

THE WINDS  
OF  
WINTER

BOOK SIX OF  
A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

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(AND FANS)

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1. Prologue - 2 - 7,592
2. Alayne I - 22 - 6,745
3. Arianne I - 41- 4,962
4. The Prince's Justice - 54 - 6,851
5. Daenerys I - 74 - 5,091
6. Bran I
7. Alayne II - 88 - 9,499
8. Arianne II - 114 - 5,922
9. The Envoy - 130 - 5,889
10. Jon I - 146- 3,884
11. Arianne III - 158 - 5,515
12. Jon II - 174 - 3,526
13. The Forsaken - 184 - 5,228
14. The Bravo - 198 - 9,748
15. Victarion I - 225 - 3,283
16. Barristan I - 234 - 3,254
17. Tyrion I
18. Barristan II
19. Tyrion II
20. The Man in the Pyramid
21. Tyrion III
22. Theon I
23. Asha I
24. Mercy



## PROLOGUE

**T**he wings unfolded wide before the grey sky, sending a plume of snow into the frigid air.

*Dragons.*

Jon watched the beast intently, noting the movement of its legs, counting its steps. It turned right, lowered its head, closed its black eyes. From its pink gullet came forth a scream, piercing, drowning out the sound of the crashing ocean below.

*Daenerys.*

The maester touched his ring of black iron, remembering Archmaester Walgrave's lessons. The old man could scarce remember his own name, yet the mysteries of ravencraft still flapped around in his addled head. The language of the white ravens was not something oft revealed to acolytes or novices, but on some days Walgrave mistook Jon for men named Cressen, Walys, or Hother, and

then he would whisper away his beloved birds' secrets with a smile and a conspiratorial wink.

*The Conclave has met*, Jon thought. The young maester brought the bird in from the window and let it stand on a table within the turret. One year, five turns, and twelve days autumn had lasted. Most maesters in the realm believed the gathering of archmaesters to be no more than a review of measurements and figures to settle the changing of the seasons, but Maester Jon knew better. If the meeting were only about astronomy, the greybeards would leave it to Archmaester Vaellyn and his bronze-bedecked followers. *Archmaester Theobald has given orders to his flock.*

Jon had always been suspicious of the Citadel's white ravens, even as a pink-necked novice. The pageantry of heralding a new season with such remarkable, mammoth birds was uncharacteristic of an order that professed humble service. And why use such clever creatures so sparingly? He'd been halfway to his iron link when he discovered the sack of soot in Walgrave's rookery.

It did not surprise Jon that dragons had caught the archmaesters' attention. They had been the talk of Oldtown just before he'd left for the stony bluffs of the Crag. At first he'd believed the stories to be no more than the ramblings of drunken sailors, like the tales of mermaids. It was Alleras, as well-informed as he was well-favored, who assured him these tales were true. *The Sphinx was right. He's always right.* "The dragon queen is coming," he had said, excitement shining through his customary wicked grin. Jon longed desperately to see that glowing face again.

*If I can produce the proof they spoke of*, he thought, *the Conclave will call me home.* The grey rats who were banished from that great nest added little to the Library's hoard of knowledge, left behind few brilliant works, lived on in no acolytes' memories. A castle maester's sad fate was to receive his lord's pointless letters, deliver his witless whelps, and be quickly forgotten. Jon did not belong at the Crag, let alone Castamere; he had to make the archmaesters see that. He had to finish his work. *They will not leave me scurrying around a ruined castle when I've solved the mystery of the seasons, when I can show how and why they change as they*

*do. They will not leave me here to freeze.* Warm weather waited for him in Oldtown, warm weather and warm arms.

The young maester was about to prompt the raven to continue when voices began to echo up the turret stair. Jon rose and tossed corn onto the table for the bird before returning to the window. Through the distant fog, Jon could just make out the docks of Craggsport, where *Bravo* was moored. *That thrice-damned ship.* The sole vessel of Houses Westerling and Spicer had returned from the Jade Sea two days prior, and treasures seemed to pour endlessly from its holds. There were silks of every color, casks of wine and rum and exotic liquors Jon had never heard of, barrels upon barrels of rare and costly spices, chests brimming with ivory and lacquered woods, precious stones like so many great glass eggs.

The maester touched his ring of yellow gold, remembering Archmaester Ryam's lessons. Jon had taken a partial inventory of the goods and reckoned their value. It was no less than a fortune. By his figures, the houses would have more than enough coin to restore Castamere and drain most of its mines. Silver and gold would flow from the earth for generations. *Bravo's* bounty was a blessing from the gods to the impoverished Lords Westerling and Spicer, and a curse to Maester Jon.

Jon's new lord, Ser Rolph Spicer, had been gifted the flooded wreck of Castamere for his service to House Lannister, though no one spoke of just what that service had been. The upjumped knight had insisted the restoration of the castle begin within a moon's turn, with Jon set to supervise the builders. *A maester must go where he is sent,* Jon grumbled to himself. He would spend the winter overseeing the construction of waterwheels and horse capstans for the draining of House Reyne's abandoned mines. Days trudging through mud and ice, nights shivering in a snow-covered tent. Worst of all, he would be a world away from *him*. Jon turned sharply away from the window and its view of the docks. The rippling waves had reminded him of those ink-black curls.

Maester Amory entered the turret with Lord Gawen Westerling's children. It was a tedious bunch. Amory may have been sharp enough when he'd forged his chain thirty years ago, but this chilly rock had dulled the edge off his mind. The maester of the Crag troubled himself with no scholarly pursuits; he would leave

behind no writings, no legacy. *Unless you count a bit of scheming against a boy king.* Jon feigned the respect due him as an elder, though. Perhaps the man would confirm his findings, when he had findings to confirm.

“Oh,” Amory said abruptly, “I did not expect you here just now.” Was that concern or irritation in his voice? The two maesters had been sharing Amory’s turret for the past half year, as Jon’s rightful tower was at Castamere and had collapsed forty years ago besides. Jon’s notes and samples littered the room, no doubt irking the imposed-upon Amory. Left to himself, the Westerling maester would have surely kept his turret as empty as his head. “The guards on the battlements spied the white raven. We have come straight away to see for ourselves.”

“Of course,” said Jon. With a modest sweep of his arm, he presented the bird eating corn on Amory’s table. “Winter has arrived.”

“One year, five turns, and ten days autumn has lasted,” declared Maester Amory to Jeyne, Eleyna, and Rollam, who had followed close at his heels to gawk at Oldtown’s pale emissary. He said it with such satisfaction that Jon wondered if his fellow maester had looked forward to this occasion, if he’d somehow spoiled the poor man’s big moment.

“I hope this one talks,” said Rollam. “The last one must have been stupid. It didn’t say anything.”

*The last one must have been clever. Silence beats talking to Rollam any day.* Jon suppressed a snigger. Lord Westerling’s youngest son was a boy of ten and the presumptive heir to the Crag, ever since his elder brother had gone missing during the Red Wedding. The Knight of Seashells was almost certainly dead, but none would say so within the castle walls for fear Lady Sybell would have them dangling out a tower window. Rollam had little and less in common with his lost brother, from what Jon had heard of the latter. While Raynald had been rebellious and witty, Rollam was serious and dutiful. *Too* dutiful. He’d worshiped first Raynald, then Robb Stark, and now his sister Jeyne. Jon had once admired his own brother with eyes as big and blind as their lord father’s, but by his seventh name day he’d gained the wits enough to stop. The scars enough as well.

“The bird has not spoken,” apologized Jon. *Not in the Common Tongue, at least.*

The white raven *quorked* before returning to its corn.

Eleyna admired the bird. “Is it true that a long summer means an even longer winter? I don’t like the cold.” The simple girl was the most tolerable of the children, as she was the least seen. Her days were oft spent alone, watching the waves crash along the bluffs from a castle window. That solitude would be short-lived: she had recently flowered, so ravens had been coming and going from the rookery this past fortnight, making a din of squawks and marriage offers.

“A summer’s length does influence the bitterness of winter,” Amory agreed, confidently wrong. The old maester only gaped at him when Jon tried to explain the movements of the heavens. How he’d ever earned a bronze link was itself a higher mystery. “But do not fear, child. We have had a good harvest, we shall always have the bounty of the sea, and Ser Duncan has brought us ample wealth with which to supply our wants. ” He smiled at the girl with affection. “This winter shall be a kind one if chill air is our most pressing concern.”

“It’s *not*. We should be using that wealth to hire sellswords,” Jeyne said grimly. Lord Gawen’s eldest child made the most exhausting company of the three. The girl had been a widow for well over half a year, but acted as if the Young Wolf had died whilst breaking this morning’s fast. More days than not she would rend her gown, no longer so much in mourning as to provoke her mother, though the castle seamstress was only the one truly riled. “The Freys must pay for their treachery! For what they did to Robb! To Raynald!” She shot Jon an incredulous look. “Don’t *you* agree, at least? You could have lost kin at the Red Wedding yourself.”

*It’s a shame I didn’t.* Before he took his vows, Maester Jon had been Jon Vance, the fifth and final son of Lord Norbert Vance. The blind Lord of Atranta’s children all looked the same: tall, comely boys with thick brown hair. They shared a vicious nature too, all of them but Jon. Ellery and Hugo, by a kind of low cunning, had contrived to vent their cruelty on the poor animals they caught on their frequent hunts. Kirth was black-tempered and

brutal with a vengeful heart, but left Jon unmolested when unprovoked. It was Ronald who was the real monster in House Vance.

In his eerie fits the young man would roam the corridors of the castle, announcing himself its prince in quest of evil warlocks to vanquish. When Jon was a good evil warlock, he received mere beatings. The scars on his arms and back could attest that he hadn't always been good: he'd fought back too hard, or not hard enough, and this had forced the prince to smite him with his magic sword—Ronald's rusty dirk.

Jon might have died had he not discovered his hiding place. The old storage room had been bricked up long ago, but he had accessed it by removing a stone from the adjacent library. Jon would spend hours there, reading by candlelight, hiding from Prince Ron. When the flame guttered out he would sit in the dark; sometimes he slept, sometimes a new day waited when he emerged. At two-and-ten he had asked his unseeing father to send him to the Citadel. Perhaps one day Kirth's rage would surmount his fear and he'd take revenge on Ronald. Jon hoped so.

"I am a maester of the Citadel, bound in service to Castamere," Jon said mildly in response to the girl's ill-considered treason. "Winter is not the season to start a war, my lady."

"Your *Grace*," snapped the girl. She styled herself a queen dowager, though she'd never so much as seen Winterfell. The Queen in the North. A title as absurd as Princess of Zulamber, the golden-haired dream girl Ronald said he was prophesied to save.

"Your Grace," Maester Jon corrected himself. He bowed his head humbly, but still glimpsed Amory's expression. The Crag's maester had made the same *error* this morning, with the same result. Here the brothers of the order were in silent agreement: it was easier to humor her. *Let Lady Sybell wage that war.*

Jeyne turned away from Jon with a huff and began eyeing Amory's medicine shelves. The old maester had an impressive display, no doubt thanks to Lord Gawen's lady wife. According to Amory, Sybell Spicer's grandmother had been a Qartheen priestess named Xharata Xisina Mexareqa. She was a healer, more or less, a "wise one" to her fellow Qartheen, and had sworn a noble vow to aid the

sick. She brought with her from the east a vast collection of potions and ointments — though most of them were for carnal arousal. The smallfolk of the westerlands did not understand what she was and made of her an exotic curiosity: a fortune teller they called Maggy. Offended by Westerosi ignorance, Xharata wove baleful futures to terrify those who sought prophecy within her healing tent. When the crone died, the tent was taken down and the medicines made their way to Amory's turret.

"Rollam," said the boy to the bird, hoping for a response. "*Rollam.*" The white raven looked up and tilted its head, but said nothing.

"They are trained with food," explained Jon. He would play Amory's part a moment, an indulgent teacher. "Let us see what he can say." He offered a cloaked forearm to the bird. "Here," he commanded. Its pale wings spread and flapped as the raven leapt to Jon. The maester took a handful of kernels from the sack and asked, "Corn?"

The great bird beat its wings with fury, slapping Jon hard in the face. Eleya and Rollam were squealing with laughter; even Jeyne was struggling to keep her face rebelliously sullen. The white raven pecked wildly at Jon's closed hand, drawing blood. As the maester yelped in pain, the beastly thing jumped back to the table, screaming.

Then it finally spoke. "*Jon!*" it cawed. The raven's voice was queerly panicked. "*Jon!*" it repeated, "*Jon! Jon! Jon!*" It walked about the table, blood still on its beak.

"It seems to have learned your name," observed Amory, with only a hint of amusement. "Children, I will need to see to Maester Jon's wound."

Still giggling at Jon's humiliation, the Westerlings filed down the turret stair as Maester Amory lit one candle, then another.

"Not too many," Jon requested, salvaging his composure. "I'm keeping the turret frigid for my observations. Do you see those chunks of ice near the window?"

Amory looked at the blocks, frowned. "Just ice. What knowledge do you hope to muster from these?"

"They shrink," Jon said. "Every day, bit by bit. I am recording how quickly they dwindle. They've been drying up like puddles."



“Yes, evaporation,” said Amory. The old man found the bandages. “Every washerwoman who has hung linen in winter knows about that.”

“Just so,” said Jon. “Did you ever wonder why the Wall does not do the same?”

Amory paused, thinking, then said, “Rain and snow add to it, making up for what is lost.”

“Ah, but then it would flatten and grow wider at the bottom.” Jon pointed to one of the ice chunks with his bleeding hand. “See that one? I’ve been drizzling water on it.”

Maester Amory’s mouth opened as if to say something, then shut.

The white raven screamed. “*Jon!*”

The old man sat to look at the cut on Jon’s hand. “When did you get these other wounds?” he asked, frowning at the scars along Jon’s fingertips.

“The night before I said my vows. Half a year ago, or near enough to make no matter.” Most of the scars on Jon’s body were painful memories, but not the ones on his fingers. His face grew warm just thinking of that night. “The Sphinx cleaned and bound my wounds—Alleras—we called him the Sphinx. An acolyte, and brighter than most. Sharpest man I know. Sharpest of wit, I mean.” He couldn’t conceal his grin. The pain in his hand was forgotten.

Amory took his time examining every finger, one by one, then abruptly looked up at Jon with a laugh. “Ha! When you said your vows? I see it now. I cut my thumb on one when I was young, fool that I was, but by the gods, these cuts go deep. What were you thinking? Did you try to pleasure the thing?”

Jon answered only with a sheepish smile. Before an acolyte becomes a maester, he must spend a night sealed in a dark, empty room with a pillar of Valyrian dragonglass, twisted and black. The archmaesters called it a final test, though they meant it as a lesson in humility. No one was expected to succeed.

It had been Alleras who had given him the notion, the business with the candle. The solution was simple, yet elegant. “A circular river,” the handsome acolyte had explained, an idea his mother had heard from a shadowbinder of all people. The copper stars, calamine, and wire had been easy enough to smuggle in the sleeves of his robe. The lemons were more of a challenge. He and the Sphinx

had used tree sap to affix three dozen of them to his body, up and down his legs and around his torso.

Jon had read of the maesters' fruitless attempts to light the glass candles over the centuries: weirwood pyres, dragon blood, wildfire. One maester had even tried to sound a horn borrowed from Claw Isle. In time, the Conclave gave up the pursuit in earnest and consigned the task to acolytes. The glass candles became tokens, symbols of the higher mysteries. Who would guess that lemons were the answer all along?

After fixing the final yellow fruit gingerly to Jon's chest, Alleras had produced a small piece of cloth from a pocket in his sleeve. Within were several dried mushrooms.

"From the Summer Isles," he said. "To keep you alert."

Without question, Jon had placed the fungus in his mouth, chewed, swallowed. The mushrooms had the taste of dirt. They tasted too of apples in autumn, of saffron, of trout fresh from the river. But what Jon remembered best was the taste of the Sphinx's kiss.

Alleras had been fast, taking Jon by surprise, though the kiss was tender. His lips were gentle, warmer than spring, as soft as feathers, as intoxicating as cider. "Become the candle," he whispered, looking up at Jon. His eyes were onyx, shining in the light.

The heavy-laden Jon had been fortunate enough to have the wattle-necked, half-blind Archmaester Harodon lock him in the cell for the evening. In the dark, Jon felt at home. He liked the darkness; he was safe in the darkness. As blind as his father in Atranta, Jon unstuck the lemons (wincing with each one) and began connecting them with the wire by feel. As he worked, he peered into the center of the pitch-black room. Into the dragonglass. *Become the candle*. The words of the Sphinx haunted him, as did his kiss.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep. He woke the next morning to the yelp of Archmaester Garizon and the light of an unflickering flame.

Minutes later, Archmaesters Cetheres and Marwyn were questioning the almost-maester. Stone-faced, they listened as Jon giddily explained the copper stars, the calamine, the lemons. He did not say a word of Alleras. Afterward,

Marwyn took the glass candle to his chambers to determine just what had occurred.

Jon had been sure his feat would impress the Conclave, earn him a Valyrian steel link, make him the toast of the Citadel. Instead, shortly after his vows were spoken and his fingers treated, he found himself aboard the fat-bellied *Myraham*, bound for the Crag. He'd been forbidden from even speaking of dragonglass. He felt bitterness at first, betrayed and abandoned by the old men who'd been fathers to him—as Lord Norbert had not.

But one night aboard the vessel, sleepless from the squalling of the captain's daughter's babe and contemplating the vast blackness of the Sunset Sea, he'd puzzled out the reason for his dismissal. Though now a maester of the Citadel, he *was* still the son of Lord Norbert, and Lord Norbert had fought for the Young Wolf. His father had been pardoned, but forgiven is not forgotten. With Jon in the hands of a Westerling or a Spicer, House Vance would not dare break the king's peace. In truth, however, the blind lord was near death, and his heir, the Prince of Atranta, would relish Jon's execution. His bitterness turned to utter frustration at the pointlessness of his own banishment.

"Jon!" the white raven cried again, nipping at a drop of Jon's blood upon the table.

Amory shook his head. "You should not have taught it your name."

"I didn't," Jon protested. "It arrived just before you—"

"*Beware!*" the raven warned.

That got Amory's attention. He looked up from the bandaging. "Do you suppose it is a message from the Citadel? What perils could it be speaking of?"

Jon thought of the dragon queen, but said, "Could it be the ironmen?"

"They harry far south of here. Feastfires would have warned us if they ventured into westerland waters, or Banefort if they came from the north."

"*Bravo?*"

"What danger is saffron?" mused the old maester. "I admit, when I visited the ship there were some unsavory sorts about—brutish sailors, refugees from Astapor, three pale Qartheen—but they are all being kept in CragSPORT."

"The mines?"

“The mines? Ah, I see what you have done,” Amory chuckled. “A clever ruse. Castamere shall be a hardship these first few years, I know, but your fate could be much harder. They say the Wall is in need of maesters. You could look into this matter of the ice first hand. Would that make you any happier?”

“I promise you, the bird is not mimicking me.”

Amory finished with the bandage, a competent wrap. “Lord Rolph wished to know whether you had reviewed his plans for these frightening mines of yours.” A note of accusation had entered his voice.

“I did, but he will not be happy. I am certain the northwest shaft will not drain,” Jon said, rising to check his sample of quicksilver in the corner of the turret. The liquid metal rested a tad lower in the glass tube today, further proof that the Myrish thinkers had the right of it.

“This again?” The maester of the Crag wrinkled his brow. “The air will hold the water down? Nonsense. *Nothing* cannot hold down *something*. He will have you at that mine day and night until it is dry, you know.”

Jon sighed. Had Amory supported his claim that air had weight, Lord Rolph might have listened. Instead he had made Jon look a fool. He knew he must speak with his lord before this vain enterprise went any further.

The young maester descended the turret stair to seek out the Lord of Castamere. Rolph Spicer would be in either Lord Gawen’s solar or Seashell Hall. Walking through the castle corridors, Jon passed a dozen arched windows, each with an arresting view of the Sunset Sea: the dusky waves were framed by dark cliffs rising north into grey mist. In better times, the arches had held six marble clamshells each; now every third arch held but one. The windows’ ornate keystones had all been replaced by simple stones or bricks, and many of those looked ready to fall out.

The maester touched his ring of copper, remembering Archmaester Perestan’s lessons. The Crag was ancient, the seat of House Westerling dating back to the Age of Heroes. Its lands were full of gold and tin, so the house had been wealthy for thousands of years. Westerlings often married the Kings of the Rock; young Jeyne’s namesake had been taken to wife by Maegor the Cruel. There were disputes amongst historians as to when the mines had been exhausted, however,

with some claiming that House Westerling's decline began hundreds of years ago. Regardless, the ruin of the Crag was what remained of the house's past glory, along with empty caves and barren tunnels.

According to the songs, the children of the forest had lived in those lonely caves before the Westerlings drove them out and uprooted their weirwoods. Jon had never seen one of the white trees—not a living one, at least. The Andals had burned the ones in Atranta thousands of years ago, but the study of weirwood had always fascinated Jon, for the old trees told old tales. At the Citadel, a slice of a great weirwood trunk could be found in the western garden; brought south from beyond the Wall, the piece measured fifty feet across, ten times wider than any tree Jon had seen standing. The archmaesters said it had been more than five thousand years old when it was cut down. Perhaps it was the oldest thing that ever lived, the oldest thing that ever died.

At some point, every novice would try to count the tree's rings, each one representing an ancient, long-forgotten summer. The wider the distance between rings, the longer the summer—it was the best record of the seasons in Westeros, older than the writings of maesters, more ancient than the scribblings of septons. The weirwood's most important testimony was the pattern of its rings: there was none. It was as if the gods cast the seasons at random. *A riddle*, Jon thought, thinking of those deep, dark eyes. *I will find its answer.*

Named for the mother-of-pearl tiles lining both the walls and the vaulted ceiling, Seashell Hall had once been a wonder. As the years passed, pieces fell, but were not replaced; the seashells that remained had become a starry indoor sky, still beautiful, but full of twinkling melancholy. At the head of the hall hung a faded tapestry, spotted with mold, depicting Jaehaerys and Vermithor's sojourn at the Crag. For two centuries since, no king had felt the need to visit the castle until its storming by the Young Wolf. Six great tables in the shape of clams filled the room. At the centermost sat the Lord and Lady Westerling opposite Lord Spicer and the captain of *Bravo*, Ser Duncan Spicer.

“Maester Jon!” Lord Rolph clapped his hands together as Jon entered, his tone mocking. “How fare your measurements? I do hope you are not so distracted that

you have forgotten about my mines? Not a moon's turn past, he was digging up dirt in caves. Now he plays with ice and quicksilver."

*How can I convince a man who disdains knowledge itself?* Jon took a deep breath. "The quicksilver relates to the mines, my lord. Like the water beneath the earth—"

"What is of interest in the caves?" interrupted Lord Gawen. "Searching for dragonglass arrowheads? My grandfather gifted me with one he found in his youth. I always wondered which dragon's breath forged the thing."

Jon suppressed a wince at the ignorant intrusion. The Lord of the Crag had meandered from the point at hand, as oft he did, but Jon was obliged to follow his lead. "I was seeing what metals the early Westerlings once mined, my lord," he said. "Most were copper and tin, as might be expected, but in one of the early caves the first Westerlings dug iron ore."

"Iron?" Gawen scratched his beard. "So long ago? Are you certain? Makes you wonder where the ironborn got their name, anyway."

"I am less concerned with yesterday's ironmen than I am with today's," put in Lady Sybell. Lord Gawen's wife was an imposing woman, sly and shrewd. She would have had the makings of a maester, had she been born a man. "My cousin's return was an impressive feat with their longships swarming the seas, but we cannot take such risks with them in future."

"How did it come to be that *Bravo* was so fortunate?" inquired Jon of her captain, taking his lady's hint. Let the man sing his success to another set of ears.

"Once we approached the Arbor, we avoided the straits and kept well out of sight of land," said Ser Duncan. The cousin of Lord Rolph and Lady Sybell looked more pirate than knight with his tanned, weathered face. He had spent much of his life sailing amongst the ports of the Free Cities and even farther east. "We were alerted to the danger when we took on fresh water in Tall Trees Town. Some ironborn had moored there after weathering storms. They boasted that their new king would give them Oldtown, the Arbor, and all of Westeros after his brother returned with the queen and her dragons."

"Dragons?" asked Lord Gawen. "Surely that was a jape."

“I saw them with mine own eyes—in Qarth, before we passed into the Jade Sea,” said the captain grimly. “They were little things, as was their mother, Daenerys Targaryen. The dragons must have grown, though. By the time we returned to the Summer Sea, she had crowned herself Queen of Meereen. I took on some Astapori passengers on New Ghis: they spoke of burnings, and the slaying of children as young as twelve. Some sailors told other tales about the queen and horses ... but those are best left unsaid in my lady’s presence.”

It seemed little and less would be said at this meeting on the properties of air and water, either. Jon would not convince his lord of anything here and now, he knew. *When I am summoned back to Oldtown, it will make no matter what Rolph Spicer thinks. Oldtown ...* Jon thought uneasily of the white raven and its warnings. *Is the Citadel in danger from the ironmen and this dragon queen both?*

“However she may have taken Meereen, I bid her joy of it,” said Lady Sybell. “That city lies a world away; the ironborn are close and vexing. But ravens’ wings bring us good tidings: Lord Terrence Kenning seeks the honor of our Eleyna’s hand. We have accepted. The Kennings of Harlaw and the Kennings of Kayce remain close, despite their difference in liege lords ... or liege kings, as it may be. Lord Terrence assures us that he can keep the Crag free from ironborn raids, as he has kept his own seat.”

Jon doubted that Lord Kenning truly wished to marry the younger Westerling daughter. The old lord of Kayce had shunned marriage for three decades and treated his nephew as his heir, even bestowing upon him the family horn. No, the betrothal reeked of lions, though he wondered why Eleyna was to be wed and not the elder daughter Jeyne.

“The Crag’s not the only thing needs protection,” said Ser Duncan uncertainly. “The Guild demanded that we provide safe passage across the Sunset Sea to their trading galleys. I accepted the term in exchange for their prices on saffron, cinnamon, and cloves. At the time it was a bargain. Now ...”

Lord Gawen blinked at his good-cousin. “And how are we to provide such protection from the Crow’s Eye? Lord Mallister told us stories of that one, he did.” Gawen had spent a year as a prisoner at Seagard, though he’d been freed from the dungeon when he became the father of a queen. After that, he’d seemingly

endured dinners with Jason Mallister, dwelling endlessly on his house's ancient feud with the iron kings, their grievous crimes, his thirst for vengeance.

Lord Rolph waved his hand dismissively. "We are speaking of problems well beyond the horizon. From what I hear, the Redwynes will deal with the ironmen in good time."

"And if they don't, the soil of the Iron Islands will still be thin, their summers cool, their autumns wet," Lady Sybell hinted. "They will need to trade their plunder for grain. Who better than with us and our new Kenning kin? Then we could set the safe passage of these galleys from Qarth as one of *our* terms, and we would have the only reliable eastern trade along the coast."

*Why would ironmen trade for what they can take by force?* Jon wondered, but kept his own counsel.

"Our grandfather was a member of the Ancient Guild of Spicers," added Lord Rolph, turning back to the captain. "Whatever should arise, I am sure our Qartheen friends will remain amiable."

Ser Duncan looked dubious. "The Guild remains amiable just as long as it puts coin in their pockets. Gulltown and Oldtown demand steep duties, it's true, and Cragstown could provide a friendlier port to trade for gold and seek riches from beyond the Wall ... but only if Qartheen ships can sail safe waters getting here."

"Beyond the Wall?" scoffed Lord Gawen. "What do they mean to trade? Snow?"

*Skins*, Jon thought, *slaves*. When Daenerys freed the chattel of Slaver's Bay, she made the slave cities look elsewhere for their labor, and the route to the Frozen Shore was free of the Braavosi who might seize slavers in the Narrow Sea. *What do you call a line of "free folk" chained in a Qartheen coffle?*

"Then our course is set," Lady Sybell decided, ignoring her husband's question. "We have mines to drain, docks to expand and a wedding to plan. In a moon's turn, we ride to Kayce."

"Save you, Maester Jon," Lord Rolph added with a derisive smile. "You will travel south with us only as far as Castamere. Your *real* work begins then."



*My real work must be finished by then*, Jon resolved, thinking of his last unwelcome journey. The night before the *Myraham* set sail, the novices and acolytes had sent Jon off with drinks at the Quill and Tankard. Mollander was well in his cups and mourning his father, still unable to appreciate his new freedom. Haughty Armen and husky Robert fervently debated something neither of them understood. Pate, ever gullible, chatted with the mummer girl who claimed she still had her maidenhead. Even Lazy Leo was there, staring at Jon from across the common room with a sneer.

His bandaged hands could barely hold the third tankard of cider Alleras bought him. “Here you are, *Maester Jon*,” he said, sly teasing beneath the deference in his address. *The gods are cruel*, Jon thought, gazing at the sloe-eyed Sphinx. Would he ever see those eyes again?

“Perhaps ...” Jon said, his words as clumsy as his hands, “... you will be sent to the westerlands ... too ... when your chain is forged.”

The acolyte already had two links—was on the verge of his third. Within three years, surely, the man would make a maester. But Alleras only smiled softly. “I am not here in Oldtown to try my learning against the archmaesters’ knowledge. Or to try my longbow against Mollander’s apples.” The smile became a grin. “From *here* I will set my own trial.”

Jon did not understand, but something in the way Alleras spoke told Jon his words were true. *He’s always right*. No one would pack Alleras off on a ship, to the westerlands or anywhere else.

He would remain at the Citadel until he had completed his purpose, whatever that purpose was. Jon’s heart sank, but he tried to return the acolyte’s kind look. “Your trial?”

Alleras sipped his sweet wine. “A riddle for you. Suppose the animals of the world were to choose themselves a leader. A King of Beasts. How to decide which is fit to rule? The sheep would set a test to see who could produce the most wool. The snakes, a test to make the strongest venom.” He took another sip. “The lions would test sharp claws and teeth, and hawks, the ability to fly. Each would choose a test according to their own powers. So, tell me Maester Jon, how can they all settle on a king?”

Jon pondered the question as he emptied his tankard, but he came to no good answer. *Was he speaking of a sphinx?* “Take a bit of this and a bit of that?” he guessed.

Alleras only smirked.

When they rose, Jon had to rest his bandaged hand on the acolyte’s shoulder so as not to fall. The men crossed the old plank bridge into the mists of night.

They walked a long time, their final night together, through that maze of a city, through its wynds and alleys and crookback streets. They passed through the Blue Gate and over the muddy stone of the Flower Bazaar. When they finally stopped, they were in a narrow back street cloaked in shadow.

Alleras kissed him now for the second time, though now passion took the place of tenderness. Jon kissed back, and the alley spun around them. The Sphinx sucked the lobe of his ear, bit at his neck; his hand slipped under Jon’s new robe.

“Oh,” was all he could say. His bandaged hand fumbled at Alleras’s cloak. The cobblestones were melting away beneath his feet. Then he melted with them.

Jon searched for Alleras in the morning, but he was nowhere to be found. Feeling numb, he boarded his ship for the Crag, then watched the domes and towers of the Citadel grow smaller as he sailed off into the distance.

Since then he’d dreamed of nothing but the Sphinx.

When Lord Rolph dismissed him from Seashell Hall, Jon wandered back across the castle and up to the turret. Amory had brought a large cage down from the rookery for the white raven, which slept quietly inside. The old maester had also tidied up Jon’s papers, leaving the room feeling empty, lonely. Jon opened the window, letting the cold in. The clouds breaking over the western sea let the sunset cast the room in a ruddy glow. The young maester sat until the sun fell behind the horizon.

The room darkened. *Solve the seasons, Jon. Solve them or watch them play across this sky, this land, till your last winter.*

In the gloom, the young maester found Amory’s lens tube, its tripod standing in the corner. The stars would be visible tonight, the moon full. He gathered his star charts and figures, an inkpot and quill. His arms full, he walked up the stairs.

Passing through the dim rookery as he climbed the tower, Jon could just make out the black wings within. The air along the battlements was more than bracing, but it was the best place to view the night sky. Jon set the tube on the tripod and directed it toward the glowing shroud in the distance. Then he waited, watching for a gap in the clouds.

The maester touched his ring of bronze, remembering Archmaester Vaelyn's lessons. When the moon was full, you could see on its face both Lyman's crater and the Lefthand crater. A line between the two blemishes was a horizon of sorts: almost—but not quite—parallel to the earth. The extent of that error varied. Through the Myrish lens, Jon could see the difference: Lyman was a quarter-degree raised from when he'd first arrived at the Crag. Vinegar Vaelyn called this curiosity "the wobble."

The archmaesters couldn't agree on what, exactly, was wobbling. Most took it to be the moon that shook, though there were some who held it was the earth that tottered instead. The septons were wont to blame the gaze of man, made crooked by his sin. Jon had spent countless hours measuring the wobble against the movement of the seven wanderers and the rings of the great tree. He'd even considered the coming of the comet and the Doom of Valyria. There was no pattern.

*If that's true, then I am doomed. A life of messages and medicines, of water that never drains. A whole life here.*

*Alone.*

He stepped back from the tube and looked up at the stars with naked eyes, thinking of all he did not know. He thought of lemons and a great river flowing into itself, of iron older than writing, dragonglass forged beneath the earth and pushed somehow to its surface. He thought of a weirwood sapling growing to a hulking tree over thousands of years, a Wall unchanged beside it, seasons turning and turning above. He felt the weight of the air upon his head, the wobble of the earth beneath his feet, the touch of a kiss upon his lips.

The cold crept into his bones.

Shivering beneath the moon and stars, an idea came to him.

Jon's eyes widened. Leaving the lens tube on its tripod, he gathered up his papers and raced down the stairs. A hundred black wings flapped in fury as the maester pounded through the rookery. "Corn!" they screamed. "Corn, corn, corn!"

In the turret, Jon lit a candle, took up quill and ink, and rolled out fresh parchment. The words flowed from his fingers like blood upon dragonglass.

When he had finished, he looked back over his words, marveling at them. But which archmaester would deign to consider his notion? *Theobald? Norren? Willifer?*

He rolled up the letter and sealed it with a glob of the Crag's sand-colored wax. Mixed into the wax was real sand, which sparkled in the candlelight. Without, he wrote a name: *Archmaester Marwyn.*

*They might well send me to the Wall,* Jon thought, grinning foolishly. The Shadow Tower was better than Castamere, though. There was hope at the Wall, a chance to uncover the truth of the world. Perhaps he would see a weirwood. *First the Wall. Then home.*

Maester Jon climbed back to the rookery, attached his letter to an Oldtown raven, stroked its feathers for a moment, and unleashed it into the sky. He envied the bird as it flew out of sight.

Afterward, he carefully returned Maester Amory's lens tube and tripod, put away the ink and wax, and organized his papers until the turret was as orderly as he had found it. As he closed the window, he looked out to where the moon now lay in the sky. It was the hour of ghosts, not too late to find Lord Rolph and tell him of what he'd discovered. Whether his lord would believe him or not, he could not sleep with such a secret.

"*Beware!*" the white raven called, awake again. On the morrow, he would see what other messages the bird had for him.

Jon descended the stair and crossed the castle once again, this time heading for Lord Gawen's solar. It was the most pleasant room in the Crag, having been maintained as the rest of the castle decayed around it. During Gawen's imprisonment at Seagard, Lord Rolph had served as castellan and spent his evenings there, reading by the light of a fire. When the Lord of the Crag returned, he felt it rude to deprive his good-brother of the room's luxury, knowing the cold

ruin of Castamere awaited him soon enough. The lords and lady would be there, Jon knew.

Oddly, there was no guard outside. Something was wrong. *Beware!* Suddenly cautious, the maester approached the door, eased it open. He peered into the solar, heart pounding.

No.

No. No. No!

The maester touched his ring of silver, remembering Archmaester Ebrose's lessons. Maester Jon dropped to the ground and pressed his ear to Lord Rolph's breast. *No heartbeat.* Three fallen bodies and not a drop of blood. *They have no wounds.* It was poison, he was certain. But which poison? He needed to act with all haste if he was to serve them an antidote. His eyes raced around the room—he saw no cup for drink, no plate for food. *Not nightshade, not greycap, not tears of Lys.* Rolph Spicer's skin was a mottled blue-green, his mouth clear of foam. *Not the strangler, not wolfsbane, not demon's dance.*

That left only ... *manticore venom.* The toxin killed the instant it reached the heart.

Jon sat up, defeated.

Lord Rolph was dead. Lord and Lady Westerling as well.

Jon made to call for the guards, then hesitated. *Two dead lords and a Vance. They will suspect me.* Neither he nor Amory kept any manticore venom, but could the guards be sure of that? What if the old man didn't recognize the poison? Even if he kept his freedom, Jon's lord had died. He remembered the sniggers in Oldtown when the Grand Maester failed to save King Joffrey. It had been an impossible task, but Pycelle was labeled senile regardless. Jon thought of his work, of the letter he had loosed to Oldtown. *The Conclave will dismiss it, all of it, the desperate ravings of a panicked boy.*

He had to explain to them. He had to—then it dawned on him. *The Lord of Castamere is dead, and the Lord of the Crag too.* The lands and incomes of both would fall to Rollam, a boy—a boy who already had a maester. There was no more need of Jon in the westerlands. Disgraced though he may be, Jon would return to Oldtown.



was going home. He  
Jon was thinking of Alleras when he  
felt the sting at his ankle.  
He looked behind him and saw something green and  
glittering scurry across the floor. There, behind the door, stood a cloaked man,  
pale of skin.

“I am so sorry,” he whispered.

## ALAYNE

She was reading her little lord a tale of the Winged Knight when Mya Stone came knocking on the door of his bedchamber, clad in boots and riding leathers and smelling strongly of the stable. Mya had straw in her hair and a scowl on her face. *That scowl comes of having Mychel Redfort near,* Alayne knew.

“Your lordship,” Mya informed Lord Robert, “Lady Waynwood’s banners have been seen an hour down the road. She will be here soon, with your cousin Harry. Will you want to greet them?”

*Why did she have to mention Harry?* Alayne thought. *We will never get Sweetrobin out of bed now.* The boy slapped a pillow. “Send them away. I never asked them here.”

Mya looked nonplussed. No one in the Vale was better at handling a mule, but lordlings were another matter. “They were invited,” she said uncertainly, “for the tourney. I don’t ...”

Alayne closed her book. “Thank you, Mya. Let me talk with Lord Robert, if you would.”

Relief plain on her face, Mya fled without another word.

“I hate that Harry,” Sweetrobin said when she was gone. “He calls me cousin, but he’s just waiting for me to die so he can take the Eyrie. He thinks I don’t know, but I do.”

“Your lordship should not believe such nonsense,” Alayne said. “I’m sure Ser Harrold loves you well.” *And if the gods are good, he will love me too.* Her tummy gave a little flutter.

“He doesn’t,” Lord Robert insisted. “He wants my father’s castle, that’s all, so he pretends.” The boy clutched the blanket to his pimply chest. “I don’t want you to marry him, Alayne. I am the Lord of the Eyrie, and I forbid it.” He sounded as if he were about to cry. “You should marry me instead. We could sleep in the same bed every night, and you could read me stories.”

*No man can wed me so long as my dwarf husband still lives somewhere in this world.* Queen Cersei had collected the head of a dozen dwarfs, Petyr claimed, but none were Tyrion’s.

“Sweetrobin, you must not say such things. You are the Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale, and you must wed a highborn lady and father a son to sit in the High Hall of House Arryn after you are gone.”

Robert wiped his nose. “But I want — “

She put a finger to his lips. “I know what you want, but it cannot be. I am no fit wife for you. I am bastard born.”

“I don’t care. I love you best of anyone. “

*You are such a little fool.* “Your lords bannermen will care. Some call my father upjumped and ambitious. If you were to take me to wife, they would say that he

made you do it, that it was no will of yours. The Lords Declarant might take arms against him once again, and he and I should both be put to death.”

“I wouldn’t let them hurt you!” Lord Robert said. “If they try I will make them all fly.” His hand began to tremble.

Alayne stroked his fingers. “There, my Sweetrobin, be still now.” When the shaking passed, she said, “You must have a proper wife, a trueborn maid of noble birth.”

“No. I want to marry you, Alayne.”

*Once your lady mother intended that very thing, but I was trueborn then, and noble.* “My lord is kind to say so.” Alayne smoothed his hair. Lady Lysa had never let the servants touch it, and after she had died Robert had suffered terrible shaking fits whenever anyone came near him with a blade, so it had been allowed to grow until it tumbled over his round shoulders and halfway down his flabby white chest. *He does have pretty hair. If the gods are good and he lives long enough to wed, his wife will admire his hair, surely. That much she will love about him.* “Any child of ours would be baseborn. Only a trueborn child of House Arryn can displace Ser Harrold as your heir. My father will find a proper wife for you, some highborn girl much prettier than me. You’ll hunt and hawk together, and she’ll give you her favor to wear in tournaments. Before long, you will have forgotten me entirely.”

“I won’t!”

“You will. You must.” Her voice was firm, but gentle.

“The Lord of the Eyrie can do as he likes. Can’t I still love you, even if I have to marry her? Ser Harrold has a common woman. Benjicot says she’s carrying his bastard.”

*Benjicot should learn to keep his fool’s mouth shut.* “Is that what you would have from me? A bastard?” She pulled her fingers from his grasp. “Would you dishonor me that way?”

The boy looked stricken. “No. I never meant — “

Alayne stood. “If it please my lord, I must go and find my father. Someone needs to greet Lady Waynwood.” Before her little lord could find the words to protest, she gave him a quick curtsy and fled the bedchamber, sweeping down the



hall and across a covered bridge to the Lord Protector's apartments. When she had left Petyr Baelish that morning he had been breaking his fast with old Oswell who had arrived last night from Gulltown on a lathered horse. She hoped they might still be talking, but Petyr's solar proved empty. Someone had left a window open and a stack of papers had blown onto the floor. The sun was slanting through the thick yellow windows, and dust motes danced in the light like tiny golden insects. Though snow had blanketed the heights of the Giant's Lance above, below the mountain the autumn lingered and winter wheat was ripening in the fields. Outside the window she could hear the laughter of the washerwomen at the well, the din of steel on steel from the ward where the knights were at their drills. Good sounds.

Alayne loved it here. She felt alive again, for the first since her father ... since Lord Eddard Stark had died.

She closed the window, gathered up the fallen papers, and stacked them on the table. One was a list of the competitors. Four-and-sixty knights had been invited to vie for places amongst Lord Robert Arryn's new Brotherhood of Winged Knights, and four and-sixty knights had come to tilt for the right to wear falcon's wings upon their warhelms and guard their lord.

The competitors came from all over the Vale, from the mountain valleys and the coast, from Gulltown and the Bloody Gate, even the Three Sisters. Though a few were promised, only three were wed; the eight victors would be expected to spend the next three years at Lord Robert's side, as his own personal guard (Alayne had suggested seven, like the Kingsguard, but Sweetrobin had insisted that he must have more knights than King Tommen), so older men with wives and children had not been invited.

*And they came,* Alayne thought proudly. *They all came.*

It had fallen out just as Petyr said it would, the day the ravens flew. "They're young, eager, hungry for adventure and renown. Lysa would not let them go to war. This is the next best thing. A chance to serve their lord and prove their prowess. They will come. Even Harry the Heir." He had smoothed her hair and kissed her forehead. "What a clever daughter you are."

*It was clever.* The tourney, the prizes, the winged knights, it had all been her own notion. Lord

Robert's mother had filled him full of fears, but he always took courage from the tales she read him of Ser Artys Arryn, the Winged Knight of legend, founder of his line. *Why not surround him with Winged Knights?* She had thought one night, after Sweetrobin had finally drifted off to sleep. *His own Kingsguard, to keep him safe and make him brave.* And no sooner did she tell Petyr her idea than he went out and made it happen. *He will want to be there to greet Ser Harrold. Where could he have gone?*

Alayne swept down the tower stairs to enter the pillared gallery at the back of the Great Hall. Below her, serving men were setting up trestle tables for the evening feast, while their wives and daughters swept up the old rushes and scattered fresh ones. Lord Nestor was showing Lady Waxley his prize tapestries, with their scenes of hunt and chase. The same panels had once hung in the Red Keep of King's Landing, when Robert sat the Iron Throne. Joffrey had them taken down and they had languished in some cellar until Petyr Baelish arranged for them to be brought to the Vale as a gift for Nestor Royce. Not only were the hangings beautiful, but the High Steward delighted in telling anyone who'd listen that they had once belonged to a king.

Petyr was not in the Great Hall. Alayne crossed the gallery and descended the stair built into the thick west wall, to come out in the inner ward, where the jousting would be held. Viewing stands had raised for all those who had come to watch, with four long tilting barriers in between. Lord Nestor's men were painting the barriers with whitewash, draping the stands with bright banners, and hanging shields on the gate the competitors would pass through when they made their entrance.

At the north end of the yard, three quintains had been set up, and some of the competitors were riding at them. Alayne knew them by their shields; the bells of Belmore, green vipers for the Lynderlys, the red sledge of Breakstone, House Tollett's black and grey pily. Ser Mychel Redfort set one quintain spinning with a perfectly placed blow. He was one of those favored to win wings.

Petyr was not at the quintains, nor anywhere in the yard, but as she turned to go a woman's voice called out. "Alayne!" cried Miranda Royce, from a carved stone bench beneath a beech tree, where she was seated between two men. She looked in need of rescue. Smiling, Alayne walked toward her friend.

Myranda was wearing a grey woolen dress, a green hooded cloak, and a rather desperate look. On either side of her sat a knight. The one on her right had a grizzled beard, a bald head, and a belly that spilled over his swordbelt where his lap should have been. The one on her left was no more than eighteen, and skinny as a spear. His ginger-colored whiskers only partially served to disguise the angry red pimples that dotted his face.

The bald knight wore a dark blue surcoat emblazoned with a huge pair of pink lips. The pimply- gingerlad countered with nine white seagulls on a field of brown, which marked him for a Shett of Gulltown. He was staring so intently at Miranda's breasts that he hardly noticed Alayne until Miranda rose to hug her. "Thank you, thank you, thank you" Randa whispered in her ear, before she turned to say, "Sers, may I present you the Lady Alayne Stone?"

"The Lord Protector's daughter," the bald knight announced, all hearty gallantry. He rose ponderously. "And full as lovely as the tales told of her, I see."

Not to be outdone, the pimply knight hopped up and said, "Ser Ossifer speaks truly, you are the most beautiful maid in all the Seven Kingdoms." It might have been a sweeter courtesy had he not addressed it to her chest.

"And have you seen all those maids yourself, ser?" Alayne asked him. "You are young to be so widely travelled."

He blushed, which only made his pimples look angrier. "No, my lady. I am from Gulltown."

*And I am not, though Alayne was born there.* She would need to be careful around this one. "I remember Gulltown fondly," she told him, with a smile as vague as it was pleasant. To Miranda she said, "Do you know where my father's gotten to, perchance?"

"Let me take you to him, my lady."

"I do hope you will forgive me for depriving you of Lady Miranda's company," Alayne told the knights. She did not wait for a reply, but took the older girl arm-in-

arm and drew her away from the bench. Only when they were out of earshot did she whisper, “Do you really know where my father is?”

“Of course not. Walk faster, my new suitors may be following.” Myranda made a face. “Ossifer Lipps is the dullest knight in the Vale, but Uther Shett aspires to his laurels. I am praying they fight a duel for my hand, and kill each other.”

Alayne giggled. “Surely Lord Nestor would not seriously entertain a suit from such men.”

“Oh, he might. My lord father is annoyed with me for killing my last husband and putting him to all this trouble.”

“It was not your fault he died.”

“There was no one else in the bed that I recall.”

Alayne could not help but shutter. Myranda’s husband had died when he was making love with her. “Those Sistermen who came in yesterday were gallant,” she said, to change the subject. “If you don’t like Ser Ossifer or Ser Uther, marry one of them instead. I thought the youngest one was very handsome.”

“The one in the sealskin cloak?” Randa said, incredulous.

“One of his brothers, then.”

Myranda rolled her eyes. “They’re from the Sisters. Did you ever know a Sisterman who could joust? They clean their swords with codfish oil and wash in tubs of cold seawater.”

“Well,” Alayne said, “at least they’re clean.”

“Some of them have webs between their toes. I’d sooner marry Lord Petyr. Then I’d be your mother. How little is his finger, I ask you?”

Alayne did not dignify that question with an answer. “Lady Waynwood will be here soon, with her sons.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?” Myranda said. “The first Lady Waynwood must have been a mare, I think. How else to explain why all the Waynwood men are horse-faced? If I were ever to wed a Waynwood, he would have to swear a vow to don his helm whenever he wished to fuck me, and keep the visor *closed*.” She gave Alayne a pinch on the arm. “My Harry will be with them, though. I notice that you left him out. I shall never forgive you for stealing him away from me. He’s the boy I want to marry.”

“The betrothal was my father’s doing,” Alayne protested, as she had a hundred times before. *She is only teasing*, she told herself ... but behind the japes, she could hear the hurt.

Myranda stopped to gaze across the yard at the knights at their practice. “Now there’s the very sort of husband I need.”

A few feet away, two knights were fighting with blunted practice swords. Their blades crashed together twice, then slipped past each other only to be blocked by upraised shields, but the bigger man gave ground at the impact. Alayne could not see the front of his shield from where she stood, but his attacker bore three ravens in flight, each clutching a red heart in its claws. *Three hearts and three ravens*.

She knew right then how the fight would end.

A few moments later and the big man sprawled dazed in the dust with his helm askew. When his squire undid the fastenings to bare his head, there was blood trickling down his scalp. *If the swords had not been blunted, there would be brains as well*. That last head blow had been so hard Alayne had winced in sympathy when it fell. Myranda Royce considered the victor thoughtfully. “Do you think if I asked nicely Ser Lyn would kill my suitors for me?”

“He might, for a plump bag of gold.” Ser Lyn Corbray was forever desperately short of coin, all the Vale knew that.

“Alas, all I have is a plump pair of teats. Though with Ser Lyn, a plump sausage under my skirts would serve me better.”

Alayne’s giggle drew Corbray’s attention. He handed his shield to his loutish squire, removed his helm and quilted coif. “Ladies.” His long brown hair was plastered to his brow by sweat.

“Well struck, Ser Lyn,” Alayne called out. “Though I fear you’ve knocked poor Ser Owen insensible.”

Corbray glanced back to where his foe was being helped from the yard by his squire. “He had no sense to start with, or he should not have tried me.”

There is truth in that, Alayne thought, but some demon of mischief was in her that morning, so she gave Ser Lyn a thrust of her own. Smiling sweetly, she said, “My lord father tells me your brother’s new wife is with child.”

Corbray gave her a dark look. “Lyonel sends his regrets. He remains at Heart’s Home with his peddler’s daughter, watching her belly swell as if he were the first man who ever got a wench pregnant.”

*Oh, that’s an open wound*, thought Alayne. Lyonel Corbray’s first wife had given him nothing but a frail, sickly babe who died in infancy, and during all those years Ser Lyn had remained his brother’s heir. When the poor woman finally died, however, Petyr Baelish had stepped in and brokered a new marriage for Lord Corbray. The second Lady Corbray was sixteen, the daughter of a wealthy Gulltown merchant, but she had come with an immense dowry, and men said she was a tall, strapping, healthy girl, with big breasts and good, wide hips. And fertile too, it seems.

“We are all praying that the Mother grants Lady Corbray an easy labor and a healthy child,” said Myranda.

Alayne could not help herself. She smiled and said, “My father is always pleased to be of service to one of Lord Robert’s leal bannermen. I’m sure he would be most delighted to help broker a marriage for you as well, Ser Lyn.”

“How kind of him.” Corbray’s lips drew back in something that might have been meant as a smile, though it gave Alayne a chill. “But what need have I for heirs when I am landless and like to remain so, thanks to our Lord Protector? No. Tell your lord father I need none of his brood mares.”

The venom in his voice was so thick that for a moment she almost forgot that Lyn Corbray was actually her father’s catspaw, bought and paid for. *Or was he?* Perhaps, instead of being Petyr’s man pretending to be Petyr’s foe, he was actually his foe pretending to be his man pretending to be his foe.

Just thinking about it was enough to make her head spin. Alayne turned abruptly from the yard ... and bumped into a short, sharp-faced man with a brush of orange hair who had come up behind her. His hand shot out and caught her arm before she could fall. “My lady. My pardons if I took you unawares.”

“The fault was mine. I did not see you standing there.”

“We mice are quiet creatures.” Ser Shadrich was so short that he might have been taken for a squire, but his face belonged to a much older man. She saw long leagues in the wrinkles at the corner of his mouth, old battles in the scar beneath

his ear, and a hardness behind the eyes that no boy would ever have. This was a man grown. Even Randa overtopped him, though.

“Will you be seeking wings?” the Royce girl said.

“A mouse with wings would be a silly sight.”

“Perhaps you will try the melee instead?” Alayne suggested. The melee was an afterthought, a sop for all the brothers, uncles, fathers, and friends who had accompanied the competitors to the Gates of the Moon to see them win their silver wings, but there would be prizes for the champions, and a chance to win ransoms.

“A good melee is all a hedge knight can hope for, unless he stumbles on a bag of dragons. And that’s not likely, is it?”

“I suppose not. But now you must excuse us, ser, we need to find my lord father. “

Horns sounded from atop the wall. “Too late,” Miranda said. “They’re here. We shall need to do the honors by ourselves.” She grinned. “Last one to the gate must marry Uther Shett.”

They made a race of it, dashing headlong across the yard and past the stables, skirts flapping, whilst knights and serving men alike looked on, and pigs and chickens scattered before them. It was most unladylike, but Alayne sound found herself laughing. For just a little while, as she ran, she forget who she was, and where, and found herself remembering bright cold days at Winterfell, when she would race through Winterfell with her friend Jeyne Poole, with Arya running after them trying to keep up.

By the time they arrived at the gatehouse, both of them were red-faced and panting. Miranda had lost her cloak somewhere along the way. They were just in time. The portcullis had been raised, and a column of riders twenty strong were passing underneath. At their head rode Anya Waynwood, Lady of Ironoaks, stern and slim, her grey-brown hair bound up in a scarf. Her riding cloak was heavy green wool trimmed with brown fur, and clasped at the throat by a niello brooch in the shape of the broken wheel of her House.

Myranda Royce stepped forward and sketched a curtsy. “Lady Anya. Welcome to the Gates of the Moon.”

“Lady Myranda. Lady Alayne.” Anya Waynwood inclined her head to each of them in turn. “It is good of you to greet us. Allow me to present my grandson, Ser Roland Waynwood.” She nodded at the knight who had spoken. “And this is my youngest son, Ser Wallace Waynwood. And of course my ward, Ser Harrold Hardyng.”

*Harry the Heir*, Alayne thought. My husband-to-be, if he will have me. A sudden terror filled her. She wondered if her face was red. *Don't stare at him*, she reminded herself, *don't stare, don't gape, don't gawk. Look away*. Her hair must be a frightful mess after all that running. It took all her will to stop herself from trying to tuck the loose strands back into place. *Never mind your stupid hair. Your hair doesn't matter. It's him that matters. Him, and the Waynwoods.*

Ser Roland was the oldest of the three, though no more than five-and-twenty. He was taller and more muscular than Ser Wallace, but both were long-faced and lantern-jawed, with stringy brown hair and pinched noses. Horsefaced and homely, Alayne thought.

Harry, though ...

*My Harry. My lord, my lover, my betrothed.*

Ser Harrold Hardyng looked every inch a lord-in-waiting; clean-limbed and handsome, straight as a lance, hard with muscle. Men old enough to have known Jon Arryn in his youth said Ser Harrold had his look, she knew. He had a mop of sandy blond hair, pale blue eyes, an aquiline nose. Joffrey was comely too, though, she reminded herself. *A comely monster, that's what he was*. Little Lord Tyrion was kinder, twisted though he was.

Harry was staring at her. He knows who I am, she realized, and he does not seem pleased to see me. It was only then that she took note of his heraldry. Though his surcoat and horse trappings were patterned in the red-and-white diamonds of House Hardyng, his shield was quartered. The arms of Hardyng and Waynwood were displayed in the first and third quarters, respectively, but in the second and fourth quarters he bore the moon-and-falcon of House Arryn, sky blue and cream. Sweetrobin will not like that.

Ser Wallace said, “Are we the l-l-last?”



“You are, sers,” replied Myranda Royce, taking absolutely no notice of his stammer.

“Wh-wh-when will the t-t-tilts commence?”

“Oh, soon, I pray,” said Randa. “Some of the competitors have been here for almost a moon’s turn, partaking of my father’s meat and mead. All good fellows, and very brave ... but they do eat rather a lot.”

The Waynwoods laughed, and even Harry the Heir cracked a thin smile. “It was snowing in the passes, else we would have been here sooner,” said Lady Anya.

“Had we known such beauty awaited us at the Gates, we would have flown,” Ser Roland said. Though his words were addressed to Myranda Royce, he smiled at Alayne as he said them.

“To fly you would need wings,” Randa replied, “and there are some knights here who might have a thing to say concerning that.”

“I look forward to a spirited discussion.” Ser Roland swung down from his horse, turned to

Alayne, and smiled. “I had heard that Lord Littlefinger’s daughter was fair of face and full of grace, but no one ever told me that she was a thief.”

“You wrong me, ser. I am no thief!”

Ser Roland placed his hand over his heart. “Then how do you explain this hole in my chest, from where you stole my heart?”

“He is only t-teasing you, my lady,” stammered Ser Wallace. “My n-n-nephew never had a h-h-heart.”

“The Waynwood wheel has a broken spoke, and we have my nuncle here.” Ser Roland gave Wallace a whap behind the ear. “Squires should be quiet when knights are speaking.”

Ser Wallace reddened. “I am no more a s-squire, my lady. My n-nephew knows full well that I was k-k-kni-k-k-kni –“

“Dubbed?” Alayne suggested gently.

“Dubbed,” said Wallace Waynwood, gratefully.

*Robb would be his age, if he were still alive, she could not help but think, but Robb died a king, and this is just a boy.*

“My lord father has assigned you rooms in the East Tower,” Lady Miranda was telling Lady Waynwood, “but I fear your knights will need to share a bed. The Gates of the Moon were never meant to house so many noble visitors.”

“You are in the Falcon Tower, Ser Harrold,” Alayne put in. Far away from Sweetrobin. That was intentional, she knew. Petyr Baelish did not leave such things to chance. “If it please you, I will show you to your chambers myself.” This time her eyes met Harry’s. She smiled just for him, and said a silent prayer to the Maiden. *Please, he doesn’t need to love me, just make him like me, just a little, that would be enough for now.*

Ser Harrold looked down at her coldly. “Why should it please me to be escorted anywhere by Littlefinger’s bastard?”

All three Waynwoods looked at him askance. “You are a guest here, Harry,” Lady Anya reminded him, in a frosty voice. “See that you remember that.”

*A lady’s armor is her courtesy.* Alayne could feel the blood rushing to her face. No tears, she prayed. *Please, please, I must not cry.* “As you wish, ser. And now if you will excuse me, Littlefinger’s bastard must find her lord father and let him know that you have come, so we can begin the tourney on the morrow.” *And may your horse stumble, Harry the Heir, so you fall on your stupid head in your first tilt.* She showed the Waynwoods a stone face as they blurted out awkward apologies for their companion. When they were done she turned and fled.

Near the keep, she ran headlong into Ser Lothor Brune and almost knocked him off his feet. “Harry the Heir? Harry the Arse, I say. He’s just some upjumped squire.”

Alayne was so grateful that she hugged him. “Thank you. Have you seen my father, ser?”

“Down in the vaults,” Ser Lothar said, “inspecting Lord Nestor’s granaries with Lord Grafton and Lord Belmore.”

The vaults were large and dark and filthy. Alayne lit a taper and clutched her skirt as she made the descent. Near the bottom, she heard Lord Grafton’s booming voice, and followed. “The merchants are clamoring to buy, and the lords are clamoring to sell,” the Gulltowner was saying when she found them. Though not

a tall man, Grafton was wide, with thick arms and shoulders. His hair was a dirty blond mop. “How am I to stop that, my lord?”

“Post guardsmen on the docks. If need be, seize the ships. How does not matter, so long as no food leaves the Vale. “

“These prices, though,” protested fat Lord Belmore,” these prices are more than fair.”

“You say *more than fair*, my lord. I say *less than we would wish*. Wait. If need be, buy the food yourself and keep it stored. Winter is coming. Prices must go higher.”

“Perhaps,” said Belmore, doubtfully.

“Bronze Yohn will not wait,” Grafton complained. “He need not ship through Gulltown, he has his own ports. Whilst we are hoarding our harvest, Royce and the other Lords Declarant will turn theirs into silver, you may be sure of that.”

“Let us hope so,” said Petyr. “When their granaries are empty, they will need every scrap of that silver to buy sustenance from us. And now if you will excuse me, my lord, it would seem my daughter has need of me.”

“Lady Alayne,” Lord Grafton said. “You look bright-eyed this morning.”

“You are kind to say so, my lord. Father, I am sorry to disturb you, but I thought you would want to know that the Waynwoods have arrived.”

“And is Ser Harrold with them?”

*Horrible Ser Harrold.* “He is.”

Lord Belmore laughed. “I never thought Royce would let him come. Is he blind, or merely stupid?”

“He is honorable. Sometimes it amounts to the same thing. If he denied the lad the chance to prove himself, it could create a rift between them, so why not let him tilt? The boy is nowise skilled enough to win a place amongst the Winged Knights.”

“I suppose not,” said Belmore, grudgingly. Lord Grafton kissed Alayne on the hand, and the two lords went off, leaving her alone with her lord father.

“Come,” Petyr said, “walk with me.” He took her by the arm and led her deeper into the vaults, past an empty dungeon. “And how was your first meeting with Harry the Heir?”

“He’s horrible.”

“The world is full of horrors, sweet. By now you ought to know that. You’ve seen enough of them.”

“Yes,” she said, “but why must he be so cruel? He called me your bastard. Right in the yard, in front of everyone.”

“So far as he knows, that’s who you are. This betrothal was never his idea, and Bronze Yohn has no doubt warned him against my wiles. You are my daughter. He does not trust you, and he believes that you’re beneath him.”

“Well, I’m not. He may think he’s some great knight, but Ser Lothor says he’s just some upjumped squire.”

Petyr put his arm around her. “So he is, but he is Robert’s heir as well. Bringing Harry here was the first step in our plan, but now we need to keep him, and only you can do that. He has a weakness for a pretty face, and whose face is prettier than yours? Charm him. Entrance him. Bewitch him.”

“I don’t know how,” she said miserably.

“Oh, I think you do,” said Littlefinger, with one of those smiles that did not reach his eyes. “You will be the most beautiful woman in the hall tonight, as lovely as your lady mother at your age. I cannot seat you on the dais, but you’ll have a place of honor above the salt and underneath a wall sconce. The fire will be shining in your hair, so everyone will see how fair of face you are. Keep a good long spoon on hand to beat the squires off, sweetling. You will not want green boys underfoot when the knights come round to beg you for your favor.”

“Who would ask to wear a bastard’s favor?”

“Harry, if he has the wits the gods gave a goose... but do not give it to him. Choose some other gallant, and favor him instead. You do not want to seem too eager.”

“No,” Alayne said.

“Lady Waynwood will insist that Harry dance with you, I can promise you that much. That will be your chance. Smile at the boy. Touch him when you speak. Tease him, to pique his pride. If he seems to be responding, tell him that you are feeling faint, and ask him to take you outside for a breath of fresh air. No knight could refuse such a request from a fair maiden.”

“Yes,” she said, “but he thinks that I’m a bastard.”

“A beautiful bastard, and the Lord Protector’s daughter.” Petyr drew her close and kissed her on both cheeks. “The night belongs to you, sweetling, Remember that, always.”

“I’ll try, father,” she said.

The feast proved to be everything her father promised.

Sixty-four dishes were served, in honor of the sixty-four competitors who had come so far to contest for silver wings before their lord. From the rivers and the lakes came pike and trout and salmon, from the seas crabs and cod and herring. Ducks there were, and capons, peacocks in their plumage and swans in almond milk. Suckling pigs were served up crackling with apples in their mouths, and three huge aurochs were roasted whole above firepits in the castle yard, since they were too big to get through the kitchen doors. Loaves of hot bread filled the trestle tables in Lord Nestor’s hall, and massive wheels of cheese were brought up from the vaults. The butter was fresh-churned, and there were leeks and carrots, roasted onions, beets, turnips, parsnips. And best of all, Lord Nestor’s cooks prepared a splendid subtlety, a lemon cake in the shape of the Giant’s Lance, twelve feet tall and adorned with an Eyrie made of sugar.

*For me*, Alayne thought, as they wheeled it out. Sweetrobin loved lemon cakes too, but only after she told him that they were her favorites. The cake had required every lemon in the Vale, but Petyr had promised that he would send to Dorne for more.

There were gifts as well, splendid gifts. Each of the competitors received a cloak of cloth-of-silver and a lapis brooch in the shape of a pair of falcon’s wings. Fine steel daggers were given to the brothers, fathers, and friends who had come to watch them tilt. For their mothers, sisters, and ladies fair there were bolts of silk and Myrish lace.

“Lord Nestor has an open hand,” Alayne heard Ser Edmund Breakstone say. “An open hand and a little finger,” Lady Waynwood replied, with a nod toward Petyr Baelish. Breakstone was not slow to take her meaning. The true source of this largesse was not Lord Nestor, but the Lord Protector.

When the last course had been served and cleared, the tables were lifted from their trestles to clear the floor for dancing, and musicians were brought in.

“Are there no singers?” asked Ben Coldwater.

“The little lord cannot abide them,” Ser Lymond Lynderly replied. “Not since Marillion.”

“Ah... that was the man who murdered Lady Lysa, yes?”

Alayne spoke up. “His singing pleased her greatly, and she showed him too much favor, perhaps. When she wed my father he went mad and pushed her out the Moon Door. Lord Robert has hated singing ever since. He is still fond of music, though.”

“As am I,” Coldwater said. Rising, he offered Alayne his hand. “Would you honor me with this dance, my lady?”

“You’re very kind,” she said, as he led her to the floor.

He was her first partner of the evening, but far from the last. Just as Petyr had promised, the young knights flocked around her, vying for her favor. After Ben came Andrew Tollett, handsome Ser Byron, red-nosed Ser Morgarth, and Ser Shadrach the Mad Mouse. Then Ser Albar Royce, Myranda’s stout dull brother and Lord Nestor’s heir. She danced with all three Sunderlands, none of whom had webs between their fingers, though she could not vouch for their toes. Uther Shett appeared to pay her slimy compliments as he trod upon her feet, but Ser Targon the Halfwild proved to be the soul of courtesy. After that Ser Roland Waynwood swept her up and made her laugh with mocking comments about half the other knights in the hall. His uncle Wallace took a turn as well and tried to do the same, but the words would not come. Alayne finally took pity on him and began to chatter happily, to spare him the embarrassment. When the dance was done she excused herself, and went back to her place to have a drink of wine.

And there he stood, Harry the Heir himself; tall, handsome, scowling. “Lady Alayne. May I partner you in this dance?”

She considered for a moment. “No. I don’t think so.”

Color rose to his cheeks. “I was unforgiveably rude to you in the yard. You must forgive me.”

“Must?” She tossed her hair, took a sip of wine, made him wait. “How can you forgive someone who is unforgiveably rude? Will you explain that to me, ser?”

Ser Harrold looked confused. “Please. One dance.”

*Charm him. Entrance him. Bewitch him.* “If you insist.”

He nodded, offered his arm, led her out onto the floor. As they waited for the music to resume, Alayne glanced at the dais, where Lord Robert sat staring at them. Please, she prayed, don’t let him start to twitch and shake. Not here. Not now. Maester Coleman would have made certain that he drank a strong dose of sweetmilk before the feast, but even so.

Then the musicians took up a tune, and she was dancing.

*Say something*, she urged herself. *You will never make Ser Harry love you if you don’t have the courage to talk him.* Should she tell him what a good dancer he was? *No, he’s probably heard that a dozen times tonight. Besides, Petyr said that I should not seem eager.* Instead she said, “I have heard that you are about to be a father.” It was not something most girls would say to their almost-betrothed, but she wanted to see if Ser Harrold would lie.

“For the second time. My daughter Alys is two years old.”

*Your bastard daughter Alys*, Alayne thought, but what she said was, “That one had a different mother, though.”

“Yes. Cissy was a pretty thing when I tumbled her, but childbirth left her as fat as a cow, so Lady Anya arranged for her to marry one of her men-at-arms. It is different with Saffron.”

“Saffron?” Alayne tried not to laugh. “Truly?”

Ser Harrold had the grace to blush. “Her father says she is more precious to him than gold. He’s rich, the richest man in Gulltown. A fortune in spices.”

“What will you name the babe?” she asked. “Cinnamon if she’s a girl? Cloves if he’s a boy?”

That almost made him stumble. “My lady japes.”

“Oh, no.” Petyr will howl when I tell him what I said.

“Saffron is very beautiful, I’ll have you know. Tall and slim, with big brown eyes and hair like honey.”

Alayne raised her head. “More beautiful than me?”

Ser Harrold studied her face. “You are comely enough, I grant you. When Lady Anya first told me of this match, I was afraid that you might look like your father.”

“Little pointy beard and all?” Alayne laughed.

“I never meant ...”

“I hope you joust better than you talk.”

For a moment he looked shocked. But as the song was ending, he burst into a laugh. “No one told me you were clever.”

*He has good teeth, she thought, straight and white. And when he smiles, he has the nicest dimples.* She ran one finger down his cheek. “Should we ever wed, you’ll have to send Saffron back to her father. I’ll be all the spice you’ll want.”

He grinned. “I will hold you to that promise, my lady. Until that day, may I wear your favor in the tourney?”

“You may not. It is promised to ... another.” She was not sure who as yet, but she knew she would find someone.





## ARIANNE

**O**n the morning that she left the Water Gardens, her father rose from his chair to kiss her on both cheeks. “The fate of Dorne goes with you, daughter,” he said, as he pressed the parchment into her hand. “Go swiftly, go safely, be my eyes and ears and voice ... but most of all, take care.”

“I will, Father.” She did not shed a tear. Arianne Martell was a princess of Dorne, and Dornishmen did not waste water lightly. It was a near thing, though. It was not her father’s kisses nor his hoarse words that made her eyes glisten, but the effort that brought him to his feet, his legs trembling under him, his joints swollen and inflamed with gout. Standing was an act of love. Standing was an act of faith.

*He believes in me. I will not fail him.*

Seven of them set out together on seven Dornish sand steeds. A small party travels more swiftly than a large one, but the heir to Dorne does not ride alone. From Godsgrace came Ser Daemon Sand, the bastard; once Prince Oberyn’s squire, now Arianne’s sworn shield. From Sunspear two bold young knights, Joss Hood and Garibald Shells, to lend their swords to his. From the Water Gardens seven ravens and a tall young lad to tend them. His name was Nate, but he had been working with the birds so long that no one called him anything but Feathers.

And since a princess must have some women to attend her, her company also included pretty Jayne Ladybright and wild Elia Sand, a maid of ten-and-four.

They struck out north by northwest, across drylands and parched plains and pale sands toward Ghost Hill, the stronghold of House Toland, where the ship that would take them across the Sea of Dorne awaited them. "Send a raven whenever you have news," Prince Doran told her, "but report only what you know to be true. We are lost in fog here, besieged by rumors, falsehoods, and traveler's tales. I dare not act until I know for a certainty what is happening."

*War is happening, thought Arianne, and this time Dorne will not be spared.* "Doom and death are coming," Ellaria Sand had warned them, before she took her own leave from Prince Doran. "It is time for my little snakes to scatter, the better to survive the carnage." Ellaria was returning to her father's seat at Hellholt. With her went her daughter Loreza, who had just turned seven. Dorea remained at the Water Gardens, one child amongst a hundred. Obella was to be dispatched to Sunspear, to serve as a cupbearer to the wife of the castellan, Manfrey Martell.

And Elia Sand, oldest of the four girls that Prince Oberyn had fathered on Ellaria, would cross the Sea of Dorne with Arianne. "As a lady, not a lance," her mother said firmly, but like all the Sand Snakes, Elia had her own mind.

They crossed the sands in two long days and the better part of two nights, stopping thrice to change their horses. It was a lonely time for Arianne, surrounded by so many strangers. Elia was her cousin, but half a child, and Daemon Sand ... things had never been the same between her and the Bastard of Godsgrace after her father refused his offer for her hand. *He was a boy then, and bastard born, no fit consort for a princess of Dorne, he should have known better. And it was my father's will, not mine.* The rest of her companions she hardly knew at all.

Arianne missed her friends. Drey and Garin and her sweet Spotted Sylva had been a part of her since she was little, trusted confidants who had shared her dreams and secrets, cheered her when she was sad, helped her face her fears. One of them had betrayed her, but she missed them all the same. *It was my own fault.* Arianne had made them part of her plot to steal off with Myrcella Baratheon and crown her queen, an act of rebellion meant to force her father's hand, but

someone's loose tongue had undone her. The clumsy conspiracy had accomplished nothing, except to cost poor Myrcella part of her face, and Ser Arys Oakheart his life.

Arianne missed Ser Arys too, more than she ever would have thought. *He loved me madly, she told herself, yet I was never more than fond of him. I made use of him in my bed and in my plot, took his love and took his honor, gave him nothing but my body. In the end he could not live with what we'd done.* Why else would her white knight have charged right into Areo Hotah's longaxe, to die the way he did? *I was a foolish willful girl, playing at the game of thrones like a drunkard rolling dice.*

The cost of her folly had been dear. Drey had been sent across the world to Norvos, Garin exiled to Tyrosh for two years, her sweet silly smiling Sylva married off to Eldon Estermont, a man old enough to be her grandsire. Ser Arys had paid with his life's blood, Myrcella with an ear.

Only Ser Gerold Dayne had escaped unscathed. *Darkstar.* If Myrcella's horse had not shied at the last instant, his longsword would have opened her from chest to waist instead just taking off her ear. Dayne was her most grievous sin, the one that Arianne most regretted. With one stroke of his sword, he had changed her botched plot into something foul and bloody. If the gods were good, by now Obara Sand had treed him in his mountain fastness and put an end to him.

She said as much to Daemon Sand that first night, as they made camp. "Be careful what you pray for, princess," he replied. "Darkstar could put an end to Lady Obara just as easily."

"She has Areo Hotah with her." Prince Doran's captain of guards had dispatched Ser Arys Oakheart with a single blow, though the Kingsguard were supposed to be the finest knights in all the realm. "No man can stand against Hotah."

"Is that what Darkstar is? A man?" Ser Daemon grimaced. "A man would not have done what he did to Princess Myrcella. Ser Gerold is more a viper than your uncle ever was. Prince Oberyne could see that he was poison, he said so more than once. It's just a pity that he never got around to killing him."

*Poison*, thought Arianne. *Yes*. Pretty poison, though. That was how he'd fooled her. Gerold Dayne was hard and cruel, but so fair to look upon that the princess had not believed half the tales she'd heard of him. Pretty boys had ever been her weakness, particularly the ones who were dark and dangerous as well. *That was before, when I was just a girl*, she told herself. *I am a woman now, my father's daughter. I have learned that lesson.*

Come break of day, they were off again. Elia Sand led the way, her black braid flying behind her as she raced across the dry, cracked plains and up into the hills. The girl was mad for horses, which might be why she often smelled like one, to the despair of her mother. Sometimes Arianne felt sorry for Ellaria. Four girls, and every one of them her father's daughter.

The rest of the party kept a more sedate pace. The princess found herself riding beside Ser Daemon, remembering other rides when they were younger, rides that often ended in embraces. When she found herself stealing glances at him, tall and gallant in the saddle, Arianne reminded herself that she was heir to Dorne, and him no more than her shield. "Tell me what you know of this Jon Connington," she commanded.

"He's dead," said Daemon Sand. "He died in the Disputed Lands. Of drink, I've heard it said."

"So a dead drunk leads this army?"

"Perhaps this Jon Connington is a son of that one. Or just some clever sellsword who has taken on a dead man's name."

"Or he never died at all." Could Connington have been pretending to be dead for all these years? That would require patience worthy of her father. The thought made Arianne uneasy. Treating with a man that subtle could be perilous. "What was he like before he ... before he died?"

"I was a boy at Godsgrace when he was sent into exile. I never knew the man."

"Then tell me what you've heard of him from others."

"As my princess commands. Connington was Lord of Griffin's Roost when Griffin's Roost was still a lordship worth the having. Prince Rhaegar's squire, or one of them. Later Prince Rhaegar's friend and companion. The Mad King named him Hand during Robert's Rebellion, but he was defeated at Stoney Sept

in the Battle of the Bells, and Robert slipped away. King Aerys was wroth, and sent Connington into exile. There he died.”

“Or not.” Prince Doran had told her all of that. *There must be more.* “Those are just the things he did. I know all that. What sort of man was he? Honest and honorable, venal and grasping, proud?”

“Proud, for a certainty. Even arrogant. A faithful friend to Rhaegar, but prickly with others. Robert was his liege, but I’ve heard it said that Connington chafed at serving such a lord. Even then, Robert was known to be fond of wine and whores.”

“No whores for Lord Jon, then?”

“I could not say. Some men keep their whoring secret.”

“Did he have a wife? A paramour?”

Ser Daemon shrugged. “Not that I have ever heard.”

That was troubling too. Ser Arys Oakheart had broken his vows for her, but it did not sound as if Jon Connington could be similarly swayed. *Can I match such a man with words alone?*

The princess lapsed into silence, all the while pondering what she would find at journey’s end. That night when they made camp, she crept into the tent she shared with Jayne Ladybright and Elia Sand and slipped the bit of parchment out of her sleeve to read the words again.

*To Prince Doran of House Martell,  
You will remember me, I pray. I knew your sister well,  
and was a leal servant of your good-brother. I grieve  
for them as you do. I did not die, no more than did  
your sister’s son. To save his life we kept him hidden,  
but the time for hiding is done. A dragon has returned  
to Westeros to claim his birthright and seek vengeance  
for his father, and for the princess Elia, his mother.  
In her name I turn to Dorne. Do not forsake us.*

*Jon Connington  
Lord of Griffin’s Roost  
Hand of the True King*

Arianne read the letter thrice, then rolled it up and tucked it back into her sleeve. *A dragon has returned to Westeros, but not the dragon my father was expecting.* Nowhere in the words was there a mention of Daenerys Stormborn ... nor of Prince Quentyn, her brother, who had been sent to seek the dragon queen. The princess remembered how her father had pressed the onyx *cyvasse* piece into her palm, his voice hoarse and low as he confessed his plan. *A long and perilous voyage, with an uncertain welcome at its end,* he had said. *He has gone to bring us back our heart's desire. Vengeance. Justice. Fire and blood.*

Fire and blood was what Jon Connington (if indeed it was him) was offering as well. Or was it? “He comes with sellswords, but no dragons,” Prince Doran had told her, the night the raven came. “The Golden Company is the best and largest of the free companies, but ten thousand mercenaries cannot hope to win the Seven Kingdoms. Elia’s son ... I would weep for joy if some part of my sister had survived, but what proof do we have that this is Aegon?” His voice broke when he said that. “Where are the dragons?” he asked. “Where is Daenerys?” and Arianne knew that he was really saying, “Where is my son?”

In the Boneway and the Prince’s Pass, two Dornish hosts had massed, and there they sat, sharpening their spears, polishing their armor, dicing, drinking, quarreling, their numbers dwindling by the day, waiting, waiting, waiting for the Prince of Dorne to loose them on the enemies of House Martell. *Waiting for the dragons. For fire and blood. For me.* One word from Arianne and those armies would march ... so long as that word was *dragon*. If instead the word she sent was *war*, Lord Yronwood and Lord Fowler and their armies would remain in place. The Prince of Dorne was nothing if not subtle; here *war* meant *wait*.

At mid-morning on the third day Ghost Hill loomed up before them, its chalk-white walls shining against the deep blue of the Sea of Dorne. From the square towers at the castle’s corners flew the banners of House Toland; a green dragon biting its own tail, upon a golden field. The sun-and-spear of House Martell streamed atop the great central keep, gold and red and orange, defiant.

Ravens had flown ahead to warn Lady Toland of their coming, so the castle gates were open, and Nymella’s eldest daughter rode forth with her steward to

meet them near the bottom of the hill. Tall and fierce, with a blaze of bright red hair tumbling about her shoulders, Valena Toland greeted Arianne with a shout of, "Come at last, have you? How slow are those horses?"

"Swift enough to outrun yours to the castle gates."

"We will see about that." Valena wheeled her big red around and put her heels into him, and the race was on, through the dusty lanes of the village at the bottom of the hill, as chickens and villagers alike scrambled out of their path. Arianne was three horse lengths behind by the time she got her mare up to a gallop, but had closed to one halfway up the slope. The two of them were side-by-side as they thundered towards the gatehouse, but five yards from the gates Elia Sand came flying from the cloud of dust behind them to rush past both of them on her black filly.

"Are you half horse, child?" Valena asked, laughing, in the yard. "Princess, did you bring a stable girl?"

"I'm Elia," the girl announced. "Lady Lance."

*Whoever hung that name on her has much to answer for.* Like as not it had been Prince Obery, though, and the Red Viper had never answered to anyone but himself.

"The girl jouser," Valena said. "Yes, I've heard of you. Since you were the first to the yard, you've won the honor of watering and bridling the horses."

"And after that find the bath house," said Princess Arianne. Elia was chalk and dust from heels to hair.

That night Arianne and her knights supped with Lady Nymella and her daughters in the great hall of the castle. Teora, the younger girl, had the same red hair as her sister, but otherwise could not have been more different. Short, plump, and so shy she might have passed for a mute, she displayed more interest in the spiced beef and honeyed duck than in the comely young knights at the table, and seemed content to let her lady mother and her sister speak for House Toland.

"We have heard the same tales here that you have heard at Sunspear," Lady Nymella told them as her serving man poured the wine. "Sellswords landing on Cape Wrath, castles under siege or being taken, crops seized or burned. Where these men come from and who they are, no one is certain."

“Pirates and adventurers, we heard at first,” said Valena. “Then it was supposed to be the Golden Company. Now it’s said to be Jon Connington, the Mad King’s Hand, come back from the grave to reclaim his birthright. Whoever it is, Griffin’s Roost has fallen to them. Rain House, Crow’s Nest, Mistwood, even Greenstone on its island. All taken.”

Arianne’s thoughts went at once to her sweet Spotted Sylva. “Who would want Greenstone? Was there a battle?”

“Not as we have heard, but all the tales are garbled.”

“Tarth has fallen too, some fisherfolk will tell you,” said Valena. “These sellswords now hold most of Cape Wrath and half the Stepstones. We hear talk of elephants in the rainwood.”

“Elephants?” Arianne did not know what to think of that. “Are you certain? Not dragons?”

“Elephants,” Lady Nymella said firmly.

“And krakens off the Broken Arm, pulling under crippled galleys,” said Valena. “The blood draws them to the surface, our maester claims. There are bodies in the water. A few have washed up on our shores. And that’s not half of it. A new pirate king has set up on Torturer’s Deep. The Lord of the Waters, he styles himself. This one has real warships, three-deckers, monstrous large. You were wise not to come by sea. Since the Redwyne fleet passed through the Stepstones, those waters are crawling with strange sails, all the way north to the Straights of Tarth and Shipbreaker’s Bay. Myrmen, Volantenes, Lyseni, even reavers from the Iron Islands. Some have entered the Sea of Dorne to land men on the south shore of Cape Wrath. We found a good fast ship for you, as your father commanded, but even so ... be careful.”

*It is true, then.* Arianne wanted to ask after her brother, but her father had urged her to watch every word. If these ships had not brought Quentyn home again with his dragon queen, best not to mention him. Only her father and a few of his most trusted men knew about her brother’s mission to Slaver’s Bay. Lady Toland and her daughters were not amongst them. If it were Quentyn, he would have brought Daenerys back to Dorne, surely. Why would he risk a landing on Cape Wrath, amongst the stormlords?



“Is Dorne at risk?” Lady Nymella asked. “I confess, each time I see a strange sail my heart leaps to my throat. What if these ships turn south? The best part of the Toland strength is with Lord Yronwood in the Boneway. Who will defend Ghost Hill if these strangers land upon our shores? Should I call my men home?”

“Your men are needed where they are, my lady,” Daemon Sand assured her. Arianne was quick to nod. Any other counsel could well lead to Lord Yronwood’s host unravelling like an old tapestry as each man rushed home to defend his own lands against supposed enemies who might or might not ever come. “Once we know beyond a doubt whether these be friends or foes, my father will know what to do,” the princess said.

It was then that pasty, pudgy Teora raised her eyes from the creamcakes on her plate. “It is dragons.”

“Dragons?” said her mother. “Teora, don’t be mad.”

“I’m not. They’re coming.”

“How could you possibly know that?” her sister asked, with a note of scorn in her voice. “One of your little dreams?”

Teora gave a tiny nod, chin trembling. “They were dancing. In my dream. And everywhere the dragons danced the people died.”

“Seven save us.” Lady Nymella gave an exasperated sigh. “If you did not eat so many creamcakes you would not have such dreams. Rich foods are not for girls your age, when your humors are so unbalanced. Maester Toman says—”

“I *hate* Maester Toman,” Teora said. Then she bolted from the table, leaving her lady mother to make apologies for her.

“Be gentle with her, my lady,” Arianne said. “I remember when I was her age. My father despaired of me, I’m sure.”

“I can attest to that.” Ser Daemon took a sip of wine and said, “House Toland has a dragon on its banners.”

“A dragon eating its own tail, aye,” Valena said. “From the days of Aegon’s Conquest. He did not conquer here. Elsewhere he burned his foes, him and his sisters, but here we melted away before them, leaving only stone and sand for them to burn. And round and round the dragons went, snapping at their tails for want of any other food, till they were tied in knots.”

“Our forebears played their part in that,” Lady Nymella said proudly. “Bold deeds were done, and brave men died. All of it was written down by the maesters who served us. We have books, if my princess would like to know more.”

“Some other time, perhaps,” said Arianne.

As Ghost Hill slept that night, the princess donned a hooded cloak against the chill and walked the castle battlements to clear her thoughts. Daemon Sand found her leaning on a parapet and gazing out to sea, where the moon was dancing on the water. “Princess,” he said. “You ought to be abed.”

“I could say the same of you.” Arianne turned to gaze upon his face. A good face, she decided. *The boy I knew has become a handsome man.* His eyes were as blue as a desert sky, his hair the light brown of the sands they had just crossed. A close-cropped beard followed the thin of a strong jaw, but could not quite hide the dimples when he smiled. *I always loved his smile.*

The Bastard of Godsgrace was one of Dorne’s finest swords as well, as might be expected from one who had been Prince Oberyn’s squire and had received his knighthood from the Red Viper himself. Some said that he had been her uncle’s lover too, though seldom to his face. Arianne did not know the truth of that. He had been *her* lover, though. At fourteen she had given him her maidenhead. Daemon had not been much older, so their couplings had been as clumsy as they were ardent. Still, it had been sweet. Arianne gave him her most seductive smile. “We might share a bed together.”

Ser Daemon’s face was stone. “Have you forgotten, princess? I am bastard born.” He took her hand in his. “If I am unworthy of this hand, how can I be worthy of your cunt?”

She snatched her hand away. “You deserve a slap for that.”

“My face is yours. Do what you will.”

“What I will you will not, it seems. So be it. Talk with me instead. Could this truly be Prince Aegon?”

“Gregor Clegane ripped Aegon out of Elia’s arms and smashed his head against a wall,” Ser Daemon said. “If Lord Connington’s prince has a crushed skull, I will believe that Aegon Targaryen has returned from the grave. Elsewise, no. This is some feigned boy, no more. A sellsword’s ploy to win support.”

*My father fears the same.* “If not, though ... if this truly is Jon Connington, if the boy is Rhaegar’s son ...”

“Are you hoping that he is, or that he’s not?”

“I ... it would give great joy to my father if Elia’s son were still alive. He loved his sister well.”

“It was you I asked about, not your father.”

*So it was.* “I was seven when Elia died. They say I held her daughter Rhaenys once, when I was too young to remember. Aegon will be a stranger to me, whether true or false.” The princess paused. “We looked for Rhaegar’s sister, not his son.” Her father had confided in Ser Daemon when he chose him as his daughter’s shield; with him at least she could speak freely. “I would sooner it were Quentyn who’d returned.”

“Or so you say,” said Daemon Sand. “Good night, princess.” He bowed to her, and left her standing there.

*What did he mean by that?* Arianne watched him walk away. *What sort of sister would I be, if I did not want my brother back?* It was true, she had resented Quentyn for all those years that she had thought their father meant to name him as his heir in place of her, but that had turned out to be just a misunderstanding. She was the heir to Dorne, she had her father’s word on that. Quentyn would have his dragon queen, Daenerys.

In Sunspear hung a portrait of the Princess Daenerys who had come to Dorne to marry one of Arianne’s forebears. In her younger days Arianne had spent hours gazing at it, back when she was just a pudgy flat-chested girl on the cusp of maidenhood who prayed every night for the gods to make her pretty. *A hundred years ago, Daenerys Targaryen came to Dorne to make a peace. Now another comes to make a war, and my brother will be her king and consort. King Quentyn. Why did that sound so silly?*

Almost as silly as Quentyn riding on a dragon. Her brother was an earnest boy, well-behaved and dutiful, but dull. And plain, so plain. The gods had given Arianne the beauty she had prayed for, but Quentyn must have prayed for something else. His head was overlarge and sort of square, his hair the color of

dried mud. His shoulders slumped as well, and he was too thick about the middle. *He looks too much like Father.*

“I love my brother,” said Arianne, though only the moon could hear her. Though if truth be told, she scarcely knew him. Quentyn had been fostered by Lord Anders of House Yronwood, the Bloodroyal, the son of Lord Ormond Yronwood and grandson of Lord Edgar. In his youth her uncle Oberyn had fought a duel with Edgar, had given him a wound that mortified and killed him. Afterward men called him ‘the Red Viper,’ and spoke of poison on his blade. The Yronwoods were an ancient house, proud and powerful. Before the coming of the Rhoynar they had been kings over half of Dorne, with domains that dwarfed those of House Martell. Blood feud and rebellion would surely have followed Lord Edgar’s death, had not her father acted at once. The Red Viper went to Oldtown, thence across to the narrow sea to Lys, though none dared call it exile. And in due time, Quentyn was given to Lord Anders to foster as a sign of trust.

That helped to heal the breach between Sunspear and the Yronwoods, but it had opened new ones between Quentyn and the Sand Snakes ... and Arianne had always been closer to her cousins than to her distant brother.

“We are still the same blood, though,” she whispered. “Of course I want my brother home. I do.” The wind off the sea was raising gooseprickles all up and down her arms. Arianne pulled her cloak about herself, and went off to seek her bed.

Their ship was called the *Peregrine*. They sailed upon the morning tide. The gods were good to them, the sea calm. Even with good winds, the crossing took a day and a night. Jayne Ladybright grew greensick and spent most of the voyage spewing, which Elia Sand seemed to find hilarious.

“Someone needs to spank that child,” Joss Hood was heard to say ... but Elia was amongst those who heard him say it.

“I am almost a woman grown, ser,” she responded haughtily. “I’ll let you spank me, though ... but first you’ll need to tilt with me, and knock me off my horse.”

“We are on a ship, and without horses,” Joss replied.

“And ladies do not joust,” insisted Ser Garibald Shells, a far more serious and proper young man than his companion.

“I do. I’m Lady Lance.”

Arianne had heard enough. “You may be a lance, but you are no lady. Go below and stay there till we reach land.”

Elsewise the crossing was uneventful. At dusk they spied a galley in the distance, her oars rising and falling against the evening stars, but she was moving away from them, and soon dwindled and was gone. Arianne played a game of *cyvasse* with Ser Daemon, and another one with Garibald Shells, and somehow managed to lose both. Ser Garibald was kind enough to say that she played a gallant game, but Daemon mocked her. “You have other pieces beside the dragon, princess. Try moving them sometime.”

“I like the dragon.” She wanted to slap the smile off his face. Or kiss it off, perhaps. The man was as smug as he was comely. *Of all the knights in Dorne, why did my father chose this one to be my shield? He knows our history.* “It is just a game. Tell me of Prince Viserys.”

“The Beggar King?” Ser Daemon seemed surprised.

“Everyone says that Prince Rhaegar was beautiful. Was Viserys beautiful as well?”

“I suppose. He was Targaryen. I never saw the man.”

The secret pact that Prince Doran had made all those years called for Arianne to be wed to Prince Viserys, not Quentyn to Daenerys. It had all come undone on the Dothraki sea, when he was murdered. *Crowned with a pot of molten gold.* “He was killed by a Dothraki khal,” said Arianne. “The dragon queen’s own husband.”

“So I’ve heard. What of it?”

“Just ... why did Daenerys let it happen? Viserys was her brother. All that remained of her own blood.”

“The Dothraki are a savage folk. Who can know why they kill? Perhaps Viserys wiped his arse with the wrong hand.”

*Perhaps, thought Arianne, or perhaps Daenerys realized that once her brother was crowned and wed to me, she would be doomed to spend the rest of her life sleeping in a tent and smelling like a horse.* “She is the Mad King’s daughter,” the princess said. “How do we do know—”

“We cannot know,” Ser Daemon said. “We can only hope.”



## THE PRINCE'S JUSTICE

**T**he sword hurled toward Areo Hotah. The captain raised his own blade to parry. The sound of crashing steel rang out through the crowd, a circle of a hundred men and one Sand Snake. Hotah breathed hard and tasted sulfur in the air. Torches lit the sands before them, and Hotah was careful to keep his eyes off the flames. His opponent, Ser Balon Swann, wore a halfhelm, a breastplate, and, as always, a white cloak. The knight looked at ease as he slashed again and again at the captain. Hotah dodged and blocked with his shield. He was unnerved by what he felt. *Exhaustion.*

Hotah's heart beat faster, his arms aching. Martell spearmen parted as he retreated from Balon's blows. The captain searched for an opening to strike, but the Kingsguard gave him nothing. Then Hotah stepped left when he should have pivoted right and he knew at once that he was caught. As the knight's sword drew close, Hotah put his weight behind a last, desperate counter, but he struck only air. *A feint, though he had his opening. A wary, disciplined fighter.* Then Ser Balon slammed his steel against the captain's copper scales and the sands rushed up to meet Hotah's cheek.

Lannister men cheered over Martell groans. Hotah lifted his face from the ground and leaned on his hip. Ser Balon tossed his practice blade to one squire as another took his shield. Then he walked up to Hotah and offered his open palm. The onlookers went silent.

“A fine spar, Captain,” Balon said, his forehead covered with sweat. “You fight well.”

*I was slow.* Hotah cleared his throat. “You fought better.” He noted the knight’s brow. *It’s as it was in Sunspear.* He took the knight’s hand and pulled himself up; even so, effort brought him to his feet. “Thank you, ser.”

Murmuring began and Hotah sensed relief washing over the crowd. It had been Ser Balon’s idea to spar for the men, thinking it would lift their spirits. Obara Sand had pushed the party across the desert from the Greenblood at a brutal pace with no thought to their bearing. Four sand steeds had died on the journey, and when they had finally reached the Brimstone, they found they had ridden too far south: it had cost them a full day to follow the yellow river north to the Hellholt. Hotah wondered again why Prince Doran had selected Obara to lead the mission. He sought her viper eyes now without finding them. *She stomped off when I fell.*

With a smile, Ser Ulwyck Uller approached Hotah. The heir to the Hellholt stood shorter than the captain, but had a bigger belly by half. “I’ve got a dragon on you, Captain.”

“A dragon, ser?” Hotah’s voice was a low grumble as he brushed the sand from his copper scales. “Did you lose a wager?”

“No,” Ulwyck scoffed, “but I’m less confident than before.” He punched Hotah’s chest. “Against my lord brother, I bet that *you* would deal the killing blow to that fiend, Darkstar. My brother predicted it would be Ser Balon. Lady Obara bet on herself.” He let out a chortle. “Don’t let me down, Captain.”

“We need a blunted axe. The sword is clearly not his weapon,” said Lord Morros Slynt, a squire of Ser Balon. Morros was nine-and-ten, but his skills placed him far from knighthood. “You are from Pentos, yes?”

“Norvos,” Hotah said.

“Norvos?” asked Danos Slynt, a squire of one-and-ten. “Where’s that?”

A third squire, Jothos, elbowed his younger brother. "It's one of the Free Cities, you dolt! On the Rhoyme!"

"The Noyne," Hotah corrected.

Danos made an ugly face. "The *Noyne*? What a stupid name for a river!" Then he giggled. "I am King Tommen, King of the Andals, the *Noynar*, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms!" "Quiet," commanded Morros. His frog-face looked uneasy at the mention of Tommen amongst

Dornishmen. "You are lord of nothing."

"*You* are a lord, I hear," Ser Ulwyck said to Morros. "Should we call you Lord Squire?"

Morros stood up straight. "I am Lord of Chyttering, ser, and the former heir to Harrenhal. I have not yet been seated, but we have been told our lands will be taken back soon. Lord Randyll will crush what's left of Stannis's forces while the would-be usurper rots on the Wall."

Ser Ulwyck smiled. "Yes, I am certain. A Lannister always pay his debts ... or her debts. Tell me again, who is it that rots on the Wall?"

The young man's face flushed with anger, but Ser Balon intervened before the squire said anything more. "Ser Ulwyck, your lord brother offered a tour of your cellars. We would like to ... pay our respects."

"The dungeons, you mean. To be sure."

The hour of the owl came and the party convened by the gates of the Hellholt. They were greeted by Ser Ulwyck, Lord Harmen and four Uller guards. Ser Balon was accompanied by his knights Ser Tanton, Ser Merlon, and Ser Timon. Of the Dornishmen, the Knight of Lemonwood and Lady Obara had come. Everyone in the party was armed, including Areo Hotah. He felt whole again with his ash-and-iron wife by his side.

"Obara? I am surprised to see you here," said Lord Harmen. "You have seen the bones a dozen times."

Obara looked sideways at Ser Balon and his knights. "I never miss a chance to revel over the fallen enemies of Dorne."

Hotah knew the truth of it, though. Prince Doran had ordered her to keep the white knight close. She was the prince's eyes, his ears, his voice. Everything Ser



Balon said and everything he knew, Obara was to report back to Doran each opportunity she got. Just two hours prior, Hotah had seen a raven fly from the Hellholt. What the prince had not mentioned to Obara was that he had given the same orders to Hotah, just before dispatching him to High Hermitage as the Prince's Justice. *Serve. Obey, Protect.*

Inside the castle, fragrant candles covered the miasma of the nearby river. Hellholt guards stared forward, stationed every few feet along the entry hall; they wore yellow and crimson plate and wielded spears with shafts painted red. Hotah followed behind the rest of the party and watched. Ser Tanton polished the apple pommel of his sword with his thumb. Tall Ser Merlon Crakehall kept his eyes on the archways above to avoid hitting his head. Ser Deziel Dalt had a dagger hidden in his jerkin and a second in his boot. Obara Sand gripped her spear as if she were strangling it.

Ser Timon was the queerest of the bunch. The knight was lean and light on his feet, with a mop of blond hair. He was never without a smile, and he stopped to nod at each Uller guard in turn. Timon kept his hand off his sword hilt, allowing his blade to swing and rattle loudly inside an ornate metal scabbard from Myr. Hotah had heard others call the knight the Scrapesword for the sound his sword made when he unsheathed it. *This one is a distraction*, the captain thought.

Ser Balon Swann was the one Hotah needed to watch. The knight was at the front of the party, speaking with Lord Uller. From the rear, all Hotah could see was Ser Balon's white wool cloak. Unlike Ser Arys, Balon never went without it. The sight of it riled the Dornish, Hotah knew, and Obara most of all. Yet the brooch of quarreling swans that clasped it at his neck was as fixed as a black-and-white tattoo.

The passage they walked emptied into the great hall, filled with a hundred trestle tables. On the walls, vibrant tapestries depicted the Dornish wars, the Andal founding of the Hellholt, and the fiery event that gave the castle its name—when the ancient Lord Uller had invited his foes to feast with him in the name of peace, only to lock them in his hall and burn them alive.

“The Ullers have a proud and beautiful history.” Lord Harmen’s eyes were bright with mockery as he gestured to an image of banquet guests engulfed in flame. *Some of those guests had been children.*

Tanton Fossoway looked pale, while Ser Merlon and Ser Timon exchanged a look. *Half of the Ullers are half mad, the captain thought. The other half are worse.* It was difficult to imagine that the gentle Ellaria had been raised here.

“These are fine tapestries, my lord,” Ser Balon said in a courteous tone. “We are honored that you share them with us.”

“You want to see dead dragons,” said Lord Harmen. It was not a question.

The party was escorted down another corridor to a narrow passageway revealing stairs. It was a steep descent, and they went one at a time. An Uller guard led the way, followed by Lord Harmen, his brother, a second guard, then Ser Balon and his knights. A third guard went in front of Hotah, with the Knight of Lemonwood, Obara, and a fourth guard coming after. *A bad place for a battle, Hotah thought. My axe has little room.*

“This is the oldest part of the castle,” called out Ser Ulwyck as they made their way down. “These dungeons kept House Uller safe from the fires of history.”

The thirteen reached the underground hall and a guard waved a torch to illuminate the way. The damp stone walls were flecked with nitre and lined with casks of wine. There was enough Dornish red to keep the castle drunk for years.

“These prisoners should be freed,” japed the Scrapesword, as he and Ser Tanton examined the vintages written on the casks. “Ten years old, from the Torentine Valley. Older than our princess.”

Ser Timon’s comment struck Hotah as odd. *Older than Myrcella?*

“That’s Dayne wine,” said Obara Sand. “Darkstar is likely in his cups on that same swill.”

“The wine of Lemonwood is vastly superior,” said Ser Deziel. “Its flavor lingers on the tongue, full and rich, free of deceit.”

“The cider of the Cockleswhent is the finest drink in the Seven Kingdoms,” countered Ser Tanton. “After I slay the rogue Ser Gerold in single combat, I will buy each of you a barrel.”

Obara and Ser Deziel stared at Ser Tanton blankly. Ser Timon snorted back laughter. “Shall we continue?” Lord Harmen called back to the stragglers.

After passing several empty cells, the party came to the Hall of Bones. Ser Balon and his knights gaped in wonder.

Ser Ulwyck took in their faces with a dry chuckle. “This is the very reason I bring my paramours here.”

Encased in jagged sheets of milky glass, the sun-mottled bones of a monstrous beast stretched the length of the hall.

“It’s true then.” Ser Balon tiptoed toward the ancient skeleton as if it were alive and hungry. “They say Meraxes could swallow a horse whole. Only the Black Dread surpassed Meraxes in size.” The knight touched the milky glass.

“That glass is said to be from the Dragon’s Wroth,” explained Ulwyck Uller. “Aegon and Visenya flew down to the Hellholt and scorched its sands from horizon to horizon, fusing glass with the bones of the fallen mount.”

Hotah watched Balon’s eyes as they followed from dragon tail to dragon neck. The bones and glass had been raised and supported with thin iron bars to return Meraxes to her shape in life.

“The dragon is missing a head,” observed Ser Merlon.

“The Dornish cleaned the skull of glass and carried it to King’s Landing long ago,” said Lord Harmen. “It was a gift of peace.”

“I would have kept it,” said the Scrapesword. “Send a whale skull in its place.”

“A whale skull isn’t big enough,” objected the Knight of Lemonwood. “And, as you can see, dragonbone is black.”

“The First Dornish War raged on for years,” recited Lord Harmen. “There was scarce more difficult a time in our history. Meraxes rained hellfire upon Lord Uthor’s smallfolk, his towers, his ships. Scorpions lined the walls and dotted every tower, but no one expected they would truly kill a dragon. We all believed the dragons invincible—Valyrian gods—and so we aimed at the riders. Danlai was naught but a tailor, thrust onto the scorpions when the dragons came south. Atop the tallest tower in the castle, he aimed for Queen Rhaenys, but his iron bolt missed. It was the most glorious failure in the history of all Dorne, as his bolt hit not the dragonrider, but the dragon’s eye.”

“The eye, my lord?” asked Ser Merlon Crakehall, turning. “I had heard the gullet.”

“I believe it was the ear,” pronounced Ser Tanton.

“Nonsense,” said Lord Harmen, annoyed. “The eye of Meraxes bled fire, all the tales agree. The shriek of a dying dragon had not been heard in Westeros since the days of Florian, and it was music to the ear. Meraxes flailed in the air, spit her pillars of flame, and crashed through the same tower she’d been shot from. Scores died just from the dragon’s fall, including Danlai Boltmaster—as men later named him.”

“They should have called him Boltnovice,” the Scrapesword whispered to Hotah. “He missed.”

The lord continued. “The dreaded beast broke through the castle wall on her way to the earth, where she let out one last bone-rattling song. None could say whether Meraxes crushed her in landing or whether she fell to her death beforehand, but Aegon’s favorite queen was never seen again.”

“Save for by Lord Uthor,” Ser Ulwyck added.

Ulwyck’s lord brother smiled. “That is but a story.”

“It’s a story I tell my paramours.”

“I am sorry, ser,” said Ser Merlon. “Are you saying that Rhaenys survived?”

“I will be clear,” Ser Ulwyck said. “Lord Uthor Uller loved Queen Rhaenys deeply ... and repeatedly ... in this very dungeon.”

The knights looked about their grim surroundings. There were no windows, no chairs, no benches, no beds. The stone walls had no sconces. Without the light the guards carried, they would be in utter darkness. Ser Tanton’s eyes went to a chain on the rear wall.

“Why the faces?” tutted Ulwyck Uller. “The silver bitch and her ilk killed thousands of innocents. Men, women, babes, burned alive ... and still people brood on her fate. You should not. Any maester will tell you that no one should love the dragon. Not the Rhoynar, not the Andals, not the First Men ... and not the Noynar neither.” He smiled at Hotah.

“Still,” Ser Deziel Dalt said stiffly. “If the story is true, Lord Uthor’s actions cannot be admired.”

“Lord Uthor faced justice for his crime in short order,” said Ser Ulwyck. “He was stabbed by a catspaw after King Aegon put a bounty on his head. One by one his trueborn sons were murdered, until his only kin was a bastard babe with purple eyes.”

Lord Harmen smiled at his guests apologetically. “Again, these are crib tales. My brother enjoys telling women we have Targaryen blood in us.”

“It would explain the madness,” snorted Obara.

The lord and his brother brushed off the insult with laughter. Then Lord Harmen regarded Obara coolly. “What do you think drew your father to my daughter Ellaria?”

“The same thing that drew him to my mother.”

“This has been a most generous tour, my lord,” interrupted Ser Balon, “but we must retire to our camp. We rise early to venture to Sandstone. We are most grateful for the water you have provided.”

Lord Harmen nodded. “Please let us know of anything else you may need.”

“There is one thing,” Ser Balon said. “Could your armory spare a blunted axe?”

That night Hotah dreamed of a bearded dragon, though he woke before he could be burned.

The next morning, Lady Obara was ready to depart, but the Scrapesword was missing.

“Is he at the sept again?” she growled. The same had happened at Vaith and Godsgrace before. “The pious fool.”

Hotah had spent more than twenty years in Dorne, but still he understood neither the seven-faced god nor its followers. Knights were warriors of the gods and made solemn vows to them, not so different from his own. *Simple vows for simple men*. Yet each knight Hotah knew was a puzzle to him. Ser Balon Swann prayed each morning with Morros, Jothos, and Danos, yet Prince Doran had said the knight conspired to murder his son. Ser Tanton and Ser Merlon’s prayers were never more than cursory, but they appeared to be good men. Hotah had not seen Ser Timon pray at all, though the Scrapesword would go to sept to light candles at every opportunity.

*Oberyn was a knight*, the captain thought. *The Mountain was a knight. Darkstar is a knight.* Ser Timon returned in a short time, his scabbard rattling.

The white knight rode up beside him. "In the name of the Father?" asked Ser Balon.

Ser Timon shook his head. "In the name of the Warrior."

Obara Sand led the hundred westward across the Dornish desert. The gods were good and the desert sky was overcast: a welcome respite. They made good time, and Lady Obara allowed for ample rest to water the horses. *Learning from her mistakes.* During one rest, Ser Tanton sang about a girl named Meggett, with both Lannister and Martell men joining in. The water smelled of rotten eggs, but Hotah heard few complaints. The party marched through the afternoon and partway through the evening, then camped by a tall outcrop of sandstone.

Ser Balon Swann found him sharpening his longaxe. Their men did not need cheering tonight, so they crested an eroding hill to retreat from view. Without a word, the captain and the Kingsguard struck steel on steel. Ser Balon swung his practice blade with deft precision; Hotah twirled his dull longaxe with ease.

Balon's parries slowed as Hotah's axe descended from every direction. The captain swung with fury while wide-eyed Balon backed away with each deflection. Finally, Hotah managed to slide his axe along Balon's blade and push the sword aside. In one quick motion, Hotah held the rounded steel against Ser Balon's breast.

Balon Swann stared, then laughed. "Well done." They stepped away from one another, and Balon eyed his opponent. "It seems I have much to learn, though you should see me with my morningstar ... Tell me, how is it that the Prince of Dorne has a Norvoshi captain of guard?"

"I was his wife's guardsman," Hotah answered, catching his breath. "She returned for Norvos. I remained in Dorne."

"She returned? Why did you stay in the hot desert when your lady headed back home?"

Hotah swallowed. He did not like to think about Lady Mellario's return to Great Norvos. Dressed in a dark cloak over a jade dress, she had boarded *Rhaelle's Reverie* without her children, without her husband, without her guardsman. She

had proved a good woman and a better master. Many an evening he wondered how she fared back in Norvos.

Areo Hotah missed her.

*My little princess looks so much like her.*

“Lady Mellario commanded me to stay,” said Hotah. “I was to serve House Martell, obey the prince, protect her children.”

“In that order?” asked Ser Balon.

Hotah met his look. He remained silent.

“Forgive me,” said Ser Balon. “A bad jape.”

“How did you become a Kingsguard?” asked Hotah. He had little interest in Swann’s story, but it was polite to return the inquiry.

“From a young age, I knew I wanted to be a knight,” said Ser Balon, quickly taking up the change of subject. “I had little choice as a second son. My brother is not the open-handed sort. When he becomes lord, there is no place for me at Stonehelm. Do you have siblings?”

“Five,” said Hotah.

“Then perhaps you understand. My father had me trained to fight with sword and lance, and I was knighted at six-and-ten. But I was not yet a knight in truth.”

Hotah did not follow. “No?”

“At court, I knew a knight named Ser Preston Greenfield,” Ser Balon continued. “I did not like him. He was a dull man, a braggart, a philanderer, only adequate with the blade. I believed

myself a better man in every respect. Yet, the day that Myrcella sailed for Dorne, there was a riot. I fled for the safety of the Red Keep along with most of the royal procession. Ser Preston fought to protect the High Septon and lost his life.”

The captain nodded. *Protect. Obey. Serve.*

“Ser Preston had a code, and that is the code I want to live my life by. I remember every aspect of that day. Every face. Every scream. My own shame. Soon after, I was asked to replace Ser Preston on the Kingsguard.”

Hotah thought on Ser Balon’s words and saw Ser Arys Oakheart charging at him like a fool. *Who was he protecting?* He thought of Trystane and what Prince

Doran had said of Ser Balon. The sweat on the knight's brow at the Sunspear feast revealed his guilt. *These knights are riddles.*

They resumed their spar. "I did not know Myrcella very well," said the knight, "though I resided at court around her family for some time. I was distressed to hear of her injury; even more so to see it."

"Lady Nymeria will ensure she arrives safely in King's Landing," said Hotah.

"Not all those who accompanied Princess Myrcella to Dorne are returning with her, am I correct?"

"Whom do you mean?" Hotah replied between strikes. "Myrcella's cousin, if I recall, and her septa."

"Her handmaid." Hotah spun and threw his whole weight behind a downward slash. "Rosamund."

Ser Balon deflected and jumped back, sure-footed. "And Eglantine, yes. Did some ill fate befall them, as with Ser Arys?"

"Ser Gerold Dayne killed your white brother," Hotah lied, but with honesty he said, "I cannot say for sure where Rosamund or Eglantine are. I cannot say for sure that they did not return with Princess Myrcella."

"Did you ever meet a guard named Rolder?" asked Balon, lunging forward with a slash. "A man called Dake?"

Hotah blocked. "I attend Prince Doran at the Water Gardens. Myrcella was in Sunspear. I was not familiar with her shields."

"I rode for Dorne with a scrawled list of everyone who left King's Landing the day of the riot. I was wondering if you knew where they went."

Hotah shook his head. The dance of dull steel went on.

"You mentioned my brother in white. I wanted to ask, but forgot until now ... Where was Ser Arys's silk cloak?"

Areo Hotah nearly took a crack to the hip. "Silk cloak?" He remembered the blazing sun looking down on Ser Arys's body, at the end. He had no head, but he had a silk cloak. Red washed down the white.

"I was collecting Ser Arys's things when I noticed his ceremonial cloak was missing." Ser Balon's vigor swelled, and his slices came down twice as fast. His wool cloak billowed.



“That must have been what he wore when Darkstar slew him.” Hotah struggled to speak and parry at once.

“That’s what I assumed, but then I thought, ‘What was Ser Arys doing wearing his silken white cloak when Ser Gerold Dayne snuffed out his life’s fire?’ Was there perhaps some great ceremony concerning Princess Myrcella, or even Prince Doran, when the incident occurred?”

Hotah had no answers. Prince Doran was meant for weaving truths and lies into a believable tapestry, but Areo Hotah was naught but the watcher. “I do not know why he was wearing it.”

Ser Balon finally backed away and afforded Hotah a brief rest. “Well, surely you know what my brother was doing when Darkstar murdered him.”

Areo Hotah stood still as a statue. “I do not know. I was not there.” He remembered Ser Arys’s light brown eyes staring at him when his head ended its roll.

“I apologize for asking so many questions. It must sound like I’m suspicious of you or Prince Doran.” Ser Balon straightened his back and raised his chin. “I simply must fulfill my duty as Kingsguard. Princess Myrcella deserves justice, and I do not know if that stops at executing this Ser Gerold Dayne.”

*Justice for his little princess.* Hotah stood upright and gripped his longaxe tight. “You can ask Prince Doran when we return to Sunspear.” They recommenced their spar anew.

That night Areo Hotah dreamt of the brand on his chest, the smell of hair and flesh. He awoke and scratched the mark until it bled.

Their band of Martell and Lannister men was within hours of Sandstone when Obara Sand rode up beside him.

“Captain, I know we have had our differences,” the Sand Snake said with a grimace, “but I entreat you to continue sparring with Ser Balon. I heard you dueled with him the other night until you both were dire sore.”

Hotah nodded, confused. “Is there cause for concern, my lady?”

Her sand steed fell in closer, though the nearest ears were Dornish and a hundred feet away. “Ser Balon will send his last raven to King’s Landing at Sandstone. The night following our departure, spar with Ser Balon. Tire him out.

He is a good fighter, from what I saw at the Hellholt. I will need him fatigued if I am to slay the man.”

Areo Hotah felt his brow furrow. “You mean to murder Ser Balon.”

“To dispense justice,” Obara said. “The man plotted to kill my cousin. My men will take care of Ser Balon’s companions as they sleep off the wine Lord Qorgyle will send with us. We outnumber the lions four to one. Ser Balon is not a drunk, however, and his blade can match your own. Fatigue him. My spear will find a chink in his armor.” *She is quick and strong. If he were exhausted ...*

“The squires,” said Hotah suddenly. “Danos is one-and-ten.” Obara only stared at him.

He thought of the Prince’s words. *Tell me, Captain, is that my shame or my glory?* Hotah scratched his chest. “This could start a war.”

“The crime will be Darkstar’s.” A laugh twisted her lips. “An ambush in the night, we will say.” Obara Sand’s horse moved away. “This is my command.”

“I follow the commands of Prince Doran,” he answered dully.

“Whom did he command you to obey?”

They reached Sandstone by midday. The castle proved smaller than the Hellholt, but taller. A hundred edifices rose up around the only well for fifty miles. Red walls encased a dozen tall towers of differing heights, each topped with a scorpion, its stinger wrought in iron. Lord Quentyn Qorgyle had planned a feast for the men in the evening, which gave them time for leisure. Most went to the brothel. Some opted only to sleep. The Scrapesword went to the sept.

When the sun set, the men convened in Lord Quentyn’s banquet hall. The dishes were of the western desert; many were foreign to Hotah. There was snake-on-the-spit, roasted swallow,

desert-mouse ear, buzzard’s wing; each of these was served caked in spices. Most of the dishes, though, were scorpion. Scorpion tail, scorpion claw, sand-scorpion, crab-scorpion,

beggar-scorpion, skewered scorpion, scorpion soup, lizard fried in scorpion oil—the Qorgyles of Sandstone were plainly fond of their sigil. The Lannister men choked on the blood-red strongwine, and the Dornishmen laughed at a man-sized dish of a lion and a stag entwined in love, made only of chickpea and olive paste.

The stewards could not agree on where to seat Areo Hotah. He had never been to Sandstone but when accompanying Prince Doran or Lady Mellario. With them, it had seemed proper that he stand on the dais, his axe ever at the ready. Having him guard a fighter like Ser Balon, however, would be insulting—yet to sit with the lords was well above his station. In the end, he was seated with the knights and squires, between Danos and Jothos Slynt. Their brother Morros was given a place on the dais, amongst Lord and Lady Qorgyle, their sons, Ser Balon, the Knight of Lemonwood, and Lady Obara.

Hotah spent most of the meal wondering what the lords and the white knight spoke of. To his right, Jothos ate ravenously. Danos made two fried scorpions battle to his left.

“Jothos,” Ser Merlon yelled from down the table. “How goes your training with the blade? Better than Lord Squire’s, I hope.”

“Fair, ser,” said the squire. “Ser Balon says I have promise.”

“Learn quickly, my boy,” said the Scrapesword. “I began my life as a hedge knight close to your age. I was seven-and-ten.”

“I was a household knight at eight-and-ten,” added Ser Tanton.

Hotah watched Jothos eat. The boy was large for five-and-ten and had a healthy appetite. Scorpion after scorpion went into the boy’s mouth. The sleeves of his shirt were too short, Hotah observed. A boy who soon outgrew his clothes.

The stewards placed me at the right table.

A serving man came to Hotah. “Captain, Lady Obara would like a word.”

Hotah rose and approached Obara Sand at the end of the dais.

“I would like you to watch Ser Timon,” the Sand Snake said, her voice hushed so Morros would not hear.

“My lady?”

“I sent a man to the sept to ask about Ser Scabbard. The septon reported the knight lit some candles, prayed to the Mother, and then inquired if he had seen a girl of nine or ten years, green eyes, cheerful in spirit, with golden hair.”

“Myrcella.” Hotah could smell the sweet wine in Obara’s glass.

“Why would the Scrapesword think she and Nym would be traveling this way?” She glared at Ser Timon, who was drinking with Ser Merlon. “He also thought the girl might be traveling with a septa. That means Tyene is with them.”

Hotah stood silent.

“Doran schemes. Tell me what his game is.”

“I cannot say,” said Hotah. He had vowed to keep his prince’s secrets. Even if he had not, he could not explain why Lady Nym or Tyene Sand would be passing through Sandstone.

“They were supposed to head to King’s Landing, but now they venture west, toward Oldtown. Toward Sarella.” Obara’s face was red with anger. “Why would my uncle lie to me? Does he not trust me?”

“I cannot say,” Hotah repeated.

“Leave me,” spat Obara.

Hotah returned to his seat. He watched Ser Timon for a long while, as ordered, though he doubted the knight would say much. The Scrapesword was near asleep from wine. Hotah turned back to look at Ser Balon. The white knight’s plate was filled with food, but he did not eat. His cup was filled with wine, but he did not drink. He spoke with Ser Gulian Qorgyle, then with his brother Ser Arron, though Hotah was too far to hear. He watched Ser Balon’s mouth, trying to make out a single word.

“Jothos,” said Danos, “I dare you to eat the soup.”

“No, you eat it.”

“You are a craven unless you eat the soup.”

“You know it is too spicy. Do you want me screaming in the privy like Ser Balon at Sunspear?”

*He did eat the stew?* Hotah prided himself on his powers of observation. *Could I have erred?* Hotah did not sleep that night. He did not want to dream again. His chest still itched.

The next day was a haze. The captain rode at the head of the column. He did not look back. Hotah did not want to see their faces. *The faces of the dead.* During rests, he kept his gaze on the sands of Dorne. Would that his ears could stay on the dunes as well. Once, he heard Ser Balon telling Jothos about the proper riding

position for tilts. Ser Tanton sang at one point, this time about a woman named Bessa. Obara shouted orders at someone. Ser Timon's scabbard jangled. Danos laughed.

The captain watched the sands shift from orange to red as the sun set, then darken as night fell. The skins of Qorgyle made their way around camp, Hotah could hear. The men were loud and merry, though the Lannister voices rose above the Dornish.

Hotah decided to walk. The stars glimmered and the moon was almost full. Somewhere in the night, a desert wolf howled. All the points of the Great Boat were in view, and he could make out the Bell in the eastern sky. The Squirrel was half-hidden by the horizon, as it was always in Dorne. These were his only companions left from Norvos. These, and his faith.

Looking above, Areo Hotah felt doubt for a moment. He pushed the sin out of his mind. It was not for him to question whether his god was watching him. *Obey, Serve, Protect.*

Hotah hiked up to a small outcrop among the dull red rocks where he could rest his head, overlooking the camp below. From up high, the sounds of the camp were faint, though Obara Sand's order to retire was clear enough. As silence settled, he found himself thinking of Jothos and Danos.

*Our quest was justice for an attempt on a child's life. Now Obara would kill children to slake her taste for vengeance. Why did Prince Doran give command to Obara? He knew what she was.*

Hotah did not remember falling asleep. He opened his eyes to find Ser Balon Swann standing over him. He was holding out an open palm.

"I have a game for us to play this time," said the white knight as they picked their starting places. "For every hit I land, you tell me a truth, and I will do the same."

Hotah looked down at the blunted axe he'd been handed, then at Balon. "You have vowed to keep secrets."

"I have," said Ser Balon. "I have also sworn to protect Princess Myrcella, and I believe that vow takes precedence. Perhaps you feel the same about House Martell."

Hotah considered the stakes. Ser Balon was a dead man. Any secret the captain told would not leave the camp. His vow would remain intact. The choice was easy.

Hotah nodded and raised the axe. The men danced.

Hotah began with an aggressive lunge that took Ser Balon unawares. Hotah's blunted mistress met Balon's chest.

The knight stepped back, resetting his stance. "What would you like to know first?"

Hotah had his first question ready. "Are you tracking Lady Nymeria?"

Ser Balon looked confused. "No. I thought she made for King's Landing. Why in the seven hells would I be following *her*?"

"You have not scored a hit."

Balon shrugged, and they began again. Hotah faked a slash with his axe. When Balon lifted his shield, Hotah used the butt of his axe to knock the shield aside. His axe blade came back to strike the knight's leg.

The captain's second question was, "At Sunspear, did you eat the stew?"

Another confused look—then the white knight laughed. "You do have the most curious inquiries. Yes, I ate that venom, to my grief. The whole night I was ill on its spice."

They danced. Ser Balon slashed; Hotah parried. The captain swung at the knight, again and again, and met his shield each time. Hotah then hit high and Balon's halfhelm rattled.

Hotah paused before asking his third question. "Did you plan on murdering Prince Trystane Martell?"

A look of concern fell on Ser Balon's face. "Never. If someone told you that, they lied. I am not one to murder children."

"You are one to follow your liege, and I was told your queen ordered it."

"Queen Cersei does only what she believes benefits her. What advantage to her is a dead prince?"

Hotah had not considered the queen's motive.

"No, Queen Cersei only commanded me to deliver the head of Ser Gregor and return with Princess Myrcella. It was stressed, however, that her return was

paramount and absolute.” Ser Balon returned to a fighting stance. “Had Prince Doran refused to give her up, we would have stolen her away from her tower, or wherever she was kept. But the prince agreed to return Myrcella, so it never came to that.”

Ser Balon thrust his sword at him. At the last moment, Hotah blocked with the grip of his longaxe. He swung the axe in counterattack; Balon blocked with his shield. Hotah struck again, this time with more power—but before his blow reached the white knight, he felt a sword hit hard on his hip.

Hotah let the butt of his axe rest in the sand. “Ask your question.” “Did Ser Gerold Dayne cut Princess Myrcella?”

“I cannot say.”

“I scored a fair hit.”

“I cannot say. I did not see.”

Ser Balon’s eyes opened wide. “Then you were there.” Hotah resumed his stance.

The captain went on the attack, but Balon retreated so deftly that he hardly had to block. Despite the shifting sands, his balance was exquisite. When Areo Hotah stumbled mid-swing, the rap he got across the legs was a formality.

Balon Swann asked his second question. “Did Lady Nymeria depart for King’s Landing with Princess Myrcella?”

It was Hotah’s turn to laugh. “A strange question. Yes. This was the prince’s order.” *Did he not just say he believed Nym headed there?*

Now Ser Balon advanced with speed. A flurry of slashes came at the captain; his parries could not keep pace. *He was holding back before.* The white knight’s sword tip ended square on Hotah’s chest.

The third question. “Did Ser Gerold Dayne kill Ser Arys Oakheart?”

Hotah looked up from the sword to Ser Balon’s face. It shone with sweat. “No.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

Hotah had no answer.

Then Ser Balon looked over Hotah’s shoulder. “My lady.”

The captain turned and saw. A cloud had crossed the moon and the figure moved half in shadow, but Hotah knew its long stride and its cold eyes. In one

hand it held a spear, in the other a round shield. Both glimmered where they caught the starlight.

“Have you come to spar with us, my lady?” called Ser Balon.

The Sand Snake’s walk became a run. “I come for justice.” She danced forward and smashed her spear into Balon Swann’s half-raised shield. She spun and skipped around him, lashing blows at his boots. He stooped with his heavy shield, blocking low.

“What treachery is this?” cried Ser Balon.

“You speak of treachery?” screamed Obara. “You came to Dorne with a mummer’s skull and a plot to slay Trystane!”

Ser Balon moved to slash Obara’s side. She made no attempt to parry, instead lunging her spear at Balon’s leg. Each strike found its mark, and Hotah heard Obara’s ribs crack. Had Ser Balon held live steel, Obara would have been gutted, but his practice blade did not as much as break her skin. Ser Balon, though, was bleeding from his thigh.

The knight ignored the wound. He pressed forward, frenzied, throwing his sword in circles at Obara, each time barely missing her, each miss met with a kick or a blow from the spear-shaft to his unprotected side.

The kingsguard staggered. Obara grimaced, dropped her shield, and clutched her side in pain. She saw the white knight’s blood leaking into the sand and smiled. The two circled each other.

The Sand Snake shifted closer to Hotah, paying him no mind. Her back was to him.

*Protect. Serve.*

She wore no helmet, Hotah observed. He looked at his axe. It was blunted, but hard enough to crack a skull.

Areo Hotah lifted the axe with effort. He was tired too.

*Obey.*

He did not strike.

Screaming, Obara darted at Ser Balon again. Her spear met shield, but Swann was sent sprawling onto his face, losing his sword. The warrior tried to rise, but his



tired limbs wobbled and gave out under him. Obara hefted her spear in an overarm grip and drove it down into the knight's back.

His body was still.

Obara pulled her spear from the corpse of the white knight, then limped to a boulder. She hit the spear against the rock four times, then another four. A signal, Hotah knew. Without a word, without a look, Obara made her way back down to the camp, wincing with every step.

Hotah was left with the body of Ser Balon Swann, but he did not see it. He kept his gaze on the sands of Dorne.

Before long, the captain heard the sounds of battle from the canyon below. Steel on steel. Steel on flesh. The scraping sound of a sword drawn from a metal scabbard.

Areo Hotah sat and listened to the screams of a prince's plan come to pass.



## DAENERYS

**N**ight gathers, and now my watch begins, Daenerys thought, looking out at the falling snow. It shall not end until my death.

The widows had told her how the rest of her days would be: a life on the sacred grasses between the Mother of Mountains and the horse gate. A life of reverence, they had said, though she could own no mount, take no husband, bear no children. She was forbidden from slaughtering livestock; she would rely on eunuchs for that service. During her moon blood she would go to a separate tent with the younger women and perform ablution. The flesh of fowl was unclean for her to eat or even touch, and the altars for her hourly prayers must be clay, never stone. Above all, they had stressed, to couple was the gravest blasphemy. No man is so accursed as one who mates with a woman of the *dosh khaleen*.

“A lot of rapers and thieves,” her brother had said of the men who stood guard on the Wall. “But their vow has some poetry to it.” He would sometimes recite it to her at night in the common tongue or High Valyrian, the latter giving the words a sinister sound. He knew it frightened her. “Our grandsire’s uncle even gave up the throne for a life in the cold, the fool, and a seed once rose to be Lord Commander.”

Daenerys did not have the patience to lead the *dosh khaleen*. The young amongst them deferred to the old, and the old amongst them to the one-eyed crone, a wrinkled corpse of a woman who said little and less. He is the stallion who mounts the world, the crone had said of her unborn son. Yet now her black eye only watched with disdain as Dany hobbled across the temple hall.

The crones had given her a makeshift crutch to walk on. The gnarled piece of wood did not fit comfortably under her arm as she struggled to make her way. Dany wondered how Ser Willem ever managed to get around on such a thing. She had freedom of the city, or at least no one had told her otherwise, but to venture far from the temple she would need to endure a thousand wincing pains.

With each step, Daenerys remembered the sharp crack in her ankle when she had been dragged behind Jhaqo's mount. Khal Jhaqo and his fifty riders had found Daenerys in the Dothraki sea, dripping with mud and blood and horse grease, standing with Drogon as he tore a chunk of charred flesh from the slowest of Jhaqo's horses. Daenerys had mounted Drogon's neck and met the gaze of her husband's erstwhile *ko* as she spoke, "*Dracarys*." Instead of breathing black fire, Drogon shook his scarlet spine. Dany clutched at his black scales, her fingers slippery with grease. As Drogon pushed off from the ground, Daenerys fell from her dragon mount.

Half a hundred Dothraki cackled and howled with amusement. The dragon had not extinguished their lives, but taken flight and glided southwest toward Dragonstone. "Your demon has forsaken you," Ko Mago yelled, his voice a dagger. They tied a rope around her throat and fastened it to the halter of Jhaqo's stallion in the gathering dusk. Half a league later, Daenerys could run no more and fell.

Draped over the back of Mago's horse like the carcass of a *hrakkar* was how she came to Jhaqo's *khalasar* of twenty thousand. They found a rickety cart for her after that. Someone had managed to set her ankle and splint it—in her agony she never knew who. The first days of her journey to Vaes Dothrak were filled with jeers and laughter, Dothraki calling out "*Khaleesi Rhaggat*." *Cart Queen*. Her ankle screamed with every bounce of her new throne, though Dany's own cries went unheard amongst the clatter of the marching *khalasar*. Once a day, an unsung boy would feed her nearly turned mare's milk and dried horse meat,

though she lacked the spit to chew it. Without any routine, a mute, dour-faced woman would change Dany's straw, perpetually soiled by her brown water.

"Two hundred leagues to Vaes Dothrak," she overheard a rider in the *khas* of Mago say. "A moon's turn." On the fourth day, the sky grew overcast, and on the sixth day the rain began to fall. Only a drizzle at first; it was refreshing for the *khalasar*, and a gift from the gods for Daenerys. But it rained again the following day, harder, and the day that followed, harder still, and the day that followed that, half again as hard. Jhaqo's *khalasar* transformed into a caravan of mud men trudging through a great grass marsh.

The rains saved Daenerys from dying of thirst, but the days grew colder and the Dothraki had donned her in no more than rags. Thirty days came and went, yet the Mother of Mountains was nowhere in sight. On the fortieth day of their moon's turn journey, it began to sleet. By then, Dany had no flesh or fat left on her to keep her warm. One frigid night, the skeleton that had been Daenerys Stormborn stopped shivering and fell into a dreamless slumber. She did not expect to wake, but wake she did to the sight of a man's stone face with the body of a dragon. *The plunder of the horselords*, Daenerys knew. She took the statue as an omen, though an ill one. The Valyrian sphinx was enveloped in a glaze of ice. *Trapped*, Daenerys thought, *like a sentinel*.

In time, Dany's sense had returned with her strength. Now under the watch of the *dosh khaleen*, her wounds were healing quickly but for the frequent blows from crones opening them up again. Her ankle had knit enough for her to trust it with her crutch as she tottered around learning the women's work of Vaes Dothrak. The ceremonies were writ in stone and the tasks were endless, as were lectures on the magics of grass, horse, and corn. The widows were not without their humor, black as it was, as they gifted their willowy new sister the byname *Khaleesi Tolorro, Queen of Bones*.

Small bands of raiders and fringe *khalasars* trickled into the city day after day, and Dany watched as the crones were paid tribute in salt, silver, and seed. The gifts were often meager, and Dany caught bits of contrition from the *kos* and *khals* in defense of their offerings: Khal Pono was the main culprit of the other's scarcity, they all claimed. The city was filling with Dothraki, and the markets were filling

with vendors, despite the snows. Every day, the smell of charred horse and burning manure grew ever stronger. Those who rode with Jhaqo outnumbered all others in Vaes Dothrak, but this was soon to change.

Khal Pono was returning.

“Pono has killed Motho,” a slave of Khal Jommo whispered after presenting a sack of corn. “The wives of Jommo will be amongst you soon.” A second rumor soon followed from the mouth of Rhogoro, Khal Moro’s sullen son. Pono had married the daughter of Khal Zekko, with Zekko granting his *khalasar* as a bride gift. By custom, the daughter passed that gift to her new husband. Daenerys understood why the *khals* were returning. The bride must be presented to the *dosh khaleen*.

The moon was covered by clouds as time blurred past for Daenerys. She had forgotten the day, the week, the month. The grey days grew ever shorter, the nights ever colder. She missed the sun, the stars, her dragons. Those things were of the world beyond the horse gate. She would die here, she believed, in the same city as her brother.

“Khaleesi Tolorro,” Jalani said to her one night. “The time has come.”

*For what?* Dany wondered, but followed the widow without a word, leaning heavily on her crutch.

Dany was taken to a hidden alcove of the temple where the shrunken crone sat on a plundered wooden bench from a faraway land. It was made from a black-barked tree, polished and lacquered. The design on its back was a tangle of foreign writing Daenerys had never seen—perhaps the words of Jogos Nhai. The dark wood shimmered like metal in the lantern light. Upon the seat, the one-eyed crone looked almost a queen.

“Eat with me, child,” said the crone, in the Dothraki tongue. “You look more dead than me.” She gestured to a stone table with a plate of horse steak sauced in yogurt and dried pomegranate. The blood from the meat made the dish look a mess of pink and red. Daenerys sat, dipped her hands into the sauce, and ate. It was delicious.

Between bites, Daenerys managed to ask, “What do you want of me?” *They always want something.*

“Your words.”

Daenerys tilted her head. “What is your meaning?”

“Why do you think Jhaqo did not kill you?”

Daenerys recalled being dragged by a stallion. *He nearly did.* What she said was, “He is a superstitious man. The *dosh khaleen* are sacred.”

That made the one-eyed crone smile. “So we are. That is not the reason. Jhaqo is strong, but he has wits as well. No man leads thousands of Dothraki without being clever. He knows the winds of Khal Pono rise. Pono has cut down my Motho. He has vanquished Khal Zekko’s *khalasar* and claimed his daughter as *khaleesi*. Jommo and Moro are gnats who will soon be swatted. Khal Jhaqo knows his time is short. The Dothraki devour themselves. As they say in Lhazar, when men have no lamb, they eat men.”

Daenerys bit into the steak again, chewed, swallowed. “You and Jhaqo conspire against Khal Pono. What has that to do with me?”

“The *dosh khaleen* kneel to no one. The *dosh khaleen* bow to no one. The true power of the Dothraki lies here. You are a woman of the *dosh khaleen*.”

“Aye,” said Dany, “a crippled widow with no braid and no riders, worse than useless.”

“Khal Jhaqo tells me that Drogo thought you magical, the blood of old Valyria. You are the Mother of Dragons, all agree. Men listen to your words, though they are loath to admit it. Khal Pono will heed you as a voice of the *dosh khaleen*, I am certain of it, and in our smokes we see the days to come.”

*Prophecy.* Daenerys was angered. “A mummer’s farce,” she barked. “You said my son would be the stallion who mounts the world.”

“*The bells in his hair will sing his coming,*” the crone recited, “*and the milk men in the stone tents will fear his name.* I remember. It was well practiced.”

*Practiced?* Daenerys blinked. “Why?”

The crone’s one eye stared long and hard at Dany. Finally she said, “The others, they call you *Khaleesi Tolorro* not because you are thin, child. No, it is because you are of the red waste.”

*The red waste?* She did not understand. *What does this old one know of my life?* Dany began to explain, “We were heading to ...”

“Qarth.” The crone did not let her finish. “The city of the milk men.”

Daenerys knew the Qartheen were called milk men, but she had always assumed the *dosh khaleen* spoke of Westerosi with those words. “What is in Qarth that concerns the *dosh khaleen*?”

“Nothing,” the shrunken widow chuckled. “Your iron coward, he sold you.”

“My brother sold me. Khal Raggat.”

“The Andal,” the crone insisted. “Jorah.” *She remembered his name, all this time?* “He killed your brother with strong wine and a trap.”

Her words were a strike to the gut, true as soon as Dany heard them. Viserys, arriving drunk but with no coin, drawing his sword, a voice in the common tongue egging him on. Jorah.

“You were to perish on the sands or on the walls of the milk men’s city, it made no matter. You, your *khal* ... your prince.”

“Rhaego,” Dany whispered. She grasped her crutch and brought herself to a stand. “Explain this!”

The crone clenched her jaw and flared her nostrils. “You mourn your son, but Khal Motho was my son. When a *khal* falls from his horse, a *khaleesi* becomes a woman of the *dosh khaleen*. But when is a mother not so to her son? The Mother of Mountains will love until it is dust, as will I.” She nudged a tear from her eye and chuckled again. “The *dosh khaleen* know what is needed for a *khal* to hear. Your Khal Drogo had the longest hair, but you were the blade to cut it. My words came after a gift of Pentoshi silver, but I would have done it with no gift to spare my Motho from the *arakh* of your Drogo. The Andal and I wanted you and your *khal* to go east forever, and we made it so.”

*Pentoshi silver.* “Illyrio,” Dany stammered. “He wanted us west, not east ... my brother on the Iron Throne ...” Her words were feeble. She had asked Viserys a lifetime ago why Illyrio gave so much. Her brother had had no good answer. Deep down, Daenerys had always known the magister was playing them false. It was why she commanded Groleo to turn their ships to Slaver’s Bay. Pentos was the den of the wolf. *Was every gift from Illyrio poison? Doreah?* Viserys had been wroth after

the Lyseni girl commanded him to sup with Dany. *Belwas?* His counsel was always urging conflict, masked with the wit of a child. *Barristan?* Jorah trusted him least of all.

“What the fat man truly wants, I am not certain,” said the crone. “My pipits say there was talk in the Western Market of an armistice, five years of peace. Lys, Myr, and Tyrosh would cease their quarrels and the *khals* would seek no gifts from across the Rhoyme. Who is to know? As the sunset men say, words are wind.” She reached down between her legs and picked up a small sack that Dany had failed to notice. “What I know is that no one loved your brother.”

“I loved my brother,” Dany insisted, unsure of her words.

“Truly?” asked the old widow. “When my Motho died, the men who adored him built him a pyre. In the west, men are buried by their doting kin, so I hear. The men of Ib cast the dead into the sea while bellowing songs of love. It is queer that no one, not your Pentoshi, not your Andal, not you, came seeking this.” From the bag, the crone produced a misshapen lump. It shimmered.

Daenerys Targaryen fell to her knees.

One of the oldest tales Viserys used to tell her was that of Bittersteel. Aegor Rivers was a dragonseed of the fourth Aegon, fierce, angry, and exiled along with the other Blackfyre Pretenders. Rivers was a villain, a dog of the usurper Daemon, yet Viserys saw aspects of the bastard to admire. *With fewer than ten thousand, he nearly put Haegon on the throne. That is all one needs. Without his brother's treachery ...* After Bittersteel died, his skull was inspiration for the other exiles.

“Keep it, sell it,” said the old widow. “It is yours if you do my bidding. With the coin, I imagine you could find a smuggler in the Western Market bound for Qohor. The *dosh khaleen* are not likely to notice you missing.”

*Freedom.* Daenerys stared at what remained of her brother. *He smiles.* Daenerys looked up from the glimmering skull to the crone's lone black eye. She could see her own reflection in it. Her thoughts were of Rhaego and of Eroeh as her mouth filled with the taste of bile. After a long while, she said, “I have been rabble on the *cyvasse* board, but I am not your piece to move. I have no reason to loathe Khal Pono.”



Without a word, the crone placed the skull back in the sack and Daenerys returned to her room.

It took the better part of the day for Khal Pono's *khalasar* to pass through the horse gate. There was no need, as Vaes Dothrak had no walls, but it was decreed by the *dosh khaleen*. Every man and woman, horse and child, eunuch and slave needed to be blessed beneath the ice-covered steeds. The shadow of the horse gate was sacred.

"The bronze stallions should be pushed farther apart," complained a merchant from the Eastern Market. He looked up at the sky, where snow continued to fall. "I will be serving customers all night in the cold." The *dosh khaleen* ignored the infidel.

Khal Pono's *khalasar* numbered more than thirty thousand warriors, more than all the other *khalasars* combined. It was not yet as large as Drogo's had been, but was expected to overtake it soon. Khal Jhaqo had ordered his *khalasar* to stay in their quarter and out of the markets to avoid provoking Pono, but Jhaqo also feared defection. *The Dothraki follow the strong*, Daenerys observed, *and Jhaqo is filled with fear. Good*. When Pono was Drogo's *ko*, Daenerys had been fond of him. He was kind, obedient, and showed her the honor and respect due to a *khaleesi*. Whereas Jhaqo ... Daenerys only thought of Eroeh. One of his first acts as a *khal* was to give the Lhazarene girl to his bloodriders, who raped and butchered her.

It was late afternoon when Khal Pono, his bloodriders, and a litter of slaves finally approached the temple of the *dosh khaleen* with their offerings. They were abundant. The first bloodrider to present was dressed in bulky Qohorik furs. He gave a polite nod to the crones. "We present to you the offering of salt." He gestured to the slaves, who dropped three heavy chests of Lorathi sea salt before the temple.

The second bloodrider to come forward donned a thick cloak of Lhazarene wool. He did not bother to speak, but his offering was more than generous. The slaves came forward with a dozen sacks of plates, knives, and candlesticks, all Volantene silver.

The third bloodrider wore a leather jerkin with a Dothraki painted vest overtop. He had gloves of leather too, but his arms were naked to the elements.

Over his shoulder he wore a bow made of dragonbone over five feet in length, double-curved in shape. Daenerys knew that bow. It had been a bride gift, but she had given it away the night she had given birth.

*Aggo, blood of my blood.*

Daenerys looked to Pono's saddle. Hanging from it was a collection of braids from his kills. Rakharo's *arakh* was likely left at the horse gate, but she did not doubt he had been cut down, along with anyone else who had ventured north from Meereen. *Jhogo? Daario?*

After the offerings had been brought into the temple, Daenerys approached the one-eyed crone in her alcove. The old woman drank hot fermented mare's milk from a clay cup.

"Pono dies," Daenerys said.

The mother of Motho nodded.

"During the ceremony, what words do I say?"

The crone closed her eye as the milk warmed her bones. "You will remember."

That night Daenerys dreamed she was wrapped in chains, drowning.

The heart was half again as large as the one presented to Dany. The young *khaleesi* brought the steaming mass to her taut lips and clenched deeply into the stringy flesh, digging her teeth around a bite like a serpent swallowing an egg. At the back of the chorus of crones were the youngest of the *dosh khaleen*, swaying and chanting. Daenerys had lost her place with the words and shifted amongst the young crones on her crutch, her healing ankle itching as the ceremony dragged on. The crone to Dany's right released her clasped hands and swung her fist like a morningstar up and under Dany's ribs. The contact knocked out her wind, but it delivered the message clearly. *Obey. You are a woman of the dosh khaleen.*

Khal Pono's bride ate ravenously. Blood shot from the severed veins of the heart. Snowflakes from a black sky fell in her hair and upon her broad shoulders. The strapping daughter of Zekko was illuminated by the light of torches and the adoration pouring from the eyes of her *khal*. Pono wore a snarling grin under his fierce mustachio.

With strength, Dany threw herself back into the chant, propelling her power toward the bloody *khaleesi* in the chalk pit below. The bride took another bite, the

heart nearly disappearing. Daenerys gagged, remembering herself in the girl's place, her jaw muscles burning as she forced a swallow of raw meat into a stomach ready to burst. To the *khaleesi* below, it was effortless. *How had it all gone so quickly?*

Khal Pono's *khaleesi* swallowed the last fistful, turned with swagger and smirk, and announced to the *dosh khaleen* in a scream, "*Khalakka dothrae mr'anha!*" A proclamation Dany had rehearsed for days before her own moment. *A prince rides inside me!*

The crones' chanting lulled as the oldest with her one eye stepped toward the red woman in response. "*Khalakka dothrae!*" *The prince is riding!*

"He is riding!" the old mummings recited. "*Rakh! Rakh! Rakh haj!*" *A boy, a boy, a strong boy.*

On cue, there was the ringing of the bells, the horn, the chant from the crones. Eunuchs filled the brazier with grasses and smoke filled the stage. Then the house fell silent to the sound of wind, the rustle of falling snow, and the lapping of the Womb.

Daenerys counted backward from five, then stepped forward with her lines. "I have seen his face, and heard the thunder of his hooves."

A murmur ran through the audience. Khal Pono's eyes locked on the Mother of Dragons' performance.

"The thunder of his hooves!" the company chorused.

"As swift as the wind he rides, and behind him his *khalasar* covers the earth, men without number, with *arakhs* shining in their hands like blades of razor grass." Daenerys' eyes met Khal Pono's. "Fierce as a storm this *khal* will be."

Pono's face was still, his gaze piercing. The other Dothraki searched each other's faces, struck dumb by Daenerys's declaration.

Daenerys went to her knees, her eyes now rolling back in her head. "I see his enemies, nay, his victims, the first daughters of Valyria, cowering inside their black ring. His bloodriders will sound a horn and the wall will crack, opening before his *khalasar*. Then ..."

Daenerys paused. The spectators waited on her words.

Her face filled with dread. “Winter comes. Every man, butchered. Every wife, raped. The entrails of children will line the streets. The *khalasar* will laugh at the screams of the dying and feast on the hearts of the dead. The Rhoyme will grow red from blood. Volantis will burn, its ashes taking to the wind. Nothing will remain.” Daenerys shuddered and wailed, pointing at Khal Pono. “He is the stallion who mounts the world.” She began to weep, taking her nails and digging them into her face. She pulled down hard, cutting four bloody stripes down each cheek. Her face dripping, she again looked to Khal Pono. “I will be the last Valyrian. I will die alone.” She collapsed.

The Dothraki erupted in cheers.

After the ceremony, Jommo and Moro swore allegiance to Khal Pono and relinquished their *khalasars*. Khal Jhaqo and his *kos* looked on in silence while the one-eyed crone gave Daenerys a confused glance. *She wonders why I improvised.*

The celebration swelled with the arrival of skins of clotted mare’s milk. As the Dothaki drank heavily, Dany found herself remembering Mero and his Second Sons, drunk on wine. Jorah’s ambush caught the Braavosi and his men unawares and they were too deep in their cups to pose much fight. The Titan’s Bastard fled in fear and Brown Ben became the Second Sons’ new leader. *What sort of name was that, the Titan’s Bastard?* Daenerys wondered. *What titan?* She had never asked the giant red-haired man. *I suppose I will never know.* Ser Barristan slew the unruly sellsword.

The statues lining the road began again on the wide road heading to the Womb of the World. They were barely more than shadows in the starless night, their faces covered in snow and ice, but Daenerys still felt them watching her. She thought again of Viserys’ story of the seventy-nine sentinels. They tried to flee, but there was no escape. Qohor was a thousand leagues. If her smuggle proved a success, what fate awaited her? *The life of a beggar queen? Death by an assassin’s blade?* She remembered her dream.

It was slow going to the lake, but a large steed managed to pull her cart over the snowy drifts. The *dosh khaleen* rode ahead, each paired with eunuch riders. The

rowdy party of Khal Pono, his *khaleesi*, and his many allies led the procession. Riding in the rear were Khal Jhaqo, Ko Mago, his bloodriders and *khas*, all silent.

A layer of ice and snow had formed amongst the reeds at the Womb of the World. It crunched and broke beneath the bare feet of Zekko's daughter as she made her way into the calm lake. The *khaleesi* bathed in the sacred waters, washing the blood from her hair, her face, her muscled body. Ignoring the cold, she returned to shore slowly, seductively, water dripping off her naked figure. Khal Pono could barely contain his desire, his manhood out of his breeches and swollen. The two leapt at each other and coupled furiously on the shore of the lake, screaming with passion. The drunken onlookers cheered them, drowning out the chants of the *dosh khaleen*.

Dany hobbled down the shore of the Womb away from the torches of the Dothraki. She looked back. All eyes were on the couple save Mago's, who spied her disappearing into the gloom of night. To her relief, he did not pursue her. *I am an old dog going off to die.*

After some distance, the cheering died away and Dany heard only the sound of wind, snow, and Womb. She stripped, letting her cloak fall between the ice-covered reeds, and walked into the water. Her last time in the Womb of the World, the water had felt cold, but on this night, in the chill air, it was surprisingly warm.

Warm as a womb. Warm as Daario's embrace. Warm as blood.

Daenerys pushed herself out into the water on her back, looking up at the black sky. The water made her feel pure. The occasional snowflake tickled her belly, her legs, her face. Her eyes drooped shut and she let the warmth embrace her.

Irri had told her the Womb had no bottom. If she sank, she would plunge forever into darkness.

Floating.

She let out her breath and turned over. The Womb engulfed her.

Floating ... falling.

In the darkness, her mind's eye was lit with a honeycomb of memories: fire and chains and dragons soaring, blood on her thighs—she saw her own face on an

armored knight, and a starry sky during the day—she raced down a hallway of doors, all on the left, each room a riddle.

*Stories. Dreams. Prophecy.* It felt like drivel to her now. Worse than legends of snarks. She had been bombarded with tales not her own, her body a puppet for those around her. Viserys, Jorah, Mirri Maz Duur, Quaithe, the Undying, Hizdahr, the Green Grace, the crone. All sought to tell her who she was and who she would be. She had never broken her shackles, had only been paraded around by powers not her own.

*Who am I?* Daenerys cried inside herself. Looking down, she saw a red door drifting at the bottom of the endless Womb. *Who was I? Who could I have been?*

The door writhed. It had eyes, two stars. It was now a mask.

It whispered.

Daenerys reached towards the starlight.

She awoke to the sound of a booming splash. Daenerys surfaced, sucked in air. Waves crashed around her violently. The Dothraki were yelling in panic.

A sudden force beneath Dany hoisted her up. Out of the Womb of the World, into the shock of the cold air, she rose. Beneath her a black mat, writhing, carried her up, slick with water, hot to the touch. Higher and higher it took her into the dark sky. It had scales.

Below they could see the gathering at the Womb scrambling to horses, some falling over. Drogon, his mother upon his back, roared, then sailed down and released an engulfing flame low along the road, catching *kos*, bloodriders, and *khas* in their flight from the Womb. The women and crones fled towards the Womb for cover. Their hair, the paint atop their leather vests burned as they dove for the water.

Dany spotted Pono, naked, riding out into the night. He disappeared into the darkness, but Drogon caught his scent ... as did Dany. It was the smell of sweat and mare's milk, his *khaleesi's* wetness mixed with his seed, the oil in his hair and the horse beneath him. Most of all, it was the stink of fear. With a few flaps of Drogon's wings, they had found him and bathed him in fire.

Jhaqo and Mago were nearly away, but Dany whiffed their mounts and bodies. Daenerys wheeled her mount around in pursuit. Drogon, his mind on Eroeh, came down on the men with his crushing legs. Jhaqo and Mago's backs broke audibly. They screamed as they fell spiraling from their horses, pleading for a jaqqa rhan. Drogon plunged into the sky and Dany looked down on the men begging for her mercy in the snow.

Daenerys then returned to the Womb of the World. The *dosh khaleen* emerged from the waters, naked, shivering, crawling. Some chanted, some sobbed, some begged for their lives.

"I am Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen," she told them. "The First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons."

The one-eyed crone scrambled from the reeds to huddle amongst her fellow widows. She had been right: Dany had remembered her words.

"To you women," Daenerys continued, "I am your high priestess."

In the falling snow beneath the Mother of Mountains, the women of the *dosh khaleen* knelt and bowed their heads.



## ALAYNE

“Ser Roland,” she whispered into the crisp morning air. “Ser Andrew, Ser Mychel, Ser Jon. The Knight of Ninestars and Ser Marwyn. Ser Harlan, *Harry the Heir*.” The names were like a prayer from her childhood. *If the gods are just, they will deliver me my knights.*

Alayne was seated just outside the lord’s box, her chair high-backed and ornate. It was no place for a bastard girl, she knew—even the highborn mostly sat on simple benches—but her lord father had had his way again over her own blushing protests. “Her presence soothes Lord Robert,” he’d told Nestor Royce, and the last thing they wanted was for the True Warden of the East to have a spell in front of all the lords and ladies of the Vale.

On the other side of the rail sat Lord Petyr and Lord Nestor, with Miranda Royce at her father’s right hand. Between the Lord Protector and the Keeper of the Gates sat the Defender of the Vale himself, a drop of snot dangling from the tip of his nose. The little lord rested atop an elevated throne upholstered in fine sable, its great cushion raising him just above the height of his companions. Alayne could see his shining eyes grow large as the first match neared, and she smiled at his innocent fascination with the attendant ceremonies. Sweetrobin was wrapped in furs from head to toe, his white cloak of bearskin over them all, and



beneath them all a belly full of sweetmilk to calm his nerves. Still, from time to time she saw him twitch and shiver. *The cool mountain air*, Alayne told herself, wishing the servants had given him another layer.

Morning rays showered the lists, glimmering off the frost-covered soil. As the first four challengers trotted before the lord's box, a herald yelled out the knights' names in turn. They saluted Lord Robert with a lowering of their lances before two circled to the north end of the tilting lanes and two headed south. Ser Garibald Hersy, a winged chalice upon his shield, faced the wheel of Ser Roland Waynwood, whilst the Knight of the Broken Lance, Ser Gulian Wydman, was opposite Ser Luke Grafton with his burning tower. The knights dropped their visors, took their places, couched their lances. A hush fell over the crowd as all awaited the great lord's signal.

The Lord of Eyrie waved with a child's gleeful vigor and a trumpet lent him its voice to announce the match was under way. The crowd buzzed with excitement as spur met horse, hoof pounded frozen earth. The charge was a blur, but time seemed to slow in the instant before contact.

**CRACK.**

A crash of wood rang out and the crowd erupted into thunderous cheers. Ser Roland had unhorsed Ser Hersy, errant splinters raining down upon both men. The lance of Ser Gulian had not shattered, despite his sigil, but its strike had knocked Ser Luke to the earth. Petyr gave Alayne a smile and a wink.

Her father had gone over the list of knights with her that morning in his solar as they broke their fast on porridge and baked apple slices smothered in cinnamon. Four-and-sixty competitors had come to the Gates of the Moon to vie for the protectorship of Lord Robert Arryn. The rules were simple as tourneys go: the first to break three lances or to unhorse his opponent would advance. Today the knights would dwindle to two-and-thirty, tomorrow to six-and-ten. On the final day, her little lord would bestow silver-winged helms on his eight victors, and her father would claim just as many hostages. The competitors believed the matches were determined by lot, drawn by the most godly of men at the Gates of the Moon. After a miracle was worked in the sept's coffers, however, Septon Vayon indulged the Lord Protector with new and holier pairings.

“Here,” Petyr said, taking Alayne’s hand and moving it to a group of names on the page. His hand was sticky with apple. “Who is the likely victor?”

Alayne considered the names, all strong competitors. “Ser Samwell Stone is daunting, but Ser Marwyn Belmore is the most seasoned. He will be difficult to defeat.”

Littlefinger smiled and nodded in agreement. “Strong Sam is here to spy for Bronze Yohn, not to win. Meanwhile, Ser Ding-Dong is hungry for honor. I shamed him when I made Brune Robert’s captain of the guards in his place.”

Alayne was confused. “Ser Marwyn already resides here at the Gates. What advantage does he offer us as a Winged Knight?”

“None, and I have bought Lord Benedar besides, but collecting the better knights on one side of the competition leaves green boys and fishmongers on the other. Below, what do you see?”

She examined the next group on the parchment. They were all weak, save one. “Ser Mychel Redfort will surely win.” She saw no better knight with the quintains.

“And his brother Jon has an easy path to victory as well.” Petyr slid Alayne’s hand to another set of names. “Where two Redforts go, the rest will likely follow. It’d be a certainty if Lord Horton would have the grace to die already.”

“These men,” Alayne said, pointing to the next group. “Ser Ben Coldwater, Ser Andrew Tollett, and Ser Damon Shett are all of similar skill, from what I have seen.”

“And each is of similar worth to me. Bronze Yohn sent no son to tilt, as he has none to spare, so I must settle for a bannerman of his. Most like Ser Andrew shall prevail amongst his peers, I think.”

As Alayne moved down the parchment, her eyes widened. “There’s a mystery knight! The Orphan of Godsgrace?”

Petyr sighed. “Yes, Donnel Waynwood insisted the Dornishman ride in his stead to add thrill to the tourney—and did so within the hearing of Lord Robert, no less. I could hardly refuse. Fear not, sweet daughter. You’ve heard more songs of the Dragonknight than you’ve seen tourneys, haven’t you? But I’ve seen a hundred tourneys, and I’ll tell you a secret: in life, the mystery knight’s rarely a prince in disguise. More often, he’s there to excite some wagers with a strong first

tilt, only to run into some bad luck in his second.” Littlefinger arched an eyebrow. “The misfortune he’ll run into tomorrow is Lothor Brune, so his loss will look utterly convincing, I think.”

“Then Ser Lothor will fall to Ser Roland Waynwood, I see.”

“Your eyes are as sharp as they are lovely,” said Petyr, dusting cinnamon off Alayne’s sleeve. “With her grandson a Winged Knight, Lady Anya should no longer trouble us, nor should Roland’s father.” Alayne read further. “Do you think Symond Templeton will triumph over Alester Upcliff? I am surprised Ser Symond, a lord, should seek wings.”

“The service to little Robert is but three years, most like far less, and the Knight of Ninestars is eager for some glory, any glory, to attach to his name. His forebears were all the greatest of knights, dying in this battle or that—what the greatest of knights are wont to do. Meanwhile, the page of Ser Symond’s life is blank, so we will give him a quill.”

Her eyes scanned down the page. “Two Hunters look to break lances,” she observed. “Do we want one above the other?”

This time Petyr's smile reached his eyes. "Harlan is here with the promise of meeting his older brother in the lists. He is a better rider than Eustace and accidents are a fact of tourneys. I expect our Arryk and Erryk shall meet on the third day, and if one potential heir should ... fall, the other's value as a hostage rises." He dismissed the brothers with a shrug. "Now tell me about your Harrold's chances."

Alayne examined the seven names the heir could face. “Harry is strong, but upjumped. Today he will tilt against Wallace Waynwood: a boy just as green, but smaller and more timid. Harry will prevail.”

Her father nodded. “What next?”

“On the morrow, he will face Ser Byron or Ser Shadrich. Both men are in your service and will do as you bid. Harry will not lose.”

“And on the third day?”

She studied the remaining names. One made her shudder. “In his final tilt, Harry will face Ser Lyn Corbray.”

“A formidable knight, a peerless jousting, and my staunchest enemy.”

“But secretly your friend,” said Alayne, uncertain.

“Lyn Corbray is nobody’s friend,” Littlefinger laughed. “Just the same, he will fall on the third day and find his debts paid on the fourth.”

Alayne looked over the page again, admiring Lord Petyr’s handiwork. There were four-and-sixty names from houses all over the Vale—Hersy and Sunderland, Lipps and Upcliff, Egen and Lynderly, Waxley and Pryor. Yet her lord father had so arranged them to gain power over five Lords Declarant and the heir to the Eyrie. Bronze Yohn would stand alone.

With a quill, Petyr circled his choices. “The Brotherhood of Winged Knights, the greatest of swords, the noblest of men. Ser Roland Waynwood, Ser Marwyn Belmore, Ser Harlan Hunter, the brothers Redfort, the Knight of Ninestars, Ser Andrew Tollett, Lord Harrold Hardyng. Has there ever been such a roll of heroes?” Petyr’s thin lips smiled as his hand brushed Alayne’s cheek. “My gift to you. Know their names, sweetling. The saviors of Winterfell.”

Alayne did know them. She felt her tummy tie itself in knots when the herald called them out. To her relief, most of her knights rode true. With just one charge, Ser Mychel unhorsed a knight from House Pryor, smashing the knight’s bright shield of moon eclipsing sun. It took Ser Andrew four tilts, but he did likewise to Ser Schuyler Stone, a hedge knight without device. Ser Everett Moore signaled the Knight of Ninestars for a mercy pass, but Ser Symond struck him down regardless.

Harlan and Eustace each won his tilt, drawing closer to a meeting of brothers on the third day, though it was a near thing for the elder Hunter. He and Lewys of Crab Cove broke three lances apiece, leaving Lord Robert to declare a winner. Her little lord said the knight with the arrows rode steadier, but Alayne suspected that he won because his shield lacked a “scary crab.”

Marwyn Belmore disappointed her, however, breaking only one lance to three by Lord Nestor’s son Albar. Randa squealed with glee at her brother’s victory, while her father nodded with quiet pride. Alayne was careful to cheer just as she’d done for the rest.

In the afternoon, four riders came before the lord’s box for the next matches. “*Ser Alester of House Upclif, a knight of Witch Isle,*” the herald announced. “*Ser*

*Xander, called the Hungry, in service of House Templeton. Ser Gareth of House Sunderland, son of Lord Triston Sunderland. Ser Jon of House Redfort, son of Lord Horton Redfort.*” Alayne sat up straight at the sound of Jon’s name.

The knights dipped their lances in salute, but before they made for their places, Maester Colemon entered the box bearing a large covered cage. He shuffled toward the Lord Protector, but Littlefinger was already out of his seat and signaling the herald. The man nodded, then sounded his trumpet long, and long again.

“*Lords and ladies,*” the herald boomed into the hushed crowd. “*A splendid omen has graced this tourney, for it ushers in the first day of winter.*” As Colemon held the cage aloft, Petyr swept away the sheet to reveal the surprise beneath.

Looking at the color of its feathers, Alayne remembered words from her childhood.

A happy shriek called her back to Sweetrobin. The lordling was beside himself in delight at the enormous bird. Polite applause at the season’s changing was all the crowd could muster.

Ser Gareth bowed his head. “My lord, the beast is white like the moon of your sigil, and it looks more falcon than raven. This is a sign. The gods have blessed your tourney!”

The raven hopped around its cage in some dismay at all the noise, letting out a caw to rival the herald’s cry. Then it turned toward the knights and screamed, “*Jon!*”

After a pause broke out a smattering of uncertain laughter. Jon Redfort lifted his visor to grin at Gareth. “It speaks my name. What better omen than that? The wings are for me this season. That must mean you’ll be flopping back into the sea.”

The raven cocked its head and squawked, “*Beware!*” This time the crowd stayed quiet.

“*Beware!*” it screamed a second time. “*Jon, beware!*”

Jon’s face turned pale as the raven.

It was on the third charge that Ser Jon erred, keeping his shield too low to stop the Sisterman's lance. The tip found the center of his breastplate and he flew from the saddle to the dirt.

*My father will not be happy about that, thought Alayne, but all that truly matters is my betrothed, my Harry. He need win but this one tilt.* Earlier in the day, Ser Byron the Beautiful had gracefully broken three lances on the shield of Ser Shadrich, scraping off his mouse's head in the process. *Ser Byron will let Harry through the second round, Ser Lyn the third. One tilt and he'll stay, we'll be married, the Vale will rise against the Boltons, ... I can go home.*

Ser Harrold Hardyng entered the lists on his destrier, a beast as white as the snow atop the Giant's Lance. Barded in the red-and-white diamonds of House Hardyng, his horse trotted toward the lord's box at a leisurely pace as the crowd roared Harry's name. *They love him well. He knows it, too.* And there were the moon-and-falcon quarterings upon his shield, presenting his claim for all to see. Robert Arryn saw. Alayne wondered what face Harry would make if he could hear Sweetrobin's feeble jeers.

Before the lord's box, the herald bellowed the names of the competitors. The four knights saluted by dipping their lances, though Ser Harrold's effort was little more than a twitch. Harry glanced at Alayne and grinned, but Alayne kept her face still.

"I order you to make him fly, Ser Wallace!" Robert suddenly blurted out.

Wallace bowed his head. "I w-w-will make him fl- f- ... soar from his saddle, my lord."

Harry scowled, closed his visor, and cantered off. Butterflies fluttered in Alayne's stomach. *No, not butterflies. Bats.* She looked to her father, but he only smirked, his eyes locked on Harry. Alayne said a prayer, the trumpet sounded, and the knights rode.

**CRACK.**

There was an explosion of lances ... though not Harry's or Wallace's. Ser Morgarth the Merry and Ser Gregor Egen had struck each other's shields, but the knights Alayne watched had missed each other and now reared their horses around for another pass. Their second charge was as fruitless as the first.

“Oh, dear,” Lord Nestor groaned.

It took nine passes for Harry to break two lances, Wallace one. The boys were then given warning to present their shields properly, though the knights’ aim did not soon improve on the tenth or eleventh go. On the twelfth charge, the Waynwood knight leaned too far toward the tilting barrier, lost his balance, and fell from his mount. It was decided that Ser Harrold had unhorsed him. Though the tilt was an embarrassment for Harry, Alayne was awash in relief.

Her solace was short-lived. Ser Lyn Corbray was next to enter the lists through the shield-covered gate. When the knight tilted against Ser Ossifer, lance met lips with such force that Ossifer’s charger went down with him. The horse got back up, but Ser Ossifer had to be carried from the field with a broken ankle. Alayne shuddered, thinking of the poor Sunderland boy who would face Ser Lyn on the morrow.

The Sisterman was handsome and a fine dancer, Randa’s smirks aside. Her father said the knights from Houses Sunderland, Pryor, and Elesham had been invited for their skill at jousting—or, more precisely, for their lack of skill. The islands of the Bite were as poor and bleak as the Fingers, Petyr had told her, filled with fish, fishermen, and the smell of fish. “In truth, they are more squishers than men,” he’d added with a laugh, though Alayne had never heard of a squisher.

“My lady Alayne,” the Sunderland knight had called to her as she’d strolled past his green-and-blue pavilion only a few hours before. “I bid you good morning.”

“You bid me? I know you not, yet you would have me do your bidding.”

“I only meant ...” the boy started, before catching Alayne’s playful look. “My apologies. You granted me a dance and I had not even the courtesy to give you my name. I am Ser Daemon.”

“Daemon?” asked Alayne. “Like the rogue prince?” In the stories, Daemon Targaryen was ruthless. *Ruthless and gallant.*

“I am not such a rogue as that one.” The boy was no older than eight-and-ten, with brown hair and brown eyes. One of his teeth was a bit crooked, but Alayne found him dashing all the same. “Lord Robert summoned us to defend him. I see no greater honor than in doing so, if I should prove worthy.”

“Then well met, Ser Daemon *the Honorable*,” she said with a mock curtsy. “I pray the Warrior shall guide your lance. If you will excuse me, I must find my father before the tilts commence.”

“Of course, my lady.” The knight bowed his head.

Alayne took four steps, then shot a sly look over her shoulder. “Unless there is some favor you would beg of me?”

The green ribbon from Alayne’s hair was wrapped about Daemon’s arm as he broke three lances against Ser Leon Elesham. It was a grand performance. *Was that my doing?* A lady’s favor was known to hearten men in the joust, giving them the courage and confidence to prevail. But the victory had put him in Lyn Corbray’s way. *Does Ser Lyn know what mercy is?*

For the day’s final tilt, the Orphan of Godsgrace arrived in a motley of mismatched armor. His breastplate was old and rusty, showing a Waynwood wheel painted over in haste with red and black between its spokes. In the center of the new sigil was a golden hand, repeated on his shield, drawn with skill equal to that of the Lord of the Eyrie. As a crest, a lobstered gauntlet had been affixed atop his helm. The man looked more a fool than Florian, but the snickering ceased when the Orphan’s lance sent Ser Hector Hardyng to the earth. Victorious, the mystery knight galloped off the field and back to his tent without even interrupting his charge.

“What Dornishman would even come to the Vale?” asked Ser Byron that night in the Great Hall. “They think snowflakes are tiny white demons that steal their young. It’s why they keep south of Blackhaven.”

“Word is some Yronwood knights went missing a few months back,” said Andrew Tollett. “Lord Anders’ own son Cletus, along with his nephew and some others. The Bloodroyal won’t say where they went. The Orphan must be one of those.”

“Couldn’t he be Oberyn Martell’s squire?” asked Strong Sam Stone. “I think *he* was from Godsgrace. Or maybe it was the Hellholt.”

“I say he’s the ghost of Aron Santagar,” put in Ben Coldwater. “He has returned from the dead for one last tourney. He hides a crushed skull beneath that helm, I bet.”



“Is it time for wagers, then? Fifty dragons on the Orphan to win his next tilt!” yelled Lord Belmore.

“Deal,” called back Littlefinger.

Alayne had no seat of honor at this meal; the places around the dais had been reserved for the victorious. *Ser Roland*, Alayne saw, *Ser Andrew*. *The Knight of Ninestars* and *Ser Harlan*. *Ser Mychel*. *Harry the Heir*. Only six of her eight, but it made no matter: Ser Marwyn was at the Gates already, and Jon Redfort’s brother would be hostage enough. *Had it all gone perfectly, it would have been too obvious, in truth*. Amongst two-and-thirty winners’ chairs, one sat empty. The mystery knight who sparked so much conjecture was still in his tent, though the squires of Donnel Waynwood and Hector Hardyng had taken him a tray of food.

As she ate, Alayne was subject to several passionate explanations of jousting and its strategy. The game took not only strength and speed and balance, old Oswell told her, but also planning, cunning, and deception. “It is *cyvasse* on destrier,” he said, speaking of the game he’d brought up with him from Gulltown. Ser Targon the Halfwild, reaching generously for a more feminine comparison, told her tilts were “no less than song with lance.”

“I won didn’t I? The boy’s stupid plume met dirt all the same,” Ser Gareth Sunderland said in dismissal of Lymond Lynderly’s criticism. The two would not meet in the lists and made frank talk.

“His helm is not your concern,” scolded Ser Lymond. “It was there to distract you and that it did. Look to his shield and only his shield. Before your horse, rides your lance; before your lance, rides your gaze.”

After dinner, Alayne met Sweetrobin in his tower for the game of rats and cats she’d promised him. She bid her little lord count seven sevens, then rushed down the corridor to his chambers. After pushing aside a stack of doublets, she found room to curl up inside his wardrobe, shutting the doors behind her. A minute later, the hinge of the chamber door groaned. She held her breath, waiting for his giggles.

“We can speak here,” she heard instead. “I must wait to give the boy his sleeping draught.”

“Which potion is it?” asked a second voice, more high and shrill than the first.

Alayne did not move. *As still as stone*, she thought, recalling her surname. She glimpsed a grey robe from between the wardrobe's doors.

"Mummer's wine," replied the first man. He sounded familiar. "The Lord Protector wants me dosing him day and night. His bastard commands me, too. If I heeded them, the boy would be dead five times over."

The second man let out a quick cackle. "Ebrose says that a man's belief can cure half of what ails him." His footsteps grew louder, and suddenly the wardrobe shifted and creaked as he leaned against it. "What of the white raven? What does the conclave say?"

"One loose in the east, two chained by the King of Meereen." She could place this first voice now: it was Maester Colemon. "Daenerys herself is missing."

The second man breathed a sigh of relief. "This is good news, is it not?"

Colemon grunted. "They live. This Meereenese king could make a new rider, or fail and let another loose. The stray could be claimed by the slave cities or Aegon or the ironmen for all we know."

"They don't have the blood."

"We thought Daenerys didn't either. You have your copper link; you know the tale of Nettles."

"Has anyone gotten a raven from Kedry?"

"We are blind when it comes to the Dornish," said Colemon. "Though in Oldtown they say Marwyn—"

The hinge of the chamber door creaked again and a boy asked, "What are you doing in my chambers? I have to find Alayne."

"The lady is not here," said Colemon. "My lord, would you like honeyed milk before bed?"

The sound of footsteps faded. Alayne waited till she heard nothing, then a long while after that.

The next morning, Alayne could not find her father, so she broke her fast with Sweetrobin. They ate bacon, melon, and eggs boiled soft, as they had every day since coming to the Gates. It was a meal he had oft taken with the Lady Lysa, it seemed. Alayne looked at the boy and thought of Maester Colemon's words.

*Mummer's wine ... the white raven's message ... blood.* She could not find the sense in them.

Alayne put her hand on the boy's head, caressing his hair. "Sweetrobin, do you know the tale of Nettles?" she asked. "Or of Daenerys?" The names seemed familiar, but she had forgotten the details.

"Nettles was a beautiful bastard girl—like you, Alayne," said Robert through a mouth stuffed with egg. "And she could fly! She came to the Vale on dragonback and ruled as queen over the Burned Men. Daenerys was a Dornish princess." Bits of egg sprayed from his mouth to land upon the table.

Alayne remembered the stories now, but they did not solve the puzzle for her. *An Aegon, a Dornish princess, a warning for Ser Jon.* How did they all fit? They were related to Ser Marwyn Belmore, and Oldtown, and the Dornish mystery knight, she knew, but how?

Half as many competitors would compete on the second day of tilts, but only a single lane was to be used henceforth instead of two, so the day would be just as long. Alayne arrived at her seat as the trumpets called the first jousts to the field.

"Father," Alayne said. "We should speak ...". She did not know how to explain what she had heard while crammed in the wardrobe. "It's about Ser Marwyn ... and Ser Jon ... and the Dornishman. I believe—"

"You need not trouble yourself, my sweet," Petyr assured her. "Our plans are all intact. But remember, there are spies about." He raised a finger to his lips and smiled.

And at first, all the pieces seemed to move as they'd planned. Ser Mychel broke three lances against his opponent, as did Ser Eustace; both would advance to the final day. Ser Roland was the victor against Ser Morgarth, who all but leapt from his horse at the touch of the Waynwood knight's lance. *My father's man*, Alayne smiled to herself. *One piece given to take a stronger one.* It was *cyvasse* on destrier after all.

The position changed with the arrival of Mya Stone.

Today the mule girl was not dressed in leathers, but in a black woolen dress with a sable trim and a matching shawl collar. Despite the cold, the bodice was cut deep to reveal the top of the bastard girl's breasts. Her short black hair was

combed and styled in a fashionable tumble. Her cheeks were pink, her lips red. The girl made Alayne feel homely by comparison, though her eyes were sullen and unsure.

“Mya,” Randa greeted her, rising. “We thank you for joining us. As Lord Petyr’s daughter has been given such a favorable seat, I thought it only fitting that the daughter of a king receive the same.”

Myranda reached over the railing of the lord’s box to squeeze the soft, clean hands of the mule girl. Mya only nodded, then took a seat on the high-backed chair beside Alayne’s.

“*Ser Lothor of House Brune, called the Apple-Eater, in service of House Arryn!*” the herald was announcing. When the applause finally quieted, he yelled “*The Orphan of Godsgrace!*” and it returned louder still.

The men saluted Robert with their lances, but Ser Lothor’s gaze never left Mya Stone. The Orphan was halfway to the south end of the field when Brune realized he was alone before the lord’s box. He snapped his visor shut and cantered south after his opponent—then realized his mistake, turned hastily about, and galloped back north. Littlefinger made a jape of it to Nestor Royce, but Alayne saw him rub his temples.

The rest went as her father must have feared. The trumpet was sounded and the horses spurred, but Ser Lothor’s horse set off a moment late. The Orphan struck the center of Brune’s shield, while Ser Lothor only grazed the Orphan’s shoulder. They wheeled around and took up new lances for the second pass, but Alayne was already thinking of the morrow. *It will be the Orphan who will face Ser Roland.*

As Lothor Brune lay on the ground, the Orphan dropped what was left of his lance and galloped once more through the sea of pavilions to his lonely tent.

“Off goes the Hermit of Godsgrace,” remarked Lord Nestor, “and your bag of your dragons, eh?”

Her father forced a laugh. “I wish Lord Belmore joy of them until our next wager.” Only Alayne saw how tight his knuckles clenched as he gripped the rail between them.

If her father's scheme had sprung a leak, the rest of the day saw it half-sunk. Ser Edmund Waxley broke three lances to Ser Symond's two; the Knight of Ninestars would not find his glory amongst the Winged Knights. Nor would Andrew Tollett, nor Harlan Hunter. In the space of an afternoon her six had dwindled to three.

The only welcome result of the afternoon was Harry's victory over Ser Byron the Beautiful, though that outcome had been certain from the start. The hedge knight's skill in the joust exceeded even his comeliness: during each charge, he deftly dropped his lance to miss both knight and shield, whilst guiding his own shield directly to Harry's tip. In just five passes, he made Harry look almost accomplished.

When the knight who wore her favor trotted before the lord's box, bats flapped restlessly in Alayne's stomach. She smiled for him, then said a silent prayer to the Mother.

*"Ser Lyn of House Corbray, heir to Heart's Home," boomed the herald. "Ser Daemon of House Sunderland, son of Lord Triston Sunderland."*

"The Sistermen have such drab helms," Randa remarked, glancing sidelong at Alayne. She had recognized the ribbon, then. "He could use a plume. Mayhaps a piece of kelp?"

Nestor Royce laughed. "Soon his helm will have ornament enough, I think. The tip of Ser Lyn's lance!" "How many Sistermen does it take to saddle a mount?" Sweetrobin joined in. "Nine! Eight to fetch the saddle and one to haul up the fish!" Lord Nestor and Myranda laughed with him politely, though the fool Benjicot had told this jape the night before in the Great Hall. Alayne forced smiled as well.

At the signal, the knights' steeds sped forward. When the lances struck, Ser Lyn's burst into a thousand shards while Daemon's slid off its target still intact. The knights turned their horses about, Lyn was passed a new lance, they charged again. This time, both lances broke with an echoing crack.

*One more break and Ser Lyn advances, Alayne prayed. Daemon will make it through the day intact.*

As the third charge commenced, however, Lyn Corbray's saddle shifted beneath him and his body slid sideways toward the tilt barrier. He dropped his

shield and leaned forward, grasping for his mount's crinet. Daemon's lance caught him in the shoulder and drove him into the mud.

A cacophony of gasps, groans, and applause rippled through the crowd. Petyr was grinning through gritted teeth, mindful even now of his feigned enmity with the knight. Ser Lyn was not so restrained. Once he found his feet, he stormed back to the groom charged with saddling his horse and struck him briskly with his gauntlet. The boy's nose spurted blood as he fell to the ground.

It was near dusk when the second day of tilting concluded, and another dinner was held to honor the triumphant six-and-ten. "Ser Mychel," Alayne whispered. "Ser Roland. Harry the Heir." A terse prayer, now, and what remained was yet uncertain. On the morrow, Mychel would ride against one of the elder Sunderlands, Roland would tilt with the fierce Orphan, and Harry would face ... a real opponent.

Alayne was not surprised when her father wasn't seen at the meal. *He is working to salvage what he can of this.* She didn't know why Lord Nestor and Maester Colemon were not there either, though.

Before the first course was served, Hunter's maester whispered in the ear of Lord Gilwood, who spoke to Lord Symond, who talked with Lady Anya in turn. Once Lady Anya conferred with Miranda Royce, it was a matter of time, and not much of it, before everyone in the Great Hall heard the news.

Two ravens, black as their tidings, had reached the Gates of the Moon.

The news from King's Landing was tragic. Kevan Lannister, the Lord Regent, had been murdered, as had the Grand Maester. Lord Mace Tyrell, the queen's father and Tommen's Hand, now ruled the realm in all but name.

"I can understand the regent, but why kill the old maester?" Ser Qarl of the Lake asked Everett Moore.

"I bet the old man knew the truth," said Ser Everett. "Just look at those tapestries and the bastard mule girl. It's plain as day."

As alarming as the news from the Red Keep had been, it was the second raven, the one from Harrenhal, that stirred more chatter and commotion. Ser Bonifer Hasty, the castellan of her father's seat, had rebelled against the crown, naming

himself Lord of Harrenhal and declaring himself for a King Aegon Targaryen, whose sellsword army suddenly controlled most of the stormlands.

The news was dizzying to Alayne. *Aegon*, she thought. *But what of Ser Jon and the Dornish Princess?* She wondered whether this invasion would spoil what remained of her own plans, ruin her betrothal, prevent a march on Winterfell.

She decided to play spymaster that night in her father's absence. As the wine was brought out, she made pleasant chatter with the serving girls, then passed them copper stars for what they could overhear.

"If he is not Lord of Harrenhal, to what does he owe his title?" Lord Grafton was heard to ask of Symond Templeton.

"He will never surrender the title of Lord Protector," Lord Gilwood Hunter had worried. "He has no seat to return to."

"W-w-won't the c-crown take the c-c-castle back?" Wallace Waynwood had wondered of Mads Melcolm.

"With what men?" Ser Mads had replied. "They must needs first check the Golden Company's advance. Their northern allies are repelling Stannis; their fleet is dealing with the ironmen; there's no one to lay a winter siege."

"It will fall to Riverrun to retake Harrenhal," Donnel Waynwood declared to a table of knights within Alayne's own hearing. "Emmon Frey will take the castle and any other lands he wants and he will never give them back. Then he will sue for peace with whichever king prevails."

"Brune. The tract the crown promised you—it's in the riverlands, aye?" asked Alester Upcliff, arching an eyebrow.

Ser Lothor nodded to his reflection in the ale.

"Welcome back to the company of landless knights." Gregor Egen raised his own cup in a toast.

Ser Donnel was not finished. "Once Emmon has taken Littefinger's seat, he is certain to move on Darry," he told them.

"Is Darry not held by a Lady Frey already?" asked Lymond Lynderly. "Merrett Frey's wife, or perhaps his daughter? They are of the same house."

"Emmon has no love for his half-brothers or their children either." said Donnel impatiently. "And Merrett's daughter is a lonely widow of ten-and-eight. Her kin

marched north to worship trees. When spring comes, they will be lords or corpses. In either case, they will not come to her aid.”

“That’s for the rivermen to sort out,” said Ser Gulian.

“Are those the words of your house?” Ser Donnel gave a mocking laugh. “Look at this lot of hedge knights and second sons. You all have a place to lay your head tonight, but will you on the morrow? In a year? In ten? Will you find lords with open hands when you can no longer swing a sword or lift a lance? We laugh at crippled Ossifer today, but that is the fate of each and every one of us.”

The knights around him shifted in their seats uncomfortably, save Ser Hector, who smirked and poured himself another drink. The maester who came with House Hunter was listening, but Ser Donnel paid him and Alayne no mind.

“In the riverlands, the Freys are going to war. It’s not just Emmon Frey. At the Twins, the heir feuds with his brother. And when brother kills brother, the ones left standing are the sisters.” Donnel’s smile was savage, baring his teeth. “The unwed daughters, the widows, the orphaned maids, they will all need husbands to sire them whelps. And they will choose from the men who come to defend their lands. If the crown will not send those men, who will?”

Alayne’s ears wanted to hear more of the knights’ chatter. Her bladder had a different desire. *I should not have had the second glass of wine.* She was forced to excuse herself to find the privy. The gods were good and Maddy was near to help her with her dress.

When she had finished, she found Ser Harrold waiting for her in the corridor, a grin on his face. “Lady Alayne, I am sorry to have spurned your offer. Will you show me to my chambers after all?” Ignoring the servant, he took Alayne by the hand and walked, but did not lead her to the Falcon Tower. Instead they found a room that sat unused, a room to be alone in.

Once he had shut the door, Harry’s eyes met Alayne’s. He put a hand under Alayne’s chin, tilting her face upward. Then he pressed his lips to hers. Her heart beat wildly, though not so wildly as the wings of the bat she must have swallowed. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. It reminded her of her first kiss, a dim memory. Then his tongue was in her mouth and his hands on her back, pulling her in.



*This is what it is to be kissed, Alayne thought, truly kissed.*

The knight slid his right hand from Alayne's back to her hip, then up her ribs until it was cupping her breast. She pulled her head back with an uncomfortable laugh. "My lord, we should return to the feast."

Harry chortled, eyes glimmering with confidence. "Should we, my lady? You said you wanted to know how I joust." He took her hand and placed it against himself. "Today I showed Ser Byron. It would be unfair not to show you."

Alayne's eyes opened wide. "Ser, I am a maid. You ... *We* must wait till we are wed." She pulled her hand free and turned to leave.

With one long stride he caught her and grabbed her above the elbow. "Well, you've made me chase you." Suddenly she was on the ground, breathless, and he was climbing onto her. "Have you played long enough at innocence, bastard girl, or should I tear your clothes for you as well?"

"Stop! Please, stop!" she shouted as he rubbed his body against hers. He clasped one hand over her mouth to quiet her. The other began to unlace his breeches.

"Hush, girl," he said. "We will only seal our betrothal. Now let me see this pointy beard of yours." He finished with his laces and reached between her legs.

"No!" Alayne let out a muffled scream.

"Leave her be, cousin!" Harry froze at the command. There in the door stood Sweetrobin, Ser Lothor behind him. "Else I'll make you fly!" he added, as menacing as the boy of eight could make himself. "I am the Lord of the Eyrie and I *demand* Alayne come with me and read me a story!"

His eyes on Brune, Harry swore, rose, tucked his manhood back into his breeches. When she found her own feet, Alayne ran past the boy in the door and kept on running.

She locked the door to her chamber, sat with her back against the door and closed her eyes.

Sometime later, when her breathing had slowed, Alayne thought about what to do. Should she tell Petyr? *Lothor has told him by now.* What about Anya Waynwood? Perhaps Harry would break their betrothal. *But I will see the Winged Knights every day.* What was to become of her plan, her future?

*Harry the Arse.* Brune's words. Petyr's man had saved her again. Harry was more than an arse, though. He was a monster. *My father could not have foreseen this.*

*Could he?*

Sansa wept and thought of Winterfell.

Alayne decided it had never happened.

The next morning she woke from restless sleep. Her shoulders ached, her eyes were dry. She had no appetite, so she did not rise for breakfast. Instead she lay just as she was, exhausted. When her eyes opened again, she thought of Sweetrobin. *Her presence soothes Lord Robert.* Reluctantly she bestirred herself.

She found her little lord in the lord's box beside Nestor and Myranda Royce, all looking cheerful. Petyr Baelish was oddly absent.

"Where is my lord father?" asked Alayne. "Lord father?" asked Randa. "Can we really call him that anymore? He still has dominion over those rocks and sheep in the Fingers, I suppose. Though it's queer—with all the chaos in the realm, the only talk this morning was of the debauchery last night."

Alayne's eyes widened. *Does she know? What tale did Harry tell?*

"You did not hear? Mychel Redfort was caught abed with Mya Stone. Lady Redfort will not be too pleased about that, nor Bronze Yohn either."

Alayne stared. "Mychel and Mya," she said slowly. "Do you think this will affect his tilt today?"

"I pray you did not make a wager," Randa laughed. "My girl, the tilt is done. Ser Aubrey Sunderlands' rod cast Mychel far from the skiff."

Numbly, Alayne looked to where the sun hung in the sky. It was past noon; she had overslept by hours. Myranda and Sweetrobin told her of what else she'd missed: Ser Aubrey's brother Gareth had also won his tilt, as had Lymond Lynderly and Alester Upcliff; Ben Coldwater had fallen to the hedge knight Targon the Halfwild; Harlan Hunter's brother Eustace had earned a place among the lord's protectors, though Alayne thought he could use protectors of his own.

"What of Ser Roland Waynwood?" she asked.

Here Lord Nestor broke in. "The Dornishman charged three times and broke three lances. I have never seen such a fine performance in the lists! If he'd had a

hundred Dornishmen like that at the Trident, the Mad King would sit the throne still.”

Soon Sweetrobin needed the privy, so Lord Nestor escorted him back to the castle, leaving Miranda alone in the box. She moved over to Petyr’s empty seat beside Alayne.

“Remind me again, Alayne,” Randa asked. “How many years have you?” “Four-and-ten,” Alayne replied.

“You do have a youthful look,” Miranda said. “Perhaps it was being ripped from your mother’s womb so early. Lord Baelish had charge of the Gulltown port scarce more than fourteen years ago, according to my father’s records. Your mother could have carried you but three moons.”

*It was a mistake to make myself older.* “He ... visited beforehand. It was love that drove him to seek the post, that he might return.”

“Yes, and it was Lady Lysa’s love that got it for him, from what I hear,” said Miranda.

“My father had many admirers.”

“Aye,” said Miranda. “As did our lady.” Her brown eyes narrowed. “Marillion’s crime was a heinous one. It *fell* to the Royces, Keepers of the Gates of the Moon, to clean up the mess he made, you know.”

Alayne had not wanted to think of that. “I pray she was buried with ... the honors due her house.”

“Oh, we did our best,” Miranda assured her vaguely, “with what the scavengers hadn’t taken, anyway. Our men gathered up a braid of auburn hair, some sapphires and moon-stones, a velvet dress colored cream and pink and red. And ... the rest. So many pieces, so many things in pairs. Two arms, so pale and lovely. A couple of legs; knees and feet to match. There were of course twin lungs, kidneys, matching eyes of blue—as lovely as your own. And three shoes.”

Alayne blinked. “Three?”

Randa grinned. “Half again two, one shy of four. I made the count twice, then thrice.”

“I do not understand,” Alayne lied.

“As I did not. I knew Lady Lysa well, and I never observed her to have three feet. So someone must have been with her at the Moon Door before she fell. But who?”

“Marillion.” Alayne’s left hand clenched the arm of her chair.

“Ah, but the shoe was far too small. Marillion had the voice of a young lady, but not the feet, as I remember him.”

*As still as stone.* “Perhaps ... Eagles are known to carry things long leagues—”

“Up to the Eyrie and into your chambers?” asked Myranda dryly. “That’s where Carrot, my mule boy, found the shoe’s mate.” She stared at Alayne, unblinking. “Sansa Stark, *enough*. You are the very image of the aunt you murdered, however dark you dye your hair, and you named Lord Eddard’s bastard for me on the mountain.”

*Jon*, the raven had shrieked. *Beware. I should have fled while I could.* The Wall was safe, far away at the ends of the earth, so close to home. “What do you want?”

“Harry, of course,” said Myranda. “And the prize Littlefinger stole from my father when he took Lady Lysa to wife—the Vale itself. Your clever plan to keep Harry here will work. As it happens, you have me to thank for much of it. Ser Lyn’s saddle? My doing. Corbray was Bronze Yohn’s man, bought and paid for. He would have knocked Harry flat whatever he’d told you. Now Harry will face that green Sisterman instead, the boy with your ribbon.”

“But Harry is ...” Alayne wanted to say what he truly was. “My betrothed.”

“He will not be for much longer. Lady Anya knew what this tourney was, as I did. Her own son Donnel provided that mystery knight, but I helped him defeat Ser Lothor; thanks to me, Anya’s grandson Roland was spared your brotherhood of winged wards. In her gratitude, she has agreed to arrange my betrothal to Harry once you are gone.”

“Gone?” Alayne could barely speak. “Randa, we are friends.”

“We are,” said Myranda. “And I am showing you mercy, Lady Stark, more than you showed Lady Lysa. You and your lover Petyr will leave on the morrow for Gulltown. From there you can sail to Braavos or wherever you choose, so long as it is across the Narrow Sea. Live with the Dothraki, if you like.”

As Myranda stood to retake her seat, Sansa rose too, hoping to frame some reply, some offer, some plea. When the words did not come, she dropped back into her chair like a sack of gold, trying to think despite the drumming of horses' hooves on hard-packed soil. *My face must not betray me.* She had to speak with Lord Littlefinger, with her father. It was the only way.

After what seemed an eternity, Petyr arrived in the lord's box, a grim look upon his face. With him came Lord Nestor and Sweetrobin.

"You missed much this morning," Petyr said, sitting beside Alayne. "I imagine you have heard the news about Mychel and Roland. It matters not. Nor does Hasty and that ruin in the riverlands. What matters is the Vale army, and Harry was always the key to that. We'll work out our next move once he defeats this Sunderland boy."

"Father ..." Alayne began. Her throat was dry. She wanted to tell him of what Harry had done, of what Myranda had said, of what she had heard from within the wardrobe, but no words came. *He will blame me, Alayne thought, for all of this.* She had said too much to Randa, had spoken the wrong words to Harry. *Even the favor was my doing.*

When the final tilt was called, Ser Harrold Hardyng and Ser Daemon Sunderland rode up on their mounts for their salute to Lord Robert. This time Harry's lance did not move. Cheers and whoops hailed "The Young Falcon!" as the knights trotted to position.

The trumpet sounded and the two green boys put spur to horse. As black horse raced toward white, Daemon's lance slipped from his grasp and dropped to the ground. Then Harry's shattered on the side of the Sisterman's helm. "Oh!" moaned the crowd, but Daemon was still ahorse when he reached the south end of the lists. He removed his helm and called for a fresh lance from his squire. The Sunderland boy looked to Alayne, donned his helm once more, and began his charge. This time both lances broke.

Alayne clapped loudly, ignoring an odd look from her father. Beyond him, she saw Sweetrobin leaning forward in anticipation, repeating a word under his breath: "*Fly ... fly ... fly.*" His eyes fixed themselves on Harry, unblinking, as if he were in a trance.

The knights made their third charge, lances couched. This time Harry's horse seemed to stumble.

*CRACK.*

Harry's lance missed Daemon completely, while Daemon's exploded into a cloud of splinters, raining wood upon the lists. The horses halted once again at the ends of the field.

*Now they are tied,* Alayne thought. *One more charge and ...*

Harry teetered a little in his saddle, paused, then fell hard to the dirt. His horse whickered nervously and turned to circle around him. On its caparison, some white diamonds had turned to red. When she stood for a better view of the fallen knight, Alayne could see blood oozing out from between cuisse and codpiece, from the thigh some wooden shard had found.

Maesters Colemon and Willamen were dashing onto the field, Strong Sam Stone behind them. Alayne only stared at the scene dully.

After a few minutes, she turned to her right. "Father. *Father.* What will we do?"

Petyr Baelish's grey-green eyes did not look her way. They did not seem to be looking at anything.

"Petyr!" Alayne yelled. He did not answer. "Littlefinger!"

Eyes as cold as ice met hers at last. Then he stood and left without a word.

Alayne sank into her seat. She felt numb. *Widowhood will become you,* Lord Baelish had told her, though she and Harry had never wed. She had no tears, not this time. Not for Harrold, nor for Winterfell. Had she wanted this?

Hours passed. Lords Grafton and Belmore paid their respects. A few of the knights offered her condolences.

"Your betrothed died bravely, my lady," remarked Edmund Breakstone. "Like his ancestor Humfrey at Ashford."

Ben Coldwater buried his face in his hand. "That was Humfrey Beesbury, you dolt."

At some point, Donnel Waynwood's squire brought her a blanket. The boy's overcoat was quartered with the broken wheel of Waynwood and twin towers.

"Thank you," she said, thinking of Ser Donnel's words to the table of knights. "What is your name?"

“Sandor.”

The name felt funny to Alayne. “Like the ... song?”

The boy smiled. “Yes, my lady.”

“Can you sing it for me?” She remembered how Marillion would sing of Sandor of the mist.

“My voice is of a frog, my lady.”

“I am certain it will suit.”

The boy looked about shyly to see that no one else was listening. Then he nodded.

*A boy wanders the mist of morn,  
For refuge he does roam.  
O'er lonely hills poor Sandor climbs,  
Mayhaps for a new home.*

There would be no melee; Lord Nestor said it would be unseemly. In its stead would be a simple ceremony to name Lord Robert's champions to the Brotherhood of Winged Knights. They had planned to do this on the morrow, to erect a platform, to weld wings to each knight's helm, to set a lavish feast with wine and music and splendor. None of that would happen now, no more than anything else they'd planned. Most of their guests were leaving the next morning: best be home before the snows came, they said.

And so, in a grassy field beside the Gates of the Moon, a circle of gloomy spectators gathered around Lord Robert and his chosen few. Seven, Alayne thought. *The gods have had their way after all.* Sweetrobin had denied Ser Daemon the honor, at Petyr's insistence. The resulting holy sum would appease Septon Vayon's piety, even if the presence of a stranger among the seven gave him pause.

Mixed into the crowd were the competitors who'd fallen, donning silver cloaks fixed with lapis wings. Ser Ben and Ser Andrew whispered between them, quibbling over who'd shown the finest jousting form. Ser Shadrich said a few words into the ear of Ser Morgarth, who glanced furtively at Alayne. Ser Lyn

brooded in silence, Lady Forlorn at his hip. Even Ossifer Lipps had hobbled from his pavilion, standing with the help of a crutch and Ser Owen. Littlefinger too had emerged at last, though he had not chosen to take part in the ceremony. He stood beside Lord Grafton, stone-faced.

As the sun set behind the mountains, the crowd hushed for the naming of Lord Robert's knights.

"Ser Gareth Sunderland, son of Triston Sunderland," Lord Nestor spoke. "Do you swear to shield Lord Robert of House Arryn, keep his counsel, and if need be give your life for his, in the names of the Father, the Mother, the Warrior, the Smith, the Crone, and the Maiden?"

The knight knelt. "I swear."

The rest were named in turn. *Ser Gareth*, Alayne saw, *Ser Lymond*. *Ser Alester*, *Ser Targon*, *Ser Aubrey*, *Ser Eustace*. Only adequate knights, from what she had seen, and not a valuable ward amongst them.

Finally it was the mystery knight's turn. Excitement washed through the murmuring crowd as the time came to learn the Orphan of Godsgrace's true identity.

He approached Lord Robert, knelt, and removed his helm.

The Lord of the Eyrie's face shone brighter than Alayne had ever seen. The boy squealed and ran to the knight, burying his face in a shoulder. Muffled as it was, his laughter still rang through the field. He laughed and laughed, drawing smiles and chuckles from all around. Sweetrobin was breathless, holding on to the old man hard.

In time, though, the laughter shifted. The boy wheezed between yelps once, then again. He breathed hard, harder still. What followed were tears. Robert sobbed, quietly at first, like a pattering of rain. Soon, the squall was upon them. As the boy wept, his body shuttered and shook, though it was no spell.

"I miss her, uncle," the boy wailed. "I miss her."

The crowd stood silent in the cold dusk around the howling of their little lord.

*The cries of the orphan.*

The grey-haired knight was still a while, not seeming to know what he should do. Then he raised a hand to the boy's head and stroked his hair.



When the boy's tears began to subside, the old knight stood. "I have returned from Riverrun, where my nephew opened his gates to Emmon Frey rather than see his son launched over them. As I see it, when Edmure renounced his seat, it rightfully passed to his nephew Robert. I beseech the honorable knights here to do their duty and claim the castle in the name of their lord."

No one spoke. Sweetrobin turned from his great-uncle to reveal swollen eyes and a red face, wet with tears and snot.

It was Donnel Waynwood who stepped forward to break the silence. "Ser Brynden. Don't you mean that we should claim the castle for our *king*?" Ser Donnel unsheathed his sword and placed it at Sweetrobin's feet, kneeling. "King Robert of Mountain and Vale!"

Alayne spied Maester Willamen whispering in Gilwood Hunter's ear. The lord nodded, then stepped forward and said, "The treachery at Harrenhal must be dealt with as well. It falls to us to bring justice to the riverlands." He took a place beside Ser Donnel and bent the knee. "King of Mountain and Vale!"

"The King of the Trident!" Hector Hardyng added, placing his sword next to Donnel's, his knee on the earth. "King of Mountain, Vale, and Rivers!" Their swords were joined by a blade of Valyrian steel as Lyn Corbray knelt beside Ser Hector.

Ser Eustace Hunter was next, followed by Ser Gregor Egen and Ser Luke Grafton. The three Sunderland brothers joined them, then the rest of the winged brothers. "King of Mountain, Vale and Rivers!" they proclaimed him, their swords a heap.

The Blackfish met the young lord's gaze, nodded, knelt. The baffled boy sniffled and turned to see the remaining Waynwoods kneel, then Harlan Hunter, Samwell Stone, Lords Grafton and Belmore.

When Alayne looked at Littlefinger, a strange smile had erupted across his face. He too bent the knee.

Soon all, lords and ladies, knights and squires, servants and commoners alike were kneeling before Robert Arryn.

*Their little king.*



## ARIANNE

All along the south coast of Cape Wrath rose crumbling stone watchtowers, raised in ancient days to give warning of Dornish raiders stealing in across the sea. Villages had grown up about the towers. A few had flowered into towns.

The *Peregrine* made port at the Weeping Town, where the corpse of the Young Dragon had once lingered for three days on its journey home from Dorne. The banners flapping from the town's stout wooden walls still displayed King Tommen's stag-and-lion, suggesting that here at least the writ of the Iron Throne might still hold sway. "Guard your tongues," Arianne warned her company as they disembarked. "It would be best if King's Landing never knew we'd passed this way." Should Lord Connington's rebellion be put down, it would go ill for them if it was known that Dorne had sent her to treat with him and his pretender. That was another lesson that her father had taken pains to teach her; choose your side with care, and only if they have the chance to win.

They had no trouble buying horses, though the cost was five times what it would have been last year. "They're old, but sound," claimed the hostler. "you'll not find better this side of Storm's End. The griffin's men seize every horse and

mule they come upon. Oxen too. Some will make a mark upon a paper if you ask for payment, but there's others who would just as soon cut your belly open and pay you with a handful of your own guts. If you come on any such, mind your tongues and give the horses up."

The town was large enough to support three inns, and all their common rooms were rife with rumors. Arianne sent her men into each of them, to hear what they might hear. In the Broken Shield, Daemon Sand was told that the great septy on the Holf of Men had been burned and looted by raiders from the sea, and a hundred young novices from the motherhouse on Maiden Isle carried off into slavery. In the Loon, Joss Hood learned that half a hundred men and boys from the Weeping Town had set off north to join Jon Connington at Griffin's Roost, including young Ser Addam, old Lord Whitehead's son and heir. But in the aptly named Drunken Dornishman, Feathers heard men muttering that the griffin had put Red Ronnet's brother to death and raped his maiden sister. Ronnet himself was said to be rushing south to avenge his brother's death and his sister's dishonor.

That night Arianne dispatched the first of her ravens back to Dorne, reporting to her father on all they'd seen and heard. The next morning her company set out for Mistwood, as the first rays of the rising sun were slanting through the peaked roofs and crooked alleys of the Weeping Town. By midmorning a light rain began to fall, as they were making their way north through a land of green fields and little villages. As yet, they had seen no signs of fighting, but all the other travelers along the rutted road seemed to be going in the other direction, and the women in the villages they passed gazed at them with wary eyes and kept their children close. Further north, the fields gave way to rolling hills and thick groves of old forest, the road dwindled to a track, and villages became less common.

Dusk found them on the fringes of the rainwood, a wet green world where brooks and rivers ran through dark forests and the ground was made of mud and rotting leaves. Huge willows grew along the watercourses, larger than any that Arianne had ever seen, their great trunks as gnarled and twisted as an old man's face and festooned with beards of silvery moss. Trees pressed close on every side, shutting out the sun; hemlock and red cedars, white oaks, soldier pines that stood as tall and straight as towers, colossal sentinels, big-leaf maples, redwoods,

wormtrees, even here and there a wild weirwood. Underneath their tangled branches ferns and flowers grew in profusion; sword ferns, ladyferns, bellflowers and piper's lace, evening stars and poison kisses, liverwort, lungwort, hornwort. Mushrooms sprouted down amongst the tree roots, and from their trunks as well, pale spotted hands that caught the rain. Other trees were furred with moss, green or grey or red-tailed, and once a vivid purple. Lichens covered every rock and stone. Toadstools festered besides rotting logs. The very air seemed green.

Arianne had once heard her father and Maester Caleotte arguing with a septon about why the north and south sides of the Sea of Dorne were so different. The septon thought it was because of Durran Godsgrief, the first Storm King, who had stolen the daughter of the sea god and the goddess of the wind and earned their eternal enmity. Prince Doran and the maester inclined more toward wind and water, and spoke of how the big storms that formed down in the Summer Sea would pick up moisture moving north until they slammed into Cape Wrath. For some strange reason the storms never seemed to strike at Dorne, she recalled her father saying. "I know your reason," the septon had responded. "No Dornishmen ever stole away the daughter of two gods."

The going was much slower here than it had been in Dorne. Instead of proper roads, they rode down crookback slashes that snaked this way and that, through clefts in huge moss-covered rocks and down deep ravines choked with blackberry brambles. Sometimes the track petered out entirely, sinking into bogs or vanishing amongst the ferns, leaving Arianne and her companions to find their own way amongst the silent trees. The rain still fell, soft and steady. The sound of moisture dripping off the leaves was all around them, and every mile or so the music of another little waterfall would call to them.

The wood was full of caves as well. That first night they took shelter in one of them, to get out of the wet. In Dorne they had often travelled after dark, when the moonlight turned the blowing sands to silver, but the rainwood was too full of bogs, ravines, and sinkholes, and black as pitch beneath the trees, where the moon was just a memory.

Feathers made a fire and cooked a brace of hares that Ser Garibald had taken with some wild onions and mushrooms he had found along the road. After they

ate, Elia Sand turned a stick and some dry moss into a torch, and went off exploring deeper in the cave. “See that you do not go too far,” Arianne told her. “Some of these caves go very deep, it is easy to get lost.”

The princess lost another game of *cyvasse* to Daemon Sand, won one from Joss Hood, then retired as the two of them began to teach Jayne Ladybright the rules. She was tired of such games.

*Nym and Tyene may have reached King’s Landing by now*, she mused, as she settled down crosslegged by the mouth of the cave to watch the falling rain. *If not they ought to be there soon*. Three hundred seasoned spears had gone with them, over the Boneway, past the ruins of Summerhall, and up the kingsroad. If the Lannisters had tried to spring their little trap in the kingswood, Lady Nym would have seen that it ended in disaster. Nor would the murderers have found their prey. Prince Trystane had remained safely back at Sunspear, after a tearful parting from Princess Myrcella. *That accounts for one brother*, thought Arianne, *but where is Quentyn, if not with the griffin?* Had he wed his dragon queen? King Quentyn. It still sounded silly. This new Daenerys Targaryen was younger than Arianne by half a dozen years. What would a maid that age want with her dull, bookish brother? Young girls dreamed of dashing knights with wicked smiles, not solemn boys who always did their duty. *She will want Dorne, though. If she hopes to sit the Iron Throne, she must have Sunspear*. If Quentyn was the price for that, this dragon queen would pay it. What if she was at Griffin’s Roost with Connington, and all this about another Targaryen was just some sort of subtle ruse? Her brother could well be with her. *King Quentyn. Will I need to kneel to him?*

No good would come of wondering about it. Quentyn would be king or he would not. *I pray Daenerys treats him more gently than she did her own brother*.

It was time to sleep. They had long leagues to ride upon the morrow. It was only as she settled down that Arianne realized Elia Sand had not returned from her explorations. *Her sisters will kill me seven different ways if anything has happened to her*. Jayne Ladybright swore that the girl had never left the cave, which meant that she was still back there somewhere, wandering through the dark. When their shouts did not bring her forth, there was nothing to do but make torches and go in search of her.

The cave proved much deeper than any of them had suspected. Beyond the stony mouth where her company had made their camp and hobbled their horses, a series of twisty passageways led down and down, with black holes snaking off to either side. Further in, the walls opened up again, and the searchers found themselves in a vast limestone cavern, larger than the great hall of a castle. Their shouts disturbed a nest of bats, who flapped about them noisily, but only distant echoes shouted back. A slow circuit of the hall revealed three further passages, one so small that it would have required them to proceed on hands and knees. “We will try the others first,” the princess said. “Daemon, come with me. Garibald, Joss, you try the other one.”

The passageway Arianne had chosen for herself turned steep and wet within a hundred feet. The footing grew uncertain. Once she slipped, and had to catch herself to keep from sliding. More than once she considered turning back, but she could see Ser Daemon’s torch ahead and hear him calling for Elia, so she pressed on. And all at once she found herself in another cavern, five times as big as the last one, surrounded by a forest of stone columns. Daemon Sand moved to her side and raised his torch. “Look how the stone’s been shaped,” he said. “Those columns, and the wall there. See them?”

“Faces,” said Arianne. So many sad eyes, staring.

“This place belonged to the children of the forest.”

“A thousand years ago.” Arianne turned her head. “Listen. Is that Joss?”

It was. The other searchers had found Elia, as she and Daemon learned after they made their way back up the slippery slope to the last hall. Their passageway led down to a still black pool, where they discovered the girl up to her waist in water, catching blind white fish with her bare hands, her torch burning red and smoky in the sand where she had planted it.

“You could have died,” Arianne told her, when she’d heard the tale. She grabbed Elia by the arm and shook her. “If that torch had gone out you would have been alone in the dark, as good as blind. What did you think that you were doing?”

“I caught two fish,” said Elia Sand.

“*You could have died,*” said Arianne again. Her words echoed

off the cavern walls. "... *died...died...died...*"

Later, when they had made their back to the surface and her anger had cooled, the princess took the girl aside and sat her down. "Elia, this must end," she told her. "We are not in Dorne now. You are not with your sisters, and this is not a game. I want your word that you will play the maidservant until we are safely back at Sunspear. I want you meek and mild and obedient. You need to hold your tongue. I'll hear no more talk of Lady Lance or jousting, no mention of your father or your sisters. The men that I must treat with are sellswords. Today they serve this man who calls himself Jon Connington, but come the morrow they could just as easily serve the Lannisters. All it takes to win a sellsword's heart is gold, and Casterly Rock does not lack for that. If the wrong man should learn who you are, you could be seized and held for ransom--"

"No," Elia broke in. "You're the one they'll want to ransom. You're the heir to Dorne, I'm just a bastard girl. Your father would give a chest of gold for you. My father's dead."

"Dead, but not forgotten," said Arianne, who had spent half her life wishing Prince Oberyn had been her father. "You are a Sand Snake, and Prince Doran would pay any price to keep you and your sisters safe from harm." That made the child smile at least. "Do I have your sworn word? Or must I send you back?"

"I swear." Elia did not sound happy.

"On your father's bones."

"On my father's bones."

*That vow she will keep*, Arianne decided. She kissed her cousin on the cheek and sent her off to sleep. Perhaps some good would come of her adventure. "I never knew how wild she was till now," Arianne complained to Daemon Sand, afterward. "Why would my father inflict her on me?"

"Vengeance?" the knight suggested, with a smile.

They reached Mistwood late on the third day. Ser Daemon sent Joss Hood ahead to scout for them and learn who held the castle presently. "Twenty men walking the walls, maybe more," he reported on his return. "Lots of carts and wagons. Heavy laden going in, empty going out. Guards at every gate."

"Banners?" asked Arianne.

“Gold. On the gatehouse and the keep.”

“What device did they bear?”

“None that I could see, but there was no wind. The banners hung limp from their staffs.”

That was vexing. The Golden Company’s banners were cloth-of-gold, devoid of arms and ornament ... but the banners of House Baratheon were also gold, though theirs displayed the crowned stag of Storm’s End. Limp golden banners could be either. “Were there others banners? Silver-grey?”

“All the ones that I saw were gold, princess.”

She nodded. Mistwood was the seat of House Mertyns, whose arms showed a great horned owl, white on grey. If their banners were not flying, likely the talk was true, and the castle had fallen into the hands of Jon Connington and his sellswords. “We must take the risk,” she told her party. Her father’s caution had served Dorne well, she had come to accept that, but this was a time for her uncle’s boldness. “On to the castle.”

“Shall we unfurl your banner?” asked Joss Hood.

“Not as yet,” said Arianne. In most places, it served her well to play the princess, but there were some where it did not.

Half a mile from the castle gates, three men in studded leather jerkins and steel halfhelms stepped out of the trees to block their path. Two of them carried crossbows, wound and notched. The third was armed only with a nasty grin. “And where are you lot bound, my pretties?” he asked.

“To Mistwood, to see your master,” answered Daemon Sand.

“Good answer,” said the grinner. “Come with us.”

Mistwood’s new sellsword masters called themselves Young John Mudd and Chain. Both knights, to hear them tell it. Neither behaved like any knight that Arianne had ever met. Mudd wore brown from head to heel, the same shade as his skin, but a pair of golden coins dangled from his ears. The Mudds had been kings up by the Trident a thousand years ago, she knew, but there was nothing royal about this one. Nor was he particularly young, but it seemed his father had also served in the Golden Company, where he had been known as Old John Mudd.



Chain was half again Mudd's height, his broad chest crossed by a pair of rusted chains that ran from waist to shoulder. Where Mudd wore sword and dagger, Chain bore no weapon but five feet of iron links, twice as thick and heavy as the ones that crossed his chest. He wielded them like a whip.

They were hard men, brusque and brutal and not well spoken, with scars and weathered faces that spoke of long service in the free companies. "Serjeants," Ser Daemon whispered when he saw them. "I have known their sort before."

Once Arianne had made her name and purpose known to them, the two serjeants proved hospitable enough. "You'll stay the night," said Mudd. "There's beds for all of you. In the morning you'll have fresh horses, and whatever provisions you might need. M'lady's maester can send a bird to Griffin's Roost to let them know you're coming."

"And who would them be?" asked Arianne. "Lord Connington?"

The sellswords exchanged a look. "The Halfmaester," said John Mudd. "It's him you'll find at the Roost."

"Griffin's marching," said Chain.

"Marching where?" Ser Daemon ask.

"Not for us to say," said Mudd. "Chain, hold your tongue." Chain gave a snort.

"She's Dorne. Why shouldn't she know? Come down to join us, ain't she?"

*That has yet to be determined*, thought Arianne Martell, but she felt it best not to press the matter.

At evenfall a fine supper was served to them in the solar, high in the Tower of Owls, where they were joined by the dowager Lady Mertyns and her maester. Though a captive in her own castle, the old woman seemed spry and cheerful. "My sons and grandsons went off when Lord Renly called his banners," she told the princess and her party. "I have not seen them since, though from time to time they send a raven. One of my grandsons took a wound at the Blackwater, but he's since recovered. I expect they will return here soon enough to hang this lot of thieves." She waved a duck leg at Mudd and Chain across the table.

"We are no thieves," said Mudd. "We're foragers."

"Did you buy all that food down in the yard?"

“We foraged it,” said Mudd. “The smallfolk can grow more. We serve your rightful king, old crone.” He seemed to be enjoying this. “You should learn to speak more courteous to knights.”

“If you two are knights, I’m still a maiden,” said Lady Mertyns. “And I’ll speak as I please. What will you do, kill me? I have lived too long already.”

Princess Arianne said, “Have you been treated well, my lady?”

“I have not been raped, if that is what you’re asking,” the old woman said. “Some of the serving girls have been less fortunate. Married or unmarried, the men make no distinctions.”

“No one’s been doing any raping,” insisted Young John Mudd. “Connington won’t have that. We follow orders.”

Chain nodded. “Some girls was *persuaded*, might be.”

“The same way our smallfolk were persuaded to give you all their crops. Melons or maidenheads, it’s all the same to your sort. If you want it, you take it.” Lady Mertyns turned to Arianne. “If you should see this Lord Connington, you tell him that I knew his mother, and she would be ashamed.”

*Perhaps I shall*, the princess thought.

That night she dispatched her second raven to her father.

Arianne was on her way back to her own chamber when she heard muffled laughter from the adjoining room. She paused and listened for a moment, then pushed the door open to find Elia Sand curled up in a window seat, kissing Feathers. When Feathers saw the princess standing there, he jumped to his feet and began to stammer. Both of them still had their clothes on. Arianne took some small comfort in that as she sent Feathers on his way with a sharp look and a “Go.” Then she turned to Elia. “He is twice your age. A serving man. He cleans up birdshit for the maester. Elia, what were you thinking?”

“We were only kissing. I’m not going to marry him.” Elia crossed her arms defiantly beneath her breasts. “You think I never kissed a boy before?”

“Feathers is a man.” *A serving man, but still a man.* It did not escape the princess that Elia was the same age she had been when she gave her maidenhead to Daemon Sand. “I am not your mother. Kiss all the boys you want when we return to Dorne. Here and now, though . . . this is no place for kisses, Elia. Meek

and mild and obedient, you said. Must I add *chaste* to that as well? You swore *upon your father's bones*.

"I remember," said Elia, sounding chastened. "Meek and mild and obedient. I won't kiss him again."

The shortest way from Mistwood to Griffin's Roost was through the green, wet heart of the rainwood, slow going at the best of times. It took Arianne and her company the better part of eight days. They travelled to the music of steady, lashing rains beating at the treetops up above, though underneath the green great canopy of leaves and branches she and her riders stayed surprisingly dry. Chain accompanied them for the first four days of their journey north, with a line of wagons and ten men of his own. Away from Mudd he proved more forthcoming, and Arianne was able to charm his life story out of him. His proudest boast was of a great grandsire who had fought with the Black Dragon on the Redgrass Field, and crossed the narrow sea with Bittersteel. Chain himself had been born into the company, fathered on a camp follower by his sellsword father. Though he had been raised to speak the Common Tongue and think of himself as Westerosi, he had never set foot in any part of the Seven Kingdoms till now.

*A sad tale, and a familiar one*, Arianne thought. His life was all of a piece, a long list of places where he'd fought, foes he'd faced and slain, wounds he'd taken. The princess let him talk, from time to time prompting him with a laugh, a touch, or a question, pretending to be fascinated. She learned more than she would ever need to know about Mudd's skill with dice, Two Swords and his fondness for red-haired women, the time someone made off with Harry Strickland's favorite elephant, Little Pussy and his lucky cat, and the other feats and foibles of the men and officers of the Golden Company. But on the fourth day, in an unguarded moment, Chain let slip a "... once we have Storm's End ..."

The princess let that aside go without comment, though it gave her considerable pause. *Storm's End. This griffin is a bold one, it would seem. Or else a fool.* The seat of House Baratheon for three centuries, of the ancient Storm Kings for thousands of years before that, Storm's End was said by some to be impregnable. Arianne had heard men argue about which was the strongest castle in the realm. Some said Casterly Rock, some the Eyrie of the Arryns, some

Winterfell in the frozen north, but Storm's End was always mentioned too. Legend said it was raised by Brandon the Builder to withstand the fury of a vengeful god. Its curtain walls were the highest and strongest in all the Seven Kingdoms, forty to eighty feet in thickness. Its mighty windowless drum tower stood less than half as tall as the Hightower of Oldtown, but rose straight up in place of being stepped, with walls thrice as thick as those to be found in Oldtown. No siege tower was tall enough to reach Storm's End battlements; neither mangonel nor trebuchet could hope to breach its massive walls. *Does Connington think to mount a siege?* She wondered. *How many men can he have?* Long before the castle fell, the Lannisters would dispatch an army to break any such siege. *That way is hopeless too.*

That night when she told Ser Daemon what Chain had said, the Bastard of Godsgrace seemed as perplexed as she was. "Storm's End was still held by men loyal to Lord Stannis when last I heard. You would think Connington might do better to make common cause with another rebel, rather than making war upon him too."

"Stannis is too far away to be of help to him," Arianne mused. "Capturing a few minor castles whilst their lords and garrisons are off at distant wars, that's one thing, but if Lord Connington and his pet dragon can somehow take one of the great strongholds of the realm ..."

"...the realm would have to take them seriously," Ser Daemon finished. "And some of those who do not love the Lannisters might well come flocking to their banners."

That night Arianne penned another short note to her father and had Feathers send it on its way with her third raven.

Young John Mudd has been sending out birds as well, it seemed. Near dusk on the fourth day, not long after Chain and his wagons had taken their leave of them, Arianne's company was met by a column of sellswords down from Griffin's Roost, led by the most exotic creature that the princess had ever laid her eyes on, with painted fingernails and gemstones sparkling in his ears.

Lysono Maar spoke the Common Tongue very well. "I have the honor to be the eyes and ears of the Golden Company, princess."

“You look...” She hesitated.

“... like a woman?” He laughed. “That I am not.”

“... like a Targaryen,” Arianne insisted. His eyes were a pale lilac, his hair a waterfall of white and gold. All the same, something about him made her skin crawl. *Was this what Viserys looked like?* she found herself wondering. *If so perhaps it is a good thing he is dead.*

“I am flattered. The women of House Targaryen are said to be without peer in all the world.”

“And the men of House Targaryen?”

“Oh, even prettier. Though if truth be told, I have only seen the one.” Maar took her hand in his own, and kissed her lightly on the wrist. “Mistwood sent word of your coming, sweet princess. We will be honored to escort you to the Roost, but I fear you have missed Lord Connington and our young prince.”

“Off at war?” Off to Storm’s End?

“Just so.”

The Lyseni was a very different sort of man than Chain. *This one will let nothing slip*, she realized, after a scant few hours in his company. Maar was glib enough, but he had perfected the art of talking a great deal whilst saying nothing. As for the riders who had come with him, they might as well have been mutes for all that her own men were able to get out of them.

Arianne decided to confront him openly. On the evening of their fifth day out of Mistwood, as they made camp beside the tumbled ruins of an old tower overgrown by vines and moss, she settled down beside him and said, “Is it true that you have elephants with you?”

“A few,” said Lysono Maar, with a smile and a shrug.

“And dragons? How many dragons do you have?”

“One.”

“By which you mean the boy.”

“Prince Aegon is a man grown, princess.”

“Can he fly? Breathe fire?”

The Lyseni laughed, but his lilac eyes stayed cold.

“Do you play *cyvasse*, my lord?” asked Arianne. “My father has been teaching me. I am not very skilled, I must confess, but I do know that the dragon is stronger than the elephant.”

“The Golden Company was founded by a dragon.”

“Bittersteel was half-dragon, and all bastard. I am no maester, but I know some history. You are still sellswords.”

“If it please you, princess,” he said, all silken courtesy. “We prefer to call ourselves a free brotherhood of exiles.”

“As you will. As free brothers go, your company stands well above the rest, I grant you. Yet the Golden Company has been defeated every time it has crossed into Westeros. They lost when Bittersteel commanded them, they failed the Blackfyre Pretenders, they faltered when Maelys the Monstrous led them.

That seemed to amuse him. “We are at least persistent, you must admit. And some of those defeats were near things.”

“Some were not. And those who die near things are no less dead than those who die in routs. Prince Doran my father is a wise man, and fights only wars that he can win. If the tide of war turns against your dragon, the Golden Company will no doubt flee back across the narrow sea, as it has done before. As Lord Connington himself did, after Robert defeated him at the Battle of the Bells. Dorne has no such refuge. Why should we lend our swords and spears to your uncertain cause?”

“Prince Aegon is of your own blood, princess. Son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and Elia of Dorne, your father’s sister.”

“Daenerys Targaryen is of our blood as well. Daughter of King Aerys, Rhaegar’s sister. And she has dragons, or so the tales would have us believe.” *Fire and blood*. “Where is she?”

“Half a world away on Slaver’s Bay,” said Lysono Maar. “As for these purported dragons, I have not seen them. In *cyvasse*, it is true, the dragon is mightier than the elephant. On the battlefield, give me elephants I can see and touch and send against my foes, not dragons made of words and wishes.”

The princess lapsed into a thoughtful silence. And that night she dispatched her fourth raven to her father.

And finally Griffin's Roost emerged from the sea mists, on a grey wet day as the rain fell thin and cold. Lysono Maar raised a hand, a trumpet blast echoed off the crags, and the castle's gates yawned open before them. The rain-soaked flag that hung above the gatehouse was white and red, the princess saw, the colors of House Connington, but the golden banners of the company were in evidence as well. They rode in double column across the ridge known as the griffin's throat, with the waters of Shipbreaker Bay growling off the rocks to either side.

Within the castle proper, a dozen of the officers of the Golden Company had assembled to welcome the Dornish princess. One by one they took a knee before her and pressed their lips against the back of her hand, as Lysono Maar offered introductions. Most of the names fled her head almost as soon as she had heard them.

Chief amongst them was an older man with a lean, lined, clean-shaved face, who wore his long hair pulled back into a knot. *This one is no fighter*, Arianne sensed. The Lyseni confirmed her judgment when he introduced the man as Haldon Halfmaester.

"We have rooms prepared for you and yours, princess," this Halden said, when the introductions finally ran their course. "I trust that they will suit. I know you seek Lord Connington, and he desires words with you as well, most urgently. If it please you, on the morrow there will be a ship to take you to him."

"Where?" demanded Arianne.

"Has no one told you?" Halden Halfmaester favored her with a smile thin and hard as a dagger cut. "Storm's End is ours. The Hand awaits you there."

Daemon Sand stepped up beside her. "Shipbreaker Bay can be perilous even on a fair summer's day. The safer way to Storm's End is overland."

"These rains have turned the roads to mud. The journey would take two days, perhaps three," said Halden Halfmaester. A ship will have the princess there in half a day or less. There is an army descending on Storm's End from King's Landing. You will want to be safe inside the walls before the battle."

*Will we?* Wondered Arianne. "Battle? Or siege?" She did not intend to let herself be trapped inside Storm's End.

“Battle,” Halden said firmly. “Prince Aegon means to smash his enemies in the field.”

Arianne exchanged a look with Daemon Sand. “Will you be so good as to show us to our rooms? I would like to refresh myself, and change into dry clothes.”

Halden bowed. “At once.”

Her company had been housed in the east tower, where the lancet windows overlooked Shipbreaker Bay. “Your brother is not at Storm’s End, we know that now,” Ser Daemon said, as soon as they were behind closed doors. “If Daenerys Targaryen has dragons, they are half a world away, and of no use to Dorne. There is nothing for us at Storm’s End, princess. If Prince Doran meant to send you into the middle of a battle, he would have given you three hundred knights, not three.”

*Do not be so certain of that, ser. He sent my brother off to Slaver’s Bay with five knights and a maester.* “I need to speak with Connington.” Arianne undid the interlocked sun and spear that clasped her cloak, and let the rain-soaked garment slip from her shoulders to puddle on the floor. “And I want to see this dragon prince of his. If he is truly Elia’s son...”

“Whoever’s son he is, if Connington challenges Mace Tyrell in open battle he may soon be a captive, or a corpse.”

“Tyrell is not a man to fear. My uncle Oberyn—”

“—is dead, princess. And ten thousand men is equal to the whole strength of the Golden Company.”

“Lord Connington knows his own strength, surely. If he means to risk battle, he must believe that he can win it.”

“And how many men have died in battles they believed that they could win?”

Ser Daemon asked her. “Refuse them, princess. I mistrust these sellswords. Do not go to Storm’s End.”

*What makes you believe they will allow me that choice?* She had had the uneasy feeling that Haldon Halfmaester and Lysono Maar were going to put her on that ship come morning whether she willed it or no. *Better not to test them.* “Ser Daemon, you squired for my uncle Oberyn,” she said. “If you were with him now, would you be counseling him to refuse as well?” She did not wait for him to respond. “I know the answer. And if you are about to remind me that I am no



Red Viper, I know that too. But Prince Oberyne is dead, Prince Doran is old and ill, and I am the heir to Dorne.”

“And that is why you should not put yourself at risk.” Daemon Sand went to one knee. “Send me to Storm’s End in your stead. Then if the griffin’s plans should go awry and Mace Tyrell takes the castle back, I will be just another landless knight who swore his sword to this pretender in hopes of gain and glory.”

*Whereas if I am taken, the Iron Throne will take that for proof that Dorne conspired with these sellswords, and lent aid to their invasion.* “It is brave for you to seek to shield me, ser. I thank you for that.” She took his hands and drew him back to his feet. “But my father entrusted this task to me, not you. Come the morrow, I sail to beard the dragon in its den.”



## THE ENVOY

**T**he obelisk drank the morning light.  
“An old place,” Jorgen the Giantslayer spat. “Old and cursed.” His horse nickered and stepped back from the ancient marker as if it had caught the scent of something foul.

“Let us turn back then,” said the Knight of Lemonwood, his tone mocking. “You can tell Prince Doran all about the fearsome rock.”

The other men sniggered, but their mirth curdled at the sound of grunts and wheezes. When Obara Sand’s horse crested the ridge, most men’s eyes went elsewhere: to the view of the green Torentine Valley below, to the red stone of the mountains above, to the black pillar before them. Areo Hotah studied the Sand Snake, slumped in her saddle. She looked worse than yesterday, and yesterday she looked half a corpse.

Her ribs had been broken by Ser Balon in the desert, that much was certain, turning the trot of her horse to agony. But that was not the worst of it, for some other wound lingered within, rotting her from the inside out. When the men suggested they return to Sandstone or even find a maester at Starfall, she only shook her head. *Does she fear our crimes would be revealed?* Hotah wondered. *Or is it mere stubbornness?*

Most of the remaining spearmen hailed from Lemonwood, so they had looked to Ser Deziel to lead in her stead. Lady Obara said nothing on the matter, but neither did she protest when the knight slipped unmistakable orders in amidst his quips and japes. That was the way of his command: never serious, but never smiling.

Ser Deziel scanned the ground around the obelisk. “The earth is level here,” he lied. “The gods favor us with this gift of respite. The marker tells us that we are but a stone’s throw from High Hermitage, our villain’s lair. Water the horses and water the rocks. You don’t want to piss yourself if we are taken unawares ... again.” As the Knight of Lemonwood dismounted, the Scrapesword’s blade jangled in its scabbard.

Hotah climbed down off Ser Balon’s former mount, a beautiful and robust sand steed that had been a gift from Doran Martell. It was the finest horse Hotah had ever sat, tireless and tractable. Its eyes were deep brown and glassy. One of them reflected a haggard face, deeply lined and with grey eyebrows; stern, spent, sad. Hotah looked close and hard at the stranger. *When did I become ugly?*

In all his years, Areo Hotah had never owned a mirror. Vanity was a sin: so the bearded priests had told him long ago, when they caught him shaving over a dark puddle. *A man’s gaze falls always upon others*, they had said. *It is never wasted upon himself*. That is what it means to serve. He had understood; still, a lashing had reinforced the lesson. That was the way of it.

Reins in hand, Hotah made for a rock near the pillar where he might sit and rest, but the horse balked and let out a whinny. It was the first resistance the steed had shown him. “Come,” Hotah commanded with a pull. Again it refused. “Mirror, come.”

“Queer name for a horse,” called out Pate of the Shadow City as he unlaced his breeches.

“The Kingsguard named it,” Hotah said. He gave the reins a yank, a hard one this time, to no avail. “For an ancestor, he said.”

“Ser Byron Swann, I bet,” announced Reginald, whom the others called the Goblin Butcher. “That dimwit tried to slay Vhagar with a sword and silvered shield during the Dance of the Dragons.”

“The dragon’s name was Syrax,” Jorgen corrected. His horse let out another nervous whicker, so he stroked its muzzle. “I heard a song about it once.”

The Butcher shook his head. “I assure you, the beast was Vhagar. Ser Byron was at Storm’s End, defending the queen’s son against the dragon’s rider, that one-eyed kinslayer ... what was his name?”

“Bloodraven,” Pate answered confidently.

The Giantslayer snorted with laughter. “You’d make a fine maester, Pate. Damned shame you can’t heal the sick.” He glanced furtively at Lady Obara, but her eyes were only half-open, surrounded by dark circles.

Pate was indignant. “This man or that man; this dragon or that dragon. What does it matter? Some fool thought he was Ser Serwyn and died all the same.” The spearman turned and made water next to his fidgeting horse.

Hotah knew little of history—books were for men who could read. But he had heard the story of Serwyn’s deeds. “The knights he slew stalked him day and night,” the Red Viper had told a wide-eyed Sarella one evening at the Water Gardens. “Remember that, girl. Dragons die and then you’re done with them. Dead men will show you no such courtesy.”

The captain had never seen a living dragon and never cared to, but he did know what it was to be haunted. All of them did. Ser Balon's howl echoed with each and every one of Obara’s grunts. Nine men nursed wounds, keepsakes of those they’d killed. Each riderless horse that trailed behind them in pack strings was a reminder of a dead man. The Butcher barely slept; Hotah heard him at night, breaths coming too quickly, reaching for the comfort of the hilt he kept beside him. Others did the same.

They had been a hundred that evening in the desert, but not half had lived till dawn. Thirty graves of sand were hastily dug for the dead Dornishmen while the one-and-twenty Lannister bodies were left to rot beneath the baking sun. *The dunes will have covered them by now.* A burial of sorts, he supposed.

Hotah heard the tale when he’d returned to camp that morning. “The sorcerer queen sent wargs and skinchangers with her white knight,” Aldonzo of Lemonwood had told him. “The monstrous Ser Merlon killed five before a spear found the back of the giant’s neck. And the singing devil, Ser Tanton, took seven

men to the seven hells with him. I swear I could hear the song and screams long after they died. Even the elder two Slynt boys turned out to be rock goblins, they did. Each killed a man before being hacked to pieces. Only way we could stop the arms and legs from moving.”

*Ser Balon trained the boys well*, Hotah had thought. *He might have made them knights once they returned home*. Innocent Danos, only one-and-ten, had been carved up with his brothers. *They died in service, and will face their god without beards*. It was small comfort.

“Ser Timon killed three,” the spearman had continued. “His drawn blade was a screaming wraith, a horrible sound. My liege was almost his fourth, but Ser Deziel knocked the magic sword from his hand.” The Scrapesword had managed to stagger into the night and escape the fray on foot. He had not been found, but his ornate metal scabbard was discovered a hundred yards from camp the next morning, no doubt abandoned because it caught the moonlight. With no well for a hundred miles around, the jovial knight was condemned to die of thirst, Ser Deziel assured them.

Yet it was the Knight of Lemonwood who also insisted they take the horses. The Scrapesword could double back and find a mount, should they release them into the desert. They would either bring them or kill them, and the men had had their fill of slaughter. Tied together behind the party in packs of five, they made an odd sight for the mountain folk on their terraced farms, though the simple farmers were happy to trade water and dried fruit for steeds worth ten times as much.

One night they had sought shelter from a storm in a tall stone house surrounded by rocky fields and lime trees. The purple-eyed farmer who lived there gave them a gracious welcome, but spoke only praise when asked about his liege. “Our silver knight lets us be, m’lord,” the man said as he and his sons feasted on horse steak. “His men only take grain when we have more than enough.” *Rarely, then*, Hotah had thought. *These mountains do not look bountiful*. Perhaps it was kindness that kept Darkstar away, though Dornish law did forbid lords to tax their subjects amid famine.

In all, two horses had been traded with the smallfolk and one had been slaughtered for meat, leaving eight-and-forty with ghosts for riders. *Too many*

*horses*, thought Hotah, *not enough men*. Only forty of them were fit for battle, perhaps one-and-forty if Gyles improved. Hotah heard whispers by night that they were too few now to siege High Hermitage, but none was bold enough to protest by the light of day.

“Scout!” Aldonzo yelled, pointing up the mountain trail. Men fumbled for their bows, but the rider was gone before they’d notched their arrows. Four men rode up the rocky trail in pursuit, but returned an hour later, empty-handed.

“A great success, I see,” said Ser Deziel. “Remind me to knight you all on the morrow.”

“His horse must have been some sort of goat, ser,” said a rider.

“Yes, mayhaps it was a unicorn.”

The rider swallowed his retort, though it cost him some effort. Instead he said, “We saw the scout ride into a castle. It’s not two leagues from here. We’ve arrived.”

High Hermitage was made of pale white stone save for a series of large black blocks near one corner, glistening in the sun, relics of some older structure. Built with the steep mountains at its back, any assault would have to come from the front. The castle’s drawbridge opened at a downward angle, so an attacker was forced to climb if it were down, which it was not. The moat was dry, but the castle had a sluice gate that could no doubt be opened to access the waters of some Torentine tributary.

The castle was large enough to hold an admirable host, though Hotah could only guess how many were inside now. On either side of the gate a square tower shot up high. Unlike most castles, whose walls are adorned by crenellations both within and without, High Hermitage had half towers, leaving the defenses open to its courtyard. Hotah counted eight helmed men on the wall—small, distant figures.

The mountain fastness was as old as House Dayne, Ser Deziel had said, perhaps older if the smallfolk were to be believed. A white-haired farmer claimed it had once been the lair of a great and powerful greenseer who still watched over the land in spirit. More recently, the son of Vorian Dayne, last King of the Torentine, had been granted High Hermitage after his cousin had usurped the

lordship of Starfall. There had been rivalry between the two Houses Dayne ever since, though marriages had helped ease the feud over the centuries.

Ser Deziel ordered the party to make camp behind the final ridge, concealing their numbers. They were on lower ground and exposed to attack, but the knight doubted that Darkstar would attempt a sortie. Still, a scout was stationed in sight of the castle to alert them in case the drawbridge lowered.

“There is no wood for towers or ladders here,” Hotah observed.

Deziel shrugged. “We will send men down into the valley. Surely nothing would please them more than hauling felled trees up a mountain.” He looked to the tent where Obara lay resting. “A long siege is not in our interest.”

“A mule!” the scout yelled from the top of the ridge. “A mule! A girl on a mule! The drawbridge is still up. She must have used a side sally port and ridden through the moat.”

Hotah, Ser Deziel, and half a dozen men mounted up.

The girl that awaited them at the moat’s edge was indeed seated on a mule. She had a tumble of sandy blonde hair that writhed in the wind. Hotah squinted for a moment. *Myrcella*? When they rode closer, he saw that she was tanned, skinny, her hands dirty and callused. She wore a roughspun tunic, her feet bare. Hotah looked to see if her eyes were green, but instead they proved violet. A haunting violet.

“Well met, m’lord,” the girl called out. Her voice was shrill and high-pitched.

The Knight of Lemonwood cleared his throat. “Tell the men inside to give us audience. We bring justice to the outlaw—”

“I have a message from Ser Gerold Dayne,” she blurted out. “Knight of High Hermitage, the Sword of the Evening, Guardian of the Red Caves, the Memory of the First Men.” She paused to take a breath. “Protector of the Old Source, Keeper of the Opal Scroll, Defender of the Fallen Stone.”

As the titles rattled on, the men muttered to themselves, but the Knight of Lemonwood was unmoved. “Ser Gerold honors us greatly by sending a little girl to treat in his stead. You are what, ten?”

“One-and-ten, m’lord.” She turned to look up at the battlements, where the helmed men stood and watched her. “My name is Tansy.”

“Are you here to negotiate or play at tea?” asked Ser Deziel. “In the former case, I can offer you three dolls for our quarry, the fiend Darkstar.”

“Ser will talk with your man tomorrow at dawn,” Tansy said. “Send only one, no more.”

Deziel nodded. “I look forward to—”

“No Dalts!” the girl interrupted again. “Ser says he cannot stand the stink of a rotten lemon!”

The knight feigned offense. “I recall no quarrel with Ser Gerold. Why does he loathe me so?”

“I couldn’t say, m’lord, but it’s what Ser said. *No Dalts.*”

The men exchanged looks. “The girl is a brat,” said the Giantslayer. “Leave her to me and I’d teach her a lesson.”

“I had no idea you aspired to be a eunuch,” the Knight of Lemonwood said coolly.

Hotah considered the girl. “She is a test. Ser Gerold is watching how we treat an innocent.”

Ser Deziel looked at Hotah, surprise in his eyes. “Who knew the Norvoshi was a clever one? Beneath the silence, a working mind.” The Knight of Lemonwood wheeled his horse around. “Let us hope it is of use on the morrow.”

In the morning Hotah found himself back at the edge of the moat, alone, holding the rainbow banner of a seven-faced god he did not understand. Two helmed archers fixed arrows on him as the drawbridge lowered. Darkstar came forth quickly, his horse in a canter before he pulled the reins hard. The destrier went to its hind legs and whinnied.

“Hold, Mirror!” Hotah warned his own steed. *Does he mean to intimidate me?*

Ser Gerold Dayne was a handsome man, perhaps the comeliest Hotah had ever seen. He had a square jaw, smooth skin, and silver hair that made him look almost Lysene, with a streak in it as black as the obelisk. He understood now why Arianne had made him part of her plot. A brooch of onyx carved into a sword and falling star fastened a purple cloak around his shoulders. The color brought out his eyes.

“Ser Gerold.” Hotah gave a curt nod.



“Doran’s pet Norvoshi,” Darkstar greeted Hotah in return. “I was puzzled at first when I saw you ride forth, but I think I’ve riddled out why they sent you.”

*There was no one else*, Hotah thought, but what he said was, “Lady Obara disdains to treat with a fugitive. You know of her pride.”

“To be sure,” the knight looked up. “I also know that she is bound to the gods of that peace banner. You, on the other hand, worship a black goat, do you not?”

Hotah contained his anger. “I am here as an envoy, not an assassin.”

“Good. You would most certainly die if you were to make a charge, though it is not the arrows you need fear. No doubt you have heard that no man matches my skill with the blade.”

That was true enough. Darkstar was dangerous, it was said, a master with the sword, clever and unpredictable. Others painted him as reckless as well, resentful at not being dubbed Sword of the Morning, impatient to prove himself. Above all, they warned of his arrogance.

Hotah left his longaxe in its sling. Instead he reached into his saddlebag and produced a warrant, then unrolled it and pretended to read. “By decree of Doran of House Nymeros Martell, Lord of Sunspear, Prince of Dorne, justice shall be dispensed to the false knight Gerold—”

“Yes, yes, and I am stripped of lands and incomes and sentenced to death.” He forced a yawn. “Yet here I am, very much alive and ruling this castle.”

“We have terms,” Hotah said, putting away the prince’s orders. “Surrender to us and the garrison will be pardoned for any aid they provided. Your lands will pass lawfully to your kin.”

“Of what crimes am I accused? Conspiring with the prince's bitch of a daughter to overthrow the king? Somehow I doubt the heir to Dorne has been judged quite as harshly as I have been.”

“You are charged with maiming the Princess Myrcella Barathon and ...” He made himself meet Ser Gerold’s gaze. “Murdering Ser Arys Oakheart.”

Darkstar returned his solemn look for a few moments, nodding thoughtfully. Then he burst out laughing. “Listen to yourself. **You** killed Oakheart. Well, the poor fool killed himself, more like, but on your axe. What sort of miserable creature accuses another man of his own crime and calls it justice?”

Hotah had no answer. “You are still to pay for your violence against the princess.”

“She was no princess.” Darkstar waved his hand in dismissal. “I once traveled to King’s Landing, did you know? It was Prince Joffrey’s twelfth name day and I tried my hand at jousting. I am no tourney knight, truth be told, but I wanted to get the measure of my rivals. In the lists I faced Ser Boros Blount, who had begged to wear Myrcella’s favor. When that fat knight knocked me from my horse, she squealed with delight: a moment I’ll not soon forget. I can say to you with certainty that the girl in the desert was not her.”

*He claims they were swapped.* Hotah had his suspicions as well. Ser Balon’s questions had haunted him these past nights. “Then where is the princess?”

“Have you misplaced her? Oh dear.” Darkstar smiled. “I believe I could point you in the right direction ... but alas! I am but a fallen star, plucked from the sky before my season. Quite unjustly, I might add.”

“Trying to kill any girl is still a crime.”

Darkstar laughed again. “To accuse me of murdering a child is vile enough, but to say I tried and failed? A grave insult to my swordsmanship. Tell me, captain, did you see this deed of mine with your own eyes?”

“No,” Hotah admitted. “If not you, who did it?”

“Do not play coy. You and I both know it was Ser Andrey Dalt. He has been Doran’s underling for years, hoping the old man would reward him with his daughter’s hand. More fool him.”

*Ser Deziel’s brother.* Hotah chewed on Ser Gerold’s words. “You think the attack was the prince’s doing?” After countless days spent at the Water Gardens, listening to the sounds of children splashing in the pools, it was hard for Areo Hotah to imagine the prince harming a child.

“Are you so blind you cannot see what is plain before you? Tell me, if Doran knew of our intention to crown Myrcella, why would he let Arianne make off with the girl? The whole unhappy adventure was the prince’s scheme, and it all went to plan, from what I can tell. A Dayne to blame for maiming a princess and killing a Kingsguard ... or is it two Kingsguard, now?”

The steep bridge they stood on suddenly felt steeper. “Two?”

“Ser Balon Swann,” said Darkstar. “That is his horse, is it not? Mirror, you called it?”

*I am a fool.* “The horse is mine,” Hotah replied, his voice low and dull.

“A gift from the Kingsguard, was it?” He flashed a grin. “The white knight rode south, but never yet rode north. That’s what Blackhaven tells me, amongst other things. The Dondarrions and the Daynes are close, soon to be joined, you know.”

All Dorne knew that Allyria Dayne and Beric Dondarrion were betrothed, a rare joining of Dornishmen and Marchers. The lord of Blackhaven was missing, but custom decreed that his younger brother would marry Lady Allyria in his stead if he did not return soon. Hotah thought of questions to ask, then thought better of betraying any ignorance. “Ser Balon is in Sunspear.”

“Does it not chafe you to lie so poorly, and so often?” Ser Gerold asked. “Your dishonesty bores me, so let me say this: my scout counted fifty men with you, some bandaged, and twice as many horses. This makes me wonder—what ill fate befell you on your way here?” He let the question hang in the air. “As it happens, I have just as many men within my walls as you have outside them. Send your spears against me and they will die. If you had a hundred healthy men, perhaps this story would have a different ending, but as it is, the ink is dry.”

“We can lay siege,” said Hotah. “Forces will come to augment ours. Blackmont is not far.”

“Starfall is no farther, and I am quite dear to my cousin Allyria. I do hope the Dondarrions do not examine the bedding too closely on her wedding night. As fate would have it, she is the one who now rules from atop the Palestone Sword, in her lost nephew’s stead. It may interest you to know that she’s received word lately from a ghost.”

**A ghost?** Hotah could not spare a thought for Darkstar’s riddles, so he simply waited.

“The late Jon Connington,” Ser Gerold added when the Norvoshi showed no sign of asking.

Hotah knew the name. “Connington?”

“An exile who refuses to stay banished ... or dead. The man rules the stormlands now. He’s trying to put Elia Martell’s son on the Iron Throne or some

such calamity. Normally, the squabbles of men north of the Red Mountains do not interest me, but Connington knew Allyria's sister Ashara well, years and years ago. Some say they were lovers—that Ser Jon was the father of Ashara's bastard. Who is to say? What is certain is that Ashara trusted the man, and Allyria is inclined to, as well. In fact, she was ready to send word to Blackhaven asking them to offer the lost lord the hospitality of House Dondarrion. But then the seasons changed.”

“So winter has come.” *They are celebrating in Norvos right now.* “But the cold has not reached us here. We can still lay—”

“—a siege as the first snows fall, and wouldn't that be a pretty sight, but it was the raven that Oldtown sent that was more important than the weather. You see, when white wings came to Starfall two days past, the bird also squawked at my dear cousin to “*Beware Jon!*” An odd little message, and one that shook poor Allyria to the bone. Now she knows not what to do, and looks to her beloved Darkstar for counsel. I received a raven with the same warning, as it happens.” Another thoughtful nod. “It is a heavy question, one lords across the realm are surely pondering as they greet the season: to follow Connington? Or not?” Ser Gerold's purple eyes met Hotah's dull brown. “That's what this is all about, is it not? Why I find myself falsely accused?”

“I do not understand.”

“Will Connington prevail? I judge it a coin flip. With such odds, our prince will need a whipping boy.”

Hotah remembered Tyene's giggle. *Why not? It is all Darkstar's doing.* “You think yourself a scapegoat.”

“I think myself a binder. No captain as prudent as Prince Doran would leave port in such waters without one. If Connington fails in his war with Dornishmen in his ranks, my life promises to pay for the prince's mistake in lending him support.”

“How?” asked Hotah. “We are far from the stormlands.”

“But Blackhaven is not, and sweet Allyria is all but betrothed to that Dondarrion boy, Bartholomys. When Lord Yronwood marches his host past Blackhaven to join Connington, Beric's heir will do nothing, not against a host so

large, and not with Dayne soldiers under the Bloodroyal's command. The boy's inaction, however, will seem as good as conspiracy with Yronwood, and in that *conspiracy* will be discerned the influence of the monstrous Daynes. Our gouty prince will claim that Lady Allyria and I seized control over the Dornish armies. Whatever they actually believed, Queen Cersei or Ser Kevan or whoever's in charge in King's Landing will accept the prince's tale and his renewed support. Especially against the word of Ser Gerold Dayne, who, although handsome, viciously slew a Kingsguard, marred the little princess ... and killed Doran's captain of guards."

*Could Prince Doran have planned that, too?* "That is quite a fable."

"You do not believe it? Let me spin another story for you, then, one I like far better." He was in deadly earnest. "You will be surrendering to me. You for the murder of Ser Arys, and Ser Deziel for the crimes of his brother. You will send the rest of your men home, to Sunspear."

*He is an arrogant one.* "Doran is the law in Dorne. Why should we?"

"Because I have dark wings."

For an absurd moment, Hotah saw Ser Gerold gliding through the sky. He could have laughed. "A raven. If Starfall answers you and lifts our siege, we can treat with Lady Allyria then. Why would we surrender to you now?"

"Not a raven, but ravens. You must know that my friends are as numerous as the evening stars, and they live in the shadows, awaiting my command. You may not believe my stories. They will. Surrender or I send word to my precious Allyria, who will alert our allies in the Prince's Pass and in the Boneway. The word on ravens' wings will be war. Our soldiers will come alive in the night and take the other spearmen unawares. The armies of Dorne will be torn apart from within."

*An attack in the night from supposed allies. A familiar tale, Hotah thought, but this time thousands would die instead of dozens. Could Darkstar give such a command, and be obeyed?*

*Would he?*

"We can shoot your messages down," he said slowly. It was a lie, another one. Ser Balon had been the only archer in their company skilled enough to down a raven. He raised his eyes to the battlements, squinted, looked away.

“I have many birds,” laughed Darkstar. “You will not hit them all. In fact, for good measure, I will also send word to King Tommen, to Lord Connington—seven hells, perhaps to King Stannis, if my old maester can work out which leg to tie the message to. The world will know Doran’s treachery ... as well as you and I do.”

Hotah felt dizzy. He could not muster a reply. He looked down to his horse.

*Was I always ugly?*

His gaze returned to Darkstar’s thrice-damned beautiful face. The man was cruel, arrogant, but he was innocent. As innocent as the others.

“Struck dumb,” Ser Gerold muttered. “What else should I have expected from the prince’s silent guardian? I’ve naught else to say, Hotah, except that if my demands are not met on the morrow, ravens will fly and blood will flow. Scurry back to your camp. Report what I have said.” Darkstar wheeled his horse around toward High Hermitage, then looked back over his shoulder. “Oh, and should you have a mind to assault while the castle sleeps, remember: I’m deadliest by starlight.”

It was a slow ride back to camp. Hotah was in no rush, instead giving himself over to thought. He thought of the many dead and the many soon to die. Of Jothos and Morros, Ser Tanton and Ser Merlon. Of Danos. Of Ser Timon’s sword jangling eerily at Ser Deziel’s hip. He thought of Obara, her back turned to him. Of Doran, his plans, his pawns, his lies. Of Doran’s lady wife Mellario, long since returned to Norvos. The oath that he had sworn, to protect her children. His little princess. The princess Myrcella. The screams of a young girl, her blood seeping into the sand. Tyene’s laughter. Ser Arys Oakheart’s eyes staring at him. Ser Balon Swann. His vows.

*Arys’s death was not my choice. But Balon’s was.*

The mountain air was brisk and the captain felt a chill. *Winter*, he thought. His mind went to wintercakes and nahsa, to the night markets and the ringing of bells. They were happy times in Norvos, but that was before he’d learned to obey.

“He’s lying,” whispered pale-faced Obara Sand. The wounded Sand Snake lay abed, wrapped in a cloak. “Darkstar hasn’t got the men or the ravens.” Beside her

in the shelter of her tent stood the Knight of Lemonwood, silent. He fingered the hilt of the Scrapesword's blade, deep in thought.

"Darkstar demands an answer by morning. Lady Allyria Dayne is prepared to make war within the Dornish hosts."

"We heard you," Obara grunted, her brow covered in sweat. "And he means to tell every would-be king in Westeros about Prince Doran's so-called plan. It's nonsense. We storm the castle ..." Obara coughed painfully. "... tonight, at the hour of the wolf."

"My lady," Hotah said. "We will die."

"Enough, captain." She paused as a spasm of pain hit her. "You did your duty as the prince's envoy. Now Ser Deziel shall prepare the men ..." She coughed again. "... for an assault. They have returned with wood for the ladders. Go sharpen your axe."

"What will the crown do when Darkstar's message reaches them? There will be war." *But that's what she wants. That's what she's always wanted.*

"You are dismissed," the Sand Snake said. With that, the Knight of Lemonwood escorted Hotah from the tent.

*Obey. Serve. Protect.*

*No. Choose.*

The next morning, Lady Obara Sand was dead.

Areo Hotah stacked a cairn atop her body himself. A burial of sorts, he supposed.

A host of six-and-forty, led by Pate of the Shadow City, departed for Sunspear. Behind them they left Hotah, Ser Deziel, and half a hundred horses.

"There go my loyal men," quipped the knight.

"They were not your men," said the captain. "They were mine."

After Lady Obara's death, Hotah had informed the men that her command was his. To his relief, the Knight of Lemonwood had made no challenge. To take definite leadership now was to die upon those walls or to answer to Prince Doran for his failure, neither of which suited Ser Deziel. He preferred to become a prisoner: a landed knight brings a fine ransom.

Areo Hotah and Ser Deziel Dalt exchanged no words on their ride to High Hermitage. The only sounds were made by the wind, the horses roped behind them, and the Scrapesword's blade in its scabbard. The morning sky was clear and Hotah breathed deep in the cool mountain air, savoring his last moments of freedom.

A helmed bowman popped his head over the battlements when Hotah and Dalt stopped and dismounted in front of the moat. Soon the drawbridge was lowered. Two men with grey beards came forth and fettered Hotah and Ser Deziel. The one who took Hotah's axe struggled with its weight.

Ser Gerold Dayne emerged from the castle once they were bound. He wore a brilliant chainmail hauberk of purple and silver under heavy plate. Pink-purple plumage rose higher over his helmet than his arms could reach. "You have made a wise choice today," the dashing knight assured them. "May that provide comfort in your cell."

The prisoners were escorted across the drawbridge into High Hermitage. Once they were past the portcullis, Hotah looked to the inside of the castle walls, where a giant winch sat in disrepair. His companion followed his glance. "The sluice gate is broken," Ser Deziel accused.

"Yes," said Darkstar happily. "I cannot recall a time before the moat was dry. Did you assume otherwise?"

Hotah brought his eyes back to the ground in front of him and walked, but the Knight of Lemonwood was not yet satisfied. In the courtyard, he turned and scanned the defenses in the half-towers. "Children on crates. Where are your other men?"

"Ah, yes, my little girls dressed as archers." Gerold Dayne stifled laughter. "My idea, and I'm rather proud of it. The smallfolk are loath to give up their boys, but they part with young girls quite readily. I've only five grown men to defend the whole castle, myself included. Makes rationing easier, thank the gods."

On a bench at the side of the courtyard sat a cage with a giant white raven. "*Marsh!*" it screamed.

"My raven," Darkstar gloated. "I do think he's lonely."

"You only have the one," Ser Deziel said. He was no longer asking.



“Just so,” said Ser Gerold. “Ravens have the pesky drawback of needing to be returned. As few enough make the journey here, our rookery has been empty for some time. Of course, I lack a maester to tend them, besides.”

“Then you couldn’t have got word to your cousin,” pressed the knight.

“Well, perhaps we could’ve got the mule girl past you with a message. Though, to tell the truth, Allyria despises me. She refused me when I sent my man Old Tom to Starfall for help. The ordeal with the Ashara was years ago, but the wench still holds a grudge.”

Ser Deziel slumped in his fetters. “Everything was a lie?”

“Most everything. I am an excellent jouster, I’ll have you know. Oh, but that bit about Jon Connington—that much was true, if it soothes your pride. Tom brought that tale back with him from a tavern, though I would have preferred a lot of sellswords.”

“*Wine!*” the raven yelled. “*Wine?*”

“Don’t believe the bird, it already drank half a flagon,” Darkstar said. “It didn’t improve the conversation.”

Deziel rose to his full height again, defiant. “Then you lied about my brother too, didn’t you?”

Ser Gerold sauntered up and relieved the knight of the daggers in his jerkin and boot, the ones his men had missed. “Drey or Sylva—had to have been one of them. Which one maimed the girl makes little difference to me.”

*Darkstar knows not why I should truly wear these chains either*, Hotah surmised. He wondered if being brought to justice would stop him hearing Balon’s scream at night. Then he broke his silence. “Where is the real Myrcella?”

Ser Gerold chortled. “How in the seven hells should I know? I might ask you.”

*Why would he let Arianne make off with the girl?* Hotah furrowed his thick brow. “Ser Gerold, answer me just one more question. Where do septas go?”



## JON

“**A**ye, I can see *you* have returned from the grave. But Rhaegar’s son?” The lord shook his head, a faint smile upon his lips. “Too fanciful a tale, that.”

Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand. “You are stubborn as an aurochs.” He opened his fist and closed it again beneath the trestle table. There was some feeling in his palm but none in his fingers anymore, nor even in his thumb. “Lords across the realm have bent the knee to the true king. I hoped you would have more sense today than you had yesterday. Perhaps on the morrow.”

“Who knows? On the morrow you may be dead again.” Lord Mathis helped himself to the meat on his plate. The prisoner could not be trusted with a fork, let alone a knife, so he ate with his hands. Grease ran through dirty fingers to dribble on his doublet of white and gold. Four nights past the garment had been immaculate; now it read like a history of stains and fruitless chatter.

Jon Connington glanced at his own plate, full and inviting. Dinner was gammon steak, boiled cabbage with bits of apple, and mashed turnips smothered

in butter. The men of the Reach had seemingly brought their entire winter stores. They had autumn's reavings by the cartload: fresh vegetables and fruit, sacks of beans and barley and corn, barrels of ale, and casks of the finest vintages. They'd even let their herds graze right outside the ancient castle, ready to be slaughtered for each night's feast. What the Golden Company's scouts had found here more resembled a harvest festival than a siege.

The small force that Mace Tyrell had left beneath the walls of Storm's End under the command of Lord Mathis Rowan numbered only a few hundred, just enough to keep Stannis Baratheon's garrison penned in and starving. Though Connington had sown the fields with rumors—that his forces were mere pirates, that they were lost in the Rainwood, that their goal had been to take Griffin's Roost alone—Rowan's men were forewarned of his coming long enough to prepare their response. Dipped banners had greeted the Griffin and not a drop of blood was spilled.

The Golden Company had made their foe's camp their own, winning with it hundreds of horses, two dozen mangonels, and all the provisions Tyrell had failed to take north with him. There was wealth amongst the captive knights as well: Black Balaq claimed a sable cloak with a spiderweb brooch, Humfrey Stone took a Valyrian steel dirk from a man whose armor bore a chequy lion, and Watkyn relieved a Blackbar prisoner of his new-made breastplate. But the greatest prize here was the Lord of Goldengrove himself.

"Storm's End has yielded," Lord Jon said. "The rest of Westeros will soon follow."

Rowan gave him a sideways look. "More lies. Yesterday you said you had the strength of Sunspear; the day before, you boasted the castellan of Harrenhal's fealty. In a week you will claim all Seven Kingdoms and tell me I'm the very last to pledge."

"See for yourself." Jon gestured at the tent's flap. "The Golden Company's banners fly from the ramparts. With such a mighty fortress fallen to us, what do you think awaits your own seat?"

"The wood beneath our gold is stronger than your gilded rust," he said, defiant. His ankles in fetters, Lord Rowan stood and crossed the tent with waddling steps.

He lifted the canvas flap and peered out through the pale mist, then let out a mocking laugh. “Those are the banners of Baratheon. Do you think yourself a great trickster? *Jon the Clever*, should I call you?”

*Clever*. His hand itched beneath the glove. “Are you so sure?” he asked. “Tell me, which do you see? A hart or a heart?” The gold flags were wet and limp, he knew, bogged down by the thick fog rolling in off Shipbreaker’s Bay. *The winter’s brume*, the stormlanders called it. Connington had missed its gloom, the mysteries it cloaked. “Those banners look like the company’s to me, and I wager our foes will think the same. How disheartening the sight will be to them.”

Lord Mathis now squinted as he looked up to Storm’s End, rubbing his stubbled jaw. “Only a fool would believe you could take such a stronghold.”

*We will see who is a fool*. “The support of your house would mean much and more, in the coming battle and in the wars to come. Spare a thought for your lady wife. When the singers sing of these years, would you not have Rowan and Redwyne counted amongst the heroes, rather than the fallen?”

“I loathe singers,” Mathis Rowan said, turning back to Lord Jon. His rosy cheeks burned redder. “But even if I didn’t, I know a lost cause when I see one. How many men do you really have? A thousand horse? Maybe four or five thousand foot? Mace Tyrell has five times your cavalry and thrice your infantry at least. I sent riders north before I lowered my flag to you, dead man. By now they will have told Tyrell everything and his full strength rides. You don’t stand a chance.”

“Only the cavalry rides. I doubt the foot soldiers have even crossed the Wendwater. And my scouts tell me mine own cousin Ronnet leads the van, not Mace Tyrell.”

“Worse for you, then. Lord Tyrell might have accepted your surrender, let you live out your days on the Wall. The singers there are quite good, I hear, if that is so important to you. Red Ronnet, on the other hand ... I know his temper well. It will come to blood.”

“I pray that Ser Ronnet is as unyielding as you say.” Lord Jon would not let himself feel pity for his cousin, though he had taken no joy in spreading fables about the young griffins’ fates. Now vengeful fury would be consuming Ronnet,

anger to burn away the grief he felt for his brother and sister. Jon Connington knew what loss did to a man. He would use that. *Jon the Clever? No. Jon the Butcher, they will name me. Jon the Kinslayer.* But it was worth any name to see Aegon named king.

Rowan made a disgusted noise and looked back out the tent. "I thought the Golden Company's banners were colorful. A destrier, with dragon wings."

"That was Bittersteel's sigil."

"A shame," said Lord Mathis. "Flying horses would have been something new, at least. Instead all I see are tedious banners, a lifeless commander, and a certain result. Who knew butchery would be so dull?"

They were done for today. "You may yet find us entertaining." *We mummings tend to be.*

Jon Connington summoned guards to take Lord Mathis away. When he was alone, he reached for his dagger, only for it to slip from his fingers and tumble to the floor. He glared at his wayward hand. *During the battle, Griff thought. It must go then.* With his left hand he grasped his fork and shoveled a glob of turnips into his mouth.

"M'lord Connington," called a voice from without.

Connington chewed and swallowed. "Enter."

Two serjeants joined him in the tent, white mist swirling in behind them. He recognized Caspor Hill by his close-cropped brown hair and big bushy brown beard; the tall man was carrying a Myrish lens. The other one, Duncan Strong, had a red walrus mustache and dark, saggy eyes. Both men's boots were covered in manure.

"Caspor. What news of our Dornish princess?"

"She's in that Myrish cog with Duncan's brother, m'lord, but they're just sitting there in the bay. Been there hours. Don't know why."

Connington smiled. "The landing at Storm's End lies within a cave that can be reached only at high tide. The sellsail we took on has missed the earlier rising."

Caspor only scratched his head, but Duncan Strong nodded. "There are two high tides a day," he explained to Hill. "One when the moon has long set, one

when it's risen high overhead. It will be well into the night before the ship can dock within the castle."

Duncan's knowledge was impressive: this man was no sailor, no more than his brother was. But whilst most men in the company spent their leisure sleeping, dicing, and retelling old war stories, the Strong brothers were always reading. It was rumored they had studied at the Citadel, though neither had a link to show for it. "And you two will tell me the moment Martell is inside."

Caspor grunted. "M'lord, must it be us that go back to the cliffs? We've been knee-deep in mud and shit all day. I can barely breathe out there."

"Best get used to the smell of shit. This will be a battlefield soon enough," Jon Connington said. "And yes, it *must* be you. It will be dark soon, and the fog is heavy. You have the sharpest eyes in the company. Do not fail me."

Caspor Hill looked as if he was about to say something, but Duncan Strong cut him off. "As you command, my lord."

When the serjeants took their leave, Connington rose, grabbed a steak with his left hand, and paced the floor while eating. *The princess*. She was the riskiest part of his scheme. *Should we have waited?*

It had been a fortnight since Princess Arianne Martell was spotted at Ghost Hill by one of Lysono Maar's informants. When word reached Griffin's Roost, Lord Jon and Homeless Harry Strickland had assembled their war council once more. Prince Aegon had sat and listened as his captains discussed their next move.

"We have the Dornishmen," said Homeless Harry. "We must wait for their forces to join our own, or the alliance is wasted."

"Must we?" asked Lymond Pease. "Prince Doran hasn't sent any raven telling us to expect support, and his armies sit idle, in the Prince's Pass and in the Boneway. The castles we claimed so far, we claimed by surprise. Surprise runs out. How long do we wait for spears that might not come?"

"They must come," declared Dick Cole. "Why else would Doran's heir herself be here, if not to swear fealty?"

"To bargain, I'd wager," said Franklyn Flowers. "Dornishmen are greedy buggers. They want to marry their princess to our prince. Never doubt it."

“They’ll be disappointed. Prince Aegon must wait for the dragon queen,” said Ser Rolly Duckfield. Aegon had insisted the knight attend the council as Lord Commander of his Kingsguard. Connington did his best to hide his annoyance, at the man’s presence and at his title: as the only Kingsguard named, Duckfield commanded no one but himself. Soon his station would be filled by a knight of some great house; he would see to it.

Prince Aegon bristled at the knight’s words. “I am not here to wait, Rolly. I am here to reclaim my father’s kingdom.”

Connington allowed himself a smirk before looking to the spymaster. “Who travels with her to broker?” he asked.

“No one of note,” said Lysono Maar. “The most noble attendant to the princess is the third daughter of Lady Alyse Ladybright, Sunspear’s treasurer.”

Ser Franklyn sniggered. “Women counting coppers. No wonder Dornishmen are always penniless.”

“Ladybright?” Connington asked. It was a minor house, the girl heir to nothing. “A handmaiden, most like. Who else?”

“Prince Doran’s natural niece, a girl of four-and-ten. If my spies heard correctly, her name is *Elia*.” Lysono Maar paused a moment. “There’s also a raven tender, but no maester, and an honor guard of three knights, all quite comely, one of whom is rumored to be Princess Arianne’s paramour.”

The men exchanged uncertain looks. Flowers let out a chuckle. There would be no envoy other than the princess herself, it seemed, and her companions were a pack of riddles.

“Prince Doran never meant to support us,” decided Lymond Pease. “His son is betrothed to a Lannister. He makes mock of us.”

“And puts his own heir in our hands?” said Dick Cole. “Dornishmen are a queer lot, then. Her plaything’s presence is a good sign, as I see it. Doran would not demand a marriage with one hand while introducing the bride’s lover with the other.”

“And the bastard girl with the name of our prince’s mother?” asked Connington. “What is the meaning of that?”

“Half our company is bastard-born,” shrugged Homeless Harry. “Does it have to have a meaning?”

The war council had continued well into the afternoon. Strickland and most of the captains had wanted to delay their march on Storm’s End, with only Cole and Flowers arguing to press on. Prince Aegon sat in his red doublet and listened, his purple eyes taking them all in. Slowly Jon Connington’s resolve had weakened: perhaps it would be best to hear what this princess had to say before the die was cast.

Then Haldon Halfmaester had entered the chamber, cage in hand. “My lord, a visitor from the Citadel has just arrived,” he said. “It seems that winter has—”

“*Jon!*” screamed the great white bird. The war council fell silent and turned to Connington. The raven stared at him as well. Then it shrieked again. “*March!*” it seemed to cry out, beating its wings in panic. “*March! March! March!*”

Wordless, Jon returned the raven’s black-eyed glare.

“I think that puts an end to our discussion,” announced Prince Aegon. “The white raven heralds the changing of the seasons. Winter has returned to this land after many years as has the Golden Company. And the true king of Westeros.” He rose from his seat. “We are here to stay. We are no longer exiles, cast-offs, nor summer children. We have not come home to huddle in castles, wait for spearmen, dream of spring. No! We crossed the ocean to dance with swords, claim our birthright, and rule with honor.”

“Prince Aegon,” Homeless Harry entreated, “I do urge caution. Could we at least discuss this plan of yours to lead the attack?”

“Why do you call me *prince?*” the boy snapped. “Did you not kneel to me at Volon Therys? On that day I became a king, and you all ceased to sell your swords.”

Homeless Harry gave Jon Connington a dark glance.

“*March!*” the raven interrupted.

Lord Jon ignored the bird and answered carefully. “We call you prince merely because you have yet to be crowned, Your Grace.”

“Then let that be done after our victory at Storm’s End,” the prince said. “This clever bird has the right of it. We *march.*”



A fortnight later, the memory still chafed at Jon Connington. The white bird had flown directly from the Citadel, yet who among the archmaesters could have had an inkling of their plans? Some old friend of Haldon's? The halfmaester had denied it fervently. *Or was Lady Lemore right? A message from the gods?* Jon had considered another possibility. *The spider.*

"My lord," another voice called from outside the tent.

Jon Connington set his steak down upon his plate and called his thoughts back to the hour at hand. "Enter."

Ser Brendel Byrne came in out of the mist. The grizzled knight's was a face Connington knew from serving together under Toyne, though they had not been close even in the old days. Ser Brendel was niggardly with tales of his past, so in truth, Jon's old comrade was near a stranger to him. His accent could have been from the Reach, highborn even, but Jon Connington had never heard of any House Byrne along the Mander, or anywhere else in Westeros. Franklyn Flowers oft japed that the man had sprung fully-formed from some rocky knoll.

"My lord, our scouts report that the Tyrell army is camped ten miles north with five thousand horse," said the knight. The company's outriders had been tracking the host's movements for the past two days. "They bear the banners of Fossoway, Crane, Oakheart ... and Connington."

*Finally, they are here.* "No Tarly banners?"

"The huntsman was not to be seen."

"Then it seems Lord Randyll is not the eager man he once was. Still no sign of any footmen?"

"No, my lord," the serjeant replied. "The host is all cavalry."

"Good," said Lord Jon. "Most like they will strike at dawn, with the rising sun at their backs. Spread word for all men to be in position by the hour of the nightingale. And find me Pykewood Peake."

It was not long before Ser Pykewood stood in the tent's entrance, outlined by a grey blanket of fog. His tunic bore the triple castles of Starpike, Whitegrove, and Dunstonbury, the ancient seats of the exile's proud house. While House Connington boasted fifty generations of tradition, the Peakes could claim five hundred, going back to the dawn of days.

“My lord, the mangonels have been moved and are in position as you commanded.” Pykewood was a serious man, determined to restore his house to glory. He and Connington were much alike in that. “Though it may displease you to hear that three are not functioning as expected.”

“That will serve, Ser Pykewood. Is the pitch ready?”

“Yes, my lord. And Torman says the faggots have been bound and prepared, all three thousand. They are soaking in oil. With the fog and mud, little else is like to catch fire, but the sticks will. When should the men proceed?”

“Not until the princess is inside Storm’s End. Then we begin.”

“Yes, my lord. And the trumpets?”

"We must have absolute silence until I give the signal. Then your men will give them wind," Jon reminded him. "But tell them to keep their lips buzzing. I want no false tones when we commence. Bold, strong blasts are what Homeless Harry needs."

“As you command,” Pykewood said, but he did not take his leave.

“Is there aught else?”

“Some of the men ... they have requested wine, my lord. For courage.”

*Beware.* The men had been content with water since the arrival of the white raven.

When the captains had left the war council at Griffin’s Roost, Connington and the Halfmaester had remained to craft letters for King’s Landing and the stormlands. *What would Tywin Lannister write? How would he win the day?* That was when Ronnet Connington had entered his mind.

He had tried to push the thought away, hoping a better scheme would come to him, but none had. With a heavy heart, Jon Connington resolved himself. In the style of the castle’s late maester, Haldon would spread rumors and falsehoods by raven’s wings to give the company the upper hand they needed.

“We are in search of allies, my lord,” Haldon had cautioned. “Once dispatched, a rumor cannot be recalled. When we come to treat, how many lords will have heard you are a rapist? A kinslayer?”

“If we are successful, I will be a kinslayer in truth. You are certain Ronnet is in King’s Landing?”

Haldon nodded. "A letter for his bastard came to the castle two days past. He is a guest at court."

"Then he will beg the court's leave to take his vengeance, and Mace Tyrell will be happy to—"

"*Jon!*" the raven cawed.

Connington and the Halfmaester turned back to the bird, still in its cage. "*Beware!*" Its great wings beat against the metal that contained them. "*Wine! Beware wine! Beware wine!*"

The two men paused. "For many years the realm believed that you died in your cups," the Halfmaester suggested a moment later. "Mayhaps the sender, whoever they may be, wishes you to be sober?"

"*Jon!*" the raven screamed again. "*Beware! Beware! Beware wine!*"

Jon Connington had walked over to the bird, unsheathed his sword, and slid the blade between the bars of the cage. The raven gave no more warnings.

Other than Haldon, Jon Connington had confided the raven's second message only to Lady Lemoire. "It's from the gods," she had said.

"*The gods.*" Connington gave a bitter laugh. It made no sense. "The Father knows I am no sot."

"Does he?" asked Lemoire with the hint of a smile. "Half the castle gossips that you start each day with a jug of bad wine."

After that, there had been no wine for Jon Connington or anyone else in the Golden Company.

"We fight with clear minds and steady arms," he told Ser Pykewood. "For courage, tell the men to pray to the Warrior." Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand again and said a silent prayer for courage of his own. It had to be done before it reached the wrist.

"Understood." The knight gave a bow. As Peake stepped outside, Connington noted the dimming greyness that covered up his form.

*Dusk*, Jon thought. "Peake," he called.

Ser Pykewood wheeled around in the brume. "Yes, my lord?"

"Find Malo Jayn and send him to me."

The knight nodded and the tent flap closed.

Connington pushed his dinner aside and laid out fresh parchment on the table. With his left hand he guided a quill into the numb fingers of his right. Then the Hand wrote one final message.

Griff read over the words as the ink dried. They were simple enough, but knowing there would be no more lent them a certain weight. He might be able to scratch something out with his left hand, but never again with this ease and grace he'd enjoyed all his life.

When Jon Connington was a boy, he had kept a terrible secret. His lord father would have disapproved, he knew, but Jon had read every book of verse in the Roost's library three times over, sneaking there by night with only a candle to keep him company. The foolish youth had tried his own hand at the art as well, though the only eyes to look upon his poems had been his own ... and Rhaegar Targaryen's.

Jon Connington had presented the prince with the poem he felt proudest of. It was a sad one, perhaps a bit clumsy, written about his mother, who had died trying to birth him a sister. As the prince's purple eyes read, the boy's heart pounded.

"Honest words," he said when he had finished. "Clever."

*Clever. Was that a compliment, or polite dismissal?*

"I shall set it to music," the prince had promised him.

Jon never knew whether Rhaegar had written a melody for his poem, as he'd said he would. If he had, he'd never played it for Jon and the song had died at the Trident. There would be no more poems for Jon Connington, no songs from his silver prince. Only blank parchment and silence.

*No, not silence. Worse than silence.*

*Clanging.*

Connington was staring at his gloved fist when Malo Jayn entered.

"My lord," he said. Malo Jayn wore five golden rings on each of his arms for his decade with the company. In the pommel of his sword, an emerald glimmered in the candlelight.

"Malo, the time for battle is here." Connington rolled up the message and handed it over. "Take this to Harry and my son."

The captain nodded. "To Prince Aegon. Yes, my lord."

“Stay with them until you hear the signal.”

“Aye,” said Malo. “The trumpets.”

“Come the dawn, all eyes will be upon us.”



## ARIANNE

**T**he only light outside the ship was a brazier that flickered atop the smooth, windowless Drum Tower of Storm's End. The flames illuminated a drooping flag of gold, too heavy from the fog to billow. Now and again shadows of men moved on the ramparts, passing before the fire, but nothing else could be seen. It was as if the rest of the world had vanished.

Deep within the gloom, Arianne Martell swayed back and forth in an anchored cog as waves lapped against its sides. The splashes were muffled by the mist that hung over the water; the shrouded breakers in the distance only whispered. The moon would be dark tonight, though it mattered not. *The gods blocked out the heavens when they spread this blanket over the bay.* She would have no stars tonight, no Crone to guide her.

"The winter's brume is thick," Morosh grumbled through a mouth of sourleaf. By lantern light the man's teeth shone red, as if he had been drinking blood. "I've seen worse, though."

Arianne did not doubt it. He had the look of a man who had endured a dozen winters and twice as many battles. Before becoming a hired sail for Jon Connington, the *Lady Cassana's* grizzled captain had fought at the Blackwater for Stannis Baratheon. There he had lost all but three of his ships, and King Stannis had fled north without paying him a copper. Morosh would not be hoodwinked by paper promises again. The cog they floated in, no doubt a spoil of war, was the mercenary's payment from the Golden Company. *A beggar paid by thieves*, Arianne thought. *These are desperate men. That makes them dangerous.* "Is it winter now?" she asked. "When did the season change?"

"When? Not sure it did." The captain's accent marked him as Myrish, though he spoke the Common Tongue with the fluency of his trade. "Sailors' tales are dear friends, they are, yet many prove false. And the true ones are oft as old as milk brothers. A drunken few help pass the time, but it's best never to trust any of them too far." The Myrman gave a ghastly smile before spitting off the side of the ship.

"Every moon's turn we hear tales of winter, even during summer," added a crewman. "Small wonder with the blood feud between the Archon of Tyrosh's lenskeeper and the triarchs' astromancer. And we all know the Stargazers of Lys are a bunch of madmen."

"It be true this time," declared another. He waved at the nothingness they were choking on. "The brume don't lie."

"What say you, Maester Denys?" asked Arianne. "Did a white raven visit Griffin's Roost?"

The maester looked up, his eyes tired and glassy. "I cannot say, princess." His voice was slow and trembling. "It may be, but my ... condition has kept me from ascending to the rookery for some time. I left those duties to the Halfmaester."

"Of course," said Arianne with a soft smile. The princess pitied the maester. She knew how draining gout was for her father, the agony it served him each day. With every rock of the boat, Arianne could see the maester clench his teeth beneath his bushy mustache. *The man needs wine*, she thought.

It was a cruel thing to send the Roost's maester to Storm's End, especially by ship, but Haldon had insisted that there was no greater need after a battle than for a maester's hand. "One knight of the mind can defend a hundred men from the

Stranger,” the Halfmaester had said. Arianne wondered who would save the other ten thousand.

She excused herself and made her way toward the dimness at the rear of the cog. She passed Ser Joss seated upon a barrel next to poor Jeyne, greensick again. Elia flirted with a young sailor, but cut her conversation short when the princess caught her eye. Ser Garibald and Feathers threw dice before the glow of a small oil lantern. At the stern Arianne found Daemon Sand looking off into the night’s fog, brooding. *He feels something amiss.* Arianne felt it too.

“You mistrust these men,” Arianne said. “Sellsails can be an unsavory lot.”

“Sellsails sold to sellswords.” Daemon fingered the pommel of his sword. “The scum that grows upon scum.”

“Men who fight for gold cannot all be so wicked,” said Arianne. “My uncle sold his sword for a time, did he not?”

Daemon glared at her. “You never met the men of his company, princess. Those beasts were cut from the same cloth as the Mountain That Rides.”

That seemed impossible. *Prince Oberyn commanded monsters?* The thought gave her a chill. “Had these sellsails meant us harm, they would have thrown us overboard already.” She did not know whether it was Daemon she was trying to convince or herself.

“They could have tried. Against three Dornish knights? They’d have fed the sharks beneath us, princess. Still, we have lingered in this bay too long.”

“The landing is yet too high,” offered Arianne with a glance to the cliff. Morosh had avowed that there was a hidden cave beneath the fortress, but the princess could not glimpse it through the mist. “We missed the high tide and must wait until the next.”

“We must, mustn’t we? At Griffin’s Roost the half-mummer pushed us upon this ship in all haste. Yet these sellsails dawdled. Was it by accident that we missed high tide? For all we know, the Myrman has sold us to the Lannisters ... or worse. Black sails could be less than a league off and in this fog we would never know.”

*Pirates.* Arianne looked out into the blackness. *Slavers.* Lady Toland had warned that these waters were infested with reavers of late. The princess’s thoughts



went to Maiden Isle and its holy women. The young ones were carried off to serve in pleasure houses, no doubt, but the older ones ...

After Lady Mellario had returned to Norvos, the closest thing Arianne had had to a mother was a long procession of septas. None stayed long, each soon returning to the motherhouse whence she had come. *Some of them would have been from the isle, Arianne knew. They are dead now, most like.* She could scarce remember most of the women's names, truth be told, but the thought still saddened her. All had their own reasons for leaving. Some could not abide Dorne's heat or its spice-filled food, whilst others would not suffer the Red Viper's advances. They complained of their declining years, a dying father they must attend, the needs of a liege lord far away. Arianne had heard every excuse and felt less and less with each abandonment. Part of her wondered if they had not all been sent away by her father for reasons known only to him. *Did he fear I would grow to love them more than my own mother? More than him?*

It was a bond she shared with Spotted Sylva and the elder Sand Snakes, although they rarely spoke of it—their mothers were all dead or far away. Without them, Obara, Nym, Tyene, and Sarella had looked to their father as a paragon, insisting that his life was the one to emulate, cock or no. Arianne and Sylva had only had each other to help riddle out how to be a woman instead.

*Motherless*, Arianne thought. It occurred to her that this dragon prince had been raised that way as well. *Unless that septa was his bosom to cry on.* The princess had only spied the white robes as their ship left port. Though she had been too far away for Arianne to get a good look, the woman had seemed queerly familiar.

Morosh barked something in the dialect of Myr and the sailors gathered around their captain. *It's time*, Arianne knew. She headed back toward midship.

After another round of growls, the seamen unfurled three banners. The big rainbow one was given to Joss Hood. The young knight took up position at the prow, waving it with all the strength his arms could muster. The other two flags were raised from different staffs. The plain golden field of the company hung limp near the stern. Fixed above the bowsprit with a torch to give it light, the orange of

House Martell blazed against the evening gloom. Then the seamen lowered the mast, lifted anchor, and unshipped the oars.

Dangerous even at high tide, the seas beneath Durran's Point swelled with strong currents over deadly, half-concealed rocks. That did not worry the Myrman, or so he claimed. "This whore's mouth has pleased me before," he boasted, though he did not say how many times. The captain made use of a Myrish mirror and lantern to shine light out before them into the fog, scanning the water for hazards. Free of sails, the boat crept forward by oars alone.

With each splash, the mist receded and the chalky crags beneath Storm's End became clearer to Arianne Martell. The rock had the look of a towering bluff of packed snow. *Is this what the Wall looks like?* Shadows fell here and there upon the cliff face. Looking closer, Arianne thought she saw a brow, the bridge of a nose, a cheekbone, all formed by the crevices. The cog made straight for the yawning mouth.

Jagged spires jutted from the water, passing close beside the vessel. The crew avoided them deftly, though more than once Arianne was certain they would crash. Finally, Morosh yelled to the oarsmen to stop rowing. *Lady Cassana* continued forward with the flow of the tide into the cave, waves crashing all around. With an unexpected shake of the ship, Arianne lost her balance and fell upon Maeser Denys, who let out a yelp of pain. Grabbing his hand for balance, she moved to sit beside him and made an apology out of what breath she could spare. She did not hear the man's reply. *His hands are like Arys's.*

The waters calmed as the cave became a giant tunnel. Soon sconces with burning torches appeared along the walls, lighting their way. A drop of cold water fell upon Arianne's brow, then trickled down her cheek and into her mouth so she could taste the salt. She looked up only to see the murder holes above, eyes gleaming within. Whispers echoed through the tunnel as the sailors dipped the oars to slow the cog to a stop. A closed portcullis barred their way.

"Surrender your weapons," called a voice from a hole above. "Unless you care to be showered in boiling oil."

The sellsails exchanged confused looks before tossing their blades and crossbows in a heap in the center of the deck. Jeyne and Elia murmured to each

other, fear on their faces. Arianne's three knights fumed, but they added their swords to the Myrmen's all the same. The only one who looked calm was Maester Denys.

Two skiffs filled with armed men appeared on the other side of the gate. Arianne noted the badges: moths, buckles, an ear of sweetcorn. She saw a shield that bore three golden bendlets, a surcoat with a sea turtle, a helm shaped like the head of a seahorse. With a rusty scream, the portcullis rose.

They stormed the ship.

It was an hour before the castellan of Storm's End came to the Round Hall. In that time, the men had been beaten, the women groped, the maester manhandled. All were given cells save Denys and Princess Arianne, who were seated on cushioned chairs in the center of the hall. Four knights stood sentry, ensuring their new prize would not escape them.

Gilbert Farring was an imposing man, large and muscled. His doublet bore two knights, their mounts in the air, leaping at each other in battle. At the castellan's heels scurried his own maester, whose gaze had lingered on Denys as the two came in. Ser Gilbert's eyes never left Arianne. "My lady," he said with a warm smile as he sat in the lord's seat. His deep voice resounded through the hall. "It brings me joy to see that Doran Martell has at last decided to lend his strength to the one true king in the greatest of wars. The night is dark and full of terrors, but King Stannis shines brightly as our savior."

"I am a princess of Dorne," Arianne corrected. "And my father has not declared for anyone in these disputes. I admit, this is a puzzling situation. We were told Storm's End was held by a different king, Aegon of House Targaryen, returned from across the Narrow Sea. I was sent by my father to treat with his hand, Lord Jon Connington. Is he not here?"

"Lady or princess, you are my hostage," said the castellan bluntly. "But to your question, no, I have not seen any ghosts within this castle. It was not your father or this Connington who led you here, but the true power in the realm, in *all* realms, the Lord of Light. You may find it queer that you sit here before me rather than before the griffin, but I do not. I *knew* this would happen. I saw it in the flames.

R'hllor guided you here as an answer to our prayers and as a reward for our sacrifice.”

*Sacrifice.* Arianne stirred uneasily. “I am certain we can arrange a fine ransom in exchange for our safe return to Dorne. Furthermore, House Martell has many friends across the narrow sea. Should any of you seek comfortable refuge in Norvos, Tyrosh, or Volantis, we would be able to negotiate ...”

“Do you take us for hopeless men in need of rescue?” asked Ser Gilbert. “We do not care for coin or luxury, nor do we fear the wrath of pretenders. No, we are soldiers in the war for life itself.”

Arianne blinked. She looked to the knights’ faces around her. They were still as stone. “I do not know of what you speak.”

Farring’s maester cleared his throat. “The war for the dawn, princess. The followers of R’hllor hold that their champion, Azor Ahai, will one day return and lead them to victory in a great battle.”

“And that day has come,” Ser Gilbert said with passion. “My son wrote me from the Wall. Oh, the things he has seen. The old powers have awoken, the boy tells me—the cold winds rise. The Long Night is upon us. Mankind faces wargs, skinchangers, giants.”

“Giants?” asked Arianne.

“My cousin slew one! He means to send the skull south as proof of what goes on, but that is not the worst of it.” The castellan grew more serious. “The dead walk.”

*He is mad.* Arianne had stood audience to the red priests’ chants and temple fires on evening rides through the shadow city. Their like were not uncommon in Dorne, least of all near the Broken Arm. They all sang of prophecies and saviors and burning swords, but Ser Gilbert’s delusional zealotry exceeded anything she had ever heard.

“If we may return to the affairs of the living,” Maester Denys cut in. “I bring messages from across the realm.” Out of the sleeve of his robe he produced an oilskin package. From within, Denys unfurled a bundle of parchments and passed them to a knight with a blackberry badge, who delivered them to the other maester. “Crow’s Nest has surrendered to the forces of Prince Aegon and Lord

Connington. Rain House, Greenstone, and Tarth as well. Mistwood, Stonehelm, the Grassy Vale ... even Harrenhal has bent the knee, and soon the rest of Westeros will follow.”

The maester of Storm’s End shuffled through the pile he was handed, squinting and picking at the wax seals. “This letter of obeisance from House Morrigen is true. And from House Wylde ... Estermont ... Tarth... all real.” The turtle knight turned his head. “Mertyns is real ... and Swann, and ...” The maester frowned, and examined a seal more closely. He handed the parchment to the castellan and whispered in his ear.

Gilbert Farring laughed. “Maester Jurne tells me this one is most like a forgery.” He picked at the wax himself. “A gallant effort. You come to treat and flaunt your victories, and if you find me unimpressed, mayhaps you think that my seneschal could be persuaded to murder me. Is that the way of it? King Stannis once did that very thing, when he took the castle from Cortnay Penrose. But now that ruse is spent. The traitor Elwood Meadows was weak in his faith, and R'hllor in need of praise. I gave him to the fire months ago.”

Arianne glared at Maester Denys. *He knew the castle was held by Stannis’s men all along. And Connington hoped a stack of letters and the heir to Dorne would convince the garrison to come over. That will never happen with this zealot in command.*

Denys was unmoved. “If a life of wealth in exile does not suit you, mayhaps marriages could be brokered for you and your men. The daughter of Casper Wylde has recently flowered, but Ser Richard Morrigen’s daughter is by all accounts prettier. Both girls stand to inherit their castles.”

“Princess Arianne, you are free to wed as well. Are you not?” asked Maester Jurne, smiling.

Arianne would not lose her composure. “I am yet to be betrothed, maester.”

Ser Gilbert shook his head. “How can I marry when I must hold Storm’s End for my liege?”

“Your king is far away. Dead, for all we know,” said Maester Denys. “You are under siege and your stores will last you but half a year, by my guess. When your

fodder dwindles, do you think Mace Tyrell will take pity? He is not the openhanded sort. Lord Connington, though ...”

Ser Gilbert cut him short. “Your promises will not sway us, maester. King Stannis outlasted that glutton of Highgarden the last time he besieged this castle. The Lord of Light came to his aid, delivering holds full of onions. Hunger will not put out the fires of our hearts.”

*This is hopeless.*

“Ser Gilbert, be reasonable. You and your men may yet live,” Denys implored. “Bend the knee to Prince Aegon.”

Anger flashed on Ser Gilbert’s face. “Are you deaf as well as lame, maester? Stannis Baratheon is Azor Ahai! He must, he *will* unite this realm against the Others! If I surrendered this castle, my weakness would reflect upon my king. Men might flee his cause, and at this desperate hour! No. I will not forsake my king, nor will I betray mankind. Not for riches, not for lands, not for a pretty face or a warm cunt.”

Arianne crossed her arms. “What are *your* terms, then?”

“Prince Doran will declare for Stannis.” The castellan spoke as if it was certain. “Last I heard, Martell had spearmen in the Boneway. Those forces will come to Storm’s End, lift the siege, and then I will take command of them. After that, we must find our way north. Your sellsail will have friends, I imagine.” Ser Gilbert paused, lost in thought for a moment. “Keep in mind, if you refuse, I will feed you both to the flames.”

Arianne’s throat felt dry. “We are envoys,” she managed to say. “You would do us harm? We came under a peace banner.”

“Your flag is for a demon with seven faces. Its true one is the Stranger, death itself. There can be no peace with the Great Other.” The blackberry knight shifted where he stood, while a knight with a cob of sweetcorn on his breastplate furrowed his brow.

“It seems we have little choice but to meet your demands, then.” Maester Denys remained unperturbed. “Might we have use of your rookery? The princess must write her father at Sunspear if you wish for Dorne to join in your king’s

cause. The nearest castle to the Boneway is Wyl—they should be informed of your plans as well. And, of course, Griffin’s Roost.”

Farring snorted. “At this hour? It is past the hour of the mole. We can craft the messages on the morrow.”

For the first time, Arianne saw Maester Denys tense. “On the morrow?” he asked. “Would it not be better to send the ravens now? There is no time to lose.”

“Words are more eloquent when men have had their rest, maester.”

Arianne saw Denys move in his seat, but he did not wince. *Something is wrong.* The princess thought of Daemon bemoaning Morosh’s delay, of the calluses on Denys’s hands, of Jon Connington outside the walls of Storm’s End, waiting, shrouded in the brume. She imagined a *cyvasse* board, the pieces in place, the turns played. She looked backward in time to the game’s beginning, then forward to the moves ahead. *We must get to the rookery now*, she decided, *but how?*

Then it came to her, of all things: a rambling, tedious story. One of many rambling, tedious stories she’d endured from rambling, tedious Maester Caleotte.

“It must be now,” she said suddenly. This time her voice boomed as loud as Ser Gilbert’s. “Ravens prefer to fly over land, yes?”

Maester Jurne was taken aback, but then nodded in understanding. “Just so. When given a choice, the bird will veer away from water, as it offers no ground to rest.”

“So our raven will not fly south over Shipbreaker Bay, but west, over the archers outside your walls. A perilous journey for a poor bird. It would be best to send our messages under the cloak of night, would it not?”

The castellan hesitated. “How many Sunspear ravens have we left?”

“Three, ser,” said Jurne.

“And to Wyl?”

“But one.”

Ser Gilbert sighed. “Very well. I am going to bed. Ser Lomas, have your men escort the princess and the maesters to the rookery. Read over her words carefully, Jurne. Short, simple messages, free of hidden words and deception.” He stood, looked to Arianne, and gave a mocking bow. “The greatest power is in king’s blood, but I imagine princess’s blood is not half bad.”

Arianne shivered as the castellan made his departure.

The climb to the rookery was perhaps the slowest Princess Arianne had ever moved. Maester Denys moaned in torment with every step, taking frequent stops to let the waves of pain subside. Two of the knights tried to assist the maester, but his speed did not improve. *Areo Hotah would carry my father, but Denys is a larger man by far.* After half an hour, Maester Jurne grew impatient and went ahead to prepare the parchments and quill, leaving Arianne between the sweetcorn and turtle knights at a landing.

“You are Ser Lomas Estermont,” Arianne said to the knight on the right. Denys’s howls echoed below. “I believe we sailed here on one of your family’s old ships. The cog’s figurehead showed a young woman with a turtle’s shell on her back.”

“I am not blind, princess,” the knight snapped. He was an older man, past forty, with shaggy eyebrows that were going grey. “Cassana was my sister. She died trying to enter the same cave we found you in. I was at least spared from seeing her drown, though I cannot say the same for my young nephews who watched from the ramparts.”

That surprised Arianne. For the first time in her life, she felt sympathy for Robert Baratheon. “Jon Connington ... is a deliberate man.”

“An ass is what he is,” Ser Lomas declared. The sweetcorn knight sniggered at that.

“You knew him, then?” asked Arianne.

“Well enough as a boy. I squired for Lord Steffon, and Griffin’s Roost is not far. I considered Jon a friend, until he went off to King’s Landing and began to think himself a Targaryen. I’m surprised the damned fool never bleached his hair. Then my nephew rose up, and the griffin was on the wrong side of the war.”

“Dorne was on that side as well,” Arianne said.

“Aye,” Lomas said, and left it at that.

“Greenstone has fallen and Lord Eldon has bent the knee,” Arianne pressed. “If you do not follow suit, do you not fear for your father’s life?”

Ser Lomas shrugged. “My father is an old man. His new wife is more like to send him to his grave than Jon is. She’s young and nimble, I hear.”



*Sylva. Punished for my crimes.* Arianne hoped Jon Connington was not aware of their friendship. It would be used against her, she knew. She wondered how safe Spotted Sylva was in the hands of her sellsword captors. They had treated Lady Mertyns well enough, but she had bent the knee. Ser Lomas's stubbornness may well put his new stepmother in danger. "You do not believe Jon Connington is one to execute his prisoners, then?"

"All squawk, no bite," Lomas said with a smile. "The Lannisters have my brother. It's only fitting that Jon should have my father. I will keep with Stannis."

"Three turtles and three kings?" Arianne noted.

"Four, if Andrew wants mischief," the sweetcorn knight mused.

"Hush, Lawrence," said Ser Lomas, annoyed.

*Who is Andrew? Arianne wondered. Another brother? A cousin? A son? Whoever he is, he is not at Greenstone, it seems, but not with Stannis or Tommen either.*

Maester Denys finally caught up with the rest of the party and they resumed their ascent. They were halfway up the tower when Arianne passed a window facing to the north. *The castle has windows after all*, she thought, as she peered out into the blackness. *What hour is it?* She listened for nightingales before remembering they had all flown south by now. Instead, faintly, she could hear the snorts and grunts of livestock in the distance.

When Denys came to the window, he too took a moment to study the outside world as he caught his breath. His stooped back rose and fell as he scratched his head. "Might I have use of the privy?" he asked. "Oh dear, please. It is quite urgent."

The four knights all groaned in unison, well beyond annoyed. "Fine," the sweetcorn knight said, and yanked Denys hard by the arm. The maester was dragged down the hall, squealing in pain. A knight with a haystack badge followed after. *They may very well throw him down the garderobe.*

For half an hour, Arianne and the knights listened to Maester Denys howl in the privy. *Are they killing him?* Arianne ruled it out only because no murder would take so long.

When at last Denys returned, he only thanked the men graciously and resumed his ponderous climb. They made the rest of the ascent in silence, or as

close to it as Denys could muster. In place of moans, the maester now sobbed quietly, though his pace was still as slow as a snail's. The knights yawned and Denys looked half a corpse, but Arianne was wide awake as they neared the top of the drum tower. *Whatever this mummer is planning, it will happen soon.*

They found Maester Jurne asleep at his table in the center of the rookery, his face laid on a pillow of stacked parchments. After the narrow stairway, the workshop seemed cavernous. Scores of cages spanned the walls, piled atop one another and climbing up to a ceiling lost in darkness above the candlelight. Arianne took the time to study them as Denys struggled his way up the last flight of stairs. Half stood empty, but there were still more than three hundred birds sleeping in their clusters, by Arianne's reckoning.

Maester Jurne, or some maester before him, had labeled all the cages. A dozen birds were marked for King's Landing; another dozen for Dragonstone; a score for the Citadel. The largest cage was for Storm's End itself, filled with nearly forty birds returned home that Jurne could not send out due to the siege. The castles of the Stormlands each had a handful of birds, as did the seats of the great houses, but other castles had no more than two ravens, and many had none. On the other side of the room, far from the black birds, sat a single great cage. A giant white raven slumbered within. *So it's true, Arianne thought. They are celebrating along the Greenblood even now.*

Maester Jurne's eyes opened with the rattle of mail and swords. "Finally," he said, groggy. He looked to the window. "It is near dawn; let's be quick about this."

Maester Jurne passed Denys parchment, quill, and ink. With slow and careful strokes Denys wrote a note, then cleared his throat. *"Father, I am held within the walls of Storm's End by its castellan, Ser Gilbert of House Farring. Bend your knee to Stannis Baratheon. Command the Dornish forces in the Boneway to march to Storm's End."*

"King Stannis Baratheon," Maester Jurne corrected. *"First of his name."*

"My father gave me command of the army," Arianne added. *"Make it, I order our forces in the Boneway to march to Storm's End."*

"Very well," said Denys. He wrote the message a second time, no faster than the first. "Who is to receive our letter at Wyl?"

“Lord Anders Yronwood, the Bloodroyal. It is his host that waits.”

A faint smile appeared on Denys’s lips. He took up a new sheet of parchment. “*Lord Anders, I command you to march your host to Storm’s End.*”

“Short and simple, but I have one change,” said Arianne. “Add, *We are at war.*”

Arianne signed the letters and passed them to Maester Jurne, who looked them over suspiciously before sprinkling sand on them to help the ink dry. “I take it you brought your seal with you,” he said.

She had. The Princess twisted off the top of the ring on her left hand to reveal the sun and spear seal of House Martell. In the puddle of orange wax on each message she pressed down her fist.

The message to Griffin’s Roost was the shortest yet. *The castellan will not kneel.* Maester Denys signed it.

Once the wax was dried, Maester Jurne rolled up the messages, dripped upon them the gold wax of Baratheon, and pressed a seal showing a flaming heart with a stag’s head within. He retrieved birds for Sunspear, Wyl, and Griffin’s Roost, rousing them gently with a caress on the head. With the letters attached, the maester brought the ravens to the window and let them fly. The sky was beginning to lighten.

*It’s done,* Arianne thought. *What will they make of all of this?*

“Get moving, now,” said Ser Lomas. “We need to get you to your cells.”

“If I could just rest here a moment,” Maester Denys implored him. “It was a terrible journey up, and I fear my knees cannot bear the agony of a descent just yet.”

The sweetcorn knight became livid. “Get up, now!” he ordered. Denys sighed and began to rise.

*DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

The sound of trumpets rocked the room.

“What is that?” yelled the haystack knight.

The ravens flapped violently, angry from the rude awakening.

Jurne flinched away from the rattling cages.

*DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

The blackberry knight ran to the window. “It’s a battle!”

The sweetcorn knight was at his side, looking out.

“What is happening?” shouted Ser Lomas over the trumpets.

The ravens cawed.

*DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

“Who is out there?” yelled the haystack knight.

“Jon!” the white raven screamed.

“In the mist, horses!”

The wall of black wings beat wildly. Their wind blew parchments in the air.

“What is this?”

“Jon!” a black raven echoed.

“Jon!” another quorked.

“Jon!” cried a third.

*DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

“There are lights! Torches!”

“Jon! Jon! Jon!” two dozen voices filled the room.

Only Arianne noticed that Denys had removed his maester’s chain.

“By the gods!”

The chain went around the haystack knight’s neck.

*DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

“JON! JON! JON!” three hundred shrieked.

“Stop him!” roared Ser Lomas.

The blackberry knight turned, but it was too late. The sword slashed at his neck. The sweetcorn knight fell in a fountain of blood.

Jurne ran.

Ser Lomas's sword met Denys’s stolen blade.

*DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

“JON! JON! JON!”

The turtle knight was disarmed.

“Not Lomas!” Arianne screamed. “We need him!”

Denys gave a nod, then knocked the man over the head with the pommel of the haystack knight’s sword.

*DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa DAAAaaaaaaaaaaaa.*

“JON! JON! JON!”

“Tie him up,” Denys told her, his voice now that of a different man.

With the grace of a panther, the sellsword hoisted himself onto the window ledge. Then he dropped.

By the time Arianne reached the window, Denys had disappeared from sight. Far below, the dawn light cast queer shadows of the cavalry in the morning mist. To the west, countless torches glowed through the fog like stars. *Like eyes. A thousand eyes.* They belonged to the Stranger, every one, leading men to the beyond. The pack raced toward his bosom.

Then, from a window below her, Arianne saw a figure fly from the castle. The night shirt it wore bore two knights, their mounts in the air.



## JON

**T***he wall must not fall.* Dread twisted in Jon's gut like a cold blade. *If it does, all is lost.*

The men were assembled on the crest of a muddy hill, shrouded all around in a brume so thick they could scarcely see the tips of their own pikes. The ground beneath their feet was soft and slippery. If grass had ever grown here it was gone now, long since grazed or trampled; in its place lay a bed of sludge, a mix of soil and clay and shit, rising to the men's ankles. "Stay close!" Jon yelled. He trotted along the line, sticky earth sucking at his mount's hooves with every step. "They are upon us."

The Golden Company's infantry had been divided into centuries ten men across and ten ranks deep, with each square commanded by a captain or a sergeant. Fifty such squares stood side by side, five thousand strong together, and they would hold their ground as one. Westerosi saw footmen as a mere complement to cavalry—rabble for mounted knights to cut down as they galloped past. But, across the narrow sea, the free companies knew better.

“Pretend you got no cocks!” Franklyn Flowers bellowed to his own pike square. “Today we fight like them pointy-hatted eunuchs!”

*No, not like the Unsullied. Better.* In truth an old commander from the Company of the Cat had developed this strategy of the square, taking his inspiration from Astapor’s slave soldiers. This had been before Jon’s time with Blackheart, back in the trying old days when the Golden Company was led by Utherydes Peake. That captain-general had signed a contract with Tyrosh and marched to meet its enemies on the shore of Vess Lake, where the Cats’ pikemen were waiting for him.

The foes had laid down their shields to wield spears twenty feet long, so that rank upon rank could support their front. Only the most disciplined riders would have charged into those thousands of deadly points. The Golden Company never lacked discipline ... and had suffered all the more for it. The squares of the Cats had held against their assault; “Red Ripples on the Lake” was the bitter song the survivors sang.

Those singers were gone now—their contracts ended, if not their lives. But their song lingered at the campfires, and the Golden Company still trained in the square. *What they shed in blood, we gained in wisdom.* The thought made Jon both sad and proud at once. He opened and closed a mailed fist. *The company remembers.*

All fifty centuries faced south, into the screams that rose out of the mists below. Snarls, moans, and shrieks filled the grey as if from the throats of rabid hellhounds, an inhuman chorus of panic and suffering. *The poor beasts. They’ll be put out of their misery soon enough.* In the winter’s brume, Jon Connington saw none of them, only a thousand points of flame dancing and writhing like so many fireflies.

“Ser Torman!” Lord Jon yelled. “It is time. Tell your brother to begin.” The knight nodded and without a word galloped down the hill toward the muffled cries of their bait. In less than a minute he’d vanished into the fog.

One minute more and the company’s trumpets blared, *DAAAaaaa, DAAaaa, DAAaaaa.* A few soldiers winced at the deafening sound, but Jon nodded his approval. The horns made him think of Homeless Harry Strickland, and he

prayed the captain would keep his prince safe. Blasts came a second time, then a third, yet there was no reply from across the field. *Where are you, coz?*

The rising sun to the east was as hidden as their foes there, though dawn had lightened the gloom to a paler shade of grey. Behind the great curtain of fog lay five thousand Tyrell riders. They'd rode through the night, snaking their way down the kingsroad like some nocturnal monster, hungry for glory. *Unless the scouts were wrong. They might be wrong. Red Ronnet could have waited for the infantry after all.*

The trumpets called out a fourth time. His men glanced uneasily about, catching the eyes of their comrades beside them. A fifth time: Jon's hand itched beneath the gauntlet. *Do they suspect something?* A sixth. *They could be behind us.* A seventh. *Others take them all.*

Finally the Tyrell trumpets answered, *da-DAAA da-DAAA da-DA da-DA da-DAAAAAAA.*

At that sound, enormous fireballs flew from the south into the east, one after another. When there was no trumpet blast to drown them out, the mangonels sounded with hideous *snaps* like the breaking of giants' bones. In the distance the burning pots they'd thrown shattered: their flames burst forth for an instant, then disappeared.

Impressive as it looked, the spectacle was but a Qartheen firemage show. The pitch most like fell short and hit no one, but that hadn't been its purpose. Siege engines were seldom used in pitched battles. They were too slow to reload—not worth the men they took to operate. And far too difficult to defend. A tempting weakness. *The lowest plum gets the first plucking.*

Jon Connington reared his horse, "Still as stone!" he shouted. Fifty feet to his right Ser Franklyn echoed him; to his left, Little Pussy did the same. Beyond them yelled Will Cole and Lorimas Mudd, then Two Swords and Perceon Ball, and so on down the line. The men stiffened and stood frozen. They had to stay hidden in the fog till the last; the smallest motion might uncloak them.

The Golden Company's trumpets fell silent while Tyrell's grew louder: *da-DAAA da-DAAA da-DA da-DA da-DAAAAAAA.* They called out *war*, but still Jon waited.



Out of the corner of his eye Griff thought he glimpsed some movement. He turned and squinted up at the Drum Tower, but other than the brazier on the ramparts, there was nothing to see. Within the walls of Storm's End Ser Denys Strong had his own role, as the rest of the company had theirs without. *If it goes to plan he'll want a lordship*, Connington knew. *Perhaps Harrenhal*. Harren's curse was more than a fair price to pay for Durran's stronghold, he supposed.

Jon had known the castellan's father long ago. Lord Farring was an insufferable braggart, but fiercely loyal, and a man of his word. Connington would extend to the son a good marriage, a lordship even. "Mayhaps the man will come over," Haldon had said as he'd prepared the letters. Griff figured otherwise. *Sheep keep with their flock*. Not so with Lord Connington or Prince Rhaegar, maybe, but with ordinary men. But if Ser Gilbert had more honor than wits, his seneschal was another sort of man entirely. Lord Elwood Meadows had already betrayed and murdered Cortnay Penrose, it was said. *An overripe peach without a stone, that one. He will make a good ally ... for the nonce*.

In another life Jon Connington had oft been a guest at Storm's End, suffering through its feasts and tourneys. The castle's tenderhearted maester had found him once, wandering the halls to avoid Lord Steffon's hulking sons, and taken him up to the rookery to see his proud flock (he had burned to think that Cressen pitied him). If Denys's treating went poorly, those birds would be the fallback: three hundred distractions would fill the air along with the trumpets. The guards would be tired, he knew, emaciated; unprepared for the fury a man of the company could bring.

Griff had wanted to give the Roost's maester chain to Ser Duncan, who seemed the shrewder of the two brothers, closer resembling a true man of the Citadel. That had not sat well with Denys. "What if the wretched knight won't come to the rookery?" he had protested. "It's a floor down to the lord's chambers, and I'm twice the squirrel Duncan is." To prove his boast, he'd raced his brother up the smoothest wall of Griffin's Roost and down again. It was an easy choice after that.

Still, Ser Denys might fail—might have already failed. If so, Ser Gilbert held the heir to Dorne as his hostage. *A disappointment*. But not the worst result. After all, the Dornish sought something Lord Jon could not give them. *They want our*

*prince to marry their princess*, Ser Franklyn had put it. And if Jon could not seal an alliance with Dorne, neither could King Tommen, so long as Stannis's men held Arianne. The spearmen in the Boneway might not join Prince Aegon, but so long as they could not join the Lannisters, the Golden Company's flank was safe. *As for Stannis, let him make of Dorne what he can from across the realm.*

*da-DAAA da-DAAA da-DA da-DA da-DAAAAAAA.* The Tyrell trumpets called again, louder this time. Connington straightened in his saddle, his good hand clenching the hilt of his sword.

The earth shook.

The brume stirred.

Then the shadows of horsemen drifted into view, still half-concealed by the fog. There were thousands of them, a long column of grey wraiths racing ahead, couching death beneath their arms. The sound of their hoofbeats rose in a crescendo. Connington held his breath. *They cannot see us*, he told himself.

*Turn*, Jon prayed to the Warrior.

*Turn*, Jon prayed to the Father.

He could see the points of their lances now, piercing through the haze. And banners of a thousand colors, each muted by the mist they moved through. The deep red of House Bulwer, the green apple of New Barrell, Lord Caswell's yellow centaur. All the might of the Reach charged toward Jon Connington, and for a moment he feared he had been wrong about everything. The battle formation, the mangonels, the beasts, the burning faggots. It all came rushing at him: the letters and the lies, Red Ronnet's anguish and his fury, the trumpets, Homeless Harry, the cliff, the brume. The valor of the company he led. The long reign of his son. Would he die upon this hill, an exile and a fraud? What bitter song would he become?

*Turn*, Jon prayed to the Stranger.

They turned.

The riders flowed like a raging river to the south, toward the flailing torches. Soon came the sound of lances striking flesh. Piercing cries rose from below: an aurochs, a donkey, some oxen. Soon hundreds of animals called out from the fog, shrieking, dying. As they fell to the damp earth, their flames went out one by one.

The horsemen brought with them a gust of wind, lifting some of the fog's tendrils to reveal the bare field below. Connington got a better look now at the Tyrell cavalry even as their formation broke. Some riders shook their heavy lances free of the carcasses. Others wheeled around, searching for anything with two legs to kill, but finding no one—Peake's men had long since retreated. Beneath a green-and-gold banner, a knight in a winged greathelm glowered at a dying ox, the torch bound to its horns still burning. His mud-spattered breastplate bore dancing griffins.

The knight barked a command and trumpets called a retreat, *da-da-DA da-da-DA da-da-DA*. But Jon Connington would not let them escape.

“Balaq, now!” he ordered.

“Notch! Draw!” screamed the Summer Islander in answer. “Loose!”

Six hundred bowstrings thrummed like a single giant harp. Their song shot arrows through the air, skimming down the hill to fall on the cavalry below. The missiles drummed upon their heavy plate. Amongst the din and clangor men and horses cried alike in unearthly harmony. *That is but your first taste*, Griff thought. He forced a smile.

The griffin knight bellowed, gesturing up the hill. Again a trumpet voiced his will, ordering the Tyrell riders to charge once more, *da-DAAA da-DAAA da-DA da-DA da-DAAAAAAA*.

The horsemen turned north and began the climb. Spread out, they lacked a true vanguard, but they ascended with daunting speed. *Too fast*, Jon thought. Despite the mushy earth, the Tyrell horses kept their footing as they bounded upward, spraying mud in all directions.

He looked to his men. “Ready pikes!”

*They are close enough to see us now*. The front rank knelt as the pikes behind them pushed forward like the bristling quills of a great porcupine. *They mustn't break*. “*Beneath the gold!*” Connington cried out with all his breath.

“*The bitter steel!*” a thousand men roared in unison.

*The pikes will spook the horses. The foe is too disorganized. In a moment they'll turn about. No horse would keep charging ...*

Jon Connington was wrong.

Horse met pike with the sound of a hundred long, bestial screams melted into one. Rows of men flew backwards as their pikes snapped. A storm of red rain cascaded over the company. The rear infantry grunted under the pressing weight of their comrades, but the wall held and pushed forward through the mud. The weaponless scurried to the rear as fresh pikemen took their place, stepping over the dead, angling their weapons up over the fallen destriers. Unhorsed Tyrell riders caked in mud drew their swords and rushed in low, knocking their pikes aside.

“Find a face!” Black Balaq commanded. His archers ran up and took aim between the squares. “Loose!”

Arrows battered the knights, piercing through eyes and brains, but over the dead rose another wave of cavalry. The bowmen retreated as quickly as they’d come and the wall of pikes remade itself. Tyrell knights reared their mounts and thrust their lances toward the front rank, but their reach was far too short.

Jon made a quick count of the pike square before him. The century had shed twenty men, maybe twenty-one. *The wall must not fall. “Beneath the gold!”* he called again.

“*The bitter steel!*” the tangle of bodies thundered, earth churning beneath them.

Connington saw a charging courser shy away from the pike wall, whilst other mounts reared and balked. “Ride down!” shouted a knight. “Down and around! Encircle them!” The knights wheeled around, descending the hill as another volley of arrows pelted them. Hundreds rode east in search of a flank, hundreds west, but most sat idle, shields high, unsure which way to go. Still a horn beckoned them to charge, brazen, as if it could bring down this wall before them by itself. *da-DAAA da-DAAA da-DA da-DA da-DAAAAAAA.*

“Stop!” another knight screamed. “Not west! It’s a fucking cliff!” The column reared, turned about, rode east.

Then from the kingsroad new trumpets blared, sharp and angry. *ARUUUaaaa, ARUUUaaaa, ARUUUaaaa.* All heads turned, and Lord Jon could almost hear his enemy’s thoughts. *Not trumpets. Too loud for trumpets, too strident, too ... alive.*

When the Golden Company crossed the narrow sea, only half the fleet had arrived near their landing site on Cape Wrath. He'd known the other half would turn up; the uncertainties were *when* and *where*. Many had been blown south to Estermont, a few even as far as the Weeping Town. It stood to reason that others would land farther north. Sure enough, on the second day of winter, a raven from Tarth had reached Griffin's Roost.

Homeless Harry had been giddy at the news. "Good, good," he'd said as he paced the room. "Though the trumpeters are with us. And it's the horns that make them good and angry— but none of those bouncy charge songs! No, they have to sound like them when they quarrel. Short blasts are what we need. As loud as possible! Bold!"

Jon Connington had examined the map, looking for where Ser Humfrey Stone could land with his forces. A lit candle had been placed atop Storm's End as their planning began, to keep the parchment from moving. Then Volantene honors, skull side up, had been set down to represent the company's forces, with Westerosi stags for the Tyrells and stars for the beasts of burden. The silver lying on the map could have paid out a tourney's prize. "Can they augment our cavalry?" asked Jon.

"Augment? You want our riders skewered? These bulls are smart, real smart, but they don't know friend from foe. That or they don't give a fig." Harry chuckled. "No, this isn't *cyvasse*. What they do is drive fear so far into a man's gut that his bowel empties all over his panicked mount. Havoc is their game, Jon. They're giant imps."

Connington opened and closed his right hand. "Here." He tapped a spot on the map. "The southern part of the kingswood will give them cover. We will smash the Tyrell horsemen between hammer and anvil."

Homeless Harry shook his head. "You still don't understand. It's *only* hammer."

Lord Jon looked to Harry, then back to the map. With his good hand he swept all the coins off the Stormlands. They would need to begin again. The map was not the land, that much he knew. *This isn't a cyvasse board either. That game has rules.*

"There is one more thing," Homeless Harry had said that night. "I know you don't want the company befuddled, but these boys are different. They need wine."

ARUUUaaaa, ARUUUaaaa, ARUUUaaaa.

Horses whickered on the field below as the earth trembled beneath their feet. Some knights stopped and pointed; others turned and put the spurs to their mounts. The griffin knight removed his helmet and gaped.

From the mists emerged a shuddering wall of great grey shades, bowling over horse and rider both. Half again as tall as the Tyrell cavalry, the herd blundered drunkenly forward and trampled everything in its path. Great arms swung back and forth like the clappers of giant bells, knocking men off their mounts with each toll. Ivory tusks gored the unlucky flesh they found and then ripped themselves free.

There were three score of them, charging faster than Connington would have thought possible, well beyond the speed of a horse's canter. Blood ran from the elephants' legs; they had been cut before their charge to raise their ire all the more. It was a wonder they could be controlled at all.

Yet each creature did have a driver seated on its thick neck. In the lead was Humfrey Stone, his mount's tusks covered in a layer of bronze, its giant ears flapping forward and back, billowing like war banners. Behind Ser Humfrey, in the center of the pack, was the largest of the herd, an enormous thing that might as well have been a bald mammoth. It was the calmest of the bulls as well as the largest, sober, its legs bloodless, but still a dire sight to behold. Its tusks were sharpened to a point and painted the color of blood. On its face was a giant chamfron—the ornate metalwork was Qohorik, if Lord Jon had to guess. What was not clad in armor was covered in a layer of wet charcoal, giving the monster the look of polished jet. *The black dread.*

The great elephant was draped in a giant sheet bearing the red three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. Straddling its neck was Malo Jayn, by the look of his breastplate, though the sergeant's face was covered by a helm shaped like a dragon's head. Behind him was a wooden tower painted red and affixed to a giant saddle of twisted dark steel and leather, decorated with old Valyrian runes; within it stood Homeless Harry Strickland, clutching a spear topped with the golden skull of Bittersteel. Beside the two grinning captains-general was Ser Rolly Duckfield, wrapped in his snow-white cloak. And in front of them stood his son. *Our son.*

Aegon Targaryen shone like the sunrise, all the more for being donned in black. His armor was as dark and heavy as midnight; it made him look almost brawny. He wore no helmet—a reckless choice, but the better to show his silver hair. *That is a king. How could anyone deny it?* And there, raised above his head, was ...

Connington could scarce believe it. Aegor Rivers had owned three treasures, all three lost thanks to Bloodraven's treachery. *With all his wealth, could the fat man have found them?*

Horses fled in every direction, ignoring their riders' commands. Some tumbled over or bucked their riders, leaving them mired in the mud before the charging drunken monsters. Others rode back up the hill toward the waiting pikemen. But most of the cavalry fled west or south into the gloom.

There in the winter's brume, amongst a thousand horses, the griffin knight took flight. His red hair streamed behind him as he crossed the edge of nothingness to meet what lay beyond.

Jon found himself nodding. Beneath his helmet, a salty droplet ran into his mouth. *Sweat*, he told himself. He scanned the battlefield. Thousands of Tyrell riders still remained, but they were scattered, broken, leaderless. Already some were yielding. The Golden Company's cavalry had swung to the east by now; the pikemen remained to their north. There was no escape for their foe, he knew. The rest would be mere slaughter.

Jon Connington let his right gauntlet drop to the earth. "Charge!"



## THE FORSAKEN

**I**t was always midnight in the belly of the beast.

The mutes had robbed him of his robe and shoes and breechclout. He wore hair and chains and scabs. Saltwater sloshed about his legs whenever the tide came in, rising as high as his genitals only to ebb again when the tide receded. His feet had grown huge and soft and puffy, shapeless things as big as hams. He knew that he was in some dungeon, but not where, or for how long.

*There had been another dungeon before this one.* In between there had been the ship, the Silence. The night they moved him, he had seen the moon floating on a black wine sea with a leering face that reminded him of Euron.

Rats moved in the darkness, swimming through the water. They would bite him as he slept until he woke and drove them off with shouts and thrashings. Aeron's beard and scalp crawled with lice and fleas and worms. He could feel them moving through his hair, and the bites itched him intolerably. His chains were so short that he could not reach to scratch. The shackles that bound him to the wall were old and rusted, and his fetters had cut into his wrists. When the tide rushed in to kiss him, the salt got into the wounds and made him gasp. When he



slept, the darkness would rise up and swallow him and then the dream would come ... and Urri and the scream of a rusted hinge.

The only light in his wet world came from the lanterns that the visitors brought with them, and it came so seldom that it began to hurt his eyes. A nameless sour-faced man brought his food, salt beef as hard as wooden shingles, bread crawling with weevils, slimy, stinking fish. Aeron gobbled it down and hoped for more, though oft as not he retched the meal up after. The man who brought the food was dark, dour, mute. His tongue was gone, Aeron did not doubt. That was Euron's way.

The light would leave when the mute did, and once again his world would become a damp darkness smelling of grime and mold and feces. Sometimes, Euron came himself. Aeron would wake from sleep to find his brother standing over him, lantern in hand. Once, aboard the *Silence*, he hung the lantern from a post and poured them cups of wine. "Drink with me, brother," he said. That night he wore a shirt of iron scales and a cloak of blood red silk. His eyepatch was red leather, his lips blue.

"Why am I here?" Aeron croaked at him. His lips were crusty with scabs, his voice hard. "Where are we sailing?"

"South—for conquest, plunder, dragons."

*Madness.* "My place is on the islands."

"Your place is where I want you. I am your king."

"What do you want of me?"

"What can you offer me that I have not had before?" Euron smiled. "I left the islands in the hands of old Erik Ironmaker, and sealed his loyalty with the hand of our sweet Asha. I would not have you preaching against his rule, so I took you with us."

"Release me. The god commands it."

"Drink with me. Your king commands it."

Euron grabbed a handful of the priest's tangled black hair, pulled his head back, and lifted the wine cup to his lips. But what flowed into his mouth was not wine. It was thick and viscous, with a taste that seemed to change with every

swallow. Now bitter, now sour, now sweet. When Aeron tried to spit it out, his brother tightened his grip and forced more down his throat.

“That’s it, priest. Gulp it down. The wine of the warlocks, sweeter than your seawater, with more truth in it than all the gods of earth.”

“I curse you,” Aeron said, when the cup was empty. Liquor dripped from down his chin into his long, black beard.

“If I had the tongue of every man who cursed me, I could make a cloak of them.”

Aeron hawked and spat. The spittle struck his brother’s cheek and hung there, blue-black, glistening. Euron flicked it off his face with a forefinger, then licked the finger clean. “Your god will come for you tonight. Some god, at least.”

And when the Damphair slept, sagging in his chains, he heard the creak of a rusted hinge.

“Urri!” he cried.

There is no hinge here, no door, no Urri. His brother Urrigon was long dead, yet there he stood. One arm was black and swollen, stinking with maggots, but he was still Urri, still a boy, no older than the day he died. “You know what waits below the sea, brother?”

“The Drowned God,” Aeron said. “The watery halls.”

Urri shook his head. “Worms ... worms await you, Aeron.”

When he laughed his face sloughed off and the priest saw that it was not Urri but Euron, the smiling eye hidden. He showed the world his blood eye now, dark and terrible. Clad head to heel in scale as dark as onyx, he sat upon a mound of blackened skulls as dwarfs capered round his feet and a forest burned behind him.

“The bleeding star bespoke the end,” he said to Aeron. “These are the last days, when the world shall be broken and remade. A new god shall be born from the graves and charnel pits.”

Then Euron lifted a great horn to his lips and blew, and dragons and krakens and sphinxes came at his command and bowed before him. “Kneel, brother,” the Crow’s Eye commanded. “I am your king, I am your god. Worship me, and I will raise you up to be my priest.”

“Never. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair!”

“Why would I want that hard black rock? Brother, look again and see where I am seated.”

Aeron Damphair looked. The mound of skulls was gone. Now it was metal underneath the Crow’s Eye: a great, tall, twisted seat of razor sharp iron, barbs and blades and broken swords, all dripping blood.

Impaled upon the longer spikes were the bodies of the gods. The Maiden was there and the Father and the Mother, the Warrior and Crone and Smith...even the Stranger. They hung side by side with all manner of queer foreign gods: the Great Shepherd and the Black Goat, three-headed Trios and the Pale Child Bakkalon, the Lord of Light and the butterfly god of Naath. And there, swollen and green, half-devoured by crabs, the Drowned God festered with the rest, seawater still dripping from his hair. Then, Euron Crow’s Eye laughed again, and the priest woke screaming in the bowels of Silence, as piss ran down his leg. It was only a dream, a vision born of foul black wine.

The kingsmoot was the last thing Damphair remembered clearly. As the captains lifted Euron onto their shoulders to hail him as their king, the priest had slipped off to find their brother, Victarion. “Euron’s blasphemies will bring down the Drowned God’s wrath upon us all,” he warned. But Victarion insisted stubbornly that the god had raised their brother up and that god must cast him down.

*He will not act*, the priest had realized then. *It must be me*. The kingsmoot had chosen Euron Crow’s Eye but the kingsmoot was made of men, and men were weak and foolish things, too easily swayed by gold and lies. I summoned them here, to Nagga’s bones in the Grey King’s Hall. I called them all together to choose a righteous king, but in their drunken folly, they have sinned. It was for him to undo what they had done.

“The captains and the kings raised Euron up, but the common folk shall tear him down,” he promised Victarion. “I shall go to Great Wyk to Harlow to Orkmont to Pyke itself. Every town and village shall my words be heard. No godless man may sit the Seastone Chair!”

At departing from his brother, he’d sought solace in the sea. A few of his Drowned Men made to follow him, but Aeron sent them off with a few sharp

words. He wanted no company but god. Down where the longships had been beached along the stony strand, he found a black salt wave searching and foaming white where they broke upon a snarled rock, half buried in the sand. The water had been icy cold as he waded in, yet Aeron did not flinch from his god's caress. Waves smashed against his chest, one after another, staggering him, but he pushed on, deeper and deeper until the waters were breaking over his head. The taste of salt upon his lips was sweeter than any wine.

Mingled with the distant roar of song and celebration coming up from the beach, he'd heard the faint creak of longships settling on the strand. He heard the keening of the wind and now whines. He heard the pounding of the waves, the hammer of his god calling him to battle. And there and then, the Drowned God had come to him once more, his voice welling up from the depths of the sea. "Aeron, my good and faithful servant, you must tell the Ironborn that the Crow's Eye is no true king, that the Seastone Chair by rights belongs to... to... to..."

Not Victarion. Victarion had offered himself to the captains and kings but they had spurned him. Not Asha. In his heart, Aeron had always loved Asha best of all his brother Balon's children. The Drowned God had blessed her with a warrior's spirit and the wisdom of a king— but he had cursed her with a woman's body, too. No woman had ever ruled the Iron Islands. She should never have made a claim. She should have spoken for Victarion, added her own strength to his.

It was not too late, Aeron had decided as he shivered in the sea. If Victarion took Asha for his wife, they could yet rule together, king and queen. In ancient days, each isle had its Salt King and its Rock King. Let the Old Way return.

Aeron Damphair had struggled back to shore, full of fierce resolve. He would bring down Euron, not with sword or axe but with the power of his faith. Padding lightly across the stones, his hair plastered black and dank across his brow and cheeks, he stopped for a moment to push it back out of his eyes.

And that was where they took him, the mutes who had been watching him, waiting for him, stalking him through strand and spray. A hand clapped down across his mouth and something hard cracked against the back of his skull.

The next time he had opened his eyes, the Damphair found himself fettered in the darkness. Then came the fever and the taste of blood in his mouth as he

twisted in the chains, deep in the bowels of Silence. A weaker man might have wept, but Aeron Damphair prayed, waking, sleeping, even in his fever-dreams he prayed. *My god is testing me. I must be strong, I must be true.*

Once, in the dungeon before this one, a woman brought his food in place of Euron's mute. A young thing, buxom and pretty. She dressed in the finery of a greenland lady. In the lantern light she was the loveliest thing Aeron had ever seen.

"Woman," he said, "I am a man of god. I command you, set me free."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she said. "I have food for you. Porridge and honey." She sat beside him on a stool and spooned it into his mouth for him.

"What is this place?" he asked between spoonfuls.

"My lord father's castle on Oakenshield." The Shield Islands, a thousand leagues from home.

"And who are you, child?"

"Falia Flowers, Lord Hewett's natural daughter. I am to be King Euron's salt wife. You and I will be kin, then."

Aeron Damphair raised his eyes to hers. His scabbed lips were crusted with wet porridge. "Woman." His chains clinked when he moved. "Run. He will hurt you. He will kill you."

She laughed. "Silly, he won't. I'm his love, his lady. He gives me gifts, so many gifts. Silks and furs and jewels. Rags and rocks, he calls them."

The Crow's Eye puts no value in such things. That was one of the things that drew men to his service. Most captains kept the lion's share of their plunder but Euron took almost nothing for himself.

"He gives me any gown I want," the girl was prattling happily. "My sisters used to make me wait on them at table, but Euron made them serve the whole hall naked! Why should he do that, except for love of me?" She put a hand on her belly and smoothed down the fabric of her gown. "I'm going to give him sons. So many sons..."

"He has sons."

"Baseborn boys and mongrels, Euron says. My sons will come before them, he has sworn, sworn by your own Drowned God!"

Aeron would've wept for her. *Tears of blood*, he thought. "You must bear a message to my brother. Not Euron, but Victarion, Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet. Do you know the man I mean?"

Falia sat back from him. "Yes," she said. "But I couldn't bring him any messages. He's gone."

"Gone?" That was the cruelest blow of all. "Gone where?"

"East," she said, "with all his ships. He's to bring the dragon queen to Westeros. I'm to be Euron's salt wife, but he must have a rock wife too, a queen to rule all Westeros at his side. They say she's the most beautiful woman in the world, and she has dragons. The two of us will be as close as sisters!"

Aeron Damphair hardly heard her. Victarion is gone, half a world away or dead. Surely the Drowned God was testing him. This was a lesson for him. Put not your trust in men. Only my faith can save me now.

That night, when the tide came rushing back into the prison cell, he prayed that it might rise all night, enough to end his torment. I have been your true and leal servant, he prayed, twisting in his hains. Now snatch me from my brother's hand, and take me down beneath the waves, to be seated at your side. But no deliverance came. Only the mutes, to undo his chains and drag him roughly up a long stone stair to where the Silence floated on a cold black sea.

And a few days later, as her hull shuddered in the grip of some storm, the Crow's Eye came below again, lantern in hand. This time his other hand held a dagger. "Still praying, priest? Your god has forsaken you."

"You're wrong."

"It was me who taught you how to pray, little brother. Have you forgotten? I would visit your bed chamber at night when I had too much to drink. You shared a room with Urrigon high up in the seatower. I could hear you praying from outside the door. I always wondered: Were you praying that I would choose you or that I would pass you by?"

Euron pressed the knife to Aeron's throat. "Pray to me. Beg me to end your torment, and I will."

"Not even you would dare," said the Damphair. "I am your brother. No man is more accursed than the kinslayer."

“And yet I wear a crown and you rot in chains. How is it that your Drowned God allows that when I have killed three brothers?”

Aeron could only gape at him. “Three?”

“Well, if you count halfbrothers. Do you remember little Robin? Wretched creature. Do you remember that big head of his, how soft it was? All he could do was mewl and shit. He was my second. Harlon was my first. All I had to do was pinch his nose shut. The greyscale had turned his mouth to stone so he could not cry out. But his eyes grew frantic as he died. They begged me. When the life went out of them, I went out and pissed into the sea, waiting for the god to strike me down. None did. Oh, and Balon was the third, but you knew that. I could not do the deed myself, but it was my hand that pushed him off the bridge.” The Crow’s Eye pressed the dagger in a little deeper, and Aeron felt blood trickling down his neck. “If your Drowned God did not smite me for killing three brothers, why should he bestir himself for the fourth? Because you are his priest?” He stepped back and sheathed his dagger. “No, I’ll not kill you tonight. A holy man with holy blood. I may have need of that that blood...later. For now, you are condemned to live.”

A holy man with holy blood, Aeron thought when his brother had climbed back onto the deck. He mocks me and he mocks the god. Kinslayer. Blasphemer. Demon in human skin. That night he prayed for his brother’s death.

It was in the second dungeon that the other holy men began to appear to share his torments. Three wore the robes of septons of the green lands, and one the red raiment of a priest of R’hllor. The last was hardly recognizable as a man. Both his hands had been burned down to the bone, and his face was a charred and blackened horror where two blind eyes moved sightlessly above the cracked cheeks dripping pus. He was dead within hours of being shackled to the wall, but the mutes left his body there to ripen for three days afterwards.

Last were two warlocks of the east, with flesh as white as mushrooms, and lips the purplish-blue of a bad bruise, all so gaunt and starved that only skin and bones remained. One had lost his legs. The mutes hung him from a rafter. “Pree,” he cried as he swung back and forth. “Pree, Pree!” Perhaps that was the name of the demon that he worships.

*The Drowned God protects me, the priest told himself. He is stronger than the false gods these other worship, stronger than their black sorceries. The Drowned God will set me free.*

In his saner moments, Aeron questioned why the Crow's Eye was collecting priests, but he did not think that he would like the answer. Victarion was gone, and with him, hope. Aeron's drowned men likely thought the Damphair was hiding on Old Wyk, or Great Wyk, or Pyke, and wondered when he would emerge to speak against this godless king.

Urrigon haunted his fever dreams. *You're dead, Urri, Aeron thought. Sleep now, child, and trouble me no more. Soon I shall come to join you.*

Whenever Aeron prayed, the legless warlock made queer noises, and his companion babbled wildly in his queer eastern tongue, though whether they were cursing or pleading, the priest could not say. The septons made soft noises from time to time as well, but not in words that he could understand. Aeron suspected that their tongues had been cut out.

When Euron came again, his hair was swept straight back from his brow, and his lips were so blue that they were almost black. He had put aside his driftwood crown. In its place, he wore an iron crown whose points were made from the teeth of sharks.

"That which is dead cannot die," said Aeron fiercely. "For he who has tasted death once need never fear again. He was drowned, but he came forth stronger than before, with steel and fire."

"Will you do the same, brother?" Euron asked. "I think not. I think if I drowned you, you'll stay drowned. All gods are lies, but yours is laughable. A pale white thing in the likeness of a man, his limbs broken and swollen and his hair flipping in the water while fish nibble at his face. What fool would worship that?"

"He's your god as well," insisted the Damphair. "And when you die, he will judge you harshly, Crow's Eye. You will spend eternity as a sea slug, crawling on your belly eating shit. If you do not fear to kill your own blood, slit my throat and be done with me. I'm weary of your mad boastings."



“Kill my own little brother? Blood of my blood, born of the loins of Quellon Greyjoy? And who would share my triumphs? Victory is sweeter with a loved one by your side.”

“Your victories are hollow. You cannot hold the Shields.”

“Why should I want to hold them?” His brother’s smiling eye glittered in the lantern light, blue and bold and full of malice. “The Shields have served my purpose. I took them with one hand, and gave them away with the other. A great king is open-handed, brother. It is up to the new lords to hold them now. The glory of winning those rocks will be mine forever. When they are lost, the defeat will belong to the four fools who so eagerly accepted my gifts.” He moved closer. “Our longships are raiding up the Mander and all along the coast, even to the Arbor and the Redwyne Straits. The Old Way, brother.”

*Madness.* “Release me,” Aeron Damphair commanded in his sternest voice, “or risk the wroth of god!”

Euron produced a carved stone bottle and a wine cup. “You have a thirsty look about you,” he said as he poured. “You need a drink; a taste of evening’s shade.”

“No.” Aeron turned his face away. “No, I said.”

“And I said yes.” Euron pulled his head back by the hair and forced the vile liquor into his mouth again. Though Aeron clamped his mouth shut, twisting his head from side to side he fought as best he could, but in the end he had to choke or swallow.

The dreams were even worse the second time. He saw the longships of the Ironborn adrift and burning on a boiling blood-red sea. He saw his brother on the Iron Throne again, but Euron was no longer human. He seemed more squid than man, a monster fathered by a kraken of the deep, his face a mass of writhing tentacles. Beside him stood a shadow in woman’s form, long and tall and terrible, her hands alive with pale white fire. Dwarves capered for their amusement, male and female, naked and misshapen, locked in carnal embrace, biting and tearing at each other as Euron and his mate laughed and laughed and laughed...

Aeron dreamed of drowning, too. Not of the bliss that would surely follow down in the Drowned God’s watery halls, but of the terror that even the faithful feel as the water fills their mouth and nose and lungs, and they cannot draw a

breath. Three times the Damphair woke, and three times it proved no true waking, but only another chapter in a dream.

But at last, there came a day when the door of the dungeon swung open, and a mute came splashing through with no food in his hands. Instead he had a ring of keys in one hand, and a lantern in the other. The light was too bright to look upon, and Aeron was afraid of what it meant. Bright and terrible. *Something has changed. Something has happened.*

“Bring them,” said a half-familiar voice from the hapless gloom. “Be quick about it, you know how he gets.”

*Oh, I do. I have known since I was a boy.*

One septon made a frightened noise as the mute undid his chains, a half-choked sound that might have been some attempt at speech. The legless warlock stared down at the black water, his lips moving silently in prayer. When the mute came for Aeron, he tried to struggle, but the strength had gone from his limbs, and one blow was all it took to quiet him. His wrist was unshackled, then the other. *Free, he told himself. I'm free.*

But when he tried to take a step, his weakened legs folded under him. Not one of the prisoners was fit enough to walk. In the end, the mutes had to summon more of their kind. Two of them grasped by Aeron by the arms and dragged him up a spiral stair. His feet banged off the steps as they ascended, sending stabbing pains up his leg. He bit his lips to keep from crying out. The priest could hear the warlocks just behind him. The septons brought up the rear, sobbing and gasping. With every turn of the stair, the steps grew brighter, until finally a window appeared in the left hand wall. It was only a slit in the stone, a bare hand's breadth across, but that was wide enough to admit a shaft of sunlight.

*So golden, the Damphair thought, so beautiful.*

When they pulled him up the steps through the light, he felt its warmth upon his face, and tears rolled down his cheeks. The sea. I can smell the sea. The Drowned God has not abandoned me. The sea will make me whole again! That which is dead can never die, but rises again harder and stronger...

“Take me to the water,” he commanded, as if he were still back on the Iron Islands surrounded by his drowned men, but the mutes were his brother’s creatures and they paid him no heed.

They dragged him up more steps, down a torchlit gallery, and into a bleak stone hall where a dozen bodies were hanging from the rafters, turning and swaying. A dozen of Euron’s captains were gathered in the hall, drinking wine beneath the corpses. Left-Hand Lucas Codd sat in the place of honor, wearing a heavy silken tapestry as a cloak. Beside him was the Red Oarsman, and further down Pinchface Jon Myre, Stonehand, and Rogin Salt-Beard.

“Who are these dead?” Aeron commanded. His tongue was so thick the words came out in a rusty whisper, faint as a mouse breaking wind.

“The lord that held this castle, with his kin.” The voice belonged to Torwold Browntooth, one of his brother’s captains, a creature near as vile as the Crow’s Eye himself.

“Pigs,” said another vile creature, the one they called the Red Oarsman. “This was their isle. A rock, just off the Arbor. They dared oink threats at us. Redwyne, oink. Hightower, oink. Tyrell, oink oink oink! So we sent them squealing down to hell.”

*The Arbor.* Not since the Drowned God had blessed him with a second life had Aeron Damphair ventured so far from the Iron Islands. *This is not my place. I do not belong here. I should be with my Drowned Men, preaching against the Crow’s Eye.*

“Have your gods been good to you in the dark?” asked Left-Hand Lucas Codd. One of the warlocks snarled some answer in his ugly eastern tongue.

“I curse you all,” Aeron said.

“Your curses have no power here, priest,” said Left-Hand Lucas Codd. “The Crow’s Eye has fed your Drowned God well, and he has grown fat with sacrifice. Words are wind, but blood is power. We have given thousands to the sea, and he has given us victories!”

“Count yourself blessed, Damphair,” said Stonehand. “We are going back to sea. The Redwyne fleet creeps toward us. The winds have been against them rounding Dorne, but they’re finally near enough to have emboldened the old

women in Oldtown, so now Leyton Hightower's sons move down the Whispering Sound in hopes of catching us in the rear."

"You know what it's like to be caught in the rear, don't you?" said the Red Oarsman, laughing.

"Take them to the ships," Torwold Browntooth commanded.

And so, Aeron Damphair returned to the salt sea. A dozen longships were drawn up at the wharf below the castle, and twice as many beached along the strand. Familiar banners streamed from their masts: the Greyjoy kraken, the bloody moon of Wynch, the warhorn of the Goodbrothers. But from their sterns flew a flag the priest had never seen before: a red eye with a black pupil beneath an iron crown supported by two crows.

Beyond them, a host of merchant ships floated on a tranquil, turquoise sea. Cogs, carracks, fishing boats, even a great cog, a swollen sow of a ship as big as the Leviathan. Prizes of war, the Damphair knew.

Euron Crow's Eye stood upon the deck of Silence, clad in a suit of black scale armor like nothing Aeron had ever seen before. Dark as smoke it was, but Euron wore it as easily as if it was the thinnest silk. The scales were edged in red gold, and gleamed and shimmered when they moved. Patterns could be seen within the metal, whorls and glyphs and arcane symbols folded into the steel.

*Valyrian steel*, the Damphair knew. His armor is Valyrian steel. In all the Seven Kingdoms, no man owned a suit of Valyrian steel. Such things had been known four hundred years ago, in the days before the Doom, but even then, they would've cost a kingdom. Euron did not lie. He has been to Valyria. No wonder he was mad.

"Your Grace," said Torwold Browntooth. "I have the priests. What do you want done with them?"

"Bind them to the prows," Euron commanded. "My brother on the Silence. Take one for yourself. Let them dice for the others, one to a ship. Let them feel the spray, the kiss of the Drowned God, wet and salty."

This time, the mutes did not drag him below. Instead, they lashed him to the prow of the Silence, beside her figurehead, a naked maiden slim and strong with outstretched arms and windblown hair...but no mouth below her nose.

They bound Aeron Damphair tight with strips of leather that would shrink when wet, clad only in his beard and breechclout. The Crow's Eye spoke a command; a black sail was raised, lines were cast off, and the Silence backed away from shore to the slow beat of the oarmaster's drum, her oars rising and dipping and rising again, churning the water. Above them, the castle was burning, flames licking from the open windows. When they were well out to sea, Euron returned to him. "Brother," he said, "you look forlorn. I have a gift for you."

He beckoned, and two of his bastard sons dragged the woman forward and bound her to the prow on the other side of the figurehead. Naked as the mouthless maiden, her smooth belly just beginning to swell with the child she was carrying, her cheeks red with tears, she did not struggle as the boys tightened her bonds. Her hair hung down in front of her face, but Aeron knew her all the same.

"Falia Flowers," he called. "Have courage, girl! All this will be over soon, and we will feast together in the Drowned God's watery halls."

The girl raised up her head, but made no answer. She has no tongue to answer with, the Damphair knew. He licked his lips, and tasted salt.



## THE BRAVO

**H**is command was to save the wildling girl, and Dahan Pedraatho was not a man to disappoint his god.

He had been lying on the temple floor, *mEEK as a mantis*, since before the sun had set. Now he lifted his eyes and gazed in wonder at the image of the Pale Child before him. Enshrined in an ornate pyramid of glass, the Child glowed with life and power, light from a hundred candles washing over his porcelain skin. The holy flames danced in the breeze that was filtering through the windows with the moonlight. On each gust rode a whisper.

Dahan could hear the voice of Bakkalon.

*My sword is yours, he promised. I thank you for giving me life and for teaching me how to keep it. For two days I will take no food or water in your name. The flames flickered their disapproval. No ... No fasting. I will need all my strength to do your will.*

It was the talk of Lys: Tregar Ormollen had a new concubine, purchased at extravagant price over his chief concubine's objections. The merchant prince,

famous for his exotic appetites, had no sooner learned of this one heading to auction than he'd weighed the slaver down in gold to keep her off the block and tucked within his manse. She was the rarest creature he had ever possessed—a wildling from the frozen wastelands north of the Sunset Kingdoms.

Though he kept his prize from prying eyes, the rumors scaled his high walls and escaped. The slave girl had a wild beauty to her, they said on the streets, a savage fierceness to match a Dothraki youth. She was an adventurer, a mother, a warrior. She had seen monsters and demons and dead men risen and she had survived them all. Wise beyond her years, she was in all but name a priestess in the art of love, and practiced ways of pleasure from beyond the Wall unknown to civilized men. Her nether region was a wet pelt of—

The bravo felt his god recoil from him. For a terrified instant his eyes darted to the raised sword behind the glass. *Forgive me*, he prayed. *My distraction from your purpose has provoked you. As penance I will make an offering of blood. My blade will open Tregar's throat! Your foe shall be slaughtered, the carpets of his manse dyed red!*

The wind grew to a howl. Bakkalon's expression somehow shifted as the flames rose and fell. Even the moonlight seemed to wobble over his divine visage.

No? Dahan struggled to understand the Pale Child's bidding. *No one is to die ... Yes, my god.* That would take work, patience, coin; his god was testing him, he knew. Still. *Obedient as a hound.* Whatever the obstacles, he would rescue the girl and keep her safe.

*Slayer!*

Dahan Pedraatho jolted to his feet and lost track of the floor. The room spun; he couldn't breathe. Then he fell in a heap at the Child's feet.

*No! I'm coming back!*

He sucked in, but no air came. Only a mouthful of blood. He was drowning.

*Slayer!*

He coughed violently, still gasping for air. *Father! Please!*

Someone was clutching his arm, he realized with a start. He wrenched away in panic. *Not the bath again!*

"Slayer!" a voice screamed in his ear.

Samwell Tarly opened his eyes. The man before him had red lips, not blue, and above them sat a mop of brown curls. Part of Sam wanted to yank that hair to be sure it wasn't a wig, but a deep breath quelled his panic. "Robert," he rasped. Relief washed over him as he remembered where he was: he was breathing in the breeze of the Honeywine, feeling the cool stone of Marwyn's chambers underfoot. "Why did you pull me away? I need ..." He thought of Gilly. "I need to go back."

"You need to eat. And *we* need to drink." Robert Frey lifted Sam to his feet, steering him away from the candle's glare and toward the tower steps. The acolyte was of a size with Sam, though he carried a good deal more muscle than fat. "When did you last wash?" he asked. "You're as rank as a stable boy."

Sam sniffed his baggy robe. "Yesterday."

"Yesterday three days ago, I'd wager. I would take you to the bathhouse, but we're already late. Mollander will have stolen a three-tankard march on us by now, and I don't mean to straggle."

"No!" Sam squeaked in protest. "I can't get drunk! Not tonight."

"Well, you certainly can't stay sober. A novice of the Citadel has shed his maiden's blood!"

*Pate.* Of course. He had forgotten the occasion. Robert led him down the steps, but Sam's mind was still in Lys, with Gilly and the babe.

The ship had seemed the safest place for them in Oldtown. The crew said the *Cinnamon Wind* would stay in port for days, and Sam meant to return in hours, just as soon as he had spoken with the Seneschal. Instead he had ended up in Marwyn's chambers, staring deep into the glass candle. A moment later, the sky was dark and the swan ship flown. He had scrambled around the docks asking after a brown-haired girl with a babe at her breast, but the smirking sailors only pointed him at brothels. Finally the harbormaster had caught him by the arm, told him brusquely that no such girl had come on land, and bade him respect the city's curfew.

*Quhuru Mo must have planned to steal her from the first.* The captain had taken far too little payment for their passage. *It was my own fault. Why did I trust*



him? The *Cinnamon Wind* would have stopped in Lys to take on water, and there, it seemed, the Summer Islander sold her to this merchant prince.

Sam had thought wildly of sailing to Lys himself, but then he would be a deserter, and there were the ironborn, and he lacked the coin ... No. He had a thousand excuses, but in his heart he knew it was fear that anchored him at the Citadel. *The bravo will save them*, he told himself. *He can be brave for me.*

His flabby arm slipped from Robert's grasp. "I have work to do."

"Sam. It's not even your night. Leo will be here soon, and he won't be nice about it like me. Do you want to wake up smeared in raven droppings? I suppose you'll hardly smell worse."

Sam stopped at the landing and hung his head.

"Come on. Don't make me carry you."

Evening rain stained the cobbles as they made their way downriver toward the Quill and Tankard. Sam stumbled in the fog, still lost in thoughts of Lys. His swordsman needed allies, but who? What team of heroes could he assemble? He tripped over a stone, but Robert caught him. *Steady as an ox*. He thought a moment.

"Have you had any news from your brother?"

"Malwyn?" Robert asked. "Not for some time. Still apprenticed to an alchemist in Lys, last I heard, learning the art of poisons and sleeping draughts. It suits him."

"How so?"

"With a face like his, only a sleeping woman would share his bed."

Sam grinned, but not at the joke. *An alchemist*. Sam considered the brother as he skirted a pile of horse manure on the old wooden bridge. *We could make use of him. No one need be hurt*. He was still wondering how his bravo could get coin to pay the lad when Hopfrog's laughter reached him through the fog and he realized they'd arrived. Sam could smell the cider before he'd made it through the door.

"Slayer!" Mollander bellowed. "You've finally come out of your cave!" Cider rained from his raised tankard. The tavern was a riot of toasts and talk and table-pounding. The bard in his corner singing "The Bee and the Fox" could scarce be heard over all the din.

Sam found a seat and a smile for his friends. "I see you didn't wait for me."

"We waited so long we sent the Butcher's Boy to find you," answered Roone, giving Robert a mocking bow in thanks.

*The Slayer and the Butcher's Boy*, thought Sam. Whether they liked Lazy Leo or not, the names he bestowed always caught on, even "Hopfrog," though most had the grace not to say it in Mollander's hearing. Cruel as they were, Leo's names gave Sam an odd comfort: they reminded him of his other friends, so far away now if they lived at all. *Aurochs, Lover, Monkey, Stone Head, Toad.*

"We thought you'd forgotten the man of the hour," said Armen the Acolyte, sweeping a hand toward Pate at the head of the table. A leather thong around his neck held a link of black iron. The new acolyte grinned with pride and relief.

"Pig Boy the Acolyte!" toasted Mollander. Sam raised his tankard with the rest and drank.

"And it took you but five years!" Armen laughed. "Fifty more and you could even finish that chain."

At Pate's blush, Robert jumped in. "He's the only one of us here with a link in ravenry, isn't he? We all have a bit to learn from you, Pate."

"It's only a short walk to the Isle of Ravens," he offered, his cheeks still flushed. "Actually, I've already started giving Alleras some lessons."

Sam looked around. "Where is our Sphinx?"

Roone raised his eyebrows and cocked his head left. "At the table by the singer."

There in the corner sat Alleras on one of the Quill and Tankard's ancient oaken chairs. Beside him sat a dirty man in an old leather cloak fringed with blond hair. The Sphinx was saying something as the stranger tore a roast fowl apart with his bare hands, grease running down his chin to a choker of thin bones at his neck.

Something was off about him. *He's paler than the dead.* Sam thought of Small Paul, of Lark and Chett. "Who is that?"

Armen rolled his eyes. "Who knows? The Sphinx takes after the mastiff. With Marwyn gone, who else would entertain the local whores and drunkards? Roone

was telling us that three days past he spotted Alleras outside the Blue Gate, speaking with an Ibbenese man ahorse.”

“Azorse,” joked Roone.

“You *followed* him?” Pate asked, curiosity winning out over disapproval in his voice.

“Well, it was more ... It was Leo’s idea, really.” Roone reddened. “He gave me a stag.”

“The price of friendship!” Armen tutted. “Why do you drink with that knave?”

“Oh, leave the lad be,” said Mollander. “Leo is a wretch, but he’s a wretch that buys a lot of rounds for his table. You could drink with worse. And when he’s a few tankards in, sometimes he’ll tell you things no one else knows yet.”

*Will he?* “Like what?” asked Sam.

“Like the new Grand Maester.” Mollander took a long sip and watched their faces.

Sam met Robert’s sideways glance. *Even we don’t know that.*

“Then Leo is a seer now?” Armen was dubious. “The Conclave is still deliberating.”

Mollander put his empty flagon down. “The *real* deliberation happened the night Grand Maester Pycelle died, so Leo says. The rest is all a mummer’s farce. One candidate will be discussed, and then another, and finally they will pick Gormon Tyrell.” He reached for a new flagon. “Then Leo’s beloved nuncle will head north with a Tyrell honor guard. Can’t go by ship, on account of the reavers.”

At the mention of the ironborn the mood turned cold. The Reach had been suffering their raids for months. Thousands had died.

Armen spoke first. “What news of the krakens, then?”

“Lazy Leo’s tales are worthy now, are they?” Mollander’s smirk soon hardened to a grim line across his face. “Leo’s father says the Arbor is as good as taken. Ser Desmond Redwyne has been slain along with his wife and son. Lorent Tyrell, Desmond’s squire, died defending them.”

Sam was shocked. Not since the days before the Conquest had the Redwyne seat been captured. “Ser Desmond’s wife was Lord Leyton’s daughter,” he said shakily.

“Even that won’t be enough to bring the old man down from his roost,” said Armen.

“But why? I mean, why slay such a valuable hostage?”

Robert spat. “The old king should’ve taken Lord Mallister’s advice and put all them squids to the sword the last time. You know, I’ve heard they’ve been draining the blood of their slain into wine casks and then drinking it in their temples.”

Roone’s eyes widened, but Armen’s only rolled. “The ironmen have no temples.”

“It makes no matter,” said Robert, waving his hand. “Killing or raping, all ironmen know to do is stab. It’s a wonder their longships don’t sink from a thousand holes.”

“But what of Lord Redwyne’s daughter?” Sam broke in. “Desmera.” It felt queer to say her name after all this time. They would have been betrothed, had he not been a coward and an oaf on that visit to the Arbor. He remembered her beauty, her face and hands covered in freckles, her hazel eyes. *She would have been safe at Horn Hill, babe at her breast, but I ... I wasn’t ...*

“A few were spared. The squire Merrell Florent’s been made a thrall, and Desmera’s been taken by a captain as a salt wife,” Mollander said. “The Red Oarsman, he’s called.”

“Salt wife?” Roone asked, wincing.

“Girls they take on raids,” Mollander answered. “Her lady mother’s fate was worse, they say. Euron gave her to his mutes ... Don’t you worry, though. Lord Paxter will have his vengeance soon enough. Many of Baelor’s galleys are seaworthy, and Humfrey will soon return from Lynesse’s merchant prince with all the sellsails Arbor gold can buy.”

*Tregar Omollen!* Sick as the talk of ironborn made him, the thought of Gilly locked away in the Lyseni’s manse was worse. *But how?* How would Dahan ever get into such a fortress? How would she ever get out?

The bottom of his tankard had no answer for him. The bard started up a jig with the first notes of “Bessa the Barmaid.”

“Enough of this sorrow!” roared Robert. “This is a celebration! Pate, tell us how you got your link.”

Pate looked up, startled. “Well ... Archmaester Walgrave said he thought I was ready. He called me Walys at the time, but I went to talk to Maester Gormon, and I told him how a novice is allowed three chances. No matter what he thinks of me, that’s the rule. I knew I could pass with fair treatment.”

“Which Maester Gormon would never give you,” Armen put in. “Still less after that bit of trouble with the white ravens.”

“Well, yes. He blames me for that, even though he has no proof.” He looked at Sam for sympathy, then shook his head. “But as it happens, Maester Gormon was stuck to the privy the day he’d agreed to test me, so Maester Walder offered to fill in.”

Robert nodded. “He’s fair, I hear.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Mollander. “Some cousin of yours?”

Robert gave him a look. “Not every Frey is a Walder, and not every Walder is a Frey. I have kin amongst the flock, but not there.”

Pate held up his new-forged link. “I’m sure you can guess how it went from there.”

Just then Rosey arrived with another tray of flagons. “A round for the maesters in the making, compliments of Alleras. With an apology for his absence.”

Mollander reached for a fresh drink. “Tell him our hearts are well and truly broken. And they’ll take a couple more rounds to mend.”

It was the hour of ghosts when a cold gust sent them staggering back to the Citadel. Cider had washed the reavers from their thoughts, but Samwell hadn’t drunk enough to erase his own mistakes. That night he dreamt of Jon; of his last command; of what they’d left unsaid. His head swam with schemes and fears and failures, but he also saw a bravo, sword in hand, within a pyramid of glass.

He felt sick on waking, and the sickness lingered. He told his friends it was the drink and shut himself away for days, emerging only at night. Secretly he was

relieved at this excuse for solitude, a rest from his lessons, his duties. Important as these were, the Citadel would wait for him.

But the Order would not.

The day of the meeting found Sam in the bowels of the Citadel, rapping out the secret knock against the ancient weirwood door. First knock. *Rangers returning*, the thought came unbidden. Second knock. *Wildlings*. A count of five, then one last rap.

“You’re late, whaleboy,” said a deep voice behind the door. It was Leo Tyrell, trying not to sound like Leo Tyrell.

“Armen delayed me,” Sam replied. He had chanced to meet his friend in the library, on his way to the forgotten staircase that took him down here. Armen had even asked Sam to study with him. He felt wretchedly guilty for turning him down flat; Armen was clever, a good listener, the sort of friend he’d wished for all his life. But Sam couldn’t tell him where he was going instead.

Leo yawned and gave up on the voice. “Password.”

Samwell thought of the bald archmaester with the lisp, whose ring, rod, and mask were all of brass. “Nymos.” The password was always an archmaester’s name, so that no one would think twice if they found it on some scrap of parchment.

The door clacked as it unlocked, and then Sam entered what had been only an abandoned storeroom full of crumbling scrolls. Now these were their council chambers, a place to gather once a fortnight and whisper what they’d learned. A place for those who kept the secrets of the glass candle.

Robert called them the Order of the Night-Walkers.

Sam saw that he was the last to arrive. There were Alleras and Pate; they had known about the candle first, after Marwyn. Then Sam, and then Sam had told his fast friend Robert, to the alarm of the other two. “No more,” Alleras had made him promise ... but somehow Lazy Leo found out anyway, and threatened to expose them all if denied a place among them. And so they were five.

“Keep Armen’s beak out of our affairs,” Leo told him bluntly as he took a seat by Robert. “And get here on time.”

“Now, now, Leo,” said Alleras in his Dornish drawl. “What matters a little lateness?”

“Ask Prince Rhaegar,” Leo said dryly. He sat at the head of the table. “Speaking of old Walder Frey, the Butcher’s Boy here was just getting started. Go on, tell us of these dreams you walked.”

Robert ignored the gibe about his family’s honor and cleared his throat. “As I was saying, they were my grandsire’s. After this, I don’t want to hear complaints from any of *you* about the heads you’re spending time in.” They all knew enough to grimace, though Leo only smirked. “Between things unspeakable and those merely grotesque, I was able to learn that my close kin have left the Twins.” Robert’s grandmother had been a Crakehall, Walder’s third wife, and he spoke of her descendants as his only true family. “They have taken up residence at Castle Darry.”

The Sphinx raised an eyebrow. “Darry? All of them?”

“Most. I have kin in the Vale, and the Free Cities, and as many in the north.” The mention of the Freys holding Winterfell for the Boltons brought another dull pang of guilt. This was why Sam had stopped looking north himself. “But the lion’s share is at Darry. I could make out little from above the castle, so I descended into the mind of Ser Jon Bettley. He is a meek and unassuming man, simple, easy to read.”

That was the way of it. With the glass candle they could fly through the air, scan the earth from far above. Little enough good that did. In the black of night, when the candle worked best, what did they ever see from up there? No, the Night-Walkers walked. They walked in the minds of men, experienced their thoughts, learned what they knew, and left them none the wiser.

It was men and only men, for Sam, and only some men at that. Not every mind was open to him: some were too complicated, too stubborn, too frightening. Those he could enter were the most like himself—a helm with the right fit for his head. Perhaps this is why he’d failed with the women he’d tried, or perhaps it was his own unease. Pate and Alleras had had some luck with them, so a man could do it, the Order knew. But all agreed children were best avoided as they were emotional and unpredictable, and ill-informed besides.

Even after they formed a bond, it took them time to be at ease within a new host. They’d learned to visit in dreams first, grow accustomed to the visions and

half-thoughts beneath the mind's surface. When this patchwork landscape had grown familiar, they started being able to see through the man's eyes while he was awake and listen through his ears. Sam alone knew that another level of mastery lay beyond even this.

"And what did you learn through this knight?" asked Pate. Leo drummed his fingers.

"My cousin Amerei styles herself lady of the castle on the strength of her marriage to Lancel Lannister, who has heard the call of the Father. This has led him to a new life as a pious fool, it seems; the boy renounced his lands and ran off somewhere. His place in Ami's bed has been taken by a man called Strongboar. He might be a relative of mine on the Crakehall side, actually. In any case, many men have gathered around Lady Frey: my uncle Danwell, my cousin Alesander, Arwood and his children, even Olyvar. *His* mother was a Rosby, you see, and—"

"Enough of these Freys," Lazy Leo groaned. "What difference is there, one to the next? Have you something useful to report, or are we just counting weasels to sleep?"

"Hush, Leo," said Alleras. "Finish what you were saying, Robert."

"No, I'm done, or near enough as makes no matter. Someone else can go."

The Sphinx sighed.

"Let's hear from the pig boy," said Leo. "What news of the north?" The lands beyond the Neck had been Sam's responsibility till he could bear such sights no longer. Now the job had passed to Pate.

"I flew beyond the Wall, where life is scarce. There I saw one village after another, all abandoned."

"Did you find anyone at all?"

"I did. I walked the dreams of a wildling girl named Dyah."

*Could it be?* It was the name of one of Gilly's sisters.

"Her life is suffering. She is a captive of four men who wear the black: Bill, Karl, Dirk, Oss. The names are always in her thoughts. She curses them day and night, hoping that her sons come soon to kill them all for what they've done to her."



“Mutineers,” Sam said sullenly. “And her sons are ...” He could not bring himself to finish. “Did you see them?” he managed. “Did you find the army of the dead?”

“I looked across many leagues,” said Pate, “but I saw no armies. Only snow and ice and trees.”

“Mayhaps they’re hiding,” Robert jested. “Did you check behind the bushes? Up the trees? You should try walking the dreams of grumkins. They may know a thing or two about where the dead walk.” Leo and Alleras held their tongues, but they were looking at the ceiling.

Many times Sam had broached the matter of the Others. The Order had been curious at first: in an age of dragons and comets and glass candles, why couldn’t other stories come to life? But week after week had passed and they had never caught so much as a glimpse of the threat he’d named. Their interest waned. Sam said no more.

“Well I for one have been doing something useful with my time,” announced Lazy Leo after a pause. “I looked into the dreams of a man named Watkyn. He’s squire to the captain-general of the Golden Company. It would seem Jon Connington has the upper hand in the stormlands.”

“Wasn’t your cousin marching to meet him?” asked Alleras.

“He was, but the fool lost his cavalry somewhere along the way.”

Robert was incredulous. “Lost? *All* his cavalry?”

Leo shrugged. “Armies go missing north and south these days.” He chuckled, pushing his shaggy blond hair out of his eyes. “But it’s worse than that. The Golden Company now holds Storm’s End.”

The table gave him the stunned reaction he was looking for. Alleras, though, narrowed his eyes. “You seem almost pleased.”

“Why shouldn’t I? Connington has won every tilt in the lists, and if he can unseat little Tommen next, he’ll claim three dragons for his prize. When Aegon holds King’s Landing, Daenerys is sure to join her strength to his. Then who will stand against them, king and queen?”

“Is that ... what we want?” asked Robert.

“Yes,” blurted Sam, remembering Aemon’s words. *Daenerys is our hope*, he had said. *Make them listen*. “In the north, the only way to keep the dead from rising is to burn them. Dragons are the best weapon we could have against the wights.”

Robert groaned and Leo smiled. “White walkers or no,” said Leo Tyrell, “the mastiff has already seen which way the winds are blowing. He is for the dragon queen, and so are we.”

Sam bristled at the mention of Archmaester Marwyn. He was the one who’d hurried the *Cinnamon Wind* out of port with Gilly onboard, who’d done nothing to stop Quhuru Mo from selling her in Lys. *Daenerys must be counseled, taught, protected*, Aemon had said. What sort of counsel would she have from such a man? What rough savior would he raise up?

“Marwyn also said the Citadel was against her,” observed the Sphinx. “They fear dragons. And magic. They won’t welcome this marriage.”

“The grey sheep are not like to be consulted on the match. The realm is wounded, its flesh rotten. It cries out for a cure the maesters cannot give. Only dragonfire can burn out the corruption. Archmaester Ebrose would agree.” Leo turned to Sam. “Where is Daenerys, Slayer? You’ve been looking across the narrow sea, have you not?”

Sam swallowed. He was grateful for Leo’s support. Still, the only trust he put in dragons was that they could save the Wall; the kingdom-healing properties of flame had not been tested. “I—I don’t know ... I’ve been using the eyes of the Lyseni bravo. Dahan Pedraatho.”

He did not mention that he had spoken to the man. Nor that the man had listened.

Robert looked up. “I thought you said he was a crossbowman.”

“Dahan *is* a trained swordsman, a water dancer,” Sam explained, “but he left his home in the Disputed Lands to join the Crossbow Guard of the First Magister. That did not come to pass because—”

Leo broke in, annoyed. “We have heard enough from him already. Weeks ago his ears picked up the gossip at the docks: Tregar Ormollen has provided sellsails to Ser Humfrey. Stannis’s smuggler told him. Well and good. Why are you

lingering in Lys? Move on to Meereen, or at least Volantis. I would help, but I've never had a knack for High Valyrian."

Sam wondered what to say. He wanted to tell them about Gilly: Quhuru Mo and Marywyn, the swan ship, their betrayal. *But they would ask why this Gilly matters so much to me. And if they discover that I broke my vows ...* Sam shifted in his seat. "It ... has been a challenge. The language is spoken differently across the narrow sea, and the candle prefers looking north to east." He felt his excuses landing feebly, so he gave them something else. "But I have heard that a bastard son of Robert Baratheon might be hiding at Tregar's manse. He is said to have loyal men about him: Ser Andrew Estermont, and a man they call the Fishwife."

Robert whistled. "Now that *is* interesting. Humfrey's sister lives with Ormollen as a concubine, and Lord Leyton has provided refuge to Alekyne Florent." He gave Sam a sympathetic nod at the mention of his attainted uncle. "Perhaps the Hightowers plan to support another claimant to the Iron Throne?"

"Unlikely," said Leo. "If the boy is a bastard, only a king could remove the taint. And what king would legitimize a rival claimant?"

Pate agreed. "It's interesting, but the boy won't matter much. Unless he's hatching dragons of his own, we need to know about Daenerys more. You should find her."

Sam nodded, then looked to Alleras. The acolyte usually wore an easy smile, but now his black eyes were solemn. "What do you have for us, Sphinx?"

"Grim tidings," he said softly. "I walked the dreams of Eleyna Westerling of the Crag. The poor child is mourning her parents and her uncle. All taken suddenly ... along with their maester, Jon."

"Jon?" Robert repeated, shocked. Distress was on every face. The man had left before Sam's arrival at the Citadel, but Jon Vance had been a friend to them all, and especially to the Sphinx. Sam felt for them. *I lost a Jon as well.*

Leo clenched his hand into a fist. "How did he die?"

"He was poisoned," Alleras said. "Gods know what for."

"What of the letter?" asked Pate.

"Letter?" asked Robert numbly.

“A raven came for Archmaester Marwyn,” said Alleras. “The message was sealed with the Crag’s wax.”

“He may have needed our help,” Leo spat. “You were craven not to open it at once.”

Alleras glowered back at him. Unsealing a letter meant for an archmaester’s eyes was a great crime at the Citadel, and every maester was trained to spot the signs of a resealed scroll. Had the Sphinx cracked that seal and been discovered, his brilliant career would have ended at the Wall. He drew a breath and went on through gritted teeth. “Maester Gormon took the letter for safekeeping. Until Marwyn’s return.”

Leo stood, knocked over his chair in aimless fury, and left the storeroom without another word.

The Order was adjourned.

It was Pate’s night with the candle, but he had agreed to swap with Sam, content to spend his evening reading Archmaester Kilcib’s *An Appendix of Feathers: An Account of Ravens in Westeros During the Reign of King Viserys, Second of His Name*. Alleras had swapped with him the night before, and Robert the night before that. Come the morrow, they’d all be here to take Sam’s turn at once, and the ruse would be exposed. The thought made his stomach queasy, but he pushed the feeling down. If tonight is a success, what else matters?

He sat in Marwyn’s chambers and watched the sunset, thinking of all he’d lost. He missed Gilly: her dark hair, her brown eyes, her nonsense songs, the way she smiled. With the glass candle he could go anywhere, learn anything, perhaps even be anyone. But without Gilly, what was the point? The only man he wanted to be was the man he was with her. With her he’d been *strong*, for the first time in his life; without her, he was weaker than ever.

So weak, so helpless, he couldn’t even save his best friend.

The very first mind Sam had entered was Clydas’s. It was an easy fit: Clydas too was a failure and a craven, and Sam felt at home amongst his thoughts. The steward had been meeting with a group unhappy with their Lord Commander’s leadership. A large group. It seemed half the Watch had joined the conspiracy, with Bowen Marsh at its head. Clydas had been brewing strongwine. Behind him,

someone said a giant would be a distraction, another that Jon Snow would be drugged, dumb, clumsy. They wouldn't get another chance.

Panicked as he was, Sam was helpless to warn Jon. If he had known—if *only* he had known then how to speak to those he visited ... but he was a novice with the candle, with no idea of all it could do. And sending a raven would be useless. Clydas was reading Jon's letters before he got them and would have burnt the message with a snort of laughter.

Sam was at a loss, until Pate said something about the archmaesters coming and going from the Ravenry's west tower. That meant winter would soon be upon them ... and if a white raven were seen arriving at Castle Black, Clydas could not avoid presenting it to his Lord Commander. With Pate's assistance, Sam snuck into the rookery. There they found the bird for Castle Black and trained it to repeat his words. "*Jon! Beware Marsh! Beware wine!*"

When they returned it to its cage it went right on speaking, and soon the other birds began to speak as well. "*Jon!*" cried one, then another. "*Jon! Jon!*" Soon the whole rookery was screaming. Alarmed, Sam had tried to hush them, until Pate pulled him away. "It makes no matter, Sam. We have our raven." He was right, Sam had thought. As long as their bird reached Castle Black, his warning would reach Jon.

It reached him too late. It was a long way from Oldtown to the Wall, and Bowen Marsh's plan moved faster than a raven's wings. Sam watched through Clydas's weak eyes as he read over a letter from Roose Bolton's bastard, goading Jon to march south. As he resealed the pink wax, Sam screamed for him to stop, but he could not make the steward hear. He watched Castle Black fall into chaos, saw the plotters stab Jon Snow in his belly. "For the Watch," they said, as they murdered Sam's best friend.

He had failed.

*Not again.* Samwell Tarly could barely lift a sword. His meek words inspired no one. Worse than all, he was a craven. But with the glass candle ...

He could save them.

Gilly. Aemon Battleborn, with her, and her true son at the Wall. Nella and Dyah and Ferny and all her other sisters. Desmera and Merrell. Pyp and Grenn.

Todder and Halder. Ed and Hobb and Dareon. All the black brothers, even Alliser bloody Thorne. His father, too. His mother. Dickon. Talla, Ramona, Cornelia. And Jon's uncle Benjen, his sisters, Bran and Rickon. Jojen and Meera and that giant boy they called Hodor. Grenn's brothers. Pyp's sisters. The Old Bear's son. Stannis and his Red Woman. The wildlings and the smallfolk. The knights and the lords and the septas and the maesters. The boy king Tommen. Jon Connington and his prince. Even the dragon queen Daenerys. The whole kingdom. The whole damned world.

He would save them all.

But Gilly first.

The stone room melted away. For a moment it was as though he were inside the candle, staring at a novice in a chair, tears rolling down his fat cheeks. Then that boy was gone, and he was aloft, his mind gliding on a winter's gale. He was above the world: he was a hawk, an eagle, a dragon. The Palestone Sword rushed by, then the sands of Dorne, the Scourge, the Stepstones. There was an island out in the sea, a speck on the horizon; then all at once Sam was upon it, gliding through a thousand souls. *I am the people, all of them*, he thought, elated.

Men sat at a table bathed in moonlight, laughing at a friend's jest. A dozen children waited on a street corner, their stomachs empty. Two women gazed into each other's eyes, in love. A father touched his son's hair. An old man reread his favorite book.

He felt it all—the warmth, the hate, the worry, the beauty. All their thoughts poured through him like sand through his fingers as he searched for his disciple, his champion. The bravo that would save the wildling girl.

Then the cascade of feelings ebbed and he only felt the cold.

“The plan is sound.” Dahan's voice boomed with confidence through the crisp night air as he grasped the necklace at his neck. The Pale Child felt cool in his palm and warm in his chest. *Bakkalon is with me*, Dahan knew, casting his eyes to the heavens. The stars were bright tonight over a crescent moon, all whispering the glory of his god. *He guides me as the stars do*. It was all the Child's will: he had led him to each man, everyone he'd need to make good his faithful rescue. *The*

*smuggler, the singer, the alchemist, and the Fishwife*. They were costly, but Dahan knew his devotion would be repaid threefold.

The visit to Silivo Rogare's ramshackle mansion had been unpleasant but swift. His had once been among the great houses of Lys, usurers as rich and powerful as the Iron Bank of Braavos. That was more than a century ago, before the magisters had gained the strength to put their rival low. Now the Rogare fortune was in ruin; they made their shabby deals with smugglers, pirates, anyone desperate enough to risk their freedom. Those who could not pay their debt would oft wind up rowing in a galley, shackles round their ankles.

With a Valyrian blade named *Truth* at his throat, Dahan Pedraatho had vowed to repay Silivo within the fortnight. He lied, wide-eyed and unflinching, effortlessly. The Rogares did not follow Bakkalon; therefore they had no souls. It was as if he had made a promise to a cow—a deadly cow, admittedly, with a sizable herd to do its bidding, but no true man.

When the time was up they would come to brand him, chain him, sell him on the auction block. But they would not find him, for *Shayala's Dance* awaited him in the harbor. Over a plate of snails, the ship's captain had assured Dahan they would be off on the morning tide just after the rescue. He had asked to go to Oldtown, but Khorane Sathmantes only laughed. "We go to Starfall and no farther," said the smuggler. "The stag king nearly got me burned. I don't fancy being drowned by the kraken one."

The alchemist had arrived even before Dahan tonight; he'd found him waiting beneath an olive tree, alone but for a pair of mules. The potion-maker refused to give his name, like all men of his order, but Dahan knew it all the same; the Child had whispered it in his ear. *Malwyn, Robert's brother*. The only Robert Dahan knew was the dead king in the west, but though this homely lad was from the Sunset Kingdoms, he had not the look of royalty. In truth, Malwyn was no alchemist, only an apprentice; but that was all Dahan could afford, and at any rate, he was the Child's chosen. He would serve.

"You brought the powder?" asked Dahan.

Malwyn made a face. "I would be little use to you if I had not." He stretched out his hands. Seven fingers bore rings, no doubt hollowed out and filled with his concoction.

"And the poison is not lethal?" Dahan's god had been very clear. *Never kill*, he had commanded, over and over.

"This is Demon's Dance," said Malwyn, closing his hands again. "In small amounts it brings sleep. As I told you, I must know the victim's weight within a stone or so to judge the dose. Too little and he will stumble about, drowsy, but awake; too much and he will never wake again."

"The Fishwife will tell us the weights once we are inside, amongst the revelry."

"Revelry? Is this some holy night?"

"Within those gates, the holiest. It is a night that Tregar Ormollen draws breath beneath the stars."

A half mile from the manse, Dahan and the alchemist found the singer watering his horse. He was dressed as Tyroshis oft do: loudly. He wore a pink doublet, green trousers, and a hat fixed with three peacock feathers, none of it matching his vermillion beard. His lute and two drums were fastened to his mount.

As they approached, the singer looked Malwyn over. "You could not have found a more handsome one? What will people say when I come in with a weasel-faced drummer?"

The alchemist scowled. "They'll say, 'Who is this Collio Quaynis? I've never even heard of him.'"

"If you have not heard of me, you must have got your poison in your ears. Let me tell you this: twice the Archon of Tyrosh has praised my voice as nectar for his ears and honored me with a jade comb." The feathers in his hat swung side to side as he spoke. "The Sealord of Braavos once offered a lion's snout as payment for my song, and I ought to have won a golden lute from your boy king at his wedding."

"Ha! I was told it was a corlos crystal dissolved in sauce that did for Joffrey. Now I find out it was your singing."

Quaynis's cheeks went as red as his beard. "I should slay you here and now!"

"By all means, unsheathe your lute and try."



“Quiet, both of you,” Dahan commanded. “Alchemist, it’s the singer’s name that will get us through the door. His fame is genuine; the guards will assume he is invited.” He turned. “Collio ... I have seen uglier drummers. The boy won’t be a problem.”

“Could he wear my hat, at least? It would draw the eye away from his chin.”

“As you wish,” said Dahan, ignoring Malwyn’s glare. Dismounting, he led his horse deep into the olive grove and tied it out of sight of the road. It would be waiting when it was time to escape.

When he returned, the alchemist had taken the offered hat along with a drum, which he tapped nervously. “I can’t keep a beat.”

“You will not need to,” said Collio. “Lucky for you, Tregar’s concubine prefers ballads. I will sing love songs, accompanied by myself, and that drum will sit in readiness for a dance that never comes.”

Dahan mounted the second mule. “While the singer plays, we find the Fishwife and we poison his wine.”

At the gatehouse stood four guards. None looked fit to stand against him; Dahan could easily slay the soulless beasts on his way out of the manse but the Child forbade it. Instead he had tossed a rope and grapnel a minute ago over the estate’s western wall. It would be simple enough to scale even with the girl on his back.

“Ho, Grey Gnat,” Collio bellowed, almost singing. The Fishwife had given them the name.

Two guards crossed their spears. The one on the left turned to him. By his looks, he had been Dothraki once; now he was a eunuch. “Grey Gnat?” High cheekbones and black eyes glared out from beneath a bronze visor. “A week ago. Now, this one is Brown Bat. Neither that one then nor this one now knows you. State your purpose here.”

“It is I, Collio Quaynis of Tyrosh! The singer for tonight’s festivities.”

“This one was told of no singer,” said Brown Bat. “Be on your way.”

“He sails for Volantis on the morning tide,” lied Dahan. “Do you want Tregar’s concubine to miss the finest singer in the world?” All Lys knew of Lady Lynesse’s love for singers and harpers; Ormollen was their steadiest patron on the island.

“The finest singer in the world is Alia of Braavos,” said another guard. Brown Bat nodded in agreement. “It is known.”

“*Alia?*” Collio asked, incredulous. “That ancient, withered—”

“Allow my Tyroshi friend but a single song,” said Dahan, favoring the godless slaves with an open smile. “If his voice is not the most beautiful you have ever heard, we will bid you a good night.”

The ballad he sang was called “The Moors of Carradyne.” A sad song on any singer’s lips, but on Collio’s it was nothing less than haunting. The bravo felt as though he’d never truly heard the words before; he saw the wasteland laid out before him, no trees for shade, no game to hunt. He felt the desolate wind on his face, the spray of an ocean where no fish ever swam. Felt the sun go out in the sky like a dying ember in a heap of ash, a graveyard for all the stars that had ever shone. And beneath that black sky, one lonely soul—no one to love, no light in the dark, forever.

The guards let them in.

The manse had been built by Ormollen’s grandsire in the style of Old Valyria. It was a massive, tiered thing rising over the estate’s outer walls. The marble facade reflected the moon’s pale light; crisscrossed with Valyrian arches, the structure resembled a sort of glowing honeycomb. From each tier hung a tangle of red-flowered vines, though none thick enough to climb.

A bubbling spring on the south side of the grounds became a waterfall descending to a pool on the east, the water flanked by rows of trees, lemon across from fig. A separate channel supplied a great brick fountain to the west, out of which rose a towering idol of the false goddess Pantera. Water shot out from each of her six nipples.

Only a drawbridge allowed entry here, though Dahan knew he could swim the moat—the more easily since the guards at the gate had lightened him of all his blades.

When the footpath they followed brought them to the manse itself, its interior was no less impressive. The entry hall let out into a cavernous parlor, which had enough couches for an army to lounge in it at ease—at times, armies had done just that. Flowers of many colors were wrapped in ribbons round the white marble

columns, high and low. Lyseni nobles sat beneath them, half in their cups, laughing and conspiring amongst themselves. Dahan recognized a few of the more famous magisters, and in their midst the *gonfaloniere* himself, renowned for having made the peace with Myr. *The coward*.

The guests' cups were filled by capering dwarf girls, all young and all naked. Taller courtesans roamed the parlor as well, some drawing guests away to private rooms. Some not. In the middle of the floor, one slave girl was ravished by four rat-faced dwarfs for the common entertainment. Incense floated over the room, casting a dreamlike haze over it all.

"Alchemist," said Dahan, "lower your eyes. And your sword."

Malwyn blushed and held his drum before him. "I've never seen the like of ... I haven't ..."

"Think of your grandmother. Or your grandfather. You are a drummer here, not a guest. Act your part." In truth, the upraised sword marked strength at arms and was nothing to be ashamed of. But he would not squander the word of Bakkalon on those who would not hear.

"A singer!" yelled a young noble. "Fetch Lady Lynesse, at once!"

Collio smiled and bowed low as a circle formed around him. When he had taken up his lute and launched into a love song, his drummers soon melted away into the audience.

Dahan was not long in finding the statue. There it was: a colossal turtle, some old Rhoynish god, mounted by a fierce bronze dragon. And sure enough, there was the Fishwife, standing at the turtle's head.

"Who guards the stairwell?" murmured the bravo without preamble.

"Today they are called Red Dust and Wet Stick." Like the Unsullied at the gate, these kept the Astapori tradition of drawing new names each day.

"How many stone each?"

"Dust, about fourteen. Stick is a fat one. Twenty."

"Twenty? Does he guard the stairs by blocking them?"

The Fishwife shrugged. "I only report what I have seen. The man is twenty stone." His stance was casual, bored, but his eyes darted nervously. "When will I

have the other half of my payment? Tregar has grown weary of harboring the boy, and whether we stay or go—”

“The Temple of Bakkalon, tomorrow, at midday,” lied Dahan. “You will have your money then.” What he’d already paid might get these exiles on a boat to Tyrosh, but he had nothing more to give. If they could not find another home, what matter was it to Dahan? Did the soulless truly belong anywhere? “Where is Ormollen now?” he asked. “I did not see him amongst his guests.”

“Of late, Tregar is mad for fortune telling. Dragons, flaming swords, endless winters, all that prattle. That’s why he wanted the wildling girl. She’s seen things, knows things. Or so he thinks. Our prince has been filling the Lysenis’ ears with omens and portents, any who will listen, and he went off two of them just before you arrived. Important men, huddled around whispering of prophecies and signs most like.”

Dahan Pedraatho had little interest in the gossip of idol worshippers. They were like dogs barking at the moon, hoping to understand the heavens. The Pale Child’s word was Truth, and man’s Way was his will. “Do you have the wine?”

The Fishwife produced two flasks: one wrapped in red leather, the other in black. Dahan stowed them in the hollow of his drum. Then he scanned over the crowd for the bobbing peacock feathers of a Tyroshi hat.

He found the alchemist behind a column, discreetly watching as a pale courtesan from Qarth pleased the *gonfaloniere*. “Twenty and fourteen,” he whispered, swapping his drum with Malwyn’s.

“Twenty?” Malwyn asked. “By what sorcery?” The bravo only shrugged.

Dahan left the alchemist to his work and watched the room. Collio Quaynis had bewitched them all; his voice was sweet, and Tyroshi accents were deemed charming here in Lys. The chief concubine sat nearest to him, wide-eyed and enraptured. None could deny she was a lovely woman, with golden hair and skin as pale as Bakkalon’s, but she was too neat, too Lyseni for Dahan’s taste. He preferred women from far away, with a certain roughness to them. There was something about a foreign look, messy hair, a scar here and there. Those were the kind that bore the strongest whelps.

When he made his way back, the alchemist was done. “Red for the big one, black for the little. Your man cannot mix them up,” he warned. “If he does, one guard will die, the other won’t even sleep, and your plan will fall to pieces.”

The bravo nodded and swapped their drums again. “Leave with the singer.”

“Won’t they notice we are two, not three?”

“The guards have changed by now,” Dahan said. It could even be true, for all he knew. Those were the last words he would say to Malwyn.

He returned to the Fishwife and gave him the flasks. The man often passed food and wine to the guards on duty in exchange for their gossip; these eunuchs heard the secrets of the mighty behind Tregar’s doors. Whatever they had heard tonight, they would drink well for it.

“The fat one drinks from the red,” he told him. “You must not err.”

“Simple enough.” The Fishwife eyed a passing dwarf girl as he started off. “Give me twenty minutes. Then you can fill yourself a chamberpot.”

The privy was a series of small rooms with an ornate bowl in each one. All the fine porcelain was covered in Valyrian runes, depicting some mythical beast emptying its bowels. A slave led Dahan to the first such room, but once the man had left, he moved over to the third. In its far corner he found the loose stone, removed it, and felt around within the wall until his fingers found the scabbard. The blade the Fishwife had hidden here was a cheap thing, unbalanced and gone to rust, but it would serve.

The window was a good twelve feet above him. Dahan put a foot on each wall and climbed. After squeezing through the opening, he made his way up to a window on the second floor, then slipped back inside.

Compared to the west wing, where the wildling was kept, the east was poorly guarded, from all the Fishwife had said. On the second floor, there were but two eunuchs assigned to guard the stairwell to the roof. And the two of them would be asleep for the next hour. He would pass the Pale Child’s strange test.

*Quiet as a shadow*, the bravo crept down the hallway toward the stairs. Suddenly he was seized by doubt. *Red Dust was the smaller eunuch’s name*, he realized, *but he gets the black flask*. Had the Fishwife been confused? Dahan peered around the corner.

There by the stairwell lay two guards, sprawled on the floor, empty flasks of red and black beside them. Slowly he approached for a closer look. He saw that they were twins, from Naath, both about seventeen stone. And he saw that they both were dead.

His god was troubled; he could feel it. *I have disappointed him.* The thought was too horrible to dwell on. The only atonement lay in the wildling girl's safety.

Dahan climbed the stairs as high as they went, then found a window. He inched out onto the ledge, followed the ledge to a buttress, and scrambled atop it, breathing heavily. Once on the roof itself, he raced across the catwalk toward the west side of the manse, *swift as a deer.* There, over the center of the manse, a fifteen-foot gap loomed between the eastern and western parapets. He would have to jump.

A new and sudden feeling crept up in him unbidden. Fear.

The ground seemed farther down than he knew it truly was—impossibly far down, as though he had climbed for hours. He could almost feel it reaching up to touch him: hard, stony, jagged. From this height the fall was sure to kill him, snap all his bones, smear his organs across the little pleasure garden below. Would he even have time for pain?

Dahan shook the feeling off. *I have no fear of heights. I have never been a craven.* He walked back, took a running start, and leapt.

When he was on his feet again, he followed the catwalk to the west face of the manse. He looked down: there was Pantera in her fountain. His grapnel waited by the wall, hidden in the trees. The bravo scaled down to a ledge, shimmied over to the window, and looked within.

There were three men in the room, upon one woman. Sweaty, hairy bodies moved up and down amidst the sounds of grunts and lapping. Dahan did not know the other two, but one of the men was Tregar Ormollen, a moan upon his lips. The woman moaned too, but not in pleasure. In despair.

Dahan heard the voice of the Pale Child. He was whimpering. Then he screamed.

He felt the wrath of his god fill his lungs, turning his breath to furnace wind. He knew the test was over. He saw his purpose clearly, and it was Bakkalon's own

purpose, neither more nor less. Somehow, for this miraculous moment, they were as one. The bravo smiled blissfully. “Yes, my god.”

He burst through the window and unsheathed the rusty blade. One man shot up, waving his arms and yelling. Dahan opened his throat and let blood rain upon his foes. Tregar Ormollen was dead a moment later, a gash at his throat.

As the third man scurried away, the door burst open and two guards charged. The bravo ducked a spear and rolled across the floor, slashing low. One Unsullied gaped as the other’s guts spilled out onto the Myrish carpet. Then he turned and ran; he got as far as the hallway before Dahan’s sword found his back. As he pulled it free, he glimpsed another eunuch at the end of the hall, turning away. *He will alert them all*, Dahan knew. *I have little time.*

He returned to the room, silenced the naked man in the corner, and approached the wildling in her bed of blood. Her breaths were fast and shallow. “Do you speak the Common Tongue, girl?” he asked her, though now he could see she was no girl. The tangled hair that covered her face had started going grey. She was past forty, her body spotted with freckles as well as drops of blood.

She nodded, eyes wide with terror.

“There is no reason to fear,” Dahan said gently. “The Pale Child Bakkalon smiles upon you; I am your salvation. What is your name?”

“Mole,” she said numbly.

“A lovely name,” he told her. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. “Come with me. It is time we left this place.”

Bakkalon had begun speaking in tongues.

Her callused hand in his, the bravo led the wildling to the window and looked down. He had planned to fashion a rope out of bedding to descend the four stories, but there was no time—he could already hear the sound of boots clomping up the stairs. He could climb out as he had climbed in, but the wildling could not, and he would not abandon her. What could he do?

*Nahgilly!* the Child chanted. *Nahgilly, Nahgilly!*

*This is my final test of faith*, Dahan realized, looking out into the night. He was afraid. *But when else can a man prove that he is brave?*

He turned to the wildling woman. “Bakkalon fashioned our bodies from steel, my sweet. This is the Truth and the Way.” Her eyes met his. *Hazel*. She was truly beautiful.

Dahan Pedraatho smiled softly. Sputters and gasps poured from the Child’s mouth.

“I feel stronger with you,” the bravo told her.

He jumped.

*Don’t!* cried the Child, too late. Though she tried to free herself from the bravo’s hand, the wildling was dragged out with him into the open air ... and, long leagues away, the fat boy could only watch as the earth rushed up to meet them. Samwell Tarly opened his mouth to scream, but it only filled up with blood.

*Not the bath.*





## VICTARION

**T**he *Noble Lady* was a tub of a ship, as fat and wallowing as the noble ladies of the green lands. Her holds were huge, and Victarion packed them with armed men. With her would sail the other, lesser prizes that the Iron Fleet had taken on its long voyage to Slaver's Bay, a lubberly assortment of cogs, great cogs, carracks, and trading galleys salted here and there with fishing boats. It was a fleet both fat and feeble, promising much in the way of wool and wines and other trade goods and little in the way of danger. Victarion gave the command of it to Wulfe One-Ear.

“The slavers may shiver when they spy your sails rising from the sea,” he told him, “but once they see you plain they will laugh at their fears. Traders and fishers, that’s all you are. Any man can see that. Let them get close as they like, but keep your men hidden belowdecks until you are ready. Then close, and board them. Free the slaves and feed the slavers to the sea, but take the ships. We will have need of every hull to carry us back home.”

“Home,” Wulfe grinned. “The men’ll like the sound o’ that, Lord Captain. The ships first – then we break these Yunkishmen. Aye.”

The *Iron Victory* was lashed alongside the *Noble Lady*, the two ships bound tight with chains and grappling hooks, a ladder stretched between them. The great cog was much larger than the warship and sat higher in the water. All along the gunwales the faces of the Ironborn peered down, watching as Victarion clapped Wulfe One-Ear on the shoulder and sent him clambering up the ladder. The sea was smooth and still, the sky bright with stars. Wulfe ordered the ladder drawn up, the chains cast off. The warship and the cog parted ways. In the distance the rest of Victarion’s famed fleet was raising sail. A ragged cheer went up from the crew of the *Iron Victory*, and was answered in kind by the men of the *Noble Lady*.

Victarion had given Wulfe his best fighters. He envied them. They would be the first to strike a blow, the first to see that look of fear in the foemen’s eyes. As he stood at the prow of the *Iron Victory* watching One-Ear’s merchant ships vanish one by one into the west, the faces of the first foes he’d ever slain came back to Victarion Greyjoy. He thought of his first ship, of his first woman. A restlessness was in him, a hunger for the dawn and the things this day would bring. *Death or glory, I will drink my fill of both today.* The Seastone Chair should’ve been his when Balon died, but his brother Euron had stolen it from him, just as he had stolen his wife many years before. *He stole her and he soiled her, but he left it for me to slay her.*

All that was done and gone now, though. Victarion would have his due at last. *I have the horn, and soon I will have the woman. A woman lovelier than the wife he made me kill.*

“Captain.” The voice belonged to Longwater Pyke. “The oarsmen await your pleasure.”

Three of them, and strong ones. “Send them to my cabin. I’ll want the priest as well.”

The oarsmen were all big. One was a boy, one a brute, one a bastard’s bastard. The Boy had been rowing for less than a year, the Brute for twenty. They had names, but Victarion did not know them. One had come from *Lamentation*, one

from *Sparrow Hawk*, one from *Spider Kiss*. He could not be expected to know the names of every thrall who had ever pulled an oar in the Iron Fleet.

“Show them the horn,” he commanded, when the three had been ushered into his cabin.

Moqorro brought it forth, and the dusky woman lifted up a lantern to give them all a look. In the shifting lantern light the hellhorn seemed to writhe and turn in the priest’s hands like a serpent fighting to escape. Moqorro was a man of monstrous size—big-bellied, broad-shouldered, towering—but even in his grasp the horn looked huge.

“My brother found this thing on Valyria,” Victarion told the thralls. “Think how big the dragon must’ve been to bear two of these upon his head. Bigger than Vhagar or Meraxes, bigger than Balerion the Black Dread.” He took the horn from Moqorro and ran his palm along its curves. “At the Kingsmoot on Old Wyk one of Euron’s mutes blew upon this horn. Some of you will remember. It was not a sound that any man who heard it will ever forget.”

“They say he died,” the Boy said, “him who blew the horn.”

“Aye. The horn was smoking after. The mute had blisters on his lips, and the bird inked across his chest was bleeding. He died the next day. When they cut him open his lungs were black.”

“The horn is cursed,” said the Bastard’s Bastard.

“A dragon’s horn from Valyria,” said Victarion. “Aye, it’s cursed. I never said it wasn’t.” He brushed his hand across one of the red gold bands and the ancient glyph seemed to sing beneath his fingertips. For half a heartbeat he wanted nothing so much as to sound the horn himself. *Euron was a fool to give me this, it is a precious thing, and powerful. With this I’ll win the Seastone Chair, and then the Iron Throne. With this I’ll win the world.*

“Claggorn blew the horn thrice and died for it. He was as big as any of you, and strong as me. So strong that he could twist a man’s head right off his shoulders with only his bare hands, and yet the horn killed him.”

“It will kill us too, then,” said the Boy.

Victarion did not oft forgive a thrall for talking out of turn, but the Boy was young, no more than twenty, and soon to die besides. He let it pass.

“The mute sounded the horn three times. You three will sound it only once. Might be you’ll die, might be you won’t. All men die. The Iron Fleet is sailing into battle. Many on this very ship will be dead before the sun goes down—stabbed or slashed, gutted, drowned, burned alive. Only the Gods know which of us will still be here come the morrow. Sound the horn and live and I’ll make free men of you, one or two or all three. I’ll give you wives, a bit of land, a ship to sail, thralls of your own. Men will know your names.”

“Even *you*, Lord Captain?” asked the Bastard’s Bastard.

“Aye.”

“I’ll do it then.”

“And me,” said the Boy.

The Brute crossed his arms and nodded.

If it made the three feel braver to believe they had a choice, let them cling to that. Victarion cared little what they believed, they were only thralls.

“You will sail with me on *Iron Victory*,” he told them, “but you will not join the battle. Boy, you’re the youngest—you’ll sound the horn first. When the time comes you will blow it long and loud. They say you are strong. Blow the horn until you are too weak to stand, until the last bit of breath has been squeezed from you, until your lungs are burning. Let the freedmen hear you in Meereen, the slavers in Yunkai, the ghosts in Astapor. Let the monkeys shit themselves at the sound when it rolls across the Isle of Cedars. Then pass the horn along to the next man. Do you hear me? Do you know what to do?”

The Boy and the Bastard’s Bastard tugged their forelocks; the Brute might’ve done the same, but he was bald.

“You may touch the horn. Then go.”

They left him one by one. The three thralls, and then Moqorro. Victarion would not let him take the hellhorn.

“I will keep it here with me, until it is needed.”

“As you command. Would you have me bleed you?”

Victarion seized the dusky woman by the wrist and pulled her to him. “She will do it. Go pray to your red god. Light your fire, and tell me what you see.”

Moqorro’s dark eyes seemed to shine. “I see dragons.”

The dusky woman went to her knees once the priest was gone. She brushed aside her salty hair and looked up at Victarion, the offer of a dagger in her outstretched hand. It was one of his; Victarion never saw where she took it from.

His scorched palm fell, dangling just above the woman's breasts. No sign of Serry's cut could be read there in the rutted flesh—but the pain was proof it hadn't healed, after all the priest had done. His magic weakens. *This fire god flickers in the wind.* Or perhaps R'hllor required sacrifices. *I'll give him those soon enough.*

The dagger traced a line over charred skin.

Victarion felt nothing.

He stood rigid and watched a puff of smoke rise out of the cut. It smelled of ash and rotten eggs. Then blood welled up dark and thick in his palm, oozed out between his fingers, and dripped into the stone bowl held by the dusky woman. Some splattered onto the cabin floor; in a moment's madness, Victarion thought he saw the red droplets writhing and squirming between the boards like fleeing roaches. He shuddered. She was looking at him, eyes as black as ink.

He yanked the bowl away from her with his unburnt hand and turned to face the hellhorn. His reflection stared back at him, warped and curving in the onyx gleam. The glyphs of red gold glittered over his bent image—soon they would scream, glowing red-hot and then white as the horn sucked up a life's breath. *Blood for fire and fire for blood.* Victarion poured the blood, his blood, over the runes and let it drip down the cursed thing's side.

He dropped the empty bowl. *His blood would claim the horn, Moqorro said. Was it done?*

He had to be sure.

The dusky woman gave a start of fear as the iron captain clapped his bloody palm onto the dragon horn's surface. It was hot to the touch—when he embraced his dragon queen, would her skin be like the horn, so smooth and so hot? Grimacing, he pushed his hand forward, slowly, then back, painting the thick horn red all round.

Through the pain, he could feel his hand grow stronger even as he rubbed, his grip more firm. With steady strokes he covered the bands, red gold and black

Valyrian steel alike. “My horn,” he murmured. Up and down its smooth contours it bore his blood, his claim. “My horn.” Brimming with desire, he whispered, “My dragons.”

When at last he removed his hand, viscous strands stretched out between him and his horn. “It’s done,” he said. “It has a new master.” He looked down at the dusky woman, still kneeling before him. “And so do you.”

Victarion reached her with one stride and wrapped his bloody hand around her neck. *The first sacrifice?* he wondered, enjoying the new strength in his fingers. *Euron’s gifts are poisoned ...* Her eyes went wide, just as his wife’s had. His manhood stirred. “No. I will keep you.” His grip loosened. Blood dripped from her neck down between her breasts. Her smile now was calm, passive, but she could not disguise the quickening of her breath.

“Open your legs.”

She disrobed and lay down.

Her moon’s blood was on her. A drop of red fell onto the boards beneath her, next to his own. The Damphair warned men to avoid women at this time, claiming they were unclean. *When is a woman ever clean?* Victarion had always found the blood arousing. The smell reminded him of battle.

He knelt between her legs. Her little mate had emerged from beneath her boat’s sail, rosy-faced. Long ago, when the Old Way ruled the Iron Isles, fathers would hack that bit off from their daughters, lest the girls grow lustful and dishonor their kin. Amongst the greenlanders, men were known to lick the boy, the way a dog greets its master. The thought turned Victarion’s stomach.

His charred forefinger pushed inside and her lips parted, slick with blood. When he twisted sharply, the woman squirmed. He added a finger, then one more. She tried to pull away.

“No,” he commanded. He grabbed her waist and pulled her close. His whole hand was inside her, and only then did he clench it into a fist. Rivulets of blood flowed through the furrows of his blackened wrist, red and black and smoking. If she’d had a tongue, she would have screamed.

His manhood was a bowsprit. It had not been this hard since he was a boy. Victarion Greyjoy wanted nothing more than to take the woman then and there.

He would show her—make her see, make her obey. She would know a true king. All of them would. His dragon queen, his brazen niece. The green land ladies, with their plump bodies and their powdered faces. Their husbands, too. Weak men, soft, never knowing pain. He would beat the smile off the boy king, squeeze Stannis Barathon's neck until his face went purple, and the Crow's Eye .... The things he would do to him ...

Victarion knew better than to unship his oar. He would not crest the wave and spend his vigor on this wench just before the fighting began. Only fools fucked before a battle. The salt of a man's seed is the salt of the sea, Tarle the Thrice-Drowned would often say. And the sea is power.

He was done with her. She lay there shuddering, unclothed, but it was Victarion who felt naked. "My hauberk," he commanded. "Be quick." When she was able, she rose and went to fetch it. A trail of blood followed her—his or hers, he could not have said. He stood and wiped his hand clean upon the hellhorn, admiring again its golden runes.

The dusky woman returned with his armor. Victarion let out a grunt as he slipped into the chainmail. It was comforting to feel the steel upon his body. *Better than a cunt*, he told himself. He had her bring him his poleyns, couters, and greaves, savoring the fit of each piece. Then there were a few things he let the woman help him with. The gorget she put around his neck, buckling it deftly. After that, her hand slid down to the strap between his breastplate and backplate and pulled it tight.

She'd done this before. "What dead man did you help dress?" he asked. Was it the slaver Euron took her from? Someone the slaver had killed? How many times had this woman passed from one man to another? He didn't know why he thought of it; it made no difference. She was no one—a bed warmer. "Are you from Naath? The Summer Islands?" The dusky woman only smiled.

If Victarion didn't kill her, the woman might see her home again someday soon. Heading back west near Valyria was far too perilous now, with the Volantene fleet sailing to Slaver's Bay. But swinging south to the corsair's road along Sothoryos might serve. Mayhaps they would find Red Ralf Stonehouse and his

men living among the savages. Victarion would need all the ships he could get to face the Crow's Eye.

The helm was last. Victarion sat as she lowered it onto his head. Through the visor of tentacles, the world always looked less solid to him, more changeable, even frail. He felt the cold caress at his throat as the black iron kraken was fastened tight.

When he appeared abovedecks, his crew gathered round. Some of their eyes were wide with panic. Burton Humble, Ragnor Pyke, and all his best men had gone with Wulfe One-Ear. *Cowards, this bunch. The battle is not even begun.*

"The dragons fly!" yelled Tom Tidewood. "The men spotted one in the east."

*Dragons.* The red priest had seen them in his flames. "Good," said Victarion. "They are free to heel before me."

"B-b-before *you*?" asked Steffar Stammerer.

He glared. "I mean to bind the beasts to my will. The Grey King brought fire to the earth—I will do the same. Then Daenerys can come to *me* the beggar, and plead to be my wife."

"*Euron* said he would marry the dragon queen," said Quellon Humble warily.

"My brother's words are wind. He says the gods have no power, yet I stand before you, the champion of two. And we will need them both. Fifty thousand Yunkishmen lie before us, and five hundred Volantene warships are at our backs."

Those wide eyes flitted about, exchanging doubtful glances.

*Enough.* Victarion Greyjoy was done with cowardice.

"I come to lead you into battle, not coddle you like squalling babes. At my bosom you won't find the mother's milk of heartening words. No, from me salt water flows; I give you the truth.

"You all know what happens come the morn: we break our fast on battle and on glory. Wulfe One-Ear will have the first helping, but he's a diversion. While the slavers are trying to tell port from starboard, *Grief* and a dozen other ships will take the river. The rest of us will make for the western shore. On my signal, you will row and sail faster than you ever have. Our strike will be too swift for the Yunkish armies to respond. Sail behind *Iron Wind*, *Sparrowhawk*, and *Kraken's Kiss*. Their



perimeter will await us, but wait before you land. When the dragons are close, I'll bring out the horn.

“On its third blow, we come ashore and await our dragons. Then we feast. All day, for *all* days, from now until the end of time, we feast. I can't say *where* you'll gorge. Might be beside me and my dragons in the palaces of Meereen. Might be in the Drowned God's watery halls, when your ashes have washed into the bay. It makes no matter. None of us here will ever hunger again. Not with three dragons. Not with the Drowned God and the red god smiling upon us both.”

Longwater Pyke began a chant. “Three dragons, two gods!”

The crew roared and stamped their feet. “*THREE DRAGONS! TWO GODS!*”

*One king.*

A gust of wind blew strong and hard. With it came a plume of salty spray and the cheers of men. Moqorro and his robes of flame were flickering behind the dull leather and armor of his crew. *My gods are with me*, Victarion knew. *Let the world beware.*

“Raise the banners,” he commanded. Tom Tidewood brought out the new ones he had sewn. Red upon black billowed as they went up the mast.

Soon a reaving song broke out amongst the men. It was an old one, sung in rounds to give strength to men awaiting battle. The ironmen pounded the gunwale as more voices joined in, weapons and armor clanking. It was a queer song, in truth, about a stillborn girl and her father's anguish—his fury. Victarion clenched his fist, thinking of his wives, past and future. Then he began to sing.

*Cold Danelle, hair and skin so pale,  
Cold Danelle, unfurl my battered sails  
Cold Danelle, your cry is in their wails,  
I'll swim the Watery Halls with Cold Danelle.*

They sang all the way to Meereen.



## BARRISTAN

**T**hrough the gloom of night the dead men flew, raining down upon the city streets. The riper corpses would fall to pieces in the air, and burst when they came smashing down onto the bricks, scattering worms and maggots and worse things. Others would bounce against the sides of pyramids and towers, leaving smears of blood and gore to mark the places where they'd struck.

Huge as they were, the Yunkish trebuchets did not have the range to throw their grisly burdens deep into the city. Most of the dead were landing just inside the walls, or slamming off barbicans, parapets, and defensive towers. With the six sisters arrayed in a rough crescent around Meereen, every part of the city was being struck, save only the river districts to the north. No trebuchet could throw across the width of the Skahazadhan.

*A small mercy, that,* thought Barristan Selmy, as he rode into the market square inside Meereen's great western gate. When Daenerys had taken the city, they had broken through that same gate with the huge battering ram called Joso's Cock, made from the mast of a ship. The Great Masters and their slave soldiers had met

the attackers here, and the fighting had raged through the surrounding streets for hours. By the time the city finally fell, hundreds of dead and dying had littered the square.

Now once again the market was a scene of carnage, though these dead came riding the pale mare. By day Meereen's brick streets showed half a hundred hues, but night turned them into patchworks of black and white and grey. Torchlight shimmered in the puddles left by the recent rains, and painted lines of fire on the helms and greaves and breastplates of the men.

Ser Barristan Selmy rode past them slowly. The old knight wore the armor his queen had given him—a suit of white enameled steel, inlaid and chased with gold. The cloak that streamed from his shoulders was as white as winter snow, as was the shield slung from his saddle. Beneath him was the queen's own mount, the silver mare Khal Drogo had given her upon their wedding day. That was presumptuous, he knew, but if Daenerys herself could not be with them in their hour of peril, Ser Barristan hoped the sight of her silver in the fray might give heart to her warriors, reminding them of who and what they fought for. Besides, the silver had been years in the company of the queen's dragons, and had grown accustomed to the sight and scent of them. That was not something that could be said for the horses of their foes.

With him rode three of his lads. Tumco Lho carried the three-headed dragon banner of House Targaryen, red on black. Larraq the Lash bore the white forked standard of the Kingsguard: seven silver swords encircling a golden crown. To the Red Lamb Selmy had given a great silver-banded warhorn, to sound commands across the battlefield. His other boys remained at the Great Pyramid. They would fight another day, or not at all. Not every squire was meant to be a knight.

It was the hour of the wolf. The longest, darkest hour of the night. For many of the men who had assembled in the market square, it would be the last night of their lives. Beneath the towering brick facade of Meereen's ancient Slave Exchange, five thousand Unsullied were drawn up in ten long lines. They stood as still as if they had been carved of stone, each with his three spears, short sword, and shield. Torchlight winked off the spikes of their bronze helmets, and bathed the smooth-cheeked faces beneath. When a body came spinning down amongst

them, the eunuchs simply stepped aside, taking just as many steps as were required, then closing ranks again. They were all afoot, even their officers: Grey Worm first and foremost, marked by the three spikes on his helm.

The Stormcrows had assembled beneath the merchant's arcade fronting on the southern side of the square, where the arches gave them some protection from the dead men. Jokin's archers were fitting strings to their bows as Ser Barristan rode by. The Widower sat grim-faced astride a gaunt grey horse, with his shield upon his arm and his spiked battle-axe in hand. A fan of black feathers sprouted from one temple of his iron halfhelm. The boy beside him was clutching the company's banner: a dozen ragged black streamers on a tall staff, topped by a carved wooden crow.

The horselords had come as well. Aggo and Rakharo had taken most of the queen's small *khalasar* across the Skahazadhan, but the old half-crippled *jaqqa rhan* Rommo had scraped together twenty riders from those left behind. Some were as old as he was, many marked by some old wound or deformity. The rest were beardless boys, striplings seeking their first bell and the right to braid their hair. They milled about near the weathered bronze statue of the Chainmaker, anxious to be off, dancing their horses aside whenever a corpse came spinning down from above.

Not far from them, about the ghastly monument the Great Masters called the Spire of Skulls, several hundred pit fighters had gathered. Selmy saw the Spotted Cat amongst them. Beside him stood Fearless Ithoke, and elsewhere Senerra She-Snake, Camarron of the Count, the Brindled Butcher, Togosh, Marrigo, Orlos the Catamite. Even Goghor the Giant was there, towering above the others like a man amongst boys. *Freedom means something to them after all, it would seem.* The pit fighters had more love for Hizdahr than they had ever shown Daenerys, but Selmy was glad to have them all the same. *Some are even wearing armor,* he observed. Perhaps his defeat of Khrazz had taught them something.

Above, the gatehouse battlements were crowded with men in patchwork cloaks and brazen masks: the Shavepate had sent his Brazen Beasts onto the city walls, to free up the Unsullied to take the field. Should the battle be lost, it would be up to

Skahaz and his men to hold Meereen against the Yunkai'i ... until such time as Queen Daenerys could return.

*If indeed she ever does.*

Across the city at other gates others forces had assembled. Tal Toraq and his Stalwart Shields had gathered by the eastern gate, sometimes called the hill gate or the Khyzai gate, since travelers bound for Lhazar via the Khyzai Pass always left that way. Marselen and the Mother's Men had massed beside the south gate, the Yellow Gate. The Free Brothers and Symon Stripeback had drawn the north gate, fronting on the river. They would have the easiest egress, with no foe before them but a few ships. The Yunkishmen had placed two Ghiscari legions to the north, but they were camped across the Skahazadhan, with the whole width of the river between them and the walls of Meereen.

The main Yunkish camp lay to the west, between the walls of Meereen and the warm green waters of Slaver's Bay. Two of the trebuchets had risen there, one beside the river, the second opposite Meereen's main gates, defended by two dozen of Yunkai's Wise Masters, each with his own slave soldiers. Between the great siege engines were the fortified encampments of two Ghiscari legions. The Company of the Cat had its camp between the city and the sea. The foe had Tolosi slingers too, and somewhere out in the night were three hundred Elyrian crossbowmen.

*Too many foes*, Ser Barristan brooded. *Their numbers must surely tell against us.* This attack went against all of the old knight's instincts. Meereen's walls were thick and strong. Inside those walls, the defenders enjoyed every advantage. Yet he had no choice but to lead his men into the teeth of the Yunkish siege lines, against foes of vastly greater strength.

The White Bull would have called it folly. He would have warned Barristan against trusting sellswords too. *This is what it has come to, my queen*, Ser Barristan thought. *Our fates hinge upon a sellsword's greed. Your city, your people, our lives ... the Tattered Prince holds us all in his bloodstained hands.*

Even if their best hope proved to be forlorn hope, Selmy knew that he had no other choice. He might have held Meereen for years against the Yunkai'i, but he

could not hold it for even a moon's turn with the pale mare galloping through its streets.

A hush fell across the market square as the old knight and his banner bearers rode toward the gatehouse. Selmy could hear the murmur of countless voices, the sound of horses blowing, whickering, and scraping iron-shod hooves over crumbling brick, the faint clatter of sword and shield. All of it seemed muffled and far away. It was not a silence, just a quiet, the indrawn breath that comes before the shout. Torches smoked and crackled, filling the darkness with shifting orange light.

Thousands turned as one to watch as the old knight wheeled his horse around in the shadow of the great iron-banded gates. Barristan Selmy could feel their eyes upon him. The captains and commanders advanced to meet him. Jokin and the Widower for the Stormcrows, ringmail clinking under faded cloaks; Grey Worm, Sure Spear, and Dogkiller for the Unsullied, in spiked bronze caps and quilted armor; Rommo for the Dothraki; Camarron, Goghor, and the Spotted Cat for the pit fighters.

"You know our plan of attack," the white knight said when the captains were gathered around him. "We will hit them first with our horse, as soon as the gate is opened. Ride hard and fast, straight at the slave soldiers. When the legions form up, sweep around them. Take them from behind or from the flank, but do not try their spears. Remember your objectives."

"The trebuchet," said the Widower. "The one the Yunkai'i call Harridan. Take it, topple it, or burn it."

Jokin nodded. "Feather as many of their nobles as we can. And burn their tents, the big ones, the pavilions."

"Kill many man," said Rommo. "Take no slaves."

Ser Barristan turned in the saddle. "Cat, Goghor, Camarron, your men will follow afoot. You are known as fearsome fighters. Frighten them. Scream and shout. By the time you reach the Yunkish lines, our horsemen should have broken through. Follow them into the breach, and do as much slaughter as you can. Where you can, spare the slaves and cut down their masters, the noblemen and officers. Fall back before you are surrounded."

Goghor smashed a fist against his chest. “Goghor not fall back. Never.”

*Then Goghor die*, the old knight thought, *soon*. But this was not the time nor place for that argument. He let it pass, and said, “These attacks should distract the Yunkai’i long enough for Grey Worm to march the Unsullied out the gate and form up.” That was where his plan would rise or fall, he knew. If the Yunkish commanders had any sense, they would send their horse thundering down on the eunuchs before they could form ranks, when they were most vulnerable. His own cavalry would have to prevent that long enough for the Unsullied to lock shields and raise their wall of spears. “At the sound of my horn, Grey Worm will advance in line and roll up the slavers and their soldiers. It may be that one or more Ghiscari legions will march out to meet them, shield to shield and spear to spear. That battle we shall surely win.”

“This one hears,” said Grey Worm. “It shall be as you say.”

“Listen for my horn,” Ser Barristan told them. “If you hear the retreat, fall back. Our walls stand behind us, packed with Brazen Beasts. Our foes dare not come too close, or they will find themselves in crossbow range. If you hear the horn sound advance, advance at once. Make for my standard or the queen’s.” He pointed at the banners in the hands of Tumco Lho and Larraq.

The Widower’s horse sidled to his left. “And if your horn falls silent, ser knight? If you and these green boys of yours are cut down?”

It was a fair question. Ser Barristan meant to be the first through the Yunkish lines. He might well be the first to die. It often worked that way. “If I fall, command is yours. After you, Jokin. Then Grey Worm.” *Should all of us be killed, the day is lost*, he might have added, but they all knew that, surely, and none of them would want to hear it said aloud. *Never speak of defeat before a battle*, Lord Commander Hightower had told him once, when the world was young, *for the gods may be listening*.

“And if we come upon the captain?” asked the Widower.

*Daario Naharis*. “Give him a sword and follow him.” Though Barristan Selmy had little love and less trust for the queen’s paramour, he did not doubt his courage, nor his skill at arms. *And if he should die heroically in battle, so much the*

*better*. “If there are no further questions, go back to your men and say a prayer to whatever god you believe in. Dawn will be on us soon.”

“A red dawn,” said Jokin of the Stormcrows.

*A dragon dawn*, thought Ser Barristan.

He had done his own praying earlier, as his squires helped him don his armor. His gods were far away across the sea in Westeros, but if the septons told it true, the Seven watched over their children wherever they might wander. Ser Barristan had said a prayer to the Crone, beseeching her to grant him a little of her wisdom, so that he might lead his men to victory. To his old friend the Warrior he prayed for strength. He asked the Mother for her mercy, should he fall. The Father he entreated to watch over his lads, these half-trained squires who were the closest things to sons that he would ever know. Finally he had bowed his head to the Stranger. “You come for all men in the end,” he had prayed, “but if it please you, spare me and mine today, and gather up the spirits of our foes instead.”

Out beyond the city walls, the distant *thump* of a trebuchet releasing could be heard. Dead men and body parts came spinning down out of the night. One crashed amongst the pit fighters, showering them with bits of bone and brain and flesh. Another bounced off the Chainmaker’s weathered bronze head and tumbled down his arm to land with a wet splat at his feet. A swollen leg splashed in a puddle not three yards from where Selmy sat waiting on his queen’s horse.

“The pale mare,” murmured Tumco Lho. His voice was thick, his dark eyes shiny in his black face. Then he said something in the tongue of the Basilisk Isles that might have been a prayer.

*He fears the pale mare more than he fears our foes*, Ser Barristan realized. His other lads were frightened too. Brave as they might be, not one was blooded yet.

He wheeled his silver mare about. “Gather round me, men.” When they edged their horses closer, he said, “I know what you are feeling. I have felt the same myself, a hundred times. Your breath is coming faster than it should. In your belly a knot of fear coils like a cold black worm. You feel as though you need to empty your bladder, maybe move your bowels. Your mouth is dry as the sands of Dorne. What if you shame yourself out there, you wonder? What if you forget all your



training? You yearn to be a hero, but deep down inside you fear you might be craven.

“Every boy feels the same way on the eve of battle. Aye, and grown men as well. Those Stormcrows over there are feeling the same thing. So are the Dothraki. There is no shame in fear, unless you let it master you. We all taste terror in our time.”

“I am not afraid.” The Red Lamb’s voice was loud, almost to the point of shouting. “Should I die, I will go before the Great Shepherd of Lhazar, break his crook across my knee, and say to him, ‘*Why did you make your people lambs, when the world is full of wolves?*’ Then I will spit into his eye.”

Ser Barristan smiled. “Well said ... but take care that you do not seek death out there, or you will surely find it. The Stranger comes for all of us, but we need not rush into his arms.

“Whatever might befall us on the battlefield, remember, it has happened before, and to better men than you. I am an old man, an old *knight*, and I have seen more battles than most of you have years. Nothing is more terrible upon this earth, nothing more glorious, nothing more absurd. You may retch. You will not be the first. You may drop your sword, your shield, your lance. Others have done the same. Pick it up and go on fighting. You may foul your breeches. I did, in my first battle. No one will care. All battlefields smell of shit. You may cry out for your mother, pray to gods you thought you had forgotten, howl obscenities that you never dreamed could pass your lips. All this has happened too.

“Some men die in every battle. More survive. East or west, in every inn and wine sink, you will find greybeards endlessly refighting the wars of their youth. They survived their battles. So may you. This you can be certain of: the foe you see before you is just another man, and like as not he is as frightened as you. Hate him if you must, love him if you can, but lift your sword and bring it down, then ride on. Above all else, keep moving. We are too few to win the battle. We ride to make chaos, to buy the Unsullied time enough to make their spear wall, we—”

“Ser?” Larraq pointed with the Kingsguard banner, even as a wordless murmur went up from a thousand pairs of lips.

Far across the city, where the shadowed steps of Meereen's Great Pyramid shouldered eight hundred feet into a starless sky, a fire had awoken where once the harpy stood. A yellow spark at the apex of the pyramid, it glimmered and was gone again, and for half a heartbeat Ser Barristan was afraid the wind had blown it out. Then it returned, brighter, fiercer, the flames swirling, now yellow, now red, now orange, reaching up, clawing at the dark.

Away to the east, dawn was breaking behind the hills.

Another thousand voices were exclaiming now. Another thousand men were looking, pointing, donning their helms, reaching for their swords and axes. Ser Barristan heard the rattle of chains. That was the portcullis coming up. Next would come the groan of the gate's huge iron hinges. It was time.

The Red Lamb handed him his winged helm. Barristan Selmy slipped it down over his head, fastened it to his gorget, pulled up his shield, slipped his arm inside the straps. The air tasted strangely sweet. There was nothing like the prospect of death to make a man feel alive. "May the Warrior protect us all," he told his lads. "Sound the attack."