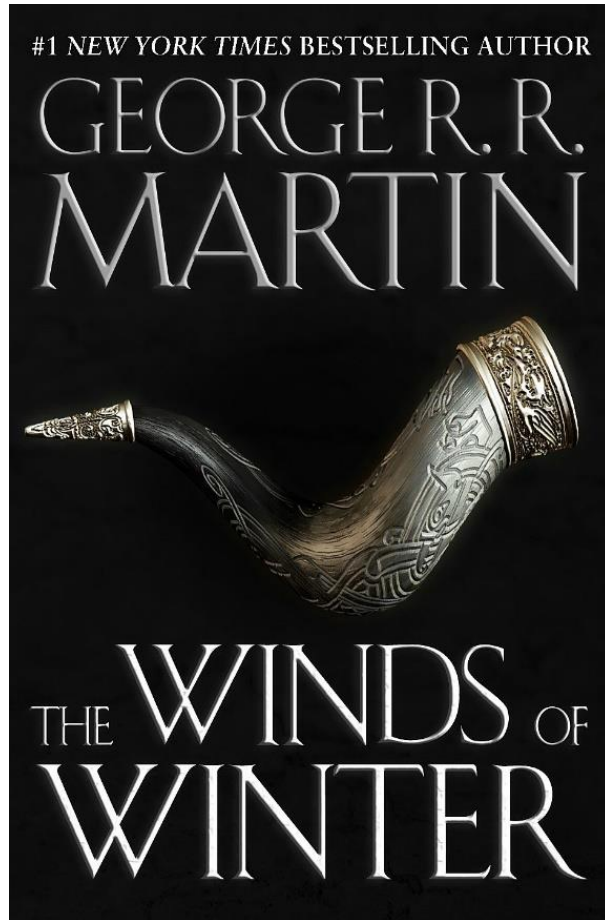


# THE WINDS OF WINTER



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# THEON

December 2011

The king's voice was choked with anger. "You are a worse pirate than Salladhor Saan."

Theon Greyjoy opened his eyes. His shoulders were on fire and he could not move his hands. For half a heartbeat he feared he was back in his old cell under the Dreadfort, that the jumble of memories inside his head was no more than the residue of some fever dream. *I was asleep*, he realized. That, or passed out from the pain. When he tried to move, he swung from side to side, his back scraping against stone. He was hanging from a wall inside a tower, his wrists chained to a pair of rusted iron rings.

The air reeked of burning peat. The floor was hard-packed dirt. Wooden steps spiraled up inside the walls to the roof. He saw no windows. The tower was dank, dark, and comfortless, its only furnishings a high-backed chair and a scarred table resting on three trestles. No privy was in evidence, though Theon saw a chamberpot in one shadowed alcove. The only light came from the candles on the table. His feet dangled six feet off the floor.

"My brother's debts," the king was muttering. "Joffrey's too, though that baseborn abomination was no kin to me." Theon twisted in his chains. He knew that voice. *Stannis*.

Theon Greyjoy chortled. A stab of pain went up his arms, from his shoulders to his wrists. All he had done, all he had suffered, Moat Cailin and Barrowton and Winterfell, Abel and his washerwomen, Crowfood and his Umbers, the trek through the snows, all of it had only served to exchange one tormentor for another.

"Your Grace," a second voice said softly. "Pardon, but your ink has frozen." *The Braavosi*, Theon knew. What was his name? *Tycho... Tycho something...* "Perhaps a bit of heat...?"

"I know a quicker way." Stannis drew his dagger. For an instant Theon thought that he meant to stab the banker. *You will never get a drop of blood from that one, my lord*, he might have told him. The king laid the blade of the knife against the ball of his left thumb, and slashed. "There. I will sign in mine own blood. That ought to make your masters happy."

"If it please Your Grace, it will please the Iron Bank."

Stannis dipped a quill in the blood welling from his thumb and scratched his name across the piece of parchment. "You will depart today. Lord Bolton may be on us soon. I will not have you caught up in the fighting."

"That would be my preference as well." The Braavosi slipped the roll of parchment inside a wooden tube. "I hope to have the honor of calling on Your Grace again when you are seated on your Iron Throne."

"You hope to have your gold, you mean. Save your pleasantries. It is coin I need from Braavos, not empty courtesy. Tell the guard outside I have need of Justin Massey."

"It would be my pleasure. The Iron Bank is always glad to be of service." The banker bowed.

As he left, another entered; a knight. The king's knights had been coming and going all night, Theon recalled dimly. This one seemed to be the king's familiar. Lean, dark-haired, hard-eyed, his face marred by pockmarks and old scars, he wore a faded surcoat embroidered with three moths. "Sire," he announced, "the maester is without. And Lord Arnolf sends word that he would be most pleased to break his fast with you."

"The son as well?"

"And the grandsons. Lord Wull seeks audience as well. He wants—"

"I know what he wants." The king indicated Theon. "Him. Wull wants him dead. Flint, Norrey... all of them will want him dead. For the boys he slew. Vengeance for their precious Ned."

"Will you oblige them?"

"Just now, the turncloak is more use to me alive. He has knowledge we may need. Bring in this maester." The king plucked a parchment off the table and squinted over it. *A letter*, Theon knew. Its broken seal was black wax, hard and shiny. *I know what that says*, he thought, giggling.

Stannis looked up. "The turncloak stirs."

"Theon. My name is Theon." He had to remember his name.

"I know your name. I know what you did."

"I saved her." The outer wall of Winterfell was eighty feet high, but beneath the spot where he had jumped the snows had piled up to a depth of more than forty. *A cold white pillow*. The girl had taken the worst of it. *Jeyne, her name is Jeyne, but she will never tell them*. Theon had landed on top of her, and broken some of her ribs. "I saved the girl," he said. "We *flew*."

Stannis snorted. "You fell. Umber saved her. If Mors Crowfood and his men had not been outside the castle, Bolton would have had the both of you back in moments."

*Crowfood*. Theon remembered. An old man, huge and powerful, with a ruddy face and a shaggy white beard. He had been seated on a garron, clad in the pelt of a gigantic snow bear, its head his hood. Under it he wore a stained white leather eye patch that reminded Theon of his uncle Euron. He'd wanted to rip it off Umber's face, to make certain that underneath was only an empty socket, not a black eye shining with malice. Instead he had whimpered through his broken teeth and said, "I am—"

"—a turncloak and a kinslayer," Crowfood had finished. "You will hold that lying tongue, or lose it."

But Umber had looked at the girl closely, squinting down with his one good eye. "You are the younger daughter?"

And Jeyne had nodded. "Arya. My name is *Arya*."

"Arya of Winterfell, aye. When last I was inside those walls, your cook served us a steak and kidney pie. Made with ale, I think, best I ever tasted. What was his name, that cook?"

"Gage," Jeyne said at once. "He was a good cook. He would make lemoncakes for Sansa whenever we had lemons."

Crowfoot had fingered his beard. "Dead now, I suppose. That smith of yours as well. A man who knew his steel. What was his name?"

Jeyne had hesitated. *Mikken*, Theon thought. *His name was Mikken*. The castle blacksmith had never made any lemoncakes for Sansa, which made him far less important than the castle cook in the sweet little world she had shared with her friend Jeyne Poole. *Remember, damn you. Your father was the steward, he had charge of the whole household. The smith's name was Mikken, Mikken, Mikken. I had him put to death before me!*

"Mikken," Jeyne said.

Mors Umber had grunted. "Aye." What he might have said or done next Theon never learned, for that was when the boy ran up, clutching a spear and shouting that the portcullis on Winterfell's main gate was rising. *And how Crowfoot had grinned at that.*

Theon twisted in his chains, and blinked down at the king. "Crowfoot found us, yes, he sent us here to you, but it was me who saved her. Ask her yourself." She would tell him. "You saved me," Jeyne had whispered, as he was carrying her through the snow. She was pale with pain, but she had brushed one hand across his cheek and smiled. "I saved Lady Arya," Theon whispered back at her. And then all at once Mors Umber's spears were all around them. "Is this my thanks?" he asked Stannis, kicking feebly against the wall. His shoulders were in agony. His own weight was tearing them from their sockets. How long had he been hanging here? Was it still night outside? The tower was windowless, he had no way to know.

"Unchain me, and I will serve you."

"As you served Roose Bolton and Robb Stark?" Stannis snorted. "I think not. We have a warmer end in mind for you, turncloak. But not until we're done with you."

*He means to kill me.* The thought was queerly comforting. Death did not frighten Theon Greyjoy. Death would mean an end to pain. "Be done with me, then," he urged the king. "Take off my head off and stick it on a spear. I slew Lord Eddard's sons, I ought to die. But do it quick. *He is coming.*"

"Who is coming? Bolton?"

"Lord Ramsay," Theon hissed. "The son, not the father. You must not let him take him. Roose... Roose is safe within the walls of Winterfell with his fat new wife. *Ramsay is coming.*"

"Ramsay Snow, you mean. The Bastard."

"Never call him that!" Spittle sprayed from Theon's lips. "Ramsay *Bolton*, not Ramsay Snow, never Snow, never, you have to remember his *name*, or he will hurt you."

"He is welcome to try. Whatever name he goes by."

The door opened with a gust of cold black wind and a swirl of snow. The knight of the moths had returned with the maester the king had sent for, his grey robes concealed beneath a heavy bearskin pelt. Behind them came two other knights, each carrying a raven in a cage. One was the man who'd been with Asha when the banker delivered him to her, a burly man with a winged pig on his surcoat. The other was taller, broad-shouldered and brawny. The big man's breastplate was silvered steel inlaid with niello; though scratched and dented, it still shone in the candlelight. The cloak that he wore over it was fastened with a burning heart.

"Maester Tybald," announced the knight of the moths.

The maester sank to his knees. He was red-haired and round-shouldered, with close-set eyes that kept flicking toward Theon hanging on the wall. "Your Grace. How may I be of service?"

Stannis did not reply at once. He studied the man before him, his brow furrowed. "Get up." The maester rose. "You are maester at the Dreadfort. How is it you are here with us?"

"Lord Arnolf brought me to tend to his wounded."

"To his wounded? Or his ravens?"

"Both, Your Grace."

"Both." Stannis snapped the word out. "A maester's raven flies to one place, and one place only. Is that correct?"

The maester mopped sweat from his brow with his sleeve. "N-not entirely, Your Grace. Most, yes. Some few can be taught to fly between two castles. Such birds are greatly prized. And once in a very great while, we find a raven who can learn the names of three or four or five castles, and fly to each upon command. Birds as clever as that come along only once in a hundred years."

Stannis gestured at the black birds in the cages. "These two are not so clever, I presume."

"No, Your Grace. Would that it were so."

"Tell me, then. Where are these two trained to fly?"

Maester Tybald did not answer. Theon Greyjoy kicked his feet feebly, and laughed under his breath. *Caught!*

"Answer me. If we were to loose these birds, would they return to the Dreadfort?" The king leaned forward. "Or might they fly for Winterfell instead?"

Maester Tybald pissed his robes. Theon could not see the dark stain spreading from where he hung, but the smell of piss was sharp and strong.

"Maester Tybald has lost his tongue," Stannis observed to his knights. "Godry, how many cages did you find?"

"Three, Your Grace," said the big knight in the silvered breastplate. "One was empty."

"Y-your Grace, my order is sworn to serve, we..."

"I know all about your vows. What I want to know is what was in the letter that you sent to Winterfell. Did you perchance tell Lord Bolton where to find us?"

"S-sire." Round-shouldered Tybald drew himself up proudly.

"The rules of my order forbid me to divulge the contents of Lord Arnolf's letters."

"Your vows are stronger than your bladder, it would seem."

"Your Grace must understand—"

"*Must!*" The king shrugged. "If you say so. You are a man of learning, after all. I had a maester on Dragonstone who was almost a father to me. I have great respect for your order and its vows. Ser Clayton does not share my feelings, though. He learned all he knows in the wynds of Flea Bottom. Were I to put you in his charge, he might strangle you with your own chain or scoop your eye out with a spoon."

"Only the one, Your Grace," volunteered the balding knight, him of the winged pig. "I'd leave t'other."

"How many eyes does a maester need to read a letter?" asked Stannis. "One should suffice, I'd think. I would not wish to leave you unable to fulfill your duties to your lord. Roose Bolton's men may well be on their way to attack us even now, however, so *you* must understand if I skimp on certain courtesies. I will ask you once again. What was in the message you sent to Winterfell?"

The maester quivered. "A m-map, Your Grace."

The king leaned back in his chair. "Get him out of here," he commanded. "Leave the ravens." A vein was throbbing in his neck. "Confine this grey wretch to one of the huts until I decide what is to be done with him."

"It will be done," the big knight declared. The maester vanished in another blast of cold and snow. Only the knight of the three moths remained.

Stannis glowered up at Theon where he hung. "You are not the only turncloak here, it would seem. Would that all the lords in the Seven Kingdoms had but a single neck..." He turned to his knight. "Ser Richard, whilst I am breaking fast with Lord Arnolf, you are to disarm his men and take them into custody. Most will be asleep. Do them no harm, unless they resist. It may

be they did not know. Question some upon that point... but sweetly. If they had no knowledge of this treachery, they shall have the chance to prove their loyalty." He snapped a hand in dismissal. "Send in Justin Massey."

*Another knight*, Theon knew, when Massey entered. This one was fair, with a neatly trimmed blond beard and thick straight hair so pale it seemed more white than gold. His tunic bore the triple spiral, an ancient sigil for an ancient House. "I was told Your Grace had need of me," he said, from one knee.

Stannis nodded. "You will escort the Braavosi banker back to the Wall. Choose six good men and take twelve horses."

"To ride or eat?"

The king was not amused. "I want you gone before midday, ser. Lord Bolton could be on us any moment, and it is imperative that the banker return to Braavos. You shall accompany him across the narrow sea."

"If there is to be a battle, my place is here with you."

"Your place is where I say it is. I have five hundred swords as good as you, or better, but you have a pleasing manner and a glib tongue, and those will be of more use to me at Braavos than here. The Iron Bank has opened its coffers to me. You will collect their coin and hire ships and sellswords. A company of good repute, if you can find one. The Golden Company would be my first choice, if they are not already under contract. Seek for them in the Disputed Lands, if need be. But first hire as many swords as you can find in Braavos, and send them to me by way of Eastwatch. Archers as well, we need more bows."

Ser Justin's hair had fallen down across one eye. He pushed it back and said, "The captains of the free companies will join a lord more readily than a mere knight, Your Grace. I hold neither lands nor title, why should they sell their swords to me?"

"Go to them with both fists full of golden dragons," the king said, in an acid tone. "That should prove persuasive. Twenty thousand men should suffice. Do not return with fewer."

"Sire, might I speak freely?"

"So long as you speak quickly."

"Your Grace should go to Braavos with the banker."

"Is that your counsel? That I should flee?" The king's face darkened. "That was your counsel on the Blackwater as well, as I recall. When the battle turned against us, I let you and Horpe chivy me back to Dragonstone like a whipped cur."

"The day was lost, Your Grace."

"Aye, that was what you said. *'The day is lost, sire. Fall back now, that you may fight again.'* And now you would have me scamper off across the narrow sea..."

"... to raise an army, aye. As Bittersteel did after the Battle of the Redgrass Field, where Daemon Blackfyre fell."

"Do not prate at me of history, ser. Daemon Blackfyre was a rebel and usurper, Bittersteel a bastard. When he fled, he swore he would return to place a son of Daemon's upon the Iron Throne. He never did. Words are wind, and the wind that blows exiles across the narrow sea seldom blows them back. That boy Viserys Targaryen spoke of return as well. He slipped through my fingers at Dragonstone, only to spend his life wheedling after sellswords. 'The Beggar King,' they called him in the Free Cities. Well, I do not beg, nor will I flee again. I am Robert's heir, the rightful king of Westeros. My place is with my men. Yours is in Braavos. Go with the banker, and do as I have bid."

"As you command," Ser Justin said.

"It may be that we shall lose this battle," the king said grimly. "In Braavos you may hear that I am dead. It may even be true. You shall find my sellswords nonetheless."

The knight hesitated. "Your Grace, if you are dead—"

"—you will avenge my death, and seat my daughter on the Iron Throne. Or die in the attempt."

Ser Justin put one hand on his sword hilt. "On my honor as a knight, you have my word."

"Oh, and take the Stark girl with you. Deliver her to Lord Commander Snow on your way to Eastwatch." Stannis tapped the parchment that lay before him. "A true king pays his debts."

*Pay it, aye,* thought Theon. *Pay it with false coin.* Jon Snow would see through the imposture at once. Lord Stark's sullen bastard had known Jeyne Poole, and he had always been fond of his little half-sister Arya.

"The black brothers will accompany you as far as Castle Black," the king went on. "The ironmen are to remain here, supposedly to fight for us. Another gift from Tycho Nestoris. Just as well, they would only slow you down. Ironmen were made for ships, not horses. Lady Arya should have a female companion as well. Take Alysane Mormont."

Ser Justin pushed back his hair again. "And Lady Asha?"

The king considered that a moment. "No."

"One day Your Grace will need to take the Iron Islands. That will go much easier with Balon Greyjoy's daughter as a catspaw, with one of your own leal men as her lord husband."

"You?" The king scowled. "The woman is wed, Justin."

"A proxy marriage, never consummated. Easily set aside. The groom is old besides. Like to die soon."



*From a sword through his belly if you have your way, ser worm.* Theon knew how these knights thought.

Stannis pressed his lips together. "Serve me well in this matter of the sellswords, and you may have what you desire. Until such time, the woman must needs remain my captive."

Ser Justin bowed his head. "I understand."

That only seemed to irritate the king. "Your understanding is not required. Only your obedience. Be on your way, ser."

This time, when the knight took his leave, the world beyond the door seemed more white than black.

Stannis Baratheon paced the floor. The tower was a small one, dank and cramped. A few steps brought the king around to Theon. "How many men does Bolton have at Winterfell?"

"Five thousand. Six. More." He gave the king a ghastly grin, all shattered teeth and splinters. "More than you."

"How many of those is he like to send against us?"

"No more than half." That was a guess, admittedly, but it felt right to him. Roose Bolton was not a man to blunder blindly out into the snow, map or no. He would hold his main strength in reserve, keep his best men with him, trust in Winterfell's massive double wall. "The castle was too crowded. Men were at each other's throats, the Manderlys and Freys especially. It's them his lordship's sent after you, the ones that he's well rid of."

"Wyman Manderly." The king's mouth twisted in contempt. "Lord Too-Fat-to-Sit-a-Horse. Too fat to come to me, yet he comes to Winterfell. Too fat to bend the knee and swear me his sword, yet now he wields that sword for Bolton. I sent my Onion Lord to treat with him, and Lord Too-Fat butchered him and mounted his head and hands on the walls of White Harbor for the Freys to gloat over. And the Freys... has the Red Wedding been forgotten?"

"The north remembers. The Red Wedding, Lady Hornwood's fingers, the sack of Winterfell, Deepwood Motte and Torrhen's Square, they remember all of it." *Bran and Rickon. They were only miller's boys.* "Frey and Manderly will never combine their strengths. They will come for you, but separately. Lord Ramsay will not be far behind them. He wants his bride back. He wants his Reek." Theon's laugh was half a titter, half a whimper. "Lord Ramsay is the one Your Grace should fear."

Stannis bristled at that. "I defeated your uncle Victarion and his Iron Fleet off Fair Isle, the first time your father crowned himself. I held Storm's End against the power of the Reach for a year, and took Dragonstone from the Targaryens. I smashed Mance Rayder at the Wall, though he had twenty times my numbers. Tell me, turncloak, what battles has the Bastard of Bolton ever won that I should fear him?"

*You must not call him that!* A wave of pain washed over Theon Greyjoy. He closed his eyes and grimaced. When he opened them again, he said, "You do not know him."

"No more than he knows me."

"*Knows me,*" cried one of the ravens the maester had left behind. It flapped its big black wings against the bars of its cage.

"*Knows,*" it cried again.

Stannis turned. "Stop that noise."

Behind him, the door opened. The Karstarks had arrived.

Bent and twisted, the castellan of Karhold leaned heavily on his cane as he made his way to the table. Lord Arnolf's cloak was fine grey wool, bordered in black sable and clasped with a silver starburst. *A rich garment,* Theon thought, *on a poor excuse for a man.* He had seen that cloak before, he knew, just as he had seen the man who wore it. *At the Dreadfort. I remember. He sat and supped with Lord Ramsay and Whoresbane Umber, the night they brought Reek up from his cell.*

The man beside him could only be his son. Fifty, Theon judged, with a round soft face like his father's, if Lord Arnolf went to fat. Behind him walked three younger men. *The grandsons,* he surmised. One wore a chainmail byrnie. The rest were dressed for breakfast, not for battle. *Fools.*

"Your Grace." Arnolf Karstark bowed his head. "An honor." He looked for a seat. Instead his eyes found Theon. "And who is this?" Recognition came a heartbeat later. Lord Arnolf paled.

His stupid son remained oblivious. "There are no chairs," the oaf observed. One of the ravens screamed inside its cage.

"Only mine." King Stannis sat in it. "It is no Iron Throne, but here and now it suits." A dozen men had filed through the tower door, led by the knight of the moths and the big man in the silvered breastplate. "You are dead men, understand that," the king went on. "Only the manner of your dying remains to be determined. You would be well advised not to waste my time with denials. Confess, and you shall have the same swift end that the Young Wolf gave Lord Rickard. Lie, and you will burn. Choose."

"I choose this." One of the grandsons seized his sword hilt, and made to draw it.

That proved to be a poor choice. The grandson's blade had not even cleared his scabbard before two of the king's knights were on him. It ended with his forearm flopping in the dirt and blood spurting from his stump, and one of his brothers stumbling for the stairs, clutching a belly wound. He staggered up six steps before he fell, and came crashing back down to the floor.

Neither Arnolf Karstark nor his son had moved.

"Take them away," the king commanded. "The sight of them sours my stomach." Within moments, the five men had been bound and removed. The one who had lost his sword arm had fainted from loss of blood, but his brother with the belly wound screamed loud enough for both of them. "That is how I deal with betrayal, turncloak," Stannis informed Theon.

"My name is *Theon*."

"As you will. Tell me, *Theon*, how many men did Mors Umber have with him at Winterfell?"

"None. No men." He grinned at his own wit. "He had boys. I saw them." Aside from a handful of half-crippled serjeants, the warriors that Crowfoot had brought down from Last Hearth were hardly old enough to shave. "Their spears and axes were older than the hands that clutched them. It was Whoresbane Umber who had the men, inside the castle. I saw them too. Old men, every one." Theon tittered. "Mors took the green boys and Hother took the greybeards. All the real men went with the Greatjon and died at the Red Wedding. Is that what you wanted to know, Your Grace?"

King Stannis ignored the jibe. "Boys," was all he said, disgusted. "Boys will not hold Lord Bolton long."

"Not long," Theon agreed. "Not long at all."

"*Not long*," cried the raven from its cage.

The king gave the bird an irritated look. "That Braavosi banker claimed Ser Aenys Frey is dead. Did some boy do that?"

"Twenty green boys, with spades," Theon told him. "The snow fell heavily for days. So heavily that you could not see the castle walls ten yards away, no more than the men up on the battlements could see what was happening beyond those walls. So Crowfoot set his boys to digging pits outside the castle gates, then blew his horn to lure Lord Bolton out. Instead he got the Freys. The snow had covered up the pits, so they rode right into them. Aenys broke his neck, I heard, but Ser Hosteen only lost a horse, more's the pity. He will be angry now."

Strangely, Stannis smiled. "Angry foes do not concern me. Anger makes men stupid, and Hosteen Frey was stupid to begin with, if half of what I have heard of him is true. Let him come."

"He will."

"Bolton has blundered," the king declared. "All he had to do was sit inside his castle whilst we starved. Instead he has sent some portion of his strength forth to give us battle. His knights will be horsed, ours must fight afoot. His men will be well nourished, ours go into battle with empty bellies. It makes no matter. Ser Stupid, Lord Too-Fat, the Bastard, let them come. We hold the ground, and that I mean to turn to our advantage."

"The ground?" said Theon. "What ground? Here? This misbegotten tower? This wretched little village? You have no high ground here, no walls to hide beyond, no natural defenses."

"Yet."

"Yet," both ravens screamed in unison. Then one quorked, and the other muttered, "*Tree, tree, tree.*"

The door opened. Beyond, the world was white. The knight of the three moths entered, his legs caked with snow. He stomped his feet to knock it off and said, "Your Grace, the Karstarks are taken. A few of them resisted, and died for it. Most were too confused, and yielded quietly. We have herded them all into the longhall and confined them there."

"Well done."

"They say they did not know. The ones we've questioned."

"They would."

"We might question them more sharply..."

"No. I believe them. Karstark could never have hoped to keep his treachery a secret if he shared his plans with every baseborn manjack in his service. Some drunken spearman would have let it slip one night whilst laying with a whore. They did not need to know. They are Karhold men. When the moment came they would have obeyed their lords, as they had done all their lives."

"As you say, Sire."

"What of your own losses?"

"One of Lord Peasebury's men was killed, and two of mine were wounded. If it please Your Grace, though, the men are growing anxious. There are hundreds of them gathered around the tower, wondering what's happened. Talk of treason is on every lip. No one knows who to trust, or who might be arrested next. The northmen especially—"

"I need to talk with them. Is Wull still waiting?"

"Him and Artos Flint. Will you see them?"

"Shortly. The kraken first."

"As you command." The knight took his leave.

*My sister*, Theon thought, *my sweet sister*. Though he had lost all feeling in his arms, he felt the twisting in his gut, the same as when that bloodless Braavosi banker presented him to Asha as a 'gift.' The memory still rankled. The burly, balding knight who'd been with her had wasted no time shouting for help, so they'd had no more than a few moments before Theon was dragged away to face the king. *That was long enough*. He had hated the look on Asha's face when she realized who he was; the shock in her eyes, the pity in her voice, the way her mouth twisted in disgust. Instead of rushing forward to embrace him, she had taken half a step backwards. "Did the Bastard do this to you?" she had asked.

"Don't you call him that." Then the words came spilling out of Theon in a rush. He tried to tell her all of it, about Reek and the Dreadfort and Kyra and the keys, how Lord Ramsay never took anything but skin unless you begged for it. He told her how he'd saved the girl, leaping from the castle wall into the snow. "We flew. Let Abel make a song of that, we *flew*." Then he had to say who Abel was, and talk about the washerwomen who weren't truly washerwomen. By then Theon knew how strange and incoherent all this sounded, yet somehow the words would not stop. He was cold and sick and tired... and weak, so weak, so very weak.

*She has to understand. She is my sister.* He never wanted to do any harm to Bran or Rickon. Reek made him kill those boys, not *him* Reek but the other one. "I am no kinslayer," he insisted. He told her how he bedded down with Ramsay's bitches, warned her that Winterfell was full of ghosts. "The swords were gone. Four, I think, or five. I don't recall. The stone kings are angry." He was shaking by then, trembling like an autumn leaf. "The heart tree knew my name. The old gods. *Theon*, I heard them whisper. There was no wind but the leaves were moving. *Theon*, they said. My name is Theon." It was good to say the name. The more he said it, the less like he was to forget. "You have to know your name," he'd told his sister. "You... you told me you were Esgred, but that was a lie. Your name is *Asha*."

"It is," his sister had said, so softly that he was afraid that she might cry. Theon hated that. He hated women weeping. Jeyne Poole had wept all the way from Winterfell to here, wept until her face was purple as a beetroot and the tears had frozen on her cheeks, and all because he told her that she must be Arya, or else the wolves might send them back. "They trained you in a brothel," he reminded her, whispering in her ear so the others would not hear. "Jeyne is the next thing to a whore, you must go on being Arya." He meant no hurt to her. It was for her own good, and his. *She has to remember her name.* When the tip of her nose turned black from frostbite, and the one of the riders from the Night's Watch told her she might lose a piece of it, Jeyne had wept over that as well. "No one will care what Arya looks like, so long as she is heir to Winterfell," he assured her. "A hundred men will want to marry her. A thousand."

The memory left Theon writhing in his chains. "Let me down," he pleaded. "Just for a little while, then you can hang me up again." Stannis Baratheon looked up at him, but did not answer. "Tree," a raven cried. "Tree, tree, tree."

Then other bird said, "*Theon*," clear as day, as Asha came striding through the door.

Qarl the Maid was with her, and Tristifer Botley. Theon had known Botley since they were boys together, back on Pyke. *Why has she brought her pets? Does she mean to cut me free?* They would end the same way as the Karstarks, if she tried.

The king was displeased by their presence as well. "Your guards may wait without. If I meant harm to you, two men would not dissuade me."

The ironborn bowed and retreated. Asha took a knee. "Your Grace. Must my brother be chained like that? It seems a poor reward for bringing you the Stark girl."

The king's mouth twitched. "You have a bold tongue, my lady. Not unlike your turncloak brother."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"It was not a compliment." Stannis gave Theon a long look. "The village lacks a dungeon, and I have more prisoners than I anticipated when we halted here." He waved Asha to her feet. "You may rise."

She stood. "The Braavosi ransomed my seven of my men from Lady Glover. I would gladly pay a ransom for my brother."

"There is not enough gold on all your Iron Islands. Your brother's hands are soaked with blood. Farring is urging me to give him to R'hllor."

"Clayton Suggs as well, I do not doubt."

"Him, Corliss Penny, all the rest. Even Ser Richard here, who only loves the Lord of Light when it suits his purposes."

"The red god's choir only knows a single song."

"So long as the song is pleasing in god's ears, let them sing. Lord Bolton's men will be here sooner than we would wish. Only Mors UMBER stands between us, and your brother tells me his levies are made up entirely of green boys. Men like to know their god is with them when they go to battle."

"Not all your men worship the same god."

"I am aware of this. I am not the fool my brother was."

"Theon is my mother's last surviving son. When his brothers died, it shattered her. His death will crush what remains of her... but I have not come to beg you for his life."

"Wise. I am sorry for your mother, but I do not spare the lives of turncloaks. This one, especially. He slew two sons of Eddard Stark. Every northman in my service would abandon me if I showed him any clemency. Your brother must die."

"Then do the deed yourself, Your Grace." The chill in Asha's voice made Theon shiver in his chains. "Take him out across the lake to the islet where the weirwood grows, and strike his head off with that sorcerous sword you bear. That is how Eddard Stark would have done it. Theon slew Lord Eddard's sons. Give him to Lord Eddard's gods. The old gods of the north. Give him to the tree."

And suddenly there came a wild thumping, as the maester's ravens hopped and flapped inside their cages, their black feathers flying as they beat against the bars with loud and raucous caws. "The tree," one squawked, "the tree, the tree," whilst the second screamed only, "Theon, Theon, Theon."

Theon Greyjoy smiled. *They know my name*, he thought.

# VICTARION

March 2012



The *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 Wulf 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," Wulf 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 Wulf One-Ear on the shoulder and sent him clambering up the ladder. The sea was smooth and still, the sky bright with stars. Wulf 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 Wulf 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 hell-horn 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 offer forgiveness to 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 hell-horn.

"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."

# ARIANNE I

January 2013

On 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*, though 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 Slyva 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 Slyva 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 Oberyn 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 Oberyn, 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 Sunspire," 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 Slyva. "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 Oberyne 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."

# BARRISTAN I

February 2013



Through 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. Larrag 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 Harriḍan. 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?" Larrag 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."

## TYRION II

2013

Somewhere off in the far distance, a dying man was screaming for his mother. "To horse!" a man was yelling in Ghiscari, in the next camp to the north of the Second Sons. "To horse! *To horse!*" High and shrill, his voice carried a long way in the morning air, far beyond his own encampment. Tyrion knew just enough Ghiscari to understand the words, but the fear in his voice would have been plain in any tongue. *I know how he feels.*

It was time to find his own horse, he knew. Time to don some dead boy's armor, buckle on a sword and dagger, slip his dented greathelm down over his head. Dawn had broken, and a sliver of the rising sun was visible behind the city's walls and towers, blindingly bright. To the west the stars were fading, one by one. Trumpets were blowing along the Skahazadhan, warhorns answering from the walls of Meereen. A ship was sinking in the river mouth, afire. Dead men and dragons were moving through the sky, whilst warships crashed and clashed on Slaver's Bay. Tyrion could not see them from here, but he could hear the sounds: the crash of hull against hull as ships slammed together, the deep-throated warhorns of the ironborn and queer high whistles of Qarth, the splintering of oars, the shouts and battle cries, the crash of axe on armor, sword on shield, all mingled with the shrieks of wounded men. Many of the ships were still far out in the bay, so the sounds they made seemed faint and far away, but he knew them all the same. *The music of slaughter.*

Three hundred yards from where he stood rose the Wicked Sister, her long arm swinging up with a clutch of corpses—*chunk-THUMP*—and there they flew, naked and swollen, pale dead birds tumbling boneless through the air. The siege camps shimmered in a gaudy haze of rose and gold, but the famous stepped pyramids of Meereen hulked black against the glare. Something was moving atop one of them, he saw. *A dragon, but which one?* At this distance, it could as easily have been an eagle. *A very big eagle.*

After days spent hidden inside musty tents of the Second Sons, the outside air smelled fresh and clear. Though he could not see the bay from where he stood, the tang of salt told him it was near. Tyrion filled his lungs with it. *A fine day for a battle.* From the east the sound of drumming rolled across the parched plain. A column of mounted men flashed past the Harridan, flying the blue banners of the Windblown.

A younger man might have found it all exhilarating. A stupider man might have thought it grand and glorious, right up to the moment when some arse-ugly Yunkish slave soldier with rings in his nipples planted an axe between his eyes. Tyrion Lannister knew better. *The gods did not fashion me to wield a sword,* he thought, *so why do they keep putting me in the midst of battles?*

No one heard. No one answered. No one cared.

Tyrion found himself thinking back on his first battle. Shae had been the first to stir, woken by his father's trumpets. The sweet strumpet who'd pleased him for half the night had trembled naked in his arms, a frightened child. *Or was all that a lie as well, a ploy she used to make me feel brave and brilliant? What a mummer she might have been.* When Tyrion had shouted out for Podrick Payne to help him with his armor, he'd found the boy asleep and snoring. *Not the quickest lad I've ever known, but a decent squire in the end. I hope he found a better man to serve.*

It was queer, but Tyrion remembered the Green Fork much better than the Blackwater. *It was my first. You never forget your first.* He remembered the fog drifting off the river, wending through the reeds like pale white fingers. And the beauty of that sunrise, he remembered that as well: stars strewn across a purple sky, the grass glittering like glass with the morning dew, red splendor in the east. He remembered the touch of Shae's fingers as she helped Pod with Tyrion's mismatched armor. *That bloody helm. Like a bucket with a spike.* That spike had saved him, though, had won him his first victory, but Groat and Penny had never looked half as silly as he must have looked that day. Shae had called him "fearsome" when she saw him in his steel, mind you. *How could I have been so blind, so deaf, so stupid? I should have known better than to do my thinking with my cock.*

The Second Sons were saddling their horses. They went about it calmly, unhurriedly, efficiently; it was nothing they had not done a hundred times before. A few of them were passing a skin from hand to hand though whether it was wine or water he could not say. Bokkoko was kissing his lover shamelessly, kneading the boy's buttocks with one huge hand, the other tangled in his hair. Behind them, Ser Garibald was brushing out the mane of his big gelding. Kem sat on a rock, gazing at the ground... remembering his dead brother, perhaps, or dreaming of that friend back in King's Landing. Hammer and Nail moved from man to man, checking spears and swords, adjusting armor, putting an edge on any blade that needed it. Snatch chewed his sourleaf, making japes and scratching at his balls with his hook hand. Something about his manner reminded Tyrion of Bronn. *Ser Bronn of the Blackwater now, unless my sister's killed him. That might not be quite so simple as she thinks.* He wondered how many battles these Second Sons had fought. *How many skirmishes, how many raids? How many cities have they stormed, how many brothers have they buried or left behind to rot?* Compared to them, Tyrion was a green boy, still untested, though he had counted more years than half the company.

This would be his third battle. *Seasoned and blooded, stamped and sealed, a proven warrior, that's me. I've killed some men and wounded others, taken wounds myself and lived to tell of them. I've led charges, heard men scream my name, cut down bigger men and better, even had a few small tastes of glory... and wasn't that a fine rich wine for heroes, and wouldn't I like another taste?* Yet with all he'd done and all he'd seen, the prospect of another battle made his blood run cold. He had traveled across half the world by way of palanquin, poleboat, and pig, sailed in slave ships and trading galleys, mounted whores and horses, all the time telling himself that he did not care whether he lived or died... only to find that he cared quite a lot after all.

The Stranger had mounted his pale mare and was riding toward them with his sword in hand, but Tyrion Lannister did not care to meet with him again. Not now. Not yet. Not this day. *What a fraud you are, Imp. You let a hundred guardsmen rape your wife, shot your father through the belly with a quarrel, twisted a golden chain around your lover's throat until her face turned black, yet somehow you still think that you deserve to live.*

Penny was already in her armor when Tyrion slipped back inside the tent they shared. She had been strapping herself into wooden plate for years in service to her mummery; real plate and mail were not so different once you mastered all the clasps and buckles. And if the company steel was dented here and rusted there, scratched and stained and discolored, no matter. It should still be good enough to stop a sword

The only piece she had not donned was her helm. When he entered, she looked up. "You're not armored. What's happening?"

"The usual things. Mud and blood and heroism, killing and dying. There's one battle being fought out on the bay, another one beneath the city walls. Whichever way the Yunkish turn, they have a foe behind them. The closest fighting's a good league off still, but we'll be in it soon." *On one side or the other.* The Second Sons were ripe for another change of masters, Tyrion was almost certain of that... though there was a great abyss between "certain" and "almost certain." *If I have misjudged my man, all of us are lost.* "Put on your helm and make sure the clasps are closed. I took mine off once to keep from drowning, and it cost me a nose." Tyrion picked at his scar.

"We need to get you into your armor first."

"If you wish. The jerkin first. The boiled leather, with the iron studs. Ringmail over that, then the gorget." He glanced about the tent. "Is there wine?"

"No."

"We had half a flagon left from supper."

"A quarter of a flagon, and you drank it."

He sighed. "I would sell my sister for a cup of wine."

"You would sell your sister for a cup of horse piss." That was so unexpected that it made him laugh aloud. "Is my taste for horse piss so well-known or have you met my sister?"

"I only saw her that one time, when we jousting for the boy king. Groat thought she was beautiful."

*Groat was a stunted little lickspittle with a stupid name.* "Only a fool rides into battle sober. Plumm will have some wine. What if he dies in the battle? It would be a crime to waste it."

"Hold your tongue. I need to lace this jerkin up."

Tyrion did try, but it seemed to him that the sounds of slaughter were growing louder, and his tongue would not be held. "Pudding Face wants to use the company to throw the ironmen back into the sea," he heard himself telling Penny, as she dressed him. "What he should have done was send all his horse at the eunuchs, full charge, before they got ten feet from their gates. Send the Cats at them from the left, us and the Windblown from the right, rip apart their flanks from both ends. Man to man, the Unsullied are no better or worse than any other spearmen. It's their discipline that makes them dangerous, but if they cannot form up into a spear wall..."

"Lift your arms," said Penny. "There, that's better. Maybe you should command the Yunkishmen."

"They use slave soldiers, why not slave commanders? That would ruin the contest, though. This is just a *cyvasse* game to the Wise Masters. We're the pieces." Tyrion canted his head to one side, considering. "They have that in common with my lord father, these slavers." "Your father? What do you mean?"

"I was just recalling my first battle. The Green Fork. We fought between a river and a road. When I saw my father's host deploy, I remember thinking how beautiful it was. Like a flower opening its petals to the sun. A crimson rose with iron thorns. And my father, ah, he had never looked so resplendent. He wore crimson armor, with this huge greatcloak made of cloth-of-gold. A pair of golden lions on his shoulders, another on his helm. His stallion was magnificent. His lordship watched the whole battle from atop that horse and never got within a hundred yards of any foe. He never moved, never smiled, never broke a sweat, whilst thousands died below him. Picture me perched on a camp stool, gazing down upon a *cyvasse* board. We could almost be twins... if I had a horse, some crimson armor, and a greatcloak sewn from cloth-of-gold. He was taller too. I have more hair."

Penny kissed him.

She moved so fast that he had no time to think. She darted in, quick as a bird, and pressed her lips to his. Just as quickly it was over. *What was that for?* he almost said, but he knew what it was for. *Thank you*, he might have said, but she might take that as leave to do it again. *Child, I have no wish to hurt you*, he could have tried, but Penny was no child, and his wishes would not blunt the cut. For the first time for longer than he cared to think, Tyrion Lannister was at a loss for words.

*She looks so young*, he thought. *A girl, that's all she is. A girl, and almost pretty if you can forget that she's a dwarf.* Her hair was a warm brown, thick and curly, and her eyes were large and trusting. *Too trusting.*

"Do you hear that sound?" said Tyrion.

She listened. "What is it?" she said as she was strapping a pair of mismatched greaves onto his stunted legs.



"War. On either side of us and not a league away. That's slaughter, Penny. That's men stumbling through the mud with their entrails hanging out. That's severed limbs and broken bones and pools of blood. You know how the worms come out after a hard rain? I hear they do the same after a big battle if enough blood soaks into the ground. That's the Stranger coming, Penny. The Black Goat, the Pale Child, Him of Many Faces, call him what you will. That's death."

"You're scaring me."

"Am I? Good. You should be scared. We have ironborn swarming ashore and Ser Barristan and his Unsullied pouring out the city gates, with us between them, fighting on the wrong bloody side. I am terrified myself."

"You say that, but you still make japes."

"Japes are one way to keep the fear away. Wine's another."

"You're brave. Little people can be brave."

*My giant of Lannister, he heard. She is mocking me.* He almost slapped her again. His head was pounding.

"I never meant to make you angry," Penny said "Forgive me. I'm frightened, is all." She touched his hand.

Tyrion wrenched away from her. *"I'm frightened."* Those were the same words Shae had used. *Her eyes were big as eggs, and I swallowed every bit of it. I knew what she was. I told Bronn to find a woman for me and he brought me Shae.* His hands curled into fists, and Shae's face swam before him, grinning. Then the chain was tightening about her throat, the golden hands digging deep into her flesh as her own hands fluttered against his face with all the force of butterflies. If he'd had a chain to hand... if he'd had a crossbow, a dagger, anything, he would have... he might have... he...

It was only then that Tyrion heard the shouts. He was lost in a black rage, drowning in a sea of memory, but the shouting brought the world back in a rush. He opened his hands, took a breath, turned away from Penny. "Something's happening." He went outside to discover what it was. *Dragons.*

The green beast was circling above the bay, banking and turning as longships and galleys clashed and burned below him, but it was the white dragon the sellswords were gawking at. Three hundred yards away the Wicked Sister swung her arm, *chunk-THUMP*, and six fresh corpses went dancing through the sky. Up they rose, and up, and up. Then two burst into flame.

The dragon caught one burning body just as it began to fall, crunching it between his jaws as pale fires ran across his teeth. White wings cracked against the morning air, and the beast began to climb again. The second corpse caromed off an outstretched claw and plunged straight down, to land amongst some Yunkish horsemen. Some of them caught fire too. One horse reared up

and threw his rider. The others ran, trying to outrace the flames and fanning them instead. Tyrion Lannister could almost taste the panic as it rippled out across the camps.

The sharp, familiar scent of urine filled the air. The dwarf glanced about and was relieved to see that it was Inkpots who had pissed himself, not him. "You had best go change your breeches," Tyrion told him. "And whilst you are about it, turn your cloak." The paymaster blanched but did not move.

He was still standing there, staring as the dragon snatched corpses from the air, when the messenger came pounding up. *A bloody officer*, Tyrion saw at once. He was clad in golden armor and mounted on a golden horse. Loudly he announced that he had come from the supreme commander of the Yunkai'i, the noble and puissant Gorzhak zo Eraz. "Lord Gorzhak sends his compliments to Captain Plumm and requests that he bring his company to the bay shore. Our ships are under attack."

*Your ships are sinking, burning, fleeing*, thought Tyrion. *Your ships are being taken, your men put to the sword*. He was a Lannister of Casterly Rock, close by the Iron Islands; ironborn reavers were no strangers to their shores. Over the centuries they had burned Lannisport at least thrice and raided it two dozen times. Westermen knew what savagery the ironborn were capable of; these slavers were just learning.

"Captain's not here just now," Inkpots told the messenger. "He's gone to see the Girl General."

The rider pointed at the sun. "Lady Malazza's command ended with the rising of the sun. Do as Lord Gorzhak instructs you."

"Attack the squid ships, you mean? The ones out there in the water?" The paymaster frowned. "I don't see how, myself, but when Brown Ben gets back I'll tell him what your Gorzhak wants."

"I gave you a *command*. You will act upon it now."

"We take commands from our captain," Inkpots said in his usual mild tone. "He's not here. I told you."

The messenger had lost his patience, Tyrion could see. "Battle is joined. Your commander should be with you."

"Might be, but he's not. The girl sent for him. He went."

The messenger went purple. "*You must carry out your order!*"

Snatch spat a wad of well-chewed sourleaf out of the left side of his mouth. "Begging your pardon," he told the Yunkish rider, "but we're all horsemen here, same as m'lord. Now, a good trained warhorse, he'll charge a wall o' spears. Some will leap a fire ditch. But I never once seen any horse could run on water."

*"The ships are landing men,"* screamed the Yunkish lordling. "They've blocked the mouth of the Skahazadhan with a fireship, and every moment you stand here talking another hundred

swords come splashing through the shallows. Assemble your men and drive them back into the sea! At once! Gorzhak commands it!"

"Which one is Gorzhak?" asked Kem. "Is he the Rabbit?"

"Pudding Face," said Inkpots. "The Rabbit's not fool enough to send light horse against longships."

The rider had heard enough. "I shall inform Gorzhak zo Eraz that you refuse to carry out his order," he said stiffly. Then he wheeled his golden horse around and galloped back the way he'd come, chased by a gale of sellsword laughter.

Inkpots was the first to let his smile die. "Enough," he said, suddenly solemn. "Back to it. Get those horses saddled, I want every man of you ready to ride when Ben gets back here with some proper orders. And put that cookfire out. You can break your fasts after the fighting's done if you live that long." His gaze fell on Tyrion. "What are you grinning at? You look a little fool in that armor, Halfman."

"Better to look a fool than to be one," the dwarf replied. "We are on the losing side."

"The Halfman's right," said Jorah Mormont. "We do not want to be fighting for the slavers when Daenerys returns... and she will, make no mistake. Strike now and strike hard, and the queen will not forget it. Find her hostages and free them. And I will swear on the honor of my house and home that this was Brown Ben's plan from the beginning."

Out on the waters of Slaver's Bay, another of the Qartheen galleys went up in a sudden *whoosh* of flame. Tyrion could hear elephants trumpeting to the east. The arms of the six sisters rose and fell, throwing corpses. Shield slammed against shield as two spear walls came together beneath the walls of Meereen. Dragons wheeled overhead, their shadows sweeping across the upturned faces of friend and foe alike.

Inkpots threw up his hands. "I keep the books. I guard our gold. I draw up our agreements, collect our wages, make certain that we have sufficient coin to buy provisions. I do not decide who we fight or when. That is for Brown Ben to say. Take it up with him when he returns."

By the time Plumm and his companions came galloping back from the camp of the Girl General, the white dragon had flown back to its lair above Meereen. The green still prowled, soaring in wide circles above the city and the bay on great green wings.

Brown Ben Plumm wore plate and mail over boiled leather. The silk cloak flowing from his shoulders was his only concession to vanity: it rippled when he moved, the color changing from pale violet to deep purple. He swung down from his horse and gave her over to a groom, then told Snatch to summon his captains.

"Tell them to make haste," added Kasporio the Cunning.

Tyrion was not even a serjeant, but their *cyvasse* games had made him a familiar sight in Brown Ben's tent, and no one tried to stop him when he entered with the rest. Besides Kasporio and Inkpots, Uhlán and Bokkoko were amongst those summoned. The dwarf was surprised to see Ser Jorah Mormont there as well.

"We are commanded to defend the Wicked Sister," Brown Ben informed them. The other men exchanged uneasy glances. No one seemed to want to speak until Ser Jorah asked, "On whose authority?"

"The girl's. Ser Grandfather is making for the Harridan, but she's afraid he'll turn toward Wicked Sister next. The Ghost is already down. Marselen's freedmen broke the Long Lances like a rotten stick and dragged it over with chains. The girl figures Selmy means to bring down all the trebuchets."

"It's what I'd do in his place," Ser Jorah said. "Only I would have done it sooner." "Why is the girl still giving orders?" Inkpots sounded baffled. "Dawn has come and gone. Can she not see the sun? She is behaving as if she were still the supreme commander." "If you were her and knew that Pudding Face were about to assume command, you might keep giving orders too," said Mormont.

"One is no better than the other," Kasporio insisted.

"True," said Tyrion, "but Malazza has the nicer teats."

"Crossbows is how you hold the Wicked Sister," Inkpots said. "Scorpions. Mangonels. That's what's needed. You do not use mounted men to defend a fixed position. Does the girl mean for us to dismount? If so, why not use her spears or slingers?"

Kem stuck his pale blond head inside the tent. "Sorry to disturb, m'lords, but another rider's come. Says he has new orders from the supreme commander."

Brown Ben glanced at Tyrion, then shrugged. "Send him in."

"In here?" Kem asked, confused.

"Here is where I seem to be," Plumm said, with a trace of irritation. "If he goes somewhere else, he will not find me."

Out went Kem. When he returned, he held the tent flap open for a Yunkish nobleman in a cloak of yellow silk and matching pantaloons. The man's oily black hair had been tortured, twisted, and lacquered to make it seem as if a hundred tiny roses were sprouting from his head. On his breastplate was a scene of such delightful depravity that Tyrion sensed a kindred spirit.

"The Unsullied are advancing toward the Harpy's Daughter," the messenger announced. "Bloodbeard and two Ghiscari legions stand against them. Whilst they hold the line, you are to sweep around behind the eunuchs and take them in the rear, sparing none. This by the

command of the most noble and puissant Morghar zo Zherzyn, supreme commander of the Yunkai'i."

"Morghar?" Kasporio frowned. "No, Gorzhak commands today."

"Gorzhak zo Eraz lies slain, cut down by Pentoshi treachery. The turncloak who names himself the Prince of Tatters shall die screaming for this infamy, the noble Morghar swears." Brown Ben scratched at his beard. "The Windblown have gone over, have they?" he said, in a tone of mild interest.

Tyrion chortled. "And we've traded Pudding Face for the Drunken Conquerer. It's a wonder he was able to crawl out of the flagon long enough to give a halfway-sensible command."

The Yunkishman glared at the dwarf. "Hold your tongue, you verminous little—" His retort withered. "This insolent dwarf is an escaped slave," he declared, shocked. "He is the property of the noble Yezzan zo Qaggaz of hallowed memory."

"You are mistaken. He is my brother-in-arms. A free man, and a Second Son. Yezzan's slaves wear golden collars." Brown Ben smiled his most amiable smile. "Golden collars, with little bells. Do you hear bells? I hear no bells."

"Collars can be removed. I demand that the dwarf be surrendered for punishment at once." "That seems harsh. Jorah, what do you think?"

"This." Mormont's longsword was in his hand. As the rider turned, Ser Jorah thrust it through his throat. The point came out the back of the Yunkishman's neck, red and wet. Blood bubbled from his lips and down his chin. The man took two wobbly steps and fell across the *cyvasse* board, scattering the wooden armies everywhere. He twitched a few more times, grasping the blade of Mormont's sword with one hand as the other clawed feebly at the overturned table. Only then did the Yunkishman seem to realize he was dead. He lay facedown on the carpet in a welter of red blood and oily black roses. Ser Jorah wrenched his sword free of the dead man's neck. Blood ran down its fullers.

The white *cyvasse* dragon ended up at Tyrion's feet. He scooped it off the carpet and wiped it on his sleeve, but some of the Yunkish blood had collected in the fine grooves of the carving, so the pale wood seemed veined with red. "All hail our beloved queen, Daenerys." *Be she alive or be she dead.* He tossed the bloody dragon in the air, caught it, grinned. "We have always been the queen's men," announced Brown Ben Plumm. "Rejoining the Yunkai'i was just a plot."

"And what a clever ploy it was." Tyrion gave the dead man a shove with his boot. "If that breastplate fits, I want it."

# MERCY

March 2014



She woke with a gasp, not knowing who she was, or where.

The smell of blood was heavy in her nostrils... or was that her nightmare, lingering? She had dreamed of wolves again, of running through some dark pine forest with a great pack at her heels, hard on the scent of prey.

Half-light filled the room, grey and gloomy. Shivering, she sat up in bed and ran a hand across her scalp. Stubble bristled against her palm. *I need to shave before Izembaro sees. Mercy, I'm Mercy, and tonight I'll be raped and murdered.* Her true name was Mercedene, but Mercy was all anyone ever called her...

*Except in dreams.* She took a breath to quiet the howling in her heart, trying to remember more of what she'd dreamt, but most of it had gone already. There had been blood in it, though, and a full moon overhead, and a tree that watched her as she ran.

She had fastened the shutters back so the morning sun might wake her. But there was no sun outside the window of Mercy's little room, only a wall of shifting grey fog. The air had grown chilly... and a good thing, else she might have slept all day. *It would be just like Mercy to sleep through her own rape.*

Gooseprickles covered her legs. Her coverlet had twisted around her like a snake. She unwound it, threw the blanket to the bare plank floor and padded naked to the window. Braavos was lost in fog. She could see the green water of the little canal below, the cobbled stone street that ran beneath her building, two arches of the mossy bridge... but the far end of the bridge vanished in greyness, and of the buildings across the canal only a few vague lights remained. She heard a soft splash as a serpent boat emerged beneath the bridge's central arch. "What hour?" Mercy

called down to the man who stood by the snake's uplifted tail, pushing her onward with his pole.

The waterman gazed up, searching for the voice. "Four, by the Titan's roar." His words echoed hollowly off the swirling green waters and the walls of unseen buildings.

She was not late, not yet, but she should not dawdle. Mercy was a happy soul and a hard worker, but seldom timely. That would not serve tonight. The envoy from Westeros was expected at the Gate this evening, and Izembaro would be in no mood to hear excuses, even if she served them up with a sweet smile.

She had filled her basin from the canal last night before she went to sleep, preferring the brackish water to the slimy green rainwater stewing in the cistern out back. Dipping a rough cloth, she washed herself head to heel, standing on one leg at a time to scrub her calloused feet. After that she found her razor. A bare scalp helped the wigs fit better, Izembaro claimed.

She shaved, donned her smallclothes, and slipped a shapeless brown wool dress down over her head. One of her stockings needed mending, she saw as she pulled it up. She would ask the Snapper for help; her own sewing was so wretched that the wardrobe mistress usually took pity on her. *Else I could filch a nicer pair from wardrobe.* That was risky, though. Izembaro hated it when the mummers wore his costumes in the streets. *Except for Wendeyne. Give Izembaro's cock a little suck and a girl can wear any costume that she wants.* Mercy was not so foolish as all that. Daena had warned her. "Girls who start down that road wind up on the Ship, where every man in the pit knows he can have any pretty thing he might see up on the stage, if his purse is plump enough."

Her boots were lumps of old brown leather mottled with saltstains and cracked from long wear, her belt a length of hempen rope dyed blue. She knotted it about her waist, and hung a knife on her right hip and a coin pouch on her left. Last of all she threw her cloak across her shoulders. It was a real mummer's cloak, purple wool lined in red silk, with a hood to keep the rain off, and three secret pockets too. She'd hid some coins in one of those, an iron key in another, a blade in the last. A *real* blade, not a fruit knife like the one on her hip, but it did not belong to Mercy, no more than her other treasures did. The fruit knife belonged to Mercy. She was made for eating fruit, for smiling and joking, for working hard and doing as she was told.

"Mercy, Mercy, Mercy," she sang as she descended the wooden stair to the street. The handrail was splintery, the steps steep, and there were five flights, but that was why she'd gotten the room so cheap. *That, and Mercy's smile.* She might be bald and skinny, but Mercy had a pretty smile, and a certain grace. Even Izembaro agreed that she was graceful. She was not far from the Gate as the crows flies, but for girls with feet instead of wings the way was longer. Braavos was a crooked city. The streets were crooked, the alleys were crookeder, and the canals were crookedest of all. Most days she preferred to go the long way, down the Ragman's Road along the Outer Harbor, where she had the sea before her and the sky above, and a clear view across the Great Lagoon to the Arsenal and the piney slopes of Sellagoro's Shield. Sailors would hail

her as she passed the docks, calling down from the decks of tarry Ibbenese whalers and big-bellied Westerosi cogs. Mercy could not always understand their words, but she knew what they were saying. Sometimes she would smile back and tell them they could find her at the Gate if they had the coin.

The long way also took her across the Bridge of Eyes with its carved stone faces. From the top of its span, she could look through the arches and see all the city: the green copper domes of the Hall of Truth, the masts rising like a forest from the Purple Harbor, the tall towers of the mighty, the golden thunderbolt turning on its spire atop the Sealord's Palace... even the Titan's bronze shoulders, off across the dark green waters. But that was only when the sun was shining down on Braavos. If the fog was thick there was nothing to see but grey, so today Mercy chose the shorter route to save some wear on her poor cracked boots.

The mists seemed to part before her and close up again as she passed. The cobblestones were wet and slick under her feet. She heard a cat yowl plaintively. Braavos was a good city for cats, and they roamed everywhere, especially at night. *In the fog all cats are grey*, Mercy thought. *In the fog all men are killers*.

She had never seen a thicker fog than this one. On the larger canals, the watermen would be running their serpent boats into one another, unable to make out any more than dim lights from the buildings to either side of them.

Mercy passed an old man with a lantern walking the other way, and envied him his light. The street was so gloomy she could scarcely see where she was stepping. In the humbler parts of the city, the houses, shops, and warehouses crowded together, leaning on each other like drunken lovers, their upper stories so close that you could step from one balcony to the next. The streets below became dark tunnels where every footfall echoed. The small canals were even more hazardous, since many of the houses that lined them had privies jutting out over the water. Izembaro loved to give the Sealord's speech from *The Merchant's Melancholy Daughter*, about how "here the last Titan yet stands, astride the stony shoulders of his brothers," but Mercy preferred the scene where the fat merchant shat on the Sealord's head as he passed underneath in his gold-and-purple barge. Only in Braavos could something like that happen, it was said, and only in Braavos would Sealord and sailor alike howl with laughter to see it.

The Gate stood close by the edge of Drowned Town, between the Outer Harbor and the Purple Harbor. An old warehouse had burnt there and the ground was sinking a little more each year, so the land came cheap. Atop the flooded stone foundation of the warehouse, Izembaro raised his cavernous playhall. The Dome and the Blue Lantern might enjoy more fashionable environs, he told his mummers, but here between the harbors they would never lack for sailors and whores to fill their pit. The Ship was close by, still pulling handsome crowds to the quay where she had been moored for twenty years, he said, and the Gate would flourish too.



Time had proved him right. The Gate's stage had developed a tilt as the building settled, their costumes were prone to mildew, and water snakes nested in the flooded cellar, but none of that troubled the mummers so long as the house was full.

The last bridge was made of rope and raw planks, and seemed to dissolve into nothingness, but that was only the fog. Mercy scampered across, her heels ringing on the wood. The fog opened before her like a tattered grey curtain to reveal the playhouse. Buttery yellow light spilled from the doors, and Mercy could hear voices from within. Beside the entrance, Big Brusco had painted over the title of the last show, and written *The Bloody Hand* in its place in huge red letters. He was painting a bloody hand beneath the words, for those who could not read. Mercy stopped to have a look. "That's a nice hand," she told him.

"Thumb's crooked." Brusco dabbed at it with his brush. "King o' the Mummers been asking after you."

"It was so dark I slept and slept." When Izembaro had first dubbed himself the King of the Mummers, the company had taken a wicked pleasure in it, savoring the outrage of their rivals from the Dome and the Blue Lantern. Of late, though, Izembaro had begun to take his title too seriously. "He will only play kings now," Marro said, rolling his eyes, "and if the play has no king in it, he would sooner not stage it at all."

*The Bloody Hand* offered two kings, the fat one and the boy. Izembaro would play the fat one. It was not a large part, but he had a fine speech as he lay dying, and a splendid fight with a demonic boar before that. Phario Forel had written it, and he had the bloodiest quill of all of Braavos.

Mercy found the company assembled behind the stage, and slipped in between Daena and the Snapper at the back, hoping her late arrival would go unnoticed. Izembaro was telling everyone that he expected the Gate to be packed to the rafters this evening, despite the fog. "The King of Westeros is sending his envoy to do homage to the King of the Mummers tonight," he told his troupe. "We will not disappoint our fellow monarch."

"We?" said the Snapper, who did all the costumes for the mummers. "Is there more than one of him, now?"

"He's fat enough to count for two," whispered Bobono. Every mummer's troupe had to have a dwarf. He was theirs. When he saw Mercy, he gave her a leer. "Oho," he said, "there she is. Is the little girl all ready for her rape?" He smacked his lips.

The Snapper smacked him in the head. "Be quiet."

The King of the Mummers ignored the brief commotion. He was still talking, telling the mummers how magnificent they must be. Besides the Westerosi envoy, there would be keyholders in the crowd this evening, and famous courtesans as well. He did not intend for them to leave with a poor opinion of the Gate. "It shall go ill for any man who fails me," he

promised, a threat he borrowed from the speech Prince Garin gives on the eve of battle in *Wrath of the Dragonlords*, Phario Forel's first play.

By the time Izembaro finally finished speaking, less than an hour remained before the show, and the mummers were all frantic and fretful by turns. The Gate rang to the sound of Mercy's name.

"Mercy," her friend Daena implored, "Lady Stork has stepped on the hem of her gown again. Come help me sew it up."

"Mercy," the Stranger called, "bring the bloody paste, my horn is coming loose."

"Mercy," boomed Izembaro the Great himself, "what have you done with my crown, girl? I cannot make my entrance without my crown. How shall they know that I'm a king?"

"Mercy," squeaked the dwarf Bobono, "Mercy, something's amiss with my laces, my cock keeps flopping out."

She fetched the sticky paste and fastened the Stranger's left horn back onto his forehead. She found Izembaro's crown in the privy where he always left it and helped him pin it to his wig, and then ran for needle and thread so the Snapper could sew the lace hem back onto the cloth-of-gold gown that the queen would wear in the wedding scene.

And Bobono's cock was indeed flopping out. It was made to flop out, for the rape. *What a hideous thing*, Mercy thought as she knelt before the dwarf to fix him. The cock was a foot long and as thick as her arm, big enough to be seen from the highest balcony. The dyer had done a poor job with the leather, though; the thing was a mottled pink and white, with a bulbous head the color of a plum. Mercy pushed it back into Bobono's breeches and laced him back up. "Mercy," he sang as she tied him tight, "Mercy, Mercy, come to my room tonight and make a man of me."

"I'll make a eunuch of you if you keep unlacing yourself just so I'll fiddle with your crotch."

"We were meant to be together, Mercy," Bobono insisted. "Look, we're just the same height."

"Only when I'm on my knees. Do you remember your first line?" It had only been a fortnight since the dwarf had lurched onto stage in his cups and opened *The Anguish of the Archon* with the grumpkin's speech from *The Merchant's Lusty Lady*. Izembaro would skin him alive if he made such a blunder again, and never mind how hard it was to find a good dwarf.

"What are we playing, Mercy?" Bobono asked innocently.

*He is teasing me*, Mercy thought. *He's not drunk tonight, he knows the show perfectly well.* "We are doing Phario's new *Bloody Hand*, in honor of the envoy from the Seven Kingdoms."

"Now I recall." Bobono lowered his voice to a sinister croak. "The seven-faced god has cheated me," he said. "My noble sire he made of purest gold, and gold he made my siblings, boy and

girl. But I am formed of darker stuff, of bones and blood and clay, twisted into this rude shape you see before you." With that, he grabbed at her chest, fumbling for a nipple. "You have no titties. How can I rape a girl with no titties?"

She caught his nose between her thumb and forefinger and twisted. "You'll have no nose until you get your hands off me."

"Owwwww," the dwarf squealed, releasing her.

"I'll grow titties in a year or two." Mercy rose, to tower over the little man. "But you'll never grow another nose. You think of that, before you touch me there."

Bobono rubbed his tender nose. "There's no need to get so shy. I'll be raping you soon enough."

"Not until the second act."

"I always give Wendeyne's titties a nice squeeze when I rape her in *The Anguish of the Archon*," the dwarf complained. "She likes it, and the pit does too. You have to please the pit."

That was one of Izembaro's "wisdoms," as he liked to call them. *You have to please the pit.* "I bet it would please the pit if I ripped off the dwarf's cock and beat him about the head with it," Mercy replied. "That's something they won't have seen before." *Always give them something they haven't seen before* was another of Izembaro's "wisdoms," and one that Bobono had no easy answer for. "There, you're done," Mercy announced. "Now see if you can keep in your breeches till it's needed."

Izembaro was calling for her again. Now he could not find his boar spear. Mercy found it for him, helped Big Brusco don his boar suit, checked the trick daggers just to make certain no one had replaced one with a real blade (someone had done that at the Dome once, and a mummer had died), and poured Lady Stork the little nip of wine she liked to have before each play. When all the cries of "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" finally died away, she stole a moment for a quick peek out into the house.

The pit was as full as ever she'd seen it, and they were enjoying themselves already, joking and jostling, eating and drinking. She saw a peddler selling chunks of cheese, ripping them off the wheel with his fingers whenever he found a buyer. A woman had a bag of wrinkled apples. Skins of wine were being passed from hand to hand, some girls were selling kisses, and one sailor was playing the sea pipes. The sad-eyed little man called Quill stood in the back, come to see what he could steal for one of his own plays. Cossomo the Conjurer had come as well, and on his arm was Yna, the one-eyed whore from the Happy Port, but Mercy could not know those two, and they would not know Mercy. Daena recognized some Gate regulars in the crowd, and pointed them out for her; the dyer Dellono with his pinched white face and mottled purple hands, Galeo the sausage-maker in his greasy leather apron, tall Tomarro with his pet rat on his shoulder. "Tomarro best not let Galeo see that rat," Daena warned. "That's the only meat he puts in them sausages, I hear." Mercy covered her mouth and laughed.

The balconies were filling too. The first and third levels were for merchants and captains and other respectable folk. The bravos preferred the fourth and highest, where the seats were cheapest. It was a riot of bright color up there, while down below more somber shades held sway. The second balcony was cut up into private boxes where the mighty could comport themselves in comfort and privacy, safely apart from the vulgarity above and below. They had the best view of the stage, and servants to bring them food, wine, cushions, whatever they might desire. It was rare to find the second balcony more than half full at the Gate; such of the mighty who relished a night of mummery were more inclined to visit the Dome or the Blue Lantern, where the offerings were considered subtler and more poetic.

This night was different, though, no doubt on account of the Westerosi envoy. In one box sat three scions of Otharys, each accompanied by a famous courtesan; Prestayn sat alone, a man so ancient that you wondered how he ever reached his seat; Torone and Pranelis shared a box, as they shared an uncomfortable alliance; the Third Sword was hosting a half-dozen friends.

"I count five keyholders," said Daena.

"Bessaro is so fat you ought to count him twice," Mercy replied, giggling. Izembaro had a belly on him, but compared to Bessaro he was as lithe as a willow. The keyholder was so big he needed a special seat, thrice the size of a common chair.

"They're all fat, them Reyaans," Daena said. "Bellies as big as their ships. You should have seen the father. He made this one look small. One time he was summoned to the Hall of Truth to vote, but when he stepped onto his barge it sank." She clutched Mercy by the elbow. "Look, the Sealord's box." The Sealord had never visited the Gate, but Izembaro named a box for him anyway, the largest and most opulent in the house. "That must be the Westerosi envoy. Have you ever seen such clothes on an old man? And look, he's brought the Black Pearl!"

The envoy was slight and balding, with a funny grey wisp of a beard growing from his chin. His cloak was yellow velvet, and his breeches. His doublet was a blue so bright it almost made Mercy's eyes water. Upon his breast a shield had been embroidered in yellow thread, and on the shield was a proud blue rooster picked out in lapis lazuli. One of his guards helped him to his seat, while two others stood behind him in the back of the box.

The woman with him could not have been more than a third his age. She was so lovely that the lamps seemed to burn brighter when she passed. She had dressed in a low-cut gown of pale yellow silk, startling against the light brown of her skin. Her black hair was bound up in a net of spun gold, and a jet-and-gold necklace brushed against the top of her full breasts. As they watched, she leaned close to the envoy and whispered something in his ear that made him laugh. "They should call her the Brown Pearl," Mercy said to Daena. "She's more brown than black."

"The first Black Pearl was black as a pot of ink," said Daena. "She was a pirate queen, fathered by a Sealord's son on a princess from the Summer Isles. A dragon king from Westeros took her for his lover."

"I would like to see a dragon," Mercy said wistfully. "Why does the envoy have a chicken on his chest?"

Daena howled. "Mercy, don't you know *anything*? It's his siggle. In the Sunset Kingdoms all the lords have siggles. Some have flowers, some have fish, some have bears and elks and other things. See, the envoy's guards are wearing lions."

It was true. There were four guards; big, hard-looking men in ringmail, with heavy Westerosi longswords sheathed at their hips. Their crimson cloaks were bordered in whorls of gold, and golden lions with red garnet eyes clasped each cloak at the shoulder. When Mercy glanced at the faces beneath the gilded, lion-crested helm, her belly gave a quiver. *The gods have given me a gift.* Her fingers clutched hard at Daena's arm. "That guard. The one on the end, behind the Black Pearl."

"What of him? Do you know him?"

"No." Mercy had been born and bred in Braavos, how could she know some Westerosi? She had to think a moment. "It's only... well, he's fair to look on, don't you think?" He was, in a rough-hewn way, though his eyes were hard.

Daena shrugged. "He's very old. Not so old as the other ones, but... he could be *thirty*. And Westerosi. They're terrible savages, Mercy. Best stay well away from his sort."

"Stay away?" Mercy giggled. She was a giggly sort of girl, was Mercy. "No. I've got to get closer." She gave Daena a squeeze and said, "If the Snapper comes looking for me, tell her that I went off to read my lines again." She only had a few, and most were just, "*Oh, no, no, no,*" and "*Don't, oh don't, don't touch me,*" and "Please, m'lord, I am still a maiden," but this was the first time Izembaro had given her any lines at all, so it was only to be expected that poor Mercy would want to get them right.

The envoy from the Seven Kingdoms had taken two of his guards into his box to stand behind him and the Black Pearl, but the other two had been posted just outside the door to make certain he was not disturbed. They were talking quietly in the Common Tongue of Westeros as she slipped up silently behind them in the darkened passage. That was not a language Mercy knew.

"Seven hells, this place is damp," she heard her guard complain. "I'm chilled to the bones. Where are the bloody orange trees? I always heard there were orange trees in the Free Cities. Lemons and limes. Pomegranates. Hot peppers, warm nights, girls with bare bellies. Where are the bare-bellied girls, I ask you?"

"Down in Lys, and Myr, and Old Volantis," the other guard replied. He was an older man, big-bellied and grizzled. "I went to Lys with Lord Tywin once, when he was Hand to Aerys. Braavos is *north* of King's Landing, fool. Can't you read a bloody map?"

"How long do you think we'll be here?"

"Longer than you'd like," the old man replied. "If he goes back without the gold the queen will have his head. Besides, I seen that wife of his. There's steps in Casterly Rock she can't go down for fear she'd get stuck, that's how fat she is. Who'd go back to that, when he has his sooty queen?"

The handsome guardsman grinned. "Don't suppose he'll share her with us, afterward?"

"What, are you mad? You think he notices the likes of us? Bloody bugger don't even get our names right half the time. Maybe it was different with Clegane."

"Ser wasn't one for mummer shows and fancy whores. When Ser wanted a woman he took one, but sometimes he'd let us have her, after. I wouldn't mind having a taste of that Black Pearl. You think she's pink between her legs?"

Mercy wanted to hear more, but there was no time. *The Bloody Hand* was about to start, and the Snapper would be looking for her to help with costumes. Izembaro might be the King of the Mummers, but the Snapper was the one that they all feared. Time enough for her pretty guardsman later.

*The Bloody Hand* opened in a lychyard.

When the dwarf appeared suddenly from behind a wooden tombstone, the crowd began to hiss and curse. Bobono waddled to the front of the stage and leered at them. "The seven-faced god has cheated me," he began, snarling the words. "My noble sire he made of purest gold, and gold he made my siblings, boy and girl. But I am formed of darker stuff, of bones and blood and clay..."

By then Marro had appeared behind him, gaunt and terrible in the Stranger's long black robes. His face was black as well, his teeth red and shiny with blood, while ivory horns jutted upwards from his brow. Bobono could not see him, but the balconies could, and now the pit as well. The Gate grew deathly quiet. Marro moved forward silently.

So did Mercy. The costumes were all hung, and the Snapper was busy sewing Daena into her gown for the court scene, so Mercy's absence should not be noted. Quiet as a shadow, she slipped around the back again, up to where the guardsmen stood outside the envoy's box. Standing in a darkened alcove, still as stone, she had a good look at his face. She studied it carefully, to be sure. *Am I too young for him?* she wondered. *Too plain? Too skinny?* She hoped he wasn't the sort of man who liked big breasts on a girl. Bobono had been right about her chest. *It would be best if I could take him back to my place, have him all to myself. But will he come with me?*

"You think it might be him?" the pretty one was saying.

"What, did the Others take your wits?"

"Why not? He's a dwarf, ain't he?"

"The Imp weren't the only dwarf in the world."

"Maybe not, but look here, everyone says how clever he was, true? So maybe he figures the last place his sister would ever look for him would be in some mummer show, making fun of himself. So he does just that, to tweak her nose."

"Ah, you're mad."

"Well, maybe I'll follow him after the mummery. Find out for myself." The guardsman put a hand on the hilt of his sword. "If I'm right, I'll be a ma lord, and if I'm wrong, well, bleed it, it's just some dwarf." He gave a bark of laughter.

On stage, Bobono was bargaining with Marro's sinister Stranger. He had a big voice for such a little man, and he made it ring off the highest rafters now. "Give me the cup," he told the Stranger, "for I shall drink deep. And if it tastes of gold and lion's blood, so much the better. As I cannot be the hero, let me be the monster, and lesson them in fear in place of love."

Mercy mouthed the last lines along with him. They were better lines than hers, and apt besides. *He'll want me or he won't*, she thought, *so let the play begin*. She said a silent prayer to the god of many faces, slipped out of her alcove, and flounced up to the guardsmen. *Mercy, Mercy, Mercy*. "My lords," she said, "do you speak Braavosi? Oh, please, tell me you do."

The two guardsmen exchanged a look. "What's this thing going on about?" the older one asked. "Who is she?"

"One of the mummers," said the pretty one. He pushed his fair hair back off his brow and smiled at her. "Sorry, sweetling, we don't speak your gibble-gabble."

*Fuss and feathers*, Mercy thought, *they only know the Common Tongue*. That was no good. *Give it up or go ahead*. She could not give it up. She wanted him so bad. "I know your tongue, a little," she lied, with Mercy's sweetest smile. "You are lords of Westeros, my friend said."

The old one laughed. "Lords? Aye, that's us."

Mercy looked down at her feet, so shy. "Izembaro said to please the lords," she whispered. "If there is *anything* you want, anything at all..."

The two guardsmen exchanged a look. Then the handsome one reached out and touched her breast. "*Anything?*"

"You're disgusting," said the older man.

"Why? If this Izembaro wants to be hospitable, it would be rude to refuse." He gave her nipple a tweak through the fabric of her dress, just the way the dwarf had done when she was fixing his cock for him. "Mummers are the next best thing to whores."

"Might be, but this one is a child."

"I am not," lied Mercy. "I'm a maiden now."

"Not for long," said the comely one. "I'm Lord Rafford, sweetling, and I know just what I want. Hike up those skirts now, and lean back against that wall."

"Not *here*," Mercy said, brushing his hands away. "Not where the *play* is on. I might cry out, and Izembaro would be mad."

"Where, then?"

"I know a place."

The older guard was scowling. "What, you think can just scamper off? What if his knightliness comes looking for you?"

"Why would he? He's got a show to watch. And he's got his own whore, why shouldn't I have mine? This won't take long."

*No*, she thought, *it won't*. Mercy took him by the hand, led him through the back and down the steps and out into the foggy night. "You could be a mummer, if you wanted," she told him, as he pressed her up against the wall of the playhouse.

"Me?" The guardsman snorted. "Not me, girl. All that bloody talking, I wouldn't remember half of it."

"It's hard at first," she admitted. "But after a time it comes easier. I could teach you to say a line. I could."

He grabbed her wrist. "I'll do the teaching. Time for your first lesson." He pulled her hard against him and kissed her on the lips, forcing his tongue into her mouth. It was all wet and slimy, like an eel. Mercy licked it with her own tongue, then broke away from him, breathless. "Not here. Someone might see. My room's not far, but hurry. I have to be back before the second act, or I'll miss my rape."

He grinned. "No fear o' that, girl." But he let her pull him after her. Hand in hand, they went racing through the fog, over bridges and through alleys and up five flights of splintery wooden stairs. The guardsman was panting by the time they burst through the door of her little room. Mercy lit a tallow candle, then danced around at him, giggling. "Oh, now you're all tired out. I forgot how old you were, m'lord. Do you want to take a little nap? Just lie down and close your eyes, and I'll come back after the Imp's done raping me."

"You're not going anywhere." He pulled her roughly to him. "Get those rags off, and I'll show you how old I am, girl."

"Mercy," she said. "My name is *Mercy*. Can you say it?"

"Mercy," he said. "My name is Raff."



"I know." She slipped her hand between his legs, and felt how hard he was through the wool of his breeches.

"The laces," he urged her. "Be a sweet girl and undo them." Instead she slid her finger down along the inside of his thigh. He gave a grunt. "Damn, be careful there, you —"

Mercy gave a gasp and stepped away, her face confused and frightened. "You're *bleeding*."

"Wha —" He looked down at himself. "Gods be good. What did you do to me, you little cunt?" The red stain spread across his thigh, soaking the heavy fabric.

"Nothing," Mercy squeaked. "I *never*... oh, oh, there's so much blood. Stop it, stop it, you're scaring me."

He shook his head, a dazed look on his face. When he pressed his hand to his thigh, blood squirted through his fingers. It was running down his leg, into his boot. *He doesn't look so comely now*, she thought. *He just looks white and frightened*.

"A towel," the guardsman gasped. "Bring me a towel, a rag, press down on it. Gods. I feel dizzy." His leg was drenched with blood from the thigh down. When he tried to put his weight on it, his knee buckled and he fell. "Help me," he pleaded, as the crotch of his breeches reddened. "Mother have mercy, girl. A healer... run and find a healer, quick now."

"There's one on the next canal, but he won't come. You have to go to him. Can't you walk?"

"Walk?" His fingers were slick with blood. "Are you blind, girl? I'm bleeding like a stuck pig. I can't walk on this."

"Well," she said, "I don't know how you'll get there, then."

"You'll need to carry me."

*See?* thought Mercy. *You know your line, and so do I.*

"Think so?" asked Arya, sweetly.

Raff the Sweetling looked up sharply as the long thin blade came sliding from her sleeve. She slipped it through his throat beneath the chin, twisted, and ripped it back out sideways with a single smooth slash. A fine red rain followed, and in his eyes the light went out.

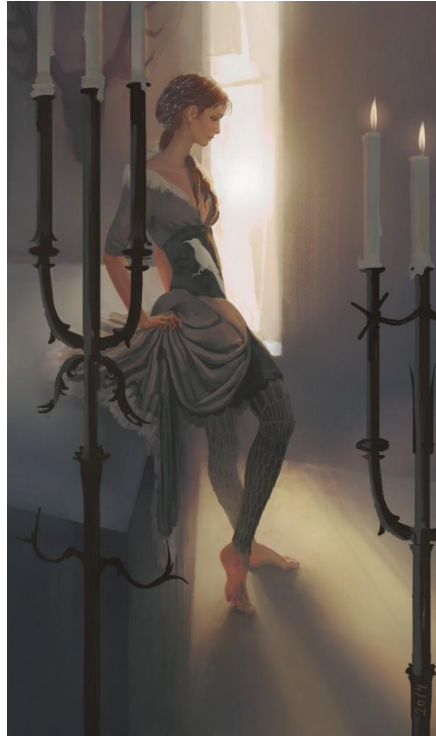
"Valar morghulis," Arya whispered, but Raff was dead and did not hear. She sniffed. *I should have helped him down the steps before I killed him. Now I'll need to drag him all the way to the canal and roll him in.* The eels would do the rest.

"Mercy, Mercy, Mercy," she sang sadly. A foolish, giddy girl she'd been, but good hearted. She would miss her, and she would miss Daena and the Snapper and the rest, even Izembaro and Bobono. This would make trouble for the Sealord and the envoy with the chicken on his chest, she did not doubt.

She would think about that later, though. Just now, there was no time. *I had best run.* Mercy still had some lines to say, her first lines and her last, and Izembaro would have her pretty little empty head if she were late for her own rape.

# ALAYNE

March 2015



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 Myranda 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 Myranda's breasts that he hardly noticed Alayne until

Myranda 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 Myranda 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 Myranda'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," Myranda 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. Myranda 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 Miranda 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 Miranda 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 Myranda 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 Lothar 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 around 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 Shadrich the Mad Mouse. Then Ser Albar Royce, Miranda'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 Harold 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."

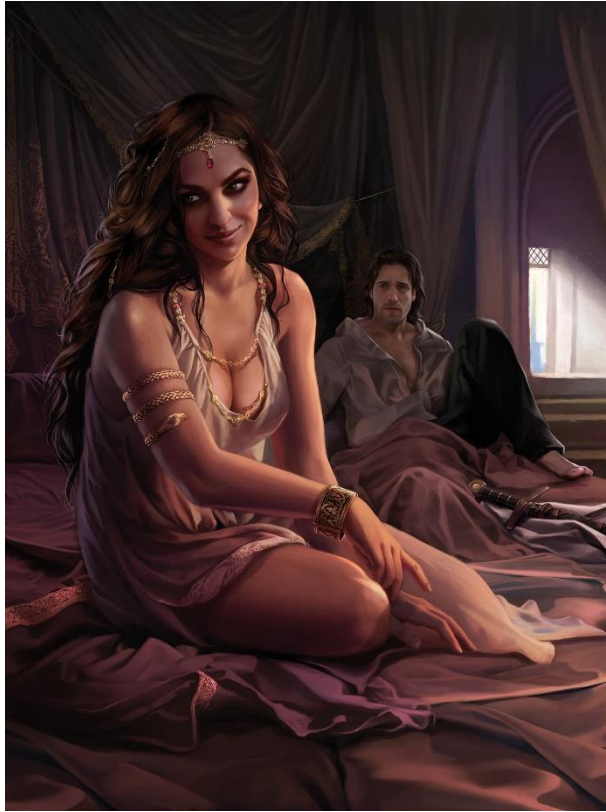
He has good teeth, she thought, straight and white. And when he smiles, he has the nicest dimples. She ran one finger down his cheek. "Should we ever wed, you'll have to send Saffron back to her father. I'll be all the spice you'll want."

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 II

May 2016



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 septray 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, lady ferns, 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.

*Nyrn 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 End 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 Mistfall, to see your master," answered Daemon Sand.

"Good answer," said the grinner. "Come with us."

Mistfall'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.

Arienne 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 *cynasse*, my lord?" asked Arienne. "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 to believe they will allow me that choice?* She had had the uneasy feeling that Halden 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 FORSAKEN

May 2016

It 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 chains. *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 half-brothers. 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 wrath 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 400 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 oar-master'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.