grumbled. "But my point stands."

"Randyll Tarly and his ten thousand men are the only meaningful defense King's Landing has, now that the power of the Lannisters and the Tyrells alike has been broken and scattered. Without him, we face certain defeat. In such circumstances, the High Sparrow is willing to wait."

I know all about Lord Tarly and how he defends the weak. "And what if he bites it?"

"Then we will all be dead, and it shall matter naught." The Elder Brother put a hand on Sandor's arm. "As you look already. Dead on your feet, that is. Come with me, there are sleeping cells below."

Sandor thought about protesting, but couldn't see the point, and allowed the Elder Brother to lead him into the undercroft of the sept, down a warren of twisting stairs. Torches burned every few paces, but the darkness remained, pressing up close. He wondered where the little bird was, if it was snowing where she slept. If she was cold or hungry or afraid. He might go and light a candle to the Maiden later. For her and Alienor both. They'd never been far away during his ride from Darry.

"Here," the Elder Brother said softly, and pulled a skeleton key from his belt to open the door into the cell. "This will serve for the time. I believe I know why you were late in arriving here, Sandor. It means you still have something to live for. That is why I instructed the Warrior's Sons to tell you of her, if they encountered you along the way. I said it at the Quiet Isle, but I will say it again. Do not. Fighting Ser Robert Strong will kill you."

"The Hound died once already, thanks to you. And I'm still standing here."

"So you are." The monk sighed. "But there is the one thing you have not considered."

"Aye?"

"You may well fight the unholy ghost of your brother, Sandor. You are one of the most stubborn men I know – and one of the most honorable, in your way. But if you mean to defend the Faith's cause, wear the seven-pointed star on your breast, and duel with the life of the queen balanced on
your blade, you will never be allowed to do it as a humble begging brother. There is only one way
for you to face off against Ser Robert. You must become a knight."
The salt breeze was the first thing he smelled, and the tang of evergreen trees and sharp cold air and the smoke rising from the longhall. He did not know how he could possibly be seeing it, but he was, the black bear of House Mormont flapping from the rafters and a coppice of lodgepole pines screening it to all sides. He stood before the palisade gate with its carving of the woman with babe and battleax in hand, the carving he had not laid eyes on for years and years and years. Beyond, a path led up the hill to the house. Behind, the steep stones spread out into the beach where he had swum as a boy. It was impossible, it was impossible, but he was home.

This is a trick. Some illusion of the red priests. Tears stung Jorah Mormont's eyes nonetheless. He wanted to breathe deep gulps of the cold sunlit mountain air, fling himself to his knees and let the earth run through his fingers, but he must still be in Asshai, and his first duty was to Dany. Remembering what she had said – "No – let me go, please – he killed him, just there, I saw – didn't you – " he had more than a suspicion that she was likewise being beguiled astray with dreams and seemings. They will try to separate us. And had already succeeded.

"Khaleesi!" he bellowed. "Khaleesi!"

He thought he heard a faint answering cry from the house, and shoved open the palisade gate, vaulted over a mound of sheep shit – if this was a vision, he had to commend the red priests' attention to detail – and raced up the muddy hill. She called out again, most certainly from inside the house, and he hesitated half a heartbeat before he pulled down the bar on the door and stormed inside.

It hit him in the heart so hard that he had to stop. She was nearby, she was calling for him. . . but this was his home, the torches mounted in a ring of antlers overhead, the south-facing windows that drenched the wooden floors in butter-warm sunlight, the bearskins spread over the benches and the old tapestries on the walls, all the furniture wrought of logs as was the hall itself. The hooks over the door where Longclaw had rested for centuries, passed down from father to son since time immemorial, and how he'd looked at it so often as a boy and thought of how it would one day belong to him. He'd left the sword behind in shame when he fled across the narrow sea with Lynesse – but it was here. The bears-head pommel and the hand-and-a-half blade, the lucent edge of Valyrian steel shimmering where it emerged from the scabbard. It would be the simplest of matters to reach up and take it for his own.

"Jorah?" Dany called from down the hall. "My sweet bear?"

He shook himself. "I'm coming, Khaleesi." Hand at the place where his sword would have been, if he'd not ditched it in the Jade Sea as they were coming in for their crash landing, he edged down the hall. This is not my home, he reminded himself once more. Anything could be waiting for him. But it was note-perfect, from the sheep shit at the gate to Longclaw over the door –

He turned the corner, and stopped dead in his tracks.

Daenerys Targaryen sat on the great fur-draped bed of House Mormont, the bed that Jorah had been born in, wearing nothing but the sheet of silver hair that tumbled down her back, iridescent in the sunlight. At his entrance, she glanced up with a smile that was almost shy, her violet eyes meeting his, and made no move to cover her nakedness. "Ser," she murmured. "There you are. I was worried."

Jorah attempted to answer, but forgot what he was going to say. He just stood there, opening and
shutting his mouth like a fool, confronted by the sight of everything he had ever wanted, dreamed about improbably, dazed and reeling. "Gods old and new defend me," he breathed at last. House Mormont worshiped at the weirwoods, as did all the northerners, but he had been made a knight in a sept of the Seven. "I am still dreaming."

"No, my bear. You're not. You've only now woken." Dany slid off the bed and padded across to him. He didn't trust himself with her so near and lovely and naked, and clenched his fists at his sides until he felt his nails break the skin. "Don't you remember? The red priests brought us back here years ago. The Targaryen name reigns supreme across the Seven Kingdoms once more."

"Then why are we not in King's Landing?" Jorah muttered hoarsely. There was next to no blood in his brain at the moment, but it still seemed a pertinent question. "Your dragons – your throne – "

"My nephew. The Prince who was Promised. He rules now, after the dragons died. You have been sleeping too long, sweet ser. You will wake." Dany's fingers sketched lightly behind his ear, along his jaw. "And remember. Come back to me, my bear. We're home now. We're home."

"No," Jorah said weakly. He was trembling with the effort of not touching her, not burying his hands in that radiant hair, claiming her mouth with his, carrying her to the bed and... I could stay here if I wanted. Stay here and have this life. It felt so utterly real, it might well be real--what did it matter if he dreamed? Dreaming had been all that kept breath in his body. It would be easy... the easiest thing...

Dany wrapped her arms around his neck, stood on tiptoe, and began to kiss him. Lightly at first, chastely, then longer, sweeter, deeper. He told himself to turn his face away, but didn't quite end up doing it. His fists uncurled, his rough hands pressed flat on the silky skin of her back... all he could hear was their gasping and soft wet sounds, their tongues parting the other's lips, and she was tugging him toward the bed herself. He was so hard that it hurt and her hands slipped under his ragged tunic to caress the muscles of his shoulders, and it was a bloody miracle and he was about to sob with the goodness of it and--

"No," Jorah gasped, breaking the kiss with the most excruciating effort of his life. "I never loved a woman who would have been happy on Bear Island. Not Lynesse, and not you. You would never have given up your crown and your children, and for... you have no nephew, Khaleesi. I loved a dragon. I loved a queen."

"Silly bear." Dany smiled. "We all change in our lives. I want nothing else now than to spend the rest of mine with you. I can give you children now, Jorah." Her hand trailed sensuously from his face down his chest to the laces of his breeches, and her smile widened when she found his arousal. "The dragons are all dead, so my barrenness has been lifted. That was the bargain. Children of fire or of flesh, not both."

"No," he said again. "I always dreamed of hearing you say that... dreamed because I knew you never would. Dany... Khaleesi... whatever you are, you are a liar."

Her face darkened. "You will not name me liar to my face, ser. I am your--"

"You are not." Jorah began retreating for the door, not taking his eyes off her. "You're in my head. I'm imagining you. The red priests stole my fantasies from my memory and somehow reflected them back. You're a ghost. An impossible dream. Leave me."

"Are you so sure of that?" Dany began to prowl toward him. "Try it. Try leaving. Or try killing me. You'll kill the real me if you do -- for I am real. There is no way out. They have us both trapped, don't you see? We can only do what they wish of us. My power is theirs now. Forever."
"Gods defend me." There was no other choice. Jorah whirled around and ran.

The hallway back was much longer than it should have been. The light had started to turn dark, and the sturdy log walls did not seem quite as solid as before, rippling and waving as if seen through water. Then the thick amber glass in the front window blew out, and another and another, and Jorah yelled and threw his arms over his face as flying shards bit his skin. Snow came howling through the empty panes, frosting the bearskins and tapestries, and the torches swung and guttered in their ring of antlers. Darkness was stealing up the hill outside as fast as a tidal wave.

At last, Jorah reached the solar again – just as a ceiling beam groaned, swayed, and buckled, the ancient timbers crashing into the floor. He was knocked to his knees by the force of it, but he rolled over and scrambled away. Longclaw was still hanging over the door.

"Do you see what is happening, ser?" It was Dany, appearing in the crumbling corridor. She was still naked, but the sight was terrifying, not titillating. "That is what happens even now, as the Long Night tightens its grip. They are coming. All of them are coming, and the red priests and their fire are our only hope. If you kill me, you will destroy their power too. You will leave the dragons without their mother. Think carefully, sweet bear. Think fast."

Jorah wheeled from side to side in the debris, as another rafter gave out and fell in an explosion of ash and snow. Then the chains holding the torches snapped, and they tumbled burning through the dark air, landed on the wood, and set it up with a roar. Dany still stood on the far side, but her smile had become a rictus. "Sweet fool," she said. "Fire cannot kill a dragon. Let me show you."

Jorah did not answer her. Head down, he sprinted. His arm and cheek were bleeding from the glass; this was all very real enough, and if another of those falling beams took him out, he wouldn't be getting up again. But the only thing he concentrated on was Longclaw. If he was creating it, creating all of this –

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dany step into the inferno of the burning rafters. As she had at Khal Drogo's funeral pyre, when he'd begged her not to . . . when she'd emerged as Mother of Dragons in truth. For a moment he was frozen, remembering the awe and terror of that moment, how he'd remember it until the end of his days, his last breath . . .

. . . Then she threw back her head and made a sound that was not dragon or woman or human, and the hackles stood ice-cold on Jorah's neck. Gasping a prayer to every god that was, every true god, to protect him from this red demon and this living nightmare, he reached the door, reached up, and ripped Longclaw from its sheath.

The fire was reflected on the steel, seemed to catch it and run down the blade. And then suddenly it was too hot to hold, searing him to the bone, and he would have dropped it but couldn't; the hilt had melted into his flesh. And he was, just for an instant, not standing in the smoldering ruins of his keep on Bear Island, but rather before a mountainous avalanche of broken ice blocks, smoke rising and twisting and small fires twinkling against an endless void. The Wall. He recognized Castle Black, almost lost amid the destruction. Father. But his lord father was dead, gods knew what had become of the actual Longclaw – he thought for some odd reason it had a wolf carved on the pommel now instead of a bear – and there was no Wall, only that monstrous pile of rubble –

"No!" Jorah roared, and the image vanished. And then directly in front of him stood the horrible fetch of Dany, her burned hair still writhing and sizzling away on her skull. The fright was terrible, but he didn't stop to process it. He drew Longclaw back and thrust it into her as hard as he could.

She gasped. Her blood hissed on the blade when he wrenched it out, sobbing, and stabbed her again. "Jorah. . ." she whispered, agonized. "Jorah. . . my bear. . . what have you done. . . please. . ."
"Dany," he wept, stabbing her a third time. The salt of his tears stung his eyes, and the smoke of the burning keep. "My queen, forgive me. . . Khaleesi, forgive me. . ."

When he pulled out Longclaw this time, she collapsed. She pressed her hands to the ruin of her chest and stomach, the blood dark as rubies on her fingers. "Jorah. . ." she breathed. "My bear. . ."

He went to his knees as well, overcome. The sword fell from his nerveless fingers. Crawling across the floor, he came to her. "Khaleesi. . ."

Her hand reached up to touch his cheek. And in the instant before it did, he felt how cold it was. Cold as ice. And saw that her eyes were as blue as crystal stars.

Jorah threw himself backwards just in the nick of time, as a shrieking ice blade lacerated the place he'd been a bare instant before. He fled headlong back to where he'd dropped Longclaw, snatched it up, and just managed to catch the Other's first blow. Even the spell-forged Valyrian steel screamed at touching such unholliness, and Jorah's arms shook with the effort of holding it off. Back and forth they battered, the Other quick and light and graceful as the wind, Jorah a big human man, a skilled fighter and experienced knight but slow and clumsy in comparison. It no longer looked much if anything like Dany, was becoming more and more diabolical by the instant. *Fire cannot kill a dragon.* But this –

*Fire and ice,* Jorah thought madly. *Dead by fire, reborn by ice –*

And then, just then, he had a glimpse of a realization so horrifying that he nearly missed his parry – and if he had, would have lost his life. A realization of where the Others must come from, why R'hllor's followers spoke of an eternal battle between the two, why Kojja Mo had been so frightened of taking them here –

*Always two. Always in balance. Always at war.*


Jorah ducked the Other's next blow, feeling the bitter blade fly less than an inch above his head. Then fumbled around, bellowed in pain as he grabbed a fistful of blazing log, and smashed it into the demon's teeth with all the strength that was in him.

For a horrible moment he saw nothing, nothing but flooding darkness and the snow hissing as it struck the fiery beams. Then all of a sudden the Other lit up like a torch, its mouth opening and a shrill keen on the very edge of hearing driving into Jorah, knocking him backwards as he grimaced and cradled his blistered hand. Then cracks ran through it like a maze across the surface of a frozen lake, and its keening turned to screaming as it burned. A column of foul smoke daggered up, and Jorah had to shut his stinging eyes. He hunched there, panting raggedly, as the hellish glow slowly began to fade.

When he opened his eyes again, it was completely dark. No trace of the fell thing remained, or the burning hall on Bear Island, or Longclaw or the Wall, or any of the other phantasms the red priests had extracted from his mind and used against him. But the pain in his hand and the bleeding cuts on his cheek told him that it had been no dream. He had just learned something, seen something, destroyed something, survived something, that he had never been meant to. *I was supposed to stay trapped there, literally living in my fantasy forever.* But of all the ironies, the Dany of his fantasy had been nothing like the real one. The Dany who would give up her crown and dragons and destiny to live happily ever after with him on Bear Island was just that – a delusion, and a
dangerous one. And that was how Jorah had dodged the noose: by knowing that it would never be so. That his duty remained to the real queen, somewhere only the gods could say inside this accursed red temple.

Asshai under the Shadow. Jorah pushed himself to his feet. He was beginning, horribly, to understand why. For these many thousands of years, the red priests had been burning folk at their fires. And now the Prince that was Promised had supposedly come, the tales of Azor Ahai and a burning sword. An eternal battle. Others of flame and Others of ice. One always giving birth to the other only to be destroyed again. Or not.

Jorah felt sick. If all the red priests in the world had burned even just one man a day over the eight thousand years since the Battle of the Dawn and the raising of the Wall, that would tally in the millions. And if he was right that every man consumed by the red god's flame was reborn in ice, becoming the things that his lord father had gone beyond the Wall to hunt. . . He wasn't a red priest and he hadn't burned the Dany his mind had created, but he'd killed her with the red priests' magic, in the heart of the red priests' ancient stronghold, and the results were unassailable. But if everything else was true, that vision when he'd first grasped Longclaw, when he'd seen the Wall fallen and scattered. . .

"Gods, no," Jorah said aloud. We are in the maw of the beast. If the real Dany was still alive, she could well be in their power for good, just as her illusion had told him. And if she was . . .

Up ahead, he could see a wraithlike glow, growing stronger and stronger. For a split second he took it for salvation, the way out – and then he saw the things writhing up from the smooth dark floor as the light passed over them. Shadows of every shape and size and form, man and monster both, shadows with no body to cast them. They only live when given birth by light. Skittering, clicking, they undulated toward Jorah in a seething, smoking knot, molding into each other and then separating again. Ash fell before them, and their eyes and throats and hands were flame.

Jorah Mormont turned and fled.

He ran harder than he ever had in his life, his torn legs screaming in protest. He could feel his burn scabs cracking, pus oozing down the backs of his thighs, but he did not dare to look back. He could hear the snapping of spectral jaws, ran still faster, thought that it was bloody ridiculous for a man to be killed by a shadow and he didn't intend to be the first. Nor the –

One moment he was running flat out, and the next he was falling, the floor having completely vanished from beneath his boots. He flailed in midair, found no purchase, then banged off something solid with a bone-crushing thud. That did not arrest his momentum, but rather increased it, until he was plunging arse over heels down some long steep tunnel. He tasted blood, broke his fingernails off trying to claw the stone to stop himself, and then at last saw something directly below that most certainly was daylight. As he was trying to decide whether or not to hold his breath, he dropped through at full speed.

The question of breath was moot anyway, as the next moment Jorah had none. It felt for several moments as if he had no lungs either, then he finally struggled to hands and knees in the foot-deep mud. Disgusting though it was, he was grateful for it. Otherwise there would have been nothing to break his fall but the bare stone of the culvert, as his landing spot apparently was, and the damage would have been much more lasting.

He was outside, however. Strong sunlight slanted down around him, and the lower steps of the temple were thickly clad in mossy trees. He could just make out the distant buildings of Asshai below, and beyond that the glittering sea. He had to think of something, had to save Dany from wherever she was trapped in that terrible place. . . Drogon had saved her in the House of the
Undying, but Drogon was slung up behind the Cinnamon Wind, too badly wounded to fly. Yet he must know that she is in danger. . . dragonfire must be superior to any of the red priests’ flames, or they would not covet it so badly. . . Others of flame, Others of ice, one always begetting the other. . . Now, Mormont! NOW!

Jorah scooted forward and folded his arms over his chest as if about to go into deep water. Then he pushed off and slid down the culvert, faster and faster, the mud keeping him moving nicely. He shot down a straight drop, saw the end coming up, and somehow managed to somersault onto his feet. The exertion burned in his chest, but he ignored it. They'd all be burning another way if he failed.

A brief and intense episode of bushwhacking later, he had gotten clear of the trees and was lurching down into Asshai as fast as he could go. In other circumstances, he would have dearly loved to be able to stop and look around. Towers of multicolored stone, hanging gardens, fluttering veils of sand silk from behind which rich laughter emanated, beautiful half-naked women with skin of chocolate and copper, snake charmers in turbans, all kinds of animals roasting over firepits and braziers. A broad plaza where spellsingers wandered, whistling, creating flocks of butterflies that appeared and disappeared to the delight of watching children, and an aeromancer who stood luxuriously cooling off beneath his own personal raincloud. Merchants of every color and race, thrusting out moonstones and porcelain and pottery and jewelry and gilded arks and pickled oddities, hour candles, black amethysts and other poisons, potions for beauty, twisting carved caps off vials to tempt with rare perfumes. Quills and parchments and books written in every tongue of man, boxes of delicacies, or ones that smoked or rattled or hissed. Zorse and tiger hides and peacock feathers and lace and bolts of cloth and amulets and runes and bones and spices – saffron, myrrh, cardamom, ginger, cloves, pepper. Ambergris and whale ivory, a conjuror floating balls of fire, strange silver instruments filling the hot air with sweet music, statues made of ice that did not melt, dogs and rats and wildcats and apes and strange multicolored birds that talked. . . the wonder and the exoticism did not end. And this was only what Jorah glimpsed in flashes as he was barreling through the crowded streets, knocking men aside like ninepins and learning curses in half a dozen new languages for his trouble.

He could see the Cinnamon Wind still docked below, and that would certainly be Drogon behind it. Kojja Mo must have convinced the crew to stay, as eager as they undoubtedly were to set sail home for Tall Trees Town. All he needed was the dragon, and then they could feel free to be on their –

A hand grabbed Jorah by the wrist, and pulled him almost off his feet into a shadowy alcove.
"You."

Taken completely off guard, Jorah tried to wrench loose, but the elegant fingers were stronger than they looked. And when he looked up, only the dark eyes were visible in the slits of the lacquered red mask. Quaithe. Seven bloody hells, Quaithe.

The priestess gazed at him a long moment in silence, then spoke. "Jorah the Andal. You came back."

"You!" Jorah could not decide whether he should strangle her on the spot or beg for her assistance. She had come riding to Vaes Tolorro at the side of Xaro Xhoan Daxos and Pyat Pree, and he had sensed then that she was the most dangerous of the three. She was the one who had planted this seed of Asshai in Dany's mind long ago – what was she here for now but to gloat at her victory?

He fumbled for his sword, before remembering he didn't have one. There was an expression of faint amusement in her eyes, as if the fact that he thought to thwart her with mere steel was almost
Insulting. I will kill her somehow, if I must. I will not let her trap me again.

"Have no fear," the red priestess said. "But I know what you mean. It will avail you nothing to set
fire to the temple. Not even with the dragon's flame. You have already seen what happens when
you do."

"You dare say that to me?" Jorah jerked away from her. "Aye, when I did see it? If all the folk you
followers of R'hllor give to the fires are reborn as – "

"Do you think it is by our choice?" Quaithe asked levelly. "It is the power of the Lord of Night and
Terror. Everything that happens in the world provokes an equal and opposite reaction, my lord. If
we give a man as a sacrifice to R'hllor, we cannot help it if the Great Other answers by reanimating
him in ice."

"You could help it. You need not burn anyone at all."

"Need we not? You speak from ignorance, Jorah the Andal. And the Others of ice can still be
killed again by fire, as you discovered."

"I discovered much and more. I will not be seduced again by you and your lies. The red priests and
R'hllor create their own enemy, so the battle will be certain to rage forever."

"Not forever." Her voice was low and urgent. "The end is here, upon us now. The cycle must be
broken. The Wall is already fallen. You saw it yourself. And if you rain dragonfire down on the
temple, the ice will grow even stronger. You must instead do the opposite. You must remember the
paradox."

"To go forward you must go back," Jorah said grudgingly. Dany had told him in Qarth what this
bloody terrifying woman had whispered to her. "To touch the light you must pass beneath the
shadow."

"Very good," Quaithe said. "And to unleash the fire, you must bring the ice. Do you love your
queen, Jorah the Andal?"

"With all my heart."

"Then you will do whatever is needful, I know. Before it is too late." Her fingers touched his
unshaven cheek, skating over the demon's-head brand.

"And I'm supposed to. . . what? Freeze the temple?"

The eyes behind the mask remained trained on his. "You must have wondered why I was in Qarth,"
she said, by way of answer. "So far away from my order and my home."

"Red priests can be found the world round."

"So they can. But that was not why I was there. I was there because I knew that the Mother of
Dragons would soon be there as well, and that one day she would have to destroy my fellows. I had
seen it in the flames, and I did not mean to be destroyed as well." Quaithe turned in a flutter of
robes. "That is what you must help her do now. If you want to save her. If you want to bring down
the Lord of Night and Terror."

"Of course I do, dammit!"

"Good," Quaithe said. "You are in Asshai, after all. Aeromancers can be found as thick as flies on
a dog. You know they can control the weather, you have seen them do so, and many of them can conjure an ice storm in their sleep. That is what you need. Take them up to the temple, Jorah the Andal. Take them up to the temple, and set us free."
Night came early at Greywater Watch. The dim sun remained in the background throughout the day, caught up in the knots of moss and ghostgrass and fading altogether before Howland Reed's hourglass had been turned eight times. Then the damp darkness came stealing in, licking at the rushlights with runnels of mist, turning the trees to spirits and the black water of the marshes to a cold opaque mirror. It was difficult to see even a dozen yards beyond the glow of the longhouse torches, and things croaked and cried in half-human voices. The crannogmen knew every mystery of the swamps, but it was still a formidable mystery to Jeyne, and even if she'd had the desire to wander out into the thick of them, it was very unlikely that she would be allowed to do so. While she was still carrying Robb's heir, she was worth more than her own weight in gold.

At night she dreamed of home. Lady Jyana had told her that it was not uncommon for women to have strange ones as their pregnancy progressed, but even though Jeyne was close enough to her time now that she grew tired from walking short distances, could not see her feet when she looked down, and had to constantly make water, she never dreamed of anything else. These visitations, however, gave her no pleasure. Her family was there with her in the Crag, but the wind sighed through the crumbling towers and her sister and brothers were always ghosts, laughing around the next corner but gone as soon as she ran in search of them. Her father flitted in and out, remote as the waves on the beach below. And her mother rarely appeared at all, but Jeyne dreaded it when she did. Bloodied and screaming, Lady Sybell Westerling's shade hounded her daughter through the darkness, begging for vengeance or for mercy in turn. Jeyne could give her neither, and would always wake with a gasp with the covers tangled around her legs. In the closeness of the earth, and what she had learned of the crannogmen and their greendreams, it was very hard to believe that they were only night terrors. Somehow, in this place of seeing, they were here.

Jeyne did not need to be reminded that they were all dead. She lived with it in every moment of her waking hours. When the news had come, Howland and Lady Jyana and Galbart Glover and Maege Mormont had tried to shield her from it. But she could tell that something was terribly amiss, and would not stop asking until they finally told her.

She had been too stunned to feel anything, at first. Lady Maege had told her that no harm would come to her family – except for her mother. But instead, the Lannisters had capriciously done away with the lot of them, and the reverberations were crashing across the whole of the kingdoms. Because of her family's murder, the westermen and riverlords were flocking to support a supposed Targaryen, and King Tommen's remaining time on the Iron Throne could be measured in weeks, if not days. All of Westeros was on the move, and the result, as always, would be writ in blood and fire.

Jeyne had tried to hate all of them. It seemed to make more sense that way. For innocent Elenya, her best friend growing up, as they whispered under the covers at night about the handsome lords they'd one day marry. *If only I knew.* For funny little Rollam and tall strong Raynald, who'd always looked out for her as a big brother should. It was them she finally wept for, so hard it hurt. But there was never much grief for her parents, only guilt and anger in turn.

It was queer to think how alone in the world she was now. Following the shocking revelation of Jon Snow's true parentage had been a raven bearing word that he was dead, had been murdered in Castle Black's very courtyard – allegedly by his own Sworn Brothers. That, obviously, torched to cinders any further notions Lord Galbart and Lady Maege might have about marrying Jeyne to him, and as the last few months whiled by, Jeyne had spent almost all her time praying desperately for a healthy son. That she might give back the north and Robb's people at least this little of what she
had taken from them. Give them a reason to believe in something, anything, again.

At night, in hopes of staving off another painful return to her memories, Jeyne had taken to lying awake, hands resting on the swell of her belly, as the babe moved about inside. Fearful of Lady Jyana's warnings that the abortifacient herbs she'd unwittingly consumed could cause her child to be born dead or deformed, she always nervously prodded her stomach whenever he'd been quiet for a while. She was not as big as she'd thought she would be, but Lady Jyana said that this was not uncommon, that some women could go a full nine moons and give birth before they ever knew that they were pregnant.

It was just one of the bits of strange female lore that Jeyne had learned recently. Before Robb, she'd barely even known the mechanics of the marriage act. Commoner girls could chuckle at bawdy jests all they liked, but for a highborn girl to have anything resembling detailed information would automatically cast serious doubt on her virginity and a shadow on her reputation, costing her father through the nose in alliances, money, and land. If anyone other than Ned Stark's son had deflowered her, that was where Jeyne would be now: damaged goods, soiled by a traitor, tainted and dangerous by very virtue of being female. As much as she oft felt like a sow being fattened for slaughter, at least having the King in the North's heir in her belly was a cause worth valuing her for.

On this particular night, it was so cold that a thin plate of ice armored the marshes, snapping and crackling. A fringe of icicles dripped from the stilts, and inside the Reeds' hall, the smoky rushlights sputtered and struggled. A fire roared in the hearth at the far end, but though Jeyne huddled so close to it that it scorched her face, draped in a heavy woolen blanket, she could not seem to get warm. She was alone but for one of Howland's hawks, hooded and prowling his perch on the other end; the Lord of Greywater Watch had trained them to do much of his hunting for him, plucking fish and fowl from the depths of the bogs. Howland himself was absent, mediating a dispute between two of his vassals, who accused each other of building weirs in each other's streams and siphoning off the other's fresh water – a serious offense in this place of brackish murky swamp – and Lady Jyana had retired to bed early, pleading headache. But since she had more than a touch of the greensight which was said to manifest so strongly in her son Jojen, and this was usually the symptom which preceded its onset, Jeyne could not help but wait tensely for the crannogwoman's next vision. They were never good. Though after the last one, claiming that the Wall would fall and the Long Night would soon begin, she was hard pressed to see how they could get much worse.

Restlessly, she shifted her position. She had recently developed a low-level but persistent cough from the damp cold air, and that combined with the baby's kicking meant that her ribs were always sore. Lady Jyana made a tonic for her, but it tasted so awful that Jeyne often preferred to suffer. There was not much else to do at Greywater. She'd already read every book that Howland owned thrice over, and combined with the strict rules about her overexerting herself or doing anything dangerous, praying was in fact her only refuge.

Sometimes Jeyne thought that when the babe was born and she herself was of no more appreciable use, she would spare Glover and Mormont the trouble and enter a motherhouse on her own accord, study to become a septa. There was so much more about faith that she hungered to know. Perhaps the northmen would allow her to be a part of her child's life, but as he would be trained to avenge his father and take up his crown from the moment he drew his first breath, nursed by another woman, reminded constantly that he was a Stark and not a Westerling, she would be wise not to expect it.

Jeyne shivered. She felt very old. If she did enter a motherhouse and never remarried – if, gods forbid, her child did not live – her House would die with her. An ancient and honorable House, for
all its current devastation and impecuniousness. And maybe, just maybe, she would want to take another husband one day, to fill a home with a family to replace the one she had lost. There would be no mother to poison her babes in the womb, no Tywin Lannister looming over all. The man would never be Robb, but mayhaps, by grace –

Jeyne started, frowned. She thought she had heard some strange noise outside – stranger than usual, that was. A rushing like trees in the wind, but stronger. It made a deep chill slide down her back, and – ignoring her first instinct to stay hidden under the blanket like a child from the monsters – she got up and ventured down the length of the low hall. "Lord Howland?" she called. "Is that you?"

No answer.

"Lord Galbart?" Jeyne shirked at the door, then reached out and made herself open it a crack. Chilly black night swirled in, almost ripping it out of her hand. "Lady Maege?"

The noise was loudest here, loud enough that she almost had to shout. And then she stumbled backwards and fell hard, choking on a scream, as a great black shape came swooping in, flapping and cawing, with a whole legion behind.

*Ravens*, Jeyne thought madly. There must have been almost a hundred of them, filling the air with feathers and beaks and talons, dive-bombing over her as she tried to cover her head; they were so close that she could feel them ripping out strands of hair. The rushlights guttered madly in the draft from their wings, plunging the longhall into sporadic bouts of pitch blackness, and still they kept coming and coming. The winter wind banged and rattled through the door, and Jeyne clawed her way back down the hall to the fire. The whirlwind had scattered embers from it across the floor, and if they caught –

Something punched her in the small of the back, and she went to her knees again, just barely throwing out her hands in time so she didn't land on her belly. On all fours she crawled the rest of the way, threw down her blanket on the embers and frantically stamped on them. But a hungry roar of flame leapt up when she lifted it, licking into the dry woven mats as if they were soaked in tallow, and suddenly a blazing line slashed the room like a knife across a throat.

Jeyne dodged one way, but the fire sprang up there; she could feel the heat as it caught briefly on her dress. Hem smoking, she turned another, but the fire was closing in from that side as well. The ravens were barely visible through the smoke, she knew somehow that it was no accident that they were here, but –

Taking as much of a running start as she could, Jeyne jumped over the flames and came down hard. Jerking open one of the sliding walls that could be used to rearrange and move the longhouse as needed, she gasped a prayer to the Mother and pushed herself off.

It was four or five feet straight down to the pier outside, and she felt the shock all the way up her knees as she hit. *No, no, this isn't good, I can't* – but what else was she supposed to do, let Greywater burn down around her ears? There were already shouts in the distance as the other crannognmen took notice of the blaze, but they wouldn't get here in time. There was no Raynald or Robb or Ser Brynden or Lord Howland or Lord Galbart or Lady Maege or any of them. Just her.

Jeyne unhooked one of the buckets from the pier and plunged it into the black water lapping below. Shards of ice juddered up from the hole, and for a moment she could see her reflection, silhouetted unearthily by the fiery longhouse. Then she turned and heaved it as hard as she could.

There was a seething hiss, and white steam boiled into the cold night. Jeyne was already on her
knees pulling another bucket, just able to make out the shapes of the ravens wheeling overhead, riding the updrafts of the flame. But that was all she had time for, for then she was pulling a third bucket and a fourth, struggling against the slippery pier and the freezing water that turned her hands numb, splashing it on the flames. Then there were other shadows running out of the darkness, jumping from their boats, and she was coughing from the smoke and suddenly the bucket had slipped from her fingers and someone had her hard by the wrist, pulling her from the inferno. "Your Grace! Get away!"

Jeyne twisted up to see Lady Maege. Greywater continued to vent ash and sullen gusts of embers, but the blaze was mostly out by now and the structure largely intact. Crannogmen scuttled about it to every side, dousing hot spots and inspecting the supports to see how badly they had been gutted, if it was safe to venture back inside or not. Jeyne's legs felt suddenly shaky, and she was glad for Lady Maege still holding her up. There had been no time to be afraid when it was happening, but now it was sinking in how close of a shave they'd had. It had all been so fast.

"But why?" she said numbly, watching as a burned wall folded forward like ashy parchment. "Why?"

"Because of my children." The voice came out of the night very near at hand, causing both Jeyne and Maege to start. Lady Jyana, still clad in her soot-stained sleeping shift, stepped up beside them on small bare feet, regarding the damage to her home in grief. "Jojen and Meera are dead. That is what the ravens came to tell me. They are dead, their blood gives birth to a new three-eyed crow, and the north is under all-out attack."

"The Boltons?" Lady Maege demanded. "If those flayed sons of whores think to – "

"The dead," Lady Jyana answered. "It is Bran Stark who tells me so, the master of the ravens, or at least the entity who once was Bran. He opened his eyes in the heart tree of Winterfell, and saw it in ruins. Saw two men struggling in the snow for a sword that shone like the sun, and saw one man kill the other and take it. And then saw the dead coming, many thousands. Wights far south of where the Wall used to stand. More will follow. The darkness is very strong now."

Lady Maege looked thunderstruck. "Bran Stark? But he was killed long ago, him and little Rickon both, by Theon Greyjoy – "

"No," Lady Jyana said, with great finality. "He was not. But the transformation that has been wrought in him... he is nothing you would recognize. The ironborn's own prayer returns to them a hundredfold now. What is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger. He becomes the prince of the green, the master of a thousand eyes and one. And he calls us to fight."

"Fight?" For once, even the redoubtable Lady of Bear Island looked unnerved. "An army of dead things inside Winterfell? A ruined Winterfell? Lord Galbart and I could try to make haste north and gather what levies we could, but it would be a terribly dangerous endeavor for likely little result. And our duty is still here to the queen, until His Grace's heir is born and – "

Jeyne gasped. At the very mention of the word, a great fist seemed to grab her by the spine and rip it out of her back, a breathless wrenching gasp that had her utterly at its mercy until it passed. That was also when she realized in further horror that not all of the wetness soaking her skirts was from the marsh. "Lady Maege," she managed. "You may not have to worry of that much longer."

Both of the older women took one look at her, and – having birthed six children between them – knew exactly what was happening. "Your Grace!" Lady Maege tightened her grip. "You never should have exerted yourself like that, so close to your time. It was much too dangerous. Come at once."
Jeyne stumbled alongside her. A few of the crannogmen had lit torches, and the lights flickered weirdly in the dark slagged bulwark of Greywater. It was a strange pastiche of shadow and flame, silhouettes like ghosts, and halfway back up into the keep another pain caught Jeyne in its teeth. Women overdue sometimes went horseback riding in hopes of bringing on their labor, but this must be one of the first of its kind.

Inside, Lady Jyana had found a corner that was still mostly shielded by its woven grass screens, and beckoned Lady Maege to lay Jeyne down there. Her home was half in ashes around her, and she had just received news of her children's death and an otherworldly assault on the north, home of her liege lords, but the little crannogwoman's composure remained astonishing. "Labor is customarily longest with the first," she said, "but with the trauma that brought on yours, it's hard to say. I am sorry, Your Grace. If I had my herbs and poultices, I could make this easier for you, but I do not. Do you pray to the Seven?"

"I pray to all the gods," Jeyne gasped. "Old and new. Robb's gods and mine."

"Sweet child." Lady Jyana's hand was soft on her hair, her eyes far away, and that, combined with the intimate term of address, made Jeyne understand that Lady Jyana was not seeing her at all just then, but her own daughter. She would never have the chance to bring Meera's babes into the world, to comfort her through the pain and put them to her breast afterwards. To see them grow up and learn the lore of their people. How a woman could stand such a loss, Jeyne never wanted to know. She'd already lost her home, husband, good-mother, father, mother, sister, brothers, and guardian, but a child was different. Flesh of your flesh, breath of your breath, soul of your soul. Gods, I beg you. You have had so much from me already. Let me keep this. Just this.

The pains rapidly got worse. Soon she was gasping and grunting and hissing her way through them, wanting to scream but somehow unable. If she screamed, she would scream for everything, and that might tear her in half. So she struggled mostly in silence, as Lady Maege periodically frightened off any onlookers and Lady Jyana held her hand. At times she would put Jeyne's arm around her shoulders, to walk her back and forth like a restless horse. Then she would gently reach between her legs to feel how the process was coming along, reassuring her that while the onset had been quite abrupt, nothing seemed wrong this far.

Jeyne's sweaty hair stuck in clumps to her face and neck. She could see Robb far off in her mind's eye, smiling tenderly at her. But every time she tried to reach him, to touch him, he vanished, and only the relentless attack of his last legacy remained. If it was true, if Bran and Rickon had never been dead, why he had turned to her in the first place... no, she did not want to think about that. It was too horrible.

A boy. Please gods. A boy. Yet a boy would be taken from her at once, sacrificed and forged for revenge alone. Another king, another crown, another endless war. Make it stop, she thought murkily, unsure whether she meant the birth, the pain, or the eternal cycle of vengeance. Mother, make it stop.

The night whiled away. The cold grew deeper, until she was shivering violently, teeth chattering as it stung her bare skin. She was exhausted, but something far beyond her kept her fighting. Then the pains were coming fast and hard and nonstop, and Lady Maege had one of her legs and Lady Jyana the other, and both were telling her to push. A burning pain shot through her from nape to navel and centered in her heavy womb, at the core of her, and finally she screamed. Blood splattered her dress and the mat underneath her. She screamed again, gagging, and pushed. Through the approaching blackness, she heard Lady Maege threatening someone that if they did not get out of here immediately, she would drown them in the swamps and stake the corpse up for the ravens. But everything was vast and formless and unimportant but the climax.
A sensation of immense pressure rocked against Jeyne, forcing her to the point of disintegration. Then there was another gush of ichor on her thighs, and she heard a pitiful mewling. Eyes dazed with sparks, she saw Lady Jyana catch something small and slimy, and accept Lady Maege's offered dagger to cut the cord. Both of the women were bent over the shape in urgent attention.

"What is it?" Jeyne croaked, her voice almost gone. "My baby... what is it?"

They were silent. Too silent, and Lady Jyana got to her feet and hurried out of sight, still clutching the babe. Panic took hold of Jeyne, tried to make her sit up, but a roar of dizziness knocked her flat again. "What's wrong?" she pleaded. "Is it... is he...?"

"Be calm, Your Grace." Lady Maege was holding her down. "You still need to deliver the afterbirth – it can mortify in women and kill them, if they do not. Lady Jyana has gone to clean the prince."

*Prince.* The word punched through Jeyne like a crossbow quarrel, a confirmation of her greatest hopes and her deepest fears. Again she tried to struggle upright. "He – I have a son? I want him, please..." She felt as fragile as crystal, heavy as lead. Her head was so light it might float off her shoulders, and the smell of blood and her own body were thick and rank in her nose. "Robb... name him Robb..."

"You're still bleeding, my lady. You need to stay still." Lady Maege was wadding torn strips of cloth between her legs, at the violated, throbbing center of her. "But you'll be fine, you're a strong lass. There now. Lie still."

"My son," Jeyne repeated desperately. "I want him."

"Lady Jyana has him, as I said. She is... seeing to him."

"Is he... is he..." Suddenly Jeyne panicked that she had imagined that feeble crying. "Is he alive?"

"He is, Your Grace." Lady Maege finished her ministrations. "The afterbirth should be coming soon. I'm going to fetch you what more warm covers I can find. Close your eyes and take deep breaths. Sleep. This pain will only be a bad dream when you wake."

Jeyne did not want to sleep. She wanted to get up and run, to find out what it was Lady Maege was not telling her about her son, to insist on her right to exist, to have consequences in her own self and not as a pawn in their plans. But she was weak and dizzied and freezing and utterly spent, and she couldn't. Shivering under the makeshift blankets, raw as an open wound, she delivered the afterbirth and lost consciousness shortly afterwards.

She fled through a maelstrom of fevered, haunting dreams – all of her customary ghosts, but a thousand times over. Sometimes she drifted to the surface of wakefulness, but could not clamber out of the deep dark pool dragging her down. She heard low, vehement voices, but couldn't call out to them. Shadows loomed over her and then vanished again. Hands touched her brows or tried to hold bowls of broth to her lips. Wolves howled in her head. Was she dying? She must be dying. Where are you, Robb?

Jeyne had no idea how long she drifted on the periphery between worlds. But at last she began to hear coherent words again, realize that she had been moved somewhere warmer and safer, lying in a pile of furs with torches to all sides. Footsteps and voices paced back and forth behind a screen.

"A monster," a man – Lord Galbart Glover – was saying, his voice thick with disgust and despair.
"No use. No good. With half an arm, he won't ever be able to swing a sword, and if it's true he's blind as well. . . I pray that Lady Sybell Westerling is roasting in some wretched hell of her Seven's devising. I pray it with all my heart."

"Lady Sybell has paid in full measure for her crimes, my lord," Jyana Reed answered levelly. "Aye, the child has no right hand, and I do not believe he can see, but he suckles strongly. It may be that he will live."

"What does it matter?" Lord Galbart cried. "We have a boy, just as we all prayed for. A boy, King Robb's blood and seed, but a blind armless weakling. He was the only hope we had left, and now we have nothing. How could he ever rule the north? How could he ever redeem us?"

"Not so loud, my lord. You will wake the queen."

"The queen," Lord Galbart said bitterly. "Yes. Much as I feel that Lord Walder may roast even more hotly than Lady Sybell, I would to all the gods that the queen was a Frey."

"You are out of your mind with grief, my lord of Glover," Lady Maege said sharply. "I share your anger and disappointment, but you accomplish no good by pointing fingers at the victims in all this. A helpless infant and his sixteen-year-old mother, whose only crime was her compassion. And when I miss my eldest girl, my Dacey, every time I close my eyes at night and every time I wake in the morning, when I miss her so much I sometimes forget what day it is or how to write my name, there is nothing the Freys can ever do to repair the damage that they themselves chose to cause."

Lord Galbart's shadow wheeled away. "What do you suggest, then? Jon Snow is dead, the babe is worthless, Lady Jyana says that Bran Stark lives but has become forever one with the trees, that the dead menace the north, that Winterfell is broken and the Wall fallen. . . there is nothing left. The Stark line is gone. We are all done for."

"Not entirely," Lady Jyana said, as composedly as ever. "News has reached our ears of a particular girl, said to have been taken from the Vale by some ill-reputed hedge knight. With her brothers gone and her brother's son unsound of body, she is what is left to us. My lords, by all law and custom, Sansa Stark is now the rightful Queen in the North."

Lord Glover cursed. "Kidnapped from the Vale by a hedge knight? Is that where she's been all this time, Littlefinger hiding her up his breeches? She'll never be seen again, even if it truly was her."

"It was," Lady Jyana said. "The ravens told another tale as well. There is a place in the riverlands, where a certain Brotherhood without Banners makes their hideout. A hollow hill, an old and secret place. It is located directly beneath a weirwood tree, one of the few left south of the Neck."

Lord Galbart and Lady Maege exchanged glances. "What of it?"

"The three-eyed crow has been inside that tree as well," said Lady Jyana. "And seen Queen Sansa there, among others. This is what has come of my children's deaths, my lord, my lady. I understand." Her voice quivered, but did not break.

"But with the Brotherhood. . . if half the things said of them are true, it's no better. She was wed to the Imp, they'd hang her for being a Lannister."

"They'd be utter bloody fools to do so," Lady Maege said. "When protecting her and taking her home would put the entire north behind them. Or not taking her home, considering what we've heard, but sheltering her at least."

"There was no shadow of a noose on her," Lady Jyana said. "I believe with all my heart that she
lives. You desired Robb's heir. It is she."


Monster. Jeyne, who had been listening the entire time, closed her eyes against that word, worse than prince in what it promised for her and her future. So he had been born missing most of his right arm and likely his vision as well, burned away by her mother's herbs. A man who could not see or hold a sword was no fit battle commander, and no unfit battle commander could ever carve out his kingdom or hold it against foes later. Yet for all that, she felt a surge of love so strong it was close to madness, for this frail little soul that Robb had left her, as damaged without as she was within. Perhaps he would never be King in the North. But while there was breath in her body, no one would take him from her again.

She slept again after that, and awoke clearer-headed and thirsty as a desert. Calling out in as strong a voice as she could manage finally led to the appearance of Lady Jyana. She fetched Jeyne a cup of water, wiped her brow with a cool cloth, and then said, "Your Grace, you must be strong. Your son lives, but he was born – "


Lady Jyana flinched. "Aye," she said at last, quietly. "You must have heard us talking, and I am sorry. That was no way to find out. But now that that is known, along with the rest, Lord Galbart and Lady Maege are of a temperament to return home after all, no matter how dangerous it is. It is their place, their family's, and what better time to defend it than in its hour of greatest need? They mean to muster the remaining folk of the north in Sansa Stark's name, and fight the Boltons, the wights, and whatever else the Long Night may throw at them. It is our only hope."

"Sansa," Jeyne repeated dully. They'd never met, of course, but for a moment this faceless young woman was both Robb and Elenya in her head. They were much alike, had lost their families and homes and hopes and dreams, but Sansa was a true Stark, a wolf, where Jeyne was only a pretty brown-eyed western girl with seashells on her dress. All she hoped was that if Sansa did emerge from this, she would offer a safe home to her brother's widow and her small crippled nephew. He is no threat to her.

Reminded of that, Jeyne had to ask again. "My baby. My son. Robb. Where is he?"

"With the nurses. He is a sweet child, they are already enchanted. But at the moment. . . Your Grace, are you strong enough for a visitor?"

Don't call me that. It was plain that she was no sort of queen at all anymore, neither wife nor mother to a king. What Jeyne said was, "Yes. Why?"

"With Greywater damaged, your son so frail, the winter closing in on the marshes, and Mormont and Glover leaving. . . this may be not the safest place for you any longer. And so, we must ask you at least."

"Ask? Ask what?"

Lady Jyana turned her head. "My lords?"

A pause, as Jeyne wondered who on earth could possibly wait outside. Her heart sped up. Then the woven screen moved aside, and two men cautiously entered the room. One was Howland Reed,
He was thin, tattered, dirty, his hair tangled and his beard fiery as a burning brand. Yet Jeyne knew him at once. She hadn't seen him since she was standing in the cold dark water of Riverrun's gate, about to swim for her life with the Blackfish, and the shock rendered her speechless for a long moment. Finally she whispered, "Lord Edmure?"

"Aye." Her good-uncle, the grief in his eyes as fresh and present as hers, bowed his head. "I... I'm sorry. For everything. It can't be enough for you or for me, when it was your family and my lady wife who paid the price for our actions. But I'm here now, to do what little I can. As soon as you're strong enough. As soon as you're ready. Far away from any Lannisters, gods be good, I will take you home."
He could taste soot in his mouth. It was a bad taste, blackening and choking, searing his throat and staining filthy on his teeth, but he welcomed it; it meant he was still alive. Lost in the jumbled darkness of splintered branches and fallen stones, all he could hear was the thunder of his own heartbeat. He prayed, halting and stammering in whispers, to the old gods, wondering if even they would be able to survive this sundering as Winterfell came utterly down around him. Ramsay did it. What exactly it was, Theon did not know, but the results were beyond dispute. He'd been just far enough away from the barrels to avoid being hit when the blast went off, remembered that the godswood had remained untouched for ten thousand years. Ten thousand years, and now this.

Somehow, smoke-scarred and freezing and exhausted, the flaming night punched by roars and groans as another section of the colossal walls came down, Theon managed to fall asleep. It was no worse a bed than any he'd had in the Dreadfort, and after making do in the ice-cold crypts, on slabs of solid rock, it felt almost warm and comfortable in comparison. Not that his rest was by any stretch of the imagination peaceful. The Starks were with him that night, tangibly enough to be real, yet for once their presence was not torment alone. He apologized to them again, begging that he'd tried to save the castle, but they didn't answer. They merely stood over him, keeping watch.

Theon woke alone, in bitter cold. It seemed to be morning, if only by virtue of the fact that the sky was a pale pearlescent grey instead of smothering black, and he was still in the godswood, comparatively unmolested. Smoke drifted overhead, and memory hit with a sharp jolt. Where's Mance? Where's Lightbringer?

Hissing with the pain, Theon unfolded his frigid limbs and reeled to his feet. Blood fizzed before his eyes, and he groped clumsily at his side to ensure that he still had his knife. There were wolves and Boltons and Baratheons out there in every direction. It would not do to go unarmed.

Feet feeling ten times clumsier than usual, Theon began to walk. The ashy snowdrifts were past his knees in some places, and the hot pools were full of floating jetsam. He wasn't sure what to do if he didn't find Mance, and not sure of what to do if he did, either. There was nowhere safe in the wreckage, they couldn't exactly go back into the crypts, and death waited around every corner, biding its time. But he no longer felt scared. Not brave, he'd never been brave, but he hadn't been scared in the snow, right before the explosion, that moment where he'd almost felt like a man again. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

Up ahead, through the thickest trees, Theon caught a glimpse of the great white weirwood that stood at the heart. Its leaves showed like shocking red bloodstains on the faded world, but darker still were the winged shadows that crouched in its branches.

Ravens. Theon stopped short. They were watching him. Every pair of beady eyes was trained on him, and so were the carven red wounds in the weirwood trunk. The face, that face. Its face.

"Bran?" Theon's voice cracked. "Bran... is that you?"

The tree itself did not answer, the cold wind rustling and sighing through it. But Theon stood spellbound nonetheless, unable to deny the truth of it – knew once and for all that Bran had become something far more than mortal. And then, as he started to take another pleading step –

A woman's scream split the silent air. Not close, but not far.
Theon spun around, heart in his throat. It hadn't come from the godswood, but from the bailey just outside – and that was bad enough. Whoever she was, she was trying to scream again, but was gurgling and squealing off into a long sustained sound of pure agony. *Who is it, who?* After he'd spirited Jeyne from the battlements, and the spearwives had been turned into Mance's cloak, there couldn't be that many women left of note, except for –

*Fat Walda.* Inhuman dread coiled down Theon's spine. And suddenly, he knew.

In that moment, a hand snatched him by the shoulder.

It was only with extreme difficulty that Theon managed to keep from unleashing a scream that would have matched Walda's. But instead he looked up into the shadowed face of Mance Rayder, his mismatched fingers splayed on Theon's sleeve in desperate urgency. "He's out there. I saw him. And he'll be coming here next, Turncloak. When he does, I mean to make an end of him. Run and hide, now. Run until I have."

Theon did not need to be told twice. He turned and ran, stumbling, not daring to look back. Yet he felt a sudden, foreign surge of vengeful pride, imagining that blazing blade opening the Bastard of Bolton's foul throat. Likely he wouldn't bleed at all when he was cut, just spew black bile. And if so –

*The Bastard.* Theon froze in the act of clambering up one of the tallest and most intact trees, where he intended to hide in the shroud of dark leaves at the top. He had called Ramsay that, he'd called him that, not *Lord Ramsay* and not *Master of the Dreadfort* or any other of the vainglorious appellations with which Ramsay was fond of improving his baseborn origins. *The Bastard."

"The Bastard," Theon repeated in a whisper, and started to climb. He still wasn't all that scared. He'd made it up the massive curtain wall of Winterfell to save Mance, he could manage a tree while Mance saved him. "The Bastard," he breathed again. "Ramsay Snow, the Bastard of Bolton."

In that moment, he had to fight an unhinged urge to jump down and run back. To have his hand (such as it was) in Ramsay's death, to enact the smallest measure of revenge for his unthinkable ordeal. Then he had to dismiss it. Looking into those pale eyes again, for real, might well crumple every shred of his abstract courage and leave him pining for mercy in a pitiful heap. Besides, Mance had Lightbringer. Mance didn't need his help.

Some time trickled by, slow as cold molasses. Theon lay still, trying to breathe as quietly as possible. He could hear voices – he could hear *Ramsay's* voice, and had to turn to the side to retch into the leaves. Then Mance answering, low and threatening – followed by the unmistakable sound of a scuffle. A faint reddish glow leavened the grey misty air, and Theon's heart lurched. *Kill him, Mance. Kill him.*

He squirmed around, straining to see better. He could just make out two dark figures pummeling each other among the fragile trees – one of them was down, the other had thrown a knife – they were struggling, wrenching, swearing – neither of them seemed to have the sword – *kill him! KILL HIM!* – and then, one on top of the other did exactly that.

Theon's heart dissolved in his chest. He recognized the man clambering breathlessly but triumphantly to his feet, off the convulsing one beneath. *Get down. Get down now, stop him – get the sword, stop him* – but exactly none of his nerves, muscles, or sinews would obey him. All he could do was lie mute, stricken and agonized, as Ramsay Bolton bent and picked up Lightbringer.

*Burn. Burn, you bastard, burn!* But Ramsay didn't. He emitted an echoing, bestial howl, clutching the sword even as his hand smoked and blackened. The light that hissed and boiled off it lit up the
entire godswood in unearthly color, dancing shadows, every hue and prism except for Ramsay. Where he remained at the center of the firestorm, he was utterly black.

At last it ended. Ramsay, gasping and grinning insanely, got to his feet, retrieved the scabbard from Mance's corpse – then, after one last lingering look, turned and began to stroll away through the trees. Theon watched him go, watched him vanish with that sword, that sword and everything it meant –

"No," he moaned, and his paralysis unlocked. He half slid, half fell to the ground, and sprinted across the clearing to Mance. He flung himself to his knees at the wildling king's side, ready to do anything he could – but one look at the ear-to-ear slash across Mance's throat revealed that it was useless. Mance's eyes were staring at the heavens, open and empty.

"No," Theon wept. "Oh, no, no, no." Reaching out, he fumbled to wipe the blood away and close those eyes, tried to make it look in the barest measure less as if Mance hadn't been murdered as horribly as he just had. But a racking spasm of grief overtook him, until his vision blurred with salt and his hands began to shake. Ramsay steals everything. Now he was alone, he had nothing, nothing, he would just –

No. Not quite alone.

Not yet.

A lightheadedness close to madness took hold of Theon Greyjoy. He recognized the brutal irony of it, but that didn't stop him. Leaving Mance behind, he got up and stumped as fast as he could to the heart tree, the heart tree with the staring face of the boy whose supposed death at his hands had been the entire catalyst for his own. Once more he went to his knees before it, a postulant at the end of his rope. "Old gods," he prayed aloud, clumsily knitting his maimed fingers together like a child learning his first catechism. "Winterfell needs you. It's under attack, it's in ruins, it. . ."

He stopped. He didn't know what else to say. "Help it," he finished at last, half in a sob. "Ramsay has Lightbringer. Bran. Help me. Please."

The silence that followed was the most excruciating of his life or his half-life. Just as Theon had time to think despairingly that the gods were going to prove as deaf to this plea as they had to countless others over the centuries, the branches stirred. Then the ravens rose into the air together, a swirling, screeching black cloud. Calling a word, screaming it. Two words. Two horrible, horrible words. The dead. The dead, the dead, the dead.

Too late to stop now, or turn back. Theon turned and galloped across the wood to the wallwalk. The stone steps were shattered and tilted and glazed in ice, but he made it up. The wind screamed in his face as he emerged from the shelter of the remaining tower, nearly flicking him off, and he had to progress on hands and knees, the bulk of the blasted castle below and to his left and the wolveswood below and to his right. Then, shivering and almost snow-blind, colder than he'd been even in the haunts of the Kings of Winter, he looked down.

And saw them.

There seemed no end to them. They shambled out of the trees in perversely regimental order, clad in rotting fur and torn leather, some trailing frozen entrails, plodding ponderous step by step, hanks of hair and flesh torn from their putrid faces and their eyes like crystal stars, blue as a long-gone summer sky. Wights. The word suggested itself to Theon's petrified mind with surprising matter-of-factness.
This isn't exactly what I meant, Bran. A demented, whooping giggle burst from his lips, loud enough to startle him. Neither Ramsay nor Lightbringer were anywhere in sight, and no other sign of life stirred throughout the entire destroyed castle. Was this it, then? Had Stannis committed his entire army and been blown to kingdom come? Did he lie down there even now, never to know that the sword on which he'd staked his claim as Azor Ahai, the supernatural favor of his cause, had been a fraud all along? Had the red priestess known from the start, and only chosen to --

The wights had almost reached the gate. This distracted Theon abruptly from his preoccupations, and he lurched along the slippery wallwalk, spurred by a dim memory of one of Old Nan's tales. When he'd been young, a thousand years ago, he'd liked to creep in and listen to her at bedtime with the rest of the children, when he was still lonely and little enough to feel no shame in it. Not that her stories were ever conducive to pleasant dreams, but no matter. They were coming to life before his eyes, and this time he would not wake up.

Theon arrived at the main crenel that stood directly over the gate – what was left of it, at any rate. There was a tangled labyrinth here, fire still smoldering among the twisted beams, and that was what he needed. Theon ripped off his ratty cloak, stuffed it into the embers, and finally got it more or less alight. Then he threw it onto the makeshift bier, and suddenly he had a bonfire roaring in his face.

Theon was tempted to just stay huddled up to it, but it did him no good up here. He got his shoulder against one of the rocks bracing it and shoved, his frail body shaking with the effort. Shoved until he thought his heart was about to give out, until the burning beams crashed off the wallwalk and went spinning straight down, trailing pennons of bright inferno almost as beautiful as Lightbringer's.

Theon's face and hands were badly blistered, and as he scooped up a cooling heap of snow and pressed it to his cheek, he heard them hit below. Thrusting his head out over the dangerously tilted merlon just far enough to look, he saw wights scattering in every direction, away from the greedy flames. Several of them were burning as well in eerie silence, with none of the screams and gargles that would have attended the similar demise of living men. But no matter how welcome the sight was, Theon knew that it counted for nothing. For every wight that collapsed, like a puppet with its strings cut, three more appeared to take its place. They were already spreading out, surrounding the castle. With all the gates demolished, they would be inside in moments.

Theon took a running start and hurled himself off the wallwalk, a fall that ordinarily would have been close to a hundred feet shortened to just over ten by the complete destruction here, where the blast had been concentrated. It was still more than sufficient to punch the breath out of him, however, and he rolled in the snow gagging and gasping, tears squeezing out of his eyes.

He lay spread-eagled for several moments, then rolled over and pushed himself to his feet. Not far away, he could see corpse-hands groping through chinks in the rubble, crawling and wiggling. They were coming.

Almost in a trance, Theon laid a hand on his knife, which he had miraculously not lost in the course of his recent desperate adventures. This was it. It was time for his choice. Cut his throat now and here, and die as he would have it. Or stand, somehow, and fight. Be brave enough. Die beyond all doubt, but every man's path led to that. And finally, at last, he was glad that he had lived. Bran, forgive me.

Theon drew the knife and waited.

The battering increased. A shelf of stone thundered down just behind him, but he didn't flinch. I am the Stark in Winterfell. No matter what anyone did or said or thought, he was. It was him here at
the end of all things.

He squinted at what little he could make out through the smashed gate. Outside it, his little trick was shooting up gusts of windblown flame, lashing ash and snow and smoke, but Theon almost thought he saw something in the woods beyond. Something else, something moving, but something that didn't look like more wights. But what – he didn't even understand –

Just as the dead men reached the gate, the fire arrows began to fly.

Theon gave a yell of shock and lurched backwards, scrambling madly for cover as the flaming shafts cracked and thumped and zinged, hailing through the sky like fallen stars and finding purchase in grey foul flesh or snowy ground, clattering to every side. A breath, and then they began to come again.

The dead had no archers. Wights would never come near fire. Nor would Others, a thought too awful to contemplate. But if so –

Theon ran, zigzagging among the ruins. He tried not to look at all the corpses everywhere. He wished he still had his bow and the fingers to wield it; then he'd rain fire from the heavens too. It was strangely and diabolically beautiful, the whole thing. Now he just had to find some high ground, a torch or anything, and there he'd make his last –

Theon turned a corner, and skidded to a halt.

They were here. They had him surrounded to every side, advancing with complete purpose – not in bloodthirst, but because all their dead minds knew how to do anymore was destroy. They drew a circle closer and closer, eyes shining. Nowhere left to run. Some of them were Bolton men who'd died for the first time only hours ago, awoken by the fell things. They'd get him at last. But not without a fight.

"My name!" Theon screamed. "My name isn't Reek!" He grappled for his knife, tears running down his face and freezing. "IT'S THEON! THEON!"

They paid no more heed to that than they would have anything. Inexorably they surged forward. That one in the front, Theon knew him, he'd been one of Ramsay's favorite boys. His face was skinned off, bone and muscle and tendon all showing, a horror out of a deepest hell or darkest nightmare. Ichor dripped from the shorn cartilage of his nose, and his dead hands reached, reached, reached –

And then –

Theon did not, absolutely did not understand –

Stannis Baratheon took down the ghast from behind, with one blow so hard it ripped Damon Dance-for-Me's rotten corpse completely in half. A flash of red and a crunch, and Stannis' heavy fur-trimmed hood fell back, revealing a face that was more than half spectral itself. He bared his teeth at the swarming dead, eyes burning blue pits, and slammed his sword hilt-deep into another wight. It tried to stagger up the blade and reach Stannis, to break his neck, but the king kicked it off and annihilated it with another two-handed sweep. The fiery heart on his breastplate took the brilliant luster from his sword, and for that instant, he was in truth a warrior of light. No one had ever questioned Stannis, or any of the Baratheons, for their skill in battle. Ours is the Fury.

His salvation was so miraculous that Theon simply stared. Stannis was carving through the dead, slashing and lunging, and he jerked his head at Theon as if he'd done nothing more remarkable
than happen across him at a traveling fair. Theon scrambled after him, wights smoking to every side, as flaming arrows continued to hammer down, kicking up more explosions. Now Theon could see the source of them: Baratheon men and mountain clansmen, kneeling on the teetering stones, nocking and loosing as fast as they could get them lit. Apparently Stannis had suspected a trap from the start.

No. No more. He wasn't going to playact a moment longer. In the middle of Winterfell's blasted bailey, Theon stopped short and went to his knees, bowing his head to bare his neck. "Your Grace," he rasped, hoarse from the smoke. "If it is my life you desire, take it right now, by your own hand. But before you strike, there is something you must know."

Stannis regarded him without expression, then jerked his head again, a gesture for Theon to rise. "Your life is your own, turncloak," he answered coldly. "Much as I would still have it from you, I cannot in honor do so. Your sister made me a bargain. She will wed Ser Justin Massey as I command, and return home to deliver the Iron Islands to my rule. In exchange, I spare your life. Come."

"Asha?" Theon gasped, doing his best to keep up. Waves of sick relief jostled through him. She had survived, somehow, and found her way back to the Baratheon camp? He knew how completely she loathed the idea of being bound to a man, forced to take a subordinate position due to her sex – something she had never had to do in her days as their father's favored child. For her to agree to marry Ser Justin and give up her homeland, their homeland, to Stannis –

The battle in the snow was still raging. Stannis shoved Theon into a convenient bolt-hole and charged back off to fight, his glowing sword making him constantly visible among the chaos. If Theon hadn't seen the true one, he would certainly have believed it to be the Red Sword of Heroes, the same way everyone else still did. *Stannis must survive, I have to tell him.* But he had no fire to fight with, could not die just yet, and Asha, Asha was alive, Asha had bargained away her own future to save his. So he remained hiding there, and remained, and remained, until the smell of burning and a veil of ash lay over the bones of Winterfell, and one of the clansmen came to find him.

"Out wi' ye, turncloak," the little fur-clad warrior informed him peremptorily. "Battle's over for now, the dead men are bloody dead again. King wants ye."

Theon had never been so happy to be summoned by Stannis Baratheon in his life. He bounded out of the hole like a dog about to be let out for a walk, gamboling along behind the suspicious clansman and sucking in deep gulps of the scorched air. He knew that this was only the beginning of a much greater and much more terrible war, but he managed to put that aside.

Ahead, Stannis' tall figure was standing in the shadow of the ruined Great Hall, as impressive a setting as there was left. A cluster of his men were with him, breathing hard and leaning on their swords. Burning pyres showed where they'd had to immediately immolate their own dead for fear of them rising, and Theon entertained a briefly hopeful thought that Ser Clayton Suggs had been one of them. Ser Corliss Penny wouldn't go amiss either, and perhaps –

"Theon!"

His head snapped up. He couldn't imagine who'd be calling for him like that, with such love and disbelief, and for an instant he thought and prayed that it was Robb. Then he saw another figure break loose from Stannis' side, run across the snow to him, and snatch him fiercely in her arms. She was so strong, and his exhausted knees went limp. Without a word, he hung onto her.

"Thank you," Asha Greyjoy said to the clansman. If her voice was not quite as steady as usual, her
bearing was still as proud. And to her brother, "Theon. . . how did you ever . . ."

Theon couldn't answer her, almost weeping with the force of his gratitude. For several moments they just stood there clutching each other, and together they didn't fall. Then he lifted his chin, and over Asha's shoulder, met Stannis' eyes. "Your Grace."

A muscle worked in Stannis' cheek. "Aye?"

"I thank you for your mercy." Clumsily, Theon knelt again. "But your task here is not done."

"Is it not? Where is Mance Rayder?"

"Dead."

A murmur went around. "Dead?" another voice repeated, and Theon glanced up to see Tormund Giantsbane. "Can that be so? The world is a bit darker and meaner than it was before, I'll say. Always thought he'd survive the lot of us. He was the clever one."

"Aye, but – "

"Winterfell is mine," Stannis said, with a quiet, vicious pride. "At last. Starks and Baratheons were the closest of friends in my brother's day, I bear no ancestral grudge against the House. And if a child of Ned Stark can somehow be found and has better sense than the traitor Robb, they may swear fealty to me and I will have it rebuilt, no matter the effort or cost. What other task did you think I had here?"

"Ramsay. . . Snow. The Bastard." The word was hot and heavy on Theon's tongue. "He killed Mance. He escaped just before you attacked. And he. . . he had something with him that Your Grace should know about."

Stannis scowled. "What?"

"Lightbringer." Ignoring the communal shocked reaction, Theon plunged ahead. "No, not the glamoured idol that you gave to Arnolf Karstark. That blade in your hand there is the same, I swear it to the old gods and R'hllor and the Drowned God and the Seven and every other god there is. In the crypts, Mance. . . Mance and I, we found the true one. Azor Ahai was buried there, but his tomb is empty. He fought alongside Brandon the Builder at the Battle for the Dawn, Brandon the Builder who raised the Wall and Winterfell, he. . ." At that Theon trailed off, transfixed by half a hundred pairs of staring eyes.

Stannis was terrifyingly silent. On and on it stretched. Then finally he said in a voice like an avalanche, "I have heard naught from Lady Melisandre at Castle Black. When I gaze into the flames, I no longer see, and the secret arts she left me no longer work so well, if at all. The Long Night is upon us now, and you dare tell me that everything I fight for is a lie?"

"I'm. . . I'm sorry, Your Grace."

"If this is your lie, I will have your head. Pledge or no." Stannis almost resembled a force of nature himself as he stood there, towering over the kneeling Theon. Then he held his sword out with a jerk. "What is this, then? What did I pull from the heart of my burning gods, what did I fight for on the Blackwater? What did I sacrifice my brother for? What cause did I take for my own? Answer me!"

Theon quaked. "I can't. I don't know. Please."
"My lord," Asha broke in. "Why in all of creation would my brother have any reason to lie about this?"

"I do not know. That is why I ask." Stannis wheeled away. "So, turncloak. If that Lightbringer is the true one, and the Bastard of Bolton has it, where has the Bastard of Bolton gone?"

"The Dreadfort." Theon spoke at once, without hesitation. "He'll be fleeing to the Dreadfort. He will, I know him. Winterfell is no use to him or anyone right now, and more... more of the dead things will be coming." He gulped. "Ramsay will want to gather his own strength, he'll see the perfect opportunity to make his play for ultimate power. If he can make it there, he may even succeed."

"By all the powers of earth and heaven, man and god, he must never do so." Stannis' voice was distant thunder, falling stone. "He must never be allowed to lay hands on that sacred weapon. And when I take it from his dead fingers, no matter what, I will be Azor Ahai. I have given almost everything, I must give the last. I must fulfill my cause and charge, whatever it is now. I must sit the Iron Throne."

Silence. Snow began to drift from the seared sky. Theon tasted the flakes on his tongue.

At last, Stannis turned again. "Make ready," he ordered his captains. "Burn the rest of the dead. Stake up a palisade and torches, for these night's terrors are unlike anything you have seen before. Then say what prayers you will and make your peace with god, for I believe we have learned a thing or two from our last terrible advance. We march for the Dreadfort at moonrise."
Sansa

The Mountains of the Moon were the wall of the world. Gazing at them where they consumed the horizon as far as the eye could see, crooked horns buried in icy clouds, Sansa could not help but think of her brother Jon, so far away on the Wall that guarded a realm even more savage than this one. The more she'd learned of the Vale, the more Sansa understood how her aunt Lysa could feel completely confident sitting out the war, protected by a natural barricade stronger than a thousand swords. Any invading army would rip itself to pieces, but a small party with native guides, assuming the guides were of a temperament to help and not fatally hinder, would have a chance – if only just.

Sansa turned back to her companions. "I shall not ask any of you to come farther, if is not your will," she said, forced to raise her voice over the wind searching to snatch her words away. "You are free to turn back here and now, and I will not think less of you. I know this was not your grievance, and if you do continue, you may well have to – "

"Don't be foolish, girl," grumbled Jack-Be-Lucky. "You and m'lady go on alone, you will end up decorating some Stone Crow's miserable little pisspot hovel somewhere. We're none of us abandoning you now." He leveled a pointed glare at his peers. "Are we."

"Certainly not," said Thoros. "It would be the height of dishonor and cowardice. But it is well done to offer us the choice, Lady Sansa. There is a good deal of your father in you."

Sansa's throat felt suddenly thick. "It was him who sent you out from court in the first place, to avenge the injustices wrought on the realm. Perhaps this is merely bringing matters full circle."

"Perhaps it is, my lady," Thoros agreed. "R'hllor brought you to us for a reason, and you need have no fear that we will turn back before we see it through. Do you think we have supplies enough for this?"

"I... don't know." Under Sansa's direction, the Brotherhood had scavenged as much food from the frozen countryside as they could, but she knew that it would wind up being irrelevant if they couldn't secure the assistance of the mountain clans. Nor was there any real chance of approaching them on equal terms, to civilly propose an alliance and fair barter. The wildlings would find them first, and then only Sansa, her plan, and her ability to articulate it under fire would save them.

For a moment, Sansa almost backed down. It wasn't too late to order the Brotherhood to smuggle her to the Bloody Gate, leave them to make their own way in and go on to deal with Petyr herself – however she would, it was still a blur of conflicted emotions. But without her, the wildlings would have no reason to let the outlaws pass, would just kill them out of hand, and she would be utterly alone again, at Littlefinger's mercy – especially if he felt inclined to hold grudges for her tattling on him to the Faith. Elder Brother had warned her that the Lord Protector would not suffer such slights sanguinely, and Sansa's own knowledge of his character confirmed it. Though if the way was shut, the Bloody Gate held fast, the inquisitors Elder Brother had promised to send might well have got no further; Petyr could be merrily thumbing his nose at them as they starved or froze to death. *Stronger than a thousand swords.*

Sansa shivered, and not from the rising wind. *No,* she thought. *Gods help me, this is the only way.*

Her face must have told the tale to the rest of the Brotherhood, for they squared their shoulders, tugged their cloaks tighter, and adjusted their swordbelts. "We're with you, m'lady," Gendry announced. "After all, s' like Jack said, they're only goat fuckers."
Sansa gave them a grateful look. They were rough and uncouth and ungently spoken, outlaws and murderers and broken men, never the sort of champions she'd imagined as a little girl, but they were hers, and she was no longer a little girl. Just then, in fact, she wondered if she had become a monster herself. She was still involved in Petyr's game, moving pieces around on him, striking back, but without the visionary certainty that guided seemingly everything he had done. If he and Aunt Lysa had in fact poisoned Jon Arryn and framed the Lannisters, then he was orchestrating a long con far beyond what any other player would ever dream. That is why he is winning. But why? Why? It couldn't have been just to marry Lysa. He'd never loved her. Only Cat. But as clever and amoral as Petyr Baelish may be, would he really have turned the Seven Kingdoms upside down into the worst war since the Conquest, in the hope that the childhood woman of his dreams would miraculously swoon into his arms? He told me not to believe in stories, but there could be no greater fairy tale than that.

Or Littlefinger's only blind spot in the world was Catelyn Tully Stark. And I am bringing her back to him.

It had been early morning when they set forth, and Sansa held out hope that they would reach the mountains by nightfall, but she swiftly discovered just how deceptively close they had appeared. The Brotherhood rode all day across the chilly moraine, occasionally dismounting and picking through the boulders to spare their already decrepit mounts further grief, but the white peaks never seemed to get any closer. Instead the ground got rougher, till their breath burned in their throats and ribboned like silver scarves in the air. Gendry slipped once and fell, crashing down so violently that Sansa feared he had broken an arm, a leg, or his neck, but he just got to his feet with an expression even more stubborn than usual and began picking his way back up to them. Apparently all the japes about his hard-headedness were rooted in firm factual certainty.

Dusk came stealing up like a cold purple mantle. The rising moon gilded the spurs of the mountains to ivory and bone and porcelain, and they were near enough that Thoros forbade a fire; the Lord of Light would hear their nighttime prayers even without one, he reassured them. There would certainly be wildling watchers in the heights, nay doubt Arryn men as well – who were by now, more than likely, Petyr Baelish's men in every way that mattered. But the night was so clear, after the intensity of the snowstorm that had forced them to uncomfortably bivouac with Podrick Payne and Ser Hyle Hunt, that there was strong sentiment for sleeping a few hours and then continuing on; they needed to wring every drop of cooperation from the winter weather that they could. After a brief and spirited debate, the issue was finally voted on in favor.

It was hard for Sansa to drift under. Unexpectedly, she found herself thinking of the Lady Brienne, and the risk she'd taken in letting Pod and Ser Hyle loose to find her. She broke her oath to my mother on behalf of the Kingslayer... am I mad? But that was too late. And another reason to reach the Vale with godspeed. It felt at times to Sansa as if she was already asleep and could not wake up, as the nightmare grew ever more twisted and consuming.

Sansa wondered and worried, teeth chattering, until it was time to go again. Sore and stiff, she rolled up her blankets and allowed Harwin to help her to her feet, though she thought he could use the courtesy more; the journey had gone hard on him with his wounds. Brienne's work. Ser Hyle had sworn that the warrior woman would die sooner than hand Sansa over to her enemies, but how on earth did that make any sense?

It was a frigid, silent, and difficult moonlit climb. Glacial waterfalls clattered down the rocks, ghosting everything with a treacherous spray; higher up they were frozen fast altogether, grotesqueries of lucent blue ice finely wrought as Myrish lace. The towering spar of the mountain edged farther and farther overhead, eliding any other sight or sound or comprehension, anything but the knowledge that they were about to be in the heart of darkness itself.
The eastern horizon was flushing a gauzy, glassblown pink when they emerged from a maze of toppled boulders, directly before a slender cleft valley that disappeared between two formidable buttresses and into the wilderness beyond. From here, the Eyrie and the Gates of the Moon lay north and east, as close as twenty miles in crow's flight or as far as a hundred. They would need to climb to much higher ground to get a better sense of the lay of the land, and just how dangerous the route through the interior would be, but that entailed exposing themselves to every one of those dangers. Including –

"Look," Gendry said, pointing at a weatherworn petroglyph etched into the rocks. "What's that?"

Sansa squinted. "It's a man with a red hand, missing an eye," she said, studying the crudely painted figure. "It means that these lands are under the claim of Timett son of Timett, war chief of the Burned Men. I saw him of a time in King's Landing. He was dangerous then, and fearless after he led his clan through the battle of Blackwater. One of my – my lord husband's especial favorites."

"That's good then?" Harwin said dryly.

"After a fashion." Sansa's stomach knotted. Timett. . . yes, she remembered him, the dark young wildling who might have been handsome if he'd not decided to burn out an eye in place of the customary nipple or finger required of his savage brethren. *If he is their chieftain, the Hound would be their god.* Repressing a sudden urge either to laugh or to weep, she returned firmly to the task at hand. "We would be wise to get what sleep we can before we start up that valley. Once we do, we must constantly expect an ambush. Timett may know of me by repute as I know of him, but whether as Alayne Stone or Sansa Stark is hard to say. That is what we will have to wager everything on."

The outlaw band snatched a few winks of fitful rest as the frosty sun crawled up the horizon. Once again, Sansa felt as if she had just closed her eyes when Thoros shook her shoulder, rousing her from murky dreams. It was midmorning, and while it was still clear and fair, an anvil of iron-shod clouds piling in the north hinted ominously that it wouldn't last forever. "My lady, it is time."

Sansa nodded, struggling to her feet and accepting the rock-hard wedge of bread that the red priest handed her to gnaw on. They turned loose the horses, as they could take them no further, and Thoros said a brief prayer to the Lord of Light, imploring that he walk by them as they passed into the valley of shadow. With no more ceremony than that, they started in.

The way quickly turned into a bewildering labyrinth of stone and snow. Seracs of frangible ice loomed overhead, shadowing out the sun, and sometimes they could hear the roar and thunder as they collapsed. Anguy had the surest and lightest footing, so he went in front, carving out the safest route. Sansa followed mechanically. Her hands had great chunks ripped out, even through her gloves, as old blisters broke open and bled. She'd simply never had to exert herself this hard before, and every muscle she had burned with a dull, constant ache. Still, she held her tongue. Their task would get no easier.

Past noon, the lurking clouds began to close in. The temperature dropped precipitately, flurries scraped across the rime-blasted rock, and the wind whistled eerily in a way that made the hackles stand on Sansa's neck. *We need shelter, and soon.* The alpine landscape was pocked with shallow caves and steep overhangs, enough to cut the worst of it but no prospect for permanent refuge. Their resources were threadbare enough as it was. Being snowbound could well prove mortal.

"Keep together!" Thoros shouted, his tatty red robes whipping like pennants. "The wildlings might not be hunting in this tempest, but we'd best not take anything for granted. Careful. Careful now!"

In single file, looking like a gaggle of blind men out for a lark, the Brotherhood shuffled and slid
across a carapace of driven snow and slippery ridges. Sansa groped at Gendry in front of her; his solidity was reassuring. One foot after the other. She could do this, they wouldn't let her fall. Step by step by step by step. The cold was even deeper now; she imagined she'd never be warm again. Bones as brittle as frost, a winter queen. A Stark of Winterfell. A wolf. That was, if they ever made it through this –

Sansa only caught it out of the corner of her eye. There was a flash of grey through the whiteness, and all of a sudden she saw her mother fall. Lady Stoneheart uttered no scream, no sound from her ruined throat, as her footing went out from under her. Her fingernails clawed furrows through the snow, her bandages unraveling as Harwin made an abortive grab for her. And then, just like that, she was gone.

Sansa knew that Lady Stoneheart was only the shell and husk of Catelyn Stark, already dead once, her resurrected sinews strained and tortured by a climb excruciating enough for the living – but none of it mattered. There was nothing, no chance, if she came back to the Vale without Lady Stoneheart, the only trump card she had. And she is my mother. I cannot lose her again.

Ignoring Jack's lunge for her, Sansa leapt down the slope. She skidded, spun, picked up momentum, nearly launched into thin air, and felt her breath leave her in a rush as the ground punched it out. She managed to get her fall under control, snow sloughing breathtakingly cold down her bodice, blood dripping queerly warm in her eyes. She reached another outcrop, grasped hold, thrust her head and shoulders over –

And saw her. There. Below. The corpse-woman lay in a crumpled heap at the foot of the rocks. She did not seem to be moving. No – no –

"Mother," Sansa wept, reaching out as far as she could. Her fingers batted ineffectually at the abyss. "Mother, take my hand."

Lady Stoneheart stirred faintly. Her head lifted; it was impossible to say what, if any, emotion lurked in the red eyes. Slowly, jerkily, she wriggled forward, then stopped. Old dark blood stained the bandages that had managed to cling to the pale dead hand; it lay inert on the mountainside as the snow and wind lashed them both. The winter was almost a lover's embrace.

Sansa crawled still further forward, almost losing her own balance. "Mother!" she cried again. "I'm here! Reach for me! Please!"

Lady Stoneheart seemed vaguely confused. She still made no attempt to save herself or answer her daughter's pleas; there was no knowledge or care for that in the thing she had become. And even if so, the verge above them was perilously steep. Sansa didn't know if she could get them both back up it, tried to fill her flattened lungs to shout for Gendry or Jack –

At that very moment, in what Sansa madly thought was an answer to her prayer, hands seized her from behind, hauling her into the air. Thinking it was one of the Brotherhood, she tried not to struggle, almost sick with relief – and then her head wrenched back violently, and a knife pressed in a steel kiss to her throat. Wildlings. They've found us. But on her own – if they caught the others without her – her entire plan, her hope –

"A girl!" her captor was shouting in guttural Common Tongue, somewhere over her head. "This one's a girl!"

Horribly conscious of the blade scraping her neck, Sansa nonetheless – she was never to know how – managed to keep her head, and suck in just enough air to speak. It came out in a strangled squeal. "Timett! Timett!"
A moment of utter silence. Then she was turned about and thrown on her back, knocking her wind out for the third time in nearly as many minutes. Sparks fizzed in her eyes, but she was able to make out three or four massive fur-clad forms towering above her, united in uncompromising suspicion. Beneath their pothelms of boiled leather and ill-fitting plate, their bearded faces showed no glimmer of recognition or sympathy. "Timett?" one of them growled, and dug Sansa smartly in the ribs with his bone-spurred boot when she failed to answer immediately. "What d'you want with the Red Hand, you milk bitch?"

"I want. . . to talk to him." Sansa tried to roll out of the range of further kicks. "It's about Tyrion. The Halfman. Please!"

The Burned Man looked briefly inclined to put her truthfulness to the test, but a sharp glance from one of his companions stopped him. So there remained at least something to conjure with in her little lord husband's name – the first time Sansa had ever been remotely glad to be accounted Lady Lannister in any capacity. Then, while she was still straining for any glimpse of her mother or the vanished Brotherhood, she was bundled up and dragged away, her feet bouncing uselessly underneath her.

The Burned Men shouted to each other as they charged through the deepening snow, more and more of them appearing from the murk like spirits. To judge from the size, it had to be a full raiding party, and Sansa had heard all sorts of tales in the Eyrie as to how brazen and bloodthirsty the clans had become. The moment of truth was now at hand. Either she would convince Timett of her veracity, or it would all come to an ignominious end and Littlefinger would rule the Vale unchallenged until the end of time. Sansa focused on the one thing she could control, getting her breath back, as she bumped and rattled in her captors' wake. Oddly, she didn't feel as scared as she should; there was not much left to be scared of. She did pray fervently for the others, though, and that she was able to explain to Timett before his henchmen took gleeful advantage of the opportunity. Her lips and face were quite numb, she felt as if she could barely think, let alone speak. But she had to, it was –

The wind cut off abruptly as the wildlings frog-marched her into a slot between two rocks, frozen lichen spidering up the walls and a trail blazed through to the firepit at the center. It was here that they pitched her negligently facedown before the man sitting on an ossified log, gnawing on a haunch of some unidentifiable animal. The smell of roasting meat made Sansa's empty belly ache, but she pushed herself to hands and knees, wincing; she'd caught her wrist beneath her when she fell. Meeting the gaze of the man across from her, one dark glowering eye and one burned pit, she armored herself in her courtesy, her only weapon to hand. "Lord Timett."

He snorted, startled both by her formal address and the fact that she'd done so by name. "I know you?"

"She was asking for you," one of the raiders informed his chief. "Thought we'd best see why before we started enjoying her. Pretty bit of a thing, if her cunt's not all froze up, but she said something about the Halfman."

Sansa considered it a testament both to the Burned Men's healthy fear of their leader and Tyrion's notoriety that they'd given her an actual audience before they commenced raping her out of hand. She did hope that they never got around to it. "No, you don't know me," she admitted, "but I do you. We were in King's Landing together, but you left after your heroism in helping save the city from Stannis Baratheon. Before – before I wed the man you served in doing so."

Timett scowled, taken further aback. "Bloody what? The Imp? Married to a chit like you? Another of his whores?"
"No," Sansa said. "His lady wife."

"I heard the Halfman wed the Stark girl," one of the other Burned Men put in. "But then she turned into a winged wolf and flew away after she poisoned the king."

Would that I had. "I am her. But I did not fly away, and I did not poison the king. I was carried off here to the Vale, by Lord Petyr Baelish."

Dark looks were exchanged; the wildlings had no cause to love Littlefinger, who had strengthened the defenses of the Vale more in months than Lysa Arryn had in half a dozen years. Still, this was by no means evidence enough for them to believe her, and another took a firmer grip on his knife. "We are no groveling servants of the little lion man any more. We are a free and mighty folk. Why listen to a milk bitch? Kill her and send her head to Baelish. He'll get that message right quick."

An agreeing rumble went around the clan, and even Timett's thin lips seemed to pluck upwards in approval. To Sansa he said, "The Halfman is not with you?"

"N-no."

"Yet we are to think you are his wife, the Stark girl? The Imp is no more use to us now. My brother is right." He glanced over to his men. As offhandedly as if remarking on the foul weather, he said, "Rape her. Kill her. In either order you prefer."

An unholy roar went up. As they startled to jostle forward, as Sansa's terror became almost a living thing surging up her throat, all she could see was the eating knife Timett had left by the fire, his staring eye socket. Burned Men. Saw, and knew what she had to do.

As the first wildling pawed at her ankle, Sansa threw herself forward. She squirreled and struggled, and – one hand desperately outthrust – managed to get hold of Timett's knife. But rather than try to use it against her attackers, she flung her sleeve back, laying bare the smooth pale flesh. "Burned Men!" she screamed. "I swear it!" And clapped the broad blade of the red-hot knife across the back of her hand.

The pain was the worst thing Sansa had ever known, worse even than Joff's countless amusements. She could smell her flesh sizzling like crackling, feel the fire eating into it, could only think of what it must have been like for the Hound, when his brother shoved his face into the coals, the reason he'd left her to ride for King's Landing and his vengeance. Perhaps now I understand. Her fingers had locked, she couldn't let go, her hand was raw and blistered and hissing, smoke rising as she heard herself crying. She thought she was about to pass out, but then someone got hold of the knife and pulled it away, and she reeled back in the snow, shaking and retching.

One of the wildlings cursed in an almost awestruck tone. There was a brief and vehement discussion that Sansa couldn't follow, and then a sharp voice. "Girl? Girl!"

Sansa weakly opened her eyes, avoiding looking down. "Yes?"

Timett son of Timett was staring at her, apparently without a single thing to say. She had done her best to become a Red Hand in literal fact, and there was no question that he realized it. The rest of the wildlings who'd been so eager to deflower and dismember her a moment before were likewise holding at a superstitious distance, and a few fearful glances were exchanged, as if by even entertaining the prospect they would call down the wrath of some provincial deity upon their heads. They remained absolutely silent.

At last, Timett broke it. "Lady lion," he said. "What do you want?"
Sansa struggled to sit up. "I am returning to the Vale with some dozen companions," she managed, swallowing the nausea. "We... meant to deal with Lord Baelish, and I... I had hoped for your protection and assistance... in guiding us through the mountains... to the high road and the Gates of the Moon. To make the Vale again free... for its rightful masters." Let them think that was them. She prayed they did.

"We'd never get so far as the Gates of the Moon," Timett said, scowling again. "That bloody pup has been leading sorties against us every chance he gets. He's so green he pisses grass, and one day soon we'll feed him his cock and balls for supper, but he's been a wretched nuisance all the same."

Bloody pup. Something about that pricked at Sansa – aside from the fact that for all the wildlings' bluster and bellicosity, they could still be chased off, scattered like roaches, by the discipline of a mounted attack. "Who?" she blurted, before she could think better of it. "Who's leading them?"

"The Hardyng whelp," Timett said succinctly. "Him and that other suckling knight – though that one's a viper, drinks poison from his nurse's teat instead of milk. Harlan Hunter."

Harry and Ser Harlan? Sansa's head was still cloudy with pain, but at that, her suspicion began to cohere ever more clearly. Given what was known or at least very strongly suspected about Harlan Hunter's involvement in his father's death, and the fact that leading attacks against the barbaric wildlings was exactly the sort of heroically and potentially fatal activity to appeal to a young man of Harry's sensibilities, she suddenly began to wonder if Littlefinger's plans for the Vale had drastically changed in the wake of her disappearance. *I would be a fool to doubt it.* She had been Littlefinger's key to the entire thing – assuming he had been telling the truth when he claimed his intentions to have her and Harry rule the Vale and the North together, never a certainty. And one with no reward for him, except for the knowledge that he'd altruistically restored his beloved Cat's daughter to her rightful place in the world. But Littlefinger didn't have an altruistic bone in his body. And what better way to deftly rid himself of the only claimant still capable of mounting any sort of challenge to his protectorate, now that the Lords Declarant had fallen into step behind him? *Clean hands, Sansa. Whatever you do, make sure your hands are clean.*

Save for her smoking fingers, Sansa felt cold to the bone. *Harry would have accidentally stumbled into the grave regardless. As soon as we were established... as soon as it made sense for the Lord Protector who had supported him so generously to wed his widow and keep the rule as strong as it was before. No one would utter a peep of protest, it would be solid, respectable, sensible...* She could not be sure. Of course she could not be sure. But she'd observed Petyr Baelish intimately for months now. Between this or the notion that it was all a noble self-sacrifice in Catelyn's loving memory, the former won in a landslide.

The Burned Men were exchanging confused looks, and Sansa tried to think of what in the world to say. "My companions..." she succeeded in at last. "If you come across them... I will not have them harmed." She could not tell whether her act had won her any lasting reverence or obedience, but she had to take what she could. "Bring them to me... the Gates of the Moon."

The clansmen glanced unhappily at Timett, apparently rooting for him to gainsay this, but he didn't. Dull relief splintered through Sansa, one of the first sensations to make it through the pain, as the chieftain raised his head and looked at hersearchingly. "All right," he said at last. "We'll take you."

Sansa was too grateful to ask any questions or struggle against the hairy troll of a man, with hands the size of smoked hams, who picked her up and slung her around his neck like a muffler. A barked command from Timett made him alter it to his shoulder, and Sansa closed her eyes as the wildlings began to move out. *I can't return on my own – I need Mother, I need the Brotherhood –*
but what if all her struggle had won her was her life alone?

Her burned hand hurt terribly, and the constant jolting and gamey odor of her faithful steed was equally unpleasant, but Sansa was exhausted enough to slip into a feverish doze. The hours lurched and reeled and staggered away; it was impossible to tell how many, as the moon was still hidden by clouds and sheeting snows. To the wildlings, however, it might have been a fine spring day. They plowed through waist-high drifts without appearing in the slightest bit perturbed.

The snow finally stopped as the light was turning a weak, watery grey. The entire world seemed clad in its virginal veil, a strange muffled quality to the air, Sansa's blood thumping in her ears. The Burned Men were descending a steep trough on the far side of the peak they'd earlier been scaling, and although visibility was sharply curtailed in the fog, Sansa could make out just enough familiar geography to realize with a start that they were in the barrens just above the high road, perhaps only a league or two off from the Gates of the Moon. Which meant that surely the wildlings wouldn't be going much further. There'd be Arryn men, Royce men --

This conclusion had barely made it through Sansa's head when it was speedily borne out in practice. The Burned Man who'd carried her all this way dropped her flat in the snow. "We go no more," he announced. "You alone from here."

Slowly, fiendishly cramped, Sansa got to her feet. "When I reach the valley floor..."

"The bastards will find you, like as not." Timett stared at her hard enough to put those with two good eyes to shame. "If not, it's four miles on your right. To the castle."

"Thank you," Sansa told them, meaning it. "My companions. . ."

"We will remember what you said." For an instant it looked as if Timett was actually about to make some respectful gesture, but that thought died aborning. He turned sharply, his men at his back. "Good luck, Red Hand." And with that, the wildlings melted into the mist as if they had never been.

Sansa blinked hard, then made the sign of the star on herself, thinking that just now she could use all the divine protection she could get. She had no idea how she was going to make it down the rest of the mountain, much less the four miles to the Gates of the Moon, but the only thing more impossible than going on was going back.

She began to walk. Every step was agony, a knife stabbing her in the small of the back and twisting, and she had very little use of her burned hand, but she began to sing, first in her head and then under her breath and then in cracked murmurs, her voice thin and stolen in the winter silence. All the songs she'd loved as a girl, all her fair maidens and handsome knights, all her happy endings and all her dreams and hopes. The snow castle of Winterfell she'd built in the Eyrie, before Petyr had appeared and kissed her and Aunt Lysa had tried to kill her. The songs she'd clung to for so long. Her last friends now.

At long last, she reached the high road. The sun was somewhere out of sight behind the Giant's Lance; she peered up at its dizzying heights, trying to make out the Eyrie, but couldn't. Yet here she was, at last. She'd come back to the Vale. One girl, footsore and battered and burned. One girl against the might of poison and plots and politics.

Sansa stood in the middle of the snowy road, too tired even to fall. She couldn't trust that the Burned Men were truly finding the Brotherhood, or if they were on their way to back her up even now. She couldn't imagine either that that would be a seamless alliance. Or if there was any time.
There wasn't. She had to keep going. She put one nerveless foot in front of the other, her legs shaking. She thought she could smell smoke from a chimney. And then, on the very brink, she caught sight of something moving, down and up and then up again, closer and closer. Despite the fact that it was still very likely to herald her death or entrapment or final defeat, she had never been so glad to see the blue-and-cream banners of House Arryn in her life.

It was an hour later when Sansa Stark rode through the portcullis of the Gates of the Moon, mounted pillion behind the knight who'd rescued her on the high road: Ser Godfrey Waynwood, some sundry relation of Lady Anya's, no doubt dreaming of heaps of gold for his service. He and the Arryn men riding patrol had already sent one of their number ahead with the news, and she had been trying to brace herself the entire time for the reunions now at hand. Yet even when Ser Godfrey dismounted in the chaotic bailey and helped her down, she found nothing left, no readiness. Only fear.

"Alayne!" Myranda Royce elbowed vigorously through the gawking crowd and caught Sansa in her arms just as her knees started to give. "Sweetling, we've been so worried! After that bloody little weasel Shadrich – we all heard – "

Sansa nodded mutely. Yet she was aware that Myranda's warm welcome had been by no means replicated among the rest of the Gates of the Moon's household; they were staring at her with a blend of confusion and hostility. One of them openly made the sign of the horns, and another muttered, "Come back to gloat, has she now?"

Myranda glared at them. "You'll keep your filthy lies to yourself," she said, half-carrying Sansa through the throng and into the shock of the warm castle beyond. "Anyone who carries on with that will get the same."

"Carries on with what?" Sansa muttered. "What?"

"Nothing, child. No one thinks it was you." Myranda paused. "No one who matters." The strained levity in her voice told Sansa at once that it, whatever it was, was a lie.

"What?"

Still Randa didn't answer. She led Sansa up the tower stairs to her private chambers, shut the door firmly behind her, stripped Sansa's wet clothes off, and put her straightaway to bed. Sansa struggled to stay awake just a few moments longer, to ask, to demand what was wrong, but it was beyond her. She collapsed into a sleep like death and did not even dream.

It was sometime indeterminately later, an hour or a day, when she opened her heavy eyelids again. Pale, battered sunlight slanted through the window, and she finally registered that she had been woken by a cultured but insistent tapping at the door. And then, before she could understand that or what it meant, hoping blurrily that it was Randa and yet knowing it was not, it opened.

She squeezed her eyes shut. It didn't make him go away.

"Sweetling," Lord Petyr Baelish said at last. "Returned to us from the dead. Such a miracle."

It took all her courage to open her eyes and look him in the face. "My lord."

A corner of his mouth twitched. It wasn't quite a smile. "So courteous as always. Good, that's good. It'll serve you well in your trial."

"Trial?" Sansa was only clumsily grasping at the sword he had just unsheathed, but she could feel its cut now. Her heart began to pound. "Why?"
Littlefinger paced across the room to her and sat down on the bed. "My darling," he said, chucking her gently under the chin. "You'll know, of course, that your sweet cousin is dead. May the gods assoil his innocent soul."

"Robert?" As if it could have been anyone else, but Sansa still felt it like a blow. *He was only eight. He was powerless. He never deserved this.*

"Robert," Littlefinger confirmed. "A tragedy beyond all measure. The folk of the Vale are, as they should be, distraught. To lose the last heir of Jasper Arryn's bloodline, and in such a way . . ."

"Such a way?" Sansa tried to move away, but there was nowhere to go. "My lord. . . how *dare* you, he was – he was p – "

"Poisoned." Littlefinger leaned forward and kissed her lingeringly on the lips. "By the very one in whose best interests it was to have him out of the way, so she could claim her inheritance and her marriage to the new heir. The one who is already well known to have murdered King Joffrey, and the one who needs the Lord Protector now more than she's ever needed him before, if she is to have a hope of escaping conviction on this most terrible charge, who fled with an unsavory hedge knight after her deed was discovered and is now known for who and what she is across the realm." His hand drifted down from her chin, across her stomach, and came gently to rest in the quilts between her legs. "You."
There had been no sunrise now for four days. At the customary hour of dawn, a cold blue light would alleviate some of the darkness, casting eldritch shadows over the tumbled ruins of the Wall and fading out the stars, but no more. It would remain that way until midafternoon, when the blue would swiftly rust to hoary steel and then to black, black as a crow's cloak or Craster's heart. Every day was shorter. Soon the night would never end, and even the curtains of light that frisked in the northern sky, colored like swirling silks, would be extinguished. It would take the torches on Castle Black, the red woman's nightfires, every scrap of warmth or living memory. No mere mortals could withstand it. *And all that is left for any of us will be Lord Snow.*

Val was still too stunned by Jon's return to make the least bit of sense of it. One moment she'd been facing down hundreds of wights, Alysane already dead at her feet and Jeyne Poole screaming, just as scared but determined not to go out like a coward – knowing there was nothing and no one that could save her now. She'd heard the roar of the Wall falling outside; the wights had heard it too and seemed to freeze momentarily, in thrall to the terrible, world-cracking blast that Val knew in her bones could only be the Horn of Winter. *But we never found it! We never found it!* Nothing made sense any more, except for the realization of the uttermost end.

And then, the red sword. Shearing through them, hacking them away, not the king of the Others that she’d dumbly anticipated – or was he? The Horn had sounded, the Wall was down, anything and everything could have come through that door, and anything and everything had. Jon Snow was as perfectly illogical a choice as any. The natural laws of the world were at an end, so to see him cut through the undead to her side, undead himself with his sword of Valyrian steel ablaze and his hands like black glass. . . her ludicrous, improbable deliverance from evil. . .

Among the wildlings, it had been known and practiced for generations that if you wanted a woman to love you, you had to steal her first. That was partly why Val had been so scornful of the kneelers and their plans to match her off like a prize heifer – she would gleefully cut her new husband's throat if she misliked him, especially if it served the added benefit of wrecking all their arrangements. She was free, the old gods' first and greatest intention for man, and nobody had the right to tear her down or shame her or rape her or kill her for it. Power was only an imagination, an illusion, a shadow. If you did not act as if it bound your every deed and thought, it could not exist.

Yet now, Val found that knowledge becoming as shattered and disordered and distorted as everything else. *Jon had* stolen her, taken her as his own, in a way that no other man ever could again – not least because Jon was no longer quite a man. A crow before, now half a demon and half a god, a warg, a beastling, a fell awakening of both Melisandre's witchcraft and the old powers in turn. *A monster.* Val went in awe and terror of him, as did everyone else. Even the hysterical Selyse, who had gone more than half mad on the horrible death of her daughter, dared not utter a word of protest against him. When Jon had ordered the King's Tower – the strongest and stoutest of Castle Black's remaining buildings – pulled down and set afire with the bodies of Shireen and her murderous fool inside, the black brothers who'd led the mutiny against him last time were foremost in rushing to obey.

*The child is unclean.* Val knew why Jon had done it – the place was a seething hive of infection otherwise, and it was still no guarantee that the flames had cleansed the taint of greyscale entirely. But as the free folk and the Night's Watch had always been intimately entwined, Val had grown up hearing ghoulish tales of the various Lord Commanders who'd fallen into black sorcery and ultimately had to be destroyed for the future of the order and the realm. Jon Snow had become more powerful and more inhuman than even the infamous Night's King, but this time he was their
And after? On the threadbare possibility that they could withstand the coming storm of Others – that first assault had only been a test, a finger prodding in the dark – what would become of him then? Hailed as the hero and the savior of all mankind, would he be content to hang up his sword and retire back into the mists? His strength would be overwhelming by then, enough to crush whoever said him nay. How long could a man's innate goodness, such as Val still believed Jon possessed, stand against that siren lure, the prize for which warriors and kings and emperors had fought and killed and died for since the world was made? That power would be no artifice or hallucination. That power would write its reign in blood.

And so, Val was left with a terrible dilemma. Did she try to save Jon now, appeal to whatever of the human man was left, in hopes of keeping him close after the battle was done? Or would any distractions pull him away from defeating the Others, a task which was of undeniably paramount importance? Yet if he did grow stronger and stronger, unchecked by any dissent or challenge, with Melisandre whispering in his ear that he had become nigh unto R'hllor himself, the hungry god of flame and sacrifice.

Standing on the broken crenel where she had drawn the watch, Val felt a thousand times colder. She'd put on the black cloak for the battle, and more importantly she'd survived it, so that made her as much a crow as any of them. Even Selyse's remaining men had put aside their Baratheon colors and taken the black. Even poor Jeyne Poole. She'd said the vows with them, and for once she hadn't shaken and stammered. Now she slept in one of the few warm spots left, the kitchen, where she helped Three-Finger Hobb with the meals. The old cook was the only man she didn't run and hide on sight of.

The watcher on the walls. That is me now. Val had to keep walking in order to stay warm, though sometimes it was crawling on all fours over the tilted slabs of ice. She wore black ringmail, a black cloak, black boots and fur gloves and a sword, and she had to keep all the torches on this stretch lit; the destruction of the Wall hadn't stopped Jon from having it patrolled at all hours of day and night, what little difference between them there was. The Others could return at any moment, and it was Jon himself, as they'd discovered, who'd brought it down. The only way to wake his power and bring him back to them, but still a terrible sacrifice. Once or twice, Val had again considered deserting, running away to somewhere at least nominally safer, but she knew it was useless, and cowardly to boot. So here she stayed by choice, a sworn sister of the Night's Watch, guarding the realms of men. Are you laughing at me, Dalla? Or weeping?

She turned the other way. The weight of the longsword was unfamiliar on her waist; she was as good with a blade as any man, but her weaponry had always been the bone and bronze knives favored by the wildlings. At least it wasn't snowing at the moment, though she didn't like the look of the sky. When will I ever? The recent cataclysmic events had had the effect of numbing Val to them; now she merely expected reality to turn upside down every time she opened her eyes in the morning. It no longer felt like life. Only a waiting, a horrible limbo, a pressure mounting past all human endurance.

Down below, she saw a tower door open and another black-cloaked figure emerge into the courtyard. This would have been otherwise unremarkable, except for the fact that as he turned to the makeshift stairs cobbled together in the ice, Val realized he wore no gloves, that the frigid blue light gleamed in his bare black hands. Jon. He was coming up to her.

She swallowed down an unwelcome attack of nervousness. She'd never been scared of him before – part admiring, part impatient, part scornful, part sympathetic – but never scared, and she didn't know how to handle it. She turned, affecting her best attempt at the cool politeness with which she
had always treated him before, though her heart was racing. She could hear him climbing the steps. No breath frosted the air before him.

"My lady," his voice said, quiet but carrying in the stillness. "Good morrow."

"Good morrow." Val made herself give him a brief smile. He stood a few feet away, Jon in his own flesh, the long brown hair and the grey Stark eyes and the scar on his face where Orell's eagle had nearly ripped one out, the grim mouth. If she took off his blacks, she knew she would see the wounds on his stomach and back where Marsh and the others had stabbed him – but what else? Of a time Jon would have a few sips of mulled wine with his men, but she had not yet seen him eat. He would occasionally retreat to his private chambers for a few hours, but she could not say if he slept.

Almost as if he was following her thoughts, Jon raised one eyebrow wryly. "I suspect you don't need me to tell you that it's bloody cold up here," he said, pacing to stand beside her and observe the wasteland of debris on the far side. "Though you've done very well. I always knew you'd be as good a brother as any, and a deal better than most."

Val felt a sudden oblique pride at his compliment, followed by a surge of irritation that his idea of doing so was to tell her that she made a good crow. It was almost backhanded. "Warmer down below for certain," she agreed warily. "Though only just. Visiting your men on their rounds, then?"

"Later, perhaps. For now, just you." The wind was blunt, and Jon reached up absently to push his hair out of his face, a small human gesture that tore at Val's heart. Demigod monster hero that he was, he'd stolen her. He was still, however faintly, the crow that had saved her people and her life. Still Jon Snow. And now, to her complete horror, she was not at all sure that she was not at least half in love with him.

No future. Nothing. Remember that. It was only the idea, the principle. She could not take Jon to her bed to keep her warm, give her comfort and pleasure in the night as she had with Jarl and the various other lads who caught her fancy. There was nothing remotely traditional about how they, as un-man and woman, could come together. Like as not he'd devour me. My heart and soul, if not my body, and he might do that too.

"Me," Val said, in a statement of all these things at once. She wondered how much, if any of it, Jon understood. "Why?"

"Jeyne Poole." The hesitance in which Jon said the name, the regrets and the pain, almost undid her entirely. "I want you to tell me everything."

"No, you don't." There was a lump in Val's throat, and the wind scoured the salt from her eyes. "It. . . I know you thought she was Arya, that was why everything happened, the mutiny. . . Jon, I'm sorry." Why? It was none of it my fault. Yet she was, so badly that it hurt.

"Yes," Jon said, mildly but relentlessly. "It was why everything happened. Hence why I want to know."

Save throwing herself into the abyss, there was no escape. "It's not a pleasant tale."

"No tale involving the Bastard of Bolton is." Jon's hands tightened on a spur of ice, breaking it off with a crack. "On the one hand, I am relieved beyond measure that it's not my little sister after all. That everything foul that Ramsay Snow can do to a woman was not visited on her. But if so. . . where is she? It is disgracefully foolish now to hope that she is still alive. When, after all, neither am I."
Despite herself, Val moved closer to him. "Jon." Her hand hovered as if to touch his, but didn't quite.

He gave her a bitter smile. After an endless moment he said, almost too quietly to be heard, "She's not even truly my sister."

Val frowned. "What?"

"I..." Jon was clearly wrestling with something, something too horrible to be done justice in mere words. "When I was a child at Winterfell, I used to wonder why I existed, if it was merely because of Lord Eddard's weakness of the flesh, his breaking of his marriage vows. It's... not that. It never was. It's kin to how I feel about Arya. Relieved on the one hand, betrayed and furious and grieving on the other."

Val edged still closer. Close enough that if there had been any warmth coming off him, she would have felt it. "What do you mean?"

Jon turned to look at her. In his grey eyes she saw nothing but winter. "Lord Eddard is not my father."

That, Val had not expected. "What do you... of course he's your father. Why else would he claim you as his own and besmirch his precious honor? You kneelers and your horror of bas..." She faltered on the word before his glacial expression. "You and your hangups about pure blood and true birth..."

"Why else," Jon said, the two words as precise and devastating as blows to the chest. "Why else lie to even his lady wife and call his own reputation into question? Unless my existence was even more dangerous than I thought, a secret that could destroy the realm? When the very reason I was born was to die and rise as... as this?" He held out his black hands with a look of revulsion. "To become a monster?"

"You're not a monster," Val said impulsively. "Monsters never wonder if they are."

Jon's smile this time could have frozen a spring brook in flood. "I wish I believed that. Truly. But no man — "

"No matter." Suddenly Val wondered whether, at the end of the battle, if Jon would not rise to become great and terrible but instead crumple to dust, his task and his time at an end. She could not stand it, she knew then. Not ever again. Without a word, she reached out and took his glass hand in hers, then softly and wryly and sadly touched her lips to his.

Jon let her kiss him for a moment or two, the understated simplicity of it in stark contrast to the desperate, euphoric one she'd given him when he saved her from the wights. His mouth was even colder than his fingers, but still sweet, and Val turned her head, trying to get closer — a spark of comfort and connection, however strange, in the middle of the apocalypse. But at that, Jon grasped her arms and gently but firmly held her away. "No more of that, my lady. My watch is only beginning."

"Only beginning," Val echoed, more sardonically than she meant. "You crows are sworn to serve the Watch until your death, but I'd say that's been more than fulfilled on your part. Wear a black cloak or one striped in scarlet silk, like Mance. It makes no matter now."

Jon flinched at the mention of Mance. He let go of her and looked away. Then he said, "It does matter. And I have made my choice to wear what cloak I do, even as Mance made his. I am no
longer a brother of the Watch, it is true. I am the Watch. Every word of the vow. You said them as well. You know."

"Said them for you. Do you think I'd let the words to make me a crow, even only in name, pass my lips for anyone else? Ever in ten thousand years?"

Jon looked startled. "After the death of so many, we had no choice but to – "

"The answer is no." Val had just enough time to think that perhaps she should not speak so frankly to the unknown entity with the familiar face, but she could not make herself stop. "Why did you steal me, then? What else do you call it, capturing me from my people and keeping me here in your castle, your prisoner, for as long as it pleased you? You promised that you'd try to prevent me from being married off to one of the kneelers, or was it just luck that Wun Wun ripped apart Ser Patrek before I could? I heard that King Stannis offered you Winterfell, the Stark name, and me, and you turned them all down. Yet you trusted me to find the wildlings, and after the dark arts brought you back from death, the first thing you did was save my life. Why? What do you want? What are you? Why?"

With that, too angry and heartbroken to pay heed to caution, Val shoved him in the chest with both hands, hard enough to knock him on his undead arse. Let him kill me if he will. I am not afraid to die. But she'd fight back. She always would. She was still a woman of the free folk, and he was still a crow.

Jon looked rather stunned, as well he might. Plainly he had only expected an ambush from the Others, not her; after this little experiment, the Night's Watch might go to its grave at the end of the world – not likely to be far away – without coming in sight of another woman, much less allowing one to take the black even in uttermost need. And if you'd expected that ambush from Marsh, none of this would ever have happened. Furious with herself, Val started to cry.

Jon pushed himself to his feet with a grunt, though he was not winded; he had no breath for her to knock out. "I should have remembered what wildling women are like," he muttered, then came toward her, opened his cloak, and wrapped her in it. He stood there, holding but not quite touching her, as the wind licked her long ash-blond hair against his own brown locks. After an endless moment in which all Val could feel was her tears freezing on her cheeks, he said, "I'm sorry."

The gracious thing to do, the ladylike thing to do, would be to forgive him, but Val was no princess, no matter how much the kneelers called her one. She said nothing.

Jon seemed to sense that pressing his luck at this moment was unwise. He said nothing either, so she heard how ragged her breathing sounded against the lack of his, and realized that she had lost track of what time it was. The drowned blue light was darkening, so she supposed it must be getting onto night. It didn't matter. Nothing much did. The rest of her life might have happened to a stranger, long before this veil fell.

Jon surely felt her let go a shuddering sigh, some of the rage seeping out as if from a punctured wineskin. His shoulders moved in what would have been a sigh of his own. Then he said quietly, "So will you tell me about Jeyne?"

"I don't want to," Val said hoarsely. "She's not your sister – " What does he mean, he's not Lord Eddard's son? What happened out there, what did he learn? – "but she suffered everything and more that you feared your sister would. And as I have the tale, it wasn't Mance who rescued her. It was Theon Turncloak."

Jon looked as if she'd slapped him across the face. "That. . . that ass? That murderer? He's still
alive? Perhaps he didn't kill my – kill Bran and Rickon after all, but he has less honor than a Thenn has – "

"I don't know." Val took note with a start of the other strange thing Jon had just said. Bran and Rickon Stark had been slaughtered by the squids ages ago, everyone in the North knew that. So she could see why Jon would find it more than passing curious that the worst offender of all had bestirred himself to perform such a dangerous, selfless deed. But if not... It suddenly occurred to Val to wonder how much, if anything, of what she thought was reality was still true. Apparently quite little, on its face.

"I tried to ask her myself," Jon said. "But she was too frightened. So I – "

"I don't blame her. She'll swallow her tongue and flee around any man who's not that cook of yours, and the rest of us are frightened enough of you without being raped and tortured by the Bastard of Bolton in the bargain. But the... Alysane Mormont was looking after her, before the wights..." It was hard to say the She-Bear's name. "She told me not to blame Jeyne for not being Arya. I suggest you do the same."

"I wouldn't," Jon said, sounding hurt. "But if Alysane is dead, perhaps you would consent to – "

"Your Grace!"

The call startled both of them. Val felt a twist of instinctive revulsion in her stomach, which tightened as the speaker glided up the broken stairs, her crimson sleeves as bright as an open wound against the falling night. Her red eyes took in the two of them, the closeness in which they were standing and Jon's cloak still enfolding Val, and she smiled faintly. To Jon she said again, "Your Grace. I've been looking for you."

"You've found me." Jon made no move to go to her. "Were the flames no use?"

"The flames were of great use. That is why I sought you." Melisandre mounted the last piles of rubble, light as a dancer, and came to a halt, close enough that Val could feel the heat rolling off her. In other circumstances she would have welcomed it, but Jon's coldness was infinitely preferable to Melisandre's warmth. "To counsel you, and warn you. As for the princess..." Her gaze flickered to Val, then away. "Your Grace, as Azor Ahai reborn, remember that there will come that moment when you must drive your red sword through Nissa Nissa's living heart."

Val did not know if this was the effect Melisandre wanted, but Jon stepped away from her. "Yes, you told me that only death could pay for life," he said to the red priestess, with more of an edge than ever. "Right before you drove your own blade through my wolf."

"Ghost's death was necessary." Melisandre shrugged. "I could not complete the sacrifice and rebirth on my own, even with his blood, but I could position it in hopes of such an outcome. The children of the forest, the demons and shades that spoke to you in the weirwoods, will try to claim it was their work, but all life and death belongs to R'hllor. You are god's incarnation on earth, Your Grace, the rightful heir to the Seven Kingdoms. Reach out and take it, and the Great Other will be brought to its knees at last."

Jon flinched again. "Yes. That was the choice you offered me last time. Take Winterfell and destroy my family's gods. And by killing Ghost, perhaps you hoped to kill my northern blood as well, the part of me that was a warg and a Stark, so I would suddenly find such a choice much the easier. Well, my lady. As always, you failed."

"Did I?" Melisandre remained serene. "That is another outcome that cannot yet be known, and
certainly one that has no relevance if the battle is not won. Your Grace, I have had a momentous vision in the fires. At last, I have seen where to find the true Red Sword of Heroes. . . and a dragon."

There was a fraught, crackling pause. Then Jon said, "How do you dare?" and spun around, seeming to grow taller and more terrible in the gathering dusk as he stared her down. "After mistake upon mistake, fraud upon fraud, leading Stannis to the ends of the earth with nothing but war and winter to show for the trust he placed in you, you now propose to do the same to me? To send me haring after myths and shadows when the enemy will be here any moment? How many times did you promise me that you saw my sister, my lady? How many? I have no grudge against Alys Karstark and Jeyne Poole, but in their very flesh they show your errors. I have had enough of your fantasies and your prophecies. Deliver me everything you have promised, or go back to Asshai once and forever. If they will even have you."

"Your Grace is well within your rights to be angry." Melisandre's ruby pulsed, on and off and on again. "All the while I was with Stannis, when I still thought him the Prince who was Promised, is it any wonder that if I could not see what was right before my eyes, I could not see the nuances? Of course I made countless mistakes. But now that I know you for who you truly are, the caul has been lifted. My seeings are stronger and clearer by far. I would not lie. My only loyalty is for you, and your cause."

"And R'hllor's?"

"They are become one and the same thing," the red priestess replied, with her infuriatingly mysterious little smile. "I saved you when your men had stabbed you, took you down into the secret places beneath the Wall, where you could be saved and your life force transferred to Ghost until it was time for the transformation. Can you deny but that for the power of R'hllor working through me, you would have remained dead forever, never to rise and lead us against the armies of the Others?"

"As you say, my lady, there are many morrows. No one can know for certain."

Melisandre sighed. "You were shown many signs and portents in your last days, Jon Snow. Your continued existence, and that of Castle Black's, is the greatest of them all. And yet you still do not believe. You shall eventually, you have my word, but by then, much blood will have been spilled that need not be."

"Lady Catelyn's septon at Winterfell used to say that it was of higher purpose to believe without seeing. That such was the very essence of faith."

This time Melisandre laughed aloud. "Now you will resort to quoting a false priest, of the false Seven that neither of us worship, and the opinion of the cold stepmother who never once treated you as her own? And besides, it is only charlatans and cowards who ask you to believe without ever showing you why. There is, in their deceit and self-obsession, nothing at all to see."

"Charlatans," Jon said. "Deceit. What do you have to show me then, my lady?"

"As I said." Melisandre moved still closer, enough that Val took another reflexive step away. "The means to your victory, and the safety of all man-and-womankind. A dragon, and Lightbringer itself."

"Fairy tales." Jon turned back to gaze over the abyss. "I ask for help, and you tell me cradle stories. A child playing Lord of the Crossing, with his mayhaps."
"Neither one. Your sword there – " Melisandre nodded at Longclaw, sheathed as ever at Jon's side – "is only a mortal weapon. If you continue to fight with it, with the power in you that it is asked to absorb, it will break and fail. Azor Ahai's real sword, after remaining invisible to the eyes of my order for many thousands of years, has come forth again. It is in the hands of one who must never wield it. You must go south and claim it."

"The last time I proposed to go south and fight an evildoer in my own cause, my men murdered me in the courtyard. You'll understand if I am in little haste to do so again."

"Then go north," Melisandre urged. "North to the fire that burns at the end of the world. That is where you will find the dragon. I have seen him very clearly in my flames. His scales are green and bronze, and you know him already. You have slipped inside his skin and thought his thoughts. Haven't you?"

A black expression clouded Jon's already grim face. "Dragons," he said, making the word half a curse. "Dragons and madness. Is that what you would have me be heir to now?"

"The right of it is in your blood. And you must. By himself, the dragon can withstand the Others. . . but only for a time. He came here because he was called to you. You must claim him. If he dies and is turned to the service of the wights, the Evil One. . ." Melisandre let that particularly horrible intimation trail off into silence.

"Such a choice you offer me, again," said Jon. "I must go north and claim this dragon, or we will all die. Yet I must also go south and claim this sword, or we will all die. But I can only do one. Not the other. So by your lights, hope is gone before we even begin."

Melisandre looked at him almost pityingly. "No, Your Grace. Not at all. Kneel here and now, and swear all that you are and will be to the Lord of Light, and he will deliver both of these priceless weapons into your hands. You are absolutely correct, you can never do it on your own. But give up your stubborn resistance. Make yourself a vessel of R'hllor's will. Own to who you truly are – breathe in the fire of life that has left you, black dead cold creature that you are now. Become a man again, the greatest on the face of the earth. Take the princess for your bride." Her red eyes flicked to Val again. "Rule Winterfell and the Seven Kingdoms alike in the name of the one true king, the one true god. It is all yours. The dragon and the sword are only the beginning. It is time. Cast aside all the falsehoods in which you once believed, and walk in the fires of Truth."

For an unending moment, Val was terrified that Jon was going to accept. How could he not? The very thing she'd feared of him, that he could reach out and squeeze the world dry like a ripe fruit. *His destiny.* Neither Jon nor the red woman had said who he truly was, if not a scion of Eddard Stark, but the truth danced maddeningly close at hand. *Dragons and madness, is that what you would have me be heir to now?* Power and eternity. The oldest and deadliest of temptations, for that it almost always worked.

Jon Snow said, "No."

Melisandre blinked. "Your Grace?"

"No," Jon repeated. "There is much and more that I do not understand about myself, about you, about any of this. But you are wrong. It is who we choose to be that we are, not who we are born. And if this dragon is real, is here at the end of the world in the Land of Always Winter, then I do in fact mean to go and find it. But not as a slave of the red god."

"All men are god's slaves." Melisandre was no longer smiling. "Turn your back on him – on me – at your peril."
Jon held up his black hands. "My peril is an old friend to me, Lady Melisandre. And my choice is made. I go north – with the woman who knows these lands."

In shock, Val realized he was looking at her. "My lord?"

"I want you at my side," Jon told her. "You are the only one left who I can trust with my life. After Satin..." His voice caught briefly at the mention of his squire. "And apart from being one of the best fighters here, you're a wildling. If there are any of them at all left alive out there, that is worth a great deal."

"I..." Val had never expected this. Just as she never expected anything when it came to Jon Snow. "Go north, with all the Others in existence ready to fall on the world? North to find a dragon? We'd never survive. Not me, at any rate. Gods know about you."

At that, Jon might have smiled. She couldn't be sure; the last of the twilight was gone, and night rushed in like the tides of a winter sea. "We're not going the ordinary way. Nor with Melisandre's red god either. It is time we found out just who the charlatans are."

"But – "

"I cannot promise that you will emerge unchanged. Or emerge at all. The paths where we must walk have little mercy on mortals." Jon did not blink. "It is your choice to make."

Val hesitated only a moment. "I'm with you. Now and... and always."

Jon did smile then, faintly and very sadly. "The shield that guards the realms of men," he said, and smoothed a tendril of hair out of her face. "So be it. We are going under the hill, my lady. Down to the children of the forest."


"So they are," Melisandre said warily. "Lord Snow, they serve full as cruel a power as mine. They may take you north through the Old Ways, true enough... but their price is always bought in blood."

"Whereas yours is bought in fire and lies and death." Jon did not look back at her. "I know a certain one of their number. An old god in truth. A Stark. That is how I will make my end, if I do. I told you, my lady. I've made my choice."

Melisandre regarded him inscrutably. "So you have," she said at last. "And much like Lord Eddard, your honor will cost the world everything."

"Go," Jon said. "Light what fires you will, sing to your god if your god will keep the Others back. If we are truly on the same side of this struggle, my lady, you will hold no grudge in that."

"No grudge." Melisandre moved to the stairs. "Only sadness. For there is no one else who can take Lightbringer from Ramsay Bolton now. No one else who could have united all the forces of good and light under the banner of R'hllor and spread his cleansing fire across the world. You may well make it north and find the dragon, Lord Snow, if the children of the forest do not consume you and the princess bone and blood alike. But your brother Bran is no longer your brother in more ways than one. He is the three-eyed crow, as unknown to you as you are to us. And the dragon without the sword is not enough, nor the sword without the dragon, and everything is nothing without R'hllor. You are everything, Lord Snow. And you have chosen death."

She paused, then said, "Farewell." Red robes swirling across the ice, leaving drops of meltwater in
her wake, she descended into the darkness and was gone.
From holdfast to horizon the world was white. Even sturdy ancient trees that had stood these winters past the memory of man looked small, dwarfed by the drifts that greedily gulped up their trunks and lower branches, their canopies buckling under the weight – old men with white beards, etched in the frost. Yard-long icicles fingered the worn stone of the tower roof, crashing down often and unpredictably in a commotion of crystalline blades. But the river, the Weeping Water, was a broad solid plateau of ice. They'd be crossing it at nightfall, and the scouts had reported that it hadn't so much as squeaked beneath the hooves of their sturdy little garrons.

Davos Seaworth stood just outside, fat flakes speckling the hood and shoulders of his fur-lined cloak. Warm was the last thing that could be said for his observation post, but although it was warm back inside, it was also smoky, filthy, cramped, smelly, and loud, too many northmen packed into a tiny stone tower originally built to house a smallholder, a haystack, and a pig or two. But it was the first reliable shelter they'd found since leaving White Harbor, and it lay, by their reckoning, no more than ten miles due south of the Dreadfort. It had occurred to Davos that when they took the castle, they might well find the skin of its original owner tacked up to keep the drafts out. As if the poor wretch hadn't had enough misery to manage being born poor as dirt in the north, he'd also been born poor as dirt on Bolton lands. Under Roose he might have managed if barely, but under Ramsay...

Davos shook his head. It still did not make sense to him that of all the high lords and great warriors in the land, it was a crabber's son from Flea Bottom whom the gods – and Wylis Manderly – had chosen for the task of bringing down these monsters in human flesh. He'd run over potential plans in his head a thousand times, everything from a straightforward assault to tying lit brands to a flock of chickens and sending them flapping over the castle walls. He dimly recalled his son Devan telling him about some siege where they'd done that, something he'd read about in a book. But the thought of Devan was too painful, recalling those dreams he'd had on Skagos of the boy with unearthly blue eyes, and besides Davos took considerable leave to doubt that a flock of chickens would just so happen to be conveniently to hand. Ravens were much too valuable to use in such a fashion, and any other game bird would likewise be long gone. And Davos and the men would have need of anything they found as food, not weapons.

The wind was thin and keening, rattling like a man stabbed in the gut trying vainly to suck in a breath. Everything lent itself to morbid comparisons in this gods-awful place, and Davos tried to pull his cloak tighter. But even if he went inside right now and elbowed out a place at the crowded hearth, there would still be a coldness in him that the fire couldn't touch. He hadn't taken off any clothes in a fortnight, and thus hadn't gotten a proper look at his back to be sure, but he could feel the insidious poison of the wound. Of late it had started throbbing with every mile they made, though he did his best to give no sign; the first thing the Manderlys would know of anything amiss was when he dropped dead in his tracks. They will have to burn me. He'd spent so much time mistrusting the fires, plotting against them, trying to counsel Stannis against their seductive allure, but they would get him in the end after all. Does that please you, Lady Melisandre?

Davos stamped in a circle, clapping his hands, breath gusting. He would have to go inside, but not quite this moment. At least out here, for whatever reason, the pain in his back was bearable; it got worse in the warmth. But he pulled his cloak tight again, by habit. A good cloak, brown triple-thick wool and white fur, so from a distance he merely appeared to be part of the landscape. Though the tabard under it was black and gold, Ser Wylis' gift. It made Davos feel proud to wear Baratheon colors again, though in truth the sigil was more Renly's than Stannis'; there was no fiery heart, only the crowned stag. But it reminded him that he was doing just another service, another
duty for his king – something he'd done countless times before, something he knew intimately well. It comforted him when he began to get too lost in the immensity of it.

Davos craned his head back to check the sky, what little of it there was. The days were getting shorter almost as he watched, and he hadn't glimpsed the sun properly for at least the last week. *How do men ever live in this place?* To judge from the evidence at hand, perhaps they didn't. His wife and his two little ones seemed farther away than ever, and no matter how many times Davos tried to convince himself that they'd be safe on Cape Wrath, he could never quite believe it. He'd personally witnessed the flaming demise of the greater part of Lannister naval power, of course, but what if the Tyrells – or someone else – had decided to attack the heart of Baratheon territory while Stannis was otherwise occupied in the north? *I am attempting the same even now upon the Boltons, after all.* He felt too weary for much more war. It was a young man's game. *Young and highborn.*

Recalling the burning of the ships made Davos think of Rickon – and Brienne. She must have got safe away, though even he did not quite know when. *Warrior defend her.* He had no way to be absolutely sure that the big warrior woman had been telling the truth about Sansa Stark or Jaime Lannister or any of the other extraordinary things she claimed, but she'd looked him in the eye and renounced all oath to vengeance against Stannis. It had been a long time since Davos had seen such profound decency in man *or* woman, and such an awful awareness of what toll the cycle of revenge was taking on all of them. *With the land in snow and ashes, is this only now when we come to it?*

Stiff with cold and sick of memories, Davos took one last glance around the camp, well patrolled by the White Harbor men. Everyone had learned piquantly in recent days what a mistake it was to underestimate them or their liege lord, and so any notion that they were less than true northerners had been rapidly disabused. Davos could not have asked for harder travel companions, but they'd had nothing much of substance to eat for several days now. Desperation was always the worst place from which to begin an attack, particularly a siege, but the faster they could make it the last ten miles to the Dreadfort, the better; once they crossed the frozen Weeping Water, they were almost there. *Then we have all sorts of options for how we wish to die.*

Davos snorted. He tried to spit over his shoulder for luck, but it froze hard in the air and fell with a faint clink. *I don't know how cold it is, but it's too cold.* And would be colder still by nightfall, but it was their only hope for secrecy; their days of marching unobserved were over. The scouts had already killed a pair of Bolton men-at-arms taking notice of their handiwork, and more were certainly out there. Turning away, Davos went inside. He'd try to sleep some. Before.

To his vast surprise, he did in fact manage to force himself under into a fitful doze, rucked up in a pile of bad-smelling blankets in the corner. They might have had a more comfortable time of things at the old Hornwood keep, which they'd also passed on their way, but it stood just as empty and desolate, and was said to be haunted by Lady Donella's maddened shade, gnawing at the flesh of men as she'd eaten her own fingers in life, desperately searching for the food the Bastard had denied her. Davos could not disbelieve it out of hand. This place was wild and dangerous and unnatural enough for anything.

He was woken suddenly, past dusk, which only meant it was the end of the afternoon. Suddenly enough, in fact, that he rolled over and groped for the weapons he'd left by his bedroll, only to be stopped by the voice of Ser Edmund Manderly, a cousin of Ser Wylis' from one of the lesser branches of the merman's trident. "My lord? You best come. Fast."

"What?" Davos struggled upright, clumsy fingers fumbling to buckle on his swordbelt. "Are we under attack? Have the scouts come across some – "
"They've found something, aye." Ser Edmund's mouth was grim. "Someone, that is. He bears a peculiar tale. We felt you should hear before we made our final decision. So come." He paused, remembered that he was speaking at least nominally to his commanding officer, and added again, "My lord."

Davos did not care what he called him. More pressing issues awaited. A spy? A deserter? Ser Edmund had not mentioned the provenance, and anything this unexpected visitor said, whether good or ill, could be altogether a wild fable. Davos hoped he still had the acumen to judge correctly. A smuggler must learn very quickly which words to trust, and which were wind. Otherwise he would very quickly be a dead smuggler.

Chewing on the possibilities, Davos followed Ser Edmund down the narrow stairs, which croaked and complained as stridently as a fishwife haggling at market. Through an open door, he could see smoky torchlight suffusing the holdfast's solar, which was really more of a privy closet. Voices followed it out, upraised in discussion or dissent.

Now we find out how bad it is. The lintel was low enough that even Davos, a man of unremarkable height, had to duck through. He still felt awkward about announcing his presence, but Ser Edmund had no such qualms. "Oy, you lot, get out of the way. Let him see, now. You! Move your arse!"

It worked. Davos stepped through and confronted an outright pitiful specimen of humanity, huddled in a snow-and-blood-spattered heap in the corner. His wrists and ankles had been rudely bound with rope, but there hardly appeared need for them; he barely looked capable of standing up, let alone murdering someone. His nose and cheeks were black with frostbite, his teeth kept chattering even in the comparable warmth of the crowded solar, and his eyes stared with a look somewhere between terror and madness. But the device on his tunic told all the tale Davos needed. The flayed man of Bolton.

Davos and the captive locked gazes for several moments. Of the two of them, it was Ser Edmund who spoke first. "Sang a funny song when we took him, this one. Said he was running away from Winterfell."

Winterfell? What in the. . . Davos frowned, then addressed the prisoner directly. "We are not your masters. We do not intend to skin you for your trouble. But you can make this much the easier for us all. Why were you fleeing Winterfell?" Such a thing could only mean that the Boltons' control over the castle had abruptly gone quite sideways, and Davos could not stop the stab of painful hope in his gut. Stannis?

The man said nothing, blinking unfocusedly. One or two of the northmen made threatening noises and reached for their knives, but Davos could see that the prisoner's reticence owed itself to dread, not defiance, and he raised a hand to stop them. Nonetheless, he was just wondering if he too was going to have to resort to more concrete methods when the man blurted out, "'S only the sensible thing to do. Sensible! Run away before the fire went off… he wanted to destroy all of it, all of it, gods help us… bring down the walls, nothing to stop 'em them… wolves howling in the woods, wolves and wolves, course there were, it's a buggering Stark place, en't it? And he killed him, I saw him do it, killed him and tried to eat his brains. That was enough for me then, never seen nothing of the sort, and when Ramsay's the sort you see a good deal, now don't you? Barely got out ahead of the blast. Got out and run. Some others did too, but the things in the woods got them. They always tell me I was the biggest coward, run the fastest. Gods, I did. And I'm the only one who survived. The coward. I'm not no use to you. He'll skin me anyway, when he hears. The coward."

He gurgled a laugh, curled up like a small child, and began to sob.

Davos was half tempted to reach out and comfort him, but recognized that the man was already too
far beyond sense and reason to have any appreciation for it. Instead, he turned to the Manderly men. "What on earth does all this mean?"

"Ramsay Bolton killed someone, that's all I gathered," said Ser Edmund. "But that bit about things in the woods..."

The wound in Davos' back pounded, painfully enough to make him see stars. *Dead things in the water.* He remembered his doomed dive in after Osha, as the pale rotting hands dragged her under. The way she'd saved his own life, charging up the mountain with the torches and Shaggy. The word dropped from his lips like one of the icicles outside. "Wights."

"Begging pardon, m'lord, but wights – if they even exist – they've not once come south of the Wall. Not in eight thousand years. That was why the Wall was built."

"Oh," Davos said grimly. "They exist." It was worse than he'd thought. Far worse. And to think they'd been about to go marching out in the darkness...

Davos smartly pushed that thought aside. The prisoner had only minutes of sanity left, if that, and there were still too many questions that needed answering. "Where is Lord Roose? What happened to Winterfell?" He knelt down, grasping the prisoner's chin and making him look into his face. If the mayhem had been general, the Boltons could be either all dead in the snow or fleeing back to the safety of the Dreadfort. If they were to arrive and find it stoutly garrisoned, girded for the ultimate battle...


A few of the nearby Manderly men flinched. They glanced at each other, as if in hope that their neighbor would tell them that they hadn't heard what they had just heard. Davos himself felt briefly faint. Wights well south of the Wall, Winterfell – by the sound of it – blown to smithereens... this was no longer about filching a castle while a dangerous enemy was distracted elsewhere, a simple strategic move. Instead they'd stepped into the middle of a battle for the very existence of the north. *And if it is not checked, all of Westeros and the world."

"Lord Roose," Davos repeated. That was the most vital of all. "Where?"

The man just stared at him, eyes bugging out further and further. A vein began to throb in his neck, and an animal noise, a hair-raising whimpering, peeled out of his throat. Then his entire body spasmed and shook as if he was being tortured on the rack, he whispered, "Following me, and toppled over with an almighty crash, froth and blood running from his broken lips.

Davos exclaimed in shock and tried to catch the man, feeling for his pulse, but he already knew that it was too late. The mad eyes were already turning dull and glazed, a sour reek of piss rising among all the other bad smells of the room. The Manderly men made various outcries and gestures as well, and one of the youngest ones looked as if he was about to bolt. He wasn't the only one. They all retreated to a wider and wider berth around the corpse, none of them in any hurry to touch it.

Davos himself wiped his hands on his breeches and backed away. He had heard of men being frightened to death before, but never quite so literally. *Following me...* Did that mean that the Bolton patriarch had also survived whatever inferno his son had apparently set off, was now commanding a disciplined retreat back home? But then, why had the prisoner been running as fast as he could, all by himself, never once daring to stop? Not the behavior of a man with friends at his back. Or anything except a terrible enemy. *Following me... the coward... and I'm the only one*
who survived.

Merciful Mother. At that moment, Davos Seaworth understood. Knew just how horrible it was. Knew it beyond any argument or challenge, a terrible bone-deep certainty. But he didn't have any time to dwell on it, or even so much as open his mouth to tell the others. For that was when the windows blew out. It scattered like shards of bone over the floor, and was followed at once by a sweeping swirl of darkness and snow, dousing the fire, bringing a cold beyond even the word, a cold so primal that even the memory of warmth was gone. And in the darkness, Davos heard skittering. Climbing. They are coming.

For a moment, he stood utterly paralyzed. His back exploded into agony so terrible he couldn't have moved even if he wanted to, and as it built, Davos was suddenly possessed with a mad urge to run and hurl himself out the broken window, to fall down to them, to let them catch him, to become one of them as he was supposed to. As they'd nearly taken him on Skagos, as they should, before –

"MOVE!" a voice bellowed, breaking the spell, and in mild disbelief, Davos registered that it was his own. The first spectral silhouettes were already appearing, groping, wriggling through. As soon as the darkness fell, they woke – they came – hunting in the night that does not end –

There was no time for anything except reaction. Davos still had his sword, but did not expect mortal steel alone to serve him in much stead against this foe. He heard the Manderly men forming a barricade behind him, their own swords clashing against. . . something, something strange and wrong. Ser Edmund roared a challenge, which was only met by silence.

Queerly, Davos found himself almost giving thanks that his first encounter with these things had come on Skagos; if he was forced to process the fact of their existence now, it would have taken away from his pressing need to fight for his life. The holdfast was stone and wouldn't burn, but that was a good thing, he didn't want to burn his men with it. There had been a palisade ditched and staked up, more torches there, he could –

Davos slammed his shoulder into the holdfast door, burst it open, and sprinted out into the falling snow. The cold rose up and punched him in the chest almost viscerally, driving him to his knees as it slashed through his lungs. He tasted ice in his mouth, saw more shadows moving out of the corner of his eye, and struggled upright, prepared to lunge at the nearest flame. Once he had it in hand, that was the only way he could go back in and fight off the hordes of –

At that moment, a guttering scream ripped from the darkness nearby. It dragged Davos' attention off his quest to save his companions long enough to redirect it to the most pressing issue of all: the horses. Even if he could burn the wights, it meant nothing if they could not then make an expeditious escape. And as he snatched one of the torches off the palisade stakes and held it up, he saw the full, unthinkable extent of it.

What was unfolding in the trees right now made the ordeal he had endured on Skagos look like child's play. Dead men, flesh grey and hard, eyes blue, hands clawing – some of them missing heads or legs or other important appendages, trailing guts and rotted muscle, crumbled bone visible through wet gleaming cracks – it was said that the hair and fingernails of the dead still grew, a piece of folk wisdom apparently confirmed before Davos' very eyes. They were swarming across the ditch and into the horse pens, tearing apart the garrons as the poor beasts screamed in terribly human agony. Their blood splashed violently crimson into the snow, the wights barely seeming to notice their destructive triumph before they bulled on in mindless eagerness, closing in on the holdfast from all sides. The one beacon of human light and refuge in the middle of a vast, haunted wilderness – small wonder they'd been drawn to it, even as they hunted the sole survivor –

Davos opened his mouth, intending to plead to the Seven to protect him, then snapped it shut so
hard his teeth clicked. He was the only one of all the men who'd had the sense to make a break for it; the northerners weren't going to run, were going to stand their ground and die for their trouble. *The coward. The only one who survived.* The words rattled madly in his head, spoken in his own voice and the prisoner's at once.

No. Davos burned to a halt. He'd abandoned four strong sons to die in the hell of the Blackwater, led them there and had to bear the shame of their defeat, the bitterness of their loss. He could not lead the Manderly men into just as terrible a nightmare and then flee cravenly to preserve his sorry skin once more. He had to get back in there and save them, even at cost of his own life. To do otherwise would be dishonor of the grossest order; he would not even be able to stand before the Father's mighty throne at his judgment. In all this hard world where men needed each other to survive, none was so reviled as the oathbreaker.

Perhaps I have lived too long. The holdfast was overrun from all sides, the garrons still screaming as the last of them died. Wights broke the door down and blundered inside, the crash of steel echoing faintly as the Manderlys took them on. *Braver men than I deserve.* Now, he had to, now.

Davos Seaworth turned and ran.

*Coward,* his mind screamed at him. *Traitor.* Smugglers were not bred for altruism. You could drink with a friend and business partner of many years in the morning, and see him swinging from the harbormaster's noose by evenfall; you could not grieve him, you had to raise your black sail and steal away on the tide so they didn't string you up too. Trust was parcelled out meanly, any gift was examined for the catch, any man just trying to talk you out of your valuables or into the magistrate's waiting arms. Davos had done his fair share of it all. If there were even a few less wights, if the pain in his back had not been so bad, if he had another torch, if there was anything else than the absolute certainty that he would in fact die gruesomely if he went back inside that holdfast... no Osha to save him this time, no dagger of dragonglass... On the most vanishing of chances that he ever saw Lord Wyman again, he would not be fit to look him in the eye, much less the Father Above. Would fall on his knees and plead Manderly's mercy for having so unforgivably failed him in the hour of the wolf... Lord Wyman would be fully justified in refusing Stannis as his king, but Davos would not be able to stand it, would not – wondered who, if anyone, would find him as broken and raving as the prisoner who'd died of fright at his feet –

The dark woods were all a blur. Davos knew that everything was gone but the clothes on his back and the sword on his waist. If he looked back he was lost; he had to keep struggling through the mounting snowdrifts, batting at them with his shortened hand, knowing himself more monstrously out of place than ever. *I should have died on the deck of a ship. Not out here in the northern hinterlands.* But he was somehow still alive, again, while good men were dead. And his only hope of staying that way was to run like all seven hellfires. If Brienne was there... Brienne wouldn't have fled... *I will never forgive myself.*

It felt like forever until the sounds of the carnage faded. By that time, Davos could barely move anymore; the cold from his back was coiling through him, turning his legs to solid lead. He fumbled a hand beneath his furs to feel, and was horror-struck to discover a hole almost as big as his fist, where the flesh had been mortified and eaten away. The pain where he touched it was blinding. There was a faint line of what might have been dawn on the horizon, a feverish shade of blood red. He was still not far enough away, but he could not make it another step.

Davos fell to his knees and began to weep.

His sobs were gasping, wrenching, retching, punching him as hard as the pain, driving him to all fours as he shook and shuddered with the force of his grief and guilt. Ghosts whirled around him,
each tree with its own face. Dale, Allard, Matthos, Maric. . . Edric Storm, little Shireen. . . Lord Wyman, Ser Wylis, Brienne of Tarth, Marya and Stanny and Steff, Osha, Rickon, Ser Edmund Manderly and all the others. . . and Stannis, always Stannis, Melisandre never far behind. He even thought he saw his lost luck, drifting in the eddy of broken ships at the bottom of the Blackwater Rush.

The light had turned grey by the time Davos regained control of himself. A sign that, however undeservedly, he had lived through the night. And now utterly alone with no companions, provisions, or horse, perhaps near the Dreadfort or perhaps nowhere near at all; he had lost all track of direction or intention during his heedless flight. He was, in short, as dead a man as the rest of them.

Lightheaded, Davos got to his feet. The first step hurt so badly that he almost went crashing down again; his throat was sore and sticky from his crying, and he couldn't stop coughing from the cold. He had no idea where he was going or what to do next. He could try to return to the holdfast and scavenge the corpses of his men, see if the wights had left even one stone on the next, but the thought alone made him want to throw up. Yet he was still wearing that black and gold tabard with the crowned stag. He was still Stannis Baratheon's Hand of the King. A piss-poor one to be sure, but there you had it. He could not just lie down in the snow and wait for an end to it. He had to find a way out.

Davos had been walking for perhaps an hour, the world a disoriented blur of cold and pain, when he finally became aware of something or someone else, close at hand and drawing closer. Of course he at once thought of the dead men, but unless their strength had become unconquerable indeed, they never came by daylight.

Who, then?

Davos lurched to a halt and waited tensely, hand on his sword. Not that it was likely to do him much good. Miserable coward that he was, he was just as likely to grovel on his knees again. If its use was needed, it was probably already too late for –

Frozen twigs snapped underfoot, and a young man emerged from the ghostly trees. Living, not dead. He was tall and fleshy, wrapped in a shaggy bearskin cloak that hid any identifying sigil he might have conveniently sported beneath, and his hair was long, dry, and dark, his eyes unsettlingly pale and his lips plump and smirking. He too wore a swordbelt at his waist, a battered brown scabbard of no remarkable quality, but to Davos' half-insensate, grief-stricken mind, there seemed to be a strange red-gold glow flickering around its hilt.

At that moment, the young man looked up, caught sight of Davos, and stopped dead in his tracks. His hand flashed instinctively to his sword as well, but a further look convinced him that this decrepit refugee posed no threat. He smiled instead. "Why, friend. A strange place to run across a fellow traveler."

"Strange indeed." Davos' voice barely sounded like his own, choked and cracked with pain and fatigue. There was something about the other man that he instinctively and immediately disliked, strong enough to make him wonder if he had just escaped the wights only to stumble into worse. But what on earth could be worse?

"I've traveled a long way myself," the young man went on. He held out a hand. "Come with me. There will be mulled wine for both of us, and hot fires, and soft beds. Not far. And you look dead on your feet."

Davos took a step back. "I'll find my own way."

"Will you?" the young man asked mildly. "To where?"
Davos did not presently have an answer to this question, but something in his mind was chirping at him, his old sixth sense. Something about that face, the eyes... the glow, the definite glow... but it was so hard to think, he was so tired, so sick at heart... though his choice was this or starving to death in the wastes, he wasn't going to...

He turned. "It's a kindly meant offer, but I think --"

A point pricked the back of his neck. A knife. He could smell the young man's rank breath, feel the strange heat -- that sword, what was that sword --

"Very kindly meant," his captor said softly. So he's the one who finds me now. Naked and raving in the darkness. "And I don't intend to have it turned down. You're coming with me. And you'll soon discover the truth of my words. There is no hospitality like the Dreadfort's."
The Northman's Daughter

She only stopped swimming when her strength began to give out. Dazed and coughing, her every breath still tasting of smoke as she gulped it into her ragged lungs, she clamped hold of a broken jetty and let her legs go limp beneath her, swaying like weed. The maze of stone buildings had long since blocked out the sight of the burning House, but she knew the blaze still roared. She could feel it in her bones. However briefly or badly, she had been a Faceless Man. *When I killed them, I killed a part of me too.* Or maybe that was only the wound in her shoulder. She closed her eyes and saw the dream all over again: the wolf and the man struggling in the snow before the grave of Winterfell, and the pale things that stank of death, coming and coming. And the only relic of it apart from the wound, the only thing that told her she was not Cat or Beth or Lyanna or any of the others, was that skinny sword. *Needle.*

She fumbled at her waist in sudden terror, to be sure it was still there. It was. She'd killed the kindly man with it, she remembered, but to a master of that order, one death or even a hundred might be meaningless, steps to ascend as they moved closer and closer to the shadowed heart of their great and terrible god. She would be a fool to assume that he and Jaqen had simply perished, trapped in the collapse. But this must be, *must* be, something that even they had not expected.

The girl shivered, hugging the pier. Suddenly she wanted to cry. But that was a stupid thing to do, a little baby's thing. It wouldn't help her get to safety, or give her the answers about the voice that had whispered to her. *Stick them with the pointy end.* His name was there, right there, waiting. She'd said it in her head in the House of Black and White, right before she'd named her final three names to be killed. Those ones she did remember. *Ramsay Bolton. Jaqen H'ghar. No one.* All of them had to die. The Bastard was the one who'd attacked her in her wolf. Jaqen H'ghar might not be that assassin's true self or face, but his god knew him by that name and could call him home with it, as she'd found out in Harrenhal. And the last... *no one* had to die, to return her to whoever she was. If it was even possible. She'd already drunk at the fountain once. *But my wolf is still alive, my true self.* For now. And for the other...

"Jon," the girl said aloud. It fell like a pebble off her clumsy tongue. "Jon."

She didn't know why, but she thought there was some strange power to it, a talisman, as if she'd invoked something more than just a memory. But it didn't do her any good right now. She *could* just throw all strategy to the winds and try to run away by herself, but she knew that she wouldn't get far. Ser Justin had an extremely vested interest in keeping her alive, whatever it was, and... *When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.* Who had said that?

Ser Justin wasn't her pack. He wasn't even a wolf. He served Stannis, and Stannis was a stag. But those voices, Jon's and the other ones, she trusted. She'd been a lone wolf ever since he'd left her, the boy with blue eyes and bull's horns, and all it had ended her up was cowering in this canal in the back alleys of Braavos, exhausted and terrified, her blasted memories flitting elusively in her skull and her slashed shoulder aching and burning. When she could chase down names to give to the gods, but could not even take her own.

Arms shaking with the strain, the girl crawled out of the water and onto the pier. She remembered her first waking on the docks, in that shroud, but she didn't have the wherewithal to do what she'd done last time. She couldn't even stand up, was starting to lose sense of what was her own body. She was bending forward and her strides were slow and stumbling, paw after paw slipping in the deep white snow as drops of hot blood pockmarked it with scarlet. No good, no good. She was not
the only hunter in the woods who followed that trail. Where the dead man-things were, she did not know. They had no smell. They were the murderous shadows to every side, but never seen, never come to grips with.

The wolf had been running for hours now, but she too was at the end of her strength. The wound from the burning blade felt as if it had struck through her heart, and the damage she'd taken in the cage in the village square, before the big hooded man rescued her, was slowing her further. She was somewhere well south and east of Winterfell, but the barren dells were still clad in endless winter. The sun was only a sullen pale smear barely above the horizon, wreathed in clouds, and the wind cut her even deeper. Blood had frozen fast on her fur, dripping crimson icicles. But there, just there –

Water. The wolf could hear it nearby. Water was good; a river or a creek, lap up a few gulps, drown her scent for whoever and whatever might be hunting her now. Her foreleg couldn't stand much more. The flesh had been ripped and scorched down to the bone, and it sprawled out from underneath her when she tried to take one more step. Whining, the wolf blundered her way up onto the other three. Hopping and limping, sides heaving, she slid down the snowy bank to the sound of water, a few frigid rivulets trickling on the ice that armored it like the hardskin men wore to fight. Just a bit closer and then she'd drink. Lie down for a moment. So tired of running, and here she'd be safe. . .

But there was another wolf there.

Blinded with exhaustion and pain, she almost didn't see him at first. Then her nose took the scent, her head jerked up, and she stared across the river at him, a low growl rumbling from her throat as he laid his ears back and snarled at her in return. He was a dark stain on the white world, black fur and green eyes, almost as big as her and clearly much stronger. He showed his teeth, and she bared hers. She'd have to fight, one last time she'd have to – not likely to survive it, but –

The big black male leapt. She wheeled away, got her haunches more solidly under her, and rose up to meet him. Over and over in the snow they rolled, snarling and snapping, agonizing pain ripping through her useless foreleg. She smelled the stench of carrion on his breath; this one was a man-eater too. A bite of flesh, just a bite. . . she was so hungry. . .

They wrestled with teeth and claws. She tasted his blood on her lolling tongue, raked her good paw across his snout, felt their combined weight crash through the ice and douse them both in freezing water; they bounded free at once, yipping furiously. And then, as she squared up for another attack –

It was there. She almost had it. The memory. Of a mother dead in the snows of summer with a broken antler in her throat, and the others. Five others. The eldest, golden-eyed, now gone beyond the pale of death with an iron crown nailed to his head. Sweet grey sister, likewise gone. Brother, spirit-talker, one of a thousand skins. A big white one with red eyes – fading out, growing dim, faraway, even as a blazing figure stood in the darkness behind him. And the youngest, the wildest, the big black hunter.

She stood stock still. Lowered her tail and whined.

Suspecting a trick, the male cocked his head and snarled. But when she didn't come after him, he padded up the bank and over to her, his own growls turning to a lower, longer rumble in his chest. He seemed just as confused. Sister. But they'd been apart for so long, how could it even be possible?

He whined in turn. Nipped lightly at her ruff – and then, as her foreleg went completely out from
under her and she fell, he made a circle around her and dashed off into the snow. Just as his scent was beginning to grow cold and she thought he was gone for good, he returned, dragging something white and ruined. Its cloth rags showed a man-form clutching a three-pointed claw. Manderly. It was the girl's thought, not the wolf's. The sigil of House Manderly. Was that where they were, somewhere in the wilds north of White Harbor? But the Manderlys – were they dead, where had they died, torn apart in the snow by her brother or something else? She should not. . . but she had eaten such flesh before, and she was so hungry. . .

A bite filled her jaws with meat, still sweet if stringy and cold. She wrenched out another, slavering and swallowing, as her brother insistently shoved the rest of the corpse under her nose. She could taste the strangeness in it, something blue and unnatural, had a memory not quite hers, of a brother eating this unliving undead flesh and feeling it move inside him. But this corpse was not awoken, and she was starving and weak. She ate almost all of it, leaving only a jumble of bloody bones, and when she was finished, her brother dragged her to the stream to drink. Then he nudged and nipped and badgered her up to the stand of leafless trees beyond, where he'd built a den of fallen logs, and began to lick her wounds.

The pain came back – hard, too hard. It burned like a thousand suns, the red blade etched across her eyes, rattling in her skull. And then there was a sensation like she'd been punched very hard, was falling and falling and falling, and the girl found herself lying flat on the doorstep of Ser Justin Massey's rented villa in Braavos, with absolutely no memory of how she had gotten there.

I must have walked here while I was with her. She had the name again. Nymeria. It had been no dream; it never was when she was in that skin. I saw him. The black one. My brother. He saved me.

But they were dead, dead, dead. Like me.

Unsteadily, the girl got to her feet – two feet, not four – and looked around for her favorite lemon tree, the one that overhung the villa walls, so she could climb over without encountering the guards. She stole around, jumped up and grabbed the branch, and hauled herself over, kicking and squirming. Then dropped with a plop on the far side, in the courtyard, sending another torrent of pain through her shoulder. The wound seemed to be getting worse. Since she had once and forever destroyed the possibility of going back and drinking at the fountain to cut herself off from Nymeria, she would henceforth have to suffer whatever it might cause the wolf. I need Ser Justin. Him and that horn he had, whatever it was. He said that Ferrego Antaryon had given it to him as a gift, but as the girl remembered that she had killed Ferrego and also that the late Sealord had been distinctly uninterested in Massey's cause, Ser Justin must actually have stolen it. But how? Had Ferrego – or Jaqen, his servant and First Sword, the face-changing perfect thief – stolen it first?

Too many questions. Too many. The girl began to trot across the veranda as fast as she could go, which was not very. There wasn't a guard to be seen. They must all be up in the tower, looking out at the burned House in the distance. Every native Braavosi knew what the Faceless Men were, must be quaking in their boots in fear of what devilry their apparent destruction would unleash upon the city. It occurred to the girl that she could be out of time, that they might already have –

At that very moment, a short, sharp scream ripped through the air. Not close, but not far away. It had come from the quarter of the villa where the Summer Maid was being held.

The girl stopped. The Summer Maid was the one who had hired the Faceless Men to kill Antaryon, they wouldn't need to kill her. . . but their temple was burned, their god's shrine and all their thousands of secrets destroyed. All the rules that held their hands in check might be gone. We only kill those whose deaths are prayed for, the kindly man had always told her. But in the flames. . . could that have been a prayer for every face that ever was?
No time to think about that. The girl began to run.

Down the halls, down and down, the same as she'd run to reach the courtesan in the first place. *Tysha, her name is Tysha.* But that was another name given away long ago, subsumed in the mask of the Summer Maid. *No one,* the girl had prayed, before she threw the torch into the fountain. *It meant me, but it also means her.*

The girl turned the corner – and skidded to a halt. A man's body lay prone on the tiled floor, a slow crimson stain pooling beneath its head. The Summer Maid stood above it, her dark hair undone and tumbling in her eyes, clutching a bloodied dagger. At the girl's entrance, she looked up wildly. "You as well?"

"No." The girl eyed the body warily. It was impossible to tell if it had been a Faceless Man or not. It could have just been a hired catspaw, paid by one of the merchant guilds angry at Antaryon's death; his tenure had been good for trade. With the much more belligerent Fregar now in charge, perhaps they feared losing their profits to war. "I – didn't. I'm not."

The Summer Maid lowered the blade half an inch, but that was all. She held it well. Even a courtesan, the pearl of Braavos, must sometimes fear for her safety, especially if a man had paid a mint for her and felt entitled to do whatever he would in consequence. "Why did you come back here, child?"

"I – I was looking. For Ser Justin." The truth seemed best in this instance. "I need him."

"Why?"

That was harder. There must be no flicker in her eyes and voice. "To make sure he got you free. It doesn't seem fair. That the tribunal convicted you, I mean."

The Summer Maid uttered a short, mirthless laugh. "Fair? When did fair ever come into it, child? Was it fair what happened to me, or you? And I did arrange for Antaryon to be killed. It's to my luck that half the court is in Fregar's pocket. Likely it'll be house arrest for a year or two, but no worse. As for Massey, he's not here."

"Where, then? The Iron Bank?"

"So far as I know."

"Then we need to go there and get him."

The courtesan's skepticism was plain. "My pardon is so important that we must try to fool our way into the Iron Bank, the strongest of all fortresses in this city save for the House of Black and White itself, and – "

It wasn't working, the girl saw. No choice. "There isn't a House anymore."

"What?" The Summer Maid stared at her blankly.

"There isn't a House anymore," the girl repeated. "I destroyed it."

An extraordinary expression crossed the courtesan's face. She tilted her head and kept on staring at the girl, her lips moving as if in some old prayer, then turned away and seemed to come to an abrupt decision. "Very . . . very well. But I am convicted of murder and you soon will be. We cannot go openly."
Surprisingly, that problem was solved easily enough. No one asked too many questions of a courtesan, and the Summer Maid still had jewels and gowns and veils to hide her identity – and that art she'd revealed, changing the color of her hair and other aspects of her features. *That was only a drop of woman's magic,* the girl recalled Jaqen saying. *She is not one of us.* Yet she did know something intimate of them, plainly. Enough that the news of their destruction was sufficient to spur her to action. *Why?*

The girl's disguise was harder. She could not pass as a beautiful, graceful lady even on the darkest of moonless nights, and while very few people in Braavos knew her by her true face, she did not want to give anyone else the chance. But then she thought of how her reflection had looked in the black water of the fountain: fluid and unfixed. Her realization that if she wanted, she too could change it at her will – or at least, that was the theory. She screwed up her face and muttered and exerted herself furiously, but she could do no more than get her nose sort of lumpy and droop one eye. It must take years of further training to do it as effortlessly and completely as Jaqen had, sacrificing more and more of your old self with every transformation. And as she had been so close to it in Nymeria, perhaps it was understandable that she had so much trouble. Finally they had to dress her up as a pageboy, a role the girl found strangely comforting. As long as she held her tongue and kept her head down, ran and fetched, stayed out of sight, nobody was liable to pay much attention to her.

That completed, they simply walked out of the villa. None of the guards came to stop them, and in the falling dusk they were little more than shadows, the torchlight dwelling darkly in the Summer Maid's jewels. She had put on her finest, as if she was going to face the executioner's axe after all. *No one. Ramsay Bolton, Jaqen H'ghar, no one. Was it done? Were they all dead? Was the girl safe after all?*

They stepped into a gondola that came whirring up at the Summer Maid's hail, and set off once more through the labyrinths of Braavos. Unlike in the aftermath of Antaryon's death, when everyone had crowded into taverns to gossip and speculate, the waterfront was all but deserted. Doors and windows were shut and barred, and few if any lanterns were lit. The wind was still smoky-smelling, and the girl kept looking nervously over her shoulder for pursuit. Kept thinking she heard it. But there was never anyone there.

At last, they glided through a final arch and pulled up before the Iron Bank. Seated on its own hill in almost as much prominence as the Sealso's Palace, it was a sprawling mezzanine of towers and terraces, sculpted in creamy white stone and crowned with hammered-steel spires. A low wall fenced in its grounds, and armed guards in livery paced every dozen yards or so. Through the high gate, it was just possible to see torches and tents set up in one of the courtyards, doubtless the fete that Ser Justin was attending. Tormo Fregar was certain to be there as well, and every member of the Bank's board. The chancellor was hosting it, after all.

The Summer Maid paid the gondolier, and he tugged his forelock and reversed into the evening. But as they stood on the walk, the courtesan gripped the girl's bad shoulder, hard, and leaned in to whisper. "Be very careful. The Bank has ways of sniffing out impostors and masquerades. If they believe you a threat to their vaults, they are no less dangerous than the Faceless Men."

The girl nodded meekly, eyes watering, and bent to pick up the Summer Maid's trailing organdy gown. They made it past the guards at the gate without being detained, and she began to look around as covertly as she could, scouting for Ser Justin. Braavosi nobility of every exclusive stripe were sipping from fluted glasses and meandering about the gardens, a few in deep conversation with the funny-hatted bankers about some important financial matter. If they knew that the House of Black and White had been destroyed earlier that day – and how could they not? – they gave no sign. The girl tried to think if the Faceless Men would have had a quarrel with the Bank. She
couldn't be sure. But if Ser Justin was here, and if he did have the horn, and if he had stolen it from Antaryon, and Jaqen found out . . .

He's dead, the girl tried to reassure herself. He burned. If he was immune to flames, he never would have called to me to rescue him from the cage. But how had he ended up in that cage? He'd been in King's Landing to do . . . what? Yoren found him in the black cells, and that was the worst of the worst. Gendry said he was even more dangerous than Rorge and Biter.

Rorge. Biter. Yoren. Gendry. The girl stopped short. Where had all those names come from? Out of reflex, she tried to reach her wolf again, but couldn't. All there was in her head now was the image of the boy with bull's horns – no, a helmet with bull's horns. Another boy too. With pie, hot pie. My pack.

She screwed up her face, hard as she had when she was trying to change it. The memories weren't getting any clearer; in fact, they were receding as fast as she tried to grasp them, like a tide running out to sea. But the pain of them remained. Why did my pack leave me? Wolves and boys both. Gone. Had she killed them too, left their blood to –

Badly startled, the girl stopped again. For a moment she thought she had seen blood on the ground, another spreading stain. It was just a puddle, left over from the hard rains pelting Braavos. . . yet it was tinged with a deep red color, and as she looked up, she realized it was reflecting the ruby that a man standing nearby was wearing. A big ruby, set in a gilted collar around his neck, and the distinctive golden clasp of the Sealord on his cloak. It must be Tormo Fregar, in the flesh.

The girl immediately pretended to be looking at something else, while examining him out of the corner of her eye. Fregar was a big man, powerful and capable-looking, with the hauteur of a king and the swagger of a soldier. He was casually drinking a cup of nectar, and beside him stood an unhappy-looking Bank envoy, in a hat even more ludicrous than the rest, whose name the girl knew. Tycho Nestoris, the one Massey had been working on so diligently.

The girl looked around for the Summer Maid, in hopes of communicating this, but the courtesan had vanished into the crowd. If he worked out her identity, Fregar would be more likely to thank her than kill her – indeed, the two of them might have been in together from the start on the plot to kill Antaryon. But as the girl turned it over in her head, she decided that she didn't think so. The Summer Maid had wanted Antaryon killed for a very specific reason – because he wouldn't give assistance to Stannis, who was fighting the Lannisters, and the Summer Maid hated the Lannisters. But why? How many games are going on here?

Fregar was trying to steer Nestoris off into a private corner. It was natural that the new Sealord would be interested in what fiscal affairs the Bank would handle for him, but from Nestoris' palpable reluctance, the girl thought it was something more. I have to get closer. She had not forgotten the Summer Maid's warnings, but she was quickfoot surefoot lightfoot, no one was looking at her, and she could turn this way and that, a step here and a step there, sidle sideways through the frowning statues of past chancellors and into the shadowed corridor where Fregar was escorting the envoy. She tiptoed after them quiet as a mouse, and had another flash of memory, of listening to two men plotting while hiding in the skulls of giants. . . the wolf and the lion. . . if one Hand can die why not another. . .

". . . regrettable," Tycho Nestoris' voice said, up ahead. "Curious. And. . . worrying."

The deeper laugh must be Fregar's. "My good Nestoris. I promised there would soon be a sign you could not ignore. The Lord of Light granted me that vision, in the flames. And now that He has destroyed that foul place with his most holy weapon, you and everyone else must see that it is so."
There was a pause before the banker answered. "The Faceless Men are not gone, my lord. Anyone who knows a thimbleful of their lore knows that. And you, born and raised in Braavos, must surely feel the same. . . this is a place where all gods are honored. . ."

"So it was before," Fregar agreed. "But I have traveled the world. There are other ways of doing things. Other mysteries to be studied. And in all my experience, R'hllor is the only god who has true power. The House of Black and White was the first, but by no means the last. Before I've ruled this city for a year, every other temple must rededicate themselves to the Lord of Light, or face the same penalty."

Nestoris began to sputter. "Are you. . . no, the people would never accept it. Braavos is a quiltwork city, a great port of all colors, all flavors, all faiths. You do this and you will kill our trade, our merchant guilds. . . the change will not be for any – "

Fregar's shadow gave a languid shrug. "Small minds always fear change. I can vow that there will be no complaints when Braavos stands as the equal of old Valyria. We are the Freehold's heirs, after all, and that was where Antaryon fatally erred. He wanted to restore the Targaryens to the Iron Throne. But who needs the Targaryens at all? It was fire that forged Valyria to the greatest empire history has ever known. And it will be fire, R'hllor's fire, that raises Braavos to take its place. The House of Black and White mysteriously burned to the ground not twelve hours past – the Faceless Men survived the Doom, but they will not survive this. What other proof do you need? R'hllor's servants are on the brink of ruling the entire world, defeating the Great Other forever and aye, and I mean to do my part."

Nestoris was still sputtering like a leaky kettle. "You then. . . the knight. . ."

"At our audience this afternoon, I promised Massey more gold and ships and men than he'll know what to do with. It's perfect. Stannis Baratheon is an utterly single-minded follower of the Lord of Light, and when he sits the Iron Throne, we will be united in faith from farthest west to farthest east. The dragon queen is in Asshai, did you know?"

"No," Nestoris said tightly. "I did not."

Fregar shrugged again. "Of course you wouldn't. But she is, with the strongest of her children, and soon they'll be joined permanently to our cause. I've seen this in the flames as well. So, my friend, that is where you and the Bank come in. I require that you advance me a loan of a very sizable nature, to weather Braavos' trade through the initial. . . disruptions that will come after the temples are cleansed."

"This. . . not even the Bank could perform such a feat, when the Lannister queen defaulted on the throne's repayments to us. . ."

"It is said that half of you are alchemists, and that you are called the Iron Bank insofar as you are busily turning it to gold in the cellars. You will find a way."

"My lord. . . this is madness, rank madness, you will destroy Braavos before you – "

"All the old must burn, before new can be built." Fregar's voice dropped to a growl. "Do not play the snake-oil salesman with me, Nestoris. Did you see what Massey had? The horn?"

"The – horn? That old broken thing?"

"Yes. And once he works out what it is – something that shall happen very shortly, when I tell him – he will snatch up his army and tear back across the narrow sea to Stannis as fast as he can go."
And when Stannis uses that horn, with Lady Melisandre's bonds upon him, the fire of R'hllor will purge the Others, the unbelievers, the unclean, the unworthy, and all others not fit to enter into the Lord's remade kingdom of Light, and the day that never ends. I advise you decide which side you stand on, Nestoris. I advise you decide it quickly."

"You... mad..."

"Tycho," the Sealord said pleasantly. "Do not think that I do not see you reaching for that knife under your cloak. Do not think that even if you did succeed in surprising me with it, it would have any effect. R'hllor guards my person. That is why, henceforward, I will have no need of a First Sword."

Nestoris burbled incoherently like a drowning hippopotamus. The girl eased backwards, her head starting to whirl. She did not understand half of what had just been said, but it was far more than enough to confirm her hunch about the horn. And there was another memory flickering out of reach, another name she'd heard before. *R'hllor has judged him innocent.* But who? A duel under a hollow hill... a big man with a burned face and a skeletal one missing an eye... Absorbed in trying to work it out, she stumbled. Threw out her hands and tried to catch herself, but too late. Needle, still at her belt, rattled like a gong against the stones.

There was a sudden deathly silence from down the hall. Nestoris said, "What the..." and cut off in a gurgling squeal. Then heavy footfalls thundered closer and closer, and Fregar rounded the corner at a dead run.

The girl picked herself up and tried to flee, but it was far too late. Fregar reached her in two more strides, snarled, "Why you filthy little..." and got her around the neck. She choked and kicked, gagging and biting, as stars popped before her eyes and her bones creaked as if about to snap. She flailed to draw Needle, but he knocked it out of her hand. She couldn't breathe, he was going to kill her here and now, and –

"Fregar!" The shout came from the head of the hall. Looking up through a black haze, the girl could just make out Ser Justin himself, and beside him the Summer Maid. "What do you think you're bloody doing? Put her down!"

"She was spying on me." The Sealord dropped the girl unceremoniously at his feet. "Ugliest little thing I've seen in my life. It's no concern of yours what I do to rats, Massey, and this one's dead."

Ser Justin bristled. "No, she damn well isn't. I don't have a clue what she's doing here, mind, but you touch her again and all deals are off. Stannis needs her almost as much as he needs the swords and gold."

"Yes," the Summer Maid said. She smiled strangely. "A girl is needed."

Fregar did not appear inclined to listen to either of them. "Bugger that. King Stannis needs another gutter rat to feed like he needs a hole in the head. And she –"

"She's no gutter rat." Ser Justin spoke through gritted teeth, as if he had most dearly wanted to avoid this but could see no other way. "And I'll be taking her with me when I sail on the tide tomorrow night. She is the true daughter, Stannis' key to the north and destroying the sham of the Boltons once and for all. My lord Fregar... that is Arya. Arya Stark."
It couldn't be that much further to the door, she told herself as she took another step. It had been quite some time since she'd left the garden, and she had no idea of the immensity of the mazes inside the temple, but Fintan had told her the way back; she must speak to no more visitations, he'd said, or risk being led deeper and deeper. There were other things lurking in here as well, things Dany could only guess at, demons and shadows and worse. And all that aside, she was not in the least certain that she trusted Fintan's instructions. *Many names and many faces.*

However, Dany was still too stunned by his final revelation to pay much heed to anything else. If he and his order did want to keep her here, then why on earth would they ever bother informing her of the continued existence of her nephew? They knew that if whispers of such a thing reached her ears, she would have no choice but to investigate immediately, and the only conclusion she could reach was that they did truly want her to go to Westeros, at once. *But on whose terms, and under whose control? And at the cost of killing my dragons, when they want nothing more than to keep them for their own?* Every time Dany thought she'd finally untangled the red priests' elusive motives, they slipped away from her yet again.

She kept walking, the ground growing steeper and steeper underfoot. The air was boiling hot, silent, and close; sweat rolled down her cheeks, stinging her eyes and tasting sour on her cracked lips. *How, how could Aegon have survived?* Fintan had furnished no other specifics, leaving Dany to pick like a carrion bird over lies years and years in the crafting. Had Magister Illyrio had something to do with this Targaryen claimant as well, congratulating himself on having a backup plan if Viserys did as what must have seemed quite obvious that he would, and gaffed it all away? But why then never breathe a word of it to her? Was Illyrio intending to play Aegon and Dany off each other, pantomiming support for both and ultimately reliable for neither? And if Rhaegar's trueborn son had been alive all this time, why, why had they given the dragons to Dany?

*Perhaps I should marry him.* That, after all, was what the Targaryens had done with their relatives for many centuries. As well as keeping the blood pure, it served the useful purpose of combining claims, discouraging an independent-minded sister from pursuing her sole right to the throne as Dany's ancestress Rhaenyra had. *And breeding madness.* Yet it was all she'd ever known, and Aegon's dynasty had managed admirably for the better part of three hundred years. Nor did she intend to let the superstitious horror of Meereenese or Westerosi alike keep her from doing what must be done.

Yet was that what must be done? It had been very different for Dany's own mother, and every Targaryen princess beforehand. They had been born in a castle and raised a lady, inculcated to believe that their place was by their brother's side as dutiful cohort and spouse. None of them, save Rhaenyra and the Conqueror's sisters, had even tried to do what Dany had done. And there was no telling what this Aegon was like. He had hatched no dragons, nor bled and suffered in hellish deserts and murderous cities, surviving slavers and harpies and mercenaries and politics. And while Dany had learned far too many hard lessons of power, knew that she could not do this entirely alone, she also knew beyond any doubt that she had no desire to function as her nephew's docile queen. Not that she would turn him away; he was, if genuine, her only living kin. But to marry him merely to forestall a new Dance of the Dragons... no. For better or worse, she had too much pride for that.

The floor was now tilting so precipitously that Dany lost her balance and went skidding. She scrabbled to arrest her momentum, but everything her fingers found was slick stone. She was falling faster and faster, her breath punched out of her, a great rip scoring through the fragile green
silk of her dress. Wherever Fintan had meant to send her, it was not the exit.

At last, her speed abruptly cut out on a long straightaway, and she whirled to a stop. Tasting blood in her mouth, she pushed herself to hands and knees, grimacing; it was utterly dark here, except for a faint blood-red glow in the distance. Dany was getting very tired of muddling about in the enigmatic blackness, hounded here and there by traps that she never saw coming, but she had, after all, opened herself to the possibility by entering the temple in the first place. Is my duty fulfilled, Quaithe? And if she was fated to go to Westeros, she had to get out of here eventually. So she prayed, at least.

With no other opportunity at hand, Dany proceeded down the corridor toward the light.

It grew stronger as she went, brighter and brighter, until she was bathed in a red almost as deep as the color of Fintan's robes. But if it was a fire, it gave off no warmth. In fact, after the drenching heat of earlier, the chill in the air was suddenly very palpable.

Dany shivered. I am not afraid, I am merely catching my breath. It was close now, very close. She could hear a faint, crackling humming, jangling her sinews like a broken harpstring. Then she stepped around the corner, and beheld it.

A vast column of crimson flame stretched from floor to ceiling. It emanated from a stone pedestal like a fountain, encircled by concentric rings of bronze, and every so often a rivulet would gush hissing across the shiny black stones before burning out. And here in this subterranean vault that should be as hot as the pit of the seventh hell, icicles bearded the pedestal like the breath of winter.

Dany stopped short. All at once she understood what this must be: the secret place where the most highly trained acolytes of R'hllor went to obtain their deepest visions. They always spoke of learning things in the flames, and this would be the pinnacle of all their study, the living heart of their god. At the very center of the temple, guarded by unimaginable sorceries, some of which she already had personal experience with. And yet, the only way she could have gotten here was if the red priests wanted her to. Whether she would be allowed to leave was an entirely different question.

Footfalls sounding eerily loud in the stillness, Dany crossed the floor toward the monolith. She was aware of a great sentience taking her in, scrutinizing her, but whether it was some manifestation of R'hllor himself or merely the long memory of the place was hard to say. There was no other breathing human besides herself, but she knew she was not alone. She came to a halt before it, tilted her head back to gaze on it. It was undeniably a beautiful piece of architecture, and she wondered at its making. What had they seen down here? What had they done? And just then, Dany remembered two of the things whispered to her in the House of the Undying, the last comparable magical edifice that she had perhaps ill-advisedly wound up in. Slayer of lies. . . the mummer's dragon. . .

But who was the mummer, and who was the dragon, her or Aegon? She recalled explaining to Ser Jorah that a mummer's dragon was painted cloth on poles, a brightly colored puppet for revels and farces, which could be contrived to spit fire but was as obviously unlike the real beast as a grampus from a goldfish. So a false dragon, or a dragon that belongs to a false master? There was an important distinction. And thinking of what else Fintan had told her – that he had seen her dragons out of her control, enslaved or vanished – she threw her shoulders back and stared directly into the flame.

For the longest time, she saw nothing but dancing shadows and spitting sparks. Perhaps it was criminally naïve of her to expect that she could immediately master an art that took decades even for experienced practitioners, but she would not have made it down here if she was not meant to
learn anything. She was sure of it, and she was no stranger to fire. Even this queer unreal variety of it, which burned blazing hot and deathly cold in turns. And when it burned the coldest, she almost thought she'd glimpsed –

Hold on. Dany leaned forward, squinting. For just a moment there, she'd definitely had it. Once and then again, as she focused in on it. Harder. Harder.

There.

Seemingly just on the other side of the fire, close enough for her to step into, sprawled the most starkly forbidding landscape that Dany had ever seen. Giant bleak mountains, glaciers and crevasses, shattered boulders, snow-clad barrens, all hunched around a lake like a spill of black paint. There was no sun or moon or stars, and to say that it was dark was not sufficient; the sky was utterly absent of light. Cliffs a thousand feet tall tumbled to an ice-bound sea. The end of the world.

A single white tree stood improbably in the middle of this desolation, leaves like red hands coming to grips with the darkness. Its bark reflected the glow of the fire, so Dany understood that there must be a fire lit there too, perhaps a beacon on the farthest northern part of the continent. But for who? No ships would sail that cape, the sea must be frozen solid for leagues and leagues around, and there was not enough sustenance to support even a small tribe of unimaginably hardy wildlings. So that beacon burned at the end of the world for no one to see. . . cold fire. . . blue eyes.

Dany jerked back, suddenly terrified, and the other world winked out of existence. But not before she'd seen – perched by the lake, green scales glazed with frost and smoke etching traceries on the sky – one of her missing children. Rhaegal! She tried to call him, to summon back the gateway, but it was too late. What was he doing there? How could he survive? And what had driven him on what must have been a fiendishly treacherous flight from Meereen? She knew that her dragons had broken free from their chains in the dark, but seeing Rhaegal there, wherever there was, drove the point painfully home. She'd lost them.

Dany remained rooted in place, staring at the flames until they began to change again. This time, she was almost certain that she saw the battered, bloodstained brick walls of Meereen, rising from the Skahazadhan river plain. More of it had been destroyed than was still standing, and out in the harbor, a fleet of black ships flew golden krakens on their sails. The entire city looked to have been torn apart, first by these outlander invaders and then by –

She heard a distant tinkle of windblown bells. Saw small black-haired figures galloping among the sooty streets, bringing down statues of the Harpy wherever they still stood. Dothraki.

Yet as curious as all this was, Dany viewed it only at a far remove. Her attention was fixated instead on the winged shape circling Meereen high above, around and around like a hawk riding the updrafts. Dany saw the cream-and-gold scales, knew it was Viserion, saw someone else riding him, two someones, small and hanging onto the dragon's back for dear life – and something like a stain of poison enshrouding the air around all three. It was dark and cold and wrong, shot through with the image of a black twisted horn – a staring blue eye, smiling blue lips, a golden kraken that matched the sails of the ships below –

Dany fought to control the image as it disintegrated, but it felt like grasping shattered glass with her bare hands, and she reeled back with a cry of pain. Other visions were coming fast and furious now, but never stayed longer than an instant or made any kind of sense. Banners flying over high city walls, an army on the march, a fleet burning in a harbor, a monster and a dog crossing swords, a march in the snow, a castle shrouded in human skins – and then lastly, a solemn, brown-haired, long-faced young man, clad all in black. He was clutching a burning sword in hands of black glass, grey eyes turning black too, the winds of winter screaming from a broken horn, an immensity of ice
lying shattered, all the fury of the wild beyond. And then he vanished, and a woman in red lifted her red eyes until they gazed directly into Dany's. Her full lips curved into a smile. "Mother," she whispered. "I see you. Come to us."

Dany couldn't breathe, or tear herself away. The silhouette of the red woman danced and swayed and flickered in the flames, growing larger and larger until it blocked the sight or memory of anything else. The knowledge of why she had come to Asshai drummed in her skull. To join herself forever with the forces of R'hllor, to burn herself and her dragons into their mighty soul, to give them the victory for all time over the things that waited out there in the darkness. The greatest of all the sacrifices on their pyres, destroyed and reborn as –

At that moment, the fire flooded out of the bronze rings. It twined around Dany's wrists and ankles like fetters, and lifted her bodily into the air.

Dany screamed, kicking and thrashing. One of her slippers fell off and was immediately consumed in the inferno, and even she could feel the deadly heat of it, chewing into her flesh and blackening her bones. No, no, I didn't come here to belong to them – she remembered, she could think clearly, but it was so hard to hold onto it in the confused din of belching smoke and unholy agony. Lightning flashed through the black vault, and the firestorm hoisted her higher and higher until she madly expected the firmament to crack and the great face of R'hllor himself to peer in. She was on the verge of losing consciousness, and once she did, she was dead. Her power and her strength and her blood and her dragons would be sucked into the energy of the red priests. And then they would be unstoppable. The world would kneel, or burn.

Dany opened her mouth to scream again, for whatever vanishingly little good it would do. Instead she breathed smoke and began to choke, beating at the fire as it hungrily gulped down her other slipper and started in on her torn dress. She was burning, burning to death, she who had thought when Viserys was crowned with molten gold that fire could not kill a dragon. Blackness swam in her darkening eyes. There was no more air in her lungs, only char. Fintan lied to me. Lied to me... said he saw me approaching this place alone, walking in rain the color of blood... But what in the name of the Seven were the infamous weather-working wizards of Asshai doing here?

If she was, it was even stranger than life. Ice blistered up her forearms, and the fire manacles went out like snuffed candles. There was another explosion, a torrent of steam roared up, and it was otherwise completely impossible to make out anything going on below, but Dany still thought she saw three figures – no, four. Two stood with their hands upraised, directing the attacking rain and ice, and she caught a split-second glimpse of the silver collars around their necks. Aeromancers. But in the last moment before she hit, one of the aeromancers barked a command, and a freezing mesh of cloud broke Dany's fall just enough for her to topple to the ground with a thud, instead of smashing in full speed and fatally. It was still plenty hard enough to knock her wind out, however,
and she lay in a crumpled heap, chest heaving, retching and gagging on the ash and soot. A stray ember landed on her, and it was all she could do to beat it out. Then she rolled onto her back and lay spread-eagled, gazing up at the more-than-mortal battle raging above her. The aeromancers were managing to hold back the furious fire for the moment, but their icicles were exploding with a sound like falling stars.

"Daenerys." A burly shadow loomed up, then immediately became shorter by half as it fell to its knees. "Gods' sake, my queen, speak to me."

Dany's heart did a horrible wrenching hoping leap. She pushed herself onto an elbow and reached out, started to fall back – but he caught her with both hands and pulled her up. Then she clawed forward, uttering short dry sobs that stole breath she didn't have, and tumbled into his arms.

Ser Jorah held her tightly, so tightly that it felt as if he might crack her bones all over again. She didn't know how he was here and she didn't care, how it was possible that he'd survived whatever traps this place must certainly have strung for him. The bulwark of his body shielded her somewhat from the withering blasts of ice and fire still dueling it out behind them. After a seemingly endless moment in which she noticed that he was shaking harder than she was, he let go, rolled back onto his heels, and got her onto her feet alongside him. "My queen, we have to get out of here."

"Are you sure of that?" a new voice said, very nearby. Dany's stomach did a nauseous flip as the fourth figure – the aeromancers had been two, Ser Jorah the third, she'd almost forgotten about the other – glided out of the violent shadows. She immediately recognized the gleam of the red lacquer mask, and the ageless eyes behind it. Quaithe.

"My lady," the red priestess said composedly to Dany, as if they'd met by chance in the marketplace. "How do you fare?"

Is she mocking me? "Well enough, for all that I nearly burned to death." Dany shot a desperate glance at Jorah, but he made no move to take the shadowbinder on. "If that was why you wanted me to come to Asshai – all this time, you were steering me to this end – "

Quaithe held up a hand. "Peace, Mother of Dragons. You would in fact have died if not for me. Who told your bear that aeromancers were the only way to fight this fire? Who helped him secure their services? Who led them down here, to this most secret place within the temple, just in time to save you?"

This made no sense to Dany at all. "Why would – no, you are one of them, a devotee of R'hllor, you want me to become – "

It was hard to tell, but she thought Quaithe's mouth twisted strangely behind the mask. "Do I?"

The fire whistled and shrieked like a demon, but none of them turned to look. A sudden doubt fell over Dany, cold as the ice that had saved her life. "Who are you?"

Beside her, Ser Jorah got it first. He moved, throwing out one arm to put Dany behind him. "A traitor."

There was no mistaking the odd smile in Quaithe's eyes now, or the amusement in her voice. "I cannot deny the charge, ser. But I am no traitor to you."

Jorah looked dumbfounded, but Dany was almost beginning to understand. There were just a few pieces that remained out of reach, but everything else... the way Quaithe appeared and disappeared, coming to her in the night to whisper words of warning, trying to save her from perils
"Take off your mask," Dany ordered. "I would see your true face."

"Why would I not? All this time you've guided me, manipulated me, and I've never once known why." Dany jerked her head at the billowing curtain of fire, and the dark shapes of the aeromancers scuttling back and forth. "I'd say there's no time like the present."

"I will take it off," Quaithe agreed, startling Dany, who'd been braced for further argument. "But not yet."

"Why?"

Another half-seen smile. This one very sad. "I will cease to exist when I do, Your Grace."

Dany startled even more badly, backing into Ser Jorah. He wrapped both arms around her, his calloused fingers digging hard into her shoulders. She winced, yet in truth barely noticed the pain. Of course she knew Quaithe had to be something else, but... "Why? Why have you stayed here so long, posing as one of them, when all this time you meant to..."

Again Quaithe held up an elegant hand, cutting her off. Then the red priestess said, "As you have heard by now, there are many who believe you to be Azor Ahai reborn. Do you know the tales of the first one, the original man, the hero and his red sword?"

In truth Dany did not, at least not well, but she could not help herself from seeing the young man with black eyes and black hands and the burning blade, the one in her vision. "Lightbringer," she said. This was far more vast than she had imagined. "Why?"

Quaithe's voice was even stranger. "Do you know how Lightbringer was made?"

"In blood." Such things always were. "But I don't know in who -- "

Quaithe's hands moved, up to the high-necked collar of her red robe. Dany's mouth shut like a trap, and all she could do was stare as the shadowbinder undid the clasps one after another, until the brocaded fabric slipped away over her shoulders and revealed her white flesh. One breast, the right one, was pale and perfect. The other was ruined, driven through with a blackened wound so deep that Dany could see through it and out the other side. It smelled of salt and smoke and tempered steel and red fire.

Ser Jorah's arm jerked like a vise. He began to swear. He stopped, then started again, then stopped once more, then started up a third time and didn't stop until he'd exhausted every oath he knew in at least three languages. Her brave bear's voice was a croaky whisper when he breathed, "Nissa Nissa."

Quaithe smiled. Very sadly. Turning to Dany, she said, "He has it right. Do you see why, now? See why I only endure in flames and shadows, why I hid here in plain sight? And love, the strongest power there is, the reason why I bared my human heart to my husband and let him end my mortal life? Why I came to you, to lead you to fight the Others as he did?"

"I – don't – understand." Dany was transfixed with shock. "The Others – the ice ones, they're not --"

Ser Jorah's arm jerked again. Apparently he had just been hit broadside with something.
"No," Quaithe – Nissa Nissa – said. "There are two. Others of flame and Others of ice, and as your knight just learned, they constantly give birth to each other, spawning each other in a vicious cycle. When a man dies in R'hllor’s fires, he is reborn by the Great Other as one of those blue-eyed creatures that you saw. It has been so for generations. That was the devilry my husband defeated, when he fought with Lightbringer at the Battle for the Dawn. Then the Wall was raised, and the dark powers forced under control. . . for a time. But now with the red priests and the white walkers both rising, they must be defeated forever, or the world is at an utter end."

Dany struggled to take this in. Her brain was not interested in doing so. Finally she whispered, "So that’s why you wanted me here. Because the Others in Westeros could never be defeated unless I also defeated the flames that forged them in the east."

"Very good, Mother of Dragons." Nissa Nissa shrugged back up her robe. "The red priests think Azor Ahai is their personal champion, but he is more, much more. Greater than both. And now, Viserion is under the direct control of the Enemy. You must complete your duty here, and return to Meereen at once."

"I – Drogon's hurt too badly, he'll never make it – "

"I saw the way." The ageless eyes fixed on her. "Through the fire."

"Yes. You need your child. Call him."

Dany closed her eyes, ignoring the continued explosions rumbling through the hall as the aeromancers fought the flames. She felt as if she was floating in inky nothingness; Ser Jorah's arm was her only link to anything real. But in her mind she could very definitely see Drogon, feel him, moored up in his sling behind the Cinnamon Wind, restless and irritable with pain and boredom. Yet she knew his scent, his skin, was in him now, gazing out from his red eyes, stirring his torn wing. And then, with an effort to make her gasp, he abruptly lifted off, churning and flailing, as startled Summer Islanders raced about on the ship's deck below.

Drogon and Dany both ignored them. The black dragon gained speed – she could feel the pain, it was a lucky thing he didn't have to go far – and then folded both wings and dove, as he'd taken on the hrakkar in the Dothraki sea that had led to his injury in the first place. She saw the spires of the temple below – was aware in her own self that he was coming – reached to welcome him –

A colossal crack scored the blackness above them, and blinding sunlight speared in. Vaults and columns roared and moaned as they began to collapse, and in the instant before Ser Jorah seized her and threw his body over hers, Dany caught sight of an almost fully grown dragon, a monster, descending from on high. He reared his head back and screamed.

The aeromancers took one look and bolted. But Nissa Nissa stood motionless, watching, as Drogon descended into the middle of the anarchy and substantially improved upon it. The tower of flame had been mostly put out, and Drogon devoured the remnants, smoke blasting from his nostrils. The beat of his wings was enough to waft scorching air across the chamber, and Dany, still trapped under Ser Jorah, could hear more rocks falling. In that moment, she finally did understand. Knew what it felt like to be a dragon, untouchable and unfettered. And knew as well why her ancestors had driven themselves to madness and destruction in search of some way, any way, to find it again.

She had no need to fear. She shoved Mormont off her, not without difficulty, and rose to her feet, spreading her arms. Bride of fire, child of three. Drogon saw her and ululated a greeting, then belched a harrowing blast of black fire onto the pillar where the previous one had burned. My fire
now, not the red priests'. Dany began to walk purposefully toward it. She remembered how it had seemed that she could step through and find herself in that desolate hinterland with Rhaegal, or in the dead city with Viserion, the krakens, and the Dothraki. Meereen. Her choice was made.

"Drogon," she called, and he flew to her, the air shuddering with shock waves as he perched on the stone fountain. It too began to collapse under his weight, and she scrambled up onto his back, swinging him around. Meereen. Fly through the gate of fire, and take what was hers.

Behind and below her, she saw Nissa Nissa, still watching silently, and Ser Jorah running toward her, bellowing her name. At that moment, she did not care outstandingly for either of them. The temple was collapsing in good earnest now, it might take the rest of Asshai with it – they'd die, they'd all die – but she was a Targaryen, she could do as she would –

Whose blood? Whose? screamed the voice of the king she had watched die, the mad voice, the mad king. And again came the answer: Rossart's.

I am not my father.

Dany turned Drogon back and skimmed low over the spreading lake of fire, reaching down with one hand and hanging desperately to his scales with the other. Groping, fumbling, screaming. "Jorah! JORAH!"

She couldn't see him anymore. No, it wasn't too late, it mustn't be. Her bear, her beloved bear. "JORAH!"

Her fingers found something alive, something solid and moving, and they gripped hers. She pulled with almighty, unlooked-for, unknown strength, and hauled him up onto Drogon's back. As they gained altitude in dizzying spirals, Dany screamed down at Nissa Nissa. "Save them!"

For a horrible moment she thought that the woman once known as Quaithe, her task finally done after centuries, had gone for good. Her lungs almost burst. "The people of Asshai! The crew of the Cinnamon Wind! Save them!"

Among the chaos, a moment of silence. Then she saw Nissa Nissa still standing proud. Saw her hands come up, and take off the red lacquer mask.

Light bloomed like an exploding star.

Drogon flew into the fire.

Dany lost track of everything after that. They were spun about and around, the flesh peeled from her bones, slammed like pebbles down a well as they reaped the whirlwind. Her body felt as if it was about to split, she tried to scream but had no breath. Over and over and around and down and down and down. Never-ending. Where they were, she had no idea, only that it assuredly wasn't Asshai anymore.

There was a long, echoing crack. She tasted hot air in her seared mouth, struggled not to fall, found Ser Jorah and held onto him as hard as she could as Drogon veered and swerved down out of the sky like the black plague. Dany's dizzied, burning eyes made out sandstone mountains, a sacked city, the harbor with the kraken ships riding at anchor. Somehow, impossibly, it had worked. They were in Meereen.

Dany's lungs were still flattened, and it was several moments more before she could even attempt to breathe. She kept pinching herself, but this was no dream and no illusion. My city. She hadn't seen it since fleeing aboard this selfsame dragon, from the fighting pit where Hizdahr had tried to
kill her and she'd unwittingly saved Tyrion Lannister's life. *Are they all dead now?* They had to set
down somewhere and find out exactly what had happened in her absence. The seven hells
unleashed, by the looks of things, and what she'd left behind in Asshai was scarcely more sedate.
*Did it work?* Had the red priests been brought down, their ungodly link to the demons of the far
north broken? Only then could she defeat whatever had Viserion in its foul sway, and fly on for
Westeros. *I will save my children somehow. I will not let them die.*

Drogon was as terrified by their passage through the fire as Dany had been, and it took some doing
before she could get him to fly straight. She made for a relatively intact section of the city wall. He
was laboring badly; his wing wasn't going to take much more. So then. Liberate Viserion. Heal
Drogon. And fast.

They plummeted the last few feet, and landed on the wallwalk with a crash. Fortunately Drogon
absorbed most of the impact, instead of Dany or Jorah, and while he yowled in protest, he did not
seem furtherly injured. His two riders struggled free, then simultaneously collapsed.

Dany lay flat, feeling the bricks under her. Meereen. She'd come back at last. A queen to her
people, but what people were those? She had at least three armies to fight against, and no time to
do it. And all she had for her own army was one stalwart but badly battered knight, and one equally
battered dragon.

She sat up woozily. It was earlier in Meereen than it had been in Asshai, and the blazing crimson
across the eastern sky must be sunrise. *Red sky in morning, sailor's warning.* And a queen's too, no
mistaking.

When Dany felt herself slightly less likely to disintegrate on the spot, she crawled to her feet and
reached out for Jorah, who was much slower to rise. In the breaking dawn, the swarthy knight
looked pale as snow. "Give me a moment, my queen. Just a moment."

Dany's nerves were rasping with her need to get out of here and find somewhere less exposed, but
she wasn't going anywhere without him. Torches bobbed in the streets far below, and she could
hear distant shouts in Dothraki. Their dramatic entrance had been noticed beyond all doubt, and she
found herself wondering if they might now revere her as a goddess. What else could she be to
them, after she'd appeared out of thin air, riding a dragon?

Dany turned back. "Now, ser?"

"Aye, my queen. I'm coming." Ser Jorah pushed himself agonizingly to his feet. He took a lurching
step toward her – then stopped short. "Daenerys – ?"

"What?" She looked at his face, didn't like what she saw there. "My bear?"

"Daenerys," he grunted, and went to his knees, slowly, slowly. Redness was starting to seep into
the roughspun of his tattered shirt. "Gods. . . run. . ."

"Jorah!" she screamed. "No!"

"No, indeed. That is not the name you cry in your passion, sweet queen," said a new voice. A
familiar voice. He loomed out of the gloom like a spirit, flashing her that rakish, gold-toothed grin
she used to love so well. "It is mine. And you soon will cry it again, once I keep my promise to
your ugly friend here. That I'd kill him the instant I had the chance."

With the care of an artisan changing brushes, Daario Naharis wrenched his golden-hilted blade out
of Ser Jorah Mormont's back. It was wet and red, red, red. "Welcome home to Meereen, my love."
We have all been waiting for you." He smiled again, and stepped over the stricken knight toward her.

Daenerys Targaryen turned and ran.
Jaime

It was the quiet that woke him. By now he'd grown so used to the bells sounding ceaselessly, whether the vast bronze ones in the Great Sept of Baelor across the city or the smaller ones in the roosts and reaches of the Red Keep, that he no longer really heard them, except to wonder once or twice who they were tolling for. Tyene? There was a thought, but Jaime doubted it. No matter how vital she'd been to the Faith, or thought she'd been, surely there was one man of sense left in the castle, someone who realized the subterfuge and was scouring Tommen's court for further evidence of Martell plots to assassinate him. It had only been sheer dumb luck that Jaime learned about this one, the result of his guards speaking too freely outside his door when they thought he was asleep. They were changed every few days to make sure none of them befriended him, and he'd never gotten a good look at the gossipers. That meant there were still at least two men out there whom the damned Dornish had bought off, running about in plain sight, who had access to the young king's person and might even now be telling him that good Septa Tyene's murder at the hands of his wicked uncle meant he had to come with them, away to. . .

Jaime's stomach clenched. He pushed himself off his grimy bed and padded to the window, which had been tacked over with a crude latticework of bars – as if the indignity of being held prisoner in the Lord Commander's own chambers in White Sword Tower wasn't bad enough, they'd taken smart steps to turn it into a dungeon after he'd killed the bloody Sand Snake. Everything that could possibly constitute a creature comfort had already been removed, and his meals were growing sparser and farther apart by the day. Jaime had never in his life had to worry about when he'd next be fed – even in Hoster Tully's pisspot under Riverrun, which was starting to look like a veritable pleasure palace compared to this, he had been far too important to risk starving to death, and so the hard bread and gamey meat had flowed efficiently, if grudgingly. Yet as for this. . . Jaime could not tell if they'd decided it was merely the easiest way to get rid of him, or if there was simply nobody left to wait hand and foot on the Kingslayer, not with other evils so close at hand.

The bells were still silent. Something had to be going on. Grunting with the pain, Jaime wedged himself as far into the window embrasure as he could, squinting over the city. It had to be midnight or close to it, but it would have been difficult to see much even in daytime. A bitter, enervating fog had enveloped the spires and towers and hills and wynds of King's Landing, and the feeble efforts of torches and beacons did precious little to punch it back. Out toward Blackwater Bay, the moon burned palely through the gauzy veil, and shreds of mist rose from the harbor as if from the fissures of hell.

*Gods be good.* If he was a theoretical commander in a theoretical army soon theoretically to fall upon King's Landing, Jaime would think that not even the Stranger Himself could conjure up a better night for a surprise attack than this one. Since the bells had stopped for the first time in almost a week, the weary, frightened citizens would be taking full advantage of the opportunity to snatch what sleep they could, groggy and off their guard. Noises would carry in the fog, making even a small force storming ashore sound like one many times its number, and the bad visibility would lend itself excellently to maintaining that delusion. Throw the city's defenders into panicked riot in the streets, where they were far more likely to start killing each other rather than the enemy, and all the Targaryen pretender's men needed to do was to secure the walls and gates. King's Landing would fall with barely a blow struck, almost as easily as it had when Aerys ordered that Lord Tywin and his army be invited inside.

Jaime leaned against the wall, slightly nauseous. Then he got up and booked across the room to the other window, from which he could view the Red Keep. Much as he doubted the trustworthiness of anyone still inside it, he nonetheless hoped to see lamps being lit and men being mustered, pikes on
the bridge of Maegor's Holdfast and crossbows on the crenels. Mace Tyrell might be no soldier, but even the dimmest Hand would have taken these steps to safeguard the king at a time like this. Unless...

No, Jaime told himself firmly. *Highgarden and Dorne loathe each other, my hand will grow back before they cooperate in anything half the scale of conspiring to murder the king.* Cersei – oh gods, he did not want to think about Cersei – had endlessly insisted that the rose was even more dangerous than the snake, that the Tyrells had killed Joff with the collaboration of Tyrion and Sansa Stark and were all arrayed together in an unholy plot to seize power for their own, but Cersei’s paranoia had been out of hand even before she lost her bloody mind. That last time he’d seen her, after he’d done for Tyene, the way Cersei had flown from raging to raping to weeping... his sister, his lover, his fierce lioness...

No.

Jaime's mouth set in a hard line. *I am done with her, now and forever, and if I ever lay eyes on her again, I'll have to kill her before she kills me.* Wherever she was, whatever she was doing, was as grave a threat as the Martell-bribed guards running free. And as Jaime stood there gazing on the dark, silent bulwark of the Red Keep, it occurred to him that his hopes were gratified after all. There *was* one man of sense left in Tommen's court, willing to do whatever must be done. Most unfortunately, however, that man was him.

*I think it's high time I got out of here.* Jaime turned and began to prowl along the wall, feeling for cracks, weak places, or anything that could serve either for weapon or escape, but the sweep of his cell had been depressingly thorough. The door had been locked from the outside and something was jammed in the latch as well, and he was in no condition to attempt to break it down; a few body blows would crack the raw scab on his chest and start the wound Lem had given him bleeding all over again. Not for the first time, Jaime cursed the piss-cloaked bastard up one side and down the other, but his old soldier's instincts also told him that if he let himself be blinded by frustration, he might miss something directly under his nose. Something such as –

The window.

Cutting himself off sharply in his aspersions upon the late Lemoncloak's character, Jaime spun around and eyed it narrowly. It was south-facing, meant to admit enough sunlight to warm the Lord Commander's rooms even in winter, and with some doing – lucky after all that they hadn't been feeding him much, he'd turned distinctly wraithlike – he ought to be able to make it through. But the window opened onto a vertical drop at least a hundred feet down the tower to the harbor wall, and besides it was nailed shut and barred. And he had nothing to break it down with, except for his...

... hand.

For the first time ever, Jaime stared at the alien appendage affixed to his right wrist with sudden gratification. This, he knew at once, was the only way. With one final cautious glance at the door – it was just as quiet outside, his guards having been repurposed to more pressing business – he walked over to the window, sized up the prospect, then drew his arm back and smashed his golden hand into the glass as hard as he could.

It sent a stinging whip of agony through his stump and up his shoulder, and he grimaced horribly as he pulled back. But it had also left a webwork of finely concentrated cracks at the site of the blow, and Jaime refused to allow himself time to recover; there was none to spare. Instead he braced himself with his good hand, and battered furiously at the pain and the pane until with a sharp, clattering explosion, his golden fingers broke through the latter and into the cold air beyond.

*It's a start.* Jaime widened the hole with a few more blows, then went back to his bed and thickly
bundled his left arm up in the sheets and blankets. Protected in this fashion from the sharp, ashy shards scattered everywhere, he eased it through the hole, fumbled around, and grasped hold of the nail holding the topmost wooden bar in place. After a few moments of intense struggle, accompanied with more profanities under his breath, he managed to wrench it out. The bar swung down precipitately, dangling by one end, and while the nail holding the second plank was more firmly fast, Jaime eventually succeeded in getting that one too. Then he wriggled his arm back in, reached for the small iron hasp on the sill, and cranked the window wide open.

A dank, salty wind thrummed in his face, the first fresh air he’d had in too dismayingly long a time to think about. He sucked in a few grateful lungfuls, then peered over the edge, trying to gauge his next move.

The drop looked even more daunting by night. But White Sword Tower was built to anchor the seaward corner of the Red Keep's walls, and just off to his right, said walls rose up high and strong. If Jaime could somehow get a good footing on the window, the jump up to the wallwalk would not be too bad. Mayhaps six or seven feet. And if I miss, the fall will be a good deal longer. Briefly he debated weaving a rope out of the sheets, but yet again it would be too time-consuming to cut and braid them properly, and the muslin was dank and rotten enough that he doubted it could bear his weight anyway. Besides, if someone should come to investigate, all they’d need to do was cut it in half, sending Jaime on a literal crash course to the sand far below. At least that way I’d have a ready-made shroud.

He was just going to have to make do. So once he'd cleared as much of the broken glass from the casement as he could, he boosted himself up into the frame, a gargoyle come to life at midnight. At any moment he expected to hear men charging up the stairs, feel a dagger or a shove in his back. Neither came. Jaime eased one leg over the sill, then the other. Pawing blindly with his foot, he found a crack between two stones that was deep enough to admit the toe of his boot, and jostled it in as far as possible. Now came the tricky part. He had to push off, turn around, and catch hold of the window again all at once, and if he didn't make it, the consequences were all too apparent. Fleetingly Jaime thought of his brother, how Tyrion had learned to leap and twirl and tumble as agilely as an acrobat before Lord Tywin found out, and threatened to banish him to a mummers' caravan or traveling freak show if he kept it up. But Tyrion was not here, had been freed from a different cell on a different night by Jaime's own offices. And if he was, he might be the one giving me the shove.

Jaime wanted to close his eyes, but resisted. Drawing in a hard, noisy breath, he got his body torqued around as far as he could, until he was gazing back into his erstwhile prison over his shoulder. Then he braced hard, spread the fingers of his left hand on the stone, and launched.

It was all over in a moment, but it was the most terrifying moment of his life. Suddenly he was entirely outside, dangling from the window like the laundry some goodwife had forgotten, the wind plucking eagerly at this new plaything and his boot almost coming free from its crevice as his other kicked at the empty air. His heart was hammering in his ears, but he got his haunches under him, transferred his weight to his solid leg, and began to monkey sideways on the whitewashed stone.

If one could overlook the looming possibility of catastrophic death, it was almost exhilarating. Jaime's feet were doing most of the work, as he could only grasp well with one hand, and he managed to get up enough traction to shin up the face of the tower like a bandit on the lam from the City Watch. Which is not far off from the truth, come to think. Once again, he wondered where in damnation Ser Addam was. With King's Landing about to fall under attack, Marbrand was the most decorated battle commander the crown had left to its credit – Jaime had also heard terrible
whispers that a fleet sent north to White Harbor on the night of the Westerlings' execution had never returned, stripping them of gods knew how much of their remaining naval power at a blow. Even Cersei should have known to summon him back from Ashemark, if that was where he was, but it was most unlike Marbrand not to have turned up already. Then again, if he was in the city and learned that Jaime was imprisoned... Cersei might well have decided to take her chances with the Targaryen pretender rather than risk it. How exactly she had wormed her way back into power after being so utterly cast down and convicted was another of the things Jaime did not know, but he could not say he was at all surprised. *Time to follow her example.*

Kicking and scuffling, Jaime made it up to the cusp of the wallwalk. Here came the next tricky part, as he had to get his arm through a crenel and find something to hold onto, something solid enough to use to haul himself over. But the stone here was smoother and much more steeply slanted, designed to discourage an enemy from doing the exact same thing, and Jaime had walked these walls in his white cloak often enough to know that caltrops were planted behind the merlons, lethal steel sea urchins with points sharp enough to punch through plate armor. If he grabbed one of those, it was likewise curtains.

Fine, then. It would have to be the same expedient that had gotten him out the window. Jaime shifted his balance precariously on the ledge, freeing his right arm, and swung it into the gap of the crenel, feeling around with his golden hand for any unpleasant metallic obstructions. Upon encountering none, he pulled back, switched arms, said a brief prayer to the Warrior, and pushed off straight up, as if a solid kick had just been applied to his arse from below.

Stone and night and sky flashed past him, and then he landed with a heavy thud on the wallwalk, mercifully unperforated. It was sufficiently forceful to quite knock his wind out, however, and when he crawled wheezing to his hand and knees, he felt a sticky wetness in his filthy shirt that warned him he'd done further insult to his injury. But it was going to have to wait. From here, he could get straight down into the courtyard of the Red Keep, and his first and only order of business was to protect his son. Once Tommen's safety had been ensured, he could see about acquiring a sword and armor. Whatever storm was coming, Jaime Lannister did not intend to meet it empty-handed.

After a suitable interval spent recovering both dignity and breath, Jaime started to edge along the wallwalk toward the nearest stair. But just as he'd reached it and was preparing to descend, a light flared in the portcullis, directly across the bailey.

_Bloody hell._ Jaime skidded to a halt.

_I didn't want them to muster now, damn it!_ It would be just his luck if that was the case, but if an enemy had been spotted and the city was being called to arms, the bells would certainly be ringing again. And – for now – the night was still eerily and oppressively silent. Yet be that as it may, Jaime had no desire to get caught out by whoever was unlocking that gate; it was singularly unlikely to be an ally. So he scooted backwards as fast as he could, out of the glow, and lay flat, unmoving, as the grate rattled up and three shadows stepped out into the windy night.

Jaime instantly recognized the first, the unassuming man in grey robes who looked kindly, even fatherly. Qyburn, the ex-maester who'd treated his stump with such skill, but had become ever and ever more Cersei's creature since his arrival in the capital. He was turning to politely escort out a –

No, not just any woman. Another bloody Sand Snake, it had to be. One had supposedly come up to King's Landing to take the vacant Dornish seat on the small council, one Lady Nymeria by name, and Jaime was willing to wager all the gold in Casterly Rock that this was she. Even from a distance, he could make out the high cheekbones, liquid black eyes, and widow's peak that branded her unmistakably as Oberyn Martell's get. Come to demand an inquiry into the murder of her half
sister? But before Jaime could get too far in debating whether Qyburn or Lady Nym was in charge of this secret midnight meeting, the third figure stepped into the torchlight and blew it all away.

*Gods be good,* Jaime thought again, stunned. That had to be him. No one else could even approach that immensity, the eight-foot-tall giant armored in plate and mail, the star of the Seven piously enameled on the massive chest and a white cloak fluttering from the equally massive shoulders. The visor was shut, the hands covered in great lobstered-steel gauntlets, and a broadsword the size of a young sapling hung from the hammered metal belt. With each step Ser Robert Strong took, Jaime could feel the distant shudder in the ground. He was suddenly abjectly grateful that he'd killed both Tyene and his chances of facing this *thing* in battle, as the Faith's champion at Cersei's trial.

"... apologize for the rudeness of the situation, of course," Qyburn was saying, his words carried to Jaime's straining ears on the frigid breeze. "But some matters are better attended in darkness, my lady, as I imagine you know full well."

"With no witnesses, you mean." Lady Nym's nostrils flared. "What sort of fool do you take me for? First you permit innocent Tyene to be murdered by the Kingslayer, and now you drag me out here at the witching hour with your vile brute in tow." She shot a glance of suspicion and hatred at the giant looming silently behind her. "Do you really think that I'll believe you about to apologize for the discourtesy and serve me tea and cakes?"

"No," Qyburn smiled faintly. "You are as brave and brilliant as you are beautiful, my lady, which is why it so deeply pains me to take this recourse. But circumstances are exigent. Is your sister Obara responsible for Princess Myrcella's death?"

On the wallwalk, Jaime went briefly lightheaded. Like with the rest of the royal brood, he'd been allowed to display no more than casual avuncular affection to Myrcella, but her so courteous and brave and sweet, with all Cersei's beauty but none of Cersei's venom... the girl, his girl... no, he decided. This was not really happening. He could not stand it otherwise.

Lady Nym's face was stone. "No."

Qyburn sighed, apparently genuinely disappointed, and beckoned to Ser Robert. The giant covered the distance to the Sand Snake in a stride, laid one huge hand on her slender shoulder, then drew back the other one and smashed it matter-of-factly into her belly.

Lady Nym gagged, made a horrible retching noise, and folded slowly to her knees, a hand pressed to her mouth. Bile dribbled between her fingers, but the gaze she turned on the false maester and his pet monstrosity burned with rage, not fear. "I see," she rasped. "This is good King Tommen's law now, is it?"

"The king, Seven save him, is overyoung for the cares of government." Qyburn's conversational tone never wavered. "So it falls to us to protect him from malefactors seen and unseen. Your sister Tyene meant to spirit him away and murder him – no, don't deny it – and now your sister Obara has revenged herself in Princess Myrcella's innocent blood. I am aware of the great numbers of Dornishmen marching in the pretender Aegon's train. Sunspear's open enmity of the Iron Throne's current occupant is no longer any kind of secret. So I will ask again. Did Obara Sand murder Myrcella Baratheon?"

Lady Nym raised her viper's eyes. "No."

Qyburn sighed again and once more beckoned to Ser Robert. But as he closed in for another blow, Lady Nym's hand moved almost too fast to be seen. There was a ringing, screeching scrape as her
blade scored a line across Ser Robert's immaculate white plate.

The giant regarded it in mild puzzlement. Then he reached out and folded his steel-clad hand around hers, bending the dagger and crushing her fingers until the Dornishwoman could not keep back a cry of pain. She twisted and struggled, trying to reach one of the dozen other daggers certain to be secreted on her person, but Ser Robert linked his free arm around her chest and gathered her closer as if in a lover's embrace. Nym's screams turned to a gurgling, crackling squeal as she fought in vain to breathe.

As he watched in horrorstruck fascination, Jaime was suddenly assailed with memories of Tyrion's trial. When Lady Nym's own father, the Red Viper, had strode out with spear in hand to match against the Mountain That Rode, and the reckoning which had followed for both of them. Oberyn with his head smashed in, as Gregor Clegane drew him close in just that way, but afterwards felt the full force of the Viper's fangs as he screamed himself to death in a dungeon. And Qyburn had said that the Citadel had stripped him of his chain for his experiment on dead and living bodies alike, his inquiries into necromancy and perhaps even darker subjects –

Jaime could taste something foul in his own throat. Why did he suddenly have a suicidal urge to run down there and stop it? Nymeria Sand was just as dangerous as the late Tyene had been, and if what Qyburn had said was true – no, no it wasn't – then she and another of her diabolical siblings had already managed to kill one of his two surviving children. But watching Ser Robert continue to slowly and deliberately snap her spine. . . there was and only ever had been one man in Westeros of that size and cruelty, and what he'd done while he was still alive. . .

"That is enough," Qyburn said crisply, and the giant let Lady Nym go. She barely managed to break her fall, and it took much longer this time for her to lift her head, her lips having gone blue from the lack of air. She spat a little blood onto the ground.

Qyburn knelt beside her, but didn't get close enough for her to touch him. "My dear, there is no need for this unpleasantness. Is the third time the charm? Let us see. Did Obara Sand murder – what, Strong?"

For the giant was no longer paying attention to either of them, and Jaime's heart shriveled to ice water in his chest. The reanimated corpse of Ser Gregor Clegane – he'd never been so sure of anything in his life – was standing with one hand raised, pointing directly to where he was skulking on the wallwalk.

"An intruder?" Qyburn scowled. "Very well. Fetch him here."

Ser Robert obediently stepped forward.

Jaime bolted to his feet and ran.

The ground began to shake again as Ser Robert broke into a sprint to match. He couldn't move quite as fast, encumbered with his armor, but it was still much bloody faster than something that size should have been able to go. There was another set of steps just ahead, and Jaime saw that they were going to reach it at almost exactly the same time. If Strong got up here and cut him off –

He put on an extra burst of speed, legs pumping. Then the head and shoulders of Ser Robert appeared above the stairs, and Jaime dodged just as the giant made a grab for his ankle, a fountain of sparks cascading off the stone where his gauntlets scraped. Close to, there was a faint but distinct scent of putrefied flesh that made Jaime's gorge rise, but he couldn't stop to be sick. From here, the wallwalk turned and bent back around the bailey, and while leading Ser Robert in merry circles might hold some comedic value for Qyburn or anyone else who wasn't Jaime, it would end
There was only one way out. After the night’s demented program of events, it fucking figured. Jaime ginned up a respectable head of speed, planted his left hand on a merlon, and vaulted out into thin air.

This time, he had some sense of how far the drop was, and was able to fold himself into a somersault at the last instant, barrel-rolling through something that felt like straw. Beached whales had been known to make more elegant landings, but it did prevent his wind from being knocked out again, and that was all Jaime cared about. Ser Robert would be down after him in just a few moments, and he used them to run for all his life was worth. There was a door here, and another, and Jaime slammed through them indiscriminately, noting as he did so that the corridor was growing steadily lower and narrower around him. This, to his thinking, was entirely to the good, as it diminished the chances that his pursuer would be able to fit through them.

Jaime rattled along like a pea in a suit of armor, his breathing as loud as a cavalry charge. Then his footing went flatly out from under him, he saved himself from a splendid pratfall by merest fractions, and spotted a ladder leading down into some tunnel barely wider than him. He’d stumbled onto one of the countless secret passages catacombing the underworld of the Red Keep, and where it led to was bloody anybody’s guess.

He hesitated, unable to keep back his revulsion at the thought of clambering into that dank, dark, cramped space. But a muffled crashing behind him announced that Ser Robert, unconcerned with such trivialities as roofs and doors, was busily breaking them all down. Stone thundered as it fell, and the silence in which the giant came on was more menacing than if he’d been shouting. If Jaime cared to wait for his tender hospitality, it was the last thing he’d ever do.

No choice. Cold sweat breaking out on his brow, he thrust himself headfirst into the pit, grabbed the rungs of the ladder, and slithered away. There was no space to turn around, and he had to keep going deeper and deeper, always just a breath from losing his grip and crashing down to the bowels of hell itself. But Ser Robert couldn't fit down it, and going back up was therefore not even the remotest option.

Finally, Jaime’s left hand encountered something solid, and he squirted out of the bolt-hole into another narrow tunnel. This one was mercifully horizontal, but while Tyrion would have been able to walk upright, Jaime had to beetle along while bent almost double. At intervals there were small holes bored into the stone, confirming this to be one of the places where the Red Keep had earned its reputation for having a thousand eyes and ears, but when he tried to look out through them, he only saw darkness beyond. It was impossible to say where in the castle he was, or even if he was still in the castle. He’d tried to order the passages exhaustively surveyed after his father’s body had been removed from the now-destroyed Tower of the Hand, but knew he hadn’t come close. And what else is lurking down here? After Ser Robert, it couldn’t possibly be worse, but –

Jaime stopped dead in his tracks. Just a few dozen yards ahead, he‘d seen something, or someone. Stout, wearing a hooded cloak, and moving through the crawlspace with expert assurance. Little birds. It was impossible, but no more so than some of the other things which had happened recently. It might finally mean some answers, and Jaime had too many bloody questions. Thinking luridly of how he’d last done this, on the fateful night he had decided not to let his little brother die, he broke into a run and hit Varys in a full-on flying tackle, sending them crashing down in a total muddle of eunuch and cripple.

The plump spymaster, taken – for once – utterly off his guard, emitted a piercing squeal, which echoed emptily away in the damp warrens. He kicked and humped as if attempting to copulate, not
that he'd know bloody how, and finally succeeded in getting himself twisted around to look straight up into the merciless green eyes above his. "Ser. . . Ser Jaime," he spluttered. "I. . . I didn't expect. . . ."

"That was the point." Jaime planted his arm across Varys' throat, to dampen any notion the eunuch might have of attempting something foolish. "No doubt you thought I was as far away from this hellhole as I thought you were, but we don't have time to catch up. What are you doing here?

Varys, who by now had certainly realized that Jaime had no blade in hand, gave one of his gallingy insincere little titters. "Serving the king, of course."

"Which king?" Jaime increased the pressure on the eunuch's neck. "Which king, you cockless wonder?"

"Why. . . gently, my lord, gently. . . the true king, of course." Varys' eyes were beginning to bug out. "As I have these many years. . . my lord, if you're not careful. . ."

"I am being very careful. Give me one good reason why – you took Tyrion up to my lord father's chambers, that night – you let him kill – "

"Was I?" The eunuch's face was starting to turn purple, but his chuckle was different this time, low and throaty. "Who loosed him. . . from the cell?"

Jaime relaxed the stranglehold by a few degrees. "You killed my uncle Kevan." It was not a question. "It wasn't the Tyrells. It was you and your little birds. You've been hiding under here all this time."

"That was not quite what I was referring to, my lord." Varys' voice had become unctuous again, if still somewhat hoarse due to its close acquaintance with Jaime's elbow. He smiled. "Does it assuage your guilt, sweet ser, if I told you that your father was a dead man even before your brother insisted on climbing that ladder? I would have taken him directly to the ship, but he was determined to tarry. He needn't have. The culprit for Lord Tywin's death could already be glimpsed at Tyrion's trial, and it wasn't the dwarf."

"What in the – "

"The grand maester. That sly and untrustworthy creature." Varys' eyes met Jaime's again, glittering more strangely than ever. "Do you recall his poisons? When he showed them to the jury in an attempt to discover what took good King Joffrey's life?"

"There is no way on the gods' green earth that Pycelle ever poisoned my father, and you grieve for Joff as much as I did. You lying bloody snake – "

"Snake," Varys breathed. "Can you think of a certain snake that might have any reason whatsoever to crave vengeance against Lord Tywin Lannister?"

Jaime wanted to argue further, wanted to do anything to make the eunuch shut up, but all he could see floating in front of his eyes was his father's disgustingly rotted corpse, as he stood before the bier in his white cloak and watched it grin that unnatural grin. "You knew," he said at last, feeling faint. "Knew that Oberyn Martell had already poisoned him, and you let Tyrion go up there anyway."

"Of course I knew." The eunuch tittered again. "Knowing has always been the nature of my service, my lord. And while it might be barely possible for the realm to believe that Lord Tywin simply keeled over one night, no one could dare argue with the mortality of a crossbow quarrel in the
belly. Why look for any other cause of death?"

Jaime's anguished rage threatened to overtake him. Never had he more devoutly longed for two
good hands, so he could strangle Varys properly and at his leisure, and suddenly he understood.
"It's Aegon you're working for. The so-called Aegon, at least. You're in with the Martells and the
pretender, and you're doing everything you can to destroy the Lannisters. What happened to
Myrcella, damn you? Damn you!"

"Your... niece was a sweet child." Varys sighed, with considerable pathos. "But in such a
dangerous place as Dorne, it's astonishing she – "

Jaime grabbed the spymaster's neck with his left hand. "Was?"

"Appearances are deceiving, Ser Jaime," Varys said silkily. "And in this case, the appearance
of such a circumstance may be all that is necessary. It may be a tragic miscalculation on their part, or
it merely may be a masquerade of..." He gagged. "My lord, you don't really want to do – "

"No, I really think I do."

"No... you don't." Varys, with surprising strength, managed to twist free. "Elsewise all of King's
Landing is going to die."

Jaime laughed aloud. "And that was another threat, I imagine?"

"No. A warning." The spymaster stared him down. "I am hidden here waiting for Aegon's attack to
come, just like the rest of the city. When it does, I intend to open the gates and let his army in. That
way no one need sacrifice themselves heroically, not even you."

"You just told me that you plan to let the invader inside our walls, and you think that will induce
me to – "

"Gently, Ser Jaime. Gently." The eunuch edged backwards. "Why, pray tell, is that more of a crime
than letting thousands upon thousands suffer and die in an attempt to forestall the inevitable? Is it
better than letting the green beast loose upon the world again?"

"What are you bloody talking about?"

"Of course, you were unavoidably absent at the party your brave brother threw to welcome Lord
Stannis back to the city, but as King Aerys' man, surely you knew all about its properties. Wildfire,
my lord. Is that plain enough?"

Jaime felt almost as sick as he had when the truth about Lord Tywin's death was disclosed. "And
who means to unloose it this time?" he asked, knowing the answer.

"Surely I need not tell you," Varys said placidly, that little smile catching at his lips again. "But
perhaps that inspires some comprehension even in your mind, my lord. Do you want King's
Landing to be wiped off the map?"

"So if you let Aegon in, so there's no need for a battle or for an attack or for wildfire, you think this
makes you a hero – "

"How exactly does it not? Let us speak plainly. Tommen, regardless his other charming qualities,
has no claim to the throne he sits. Persisting in trying to keep him there will spill more oceans of
blood across this drowned kingdom, and most of it, I regret to inform you, will belong to the
Lannisters. You yourself do desire so acutely to be a shining white knight, Ser Jaime. Face the
inevitable, agree to negotiate and hand over the crown to Prince Rhaegar's trueborn son, and you will be hailed as the savior of the Seven Kingdoms."

"After I put my blade through his grandfather's throat? Assuming it was his grandfather. How in hellfire did you manage to conveniently come up with a child whom Ser Gregor Clegane brained on a nursery wall?"

"Appearances are deceiving," Varys repeated. "And as for brave Ser Gregor – "

"I know what happened to him." Jaime wanted to try to kill the eunuch again, quite fervently he did, but somehow he didn't have the heart for it. "He's out there with the rest of the madmen running this bloody place right now."

"So why in the world would you object to Prince Aegon's ascension to the throne?" Varys asked, a question for which Jaime notably lacked an answer. "And you are not the only one to have taken notice of Ser Gregor's return from the dead. If it does come to a battle, I am sure the smallfolk will be so heartened to know that the coward of the Blackwater and the butcher of Saltpans fights on their side once more."

"What do you... the Hound?" Jaime hadn't expected anything Varys had lobbed at him all night, but that somehow the least. "Sandor Clegane is back in King's Landing?"

"For a certainty. He was spotted riding through the Dragon's Gate several days ago. There can't be two men with scars like his, and he's currently kenneled up in the Great Sept of Baelor. As impossible as it sounds, he seems to have turned holy."

"Sandor Clegane? Not bloody likely." Jaime's head was spinning. The Hound had always wanted to fell the Mountain, that was no secret, and if he was sworn even nominally to the Faith, with Jaime having taken himself out of the running to face Robert Strong... he almost began to glimpse what might be going through the man's beaten, half-mad brain. He'd never really believed that Sandor was responsible for the atrocities committed in the riverlands, and had heard alternately that he had crawled off to die somewhere on the Trident after a run-in with Gregor's cronies, but death, as well proven, was no match for either of the Cleganes. The seven hells are breathing a sigh of relief.

All this revelatory information, however, was not enough to make Jaime forget who he was hearing it from. While they had been talking, Varys had started to inch along the tunnel, and had covered enough ground that they now stepped out into a small space before a door. The eunuch turned casually to open it, apparently having sensed that Jaime no longer posed a threat, and led them through onto the parapets. It was horribly exposed out here, and Jaime reflexively turned to look for anyone watching him, but Qyburn and Ser Robert were far away on the other side of the keep.

"Look, my lord," Varys said softly, indicating the dark city tumbled out below them, from Aegon's Hill to Visenya's to Rhaenys'. "It might be a festering, filthy midden heap, but it is worth saving. The lives of how many hundreds of thousands are in your hands. I may be a liar by trade, but I am not lying about this. It's so easy, will save so much grief and bloodshed. Swear to me that you will not stop me from letting Aegon and his army in, and I will hasten you through secret ways to the king's chambers. You and Tommen will be allowed to safely escape from the city, though I wouldn't advise making for Casterly Rock – Aurane Waters and his fleet of dromonds will soon have it barricaded by sea. Once you've found a safe house, you will name yourself Tommen's guardian and issue a proclamation that he yields the throne to the rightful Targaryen heir. After which, there will be no need to further molest either of you, and you may live out your lives in peace."

Jaime stood motionless, completely irresolute. He could imagine nothing closer to making a deal
with the greatest of the seven devils themselves – with the man who'd arranged the death of most if not all of his family and his House and his legacy. But in return, if Tommen could still be saved... he might see Brienne once more, look into her ugly face and her astonishing blue eyes, smile and call her "wench", taken far away from plots and politics and the intrigue of the court... perhaps to Tarth with its high mountains and rushing waterfalls, away from his vows, the only life he'd ever known...

*You never knew what it meant to be a Lannister,* Cersei whispered in his head.

Jaime raised his golden hand to his eyes, dashing away the tears. For a moment he seriously considered throwing himself over the edge into the abyss, as that at least would save him from a choice that would damn him no matter which side he settled on. But the storm was breaking, was here, and he had never once run from a fight.

In the distance, the bells of the Great Sept of Baelor began to boom, deep and dolorous in the night.

"You had best decide, my lord." Varys' voice was now so soft that Jaime could barely hear him. "They are coming."
Knives slashed in her belly, twisting and twisting until the steel ran a dark, violent crimson with her blood. Whenever she threw up her arms to block the blows, they bit even deeper into her flesh, slicing down to her core. Her hands were soaked red as she tried to hold her guts in, but it was no use, she was dying. In the darkness clouding her eyes, she could see shades with familiar faces: her own long-dead lady mother, stern scowling Septa Roelle, and Lady Catelyn Stark herself, as brave and strong and sad as she'd been when Brienne first knew her, and not the mutilated revenant she'd become. Their grey lips moved in unison, echoing a hoarse, whispering chorus. *A woman's war is in the birthing bed. . . a woman's war is in the birthing bed. . .*

*No,* Brienne tried to say, to tell them that she'd been different, trained in sword and spear and shield and mace, as good as any man and a great deal better than most. *I guarded a king.* Let that king die, in a torrent of blood much like this one. *Swore an oath.* Failed in its keeping. *Could at least claim a life of chastity, virtue, and restraint.* Had yielded her maidenhead in the sand of a holy isle to a crippled traitor, and drunk moon tea to erase her transgression, as if the gods would somehow fail to notice. *But I drank it at least three weeks ago. I should not be bleeding so much now. Not unless. . .*

Moon tea did not always work, Brienne knew. The septons could never quite decide where they stood on the issue; the Mother loved all her daughters and cared for their well-being in marriage and childbed, but knowingly murdering the possibility of her gift could not be otherwise than sin. The Citadel held quite a different opinion, to be sure, and more than one household maester had lost his head for supplying a lady with moon tea without her husband's knowledge or consent. It also raised the serious possibility of adultery, for why would she want to take precautions against pregnancy unless she was cavorting with a lover on the side? Bloodlines and heirs were everything, and the War of the Five Kings showed how seriously so. And it was one of the chief causes, the man who'd fathered children upon his own sister, whom she'd nearly let do the same to her. . .

The horrible understanding settled clearly into her mind. Either she'd conceived, killed the sprouting with moon tea, and was now bleeding it out, or the moon tea had not worked at all and she was only now miscarrying after the brutal physical ordeal of her escape from White Harbor and her flight south through the snow. *My sin.* She must be dying, surely she was, the pain was too much, fever shrouded her brow and her eyes and she could feel herself burning up. Alone. . . alone in the middle of nowhere. . . over, done, at an end, ruined, Oathkeeper lost down some Manderly bolthole and Sansa and Jaime beyond her reach forever. . .

A hand touched her brow, a voice floated through the murk. "Ser? My lady?"

*Go away.* Brienne did not want to return and face reality, even if what awaited her here was scarcely any better. But the voice caught something inside her, began reeling her up from the darkness like a fish on a line, and she realized that she was about to wake. Some smothering veil broke, and she rose.

Brienne of Tarth opened her eyes. Snowflakes swirled lazily down from a pitch-black sky, kissing her hot brow with cool, light lips, and firelight threw shadows in dancing ripples across the white ground. She was lying beside it, bundled in apparently every blanket and fur to be found, a thick, hot stickiness soaked underneath her thighs. Every sinew of her body hurt, her head pounded, and she felt too weak even to sit. All the water and all the blood and all the strength had run out of her, leaving her a crumbling, desiccated husk.

"Here, my lady." The voice again, and an accompanying face swam into view. Brienne stared at it
in shock, before finally remembering what had happened just before she'd lost consciousness in the snowstorm. Jaime telling her what a stubborn brave wench she was, and her telling him that he was imaginary, and then that real figure that had appeared out of the horizon, catching her as she fell. But it wasn't even –

"Podrick?" Brienne muttered. Her tongue felt as rough as sand, and anything more than the barest shape of the name was too difficult for it, but it excited a corresponding flap of activity. Podrick Payne sprang up as if launched from a catapult and sprinted to the other side of the camp, where Brienne lost sight of him. He returned shortly with several items in hand, as well as a much taller figure. Two of them? Who was Pod traveling with? Had they found Sansa as she'd bade them?

"Ser, she's awake," Pod was saying urgently. "My lady. Brienne. If you'll help me heat the broth, ser, she needs something. After the bleeding. Please, ser."

A knight. And she wagered she knew which one. Something equal parts relief, guilt, and resigned dismay formed in Brienne's head. She heard the clatter and splash as liquid was poured into a rusty kettle, a hiss and crackle as the fire was stoked, and attempted no resistance as Ser Hyle Hunt propped her up like a dead log so Pod could solicitously ladle the broth into her, a mother bird feeding the runt of its nestlings.

Brienne could manage opening her mouth and swallowing, if nothing else. The broth was thin, but hot, and whatever they'd managed to kill had enough meat on its bones to give it at least some flavor. She tasted salt and marrow, knew that she needed it to replace what she'd lost, and sent up a desperate prayer that Ser Hyle had been only superficially involved with her care. The thought of him poking about the bloodstained furs, drawing conclusions, realizing that this was a malady no maid could have, was too horrifying for words.

Brienne closed her eyes, swallowed more broth, and only knew it was gone when Pod's spoon stopped prodding at her lips. Her stomach heaved with sudden nausea and she thought she was about to spew it all back up, but by sheer force of will she kept it down. She could not tell if she was saved or not. The three of them had been reunited on the far side of Lady Stoneheart's noose, but where? Out in the snowbound forests of the high plains, another winter storm already rumbling in over the mountains? There are wolves in these woods. And they would surely smell blood, and meat, and fire.

"My lady," Ser Hyle's voice said above her, at length. It was recognizable, but different, hoarse and rasping. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

Brienne uttered an incoherent noise in her throat; she was in no humor to tolerate even the most inoffensive of his gibes. It took even longer to sort her faculties of speech back into order, but she managed. "Thank you."

His weight shifted as he set her down and took a seat by the fire. "Pod's to thank, mostly. No better stammering squire to have about in a crisis, even if he looks utterly useless the rest of the time. He tried to stop the bleeding, but he couldn't find a wound." There was an implicit question in Hunt's tone.

"My moonblood." None of her courses had ever almost killed her before, but Ser Hyle was not like to know it. Brienne had never seen anything to rival how battle-hardened warriors, accustomed to blood issuing forth effusively from every imaginable orifice, would turn as squeamish as virgin septas when confronted with this particular female mystery. Then again, if a man bled for a week, he'd be dead. As if from a very long way off, she remembered one of Jaime's earliest jabs, back when they still hated each other, about how she must have killed Renly during one such affliction. Everyone knew how dangerous and unreasonable a woman was then. Never give a wench a sword
when she's bleeding.

Oh, Jaime. What did we do to each other? Brienne's raw eyes stung with tears. Never in her life had she wanted more devoutly not to think about the Kingslayer, and considering how that adventure had gone until Harrenhal, that was a hard standard to beat. She just lay there, quietly dying.

She heard Ser Hyle cough. Then he said softly, "There's a little sept we passed, about ten miles ago. May be that we could make it back there. If you agreed."

"Agreed?" Brienne repeated suspiciously. "To what?"

"To what I asked." Ser Hyle didn't sound as arrogant as usual. In fact, it was almost sad. "My lady, what other offer are either of us liable to get? Marry me, and I'll take you home to Tarth and nurse you back to health. We can't have that many lives left. And if you're worried about me interfering, you'll be the sole mistress of the island once your father dies. I'll content myself as your consort. A good life, quiet, peaceful. Tending the needs of your people, swinging your sword to defend them, sons and daughters to fill our hall and laugh with us at our fires and mourn us when we die, to write our names into the songs. I mean every word. It is the only future I can see."

"I can see many. None with you at my side." Brienne turned away.

Ser Hyle let out a pained sigh. "My lady, you are too weak to walk, let alone ride. You cannot continue on this mad quest. For your own life, if you do – "

"She has to." Podrick emerged from the icy trees on the far side of the fire, arms full of broken branches. He turned an accusing glance on Hyle. "Ser, you have to. Have to tell her. About my lady. Not her. Lady Sansa."

"Lady Sansa?" Brienne ripped the blanket off and sat bolt upright. She then regretted it dearly, as a seething roil of blackness promptly prostrated her again. There was nothing but the pain, shot through with infected red, but even that was not enough to stop her from clawing around to face Pod, blood banging in her skull and bile burning in her throat. "Did you see her? Did you find her? Where? Where?"

Podrick, looking vastly alarmed, dropped the firewood in a clatter and hastened to her side. "Calm down, my lady, please. Ser. We did – did see her. My lady. Sansa. She was traveling with the... with the..." His words trailed off into a gurgle, and by the way he just sat there staring at her miserably, Brienne knew it had to be bad. Gods preserve her, not Ser Shadrich? If she was still with a half-mad hedge knight grown increasingly vindictive as he failed to exact any ransom... a woman's war is in the birthing bed..."

Brienne shook her head violently, doing nothing to improve its ache. She reached out and seized Podrick by both shoulders, intent on turning him upside down and rattling the information out of him if necessary, but it was Ser Hyle who interjected. "Don't blame the lad for having a bit of a qualm in telling you, I damn near pissed myself when I found out. What he will get around to saying, potentially even by the time spring comes, is that Lady Sansa is traveling in company with a mendicant red priest, a stubborn young blacksmith, a skinny Dornish archer, and other members of a certain Brotherhood without Banners, led by the unliving dread corpse of her own lady mother. Yes, the very one that almost hanged the lot of us, spared only by your agreement to fetch Ser Jaime back for their brand of justice."

It was a good thing that Brienne had not succeeded in getting up, as this would have sent her flat again. "Lady Sansa... is with her mother?" she managed at last. Did this mean that her oath to
Catelyn Stark had been rendered null, if against all odds her lost daughter had been returned to her? But Lady Stoneheart was not Catelyn Stark, and while she'd let Brienne go at the end of Jaime's trial, it had been with a promise of undying, more-than-mortal hatred. Somehow she did not think that would be cast aside easily, if ever.

"Where were they going?" Brienne could not think how she would even begin to explain that she now needed to take Sansa away from her mother and back to King's Landing to save Jaime Lannister's life. I would swear an oath to return her unharmed... but what moon-mad fool would credit it? The possibility had already occurred to Brienne that it was a trap, that the Arryn men would seize Sansa back into their custody to do gods only knew what, then kill both Brienne and Jaime out of hand. Perhaps the only real way to achieve Jaime's freedom was to go down there with nothing to lose and fight for it. Leave Sansa where she belonged, safe at last. But that all hinged on the answer to her question.

"Well?" Brienne repeated. "Where were they going?"

Ser Hyle and Pod exchanged an unhappy look. Finally Ser Hyle went for it. "The Vale," he said. "They're making for the Vale. They let us go only after we swore we'd tell you and only you of her whereabouts, and no one else. Which we kept to, you may be interested to know. But the high road will be snowed in – likely already is – and the Bloody Gate is shut. And there are dark rumors trickling down. It's said that little Robert Arryn is dead, and it's the Lord Protector, Petyr Baelish, pulling all the strings."

"If Lady Sansa is returning to the Vale, it must be for a reason," Brienne insisted stubbornly. "And if she has her mother with her... even Lord Petyr cannot have foreseen that gambit. There must be a way in."

"Not unless you fancy a winter climb through the Mountains of the Moon. Which I don't, tell you true. My lady, what will it take to make you see sense? Lady Sansa has chosen her own fate, her bloody undead mother will hang all three of us again if she can and this time good and properly, and there's no getting in after them anyway. Please, I beg you. Let me take you back to Tarth."

For a moment, Brienne wavered. There was no denying that she was sorely tempted by a reprieve from her travail, even if the prospect of Ser Hyle's bed and body remained as unappetizing as ever. Lady Brienne Hunt. It made her shudder just to imagine. And if she let him cart her home in shameful failure, she'd never forgive herself. As for Jaime... much as it hurt Brienne to admit, he was even farther out of reach. There was no way of knowing if his captors actually had taken him to King's Landing, or what they'd done with him once there. Brienne's only option was to try to reach Sansa now – they were already on the outskirts of the Vale – and defend her as best she could from whatever enemies awaited, seen and unseen. Whatever and wherever Sansa Stark led, Brienne was honor-bound to follow. Farewell, Jaime Lannister. I love you. Go with the gods.

Ser Hyle was watching her resignedly. "Please don't tell me that you decided what I think you just did."

"I care not what you think," Brienne snapped, before remembering that Hyle had almost suffered hanging on her behalf, told her where Sansa was, and, albeit with a strong dose of self-interest, offered to see her safely home. "I am sorry, ser, but there is nothing left for me but to continue onto Sansa, and see that all our sacrifices are not in vain. You may see it differently, but I do not. You and Pod owe me nothing further, nor I you. Go home. Survive the war. I won't stop you."

"I don't," Pod said timidly. "Have a home, I mean. It was with my lord. Lord Tyrion. Lady Sansa is his wife. And you, ser. My lady. You're going to her. So I'm going with you."
There was a long pause in which Brienne and Pod stared daggers through Ser Hyle.

The knight let out another weary sigh. "Well, that just does me in then, doesn't it? If I let it be said that a squire and a woman went where I was too frightened to follow, I'd never get another job, and Randyll Tarly is likely to ensure that my employment opportunities are thin on the ground as it is, after I showed myself the door how I did. It's only one life to live, am I right? Bloody fine then, we're going to the Vale. At least when we die, the snow will bury us and our corpses won't get raped." He raised a pretend goblet in toast. "Three cheers."

Despite this pessimistic declaration, Ser Hyle actually proved useful in getting the plan moving forward. Brienne's horse had been lost in the snowstorm, and Pod and Ser Hyle had only one between them. It was a palfrey of reasonable speed and wind, which apparently they'd had to haggle back after the Brotherhood had stolen it, but loading all three of them onto its back was quite impractical. Pod volunteered to ride pillion with Brienne, meaning that they only had to find one extra for Hyle – but out here, that would be as difficult as finding ten extra and the rest of Prince Rhaegar's rubies. So when they set out two mornings hence, it was with Pod and Brienne riding and Ser Hyle walking. Considering the size of the snowdrifts they had to break trail through, there wasn't that much difference in their pace.

Brienne remained lightheaded and feverish, and it was excruciatingly painful to sit astride in the saddle; blood still spotted her smallclothes, and she knew that such things could develop into a very serious infection if the woman was not cleansed and treated properly by a maester. But the only place they were going to find one for a hundred miles was the Vale, which added a weight of recommendation to her choice. The ground sometimes seemed to dissolve under the palfrey's hooves, sending her head spinning, and she felt too sick to eat more than a few crumbs of their pathetically scant stock of food. But she would be damned if she let Ser Hyle see how much she was suffering, so she grimly plowed on without a word of complaint.

On the third day out, the Mountains of the Moon came into view at last. Brienne's heart leapt on the sight of them, then just as quickly plummeted as she assessed the unforgiving prospect of the pyramids of stone and snow, clouds billowing off summits that scraped ice from the roof of the world. *We will never get through those,* she was forced to admit. It was maddening to be so close to Sansa at last – assuming that the girl herself had connived some way past the barrier, and wasn't lying frozen on some remote ridge with a wildling's spear in her belly – and unable to get around this last impasse.

"We're going to have to take the road," Ser Hyle announced, breaking into Brienne's thoughts with the same conclusion. "And think of some cover story or other. Traders don't usually come to the Vale in winter, true, but it's not entirely implausible. Or better yet, we could be dispossessed smallfolk from the Fingers or Gulltown or some such place, come in hopes of throwing ourselves on our liege lord's mercy."

"You said Lord Robert was dead," Brienne reminded him.

Ser Hyle shrugged. "It was just a mad rumor passed on from a messenger we shared our fire with, while we were looking for you. Though he's not about to do us a great deal of good even if he is still alive. If it wouldn't stick in your craw too much, you could pose as my wife, and Pod here would be our son. Soldiers tend to their own, and I can talk to any of them. Might even know a few. And if worse comes to worse..." He rattled a purse in illustration. "That's stags and stars you hear clanking around in there, as I don't have a bloody dragon to my name any more, but silver is silver. Unless you have a better idea?"

Much as it chafed, Brienne once again had to admit that she did not. It was agreed that Ser Hyle
would be a hedge knight who'd done business with the Arryns in the past, and had been forced out of his humble croft in Maidenpool when Lord Randyll occupied the village – which, if you squinted at it from several paces in a bad light, could almost pass for the truth. Penniless and now homeless, with a wife and a growing lad to feed, he had heard of the demand for swords in the Vale and decided to risk the winter journey. He knew nothing of its recent political upheavals that would compel him to take one side or the other, and at any rate, it was all far beyond the concern of a simple man like him. Ser Benfrey Poole would pose no one any threat, just an opportunity.

"Ser Benfrey Poole," Brienne repeated. She would remember it well, as she did not plan to call Hyle "husband" even in play-act, and debated briefly over an alibi for herself. She would have to keep her hood up and speak as little as possible, for her name and likeness were already infamous in the riverlands, and if anyone connected her to the ugly wench who had been sniffing after Sansa Stark before, the entire thing was blown to hell. But Alys Poole, as Brienne finally reluctantly decided, was merely an obedient peasant wife. Though I will knock Hunt's teeth out if he tries to make me prove it.

As for Pod, he wanted to dub himself Tyrion, but was informed by both Brienne and Ser Hyle, in one of their blue-moon moments of unanimous agreement, that this was precisely as clandestine as marching in with a drum-and-trumpet company. The disappointed youth was then persuaded to settle for the much plainer moniker of Jon; Ser Benfrey had been so impressed by Lord Arryn in even his brief service that he'd named his son after him. It was as solid a premise as they were likely to get, and Brienne ripped apart and knotted the Manderly tabard Ser Davos had given her to make a skirt. Another good man I will never see again. A hedge knight's wife would also not be traveling in plate and mail, so they cached it under a distinctive-looking rock on the vanishingly optimistic notion that they would be back to fetch it one day. Then, with Hyle leading the horse, they started down into the gorge that led to the Bloody Gate.

The descent was precarious and treacherous, littered with ice and sliding stones, and Brienne and Pod ended up having to dismount and pick their way through to save the palfrey breaking an ankle or worse. The wind scraped across the mountainside as if determined to scour them off, and Brienne's vertigo was made worse by the exposed cliffs that plunged into the abyss on all sides. By the time they finally made it to the valley floor, more or less in one piece, the Bloody Gate was only a few leagues' ride away, but night was coming fast, the road up was as narrow and chancy as the way down had been, and all of them were starved, exhausted, and freezing. Brienne herself was not sure if she could manage the trip. When she stepped into the trees away from the men and skinned her breeches down, she found more dark, sticky blood clotted on her thighs. It burned when she pissed, and as she was rising from her crouch, her head reeled so badly that she had to grab a branch to avoid collapsing.

Brienne clung stubbornly to it until the world stopped cartwheeling, then set off at a hobble back to camp. There would be little and less to eat, so it was a good thing she was not hungry, but she did most sorely crave the comfort and warmth of a fire. It would be beyond idiotic to light one, however. From this vantage, they would be visible up and down the valley, and to both sides of the mountain as well. If they were caught by enemies here, their choice would be to die fighting or blunder away in the dark to die by a fall.

Her breath steamed bitterly silver in the twilight. She stepped back into the clearing and huddled down, declining the rock-hard chunk of bread that Pod proffered. When Ser Hyle sat next to her and attempted to put his cloak over both of them, she restrained the urge to shove him away with both hands, but just barely. "No. We will play this mummer's game of husband and wife only where others might see us. Nothing else."

Ser Hyle rolled his eyes. "Believe it or not, I almost forgot what a pigheaded bitch you are, but now
you've reminded me, I believe I'll let you freeze to death after all. Ser Benfrey will have much better odds of being taken in as a charity case if he had to bury his beloved spouse on the road."

Brienne's cheeks burned as if he'd slapped her. Having no rebuff for that, she sat silently until supper was over, and even bit her tongue when Hyle rolled all three of them tightly up together under their ratty blankets. Without a fire, it was the only way to guard against dying in the night and Brienne knew it, but she had never slept well in the company of men and even less so now. When Hyle draped an arm around her waist and pulled her solidly against the warmth of his chest, it took every ounce of self-control she had not to rip away, knee him in the stones, and flee.

Hyle, however, observed chivalric etiquette as scrupulously as if he was actually an honorable man, and eventually Brienne began to drift into a doze, shivering and hallucinating. His breathing deepened to snores in her ear, but she kept her hand clasped on the hilt of her longsword, the one item she'd flatly refused to leave behind; even Ser Hyle had admitted that it was unwise to have their defenses consist of him alone. In the hungry, howling winter darkness, no longer able to tell quite what was real and what in her head, Brienne began to believe that she would not survive the night, that she would die out here before the morning came.

She did not die. She even must have, impossibly, gone to sleep. The next thing she knew, weak cold sunlight was hurting her eyes, and Pod was shaking her as gingerly as if he expected her to explode. There was an absence in the blankets behind her, and crackles, snaps, and curses from the general direction of the horse suggested that Ser Hyle was making preparations for departure.

Brienne got up and wordlessly pitched in. There wasn't much to be done, one of the advantages of traveling at the barest bones, and they and the sun were soon toiling up the road more or less in unison. Everything was blindingly white, and Brienne clenched her eyes almost shut. Without recourse to sight, she had to listen hard instead for the distant roar that would signify an avalanche or an ambush thundering down to sweep them away.

Neither came. Onwards and upwards they trudged. But in a short while more, the glare of the sun inside the valley walls turned it unbearably, infernally hot. They had to strip off almost all of their bundled layers of fur and leather and wool and pile it on the back of the palfrey, tasting their sweat on their broken lips as the thin mountain air shredded their lungs. Brienne fell so far behind that Pod and Ser Hyle had to stop and wait almost half an hour for her, and when she finally reached them, she knew that it had come time for sense to win out over pride. "I can't," she said, gasping. "I can't keep on, I have to stop. Please."

Ser Hyle opened his mouth to say something – *I told you so*, most like – but cut himself off with an exclamation. "Sunlight on steel. Riders coming this way. We must be closer to the Bloody Gate than I thought. Remember what to do, *wife*?"

Brienne nodded weakly. The three of them stood waiting, her heart going so fast that she thought she was about to black out, until she felt the tremble in the ground and a party of mounted knights trotted into view. They flew the broken wheel of Waynwood and the moon-and-falcon of Arryn, but a new banner as well, a silver mockingbird with wings outspread on a field of black. Brienne needed no one to tell her who *that* belonged to.

"Halt!" The leader's voice boomed out of his helmet. "You will pass no further. The Bloody Gate is shut."

Ser Hyle cocked his head and squinted at the man as if the name was on the very tip of his tongue. "And who's that commanding, there?"

"Ser Donnel Waynwood." The knight spurred forward, drawing rein so close that Pod and Brienne
both took instinctive steps backwards. "And what manner of dirty vagabond thinks to – "

He was abruptly cut off as Ser Hyle let out a whoop. "Donnel, you sly devil!" He strode forward, reached up, and clapped the exceedingly startled Waynwood on the back. " Took over after the Blackfish left, did you? Poole, Benfrey Poole. Rode in Lord Jon's ranging against the wildling clans, back when he was briefly home from King's Landing. Killed me half a dozen Stone Crows, and some Milk Snakes and Painted Dogs to boot. Don't tell me my glorious tale's already forgotten!"

Ser Donnel pushed up his visor, suspicion engraved into every aspect of his homely, earnest features. "I don't recall, in fact."

"Poole?" another of his men said at the same moment. "From Maidenpool?"

"That's the one," Ser Hyle said, leaving Brienne to realize that Ser Benfrey must have been an actual worthy of his acquaintance at one point, before meeting who knew what sticky end. "Thought I was going to go home and raise my boy in peace, but then Randyll Tarly turned up and well, that was quits of that. I also inadvertently offended his lordship by borrowing a chicken for my wife's pot, and that was enough to get me good and hanged." He ruefully indicated the livid scar on his throat. "My brave lady here cut me down in the very nick of time, but for obvious reasons, we've been on the run ever since. This is our last chance. We've come to take up service to little Lord Robert, if he'd be so kind."

Ser Donnel still looked suspicious, but confused and uncertain as well. He was a young man of just twenty, could not be expected to know every freerider and sellsword who'd passed through the Vale outside of just a few months ago, and so he could not gainsay their tale out of hand. "Little Lord Robert is dead."

Hyle's face fell in convincing astonishment and grief. "No. Never."

"Aye. May the gods assoil him."

"I see his banner there."

"The Lord Protector has commanded us to honor his memory," Ser Donnel said uncomfortably. "And we need no more trouble. Baelish's bastard daughter has returned, only it turns out that she's neither a bastard or his daughter. Word is she murdered Robert herself, to marry the Hardyng whelp and inherit the Vale, and she'll soon stand trial for it. After the bitch did for King Joffrey, not that he didn't deserve it, I imagine it came easy."

Brienne's heart turned over. Sansa, she knew at once. Sansa is here, and in terrible danger. There was no time to waste, and she edged forward. "Ser Donnel," she blurted. "Is there a maester at the Bloody Gate? I am suffering from a... female complaint, and our journey has been long and painful."

Waynwood turned his suspicious look on her. "There is," he allowed after a moment. "Though not for long. Maester Colemon went up from the Gates of the Moon to Longbow Hall, as everyone is certain that Ser Gilwood Hunter has been poisoned and Maester Willamen requested Colemon's counsel. Our own maester will soon be sent to the Gates of the Moon in his place."

"If mischief like that is afoot, you need every loyal heart and stout sword you can get," Ser Hyle remarked. "Which would include my wife, by the by. Me being gone all the time, she learned to handle a blade passing well. I wouldn't cross her."
Ser Donnel scowled at him again. "She says she has this woman's complaint, and you say you took her all this way —"


There was a long pause. Brienne watched Ser Donnel's face intently, as his lingering suspicion wrestled with the dawning awareness that it would not be well done to turn away a helpless woman, especially if said woman's husband had done the Vale a service in the past. She held her breath, until the young Knight of the Gate raised a mailed fist. "We will take you back to the keep, I suppose. For now."

Ser Hyle bowed. "Your lordship is very gracious."

Waynwood glanced at him as if in search of mockery, but Hunt's face was perfectly studious, and he made no further comments as they plodded up the road, around and around, and beheld the Gate at last. The parapets were bristling with new fortifications, and the watchtowers and bridge were patrolled by men with halyards and crossbows. The gate itself was shut and barred, triple-thick black old oak studded with beams and bolts and bars. *A dozen armies smashed themselves to pieces on it during the Age of Heroes*, Brienne remembered. In this narrow bottleneck of mountain, it was easy to imagine.

Someone took the palfrey, Pod, and Ser Hyle, and someone else took Brienne by the elbow and escorted her into the chilly, narrow halls. The maester's chamber was scarce more than a glorified rookery, and the man who opened the door had somewhat of a beaky look himself. But he uncomplainingly agreed to tend to her, introduced himself as Maester Kelvin, and apologized for having more expertise in patching up battle wounds than run-of-the-mill afflictions. He hoped he would not acquire it further. "The Vale is in arms," he told her as she crawled onto his straw mattress. "I only pray it will not come to war."

Brienne, for her part, prayed he would not talk the entire time he was examining her, and also that he would be expedient about it. She gritted her teeth, but he was quick and gentle, and was soon mixing up a medicinal simple for her to drink. But as she was reaching for it, he caught her wrist. Quietly he said, "This was no moonblood, my lady. You have lost a child, no more than two months into your term."

"I know." Brienne grimaced. "Please, if you will, say nothing to Ser... my husband. He has guilt enough to bear, I would not put him through this."

Maester Kelvin gave her a curious look, but had the good grace not to enquire. He had just given her a warm cloth to clean the crusted blood off, and was charitably preserving her modesty by remaining engrossed in a book, when both of them heard distant shouting from the window – on the far side of the Gate, the one inside the Vale.

Brienne, forgetting about her ablutions, frowned and dropped the rag. She went to the window and peered over the maester's shoulder, just in time to see another company of horsemen, quite a bit larger than Ser Donnel's sentinel duty, clattering down the road toward the waycastle in an explosion of stones and ice. They passed through out of sight, but their shouting continued to waft up through the floor, and it was not long before someone was pounding on the maester's door.

"Kelvin! Come down, come bloody down here!"

"My lady," Kelvin said, excusing himself with a flustered bow. "If you are all right for the moment —?"

Brienne waved a hand, dismissing him, and he scuttled out posthaste. Seeing as he was likely to be
occupied for some while, and exhausted after her labors, she got back onto the bed and had barely closed her eyes before she fell crashingly asleep.

She was woken at dusk by the sound of the door opening. It was cold in the room, and since she'd taken off most of her clothes during the last sweltering climb, she at once began to shiver. Purple twilight bruised the sky beyond the window, spackling the mountains in hues and streaks of shadow, and it was enough of a beautiful sight that she jumped badly when Ser Hyle's voice said, "It's bad, my lady. It's very bad."

Brienne spun around to face him. "What do you mean?"

Ser Hyle paced across the chamber and seated himself on Kelvin's writing stool. He seemed in search of the proper way to begin. Then at last he said, "The party who rode in this afternoon, just after we did, was out fighting against what they report as the largest band of Burned Men they've ever seen. And they said that there were some... strange folk with them. A man in red robes, a man with one eye, and a hooded woman, among others."

"The Brotherhood?" Brienne breathed. "But why would they be apart from Lady Sansa?"

"So I wondered too," Hyle admitted. "They got away, so gods know where they are now. I can't figure why on earth the Burned Men would be serving as their guides, but there's no denying they're clever. Yet that's not what makes it so bad. The party was led by one Harlan Hunter and one Harrold Hardyng. As he's called, Harry the Heir. And..."

"And?" Brienne prompted, when the silence threatened to become enormous.

Hyle glanced up. "Harry was wounded in the skirmish. Or so it was said. But I got a look at them as they were riding in, and I don't believe a word of it. Harlan Hunter did it, I swear it. He killed his father and poisoned his brother Gilwood, everyone seems certain, and now he's almost killed Harry and made it look like an unfortunate accident. But why? It's not as if he has any chance of inheriting the Vale himself, just Longbow Hall, and if Harry does die of his injuries, that leaves the entire bloody place without a leader, without a heir, without anyone except for..."

There was an even longer pause as it took shape. Then they said at the exact same instant, "Baelish."

"I think we've found our answer," Brienne whispered.

"I think we have too." Ser Hyle got to his feet. "They're about to send riders up to the Gates of the Moon, to bear word of Harry's mishap. If the word reaches Baelish, I have no doubt that he'll send someone back down to make sure he dies. I wonder how much he's paid Ser Harlan, or what he's promised him, or how far exactly this damnable web stretches. But it's our chance."

"Our chance?"

"Aye." Ser Hyle smiled mirthlessly. "We're riding with them. Tonight. Up to your beloved Lady Sansa at long last, held prisoner at the Gates of the Moon on charges of murdering her cousin Robert Arryn. No, don't thank me now. The storm's about to hit."
Sansa

She had been dreaming of wolves when the bedchamber door crashed open. Groggy and confused, the silvery taste of venison and blood still filling her mouth and giving her a desperate urge to spit it out, she sat up. *It was just my imagination. Lady has been dead for years, it is only me now.* "M-my lords." Her burned hand throbbed as she clutched the quilts to her chest. "I am in no fit state to receive you."

"You will receive us when we damn well decree it." Lord Benedar Belmore elbowed through his companions and stood at the foot of her bed, glaring down at her. "In Lord Jon's day, blessed be his memory, murderers were left to rot and freeze in the sky cells. Not tucked up in here with silken pillows for their heads."

"Be courteous, Benedar," Lord Nestor Royce said nervously. "The Lord Protector still insists on her innocence, after all, and my Myranda tells me that the girl has been through a dread ordeal." Addressing Sansa, he continued, "My lady, none of us want the spectacle of a trial. If you are guilty of a crime of this magnitude, justice will be served upon your soul by ourselves and the gods alike. But if you confess and cooperate, the sentence will be gentler. Now tell us true. Did you kill Robert Arryn?"

Sansa's eyes swept the room. Apart from the corrupt Belmore and the gullible Royce, there were the sycophantic Symond Templeton and the elderly, failing Horton Redfort. Belmore and Templeton were Littlefinger's creatures, bought and paid for, which meant that Belmore's belligerent outburst had been serving some ulterior motive. Templeton would back up anything he said. Royce might speak her more kindly, but would not oppose Littlefinger too strenuously, as his continued fief of this castle depended on it. And like Lord Gyles Rosby back in King's Landing, no one took Redfort's opinion seriously through the coughing. Whatever it was, it would not outlive him by a moment.

In such an accomplished company of liars, Sansa knew, she was the least of them. Therefore, she could not meet them on their grounds. "No."

"What a relief," Templeton murmured.

"Not only a wicked murderess, but a filthy perjurer!" Belmore banged a fist on the quilts. "Do not play coy with us, with your lamb's eyes and strumpet's smiles. We know who you are. We know everything. You killed King Joffrey, though not before seducing one Ser Dontos Hollard to spirit you away to safety. Once here, you assumed the persona of Alayne Stone and bided your time, before finding your opportunity when Lord Baelish planned to wed you to young Hardyng. Since your helpless little cousin was in the way of your marriage and your revenge upon your enemies, you had him poisoned. Then disguised your crime by arranging an unsavory hedge knight, one Ser Shadrich, to kidnap you. You expected to walk triumphantly back in here and have us kiss your feet, didn't you, bitch? *Didn't you?*

His spittle sprayed Sansa's face. Heart pounding, she inched farther backwards in the bed. "Did Lord Baelish tell you that?" she squeaked.

"No," Lord Nestor interjected, with a disgusted glance at Belmore. "As I said, he most devoutly maintains your innocence, but the whole sordid saga is readily available from even the least among his servants. And quite frankly, most of us believe Lord Petyr to be blinded by his love for your late lady mother. Of course he would never credit Catelyn Tully's daughter with any wrongdoing."
This concise summation of the situation, breathtaking in its inaccuracy, rendered Sansa momentarily speechless. She began to think that she glimpsed hints of Littlefinger's strategy after all. He was the only one who could have planted and germinated this ugly seed of her guilt, but as always, he kept his hands clean. And so he'd arranged for ghoulish tales to be spread in the household, while himself vigorously denying them. It was impossible to tell if Belmore genuinely believed it, or was merely blustering and bluffing to increase the pressure on her, hoping to crack her into making a mistake. And my lady mother is not so late as you all think. Where are you, Timett? Find her. Find them. If the Brotherhood never made it, Sansa was done for. Unless I beat them, but how? How?

"Well, my lady," Templeton remarked. "You have what, exactly, to convince us?"

"M-maester Colemon." Sansa pulled her burned hand under the sheets, having seen Lord Horton's gaze darting curiously to it. "Call him, call him at once if you wish. He will tell you that I warned him of Lord Robert being poisoned, was trying to stop it."

"A passably clever move and one to be expected of a woman's low cunning, but of no use. First, Maester Colemon was called away to Longbow Hall to tend Ser Gilwood Hunter. Secondly, before he left, he swore on the Seven-Pointed Star that you consulted with him as to the most unobtrusive poisons, to take Lord Robert's life while making it look an accident, a natural death for a child as frail as he."

"What?" Sansa was shocked. The maester had always struck her as the only honest man in the Vale, the only one besides herself who cared a whit about Robert's welfare. Either he had also fallen prey to the insidious whispers, or Littlefinger had blackmailed or bribed or beaten him into compliance. In default of Colemon, the last hope to take her side was Myranda Royce, and against the Lords Declarant, Lord Nestor's gossipy daughter would be no use. "Bronze Yohn," she blurted out. "What is his view of this?"

"Bronze Yohn believes nothing that Lord Baelish says. Hence, he is most acutely convinced of your guilt."

That sank into Sansa's stomach like a rock. With every passing moment she saw more of the breadth and depth of the skein woven to ensnare her, the artistry and subtlety and care by which Littlefinger had closed off every escape route. He had told her that he was her only hope, and it was beginning to look sickeningly like truth. The only other prominent lords unaccounted for were the Corbrays – Littlefinger's hidden knife, since everyone still believed Ser Lyn to be his stout foe – and Lady Anya Waynwood, who would fear for the safety of her precious ward Harrold being wed to such an infamous witch and woman of the night. I have no allies, Sansa realized. Nothing. She longed beyond words for the Hound. If he was here, he would kill them all.

"So," Belmore announced. "I would like nothing more than a trial, so the world knows you for what you truly are. Lord Nestor claimed that if you'd confess, it would be unnecessary, but since you won't . . ."

"I have nothing to confess, for I committed no crime." Sansa's voice was still a squeak, and she tried to clear her parched throat. "Lord Robert was murdered, but not by my hand."

"Then whose?"

She hesitated. I told Elder Brother, he promised to send inquisitors of the Faith, where are they? That was assuming the monk had been able to flee after Ser Shadrich abducted her, and not met with some convenient misfortune on the way back to the Quiet Isle. Even if by the gods' miracle the inquisitors had been sent, that was no guarantee whatever of their arrival. But the lords were
staring at her, waiting to pounce, and if she was unable to come up with an answer, it would be seen as a clumsy and ill-judged attempt to deflect blame. All she had was the truth. "Littlefinger. Littlefinger did it."

"Petyr Baelish is the best thing to happen to the Vale since Lord Jon left us!" Templeton snarled. "After we were held ransom to Lysa Tully's half-witted flights of fancy and her sniveling, drooling wretch of a son, a man of action is precisely what we need!"

Lord Nestor stared at his compatriot, aghast. "You are speaking of your own late liege lord, a child of eight, whose sacrilegious murder we are even now investigating."

"Oh, aye," said Templeton unconvincingly. "May his soul rest in peace." He marked the sign of the star on himself.

Still shaking his head, Lord Nestor turned back to Sansa. "This is an extremely serious accusation to lodge, my lady, especially in the utter absence of evidence or witnesses. If there is any way to begin to prove – "

"What on earth is this?" a new voice demanded, and Sansa's stomach seized into a fist. Littlefinger himself, impeccably turned out in black mourning weeds trimmed with onyx and jet, his doublet of slashed sable and his silver mockingbird holding his fashionable half-cape in place, shoved through the four lords with a look of disbelieving fury. "First you have the gall to openly accuse my lady of murder, then to go bursting into her bedchamber at the crack of dawn, to bully and terrorize an unarmed, gently bred girl in her nightclothes? Under your roof, my lord of Royce? For shame!"

Lord Nestor's moment of original thought was wilting like a rose in frost. Sansa had heard as well as he had the reminder that he held the Gates of the Moon only by Littlefinger's sufferance, and he was already stumbling over himself to make apologies. "My lord – my lord – you are most correct, it was grossly unchivalrous and I tried to tell the others so, but they were too carried away in their own – "

"Butt out of this, Baelish," Belmore said threateningly, furthering Sansa's suspicion that he was acting. "If we find out that it's true, the maester having sworn to it and everything, we'd have to ask what motives you had in bringing her here."

Lord Petyr bristled. "Does everyone hear him slandering me to my face? When my guidance and purview is the only thing keeping the Vale from utter anarchy? A more suspicious man than I might wonder at how eagerly you seem to desire to take advantage of it, my lord."

"He's right, Benedar," Lord Horton coughed. "You have grievously erred in this."

"Well then." Belmore's jowls were quite florid indeed by now. "If you have naught to hide, then why not a trial? If your precious flower is innocent, Baelish, you should have no difficulty proving it. Clever man like you."

"I wholeheartedly await the opportunity." Littlefinger swept a sarcastic bow. "Now get out, all of you. Let me see if I can possibly repair the damage."

The last thing Sansa wanted was to be left alone with him, but the other lords were already shuffling for the door with chastened expressions. He disdainfully barred it shut behind them, then padded across the room and sat on the covers next to her with a sympathetic expression. "Well, sweetling. I apologize for that unpleasantness. But unfortunately, it looks as if that blustering oaf Belmore will never be satisfied until he gets a trial, so a trial it must be. Don't be frightened. Just
do what I tell you, and everything will be all right. You're lucky that I have never once doubted your innocence, am so steadfastly on your side."

"On my side?" It bubbled up before Sansa could stop it.

"I am always on your side." Littlefinger leaned down and kissed her luxuriously, nibbling on her lower lip. Sansa squirmed and gagged and tried to wrench her head away, but he'd pinned it firmly between his elbows. Compared to the wild feeling of power that had engulfed her when she'd killed Shadrich in more or less this exact activity, she felt soiled and small and helpless. "When I look into those blue eyes, I find myself completely unable to hold a grudge. I must, indeed, thank you from the bottom of my heart. My plans have been immeasurably improved by your contribution."

No. Sansa clamped her mouth shut. She gave Littlefinger a clandestine shove, but either he did not notice or pretended not to. He kissed her one more time, then rolled off. "I'll send a maid up to prepare you," he said, as casually as if inviting her to breakfast. "Look as beautiful and vulnerable as you can, and half the tribunal will be on your side the moment you walk into the chamber."

As he made to go, Sansa searched her mind furiously for any gambit, anything. There was one horrendously feeble possibility. "Harrold."

Littlefinger paused with his hand on the latch. "What's that, my darling?"

"Harrold. My – my betrothed. I want to see him." Sansa was desperate enough to actually recall Queen Cersei's drunken advice on the night of the Blackwater, about how a woman's best weapon was the one between her legs. She had no intention whatsoever of actually yielding her maidenhead to Harry, but perhaps if he thought the possibility was on the table… a few kisses, pleas for him to take her side as her future husband… Harry was as green as summer grass, swaggering and vainglorious, but he was not a bad man. Not yet. And as the heir to the Vale, the Lords Declarant would have to take his views into account, even if he publicly denounced the Lord Protector in open court. "Please."

Littlefinger smiled. "I'm afraid that's quite impossible."

"I should have known he would have thought of that. Sansa felt as if she was about to cry. "Why?"

"Because he is out with Ser Harlan Hunter, chasing a report of a band of Burned Men far larger than the no-account raiding parties that periodically emerge to irritate us." Littlefinger was watching her face very closely. "Brave of him, wouldn't you agree? We all have to thank Harry for tending to our safety so vigilantly. When he comes back, I'm sure he'll be outraged at the insults done your person, never fear. Now. No time to waste. I'll send the maid."

And with that, he left.

Sansa sat completely immobile for some moments after. Harry will never come back. Or at least not in any state to talk. She remembered Timett telling her that he and Ser Harlan were leading forays against the wildlings that verged well on the reckless, and her own conclusion that Ser Harlan – who must also have poisoned his brother Gilwood on Littlefinger's orders, removing Maester Colemon as a potential witness on her behalf – was planted in order to turn on Harry when the time was right. It was impossible to know how many other heads of Petyr's snake there were, and each with full as venomous a bite. Ser Harlan, Lord Belmore, Lord Templeton, and Lyn Corbray, just for a start. Gods preserve me.

Her limbs feeling leaden, Sansa got up and began to dress, not waiting for the maid. She applied an unguent to her burned hand, gasping at the pain; the flesh was blackened and gnarled like melted
candlewax, and underneath it was red and oozing. *What would the Hound think if I raised this hand to touch his cheek now?* she wondered. *Would he laugh and tell me that I'd finally learned the truth of the world, and that I was no better than him now? Or would he weep?*

She could not dwell on it. The thought of Sandor Clegane was even more unbearable than the rest. She was just struggling to tie up the bandage on her hand when the maid – not Gretchen or Maddy – arrived, clucked over her, and did up the buttons on her gown, which Sansa could not manage alone. She sat still as the maid brushed her hair, what little of it had grown back at its natural hue of Tully auburn, and fitted a demure jeweled hood over it to conceal the impropriety. A seven-pointed star necklace was added – presumably to emphasize Sansa as the living incarnation of the Maiden, to whom even the thought of duplicity was foreign. *The gods must see the truth of this, but what good does that do me?* If only she knew if she was meant to be offered up as a slaughter lamb for Littlefinger's own misdeeds, or if he had something much more twisted in mind. The jaws of the trap closed tighter with every moment.

Sansa barely remembered descending the stairs after the maid, her cloak and gown swirling around her feet. She had not initially wanted to dress in white, fearing that it would be interpreted as too obvious a ploy for sympathy, but then she had found a bodice and undersleeves of soft brocaded silver, and put together they were her own House's colors. *Live or die, I will meet my fate as a Stark.*

It was cold outside the Great Hall, and even in her fur-lined mantle Sansa began to shiver. Everyone of consequence was either within or shortly about to be, so the only gawking or hostile looks she attracted were from servants. But the waiting was wreaking havoc on her nerves, doubtless exactly as it was intended to, and she was just wondering if they planned to keep her in suspense all day, her belly cramping with hunger, when the doors finally swung out and two guards in Arryn livery emerged. "You are Lady Sansa Stark, alias Alayne Stone, the defendant?"

"I am." Sansa managed to keep her voice level. Briefly, ludicrously, she remembered Olenna Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns, and her indistinguishable mustachioed bodyguards, Left and Right. *Another life that does not belong to me.* One of the men formally offered her his arm, and she took it. Her knees were water, and she did not want the court's first impression of her to be a swooned muddle on the floor.

They began to walk. Sansa had last been in the Hall for the harvest feast, and in one respect it looked much the same now as it had then: people packed in at every table and bench, almost crawling atop their neighbors in their efforts to get a good vantage. The banners of the great houses of the Vale likewise hung from the high hammer-beam vaults, and the pale grey light that survived the passage through the leaded-glass windows was immediately gulped down by the torches clutched in scrolled sconces. A wave of heat hit Sansa broadside, both from the assembled bodies and from the fire kindled in the hearth, and she went lightheaded. *No. I must not faint.*

It was utterly silent, apart from the whispers, as she and her guard proceeded up the aisle to the high table at the far end, placed before a majestic Arryn banner large enough to drape the entire back wall. Along it sat all seven of the Lords Declarant – or rather six, excluding the unavoidably absent Ser Gilwood – and Lyonel and Lyn Corbray, Littlefinger, and Lord Nestor, who had been placed in the middle and supplied with a gavel. Apparently as master of the house and Lord High Steward of the Vale, it fell to him to preside.

"My lady," Lord Nestor began, when Sansa had come to a halt before them. "You are brought before us today to answer to the very serious charges laid against you, crimes of murder and kinslaying, for which if found guilty you must pay with your own life's blood. Do you understand?"
Feeling sick all over again, Sansa opened her mouth, but was interrupted. "Kill the last living and legitimate heiress to the North, Eddard Stark's own child?" Lady Anya Waynwood glared around at the others. "The best hope of evicting the infamously terrible Boltons? Have you taken leave of your wits?"

Lord Nestor rapped his gavel. "The jurist shall not speak out of turn."

"Starks are subject to the rule of law just like the rest of us," Lord Belmore countered. "This one's sainted father found that out when his own sword took off his head, for his plot to usurp the crown. If dear dead Ned didn't let loyalty to Robert Baratheon and Jon Arryn stop him, why should we let his long-ago wardship under Lord Jon's dutiful —"

"As usual, Benedar, you argue like a drunken three-year-old," Ser Lyn Corbray sneered. "Queen Cersei's little cuntstains are the Kingslayer's bastards, everyone alive knows that by now, and considering what Joffrey became, I'd say Ned was acting in remarkable prescience and it's a pity he didn't succeed. As for his daughter's so-called guilt in murdering Jon Arryn's son, only a fool comparable to my lord of Belmore would think that it lay anywhere but with —"

"Order!" Lord Nestor gaveled the table into abject submission. "I demand order! Ser, you will temper your language and your rhetoric, or face immediate exclusion from this gathering!"

Corbray laid a hand on the hilt of Lady Forlorn. "Was that you offering to do it yourself, my lord?"

_Gods_, Sansa thought in despair. _They are eating each other alive_. Corbray could be picking a fight on Littlefinger's instigation or merely because he enjoyed picking fights, and she suddenly had a sense that this spectacle was staged for a much more dramatic downfall than just her own. Lord Lyonel grabbed his brother's arm and hissed at him, Ser Lyn looked utterly unapologetic, and Bronze Yohn Royce had never once moved his attention from staring evilly at Littlefinger, who was affecting not to notice. _Not a one of them truly cares that Robert is dead. Sandor was right._

"We will now — " Lord Nestor applied his gavel once more for emphasis — "review the circumstances of the case. Lady Sansa is accused of procuring, per the testimony of Maester Coleman, her cousin's death by poison, specifically sweetsleep. An inquest carried out after Lord Robert's demise did indeed find toxically high levels of this substance in his blood. Thus the cause is established, and my lord of Belmore suggests — " he aimed a look of total loathing in that eminence's direction — "that the motive is easily established as well. That Lady Sansa was enticed by the prospect of betrothal to Harrold Hardyng, and wished to remove Lord Robert in order to inherit the Vale and take revenge upon her tormenters."

"In that case, why are we punishing her at all?" Ser Lyn drawled. "Is there any man here who wishes to stand up and say that he was genuinely and abidingly inspired by the prospect of Robert's shaking, sneezing leadership in this deepening winter? It will hasten the process of the rest of us identifying him as an arse-licking idiot. If she did do it, which I don't believe for an instant, it showed wit and initiative, not to mention an unwillingness to tolerate the useless among us. All qualities I fancy. I'd bend my knee."

"I did not know you fancied women at all, Corbray," Belmore snapped. "Or, for that matter, got on your knees for them. I suppose you'll tell us next that Cersei Lannister was not responsible for poisoning Lord Jon either?"

Sansa's breath caught. Here was the only place she had any chance of convincing them, or making them at least listen. But Mariillon himself had sworn that he killed Lady Lysa in a fit of spurned passion, and she had told the lie countless times as well. It would only be seen, now that her feet were in the fire, as a transparently self-serving alteration of a well-established truth. _I have to try,
before all of them. It would almost certainly result in her death one way or the other, but the lords of the Vale had to know what a viper they had taken to their breasts. "If I – if I may speak?"

Her voice was too small to command much attention in the hubbub, but Littlefinger noticed it, and magnanimously waved for silence. It fell grudgingly.

"Thank you." Sansa tried to swallow. "On my lord father's soul, my name as a Stark, and on peril of my judgment before the Father Above, I swear that Cersei Lannister did not poison Lord Jon Arryn. There are many other crimes to lay before her door, but not that one. It was his own lady wife, the late Lysa Tully. She put the tears of Lys in his wine, on orders from the man who drunkenly took her maidenhead, and whom she had always cherished a hopeless love for in the midst of a barren, unhappy marriage." She raised a hand, and pointed directly at Lord Petry Baelish. "That man."

There was a moment more of shocked silence. Then total chaos descended on the court, which appeared to be its standard method of operation, and all the gaveling in the world by the agitated Lord Nestor could not restore it to order. Investigating little Robert's murder might be a matter of law, not deeply felt emotion, but Lord Jon Arryn of universally beloved memory was something far different.

"You certainly have a knack for entertaining government, my lord of Royce." It was Littlefinger himself who finally got in the first word. If he was shaken by Sansa's accusation, it was hard to tell. "If politics were like this all the time, I daresay we'd have a good few more volunteers."

"The girl has just charged you with murdering Lord Jon," Bronze Yohn Royce growled. "Have the decency to answer it."

Littlefinger gave an airy shrug. "That fable? Why on earth should I? Unfortunately, my lords, Lady Sansa's tender years, traumatic ordeal, and impressionable state of mind have left her open to nefarious influences from my enemies." He aimed a deliberate glance around, as if to say that they were all seated in the hall and knew who they were. "I confess that I have always loved one of the Tully sisters, but likewise the world knows that it was Catelyn, not Lysa. If I wanted Catelyn free for remarriage, wouldn't it make rather more sense for me to poison Ned Stark, not Jon Arryn? How could I possibly have known that Lysa would take it into her head to frame the Lannisters as the perfect cover, and get Ned marching down to King's Landing in all his craw-thumping righteousness, to quite flatly lose the game of thrones and be shortened by a head for his pains? I am oft praised for my foresight, but anyone who could predict that would have to be shackled up in a tree with Brynden Bloodraven of old." Littlefinger held out his arms and wiggled them. "Alas. No branches."

There was a susurrus of nervous laughter. Bronze Yohn, however, was not about to be deterred. "Where would she ever even get that notion, Baelish, if it wasn't true?"

"I have the notion that you are a crashingly boring, one-balled, shit-witted sack of sanctimonious cockamamie, Royce. Where would I have gotten it, if it wasn't true?"

The titters were louder this time. Bronze Yohn altered aspect to Burgundy Yohn, slammed a fist down on the table, and started to rise, but was dragged down by Lady Anya. He shook off her hand and addressed the gathering at large. "I entered here quite convinced that if Lord Baelish – " the title loaded with enough poison to fell an aurochs – "proclaimed the girl's innocence, she must be guilty, but now I have cause to reconsider my opinion. She is but a pawn, whether willingly or otherwise, and the true malefactor sits smirking yonder!"

Littlefinger clapped sarcastically. "Very good. You had a thought, that must have hurt. But now my
cohorts can see for themselves that you are obviously the source of the lies you have most foully induced Lady Sansa's blameless lips to repeat, and therefore are deserving of just enough further consideration to throw you out of this hall. But since we are on a witch hunt, I will offer you all a better one. It was neither myself nor the lady who killed Lord Robert. It was him." Just as Sansa had, he pointed, but with far more drama and pathos. "Ser Lyn, what was the phrase you used? An unwillingness to tolerate the useless among us?"

Corbray's jaw dropped. From the look of total stupefaction on his face, Sansa had just enough time to tell that this had certainly not been planned between the two of them, that Ser Lyn was as blindsided as the rest. Then he was swarming to his feet, knocking over chairs as he tried to reach Littlefinger, as Lord Lyonel hauled on his sword arm and Lord Templeton on the other. Ladies were shrieking in the gallery, and the guards had to be called in to wrestle Ser Lyn down. Someone got custody of Lady Forlorn, a maneuver that nearly cost him his life, and blood splattered the rushes as he was carried away.

"Corbray, this is unforgivable!" Lady Anya screamed. "You are a stain on the Vale itself for that conduct alone, even if you had naught to do with Lord Robert's death, and now you – "

"If I'd killed the whelp, you'd have found him run through in his bed, you stupid bitch!" Corbray roared back. "Only cravens, eunuchs, and women use poison, not – "

"ARREST HIM!" Lord Nestor boomed over both of them. For a desperate moment Sansa prayed to see him indicating Littlefinger, but it was Ser Lyn, being restrained hand and foot as he was manhandled off the premises. And suddenly, she understood. Littlefinger had always told her that the younger Corbray was a dangerous man, and his tenuous loyalty must have become even more so in the political turmoil following Robert's death. And so Littlefinger had acted pre-emptively to destroy him, even if there might have been some use remaining, before Corbray could take it into his head to betray Littlefinger first and spill all the details of their under-the-table agreement. She saw it now. In one afternoon, Littlefinger is bringing down the entire Vale.

After that, there seemed to be no further interest in examining her. Indeed she had been totally forgotten. Bronze Yohn and Belmore were on the brink of swords themselves, Lady Anya was still screaming, and Lord Horton had had some sort of fit and had to be carted off the dais by his sons. Lord Nestor was sitting with his eyes popping, looking as if he might have one himself, and Templeton was shouting at Lord Lyonel. Their respective supporters and men-at-arms were striking up spirited local fistfights in the benches, and someone was bellowing that they all had it wrong, it was that snake Ser Harlan who'd poisoned Robert, just as he'd poisoned his brother Gilwood. Sansa stood paralyzed, unsure whether she should take cover or try to make a run for it, until a hand seized her arm.

"Beautifully done, sweetling," Littlefinger whispered in her ear. "I couldn't have planned it better myself. Come."

Sansa dug in her heels, but he freed them with a quick jerk of her wrist and drew her off to a side door. In all the madness, nobody gave them so much as a second look. Then they were out of the hall in the silent chill, and Littlefinger was leading her briskly across a narrow, muddy yard to another door at the far side. When opened, it led steeply downwards, spiraling stone steps into the underworld.

Sansa tried to get her breath for a scream, but Littlefinger had them through and the door slammed before anyone would have detached themselves from the brawl long enough to hear her. "Please," he said, sounding only mildly perturbed. "I am going to all this trouble to save your skin and see to it that you still rule the Vale and the North. A bit of gratitude wouldn't go amiss."
The Mad Mouse said the same thing. Sansa's heart was about to explode out of her chest. "How?"
she choked. "How?"

"Why," Littlefinger said. They reached the bottom of the stairs. "Like this."

Sansa looked up and stared. They had entered a low, grimy hall, and water dripped far off, the air
dank and moldy-smelling. As they continued along it to the farthest cell, she realized that there was
something – someone – inside it. By the light of the lone torch guttering sootily outside it, she
found the answer to one of her questions. Confined within, still in the robes that marked his
standing as one of the Most Devout, was a Lord Inquisitor of the Faith.

"There were two of them, originally," Littlefinger explained with a smile. "I had been wondering
and wondering how I would get a suitably high-ranking member of the Faith to travel out here, and
I have you, so I'm told, to thank for that. This one's companion was a true believer, alas, and so
swiftly starved to death rather than reach any sort of compromise or cooperation with me, but he –
" indicating the prisoner – "has proven to be a man of flexible moral convictions when his own
neck is the one at stake. And so, he will be assisting us with the final portion of the day's
ceremonies."

"Ceremonies?" Cold foreboding redoubled its slither down Sansa's spine.

"Indeed. This part wasn't supposed to happen until later – but, well, time and chance. I had no
choice after the quandary you left me with, but we're about to both emerge as winners." Littlefinger
held out his hand. "It was thoughtful of you to dress in your House colors, sweetling. Brides
customarily do."

At last. She had seen it all along, piece by piece, yet it had never been driven home so shatteringly
as now. "No."

Littlefinger sighed. He removed a parchment from his sleeve and unrolled it. "This is a decree of
the annulment of your union with Tyrion Lannister, on grounds of non-consummation," he
informed her. "Already attested by our friend here, and by Belmore and Templeton as witnesses.
All it wants is your own signature, as does this." He flourished a second parchment. "A contract of
marriage, likewise attested by said high-ranking member of the Faith, Belmore, Templeton, and
myself. Sign it, our friendly Inquisitor – has anyone ever said that before? – will perform the
ceremony, and we'll judiciously retreat somewhere to await the storm blowing over. By then poor
Harry's bravery will have gotten the better of him, and Benedar and Symond – such good friends,
wouldn't you agree? – will have prepared the others to accept our joint rule as the best temporary
measure. Once it's so secure as to deem permanent, we'll think about our reclamation of the North
together." He smiled. "See, sweetling? I promised I would take you home. This isn't much of a
venue for a wedding, but the Great Hall's in use."

Sansa backed away. "No."

"You're not leaving here until you sign it, so please make this simple on yourself, after everything
you've suffered." The amiable mask was gone, and a stranger stared at her with cold, acquisitive,
lusting eyes. "You're mine now, Sansa. Mine, do you understand? Everything I've done from the
moment I met you has been leading to this. Why do you shrink? I won't mistreat you. Far from it.
You will be my queen of love and beauty, like your mother should have been. I will put a crown on
that exquisite head, and men from far and wide will bend the knee – yes, including Ser Lyn, if his
rashness doesn't get him first. And you've proven yourself a worthy match for me at last, with this
little manipulation of yours. I still would have married you even if you were the vapid little girl you
were before they chopped Ned's head off, but it would have been terribly boring. No wonder I had
to help them do it. You've grown teeth and claws and brains – and a distractingly perfect bosom.
Come to me now, darling. I'm the only husband in the world for you.” He held out the parchments.

Sansa turned and ran.

She ran faster than she ever had, kicking away her skirt as she floundered up the stairs and smacked her shin so hard that it made her nauseous. Her hands beat at freezing stone, burned and unburned, up and up and up, not daring to look over her shoulder. Her blood roared and her mind screamed, faster, faster, faster. Wolf in the woods, the taste of raw meat. A Stark. Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn's daughter. He had betrayed them, betrayed them all. A stitch throbbed in her side. She couldn't. She had to.

She burst above ground and fled across the courtyard, screaming. "No! No! No!" Her hair coming down, her white dress bedraggled in the mud. Weaving and dodging, hearing footsteps running after her, but whose she couldn't tell. A pretty talking bird in a cage. "NO!"

She was almost there. But there was no refuge. It was at an end. She twisted her ankle on a stone and went down, sobbing. Still she crawled on all fours, wild, primal. A dull roar filled her ears. Deeper and deeper it moved in her, and became more coldly and terribly so. No. No. No.

The castle gates loomed before her. No escape. No one. Nothing.

And then, they burst open.
The bloody bells made his head hurt like buggery. That, however, was entirely his own bloody fault. After being told that he had to become a bloody knight in order to face his unholy thrice-damned bleeding fucking whoreson of an undead brother, Sandor had done the only sensible thing possible in reaction to this news, and drunk himself into total piss-faced oblivion. This had not been the easiest of feats to achieve in the Great Sept of all bloody places, as the only libation readily to hand was the sacramental wine and even Sandor felt some qualm about snatching a chalice off the altar and downing it in full view of a crowd of scandalized septas. But the sparrows had been stockpiling supplies in the cellars, and after mouthing some meaningless promises to Elder Brother that he understood the necessity and would do whatever he could to help the Faith accomplish justice, Sandor had blundered away, not stopped until he found the cache, and wrestled the spigot on a barrel until a dark, yeasty brew ran out.

He did not remember a great deal after that. There was some scattered awareness of sitting there in the darkness, bitterly ashamed of having been so quickly reduced to this again, and the trembling, tormented mess it had wrought of him – during his recovery on the Quiet Isle, it had been some time before Sandor was even permitted to be served ale at supper. But goat's milk was a bloody inadequate substitute, and so he began thinking instead of how good the drink tasted, and how he was his own bloody man at long last, his life was his, and no one had the right any longer to tell him in the barest damnation what to do with it. He might have just disappointed the man who had selflessly saved his life, lost the little bird for good, and have to embrace the entire rotten bloody hypocrisy of knighthood that he'd spent his life sneering at, but none of it mattered with tankard in hand.

Sozzled in spirits and self-pity, Sandor finally passed out in the corner. Some time later, Elder Brother found him down there; Sandor had a bleary memory of the monk standing above him with a look of both anger and grief. But instead of launching into a sermon, he'd merely pulled Sandor's arm over his shoulder and – with the same fumbling, shuffling steps as when Sandor had learned to walk again – gotten him back to his cell.

The bells had followed, and followed, and fucking followed. At first Sandor had assumed that Aegon Targaryen must be marching up the Street of Sisters at that very moment, to warrant such a bloody racket – but soon found out that he wasn't, that it merely came part and parcel of squatting in a city about to fall under attack but which hadn't yet. As long as the bells sounded, the citizens knew the hours of day and night, that the Faith was still holding strong, and to remain on their guard. Of course none of them could possibly be getting any bloody sleep, which Sandor figured as a definite drawback.

The week following Sandor's grand return had not been noticeably more enjoyable. Penned up in Baelor's, as there was clearly no chance of him being let loose to wander his old haunts and be spotted by the wrong eyes, he had more religious pomposity crammed down his throat in a sevennight than he'd ever had in months on the Quiet Isle. Once or twice before learning of Gregor's resurrection, Sandor had toyed with the idea of actually becoming a brown brother – perhaps it was only his brains turning from lack of alcohol, but it seemed to him that there was genuine good for the Faith to undertake in the world. But here, that sprout had withered on the vine. He almost wanted Aegon to get there, kill them all, and put him out of his misery.

The bells, however, had fallen silent tonight for the first time in said week, excluding the unpleasant episode where the Poor Fellows and Warriors' Sons had actually taken to arms to repel a mob trying to break in, possessed of the understandable (and accurate) conviction that there must
be food, shelter, money, and other largesse in the rich marble halls and cloisters of the Great Sept. It might be claimed that all men were welcome in the gods' house, but the Poor Fellows had butchered a few dozen rioters before the rest got the picture, and some of the corpses were still visible on the steps outside. Others had been dragged off. Whether by family members to bury, or to the pot shops in Flea Bottom, Sandor did not want to know. But now...

Sandor shoved himself unsteadily upright. It was a freezing, foggy night, not even the rats seemed to be alive out there, and he had stealthily retreated once more to the cellars. Just for a bit, he promised himself. Just enough to erase the shame of failing last time, and to soothe his irritation and steady his nerves. He didn't know any sane man who'd actually bloody want to deal with this nonsense while sober, and he certainly was never at his best when so.

Yet one sip had quickly turned into several, and Sandor was almost at the bottom of his tankard. That was also why he hadn't immediately noticed that the bells had started up again; this far underground, it was only a distant echo in the corridors. But he began to hear footsteps as well, and shouting, and realized that if something was happening, it would be just like him to fuck himself over by drinking his way through it. Sandor considered the tankard in his hand a moment longer, then suddenly and violently flung it away. The clay broke with a crack on the floor, and a dark stain of ale soaked the rushes.

Ignoring it, Sandor strode with no more than a faint lurch to the door and up the stairs beyond. The drink at least had been good for his leg, as he barely noticed the pain right now, and he made a stop off at his cell to collect his sword – he had after much trouble weaseled it back from the Warriors' Sons, who did not prefer anyone to be armed but themselves. Sandor, however, had no intention of girding his loins for this bloody battle with a fucking peashooter, and after buckling on the belt, he turned and loped up the last set of stairs, his long legs handily overtaking a slow-moving septa and her flock of screeching females. They all gave him dark looks as he shoved past, but if they were offended by the sight of preparations for war, they should bloody well stay below.

Sandor emerged into the main hall of the Sept to find it an utter sea of chaos. Warriors' Sons and Poor Fellows were shrugging on armor and hoisting their shields. One or two of the Most Devout were singing a service to the Mother for mercy, but were vastly outnumbered by the rival offices being conducted beneath the Warrior, adrift in glowing candlelight. The High Sparrow was nowhere to be seen – probably smuggled off to safety the moment things started hotting up – and more septas gassed by in all directions, shepherd the various orphan children and lost souls. Someone was standing beneath the bell tower, exchanging shouted intelligences with the lookout high above, and as such a person was most likely to have an inkling of what in sheep-fucking hellfire was going on, Sandor angled straight for him.

The man became aware of the approaching distraction rather too late. His eyes widened in horror as they fastened on Sandor, who refused to sally around in a cloak and hood like some twopenny mummer's villain and who thus had his burns on full display. He reached the man in the next instant, hoisted him by the scruff, and growled, "Well?"

"My l... ser... it's... offshore, they've spotted them in the Rush... the ships, the usurper's ships. He's here, he's coming, he'll..."

That was all Sandor needed to hear. He dropped the unfortunate and strode away, his mind starting to whirl. So Aegon so-called Targaryen was here at last, and to judge from the foulness of the night, he could hardly have chosen his moment better. It all gave Sandor a strange case of déjà-vu – the last time he'd been in King's Landing as it was about to come under attack from a would-be king, who was sailing up the Blackwater with the bells thundering in the night...
For a moment, he felt an instinctive, lacerating panic. What if the whelp had decided that his chances of being accepted as legitimate would be greatly improved by a dose of some fucking flaming stuff? Or what if the mad bloody bunch in the Red Keep had likewise remembered how well wildfire had done at dismaying Stannis? Sandor still often revisited the inferno in his dreams, and it was bad enough then. To face it in the flesh a second time. . .

_I will do whatever I must, to face Gregor._ It would be the gods’ idea of poetic justice if he was crisped thoroughly beforehand, but Sandor had come too far, sacrificed too much, to turn and dash back into the undercroft, even at the thought of what fey emerald monster might await him out there. Instead, he cut across the sanctuary to a Poor Fellow who looked to be in charge. "We're doing what, now?"

The Poor Fellow glowered at him, but as Sandor had guessed, was too hard-up for swords attached to warm bodies to turn him down on the spot. "The usurper's ships are in the Rush, so we'll have to proceed to the Mud Gate to defend it. Some of the others feel that our only obligation is to the holy ground of the gods, but if the invading army is overrunning the sept, we are all done for. And how can we show the smallfolk that the Faith will defend them when the crown will not, unless we fight at their side?"

"Good plan," Sandor said. "I like it. I care bugger-all for the smallfolk – _and the Faith_ – "but no flaming whoreson is getting into the city while I'm still about to shove a sword up his arse."

The knights graced him with the looks of haughty disapproval that only knights could do so well, but none of them, Sandor was pleased to note, could rebut him. Except, that was, for one of the Sons. "What if... what if this _is_ Aegon Targaryen, the Sixth of his Name, Prince Rhaegar's trueborn son? It sounds mad, I know, but he has the westerlands and the riverlands behind him – and Highgarden as well, if the whispers are true. If we stand in the way of his rightful return and scouring of the Lannister abominations, we might..."

"What if I was Baelor the Blessed and smelled like roses when I farted?" Sandor grabbed the smaller man's shoulder and spun him around to face the antechapel where the septas and the children were taking refuge. "If you don't want to fight, there's your place. I hate the Lannisters more than any of you, but I hate the Targaryens worse. Anyone here want Aerys the Third? Bloody do you? Burnings for breakfast, dinner, and supper. Once he gets that other one over here, the little queen with those bloody dragons of hers... you ever think what her father would have been like with them? Huh?"

The Warrior's Son, mutinous but afraid to further press the point, backed off. Somebody threw a hauberk at Sandor, apparently as a sign that it was time to shut up and fight, and he got into it clumsily; it was a long time since he'd worn mail. He strapped his own battered black leather cuirass on over it, then accepted a stupid-looking helmet and – though it galled him to every nerve in his body – a kite-shaped shield blazoned with the Fellows' seven-pointed star. The vast doors of the sept yawed open, and then he was rumbling out with the rest of them into the night.

The foggy, empty streets of King's Landing were coming eerily alive, with distant, disembodied torches and shouts. Smaller bells were adding their cacophony to the great deep boom of Baelor's, and Sandor could hear wooden shutters clapping closed as he and the knights charged past. They needed to descend Visenya's Hill and get across the city to the Mud Gate as fast as possible, and Sandor therefore had to devote all his attention to the task if he didn't want to slide there on his arse. But as he ran, mail jingling and boots splashing, he couldn't help but rake his eyes over Blackwater Bay.

He could just see the translucent sheets of sails floating along apparently unsupported in the mist,
the merest outlines of the dark ships below – at least Aegon had been wise enough to put out all the lamps before starting his approach. Yet it seemed to Sandor that there were not that many, not as many as he would have expected and certainly not as many as Stannis, and it gave him a cold, uneasy feeling. After the Imp’s chain and the wildfire, then Garlan Tyrell dressed in Renly Baratheon’s armor, tricks in the last Battle of the Blackwater had been what had won the day. And this Aegon is not going to make the same mistakes. He has another strategy.

Just as the Fellows were reaching the Mud Gate, Sandor heard a distant, deep trumpeting that did not sound like a war horn. His gut tightened into a knot. This so-called Aegon can’t get in unless he has bloody giants. He prayed devoutly (full aware of the irony) that they were not about to prove the truth of that sarcastic dismissal.

Men were already pounding up the steps to the wallwalk. Sandor slung his shield over his shoulder and joined them, taking quick note of the location of the iron braziers stationed along the parapets. Some were still dark, but most were being lit, whooshing gusts of flame hissing in the mist and turning shadows into specters. Sandor took up a position as far away from them as he could, and squinted down at the dark beach. If the pup tried the same as Stannis, opening up with a battering ram on the gate, it was going to be mostly work for archers. Though I’d be a poor man if I wagered on it. Well, I am a poor man, but bugger it. No Imp to order me about. No little shitstain Joff to protect. I can go or stay as I will. So long as the Rush didn’t explode.

The ships were drawing inexorably closer through the murk. Sandor heard bowstrings creaking as they were drawn, wondered if he should get back down to the gate while he still could – that was where his services would be most effectively applied, but he couldn’t bring himself to go anywhere out of the line of sight down the bay. His heart was in his throat as the far-off, windblown trumpeting came again. He strained for any glimpse of floating hulks, green stain unfurling on the blackness of the river. Cold sweat trickled under his matted hair.

A white-hot flare went up on the horizon, shredding the underside of the clouds. Sandor cringed, tasting bile, as the sound of the explosion followed an instant later, rattling across the dark rooftops of King’s Landing. Then the ships flurried into wild motion, oars dipping and scything and splashing as they closed into a hammerhead to the shore. But they couldn’t drive all the way in unless they wanted to go aground, and only a madman would beach them with no option to safely retreat. A madman, or one bloody well certain of victory.

Sandor was more convinced than ever that something was horribly wrong, but couldn’t put his finger on what. He swiveled his head madly from side to side, desperate to see further in the darkness, then recoiled as a second barrage of flares went up, blindingly close at hand. They are coming now. Sandor clawed for his sword, for all the fucking good it was going to do him up here, and then the trumpeting almost deafened him, he saw the monsters thundering up the sand from both sides at once, and understood.

Elephants. The buggers must have been ungodly clever, landed the beasts south and north on the coast, and marched them in for a pincer movement before they ever even entered the bay in their ships. Who the fuck thought of that? It showed a considerable cunning foresight, in total contrast to Stannis’ straight-down-the-gullet approach. Then a rending crash slammed into the wall just under his feet, flaming arrows started to hiss down, and Sandor knew in that small and silent moment before the storm broke that the second Battle of Blackwater Bay was beyond all doubt underway.

Flame, smoke, and shadow tangled crazily. Goaded on by their shrieking drovers, the elephants galloped up the beach and lowered their tusks into the already-damaged Mud Gate, which shuddered and screamed at the impact. Archers loosed at will, shafts skittering off their armored hides, as out in the Rush, longboats clattered from their hoists into the water. The Targaryen army
had all the cover for landing that could be desired; there was no way to shoot at them through the screen of attacking elephants. Someone had gotten the mangonels on the seaward corner of the wall operational, throwing out boulders that fell with a shriek and a splash, but aiming it was total guesswork in the teeth of the assault. Sandor heard men screaming, saw a ladder rising over the crenel as the nearest elephant’s riders threw it up, and snapped out of his paralysis.

He threw himself forward, snarling. His sword sang from the sheath, he hacked through the trailing rope as the hook grated to a sparking halt, and the ladder vanished as quickly as it had appeared. The elephant’s back was only six or seven feet below the outer curtain wall, and arrows and bolts rained down until it reared and blared in pain, its head almost level with the defenders. Another arrow caught it in the eye, but instead of falling back, it plunged forward. Its trunk and tusks skewed from side to side, sweeping men like ninepins, explosions of dust coughing up from the crumbling stone. Sandor dodged but not in time, felt a punch in the small of his back, and then he was falling.

Thin air whistled around him. He had just enough time to twist his sword out of the way, and then he smashed into mud that he tasted to the back of his throat. Spitting and swearing, he rolled over and staggered to his feet, feeling the links of his mail driven all the way through his leather gambeson into his side; it would leave a nasty bruise later. If there was a later. His eviction from the ramparts had landed him squarely in front of the beleaguered Mud Gate, shaking under the unrelenting battering from another elephant, as a motley confederation of pikemen rushed to form up. They must have seen, as Sandor did, that there was no hope of holding it intact. All they could do was try to kill more of the enemy when they came rushing in.

A coldness touched the back of Sandor’s neck, under the helmet. He twisted his head up and saw the first fat flakes tumbling from the clouds. Oh, and this is exactly what we bloody need. But could be it will put out some of the fires.

The snowfall quickly gained momentum. Soon it was stinging in their eyes, frigid meltwater running down their cheeks, as the Mud Gate continued to shake and disintegrate. The stark afterglare of more flares seared the night, and between the lot of it, Sandor almost missed the moment when the foot-thick oak turned well and truly to splinters. The silhouette of a behemoth loomed through, and dark figures swarmed around it, screaming.

Sandor yanked down his helmet strap, lowered his head, and charged. He hoped that the pikemen were backing him up, felt oddly and madly alive at knowing that he could be dead any moment, and then was in the thick of the melee, sword slashing and slanting as he slammed full-bore into some bloody bastard with a death wish. He thought luridly of fighting the Warriors’ Sons and the Arryn men back in that miserable little tavern on the Bite, how it was more than passing strange to be fighting alongside the former now, and then had no time to think at all. It was only reaction, hacking and hammering, his blade running red as he wrenched it out of some dead whoreson with the Martell sun and spear on his tabard. Clash and parry and clash, bull-rushing through the snow, no strategy in his mind except to kill the next man in front of him. The elephant had gotten stuck in the ruins of the Mud Gate, and Sandor vaulted up over its still-twitching carcass, stabbing down at the screaming drover tangled in the canopy. His aim must have been good, for the man went silent with a gurgle. And then, before he had any time at all to consider if this was a good idea (it wasn't, it was suicide) he was on the wrong side of the wall, brawling his way down the beach.

This, at least, he knew. Here he had always been unstoppable. He killed a man on his foreswing, another on the backhand, and crushed a third to insignificance beneath him. His blood was roaring in his ears, he had no intention of turning back now. Where the fuck is Randyll Tarly? If the Lord of Horn Hill’s absence was keeping him from squaring off against Gregor at the trial, he could at least have broken Aegon’s advance like he was supposed to. Unless he got drawn off elsewhere,
and this is all some massive bloody trick.

Sandor lost track of anything except the fight. He gulped ice crystals when he breathed, following the swing of his sword, hilt and hand and arm all fused together. He took a jarring blow off his shoulder, spun around and killed whoever had dealt it, then threw himself flat and rolled as a maddened elephant came blundering out of the confusion by the gate, running amok over the crushed bodies of friend and foe alike. It passed so close to Sandor that he could feel the ground shaking, then rampaged down the sand – directly toward one of the burning longboats.

Sandor's stomach turned to ice water. He was cut off between two mercenaries – this would be the Golden Company, then, according to rumor – and couldn't get clear in time, couldn't stop it, couldn't do anything but watch. The elephant trampled over the flaming vessel and reduced it instantly to matchwood, bellowing in agony and throwing searing contrails of embers to every side. Some skidded and hissed and went out in the snow, but others began to catch. One and then another and another, fountains of sparks that Sandor felt beating on his back, heat and cold swirling vortexes in the air above.

There was no way back to the gate, no way through it, and the bloodlust had most thoroughly had its way with Sandor by now. He slashed through a thicket of corpses-to-be, and back around the mercenaries trying to outflank him, the elephant's death throes sounding like the seven hells themselves. He had no idea what the overall progress of the engagement was, who was winning and who losing; the invaders could be running riot in the city streets by now. But a glance over his shoulder revealed that a front of Poor Fellows had set up shop almost in the harbor's shallows, one row loading and firing their crossbows as fast as they could get them off while the other row braced a shield wall against the Targaryen infantry still coming in off the fleet. It was heavy, brutal hand-to-hand fighting, spears and axes and swords, men colliding and falling like ripe apples. But they were looking for something – had seen someone – and in an instant more, Sandor saw it too.

There was someone coming ashore – *riding* ashore, the utter bloody fool, racing up the shoreline on a swift black courser, in black armor with fire flashing in the rubies of the three-headed dragon on his breastplate. And though Sandor knew as well as anyone that Rhaegar Targaryen was dead, that this was only some damned illusion, he felt his heart stop. Remembered seeing the Prince of Dragonstone riding through the shabby gates of Clegane's Keep, saw him tapping his silver sword on Gregor's shoulder – *arise, Ser Gregor* – saw him smile as if he'd done something of value to the world, when in fact he'd done the total opposite. When he'd not thrown Gregor in a dungeon, stopped it as a true hero should, shattered the last of Sandor's fantasies forever. It was for himself, for Alienor, for all of them, and the fire, the snow, the battle faded to a distant roar.

Sandor ran harder than he ever had in his life. He hurled aside the idiots who tried to get in his way, swerved around an elephant that came from nowhere and felt a sharp thud as an arrow lodged in the mail on his back. Another pinged off his helmet. In one more stride he reached the courser, which reared on sight of him, and ducked and spun out of the range of its strafing forehooves. Then he came up, got his balance, and drove three and a half feet of longsword into its chest.

The horse screamed and crashed to its knees, its hot blood spilling crimson through the snowy sand. The rider himself was clearly unused to rolling clear of a dying mount, though he improvised admirably on the spot, and struggled to keep hold of his blade as he fell. It only did him an incidental amount of good. Sandor was on him like an avalanche.

The ruby-girded ghost of Rhaegar blocked his first crashing downcut, but with difficulty. He retreated and circled around, trying to get the bulk of the horse between them, but Sandor sprang over it and locked their swords in a screeching tangle, driving him relentlessly and forcing him to give ground with every blow. Low and high and side and side and side, left and right and center,
feint and slash and counter, step and step and step and –

Sandor felt it an instant before it happened, felt the blinding pain in his bad leg and realized that he was about to lose his footing, was already going down to one knee. But as the youth swooped in to seize the advantage, Sandor threw his own sword away and caught his opponent's instead, getting it stuck in his gauntlet just long enough to reach up with his other hand and drive a fist into the grille of the helmet. He could feel a wet trickle of blood inside his left vambrace, knew that the edge had punctured the steel, but did not stop to care. He got a better hold on the other's epaulet, rose up, and threw him over in midair to the ground.

Sandor heard the grunt as the breath was pummeled out of the usurper's body. He rolled on top, almost pinning him, as they grappled and wrestled in the snow and sand and dark, the youth making some risible attempt to knee him in the balls. Sandor smashed his elbow into the helmet again, denting it badly, then reached down and hauled the usurper's dirk – a good sharp piece of steel – from its sheath. A forearm planted across Aegon Targaryen's throat, he used the tip to flick open the visor.

Wide, terrified eyes stared back at him. A boy's eyes. In the maddened firelight, Sandor saw that they were a very dark blue, not quite the indigo of Rhaegar's. But the matted, bloodstained silver hair was certainly like it, as were the rubies now being scraped off and scattered. There was no space left in him but for the rage. He raised the dirk for the killing stroke.


Sandor snarled in his face. Screaming for mercy did not save my sister. It made no matter that this was only the offspring of Rhaegar, if even that. Rhaegar had not stopped Gregor, none of them had. He had to do it, now. Avenge Alienor, end the battle –

Now –

Snarling at the little bird, at Sansa, that there were no true knights and a sword with ribbons on it would kill you just as dead –

Elder Brother, You must become a knight –

Alienor, But you're going to be a knight one day. . . Gregor's not a true knight, he's a monster. . . when it comes time. . . when it comes time. . .

Roaring in anguish, Sandor brought the blade down. Aegon tried to twist away, and just barely succeeded. But it still ripped a gory slash across his cheek from orbital bone to jaw, and the Targaryen princeling screamed in pain. Sandor tasted royal blood on his tongue, had expected it to have more of a vintage –

One more blow and he'd kill Aegon here and now –

– groped for the dirk –

Heard running footsteps, took a crack across his skull –

– and saw an explosion of white stars. Heard the helmet ring, felt his fingers go limp, and collapsed into blackness.

The next thing Sandor was aware of was a bright light hurting his eyes even though they were not open, and someone saying his name very loudly two inches from his face.
"Bloody hell. . . I hear you," he gritted out, forcing down a surge of nausea. "Bloody hell. . . now shut up and leave me to. . ."

"You're not going to die, Sandor," a vaguely familiar deep voice said. "The gods be praised."

"Gods. . . nothing to do with it." Sandor sucked in a breath and fervently wished to be rendered unconscious again. "My head. . . too bloody hard. . ."

"However you wish to credit it." A cool cloth touched his brow. "I'm here patching you up again. Do you want to know what happened?"

"Why not," Sandor whimpered. He seemed to be lying on his back, still in his grimy armor, on some sort of appreciably flat surface. The light came from candles. Whether it was morning or night, and how long he had been out, he couldn't tell. Even opening his eyes a crack was a misery. "But no. . . fucking. . . riddles."

"No riddles," Elder Brother agreed, sponging away the crusted blood. "After you almost killed Aegon, the Targaryen army was forced to hastily retreat. They made it mostly intact back to their ships, though with great loss of their elephants, and are believed to have sailed east to the mouth of the Wendwater, on the kingswood, to regroup. But the Iron Throne does not have the strength to pursue them there."

"So. . . what? Waiting for bloody. . . Tarly again?" Sandor saw no particular reason to welcome this reversal of fortune, if it got him no closer to Gregor. And I've managed to bruise myself up nicely. More than that, by the feel of things.

"Lord Randyll is our best hope for salvation," Elder Brother admitted. "But there are tidings of another fleet besieging Casterly Rock in force, and the jaws of the trap are closing from both sides at once. If the Targaryens receive reinforcements, they may well make a second attack on King's Landing in their fallen prince's name. This war is far from over, but the Faith has decided. . ." He stopped.

"Aye?"

"The Faith has decided that while Margaery Tyrell's trial may have to wait for Tarly's return, they must take advantage of this miraculous reprieve and put the house in order while they can. Hope to buy favor with the gods, if you will. Cersei Lannister will be tried on the morrow."

Another, worse surge of nausea scorched Sandor's throat, followed by lightheadedness as he sat bolt upright. Elder Brother put a hand on his shoulder and tried to get him to lie back down, but he swung his boots over the side of the bed and got three or four more steps before the monk caught him from behind and forced him to sit. "Sandor. Where on earth do you think you're going?"

"Up to the bloody sept." Sandor tried to wrestle free. "So they can. . . fucking. . . knight me."

"Sandor – "

"Don't you dare stop me now. Don't – you – bloody – dare."

There was a tenuous pause. Then the Elder Brother sighed, sounding truly heartbroken, and released his grip, but only to take Sandor's arm and help him up. "Here, my friend," he said softly. "Lean on me."

Sandor was tempted to tell him that he didn't need his bloody help, but it was plainly a lie. So once more, as they had when the monk had found him down in the cellar, they began to walk.
"You cannot be knighted at once, you know," Elder Brother reminded him. "It is customary for a candidate to keep an overnight vigil in the sept."

"What time is it now?"

"Just past midnight."

Sandor stopped short, surprising him, and began to strip then and there. He removed the cuirass, hauberck, gambeson, and tunic, the boots and hose, until he was standing in the cold hallway in just a shirt, breeches, and bare feet, his dark hair hanging in unwashed tangles around his gaunt, unshaven cheeks. Then he stared defiantly at Elder Brother and made a small, sarcastic gesture inviting him to lead on.

After a moment, the monk gave in. It was deathly silent in the halls above, a sharp change from the clamor before the battle, and Elder Brother showed Sandor into one of the tiny side chapels, just large enough to hold an altar and seven statues of the gods. "May they go with you, my friend," he said, relinquishing his grasp. "I can do nothing more. I do not think we will meet again in this life. Farewell."

Sandor meant to answer him, say something curt, but he couldn't. The screen dropped softly behind Elder Brother, and he was alone with the gods. Hurt, cold, hungry, exhausted, disoriented, sick at heart. Of course it would be no different.

The Father. Sandor had hated his father from the moment Ser Theodor had lied about what had happened to his face. The Mother. He didn't even remember his mother. The Crone. What bloody wisdom had she ever bestowed on him? The Smith. Useless like the rest. Had Sandor's broken soul ever been mended? The Warrior. One of two he'd ever had any shred of respect for. And –

The Stranger. His old friend. His horse. His bosom companion.

And the Maiden.

Her eyes were Alienor. Her face was Sansa.

Sandor realized then that he was shaking, and not from the cold. Clumsy, staggering, leg burning and head ringing, he got to his knees on the hard stone before her. Reached out and lit a candle, settling it in the alcove, shielding this one small light against all the legions of hell and darkness. Bent his head, went to all fours, felt his heart break with a soft click, and his back almost likewise as he sobbed.
All above him was black sky and howling snow, the branches of the weirwoods bending and moaning in the gale. Threads of hoarfrost pulsed into the earth and under the hill, so the cold reached him even where he sat enthroned among the roots, his own veins now running more with sap than with a boy's blood, as he fought desperately to control the assault on his mind and senses and soul. His heart beat impossibly slowly, as he was sprung from the bonds of time and mortal flesh. And with each beat, deep as a northern war-drum in his chest, another eye opened, and he saw.

First and foremost, inescapably, he saw that Meera was dead, her body withering like the husks of leaves where it lay. He wanted to weep, wanted to scream, to crawl down to her and beg her to wake up, but he couldn't. She had kissed him in that last moment, as Bloodraven turned to smoke and steam and all the old spells and all the old existences crumbled along with the ice of the Wall. Kissed him so he would not realize that she was crumbling with it. He'd seen why, now. Seen the children taking her blood with their bronze knife, drawing new wards in it, wards meant to save his life even as they stole her own. He wanted to scream at them that they were all liars, that they'd never told him, that he'd never known, but he was terrified that was a lie too. Meera was dead.

*He* was the three-eyed crow now. He must be. He didn't want it, but still the visions swarmed in. He'd seen Jon again; he remembered speaking to him just before, just before the Horn sounded and everything ended, telling him to wake up. Then he'd felt giants rising from the earth and Others burning and too much madness to stand, pelting him like falling, flaming stars. Meera was dead.

He'd fled from that, terrified. And then, out of nowhere, he'd seen his sister Sansa, far away under another hollow hill, among the roots of another weirwood, with a hooded corpse-woman and a band of ragged outlaws and a big man with a burned face. Meera was dead. He thought he had seen his brother Rickon, but couldn't be sure. Meera was dead. His sister Arya was too far away to even catch an echo. Meera was dead. Even his own wolf, Summer, appeared and disappeared, a separation he found horribly unfamiliar and shocking, after how long he had lived in Summer's soul. But Summer was the warg of Bran Stark. To the three-eyed crow, he was only one skin among many.

As Bran fought the tide of visions, he lost track of if he even had a body or mind of his own anymore. Nor could he exert any control over them, so they stabbed into him like freezing knives. Meera was dead. He had to do something about that, he couldn't just leave her there to lie forgotten, and he'd called the ravens. Sent a flock of them winging south, seen Greywater Watch through their eyes. Seen it burning, foundations smoking in the dark marsh. Heard a young woman screaming as she gave birth, and seen a blind babe with no right arm, another broken boy – and in that moment, felt a shock of recognition. *Robb Stark. Your heir now, prince of the green. Yours. Yours. Yours. Take him.*

Ever since he had gone under the hill, Bran had barely remembered that he was his elder brother's heir, the rightful King in the North. Yet now he realized that he *was*, in a way far stronger and more unearthly and eternal than any mere mortal crown of steel and bronze. He was the three-eyed crow, master of the children of the forest and every old thing – yet just as much their slave. And this babe called Robb, his brother's son but now his own. . . the boy might be blind, but one day he would see far beyond any other man. *All I need do is bring him here and kill everything that he holds dear.* He hadn't seen Hodor in forever. Summer's skin was gone. Jojen was dead. Meera was dead.
Bran began to cry. The salty tears skidded off his cold cheeks and vanished into the writhing tangle below him, the trees pulling him in even tighter at this last reminder of human frailty. He beat at the roots with his hands, but they locked around his wrists, pulling them over his head. And of course his legs were still broken, he'd thought that after all this he'd at least learn how to fix them, but they were as numb and useless as ever. And Bloodraven had said that he couldn't warg into any other human and borrow their body, but Bloodraven was dead too, and it was his rule now, no one to say him nay.

A hot, delirious, delicious rush of power surged through Bran, and almost swept the rest of him away with it. Every skin, every secret, every truth of the world, woven in the memories of the weirwood watchers, was his now. His to rip out or bare or know or grant mercy or vengeance as he wished –

Then something hit him very hard across the face, and the insanity snapped. Wincing, he saw Leaf standing directly in front of him, her golden eyes staring into his with an expression he had never seen. They were wide, wild, fey, more than half monstrous, and any remaining illusions he had about the children of the forest being benevolent, mischievous little sprites vanished in a trice. They were old, old as time itself, and they had not clung onto their sanctuary in an ever colder and darker world by suffering madmen or fools. They'd chosen him, brought him here, murdered everyone he loved. And now –

Bran cringed. "I'm sorry!" he gasped. "I'm sorry, I won't – no, please don't – "

Leaf paid no attention. Looking up, he saw the other children filing out of the darkness, one by one in an endless procession, humming a low, rumbling dirge that made his hackles stand. Then as the roots imprisoned him in place, Leaf bent forward, lowered her head, and took a bite from the flesh of Bran's skinny chest.

The pain was instant, intense, and blinding. "No! Leaf, don't!" He squirmed pointlessly, staring in horror at the raw place where shreds of skin dangled, saw his heart's blood red on her lips. Somewhere, very far away at the back of the cavern, he became aware of an ungodly blue glow, knew that the last protection against the Others had broken and that they were coming now, would come and kill them all. Unless Bran let the children eat his flesh, drink the blood of the new three-eyed crow, join in the savage mystery, make the sacrifice, build the gate anew. But how could he do it? How could he agree to die?

Meera was dead. She had died for him.

Sobbing, Bran closed his eyes and stopped struggling.

The second bite was worse than the first. He could feel the teeth sink in, rip away muscle, grate against bone. His heart was beating desperately, trying to keep sap-blood flowing even as it was leaking out, staining the white weirwood the same color as its leaves – and Bran, at last, understood why they were that color. Then he thought of Maester Luwin bleeding to death beneath the heart tree in the godswood of Winterfell, and in that moment Luwin was there with him, the little grey maester with sad eyes and the deep wound where Osha had given him the gift of mercy. Here, child, he whispered. Hold my hand. It's not so bad, dying. Quicker and easier than falling asleep.

Bran was losing consciousness. Only the pain existed now, but seeing the maester sent a surge of fierce love through him. He reached up, and his fingers caught Luwin's. The old man smiled, with such pride and trust that it broke Bran's ceasing heart.

Then there was only the darkness, and falling. Fly or die. Fly or die.
"The things I do for love," said the golden man atop the tower.

"Corn," said the raven.

"Bran the broken," sneered Little Walder.

"Wake up," Jon whispered, as he had said to Jon.


"My sweet summer child," said Father and Mother and Old Nan and Maester Luwin and everyone else whose child he was.

"Hodor," said Hodor.

Me, Bran thought. Me, me, me.

Dying, believing, living, loving, he flew.

He was cold. Something prickly was under his cheek. It was utterly silent, not a word, not a whisper, not a hint of the roaring visions from before. Being dead, in that case, was much nicer than being alive. He heard something like far-off waves on a shore, felt his chest move, felt himself breathe in with a scraping, burning effort. It went out and he waited for the darkness to close softly over his head, but instead it was followed with another one, in and out without him remembering how. Slow and strange and steady, his heart beat in the scars.

Bran opened his eyes. He was sprawled in a deep scatter of leaves, and the only light in the darkness was a faint, faraway golden pinprick, like a lantern hung to guide travelers home in the storm. He was somewhere, otherwhere very deep in the heart of the cavern, lying on the earth's bare breast. He put out his hands, reflexively tried to get up, and stumbled to his feet.

Stumbled.

Up.

To his feet.

A wave of lightheadedness overtook Bran, for reasons only incidental to his resurrection. He grasped at them, felt them, pinched his arm so hard it made him bite his lip, groped and ran his hands over the flesh, legs and feet, his legs, he was standing on them. He took a step and almost crashed flat on his face as burning pins and needles surged to his toes. He toddled along on all fours and then went to his knees, hauled himself skyward, pumped his arms and began to run. He immediately lost his balance again and went rolling, scattering leaves everywhere, as he lay on his back and laughed and cried, kicking his feet and wriggling like a dog let off the collar, delighted, disbelieving, sobbing so badly that it hurt, it hurt, it hurt.

At last, exhausted and empty but dry-eyed, Bran wobbled back upright, hanging heavily onto the cave wall, and started to walk. He couldn't see to be sure, but he could feel crusted little wounds all over his body, some still dripping eyelets of blood. Cold certainty was beginning to overtake his euphoria. He had been given his legs back, but at the cost of never leaving the hollow hill again. Never, never. For was this not the ultimate proof that he had been transmogrified and transcended, forever changed? His very existence was tied to the wards of this place, the workings of the children, in blood and flesh and bone and heart and soul. He was Bloodraven now, living here in time out of mind, time out of years.
Bran began to walk faster. His head was so light it felt as if it would swim right off his shoulders and escape. He still had to look down to make sure that those were his steps, crunch-crunch-crunching in the mold. I wish you could see me, Meera. And Jojen, and Hodor. Hodor. Was it Hodor's life he'd paid for these new legs, Hodor's wholeness and strength that he had taken? It must be, and he should feel great grief, and yet it was only joy, wild and more than half mad.

The path beneath him began to slant steeply upward, and Bran had to use his hands to climb. It was the first time that he had, he'd really climbed, since he'd fallen. There was still some old muscle memory, and it got easier as he went, so the stones he grasped could have been the walls of Winterfell. And the distant pinprick of light was growing closer. He was coming out of the darkness. He was still alive.

Bran hauled himself over the edge and cautiously gathered his feet under him, then tottered upright. The silence around him was living, tangible, until he was half sure that he would never look upon another face, not even an inhuman one, until the end of time. But by the golden light, casting knifelike shards across the high stone hall, he could see two figures standing at the end. One was a child of the forest. The other was a woman. A human woman.

A painful stab of hope went through Bran's heart. It wasn't, he knew it wasn't, but he still hobbled as fast as he could go, down the slippery flowstone toward them. Then he halted just short, and stared.

The woman was dressed all in furs and leather and wool, a black cloak pinned up over her shoulder and a bronze dagger belted at her waist. She wore boots laced up to her knee, with queer bone spikes on toe and heel, and a long ash-blonde braid fell down her back, her eyes grey and her cheekbones high. Her face was flushed with cold, her deep hood undone. She could not quite meet the eyes of Leaf, who was scrutinizing her curiously, and shifted from foot to foot, muttering under her breath.

"You." The sound of Bran's own voice made him jump. "Who are you?"

She hadn't seen him coming, and jumped and jerked around to face him, her pulse visibly hammering in her throat. Then she shook it off irritably, like a dog shedding water, and gave him a stiff little nod. "You," she said. "You're the crow? The three-eyed crow, I mean?"

"I am." Bran was confused. "What are you doing here? It's dangerous."

That made her smile. "I'm a wildling, crow. I'm not afraid."

Brave words, but she was. Bran could smell it, taste it almost, see the blood tripping butterfly beats beneath the porcelain-pale skin. "What's your name?"

The wildling woman shot another suspicious look at Leaf, who bowed silently and retreated a few paces into the shadow. Then she said, "Val."

"And how did you come to this place?"

"We went under the hill. In the weirwood grove, back by the – where the Wall used to stand." Val had started to pace, as if she felt the unearthliness of this place greedily closing down on her. "There's a circle there, a way in, he led us. But we can't go any farther unless you open the Old Way. There are wards here, and we can't pass. He can't pass."

"Who?"

Val turned to look at him straight. "Jon."
Bran's heart skipped a beat. He didn't want to be sure he had heard what she had just said, had never wanted anything so much as that, felt half a boy again, terrified to hope. "Jon? Jon is here?"

"Outside waiting," Val said, with a cynical smile. "The guards you've put up against the Others, he can't come through them either."

Half of Bran was ready to drop everything and run. But they were so far from those boys at Winterfell, it could as lief be a different world altogether. "Why not?"

Leaf spoke at this, unexpectedly. "Because he lives through the power of the red god," she said. "Killed in ice, reborn in fire, unliving but undead, master of the Horn of Winter and summoner of the giants, the prince who was promised and true wielder of Lightbringer. What else is he, then, but the Great Other made flesh?"

Val went pale. She opened her mouth as if for an instinctive denial, then shut it. "I'll grant he's nothing normal," she said after a moment, trying to sound dismissive, "but he says it's what you choose to be that you are, not what you're born. And you have to let us through. We're going north, to the dragon."

"Dragon?" In all his visions, Bran hadn't glimpsed that.

"So he says, at least. He already had done with the red woman, so it's his own neck on the line. And the rest of ours." Val turned a pleading glance back to Leaf, who remained unmoved. "You'll know. We don't have time."

"No," the child of the forest said. "We have just forged the barriers anew, at great cost to ourselves and the three-eyed crow." She shot a sidelong glance at Bran. "If Jon Snow enters here, so will every other dead thing. He is the Other. He cannot pass."

"That's why he brought the bloody Wall down!" Val was getting agitated. "He would never have been able to return to us, burn away them Others before the gates, if he hadn't blown the Horn of Winter. That's what's happening. Everything has to come down. Everything has to break. I don't like it more than you, but it's so."

Leaf shook her head again. "The children of the forest have held this place for thousands upon thousands of years. Against the Andals, against the Others, whether ice or flame or both. We cannot survive in the presence of such a one. Jon Snow cannot pass."

Bran had been starting to argue, but this suddenly caused him to wonder if he could survive in Jon's presence, as beholden to the children's power as he was. He didn't entirely understand what Leaf meant, but he had seen enough of Jon's transformation to know not to underestimate what had become of him. **But how can Jon be the Great Other?** They had spoken to each other in that place beyond time, seen and known each other, and he himself had told Jon to wake up, to rise. **I'm not the Great Other either.** But was he?

"There has to be something," Bran insisted. "There has to be a way."

Leaf looked at him almost pityingly. "Who else will hold the wards, if we break them once again? In whose blood will they be written?"

"In mine."

Both Bran and Leaf turned in surprise. Val was facing them down with fists clenched, pointed chin set, eyes snapping fire. When neither of them responded, she took two steps forward and pulled off her glove, then briskly cuffed up her sleeve to reveal her bare forearm. "If all it takes is blood, you
do it now. I'll not have it said that the world fell for want of a drop, when lakes of it have spilled already."

"You don't know what you ask, human." Leaf's voice had gone darker. "There is no way to reverse what is begun. And if you give this place to the Other, the monster – "

"Jon's a monster, aye. But he is no demon. And you said he was killed in ice, reborn in fire. Wouldn't that make him the red god instead?"

"R'hllor and the Great Other are two sides of the same coin. In this place – "

Quicker than Bran could imagine, Val's free hand flashed to her waist and drew her bronze dagger. In a sharp, brutally economical motion, she slashed it across her exposed wrist. A deep, welling spurt of crimson bloomed across her skin.

Val's teeth were gritted, but she twisted her arm over so that it began to fall into the leaves, drop by drop. "Draw the wards in that," she ordered Leaf. "Do it."

For a final moment, the child of the forest remained motionless. Then she moved forward, squatted, and did something strange with her fingers, sketching shapes into the blood and crooning under her breath. Bran stood mesmerized, hearing a sound like distant bells, as the golden light flickered and lurched wildly, and the buzzing he'd heard while the children were consuming him grew stronger and stronger. Just as it was about to drive him to his knees, gasping and clutching his bleeding ears, it cut out.

He looked up. Val was still standing, but she was very pale, and muffled her cut wrist in her cloak as Leaf got to her feet, clearly displeased about being outwitted. In a sharp voice the child of the forest said, "Come."

Bran and Val trailed after her as she set off across the cave floor, Bran still in awe of the sensation of walking, really walking on his own. He was so self-satisfied, in fact, that he tried to offer an arm to Val, who was a few steps behind him. But she gave him a faint, sardonic smile and said, "No need, crow. I'm not about to faint like one of those kneeler women o' yours."

Meera wouldn't have fainted either. Bran tried to fight away the overwhelming sadness, but it came back hard and fast. Throat choked, he said, "Jon's here?"

"Aye." Val ghosted a smile. "For certain he'll be glad to see you. You must be the brother."

Will he? Am I? Bran did not know what he was anymore, or what Jon was. He just climbed up, hauled himself out of the passage and into the hall, suddenly realizing that he was very scared. The only time he had with Jon was as long as Val's blood was able to hold the wards, and if it broke... he was so far away now, so changed...

Roots writhed down around them, the smell of earth and water and old power. His throne now, his place, his power. He straightened his shoulders and threw back his head.

Jon Snow stood waiting at the far end of the cavern.

Bran blinked hard, barely trusting it. It was Jon, no doubt, but he looked so different, and yet so familiar. Long brown hair, grey eyes, the grim mouth, but he was taller and darker and weathered, quiet, unblinking, not entirely human. A scar had torn up the right side of his face, and his hands – Bran had thought he was wearing gloves, but he wasn't. His hands were black and shimmering as Coldhands, the one Bloodraven had said had been his uncle Benjen. Bran didn't know how that was possible either, but right now he didn't care. Salt filled up his eyes, and snot filled up his nose.
"JON!"

Jon started, looked around the wrong way first, and then saw him. An expression of almost comical shock crossed his face to see Bran on his feet, Bran running toward him, and then a smile to crack the sky in half appeared in its place. He was not monster or demon or Other, nothing at all, just Jon, still his brother. And he, too, began to run.

They collided halfway across the floor and clutched each other, sobbing. Jon's hands were so cold they burned, and Bran felt them trying to steal away his own warmth, but he could not even bother. He wrapped both arms around Jon's neck, felt Jon hugging him back just as hard, could not believe that he had ever been dead, that he had ever been gone. He'd never seen Jon leave Winterfell, had been unconscious when he rode away to the Wall, and yet for everything that had separated them since, the fact that they met as something closer to demigods than men, it was him. It was him.

"Bran," Jon said at last, voice none too steady. "You're walking."

"You're alive." Bran giggled weakly. "I guess we're both surprising each other."

"Yes." Jon hugged him one more time, then put him down as if to devour his face with his eyes, as if he could never get enough of seeing it. "How did you. . . how did I. . ."

"You can thank your woman, Lord Snow," Leaf said. She had made no move to come near him. "And you'd best hurry."

"My woman. . . ?" Jon looked blank. He turned to Val. "What did you. . . ?"

"Nothing worth mentioning, crow." Bran thought her eyes were very sad, no matter how she tried to sound matter-of-fact. "You heard the. . . thing. We'd best move."

Jon looked vaguely unsatisfied with this answer, but deferred to it nevertheless. Glancing back to Bran, he said, "We're taking the old ways under the hill, as far north as north goes. To the end of the world. You need to show us the gate."

Bran hesitated. "Val said there was a dragon there."

"Val is correct." Jon said it as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world. "And if I was allowed under here, the Others will follow shortly. Let's go."

Bran was about to protest that he didn't know where the gate was, but it wasn't true. He did. Silently, he climbed up into the root throne and felt them begin to close over him, snaking and curling around his flesh. In fifty years, they will go through me. With every time, every vision, he moved farther and farther away from his own memory, his own self. Will I remember that my name was Bran Stark? Will I remember why Jon was here?

He bit his lip, but kept on going. Could feel the roots coiling and drawing away, could feel the cold breath of the abyss. Opened his eyes, and saw the dark hole beneath him.

"Here." His voice sounded thin. "It's here."

Distant but not distant, they all heard the soft skittering of undead feet.

Jon stared at it, then nodded once, jerking his chin at Bran. "Come with us," he said. "I don't think we'll make it through the final paths alone. A human and a. . . " He seemed to fail at coming up with a satisfactory description of himself. "The old powers will reject us. You have to come. Open the way."
"But I did," Bran insisted. "It's right here, Jon. Go." He knew that if he went down into that blackness with them, it would mean the longer Val's blood had to hold the defenses against the Others already tapping at the door, and the memory of Meera was too strongly with him. I might be glad to forget the pain of that. But every new day would come, and pile up into months, and years. And then one of those days, without him noticing when precisely it had happened, he would not be able recall how exactly her smile had looked, or the way she sounded when she laughed, or the simple and complete joy he had felt when he was there, and she was there, and Jojen, and Hodor, and Summer. And in no longer remembering, no longer understand the depths of what he had lost.

"The three-eyed crow stays," Leaf said sharply. "He has done more than he must. This is your madness. You may yet destroy the world of men, but not ours."

Jon just stared back at her, his eyes so cold that it made Bran shiver. "There will be no world belonging to you if the Others win, if the ice comes down upon us. Do you think that if every human man, woman, and child should perish, the green will return and all will be as it was before the Andals came with steel and fire, chasing you into these dark places to begin with? The world is already too old for that, the hour too late. Everything and everyone who does not wish to see it rendered into nothing must stand together."

"Child," Leaf shook her head. "You are beyond such cares. You will have to give yourself, sacrifice yourself as well. You too will never come back."

"If such is the price, I intend to pay it." Jon's tone did not waver. "But we must reach the north and the dragon, and without Bran . . ."

Both Jon and Leaf looked at him, in question.

Bran didn't know what to say. He wanted to go with Jon desperately, couldn't stand the thought of seeing him and then losing him again, for what this time might well be forever. But he also couldn't make Val shoulder the burden that was his by rights, and he knew also that he could not truly leave the hollow hill. His life, such as it was, was bounded in by blood and bone and older, darker, crueler things. I am a Stark. I must do my duty.

"Jon," he said. Don't leave me, he wanted to scream. He'd be down here alone for gods' ages, until – if – his heir should come. The broken boy, the blind boy. "I can't go with you."

Jon looked baffled. "Why? Bran, you have to – I don't know if we –"

Footsteps still closer, closer, slow dead tread. Val shuddered. Bran could see the blood leaking through the cloak she had wrapped so tightly around her wrist.

"We'll manage," the wildling woman said. From the sound of her voice, she was in considerable pain, but she was still the first to move toward the darkness. "Bran's done what he can for us. Hurry, Lord Snow. Hurry."

Jon remained irresolute an instant more, his eyes still fixed on Bran's. Both of them wished that that moment would never end, that they had met anywhere but here, like this. But they had, and they knew it. Jon nodded stiffly, turned away, and moved to the mouth of the gate, the path even deeper and more unknown than the hill's heart itself. The old way, down and down, their last gamble, their only chance. To Bran he said, "I love you."

"I love you too." All Bran could see through his tears was the featureless smudge of their faces. "I wish I could –"
"We'll manage," Jon said, echoing Val. He took a few steps down into the passage, offered his hand to her, and she took it readily, even though Bran knew how cold it was, holding tight. She pulled up her hood, and so did he, until both of them had transformed into black-cloaked spirits, walking slowly but steadily deeper, deeper. Then all Bran could hear was the trickle of water, the breath of the abyss, and they were gone for good.
Sam had never been very good at running away. Considering what a craven he was, he should be better at it, but he was so big, so fat, so slow, that trying it generally just made the situation even worse. He knew it too, knew that he would have died on the Fist of the First Men if Grenn and Small Paul weren't there to save him then, and Grenn and Small Paul weren't here to save him now. Not from Euron Greyjoy and his mongrel monsters and the thing that lay smoking and steaming on the floor, its crystalline armor melting and turning to foul black stuff, its blue eyes still staring at Sam with horrible sentience even as he blindly stabbed and stabbed the shard of dragonglass into it, the coldness of the grave engulfing him and the high keening almost deafening him. But somehow he wasn't yet dead, it was falling, he was scrambling over it as it disintegrated, and then he was running quite competently down the dark corridor beyond, at leisure to give full rein to his all-consuming terror.

Others. Others here. Others in the Citadel. Sam didn't know how in the Mother's Mercy it was possible, but there could be no dispute over what he had just killed. Half in a dream, he remembered seeing the candelabras in the library frosting up, bearded with improbable icicles in the middle of an otherwise unremarkable Oldtown autumn. They've come here with Euron. All those awful, apocryphal tales about the Crow's Eye no longer sounded like urban legends exchanged around a campfire, in hopes of frightening children or gullible novices. Somehow the King of the Iron Islands had joined his power to theirs, and they had descended upon the Citadel – the heart of the maesters' ancient order, the vault of its darkest secrets and most dangerous weapons – to rob it and raze it stone from stone. And in so doing, take all that knowledge, that dragon-killing knowledge, for their own.

This realization was so horrible that Sam felt his knees starting to give out. He stopped, wheezing for breath, and clung onto the wall. But he couldn't stay there. It wasn't safe. Nowhere was safe. Seething red flashes split the night, punctuated with screams and stone collapsing and shattering glass, and who knew what was behind him right now, hunting with step after deliberate step? He'd never been so utterly lost in his life, not knowing which way to run to find the Conclave or Alleras or any of them. At least on the Fist I would have died with my brothers. At least on the Fist I would have died like a man.

No. Sam gave his head a hard shake. He had seen Jon in the weirwood, spoken to him, after Alleras said he was dead, and while he didn't pretend to understand how or why, there was still something worth fighting for. He still had his dragonglass in hand, had been too busy running to notice how cold it was, and had killed another Other with it. Sam the Slayer. An unhinged giggle bubbled up his throat. You see, my lord? Even demons fear me.

Sam turned in a circle, trying to get his bearings. The Citadel was a vast stone labyrinth of towers, bridges, corridors, chambers, courtyards, and cloisters, strung together on its islands in the Honeywine, and Euron had likely deployed ironmen in longboats to row up all the river channels. But Sam could see something on fire outside, and when he forced himself to rush over to look, he recognized that he was standing in the breezeway directly above the archmaesters' walled garden. And it was an utter madhouse.

Dark shapes swarmed through the benches and topiary, punching in stained-glass windows in the surrounding quadrangle, throwing torches into the flowerbeds. As Sam watched in horrified fascination, a door burst open and a dozen men in black armor, helmets hiding their faces so that only their eyes glowed in the inferno, came marching into the courtyard, dragging senile old Archmaester Walgrave by the chain. The poor man was demented, oft soiled his smallclothes, and
needed to be reminded of who and where he was on a daily basis, and from the ironmen's reactions as they tried to threaten him for information, they were presently finding that out. At last one of them, exasperated, jerked the old man up by the hair and drew his knife. With one slash so violent it almost took Walgrave's head off, he opened his throat. Blood spewed heart-crimson on the stones.

Sam sobbed, backing away from the window and clapping both hands to his mouth as he tried not to retch. He turned and got set to run – anywhere would have suited him, right to the Stranger's throne in the seventh hell – but a blinding white flash went up, a split second of pure silence followed, and the roar of the explosion erased all other sight or sound or memory.

Sam was thrown at least ten feet, and he landed with a bone-crushing thud, struggling for breath. Then the section of the breezeway where he had just been standing began to veer and buckle, and the elegant bridge folded in half and collapsed, with a scream of pulverized stone and mortar. Dust billowed up, luminous in the afterglare, and Sam could hear the moans and curses of the ironborn below. They didn't set that off. Something else is coming. It had always been said that like the Wall, the Citadel defended itself, but how could that be true? If the Wall still stood, the Citadel wouldn't be under attack in the first place. At least, not from the Others. From the ironmen, all too likely aye.

The library. That was the only thought left in Sam's head. I have to get back to the library. There was more dragonglass there – his shard had been blown out of his hand in the explosion – and among the mazes of shelves, even the ironborn might lose their way. Besides, if the library burned, all those centuries of knowledge... it would be better for the world rather than letting the Crow's Eye have it, but for the maesters, it would be full as disastrous. The end of their order. And Sam did not want to see if what was coming was salvation, or damnation. His imagination was hard pressed to picture what could possibly be worse than Euron Greyjoy with the Others, but he didn't want to put it to the test.

Spitting out the copper-metal taste of blood in his mouth, Sam somehow managed to ignore the bridge collapsing not a dozen yards away, and claw and lumber to his feet. He had a rough idea of how to get back to the library from the archmaesters' quadrangle, but couldn't go forward for obvious reasons and did not want to return the way he had come, for fear of passing the dead Other again. Still, he was not exactly spoiled for choice. Coughing and hacking, Sam ducked back into the corridor and scuttled. He had stopped praying or pleading. He didn't have the breath.

Periodic crashes and mayhem continued to rock the Citadel's walls. Sam had lost all track of who was responsible for it. The maesters must be fighting back. He wasn't, but he wasn't a maester, and was a pissant craven to boot. Still, defending the library had to be worth something. Watching his books burn would be like watching his children burn. Not that I will ever have children. He would have liked to, someday. Wanted sons and daughters, girls like his sisters, boys whether they preferred sword and shield or songs and silks. But he was a Sworn Brother of the Night's Watch and a maester-in-training. Doubly prohibited. And it wasn't good money that he'd even survive this night.

Bent almost double, covering his ears when another boom went off, Sam dodged and spun through every back way he could think of. Then he saw a riot of torchlight ahead, and barely managed to dive behind a statue before a troupe of ironmen turned the corner, laughing and cursing and smashing things. They were dragging a limp body in grey robes, leaving a dark trail of blood along the cloister stones, and Sam squeezed his eyes shut, petrified to look closely in case it was someone he knew. His hiding place was horrendously feeble, but he stayed as quiet as a mouse, and the Iron Islanders were too eager to reach a place better suited for sacking, anyway. They barreled past the statue without a second glance and were gone, their shouting echoing through the violated heart of
the Citadel.

Sam was still terrified, but as he squirmed out from behind the statue and started to run, following the ghastly smears of blood in the opposite direction, he realized that he was furious too. How dare Euron Greyjoy come here and do this? How dare he bring monsters of human and inhuman stripe alike, to terrorize not just the maesters but the future of every other soul on the face of the earth? *I may not have been there to defend the Wall when it fell, but not so for the Citadel. I'm here. I'll fight.*

Sam was certainly aware that the enmity of a half-chained apprentice was nothing to make the hard-bitten Greyjoy reavers quake in their boots, but it gave him the steel in his spine he sorely needed to make it, wheezing, up the last set of steps and pound across into the library tower. Eerie orange light infiltrated the labyrinthine stacks, shadows loomed and shouts roared. They were here.

*I've killed an Other,* Sam reminded himself. *Men are nothing. If I always had books to defend, I might always be this brave.* He wrenched a torch out of its sconce, supposing it better to go in with *something* in hand before the sons of whores realized that they were being attacked by an unarmed fat man. Then he took a deep, shuddering breath, and flung himself headlong through the battered golden gate. "OY! ARSEHOLES!"

The ironmen had been rampaging through the shelves, pulling out priceless codices and manuscripts and getting ready to set them aflame, but they were distracted from this vital task by the enraged ingress of Samwell Tarly, all incoming twenty stone of him. They looked up with a start, then went running for their swords.

Before they got there, Sam bowled through them. He snatched up an armload of books on one side, keeping them well away from the torch in the other hand, and kicked over an iron grille as the nearest man lunged for him. As it fell, it laid the bastard out headlong, and his compatriots hard on his heels suffered a similar fate. Suddenly the narrow aisle was choked with a pile of screaming, flailing, smoking Greyjoys.

Sam almost wanted to laugh, but didn't dare. It was good he'd just been down here, memorizing the maze that led to the library's heart – left, right, right, center, left, left, center again. He sped on through, resisting the urge to look over his shoulder with a terrible effort, until his arm began to ache with the weight of the books. By the shouts rapidly closing the distance behind him, at least some of the ironmen had extricated themselves from their predicament, and were not at all kindly disposed toward Sam for causing it.

"I'm sorry," Sam whispered to the books, gasping. "I can't carry you anymore. I'm sorry." He hated to think of abandoning them to their deaths, had the brief and irrational impression that they were crying like babes, but gently put them into the recesses of a dark shelf. He was scared, but oddly enough, less scared now that he had murderous ironborn after him than when he'd been down here alone. He was sure – fairly sure – that he recognized the wall of shelves in front of him. He could feel cold air on his face. *That's not good. That's so very not good.*

Still, he ran forward.

With a crash, he burst from the stacks and toppled head over heels into the cleared space before the windows, only barely avoiding lacerating himself to death on the lethal shards of dragonglass scattered everywhere. All the candelabras were out, but it wasn't dark. A witchy glow pulsed from the forest of black splinters, and the cold air was due to the fact that the tall picture windows were likewise blown out. Someone must have scaled the tower, traversed the wallwalk, and bashed his way in, and there wasn't much mystery as to the culprit. He was standing in front of the mahogany rostrum, flipping through the Citadel's priceless history of the world, the *Chronicon* that Sam had
risked his hide to get down here and find just hours ago. And he was casually ripping out pages, and rendering them to bits.

Such barefaced naked villainy was more than Sam could stand. As he got a hard look at the malfeasant – the patch over one eye, the unearthly blue of the other, the smooth dark hair and comely face and mad smiling blue lips, the golden kraken on the black tabard – it hit him all at once that this was no mere lowborn raider, no mindless brute. No, he was looking for something very specific and destroying the rest, and if he was allowed to get away with this intelligence, everything and everywhere was at an end.

In the same amount of time it took Sam to process this, he also realized that he was the only man able to do anything about it, the only one to stop Euron Greyjoy himself from absconding with the dread secret of how to kill the last three dragons in the world. *Fire destroys the Others.* Once Greyjoy had the greyscale in his arsenal, there would be no standing against him. He could master the dragons or murder them, as it pleased him. It was over.

Fleetingly, desperately, Sam wished for a hero, a miracle. Neither one came. Then he commended his soul to the gods, took a running start, and leaped onto the Crow's Eye's back like a wild animal.

Euron, intent on his work, was taken totally off guard. But he reacted immediately, his sinuous body snapping around with horrible strength to throw Sam off him. He snarled, teeth flashing unearthly white, and drew the shortsword at his side, but Sam flailed out and got hold of the heavy leather *Chronicon.* He felt like apologizing for the undignified use to which he was about to put it, but there was no time. As Euron reared like a viper, Sam swung the book with all his might and hit him in the face.

He heard something crunch, prayed it was Euron's nose, and braced the *Chronicon* like a shield, into the path of the incoming knife. It got stuck in the leather and parchment, and the Crow's Eye, swearing in the most hair-raising inventiveness Sam had ever heard, had to waste valuable moments twisting it free. Sam groped desperately around for another weapon, but all the dragonglass was out of reach. And he could not, for the life of him and everyone, let go of the *Chronicon* and let Euron have it.

They struggled furiously in the middle of the room. Euron was ungodly strong and from the looks of things, ungodly powerful to boot, but Sam outweighed him by at least six stone, and panic was no small motivation. His fumbling free hand scooped up a candelabra, and snagged Euron's knife in the branches with a screech. Sam twisted it as hard as he could, and the blade went flying away across the room.

Sam had no time to admire his handiwork. His back was up against the rostrum, and Euron was snarling into his face, the blue eye alight with demonic rage as he forced Sam's arms higher and higher over his head, the *Chronicon* on the verge of slipping from his sweaty, straining fingers. Then Euron's hand moved with that same snake-striking speed, and Sam saw the flash of steel just for a heartbeat. The next, pain like he had never known exploded up his side, driving deeper and deeper with all Euron's weight behind it, and Sam knew with a queer, calm clarity that he had been stabbed.

He could see the knife sticking out of his ribs, but he couldn't look, couldn't think about it, still couldn't let go of the book. He could feel blood starting to gush down his side and soak his robes, but it didn't matter. Then he heard someone running through the shelves, knew that he was dead now, that an ironman was coming to help his captain, and heard the deep, thrumming thump of a longbow. One arrow sprouted between Euron's shoulder blades. Then, in the back of his neck, another.
The Crow's Eye was still snarling, still struggling, but seemed to slow down, almost freeze. A look of confusion spread across his face. Then he skewed sideways, and fell.

None of this made any sense whatsoever to Sam. Still less so when a familiar, light-footed figure sprinted around the corner, another two arrows already nocked to their goldenwood longbow. Sam's lips formed the name, but couldn't speak it. Not until the Sphinx was pelting flat-out toward him.

"Alleras." Sam felt like he was going to faint. "Alleras, I'm stabbed."

"Don't look at it." The Dornish youth hauled him upright, then took hold of the knife and pulled it out with a horrible squelch. "You're damn lucky you're so fat. Slashed up the lard, but didn't hit anything vital. Seven hells, let's get out of here."

This sounded like an exceedingly appealing idea to Sam, but he couldn't forget what he'd just been doing. "Wait – the Chronicon – we can't leave it, can't let – he'll take – "

"I shot him in the neck, he's not getting up. Now come on, Sam, let's go – "

"Am I not?" said a voice from the floor. "Are you so sure?"

Sam and Alleras froze. They both stared uselessly, as the Crow's Eye rolled over and sat up with no more irritation than if he'd been stung by a bee. He reached around and pulled the arrows from his neck and back, then shrugged, snapped the shafts in half, and dropped them. Grinning that mad grin, he got to his feet and held out both arms. "Go on, girl. Shoot me again."

Sam looked around wildly for a girl, but didn't see one. Just Alleras, who looked as if he'd been hit over the head. Euron couldn't be talking to – he didn't mean –

"You," Euron said, when both the apprentices continued to gape at him. "Sarella Sand. This is all a game to you anyway, isn't it? Well, sweetling, it is for me too. I adore games. I mean it. Come. Shoot me. You won't enjoy it if you don't."

Sam should have been paying attention to this, but he was still staring at Alleras – Sarella? That was Alleras spelled backwards, true, but why was Euron calling him – her? Sarella Sand? That would be the name of a Dornish bastard girl, of –

When he'd asked the Sphinx for help with his assignment on poisons – *Your father sounds to have been a dangerous man –*

*Oh, he was –*

*All Dornishmen are vipers, some more so than others –*

The Sand Snake, Prince Oberyn Martell's bastard daughter, raised her bow numbly, and shot.

Euron looked down at the arrow in his chest, and his grin broadened. Then he just as negligently pulled it out, and broke it. "What is it you two are going to do next, pray?" he enquired. "When I have the greatest power the world has ever known at my back, the Lord of Night and Terror? You think you're going to kill me with these flea bites? The Wall is fallen, children. The Lord's servants go where they will. The Citadel and everything within it is now mine. The dragons across the sea, mine as well. And when they have served their purpose – " the blue lips smiled at the Chronicon – "I'll kill them as well, turn them to stone, then have them reborn in service of the Great Other. The flood tide of ice shall cover the world. The Valyrian horn has been sounded. They are mine."
Sam and Alleras continued to act as if they too were made of stone.

Euron appeared annoyed by their failure to appreciate his triumph. "Each time my brother Victarion uses the horn," he went on, "it kills him just that bit more. Do you think I'd ever actually allow him to win the dragons to his side, when I know full well that he means to kill me and have my bride for his own? Victarion will never return from Meereen alive, but the dragons shall. Already so in thrall to the Lord's will, to my will, that they shall stretch out their necks meekly for the unholy blade. Can you imagine? An Othered dragon, breathing ice instead of fire? And the Long Night is already on us. I will ravish the dragon queen and plant demons in her fiery womb, sons of more than mortal flesh, ice and fire united at last. And you can stop me? Can you do anything apart from pule in terror? Your dying will be slow, I vow, as slow as I can make it, and you will be reborn as Others to serve me past death, past the memory of anything except pain and madness. Go on, my sweetling. Shoot me one more time. It will get my blood up before I rape you."

Alleras – Sarella – had nothing to say. Her mouth opened and shut like a fish. The bow dropped from her hands and hit the library floor with a clatter.

Euron's eyes moved to follow it, with an aggrieved expression. And in that bare moment, the serpent's gaze broken, Samwell Tarly acted.

He flung himself forward, snatched up the largest piece of dragonglass he saw, and refused even to let himself shriek in pain as the razor edge sliced his hands almost to the bone. Fingers slippery with blood, he plunged and charged and fell. Then he did not hesitate, did not flinch, oh gods, the pain, the pain — and drove the dragonglass into the Crow's Eye's blue eye. As hard and deep as it would go.

Euron Greyjoy howled. His hands came up to madly claw the splinter, but they steamed where he touched it. Yet he was somehow still on his feet, still coming, a horror in human flesh, and Sam yanked Sarella desperately by the arm, his blood showing livid on her dark skin. "Run," he choked. "RUN!"

That broke the Sand Snake out of her stupor. Both of them turned and lit out – not in the direction of the stacks, but to the broken windows, stampeding out onto the wallwalk beyond. Sam was going dizzy with height and blood loss, but he could see the eastern horizon turning grey and pink, black ships before Oldtown, the mouth of the harbor sparked with distant blazes and piles of broken stones where buildings had once stood. Bells still boomed from some of the Citadel's towers, but others had gone silent. The Hightower itself was dark. Far below in the streets, tiny dark figures fought or stood their ground or ran or lived or died. The golden krakens on the fleet's sails caught livid in the breaking dawn.

Sam was falling behind, but he knew that the thing that had been Euron Greyjoy was still chasing them. He stumbled over his feet. Pain shuddered up his side in nauseating bursts. When they reached the beacon tower, when Sarella cut the halyard on which the banners of the Citadel flew and threw the rope to the ground fifty feet below, Sam knew he'd never be able to hold on. His hands were as useless as two lumps of wood. Will I ever be able to write with a quill again? Hold a book? Touch Gilly's face?

"Just go," Sam whimpered. "Just go, and leave me."

"No." Sarella knotted the rope around one of the few crenels that was still standing. With desperate but practical haste, she tore two long strips from her tunic and bound up his hands, then tore off her belt, managed by extreme duress to make it fit around Sam, and cabled the rope through it. "Do your best. The ground is soft. Now listen to me. Run to the weirwood, in the ravenry, where we
saw your friend's face. You'll be safe there. Trust me."

"Why?" Sam gasped. "What about – "

"Just trust me!" Sarella screamed. They could both hear the demon that had been the Crow's Eye, coming.

Sam took her at her word. Before he had time to think about it, he grasped the rope clumsily in his cut hands, backed off into thin air, and began to rappel madly, bouncing, down the wall. The pain was so bad he almost couldn't stand it, and he lost control and free-fell the last ten feet – luckily, as she had said, the ground was soft and squishy. He rolled away, expecting the Sand Snake to come abseiling much more gracefully down after him, but couldn't see her. "SARELLA!"

He might have heard an answer. Might not. The parapet above him was empty.

_Run to the weirwood. You'll be safe there._ He'd seen Jon there. The old gods. The old powers. They'd preserve him, they must. But he wasn't willing to leave the Sphinx behind. Oh gods, had Euron caught her? Was he going to die, or could not even the dragonglass kill him? _The Lord of Night and Terror. The flood tide of ice._ At all costs, the Crow's Eye must not get back to the library and the _Chronicon._ And must not go further, to reach the weirwood.

Sam understood, then. Why she'd had him go first. And that she wasn't coming. Gasping, gagging, almost blinded, he put his head down and ran away.

Down the bridge. Through the blasted, gutted ruins of the Citadel's inner ward, not even slowing to look at whose corpses were whose. From what he did see, the maesters had put up the hell of a fight – dead ironmen far outnumbered dead acolytes, who themselves were considerable. Still crying, Sam toppled through the door and dodged down the steps, across to the island, to the ravenry, to where the weirwood waited.

Sam fell to his knees and crawled the last few feet. A thick column of smoke rose beyond the mossy walls. Blood – his blood – stained the grass, and the weirwood branches writhed and creaked as if caught in a high wind. So did the root. And Sam only then saw the dark hole that they opened to reveal, a way, a path down, down, down. Under the ground. Under the tree. Under the hill.

Salvation, or damnation.

"Help me," Sam whispered, pulled himself to the edge, let go, and fell.
After the mists and marshes of Greywater, the cold dour fog and the hunched black branches, the distant glimmer of will-o'the-wisps, even the weak winter sunlight was tormenting her head. She'd been blinking like an owl ever since the skinboat emerged from the reeds, when Ser Edmure jumped knee-deep into the peaty bog; remembering the Blackfish's gruesome fate, she'd barely been able to watch. But no viper felt like trout for breakfast, and he bumped and hauled them up onto (comparatively) solid ground. Lord Howland gave her a hand, and she clambered out with one arm tight around Robbie, peacefully sleeping in his sling against her chest. There she stood, shivering under her cloak and using the edge to wipe her streaming eyes, while Lord Howland once more interrogated Edmure about their choice of route. I have spent a deal of time on the run with Tullys lately. She prayed it would be nothing like the previous one.

At first, Jeyne had cherished the foolish notion that when Edmure had said he would take her home, he meant back to the Crag. Not that she was even sure she wanted to go there, as it must be haunted with her family's bloodstained shades, but she couldn't think of anywhere else. Surely he could not mean Riverrun, fallen into the grip of Emmon Frey and his pet parchment, and as for Winterfell... in ruins, dead things in the walls...

"White Harbor," Ser Edmure was saying. "Trust me. Ser – Lord Wylis Manderly has vowed to protect the queen and her child with every breath in his body, and having seen what he did to the Lannister fleet, I would not at all underestimate his ability to do so."

Lord Howland's gaze sharpened. "You said naught of any Lannister fleet before. What has that to do with anything?"

Edmure squirmed. "Nothing," he protested. "You know, that as the Young Wolf's own uncle, I would never do anything to endanger his widow or son."

If Howland Reed had been a crueler man, there were all sorts of opportunities for him to stick in the dagger as to how Edmure had endangered Robb in life, but the Lord of Greywater Watch was not the sort who tore open the old wounds of others for his pleasure. Nonetheless, conscientious vassal that he was, he had to ask again. "There was a Lannister fleet in White Harbor?"

"Aye, there was," Edmure said, somewhat sulkily. "But Lord Wylis had it destroyed, and sent me to bring Queen Jeyne back to his keeping."

"Yet in all you've told me, you have not yet included how it is that you, a prisoner at Casterly Rock last we left you, have found yourself all the way up here in the Neck," Lord Howland persisted. Doubtless seeing Edmure's neck turning the same color as his beard, he hastened to add, "I am in no way impugning your honor, ser. Queen Jeyne must leave Greywater; the climate is not suitable for young Robb's health. But for that same reason, nor can I permit her to hie off into the wilderness again."

"I'm not taking her to the wilderness," Edmure insisted. "There are Manderly men waiting to meet us, just a few leagues off at the shore. We'll be aboard the ship to White Harbor by nightfall."

"It comes quite early these days. And you will not be able to ride very fast at all with Her Grace and the child. But if you will swear..."

"I will," Edmure said stiffly. "You need not mind me of my failures, my lord. I count them all too well."
"I suppose you do," Howland agreed with a sigh. "And if you can get my lady Jeyne to safety... Lord Galbart Glover and Lady Maege Mormont have also gone north. A fool's errand as much as yours, perhaps, but what are any of us if not fools? They mean to rouse their lands in the name of Sansa Stark, now rightful Queen in the North and last living offspring of Lord Eddard."

At that, Edmure looked very much as if he was about to say something, but deferred. "If they can even dig it out of the snow," he commented instead, "I'm sure it will be most welcomed. Well, as you said, my lord, the days are short. We'd best be away."

"Aye." Lord Howland's shoulders looked stooped and heavy as he said it, and Jeyne remembered that he, like both she and Edmure, had just lost intimate family, his son and daughter both, the tale that the flock of ravens had come to Greywater to bear. _Ser Edmure's wife, my parents and brother and sister..._ She shivered again, half-expecting the ghosts to rise up dripping from the marsh, silent and accusing. _Will we ever be free of them?_

There were two sturdy garrons tied up in a nearby thicket. Edmure bushwhacked his way in, cursing when the gorse caught his sleeve, and led them out. "Can you stand a saddle, my lady?"

"Aye." Jeyne was still not entirely recovered from childbirth and the fever that had claimed her after, but she was determined not to be a hindrance. Nevertheless, it took the assistance of both Lord Howland and Edmure to get her up and settled, and a sharp blaze of pain shot through her raw, tender core. She grimaced, folding her skirt under her leg, and accepted Robbie when Lord Howland handed him up. The infant might lack both sight and right hand, but he suckled and slept and shat like any other. _He will live_, Jeyne Westerling Stark promised herself, and the gods too if any were listening. _I will not let him die. Never._

With a final farewell to Lord Howland, who stood on the edge of the marsh watching them, Edmure swung up on his own garron and they set off. Jeyne could not resist glancing over her shoulder once and then again, until the small crannogman was out of sight in the rolling lowlands. She wished she'd had more gracious words to thank him, to atone for the calamity she had visited on his house. _One day, when Lady Sansa is queen, I will have her honor the Reeds a hundredfold._ If there were any Reeds left. If Howland and his Jyana could still have more children to replace the ones taken from them. If any of them survived the winter. The thought made Jeyne very sad.

She and Edmure rode for several hours, and crossed the kingsroad – a muddy, meandering track that nonetheless made her nervous until it was well behind. They did not talk much. On Jeyne's part, at least, this was due to clenching her teeth too tightly for speech; even the comparatively gentle pace her good-uncle set was agony. She still did not want to complain, but he clearly saw her discomfort, and called them to a halt just before noon. "I'd ride ahead and fetch the Manderlys, my lady, but I much mislike leaving you alone."

Jeyne misliked it as well. Robbie had woken and was starting to whimper, and with the aid of Edmure's arm, she hauled herself off the garron to sit on a broad boulder. Nursing an infant was not at all as simple as it looked, and in the ordinary course of things, a gently bred young noblewoman such as herself would have had someone else to do it anyway, but this, plainly, was not ordinary. After several fits and starts she finally got the babe to take the breast, Edmure embarrassedly glancing away even though she was covering herself with her cloak. As Robbie industriously rooted away like a runtling pig, she looked back at Edmure and said softly, "How did you come to be out here, ser?"

Again, Edmure looked shifty. Again, he essayed no immediate answer. Instead he said, "It makes no matter. I'll get you to White Harbor or so help me Seven, and Lord Wylis will keep you safe. But I... I did not confess all. Robb's little brother is there, alive. With his direwolf. So Lord Wylis..."
says, at least. I was not afforded the opportunity to inspect him before I left."

"Robb's little. . ." Jeyne stared at him, mortified. "But he has no surviving. . ." Yet she could hear Lady Jyana speaking of the entity that had once been Bran Stark, that had sent the ravens to tell her of Jojen and Meera's deaths. That he lived, but had become forever one with the trees. What is this other one now, then? What monster?

"Aye. Rickon Stark." Edmure gave a shrug. "I did not tell this to Lord Howland, he has enough complications, and he's already sent Glover and Mormont to raise the north in Sansa's name. He is quite certain that she lives. By technicality, Rickon would be the heir now, but. . ." Edmure shrugged again, casting half a look at Robbie. "We've already decided that in the winter, we cannot do with babes. And from what Cat told me, Rickon has always been blithe, wild, and reckless even for a five-year-old. Sansa would still have to rule for him even if he understood what it meant to be King in the North, if he even wanted to claim it. Besides, from the tales of things, he's been off gallivanting with savages and cannibals, and that's sure to be no help. It is burdensome of me to ask, I know, but would you consider taking him under your wing? He can be right beastly, you'd need a firm hand and a sharp tongue, but it may be well worth it for us in the future."

Jeyne was taken aback, not least by Edmure's apparent presumption that now that she was a mother, she would automatically know just how to manage a headstrong, spoilt, strong-willed child. She also had enough pride to feel a brief stab of anger at the thought that since her own son had already been discarded, she must perforce be willing to train his replacement. But unless she planned on taking the veil and withdrawing into a motherhouse, a course of action which she had already decided against, this was what her use would be. The north would still be rallied for Sansa, whether as queen in her own right or just as regent and caretaker, but Jeyne found herself fiercely, instinctively on her good-sister's side. Against any rhyme or reason whatsoever, she resented the fact that Rickon Stark had risen from the grave, when his supposed death had been what caused Robb to wind up in her bed in the first place. If Rickon is alive, everything was for nothing after all.

Edmure plainly saw the mulish look on her face. "My lady, I am sorry," he said sheepishly. "I only meant to ask if –"

He cut off, cocked his head, and frowned.

"What?" Jeyne said, startled. "What is it?"

"I thought I heard. . ." Edmure turned in a circle, hand drifting to his sword. "But I didn't. . . I made sure. . ."

"What?" Jeyne's heart was starting to pound. She detached Robbie from the breast, much to his voluminous dismay, and covered herself quickly before thrusting a finger in his mouth to muffle the racket. "Are we in danger?" The countryside didn't look it, placid and low and frosted under the grey sky, but she could feel an approaching rumble in the ground, closer and closer. "Who's coming?"

Instead of answering, Edmure began to swear. Under his breath at first and then louder and far more colorfully, making a lunge at the garrons as if to vault up and imminently be away – which, of course, did nothing to stem Jeyne's surging panic. She lurched to her feet, wheeling in this direction and that, and then saw a helmet rising into view over the nearest hill-crest. It was promptly followed by the rest of the rider, and then a good dozen or two dozen more of them. She saw crimson tabards, golden lions. There might have been others, but that one burned into her head. A trap. He's led me into a trap. They'll take me – take Robbie – all of us, in the hands of the Lannisters, done for –
Jeyne screamed, spun around, and started to run. The ground was rough and soggy, her legs felt like lead, and she was cumbered by the baby — if she truly thought she was going to outrun mounted men. She didn't care. \textit{How could he — how could he —}

There was an outcry behind her. She didn't hear. Then the sound of galloping, and she stumbled, threw an arm up over her face, and screamed again as a destrier towered up above her, the man on its back shouting at her. "My lady! My lady, stop! I'm not going to hurt you! \textit{Stop}!"

Shock momentarily transfixed her in place. Then he reached down, and Jeyne's feet flailed in empty air as he got her under the armpits and hauled her up in front of him on the saddle, holding her tightly as she struggled and shrieked and tried to pound his chest with her fists. He was, however, much stronger than her, and adroitly deflected her attacks, getting a bruising hold on her shoulders and making her look up into his face. "My lady! I'm not going to hurt you. Lady Jeyne, stop. It's me, it's me!"

Panting, horrified, befuddled, Jeyne realized that she did in fact know him. Her family had guested at Ashemark under Lord Damon Marbrand's roof on many occasions, and as little girls, she and his daughter Genna had served as maids of honor to young Lady Cersei Lannister at Casterly Rock. But what Genna's dashing copper-haired elder brother was doing here, what he had — what \textit{Edmure} had —

"Steady, my lady," Ser Addam said, breathing hard himself from the effort it had taken to chase her down. "You're not in any danger. Nor the child," he added, hearing if not seeing Robbie squalling like a scalded cat in his sling. "Though I do wonder, precisely, what in all seven hells you were planning?"

This comment was directed extremely pointedly to Edmure Tully, who was standing stock still and looking as if he would be perfectly content for the earth to open up and swallow him whole. Now that some of Jeyne's adrenaline was subsiding, although none of her fear, she could look around and see that there were half a dozen men in Lannister colors, the rest wearing the blue and grey merman of House Manderly, and none of them appeared well disposed toward Edmure. She wanted to tell them not to hurt him, but he had led her into this snare, had . . .

"My lord of Tully," Ser Addam said, in a voice sharp enough to split steel. "Do you now intend to tell us all what just happened?"

"My lord of \textit{Tully}?" A shocked echo circled the gathered men, Lannister and Manderly alike. They stared at Edmure, clearly having mistaken him for someone else, and Jeyne was left to wonder in aghast disbelief just how deep this conspiracy ran. "Lord \textit{Edmure}? But how could you possibly — "

"I was going to take her to White Harbor!" Edmure burst out, surrounded by a ring of scowling faces. "Just as ordered!"

"Yet," said Ser Addam, "you were trying to skirt around us. Why?"

Edmure glared at him. "If \textit{you} brought her back, Lord Wylis would have to keep his promise and let these — these — " he waved a scathing hand at the present Lannisters, finding no epithet suitably foul — "go back to King's Landing! Defend precious little Tommen's precious little crown! Do you think I was going to let that happen if I could at all avoid it? I'm not your fucking lapdog, Marbrand!"

Ser Addam just stared back at him, apparently at a loss for words. Then he shook his head and sighed heavily. "So instead you struck out on your own with a young woman just delivered, \textit{and} her newborn babe? What \textit{was} it you meant to accomplish?"
"I told you I would bring her back to White Harbor. I just didn't intend for you to be able to take any credit for it."

"That's why you claimed that Lord Howland would only allow one man into Greywater, and went on ahead by yourself? I see."

"Do you think he'd let you, Jaime Lannister's nearest and dearest friend, in there instead?" Edmure's entire head now matched his hair. "Now you're going to deliver her to Lord Wylis, reap your reward, and truss me up in the dungeon! You sent the raven telling the small council that it wasn't the real Jeyne in the Crag! I told you! It's your fucking fault that her family and my wife are dead!"

Jeyne jerked. She half turned to Ser Addam, hoping for him to deny it. But he's a Lannister man through and through, he's my enemy too... if he'd told Cersei about her escape from Riverrun, worked it out somehow, paid a visit on her family at the Crag and realized it was Elenya... my family... her mother and father she did not grieve, or not as much, but her sister and Rollam...

"Ser Edmure," Marbrand said at last. He sounded genuinely pained. "No words or deeds can ever right that wrong, I know. So far as it goes, you have every right to hate me. But do you remember what was said before we raised anchor off the Sisters? You were there. That I no longer wished to serve Queen Cersei because of the evilness of those executions? Do you see these men here, Lannisters alongside Manderlys, when the latter burnt our ships to ashes? Do you remember what was said in the audience with Lord Wylis?"

"Bloody well enough," Edmure snapped. "There you go. You have her. You've won. But hear this, my lord of Marbrand. Her babe is no use to you. He's blind and maimed, from the potions Lady fucking Sybell had Jeyne drink, trying to prevent her from conceiving. He will never inherit Robb's throne, and so you can't stop Lord Wylis from swearing homage to Stannis over Tommen. If I have no leverage, neither do you. You're finished."

"I would indeed be so," Ser Addam answered, unruffled, "if it was still my primary intent to obtain Lord Wylis' allegiance to Tommen. Yes, I still hold to him as King of Westeros, but there is a far greater menace stalking the north, and I meant it when I said that Cersei could no longer command my loyalty by reason of madness. These men you see here – " he indicated the six Lannister captains – "agree. In exchange for our liberty and three new ships, we have placed ourselves under Lord Wylis' personal command, thus to fight Boltons, Freys, or... worse things. If you had not distracted us by attempting to make off with the queen, we would have begun earlier. As it is, we still have to deliver her safely to White Harbor, and hope that not too much time has been wasted. What say you to that, Ser Edmure?"

The erstwhile Lord of Riverrun's vermilion hue turned deeper. "You never told me."

"You never gave us a chance. You were determined to outwit us and make it to Greywater and back by yourself. As is customary in your life, you did not succeed." Ser Addam reached around Jeyne to gather up the reins. "Is there aught else you would like to foolishly attempt now, my lord, or are we through?"

Edmure stood chewing his tongue, looking as if he would rather spit it at Marbrand's feet than answer. Then, realizing that he was beaten, he whirled around, furiously untied the garrons, and swung up onto his, leading Jeyne's behind him. Utterly unsure who if any of them to trust, she could think of nothing to say as the company began to move. She held Robbie tight, the only thing she could count on.

It was very late afternoon by the time the riders surmounted the last hilltop and cantered down onto the bleak stones of the shore. Frozen tidepools and icy wrack littered the barren sand, grooved...
deeply by the hull of a beached longboat. A few hundred yards out to sea, anchored but rocking on
the restless swells, its mother ship waited, sails furled to the mast but a Manderly banner whipping
in the stiff northeasterly wind. On sight of the arriving riders, someone raised a flag on the bow to
semaphore them, and one of the men-at-arms signaled back. Then Ser Addam reined in and swung
down, boots slurping in the wet sand, to offer his hand to Jeyne.

After a pause, she took it, and allowed him to ease her down. She expected him to merely march
her to the longboat and heave her in like a hay-bale, but he didn't. Instead, almost diffidently, he
asked, "What is the lad's name?"

Why does he want to know? Does he wish to make me prove my treason? She couldn't look him in
the eye. "R-Robb."

"For the Young Wolf, of course." Ser Addam's voice was gentle. "Is he healthy?"

After Edmure had thrown the fact of the child's deformity in Marbrand's face, Jeyne nearly took
this for mockery, but he sounded quite sincere. "He is small and stunted, but . . . strong enough. He
feeds well. I believe that he will live."

"It would be a comfort to you, for certain." He was still gentle, enough so that Jeyne felt her eyes
well with tears. She had no idea if this was all some elaborate ploy, if he still meant to take her
back to King Tommen's justice or if he had truly been responsible for her family's execution –
whether she should try to flee again or if it was best for her to go onto White Harbor, as they all
promised. She did not want his pity, wanted to hit him, wanted to throw herself into his arms and
sob. She dared do neither.

"Come," Marbrand said, seeing her expression. "Let's get you on board. You'll have a cabin of your
own, and if the wind remains with us, we'll make it to White Harbor in two days. You'll be safe
there. Trust me."

I do not trust anyone. Yet she had known Ser Addam since she was a girl, and she was so very,
utterly tired. At the moment, she almost did not care if she was going away to prison for the rest of
her life, so long as she could sleep. Stiffly, she took his offered arm, and let him escort her down
the sand to the longboat.

They were aboard the ship by nightfall, the rising wind keening in the lines and sculpting the
waves with white-frothed rime. For more reasons than this alone, Jeyne was abjectly grateful to get
below into her cramped cabin. The Manderly men had all been most scrupulous in addressing her
as "Your Grace," and politely congratulating her on a son, but she could see them sizing her up
from the corner of their eyes, deciding for themselves if her face and form were worth throwing
away a betrothal and a kingdom. They treated her with a blend of pity and cool, correct decorum,
and one of the younger ones had said, not quite out of her hearing, that she had a bloody lot of
nerve, bringing that twisted little thing aboard. To him, to them, it was another reminder of
everything she had cost them, and her with the nerve to not even give them an able-bodied heir in
return.

Jeyne huddled on her berth in the darkness, rocking Robbie and trying to sing to him to calm him
down. She'd already had to change his clouts, and the foul brown stink of infant shit permeated the
small space. From the lurching of the floor, they were well underway, skimming across the black
water of the Bite with the wind humming in the sails. But her voice kept cracking, and she couldn't
remember the words to the lullaby. Finally she lay down on the bunk, cradling her small mewling
monster to her chest, thinking that without sight he could not even see her face, know that she was
his mother and that she loved him. And that did it entirely. She closed her own eyes and began to
sob.
As emotionally and physically devastated as she was, she must have somehow fallen into a dead, catatonic sleep. When she was next aware of light prying at her eyelids, each of which weighed several hundred pounds, the air smelled fresher, and a quilt had been laid over her, her contorted position carefully straightened out. Her chest felt lighter as well, and when she put out a groggy hand to fumble, she realized that Robbie was not there.

Panic peeled her eyes open. She salt bolt upright, nearly braining herself on the low beam, and swung her legs over the side of the bunk, groping to fasten her cloak and put on her shoes, which had also somehow been taken off. Then she lurched her way across the cabin, fighting reels of nausea and terror in turn. What if that Manderly man had taken him, pitched him over the side while she –

Jeyne wrenched the door open and clawed up the ladder, heart hammering. A gust of wind caught her broadside as she emerged onto the deck, and she staggered and caught onto a shroud to avoid measuring herself at full length across the planks. It was some indeterminate time of day, earlier rather than later, sailors and soldiers streaming by on either side as wood and canvas creaked and the distant coastline coiled past like a ribbon, sometimes visible and sometimes vanished in low-lying cloud. But she barely noticed. All she cared about was Robbie.

"My lady!" One of the crewmen caught her arm. "Begging your pardons, but you shouldn't be up."

"My son!" Jeyne almost shook him. "Where is he?"

The man looked startled, but pointed. "There. Marbrand has him. With luck and this wind, we'll make it to White Harbor this evening, so go back below and get –"

Jeyne didn't hear the rest of it. Instead, she turned and wove her way to the stern, where Marbrand was sitting with long legs outstretched, a bundle of blankets perched in one arm. Edmure was glaring poisonously at him from across the way, but apparently hadn't yet taken it into his head to actually intervene.

"My – my lords." Just as Jeyne reached them, the ship tilted sharply down a wave, and she squealed, lost her balance, and would have in fact spilled if not for Ser Addam reaching out with his free hand and managing to snag her elbow. "I thought. . . you scared me half to death. . ."

"I told you," Edmure muttered, but quietly.

"I apologize, my lady." Ser Addam beckoned her to sit. "But you were dead on your feet, and I saw no harm in letting you sleep some. Your lad hasn't minded. He's a handsome and cheerful boy. You should be proud."

Does he mock me again? Yet the words, once more, were kind. As Jeyne accepted the baby as Marbrand handed him over, their eyes met, and she could not help but feel a sudden hot flush. Marbrand was tall, handsome, gifted, gallant, a longtime friend of her family – all of whom he had killed, a voice inside her jeered savagely – and had treated her and her son alike with chivalry, grace, and kindness when she stood in the most desperate need of it. She was a young woman, and a widow, not a virgin. She knew full well what had made her breath catch, her knees weaken.

How dare you? Your love, your king, is dead. Horrified, forcing herself to remember the numb, stricken, sickened look on the face of the servant who'd come to break the news of the Red Wedding to her in Riverrun, Jeyne all but snatched Robbie back and fled below. She made it a point to avoid Marbrand for the rest of the day, and was only summoned out from her anchoress' hole by a sharp rap on the door, as the light was starting to go. "M'lady. We'll be landing in White Harbor within the hour. Make ready."
For what? Jeyne wondered drearily. Is it a queen, a relict, or a hostage that Lord Manderly awaits? She did not even know herself. She was clumsy and slow getting wrapped up. She did not feel in the least prepared for whatever was about to happen.

It was getting very cold when she came back on deck, and she instinctively checked that Robbie was well swaddled, even though she'd wrapped him in all the blankets herself. The ship's wake was the only scratch on the eerily glasslike water, and the stars were starting to come out above. Ahead and to the left, the sharp, snow-clad hills rose sheer from the shoreline, balancing the city of White Harbor on their stony hips. Torches flickered distantly from the serpentine walls, and from the ringfort atop Seal Rock. It smelled of fish and salt.

Jeyne's breath billowed silver, and she pulled her heavy mantle as tight as she could. They were moving at a clip fast enough to slap the cold air against her cheeks, and her teeth were chattering by the time they had passed into the inner harbor and were approaching the end of a long, perilous-looking jetty. She had also noticed, but not dared to ask the provenance of, the dark, burned hulks of ships lurking just beneath the waves in the outer one. Ser Edmure said a Lannister fleet was destroyed here, on Lord Wylis' orders. She was beyond all knowing whether that pleased her or not.

She was showed into the longboat again. Someone ordered, "Raise your hood," and she meekly did so, wondering who in this place could possibly know her on sight – then broke out in a cold grue at remembering the rumors that there were still Freys in the city thick as maggots on a corpse. Surely Lord Wylis, if he dared bringing her here, had done something about them too...? The alternative was too horrible to imagine.

They got ashore, and rode up the steep, twisting, cobbled streets lit by marble mermaids, past well-kept white stone houses with slanted roofs of grey slate, through the empty Fish Market and past the magnificent Sept of Snow. Robb had told her a little about White Harbor, and Jeyne dimly remembered the rest from the maps in her father's solar. A thousand years ago. Then the street narrowed into heavy ironwood gates, the Manderly men shouted to the sentinels on the wallwalk, and massive chains creaked and groaned as they opened into the New Castle courtyard.

Jeyne was bone-tired, hungry, cold, and cramped, and when Edmure and Ser Addam had a brief and silent scuffle as to who was going to assist her down from the horse, she accepted Edmure's hand, despite still feeling extremely frosty toward him for the mess he'd gotten them into. You failed Robb again, my lord. It was to her relief when one of the Manderlys took over instead, showing her into the castle and through the warren of dim corridors. Then they opened one more door, and stepped into the great hall itself.

It was barely any brighter, and Jeyne had to squint to see anything. She made out the fishing nets hanging from the ceiling, the scenes of seafaring life chiseled into the walls, and concluded that this must be the vaunted Merman's Court itself. But for a hall built to hold hundreds, it was almost deserted. Save for the fat man waiting alone on the high seat at the far end, half-hidden in shadow.

Jeyne did not know Wylis Manderly, as he'd been captured at the Battle of the Green Fork some time before she met Robb, but she had known his younger brother slightly, and knew as well that Wendel Manderly had died at the Red Wedding, died on her account. What must Lord Wylis think of me now? Her knees were shaking again as they advanced the length of the hall. She did not know if Robbie sensed her fear, but he remained quiet as a dormouse – so quiet, in fact, that she had to chance a nervous peek beneath the blankets to see if he was still breathing.

"My lady." Lord Wylis rose ponderously to his feet as they drew to a halt before him. He was immensely fat and bald as an egg, wearing a bushy mustache like his brother, but unlike the
boisterous, jolly Wendel, his manner was quiet and reserved. "Welcome to White Harbor."

Jeyne dipped a timid curtsey, and managed not to disgrace herself. "M-my lord is very generous." As if she'd had any choice in coming here.

"You look half frozen. I'll have warm cider brought." Lord Wylis clapped his hands, and a servant appeared, bowed, and disappeared. To the men he added, "You've done well. Now if you would kindly leave me with Lady Jeyne, Ser Addam, and Ser. . . Cristofer?"

The soldiers bowed and made their exit as well, and Jeyne found herself alone in the dim hall with Lord Wylis, Ser Addam, and Edmure, who had apparently been known as Ser Cristofer in prior company; she couldn't tell if Manderly had seen through the ruse, though that pause seemed to imply it. At any rate, the Lord of White Harbor waited until she had been brought her cider, and the servant had departed again. Then with no preliminary, he asked, "The child?"

Jeyne took a sip of cider, but could not wet her throat. "He. . . my lord, he is no use to you. He was. . . is. . . blind, or as good as. He. . . he has no right hand. Lord Galbart Glover already took care to proclaim that he could never inherit the north."

Lord Wylis' face remained expressionless. "Is that so? That is not what I wanted to hear, to be sure, after wagering so much to bring you here. Is there anything else you can offer me?"

Ser Addam shifted in his seat. "My lord of Manderly, speak her more gently," he urged. "She is young and sad and frightened, and has been through a terrible ordeal."

"Terrible ordeal?" Lord Wylis' mouth twisted oddly. "Whilst you were away on this errand, I have had strange news. Coming from one of the brave men I sent north with Ser Davos Seaworth, after he stumbled through my gates half-dead of fear and raving with madness. He had been running without pause for three days. By his tale, my men were attacked in a holdfast, a few leagues south of the Dreadfort, by wights in the snow. The dead things came on them unawares in the dark, stormed the keep and tore apart horse and man alike. Red slaughter." His mouth twisted again. "He died soon after telling me. There are no survivors."

Jeyne, Ser Addam, and Edmure all tried to say something at once. It was the latter who succeeded. "Wights? But. . . children's stories. . . monsters and the Long Night. . . the Wall. . ."

"No one will be happier to hear it than all my dead men." Lord Wylis' tone was cool. "As for the Wall, while I shudder to repeat such ill tidings, the presence of wights here, in the north, can only confirm the ghastly whispers I hear that it has fallen."

Fallen. Jeyne flinched, hearing again Lady Jyana Reed's ominous foretellings. Winterfell in ruins, dead things inside the walls. . . the north is under all-out attack. Gods above, the danger was only beginning.

Ser Addam gave her a sharp look, having somehow sensed her disquiet. But his words were addressed to Lord Wylis. "What about Davos Seaworth?"

The look Manderly returned to Marbrand was narrow and shrewd. "Ah. Yes. That would be a concern of yours, would it not, for all that you have offered me your service? As it just so happens, my man did not recall seeing the onion knight among the victims of the slaughter. There is no wager that he is still alive, but nor is there an absolute wager that he is dead. This, in fact – " and Lord Wylis turned to look directly at Edmure – "is where you will be assisting me. My lord of Tully."
Edmure had a moment to look shocked at being called by his right name. Then he had another to look even more shocked at the proposal. "What are you – I don't –"

"From what I am told," said Lord Wylis, voice cooler than ever, "it was your notion to take flight with the queen that wasted valuable time in getting her back here to safety, just so you hoped the Lannisters could not take credit for it. It is time, in fact, that we see what you are good for. You were born a Tully of Riverrun, I imagine you know quite well how to handle a boat. You'll sail north as far as you can with a crew of my good remaining men, and find Davos Seaworth – alive, dead, or otherwise. As well, the truth of what happened in that attack."

Edmure was starting to look queasy. "My lord... this is suicide, you can't..."

"My lord father risked his neck to save Davos Seaworth's life. And my lord father is, or at least he was when he last sent me a raven, alive but grievously wounded in Stannis Baratheon's company. Find Davos Seaworth, and you will find Stannis Baratheon, and hence my lord father, as well as my own personal gratitude and the name of hero throughout the realm." Lord Wylis did not blink. "Not to mention, where and how we must gird our loins to face the Boltons for the final battle. At least, if you succeed. Die trying, and..." He shrugged. "They may make songs of you, but we're not likely to live long enough to hear them. If the wights are still pressing south, they could reach White Harbor itself in days."

Edmure, doubtless thinking of how he himself had warned Howland Reed not to underestimate Wylis Manderly, just sat there with his mouth opening and shutting (rather appropriately) like a fish. While his dumbstruck state persisted, Lord Wylis turned to Ser Addam. "I don't like you, Marbrand, but you're an honest and loyal man, and if the dead ones are on the move, I need all the living ones I can get. You said you'll serve me. It's time too for you to prove it. Sail south and get me – get the north – all the fighters that you can. On the way, put in at the Vale. I hear strange rumors from there as well, and I would know their truth or falsehood."

Ser Addam looked almost as blindsided as Edmure, but he managed to nod. "As you will, my lord," he said formally. "The Vale and – where? King's Landing? I hear strange rumors about there as well. If you wish me to return all the way to my family's lands in the west, it will be far too late by the time I –"

"Gather men from the Vale, then," Lord Wylis instructed him. "The ties between Arryn and Stark are strong. You too will have a host of my men with you, elsewise it would seem more than passing strange that Lord Tywin Lannister's most decorated battle commander turned up hat in hand to plead for the cause of the north. But pay no heed to whatever excuse that skulking whoremaster Baelish tries to peddle off, and – what is it?"

Jeyne, Ser Addam, and Edmure all looked around in confusion, thinking he was addressing them, but it turned out to be aimed at a servant, who was approaching with great trepidation up the Merman's Court's broad aisle. "My lord..."

"Aye?" Lord Wylis said brusquely. "Out with it."

"I..." The servant took a deep, bracing breath, then made the sign of the star on himself and blurted it out. "It's Rickon Stark. On my soul, my lord. The boy and his direwolf are gone."
The great castle reared high overhead on its bluff of tide-scoured rock, looking exactly like a lion tensed to spring upon its enemies. Buttresses of blond sandstone, corbels and crenels capped in pale cream, the frigid Sunset Sea lashing its foundations and its towers vanishing in the underbelly of the murky clouds. There was no one visible on the distant parapets that overlooked the bay – without Tywin, Kevan, Jaime, Cersei, or even Tyrion, mighty Casterly Rock could be gleefully imagined to have lost its teeth and claws, but Jon Connington was not fooled. Legend claimed it had never fallen. The same had been said of Storm's End, of course, yet if anything it made Connington even more wary. As Storm's End's own tale proved, the gods did not care to be defied even once. Twice, and... He shook his head and turned away, working his maimed hand in its glove. The spread of the greyscale had slowed after his self-amputation, sure enough, but without fingers, it was almost as bloody useless as if he'd taken the entire thing. It had been extremely difficult to concoct an alibi as to why he wished to proceed to the siege of Casterly Rock with Aurane Waters' fleet of dromonds, rather than the attack on King's Landing with Aegon. Finally he'd had to resort to showing the scabbed stumps of his knuckles, leaking blood and ooze, and mouthing some fable about how he'd taken a wound to the hand during a skirmish in the stormlands, the wound had festered, and he had chopped them off to avoid a deadly infection.

This, of course, was all true so far as it went. But it had been cause for an explosive confrontation with the prince, who was furious that Connington had not let Haldon Halfmaester wield the knife, instead nearly crippling himself with his own stubbornness. That had then provoked Connington's wounded pride and guilty conscience into firing back that Aegon himself knew something about blockheaded stubbornness, and the two of them had departed Storm's End without speaking again. Combined with the news about Princess Myrcella, and the fact that Ser Loras Tyrell had accompanied Aegon and the Dornishmen to the capital, intending to rescue his sister Margaery come hell or high water... The memory chafed at Connington more or less constantly, like a burr in a boot. Even the adventure of getting here had not been enough to make it stop, and it had been a bloody adventure. Myr and Tyrosh were disputing over the Disputed Lands again, making a deathtrap of the Stepstones off the Dornish coast, and while longships could be portaged overland and sailed in the rivers Cockleswhent and Mander, the dromonds, with their deeper drafts, two decks, banks of oars, and battering rams, were much too large even for the considerable talents of the riverlords Mooton and Ryger.

So they'd had to take their chances with an open-sea voyage through the Stepstones, far south into the Summer Sea; they did not dare to come too close to the coast, even if that coast was Dornish desert. There were all sorts of ghastly tales of how the ironmen were pillaging from the Shield Islands to the Stony Shore, and even that they had come as far south as the Honeywine. They'd already made one attempt on Oldtown itself, and with Euron Crow's Eye at the helm, must be assumed to be returning for a repeat engagement. As satisfying as it would be to smite the kraken bastards, it would take valuable strength away from their push on the last remnant of Lannister power. Lord Jon did recall what Ser Loras had claimed, that the Crow's Eye had made some sort of unholy alliance with the ancient enemy... but he had foes enough among living men. No need to add demons to the count.

The wind and water had been with them, fortunately, and they'd made it through the Broken Arm, past the Arbor, and into the Sunset Sea with only a minimum of disaster or delay. One of the
dromonds had rolled over and sank almost fully loaded, after they'd been caught by a freak squall and almost blown aground, but that was mostly the extent of the misfortunes. It had occurred to Connington that if Aegon's attack on King's Landing had been successful, the war might be over by now, and all they had to do was cuff the Lannisters twice or thrice. That, however, was another of the fond hopes he did not wager on too dearly. Lions, like other beasts, were all the more dangerous when wounded, and even if the prince by a miracle had managed to breach the city walls with the Golden Company, the Dornishmen, and the elephants, he'd still be in for a harrowing ordeal of seizing and holding control. Victory in battle, as the first Aegon had proved, was only the first step for a conqueror.

Yet even so, it was nothing to scoff at, and if the story continued to spread that Aegon Targaryen was not only alive but had taken Storm's End, King's Landing, and – gods be good – Casterly Rock, the rest of the country would have all the reason they needed to fall in line. It was very close to the tipping point now. Neither Stannis nor Tommen could command any affection or loyalty outside their ever-dwindling circle of diehard supporters. No man in his right mind would take Euron Greyjoy for king. The only holdout would be the north, but once spring came and they all thawed out to find Prince Rhaegar's trueborn son with his arse on the Iron Throne and (again, gods be good) three large dragons, the pressure would be considerable for them to follow old Torrhen Stark's example, and bend the knee. If not . . .

Connington shook his head again. It did him no good to wander that far in the future. Ignoring the stabs of pain from his hand, he swallowed down the ever-present taste of bile in his throat and strode across the foredeck to find Waters. He disliked taking orders from a common sellsail, but while his years masquerading as Griff might have educated him admirably in the use of river poleboats, a fleet of dromonds girded for battle was different. "What next, my lord?" The title came grudgingly through his teeth. The crown's erstwhile Master of Ships or not, the Bastard of Driftmark was no lord.

Aurane Waters glanced sidelong at him, with that perpetual amused little smirk he wore. Once Connington had been able to put aside the young man's haunting resemblance to Rhaegar, he found everything about him irritating, but this was the choice he'd made for Aegon's cause. And as if he knew precisely what Connington was thinking, the sellsail said, "You needn't strain yourself so on my account. If Lord Aurane comes too hard to you, Waters will suffice. So long as you do not object that I should call you Griff."

"Fine. Fine." Connington had not come this far to dicker about titles, and he'd grown used to his alias over time, remembering the happy days when Aegon was only his son, even if pretended, and too small to care about battles and thrones and crowns. "So what do you advise, Waters?"

Aurane made a graciously deferring gesture. "Surely King Aerys' old Hand should speak first."

Connington heard the mockery in that, but chose to let it pass. "Very well. We have twelve ships – eleven," he amended, remembering the sunk one – "and even the Conqueror did not underestimate the power of the Rock. It would be best for you to take half the ships into the Lion's Mouth; if the Rock is as undefended as it appears, you will be able to infiltrate it from within fairly easily. The rest of us should come ashore, storm and take Lannisport, and circle around behind, so you're not pinned down in the castle if something goes amiss."

Waters considered, scratching his silver-blonde beard. "And who leads this landward assault? You?"

Connington flushed. He had in fact spoken out of his old, unconscious assumption that he would be physically fit to swing a sword, and it galled him to the marrow that Waters had to give it the lie
yet again. "Aye, I could command it," he said stiffly, unwilling to back down altogether. "A prudent captain rides at the rear, does not partake directly in the fighting." And look how well prudence served you at Stoney Sept. "Otherwise – "

"That would indeed be suitable, my lord of Griff," said Waters, reading his mind with uncanny accuracy yet again, "if prudent was truly what we needed. To take Casterly Rock, even weakened and abandoned, requires something a bit more."

"If you are suggesting that we take all the dromonds down the lion's throat, I in turn must object. Too many men will only tie us up in the dark tunnels of the Mouth, and cause confusion in the landing." Connington was swiftly changing his mind on whether the Bastard of Driftmark had any idea whatsoever of the requirements of a naval battle; he looked too much like a young man playing a game with wooden swords. Too much like Aegon, but Connington pushed that disloyal thought aside. "Besides – "

"I am the commander of this fleet," Waters said. His little smile had disappeared. "Therefore – "

"You may be, but you and Ser Loras swore fealty to the prince and the Targaryen claim. In default of Aegon's own presence, I speak with his voice, and I will not allow you to dramatically demonstrate to Cersei Lannister just how much of a mistake she made in trusting you, at the expense of winning a strategically viable victory. And so – "

Waters looked sulky. "If you thought this all along, why did you even ask me?"

Connington stared at him incredulously. "For the reason you just named. You are the commander. I hoped to secure your opinion and agreement. As well, we must make a decision quickly. Now that they have seen the fleet, the Lannister sentries will have raised the alarm. If we wish to preserve any element of surprise, we must be ready to launch the attack."

"I thought we were just going to besiege them," Waters drawled. "That's the prudent thing to do. Especially for crippled old – "

At that, Lord Jon's strained temper had finally had all it cared to take. Seizing the young mercenary's collar with his good hand, he spun him around, slammed him to his knees on the deck, and peeled off his glove with his teeth, shoving the bandaged stumps into Waters' face. "Listen, you little pissant," he snarled. "I'll not hear another word on how I'm a hobbling old coward, unless you too wish to cut off your own fingers and so prove something to me. Now hold to your oath and do what we've come for, otherwise throw yourself into the sea. I'll not be leaping in to rescue you, either."

The Bastard of Driftmark, Connington was pleased to note, did look rather taken aback. If he'd known what that hand was truly infected with, he'd be groveling, but not even to wrestle Waters to heel would Connington risk that secret getting out. Instead, he let go of the ruffled admiral, and clumsily pulled his glove back on. "Your answer to your own question, by the by, is correct. I will lead the land assault." What do I have to lose any more? What at all? His own guilt for not being able to accompany Aegon to King's Landing, for nearly giving him greyscale, for saving the damned dwarf in the first place... Lord Jon cast a baleful look at Tyrion Lannister's childhood home, looming industriously away on the bluffs above them. That is one score that will soon be set aright.

Waters, somewhat deflated, sloped away to issue the orders. Connington glanced across the rapidly darkening purple ocean, and the skeletal silhouettes of the dromonds, their translucent sails and double banks of oars making them resemble large, exotic water beetle. Torches burned on their forecastles, and drums kept up a deep, steady call to muster. He could see the small dark figures
scuttling around as the Golden Company – half of it, at least – readied for battle. The other half, the seasoned men they'd taken raiding down Cape Wrath, had accompanied the prince to King's Landing. These were the ones who until recently had been taking their repose of the flesh in the Summer Isles, and Connington devoutly hoped that the relative lack of discipline would not cost them.

Preparations were soon made. Another dromond drew up alongside theirs, and Lord Jon, not trusting himself to swing over on a rope, elected for a plank instead. The sunset was sullen red behind them, and the waves were getting choppy, even a few hundred yards out from the breakers. The Mootons, the Rygers, and the other riverlords would be staying aboard the flagship with Waters, assaulting the Rock by sea. Apart from the fact that their expertise in handling small craft would be essential in staging the landing, they were slaverling to do their worst to the place where their wronged liege lord had been so recently held prisoner. And for that matter, find out what had happened to him. It was increasingly whispered that Edmure Tully had been mysteriously spirited out of Casterly Rock – he certainly hadn't been executed with his wife Roslin and the Westerlings – and several of the riverlords were darkly convinced that this meant his bones were moldering somewhere in the sea caves. If they did find evidence of his murder, even the Mother Herself would despair of entreating them to mercy during the sack.

This, however, was not presently Lord Jon's concern. His heart was pounding fast and short with nervousness, vexing him. Lannisport was a prosperous fishing village, but they'd taken on more stoutly garrisoned keeps in the stormlands without outstanding difficulty. It had walls, but so, rather more impressively, had Storm's End. The village folk might have one or two messengers flying down from the Rock to bear tale of the enemy fleet that had appeared out of the sea, but then, they might not. They might have thought it just a cry of wolf, though there was good reason to fear the ironborn, and confusion and panic would only aid the Golden Company's cause.

The ships drew apart. The oars dipped and splashed, fighting to keep the big dromonds on course against the rising wind. They began to move off down the coast, the other half of the fleet swiftly fading in the twilight behind them. Connington glanced up, and was unsettled to see that the slender paring of moon was almost blanketed in the increasing raft of clouds. He could also taste the coldness in the air. A storm is coming. And thought of what he had thought before. The gods do not like to be defied.

The deck was starting to pitch under his feet, so he grasped hold of a shroud with his good hand to avoid taking an undignified tumble. His mind kept returning to the fisherfolk of Lannisport, drawing closer with every pull on the oars. If it comes down to it, he reminded himself, you must kill them. He did not intend to do so if it could be avoided, but as he had never been able to forget for almost twenty years, his tender conscience at the Battle of the Bells had prevented him from doing what had to be done for Rhaegar. He could not fail Aegon the same way. Not with so much at stake.

They were picking up speed. Cliffs flew by them to the left, the black sea to the right. Lord Jon felt something cool and light kiss his cheek, put up his mutilated hand in confusion, and realized that it was a snowflake. A fine, glittering dusting was already settling on the spars and sails, making the flames in the lanterns dance a reel, and the drums answered with a tattoo that he felt down to his bones, making him shudder for more reasons than merely the cold. A horn sang out above them, high and piercing, almost fey. The dragons, it called. The dragons are coming.

The fleet rounded the rocky spur, and there before them was the village on its headland. As Lannisport was, after all, a port, there was no need to waste much thought on the landing. If they had more than a few hours' notice that invaders were coming, they might have burned their quays and barred their gates, but they hadn't. It was simplicity incarnate, therefore, for the five dromonds
to ship their oars, glide in past the breakwater, throw out rope, and coast in for a docking the same as any other merchant vessel. But instead of clothiers from Lys, glassblowers from Volantis, gourmands from Oldtown or grocers from Highgarden, it was the Golden Company that swarmed down the gangway, armed to the teeth and spoiling for a fight.

Distant, windblown in the night, Lord Jon could hear the bells of the Lannisport sept singing of the danger, a sound that instinctively turned his stomach. The mercenaries were already ripping out heavy planks from the pier to serve as battering rams – some of them, at any rate. The rest were uncoiling grappling hooks and cords, throwing them up to snag on a merlon and starting the ascent. Lannisport's walls were only twelve or fifteen feet, built of unmortared stone – a cinch for a man to climb, at least if he had both his hands. Assuming they met with no stout-hearted citizens, the Golden Company would be over in minutes.

*This is going to be a slaughter,* Lord Jon realized. And suddenly, he had quite lost his taste for allowing it. If Aegon's forces overran Lannisport without the least resistance, if they burned and raped and put to the sword its inhabitants, they would lose any gloss they had as the delivering, conquering heroes. Men would remember Mad King Aerys. Men would remember how Lord Tywin had saved them from it, and how the Sack of King's Landing had been tacitly condoned as a horrible but necessary measure, to purge the stain and the shame of the Targaryens' defiled dynasty. They must not. They must *not.*

Lord Jon found his voice. "HOLD!" He ran to the gangplank and vaulted down it, tearing up the gutted pier toward the detachment busily assaulting the gates. He could already hear screams coming from inside, more of the Golden Company shinnying up the trailing ropes and over the walls. "It's peasants you face, *peasants!* Take the towers and the walls and see to it that no one escapes, but for the gods' sakes, stay your swords! *We have not come to murder them!*

Even while he was screaming, there was a small aghast part of him wondering what he was doing, being so unutterably foolish as to repeat his oldest and most enduring mistake. But he found himself just as unable – and just as convinced of its sin – as he had been when he refused to murder every man, woman, and child in Stoney Sept to smoke out Robert Baratheon. Leaving Lannisport in flames would write no glorious victory in the annals of mankind. It might not even bring Aegon closer to claiming his father's stolen crown; in fact, it could well do the opposite. Above all, it would mean that the innocent blood he had refrained from shedding at the Battle of the Bells – the one cold victory of all the downfall and defeat that followed – would now be on his hands in truth, and with the weight of what he already bore on his conscience, Jon Connington could stand no more.

"ENOUGH!" He noted in an unimportant way that there were cold tears on his cheeks, that he was shoving through the scrum like a man possessed, that the mercenaries had debarked the horses; he snatched the nearest of these and swung up into the saddle with a fair simulacrum of his old agility. The glare of torches and lanterns and flames burned through the salt in his eyes as he galloped up to the rapidly crumbling gate, then through into Lannisport. Let them call him a coward, let Waters call him a coward, but Connington did not care. All along, he had vowed to himself that he would not avenge his silver prince at the cost of becoming his father, and at last, that promise, that belief, was stronger than the guilt. He felt half mad with grief, and yet devastatingly clear-headed. *No. I need apologize no longer for what is done and gone. All that matters is what is to come.*

Connington felt, just then, that the spirit of Rhaegar had truly entered into him, that he was no longer merely a decades-exiled, aging ex-mercenary and failed Hand, rumored to have died of drink and actually dying of the grey bane. He rode in circles, up and down, bellowing himself hoarse. The snow was coming harder and harder, blowing slantwise into his face; he had to wipe his eyes with his gloved stump. Yet by dint of his relentless effort, he managed to keep, if barely,
the attack in order. He refused to let the smallfolk be attacked, forcing the mercenaries to the walls and ramparts; once they established a beachhead and fortified their hold on the town, they could effectively cut off any reinforcements attempting to arrive at Casterly Rock by land. It was just possible that none would come, as the westermen were for the moment largely on their side, but the balance all depended on what happened with Aegon at King's Landing. If little Tommen's remaining men did somehow manage to put the prince on his heels, they might catch wind of the menace to their homeland and feel more confident in racing west to counter it. An army on quick march, taking the gold road and provisioning in the bare minimum of food and sleep, could make it here from the capital in less than five days.

Lord Jon lost track of almost everything after that. There was no room for it. Yet at some point he became aware that they had it, that it was over, their men were posted on every tower and every rooftop, tearing down the Lannister lions from where they flew over the village square and running up the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen instead. But on the dark horizon to the north, he could see the eerie glow of flames, lambent against the low, heavy clouds. Casterly Rock – or its attacker – was burning.

"To me!" Connington took his good hand off the reins to put two fingers in his mouth and blow a sharp whistle, and the mounted half of the mercenaries thundered up behind him. A brief entanglement later, more with the ruins of the gate than anything the stunned Lannisporters could offer, they were out of the village and riding hellbent up the road to the crag, slewing in mud and snow, their breath visible in light of the inferno up ahead. Strange umber shadows twisted and scattered, and Connington tasted smoke rasping in his throat. Stone does not burn.

They galloped up and around the final turn, to the portcullis and gatehouse that guarded the approach up to the Rock. It was open, wrenched half off its hinges, and posed no impediment. Higher and higher they rode, closer and closer, and Connington could see that the flames were gushing from the courtyard, the stables, the maze of tunnels that honeycombed through the Rock. High above, half the windows in the central keep, the hallowed hall of House Lannister, were blown out. Even as Lord Jon and the Golden Company stared up in mesmeric fascination, there was a rending scream and the flailing figure of a man hurtled out into thin air. With arms outspread, he seemed, for a transfixed moment, to fly. Then he tumbled head over heels and landed not five yards away, spooking the horses already leery of the fire, with a horrible, wet, yielding squelch. Ichor spattered the courtyard stones, greyness leaked from under a shattered skull. The only thing redder than his tabard, though both looked black in the firelight, was his blood. Red, Connington thought, exhilarated yet queerly, perfectly calm. Red, Lannister red, it's ours, we're taking it, we've taken it, it's ours. His eyes were stinging from the smoke, yet he could look around and understand that it was the Golden Company setting it, that the riverlords must have navigated the dark sea caves under the Rock to the secret passages within. He watched the chaos, knew that they had won, that they had taken both Storm's End and Casterly Rock and surely King's Landing, that as the snow swirled down around his hot face he almost felt like laughing. The lions had had their teeth pulled one by one, by death and imprisonment and madness and exile. The wheel of the world's justice ground slowly, but just then, Jon Connington had no doubt that it ground well.

The sky was turning grey in the east by the time the devastation was halted. Dead Lannister men-at-arms littered the courtyard, in comparison to only a few of the Golden Company, and broken glass sparkled like shards of ice among the steadily falling snow. The surviving mercenaries, drunk with greed, were emerging from the cellars, with salvers and chalices stuffed down their shirts and jewels and coins bursting through their fingers. Lord Tywin's shit. As for the riverlords, they were even more voracious. The Red Wedding, the siege and fall of Riverrun, the manifest insults and devastation that they and theirs had endured under the Lannister lord and his mad dog Gregor
Clegane; out of all of Westeros, their homelands might have suffered the worst in the war, and they were wasting nothing in their vengeance. One of the Lannister men was still moaning for mercy, and a pack of jeering Rygers gathered around and took it in turns to bash his head in with a heavy golden platter, demanding to know how he liked the lions' riches now. Once he had stopped moving, the Ryger ringleader undid his laces, pulled out his cock, and pissed in the corpse's mouth.

Connington glanced away. Unlike in Lannisport, he did not feel that he had the right to call off the dogs here, but that did not mean he had to watch. Instead, he reined in and dismounted, then had to clutch onto the saddle pommel as his head turned in a sickening whirl. His legs were cramped and agonized from the long night of riding, and to judge from the new red stains seeping through his gloves – not to mention the pain – he had torn the scabs off the stumps of his fingers. For a moment, he actually caught himself worrying about infection. Then he laughed bitterly, cursed aloud, and had his best go at an insouciant stroll across the ruins of the courtyard, into the dim, sooty, snowy Great Hall.

The windows, as he had noted, were smashed, and the gilted hangings, worked with the roaring lion of House Lannister, had been slashed or torn from the rafters, trampled with muddy boots and sputtering with ill-smelling smoke where some of the Mootons had unsuccessfully attempted to set one alight. Tables and benches were upturned, blood soaking into the rushes where a few bodies sprawled beneath them, facedown. From the looks of them, they had been servants, unarmed. And now dead. There is nothing you can do.

Here, as Connington had expected, he found Aurane Waters. The sellsail was comfortably installed in the ancestral Lannister family seat, a hulking mahogany throne carved in likeness of a lion, one leg flung over the side. He was enjoying what he clearly considered to be a well-earned cup of wine, and on spotting Connington, he lifted one hand and expended the minimum amount of effort in a wave. "My lord of Griff."

"Waters." Whatever hubris had leaked out of the Bastard of Driftmark earlier was clearly going to be back in full throat. I do owe him a debt of gratitude, Connington reminded himself unhappily. "You've done well."

Aurane preened. "Just as planned. How went your visit with the fisherfolk?"

"Just as planned," Lord Jon echoed shortly. "I suppose you'll be wanting payment?"

"I don't work for free, no." Waters tossed down his last swallow of wine, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and sauntered across the dais toward Connington. "Fortunately, if you're in want of easy money, you could hardly have sacked – excuse me, requisitioned me to sack – a more suitable place. Even after I've had all I want, there will still be plenty left for you."

Connington bristled. "I am no common brigand."

"Suit yourself." Waters shrugged. "The rest of us with less highly developed moral sensibilities see no reason why, now that Lord Tywin is banging on his tomb lid down in the Hall of Heroes, his wealth should not be enjoyed by those more deserving. You might want to take some, however. The Golden Company, aside from the ones happily looting right now, isn't going to pay itself. Unless they've altruistically put aside their fee, just for the pleasure of seating Aegon on the throne?"

Rather than concede the point, Connington grunted. Mercenaries, even if descended from Blackfyre exiles, did not work for free either, and it was another sore spot with him that they were reduced to paying the scions of former traitors for their swords. Even if he himself had served in the Golden Company for half a decade and valued the rough fraternal camaraderie and mutual
hatred of Robert Baratheon that united them, he never entirely ceased to wonder what Varys and Illyrio Mopatis had said to them, what they had done or revealed or promised, to make them so eager to fight for the restoration of a Targaryen line that they had considered illegitimate since the time of Daeron the Good and their own infamous founder Aegor Rivers, Bittersteel. Aegon’s speculation that Varys and Illyrio themselves were Blackfyres made a good deal too much unsettling sense, and that led to the very brink of questions that Connington, even in the very deepest and darkest recesses of his thoughts, refused to let himself entertain. But remembering his conversation with Ser Loras back at Storm’s End, where the Knight of Flowers had gotten him to admit successively that he’d had nothing to do with Aegon’s rescue from the royal nursery, that he hadn’t met the prince or known of his survival until he was five years old, and that he’d taken the word of the two most untrustworthy men on the earth’s face in doing so, the eunuch and the cheesemonger, bothered Lord Jon anew. Beneath the gold, the bitter steel.

This is all suspicious nonsense, he reminded himself angrily. Lady Lemore would not lie to me, and my silver prince. . . I see him in Aegon more and more each day. Yet he himself had been Rhaegar Targaryen’s dear friend, had raised the boy from childhood, had told him countless stories of his father’s talent and temperance and chivalry. . . any lad would want to be like that, any lad would think he had the right. . .

"You look verily as if you are having some sort of dilemma, my lord," Aurane Waters observed lazily. "Should I turn my back to give you some privacy?"

"Mind your own business," Connington snapped. He was of half a mind to give the pup a further lesson in humility, seeing as the first clearly had not been very lasting. In fact, he had taken a step toward doing just that, when the doors of the Great Hall – or what was left of them, at any rate – suddenly crashed open.

Connington jumped, fumbling for his sword. He could barely grasp the hilt properly with the wrong hand, far less draw it, and thought blackly that if it was some avenging spirit of the Rock, he would have to rely on Waters to save him and that would just be no good at all. But he realized now that it was only one man, staggering bow-legged between the overturned benches and dead servants with a look on his face as if he did not even see them. He was as pale as a corpse himself, battered and weather-beaten, and with mounting disquiet, Connington recognized him. It was one of Franklyn Flowers’ serjeants – one of the young Mudds, he thought – who had sailed to attack King’s Landing with Aegon. What in damnation was he doing here?

"Ser," Lord Jon said curtly, as the stumbling man reached them and went or fell to his knees. "You have news?"

"I – I do." The mercenary’s voice was slurred, but with exhaustion, not drink. "I’ve been riding all but without a pause for three days. Gods be good, I’m glad you’re here. But you must come at once. The prince. . . the prince. . ."

Jon Connington’s world turned upside down. He barely remembered lunging across the dais, stumbling near as badly himself, reaching the Mudd and shaking him like a cat with a mouse in its jaws. "What?" he croaked. "What? What about the prince?"

"M’lord, he. . ." The serjeant gulped air. "M’lord, he’s. . . grave hurt. He insisted on coming ashore with the first attack, and. . . some big whoreson charged down the beach and took him on single-handed. Once we saw, we did make it in time to knock the crazy bastard away, but some bloody Warrior’s Sons got there before we could finish him. They dragged him off, we dragged the prince off, just managed to get back to the ships as the entire battle turned to rout. We. . . we lost bad. What’s survived of our forces retreated to the mouth of the Wendwater to regroup, and I was sent
out on our fastest horse in hopes you had made it here. Rode the beast so hard it done and died just a mile or so from here. Three days, as I said."

The messenger looked as if he might do and die himself, but Connington barely cared. All his worst fears had just been realized, as if in punishment for his heretical thoughts. Aegon sorely wounded, the attack on King's Landing broken up and turned to disarray... I must go to him. But what could one man do? How could he put together the pieces of what this failure had cost them? My prince, my prince, what have you done?

"It's not all," the messenger added, still gasping. "Two other things I learned on the road. First is that the Citadel itself is said to have been sacked by the ironmen, that Oldtown is in flames, that Euron Greyjoy's monsters scaled the Hightower and murdered Lord Leyton and every one of his kin they could get their hands on. Next, Randyll Tarly is pressing closer and closer to King's Landing with his ten thousand men. We outwitted and eluded him on our first approach, but if he hears where the prince is hiding, that he's a sitting duck with the remaining Targaryen fleet at Wendwater..." He let that particularly horrible implication trail off into silence.

Gods be good. All of Connington's triumph at the conquest of Casterly Rock had burned off like fog in the sun. The Citadel fallen, Lord Hightower dead? Randyll Tarly closing pincers on the grievously wounded Aegon? And he himself sitting here on the other side of the country because of his foolishness, because he could not let Tyrion Lannister of all men die without reason? Look how well your noble forbearance in sparing the fisherfolk of Lannisport served you after all. When will you stop trying to be a bloody hero?

He did not know. But there was only one choice to atone for this. He cared not at all about the ludicrous danger, the toll it would take on him when he was already in such fragile condition. Rhaegar, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

"As soon as you can sit a horse," Jon Connington told the messenger, "we leave for King's Landing."

That was precisely what they did. A pair of fools, a cripple and a mercenary, lashing themselves to their saddles so they could sleep without stopping, one leading the other. Blind men both. Not without severe misgivings, Connington had left Aurane Waters and the rest of the Golden Company behind to consolidate their hold on the westerlands; besides, if they did get caught and killed by Randyll Tarly, it was best for it to be two men and not two thousand. Even if one of them was Connington. But if I do die, and the prince is incapacitated..."

No good thinking of that. If, gods forbid, it did come to pass, he would be dead, and beyond caring. He had not ridden so hard even when he was fleeing into exile ahead of Aerys' wrath, or when he was hastening to Pentos on Varys' cryptic word that a certain young son of a dear friend awaited. Every mile jounced away sent another red-hot spear of pain through the remnant of his hand, and opened great suppurating sores on the inside of his legs. He might have slowed the insidious creep of greyscale in his flesh, but on that hellish flight east, Jon Connington felt death very close behind him, almost breathing down his neck. He scarcely dared to turn around too quickly lest he behold the advancing black-cowled ghoul of the Stranger, his empty hood and outstretched hand.

At last, sometime on the late afternoon of the fourth day after they'd had a horrifically close call with Tarly's outriders, blundered into the kingswood to escape them, and followed the rivulet of the Wendwater north to its mouth, they reached the barren, rocky stretch of estuary where the Targaryen fleet was anchored, all its banners struck and all its hatches battened. The loss of ships was not quite as severe as Connington had feared, but that was pitifully small potatoes in light of everything else.
His exhausted mind was already sifting through possible options as to where they could go – they certainly couldn't stay here, not with Lord Randyll just hours behind. Due north lay Driftmark, but it was a tiny, undefended island and Connington had no desire to further indebt himself to Aurane Waters. South was Storm's End and Griffin's Roost, but turning that direction would place them squarely in the teeth of Tarly's advancing army. West was King's Landing, which was plainly insuperable, and east was Pentos. That was a possibility, but Connington would feel safer bedding down with a brood of vipers than with Magister Illyrio Mopatis, protestations of devotion and alliance notwithstanding. Still, it might be their only chance.

He was reeling in the saddle by the time they had descended to the muddy, icy coastline, and greeted by a pair of Golden Company serjeants who were clearly astounded to see Lord Jon in the flesh, haggard as it was. Cursory pleasantries were exchanged, and with a mercenary on each arm, Connington was helped aboard the flagship and taken down to Prince Aegon's cabin.

It was hot, dim, and smelled of tallow, medicine, sweat, and blood. The prince himself lay on a narrow cot swathed in tangled sheets, attended solicitously by Arianne Martell and Elia Sand themselves. The Dornishwomen looked just as unkempt and unslept, thick black curls coming down in tangles, and Connington experienced a grudging gratitude for their presence. At least he did not see Ser Loras, which was either very good or very bad.

"Leave me." His voice sounded cramped as well, dull as a tuneless bell. But the serjeants bowed, deposited him on a stool, and left him there with the prince and the women.

Aegon, hearing his voice, had started to move agitatedly. He even tried to sit up, which Connington was abjectly relieved to see; he couldn't be hurt that badly if so. A heavy linen bandage covered much of his face, but one eye still looked out. His voice was a hoarse, pained whisper. "Griff?"

"It's me, my prince." Connington edged the stool nearer, to stroke a lock of blue-silver hair off his flushed forehead. "Gods have mercy, what. . .?"

Aegon tried to say something else, but Arianne laid a hand on his shoulder. "Let me." With that she turned to Connington, clearly daring him to order her to leave, and said, "The prince took a slash across the face, under the left eye across the cheek to the right jaw. It has been stitched, but must be cleaned often to prevent festering. He still has sight in the eye, thank the Mother, but we do not know how long it will take to mend."

Aegon uttered a low gurgling noise that was plainly some sort of interrogative. He coughed wetly, tried again, and managed to come out with, "... Rock?"

"Taken for now," Connington said wearily, electing not to burden the prince with all his misgivings about Waters and his choice to spare the rod at Lannisport. "It is even possible we will hold it."

"You came as if it already was," Elia Sand commented coolly.

"I came because my prince had need of me." Connington glared at the Sand Snake. "And I will not hear advice on how to treat the Lannisters from you, girl. Is it not your sister Obara who is bragging even now of having killed Princess Myrcella under your uncle Doran's nose?"

Arianne, on the other side of the bed, flinched as if stabbed. She was unable to even speak of Myrcella's reported demise, and Connington did not know how to feel either. On the one hand, Myrcella was the incestuous get of Jaime and Cersei Lannister, the family whose crimes were all too well known. But he had, after all, just seen Casterly Rock put to the ruin. And it was Gregor Clegane who had killed children without a care, who would have killed Aegon.
Connington had to ask another difficult question. "Where is Ser Loras Tyrell?"

The Dornishwomen exchanged glances. At last Arianne said, "He did not return to the fleet with us. If he survived, he must be in King's Landing somewhere, hunting for his sweet sister."

"If he survived boiling oil on Dragonstone, we would be unwise to discount him." Though if not, the loss of Ser Loras would prove hard to smooth over with the Tyrells. Another conundrum. "Still, we must leave here before nightfall. Lord Randyll Tarly is coming. I know you will not like this, my prince, and neither do I. But we must sail for Pentos."

"Nnn. . ." Aegon struggled to speak through the thick linen bandages. He made a retching noise, cut off, then tried again. "No. Not Pentos. Only one place. We can go now."

"Where?" Connington struggled against the mounting despair. "Where?"

Aegon's eye was feverish, but still burned with fierce conviction. "Lord Stannis. Is gone. We must take. The seat of my House. We must make. Our own dragons. If my aunt does not come. With hers. Dragonstone, my lord. We must sail for Dragonstone."
Out here, he could see more stars than ever before. The dryness of the desert air, the heights of their precipice, the Skahazadhan river delta tumbling out to the shredded wreck of a city still clinging to its mouth, the jumble of sandstone mountains and canyons, the perpetually circling buzzards and distant, redolent reek of rotting flesh from the killing fields of the Yunkish camp, the fact that the Dothraki had taken apart anything left to die again, and hung bodies over the barbican walls to ripen and blacken and wither. . . if one could overlook all that, the stars were truly quite spectacular. Fat as a fist, lucent as if punched through crystal, embroidering the black velvet beauty of Meereen's nights as if in recompense for the ghastliness of its days. Sure, he was stranded in a desolate oasis with his illegitimate fucking daughter who didn't even know that she was his illegitimate fucking daughter, and they'd soon die of exposure or starvation, but at least the stars were beautiful. Thank you, gods. I know how much you care for me.

Penny and Tyrion had been stuck out here, by his estimation, for a fortnight at least. After he'd rescued her as Khal Mago's attack was closing in, soared up into the sun with Viserion writhing and twisting higher, higher, higher, he hadn't had even the shreds of a clever plan in mind. But somehow the dragon kept on madly flapping, farther and farther away from the city. Even deeper fear had filled Tyrion as they went – being abandoned in the Khyzai Pass or the unforgiving desert would be just a longer and more brutal death – but as he wrestled and cursed with the slippery, steaming scales beneath him, he was unpleasantly disabused of any delusion he had about his ability to control the monster. He was just about to fall, but Penny had seized him around the waist and yanked him back. He'd never known she was so strong, but terror gave both men and dwarfs alike unexpected steel.

Everything had mostly been a blur after that, though he wished it had been more. So it would block out the ungodly noises screaming on the wind after them. He kept waiting for Viserion to wheel around, to fly back, to fulfill the obligation the cursed horn had created for him to serve Victarion Greyjoy, but the dragon never did. Then they were swerving, plunging, losing altitude fast and faster, and the ground was punching up, and there was a bloody big cliff ahead which he had no intention of hitting: he refused to give the world the satisfaction of seeing him go out splat, like a bug on a windowpane. So he grabbed Penny, and jumped.

The impact had slammed the breath out of him, but at least he took it and not her. See, my lord? I'm already a better father than you. Then they rolled and rolled in a cloud of dust and pebbles, hearing the dragon shrieking somewhere unseen above, heat and red stone and blood in his lungs, gasping and retching and still hanging onto her for gods knew what reason, until they finally rattled and spun and fetched to a halt in a shallow dry ditch, bruised and bloodied but still breathing, and Penny hung onto him, and lay on his chest, and sobbed.

That was how they had arrived. As soon as he could get her calmed down, Tyrion insisted that they search for water; he'd read enough books about Dorne to know not to underestimate the Stranger's paradise that was the desert. They'd cut it damned close as well, until they finally stumbled on this tiny oasis, a sanctuary of fragile life in the sandstone wastes, with a cave deep enough for them to take shelter during the worst heat of the day. They mostly slept. There was nothing else to do, and nothing to eat except tough clusters of weeds, which Tyrion had insisted on trying first in case they were poisonous. After the first bite, he almost wished they were; they were sour and stringy and barely palatable even when torn into small pieces. But it was that or nothing, and so they both gagged them down.

We have to get out of here. Even if water was plentiful, though hot and grimy and choked with rock
dust, Tyrion knew that neither of them could survive for much longer. Penny was sunburned so badly that her skin was peeling off in white strips, and it was harder and harder to wake her from where she curled up in the cave like a pitiful little bundle of rags. Tyrion was no Prince Aemon the Dragonknight himself; his piss was foul dark yellow, there was the constant taste of bile in his mouth, and his burned, blistered hands were cracking and turning to callus so painfully that it made him want to scream. But if nothing else, he knew one thing. The dragon had brought them out here, and it was the dragon that was the only chance of bringing them back. Tyrion had already noticed that there was something peculiar, not quite certain, about who really controlled Viserion. And if he did not riddle it out, he and Penny would both die out here, their small skeletons swallowed up forever by the waste. It was that simple.

The first and greatest incongruity was this. If Viserion was under Victarion's command, why in damnation hadn't he turned around and flown back to roast the Dothraki when the Greyjoys were well-deservedly getting the squid kicked out of them by Mago and his rampaging khalasar? Unless Victarion had been stupid enough to meet them in open battle, rushed out and got killed on the very first attack and thus been unable to summon the dragon back for assistance – but Tyrion greatly doubted it. Even leaving aside the fact that Moqorro would have been sure to take over in his place, every man, woman, and suckling babe in Westeros knew that the ironborn were no conquerors, no rulers. If Victarion was dead, they would see no use in continuing to loiter in the charnel house of Meereen, and so would have buggered back to their longships and set sail for somewhere else that would actually be sport to plunder. There couldn't be much gratification in raping a corpse, or being turned into one by the horselords. But no. The black sails of the Iron Fleet continued to mar the white-hot horizon, the ships still riding at anchor. So Victarion was still here, still alive . . . and trying to get back something that he wanted.

It could be Daenerys, but that was a fool's gamble, and the iron captain was not, despite his manifold and one other flaws, a foolish man. He was capable of a hunter's patience, but to sit immobilized in this hellhole on the vanishing hope that the queen would return was a recipe for a no-holds-barred mutiny by his men. It must be something else, something that Victarion thought he was capable of acquiring soon, and which could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Dothraki. Tyrion was damned if he knew who had really won the battle, as it had appeared to consist of both Mago and Victarion butchering as many of the other's men as possible, but since the only distant figures he'd spotted circling the ruined walls of Meereen had been on horseback, it looked like a safe wager that the Greyjoys had taken the worst of it.

So, then. The survivors might be mewed up in the Great Pyramid right now, would be if the bloody bullock had a drop of sense, hoping that the khalasar would get bored and go away. As strategies went, this wasn't actually as risible as it sounded – Tyrion, knowing the Dothraki disdain for sieges, had of course suggested it himself. But to let an enemy triumph over him must be like swallowing sand for Victarion, and Tyrion, unhappily, now knew exactly what that felt like. The iron captain would never live it down if he had to hide and wait until Mago took his hoof off his throat and departed. He wanted something, needed something, to kill them all.

The dragon.

What else could it be? It wasn't as if there were two weapons of similar potency present, and certainly not another that was supposed to be at Victarion's beck and call already. But the cream-and-gold beast had done anything but obey. Sometimes it circled high above like a hawk, sometimes it swooped and shrieked and sent the khalasar galloping for cover – but it didn't actually take any of them out. Once it had dive-bombed Tyrion and Penny, and he had felt utterly sure that it was then and there going to rectify all its previous failures to make them tasty dwarf morsels, but it merely sent them scattering a few times as if for amusement, and then pulled up into the sky again. It was never far away, making it impossible to rest easy, but it hadn't returned either.
And as Tyrion observed, he could only come to one conclusion: the dragon was not, and possibly
never had been, truly under Victarion Greyjoy's control.

That was another mystery he had no answer for. He'd seen Victarion and Moqorro atop the Great
Pyramid, the smoking corpse of the Greyjoy man who'd blown the Valyrian horn, and then the
drained corpse of gallant old Ser Barristan, supposedly cut down to seal Viserion to the iron
captain's will with blood. But this...

Selmy had been no friend to Tyrion, it was true. He had agreed to work with him, to kill Hizdahr zo
Loraq, only after hearing that Prince Aegon was alive, and still then with extreme reluctance. But
the thought that he might have died for a lie, that Tyrion himself had blackmailed Barristan the
Bold into losing his honor and then his life, was one that the dwarf found – even with everything
else – hard to bear on his stooped shoulders. He had started to want to avenge Ser Barristan, to
somehow atone for only the latest and greatest of his reign of terror and murders. And to do that, he
needed to understand who mastered the dragon. Again. It all came down to it.

The mystery was getting, slowly but surely, clearer. The conversation that Tyrion had had with
Victarion, just before the iron captain sent him out to scout the Dothraki advance. About how
Euron Crow's Eye had been the one to give his brother that ungodly black horn, and send him all
the way here to the other side of the world. Euron Crow's Eye, who had sailed to Asshai and
Valyria and knew their darkest arts. Euron Crow's Eye, who by Victarion's own admission only
ever bestowed poisoned gifts. Euron Crow's Eye, who would never, never actually allow someone
who wanted to kill him the means to master one dragon, let alone three.

It was Euron Crow's Eye who truly controlled Viserion.

This was practically the worst conclusion Tyrion could come up with, but he couldn't see another,
and he'd looked at it from all angles. Euron was gods knew how many thousands of leagues away,
which was ordinarily something to be abjectly grateful for, but in this case meant he couldn't be
killed – if he could even be killed – to put an end to his control. The only faint hope was that since
he was so far away, his control was not continuous or complete, which would explain Viserion's
bizarre behavior. As well as why the dragon had apparently left the iron captain out to dry, literally.
Euron had no interest in saving his hated brother's life. In fact, he would find it most sadistically
amusing to shut Victarion up in a parched, dusty pyramid, close enough to the ocean to see it but
not to reach it, and watch him slowly starve to death in a siege by savages with bells in their hair,
the worst and most ignominious end imaginable. The Dothraki would keep hanging around
because of the dragon's tempting nearness; there was just as much chance that they could capture
it. And once they did...

Everything at this point is suicide, Tyrion Lannister thought, too exhausted and heartbroken to even
feel anger anymore. All that's left is how we go.

That day had been even hotter than the rest, and a smothering mantle of sweat still lay draped over
the night. Tyrion's mouth was so dry he could barely pant; the oasis water, having been in the full
sun for hours and hours, felt like drinking live coals. At the moment, he was crouched on a high
rock like a gargoyle on a battlement, gazing down over the desert and the distant, dark, broken
brick towers of Meereen. Penny was below in the cave; she hadn't eaten any of the repulsive weeds
all day, had barely woken up or even moved, and Tyrion knew that the end was near. What should
I do? Go to her? Sing Tysha's song? Her mother, her fucking mother, my wife? Hold her hand and
sing to my daughter as she dies?

I loved a maid as hot as hellfire, with serpents in her hair.

And with that, just then, Tyrion couldn't stand it. He scrambled clumsily around and lurch...
upright, all four feet nothing of him, and spread his arms. "OY!" he bellowed into the night, down the silent valley, salt tears stinging as they welled up and couldn't even fall, evaporating on his burning cheeks. "OY! I'M UP HERE, YOU SONS OF WHORES! HERE! YOU BLOODY BASTARDS, HERE! YOU FUCKING GODS OR SQUIDS OR DOTHRAKI OR DRAGONS, COME GET ME! I DON'T CARE! UP HERE! UP –"

Halfway through it was as far as he got. The rocks began to shake, and he lost his balance, and then as he was still screaming, the night sky over Meereen split apart in an explosion. Fire, red fire, he thought it was Moqorro, the red priest, that the counterattack had come – but the plume was a terrible beautiful firework in the darkness, brighter and brighter so it was as sickly crimson as breaking dawn, as blood –

And something was coming, flying, through.

Tyrion stared incoherently. The gods. The gods actually answered my prayer. Now. Of all the unholy times, now. The world appeared to actually be ending, and that was fucking fine with –

Except he knew that shape taking form out of the fire, the distant ululating screech, the diaphanous wings stretched between bone pinions, shining eerily in the glow, the thrashing tail and the massive black head. He'd last seen it, like a nightmare, at the folly in Daznak's Pit, when Drogon smelled the blood and came hunting, when the queen had leapt into the fire and flown away. And if the foundations of the earth had been undone and they were all about to be immolated in surging lava anyway, it made perfect sense that the black dragon had just emerged through a crack in the sky. By himself? Or with his –

Tyrion stared a moment longer. Then he wheeled around and roared again, with everything he had left in his frail, fallible, stunted mortal vessel. "VISERION!"

Euron might control the dragon, but there was always the mad chance that he was just that bit distracted right now. And Tyrion had ridden the beast, had clamped down on him and ridden him out of the inferno of the collapsing Temple of the Graces, before the horn sounded. Whatever contrived sorcery bound Viserion to the Crow's Eye, he had something else, something real, however small. And at last, Tyrion Lannister had his final plan. Suicide.

"VISERION! I'M NOT LETTING ANYONE KILL THAT GREYJOY BASTARD APART FROM ME! VISERION!"

It wasn't working. Nothing. Just the tilted, thundering aftereffects of the red red explosion – the distant shape of the black dragon, Viserion's brother, plunging down to the city battlements as if drunk or wounded –

And then Tyrion saw it, a white ghost in the sundered night, soaring down on stalker's wings. Jaws peeled back. And fire.

He turned, threw himself headlong off the rock, and hit the ground rolling as the gust scorched over him. Viserion, shrieking, thrashing in midair as if possessed, belching sparks and flame. That's what I get for calling a dragon bound by a demon. But he still had that desperate strength, and he pushed himself up again. "Oy! Beast! Bloody bastard! Come here! Come at me! You think I'm fucking scared of you? Now?"

Viserion, apparently, thought he should be, and released another searing torrent of flame. Even as he was hiding behind a rock as it blew over, Tyrion was hoping desperately – as utterly impossible as it sounded, could something possibly have happened to break the Crow's Eye's control? Could the bastard have been attacked, killed, by someone who was undoubtedly the bravest man in the
Seven Kingdoms? Even during his feinted attacks, something of Viserion had always been dull, stupefied, sedated. But if not – if he could just possibly be free, and had a great deal of draconian rage to unloose –

"Tyrion?" Behind him, he could just hear Penny's cracking, terrified voice. "Tyrion?"

He didn't dare take his eyes off Viserion, who was now uprooting all the palm trees that bordered the oasis, vaporizing the water to seething steam, thrashing cracks into ancient stone with his tail, and otherwise laying the entire place to ruin. It was as mesmerizing as it was lethal, an ultimate reminder of how wild, how destructive, how powerful this monster was. "Penny, stay where you are. Don't move. Don't run." As if she could.

"Tyrion –"

"STAY!" Tyrion bellowed, as Viserion swung back around on both of them again, golden eyes like a pillar of towering flame. Or perhaps that was the actual tower of flame, which fell slightly short this time. Viserion threw back his head and screamed, possibly making the moon weep tears of blood, but Tyrion still didn't have any attention to spare. He knew what had happened to the Martell boy, he knew how many men and animals had been reduced to blackened, crumbling bones – but he had to. This was his fight, now. "Beast!"

Viserion halted just a few dozen yards away, pawing the ground like a nervous horse and tearing long slashes into the sand. The thought occurred to Tyrion that if something had broken Euron's control, the dragon would either be unbridled altogether, or actually fall under Victarion's sway as he was supposed to have been all along. Neither of which would be good for Tyrion, but he'd just about given up any hope of surviving this anyway. And if it was the latter, Viserion would be flying back to Meereen very shortly, and –

Another distant scream from the city walls pierced the night, a dragon's scream, and Viserion seemed to understand that it was his brother, that somehow, impossibly, Drogon had just returned with or without a rider. He cocked his head, but held as still as if he'd been grabbed by one of the men on the bridge and turned to stone, and Tyrion saw his chance. "Penny."

"Tyrion," she whimpered. "What are you – I can't –"

"I don't care. I'm not leaving you here. One more flight. We did it before. We can die together, or live. Come on. Now."

There was one eternal moment where he thought she wouldn't, she'd refuse. But then he heard scuffling as she crawled out of the cave, knew that she was doing her best to come to him, that she for some horrible reason trusted him with her life, and it almost broke his heart. But he turned around and caught her dry little hand as it groped for his, and then he pulled her upright and threw her arm around his shoulder, and both of them lit out as only two half-dead, moon-mad dwarfs could do, across the rutted, pitted ground, to the dragon.

As before, it was surprise that was the key. Tyrion got hold of Viserion's ruff with one hand and swung them both up onto the scaly back, into that place where the dragon couldn't reach them with his jaws. Not an instant after they were aboard, Viserion spread his wings with another screech, and they launched into the desert night like a catapult.

Tyrion wanted to close his eyes, to do anything to avoid looking at the stupendous distance between him and the sand below, but he was the one holding them onto this. With every powerful beat of Viserion's wings, they drew closer to Meereen. Tyrion, screwing up his eyes – it wasn't just the afterglare of the explosion, it was almost sunrise, red dawn – thought he saw a human figure, or
two. Or even three. One falling. One running. One following.

Before he had time to think about it, Tyrion seized Viserion's ruff even tighter, like the reins on a horse, and steered them into a steep, whistling dive. He wondered what would happen if the black dragon took them as a threat, then realized that Drogon was sprawled almost at full length atop the ramparts, screaming in something that was almost human in its distress; from this overhead vantage, Tyrion saw that the membranes of his wing were badly torn. Just as he noted that, he also saw the big man on his knees with a spreading dark stain of blood on his shirt and –

Mormont.

Damned if Tyrion knew how it was possible. Damned. But the fact was inescapable: it was Ser Jorah Mormont on top of that wall, and from the looks of things, he'd just been stabbed in the back. I told him we'd all congratulate him if he came flapping up on Drogon's back with Daenerys swooning in his arms. Had the stupid bloody stubborn bear won his maiden fair's heart back at last, only to –

They were instants away from crashing themselves, and Tyrion frantically pulled up, so Viserion's talons raked along the stone and struck up a fountaining bloom of sparks, but refrained from further perforating Ser Jorah. Whoever perforated him in the first place must have been one of the two figures who had just run away, but Tyrion had enough difficulties without worrying about that. He wrestled Viserion to a slewing, snorting halt, saw Mormont looking up as if in utter expectation of his instant demise – then the matching blank shock on his face. "Imp?" he coughed, the word red and wet with blood.

"At your service," Tyrion gasped. He didn't know why he was doing this, it was Mormont's own choice to hare off after the queen and get himself killed – but he was reaching out again, the way he had when he'd pulled Penny out of the street. His stunted fingers stretched, clawing at the void –

Mormont's large, hairy, callused hand caught his, and Tyrion yanked. The knight still had enough strength to throw into one great leap, and he landed across Viserion's back like a sack of flour. Whether he had enough strength to hold on was a question that Tyrion did not have time to ask before they were airborne again, racing above the desolate alleys and buildings of Meereen, Mormont still trying to say something as they did. Tyrion would have told him to shut up, but had no attention to spare for anything except correcting their demented obstacle course. And he saw in a moment more where they were going. Oh gods.

Viserion ascended an updraft, shrieking fit to wake the dead men (and girl) they were all shortly about to be, and then plowed over the low wall surrounding the garden atop the Great Pyramid. Tyrion, Penny, and Ser Jorah all toppled off like quoits struck with the ball, landing in soft grass and making a whole cacophony of horrible noises themselves. Sky and ground and ground and ground and sky and sky and stone and sky and sky, and Tyrion was so bloody dizzy and why wouldn't the world just fucking stop and let him off it.

It was the sound of Mormont's voice that dragged him back to his senses, in wretched estate though they were. The big knight, pale as a sheet, was on all fours and still trying to get to his feet, despite the blood now pooling in the grass beneath him. "Daenerys..."

Tyrion rolled over himself, and crawled toward the stupid stubborn noble pigheaded bastard. "She's... not here. Did she come with..."

"Aye." Mormont bent in half, fighting a spasm. "We were together... in Asshai, rescued her from the... Quaithe sent us through the fire.. red fire..."
This made less than half a damn of sense to Tyrion, and more pressing concerns awaited. "There's a well up here. Hold on. Let me get you some... water or..."

"No... use..." Ser Jorah got up to one knee, then collapsed. "Daario... fucking sellsword... Naharis, he's after her... should have torn his throat out when I..."

This was not encouraging news either, but Tyrion scarcely expected anything else. Instead, he gathered his reeling legs under him and made it across the garden to haul up a bucketful of cool, clear water from the ruler's private well. It alone had been spared the corpse-taste so prevalent in the rest of the city, and he wanted to stick his head in it and slurp and slurp and slurp until he drowned, but he detached the bucket from the hook and teetered back with it. "Here... you...

Ser Jorah didn't move to take it, but Penny did. She dragged herself over and thrust face and hands into it, gasping and drinking and crying, and Tyrion felt that strange, twisting agony in his chest again. "Mormont, stop being so damned stupid, I'll get you some as..."

"No use," the knight repeated. A bubble of blood broke on his lips and drooled down his chin. "How did you..." He turned his head agonizingly to look up at Viserion, who was still soaring around the pyramid and shrieking in extreme dudgeon. "The dragon... how did you possibly..."

"Can't work out who the horn actually bound him to, but if it was Euron --"

"Horn?" Mormont almost succeeded in getting to his feet, then fell even harder. "What horn?"

If Tyrion had seen another option, he certainly would have chosen it. However, he did not. As succinctly as possible, he explained the situation.

"Have to get it." Ser Jorah's dark eyes were clouded with pain, but he still didn't know when to give up. The idiot. The brave noble doomed idiot. "Otherwise..."

"I know what's at stake, Mormont. But we --"

"Then help me." Ser Jorah's bloody fingers twisted in the ruins of Tyrion's tunic. "Imp. Tyrion. Please. If we get the horn... look at me, I'm a dead man already, but if I blow it... my will has always been to serve her, it will give Daenerys back the control of her dragons... last thing I... please..."

Tyrion was torn. "You fool," he said. "Get in there --" the horn could in fact be close, just behind those tall bronze doors, just inside the pyramid -- "how? Put us together and we don't even make one good man right now... Mormont, you should..."

"I should what? Put my head down... crawl into a hole... and die?" Ser Jorah's face twisted, so the demon brand on his cheek seemed to be staring directly at Tyrion. "Gods have mercy on me... I am still a knight. I will die a knight."

"Gods have mercy indeed. You mean it."

For a depthless moment longer, Tyrion and Ser Jorah stared at each other.

I loved a maid as fair as springtime, with moonglow in her hair.

And with that, Tyrion made up his mind.

He stepped forward, pulled Ser Jorah's arm over his own stumpy shoulders, and lowered his head like a charging pig. At last, all my jousts are good for something. With Mormont still on his knees,
they staggered and jolted across the garden, leaving a trail of blood and grime, up to the doors. *Will Victarion let us in if we ask nicely?*

To hell with that. *To hell* with that.

They crashed into the doors with their combined strength, their combined desperation, and found, to their combined astonishment, that they were unbarred. This precipitated a combined face-plant on cool black-and-white tiles, and Ser Jorah groaned in agony. They were in the cavernous hall that Tyrion had been in earlier, the one the Greyjoys had already sacked, where Moqorro had been gazing into the flames. It was deserted now, nobody present except for –

"*OY!*"

Oh. Not so deserted as all that.

Tyrion let go of Ser Jorah and wheeled around just in time to see a ragged, desperate-looking ironman come charging around the corner at them, eyes wild and steel bared. There might be only one of him, but he was still plenty capable of causing a great deal of trouble if he put his mind to it, and there was only one of them in any fit state to take him on. *Queer fits of gallantry, indeed.***

Tyrion lowered his head once more, and charged.

Ser Fuckwit had plainly not expected this maneuver, and he barely had time to brace for it before Tyrion hit him like a battering ram. As they overbalanced and crashed to the floor, Tyrion reflected that he was, come to think, certainly not a *ser* at all; the ironborn made their men with blood and salt, not scented oil and septons' songs. This, however, did not make him any less a fuckwit, and one of terminal irritation to Tyrion Lannister at the moment. Panting, he managed to get hold of the man's wrist and pin it – he was thin as a wraith, they must be starving – and in the ensuing confusion, knocked the blade loose. It was pitiful, an eating knife, but it would be enough.

As the two of them wrestled and kicked, Tyrion caught a glimpse of Ser Jorah out of the corner of his eye, crawling across the hall and leaving great gouts of blood on the tiles. The knight was moving with single-minded purpose, but Tyrion could not tell if he'd spotted his quarry or not. He wasn't going to be alive to care about it unless he paid attention to his own fight, and so he did just that. The man was drooling and swearing, jerking and kicking, and no matter how decrepit Tyrion was, he was not at all that much of a disadvantage. Reached out, stretching, *stretching* –

– felt his fingers batter the knife –

– *closer* –

– *then* in his hands, in *his* hands, he saw them, saw all their faces, Ser Barristan and Penny and Ser Jorah and Griff and Prince Aegon and Septa Lemore and even the Yellow Whale, Yezzan zo Qaggaz, and Tysha, Tysha, Tysha –

And ripped the blade across the ironman's throat from ear to ear, and drew him a crimson smile for all time.

Tyrion lay there for several moments, gasping. *This poor bastard isn't going to be remembered in any reavers' songs or sea shanties, back home in the Iron Islands. Killed by a dwarf, indeed.* He wanted half to be sick, and half to laugh until he lost his mind, but as it was, he had time to do neither. Instead, he rolled to his feet and sprinted down the hall toward Ser Jorah.

As he drew nearer, he saw feet on the floor, and naturally, had leave to wonder whose. They were dark, horned, tough – appeared to be connected to a body, another body, and that was even more
puzzling. Then he saw the red robes, and understood.

Moqorro, the red priest, lay sprawled on the tiles, eyes staring sightless at the high vaulted ceiling. Smoke still curled up from his mouth – almost as if that explosion in the sky, Asshai’s own flame if Ser Jorah wasn’t just raving nonsense, had consumed him too. And in the priest’s hand, still clutched –

"Is that it?" Mormont rasped.

"It... is." Tyrion stared at the terrible dark twisted thing, the horn of Valyria, the binding spell, their damnation or possibly, unbearable to think, their salvation. *Gods, you owe me. You owe us.* "Fucking hells, Jorah. Fucking. Hells."

Ser Jorah managed to nod. Then he eased forward, unlocked the stiffening fingers with his own shaking ones, and freed the horn. But he didn't lift it to his lips at once. Instead, with another soft sound of agony, he went to hands and knees. Blood splashed like rain on the tiles.

"It's enough, man." It was hard for Tyrion to speak through the thickness in his throat, the sudden, matching anguish in his chest. "It's enough."

"No. Not yet. Promise..." Ser Jorah's free hand fumbled out and caught Tyrion's. "Burn me. Take me home... Bear Island... scatter me to a strong north wind. And Daenerys, tell her... tell her what I did, tell her..."

"I promise," Tyrion repeated. "Mormont. You don't have to do this."

Ser Jorah smiled faintly. "I do. One last thing. You... visited my lord father at the Wall. So long ago. For me. Help me... remember... the words..."

"The words?"

"The vow." Mormont's breathing was getting faster, shorter. "He would. Have wanted it."

Tyrion closed his eyes against the ghosts. He felt as fragile as glass, as if he had been thrown overboard, as if he could scream for his grief, for how he was haunted by it, hounded by it, *murdered my father, my own father,* he'd loved him, he'd wanted his love, he'd wanted, *wanted,* heard the noise as he'd heard it so long, the crossbow and the sound of his cell door opening, *my brother,* lost his brother, *Jaime,* would he ever see Jaime again, tell him that he was sorry, he was *sorry* –

"The words," he whispered. "Say them with me, then."

"As much... I can." Jorah's fingers still had enough strength to clutch Tyrion's. Their voices, thin and choked and agonized, echoing in this silent room so far, so very far from home.

"Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It will 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."

Ser Jorah let out a shuddering breath. "Thank you." And with that, with a shaking, bloodstained hand, he raised the Valyrian horn to his lips.
As he did, at the far end, the door to the hall crashed open. Tyrion cringed as the light hit. Thought it would be an army, but saw instead a girl, slender, silver-haired, in rags. Gasping. As if she'd run through all the seven hells. Come to think of it, she likely had.

Daenerys Targaryen screamed like her dragons.

"Jorah!"

Her bear knight smiled at her, a smile of utter love and faith and death, and blew the horn.
Asha

Asha was in the rearguard when she heard the horns. Distant and strident in the sunless winter dawn, but not that distant. King Stannis barely had enough men to cover a mile's worth of march, and it was better to remain as close together as possible, as defense against the prowling white hunters in the woods. If anyone had been under any delusions that their victory at the battle of Winterfell had bought them a reprieve from the wights, they were sore mistaken. As soon as Stannis had set east through the mounting snows toward the Dreadfort, the attacks had if anything intensified. They could not sleep without posting a double guard with torches and blades, and even then they would hear evil rustlings in the snow-laden trees, blue eyes glimmering like jewels in the blackness.

Hence, the rearguard was the safest place to be only by virtue of the alternatives. And there were numerous times when Asha wasn't certain of that, either. Back here with the cripples and the frostbitten and the sorely wounded Lamprey Lord, Wyman Manderly, pulled along on his sledge by a team of little mountain clansmen, as indefatigable as they were incomprehensible, and of course Theon. She'd not wanted to let her brother out of her sight after Stannis rescued him from the swarming wights in the broken walls of Winterfell, yet to her surprise, Theon seemed. . . different. As if he'd come to some sort of reckoning in that moment of almost certain death, and been bizarrely at peace with the results. Not to say that he was by anyone's measure a whole man again. But there was something in his eyes that she'd never seen before. Something that kept him stumbling along on his maimed feet, one before the other, even in the worst difficulties of their advance.

When the horns sounded now, therefore, Asha was barely even surprised. She'd gone so long without sleep that she had become accustomed to it, and when the blast jarred in her ears, her hand fell to her sword – now that she'd sworn fealty to him, Stannis had been honor-bound to arm her. "I'll be back," she whispered to her brother, hoping that it was true, and then broke into a lurching run, through the drifts of thigh-deep snow, up toward the front of the column.

By the time she and the others arrived, the attack was already over. Stannis stood staring inscrutably at the two dead men before his feet – one who had been that way for some time, and one who'd just finished arriving in that state, his blood leaking shockingly crimson across the snow and his eyes staring at the sky with a look of affronted surprise. They were still locked together, entangled like lovers. From the looks of things, they had broken each other's necks.

Stannis was the first to speak. "Are there more of them?"

"M'lord, there's always more of them," Ser Clayton Suggs said, looking exhausted. "This one looks to be an isolated attack, aye. But they're in the trees. All around us. They have us surrounded. Only question is when they spring on us at once. When that happens. . ."

"We shall meet it," Stannis said coldly, before returning his sunken blue gaze to the dead men, wight and knight. "Burn them."

"The smoke will give away our position."

"The wights already know well enough where we are."

"I wasn't thinking of that, m'lord. Thinking of what else might spot it."

"The Boltons are made ruin of, their forces crushed." Stannis's face remained implacable. "And if
any other living man is out here, they are like to be just as mad and desperate, and no friend to us, so we need not worry any more than we do now. Do as I have ordered."

Ser Clayton did not look pleased, but recruited a few of the men to assist him in dragging the bodies into the trees. None of them seemed in any haste to touch the wight, for which Asha could not blame them, and she couldn't help but share their misgivings about what other eyes might be watching. She had almost forgotten what it was like to not be afraid, for that constant low-level apprehension in her stomach to go away. *Theon is braver than I am right now.*

That thought angered and shamed her in turn. Seeing no present call for it, she sheathed her sword and was about to return to her position, but at that moment, Stannis caught sight of her. "Lady Asha," he said, curtly as always. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard the horns, Your Grace." Her breath steamed bitterly silver in the queer, rose-colored shadows. "I was answering the call."

The king snorted at that. But though she'd met stumps and stone walls easier to read than Stannis Baratheon, Asha thought he might almost be impressed that she was willing to hold to her oath, that she realized there was no division between ironborn and stormlander out here – only between living and dead. "In truth," he said unexpectedly, "the march has taken more of a toll than I imagined. And the ruby begins to dim."

"Ruby?" Asha remembered it only vaguely, from when she'd watched poor unfortunate Arnolf Karstark transform into Stannis's own fetch before her eyes. A ruby had indeed had something to do with that business, but she supposed that the king had another. To speak to that red priestess of his, or channel what pitifully little power of fire could ever survive in this godforsaken place. *I always thought the greenlanders claimed hell was hot.* "Your Grace. . . do you think. . ."

"I do not know. The light in it grows darker by the hour. Something terrible has happened at the Wall. The silence is deafening." Stannis snapped his teeth shut on the words, as if embarrassed even to confess this much doubt. "Lady Melisandre would not abandon me, so I can think of no other reason why the power would fade away as it does, a slow baneful leak. When it does. . ."

Asha did not want him to finish that sentence. Yet she found herself prompting anyway. "Whatever strength sustains us will go as well?"

Stannis gazed at her without blinking. Then at last he said, "It would serve our purposes to reach the Dreadfort as fast as we might."

Clearly, that was as close as he would ever get to a dire warning that they were all on the brink of death. Asha flinched, and the weight of the words hounded her back to the rearguard, and their anxious questions. They could see the column of dark smoke climbing into the sky; they must have at least some inkling of what had happened, but she fed them soothing lies. *A mother poisoning her children so they need not starve.* The thought made her melancholy. Asha Greyjoy had never been a woman who saw her future in the birthing bed, meekly keeping hearth and home for a valiant adventuresome husband; if she had to marry at all, she fully intended it to be the opposite. But now it reminded her of the time she was losing, the choices slipping away from her. *It will kill me quicker than the cold if I give into despair. I must stay strong, strong as iron.*

But she was so tired. So bloody tired.

They left the burning pyre behind and continued to press eastward, through the low, rolling Sheepshead Hills. They were making even worse time than usual, but the clansmen, ranging ahead as scouts, were in high spirits; they knew this land intimately, and claimed that they would reach
the frozen Weeping Water within hours. Once that happened, all they had to do was follow the river south a few leagues, and there would be the Dreadfort. *Assuming we can even see it in the snow.*

With the wind now at their backs, Stannis was transparently impatient, chiding them relentlessly onward with barely a stop for food or fire. Despite her continuing personal ambivalence for him, Asha had to admit at being impressed that he was able to ask so much of his men, and that they were willing to give it. As a commander and captain herself, she knew that you must always keep in mind that even if you held the nominal power, there were always more of them than you, and that while shouts and lashes and curses would keep them under your thumb for a time, there would always come a moment when they made up their minds to take no more. She'd never held to that herself, but as a woman, her dance was doubly difficult; she preferred to make her men love her without ever once presuming to think they had the right to bed her. Then she would show the whip hand; she'd keel-hauled several who had tried, and beaten the rest with quips and mockery and casual, confident competence, made no bones at pretending to be a man but considered herself the match of any. Among the ironborn, rape of captured prisoners was the oldest of honored rituals, but her men knew that if they did any such thing, she'd have their cocks off before they had time to go limp. But they knew the sailing was good with her, the plunder fair, the adventure sweet, and so she'd always managed.

Until now. Until this desolate wintry wasteland that was going to kill them all. She would never raise a sail or stride a deck again. *Nor die with even a last breath of salt in my lungs.* At least she'd saved Theon, she told herself. *For all the bloody good it does.*

The scouts returned as twilight was falling, bearing tidings that could be considered promising only insofar as they intimated that the Dreadfort now stood just a few miles away, through a long approach thickly clustered with snowy underbrush and standing stones. From the glimpses they'd been able to steal of the fortress's distant dark ramparts, they thought it stood almost undefended, and that a swift hard strike, coming out of the night like wraiths – or wights – should do the job.

"That may be," Stannis said, when they'd finished. "But we would be fools to assume so. There are most likely traps and other hidden devices to ensnare us – the Bastard of Bolton possesses both a lowly cunning and an exquisite perversity. *Even if he is not there, even if none of them are there, we underestimate the danger at our peril.*" He ground his teeth. "And it looked very much as if Winterfell was undefended too, did it not? I thank god that I had the sense to anticipate that ruse. Is there aught else you can tell me?"

The swarthy, ice-crusted little clansman hesitated. Finally he said, "Y'Grace, true enough it's dangerous, yet me and me brothers . . . We didn't see it at no sort of close range, far was bad enough, but there's a whole bleedin' swarm of wights on the march, just south and east of here. There's naught to stand in their way but the abandoned Hornwood keep, not until they reach White Harbor. And if that should happen . . ."

Asha saw the glance that Stannis cast back at the distant, shadowed shape of Wyman Manderly's sledge. The Lord of White Harbor had perhaps the easiest time of it, being wrapped in furs and quilts and pulled by his own team of men, but that was since he was already the worst off; old, fat, infirm, horribly wounded by his stay in Ramsay's tender mercies, and clearly not able to stand much more. Since Manderly's disclosure that he had not killed Davos Seaworth after all, but in fact had sheltered him at great risk to his own life and limb, Stannis had come to see the value in keeping him alive, but that was another decision he must hold in the balance. For her part, Asha was grateful that Manderly had confirmed the continued existence of Bran and Rickon Stark. She hadn't thought that Theon was lying about not killing them; he didn't have it in him any more, but Manderly's word had soothed some of the bloodlust among the northerners. They had not been
pleased to suffer the Greyjoys' renewed presence by any stretch of the imagination, and many still threw Theon loathing looks, but those had become generally commingled with horror or pity, and no one had yet tried to kill him in his sleep.

"Yes," Stannis said at last. "I see. So it is your counsel, then, that it would be wiser for me to try my luck against the weakest the Dreadfort may ever be, rather than continuing to allow my men to be decimated by the wights?"

The clansman hesitated again, then nodded. "Either option is nay basket of roses. But so it stands, Y'Grace, we ken we'll snuff it for certain against the bloody dead men. Against the Dreadfort, it's only likely."

Something that might have been a terrible smile plucked at the corner of Stannis' mouth, enough to make puppies cringe and babies cry. After a seemingly eternal moment, he nodded in return. "Very well. We march tonight."

March they did. After the war council had broken up, Stannis informed his men of the decision, that they would be advancing on the Dreadfort under cover of darkness; as cold and haunted as the night might be, and more replete with terrors than even the red priestess could have imagined, there was at least no storm brewing, and that was a signal advantage. The intervals of clear weather had grown shorter and shorter, and farther and farther apart, and Asha agreed that they could not afford to waste this one. Yet she thought that Theon could use some warning that they were about to strike at the place of his torment. No matter how surprisingly well he'd held up, it would rattle him down to his bones, and she did not fault him for it.

Therefore, as the Baratheon men were scoffing down their last mouthfuls of frigid jerky, slinging shields and bucklers over their heavy fur cloaks, and saying what prayers they would to whichever god they might, Asha slipped back through the camp to find her brother, who was sitting placidly under a tree, his white head ghostly in the strangled starlight. "Theon," she whispered. "Put your hood up. You'll freeze."

Theon jumped, and glanced up with that look he always wore when spoken to unexpectedly: the blank, glazed thousand-yard stare of an animal expecting to be kicked or worse. It made her heart full sore, but she crouched down next to him and pulled his hood up as if he was a small child, tying it with her clumsy gloved hands under his chin. "You know. . . . You know we'll be there tonight, don't you?"

She felt a shiver run through him, yet when he spoke, his voice was thin but clear. "I know."

"And you. . . you'll stand it?"

Theon gave her a trembling smile. "I think so. You. . . you just have to remember, Asha. It'll be all right if you remember. Go away inside."

She didn't think he was speaking entirely to her, and didn't want to ask either what he remembered or where he had gone. But when she held out a hand, he put his own into it willingly, like a lad who had never been asked to run and play with the others and was excited now to be included. She pulled him to his feet and couldn't stop herself from giving him a brief, convulsive, one-armed embrace. "I'm marching with the others. I won't be far."

"All right," he said again. "I'll be here."

Task concluded, she hurried back through the snow to rejoin the clansmen, her heart thudding in her chest like one of their great deep drums. She'd always been of the opinion that an overactive
imagination was to a warrior's sure and sharp detriment, but she couldn't seem to stop hers on this bloody spooky night. According to Theon, Ramsay Bolton had his hands on Lightbringer, the real Lightbringer, and while she couldn't yet tell if Stannis truly believed it, the king certainly was taking no chances with it. Between the combination of a false sword, a fading ruby, and the enduring silence from his red witch, Asha was beginning to realize that some unconscionable deception had contributed to driving Stannis this unthinkably far. And if he stopped to think about it now, to admit to it, he was lost.

They were well underway by moonrise. The desire to keep their attack secret, and thus light no torches, was balanced painfully against the awareness that if they did happen across another army of wights, no fire might well mean the end of them. That had been a gamble which Stannis was willing to make, however, and given his combination of utter, pigheaded tenacity and utter, pigheaded inability to know when he should just bloody give up and go home, Asha felt strangely better about it than she would have if it were someone else. Not good by any stretch of the imagination, but better.

She marched steadily with the others, their boots crunching through the hard-packed, windblown snow. Clansmen weren't scintillating conversationalists at the best of times, and now they were all but silent, except for a few grunts here and there to encourage their fellows or warn them away from a place where the crust was broken; a careless man could end up in over his head, like a sucking bog. Their breath froze on their mouths and noses, and Asha had to keep breaking the ice away, but other than that, she was almost –

And then, like a blade through the night, an echoing, terrible scream.

Asha skidded to a halt so fast she almost lost her balance, and spun around. Cold horror had seized her heart harder than the Weeping Water, but the realization still punched through like broken glass. *Theon. Oh gods, that was Theon.*

One of the clansmen made a grab for her, but she was already running, blundering headlong through the snow and in danger of breaking her neck, of colliding with a low-hanging branch or a standing stone or something worse. But still she didn't stop until she stumbled breathless, almost on all fours, through the final tangle of frozen underbrush and saw her brother ahead, tugging and thrashing at his right leg. It was trapped – something under the snow had hold of it –

*Wights,* Asha Greyjoy thought at once, almost numb with dread. *Under the ground, coming to life from their cold graves.* Yet even while this conviction was taking shape, she saw instead that it was some sort of bear trap, a cruel thing of steel and spikes, crafted to catch a –

*No. Not a bear. A man.*

Theon was sobbing, almost retching. As she threw herself to her knees and tried to free him, he shoved at her frantically, eyes wild and unseeing. "Kyra! Kyra, no! Run! Run! He... with the bitches, he's coming, he's hunting... don't go back, Kyra, don't go back, I'll distract him, you run for it, run, please, run!"

"Theon!" she screamed. "Theon, stop, it's me! It's Asha! Please, stop moving, just stop...!"

It was no good. He was consumed in the terror of whatever memory he was reliving, and she could see blood starting to seep through his torn leather breeches. They had nothing to treat a wound, and if it festered... well, that was the least of their concerns, but –

She could feel tears leaking down her own cheeks as she struggled with her brother. He might be frail and wasted, but panic had him in its thrall, and it was giving him mad, unlooked-for strength.
She could barely hold him steady, others were starting to crowd around them now, they couldn't wastes it, the time they had, they couldn't –

Someone appeared out of the dark, and Theon shrieked again. He tried to wriggle back across the ground, but the trap was anchored firmly, and he could barely move. He wasn't, she couldn't –

"Bloody madman," a Baratheon knight muttered, half in rage and half in pity –

"Turncloak." It was Stannis's voice, Stannis who dropped briskly to a knee in front of Theon, smacked him on the cheek, and waited until Theon's maddened gaze had focused on him. Then the king reached down and with his gauntleted hands, ripped the teeth of the trap apart with no more than a faint grunt of exertion. "Get up. We must make haste."

Shaking, Theon gulped great deep breaths of the freezing air, froth oozing down his chin. Asha swabbed it away with her hand, wishing that everyone would stop looking, and then reached down to see if Theon would allow her to help him up. He did, glancing around at their audience timidly. "I don't . . . I don't know what happened. . . ."

"Man-trap," one of the clansmen said, scowling. "Now we ken what sort o' tender greetings the Bastard has waiting for us. He's here."

"He's here," Stannis agreed, "and so time is of the essence. We have lost our surprise, so I will have torches and skinpipes. All the fury of the north and of the wild."

The clansman looked at him for a long moment, then smiled, revealing several missing teeth in the whiteness of his beard; he could have been an old man or young, there was no way to tell in the snow. "Aye," he said. "Your Grace."

This command spread quickly through the ranks. Torches began to flare, as many as could be made; in the darkness, it could well cause the enemy to overestimate their numbers. Then the skinpipes and the drums started in, a savagely beautiful, spine-chilling roar, and Asha realized, almost dreamily, that she was shaking as hard as Theon. *Boom. Boom. Boom*, the drums spoke, and over them the pipes wailed, primal as the winter wind. In a sea of flame and shadow and song, the Baratheon army began to charge.

She saw it ahead, at first only a hulking silhouette in the darkness, then acquiring eerie relief from the flickering torches. Deepwood Motte had been her wooden pisspot on a hill, and she had been impressed with the ancient grey stone and great walls and towers of Winterfell, but the Dreadfort was entirely different. Stout and square, rising from the snow like the prow of a dark ship, triangular merlons like biting teeth and the flayed man capering above the battlements for all the world as if dancing to their unholy music. Every gate and crenel and arrow-slit was barred, every weakness made fast. No defender was visible; she recalled hearing that the Bolton host was sundered and scattered, half of them dead in the siege of Winterfell and the other half trapped south of the Neck. Even if they'd gotten through Moat Cailin by now, it was exceedingly unlikely that they would ever arrive alive. It gave her a sudden terrible hope, and she mouthed a prayer of her own, though to who she barely knew. The Drowned God had no sway up here in this land of snow and stone and winter, she would not pray to R'hllor, and nor the greenlander Seven. It must be the old gods, then. The only gods as elemental and primal as this place.

In rank on rank, flame on flame, blade on blade, Stannis Baratheon's forces massed against the base of the fortress. The drums were still booming, but the pipes ceased, and it was the king's voice that roared. "Bastard! We've come for you, Bastard! *Come out! Come out and die!*"

*Why would he?* Asha thought, in the vanishingly small part of her unmoved by the power of the
moment. Even if Ramsay Bolton was all alone within, he still held the advantage. They could break down the gates, but not easily, and not fast. And there would still be snares, man-traps or worse. She held tighter onto Theon, no longer entirely certain who was holding who up.

The dark parapets remained deserted. Stannis bawled his challenge again.

At last, they heard footsteps above. A torch struck. Then a young man strode into view on the wallwalk, smiling as genially as if they were all his invited guests and he looked forward to a party. He was tall and fleshy, with thick pale lips and even paler eyes, long, dark, dry hair and a shaggy bearskin cloak. Staying just far enough back to discourage any archers from trying the range, he grinned obscenely down at them. "Oh. So you made it after all."

Theon whimpered and buried his head in Asha's shoulder. She whispered something inconsequential, muttering and patting his back like a baby with colic, but kept on staring up at him, the Bastard of Bolton in the flesh. If she'd had a bow, she'd have tried a shot herself.

"Bastard," Stannis snapped. "In the sight of god and man, and in payment for your monstrous crimes, your life is forfeit. Surrender now, and your death will be quick. Hold out, and it will be as slow and painful as any your own mind could devise."

Ramsay smirked. "I very much doubt that. You've never had a chance to admire my handiwork – or have you? And even if so, you'll see it it anew, if you keep blustering at me like that."

He is too confident. Asha felt that chill again. Something is wrong.

"You have no idea of your position," the king snarled. "Outmanned, surrounded, with the judgment of every man in the north against you. I repeat. Surrender, and – "

"And what?" The smirk had gone from Ramsay's face. Something worse, something far uglier, had taken its place, like a wolf creeping out to taste a fresh-killed carcass. "Prate at me of your strength if you care to, old fraud. But I think you'll find that it comes down instead to one man."

With that, he plunged a hand out of sight, so fast that the entire front row of clansmen notched their bows and drew even before Stannis had time to command them so. Yet when it reappeared, Ramsay was not holding a terrible weapon, but rather –

The cloak of a man, an unremarkable man with one eye swollen shut, brown hair and beard streaked with salt and pepper. He hung almost unresisting in the Bastard's grasp, blood streaked on his mouth and chin, and cringed as if the light of the torches was tormenting him. Asha did not recognize him, but she heard the gasp that shot among the Baratheon men, and she saw the look on Stannis's face. Even the most legendarily stubborn, unbowed man in the Seven Kingdoms had just been brought to his knees.

"Your onion knight," Ramsay remarked, leering. "I do believe you lost him."

Onion knight? It couldn't be – the one Wyman Manderly had sheltered, the smuggler who had been made Stannis' Hand – Davos Seaworth? But what, what –

Since Stannis himself still had nothing to say, Ramsay was all too happy to fill the silence. "I've been practicing my handiwork on him, so you'll be certain to get a good look. Here, my lord, is the bargain. Retreat, call off your army, and I'll throw him over. There's enough snow below, he's likely to survive. If not. . ."

Ramsay reached down with his other hand, and an unearthly red-gold glow spangled the darkness. He drew it slowly into sight again, a look on his face of ecstatic agony; the sound of flesh sizzling
was audible even from here, but the madman must have barely noticed. "Otherwise," he said clearly and with relish, making sure they understood every word, "you can watch me cut his throat with this. Lightbringer. The Red Sword of Heroes. And now... mine."

Like everyone else, Asha stared in horrified fascination. It was, even in the hand of the man holding it, the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, imbued with a powerful, radiant transcendence, a long elegant blade with three fullers, gold and steel and smoke and red, red, red. Anyone looking at it would have thought Stannis' own blade to be a child's toy, and she knew at once that Theon was right. That was the true sword. The true Light.

And in the hands of Ramsay Bolton, Ramsay Bolton—

"Well?" the Bastard asked. "Your choice, old man."

At that, Davos Seaworth seemed to rouse. "Your Grace..." he managed, his voice thick and slurred with pain. "Your Grace, no, let him... let him kill me, I'm dead already, you must take the castle, you must not let him—"

"Shut up!" Ramsay smashed the pommel of the sword into the onion knight's face, and there was a horrible crunch of breaking cartilage. More blood started to seep down Ser Davos' face, and an enraged rumble rose from the watching army.

Stannis still hadn't said a word. He was staring at his battered Hand, perhaps begging his eyes to tell him that they lied. He was so motionless, in fact, that the night air around him seemed to shimmer as if in summer heat. What is he thinking? What can he possibly be thinking? If she hadn't been holding Theon up, Asha might almost have wanted to go to him. Whatever he was, whoever he was, she would stand at the side of Stannis Baratheon, against Ramsay Bolton, a thousand times out of a hundred.

"My lord..." Ser Davos breathed. "It is enough... to look on your face again. I have... what I need... my lady, my two small ones... take care of them... I am not afraid... I know what I will..."

It was a standoff. Neither Stannis nor Ramsay moved, or even seemed to blink. Then, shocking everyone, Theon pulled his head out of Asha's shoulder and looked up.

"No," he said to Davos Seaworth, in barely a whisper. "You don't know."

A jolt of surprise shattered Ramsay's smug expression. Surprise — and, Asha thought, a hint of fear. When you did what he'd done to Theon, you rarely expected him to live so long, let alone come back here and face you down. "Reek?"

"No. Not Reek. My name isn't Reek. It's Theon. Theon Greyjoy." Her brother straightened his thin, stooped shoulders and looked up directly into the basilisk eyes of his tormentor. "I didn't forget after all."

"So I see." Ramsay looked to be recovering himself, but it was plain he was still off balance. "A mistake I shall have to rectify. Well, old man, the deal has changed. We both happen to have possession of a pet that the other wants. Hand over my Reek, and I'll give you back your Ser Onions. I won't even ask you to withdraw. Then it will be a game."

Asha glanced wildly at Stannis, terrified. How could he refuse that offer? Unburden himself of the turncloak, the useless mouth, the man he still would have burned if all had been fair in love and war? Get back his Hand, and even retain the chance to attack? She was so certain he would agree
that she felt her palms going cold and clammy with sweat. *The only way to stop him will be to kill him myself.* But then what would *that* –

"No," Stannis said. "The boy is one of mine own subjects now, and his sister has sworn me her oath. I will not dishonor that agreement."

"Not even for your precious errand-boy?" Ramsay had apparently put Lightbringer down out of sight, for he used both hands to thrust Ser Davos dangerously far out over the merlon. "*Do you want him? Just say the word.*"

Stannis might have flinched. He did not respond.

Theon grabbed Asha's shoulder. "*The sword,*" he whispered. "*We have to get the sword.*"

She stared back at him in something close to panic. "What are you saying?"

"Ash – Asha." His hands were shaking even harder. "I... I'm still alive. I don't know why. But for some reason. I am. I... I could have been brave enough to get it from him, before he killed Mance, but I... I didn't... I was too frightened. But I saw... I saw Bran. In the heart tree. And when the wights were coming, it was *me.* I was the Stark in Winterfell. I... I have to."

For an instant longer, it didn't register. Then it did, and she felt her heart turn over.

"No," she begged. "No, Theon, you can't. You can't go in there by yourself. Even if you got your hands on Lightbringer, Ramsay would kill you. You'd never get back out, you'd never – "

"Please," he said again. "I have to."

"If you do..." At that moment, Asha made up her mind. "I'm coming with you."

There was a sense of pure and terrible knowledge, as they looked into each other's eyes and realized what they had just committed themselves to. But even as it was still echoing, she knew that they had just made a vow. And that they could not take it back.

Theon stepped forward. "I'm agreeing, Lord Ramsay," he said, his voice small and very polite. "I'm agreeing to your bargain."

Ramsay blinked. "You what?"

"I'm agreeing," Theon repeated. He indicated Asha. "Me and my sister. We'll go in, give ourselves up to you, if you release Ser Davos."

Ramsay raised one eyebrow, as if impressed. Then he shrugged, commented, "As you wish," and hurled Ser Davos headfirst off the battlements.

There was a scramble forward, and half a dozen of the clansmen linked their arms, braced themselves, and managed to catch the onion knight cleanly as he hit them from above. They immediately lifted him up and carried him off, perhaps to Wyman Manderly's sledge so they might come face to face once more, and for a few long and terrible and painful and euphoric moments, there was a fathomless, perfect silence.

Then the postern door of the Dreadfort's portcullis began to rattle. It yawed open, a deep dark descent into hell, and a man in Bolton colors stood there, waiting. "Trot on in then, you two," he said with a twisted grin. "Fair's fair."
At last, Stannis came back to life. "Lady Asha," he said rustily, a man surfacing from an old, bad dream. "Wait. I have need of you. You must not –"

"No," Asha told him, feeling her heart, just a bit, start to break. "I must."

"The sword," Theon whispered in her ear. His fingers, such as they were, locked tightly into hers. "We have to get it."

"Aye," she whispered back. "We will."

The drums started to beat again behind them. Her mind had never been so clear. She had never been so certain of death, and never so grateful for life. *The end of all things.*

She took a stronger grip on her brother's hand, and walked into the Dreadfort.
With every step he took, the louder the voices whispered. At first they had been quiet enough that he mistook it for the wind creeping through these broken lost places, these barrows unfathomably far under the cold skin of the earth, cold as his. But the farther they tunneled into the frigid catacombs, darkness engulfing them on every side, the harder it was for him to shut them out. *Jon,* they murmured, coaxingly at first and then more insistently. *Lord Snow! Listen to us. Remember. Remember who you are. Who you truly are.*

Jon stopped in his tracks, listening to the echoes. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Val was clearly in no mood for distractions or flights of fancy, holding her hand tightly against her chest as she had ever since they'd left the prince's – left *Bran's* – eerie underground court behind. Whenever Jon pressed her, she said only that she'd done what had to be done, and nay bother getting fussed over it now. If there was something wrong, he couldn't tell. The only way they could see each other was in the peculiar glow of the tangled weirwood roots, causing them both to appear as disembodied, floating specters, half-born from the darkness, half-dying. *Which I am, more than half,* Jon Snow thought bitterly. *A monster.*

*Monster,* the voices agreed. *But master as well. Open your eyes. You are the child of ice and fire. You should command this. The old ways, the dark ways, under the hill. This is yours. Shed your skin, become all and none at once. As many eyes as there are ways. Dragons, swords of light, queens and lords and kings and crowns. All is yours, Jon Snow. Why will you not take it?*

"Them," Jon said agitatedly, as the voices swooped overhead like bats, whispering and bouncing. "Somebody's talking."

"Nobody's talking, Jon." The use of his first name, when she always called him "crow" or "Lord Snow," was a sign of her impatience – and fear. There was little water down here, and less food. She couldn't afford an indefinite stay. "Can we go on, then?"

He held up a cold black hand. "*Wait.*" Whoever was down here, *whatever,* was whispering the same sort of fey temptations that he had last heard from Melisandre, back at Castle Black. While the red priestess had warned them that the Old Ways would change them, transform them, Jon had had more pressing concerns at the time, yet he was recalled sharply to it now. *Did she send something to follow us? One of her shadows, perhaps? Or was it –*

*The third head of the dragon,* the voices murmured, sibylline, very close at hand. *You were supposed to be a girl, did you know? Your father was convinced you would be. He meant to name you Visenya, to join his own Aegon and Rhaenys. You were to be a Targaryen in flesh and blood, once it was found that he had done as the dragons did, and took your mother for a second bride. Yet instead you were born Jon. A bastard boy, a Stark, unwanted, overlooked, unneeded. All ice and nary a flicker of fire. A lie. A lie. A lie.*

"No," Jon said thickly, shaking his head. "No, no."

"Crow." That was Val again, urgently. "There's nothing there. Let's go. *Hurry.*"

*She is blind. So blind. Like the rest of the small petty mortals. Come to us, Jon Snow. We are the only ones who are worthy of you, who can teach you to command the power that floods your veins. The oldest and greenest of all magic, the spark to light the flame, to end the Long Night and keep your oath. Make yourself who you were meant to be.*
His hand dropped to the hilt of Longclaw. "Show yourselves."

"Jon –"

"SHOW YOURSELVES!" His bellow rang off the low earthen ceiling, the twisted roots, the drips of distant water. He knew that something was down here, hunting them. Children of the forest or demons or worse. Ice and fire themselves, some elemental magic of the dawn of time. Something that had first fended off the Others – or created them.

He drew Longclaw, and an unearthly glow suffused the Valyrian steel, casting shadows like dancing spirits. In them, he was starting to see, and not merely hear. See a mad silver-haired king with fingernails a foot long, laughing. Fire crackling, a gallant old man in grey and white, screaming as he burned, and another, younger man strangling himself as he tried to reach him. The silence of five hundred observers, the silence of the grave. Thus is always the fate of traitors.

The images were coming faster and faster now. Another silver-haired man, young and handsome and melancholy, drawing sad songs from harp strings, eyes as purple as an emperor's cloak. A woman, frail but goodly, a sun and a spear pinning her cloak, grieving as her husband abandoned her for the madness of prophecy. Another young dark-haired woman, a child really, with blue flowers in her hair, screaming as she labored, the stink of the blood in the bed. A quiet wolf, faced with telling an impossible lie to the bride who barely knew him, the proud daughter of the trout lord. You see this? the voices accused. All for you. See everything that you tore apart to live? Your fault. You. You.

They were almost shouting now, deafening Jon, driving him to his knees. If he had breath to lose, it would have been lost. He could still see his sword shining, but dimming. It was another sword now, in the hand of a prince in black armor, the three-headed dragon worked in rubies on his chest, raising it against a warhammer from the giant in a stag's helmet, struggling in a river, and common men all around them, grappling and dying and losing their blood and lives for no other reason than that they had been ordered, men driving steel into the hearts of other men they never knew, men who would lie eaten by crows by sunset, men who would never kiss their children again, never open their eyes to their wives' smile, never step outside their door, never not be afraid. All for the war, the unspeakable horror of war. See this? For you. MURDERER.

"No," Jon gasped. "I didn't, I never chose. . . only. . . only who I was. . ."

The dead howled out to him, in voices colder than their forgotten tombs. A sword of ice, coming down against a flawless southern sky, a moment he had pictured a thousand times in his dreams. Lord Eddard Stark's legs kicking. A girl screaming. A crowd cheering. My father. . . The betrayal was agonized, unbearable. The lies. All the lies. They were right, the voices, the demons. Whatever power he had, he should give to them. It was the least he could –

Yes, the beasts whispered. Their mouths opened like soft kisses, sucking black blood, he could feel it start to leave him, crumpled to his knees like a leaf on the wind of time –

And then, Jon took a wrenching blow across the face, and another across his shoulder. He staggered, and felt the bracing sharpness of cold, clean air. Wincing, he blinked, and the miasma cleared from his eyes. What he saw was Val standing directly in front of him, bloodless to the lips, the hilt of Longclaw clutched in both hands. She had apparently wrestled it away from him, then hit him with the flat. He wanted to gulp air as if coming up from a deep dive, and had to settle for making a strange croaking noise like a kicked bladder instead. "What just. . .?"

"I don't know." Val stared back at him. "You started going mad, thrashing and struggling, talking to those who weren't there, muttering about how you had to let them have you. I didn't intend they
Despite everything, Jon felt a wry smile quirk up his mouth. Here they were in the hellpit of the frozen north, untold thousands of leagues away from anything human or friendly or safe, and yet it was a stubborn ordinary wildling woman who'd had to save him, the demigod warg monster with the hands of dragonglass and the blade of lightning, from the demons in the darkness, with a good old-fashioned clout over the head. Strange as it sounded, it made him hopeful. *There is still something in us that can hold back this storm.* He felt almost like a true man again, for the first time since he'd waked in Ghost's body in the cave of ice under the Wall.

"Here," he said, holding out his hand. "Give me my weapon back, my lady."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Not until you can swear you're not about to go mad again."

"I shall do my best, and you have my permission to hit me again if not," Jon assured her gravely. "Now, if you would?"

Val hesitated, but gave it over. As he closed his hand around the hilt, Jon felt something warm and sticky against his cold glass fingers, and he frowned, bringing it close to his face. Even the distant witchlight was sufficient to identify it as dark crimson. Blood.

"My lady," he said, shocked. "What is this?"

Val's eyes flicked from side to side, in the plainly futile hope that something else would appear at that moment and spare her having to answer. Then she gave up the ghost. "The... thing, the child o' the forest, didn't care to let you in to see your brother. Said that with you the master of the Horn of Winter, unliving but undead, killed in ice and reborn in fire, you were no less than the Great Other made flesh. And with that being so, you could not enter under the hill."

This theory of his identity shocked Jon anew, yet not as much as he felt that it should have. *The Great Other, indeed? I cannot say it nay.* "But I did enter."

"Aye, you did." Val stuck her pointed chin at him defiantly, in a way that reminded him heartrendingly of Ygritte. "Because of this." She pulled back her sleeve, exposing the ragged red slash against the pale ivory of her wrist. "I writ the wards in blood for us, so the children wouldn't have to break all their last protection against the demons of the cold. Them blue-eyed cousins of yours. The only way to open the Old Way, so I did what need be done. As I said. No use fussing."

"Oh, my lady." Jon tore a strip from his black cloak and began to bind up the wound. "You should have told me."

She glared at him. "Why?"

"Because – " To his surprise, Jon had no immediate answer for that. At last he said, "Because I should know your sacrifice, as much as you know mine. Earlier, when you hit me... you may have literally hit upon it. The only way to get through this place, these voices of things, these old monsters, is to draw on a power much simpler than that of dragons and swords and crowns. Only the power of a human heart against the dark."

Val tried to keep glaring, but her lip was trembling. "That's a pretty sentiment there, crow. I suppose you have a clever idea for that, as well?"

"No," Jon admitted. "I wish I could say that I did. It would make this all much the easier. But I think, my lady, there is a power in you which even I do not have. I ask you only to be strong a short while longer."
She looked as if she was about to say something, then turned away, shaking her head. And it was as he took a step toward her, intending somehow to comfort her, that he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and reacted on instinct.

"Down!" He barely had time to sheathe Longclaw before he leapt at her, knocking her flat underneath him as the first heavy white branch punched out of the darkness, swinging over their heads like a ship boom in a storm. It was followed almost immediately by another, as the roots grasped and clawed for them like the rotted hands of the wights themselves. Then the entire tunnel seemed to come apart, rocking and heaving, pelting them with chunks of ice and wood and stone, as the trees moaned and grasped and writhed. *The Old Way will have its price.*

Jon felt around, got hold of Val's wrist – the uninjured one, he prayed – and began to slither along on his belly, pulling her with him. They groped in the darkness, dodging the roots that kept exploding through the ground, hearing a faint and far-off sound like agonized screaming. Who or what it was, Jon had no notion, and nor did he especially care to find out. Just keep moving, still not safe to stand – just a bit further, they had to come to the end and –

One moment they were still crawling desperately together, Val's breathing harsh and desperate enough for both of them, and then he was alone. He'd lost her, had no clue where to find her, and had to fight back a stab of very human panic. Madly, he remembered the tales Ygritte had told him, in the cave. *Gendel's children are always hungry.* And strange as it sounded (no stranger than the rest of it, he supposed) there had been a few times on this journey when he thought he heard Sam Tarly calling out to him. *Jon. Help me, Jon, I'm hurt, I'm alone down here, I'm lost. They're coming for me. Jon, please.* But Sam was thousands of miles away, safely in Oldtown. Please gods let him have found the Horn of Dawn, and if Jon went back toward the voice, he would find only a ghastly wight and unholy master waiting to –

No. No thinking of that. He had dangers enough. He thought he heard a choking scream, and swung back around in that direction, pawing Longclaw out of the scabbard. He could see it, now. Great white things like massive snakes, devouring a small, flailing figure into their roots. Val.

"Hey!" Jon sprang to his feet, ducked as another branch whistled over his head, and jumped over another one that tried to take out his ankles. He sprinted the last few dozen feet to the seething knot of arboreal menace that had hold of her, and swung Longclaw down as hard as he could, into the rotten white wood.

It screamed in a terribly human way, and sap dark as blood welled from the gash. The pain made him stagger backwards, as if he'd sunk the blade into his own not-flesh – perhaps it made sense if he was now knitted from the same terrible stuff as they. But after what he'd just realized, how she'd saved him, how they had to make it together or not at all, he couldn't stop. Almost blinded, he kept on hacking at the roots, making a gulping noise of agony each time he felt the Valyrian steel in his own sinews. Yet at last, the final root parted with a shriek, falling and twisting like a cut earthworm, away into the sinister dark. The wildling woman lay spread-eagled, motionless.

"Val?" Jon flung himself to his knees. "Val!"

He could hear her breathing, wet and painful. Finally she said wearily, "Aye, Lord Snow. I'm here."

"Thank the gods." He fumbled for her hand. "Can you stand?"

"The... gods?" She let out a sound that might have been a laugh. "All my life I've worshiped the old gods of the north, same as you. But wasn't it just them that attacked us, the roots of the weirwood trees? Seems to me you should... hope they don't come back."
Jon hadn't thought of that, but there would be time to argue theology later. By blinking hard, he could just see her, her grey eyes huge and hollow in her dead-white face. "Are you hurt?"

"Maybe... a little. Not bad. Help... me up."

For Val to ask for help under any circumstances, something must be terribly wrong; she had to be missing a leg or worse. But she was right, they had to get out of here. He hauled her arm over his shoulders, then lurched to his feet, taking most of her weight. She didn't seem able to bear it all, and cold foreboding congealed in his throat. *Hurry. Hurry, hurry.*

In such fashion, a pair of cripples, they made it down the rest of the tunnel, glancing nervously in every direction in anticipation of the murderous trees returning. But instead the path began to slant upwards under Jon's boots, swiftly turning vertical, and he skidded back in the leaf mold, almost sending them down for what would have been a lengthy and unpleasant fall. "I can't carry you up this." It would have been a gasp if he had breath. "Come on. With me. Come on."

With a groan, Val rolled off his back, then began to claw determinedly up the incline. Her ash-blonde braid was almost entirely unraveled, frozen with sweat, hanging in her eyes, but she kept going. Rock was beginning to punch through the soil, and Jon felt the breath of winter on his face. *We are almost there. We are almost to the surface. We've almost made it through the Old Ways.*

A few more minutes of hard, filthy climbing proved this theory. His hand knocked against something, and he pushed it aside and pulled himself through a hole, onto solid ground and into (fittingly) a drift of snow that must have been a dozen feet tall. He spat it out, yet felt almost delirious with joy to see it. "Val! Look! We're here! We survived!"

No answer. He spun around. "Val?"

For a moment, still nothing. Then a glove emerged, grasped hold of the stone, and connected itself to a shuddering gasp as the wildling woman emerged from underground. By the dim, filmy afterglow of whatever hour of day or night it was – the sun would not rise here, they'd be lucky to even get twilight – she looked even worse. There was blood, enough blood that Jon was briefly perplexed. He'd bandaged up her wrist, it couldn't be –

"Oh no," he whispered. "Val."

She gave him a smile through gritted teeth, which looked more like a grimace. There was a thick trail of blood smearing the whiteness of the snow where she'd just crawled out, and he recognized the way she hunched over herself, the increasing gurgle in her breathing. It wasn't just the roots that had done this. When he'd lost track of what was him and what was her and what was the trees – in that transcendent, diabolical moment when it had all been his flesh –

*Monster.*

*Murderer.*

"It's all right, Lord Snow," she said weakly. "We're almost to the end of the world now, one way or t' other. Help me up."

Speechless, Jon obeyed, lifting her arm around his shoulders again. Then he took a glance around, in search of some way to fix their bearings. He could make out the great sheet of a glacier, the huge shadows of ice-giant mountains, capped with summits of black steel and scarves of winter lace. Shattered boulders and yawning crevasses were just visible under the frozen carapace of snow. Here and there dead trees, hard and stunted, lifeless for generations, prodded out like skeletal...
fingers. And when he looked up, the only celestial body remotely visible was the blue star in the eye of the Ice Dragon, the star that always pointed north. Yet now it was directly overhead. There was no more north to go.

_The end of the world_, Jon Snow thought. _We made it_. He'd staked everything on the other ice dragon being here. If it not, he would not return, either alive or dead. _And soon everything that is alive will be dead as well._

Slowly, trying not to jostle Val too much, he started to walk. There was something ahead, some sort of glow, and he could hear clicking of teeth or bones. _Or mandibles_, his brain supplied unhelpfully, conjuring up the gory details of one of Old Nan's most ghoulish tales. _Packs of pale spiders that hunted like dogs._

With Val slumped against him, Jon Snow mounted the last hill, and looked down.

A frozen black lake spread out in the lowlands, like a spill of paint against the whiteness and desolation that stood guard at the very end of the earth, the furthest northern point of the Westerosi continent. A single weirwood stood alongside it, reflecting the glow of a burning beacon. Somehow, the tree had managed to keep its leaves: red as blood, and he was beginning to understand just why they were that color. _It has exacted its price from me, and from Val_. He'd never imagined the old gods to be either benevolent or malevolent; they merely were, watchers and sentinels, the embodiment of the wild and unforgiving north. But now he saw that they had been created in the flesh and blood and bone of their people, in the most literal sense. That as men fed on the land, the land fed on them.

Still, however, that was not the realization which occupied the greatest part of his attention. That was the rock in the middle of the lake, and what sat on that rock, so still as to look as if it too had been carved from the bones of time. Snow dulled the green and bronze scales, and no smoke rose from the slitted nostrils. The wings were folded, icicles hung in beards from its evil snout, and the eyes were glazed but open, fixed on them. At him.

A dragon. His dragon.

_He's here_. Jon felt a jolt of disbelief and euphoria. _Melisandre has lied about a thousand things and more, yet not this_. "Val," he whispered. "Val, look."

She pried her eyes open, glanced blearily at nothing – then caught sight of it, and stared. The air was so cold that she choked when she tried to speak, but she did her best to be dismissive, as if this was a sight she saw every day. _Looks to be a dead dragon._

"No. It's not." Jon felt unaccountably certain, as if a part of him had entered into the beast – the warg part, which he had thought was killed with Ghost. "It's waiting for us. For me."

"If you say so, Lord Snow." Val sounded drowsy, and Jon was reminded of the urgency of their situation. If she fell asleep, she would be dead in minutes, and he could not leave her alone to do so. Yet he could not be cumbered with her, badly wounded, when he was venturing out to tame a dragon and get them out of here before something – something worse – came to stop them.

After a somewhat frantic deliberation, Jon started to walk again, hauling her down the far side of the hill toward the shoreline. Not far in the distance, he could see the end of the land, where it turned into plunging cliffs a thousand feet tall. He wondered what would happen if he kept going, if he would fall over the edge or if he would somehow wind up going south again. _Where? What is on the other side of nothing?_
Val was flagging badly by the time they reached the frozen, shimmering black glass of the lake. She grunted in agony when Jon set her down as gently as he could, and more blood stained her leathers and furs. Still, she had enough composure left to give him an irritated glare. "What are you fussing over me for, crow? Go get the bloody dragon."

"Of course," Jon said, his throat feeling too tight; he wondered if who he was now, what he was, could weep. It was a wildling gift to matter-of-factly accept every situation, no matter how surreal, as well as the imminent presence of death. Val had lived alongside it every day since childhood, watched it carry off her friends and her parents and her lover Jarl, her beloved sister Dalla, all her people at Hardhome, before the Wall, in the Frostfangs, in the snow. Of blade, of cold, of wight, of sickness, of starvation, of pain, of grief. She knew its face and its touch, had no reason to fear it. A rare woman indeed.

Jon put two black fingers in his mouth, and whistled.

It reeled out pure and skirling as the northern clansmen's skinpipes, the only sound in the silent night, shattering the iced-up air. For several nerve-racking moments, there was no response. No sound. Only the end of the world.

Then the dragon threw its head back, and screamed.

It juddered through Jon as his blade had, just as painful and exquisite. He could feel it then, feel the dragon rise, the ice crack and slough off its wings as it spread them, its smoke showing only in faint wisps at first, then in a full-bellied explosion, its fire impossibly brilliant against the endless night. He knew its body already, having warged into it briefly after he'd died in Ghost: the beast inside the brick pyramid, with its cream-and-gold companion. It was like a glove he'd worn once, could pull on and clasp his fingers around, and he imagined Ghost's red eyes turning to him, the white wolf starting to run again, the wild soul set free.

Come to me, he told the green dragon. You are mine. I am yours. And in his mind he heard its name: Rhaegal.

The beast launched off its rock in a blizzard of icicles, still screaming fit to wake the dead. They cannot be far away. With a few lurching flaps it was airborne, a blast of fire scorching so close over Jon's head that he had to duck. It was big, far bigger than he'd expected; nearly full grown, lambent with heat. Its wings caused powerful gusts that fluttered red leaves off the weirwood, caused the northern beacon to skip and stutter. And as it came around for another pass, Jon saw what was creeping behind it.

"Val!" He grabbed hold of her – she felt disturbingly fragile, a bundle of rags – took a running start, and jumped.

For a moment, they were falling in thin air. Then the next, the hard green scales of the dragon's back, massive and slippery, punched up underneath them, and Jon instinctively tried to grasp with his knees. Rhaegal had other ideas, however, and twisted and snapped like a hooked eel, great curved incisors nearly taking a chunk out of both his newly acquired riders. Jon smacked him hard on the snout, however, and seized a handful of his ruff, keeping desperate hold of Val with the other arm as they whirled into the air, the ground already ten, fifteen, twenty feet below. Bitterly cold air screamed past them like the apocalypse.

Which, to judge from what was going on below, it very well could be.

The hills were waking up. They emerged almost regally, as if arising from sleep – and they were, Jon thought madly, after eight thousand years they were freed from their slumber at last. If he had imagined that all the Others in the world were arrayed before the Wall before he brought it down, it seemed almost absurdly childish now. Others and more Others, Others upon Others, breaking
through the snow, marching down the rocks. There came the pale spiders, clacking and scuttling, one of them nearly the same size as Rhaegal. Demons and fiends and unquiet wraiths, specters and seemings, monstrous and gory, reaching up with ice blades and teeth and claws and darkness, wanting to fling the dragon from the sky and put out the fire for all time. Jon could barely keep them going fast enough, kept goading them frantically higher, could feel the chill spreading through him as if his blood – if he had it – was freezing solid. The pain of his slashed flesh. . . the memory of falling. . . consume me. . .

Val stirred. "Crow," she husked. "Don't you dare fall off and leave me now." She turned to look at him, her eyes luminous in the light of the blue star, wide and brilliant with fear and pain and pride. "Jon Snow, stay with me."

"Always," he told her, and drew Longclaw.

It shrieked and shivered, flashing that light beyond light, and Jon swung down madly as one of the spiders launched for them; Rhaegal dodged and swerved, screaming, but could not dislodge the mandibles sunk into his hide. But Longclaw cut into the carapace with a horrible wet sound, and the spider fell away, trampled under its onrushing fellows. It made a horrible keening sound, torn away in the din of the waking monsters. Am I one of them, or not?

"No," Jon said aloud. "No."

He felt warm now, almost too hot, as the dragon's flame coursed through him, his hands glowing like the very heart of a furnace. Longclaw was turning molten – dragonsteel, made in the forges of Valyria – and he could see cracks splintering up its blade. Heard Melisandre warning him that he could not wield it forever, that he needed the weapon that was worthy of him, that he needed Lightbringer. . . swear all that you are and will be to the Lord of Light, and he will deliver both of these priceless weapons into your hands. . .

But he hadn't. Or to the old gods, the children of the forest, either. All the whispers, all the temptations, all the power, all the pain, and yet he remained Jon Snow.

Great Other.

Master of the Horn of Winter.

It was still on his belt, the two broken pieces, from where he'd last winded it. And in the flame, the Long Night, the moment of truth, he knew.

Longclaw was well and truly alight now, cracking, breaking apart, thousand-year-old steel screaming and shattering in the face of the power coruscating through it. Jon shoved the sword into the scabbard, and lifted the Horn instead – then thrust it into the flame. As Rhaegal fought and swerved and snapped at the spiders, as the Others reached up with their elegant milkglass hands, as starshadows unfurled, as fires raged and stars fell –

– as he could feel Val starting to tumble –

Jon Snow caught her, and blew the Horn.
"Where are we going, Mother?" the king asked, struggling manfully to keep up on his short legs. He yawned, rubbing his eyes, and seemed inclined to dawdle at the window embrasure that looked out over Aegon's Hill and the dark, foggy city, the night split apart with the distant chorus of great bronze bells. "If we're being attacked, shouldn't I go out to let the men see me?"

"No, I said." The queen spun around, strode back down the corridor, and hoisted him smartly under the armpits, his ermine-trimmed bedrobe dragging on the stones. "Are you mad? The pretender's army is coming ashore right now, and if they capture or kill you, my sweet, the war is over and we have lost. I am taking you someplace we'll be safe, and we'll hide there together until the danger is passed. It will be an adventure."

Tommens pouted. "You let Joffrey go out to the battle when Uncle Stannis was attacking!"

"Joffrey was almost a man grown, and I hope you will never again blame me for that bit of lunacy cooked up by my wretch of a brother." She would not speak the dwarf's name; it was bad enough that she had to refer to him as kinsman. "As I've told you, he was trying to kill Joff, and he eventually succeeded. So you can see why I am in no haste to repeat the experiment."

"I don't know." Tommen looked sad. "I miss Uncle Tyrion. I wish he'd come home."

At that, Cersei set her son down in the middle of the dark hallway, held his chin in one hand, and administered two deliberate smacks, one on each cheek. "If you say that ever again," she informed the stunned-looking young monarch, "I will have you take your whipping boy's head off yourself, so you may learn what the proper punishment for treason. You hold Pate's life in your hands, and your own, and mine, and all the realm's, when you say that you wish that monstrous little murderer would come home. Is that what you want? To kill us all? Do you?"

"N-no." Tommen's eyes welled with tears. "No, I don't. I'm s-sorry, Mother."

"There, there, my lion cub." Cersei kissed his tumbled golden curls. His round face was flushed pink; he still slept warm, like the small boy he so nearly was, and it had been difficult to convince him to abandon his cozy bed in Maegor's Holdfast for the uncertainties of a journey in the dark. Cersei had been worried about the guards posted outside his chamber – with the entire Kingsguard dead, absent, or traitorous, save for Ser Robert Strong whom Tommen totally abhorred, the task of overseeing his welfare had fallen to common household knights who all had Tyrell gold jingling in their pockets – but Qyburn had assured her that he would drug their evening wine. And the false maester (false only in the eyes of the Citadel, in Cersei's eyes her truest servant) had been as good as his word. When Cersei had mounted the stairs in a dark cloak and hood, the louts were all snoring behind their halberds, and it had been simple, the simplest thing, to slip into Tommen's room and spirit him away.

Now it was up to her alone to keep him safe. She would rather have had good Ser Robert at her back, but aside from Tommen's irrational terror of the man, the giant was too big to fit down the secret passages that they must travel, and Qyburn required Strong elsewhere tonight, to help interrogate the Lady Nymeria Sand as per certain disturbing news that had just arrived from Dorne. When Cersei begged to be told what it was, if it involved Myrcella, Qyburn had reassured her that all was doubtless well. Even if not, he said, this provided a perfect opportunity to pull out the fangs of the Dornish snake that had worked its way sight unseen so far into the crown's councils, and Cersei had to agree. To his credit, the maester did not mention Tyene.
My sweet girl. She wanted to help me, she wasn't like her loathsome family. No matter anything she heard confirming that the septa had indeed had some plot in hand to remove Tommen from the city and then from this life, Cersei refused to believe it. She gave me good counsel on the Westerling affair. Those traitors would still walk free today if not for her. Thus, Jaime attempting to save them and murdering her in cold blood could never be forgiven. Thank the gods he was still in his cell, where Aegon's lackeys could find and finish him off at their convenience – they would have no tender feelings for the man who'd opened the throat of the last dragon king to sit the Iron Throne, their prince's grandfather – pretended prince's pretended grandfather, that was. Yet even as Cersei smiled with satisfaction at the thought, another turned her blood cold. She had assumed that the Imp was safe in his cell, awaiting execution, as well.

She stopped.

"What, Mother?" Tommen stopped as well, looking up at her curiously. "Is the danger done? Can we go back?"

"I – no. No, we must hurry." It was a foolish idea to try to make it all the way from here to White Sword Tower. They'd waste too much time, they'd certainly be seen, and it would put Tommen in too much danger. Jaime was clearly deranged and corrupted to who knew what measure by his misadventures in the riverlands. If he'd lay hands on a blameless holy woman, why would he flinch at harming his own blood? Tommen was nothing to him, and she shuddered as she remembered the look in his eyes after he'd thrown her off him. He'd catch her, take her one last time without love or tenderness, and then slit her throat. Tommen's, too.

No. We must avoid him at all costs. Cersei took Tommen's hand and quickened their pace, down a dusty, unused staircase to the cellar at the bottom. She hoped it was the one Qyburn had told her about. She hadn't dared to bring a light, even a dark lantern, and the grimy underbellies of the Red Keep tended to look alike even in daytime. With her free hand, she felt in front of them, ready to let go of her son in an instant if there was a yawning abyss; better she should fall in alone than both of them together. She could hear Tommen valiantly trying to stifle his sneezes, snuffling like a truffle hog in an effort not to let one rip, and wanted to kiss him for his thoughtfulness. Her sweet child. She would save him if it was the last thing she did.

No sepulchral chasms opened up to swallow them, however, and they reached the far side safely. Here, there was just enough light for Cersei to make out the dim shape of the counterweight – so it was the right place after all. She groped around on the slick, cold stone until, quite by accident, she found the catch.

Tommen gasped as, almost as if by magic, the stone wall in front of them floated up as effortlessly as a puff of dandelion on the wind. Cersei held her breath, nervously scanning the darkness in anticipation of arriving pursuers. But there was still nothing, no sound. If they could just get down here, they'd be safe. She devoutly hoped that the old legends, of unwitting servants who went into the bowels of the castle and were never seen again, were more than just legends.

"Me first," she whispered to Tommen, easing herself into the narrow black passage thus revealed. "I'll tell you when."

She heard him gulp. "Yes, M-Mother." His voice was almost faint with terror.

Joff would not have been afraid, the queen thought, feeling around with her foot until it happened upon the rung of a rusted ladder. Then again, there was no way to replace what she had lost in her firstborn. She'd been so infatuated with him that it was over three years until she felt the desire for another child, and told Jaime so. He obliged, as always, but that night Robert had returned unexpectedly from a hunting trip, and crawled into her bed to drunkenly rape her for a bit. All
throughout her pregnancy, Cersei had lived in fear that this child might be his, and words had not been enough to describe her relief when her beautiful golden girl slid into the world on a lazy summer afternoon. She loved Myrcella almost as much as Joff, but Tommen.

He had been an accident. Not in the conventional sense, but Robert had gotten a letter from bloody Ned Stark announcing the birth of another son – Bran, in a certain pitch-black irony – and decided that it was about time he fettle himself with a spare. Cersei, just a few months recovered from childbirth, had not been amenable to this idea, but Robert was insistent; other women around him bountifully produced babes with no ill effect, and he was king. He had what he wanted. So he had her that night, not at all put off by the fact that she lay as if dead. She thought she had managed to prevent him from finishing inside her, but couldn't be sure, and when he was snoring, crept out sobbing to find a wisewoman. She took the tea, let the old hag's gnarled hands cleanse her in her intimate places, and then stole away. If Robert was going to rape her until she fell pregnant, it was best to get it over with.

She and Jaime had met, no matter the danger, in an unused chamber deep under the Red Keep. He had been so sweet with her that night, so tender, whispering words of comfort, holding her and stroking her whole again in her heart, until he entered her and made her whole in their flesh.

Nothing had ever felt so good as that revenge. Yet when Tommen was born nine months later, Cersei had been somewhat disappointed. She'd wanted another girl to spite Robert, and also because a girl would have been left to her. Instead it was a boy, who Robert might get ideas about promoting to heir at Joff's expense; his disdain for his supposed eldest son was no secret. It had taken Cersei time to get past that, to love her plump meek boy with his fondness for kittens and sweetmeats for who he was. And now, there was nothing more precious to her.

Her foot hit ground, and she looked up. For a moment she could not see Tommen above, and felt a lurch of terror that someone had stolen up and taken him – how could she have been so foolish as to go down first and leave him alone? Frost clenched her heart. As loud as she dared, she hissed, "Sweetling? Sweetling!"

For another nerve-shredding moment, there was no answer. Then the tail of Tommen's robe appeared, and then his small feet, as he started to descend the ladder hand under hand. She could hear him counting each step. "One. . . two. . . three. . ." Much as she was proud of his bravery, she yearned to stuff a rag in his mouth. Even down here, there were ears everywhere, and the queen touched the dirk sheathed at her waist, under her cloak. One boon of this almost-complete darkness was that Tommen would not be obliged to watch if she had to kill someone for him.

The king had counted one hundred and thirty-six rungs by the time he reached bottom. The passage was narrow enough that they could not walk abreast, and low enough that Cersei had to stoop, but she whispered to him to wait while she went back up and closed the false wall. She chafed at the delay, but Tommen's fumbling efforts to shut it would have been more trouble than they were worth. So while he watched nervously, she climbed back up the ladder and tripped the counterweight, causing the stone to roll back into place as if over the mouth of a tomb. It made Cersei feel much the better. Now we should be safe.

She was quite winded when she reached the bottom again. She was not as young nor as fit as she used to be, and all this ratting around in the dark, after weeks of sedentary imprisonment, was quite the chore. Nonetheless, it was irrelevant. She stepped in front of Tommen, feeling like the Crone leading the way into the blackness with golden lantern held high. Well, perhaps not quite yet. But Cersei had never been impressed with the septons' hypocrisy in the matter of the Mother – they claimed that she could be as fierce as the Warrior when her children were threatened, but every time Cersei had tried that fierceness herself, she was reviled. If one was to be a legitimate wise woman, one had to be as old as the hills, with white hair and withered teats. That way there was no
danger of beauty, of sexuality, of damning the souls of those poor blameless men led astray into sin as a result of your shameful mortal flesh. Cersei had concluded long ago that it was impossible for a woman to be accepted as both beautiful and strong, or even as either one. If beautiful, she was a slut. If strong, she was a bitch. A virgin, a broodmare, or a celibate widow. Those are the women we must be. And she was none. Small wonder the Faith hated her so much.

Cersei lost track of how long they walked. Forever and a day, it felt like. They went down and down and down, until the ghostly moss spidering up the walls and the damp chill in the air told her that they were well underground. At first there had been grates overhead, and sometimes the sound of distant shouting, but those too had faded away into an all-consuming silence of the grave. There was only the echo of their footsteps, their breathing, and sometimes a far-off drip of water. Then and odd she glimpsed ancient graffiti on the stone, giving her leave to wonder just who had trafficked these tunnels in the past. There had always been people who lived down here, filthy half-wild sewer folk, but when she anxiously asked Qyburn if they would attack, he'd said not to worry. He said that so often.

"Mother?" Tommen whispered. "I'm so tired. Can we stop now?"

"Not yet, my love." Cersei wanted them to burrow deeper into the belly of the city, like a feeding tick, before she'd trust to a respite. "Be strong. It won't be much further."

"I'm hungry too," Tommen said, in a carrying whisper.

"Quiet!" He quailed at once, and Cersei felt guilty. He was only nine, a boy raised with every worldly luxury and comfort, not used to hearing nay or dealing with cold and exhaustion and deprivation. Perhaps it would be good for him, stiffen his mettle, burn away the last childish softness. If he came out of this stronger and harder, perhaps she would finally see him as worthy to wear Joffrey's crown. It was still possible for him to be a great man. So long as he, at any cost, survived.

On that note, Cersei wondered how the battle topside was going. Had Aegon's forces overrun King's Landing by now, as everyone had predicted? She had far more confidence in the strength of the city's walls than she did in the hearts of its defenders – the instant things went bad, the miserable self-serving lickspittles would be tripping over themselves in their haste to tongue the Targaryens' arses. But she'd be a fool to put too much faith in King's Landing's reputation as impregnable. The impostor and whatever fell sorcery he'd worked at Storm's End would certainly have something to say about that.

_They are all coming for me._ Cersei shivered. _They will smoke me out, stone by stone._ No, there was no possibility of returning to the surface any time soon. It burned in her throat like gall that she, the proud lioness of Casterly Rock and Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, was reduced to fleeing down a sewer like a rat, but if it was what must be done to live and take revenge on her enemies, she would do it gladly and count herself fortunate.

They kept on going, crawling through a labyrinth of narrow catwalks and ledges while evil-smelling black rivers rushed below. Aegon the Conqueror had ordered the sewers of his new capital to be built of brick, in the Valyrian fashion – Cersei knew of no other king in history who'd thought of such a thing, but that was doubtless how one became a conqueror in the first place. Obsessive attention to detail. She held tight to Tommen, who was gagging on the stench. It was admittedly eye-watering, but they had to get to the far side. There was a mark that Qyburn had told her to look out for, where the sewers intersected with a tunnel that paralleled the path of the Blackwater Rush out of the city. It had been dug by the pickers and the salvagers, all the folk who never saw the light of day, but if they could get to it, it was just possible that they could hire
passage on one of the canal boats that plied their trade along the underground river. These people had no idea what the infamous Queen Cersei looked like, would see only a grubby poor mother and her son – though they’d have to abandon Tommen's ermine bedrobe sometime before that point. Then, once they'd made it out of King’s Landing, they could find horses in the westerlands and ride like the seven hells to Casterly Rock. *They may take the Red Keep, but they will never take the Rock.*

It would help, however, if she could be certain of the mark. Qyburn had been vague about its description, and there were all sorts of scribbled symbols, stains, and scratches. Tommen, meanwhile, was beginning to sniffle and cough in the miserable, heavy, frigid, foul air of the sewers, and while her every instinct wanted to push on, Cersei reluctantly realized that they had to stop. So they crawled into a small side tunnel where it smelled moderately better, and she sat down against the dirty wall, feeling her own limbs trembling with exhaustion. But she summoned up a smile for her son and patted her lap. "Come, sweetling, lay your head. I'll look after us."

Tommen looked at her miserably. "I want to go home."

"We're going home. I'm taking you home. We'll be safe in the Rock."

He sniffled again, wiped his eyes with his grubby fists, and clambered into her lap. *I have him back from Margaery at last.* Humming, Cersei put her arms around him and stroked his hair, pulling the corner of her own cloak over him until his plump little body went slack and he began to snore in a high childish whistle. It almost made her smile. She'd do best to close her eyes too, a moment, just a moment. . .

Strange phantoms stepped out of the grey air all around her, making no sound. The largest by far must be Ser Robert, huge and silent in his white plate. But his helmet was off, the first time she could ever recall it being so, and he stared at her with blue, blue eyes through a carapace of black blood, a wolf's shadow stretching behind him. The woman behind him, mutilated and mangled, was nonetheless recognizable as Falyse Stokeworth. Then there was Lord Tywin, with dead flat eyes as gold as his radiant armor, his guts slithering out of the putrefying hole in his belly, and the Imp with his jaws slavering blood. Cersei shrank before them all, terrified, unable to lift a finger to save herself – until she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her champion stepped past her, small and mousy with a bald spot. It was Qyburn.

A rush of sick relief filled the queen. *My savior. My only friend.* She suddenly wondered what the body beneath those drab grey robes might look like. The false maester was a slight man, physically unprepossessing, but he had helped her when everyone else had abandoned her. Shut up for years in the airless celibacy of the Citadel, he would need her help finding his way around a woman's body – though given his experiments on Falyse, he couldn't be too unfamiliar, and he hadn't held to his other vows too dearly. He might be kind to her, caress her, hold her close in the watches of the night. She ached for comfort, for completion. A gentle kiss, a sweet word, a tender glance, anything. She wanted Rhaegar. She wanted Jaime. But it was Qyburn who had been given to her, and she reached out a hand to draw him in. He smiled, and remained where he was.

Baffled, the queen reached out again, more insistently. This time he took a step – but a step was as far as he got. Then the point of a sword flowered from his chest in a welter of blood, and he looked confused. He took one more step, and fell. And in the darkness behind him, green eyes flashed, a golden hand drew the sword back.

*Jaime. Jaime killed him.* But she didn't understand. Qyburn had mended his stump, saved his miserable undeserving life. He wouldn't – he wouldn't –

"*No!*" Cersei screamed as her twin stepped toward her, looking sorrowful, bringing the blade up.
She thrashed awake with the desperate denial still on her lips, cold sweat beading on her face and her heart roaring as if she'd been chased. A dream. It was a dream, just a bad dream. She was still here, underground, away, safe. It wasn't, it was nothing, it was –

Where was Tommen?

Panic lacerated her like a blade. She scrambled up, shaking out her filthy clothes, as if he might be hiding under them. "Tommen!" Her scream felt torn out of her very soul. "Tommen! Where – Tommen, please, Jaime, no, no, no. . ."

She thought she heard a faint answering shout, and wheeled around toward it, wild-eyed. Stumbling half to her feet, racing, slipping down the tunnel, she finally saw him perched at the end, peering out at the underworld. Grimy speleothems, glittering salt crystals, dirty tunnels, iridescent slicks of oil on the dark surface of the fetid water, and the precipitously narrow path that bordered it. It was there that Tommen pointed. "Is that where we're going?"

Cersei tried to resist the urge to smack him silly, and succeeded, though barely. "How dare you go off on your own! I almost died of fright! Down here – never leave my side again, do you hear me? Never!"

"I'm sorry, Mother." Tommen looked penitent. "But I thought I heard something."

A new chill gripped Cersei's heart. Anything, it could be anything. "What sort of thing?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Voices, I'm pretty sure. Over there." Tommen's finger sketched inconclusively at the passages on the far side. "I think someone else is down here."

The sewer folk. It could be that they were saved after all, but Cersei reminded herself to be cautious. "All right," she said, more composedly. "We'll go to investigate. But you must leave your robe here."

Tommens stared at her. "But why? I'll be so cold without it!"

"I know, sweetling, but that can't be helped. No one must know our identity, and no one would take you for a rubbish-picker in that. Here." Over his protests, Cersei pulled the ermine cloak off and folded it up neatly. "We'll keep it safe until we come back to fetch it. You can have mine." She undid the clasp of her own homespun brown woolen mantle, and draped it around his shoulders. "Now, are you ready?"

He carefully gathered up the excess cloth so he wouldn't trod on it. "Yes, Mother."

"You're my best boy, sweetling. Come on." Cersei herself was too cold without the cloak, the icy air biting into the thin fabric of her shift, but that was only a temporary discomfort. She took Tommen's hand again, and started over the crossing.

Over here, the tunnels were slightly more roomy, but also steep and slick with all sorts of vile ordure, making the climbing slow. Cersei was soon several lengths ahead of her son, and was obliged to periodically stop and wait for him to catch up. It was trying on her nerves, especially since she was increasingly sure that there was someone else here, and that they were not all that far ahead. Who knew how many entrances and exits honeycombed the tunnel system; they could be anywhere under the city, and she kept a nervous eye on the high-water marks. If they ran into the Blackwater's underground wellspring...
"Mother, I'm so hungry," Tommen moaned, when they finally reached the top. "Please, I'm so very hungry. Can we find a way to –*

"Quiet, I said. It won't hurt you to lose some weight." Cersei was as tense as a hound on point. She cocked her head, listening, and this time she was certain that she heard it. Voices, echoing only a few hundred yards down one of the passages. More than that. *Familiar* voices.

In that moment, absolutely everything else flew out of her head. Tommen, Ser Robert, Qyburn, Jaime, everyone, leaving no room for anything except her burning desire for vengeance. They were the ones who had ruined everything, took Joffrey from her, her crown, her kingdom, her dignity, her pride. The gods of the underworld were good after all. Her knife was at her belt. Now. It must be now.

Cersei began to run. She never looked back, to the side, anywhere but forward, with the murderous intensity of a hawk swooping in for the kill. At last, she had them at last. Their rotting corpses would lie under here forever, looted by the salvagers before their bones sank through layers and layers of shit. It was the perfect end, the most perfect. She slammed through turns without looking, one tunnel and then another, clawing up one final ladder –

And there, she saw them.

Their faces were smeared with filth, their glossy brown curls tangled and dirty. Margaery was clad in some no-account sackcloth of a dress, and her brother – *Loras*, how in the seven hells was it possibly Loras, but it was, half his face burned as unattractively as Sandor Clegane's, so the boiling oil hadn't been *entirely* fictional – looked no better. They were sitting for a rest, but they sprang to their feet as if from a catapult when they saw who it was.

"You!" The accusation burst from all three throats at once, and Cersei looked behind her desperately – no, she couldn't have Tommen anywhere near this, couldn't let him see his precious little wife and regrettably still breathing Knight of Flowers. Not until she'd remedied that mistake herself. *"YOU!"*

"Your Grace." It was Ser Loras who answered, with enough acid to cut through steel. "What an unexpected pleasure." He'd already pushed Margaery behind him, and his hand was on the hilt of his sword.

"Speak for yourself." Cersei reached for her own dagger. "I thought you were already in hell, but I'll be certain to send you there very shortly."

Ser Loras was unimpressed. "Forgive me if I'm not quaking in my boots. So you've escaped as well? I'll suppose they'll have a lark hunting you down."

"They'll never find me. But, my dear good-son, I forget my manners." Cersei smiled sweetly. "How do you come to be down here?"

The Knight of Flowers, as she'd hoped, couldn't resist an opportunity to demonstrate his own cleverness. "I arrived in the city with the Targaryen host, in order to rescue my sister at any cost. The first part of that, as you may see, has been accomplished. Now we're getting the buggering hell out of this cesspit and back to Highgarden."

"Your darling sister, yes." Cersei had been so completely expecting the news of his treachery that she couldn't even feel angry about it. "But I don't see your lord father."

"My lord father insisted on staying behind," Ser Loras said stiffly. "You might be pleased to know
that the attack on King's Landing has been broken, Aegon's army forced into rout. As Hand, Lord Mace is going to make damned sure he takes credit for the victory and defending the people, as well as explaining to Randyll Tarly and the Faith that my innocent sister has been removed from harm's way and there is no need to get . . . excited about it. So, yes. Do go on and flee. It won't look in the least suspicious."

"Perhaps," Cersei smiled again. "Or perhaps I'll just reach Casterly Rock and smash you all."

"Casterly Rock?" Ser Loras laughed. "I wouldn't advise that, Your Grace. When I left Storm's End with Aegon's army, Aurane Waters and that fleet of dromonds you so auspiciously paid for had just set out to lay siege to it. It'll be sacked to the seventh hell and back by now."

"The Rock?" Cersei tried to match his laugh, forcing away the stab of horrible doubt that had just leapt up in her stomach. "It will never be taken."

Ser Loras shrugged. "Suit yourself." And then, with no further ado, he ripped his sword out of its sheath. "It's been wonderful to catch up with you, my lady, but we'll be off now. I'll warn you not to get in our way."

Cersei held out both arms. "Go ahead, then. Do it. But just wait a moment. I'd like Tommen to see what sort of man you truly are."

"Wha – Tommen?" Ser Loras abruptly lost some of his bravado. "You brought him down here?"

"With you and your fellow traitors marching on King's Landing, it was the safest place. Don't you dare have the nerve to tell me that you care for him."

Ser Loras shook his head. "You have more flaws than can be counted, Your Grace, but I thought that even you would hold your child's life more dearly. Especially now that he is the only one who remains to you."

Cersei felt those last words hit her very slowly, almost elegantly, one after another like punches. Her stomach turned to ice, her knees to water. Lying. He must be lying. Her chest unraveled, her heart seized up. No. It is still the nightmare, I will wake up. Lying. He must be lying. Her voice sounded quite drunk. "What. Do. You. Mean."

"I'm sorry." Ser Loras wore a hard expression, but there was almost a hint of sympathy in his eyes. "That news came as well, just before we left Storm's End. Obara Sand has killed your daughter Myrcella and announced she is proud to suffer the consequences."

Cersei could not move. Her feet had turned to mud. She saw Joff clawing at his throat, the panic in his eyes. Saw him glittering on his bier. Saw Myrcella on the deck of the Seaswift at her leavetaking, the princess composed and gracious while Tommen wept. Saw the madness that the King's Landing streets had erupted into as they rode back to the Red Keep, the dung on Joff's face, the shouts for bread. Lying. He is lying. He must be lying. This was Ser Loras, Ser Loras, he'd say anything to hurt her. Myrcella. My girl. My golden girl.

"I'm sorry," Ser Loras said again. "For Tommen's sake alone, I'm not going to kill you. Find him and get him out of here. Then go. Far away."

"Aye," Margaery added. "And remember who you owe your life to."

I will never take any gift from them. I will kill myself sooner than owe my life to them. Cersei felt her stomach heaving as if she would be sick. Her heart was shattered. She couldn't even lunge after them, plunge her dagger into Ser Loras' negligently turned back. All she could do, mired in the
worst nightmare she had ever had, was watch as Ser Loras put his arm around Margaery's waist and began to help her away down the tunnel, until they had become small shadowy figures and then vanished entirely in the darkness.

She didn't know how long she stood there. It must have been years. But when she surfaced at last, when she turned around, her decision was utterly clear in her head.

There was still something else for her down here. She didn't know exactly where, but she'd find it if she had to spend the rest of her life looking. She'd told Qyburn to order the pyromancers to make as many pots as they could, and cache them under the city in expectation of Aegon's landing. Well, the Fat Flower could take all the credit for the victory that he wanted, but there would be nothing left when she was finished. It was the only way to match the screaming desolation in her heart. Only way. She had lived too long. Maggy the Frog's evil eyes taunted her. *Gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds.*

Cersei began to walk faster. Gooseflesh shivered her bare skin. Her cloak was wherever Tommen was, and wherever Tommen was, gods be with him. She couldn't go back now. This was over. Her eyes burned, tearless. Green fire.

Green fire.
Sansa

She heard the shouts, as if in a dream, while she was still on her knees, as a grey glaze of snow settled on her shoulders. Cold mud stained her dress, slipped under her hands as she tried to steady herself. She had lost sight of Littlefinger, or any other of the participants in her so-called trial; it would be a miracle if they weren't dueling to the death in the Great Hall right now. But who had just arrived here in such spectacular fashion... it wasn't, it couldn't be...

In any event, she had to find out. Sansa finally got her skirts out of the way, and struggled to her feet. She had twisted her ankle and it was throbbing, but not enough to stop her as she limped fiercely across the courtyard, toward where the disturbance was concentrated in front of the open gates. She was still terrified, but at worst, this could get her into no more trouble than she was in already, named and shamed as a harlot and murderess in front of the entire Vale. At best...

_I have been without teeth and claws for so long. It is time I found myself a new wolf._

As she drew closer, she realized with a sinking stomach that it wasn't the Burned Men after all, and certainly no one who looked disreputable enough to be the Brotherhood. Instead, it was a garrison of Arryn soldiers led by someone whom she recognized at once as Ser Donnel Waynwood, the earnest young Knight of the Gate. They were hauling a travois slung between their horses, and from the exclamations of shock and horror as Lord Nestor's household viewed its occupant, it was plain that said occupant was both grievously injured and shockingly familiar. And with that, before she took another step, Sansa knew. Remembered Littlefinger telling her sleekly that the reason she could not see her betrothed was due to him being out hunting a great pack of Burned Men. Remembered everything she'd concluded about how Littlefinger had, on the sly, set up Harrold Hardying to be removed. _Of course. If he meant to marry me all along, Harry would be a monstrous imposition._ Sansa still did not know what to think about half of what had been revealed to her underground, in the Inquisitor's prison. But now was not the time.

She took a deep breath and gathered herself together, straightened her back and put her fear aside. Then she stepped into the throng as if she had nothing to hide. "Excuse me. I want to see him. Lord Harrold."

"He's in no shape for it, m'lady." Lord Nestor's supercilious steward tried to hold her back. "He needs a maester, and then we'll be most curious to hear what he has to – "

Sansa shook him off and put on her best impression of Cersei Lannister's chilling, haughty stare. "How dare you lay hands on me? I am Lady Sansa of House Stark and my reputation has been destroyed with no evidence, by the man who murdered Lord Jon Arryn. Until I receive a fair trial, I will _not_ be considered a guilty woman. Now _let me through._"

To her shock, this worked. The steward emitted a noise like a stepped-on bladder and permitted her to pass. In a moment more she stood at the travois, looking down into Harrold Hardying's battered, bleeding face. Whatever wound he had taken, it was clearly substantial – and, Sansa had no doubt, supposed to be fatal. But it had been interrupted.

"Harry," she whispered. There was no chance of privacy in this mob, but she leaned down as close as she could. "Who did this?" If it _was_ the Burned Men... 

Harry's chest heaved as he struggled for a breath. The dried blood on his lips cracked as he tried to form them around a word, which emerged in a strangled hiss. _"Harlan."_ 

Harlan Hunter. Ser Gilwood's kinslaying little brother had struck again, and confirmed Sansa's
theory beyond any doubt. That was all she needed, and she didn't even resist as rough hands seized her shoulders and pulled her back. Harry was conveyed away toward the keep, and as she watched him go, she wondered just who was going to be seeing to his wounds. Maester Colemon had gone to Longbow Hall, but if he was suborned into Littlefinger's service, he would have a vested interest in seeing to it that the Young Falcon flew no more. Otherwise –

Sansa's question was answered, however, as a beaky man in grey robes clambered down from a donkey. After a moment to apologetically introduce himself to the steward as Maester Kelvin, formerly of the Bloody Gate, he made haste after Harry's litter. Which meant, if Littlefinger caught either of them... he had vanished for the moment like a rat down a hole, but he had to be nearby... .

Sansa stood irresolute, completely unsure what to do or where to go. She had no interest in returning to the Great Hall, and even less on going off on her own; Littlefinger was surely just waiting until the crowd dissipated to continue in the execution of his interrupted matrimonial plans. This crowd did not seem inclined to seize her and string her up, at least, but the question of her innocence was far from resolved. They might just shut her into a tower cell, or into the dungeon with the trapped Inquisitor, and then she'd never know if her mother and the Brotherhood and the wildlings made it. She'd be done for.

Just then, she noticed three riders at the rear of Ser Donnel's garrison. Two men and a boy, it looked to be, all severely weather-beaten and road-worn, haggard and grey-faced and cold. But just as she was about to glance away, something caught her with a start, and she looked back.

She knew them. It hit her in a freezing cascade like broken icicles. One of the men was the very knight-errant that she and the Brotherhood had encountered in the frigid forest, after they'd stolen his palfrey and he tracked them down to retrieve it. Ser Hyle Hunt. And that meant the other was – Pod. Sansa could not recall ever being more abjectly relieved to see a face in her life, even one as pimpled and timid and sun-and-snowburned as the young squire's. But Ser Hyle and Pod had been the ones who swore to find the Lady Brienne for her, the one who may or may not be a traitor to her mother and the Kingslayer's whore, and how, how in the name of the seven gods and the bones and blood of the north, how could they be here, with – with –

Sansa realized then that their companion, the one she'd taken for a man as well, was not. He – she – was a hand and a half taller than many knights, with tangled straw-colored hair, a broad nose, and a spatter of freckles on her scarred cheeks. She had hunched muscular shoulders, wore a longsword strapped at her waist, and the torn remnants of what looked very much like a Manderly tabard. Had she been at White Harbor, then? But for what purpose, and in whose company? The Brotherhood had made Ser Hyle and Pod swear that they would only tell Brienne of Sansa's whereabouts, and now, for better or worse, they had found her.

She hesitated, tempted to glance away. But there could be no doubt, even in that brief moment, that the warrior woman had seen her; Sansa could feel the intensity of her eyes burning against her back. She was not in a position to refuse allies, no matter how tenuous, and wanted to believe, very much so, that she could trust the oaths Pod and Ser Hyle had made. But conversely, she could also ill-afford any more enemies, and either way, she had to do something now. Apart from Lady Brienne's stare, Pod's mouth had fallen open far enough to stuff a weasel down, and if they had come here with any intention whatsoever of assisting Sansa, surely they would have thought to use false names. Yet if someone saw the way they were staring at her, her apparent cognizance of them, and put two and two together –

Thinking on her feet, Sansa spun around, breezy as a queen in her filthy white gown. "I don't
believe I've made your acquaintance, ser," she said, offering her hand to Hyle Hunt and narrowing her eyes at him significantly. "What business brings you to the Vale?"

Mercifully, Ser Hyle appeared to take the hint. With a flourish as convincing as any actor, he kissed her fingers. "Ser Benfrey Poole at your service. This is my son, Jon. You'll forgive his gawping, he's never seen a highborn lady before." Pod jerked in a way that suggested Ser Hyle had just stepped hard on his foot. "And my wife, Alys." He indicated the big blonde woman, but his own gaze flicked back to Sansa's, searching for comprehension.

Sansa gave him the smallest of nods, indicating that she understood, then glanced back at Lady Brienne. It was plain that she was no sort of liar; despite her efforts to school her homely, freckled face to well-mannered neutrality, her large blue eyes were fixed on Sansa, her lips were trembling, and her cheeks were very pale, dewed with cold sweat. Indeed, she looked downright ill, and not just from the shock of beholding Sansa at last. She should be in bed with a maester to tend her, not gallivanting around the Vale in winter. By reflex, Sansa looked for Maester Kelvin, but he was long gone to patch Harry up. Potentially.

"My lady?" As she was searching for an auxiliary plan, a self-important man-at-arms bobbed up at her elbow. "I'm terrible sorry, but as the matter of your trial is not yet decided, it would be a travesty of justice did we permit you to walk free under suspicion of murder. If you would come with me?" He moved to take her arm in his mailed fist.

Sansa stared back at him coldly, hoping to dismay him while she groped for a plausible denial. She had seen Brienne's hand move to her sword, and knew that in a moment there would be blood in the mud, as well as destroying any hope of carrying out this delicate operation undercover. But just then, her much-taxed ingenuity was failing her.

In another miracle, she was spared the need. At that very moment, the doors of the great hall burst open, and they were all witness to the egress of numerous outraged Corbrays. They were followed almost simultaneously by an equal amount of Belmores, who appeared fully as intent on making their displeasure known. Lord Lyonel and Lord Benedar were in confrontation in the middle of the throng, and their retainers were pushing, jostling, and cursing each other, steel starting to be bared in the case of the most involved disputes. Ser Lyn himself was not in evidence, which meant either that he'd been arrested or already killed inside; Sansa could think of no other circumstance that would cause the younger Corbray to be absent from a brawl, even if he was missing one or both legs. Littlefinger lit the spark to bring the Vale down, and they themselves are kindling it into an inferno.

The man-at-arms who had been so concerned with arresting her, moreover, had to let go and sprint over in hopes of containing the fracas. And with that, Sansa saw her chance. Employing the same maneuver Littlefinger had used on her, she slipped over, jerked her head at Brienne, and darted back around the gatehouse, into a narrow postern corridor. The skirmish in the courtyard continued fiercely, but Brienne hastened after her. Out of the corner of her eye, Sansa saw Ser Hyle draw his sword and move to guard the entrance.

The instant they were alone, Brienne threw herself to her knees in the mud, clutching Sansa's hands and pressing them to her face. "My lady. My lady, it's you, it's you at last. We're not too late, after all this time, gods be thanked, gods be thanked." The big warrior woman was crying freely, shoulders heaving as she tried to control herself. "You don't know how long I've searched for you, I'll never leave your side again except to carry out your command. I swear it. I swear it. I swear it."

Sansa felt both taken aback and touched as she gazed down at Brienne's bent head. Standing, the other woman would almost double her in height, but now on her knees, she was the smaller, more
vulnerable. *If she is a liar, she is an ungodly good one.* And judging from her own observation of Brienne earlier, this was a nature that deceit came hard and foreign to.

Making a decision, she tightened her grip in Brienne's. "So then," she whispered, her voice sounding strange and hoarse. "Swear to me."

Brienne lifted her chin and looked straight into Sansa's eyes, blue meeting blue. Tears were still coursing down her scarred cheeks, but a sudden new dignity was conferred on her as she heard those words at last. Throwing back her shoulders, she began.

"I, Brienne daughter of Selwyn, do swear in the sight of the Seven and of my fellow men, to serve in thought, word, and deed, night and day, in sight and out of it, until my lady release me or death receive me, Sansa daughter of Eddard and Catelyn, by the grace of the gods Lady of Winterfell and Queen in the North. To you will I bear body, chattels, and earthly worship, and I will keep faith and loyalty to you above all others. On my soul I make this oath, and may I be damned if I break it. I swear it by earth and iron. I swear it by ice and fire."

Sansa felt a chill rush down her back. She has sworn. Looking into Brienne's face, she heard a thousand echoes from her childhood, her father standing in the Great Hall of Winterfell to accept a northman's oath. She could almost see the direwolf banner in her mind's eye, her brothers gathered solemn-faced behind Lord Eddard to watch. "We do promise you, as our vassal and liegeman, that we and our heirs will guarantee to you and your heirs the honors you hold of us, against all others, so that you may hold said honors in peace. Rise." Brienne was no ser, not a true knight – but she was Sansa's,Sansa's, and whatever should follow from here, she was no longer alone.

Slowly, wonderingly, Brienne got to her feet. "What would you have me do, my lady?"

Sansa shot a glance over her shoulder at the courtyard. Ser Hyle was still standing watch, but the brawl was coming closer, and it was hard to say how much more time they had. She turned back and spoke quickly. "There is an Inquisitor of the Faith imprisoned in the dungeons, down the steps across the way from here." She pointed. "He will have certain testimony that is vital to my cause, about Littlefinger's true plans and culpability in the downfall of the Vale. Free him as fast as you can, and get him to the Hall."

Brienne gazed at her worriedly. "Testimony to be heard by who, my lady?"

*Excellent question.* "That is what I must do. Find some way to put out the flames before they all storm out of here and call for their banners." As Brienne moved to object, Sansa held up a hand. "I am sorry, but this is something I must do myself. I will take Ser Hyle as bodyguard."

Brienne set her jaw stubbornly. "No. That one's not to be trusted with your life. He used to be Lord Randyll Tarly's, he knew what you were worth in ransom. Send him to free the Inquisitor, and let me guard you. Do not ask me to be separated so soon from you again."

Seeing the warrior woman's obvious distress, Sansa spoke gently. "I understand your pain, my lady. But as you yourself must know, you are simply too conspicuous. Men will stare at you, remember you, gawk at you, and otherwise distract from what I must accomplish. Ser Hyle is more plain and matter-of-fact, the sort of sword that it would be entirely defensible to have at my back. Just get down there, release the Inquisitor, and then return. I have told them what I know of Littlefinger's plans, but my word remains unreliable. If they hear further hair-raising tales from a man of the Faith's lips..."

Brienne took her meaning at once. "I see," she said, although she was plainly still unhappy. "If I may presume, my lady, where do you mean to go once you leave here?"
Sansa hesitated, but told the truth. "King's Landing."

She had expected Brienne to object, but glancing up, she surprised a most extraordinary expression on the other woman's face. It was so intense, so visceral, that Sansa involuntarily stepped forward and put her hand on Brienne's arm, wrapped in rags and corded with muscle. "What? Why?"

Brienne swallowed. "I – nothing," she said huskily, but tears gleamed on her lashes. "It is only... I would go to King's Landing too if it was at all possible, but how? There will be no more ships coming to Gulltown, unless it was from White Harbor. When I was there, Lord Manderly..."

"You were there?" Sansa knew their time was short, but still found herself intrigued. That explained the torn tabard. "Does Lord Wyman remain loyal to my family?"

"Outstandingly so." Brienne's mouth quirked into something that almost resembled a smile. "Though it was his son, Ser Wylis, who I had close encounter with. He burned the entire Lannister fleet sent north... and, my lady, he has your little brother."

Sansa stared at her. "My little – but I have no living –"

"Rickon," Brienne said, speaking low and quickly. "Rickon and his wolf."

"Shaggydog." Sansa felt numb. "His name was Shaggydog. Did you see them?"

"Aye, I did. If you can reach Manderly and reveal yourself, it would certainly be his will to assist you – he imprisoned me for fear that I meant you ill. It would –" Brienne stopped, and had to fight the words. "It would be better to go north to White Harbor and the Manderlys, but the closing jaws of winter, and the rumors of what presses closer and closer every moment... it is, of course, your will."

"We will decide when we've gotten ourselves out of this," Sansa allowed. She felt almost desperate, to return south and go to King's Landing, to make it back to Sandor somehow... but she was more than a frightened girl now, and he was only one man. As Brienne had sworn to her, she was a lady, a queen. *Though if Rickon lives...*

Time for that later. She grasped Brienne's arm harder. "Very well," she said. "Hurry. To the Inquisitor. Take Pod with you as a lookout."

Brienne glanced back at her, gathering in every detail of her face as if she could never have enough. Then the big woman nodded, pulled up her hood, and began to run. Sansa exited the corridor after her, and caught an extremely surprised Ser Hyle by the arm. "She has gone on my errand," she said, low-voiced. "Follow me."

Ser Hyle was likewise astounded, but he didn't waste time quibbling. Instead, he fell in at her back, fending off a few of the most carried-away participants, and elbowing a few more in the face to clear a path for Sansa. By means of this expedient, they succeeded in winning through, barely, to a position before the doors of the Great Hall. The Belmores and Corbrays were still having it out below, and the din from within suggested that sundry Templetons, Waynwoods, and Royces would soon be along to join the party. Sansa shot a glance at Ser Hyle, and once again, he proved admirably sensitive to her requirements. He filled his lungs and bellowed, "OY!"

Slowly, badly, and piecemeal, grudging quiet was achieved. The feuding parties glanced up in amazement to see Sansa Stark standing at the top of the steps with a knight at her side, and even more amazingly, it was the Corbrays who were the first to turn to her. *Or not so amazingly. After all, it was Littlefinger's accusation of Ser Lyn before the entire court that started this. Small
"Lords of the Vale." Sansa had to almost shout to make herself heard. "You know me as the daughter of Lord Eddard Stark, the nearest and dearest friend and ward of your own departed Lord Jon Arryn. I regret the necessity of my masquerade as Alayne Stone, but it was for my own safety following my departure from King's Landing, under suspicion of the murder of Joffrey Baratheon. Petyr Baelish did save my life and bring me here, but for reasons of his own. No word that I spoke in the trial was a lie. He did plot to poison Lord Jon. He did kill Lady Lysa, not the singer Marillion. And he almost certainly ordered Lord Robert's death as well, as well as Harrold Hardyng's removal. My lords, open your eyes. What was the purpose of that spectacle today, if not to pit you at each other's throats and blind you to the magnitude of his misdeeds? You all, as I was, are simply players in his game. And I am not the only one who will attest to it."

There was an uneven, suspicious silence. She knew how hard it was to see past Littlefinger's charming, unthreatening façade, how skillfully he had played himself as the Vale's only hope in winter and woe and turmoil. He had already tried to discredit her as a weak, naïve young girl being manipulated by stronger men, but he had also, perhaps too soon, made sworn enemies of the Corbrays. Brienne and Ser Hyle alone would not be enough. She needed them.

At last, Lord Lyonel was the one to step forward. "You, girl," he ordered. "How would you know all this?"

Sansa chose, for the moment, to let the disrespect pass. Instead, as succinctly as possible, she explained her view of Littlefinger's plans for the past months, and what had transpired in the dungeon with the imprisoned Inquisitor and the marriage papers. There were other loud questions and objections after that, a few punches exchanged among those hotheads of either side who could give a damn about political implications and just wanted to get back to their unfairly interrupted dust-up. But Sansa had talked herself almost hoarse by the time she caught sight of an alarming interruption at the corner of the courtyard. Pod, covered in blood, was waving at her frantically.

Sansa's heart vaulted into her throat. She had to step down from her perch to move toward him, and as Ser Hyle hustled her through the mud, the spell that had lingered over the courtyard since her appearance began to break. She could hear Lord Belmore, Littlefinger's footstool, deriding everything she had said, and the Corbrays in turn deriding him. The situation was already smoldering, and clearly about to go up with a bang again. And I still do not know where Littlefinger is. She could not be sure if it was in his nature to flee, or if he would consider this tantamount to an open declaration of guilt, especially with nowhere else to go in the snowbound, freezing Vale. Even he would not be so mad as to attempt to make it back to the abandoned Eyrie. Even if no one would dare follow him there.

That was an unsettling thought, but she had other concerns. She reached Pod and had to restrain herself from grabbing his shoulders. "What? What happened? Where is Brienne?"

"Dead." Pod's first word stopped her heart, and she could feel herself turning faint, until the squire blurted, "The Inquisitor, I mean. Not my lady. Lady Brienne. We went down there. And found him. His throat cut, and his seal and ring. Taken."

Dead. Sansa had to take a moment to grimly absorb that. So that answered the question of Petyr Baelish's next move. Upon realizing that she had gotten away, and that undesirable witnesses had arrived, he had correctly anticipated that she would try to use the Inquisitor as a trump card. So he had hastened back down to the dungeons and killed the man, then taken his seal, ring, and any other identifying regalia that marked him as a high-ranking emissary of the Faith. Now, even if they did get down there and recover his corpse, it would be impossible to prove that he was who

wonder if the infamously temperamental family might be inclined to hold a grudge.
she claimed. Yet again, as with Lyn Corbray, Littlefinger had fallen on his own sword rather than permit a valuable piece to be turned against him.

**So he is here, somewhere.** Shut up in a tower room, most likely, hoping that the internal divisions between the lords of the Vale would complete their noble work (and that Harry would die without spilling any more incriminating information) before he reemerged to clear his good name. **It must stop.** She remained maddeningly unclear what she felt for him. There was no doubt that as a political entity, his reign of deception and murder had to end – as well, she had no desire to submit to one more of his gropes or kisses or sly comments. But was that enough to take his life? It had never been in her hands, and the power and desire to kill in cold blood was never one she had wanted.

And yet, she had to find him. Aside from all the other problems that would be solved by impounding him, he almost certainly still had the marriage papers. And while she had no intention of shackling herself to Littlefinger in unholy matrimony, the contract of annulment was attested by the Faith, and thus presumably valid with her signature. She could not have done so in the dungeons without being immediately forced to sign the other, but on the far side of panic, the realization of what it meant was finally occurring to her. She could free herself of Tyrion Lannister at last, no longer have to fear yielding her maidenhead to him, nor that he would reappear from exile one day and be able to yoke her back to him. **I would be safe.** Assuming that Littlefinger hadn't just destroyed both contracts, but if Sansa knew anything about him, it was that his besetting weakness was his vanity – as well as his unyielding belief that he was entitled to her, as a replacement for her lady mother. He would not have given up the idea of attaching himself to her so quickly. Which meant the annulment was still in reach.

With that, Sansa had to consider the idea of who she would marry next. Eventually, she knew, she would have to, especially if she thought of laying claim to the north and holding it. **Willas Tyrell,** she decided at last. If the lords of Highgarden came out of this mess with Margaery with their necks and prestige even somewhat intact, it would make the most sense, mortar together north and south of the Seven Kingdoms alike – an alliance so formidable that it was, after all, the reason she had been married off to Tyrion to forestall it. Willas was gentle, charming, courtly, and doubtless no ogre in his looks – he was brother to Ser Loras, after all. **If he survives, and I do, I will send men to make the proposal.** Something chafed in her heart at the idea. But she already knew that she could not marry for love, and was not even sure that love was the word to describe it. The other man whose face was in her mind was no husband for a queen.

Reflexively, she glanced down at her burned hand. It still pained her, was still blackened and cracking, but in all the kerfuffle, she'd forgotten to pay attention to it. Then she wrenched her attention back to Ser Hyle and Pod, who were anxiously awaiting orders.

Sansa shook her head, clearing it. "Get Brienne out of there." She had no doubt that the warrior woman could handle Littlefinger smartly in a face-to-face confrontation, but if he was still down there, waiting for someone to come in search of the Inquisitor. . . "Then hurry back to me as fast as you can. This castle is brimful of enemies right now, and they cannot decide of who. We will be lucky to avoid a war by nightfall." Which was coming fast. The murky, sour sky had turned frozen blue-grey, and the chill was deepening.

"You should not," Pod ventured. "Be alone, my lady. Not here, like this. I'll stay with you, while Ser Hyle goes for my lady. Lady Brienne."

Sansa could not argue, but wondered at the efficacy of deputing a skittish stripling squire to serve as her guard. She was about to turn to Ser Hyle for a second opinion, but the knight said wryly, "You'll not believe me until the shit starts to fly, my lady, but young Podrick here is quite handy in
a crisis. Give him a knife, he'll serve fine."

"I don't have one," said Pod. "A knife, that is. Not shit."

"Luckily for us all, I do." Ser Hyle unbuckled his dagger and handed it over. "Try not to stab yourself with it."

"When do I use it?" Pod accepted it fumblingly, doing nothing to engender Sansa's confidence about his ability to protect her.

"Trust me," Ser Hyle said wryly. "You'll know. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go rescue the fair maid from whatever trouble she's gotten herself into, which will sadly do nothing to improve her poor opinion of me. I expect everything will be livening up again shortly." And with that, he bowed, whirled around, and vanished into the twilight at a run.

That left Pod and Sansa standing together in the courtyard, and Sansa starting to shiver violently; she was still wearing her torn dress and mantle, soaked with frozen mud. Pod himself was clad in woebegone, mismatched rags that had certainly seen better years, but he timidly moved to offer her his arm. She let him put it around her shoulder, surprised that she was willing to let him comfort her; it had been a very long time since she had dared to lower her walls even the barest bit. And there was still so much more that must be done, she could not be weak yet, not yet. Another day, tomorrow, she might weep, might feel like the girl of not quite fifteen that she was, but not today. It could not be today.

Torches were being lit across the parapets of the Gates of the Moon. Angry voices echoed from corridors and crenels, and the drying blood on Pod's face looked eerily, ominously black. Sansa allowed herself to remain in his awkward, one-armed embrace a few moments more, then stepped back. They had to get inside. "Come on."

Trusting as a favorite hound, Pod gamboled after her as they ascended the icy steps of the great hall. It was even colder and darker within, and Sansa stopped, eyes searching the shadows nervously; she was having too many memories of being assaulted and kidnapped by Ser Shadrich. Pod hovered territorially at her side, eager to prove his mettle. "My lady?" he whispered. It sounded unnaturally loud. "Where now?"

"I don't know." The castle had been divided among the warring factions, under siege inside and out, and the silence was an uneasy, bloodstained hush. Where were the Burned Men, gods have mercy? Were they even coming, or had Harry's sortie party served its intended purpose in killing them all? If that was so... everything she'd gambled in the dangerous crossing of the Mountains of the Moon, the blizzard, her burned hand, the Brotherhood, Lady Stoneheart... .

As Sansa was thinking this, she took one more step back – and ran into someone standing directly behind her, who looped an arm around her waist and flicked the point of a dagger to her throat. "Careful, my dear," an all-too-familiar voice whispered. "It's dangerous to be creeping around at night."

Sansa reacted instinctively, too fast to encumber herself with thought. She spun on her heel and clumsily slammed her elbow into his face, feeling the knife draw a long bright streak of pain along her collarbone – a gash, but a glancing one, and shallow. Then Pod was charging out of the darkness, bellowing like a wounded aurochs, and hit Littlefinger just as he was attempting to get up. In a furious three-way tangle of knives, boots, punches, skirts, cloaks, blows, curses, and chaos, they rolled across the stone floor, grappling with each other like urchins in the street.

They hit the lintel and went tumbling over it, crashing down the steps outside, back into the frigid
shock of the night. She could hear Littlefinger swearing as he attempted to peel Pod off him; the squire was clamped on indestructibly, swinging his fists like a drunken latecomer at the joust. Sansa was completely winded from their whirlwind tour down the stone stairs, and she simply lay there, staring blankly up at the reeling stars.

Littlefinger and Pod were still wrestling behind her. She tried to roll away, gagged, and realized that her cloak was pinned under them. Fumbling with the clasp, burned fingers aching, she managed to get it loose and spring to her feet. No evidence of Ser Hyle and Brienne. Plenty of evidence, on the other hand, that the brawls she had endeavored so hard to stop earlier were well underway. A dead Inquisitor somewhere below, and nobody's word to reinforce hers. She had escaped once, but twice must be, surely was, no soul had that much luck, no one could –

And then, Sansa saw a grappling hook appear at the top of one of the Gates of the Moon’s sturdy walls. Had a moment to stare in sickening hope, before it was followed by another, and another, and another, and ropes flung into the courtyard. And in an instant more, shrieking at the top of their collective lungs, Burned Men were seething down those ropes, vaulting from the walls on every side, in furs and leathers and dismembered animals that made them look more than half like beasts themselves. She saw the torchlight flash in the milky white eye of Timett Red-Hand, and felt like throwing her head back and laughing out loud. Saw the tattered robes of Thoros of Myr as he hauled himself up, the flash of a bulls-head helmet, the green cloak of Jack Be-Lucky –

– and then, there –

Lady Stoneheart rose almost majestically over the walls, in hood and cowl and long, snow-caked train, pale white hands turned even whiter in cold, moving as slowly as if her undead sinews had been almost torn apart in the fall that Sansa had tried to save her from, back in the howling fury of the wild. She does not have much more left in her. But let it be enough, then. For this.

Thoros and Gendry helped their mistress off the ropes. Steel was already starting to screech and clash elsewhere as the feuding Vale lords discovered that the wildlings, their common enemy, were invading. No quicker way to unite them again. But if they learned that the Burned Men had come here, on Sansa’s own behest, apparently to rape and pillage –

I have to stop them. I am a Red Hand as well, they will listen to me. She had, after all, scorched her hand to cinders for a reason. But before she turned to race off after the bloodthirsty lot of them, she had to turn back. And watch.

Lady Stoneheart moved, step by step, across the courtyard. Closer and closer to where Littlefinger had almost gotten the upper hand on Pod – if barely. He pushed the squire away with another curse, and rolled to his feet, his sleek sartorial flair disheveled and his usual smug expression nowhere in evidence. Pod was still kicking, but to judge from the hand he had clapped to his shoulder, Littlefinger’s knife had gotten in a stab – or two.

"Son of a bastard whoreson bitch," Petyr Baelish said, still panting. Clearly, this was not unfolding at all how he had envisioned it, and he turned to stride away – then stopped utterly dead in his tracks.

Lady Stoneheart stared at him for the world’s longest, most frozen moment, her red eyes burning balefully in the winter night. And then, reaching up with both hands, she lowered her hood.
Arya

Seen from the harbor, the skyline of Braavos was gauzed in heavy dark smoke. The temples had been burning for almost a week now, sporadically and fitfully, lurching to life in a showering inferno and then subsiding into grumbling embers, staining the air with soot and ash that rasped in eyes and ears and throats. At least in the treeless stone warrens, it had not spread, elsewise the oldest and proudest of the Free Cities would lie in ruins. And besides, of the diverse religious houses and places of worship, the fire had only attacked that of the red priests. All the rumors told the same tale. Every place in Braavos dedicated to the worship of R'hllor, from the great edifice on its high hill to the smallest and meanest of marketplace shrines, had had some fey Doom come upon it. For all anyone could tell, the confrontation the Lord of Light's faithful servants had always predicted was here. The end of the world was nigh.

Arya had a good look at it from Ser Justin's ship, anchored just offshore, right where the harbor deepened as the Shivering Sea rushed through the Titan's vast stone legs. She didn't know what she thought of it, not really. She didn't know anything, not even the certainty that she should be called Arya Stark. That was the name Ser Justin had finally been forced to give her, and it fit, but strangely, like an old tunic she had outgrown. In her heart, she still felt like the dead girl: nameless, adrift, the one who had woken up on the docks of Braavos with the burning of the Faceless Men's poison still in her throat. Giving her name back had been no magical solvent. She was only aware of how echoing and hollow she was inside, that place where there were people she loved and places she knew who had been forever taken from her. Brutalized, broken, abandoned, alone, seeing things that no child should, becoming half a monster herself, drinking from that fountain of death, having no choice. She was no triumphant soldier. She was a walking ghost.

Arya tried not to think about it. She didn't want to. It was hard to be in a head where nothing was fixed and everything was tilted, smashed up on the floor. Hence she had been trying twice as hard to warg, into cats or into her wolf or anything nearby, but the harder she strained at it consciously, the further those skins slipped away. They were supposed to be out of here, they were supposed to be long gone. When he saved her from being killed by Tormo Fregar, Massey had said they would sail on the tide at once, but that had been contingent on the Sealord actually delivering the gold and ships and men he had promised for Stannis Baratheon's cause. When all the temples of R'hllor across the entire city began to burn that very night, Fregar was fronted with far more pressing concerns. Thus they loitered, until they could obtain the goods and set sail back to Westeros.

Arya herself was not surprised at Fregar's preoccupation. She did remember the conversation she had overheard between him and Tycho Nestoris, right before Fregar caught her and made Massey's intervention necessary in the first place. The new Sealord's proud declaration. *I can vow that there will be no complaints when Braavos stands as the equal of old Valyria. We are the Freehold's heirs, after all, and that was where Antaryon fatally erred. He wanted to restore the Targaryens to the Iron Throne. But who needs the Targaryens at all? It was fire that forged Valyria to the greatest empire history has ever known. And it will be fire, R'hllor's fire, that raises Braavos to take its place. The House of Black and White mysteriously burned to the ground not twelve hours past... the Faceless Men survived the Doom, but they will not survive this.*

That made Arya wonder if this had been part of Fregar's plan, or a total disaster. *Did I help cause it too?* She, after all, had been the one to burn the House of Black and White. He'd talked about cleansing the temples, but she thought he meant the temples dedicated to other gods. It seemed queer to start off by burning his own.

There wasn't much to do on the ship. She'd wandered from bow to stern, from deck to bilges,
within hours of Massey bringing her aboard. Once she'd tried to slip her clothes and jump overboard, just to go swimming and not even to escape, but one of the Baratheon men had shouted, fished her out like a skinny drowned rat, and paddled her before warning her not to do it again. Arya didn't think it was very fair. She would have hit him too, with Needle, but they'd taken it from her. Why give me back my name and steal everything else? She wanted to scream at them, to bite them, to kick them, to beg them. Who is Arya? Who?

The only other person aboard who would even talk to her was the Summer Maid. For some reason Arya was not yet certain, it seemed to be a given fact that the courtesan was coming with them – that she'd abandon her life of ease and repose in Braavos for the hard cold prospect of a Westeros winter, the uncertainty and hardship and pain of joining with King Stannis' cause. Then again, perhaps it was easier with Braavos in the bedlam it was, and the Summer Maid – her real name was Tysha, Arya remembered that too – did hate the Lannisters. This might be her only chance to move against them with the strength of an army at her back.

It must be for that reason, therefore, that the Summer Maid was acting oddly as well. She spent much of her time on the deck, eyes fixed on the distant, smoking ruin of the House of Black and White, and sometimes Arya caught the courtesan looking at her with a strange, calculating expression. Not to mention, there were times when it seemed as if the Summer Maid's mouth moved, but it was not quite her words that emerged, as if something or someone was speaking through her. As nervous as Arya still was about Jaqen having possibly escaped the destruction of the House, it made her wonder if the Summer Maid was no longer entirely what she seemed – or if she had ever been. She hired the Faceless Men – she hired me – to kill Antaryon. She knew them too. And the courtesan had had that very unusual reaction to hearing that Arya had brought down the House; it had been that which convinced her to go to the Iron Bank and find Massey. I should get Needle back. She might be one of them. I should kill her too.

Yet be that as it may, she was still aboard Ser Justin's ship at Ser Justin's sufferance, and if she did kill the courtesan under the nose of his men, she would never get back to Westeros. If that is even where I am supposed to be.

Today had been particularly exasperating. Ser Justin had left long before dawn, and finally returned long after dusk, to report that they were still not in the least closer to finding an answer for why the temples had apparently self-immolated. No one had seen any red priests either, lending to the serious possibility that they had all been killed, and every available sellsword or bravo had been conscripted for relief and defense efforts, instead of being allotted to the Baratheon cause as promised. "Not to mention," Massey added furiously, "Fregar's now claiming that in exchange for the service he'll do me, I should stay yet longer and place my forces under his command, to assist in garrisoning and holding the city during this time of chaos. As if I'd ever see them again if I did."

"Could be so, ser," one of his men ventured. "But if he's not going to help us until we get this sorted out . . . and it's not immaterial to us either. It's just that bit worrying, don't you think, that all the temples of R'hllor are burning? And that all the priests may be dead? Fregar's summat of a cunt, granted, but there's no doubting his allegiance to the Lord of Light. He didn't do this himself. And since that's so, if this is bigger than Braavos, it could have direct relevance to His Grace's fortunes as well."

Massey's irritated expression faded into a worried frown. "I hadn't thought of that," he conceded. "The king left the red woman at the Wall, but I can't say if that would be to the good or not. You'd really believe that rubbish, then? That this is indeed some sort of apocalypse?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" The man indicated the red, smoke-scarred night.
Ser Justin had to gnaw on that. After a moment he said, "But if so, it is even more imperative that we get back to King Stannis. If the red woman is destroyed by this as well... I'll be frank, I've never been quite comfortable with the influence she has over him. Too many damned flummeries and mysteries and mealy-mouthed prophecies, too little result. It will serve His Grace better if we bring him real swords, not more of the trouble and flames and traps of the red priests. We've already been in Braavos longer than I wanted. Not entirely for naught, however." He shot an oblique sidelong glance at Arya.

"Aye, but we won't have those swords until Fregar's satisfied that his city isn't about to completely come apart at the seams. For which I can't blame him, mind. First the Faceless Men go under, and now the priests of R'hllor. Something great and terrible is come here."

"If that's so," a third man broke in, "we would be best served by getting the buggering hell out of here. We may not be priests, but we serve a king dedicated to the Lord of Light. Whatever's lurking here, whatever unholy power disguised as one of us, it's only a matter of time until it pounces."

"So what do you collection of geniuses suggest, then?" Massey's aggravation was plain.

"One Sealord died." It was the Summer Maid who spoke, turning from her customary position at the rail. Her dark skirts whispered like secrets. "So can another."

There was a communal flinching and blinking. The presence of a courtesan, a famed and seductive beauty, aboard a ship of bored knights had not proven the calamity that might be expected, mainly because the Baratheon men were healthily terrified of her. A woman who had the stomach to hire a Faceless Man to murder the Sealord was no tavern wench to trifle with. She had been Antaryon's lover for years, but when his continued existence had interfered with her plans for revenge, she had calmly set the most feared killers in the world on him.

"Kill Fregar, my lady?" For all his complaining, it was apparent that Ser Justin was uncomfortable with this solution. "Who would do that? Any of my men would be caught and punished, and after that, it would be signally difficult to explain to the swords of Braavos as to why on earth they should still help us. And even for this place, the death of two Sealords in less than two months would be viewed as far more than coincidental."

"Does that matter?" The Summer Maid shrugged. "If this is the end of the world, men will die, and in far less opportune fashion."

"You prefer to wait, then?"

"No, not necessarily... but again, who would do it?"

"She could." And the courtesan turned to Arya.

Arya opened her mouth, startled and upset, but Ser Justin was faster. "Absolutely not. She's far too valuable, and she's a highborn girl. What makes you think she would possibly be able to –"

"Ser." The Summer Maid's mouth twisted. "You don't know who killed Antaryon?"

Massey blinked again, running a hand through his tousled, sooty fair hair. "A Faceless Man, I thought that was well established. And now that the House has burned, there is no convenient place to secure the services of another, even if we had the absurd price they'd demand, and even if we wanted Fregar killed in the first place. Anything else –"

The courtesan laid a hand on the knight's arm. "What do you know about the ragged, half-feral child you've taken into your ward under the belief that she is Arya Stark? What do you know at
"Enough to know that it's quite foolish to think the Faceless Men would have anything to do with a little ragamuffin girl. I'll admit that I'll be damned if I know how Arya Stark ended up here in Braavos, but it's no more improbable than, say, her turning up precisely when the Boltons needed to wed her claim to the north. And I have reason to be quite certain of my conclusions."

"Do you?" the Summer Maid persisted. "Has she spoken a word to you on her own behalf, does she even know who she is? Is she even worth it, if so?"

"Of course she is," Ser Justin said, with a fair degree of stout conviction. "Aside from the... other matters, there's the Stark face. I'd know it anywhere."

The courtesan laughed aloud. "Faces are so deceitful, I hope you are not placing a great deal of trust in that. And as you said, there was another girl who claimed to be Arya, and men saw what they were told to see. Tell me, ser. If we were to set sail tonight, where would we make?"

"White Harbor," Massey said. "From here, it's a voyage almost due west, and if the trade winds are at our back, it could be made in little more than a week. We need not sack the place, but King Stannis asked for Lord Wyman's loyalty and ships, and Lord Wyman repaid him with Ser Davos' head and hands mounted above the gates. When we arrive, we'll have the Manderly strength one way or another, and a reminder that treason does not go unpunished."

"How can it be treason if the Manderlys were never Stannis' vassals?" the Summer Maid countered. "They owed their fealty to House Stark, and Winterfell. If you are so certain that this girl is who you claim, there is another route to take."

"Yes, but -"

Arya was wearying of their argument. She uncurled her legs and jumped down, quiet as a shadow, out of sight beyond the barrels of rainwater. They had been carted up from the holds and left open on the deck in hopes of replenishing their stocks for the voyage home; it rained often in Braavos. But with the fires turning the sky to dust and ash, that plan had been scuttled for the near future. She tapped the cask and took a drink anyway. It tasted like flame.

Glancing back, she noticed that there was something different about Ser Justin. Nothing she could put her finger on exactly, just a nagging in the back of her mind, until she finally realized what it was. He wasn't wearing the broken old horn on his belt, the one that until now, she'd never seen him take off. And there was something else in her mind about what Fregar had said, during that conversation back at the Iron Bank. Once he works out what it is – something that shall happen very shortly, when I tell him – he will snatch up his army and tear back across the narrow sea to Stannis as fast as he can go. And when Stannis uses that horn, with Lady Melisandre's bonds upon him, the fire of R'hllor will purge the Others, the unbelievers, the unclean, the unworthy, and all others not fit to enter into the Lord's remade kingdom of Light, and the day that never ends.

But had Fregar ever had a chance to tell Ser Justin? They certainly hadn't gone tearing off yet, and there was no certainty as to who the fires were purging now – it might be the Others, but it could also be the servants of R'hllor, the snake devouring its own tail. Had the Sealord changed his mind? Did he want to keep the horn here, in hopes it might mend the disarray that Braavos had fallen into? What, what was it?

Arya stood on her tiptoes to look at the dark silhouette of the beleaguered city. Ser Justin had been gone all day... had Fregar stolen it from him somehow, without him noticing? But he had said at some point in the past (she could no longer sort out any of her memories, nor be certain that they..."
were hers) that he had gotten the horn from Ferrego Antaryon as a gift, and thus it had been in the Sealord's palace for some time. With Jaqen... and with the Summer Maid.

_She knows about it._ Arya realized suddenly. _What it is. And now that Ser Justin took us on his ship, she can get it back._ Possibly already had. And if so, had a powerful inducement to make the knight follow her preferred course of action, if he hoped to ever get his hands on it again. **And that means killing Tormo Fregar. Making me do it.**

A chill scurried down her back. It wasn't that she was scared. She'd already killed Antaryon, and if any other stupid Sealord got in her way now, she'd do the same again; Fregar had already tried it on her, it would be fair. But with the uncertainty over how precisely the courtesan was connected with the Faceless Men, and the fact that she had more or less openly threatened to rat out that Arya was the killer the entire city of Braavos was looking for, it wasn't quite so easy. Whoever the Summer Maid was, whoever Tysha was, she was admirably unencumbered by mercy or second thoughts at this stage in the game.

Arya chewed her lip, something that felt vaguely familiar whenever she did it, but at once there was the voice of the kindly old man in her head, telling her not to; she flinched in expectation of glancing up and seeing him. But no, she'd killed him too. _Is there anyone I haven't killed?_ Including herself. _All dead. All rotten._ She hadn't been able to fight her way away from her demons, from the half-shaped, shattered memories that hunted her in the night. She hadn't been able to murder her way to peace, or bleed her way to vengeance. She hadn't been able to destroy herself to sanity. _I gave and gave, and they've taken everything._

Quite suddenly, she wanted to weep. She wanted to crawl somewhere comfortable and dark in the bowels of the ship, and wait for Braavos to stop burning, and for them to go home and for her to find a place somewhere, just a little place, warm and safe. She didn't _want_ to keep killing, not really, not anymore. She couldn't see what it would give her back. If by cutting Tormo Fregar's throat herself, she could remember everything about who she was, take back what had been destroyed in the black waters of the fountain... but she couldn't. It didn't work that way. Any scrap of memory, any hope of grace, had washed away on the flood tide of blood. If she killed Fregar, it would only rise higher.

And if she didn't take the horn back from the Summer Maid, she might have to.

With that, Arya abruptly made a decision. The others were still arguing; there was no chance, or at least she hoped, of any of them coming after her right now. And so, softly, smoothly, quiet as a mouse, she eased open the trapdoor in the deck and slipped into the darkness below.

There was an unexpected drop, and she managed to break her fall with her hands, though it bent back her thumbnail hard. But she straightened up, and started along the narrow walkway. Ser Justin had offered the Summer Maid the use of the best cabin on board, but she'd refused, taking instead a small private berth behind the bulkhead. It occurred to Arya now that this might have something to do with the fact that her own bunk was just a few feet away, on the other side of a canvas curtain, and the courtesan was certainly able to keep a much better eye on her here. _She is watching me._

It didn't matter, though. Arya quickened her pace. She couldn't see, but she'd gone without her eyes for weeks, so moving easily in the darkness was second nature, and if there had been men asleep just a few feet away, they would not have stirred. If she'd had a knife, she could have cut their throats without a sound, but she didn't. And after all, they weren't there.

In a few moments more, she reached the canvas hanging, and cautiously pushed it aside. The dim dimensions of the Summer Maid's quarters stood beyond, no different than any other shipboard bolt-hole. The bed, the trunk with the things the courtesan had brought; just a few dresses, no
jewels. She certainly seemed to possess no nostalgia for her old life.

Arya stepped inside, making sure the boards didn't creak, and wondered where to begin. She had no proof, after all, that the Summer Maid had stolen the horn in the first place, let alone been so foolish as to hide it among her own things – but then again, the men were terrified of her, and at pains to avoid offending her or encroaching on her private space. She could have stored the riches of the gods in here, and Ser Justin and the rest were like to be no wiser.

Quietly, Arya began to search, pawing through the sheets and blankets of the narrow bunk and the rustling fabrics of the clothes. She didn't find anything that remotely resembled a horn, and sat back on her heels in frustration, suspecting that she was barking up the wrong tree after all. It would be better if she had more light; perhaps she could come back later. Yet while she thought she had left everything essentially undisturbed, she could not be sure, and if the Summer Maid noticed that someone had been down here... No, she had to search one more time. Just in case. Then if she did not –

"What are you doing, child?"

Despite all her training, Arya was startled almost out of her wits. She hadn't heard anything, not a sound or breath, and she spun around like a guilty child caught stealing sweetmeats, to see the Summer Maid herself standing by the curtain, one eyebrow raised. She didn't look mad, merely curious.

"I – was just looking." Arya reminded herself to school her face, to show nothing, to reveal no secret. "I thought I lost something. From my bunk."

"And suspected it of being in here?" The Summer Maid laughed. "Child, you lie, and poorly. As ever. Now tell me, and perhaps I won't tell Ser Justin what I know of you."

Arya squirmed. That had been unmistakable. She hesitated a moment longer, gauging the likelihood that she could escape or lie again, but had to conclude that it was low. Yet instead of answering, she fired back with another question. "What do you know about Jaqen?"

The Summer Maid blinked, genuinely baffled. "Who?"

_He wouldn't be so stupid as to use that name with her too_, Arya reminded herself. At their meeting in the Sealord's Palace at the point of a knife, Jaqen had said that the Summer Maid wasn't one of them – wasn't a Faceless Man, he meant – and only knew a little of their arts, enough to change her hair and looks to suit a customer's fancy. But that could have been a lie too. And if he'd been masquerading as the First Sword... "What do you know about Qarro Volentin?"

The Summer Maid blinked, genuinely baffled. "Who?"

"The... Horn?" The Summer Maid did better on that one; Arya wasn't quite sure if it was a lie or not. But the courtesan hadn't said *horn*, she'd said *Horn*, implying a name, a proper name, a recognizance of something. "What about it?"
"The horn Ser Justin always had," Arya said, deciding on the spur of the moment to go for broke. "It's gone. And I think you stole it."

A strange expression touched the Summer Maid's eyes, like the sun shining on the darkest coldest corner of the world after a thousand years. "Me steal it?" she repeated, and smiled. "Oh no, I did not steal it. A man stole it, from the Citadel in Oldtown, where it had been taken all unwitting by a black brother who did not know its power. There in the south, it was far away, so far away from where it needed to be. It must find its way to the north."

"Why?"

"Why?" The courtesan laughed again. "What else is the Horn of Dawn for?"

"The... what?" Arya screwed up her face, trying to work out if this would have meant something to her other self, the girl who knew who she was, but it didn't fit at all. "What's that?"

"For what it is," the Summer Maid said unhelpfully. "I was stunned that Ser Justin dared to wear it so openly, when losing it might have extinguished any frail hope we have of standing against the darkness. I have merely taken it for... safekeeping."

Arya opened her mouth to hotly rebut this, but at that moment, the ship lurched sharply sideways beneath them, causing both to grab onto something to stop from falling. It felt as if the tide had suddenly risen several feet, but here in the harbor, they were sheltered from most of the whims of the wind and weather. She wanted to think it was nothing, but considering what had been going on in Braavos recently, that wouldn't be very wise.

The Summer Maid had apparently arrived at a matching conclusion. She frowned, shot a pointed glare at Arya as if to remind her that this was not over, then turned in a whirl of skirts and vanished beyond the canvas. After giving her a head start, just in case the courtesan thought to attempt something untoward in the darkness of the hold, Arya jumped down and hurried after her.

They arrived on deck about the same time. Ser Justin and the others were gathered in the forecastle, scowling at the distant shape of smoke-shrouded Braavos. One had his spyglass out, and the other was peering up at the sky. A third had lowered a sounding line over the rail, and was just turning to inform Massey of something when they rocked again, harder. Then quite suddenly, startling all of them, a blast went out from the Titan's mighty tower, which normally only sounded when a ship entered the lagoon. But there was no ship coming through now, and –

The blast sounded again. And a third time.

While the Baratheon men were still staring at each other blankly, a sudden riot of activity broke out on shore. Local merchant ferries and fat-belled Pentoshi galleys and northern longships and Ibbenese whalers and Essosi trader sloops and Summer Isles swan ships and tiny fishing tubs – anything that could possibly float was now doing so, a mad exodus of small dark figures pouring out of the winesinks and gambling dens and customs houses, scrambling down the docks and into their vessels. The Titan's blast sounded again, and they could all hear the panicked shouting echoing across the dark water. The crafts cast off and began to throng the surface of the harbor, jamming toward the Titan's legs – the only way out of the lagoon.

Ser Justin stared for a moment longer, then spun on the captain. "Up anchor," he snapped. "There's something coming."

"What – ?" The man kept on staring. "M'lord, do you think that's – "
Ser Justin grabbed him by the collar. "Do you think they're all running from nothing, fool? *Something's coming,* that was some sort of emergency signal, and the way out is going be a bloody mess in a few more minutes. Get *going!*

The crew needed no more telling. They scurried en masse up the rigging or to the capstan, getting the galley hauled around to the wind in record time, and unshipped the oars to make further speed. Arya frowned, not sure if she should be frightened or not, but when she peered over the rail, the water level had crept steadily up the side, and was still rising. There was a strange sound in the night air, almost like the absence of it, like everything was holding its breath. Braavos remained visible on its islands, the smoke thick in the sky, but there was something faint far behind it, rising spectral. A sound. A roar.

They were making speed toward the Titan's legs as fast as they possibly could. Behind them, the citizens of Braavos were still jumping into everything, every boat, and some had barely left the dock, toiling under the weight of too many possessions and too many people. The Titan's blasts were shriller now, unceasing, until Arya sobbed and covered her ears. Waves were cuffing their stern, making it hard to hold course. As Ser Justin had predicted, there was already a flotsam and jetsam of smaller craft jammed up trying to escape the lagoon, and the larger galley plowed some of them under its bow as it hauled closer. Arya tried to shut out the sound of screams and splintering wood, and clung onto the mainmast, reminding herself of everything, what she could remember, any of it, to not be afraid –

wolf, she was running with the big black green-eyed male, the hills were white and the sky was black and the things behind them were dead, dead, smelled of rot and reek and pale wight flesh, coming, hunting, the man-den on the hills below, the memory of man-talk echoed in her head, the girl's memory –

*White Harbor, the place was White Harbor, home, it was home, the wolf was her, all of her, her memories, running wild, so far away* –

– and then Arya lost her balance and was flung hard on the deck of the ship, rolling, as something hit them hard from behind. Flipping over, she struggled to all fours, for a moment still the wolf, staring up – up –

The fires across Braavos were going out. One by one, they were doused in crashing darkness. Briefly, madly, she thought that was a good thing, that the terror was receding, that the night was over, the temples had stopped burning, that it was all right. She hoped, she hoped. But then she saw what was rising, still rising, and she, far more terribly than anything ever, far more than what she'd sensed with the Summer Maid, knew it for the lie.

The water was getting higher every instant. In moments it would be too high for the galley to make it under the Titan, and Arya heard the scrape and screech of the mainmast on stone as the Baratheon men rowed with all their might, swearing; some of them, who must have grasped as well what was happening, were praying. The roar was louder and louder now, echoing up from the very heart of the deep, as the crest began to appear over the dark city, then thundered down in madness. A city as low-lying as this one, half-water already, must have always feared this fate, but not like this, in this moment. But the wave was still coming and coming, higher than a castle, higher than a tower, a roaring maw of salt and darkness, down and down and down.

*Men will sing of the sunken city of Braavos one day,* Arya thought, her mind bizarrely, perfectly clear. *Of its beauty and its bravos and its canals and its courtesans, of its silks and mysteries and mazes, of its harbor and its mummers and its merchants, perhaps even of its taverns and its cutpurses and its cats and mussel-sellers. Of its terrors and temples and its Iron Bank and its*
Faceless Men. Of how it was a great civilization before it vanished forever to the bottom of the sea, and became a memory, a myth.

The galley struggled and scraped and slammed from side to side in the darkness, the rock of the Titan's legs. The wave was still breaking, runnels of violent foam spilling out like an overturned cask, gulping up half the city by now and still coming, flooding, unfolding, mad and marvelous, spray blasting against the Titan's breastplate, two hundred and three hundred feet in the air, the guardian of Braavos now turned into its gaoler and executioner as the boats who had not made it out began to be overtaken by the whitewater. Some say the world will end in fire. Some in ice. She wondered if they had meant this instead.

She pressed her face into the wood of the deck, and prayed.

The immediately following moments were utter, screaming insanity. The ship jerked as if thrown, like a toy boat caught up in a river after the child turned away. The ocean pummeled them this way and that, ropes unraveling and spars shattering, sails sodden with the salt, through and through and still and still and on and on and on, and still in the darkness, screaming. They are drowning. She didn't know who they were, Braavosi she had never met, though perhaps Cat or Blind Beth or Lyanna had. So Tormo Fregar had gotten his wish after all. Braavos had become Valyria, and the end of the world was at hand.

It felt like forever and a day until the madness stopped, until the galley crashed down on the high, heaving seas beyond, as Arya's dazzled eyes picked out a fleet of other ships. So we are bringing Braavos back with us after all. Not the strength and sellswords and gold as Ser Justin had hoped, but the refugees, any man, woman, and child who had managed to escape the destruction of the city. The rest would lie forever among the broken bones of stone, sinking, sinking, sinking. Dear gods, such a long way down.

Arya wasn't shaking, now. She was so far beyond being afraid as to feel quite calm. To not look back. To not wonder what came next, to not think at all. Only to stand up on her own two girl-feet, shivering and soaking wet, as Ser Justin kept on swearing and the Summer Maid hung onto the ropes and the Baratheon men kept praying and rowing, and the galley – battered, beaten, broken, limping, but still sailing, like me, like me – struck out into the starless night for Westeros.
He died in her arms. As she scrambled across the floor, as the high dark scream of the horn seared the sticky air, as she felt it in her bones, wing and fang and scale and flame, the pain of Drogon's wound and the heat of Viserion's snarl, the breath in her that had been so long gone, felt the power, felt them, felt her dragons in her soul the way she had when she'd burned away the little girl and given birth to fire and blood – in that mad wondrous moment, as it hurt too much to be real, as she reached him and he fell back, she cradled his head and held him against her heart, seeing the horn slip from his fingers, saw his lips blackened but smiling, at so long last at peace, with himself and what he'd done. His final act, his gift to her. She barely even understood what fey power was bound up in that twisted black horn, but it made no matter. It was for her, and she could do nothing to repay him in return. Only to catch him. Only to be there.

"My... queen." Ser Jorah's smile grew stronger, his head fell back, his eyes open and empty as if he saw something far beyond the vaulted roof. The tall pines and salt air of Bear Island, perhaps, and his log house on a hill. "Thank... you."

Dany clutched at him, as if by her hands alone she could keep breath in his body. But it was over, already over. His burly shoulders shuddered, and then he was gone. Despite the violence of the blast, it was heartbreakingly gentle. Swift and easy as a candle being blown out.

She remained hunched, rocking him, for she didn't even know how long. His face was serene, the death's-head brand gone slack and easy. The slaver's mark, Ser Jorah Mormont's final legacy. Selling slaves, bought as a slave, dying for her, the queen's slave, love's slave. She kissed her fingers and brushed it lightly over the unshaven cheek. There was simply no need to say what coursed through her, what swept her away and crumbled and hammered hot and hard every new truth of her. Khaleesi. Stormborn. Mother. Mother. Mother.

Dany ghosted another kiss across Ser Jorah's forehead, then laid her brave bear's body down on the floor, carefully as if it was made of glass. Then, and only then, did she coolly lift her head and meet the mismatched eyes of the little man standing across from her.

He opened his mouth as if to introduce himself, or perhaps offer condolences, but she cut in; there was no need. "Tyrion Lannister."

He nodded warily, never blinking. "I have that dubious honor, Your Grace."

He nodded warily, never blinking. "I have that dubious honor, Your Grace."

Dany rose to her feet and offered him her hand, which he impressed a brief, correct kiss upon. She had no notion of how she should deal with him, if she should scorn him as the infamous and deranged Imp, if she should order him to kneel and do fealty, or if she should welcome him into her confidence – considering the fates of the other high lords he'd been attached to, that seemed a dangerous proposition. But Jorah had said that he planned to bring Lannister to her for whatever gods-forsaken reason, that there was a price on the dwarf's head placed by his sister the queen, and that he knew who had truly hired the Golden Company. Mormont had been blunt about his utter lack of trust in the man, but if Tyrion had wanted to harm her outright, he'd had ample opportunity while she grieved Ser Jorah. No. Whatever he wants with me, it is more subtle.

"Will you help me?" Dany asked now. "Meereen was in no tidy state when I left it. I take leave to doubt that it is any more so now."

"A great deal of which is my fault, I confess." He sounded as if he was attempting levity, but his squashed face remained grim. He is so ugly. It fascinated her; folk wisdom had always claimed
that ugly souls hid ugly hearts, but she was far beyond believing that now. The little man, with his brutish brow and missing nose and thin wispy hair, looked like some gremlin from a story, a gargoyle on the battlements of Dragonstone. But he was Westerosi, well born, and theoretically able to command all the riches of Casterly Rock, among other pertinent advantages. She had her dragons back – two of them, at least, and she felt Rhaegal's absence keenly as a missing limb. But if she proposed to make it mean something, she required human allies as well.

"That is a tale you will tell me in full," she said in answer, taking a step and wincing as the cramps caught. She had run like heaven and earth in her desperation to escape Daario, dodging through the desolate streets littered with corpses and char, didn't think she would have made it if Drogon had not descended from on high with a terrible, snorting, steaming effort, flapped and screeched aloft as if drawn by a beacon, up and up to the Great Pyramid, up and up. *It was the horn. He was drawn to the horn, even before it sounded.* Who had brought that terrible thing here, and for what purpose? Just one of the intelligences she must find out. *And one I feel the dwarf can help me with.*

"I expect we can deal with our three dead men first, however." Tyrion glanced at her. "I don't know if you heard it, but your knight had certain wishes for his burial."

"You will... have to tell me that as well." Aside from Ser Jorah, there was also the dead man in red robes, with his coal-dark skin and white halo of hair, and the dead man in a black tabard with the device of a golden squid. "As well as who it is that is starting our collection of corpses. But we needn't do this alone. I – I should find Ser Barristan, prepare a plan for –"

The Imp's face stopped her cold. She turned back toward him, a sudden dread congealing like solid ice in her stomach. "No," she breathed. "No, you can't tell me that..." The mere thought of losing Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan... she couldn't...

"I'm sorry," Tyrion said. "As before, that's in no small part my fault as well, so if you're inclined to banish me from the realm forever, it would be deserved – I'll have to discover a new continent at the rate I'm wearing out my welcomes. But Selmy is dead. Your noble lord husband Hizdahr as well. Victarion Greyjoy holds half this city, and Khal Mago the other half. That, Your Grace, is the concise version of what has happened in your absence. Oh, and I killed the Harpy and the Second Sons are back to being untrustworthy while more or less in your employ. Again thanks to me." He shrugged. "I'm not asking for a lordship, mind, but there is that."

"What?" Dany's head was spinning. "The Harpy... Khal Mago... Victarion Greyjoy? The Second Sons... I didn't ever want to see them again..."

"Frankly, my lady, they were in no great haste to see you either. Which admittedly was less of a problem, as no one thought that they would. The whole of the city still thinks you're dead, and most would rather you stayed that way."

Dany glanced up with a start, stung by his frankness. "I am their queen."

Tyrion shrugged. "So you are, my lady, and my service is yours, but the first thing you must learn about me is that I am quite terrible at tonguing the arses of royalty. It's the character flaw that wound me up in your lap, actually, so there's that. If you'll keep me, you'll have to accept that I deal in the naked truth. Not poisoned courtly games. If that's what you want, find yourself another imp."

Dany had to gnaw on that. Part of her was shocked that Tyrion would dare address her so bluntly, but Ser Barristan was dead – oh gods, her brave old knight, what had happened to him? – and he was likewise the only one who'd spoken truth to her in this viper's pit. With the questions she still had, the answers the dwarf apparently possessed... *I need him*, Dany realized. How, she was not
yet sure – whether as court jester or chief vizier or ambassador or treasurer or spymaster or something else, the opportunities were limitless. But Ser Jorah had said that there were two of them, Tyrion and a girl, who jousted and rode pigs and dogs. Was there some use for her too?

"I beg pardon," Dany said, not knowing what to make of hearing herself say it. I am queen, I should be ordering him. But she had already sensed that would not work with him, and that continuing to title herself Queen of Meereen, in the absence of direct and drastic action, was the greatest jest of all. "Ser Jorah. . ." Her throat closed. "He. . . said there was a girl you found. Penny. Where is she?"

Tyrion looked back at her with an extraordinary expression. "Assuming no further calamities," he said at last, "just outside, in the garden. It did work, did it not?"

Dany was confused. "Did what work?"

"The horn." Tyrion cut his eyes at the twisted black thing, still clasped in Ser Jorah's stiffening fingers. "That was why he blew it. It's a cursed dragon horn of old Valyria, a bloody dangerous item to be meddling about with, but the only way. It is my belief that Euron Crow's Eye previously had control of your dragons – an extremely unpleasant man, you'll do well never to cross paths with him – and it was achieved by the presence of his brother Victarion here. Which has to do with why Ser Barristan is dead, incidentally. Ser Jorah blew the horn because his will was always to serve you, and he hoped it would break Euron's control and give them back to you. But I'm getting off track. Suffice it to say that I rode Viserion before, and now that he's yours again. . . if you've allowed him to hurt Penny in any way, any deal we have is off."

Dany was shocked. "I chained my dragons since I would not allow them to devour young girls alive. There was one, Hazzea. . ." She shook off the clutches of memory, but was taken aback at the vehemence in the dwarf's tone – and the allegation that he'd ridden Viserion himself. The dragon has three heads. "It was my own fault that they'd become so wild, but nay mind. Why does Penny matter so much to you?"

Tyrion glanced away. He seemed to be fighting himself with every breath, every inch, until his small misshapen body was almost strung up and skewed with the tension. Dany had almost given up hope of getting an answer when the dwarf said, "She's my daughter."

"I – what?" Beneath the scars and deformity and dirt, he was quite a bit younger than Dany had pictured; he could not yet have seen thirty years. "Are you wed, my lord?"

That made the dwarf's mouth twist even more viciously. "I am," he said, biting off the words, "but I do not expect to ever see my lady wife again. Besides, Penny's not hers. A bastard, born of a youthful liaison that ended in disaster. Which has to do with why Ser Barristan is dead, incidentally. Ser Jorah blew the horn because his will was always to serve you, and he hoped it would break Euron's control and give them back to you. But I'm getting off track. Suffice it to say that I rode Viserion before, and now that he's yours again. . . if you've allowed him to hurt Penny in any way, any deal we have is off."

"Of – of course not." Dany had not expected to learn this much of Tyrion so soon after meeting him, and she could see that she had opened an old wound. "Shall we retrieve her then, my lord?"

Tyrion agreed. They crossed the hall together and ducked out into the garden.

It was midday by now; it had been dawn when they arrived. The sky was low and sullen, lambent with trapped heat and colorless as a corpse bled white. Neither dragon was anywhere in sight, leading Dany to a moment of alarm, but all it took to calm her heart was to reach for that new sense in her, moored as deep inside her as a lover. She could feel them nearby, drenched up somewhere
dark and cool, Viserion balming his brother's wounds with a rough forked tongue. *They are mine.*

Ser Jorah's last gift had not been in vain.

This did not mean, however, that the garden was entirely deserted. A small figure was hunched under a tree, hugging her knees, eating one of the withered, fallen fruits. But at Dany and Tyrion's appearance, she looked up with a start, then struggled to her feet and ran to them. "You — you're safe! You're alive! What happened to Ser Jorah? Is he —"

Dany was watching her newfound ally closely, and she thought, for the barest moment, that the look in Tyrion's mismatched eyes was almost tender. But the dwarf merely put a hand on the girl's shoulder and gave a brisk squeeze. "Ser Jorah... well, you saw what he was like when we came in. Sad to say, it's turned out how you'd expect."

"What?" Penny — she had dark hair and big blue eyes, she must take after her unknown mother — looked grief-stricken. "He's dead?"

"Yes," Tyrion admitted. "We'll have to find a new bear somewhere, but I don't intend to be performing any acts requiring one for a good long while. Preferably not for the rest of my life. But where are my manners? Penny, this is Daenerys of House Targaryen, Queen of Meereen and rightful heiress to the Iron Throne, now once more undisputed mistress of the last three dragons in the world — or two, at any rate. In short, she is quite frightening. I'd advise gazing down when you curtsy."

Penny, shocked, began to attempt just that, but Dany caught her hand. "Your — friend merely jests," she said gently, catching herself as she remembered that Tyrion had mentioned that Penny was unaware of their relationship. "I do not want you to be frightened of me."


"All this stammering is making me miss Pod," Tyrion quipped dryly. "It's all right, girl. If either of us is going to be roasted for supper, it'll be me, as I'm sure you and the queen will get on famously. But come on, we've a great deal of work to do, and less time than we think in which to do it. The sight of the dragons may have caused our enemies to flee this place in panic for the time being, but all it means is that they're gathering elsewhere. What comes next..." He shot another of those oblique glances at Dany. "That is entirely up to my lady here."

Dany understood that he was asking if she would consent to loose the dragons on her enemies — the very inhibition that, while he could not have known it, had caused her to lose control of the city last time. She shot a glance down the long slant of sunbaked brick, to the streets far below. They were safe up here in the Great Pyramid, for now, but as Tyrion had just pointed out, it was a very deceptive safety. If it was true that both an invading Greyjoy fleet and a raving Dothraki *khalasar* were here, and by all appearances had been for some time, there would be nothing to eat, and no time to wait out a siege besides. Neither of her current enemies seemed of the temperament for one, and she herself was shrewd enough to realize that despite all her well-meant, misguided efforts at rehabilitation, there was simply nothing left here to rebuild, defend, or cling to. She could always just fly away. But she did not intend to go alone.

Dany, Tyrion, and Penny passed the afternoon in clearing the rubble from the pyramid garden and the great hall, barring the great bronze doors in anticipation of an attack almost surely coming that night, and facing the grim task of dealing with the three dead men. The ironman Tyrion had killed was merely dragged out and pitched over the triangular merlons — "He'll match beautifully with all the rest of them down there," the dwarf remarked, with mordant humor — but for the other two, it was not as simple. Even hours after his death, the red priest's body remained too hot to touch, and smoke wafted sullenly off him. Tyrion assured Dany that it was no loss; the man, Moqorro his
name had been, was a subtle and dangerous trickster who had been instrumental in Ser Barristan's
depend and stealing Viserion. She had a thousand more questions for him, but out of respect, she
held her tongue until the funeral was through.

Dany had never considered herself particularly religious. Viserys had instructed her in bits of the
lore of the Seven, the same as he had for the rest of Westerosi culture, but he was never a patient
teacher in the best of times and difficult questions – questions such as why, if the Targaryens were
the holy and rightful guardians of the Faith, the Faith had let them lose the throne – were received
even worse, so she swiftly learned to stop asking. Yet now, as she and Tyrion labored to build a
makeshift pyre for Ser Jorah and give him to the gods with the proper remembrances, she sorely
felt the lack. She could not be sure if he had kept the old or the new. House Mormont worshiped
the former, but as a consecrated knight, spouse of a gently bred southern lady, he must have paid at
least lip service to the latter. The only one he certainly would have disdained was the red one.

After it had taken the combined effort of all three of them to lift Ser Jorah's body onto the pyre, she
set the torch to it and murmured what prayers she could recall. In this, surprisingly, Tyrion assisted
her; he would not say that he and Jorah had been friends, exactly, but admitted that he too would
see the man sent to his rest in decent fashion. Penny wept, although Dany thought the girl scarce
knew why – it seemed the sort of thing to do at a funeral, after all. The queen's own eyes were dry,
though not for lack of grief. As she watched him burn, all she could think of was that night in the
Dothraki sea when she'd laid Drogo on the pyre and heard Mirri Maz Duur's high, keening
screaming, walked into the firestorm and called out for her children.

A strange sensation came to her, then, a sense of time come again and a moment once more to
choose. Dany herself had released vast and terrible forces upon the world – after destroying Asshai,
or whatever she had done when she snuffed the red priests' flame in the heart of their temple, when
she'd screamed to Quaithe to save the people, when the seer's hand had taken away the mask. That
could very well be the reason that Moqorro was dead. She had unloosed something elemental,
primal, savage – but even those flames had not been sufficient to give her back her dragons. Not
until Ser Jorah had blown the horn.

And now, she was giving him back to the fire. Closing the circle.

In spite of the heat, Dany started to shiver. She could feel it, as she had at the moment he'd first
done it, as he was dying, as his lungs turned to charcoal in his chest. That great terrible ecstatic
bond, of a skin much greater than her own. And, at last, no fear.

Slowly, one foot after the other, she stepped forward, closer and closer. The heat lashed her face,
torrents of embers and ash. She heard Tyrion interrupt his muttered homily and say something in
an alarmed tone, but she was as deaf to him as she had been to the others, to Ser Jorah, when he had
told her that he would not stand aside and watch her burn. That circle closed as well.

Dany reached for the flames as they reached hungrily back for her, and stepped in. Smoke choked
her; she coughed, eyes stinging, but her tears hissed and parched on her cheeks. The fire licked
seductively at her, crooning like a lover, encircling her wrists and ankles like the manacles that had
snatched her up in Asshai. Yet these she felt no fear of, not at all. She saw, again as she had in the
red priests' temple, the specters of her family: the mad king her father, the sad queen her mother,
the brave prince her brother, whispering to her, singing the song of ice and fire, fire, fire. Viserys
was there as well, and Drogo, and Doreah and Jhiqui and Irri and Ser Barristan and Missandei, all

Dany raised her arms above her head. Madness and greatness. She fancied she could see the coin
spinning, a bright streak. Falling, falling.
She reached out, and caught it.

Everything after that turned increasingly jumbled. She could still hear Tyrion shouting from far away; doubtless he had not expected his first hours with a Targaryen to be so, well, Targaryen. But she breathed, she breathed, and her family, her loved ones, breathed with her. In the garden back in Asshai, Fintan had told her that death was impermanent, that she could conjure them into life again. They were not alive now, not in a flesh and blood sense, but there could be no doubt that they were, once and for all, with her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Dany caught a glimpse of a great dark shadow crashing into the hall, and an equally massive white ghost next to it. My children. Still trailing pennons of flame, sparks tumbling from her like a bridal wreath, she stepped out; the floorstones felt like ice against her feet.

Drogon landed first, far more gracefully than his tumble out of the air onto the walls of Meereen. She did not need to look to see that his wing was mended; she felt it already, felt the strength in it that hadn't been there ever since the hrakkar had attacked him while she and Jorah were fighting Khal Jhaqo's bloodriders. Viserion was right behind him. They folded their wings, put back their heads, unleashed twin gusts of flame that swirled and danced around her like colored silks, and Dany laughed out loud. The Unburnt. As they got set to do it again, she reached up and grabbed hold of them, one with each hand. They towered above her now; while still nothing to match those of the Conqueror's, not enough to cast a shadow like Balerion the Black Dread, they were no feeble little lizards. They had been born in the flames of a funeral pyre, and been returned to her once and for all in the flames of another. It was time.

Drogon regarded her wisely through his slitted red eyes, while Viserion snorted, sending another cascade of fire scattering. Dany kept hold of both of them as the funeral pyre dwindled down, as the infernal heat began to die. The moments passed, transcendent, until it was quiet again.

"Well." The hoarse voice came from behind a column, where the dwarfs had dived to take cover when the fireworks began. "I wish I had an appropriate epithet for that, but even my ingenuity is deserting me, Your Grace. I believe the only proper response to that. . ." Tyrion shook his head, still looking stunned. "Fuck."

Dany smiled wanly. "I understand you must have been expecting something. . . tamer."

"The parlor Targaryen? Safe to take home to your mum?" Tyrion managed to summon a smile in return. Then his gaze flicked past her to the dragons. "Well, we certainly are not sitting in here to wait, now. Are we?"

"No." Dany beckoned him, and, looking justifiably and extremely chary, Tyrion edged closer. "My lord of Lannister, I have a task for you."

The Imp regarded her inscrutably, then dropped to one knee. "I am at my queen's service."

"You have done well," Dany told him. "You understand, of course, that I cannot yet trust you without reservation, but I am willing to allow you the chance to prove yourself. I would be grateful if you would serve as Viserion's rider."

Another faint, wry smile quirked Tyrion's mouth. "Luckily, I have some practical experience to bring to the job. Not nearly as much as could be hoped, but. . . well. A dragon named for an overlooked little boy who was either pitied, reviled, or laughed at, who could never live up to the standards of his glorious elder brother, whose relationship with his sister was contentious at best, and whose lord father was, for all the gloss and glamour placed on him, still a cold-hearted bastard and murderer. Perhaps it's not so surprising."
"Good." Dany gestured to Viserion, and the dragon took a few lumbering steps toward Tyrion, who stretched out his hand as gingerly as if expecting it to be bitten off. It wasn't, of course; Dany was in his skin, in his jaws, and she had no wish for him to do such a thing. Instead, Viserion lowered his head, and permitted Tyrion to stroke his golden ruff. Then he lazily blew a few sparks, apparently for the satisfaction of seeing the dwarf jump a foot, and yawned, displaying a full complement of gleaming incisors.

Tyrion grimaced. "If that was a reminder to be bloody careful, I didn't need it. I'm not fireproof like you, my lady, and I've had my share of sharp objects, so I will not, I assure you, take this facetiously. Well, then. What now?"

Dany put her foot into the joint of Drogon's wing, and vaulted onto his back. "We fly out together."

"To Victario Greyjoy and the Dothraki?"

"To whoever may be out there. Where are they?"

"Last I looked, the Greyjoys were trapped in the city after the arrival of the Dothraki, penned up and unable to get back to their ships. But I had a look out over the harbor as we were pitching that dead one off the walls, and the appearance of the dragons has done us a further favor. The Dothraki broke and ran when the beasts were swooping overhead, and left the Greyjoys with a clear path to get the blasted buggery out of the city ruins and back to their fleet. They're no fools. They know they're at a horrible disadvantage so long as they stay on land; if they return to the sea, their enemies must bring the fight to them, on their territory. They should have been aboard for some hours by now."

"Well then. We must pay a visit to the fleet."

"I like the cut of your jib, Your Grace. As for – ?" Tyrion shot a glance at Penny.

"She should stay here." Dany turned to the dwarf girl as well. "If you would . . . find an urn or jar or some such for Ser Jorah's ashes? As well, if they have not killed her, my scribe Missandei is somewhere in the pyramid. If you can find her, stay with her until Tyrion and I come back to fetch you. Don't leave or open the door for any reason."

Penny, still looking floored, nodded weakly. "Yes, Your Grace."

Confirmation secured, Dany glanced back to Tyrion. "Come. Let's be off."

The dwarf paused, looking at Penny, then nodded. His climbing onto Viserion's back was not by any description graceful, but it did the job. And then, side by side, the two of them spurred the dragons, who hurtled down the scarred floor, through the broken doors, and high into the deepening twilight above Meereen almost in perfect unison.

Dany held tight as Drogon and Viserion banked and wheeled, quickly gaining altitude. Tyrion was holding on even more tightly than she, but he managed to peel his face out of its rictus long enough to give her a strained grin. The two dragons and their two riders made such elegant aerial symmetry that Dany ached to know where Rhaegal had gone, and who would lay claim to him. Suddenly she remembered that vision she'd had in the red priests' temple, of the young man with the black glass hands and the burning sword, and the ice. As much ice as I am fire.

Such concerns were secondary, however, as she and Tyrion sped over the dark rooftops of the sacked city toward the torches in the harbor, the only extant sign of life except for a few itinerant Dothraki trotting in the alleyways. They had, of course, been spotted; shouts of alarm were starting
to echo in the heavy, humid air. They were high enough that any archer would have a long shot, but Dany nervously nudged Drogon higher again. She meant to speak to Victarion Greyjoy and Khal Mago both, but if they would not hear her.

A few more beats of the dragons' wings had them sailing down toward the fleet anchored in the harbor, and Dany angled for what was clearly the flagship. There was a massive industry on deck, scuttling and shouting, and she needed only a quick glance over her shoulder to see that Tyrion was shadowing her closely on the descent. Dany guided Drogon into a skim just above the surface. Then she stood up, stepped down his head, and dropped with a thump onto the deck of the Greyjoy longship.

Tyrion brought Viserion in to hover just above the mainmast, the downdraft of the dragon's wing beats causing the flame in the lanterns to jerk and reel, and tousle Dany's hair out of her face. But that was not her concern either. Glancing around at the blank, utterly terrified expressions of the ironmen who surrounded her, she raised a hand. "I am Queen Daenerys Targaryen, returned from Ashhai. I would speak to your captain."

Frightened murmurs and shuffling. Then someone darted belowdecks, and returned shortly with a great dark bullock of a man, with long salt-streaked hair and a vulture's nose, deep-set eyes that shone like chips of onyx. He wore a black tabard with a golden kraken on it, over a full suit of plate armor. Dany had never known a man to wear even a scrap of steel on board ship, but the iron captain clearly had no fear of drowning. In one hand, he hefted a black axe, and on seeing her, he lowered it and inclined his head. "The most beautiful woman in the world. As it was prophesied."

"I beg pardon?"

"The most beautiful woman in the world," Victarion Greyjoy repeated. "You are who I came to Meereen to find, and now you are here." He held out his free hand. "If you are not yet a widow, I can make you one."

"I beg pardon?" Dany repeated. "I am neither a prize heifer to fetch, nor a damsel to be rescued at need. I am not here to treat with you as a refugee, as I imagine the dragon makes quite clear." She jerked her head at Drogon. "I am here as queen."

Victarion almost smiled, which was full as terrifying as it sounded. "Indeed. I mean you no harm. I have come to marry you."

"Have you? And have you heard of what befell the last princeling to ask my hand?"

Victarion was unruffled. "A greenlander weakling. Nay matter to me."

Dany was momentarily confused. Quentyn Martell had hailed from Dorne, and a less green and weak land could scarcely be envisioned, but she supposed this was some fashion of the ironborn showing contempt for any man not as accomplished in murder as them. "Be that as it may, I am not interested in matrimony. But if you will make treaty with me as a – "

Victarion waved a huge hand at the shadowy ships that rode at anchor to all sides. "Do you see these, my beautiful queen? All the power of the Iron Fleet, at your command, if you will take me as husband. Accept, and we will set sail for Westeros tonight. I honor you in the asking."

Otherwise you would merely rape me and cut my throat, you mean? Dany had to admit that she was sorely tempted by this clear evidence of power, and the gods knew that she'd been striving so long for ships that it would be easy to just say yes. But she had already contrived a disastrous second marriage in pursuit of ephemeral political gain – if what Tyrion said was true, Hizdahr was
dead too – and she was done with it. She would never marry again unless for love. "Your offer is kindly meant, my lord of Greyjoy. But I must refuse."

Victarion's face had gone dark. "I did not travel across half the world to be refused."

"And I was not born to bow to the whims of men, my lord. Even if I was a commoner girl, I would not." Dany stared straight back at him. "I will treat with you as one lord to another, offering you protection and alliance; who would cross you if I placed the dragons behind your cause? But you will speak to me as a queen, not a helpless female."

This was plainly a vastly novel concept for Victarion, and he scowled at her again, as if trying to decide whether to obey. She had already sensed that his was a nature accustomed to doing so, but certainly not from a girl half his age and half his size, even if she had flown out of the night on the back of a dragon and boarded his ship. Yet while he was engaged in this riveting contemplation, the deck began to roll beneath their feet. Gently at first, and then harder.

Dany frowned, glancing around as if expecting to see a Dothraki horde clambering up the sides with *arakhs* between their teeth. But that would have required them to swim out to the ships, something that not even the most piss-drunk young *ko* would have attempted without the entire riches of Vaes Dothrak promised in return, and it was getting stronger. Strong enough, in fact, that the ship was starting to groan and pitch as if in the grips of a storm. But the sky was clear – she didn't understand –

"*My lord!*" The shout came from the crow's nest, hoarse with alarm. "*The sky –*"

Dany, Victarion, and half the ship turned, to see that something queer had indeed happened to the horizon. It seemed to have gone quite black, washing out the stars, and there was a roaring, rushing sound frothing closer every moment. Then Dany realized that it was in fact a great wave, larger than anything she'd ever seen before, and it was speeding toward them twice as fast as a cavalry charge.

Victarion remained motionless an instant longer himself, then snapped into action, roaring at the men to raise the anchor. As the deck exploded into action, and corresponding panic was to be distantly glimpsed on the other ships, Dany ran for Drogon, threw herself out terrifyingly over the open sea, and jumped on. She gained altitude as the wave pummeled closer and closer, and threw a desperate look up at Tyrion. She shouted up at him, but he clearly couldn't hear.

They were safe on the dragons' backs, but there was nothing to do but watch as the wave surged in, its crest almost equal with the top of the Iron Fleet's masts. It crashed into the ships broadside, with unbelievable force and power, some of them who had managed to get their anchors up riding it out and spinning as they were shoved up against Meereen's seaward walls, and others vanishing under a blast of monstrous, fountaining spray as their anchor chains held them fatally in place. Dany observed in horrified fascination, thinking of Victarion Greyjoy in his plate armor as she watched the wave engulf the flagship.

It felt like forever until the wave finally broke against Meereen's slagged brick towers, and began to retreat in a torrent of whitewater, leaving a rack and ruin of scattered timbers and seaweed and men bobbing in the shallows, some still screaming and trying to swim, but most floating facedown and motionless. A broken stern of a ship lay slewed just beyond the breakwater; others were fully capsized. Perhaps half remained upright, those fortunate enough to be driven aground on the sand. Victarion Greyjoy's flagship was gone.

Dany didn't know if the sound she heard was her screaming or the blood ringing in her ears, and either way she had to wait until it subsided. She was soaking wet; the spray had drenched them
even though they were over a hundred feet in the air. Then she turned, flew closer, and called to Tyrion in a voice that barely sounded her own, "What in the name of the gods was that?"

The dwarf didn't answer for several moments. His eyes were as wide and fixed as if he too had just stared far too closely into the abyss of death. Then he said, "That, my lady, was a tidal wave. According to the maesters, they're known to happen in a few particular circumstances. One, when the earth moves and shakes. Two, when oceanic glaciers break off into icebergs. But the amount of ice that would have needed to hit the water in order to create a wave that size, this far away from the north. . ."

He paused as if something truly terrible had occurred to him, then shook it off. "Otherwise," he said softly, "it is quite obvious to us both that the power of fire is unleashed most terribly in the world, Your Grace. By you, and whatever you did in Asshai, if what little Ser Jorah was able to tell me before his death was true. And I think we have seen proof, quite undeniable proof, that now the power of ice is as well."
Arianne

Dragonstone could always be smelled – and heard – long before it was seen. The reek of sulfur, the crashing waves under the Stone Drum, the screams of the Windwyrm, the distant grumbling of the unquiet volcano. And if Stannis Baratheon was still here, the grinding of his teeth. It was only when you were dangerously close that the black towers took mouthfuls out of the low crimson sky, the smoke etching delicate traceries and the dark bulk of the island towering up behind the solitary castle hunched on its cliff, as if brooding on its failures. Arianne was curious if anyone had ever tried to count the dragons graven on its parapets, clutching its torches, looming along its battlements. There were thousands, all stone, all watching. Waiting for the moment when they will finally wake.

As such, the Targaryen fleet had to take great care on the approach. Stannis might be gone, but no one supposed he had left it undefended, even if Ser Loras had done much of the work for them by storming it, taking it, and installing a skeleton garrison to hold it, at great cost to his pretty face. Idly, Arianne wondered where the Knight of Flowers was now. He and his family might have taken up with Aegon's cause, but the garrison was liable to see things differently, still considering themselves loyal to Tommen. Even when the Tyrells aid us, they vex us.

She stood on the deck with her cousin Elia, both of them having left Aegon's side on the orders of Lord Connington, who claimed he needed to confer with the prince about this strategy, and privately. Arianne thought it was rather more likely that he wished to nip any further intimacy in the bud. While anything of a physical nature was ruled out due to the prince's injury, there was no denying that he and Elia had been making any number of lovelorn faces at each other, the sort of thing that Connington would have taken far more firmly in hand if he had not been away with Aurane Waters at Casterly Rock. Arianne did not know whether or not to be insulted that the prince had taken more of an interest in Elia, rangy as a young colt and scarce with breasts to speak of, than he had her. He certainly had become quite fond of her, but it was awe mixed with a certain fear. And perhaps Aegon, half a child still, felt more comfortable with Elia than Arianne, woman that she was. And one who is known to have as good as killed her lover. Gods rest Ser Arys... and his princess, too.

Arianne's mouth tightened, and she turned away, telling herself it was the stench in the wind that was causing her eyes to water. She had sent raven after raven to Prince Doran, demanding to be told the details of Myrcella's death, but the silence from her father remained deafening. Either all the birds had met with calamity between here and Sunspear – something which was admittedly entirely likely, as Randyll Tarly's advancing army could be shooting down ravens on sight – or Prince Doran preferred to keep such sensitive information as strictly privy as possible. Thus defeated, Arianne had considered sending to her cousin Nym in King's Landing, but she knew that any scrap of Dornish correspondence even hinting at Obara's involvement in Myrcella's murder would be enough to convict Nym on the spot. So she was left in ignorance, with only her grief, guilt, and lies for company.

The ship was close enough to the castle by now that the men were starting to shrug into hauberks and helmets, in case Tommen's garrison felt inclined to test the range with a barrage of crossbow fire. One of them came up to take Arianne's arm. "M'lady, it's best you go below. Hard to say exactly what sort of welcome we're in for, but I'd wager it won't be a friendly one."

"We have no token from Ser Loras? He was the man who led them here, surely his warrant should serve for them to step aside?"
"Might be so, but we have nothing. He left us long before we knew we were sailing to Dragonstone. We did expect to take King's Landing, after all."

Indeed, Arianne thought bitterly, they had. She shot another glance at the fleet converging on the castle, and considered that whether or not the garrison elected to complicate the situation, it was still going to be delicate. A Dornishwoman born and bred, whose only sea was sand, she was no authority on the vagaries of the tide, but it seemed to be running much higher than usual, frothing and crashing on the strip of desolate beach directly fronting the gatehouse. That beach was the only place for the Targaryen forces to chance a landing, and remembering what had happened the last time they'd overconfidently stormed ashore. . .

Either way, Arianne decided that her presence was indeed not going to make much meaningful difference. She glanced at her cousin, getting in the way as the longboats were hoisted, then turned and went below, into the dark, creaking corridor. The only light down here was the sullen glow undergirding the door of the prince's cabin, the only sound that of muffled, strident voices.

Arianne stopped, debated, and then edged closer. Connington, of course, avoided revealing anything to her that he possibly could, and his disapproval of this dangerous gambit had been plain from the start. If the griffin lord had had his way, they would have returned to shore up their gains in the west, but Arianne failed to see how that was any less dangerous, if not more so. With Myrish and Tyroshi privateers making a terror of the Stepstones, winter storms and Greyjoys and worse lying between them and the lion's den. . . yet as much as she disdained her father's slow, cautious, circumspect methods, Arianne had at least picked up some of Prince Doran's acumen at reading people. *There is some particular reason Lord Connington does not want to be here. There is something he is hiding.*

She stepped in and pressed her ear to the door, straining with the other for any sound of conflict from above. None. So she turned back.

". . . and no likelihood of discerning how." It was Connington's voice. "Not without great sacrifice."

Aegon's answering laugh was bitter. "You mean I should not expect to wake the beasts of Dragonstone as easily as snapping my fingers? I could have anticipated that."

"My lord, no. For hundreds of years, your ancestors sought to birth dragons, to master them, to overpower them. Those attempts were farce or tragedy. And now – "

"That was *before,*" Aegon reminded his foster father, with characteristic stubbornness. "My aunt has birthed her own, but will not or cannot bring them to me. And as we just discovered in the failed assault on King's Landing, even elephants are not enough of a weapon. We need those beasts."

Connington's despair was plain. "Men have won crowns and held kingdoms by the strength of steel and sinew alone, and you vest our hope in a fantasy?"

"Answer me plainly, my lord. I am a trueborn Targaryen, Prince Rhaegar's son and seed, am I not?"


"Men called my father the last true dragon, did they not?"

A pause, longer. "Aye, Your Grace. They did."

"And he predicted that I was the Prince who was Promised, the savior of the realm in this time of
"ice and darkness?"

"He thought so, my lord. Yes."

"Well then. This is the risk I have been meant to take all along. Free of Varys and Illyrio and their whispers and their plots and their cheese. And my lord, to speak of things not certain... you still have not told me what really happened to your hand."

A third pause, longer and more fraught than its predecessors. "My hand?"

"Playing the imbecile suits you poorly, Griff."

Connington barked a mirthless laugh. "I... took a wound to the fingers in a skirmish, as I told you before we left Storm's End. I had to cut them off."

"Yes," Aegon said. "You told me that. I was only wondering when I was entitled to the truth."

The silence beyond the door was hideous, so much that Arianne winced on their behalf. Then Connington said, "That is the truth."

"Please, my lord." Aegon sounded tired and pained. "What is it? What is it about this place you mislike so much? This is my family's own ancestral seat, the place from whence the Conqueror himself set sail. A few decades of Stannis Baratheon cannot have undone that so hastily."

If Connington was actually about to answer, Arianne didn't find out. At that moment, with no warning, she was flung violently sideways, losing her footing and slamming into the corridor wall as the galley rocked and yawed, tilting so precipitously that she thought they were about to capsize. Salt water hissed and spewed through every uncaulked join, every weak place, snuffing the swinging lantern and drenching Arianne to the skin. They rocked and rolled and roared, as she groped blindly for some, any surface that wasn't sliding away beneath her fingers. The hull hadn't been breached, she thought, but the water was up around her knees and rising. She tried to flee back in the direction of the deck hatch, under some ludicrous delusion that she might be safer topside, but a wall rose out of the darkness where she didn't recall there being one before, and punched her flat. She landed on her back in two feet of frigid seawater, sobbing.

It felt like forever until the madness passed, until the galley slowly began to right itself and the gushing leaks stopped, until walls and ceiling resumed their customary alignment and Arianne could struggle to her feet, breathless and battered. It was ominously silent from the direction of the prince's cabin, and a sudden, unreasoning terror seized hold of her. Surely he hadn't...?

"Aegon!" She sloshed back down the narrow passage. "Your Grace! Are you –"

She reached the door, which had been jammed shut, and managed to work it free. Then she stumbled into the cabin, which had been rendered a blasted mess. Charts, candles, sextants, swords, quills, ledgers, plates, maps, medicines, and more all floated in a sad murky soup, and on the bed, Connington was frantically tending to a prone Aegon, who appeared to have been knocked out. Fresh blood was seeping through the bandages on the prince's face, indicating that his raw wound had broken open again, and Connington himself did not appear in much better estate. Dark, crusted stains marred the leather of his gloved hand, the one with the severed fingers, and the glove itself had been mostly torn off by the force of the water, revealing...

Arianne blinked hard, once and then again. She couldn't be certain, but she thought she saw - no, she knew she saw - a hard grey-black crust at the base of his knuckles, just below the cauterized stumps. And that impression which she'd shrugged off on meeting him, how his hand felt more like
stone than flesh, his odd and utter reticence to elaborate on why he'd chopped off his own fingers, his apparent terror of this place and its stone dragons.

The horrible conclusion rushed on her like the wave. "Are you mad? Get away from him!"

Connington, as intent as he was on Aegon, hadn't even heard her come in. He spun around with a startled oath and saw her, saw where she was staring, and went ashen. He awkwardly tried to clutch the compromised limb to his chest, but it was far too late, and his reaction erased her last shreds of doubt. "My lady... Princess, please, let me explain, you don't know what it – "

"I know exactly what it is!" Dear gods, he might have touched Aegon with it in his panic, not realizing. Aegon's open wound, those hideous stumps... did the man have any idea what his pride, carelessness, and obstinacy had cost them? "Get away from him!"

Connington flinched as if she had slapped him. For once, even that man had no answer for her, as she shoved him aside and clambered up onto the seawater-soaked mattress next to the prince. Aegon's eyelashes were fluttering; he appeared to be coming around, making faint noises of sheer agony. Arianne could not imagine that it was remotely pleasant to be thrown headlong into a wall, then have the raw sword-gash across your face doused in salt. But he saw it was her kneeling above him, and tried to bite his lip. "What did... what happened?"

Arianne herself had no answers, of course, but they were not to be left in suspense for long. Footsteps were to be heard crashing nearer at speed, and then the door burst open again to admit a frantic-looking man-at-arms. "Your Grace? Your Grace!"

Aegon groaned and did his best to sit up. "I am well," he said weakly, not sounding it. "What in seven hells...?"

"Rogue wave. Bloody freakish. Never seen a thing like it. Thank the gods that the castle caught most of it, or we'd be sunk for sure. I mean, we saw the tide was running too high, but..." The man shook his head grimly. "Rose out of the horizon like a monster, far as we could see. Too fast to do anything but pray."

Aegon coughed. "Any losses?"

"None of the ships, Your Grace, but it tore the longboats clean off the hoists and snapped a mainmast or two on the others. Swept who knows how many men overboard, and..." The soldier hesitated, then glanced sidelong at Arianne. "Your... your cousin was one. It could be she's fished out by now, m'lady, but..."

"Elia?" The Sand Snakes appeared to be in mortal danger these days. *Punishment for their father's sins?* Dearly as Arianne had loved her uncle, Oberyn Martell was no man's notion of the Most Devout, and thinking of Obara's murder of Myrcella made her acknowledge grimly that the Snakes had much to account for on their own. Yet as aggravating as Elia Sand could be in her fourteen-year-old fecklessness, she had done nothing to merit such a fate. "Find her."

"We'll... we'll do our best, Princess." The man glanced back to Aegon. "Orders, Your Grace?"

"Do as my lady has said. Launch the remaining boats, round up any survivors in the water. But it is ever more urgent that we -- " Aegon raised a hand, apparently encompassing the three of them -- "are taken ashore and found a way to enter the castle keep. Myself and my lord Connington will then -- "

"No," Arianne said sharply. Gods, someone needed to speak truth to this pair of purblind fools
before they staggered straight off the cliff, and took the rest down with them.

Aegon stopped with a jerk. Even in his wounded, invalid state, he was unused to being told off or gainsaid, and the petulant look he gave her reflected this. "Yes, my lady? Did you have something to say?"

Arianne nodded brusquely at the man-at-arms, who took the hint and promptly made himself scarce, shutting the door behind him with a click. Then she said, "No, I do not. But he – " indicating the grey-faced Connington – "does."

The prince shot his adoptive father a curious glance. "What?"

Connington now strongly resembled an animal in a trap. "I – I don't – "

"Tell him," Arianne warned. "Tell him or I will."

"Tell me what?" Despite his pain, Aegon's blue eyes were narrow and sharp.

"The truth. About his hand."

The look Lord Jon shot her then was one of pure and utter loathing, but Arianne could not bring herself to care. Then, slowly, every fiber in his body clearly rebelling against it, he lifted his maimed hand and stripped the torn glove off.

Aegon blanched at the ugliness of the wound, but the expression on his face remained confusion; he had seen the stumps, if only briefly, during his row with Connington at Storm's End. He was opening his mouth in apparent formulation of a question when he saw, as Arianne had, what had not been visible back then. The hard, crusted rime of stone creeping down the back of the hand.

The silence was unearthly and horrible. Then Aegon's face lost what little color it had had, and he reared back as if from a pit viper. "What? How could you – when did this – no! No!"

"When I saved the Imp from drowning in the Rhoyne." Connington spoke the words as if the weight of all the world was on them. "My prince, please – " Out of instinct, he reached for him.

Aegon flinched away as if Connington had tried to hit him. "No," he said hoarsely. "All this time. . . you kept this murderous secret? What else have you been keeping from me? What else haven't you told me? I trusted you! I trusted you!"

Connington could not have looked more a ghost if he was already dead and in his grave. "My prince. . . I did not want. . ."

"Yes," Aegon said, cool, measured, and sharp as knives. "You did not want. You did not want to tell me that you harbored a plague that could be the death of us all, you did not want to tell me why you feared Dragonstone, you did not want to tell me anything. You have raised me in a lie. I do not know what you sought to gain by this, but I never want to see you again."

"No," Connington breathed, sounding like a man stabbed in the gut. He stumbled upright, reaching for the prince, realized it was the maimed hand again and snatched it back as if burned.

"Everything I've done. . . for the Targaryens, for Rhaegar, for – "

"Yes," Aegon said again, sounding halfway to tears himself. "All of it was for my father, for an old dead cause, for some lost shred of your honor. Tell me, my lord. Did you ever love me?"

"Like my own son. Until my death. Please, Your Grace. Please."
Aegon did not answer, made no move to come nearer. "Good," he said at last. "Then you'll obey when I tell you to leave. Go back to Casterly Rock, or wherever you choose. I will not persecute you, but nor will I welcome you ever again." He turned to Arianne. "My lady. Let's go."

Absurdly, she found herself glancing back over her shoulder, at the griffin lord sitting motionless on the bed, shoulders slumped, ruined hands dangling uselessly between his knees. But though she could have said something then, she did not. *I wreak wrath and fury wherever I pass.* It should have made her proud that she had finally learned to play the game of thrones with such a vengeance, but it always cost far more than it gained.

Still, however, she did not raise her voice. She did not argue. She took Aegon's arm, supporting his weight, guiding him gingerly through the ruins of the cabin and out into the corridor beyond, out to the deck, with only Connington's haunted eyes to follow.

They came ashore by twilight. Several of the Golden Company men, old Targaryen stalwarts that they were, knew a secret way under the castle's gullet, a dark sulfur-reeking wormhole barely large enough to accommodate the half-dozen longboats they had been able to retrieve and put to serviceable use. Elia Sand had still not been found, a circumstance that Arianne tried, with no success, not to dwell on. She could not imagine how she would ever look Ellaria in the eye again, even though it was not her fault. But *Myrcella was.* Obara might have struck the fatal blow, although even that was uncertain given how little Arianne knew, but it was because of her that Obara had done so.

Aegon was in no shape to fight, however much he insisted that he should be alongside his men, and he and Arianne were forcibly immured in the longboat and made to wait in the darkness before the mercenaries finally returned, bearing word of the garrison's surrender. Apparently, word had not yet reached them of the Targaryen forces' grievous defeat at King's Landing, and the Golden Company had been able to spin some fable of how King Tommen was deposed and on the run, the queen about to go on trial. Apparently, the information that the Tyrells had switched sides was persuasive as well. Ser Loras *had* earned a certain amount of cachet for his valiance in the attack, and the men were war-weary, hungry, nervous, cold, and extremely eager not to end up on the wrong side of any more kings. They were, in fact, largely from the stormlands, men of Baratheon allegiance who had more than a passing doubt as to whether Tommen had any legitimate entitlement to their loyalty at all, and they had heard of the Golden Company's activities on Cape Wrath. They were appreciative of the fact that the prisoners had not been killed, and the castles, while taken, left unsacked. There were also enough Tyrell men sprinkled in to urge that they should follow the lead of Ser Loras in altering their choice of king, and that was that. In exchange for the Targaryens' pledge not to molest them, their properties, or their families further, they were willing to swear allegiance to Aegon and depart.

Arianne, when she heard this, considered that the Golden Company must have done their damndest to conceal the reality of Aegon's condition; if the garrison knew they were swearing to a badly wounded teenager who had barely escaped King's Landing with his skin, not to mention been in close proximity to a man infected with greyscale — a man he had just disowned, no less — they might be in less haste to volunteer. But she was not about to puncture their good fortune, and they waited until the men had gone before she helped Aegon up into the vast, glowering, dark hall of the central Dragonstone keep. It must only be her imagination, but she thought she could hear faint, scuttling whispers in the vaults, fading away around corners. As deeply as Storm's End had been a Baratheon place, this was a Targaryen place, fire and blood. *So why does Aegon look as frightened as I feel?*

Even the comparatively minor effort of getting ashore had told badly on the prince, and he was putting more of his weight on her than ever as the two of them glanced around, as if in search of a
helpful book of instruction. Who were they fooling? This was a bloody mad plan, a gamble that might already have cost them too much, and now –

"So you came at last, my lord."

The soft voice echoed from a darkened corner of the great hall, causing Aegon to swear, Arianne to start, and all the Golden Company present to reach for their swords. But it was to their utter stupefaction when the stout figure who glided out was neither burning phantom nor avenging Lannister loyalist. It was, instead, the very man Aegon had thought he was avoiding when he concocted the plan to detour to Dragonstone in the first place.

"Lord Varys," the prince said at last, clearly struggling to master his courtesies. "I was told you had gone to await me in King's Landing."

"I did, Your Grace." The eunuch made an obsequious little curtsey. "But as you are doubtless well aware – such a pity about your pretty face, I do hope it won't scar too badly – the plan to take King's Landing went rather sideways. And now the king has gone missing, the queen as well, and the Red Keep, the Faith, and the City Watch alike are in quite a ferment as they search for them. What better time to turn into a rat and scurry out the back?"

"The boy? Tommen? He's missing?" Some lies were apparently not lies after all.

"Indeed. Nobody has seen him since the night of your failed attack. Surely something you did not know, elsewise you and your brave troops might have been heartened to try again. Likewise, Queen Cersei has also gone missing. Most inexplicable, and ruining certain plans I had in train with Ser Jaime." Varys pouted. "But I prefer not to dwell on disappointment. Thus I asked myself, where would you be fleeing next?"

"Am I so predictable?" Aegon asked warily.

"Kings generally are. More than they think." Varys tittered, but it lacked its usual flighty edge. It was darker, deeper, and gave Arianne a chill. Suddenly she was unsure if they should be treating with this man (or not-man) at all, the puppetmaster behind the prince's cause for so long – and with such uncertain motives. "I do congratulate you, Your Grace. This is exactly where I would have chosen to go – as surely you can tell, by my being here to greet you. If I may ask, where is dear Lord Connington?"

Aegon stiffened. "We... quarreled. I will not have his name spoken."

"Pity." Varys' eyes glittered. "You may regret sending him away so hastily."

"I... I left him on the ship. It is likely he is still there. Why?"

Varys glanced around at the watching Golden Company, put a finger dramatically to his lips, and quirked his eyebrows. Evidently they understood, though they were reluctant to go until Aegon nodded painfully at them. Then they withdrew, footsteps lingering like spiderwebs in the stillness.

"There," Aegon said. "You may speak freely."

"A habit all of us would be wise not to get into. Yet I see you keep the Martell princess with you. You trust her, then?"

"With my life." A noble sentiment, Arianne thought, but it was more likely that Aegon had not sent her away because he might not be able to stand up without her arm. He should be tucked up in some warm bed with a posset for his face and months to stay off his feet, but there was no leisure
for that in the campaign, not with winter closing in – and gods knew what else. That tidal wave, the
tone in the man's voice. . . Bloody freakish. Never seen a thing like it. Rose out of the horizon like a
monster. Too fast to do anything but pray.

"So I see." Varys began to pace around the two of them, his silken slippers whispering secrets to
the dark, polished obsidian. "Well, Your Grace, let me see if I may hazard a guess at your future
objectives. You realize that your situation is far more desperate than your current position standing
in the middle of Dragonstone would attest – your forces have now taken Storm's End, Casterly
Rock, and Dragonstone? You should get a statue in the Hall of Heroes out of this if nothing else.
But you need a new weapon, and you are right to do so. You want to wake the sleeping monsters of
this place."

Aegon's discomfort was plain. "How did you know that?!"

"I have a thousand ears and one, Your Grace, as always." Varys laughed again, that earthy low
chuckle. "Family trait. But this is something that will only be accomplished with an old and very
dark power, and a price which you should be most wary of paying. Let me be frank, my prince. I
loathe magic. As a small boy, when I was cut, a sorcerer burned my manly parts on a brazier and
spoke to a voice called up from nowhere, a voice that spoke of the Prince that was Promised. A
prophecy which, surely you can likewise tell, captured my imagination. In revenge, I swore, I
would find the prince and stop him. To show that even that magic could be destroyed, that this was
an age of swords and steel. A child's foolish dream, of course. I forgot about it for many years.
Until my old friend Illyrio sent to me with curious tidings of a charming blue-eyed boy."

"Me." Aegon was staring at the eunuch in dawning horror. "All this time. . . have you. . .?"

"All this time, Your Grace, I have been exactly what I appeared: a staunch supporter of your claim
to the throne. I have no secrets to disclose in that regard. You have done exactly what you were
required to. Which is why I am here, incidentally, to tell you just what it will cost to wake the stone
dragons. As it is always. With fire. . . and blood."

"But you – you said you hated magic – "

"There are many queer things in this world, my prince," Varys said with a twisted smile. "Some
worse than others. That dark power approaches us now. There is no time for second thoughts. . .
and red or black, a dragon is still a dragon. Are you going to do what is needful, or not?"

"Blood. . ." Aegon seemed unable to get past it. He opened and shut his mouth.

"It works particularly well, seeing as these are stone dragons we desire to wake, if it is the blood of
one with the taint in it." Varys turned back. "Surely you don't think it's coincidence that we sent
you up that river, past the bridge of the stone men?"

Aegon looked horrified. "No. I will not believe that."

"Do as you wish." Varys shrugged. "But greyscale is what turned that living flesh to dead stone.
The gargoyle, chimera, dragons, all the monsters that grace this fortress with their memories. It
can yet undo it. And you did say you quarreled with Lord Connington."

"This. . . this evil. . ." Aegon made the sign of the star. "This unspeakable. . . to have me take my
family's throne, you would turn me into my grandfather. Burn a man, a Hand, alive."

"I would do nothing," Varys said, with some asperity. "I merely give you the choice. When you
have made it, I shall know everything about you that I need to."
Aegon shot a panicked look at Arianne, clearly pleading for help. His face was bleeding again beneath its layers of bandages, and it was plain that he couldn't endure much more of this or anything. But while she should have had some sage answer for him, she found herself tongue-tied, speechless. *Is this what it has come to?*

"There has to be another way," Aegon said, apparently to Varys.

"There is not." The eunuch shrugged again. "I told you, my prince. This is a cost you should be well aware of."

"But... the Mad King, the..."

"Targaryens have always burned lesser men. Your many-times grandsire Aegon the Conqueror is remembered as the uniting force of the kingdoms, a great man and a splendid warrior... and he was. But how many thousands of soldiers did he and his sisters turn to ash on the Field of Fire? How many *hundreds* of thousands? Why is it so villainous to burn one man, who has betrayed you and everything you thought you knew about him, rather than to wake the stone dragon so that many more may live? The dark power that approaches is the end of all things, the very entity that the priests of R'hllor call the Lord of Night and Terror. The Wall is fallen and the Others are coming." Varys no longer sounded a thing like his giggling, mincing self. His voice was grim and cold and hard as iron. "This is what I told you about making choices, about one lesser evil against a far greater. *Fire*, my prince. *Fire.*"

Aegon was white to the lips, trembling under Arianne's hand like a spooked horse. *Does he find the weight of kingship too much for him? Does he know what it feels like, to take a man's life? Gods, Myrcella... no, she had never meant it, she never...*

"You're a liar," Aegon said at last, barely above a whisper. "You're known for it."

"I prefer to be known as a selective informant, Your Grace. And from the days of Robert Baratheon, that boorish drunken whoremonger, I have been the only man in the entirety of the Seven Kingdoms genuinely working to save them. It has come time to play your role and to accept your destiny. Do it, or throw your sword into the sea and play at the game of thrones no more. You are a boy. Become a man, or die."

For a moment, an endless moment more, Aegon remained silent. Then his breath rattled out of him in a slow, pained gust, and he drew himself up.

"All right," he croaked. "Send the Golden Company with the order. Fetch Lord Connington."
Samwell

He had been so cold for so long that he had forgotten entirely what it was like to be warm. He had thought he was the coldest he could ever be after the wights attacked on the Fist, that long nightmare of fire and snow and demons in the darkness, but he must have been wrong, for this cold was even worse. It sank into his bones, froze his blood, which was still coming out of him from the wound in his side, from Euron Greyjoy's blade. Alleras – Sarella, no, Sarella – had said that it hadn't hit anything vital, but it hurt too much for Sam to believe that. He is more monster than man. And that was even before Sam had stabbed him in the eye with a shard of dragonglass.

Sometimes he thought he heard rustling feet, never close and never far, always just behind the last corner, daring him to go back and look. Euron is down here. He is following me.

Sam had lost all track of how long it had been since he had dragged himself to the weirwood, since he had tumbled down it and left the Citadel in flames and Sarella to the gods alone knew what fate. And if Euron is after us, even the gods will not be enough. He had run as far as he could, and then started to limp, and stumble, and fall. His fingers skidded on the frigid dirt (at least he thought it was dirt, and supposed he was better off not seeing) as he doggedly kept on crawling. It was hard, so hard, but at least he could do it. Yes. He could do that at least.

Maybe.

Sam's arms were shaking with the effort. His legs too. His robes were filthy, soaked with frozen blood, and the tunnel was never-ending, braided with eerie white roots like ghosts, like haunting wraiths, like all the sorts of things he did not want to think about down here. Aside from the rustling, he had begun to hear murmuring, voices, deep breaths not his own, as if something was down here and something was sentient, and it was waking up. He could not rid himself of the memory of seeing Jon's face in the very tree that he had now gone under, and his persistent conviction that something of his friend lingered on, to whisper to him. Horn.

There was nothing at all to lose anymore, and words bubbled to Sam's lips involuntarily, a hushed prayer. "Jon. Help me, Jon, I'm hurt, I'm alone down here, I'm lost. They're coming for me. Jon, please."

The echoing, dripping silence was his only answer.

It was worth a try, Sam reminded himself grimly. With no notion of what was lurking here, no glimmer of his fate, he could discount nothing, no far-fetched possibility. He cudgeled his cold, hungry, hurting brain in hopes of thinking logically or creatively, like a maester, like a man. Nothing in this world was infinite, so hence even the weirwood system had to eventually come to an end. That did not mean, however, that he was anywhere near it. "Not infinite" in no way translated to "small."

Very well. The only present option was to keep walking, or crawling. Crawl, and hope that whatever slender shred of luck keeping him alive would hold out. Otherwise –

One moment the ground was still solidly beneath his fingers, and the next, there was nothing. Sam barely had time for a terrified squeal before he plunged into abyssal darkness, head over heels over head over heels, hearing Ser Alliser Thorne sneering. Lady Piggy. Once or twice, he crashed into unseen walls, but for the most part he was in free-fall, a stone down a well, down and down, hearing empty air whistling past. Oh gods, this is it, I'm dead. He tried to think of prayers to say, but nothing came to mind. There was nothing in his head but wild white terror.
He thought he heard the sound change. The ground was coming up. He contorted himself around clumsily and did his best to brace, but it still pummeled the breath out of him in a blasting blow of agony, up his chest to his head and down his legs, so hard that he was convinced every bone in his body had broken. *Well, at least that stops me worrying about my side.* He lay in a crumpled, breathless, quivering heap, struggling to choke in air, terrified that he was about to start falling again. *Am I dead?* It seemed eminently possible. But being dead shouldn't hurt this much.

Sam was sorely tempted to just lie there and hope that death arrived on its own accord; by this point, he would be more than ready to greet it. But just then, out of nowhere, he thought of Gilly. Thought of how brave she had been by leaving behind everything she had ever known, the woods and wilds of the north and the fear and squalor that was nonetheless her home and family, taken another woman's son and sailed south to live at Horn Hill and play at being a lady's maid. A daughter of the cold, but she'd warmed him, loved him, *him,* for a little while. He was never going to see her again, but just then, he could almost imagine looking at him anxiously. *Come on, Fat Sam. Let's get up. Let's get going.*

"I can't, Gilly," Sam moaned aloud, through a mouthful of mud and blood. First Jon and now her, down here in shade and seeming, haunting him. "I can't."

*You did it with me.* She was somewhere in the searching darkness. Only her whispers came back to him. *You got me safe. Don't you die now, Sam. Don't you dare.*

Groaning, Sam gathered his haunches under him and tried to stagger to his feet. Blood rushed to his head like a tempest, and he dropped again as if he had been shot, gagging on the taste of rich loamy earth. This time he'd landed on his back, and he must have knocked himself silly again, for all he saw were stars.

No, wait.

He saw *stars.*

Dull curiosity scythed through Sam's stupor. They were so faint and faraway that it was like gazing at them through a dark fogged glass, so distant that he still couldn't be sure that they weren't a dream, but he blinked hard, once and then again, and they remained. And due to those star charts he had been doing for Maester Tycho, on the fateful night when Sarella came up to the tower to find him and tell him that Jon was dead, Sam could tell that wherever he was, it was no longer Oldtown.

He was sure of it. From what rudimentary calculations he could make, the Ice Dragon's blue eye was almost a dozen degrees nearer to center, meaning that he was a great deal further north than he had been when he fell down the barrow in the first place. *And kept on falling.* He thought of all those tales of people who stumbled into the dark places under the hill and thought they'd spent only a day or a night, then emerged to find that it was two hundred years later and all their loved ones were dead. *Is it like that with me, then?* Because he was such a coward, the thought made him almost hopeful. *If it is two hundred years from when I left, the war is over, the Others defeated. The kingdom still survives.*

Or did it?

When he turned around, the child of the forest was standing directly behind him.

The shock was so bad that Sam wanted to scream again, but he couldn't even do that. It felt like a giant fist had squeezed his lungs, choking off any sound that might have tried to emerge, until he stood rooted to the spot in dumb stupid silent terror. The thing facing him was no sort of human,
clad in leaves, with nut-brown skin and luminous green-gold eyes, glowing with their own light. Its – her – hair flowed down her back, in a tangle of ochre and crimson and amber and russet, all the colors of a fled autumn, a memory of life in the deepening winter. She stood barely higher than his waist.

"Black brother," she said. Her voice was high, clear, lilting, sweeter than a thousand kisses, sadder than a thousand tears. "You are very far from home."

"I – " Sam should have had an answer. He didn't. "I know."

"Here in the prince of the green's kingdom. No wanderers come here. You are in search of something." The child cocked her head. "Or you run from it."

"Both," Sam admitted, in a hoarse whisper. "I can't go back."

"Nor could you." She seemed amused. "Your road is longer yet, Samwell Tarly."

Of all the things about this unearthly situation, the fact that she knew his name struck him as the oddest. He only barely stopped himself from blurting out the question as to how. Instead, recklessly, he said, "Will you help me?"

"That is not for me to decide. That is the prince's."

"Take me to him."

That amused her more. "He is very far away. Farther away than you could ever reach, were you to walk a hundred nights and a hundred days. And you do not have that time to spare, nor that strength."

"But you can take me to him," Sam repeated doggedly. "You have the power."

Her eyes held his. "It will cost you."

"I have no gold to pay."

She laughed, a sound like a spring brook in flood. "Gold! The Andals ripped it from the bones of the earth and made it their idol, their god, second only to their alien Seven and their worship of iron and flame and fear. What use do I have for gold?"

"What do you want, then?" Whatever it is, I must give it.

"We are hungry, Samwell Tarly," the child said simply. "Hungry and cold and lost as you. We huddle in fear of the same white shadows as you, with their blue eyes and their icy blades. They eat further into the weirwood roots with every moment, corrupting it, poisoning it. We have only a little human blood left from the wildling princess, and human blood – the strength of humans, the love of humans, whatever courage is left in their mortal hearts – is the only thing that can save us. Do you offer yours?"

Sam was opening his mouth to say something, when her last sentence struck him over the head like a dropped anvil. "The – did you say the wildling princess? Val?"

Her eyes flickered. "Human names are only wind to us."

"You – you're lying. You saw her. Was she down here?" Sam's heart was starting to pound. How could Val have left Castle Black and gone down here, and who was she traveling with? Had she
been kidnapped under duress, had they helped themselves to her blood and left her corpse cold and white among all the other tangled roots? "Where am I?"

"Under the hill, Samwell." She seemed surprised that he would ask. "Very far under."

So far. And yet he could still see the stars. "I'm not really anywhere. Am I."

"Only if you choose to be. Time and space is not the same to us as it is to you. A lifetime is only a blink to us. But we feel the press of danger just as close. Now, then. Tell me. What choice do you make? Will you feed us with your strength, or will you not?"

"I – " Sam quailed. Whatever on earth (or under it) this ordeal entailed, he already had no desire for it. But he could not go back. Sarella had sacrificed herself to get him to safety. Jon and Gilly would have wanted him to be brave. "I don't have any strength."

"You have far more than you think."

Sam was silent a moment longer. He clenched his fists, mouthing a prayer to the Mother out of old habit, but he could hear the vastness of the silence that surrounded him. Then, madly, before he had time to change his mind, he said, "All right."

She smiled, or he thought she did. Then she raised a hand, and he began to see something moving in the darkness. Countless somethings, none of them bigger than her. Fey eyes and black nails and sharp teeth, a thousand and a thousand more, making a strange crooning noise that was like no song he had ever heard, and yet all of them. Burning him and then freezing him, a deep and primal thunder. The song of ice and fire.

Sam realized what was going to happen an instant before the first children reached him, and he clapped his eyes shut with a whimper. Even that, however, did not stop him from feeling the searing pain as those teeth bit into his flesh and ripped it out. Then it came again, and again. Small mouths latched onto him and did not let go. Bite by bite, tearing. They were eating him. They were eating him alive.

His knees gave out, and he barely remembered falling.

There was nothing after that but pain, for the longest time. His heart labored to beat, a hunk of bloody muscle in the shreds of his chest, and he could not open his eyes for knowing that he was dying, not able to stand watching it. Remembered seeing his father tearing out the stag's heart, as he told him matter-of-factly that he was to take the black on the morrow or suffer a fatal hunting accident. I've been hunted now, my lord, but not the way you thought. It almost made him want to giggle, as if the worst had happened, truly happened, and he never had to be afraid again. It was a cruel irony that it had only taken place now that he was dead, but there was life for you. I wonder if Mother will weep. His father certainly would not. Lord Randyll had no tears in him.

Slowly, however, Sam became aware that he was, as before, not quite dead. In that halfway-between place, the place between sleeping and waking, where dreams were still almost real and remembered. He hurt, but he had a body to hurt. He could move a hand, then a foot. He was lying in a bed of leaves, soft and rustling and deep. He thought of the song of the forest lass. He had sung it long ago, with his sisters. He would have liked to sing it with them one last time.

And then, all at once, Samwell Tarly opened his eyes.

Bran Stark was standing over him.

If it had been Lord Tywin Lannister and Aerys Targaryen arm in arm, singing "The Bear and the
"Maiden Fair," Sam could not have possibly been more dumbstruck. He recognized the broken boy that he had taken through the gate at the Nightfort, with the simple-minded giant and the two little crannogmen and the great grey wolf, the dead prince whose secret he had vowed to protect even from Jon. But Bran's grey Stark eyes had become an eerie green and gold like the children's, he was wearing queer garb of skins and leaves, and he was standing on his own legs, his own whole legs. He was no longer a cripple, and he was no longer human.

"Bran?" Sam's voice came out in barely a whisper. "Do you... do you know me?"

Bran cocked his head thoughtfully, and did not answer at once. When he did, the voice was still a boy's, but underlaid with a thousand whispering echoes, as if a great and ancient oracle spoke through him. "I know you."

"Where..." Sam struggled to sit up. Looking down at his arms, he saw that they were recognizably still his own, but marked with a thousand livid scars, red and raw and weeping, where the children of the forest had eaten his flesh. But he was still here, intact! "Are you the prince of the green?"

Bran smiled. "Do you need to ask that question?"

"I... no." Sam fumbled for another one. "Is Val here?"

That pale, smooth face remained impermeable. "She was."

"How – how long ago?"

"I do not remember." Bran shrugged. "She has gone on."

"Alone?" Sam begged. Val was perhaps the most self-sufficient woman in existence; if she had found herself in this place, she would have done whatever was needful to survive, but he had to know. "Was she alone?"

Bran seemed to be weighing his words. Then finally he said, "No. Jon was with her."

"J – ?" Sam could not believe what he had just heard, did not dare to, felt like his heart was about to explode with joy. "He's alive?"

Bran's smile remained, but it had become strange. "In a manner of speaking."

"Where did they go?" Sam pleaded. "Where? I have to follow them, I – " What good would he do them, could he possibly do them? But at this hour of the wolf, he could not in any sort of honor stand aside. "I have to."

"You cannot go where they have gone," Bran said, almost gently. "The way grows darker every hour, the roots more poisoned. We can only hope they reach the end of the world in time."

"Then..." Sam struggled to think of where else he could be right now, other than cowering down here in fear and filth. Where could he, where could he possibly –

But just then, in that moment, he knew.

He may be a maester, but he was as well a brother of the Night's Watch.

And his watch was not yet ended.

"The Wall," Sam said. "Can you take me to the Wall?"
Bran shook his head. "The Wall is no more. Its ice and stone have fallen into the sea, and tidal waves rise from the deep to bury cities and lands and ships alike. The darkness is very close now."

Sam had expected that, after his investigation with the *Chronicon* and his misadventure in the Citadel library, but it still felt like a blow to the chest. He wanted to weep, but he too had no more tears. "Castle Black?" he asked instead. "What about it?"

Bran hesitated again. Then he said, "It remains, for now."

"I want to go," Sam pressed. "I should. . . I should be home. With my brothers. If we die, at least we'll die together. I'd like to see them. Just once. Grenn and Pyp and—"

Bran shook his head again. "They are all dead. They died when the Wall came down. Their blood runs into the earth now, their memories only alive in the weirwoods. And the roots are being eaten away by the poison of the Others. Fire is the only thing that can stop them now, and it goes dark. I can see nothing."

"Fire," Sam repeated, like the Old Bear's talking raven. He wondered what had happened to that bird. It was probably dead with the rest. "Melisandre is at Castle Black."

"Her?" Bran said, with a scorn that was certainly not the boy's. "She is useless. She lost her powers when Asshai fell. She is a conjure-woman in a torn red cloak, huddling to await her death with the rest of them. Even her powders and her potions avail her nothing now."

"Asshai f—?"

"The world is at its end, Samwell." Bran sounded sad. "The time of men is over. All things go in cycles. For eight thousand years they ruled this world. And now the Long Night is come. Only death can hold sway now."

"I—" Sam stared at him, appalled. How could he be saying those things, how could *Bran* be saying those things— but no. It was Bran only to look at, and both he and the child had said that the weirwood roots were being increasingly poisoned by the Others, as they ate ever deeper. It was the *weirwoods* from whence Bran took his strength, and if they had gone dark, twisted—He does not care if any human should live or die.

"Bran," Sam said, determined to use the name, to call back whatever of the Stark boy, Jon's brother, was left in this familiar revenant, this faceless ghost. "You can have more of my blood, if you need it. You—you can eat me again, if you want. But let me go to Castle Black."

The greenseer smiled faintly. "You are brave, Sam. But that is not the way it was meant to be."

"I don't care." Sam stood up straight, ignoring the pain and the blood and the scars. Jon had been here, Jon and Val both, and they were still fighting. They must think there was a reason to. They wouldn't give up, and neither would he. "Take me."

"You will find only a ruin. A crumbled haunt of death and destruction. There is nothing for you there. Go to sleep, Sam. Dream. In time, a better world will come when the morning breaks."

"The morning won't break by itself." And just then, as he uttered those words, Sam understood. The Wall had come down, and the only thing that could do that was the Horn of Winter. Someone must have found it and blown it—someone, Sam was suddenly certain, he knew quite well. So there must have been a second horn, the horn Jon had found on the Fist of the First Men and given to him as a souvenir. The one he had taken, all innocence, to the Citadel. Thousands and thousands of leagues from where it should have been.
It's in the oath, Sam realized, aghast and awestruck. The horn that wakes the sleepers, that brings the morning. A horn of dawn.

It was still out there. He had lost it, or it had been stolen, or both, but it was. Jon and Val and the Horn of Dawn were all out there somewhere, and so there was yet the barest sliver of a chance. His grief had never been so deep, and his resolve had never been so strong. He wasn't scared at all. "Take me to Castle Black."

For a moment more, Bran said nothing. Then he turned away and made a gesture with his hand, revealing a dark, low tunnel behind him. "As you wish."

Sam knew he should be on the lookout for some sort of trap, but he had no time for it. He limped past Bran, out of the strange court, away from the memory of being devoured alive, and into the tunnel. More damp cold dirt slid beneath his fingers. They were gaunt, not like plump sausages, but like bare bone. Scars marked them as well, but Sam didn't care. He swam forward in the darkness like a digging mole, perfectly calm.

The tunnel twisted and turned and doubled back on him, until he had been utterly deprived of any sense of direction or place. But the faint whispering never burned out entirely, and so he knew he had to keep on. A hundred days and a hundred nights. Did that mean he was going that far, for that long? She said I did not have the time to –

And then, Sam's head knocked with a reassuringly but painfully solid thunk against a heavy wooden trapdoor.

Wincing, Sam reached up and pushed it. It gave with a creak, and as he hauled himself through, he realized with only mild amazement that he knew exactly where he was. He was in the dismal cellar of the Castle Black library, the place he had spent so much time squinting by the light of a single candle at the rat-eaten scrolls. He crawled through the rest of the way and straightened up, hearing his back pop and snap. I am here. I am home.

The air was heavy, dank, sullen, and silent. Sam groped his way across the room by memory, to the door at the far end. He had a moment of terror that it would be locked, but it wasn't, and swung open into a corridor that was just as dark. His footsteps raced ahead of him like a thousand ghosts, a thousand better fighters than he was, but he was the great hero who had been sent here at their hour of need. The least he could do was hold his head high.

Sam stumbled on the stairs and climbed up them, already starting to shiver. He knew that he had to find his black wool and leather and mail, garb himself as a brother and prepare to die at his post. And find the red priestess. Find her soon. Even if she was only able to muster the barest spark, fire was their only friend in the apocalypse to come.

At last, Sam reached the door. He hesitated, unsure he wanted to see what had become of this place since he'd left. Then he moved forward, and into the new world.

Even all of Bran's words and warnings could not have prepared him. It was an unrecognizable, rubble-strewn hinterland, the King's Tower – or rather, where it had used to be – nothing but a wrecked labyrinth of char and sooty stones. Who burned it? The rest of Castle Black was in little better estate, in fact barely recognizable as a castle, pinned under broken piles of ice and twisted logs, the remnants of the winch cage scattered over the snow. Bodies were littered everywhere, some in black cloaks, some naked. Some in wildling fur and leather. Some only in pieces. Ashes and snow drifted softly from the starless night sky, light as kisses on Sam's face.

The end of the world. No exaggeration.
But even if he was the only black brother here, he was here. And so the watch remained to be kept.

Sam picked up his pace, jogging across the remains of the courtyard and into the shattered keep. A few minutes of searching led him to the armory, which was almost bare of steel. But he sought something else here, and he would not loot the corpses of his brothers. Even in death, they remained his brothers, and they would keep their honor.

There was a black cloak here. Black ringmail, gambeson, chainse, tabard, gloves. And silently, reverently, Samwell Tarly dressed. When he was finished, he hoisted the only weapon he could find – an unwieldy, ancient halberd, its point covered in rust – and carried it to the whetstone. It took a few tries to kick it into motion, but finally he did, and laid the edge of the blade to it, screeching and fountaining sparks through the dusty dimness. Sam's hands had always been clumsy before, but they were remarkably sure now. When he had finished, he hoisted it again and went outside.

There was no Wall to guard, no patrol to walk, no archery to practice, no Lord Commander to heed. But he might not be entirely alone after all. Sam stood irresolute an instant longer. Then, acting on a hunch, he crossed the courtyard again, to the great wooden trapdoor set into the ground in the shadow of Hardin's Tower, where Wun Wun had had his lair. The giant was gone now, but the trapdoor led to the wormways, the tunnels beneath Castle Black, which Sam now had personal cause to know went far deeper than ever suspected. If anyone was left alive in this place, they had gone down there.

He reached it, stood above it, and took a rattling breath. Then he raised the halberd and banged it on the trapdoor, with a deep, booming thud.

For what felt like forever, there was no answer, and he was left to face the prospect that he was alone after all. Then it raised and squeaked aside an inch, and a disembodied voice drifted out. "Name yourself."

Sam cleared his throat. His own voice, when it came, was thin but clear. "Samwell Tarly, Sworn Brother. Come to call you to the watch."

There was a deathly silence. Then all of a sudden, the door clattered aside and another figure in blacks swirled up like a djinni from a lamp, a tough bastard of a wildling with a face like an old boot. "I'm Leathers," he said, "master-at-arms. And you, I've heard of you. You're Lord Snow's friend, the fat one they sent away to take the southron learning."

"I've come back." Sam shrugged, rather embarrassed. "It's a long story." To tell it would be just as unprofitable as asking why on earth a wildling was wearing black and identifying himself as a member of the Watch; plainly a great deal had happened while he was away, Jon's purported death being the least of it. "How many of there are you?"

Leathers chewed his cheek before answering. "Me, a few of the cowards who ran when the wights started coming over, a few of the lucky ones, the cook, the steward's girl, the mad queen, the brat and his wet nurse, and the red priestess. Not much of one no more."

"How many in all?" Sam repeated.

"Fit to fight?" Leathers spat. "Maybe two dozen, at the best. Why do you think we're bloody huddling down the castle's arsehole, crow? It's only a matter of time. If the Others don't get us first, the cold will do it instead."

"Melisandre," Sam said. "I need to see her."
The wildling crow eyed him with patent skepticism, but finally made a grudging motion, lifted the trapdoor aside, and led Sam down into the cramped darkness. He could hear voices drifting faintly from up ahead, hushed as if they were all attending their own funerals, and could not imagine that that was terribly far off. Then he saw evanescent, flickering candlelight, casting shadows on the earthen walls, and stepped into the underground chamber containing the very last survivors of Castle Black and the Wall's collapse. Perhaps the very last survivors of the Night's Watch itself.

They were dressed, almost to a soul, man or woman, in black. They were so filthy and thin that they looked like skeletons, but there was still life, however faint, in their eyes. The bundle of rags huddled against the wall over there, staring at nothing – it took Sam a horrified moment to recognize it – her – as Selyse Baratheon, Stannis' queen. The mad queen, Leathers had called her. Where was her daughter Shireen? Where were her men, her haughty airs and graces? All he saw was a ghost.

On the other side of the room was a girl with big brown eyes that had seen the absolute worst of men. She was wearing black like the others, and she was cradling on her lap a bundle wrapped in furs, which Sam realized in a moment more was a baby – Gilly's baby, gods be good, gods be good. Only being born of Craster's line could have enabled the child to survive when men were dying like flies. He lives, Gilly, Sam wanted to tell her. He's strong and whole and if he sees his second nameday, if any of us see another sunrise, he'll have a name fit for any warrior. He wished he could see her smile. She would be proud.

It was the girl who took notice of him. "Ser," she said. Her voice was faint and thin, but Sam of anyone knew when someone was frightened out of their mind, yet still managing to take one more step. "You've come for us. Did Lord Snow send you?"

"Lord Sn – " No matter how much Sam knew that Jon, if not alive, was somehow walking around, he couldn't wrap his head around the idea. "No. I – am here on my own."

"Lord Snow," another voice repeated, bitterly, from the corner. At that, as Sam glanced over, he saw the red priestess rise to her feet in a swirl of filthy, torn scarlet silk. Her hair was coming loose in clumps, wrinkles etched on her formerly flawless skin, the ruby at her throat gone entirely dark. "Lord Snow has failed us all and left us to die. I asked him, I begged him, to give himself to the Lord of Light, to bring the living heart of fire, but he refused. And now even R'hllor's flame cannot reach us in this place. It is over. All that remains is the unholy waiting."

"Can you not give us something?" Sam faced her down. "Not even a spark?"

Melisandre laughed. It was not her usual low, musical chuckle, but a high, cracked cackle. "Does it look as if I may?" she asked, spreading her hands. "Do you see it? Asshai itself is sundered, the fire at the temple's heart put out. I felt the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of my compatriots. And now you come in here and speak to me of Jon Snow?"

"He – he'll do it." It was the girl who spoke again, the girl with the young face and the ancient eyes. "He will. He saved me. Like Theon. He saved me."

Sam did a double take. "My lady – I do not know your name?"

She blinked at him, shyly as a young deer. In barely a whisper, she said, "They used to call me Arya, but it's not Arya. I'm not Arya. My name is Jeyne. Jeyne Poole."

"Jon saved me too." Sam held out his hand to her. "Will you stand with me?"

She considered a moment longer, then came to a decision. She put Gilly's baby in the lap of the
woman next to her, who must be the nurse, and got to her feet. With a trust that broke his heart, she padded across the floor of the cellar to him, and put her hand in his. "Aye," she whispered. "I can do that."

Sam squeezed, holding her hand tightly, and then turned to the others. "Well?" he asked them. "Is it the two of us? Or is it every one of us?"

Silence. Then Leathers said, "Jon Snow saved my people, our women and our children and our cripples and our elderly, when he had no need. I'll stand with you."

"Aye," other voices called. One by one, they came to their feet. The sound of affirmation began to echo, each after the other, a deep chorus. Swords were picked up, bucklers strapped on, hoods raised. "We'll stand with you."

"My lady?" Sam glanced to Melisandre, the only one to say nothing. "All this time, you've never doubted. I don't know much of you or your faith, but we need you to believe just a short bit longer. We need your flame." He held his other hand out to her. "Burn for us."

The red priestess looked at him as if he had offered her a snake. But it was possible to see years, so many years, behind her eyes, a burden, an exhaustion like any mortal woman, the fear that she had spent her life in a ruinous mistake. It was not Melisandre the fearsome sorceress, but merely Melisandre the weary soul, who said at last, "Very well, Samwell Tarly. I will try."

It was Sam who led them to the surface, not Leathers. It was Sam who they walked behind, in neat file as disciplined as any soldiers, but Jeyne Poole went at his side. He barely knew any of them; the brothers he had known, his friends, were all dead. And yet he loved them, as fiercely and proudly as if they had been at his side all his life. My family. My brothers. My sisters.

The cold when he stepped back through the trapdoor was hard enough to punch him in the gut, but he scarcely noticed it. They arrayed themselves in ragged succession, unsure how to face against an enemy too great and terrible to be imagined, drawing closer every second; Sam could hear faint skitterings, things moving on the far side of the rubble. Others and wights and worse. It was here. They were coming. It was coming. The end.

But nay matter if it was wildlings and women and cravens, the Night's Watch was still waiting.

Bran is wrong. Sam thought. It was always meant to be this way.

Letting go of Jeyne's hand, he turned to Melisandre, who was staring at the ruined remnants of the Wall as if she was in a trance. Without asking permission, he took both of the red priestess's pale, crumpled, skeletal hands in his. He still had a little warmth. Maybe he could help. "Come," he whispered. "Come, now. Burn, my lady. Burn."

"I can't." Melisandre's voice cracked. "It's too far away. It's too late."

"No, it's not," Sam said. Jon and Val and the Horn of Dawn. "It's not."

A faint, constrained shudder ran through her, as if she could feel the conviction of his words. A spark burst from her fingers, then went out.

"Harder," Sam urged. "Try harder."

Melisandre whimpered, as if she was in physical pain. He could feel her struggle in his own flesh, as if in that moment, the two of them had become oddly one. Fire, Bran had said. Melisandre was flawed and broken and fallible as the rest of them; in this moment, her glamour and her mystery and
her conviction stripped from her, she was no enchantress, no savior. She was no more and no less a woman than the rest, and now, in this moment, that was all that mattered. Humanity. No matter their spells and seeings and unearthly long lives, the greenseer and the children of the forest could not fight this battle and win. No wonder the weirwoods roots were more and more poisoned, more and more dark.

Men destroy themselves so often, Sam thought. But they also save themselves too.

And that was all they needed.

He sensed it a moment before it exploded, burning up Melisandre like a birthing star, in heat and madness and transcendence. He leapt away just in time as the red priestess became a column of fire, as flames leapt to every darkened torch and every empty corner, every row and every blade. It burned as bright as the day in the depth of the Long Night, and Samwell Tarly saw it, and thanked her, and almost smiled. For this, at last, he knew.

The final battle was about to begin.

He turned to them, his last two dozen heroes, each of them Azor Ahai in their flesh, and raised his halberd.

"To arms, men and women of the Watch," he said. "To arms."
The filthy floor was striped a ghoulish red-black with drying blood, shining fingers creeping over the stones. The torches were burning low, sooty stumps clasped in rusted sconces, making Brienne cough and blink as she struggled to see. It was bitterly cold down here in the bowels of the Gates of the Moon; the imprisoned Inquisitor couldn't have been having a picnic even before he was treacherously murdered. His was the blood that her boots were slipping in, his the pale plundered corpse that she struggled not to look away from. Does Baelish have no shame? His alone was the hand that could have done this foul work. Lady Sansa had said that the captive emissary of the Faith held intelligence vital to her cause. All too obviously, Littlefinger had surmised the same.

Brienne's mouth tightened into a grim line as she knelt by the bars. She had already sent Pod back to convey the news, and did not know whether to be reassured or disturbed at his continued failure to return. Likely Lady Sansa had some other errand for him, some clever plan. To have found her at all was a blessing far beyond anything Brienne thought she deserved, anything the world should deign to give her, and only later would she permit herself to grieve for the aching hole that her own bleeding had left in her – and her own guilt.

It was no murder. Only moon tea. Yet her heart felt as raw and rent as if she herself had driven the blade through it.

(Would the child have had Jaime's eyes and lazy smile, the famed tumble of Lannister-gold locks? Gods save it if it had been a girl, poor thing, and looked like her.)

Brienne realized that she could barely see through the haze of tears, and angrily backhanded it away. What part of later did you fail to comprehend, foolish girl? Even if she was no true knight, she still had a service to perform, and it had battered her fragile heart further to see how much Lady Sansa resembled her mother. Before Lady Catelyn became a corpse, of course. But after so long, she had purpose again. Gods – or anyone – grant her the strength to see it done.

If only she could figure out what to do. Littlefinger had already appropriated the Inquisitor's seal and ring, but the man couldn't have had time to make a thorough sweep. By the ragged wounds on the Inquisitor's throat, Brienne could tell that he had been slain in a tearing hurry, out of keeping with Baelish's usual, methodical chess moves. He was not expecting us. It was a small thing, but it gave Brienne hope. If even the master manipulator was on his heels, there was at least a fighting chance. While Brienne was not at all sure that the three of herself, Pod, and Ser Hyle added up to anything remotely equivalent to one Petyr Baelish, he lost a great deal of his advantage if he could not scheme them out and string them along in advance.

Gritting her teeth, Brienne wriggled her arms through the cell bars and began to fumble along the Inquisitor's stiffening body. It was too much to hope for a convenient warrant or notarized letter from the High Septon, stating the precise matter the man had been dispatched to the Vale to investigate, as Littlefinger would have been certain to confiscate it before clapping him unlawfully into confinement, but perhaps a brooch, an insignia. . . the dead flesh was unpleasantly cold and waxy beneath her fingers, and the still-open eyes stared at her accusingly. Brienne closed them with a whispered, half-remembered prayer, surely nothing to satisfy the standards of a man of the Faith, but the only thing that came to mind. He would be burned, most like, if he was not left out for the shadowcats. The ground was frozen fast, admitting for no burials.

"Gods rest your soul," Brienne murmured aloud, in case his spirit was still close enough to hear. She wished she had a name for him. It would make it less as if she was looting him, leaving him for the ravages of –

A low, dark chuckle came from the shadows. "That's very touching. But if you were going to waste
your breath asking for mercy, cunt, you should have asked it for yourself. Still, I understand. Woman as pissing ugly as you, a dead man must be the only one you could hope to love you."

Brienne went cold from head to toe. She pulled her arms free and rose to her feet, drawing her sword. "Have you come merely to slander me, or to fail at killing me, coward?"

"The latter, somewhat." The shadows moved, and a man who must be one of Baelish's catspaws, for all that he wore the moon and falcon of House Arryn on his tabard, strolled out and grinned unpleasantly. "You really think nobody saw you sneak down here, cunt? And now you're caught at the scene of the crime. Murdered a holy man, no less. Horrible wicked. Normally we'd have to try you and hang you, but no time for formalities just now."

"You may try, if you wish." Brienne took a better grip on her sword. "It'll be the end of you if you do, though, and then who's to say that I murdered the Inquisitor?"

"Me." Another voice spoke, followed by the emergence of another man from the shadows. He bowed. "Symond Templeton at your service, m'lady."

Templeton. This was not good. Brienne's recollection of Vale nobility was nebulous at best, but Ser Hyle had done his best to acquaint her with the bare facts of the political situation, as collected from the gossip he and Pod had absorbed during their search for Sansa. Templeton was one of the Lords Declarant, ostensibly sworn to protect Robert Arryn's rights, but with the boy dead, he was sailing his ship to a different wind – Baelish's. His presence down here seemed to confirm it, and while she could and would kill the catspaw if he came for her, she could not do the same for the Knight of Ninestars. He must have ducked out of whatever mess was taking place aboveground, and wangled on catching her here. Whether on his own instigation or Littlefinger's was unclear, but it didn't matter.

Sensing her hesitation, Templeton raised a hand and glanced back down the corridor. Dear gods, there are more of them. Brienne could feel her breath starting to come short as she searched in vain for a way out of this that did not involve having to cut them all down. Even if they did not quite succeed in killing her, they could certainly hurt her enough to render her useless, then trot Templeton out to claim her guilt. And then Sansa would be alone, and I would have failed.

Nonetheless, for some reason, they seemed to be holding back, waiting for a signal. And with that, Brienne's dwindling patience was spent. "Look at you knock-kneed sons of whores," she growled, in her best approximation of Jaime's devil-may-care manner. "Are you afraid of one ugly wench? Come on, who wants to die first?"

They all exchanged expressions of considerable surprise and not a little fear, and it occurred to her that while they'd never admit it, they were unnerved. The one boon of being a fighting woman was that you were a rarer breed than white harts to begin with, and with her cheek eaten by Biter, her throat scarred from the Brotherhood's rope, the dead Inquisitor in the gaol-cell to attest to her apparent malevolent intentions, and the naked longsword in her hand, she must look like something out of the seven hells. And that, just then, she was abjectly grateful for it. Take your enemies at their disadvantage, Ser Goodwin whispered, and she did. Whilst they were still wasting time in staring, she lunged.

There were at least a dozen of them, men-at-arms in mail and leather, but she was taller than all of them, and had the advantage in reach and quickness. She slammed her elbow into the face of the first one, hooked the second's leg out from under him, and deflected the blow of the third, spinning him around and shoving him into two of his fellows so they toppled like quoits. The close quarters were to her benefit; they had to work harder to avoid running into their fellows, whereas anything she struck out at was an enemy. But she could feel her head spinning, her muscles groaning with
the exertion, and prayed she didn't have to keep it up for long. She'd barely made it to the Bloody Gate in one piece, after all, and that was like to come back to haunt her if she didn't –

Three of them tried to rush her. Brienne lowered her head and slammed her shoulder full into the first, lashing out at the other two and feeling the distinctive sensation as her blade found flesh. One reeled back, clutching his lacerated arm, while Symond Templeton made a considerable spectacle of shouting at them to stop being such miserable muttonheads and to just take her down. The Knight of Ninestars himself, however, did not seem inclined to put his own steel to the test. Brienne wished it was due to actual fear of her, but she was aware that lordlings had minions to do their dirty work for them, so they need not bloody their own well-bred fingers. Templeton wanted the chance to frame her and turn her in to Lord Baelish, but not run the risk of suffering for it himself.

*Fine,* Brienne thought grimly, whipping around and flatly discouraging the man who'd been thinking about tackling her. Then she lurched and tripped sideways; one of them on the floor had strangler's fingers around her ankle, and was trying to bring her down. She kicked him in the face with her free foot, but the distraction cost her dearly. Her back was slammed against the wall, as she struggled to get her sword up to fend off a hail of blows. She ducked one and then another, but felt the lethal kisses biting far too close to her face. They had her cornered like an animal in a trap, and now they were going to –

Brienne only caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye, as someone pelted down the steps and exploded into the cell corridor like an avenging demon. The next moment, the man pressing her the hardest was stumbling and screaming, a foot of steel jutting out his back and the point tearing down to his belly. Then his guts were on the floor, he was dying noisily, and she had a better grip on her sword and sprang off the wall and, of all the strange bloody things that had happened to her since she had left King's Landing in search of Sansa Stark, she was fighting shoulder to shoulder with Ser Hyle Hunt.

He flung her a cheeky grin, as if to ask her if she had ever doubted him, and any remarks she was thinking of making would have to wait. She had to admit that they made a good team. He moved instinctively to cover her weak side, and so long as they kept circling, it was hard for any of their remaining assailants to get a proper jump on them. This included Lord Templeton, who was plainly on the brink of deciding that the situation was going to require personal intervention. He was fumbling for his own longsword, at least, and the look in his eye promised red death and retribution.

Brienne did not intend to let him get so far. With a glance at Ser Hyle, she moved smoothly around on him. She did not want to kill him, but the instant his blade cleared the scabbard, he opened himself up to be dealt with as any other foe in battle, and she only had to hurt him enough to stop him following. Then they could both get out of here and find what in damnation the plan looked like now. *Survive the night, first.*

Templeton made up his mind. He charged.

Ser Hyle had his hands full with those recovering their wind after their first encounter with Brienne, but Brienne herself had been watching him like a hawk, and she perfectly anticipated the timing of his strike. She countered it, slammed it back into his face, and wrenched his arms over his head with the force of her parry, raining downcuts on the smaller man, forcing him to give ground as she steadily fought him back toward the stairs. But Templeton *was* a knight; she would offer him the chivalric courtesies. "Do – you – " Sweat was running in her eyes. "*Yield?*"

Templeton bared his teeth at her in lieu of an answer, but she took it plain enough. Her heart was
pounding fast and short, her skin feeling breakable, her eyes aching in her skull, but for Catelyn, for Sansa, for Jaime, for the unlived child that they had in one sweet mad moment made and lost, Brienne was a woman possessed. She easily blocked him, blocked him again, and then, with a violent sideways arc, parted his right hand, and hence his sword, from his body.

Templeton howled, clutching his maimed wrist. All Brienne could see just then was Zollo's arakh flashing down, wicked sharp in the sunlight, and hear Jaime screaming. Even then, minutes removed from a good-faith attempt to kill him, it was the worst sound of her life. The Lion of Lannister, infamy and legend, unmade in an instant, with one careless swipe of a fat Dothraki's blade. She had always thought that stars should fall harder.

Nonetheless, there was no time to be distracted. She jerked her head at Ser Hyle, still hard pressed, and he saw their chance and slammed through the melee toward her. The next moment they had gained the stairs, galloping up like a pair of destriers hearing the charge, her legs burning under her as she dared not look back. They had to get out of the dungeons, but there would be no sanctuary aboveground; if anything, it would only make it easier for them to be surrounded and hunted down, unless they could blend in among the crowd. And once the Templeton men found their lord wounded and furious, and he told them who was responsible for putting him in such a state, even those chances would dwindle to nothing.

Think. Think like Jaime. Brienne put on an extra burst of speed and flung herself against the heavy trapdoor, barely managing to get it shoved aside. She crawled into the mud of the bailey, sucking grateful gulps of frigid twilight air, and reached back to help out the knight. "Are you hurt, ser?"

"Just a flesh wound," Ser Hyle assured her bracingly. "Nothing to worry about. That wasn't a bad bit of rescuing, now was it?"

Brienne's instinctive response was to inform him icily that she needed no such thing, but he had, yet again, put himself in considerable danger for her sake, and with no apparent financial motive for it. Unless he was wagering on Lady Sansa being able to take back the North and become a queen worth serving, but only a madman would make it. Perhaps he really was genuine, Seven help them all. "Thank you," she said stiffly. "What now?"

"I'd say we find our lady and prevent some damn fool from ripping her head off. Or her skirts." Ser Hyle grinned, with downright ghoulish cheer. "Unless – what's that?"

Brienne frowned, cocking her head. She hadn't heard it at first, but then she did. In the main courtyard of the castle, some sort of ungodly ruckus was starting up: a clatter of grapnels and ropes and swords and screams, shadows surging over the parapets and plummeting out of sight down the curtain walls. Are we under attack? Her breath caught in her throat, even as she struggled to think what kind of army would have made it through the Vale unnoticed, through the Bloody Gate guarded so steadfastly by Ser Donnel – but then, in something that indeed felt very like a blazon of light from the heavens, she had the answer.

"Wildlings," Brienne breathed. "Burned Men. And you told me that there were certain strange others spotted with them. The Brotherhood."

They stared at each other a moment longer, as the conclusion percolated. Then, without another word spoken, they turned and began to run.

Horns sounded from the crenels, a cacophony of anger and alarm. Torches danced and reeled along the dark warrens, and voices shouted contradictory orders. As they barreled around the corner, Brienne caught a glimpse of hairy, charging shadows, and as one ran through the light, she could tell by the unruly furs and the heavy double-bladed axe that it was definitely a wildling. For a
moment she hesitated, caught by a ludicrous urge to pursue him instead, but one Burned Man was, she knew, shortly about to be the least of her worries. Instead, she and Hyle continued to run toward the center of the castle, the concentration of the disturbance.

The first thing she saw was Pod. The squire was clutching a hand to his bloodied shoulder, staring red murder at the disheveled, panting, and otherwise utterly discombobulated Lord Petyr Baelish, who was evidently in the process of making a convenient exit. He looked as if he had just come off barely the better in a tavern brawl, and to judge from their respective conditions, Brienne guessed instantly that it had been with Pod. But while she was putting a hand on her sword and preparing to step forward to confront him (gods alone knew what would come of *that*) she and Ser Hyle both saw the cloaked, cowled figure sweeping forward with lethal majesty. Saw Littlefinger freeze in his tracks.

Saw, and had a moment of horrible recognition that must have been nothing besides his. And just then, almost felt sorry for him.

The corpse-woman's bandaged hands ghosted up, and lowered her hood.

Littlefinger did not react at first; in fact he did not react at all for what felt a small eternity. He made a faint choking noise, but no other sound, and a vein pulsed madly, possessed, in his otherwise chalk-pale face. "Cat," he croaked at last. "Cat?"

Lady Stoneheart reached for the hideous slash in her throat and pinched it closed, as she always did when wishing to speak. It was Thoros of Myr, faithfully at her side as ever, who rendered her rattling gargle into words. "My lady wishes to inquire of you where her daughter is."

"I..." Littlefinger was still staring at the ruined shell of the woman he had loved so obsessively and for so long, and did not appear to hear a word Thoros had said. He moved forward convulsively, as if in expectation of being offered a forgiving hand. "Cat... what is this? The Red Wedding... that dish was of Lord Tywin's seasoning, him and Roose Bolton and the Late Lord Walder, I had naught to do with it – Robb, it was only Robb, you were never meant to be killed, only held for – "

Lady Stoneheart interrupted him with a bloodcurdling shriek. She lunged forward across the snowy, muddy ground and seized Littlefinger by the collar, that ghastly torn face just inches from his. Even Brienne could make out the word she was screaming, over and over. "Robb? Robb! ROBB!"

Despite the chill of the night, Littlefinger was perspiring freely. "Cat, listen... the demands of politics... I saved Sansa's life, I took her away from King's Landing after she was accused of Joffrey's murder... what happened at the Twins... regrettable, but I cannot be blamed for it... Cat... Cat, please..."

Lady Stoneheart was in no mood to hear him or to be reasoned with. She flung him away with another screech, and Littlefinger reeled and fell, landing on hands and knees as the corpse woman towered implacably above him. He scrambled backwards, away from her, taking absolutely no notice of Pod, who had spotted Brienne and Ser Hyle and was attempting to skulk toward them. *Gods be good, where is Lady Sansa?* Brienne could not see a sign of her, but it was possible that she had hastened off to prevent the Burned Men from taking the Gates of the Moon apart. Which was quite desirable, in fact, but it was only her presence that could stop this from bloodshed one way or the other. *The shoes are on the other feet now, for certain.*

Littlefinger attempted to get to his feet, only to be thrown flat by Lady Stoneheart. Snow swirled from the dark sky, settling on her shoulders and the pale withered flesh of her bare head, the red
gashes torn on her cheeks by her own fingernails. It crowned her with a peculiar macabre innocence, as if there was still a chance to glimpse Catelyn Stark beneath the ruin and rain, the wife who had loved her husband and seen him betrayed to death by this man; the mother who had lost her daughters to abuse and torture and in the case of the younger, presumed death; the lady who had seen her family's ancient stronghold sacked and sundered by the ward raised among her own children; learned of her younger sons murdered by that very man; heard of her surviving daughter wed to the Imp; then at last, with the only thing she had left, her son and her king, seen him gruesomely slaughtered before her eyes at his bannerman's board, as he sat to celebrate her brother's wedding and a fleeting hope of peace.

Small wonder she had been reduced to this, mad furious shattered creature. Lady Stoneheart had tried to hang Brienne, Ser Hyle, and Pod all three, and then nearly forced Brienne to fight Jaime to the death, culminating in Jaime's serious injury, but Brienne had never had it in her to hate her lady, even as unholy and terrible as she had become. She knew she had no right to interfere in whatever justice Lady Stoneheart desired to mete out, and found herself mesmerized by the unfolding spectacle, rather than tending to Pod or hastening off to find Sansa. This has been too long in coming.

"Cat. . ." Littlefinger wheezed again, clutching at the ragged hem of her cloak. "Everything. . . everything I've ever done has been for you, so we could be together. . . please understand, I never meant – aah – "

His impassioned exposition was cut short as Lady Stoneheart kicked him again. Even Thoros was not attempting to hold her in check; he seemed to understand as much as Brienne did how dearly this had been dreamed of, vengeance the only succor left for the unliving soul. Littlefinger squawked as he was upended, gasping and bleeding from a wound above his eyebrow. He raised both hands in a futile hope of mercy. "Cat – Cat, no – "

The corpse-woman held out a hand as if in expectation of a sword being placed into it, and Ser Gendry the Bull was hastening forward to obey. But then, taking everyone completely aback, a young woman's voice rang out from the shadows, hard and clear as a hammer on hot-forged steel. "Stop."

Littlefinger and Lady Stoneheart both glanced around – the latter in vexation, the former in sick hope. He raised his head and attempted an ingratiating smile. "Sweetling. . . you'll be a good girl, won't you? Help us smooth out this. . . small misunderstanding?"

Sansa Stark barely glanced at him. She stood a few yards away, her white dress almost brown with mud, her wounded right hand curled awkwardly against her chest, but her bearing was calm, regal, and icily erect. A Burned Man even more alarming than the rest, one eye a milky, staring oval, loomed behind her, clearly hankering to resume the interrupted fight. Addressing her mother, Sansa said, "My lady. . . I know what it is to ask of you. But spare his life."

"Thank you, sweetling." Littlefinger was already regaining some of his battered savoir-faire, now that there was a chance of him avoiding imminent death, and he tried a charming smile on her. "As I said, this is all very regrettable, and we certainly needn't – "

"Be quiet." Sansa's expression remained as inscrutable as a frozen lake. Lady Catelyn had spoken to Brienne of her eldest daughter's love for silks and songs and dancing and lemoncakes, all the pleasures afforded to a sheltered highborn girl expected only to make a fine marriage and tend a household and raise a family, but this creature was something far different. It was not a fifteen-year-old child that looked out from her face, but a woman of near a hundred, her eyes almost as ancient as the Crone's. "I did not give you leave to speak."
"You did not give me. . .?" Littlefinger could not quite keep back a disbelieving smirk. He brushed himself off, still breathing hard; he could not have had that close an escape, nor that physical of one, for quite some time. He preferred to fight his wars with letters, not lances. "My darling, let us not jump to conclusions just yet. I remain Lord Protector, and will not be arbitrarily stripped of that authority. If I order, all of you could be arrested, taken into – "

The Brotherhood, the Burned Man at Sansa's back, and Brienne all simultaneously reached for their swords. "Give that order, little man," Jack Be-Lucky growled. "We can't bloody wait. Go on. Do it."

"He has a point, you know," Ser Hyle murmured wryly, at Brienne's side. "Especially about the bloody part. Do we spring out now, my lady, or wait until the corpse is safely out of the way and won't take delusions into her terrifying head about hanging us?"

Brienne shot him a cold look, misliking how disrespectfully he spoke of her lady, but understanding it. And she herself had thought it might be wise not to test a vengeful undead woman's finite forbearance at this delicate moment; she had not forgotten Lady Stoneheart's pledge to hate her eternally, as she was leaving for the Quiet Isle with the grievously wounded Jaime. If it did come openly to swords, she was honor-bound to protect Sansa, but . . .

"Arrest him," Sansa herself ordered the wildlings, appearing out of the dark from every direction. "Find him a tower cell somewhere. He should not be wantonly mistreated, but he must stand trial for his crimes, even as he would have had of me. If I can restore even the semblance of peace to the Vale nobility, it will be theirs to decide. If not. . ." She hesitated. "We will come to that later."

Brienne could see the awful awareness dawning in Littlefinger's eyes, that the end of the game was closing in on him and he had run out of clever moves to make. He, instead, took the last chance he had available. As the Burned Men began to converge on him, he whirled around and bolted. "AFTER HIM!" The wildlings broke into matching sprints, but they had the disadvantage of being unfamiliar with the castle, and Littlefinger had managed to break off a considerable head start. Nonetheless, they were not the most feared hunters in the Vale for no reason, and a period of utter confusion ensued, as they chased him up and down and across the Gates of the Moon, eventually (by the sound of things) cornering him several courtyards away. But just as they were taking the erstwhile Lord Protector firmly into custody, it all went, yet again, to seven hells.

"What on earth is this?" Brienne didn't recognize the bald, barrel-chested lordling who stumped in at that moment, but she did recognize the device of House Royce on his chest. "What is this madness? Wildlings running loose, dragging Lord Baelish away, Lord Templeton with his hand cut off, Belmores and Corbrays openly at swords and now this. . . this. . . I will not suffer this lawlessness, do you hear me? I will not!"

Sansa paled, but stood her ground. "Lord Nestor," she said bravely. "The fault is mine. I brought the Burned Men here, and I will answer for any depredations they have visited upon your castle. If you will permit me to explain – "

Lord Nestor – that was apparently who it was, the Lord High Steward of the Vale – shook his head. "My lady, enough. You have brought nothing but woe and misery. I cannot permit it to continue."

He raised a hand, beckoning to his men. "Take her."

That is my moment. Brienne stepped forward, and heard, to her great surprise, Ser Hyle following. "My lord of Royce," she called, breath steaming. "I am sorry, but I am honor-bound to stop you."

Lord Nestor did a double take. His eyes flicked around, taking in not just Brienne and Ser Hyle, but
Pod (bleeding, but still fully operational, and looking more stubborn than many stubborn people Brienne had known, herself not the least) and the Brotherhood – and Lady Stoneheart herself, her ghastly visage still bared to the night. He flinched, clearly assessing that his order was going to be cause for yet more disturbance, and changed tacks. "If you would agree, perhaps, to a voluntary confinement... until such time as the circumstances can be more fully assessed? None of your... retainers will be harmed, save for the savages who must leave at once, and whoever among you has taken Lord Templeton's hand. They must be turned over to Ninestars for justice, and --"

Brienne went stiff. *I have to,* she told herself. She had done the deed, she must bear the penalty – but voluntarily separating from Lady Sansa, only hours after finding her after a quest of months, of fear and suffering and solitude – after this, after Jaime –

Ser Hyle cleared his throat. "Ah," he said. "It would be me you're looking for."

Brienne jerked, and he stepped hard on her foot. To Lord Nestor he said, "Templeton is like to sing some stupid song about it being the wench, but if he wants to rub salt in his own wound, so to speak, by pretending it was a woman who bested him, that's his lookout. It was a bit of a mess down there besides. No thanks to Lord Baelish, who murdered the Inquisitor of the Faith he was keeping prisoner. You may wish to look into that."

"An Inquisitor of...?" Lord Nestor stared. "You jest."

"A wise woman once told me I jest like a dead jester, so alas, I do not. He's missing his ring and seal and a few other pertinent items, but they might just fall out of Lord Baelish's pockets if you turned him upside down and shook him hard. It would be, again, something to look into." Ser Hyle shrugged, then held out his wrists. "Very well. Go on, arrest me. Turn me over to the Templetons."

"Are you mad?" Brienne hissed in his ear. "It wasn't you, it was --"

"It was me," Ser Hyle shot back, "and I'm not quite sure why you recall otherwise. They'll likely lock me up somewhere and forget about me, or at worst, take my sword hand. Wind me up like Ser Jaime, mayhaps you'll like me better." He gave her a lopsided smile. "So long, Beauty. Don't weep your eyes out over my grave."

"You foolish --"

Too late. Ser Hyle was stepping forward to the startled Lord Nestor, the wildlings were warning that they weren't being evicted so easily. Sansa gave them a look seeming to inform them that they were, and Brienne, Pod, and the rest of the Brotherhood were gathered up and conducted away. Nobody had been brave enough to apprehend Lady Stoneheart, but Sansa drifted over to her and said something, then took the corpse's hand. Brienne had never seen the two of them together, and she could, even in the ruined, rotting face, glimpse something of how similar they had once been. As well, she thought she saw in the mad red eyes some glimpse of Catelyn Stark, the woman, who knew Sansa and was willing to hold herself in check for her daughter's sake. Sansa herself had graciously consented to be imprisoned at Lord Nestor's behest, until they could sort out this mess, and Brienne found herself shut in a chilly tower cell with both of the Stark women, living and unliving.

Lady Stoneheart hissed angrily on seeing her, and made a move as if to attack her, but Sansa intervened. She pulled her mother back and explained in a low voice what had happened, that Brienne had sworn her fealty and never broken her oath, risked uncountable trials to get to the Vale, and was here to serve, that she had forsaken all other hope of home or family. This was truer even than Sansa knew, and Brienne felt tears once more stinging her eyes as she crawled onto the small pallet in the corner. She had been bleeding again, and her smallclothes were stiff with it, her
entire body feeling battered and used.

The hours dribbled past. Someone fetched up food to them, but Sansa was the only one to eat. Lady Stoneheart sat by the window, a silent sentinel, gazing down at the courtyard below. At last, Brienne drifted into a troubled, feverish sleep, but her dreams were no comfort. They chased her and cornered her, whispering and sighing, half-shaped and savage.

_I dreamed of you_, Jaime had said once.

Brienne woke in the pale light of morning, alone; both Sansa and Lady Stoneheart were gone. She still felt empty and wrung out and fragile as blown glass, but she could sit up without her head reeling, and when she staggered to the pot at the far side of the room, the only blood there was dried and old. There was some food left, and she was surprised to discover that her appetite was slowly beginning to return. She sat and ate, staring out at the distant, snow-mantled peaks of the Vale, lofty summits tearing slashes from golden-rose clouds. _As beautiful as it is deadly._

Brienne had almost finished with her meal when a brisk rap sounded on the door, and she rose awkwardly to answer it. It was one of Lord Nestor's household guard, who imperviously repelled her questions but did deign to allow that he had orders to escort her down to the great hall. Biting her tongue on her questions, forced to wonder to herself if this meant they were saved or doomed, Brienne followed him.

It was very cold as they crossed the bailey, the disruptions of last night (or the night before, or before, as she had the feeling she had slept for an age) still plainly visible. The Gates of the Moon seemed to have settled into a mutinous mutual truce, as it was at least not ripping itself apart in convulsions of political rivalry, and there were no corpses sprawled in the icy mud. Brienne ducked her head against the freezing wind as they passed into the cloister walk on the other side, and then into the great hall. Sansa, Lady Stoneheart, Pod, and the rest of the Brotherhood were already present, some of them looking as if they had consented to their temporary incarceration with more grace than others. Ser Gendry's black hair was sticking up in aggressive fistfuls, and Jack Be-Lucky had a fading bruise or three, but they were sufficiently respectful as to hold their tongue in present company. Which consisted of Lord Nestor Royce, Lady Anya Waynwood (to judge from the sigil on her cloak) and . . .

A jolt of shock went through Brienne. She looked once and then again to be sure, but it was. She'd last seen him in Lord Wylis Manderly's hall in White Harbor, with Edmure Tully in disguise and the rest of the Lannister captains, reeling over watching their fleet being burned at anchor. _Ser Addam Marbrand?_ He was wind-and-weather-beaten, sporting a scruffy, icy beard near as fiery as his hair, and he was accompanied – stranger yet – by a host of men in Manderly colors. Whatever he had done to alter his fortunes, it must indeed verge on the truly miraculous.

". . . put in at Gulltown," Marbrand was saying to Lord Nestor, "and rode like seven hells to make it here. Near on killed our horses, and several of us for that matter. But on our errand, there is no time for sloth. As I said, I've pledged to serve Lord Wylis and the North. There is nothing left in House Lannister, and no alliance that should matter save for that of the living against the dead. When we left White Harbor, there were already rumors of a massive army of wights marching south to attack it. I have come to the Vale as Lord Wylis requested, to find the truth of what was going on here, and to recruit men to fight."


Marbrand shook his head. "Every tale we hear bears the same dread news. It is fallen. We can either wring our hands and wait to be murdered in our sleep, or we can strive to defend the realms of men with whatever strength we have left."
'Ser.' It was Sansa Stark who spoke. "How many ships did you bring?"

Marbrand glanced at her, plainly recognized her – she was Joffrey's former betrothed, after all, the most famous hostage in King's Landing – and did his best not to gape. Blinking, he answered politely, "We brought half a dozen, my lady, the most Lord Wylis saw fit to spare. Northern longships, though, hardly and brawly made. If there are any men in the Vale willing to swing a sword in this battle, unafraid of the cold and what comes with it. . ."

A small smile plucked at Sansa's mouth, but her voice remained composed. "I can give you men," she said. "As many brave and hearty men as you could wish, provided you do not mind their being uncouth and unwashed. And burned."

Marbrand blinked. "My la – ?"

"It happens that I am a Red Hand of the Burned Men, one of the most savage and numerous of all the wildling tribes from the Mountains of the Moon." Sansa held up her right hand. "They will go where I tell them. And I will tell them to sail to White Harbor to fight – the entire clan, at least five hundred in number – if you allow me the use of one of your ships, and a crew to sail it."

Marbrand blinked again, but Sansa gave him no time to answer. Glancing to Lord Nestor, she went on, "If you will keep Littlefinger imprisoned here, you and your fellow lords may decide for yourself as to his fate. If Harrold Hardyng recovers, and Ser Harlan Hunter is questioned for his part in wounding him, it may yet be possible to hold peace in the Vale. I will leave my mother here, as I know that she is the most dedicated to seeing Lord Baelish called to account for his crimes. But I myself, now that you have discovered I am telling the truth, will remove myself from your halls. There is one last place I must return to."

"Where?" Lord Nestor's puzzlement was plain. "Where, my lady?"

Sansa looked up, and Brienne met her eyes, remembering what they had said to each other as she knelt to swear her fealty, the hope she had not dared to cherish again. Dared not even believe that this could be possible, in the depths of war and winter and woe, as Sansa smiled thinly and said only, "King's Landing."
Jaime

He had always hated guarding these rooms. Ironic, of course, considering his vocation, but Jaime had never loved any of the kings he served. *I killed a mad one, cuckolded a bad one, and sired one that was both.* In Aerys' day, to draw this post was to be subjected to his constant gripes and fretting and mercurial whims, his sour suspicion of just what he knew Jaime's lord father was up to behind his back, and worse, when he took it into his head to burn someone for some petty grievance. In Robert's, it was to listen to the fat bastard scratching and bellowing and eating and drinking and shitting and piling so many whores into the royal bed that it was a miracle it didn't cause Littlefinger to materialize on the spot. *Or perhaps it did, considering the tragic state of the treasury.* As for Joffrey... at least Jaime had never once actually been here during the pissant's not-brief-enough reign of discord and misery. *I could have just signed my name to Stannis's, come to think.* And now... he had to fight those bad memories as he tore up the steps to the king's chambers, still utterly unsure that he'd made the right decision by agreeing to Varys' infernal bargain. But as he drew nearer, he realized that once again, he was not at all going to enjoy what he saw here.

Considering that Ser Loras and Ser Balon were absent or dead, Ser Robert please the gods somewhere very far away, and Trant, Blount, and Kettleblack roasting their arses nicely in hell thanks to Jaime himself, he was aware that the matter of Tommen's safety had been delegated to a bunch of third-rate Tyrell arselickers, none of whom he trusted in the least. But even said toadies, pockets rattling with ill-gotten Highgarden gold, had to know that to guard a king, one had to at least stand upright. And it beggared the imagination that they'd all decided to lie down for a nice nap at the same moment.

*Bloody hell.* Jaime knelt by the nearest of the prone men and peeled back his eyelid. The pupil stared up unblinkingly, dull and fixed. It was impossible to tell what exactly they'd taken, or how long ago, but his immediate suspicion went to Varys. Yet why would the eunuch make that apparently sincere offer, and then forestall it by drugging Tommen's guards and removing the king's royal person before Jaime even got there? It was true that not only did Varys play with his own deck of cards, he rigged it anew as he went along, but the tale he'd spouted off – about waiting for Aegon Targaryen the pretender to arrive in the city, thus to admit him into the Red Keep without bloodshed – was too ridiculous to be a lie, even for him. Of all the reasons Jaime had come up with for the spymaster's motives, that one had never made an appearance.

No matter. The vicissitudes of Varys' falsehoods were immaterial. Jaime had half a dozen guards out cold, and a sinking, horrible suspicion. Just to confirm it, he rose up, shoved the door to the royal chambers, and was utterly unsurprised when it proved to be open and unbarred. Inside, it was dark, peaceful, and deserted. The covers of the bed were tossed back, empty, its occupant long gone. It was true, then. He was too late.

Jaime stood staring, then whirled around with a furious curse and slammed his golden hand into the wall. He had collected a heavy dark cloak and a longsword before venturing here, and couldn't help the irrational fear that that delay had been what cost him the chance to rescue his son. He'd have taken Tommen out of the city if the way was still open – Varys had promised to show them the secret passage out to the country, had promised! Even knowing that for Tommen to abandon King's Landing at this vital moment was as good as a signed decree of abdication, Jaime had not cared. Cersei's ambition had already done enough damage to their family. Tommen needed no golden crown save his own curls.

It hit Jaime just then, a sobering realization indeed for a man who preferred to fight first and think
later, that he had no idea what to do next. He had a nasty feeling, however, that if someone was to investigate the whereabouts of his sweet sister, they would find her similarly absent. And if that was the case... Cersei's grip on reality had been tenuous beforehand, and that was even before Jaime killed Tyene. Now with the foe at their gates, Varys' firm belief that the city was all but lost... Jaime could hear the distant, windblown sounds of battle and trumpeting elephants and thundering explosions. Bloody hell, for all he knew, the Targaryen forces were buggering up the walls right now. It killed him not to be out there on the battlefield, but as he'd be just as much use as only a one-handed traitor could, it was better for the Lannister men that he wasn't. *I am still, so far as anyone knows, rotting away in my own shit in White Sword Tower.*

Right. He had to find Tommen. He'd rip the castle apart if he had to, then hope either to negotiate a truce with Targaryen men eager to prove they weren't child-killers like Lord Tywin, or die fighting. Unless by some miracle he could –

"Ser Jaime?"

Startled out of his wits, Jaime whirled around. His brain had already recognized the voice, but it took him a deeply unpleasant moment to connect it to the presence of the slight, grey, fatherly figure in the doorway. The last he'd seen that particular face, some hours ago, it had been casually ordering the undead monstrosity to take Lady Nym apart. Jaime had no idea if the Dornishwoman had survived the ordeal or not, as Ser Robert had been distracted by the necessity to chase him, but in either case, she could not be much enjoying herself right now.

"My apologies," Qyburn said. "I was simply surprised to see you."

"I bet you bloody were." Jaime did not let go of his sword. "Where's my sister?"

Qyburn did a fairly passable job of looking taken aback. "The queen is missing?"

"Spare me." Jaime gestured at the empty bed, the drugged guards outside. "Does it look as if I'd be here if she wasn't? Where did you tell her to take the king?"

The false maester's eyes flickered, but only once. "If King Tommen is missing, it is much an alarm to me as to you. Surely all effort must be put into locating him at once, especially with the pretender in arms before our gates. As for Queen Cersei – my lord. . . are you very sure you. . . want to do that?"

Jaime gave the sword a twist, gliding the razor-sharp edge up under Qyburn's chin. "You can tell me the truth, or you can lose that ridiculous little wisp of beard you seem to fancy growing. Even Harys Swyft didn't look as stupid with it. I know what you are. I know you are my sister's creature. I should have left you with the Bloody Mummers, it would have made you a better man. Now talk, or the beard's just the first thing to go."

Qyburn smiled. He seemed curiously unconcerned for a man being held at swordpoint by a mad and dangerous escaped prisoner who'd already murdered three of his fellow Kingsguard, and a cold grue slid down Jaime's back. *Oh, bloody hell.* *Bloody, bloody, fucking hell.*

"Ser Robert," the wretched grey weasel called. "I could use your assistance."

Whatever profanities Jaime had reserved for the worst of all possible situations were thus discovered to be entirely inadequate. As the floor began to shake, and he recalled the episode earlier in the night spent running madly for his life, he realized that indeed, this had only begun to go wrong. How bad it could actually go, he was quite sure he did not want to find out.
The giant loomed at the end of the hallway, pale and spectral in his white plate. His head nearly brushed the ceiling as he came on, reminding Jaime of a hound gamboling obediently to its master – apt, considering what he knew of the monster's true identity. To Qyburn he said, "I begin to see why the Citadel stripped you of your chain."

"Surely that was no secret to either of us?" Qyburn smiled again. "And I do not recall you complaining of my art when it saved your life. Now, remove your blade and sheathe it, elsewise Ser Robert is liable to take it as a threat. And we have both seen what Ser Robert does when he feels threatened."

"I'll sheathe it up your bunghole, you bloody bastard. And I should add, I do not mean that in any way Renly Baratheon would approve of." Nonetheless, despite his bravado, Jaime slowly edged backward. He'd seen Ser Robert nearly snap Lady Nym's spine with no more effort than breathing, and the Sand Snake was no fainting damsel. A poorly fed cripple was not like to prove much more of a major impediment.

Qyburn raised an eyebrow. "Shall we include Ser Robert in that conversation?"

Jaime changed tack. "Lord Qyburn," he said instead, affecting a charming smile. The title tasted rancid on his tongue, but Cersei, so help them all, had seated the man on the small council. "I believe I see your point after all. There is no call for such unpleasantness."

"Indeed there is not." The bugger was still smiling, but now with a vaguely apologetic air, which Jaime misliked with a vengeance. "I confess, my lord, I have not been entirely truthful."

"Warn me before you unload such a potent blast of revelation, will you? Here I was thinking that Robb Stark sat the Iron Throne, Stannis Baratheon had a sense of humor, and Aegon Targaryen is the miserable whoreson trying to break our gates down." Someone was, at least. Seven hells, where was Varys? The poncing craven was supposed to be out there preventing a massacre, and it was a mark of the magnitude of Jaime's desperation that he'd ever put his eggs anywhere near that basket, that individual who was prevented from being the least trustworthy man on the gods' green earth only by virtue of not being a man, who had openly copped to arranging the murders of Lord Tywin and Ser Kevan. And Joffrey? Well, perhaps he wasn't altogether irredeemable.

Nonetheless, the continuing battle – the Second Battle of the Blackwater, they'd have to dub it – was even more of a reason to think on his feet, which at least he had two of. "Apologies, my lord. I didn't mean to steal your thunder. What, pray, were you about to divulge? Could it be that you know exactly where my sister and His Grace are?"

"Not exactly." That bloody smile remained. "But for the rest... Ser Jaime, you have to trust me when I tell you that they are safe."

"Like hell they are."

"I care deeply for the king's welfare. What motive would I have to lie about it?"

"That's a rhetorical question, I assume. Either way, it still stinks worse than our late lamented King Robert on his deathbed." Jaime was done with any semblance of politeness. "To put it another way, what motive do I have for taking your word for it? That's right. None. So if you'll excuse me – "

"I'm sorry, my lord. You're not going anywhere."

"And then I'll – what?"

"I'm terribly sorry," Qyburn repeated, inclining his head. "I bear you no personal ill will, Ser Jaime."
But it was your royal sister's express wish that your imprisonment be permanent, and I do not recall any orders to release you. She is gone, but I continue to carry out her orders in her stead." He took several steps back, until he was nestled in Ser Robert's protective shadow, and smiled again, ruefully. "Farewell, my lord."

That was it. His very last bloody chance.

Heedless of the looming monster, Jaime ripped out his sword and lunged.

Qyburn, fatally, had turned away to shut the door and bar it, trying to lock Jaime into the king's chambers forever – the ultimate irony, the ultimate insult, for the only soul in the Lannister family who never wanted a king's power, yet had defined his entire life by his entanglement with it. But even with one paw, the Lion of Lannister would go out with a roar, and Jaime braced the hilt with his golden hand as he slammed the blade home. He felt the steel scrape on spine, turning Qyburn's innards to ribbons. *It has always been so damnably easy to kill a man, but no one ever tells him how to live.*

"I'm sorry, my lord," Jaime breathed, driving his sword back in. "It's nothing personal."

Qyburn swayed as Jaime ripped the blade out, then collapsed against Ser Robert, sheeting crimson blood down the white armor. *At last, the murderer looks like what he is. But Jaime's moment of savage triumph was stillborn. The giant seemed merely confused at first, trying to push the maester back onto his feet like a puppet that had broken its strings, but the truth dawned even in that unholy mind the next moment. I just killed his master, his maker, his controller. He – it – it's now officially gone rogue.*

While this was a horrifying thought, Jaime used the giant's momentary stupefaction to his advantage. He circled to the back of the room, wrenched the only burning torch out of the bracket, and wedged it awkwardly between the fingers of his golden hand, keeping his sword clasped in his good one. As Ser Robert dropped Qyburn's lifeless corpse to the floor like a bundle of grey rags, blood pooling under him, Jaime yelled, "OY, YOU UGLY SON OF A SHIT!" and charged.

Ser Robert swung around, off his guard. Jaime knew that taking him head-on was an invitation to disaster, and finding another convenient passage to vanish down was not going to happen this time. Torch in hand, he circled and jabbed like a demented hornet, having a lurid memory of defending Brienne from the bear in Harrenhal. *Defending is a bloody noble word for chucking your barse-ackwards rotted carcass at it, Lannister, but whatever helps you sleep at night. Ser Robert was only mildly smarter than the bear, and now, while he was still muddled from losing his puppetmaster, there might be the faintest chance.*

Jaime thrust the torch hard into Strong's face, and the monster wrenched away from it, clearly discommoded by the fire. He couldn't get a solid grip on it with his golden fingers, however, and if he lost hold of it for even a moment, it was quits. All he could do was clumsily shove it, forcing the giant onto his heels, knowing that his sword wouldn't pierce the heavy plate, only hoping to hold him off long enough to get into the clear and make a break for it. As strategies went, it was neither the best nor the worst one he had ever had. So long as he could avoid doing something stupid and tripping over Qyburn's corpse, he –

Most unfortunately, however, there was still a spark of animate intelligence, and brute warrior instinct, left in the necrotic shell. Just as Jaime was backing Ser Robert through the half-open door, the giant swung a massive fist at his face.

Jaime barely dodged in time; in fact he took the glancing blow off his cheek, hard enough to make him see stars. He almost lost hold of his torch, which Ser Robert was now trying to capture in his
fist and squash like an annoying flea, and ducked awkwardly and spun around, looking nothing like the famed jouster who'd gone undefeated in the lists until encountering Ser Loras Tyrell and his buggering posies. Just a little farther, just a little –

Ser Robert wheeled back around like a trebuchet, and this time, Jaime couldn't get the torch in the way quick enough. The monster would have been roaring if he had any voice to roar, but instead he coiled like a viper and unleashed a thunderous blow with the spiked steel knuckles of his great gauntlet, directly into the half-healed scab of the wound in Jaime's chest.

The pain was so instant, intense, and blinding that it drove him to his knees, retching. His fingers unlocked from his sword, and he had barely enough time to curse Lem Lemoncloak and the thrice-damned Brotherhood before he felt dizzy darkness reeling up to catch him. But no, if he lost consciousness now, he would be destroyed, and he refused to go out by being beaten into pulp by the undead Ser Gregor Clegane. Fumbling, gasping, feeling blood trickling down his chest, he snatched the torch, and jammed it into the vulnerable crevice of armor between cuisses and codpiece, into the cut of the groin.

For a dreadful moment, it only smoked and sputtered and achieved absolutely nothing of measurable use. Jaime was already passing out, lacked the strength to try again, and could only pray, madly and formlessly, for a miracle. Then a blaze of flame went up, the giant lurched off and batted at it, and reeled backwards through the door, blundering away down the hall in a halo of unholy orange light.

Burn, you dead bastard. Burn.

Darkness was eating up Jaime's mind, his senses. It was so much like what had happened when he charged up the scaffold in the vain attempt to stop the executions of the Westerlings that he started to hear Elenya's screaming, the bells of the Great Sept booming and the throaty, animal, lunatic roar of the crowd. He could have stopped it if he hadn't been hurt, if he'd had his hand. He could have stopped this if he – if he – if he –

Memories. The Brotherhood. The weirwood roots. The trial. Oh gods, Stoneheart had known what she was about after all. She might not have succeeded in ending his life on the spot, but instead she'd gotten Lem Lemoncloak to deal him a grievous, lingering wound that had permanently hobbled Jaime's ability to do anything, to fight back, to redeem himself, to slay one more monster. Disposing of Blount, Trant, Kettleblack, Qyburn, even Tyene – it was a joke, the world's cruel jest to make him remember who he was. The Kingslayer. Killing was all he knew how to do, the only way to make his name. Perhaps Jaime Lannister had already died under the hollow hill for good and all, and never known it. In his place was this even more sadly pathetic creature, lashing out like an old blind dancing bear that nobody had been humane enough to put out of its misery. Aye, then. Indeed. The bastards had won after all, and it was turning to fractures and madness and agony. Jaime hit the ground and was gone.

However, some time later, some horribly interminable time later, as voices and sounds and a spear of blinding light perforated his fragile skull, he returned.

Jaime lifted his head an inch from the hard stone floor, stopped, swore, and put it back down, feeling a wetness soaking into his cheek; he had been lying unconscious in a puddle of his own blood, pus, piss, sweat, and drool. He would have found it far more disgusting if he had not been held captive by the Bloody Mummers; after that, nothing even remotely fazed him. At the moment, all he felt was regret for still being alive.

Light. There was light. It must be day. And yet, he was on the floor of the king's chambers, where he'd been when he passed out, and there was no Aegon Targaryen warming his arse by the fire or fucking a whore in the bed. Either the entire nighttime attack on King's Landing, encounter with
Varys, and fight with Qyburn and Ser Robert had been an increasingly long and demented dream – or against all odds, Aegon's assault had been repelled, the city miraculously saved at the eleventh hour, and Tommen's crown preserved.

*Gods, who was it this time?* If Lord Tywin had broken off the shackles of the grave to triumphantly ride into the capital and once more put an emphatic end to a Battle of the Blackwater, Jaime would almost – almost – not be surprised. *Bloody good thing I snuffed Qyburn before he could get out to Casterly Rock and start nosing about the crypt.* There was no one currently dead who Jaime had any remote desire to see alive again, except perhaps his mother. *And she has been gone so long, not even Qyburn could breathe life into dust and mold.* It was just as well. He remembered that strange visitation of her he'd had, while he was keeping vigil over Lord Tywin in the sept. He did not think Lady Joanna would be proud to learn what her children had become.

This, however, was immaterial against the other pressing issue. Jaime fumbled at the floor, spread his fingers, and tried to get enough purchase to lever himself off it, wondering in the vanishingly small space in his head available for critical thought just what had startled him back here. That noise, it had been –

"*Ser Jaime?*"

Oh, fuck. The last encounter which started off in that fashion had not gone well, and this could only serve as a prelude to an encore. He had an impulse to reach for his sword, but no notion of where it was. So he pried his grimy, sticky, filthy eyes open, sat up so fast that he must look like a corpse bursting out of the grave, and beheld none other than the Fat Flower himself, the Hand of the absent King, Lord Mace Tyrell in the flesh. All of it.

"My lord." Jaime rubbed his hand over his unshaven, filthy scruff. "You won't take this the wrong way, I trust, but how in the bloody hell aren't you dead?"

"I could ask the same of you." Lord Mace was staring, and Jaime belatedly glanced down, thus to discover just how badly his shirt had been made a ruin of. In no good shape to start with, it was now soaked, stuck to his skin with blood and pus from the opened wound. The sight was stomach-turning, but Brother Narbert's diligent work had kept him from dying on the Quiet Isle, and hopefully was in no danger of failing now. *In just the latest irony, I suppose.*

Putting that aside, Jaime returned his attention to Lord Mace. "As you can see, I have been unavoidably ignorant of the situation, but the last I knew, King's Landing was teetering on the verge of very unpleasantly meeting the Targaryens again. As well as my lord father did at thwarting them last time, please tell me he wasn't the one to do so now."

Lord Mace looked taken aback. "No. As I have the tale, the pretender was foolish enough to come ashore himself, rather than waiting for his vanguards to secure the advantage, and one brave man charged him and grievously wounded him, forcing the attack to break off and retreat. Thus, as you see, the city was saved. It is the Seven's own miracle."

"Bugger the Seven. What did they have to do with it? You should thank the lunatic bastard who took the pretender down. Assuming he survived."

"Nobody knows. If he can be located, he will be granted a lordship, a pension, and the crown's eternal gratitude. But my lord... forgive me, but it is unwise to be speak of such matters with a convicted traitor. If you will – "

"*Where's the king?*"
Lord Mace, interrupted from the pressing problem of apprehending a badly wounded cripple, looked surprised. "My lord...?"

"The king." Gritting his teeth, Jaime staggered to his feet. "You're here, in the king's chambers, where you discovered me, but not His Grace. And if you think I believe that you don't know more than you're telling, you're dead wrong. You and Varys – did you arrange this together? He had a sweet few songs to sing of what you'd been up to, when I met him under the castle." That was an utter bluff, as Varys had said naught at all of the Tyrells, but Jaime had to see if he could rattle the Hand into revealing his, well, hand.

Mace Tyrell blinked, thrown. "Varys?"

"Bald, untrustworthy, slinking fat craven with no balls? He smells of lilac perfume and rank backstabbing, I'm sure you've had the misfortune to stumble across him. Seems to have been hiding out under the Red Keep for some while – which you know nothing about, I presume. Does Randyll Tarly know what you've been up to, my lord? You know how much he enjoys hanging traitors."

Jaime was throwing darts completely in the dark, hoping to find a chink, and he did not have high hopes for this tactic's success, but he was sure he had not imagined the brief look of panic that flitted across the Fat Flower's face. "Lord Randyll has not yet reached the city. Inasmuch as King Tommen's crown was saved, it was thanks to me."

"Wrong again. Still the crazy whoreson who charged Aegon on the beach. By the by, how has the Faith taken word of our miraculous deliverance? How have they taken the word that the queen awaiting her trial at their hands has escaped?"

Lord Mace was starting to look panicked. "I – I did not – my lord, may I enquire how you know that?"

"Who else would have taken Tommen?"

"I... I cannot believe that my daughter would be so fool as to – "

"Margaery?" Oh, hellfire. "Who said anything about Margaery?"

"Did you not mean...?" That sound was the Fat Flower scrambling to cover his tracks, too late. "I thought – "

"You son of a bitch." Jaime took a step, and was gratified to see Lord Mace flinch as if he'd brandished a dagger. "She's gone, isn't she? Your daughter. Margaery fled, and you're trying to cover her tracks. Where is she? Where is she?"

"I do not know!" Lord Mace protested. "I have the City Watch, the Faith, the household guard, all most desperately searching to find the king and queen and bring them safely home. If they cannot be found, I will take full responsibility for – "

"How do you fancy explaining to Lord Randyll Tarly, who seems to be competing to take over the mantle of Late from old Walder Frey at the leisurely rate he's marching here, that you so subverted royal justice, and Tarly's own authority as Margaery's legal custodian, as to wink and look the other way as she escaped? Who did you sneak in here? What are you up to?"

Lord Mace, Jaime was gratified to note, had absolutely no clever answer for that. He gabbled like a mooncalf, excuses about confusion and the demands of the battle and not noticing until later, but a lifetime spent at the royal court had given Jaime a better nose for liars than most. He waited until
Tyrell paused for breath, then said, "The only question remaining, my lord, is if you're going to tell me where to find them the easy way, or the hard. I don't doubt that you have the City Watch and the Faith and the bloody rest running all over the city, wherever you can be sure that your darling daughter will not be found. But for your information, it's my sweet sister who concerns me. She's taken His Grace, and I'd rather not think about what she could possibly do. Do you want to be called the new Kingslayer, my lord? Take it from me. It's not a mantle you wear lightly."

Lord Mace looked as if he was about to continue to fulminate and bluster and dissemble, but there must be something persuasive about being confronted by a one-handed murderer with a bloody shirt and wild eyes. "I agreed to have Margaery taken to safety, yes," he admitted grudgingly. "Can you blame me? Any father would have done the same."

"Indeed," said Jaime, thinking of Tommen. "One other question. Have you seen Ser Robert Strong skulking anywhere?"

"The... knight? No. Nobody has seen him."

That was even more unusual, especially for a behemoth of Strong's size. For a moment, Jaime entertained a terrible hope that he'd actually succeeded in reducing the monster to ash, but he knew just as well that he hadn't. *Wounded him, at best, and made him still angrier.* "All right, my lord. I'll make you a bargain. You tell me where someone, whether your daughter or my sister or the king, might have gone to escape. In return, I will tell no one, whether Randyll Tarly or otherwise, of your treachery."

Lord Mace looked pale. "I tell you, I do not know where the king is."

"That's too bloody bad for you, then. I'll just have to..." Jaime did a creditable impression of being about to lunge for the door. Gods, he hurt. Everywhere.

"No! Wait!" As he had hoped, Lord Mace was all too eager to disguise this naked instance of Tyrell chicanery. "I don't know where His Grace has gone, but my daughter... my lord, if you do find her, will you promise to let her..."

"I could give a damn about Margaery, the Faith, or her trial. That was Cersei's pet plot, not mine. This is very simple, my lord. Tell me, or I tell them."

And that was all it took.

Not even an hour after waking up on the floor of the king's chambers in his own bodily fluids, Jaime was lurching down the stairs and into the cellar of the Red Keep, following Lord Mace's terse instructions. There was supposedly a passage here that led deep into the city sewers, a prospect pungent enough to cause him pause in any other circumstances but these. Presumably Margaery hadn't run off on her own, which raised further intriguing questions as to who was accompanying her, but assuming Jaime survived this gamble, he'd return and throttle it out of Lord Mace later. And as all the hope he had of finding Tommen down here was a wing and a prayer, that was as solid as the plan would get.

Jaime tripped the counterweight, watched the false wall rise up, and began to descend the endless ladder below. Or not quite endless; by his count it was one hundred and thirty-six rungs until his booted feet touched bottom. It was narrow, dark, slimy, and cramped, and he was already gasping from the effort, his filthy shirt stuck to the oozing hole in his chest. He had his sword, but any substantial confrontation was going to be the end of him, and he recalled tales of feral folk who lived in the darkness, going years or lifetimes without the touch of the sun. It was said that they ate human flesh, paddled on their underground river with hands and feet webbed like a duck's, and
sometimes stole up into cisterns to grab unwary children and drag them down to drown. Jaime had always taken these urban legends well salted, but gazing into the black abyss before his feet, he found it harder to be the cynical, smart-arsed, worldly-wise skeptic he had always been before.

_Bloody hell, Lannister. The kingdom teetering on the brink, Cersei on the loose, the Tyrells turned traitors, Randyll Tarly on the way, the Faith infuriated, and you're worried about snarks and grumkins._ Shaking his head, Jaime started the descent.

The smell started up long before he could see anything. He had brought a lantern, of course, but the flame couldn't pierce more than a few feet into the solid blackness on every side, making sweat break out on his forehead at the overwhelming sensation of being stifled and trapped. _The Tyrells, Tommen, Cersei, and the entire bloody population of King's Landing could be down here, and I still might not see them._ Not to mention the reek, which was eye-watering. Breathing through his mouth, Jaime clambered down an interminable maze of ladders and tunnels that led ever deeper, unable to repress the horrible suspicion that Lord Mace Tyrell had developed political aptitude at the worst possible moment, and sent him into this hellhole on false pretenses; what better way to make sure that he never reappeared? Keep him chasing after shadows forever, and eventually the dank dark cold and filth would do its job.

At last, Jaime began to hear something that sounded like running water – a river, a leak, the Blackwater's underground source, he had no idea. He only hoped he wouldn't stumble headlong into it. But no matter how much he tried to track in its direction, the sound eerily receded, always around the next corner, until he realized that it was only echoes and he might in fact be nowhere near it. As consumed as he had been in getting down here, he had spared no thought at all for getting back up, and he was suddenly seized by a terror of dying like a dog. He had lived no saint's life, but he had always felt he deserved a better end.

Jaime soon lost track of time. He could have been searching for an hour, or for a day. Finally, exhausted, he had to stop, and eyed the jungle of side tunnels warily, judging their likelihood of unwelcome inhabitants. He'd have to risk it, and he finally chose an opening of suitable size and distance from the smell. He'd lie down, close his eyes a spell, hope he opened them, and then –

It was the feeling of cloth that caught his attention, so unexpected against the bare flesh of his left hand. He'd come within fractions of not touching it at all, but he did, and at once recognized the sensation of velvet and fur, something to send a wrenching shock through him – and even more so when he seized it, shook it out, and held it up to the lantern.

It was Tommen's ermine-trimmed bedrobe. There was no doubt of it. It had been left folded neatly here, as if to await the return of its owner, and while Jaime could not for the life of him fathom why, it told him that Lord Mace had not lied after all. Tommen _was_ down here somewhere, likely scared and cold and hungry, and in gods knew whose company. That was not even to account for the potential presence of a vengeful and insane Cersei, and while Jaime was so weary and sick and sore that he could barely stand up, the discovery flashed through him like wildfire. He couldn't sleep now, no matter what. He had to keep going.

"Tommens?" Jaime's voice sounded hoarse and rasping, barely like his own, as he dropped the cloak and swung around, sweeping his lantern from side to side, light reeling on the black, glittering walls. "Tommens!"

No answer. But he couldn't shake the feeling that he was very close, that it was now or never, and he stumped down the tunnel to where it opened out to the underworld. _Fine place for the king of hell to sit and survey his domains._ A narrow catwalk crossed the river of sewage that rushed below, and Jaime edged across it with every nerve screaming, until he reached the steep, slick maze on the
far side. His light raced ahead of him like a living thing. "TOMMEN!"

It was only his own bellows that spited him, as before, but this time he thought – he was certain – that he heard a faint answering voice in reply. He had never in his life known the feeling – had never been told to or allowed or even permitted himself to know it – but just then, he understood exactly Cersei's utter, uncompromising desire to protect her children, their children, even if her method of going about it was rarely calculated to improve the situation. But it was his son down here, his son who was lost, and at that moment, Jaime Lannister would have arm-wrestled the Stranger himself if it meant getting to him in time.

He broke into a run, gasping. Every step felt like Lem or Ser Robert was stabbing him anew. But for once in his miserable life he was struggling in service of a good cause, and the lantern light silhouetted a small, crouched, trembling figure at the end of the passage, shielding his eyes against the unexpected glare. Yet it – he – recognized Jaime, and Jaime recognized him, and the next moment they were flinging themselves into each other's arms.

"Ser Uncle!" Tommen began to sob in earnest, clinging to him and shaking and crying, his hot tears soaking against Jaime's filthy neck. "Ser Uncle! It's – it's – I was so scared, so scared –"

Jaime hugged the boy back as hard as possible, not trusting himself to words. He could feel his blackened, wretched heart trembling inside his bruised chest, like a coin someone had flicked and sent spinning, about to topple off the table and smash on the floor. All he could do was awkwardly smooth Tommen's golden curls, mumble inconsequential nothings, and hope to get him calmed down enough to talk. He had at least thought to bring some food and drink, and carried the king over to flat ground. It took quite some time to persuade Tommen to detach, and even then, he insisted on sitting on Jaime's lap. So, with the warm little body held tight against him, Jaime fed and watered him, not sure he wanted to know how long Tommen had been without, starving and thirsty and alone. The king tore into it as if he was, cramming food into his mouth with both hands.

"Uncle Jaime?" Tommen asked at last, tremulously. "Where's Mother?"

Jaime's gut turned over. "You don't know?"

"No." Tommen shook his head. "She took me down here and we were together for a while, and she said she was going to take me to Casterly Rock and that we'd be safe there. Then she heard someone, and she ran off. She didn't come back."

_Casterly Rock, eh?_ It was more of a sensible plan than Jaime had expected from Cersei, truth be told, but only if one ignored the small fact that they would be recognized long before they ever reached it, that Varys had said it was under siege from Aurane Waters and his fleet of dromonds, and that many of the western lords were in full-out rebellion against House Lannister, allegiance now pledged to the pretender, in protest for the unlawful executions of the Westerlings. _That comes back to haunt us again and again._ It still stuck in Jaime's craw that he could not stop it in time, another of the failures dealt to him by the Brotherhood and that farce of a trial. He could not blame Lady Stoneheart for her rage, but yet... No time for that now. Instead, he had to consider what Tommen had said, and it jolted him to the core. Whatever other ill could justly be spoken of Cersei, for her to voluntarily abandon her son was both drastic and horrifying. Tommen had said she heard someone... could it possibly be the Tyrells? It was a wild guess, but if so, in her current fracable mental state, her overpowering desire for revenge might well have driven out anything else. Margaery and whoever was with her... aye, if Cersei had somehow crossed paths with them, if anything... Jaime wondered suddenly if Cersei had any idea of the news from Dorne, which he had witnessed.
Qyburn and Ser Robert interrogating Lady Nym about. *Is Myrcella truly dead?* He hadn't had time to think about it, embroiled in the rest of the madness, but if Cersei had caught even a whiff of that... she would be utterly demented, and not without reason. Wherever she was now, whatever she was doing, she was a clear and imminent threat to each and every soul in King's Landing and possibly all of Westeros, and Jaime's stomach turned over once more as he recalled Varys' cryptic warning. *Why, pray tell, is that more of a crime than letting thousands upon thousands suffer and die in an attempt to forestall the inevitable? Is it better than letting the green beast loose upon the world again?* . . . *Wildfire, my lord. Is that plain enough?*

Yet again, there was no profanity foul enough to encompass the situation, and Jaime racked his brains. If he took Tommen back to the surface, he would waste valuable time, and there was absolutely nobody left in court that he trusted; Tommen could be made a Tyrell hostage, or the Faith's, or anyone's. If he didn't take Tommen back to the surface, that entailed exposing him to all the dangers of the underworld, and the king was already sniffing and coughing; he was coming down with something. Not to mention, if Cersei saw him in custody of Tommen, when she was already convinced he meant to murder the boy. . .

"Ser Uncle?" Tommen plucked at Jaime's sleeve. "Please, what are we going to do?"

Gods damn it all. There was, in the end, only one choice.

Jaime stood up with a groan, and offered his son a hand to clamber up after him. "Well, lad," he said, as cheerily as he could. "Come along. We're going to find your mother."
The corpses began to bob up even before the crashing whitewater receded, taking with it a shattered morass of broken timbers and sundry flotsam but leaving still more by far heaped on the sand. Not all the dead men had just arrived in that state; some were bloated white maggots with faces patterned in motley, Volantenes who must have been trapped in their ships when the Greyjoys sank them, now liberated by the massive force of the tidal wave to rise to the surface and float merrily alongside their murderers. There were also a deal of things even less recognizable as men, identified as Yunkish only by virtue of their rotten, ragged tokars, swaying like weed on the bosom of the deep. It was the last thing to be expected of any god the ironmen worshiped, but it very much appeared as if this drowned bastard of theirs had a sense of truly macabre humor.

*Or perhaps he merely did not appreciate being forced to bed with the red one.* While Tyrion Lannister had seen many strange things in his life, himself not least, there was still little to compare to the shock of Victarion bloody Greyjoy taking up with R'hllor. *How could you have a god that burns when your other god was created for the express purpose of snuffing him out?* Nobody was about to send Tyrion a gilt-plated invitation to debate theology with the High Septon, or anyone else for that matter, but it still seemed something that even a man of the iron captain's provincial intelligence should be aware of. In any event, he had now been afforded the opportunity to inspect the irony at lethally close range, and that left Tyrion and the queen aboard the backs of their respective dragons, flapping high above the drenched rat warren of Meereen. *And now we get to see which rats come scuttling out.*

Tyrion shot a brief, sidelong look at Daenerys. He was full aware that she was trusting him almost as little as humanely possible. She'd granted him leave to ride Viserion, yes, but Viserion was back under her control thanks to Mormont's final sacrifice, meaning that Tyrion, if he'd had any nefarious intent, could hardly use the dragon as a weapon against his mistress. And the queen plainly did not categorize a scorched dwarf as much of a threat. *I suppose it barely counted, he had both feet in the grave already.* Killed him and then helped Jorah blow the horn, technically killing him as well.

*I hope you find your way home, ser.* Actually making it back to Bear Island to scatter the exile knight's ashes among the tall pines of his beloved birthplace sounded like a ludicrously romantic implausibility, but Tyrion, to his great surprise, found that he did want to try. *Both Mormont and I lost the women we betrayed, wandered like a pair of drunken fools in search of her, wrecked everything we laid hands on, and were brought as low as dust, but at least he found his. At least he redeemed himself and died worthily in her arms.* Sadly, Tyrion wondered if that was the best he could hope for, if in some distant age he should ever find Tysha again. *Offer her the knife and kneel to bare my throat to the blow? If I tell her about Penny, would that incline her to mercy? But that was a fool's thought, madness. You bloody bastard, of course she knows about Penny. Knew when she and her brother were born that of all the men who raped her, I was the one to leave her with my seed.*

Tyrion clenched his blunt fist so hard that he felt the nails break the skin. The cooling spray of the heaving water below still blasted against his hot face, wet and salty as tears. But he turned away, grabbed awkward hold of Viserion's ruff – he still had a deal to master when it came to steering a dragon, though he supposed this was the best way to learn – and flapped them toward Daenerys. "What now, Your Grace?" he bawled.

She stared at him, then shook her head. "What you just said, about the power of ice. . . that in Asshai I unleashed the power of fire. . ."
"That was only an educated guess, based on what I understood from Mormont, but as for the ice, yes..." Tyrion paused, chewing over the words. "This is just an educated guess as well, mind you, but I'm sure you've heard at least some of the droning about how ice and fire must always remain in balance. Well, my lady, they're not. And in counterpoint to whatever havoc you two wreaked in Asshai, the reaction that would spark... once again, I stress that I have no proof. But to cause a tidal wave this massive, so far from Westeros... it is my conjecture, wild as it may seem, that the Wall of the North has fallen."

Her face was pale beneath the sunburn. "The Wall? Viserys mentioned it. He said that it supposedly shielded the realm from monsters, but that it was only wet-nurse fables told to frighten children. He didn't believe them."

*Aye, a child,* Tyrion thought. *That is who I am putting my hope and trust in. A strong brave child, with dragons and fire and blood at her back, but a child nonetheless.* Still, he spoke her gently. "Oh no. The monsters are quite real. Your bear knight's lord father could tell you something about that, if he wasn't dead as well. Lord Commander Jeor Mormont was treacherously slain, gods know where in the wild, as he and his surviving Night's Watch command fled some monstrous evil in the woods."

He had intended that to scare her, and could tell by the look in her eyes that his arrow had found its mark. But Daenerys Stormborn was not the sort to spook easily, and her voice was perfectly calm when she said, "That evil came from the north, then. From the cold and ice."

"Yes."

"The Others." Daenerys smiled. "One of fire, one of ice. Always in eternal war, giving rise to each other. The fight can never end unless both are destroyed."

"Yes," Tyrion said again, taken aback. Plainly he had underestimated how much she already knew, and that cryptic comment about Others of fire made him burn (so to speak) with curiosity to what had transpired in Asshai. But Dany was turning Drogon, and he, as a loyal servant, had no choice but to follow.

Side by side, the two dragons and their riders winged down into the flooded streets of Meereen. Tyrion glanced around, wondering what exactly she expected to dredge up in this wasteland. The one consolation was that all the fires were out, drowned in a torrent of murk, and water lapped sullenly at the doors and windows of the baked-clay hovels and red-brick manses that outlay the Great Pyramid – waist-deep for an ordinary man, and certainly over Tyrion's head. It will be hard to find an army in this. Unless they all have gills.

Daenerys Targaryen, however, was not one to be deterred by such trivialities. She flew on, toward the eastern and northern portions of the city where the wave's destruction had not reached quite as far, and a rude squatter's jungle of tents and skins had been cobbled together on the barren salt flats. In Tyrion's expert opinion, it looked somewhat more liable to harbor intelligent life than the Yunkish camp, but only somewhat. Yet he recognized the general aspect of it, and was just opening his mouth to ask what aid she expected from the Dothraki when Dany reined in Drogon, stood up on the black beast's scaly back, and called loudly and commandingly in the horselords' rough, rattling tongue.

After a pause long enough to make Tyrion think that they were all dead as well, there was a timid rustling, and the ragged remnants of a mighty *khalasar* peered out suspiciously. Most of them, upon beholding two large dragons, shut the flaps again straightaway, a bit of critical thinking for which the dwarf could not well fault them. But others, despite liberally making the sign of the horns and other such gestures presumably intended to ward off evil (a bit late for that) began to
emerge, staring. If this was Khal Mago's horde, some of them must surely remember Daenerys; Mago had been _ko_ to her late lord husband Drogo, after all. _But then she must have been only a frightened girl to them, and not a dragon's mistress._

Several of the Dothraki shouted what sounded like questions or pleas to Dany, and she raised a hand, brushing them aside. "Mago," she repeated firmly, a word that even Tyrion's limited linguistic capabilities were able to discern. "_Mago!_"

One final hesitance, and then, a warlord apparently corresponding to the description trotted into sight. He was a big bastard with a braid of middling length, two or three bells at least, intricate blue tattoos chiseled on his shoulders and hard eyes, the eyes of a man who'd trample the seven hells out of you if you didn't get out of the way. All in all, not by any reasonable yardstick a more promising choice of ally than Victarion Greyjoy. If that was what the queen was intending. Come to think, she could be intending to roast him crisp as a harvest-feast hog.

Mago's horse reared and screamed at the sight of the two hulking dragons, and the khal curbed it with an angry gesture, shouting something that did not sound particularly polite up at Daenerys. She answered coolly, however, and by oh-so-fortuitous accident, Drogon happened to sneeze, scattering sparks across the tinder-dry ground. There was no brush for them to catch in, fortunately; elsewise poor Meereen might have been subjected to a wildfire in addition to its voluminous list of torments already endured. In any event, this was sufficient to command the Dothraki's attention, and he wheeled on the queen with an expression that, while mutinous, was tinged with a certain unwilling respect. He started to say something else, but she cut him off with another calm, fluent disquisition.

Tyrion listened attentively, though of course this did him less than no good. Instead, he cast a wary eye around at their surroundings, shifting uncomfortably on Viserion's hot, hard scales, which were already chafing grooves into his stunted legs. Still vastly to his surprise, he found that he would rather be hastening back to the Great Pyramid to assure himself of Penny's safety. It was as much of a fortress as still existed in this place, but it was still crawling with villains and vermin.

The end result of the conversation between Daenerys and Mago was that the horselord spat, cantered in a circle, and gesticulated ever more fervently, but still did not quite dare to turn and ride away altogether. Finally, with an expression of rancorous surrender, Mago said something that made the queen smile triumphantly. She reached down—a dangerous maneuver to Tyrion's eyes, considering that the bastard could have taken her arm off at the elbow with his _arakh_—and clasped his hand, whilst the khal was still looking flattened. Not giving him time to recover, Dany let go, pulled up, and jerked her head at Tyrion, taking to the air with a few swift, efficient strokes of Drogon's wings.

Tyrion pulled his own dragon after her with somewhat less grace, but far more curiosity. "What did you _tell_ him?"

"I gave him a choice." Dany's wind-whipped hair peeled back from her face. "I told him that the late Khal Jhaqo was willing to travel to Asshai and face the very Shadow, and asked if he would be remembered as a lesser man. I told him that Jhaqo was dead, killed by the very beast he saw before him, and that he had a chance, if he dared, to write his own name even greater. That if he would take all his horses and all his men and cross the poison water, follow me to Westeros, his legend—and his braid—would be forever unequaled."

Tyrion had to take a moment to chew on that. It displayed a considerable degree of political dexterity, more than he had imagined to be quite honest, playing to the Dothraki _khal's_ vanity and lust for glory and straightforward tribal rivalry. But something about the set of her jaw told him...
that it had not been quite as simple as that. "What was his other option, if I dare ask?"

"I told him that I had not forgotten his crimes against the lamb girl Eroeh, for which Jhaqo already paid the price. I told him that he could follow me, fight by my side and obey my commands, or he could die here like a dog, in the same dishonor he served to her."

The dwarf whistled, half in admiration and half in apprehension. Indeed, she is Targaryen to the bone. More of Rhaegar's mold than Aerys, it seemed, but still not a person to be triflingly crossed or challenged. Yet as her de facto Hand, it fell to him to raise the logistical complication. "Well done indeed, Your Grace, but what use will an army do you, if you have no ships? There may be a dozen or so still seaworthy from the Greyjoy fleet, if the wave spared them, but – "

"A dozen will serve, if needs be," the queen said calmly. "I have the dragons."

Spying the look on her face, Tyrion decided not to argue. He trailed her back across the scattered, sooty rooftops of Meereen, trying to follow the direction of her gaze, then had to pull Viserion into a sharp dive as she apparently located what she was looking for. One careering, swerving passage through the streets later, she was pulling up over the broken bricks of the Pyramid of Hazkar, which until of late had served as the prison for her children. Seeing it again, Viserion snorted angrily, and Tyrion dug his fingers into the dragon's ruff, hoping that the beast wasn't inclined to hold violent grudges. But Dany turned back, quieting him with a mere glance, and the dwarf wondered what exactly sort of sorcery had gone into re-forging her bond with the dragons. She was their rightful mistress, of course, and Jorah's sacrifice had worked exactly as it was meant to, but nonetheless, that horn was of old Valyria. It would serve her will, but as with all magic, there could be no safe way to grasp it. It will take its price.

Dany was already involved in scouting around the ruins, towers of slagged brick leaning precipitously to the side like Robert Baratheon after a night of drinking. Although Tyrion was yet again at a loss as to what she was looking for, he gamely pitched in, although he couldn't cadge Viserion to move closer than about a thousand yards; this, therefore, was not terribly useful. But just as he was speculating how long they'd have to occupy themselves on this scavenger hunt, there was motion from the dark abyssal cracks below, followed shortly by the emergence of ten or fifteen men – no, not men. Unsullied, to judge from their spiked bronze caps. As one, they bowed their heads, then offered up their swords, hilt first.

"Your Grace." It was the leader who spoke, a square sun-brown one of perhaps two-and-twenty, though it was always hard to judge with eunuchs – particularly those who had been made young. He had a grim face made even grimmer with dust, filth, and despair. "Smite these ones down if it please you. We have failed."

Dany was plainly startled. "How?"

"These ones released your dragons as Ser Barristan ordered, but could not defend the city against its sack by the Westerosi squid men and the Dothraki khalasar alike. These ones fought to our greatest ability, and many of us have died, but better that we should have all perished, in the manner of the Three Thousand of Qohor, rather than suffer Your Grace's foes to pass." The young eunuch took a knee. "This one's death is in your hands."

"No," the queen said. "To your feet, Grey Worm. Do you recall what I told you once, when we first came here? That you should show wisdom as well as valor? I would rather that you survive, save your strength for greater battles, rather than spend yourself all in vain. How many of you remain?"

Grey Worm – a peculiar name, a slave name to Tyrion's ears, he'd thought that Daenerys had freed her eunuchs, but old habits must die hard – hesitated. "Perhaps five thousand, Your Grace. Fewer if
the wounded are excluded. These ones will bind themselves up and fight again if you order it, or however we may atone for our failure, but – "

"Five thousand is sufficient," Daenerys said. "Make your troops ready."

Grey Worm bowed his head. "Your Grace speaks, these ones obey." Still he hesitated, glancing back at her, and Tyrion thought that if the tales of the Unsullied's training were true – the castration, the strangling of the puppy, the slaughter of the suckling babe, and all the other horrors and indignities – that here was a soul more accustomed to the cut of the lash, the sting of cruelty and sharp words, more than any sort of mercy. It bred in the dwarf a sudden and unlooked-for, unwelcome empathy with the eunuch, knowing how eyes looked on you in well-bred revulsion as less than a whole man. At least I have my dangly bits, but in the judgment of the rest of the world, that is worth just as little.

"Is Your Grace certain you do not wish to punish us?" Grey Worm asked again. "These ones will flog ourselves if necessary, so you need not spare another man to – "

"I am certain," Dany told him. "Go forth and do as I have ordered."

The eunuch touched two fingers to his forehead, then whistled sharply to his comrades, and they vanished back into the ruins of Hazkar's like a torrent of industrious ants down an anthill. Dany watched them go for a moment, then beckoned to Tyrion. Once more, the dragons lifted off, wafting heavy blasts of the hot, dry air beneath their leathery pinioned wings, and Tyrion felt a sudden and soul-deep longing for a drink. "Where now?"

The queen's face was set in stone. "Now we find Daario Naharis."

The name was only vaguely familiar to Tyrion – though he did seem to recall that he'd heard it quite often in scurrilous camp gossip among the Yunkish – but yet again, he deferred to her judgment. This search, however, did not prove nearly as fruitful as the other two. Salty, stinking water was still standing in the sunken streets, draining out in slow fingers across the arid plain, and almost nothing remained of the poorer, low-lying districts and even some of the wealthier ones, the many-colored bricks of Meereen turned a uniform muddy brown and sepulchral black. "Your Grace," he shouted. "It may be the man is already dead."

"I do not believe so. Not a Second Son and a sellsword, and especially not that sellsword. Survival is their very name."

"If I may presume, who is he to you?"

"Much as it shames me to admit, my former lover. As well, the murderer of Ser Jorah Mormont. I will hold him to account for his crime before we depart."

Tyrion should have been expecting this, as he'd just been watching her reconstitute the tatty shreds of her army, but it still took him off guard. "Depart where? Westeros?"

"Indeed." Dany brought the black dragon alongside the cream, so the two flew almost in unison. "I have lingered here too long."

"Again, an admirable plan, but shouldn't we be a bit clearer on the ship situation?" Tyrion felt a strange twist in his gut at the thought of turning back toward the country he had left what still felt like far too recently. Though I return with far more flame. Some scores were long past due for settlement, but the sooner they returned to Westeros, the sooner he had to kill Jaime. And while he reminded himself of the burning anger, the last words he'd exchanged with his brother – Yes, I
killed your vile son – he couldn't take as much joy from the thought as he'd hoped. It will be different when I wrap my ugly hands around his throat. Let Tysha watch, let her realize that he'd finally avenged her, far too little and far too late. If he'd already taken down Lord Tywin, the chief architect of their destruction, then once he finished with Jaime, he'd have laid the ghost to rest, found their daughter, he'd have –

He couldn't even remember her face.

If it was possible to halt a dragon in midair, if it was possible to freeze solid in blistering heat, Tyrion would have done so. He couldn't even wrap his head around the thought. Had he not been hunted by Tysha's ghost every day, haunted by her singing every night, in all the long years since they had been torn apart? How then could he possibly have forgotten a single detail, hoarding them to his heart like a miser with his gold? But no matter how valiantly he strove to retrieve them, they continually receded, farther and farther away until she was nothing but a dark-haired blur, a half-imagined smile. I was so young. So bloody, bloody young. A stunted ugly unwanted child shown love for the first time in his life, far beyond anything he understood or was ready to handle, clutching it as if he'd been thrown a sweet. It was me who did that to her. Always I told myself that Father made me, but he was not the one to make me crawl across the floor and rape her one last time. I did that. Me. Me.

At that moment, Tyrion's grief felt so vast that he thought he could crawl into it and disappear forever, let it close over his head like a soft black sea. Yet at the same time, it was as if it was the first time he had ever let it out from the dark wardrobe where he had shut it away, like the other things he hid that deep in hopes that they would disappear. In hopes that everyone would forget that he was a dwarf, his crimes as deep as his family's own. In hopes that they would forget to blame him, when he could barely stand to forgive himself.

Tyrion let out a slow, anguished breath, feeling as if he was scraping his chest raw with a blade. As if he was opening his eyes like a newborn kitten, as if he was wondering how in seven or seven hundred hells he had ended up here, like a demented dream that had vanished on waking, as if he was blinking and rubbing his eyes and staring around at a world as strange and grotesque and small as he was. As tenuous and fearful and tender. As bloody pigheaded stubborn, as stupid, to never know when to toss in the cards and die. A place, a man, that just somehow went on surviving, had survived grimly for so many years, but never known when or how to live.

"Your Grace." Tyrion's throat felt thick and raw as sand. He shook himself and spurred Viserion up beside Daenerys; she was looking at him quizzically. "This may seem a bit of a non sequitur, I apologize . . . but once we do return to Westeros, assuming all is successful . . . what will become of my siblings?"

She shot a guarded look at him, and in it, he knew she was suddenly seeing him not as a fellow comrade and dragon rider, but once again as a Lannister, the worst Lannister. Still more, as he'd barely shown the slightest damn for anything besides burning them alive, this sudden change of heart must smell suspicious. "What matter is it to you?"

Tyrion shrugged. "They're a pair of wretches, but then, so am I. It's my brother I'm the more curious about. Though he may be something of a touchy subject, I understand."

The queen took her sweet time in answering – he supposed he ought be grateful she even had, as that was a jar of wildfire he had just lobbed into her face and no mistake (fittingly, considering the subject.) Finally she said, "I have no interest in persecuting men for every crime long gone, and I have learned more of my lord father than perhaps I was meant to. In Asshai, in the visions of the red priests, I saw – "
Tyrion waited, but this particular intriguing sentence was not furthered. At last he prompted, "You saw?"

"I saw... it." Dany's lips tightened. "The murder. Your brother, opening my father's throat with a golden sword. Who was Rossart?"

The dwarf was discomfited. The devil does she know that? "Your kingly father's last unfortunate set of fingers to be chopped. The Hands that succeeded mine own father always danced on the edge of a knife, and Rossart was more of a toadying fool than most. I was only an ugly boy at Casterly Rock when King's Landing fell, but... he was a pyromancer, if I recall. Mad like the rest. Aerys kept them as pets."

"Your brother killed him?"

"Nobody knows who killed him." Why is she asking about the poor bugger? "If so, Jaime never said anything about it. Why?"

"I only wish to understand the matter," Daenerys said quietly. "What would move a man to break his solemn oath and slay his king, no matter how mad or foolish or incompetent. If your brother lives, I will allow him a chance to account for himself, and his fate will be served as it is merited. I had thought of offering him the chance to take the black, but if what you say is true, and the Wall fallen..."

"Jaime will never take the black," Tyrion said flatly. "Even if the Wall still stood, you'd have a better chance of growing me to his height than you would of him putting off the white cloak now. He fancies himself some sort of hero, if his lunatic decision to free me from my cell and pack me merrily off to commit patricide is any sort of indication, and the men of the Night's Watch are no heroes. Likely dead now, the poor bastards." And if so, the rest of us with it. The thought made him shiver. Tarrying in Meereen a few years yet might have its advantages, but if the Others were come as Dany had insinuated, unloosed in a flood tide..."

The queen briefly looked as if she was about to ask something else – perhaps about Cersei, gods be good – but something on the ground below distracted her. They were out over the beach again, and to Tyrion's eye, there were indeed a dozen or so Greyjoy ships that had survived the tidal wave – yet considering the Iron Fleet had first menaced the city with near a hundred, that was a paltry wage indeed. We could cram them in like sardines, the Unsullied certainly wouldn't mind, though the khalasar and their horses would be a bloody nuisance. No matter how many ways he counted it up, he could see no way to accommodate more than one or two thousand men, and that would be a sure way to end Daenerys Targaryen's long-rumored invasion of Westeros in disaster and defeat. Half eunuchs, half savages? It would take a steward's acumen to sort it out. Or a master of coin's?

Tyrion looked around reflexively for Littlefinger, but thank heavens the man was off rigging some other poor fool's dice game. Where, exactly? No matter. The search for this Daario Naharis was still in the forefront. Then they could do something about the rest of these bloody bastards.

Tyrion had been glancing out to sea as the two dragons glided along the ruined shoreline, no more than ten or twenty feet off the sand. In fact Drogon himself had landed, eyeing the waterlogged corpses; he blew a few inquiring sparks, as if to judge the probability of roasting them to his taste. A magnificent beast, but still one that feeds on human flesh. As always, a wise lesson to remember, and one that would –

Tyrion was the one to catch the flash of movement, out of the corner of his eye. He had been so utterly unprepared to see anything alive besides himself, the queen, and the dragons that it took longer than it should have for him to realize. But then his brain locked up, could see nothing but
the hell of the Blackwater, of green flames like towers, of a faceless white knight standing over him and ready to drive a blade through his visor, Mandon Moore and the memory of it and hideous injury and death and convalescence and –

"Your Grace! LOOK OUT!"

Startled and confused, Dany ducked awkwardly – just in time. The specter in weed-draped plate armor towered over her like a devouring shadow, deep-sunken eyes burning in the corpse-white face, as the axe swung and bit a hunk from Drogon's scaled hide, as the dragon screamed in shock and rage and unloosed a torrent of flame that his assailant threw himself flat to dodge. Tyrion's mind continued to prattle vainly at him like a bad actor, unable to shut up for the world, as it forced him to accept the evidence of his own eyes: Victarion Greyjoy, impossibly undead, going after a nearly grown dragon with an axe in hand like the mad motherfucking whoreson he was.

You bastard!

Tyrion had not been sorry to think that he'd seen the last of the iron captain. You were in full plate, you were supposed to drown! But if it was true what they said, that a man drowned in service to that wretched god of the ironmen, the one he'd just been deriding as either capricious or comic, could never drown again –

Victarion himself had no comment on his resurrection, his long black hair hanging in soaked clumps around his face. Drogon reared and spread his wings, Dany shrieking something, but Victarion was now hacking his way past the dragon's lunges and reaching for her, trying to get in range to pull her down. What he would then do Tyrion could not be certain, but as it was a Greyjoy they were talking about, that Greyjoy in particular, he had a hunch that it wasn't to sing her love songs and offer her a cup of nectar. And Daenerys Stormborn was no Tysha, no poor westerlands whore with no scrap of money or dignity or ability to defend herself, but she was still yet a girl. Barely older than Tysha had been. And in that moment of remembering, of awakening, Tyrion Lannister finally acted.

Kicking Viserion, he sprang forward. He was empty-handed, but that didn't matter. He was riding a scaly concoction of claws, teeth, and flame, and he jerked the dragon around to go after his former master (or puppet master) with all that unloosing, releasing, pent-up fury. Tyrion could see Ser Barristan Selmy's blood spilling on the stones as Victarion drove that blade into him atop the Great Pyramid, could hear the eldritch scream of the horn. It was never yours. Always Euron's. But no matter no. No matter. It ended, now.

Victarion hacked at both dragons, as they dodged and wove around him, sinuous necks bobbing and screeches ululating, as one of their fireballs caught him full in the face and yet he was apparently too sodding wet to burn. The god of water and the god of fire both. It seemed there were advantages after all to swearing your fealty jointly to them, regardless of the theological objections. Viserion lunged, trying to catch the iron captain between his jaws, but Victarion's axe flashed back and there was a hiss, a steam of black blood, as his blade found the dragon's flesh. Bloody hellfire, perhaps he can't be killed after all.

Tyrion found this situation extremely undesirable to say the least, and was just vainly attempting to think of something clever to circumvent it, when Drogon ripped back and reared, Dany looking as small as a child's doll on his neck as she clung to him. With the most bone-chilling, deep, thunderous roar that Tyrion had ever heard from man or beast, the black dragon lunged forward and slammed the crest of spines on its blunt armored head directly into Victarion. Unholy unlife or no unholy unlife, there was still no withstanding it. The iron captain flailed madly, then fell.

Before he could regain any semblance of his bearings, Drogon was on top of him, keening, wings beating a burning sandstorm. He appeared fully prepared to investigate how squid tasted, but Dany
held him in check. The dragon slammed a great claw into the iron captain's prone body, and Tyrion heard the queen speak, in a voice clear and ringing and hard as one of the bells in the Great Sept of Baelor. "Do not move, my lord. If you do, it will be the end of you."

Victarion Greyjoy gurgled a black chuckle. "I fear no death," he rasped. "I told you that I could not be drowned, nor burned. Do you believe me now, little queen?"

"You will style me Your Grace." Dany's voice was like ice cracking.

"I bend my knee to no woman."

Despite himself, the dwarf was impressed with the bastard's bravado. *Then again, if he truly is some sort of immortal, he can deal all the grand talk he likes.* Still, that did not preclude it becoming extremely unpleasant for all of them. "Do as she says, Greyjoy."

Victarion's sunken eyes turned to follow the sound of his voice. By the look on his face, Tyrion could tell that the reunion was just as unexpected, and unwelcome, as it had been for him. "Dwarf. I thought I had seen the last of you."

"After you dropped me on a dragon and told me to fly out and scout the khalasar, you mean? Well, the dragon's mine, the khalasar is hers, and you, my soggy friend, are flat on your arse beneath some combination of all four. A little respect might wet your whistle."

Victarion laughed again, breaking off into a grunt of pain. "Respect? What would you know of such a thing?"

"Exactly none, but I've always believed in learning new skills as the situation requires. If I were in yours, it would be the first thing on my list."

The iron captain only grunted again, twisting beneath Drogon's claw. The silence threatened to get murderous. Then he said, sounding as if he was gnawing on rocks, "Aye. You have defeated me. Now end me honorably, or else fight us both to our deaths."

"He does have pluck, one must say that for him," Tyrion commented wryly. "As well as a singularly focused mind. Your Grace?"

Daenerys remained silent a moment longer, staring down at him. Then she said abruptly, "And if I had better uses for you than dying?"

Victarion's bafflement was plain. "What better use can there be?"

"Fighting." Dany tapped Drogon's neck, and the dragon pulled up. "Fighting for me."

"Oh no. This is too far. Not a fortnight gone, the Greyjoys and the Dothraki were ripping each other to shreds on the boneyard of this city, and now you want them to – "

The queen gave him a look remarkably similar in searing intensity to the one she had given Victarion, and Tyrion, much to his own surprise, found himself stunned into shutting up. Ignoring him, Dany pressed forward. "I have need of your ships, and your axe. Such men as might remain to you. Who knows? If you serve me well, I may serve you in return. With fire and flame and steel, against your brother Euron and all the wrong he has done to you."

Tyrion whistled. *That was a daring gambit and no mistake.* Doubtless Victarion had other sorts of service in mind, as evidenced by his baldly stated desire to marry Daenerys and make her his rock wife, but then, Tyrion himself was no better. *It seems we are both in the process of receiving a*
sharp lesson on just what sort of bride we would have to bed. He remembered the Green Grace, the Harpy. Her charge that women were naught more than maids or whores to him, that he did not understand and so feared them. *Gods be good, what do I do about Cersei?* His desire to make her pay for all the wrong she had inflicted on him remained undimmed, but it no longer seemed so clear-cut, so necessary. Her green eyes still burned like a stalking lioness's in his memory, his promise to her to destroy everything she loved, but if he had already entertained that absurd delusion of sparing Jaime. . . and Cersei, despite everything, remained his kin. . . *No. No, I must still kill them and have done with it.* They would curse his name and face from the red mountains of Dorne to the white snows of the north, but then, they already did. . . *Myrcella. . . Tommen. . . gods, Cersei, I swear, I would never have hurt the boy, never.* . .

It was hard to tell, but it seemed almost as if Victarion was considering the queen's offer. He said nothing, and still nothing. Then at last he asked, "Where would we sail?"

"To Westeros. As soon as all can be made ready. There is no time to waste." To Tyrion's eyes, Dany was fierce and terrible, face set, lips thin. "The Iron Fleet can yet rise again, one last time."

Victarion looked rather impressed, but still stubborn. "We are no slaves."

"No," the queen said sharply, taking both men aback with her vehemence. "No, you are no slaves. Why do you think I tarried here, long past time and long past sense? I am many things, but I am no slaver. I do not keep men and women in chains for my pleasure. I do not believe any soul, king or queen or peasant, has the right. Yet the world is changing. It has already begun. The ironmen can no longer set sail to reave and rape and ravage as they please. It begins with you. You will bend the knee, or you will be destroyed."

Victarion actually blinked. "You said that —"

"I said that I was no slaver. I never said that I was inclined to soft female mercy." Dany nudged Drogon's side with her heel, and the dragon flapped into the air, a great black shadow. "My lord, I am no bedwarmer, no man's toy. I am a *Targaryen.* Learn it well."

Tyrion was tempted to interject that he himself had informed Victarion to look into his prospective bride's temperament before making further matrimonial plans, but for once, he held his tongue. He spurred Viserion up to join Dany, feeling that some show of union would be preferable, even if he was quite clearly only along for the ride. Together, four sets of eyes, two human and two dragon, bore down on the bedraggled iron captain as he stood below them, staring back. The standoff stretched on.

At last, Victarion uttered a short, gruff bark of something that was far too terrifying to be a laugh. "So, the fairest woman in the world has teeth," he said, sounding admiring despite himself. "Be it so, then." He touched his fist to his chest. "We sail."

Daenerys Targaryen's lips quirked back into something too sad, too steely to be a smile. "Yes," she agreed. "We sail."
Davos

He was warm, and that was how he knew that he must be dead. For so long, from the gloom of Lord Godric's hall on the Sisters to his imprisonment in White Harbor, to his harrowing voyage to Skagos, to his fight against the wights, to his dive into the frigid sea in the futile attempt to save Osha, to the long journey back with Rickon and Shaggy, to his march north with the Manderly men and their massacre by the dead men in the darkness, to his blundering flight through the snow and capture by the Bastard of Bolton, to down into the depths of the Dreadfort, Davos Seaworth had been bone-chillingly cold. It had also come with every kind of hell and torment imaginable, so he was profoundly grateful to think it might be at an end. He lay motionless, just under the surface of consciousness, as distant voices swept overhead like the sighing of the winter wind. So long as they did not trouble him, Davos could have cared less what they had to say. The last of his strength was gone. He had done everything he could, kept his oath, fought well, seen his king’s face one last time. It was no dishonor to die now.

Yet there was still pain. Sometimes dull and bearable and sometimes overwhelming, coming and receding in waves. Pain was not something that Davos had been given to expect in the hereafter, where all sins were judged and all sufferings ended. It was just possible that he had lived enough of a reprobate life to wind up in the place where things went the opposite, but he had, for better or worse, always placed more faith in the Mother's mercy than that. If he hurt, then he must be still alive, and thus his duty not yet ended. Still alive, and with a hope of vengeance.

Davos had never been one for the idea of revenge. A smuggler's life was too short, his business too changeable, to hold grudges or burn bridges. Yet more, his was not a temperament inclined to it; he had always considered there to be enough suffering in this world without his own contributions. But that was before he had been held prisoner by Ramsay Bolton. That was before he had been acquainted with the true depths of depravity.

If it was just the pain of losing a finger, Davos could have borne that. It was hardly something new, after all, even if Stannis had used a butcher's cleaver to cut clean and true and Ramsay had used a flaying knife to make it as horrid as possible. If it was even the pain of losing two fingers, still. But Ramsay had announced that they needed to make a matching set, and thus taken them all, as well as the thumb. Davos had managed well enough in life with one shortened hand, but with two, he was scarce more than a glorified cripple. How was he ever supposed to sail a ship again, swing a sword, even feed or dress himself, with no fingers? How could he grasp a knife long enough to drive it into the Bastard's eye?

At first, Davos had been naïve enough to think he could make some sort of bargain with his tormentor. Offer him something. Appeal to a better nature. But he discovered, as soon as Ramsay marched him to the Dreadfort at the point of the burning sword – the true Lightbringer, how had it ended up in his custody, how? – that the Bastard of Bolton simply and completely lacked a better nature. He gleefully informed Davos that he knew exactly who he was, that Stannis had irked him very badly by his interference at Winterfell and his constant attacks, and that he, Ramsay, felt more than justified in revenging all these annoyances in Davos' helpfully present carcass. It was enough to make him know that the gods were firmly on his side. Why else would they spare his life, get him home, and then deliver Lightbringer and the onion knight into his hands?

If that was true, Davos thought, they were no sort of gods he cared to worship. But he didn’t believe it, simply could not believe it. Otherwise, there was no point and purpose for good people to continue to struggle in the world against evil, whether it was the supernatural terror of the Others and the wights, or merely the malicious madness of Ramsay Bolton and his all-too-human desire
for pain and suffering. It was that thought alone, along with the memory of Marya and his two small ones, that got Davos through the torture which followed. He had never expected deliverance. Had fully thought he would die down there, and did his best to make peace with it. It wasn't the way he wanted things to end, of course. Yet he'd had more than enough fortunate escapes in his life. No need to think himself entitled to more.

But then, the warhorns.

It had been something out of a dream, impossible, when Ramsay had dragged him up to the ramparts and he'd seen the Baratheon host in arms below, fire and shadow and song, torches and drums and skinpipes and his king, ordering Ramsay to surrender or face immediate death. Davos had considered that enough of a blessing to die with, knowing that Stannis was still left to carry on the fight, and he had begged his king not to jeopardize his cause by agreeing to any deal to reclaim his worthless hide. He told Stannis that he was not afraid.

And then, the turncloak had spoken up. Theon Greyjoy. Ramsay had offered to exchange Davos for him, but Stannis refused that offer. Davos, even knowing it meant his certain death, had been pleased. Yet then, impossibly... Theon agreed. Agreed to yield himself up to Ramsay's clutches, if he let Davos go.

Ramsay had obeyed, literally, flinging Davos headlong off the Dreadfort walls. He had a hazy memory of tumbling through the snow, being caught by the scuttling dark figures below, and being carried away to some sort of tent, pitched among the snow with furs and leathers and another motionless man inside. His wounds had been bandaged, and someone tried to force something hot and foul down his throat, but Davos gagged and retched and brought it all back up. After that, he had slipped inexorably down the abyss into darkness.

That was where he remained now, wandering the frontier between life and death. There was something to be said for either choice. It was all too likely that they were going to end up in the latter state anyway, and if so, no sense in wasting time. He had many friends on that side of the veil, and his four sons. They'd welcome him, carry him safely home. Yet on this side, he still had Stannis, and Marya and his boys. And Ramsay. Battered and broken as he was, as old and used and exhausted and ill, Davos Seaworth did not want to face the Father's judgment before he had a chance to pay the Bastard bloody back.

The voices above him were getting louder. He felt as if he was rising through a soft grey miasma, shot with hot red streaks. Definitely alive, then. His useless hands throbbed. His head was about to split in half. Perhaps he had erred, rejecting death so swiftly. At least it would be darker there, easier, away from this, away from it all. Let the gods, or Stannis, sort Ramsay out.

But it was too late. He had made his choice.

Groaning, feverish, but still breathing, heart beating, Davos opened his eyes.

At first he saw nothing, a blackness so complete that he wondered in terror if he had gone blind as well. He reflexively tried to lift a hand before his face, but the pain that flashed through the fresh stumps was nauseating, and he dropped it with a whimper. As the lurid spots began to fade, he slowly began to make out the shadowy shapes of men moving outside the walls of the tent, snow piled up two and three feet at the flap. He could hear a steady current of drums and steel. They were still at the Dreadfort, then. Or were they?

Davos moaned. Seeing him awake, some short furry shape was above him, holding a skin to his lips, and this time he swallowed the burning, bitter draught; his gut churned, but he kept it down. It took forever to coerce his mouth into cooperating, but finally it did. "What...?"
"Quiet, lad." The voice was gruff, but not unkind, and as Davos' bedazzled eyes eased further back into operation, he saw that it was a wildling, white-bearded and snow-speckled, with arms the size of tree trunks and frostbite deadening the end of his nose. "The Bastard didn't give you no posies and ponies, did he now? Har!"

"No," Davos muttered groggily. "I... thank you, I don't know your...

"Tormund Thunderfist," the old wildling announced proudly. "Don't ask me what I'm bloody doing in Stannis bloody Baratheon's vanguard, for I couldn't tell you. But after Lord Snow and Mance was murdered, and me own son Toregg as well, I've begun to take it quite personal to see the Bastard's head on a spike, eat his black heart for me supper. I wasn't about to do it by my lonesome, so I've come here. Easy there, lad. Easy."

Davos had tried extremely unwisely to sit up, and fell back heavily, tasting bile in his throat. His chest heaved, struggling for breath, but every gulp of cold air seared his lungs. I was warm before, I was warm. He rued that lack more than anything. "What... going on?"

"The king's at council. Bloody fool habit for you kneelers, talk about fighting a man before you do it." Tormund guffawed. "But after they sent the turncloak into the castle... not a soul believes he's coming back out, let alone with the sword, so they have a decision to make, whether to attack or nay. T' hope is the Bastard will be too distracted with his pet to pay attention."

Davos was unsure what to make of this. It was open to question as to whether Ramsay had a strategic bone in his body (though he certainly did possess an animal's low cunning and instinct for survival) or was merely interested in wringing every drop of pain from his victims that he could, in which case this could actually masquerade as a sound strategy. To judge from his boasting during the torture sessions, he'd already killed his own father, the brains of House Bolton by a long shot, and he was like to feel invincible with Lightbringer by his side. We would do well to respect that power. The Red Sword of Heroes was not called that for no reason. Davos could still feel it burning in his flesh.

Nonetheless, the thought of serving Ramsay Bolton his just desserts was one to make Davos overlook a great deal of discomfort. With Tormund's help, he tried sitting up again, and while his head reeled sickeningly, he managed to remain upright. Glancing over at the other sledge, he realized to his astonishment that his fellow invalid was none other than Lord Wyman Manderly, who was eyeing him back in equal surprise. They inclined their heads to each other awkwardly, and Lord Wyman's question burst as if from a breaking dam. "Rickon?"

"He is alive, my lord. And well. I left him at White Harbor with his wolf, in the custody of your son, Ser Wylis. He is... most indomitable, like his sire."

A faint smile quirked the fat lord's lips. "He is, at that. How fares the war?"

"For the Lannisters? Poorly. Ser Wylis burnt their fleet at anchor, while the captains were ashore in expectation of parley. But my lord, there was a twist. Ser Addam Marbrand was with them, and claimed that the Young Wolf's widow, the Westerling girl, could have a son. That she was hidden in Greywater Watch, with Lord Howland Reed."

He watched Lord Wyman's face closely, waiting for his reaction. It had been the Manderlys' belief that Rickon Stark was the rightful heir that was supposed to seal them to Stannis' cause, and Davos could more easily have said naught at all about Robb Stark's potential child. But Lord Wyman had dealt with him bravely, at extreme risk to his own life and in valiant pursuit of the truth, and Davos could do no less. He deserves to know of the possibility. We both stand at the same likelihood of making use of it, which is little.
"Is that so?" Lord Wyman said after a moment. "What else?"

"Your son sent Ser Addam and his companion in search of the Westerling girl, hoping to find her and bring her to White Harbor. He said nothing about taking Tommen back as his king."

"Wylis sent Marbrand after Queen Jeyne?" Lord Manderly raised an eyebrow. "Unless there has been some development I am unavoidably unaware of, what would stop the man from stealing her straight back to his Lannister masters?"

"Wylis had them all by the short hairs. He held the rest of the ship captains hostage, only to be released to defend Tommen's crown if Marbrand succeeded in his charge."

"Aye. That's my lad." Manderly smiled again, then coughed, wet and agonizingly. His speech, though understandable, was oddly slurred, and Davos could see that he was missing several teeth, his jaw swollen and mottled with ugly bruises. We both enjoyed our stint in the Bastard's custody equally well. "And yet, onion knight. I am not unmindful of who has saved my life, whose camp I am in this very moment, whose smuggler returned Rickon Stark to the land of the living against all odds. If I should survive, all factors will be considered."

"Thank you, my lord," Davos said fervently. He wondered if there was any food. He was so hungry that his belly was twisting in knots, but the actual thought of eating turned it to nausea. I would need a man to feed me. The thought made him lie back down again, sick at heart.

He dozed, pursued by fitful phantoms. Tormund had departed to attend to whatever was going on with the rest of the army, and Lord Wyman was clearly as exhausted by the short conversation as Davos was. What has become of the rest of the Bolton forces? If it was true what the sole survivor had told him, in the holdfast in the snow right before the wights attacked, they had been overcome by some dread power, and Winterfell itself was no more. I did not tell Lord Wyman that. That I led Manderly men up here in hopes of making an attack on the Dreadfort, good men, and lost them all. That I was the only one to live because I ran like a coward, rather than turning back and fighting for them. Instead I pretend to honesty by telling him about Robb Stark's son. Coward. Coward. Coward.

Davos closed his eyes tightly against the memories, tears burning under his lashes. He was about to call out to Lord Wyman again, plead for forgiveness, but at that moment, the flaps of the tent rustled. None other than Stannis Baratheon ducted through, snow settling on the shoulders of his furry cloak, his blue eyes burning in the tight-stretched skull of his face.


"You are sore wounded. I do not expect you to." Stannis brushed it off as tersely and matter-of-factly as if they had last spoken only hours ago, not months. "How do you come to be here, ser?"

Davos shot a dreading glance at the prone form of Lord Manderly. I must speak of it after all. "I returned to White Harbor after retrieving Rickon Stark from Skagos. Lord Wyman promised to take you for his king if I did so. He was absent, but his son Ser Wylis received me and gave me command of a Manderly host, to attack the Dreadfort in hopes of pulling the Boltons out of Winterfell. But we were. . . beset, only a few leagues south of here, and torn to pieces by wights."

"Wights." Stannis snorted. "They have menaced my march as well. Where does this surfeit of dead men come from?"

"I. . . cannot be certain. But the Wall. . ."
"I know," Stannis admitted. "Something terrible has happened there, and there has been no word from Lady Melisandre. We have very few chances left to escape from this with our lives, and I need your counsel. You have, I assume, been inside the walls of this fell place, the Dreadfort. If we mounted an attack on it now, would we succeed?"

Davos' head hurt like the devil. I have to tell him as well that I am no Hand. Nothing more than an old man who has lived too long and yet lacks the courage to die. "I saw only a few other men-at-arms within the castle. Most of them... my lord, Winterfell, I think it -"

"It is destroyed," Stannis said. "Blown apart as Ramsay attempted to catch my army in his jaws, but it ended up doing more harm to his men than mine – I suspected something amiss, sent the weak and sickly and old at the vanguard of the assault. After the blast, I rescued the turncloak from the wights, and he informed me of Mance Rayder's death. On his belief that the Bastard would almost have certainly fled here, I set out on the march."

That was pure Stannis Baratheon: making a terrible, ungodly dangerous, hair-raising traverse of the north in winter sound like nothing more than a dry, logical tactical maneuver. Still... "Theon Greyjoy gave you this information?"

"Aye." Stannis shrugged. "But he and his sister are gone into the Dreadfort. They offered their freedom in exchange for yours. Like it or not, we owe them a debt."

Davos began to see the problem. "And if we attack now, Ramsay will almost certainly put them to death on the spot, rather than keeping them alive for his sport."

"Aye," Stannis said again. "It is in his nature to play with his food. I had hoped to persuade Lady Asha not to go, as she is the key to the Iron Islands – in exchange for my sparing her brother's life, she gave me her word to wed Ser Justin Massey and bring them under my purview. I need her alive. But if we do not attack, the Bastard is made aware that he holds valuable pieces. And we can both be sure, he will exploit it."

"I see." It was a bloody conundrum and no doubt about it, and Davos's battered head could not riddle out a solution. Either way, there could be no unqualified victory, and the only hope was to mitigate the damage. Theon offered his life in exchange for mine, knowing exactly what awaited him in Ramsay's lair. For all the ill and vitriol Davos had heard about the turncloak, that was no inconsiderable sacrifice. I cannot justly counsel Stannis to take his in return.

But if the king's very victory depended on it... to smite down the Dreadfort at last, clear away the Boltons for good and all... Davos yearned to see Ramsay pay for his crimes, for the north to be won and Stannis' war to be over. If he emerged from this as the triumphant conqueror, the liberator, there would be plenty of northmen eager to help him take the Iron Islands. Lady Asha's contribution would not be needed. I could go home, at last. After so long, Davos barely even remembered the merest shred of it. What would it be like, to wake up in the morning and to not be afraid? To hold my wife in my arms, to hear my sons laugh?

His throat felt thick. Evil done unto evil. There was no other choice.

"Your Grace," he said quietly. "We must attack."

Stannis looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. "Aye," he agreed. "We must."

Gods forgive me. Davos' blood was still tattooing a drumbeat behind his eyes, guilt and grief and agony. As the king turned to go, he blurted out, "Your Grace?"
Stannis glanced back. "What?"

"I must tell you. I am no longer fit to serve as your Hand, or even as your smuggler." Groaning with the effort, Davos lifted his arms. Dried blood was still crusted on the linen bandages, the useless clubs attached to the ends. "I . . . I am sorry."

Stannis sucked in his breath with a sound as if he'd been struck. "What devilry?"

"The Bastard's. He took my fingers. All of them, and left me not even the bones for luck." For the first time since his ordeal in the Dreadfort had begun, Davos felt as if he was about to weep. To come undone. To drown. "Please, my lord. Release me."

The king continued to stand as if struck by lightning. His head, when it finally came up, had a queer look, grim and fixed as a death mask, nigh on unholy. "Ramsay Bolton will pay," he said, in a voice like the thunder before a breaking storm. "Will pay, and pay dearly. I will rip apart the Dreadfort until no stone stands upon another, until the flayed man is nothing more than a memory, until the name of Bolton is only uttered as a curse and a vengeance upon these lands. On this, you have my word. And no, ser. I will not release you."

"My lord. . . I am no use, I would not – "

"I do not recall asking you." Stannis put his hood up. "You have never once turned your back on me, Ser Davos, nor balked at the hardest and most terrible tasks I should require of you. You have given me good counsel when I would not have heard it, and lost all for the sake of honor, and loyalty. Why then should I turn my back on you?"

The onion knight was speechless. "Your Grace, I . . ."

"I care not for your excuses. You will be provisioned for until the end of your days, your lady wife and your small sons, and you are my Hand unless I say otherwise. I do not say otherwise. If I should fall in this assault, the men are to follow your leadership. Take them back to Castle Black to confer my crown upon my daughter Shireen. If she is dead. . . " The king hesitated. "I am not Lord Jon Arryn, to send you questing after all of my brother's bastards. It is a hard charge to lay on you, Ser Davos, but as I have said, you have never failed me. A king can adopt an heir of his choice, if the issue of his own body fails him. Very well. From this moment henceforth, if my daughter should not live, you are mine."

If Davos had thought he was shocked before, it was nothing compared to now. *Mine own seed could wear a crown. Steff or Stanny, the rulers of seven kingdoms. "Your Grace. . . no, a crabber's son with no fingers, born poor as dirt in the slums of Flea Bottom. . . do you mean to make them all revolt on the. . ."

"Have the high lords made such a marvelous show of it?" The corner of Stannis' mouth quirked in the barest, most terrifying hint of a smile. "And since when have you known me to concern myself with the opinion of the commons? Nay, I will hear no more. The Old King plucked Septon Barth from the library of the Red Keep to serve as Hand, and those forty years of peace and prosperity were due full as much to him as to Jaehaerys. If a blacksmith's son can do so well, I see no issue with a crabber's. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes."

"Good. As always, I expect you will obey. As well as – what was that?"

Davos blinked. "What was what?"
"That." Stannis turned, frowning, as the sound came again. Low and deep and distant in the night, the cry of a horn – a warhorn. "Has the remnants of the Bolton horde finally made it north through Moat Cailin?" He turned to one of his guards. "Go and learn who is coming."

The man bowed and hastened out of the tent, and Stannis' hand tightened on the hilt of his sword, the ersatz Lightbringer. *What does he think, to know that now beyond any doubt? That all along, the red woman was lying or incompetent, that even her spells and flames and flummeries could not deliver the item that she claimed was the very vouchsafing of his claim? Has he even thought that this proves him no Azor Ahai at all? It would make no matter to Stannis Baratheon whether or not he was the savior of the red priests' visions; he was still, simply, the legal heir after Robert's death, and to hell with all the trappings. But to suffer such a betrayal... even as much as he had disapproved of Melisandre's influence over his king, Davos could not feel glad for it. Is she even alive? What has transpired at the Wall?*

The call of the horn came again. Lord Manderly stirred. "Your Grace?"

"Aye?" Stannis did not move, tense as a hound on point.

"That... I know that horn. That is one of mine."

At these words, Davos was seized by a sudden, horrible hope. Was it possible that he was mistaken, that not all of the Manderly men who came north with him had died in the snow with the wights? Had some survived and held to their command to march on the Dreadfort, regardless of how tempting it must be to turn back to the comfort of home and hearth? Though if the wights are truly on the move in all their numbers, White Harbor is no refuge.

"One of yours?" Stannis was skeptical. "Ser Davos said that your son Wylis gave him command of a host, but I see none of them here."

Lord Wyman shot Davos a curious look, and he cringed. Nonetheless, Manderly was resolute. "Aye, I am certain. If they are come here, it can only be to fight on your side."

Stannis looked stunned. He had spent so long doggedly styling himself king by hook or by crook, insisting that men should fight for him merely because he had the right, and having nothing much to show for it but the loyalty of the mountain clans – a useful contingent, to be sure, but not even a single family in Westeros that was not already sworn to House Baratheon. For the Manderlys not only to make good on their promise, but to tangibly back it up... in that moment in his king's hollowed and haunted and hungry face, in the deep pits of his eyes and the uncertain cast to his hard mouth, Davos could see a man honestly confounded by human decency, who had never thought he would see it for himself, who barely even thought he merited it – and until now, had not cared. But in the hour of the wolf, in the mounting snows of winter before the fortress of a terrible enemy, if reinforcements had arrived for his bruised and battered men, for a battle that, if won, would change the course of Westerosi history forever –

Stannis swallowed. "I – I am obliged. Most obliged. House Manderly is as good and true a vassal as any king could hope for."

"Vassals, may be," Lord Wyman answered softly. "Or perhaps merely men, men who are not yet willing to relinquish the world to darkness, however grim the odds may be, however perilous the cost. I told it to your onion knight before, and I tell it to you now. The north remembers, Your Grace. The north remembers, and so this farce is through."

A shiver ran down Davos' back, as he in fact recalled exactly when Lord Wyman had said that to him. Now more horns were calling, and they could hear the flurry of boots and stomping and
shouting and clanging outside the tent, and then the flap whisked aside. Two mountain clansmen came marching in, escorting a man in furs and cloak and buckler and shield, a fiery red beard bristling from his muffler. They bowed to Stannis more or less in unison. "Y' Grace. Presentin' Edmure Tully, Lord of Riverrun. At your service."

"Lord Edmure?" Stannis' surprise was plain. "You are a long way from home, ser."

"Aye." The newcomer shrugged down his hood, revealing a thick mop of hair the same blazing auburn as his beard. "I was sent north by Ser Wylis Manderly in command of a host, to find Ser Davos Seaworth if he lived, and to take the Dreadfort in his stead if he did not."

"Then you have done quite well." Stannis gestured. "The former is there, the latter soon to come."

Ser Edmure's eyes flickered in surprise as he beheld Davos, then turned even more surprised to behold Lord Wyman. "The gods are good."

"God," Stannis corrected, in his usual pedantic fashion. "But we are well cheered to see you, my lord of Tully. How many men have you brought?"

"Three hundred. Near the last of the strength White Harbor could spare. Ser Wylis thought that the battle against this foe was the more pressing."

"And Rickon Stark? I am told he is there. How does he fare?"

Edmure's eyes flickered again. After a long moment, slightly too long, he said, "He is well."

"And White Harbor itself?" Lord Wyman broke in. "How is it defended?"

"Poorly," Edmure admitted unhappily, "but Ser Wylis has thrown the dice on breaking the Boltons for good and all here. He sent Addam Marbrand to the Vale in hopes in finding more men to fight against the wights."

"Marbrand," Stannis mused. "So he has been swayed from his Lannister masters?"

"Seems to be." It was plain that Edmure did not care for the subject.

"And thus if he is in service of Lord Manderly, and Lord Manderly in service of me, could other westermen possibly be induced to follow?"

"Not sure. The last I heard, they were throwing their support behind the stripling who's been making quite a good showing of things in the south. A pretender calling himself Aegon Targaryen."

"Another false king rises?" Stannis' anger was palpable. "Will there be no end of the usurpers I am plagued with? Very well. I shall deal with him as I did with Balon Greyjoy, with Joffrey Baratheon, with Robb Stark."

"How, Your Grace?" Davos blurted out. "With fire and dread sorcery? You have no leeches here, and nor the red woman."

Stannis shot him a withering look. "I need no reminding, onion knight. Yet my resources are not bereft entirely." He made a motion, and one of his guards drew nearer; the king spoke to him softly a moment, then beckoned him to depart. That settled, Stannis turned back to Edmure. "You have come just in time. We attack the Dreadfort at sunrise."
If there shall even be a sunrise. Davos had an odd feeling that they would not see the sun, not in the morning nor even again. The Long Night. He tried to tell himself that it was only a story, that of course the sun had to rise, the dawn to break. Yet there was that cold certainty that it would not. That the ice was rising, the fire burning out. That in the darkness, in the terrors, the monsters — whether man or no man, Bolton or wight or worse — were only now beginning to wake.

The end of all things.

Davos Seaworth closed his eyes, settled back, and began to pray.
Jeyne

The beacon atop Seal Rock was the first to go out. Ordinarily it burned by both night and day, visible even in fog or snow to warn ships away from the treacherous tide races that outlay the haven of White Harbor, but as she was gazing out the window of her lonely tower chamber, she saw it dim, darken, and then extinguish entirely. The blackness that pressed in to fill the space seemed nearly solid, breathing, devoid of the light of star or moon, a velvet curtain that fell across the world. When she looked again, she could not even make out the shape of the ringfort.

A shiver ran down Jeyne's back, and she turned away, telling herself it was nothing. No need to borrow trouble. Officially, she had been scanted no convenience or comfort; the room was well equipped with a warm fire and curtained bed and table on which a hot supper had been laid; if there was anything else she required, she had only to ask. There was even a cradle for Robbie – they would have put him in the care of a nurse, but she refused to let him out of her sight, too fearful of the whispers and mutters about the "monster." And with Rickon Stark missing, it had been rendered twice as important. Jeyne had heard it bruited about that Ser Wylis should appoint himself the crippled infant prince's regent and assume command of the North in his name – whatever could be more logical, considering that Manderly was already in charge of its defense? If Rickon could not be found, it became exceeding likely. And Jeyne knew what became of the foreign mothers of underage heirs. The servants might still call her "Your Grace," but that courtesy wore thinner every day. She was a virtual prisoner.

Unwillingly, she could not help but think that if Ser Addam was still here, her situation would be very different. He had paid a call before departing for the Vale, to be sure that she was well taken care of, and had assured her that this indisposition would only be temporary. "When I set out to find you," he added, "I promised Lord Edmure that I would see you taken safely to Ashemark, your child given knighthood or an honorable marriage. I still mean to hold to it, my lady."

She bit her lip, bitterly certain that he was mocking her. There was no hope of knighthood for Robbie, and small chance of a marriage either. Still, she made herself mouth her courtesies. "I thank you, ser."

Marbrand paused, turned as if to go, then back. "I had hoped this would please you," he said gently. "I know I have much to answer for, but in time – "

"In time? You sent the raven that murdered my family. Do you think you can atone for that with a few crumbs of kindness?"

Marbrand shook his head sadly. "I have no apology to make it right, my lady. Nothing I can say in my own defense. But if you were to come home to the westerlands – my sister Genna will be glad to see you again, and your son – "

"Would be as much a plaything for the northmen as he is here. And I would go as a prisoner myself, not a lady, far less a – "

"Would you like to go as a lady?" He met her eyes. "My lady?"

A hot flush burned from the pit of her stomach to the crown of her head, until she could neither turn away nor swallow nor even shape a word. She wanted to plead with him not to go and leave her in this literal wolf's den, but he had. The northmen frightened her, Ser Wylis frightened her more, and White Harbor itself might itself stand in the path of a gathering storm. Ser Wylis was staking everything on sending his ships and men away, a go-for-broke gamble on the Dreadfort and the
Vale. If some enemy made it here, there would be only the household men-at-arms and a few old knights to defend them. And if so, they were like to be slaughtered in their beds.

*Don’t be absurd.* She should not forget that she was dealing with the man who had calmly torched the entire Lannister fleet at anchor, contrived Rickon Stark’s return from the land of the flesh-eating savages, and would either find him again or die trying. For obvious reasons, Ser Wylis had kept the fact of Rickon’s renewed absence as quiet as possible, clearly expecting it to be a minor bump in the road if at all, and that being so, he clearly did not intend to get chopped to bits beforehand. He would have made proper arrangements for the defense of the city and the keep, would have left nothing to chance.

So Jeyne reminded herself, again, supposing that she should see to supper; she hadn’t been hungry when the servants brought it and was not more so now, but she had to keep her strength up. If nothing else, for Robbie. She took a step toward the table, was about to light a brand for the candles, when –

There. Again. Closer. The great lamp on the inner harbor wall had just gone out as well. Braziers still burned, pinpricks of light along the parapets, but even as Jeyne watched, those too were overtaken by the advancing shadow. She had been resting her hand on the windowpane, but a sudden sear of cold made her hiss and snatch it back. Ice was spidering up it in a fine trellis before her eyes, reflecting her own faint, frightened face in the mirror of the glass.

Jeyne’s heart was starting to race. *The sentries would have winded their horns if something was seriously wrong.* This reassurance, however, was presently withering to a husk. She recalled that conversation with Ser Wylis in the Merman’s Court, where he had sent Edmure and Ser Addam on their respective errands, and his dire warning. If the army of wights who had attacked the Manderly men in the snow, outside the Dreadfort, were still making their slow, shambling, inexorable way south, unchecked by fight or flame, they could reach White Harbor in days.

*What if they are here?* What if the sentries had not sounded their horns because they were already dead, necks broken by the soft pale dead hands of things that scaled the walls and fell on them in the darkness before they even had time to draw their swords? What if all the rumors were true? Growing up safe and sheltered in the prosperous westerlands, Jeyne had never once counted the monsters of the old tales as anything more than wet-nurse fables, scary stories for blustery autumn nights. But now, as the truth took more and more horrible shape in her head, it all went out the window.

She stood frozen a moment longer, then whirled. No matter how much every instinct screamed at her not to leave Robbie behind, she had to – he would wake, he would cry, he would slow her down. He’d be safest here until she returned, and if she did not . . . no. There was to be no thinking of that. Sweeping her skirts aside, she knelt on the ashy hearth and stoked the fire to a roar, until it lashed her face like the breath of a dragon. *Would we had one now.* Then she hefted the poker, threw on her heavy cloak, and shouldered the door aside. She barred it firmly shut behind her, then turned and started to run.

She hammered on every door she passed, desperate to rouse any occupants inside. A stream of sleepy shouts and curses followed, but she could only spare enough time to scream at them to get up and dress. Then she continued her headlong flight down the tower steps toward the central keep of the New Castle, where Lord Manderly kept his apartments. There still had been no sound from outside, and when she chanced a glimpse out one of the arrow slits, she saw that *all* the braziers on the wall had been quenched; the village was dark as well. Something, some many many things, were climbing the hill, moving out there in the night, crashing like a flood tide into unsuspecting, sleeping White Harbor. Just as she’d feared. *Red slaughter.* Whatever preparations Ser Wylis had
made for the defense of the city, even as clever and foresighted as he was, were being crumbled and cast aside like chaff. The dead were coming, were coming, were here.

Jeyne pressed both hands to her mouth and backed away. She had gone so numb that she tripped over her own feet and almost fell, but recovered and managed to complete the descent without breaking her neck. Then, the briefest interlude to catch her breath, she tore across the deserted hall to the private corridors beyond. "Lord Manderly? Lord Manderly!"

The air smelled wrong here. Heavy, dark, cold, rotten. There was some sort of shining liquid spreading lazily on the floorstones, and Jeyne skidded in it, going to one knee. She pushed herself upright, and saw that the stains on her skirt were as red as a weirwood leaf, as a traitor's crossbow piercing his king's heart. Red. Red. Red. It always came back to red.

A queer madness took hold of Jeyne. I am too late. Of course. If the wights had been coming from the north, they would have reached the keep and the castle first, then spilled over into the city and the harbor. What she had taken for the beginning of the attack was in fact nearly the end. The sentries were dead, had been dead for hours, likely taken from behind as they stared out to sea, never knowing what was unfolding in the castle behind them. To achieve the seizure of keep and village almost simultaneously. . . gods be good. There must be thousands. Thousands.

If Jeyne stopped to think, even to breathe, everything was lost. Somehow, madly, she kept running, slamming down the corridor to the heavy door at the end. Manderly's two bodyguards lay outside, limbs sprawled in unnatural directions like a spider trodden under a man's boot. They were on their stomachs, but their eyes stared up at her in glazed stupefaction, blood still trickling from the corners of their mouths.

No. No. She could not enter this room, this place, and live. But the only other choice was to turn back, to return to Robbie and huddle in the darkness and wait to die. And throughout that long, terrible flight from Riverrun to Greywater Watch, from losing Ser Brynden, to hearing of the death of her entire family, to being abandoned by the northmen when her son was born a deformed cripple, to her incarceration and uncertain fate here, Jeyne Westerling had not yet turned back.

She flung herself through the door, and into Ser Wylis' chambers.

There were two of them. Two dead men, closing in on Manderly like mindless, hunting sharks. The smoking corpses of four more showed where the Lord of White Harbor had put up a terrific fight, but six wights were too many even for him, and Jeyne could not see if he was moving. The surviving two were turning in vague cognizance of her arrival, but they were slow and stupid. That gave her the merciful instant she needed to throw down her poker, snatch the red-hot one from the hearth instead, and drive it with both hands, haft-deep, into the first wight's chest.

It kept coming, impaling itself further on the burning rod even as its pale rotten flesh started to smoke and hiss and peel back in gobbets, thrusting with mad animal strength, black hands groping for her throat. But there was a sound, a deep belching roar, and it went up in flames almost anticlimactically, its literal dead weight ripping the poker out of her hands as it fell.

There was still one more, its blank eyes reflecting the firelight like an animal's as it stalked closer. Jeyne scrambled for her makeshift weapon, but it was stuck on something inside the thrashing, burning corpse of the first, and she could not get it loose. It scorched her hands as she pulled wildly – and then, as she saw death looming over her, something grabbed it from behind, until its head lolled forward with the pop of rotten sinews. It went down, still fighting, and Ser Wylis Manderly, white as a sheet himself, shoved it into the fire. There was another wet whoomp as it went up, and the flare dazzled Jeyne's aching eyeballs anew.

"Go where?" Her voice sounded dull, matter-of-fact. "There's nothing left. Nowhere."

"No, you must..." Ser Wylis cut off with another grunt. "You must. Should have let you stay in Greywater, not brought you back to move still more in this damnable game. You have been played and played, child, and only for grief and death... forgive me, gods forgive me. go..."

"I can't." Jeyne staggered to the fat lord and knelt at his side, frantically searching for the damage, but his tunic was a sucking crimson ruin from where the wights had ripped his belly open like a hog for slaughter. I can't help him, she realized. I can't. They've killed him. How on earth Ser Wylis had managed to kill the last wight with half his vitals hanging out was an end worthy of a hero in a song, but she was done and through with songs, never wanted to hear another haunting ballad of tragic lovers, or a glorious death, or any at all, so long or little as she had left to live. Music will drive me mad. "My lord, I. . ."

Ser Wylis' bloody hand fumbled for hers, catching it firmly away from the wound. "Leave it, child. It is over. My lord father... if Ser Edmure should find him, tell him that I did not fail him. Whether Rickon or Sansa or any of them... let there be a Stark in the north again." His breathing was growing faster, shallower, whistling. "Do not weep, my lady. All nights, even the longest ones, must end. Be brave but a while longer."

Jeyne could not answer. She merely sat there with his head in her lap, his great chest heaving as he struggled for the life that was leaving him. Then she said, "But you... the Manderly cause... the defense of White Harbor, everything you fought and suffered for..."

Ser Wylis coughed a chuckle. "I have children. Strong lasses. I fear not for the survival of my House. My Wynafryd... she will be the Lady of White Harbor now... help her, however you can. And my lady wife... she will be desolate that the gods should take me from her now, so soon after springing me from captivity with the Lannisters. But I have lived... a good life. I do not regret... what is done. Rickon... your lad... do what you can for them as well, then..."

She waited, but he did not continue. In a sudden terror, she pushed his shoulder. "My lord? Lord Wylis? My lord? What should I do next? My lord?"

He didn't answer. His eyes gazed at the ceiling, clear and empty. He was gone.

Jeyne let out a slow breath, then let him slide from her lap to the floor. She should have said prayers, but those had been spent, and why give him any of the traditional remembrances when she already knew what had to come next? He had been touched by the wights, murdered by them. He would rise.

There was no hope of moving him by herself. Jeyne lurched to her feet, snatched the lamp from the mantle, and broke it over Ser Wylis' body, drenching him in whale oil. Then she pulled a fresh fagot from the woodpile and thrust it into the hearth, stirring the remaining embers, until she got a flare of flame. She blew on it, stoking it, until it was fully ablaze. Then with a whispered apology, she threw it.

The whale oil caught immediately in a greasy white-hot blaze, and for a moment, she thought she saw Ser Wylis sitting up, raising a hand to accuse her. Her heart stopped, but it was only a phantom, a dancing dream. She turned away as the heat scorched her, unwilling to watch him burn; she had to run, she had to find them. Do what you can. He must have thought there was still some use for her, something beyond merely the mother of a monster. I must.
The room was starting to turn to inferno, but its walls were stone; it would not spread. Jeyne turned away, almost tripping over the wights, and crawled for the door, clutching her poker awkwardly in her blistered hands. Outside was cooler, but not by much, currents of hot and cold air colliding, whistling down the corridor like a vengeful spirit. _Don't look back._ She gained speed, running. She slipped in the blood again, but this time she did not fall. _Don't look back._

Jeyne reached the end of the hall and spilled out into the Merman's Court. Here at last she saw the result of her frantic call to arms: torches burned, steel flashed, men shoved and shouted, and someone was screaming about the need to hold the keep, that it was madness and slaughter out there and that if they went to meet it, they were done for. Someone else was shouting that it was too late, they were done for already, they had no fleet, they had no fight, they had no men. Only death waiting, hunting in the dark. In all the madness, nobody even noticed Jeyne.

Robbie. I have to get back to him. The thought was locked in her head, driving her back to the tower stairs, but there were too many people in the way and she was pushed and jostled from side to side. A third voice was bellowing for Lord Wylis, that they should see if there was enough fire left for the mangonels, the ones that had sunk the Lannister fleet, if they could spit wrath and ruin at the wights, light chunks of pitch or bales of hay or anything they had to hand that would burn. The irony almost made her laugh. _You spent your fury too soon, my lord. You should have saved it for the true enemy._

Realizing that turned her mind bizarrely, oddly clear. She would still cut the throat of any Frey she happened upon, but there was no longer time for it. No time for any human rivalry, for any thought except survival, every desperate gamble the Manderlys had made for victory. This was it. The very end.

She was still struggling through the crowd, trying to gain the tower stairs, when she heard the door break.

A sudden, sickening chill swept over the court, guttering the torches to cinders. In the sputtering blackness, the world tilted and shifted, and then suddenly she was on her knees, knocked and buffeted by the throng of feet trampling above her. Desperate, she kept on crawling, knowing nothing but that she must reach her child, her Robb, her only son. _Did Lady Catelyn think the same, at the Twins? As the drums sounded and the pipes skirled, as death came walking in from the night?_ No, she must not think of that, she must not, only –

She pushed herself upright, spitting blood from a broken lip. The hall had been shrouded in shadow, but she heard the high keening on the very edge of sound, saw the elegant, knife-slender white shapes that glided sinuously through the door. Saw the burning blue eyes, saw glittering blades raised, knew that it would be cold butchery, that this was it, that all the suffering and all the madness had only brought them to this. If there was any memory left in the north, it would crumble, all crumble, torn down like ruins, to darkness, to ash and ice, to the night that never ended.

And then, she saw the wolves.

_Grey Wind,_ was her first, mad thought. _Grey Wind, back from the dead._ Of course it was not, could not possibly be, but as the direwolves leapt, she half believed it. Two of them, big as ponies, one grey with burning gold eyes, like enough to her husband's wolf to stop her heart, and the other black as night, eyes a lucent, savage green. Desperately she tried to recall the names of the wolves belonging to the five Stark children; Robb had proudly told her the tale of finding the pups in the summer snows. Grey Wind, of course, slain with his master. Lady, his sister Sansa's, life unjustly ended on the kingsroad by Cersei Lannister's vengeance. Ghost, the red-eyed white one, gone north.
with his brother – no, cousin – Jon to the Wall, likely dead as well if Jon was. Summer, his brother Bran's – but Lady Jyana Reed had said that Bran was gone forever to the trees. Yet the great black one had to be Rickon's beyond all doubt, Shaggydog, meaning that the boy must also be still here somewhere. And that would make the other –

_Nymeria?_ Jeyne did not know, could not dare to hope, or do anything besides stare as the beasts crashed into the Others, jaws wrenching at crystalline armor, running with black blood, snarling and snapping ferociously as the fey fingers tried to get hold of them, clawed in the thick ruffs at their throats, as blades went skittering and screeching away across the floor. Vicious as the assault was, however, two direwolves alone could not possibly turn this tide, could not stop it, and the big grey one already had a deep, half-healed wound in its – her – shoulder, a smoking black scar. Whatever dangers and darkness she had already faced to get here, she couldn't –

"Stark!" a voice screamed. "Stark! Stark and the North! _The North! THE NORTH!"

As the cry started to sink to earth, a thousand more surged up to catch it, fling it skyward again. With that, the living men in the Merman's Court began to move. Snuffed torches were kindled anew. Dropped swords were snatched up. And with a roar to match the wolves, what felt like the whole of White Harbor charged headlong, heedless, at the Others.

Everything turned to madness. Searing contrails of flame lashed at those unholy ice-clad monsters, as the wolves lunged and leapt and bit, teeth and claws splintering them, bringing them down, as men thrust blazing brands into them before they could rise, the screech of mortal steel meeting supernal blades, men dying, men living, men screaming for mercy, men giving no mercy, animated by a furious transcendence. The advance of Others was broken, men pouring through their ranks, hacking and hewing, and the demons seemed to be falling back, driven by fire and wolves and screams. "Stark! Stark! Stark! The North! The North! The North!"

_The North._ Jeyne was smiling, she realized. Almost laughing. Here on the abyss, where life and death were dice thrown in the Stranger's hand, she was free. It was over, done. Complete. In her head, Robb smiled one last time, then turned to smoke and stardust, gone. At rest. Free. Free. Free.

Jeyne slid down the wall. She was overwhelmed by a gratitude more profound that anything she'd ever known, draining her and undoing her. She watched, detached from her body, floating above it, as the battle raged on, somehow very far from her, not reaching her. As the world kept turning. As hope survived, in the face of every ludicrous odd, for one more night. Until at last, in the shattered, smoking, silent aftermath, the big black wolf stalked up to her and bared his teeth, and she raised a hand. "Shaggydog?" she whispered. "Rickon?"

He cocked his head. She could not tell if he was about to rip out her throat. Perhaps it was deserved, but let it be as it would. She was far beyond any fear of death.

The wolf whined. Then he lowered his head, and licked her hand.

Jeyne let out a ragged, gusting breath she must have been holding all night. Slowly as an old woman, she got to her feet. The other wolf, the grey bitch, had come bounding up to join her brother, and the two of them trotted to the tower stairs, which were choked with corpses. The wolves dragged them away, clearing the path for Jeyne, and she broke into a run, up and up and up. There was a distant crack of red on the eastern horizon, just visible through the windows, the only hint of dawn. _This is far from over._

She reached the tower door. It was still barred, and she wrenched it away, would have broken it with her bare hands if need be. Then she shoved it open, and fell through into her bedchamber.
The first and only thing she saw was her son. Peacefully and completely fast asleep, undisturbed and unharmed, in his cradle, just as she had left him. By the looks of things, he had slumbered happily through the entire battle. *The northmen defended him. The men at the foot of the stairs, they would not let the dead pass. At the uttermost end, they still gave their lives for the memory of the King in the North and his son, no matter how small and broken and useless.*

Jeyne let out another breath, shaking from head to toe. Then she lifted him out and held him close against her chest, sobbing.

Once she had calmed, once he had woken, once she had changed his clouts and fed him, Jeyne dared to put him in his sling and venture back downstairs to find out how bad it was. Bloody bad enough, from the looks of things. But the appearance of the wolves and the northerners' heroic charge had forced the wights and Others into full-blown retreat, and the only men moving around the hall were living ones, cleaning up the mess and shaking their heads; as miraculous as their deliverance was, it was only temporary. The undead would return tonight, and the night after, and the one after that. Fending them off just once had already gutted White Harbor to a skeleton – but that skeleton was, nonetheless, yet standing. *We will make the end of brave men.*

And yet, Jeyne was still not very frightened. Not anymore. She stood in the blasted remnants of the Merman's Court, hugging Robbie and observing the efforts. Someone was trying to corral the wolves, having apparently likewise realized that they could lead them to the missing Rickon, but the beasts were having none of it, sniffing the corpses as if in assessment of their suitability for a meal. Then the big grey bitch whined to her black brother, and he padded after her, out of the hall. The last Jeyne saw of them, they were loping down the castle steps, on their way back to the wild to hunt the enemy. *They will not wait for nightfall.*

Ser Wylis' demise had been discovered by now, and Wynafryd Manderly was located and brought to the hall, along with her mother and her younger sister Wylla, to be broken the news. The girls took it stoically, though Lady Leona fainted; the poor woman, her husband had been her whole life. This meant Wynafryd was now in charge of commanding the defenses and tactical maneuvers that her father and grandfather had masterminded so brilliantly, and Jeyne, remembering Ser Wylis' dying entreaty to help his daughter however she could, decided to offer a comforting word at least. But she had barely taken a step when one of the few surviving guardsmen came pelting in. "My lady – in the harbor – there's dozens of them, dozens –"

Wights? Jeyne's heart seized up. *Is this our end after all?*

"The dead?" Wynafryd asked urgently, apparently suspecting the same.

The man-at-arms shook his head, still gulping for air. "No, my lady. Ships."

*Ships?* That wasn't possible. Ser Addam could not have returned (if he would at all) from his recruitment mission to the Vale so speedily, and he had taken only half a dozen, nothing in such numbers. Nor could Jeyne think of any Westerosi lord who could still command anything close to such power, much less who would have thought to send them north. *Dear gods, is it the ironmen?* Had Euron Crow's Eye grown so great in strength or arrogance as to bring his fleet to face the full blast of winter, to prove that he would succeed where his nephew Theon had failed? It must be. Who else? *Dear gods.*

Jeyne's throat was as dry as parchment, but she moved. Followed Wynafryd, Wylla, and the rest of the remaining Manderly men out onto the parapets (the insensate Lady Leona having been removed to her rooms). The biting wind cut into them as they strained, looking down, down, down to the ships materializing out of the onyx-dark dawn sea. If it *was* a Greyjoy fleet, it was the least ordered one ever seen, with half the craft looking as if they had barely survived a sinking and the
rest in no tidy estate either. Nor were they the swift, lethal longships of the Iron Islanders, but a motley collection of vessels both large and small, flying a vast panoply of banners and flags; no two were the same. Refugees, Jeyne realized suddenly. But from where?

Wynafryd Manderly, again, was plainly wondering the same. "Go down to meet them," she ordered her men. "Let them enter the harbor, but bring their captains to speak with me."

This command was duly obeyed. If the arriving parties had had the slightest notion of what happened the last time a fleet dropped anchor in White Harbor and sent their captains ashore for parley, they might have turned tail and not stopped until they returned from whence they came, but (luckily for them) they were altogether ignorant. After a period of great confusion, the sounds of creaking wood and snapping canvas and slapping ropes blowing on the breeze, a small delegation was extracted and brought up to the New Castle for an audience. Aside from several waterlogged knights and windblown merchants, there was a tall fair-haired man with the look of a soldier, a beautiful woman with half her face covered by a silken veil, and a scrawny, dirty, scruffy youth whom Jeyne could not be certain was girl or boy. At last, she decided it the former, but would not have liked to draw closer. The girl had solemn grey eyes, brown hair, and a long face; there was the look of a northerner to her for certain, but as well an utter disconnection, an odd blankness, as if she did not quite know who or where she was and was too proud to ask. There was nearly something familiar about her, in fact, but Jeyne shook her head, dismissing it.

"My lady." It was the tall man who spoke, breaking the pall of silence that had fallen over the Merman's Court. "May I be informed as to whom I have the honor of addressing myself?"

"Wynafryd Manderly," the young woman answered composedly. "Mistress of White Harbor in the wake of my father Wylis' death and my grandfather Wyman's disappearance. And your name, my lord?"

"Ser Justin Massey, in service of the one true king of Westeros, Stannis Baratheon. We thank you for receiving us, but as your grandfather executed His Grace's envoy and Hand, Lord Davos Seaworth, and publicly proclaimed his loyalty to the Iron Throne, you will understand that I do not – "

He was cut off as Wynafryd laughed aloud. "Ser, there is plainly a great deal you do not know of what our House has done to aid your king, and what I could tell you if I had a mind – where to find him, what battles he fights, and the risk we have run to deceive the Lannister boy king and save the onion knight's life. Much and more indeed."

Ser Justin blinked, then stared. "You – you what?"

"Did I misspeak?"

"No, my lady, but – "

"Ser," Wynafryd Manderly said again. "We have this very night barely survived an attack by Others and wights alike, all the fury of the things that have crossed the broken Wall and come to destroy the world of men. We have not the time for fools and fables. So you will answer me, and swiftly. How is it that you come here, and in this company?"

Massey blinked again, opened and shut his mouth, and then, as was usual for mere mortals who had the misfortune of dealing with House Manderly, found himself thoroughly overmatched. "I was on a mission to Braavos for His Grace," he admitted grudgingly. "In search of gold and swords and men to reinforce his cause, as he has been hard pressed with his travails in the north. I succeeded, if you may call it that. The ships you see in your harbor now are all that is left of the
city. A great tidal wave came from nowhere and drowned it, sent it to the depths. It is no more."

A shocked murmur circled the hall, and even Wynafryd looked stunned. "Braavos is gone?"

"Aye, my lady. Sunk into the sea with scarce a trace. These are the survivors. We sailed for White Harbor in hopes of finding the king – or at the least, a chance. Have we come too late?"

"Perhaps not," Wynafryd said, after a long moment. "We have dispatched three hundred men, near the last of our remaining strength, under the command of Ser Edmure Tully, to find and reinforce Stannis in the north. Ser Davos, if he lives, has likewise done us good and loyal service. We are no enemies of yours, my lord. And with the Long Night upon us, all living men must set aside their rivalries and band together to fight the dead. That is the only battle left which matters."

Ser Justin looked flattened, as well he might. "If that is so," he managed, "then we too must leave again at once to find His Grace, if you will provide us the intelligence on his position. We have our possession a weapon that could prove vital in the cause."

At that, the woman next to him spoke for the first time. Jeyne had originally taken her for Massey's wife, but from the look of slightly awestruck horror the knight regarded her with, she revised that opinion. "That is not precisely correct," the veiled woman said. "I have the weapon, ser. If you desire it, you will barter for it."

Wynafryd's gaze sharpened. "And who are you, my lady?"

"I am called the Summer Maid. Formerly a courtesan of Braavos." The woman inclined her head. "Now, once again, I am no one."

Ser Justin shot her that look. In an undertone, he said, "I need that horn."

"And you shall have it. For a price."

Massey hesitated. "Name it."

"Her." The Summer Maid indicated the shabby urchin with the northern look, the one who had unsettled Jeyne before. "Little enough to pay, don't you think?"

"Her? Why?"

"Because there is unfinished business with a girl. None of your concern. The Horn or no, ser?"

Ser Justin was plainly discomfited, but had no choice. "The Horn."

"Very good." The courtesan smiled and turned back to Wynafryd. "Indeed, Massey does now possess the weapon. It would be best indeed if you hurried him north with it."

"Very – very well." The young woman frowned. "But what of the rest of the refugees? We have not the resources to feed and clothe such a great multitude, and as I said, the Others will come again. If they will stay here, and admittedly we could use the extra hands, they must fight."

"If you tell me where to find Stannis, they will do whatever is needful."

This appeared to be a bargain that both sides could agree to, and Ser Justin and Wynafryd withdrew to hammer out the details. As they did, the courtesan moved to take the filthy girl firmly in hand, her price for whatever Horn she had just bargained to the knight, and Jeyne noticed something odd about her. Not merely the thousand-yard stare of the eyes, or the emptiness of the face, but
something on her shoulder, beneath the battered rags of her clothes. A scar. A long, snaking black scar, burned and half-healed, exactly similar to the wound of –

The wolf.

Dear gods.

The wolf.
The drums beat and beat in his head like distant thunder. He could hear them but faintly, a steady tattoo keeping march and muster and time, shuddering through the heavy stone walls, deep and dark and menacing. He did not know if he should find them reassuring or terrifying. They meant Stannis was still outside in the snow, closing his jaws on the Dreadfort, and that at any moment, he might decide on an attack that would spell the end of them. *I need not fear that,* Theon reminded himself. All he needed was to get his hands on the sword, and die close enough to the gate that the Baratheons would be the first to find his body when they broke through. *I can. I can do it. I can.* So he thought desperately, even as every step took him and Asha deeper and deeper into the heart of hell.

Immense dark walls climbed into the vaults above them, stained and scratched by countless damned souls over the centuries. This was where the Bolton man-at-arms had conducted them, doubtless to await Lord Ramsay's triumphal entrance, or perhaps merely to slowly starve them to death. *We should be so lucky.* Theon had lost track of how long, exactly, they had been down here, but it hadn't been more than twelve hours. *We will have to catch rats.* He was good at that. He'd catch some for Asha too. She'd come with him, he had to take care of her. *There is straw down here. I'll make us a place to sleep.* They could keep warm together. Maybe she'd even sing.

His sister, however, was not taking their imprisonment nearly as sanguinely. She'd already prowled around the chamber thrice, prodding for any weak spots, tensing any time they thought they heard someone outside, every inch of her strung up for a fight. Theon had finally had to tell her to sit down and save her strength. This unholy waiting was Ramsay's signature. He used the anticipation of the horror against you, as much or more as the horror itself, until you were driven into the sick, shivering places of your mind, mistrusting every kind gesture, desperate only to avoid further pain. *Reek, Reek, it rhymes with bleak.*

Despite himself, Theon dozed. He had slept here a thousand nights before, in the very pits of filth and vermin; this deserted dark hall was a palace by comparison. He was wracked with exhaustion by the grueling march from Winterfell; Stannis had allowed barely any leisure for rest, and whenever they did stop, there was always the threat of being torn apart by wights in the darkness. Theon slipped deeper, into the throes of a demented, repetitive dream, until he was jerked rudely back into wakefulness by the sounds of a furious scuffle.

Theon scrambled around on all fours, panicking. His first instinct was to curl up and shield his head; Ramsay had liked to awaken him with blows or cuffs or buckets of freezing water, or the bitches after they'd been starved for three days. Nothing was attacking him at the moment, but he could dimly make out the shape of Asha and someone else, struggling in the corner. *Oh gods.* All he could see was Ramsay and Mance, fighting in the snow, and the bloody end written by a slash of the Bastard's knife, because he was too much a coward to intervene. *Get the sword. Get the sword.*

But even as a confused surge of terrified bravery propelled him forward, Theon realized that Asha's foe wasn't Ramsay, but rather the Bolton man-at-arms who'd brought them down here. And in fact, he seemed to have been forcibly separated from a heavy cauldron of ice and snow, which plainly he had been intending to dump over Theon before being interrupted. Asha had him by the throat, and had made a good-faith start at throttling him; his face was beginning to turn a dark purple as he wheezed for air. Much as the bugger deserved it, Theon knew something else, someone else, was staging this farce, and he ran forward, pulling desperately at Asha's straining arm. "No – Asha, wait, don't, it's a trap, it's a trap, he wants –"
"Oh no," a voice drawled from the doorway. "Don't stop her. Nothing gets me harder than watching a bitch murder someone."

Theon went as cold as if he'd been doused in the contents of the cauldron after all. Terror snapped his spine straight, and he stepped away from Asha, trying to keep her behind him, as she let go of the twitching flunkey and turned like a stalking cat. Together, both of them faced down Ramsay, who was lounging against the jam and applauding sardonically. His pale eyes were lit with anticipation, his tongue flicking out to rim his thick lips. "That was quite an arousing display, wasn't it? Didn't you think so, Reek? But you'd have nothing to want it with, would you? Unless I need to unman you again?"

Theon flinched. "My name isn't Reek," he squeaked.

"And they accuse me of not learning my lesson," Ramsay grinned. "It was good of you to bring another specimen for my collection, though – I expect I'll have several bitches named Asha soon, the fight she'll give me. Touching. Where was she before, when you were suffering? Letting you. She doesn't care so much for you as all that. Remember that song you sang for me? How she played with you, how you grabbed at every bit of her as quick as you could when you thought she was slutty wet Esgred? Go on. Do it again. I want to watch."

"N-no."

Ramsay raised an eyebrow. "You've gotten even stupider. Difficult, but I applaud your effort."

"Bastard." It was Asha who spoke, circling out from behind Theon and staring the master of the Dreadfort down with a stare that should have been arrested for murder. "If you want either of us, you can come here and fight for it."

Ramsay touched the sword sheathed at his waist and drew it an inch, letting the unearthly red-gold glow flame across the dungeon. "Thought you'd never ask."

"No!" Theon blurted out. There was no standing against Lightbringer, he knew that. It was a gods-damned sword of legend, the weapon of heroes. However in hellfire they were supposed to get their hands on it, fighting Ramsay straight up wouldn't do. "Wait!"

"Going to fuck your sister, Reek? With what? I'll call you Jaime Lannister, cut off your hand, make you slip your rotting fingers up her cunt. Want that, do you?"

"No," Theon repeated again. "You like forcing people to make choices, my lord. You like games. Let's – let's play something different." His voice was shaking, but he forced himself to hold his tormentor's basilisk stare. "Think of a new one."

Ramsay considered a moment, then clapped his hands. "I have it! One of you gets to eat. The other one doesn't."

Asha and Theon exchanged a glance. "And?"

"And," Ramsay went on, "the one who eats comes with me. The other stays here."

Both the Greyjoys grimaced. They knew that there could be no profit to continually coming up with new scenarios; they would all be equally indebted to Ramsay's utterly perverse imagination. After a long, fraught moment, Asha blurted out, "I'll do it."

Ramsay shook his head. "Depriving your poor brother of food?" He glanced to Theon. "See. She cares for you so terribly much."
"No, I'll..." No, no, he didn't want it, he didn't. He wanted to cry, to come undone, to beg for mercy, but he would only waste his breath, and the words came pouring out of him like sickness. "No, Asha. You're still whole, you can't let him ruin you too. With me, it... doesn't matter as much. I'm the turncloak. I know, I know. I know lots of things. See? Reek. I know that too. It rhymes with freak." He lurched forward on his mismatched feet. Asha was the stronger, he should let her go... but he knew too well what Ramsay did to women, and he could no longer countenance sending someone else to take the punishment in his place. "My name is Reek," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm yours, Lord Ramsay."

Ramsay's grin widened. "So you are. And for being such a good Reek, you'll get to have your supper. You remember your rats, I'm sure. I'll even have one roasted up nice and crisp. You'll like that. You used to eat them raw, didn't you?"

Asha's fingers cut into Theon's arm like a vise. "No."

Theon stared at her helplessly. She was so brave, but she didn't have the faintest fathom of what they were up against, the odds they faced just to survive tonight. "Yes."

Ramsay applauded. "And we've now learned an important lesson on the value of asking politely. Come, children. We don't have all day."

With that, he reached out, grabbed Theon by the shoulder, and pulled him away. They took a few steps – then stopped. Not due to any sudden change of heart on his part, or even a new ghoulish idea, but because Asha was in his way.

"You leave this room," she said, voice barely a whisper, "you're going through me."

"Am I?" Ramsay licked his lips. "I like that idea."

"I don't think so."

Ramsay let go of Theon and drew Lightbringer. "I do, and that's what – "

Whatever else he had been going to say, however, was cut joltingly short as Asha lowered her head and charged him. She twisted away from his first slash, teeth bared, feral as only an ironborn warrior could be, the raider and reaver who had captained her own ship as well as any man. For once, Theon saw why their father had relied on her so heavily, been perfectly willing to ignore their cultural mistrust of women to bestow Asha with the most vital of his errands. But you fell. You fell. He barely remembered Lord Balon Greyjoy with anything besides fear. You fell from a bridge at Pyke and the crows ate your eyes. Too far from the watery halls now, too far from the kraken's bones. You were only a pompous old fool playing at glory. Like me. Like me. If he had ever been young, it was a thousand years and a thousand more.

Asha ducked again as Lightbringer seared over her head. And Theon moved. If he had known which gods to pray to, or even thought there was a god, perhaps he would have. But instead, remembering Mance again, remembering how he had been too craven to intervene in time, he flung himself on Ramsay's back like a wild animal, biting madly with his broken teeth.

He got a scrap of flesh between his jaws and ripped at it. Ramsay lurched around and swore and slammed him back into the stone wall, dazing Theon hard enough to see stars. Still he wouldn't let go, as he snapped and bit at Ramsay's neck like one of his own bitches at the kill. Thought he tasted blood, but knew it wasn't enough, it wasn't –

Ramsay wrenched back again, crushing Theon into the torch bracket. Theon screamed as he felt his
hair catch on fire, scorching his scalp, and he batted frantically to put it out. His grasp loosened and he fell hard, twisting his ankle underneath him, as Ramsay swung around on him, Lightbringer raised over his head in both hands, searing, the last thing he was ever going to see –

Until someone threw themselves in the way, and there was a hiss and a sear and a grunt, an indistinct struggle –

And then, her eyes fixed malevolently and unblinkingly on the Bastard, even as Lightbringer grated into her, Asha Greyjoy grinned.

Theon's scream caught in his throat. He could smell her burning, could smell it, but the wash of dark blood was quenching the flame, sputtering it low, until it burned only erratically, was barely alight at all. She managed to keep grinning even as her knees were buckling, as the steel started to turn dun and dull, as Ramsay struggled to drive it deeper but couldn't; the heat of the blade was already cauterizing the wound. Then Asha, with a final burst of strength, jerked them both over toward the cauldron, pulled the blade out of herself, and plunged it hilt-deep, smoking and steaming and spitting, into the ice.

Lightbringer made a noise, an ungodly noise, a nearly human scream, as the magic blade was extinguished altogether. Remnants of red glow remained, but Asha held it there until even those had started to go out. Theon was almost blinded by the gusting steam, then threw up his hands as he heard the cauldron explode, shards of red-hot metal flying everywhere. One gashed his leg, another his shoulder, and he whimpered and covered his head as the tempest roiled and rattled against the stone walls, momentarily veiling Asha and Ramsay's struggling figures from sight. Then they wrenched apart, and Asha went to her knees. Blood bloomed on her lips, the slash from her shoulder to her rib charred and smoking black. Without a word, the sword still locked in her fingers, she fell slowly forward and did not get up.

Ramsay stood above her, spitting blood himself. He did not appear nearly so amused as when he had watched her strangle his man-at-arms, and he stared at her with something between confusion and rage. It was hard to tell if she was breathing; the wound hadn't been that deep, Theon didn't think, but with what had just happened... the silence, dear gods, the silence, as if it would never end but only grow greater... even the drums had faded, as if the world was gripped in the thrall of it, as if time too had grown old and died, only a memory, nothing but a...

At last, Ramsay looked up. "Reek," he breathed. "Come here like a good lad."

Theon struggled mightily to resist, to defy, to be so brave, but the memories were too strong, the fear too deep. He took a step. *He is going to make me kill her. Pull the blade from her hand, now plain steel instead of fell sorcery, bury it through her heart to be sure there were no mistakes. But if it is in my hand... I could go for him, I could..."


Theon came closer.

"Now, Reek." Ramsay stooped, pried the sword from Asha's death grasp, and sheathed it again. "I do still want to watch you fuck her corpse, with your fingers or your tongue perhaps, but we don't have the time. Come with me."

Theon wanted desperately to lean down, to reach for her, to see if she was still alive; he couldn't tell. He felt frozen, clumsy, stupid, helpless. He followed.

Ramsay led him out of the hall and up a steep, twisting staircase. Theon could feel breaths of
bitterly cold air through the arrow slits, his mutilated feet skidding in the snow that sifted on the stone. I could grab him. I could take him from the back. Fall down the stairs together. One or both would break their necks. He could still taste Ramsay's blood on his tongue. He has something worse planned. I attacked him. Oh gods, I attacked him. He choked back a furious, demented giggle. Why need be afraid of anything again?

Finally, at the top, Ramsay opened a door into a gloomy tower chamber that Theon didn't recognize. His experience of the Dreadfort was mainly limited to its dungeons, its kennels, or worse. He didn't move, standing like a lump, as Ramsay lit the candles on the table, tall waxen tapers that looked unpleasantly as if they were made of a dead man's rendered fat. Then at last, he turned back to Theon and smiled, but with a queer, feral edge. "Get me a drink, Reek."

A drink? What kind of drink? Theon didn't know, didn't know, and the panic threatened to overtake him. My name is Theon. But Asha had been left behind, might well be dead, had put out Lightbringer's flames yet Ramsay still had it... Attack him. Attack him as she did. But he had once already, and was too weak, too. . .

"A. Drink." Ramsay pointed to the decanter on the sideboard, paired with a goblet. "Pour it."

Slowly, sickeningly, Theon stumbled forward. He managed to grasp it, lift it, tip it – then recoiled as the liquid splashed into the cup. In the low, flickering torchlight, he could see that it was dark shining crimson. Blood. Whose, he didn't dare think.

"Bring it to me." Ramsay held out his hand. When Theon had put the goblet into it, he raised it in a rakish toast and grinned. "You're about to witness a most important moment, my Reek. I've worked out a way to live forever."

Theon froze. What is that? What is it? He should run at Ramsay, knock him down, spill the cup. He turned clumsily in half-arsed anticipation of doing it, but Ramsay ripped the sword free and held it out. Even without its flames, it was long and lethally sharp, the point trained on his heart, and he could feel the sting as Ramsay twisted it. "Don't you want to know what it is? Ask. Ask, or I gut you slowly."

Theon stood trembling from head to toe. Piss was leaking slowly down his leg, but he managed to shape his clumsy lips around the words. "What is it?"

"Why, the onion knight's blood." Ramsay raised the goblet and took a deep gulp, the muscles in his throat moving as he swallowed. "He had a great many songs to sing to me, just as you did. About that wound in his back, and what had given it to him. Do you know what it was, Reek?"

Dumbly, Theon shook his head.

"The Others." Ramsay took another sip. "Attacked in the snow on Skagos, he said. Ugly thing. Big as a fist. Blackened. He would have talked all night if it would stop me putting a hot knife in it. Said that he realized their poison was in him, that it was changing him... that he was like them now. That he was becoming one."

Some horrifying realization flickered vaguely at the recesses of Theon's conscience, but he couldn't grasp it or pin it down. Kill him. Kill him now. Do it. You coward, you broken useless coward, do it. The sword was still pressing into his chest, but not as hard now, almost carelessly, as if Ramsay was barely paying him any attention. His bloodstained smile had widened, a nightmare rictus, and that did it. Thinking of Asha, thinking of him, of Kyra, of everything, of every terror, of every flaying, of every monstrosity, Theon turned and lunged.
He hit Ramsay hard enough to knock the cup of blood from his hand, scattering it across the floor. Felt the tip of the sword slash into his shoulder, but ignored it. Made the first good fist he'd made since losing his fingers, and drove it into Ramsay's teeth, hammering away, ignoring the spear of pain that lanced up his arm, grabbing Ramsay's wrist with his other hand and wrenching it above his head, breaking Lightbringer loose with a clatter. Its flames were still out, his sister's burnt-black blood streaking the blade, and in the ensuing struggle, Theon got hold of it first. It scorched him, some deep heat in it remained, but nothing short of all hell on earth unleashing could have made him let go. Grunting, gasping, swearing, sobbing, he swung it around and into Ramsay's chest.

The Bastard of Bolton jerked and grunted. Theon twisted the blade harder, driving it deeper, choking on his own snot and tears, getting on top of him, stabbing him again. "Liar!" he screamed. "You can't! You won't! You won't live forever! You'll die, you'll die! Your name is the Bastard! The Bastard! The Bastard!"

Ramsay was still struggling underneath him, but only in spasms. Theon kept on stabbing in a mindless frenzy, hands slick with blood and viscera, feeling it grate as it went in, realizing he was smiling like a madman. Hacked and hacked and hacked. Flayed man. The flayed man of Bolton.


It was long after Ramsay stopped moving when Theon finally realized he was dead. He lay motionless, half atop the body, Lightbringer's hilt still clutched in his mismatching fingers. Then he jerked away and was violently sick in the rushes; he hadn't eaten in so long that it was little more than foul-tasting brown bile. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, shaking all over. He stared at Ramsay's corpse in horrified fascination, his legs like water; he knew they would not bear his weight if he tried to stand. I killed him. He was wrong. He didn't work out a way to live forever. He didn't. Not even the blood – whatever was in the blood –

And then, the torch went out.

What? Theon twisted back to look at it, peering through the suddenly absolute darkness, but hadn't seen anything, felt any breath of wind. The temperature seemed to be dropping, fast and then faster, and he could feel the ice beneath his fingers. He beetled backwards on hands and knees, but his strength failed him again and he fell. And in the darkness, close, terrifyingly close, he could hear something starting to move.

No. No. No. Terror numbed Theon's brain, made him dull and stupid and slow. It was only him, there was nothing that could be moving. But he heard a scraping, a rustling, a breaking, something like far-off screaming. And then he turned, and gazed directly into blue, blue eyes, burning in the blackness like crystals.

Deliberately, elegantly, nightmarishly slowly, Ramsay rose to his feet, towering above Theon. His flesh was already turning white as ice, barely visible in the glow of his eyes. He was not quite Other and not quite wight, neither living nor dead, but some monstrous crossbreed, and in that moment, Theon realized in stomach-turning horror that he had in fact done exactly what Ramsay wanted him to. If it had seemed somewhat too easy to kill him, it was because it had been. Whatever poison had been in Davos Seaworth's blood, from the Others – I've worked out a way to live forever –

And the sword was out, the flames quenched, and there might be countless bodies in this castle, grim relics of House Bolton's anarchy and terror –

"Nooooo!" Theon's scream was wild, keening, as he snatched up Lightbringer and swept it out. But the Bastard, or the thing that had once been the Bastard, did not seem terribly concerned, reaching out a hand negligently as if to catch and crush it. Fire, I need to light it again, fire is the only hope
– but the torch was out and he was about to be murdered by this unholy creature before he could get it lit. Slashing back and forth, Theon sprinted to the doorway and wrenched desperately at the latch, pulled it out, and more or less fell headlong down the stairs beyond.

He knocked his wind out, but by some merciful fortune did not impale himself on the blade still in his hand. He could hear the thing coming, clumping down the steps as if still working out the particulars, could see the blue glow burning in the stairwell, had never known terror even close, had never known it, pissed out everything in him and shat it as well, could smell his own stink rank in his nose as he ran and ran and ran. Asha. He couldn't leave her here, dead or alive. Couldn't leave her to rise, to the rule of the monster.

Theon tripped over his own feet, but somehow did not fall. He had a hazy memory of the Dreadfort's corridors and chambers, tried desperately to retrace it, kept on, kept on, so scared he was screaming, it was his own screaming he heard, but it wasn't out loud, it was in his head, down and down and down. Rattling in his skull like an explosion, bursting out his ears, it was going, it was gone, shredding his sanity, devouring his hope. No. No. No.

He sped around one final turn, recognized the contours of the hall, stared back wildly into the dark corridor. Nothing there. Had he lost it? No, it was there. It was waiting. It would spring on him. It was coming. Coming. Now.

"Asha!" Theon launched through the door and into the chamber beyond. "Asha! Asha! Now! Run! We have to run!"

His sister's body lay motionless on the floor. He flung himself to his knees and shook at her desperately. "Asha, wake up. Wake up. Please, please. Don't. Don't leave me. I'm here. I came back. I came back. Please."

Distant but not distant, the sound of heavy, hunting footsteps.

Theon, panicking, shoved the sword through his belt and hauled Asha's arm over his shoulders. She shifted ever so slightly, eyes rolling beneath their lids, and he could feel a ghost of breath from her lips, but she was still a dead weight as he staggering to his feet. Hauling her, her boots dragging on the floor, he began to stump as fast as he could back down the corridor, knowing that the postern gate had to lie at the end, the sword still dark, the beast still coming, coming. He was sobbing in a faint, rhythmic gasp, punching out of him, he shouldn't be scared but he was, he was, he was. Yet the terror still coursing through his veins gave him impossible, desperate speed, the kind that gave mothers the strength to lift fallen carts off their children, to fight off too many foes, to do what simply, in the ordinary course of events, should not be done. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with weak.

Yet for all that, he was still running, and up ahead, Theon could see the faintest glint of something, something that was not iron or stone or darkness. The end. The way out. Almost. Almost. Almost.

And then, from behind, cold hands grabbed him.

Theon choked on a scream, falling, Asha hitting the ground beside him, as he thrashed and kicked around to see the monster directly above him. It stalked us, it stalked us in the dark, I never heard it coming. He ripped the sword from his belt and hacked at it, crawling backwards, hearing the drums again, hearing them closer, desperate for them now, knowing that they were their only chance at salvation. "Asha," he choked. "Asha!"

His sister was stirring feebly, but seemed to lack the strength to push herself upright, far less run. She was trying, however; her breath came faint and rattling in her throat. "Theon. . ." Her voice was
a whisper, distant as the winter wind. "Blood. . . the tales of Azor Ahai. . . drive it into me. . . light
the blade. . . live. . ."

"No," Theon wept. "No. No, I can't. I won't. I won't. I won't."

Asha, with a grunt of agony, tried to pull herself closer, but couldn't. The drums were thundering
now, and Theon could hear clashing steel and screaming men. Stannis is attacking. He's coming.
He's coming. But not in time. Not in time.

The world had shrunk to nothing except him, and Asha, and the hideous revenant of Ramsay
standing above him, eyes blue as the summer sky, of the summer Theon could barely remember,
which seemed exceeding unlikely to ever come again. But there was the blade still in his hand.
Blood. A cup of blood had poisoned Ramsay, transmogrified him into this demon. There is power
in it. Power in him, at the uttermost end, despite it. Despite everything.

Theon fumbled to hold onto Lightbringer, just long enough. Jammed it against his wasted chest.
Couldn't break the skin. Cold hands pulling him back. Now or never. He shoved, gasped, and
convulsed as he felt the bite of steel. Drew it out, dark in blood, his and Asha's alike. Muttered
some shattered prayer.

And then, the fire.

Lightbringer came alive in his hand all at once, red and gold flames bursting like pennons, until he
wanted to scream with the pain of it, charring into his hand, eating up his flesh, what little of it,
wracked and wasted, there remained to be destroyed. The glow dazed him, blinded him, but it was
burning in him, searing, sealing the wound, driving him up, driving him on, past the end of
endurance, past the end of everything. He swung and swung, staggering, knowing only that
Ramsay was on the other end of the blade and he could not stop until he fell, flames and madness.

Behind him, he could hear Asha crawling. Could feel himself either dying or living, damned if he
knew which. Staggered backwards, still hacking with the blazing sword. Cold air ripped at him,

Steel clashed and crashed and sobbed and sang. An explosion went up, very near at hand, and the
ancient walls of the Dreadfort trembled like a ship caught in a mighty storm at sea. Men were
coming, were charging, breaking down the portcullis and the postern gate, yet there might be any
number of dead ones inside. Stannis's attack kept driving forward, kept coming, men with swords
in their hands and mad hope in their hearts. Like me. Like me. Perhaps, after all, he was yet a man,
twisted and broken and unmade though he was.

Theon's legs gave out, and he crawled the last few feet to the gate. He did not dare look behind him
to see if the thing that had been Ramsay Bolton was still coming. I killed him once, I killed him
twice, must I kill him thrice? An unhinged giggle erupted from his throat. Asha was somewhere
ahead of him, out in the night, out among the army. He wondered what Stannis would think. I am
coming back, Your Grace. My turncloak skin. You would not trade me, I only traded myself.

Somehow, with one heart-bursting effort, Theon staggered upright, Lightbringer still clenched in
his burning hands. It hurt less than he would have thought, and then it hurt too much to believed.
Tottering, he emerged into the night, and into the sheer chaos that surrounded the Dreadfort. Into a
night without stars, a song of snow and steel. Ashes fell around him. Flames and inferno burst
around him, yet he kept on walking, in a trance, in a dream. Blue. Blue. Blue. As summer. As
summer.

As summer.
What a strange and impossible thought. What a sure and necessary truth.

All around him, the world came apart at the seams, could not hold. The Dreadfort shook to its very core, and yet Theon Greyjoy looked neither left nor right. Meteors and missiles and debris hailed around him, flaming, exploding in the snow. Nor did he look back. His hands were blackened now, scalding. Still he held Lightbringer. Still he kept on walking, until, at last, he could not take another step. Until his knees folded out from under him, until the burning sword hissed and steamed as it hit the snow, and he lay in the night that had turned as bright as day, as heaven, as falling stars and fiery apocalypses, and he sobbed.
Daenerys

They set sail three days hence, at nightfall. Black ships rose like phantoms from the black sea, streaked with the vivid scarlet of the setting sun, bloated and sinking in the distant west. *I must follow it. Farther and faster than ever before.* She wondered what had gone through her ancestor Aegon's head, as he set forth from Dragonstone. He had had soldiers and swords such as she did, in fact far fewer, but his greatest weapon was elsewhere. *He had dragons too, and his were fully grown and trained, mastered to a man – or a woman's – hand.* The Conqueror's sisters had always fascinated her. Who had they been, these wives and queens and warriors, fighting battles as ably as any hero, then keeping court, bearing children, both sharing and competing for their husband, strangers in a strange land? They had died well respected, if not beloved, by the lords and smallfolk of their conquered country, though the uprising by the Faith Militant against Maegor the Cruel, Aegon and Visenya's son, had tarnished their legacy somewhat. *It was said of Visenya that she was more comfortable in steel than silk, a hard soldier and formidable sorcerer. I am not like her, but am I Rhaenys either?* The younger sister had had more love for songs and cheer and frivolity, Aegon's favorite. *It does not matter. They were his right and left hands, matched well in their differences. And now I go as a dragon with only one head, not three.*

To be sure, she was far from alone. The seventeen ships of the Iron Fleet that had been salvaged and made seaworthy were packed with a sweltering array of Dothraki, ironborn, and Unsullied – one sort per vessel, to avoid any unfortunate entanglements. By final count, it was somewhere just under five thousand men. She could have gotten no more. Mago had left a good chunk of his *khalasar* behind, the ones who would not cross the poison water under any circumstances. Most of Victarion's men had drowned in the wave or fallen fighting the horselords, as had many of the Unsullied, caught up in the constant battles that had engulfed Meereen since her disappearance. As well, Dany had left nearly all the wounded, invalid, or infirm. Their task, once they recovered their strength, would be to rebuild from the ground up; she would not have it said that she left this great old city in ruins for all time. Some day, when her work in Westeros was through, the crown of her forefathers secure upon her brow, she hoped to return.

*Though on wings of bone and scale, or wings of wood and canvas?* Dany had by no means forgotten what Fintan had told her in Asshai, before she destroyed his temple: that if she returned to mount a claim to the Iron Throne, her dragons would die. That she could have children of flesh or of fire, but not both. Yet while she harbored no delusions of invincibility, she set less store by such things than she used to. Whatever flame now burned in the depths of the red priests' broken temple, it belonged to Drogon. She wondered if the acolytes of R'hllor had foreseen their own demise, or, like most prophets, they could not know the day or hour. *And they nearly had me, as well. It was Jorah who saved me, with the aeromancers. Who sounded the horn and sacrificed himself.*

Her eyes stung with tears at the thought of her bear knight, and she knuckled the salt away; a queen could not appear weak before her generals. Still, the loss had not ceased to hurt. Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan both, her stout sword-arms and faithful counselors, were returning as ashes in urns, to be laid properly to rest when the fighting was through. Ser Jorah, she knew, had asked to be scattered to a strong north wind on his beloved Bear Island, but Ser Barristan had no home or life outside his service. She thought of interring him at the Great Sept of Baelor, then wondered if he would want that. Surely he did not desire to lie beside Robert Baratheon for all time, and the other kings he had served were all Targaryens, who likewise were burned, not buried. *If there is aught left of House Selmy, surely they will find a place for their greatest son.*

Thinking of Barristan and Jorah made Dany think again of Daario Naharis, who she had not been
able to find before departing. *I will kill him if he shows his face. It is only just.* She could not be distracted that anything that had passed between them before. *He trifled with the girl, but the woman must show him no mercy.* Blue eyes or no, she should have rid herself of him long ago.

Dany set her jaw, not looking back as the ships moved deeper into the bay. She should be grateful for the companions she did have, rather than dwelling on those who were gone. Her scribe Missandei and her handmaids Irri and Jhiqui had been discovered hiding in the very deepest warrens of the Great Pyramid – starved and terrified, but alive, and Dany had also managed to reunite with her bloodriders Rakharo and Aggo, who had been so far afield leading search parties for her that they had only now returned. For Jhogo, a hostage of the Yunkish, there was very little hope, but Dany had ordered the killing fields searched until they finally found her young *ko*'s body. He was riding in the night lands with Drogo now, she hoped, forever eighteen, free and fearless, flashing his smile and cracking his whip. *So many good men I have lost. And now I come back with only one, and that one a half.*

Reflexively, she shot a glance at Tyrion Lannister. When she asked the Imp if he was a good sea-traveler, he had replied frankly that he could not remember, as he'd spent the last one in a haze of shit, piss, vomit, and drink, going in one place or out another. "So long as we are not sunk by a storm or boarded by slavers, my lady, I suppose this one can only go better by comparison. Though if we have a skin of wine just in case, I shan't object."

They had, but she refused him it. When Tyrion was sober, he was a considerable asset: shrewd, cunning, and clear-sighted, with priceless intelligence on the royal court and the defenses of King's Landing. Dany had consulted him several times as they planned their strategy, and Tyrion – again, so long as he was sober – had given her no reason to regret naming him Viserion's rider, essentially her Queen's Hand. But she had also learned that it was just as easy for him to be completely useless, drinking himself into a stupor; he did not seem to have the instinct to stop. In this state, he was altogether the wretched little lecher of all the worst rumors, spending hours shut up and speaking harshly to anyone who interrupted him – particularly Penny. Dany could not understand why Tyrion was so mercurial toward the girl, his own daughter, but remembered that what little Tyrion had told her of Penny's origins had not been pleasant. *And now he is returning to Westeros as well, which he fled a condemned traitor, kingslayer and kinslayer.* Small wonder he was even more on edge than she.

Seeing him now, however, and judging that he did not appear inebriated beyond the usual, Dany ventured in his direction. "My lord."

"Your Grace." His mismatched eyes regarded her warily. "If you're planning to ask how long the voyage is, I am afraid that I am once more of negligible use. Long, I wager. We need to navigate south nearly to the coast of Sothoros to avoid the Smoking Sea – any ironman not sailing under the command of Euron Crow's Eye would rather be gelded than come in sight of Valyria. The Doom still hangs heavy over that place."

"The Doom." Dany had grown up hearing of it, the gods' wrath on an empire of man grown too high and too proud, but not much in the way of details. "What was it, exactly?"

Tyrion's look turned curious. "Your brother never told you?"

"Viserys was... not one to speak much of ancient disasters and defeats. The present ones chafed him enough." To her surprise, Dany felt a sudden sadness for him, with his melancholies and his madness and the way he must have dreamed, craved, prayed to see this day, the Targaryens returning to take back what was theirs. She would not have had him alive again, but she hoped that at least he knew. *Would it bring back the last joy that left him, when he sold Mother's crown, to see*
She shook her head, forcing the ghosts away. "He said only that Valyria was cast down root and branch, stone by stone, and a powerful curse was laid on its bones. To destroy anyone fool enough to think of raising it again."

"That's close enough," the dwarf agreed, "and the maesters have bickered ever since whether it was indeed the act of the gods, or some natural disaster. Whatever it was, it was spectacular. What I read is that it died by fire, as it had lived. That the hills broke open for five hundred miles in every direction and spewed ash and flame and soot, that lakes boiled, that even dragons fell from the sky, that the black blood of demons lashed the Lands of the Long Summer and every building collapsed, fallen down abyssal cracks or drowned in raging lava. That even now, the air is hot enough to boil the bones of any man. Apparently not including the Crow's Eye, if you believe the tale that he found that dragon horn there. Which could be quite bad, considering——"

A low, dark, rasping chuckle came from behind them. "Fool of a dwarf. The Freehold did not burn. It drowned."

Both Dany and Tyrion started around, taken at a similar disadvantage, to behold Victarion Greyjoy in the — well, flesh was not quite appropriate, but nothing else came to mind. After swearing his fealty to Dany, he seemed to have taken to it as if he had done so all his life, but she still did not care to turn her back on him. It did indeed appear as if he could not be drowned — he had had no business surviving that wave — and he had, after all, made a good-faith effort to kill her on the beach. Now he was captaining the ship that bore her home. A fighting man his life long, and a loyal one, in his hard cold way. What else?

"Drowned?" Dany repeated, thinking of Meereen. "How?"

"How all things are." Victarion shrugged. "A great wall of water came down on fair Velos, and on the slaver's port of Ghozai, and sent them forever to the deep. We anchored there, on the Isle of Cedars, on our way to you. Thick green forests queer silent and still, animals with no fear of man, shattered statues and broken palaces. Storms that come from nowhere, skies as white and hot and endless as a desert, water that is turquoise near to shore but almost black at the depths. My dreams there were dark and foul, and the last night I passed ashore, I woke with my mouth full of blood. The Drowned God warned me not to stay in that place. It is cursed."

"Keen of the Drowned God to notice," Tyrion remarked cuttingly. There was very little love lost between the dwarf and the iron captain; Victarion had even suggested to Dany that she pitch Tyrion overboard as a sacrifice for fair weather and swift sailing, but she curtly rebuffed him. "But Valyria did burn, first. The water followed later."

"And seems to have come again." Dany glanced at him. "When was the Doom?"

"A century before Aegon the Conqueror, my lady, if I recall my history aright. It was in seeking to recapture the Targaryens' lost glory that your ancestor conceived his plan to take the Seven Kingdoms. Yours was one of the few families to escape."

"Aye, they fled to Dragonstone. I was born there. And now I sail as Aegon did, after a Doom of a very similar sort." It must not be coincidence, Dany felt. Something else occurred to her. "We left when I was only a babe hours old, so I have no memory of my own, but Viserys did tell me of the stone beasts that stalk every corner of the castle, dragons and chimeras and gargoyles and more. Is it possible that they were... more than stone?"

Tyrion gave her a queer look. "Are two dragons not enough?"
I do not know. It should have been three, but Rhaegal was somewhere far away, and Drogon and Viserion – currently flapping high above the fleet, sinuous dark shadows in the falling twilight – could very well have their own sort of Doom awaiting. If more could be woken... she knew of her family's countless attempts to kindle living fire from dead stone, and the tragedy it had too often led to, but just as with the whispers of the red priests, Dany no longer considered it of much relevance, if any, to her future.

The subject of red priests and dragons and wars of conquest and Targaryen claimants, however, made her think of something else Fintan had told her: the miraculous survival of her nephew. She had already wondered how Aegon could possibly be alive, and decided that she would not marry him merely to serve as his queen consort, but she recalled something Ser Jorah had said, right before they were attacked by Khal Jhaqo's bloodriders in the Dothraki sea. Of the reason why he had wanted to bring the Imp to her: the party Tyrion had been traveling with up the Rhoyne, who had hired the Golden Company. That they had more to them than met the eye, and that the dwarf knew full well of their identity. And suddenly, so did she.


At last, she appeared to have completely stupefied her traveling companion. "My lady – I – if I may, how on earth did you know that?"

"It is of no matter." Better to keep some secrets for herself. "But you have, haven't you?"

"Aye," Tyrion admitted. "As a matter of fact, I would have drowned long before I reached you if Lord Jon Connington, the prince's adoptive father, did not decide to leap in and rescue me from the stone men. Connington was a dear friend of your brother Rhaegar, and briefly served as Hand to your father. Exiled after he lost the Battle of the Bells, and supposedly soon dead of drink, but not so much as all that. If I ever see him again, I'll have to ask how he managed."

"Did you know him?"

"Not until our paths crossed in Pentos. I was not yet nine years old when Robert's Rebellion broke out, still an ugly boy at Casterly Rock."

"And all this time he has been – where? In hiding with Aegon?" Dany felt a sudden burn of injustice. Ser Jorah had also said that Magister Illyrio knew the Imp's traveling companions, and she had already become severely suspicious of just why the cheesemonger had never said anything of it to her. If he had the ability to stash Aegon safely away for years, why let me and Viserys wander the Free Cities like beggars, homeless and hungry? Illyrio Mopatis was no man's friend save that he had been handsomely compensated for it, but something was even more amiss than usual. And if they'd hired the Golden Company, well-known as Blackfyre diehards who still carried Aegor Rivers' gold-dipped skull, in hopes of seeing victory over the Targaryen "usurpers. . ."

"This boy." Dany's hands tightened on the rail. She glanced over her shoulder for Victarion, just in case, but he had retreated to tend the helm. "You're quite sure he's Aegon?"

Tyrion gave a one-shouldered shrug. "He does have the look of a Targaryen, I'll grant you, and the temper as well. And why go to such trouble if he wasn't?"

"Many reasons." Dany's scowl deepened. "You said that Lord Connington was a close friend of my brother? Who better to persuade of the boy's veracity? If he alone stayed loyal to Rhaegar's memory when others were turning their cloaks to Robert Baratheon in droves. . ." Aye. She could see it. Not all of it, not entirely, but enough. "My lord, I doubt I need tell you, but Magister Illyrio
is a liar. He has lied from his first breath and likely will be lying with his last, and he has lied to us all longer than we could have imagined. This so-called Aegon is a fraud."

One of Tyrion's eyebrows ascended to his hairline. "The thought had occurred to me. But it makes no matter."

"No matter?"

He held up both stubby hands, as if to deflect blame. "My sweet sister's children are frauds as well, if trueborn bloodline has anything to do with it, and yet they have sat the throne quite a time now. Because they were there first, as Aegon is. In Westeros."

"In Westeros – ?" Fintan had also told her that, said that her nephew awaited her there, but the revelation that the Imp had known this all along was not one to sit well with Dany. "How is it that you traveled with them down the Rhoyne so far as Volantis, and yet now they are somehow adventuring gaily up the narrow sea?"

"Simple. I told them to go there."

"You?" Dany's anger flared. "And yet you did not see fit to tell me, would not have mentioned it at all if I had not first? Perhaps I should have let Victarion throw you overboard as he wished."

Tyrion's mouth twisted. It was not quite a smile and not quite a leer. "Perhaps, but I once threatened the same of an untrustworthy associate. He replied that I would be disappointed by the result. That the storms would come and go, the big fish eat the little fish, and yet he would keep on paddling. I am something of an accomplished paddler myself."

"Be that as it may. What else have you been keeping from me?"

"Far more than you would ever wish to know, Your Grace. Believe me."

"Do I?" Dany turned away, trying to master herself. There was a small voice in the back of her head, asking if she had expected anything less of Tyrion Lannister; as he himself had bluntly warned her, he had no inclination to pander to highborn feelings and a suspect record, to say the least, when it came to kings and queens. "Is that your game, then? Continue to play us all one off each other, in search of your own best interest?"

Tyrion laughed aloud. "I do hope you've not mistaken me for an altruist, Your Grace, as that would be nearly as bad as mistaking me for the Mountain. I serve you and I mean to continue doing so. But from my own free will, nothing else and nothing more. I'm certainly not bending my knee to the Mad King's daughter merely because I feel as if I must. Not when my brother opened his throat, and my father laid the corpses of his grandchild, or grandchildren, wrapped in cloaks of Lannister red before the throne."

Dany's breath caught in her throat. For a moment she wanted very much to fly at him and claw his eyes out, and the strength of the desire frightened her. There is some madness in me as well. She forced it back down, thinking of what Ser Barristan had said about how folk had forgiven King Aerys' lapses at first as well, that he could be friendly and charming. She had seen him die, in the darkness of the visions in the temple at Asshai. Killed by the son of Tywin Lannister he kept the closest, who served him and should have protected him. Without another word to the dwarf, she turned away and went below into her cabin.

Dany kept a cool distance from Tyrion for the next several days. The sailing was better than she had hoped, the wind steady from the northeast, and on the evening of the seventh day, the Basilisk
Isles glided into sight a few miles off to port. They'd crossed the Gulf of Grief in just a week, a time generally unheard of, and this was their last chance to resupply and take on food and water before tackling the countless leagues of trackless seas between here and Westeros. The Basilisks were stony and inhospitable, little more than barren juts of sandstone, and they'd have to come closer, to the coast of Sothoros itself, if they hoped to send a hunting party.

The ships were the only sign of human existence on the broad waters, which were an almost unnatural cerulean blue, turning shadowed in the advancing twilight. High pillars of rock had been carved into natural arches and bridges, like the gnarled fingers of old men seeking to snatch the sun from the sky, and Dany could hear the distant roaring of whitewater as the ocean crashed through them. The air was thick, sultry, hot and heavy, redolent with the reek of brine and rotting weed and stagnant salt marsh, and something distinctly reminiscent of decay. It grew stronger the closer they drew to land. A strip of pink sand beach, a low dark tangle of jungle beyond.

At last, they entered a sheltered bay where they could put down anchor, and Dany gave orders that Grey Worm should lead a party of Unsullied ashore on the morrow, to see if any commerce could be established with the natives. There were a good many of her eunuchs with the polished-jet skin of the southern continent, and indeed if they were other men, she might have worried that they would take the opportunity to desert, run far from the danger and death she asked of them. But the Unsullied would find it more natural to stand on their heads, to breathe water, rather than do such a thing, and though she had freed their bodies, in mind they remained slaves. It is not right. I should ask them if they wish to go. Yet what good would that do? They could not return home, could not marry or sire children or even hope to find their families. Brick men. Strangled puppies. Slaughtered babes. It was far too late to wish certain things undone, yet as she stood at the rail, Daenerys Targaryen felt their weight crushing her nonetheless.

A hand touched her shoulder timidly. "Khaleesi?"

She jumped, then turned and made herself smile. Irri and Jhiqui had scarcely known what to do with themselves since their miraculous restoration to her side. They had been wretchedly sick for the first few days, and even now, had a propensity to turn green if the ship came about quickly. She tried to imagine them living as ladies-in-waiting in a Westerosi castle, taking up embroidery or the high harp or singing, and could not see it. "Aye, sweetling?"

"Come below? Supper?" Both the girls had taken to speaking in permanent questions, as if in fear that Dany might call down the same power to smite them as she had in Asshai. It made her sad. Does everyone see me as a potential monster? "For your strength?"

"Of course." Dany followed Irri below, into the cramped environs of her cabin, and nibbled unenthusiastically on a skewer of the meat Jhiqui was charring over a brazier. She too had been sicker than she expected, and her stomach was still settling. Afterward, she crawled into her bunk for lack of anything better to do, and yet could not sleep. Again she saw the face of that mysterious young man she'd glimpsed in the flames of Asshai, with the black hands and the burning sword, the winds of winter and the broken horn. Seen him among an endless immensity of piled, twisted ice. . . and seen there as well, just moments before, her missing child. Rhaegal in the darkness, in the bitter cold, glazed in frost, icicles bearding his snout.

Are they in the same place? Together? That was a startling thought, and one with an even more unsettling implication. The dragon has three heads. Viserion and Drogon have their riders, but Rhaegal does not. Is he. . . can he be. . .?

As she lay there, Dany began to wonder, began to speculate, began to grasp at something greater and still more terrible. Was it possible in the remotest degree, or was she even madder than she
thought, that her brother Rhaegar had had another son? Not from his wife, the frail Martell princess, but it had been Rhaegar's abduction of Lyanna Stark, Robert Baratheon's betrothed, that sparked the entire War of the Usurper and the downfall and disgrace of her family. Dany had always known that, yet never stopped to consider what it might mean. Did she give him a child? She did not want to think that her gallant brother, the handsome and tragic silver prince, could be capable of taking a woman against her will, yet it stood to sobering reason that Rhaegar had not merely kept the Stark girl for decoration. He crowned her the queen of love and beauty at the tourney of Harrenhal, and stole her for his own.

The more she thought of it, the more Dany became convinced that it was possible. How on earth any child of Rhaegar Targaryen could have survived the Usurper's rule. . . Robert sent hired knives after me and Viserys often enough, he would have done the same if he had any inkling that any seed of his greatest enemy still lived. . . She had no idea how it had happened, but certainly coalesced cold in her stomach. Fintan could be right after all. My nephew, in Westeros. Not whatever illusion Illyrio has conjured for purposes of his own, but a deception decades in the keeping, a secret that could shake the very foundations of the land.

She could not sleep for the rest of the night, and rose before dawn, restless and red-eyed. The sunrise was bloody crimson, and remembering the old seadog's saw – red sky in morning, sailor take warning – did not assuage her disquiet. She paced the decks until Grey Worm appeared with his expeditionary party. "Return no later than noon," she told them. "Merely find if there is good hunting, or hostile inhabitants, or a water hole. We'll make arrangements after that."

Grey Worm touched his brow. "Your Grace commands, these ones obey."

That may be so, but Dany remained unsettled as the sun crawled higher in the sky. It quickly grew scorching hot, forcing her into the shade of the sails; it was stifling in her cabin, and smelled of sick. During the crossing from Meereen, she had been too busy to spare a thought for much else, but this lull was making her feel like a caged cat. Combined with her estrangement from Tyrion, her firm conviction that Aegon was an impostor and this nameless young man might well be her nephew instead, she felt as if she was about to fly to pieces, and missed Ser Jorah so sorely that it made her want to crawl into a hole and never come out again. I am no queen. Only a green girl playing at glory with a tin sword and a stolen crown.

It was past noon, later than she thought it should be, by the time the Unsullied returned. Their tale was not a promising one. They'd scouted inland along the mouth of the estuary, Grey Worm reported, and found nothing – no fresh water, no animals, and no men. Not until they reached the far side of the cape, and stumbled across a vast wasteland of bodies, reeking and bloated in the sun. "They drowned, Khaleesi. Perhaps in the very same wave that struck Meereen."

"Are you sure?" Dany did not doubt that the eunuchs knew how to identify and administer every sort of grisly death there was, but this still seemed odd. She almost glanced at Tyrion, before reminding herself that she was not soliciting his opinion.

"These ones are very sure, Your Grace."

"Indeed." She turned away, hands tapping a nervous rhythm, and looked up at the dragons, circling lazily in the white-hot sky. The intuition had been lurking in the back of her head for some time, yet she did not trust it. She still did not, in fact, but that wave, Tyrion's insistence that the Wall had fallen, a Doom of fire or of water, a dragon horn of dark enchantment, and what she had witnessed herself. . . Before she could think better of it, she turned to Victarion, who had been observing with his usual stolid glower. "How far from here to Valyria?"

Everyone's jaw dropped, and Irri and Jhiqui let out matching wails. "You cannot sail to that place,
Khaleesi! It is cursed!

Dany raised a hand, cutting them off. Her attention was for the iron captain. "I saw the charts. It would be two or three days, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Victarion allowed grudgingly. "What need have we for that place?"

"I heard your brother sailed there, and set foot on the smoking ruins. Took the horn from it, and lived to tell the tale."

"My brother is a madman." Victarion folded his massive arms, scowling fit to turn her to stone. "And more than half a demon himself. It is no place for you."

"I am of the blood of old Valyria, Stormborn and unburnt. I fear no fire."

Victrarion snorted like a bullock. "I will not sail there."

"Are you a lesser man than Euron, then?"

For a moment, as his eyes burned out from under the craggy ridge of his brows, Dany thought he was going to strike her. She could see the Unsullied dropping their hands to their sword hilts, and knew that if he did, even his considerable length of immortality would reach its prompt end. Then the ironmen on the other ships would bare steel to avenge their captain, come screaming like the reavers they were to the battle, and everything would end here on the empty shores of Sothoros, the gulls circling down to pick them clean with the rest. But I must. The conviction was fierce as the one that had sent her to Asshai. Fire and blood.

The silence was almost alive, fraught with murderous tension. Then Victarion snorted again, wheeled away, and spat. "It is your own head, little queen."

"Khaleesi, no." Irri clutched Dany's arm. "The squid man is right. It is no place for the living. A haunt of ghosts and demons. It is known."

"It is known," Jhiqui whispered furtively.

"It is not." Dany detached herself. "Tell the other ships of the fleet that they are not required to accompany us, and should instead continue west. They may drop anchor in Lys and wait for us, and from there we will decide how to carry on to Westeros."

The Unsullied were the ones to carry out this command, climbing the rigging to semaphore the others. It apparently took a great deal of convincing, and Dany had a brief moment of panic that she was gambling away her army for no point and purpose. What was to stop them, as soon she had apparently gone to die in Valyria, from setting out as free men again, or as pirates, or as any damn thing they wanted? They were bound to her only by tenuous loyalty, could not be expected to proceed obediently to Lys, and finally she decided to place a garrison of Unsullied on each ship. They were the only ones she could trust, who would ensure that the fleet reached Lys more or less intact, and once more she longed beyond words for Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan. They would tell me if this is wise, foolishness, or merely suicide. But it was only her now. Only her.

By the time the Unsullied had been divided among the ships and they were finally underway again, a hammerhead of murky clouds had closed over the sun, and the crests of the waves were starting to break white. The wind was keening through the lines, and even Victarion was having to work hard to keep them on course as Sothoros and the Basilisk Isles vanished behind them. Tyrion remarked with macabre humor that this was looking too bloody familiar for his taste, and that if anyone needed him, he would be below getting stinking drunk. Before Dany could chide him
otherwise, he was gone.

**Wretched Imp.** Another pang of anger burned through her, yet this one was more helpless than anything. It was no wonder that they were all afraid. Even she was, but it was tempered by her absolute belief that she must look on those smoking shores. Even if only that. *There is something waiting for me there. Some knowledge of the uttermost end.*

Not long after that, it started to rain, and rain hard. Thick drops hammered down like beads of mercury, and Dany was urged into her cabin by her terrified handmaids, who barred the door and curled up in clear expectation of their imminent deaths. They began to jerk and plummet in the choppy, crashing waves, the ship pitching and struggling in the tempest. *Victarion may not be able to drown, but the rest of us can.* Was that truly the fate the gods had chosen for her? That the moment she finally set out for Westeros, she would be flicked aside like an insignificant speck? For better or for worse, she had always believed herself more than that.

The storm quickly increased in intensity, until a thousand tormented voices seemed to scream in the wind. They lurched and rocked and rolled, on and on and on, until Dany herself began to despair of it ever ending. She hung grimly onto her bunk, face buried in the pillows, and mouthed unformed prayers. *What else can kill fire, but water?* She had always feared to die like this. *No. No, I will not.*

Despite herself, she must have drifted under. When she opened her eyes, the silence beat like a drum against her ears, ringing in her skull, and the madness had stopped. Irri and Jhiqui were still prostrate in the corner, showing no signs of moving any time soon, and Dany decided to leave them, poor things. She swung unsteadily over the side of the bunk, crossed the cabin floor strewn with everything in it, and went up to the deck.

The brimstone was the first thing she smelled. A sour red glow lay heavy on the horizon, and the sea bubbled and brewed mutinously against the sides of the ship, spewing sulfuric geysers on the glittering black volcanic rocks. Victarion was motionless at the helm, watching the distant coast with an even darker glare, and at her approach, he turned. "So. This is what you want, little queen? This unholy place?"

"Yes." Dany stared at it intently, eyes stinging from the ash. "Can we draw closer?"

"This is close enough."

She stared at him coolly. "Is that what I said?"

Victarion grumbled and mumbled and swore and in general made his displeasure voluminously known, but at last, that deep-seated grain of obedience reasserted itself. He barked orders to his shirking crew, and they eased past the towering onyx cliffs, as the sea continued to simmer and steam like a witch's cauldron and the air tasted rancid in her lungs. Somewhere above her, she could hear Drogon and Viserion flapping along with the ship, but the closer they drew to the Smoking Shore, the wilder the dragons turned. They screeched and wrenched and dove, fighting as if to get free from their bond, and she felt their efforts like a dagger in the chest, driving her to her knees. *The dragon horn came from here. A cursed thing in and of itself. Could not be used without a price.*

At last, when it felt as if her heart was about to be ripped out, they coasted to a halt just a few hundred yards from the blighted Freehold itself. Dany struggled to catch her breath, staring at the devastation. *What could men do to call such wrath upon themselves?* But she thought again of that tidal wave, how it had crashed over Meereen. How it had killed the villagers of Sothoros, and gods alone knew who else. *The old Doom will be nothing before the one to come, if we do not arrive in time.* She was well aware that her battle was not only for the Iron Throne. Remembered what
Quaithe – Nissa Nissa – had told her. Her husband, Azor Ahai, had been the hero of all existence. Do you see why, now? Why I came to you, to lead you to fight the Others as he did?

Despite the blistering heat, Dany shivered. A monstrous evil from the north, from the cold and ice. If Rhaegal and that young man with the black hands were there. . . the battle might have already begun. We have no time. We must find what is here, and –

At that moment, a chaos of alarmed shouts and curses broke out from the sailors. Dany's head jerked up, and saw a dark figure descending the rocks toward them – but how on earth could someone be living here? Perhaps it was a demon after all, and she poised on the brink of ordering archers to the railing to load and fire, as if mortal weapons could harm it. But her tongue had locked, and in those few moments, she saw that it was in fact a man. Short, squat, powerful, kettle-bellied, clad in the robes of a maester of the Citadel, and hauling an enormous sack on his back as easily as if it was full of feathers. He wore some sort of steel mask over his nose and mouth, perhaps intended to help him breathe in the unforgiving Valyrian murk, and upon seeing them, he raised a hand to hail them as casually as if he had been expecting them all along.

Dany turned to Grey Worm, who she had kept at her side. "Bring him to me."

"Kill him," Victarion growled. "He is no true man."

"Bring him aboard, I said." Dany raised her voice, and transfixed Victarion with a cold stare. "The next time you gainsay me, I will have you keel-hauled."

The iron captain opened his mouth, found no good rebuff, and shut it sullenly – but with, despite himself, a tinge of respect. He had nothing further to say as a troupe of Unsullied went out to meet the newcomer, searched him, and finally brought him aboard. When he removed the mask, he had a nose broken more than once, tufts of white hair bristling from nose and ears, and teeth stained red with sourleaf. But his bow was courtly enough. "Queen Daenerys."

She started. "You know me?"

"I have been waiting for you for some time, after I had the Cinnamon Wind drop me here." He said this as if it was as common as awaiting her for supper. "I am Marwyn, sometimes called the Mage, Archmaester of the Citadel. I meant to join you in Meereen, but hope you will excuse me for diverting here."

"Marwyn?" That stirred something deep in the recesses of Dany's memory, and not one to comfort her. "A long time ago I knew a maegi named Mirri Maz Duur, who claimed that she was taught the Common Tongue and the secrets of a man's body by a Westerosi maester named Marwyn. Your brother, perhaps?"

"No. Me." He met her eyes squarely. "You knew her? Where is she?"

"She is dead. I burned her for her treachery."

"And what treachery was that?"

Dany shifted uncomfortably. "She promised me my husband's life, and gave me cursed blood magic instead. Called demons to dance, and murdered my unborn son in the womb. But by her death, she became part of something much greater." She indicated Drogon and Viserion, still circling restlessly in the ashy updrafts. "Dragons."

"Dragons." The Mage eyed her intently. "So they are."
"You said something of the Cinnamon Wind?" Dany pressed. "I encountered that very ship in Asshai. They brought you here? To Valyria?"

"Aye. It was an unexpected alteration." The archmaester shrugged thick shoulders, then reached for his great sack. "For this. You'll want these."

Just as Dany had time to fear that it was some sort of poisonous serpent or manticore, or something even worse, Marwyn upturned a veritable avalanche of glittering black glass at her feet. It clattered and shrieked and sparked and piled up and up and up, more than she had ever seen in her life. The ironborn jumped back as if it was in fact deadly, watching it with superstitious horror, and Grey Worm seemed to be tensely awaiting the word to cut this lunatic's throat. But instead, Dany raised her eyes to Marwyn's, finally starting to understand. "Obsidian," she said slowly. "Dragonglass."

"Aye."

"What is this?" Victarion was scowling ferociously. "What does any man need a weapon of glass for, when he can bear one of steel?"

"Ah, but the foes that await you cannot be killed with steel." Marwyn smiled a queer little smile, as if he knew something they did not, and found it amusing. "You can pick up dragonglass from the ground as if it were ordinary rock, but nobody does, because no one dares come here. Especially not the maesters."

"You did."

"I am not like those pitiful others of my order. Grey sheep." Marwyn snorted. "I have studied with shadowbinders and warlocks, with hedge wizards and spellsingers and sellswords, and I know full well what this fight is truly about, my lady. As I said. You'll want it."

"Dragonglass. . ." At last, Dany fit the pieces together. "It kills them. The Others."

"Aye."

"Is this all you have?"

"For the moment. But I can collect more."

She was reluctant to trust him, especially knowing that he had trained Mirri Maz Duur, but it was no worse than anything else that had been asked of her previously, and she gave her permission for him to return and pick up one more sack, leaving this one behind as proof of his good intentions. But while he had some sort of ability to withstand the harsh climate, the rest of them did not, and she knew that they could not tarry here much longer. If we had unlimited time, I would take all the dragonglass they have. But we do not.

It was growing very dark by the time the Mage finally returned with his second cargo of dragonglass, and the eerie glow of distant volcanoes lit the clouds a sickly orange. Dany's own breath was starting to rasp and wheeze, and Penny had been taken so poorly that she was coughing and vomiting up chunks of black soot. Tyrion had gone below with her, after warning Dany that if she got any worse, he was not like to forget it. His protection of her was clumsy and self-loathing, but still fierce, and Dany did not want to know what would become of him if he lost his daughter too. She had the sense that Tyrion was only barely crawling out of an endless dark abyss, and if he fell again, he would not rise.
When Marwyn was aboard, Dany gave the command for them to weigh anchor. There was not much wind, and the ironmen had to pull hard on the oars, creeping them along the black water at a downright glacial pace. Valyria smoked and steamed and loomed at her back, beating like a sheet of hot iron. Her dragons were still restless, screaming and swerving, and more than once, she lost sight of them entirely in the murk. It felt as if the bond was increasingly frayed, as if it was only fell sorcery that had brought them back, and now the sorcery was starting to fail. No. They are mine. Jorah died to bind them to me.

This place is cursed, the queen thought again. She had an uneasy feeling that no matter how lucky she had been at finding Marwyn and his cargo of priceless weaponry, she was going to pay a steep price. I was right, I did have to come here. But if I enter into commerce with Mirri Maz Duur's own teacher, I dare not underestimate the cost. Had she learned nothing? She should have the Mage thrown overboard right now. Yet he had seemed sincere in his wish to assist her, and plainly knew a great deal of odd and esoteric things that could help in the battle to come. . .

Lost in troubled thoughts as she was, the step on the deck behind her startled her badly, and as she whirled around, Grey Worm was to be observed looking deeply chagrined. "This one did not mean to frighten you, Your Grace. This one can go."

"I – no." Dany beckoned him closer. The young eunuch was the only one she had left that was even close to a man she trusted. "How fast do you think we can make it to Lys?"

Grey Worm thought. "With good winds and fair weather, perhaps a fortnight."

Dany did not need to ask what would become of them if not. There was a very great deal of empty ocean between here and there, and just as many legends of the shipwrecks. "And the rest of the fleet will be waiting for us there?"

"My brothers will permit no less," he said stoutly.

Dany believed him, truly she did, and yet her fear would not go away. "Good," she said, choosing to ignore it. "We will need them before we continue on."

"To Westeros?" He had never seen it in his life either, and yet there was no hint of awe or anxiety on that square brown face. "To the city that Aegon built?"

"To Westeros, aye. But not to King's Landing. Not yet."

Grey Worm blinked. "Then where?"

"To the seat of my ancestors, where Aegon set forth," Dany told him. "Where I was born, and where I must be born again. To Dragonstone."
The Broken Man

He had not once moved from where the prince had left him, not lifted a maimed hand, not drawn a breath, barely even felt his heart to beat, when he heard the sound of men on the deck above. Footsteps and voices, the click of mail, the clank of swords, descending the steps toward the cabin where his life had ended. Connington listened to them come with dull incuriosity. It scarcely even mattered to him what they wanted. If they could rummage out anything whatsoever of value in his decrepit, disease-ridden carcass, they were welcome to it. Intending to throw him over the side into the dark waters of Dragonstone, more likely, so he could not continue to spread the grey poison among them. So be it. He had lived too long.

Gone. All gone. Lord Jon could barely remember the charmed days just a scant few months before, when Aegon's victory had seemed all but assured, his grip on the Seven Kingdoms' loyalty won clean, the taking of King's Landing and the crown merely a formality. As any old soldier would tell you, that is why you must fight the battles, and why any young soldier who thinks otherwise will never live to become one. Connington was nothing if not an old soldier, but the game of war had changed too much – else that or he'd simply played himself out of it with his own stupidity. Every blade lost its edge eventually, and he was no legendary hero for the songs to laud. In fact, everything about his apparently distinguished record was fool's gold. A lord of an honorable House, but only the last barren crumbs of it. A King's Hand, but one exiled in disgrace after a catastrophic military failure. Dear companion to a prince, but a prince murdered and overthrown, forever a haunting memento of what might have been. A mercenary, but not even an infamous one. A captain and general, foster father to the true heir to the throne, but now in danger of single-handedly (ha bloody ha) bringing down the entire venture. Alone and disgraced, listening to his own men arriving to kill him.

In short, Connington realized, the perfect catspaw. The perfect lie.

Had anything about his life meant a thing? Would he even know it if he saw it? Or had he been clutching so desperately onto Rhaegar's memory that he missed the truth even when it was there before his eyes? How long had he let Illyrio and Varys deceive him? How long? They would only be the latest – and greatest – masquerade of his entire existence. I have danced to the pipes of madmen, mummers, and fools. They ordered me to leap, and I only asked how high.

Lost in his bitter recriminations, Connington barely heard the terse knock on the cabin door, and did not even glance up when it was shoved open. Half a dozen men filed in, none of them in any haste to get close to him; his infected hand was still ungloved, the stumps a dead charred black, where it lay like an alien thing on his leg. I could fight my way out of here with not even a sword, if I took a mind to it. But why? What was left anymore?

"My lord." The Golden Company serjeant cleared his throat. "We are under orders to fetch you up to the castle. Prince Aegon requires a. . . a service of you."

"A service?" Connington lurched to his feet, making the lot of them, hardened mercenaries though they were, take a precipitate step back. Not many worse fates than to slowly turn to stone. Considering that he had anticipated them to merely bundle him into the depths and have done, this was far more than he'd hoped for. "Does the prince wish to make amends?"

The serjeant hesitated before answering. "That is not your concern. He has been informed of a task he must carry out to assist in his quest for his throne, and he requires you. You may come of your own will, or we may force you."
"Force me?" Lord Jon laughed. It came out sounding high and cracked, so reminiscent of Aerys that it made him shudder. He felt as if he was gazing down a long dark tunnel, the ground giving way beneath his feet, falling into that great hungry abyss from which there was no return. He brandished his hand at them, and they flinched again. "Do you really wish to make that threat?"

"Are you unwilling to cooperate?"

"I never said that." Connington held out his wrists. "If by my life or death I may prove to the prince that I remain his faithful servant, I shall."

More suspicious looks were exchanged, but at last, a man stepped forward to clap him into fetters. It was no less than Lord Jon had expected, but it gave him an unwelcome foresight that his contribution must be distinctly of the latter variety. Very well. He had spent too long cheating death of its due. Your debt will be paid, with interest.

He was escorted out of the cabin, up onto deck, and into a longboat, chains clanking. As the mercenaries stepped in after him and took up the oars, Connington twisted his head to gaze up at the brooding dark bulk of Dragonstone on its cliff, venting vile sulfuric steam from a thousand secret places in its fiery heart. He had been here many times with Rhaegar, ventured through its corridors and chambers and great booming towers, sat in the garden and talked of other things, in the days before the king's madness weighed quite so heavily on them all. A fitting place as any, for me to go to my end. He wondered if they would burn him, and fling his ashes to the wind. Leave me to rot in a cave, more like.

The longboat aimed for one of said caves, carved in the volcanic schist by the ceaseless crashing of the waves, and they rowed down a pitch-black passage, illuminated eerily by distant torches, to a scatter of wet stones and the mouth of a dark culvert. The boat rode up on the underground shore, and the Golden Company marched him out, still taking care to touch him as little as possible. One unlocked the grate, and they stepped through, into the echoing passages. Connington could have found his way with his eyes closed, but this time he kept them open. Fearing nothing, knowing that no one could do unto him as he could not do unto himself, was queerly exhilarating. He hoped neither for Aegon's pardon nor his perdition. He was beyond conscious feeling at all.

At last, they reached another portcullis, which Connington recognized as leading into the great hall of the castle. A sudden intuition seized him, and for the first time, he felt a stirring of fear. Thinking of why he'd been loathe to come here at all, this dark grotesquerie with all its close-kept secrets, remembering Aegon's words as he gave the order to set sail for the fortress in the first place. We must make our own dragons, if my aunt does not come with hers.

It should be an honor, Connington told himself. The red priests of R'hllor claimed that king's blood could wake the stone dragons. He was no king, of course, but if they were stone... and he himself had the very illness that could quench even fire, transform it into the ruin of ages... greyscale... Had this been the very means of turning the beasts of Dragonstone into statues in the first place? Fire cannot destroy stone.

Dear gods. He saw it. He understood. Aegon means to burn me as a sacrifice. To trade my life for one of the dragons. But how would the prince ever have acquired such a notion, much less worked out the particulars? And perhaps it was only his own pride trying desperately to convince himself that the last twenty years of his miserable life had meant something, but Connington still prayed that he meant enough to Aegon that the boy might balk at casually condemning him to death. He said he would not persecute me, he only ordered me from his side... and now he is willing to give this command?

Something was very wrong, and Connington grew more convinced of it with every step they took,
as his guards led him into the great gloomy precincts of the hall, a few others waiting on the dais on the far end. And then as he got a good look, every one of his worst suspicions was confirmed, and something close to madness – or a burning clarity – fell on him at last.

"YOU!"

His voice echoed out, a hoarse bellow, through the shadowy columns. He wrenched free of his captors and staggered forward, driven on by rage and grief. He could only think of getting close enough to wrap his chains around the eunuch's soft lying throat. "You," he breathed again. "I should have known all along."

Varys looked politely uninterested, as if a fettered, diseased, wild-eyed madman had not just come rushing up with the express intent to murder him. "My lord Connington, how good to see you as well."

"Shut your mouth." Connington caught a glimpse of Prince Aegon and Arianne Martell standing to either side, clearly startled by his unorthodox entrance. Let them stare. Let them hear. Let them all open their ears for once. "Well done. Well done. You played me all along. You and your bloody cheesemonger oaf of an accomplice must be snickering up your perfumed sleeves at me, at how well you pulled my strings as if I was a dancing puppet at the fair. They were right. They were all right. Ser Loras Tyrell asked me at Storm's End if I knew whose lot I had thrown in with, and I barely listened. Aurane Waters asked me at Casterly Rock if I thought the Golden Company was serving for free. And he!" Lord Jon thrust a fist at the prince – the boy – the lie. "Even he saw clearer, when he told me what you were!"

Varys looked startled. "My lord, you are not well."

"No!" Connington roared. "I am well at last! You and Illyrio both. You're Blackfyres. The Golden Company are Blackfyres. And so is Aegon. It answers everything. Everything. Why you did not shelter Daenerys and Viserys Targaryen. Why you gave the dragon eggs to her, for fear they would not hatch otherwise! Why you must marry Aegon to her, to seal his claim. You are a liar, a master of changing faces, of making men see what they want. All this time." His chest was ragged, heaving for breath. "You gave me Illyrio Mopatis' bastard son, and talked to me of thrones."

Aegon started, shooting an uneasy look between his estranged foster father and the eunuch. "Lord Varys – what is this?"

"Nothing at all, my prince," Varys reassured him. If he was in the least discomposed by the accusations, no trace of it showed on his plump face. "Lord Connington is mad, you can see it for yourself. Surely this only confirms your decision."

"Your decision!" Connington could see everything now. "It's you who talked him into this! As you have all along! The boy is the spawn of Magister Illyrio and his late wife Serra, the blue-eyed, silver-haired Lysene whore he remembers so fondly that he keeps her hands as trophies! The real Aegon Targaryen is dead. Dead. He died when Gregor Clegane brained him on a nursery wall and raped his mother Elia while she screamed! And yet you so nearly succeeded in convincing everyone otherwise. Your greatest trick. Your greatest folly. Isn't it. Is it not."

Varys shook his head, a small sad smile on his lips. "You convict yourself of treason with every word you speak, my lord. Your illness and your grief make you unwell, and all that you seem so surely to clutch onto is nothing but a tissue of illusion. You will – "

"What is this?" Aegon repeated nervously. If the eunuch was paying no heed to Connington, the prince – the pretender – certainly was, and plainly disliked what he heard. "What is this about
Illyrio Mopatis and a Lysene whore?"

"Your parents, boy," Connington flung at him. "Your true parents. They deceived you as much as me. Your name is Aegon, but you are no blood of Rhaegar Targaryen and Elia Martell. You are a Blackfyre. A trick. A – what were your words, Lord Eunuch? – tissue of illusion. Lies and more lies made you. Lies and more lies must bring an end."

Aegon's face was stark white. "No," he said, half in a whisper. "You're wrong. Lord Varys. . ."

"Lord Varys does not exist. All you see is a serpent. But I love you. I could not stop loving you even now." Connington's voice was anguished. "You are no prince, no Targaryen, but you are still my son. Come away. Come away with me, and forget this game of thrones. We can be Griff and Young Griff again, sellswords and soldiers. Find our own fate in Tyrosh or Myr or even further east, to the gates of the Jade Sea or the sparkling sands of Sothoros. Roam free across this wide world, and never, never lay eyes on Westeros again."

Aegon's cheeks were still pale as a corpse, but an ugly red hue was starting to climb them, as if he had been slapped. "You're lying."

"Of course he is, my prince." The amusement, however, had gone from Varys' expression, and his lips were thin. "Tell me, Lord Connington. Shall we consider this hypothetically, without lending your wild accusations any grain of truth? If we were to grant that Aegon was an imposter, where would that leave us? A boy bred and molded to be king, who by looks, talent, and temperament could be as pure-blooded a Targaryen as the Conqueror himself? A boy taught languages and history and religion, schooled in swords and strategy and tactics, and who is even now facing the difficult choices that one must make to wear a crown? A boy who, despite his youthful impetuosity and raw nature, has it in him to be a great man? A boy, in short, who would serve the Seven Kingdoms exactly as they need? I repeat, Lord Connington. What is that?"

"Your greatest achievement." Connington's voice was barely more than a whisper. "You would have crafted the perfect king, only to see Westeros turn him away for not having the correct bloodline. The ultimate jest on them, for their grubbing pursuit of earthly power while winter and a far worse power closes in to kill us all. The mummer's final trick, before he vanishes down the trapdoor and leaves only smoke behind."

Varys smiled. He appeared peculiarly gratified. "You have an artful way with words, my lord. Perhaps you should have joined a traveling troupe of players as well, instead of the Golden Company. Shall we recall the tiresome dirge that the Lannisters are so drearily fond of? If a lion red or gold yet has claws, what of the fire of a dragon red or black?"

"So you confess it?"

"I confess nothing. You have crafted this fable from your own mad dreaming." Varys shrugged, glancing back to Aegon. "I assume the command still stands, Your Grace?"

"Burning me alive?" Connington burst out. "Is that the one you mean?"

Aegon's dark blue eyes were anguished. "It is the only way."

"Indeed," Varys remarked. "It is. As I have said, why is it so villainous to burn one traitor, who raves at you of bastards and whores and lies, so that you may wake a dragon and the rest of the realm may live? I may seem cruel to you, Your Grace, but I ask nothing without good reason. Why indeed would I dabble in sorcery, which I have always hated, unless the cost for inaction would be worse? Only fire can save the realm from the monsters of ice which approach. And why would we
have taken such care and trouble these eighteen years to shield you and shape you, unless you were the true heir?"

"What he said." Aegon appeared to be wavering. "About presenting me as the perfect king. The mummer's dragon. Fooling all of Westeros. Do you care so much about the true heir, Lord Varys? I have never trusted you, and if I commit this madness at your behest, I must be certain. If Lord Connington is wrong, tell me why."

"Nothing I can say will convince you." Varys shrugged again. "Only fire can tell. If you can wake a live dragon from dead stone, you will achieve that which even the most illustrious of your ancestors could not. Burn him." He pointed at Connington. "The greyscale in his blood will turn from stone to flame, and so too will the dragon."

"Only one dragon?"

Another of the eunuch's queer little smiles. "Only death may pay for life, Your Grace. If you wish to rouse another beast, you shall have to kill another man."

"No!" Aegon clenched his fists, turning to Arianne as if in search of moral support, but the Martell princess only stared back at him, white-faced. Connington could not tell if she believed him, if she was convinced that the boy was an impostor, or if she sided with Varys. "You trick and guile me into mortal – "

"Do you want the throne or not, my lord?" Varys' voice was low, grim. "I did think you were persuaded."

The prince – no, not the prince, Connington reminded himself – appeared utterly torn in two. Finally, lips in a thin white line, he jerked his head in a nod.

At once, as if they had only been waiting on the signal, the Golden Company men moved in, dragging Lord Jon to the nearest pillar, shoving his back against it, and tying him into place. Of course. I nearly stopped the Blackfyres from winning the throne at last, after centuries, and they are nothing if not loyal to the cause. How much had they known, how much had any of them known? I would have burned if Aerys had gotten his hands on me, if I had not fled into exile after Stoney Sept. He remembered what he had heard of the deaths of Rickard and Brandon Stark. I will not plead. I will not scream.

One of the serjeants struck a torch, and Connington watched it impassively. Do they expect me to break down and recant? Luridly, he wondered if he should have expected this all along. I will see you soon, my silver prince. I pray you, do not hate me for my frailty. My foolishness.

The man with the torch approached, slow and meticulous as any executioner swinging a blade. With no kindling and no oil, it will take me a very long time to die. Fire was a horrible death. But Connington would not turn away, mesmerized by its beauty. No man will have cause to call me coward at the end. Let him burn. Let it fail. Let it –

And then, Prince Aegon broke.

"NO!" He flung himself off the dais, shoving the Golden Company serjeant away so hard that the man almost hit the ground. Fresh blood was staining the bandage wrapped around his head, his face so utterly devoid of color that he could have been a tomb-carving; he seemed on the brink of losing consciousness, but he did not stop. Heedless of Connington's maimed black hand, of Varys, of anything, the boy fumbled with madly shaking fingers at his foster father's bonds, pulled him free, and clawed into his arms. "No! No! NO!"
Connington, struck mute, embraced the young man so hard that he nearly lifted him off his feet. They stood rocking, as he stroked Aegon's hair as he had done countless times when the boy was small, when he'd come pattering to him in the night as any child would to a parent, knowing nothing of plots or politics or power. When Connington had told him tales, had promised him a better life when they came out of hiding to return to Westeros, had dreamed with him, had taught him to swing a sword and be a man, and Aegon was sobbing so hard that he choked. "No," was the only word he seemed capable of uttering. "No. No. I can't. I can't."

Varys watched them with a completely inscrutable expression. At last, as Aegon was regaining command of himself, the eunuch spoke. "That was an unwise decision, Your Grace."

"No." The boy turned, arms outstretched, as if to shield one man from the other. "It is the first wise one I have made. By your poisonous counsel, I ordered the Westerlings and Lady Roslin killed, and now I nearly agreed to slaughter the only man in this world who has always stood by my side, my father and my friend. Thank all the Seven that I came to my senses in time. If this is the price of a dragon, of a crown, perhaps it is more than I care to pay."

Varys' eyes glittered. "And thus perhaps you are no Targaryen after all. As I told you, my lord. Fire will tell. Fire. And yet you flinch from it. I, however, will not see the realm slave to your scruples just yet." He turned. "Bring her in."

Before anyone present could ask what this meant, the mercenaries guarding the door bowed and turned to open it. Then they escorted in a small figure, waterlogged as a drowned rat, black hair standing up in damp fistfuls, glaring belligerently at her captors, and –

Arianne Martell gasped, as well she might. It was Elia Sand, her cousin, who had clearly been found in the water after the great wave swept her overboard. "No," she said convulsively. "No. We have already lost Tyene and likely Nym as well, there is no word from Sarella – Elia is a child, a child, she has done no wrong, you cannot use her like this, you cannot –"

"Why not?" Varys asked practically. "She is the natural daughter of your uncle Oberyn, a prince of the Rhoynish line. Royal blood, if you recall, will also wake the stone dragon."

"No," Aegon echoed. "It is a foul thing, unspeakable –"

"Once I told you, in the matter of Marya Seaworth and her sons, that you thought of yourself as a hero, and heroes do not kill children. Well, Your Grace, let this serve as your final lesson. Kings are not heroes. Every throne is made with blood and grief and treachery, and yours will ultimately be no different. Kings are merely men who kill more than others, who rob more than others, who dress in gold and jewels as if outward beauty could signal inward purity, who claim the gods have favored their endeavors when in truth, there are no gods. It is all a lie and a game that we play because we are foolish and know no better. Why do you look at me as if I am the villain? I said it before, I shall say it again. The Wall has fallen and the Others are coming in all their numbers. You need a dragon. It is the only way. I may lie in everything else, but I do not lie in this. I am the only one, have always been the only one, working to save the realm."

_Gods preserve us all. He means it._ Connington stared at the eunuch in dawning horror. An awful plan was coming clearer and clearer in his head. "Aegon."

The boy turned at once, eyes pleading with him to make this nightmare stop, to put an end to it, to make him wake up. _If only I had that power, my child. _"Aye?"

"I love you," Connington told him. "I'm sorry. I should have told you about the greyscale. I'm sorry. I should have served you better. I'm sorry. I should have seen the truth sooner, and taken you
away. This is all I can give you now. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Griff?" Aegon took a step, plaintive. "Griff, what are you – ?"

"I'm sorry," Connington breathed again, moving back. Gazing overhead, he could see the carved dragons in the vault, frozen forever – or so, at least, he had always thought. He reached the brazier, gripped by a grief so deep it was transcendent, a complete and serene certainty. I am a dead man either way. I can die by stone or by flame, slowly or swiftly. All that is left to me is the choosing. And his heart, for better or worse, had always belonged to the Targaryens.

He knelt down. He took the vessel of oil from the brazier. Whale oil; it would burn hot and clear and true. He raised it like a chalice.

"N – " Aegon, too late, realized what he meant to do. "PAPA, NO!"

The boy's scream split the shadows of the hall as Connington upturned the oil over his head, soaking face and hair and clothing, then plunged the snuffed torch into the brazier and kindled it again. He clutched it close to his heart like a lover, feeling it licking eagerly at his chest, the red dragon that capered on his black tabard. It caught and spread, running across his shoulders, down his arms, lighting in fierce and unholy radiance on his broken hands, the infected stumps, the scales hard and black and mortal that limned the cracked grey skin. Aerion Brightflame drank a jar of wildfire and thought it would turn him to a dragon in himself. In those last moments, as he burned, did he believe that he could fly?

Connington lurched to his feet again, a human torch blazing like a beacon, like a star. Like a dragon. There was pain now as his hair caught, his eyelashes, the skin of his face starting to melt like wax, as all he could see was brightness and darkness and indistinct figures, heat waves rattling the cold stone, calling out, calling. Dragonstone comes alive once more. And even as he burned, one thought remained locked in his head, what Varys had said earlier. Only death may pay for life. If you wish to rouse another beast, you shall have to kill another man. . . Royal blood, if you recall, will also wake the stone dragon. . .

The Blackfyres were descended from Aegon the Unworthy. They were – however deceitful and poisonous and false – the blood of kings as well. And Lord Jon Connington did not mean to fall alone. Did not mean to let the lies of a lifetime go unavenged.

He lowered his head, his entire body ablaze now, and charged.

Varys had not seen him coming, and turned too late, too slowly. The eunuch wore no weapons, raised his hands in futile defiance, and was taken down with Connington's full weight on top of him, crashing to the floor and thrashing to extricate himself as his fussy lilac-scented silken robes began to hiss, then smolder, than flame. Curiously, he never cried out, never even made a sound, as Connington clutched him close with the strength of the damned, as the fire licked from his flesh to Varys', as they went up like a great log at a winter feast, the darkest moment when it seemed the snows would never end and the dawn would never come. The moment where all was lost. If it was now, what it would be, Lord Jon would never know. The fire was roaring, eating into him, chewing his bones away, his flesh turning black and crackling. It was pain beyond knowing and yet also transcendence, beauty, perfection. And as his eyes began to fail, as he jerked and writhed on the floor in agonized throes, scattering sparks, Connington saw the stone dragon above him began to move.

It stirred as if from the sleep of time past knowing or counting. It shook itself, uncurling from the vaults and raising its blunt head, eyes and jaws opening, one slitted yellow and the other the whiteness of fang, pulling itself free, one wing and then two, leathery skin almost translucent
between bone pinions, spiked tail thrashing, clawing loose, almost falling as if it had forgotten how to fly during its centuries of stony slumber, plunging toward the floor and then pulling up, great gusts wafting from its wings to send the fire dancing, as Aegon, Arianne, and Elia clutched each other and cowered. It threw its head back, and screamed.

Connington was fast losing consciousness, though not fast enough. He could feel the flames devouring him, running riot, the stench of burned flesh and seared hair and cooked meat, the reek of death and the ring of victory. As the fire continued to chew through him and Varys, he caught a glimpse of another rustle of movement, another beast coming to life as the eunuch died. **Two dragons are better than one. Indeed, my lord. Indeed. We will perish, and yet we will live forever.**

He opened his mouth to scream, and yet the fire had stolen his lips, his teeth, his tongue. An end to kindle the stars and heavens. The prince’s last chance. Even with elephants he had been unable to take King's Landing and the crown, but with two dragons woken from the bones of Dragonstone itself, matters would be very different. And so, in the end, Lord Jon saw it Varys’ way after all. What did it matter if Aegon was the seed of Rhaegar Targaryen or not? He had all the might of fire and blood behind him now. Why waste the choices they had made, the lives they had sacrificed, the years they had labored, to bring him to this moment? The king made for Westeros, the mummer’s dragon, its final jape and yet perhaps its final triumph. **I love you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.**

Through the raging curtain of fire, white and red and orange and gold and sometimes nearly even green, blue and umber and crimson and blood, Connington could still see Aegon staring in utter, transfixed shock. The air was beginning to crackle and scream with heat, lambent and infernal, as the Golden Company men seized hold of the prince and the Martell girls and pulled them to safety. Pain, pain, pain, erasing his every coherent thought and breath, exploding in his chest, strangling his heart, charring his lungs to ash, as he could see his hand falling and crumbling away, as even the grey dead scales began to catch, peeling the skin off as if the egg from a newly hatched chick. Somewhere in the madness, he could still hear the dragons screaming.

He could no longer see, taste, touch, feel. Nothing except the pain, and the brilliance. Skin splitting, blood smoking in shining pools that seared like acid. **In a coat of red or coat of black, a dragon still has claws. And mine are long and sharp, my lord, as long and sharp as yours.**

Impossibly, Lord Jon smiled, though he had nothing to smile with anymore. His hands and heart and mind were almost gone, the flames boiling higher and higher, crackling off the walls, more agony than he thought he could withstand, a light brighter than them all, brighter than the sun, purer and purer, white and white –

He was rising. Moving to meet it.

He was no longer afraid.

Below on the ancient flagstones of Dragonstone, a husk of blackened meat was still burning. But that was no longer Jon Connington. Jon Connington was a wisp now, a phantom, a breath of life, wind over the water, the sun out from behind a cloud, higher and higher. And then as if from very far away but swiftly rushing closer, he saw a faint figure turning toward him. Reached out for it, and saw the indigo eyes that had always gazed into his soul.

*Jon, said Rhaegar Targaryen, and smiled sadly. It has been so long.*

*Too long, my silver prince,* Jon Connington whispered, and took his hand.
They gathered in the courtyard of the Gates of the Moon in the darkness before dawn, as only the faintest gauzy hues of rose and lavender spilled over the distant, jagged eastern mountains. The air was so cold that it felt solid, a coffin of ice for a princess in a song. Waiting on a kiss to wake her. It seemed quite silly to Sansa now, to think of it that way. Not when she had fought and killed, fled and feared, bled and struggled and suffered and froze and burned, to survive, cross the mountains and return to the Vale, back to face the final act. No fairytale lady would be caught dead contemplating such activities, far less carrying them out, and yet Sansa did not much mourn the loss. We shall have to write new songs, then. One day when the fighting is done.

She glanced around, taking stock. Lady Stoneheart was to remain here, with Thoros as intermediary and interpreter, supposedly in hopes of seeing the lords of the Vale mete out appropriate punishment to Littlefinger, but Sansa very much doubted that her mother had the patience for a trial. She will kill him if she gets the first chance. It is the only way she can go to her rest at last, poor tormented soul. Theoretically, Thoros was supposed to intervene, but he knew as well what the death of Petyr Baelish meant to his mistress. And from what Sansa had gathered, the Corbrays in particular would not be grieved if the erstwhile Lord Protector should happen to meet an unfortunate and fatal accident before getting a chance to bamboozle them all again. She did not like it; she had been genuine in her wish to restore the rule of law to the restless and faction-riven Vale. But short of taking him to King's Landing with her, she could do nothing. His life was now out of her hands, and she had washed them clean of him.

Ser Hyle Hunt was also to remain here, a prisoner accused of chopping off Lord Templeton's hand, but Sansa could tell that the knight was covering for someone. He had done her loyal service in the short while she'd known him, and she intended to return and free him. And perhaps more. It was plain that he had a genuine attachment to Brienne, albeit in his cynical, wisecracking way, and if the warrior woman would have him, they would make a fine match. Pod and Brienne themselves, of course, were accompanying Sansa; neither would be parted from her side for more than a few heartbeats. Ser Addam Marbrand was sailing with the Burned Men to White Harbor, to fight against the invading hordes of fell creatures coming from beyond the fallen Wall. The rest of the Brotherhood could go north with him to battle, or south with Sansa to the intrigues of the capital, as they chose. Knowing their temperament, she suspected the former.

Thus, it had come time for leavetaking. Throat thick, Sansa turned toward the dark silhouette of Lady Stoneheart, who stood by herself apart from the main company, gazing up at the slender snow-spire towers of the Eyrie so very far above, bunched like arrows in a quiver on the shoulder of the great mountain. Lightly, she touched the sleeve of the ragged cloak. "Mother?"

The red eyes turned slowly toward her. No longer as hateful and mad as when they were fixed upon everyone else, there was nothing to be glimpsed in them now but weariness and – if such even remained in her – a fragile and agonizing grief. The husk of Catelyn Stark said nothing, a silent sentinel as ever, as Sansa drew her into her arms, holding her for what she knew would be the last time. She remembered how she had first realized who it was, in the hollow hill with the Brotherhood looking on. How she had wept as if she would break in half, and then gone to face it. I am glad for it. Whatever had driven Lady Stoneheart this far, it was not merely a rotted, raving desire for revenge on Littlefinger and all her enemies, but some flickering remnant of the living woman and her fiercely loving heart, as proud a she-wolf as any Sansa had ever known.

Holding back tears, she kissed Lady Stoneheart quickly, then began to step away; as ever, the corpse woman had neither responded to nor rejected her touch. But as she did, her mother suddenly
grasped hold of her, her bandaged hands cradling Sansa's head. Their eyes locked. And in that moment, Sansa saw her. Saw her pride, and saw her blessing, and her parting.

Sansa bit her lip, kissing her fingers and touching them to the torn white flesh beneath the hood. It was harder than anything she'd ever known to let go, to grow up, to turn away, to cross the courtyard to the waiting horses and Ser Addam offering her a hand up into the saddle, Brienne and Pod positioned stalwartly with the Burned Men – her men, who would be guiding them through the Mountains of the Moon and collecting more of their number on the way. Once they crossed the pass just north of Redfort and descended into the windswept coastal lowlands, it was a comparatively swift ride to the port of Gulltown, where Ser Addam's ships awaited. Assuming no acts of gods or demons, she could reach King's Landing in less than a fortnight.

Sansa swung up, arranging her heavy skirts and cloak and wraps; she was dressed for the extreme of winter weather, and still expected it to be entirely insufficient. As the portcullis grated open, she took a last long look around the dark castle. Imagined Littlefinger watching her from a lonely tower window, and wondered what he could be thinking. Was he proud that he had trained her so well, that she'd learned to play his game? Or was he smoldering with impotent rage and jealousy, watching his great prize ride away, after everything he'd done to win her? He must see it as one final attempt by the world to thwart him, one final piss in his face. Knowing that no matter whose hand it came by, he was very likely a dead man.

She shook her head, banishing him as best she could. There was a long cold ride ahead, and she had no space to spare for ghosts. It seemed exquisitely strange that the Vale had been a refuge from her days of cold and toil, but it had, despite everything. And now she must leave it behind.

Head high, spine straight, and not looking back, never looking back, Sansa Stark rode out from the Gates of the Moon and into the breaking winter morning.

Conversation was minimal as they labored up the steep, slippery paths that forked the mountainside like a serpent's tongue. The Burned Men, of course, were more than half goat, and consistently found the hidden byways that would have eluded anyone less familiar with these wilds, breaking trail tirelessly and serving as scouts for any of their clan rivals who might be encountered unexpectedly behind a boulder. Sansa got the impression that the wildlings would prefer to wet their whistles on some hapless Stone Crows or Painted Dogs or Milk Snakes prior to taking on the entire fury of the north, but if not, they were not about to lose any sleep at night. They were hers, in their uncouth way, as much or more than they had ever been Tyrion's, and so would go where she sent them. As always, her burned hand throbbed in its glove, but the flesh was slowly starting to knit, and she no longer much noticed the pain.

They made good time that day, and established camp for the night in the lofty shadows of snow-capped peaks, marching across the horizon from end to end, tearing streaky crimson and gold clouds from the molten underbelly of the sunset. As Sansa was taking her supper, a stew of unidentifiable meat bobbing in a dark brown broth – it would have not looked at all out of place in the pot shops of Flea Bottom, she imagined – Brienne came to sit next to her. "How do you stand the traveling, my lady?"

"Well enough," Sansa promised, mustering up a reassuring smile. "I have been a vagabond for what feels like months now. This is not much different."

Brienne absorbed this solemnly. The warrior woman herself looked as if she was only barely recovering her strength, her broad freckled face still pale and drawn and her big blue eyes inward-looking, introspective. "If I may ask, my lady, what are we meant to accomplish in King's Landing?"
"A great deal." Sansa took another sip of the soup, grimaced, and reminded herself that she could not starve. "Ser Hyle and Podrick told me something of the quest on which you three found yourselves, and the oaths you swore both to my mother and to Ser Jaime Lannister. They claimed that he was sincere in wanting to protect me from his family, that he charged you to keep me safe. Is this so?"

A most extraordinary expression came across Brienne at hearing the Kingslayer's name, the same as when Sansa had told her that she meant to return to the capital in the first place. She swallowed, seemed momentarily lost for words, then nodded. "Aye."

Sansa studied the other woman curiously. "You are fond of him?"

"We understand each other." Brienne glanced away. "He – he is not the man he was, my lady."

"That is what I am wagering on," Sansa admitted. "I have not heard a good word of him, but I trust your judgment, and I do not believe that you would lie to me. If you will intercede with him on my behalf, perhaps Stark and Lannister can reach an understanding at last, a peace between our Houses that will formally end the war and prepare us to face this threat from the farthest north. I will need it, considering that I mean to cease my marriage to his brother." She touched her bodice, where the signed annulment decree was hidden; it too had been found among Littlefinger's effects when he was taken prisoner. If she could reach the Great Sept of Baelor and file it formally with the Faith, it would free her once and for all from Tyrion Lannister. Until then, it was merely a scrap of parchment. "Can you do this?"

"I – I believe so, my lady." Brienne gazed at the ground, then back at Sansa. "But there is something else you may not know. When we left the Brotherhood, after Jaime's trial, he was sore wounded, near to death. I took him to the Quiet Isle, where he recovered his strength and we. . ." A deep flush climbed her cheeks, and she swiftly moved past whatever she had been about to say. "But we were caught there by men from the Vale, who blamed him for your abduction by Ser Shadrich. They thought the Mad Mouse had done it on Jaime's instigation, and arrested him accordingly. They followed the Elder Brother, I understand, and thus implicated him as well in the conspiracy."

Sansa blinked in astonishment, remembering the tall monk who had come from the Quiet Isle to treat Robert Arryn, and her daring decision to confess to him and start this entire plan in motion. "Aye, the Elder Brother promised that he would help me escape the Vale, but that went. . . sideways. Ser Shadrich acted on his own, out of some foolish notion of selling me to Ramsay Bolton. I doubt Ser Jaime had anything to do with it."

"He didn't. That was the point. They framed him for Ser Shadrich's crime, and wanted Shadrich to swear that Jaime had nought to do with it. I don't suppose. . ."

"The Mad Mouse can swear to nothing now. He is dead. I killed him."

Brienne looked torn between relief and consternation. "That is well done, my lady, truly. But such is the difficulty. Jaime was taken prisoner, and might still be one, wounded and powerless. I cannot even be certain that the Vale men took him to King's Landing, though I believe they did. They were acting on Lord Baelish's orders, that is all I know."

"Vale men." Sansa considered. "Which Houses, do you recall?"

"Corbray, Belmore, Templeton, at least." Brienne screwed up her face, thinking. "The Corbrays will be in no mood to humor any pact with Lord Baelish, after what happened with Ser Lyn at your trial, but the others. . ."
"Hearing that he is fallen from grace will change their minds," Sansa declared, more confidently than she felt. She had been noting as well how familiarly Brienne referred to the Kingslayer, just that simple "Jaime," and began to wonder if she was quite mistaken about the warrior woman's willingness to accept Ser Hyle as husband. But _Ser Jaime is a sworn brother of the Kingsguard, and guilty of incest, treason, and murder._ Surely Brienne did not harbor any notions that they could be wed, could not possibly even want a man like that. But they had known each other too brief a time for Sansa to feel entitled to ask, and she supposed that she had small right to point fingers in that department. It made her remember the last task she hoped to see done in King's Landing, and the reason she must detach herself from Tyrion in the first place.

"Well," Sansa said. "You must do your best to track down Ser Jaime. My brother Robb would have fought the Lannisters until the bitter end, but my brother Robb is dead now, and I will make a treaty if I can. Either way, I mean to seek asylum with the Tyrells. Lord Mace is Hand of the King, ruling for Tommen, and if I can arrange an audience with him, I believe he will be most receptive to my proposal. Once I have annulled my marriage, I mean to ask him for his son Willas' hand, and make my way to Highgarden as quickly as I can. When Willas and I are wed, I will return north with the Tyrell strength, to destroy my House's enemies and lay claim to our inheritance. You said that my little brother is in White Harbor?"

"So far as I know, my lady."

"Rickon." Sansa barely remembered him, only a fierce toddler fond of biting and playing and running wild with his wolf, gone so long that they were nearly strangers. "Whether as his regent or in my own name, I shall still have to rule."

Brienne looked at her stoutly. "I would bend the knee to you, my lady. Not just as caretaker, but as queen. Queen in the North. It's in you, I think. The Stark strength."

Sansa flushed, pleased. She had never before imagined holding Winterfell in her own right. With three brothers, and her own betrothal to Joffrey, she had thought that if anything she would be queen consort of the Seven Kingdoms, a demure faceless figure to wear Joff's colors and bear his children, to sew and hold court and make conversation and occasionally ask him to pardon traitors (though she doubted that she would have ever done so successfully). But she found now that she wanted it. She wanted to marry Willas Tyrell, or at least the swords and gold and soldiers of the Reach, and rise up to rebuild everything that had been torn down for House Stark since Ilyn Payne had taken her father's head off, since a future that once looked so bright had been burnt to dust and snow and ashes. And despite everything, no matter how young and uncertain she still was, she too was starting to believe that she could.

They passed a cold night in the rough, and were up again the next morning well in advance of the slumbering sun. The Burned Men wanted to reach the Redfort pass today, though their notion of how much ground they could cover differed sharply from the rest of the party's, and the usual trail was closed off by snowdrifts six feet deep, necessitating a detour through one of the lower saddles. It was hard, slow, torturous slogging, breath burning in their chests, sometimes clambering on all fours through narrow bottlenecks choked with sliding stones, ice slabs the size of houses, and exposed cliff faces, everyone doing their absolute damndest not to look down. But the wildlings continued to guide them true, and when they stopped again that night, the Burned Men had somehow doubled their number, without anyone ever noticing when. Sansa, for her part, could very well see why almost nobody risked their neck running about the Vale in winter, and had started to think of her featherbed and blazing hearth and hot supper back at the Gates of the Moon with something close to physical longing. She was very weary of always being cold and hungry and exhausted, on the move from one dubious refuge to another, her muscles sore and aching and her dreams strange and sinister. _It will be good to go south. Just for a short while. Just long enough_
to rest. Where it's warm, or at least warmer.

She had deliberately busied herself with the politics of Littlefinger's arraignment, the plans of making truces with the Lannisters and marriage with the Tyrells, to forget about the fact that she was terrified of returning to King's Landing. She had to, for all the very sensible reasons she had outlined to Brienne, but it was still the place where she had been held captive, subject to Joffrey's sadistic whims, battered and scorned, fearing for her life and family. She had changed so much since then, but would passing through its gates transform her back into that frightened little girl, that bird in a cage without wings? Still more, she had not forgotten who else might await her there. She wanted to know that Sandor Clegane had made it to the city, but what good could possibly come of that? Their paths had brought them together again for a short while, a gift she had never thought to have, but they branched separately into the dark horizon, unknowing and unknowable. I will never see him again. I must remember that.

They reached Gulltown five days later. As predicted, the going had gotten somewhat easier once they won their way out of the mountains, and they now had in train a cohort of Burned Men some several hundred in number, which Sansa ordered to keep their distance in order to not seriously alarm the townsfolk. The rest of them rode in to resupply.

Gulltown was the largest city in the Vale, though still a shit-stained backwater beside King's Landing or even White Harbor; crookbacked streets dodged and wove through half-timbered cottages, thatched hovels, whitewashed shops, and stone watchtowers like drunkards staggering home late from the tavern, pigs and dogs rooting industriously for scraps in the mud and merchants plying trade and gossip in the market square. Aside from the locals from the small towns on the Fingers or the Bite, there were northerners, Lyseni, Pentoshi, Braavosi, and even an intrepid few from far Lorath or freezing Ibben. The wild rumors they shared, however, were the same. Braavos itself, the jewel of the Free Cities, was no more, buried into the depths by some monstrous wave, its culture and its beauty and its lore drowned forever. It would have sounded a most romantic end to Sansa once, but now, all she could imagine was what those poor doomed souls must have thought, as that rushing howling demon of the deep bore down on them, the salt in their lungs, the cold, the darkness, the death. Dear gods, such a long way down.

This only confirmed Ser Addam's conviction that something dreadful was afoot, and he was transparently in haste to be away to White Harbor with the Burned Men. His half-dozen longships were moored at the quays, flying the merman of House Manderly; it sent a stab through Sansa's heart, after not seeing a single shred of northern regalia for months. They looked to be strong and sturdy vessels, and she had the use of one to bear her south, as agreed. Thus, after a night spent recuperating in proper beds, it was time for final decisions to be made.

Sansa would be taking Pod, Brienne, a crew of sailors, and an escort of Burned Men and Manderlys with her to King's Landing. She trusted the wildlings to see to her safety, but having men along who possessed more politesse than your average rutting boar would be useful in negotiating with the Faith, the Tyrells, and the Lannisters. As for the Brotherhood, she informed them that their duty to her was discharged. They could go where they would.

Jack Be-Lucky, Anguy, and most of the others chose to return to their old haunts. With Lady Stoneheart gone, they would likewise need a new leader, and most felt that plenty of Freys remained offensively alive back in the riverlands. But Harwin, although plainly dubious of Brienne, chose to go with Sansa. "I... I'd feel strange, m'lady, leaving you now. I'd not say that I'm a Stark man, not again, but... I'll do my duty."

"Thank you," Sansa told him, then turned to Gendry. She had grown used to having him at her back, and was hoping he would stay, but she could not give him less of a choice. "And you?"
The Bull scratched his thick black mop of hair and shuffled his feet, looking self-conscious. Finally he said, "You've treated me kindly, m'lady, and I'll not deny there's times that I dream of going back to King's Landing and Tobho Mott's shop, waking to swing a hammer and forge good steel and never hear of bloody gold cloaks or crows come wanting to take me to the Wall or queens out for my head or none of it. But I can't. I'm not Gendry the orphan lad no more. I'm Ser Gendry of the Hollow Hill, and that means something. And so, I . . . I want to go to White Harbor, and fight. Defend the realm. That's what a proper knight's s'posed to do, and that Ser Addam, he's not a bad sort, for all he used to be one of the Lannisters. I think he'd deal with me fair enough. By your leave, of course."

"You have it." Sansa smiled sadly. "I am sure you will be something to sing of."

"Not really, m'lady, no. I don't think so. For sure no one's writing a song for me." Gendry shrugged self-effacingly. "I can't sing a lick neither, so it would be a waste. I . . . I'm glad I knew you, though. If some day in the future . . ."

"So long as I rule in Winterfell, you will always be welcome in my halls."

"Thank you. M'lady." He glanced down again. "I hope you find your sister. Arya."

"I hope so too. Very much. Travel well, ser."

Gendry bent to clumsily kiss her offered hand, then made a hasty exit. Sansa was still looking after him when another voice broke in. "My lady, I as well have something to ask you."

She turned with a start to see Marbrand. She was most grateful for his fortuitously timed arrival in the Vale; without it, she would have no ship, and she smiled at him as graciously as she could. "Ask, ser. I am in your debt."

He looked as close to uncomfortable as the tall copper-haired knight ever could. Then he said, "Your brother Robb's widow is in White Harbor. Jeyne, a young woman of near seventeen years, with a small son, your nephew. He is no threat to your claim or your brother Rickon's; he is blind and crippled. Still, he is all she has left. I know you must have heard what role the Westerlings played in bringing your brother down, but Jeyne had nothing to do with that, and they are all dead besides. I entreat you to deal with her gently."

Sansa was shocked at the fact that he would think her capable of harming her own blood, Robb's own child, if it conflicted with her inheritance of Winterfell, but she had learned more than enough of politics to know why he had said it. "Likewise, she will be welcome beneath my roof, but surely she must grieve my brother, and thus I shall not force her to wed again against her will. But if she will have you, then I wish you many years of happiness."

"Actually, my lady." Marbrand cleared his throat. "About that. I am responsible in considerable measure for the loss of her family, and I have known her since she was a girl. I wish to do whatever I can to give her a life and a place in the world. With your permission, I will marry her, adopt her son as my own, and take them home to Ashemark with me. When the fighting is through, of course. I do not mean to shirk my obligation to Lord Wylis."

"That is . . . that is very good of you, Ser Addam." Sansa was genuinely surprised – and unsettled – to realize that he had approached her as if she was already a queen, capable of matching off her relatives in advantageous marriages or thwarting them if they were otherwise. "Surely she must grieve my brother, and thus I shall not force her to wed again against her will. But if she will have you, then I wish you many years of happiness."

Marbrand inclined his head. "Thank you, my lady. For what it is worth, I owe you an apology for
standing by, as did all else in King’s Landing, and turning a blind eye to the caprices and abuse that
King Joffrey heaped upon you. It is . . . not how I would have dealt with the situation, to be sure,
and that is another of my misdeeds for which I hope to someday atone. But you are strong, and that
strength will serve you well. Go with the gods."

And with that, he too was gone.

They set sail the next morning, on the back of a fierce southerly trade wind that set to dripping all
the icicles bearding the railings and rigging. Sansa wished that they could fly the direwolf of Stark
openly, but that would be unwise; the Boltons were still legally the Wardens of the North, the
Stark name attainted and dishonored, and she should not draw more attention than strictly
necessary. One ship with no colors – the Manderly banners likewise had been struck, their
disloyalty to the Iron Throne having been discovered – should be able to slip into one of the many
hidden inlets along the mouth of the Blackwater, and sneak Sansa into the city from there. If worse
came to worse, they had a rainbow-striped peace banner of the Seven, but she must not count on
scraps of cloth to save her. My father had a piece of paper, and that served nothing.

The other five ships drew apart, tacking out to begin their journey north. If Sansa squinted, she
thought she could see Gendry, but could not be sure among the tangle of unruly heads; the Burned
Men had packed aboard like sardines in a net, so that she hoped the ships did not sink from being
overladen before they reached their port. Timett Red-Hand, however, was accompanying her. With
him, Brienne, the Manderlys, and even Pod, she did not fear being jumped and killed in an
alleyway at least. Only everything else.

Gulltown swiftly receded into the horizon, and they left the Bay of Crabs behind and blew into the
narrow sea. Counting her escape from King’s Landing aboard the Merling King, this was only
Sansa’s second ocean voyage, and she devoutly hoped that it would not go as had the first; she had
thought she would die from seasickness, storms, terror, and general misery. It was better so long as
she was on deck with fresh air, but it was too cold to stay there, and she soon found herself below
sharing a cramped cabin with Brienne, neither of them with much to contribute by way of
conversation. She kept thinking of how she had left things, back in the Vale. Had Lady Stoneheart
had her vengeance at last? Had Harrold Hardyng started to mend from his wounds, and would he
be able to steer the squabbling nobility back to some sort of accord, or had Ser Harlan Hunter made
sure that he would never be able to confirm what had been done to him? Most pressingly of all,
should she really assume that Littlefinger's bag of tricks was empty? He could have contrived to
free himself and slaughter the lot of his enemies by now, regain command and come out higher
than before.

Sansa’s anxious thoughts kept her gloomy company as they circumnavigated the stony finger of
Crackclaw Point, a distant grey shadow of mist-wreathed cliffs far off to starboard. The waves
were white and the wind was contrary, but the Manderlys had grown up as seafarers, and it was
nothing beyond their capabilities. Then they were striking due south, into the heart of the falling
night. Stars and a slender paring of moon came and went behind iron anvils of clouds, torches
guttering as the helmsman worked to keep them on a steady course. Sansa had little appetite for
supper, and retired below to her berth in hopes of catching a few hours of fitful sleep.

Her dreams were green, green as flame. Walls of wildfire roaring up the black river, leaping and
swirling and screaming. Ships burning, men dying. Gentle Mother, font of mercy, save our sons
from war, we pray. His eyes gleaming in the dark, her hand wet with the blood on his face, and
something that was not blood. Stay the swords and stay the arrows, teach us all a kinder way. He
had not kissed her, he said – said that she had only imagined it, that it too was only a dream, a
fading phantom. A stained white cloak she’d drawn close, shivering.
And then Sansa woke, and realized that the flames were real.

She panicked, disoriented, stumbling out of bed, groping for her cloak – her own cloak, not Sansor's, of course it was not Sandor's – as she heard shouts and screams from above, could see violent glow spangling the night. She blundered across the cabin to the ladder, and almost collided with Brienne, whom she clutched at. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"We don't know, my lady." Brienne's voice was grim as she helped Sansa up after her and onto the deck, pointing. "That there, in the distance. That's Dragonstone."

Sansa leaned on the railing, straining her eyes. Sure enough, there was a brilliant bloom of firelight on the horizon, silhouetting a dark island like the mouth of the seventh hell, strange shadows stirring and screeching, the entire place belching fumes and shrieks and savagery. Sansa had no idea why it was, but she knew at once that she did not like it. "I thought the monsters were in the north. That was why she had sent the Burned Men to White Harbor, to fight the things from the ice... but something else was here, something from fire..."

The others were staring intently as well, as the sailors scrambled up the rigging to let out more canvas, make more speed to give the island a very wide berth. Sansa knew that it had been the longtime stronghold of Stannis Baratheon, but Lord Stannis had been in the north for months now, unseen and unheard, perhaps even dead. Who then could have taken it? She did remember Littlefinger telling her that Ser Loras had been horribly burned with oil while storming it for Tommen. At that breakfast after the harvest feast, when she was still Alayne, when he informed her as well that Margaery had been arrested on suspicion of adultery and fornication. The Tyrells need to fight back as much as I do, it seems. She wondered what it would be like, when she was wed to Willas. Would Margaery still be the sister she had dreamt of, or would everything be changed? That old world, that old life, that old Sansa, was gone beyond recall, but sometimes she missed it so much that it made her want to weep. She had been only a girl, a girl with a head full of songs and dreams and silks and chivalry and happiness. Why was that so terrible? Was she not allowed to grieve the end of her innocence? Was she not allowed to bleed?

With sails and oars alike, the longship managed to put Dragonstone arrears of them, the tormented glow finally vanishing in the cold winter night. They heard strange sounds blown on the wind for hours afterward, however, and one of the Manderlys swore he'd seen something flying far in the distance, something too big by far to be a bird. He was convinced, no matter how mad his fellows found him, that it was in fact a dragon.

"Dragons..." Brienne's face was just as troubled. "There were wild tales from the east that the Mad King's daughter was alive and had hatched a clutch of eggs, that she had three of them at her command, but..." She shook her head, then glanced sidelong at Sansa. "My lady, are you sure that you wish to proceed to King's Landing? If this is true, if there are claimants for the crown still afoot, you could well be swept up in the middle of a battle. You would be a valuable piece for whoever came out on top."

Sansa shook her head. "I have always been a pawn, a prisoner, a toy for the powerful. I cannot let that fear stop me. We have to go."

Brienne looked reluctantly admiring, but still nervous, and as their journey continued, as they bent around Massey's Hook and into Blackwater Bay, the big warrior woman was increasingly to be found pacing on the deck. They were yet several dozen leagues away from the capital, but if the wind kept up, they could arrive within another day or two, and it was time to seriously think of how and what and where they would enact their plans. It would not be terribly difficult to disguise themselves and enter the city itself, but attaining access to the Red Keep, and the all-important
audience with Mace Tyrell, was liable to be significantly harder. Their current best gambit was that Ser Jaime would be present to recognize Brienne and order them admitted on her behalf, but as Brienne had already divulged, Ser Jaime's circumstances were just as precarious as their own – if not more so. Then they also had to hope that Lord Mace was still in a position of authority; King's Hands tended to dance on the blades of knives, especially in these unsettled times, and with the Tyrell name in disrepute, he would have to flap even harder to stay aloft.

At last, the distant darkness on the horizon unfolded into a rumpled collage of sharp-pointed roofs, rambling serpentine walls, mudflats picked over by larks and scamps, a harbor that looked oddly empty, and smoke drifting into the flat silver sky from the countless towers, chimneys, taverns, brothels, manses, pot shops, and townhouses crammed into the bounds of the great city on its three hills. The Red Keep loomed over them all, and one of the Manderlys with the sharpest eyes reported that King Tommen's banners, the stag and lion, were still flying from the parapets. Whatever had befallen King's Landing in Sansa's absence, however, bespoke of anything but a peaceful rule. The mud was gashed with the marks of a furious battle, broken timbers piled up before the smoke-scorched gates, corpses still bobbing in the filthy tide, picked over by seabirds and Flea Bottom looters alike. As the longship navigated past them, Brienne glanced down and let out an exclamation. "Those are Targaryen colors."

Everyone crowded to the side to look, and sure enough, she was correct. Many of the dead men wore the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen, along with a number in the sun-and-spear of House Martell. There were also several Poor Fellows and Warrior's Sons, and yet more with no colors at all, common-born foot soldiers. Yet if Tommen's banners still flew, the attack on the city must have been repulsed. Targaryens and Martells? It had been no secret that Prince Oberyn, the flamboyant Dornish lordling with his dark eyes and serpent's smiles, loathed the Lannisters for their part in the murder of his sister Elia and her children, and had come to the city before King Joffrey's wedding in search of vengeance. . . but the Red Viper was dead. What in the world could have brought the Martells together with the Targaryens – the Targaryens – now?

They dropped anchor in a wooded cove and stealthily came ashore, all dressed in their plainest, darkest homespun and their hoods up over their faces as they approached the great shadow of the walls. The Iron Gate was closest, and it was there that they directed themselves, her heart pounding like a drum. Sansa's feet would barely move, and she clutched onto Brienne's arm for fear that her knees would give out. What if the guards at the gate were disposed to ask questions? What if they saw? What if they knew?

They didn't. They were a pair of gold cloaks who barely seemed to know which end of a spear to point, cold and tired and weary of trouble, and they waved Sansa and her companions through without a second glance. Inside, the streets were as busy as ever; the smallfolk could not waste their time wondering after the games of kings when there was still the pressing business of surviving the winter. After sending Pod and the Manderlys off to gather intelligence in the nearest tavern, Brienne and Timett each took hold of an elbow and more or less carried Sansa through the muck, making steady progress toward the Great Sept on Visenya's Hill.

I am here. I am back. I made it. I survived. Her father had been killed on Baelor's plaza. She could almost see it again. The crowd screaming, the flash of the blade in the sun. No. She was conscious of a strangling sensation in her chest, spots dancing before her eyes. She needed to breathe, or else she was going to faint.

They reached Baelor's at last. A scattered camp of scruffy Faith Militant were sleeping on the steps, but they picked their way through and sued for admittance at the great crystal doors. It was some time until their knocks were answered, by a suspicious-looking septa who was on the verge of turning them away until Sansa blurted out that she had come on urgent business, that she knew
something about the Elder Brother of the Quiet Isle and the murdered Inquisitor of the Faith, the
information for which he had died. At that, at last, Brienne and Timett forced to relinquish their
considerable quantity of weaponry, they were led into the echoing marble halls.

Running the gauntlet of gatekeepers and petty bureaucrats took up much of the remaining day, and
Sansa was despairing of ever achieving anything, when they finally found themselves before a
member of the Most Devout who was sympathetically inclined and willing to take her seriously.
He listened attentively to her tale of escape and abduction, the encounter with the Warrior's Sons at
the tavern on the Bite (she left out the part where Sandor had nearly killed them) and the discovery
of the slain Inquisitor in the dungeons of the Gates of the Moon. Last of all, she removed the
annulment decree from her bodice, and asked that it be filed to the appropriate courts without
delay.

The Most Devout took it, scanned it, and then his eyes went wide. "Lady Sansa? Sansa Stark?"

Her throat was very dry. "Aye."

It was hard to read his expression. "You seek an end to your marriage with Tyrion Lannister, on
grounds of non-consummation and abandonment?"

"Aye."

"Lord Tyrion has fled Westeros, accused of regicide and patricide. I do not expect he shall ever
return, but. . ." Even here, where the working of the gods was supposed to be sacrosanct, money
and power played heavily. "There is nothing left of the Lannisters, it is true, and yet. . ."

"Nothing left. . .?" It was Brienne who spoke, plainly doing her best to keep her voice level, but
there was a distinct quaver in it. "My lord, do you know how Ser Jaime fares?"

The Most Devout shook his head. "I have heard nothing. The last I knew, he was imprisoned
indefinitely, on sentence of tampering with royal justice for attempting to stop the executions of
Lord Gawen Westerling and his family. An action for which I feel he should be commended,
personally, but politics will be politics. We meant to try Queen Cersei for her crimes. Yet she has
vanished, and more sinisterly, King Tommen has as well. This city hangs by a thread."

"Who attacked it?"

"A pretender calling himself Aegon Targaryen, whose assault was broken by what surely must be
the gods' own mercy, and one brave man who charged him on the beach." The Most Devout
fingered the annulment decree. "This will go under advisement, my lady. I can promise no more. Is
there anything else I may do for you?"

It was not the answer Sansa had wanted, but she could not be terribly surprised. In time, she told
herself. All things in time. "If you could possibly offer us an escort to the Red Keep? I must speak
with the King's Hand, Lord Mace Tyrell."

"With His Grace missing?" The man's skepticism was plain. "My lady, are you quite sure that is
wise? You were already suspected alongside your lord husband in King Joffrey's murder. . . if you
were to be recognized, we could not guarantee your safety."

"Ser Jaime," Brienne insisted again. "Is there a way to send a message to him? He could arrange
our entrance. Surely the Faith must owe him a debt for standing against the – "

"As I have said, he is imprisoned. He can arrange nothing. And even if he tried to stop the
Westerling executions, he then murdered a young septa in cold blood, a particular favorite of the
High Septon. The Faith sees small reason to bestir itself on behalf of such a man, whose depravity continues to – "

"I know a way," Timett said.

Everyone swung about to stare at the gaunt, one-eyed young wildling – even Brienne, who had been glaring at the Most Devout as if about to challenge him to a duel for his impugning of Ser Jaime's honor. As for the Burned Man himself, he shrugged. "When I served the Halfman here before, he would often sneak from the castle to visit his whore. There are many secret passages both into and out of the Red Keep. I know them."

If he was anyone else, he would have apologized to Sansa for the indelicacy, considering that they were discussing her lord husband's propensity for other women. But she did not care, and though the Most Devout looked quite scandalized, he recovered, then frowned. "Lord Tyrion served as the King's Hand as well, it is true, but the Tower of the Hand was burned to the ground. On Queen Cersei's orders, after Lord Tywin's death."

Timett shrugged. "It is no matter. I can still find my way well enough. I fear no milk men or little lion guards. I will take her myself, if you in your silken dress and fine jewels are too frightened."

The Most Devout looked furtherly insulted at the suggestion that his elaborate robes and seven-pointed crystal could be classified as such, but appeared to have no immediate rejoinder. "If you are certain," he allowed at last, grudgingly, "then I suppose I cannot prevent you. But if you have returned after so long, why waste your life like this?"

"It is not wasted. I thank you for what you have done for me, my lord." Sansa stood, beckoning to Brienne and Timett. To the latter she said, "Show us."

Timett jerked his head, the closest he ever came to a traditional respectful gesture, and after a stopover at the front gates of the sept to retrieve their weapons, he led them out into the streets, following a path up toward Aegon's High Hill and the towering Red Keep. Then he veered into a culvert, dim and damp and smelling of mildew, pulled a grate aside, and began to climb.

Sansa followed close on his heels, Brienne behind her, as they ascended through some interminable jungle of narrow stone passages, finally spilling out beneath a wallwalk that she was almost certain she recognized, a serpentine stair she had once nearly fallen down. They scuttled across the courtyard and into another grotto, and she glanced back anxiously, unable to shake the sensation that they had been seen – even though the parapets had appeared all but deserted. Where is everyone? Where is the king?

After another precarious climb in the dark, her hands slipping and splashing in all sorts of thankfully unseen ordure, they emerged in the inner bailey, the rough red curtain walls rising to every side. Sansa felt a cold grue slither down her back as she gazed at this place; it felt as if she had only been days away, and yet as unfamiliar as if she had been gone for years. If I look, will there still be the stains on the stones where Ser Boros beat me?

Beside her, Brienne was just as tense, her hand clutching Sansa's arm as her eyes skated in every direction. Where are they keeping Ser Jaime penned? Her stomach had done an unpleasant flip at the idea of meeting the Kingslayer face to face, regardless of how much trust Brienne seemed to place in him. Yet try as she might, she could think of no good reason for him to do what he had done unless, gods help them, he actually meant it. Still, it did not mean that he would then consent to turn his back on kith and kin and king, on –

Timett hissed.
"What?" Sansa whispered nervously. "What?"

He said nothing, but seized hold of her other arm, and dragged her back behind a wall, Brienne trotting along by necessity. Then he held a finger to his lips and pointed up, up, up – at the solitary figure in snow-white plate armor and wintry cloak of the Kingsguard, standing huge and silent by the drawbridge of Maegor’s Holdfast. A figure who must surely have seen them emerge, intruders in the castle. *A thousand eyes and ears in the Red Keep.* But this –

The falling twilight was chill enough, but as she stared at the motionless man, Sansa’s heart turned a thousand times colder. There was something queerly *wrong* about him, and not just his ungodly size and strength. *Only one man in the Seven Kingdoms has ever been that large.* What Sandor had said when he’d tried to drag her out of the hollow hill. About why he was going to King’s Landing. *We both have to deal with our bloody undead relatives, just in different* –

It was. *Gods help us.* It must be.

Ser Gregor Clegane.
Sandor

He woke alone in the pale wintry light of morning, sprawled flat on the stone floor with his face mashed beneath the Maiden's altar, cramped and chafed and sore. Every bone he had bloody hated him, his half-healed wounds throbbing. He groaned, cursed, tried to push himself upright, and only succeeded in making it so far as his knees, where he tilted forward and rested his forehead on the cool plaster of the statue. He must have slept, though he didn't remember. All he could recall was coming in here, kneeling, staring at that lone flame in the dark, haunted by his long-lost sister and the little bird, and weeping as he had not in years, in decades, not since those first dark days after his face was burned. His throat was sore, his eyes raw. He felt like seven kinds of hell and possibly more. *Bloody fucking appropriate, for the day I become a knight.*

Suppressing the strong urge to add a few more epithets, Sandor rose to his feet. They barely felt as if they belonged to him, stitched clumsily to his legs. He was clad only in shirtsleeves and breeches, having kept the vigil bareheaded and barefoot, and the chill laced through him. His head hurt as much as it had after any night of drinking, and when he took a step, a jolt of pain shot up from the old wound in his thigh. *I'm barely fit to fight a piss-drunk squire, let alone my bloody brother.* Leave it to the gods to arrange such deplorable timing, right when he'd reached the point of no return. *I could still say no. I could still leave. I could still tell themselves to fuck themselves and die.*

Instead, he clumsily rearranged the spent candles, broke the wax off, and nodded gruffly at the Maiden, watching with her serene carven eyes. Whatever she'd seen him reduced to, she at least had no voice to speak of it, no mockery to make of it, and he was grateful for her. The rest of them (excluding the Stranger) were still welcome to be buggered in their sleep, but it was more of the gods than Sandor had worshiped in years.

On that devoutly religious note, he lurched out of the chapel.

He had some furry notion of finding the Elder Brother, as he would be more able to accept knighting from him than another. It was doubtful whether a humble brown brother could perform such a ceremony. Still, the man *had* been a knight once, and tradition did allow that any knight could make another. He at least would understand the great bloody jest of it, as well as the price that must be paid. And who better to fettle Sandor to face his other elder brother, than that?

The Great Sept, however, was thoroughly preoccupied with the stunning victory against the invading Targaryen fleet, all of which they were in a great hurry to attribute to the Father's strength or the Mother's mercy. Not him, the idiot who had actually charged down the beach and dragged the pretender from his horse, yet Sandor was not terribly surprised. Still, he didn't have time to waste. Queen Cersei was going to be tried today, and no matter if he was slightly less shipshape than one of the sunken hulks at the bottom of the Blackwater, he had to be prepared.

Asking about, however, uncovered a far more sinister story. Somewhere in the midst of the ruckus, the queen – and King Tommen – had both unaccountably disappeared. An examination of the royal chambers had turned up something still more outlandish: the corpse of ex-Maester Qyburn, and the near-corpse of Ser Jaime Lannister, who had clearly had something bad to do with rendering him that way. Lord Mace Tyrell swore that he'd packaged the Kingslayer back off to his cell, but seemed curiously unable to provide details. Adding to the Hand's tribulations was a rumor that his own daughter, the paroled but not exonerated Queen Margaery, had vanished as well, before the Faith could bring her to court on charges of adultery and fornication.

The only thing Sandor could make out, and the only thing he cared about, was that there was
exceedingly unlikely to be a trial after all. It was a downright miraculous reprieve, allowing him
time to rest and recover his strength. Of course, he cared less about that and more for the fact that
he might hie off somewhere and find a bed and a drink. Yet not wanting to get sozzled down in the
 cellar where no one would ever lay eyes on him again, he regretfully decided that he could only
settle for the bed. He crawled into his old cell, and fell asleep as if he'd been clubbed.

It was much colder when he woke, and his belly was cramping with hunger. He still felt wretched,
but purposefully so, and his head didn't try to leap off his shoulders when he stood. He grimaced,
and managed to make it out into the vault beyond. He felt as if he was floating, divorced from all
reality, any sight of –

"Sandor?"

The voice came seemingly from nowhere, and in the state his mind was in, it was far too easy to
imagine it was something else – the gods dropping by to finally order him to stop shitting on them,
for instance – and he jerked, clawing at the place where his longsword should hang. Not that it
would do much use against a wrathful deity. Not that it was even there. Nothing but the Elder
Brother, sporting a torch and a confused expression.

"There you are." Sandor's own voice was a low, graveling growl in his throat, and he coughed.
"I've been looking for you. Where have you bloody been? Hunting down the missing queens with
the rest of the knightly pissants?"

The monk looked reproachful. "I know how you feel, Sandor, but they are soon to be your
brothers. You should not blaspheme – "

"Fuck that. I have too many brothers. I'll blaspheme them if I damn well please." It sounded
reasonably convincing, but it was nonetheless an act, a reflex, a final defense against being brought
to his knees, literally, by the bastards at long last. "So?" he added. "Well?"

"I see you have been informed. No, neither Queen Cersei nor Queen Margaery have been found. A
raven has been sent to Lord Randyll Tarly, who expects to arrive in the city on the morrow. His
delay owes to his battle with the remaining Targaryen forces. He ambushed the rearguard anchored
at Wendwater and killed a sizable number, as well as burning their ships, but did not succeed in
catching the pretender Aegon himself, who must have fled elsewhere."

"Ah." Sandor made that noise again, half a laugh, half a snarl. "And I suppose Tarly and Tyrell are
already fighting about who gets credit for the victory? If I recall, at Ashford it was Tarly’s, but he
can't take much glory this time for eating our bloody leftovers. And I've known skinny little bitches
more use in a tight corner than the Fat Flower."

"You would be correct. And as a matter of fact, that is why I was coming to find you. Your
presence and cooperation are valuable. Lord Randyll wishes to see you, when he arrives. Lord
Mace has already requested it."

"What?" Sandor was outraged. "You didn't bloody tell them it was – "

"Of course I did not tell them your name," Elder Brother snapped, the first crack Sandor had ever
heard in the older man's apparently inexhaustible patience. "But the Faith already knows that the
soldier who may have single-handedly saved the city is here in the Great Sept, among their
number. Make no mistake, they will use that as a bargaining chip."

Sandor swore. He should have guessed. Survived another Battle of the Blackwater, nearly had his
head taken off, and now he was about to get swept up in all their fucking politicking. His old self
would have bellowed that the Faith, Lords Tyrell, Tarly, and anyone else could bugger themselves
or each other as they pleased, but he had to remember the real reason why he’d come here. It was
still nowhere close to a certainty, and he’d already done too much to risk it. Perhaps if he croaked a
few well-trained phrases for the Faith, scratched their back, they’d scratch his. And this was an itch
that could only be done for with a very large scratch. Carved through his undead brother's black
heart with a blade. That was the only battle left which mattered.

"All right," he growled. "What the hell do you want me to do?"

The first step was, in fact, the completion of his knighthood, the next morning. *Painting tiger
stripes on a toad.* Lord Mace and Lord Randyll knew perfectly bloody well who Joffrey's dog had
been, and being dubbed and daubed would do absolutely nothing to change that. If anything, if the
bastards possessed the faintest sense of irony, they would laugh and laugh. He hoped it choked
them. It seemed liable to choke him.

He kept his eyes on the Maiden as he repeated the vows. She was the only one he could make them
to without wanting to tear his own tongue out. He wondered if there would be an exact moment
when he felt different, when he'd know that he was done for, had finally become what he had spent
his life running from, but he didn't. Only the cold stone beneath his knees, the kiss of steel where
the sword lay on his shoulder, and his heart in his ears, behind his eyes, echoing in his skull. Then
that sword rose and traveled to the other shoulder, and the Poor Fellow performing the ceremony
said, "Arise, Ser Sandor."

*Arise.* It was that which struck him, if possible, as stranger than the rest of it. Dogs never *rose*;
they stayed where nature and their masters put them. Even to walk on two legs instead of four was
a trick for a mummer and a market fair, for the masses to laugh at. *Arise.* The Hound was dead, had
died in Elder Brother's arms on the banks of the Trident, but his ghost had remained unquiet. *Arise.*
To claim victory. To live, and not just as a scorched, scorned, half-human monster, but as a man
worthy of an honor, a name, a legacy.

*Arise.*

No one had ever asked Sandor Clegane to stand.

He could feel hot salt in his eyes, and the wetness running down his cheeks. He was supposed to
have something to hand, some gruff or snarling rejoinder, some way to prove that he still loathed it
and everything it stood for, but he was utterly at a loss. He merely stood there, head bowed, chest
shuddering as he struggled to breathe, struggled to imagine how to go on. Walk out of here and
return to that hellhole of mockery and misery and drink, or realize that he was the only one who
could glorify or destroy this new state as he wished? The misdeeds of every knight in the past did
not matter a bloody damn. Nor did any that they would assuredly commit in the future. From this
moment on, nothing mattered but his own.

After a long moment, Sandor nodded brusquely to the Poor Fellow and turned to depart. He didn't
need the tedious ritual of prayers and scented oils and marble-mouthed muttering that usually
followed. He'd already done what he had to, and time was wasting. If he survived, they could
sprinkle him to their heart's delight at a later date. If he didn't, they could do likewise.

Sandor's mouth set into a thin, grim line. Then he stumped off to find a bloody bath.

Once this had been procured, and his smell rendered marginally less offensive to delicate highborn
noses, he pulled a comb through his dark hair, cursing, and managed to shave the unburnt side of
his face without cutting his own fool throat. There was fresh garb as well, and a seven-pointed star
to clasp the mantle. He was momentarily surprised, having expected the dogs of House Clegane,
but supposed that his loyalty and usefulness to the Faith must be explicitly underscored. He shrugged it on, then buckled on his sword. The familiar weight felt good, the only thing about his new life that was real.

Put together, the effect was passable. Sandor studied his reflection. He did not look much like a knight – there was no hiding the burns, the gauntness, the half-mad eyes – but washed, brushed, and barbered, decently and soberly attired, he did not resemble the feared Hound either. *The face of a trustworthly man?* That remained to be seen. And so, with a muttered curse just to be sure that he hadn't forgotten himself entirely, Sandor turned and went.

There was a deputation just leaving for the Red Keep, and Sandor fell in. The streets of King's Landing were clothed in eerie fog, reminiscent of the night of the battle, and it was cold and chill as a silver blade. Even the smallfolk were scarce in evidence, aside from a few ragamuffins who scattered out from under the hooves. But at last, they trotted through the glowering gates of Maegor's Holdfast, and dismounted in the courtyard. Evidently recognizing that his prospects of being found innocent were far slimmer than he would ever be, Lord Mace Tyrell had sent a man to greet the Faith's inquisitorial party, to show them into a warm, well-lit solar and beg their forbearance. The King's Hand, of course, most devoutly welcomed their visit, as a chance to set to rights all these regrettable misunderstandings. Sandor ignored the miserable lickspittle, eyes sketching about restlessly.

They were offered goblets of spiced wine and hippocras, but he took neither, wanting (surprising him as much as anyone) to keep a clear head. His heart was beating short and sharp in his chest. *Ser Robert Strong is on the Kingsguard. He's here. He's bloody here.* What if he walked in right now? Would the monster recognize him? If that was the case, the Faith would have less of a leg than him to stand on, as regarded protocol and proper trial procedure. Hang protocol and fuck procedure, and to hell with their scented oils. He'd draw swords and go after the bastard the first chance he got. It would be memorable, at least, but Elder Brother had come along as well, and was certain to interfere before matters reached such a fevered pitch.

Finally, after what might have been forever or only just felt like it, Lord Mace Tyrell made his entrance. He struck the correct notes of piety and concern for the missing monarch, and once more insisted that he had no idea what had become of his daughter; he wanted her back to clear her name full as much as did my lords of the Faith. As for Queen Cersei, her capture was even more necessary. Ser Jaime had been sent back to his cell in White Sword Tower, of course. As for the rumors that Highgarden had sworn allegiance to Aegon – if it was true, it was as much news to him as them. He played the part convincingly, but then again, he'd have to. The fortunes of his own House and his personal power, particularly if King Tommen did not turn up, hung perilously in the balance.

Sandor lurked in the corner, observing the palaver with a jaded expression, until it was time for him. "My lord. It pleases me to present the man to thank for saving the city. By his brave combat with the pretender, sorely wounding him, the Targaryen attack was broken. He has been recognized by the Faith for his duty to the Crown, and we hope you shall see fit to do likewise."

Sandor shuffled forward, eyes on his boots. He heard a sharp intake of breath, and then the Fat Flower sounding as if he'd discovered a particularly succulent maggot in his sugared subtlety. "King Joffrey's *dog?* The very one who went rabid at Saltpans?"

"Not a dog, but a man." Elder Brother was courteous but very firm. "Furthermore, a knight honored and anointed in the holy light of the Seven. Ser Sandor has made sufficient atonement for his crimes, but they do not, on peril of my eternal judgment before the Father, include the atrocities committed at Saltpans in his name."
Ser Sandor. Sandor himself grimaced. It might be a fact, but bugger him if he wanted people to get into the habit. I almost preferred it when they were cursing me.

"Ser. . . Sandor?" Likewise, Mace Tyrell's finite intellectual comprehension was no match for a fact of this stupefying nature. His plump jowls purpled. "Is this some sort of jest, my lords? I assure you, I have dealt with you fairly and openly, deserving nothing of this – "

"Have you?" The Chief Inquisitor of the Most Devout raised an eyebrow. "Then surely you will be able to produce Ser Jaime Lannister for our immediate questioning?"

Even though he had been used as a setpiece in this tawdry little drama, Sandor was certainly not above enjoying himself thoroughly at the way the Fat Flower visibly wilted upon hearing the trap spring. So the Kingslayer has gone on the bunk? Where to, he wondered. Down a rabbit hole with my dearly not-so-departed brother? That would be unfortunate.

Mace Tyrell was starting to look somewhat wild-eyed. "The Faith. . . the Faith knows that I remain a true and stalwart friend to the gods and to King Tommen. I am his own Hand! Why would I have any reason to aid and abet the man who most viciously betrayed him?"

"There is the small matter of the unlawful execution of the Westerling family and Lady Roslin Tully." Another of the Devout moved in to work on Lord Mace from the other side."Grievous as Ser Jaime's other crimes may be, he remains the only man in the city who attempted – quite publicly – to put a stop to them."

"I had nothing to do with that madness!" Lord Mace insisted desperately. "As I had the tale, it was the High Septon himself who signed the warrants, after receiving them directly from the king. There was nothing I could have done to stop it. You can be quite sure, if the plans were divulged to me, I would have condemned them. They may have done wrong in permitting the Young Wolf's widow to escape Riverrun, but a trial – the restoration of the royal justice is of utmost necessity – why would I plunge the realm back into dark days when my only desire is to prove the good governance of King Tommen?"

The gathered members of the Faith exchanged leery looks. "That may be so, but once again, the High Septon never authorized any such – "

"He's telling the truth," Sandor said abruptly.

Further looks, these ones askance at him. "What makes you so certain?"

He barked a humorless laugh. Ser he might be, but they'd still take his word as worth somewhat less than the shit on their boots. "A dog can smell a rat. Do you really think Mace Tyrell would have the balls to lower the axe on the entire bloody Westerling family, and Walder Frey's spawn to boot? He could be lying until the moon turns blue about everything else, his daughter and the Kingslayer and the rest, but it wasn't him who did this."

Having been rescued by literally the last man he imagined, Lord Mace looked absurdly gratified. "Ser, thank you. What I said earlier – I spoke in haste, I did not mean – "

"Oh, shut your trap. You meant every word of it. And don't call me ser. If you were wondering, there is one way you can repay me. Whenever Queen Cersei's dragged out from whatever shithole she's squirreled down, my friends here have given me to understand that there's to be a trial. Still more, that she intends to choose it by combat, rather than be judged by the costive old cunts on the council. You'll ensure, in your capacity as Hand, that Ser Robert Strong is named the queen's champion. . . and that I stand as the Faith's champion."
Lord Mace blanched, and not from Sandor's bad language. "Ser Robert. . . of all men, you would face that one? It is true that the queen's cause can only be defended by a member of the Kingsguard, but. . ."

"Unless you have her bloody one-handed brother up your arse for us?"

Lord Mace continued to sputter, and it was Sandor's turn to feel idiotically pleased with himself. The Faith, vicious bastards that they were, even wore looks of mild approval. The silence was hideous. Then Tyrell said stiffly, "Indeed, my lords. Ser Jaime is gone. I let him go after finding him in the royal bedchamber, as he was insistent in his desire to search for and rescue King Tommen. Of course, I dispatched as many of my own men as possible in the hunt for His Grace, but he is Ser Jaime's own nephew, I cannot cast aside the bonds of family all at –"

"Oh, aye," one of the Most Devout murmured, dryly as a bone. "Nephew."

"I do not dignify scurrilous gossip about my monarch by repeating it." Lord Mace inflated like one of those puffer fish from the Summer Isles, a more apt sigil for him than that bloody tulip. "You cannot think to induce me to speak treason by –"

"And what reason would you have for letting a convicted traitor and murderer walk free, rather than returning him to White Sword Tower as you most stoutly maintained you had? Could it be that during his imprisonment, Ser Jaime became privy to damaging intelligence about the true nature of you and your House's loyalties, and threatened to reveal it to inconvenient parties unless you capitulated?" The Chief Inquisitor raised a languid eyebrow. "I shall ask one more time. You may confess to us, or to Lord Randyll Tarly when he arrives – which should be any moment. He is, of course, the new Master of Laws on the small council, and your daughter's legal guardian until her trial. Where is Queen Margaery?"

The silence this time was even more hideous. As Sandor watched, what piss and vinegar there was drained out of Lord Mace, leaving him as grey-faced as a ghost. He seemed to deflate three sizes. "Gone," he whispered. "I arranged for her to leave the city on the night of Aegon Targaryen's attack and be smuggled back to Highgarden. To safety."

"And in whose company? How could you be so sure of a man's allegiances?"

"My – my son." Lord Mace flinched. "Ser Loras. He accompanied the Targaryen fleet when they sailed from Storm's End. I swear to you, my lords, I had no knowledge of this until he arrived in the Red Keep. What would any father have done, faced with the likely death of his child? I beg you, do not think less of me for –"

"The last we all heard of Ser Loras, he lay near to death after being burned storming Dragonstone. Are we to collect that this is another of the Tyrell lies?"

"I knew nothing different!" Fat drops of perspiration splashed into the straining rose-embroidered collar. "I had every reason to believe that it was so, that he –"

"You were – remain, as yet – the King's Hand. It is true that we have no authority to make or unmake you, my lord, but you have, at the very best, been guilty of serious misjudgment. At the worst, openly set your family and House against the very king you claim to serve. Great men have fallen for far less. We shall be sharing this information with Lord Randyll, and advise you, if you desire any hope of escaping perjury and damnation, to immediately send a messenger to Highgarden to fetch Queen Margaery and Ser Loras back here for trial."

"Loras has committed no crime, I do not believe that he should –"
"He falsified his death, rode in the usurper's vanguard, in the very attack that was broken only by the good offices of Ser Sandor, and yet you still attempt to maintain that this is all an innocent misunderstanding?" The Inquisitor's voice rose in strident disbelief. "You have our word that this shall not go beyond the Red Keep, but you must see what a shadow and a stain lies upon your name. We advise you to think very closely indeed about your next move. Shall you send the messenger, or shall you recall what became of one of your near predecessors as Hand, when he turned against Robert Baratheon's acknowledged son and sought to hand the crown to the usurper Lord Stannis?"

As threats went, this was far from the most delicate, but it got the point across admirably. Ruddy cheeks gone sallow, Lord Mace nodded. "I'll send the messenger."

And with that, their task was done.

After wringing out the confession, the deputation of the Faith returned straightaway to the Great Sept to spill all in the High Sparrow's ear; they would have taken Sandor as well, but he refused. He could not let go of the irrational fear that if he left the Red Keep, he might never again be allowed to enter, and after struggling so long and hard to get here, he could not lose it in such a ridiculous fashion. He even tried to persuade the castle guards to let him return to his old haunts in White Sword Tower, where he had kept a small cell as a brother of the Kingsguard, but was informed that this would be highly irregular. And perish the thought that we should be bloody irregular. He had, after all, abandoned his post in dudgeon and disgrace, his place filled (in a certain neat irony) by Loras Tyrell, and it occurred to him that if the Knight of Pansies was dragged back here with his sister, Sandor could wind up facing off against Renly Baratheon's little sweetling instead of eight feet of bad-tempered undead Gregor. Though that one will choke on a woman's tit before he lifts a finger to defend Cersei. Margaery, though. . .

Barred from White Sword Tower, Sandor was deposited instead in a small apartment in another part of Maegor's, and while he shut himself in and barred the door, he could not sit. He paced from one window to the other, peering across the distant parapets, straining for anything that resembled a Mountain. Yet there was nothing. Only shadows.

Day filtered away to night. At some point he heard the call of trumpets, and saw banners blazoned with the striding huntsman of House Tarly trotting across the drawbridge, announcing that the Late Lord Randyll had finally made it after all. Sandor wondered if he had discovered the wolf bitch's escape in Maidenpool, and what, if anything, he had concluded from it. Likely he'll be Hand instead of Tyrell, so perhaps I should go down and make sure that my guarantee still stands. Yet he could not bring himself to it. I've had bloody enough of politics for today, tomorrow, and the rest of my life, but there you damn well have it.

Troubled, restless, and still feeling his bad leg, as well as the clout to the head he had taken before he could finish Aegon, Sandor finally crawled into bed. Yet he lay with every muscle tense, able to sink no further than a queasy doze, hand wrapped around the hilt of his longsword, waiting to hear heavy footsteps in the hallway, to see a giant's shadow fall across the floor. It felt like being five years old again with that wooden soldier in his sweaty hands, terrified the entire time he was playing with it, knowing what waited to follow him and find him, to catch him. He'll come for me tonight. He'll find me. He'll know. He always knows.

And yet, the place remained silent. No monsters stalked the darkness. Despite himself, Sandor must have slept, for when he woke, morning light was etching the floor. He pushed himself upright, grimacing and swearing under his breath, and decided that he could no longer put off finding how matters stood with Lord Randyll. He did not intend to scrape and toady and tongue arses for anyone, but he had to keep making himself useful just long enough for them to find...
Cersei. Just long enough. After that. . . he was under no illusions. Even strong and whole, he'd never been able to match Gregor. Crippled already, it was lunacy. This trial would be the end of him. All he could hope was to kill his brother before he himself was killed.

Sandor passed another several days in this uptight, pins-and-needles fashion, scouring the Red Keep for any hint of Gregor and unsure whether to be relieved or furious that he found none. The bastard had gone to bloody earth somewhere, he was sure of it. Was it too much to hope that he'd taken some sort of wound, might be laid up? As long as the promise held. Mace Tyrell remained the King's Hand in name, but Randyll Tarly had taken over the real power, and had no qualms about expressing his blunt opinion that the ongoing search for Tommen and Cersei had been miserably mishandled. He too had been about as happy to see Sandor as was expected, but the Faith's patronage prevented any overt move to excise him. It was the first time since his arrival in King's Landing that Sandor had been grateful for the bastards.

By now it had been a week since his arrival in the castle, and over a fortnight since the second Battle of the Blackwater. He was glad for the time to mend, but the waiting had become downright intolerable. He had prepared his mind to face death, and there was only so bloody long you could linger in that state before the inconvenient fact of still living began to conflict uncomfortably with it. Worse, he was scuttling about like a rat, scared of his own shadow, worried that it might be Gregor before he'd had a chance even to take a last piss. He could neither go nor come, strung out longer than any man should be forced to bear, and his mind was made up. *Fuck* waiting for a trial. Go out to find his damned brother, and have it done with. The only thing that would expedite the process was finding Tommen and Cersei, and as the city, the kingswood, and the countryside had been scoured with no sign of either, the possibility was beginning to look rather grim indeed. But just yesterday, acting on further intelligence from a reluctant Mace Tyrell, the search had expanded into King's Landing's vast warren of subterranean tunnels and sewers. It would be nigh on impossible to find someone down there who did not want to be found, and supposedly it was this route that Queen Margaery and Ser Loras had used to escape. It was not at all out of the question that Cersei knew of it as well.

That being that, Sandor supposed he could slap on some rags and venture down the sewers himself, but he'd already saved the bastards' ungrateful arses once, and as he was up to his neck in shit to start with, it didn't need to be quite literally. A few less Lannisters would do the world a favor, but if Tommen bit it, everybody from the High Sparrow to the beggars of Pisswater Bend could put their names forward as king. *And wouldn't that just be bloody wonderful.*

Yet tonight, it transpired, was the moment of truth. Sandor had been debating whether he wanted to take supper, when an almighty hue and cry went up outside his room. Sticking his head out to bark a bad-tempered inquiry supplied him with the information that a small, fair-haired body had been washed up in one of the city's great brick culverts. Whether it was King Tommen, and whether he was alive or dead, must be ascertained immediately. There was no sign of anyone else, neither Cersei nor the Tyrells.

*Bloody hell.* It then struck Sandor that if Tarly soldiers, Tyrell stooges, and gold cloaks alike had to depart Maegor's on this urgent errand, they'd still have to leave someone behind to guard it. Someone such as the only remaining member of the Kingsguard – who, incidentally, the young king happened to be terrified of, making him an impractical choice for this mission. If Ser Robert Strong even still existed, if he was anything more than fevered gossip and terror, if he was here anywhere at all, he would have to show himself. Sandor was about to wager his life on it.

Heart pounding, he waited until the rescue party had formed up and ridden out. Then he retreated into his room and began to dress. All the plate and armor in the world would not protect him if this went ill, and his only hope, pathetic as it was, was to outlast his enemy. So he went light, chose a
smoke-grey doublet and tabard, boiled-leather gambeson and steel hauberk, gauntlets and greaves and helmet. For his legs, only boots and vambraces. No cloak; he would get tangled up with it, didn't need to be out there flourishing it about like some idiotic hero. Lastly, he ensured that his sword was honed to a lethal glimmer, too sharp to touch, and buckled it on. And thus, Ser Sandor goes forth to fight the monster.

He shook his head angrily, but with a sudden stab. It had sounded so much like his sister's voice, playing make-believe when they were children, that he almost couldn't breathe. Then one last time, he mastered himself. Now, Alie. I'm about to avenge us both now. I'm sorry it took so long. I'm sorry. But I never forgot. I never forgave.

Sandor Clegane shoved the door open, and went out to confront what really was, by any sane man's measure, a fucking awful destiny.

A few sweeps across the ramparts, however, turned up nothing. Had he been mistaken? Had they all been mistaken? Maester Qyburn was dead, his foul necromantic strings cut with him. Perhaps Ser Robert was already defunct, a puppet with no master. Or perhaps he –

Sandor only caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye, too fast and too faint to even really register. But then it came again, like a morning star in the falling twilight. A man, standing motionless as a sentinel, overlooking the inner courtyard. A man all in white, plate and scale and cloak and helmet. A man far too large, even from this distance, to be a man at all.

Sandor's chest seized in half. This was it. This was bloody it. All he could hear was a distant roaring in his ears as he stared at the silhouetted figure of his resurrected brother. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. If Cersei ever made it back, far less to trial, she was just going to have to find herself a new champion. I hear Arthur Dayne might be available.

With one hard breath, Sandor lowered his head and broke into a run. The parapet wallwalks were narrow, the drop precipitous, but he had staggered along them while drunk out of his bloody mind on countless occasions, and not yet killed himself. That had been saved for today. He hurtled up the tower stair, reached the top, took several more turns, wove through the maze of crenels, and closed a hand around his sword. He was within shouting distance now, and surprise was key. Still more, Ser Robert appeared to be distracted with something odd below, three dark figures darting around a corner, when there was supposed to be no one there – someone in the castle, intruders, spies –

Ser Robert's rotted mental sinews had apparently reached the same conclusion. Far faster than something that size should move, he whirled to descend the stairs in pursuit, white cloak flowing as elegant as a current of snow. The impact of his great steel-shod boots shuddered on the stone, but otherwise he made no sound.

Just as he reached the bottom, Sandor drew his sword and launched at him.

The monster, taken utterly off guard, staggered backward into the wall, but recovered with unholy speed. The gauntleted hand ripped a broadsword the size of a young tree from its belt, and swung it like a bludgeon. It tangled with Sandor's in a spray of sparks and slid down it to the ground, then was already rising again. The edges of the swords shrieked and gritted, razor-sharp.

Ser Robert put his shoulder into the next cut, and Sandor blocked again, shifting his feet and sending Ser Robert just that slightly off balance. While he was, Sandor aimed a viper's bite of an uppercut at his chest, but Ser Robert's sword flashed out to knock it down. He twisted, and Sandor's blade slid sideways, buying Ser Robert enough time to get his feet back under him. Then he was on the offensive again, each blow with more force behind it. Yet Sandor was waiting for his opening,
waiting . . . waiting . . . and then, found it.

One moment he seemed to be retreating, swatting away a hard sidestroke. The next he was lunging, sword screaming through the air, as his blow landed with all his considerable strength behind it. Clean across the massive white breastplate, but it left only a long, tarnished scratch. No penetration whatsoever, and with that, the last vestiges of restraint went up in smoke. Now they were fighting, clashing like titans, savage two-handed cuts and slashes. They drove each other back and forth – dodged, feinted, spun, stabbed, and Sandor bull-rushed Ser Robert against the wall. Ser Robert dropped to a knee and spun away, and Sandor had to jump back as the monster's sword lashed at his legs. Then Ser Robert was up, and on him again. Cuts from the left, right, overhead, below – steel clashed and crashed and skidded and shrieked, but neither of them could quite break the other's defenses. Well, good. I wanted a decent contest.

The two of them circled, then charged again, at precisely the same moment. They met in midair in something close to an explosion, and reeled back. Sandor could feel sweat running in his eyes. Harder. Harder. A rain of blows from every angle and direction, no sound but Sandor's harsh gasping and grunting, the shriek of steel, and the thunder of Ser Robert's – of Gregor's – footfalls. If the monster knew him, it was impossible to say.

Gregor reversed from the deadlock first. Sandor ducked as a mammoth fist whistled over his head, ducked again, twisted – and never even saw the backhand coming. It exploded in his face in a burst of white-hot agony, and he knew at once that the cheekbone was shattered. He went down hard, unable to break his fall, and landed on his back in the freezing mud, staring at the pale behemoth looming over him.

Time seemed to slow, to stop. His sword lay inches from his blindly fumbling fingers, and yet it felt like miles. Gregor's ghostly armor was battered and dented where Sandor had landed half a dozen blows, but none had come even to piercing the heavy plate. All that lay in that direction was a slower death than otherwise, and a –

And then, in the cut of the monster's leg, on the cuisses, Sandor saw it. Dark smoke scars on the whiteness, as if someone had burned or shoved a torch there. It was hard to be certain, but he thought Gregor was favoring that leg, as if he too had a bad one, a weakness, a –


Fire.

And then, at last, the burned boy understood.

Sandor rolled out of the way just as Gregor's sword screamed down, carving a torn furrow in the mud where his head had lain a moment before. He rolled to his feet and sprinted, fighting a sickening revulsion the entire way, to the nearest torch bracket. Had a memory of another duel beneath the hollow hill, Dondarrion's eyeless socket shining black, his blade burning red. Wrenched it free, snatched up his fallen sword, and lunged.

Sandor drove the torch forward with all his strength, swearing and snarling, tasting bile at the nearness of the dancing flame, deflecting a furious uppercut that jarred to the back of his skull, trying madly to get the brand wedged in the grille of Gregor's helmet. Wondered if it was true what the Elder Brother had hinted, that he had no head. But how could a man, even one undead, live without a head? How could he know what to do, remember how to fight? Gregor's own head had gone south to Dorne and the Martells. Wasted, considering they had just fought alongside the usurper Aegon. So who –
No. No time to think. It would get him killed. The monster was discomfited by the fire, aye, but it was only making him angrier. Fine. Bloody fine. Let him know. At last, after all this, let him know.

"Burn!" Sandor did not recognize his own scream, raw and agonized, as they hacked and hammered back and forth across the courtyard. He'd taken a glancing but deep cut to the shoulder, and his arm felt more leaden every time he raised it, blood trickling hot and wet. "Burn, you fucking bastard, BURN!"

Still the monster had no voice to answer. Still it came on, inexorable as a nightmare, greatsword stitching the air with steel and flame, reflecting the torch, forcing it back until Sandor felt the greedy heat in his own ruined face and screamed, wrenching his arm away as it tumbled into the mud. Gregor promptly trod on it, snuffing it to cinders, and Sandor heard himself scream again, the boy's scream, rattling and gurgling. "No. Noooooo!"

He had no idea where they were. They had fought into a dark labyrinth far away from the rest of the castle, far from help or discovery or intervention. Just him and the monster, death at hand, death and fire and failure, once and forever. He wasn't strong enough, had never been strong enough for Gregor –

Alienor's voice in his head. When it comes time, you and me, we'll tell the king or Prince Rhaegar or any of them that he's horrible. Then they won't do it. He's not a true knight, he's a monster. You and me –

But she was dead, dead, had been for years and years –

"Alienor," Sandor breathed, through a mouthful of blood and soot. He turned to the side and spat. "ALIENOR!"

His fingers closed on the charred stump of the torch. There was still one ember, still a flicker, still a hope. He blew on it, and it spread agonizingly slowly, as Gregor lumbered at him like a maddened aurochs, now clearly favoring the fire-wounded leg. Sandor's own bad leg wouldn't take his weight much longer. He couldn't take anything much longer, in fact, but nor would he stop, could not stop, driven far past ordinary endurance and far into the wilds of madness.

The torch popped and guttered and burned, bright as a falling star.

Now or never. With no way to block it, Sandor stepped full into Gregor's blow and slammed the torch into the monster's neck, into the crevice between helmet and gorget. A memory, dim and distant. Gregor's lance goes where Gregor wants. That gorget wasn't fastened proper.

The broadsword crushed into Sandor's chest, through hauberk and gambeson and doublet as if he was wearing nothing. Sandor could feel it split, felt it bite into his flesh, felt the pain from throat to hip, lost his footing, started to fall. But his gauntlet was locked into Gregor's epaulet, dragging them down together, as the torch began to catch, lit up unearthly beneath the helmet, as the monster jerked and writhed like a great worm in its death throes but could not put the fire out. Sandor kept on grinding it in, heat lashing up his arm, burns raising and blistering, blood pulsing out of the ragged gash across his torso, groping for his sword, finding it, and plunging it under the gorget with an explosion of black blood and a smell foul enough to choke him. His strength was slipping away, his own blood nearly as black, but he still found breath for one last roar.

Gregor was down now, burning, smoking, convulsing, as Sandor, gasping in agony, dragged himself to his knees above him. The monster kept on struggling in mindless defiance as Sandor drew his dirk, wrenched the visor open to drive it through whatever was beneath, an explosion of nothing but more black blood and –
Blue.

Gregor's eyes had never been so blue, or so terrified.

Gregor's face had never looked so young.

Sandor could only stare, seeing it, recognizing it from a thousand years ago, when he, along with the rest of Robert Baratheon's court, had visited the Starks at Winterfell. The boy had just been a pup then, not yet the infamous traitor or the beloved Young Wolf. Only a child, playing at swords in the bailey with a supercilious Joff, escorting a smitten Myrcella to the feast –

The thick auburn hair was just like his sister's. The beard would never grow.

Elder Brother. Elder brother.

It was Robb Stark's head sewn to Gregor Clegane's body, the stitches punched raw and black through the dead white flesh. It was Robb Stark's glazed eyes that stared at Sandor in mute, desperate appeal, as the flames began to eat into his face, hissing and crackling, as his lipless mouth opened in a scream he had no voice or breath to make –

And then, from the dark archway, a woman screamed instead.
The black sky was the first to break apart. As the blast of the Horn of Winter began to fade, as the molten shards of Longclaw plunged into the snow below, as Rhaegal continued to struggle to elude the charging spiders, pincers thrashing and mandibles running with frosted slaver, Jon Snow looked up and saw the stars. It had been so long, such a dim and distant memory, that he barely registered what they were. The veil of endless night had torn in two, and their light fell down over the cold, shivering world. Only for a moment. One moment. But here, pale and luminescent and perfect, it was enough. There is still time. There is still hope.

He was, however, not at leisure to enjoy it. Rhaegal was swerving and plunging, and Jon had one arm wrapped around Val, his free hand scrabbling against the green-and-bronze scales as he tried to keep the three of them – man, woman, and monster – on anything approximating a steady course. He could hear awful, ululating shrieks as the starlight struck the pursuing hordes of fell creatures, blinding them and staggering them, but it was already fading, and he knew it would not be enough. He was just wondering how in possibly literal hellfire they were going to get out of this, when the first of the giants awoke.

Jon had placed his last desperate wager in this very possibility, remembering how they had risen from the snows after he broke the Wall and bought him enough time to get back to Castle Black, but he had been afraid that the power would only suffice once. Either he had been mistaken, or his incarnation as the Great Other, Hornblower and Lightbringer, gave him still more than he had ever dreamed. The giants rose from the cold bones of the earth as if from centuries of sleep, golems of snow and stone: eyeless, faceless, nothing but beasts of the wild, determined to answer the Horn of Winter's inexorable call. They were far huger than the ones Jon recalled seeing in the wildlings' camp, the shaggy, smelly trolls marching with Mag the Mighty. True giants, not a drop of human blood in them, the foes of the First Men and the scourge of the north. Their great heads turned toward him, seeking instruction.

He had no time to shout. He merely thrust a fist at the Others, the wights, the spiders, the twisted beasts, the demons, the darkness. And they understood.

Jon frantically kicked Rhaegal higher into the sky as the giants waded into the thick of the fray below, their roars rattling off the distant mountaintops. As he spared one mad look over his shoulder, he saw them start to tear the monsters limb from limb, as tides of Others ran against them like crystalline blue waters, fey blades hacking and hewing. It would be a red slaughter; even giants could not stand against all the forces of night and terror unloosed at once, not forever. But Jon and Val and Rhaegal were up, still aloft, rising through the blackness, the eye of the Ice Dragon burning palely above –

And then, something caught them from behind, so violently that both Jon and Val nearly fell. Something was tangled around Rhaegal's tail, dragging them from the air –

Jon looked around madly. They were high enough that he had not thought it could be one of the spiders – had one of the giants turned rogue, broken from the Horn's control and decided to –?

No. As he stared down, down, down, he saw what it was.

Jon barely had time to remember the rotted, corrupted weirwood roots they had crawled through in the Old Ways, and how Val had saved him from their baneful influence by the simple expedient of bonking him over the head with his own sword, before the trees shot out another whiplash, clawing like a clutching, skeletal hand. They were rocking and rolling and groaning, dead for eight
thousand years here at the very end of true north – but now, at the end of all things, waking up again. Desperately Jon tried to warg into them, as he had to speak to Sam in Oldtown and learn the truth of his existence, but they repelled him as ferociously as if he'd run headlong into a wall of iron. They would not accept his control, would be content only with his destruction or his defeat, wanted him, were furious that he was trying to escape, when he was the one they had been waiting for, whispering for. He heard again how they'd tempted him. *Come to us, Jon Snow. We are the only ones worthy of you, who can teach you to command the power that floods your veins. The oldest and greenest of all magic, the spark to light the flame, to end the Long Night and keep your oath. Make yourself who you were meant to be.*

And still, his utter refusal to swear himself to the red priests of R'hllor or the children of the forest or any of those who would have used him for their own ends, recognizing that he must remain, or die, as Jon Snow the bastard boy –

Jon had no sword anymore, but he could still fight, and he clawed away another swipe of the violent, groping branches. Val was so motionless that he briefly feared the worst, but then he saw the grey of her eyes flash icily, saw her turn to take their attackers head-on. She reached out a hand, wet with her own blood, and raked her fingers through the rotten white wood.

Thick, turgid black sap oozed from the wound, as the poisoned weirwood smoked and screamed, unable to withstand this most elemental of all magic: a human, an ordinary woman of no stature or power or renown, continuing to fight for what she believed in, even in the middle of an exploding, howling, giant-waking, Other-charging, stars-falling apocalypse. He had told her the same, when she saved him from the roots. *The only way to get through this place, these voices of things, these old monsters, is to draw on a power much simpler than that of dragons and swords and crowns. Only the power of a human heart against the dark.*

Between Jon breaking the branches off, and Val scratching her own blood into them, they managed to get free. Rhaegal was keening, struggling to regain lost altitude, weaving and dodging so unevenly that Jon was convinced he was about to crash. But the dragon snorted twin columns of steam, regained himself, snapped once more, and soared over the icy mountains, away, away.

Jon lost track of how long they flew. He could hear the sound of the almighty battle long after they were out of sight, when it was only featureless glaciers and empty white wastes beneath them, and felt the darkness fall thicker and heavier and harder than ever before, as if to pay him back for presuming to shatter it in the least amount. He still had the Horn of Winter, but he dared not use it a third time. Not unless it truly was this or annihilation.

Strangely enough, Jon no longer felt cold. Indeed he felt blazingly hot, as if the dragonfire that had consumed Longclaw and reforged the Horn continued to dwell inside him, running through his dead veins and stirring them back to something nearly close to life. Perhaps it was because he had become bound to Rhaegal, that they were not merely the sum of man and beast but something far greater. It was an ancient power awaking in him now, whatever it was alchemizing him into. He was no longer what Melisandre had resurrected him into, or what had entered the prince of the green's court, or what had nearly fallen to the Others whispering in the wood. In fact, among all the magic and madness that consumed the world around him, what Jon clung the most closely to was Val. Her stubborn, unyielding bravery was the only thing that had brought him this far. He wanted to find a place to set down and tend to her, but there was nothing except wilderness.

"Crow," Val said at that moment, as if hearing him think. "Is it over? Are all t' monsters gone?"

Jon tightened his grip on her. As long as he kept his burning dragonglass hands pressed to her wound, the one that he himself had dealt her as he struggled to free her from the murderous roots,
the bleeding was stanched, and he could imagine that he was giving her back even the faintest amount of the strength she had given him. "No. The giants will slow them, but they cannot stop them. We have only bought a little time. They are coming."

Val shifted her position, grunting with pain. "How did... you know it'd work? Blowing the horn, waking the giants... so they'd attack the beasts... and we could get away?"

"I didn't," Jon admitted. "It was a lucky guess."

"Lucky guess?" Val's mouth quirked in a sardonic smile. More blood dribbled down her chin. "Aye, that's you, Lord Snow. Throwing the rune bones... on t' fate of the entire world. But we'll still have to fight them. And now. You don't even have your sword."

"Aye." Jon had thought of that as well. Remembered very clearly what Melisandre had told him, before they left Castle Black. That he could only overcome this darkness with the dragon and the Red Sword of Heroes together. Against all odds, he had obtained the one, so could there be some way to achieve the other? Last he had known, which was a dishearteningly long while ago, Lightbringer was in the hands of the Bastard of Bolton, who had stolen it for his own after imprisoning Stannis Baratheon. Melisandre had sworn up and down that was the true one, but she had also sworn that there was no way to accomplish this without yielding himself to the Lord of Light. Jon was still as stubbornly bent as ever to remain independent to the last, but how on earth was he supposed to find where Ramsay Bolton was hiding now, let alone be certain he yet had Lightbringer? How could he make another grueling flight through the Long Night with a sorely wounded Val? Where was he supposed to go from here, to gird for the battle? Where?

Val coughed. Her head slumped back against his shoulder. "The stars," she said, almost shyly. "For that moment after you blew the Horn. Did you see them?"

"I did, my lady," Jon told her gently. "They were beautiful. But don't talk. Save your strength."

The wildling woman snorted. "If I die, Jon Snow, I'll die as pleases me. But we already swore... it would be both of us to live, or neither. You said you'd stay. You promised it. Well, I don't intend... to leave."

Jon tried to answer, but his throat had become unaccountably thick. He had not even known that the creature he was now could weep, or if it was merely a memory of his old self, a grief sweeter and sadder and stranger than he had ever known. "Well," he said at length. "I don't intend to either."

"The weirwoods." Val once more tried to sit straighter. "They were all poisoned. That's what was whispering to you down in the Old Ways, you think?"

"Aye. The Others have taken them over, somehow. That's why they attacked us." Jon wondered suddenly what this would mean for Bran, or whatever strange fetch of Bran had guided him to his awakening in the snow. The Bran he had met deep under the hollow hill, the boy with legs made strong and true, the boy who had been, in that moment, his little brother. What price did they take from him, for such a gift? "They... they wanted me."

Once again, he heard Leaf's voice, the child of the forest so reluctant to let him break her fellows' wards against the cold, the terror, and all that came with it. Great Other. Killed in ice, reborn in fire. Jon was beginning, slowly, to see just what that meant. He had had no choice but to sound the Horn of Winter, to break the Wall, to live in this strange cold half-human body, god or monster. But that marked him as one of them. The embodiment of everything that the Night's Watch and the world of men were fighting against. And if the battle was to end, the dawn to break, the light to
come...

Just then, distracting him, Rhaegal's wings began to jerk and quiver. They were losing altitude, and fast. This time it wasn't due to murderous weirwoods or monstrous spiders, but because the beast was simply struggling to continue against the depths of this cold. Even dragonfire could not burn forever, and gods knew how long Rhaegal had been hibernating on that frozen rock, waiting for him. If the dragon failed, so did their last hope.

Jon scooted forward and pressed his black hands to the dragon's scales, feeling heat flickering around his fingers, the fire that dwelled deep in their heart waking back to life. He closed his eyes, hearing an immense rushing sound, a sensation as if he was falling very hard and fast, plunging down, down, seeing through Rhaegal's eyes with the queer far-ranging vision of a dragon, brick pyramids on a broken shore, a red desert and a hot white sky, a muddy bay –

a woman, silver-haired with violet eyes, who turned her head as abruptly as if she could see him –

a woman, silver-haired with violet eyes, who turned her head as abruptly as if she could see him –

tattered banners waving over an army of men in bronze and iron, black ships and a bloody sunrise –

another dragon, two, a great dark one that breathed the flame of a thousand nightfires, and a smaller one, gold and cream, soaring and screeching –

a great ocean below, blue and endless, purling away with every sweep of his wings, as he fled far and fast, night and day, with the great speed only a dragon could muster, across continents and cities and wild wastes, following an instinct, banking north, north, to the end of the world –

Jon had not realized that he was starting to fall until a pair of hands pulled him ferociously up. All at once the vision – or the dragon's memories – shattered and vanished, and he blinked hard. Their course had corrected, and Rhaegal was flying straight again; he must have taken enough of Jon's strength to continue. Jon himself felt drained, almost light-headed. But Val was still holding onto him; it had been her who stopped him from plunging. In some inexplicable way, they were completely connected, the three of them. Rhaegal needed Jon to continue, and Jon needed Val.

And then at once, he had it.

"Black!" He slid up to the wing joint, getting a better seat on the dragon's broad, slippery back. "Castle Black!"

He had no idea if this would do him a damn bit of good; the dragon had never been there before, could not be expected to find it by pure instinct. He was deeper into the Land of Always Winter than even the most intrepid wildling would venture, but he had some sort of lodestone in his head, guiding him, and if he followed it, he had to trust that he would reach where he was going. Whatever of Castle Black might be left, if anything... fly and muster the tattered fragments of the Watch for the last battle, and then, and then... who would know where Ramsay had gone, who could say, who could...

And even more unbelievably, madly, his final hope, the answer was there.

The sky never lightened. The day never came. There was nothing except bitter, bitter cold and endless white mountains slicing the dark carapace of night. Jon's preternatural heat was the only thing keeping Val from freezing solid, and she was the only thing that kept it burning. Rhaegal labored steadily beneath them, over and over, until time itself seemed to stand still, and yet they kept flying. Then and odd the blackness behind them would shudder and echo, and Jon knew that
their pursuers had begun the hunt. *We must ready ourselves. We must prepare to stand and fight.*

At last, at utterly long last, what might have been hours or days later, he spotted the great tumbled mass of ice on the far southern horizon, the only remains of the Wall. Even from here, it looked alive with small, scrambling figures. The first vanguards of Others had already reached it, and this time, there were no spells to stop them crossing. When the full might of their brethren, woken and vengeful, arrived as well.

*I brought this,* Jon thought, staring down at the elegant, slender shadows scaling the ruins, blue glass armor twinkling and bony silvered hands reaching for blades. *I broke the Wall, I woke all the monsters in existence. I am the Great Other indeed.*

There was only one thing to be done now. He gripped Rhaegal tightly with his knees, Val with one hand, and steered them into a whistling dive with the other. And then, finding it in the dragon's memory and not his own, for surely he had never uttered such a word nor known what its use was to be, he heard himself screaming, "**DRACARYS!**"

Rhaegal's jaws peeled back. Golden fire, fringed with veins of scathing emerald, ripped apart the night.

Jon saw the Others incinerated, going up like torches, as they swept low, strafing the ice with explosions. The dragon's wings thrashed madly as Jon pulled them up, spun them around, and dove them back the other way, taking out more. Burning Others were melting, dissolving, leaving hissing black pools of ichor, but Jon knew it was, as when he had broken the Wall, only a temporary victory. Just long enough for him to do what must be done, while the spiders and the demons and the monsters and the wights closed in from the far north in all their numbers.

The night was burning now, and so, he noticed, were all the watchposts atop the ruins of the Wall. A column of red flame towered on each, oddly reminiscent of Melisandre's ruby. **Where is she?** That was another matter he'd have to finesse, but it could wait. His only intention now was to finish this, and after a few more dive-bombing runs, the Others were down or dying, blundering or staggering or melting. Steam billowed from the pitted ice, a ragged white curtain across the night, and Jon pulled up, guiding Rhaegal through the clattering, falling droplets to the far side. Wings outstretched, silent against the night, they sailed over. Below them lay the crushed, twisted wreckage of Castle Black, so desolate-looking that he barely believed anything could still be living. Had they come too late after all? Was there nothing left of the Watch but him and Val? How then could they hope to –

And then, as the dragon's massive shadow coasted over the charnel-house of the King's Tower, the one he himself had ordered burned to prevent the spread of Princess Shireen's greyscale, a terrified scream split the darkness.

Jon stared down with wild, unreasoning hope. *That was no wight. They have no voice, and no fear.* Something living, it must be. Stared harder, *harder* – and then, finally, saw them. Running figures clad in tattered black, man and woman both. The very last shreds of the Watch. Baratheon men or wildlings, Sworn Brothers or –

"**LORD COMMANDER!**"

Shock burned through Jon like strong wine. He knew it. He knew that voice, and madly, he dropped them into a final dive. The draft of Rhaegal's wings kicked up snow and ash and soot as he crashed down for an inelegant landing, skidding across the bailey. Val lurched forward, boneless as a rag doll, as Jon wrestled the snorting, shrieking, slewing dragon to a halt, swung over, jumped off, and sprinted toward Samwell Tarly.
The next moment they were in each other's arms, swearing aloud, pounding each other on the back, Sam making an odd gulping noise that sounded suspiciously as if he was trying to keep back tears, only able to say, "Jon, Jon, Jon," over and over. He was dressed from head to toe in black, and his presence here was, Jon supposed, only marginally less miraculous than his own. They kept hugging each other fiercely, Sam's breath gusting silver and Jon's showing nothing at all, stepping on each other's feet, until finally they looked at each other, laughed helplessly, clapped each other on the shoulder again, and merely shook their heads.

"I can't believe it," Sam croaked. "It's you. It's really you. With a – with a – " Eyes the size of plates, he stared at the dragon sprawled out on the snow, screaming irritably. "The Others – there were Others climbing the Wall, what did you – "

"Burned them," Jon said. "For now, but there is no time to waste. The entire fury of the darkness is woken. We must prepare for battle. Where is Melisandre?"

"Melisandre's. . . gone. She burned. That's all that's left of her, there." Sam pointed to the watchfires, the ones Jon had thought looked like the red priestess' ruby. "She thought you had failed us, abandoned us to die. That there was no more light and no more life. But she was wrong, wasn't she? You're here."

"A final error for her legacy." Jon stepped back and raised his voice, beckoning to Val. "See to her quickly. She is badly wounded."

It was the wildling master-at-arms, Leathers, who stepped forward. Jon gently scooped up Val; she was still alive, but only barely. Leathers took her weight as Jon passed her over, and set off across the courtyard at a trot. Jon watched them go, Val's long blonde braid dangling over her countryman's arm. If she did not live, he was not so sure that he would.

But then, he reminded himself, a cold foreknowledge settling in his stomach, you know what awaits you. And it will be as she said. We live or die together.

Jon shook his head, and glanced back to Sam. "I must speak with you, alone. Come."

Sam, clearly too awed and terrified to do anything else, nodded and scuttled after him into the dark skeleton of the King's Tower. There was enough of it left to get out of the cold, though Jon barely noticed it, and he wedged the door shut behind them. For a long moment, all he could hear was silence. No breath, no heartbeat. Only Sam's, only Sam's good strong stout heart. He had never been more grateful for his friend than he was then.

"We don't have time for explanations," Jon said, breaking the spell. "So, dearly as I would love to know how you returned here from the Citadel and everything that has transpired since we parted, it must wait. Do you know if Ramsay Bolton still has Lightbringer? The night I was. . . attacked, I had received a letter saying that this was so, that he had imprisoned Stannis at Winterfell."

Sam shook his head. "I don't know. There has been no word. Nothing."

"I must find it. I have to fly south and get the sword, and then return here with it. With the dragon and Lightbringer. . . " It sounded futile, foolish, hopeless. Jon thought of what he'd seen in Rhaegal's memories – an army, a silver-haired woman, and two more dragons. Would they know to come here, would they arrive in time? "Well, I'll not say we stand a good chance, but we might not all die."

Sam smiled sadly. "I don't think any of us really imagine that we're going to survive, Jon. But it doesn't matter if we do or not. As long as we defeat them. We're the Night's Watch. We're the ones who die so that the realms of men may live."
"Aye. And so, Sam. There is one thing I must ask of you, and you must not balk, you must not question, you must not fail me. Do you understand?"

Sam hesitated, then nodded.

"When I return with Lightbringer, the monsters will already be here. Every creature of blackest evil is coming – spiders, wights, ghasts, Others, demons, possessed weirwoods. Everything. Melisandre speaks – spoke – of a Lord of Night and Terror, a Great Other. There is no hope of defeating this army unless the Great Other dies as well."

Sam nodded again, vigorously. "Who is it, Jon? Do you know? I'll find it, I'll kill it if it's the last thing I do. You can rely on me, I won't – "

"Sam." Jon stepped forward and laid a cold black hand on his friend's shoulder. "Look at me."

Sam glanced up. Their eyes met.

"Sam," Jon said again, softly. "It's me."

For a long moment, Sam looked completely blank. Then horrified understanding swept over him, and he shook his head wildly. "No. No, Jon, it can't be. I won't – no, without you – no, you can't ask me, you can't – "

"I can, and I did," Jon reminded him. "Trust me. It has been made plain beyond all doubt. I am the Great Other. I blew the Horn of Winter, I broke the Wall, I woke the creatures of the darkness. Killed by ice, reborn in fire. The Prince who was Promised, and the Prince's greatest foe. Brought together in me. You have to do it. When the battle is over, you must take Lightbringer, and you must drive it through my heart."

Tears shone coldly on Sam's face. He shook his head again.

"Promise, Sam." Jon's voice was soft and very sad. "Promise me."

Sam gulped, scrubbing at his eyes. "Why – why me?"

"Because there's a reason you came back here, at the end. Because it's always been the two of us. Because you are the bravest man I've ever known." Jon touched his cheek. "You're a hero, Sam. It's who you were born to be. I may not remember, I may try to stop you, I may try to attack you, to go wild, to call the Others here. You must not let me. Swear to me, swear now that no matter what, you will kill me with Lightbringer. I will fight with you until the end, but you must make the end. When I am gone, you must become Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. Build it strong again. Build it great. They will sing of you for years and years to come."

Sam was silent for so long that Jon began to wonder if he had even heard. Then, as if it had been torn from him, he whispered, "I swear, Jon. I swear it. By earth and iron. By ice and fire."

"Good." Jon smiled at him. He had never been more proud of Sam than he was then, never so aware of the strange and miraculous magic of friendship, of love, of courage and bravery and sacrifice, and of the parts they all must play. "I have to go. I have to hurry."

"Where?"

Jon paused. Then he said, "Winterfell."

So it was. He bid farewell to Sam, ducked out, crossed the bailey, and hurried down the passage
where Leathers had taken Val. His leave-taking of her was brief as well; he must cauterize the
wound, could not look back, never look back. She was too weak to lift a hand, but her eyes were
open and clear. "Go," she whispered. "Get you gone then, crow."

He smiled at her. His own heart must still be there, through all the transformations and the magic
and the vengeance. He knew it, for he could feel it breaking. Gently, carefully, he leaned over her,
trying to give her the last of the warmth he had. Closed his eyes, and kissed her swiftly on the
mouth. Then he straightened up and turned.

"Jon."

He could not stand to glance back, to see her like that, pale as a tomb-carving. Only barely keeping
his voice even, he said, "Aye?"

He could hear her smile. "I love you."

There were no words to answer that. Nothing fine and fair and raw and fragile enough, nothing so
simple, or so perfect. He nodded once, and left her.

The frigid blackness was turning a deep dark blue by the time Jon Snow mounted Rhaegal and
kicked off into the sky. That was the most light that would come; there were still no stars or moon,
no sliver of illumination. The night that never ends. This was what he had been born for, raised for,
lived for, died for, and would, finally, die again. He could hear the woman's voice in his head –
Lyanna's, Promise me, Ned, promise me – and his own request of Sam. How strange, and yet how
strangely fitting, that this was how it ended.

Jon flew south as fast as he could go, over fields and fastness and lonely smallholdings, tower
keeps and abandoned cots, the shadow of dragon wings falling over Westeros again for the first
time in the memory of man. Let them see, let them stare, let them know that the hour was nigh, that
they must take out every weapon they had and defend everything they had ever loved. Already he
saw tracks where shambling feet had marched, where wights had crossed the broken Wall and
began to crawl south in search of warm living prey. A short while later, he came across a pack, and
pounced on them, as Rhaegal unleashed blasts of flame that reduced the foul creatures to smoking
cinders. Then Jon pulled up again, and flew on.

He almost did not recognize Winterfell when he finally saw it. It looked nearly the same as the
Wall: tumbled, broken slabs of impossible size, yet these were of stone, not ice. Some of the towers
still stood, but listed far to one side or the other, and the curtain wall was ripped to pieces, great
blocks half-buried in the filthy snow, windows blown out, bodies and pieces of bodies scattered
everywhere. The godswood still stood amidst the devastation, but it was the only thing that
remained untouched.

Jon felt as if he had been hit very hard, and was too dazed to know if it had hurt. He guided
Rhaegal to a landing atop the wallwalk, and merely stared. How often had he seen this place in his
dreams, his fantasies, his memories? There were the towers that Robb and Lord Eddard would
climb to shout at each other across the bailey, and there the tower that Bran had fallen from. There
the yard where the boys would drill at swords under the stern eye of Ser Rodrik Cassel, and there
the ruins of the armory that Mikken would always chase them out of, telling them that they’d get an
edge on their blades when their lord father said so and not before. There the kitchens and the
kennels. There the solarium where Sansa liked to sit with her sewing and lemoncakes and Septa
Mordane, doubtless with Arya rolling her eyes furiously in the corner. And there, blasted and
silent, the Great Hall, where Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn had entertained Robert Baratheon, his
queen, and his court, where Jon had sat at the common table so not as to give insult for being a
bastard, and where he had first told his uncle Benjen that he wanted to join the Night's Watch. So
That life barely felt real to Jon now, as he gazed out over the wreckage. The grief filled him up, overflowed. I meant to march here on the night I was first killed. If I had, if I had come in time, would I have been able to stop this? Ramsay Bolton had already sacked Winterfell once. This time, to all appearances, he had made sure to do it thoroughly. Nothing living stirred in the ruins. Nothing but the distant howl of the wind, and the drifting snow.

Jon gazed at it, thinking of the giants he had woken back in the wild. Giants first raised the walls of Winterfell. Was there possibly a way to get them to rebuild it? All at once he felt the sting of injustice at having to leave this life, that so much would remain undone, but then it subsided. In time, one day, these walls would rise again. The north remembers, and so too do the Starks.

After a moment, he steered Rhaegal off the wall and down to a landing before the godswood. His boots crunched in the frozen snow as he dismounted, and the dragon swooped off to make a meal of the bodies lying so temptingly about. Jon grimaced, but supposed he could not blame the beast; it had to be hungry work, and there was more traveling to come. Instead, looking only forward, he stepped over the broken wall and walked into the depths of the dark trees.

Up ahead, he could just see the paleness of the heart tree. This was it, the gamble he had staked everything on. There would be a way, there must be, in hopes that the poison of the corrupted weirwoods had not yet spread this far, that he could still reach Bran, speak to him, or whatever animate intelligence lingered in the trunk of the –

Just then, something caught his boot, and he stumbled, almost pitching headlong. His heart leapt into his throat, he thought it had been –

It was. A body, frozen stiff, and not merely any body. It was Mance Rayder who lay dead in the snow, eyes closed, a frozen, ragged slash ripped from ear to ear across his throat. Yet aside from the gruesome wound, the wildling king looked almost peaceful. Silent, shielded here in the forest. Bael the Bard and the rose of Winterfell.

As he stood there, looking at the man who had been his sometimes friend and doubtful ally, whom he had sent here with the six spearwives, who had died for him, Jon wanted more than anything to weep. For Mance, for Arya, for Shireen, for Val, for all the dead, for all the losses. He ached to be human enough to do so, to be weak for just a moment, just a short sweet moment. But he could not. This long and lonely path only led to one end.

"Thank you," Jon said quietly. There was nothing he could do, no way to bury Mance in the frozen ground, or to drag him below to the crypts. Mance would not have wanted that besides, to be denned up in some kneeler's dungeon for all eternity. He would want to lie somewhere on a hill, with sun and moon and stars and perhaps, a scrap of scarlet silk and a dark-eyed Dornishwoman to lay flowers on his grave. I wish I could give you that, at least. I hope I meet you to say so.

Jon stepped past Mance, and walked on. Shortly after, he reached the heart of the godswood, and the great white tree with its carved face. Ravens were roosting in its branches, and it seemed to Jon that they turned toward him, that they knew him, I am a Stark, he wanted to say. No matter my blood, I will always be one. Not merely Snow. This is my place as well.

"Help me," he whispered. "Where did Ramsay Bolton go? When he left here, where did he go? What did you see?"

Still the silence stretched on. He stared at the weirwood with all his might, ready to duck in an instant if it tried to attack him as the poisoned ones in the Old Ways had, willing it to come alive, to
speak. Without it, he had no chance of tracking the Bastard, no way of finding Lightbringer and setting long-festering scores to rights. He must. He must.

Please.

An invisible wind stirred the remaining blood-red leaves, dangling from the gnarled branches. The ravens took flight. And the great lipless mouth stirred and stretched. It might have been Bran's face, or something far older and more powerful, that showed in the weathered wood. It might have been Bran's voice, or something greater and more terrible, that whispered to him.

Two words.

"The Dreadfort."
Jaime

The only light came from somewhere vastly high above, shining from a mossy crack in the bricks down and down and down to a bright spot on the grimy tunnel floor. It was pale and cold and colorless, but it was better than the various stages of darkness (dark, too dark, dark as all buggeration) they had heretofore been making do with, and Jaime stopped, letting it wash over his face. It was impossible, of course, to tell where they were by light alone. He had not exactly had cause to go gallivanting down the sewers before, and the graffiti and marks that covered the walls were as incomprehensible to him as High Valyrian. They had been climbing and crawling through an endless warren of tunnels, cisterns, cesspools, and catacombs, and while Jaime had taken to chalking a mark on each of the turns they took, that only did him an incidental amount of good when he couldn't even find his own marks again. At this rate, my last words are like to be something to the accord of, Where the fuck is the bloody whatsit? promptly before I'm drowned in piss. Stirring. Very stirring.

Still breathing hard, he turned back to glance at his son. Tommen had taken the endless, filthy, rambling sojourn surprisingly well; once he adjusted to the lack of every decent comfort or commodity he had ever known in his young and pampered life, he'd started to see it as a marvelous adventure. Clearly, standards were lax if literally falling into shit was the most exciting thing to happen to him since stamping documents with the king's seal, but Jaime was relieved. However last night, they had been attacked by a pack of giant, feral rats, and were forced to improvise a harrowing escape, slipping and sliding through low, dim passages and stuff that smelled eye-watering, while the rats scuttled after them. Jaime had just barely gotten them out of that one by lighting half the sewer ablaze, nearly including himself, and climbing to a higher level where they finally found an unoccupied corner. After which, he could feel Tommen's enthusiasm for the underworld steeply decreasing, and could not blame him. We have to find a way out of here, or find Cersei, and soon.

The only thing that reassured Jaime that his sister had not yet set off a massive cache of wildfire was the fact that the light above was white, not green, and there was no scent of charbroiled flesh and smoking ruin. Once or twice he entertained the foolishly optimistic notion that she might have called the whole thing off and gone home, but this was Cersei, the proud lioness who neither forgot nor forgave a single imagined slight, the deposed and disgraced queen driven to desperate measures, and the bereaved mother who might have heard of Myrcella's death in Dorne. If so, even if it took months, she'd bring the city to its knees. He had to stop her.

Time for a new strategy. As Tommen caught up with him, panting, Jaime clapped his golden hand to the boy's shoulder. "So, lad," he said, having long since slipped out of the formal address of Your Grace. "I think I'm going to climb up there and try to find out where in the city we are. You'll wait here for me, aye?"

Tommen looked leery. "You'll come back, won't you? Mother left me behind and then she didn't ever..."

"Well, we'll find her." Jaime tried to keep his tone cheery. "Besides, we've been missing for days and days now. Everyone is certainly worried for you." Good. Let them be a bit longer. He just hoped it caused them to find out what Mace Tyrell was up to, the fat bastard.

Tommen sniffled, then coughed. Jaime didn't like the squelching sound it made. "If you say so, Ser Uncle," he said trustingly. "I'll sit here. Right here and wait. Don't forget."

"Good lad." Jaime ruffled his hair. "Of course I won't."
After Tommen had plopped down on a suitably less filthy bit of ground, Jaime walked to the wall and eyed the ascent, straight up a good hundred feet of rotten and mildewing brickwork. There were enough ladders and ledges to make him reasonably confident of his ability to pull it off, but the fall was nothing to scoff at. It might not kill him outright, but it would certainly break his leg, back, or something else useful, and that would be just as bad. Still, if he could get to the top . . . probably in the middle of some filthy stew in Flea Bottom, but at least he'd attract no notice. Even a bowl of brown was starting to sound savory; he'd given Tommen almost all of their remaining food. His dreams had always been of swords and valor and Cersei in the past. Now they were for just a crumb of real supper. Welcome to life as a peasant, Lannister.

With that encouraging thought, he set off. After climbing out the window of White Sword Tower to escape, this wasn't nearly as daunting, and he had soon achieved a good bit of altitude, Tommen's anxious face growing smaller and smaller below. Jaime sidled carefully from ledge to ledge, and finally hauled himself up into the vault. The crack of light, and the streets of King's Landing, were now just over a man's height above. However, to reach it, he was going to have to jump from one rib to the other, a distance of a good six feet. And there was no place to take a running start.

Jaime considered the prospect, balanced tenuously on the ledge. Then he took a deep breath, crouched, rocked back and forth, and launched himself into space like an unruly drunkard pitched headlong out of the tavern at closing.

For half a horrifying moment, there was nothing but air beneath him. Then the wonderfully solid stone came up to smack him, knocking his wind out. After all the acrobatics of this sort he had been performing recently, he couldn't think of a mummer's troupe in Westeros that wouldn't want him – the amazing tumbling Kingslayer, a penny a pratfall! Wishing for once that his imagination wasn't so bloody good with a quip, Jaime pushed himself to his feet, wheezing. He managed a reassuring wave for Tommen, then shoved aside the grate, fumbled about, got hold of something, and hauled his decrepit arse up onto the street.

He lay panting, then rolled over and staggered to his feet. It was late afternoon, the pale light dwindling and the shadows stretching long. Nobody seemed to have noticed that the kingdom's second-most-wanted fugitive had just popped out of a muddy shithole, and windows and doors were shut and barred. So he grabbed the grate and wedged it back into place, wishing he had some way to mark it. There were no street names in Flea Bottom, which was plainly exactly where he was, and he'd have to navigate by memory. The idea of abandoning Tommen was starting to look stupider by the moment, but he couldn't turn back now.

Jaime straightened up, started to walk, then caught himself – even filthy, wounded, hungry, and on the run, he'd been unconsciously falling into the arrogant swagger of a knight and highborn lordling. He did have his sword belted under his rags, but best to make that inconspicuous as possible. There were plenty of small-time troublemakers prowling the city streets, who adhered to the same code as the bravos of Braavos; anyone wearing arms could be challenged to a duel just for the sheer hell of it. The gold cloaks would normally pounce on any such lawbreakers, but Jaime hadn't seen a competent, sober, or alive one for weeks. Down here, left to fend for themselves, barely holding together in the aftermath of the Targaryen attack, mob rule clearly ran the roost.

Adopting instead a slouching, stumbling shuffle, Jaime altered his course out of the warren of back alleys and presently emerged onto the Street of Sisters. The ruins of the Dragonpit loomed just ahead, black and sinister atop Rhaenys' Hill, and he paused, wondering whether to follow a sudden hunch. The Targaryens' great folly had been shuttered for over a century, great bronze doors sealed and marble dome caved in, but . . . during the Great Spring Sickness, the bodies of plague victims had been piled within and burned with wildfire. What was more, during Robert's Rebellion,
Rossart had placed caches of wildfire across the entire city, but specifically so in the Dragonpit, where the Mad King doubtless expected to be transformed into one of the beasts himself. Jaime himself had killed both of them before any such thing could happen, but what if. . .?

Bugger it. The only other option he had was breaking into the Guildhall of the Alchemists. He'd do it if it came to that, but otherwise, this was his best place to start. Jaime started to trot.

Staying on the Street of Sisters was too exposed, so he ducked back into the dim wynds that bordered it. Distant from Visenya's Hill, he heard the deep bronze boom of the Great Sept of Baelor's bells, calling evenfall. A few dirty faces peered from behind shutters or barrels, but without much interest. He clearly couldn't be jumped and robbed easily; he was too tall and too straight-bodied, and there was a black glove covering his telltale golden hand. Otherwise they might –

"Oy! You there! Where d'you think you're going, whoreson?"

Jaime froze. He had a brief impulse to rip off his hood and demand if the bastard knew who he was addressing, but as such an action was likely to earn him the first available appointment with whatever chump was now serving as the crown's executioner, he held his tongue. Then he spotted the half-dozen men-at-arms, sporting the striding huntsman of House Tarly on their tabards, strolling out of a nearby winesink, clearly having gone there for perfectly legitimate reasons. Which, knowing Lord Randyll, was in fact very likely; he was precisely the sort of man to enthusiastically support Stannis Baratheon's plan to outlaw whoring and tax drunkenness. Bloody hell, he's here? Information about the wider world had been notably lacking during Jaime's imprisonment, but if he had known that the Lord of Horn Hill was mounting an effort to reclaim the city and buttress the beleaguered royal forces. . .

Too late. The men were making straight for him, and any notion that they were merely here for a lark, separate from their liege lord, went up in flames the next instant. "Lord Randyll has decreed that no man shall be abroad on the streets after the evening bells. You're in for it now, scum."

Jaime's first impulse was to bite back with all sorts of imaginative acts Lord Randyll was welcome to attempt on himself, but once more he just caught himself. He couldn't be sure if they would know him by his voice, and thus stayed silent.

"Are you deaf?" The buggers were almost on top of him, swollen with misbegotten self-righteousness. "You're breaking curfew, we could arrest you on the spot. It's about bloody time that somebody took King's Landing in hand again, otherwise – OY!"

Jaime paid no attention. Having performed a quick sequence of calculations about his likelihood of being recognized, his ability to fight all six of them off, the punishment awaiting him back at the Red Keep, and Lord Randyll Tarly's idea of firm justice, and realizing that it added up to one complete and total fuck up the arse, he had seized the moment of their distraction and bolted. Head down, he sprinted, careering through the increasingly narrower alleys, choosing turns at random, blundering deeper and deeper into nowhere. He knew the place no better than the soldiers, but he at least looked like a local, whereas they did not, and he hoped this might assist him. He was gaining speed, they must have lost him, no one could track for long in here, he was getting away, he was –

Running around a corner and headlong into them.

They shouted. Jaime swore. Someone swung a sword at him, barely missing. He shoved one of them into a cart, tripping the second, and this, predictably, much enraged the third and fourth. The fifth and sixth, apparently the lollygags of the group, were still catching up, after which nothing
good could possibly happen. In fact, it would then mean that he –

And then, with diabolically brilliant timing, some merciful savior of the Flea Bottom slums banged open the shutters and upended a full chamber pot directly onto three of the Tarly men-at-arms below. They spluttered and staggered, and when their fellows shouted angry threats, the aggrieved citizen made his displeasure further known by throwing down the pot itself. Because the gods, despite all evidence to the contrary, loved Jaime Lannister, it landed dead on the head of his nearest pursuer, clanking over the man's eyes as the world's truly shittiest helmet.

Slack-jawed, Jaime himself simply stared, wondering if he too would be smote down by a flying turd from the heavens if he did what he very much wanted to, and pointed and laughed. Then the impulse, thankfully, deserted him, and he ran for it.

It grew darker and darker as he scrambled in a vaguely northward direction, trying to find his way by the occasional blaze of torchlight. He only stopped upon becoming conscious of, firstly, the absence of anyone but himself, and secondly, a stabbing pain in his side. When he looked down, his already filthy shirt was flowering a slow, dark scarlet.

Jaime gingerly peeled the cloth away, and grimaced. Apparently, that one blow that he'd thought had just missed him, had not in fact missed him after all. Now that he was aware of it, the throbbing increased, and his hand came away wet and red. He could either try to bind it up, and forage on to the Dragonpit in hopes of locating Cersei's trail, or concede defeat, steal some food before the Tarly men-at-arms sorted out their troubles, and hope to sneak back into the underworld and find Tommen.

Jaime hesitated. There was no good choice. Returning to the filthy sewers with an open wound hardly sounded like an invitation to health and happiness, as he had grave doubts about his ability to protect his son whilst dying from a grotesque infection, and any treatment he could find here would be even worse. Besides, he could not rid himself of the conviction that Cersei was somewhere out there in the darkness, hell-bent on completing the task that he had so narrowly foiled Aerys in, and he was overwhelmed with an eerie realization at how perfectly history was repeating itself. But at least then he'd been an energetic seventeen-year-old with the cocksure confidence of youth and good looks and a world in which he could have anything he wanted, scion of the richest and most powerful family in Westeros. This time he was an aging, greying, starving, wounded cripple, lost and alone in the middle of the stinking stews of Flea Bottom with not even a groat to his name.

Just then, Jaime wanted to scream at the sheer futility of it, at what a complete and utter travesty he had managed to make of his entire life. He wanted it at an end, wanted it over and done with, wanted to go home but not to Casterly Rock, haunt of sweet sisters and little brothers and disapproving fathers, wanted a sword at his back, wanted a friend in the world, wanted Brienne. Gods, where did you send her? Why did you take her? She was in all likelihood lying dead in some hellhole northern holdfast, the crows eating her beautiful blue eyes. Of all the losses, he might rue hers the most. Honorable to the end. It seemed the sort of fate the world would reserve for anyone who dared to believe in idealism and chivalry and gallantry and love.

Jaime blew out a long, uneven sigh, and pulled himself together. He sponged away as much of the blood as he could, then started to move again. He could not stay in one place, and he was close enough to the Dragonpit that he could not stomach turning back. For better or worse, he had always been a man of action.

The crumbled ruin loomed high above him, a great stone monolith shadowing out the stars, when he finally reached the top of Rhaenys' Hill. It had been warded with boards and chains trying to
keep curious visitors or thrill-seekers out, but those had been broken in many places. It was not hard even for Jaime, grunting with the effort, to find a way through, and into pure and perfect blackness. He fumbled along, blinking furiously, and soon became conscious of a vast and echoing space somewhere close ahead. As his eyes adjusted, he could see more. The rich gilt fittings and bronze glyphs and marble pillars had been stripped and soiled by countless looters and vandals, and the place gave off a sense of exceptional grandeur fallen into even more extravagant squalor. The vast leaded-glass windows lay in glittering pieces like strange snow, the dome was missing massive chunks where the stars shone through, and the walls were blackened by soot and smoke; Jaime could not help but recall those tales of dead plague victims burned here, and felt a sudden childish fear that they might still linger in the darkness. Don't turn around. Don't look. Yet reaching the edge of the observation gallery, gazing down to the massive arena where the later Targaryens had striven in vain to recreate the earlier monsters of their House, fire and blood made flesh, he could not help but stare. For a fleeting moment he thought of those skulls that had hung in the throne room of the Red Keep, until Robert hauled them off into a dungeon, and the fact that even though thirty knights could have ridden abreast into the door of this place, Balerion the Black Dread would not have been able to fit his head through. If not for this, and the progressively stunted and weaker dragons that it bred, Aerys would have had a Balerion of his own.

All things considered, Jaime could not help but feel a certain abject relief. But it did not last long. An unexpected flicker of motion had caught his eye. And before his over-fevered imagination could conjure a ghastly plague specter come to tear him limb from limb, he realized instead that for one final time, he and his twin had shared one heart, one soul, one mind.

Cersei Lannister emerged from the tumbled, tilted stone blocks on the far side, and strode regally across the floor. She was as filthy as him, if not more so; her dress was ragged, torn, and stained, her golden hair growing back, almost to her shoulders, after it had been shorn to the skull for her walk of punishment. Her green eyes were feral and lucent, shining like a cat's. Her head was high, her back straight. She had never been more beautiful. She had never been so completely alien. He had never loved her more. He had never hated her so fiercely.

Cersei came to a halt at the base of a pillar, her attitude tense and expectant, clearly waiting for someone. He wondered how long she'd been here, hiding out. Whenever she herself had found her way out of the sewers, she must have known that nobody would bother looking in the burned, abandoned ruin of the Dragonpit, which by its very nature represented fallen and failed kings and queens. It might have been the first and last truly clever thing she had ever done.

Jaime put his left hand to the mildewed marble railing, and, one last time, vaulted out into thin air. The descent whistled past, and he bent his knees, landing with barely adequate grace just a few yards away. "Good evening, sister."

She started, turned, and saw him. Her eyes narrowed to slits, but she did not display any overt signs of surprise or shock. "You. I should have known that you'd take some sort of misguided heroic notion into your pretty little head. Although pretty is hardly the word I'd use anymore."

"Call it what you will." Jaime faced her, arms crossed, as much to hide the spreading bloodstain on his shirt as to look defiant. "I won't let you get away with whatever you're planning."

"Whatever you're planning," Cersei repeated, with — ironically, considering their surroundings — enough scorn to fell a fully grown dragon. "When have you ever known what I wanted? When have you ever known a thing? I suppose you've been feeling very sorry for yourself tonight, haven't you? Bemoaning how difficult your charmed life has become? Yes indeed, how unfair that the golden boy of House Lannister should have fallen so far. Or no, wait. Let me think. Never mind. It's perfectly fair."
"I'm not here to argue about the past." Jaime stayed light on his feet. "Surrender, come with me peacefully, and there's still a chance for you. Otherwise –"

Cersei laughed out loud. The sound rang eerily away into the deserted vaults, echoing, creating the unsettling impression that a thousand fetches laughed with her. "Surrender," she said. "Give in. One more time. Make the marriage my father wanted. Burnish the family name. Lie back and open my legs when my drunken oaf of a husband cared to rape me. Shut my mouth whenever I had a thought. Be left with nothing but my children, and then have even them taken from me. You were the only thing I had that I wanted, Jaime. The only way I could stand to look at myself, to know that I was something, anything more than a shadow and a waif and a wretched wailing woman. And now even you have turned on me."

"You've done it to yourself." Jaime's voice was hard and cold, but he could feel the anguish that lurked too close to the surface. It was hurting him more than he had ever believed, to see her like this. "But you don't have to end it like this. You can –"

"I can what?" Cersei asked, with a cool pragmatism far more terrifying than her laughter. "Wait for the Faith to give me a sham trial and find any way they can to convict me, while Mace Tyrell's sainted slut of a daughter walks daintily free? She ran for it as well, yet I'm the one who will be blamed. Wait to be chained and caged, to have my claws pulled? I don't care what anyone thinks I've destroyed. I don't care what anyone even thinks of me. I've made my mark, I've left my legacy. Nothing will ever be the same. Perhaps one of the Lannister women will be recognized at last for what they were. Mother would be pleased."

"Mother? You can't mean that. Mother would be horrified by what you've –"

"Oh, shut up," Cersei said. "Of course you thought Mother was a gentle and good angel, some sort of moral compass for the rest of us, and it was only her sad and untimely death that kept us from being as happy a family as Ned bloody Stark and his frigid little wife and their brood of wolf pups. Well, you can take the satisfaction of knowing that like everything else in your life, you are wrong. Do you think Father, the fearsome Lord Tywin, would have been ruled at home by a woman nagging him to say his bedtime prayers and give alms to the smallfolk, a woman who tried to stop him from crushing the Reynes and the Tarbecks and restoring the glory and terror to a tarnished House? Mother was as bloodthirsty a bitch as me, and don't delude yourself. Then again, after a lifetime of it, I imagine it's second nature by now. That's the irony, see? After Joff had Ned's head taken off, the Starks spent the rest of their short lives trying desperately to get back to each other. A family scattered, frantic to reunite. And then there's us, the Lannisters. We've been falling apart since we were born. It's all been one long slow decay, slipping away from each other, into the dark. If only we could have pulled together, we could have been the dynasty that Father always wanted. Instead we end like this. But I won't do it. I will not die with a whimper."

Jaime had nothing to say to that. He felt as if he should, as if he should cherish the unblemished image of his lady mother that still dwelled in his nine-year-old brain, the last bulwark he had against facing the full dark reality. Have we always been like this? Was there ever even a chance? He wanted to dismiss Cersei's assessment as just the fevered ravings of a broken mind, but the fact remained that this was the most sense he had ever heard her make – for him, for her, for all of them. The fact that if Lannisters always paid their debts, the last and greatest and most terrible was now being called in with a vengeance.

There were many things he could have answered with, or tried. Instead he asked, "Who are you waiting for?"

"Wisdom Hallyne." Cersei smiled thinly. "He has been most accommodating about the
requirements of his queen. Qyburn was the one who brought my orders to the Guild, but Hallyne has been the most diligent in carrying them out."

"Wildfire." Jaime surreptitiously pressed his shirt harder to his side, feeling hot blood soaking into his breeches. "You're truly going to play with that, Cersei?"

Her eyes turned molten. "Play?" she snarled. "No, you puling wastrel, I very much do not intend to play with it. As if I was a child, and saw something shiny, and had no idea of the danger that it contained, the serpent's poisoned bite? They killed Joff. They killed Myrcella. They killed Tommen. They'll kill me too as soon as they get the chance. It all has to burn, Jaime. It all must burn. If you try to stop me, so must you."

"No. Cersei, listen. Don't be what they think you are – this monster, this devil's daughter. Please. Be a queen, a true queen."

"By which you mean I should do as my menfolk tell me?" Cersei raised an eyebrow. "Disguise it with fine words as you please, it's still what you want. Small wonder it frightens you all so much, any hint of the contrary. When my wrath could literally bring this city to bone and ashes, only the smallest measure of recompense for everything it has done to me. I walked naked through it, Jaime. Naked and stripped and shaved, an old woman for the masses to leer at and throw rocks and dung at, when I fell, when I bled, when they frothed at my terribly female body. I felt them hate me then. They screamed insults at me, called me cunt and whore and traitor and everything worse, branded them into my skin. I look forward to hearing them scream as they burn."

"Cersei – "

"And where were you while this was happening, my love? Safe away, as always, running off in the riverlands with some huge ugly freak of a woman, after you ignored me begging you for help. Do you sleep well at night? Or do you – "

"Don't call Brienne a – "

"Ah." Cersei raised an eyebrow. "You've come to care for her. Have you fucked her yet? No, don't answer that. I can smell her stink on you. All this time never seeing any woman but me, and then you fall for the first shambling travesty of one to cross your path? You fool. You utter, barking, purblind fool." Her voice had turned ragged. "You adored me."

"Aye, I did. Once." *The things I do for love.*

"And that was your mistake. You and Tyrion both, thinking with your cocks. Look where that got you. I was Father's only true child, the only one who understood how bloody little love could do for you or for anyone. What was it he used to say, about how it couldn't warm your hall, nor buy you a horse, nor feed you? I wanted to be loved, once. I wanted to rule. I was never given either."

"Cersei. . . " He struggled for the words, for anything, any way to reach her. "You didn't. . . we could have. . . we could have run away together, we could have found a way. . . the song. . . For you shall be my lady love, and I shall be your lord. I'll always keep you warm and safe, and guard you with my sword. . ."

Cersei laughed again, close to a shriek. "And you think *I'm* mad!" she cried. "Run away together and do what? As if no one would know we were Lannisters? As if no one would know who we were? Isn't that exactly why Father had you hire that whore for Tyrion, to teach that lesson about our House, our duty, our place in the world? I didn't want a crown of grass! I wanted a crown of gold! And because I was a woman, this was the one thing I could never have. Don't you stand there
and speak to me of love songs and lost chances and some imaginary life we could have had. You have nothing. Not Casterly Rock, not a place in the Kingsguard, not honor, not glory, not renown, not me. Not me. You will never have me. And you've lost everything."

Jaime, once more, was at an utter impasse. *I always loved her, needed her, more than she loved or needed me.* He made a move as if to reach for her, but she ducked away. "Ah," she said to the darkness, behind him. "You certainly have taken your time."

"I am, hmm, *terribly* sorry, Your Grace." An unpleasantly familiar, obsequious voice came out of the shadows. "The substance was being quite temperamental, quite... but we have arrived at the proper consistency and are only waiting your final instructions."

Jaime's stomach turned to lead. Nor did it turn to gold as he spun around and beheld the pallid alchemist slinking out between the pillars, having appeared as if by magic. *There are many hidden cellars beneath this place, he remembered, and just as many beneath the Guildhall. And Rossart had many jars already hidden in here. Most of them have never been found. Wildfire grew more unpredictable the longer it sat, and even if all Hallyne had brought was one jar of new stuff, that would be enough. Light it, fling it down into the depths, and..."

"Wisdom," he blurted out. "During Aerys' reign, you were only an acolyte, you did not know that the Mad King had given orders to destroy the entire city rather than let it fall into Robert Baratheon's hands. His pet pyromancers kept the truth even from their own apprentices, but not from me. I was on the Kingsguard, I stood there in silence, I guarded my liege and all his dark secrets. But there came a moment when I had to choose, and I did. I killed Rossart and Belis and Garigus and Qyburn. And if you try to do this, I will kill you too."

Hallyne blinked. Clearly he was not accustomed to threats being made directly to his pale wormy face. "My order serves the crown, Ser Jaime! Did we not, hmm, *prove* that most devoutly when Lord Stannis was attacking the – "

"I wouldn't know. I wasn't here." Enough talk. It had come to this. Doing his best to ignore the pain in his side, Jaime drew his sword. "Hand it over."

Hallyne hesitated, then put a hand into his robes and drew out a small pebbled-clay pot. One of the alchemists' infernal fruits. "You mean this?"

"Yes!" Jaime's heart turned over. That small thing, thrown into the cellars of the Dragonpit and their slumbering wildfire caches, would be enough to take out the whole of Rhaenys' Hill, and the rest of the city once it spread. "You'll die, we'll all die, if it burns. Your precious substance and your order, lost forever, you won't do this, you – "

The pyromancer seemed to be trying to move around him. His eyes flicked to Cersei. And then, knowing that it was now or never, Jaime lunged.

His sword flashed out and down, taking Hallyne's soft damp hand with it. As the pyromancer squealed and clutched his bleeding wrist, Jaime dove for the falling jar of wildfire and just managed to catch it. Knowing that he could not let the injured alchemist flee to call for help, fetch another jar, or spread word about what had been done here, Jaime stepped over him as Hallyne raised his maimed fingers pitifully, trying to ward off the blow. It did him no good. The blade came down. The alchemist squealed once more, legs jerking furiously, and went silent.

A spreading stain of blood began to blossom beneath the corpse as Jaime stood there, mildly stunned. Awkwardly clutching the jar of wildfire to his chest with his golden hand, he turned and –
A blazing pain exploded up his face, blinding him, as Cersei smashed him again with the hunk of jagged marble in her fist. He staggered, tasting blood in his mouth, as the jar slipped from between his stiff gloved fingers and she snatched it. Holding it close, she broke into a run, straight toward the dark, gaping hole in the floor, and Jaime reacted instinctively, snatching up his sword. Just as Cersei was about to reach the entrance to an underworld far hotter and far more horrible than the one they'd both voyaged through, he threw it.

Cersei screamed as it lanced the back of her legs, sending her toppling. Her face was a mask of sheer and utter hatred as she rolled around, breathless, teeth bared. She had never looked more a lioness than she did then, too wild for a man to touch. Jaime didn't care. He was already picking himself up from the floor, throwing everything into one final effort, and charging.

The twins crashed into each other like a pair of titans in the next instant, Cersei rising to her knees just as Jaime hit her. Once more, the jar of wildfire rolled loose, sitting only a few tempting feet away, barely out of reach of both of their furiously grasping fingers, as they kicked and thrashed and struggled, wrestling and snarling. It was almost a perfectly matched fight. Jaime had been trained long years in knighthood, but Cersei was much physically stronger than him at the moment, debilitated as he was by hunger and filth and numerous nagging injuries. He'd nearly been unable to fight her off when she tried to rape him in his cell in White Sword Tower, and this was for far greater stakes. For this, for them, for everything – not sure whether it was his own blood or Hallyne's or Cersei's that stained the floor as they continued to fight, his golden hand slamming into her throat, over and over, over and over –


Panting, Jaime loosened his grip on her, allowing her to suck in a ragged breath. He did not get up or move away or let her anywhere near the jar, but as she wept, he began to hope desperately, impossibly that she might mean it. That whatever was left of their love that had lit the world on fire, it would be enough. To change her, to save her, to save them. *My featherbed is deep and soft, and there I'll lay you down. I'll dress you all in yellow silk, and on your head a crown.*

"Jaime." She reached for him. "Sweetling, my sweetling. . . I'm sorry. I'm sorry. For this, for you. . . take my hand, we'll go. . . we'll go, we'll leave, we'll do what you wanted, we'll run away. Run away and be happy. At last. At long last."

Jaime hesitated. He wanted to reach back for her, truly he did. This was Cersei, Cersei, the great love and folly of his entire life. But she was reaching for him with her left hand, and as hard as she was sobbing, he didn't see any –

He jerked backwards just in the nick of time. Not far enough. The raw, rugged scar on his chest, where Lem Lemoncloak had stabbed him during their duel, exploded in white-hot pain as Cersei drove in her dagger almost to the hilt, the bones in her thin hand standing out like cords of iron. He could already feel himself struggling to breathe, not being able to gulp down enough air, whiteness lapping at his vision. He cracked her across the mouth with his golden hand and fumbled the dagger out with the other, but the damage was done. He shoved her down, his blood dripping in great crimson tears on her dress, realizing that he had to, he must, there was no other end but this. *And how she smiled and how she laughed, the maiden of the tree. She spun away and said to him, no featherbed for me. I'll wear a gown of golden leaves, and bind my hair with grass. But you can be my forest love, and I your forest lass.*

She was trying to grab the dagger, to stab him again. He tightened his grip. Her face swam behind a blur of salty tears. Her words haunted him. *And then there's us, the Lannisters. We've been falling*
apart since we were born. It's all been one long slow decay, slipping away from each other, into the dark. They'd all killed each other. Tyrion had killed Mother and Father, perhaps Joffrey as well, and he, Jaime, had killed Tyrion, or as good as, by telling him the truth about Tysha. Now this, now Cersei, after Cersei had killed him –

Her struggles were becoming more desperate, convulsive. A single word, one he didn't understand, bubbled through her lips. "Valonqar," she breathed. "You. It... was... you."

Jaime did not answer. He could not, could not say anything, could not think. He kept on squeezing, throttling, until he could hear her straining for air in a high nightmarish whistle, as her hands beat like broken butterfly wings, as both of them thrashed and jerked, locked together in a grotesque parody of the act of love, as she choked and he bled and it was only, only, a thousand years from anything or anyone, screaming and ringing and banging and echoing to every corner of every existence of every moment of every day and every night that had ever been, of everything and nothing, that he finally realized she was dead.

For you shall be my lady love, and I shall be your lord.

I'll always keep you warm and safe, and guard you with my sword.

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Jaime stood up. His head reeled. Small wonder; between the wounds that the Tarly soldiers and Cersei had dealt him, he had lost enough blood to dye his entire shirt red. Lannister crimson. He almost wanted to laugh. He must have gone insane as well. He took a step. Where was he supposed to go? Back to the sewers, tell Tommen he'd just killed his mother? Turn himself in, more like. To the Red Keep. They wanted him. They could have him.

Limping agonizingly, coughing up gouts of blood, and leaving even more splattered on the stones, Jaime picked his way across the empty, echoing floor of the Dragonpit, Cersei and Hallyne's corpses lying sprawled behind him, the jar of wildfire abandoned, never to reach its fellow fruits in the cellar. He could scarcely take it with him. Why hadn't he simply lain down in a dark corner and waited to die? It could not be that after so long, he had become afraid of it?

The ruins of the door almost defeated him. It was getting harder and harder to breathe, and his arms were shaking, weak as water. Pressing his good hand to the sucking hole in his chest, he staggered through and went to all fours outside. The cold of the winter night assailed him, wanting to pull him down, to drown. He did not deserve to stand up, to go back down to the city of the living. Monster. There was no other word for what he was. No other name.

Jaime had seen more men die than he could count. More than a few of them, he had sent along that road himself. Somewhere they stopped being noticeable, or remarkable, or tragic. He recognized in a distant, academic way that he was very likely now dying himself, and there was no point in trying to make a better lot of it. No hero's end as the grateful commoners mourned his loss and showered him in roses. Just this, in the stronghold of the family and dynasty that he had ended. See. Now he was dying beyond all doubt. He could see something faint and far off in the night, winging closer and closer. It was them. The Targaryens. They were coming for him.

Closer. Closer.
Strange shapes of fell form. Distant flashes of fire in the darkness. Something flying out over Blackwater Bay. In fact, two of them. And still more horribly, they were not byproducts of his fevered, failing brain, but something most dreadfully real. As if the wildfire had done its work after all. As if the flames had been reborn. As if all along, the madness of Aerion Brightflame and Aerys II had been justified. Because it was. It was so.

Dragons.
Arya

She knew this place. She was sure of it. The girl was a stranger, but the wolf had fought in it just hours past, in this cold stone cage that still reeked of blood and rot and death, the pale white dead men that came stalking with the blue-eyed demons, who had been driven back with fire and steel and sacrifice. Arya recognized the stains on the floor, the soot and ice and ichor, the tapestries of seafarers and mermaids hung on the walls, the worn fishing nets draped from the vaults. *White Harbor*. It struck something faintly familiar in the recesses of her ravaged memory. *The north. I am in the north.* She wanted to creep into some dark corner and sleep, still feeling the wounds that Nymeria had taken, but that was not likely to be permitted. The Summer Maid wanted her, had bartered her in exchange for the Horn, and the Summer Maid, whoever and *whatever* she was, would have her.

*Nymeria.* Arya froze. Where had that name come from? Yet even as she thought it, she was certain that it was right, it meant something. And the wolf had been here, *here*. Maybe she was close by. Maybe Arya could go off and find her, just for a little. She wouldn't be alone anymore. She wouldn't be weak. She still had her own teeth and claws. She was a fighter too.

Arya glanced around the hall, judging her prospects of escape. The Summer Maid was still talking to the ladies of House Manderly, and maybe now, if she was quick, she'd make it away. If she could change skins and reach the wolf, let her know that she was coming, Nymeria would find her. Arya hoped it so much that it made her chest hurt. She had spent so long running from any faint reminder of her old life, her old pack, that now, when she wanted to find her way back, she wasn't even sure how to start. But now, she'd go, *right now* –

Just then, as she was about to make a break for it, a hand caught her wrist from behind, pulling her back, so she tensed and instinctively prepared for attack. But it wasn't a monster that had hold of her, but a thin brown-eyed young woman with a bundle of blankets, a baby, cradled in her arms. She was looking at Arya as if she'd never seen any such thing before, something strange and wild. "You," the young woman whispered. "You're a Stark."

Arya stared at her. That was the name Ser Justin had given her, aye, but how did this woman know? What did she want, where had she come from? She didn't know her, didn't even have a faint piece of a recollection, just holes. "Who are you?"

"My name is... is Jeyne." The young woman wet her lips. "I saw the scar on your shoulder. The same as was on the wolf's."

Arya groped instinctively for the seared black line. When she had gotten it, she had woken from a violent dream of blood and snow, Nymeria fighting among the ruins of a great winter castle with a man Ser Justin called the Bastard of Bolton. His blazing blade had cut the wolf so deep that she, the girl, had woken hundreds of leagues away in Braavos breathless with pain. *A magic sword. Lightbringer.* Something about that mattered. A weapon. Ser Justin needed to take the Horn of Dawn north to his king, Stannis, so he had bartered her, Arya, to the Summer Maid in exchange for it. But if that happened, she'd... .

Making up her mind, Arya turned to Jeyne. "I need to run away," she whispered, and pointed to the Summer Maid. "Can you distract her?"

Jeyne stared back at her, pale and tremulous, but then her lips firmed, resolute. Without asking a single question, she nodded once, then joggled the sleeping baby in her arms just enough that he woke and began to wail, echoing impressively through the stone precincts of the Merman's Court.
Jeyne turned and hurried toward the Summer Maid and the Manderly women, blocking Arya from their view. It was just a few moments of distraction, but it was enough. Arya ducked behind a pillar, slithered flat to the wall until she reached a heavy wooden door out onto the portico, pulled it open with both hands, and dove through.

There weren't any guards outside. There had been a terrible battle here last night, the last of White Harbor's waning strength pared to nothing, and the dead men were still waiting out there for the nightfall. It didn't matter. Once more, one last time, after everything, Arya Stark had to run away. Only now, at the end, it was in her last hope of finding who she was.

She shinnied up a merlon and swung to the other side, digging her boots into the cracks between the stones where the mortar had come loose. The New Castle was built with its back to the upthrust spit of glacial rock that sculpted the hills of White Harbor, so once she reached the end of the wallwalk, she jumped down onto the mountainside, scraping her hands and knees. The cold wind cut like a whip through her raggedy brown cloak, but she paid no attention, more certain of it with every step. The wolves had come this way, were hiding somewhere in the hills. Yet as she jumped from crenel to crenel, Arya caught a glimpse of something unexpected. It was the castle courtyard, ringed with a stout wall, with a great wild old tree in the middle. Gnarled roots, sprawling bare branches, weathered white wood that clutched the icy sky, stripped of all but a few blood-red leaves, framing the face that stared back at her, carved from the trunk. For a moment, she thought the graven eyes knew her, were watching her, that the lipless mouth shaped around her name. *Arya. Daughter of the north.* It was deep and fey and not entirely friendly, the wakening of an ancient sentience. *The battle is here, child. Here.*

Rattled, she stared back at it, straining for any sound of pursuit from the main keep. None yet. *Weirwood.* The name suggested itself with surprising ease. *Weirwood tree. Guardian. Watcher.* Whatever was coming tonight, the men of White Harbor would no longer stand alone.

Mayhaps that was so, but she needed something else. Arya shook her head, trying to break the spell, the sensation of that gaze, and continued on, scuttling down the narrow, icy stairs carved into the wall, jumping into the muck, and working on the postern gate until it gave. In a moment more she was through – and then discovered why it had been so lightly guarded. The castle was built atop sheer cliffs, and she was staring thousands of feet down to where they folded into a towering fjord, the sea just barely visible at the bottom. The wind ripped at her, screaming, until she was about to come loose and fly, fly or fall, and she turned around, pressing herself into the outer curtain wall, inching along, not daring to face the abyss in case it gulped her up. Hand over hand she scooted along, until it ran out and turned to stones, and there was a narrow path, barely wide enough even for her, that led into the mountains.

Arya lost track of how long she climbed. The smell of salt was pungent in her nose, her fingers bruised and bleeding. Yet the thrill of the hunt was in her blood, driving her on. *I did it. I made it. I got away from the Summer Maid.* She couldn't even be joyful about it, though. Not really. Not until she found the wolves.

At last, the path bent inwards from the coast and into a narrow ravine wedged between two steep shoulders of the mountain. Arya could see old bloodstains, the carcass of a dead animal, dragged logs, broken bracken, and knew beyond all doubt that this was it, she was here. A look around, and she saw the eyes gleaming beneath a jagged fall of boulders. Gold eyes. Inhuman.

Arya felt a breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding rush out of her. Then she got to all fours and crawled through the cold mud, following the track straight to the wolves' den. She could smell them, rangy and gamey and animal, could almost taste them on her tongue. Her limbs were shaking, her heart fragile as a coin spun with the flick of a thumb. She couldn't bear it if it wasn't,
not after so long. But it was. It was. It was.

"Nymeria," Arya cried, a howl more than half beastly to her own ears. "Nymeria, is it you, is it really, is it really?" She was choking, snot and tears leaking down her cheeks, as she fisted both hands in the ragged ruff of fur around the wolf's neck and buried her face in it. "It's me, it's me, it's Arya! It's me!"

Nymeria licked her face with a rough tongue, and whined. Then she locked her jaws around Arya's arm and pulled her deeper into the den, and in the dim, frigid light, Arya realized that there was another wolf there – and another boy. Not very old. Five or six. He was curled up against the big black beast, munching on a hunk of bloody raw meat, and started to attention when he saw her, demanding something in a language she didn't know. It sounded wild. He looked wild. Dirtier even than her, with a filthy, overgrown mop of auburn hair that fell past his collar and blue eyes fixed suspiciously on her, as if she might try to steal his food. Sensing a potential threat, the big black wolf likewise pricked his ears and growled, deep in his throat.

Arya was momentarily discomfited, but she knew what to do; she had spent more time in the wolf's skin than her own recently. She rolled over on her back, showing her belly, and let the big male sniff her until he showed his teeth one last time, then snuffled, nipped her, and pulled away. Yet as she sat up, Arya's head was starting to spin. That girl back at White Harbor, Jeyne, had known who she was – you're a Stark – because of the wolf. And here there were two. Was this it? Had she found her pack? She had thought all her memories would reappear, intact and complete, when she was reunited with Nymeria, after they had been destroyed in the black water of the Temple of Many Faces. They hadn't. But there had to be a way, there had to be a chance to know. Clumsily, she cleared her throat and looked at the boy. "Stark?"

He giggled. "Nuh-uh," he said, in the Common Tongue. "I'm a wildling. Rickon the Red. And this is Shaggy."

"Oh." Arya felt her heart sink, hopes dashed as quickly as they had risen. But there was something bothering her about that. She knew the big black wolf; he had rescued Nymeria when she had nearly succumbed to her injuries, fed her and dragged her to shelter, and fought alongside her in the battle last night. There had been a familiarity, someone she had known. Brother. Five of them. No, six. Scattered but not shattered. "Are you sure?"

He shrugged, then continued to gnaw on the raw meat. The scent of blood and marrow made Arya's empty belly rumble dolefully, her mouth water, and she moved to grab it, ignoring the way he growled at her. They rolled back and forth, the wolves watching quizzically, until she finally ripped the haunch from him and sank her teeth into it, almost fainting at the richness that rushed into her mouth. She tore and chewed at the cold sinew until it softened, lapped up the savory juices, then crawled over to Nymeria, curled up against her, and fell asleep.

Her dreams were strange and savage. Half-shaped specters swirled in the netherworld, screaming for her, but she couldn't touch them, couldn't see their faces. She was hanging onto them, but her grip loosened, the storm engulfed her, and the wall of towering black water that had drowned Braavos rose above her, higher and higher and higher until it snuffed all the stars out. Then it crashed down on her, choking her with salt, drowning her, pounding her down into oblivion, and she fell and fell and fell, far down, so far down into the darkness and she'd never come back, burned away, she'd never remember, she'd never –

Arya jerked awake with a muffled gasp, heart pounding. She lay still for several moments, struggling to remember where she was or how she had gotten there, then pressed a hand cautiously to the ground, testing it. Once she was satisfied that it was solid, she sat up.
It was much darker, and much colder, a chill to lash through her bones and make her teeth chatter. As she blinked to make her eyes focus, she saw Nymeria standing at the mouth of the den, hackles raised and a low, constant growling rumbling through her from teeth to tail. There was a peculiar wrongness to the air, a decayed, rotten smell, heavy and damp, and it made Arya gag and spit. Then she pulled herself across the cave floor and peered out.

There were no moon or stars, and the blackness breathed like a living creature. But nonetheless, she could make out the ghostly pale shapes swarming over the rocks, not two dozen yards away. Some were slow and clumsy, shambling, while others were agile and light like ribbons of icy silk, eyes gleaming like blue stars. But all of them moved with single-minded purpose, a never-ending line. Making toward White Harbor, and the exhausted men that waited there with steel and fire, knowing the battle must be met again. Wights. Others.

Arya's breath hitched nervously. She curled her fingers in Nymeria's fur, trying to fight down the sudden uncertainty. After all the places she'd run from – the Sealord's Palace, the House of Black and White, Ser Justin's villa, Braavos, White Harbor – she was finally safe, away from the faceless ones who wanted her soul. As long as she kept moving, drifting like a leaf on the wind, they couldn't catch her. But what if she had to go back? Return, at last, to all the places she had been fleeing from?

It doesn't matter to me. Attachments were weakness, the kindly man's voice whispered in her head, and she saw the way he had smiled so sadly when she had driven her sword into him. He must have known that one day I'd kill him as well. But there were other people back in White Harbor, neither him nor the Summer Maid. The brown-haired girl, Jeyne, with her baby, who had called her a Stark and been willing to obey her without question because of it. Ser Justin, who needed to bring the Horn of Dawn to his king in the north. Lady Manderly, who looked no more than nineteen, and her sister. Real people. Many of whom had only been saved last night because the wolves had fought.

Arya stood chewing her lip, then turned and hurried to where Rickon was curled up asleep against his wolf. He blinked at her grumpily when she shook him awake. "Wha?"

"There are monsters out there." Arya kept her voice low. "We need to get the wolves to help fight them."

Rickon scratched his nose, looking skeptical. "No, we don't."

"Yes, we do!" Anger flared up, sudden and desperate. "They're going to get killed!"

Rickon shrugged. "Who cares? We're safe here. They can't find us." With that, he picked up the scattered bones and began to gnaw on them, cracking and crunching. Shaggy woke up and growled, and Rickon growled back, beast and boy scrabbling for the scraps. Arya could only watch them with a sinking feeling; it was true what he'd told her. He was a wildling, he didn't care, he wasn't going to help her. He wouldn't be that useful anyway, probably. They were wasting time. It was stupid. Stupid. Stupid little girl.

"Fine," she said angrily. "I'll go. You just stay here and don't run anywhere else."

Rickon paid no attention, preoccupied with his bones again. Arya watched him for a moment longer, then determinedly turned away, telling herself that it didn't matter. She beckoned to Nymeria, who padded after her, and emerged from the wolf's den into the night.

The cold hit her in the stomach before she'd gone a dozen paces. It punched the breath out of her, as it seared her throat and made her eyes water. She backhanded it away, following Nymeria's lead, the dead men still marching just a few dozen yards below. If they were living, they would have
looked up, they would have heard, but they were so mindlessly intent on reaching their target that they never once flinched. Arya felt more than half dead herself, her legs like useless blocks of wood, blood struggling to pump through her freezing flesh. *Farther. Just a little farther. I can make it.* She had run from here in such haste, and it was a struggle with every step to return. She couldn't be any less stubborn now.

She knew White Harbor was on fire before she saw it. Could see the eerie orange glow licking at the night, scorching the underside of the ghostly clouds like the breath of a dragon. She remembered, faintly, the tales from the east she'd heard in Braavos, about the queen who had awoken three. *But she's not coming. They're not coming.* There were no heroes left. There was no time. Only her. A girl and a wolf. Only them.

Arya stumbled over the last icy tussock, and looked into the mouth of hell.

She stood at the top of the cliff, and the overrun city lay below. The wights were everywhere, crawling over everything, the Others rippling graceful in their wake. The beacon on the harbor rock was out, but with all the flames, it scarce mattered. Fire and stone and death raining down from the night, scuttling dark figures of men trying in vain to mount barricades at the gate of the New Castle, chains groaning as they endeavored to haul the portcullis down, but soft dead hands thrust through, twisting the iron and tossing it aside. Intermittent bombardments from the few operational catapults hammered the plaza where most of the dead men were gathered, but for every one that fell, five more moved in to take its place. They were climbing, up and up against the high curtain walls, slow but relentless, nearer and nearer the top. And once they reached it, that would be the nail in the coffin. No stemming the flood tide. No stopping the end.

*They are all going to die,* Arya realized. There was nothing she could do about it. It was preposterously stupid to think that she and Nymeria could have helped at all. She felt caught in a nightmare, dragged underwater to drown. *There is no way they can last the night.* She'd wanted to be her again. She'd wanted to come home. But it was over now. *Too late. Too late.*

And it was then, staring hopelessly out at nothing, at the black empty sea, she saw the ships.

There were five of them. Northern longships flying the merman of Manderly, loaded to the gills with men – living ones, not dead, oars churning the frozen water to froth. They surged into the quay, one after another – torches blazing, drums booming and deep voices bellowing, barely moored up before they began to disgorge hundreds of charging fur-clad forms, battle-axes in both hands, spilling up the streets and into the besieged heart of White Harbor. *Wildlings.* They were possessed, striking down anything dead or demonic, until the courtyard was littered with burning corpses. Madly, Arya remembered her conviction, in the moment of communion with the weirwood, that something else was coming tonight. That the men of the city no longer stood alone. And gazing upwards, she saw ravens. Rising in a dark cloud, screaming and reeling. *Stark. Stark. Stark.*

The battle was over before dawn. The wights were routed, the Others fleeing. If she was going to turn back again, if she was going to run, it was the perfect time for Arya to do it. Steal away to Rickon, and they could live as wolves together, hunting for their supper, forgetting their names and tongues, slipping into the warg's skin forever, forsaking all other hope or home or memory, beasts of the wild. She could do it. She could be happy.

She could.

Slowly, so slowly, she took a step. Then another. Then another. Moving toward the switchback stair. On hands and knees if she had to, Nymeria trotting behind her. Climbing. Climbing down.
There was a scar of bloody crimson across the eastern sky by the time she reached the broken gates. Dead wights and dead wildlings and dead Manderlys and dead men of all descriptions were stacked three and four deep to every side, brackish blood congealing beneath torn-off limbs and smashed-in skulls. No one moved to stop Arya as she climbed through them, thinking of how, if she was still in Braavos, she would have brought them down to the black cells and a man would have skinned their faces off. It was the water of the fountain that had taken hers, poisoned her, and she had spent every moment since looking over her shoulder for their return. And so, at last, she could not run anymore.

Arya found no signs of life until she reached the bailey. The survivors were standing in huddled groups, and she picked out sight of Lady Manderly, Ser Justin, and a copper-haired knight she didn't know, looking as if he hadn't slept in an age, surcoat and mail blood and soot-stained. "My lady," he was saying. "There is no choice. You must give the order to evacuate."

"And what about the Burned Men?" Lady Manderly asked composedly. "What about the Braavosi refugees?"

"They have their own vessels. Anything that can float. As for the wildlings. . ." The knight hesitated. "They knew their lot when they agreed to come north. They will stay."

"They will all die."

"They have accepted that, and do not fear it. Please, my lady, I beg you. You cannot hold this city against another attack. When your lord father, the gods assoil him, sent me to the Vale, he knew it was a fool's gamble. All that matters now is survival. White Harbor must be abandoned. We must sail south. It is no cowardice to retreat in the face of a foe this great and terrible."

"Aye, perhaps," Wynafryd Manderly said. "But if we run to the south, where do we run after that when they finish with the north? What stops them?"

"As for me," Ser Justin Massey broke in. "I must go north. I must. His Grace King Stannis is at the Dreadfort. If I give him the Horn of Dawn, this terrible war is over. I do not expect to return, nor do any of the men coming with me, but our choice is firm."

"You must leave at once, aye," Wynafryd agreed. "Take the most seaworthy of the remaining ships, and may all the gods go with you. As for you, my lord of Marbrand, your service to House Manderly has been exceptional, and we do owe you our lives. But I cannot ask northmen to abandon their posts at the hour of the wolf."

"Wolf." The knight's – Marbrand's – face went slack. And with that, he turned on the spot and stared at Arya and Nymeria, who in turn were staring back at him. "Wolf!"

Nymeria laid back her ears and growled. Arya grabbed a fistful of her ruff just in case. What, what were they going to –

"Arya?"

The voice sent a searing chill down Arya's back, twisted in her gut like a punch, snapped her upright and choked her throat. She knew it, she knew she knew it, she just didn't know who, or why, as she looked up and directly into the stunned blue eyes of the young man across the way, with his shaggy black hair and stubborn expression and a name close, so close, she could almost taste it on her tongue. He was clad in mail and armor like the rest, a bulls-head helmet cradled under one arm; he'd clearly been fighting the wights alongside the wildlings, had sailed here under the command of Ser Marbrand. His longsword, still in his hand, clattered loose onto the cobbles as
he took a convulsive step toward her. "Arya? Arry? It's me. It's me."

Arya squinted doubtfully at him. "You?" she said hesitantly. "You."

"Aye, me!" He looked strange, sad and angry and awed all at once. "Don't you –"

"Girl!" That was Ser Justin, and he just looked angry. "What on bloody earth were you thinking? Where have you been? If you'd been killed, the courtesan would have skinned me for a cloak, and that would damned well have been the end of everything! Now, Ser Gendry, are you –"

"Don't talk to her like that!" The boy – the Bull – Ser Gendry – glared at the older knight. "Don't you know who she is?"

Massey blinked. "Yes, I know perfectly well who she is, seeing as I was the one to find her and rescue her in Braavos, an act for which I should be well –"

"Braavos?" Gendry bellowed. "What was the fable of her wed to the Bastard of Bolton, then? The entire north roused to fight, and all for a –"

A communal shocked inhalation traveled the hall. "Arya?" Lady Manderly demanded. "Arya Stark? And when did you plan to divulge that information, good ser?"

Massey realized his danger an instant too late. "My lady, I assure you, I did not think it was needful to distract the mission with –"

"Did not think it was needful?" Wynafryd Manderly reared back as if about to spit fire. "My father and grandfather fought until the bitter end on the faintest and most desperate hope that the girl we believed to be Arya Stark could be rescued from the Boltons, and now we find that you have bartered the real one to this Summer Maid, as if she were a cow at market? All along intending us never to find out, I suppose? House Manderly has sworn our fealty to your king Stannis, given everything to assist him, and this is how you repay us?"

Ser Justin looked ashen. "My lady, your anger is... is justified. But if I dealt with you in false faith, I swear, it was not from malice. Even now, you must understand how dangerous any distraction is. And if I may give you some advice, heed Ser Addam's counsel. There is nothing to be gained from blind heroism. There are ships at hand, and the Burned Men to cover your retreat. Get the women and children out of the city. Any man that wishes to stay and fight may do so, but he must know that if he does, it is to certain death and another cold grave. And saving your pardon, but I would think the north has had a bellyful of that. Look at us. A Stark vassal, a Baratheon vassal, and a former Lannister vassal all united to do what must be done." He indicated Wynafryd, himself, and Marbrand. "Against the winds of winter, there can be no other choice."

Wynafryd Manderly's lips were tight. She clearly longed to fire back a sharp retort, but none appeared to be coming to mind. Then she said grudgingly, "Very well. Give the order. Every woman and child for whom there can be found a place on the ships must leave White Harbor by sundown. Men if space permits. Tell them to take only what they can carry. Hurry!"

Her guards bowed and departed, and Massey and Marbrand as well. But Arya saw Gendry reckoning on his fingers, with his face screwed up as if it hurt him. Then he said, "M'lady, with the people of the city and the Braavosi refugees both, even with our longships, there's not going to be passage for everyone."

"I am aware." Wynafryd's face was pale but resolute. "Ser... Gendry, was it?"

"Aye, m'lady. Of the Hollow Hill."
"Ser Gendry. We owe you thanks for revealing the secret of Arya Stark's presence to us. If it is your will, you may go south at her side."

Gendry blinked, then swallowed, momentarily at a loss for words. Then he said, "No, m'lady. It wouldn't be right. I came here meaning to fight, and die if I had to. I'm not scared. I'm no coward. And – and knowing she's alive. . . that's all I could have asked for. I'll stay."

"No."

Arya didn't know at first that it was her that had spoken, or feel the angry steps forward, relinquishing her grasp on Nymeria's fur and planting her hands on her hips. But then it was too late. "No," she said passionately. "No, you won't. I don't remember you, but you're part of my pack. You're one of them. You and Rickon both, and I'm not going to leave you behind anymore. I ran and ran, I gave and gave, I lost and lost, I killed and killed, and I don't want to do it anymore, I don't!" Her hands balled into fists. "You're coming or I'm making you!"

Gendry looked utterly blindsided. "M'lady. Arya. What's. . . what's happened to you?"

"Rickon?" Wynafryd Manderly broke in. "Rickon? Do you know where he is?"

"He's in the hills," Arya said miserably. "In a cave. Not that far from here. With his wolf." She wanted to scream at how it was slipping through her fingers like sand, but couldn't get up the energy. She was tired, tired beyond all bearing. She wished this had never come to her. She wished none of this had happened.

Lady Wynafryd summoned a man-at-arms and whispered urgently in his ear, apparently concerning the potential recovery of Rickon. It was a full dozen of them that finally departed, armed to the teeth with ropes, torches, nets, and swords, plainly not underestimating the task of capturing a fully grown direwolf and a savage little boy. Arya stood watching them go, not really thinking anything, not wanting to, until a hesitant hand touched her shoulder. "M'lady?"

She flinched, then turned. It was Gendry. "Aye?"

He swallowed again. "I just. . . I don't know what happened to you. And you said you didn't know me no more. But I wanted to tell you, in case I don't get the chance again, that I know you. Your name is Arya Stark, and you're a proper highborn lady, a daughter of Winterfell. You and me, we met on the road when Yoren was taking us to the Wall, except we didn't get there and was ambushed instead, in the fight at the holdfast where Yoren was killed. Us and the baker's boy and some others, we finally came to Harrenhal and worked there a time. Me in the forge, and you as Lord Bolton's cupbearer. You killed some men with that terrifying Lorathi friend of yours and freed the northmen, and then we escaped, after you killed the guard on the gate as well. You and me and Hot Pie. We left him at the inn of the crossroads, and then I joined the Brotherhood without Banners under the hollow hill. It's them that made me a knight. That's. . . that's who I am. How we know each other." He trailed off. "If you were wondering."

"Oh," Arya said in a small voice. "I wish I hadn't forgotten you."

"I wish you hadn't as well." He seemed to be having a hard time getting the words out. "But that's. . . that's what it is."

"You can still come with me," she pleaded. "Even if I don't remember. I might, eventually. You can't stay here, you heard what they all said. You'll die."

Gendry got a stubborn look on his face that made her heart ache. "It's not right, if I'd take a place
Arya had nothing to say. She was out of things that might change his mind, and out of reasons otherwise. Silently, she nodded.

The rest of the day was a blur. She was aware of the Manderly men returning, a furious Shaggy tied up and trussed in a net, and a not markedly more compliant Rickon likewise restrained. Jeyne and her son appeared not long later, and her eyes briefly met Arya's, clearly surprised to see her again. But then they were joining the long slow trail of people down to what was left of the harbor and the ships anchored there, pennants and banners and sails of many devices and colors streaming on the bitterly cold wind. The women and children of White Harbor were boarding, let on until one of the vessels was full and then cast off, to find their fate wherever the wind and water would take them. They are never coming back, Arya thought, looking up at the high proud towers of stone now turned to rubble, the smoke rising from where the bodies of their fathers and brothers and sons and husbands still burned. The roots of the north might run deep, but the roots of winter, of death and loss and evil, ran deeper.

Arya, Rickon, and Jeyne all boarded the same ship, one of the longships that had brought the Burned Men (Nymeria and Shaggy chained in the hold, so as not to alarm the crew). Ser Justin must have departed, set sail to the north with all his brave men who likewise would never return, taking the Horn of Dawn to his king. Will that stop the war? He seemed to think it would. But how soon? Who else would die? Gendry and Ser Addam and all the wildlings, all the men staying to give the rest of them a chance? Too many. Too many.

She stood at the side as the ship began to move off. She couldn't imagine what would come now. Just a little girl who doesn't matter. All her broken pieces fit less well than ever. She kept going over things in her head, what she should have said, what she should have remembered. But there was no cure for what she had done. No way to bring back what was lost, or –
She heard the soft step behind her an instant too late. Didn't quite turn in time, felt the sharp prick of a blade at the back of her neck. And had a vision, there and gone, of the time it had been before, in the Sealord's Palace in Braavos – a voice – "And what is a girl doing in this place? A girl alone, with a knife? I am wondering." And then, knew. At last, and beyond all doubt.

"You," she breathed, hands clenching on the railing. "It's you."

"What was that?" The Summer Maid's voice was close in her ear. "I would not advise turning around, child. A finger's width up this blade is a bead of poison that, should it touch a wound, will kill you in moments. Did you think you were going to break the bargain? This is what your running has led to. You still belong to us."

"You." The word felt as cold as winter itself. "You're Jaqen H'ghar. When I killed him in the fire at the House of Black and White, you took him on, somehow. A man attacked you at Ser Justin's villa, and the way you were acting so strange on his ship, and the way you wanted me, me, for the bargain if you gave him back the Horn. . ." Arya didn't understand everything, but it didn't matter. "You've been him since that night at the Iron Bank, at least."

"Clever girl." The Summer Maid laughed again. "But then, a girl always was. Both of us. A girl, a ragged girl, a girl alone, scorned and cast out by the world. I arrived in Braavos with nothing, torn to shreds by the lions. Are we really so unalike, you and I? Jaqen befriended me, took an interest in me. Even as he did you. I became a courtesan, I learned something of their faceless art. I was just like you. Numbering my grievances, the men I would have dead, never giving in altogether. I could not be one of them, so long as I held my old self in my heart. Just like you."

Arya wanted to find the words for a denial, but it wouldn't come. "Tysha," she said numbly. "Your name was Tysha."

The Summer Maid twisted the blade. "Once, yes. But as you know, we give that up. You became Cat of the Canals, the blind girl, the nameless waif, and I became the Summer Maid. You chose to become a killer of men, whilst I chose to destroy them in my own way. Both of us owed what we became to Jaqen H'ghar. He is dead now, but he lives in me. And I will finish what is begun. A girl chose poorly. A girl will not grow up, but die."

And in that, that last moment, that final chance, Arya Stark grew up.

She whirled around, feeling the blade etch a burning scar into the back of her neck – the poison, she thought, but no time to care – knocked it loose, scrambled for it, hearing the Summer Maid snarl, a sound barely human, wrenching for it across the deck, as they struggled. Until Arya's fingers closed on the hilt, and she jerked around and grabbed hold of hair, of dark hair, tumbled and worn and streaked with grey, and the Summer Maid's – Tysha's – mad and haunted eyes stared back at her under the hood, and she could only see herself.

"Kill me," the courtesan breathed. "Kill me, and you can have your memories back. You'll be what you were meant to be then, girl. After all of them. One more. Go on. Do it."

Arya's hand trembled. One more. The easy thing to do. End the threat that had stalked her from Braavos. One more. She had killed and killed until she couldn't tell apart the faces, until they had only become a blur. One more. Kill the woman who had become her. Who was her. One more. As if it was so simple. As if she wanted to. If this wasn't merely another lie. One more.

Look where it had led her. What it had made her.

She would rather forget everything, and learn it anew, than to remember it like this.
She opened her fingers. Let the dagger clatter to the deck. And with one whispered word, defied the Faceless Men one last time.

"No."
Sansa

In the moments after the monster spotted them, Sansa's feet felt rooted to the ground. She ought to say something, to do something, to move, to flee, but all she could see in the towering white phantom was the ghosts of her tormentors. Ilyn Payne bringing Ice down into her father's neck, Janos Slynt holding the head aloft for the crowds to roar and rage. Joffrey and his plump smirking wormy lips, Joffrey clawing at his throat among the spilled purple wine, Cersei's drunken ravings on the night of Blackwater, Boros Blount and his mailed fist, the cruel titters of the court like thrown knives, the Imp's eyes devouring her on their wedding night, Ser Dontos groping for sloppy kisses, then tumbling with a quarrel in the throat as Littlefinger plucked her from the sea and trapped her in another gilded cage. What am I doing? What have I done? They were right, they were all right. She was a stupid little girl playing in the game of thrones with no notion what she was grasping at, what forces she was unleashing. And now – thinking to come to King's Landing as if she had any pieces to use, any real way to fight back against war and winter and woe. . . Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. The little bird should never have flown the coop.

Sansa only became aware that she wasn't breathing when Brienne's mailed fist cut into her arm and jerked her backwards, around the corner. Then she had to gulp down a half-hysterical lungful, clutching at her cloak to pull it farther around herself, otherwise she would be naked and alone in the darkness. She had ruined them, led them to their deaths. How could she be so foolish, so careless? How could she not have known that they would be there, waiting for her?

"My lady?" Brienne hissed. "My lady! Look at me!"

With a hideous effort, Sansa managed to train her eyes on the other woman's face, which seemed strange and skewed out of all proportion, as if seen through a broken looking glass. "I can't," she whimpered. "I can't, I can't."

"Aye, you can." Brienne's hands remained fast on her shoulders. "Now, listen. You know the keep better than I. If he comes for us, run. We'll – "

Timett loosened his sword in the scabbard. "I will take the man-monster. You, woman, get the Red Hand to safety."

"You cannot face that alone," Brienne warned him. "And you are the one who knows the keep's secret passages and warrens. Take her."

Timett looked deeply affronted. "I am not one for hiding and crawling in the darkness when there is a fight to be had. Take her, or – "

"Both of you!" Sansa was straining for any sound, horribly certain she could hear heavy, pursuing footsteps in the courtyard. She was only with difficulty keeping in check her overwhelming urge to do exactly as they suggested, and run far and fast and never look back, but forced herself to move forward instead. She reached the edge of the wall and peered around, squinting in the flat chilly twilight, absurdly afraid that the gusts of her breath would give her away. But if Gregor Clegane was coming, if he was –

She could no longer see him, and her heart caught in her throat, suddenly wondering if she had only dreamt him. But – no – there was a man descending the tower steps, and not far behind him, another. A man nearly of the same size, who for a heart-stopping moment she was utterly certain she recognized. It could not be – but that was the reason Sandor had declined to accompany her to the Vale, and left for King's Landing instead. Had been bound and determined to hunt his own
monster. And if by some impossibility had found him now... He always guarded me, as best he could. There was nothing left but to take the gift.

Sansa threw herself back around the corner just as steel shrieked and sang on the far side, the storm of meeting swords. Then Brienne had her by one arm, Timett by the other, and they made off into a dark alcove that the wildling seemingly found by smell, as the sounds of combat echoed in their ears, far but not far. Brienne drew her sword and stationed herself at the mouth of the tunnel, and Sansa huddled back against the cold stone, trying to recall any of the prayers she had mouthed so often in the godswood here, to the dark deaf trees. "Why is no one coming?" she whispered. "Why is no one stopping them?"

"They are gone." It was Timett who answered, the hollow of his eye looking queerly ghastly in the gloom. "Do you recall what the holy man said? The queen is missing. So is the king. There is no power left here. Your ugly iron chair has always been taken by conquest. We can escort you there, seat you on it, and proclaim you queen, and it will be as much yours as anyone's."

"Queen. Sansa shuddered at the sound. Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. I was supposed to be that, once. Joffrey's wife, Joffrey's slave. It was all she had wanted, those days a thousand years ago, and she could not deny that it tempted her in some measure now. To win at last, to pay back in kind everything that had been done to her and hers. She could see herself grand and pitiless, a red-haired queen in a robe of icy white, standing on high, ordering the sword brought down on all the Lannisters, Ilyn Payne, Petyr Baelish, Roose Bolton, all the false friends and worse enemies. I could take the power to kill, and in this world, is there any other sort? Timett was right. She could. It was eminently within her grasp.

Except that there was. Another sort of power. One she had seen quite well for herself.

"No," Sansa said. It sounded hoarse and choked and small, and she had to clear her throat, steady herself, utter it again. "No, I don't want that."

"Suit yourself." Timett shrugged. "Then we wait here for the fat flower lord, is it so?"

"Aye." Determinedly, she tried to stop her ears to the unearthly sounds still drifting in the night, and tried not to think what might become of her plan if Lord Mace Tyrell numbered among the casualties. At the moment, she was less than certain that she or any of them would get out alive, but to distract herself, she turned back to Brienne. "Do you think Ser Jaime is in the castle? If it is true there is no one left to guard this place, we could find him and set him free."

Brienne's shoulders tensed. It was clear how much the idea allured her, especially considering how often and how stoutly she had insisted to Sansa that she could trust the Kingslayer and that he had abandoned his old loyalties. But if he has done that yet again, how am I to know he will not do the same to me? Abstractions of honor were easier than actions. But she had already run a risk on so much else, this must merely be another. "Well?" she pressed. "Is he?"

"I don't know, my lady," Brienne answered at last. "But even if so, my duty is at your side. If we find him, we find him. If not..." She trailed off.

Once more, Sansa was led to wonder just what had passed between the two of them, but did not consider it suitable to ask. Neither of them said more for the longest time, what felt like forever, and she was about to do something, anything to break it when Timett raised a fist. "D'you hear it?"

Sansa strained, but didn't. "What?"

"There's nothing to hear." Timett laid a hand on his sword. "Could be that monster got whatever
was fighting it, and now it's coming for us."

"No," Sansa said. She pushed herself to her feet, suddenly certain. That even if she had nothing else, never again, she must at least have this. "Come."

Openly dubious, Brienne and Timett shadowed her out and back into the bailey, the stars shining coldly above, the ramparts darker and higher and more forbidding than ever. The windows reflected like blank black eyes, watching them. Even by the scanty half-light, it was not hard to track the gouges and gashes in the mud, the prints of heavy boots, scuffed and scarred through a procession of archways leading deeper and deeper into the keep. She could see a violent blaze of firelight up ahead, and sped up, almost running. Took one turn and then another, heart pounding in her throat. Had to fight the fear that they might be too late after all. If she did not –

Sansa turned one final corner, emerged into the courtyard, saw what lay before her, and screamed.

It was worse, a thousand times worse, than she could ever have imagined. It was Sandor, gods, it was him, dragging himself to his knees above the flaming, thrashing carcass of the giant, sodden with blood from the great ragged gash riven through his steel and leather and flesh, clutching his dirk in a shaking fist and clearly on the verge of making an end of Ser Gregor Clegane once and for all. But it was not Gregor. The body, perhaps. But the head that stared up with eyes bluer than the sky in the firelight – stitched to the trunk of the monster, fixed and frozen, hidden beneath the helmet all this time, condemned to serve his enemies even after death, animate by some black ungodly sorcery –

Robb.

Sansa was barely conscious of going to her knees. She felt as if she was tumbling down a long black tunnel, had to claw back from the brink or be lost forever, and she spat out the foul taste of sickness in her mouth. Then somehow she was up again, staggering across the stones to them, trying to touch Robb's face even as the fire was devouring the rest of the body. She knew he could not speak, might not remember her, but did not care. Wanted him to see her if nothing else, as he let go at last, swirling up in sparks and embers into this southern sky so very far from home. Could see in her head her goodbye to Lady Stoneheart, in the Vale. Could sense, at last, that that door had finally been closed. I love you. I love you both. Go with the gods.

She remained transfixed a moment longer, watching the body turn into a towering pyre of smoke. It was then, only then, that she turned and looked directly at Sandor Clegane. Her voice was frozen in her throat and no words could emerge, but he merely looked back at her, looked and looked as if he could never have enough. And then, for perhaps the first time she could ever recall, his bloodstained, sooty, harsh face split into a smile. "Little bird."

"Sandor." She caught him as he toppled backwards, but wasn't strong enough to hold him upright. She could not tell how deep his wound was, but to judge by the blood pooling beneath him in the mud, soaking into her skirt, it was more than deep enough. "What have you done?"

"What have I done?" he rasped, and coughed. His head turned, gaze flickering to her burnt hand. "Bloody hell, girl, what have you done?"

"I..." Sansa could not even think of the words to answer, laying it gently against his scarred cheek. "I understood."

He coughed again. Blood flecked his mouth, the twisted ruin of the flesh on the side he had no lips, pulled wider with his smile. "Well then. That's the damndest thing. You go off... and get burned... and I... turn into a sodding... knight."
"What?" She wondered if he was delirious, mind already wandering in the soft dark hinterlands from which there could be no return. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly... what I said." He was fighting for breath now. "Daubed... and dubbed... proper. Ser Sandor. To face my bloody brother. I did not know... little bird... didn't know it was yours as well. Swear to it. Did you... did you get Baelish?"

Did I? She had no notion. But she was here, and Littlefinger back in the Vale to face the merciless judgment of her mother, and Sandor was dying. So she said only, "Yes."

Once more, the Hound grinned. "I'll be sure... to spit on him in hell for you. Brave girl. Brave woman. Little bird... found her claws. She-wolf found... her teeth."

"Sandor." At last, Sansa's voice cracked. She cradled his head, turning his face toward hers, her fingers sticky with the caked blood and sweat and filth. "Sandor, don't."

His eyes were starting to reflect the starlight. "It's well, little bird. It's well."

"No," Sansa said, suddenly and violently. "No, it's not."

And then, before she could think otherwise, she leaned down. She had dreamed of this moment, thought of it, savored it – only to find out that it was false, some sweet lie she'd clung to for reasons beyond her comprehension. She did not know why she had remembered it, nonetheless, now, she had to know the truth. She brought her face to his, gently, and kissed him.

Sandor grunted. His free hand came up, trying to touch her hair, but could not make it. His mouth tasted of blood and smoke, his lips cold, his breath ragged and catching. She held it a moment longer, and in that instant had time to see everything that never could have been, that never would be. Her tears blinded her as she pulled back and let him rest in her arms, the pain leaving his face. She thought she felt Brienne grip her shoulder, thought the other woman was saying something urgently, but couldn't be sure. The outside world had faded to a blur, felt numb and dreamy and slow. Yet now there were other voices, other shadows thrown huge on the stones, a sea of torchlight, and she looked up to belatedly realize that they were surrounded: by soldiers, gold cloaks, men-at-arms, and stragglers. She had neither heard nor seen them coming, and did not know what to say. Silently, she laid Sandor down, then rose to her feet, his blood still staining her dress and cloak and hands. She donned the iciest armor of courtesy imaginable, inclined her head, and said, "My lords."

"My lady." A tall man on a grey horse jostled through the gathering crowd, with short-cropped hair and eyes like chips of granite. His voice was curt and cold. "State your name and your errand at once, or face the consequences."

Sansa studied him. The striding huntsman of House Tarly on his tabard, the greatsword slung over his shoulder – Lord Randyll of Horn Hill, it had to be. Where is Mace Tyrell? Had she come too late after all, the King's Hand shorn of its fingers? It was on him that she had placed all her hopes, and she did her best not to let her dismay show. "My lord," she began carefully. "I – I am Lady Sansa of House Stark, returning to the city after a long time away, in hopes of seeking alliance and counsel. Is Lord Mace at – "

"The Tyrells are traitors." Randyll Tarly gazed back at her stonily. "And unless I am much mistaken, my lady, you yourself fled under suspicion of accomplice to regicide, or of the crime itself. Where is your lord husband?"

"Tyrion? I – I have not seen him since the night of King Joffrey's death, I did not – "
Lord Randyll raised a hand. "Seize her."

Two soldiers reached for their swords, but were deterred by Brienne stepping forward even faster and placing herself bodily between Sansa and Lord Randyll, arms outstretched. "My lady is altogether innocent of that charge. Anyone who disputes it shall go through me."

Randyll Tarly regarded her with a contempt so cold and black that even though Sansa was not the object of it, she could feel it like poison in her veins. "Ah, yes," the Lord of Horn Hill said. "The shambling freak of Tarth. I recall you as well. And recall saying that you would fare much the better for a good hard raping. Has it been done?"

It was the first time Sansa had ever seen the big warrior woman shrink. Yet it was only for an instant, and then Brienne drew herself up and stared him coolly and unblinkingly in the eye. "It has not. And any man who tries will come off much the worse."

"Pity. I will have my soldiers attend to it, once you have been imprisoned as well." Lord Randyll towered above them, hard and implacable as aged steel, utterly without mercy or second thought. "As acting master of this kingdom, it is my right to restore law and order as seen fit, until such time as –"

"Acting master?" The world turned over beneath Sansa's feet. "Where is Queen Cersei? Where is King Tommen?" The Most Devout had said they were gone, but for Tarly to be so sure –

"The queen is vanished, and stands accused of crimes bearing a sentence of death if she ever does reappear." Lord Randyll plainly considered that of small interest. "As for the king, he is dead. We found him in a drainage culvert earlier tonight. It seemed he drowned in the sewers, a happenstance that I would give much and more to know about. But the dead cannot speak, and if they could, we would soon wish them silent again." He jerked his head at the two men unloading a small, shroud-draped body from the back of one of the horses. "He leaves no apparent heir, and the kingdom must not remain leaderless. That being so –"

"Tommen?" Sansa felt so heartsick that a gust of wind might crumple her up and scatter her. Tommen with his kittens and his kindness and his plump pink face. This war claims the innocent far more than the guilty. "He... he is dead?"

"Aye," Lord Randyll answered shortly, "and as for the matter of his brother's end –"

"If you had a drop of sense in your skull, you'd keep the girl for hostage, or for making new alliances," Timett commented. "Not that I know a bloody thing about you milk men and your power games, but that seems a deal more useful than punishing her for the death of a king that nobody was sad to see the last of. The last grown heir of House Stark, and you'll waste her on a sham trial? She barely left that nonsense back in the Vale."

Tarly stared at him in disbelief. "Who is this stinking savage, precisely?"

"He is my sworn man." Sansa straightened her shoulders. "Timett son of Timett, a Red Hand of the Burned Men, and a brave and loyal warrior."

Lord Randyll's lip curled. "I suspect you overvalue him, my lady. It is for the Master of Laws to decide the realm's fate, not some upjumped –"

"My lord!" The shout rang out sharp and urgent in the night. "MY LORD!"

Tarly curbed his horse around abruptly, and Sansa, Brienne, and Timett spun to look as well. One of the men-at-arms stationed on the seaward walls was waging frantically, pointing up at
something in the black sky. Strange explosions, fireballs in midair where no fire should burn, oddly shaped silhouettes far too large to be a night-bird, coming closer at terrible speed. The shadow fell first over the city below, then over the castle, and an ululating screech echoed against the towers of the Red Keep. All at once Sansa thought of what they had seen just off Dragonstone on their voyage to the city, the mad firelight and the strange dancing silhouettes, woken from the very bones of the fortress. The Manderly man swearing that he had seen it flying, had seen a –

"Dragon!" Lord Randyll had reached the conclusion abreast of her, yet Sansa had just enough time to consider him in err: there were in fact two dragons, snapping and shrieking and swooping lower, harrowing the surrounds of the castle with fire. Then horses were rearing, men were shouting, and everything turned to chaos very quickly. Brienne seized Sansa and pulled her away, under the curtain wall, as one of the beasts blew very low overhead, and Lord Randyll drew his greatsword – *Heartsbane*, Sansa thought, recalling the days when she had learned the words and sigils and strongholds of every noble house in Westeros, at lessons with her siblings and Maester Luwin in his tower room overlooking the bustling courtyards of Winterfell. It seemed a thousand and a thousand years ago, if indeed it had ever been, as she watched the dragon pull up and swing around for another pass, jaws peeled back. An instant later, Lord Randyll had become nothing but a column of fire.

Sansa retched and turned away, burying her face in Brienne's chest. Men were running, men were screaming, men were trying in vain to launch arrows at it, men were praying, men were begging for their mothers, for mercy, but men were burning to every side, blundering about like torches, consuming, devouring. Then Brienne and Timett were hauling her down the narrow walk beyond, holding her down out of sight, until she felt altogether separate from herself, floating. She breathed snow and smoke and steam into her lungs, and whether from exhaustion or shock or grief or simply reaching her breaking point at last, she fell asleep or lost consciousness for a time. When she opened her eyes, the sky above her was a dun grey, and the silence was thundering in her ears, echoing in every beat of her aching, empty heart.

Groggily, slowly, Sansa sat up. Her mouth tasted of char, her eyes gritty with ash, and she wanted nothing more than to lie back down and let the soft, comforting darkness wash over her again. She felt as if she had been gone for days, months, years, centuries, when in fact it must have been only a few short hours, and they were still trapped in the midst of a madhouse. *Dragons*. Her mind refused to wrap around the idea, and yet it was true beyond a doubt. She wondered if they had burned Sandor as well, and had to fight down a fresh surge of grief. *He would have hated that*. The final insult, the final stab in the back from the world he had so long despised and distrusted. She wondered if he was at peace now, if the Mother had taken him into her arms and tamed the wrath, soothed the fury. *Save our sons from war, we pray.* Then she thought again of Tommen, and wanted to weep until she drowned.

She could not. Not yet. Stiffly, badly, brokenly, she pushed herself to her hands and knees, and then to her feet. She was alone. Brienne and Timett were nowhere to be seen, and a damp chill sea fog was lapping at the parapets, swallowing the towers in its underbelly. The fires were out. Her legs felt wooden, barely belonging to her. Still, one step after another, she started to walk.

The courtyard was deserted, except for the charred corpses still sprawled everywhere, when she emerged. She crossed the sooty stones, determined not to look too closely, supposing that whoever was master of the dragons must have come to the castle and would find her soon or late, and it was best to present herself before then. Brienne and Timett must have distracted the newcomers from finding her, led them away like a mother bird protecting its chicks, and Sansa was conscious then of how utterly, devouringly alone she felt. *Tell me they are not dead as well.* If they were, she was lost. *This is too much. Too much.*
Her steps quickened as she crossed the drawbridge into Maegor's Holdfast, entering the forbidding stone hall lined with statues, drowned light slanting through the leaded-glass windows. She could hear voices echoing from the throne room, and knew she must be close.

With no fathom of what she was about to find, Sansa turned the corner.

The throne room looked exactly as she remembered, enough to send a cold grue down her back. But all of Tommen's banners, the counterchanged stag and lion, had been pulled down, and a device she had only seen in history books raised instead: a field of black, with a three-headed dragon rampant in red. So it was true. She vaguely remembered the Most Devout saying that an attack on the city by someone calling himself Aegon Targaryen had been repulsed only with difficulty, but if that was so, he clearly had not possessed dragons the first time. Fire made flesh. Finding them (but from where?) had evidently turned the tide.

Her entrance had not gone unnoticed. A pair of guards appeared in front of her, locking their halberds. "This is the domain of His Grace, Aegon the Sixth of His Name, King of the Seven Kingdoms, Lord of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Prince of Dragonstone. You will pass no further."

"No," a hoarse voice said from the Iron Throne. "Let her."

Surprised, the guards stepped aside, and Sansa moved forward, remembering how all the eyes had beat down on her as she pleaded for her father's life. It was almost empty now, all the courtiers gone, all the trappings vanished. Supposing it best to hedge her bets, she knelt and bowed her head. "Your Grace."

"Be welcome." It was not a man, but a stripling really, who spoke. Half his face was bandaged, and what else she could see was pale as bone. His eyes were a dark blue, almost indigo, and his hair of fine-spun silver; he was tall and slender, wearing a ruby-studded dragon on a black tabard, certainly a handsome lad. But his overall impression was one of fragility and weariness, a dim figure fading in a mirror. "You are safe here, and under my protection. Would I be correct in surmising that you are Lady Sansa of House Stark?"

"I am, Your Grace." At his nod, Sansa rose to her feet. "Where are my companions?"

"They have not been harmed," Aegon reassured her. "Though it took considerable convincing to assure them of that fact. They were trying to protect you?"

"Aye." Sansa hesitated. It seemed plain that the dragons were his, that he must have been the reason for the strange stirrings at Dragonstone, that his second attack on King's Landing had gone far more fruitfully than its predecessor, and he now intended to assume the vacant crown. "As well, there was... there was a man, last night. Badly burned to look on, and sorely wounded. Is he... has he been decently done by?"

"There were many burned men," Aegon said. "I cannot know which this would have been. The survivors are being treated by my maester, and it is possible that the one you seek may be among them. But I must ask, Lady Sansa. What are you doing in King's Landing?"

"I meant to make an accord with the Tyrells." It did her no good to lie now. "But they are traitors, attainted and dishonored, and so -- "

"Not any longer," Aegon interrupted. "The Tyrells aided me to my throne, and now that I have it, will be richly rewarded. What would you have of them?"
"A match with the eldest son, Willas. Their swords and gold and men, to assist me in my fight for the North and for my family's claim. If so, if the Starks are restored to Winterfell with Your Grace's help and support, we should count ourselves as the true and steadfast subjects of the Targaryens once more."

Something passed over Aegon's face like a cloud over the sun. "You are not interested in pursuing your brother's claim to the free and independent Kingdom of the North?"

"That is a discussion for another time, Your Grace," Sansa said, "and for otherwise than me. If you will provide me with an escort down the roseroad to Highgarden, and the presence of my companions, that is all I ask of you for now. That and your instruction to the Faith, as their new king, that my previous marriage be annulled at last."

Aegon paused, then nodded. He made a gesture to the guards on the doors, and they opened to reveal Brienne and Timett, who rushed in quite without any semblance of decorum; the former knelt and bowed her head, while the latter contented himself with glaring, gaunt and crowlike, at the assembled Targaryen men. "My lady," Brienne breathed. "We would not have left you if we could have helped it, but –"

"No matter." Sansa offered her a hand. "We are bound for Highgarden, as soon as we can. It is only..." She struggled for the words, not wanting to ask what she so dearly wanted to know in front of these strangers, but unable to keep it back. "The Hound...is he...?"

"Clegane was still alive when they took him to the maester with the other wounded," Brienne said. "By the barest thread, but he was. It seems he is most hard to kill."

Alive? The world seemed different all of a sudden, as yet possible, and she let out a breath that had been aching in her chest. She wanted to see him, to ascertain for herself, but now was not the time for it. Instead she turned back to Aegon. "As a condition of my bargain," she said, "I want Ser Sandor treated and treated well. Whatever misdeeds he has committed in the past are merely that. His life is of great value to me."

Aegon looked taken aback. But he clearly was in no position to refuse her, when with her wedding she would cleave Tyrell and Stark together beneath his fledgling crown, and after a moment he nodded again. "As my lady commands."

"Good." Sansa let out another uneven breath. "We will have provisions and warm clothes and horses, I am to imagine?"

"Of course." Aegon turned to instruct a servant, and they discreetly slipped out. Sansa was already tallying in her head. If the roads were good, and no more invading armies were met on the way, they could reach Highgarden in no more than a fortnight. Marry Willas Tyrell as soon as it could be arranged, spend the worst of the winter in the south, and hope it would not last for more than a few years. She did not intend to leave the north without succor or hope until then; she would have to find a way to come home as soon as she could. Rickon is in White Harbor, and my brother Robb's widow and her son. She hoped Jeyne would accept Ser Addam Marbrand's proposal of marriage, have another life, go home to the westerlands. There had to be some way, even in the smallest measure, to put back together what had been torn asunder.

Sansa's preoccupations were distracted at that moment, however, by the throne room doors swinging open once more, and four men entering, carrying a thoroughly decrepit, battered, bloodstained, motionless figure on a makeshift litter. Indeed it was in such wretched estate that Sansa took it for another corpse, but as they drew nearer, she could see that it was in fact a man, breaths so shallow that they barely stirred his chest. A man with filthy, tangled golden hair, the
rags of a white cloak, a right arm that ended in a stump, and –

Brienne uttered a sound that Sansa had never heard her make, had never heard a woman or a man or any living creature make, and lunged. In two strides she had reached the litter and thrown herself to her knees beside it, clutching the man's good hand to her heart, shoulders heaving in silent, barely controlled sobs, heedless of who was looking or what they should think or anything at all. "Jaime," she choked. "Can you hear me? Jaime? Jaime!"

*The Kingslayer?* Sansa stared. In that moment, she understood at last everything she had never wanted to ask Brienne directly, everything that she had wondered about the warrior woman and the kingdom's most notorious knight, and why Brienne was so insistent that Ser Jaime could be trusted. *I see it. I see it all.* Brienne had come with her to the capital full as much in the service of love. She wished she had grasped that sooner, though she could not imagine what she would have done. *I still might lose Sandor, and if Brienne was to lose Jaime as well –*

"What is this?" Aegon looked pale and stunned. "What do you mean by this?"

"We found him in the Dragonpit, Your Grace. When we went to confine the beasts there." One of the men, looking shaken, stepped forward. "That and what we're fair sure was Queen Cersei. She's dead. Strangled, by the looks of things. And a dead alchemist as well, and a bloody big cache of wildfire. As for this one... you'll know who he is, aye? The man who killed your grandsire Aerys, and brought down the old dynasty. Who betrayed the king he was pledged to guard, and broke every vow he'd made. Ser Jaime Lannister, in the flesh. Would you have him pay for it in turn?"

"No!" Brienne gasped, clearly distraught. "No, you can't!"

Aegon looked more troubled than ever. Again that flitting, elusive look crossed his face, as if he desperately wanted to blurt something out but could not bring himself to it, the same look as when Sansa had told him that the Starks were willing to once more become loyal vassals of House Targaryen. "Aerys was not – " he began, then stopped.

"Aerys was not what, Your Grace?" The man looked puzzled. "Saving your pardons."

The young king turned away. Blood was starting to stain the bandages across his face; to Sansa's eye, he did not look well at all. The silence was towering, depthless. Then at last he said, "It does not seem meet to me that we should begin the new reign by picking at the scabs of the old one, by attempting to avenge wrongs twenty years past and done. Are we to disinter Robert Baratheon's bones and scatter them to the winds as well? The realm needs peace. Not more blood. Leave him be."

"What? Him?"

"Aye," Aegon snapped. "He will be stripped of the white cloak, for I will not have him as Lord Commander of my Kingsguard, but beyond that, I see no need or call to persecute him further. He will be sent home to Casterly Rock with a decent pension and a royal pardon, so long as he promises to live out his days in peace and raise no hand against the Iron Throne again. Though our forces sacked it, you may recall, so he will have enough to occupy him putting it back together. The loyalty of corpses does me little good. Save him."

Brienne lifted a tearstained, disbelieving face. "Your Grace – thank you, I cannot thank you enough – "

Once more, Aegon seemed to teeter on the brink of confessing something. Instead he coughed and said, "If I am to be king, if that is what I have been fashioned to be my life long, the least I can do is
act worthy of it. This has cost us all enough. Take him away."

The men lifted the litter again, and Brienne turned to Sansa in a panic. "My lady... if you order it, I will accompany you to Highgarden, you must not think that I mean to break my oath, but - "

"No," Sansa said. "Stay here. Find Pod and the Manderlys. Guard my interests at court. See to it. . . " She hesitated. "See to it that both Ser Sandor and Ser Jaime awake."

Brienne nodded wordlessly. Then she turned and followed Jaime Lannister's litter between the great columns and out of sight. Sansa watched her go, never feeling older than she did then. Her heart was trembling and fragile in her chest, spinning and spinning, about to fall. When do I stop? When is it enough? It would not be, she supposed, until she made it to Highgarden safely, until she ascertained if Willas Tyrell was still in any temperament or circumstance to marry her; better to ask for forgiveness than permission in regards to waiting on the Faith and the promised annulment. Perhaps this race is almost run. It sounded sweet, the sweetest thing. She wanted so very badly to weep, but barely remembered how. Ivory. Porcelain. Steel.

She slept a few hours, ate, washed, and changed her clothes. Collected the promised provisions, an escort of twenty-five men, and Timett Red-Hand, who clearly intended only to be parted from her side by death or dismemberment. Then rode through the portcullis of the Red Keep, through the silent and desolate city, to the Gate of the Gods; they would take the kingsroad south the few leagues to whence it became the roseroad. The clouds overhead were heavy-laden, mounds of iron anvils, promising snow or worse. Winter had closed hard and fast around the world.

Sansa looked back only once. The towers and parapets and untidy rooftops of the city were already receding. The bells of Baelor's called, but fainter and fainter. Then she gave the command, the men began to move in earnest, and King's Landing was gone into the fog.
Daenerys

Somewhere off the starboard side, lost in fog, the towers of Lys rose like ghosts from the sunrise sea. It had frosted last night, and bitterly; glaziers of ice draped the ship's railing and rigging, and breath steamed silver in the chill, lifeless air. Everything seemed wrung out, devoid of color, as if it had been in the full flush of summer an instant before and then turned all at once to snow and stone. The water was a flat dun grey, the ship riding restlessly on the chop, out here beyond the harbor break. After the sweltering heat of the east, the baked-brick cauldrons of Astapor and Meereen, the endless sun and swaying grass of the Dothraki sea, it felt like a gnawing damp bite in the bones, a faint but uncontrollable shivering, so that she could not help but recall the tales of commanders stymied from victory not through any fault of their own, but by the whims of wind and weather. *Never invade a kingdom in the winter.* Had Ser Jorah told her that? Or had she read it somewhere? *But it makes nay matter. Winter is when I must come, to fight with dragonfire the white threat that comes creeping from the north.*

"They are here," Dany said at last, turning from where she had been standing at the bow. She was wearing the great *hrakkar* pelt that Drogo had given her long ago, its thick white fur a welcome shield from the cold, and its paws fell to either side of her shoulders like a septon's ceremonial stole. "Or at least, most of them. Near as I could make out."

"I shall take your word for it, Your Grace," Tyrion Lannister replied, with rather stiff formality. "As you may have noticed, you *are* somewhat taller than me."

"Aye, they are," Marwyn the Mage cut in. "As you said, the ships that you sent ahead to Lys whilst you detoured so fortuitously to Valyria." He grinned, showing his red-stained teeth, and Dany glanced away; much as she welcomed the erstwhile maester's cargo of dragonglass, she was not altogether sure that she cared for the man himself, bloody smiles not least. During the long, tossing voyage, she had quietly asked Grey Worm to inform her at once if he caught Marwyn performing eldritch rituals or conversing with fell spirits, but the young eunuch reported nothing of the sort. Marwyn slept, ate, and shat like any other man, taking part of the hard bread and narrow berths of the crew without complaint. If there *was* some lurking sinister element in his character, waiting the appropriate moment to manifest, it apparently had not yet found it. *And I do need his help.*

"Wait," Dany said as Marwyn made to turn away, and a man scrambled up to the crows' nest to signal the other ships. "I had something to ask you, my lord."

The Mage regarded her frankly from beneath his bushy white eyebrows. "I am, of course, Your Grace's servant."

"I suspect you know more of dragonlore than any man living," Dany began cautiously. Drogon and Viserion, so as not to seriously alarm the Lyseni – doubtless made wary enough by the appearance of sixteen unfamiliar ships in their harbor, laden to the gills with Unsullied, Dothraki, and ironborn – had been kept well out of sight, flying high above the clouds. She could feel them like a small warm marble in her chest, could summon them down with a thought, but best for the nonce to keep them where they were. "In Asshai, the red priests told me that if I went to Westeros, my dragons would die."

"And?"

"The Free Cities are not Westeros, as yet," Dany admitted. "But the prospect is near enough at hand to trouble me. Is there something you could do? Some protection you could work?"
Those eyebrows made a rapid ascent toward the dome of his bald head. "Trying to thwart prophecy again, Your Grace?"

*Tread carefully.* This man had taught Mirri Maz Duur, after all, and she did not need the reminder of what had become of that. "I realize what I am asking. And who I am asking."

Marwyn scratched his chin. "Do you, Your Grace? Do you indeed? You said we were sailing for Dragonstone, as soon as we had collected the rest of your fleet here."

"I did. What of it?"

"Perhaps you..." Marwyn paused delicately. "Perhaps you would wish to make this decision when we are on actual Westerosi soil, rather than plunging into it now? Anything I did or could do – I am none so sure you would want to pay that price, Your Grace. Your husband and son were nothing, the first time. And with the dark rising and so strong, I do not know that you would care to feed it."

His words sent a shudder down Dany's back.

"He is not wrong," she was forced to concur. "Very well. We will speak again when we reach Dragonstone." Please the gods the weather would hold out. The storm they'd endured en route to Valyria had been by far the worst, though there were seemingly constant low-level squalls pelting them westward. Yet the closer they drew to Westeros and the thrill it lay under, the worse it would get. Sometimes she fancied she could see it: a faint dark stain, a consuming poison. *Stop. What you face is dire enough, without these girlish fantasies and fears.*

Marwyn bowed his acknowledgement and retreated, and Dany hurried off as well. Even her brief sojourn on deck had chilled her to the bone, and she was profoundly grateful to decamp below into her cabin, the well-tended brazier that her handmaids were huddled around, and warm her frozen face and fingers. However, she was not to be at leisure to do so for long. There was a rap on the door, and a timid dark head peeped round. "Y-Your Gr-Grace," Penny stammered. "They sent me to tell you that you're needed."

Dany smiled at her and rose to her feet, making a mental note to rebuke whoever had decided to employ the dwarf girl as an errand-runner. While somewhat recovered from the ailment that had befallen her in Valyria's dense, smoky air, Penny remained pale and wan, and had not found the almost three weeks of rough sailing of much aid in her convalescence. Tyrion watched her protectively, but still seemed to have little idea how to properly care for her, and Penny remained in total ignorance of her true parentage. *He should tell her,* Dany thought, not for the first time. But perhaps not just this minute, what with everything. So much of the Imp's mind remained inscrutable to her, besides.

The wind hit her broadside as she emerged, Penny trotting in tow. With a quick gesture, Dany sent her back to the cabin; while Irri and Jhiqui had the usual Dothraki horror of deformed children, they had taken a queer sort of shine to Penny despite it, brushing her hair and feeding her tidbits and otherwise making her a sort of exotic pet. It was better than the girl dying of cold or consumption, at least, and Dany glanced around reflexively for Tyrion, unsure whether she wanted him at her side or not. On consideration, she decided that she did. Her personal quarrel with him might still rankle, but his knowledge and advice on Westeros remained invaluable, and must be figured into her counsels.

The dwarf was in fact already present, gathered with the others. Victarion had steered them into a sheltered anchorage near the rest of their fleet, and boats had been lowered to bring their captains aboard for conference. They were all plainly surprised that Dany had emerged intact from the perils of the Smoking Sea, and once the usual courtesies had been exchanged, she asked about the
state of her troops. The Unsullied would never leave her, of course, and her tiny khalasar was at least too frightened to jump ship in this strange cold land of milk men far from home, but she had been having serious doubts about the reliability of the ironborn. They were fiercely loyal to their captain, and would wait here for some time in hopes of meeting him again, but they were no martyrs to the cause, deeply opportune and survival-minded pirates. If they thought that Victarion had gone on a suicide errand to an unhappy ending – and with one of the wealthiest of the Free Cities dangling temptingly at hand, ripe for the pillage – the gods alone knew what mischief they could have wreaked.

On this front, the news was both better and worse than expected. The Lyseni had not allowed these strange visitors to make berth; even in a bustling merchant port and center of trade, nobody wanted the slightest thing to do with sixteen shiploads of eunuchs, horselords, and Greyjoys, and had regarded them suspiciously for the fortnight that they had ridden at anchor, waiting to see if Dany would arrive. But likewise, no one wanted to provoke them either, and so they had received no firm demand to leave. A good deal of the ironmen had thus snuck ashore, entertained themselves in the soft silks of Lys’ legendary pleasure houses, neglected to pay their bills, drank fine wine and started fights, and otherwise created exactly the sort of uproar that the authorities had been trying to forestall by denying them permission to land in the first place. Serious bloodshed had only been averted by judicious dispersal of the intelligence that they were in fact the Targaryen queen’s men, sent to await her coming with some dread Valyrian weapon, and two nearly full-grown dragons entirely capable of doing the job even if not. Hearing this, the aggrieved Lyseni merchants decided against pressing their luck, but had not gone so far as to forgive the injustice entirely. When the queen arrived, they insisted, she should make full recompense for the losses they had suffered, and otherwise soothe their distress and dispossession. Which, as it happened, would be now.

"Is that so?" Dany repeated, biting back a few highly uncharitable remarks. "And what in the name of the Seven am I supposed to pay them with?"

Tyrion cleared his throat. "Is this an inopportune time to remind you that I have placed the vaults of Casterly Rock at your service, my lady?"

"What good is that? The vaults of Casterly Rock are a thousand leagues away."

"That is exactly the point." The dwarf shrugged. "I can sign a few papers promising the buggers however much gold they like, payable upon receipt if they turn up in King's Landing when you sit your father's throne. It gives them a compelling reason not to hinder you, and it gives you a compelling reason not to hinder me. What do you say?"

It displayed the Imp's usual low cunning, to be sure, but Dany still misliked it. "What if the vaults of the Rock are empty when they ask?"

"Perish the thought. We could always excavate the privies. But actually having money has never been a requirement for any king to spend it. I'm fairly sure Littlefinger was tricking up the stuff out of sheep shit, bad wine, and whores' tears for Robert, considering how long the royal treasury was empty. Do you want to sail for Dragonstone or not?"

She did, but Dany could not suppress a faint distaste at so quickly becoming like the Usurper. *Enough folk will see me as that, besides.* She thought of the boy claiming to be Aegon, already in Westeros, and the dark young man she had seen far in the north with Rhaegal, whom she had such an odd and unyielding suspicion was her brother's son, some secret bastard by Lyanna Stark. *If three dragons meet, will we dance or die? If I even live so long as to reach them.* Sometimes it seemed less and less likely.

Just then, Victarion Greyjoy snorted loudly, breaking her reverie. "The Imp speaks a fool's words,"
he growled. "You are a dragon, little queen. Do you pay the sheep after you have eaten them? You owe these greenlanders nothing. How will they stop us? We should set sail at once, before nightfall. A storm is coming. I feel it."

Dany hesitated. If he said that was the case, she had no doubt it was true; the captain had spent his entire life at sea. And it was true that she resented being held to account for the ironmen's misdeeds. *But they were my men, sailing under my banner. That is what a queen must do.* And she did not mean to be a pirate and reaver and raper herself, another mad Targaryen who could not be trusted to protect her people or right her wrongs. "No," she said, lifting her chin sharply. "I will pay it. My lord of Lannister, with me."

"As you wish, Your Grace," Tyrion murmured, with no more than the usual amount of sarcasm, and waited as Dany assembled her escort. For obvious reasons she thought that the Lyseni would have had a bellyful of krakens, and chose two dozen Unsullied with Grey Worm and her bloodrider Rakharo at their head, surely enough to protect her in the event of the defrauded merchants wishing her ill. With that and the boat launched, then rowed ashore under the shadow of a glowing barbican, it was early afternoon by the time Dany finally presented herself at the guildhall, stated her name and business, and was admitted.

The merchants were extremely startled to see her, having evidently never expected that she would actually appear, and it allowed negotiations to proceed somewhat more smoothly than Dany had feared. It was here, however, that she learned another piece of deeply disquieting information. While attempting to assure the Lyseni that she would repay them however possible, even if it meant taking a loan from the Iron Bank, she was met by grim glances and portentous muttering. It finally fell to the guildmaster to inform her that so far as terrible rumor could be trusted, Braavos was no more, had sunk to the depths of the sea under the fury of a great wave. These were dark days and evil times indeed.

Dany had no difficulty believing it, with vivid memories of the wave that had struck Meereen and wrecked much of the Iron Fleet, but it jolted her further back on her heels. *What am I sailing into?* It could be her home and her crown at last, or it could be the mouth of the seventh hell itself. Clearly thinking the same thing, the merchants were not particularly disposed to take vague promises when there was no guarantee that they would live to collect them, and it took hours of hard haggling on Dany and Tyrion's part, promising a good deal more than she wanted, before they finally agreed. She signed the papers in full style – *Daenerys, the First of Her Name, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, Lady of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Princess of Dragonstone* – but could not help but wonder if it was still as much a jest and a dream as ever. Again she longed beyond words for Ser Jorah and Ser Barristan. She had never felt so alone.

By the time they had rowed back to the ship, the rising moon had vanished entirely behind a raft of fast-moving clouds, and the wind was keening shrilly through the lines. There was, however, no chance of staying; as part of the settlement, they had agreed to quit Lyseni waters immediately. So as much canvas was raised as it was felt they could safely take – Victarion Greyjoy muttering under his breath the entire time – and the seventeen ships of Daenerys Targaryen's conquering armada struck out into the bitter, blustery night.

Dany stayed below in her cabin with Irri, Jhiqui, Missandei, and Penny, watching the lantern flame dance a jig. They were already rocking and straining, the porthole awash with seething foam, and while it was not as sheerly bad as the storm that had harried them to Valyria, it felt somehow and indefinably more... wild. As if this was different than a mere winter gale, as if *something* was out there in the darkness, hunting her. She thought suddenly and with a lurch of fear of her children, winging above the fleet. Even the worst storm was not capable of knocking a full-grown dragon from the sky, or of causing him significant injury beyond an inconvenient damp, but they were
certainly not immortal. And if (a foolish thought, but she could not push it away) something beyond the ordinary was responsible for this. . .

The pitching and rolling swiftly intensified. All four of the girls were sick, and even Dany felt queasy and wrong, tossed about like a rat in the bilges. She wondered if even as superlative a seaman as Victarion could keep them on course, and knew that it would be at least another week to Dragonstone. They had to navigate through the Stepstones, a daunting task even in good weather, and split the heart of the narrow sea, without getting entangled in the constant feuds between Myr and Tyrosh, the rumors of prowling pirates, or spotted from the coast of Westeros. This is taking too long. She felt a sudden unhinged desire to go up on deck and call Drogon to her through the tempest, climb onto his back and take off into the rain. I was born while the worst storm in living memory wrecked my family's fleet. Was this, then, how she must come back?

She clenched her fingernails into her palms, absurdly and dangerously tempted. I will not drown, at the least. I refuse. But crouching here in the cramped, foul-smelling dark cabin, with everything that was not bolted down crashing and clattering with each new wave. . . She closed her eyes, and all at once the shades of Asshai came rushing back. The golden young knight who had opened her father's throat with a slash, the blood shining on the floor. The scars on her mother's body, the sadness of her brother Rhaegar's purple eyes, and the way they had all faded into the dark, dust and dreams. Ser Jorah barging in with the aeromancers to save her from the deepest heart of the red temple, Quaithe baring the smoking wound in her breast, the way Drogon had flown through the fiery gate, screaming, screaming. . .

Dany's head jerked up. "Did you hear that?"

Her handmaids stared at her with pale, terrified faces. "The storm, Khaleesi?"

"No, the. . ." She got unsteadily to her feet. "That. . ." Her head turned in every direction, trying to pinpoint it. Screaming, crying, sobbing, so like an abandoned infant that it made her hackles stand. Rhaego. Somehow and beyond all reason, he was here, she knew he was, and she had to find him. She could hear Drogo as well, calling for her, and even Viserys, tormented beneath his helmet of molten gold. All of them were near, were here, so much that she could hear the latch rattling, as they begged to be let in. Their cries assailed her, and then before her eyes she saw Irri's familiar features shift and alter into a skull-mask, until her dead handmaid Doreah stared back at her, the one who had died in the Red Waste holding her hand. Khaleesi, she whispered, and blood ran down her chin.

Dany screamed and reeled backwards, stumbling and falling, as more of them began pressing in from every corner. There was Jorah with his shirt stained with blood, Ser Barristan charred black and burned, only his eyes left to stare at her in silent entreaty. She covered her head as they towered in, closer and closer, and still the terrible screaming would not stop. They were going to kill her, could not bear for her to live when all of them were dead, and she half-wished they would, just to make it stop. The coldness was foul, poison, wrong, and she had never been so sure in her life as she was then that demons were consuming her, bite by bite. This is no storm. This is utter damnation.

Eventually, mercifully, she must have blacked out. She had no idea how long it was, but when she opened her eyes, she was tucked into her bunk with all the blankets and mats piled on her, shivering, cramped and confused as if she'd been hit over the head. Seeing no call for consciousness, she sank under again, pursued by formless nightmares, until she awoke in a cold sweat. Dimly she grasped that this must mean they were not sunk, and more or less still in one piece, but the thought could never hold solid form for long. It receded, slippery as oiled glass, and then she faded once more.
At last, she woke for good with the silence ringing painfully in her ears and her throat burning with thirst. She tried to form words and call for her handmaids, but was too weak even to manage that, and had to wait until at last they loomed over her like skewed reflections. "Khaleesi?"

Dany managed a small nod. She was still not possessed of sufficient wherewithal to pose the question, but they must have seen it in her eyes, and told her that they were only a day's sail out of Dragonstone, according to Victarion's reckoning. The storm, however, had not come without great cost. Six of their ships were missing without a trace, another three were limping and leaking badly, and even their own vessel had sustained heavy damage. Worst of all, Marwyn's sack of dragonglass had come loose and smashed on the floor of the hold. While some of it could still be salvaged for use, the rest was nothing but splinters. She was furtherly led to collect that it was thanks to the Mage they were still afloat at all, as he had performed some sort of occultation to soothe the wrath and tame the fury. But even he had serious fears about what had brought it about, and was convinced that some unholy power had called it up from the deep. Indeed, he did not think it too far-fetched that the darkness had penetrated far past the broken Wall, overtaking all of Westeros.

Dany absorbed this bitterly. It was one thing for her to fear supernatural elements at work, but for a man as learned in arcane matters as Marwyn to confirm it was quite another. If it was true... she had to fight a sudden terrible conviction that she was already too late. That even the hours wasted in Lys had been too many, far less the months in Meereen. Yet the option of taking to the skies on Drogon's back was now gone as well; she could barely even sit up on her own, and her head lurched sickeningly when she did. The Others know I am coming. They know I am a threat. They want me dead.

Sleeping and waking fitfully, choking down a few sips of broth when Irri held it to her lips, she passed the last leg of the voyage in a suspended animation that felt neither like death nor life. Then at last Grey Worm was sent down to fetch her, wrap her tightly in blankets, and carry her up to the deck. "Look, Your Grace," he said softly, pointing. "You are almost home."

Dany squinted, trying to focus her watering eyes. All she saw was a low dark smudge on the horizon – and then, slowly taking form, the glowering castle on its stone drum that she knew at once, instinctively, though she had been a babe hours old when last here. She caught the whiff of sulfur, saw the restless roil of its volcanic sea, but something seemed off about it, wrong, like the tales Viserys had told her of the burned castle of Harrenhal, and how Harren the Black had finished his folly on the very day Aegon the Conqueror landed in Westeros. It was blanketed in heavy snow, which seemed strange for a place perpetually warmed by the deep fire in its foundations, and its windows stared eerily, surf booming against the stones with a deep echoing thunder. Altogether, Dany felt a strange and complete revulsion, not the joy she should have felt to lay eyes on her birthplace and her family's ancestral seat at so very long last. "That's it," she managed, craning her head back to stare at it, hearing the capstan rattle as the Unsullied dropped anchor and prepared to scout it out. "Dragonstone."

"Aye." Grey Worm looked at her anxiously. "If Your Grace is cold, this one can take you below again. This one thought you would want to see first."

"I do." Dany coughed, tasting blood in her mouth. "Where is Marwyn?"

"The maester? Below, Your Grace."

"Take me to him."

As usual, the young eunuch obeyed without demur, and Dany was conveyed to Marwyn's stinking little berth, curtained off from the rest of the crew by a hanging scrap of sackcloth. The Mage had been poring over a scroll written in some cramped ancient hand, but broke off to see her. "Your
"Grace. This is no fit place for me to receive you."

"It will suit." Dany beckoned Grey Worm to put her down on the bunk, and to leave them. "We are in Westeros now, and as I said, we must speak again. It is time for you to tell me what you advise done with my dragons."

Marwyn hesitated.

"Surely you do not advise abandoning them to death?" Dany's voice rose.

"Well, Your Grace. . . you cannot be so sure that they will die immediately, can you?" the archmaester pointed out. "You would know if they had."

Dany reached by reflex for the small bright awareness of them, found it, and clutched at it hard. "So you think I should do nothing?"

"Anything I could do comes, as I have warned, at a terrible price." Marwyn regarded her coolly. "It already took enough of my strength to stop the storm. Another conjuring of similar power would be detrimental to us both, Your Grace, and I can say no more."

Dany sat silent for a very long moment, considering. She had just opened her mouth – to say what, she had no notion – when the sackcloth jerked aside, and Grey Worm rushed back in, barely stopping to bow. "Your Grace," he panted. "Some of these ones' brothers have returned. They have found –"

"What?" Dany looked around in alarm, cursing her infirmity. "Take me."

With Marwyn trailing along behind, she suffered Grey Worm to haul her back to the deck, where the first expeditionary party of Unsullied was just coming back aboard in great haste. They were carrying something between them – a corpse, she realized with an unpleasant jolt, and not just any corpse, but that of a man clad in Targaryen colors, the three-headed dragon girt in rubies on his chest. Still more, his head was twisted completely around, so that he stared up at them with eyes the blue of a summer sky, frozen in a look of utter terror.

"But whoever heard of a man being literally frightened to death?"

"These ones found him on the beach, Your Grace," the Unsullied captain informed her. "These ones did not even need to reach the castle. There are more of them. All of them the same. With their heads turned completely about."

Dany swallowed. "These must be the men of the pretender Aegon," she declared, with a good deal more self-assurance than she felt. "It stands to reason that he would have come here as well – but why?"

"Magic, Your Grace." It was Marwyn who spoke. "Of a very old and powerful kind. This place reeks of blood and sorcery – and, aye, of dragons. And as for that thing – toss it overboard. Burn it. Whatever you will. On no account keep it on the ship."

"Why?" Dany gaped at him. "If someone has killed the pretender's men –"

Marwyn set his jaw. "He left a garrison here to hold it, and now they are all dead? Killed by mere happenstance, I suppose? When it has already seen an act of some terrible power? Something is awake here, Your Grace, and not merely the statues."

"Statues?" Dany cast a befuddled look up at the gargoyles and chimeras looming far overhead, glazed in frost, crowns and beards of icicles deranging their features even more than customary.
"What is awake? How would it have happened?"

"I do not pretend to know that. But everything about this place feels wrong. You can sense it as well as I. Such a powerful act of fire cannot but summon the ice in return."

Others born in ice, by fire. Everything that Quaithe – that Nissa Nissa – had told her in Asshai was rushing back. If Dragonstone had recently witnessed a sacrifice, some sorcery on the scale that Marwyn was suggesting, of such power as to wake the old and not necessarily friendly magic that lay slumbering here, it stood to reason that that was not the only thing which had been wakened. And with the storm –

At that moment Tyrion, by the rail, let out a yell of alarm. "What in the devil is that?"

Dany, Marwyn, and Grey Worm pivoted on the spot, badly startled, which was then compounded with confusion when the barren black shore the Imp was pointing at appeared to possess no feature to distinguish it from any other. The rocks were frozen and cracked and tumbled, the cold rising from them so fiercely that it seemed to shimmer like a desert heat, as if something was moving, undulating gracefully down the scattered stones, barely visible in the dank, murky air. A flash of crystalline glass, a whisper of a fey wind, a blaze of blue in a hue to match the dead man's eyes. A sensation like shattering, a high keening call, as it stepped into the shadow of a great twisted volcanic outcrop, and Dany saw it plain at last. Man-like, but no man. A head and a half taller, pale as a bone, elegant and graceful, with armor smithed of starlight and a blade that sang a thin savage song as it was drawn.


For an endless heartbeat, Dany and the Other simply stared at each other. There was an ancient, awful sentence in the deep-pitted eyes, fixed on her, as if it knew exactly who she was and had been waiting for her to come for a very long time. As if now that she had, they could come to it at last, the final floodgates of the battle broken. It made no other move, no human gesture, but she felt it, jarring through her to the back of body and soul. And then, so easily, it sprang.

With that, the spell was broken. "MOVE!" Dany did not recognize the voice screaming, could not be sure if it was hers or Marwyn's or someone else's entirely. All she knew was that they had to get out and get out now; the rocks were seething with them. Victarion was hauling on the helm and swearing to the Drowned God and R'hllor and who knew which other deities all at once, the Unsullied were amassing at the rail with longbows, but the ship was not moving. The timbers creaked and groaned, crying out against the inexorable pressure of the ice crushing in from every side, as before their eyes the open sea turned to a frozen plain and the Others began to charge onto it. There seemed no end to their number, more taking shape every moment from whatever terrible magic had wracked the guts of Dragonstone. Dragons. The notion was fixed with the queer clarity of calamity in Dany's head, and was not to be dislodged. Blood and treachery and sorcery. The breaking of the world.

Dragons.

Wordless in her mind, in her need, she screamed.

Nothing. She spun from side to side, panicked. The entire ship was rapidly turning to ice, the deck skidding out from under her boots as it convulsed in the grip of the advancing floes, cold enough to burn – but that was not possible, she thought numbly, for she had never burned. One of the eunuchs emerged in a tearing hurry with the sack of dragonglass, or what remained of it at least, and the Unsullied bent to lash it to their arrows with a desperate but practical haste. Smoothly in unison,
they nocked, drew, and loosed.

The arrows flew with a sound like a soft sigh, and then a much more hideous one, cracking and screeching and snarling as they began to fall in among the foe. Shielding her head, vaguely aware that someone was trying madly to pull her below – but she was Stormborn, Unburnt, Mhysa, queen, she would not die like an animal in a cage – Dany saw some of the Others turning to hissing white smoke, losing shape and form. But it was not enough; there were too many of them. Where – where – where –

*You could not pay the price to keep them safe,* a voice whispered in memory –

But it was not so, she had called them, *called* them –

Drogon folded his wings and dove out of the sky, screaming. He was followed instants later by Viserion, as their jaws peeled back and all Dany saw was flame – black, red-veined, gold and crimson and umber. She had never dreamed anything half as sweet, as beautiful as its towers and billows, as her children swept low across the frozen sea and turned it to the Field of Fire made new. Scathing runnels of dragonfire strafed the ice, melting it so quickly that the ship abruptly came loose and plunged in free fall, an explosion of seawater cascading over the Unsullied. They wallowed and heaved, on the very brink of capsize, an upset from which there would be no recovery – but Victarion was still planted at the helm like a great block of sea-swept granite, standing centuries against time and tides and fury, and even as Dany clung desperately to a spar and felt the cold starting to engulf her legs, they slowly, ponderously began to hew upright.

Everything was madness. Some ships still rode in a sea of ice and fire and steam, but others were downed or burning – Dany saw one overcome as the Others rushed over it, saw its mainmast crack and its lanterns quenched, heard the screams and gurgles of dying men and the terrible silence of their murderers. Crystal blades fell like stars from the heaven, bodies flung overboard, red torrents washing over the whiteness in strangely beautiful stains. She was almost blind with salt and smoke and cold, had never felt so futile, so inconsequential. *How? How do I make it stop?* She had destroyed the flame in Asshai that birthed the Others there, made it Drogon’s fire instead, they weren’t supposed to still be coming – but they were, they *were* – even as her ship was starting to gain speed at last, escorted to either side by the massive, shrieking, smoke-wreathed monstrosities of Drogon and Viserion, winning distance from the hellish inferno of Dragonstone.

Dany was drenched in the dripping meltwater from the sails, shivering so hard that her teeth felt as if they were breaking apart in her head. *Where? Where?* Where to find all the swords in the world, to check the devouring maelstrom of death that came racing at her back, that would not be stemmed or stopped until it had consumed the world of men, everything good or real or true that anyone knew or loved? A darkness without a dawn. Swords forged in dragonfire, still sharp enough to kill, that had lain all this time, waiting, *waiting* –

And then, quite simply, she knew.
The dark curve of the world fell behind him in shadow, and nothing but sky opened before him: depthless, alluring, dangerous. It was a clear night, though utterly without stars or moon, and so cold that even he could feel it running fingers under his blacks like a teasing lover, searching for a way to his heart. His hair swept back in the wind of their speed, with each great beat of Rhaegal's ice-jeweled wings bearing them aloft, so high that the barren fells, snow-bound holdfasts, frozen ribbons of rivers, and thick copses of clustered trees that chequered the empty northern wilds looked like nothing more than quiltwork far below; his eyes could pick out keenly what a mortal man's would not. Aye, and I suppose that becoming the Great Other in flesh had to profit me something.

The thought summoned a wry snort out of Jon, and he leaned back, adjusting his grip on the glistening green scales and taking a second reckoning of the position of the mountains; that and the blue eye of the Ice Dragon, the only heavenly body still visible, were all he had to navigate by. But he also had some sort of internal lodestone he could not explain, burning bright and fierce in his cold heart, that must be Lightbringer. Following it east from the words of the heart tree at Winterfell to the Dreadfort, and whatever battle awaited him there.

He was conscious of a faint, gnawing sensation of impatience, urgency, almost fear. As long as he lived, the Others could not be truly defeated – slowed for a time, aye, but not stopped. Once he had the Red Sword of Heroes and had done his part, he must wing back to the Wall with godspeed and trust Sam to carry out his part. At times, Jon was afraid that he would not be able to make himself do it, that a selfish desire to survive – even as this cold undead unfeeling husk – would keep him away. What man goes willingly to his end? But he had to. I am everything the Night's Watch is sworn to defend against. They must destroy me.

Not yet, though. Not yet. He still had a little time to think and wake and walk and be, and he intended to make the most of it. One of the questions which had occurred to him on his long flight south was why, exactly, the Others wanted to slaughter the world of the living, and rather paradoxically and simply, he thought he had in his own existence the answer. We are two different kinds of creatures, and so we simply cannot live together. The flesh of one is inimical to the other. For one to have the world, the other must be gone from it. Then he had wondered if it was even that complicated at all, or if the Others were simply men void of all other desires but their most profound and deepest: to destroy. Did the Andals have to butcher all the First Men in order to live in Westeros? Did those innocent folk caught in the War of the Five Kings, and all the battles before in all the bloody annals of history, have to die? It seemed to Jon quite queer that men should fear and revile the Others as ruthless killers, when those such as Gregor Clegane and Ramsay Bolton walked the earth among them – and even those much admired, such as Tywin Lannister and other great lords, whose power rested on their ability to have anyone killed when and where they should desire it. They show us nothing, bring us no evil, that we have not already visited upon ourselves.

Suddenly, Jon felt very tired, if such strange flesh and sinew as he was now was even capable of experiencing such a thing. He longed for the touch of sun, the taste of a warm draught of ale and Three-Finger Hobb's mutton stew, laughing before the fire with his brothers, the feeling of a woman's mouth, her tongue, her hands, her warm beating heart. All dead. All gone. If he was allowed to share the same afterlife as men, his only hope was to meet them there. There was no going back. There was no going home. Only going on.

He flew for what, by his count, must have been another half-dozen hours at least, trying vainly to
remember Old Nan's stories about Good Queen Alysanne riding her dragon from Winterfell to the Wall, and if perchance she had ever mentioned how long it took to get there. Then up ahead, distant at first but swiftly rushing closer, he spied a dark blot among the white, unfolding and taking form as the peculiar sharp-buttressed silhouette of what was unmistakably the Dreadfort, engulfed in steel and flame. Small figures scuttled around like industrious insects, one of the towers was ablaze, throwing a wild and eerie glow through the gloom, and he could hear the high skirl of skinpipes and the deep thunder of drums – the mountain clans beyond any doubt. Which meant the banners still flying from their stanchions, gold and black and crimson, the crowned stag prancing in a fiery heart –

Stannis. Jon did not know whether to be surprised or not at all that the king had somehow found himself here as well, though given the nature of the last rumors he had heard – Stannis imprisoned, defeated, disarmed, the Bastard of Bolton's prisoner – it seemed that he had missed some rather large pieces of information along the way. Being dead will have that effect. And yet if he was not expecting to see Stannis, the wager was excellent that nor was Stannis expecting to see him. Jon took a firmer grip on Rhaegal's ruff, and plunged.

As the shadow of the dragon blacked out the dim, dark blue light that was the only visible herald of morning, Jon could hear shouts and curses of alarm from the Baratheon men, doubtless wondering what new devilry had been summoned from the snows to torment them now. A few of those with their wits about them raised their bows and tried a shot – the bolts bounced harmlessly off the plates of heavy scale, and Rhaegal snorted in vexation, blowing sparks and extinguishing torches in the massive draft of his wings as he descended. Jon steered him deftly through the scant accoutrements of the camp – a command tent, a siege line, the men hammering with axes on the Dreadfort's ancient studded-oak gates but likewise turning to stare in shock – and set them down where the snow had been scraped away to be shallowest, the first graceful landing he had yet managed on dragonback. There he sat, a peculiar sort of king of the castle, as somehow the entire cacophony of the battle seemed to have fallen silent, and everyone merely gaped.

After allowing them another moment to come to terms with their astonishment, Jon swung off and jumped to the ground. "Ho," he said mildly. "Where is the king?"

"Lord Snow?" The voice – booming, deep, familiar – came from a few paces away, as a short, squat, wildly white-bearded shape emerged from the nearer of the tents. "Damn me eyes for a liar, boy, but they thought beyond all doubt they'd seen the last o' you!"

Jon's spirits lifted, despite himself. "I'm a black-hearted bastard and crow come down to plague you. Did you truly think you were getting shot of me so swiftly?"

Tormund Giantsbane said nothing else, but rushed forward to clap Jon on the shoulder, with such force that he actually staggered. The old wildling's eyes were in fact suspiciously bright, though he snorted sharply to disguise it, grinning and shaking his head. "Blowed if I ken how you managed it, boy. That pink woman wi' her smells and spells – she had a hand in it, aye?"

"Partly." Jon hesitated, not certain he should share the news of Melisandre's demise so publicly, to these brave men who had come so far and suffered so much for her, her god, her prophecies, her king. Instead, he glanced around the camp, taking stock of the siege, the burning fortress, the scattered bodies. "How is it that Stannis is here, alive?"

Tormund shook his furry head reprovingly. "Now there's a question you don't have the right to go askin' of others, Lord Snow. But come, I'll see you to him."

"No," another familiar voice said, also near at hand. "No need."
Jon turned. Stannis Baratheon – gaunt, soot-stained, eyes more like blue wounds than ever, the hood of his cloak thrown back and drifting snowflakes speckling his bare head, sword still in hand – stood a few feet away, watching Jon, and the dragon, as if, for the first time in his life, unsure what to say or do. Yet as always, he gave small sign of it. "Lord Snow," he said curtly. "The wildling speaks true. We had not expected to see you again. Yet I gather, somehow, that you have not come to amend your previous error, take your father's name, the lordship of Winterfell, and the princess to wife?" One black brow raised. "Did the red woman send you?"

"No." Jon met his gaze squarely. "We need to speak, my lord. Alone."

Stannis grunted, raised a fist, and beckoned brusquely toward the command tent. Jon followed him in, pushing aside the heavy skin flap and ducking into the smoky dimness, not much warmer than the air outside. "Congratulations, Your Grace," he said. "It looks very much as if you have taken the Dreadfort. Very few commanders can boast such a feat."

Stannis grunted again. "Only fools boast. It would serve me no purpose. But the Bastard, so I have been told, is in fact dead, and may R'hllor prepare the hottest of hellfire for him."

"Ramsay is dead?" Despite knowing that it was only a vanishingly small victory in the scheme of things, Jon could not help a stab of joy. "Who killed him?"

"His own pet." A grim smile, terrible in even its merest suggestion of mirth, twisted the corner of Stannis' lip. "Perhaps I was right after all not to put the turncloak to death, sorely though he may have deserved it. But now that you have come, I suppose it is your will whether you wish to have justice upon him for what he did to Winterfell and your brothers."

For a moment, Jon was utterly baffled – then, as he stared at the king, it hit. "Theon? Theon Greyjoy?" He remembered Val telling him that Theon had saved Jeyne Poole, the false Arya, from Ramsay, and while he knew of course that Bran and Rickon had never been dead, had become – in Bran's case, at least – something much greater and far more terrible, he still could not quite wrap his head around the notion. Strange and stranger.

"I would speak to him."

"Anon." Stannis closed one fist and put it on the table. "Where is Melisandre?"

It seemed a poor way to repay him for such news, and yet there was no good call in anything but the truth. "She is... she is gone, my lord. I am sorry."

A muscle tightened in the king's cheek, and yet he made no other sound or reaction; he must have at least already suspected. "And yet you are here," he said after a few moments, glancing up with a jerk. "Why, Lord Snow?"

"I've come for Lightbringer," Jon told him. "It was Lady Melisandre's own wish that I should have it and the dragon, for the battle to come against the Others." He thought of the Horn of Dawn, rued his failure to ask Sam what had become of it, if he had ever found who had stolen it from Oldtown. And for want of a nail, the war was lost. He hoped not, prayed not, but could not be sure. "The sword, the real sword. It's here. Isn't it."

"Aye," Stannis said again, after another pause. His other fist joined the first on the table, as if to brace for bad news. "So I am not Azor Ahai," he said, half to himself. "After all this time. Is that not so?"

Jon felt a sudden sharp sympathy. "Prophecy is a mysterious beast, Your Grace," he said awkwardly. "Clearly, as yet, you have a part to play."
"I did not ask for your pity, Lord Snow." Stannis' teeth ground, in such a familiar expression of frustration that it nearly made Jon sad. *I am leaving him, leaving all of them. Good men and bad alike. "Tell me, was the red woman lying to me all along, or merely and grievously in err?"

"She truly believed in you, my lord," Jon said honestly. "So far as it went. But what happened with – with me gave her cause to change her mind." He could not think of any further platitudes to add, and doubted that Stannis wanted to suffer them. He debated as well whether to tell the king about Shireen, the way the girl had died holding his hand, face half-eaten by her mad fool, but did not have the heart. Stannis had never been overfond of his disfigured little daughter, perhaps, but she was still his flesh and blood, his heiress, and he had already shouldered enough of a burden for now and ever. "Yet we have no time to tarry. I would speak with Theon. Now."

It was clear in the king's face that he had heard it for what it was – a command, not a request – but he did not bother with schooling Jon in propriety. Instead he beckoned again, and one of the fur-clad clansmen – a Liddle, to reckon from his sigil – appeared from nowhere, escorting Jon out of the tent and across to the other. This one looked to be an infirmary of sort; a great fat man lay on a sledge, piled in blankets and furs that lent him even more sprawling dimensions, and another man – slight, unremarkable, brown hair and beard gone mostly grey, hands bandaged to clumsy stumps – lay on a similar setup beside. Neither of them stirred as the clansman led Jon past, to the makeshift cot at the back of the tent.

Jon stared. He had never met the woman, but recognized the dark hair, the sharp-chiseled features, and lean wiry frame at once; she had to be Theon's sister. And as for the frail crumple of skin and bones and white hair curled silently under the blankets beside her, apparently some ragged-arse old man – he frowned in puzzlement. It was plain that both of them were badly battered and ill-used, the woman's chest wrapped in bloody bandages that looked liable to be holding her life together, their skin scorched and charred, as if they had been dragged back from the uttermost brink, but he still didn't see what –

Then the pathetic creature – evidently stronger than the unconscious woman, for all that he could have blown away in the next good gust – heard them coming, scrambled to all fours, and stared around madly with wide, unseeing, terrified eyes. Whoever or whatever he expected to see stalking him, it took him a very long moment to register that it wasn't. He blinked once and then again, licked his cracked lips, and shrank back as if in expectation of a blow. In a hoarse whisper, he breathed, *"Jon?"*


"I know," Jon reassured him, and saw the spindly shoulders shake in a sigh. "I am told, however, that you did kill the Bastard of Bolton. Is it so?"

Theon flinched, face never free of expression of remembered terror. Then he swallowed, and drew himself up as best he could. *"Aye. Ramsay – Lord Ramsay – he drank the onion knight's poisoned blood, me and Asha had gone in to save him – the onion knight, Davos, Ser Davos, Ramsay was holding him prisoner, it was a bargain between him and Stannis, but we agreed – we had to get the sword, but Lord Ramsay wanted to become an Other, to live forever. I fought him, I
ran, he – he –"

Jon bit back an oath. Ramsay Bolton on his own was quite a sufficient terror; an immortal demon Ramsay Bolton did not bear thinking of. "The sword," he repeated urgently, trying to commandeern Theon's wandering thoughts. "Do you have it?"

"Aye," Theon said again, small but clear. "I have it. Here."

With that, he reached into the blankets and pulled something out, bundled thickly in cloth – after the sacrifices he had made, the nightmares he had faced, to find it and fetch it out, he must have refused to let it out of his sight for a moment, clinging to it as all the world came down around him. He fumbled at the wrappings with his mismatched fingers, with a painful expression of eagerness like a kicked dog desperate for a crumb from its master, and then plucked them away.

A rich glow suffused the dim tent, dancing in unearthly shimmers and flares. If he had breath at all, Jon would have been short of it to see what had been revealed: a sword at once like Stannis' pale copy of it, and yet terribly unlike. This, Jon knew, had never been handled by the king; had never been in his possession; had come to light from somewhere else entirely, lying hidden all these centuries. It was all the colors of red and gold at once, dancing through the blade, but burning low, faint and steady like a banked hearthfire. It gave off a barely perceptible warmth, bathing them all in its radiance and making even Theon's wrecked and ruined face look young and comely again. Tongues of glimmering fire enlaced the grip and crosspiece, guttering in and out. Lightbringer.

"I kindled it again when I killed Ramsay," Theon explained, glancing anxiously up at Jon. "But it's been fading ever since, and I can't bring it back. I tried. I'm sorry. I tried."

"You've done well." Jon was still abstracted, studying it, not quite daring to believe that it was in his hands – black glass though they were, they would serve, and now he thought he understood at last why they must be. He nodded at it. "May I?"

Theon hesitated, then nodded in return. And Jon, girding himself for whatever might be about to happen next, reached out and closed his fingers around the hilt.

All at once, he was no longer certain whether he was still standing, or if he had fallen, or which direction was up, or which down. It felt as if a soundless explosion had gone off in his head, rattling him to the marrow, bright and white and hot as a burning star, torn between intense pain and an even more intense pleasure, coruscating through every cord of him, jangling like a broken lute-string, soaring to the heavens and bursting against the sky. He was too small to contain all the sensation, too small, too pitiful – but he was expanding, made great, consuming the darkness, feeding on it and growing larger, falling and flying. He could not unlock his fingers, nor was he entirely certain where the sword ended and he began, or if there had ever been a difference. He was vaguely conscious of a blinding light searing his eyes and all of them, feel the scouring heat of flame, beautiful and changeable as quicksilver. It was only in the shattering, scattered afterglow, coming down as if from the peak of climax, that he became aware of himself again, and his surroundings. Theon was cowering in the blankets, and even the stolid clansman looked stunned.

Slowly, Jon lowered his arm. He felt drunk and giddy, euphoric, with the force of the power coursing through him; it was almost like living, like reality, like truth. No longer blazing like a thousand suns, but still burning hot and steady at a scathing red pitch, Lightbringer pulsed in his hands; if they had still been made of ordinary flesh, he would not be able to hold it. Instead, the dragonglass glowed brightly as well, channeling warmth to the rest of his cold body, beating inside him like the ghost of his pulse. He did not want to let it go even for an instant, did not want to be separated from it again; mine, a voice whispered greedily, delightedly. No one was worthy to wield it but him, no one could –
Jon shook his head hard. But it was extremely difficult, just then, to remember why he had to let himself be killed, or do anything apart from exactly what he pleased. He had the dragon, he had the sword; whatever he wanted, it was his. Cut a ruinous red swath through the traitorous Boltons and any hint of their seed, return in triumph to Winterfell, raise its walls high again. Jon Stark, King in the North. But not just the north, the world as well – his blue-eyed soldiers, marching obediently to do his bidding, while he kept Val and any other woman to warm his bed and bear his sons, for no man would refuse him, no man could –

"Jon?" a voice was saying, far off and distant, over and over. "Jon? Jon!"

He focused on it, grasped it, stumbled after it out of his reverie. It was Theon, repeating it over and over, looking frightened. "Jon?" he said again. "You – are you – ?"

"Fine. I'm fine." Jon barely heard his own words, feeling as if he had been dropped a great distance from the sky to the ground. Carefully, slowly, he sheathed Lightbringer at his side, in the scabbard that had held Longclaw. It was somewhat easier to think straight when the intoxicating glow had dimmed, and he forced himself to fix on Theon's scared pale face. Mustered up a reassuring smile. "Thank you."


"I am a monster," Jon said simply. "But it's all right. I won't hurt you." He hoped not, at least. He was not sure he trusted himself around these vulnerable humans for much longer. "Your sister – is she – ?"

"I don't know." Theon stared at the ground, lip trembling. "She was badly wounded when we escaped the Dreadfort. I don't know."

Jon rocked back on his heels, wondering what he could do for her – or if anything he did would involve turning her into an Other. It seemed rather too likely, at the moment. But as he was still considering, a hoarse, rasping voice came from behind him. "Seven save us."

He turned sharply, forcing down the stab of anger at whoever had dared to blaspheme him. It was the brown-haired man who had spoken, pushing himself agonizingly upright with his bandaged broken hands, staring at Jon with an expression of wonder and horror mingled. "You," he said. "You're – "

"Jon Snow." It still came the most easily to his lips. "Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. And you would be?"

"Ser Davos Seaworth. Lately the King's Hand to His Grace, Stannis Baratheon. Now – " bitterly – "naught much more than a used-up old smuggler."

"Your hands," Jon said. Something was pricking at the back of his mind, whether suspicion or idea he could not be sure. "What happened to them?"

Davos hesitated. "I was a guest of Lord Ramsay's hospitality," he said at last. "A great jape, to be a Hand with no fingers. I sought to quit my rank, but His Grace would not have it, said even that if he was to die, I should be. . . ." He stopped again, clearly aghast with himself for repeating such madness. "No matter. I do not wish to trouble you."

"Let me see." Jon crossed the tent to him, carefully unwrapping the clouts of linen swaddled around Davos' arms. He examined the stumps, cauterized black with hot iron, and just then, knew
exactly what to do. He turned to the clansman. "Do you have dragonglass?" At the blank look, he
tried, "Obsidian?"

The Liddle still looked as if he had been rapped smartly over the head, but finally mustered enough
self-possession to answer. "A-aye, m'lord. Some. But it's not much, not enough to – "

"Fetch it."

Jon was pleased to see that his new status brooked no dissent; the Liddle wheeled about
straightaway and scurried off, to return shortly with several good-sized fragments of the glittering
black stuff. Jon turned it over in his own black hands, considering, and then drew Lightbringer
from the sheath again, enough to set free the light and heat and blaze of power, letting himself be
consumed by it. The pieces of obsidian felt as molten and pliable as butter in his fingers, charged to
do his will, shaped as easily as a smith hammering steel or an artisan blowing glass, as he crafted
them into place. He thought he heard Davos muffle a grunt of agonizing pain, but did not stop to
look. The task must be finished, first.

It was even harder to sheathe Lightbringer the second time, when he was. But somehow, with a
tremendous effort of will, he did. Then stepped back, waiting.

Davos stared in disbelief at his black-glass fingers, still glowing and lambent with heat, so like
Jon's own. He moved them, flexed them, reached out and picked up the cup next to him, set it back
down, mouth working soundlessly, clearly unable to express the magnitude of his shock, the
unthinkable prospect of having hands again. He must have seen nothing at all, no possibility for
recovery or for hope, life as a cripple or a charity case, not even quite a man, after what he had
gone through at the Bastard's pleasure. Finally he looked up, overcome, stammering. "My lord. . .
My lord, I am not – I cannot ever – "

"I do not need to be repaid." All Jon could see in his head was Jeyne Poole, the girl who had not
been Arya – but who might have been. "I know what Ramsay Bolton was."

Davos still seemed to be in too much shock to form a coherent answer. But at that moment, from
outside, there came a noise that sounded distinctly like a displeased dragon, and shouts and general
disorder. Jon pricked up his ears, and frowned. "Pardon me."

He stepped out into the cold blue gauze of what passed for midmorning, hastening back to where
he had left Rhaegal. The beast was clearly not altogether impressed with their new environs, and
especially not with the party of men that had just emerged, snowy and filthy and clearly in tearing
haste, from the woods. They in turn reared back with curses and exclamations, not having expected
to be confronted by a full-grown dragon, and it fell to Jon to run intervention, beckoning Rhaegal
into retreat. It was only then that he realized they were not part of Stannis' forces, or at least what
remained of them, but newcomers. And one of them, gaping beneath his ice-choked muffler, was at
least somewhat familiar, indeed –

"Lord Snow?" Ser Justin Massey's eyes bulged nearly out of his head. "Seven hells! When we
called at the Wall – your little squire said you were – "

"Satin is dead," At the name, Jon felt a faint grief, but it faded. "I am not."

"Apparently so," Massey muttered, plainly stunned. "Where's His Grace? We must speak to him at
once. We've come from White Harbor and barely with our skins, fought through all manner of
monsters, brought something he needs for his war, for – "

"It is my war now as well." Jon held out his hand. "You will tell me."
Massey opened his mouth to refuse, but something about Jon's face, his eyes, his strange and shadowed presence, decided him otherwise. He swallowed. "Very well. After we delivered your sis – the lady to the Wall, we went onto Braavos. It was there that I came into possession of this." Carefully as if it was his firstborn son, he removed a dirty, broken horn from his tabard. "I learned that it might be of considerable interest in His Grace's battle, and made arrangements to bring it to him as soon as I could. We had the hell of a time getting out of Braavos and back here to Westeros, then sailing north in search of him, but we've made it now. As I said, barely." His impatience was thinly disguised as he glanced over Jon's shoulder, but was once more confronted by the imposing bulk of Rhaegal. "Can we – "

"No." Jon could not take his eyes off it. He knew what it was: the broken horn he had found buried with the cache of dragonglass at the Fist of the First Men, given to Sam as a souvenir, and which Sam had subsequently taken south to Oldtown. What had been stolen from there by the mysterious thief he had seen in the weirwood, and smuggled somehow to Braavos: the Horn of Dawn, the last piece of the puzzle. He tried not to hope too greatly, but it was too late. It flared up in him, a terrible clawing joy. He had to fight the overpowering urge to rush forward, knock it from Massey's hand, and clutch it close. "One other thing. How did you know that the girl you brought to the Wall was not my sister Arya?"

Ser Justin blinked. "Did I – did I say so?" he faltered.

"Aye. You started to call her that, and then called her 'the lady' instead. But it was not my sister, as we are both well aware." Cousin, he supposed in all technicality, but she would never be anything other to him than what she was. "Have you seen her?"

Massey hesitated, looking uneasy. "Lord Snow, we both know that – "

"Have you seen her?" Jon took a sharp stride forward, hand falling to the hilt of Lightbringer. It struck him suddenly what a simple, what an absurdly simple, thing it would be to crush Ser Justin's miserable throat, flick his fragile life out of existence like a man swatting a fly, and with no more trouble or consequence. The need was so strong, and so seductive, that he wrestled himself back with horror. "My sister, Arya Stark, have you – "

"Aye," Massey admitted at last. "I found her in Braavos. It's the gods' own mystery how she wound up there, but she did. I brought her back with me, but bartered her to the courtesan, the Summer Maid, in exchange for receiving the horn to bring north. Not what I wished to do, by any means, but a kinder fate than whatever poor wench was saddled with the Bastard of Bolton for a husband. And a bargain, for us all, I had to make."

"Perhaps so. Jon turned away, briefly speechless. Never in his life or after it had he wanted so badly to run from his duty. He had meant to march on Winterfell to rescue her the night that Bowen Marsh murdered him, after all, and the thought of leaving her now tore at him still worse. But he could not go after her this time. He could not. Had to let her go, her and everyone, and do it swiftly, before the monstrosity truly set in. Without a word, he stepped aside, and let Ser Justin and the men pass into the camp.

He stood watching the desolate ramparts of the Dreadfort as if expecting to see something woken from them, but there was no movement save for that of Stannis' men, who had broken in as the culmination of vigorous effort and were now pulling down the flayed man everywhere it flew and raising the crowned stag in its place. Jon would have been satisfied if they left no stone standing on another, was again conscious of the fact that he could reduce it to rubble and ashes if he chose; draw the sword and take the power, it would be as natural as breathing. Or have Rhaegal bathe it in his flame, orange and yellow and green, a beautiful towering pyre, so that the taint of the Boltons
might never again spread in the world. Burn it clean off the map. Revenge for Robb and Jeyne Poole and Davos Seaworth and even Theon, make their very name anathema. Wanted it, wanted it, wanted –

Someone tapped his shoulder. "Lord Snow. You're needed."

Jon surfaced from his reverie badly and slowly, following the Liddle (another one this time) across the ground to the tent. When he ducked in, Stannis and Ser Justin were to be found absorbed in tense conversation, but both broke off at sight of him, though plainly the knight had a great deal to fill the king in on as regarded his adventures in Braavos. The broken Horn of Dawn lay on the table among the charts and quills, cast down like a gauntlet, and Jon's eyes were drawn inexorably to it. He clenched his fists, waiting.

"Lord Snow." It was Stannis who spoke. "I am told this is of use to us."

"That is so."

"But not in its present condition. Can you mend it?"

"I believe so." Jon's voice was neutral. "Have you spoken to Ser Davos?"

"I – have." Stannis' voice, in comparison, was stiff, but even on his hard, guarded face, it was plain to see that he must have learned what Jon had done for his onion knight. "It was well done, and I am in your debt for it. But what do you know of this thing?"

"Little enough." Jon shrugged. "It was the horn blown by Azor Ahai to end the Battle for the Dawn, long ago. It must be blown again, if there is any hope of ending this one."

"By whom?" The king's gaze was sharp as icicles.

"I do not know," Jon admitted, "but not by me. I sounded its twin, the Horn of Winter, to bring down the Wall and wake giants. I cannot do the same with this one. Perhaps this will come as small surprise, my lord, but I am not who I was, when you knew me last."

"I know." Stannis' jaw clenched. "You cast no shadow, give no heat, and I have not seen you either to blink or breathe this entire time. But you said it was sounded by Azor Ahai, before. And this time, is that not you?"

"Melisandre thought so, Your Grace. But as I said. It cannot be me."

Stannis was silent, studying the broken halves of the horn. Then at last he glanced up, scowling. "Yet someone must."

"Your Grace," Ser Justin began, "if such an honor was needful, I would be glad to –"

"No, Massey." Stannis' scowl deepened. "Leave us."

This was plainly not the answer he had expected after months of hard toil in the king's cause, but the fair-haired knight nonetheless bowed and took his leave, so that Stannis and Jon were alone. The silence seemed to tower, grow thicker and stronger, until at last Stannis said, "No mortal man could blow this and survive."

"No, my lord," Jon agreed. "It would be death for whoever did."

"Yet life for all else." Stannis' gloved fingers tapped a restless rhythm on the table, the furrow
between his brows drawing deeper. "A duty. What would happen?"

"I am not altogether sure, Your Grace. But so far as I know, no more Others could wake or be created. There would still be all the ones left to contend with, but they cannot continue to increase their numbers. They would be pushed back, weakened, perhaps made vulnerable long enough for the Night's Watch – what little remains – to do what must be done. It is the Horn of *Dawn*, my lord, and they cannot endure the light."

"Then there is no choice." Stannis picked up the broken halves, turning them over and over in his hands. "The horn must be sounded. At the Wall?"

"The Wall is broken, its protection rendered meaningless, and wights and Others infest every corner of the land. I do not think it matters greatly at one place or another."

"I see," the king murmured. "And Azor Ahai must blow it, and give his life in the doing, but it cannot be you. Very well then, Lord Snow. Our answer presents itself."

"It does?" Jon was startled. "What do you mean?"

For the first time, at last, Stannis Baratheon smiled, truly smiled. It was like the cracking of a skull mask, a tomb-carving broken open and the light shining into the dusty bones below, as if at the uttermost end, he had finally found his purpose, a truth, the very last thing that he, a man so entirely alone, who had fought so hard and so long, could finally believe in, and win. "Aye," he said. "Me."
Brienne

The only thing colder than the dim tower room was the fear wrapping strangler's fingers around her heart, as she sat back on her heels and cursed aloud as at least her dozenth attempt to kindle a fire died a sooty, ignominious death in the hearth. She did not understand; there was tinder and flint enough, she should have had a merry blaze crackling. But no matter what she tried, she could not, and she was almost in tears with frantic panic. *So cold, why is it so cold?* Her breath was visible in the air, and hoarfrost clung to the torch bracket and the casement of the window, blurring the lead-glass diamonds that gazed out over the courtyard of the Red Keep. *Guard my interests at court,* Lady Sansa had said before departing for Highgarden, and yet Brienne was still here in this dank little chamber, scraping her fingers raw and bleeding with futility.

She shot an apprehensive glance at the bed in the corner. Jaime lay as still as a corpse, draped in all the blankets and quilts she could scavenge up, eyes closed. Only the faintest rise and fall of his chest gave any sign that he was still tentously clinging to life, and after watching all these frail sparks snuffed, she could not help but fear that his was next. She did not know what to do. She had been the knight of the stories, on the brave quest to save the maiden and fight monsters and win her honor, whilst Jaime had been the princess, locked in a tower by some evil sorcerer and needing her to rescue him. Should she kiss him, perhaps? That was what the knight always did, before sweeping the princess onto his white destrier and galloping off into the sunset, but Brienne doubted it would be of much use in the present situation. No, she should try to start the fire again, keep him as warm as she could, while she went back and informed Aegon of what they had left behind in the north. Or did he already know? Would he dispatch his dragons to assist? Strange to so desperately trust in an eighteen-year-old stripling, but he had said that he must be a king, he must save the realm, he had pardoned Jaime, he'd do what he had to. He must.

Brienne's thirteenth attempt to start the fire, however, met with the same dismal failure as its predecessors, and she threw down the flint with a roar of frustration. *Failure. Always a failure.* Even in this, this one simple thing. She herself was starting to shiver, even in her wool and leather, and could not think of how else to make it warm, struggled to remember what heat and summer even felt like. So was this it, the long and terrible winter the maesters had always predicted, which might stretch on beyond the lifetime or lifetimes of men? *So cold. So very, very –*

"Wench?"

It was the weakest, rasping, gargled word, but it went down Brienne's back like a bolt of lightning. Choking on a gasp, she whirled around.

A slit of emerald green was watching her from the bed, almost lost among the bruises. It seemed to be taking all his effort even to do that, fluttering half-shut, but by that time she had crossed the room in a single bound and knelt at his side. "Jaime? Are you there? Jaime?"

He looked as if he could not be entirely sure. There was no particular expression on his face, not grief or relief or joy or pain, but an utter, all-consuming emptiness. His gaze seemed to be looking straight through the ceiling at something else altogether, as if he himself would not mind joining it. But she reached out, fumbled for his hand and held it hard, and he turned his head with a pained, bewildered air. "Am I... am I dead? I must be. That's the only reason you'd be here. I'm sorry. Brienne. I'm sorry."

"No." She bit her lip. "You're alive. Believe me, you are."

Jaime's mouth twisted. If he did in fact believe her, it was plain that this was not what he had
wanted to hear. She thought of the guards reporting that they had found him in the Dragonpit when
they had gone to confine Aegon's beasts there – him, a great cache of wildfire, a dead alchemist,
and the strangled body of Queen Cersei. Was that – had he – ? No matter how much love had
turned to loathing between the Lannister twins by the end, Brienne could not imagine that this
would do anything but what it had done: destroy Jaime as well as Cersei. They came into the world
together, two halves of one soul. They must have meant to die the same way. How could he even
begin to understand how to breathe, to walk around, to exist, as half a torn-apart creature? But he
has to. He has to. It was Jaime she loved. Not as part of some other chimerical monster, some two-
headed hydra, but Jaime himself, Jaime alone, the Jaime she knew, the man. And it was Jaime she
was going to save.

Just then, as if following her thought, Jaime's fingers tightened on hers. With a supreme effort of
will, he managed, "Tommen?"

"I – he – " Brienne could not face the prospect of telling him that Tommen was dead as well, that a
Targaryen king had seized the city and the throne, and that he himself had been stripped of the
white cloak and, if he recovered, was faced with the prospect of being carted home to Casterly
Rock as a crippled pensioner in disgrace, that everything he had ever fought or suffered for was
gone. "I – I don't know. Jaime, you need – need to rest. Save your – "

His eyes flicked at her, and for a moment she almost did not recognize him, lost behind the gilded,
ruined mask. "You're lying to me, wench."

"No – Jaime, I – "

"WHERE?" he roared, so that it echoed madly in the small stone room, taking so much of his
strength that he collapsed back on the pillows, gasping, blood flecking his mouth. He curled onto
his side and began to cough, dry-retching, as Brienne did her best to hold him steady. More blood
came up, bright red and frothy, and she knew at once that was not a good omen. She felt utterly
useless, just herself and her two bare hands, without a fire or the sweetness of a lie to comfort him,
stroking his hair until at last the hacking stopped, and he lay sprawled, face half-buried, breathing
rasping and tormented. "Go," he said, muffled. "Go away. I'm going to die, I'd damn well like to
die, and I don't want you to see it."

Brienne could not summon up the barest notion of a reply, except for instinctive, immediate,
complete refusal. He might be as stubborn as the wrong end of several horses, but so was she. "You
don't get to tell me what to do, Kingslayer. Live, or I'll throttle you."

His shoulders shook with the ghost of an agonized laugh. Then while they were still staring at each
other combatively, waiting to see who would be the first to blink, there was a sharp rap on the
chamber door.

"Oh, good," said Jaime. "I hope it's the silent sisters."

"Shut up." Brienne rose to her feet and crossed to it, pulling it open a crack with one hand and
keeping the other on her sword. If it was someone meaning him harm, she doubted that they would
have bothered to knock; besides, Jaime's life was already in such fragile estate that some lone-wolf
Targaryen loyalist, seeking retribution for Aerys' murder despite the pardon granted by the king,
only had to sit back and wait for him to expire without incriminating themselves in the least. But
she would take no chances.

It was not some masked assassin or righteous avenger. It was a tall, spare-fleshed, clean-shaven
man with hair pulled back in a knot and cool grey eyes, who took note of her tense defensive
posture, raised an eyebrow, and sketched an eminently correct bow. "My lady," he said. "I am
Haldon, called Halfmaester, in service of His Grace. He has sent me to see to Ser Jaime's wounds."

Brienne blinked. "You would – the king would truly have him cared for, as well as pardoned?" she said warily. "That is... that is kind."

"It is not kindness." Haldon looked amused at her naïveté. "Lady Sansa did request that Ser Sandor and Ser Jaime be saved, and once she is wed to Willas Tyrell, they shall stitch north and south together. It would be a boon to add the west as well. King Aegon sees far more advantage in living allies, rather than dead enemies. So, surely you will allow me to do what I have come for?"

Flushing, Brienne hesitated a heartbeat longer. Then she stepped aside, though not taking her eyes off him an instant, as he proceeded toward the invalid in the bed. Jaime himself, however, looked far more uncooperative. "Wait just a bloody minute," he growled. "King Aegon? What in the name of – where is Tommen?"

"They have not ceased to look for him, my lord." Haldon's lie, unlike Brienne's, sounded smoothly practiced. "If he is found, he shall be brought here to you. We are well aware that King Tommen is only a boy, and despite the crimes of his family, deserves no share in their guilt."

"Merciful of you." Jaime's tone was half suspicious, half surprised. "Well, if you're now in the business of saving Lannisters, rather than killing them, how about lighting me a damned fire?"

Brienne's flush deepened, and she was about to say something when she was brought up short by the queer look on Haldon's face. "I would if I could, my lord," he said, "but something strange has befallen the castle in these last hours. The fires are simply going out. From the meanest cookfire to the torches in the throne room to the beacons that burn over Blackwater Bay. And when they do, they cannot be kindled again."

Jaime raised an eyebrow. "I saw a pair of dragons, or was that a hallucination as well? Leaving aside the question of how the devil your boy Aegon managed to procure them, it seems exactly the sort of problem they would be suited to assist with."

Brienne saw in her mind's eye Randyll Tarly turning into a column of flame, as death swept down on dark wings, and shuddered. It was due to them being taken to the Dragonpit that Jaime had been found at all, of course, so she could not judge too harshly, but the reality of their presence was not one to judge lightly. "How did he?" she pressed, echoing Jaime's question. "Find them? Surely there were not more eggs?"

"At Dragonstone." Haldon looked reluctant, but answered nonetheless. "Lord Connington and Lord Varys nobly sacrificed themselves to wake the stone beasts. I suspect that is why His Grace can control them, that they share in something of the animating spirit and intelligence of the men who died to give them life. If so, then perhaps he can try to –"

This stirring eulogy was unceremoniously interrupted with a grampus snort from Jaime. "Seven hells, are you bloody serious? Varys sacrificed himself? Somehow I greatly doubt that. And I'd rather freeze my own balls off than trust him or any relict of him to pop by and warm my toes. As for Lord Connington, I suspect he feels the same. But why, then, are all the fires going out?"

"We would delight in knowing the answer to that, my lord." Haldon had begun pulling things out of his capacious sleeves, bending to his work. "To say the least, it is not usual. And this... cold."

"They're coming," Brienne blurted out. "The... them. The blue-eyed ones. The Wall is fallen. They're coming."
"His Grace is aware of the stakes of this struggle." Haldon's expression did not alter. "That was in part why Lord Connington and Lord Varys made the choice that they did. He knows it is not merely men to fight, nor simply a matter of crowns and politics. Tell me what you have heard."

Brienne did, filling his ear with everything they had learned of the Others and the wights in the north, that Lady Sansa had sent the Burned Men to fight at White Harbor, that the Wall was down and the Night's Watch all but spent – that part Haldon seemed to know already, nodding as he worked on Jaime, who periodically uttered hair-raising oaths against them and demanded they leave him in peace to die, which in turn they both ignored. Brienne was heartened to see that; for him to have enough spirit to argue and complain was far preferable to the dead-eyed, passionless, empty look on his face when he had first woken. But she could not forget that it was fed on lies, that a fragile web of falsehood was the only thing preventing him from plunging back over the edge to the bottom. He looked like Jaime, he sounded like Jaime, but she had no way of knowing who had gone into that final confrontation with Cersei, and what had come out.

Against a passion such as that, twisted and dark and damning though it had been, what good was her plain, simple, ordinary love? She'd never said, not aloud. Neither had he – if he even felt remotely the same. The Quiet Isle was never supposed to have happened, and nor could she tell him what had resulted from it. Everything felt as cold and dun and fragile as the grey snow whispering at the windows, the way her fingers ached with how hard Jaime was gripping them, the cords in his neck standing out as he struggled not to scream; the bruised, starved, bloodied, filthy flesh revealed by Haldon's ministrations was so hideous as to be almost gruesomely beautiful. Brienne longed to take the wounds on herself, would have given anything to bear them in his stead. But they fought through it somehow, together, their individual stubbornness made truly exceptional by their combined efforts, until Haldon was finished, and rose to his feet. "I will see if a brazier can be found, my lord. Is there aught else you require?"

Jaime's flat green gaze said quite clearly that there were any number of things he bloody well required, but saw less than no point in asking for. He emitted an indeterminate grunt, turned away, and tidily threw up over the side of the bed.

Haldon inclined his head to Brienne rather pointedly and turned to go; whatever care he was obligated to provide to the Kingslayer evidently did not include mopping up his sick. She got a rag and then to all fours to do so, only to resurface and see Jaime watching her intently, almost feverishly. "Brienne," he murmured. "Seven hells, don't."

"I – I don't want you to – "

"You're not my nursemaid." His head fell back on the pillow like an aged lion's, the tawny, unruly golden mane well flecked with grey, the rest of him looking as if he had been carved of marble. He was quiet for so long that a sudden fear began to rise in her chest again, when he finally said, "Sansa?"

"She's – she's safe. I found her. As Haldon said, she's going to Highgarden now, to wed Willas Tyrell." Brienne's eyes prickled with tears. "Jaime, I'm so sorry. I lost Oathkeeper. In White Harbor, the Manderlys had me prisoner, they took it. I'm sorry."

"It's just – a bloody – sword." Jaime coughed. "And it was never mine to give, it was always Ned Stark's. It's gone back to the north, then. I'm sure they'll have good use for it."

"I – I suppose." Brienne's hand hovered timidly, unsure whether to grasp back at his. "Jaime – "

He sighed raggedly, interrupting her. "One thing. Don't lie to me. What in the blazes is the new king – " he spoke the two short words with a cool, bitter irony it seemed impossible to fit into them.
Brienne hesitated. "You've been stripped of the white cloak. You're to be sent home with a pardon and a pension, if you agree to keep his peace. To Casterly Rock."

"Gods, no." Jaime's face twisted in disgust. "No. No! I don't bloody want to go back there! Trapped in that place with their shades forever – no! A little bird told me it had been besieged by our noble monarch's forces, besides. Leave it. My lord father can haunt it all he likes. Assuming I live, which is a debtor's wager, then. . . ."

"Then?" Brienne prompted, when he had again fallen silent. "Then what?"

His eyes met hers. "Take me to Tarth. Give me some land and a holdfast somewhere, and a window that looks over the sea. I'll send my taxes to Evenfall Hall and keep your peace and suffer the tedious complaints of your smallfolk. Though what is there even to quarrel about on that backwater anyway? Who stole whose sheep?"

Brienne's chest felt as if it was about to explode. "Jaime," she began, and stopped. "Jaime, if you want to live on Tarth – "

"I don't particularly want to live anywhere. But Tarth is the least heinous of the options, and if they find Tommen. . . it would be the best place for him. I'm done with lies. He'll live with me, as my son, and when he comes of age, he'll have the Rock if he wants it."

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak. But he had asked her not to lie, and now, here, she could not. Without a word, she reached out and took his hand.

Jaime's brow furrowed in momentary confusion, but it took him no longer than that to understand. He made some faint, involuntary noise, then turned his head and stared at the wall, utterly silent. She bit her tongue; there were no words of comfort she could offer. Tommen had been nephew, king, and son in different parts, and it was impossible to say how he felt the loss in each, but the boy had also been the last remnant of his house, the only thing he felt was worth fighting for. "Somehow," he said, still staring at the wall, "I was fool enough to hope otherwise. I won't make that mistake again."

Brienne remained hunched by his side, their cold fingers knitted. At last she said softly, "It wasn't your fault."

"I don't want your absolution, wench."

"I know." She did, though. Wanted his absolution, and more, her own. The difficulty of forgiving others paled before the difficulty of forgiving oneself. I killed my child too, she wanted to tell him. I understand. And worse, had no choice, no chance, no idea how she ever could have done differently than she had. It was the only way. But it did not make the grief any less.

"Brienne," Jaime said, when the silence had grown old again. "You should go. Somewhere useful. There's not much to be had here. Measure the new hangings for the throne room. Help the Targaryen boy try on his crown, if he's wiped Tommen's blood off it first. Anything that doesn't – "

She met his gaze. "Do you want me to?"

He hesitated, didn't answer. But then in that moment, when she was convinced that they were both about to speak or shatter, a shadow swept over the window, vast and dark as if an eclipse had come unlooked-for; the Citadel kept detailed star-charts and would often let it be known when one was expected, but such was not the case now. It was moving swiftly, cast by some creature – no man,
no common beast, and sudden intuition pricked the back of Brienne's neck. Letting go of Jaime's hand, she got up and hurried to the window, just in time to see something truly monstrous cruising over the parapets of the Red Keep.

Cold recognition went through her like a blow. A dragon, but not one of Aegon's. Thrice the size at least, scales black as jet, eyes red in its massive, evilly triangular skull, sending downdrafts of steaming snow whirling with every effortless, lazy beat of its leathery wings. Brienne could almost feel it, even through the heavy stone and mortar of the castle walls, pulsing like a mighty furnace. *This is no mummer's dragon,* she knew at once. *It's one of hers.* The queen's. Of the rumored three that the Mad King's daughter had hatched across the narrow sea – but what was it possibly doing –

"Brienne?" Jaime said from the bed. "Brienne, what is it?"

She turned slowly, still mesmerized by its lethal beauty as it glided out of sight over the next tower, great columns of smoke purling from its nostrils and vanishing into the fog. "It's a..." Her own voice sounded strange and thin to her own ears. "Jaime, it's a dragon."

Something passed over his face like a stone skipped across a pond, too swiftly to judge what. "I thought Haldon said that Aegon had two."

"It's – it's not one of them. I've never seen it before. The queen. I think she's here."

At that Jaime actually laughed out loud. "And if so, to do what? Politely take tea with her best-beloved nephew? Knowing the Targaryens, I very much doubt it."

"But they must." Brienne had never been so certain of anything. "There *can't* be a new Dance of the Dragons. If they're fighting for the *throne* when what's coming is worse – they must work together, they must send their dragons against the white walkers – "

"Once they're through incinerating King's Landing, I'm sure they'll get around to it." It would have been impossible for Jaime Lannister to sound more bitter and broken.

"No." The seed of a reckless, futile, desperate plan was taking shape in Brienne's head. She stood straight, pulled her sword belt tighter, threw her cloak back over her shoulder. Did not know if she could stand to meet his eyes, did not know if she could stand not to. At last she did, and blue and green locked and held fast. "Goodbye, Ser Jaime," she told him. Could barely get it from her throat. Knew then that she would never see him again, and could not live the rest of her life, however scant it might be, knowing that this at least had gone unsaid. "I love you."

And with that, not waiting for his reaction, not looking back, she opened the door and stepped through, then shut it, leaning against it, swallowing the racking sobs that wanted to come racing up her chest. Shook silently, fought against every instinct that wanted to go back inside, crawl into bed with him, curl up and hold him tightly and wait for the end together, and began to walk.

She could barely see where she was going through the haze of tears, and was not over-familiar with the Red Keep in the first place; it was a struggle to find her way back from the remote tower room to the main castle, but she did. Quickened her pace as she began to hear voices, a muted babel of alarm, glanced out one of the high vaulted windows just in time to see an equally immense cream-and-gold silhouette soaring by. *Two dragons, she has brought two at least.* Gods knew where the third one might be, or what would come of it, but it was indisputable.

There was no one to block her way, and Brienne shoved aside a final door and dodged into the throne room. King Aegon was standing on the steps before the Iron Throne, with a young woman with the look of Dorne at his side – Princess Arianne, perhaps? A few men-at-arms in Martell and
Targaryen colors had their hands nervously on their swords, but not yet drawn, waiting in an air of tense expectation. All attention was fixed on the great doors grinding back over the floorstones – once deeply polished to a mirrored sheen, but now dirty and scuffed with the constant passage of tramping boots – and the small party making, at long last, its entrance.

At the front must be the queen herself. She had the silver-gold hair and purple eyes of a true Targaryen, enough to give Brienne a turn; she had only ever seen illuminations of the dragon kings in books, and even Aegon did not quite match this strange young woman's eerie luster. She walked slowly, supported on both sides by a pair of young Dothraki warriors, two handmaids of the same people trailing behind. Then there was a squat old man, bald and immensely strong-looking, in the tattered robes of a maester, and a terrifying black specter in iron armor blazoned with the golden kraken of House Greyjoy. An escort of two dozen soldiers in spiked bronze caps. And then as well, with a dark-haired girl creeping after him –

The Imp. Brienne was utterly certain of it; it could be no one else. He was ragged, filthy, grown a scruff of mangy beard that had done little to improve his hideously scarred face, which wore an expression as if he was proceeding headfirst into the mouth of the deepest hell. He must have never expected to return here again, after he fled as kingslayer and kinslayer. Now there are two in the family. Tyrion Lannister gazed nowhere else than directly ahead, matching the queen's deliberate steps as best he could on stunted legs, as the party advanced in utter, trancelike silence down the length of the throne room and the reckoning that waited at the end of it. And now, Brienne thought with that same queer and complete clarity, we learn if we should live or die.

Daenerys was the first to reach the dais, tilting her head back coolly to regard her counterpart. Her voice echoed among the empty pillars when she spoke. "Are you the boy that calls himself Aegon Targaryen?"

"I... am." The young king was pale as a ghost himself, but managed to sound reasonably steady. "And you then would be Queen Daenerys, my... my kinswoman. I see that you number my lord of Lannister among your company?"

The Imp inclined his head, though the gesture fell well short of humble. "My prince. Where is Lord Connington?"

"He is dead." Aegon's lips trembled. "At Dragonstone. The circumstances were regrettable, but his sacrifice has offered – "

"Dragonstone?" interrupted the queen's maester, moving forward abruptly. "So it was you, then, that worked the sorcery? That broke the balance, that woke fire and summoned ice? We have just come from there in terrible haste, barely ahead of what we found there. The entire world of the living is in peril. The enemy is here."

Aegon's jaw sagged. "I don't – "

"Others, boy." The maester's face was utterly grim. "They've woken, they're coming. It is too late to take back what you have done. Our only chance is to fight."

Aegon still looked blindsided; if his royal dignity had been injured by being referred to as "boy"; it was impossible to say. "Varys," he stammered. "Varys said it was the only way – the sacrifices – the crown, the weal of the realm – what we had to for the Seven Kingdoms and the throne – "

"You misunderstand." It was Daenerys who spoke again this time, a mirthless smile turning up her lip, so that she looked far older than the sixteen or seventeen years she must have. "I have not come to claim the Iron Throne. I have come to destroy it."
The young king could not even feign comprehension of that, and Daenerys ruthlessly continued. "It is made of swords, swords forged in dragonfire, swords still sharp enough to kill, swords raised against an invasion of a very different sort. You spoke of sacrifices. So do I. I have brought men, almost five thousand, Dothraki and Unsullied and ironborn, and my two dragons, Drogon and Viserion. You may aid me, my lord, or get out of my way."

"I – I have dragons of my own." Aegon was clearly not quite ready to concede just yet. "That was what I woke at Dragonstone. If what you say is true –"

"It is." The queen spoke simply. "You will place them at my command, then, and remove yourself somewhere you shall not hinder the effort." Her eyes traveled lingeringly over him, clearly taking in the bandaged face, the blood seeping into his collar, the general fragility. "If any of us survive, we will arrive at further accommodations then. My lord."

Aegon took a step. "Wait – you can't –"

A step was as far as he got. Daenerys closed her eyes and rose on her toes, as if throwing herself out along an invisible line, and Brienne had a split second to wonder what was happening before the great window, high on the back wall, went dark. Then there was an unearthly roar of breaking glass as colored shards rained everywhere, a blast of frigid air snuffed the last few torches that had managed to cling to an ember, and the black dragon thrust head and shoulders through the jagged opening and everyone except Daenerys herself broke for cover. Stone-calm, the queen indicated the Iron Throne, hunched and massive on its marble plinth. Uttered something, one word, in a foreign tongue – Valyrian, perhaps.

The next moment, the room well-nigh blew apart. Brienne flung herself flat as a scalding gust blasted overhead, breaking the other windows, as the dragon bathed the throne in bursts of red-and-black flame, the deep cold of the outside air battling the heat, her ears popping and her chest seared from the inside out. Through the glare, she saw the two dozen soldiers in spiked helmets striding in; they were wearing heavy, fireproof leather tabards and gauntlets, and began to pull the red-hot blades apart. The throne writhed and swayed, a great black beast in its death throes, burning like a fiery heart, until Brienne thought suddenly of Lord Stannis and his banners and his red woman and her flames, and of a shadow cutting through King Renly's green-enameled gorget like cheesecloth and blood and torches and screaming and Catelyn Stark pulling her away, away, away. She had already given up her vengeance against Stannis in White Harbor, when Ser Davos had saved her, but for a blurry dizzy moment she was back in that tent, and past and future collided terrifyingly on her from either side.

Then she blinked hard, forcing reality back to her seared eyes, and watched as the soldiers – neither Dothraki nor ironborn, Unsullied? – continued the methodical, merciless dismantling. It took less time than she thought. The legacy of Aegon the Conqueror, forged at the end of his battle, unmade by his descendant on the eve of quite a different one. The reek of hot metal scented the room as the Unsullied hammered apart the twisted blades, laying them out in rows on the flagstones, still soft and lambent, burning with molten glow in the fullers. The throne itself was scarce more than a skeleton now, like the bones of a body left after the funeral pyre had dwindled to ashes. Snow was blowing through the broken window, hissing and steaming as it struck the inferno. Its work complete, the black dragon withdrew with a clatter of falling stonework and flapped off, shrieking.

Brienne had been transfixed the entire time, held in thrall by the spectacle. As the Unsullied began to cool and temper the blades, Daenerys turned to the likewise watching, likewise dumbstruck Aegon and asked coolly, "Where are these dragons of yours, my lord?"

It took him several moments to find his tongue. "In the – in the Dragonpit, but – "
"Good." The queen turned on her heel. "I shall fly there and fetch them directly. My lord of Greyjoy – " this to the iron captain – "return to the fleet. Muster them as the first line of the city's defense. Blackwater Bay is freezing over. The enemy comes by sea."

The captain inclined his head stiffly and turned to go. As Daenerys made to follow him out, evidently to fetch her dragon and be off on her errand, one of the young Dothraki caught her arm. "Khaleesi, are you strong enough to fly alone?"

Daenerys hesitated fractionally. "Aye. Blood of my blood, go with Rakharo and see that Mago is prepared with his khalsas. Grey Worm – " to the leader of the Unsullied – "see to it that the swords reach every man who can wield one. Marwyn – " this to the bald maester – "is it true that the Others will be here by nightfall?"

"Beyond a doubt, Your Grace."

"Do what must be done, then. Whatever spells or workings might slow them, you have my permission. Go."

The maester bowed and took his leave. Everyone else was hurrying off to carry out the tasks entrusted to them, in the focused pre-battle intensity that Brienne knew well. Only now the Martell and Targaryen men who had been guarding Aegon were coming forward to accept the swords from the throne, Aegon himself was giving orders for them to post around the keep or go to fight in the city as they would, and for one odd, giddy instant, Brienne realized that it did not matter what sigil a man wore on his breast, what House he pledged allegiance to, but that they must draw together to face something far worse, something the enemy of them all.

She had some notion of going down to the city walls with the rest of the armies; if the Others breached the Red Keep itself, it was too late for everyone and everything. But even as she thought it, she knew she could not. She would stay here, fight here, die if she must. Gave fervent thanks that Lady Sansa was safely away to Highgarden, but if the creeping white tide was not halted here, Highgarden – and every other refuge of men and women in Westeros – was the next to fall. Safety was only an illusion, an –

And then, her eyes caught the Imp's from across the room. He must know of her by repute, as she knew of him, and indeed she saw him stiffen as if struck. Then after a moment of indecision, pulling the girl at his side along with him, he moved forward. "Lady Brienne," he said, raising his voice over the clamor. "If you would do me a service?"

Brienne regarded him warily. Did he want to know where Sansa was, thinking to reclaim his wife and her birthright? Or perhaps Jaime, for something worse? "Aye?"

"This is Penny." The dwarf gave the girl a half-brusque, half-gentle push forward. "Take her to some spare closet – as you will notice, she's small and won't take up much room – and make sure she stays out of the way if the rest of us should happen to be horribly killed." He shrugged, clearly trying to act as if it was only mildly of concern to him. "I'd do it, but I can't stand to see a single wretched bit of this godsforsaken place again, so I'm afraid the task falls to you."

Brienne had not expected that. She eyed him narrowly, but the Imp determinedly looked away. "Besides," he said. "I might be no warrior, but I'm not hiding under a bed. Quite frankly, I'd just as well drink my way through it, but I'll nobly refrain from that as well. At least the blue-eyed bastards will have to work if they want to kill me."
And with that, he turned and stumped off, not looking back, leaving Penny blinking bewilderedly up at Brienne. "My – my lady?"

"Come with me," Brienne said tersely. It was not the charge she had wanted or expected, but she could not leave the girl by herself in the middle of this. She already knew what she had to do, and could not think on it. She shepherded Penny out through the growing crowds, into the corridors, and, faced with the prospect of the long and winding serpentine stair, bent to lift the dwarf girl onto her back. The exertion burned in her legs and lungs as she climbed, the air feeling colder and colder the further away from the throne room they got. Until they finally reached the top, she put Penny down, and strode along the hall to the end. What am I going to say? Not long ago, she had steeled herself to never see Jaime again, and now –

Her hands were unwarrantedly clumsy, shaking, as she pushed the door open, into the dim tower room. He was going to – he was –

He wasn't there.

The shock punched her like a physical blow, rocking her back on her heels. She thought she was seeing things; she blinked hard, but it remained. The bed was disordered, empty. There was nowhere else in the small tower room he could be, and she stared madly at the window, wondering if he had somehow crawled or jumped out of it – but he could not have gone that way either, he could only have left by the door. On his own, or because someone or something had come for him? Her brain whirled madly, concluding nothing. Gods, what happened?

"My lady?" Penny ventured. "Am I to stay here?"

"You – yes." Brienne pushed the girl gently past her and into the chilly, dim chamber, knowing it was little and less of a refuge, trying to assuage her guilt. I am not responsible for her, I cannot save her. She too needed to return and fight. "Someone will come and fetch you when it's safe." It tasted sourly of a lie. If anyone lives.

Penny nodded, looking nervous but resolute, and Brienne shut the door and turned away, retracing her footsteps down the corridor, trying to settle her head. She had been prepared to face her death, or what might well be it, with the knowledge that she had told Jaime what she must, and that he was safely left behind, away from it. Now both of those were uncertain, unbalanced, no longer something for her to find solace in. She descended the stairs almost at a run. He couldn't have gone far. A badly wounded cripple, and notorious with it. Did he have a death wish? If Daenerys Targaryen was not inclined to be as forgiving as Aegon with the man who had killed her father – she might not stop to attend to such trivialities now, but later –

Brienne felt sick as she reached the bottom of the stairs. It was getting very dark; a heavy twilight suffused the dim, unlit corridors, casting thick shadows. The throne room was almost empty, everyone gone to where they had chosen to make their stand. She closed her hand around the hilt of her old-new sword; it was still warm, burning steadily with an inner heat. She wondered who it had belonged to, three hundred years ago, which of the Conqueror's foes had thrown it down on the Field of Fire. It was only then that Rock and Reach bent the knee. A Lannister's blade, perhaps, or a Tyrell's. Now hers. The world felt strange, like an old dream that had not entirely fled on waking. She crossed the floor, pushed open the heavy oaken doors, and emerged out onto the ramparts. King's Landing lay below, as always, but a King's Landing that she had never seen. It was completely dark, no lights burning in any alley or window or wynd, smothered in low-lying mist, and out to sea, as Daenerys had said, Blackwater Bay was a sheet of solid ice. A dozen or so black silhouettes of ships could just be made out, and she heard, distant and far above, the screeching cry of dragons. They are all we have.
Brienne went to the wall and peered over. Nothing. Should she unsheathe her sword now? The sky was black as ink, but there were no stars or moon, and she had to wonder if any of them would see the sun again. She was not frightened of dying, not really. If it was pain, she could stand that. It was only the losing time she feared. The not knowing. Of whether it would mean anything, or if it was utterly and simply the end.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. There was a chance for victory. However small, it was there. They had four dragons, a Greyjoy fleet, Martell and Targaryen men, a Dothraki khalasar, a maester and mage, and countless flaming swords – a motley confederation, unimaginable in any other circumstances but these, differences put aside to fight together. And if we do win, likely we will fall at one another's throats again. Though that was a problem she would quite like to –

"Seven hells. There you are. At last."

For a mad instant, Brienne was certain she was dreaming. Then she was spinning around, staring, as Jaime limped toward her, wrapped in a ragged white cloak, his dirty golden hair bare in the winter wind, holding one of the swords from the Iron Throne in his left hand. He could barely stand up, but kept on until he reached her, leaning heavily on the crenel and wincing. "Lovely night. . . for the apocalypse. . . wouldn't you say?"

"You're not – " She couldn't even finish the sentence. "You're not supposed – "

Jaime coughed, splattering blood on the stones. "I'm not dying in bed. I'm not dying as the dragon bastards want me to, stripped and shamed. I'm not dying with Cersei." He looked her dead in the eye. "I'm dying with you, wench."

Brienne should have had something, anything to say to that, but she didn't. Should I tell him about Tyrion? Surely the brothers deserved a chance to see each other once more before the end, but would they even want to? And selfishly, she wanted to keep these last hours for herself, if indeed they were. Moved to stand beside him, shoulder to shoulder. Felt, despite everything, almost abjectly relieved. "You're foolish," she said softly. "You didn't have to."

"I did." Jaime coughed again. "So it was her, then? Daenerys?"

"Aye." Brienne bit her lip. "I – I don't think she's like Aerys. If you were wondering."

"If I've wasted my life? I was." Jaime's lips tightened. "If the city was going to burn under the Targaryens' orders sooner or later, and all I got was to be called Kingslayer. Or Queenslayer. I can't remember now how many slayers I am." He barked a humorless laugh. "I've made peace with it, I suppose. I've done what I can. I'm through."

Brienne reached for his golden hand and held it hard, then let go. The wind was shrilling, making her eyes water, whispering like fell voices. The temperature was dropping fast, ice creeping across the stone seemingly of its own accord, and every hackle on the back of her neck was standing up. "Jaime," she whispered, convinced of it. "They're here."

Without a word, he raised his sword. The effort it cost him was visible in his arms, both of them staggering as the cold hit, gazing out into the darkness and realizing that it had turned eerily luminous, a faint blue glow shining like earthbound stars. Something moving, rippling, delicate as white silk. The city and the ships and the castle, all of them, this place where only politics and power and the game of thrones were supposed to be the danger, King's Landing, how could it have come to this, King's Landing under attack from the Others – here with Jaime Lannister at her side and above dragons, dragons, dragons –
And then –

Brienne never saw where the first one came from, only that it was there, springing over the wall and towering up, up up up, tall as terror, an elegant slender figure with shifting crystalline armor like moonlit shadow and unearthly blue eyes, swinging at her in a blur she barely saw – but she was turning to meet it, and while the sound the blades made when they kissed was utterly unholy, the dragonfire-imbued steel did not shatter as an ordinary sword would have, and the Other stumbled back, momentarily off guard. Then it was only a battle, only another brawl, she had fought the Brave Companions and killed them, and they could be no worse monsters than this. With all her strength, Brienne leapt after it, and gave herself up entirely.

It was fast, but so was she. It was agile, but so was she, and she had not spent all those years training for nothing. She was dimly aware of another one clambering over the edge, and Jaime turning to meet it with a smirk on his face and a jest on his lips, perhaps indeed the only way he would have cared to die, and then the black clouds were ripped apart as a dragon – she could not tell which – soared overhead, blistering the wallwalk in flames. Others were burning and blundering, but still coming, and her sword seemed to be blazing brighter and brighter in her hand. It laced through the night, a bright pennon, stitching intricate embroidery from side to side, up and down, through, across, beneath, above. She was strong, here. She was enough.

If there was a greater battle, if there was a city or a castle or a world or time still going on, Brienne did not know. It was only one foe after another, every blow and parry having to be perfect, waiting until she found a weakness and drove the length of burning steel into them, as the starlight armor cracked and fissured away and the Others began to melt, columns of icy smoke swept up in the wind. She would not let them pass, would not let any of them pass, not caring about anything except her next stroke, feeling the echoes of it judder up her arms. She was proud that she was who she was, proud that she was Brienne of Tarth, Brienne the Blue, Brienne the tall ugly freak of a woman, for this Brienne could swing a sword and fight for what she believed in, still hope and trust and love, and this Brienne was truly beautiful.

In a trance, in a thrall, Brienne fought steadily on. Sometimes she thought she caught more glimpses of the dragons, other times she thought it was only a ghost, but she was still alive, still battling. The night will end. It will. Ice bit into her face, swirling down from the black sky, scything into her lungs. One after another after another after another. I won the melee at Bitterbridge. I was stronger than them all. And over and over again, from the hollow hill to the Quiet Isle to White Harbor to the Vale to here. I can. I can. I can.

The queer emptiness of the world, the lack of resistance when she swung her blade for the hundredth or thousandth or ten thousandth time, finally caught her by surprise. The air was grey and silent, and the tower walk was littered with broken ice and blue pools like melted sky. King’s Landing still stood beneath the walls of the castle, and a faint crimson scorched the eastern horizon, flushing the underside of steelsheen clouds. The night is over. She was shaking with exhaustion, sweat freezing her clothes solid, suddenly aware that she could not lift her sword one more time without collapsing – but still the silence reigned. No movement. Nothing.

Did we win? Brienne did not know. Did not know what had happened across the city as a whole, if there had only been so many Others to begin with, if the dragons had burned them all into oblivion, or if they had to retreat at first light and would return again tonight. If the battle was over or merely beginning. If anyone had been saved. But still her. Still –

She turned slowly, so slowly. Her legs were giving out, weak with weariness, she needed to sink down, to break, to go under, to drown, but not quite yet. She was crawling on hands and knees the rest of the way across the stones, to where Jaime lay with arms outstretched, white cloak tangled
under him, sword fallen from his fingers, eyes wide and clear and utterly untroubled. He gave a
small, faint sigh as she lifted him into her arms, his head rolling into the crook of her elbow and

"Aye," she managed. "It is. We've made it. This will go into the White Book. How you were – how
you are – a hero. You are. All the songs will say so."

His colorless lips turned up in half a smile. "And the singers get to make history, I suppose," he
whispered. "Don't let them come up with anything too dreadful, wench."

"You'll be there," she told him fiercely, as if she could make it so. "You can hear them yourself. On
Tarth, remember? You'll come to Tarth. We have plenty of singers there."

Jaime was not listening. He was looking past her, brow creased in puzzlement – and then in utter,
blank shock. "Tyrion?"

Torn from her reverie, Brienne jerked her head up and followed the direction of his gaze. It felt as
if something had hit her in the stomach, driving her wind out, as she realized that the small figure
standing a few yards away, turned black by the shadow of the dawn, battered and bruised and
bloody but still breathing –

Tyrion Lannister made no sound, spoke no word, as he regarded his fallen brother. It was
impossible to tell what emotions were at play behind the mask of his squashed face. He took one
step, and then another, and squatted on Jaime's other side. "Aye," he said at last, very quietly. "It
looks as if you finally got what you deserved."

Jaime convulsed with something not laughter, closer to a sob. "I'm sorry," he choked. "About
Tysha. About – about everything."

Tyrion's face remained expressionless. His hunched shoulders shook, his fingers opening and
closing, raw and scraped, the tips blackened with frostbite. His hand moved out, retreated, then
moved back again, closing over his brother's. "Damn you."

"I know." Jaime's body shuddered with one long, racking sigh, settling back into Brienne's arms. "I
know."

The dawn turned to silver glass. Tyrion stayed unmoving, barely breathing, holding on. Brienne
held even tighter. But a glimmer of light fell over the battlements, reflecting in Jaime's opaque
eyes. He seemed to smile. Then he let out a long sigh, turned his face to her shoulder, and quietly,
softly, easily after all his suffering, he died.
It had never snowed so hard at Highgarden in all the memory of man. Thick wet flakes pelted
down from the hoary silver sky, mounding into shapeless white on the statues, the colonnaded
cloisters, the elegant slated roofs of the manor house and the red-tiled ones of the village alike,
deep enough in the open fields to reach the knee, and still falling. Bladed icicles periodically
crashed in the courtyard, and Lady Olenna was practically in conniptions over the failure of the
servants to keep the fires properly tended. As for Willas, walking had become even more of a
hazardous endeavor than usual, so he prudently stayed out of the vicinity of both his grandmother
and the slippery pathways alike. The library was not the warmest choice for this refuge, but it was
where he felt the most at ease, and where he could pretend not to notice the hours passing.

Over and over in his head, he had attempted to reckon for all possibilities. Perhaps Loras had been
killed in Aegon's failed assault on the city, left fallen on the beach as a nameless corpse, and had
never reached Margaery at all. Or he had, but they had been caught and apprehended before they
could make good their escape. Or (and this was in some ways the worst) they had both made it
safely through the underground warrens and out of King's Landing, but had then had their identities
discovered or met with some other mischance on the journey south. Would Loras possibly be as
brash to take the roseroad, with him supposed to be burned and defunct and Margaery still awaiting
formal trial by the Faith? Had they been swept up in the rumored advance of the Tarly vanguard?
There was simply no way whatsoever to know whether they were alive or dead or worse (he could
not forget Garlan's disturbing letters) and Willas felt that he would likely go insane prior to finding
out. To say nothing of the mess the Tyrells were in if Tommen had survived, was somehow still
clinging to his throne, and had acquired undeniable proof of their change in allegiance to the
Targaryens. In that case, their best hope would have to be that he was too strategically depleted and
demoralized to punish them.

With a sigh, Willas realized that his eyes were flicking uncomprehendingly over the same page he
had read, or at least pretended to, for the last hour. Sparing a glance at the window, he saw that the
peephole he had chinked out was already frosted over again, and a drift of snow on the sill seemed
to indicate that the leaks were still finding their way through. This place is not built for winter.
Highgarden rarely had to endure it, intended for the pleasures and warmth of summer, and of a
sudden Willas thought of Winterfell, with its massive stone walls, the hot springs it was built over,
tall towers and deep cellars that had withstood winters of ten, twenty, fifty years and worse. All
that, and yet it could not resist Theon Greyjoy and the ironborn sacking it. That was a bloody
shame. The Boltons were said to be rebuilding it, but then, there were a plague of ill-omened
rumors surrounding the Boltons as well. Add in everything else presently bedeviling the north, and
it seemed less than likely it would make it until the next spring. If any of us do.

Too restless to remain sitting, Willas got to his feet, hitched his crutch under his arm, and limped
down the length of the library hall to the door. His lame leg ached fiercely in the cold, provided
only incidental relief by warm poultices, and he felt rather ashamed of his lack of fettle, was not
about to go to the kitchens and ask for another one. So he stumped deliberately along the walkway,
eyes squinted almost shut and the tail of his cloak vigorously attempting to trip him. The wind
shrilled and keened, and it gave Willas more of a chill than the temperature alone would have
achieved. Someone, something, was out there.

He was almost to the end of the walk, and the blessed refuge of the chapter-house, when he caught
sight, far in the distance beyond the manor walls, of several small moving specks. Gods knew how,
seeing as the vantage was largely composed of swirling snow and mist, but they were certainly
headed in this direction, and at speed. Twenty or thirty riders by Willas' count, too many to be
Loras and Margaery, and flying no visible banners. In days past, of course, all sorts of folk had arrived to do business and pleasure and any number of occupations within the world of Highgarden, but these days were not those ones. Whatever this meant, it was extremely unlikely to be good.

Willas started to run. He was as awkward in doing so as a fledgling colt with four left hooves at the best of times, and this effort nearly defeated him altogether, but he did not stop, reversing course and dodging into the main house, slipping and skidding, snowflakes melting in his hair and oozing down the back of his neck. He caught the first passerby he happened upon and wheezed, "Riders – this way –no banners – my grandmother ought to – "

The run-into party somehow understood this or at least the gist of it, nodded, and hurried away, returning shortly with Lady Olenna, voluminously irate at being extracted from her warm (or at least warmer) solar. "Gods above, boy, if the Lord of Highgarden is destined to always be an idiot, you're making a magnificent running start at it. If it's not your brother and sister, the Targaryens with a dragon or several, or a peddler to sell us a nice pot to catch the drips, I've altogether no interest in it, and as I am liable to die from old age before that dolt of a manservant gets the fire started again, I am quite confident in concluding that – "

"My lady." The voice came from a shivering, windswept groom who had popped up unexpectedly at the end of the hallway, brushing snow out of his face as he made a quick obeisance. "You'll want to receive these visitors. Trust me."

Olenna Tyrell opened her mouth. Olenna Tyrell closed her mouth, apparently at a loss (doubtless for the first time in eighty years) for words. Then she recovered herself and said briskly, "Very well, show them to whatever room we're least likely to catch consumption in, and do someone do something about that fire. Willas, come with me."

Dutifully heeding his grandmother's autocratic snap of the fingers, Willas laid hold of the crutch with a martyred sigh and followed her into the corridor, as it tapped in time with her cane. The room that Lady Olenna had chosen (not at all by accident, regardless of appearances) for dealing with their mysterious guests lay at the end, a small antechamber hung with tapestries and emblazoned with a large Tyrell coat of arms on the wall – the inside of which, Willas happened to know, was hollow, so that one of his grandmother's minions could station themselves inside, taking careful note of the proceedings and seeing to it that any useful information reached the pertinent parties. She was weaving her webs when Lord Varys still had both his balls, Willas thought wryly, holding the door open for her as they stepped in. For the newcomers' sake, he hoped they weren't about to try anything nefarious.

A servant arrived with goblets of mulled cider, which both Willas and Lady Olenna sipped with feigned casualness. At length, the sound of footsteps in the hall, and low voices. Then the door opened, and both of them nearly upset their cider in their laps.

"My l-lady. My lord." Snow dripped off the young woman's heavy riding mantle, her sodden auburn braid, her boots, puddling on the floor. Her teeth were chattering even as she tried to hold in check, offering them each a gracious nod. "Th-thank you for receiving me."

"The pleasure is entirely mine, my dear." Lady Olenna looked as if she had cast a line at an iced-over pond and somehow reeled up a fine fat trout, and mad understanding began to war with the murk of utter bafflement in Willas' brain. What the – it couldn't be – "You have certainly grown," the Queen of Thorns went on, and upturned her wizened cheek. "Do come here, Lady Sansa, and give me a kiss."

While Willas was still staring in stupefied disbelief, Sansa Stark hesitated, then moved across the
room and gave her a quick, formal peck. "I apologize for the clandestine nature of my errand," she said, "but it was too dangerous to send word. I – I am glad to behold the fabled beauty of Highgarden at last."

The old lady snorted. "Now, child, don't start in with that nonsense of yours again. There's damned little to behold in this snow, and certainly you did not risk such a treacherous journey merely to hear Butterbumps sing *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* – I daresay that one out of all of us will make it through the winter, if we don't have to roast him and eat him first. The other questions may wait their turn, but what on earth are you doing here?"

Sansa hesitated again, then visibly steeled herself. "My lady," she said. "My lord. I have come to ask that you will do me the great honor of joining our Houses in marriage."

This had the result of rendering Lady Olenna momentarily speechless for the second time in less than half an hour, surely some sort of record. Her eyes narrowed and she regarded the younger woman shrewdly, calculating, any multitudes of wheels and gears clearly turning. "By which such remarkable offer, you mean yourself, surely?" she said after a moment. "Collecting husbands, are you? There's a distinguished legacy, but – "

"If you refer to Tyrion Lannister, he is no longer of concern." Sansa flushed, but kept her composure. "He has fled Westeros and is unlikely to ever return, and I had an annulment filed with the Faith before I left the capital."

"Did you?" Lady Olenna arched a brow. "That was clever. You have been up to all sorts of things, haven't you? But my dear, you'll understand if I have to ask a few questions, just between us hens. The north is presently the very image of what the seventh hell will resemble on the day Stannis Baratheon gets a good look at it, and unlikely to do anyone the least amount of good in the meanwhile. The gods only know when spring will come again, and when it does. . ." She shrugged. "If you've annulled one husband not to your liking, what's to stop you getting shut of a second? It does rather run in the family, you know."

"I have no intentions of such a thing." At the old lady's nod, Sansa sank into a chair across from them. Willas was watching her intently, trying to take her measure; she sensed his regard and glanced up, their eyes momentarily catching. Pretty, surely – in fact, quite beautiful. And not the stammering, terrified girl that Margaery and Lady Olenna had first cozened in King's Landing. He was intrigued by her beyond a doubt, all his old thoughts of what sort of match they would have made rushing up unchecked, and wondered what she saw of him. If she had seen anything, yet. She surely had not come rushing down here to Highgarden out of some newly discovered and dumbfounding love of him; she wanted something, and now it fell to his grandmother to haggle it out of her what.

"I see," the Queen of Thorns said approvingly. "Marvelous things, intentions. My late lord husband intended to stop farting quite so abominably, and to bathe more than once a month, and to not pick his teeth at feasts, and yet he never quite got around to any of them. You are a lovely girl, Sansa, and you know I'm terribly fond of you, but let us be frank. Wedding you did not do the Imp the slightest bit of good, though I am prepared to concede that I am not sure what *would* have done him good, what with King Joffrey so tragically dropping dead. In fact – "

"You killed him." Sansa's expression had an odd remoteness, as if seen through a ghostly, frozen lake. "You and Lord Baelish, with the amethysts from my hairnet. I was taken by him to the Vale, where I masqueraded some time as Alayne Stone, his natural daughter. After he killed my aunt Lysa and became Lord Protector, I was betrothed to Harrold Hardyng, but kidnapped by one Ser Shadrich, a hedge knight who had guessed my true identity, before we could be wed. I killed him
and escaped, and after much trial found my way to the riverlands and the Brotherhood without
Banners, led by Lady Stoneheart." She paused and swallowed. "I acquired their allegiance, led
them back to the Vale, won the Burned Men as well, and returned to find that my cousin, Lord
Robert Arryn, was dead. I was brought to a sham trial for his murder, nearly wed to Lord Baelish
by force, and saved instead by the Brotherhood, whereupon we overthrew Lord Baelish's control
of the Vale and placed him under arrest, in the custody of Lady Stoneheart. After Ser Addam
Marbrand arrived from White Harbor, claiming that the north was under threat from an ancient foe,
I sent the Burned Men there to fight, and traveled south to King's Landing, with the intention of
annulling my marriage to Tyron. While there, I learned that King Tommen is dead, and a prince
calling himself Aegon Targaryen has taken the throne. It was under his auspices that I hastened on
here, to make my proposal of marriage. So, my lady. That is what I have been doing."

Willas realized his mouth was open, and shut it. Aegon succeeded? The crown is his? The last they
had heard, the prince had been curtly rebuffed, fled in disgrace and defeat. He could not hold it in.
"How?"

Lady Sansa turned to glance at him, her eyes as blue as cornflowers. "Dragons."

"Dragons?"

"Aye. Two." Sansa shrugged. "I do not know where he found them, but he has. Now that he is king,
he has a vested interest in our marriage. The possibility of a great alliance, united beneath a
common crown, still stands. I can offer you the loyalty and riches of the lords of the Vale and of
the north, in exchange for your men and gold and swords." She leaned forward, intent on them. "A
firstborn son would inherit Highgarden, and the next would inherit Winterfell. We – we could.
Build again from the snow and ashes. Someday."

Despite himself, Willas was fascinated by her, and considerably impressed. Growing up under the
tutelage of his grandmother had long since disabused him of any remote notion that women were
the weaker sex, and he could almost see the bones of iron beneath her pale porcelain skin, the set
determination in her face. It sounded too idealistic a plan by half, but refusing it sounded far worse.
This was an unthinkable gift to have dropped into their laps, even with the news that Margaery (if
she lived) had been widowed for the third time. Wedding her to Aegon would likely result in that
worthy's prompt demise as well, but that was a conundrum for another day. Somehow their gambit
to wager on the Targaryens had paid off, and with dragons –

"Just the one thing," Willas said. "The annulment. You are certain that the Faith will grant it? With
my sister still standing condemned and awaiting trial in their sight, we must not give them further
reason to be vexed with House Tyrell."

"I delivered it by my own hand to one of the Most Devout." Sansa licked her lips, for the first time
looking younger than she was. "King Tommen is dead, the Lannister line snuffed out. King Aegon
will do whatever he can to ensure that this marriage happens."

"Kings must be good for something," Lady Olenna agreed. "What with all this fuss about them,
though I've never quite worked it out exactly myself. Well, my dear. I must say, you drive a hard
bargain. And if you're wedded and bedded, what with the tales that the Imp was indeed quite
impotent, then that's the scales tipped in our favor." She pushed herself to her feet with her cane.
"I've scant experience planning weddings of the regular sort, but I suppose that's a boon in this
case. I'll fetch a servant and have you made decent, child, and we might be drear and cold and
mingy compared to our usual splendor, but you'll still have a wedding feast. Willas, I won't have
you married looking like a ragamuffin, so for heaven's sake comb your hair at least. Chop chop."

Prospective bride and bridegroom alike gaped at her. "Now?"
"Well, of course," the Queen of Thorns snapped. "What did you think, we were going to pay for seventy-seven courses and a gilded lute first? No one will be playing The Rains of Castamere at this wedding, thank you very much, and Willas, do try not to die in the treacle pudding, it would put rather a damper on things. Nor the cheese, or I shall be quite cross. Well? Do you intend to goggle at me like a pair of fools, or get on with it?"

The latter was elected, and Willas, still in a daze, was hastened off to his chambers, upholstered into his fine green velvet tabard and mantle with gold fittings, his thick chestnut curls attacked with a comb, and shuttled to the looking glass to examine the results. They were, admittedly, not altogether displeasing. He was tall and thin, almost whole-looking if the crutch was taken away, not a horribly unbecoming bridegroom; comely enough, if comely was what she wanted, though he doubted it. Everything still had a distinct tinge of the surreal. He did rather hope he was not struck down by a bolt from the blue, all things considered, and made a note not to drink any wine. Even here in the heart of Highgarden, and even knowing quite well what had happened to Joffrey, no use tempting fate.

With one more wondering look at the stranger in the mirror, he turned his back on it and prepared to face his destiny.

The Tyrell family sept was adorned with plaster roses, the statues of the Seven richly gilted and jeweled, countless racks of candelabras set with white tapers, wax overflowing in elaborate gremlins. Willas walked carefully, unsteady on his feet without the usual aid of his crutch, ignoring the stabbing pains in his leg. His grandmother, several of his young cousins, and sundry other witnesses, the few who could be scraped up at such short notice, stood at the front, and the family septon waited between the altars of the Father and the Mother, still looking rather surprised himself. There was no music, no incense, barely even any light; half the tapers inexplicably refused to take the flame, and the small sept was dim, cold, and hushed, the paradoxically ideal setting for a rushed, secret wedding. Snow scratched at the windows. Willas could hear his heart pounding in his ears; he felt absurdly afraid that Sansa had fled back into the snows from whence she had appeared, that this was all some sort of demented and cruel joke. Perhaps it was just some sort of dream, a phantom from the winter night. This could not – could not –

And then there was a murmur from the small congregation, and he looked.

Lady Sansa entered, accompanied by the fearsome wildling who had ridden in her escort and a few other of her men. She was wearing one of Margaery's gowns and a plain white mantle, devoid of the usual elaborate ornaments and family sigils of a maiden's cloak, her hair unbound and wreathed in white lilies from the glass hothouses. She walked by herself up the aisle, face utterly solemn and intent. She said nothing, and he said nothing, as she took her place across from him, but his heart clenched a little at her loveliness. He offered her his hand, and she accepted it.

Together, they turned to face the septon, and the ceremony began. The seven blessings and the seven songs and the seven vows, although in their briefer version rather than their full, formal one, which was good, as Willas doubted his leg would cooperate for it. At moments when the septon began to wax too long-winded, he was prompted along by an impatient cough from Lady Olenna, and the sept was almost dark, lit only by the flickering candles, when it was time to change the cloaks. Willas hoisted the cloak of Tyrell green, worked so heavily with gold that he could feel its weight, and carefully undid the clasp of the white one, letting it drop to the chill floorstones. Then he swept the colors around Sansa's shoulders, catching something in her face that gave him an odd chill. No matter her name or fate or the man she weds, she will always be a Stark.

The septon raised his crystal, pronouncing Willas of House Tyrell and Sansa of House Stark to be one flesh, one soul, one heart, and cursed be the one who came between them. She has heard this
before, and she is scarce fifteen. Willas stole another sidelong look at his bride, trying in vain to read her face. She has learned too well. Is this only another mummer's play to her? His grandmother had always told him that the most successful marriages were the ones based on amiable mutual respect and essential romantic indifference, but he was already aware that he did not think he could manage it. Winterfell did not matter to him; he had never had much interest in the game of thrones. She did, much more.

Sansa turned to face him. "With this kiss I pledge my love," she told him, impeccably correct, "and take you for my lord and husband."

"With this kiss I pledge my love," he echoed, "and take you for my lady and wife."

He lowered his head to hers, and their cold lips met. It was a brief kiss, though not unpleasing, and at least she did not flinch away from him and flee from the sept screaming. Then it was done, and over, and they were evidently married, but not yet, not truly, he knew that. It was still only a puppet show, and he kept waiting for the master to pop up from behind the curtain and call an end to it. What are we doing? What are any of us?

They emerged from the sept, not much of a wedding party – no minstrels to play and sing, no girls to scatter flowers, only a dozen of them struggling across the snowy courtyard and into the small hall. The cooks, to their credit, had managed to concoct something vaguely suitable for a festive occasion; though there were only three courses, there was mutton and onions baked in a pastry coffyn, swan in heavy cream, baked quinces, candied apples and pears, plover with currants and plum-sauce, and lampreys with pepper, cinnamon and garlic. Sansa ate but sparingly, plucking at her plate like a sparrow, and Willas shot her sidelong glances, unsure whether he should offer her the ceremonial cup that man and wife were supposed to drink from. At least with his leg he would be spared the indignity of leading the dance, but then it occurred to him that perhaps she would have wanted that.

Just then Sansa, as if reading his mind and recollecting her courtesies, turned to him gracefully. "Your brother Garlan was most gallant to me at my first wedding," she said, "when I was greatly in need of it, and of course everyone knows of Ser Loras' valor. If such is the stuff of the men of House Tyrell, then I count myself most blessed indeed."

"Ah – thank you, my lady." He took her offered hand and kissed it. "I have generally been accorded the bore of my kin, it is true, but you may have my word that I am neither Joffrey nor the Imp. I – I hope that we shall find some small measure of happiness."

Sansa's gaze flickered momentarily, but revealed nothing of what she may have thought of this. She watched intently as Butterbumps got up on one of the trestle tables and launched into some bawdy tune, but Willas could sense her fear. Small wonder, if she had been forced into an unwanted marriage at one wedding, her brother and lady mother cut down at another, and then forced to flee in fear of her life from a third, that she viewed this prospect with no great relish. At least we can get through this one without a decapitation. So Willas hoped, at any rate.

Finally the feast was through, and everyone's minds, well lubricated by the copious amount of wine, mulled mead, and hippocras, had turned to the main event. Willas ordered them to do as they would with him, but to take Sansa discreetly and privately to the nuptial bedchamber; he saw no reason they should have to make this more upsetting than it already was. Hence, once he was sure that his bride had been bundled off, he allowed them to crack all the jests and jollity at his expense, until he was borne through the door more or less as naked as his nameday. But as they reached the great curtained bed, his grandmother grabbed him by the wrist. "Pluck her and plant her," she whispered. "Twice or thrice, as needed. We shall have no such loopholes as the Lannisters left."
Feeling a sudden knot in his stomach, Willas nonetheless managed to summon a stiff nod, and was inserted between the curtains – as Sansa, who had been clearly waiting in tense, expectant silence, rolled away to avoid being squashed. Feeling rather self-conscious about being unclothed before her, Willas hastily grabbed the counterpane and pulled it over himself, waiting until he was quite sure the last dawdlers had returned to the hall before he checked to see that the door was shut. He got out and limped painfully over to bar it as well, then left with no further delay, turned back to the bed and the girl-woman that waited within.

They stared at each other for a long moment. She was only wearing a shift, and her hair waved on her shoulders in lustrous auburn locks. He reached a hand out to gently brush it away from her face, and saw her brace herself not to flinch.

"It's all right, my lady," he said, feeling foolish. "I – I won't hurt you."

Sansa bit her lip, then nodded. "I apologize, my lord."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Faintly, he could still hear the snow scratching at the window, wondered how deep it would have fallen by morning. "Would you like to touch me first? As you wish, of course."

She considered again, then made up her mind, edging hesitantly closer. Her fingertips ghosted light as dewdrops over his hair, his face, his chin, along his shoulders, and then down his arms, circling the fine bones of the wrists. He sat very still, then when she took her hands away, smiled at her.

"See, there, that's good. Do you like that?"

"I am your wife, my lord." Sansa raised those big blue Tully eyes to him again. "We should bind it so, for your surety and mine."

"Ah – of course," Willas agreed, discomfited. Thinking it might be of ease in the process, he reached for the decanter and goblets on the sideboard, and poured them each a few swallows; Sansa took her cup from him and sipped composedly. Then when that was gone as well, he steeled himself and said, "My lady, would you mind if I kissed you?"

"It is our wedding night," she said again. "I imagine you shall do a great deal more than that."

He quirked an eyebrow again. Then he took her face in his hands and gently, carefully, tipped their mouths together.

At first it wasn't much more than what it had been in the sept: a brief, shy encounter, dry and passionless, formal as signing a charter. But gradually it deepened, experimenting with opened mouths, with lips and tongues, Willas' hands sliding down Sansa's back and pulling her against him. From there, in a sort of trance, it was easy, or at least easier. He bore her down into the sheets beneath him as gently as he possibly could, waited until she shifted and silently gave him permission, and did what must be done, bonding the two of them to one. He had scarce more knowledge of it than she did, having never been the sort of man to consort with harlots, and comforted himself with the fact that at least they could be ignorant together. With this done, he intended to wait at least a year – or until his wife regarded him with something besides cool, resigned duty – before attempting to establish any sort of consistent conjugal relationship. He still would have waited, wanted it to be better than this somehow, but knew that was the sentimental part of him, the part that must be ignored, or at least muted, if the Tyrells were to win in the game of thrones at long so very last.

Later, they slept, and woke in the dim, sunless dawn of a frigid winter morning. The snow had stopped, but barely, and when Willas hobbled to the window and peered out, he could see nothing
but white for every direction. A hushed, frozen quiet lay on the world, the sort that made him want to go back to bed for another several hours, but there was a rustling behind him, and Sansa pulled on a dressing gown and stepped out. "It seems I made it here just in advance of the worst of the storm, my lord."

"So you did," he told her, and moved to see if she would let him kiss her; she did, and even wore a small smile when they stepped apart. They then dressed and presented themselves for an intimate breakfast with Lady Olenna, who observed them keenly as they stepped into her solar and seated themselves. Willas could feel her gaze burning into them, so he finally cleared his throat and said, "Good morning, Grandmother."

"Good morning, Lord and Lady Tyrell." The Queen of Thorns drizzled honey on her potage. "I'm rather surprised to see you both up so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed already, truth be told, but then, you'll have time to practice later. Lie back and think of Westeros, as it were. You, dear, was my grandson an oaf?"

Sansa's cheeks colored faintly at such a frank inquiry, but she answered diplomatically. "Not in the least, my lady. He was... most kind."

"Good," Lady Olenna said cheerfully. "I knew we had to get lucky at some point. At least it is better than hearing – gods above, what is it this time?"

A servant had entered in evident haste, bending to the old lady's ear to whisper something that caused her to frown, then sit quite straight and make a curt gesture ordering him off again. Willas and Sansa sat awkwardly, unsure what to say or do, until a second bedraggled party of travelers was shown in, snow-soaked and dripping and ragged, half a dozen or so. Sansa's wildling bodyguard, whose name Willas thought was Timett, took a reflexive step forward, hand on his sword, but she beckoned him off. Glancing at the newcomers, Willas thought – he thought, it might be, it just might –

"Garlan is dead." Loras Tyrell, grey-faced, weather-beaten and exhausted, shrugged down the hood of his cloak, steadying himself on the sideboard. "It is thanks to his valiant sacrifice we are here; if we had not come across the remnants of his fleet following our escape from King's Landing, we would never have made it home at all. Oldtown is in flames, the Citadel rumored sacked and fallen by Euron Crow's Eye and the ironborn. But it is more than that. The coast is swarming with..."

"With what, lad?" Lady Olenna prompted, no more than mildly surprised to lay eyes on her itinerant grandchildren.

"Monsters." Loras blew out a slow breath, reaching behind him to give an arm to his sister, as Margaery – equally filthy, starving, and freezing-looking – slowly sank into a chair. "Blue-eyed monsters. The Others are not merely coming. They are here. By now, they may well have reached the capital."

Everyone was silent, stunned and unmoving. Willas' grief for his brother struggled with the dawning realization that Highgarden was no refuge from the war and woe and winter of the north, that the fate of mankind itself may hang in the balance. Sansa had said something about the new-made King Aegon having dragons, two of them in fact, but would that be sufficient? If he died, if King's Landing fell, then hope would be all but snuffed out. At the moment, getting aboard ship and fleeing to the Summer Isles was starting to look like the most desirable option, but the Others would eventually follow there as well, to every corner of the world. There is nothing, no stopping them. No time.
Even the dauntless Lady Olenna had to take a moment to swallow that tough gristle. At last she said, "Are you quite sure?"

"Aye." Loras wavered on his feet. "We must marshal the remaining strength of Highgarden and make what stand we can. This is past all other fights, all other rivalries. The North may be well out of reach already, but – " At that moment he spotted Sansa, and his mouth fell open.

"Brother," Willas said swiftly. "Sister. May I present Lady Sansa of House Stark, whom both of you will know – and now, my own lady wife."

"Lady. . . Sansa?" Margaery blinked. "It is. . . it is good to see you again. And you – you have joined our family at last?"

"So I have," Sansa acknowledged. "I had not heard that you were free from your confinement by the Faith."

Margaery flushed. "That was nothing but vile lies, concocted by Cersei Lannister from her jealousy and spite. My brave brother rescued me after coming to the city with Aegon Targaryen's forces, and now Garlan has paid that price again in blood."

"Aye," the Queen of Thorns agreed, "and swine will soar past treetops before we let you go to face the hypocritical nattering of a lot of old men in gilded smallclothes, so don't worry, my dear, you're safe now. But you still look rather as if there is something you wish to tell me. I do hope it's nothing alarming. I don't do well with surprises at my age."

"More or less." Loras turned. "While we were on the road, we had curious tidings from Dorne. Princess Myrcella was supposedly murdered by Obara Sand, one of the Red Viper's bastards; I heard that all the way back at Storm's End with Aegon's forces, before we left for the first assault on King's Landing. But no one was ever able to ascertain how exactly this was to have taken place – and, apparently, with good reason. With Joffrey and Tommen dead, she is the last living heiress of House Lannister."

Lady Olenna frowned. "Did you say is?"

"Aye." Loras looked pleased. "It was a feint. A clever bluff. Prince Doran got her away in time, and some little handmaid of Myrcella's was killed in her place. After which, the last remnants of the princess' escort decided, rather sensibly, to get the bloody hell out of Sunspear, and so they went on the run. Whereupon, before reaching safety, they were intercepted by Garlan's fleet. The war – at least in the realm of men – is won, Grandmother. We have her."

Lady Olenna arched an eyebrow. "Really."

"Aye." Loras beckoned, and a small, black-cloaked figure was marched forward, as the deep hood fell back to reveal the girl's disfigured face, ear gone and the hideous stitch of scar tissue across her cheek. Princess Myrcella Baratheon stood silent and still, awaiting her fate as a great lady should. "So, then. Victory."
Davos

He feared to fall asleep, to glance away for a moment, to do anything but stare at his new fingers, and the way they shone in the feeble light, a fire seeming to dwell in the heart of the black glass. He could not feel much with them, but he could pick up the skin of whatever foul wildling draught Tormund had left, and drink it for himself, not an invalid waiting to be pitied and fed. He could touch his own face and pull up his own blankets, could even think of sailing again, of lifting his sons aloft, of holding his wife's face. The world was made new and possible once more, some flame of hope in the darkness, the snows of winter. Even here, after nothing but pain and misery and travail and terror, there was still the smallest reason to think he had not been a fool to persevere unto the bitter end, and for that at least, Davos Seaworth was glad.

The camp was grey and bitterly cold, and shadows moved like ghosts beyond the walls of the tent. Davos lay still, listening. To his eye, Stannis' purpose at the Dreadfort was now complete – he had survived the march, taken a fortress said to be invincible, reclaimed his Hand, and thanks to Theon Greyjoy, killed the Bastard of Bolton and gained possession of the true Lightbringer. Now with Jon Snow come to join him, as well as a living dragon, Stannis' long-suffering cause seemed poised to see its day of glory at last. He had the Manderlys and the mountain clans behind him, and could lay a fair claim to the loyalty of the rest of the north for ridding them of their monstrous new overlords and bringing Rickon Stark back from the wastes of Skagos. If the Others and wights could be stopped... if the Long Night could end...

It had not escaped Davos' attention, even among his giddy dreams of home and hearth, that such a victory might well have to include his own demise. After all, it was his poisoned blood that had nearly turned Ramsay into an Other (at least, such as they had gathered from Greyjoy's stammering recollections) and that could not be left unaccounted for. *I will give my life if I must,* the onion knight told himself; after all, he nearly had, several times. But it had been easier when he thought there was scarce anything left to sacrifice. And he wanted to see the end. He felt that by now, he had earned it.

Davos glanced over at the silent shapes of the Greyjoy siblings, curled beneath their ratty furs and blankets. *They have been brave beyond all ordinary measure. They deserve it as well.* Theon had given Lightbringer to Lord Snow, but Asha's injuries were so grievous that she had not yet regained consciousness. *Is the poison of the Others in her as well?* Davos wondered. Or was it still only him? His new hands had been fashioned by Lord Snow, after all, and whoever that man was, *whatever,* it was very far from anything safe, sane, or mortal.

He was just chewing over these unsatisfactory thoughts yet again when the heavy flap of the tent lifted and rustled aside, and Tormund Thunderfist ducked in. "Up ye get, lad," the old wildling announced. "They've summoned you at once, you and them squids. Can you manage it, or are you needin' me to hold your cock while you piss? Don't bother returning the favor, you couldn't manage mine even wi' two good hands. *Har!"

A reluctant smile plucked at Davos' mouth; despite the obvious vast differences in culture, taste, and temperament (not to mention simple cleanliness and a sense of social decorum) something about Tormund reminded him of the old Lyseni rogue Salladhor Saan, and he was always at peculiar ease with pirates. "No need, I'll do it myself," he said, pushing himself onto an elbow. "You may inform His Grace that I will attend him at once."

"What?" Tormund looked vastly insulted at the implication that he would – alive, dead, or undead – be caught fetch-and-carrying for Stannis Baratheon in any capacity. "It's not for the bloody *king*
that I've come. It was Lord Snow that ordered it, and it's Lord Snow that's waiting. King too, aye," he added, clearly as an afterthought. "Best not keep 'em."

"No, I don't suppose," Davos murmured, hewing himself upright and standing unsteadily on his own two feet for what felt like the first time since Ramsay had captured him in the snow. He felt lightheaded and ill and sore, but gulped resolutely until the urge to vomit had passed, and clad himself in his heavy fur-and-leather wrappings – seeing Tormund shoot furtive glances at his glittering black-glass fingers, but evidently deciding it wiser not to enquire. Davos pulled on gloves, not wanting to attract more attention, but kept flexing them, moving them. Gods, he had forgotten the feeling of having two whole hands, two working hands, neither shortened nor maimed. Lord Snow has given me my life back, but what does he mean to take in return?

His dressing finished, Davos went to help Tormund with the Greyjoys, who were significantly more of an impediment. Theon was mostly uninjured, apart from frostbite, burns, and fear, and could walk if needed, but he flatly refused to leave Asha, and she could not be moved. Nor was leaving them behind an option, as Tormund said the entire camp was summoned unless they were dead and frozen in their graves, and the army was on the verge of pulling out of the Dreadfort besides, preparing to march to wherever this final act would take them. Whether to King's Landing for the crown, or to Storm's End to sleep a hundred years, or back to the wilderness of the north forever, Davos did not know. He had given up guessing.

At last, it was decided for them to pull Asha on a sledge, such as the one Lord Manderly was making use of; the clansmen had come and taken him away some hours previously. Tormund harnessed himself in as Theon anxiously made sure his sister was warmly covered, and in such fashion, they emerged from the tent into the dim, bone-achingly bitter twilight of a sunless winter dawn.

The Dreadfort loomed on the horizon, black and spectral, triangular merlons chewing into the milky sky and low-hanging fog. Its gates were broken, its towers slumped, the crowned stag capering above the violated battlements; the Bolton banners had been cut down and burned in the nightfires still smoldering sullenly at the foot of the mighty foundation-blocks. Just the look of it gave Davos a cold grue. This is a haunted place now. Dark and evil. He wondered if Stannis meant to keep his vow to rend it stone from stone, and decided he would be a fool to doubt it. He had, after all, never known the king to break one yet.

Still, no matter how eerie and impressive the sight of the ruined castle was, there was one yet greater. The green-and-gold dragon, wingspan broad enough to nearly cast the camp in shadow, scales bright as jewels in the murk, circled lazily one more time and then was called down by a sharp gesture from its master, who stood alone, waiting. Looking at him gave Davos even more of a chill. Jon Snow's long brown hair and weather-worn Night's Watch blacks flapped madly in the rising wind, but he gave no hint of feeling it, or even noticing the approaching men – until he suddenly lifted his head and met their gaze. His eyes were as dark and unsettling as a bottomless abyss, two chips of onyx in his pale face, and the faint glow, emanating from the sword sheathed at his waist, lent him an unearthly radiance, cold and beautiful and terrible. And just then, much as he was grateful to the Lord Commander, Davos Seaworth did not want to come a step nearer to him.

Nonetheless, as Stannis' remaining men closed in, he had to. Jon caught sight him among the crowd and gave him a curt nod, which Davos returned awkwardly. The bulk of the dragon at Snow's back cut the cold wind, as well as providing a deep, primordial heat that the freezing soldiers clustered gratefully towards. Even Davos could not resist edging in, feeling it sink into him like the wash of a warm bath. He let out a shuddering sigh, but did not relax his guard, or cease to glance from side to side. By the Seven, where was Stannis?
At last, he saw him. The king strode from his tent, dressed in splendid finery: a cloth-of-gold tabard with the Baratheon stag picked out in jet and chalcedony and black pearls, the fiery heart stitched with red-gilded thread and rubies, his heavy fur cloak trimmed in vair and orphrey. He wore a hauberk of leaf-scaled iron beneath the tabard, polished mirror-bright, and bronze vambraces, gauntlets, and greaves. On his head was set his crown, no other hood or cap despite the cold, and around his waist was buckled his sword, the false Lightbringer. He was a grim, glorious figure, like something out of a legend, and the ranks drew silently apart, inclining their heads, to allow him to pass through to Lord Snow's side. Behind him, carrying an old and broken warhorn, was a knight whom Davos, to his surprise, recognized: Ser Justin Massey, not nearly as smiling and chivalrous and careless as usual. His tousled fair hair was filthy and unwashed, and a furtive redness in his eyes looked almost as if he had been weeping. But what on earth? If Stannis was garbed so richly to accept the official surrender of the Dreadfort and begin his triumphant procession south, why would he –?

A cold finger of disquiet touched the back of Davos' neck, but he sternly quashed it and told himself to pay attention. He fixed his gaze on the king, who in turn was watching the muster with eyes like the sky before a storm. Northmen – Liddles, Wulls, Flints. Baratheon men – Carons, Estermonts, Horpes, Morrigens, Swanns, and more. Edmure Tully and the Manderly force he had brought from White Harbor, their wounded Lord Wyman, and of course, Tormund, Davos, Theon, and Asha. All of those who, for one reason or another, had followed Stannis' banner, fought with him, bled for him, let him lead them even into hell and darkness, sailed to distant corners of the world for him, suffered and sacrificed. And as the last latecomers crowded in, trying to peer over their fellows for a better look, Davos thought that for the first time in his life, Stannis Baratheon was lost for words, overcome by a surge of emotion. He opened his mouth, then shut it, and had to swallow. But when he spoke at last, his voice was the same as ever.

"Men of my service," the king began. "You have all proved your worth too many times to be reckoned, and you have once more fought bravely here. Now, the time has come. Lord Snow – " he made a terse acknowledgement of the creature standing next to him – "has retrieved the true Lightbringer from the turncloak, and taken command of great power. By it, I mean to keep the oath I swore, to bring the Dreadfort to ruin and ashes. After that. . . there is one final matter to attend. My knight Ser Justin Massey has returned from Braavos, and brought with him a certain horn. The Horn of Dawn, it is called, and once mended – and sounded – will mean that the last struggle against the Others is begun. It is an old and powerful force beyond our knowledge. It must be blown."

Sorcery, Davos thought. This did nothing to assuage his growing unease. Where is this going? Who blows it, and then –?

"Furthermore," Stannis continued, "it must be blown by Azor Ahai, the Prince who was Promised. That is. . . it is Lord Snow." The grinding of his teeth might have leveled the Dreadfort itself. "But he cannot do so. He has already sounded the Horn of Winter, and what he is now is of a power fundamentally opposed to it. Yet still we have the horn. Still have a man who has borne a sword called Lightbringer, who was seen in the flames of the red priests as the hero reborn. This man can step in. Can serve as Azor Ahai – for so long, having believed he was. Can blow the horn, and see his duty done at last."

Seventeen hells. Davos could see it then. Stannis. Stannis will blow the Horn of Dawn. That was what Melisandre saw in her conjurings, why she believed he was Azor Ahai, why she came from Asshai to serve him. He will do it, he will fulfill the prophecy and unloose old magic upon the world, a force greater than even the Others, and in so doing –

He stared at the king, understanding at last, and horribly. He has not dressed for a triumphant
A murmur was beginning to travel the gathered men as they realized the same, but Stannis raised a fist, and it quieted. "Aye," the king said simply. "I will die. Lord Snow will return to Castle Black, and do what he must. If we are strong enough, if we face it and do not fail, the Long Night will be over. So we must pray, at least. And so, you are released. Your charge to me is ended. My Hand and heir, Lord Davos, may choose to take up my claim to the throne, and in such case, I expect you to fight as long and loyally for him as you ever did for me. But if not..." He paused. "Serve no usurpers or madmen. Do justice and live rightly. Burn a nightfire for me. And remember. Remember always."

A trancelike silence reigned over the men, the camp, seemingly the very world. Stannis looked at them a moment more, then turned. "Lord Snow. It is time."

Jon nodded. Then laid one black hand on his sword, and drew it.

At once, a dazzling, red-gold light blazed from the blade, pulsing and dancing over the white world. At the same time, Jon swung up onto the dragon's back and shouted something in a foreign tongue – Valyrian, perhaps, though Davos could not be sure – and they took off in a rush of wings, men staggering as the force of the backwash hit them, swooping to the castle on the horizon and ringing it in fire. Lightbringer sketched as elegantly as an illuminator's quill, directing it in flashes and sweeps, as the dark ramparts of the Dreadfort lit up in unholy inferno – towers tottering and sagging, windows exploding, beams crumbling, as even the mortar was seared away and the foundations gave, cracking and collapsing. It was a transfixing, terrible spectacle, and Davos could feel no grief for seeing the place of his torments finally and forever razed to the ground – neither could Theon, he imagined – but he was ever more conscious of a coldness in the pit of his stomach. A monster. Lord Snow is a monster. No man should have that much power, and he is no man. And then he was not at all certain of this plan, did not think Lord Snow could be stopped or checked or destroyed, and that far from ending the Long Night, he might instead spread it over every corner of the land.

Flaming, broken battlements thudded into the ground. Sparks fountained and exploded, scarring the sky. The din was horrendous. Winterfell is avenged, Davos thought. But that will not raise its walls again, nor give life to the dead, nor end the winter or bring the dawn. Only destroy, utterly and remorselessly, even so much as Ramsay Bolton had done. Two northern bastard boys, unlike and yet like. Snow. Snow. Snow.

The men shielded their eyes, watching as the ground shook and rocked under their feet, until the Dreadfort was nothing more than a maw of flames, burning like the mouth of the seventh hell, and Lord Snow turned the dragon and flew back. As he landed and dismounted, he looked less human than ever. There was no sun, but he cast a shadow where he stood, face blurred and distorted as if seen through broken glass or deep water. As if the good man that was Jon Snow had almost entirely burned away as well, and all that was left was the monster. Jon himself (if he even was Jon) seemed stunned, taking a moment to recollect. Then, Lightbringer still blazing in his hand, he beckoned to Ser Justin.

Massey, as any sensible person would do when faced with what was standing across from them, hastened forward, knelt, and offered up the halves of the Horn of Dawn. Jon took them, dousing them in the glow of the sword, fitting them together, shaping them with the same sure grace as he had fashioned Davos' new fingers. Then there was a crack that echoed like thunder, time seemed to stand still for an eternal instant, and he held up the Horn – whole and unbroken, except for the charblack seam that welded it together, smoking faintly.
Nobody appeared to be breathing. Davos felt a pressure on his left arm, and looked to see that Theon had clutched onto him in terror, eyes fixed on his former foster-brother – they must have grown up together a thousand years ago, when Lord Eddard Stark had taken the last living Greyjoy son from Pyke after his father’s rebellion. Now look what has become of them. But Davos pulled Theon gently off and shoved through the crowd to the front. "Your Grace. Your Grace!"

Stannis glanced up, startled and mildly peeved. "Ser Davos. I did not send for you."

Despite himself, Davos had to bite his lip on a painful chuckle; Stannis Baratheon would, indeed, be Stannis Baratheon until the very end. "No, perhaps you did not. But I – wished for a final word. Before." His throat had closed up; he could no longer speak.

"I have said to you what needs saying." Stannis shrugged irritably. "Take up my cause – or, if you consider it fulfilled, be at rest. If you can find Edric Storm, or any other of my brother Robert's bastards, bring them home, to Storm's End. I would that House Baratheon continue, even if it must be in baseborn stock. And mind your fingers, smuggler. If they're hacked off a third time, that would be quite ludicrous."

Once more, Davos choked on a weak laugh, thinking that was the closest thing to a jest he had ever heard his king make, but it hurt too much. He wanted to say many things, in fact, but he did not have the words, or the time. So he merely inclined his head, and Stannis nodded stiffly back. Then as the onion knight stepped back, struggling to keep his composure, Stannis took the Horn of Dawn from Lord Snow.

He did not look frightened in the least, nor appear to have second thoughts, but anyone who knew him at all would not have expected it. He ran a gloved hand along the old ivory, the bronze bands worked in strange glyphs, deep in contemplation. Whether it was of his ultimate victory or ultimate defeat, even in the service of something far greater than any of them, nobody could be sure. The king's face was an utter mask, frozen as the snows.

Stannis took a deep breath, threw his shoulders back. Facing the burning Dreadfort, facing east, he lifted the Horn to his lips and blew it.

For an instant there was nothing but a distant, ringing echo, resounding on the hills and the horizon and beneath their feet like drums, drums in the deep. Then it burst forth full-throated, a low and long and mighty blast, a sound to turn a man's soul to madness and send freezing shivers down his spine, thundering out, on and on, until there was no place, no time, no space where it was not. It grew larger, consuming, devouring the very world, and with no memory of falling, Davos was on his knees. The wound in his back that he had received that night on Skagos, as the Others and the wights charged up the mountain and he fought them with a dragonglass dagger, before Osha and Shaggydog came to save him, was burning madly. He clutched his hands to his face, but they were burning as well, the black glass scoring and cracking, stinging and spitting, blood running down his cheek.

His eyes were watering, he was almost blind, but Davos did not look away. He did not want to watch, but he had to. He could still see Stannis standing as proud as a statue, the horn held to his lips, as its and his last breaths boomed across the winter sky. Until at last, the echoes resounding like the beat of a great heart, it faded, and there was only the loudest and most terrible silence that could be imagined.

Stannis Baratheon went to his knees gracefully for such a big man. The Horn, smoking and splintering, fell from his hand into the snow. He seemed shrunk somehow, diminished, cold and still, as he collapsed. He landed heavily, eyes open and clear and empty – whether he saw the red god he had followed so stubbornly, or the Father to inform him of his error and read his judgment,
or nothing at all, no one would ever know. He lay still, the last trueborn son of Lord Steffon and Lady Cassana in his tomb of white, life gone.

Davos remained almost incapacitated by the pain in his back, but it felt better somehow, clearer, truer. As if the poison had been leached out of him, destroyed by the Horn’s sounding, and as he lifted his hands, his fingers, he saw to his disbelief that they were made of flesh, not stone or glass. Slowly, assailed by terrible joy and terrible grief at once, he rose to his feet. Could not take his eyes off the body of his king.

There was a stirring from nearby, and the men glanced to see Lord Snow, who also had been knocked back by the force of the Horn, momentarily staggered and weakened – but even it was not strong enough to drive the Otherness from him as it had done with Davos, for he was something else altogether, far beyond its reach. At last he said, "Do not follow me. There is no purpose in it, and you will only die sooner if you do. Go south. Return to your homes. That way, whatever happens. . ." He hesitated. "Never mind. There is nothing more you can do. Go."

"Jon?" a timid voice said. Theon's. "Where are you going?"

For a brief, unlikely moment, something almost akin to a look of tenderness crossed Jon's strange, dark, shadowed face. "To see this brought to an end. King Stannis has done his part. Mine remains. Farewell."

With that, he climbed onto the dragon's back again, and it spread its wings, launching up into the sky. It swiftly grew smaller, fading to a speck and then nothingness, as the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch flew, for the last time, north. *Never to return.*

Silent and stunned, the Baratheon men lifted Stannis' body onto a makeshift travois, folding his longsword in his hands, draping him with his standard. The camp was dismantled, the tents and stakes rolled up, all made ready for departure. Davos felt as if he was walking in a dream, belatedly realizing that he was now in command; he barely recognized his own voice giving the order to move out. They formed in two great lines across the snow, Tormund still pulling Asha's sledge, the clansmen pulling Lord Manderly's. Marching east to where the Weeping Water widened and broke up enough to be navigable, though still choked with great floes of ice, where Edmure Tully and the Manderly men had anchored the longships they had sailed up from White Harbor. They met with no obstruction; the Horn had rid the land of the Others and wights as far as it could be heard, though all the ones that were swarming the broken Wall and the rest of Westeros remained. *How can they ever be destroyed? Is that Lord Snow's last duty?* But then an awful possibility occurred to Davos, as if he might have just grasped a hint of what Jon Snow had become, and what it was that he had gone to do. *Or not do, if he chooses. The power is there. All he needs to do is reach for it, and bring everything to darkness.*

The Baratheon force was so decimated that there was room for the extra men on the ships, even if they rode quite low in the frigid water once everyone was aboard, creaking and groaning. Davos stood in the bow, looking up at the merman of House Manderly, the banners belling out in the stiff wind. *So I am going back after all.* The world sprawled before him, terrifying in its possibilities. He could proclaim himself king in Stannis’ stead, or take up smuggling again, or go home to Cape Wrath and see if Marya and Steffon and Stanny were still there, or perhaps he had only ever dreamed them. He could go in search of Edric Storm. He could sail to the Summer Isles, to the Jade Sea, to the dragons on the map, to the uttermost edge, and over the waterfall into the gods' country. Or he could go inside, sit by the hearth, and wait for the world to end.

The sky was a bruised purple, foreboding anvils of clouds piling up in the north, and the chill was savage. Davos eyed the horizon with a sailor's eye, though even a green landlubber could have seen
the scale of the storm that was coming. It gave him a colder feeling yet, even through the numbness, as the ships began to raise anchor and move into the current, torches guttering like fallen stars in the deepening night. He glanced at Stannis' body where it lay in state on the deck, the gold of the banner shining bright. _My lord, forgive me._

The wind drove them hard into the Shivering Sea, and Davos finally went below. He did not think he would sleep much, but he was pulled under as if by a great weight, hounded by strange and demented dreams. When he woke at last, he realized that he was weeping, but he barely knew how or why or for who. Just lay there, silently shaking, so tired, tired beyond all believing. Stared dully at the cramped ceiling of the berth, half-formed thoughts and plans drifting just out of reach, receding back into nothingness when he tried to grasp at them.

He had to take the king home to Storm's End, that much was certain. Despite his acrimonious relationship with the place, Stannis would want to rest there, whether buried in the Baratheon family crypt or burned with the rites of R'hllor and scattered across Shipbreaker Bay, where he had watched his parents drown. Davos did not want to give his king to the power of the red god one last time, but Stannis' last wishes should be followed, as near as they could be made out. _He would not like to lie trapped in the darkness as he was during the siege, waiting for an onion knight to break the cordons and bring him food. To save him. But I could not save him now._ Davos wanted to weep again, but his eyes were hot and dry. The world had changed, would never quite be the same. _Whether it turns to a beginning or an end, only the gods can say._

With the wind keening like a lost soul, and the storm still dark and threatening, the longships were borne on the breast of a southward current past Widow's Watch, following the remote, rocky coast. When he came on deck again, Davos could not help but looking back, as if to divine what might have taken place back at Castle Black, if Lord Snow had reached it at all, or if the clouds hinted something even more sinister. The sky seemed flattened and fragile, like a pane of glass that could be shattered at any instant and let the darkness of the void gulp them up. _Something is wrong. Or everything._

Nonetheless, they reached White Harbor as dusk was falling that evening, though that was a formality since the sun still had not risen all day. _The Horn of Dawn has been sounded, and yet there is no dawn._ The beacon on Seal Rock was dark, the city hunching defensively on its hill, the bells of the Sept of Snow calling deep and dolorous. But that was the only sign of life; it looked almost empty, the harbor devoid of ships, no warm glow emanating from shops or windows, shut down and silent. _Where have all the people gone?_

The Manderlys were plainly wondering the same thing, whether they had gone to fight only to return and find their home sacked and violated. The longships entered the Inner Harbor, past the burned hulks of the Lannister fleet that Davos had watched destroyed with Ser Wylis and Lady Brienne; he wondered what had become of her. He had smuggled her out of the city with him, in repayment for her giving up her vengeance on Stannis, but he had no notion where she might have gone. Yet again, it seemed like something from another life, distant and remote.

They anchored, and Lord Wyman was carefully brought ashore, the liege lord returned to his seat at long last. By that time their arrival had been noted, and a pack of grubby wildlings had come down to investigate, a state of affairs that caused considerable confusion and alarm until it was explained that they were Burned Men, who had sailed from the Vale under the command of Lady Sansa Stark and come here to defend the city from the attacks of wights and Others. Ser Justin confirmed this story, saying that he and his ragged crew had escaped the destruction of Braavos and arrived here in the aftermath of one such, to find Wynafryd Manderly in command after the death of her father, Ser Wylis. At this Lord Wyman made a choked sound and turned away; he had sacrificed everything, pretended to execute Davos, to bring his last living son home after he had
lost the younger one at the Red Wedding, and now he too was gone. The survivors had taken anything that could float, and sailed south to an uncertain fate, the Burned Men staying to cover their retreat. They had not expected to live very long afterwards, nor for anyone to come to the city save more wights, and hence were quite surprised to behold the returning forces.

As Ser Justin began to sort it out, Davos glanced away – then stopped with a jolt, not believing that he had actually seen what he thought he had. It was grief and weariness and guilt, just a phantom – but no, he had, he had, and his heart beat hard in his chest. A taller, stronger, older version of Edric Storm, though without the Florent ears, coal-black hair and blue eyes, Baratheon beyond any doubt or questioning. He looked as dirty and tired as the others, a bulls-head helmet under one arm, and he jumped when Davos hailed him. "You, lad. What's your name?"

The young man looked confused, but answered. "Gendry. Ser Gendry, of the Hollow Hill. Was in the Brotherhood, but... now I came here. To fight like a proper knight. Protect the smallfolk. I done what I had to."

"Aye, I'm sure you did. Before then... where did you come from?"

"King's Landing." Gendry scratched his chin. "Born there, at any rate. Lived most of my life there, before." He scowled, suddenly suspicious. "Why're you asking?"

"Only... do you know who your father was?"

"Some drunkard, likely."

"No, lad. He wasn't. Or rather, aye, he was, but not the drunkard you think. If you wanted to leave here and come with us, you'd see."

"Why?" Gendry demanded. "What do you think you'll get from - "

"King Robert was your father, lad," Davos said simply. "And his brother, King Stannis, is gone now too. You may well be the oldest living male heir of House Baratheon."

That, as it should, threw Gendry entirely. He opened and shut his mouth, finding nothing to say to that, clearly unable to wrap his head around even the possibility of going from a penniless, bastard-born hedge knight to the scion of one of the Great Houses of Westeros – though a decree of legitimacy must eventually be granted, if there would even be time or place for it. Davos glanced at the northern sky again; the clouds looked even stranger than before, twisted and evil, and the air smelled of snow and smoke. The world is coming undone at the seams. What has Jon Snow done? What? What?

The Manderlys were wearily disembarking, clearly planning to stay here and wait for whatever may come; this was their city, their home, and if this was the last night of their or anyone's lives, there was nowhere else they would wish to spend it. But it was not Davos', and tempted as he was, he could not linger. Whether to the wings of the sky or the depths of the sea, what time he had been given must be done, his duty complete.

And so, with the Baratheon men and Lord Edmure and the rest who were not staying in White Harbor – including Ser Gendry, who was still too dazed to protest as he was taken firmly into custody – Davos returned to the ships. Stepped aboard once more. His farewell with Lord Manderly had been brief and quiet; they wished each other well and parted ways. If he can build this city back, if the North can be raised again... but that was assuming that anything would be left, that the sun would ever rise. Instead, the night seemed only to be deepening. The end of all things.
And yet Davos Seaworth was, at last, at peace. He had made his choices, served his king, done his best, faced the worst, and let go of all else. In his mind's eye he could see his wife standing before the house on Cape Wrath, her skirts blowing in the wind, holding out her hands for him. Where he intended to go to meet her, and if there was chance, if there was grace, grow old together. If not, that too must be as it would. It was finished. It was through.

Once more, the sails were raised. He drew in a breath of salt air, invigorating his lungs, and felt almost young. With the wind in his face and the storm at his back, the onion knight did not regret anything he had done, nor to be ending it now. Left it all behind, and so, as the ships moved into the black sea, no star nor moon to light their path but only the lanterns that swung on their bow, at very long last, he sailed for home.
In every direction, from sky to ground to snow, the world was black. Wind scoured across the ground, lonely and haunting as a lost child crying, and Sam stood leaning on his sword, sweat frozen to the back of his neck and congealing in his smallclothes, each gulp of frigid air searing his chafed lungs anew. He was so tired that he didn't think it was possible to still be standing upright, even more tired than when he had been struggling through the hellish flight from the Fist, as snow continued to swirl out of the coal-black sky, settling on the hood and shoulders of his cloak. He had been fighting for as long as he could remember, and he was going to be fighting until he no longer remembered anything at all. Lifting the sword, swinging, hacking, keep the torches lit keep them lit, pale hands scrabbling through the ghostly, towering seracs of ice, as the few archers they had left rained holy wrath and ruin, fire arrows hissing and sighing as they fell to earth like trailing stars. Leathers had been in charge of that, but Leathers was dead. Sam didn't know how or when. It didn't matter much. All of them were going to be, soon. But for now it was him, Sam couldn't fail now, not now, and he kept bellowing at them to hold the lines, hold, hold, hold.

They'd held. It had been madness and mayhem and monstrosity, but they did, even as the advance of the Others was chewing their tattered, makeshift force to shreds. Sam had seen the end then, and been at peace with it. Taken a better grip on his sword, his hand raw and blistered and bloody through the gauntlet, and was not afraid in the least.

But then, that sound, shivered on the very edge of hearing. Sharp and keening and relentless, thin and faint at first, then louder, growing deeper and fuller, clear as a bell. A sound which Sam had never heard before, which he did not imagine any living man had ever heard – a warhorn, he thought, but a warhorn only for lack of a better word to describe it. It went on and on until it seemed there could be no end to it – then just as swiftly, it was not, even as its reverberations continued to roll across the hills. Sam could hear his own breathing in the space it left, hard and thick and labored, grinding in his chest. Was that the – the Horn? The Horn of Dawn? He barely dared to hope.

And then, before their eyes, something began to seize hold of the Others – intangible, inexorable, curling them away, dissolving to nothingness like dust on the wind, pale white and iridescent, nearly beautiful. Their crystalline blades fell and shattered, their outlines still etched in the air a moment longer before collapsing, leaving only the last ragged remnants of the Night's Watch, not daring to believe in their deliverance. One of them, one of the queen's men who had taken the black after the destruction of the Wall, turned toward Sam. "That... is that it, m'lord? Are we saved?"

"No." The word stuck fast in Sam's throat, as he thought again with that almost unbearable grief of what he would have to do to make the victory complete. If Jon is even still coming back. This entire mad plan, their one slender hope, hung on the thread that Jon would agree to fly back here and offer himself up as a lamb for slaughter, thus to destroy the Great Other at last. But Jon had been forthright about his fear that the monster would overtake whatever of his own humanity remained. I may not remember, I may try to stop you, I may try to attack you, to go wild, to call the Others here. You must not let me. Swear to me, swear now that no matter what, you will kill me with Lightbringer. I will fight with you until the end, but you must make the end. And if that was already so, if he had found the sword and ascended to his full night and terror, he could have gone anywhere from here, anywhere. Why hold back, with all the power in the world at his command? He might even still think he was using it in the service of the good of mankind – but with what he'd become, what he was –
"No," Sam repeated. *When I am gone, you must become Lord Commander,* Jon had said as well. And so he must do this, must command. "This is only a respite. There are still spiders and ghasts, wights and weirwoods and the gods know what, and they are coming."

Glances were exchanged: two dozen men at the most, staggering and freezing and injured and starving and spent from fighting, several of their fellows already dropped dead of exhaustion and several more looking close to doing the same. It was plain that unless the respite was for a year or so, and unless they magically conjured a thousand knights from thin air, hardly strong and heavily armed, this was merely the wait of the condemned man on the gallows to be hanged. Some of them even seemed to be wondering if it was worth the effort to fight, when they would be crushed and swept aside regardless. "We can't," someone said, panting, and the sentiment was generally seconded. "Not unless Lord Snow returns with – bloody hell, I don't even know what it would have to be, now."

Sam, who did know what Lord Snow was returning with, fought to keep his face impassive. Several times, he had considered telling someone, anyone about the charge laid on him, simply due to his ever-present conviction that literally any other man in the world was better fitted to perform heroic deeds and especially one of this magnitude, but he knew in the back of his head that if he could not do it, no one would. Jon had asked him, and seeing as Sam was still standing here, perhaps there was some merit in the selection after all. So he pulled himself together and said, "A brother of the Watch is released from his vows only by death, ser. I will fetch out a block and hasten that process for any who wishes to name himself deserter. The penalty for it has not changed."

There were disgruntled murmurs, and Sam could feel his torn palms sweating – pray the Mother that they did not call that bluff. But after a moment the malcontent backed down, albeit with bad grace, and the lot of them crossed the bailey to the squashed remnants of the Flint Barracks. Inside, while not warm, it was at least warmer, and the need for rest superseded even the need for food; they rolled themselves up in tattered blankets and fell into a sleep distinguishable from death only by the fact that it was theoretically supposed to end. None of the brothers could be spared to post a watch, so Sam's last coherent thought was that if the Others did return, they were like to be slaughtered in their beds and never know the difference anyway. But then he was crashing into oblivion, and hence could no longer find it in himself in the least to care.

When they woke some interminable time later, remarkably un-slaughtered (though whether this was boon or not was difficult to say) every man of them was ravenous enough to eat his neighbor raw, and acquiring sustenance was the next order of concern. So, yawning and staggering, they made their way to the Common Hall, where Three-Finger Hobb and Jeyne Poole served them mutton stew, fresh-baked bread, cheese and dried apples and spiced ale. They had barricaded themselves in the kitchens, watching the battle from afar, and as Hobb said, were surprised that anyone at all had come back. "I'd go out there and swing a cleaver if you had need, m'lord, and so would the girl. We've sworn our vows too. But I doubt either of us would be the least use, and we'd likely get you killed the quicker."

"No matter. You serve us far better here, and I know you are no craven." After having that dagger driven into his heart his life long, the last thing Sam would do was turn about and drive it into another man's. And at least they would have a final meal. The cellars were still provisioned, after all, and the men tore into the food with both hands, gulping down more as fast as Jeyne could fetch it. Yet while Sam felt so hungry that his stomach was touching his backbone, he could not eat. It reminded him too much of the starving crows at Craster's Keep, then his throat opened from ear to eat, drowning in his own blood – sitting with the Old Bear's head in his lap as Jeor Mormont whispered for him to tell his son Jorah to take the black, his wish, his dying wish – then fleeing with Gilly into the
"Ser? Ser, m'lord?" Jeyne touched his shoulder timidly. "Won't you eat some?"

Sam, startled out of his reverie, glanced up at her, blinking. She was even more scared than him, maybe, but she'd said that Jon saved her, and she stood with him. Was brave despite everything and everyone. She held out a steaming ladleful of stew over his bowl. "You need to be strong. Lord – Lord Snow, he'd have wanted."

At that, Sam felt his heart break, just in small part. "Aye, go on," he managed, then made himself swallow a gulp for her anxious approval. The warmth hit his stomach like a pit of flaming coals, so good that it brought him almost to tears. "Th-thank you, my lady. Do you know where the – the baby is?" Gilly's son, present both in memory and the moment.

"Upstairs," Jeyne said, "with his nurse, and the queen. She... Selyse, she scares me, she's mad, she won't stop calling for her husband and her daughter. But the fool, Patchface, he... he ate the princess' face. Lord Snow had to kill him."

Seven hells. Sam had not known Shireen Baratheon, as she had taken up residence at Castle Black after he had already sailed for Oldtown, but no child deserved such a fate. Who is heir to Stannis' claim now? If Stannis himself even still lived to press it. But with Melisandre gone and the end of all things at hand, it seemed trivial, useless. "I – am glad the child is well. As for the queen, send up what cooking sherry you have left, it may help." He paused. "And the – the wildling princess? Val?"

"I've been tending her," Jeyne said. "She's – sore wounded, my lord, but she's stubborn. She may yet live. Was most annoyed at having to miss the fighting, at least."

Sam choked on a weak laugh. "That does sound like her," he agreed. So much as any of us will live.

The thought deprived him of his appetite again, but Jeyne was still watching, so he gamely put down a few more spoonfuls of stew. The brothers' flagging spirits had been somewhat revivified by hot food, and they were starting to peer out into the desolate white waste, to see if their foes had reappeared, when there was a hoarse cry.

"Dragon!"

At once, Sam was devoutly grateful that he hadn't eaten much, as he could feel it boiling back up with a vengeance. He swallowed heavily, forcing it into place again with a supreme effort of will, then pulled on his black cloak and got to his feet, thinking that no matter he himself would have liked to shirk this duty, he was still breathing, and hence a brother of the Watch, sworn to obey his Lord Commander. Sure enough, a great winged shadow was swooping low over the courtyard, lit by the sullen glow of the sparks coruscating from its nostrils, and on its back hunched a shape still darker, cloaked and hooded.

"Who is it?" Jeyne Poole glanced up nervously, hopefully. "Is it Lord Snow?"

"A-aye," Sam stammered. Even if it bears his face, it may not be. But he was barely heard or his misgivings noticed as the men stampeded outside in joy, even Hobb and Jeyne. They emerged just as the dragon was landing, green-and-bronze scales glimmering eerily in the few torches still burning.

The dragon's rider reined it in, but made no move to dismount. He surveyed the pitifully small crowd below. Then in Jon's voice, he called, "Lady Jeyne?"

The girl who had not been his little sister shook, shrinking back – but then after a moment,
unexpectedly gathered herself and stepped forward. "Yes, my lord?" she squeaked.

"I have a gift for you." Jon reached into a satchel slung behind the dragon's ruff, pulled something out, and pitched it into the snow before her feet. An aghast, horrified rumble rose from the brothers, and Sam's gorge rose again as well as he realized what it was. The eyes were the same unsettling shade of blue as all the creatures they had been fighting, but dull, sightless, opaque. Chunks of the long, stringy dark hair were seared away, and the blackened flesh on the stump of the neck showed where Ramsay Bolton's head had been mercilessly cleaved from his body. As everyone else remained too stunned, Jon continued, "You are avenged, my lady. Theon Greyjoy killed him, in recompense for his crimes against you both, and even when he would have devised still greater devilries. It is no balm for what you suffered at his hands, but I hope it is something."

Jeyne was speechless. Utterly overcome, she sank to her knees. "Theon... saved me... and killed him?"

"Thus far as I know," Jon said. "If he is wise, he has gone south with the others. I have returned from the Dreadfort to do what must be done. King Stannis has sounded the Horn of Dawn, and given his life in the doing. We stand at the brink."

The former queen's men turned black brothers communally flinched, though they had perhaps been more dedicated to the abstract cause of R'hllor than Stannis himself, and murmured prayers to the red god for the king's repose. Sam himself could not quite take his eyes off Ramsay Bolton's severed head, half expecting it to leap up and come to life again, or for Jeyne to turn and flee screaming – at which she would have been well within her rights. But she did not. After a moment more of total silence, she lifted her teary eyes and, for likely the first time since she had come to the Wall, or even since her terrible ordeal had begun, she smiled. "Lord Snow, I th – thank you."

"Do not thank me yet." Jon's tone remained unmoved. Nor had he taken down the hood, so they could not see what expression might be on his face. To the strongest-looking of the remaining men, he ordered, "Take what things you can, all the provisions you can carry. The wounded and the young and the ill, if they will not slow you overmuch. Go."

"What – leave the Wall? The Watch?" The man goggled. "M'lord Tarly, he said he'd have our heads if we deserted – "

Jon swiveled to look at Sam, with an aspect of some surprise. After a moment he said, "He did what must be done when such things were needful. Now I am doing differently. There is no point and purpose to you staying now. You have fought bravely and well, but this foe is beyond you. All of you must leave."

There was a half-reverent, half-frightened hush. Then Hobb clapped his gnarled hands, clearly to prod them to attend to their Lord Commander's wishes, and slowly, haphazardly, in fits and starts, the evacuation of Castle Black began. The cellar doors were opened, sacks of food hauled out, their few remaining horses saddled and bridled. Gilly's babe, his nurse, Selyse, and Val were all brought out, well wrapped in furs and lifted onto sledges. Selyse shivered and murmured nonsense, but Val's head turned back and forth, looking. "Crow!" she called weakly. "Jon!"

Jon started, then turned, hood falling back at last, and saw her. Sam had to bite his tongue. Jon's face was as pale and perfect as if carved from ice, the snows of the north that had always been his name, but his eyes were utterly black; no whites remaining, just two abyssal cracks that promised the depths of the deepest hell. Yet at the sight of the wildling woman, he seemed to hesitate, briefly human for a moment, until he recollected himself and crossed the crowded bailey to her side. "My lady?"
Val tried to reach for him, but lacked the strength. "You do anything but what you're s'posed to," she said fiercely, "touch one hair on fat Sam's head, and I'll kill you myself, hear?"

A queer, almost savage smile twisted Jon's lip. "I do not see that being a concern," he said, half to himself. Then lifted her pale hand in his own black one, and kissed it. "Farewell, Val. Go with the gods."

She looked at him for a long moment, but said nothing else. Jeyne Poole made a flustered little curtsey to him as well, then, wrapped in a shaggy bearskin robe, climbed onto the sledge beside Val, making sure the princess was well shielded against the bitter wind. The drover cracked the whip over the dray-horse's back, and they began to move, runners squeaking in the fresh-fallen snow. Sam watched them join the slow exodus streaming out past the remnants of the palisade and breaking trail laboriously down the kingsroad. A few of the surviving wildlings were in front, digging like moles to ease the passage, but it still took nearly an hour until the refugees vanished from sight altogether. That left Sam, the dragon, and the creature that had once been his best friend, standing in a completely empty, broken castle as the wind whistled through the ruins. It is truly over, then. The Wall has fallen and the Night's Watch is finished.

"Jon," he said at last, just to break the awful silence. How do I leave, when I have done this? Do I fly on the dragon's back, or do I die too? He could not take his eyes from the sword sheathed at Jon's waist, casting a faint, bewitching cherry-gold glow. "Is it – is it time?"

"In a moment." Indeed, Jon seemed in no haste to hand Lightbringer over to serve as the weapon of his own execution. He was stabbed by one of his own men in this very courtyard before, after all, and died. Even for this, he cannot much look forward to doing it again. "You have done well, Sam."

Sam colored pink, pleased at his praise, but not enough to be distracted. He held out his hand. "P-pray to the old gods, if you will. Then give me the sword."

"The old gods?" Jon scoffed. "Those foul, bloodthirsty fell demons? The ones I met in the Old Ways, twisted and maddened? When they can serve me nothing, when I have become more powerful than the greatest among them? And then give you the sword. You."

A faint, cold tremor of fear slithered down Sam's spine. "Yes," he repeated, as steadily as he could. "The sword. As you asked of me."

Jon laughed. "You," he said a third time, to emphasize the impossibility. "Lord Randyll's greatest disappointment, the fat, weak craven who could not swing a sword or sit a horse or be a man, who was packed off to the Wall because he lacked even the decency to die? That is who should take Lightbringer from me, the Red Sword of Heroes, and command the power of gods and ages? I think not."

The fear was swiftly ripening into full-blown panic. As Sam stared at him, all he could see was Euron Greyjoy, back in the Citadel. Euron with his smiling mad blue eye, Euron who had not died when Sarella shot him, Euron who had boasted how he was in the service of the Great Other and would cover the world in a flood tide of ice. But I killed him. At least I think I did. I took the drogonglass and drove it into that eye. I've done it before, I have to do it now. This isn't Jon. It's a monster.

And with that, Samwell Tarly made up his mind. As he had then, with even less grace but twice as much determination, he charged.

Jon had not expected it, but it took him less than an instant to recover. He whirled on his heel and
flung out one black hand, and a withering blast of some invisible force struck Sam in the chest, throwing him ten feet and landing with a bone-jarring crash. As he was gasping in vain for his wind, Jon drew Lightbringer and vaulted onto the dragon's back, kicking it around and taking to the sky in a monstrous sweep of wings. As he raised the sword on high, Sam could see dark clouds starting to thicken and gather, swirling together as sickly spears of lightning crackled in the maelstrom. A titanic boom of thunder nearly split the firmament, and he felt shards of ice sting his cheek, throwing up his arms and rolling away just as the massive tumbled blocks, the remnants of the Wall, began to disintegrate. *The children of the forest ate my flesh and drank my blood to ward their hill against the Others.* It was entirely too much to hope that they had given him some of that more-than-mortal protection in return – but it was the only chance Sam, or any of them anywhere, had left.

He sprinted, dodging and weaving, as the ice continued to shatter behind him. Then he heard a maddened, monstrous clicking, and flung himself flat again just as the first of the giant pale spiders scuttled past, followed by an army of the very ghasts that Sam had warned the men about. Twisted demons; wight upon wight; slender men of impossibly long and willowy limbs and eyeballs in the palms of their hands; things that might have been children of the forest once; the shades of a thousand violated graves, grey and gruesome, hot drips of blood staining the snow from their cold dead flesh. All of them were bound in adoring thrall to their master on the dragon high above, more and more of them rising at each sweep of his sword. Then the ground exploded as the wormy white roots of the poisoned weirwoods burst through, and Sam ran for it.

He reached the roots in the next instant and began to claw madly up them, tearing out wet, rotted hunks of wood that felt horribly like flesh. *Bran!* he screamed in his head with all his might, recalling the greenseer he had met under the hill – once more, alike to look at in face, but no longer at all in the soul. *Bran, these are yours, help me, help me!* Bran had said that the fate of the living world, of all mankind, was no longer his concern, but he had still opened the way for Sam to return to Castle Black. *You got me here, to fight. HELP ME!*

Whether or not this prayer was answered, it was impossible to say. But in the very next instant, the weirwood roots heaved high into the air, and Sam lost his grip, and then he was flying. He flailed, started to fall – but then the dragon was cruising directly below, and with a presence of mind he had never suspected himself to possess, he twisted himself around, aimed, and crashed out of the sky onto Jon's back, missing the blade of the burning sword by a whisker. It knocked loose and tumbled into the snow below, sparking and hissing.

Jon snarled, whirling around, but by then Sam already had him in a clumsy headlock, and was wrenching him sideways, over the wing joint. As it had been in his fight with Euron, Jon was both much stronger and fueled by unholy magic, but Sam had the considerable advantage in weight, surprise, and sheer desperation. They slid and slipped on the scales, the dragon veering this way and that as it tried to shake off this vexation, and then Sam got hold of Jon's cloak and threw him head over heels. Clutched onto him for all he was worth, and the two of them fell, entangled, like stones.

The ground came screaming up underneath them, and they hit with punishing force. Fortunately Jon took the brunt of the impact, not Sam; if he had been winded again, it might well have been the end of him. He drew back his fist and punched Jon as hard as he could – it felt like hitting solid marble, he might have broken his fingers, but he didn't care. Jon raised a hand, trying to dislodge Sam with the same power he'd used earlier, but Sam grabbed his wrist and slammed it over his head, so the blast felled one of the pale spiders instead. He kicked out, then flung himself madly toward where he'd seen Lightbringer fall – just as Jon, roaring, tackled him from behind.

They rolled back and forth in the steaming snow, grappling, hitting whatever part of each other
they could reach. Sam could taste blood in his mouth and one of his eyes was starting to swell shut, but he didn't stop. The stormclouds were towering in the sky now, consuming it from horizon to horizon, as lightning struck not a dozen yards from them, blowing a black crater in the snow and leaving the reeking, burning scent in its wake. Dazzled by the brightness, Sam wrestled around and kicked with both feet, hit something solid, then scrambled around on all fours and dove.

His fingers batted madly at the hilt of the sword, and he had to stop himself from immediately snatching them away from the heat. *I survived the children eating me, this pain is nothing.* He clutched, got a firmer grip, feeling the flesh of his hand starting to crackle and sear. Remembered Bannen burning at Craster's, smelling like roast pork. *Lady Piggy.* Ser Alliser loomed up in memory, scornful and sneering, and then last of all his father, the very one that not-Jon had thrown in his face, the one thing the real Jon would never have done. Holding out the blood-dripping heart of the stag. *The Night's Watch – or this.*

The Night's Watch, or this.

Jon was on top of him now, throttling him. Sam couldn't breathe, his vision popping with white sparks, but he still got enough momentum to swing the sword – a clumsy, glancing blow, not nearly enough to take Jon down, but enough to knock him back. In the split second of time this afforded him, Sam lurched to his feet, gripping Lightbringer with both hands, as Jon stared him down along the length of the blade. "Traitor," he said; he would have been gasping if he had breath to knock out, and even he sounded somewhat strained. "Traitor."

"No." Sam held the blade steady, hearing monsters still swarming by on every side. Thought of Val, and brave Jeyne Poole, and even poor mad Queen Selyse, and how he must kill Jon and hence destroy the beasts before they caught up with the refugees. "I'm no traitor. And you have to die now, Jon. I'm sorry."

Jon's black eyes turned completely hellish. He flung out a hand, but Sam brought the sword across, and felt a sizzling jolt as Lightbringer deflected the blast and turned it back on its caster, sending him staggering. It was an opening, it was a chance, the only chance, and Sam seized it. Stumbled and lunged and ran forward as hard and as fast and as far as he could, and drove the Red Sword of Heroes to the hilt in the Great Other's heart.

Jon jerked, making a confused sound. He tried to turn away, but Sam gave the blade a twist, shoving it even deeper. The pale dead flesh did not bleed; it shivered, shrieking like the Others' blue glass did when crossed with ordinary steel. Black smoke began to pour from the wound, and Jon swayed, went to his knees, and fell.

Sam, sobbing, drew the blade out and then stabbed him again. *It's done, I've done it, I have become Bowen Marsh myself.* More black smoke gusseted from the wound, the storm now howling around them – the maw of the beast, the beasts, who had slowed in their march as if confused, then starting to smoke and hiss themselves. One of the spiders, then another, stumbled and shriveled up, legs curling and calcifying, as the demons began to lose their shape, the thrashing of the weirwood roots began to slow. The only thing louder than the thunder was the magnitude of the silence that rolled in to follow it.

Jon touched the wound in his breast with his glass fingers, which were cracking to pieces even as Sam watched. Still on his knees, he glanced up. The poisoned black was fleeing from his eyes, flowing out like an inky tide, and it was the Stark grey of Jon Snow, the real Jon Snow, that looked back. "Oh, Sam," he breathed, and collapsed.

Sam caught him just as he did, as a long, terrible tremor ran through Jon from head to heel, then fell still. There was no last breath to take, for the breath had gone from him long since. His eyes closed,
and that was all. As the night continued to burn and hiss and shriek and steam, as the monsters went up like matchsticks, as it ended, as it all ended, Sam sat with Jon's body in his arms, rocking it, unable even to weep. *Fly*, a voice that might have been Bran's whispered. *Fly or die.*

Somewhere overhead, Sam could hear the dragon keening, but whether it was in rage or lament or even its own death throes, he did not know. He waited to burn away, to become nothing, but impossibly, he kept existing. Saw rivulets of molten rock spreading across the ground, breathed elemental heat into his lungs, watched as hail of ice scorched to glass and then exploded, a shower of lethal fireworks such as he had sometimes seen set off in Oldtown, and before that on Horn Hill one midsummer festival, when he had been very young. The memory was a fantasia, silvered and fragile as a dewdrop in frost. Summer. Sweet wine. And far, far away, Gilly smiling.

Sam shut his stinging eyes and remembered a story he'd once read, of mighty eagles coming to pluck fallen heroes from a fiery mountain. None such were coming now. Only the dragon, its shrieks lost in the tumult. Until finally, bit by bit so that he scarcely noticed, quiet began to return to the world. The roaring died, the fires were quenched, the monsters gone, the ice shattered, the entire world lying raw and unsmelted on the forge, a strange new land. Jon still lay in his arms, the darkness and the shadow gone from him, at peace. Only a human man. *The Great Other is dead. Gone. It is finished. Destroyed.*

Sam could barely breathe, could not hope or dare to believe. It did not mend everything, not even close. The winter could still go on for years, the north lay sundered and in ruins, countless folk were dead, and the gods alone knew who was king or queen, who if anyone could pull the broken pieces together and hope to lead them to a new morning. *Me?* The thought crossed his mind briefly, then was even more hastily dismissed in horror. But if need be... now, after everything... And then, Sam saw it. A pale flush of pink on the eastern horizon, searing through the black anvils of clouds. Rose and gold and red. *Dawn.*

The first fragile rays of winter sun fell over Jon's pale face. Then, impossibly, his eyelashes fluttered. His chest heaved, struggling to gulp in the first proper breath he had taken since that night in the courtyard, knives in the dark, the one Sam had heard of from Sarella. His arm jerked in place of the shattered black glass, he raised a hand of flesh to touch his face, and his grey eyes opened.

For an eternal moment, Sam and Jon stared at each other, completely transfixed. Then, slowly, choking and grimacing, Jon sat up. "I," he began, licked his cracked lips, coughed, and tried again. "Is it you?"

"Aye." Sam's chest felt about to burst. "Is it – you?"

"I – think so." Jon coughed again. "The Great Other is dead. The boy is killed. And the... the man lives."

Sam was too overcome to speak, to understand, to do anything but exactly what he did, which was to grab Jon in an embrace so violent that it knocked the breath out of both of them all over again. He could hear Jon's heart beating under his ear, feel the warmth in the hands that gripped him, as they knelt in the snow clinging to each other for dear life, truly for *life*. Ashes continued to swirl down around them, small pricks of heat on Sam's face. Lightbringer still lay where he had dropped it after stabbing Jon, the blade no longer burning but glowing, though that too was receding from the steel as Sam watched. Then it hissed once more and dissolved altogether into a shining scarlet puddle, running slowly away like quicksilver. In another moment, it was completely gone.

"Help me up," Jon said at last, shakily. "I'm as weak as a newborn kitten."
After how unearthly, ungodly, terribly strong he had just been, this was music to Sam's ears, and he wrapped his arm around Jon's shoulders, lifting him to his feet. They stood there in silence, surveying the devastation, the corpses of the spiders, the motionless weirwoods. No trace of the demons or the Wall remained, so they could gaze north forever at the broad and open horizon. It was nothing but white, savage mountains and glaciers, but a faint rosy color burnished the distant summits to gold. 

"Dawn," Sam thought again, a prayer beyond any he had ever known, unfathomable in its gratitude. 

At last, he said, "Where – where will you go from here? Will you rebuild the Wall again? Like Brandon the Builder and the – the first Azor Ahai?"

A faint shudder passed through Jon. "No," he said. "The time for that, as I said, is done. The Night's Watch is no more."

"So then." Another terrible hope flooded Sam to the marrow. "You could go back. Have a life. A real one."

Jon paused. A small, sad smile touched his lips. Then he shook his head.

"What? How can you – ?"

Jon raised a hand. "How could I possibly pick up the threads of that old life? How could I even try to go back, when in my heart I already know that there is no going back? Here is what I mean to do. I will fly south to see how matters stand in the rest of the world, and find out if any of my family is still alive. You will come with me. I will take you wherever you want to go – Oldtown, Horn Hill, the Summer Isles, anywhere you choose. But when that is done, I must come back here. Rhaegal and I will go north, and there we will stay. Guarding the realms of men against the Others ever rising again."

"Jon – "

"I cannot survive down there," Jon said simply. "The power that gave me back my life is here. I am the Prince who was Promised, and so I shall watch over the realm always. But not in King's Landing, not in Winterfell, or any other seat of man. I will have Winterfell rebuilt – I woke giants from the earth when I sounded the Horn of Winter, they can raise the walls anew as their ancestors did the first time. But after that. . . I must make my parting. For good."

He is utterly settled, Sam realized. There is nothing I can do to stop him or change his mind. He will do as he must, as he always has. He scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. Even he felt far too small for the emotions that surged through him then: the grief, the guilt, the agony, the awe, the pain, the love.

"Aye," he agreed at last, croakily. "Dickon – my brother, he has Horn Hill. I don't want to take it from him, and it was never my place, besides. I may go there to visit Gilly and little Aemon, but – "

"Aemon?" Jon's mouth quirked, wry and sad. "Is that what you named Dalla's babe? It is. . . well done."

"Aye," Sam said again, softly. "But after that, take me back to Oldtown. To the Citadel. It was sacked and burned by Euron Greyjoy and his reavers, and I – I cannot let that stand. I too must rebuild. Become a maester, as I was meant to be – but more."

Jon considered him for a long moment, then finally nodded. "The greatest maester in all the annals
of the order, I have no doubt," he said, and clasped Sam's arm, both of them holding hard. Then he turned away, beckoning him across the snow toward the dragon – whose name was evidently Rhaegal. "Come."

Sam approached the beast with considerable trepidation, not at all sure how it would react to him given the fact that he had just killed its master, but while it snorted sparks and eyed him evilly, a touch from Jon quieted it, and he offered a hand to help Sam clamber onto the broad back behind him. Sam clutched him tightly around the waist, then let out an involuntary squeak, accompanied by a whoop from Jon, as the dragon spread its wings and launched into the deepening glow of dawn.

The ground fell away beneath them, Sam's eyes watering furiously as cold air rushed by. A delightful sensation of weightlessness and freedom overtook him, until he was grinning like a fool, and very nearly whooped as well. Higher and higher they rose, carried on the wind, and he looked back only once, as what had been the Wall and Castle Black and everything that he had known, where he had become at last and forever a man and a brave one, faded into insignificance. Then they soared into a low-lying cloud, pelting them both with stinging, frigid droplets, and on the far side, as all the world opened before them, it was gone.
He had never seen King's Landing like this. The shivering sun cresting Aegon's Hill and spilling like melted butter into the lanes and wynds, setting the crystal tower of the Great Sept ablaze. The snow glittering on cluttered rooftops and sharp spires, the frozen bay, the distant shapes of dragons circling high above in the winter-white sky, and the icicle-barded towers of the Red Keep looking almost peaceful after the night's brutal, unearthly battle. Tyrion thought of how impressed he had been when he first saw the city, before it turned to the filthy, seething nest of shit, intrigue, and murder that he had grown to loathe so bitterly, and fled for his life without ever looking back. It was not long after Robert Baratheon had been crowned, the place spruced up and rebuilt from the savage sack his own sainted father had inflicted on it – Lord Tywin had certainly not troubled to take his dwarf son to court when he served as Aerys' Hand, and likely would not have troubled now, but Jaime had persuaded him. *I was young, but I was no child. It was after Tysha, after...* and yet how important he had felt, how grown-up, trotting through the Lion Gate on his own pony. How he had marveled at the sprawling keep, how eager he had been to see his tall knightly brother, resplendent in his white cloak and his shining golden hair, the way Jaime had picked him up and swung him around in the way he himself used to do with Tommen, how he... gods, Jaime, he didn't, he hadn't, he... Tyrion swallowed thickly, wanting the comfort of his memories, his lies, for a brief moment longer before he had to reckon with the bitter truth. He didn't want to see what it had become, any of it. Didn't want to look at his brother's body, still held silently in the big warrior woman's arms as day continued to break full and fair. He felt as if someone had thrown him from a very high shelf to crash onto the floor, all tilted angles and smashed crockery and not knowing which way was up and which down, if such a thing even still existed. Couldn't tell if he'd truly forgiven Jaime or not, if he was at peace with it, or if he had only done so because there had been no time, because he wanted to grasp at those last moments before they fled. *If he lived, would I have pardoned him? Would I want to?*

There was no use wondering. In that, or anything. Tyrion felt numb, dreamy, cold in a way that might never be warm again. He'd ridden out the battle – most of it, at least – in the nearest suitably unobtrusive location, as Others swarmed like snow and silk over the walls and the Targaryen and Martell men beat them back with the swords from the Iron Throne, as the screams and swoops of the dragons overhead filled the night with fire. Any wise man would have stayed as far away as he could get. But then something ludicrous had come over him, as it had at the Battles of the Green Fork and the Blackwater, and he bolted from cover, grabbed a helmet and a sword from one of the fallen bodies, and threw himself into the fray. Despite their noticeable and murderous distinctions from living men, he discovered that the Others did share one useful similarity with them, in not expecting a demented dwarf to clothesline them at the knees. Tyrion had downed more than his share, spinning and slashing through the icy mob of monsters, thinking that their dead eyes did not look so dissimilar from Ser Mandon Moore's, and that turned the fear merely to grim determination. He'd kill the bastards, kill them all, and let them do the same to him if they could.

They couldn't. Not that they hadn't come close on more than one occasion, but there were too many helpfully taller men at hand to slaughter first, and thus he skated by under the surface, no longer feeling even exhaustion. Until the light came, until they had gone, and drawn by some unnameable instinct, he had ventured to this tower here, to see... Tyrion dragged a hand across his eyes. Then he pulled himself to his feet and turned to Brienne. "Come on," he said. "We should get inside."
She blinked at him dully, his words clearly barely registering through her haze of grief. It was his as well, but he could not fall into it again and live. Thus he did not let himself. He felt clearer somehow, lighter, in fact so light that he wondered if he would blow away on the next gust of wind. Remembered that realization he'd had in Meereen, how he could no longer even picture Tysha's face. Did not know what came now. Only that it had to be something, presumably. Everything and everyone from before was gone, in every imaginable way.

"Come," Tyrion repeated, as gently as he could. "I'll help you with him."

Brienne flinched as if he'd driven a dagger into her himself, but after a moment, got to her feet and used her cloak to fashion a shroud, wrapping Jaime in it. With Tyrion carrying his feet and Brienne his head and shoulders – he suspected she could have done it alone, but needed any sort of support at the moment – they shuffled awkwardly along the ice-slick wallwalks and into the chill, sunlit, eerily empty halls of the Red Keep. Tyrion wanted to go see if Penny was all right, but supposed that if she was, she'd keep an hour or two yet without his interference. If she wasn't, there was already nothing he could do for her.

They managed the cumbersome business of descending the tower stairs more or less in order, though Tyrion's arms were aching fiercely by the time they reached the bottom. He refused to say so, however, and took a better grip as Brienne stepped out after him. She had not yet spoken a word, wept a tear, or even seemed to breathe, and he knew the feeling of a heart-wound so deep that the pain only came later, much later, chewed you up and spat you out. His moments of such had generally come in the vicinity of enough strong drink to incapacitate an aurochs, but Brienne did not strike him as the sort. He did not envy her; in her position, he would have cut off his own nose, again, before trying to bear it sober. Absurdly, he found himself wanting to help her, but did not know how to offer and did not think she would accept. And was afraid, terribly afraid that her grief for Jaime would unleash his own, and he was liable to be a selfish bastard until the end.

He pushed aside the last door, and they stepped into the throne room – well, he supposed, it was no longer strictly a throne room, what with the throne in question having been destroyed last night. At once, he realized that they were not the only ones with the idea. Any number of bodies were laid out on the flagstones, and more were being carried in. The dead men wore three-headed dragons, or suns and spears, or golden krakens, or the bronze armor of the Unsullied, or the blue paint of the Dothraki. As well, Tyrion saw gold cloaks and common citizens, Tarly huntsmen and Tyrell roses, even a scattering of Lannister lions. 

All of them fought and died side by side. A less cynical man would have found it stirring, some triumph of shared humanity against a terrible enemy, but Tyrion only found it wearying. Aye, they fought and they died and if the Others do not return tonight, the rest of them will be back to bickering about who gets to make – and sit – the next ugly iron chair. He wagered on Daenerys, personally, what with the dragons, but Aegon could not entirely be counted out.

He and Brienne found an unoccupied bit of floor on the steps, and set their burden down. It gave Tyrion a queer turn to see Jaime lying before where the Iron Throne used to stand, likely in nearly the same place where their lord father had laid the bodies of Aegon and Rhaenys, or at least Rhaenys, wrapped up in red Lannister cloaks to hide the blood. Jaime's white cloak, by contrast, showed it vividly, his gold-grey hair tangled and stained with it, but that little smile remained locked on his lips. Brienne knelt at his side, closing his stiffening hand around the hilt of his longsword, laid on his chest as proudly as any king in his serene marble sepulcher. 

But Jaime never wanted to be a king. The only bloody one of us who didn't.

Tyrion wanted to laugh, almost, and then he didn't, and then he had to turn away, couldn't stand to look an instant longer, as the great hall swam in tears. Cold air was still blowing in through the vast broken window, the one Drogon had shattered when the queen summoned him to melt down the
throne, and Tyrion welcomed it, hoped it would freeze the wetness off his cheeks. He dug his fingers into his palms until it hurt. No matter how hard he tried to fortify himself against the sorrow, it kept finding its way through, chink by chink. He had drowned in it so long, so long, and he still hadn't even learned how to swim.

Brienne had almost finished her ministrations when there was a murmur at the far end, and heads turned as Daenerys Targaryen – filthy, soaked, soot-stained, bleeding from a long wound down her shoulder, and leaning heavily on the arm of one of the Unsullied, but indubitably alive – made her entrance. Tyrion supposed that if the victory was won, it would have been a stunning success for a commander twice her age – as well as a certain neat redemption for her House, if the Mad King's daughter had fought and struggled and sacrificed to save the city and the kingdom, rather than turn it to ashes. Even in her present state, she was a sight to draw the eye, and despite everything, Tyrion felt a certain faint pride in her. When she reached the dais, he dropped to a knee. "Your Grace."

"My lord." Daenerys inclined her head, and beckoned for him to rise. Dark smudges of weariness bruised her fine skin under the violet eyes, but her poise remained impeccable. "I am pleased to see you have survived. I wish I could say the same for many of the others."

Tyrion glanced around. "Is it worse than this?"

"Worse than I had hoped," the queen admitted. "Five ships destroyed, after the six we lost in the storm from Lys and the four that burned at Dragonstone, so that we have but two remaining. Not to mention most of Mago's khalaras and nearly as many Greyjoys, one of Aegon's dragons, my bloodrider Rakharo, and half the Unsullied, down where the fighting was fiercest – as well as these." She indicated their mausoleum-like surroundings. "All in all, it leaves me with less than a thousand men. If we have to fight again, no matter the foe, it is like to be the end of us."

"Even with the other dragons?" Tyrion was surprised. Drogon was a flying fortress, and Viserion no small factor either. So far as he and everyone else had always been concerned, that made their masters invincible. Though the Targaryens fell, and fell hard. I – and she – should know that better than anyone.

"The dragons are a considerable weapon, of course," Daenerys agreed, "but nor are they foolproof, as evidenced by the fact that one of them was already killed. I do not know what became of Aegon's surviving one, but both of mine took wounds in the fighting, and Marwyn does not have enough power left to heal them. And I must not count on having them forever. In Asshai, I was told that if I chose to sail for Westeros, they would die. It may be on the morrow, it may be years from now. They cannot be my only hope."

Tyrion was once more impressed, considering how long her ancestors had spent thinking that dragons would solve all their woes. "Aye, maybe not, but they will serve well enough for the moment, surely?"

"So I hope." Dany gave him a thin, exhausted smile, and he could see her trembling with the effort it took to remain standing upright. "And, my lord, who is your . . . friend?"

Tyrion, startled, was about to protest that he had no friend, when he followed the direction of her gaze to Brienne, who was just pulling the cloak up to cover Jaime's face. His tongue turned to mud once more. Of course Daenerys had known that he was brother to the Kingslayer, her father's murderer, yet to see proof of it in the flesh must be different. "I . . . leave her be for now, my lady. It is no matter. She – both of them – fought gallantly to defend the city. Any old crimes are certainly expunged."
Dany's eyes flicked to Jaime's shrouded body. After a long moment, she said formally, "I am sorry for the loss of your kin, my lord. I had a... difficult relationship with my own brother as well, but I grieve him sometimes still."

Tyrion did not want her words, even graciously offered as they were. Did not want anything to come any closer to breaking the dam inside him. "Well," he said brusquely, hoping to change the subject. "You destroyed the throne, but the kingdom remains, and I doubt you'd have many challengers if you chose to take it. Is that what you mean to do?" It occurred to him that he had not heard anything about Cersei – where she was, what she might be doing, if she was still alive. But the absolute last thing he wanted to do was to rip open his own wounds yet further by asking about her. If she did still live, she was welcome to it. He did not ever want to see her face again. He was done. So bloody, bloody done.

Daenerys hesitated. She seemed to be on the verge of answering, when the throne room doors opened again, and a second delegation made its entrance, the sight of which gave Tyrion a certain foreboding pall. If there is to be a new Dance of the Dragons, now we come to it.

The bandages still swathed most of Prince Aegon's face, but he seemed stronger than he had last night, and he did not, to Tyrion's admittedly faulty judgment, look precisely as if he had come to surrender. The dwarf had a flash of that hot-tempered, blue-haired boy he'd played cyvasse with on the Rhoyne, looked, could not see him. Thought of plunging overboard by the bridge of the stone men, Lord Connington for some unfathomable reason leaping in to rescue him, Aegon saying that Connington was dead, had died at Dragonstone. Of all the stupid things, a pang of grief for Lord Jon rose in Tyrion's chest, but it was still easier to permit himself to mourn a man who had saved his life, than it was to permit himself to mourn for Jaime.

What has been made of this mummer's dragon, whoever he truly is?

"My lady." Aegon stopped a few yards shy of Daenerys, flanked by the Martell princess and Haldon Halfmaester, whose cool grey eyes sketched over Tyrion with recognition but not acknowledgment. "I have come to say something to you."

Daenerys regarded him inscrutably, then nodded. "You may, my lord."

Aegon rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet as if preparing to dive off a monstrously high precipice, then most unexpectedly, dropped to his knees instead, ignoring the stunned looks of his entourage. "My lady," he said. "I cannot in honor continue to keep this secret. I am not who you think I am. I am not who I thought I was." His mouth twisted bitterly. "You know that I was at Dragonstone, that I woke two beasts there with the blood of my foster father, Lord Jon Connington, and the master of whisperers, Lord Varys. But you do not know why that was possible. Royal blood will wake the stone dragons, that or the blood of a person infected with greyscale, and Lord Connington contracted the disease after rescuing the Imp, though I did not learn of it until shortly before his death. But Lord Varys is... was... a Blackfyre. So was Illyrio Mopatis. And..." He paused. "And so am I."

A gasp rolled around the throne room from its living occupants – at least Tyrion bloody well hoped that none of the dead ones were resurrecting – but Aegon took no notice, plowing doggedly on. "Lord Connington worked it out, somehow. That I am not, as I always believed and was told, the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Elia Martell, miraculously spirited away from a gruesome death to be raised in hopes of one day returning to my rightful throne, but a... a lie. The son of Magister Illyrio and his Lysene wife Serra, and hence a descendant of the Blackfyre pretenders, the claim that lived so long in exile, Varys' greatest jest, deception, illusion. And there is more. Before the Westerlings of the Crag and Lady Roslin Tully, the wife of Lord Edmure of Riverrun, were put to death in King's Landing, Varys brought word of the plot to me. As I had the tale, it was some vengeance of Cersei Lannister's mad crafting, to punish them for letting the true Jeyne Westerling,
widow of the Young Wolf, escape confinement. But the plot was allowed to go through, the Faith manipulated into commanding it, by my word and warrant. It was meant to separate the riverlords and the westerners from their loyalty to King Tommen and hence attach them to me, and it... it did. But I gave that order. I wish I never did, but I did. Their blood is on my hands as much as anyone's." Arresting the mad tumble of words, he inhaled a deep, ragged breath. "Lies and lies have brought me here, my lady. They must end. Now."

Daenerys, pardonably, was looking blindsided, and Tyrion himself had no idea what one could even begin to say in response to this astonishing, agonized confession. He remembered her claiming on the ship that this so-called nephew of hers could only be a fraud, but had thought that only her desperate attempt to convince herself that she was not too late. As for Aegon, his face had turned the color of parchment again, but he was not shaking; his lips and shoulders were set like granite. He waited, clearly steeled to accept any manner of horrid reprisal she could offer, and Tyrion felt an unwanted prick of pride for the boy as well. He has grown up. Sculpted to be a king indeed, and yet at the moment he could have taken it all, flinging it away from him with both hands. Why?

At last, Dany asked that very question. "If this is so," she said levelly, "and I do not think you would have a good reason to invent it, why? Why, when you could have let everyone go on thinking that you were the real Prince Aegon, reveal yourself now? I had already suspected that it seemed too neat and convenient to be true and that Illyrio was the least trustworthy man on the gods’ earth, but there was no way to know that for certain. So, then. I advise you to think well upon your answer. Why?"

Aegon paled still further, but he did not back down. "Because, my lady," he said quietly, "while Rhaegar Targaryen might not have been my father, Jon Connington was. The dragon that was killed tonight was the dragon he gave his life to. And so, he is gone for good and all. I tried to save him at Dragonstone, but he chose to burn. I cannot..." At last, his voice cracked, and he sounded very young. "I could not let him die for a lie. For nothing."

Dany did not appear to know how to answer that. Finally she said, "But you could have, of course. Though I will admit it is well done that you did not. I cannot give you an answer just now on what should become of you, my lord, but if you will assist me in putting this broken realm back together, and swear me your fealty, you are not my enemy. We have both seen it face to face." To her guards she said, "Take him away, and find him decent lodgings. See to it that he does not leave, but anything he wishes, he is to have."

The guards did as commanded, a dazed silence still reigning over the hall. Well, and what do you say to that? Ask how everyone feels about the weather? Instead, Tyrion turned to Brienne. "My lady, all this revelation and conspiracy would go down better with some breakfast, don't you think? You must be hungry."

"I am not, thank you." Brienne spoke for the first time. Her voice was absolutely clear, steady, expressionless. "Leave me, my lord. I imagine you have much to see to."

"Oh, not nearly as much as that." Fine then, see? I tried to help her and she doesn't want it. I don't have to do anything more. Feeling bitterly vindicated, and also like a bloody arsehole, Tyrion made her the most correct of bows and stumped out of the throne room, not at all sorry to put it behind him. He had used to scorn Cersei for drinking wine at breakfast (among the least of her crimes) but that was before he started taking it for every meal, Gods, he needed one cup or six, didn't want to wake up for three days. It was as well Brienne had not come with him; he had no interest in her freckle-faced, horse-toothed disapproval. What on earth did Jaime see in her, or was it only her that saw something? Which would be what, for that matter? Yet this line of thought was certain to
lead him only to direly unprofitable places, and he desperately tried to quash it as fast as possible.

Something strange was happening, though. Despite Tyrion's full and unambiguous intention to go
to the cellars and drink one of the great casks dry, his feet seemed to have other ideas, carrying him
up the stairwell where he'd seen Brienne take Penny, last night. An oblique sense of shame gnawed
at him; he pushed it aside; it returned, stronger. His legs burned as he climbed the serpentine.
Stopped for breath at the very top, leaning against the wall, wanted to slide down it but would not
let himself. Then set off along the hallway, wandering to nowhere particular, until he reached the
end, and the lonely room at the top of the tower. Banged away, and heard a timorous voice answer,
"Who – who is it?"

"It's me." Swearing under his breath, Tyrion squared his shoulders. "Open the damned door."

A pause. Then he heard the bar thunk back, the latch creak, and Penny threw herself into his arms,
effusively joyful. "Tyrion! It's you! You're all right! I saw the battle from here, it was terrible, I
thought everyone was going to die, but you – " Deciding words insufficient, she clasped his face in
her hands and kissed him instead.

Reflexively, Tyrion shoved her away, hard enough that she stumbled, looking surprised and hurt.
"Tyrion – my lord, did I – ?"

Now. Do it, you fool. You stupid, twisted, stunted little fool. "I – apologize. That was unmannerly of
me." Tyrion raked a hand through his hair, trying to master himself. He stepped in and shut the
door behind him, seeing Prince Aegon dropping to his knees before the entire court and confessing
his darkest secret, even when it meant nothing good for him. If he can do as much, so can I. Jon
Connington was his father, and Tysha was my wife. I too cannot let her be a lie, nothing, after all.
After all this time. Always. "Sit," he said instead. "I – I have something to say to you."

Penny, wide-eyed, sat.

Tyrion turned to the wall. Stared at it. Turned back to her. And then, not trusting himself to stop
once he started, or to start if he stopped, he told her everything.

When he finished, Penny was looking much as Daenerys and the court had upon hearing Aegon's
revelations. She glanced up at him, looked scared, then back at her hands twisted in her lap,
blinked, opened her mouth, and shut it. "Tyrion," she said at last. "My lord – or – or should I call
you Father, I don't – "

"No." Tyrion shuddered. "Not yet. One day, perhaps – but not yet."

"As – as you wish." Penny passed a hand over her face in a gesture that he was unsettled to
recognize as one of his own. He had been trying so hard to avoid seeing himself or Tysha in her,
even when it was there before his eyes, and felt as if sticky honey had been scraped from them, as
if they were open at last, could not shut them again. How do men live like this? Once more, hearing
Aegon. Lies and lies have brought me here, my lady. They must end. Now.

He took a deep breath, fighting an inane urge to summarize, as if he was giving a lecture at the
Citadel. What he came out with instead was not much better. "Well – well then. Do you – do you
have. . . any questions?"

"I just. . ." Penny must not be able to decide remotely where to start, and he immediately regretted
the offer; he could not face the thought of sitting in here, sharing cozy reminiscences. But what she
said instead was, "This would mean that Ser – Ser Jaime was my uncle. We should have a proper
funeral for him."
Tyrion had not expected that. "Penny, no."

She gave him a stubborn look – another one of his to the life, bloody hell. "We gave Ser Jorah a proper funeral even though the queen had been angry at him for a long time. You said they made peace. And you know that it wasn't your brother you hated over what happened. It was your lord father – and yourself."

Damnation, how does she do that? Tyrion wanted to flinch away, prevent any more soul-baring moments, but much as he wanted to deny her, he couldn't. Still, he tried. "Penny, they can do whatever the blazes they like with him, but I refuse to have a bloody thing to – "

Once more, that stubborn look. She got to her feet. "I'm going to ask," Penny announced. "You can do whatever you like."

Seven hells, Tyrion thought blearily. Five bloody minutes knowing she's a Lannister, and she's already putting on airs and graces. He should have known that no good could possibly come of this. It did briefly amuse him to picture Lord Tywin's face upon learning that there were now not one but two dwarfs in the family tree, and one of them had a whore for a mother, but even that hurt more than it helped. "Fine," he said, unable to face the prospect of another argument. "Ask. I don't care."


Tyrion spent the rest of the day by himself, staying far away from any human contact or company, wandering the farthest, darkest corners of Maegor's Holdfast like an unquiet ghost. When dusk fell, he glanced apprehensively through an arrow-slit in expectation of the Others popping up again, but didn't see them. He had seen quite enough of them for all time, and hence did not rue the omission, but it did make him wonder what was happening elsewhere, in the distant reaches of the world. At last he made his way back down, found an unused chamber, crawled into bed, and fell asleep.

It was the first time in who knew how long that he had not used wine to assist the process, and he woke up in the morning shaking, sweating, heaving, and otherwise feeling like bloody death, the only thought in his mind to get a drink before he flew to pieces. He gulped whatever rancid swill was left in the decanter on the table, which tasted as good as the finest Arbor red at this point, then dressed and went in search of something more potent. He was just engaged in this pressing enterprise when someone tapped him on the shoulder. "M'lord. The queen sends word that she has decided to grant your daughter's request. Your brother will be buried tonight."

Tyrion wanted to scream at the imbecile, wanted to throttle everyone involved, but he was presently in a fragile state and thus could not. Once he'd had his breakfast wine, he felt steadier, but no happier. Grudgingly, he wondered where they were going to put Jaime.

Out back in the vegetable gardens? Shipped off to Casterly Rock to compare notes on being dead with Father? That almost seemed unfair, and from what little he had gathered, Jaime had been vehemently against going back there. Not that I bloody blame him. So where?

Despite trying to convince himself all day that it was no matter, his damned curiosity got the better of him. He reminded himself that it was just for observation purposes as he donned a black cloak with a hood and joined the small group of mourners leaving the Red Keep with a heavily armed escort. It was a somber and silent ride through the cold winter twilight, the almost deserted streets of the city, until they reached – to Tyrion's considerable surprise – the Great Sept of Baelor.

Walked in, away from the elaborately adorned sanctuary, the soaring pillars and serene statues and stained-glass windows, and down a narrow, dark staircase to the plain stone undercroft where the brothers of the Kingsguard had always been buried, in simple wall vaults with only their surnames to mark them by. Tyrion glanced around as they passed. Darklyn. Redwyne. Cole. Targaryen.
A wave of queasiness washed through Tyrion, looking at the carven letters stark and black in the torchlight. I shouldn't have come. He had heard as well that Aegon had tried to strip Jaime of the white cloak, but Jaime had openly ignored this; he had died wearing one, after all. And what with Penny (and Brienne, perhaps?) as well as the fact that Aegon's decrees, as a self-confessed impostor, had no legal weight, that meant Jaime was still Lord Commander, and if nothing else, entitled to this place of final repose. I suppose it's better than the alternative.

The only light came from the flickering candles. Tyrion stood stiffly at attention with the five others attending, the kingdom's most notorious knight given this dark, quiet, anonymous sendoff. Six more people than will come to my funeral. Him, Penny, a tall hooded figure that had to be Brienne, two Lannister guardsmen likely there out of obligation, and one of the Unsullied, clearly acting as Daenerys' eyes and ears in case anything treasonous should accidentally crop up. Six, and four of them did not know him, one is Brienne, and one me. He could still leave. He could.

The silent sisters arrived with the shrouded body, and the septon came behind. Two Warrior's Sons followed, as the Warrior had been the only one of the gods that Jaime Lannister had any use for. The service was brief and spare. Tears rolled down Penny's cheeks, though Tyrion thought it was once more the principle of the thing, as she had wept at Ser Jorah's, rather than any wrenching personal depth of emotion. Yet when the septon said, "Into Your hands, O Seven, we commend Your servant Jaime," Tyrion heard a faint, muffled noise that made his hackles stand, that barely sounded human. He glanced at Brienne, but her head was down, her hood hiding her face. Still he could feel it, like shards of glass embedded in his skin. It filled the dark catacombs, palpable, inescapable. The Seven don't want him, he wanted to shout, but bit his tongue until he tasted blood. What did it matter, if none of this, none of them, were real?

The silent sisters moved the body from the bier to the tomb, and turned back the shroud, offering a chance for final farewells to be made. Uncovered, Jaime's face looked quite peaceful, eyes closed, the blood washed and combed from his hair and his wounds dressed and mended, all made presentable with wax and paint and powder. The Lannister guardsmen touched two fingers to their brows respectfully, and Penny sniffed, but both Tyrion and Brienne remained motionless. How could he possibly say or do anything to adequately represent what he felt, boiling over? How could he even stand it?

At last, as Tyrion's feet remained rooted uselessly to the ground, Brienne moved forward, bent, and kissed Jaime's forehead lightly. Then she rose and stepped back, spine straight as a spear, and the silent sisters — after one more glance at Tyrion — folded the shroud over Jaime's face again. The septon mumbled benedictions as he was lowered in, and the tomb was sealed. The Warrior's Sons lit candles, and the engraved stone was put in place. Tyrion felt his legs turn watery, and locked them hard. Father would be furious that Jaime was buried here, not at the Rock. Small mercies, I suppose. Though if Lord Tywin had disowned both his sons for being stains on the Lannister name, he might not have thought them fit to lie there anyway. There you go, you old bastard. You have it all to yourself now, and for good. How does it feel?

The silent sisters retreated, the septon and the Warrior's Sons and the guards. It was over. Penny, after a brief glance at Tyrion, followed. Brienne did not, watching the candles. Tyrion stood a few feet away, both of them remaining utterly still, until at last he said, "Where do you mean to go from here, my lady?"

"My duty to Sansa Stark remains." Brienne kept her gaze straight ahead. "When she returns from Highgarden — with her new husband," she added quite pointedly — "I am honor-bound to follow her back to the North, and there serve her however I can."
Tyrion was rocked at the thought that his lady wife had availed herself of the chance to contrive a second and more opportune marriage—though not surprised, and not sure that he could have done much about it even if he objected. We already proved what a jape of a union that was, and she already made it plain how much she hated me. He didn't know why he had expected to have a say in how it ended, considering that he too had had none in how it began. "I wish Lady Sansa and Butterbumps all the best," he said coolly. "At least I hope that's the one she married, as Willas Tyrell is liable to bore her spitless. Though now that my brother's dead, you can wed him instead. You'd suit each other."

Brienne looked at him with slitted eyes, the rawness of her emotion clearly leaving her with absolutely no skin for mockery, and for a moment he seriously thought she was going to hit him. But she must have decided not to profane her beloved Jaime's grave with such things, and restrained, barely. "Your pardons, my lord," she said, in a voice of utter ice. "I am very weary. Good night."

Tyrion watched her go without a word. The weight in his stomach felt more leaden than ever. He wanted to call after her, apologize, tell her that he was right, that he was wrong. Who bloody knew. Who bloody knew a bloody thing. He stood there until long after he was alone, as the night went on, softly. At last, he moved to snuff the candles that the Warrior's Sons had left—then turned sharply and walked out, leaving them burning in the darkness.

Upon return to the castle, much later, he did not make the same mistake twice, and drank enough wine to be quite sure that he'd sleep without disturbance. Slept well enough, in fact, that he was sorely displeased to be awoken by a messenger summoning him to a small council meeting, a disconnection great enough to make him seriously wonder if this was all one long and increasingly bizarre nightmare, and that he would wake as King's Hand with Joffrey on the throne and Shae waiting for him in the manse, Bronn to do his dirty work and Shagga terrifying the servants. But it wasn't. It was Daenerys who called for him, not Cersei, and Tyrion supposed grimly that at least that was something. He pulled on his clothes and stumbled out, accompanied by a bloody bitch of a hangover. More wine would make it go away, once the meeting was done.

He arrived at the appointed chamber, girding himself for the worst. But at least Dany had a more efficient idea of government than the corrupt, the crony, the incompetent, the poxy lickspittles, and Pycelle that had staffed this august assembly before; it was her, Grey Worm, Marwyn, Victarion Greyjoy (though what use he was going to do anyone, Tyrion had no notion) and, rather surprisingly, Aegon and Princess Arianne. Aye, well, the Martells have been loyal to the Targaryens a long while, and Rhaegar was her uncle by marriage. Tyrion wondered what they might have done with his niece, but was not sure he wanted to know the answer. He took a seat, still fighting a massive sense of unreality.

The proceedings were fairly straightforward. Daenerys announced that she planned to formally take the crown as soon as it could be arranged, but wanted only a small and modest ceremony; any money left anywhere would be better spent on dealing with the countless and extensive ravages of the kingdom. Still more, she had no intention of using her dragons to wrestle the torn-apart corpse of Westeros together with more fire and blood and death. She was, Daenerys said, well aware that she herself had destroyed the Iron Throne, which the Conqueror had wrought as a symbol of it. Any man who still thought to do whatever misbehavior pleased him would find her twice as ruthless, but she meant to offer mercy and pardons to those who would accept her rule, encourage the lords and ladies of all the Seven Kingdoms to come to court and make their concerns and that of their homelands known. She had the Martells for certain, and Tyrion supposed that his own presence signified the Lannisters. Aegon said that Sansa Stark had promised northern loyalty if the Tyrell marriage was permitted, and she had a strong sway on the lords of the Vale as well. Victarion was the queen's captain and admiral, so perhaps the ironborn were not completely a lost
cause. The riverlords, westermen, and whatever remained of the Baratheon claim were unknown commodities, but Tyrion conceded reluctantly that it was not quite as hopeless a beginning as might be feared. He shifted in his chair, aching for a drink, and was then startled to realize that Daenerys was addressing him. "– would do this honor, Lord Tyrion?"

He blinked. "I – beg your pardon?"

"I was asking," Daenerys repeated, with some asperity, "that as you have done me good service and offered wise counsel, speaking truth even when I would rather not have heard it, and ridden Viserion for me, that you do the honor of becoming my Queen's Hand."

Tyrion had to take a moment to absorb that. Aerys' daughter asking Tywin's son that question, of all things. Perhaps we truly do repeat our history, unceasing. Thought of his own sense of being trapped in the past, this morning. Knowing what it had made of it, of him.

"My lady," he said finally, "you indeed do me honor. But I cannot accept. I will serve you, and see that your wishes are done, and offer what small help I can, if you will forgive a bad jest. But not as that. You would, I think, regret the choice – but not more than I."

Dany eyed him warily. "Do you wish to go to Casterly Rock, then?"

"No," Tyrion said. "Not in the least. I wanted it, once. More than anything else, that my lord father acknowledge me as his heir, since J – my brother joined the Kingsguard and it was plain that he would never inherit. But I cannot live there with his shade. If you do wish me to become Lord of the Rock, I ask leave to exhume my father from the Hall of Heroes and throw his rotting carcass into the Sunset Sea, after a suitable apology to the fish. Otherwise, if my niece Myrcella is still alive – " he shot a narrow glance at Arianne Martell – "let her have it. Help yourself to whatever's left in the vaults, pay the Lysene merchants, raze it to the ground and build a brothel, whatever you wish. Though I have heard that the prince's forces sacked it, so everything of value is likely gone already. As I said. Give it to Myrcella. She's my elder brother's child, she comes before me in the line of succession anyway."

A general glance was exchanged at this cavalier confirmation of the Lannisters' incest, but a Targaryen queen of all people could not have much to say on that accord, and Daenerys shut her mouth with a click. Then she nodded, and was just about to say something else when there was a knock on the chamber door, and a servant entered. "Your Grace? Please pardon the interruption but – you'll want to come quickly. Trust me."

The queen's eyebrows flew up, but she got to her feet – as did Tyrion, deciding on the spot that whatever qualified as urgent enough for her to know immediately was something that he should as well. The rest of the small council apparently reached the same conclusion, and the thought was certainly shared in their minds as they hurried down the hall that the Others had returned, very arsed off about having been shown the door so unceremoniously the first time. *We saved the city, but now that doesn't appear to matter very much, does it? I thought so. I always thought –*

It was to Tyrion's considerable confusion, therefore, when the interruption proved not to consist of a horde of murderous snow demons, but rather a tall, dark young man, standing with his back to them, bathed in a pillar of sunlight from the high windows. He was dressed in the blacks of the Night's Watch, and Tyrion thought suddenly that there was something familiar about him. The corpses had been almost all removed from the throne room, to burning or burial or whatever was to be done with them – but that outside, was that a –

Daenerys clearly realized something, and stopped short. "You," she breathed. "It's you. You're the one I saw in the flames of Asshai, with the black hands and the burning sword, in the far northern
wilds with my third dragon. I saw you. I saw you. And I know who you are. You're Rhaegar's son. Aren't you."

A long, long pause. And then the young man turned.

"Indeed, my lady," Jon Snow said calmly. "So I have learned that I am."

Tyrion's jaw sagged. He felt that he should inform her that she was terribly mistaken, that that was just Ned Stark's bastard, not – this. All he could see was the rash boy he had met at Winterfell, angry and dissatisfied with his place in the world and his dishonor of illegitimacy, determined to join the Night's Watch with his uncle Benjen and win glory, who had sicced his white wolf on Tyrion after Tyrion jabbed him once too often about it. Yet on the journey to the Wall together, they had forged a certain clumsy rapport, as he told the boy to be proud to be Jon Snow, that then the world couldn't hurt him with it. Remembered the way Jon had offered him his hand on that night atop the Wall, and how Tyrion had told him that most of his kin were bastards, but Jon was the first he'd had to friend. Stopping back at Winterfell with the saddle designs for Bran, eventually ending up at that tavern and being dwarf-napped by Lady Catelyn and everything that came after –

"You seem... different, though," Daenerys said at last, once she had finished studying Jon from head to toe. "Than when I first glimpsed you."

Jon looked wry. "I rather imagine so, my lady."

"Is –" Dany paused. "Rhaegal's here, isn't he."

"Aye. I have flown him for some time now, and am presently returning from Oldtown, where I left a friend of mine at the Citadel. There is... much you should know."

The queen nodded. "Will you take supper tonight with me then, Lord Snow?"

"I should very much like to, Your Grace."

Look at them, Tyrion thought dazedly, already thick as thieves. He wondered when, if ever, the world would stop completely turning out from under his feet. Then from nowhere, he heard himself speak. "Jon."

The young man stopped, then blinked, then actually smiled. "My lord of Lannister. It is good to see you."

"The first time anyone has ever said that, I imagine. But are you... going north again, soon?"

Jon hesitated. "Aye."

"We both knew the Old Bear," Tyrion said awkwardly. "Jeor Mormont. And I... had a chance to make acquaintance with his son, Ser Jorah. Just before he died, Jorah asked me to recite the Night's Watch oath with him, as he believed it would be his lord father's wish that he take the black. And as you are, last I recall, Lord Commander, I ask that you do this service for one of your brothers, and take his ashes to scatter on Bear Island, as he asked."

Jon looked surprised, and sad. "Not quite," he said. "Not anymore. But all a man's crimes are forgiven when he swears to the Watch. I would be honored to take Ser Jorah home."

Daenerys' eyes were bright, Tyrion noticed, and she had to swallow hard. Then she drew her – her bloody nephew off (Rhaegar's false son unmasked, Rhaegar's true son revealed – it wasn't enough to get Tyrion to believe in anything, but it was the hell of a coincidence) and the dwarf stood in the
chilly winter sunlight by himself. Somehow the world appeared to still be turning, grinding and
groaning on, as if more days would come, more weeks, more months, more years. He could not say
he relished the prospect. Couldn't figure out when he'd been hoodwinked into living, or even
exactly why he would want to, but thus it was. And fittingly, perhaps, the words of House
Mormont flitted into his head. _Here We Stand._

"Here we stand," Tyrion murmured. And wasn't that just the bloody bugger of it.

He remained there a moment longer, then turned away. Passed into the cloisters, and began to
walk. Walked from the sunlight into the wells of shadow, walked on, until the air had grown still
again and even the echoes of his footsteps had faded away behind him.
The Girl With No Past

There was a hole in her chest that had been there for days and days, months and months, maybe years, the hole she had lived and died for, woken up and slept with every night and morning until she thought men and women customarily walked around like that, half their vitals hanging from their bodies. She had grown accustomed to it, comforted by it, and it no longer seemed strange to lose other parts of herself, let them slip away into the gentle, greedy hands of the darkness. Yet this, now, was different. This was knowing she wanted back what used to be there, but knowing too she would never have it. The poison. That's what it was, what it did. The Summer Maid had said it would kill her in moments, but once again, she had not told the entire truth. Though it did kill me. It killed the girl who used to be Arya Stark, for good and all. She wished she knew if what Ser Gendry had told her was true, about her being a daughter of Winterfell who'd traveled with him on the road, but she wouldn't. I can learn back who I was, maybe, but I can't have my old memories ever again. She had been trying with all her might to run away from them, but now that she had, finally and forever, she felt the loss constantly.

Still she did not regret it. Not killing the Summer Maid, that was. She'd thought she might, as if that would be a fair price to pay for the courtesan poisoning her, but every time she considered it, it just made her feel worse. It would be easy to do it now, but it would have been easy to do it then. The ship wasn't that large, after all, and there weren't many places to hide. Not that the Summer Maid was hiding. She was out and about, on deck, as if daring Arya to do it, and while she herself hadn't made another attempt, Arya didn't sleep easy, knowing she was watching. Ser Justin bartered me to her in exchange for the Horn, so I still belong to her. She and Jaqen are still part of each other. But how do I escape without killing her? How? She could set Nymeria on her, maybe Shaggydog, but the wolves were man-eaters and would certainly not hold back. I should. I have to.

One more. One more. It still tempted her maddeningly. But this last kill, if she did it, would make her into a Faceless Man for good, and then there would never be any escape. Maybe the permanent destruction of her old memories was supposed to make the choice easier. If she knew there was no chance of recovering them, she should be freed to take the final step, no looking back. Surely it would be better than this, lingering in this forever halfway-between. Kill me and you can have your memories back, the Summer Maid had said. But that was a lie too. She wasn't going to. She wasn't.

The wind was sharp and cold as a winter bone, and the ships fleeing White Harbor made good time, putting more and more leagues of open ocean between them and the monsters at their backs. Arya kept thinking about Ser Gendry. She didn't want him to die either, but he had chosen to stay behind and fight like a knight, and she couldn't save him, couldn't save herself or anyone. At least she had Rickon, who she'd worked out was her brother, but he wasn't much help. He kept sneaking down into the hold trying to free Nymeria and Shaggy from their chains, and after catching him at this once too often, the crew had shut him in one of the cabins – causing Rickon to scream and kick the wall for hours, cursing and ranting in the Old Tongue of the wildlings and demanding to be let out. There seemed to be a general consensus that if he wasn't a Stark, he'd have been thrown overboard long since and good riddance to him, and Arya didn't want them thinking that maybe they should throw her too. So she laid low, quiet as a mouse.

On the occasion she did talk to anyone, it was mostly Jeyne. They shared a berth, and sometimes Arya liked to play with the baby while Jeyne ate. She didn't mind that he had no right hand, and that his big blue eyes were sightless; he always gurgled and cooed and kicked happily when she picked him up, and he was starting to acquire a soft auburn fuzz of hair that reminded her of someone, that in fact looked sort of like Rickon's untamable mop. His name was Robbie, which she liked but didn't know why. She didn't think it was fair, the looks she sometimes saw the northmen
giving him when they were above, taking what little air they could get, a relief from the squalid, sick-smelling stuffiness of below. He hadn't asked to be born blind and maimed. At least she, whatever she was, had chosen to do this to herself.

So far as Arya knew from listening to talk, they were going to a place called the Vale, which was where the Burned Men had come from and where Ser Gendry said he'd traveled with her sister, Sansa. I have a sister. She kept returning to it, like a small bright flame. Whenever she got to the Vale or King's Landing, where Gendry said that Sansa had gone, Arya decided, she would kiss her like a proper lady and make her courtly graces. Then Sansa might not even know that she'd forgotten her completely. I can pretend, can't I? Arya was sore afraid that if her sister knew the truth, if any of them knew it, they'd cast her out to fend for herself. They're your pack. But what if the pack didn't want her anymore?

It was a sail of four or five days across the frigid Bite and down the rocky, snowy, stonycroppings of the Fingers to the port of Gulltown, where the refugee ships finally landed. Some of them, at least; the Braavosi survivors were of a temperament to continue on for Lys or Myr or Volantis, any other of the Free Cities, rather than commit their fortunes to this desolate place. Arya briefly considered going with them, but knew she couldn't. Maybe she could steal one of the ships and go off wherever she liked, with Nymeria and Shaggy and Rickon and Jeyne and Robbie, but that was a stupid idea. You needed a crew and a captain, grown men, to sail a ship, and none of them seemed to be available. She wondered how she had gotten to Braavos in the first place with no money for a ship, if perhaps she'd paid her passage in some other way. Jaqen knows. He must have told me. But she couldn't risk going near the Summer Maid again.

With no other recourse, Arya went ashore with the others, taking a room in a shabby, dirty hostel with Jeyne. The place's claim to fame was that back before the Conquest, a king returning from the wars in the east had been captured here, valiantly fighting his enemies with a kitchen spit before being scurrilously vanquished, and that was the device painted on the wooden sign: a red-haired man laying about, smiting down his craven foes, which gave Arya an odd feeling of both exhilaration and despair. But that king had lost, been taken away, cast into chains, only returned to his realms after a great sum was paid; the tavern was called The King's Ransom, after all. It wasn't fair. If she couldn't remember anything, why was it still making her sad?

"Are we just supposed to wait?" she asked Jeyne, that night. Another snowstorm was brewing, and she could feel the cold air slipping through, prying at the cracks, ghosting across the floor. "If they all die, back in White Harbor, how would we ever even know?"

"Where else would we go?" Jeyne's hair was down, tumbling over her shoulders in tangled brown curls. "The men are saying that the Lord Protector, Petyr Baelish, has been deposed, and is awaiting trial by the Lords of the Vale and the Hangwoman, Lady Stoneheart. If that is so, the place is like to be in turmoil anyway."

"I just..." Arya picked at her thumbnail. She didn't know how to say that she thought she should get away from the Summer Maid, or at least she should. But Jeyne was probably right. They couldn't escape into the night, the blizzard, just two girls and a baby, from Gulltown up into the savage mountains of the Vale. Couldn't go back to White Harbor, either. After so long running, her feet itched restlessly, and the back of her neck prickled as if in wariness for a predator in the shadows. She didn't feel comfortable or safe when she wasn't moving, even a little, and so she got up and started to pace back and forth on the creaky floor. She wished she had Needle, but Ser Justin hadn't given it back, so she'd have to fight bare-handed if anything attacked them here. She thought of the wights and the way she had watched them stalk and tear apart White Harbor. They're coming for us. We can't outrace them, we can't ever leave them behind. Why couldn't they see how much danger they were in? Why?
"Sit down," Jeyne said. "You're wearying me to look at you."

Arya wanted to snap at her that that wasn't so, that she should get up too and make ready to fight, but she made herself do so, hands twisted in her lap. She didn't even want to play with Robbie, and finally, miserably, she crawled under the inadequate blankets and lay there shivering, staring at the dark ceiling. _I've become a mouse again._ Hiding, scared. She hated it. Maybe she shouldn't have ever left Braavos, even if she would have drowned. Maybe she should go kill the Summer Maid, become a Faceless Man and never be afraid again... but even then, she wouldn't have a place to belong. She'd burned the House of Black and White, the city was sunk. _Lost. Lost. Lost._ Only this, a mouse lost in the mounting snows, the night, the darkness, until... 

Until just so, she was no longer a mouse but a wolf, still stuck in the bowels of the ship but almost free, wrenching and pulling at the chains until at last they gave, tearing out of the wall, and her green-eyed brother did the same. They bounded up and onto the deck, vicious cold wind tearing at their fur, but she ignored it. Could taste the scents of earth and salt and iron and manflesh, the allure of the hunt. Had to restrain herself from running into the humans' den and finding the men who had chained her, serve them in kind. Instead, she turned into the hills beyond, her brother at her back, and began to climb.

They hunted and killed a deer together, though it was so scrawny that there was barely meat for them both, and they wrestled and nipped and growled in the snow until he finally rolled over, submitting. They finished their feeding, then carried on. The ground grew steeper and steeper under their paws, until she was almost skidding. But she made it, hauling herself up onto the ridge, looking up into the wilderness beyond, the monoliths of snow and stone. There was nothing here to fear, to turn her away, and she started to run.

The two direwolves galloped all night. They evaded packs of wild men, well-armed and moving at speed, and now stood on a hilltop, gazing down into a long white valley furrowed in deep drifts, trees bent over under the weight of icicles. But in the distance there was a man-den – _a castle_, some whisper of the girl's memory corrected – lit with fire on the towers. Yet great as it was, it was still dwarfed by the bulwark of the dark mountain behind it, which led up and up, up and up and _up_ a dizzying long way, to the faint shadow of another castle at the very top, like seven slender shoots of white birch at the eagle's eyrie of the world, veiled by the drifting clouds.

After a long moment, the wolf yipped at her brother to follow, and the two of them began picking their way down the steep hillside, skidding on the talus. _Don't look down_, the girl's voice whispered, _don't look down_. But they switchbacked and zigzagged across to the valley floor, and then it was a straightforward lope along the road to the castle waiting, that stood guarding the gates of the mountain and the white fortress high above. They stopped just shy, prowling on a hillock, wary of hunters who might think a thick pelt just the thing to ward off the winter; the wolf still remembered the ache and humiliation and chains of last time, the ones who had caught her on the Trident and kenneled her up, as well as her much more recent imprisonment aboard the ship. But while the place was alive with torches, with a distant, angry noise, they smelled no danger to them, and began to pad steadily nearer. Her brother was hungry, peeled back his jaws to show their slaver, clearly intending to pick off one of the men if he could, but she turned and snarled at him.

The wolves circled around to the rear of the castle, just in time to hear chains rattling, see a grate being hauled up, and the emergence of two figures into the chilly, blustery blue murk. One was cloaked and hooded, hands wrapped about with bandages, mounted on a mule. Behind them, chained around the neck, stumbling and afoot as he tried to keep up to avoid being dragged, was a smallish man with a pointed little black beard and eyes of greenish-grey, clearly once very smart in the way humans preened themselves, but now disheveled and dirty, bleeding from a cut above his eye. His breath steamed in the air as he tried to plead with his captor. "Cat – my lady – really no
call for this – I assure you, I can explain, I can make it right, just let me have a chance – "

The cloaked figure paid him no heed. She merely jerked the chain harder, and they started up the steep path beyond, the mule sure-footed even on the ice and snow, and soon the little man had no breath left for talking, was gasping and wheezing, boots slipping as he scrabbled to avoid plunging off the mountainside. The two wolves watched curiously – and then, when the two had reached some height above, the she-wolf began to climb. After a moment, her brother whined and followed her.

Slowly, bit by bit, careful to stay just out of sight, they toiled up the exposed trail, up and up and up. The castle at the foot of the mountain dwindled smaller and smaller, then out of sight entirely, as they gained altitude, following the hooded woman and her prisoner. They passed two smaller waycastles built into the side of the peak, as all the world unreeled below, mountains and mountains, snow and sky. Higher and higher, until the wolf thought dimly that if she had wings like a bird, she would soar. But there was no such creature as a winged wolf. Fur and teeth and claws served her well enough, though she could feel the strain as they continued to ascend. Her instincts told her the sun should be risen by now, but it remained below the horizon, only a faint, sullen glow in the east.

The remote white castle slowly drew nearer. They crossed a narrow stone bridge with the wind screaming to either side, such a long long way down. Then at the far side, the hooded woman dismounted from the mule, but did not tie it or otherwise do anything to it, and it seemed to the wolf suddenly that she did not intend to return. Then, her prisoner's chain in hand, he running ragged with exhaustion, lips blue, coughing and choking every time he tried to take a breath, she hauled him up the final, nearly sheer pitch, and they disappeared into the roof of the world above.

One last time, the direwolves followed, haunches straining, the air burning in her chest like a blade, as if she could not quite get enough of it. At last, she crawled her way over the precipice, and through the doors that had been left open into the cold white tomb of the castle, sounds bouncing back on them from all sides and snow drifting in, empty and freezing and desolate. Side by side, they stalked after the two humans – though the woman's scent was wrong, queer, musty and decayed – and into a great hall with a massive seat of weirwood, blue-and-white banners draped from the walls. At the far end, before a door carved with a crescent moon, stood the woman and the man. She had chained him to a pillar, and was now lifting aside with her bandaged hands the bronze bars that held it shut.

"Cat," the man was saying again. Despite the fierceness of the cold, he was sweating. "Cat, please – all I ever did was love you – I cannot be blamed for loving you! I would have made you as good a husband as Ned, but I was lowborn and you were a daughter of Riverrun, it's their fault, not mine – if we had run away, I would have given you everything you ever wanted, adventured through the Free Cities, plucked stars like diamonds for your hair. If you had just trusted me, given me a chance, none of this would ever have happened, there would be no need! It – it's not too late, we can – "

As before, the hooded woman completely ignored him. She pulled the last bar off, and the door slammed open into a screaming void of – nothing. At the same time, the whipping wind stripped her hood off, and the wolf felt a shock of recognition burn through her.

She. . . she knew her, or at least the wolf did, though the girl's ruined memory did not. Had dragged her naked body out of a river, had smelled the rich ripeness of rot, had seen her slashed throat bleeding in a soft cloud of red from ear to ear, the torn tracks of flesh on her face. Taken an arm in her mouth and shook it vigorously, trying to wake her, but she wouldn't wake. I know she's dead. I saw it in a dream. Yet how was she here now, woken but somehow still dead, bloodshot eyes
burning, throat hidden in a high collar, flesh turned white and wrinkled and hair as sparse as eiderdown? Who was she, that the wolf would have tried so hard to save her? It was almost there, but then it washed back out into the soft dark sea that the Summer Maid's poison had made of all her memories.

The wolf tucked her tail between her legs and whined.

The woman looked up, and saw them at last. An awful expression crossed her face, her inhuman gaze still fixed on them, as she raised a hand and they trotted closer. The man twisted in his chains and stared at them in aghast horror, clearly thinking that the woman had conjured them up from nowhere. "Cat. Cat! I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you, never meant any of it – I saved Sansa, I – "

The black wolf crouched, snarling and showing his teeth. She did the same. And at the smallest gesture from the woman, Cat, one tip of her head, they leapt for his throat.

The little man screamed, jerking and thrashing, but he had nowhere to go, and her jaws closed around the meat of his shoulder, ripping away a chunk, the hot blood and marrow trickling deliciously down her throat, as her brother worried at the tender meat of the breast. They gaped and grabbed and growled, biting and tearing, until the little man was a bloody, abject, mauled mess, whimpering through the mangled remnants of his throat, but still alive. Then Cat made another motion to call them off, and they retreated, licking their chops and snarling, circling, as she stepped in and unchained him. Without their support, he collapsed, and she dragged him facedown across the floor, leaving a vivid smear of gore and viscera, to the open door. She paused a moment, as if contemplating the fall, the nothingness, that lay below. She croaked something through the ruins of her own throat, and then, with one swift, merciless motion, she threw him out.

If the man screamed, it was instantly lost in the wind. Cat slumped back against the wall, as if the last strength of vengeance had gone from her, turned to a frail crumple of bones and skin that would blow away as well. The wolves lowered their heads and padded toward her, and the she-wolf whined and nosed at her, trying to get her up to her feet, going down on her front legs to encourage the woman to climb onto her back – she'd carry her down the mountain, she'd save her this time. She would. She had to.

Cat's bandaged hands closed into the thick fur of their ruffs, the grey bitch and her black brother, and pulled their faces toward hers with a last, desperate effort, her red eyes gazing into theirs, gold and green, as they put out rough tongues and licked the tears of blood and salt from her shredded cheeks. She shuddered from head to toe, motionless for an eternal moment, holding them. Then at last, she let go. Got slowly to her feet, and walked – not toward the wolves, but toward the open door. Stood there, wrappings whirling in the tempest, as the she-wolf realized too late what she meant and lunged for her, jaws closing on – nothing. Cat stepped out into the abyss of sky, and easily as that, she flew, leaving her last croaked whisper swirling behind her on the wind.

Oh, Ned.

The wolves stood there long after the only thing left was the wild keening of the wind. Then at last, they turned and loped down the empty hall, to the doors that still stood open and the descent down the mountain. They attacked and ate the mule for sustenance, stripping it down to bare bones, then stepped into the rock chute, picking their way gingerly down. The unexplained sense of loss still pounded in the bitch's heart. She was possessed with an urge to cross the mountainside and find where the woman had fallen, scuff some snow over her to cover her properly, see for herself one last time if there was truly nothing that could be done, but knew it was useless. Go, child. Fly. But wolves had no wings, she'd already known that, and she couldn't. Only feel the empty spaces
within her grew ever darker and deeper and vaster, to nothing, to never never never. Not even – not a – and then a faint fleeting sense of running toward twin grey castles in the rain, knowing only that she must reach them, whoever they were – a big man on a black horse bellowed and chased her, and hit her in the back of the head with the flat of an axe –

And then there was a feeling as if she was being pulled backwards down a long tunnel, and she saw the wolves from overhead and far away, no longer through the bitch's eyes, no longer in her skin, and she felt it like another violation, another separation, as she whirled and fell and crashed back into her own useless, miserable body, lying flat on the bed with Jeyne's face hovering anxiously above her, back in that shabby little hostel in Gulltown, far from the wolves in the mountains of the Vale. "Arya," Jeyne was saying, shaking her. "Arya? Arya!"

Blearily, she struggled to recollect that that was her. She felt as weary and cold and shaky and exhausted as if she too had run that far and climbed that high, empty and hollow with grief. She curled onto her side. "Leave me alone."

"You've been asleep for hours and hours. We couldn't wake you." A rustle, a creak of floorboards, and then Jeyne returned with a bowl of hot broth. "Drink this. You'll feel better."

Arya did not want to drink it, nor to feel better. She curled into a tighter ball, trying to use the covers like armor, to ward off everyone and everything, especially Jeyne and her stupid broth. *I was with her, in her, deeper than ever before. It was better there. I was stronger. I don't want to come back again. Not again.* She lay there, shivering in a half-doze, until she heard somebody at the door, and couldn't resist peeking out to see.

It was Rickon, looking uncharacteristically solemn. "She's dead," he told Arya. "After we killed the man together. She flew. I saw it when I was with Shaggy."

Arya grunted. "I know."

Rickon's lip wobbled. He paused, then trotted into the room, climbed up onto the bed, and crawled in with her.

Arya tensed. She should have pushed him away, thrown him out, told him to go back to his own bed, but he was warm and solid and real, and she was too tired. So she let him stay there, the two of them lying in silence, curled up like wolf-pups in the den, as she wanted to cry but didn't even know how to start. *The man we tore up, was that the Lord Protector they said was on trial, the one with the Hangwoman?* There were no witnesses; both of them were dead. Just like everyone, always. Always.

Who was she fooling, refusing to become a Faceless Man? Death had brought her nothing, but it was all she had left, the only thing she was good at. She could build the order anew, maybe teach them to serve the old gods rather than the God of Many Faces. *Stark.* That at least she knew she was. This was the only way. The only.

Quiet as a shadow, Arya slid out of bed, leaving Rickon sleeping. Jeyne was nodding off with Robbie, so there was no one to stop her as she stole down the hall, up the narrow flight of stairs to the next floor, down to the room at the end where the Summer Maid was billeted. Lifted the door on the latch, and stepped in. Took the long dagger from the sideboard, tested its sharpness with a prick of her thumb, and walked across to the bed where the courtesan lay. Stood above her, steel in hand, poised at the brink.

Now. Do it.

After a moment, the Summer Maid's – Tysha's – eyes slitted open. She seemed not surprised in the least to see Arya there. Instead, utterly calm, she reached for the collar of her high-necked robe, and
pulled it aside, baring her breast. "Strike, child," she whispered. "Strike. I have lived too long."

Arya's hand wavered. There was a lump in her throat, her eyes stinging with salt. Then, once and forever, she closed them. Raised the dagger on high, then drove it home, swift and deep and true.

The Summer Maid jerked, but made no sound apart from a brief, strangled grunt. The dagger fell from Arya's nerveless grasp as she pulled it out, and then she went to her knees, clutched Tysha's hand, and pressed it to her face with both of hers, shaking with soundless sobs, crouched and rocking and holding it tight as the courtesan's pulse was already slowing, blood soaking into the rough sheets. She had fought and fought, defied them over and over, burned their temple, killed the kindly man, fled Braavos, kicked and bit and struggled, but in the end, they had won after all. It was too much, the damage done to her. There was no way to mend it, no magical medicine to descend from on high. Only this, the only way she could live or breathe or walk forward. She was falling. Falling.

The Summer Maid convulsed one last time, her fingers clawing around Arya's. In Jaqen's voice, she whispered, "A girl learns," and died.

Arya remained on her knees, hearing the slow patter of blood. Put out a finger and dipped it, painted a rough stripe across her tongue, could taste the copper-metal tang of it, red and bitter. She didn't know if it had worked, if she had become a Faceless Man at last – but then, she thought, she hadn't. She wanted to be a Faceless Woman instead, and her order would be all-female, to kill men like the ones that had done this to her and Tysha. She shivered at the thought, a strange little frisson of shock and delight, and then could feel it coming over her, changing her, alchemizing her. Until at last, for the first time in years, she drew a breath without pain, without feeling the hole in her chest, and almost fainted.

Her heart pounded wildly, her head turned light as a feather, as she rose to her feet. She could not remember, but now she did not care. It was no use, no need. She felt as strong as if she could run for a hundred leagues, free of the burden of caring, free. She felt giddy, euphoric, took another taste of blood, then watched as before her eyes, the husk of the Summer Maid withered and dissolved into black water – the very black water of the fountain that every initiate drank from, as she had done – and trickled down the covers, away across the floorboards, until nothing remained of it at all. No body, no trace, no proof that the person had ever even existed. So this is how a servant of Death dies. She filed it away with an abstract interested. She'd done enough now, enough. She was still alive, breathing on her own, steady and true. She had died and died, and now, at last, she lived.

The Faceless Woman who had once been Arya Stark turned away, and walked out of the room without ever once glancing back.

It was four days hence when the news arrived, borne by a gasping, windblown messenger on a half-dead horse, who had apparently fought through the dangers of the high road come hell or high water to make it known. Petyr Baelish, Lord Protector of the Vale, had been tried and found guilty of high treason and gross conspiracy, and henceforth sentenced to death. It had been carried out by Lady Stoneheart, erstwhile leader of the Brotherhood without Banners, who took him up to the abandoned Eyrie and never returned either. With them gone, rule of the Vale had passed to a regency council of Bronze Yohn and Lord Nestor Royce, Anya Waynwood, and Lyonel Corbray, until such time as Harrold Hardyn recovered from his wounds and could take over. The names rushed by Arya like wind; she neither knew nor cared who any of them were, but other folk did. She did take note of them, though, as their names were important if she should be called upon to kill one of them some day. Otherwise, she was still too busy exulting in her freedom from pain. How much better it was to wake up in the morning, to go about the day, to breathe and be. She no longer felt any connection with her wolf, had slept deep and dreamlessly the last several nights
without slipping into Nymeria's skin in the least. *She served me well when I needed it, but that time is done.*

The downside, if it could be called that, was that both Rickon and Robbie seemed to her transformation and, to say the least, disliked it. Rickon ran and hid whenever he saw her, and Robbie, who before had cooed happily when she held him, now screamed and kicked and sobbed until Jeyne, puzzled and alarmed, quickly took him back, apologizing. Arya didn't really care. It was immaterial to her. She was better now. Better.

With the entire Vale in upheaval, however, there was a certain amount of trepidation about remaining in the middle of it. There were already rampant reports that now, completely unchecked, Black Ears and Painted Dogs and Stone Crows and the rest were traipsing in great numbers from the Mountains of the Moon to attack and plunder the small and relatively undefended villages and settlements that scattered the coast and lowlands. While wildlings might not be *quite* as implacable a foe as wights, the risk of ending up dead was just as real, and there was a certain sense of betrayal among the White Harbor coterie, as after all the Burned Men had traveled there to fight for them. But these were not Burned Men, who were all resolutely loyal to the absent Sansa, and hence there was no hope of appealing to them. Gulltown was somewhat safer by virtue of its mud-brick walls and being mostly encompassed by water, but one of its near neighbors had already suffered the incursions of a marauding horde of Milk Snakes, and it would be some time, if at all, before the regency council was able to pull itself together to muster an effective response. Thus with great reluctance, it was decided that their safety could only be assured (or only slightly improved, considering the state of things) by getting aboard the ships and sailing, again, further south.

Arya went uncomplainingly aboard with the others. Nymeria and Shaggy had not returned, which did not trouble her but quite exerted Rickon; he insisted that they were still out in the wild, and they had to wait for them. Everyone else, however, was not at all sad about leaving two vicious man-killing beasts behind, and Rickon was soundly outvoted, then pre-emptively locked into a cabin to brood upon his misfortunes. With that, and ominous black clouds swirling and brewing on the northern horizon, they set sail.

The scanty light fell away, and the darkness came rushing in. The wind was contrary and the seas were high and rough, and the ships had to take in most of their canvas, laboring against the chop to make torturous headway. It must surely have occurred to everyone that drowning was no better option than a wildling's axe when it came to death, but nobody pointed it out, perhaps in hopes of not encouraging it. Arya stayed topside as long as she could, but at last it became too much even for her, and she went below, sticking a finger in her ears and twisting. They had been funny all day and the day before, ringing, as if she had stood very close to someone blowing a horn, the echoes of it still thrumming away but never quite fading. She didn't even know why she thought that. *Silly.*

Arya lay down in her berth and, despite the tossing and rolling, fell asleep quickly. Her dreams, however, were strange and savage. She saw a terrible storm, the shrieking shadow of something huge, green and gold, winged, breathing fire. Broken ice, a stampede of monsters and spiders and demons, and two men dressed in black, struggling in the snow for a burning sword. Saw one of them stab the other, weeping. Smoke and salt and blood, exploding, collapsing, as the monsters were destroyed as well. The live man held the dead one in his arms, head bent, as all the world ended around them. *Like me,* some fragment of her waking mind commented. *Like me.* *He died.* *It ended.* And for a moment, the pain resurfaced, aching too hard to bear. But then, panicked that it might gain hold over her and this time never let go, not for anything, she pushed it away and reminded herself who she was now, and it faded. She breathed, and slept again.

When she woke, it was to a fragile but lovely morning, sun spilling over the sea and slanting through the sails, the first time anyone could remember seeing it in too long to reckon. Everyone
crowded above to soak it in, basking and marveling at the icy-clear sky and the crisp breeze, which felt as warm as summer after the endless night and dark and brutal, murderous cold. Even Arya was not unaffected. She stood at the railing, feeling it on her face and hands. Thought of Ser Gendry and everyone else at White Harbor, wondered if they were seeing it too, or if they were all dead, as it poured so brilliant into their clear empty eyes. But that likewise was something she had to give up now and forever, and she let it go. If ever one day his name was spoken at her new temple, she'd kill him too.

With the storm cleared, they made it down the coast much faster, and at last, three mornings hence, rounded the cape and saw King's Landing lying in the crook of the bay, only a distant dark smudge from here, but its towers and walls still standing. It gave Arya an unpleasant jolt to see it, though of course she did not know why, and concluded that in her old life she must have had to run away. But it was noticed by everyone that the banners which were supposed to be flying over the castle – a stag and a lion – had been pulled down, replaced instead by a red three-headed dragon on a field of black. There were noises of awe and horror, and someone muttered, "Targaryens," in a tone of voice which suggested one should attempt to never meet a Targaryen even in extremity. When Arya asked why everyone was so unhappy, she was told that Prince Rhaegar had abducted Lady Lyanna and sparked off Robert's Rebellion, and the Mad King had killed Lord Rickard Stark and his eldest son, Brandon, because of it. The northmen were disinclined to forgive these actions even nearly twenty years later, or to bend the knee to a new dragon king even in hopes of being granted shelter and succor, and after a brief discussion, it was decided to remain aboard the ships, sending a few individuals into the city to acquire provisions and the news. Arya volunteered at once, and after some grumbling on their part, was furnished with a shortsword and a few silver stags, and sent through the great gates and into the maze beyond.

She did not need to search for tidings, for they were everywhere. All sorts of shocking tales, including that King's Landing itself had just barely survived an invasion of ice demons, was still burying its dead and tallying its losses, that a new dragon queen was in residence in the Red Keep, that the Kingslayer had been killed, and more. The place did look as if it had been attacked, slashed to bits, and it made her wonder if they'd just have to run away from here again as well. Sail until they fell off the edge of the map. It did hold a sort of macabre allure, and she paused at the crest of a hill, panting. Go, fly. Fly like Cat had, into the nothing. Or perhaps –

She looked up at the towers of the Red Keep, and froze.

Flapping above the parapets, immense and lazy, was the thing – the dragon – she had seen in her dream. Green and gold, the one that had swooped over the fight between the two men in black. *What's it doing here? Did it escape?* Such interest was unbefitting, but she reminded herself that now she was permanently fixed, she couldn't be broken again. After a spellbound moment longer, she turned determinedly and began to climb.

When she reached the castle gates at last, the guards were not impressed with an apparent street urchin attempting to inveigle entrance, so Arya shrugged and changed her face – she didn't even know to what, and not very well – but it did the trick of frightening them into asking no further questions. She strolled through and changed it back to herself, examining the broad courtyard with a vague, impersonal curiosity. It looked broken too, smashed up, merlons and ramparts torn off, great streaks of blackened stone, bodies still being carried out. Everything everywhere seemed poisoned, damaged, ended. She stood there looking at it, she didn't know how long, until she heard a young woman's voice from the wallwalk above, sounding irritated. "Nay, it would not be the first or even the dozenth attempt to kill me, but they suspect there is a Faceless Man here, and hence they must search the castle diligently before they let us –"

"With respect, Your Grace," a young man's voice answered dryly, "it may not be you they are after,
if indeed they even are. There are many lords and ladies of importance in the castle at present –
though I too would confess to being dismayed, if someone is already at the point of hiring assassins
for political rivals just days after surviving a full-scale assault by the Others – and more expected.
Did you not say that Lord and Lady. . . Lady Tyrell sent a raven from Highgarden announcing their
intention to travel here, to pay homage and forge new alliances?"

"They did," the young woman – the queen – confirmed. "Though it will be slow going, likely, what
with this snow. Do you intend to stay until they arrive, Lord Snow? I am given to understand that
Lady Tyrell is your half-sister. Or no. . . cousin?"

"Formally, I suppose, though to me she will always be my sister." Lord Snow sounded sad. "I do
wish to see her, though it will make the parting harder when I leave for the north again. Still, that is
the price I must pay."

"Good. I hope to rely on your assistance with the diplomatic arrangements. I had thought of
marrying Aegon to Margaery – though from what I have heard, at the rate she runs through
husbands, that may not be the wisest of ideas. I don't suppose you yourself have any interest in
wedding, my lord?"

"To Margaery Tyrell?" Lord Snow was startled. "No, not in the least. And if I do take a wife one
day, I had another woman in mind, one who will stand the snow and ice and winter that will be my
home far better than a daughter of warm, wealthy Highgarden."

"Aye, true. I have heard that pampered southern women do not flourish in the north." Now it was
the queen who sounded sad. "It is. . . it is good of you to take Ser Jorah's ashes."

"It is no burden at all, my lady."

"Still, I thank you. Speaking of which, if they can kindly find this Faceless Man, we could go back
inside and continue our conversation in the solar. I fear I too am unused to the cold. That or – "

At this, Arya could no longer pretend she hadn't overheard it all. She stepped forward. "It's me,
"she called up. "I'm the faceless one. Though I'm not a Faceless Man. Not really, that is. And I'm not
here to kill you, either."

There was an absolutely fathomless silence. Then the two speakers appeared at the edge, and Arya
could see them both clearly. One was the queen, silver-white hair braided back under a small
golden coronet. And the other –

It was the man she'd seen in the dream as well, the one who had been stabbed and died in the
other's arms – but he was here, here, alive, it wasn't possible. Brown-haired, grey-eyed, solemn-
faced like her, still dressed in black, staring at her as if he could not believe it, could not possibly.
He spoke no word, made no sound, then whirled away. A moment later she heard his footsteps
pounding down the stairs, and a moment after that he burst into the courtyard. He reached her,
stared at her a split second longer as if expecting her to vanish, then snatched her in a fierce
embrace.

Arya tentatively returned it. She didn't mind, exactly, presumed once more that he was someone the
old Arya Stark would have been happy to see, so she let him hug her for that girl's sake. He was
muttering something about her being taller than he remembered, and unexpectedly she felt bad that
she didn't. None of that made sense, though. She wasn't supposed to. Unless whatever love was,
whatever she was, there was still some tiny spark of it that no pain or poison or grief or death or
time or evil could completely destroy. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that, but she was
still only new-made. Likely the residual ghosts of emotion faded with time.
At last, Lord Snow let go and stepped back, but not entirely. "Arya," he said croakily. "It's you? You're really here?"

"Aye." She decided to be gentle, and smiled. "I really am."

He made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob, and ruffled her hair. She ducked away and kicked him, because that was probably what the old Arya would have done, and he ran after her, tackled her, and threw them into the snow, as they shouted and wrestled and rolled around and stuffed handfuls down each other's collars. And just then, even without knowing why, she was happy. Didn't have the heart to force it away, even if she should.

Finally, the jollity was put to a rather sheepish halt by the arrival of the bemused queen, and they got up and dusted off and Lord Snow presented her as his little sister, Arya. Little sister. The words jarred her. I knew about Sansa and Rickon, but not him. She wondered what his real name was, but couldn't think of a way to ask without giving away that she wasn't who he thought she was, whoever he'd known. So she just made a ladylike curtsy to the queen, Queen Daenerys as Lord Snow called her, proper as anything. Then he was asking what she was doing here in King's Landing, and she was trying to explain about the ship and getting food and that Rickon was here too, and he was even more flabbergasted, and everything was great confusion for an interminable while. Then she was being led into the castle and given quarters, and Lord Snow was saying they should take supper together; he wanted to know where she'd been and what she'd done, and she couldn't face the thought of telling him the truth. So instead she told him she was tired, and went to bed, barred the door, and lay awake for hours, staring at the dark vaults of the ceiling.

In the morning, her conundrum had not resolved itself, and Lord Snow was still persistent. So she told him that she didn't really remember and didn't want to, which after all was mostly the truth. He said he was awaiting Sansa's arrival here (apparently she was the Lady Tyrell that he and the queen had mentioned) and then was returning north, far far north with the dragon, Rhaegal. Said he might come to visit Winterfell some time, once he had the giants rebuild it, and hoped he'd see her there. It was plain that he expected this to please her, so Arya nodded and smiled and said that she was sure he would.

In all, it was another five days until the news arrived that Lord and Lady Tyrell, having taken a boat up the River Mander to just past Tumbleton and then riding the rest of the way to the capital, were nigh. Rickon and a few of the others, including Jeyne and Robbie, had also been retrieved from the ships, though the former was not invited to the formal welcome, being still of a temperament to cause a ruckus about his missing wolf. Queen Daenerys and her interim small council – a eunuch, an archmaester, an iron captain, a prince named Aegon, and a princess named Arianne – were all present, the dwarf Tyrion Lannister having apparently begged off on unspecified personal grounds. Lord Snow was there, though, and Arya kept sneaking covert looks at him from where she stood among the lower ranks. She'd follow his lead when it came to their sister Sansa, she guessed. She shifted from foot to foot, unaccountably nervous.

At last, the heralds announced their guests, and the great doors swung open. Lord and Lady Tyrell made their entrance, sedately arm in arm. He was tall and thin, handsome and elegant, with curly chestnut hair and golden eyes, but walked with difficulty, leaning on his wife, and seemed flustered by all the avid stares. By contrast, she was poised and utterly self-possessed, expressionless. Very beautiful, with blue eyes and auburn hair netted with pearls, her dress silver and white rather than the green and gold attire of her husband. They certainly made a striking pair as they came to kneel and exchange the requisite courtesies and words of welcome. Arya was still tense, waiting, as they didn't seem to have seen her. But then the queen put out a graceful hand and said, "Lady Sansa, to show my good faith in dealing with you, and to represent my hope that House Stark may once more place its trust in the dragons, I present your – your half brother, Jon Snow, and your sister, Arya."
At long last, the perfect mask cracked. Sansa stood rooted to the spot as Lord Snow – *Jon, his name is Jon, it's Jon* – and Arya stepped forward, recognizing their moment. She simply stared, then at last, silently and thoroughly, began to weep, her entire body shaking, as her husband put a hesitantly comforting hand on her shoulder. Then she moved closer, gathered them each in one arm, and held them tightly, still sobbing without making a sound. Arya paused, then put an arm around her in return. *My pack.* Here she was with them at last, no matter everything. Maybe, in the end, that truly did mean something.

Sansa recovered herself quickly, apologizing for making a spectacle in public, and introduced her husband, Willas of House Tyrell, eldest son of the former King's Hand and acting Lord of Highgarden. While he traded more general pleasantries with Jon, who eyed him as narrowly as any elder brother would upon meeting his sister's male counterpart, Sansa turned to Arya again, gulping helplessly and trying to speak. "I," she managed at last. "I'm so glad you're here. Whatever was in the past, between us, it... it doesn't matter any more."

Indeed, Arya thought, it did not. So she said, once more quite truthfully, that she felt the same, and Sansa smiled teary-eyed and hugged her again. Then she said, "Where will you go, from here?"

Arya was surprised, unsure. She had not thought of a future for so long, forever and ever, not hoped for one, not wanted. But she did, now. Whatever it was. Didn't want to be what she had been before, but maybe not everything faceless either. Could still learn it back, her own story. Could, and would, kill again, even as a profession, but do other things too. There were people here who loved her despite everything, still would, always, and she couldn't kill that. And it made her think that perhaps that was that, that was so. That love *was* stronger than death. Than time. Than anything.

"My lady," she said shyly, and ducked her head. "I'm coming with you."
The sun was coming up, to the east over the vast mirror of the Shivering Sea. He watched it tentatively, fearing that it was some sort of trick and about to be snatched away at any second, but there it remained, splashes of gold and pink and red, the light hurting his eyes and making him wonder why he had not gone up in flames the instant that it touched him. That was what Old Nan's stories had always said, that the foul creeping creatures of night and winter could not live in daylight, and the trick was to outlast and outmaneuver them until dawn, when they had to surrender, as in the tale of Jenny and the boy she loved and the faerie queen. But then, Theon thought, maybe that wasn't so. He had held Lightbringer in his own two hands, summoned the fire, and already slain the deepest darkest monster there was. What if I'm the hero, resting after his tribulations by morning light? The notion was so strange and ridiculous that he had to hastily dismiss it, but a flicker of it remained, glowing like an ember in a banked heart. Me. I did it. Me.

The chilly wind ruffled his tangled white hair, and he gingerly stretched his legs, dangling them over the crenel and looking down at White Harbor below – or what was left of it, at any rate. After Lord Edmure, Ser Davos, and most of the Baratheon host had left with the king's body, and also one Ser Gendry, apparently now the heir to all that after Stannis' decease, Ser Addam Marbrand had taken temporary command of the city and its defenses, acting on the orders of Lord Wyman. Theon could see the tall knight down there too, copper head glowing like a fresh-struck penny, striding to and fro as he observed the progress of the fortifications; the men had been working all night, and were doubtless thinking that if nothing was liable to pop up and murder them now, they would like their beds, please and thank you. Devoid of all its inhabitants except for its wildling garrison, the Manderly men-at-arms, its injured liege lord, Marbrand, Theon, and Asha, White Harbor was almost entirely reduced to a ghost town. Theon didn't know where they were going next. He supposed they would stay long enough for Asha to recuperate, and then. . . hard as he tried to picture himself going home to the Iron Islands, he could not see it. All they would see was the frail weakling, no man and no warrior. They wouldn't understand the rest of it, what he'd seen, what he'd become. I should stay here in the north, where I belong. If he could find any holdfast lord willing to shoulder the burden of him permanently. But Asha would be going back as soon as she was strong enough, to fight for her place on the Seastone Chair, and if it meant leaving her forever. . .

Theon shifted position again, hugging his knees to his chest and pulling his cloak tighter. Even if I do live, what will I do? He could not marry nor sire children, nor hunt or fight or fire a longbow, nor help to rebuild White Harbor, and was not even much use as a servant, as ordinary masters would not have call for him to carry out the various depravities that Ramsay had required of him. I could become a maester, mayhaps. There he would have no need to explain his incapability, and would be left alone as long as he liked. But Oldtown was a very long way away, and he had never had the temperament for books and study. Maybe one day far in the future, when Asha had won her inheritance, she would invite him to live at Pyke under her protection. . . but even then he would be an object of pity and derision, and what was he supposed to do with himself until that came to pass, assuming that it did? I should go back to the crypts of Winterfell and lie down there with the Starks. If they would even have me.

Theon rubbed a clumsy hand across his eyes, trying to ease the ache behind them. Then in hopes of distracting himself from these dark places, he got to his feet, making sure the wind did not catch him and flick him off the edge, and climbed down. Trotting along the wallwalk, he rounded a corner, opened a door into a tower stairwell, and went in to see Asha.

She had been placed in a chamber overlooking the harbor, the posts of the bed sculpted with
Manderly mermen and the walls hung with fishing nets and ropes. Theon thought she liked it, the
sea reminding her of home, and slipped in to take a seat next to her. He looked at her, sleeping. Her
color was better, he hoped, and she did not immediately start bleeding to kingdom come whenever
her bandages were changed, which was certainly a good thing. She had started an infection,
however, and there had been a few tense nights as the chirurgeons fought it off. Theon had slept on
the floor, not liking to be away from her and terrified that she would die in the night behind his
back. If one of us has to die, let it be me, he prayed. Asha's worth something. The Iron Islands need
her. He looked at her hair, inky-dark, tumbled on the pillow. She's still young. Spare her, gods.
Please.

At length, Asha stirred weakly, cracking an eye. A wry smile twisted up her mouth. "First fine day
in months, and you're wasting it in here... with me? Go outside, little brother."

"I was," Theon said nervously. "Outside. But I came in. It's not wasting. I just had to see how you
were."

Asha groaned. "Alive. More or less. That's... something."

"Aye. Can I fetch you anything? A warm drink? Another quilt?"

She glanced at him, both surprised and touched, then shook her head, grimacing with the
movement. "You're not... my nursemaid, Theon. There are plenty of people to care for me. You
need to recover your strength too."

What for? Theon thought sadly. It was becoming more and more apparent that this was a question
without an answer. So, evading it, he said, "What are you going to do?"

Asha shifted, settling back with another wince. "Much to my own surprise, I assure you, I'm going
to marry Ser Justin after all. Our uncle Euron and his creatures still need to be cleaned out, and I'm
not quite so mad as to think I can do it all alone. Massey, whatever else he is, has fought bravely
and well in this war. I could not... be wed to a coward, and he is not. Stannis is dead, so the
question of whether I owe fealty to him is moot. If I train Ser Justin up when we're in bed, and to
keep his mouth shut when we're out of it, we should fare well enough. I'll have him convert to the
faith of the Drowned God -- he already left his old gods behind once, for R'hllor, he should find no
difficulty in going it twice -- and formally drowned to see... if he is in fact... worthy. Any
children of ours will bear the surname Greyjoy, and learn to sail... before they can walk. So it
shall be done after all, but on... my terms."

Exhausted from so much talking, she started to cough, Theon looking on anxiously, until she finally stopped, wiping blood and froth from her mouth.
"That is... assuming... I live to see... my marriage bed."

"You will," he said immediately, shuddering and making a surreptitious gesture to ward off evil.
But Asha's pragmatic outlining of her matrimonial plans had woken an immense ache inside him, a
longing for what he could never have. He would have liked all that, spouse and children, a little
place by the sea, where he could fish and hunt and fight and keep his family by the sweat of his
own brow. But no woman would marry a wrecked, white-haired turncloak who could neither serve
her properly in bed nor give her children, and as he had thought before, he could not do anything of
use. And despite everything, he had too much pride to live as a charity case, tossed scraps with the
dogs, the way he had bided in the Dreadfort. The world had never seemed so wide and so clear and
so utterly, completely empty. That is how I know for sure I am no hero. Heroes get happy endings.

"Theon?" Asha said, seeing the look on his face. "What's wrong?"

He mustered up a smile. "Nothing. Just worrying about you, that's all. Is Massey here? In White
Harbor?"
"He went south to see Stannis decently done by, and that Ser Gendry was granted a decree of legitimacy and installed in Storm's End. He promised to return as soon as he could. When I can stand the voyage, we'll be married here, then travel overland to Flint's Finger and take a ship to Pyke. With numerous armed men at our backs, of course."

"What if, when is all said and done, you still do not care for him?"

Asha gave him a lopsided smile. "Push him off a bridge, of course. Though not before a few good hard fucks. It's been a long time since Qarl, I'm feeling the need."

Theon flushed, not wanting to think about that. "I hope you will be happy together, truly."

"So do I," Asha admitted. "Easier to live that way, certainly. And you... I hope you will be happy too. Whatever should become of you. When I rule the Iron Islands, you will always be welcome at my table and my keep."

Theon's throat had closed. He couldn't answer her. Instead, he bent to gently kiss her cheek, then without another word, took his leave.

He spent the rest of the day doing nothing much, wandering around the New Castle and trying to stay out of the way of the ongoing repair work. Nobody troubled him; indeed, as word had spread about his role in Ramsay's death and getting Lightbringer out of the Dreadfort, their attitude toward him was distinctly respectful — the first time in his life Theon could recall being looked at like that. His father certainly never had, nor his brothers, nor even Asha, for all her steadfast support of him during their adventures in the north; she only pitied and protected him. None of the Starks; Robb liked him and enjoyed his company, but never quite saw him as his equal, still his lord father's ward and captive. Then he fell into the Bastard's hands, and of course there was nothing but mockery and poison and abject torture and humiliation to be found there. Nor from Stannis and his clansmen, never... though maybe Jon had shown a little, but he was probably dead and never coming back. It doesn't matter, though. None of it does anymore.

That night passed, and then the next day, and the day after that, and a third. Theon continued to keep to himself, and to check in on Asha, but only when he was sure she was asleep, as he could not face the prospect of another conversation. Too many other people around made him anxious, and he had to go out of his way to avoid them, checking over his shoulder to be sure no one was following him. Still thought he was being watched, had to get into bed (a bed, he had a proper bed all for him, with blankets and pillows, and sometimes it unnerved him so much he had to get out and sleep on the floor) and pull the covers up in a tight ball and hide. But he didn't like to sleep too long, just in case. Was always hungry but didn't trust himself to eat. It was too much, after the starvation and deprivation, and sometimes Ramsay had forced him to eat a huge meal and then throw it all up later.

That night at supper, Ser Addam noticed his peculiar behavior and tried to be kind to him, but Theon edged away. He knew not to tell secrets, to speak out of turn; he'd be punished. Indeed, the longer he spent in White Harbor, free to do what he liked and go where he wanted, the more Theon found himself reverting into his old habits from the Dreadfort, always running scared, just trying to survive. He sat in corners counting up stone, mortar, adzes, hammers, chisels, wedges, awls, spades, and pins for hours, and could give an exact figure whenever the builders asked. Other times he simply shut down completely, rocking back and forth, having to go put something dark over his head until he could breathe again. I've forgotten everything, The taste of bread, the sound of trees, the softness of the wind. Even my own name.

It was just over three weeks since their arrival in White Harbor when Ser Justin, having seen to his affairs in the south and then sailed back with apparently lightning speed, returned, bearing news.
Daenerys Targaryen, the Mad King's daughter, had been crowned queen of Westeros after her successful battle against the Others in King's Landing, but she had destroyed the Iron Throne as part of that battle and announced that her rule would not be absolute, but rather a product of counsel and advice from many voices. The war-ravaged, weary, wintry continent – or the south, at least – was ready to accept her sovereignty, and she had received oaths from Houses Tyrell, Stark, Lannister, and Martell, which was not a bad beginning. Likely she would receive it from House Baratheon as well, once Ser Gendry's legitimation was completed, Ser Justin added with a wry, not altogether pleased look on his face. But the Battle for the Dawn was finally over, the Others defeated, and it was left to men to pick up the countless broken pieces.

One of said pieces included, the very next day, his and Asha's wedding. Ironborn marriages were as simple and salt-of-the-earth as could be imagined; oftentimes they did not even bother with a ceremony, but in this case, there would be that at least. Asha had made great strides in her recovery, was able to be carried out and to stand for a short time, and she had dressed for her nuptials not in the silk and lace of a greenlander lady (perish the thought) but in leather trousers, woolen cloak and laced jerkin, high boots, the attire of a raider captain; Theon wondered if she had an axe down her bodice and was planning to use it to enliven the proceedings. Her dark hair had been swept back and braided, and the only concession to ornament she had made was the bronze torque around her neck, clasping her cloak, and the matching cuffs at her wrists. Ser Justin was arrayed in more traditional finery, and they made a rather odd couple, but everyone was excited to celebrate the happy event of a wedding, even the Burned Men, and were all crowded on the shore to watch.

There was no priest of the Drowned God to preside, which was briefly a difficulty, but then Asha turned to him and asked as he was the only one here who had been blessed in salt and iron, blood of the kraken, that he do the honor. Theon, shocked, stammered that he couldn't possibly, he didn't know the words, but she waved that aside. And that was how he found himself standing knee-deep in the bitterly cold water (they all had boots on, but the chill cut right through them, at least until his feet went numb and whatever were left of his toes likely fell off) facing his sister and Ser Justin, reciting whatever came to mind that felt appropriate for the occasion, prompting them through vows to keep the hearth fires burning, to sail true through all storms together, and to share any plunder, ill-gotten or otherwise. Then instead of rings or cloaks or any other such token, Asha and Ser Justin exchanged pebbles washed smooth by the tide, to symbolize them taking each other as rock wife and rock husband. Finally Theon, unable to think of anything else, told Massey to kiss his bride, which he did with much enthusiasm, and a roar went up from the spectators on the beach. And standing there, shivering in the seawater and the pale, watery sun, he felt. . . he wasn't even sure what. Just there, breathing. Not running. Just there.

Lord Wyman had ordered as splendid a wedding feast as could be scraped together from White Harbor's bare larders, but Theon did not think he could bear to attend, and once he had politely offered his congratulations to the presumably happy couple, he escaped to his sanctuary atop the ramparts, far away from the noise and heat of the hall. From this crow's-eye view, the place was almost starting to look like a city again, and it felt odd to imagine that life might ever return to normalcy for anyone anywhere. As if they would still be born and grow up and kiss girls (or boys) and learn a trade and get married and have children and fight with their spouse and watch the sun go down long and slow on a late summer night, struggle to make a living and grumble about the crown's taxes and ask about their neighbor's bad back and otherwise persevere in the simple mundanities of existence, until one day they died in their bed and not because they had been tortured or murdered or hunted by Ramsay or the Others or any of it, but merely because they were old and wished to lie down and rest at long last. It felt like a fever dream. Strange, that the most ordinary of things should seem, after everything, the most impossible.

As Theon continued to sit there, listening to the merriment from below, and as the shadows
stretched long and the wind turned ever colder, he glimpsed a small dark shape on the southern horizon, which steadily grew nearer and nearer. He scrambled to his feet, wondering if he should sound the alarm, but then the shape became increasingly recognizable as a dragon, soaring lazily on the updrafts like a great hawk, green and gold – and hence the rider on his back would be – was Jon Snow himself. And not the strange fey black-eyed monster that he had been before, but Jon, looking like a man. Not dead in the snow, or overcome by night and terror, but just . . . him. As the dragon glided over the parapet and came in for a landing, Theon felt himself starting to smile in disbelief, and ran to Jon as he was dismounting. "What – it's you, it – I didn't think – it's you, what did –"

"It's a long story." Jon swept his tousled brown hair out of his eyes, cheeks reddened with the cold, as he glanced down inquisitively at the hall. "What's the occasion? Though I wouldn't mind joining in. I swear I could eat an aurochs."

"My – my sister. Asha. She and Ser Justin were married today. Justin Massey, I mean," Theon added, flustered, in case Jon didn't know. But he should, he was the one who had taken the Horn from Massey and thence given it to Stannis, and Theon felt stupid. "It's their wedding feast."

Jon raised an eyebrow, but seemed to understand without asking why he wasn't attending. Instead he said, "I've just returned from the south, and King's Landing. I'm going to see if I can find the Castle Black refugees, and bring them out of the wilderness to safety. Then I'll . . . well, I'll do what I must. What for you?"

Theon shook his head, deflecting the question again. Then he asked, "In King's Landing, did you find . . . we heard about the queen, but . . ."

"I found my family." Jon's smile turned soft and pained. "Arya, Sansa, and Rickon all. I spent a few days with them, but did not trust myself to more, otherwise I'd never be able to leave, and I had to. I'll see them again someday, but I don't know when. Sansa's married now, Rickon is as wild as ever, and Arya . . ." He hesitated. "Strange as this sounds to say, I don't think she remembers me. Or any of us."

*Neither do I,* Theon thought. *Not much. Or not much that I want to.* "I'm glad to see you," he said. "I'm glad it's over."

"So we hope." Jon reached to clasp his arm briefly, then turned. "Your pardon. I think I'll go down to the hall and eat. I don't want to be alone tonight."

Theon was alarmed at the idea of being left in sole custody of a very large and potentially also very hungry dragon, but Jon whistled, and it flapped up again, circling into the sky. "He'll find his own supper, never worry," he said, seeing the look on Theon's face. "Should I bring you up something?"

"No. I'm . . . not hungry," Theon lied. "Thank you."

"As you wish," Jon said, though he looked faintly troubled. He excused himself and went down, and Theon watched him go, feeling as if a long tunnel had opened up, as if he stood at one end and everyone else on the other, and the chasm was growing wider and wider. He could still make it back if he chose, but not for much longer, and he didn't know whether he should or not. Jon had evidently made it back in far more drastic circumstances, but then, Jon was a hero. He had the inner strength and goodness that heroes always had, to persevere even when things seemed the darkest and most hopeless. Even with whatever terrible evil had possessed his body, he had fought free of it, and now he was here. Found his family again, given his happy ending. He'd said something about not knowing when he would see them again, but surely that was not for very long.
He had everything, could take anything, but once more, because he was a hero, he hadn't.

*I can't*, Theon thought. *I can't be him, can't be worthy of the same end.* Bastard and Turncloak. *If only Ned Stark could see us now.* It made him laugh, and then it made him crack, and then he quietly stole down to his bed, hid under the covers, and cried until it hurt.

The next morning, the wind was fresh in the west, and Asha, when he visited her, had the kind of catlike satisfied smile which made Theon suspect that Ser Justin, despite his bride's injuries, had nonetheless managed to pleasure her adequately; he might avoid death by bridge yet. Then Theon went back out just in time to see Jon taking off on his dragon, and he did not return until very late afternoon, with at least four women and several more men all mounted behind him on the immense green back. These must be the first load of Castle Black refugees he had spoken of, bringing them to White Harbor from wherever he had found them in the hinterlands of the north.

Theon watched as they were got down. He thought he recognized Selyse Baratheon, Stannis' queen, though she was now not much more than a dowager and a widow. A few of the Manderly men-at-arms had to escort her off, one at each elbow, as she stared around vacantly and did not seem to recognize where she was. Next came a beautiful woman with a long white-blond braid, who Jon lifted off with particular tenderness, and his hands lingered on her waist far longer than seemed necessary for mere support – though when she finally moved off, Theon saw that she too hobbled painfully and had to take a Manderly's arm, even if she looked displeased about it. A woman with a baby, who had the look of a nurse, followed. Then last of the ladies, who Jon also helped down gently –

Theon blinked. Blinked again, resisting the urge to rub his eyes. Then he felt quite certain that it was, it was, and started hesitantly down the stairs, second-guessing himself with every step, telling himself that she didn't want to see him, that it would be as Jon said, just make it more painful to say farewell. But somehow that wasn't enough to make him stop, and he made his way to the courtyard, as the men were climbing off the dragon and Jon appeared set to take off and fetch a second round. But he reached her, and rocked back on his heels, and then finally moved forward to timidly tap her on the shoulder. "J-Jeyne?"

She turned, saw him, and her eyes went perfectly round. A hand clapped to her mouth, and she made no sound whatsoever, the two of them staring at each other. Then she whimpered, "Theon?" and threw herself into his arms.

Theon startled badly, but then he clung to her tightly, her face buried in his shoulder, her feet dangling off the ground. They remained like that for at least five minutes, holding each other silently, until at last his arms began to ache and he had to set her down. She reached up to lightly touch his face, her own soft with wonder, and he turned his head and quickly, shyly kissed her palm. Then they stepped back, and she too was escorted into the castle by the Manderlys for blankets and warm drinks. Something about her looked different too. As if somewhere, somehow, unimaginably, she had found her courage. *Women are the strong ones.* He felt shamed of how he had thought of them, before, only objects to be exercised for his pleasure. He had saved her first, maybe, but in the end, she had saved herself. *It's good. I'm glad.*

Jon carried on retrieving refugees through the night, and by the time the castle woke the next morning, he appeared to have collected almost all of them. He spoke with Lord Manderly for a time, and some of the men – and, Theon felt quite sure, the longest of all with the blonde-haired woman. Then at last, provisioned and warmly clad, he walked out into the courtyard and stepped up onto the dragon's back. "I'm going north," he said. "As far north as north goes. Do well by yourself, Theon. Farewell."
"Farewell," Theon echoed, throat thick, and didn't trust himself to say more as Jon spurred his mount; he knew that had been a goodbye forever. So perhaps whatever Jon meant to do up there was not temporary after all, but the life he would now have, guarding the realms of men, making sure the Long Night would never come again. But how can that be so? He's supposed to have everything he ever wanted, now. Not a life of solitude and cold and service, the last member of the Night's Watch for now and ever. He almost wanted to call out to Jon to stay, that he didn't have to do this. But he does. Even as much as I did.

Theon remained there, standing motionless, until the dragon and its rider had turned into a tiny dark spot against the sun, and then gone from view altogether. He didn't want to stay here, or go back inside. He wanted to fly away too. It sounded a marvelous thing, to fly, to be free. Though knowing him, he would just get too scared, and make a botch of it somehow. Did not deserve the gift of wings. I would fly too close to the sun, and fall.

He was still standing there when he heard the sound of hooves and voices and general disorder, and turned just in time to see Asha, Ser Justin, and what appeared to be their traveling party emerge into the bailey. Ser Justin had thought to bring a litter for her to be carried in, and likely Asha herself was impatient to be away, did not want to waver like an invalid for longer than she absolutely must. And as Theon stared at them, he realized that it was true. They were going now too. He had to leave them. Had to do it. To say goodbye.

"Theon!" Asha spotted him and waved him over. "Here, I've had your new winter things fetched out – made of sealskin and fur, much warmer than your old rags. Put them on, hurry. Justin says there's a window of good weather, we need to take advantage of it before the next storm. But it'll still be a cold ride to Flint's Finger."

Theon noted that she had already taken to referring to her husband rather familiarly, but that was subsumed in the ache of what she was saying. She thinks I am coming with her, to go to the Iron Islands. He stood there, wordless, unable to do it, unable to not. Tears began to blur his vision. "Asha." His throat was now completely stuck. "Asha, I . . ."

She stared at him, confused and taken aback, until at last she saw the awful knowledge dawn on her face. "You're not coming."

"I. . . I can't." Theon scrubbed at his eyes, but more tears kept falling. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Asha didn't say anything, her head bent. Then she finally reached out and pulled him into her arms, shaking silently. She kept trying to hum something, he didn't know what, until he realized it was the nonsense song she had sung to him in the tower in the snow, where he had wanted to stay forever, had been so happy. Before Tormund and the wildlings found them and took them back to Winterfell. Before. Before. It made him cry harder, his head on her shoulder, as they did not let go of each other for the longest time – knowing that when they did, it would be forever. He did not have that sort of strength. Facing down Ramsay's horrendous revenant and igniting Lightbringer, all the struggles and sacrifices, had been easier than this. Anything had been easier.

At last, as Ser Justin had come over to see what was amiss, Asha very, very slowly opened her arms, pulling back from him bit by bit, until there was space between them, and then there was more, and she was still smudging at her eyes with the heel of her hand and there was no way he
could speak. They both coughed, cleared their throats, and did their best to recover. Asha turned to him and whispered, "Good night. Go well."

"You." All the world was in that word, all his love. "You too."

She smiled at him, a smile that would be graven on his heart, as still watching him, she directed the last preparations, and the portcullis of the New Castle was opened. Theon savored his last sight of them, watching them ride out, watching Asha not look back, never look back, because he knew she could not bear to. He did not know how he did it either. But now and for all time, he did. He let them go. Let all of it. Goodbye. Goodbye.

At last, when the last of their retainers had vanished, Theon too started to walk. Out past the walls, out through the narrow path that circumvented the castle and led up to the thickets of pines that carpeted the hills where the city ended. It was a hard climb, and it burned in his chest, but at the top, he could look out and see the glittering sea, the castle rising slowly again, the promise of days renewed. He no longer felt the cold, exactly. Felt as warm as if it was high summer, and he had stepped into a garden, green and gold. The old world was gone behind him; he too could never go back. Far off, through the trees, he thought he heard his mother's voice calling for him. I will come home after all, he thought. Asha will keep her promise, Mother. You're dead, aren't you? You're dead.

It seemed no more impossible than anything else. Theon took a step, and then another. It grew easier and easier; he no longer felt his broken feet, his missing fingers, his missing self, or anything at all. Sounds fell away, and even the trees, and all time, and everything that was or had been. And then at last, greater than the sun of the new-broken morning, greater than the night's ending, greater than life itself, Theon Greyjoy saw the light.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Well guys. . . this is it. As I said many times, I promised to never abandon the story and to see it through to the end, no matter how long it took, and now I have. I'm quite emotional about it, actually. I realize that I could probably write another whole book about Westeros in the years after the war, but this is the end of the story I wanted to tell with this fic, and hence where I leave you. Obviously, not every single tiny question is going to be answered, but feel free to fill in the details as you like. If you'd like to hear more about future projects and book publishing, follow me on Tumblr (qqueenofhades). It has been an absolute joy and pleasure to work on this project, to hear your comments and questions and kind words, and I hope this brings you at least some of what it has brought to me.

With no further ado. . .

The great walls of Winterfell had borne the years well, the queen thought as she stood on the balcony overlooking the bailey, the stables and the smithy and the kitchens, but the scars would always stay. The giants had done their best to rebuild the castle from the broken ruins, but the blocks remained faintly stained with soot, chipped and roughened, seamed black in the joins. The destruction of the Library Tower and all its manuscripts could never be replaced, it had taken months to get anything to grow again in the glass gardens, and the wind whistled forlornly through cracks that had never existed in its thousands of years of history, so that in the very deepest dark of winter it sometimes turned unbearably cold. But on this cool and pleasant autumn day, it looked serene, the trees of the godswood rustling gold, the gates and towers festively bedecked, and a steady stream of lords bannermen, vassals, knights, and dignitaries issuing through and into the Great Hall. Most of the North had come, and she could see the black bear of House Mormont, the mailed fist of House Glover, the merman of House Manderly, the roaring giant of House Umber, and more. Conspicuously absent was the flayed man of House Bolton, but it was rare that anyone even spoke their name. If nothing else, for now and for all time, the north remembered.

Sansa turned and began to walk along the ramparts, the wind tugging tendrils from her auburn braids. Or mostly still auburn, she thought, though more and more she found strands of grey in her looking glass. She was not quite fifty, but the past decades had not been easy. And now, alone at night, they felt still harder. Oh, Willas. They had had thirty good years together, four children, survived diplomatic intrigues and battles and the death of their second son, learned to love and cherish one another even if their life was no song, but he had rebroken his bad leg just a few months past, and despite the maesters' best efforts, it quickly festered, went purulent, and a fortnight later he was gone. She had sent him home to Highgarden for his burial, in the company of their eldest son, now Lord Brandon Tyrell in truth, and today. . .

Sansa paused to sit, gazing out over the shadow of the wolfswood. She had not started out as she now was. After the war had ended and she, Arya, and Rickon had finally gone home, with Willas and a great company of Tyrell men and the armies raised by Lady Maege Mormont and Lord Galbart Glover, Rickon was proclaimed Lord of Winterfell, and Sansa governed as his regent, managing the affairs and overseeing the day-to-day operations of what justice could be dispensed as Lady Maege and Lord Galbart were fighting in the field to return it to the broken, barren north.
But as the years went by, Rickon only grew wilder and wilder – *the wolfsblood*, folk whispered, the sort that had led his uncle Brandon into so much misadventure – until it was finally plain that he would never be able to rule in his own right. He was just as pleased to be let back into the mountains with his wolf, to go back to the free folk who were at heart his own people, and quietly, without fuss or ceremony or spectacle, or even much change from what she had been and what she had done, Sansa became Queen in the North.

It was that, truly, and not merely Lady of Winterfell. The unity of the Great Houses and the Seven Kingdoms in standing together against the invasion of the Others had not long outlasted the end of the threat, and within a few years of Daenerys' ascension to the throne, they were back to scheming and jockeying against each other, trying to gain more favor or patronage. *The song never ends, merely sings on in a different key. The game of thrones will always be played, in the courts and halls of power.* Daenerys was left in the unenviable position of needing to assert some sort of authority, but always knowing that any overt application of force would instantly label her another mad Targaryen, so her rule teetered along on a series of lukewarm compromises and half-hearted treaties that never pleased anyone for very long. Princess Myrcella, who had taken the name Lannister and become Lady of Casterly Rock, in particular was not interested in bending the knee, and additional difficulty had been encountered with the Tyrells. Margaery seemed to think, not without some reason, that she had served her time in the shadows, playing a dutiful wife, and that if there was to be a sovereign queen of Westeros, it should as well be her.

Sansa, not without misgivings, had sided with her husband, though Willas was just as ambivalent about the prospect of starting a fight with dragons. There had been months of tension that never quite erupted into an open conflict, but as a result, Highgarden and Winterfell had both pulled increasingly out of the court's orbit. With Casterly Rock asserting its independence, Myrcella proving to be much like her mother in some respects, that circumscribed Daenerys' actual authority to the crownlands and some, though less, in Dorne, where Princess Arianne ruled with Aegon, who she had eventually taken to husband. The Iron Islands, under the rule of Lady Asha Greyjoy, also remained outside royal purview, and the riverlands and Lord Edmure Tully were willing to accept whoever was bloody willing to promise to leave them the seven hells alone. The Vale and Harrold Hardyng mostly stayed out of it, as usual. Lord Gendry Baratheon of Storm's End was likewise apt to do as pleased him, though some years ago he had sent an envoy to Winterfell, asking if the Lady Arya would see fit to consider a match between them. Arya, however, had not been interested. Here and there she had recovered bits of her memory, but she remained distant, independent, a Faceless Woman who served no mistress but herself and of a time, Sansa. The sisters had built an odd, tentative relationship, learning to know each other again, and Sansa had spent many hours telling her the things about their childhood she did not remember. But whenever she saw Arya, she always had the sense of a wild thing in a cage, aching to run free again, to catch whatever shred of her soul remained among the stars and snows.

Yet all was not lost, Sansa supposed. There had been no more full-scale wars, whether supernatural or political in origin, and Daenerys had eventually arrived at some balance of authority and acknowledgment of its limited scope. After years of living with him at court and relying on his advice, she had finally married Tyrion Lannister, though it was more a dynastic arrangement than a love match. A prince had been born – Rhaegar, with his father's wit and his mother's beauty, and on that day, the queen's dragons had died. It was a prophecy, some whispered, that she could have children of flesh or children of fire, but not both. Now she was no more and no less than a mortal, flawed woman, and without the lurking threat the dragons had posed, there was an upswing of unrest and politicking and manipulation, culminating in several minor rebellions that had to be put down with force.

That was the conflict in which Sansa and Willas had lost their younger son, Eddard, who she supposed bitterly was eventually doomed to share the fate of his namesake. Brandon, the heir to
Highgarden, and their two daughters, Catelyn and Elinor, remained. The only Stark children. Arya and Rickon had neither spouses nor offspring, and the only other continuation of their House's line was her blind nephew, Robbie. Though he now was gone as well. Jeyne, her brother's widow, had married Ser Addam Marbrand and gone to Ashemark with him, where they raised their own children and had lived, so far as Sansa knew, quite happily. Yet one day Robbie had started to insist that he had to go north, that he had to find his uncle Bran, who lived under the hill as prince of the green. Had to go and learn from him, that Bran was calling to him, that he must be the heir of that strange and fey place. And so he had left, never heard from again. My girls are all that is left. It always gave Sansa an odd feeling, half pride and half terrible grief.

She rose from her seat and continued to walk. The sky was dazzling blue, the air crisp and sharp. After the Others had been defeated, the imbalance of the seasons had changed: now spring, summer, autumn, and winter came each in turn and passed away in the course of one year. Grand Maester Samwell, at the Citadel, had written some treatise explaining why this was so, the fundamentals of magic that had been altered, the forces of the world. Eddard wanted to be a maester. I hope he learns it, wherever he has gone. Sometimes Sansa could bear it, the pain of his loss. Other days she could not get out of bed, or stand up, or remember how to write her name.

Having reached the terminus of the wallwalk, she was about to give up her moment of peace at last, and go down into the castle to see if there were any last-minute preparations she could help with, when she spotted a small silhouette on the northern horizon, winging toward her. Then it gained shape and form, and she gasped like a little girl and waved as hard as she could, signaling. "Here! Here!"

Rhaegal circled once more – he, up in the far north, had escaped the fate of his brothers, Drogon and Viserion – and landed, Jon Snow swinging off his back as Sansa laughed in disbelief and ran to him; she had not seen him in fifteen years. In contrast to her, her greying hair and her lined face, Jon looked not a day older than when they parted. As if, having borne the terror and transformation of death, he was now destined to endure past all memory and time, forced to live and watch as all else passed away. He hugged her hard; he felt and looked human, was a man, but still something more. "Do you think I'd miss this?" he asked, grinning, when they stepped apart. "Of course not."

"I. . . didn't expect it, is all." Sansa looked him up and down, taking him in, as he did the same with her. "Where is Val?"

"She chose not to come. Not much one for ceremonies." Jon smiled wryly. For years, he had resisted having anyone else at his lonely guard post in the north, and once he had realized that he was no longer aging, he refused to take a human companion who would grow old and die; over and over, he would have to lose them all. But at last, Val's stubbornness had worn him down, and he had married her before the heart tree in Winterfell – the last time Sansa had seen him, in fact. They lived together in the farthest north, burning their fires together, guarding the realms of men. She would die one day, and he would bury her there. After that. . . Sansa did not know what he would do, and did not want to. The idea of having to face it herself frightened her. Life unending, immortality, was as much a curse as blessing.

"Well then," Sansa said after a moment. "Come down. Everyone will be delighted to see you, I am sure."

"No doubt." Jon himself looked less enthused by this prospect, as living in near-complete isolation with only a wife and a dragon for company did not give one a taste for boundless socialization. But he gamely linked his arm in hers, and they descended the stair to where Brienne stood waiting at the bottom. The captain of Sansa's Queensguard and her most loyal and reliable servant, Brienne had passed the years here at Winterfell with a quiet, upright dignity and exceptional prowess, but
Sansa did not think she had smiled more than a half-dozen times in all of them. When they were younger, Catelyn and Elinor had used to make a game of it, teasing her and playing with her and running circles around her, trying to get the big warrior woman to crack a grin or laugh, but it rarely worked. As she did now, seeing her mistress and Jon, she bowed correctly and fell into step behind them, guarding them from any threats that might lurk nefariously in the sunny courtyard, full of children running and shouting before their parents would come out to shoo them into the stuffy, crowded Great Hall.

"It looks better than I expected," Jon said, gazing around at the walls and towers of the castle, some quite a bit shorter than they had been, but still standing. "You have done well. I am sorry for the loss of your husband, by the way."

Sansa nodded, but did not quite trust herself to speak. Then a door opened across the way, and Arya emerged, looking more or less presentable. She smiled and came to greet Jon; what she had recovered of her memories were mostly to do with him, and Sansa slipped off to let them have a few moments alone. She could see the last stragglers filing into the hall, and knew that she too had to go within soon. But she too was not yet willing to go inside just yet, wanted to bask in the sun. Or perhaps –

She was still standing there, gazing through the open South Gate, when to her considerable surprise, she saw one more rider trotting up it. They bore no standard or heraldry, no finery or identifying mark at all, looked like a wandering vagrant. But then he passed under the shadow of the portcullis, trotted to the center of the bailey, and pulled up, dismounting and limping to hand the horse off to the overworked stable-boys. Then he turned, and she knew him.

He was still big, tall, imposing, through he was grizzled and grey-haired, the burned side of his face looking more hollowed out and scarred than ever. He was missing an eye as well, and likely other parts of him, but he had done his best to clean up for the occasion, put on a yellow tabard with the three black dogs of his House. Stumping and cursing under his breath, he made his slow way toward her as she stood stunned, then reached her and, as if not daring to look into her eyes, stared fixedly at the ground as he bowed.

"Little bird," Sandor Clegane rasped. "I hope you have one more place left for me."

Sansa nodded, still wordless. They stood across from each other, grown up, grown old, decades since she had left him in King's Landing after ordering he be saved. She didn't know what his life had been in the space between, or if she ever would, but she felt grateful, deeply so, that he had had it. "Come, my lord," she said at last, quietly. "It's soon to begin."

Sandor followed her into the hall, sliding unobtrusively into a position in the back, as Sansa walked alone to the front, each row of lords and ladies rising respectfully to their feet as she passed, the sunlight drenching her from the windows and dazzling in her jewels. The banner of House Stark was hung at the front, stitched heavily with pearls and silver, the direwolf with claws upraised.

And before it, on the dais, waited Catelyn Tyrell Stark, eighteen years old, cool and dignified, in full command of the moment. 

This is not too much for her. I have trained her well. She is ready, and then I will rest, at last.

Sansa reached her eldest daughter, and they stood facing each other. Northerners had no priests or septons or elaborate ceremonies, no words to say, and none were needed. She reached for the rune-engraved crown of bronze and iron that sat on the plinth nearby, and Catelyn sank elegantly to her knees, bending her head. Then Sansa raised the crown on high, and with every eye upon them, the very world seeming to hold its breath, set it on her daughter's brow.

The world remained silent for an eternal moment more. Then, as Catelyn rose slowly to her feet, its
breath began to let out, to a whisper, then a hiss, to a murmur, to a roar. A great din of spear and shield thundered from the courtyard and beyond the walls. Birds flapped in the rafters. Sunlight fell in daggers, the skinpipes of the clansmen sang and skirled, high and wild, and Catelyn raised her arms, gathering in the tumult that formed itself into words, over and over, rattling at the stone walls of Winterfell, shouted and shouted, with all the days before them.

"The Queen in the North!"

"The Queen in the North!"

"THE QUEEN IN THE NORTH!"

"THE QUEEN IN THE NORTH!"

THE END

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