

DAENERYS

She could hear the dead man coming up the steps. The slow, measured sound of footsteps went before him, echoing amongst the purple pillars of her hall. Daenerys Targaryen awaited him upon the ebon bench that she had made her throne. Her eyes were soft with sleep, her silver-gold hair all tousled.

"Your Grace," said Ser Barristan Selmy, the Lord Commander of her Queensguard, "there is no need for you to see this."

"He died for me." Dany clutched her lion pelt to her chest. Underneath, a sheer white linen tunic covered her to mid-thigh. She had been dreaming of a house with a red door when Missandei woke her. There had been no time to dress.

"*Khaleesi*," whispered Irri, "you must not touch the dead man. It is bad luck to touch the dead."

"Unless you killed them yourself." Jhiqui was bigger-boned than Irri, with wide hips and heavy breasts. "That is known."

"It is known," Irri agreed.

Dany paid no heed. Dothraki were wise where horses were concerned, but could be utter fools about much else. *They are only girls, besides*. Her handmaids were of an age with her; women grown to look at them, with their black hair, copper skin, and almond-shaped eyes, but children all the same. Khal Drogo had given them to her, who was her sun-and-stars. Drogo had given her the pelt too, the head and hide of a *hrakkar*, the white lion of the Dothraki sea. It was too big for her and had a musty smell, but it made her feel as if Drogo were still near her.

Grey Worm appeared atop the steps first, a torch in hand. His bronze cap was crested with three spikes. Behind him followed four of his Unsullied, bearing the dead man on their shoulders. Their caps had only one spie, and their faces showed so little they might have been cast of bronze as well. They laid the corpse down at her feet. Ser Barristan pulled back the blood-stained shroud. Grey Worm lowered the torch, so she might see.

The dead man's face was smooth and hairless, though his cheeks had been slashed open almost ear to ear. He had been a tall man, blue-eyed and fair of face. *Some child of Lys or old Volantis, snatched off a ship by corsairs and sold into bondage in red Astapor*. Though his eyes were open, it was his wounds that wept. There were more wounds than she could count.

"Your Grace," Ser Barristan said, "there was a harpy drawn on the bricks in the alley where he was found... "

"... drawn in his own blood." Daenerys knew the way of it by now. The Sons of the Harpy did their butchery by night, and over each kill they left their mark. "Grey Worm, why was this man alone? Had he no partner?" When the Unsullied walked the streets of Meereen by night, they always walked in pairs.

"My queen," replied the captain, "your servant Stalwart Shield had no duty last night. He had gone to a... a certain place... to drink, and have companionship."

"A certain place? What do you mean?"

"A house of pleasure, Your Grace." Beneath the spiked bronze cap, Grey Worm's face might have been made of stone.

A brothel. Half of her freedmen were from Yunkai, where the Wise Masters had been famed for training bed slaves. *The way of the seven sighs*. Brothels had sprouted up like mushrooms all over Meereen. *It is all they know. They need to survive*. Food grew more costly every day, whilst the pleasures of the flesh got cheaper. In the poorer districts between the stepped pyramids of Meereen's slaver nobility, there were brothels catering to every conceivable erotic taste, she knew. *Even so...* "What could a eunuch hope to find in a brother?" she asked.

"Even those who lack a man's parts may still have a man's heart, Your Grace," said Grey Worm. "This one has been told that your servant Stalwart Shield sometimes gave coin to the women of the brothels, to lay with him and hold him."

The blood of the dragon does not weep. "Stalwart Shield," she said, dry-eyed. "That was his name?"

"If it please Your Grace."

"It is a fine name." The Good Masters of Astapor had not allowed their slave soldiers even names. Some of her Unsullied reclaimed their birth names after she had freed them; others chose new names for themselves. "Is it known how many attackers fell upon Stalwart Shield?"

"This one does not know. Many."

"Six or more," said Ser Barristan. "From the look of his wounds, they swarmed him from all sides. He was found with an empty scabbard. It may be that he wounded some of his attackers."

Dany said a silent prayer that somewhere one of them was dying even now, clutching at his belly and writhing in pain. "Why did they cut open his cheeks like that?"

"Gracious queen," said Grey Worm, "his killers had forced the genitals of a goat down the throat of your servant Stalwart Shield. This one removed them before bringing him here."

They could not feed him own genitals. The Astapori left him neither root nor stem. "The Sons grow bolder," Dany observed. Until now, they had limited their attacks to unarmed freedmen, cutting them down in the streets or breaking into their homes under the cover of darkness to murder them in their beds. "This is the first of my soldiers they have slain."

"The first," Ser Barristan warned, "but not the last."

I am still at war, Dany realized, *only now I am fighting shadows*. She had hoped to have a respite from the killing, some time to build and heal. Shrugging off the lion pelt, she knelt beside the corpse and closed the dead man's eyes, ignoring Jhiqui's gasp. "Stalwart Shield shall not be forgotten. Have him washed and dressed for battle, and bury him with cap and shield and spears."

"It shall be as Your Grace commands," said Grey Worm.

She stood. "Send a dozen men to the Temple of the Graces, and ask the Blue

Graces if any man has come to them seeking treatment for a sword wound. And spread the word that we will pay good gold for the short sword of Stalwart Shield. Inquire of the butchers and the herdsman too, and learn who has been gelding goats of late." Perhaps they would be fortunate, and some frightened goatherd would confess. "Henceforth, see that no man of mine walks alone after dark, whether has the duty or no."

"These ones shall obey."

Daenerys pushed her hair back. "Find these cowards for me," she said fiercely. "Find them, so that I might teach the Harpy's Sons what it means to wake the dragon."

Grey Worm saluted her. His Unsullied closed the shroud once more, lifted the dead man onto their shoulders, and bore him from the hall. Ser Barristan Selmy remained behind. His hair was white, and there were crow's feet at the corners of his pale blue eyes. Yet his back was still unbent, and the years had not yet robbed him of his skill at arms. "Your Grace," he said, "I fear your eunuchs are ill-suited for the tasks you set them."

Dany settled on her bench and wrapped her pelt about her shoulders once again. "The Unsullied are my finest warriors."

"Soldiers, not warriors, if it please Your Grace. They were made for the battlefield, to stand shoulder to shoulder behind their shields, with their spears thrust out before them. Their training teaches them to obey, fearlessly, perfectly, without thought or hesitation... not to unravel secrets or ask questions."

"Would knights serve me any better?" Selmy was training knights for her, teaching the sons of slaves to fight with lance and longsword in the Westerosi fashion... but what good would lances do, against cowards who killed from the shadows?

"Not in this," the old man admitted. "And Your Grace has no knights, save me. It will be years before the boys are ready."

"Then who, if not Unsullied? Dothraki would be even worse." Her *khalasar* was tiny, and largely of green boys and old men. And Dothraki fought from horseback. Mounted men were of more use in open fields and hills than in the narrow streets and alleys of the city. Beyond Meereen's walls of many-colored brick her rule was tenuous at best. Thousands of slaves still toiled on vast estates in the hills, growing wheat and olives, herding sheep and goats, and mining salt and copper. Meereen's storehouses still held ample supplies of grain, oil, olives, dried fruit, and salted meat, but the stores were dwindling. So Dany had dispatched her *khalasar* to subdue the hinterlands, under the command of her three bloodriders, whilst Brown Ben Plumm took his Second Sons south to guard against Yunkish incursions.

The most crucial task of all she had entrusted to Daario Naharis, glib-tongued Daario with his gold tooth and trident beard, smiling his wicked smile through purple whiskers. Beyond the eastern hills was a range of rounded sandstone mountains, the Khyzai Pass, and Lhazar. If Daario could convince the Lhazarene to reopen the overland trade routes, grains could be brought down the river or over the hills at need... but the Lamb Men had no reason to love Meereen. "When the Stormcrows

return from Lhazar, perhaps I can use them in the streets," she told Ser Barristan, "but until then I have only the Unsullied."

Dany wondered if Daario had reached Lhazar. *Daario will not fail me... but if he does, I will find another way. That is what queens do. They find a way, a way that does not involve taking plows across the river.* Even famine might be preferable to sending plows across the Skahazadhan. It was known. "You must excuse me, ser," she said. "The petitioners will soon be at my gates. I must don my floppy ears and become their queen again. Summon Reznak and the Shavepate, I'll see them when I'm dressed."

"As Your Grace commands." Selmy bowed.

The Great Pyramid shouldered eight hundred feet into the sky, from its huge square base to the lofty apex where the queen kept her private chambers, surrounded by greenery and fragrant pools. As a cool blue dawn broke over the city, Dany walked out onto the terrace. To the west sunlight blazed off the golden domes of the Temple of the Graces, and etched deep shadows behind the stepped pyramids of the mighty. *In some of those pyramids, the Sons of the Harpy are plotting new murders even now, she thought, and I am powerless to stop them.* Viserion sensed her disquiet. The white dragon lay coiled around a pear tree, his head resting on his tail. When Dany passed his eyes came open, two pools of molten gold. His horns were gold as well, and the scales that ran down his back from head to tail. "You're lazy," she told him, scratching under his jaw. His scales were hot to the touch, like armor left cooking too long in the sun. *Dragons are fire made flesh.* She had read that in one of the books Ser Jorah had given her as a wedding gift. "You should be hunting with your brothers. Have you been fighting Drogon again?" Her dragons had grown wilder of late. Rhaegal had snapped at Irri, and Viserion had set Reznak's *tokar* ablaze the last time the seneschal had called. *I have left them too much to themselves, but where am I to find the time for them?*

Viserion's tail lashed sideways, thumping the trunk of the tree so hard that a pear came tumbling down to land at Dany's feet. His wings unfolded, and he half-flew, half-hopped onto the parapet. *He is growing,* she thought, as the dragon launched himself into the sky. *They are all three growing. Soon they will be large enough to bear my weight.* Then she would fly as Aegon the Conquerer had flown, up and up, until Meereen was so small that she could blot it out with her thumb.

She watched Viserion climb in widening circles, until he was lost to sight beyond muddy waters of the Skahazadhan. Only then did Dany go back inside the pyramid, where Irri and Jhiqui were waiting to brush the tangles from her hair and garb her as befit the Queen of Meereen, in a Ghiscari *tokar*.

The garment was clumsy thing, a long loose shapeless sheet that had to be wound around her hips and under an arm and over a shoulder, its dangling fringes carefully layered and displayed. Wound too loose, it was like to fall off; wound too tight, it would tangle, trip, and bind. Even wound properly, the *tokar* required its wearer to hold it in place with the left hand. Walking in a *tokar* demanded small, mincing steps and exquisite balance, lest one tread upon those heavy trailing fringes. It was not a garment meant for any man who had to work. The *tokar* was a *master's* garment, a sign of wealth and power.

Dany had wanted to ban the *tokar* when she took Meereen, but her council had convinced her otherwise. "The Mother of Dragons must don the *tokar* or be forever hated," warned the Green Grace, Galazza Galare. "In the wools of Westeros or a gown of Myrish lace, Your Radiance shall forever remain a stranger amongst us, a grotesque outlander, a barbarian conquerer. Meereen's queen must be a lady of Old Ghis." Brown Ben Plumm, the captain of the Second Sons, had put it more succinctly. "Man wants to be the king o' the rabbits, he best wear a pair o' floppy ears."

The floppy ears she chose today were made of sheer white linen, with a fringe of golden tassels. With Jhiqui's help, she wound the *tokar* about herself correctly on her third attempt. Irri fetched her crown, wrought in the shape of the three-headed dragon of her House. Its coils were gold, its wings silver, its three heads ivory, onyx, and jade. Dany's neck and shoulders would be stiff and sore from the weight of it before the day was done. *A crown should not sit easy on the head.* One of her royal forebears had said that, once. *An Aegon, but which one?*

Five Aegons had ruled the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, and there might have been sixth if the Usurper's dogs had not murdered her brother's son when he was still a babe at the breast. *If he had lived I might have married him. Aegon would have been closer to my age than Viserys.* Dany had scarcely been conceived when Aegon and his sister were murdered. Their father had perished even earlier, slain by the Usurper on the Trident. Her other brother Viserys had died screaming in Vaes Dothrak with a crown of molten gold upon his head. *They will kill me too, if I allow it. The knives that slew my Stalwart Shield were meant for me.*



She had not forgotten the slave children the Great Masters had nailed up along the road from Yunkai. They had numbered one hundred sixty-three, a child every mile, nailed to mileposts with one arm outstretched to point her way. After Meereen had fallen, Dany nailed up a like number of Great Masters. Swarms of flies had attended their slow dying, and the stench had lingered long in the plaza. Yet some days she feared that she had not gone nearly far enough. These Meereenese were a sly and stubborn people who resisted her at every turn. They had freed their slaves, yes... only to hire them back as servants at wages so meagre that most could scarce afford to eat. Freedmen too old or young to be of use had been cast into the streets, along with the infirm and the crippled. And still the Great Masters gathered atop their lofty pyramids to complain of how the dragon queen had filled their noble city with hordes of unwashed beggars, thieves, and whores.

To rule Meereen I must win the Meereenese, however much I may despise them. "I am ready," she told Irri.

Reznak and Skahaz waited atop the marble steps. "Great queen," declared

Reznak mo Reznak, "you are so radiant today I fear to look on you." The seneschal wore a *tokar* of maroon silk with a golden fringe. A small, damp man, he smelled as if he had bathed in perfume and spoke a bastard form of High Valyrian, much corrupted and flavored with a thick Ghiscari growl.

"You are kind to say so," Dany answered, in a purer form of the same tongue.

"My queen," growled Skahaz mo Kandaq, of the shaven head. Ghiscari hair was dense and wiry; it had long been the fashion for the men of the Slaver Cities to tease it into horns and spikes and wings. By shaving, Skahaz had put old Meereen behind him to accept the new. His Kandaq kin had done the same after his example. Others followed, though whether from fear, fashion, or ambition, Dany could not say; shavepates, they were called. Skahaz was *the* Shavepate... and the vilest of traitors to the Sons of the Harpy and their ilk. "We were told about the eunuch."

"His name was Stalwart Shield."

"More will die, unless the murderers are punished." Even with his shaven scalp, Skahaz had an odious face; a beetled brow, small eyes with heavy bags beneath them, a big nose dark with blackheads, oily skin that looked more yellow than the usual amber of Ghiscari. It was a blunt, brutal, angry face. She could only pray it was an honest one as well.

"How can I punish them when I do not know they are?" Dany demanded of him. "Tell me that, bold Skahaz."

"You have no lack of enemies, Your Grace. You can see their pyramids from your terrace. Zhak, Hazkar, Ghazeen, Merreq, Loraq, all the old slaving families. Pahl. Pahl, most of all. A house of women now. Bitter old women with a taste for blood. Women do not forget. Women do not forgive."

No, Dany thought, *and the Usurper's dogs will learn that, when I return to Westeros*. It was true that there was blood between her and the house of Pahl. Oznak zo Pahl had been Meereen's hero until Strong Belwas slew him. His father, commander of the city watch, had died defending the gates when Joso's Cock smashed them into splinters. His uncle had been one of the hundred sixty-three on the plaza.

"How much gold have we offered for information concerning the Sons of the Harpy?" Dany asked of Reznak.

"One hundred honors, if it please Your Radiance."

"One thousand honors would please us more. Make it so."

"Your Grace has not asked for my counsel," said Skahaz Shavepate, "but I say that blood must pay for blood. Take one man from each of the families I have named and kill him. The next time one of yours is slain, take two from each great house and kill them both. There will not be a third murder."

Reznak squealed in distress. "Noooo... gentle queen, such savagery would bring down the ire of the gods. We will find the murderers, I promise you, and when we do they will prove to be baseborn filth, you shall see."

The seneschal was as bald as Skahaz, though in his case the gods were responsible. "Should any hair be so insolent as to appear, my barber stands with razor ready," he had said when she raised him up. There were times when Dany wondered if

that razor might not be better used on Reznak's throat. He was a useful man, but she liked him little and trusted him less. She had not forgotten the *maegi* Mirri Maz Duur, who had repaid her kindness by murdering her sun-and-stars and unborn child.

The Undying had told her she would be thrice betrayed. The *maegi* had been the first, Ser Jorah the second. *Will Reznak be the third, or the Shavepate, or Daario? Or will it be someone I would never suspect, Ser Barristan or Grey Worm or Missandei?*

"Skahaz," she told the Shavepate, "I thank you for your counsel. Reznak, see what one thousand honors may accomplish." Clutching her *tokar*, Daenerys swept past them down the broad marble stair. She took one step at a time, lest she trip over her fringe and go tumbling headfirst into court.

Missandei announced her. The little scribe had a sweet, strong voice. "*All kneel for Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Khaleesi of Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Shackles and Mother of Dragons,*" she cried, as Dany made her slow descent.

The hall had filled. Unsullied stood with their backs to the pillars, holding their shields and spears, the spikes on their caps jutting upward like a row of knives. The Meereenese had gathered beneath the eastern windows, in a throng of shaven pates and hairy horns and hands and spirals. Her freedmen stood well apart from their former masters. *Until they stand together, Meereen will know no peace.* "Arise." Dany settled onto her bench. The hall rose. *That at least they do as one.*

Reznak mo Reznak had a list. Custom demanded that the queen begin with the Astapori envoy, a former slave who called himself Lord Ghael, though no one seemed to know what he was lord of.

Lord Ghael had a mouth of brown and rotten teeth and the pointed yellow face of a weasel. He also had a gift. "Cleon the Great sends these slippers as a token of his love for Daenerys Stormborn, the Mother of Dragons," he announced.

Irri fetched the slippers for her and put them on Dany's feet. They were gilded leather, decorated with green freshwater pearls. *Does the butcher king believe a pair of pretty slippers will win my hand?* "King Cleon is most generous," she said. "You may thank him for his lovely gift." *Lovely, but made for a child.* Dany had small feet, yet the slippers mashed her toes together.

"Great Cleon will be pleased to know they pleased you," said Lord Ghael. "His Magnificence bids me say that he stands ready to defend the Mother of Dragons from all her foes."

If he proposes that I marry Cleon again, I'll throw a slipper at his head, Dany thought, but for once the Astapori envoy made no mention of a marriage.

Instead he said, "The time has come for Astapor and Meereen to end the savage reign of the Wise Masters of Yunkai, sworn foes to all those who live in freedom. Great Cleon bids me tell you that he and his new Unsullied will soon march."

His new Unsullied are a obscene jape. "King Cleon would be wise to tend his own gardens and let the Yunkai'i tend theirs." It was not that she harbored any love for Yunkai. More and more she was coming to regret leaving the Yellow City untaken after defeating its army in the field. The Wise Masters had returned to slaving as soon

as she'd moved on, and were busy raising levies, hiring sellswords, and making alliances against her. Cleon the self-styled Great was little better, however. The Butcher King had restored slavery to Astapor, the only change being that the former slaves were now the masters and the former masters were now the slaves. *He is still a butcher, and his hands are bloody.* "I am only a young girl and know little of the ways of war," she went on, "but it is said that Astapor is starving. Let King Cleon feed his people before he leads them out to battle." She made a gesture of dismissal, and Ghael withdrew.

"Magnificence," prompted Reznak mo Reznak, "will you hear the noble Hizdahr zo Loraq?"

Again? Dany nodded, and Hizdahr strode forth; a tall man, very slender, with flawless amber skin. He bowed on the same spot where Stalwart Shield had lain in death not long before. *I need this man,* Dany reminded herself. Hizdahr was a wealthy merchant with many friends in Meereen, and more across the seas. He had visited Volantis, Lys, and Qarth, had kin in Tolos and Elyria, and was even said to wield some influence in New Ghis, where the Yunkai'i were trying to stir up enmity against Dany and her rule.

And he was rich. Famously and fabulously rich...

And like to grow richer, if I grant his petition. When Dany had closed the city's fighting pits, the value of pit shares had plummeted. Hizdahr zo Loraq had grabbed them up with both hands, and now owned most of the pits in Meereen.

The nobleman had wings of hair sprouting from his temples as if his head were about to take flight. His long face was made even longer by a beard of wiry red-black hair bound with rings of gold. His purple *tokar* was fringed with amethysts and pearls. "Your Radiance will know the reason I am here."

"Why," she said, "it must be because you have no other purpose but to plague me. How many times have I refused you?"

"Five times, Your Magnificence."

"Six, now. I will not have the fighting pits reopened."

"If Your Majesty will hear my arguments... "

"I have. Five times. Have you brought new arguments?"

"Old arguments," Hizdahr admitted, "new words. Lovely words, and courteous, more apt to move a queen."

"It is your cause I find wanting, not your courtesies. I have heard your arguments so often I could plead your case myself. Shall I?" She leaned forward. "The fighting pits have been a part of Meereen since the city was founded. The combats are profoundly religious in nature, a blood sacrifice to the gods of Ghis. The *mortal art* of Ghis is not mere butchery, but a display of courage, skill, and strength most pleasing to gods. Victorious fighters are well fed, pampered, and acclaimed, and the heroic slain are honored and remembered. By reopening the pits I would show the people of Meereen that I respect their ways and customs. The pits are far-famed across the world. They draw trade to Meereen, and fill the city's coffers with coin from the far ends of the earth. All men share a taste for blood, a taste the pits help slake. In that

way they make Meereen more tranquil. For criminals condemned to die upon the sands, the pits represent a judgment by battle, a last chance for a man to prove his innocence. " Dany tossed her hair. "There. How have I done?"

"Your Radiance has stated the case much better than I could have hoped to do myself. I see that you are eloquent as well as beautiful. I am quite persuaded."

She had to laugh. "Very good... but I am not."

"Your Magnificence," whispered Reznak mo Reznak in her ear, "if I might remind you, it is customary for the city to claim one-tenth of all the profits from the fighting pits, after expenses, as a tax. That coin might be put to many noble uses."

"It might," she agreed, "though if we *were* to reopen the pits, we should take our tenth *before* expenses. I am only a young girl and know little of trade, but I dwelled with Illyrio Mopatis and Xaro Xhoan Daxos long enough to know that much. It makes no matter. Hizdahr, if you could marshall armies as you marshall arguments, you could conquer the world... but my answer is still no. For the sixth time."

He bowed again, as deeply as before. His pearls and amethysts clattered softly against the marble floor. A very limber man was Hizdahr zo Loraq. "The queen has spoken."

He might be handsome, but for that silly hair. Reznak and the Green Grace had been urging Dany to take a Meereenese noble for her husband, to reconcile the city to her rule. If it came to that, Hizdahr zo Loraq might be worth a careful look. *Sooner him than Skahaz.* The Shavepate had offered to set aside his wife for her, but the notion made her shudder. Hizdahr at least knew how to smile, though when Dany tried to imagine what it would be like to share a bed with him, she almost laughed aloud.

"Magnificence," said Reznak, consulting his list, "the noble Grazdan zo Galare would address you. Will you hear him?"

"It would be my pleasure," said Dany, admiring the glimmer of the gold and the sheen of the green pearls on Cleon's slippers while doing her best to ignore the pinching in her toes. Grazdan, she had been forewarned, was a cousin of the Green Grace, whose support she had found invaluable. The priestess was a voice for peace, acceptance, and obedience to lawful authority. *I can give her cousin a respectful hearing, whatever he desires.*

What he desired turned out to be gold. Dany had refused to compensate any of the Great Masters for the value of the slaves that she had freed, but the Meereenese kept devising other ways to try and squeeze coin from her. The noble Grazdan was one such. He had once owned a slave woman who was a very fine weaver, he told her; the fruits of her loom were greatly valued, not only in Meereen, but in New Ghis and Astapor and Qarth. When this woman had grown old, Grazdan had purchased half a dozen young girls and commanded the crone to instruct them in the secrets of her craft. The old woman was dead now. The young ones, freed, had opened a shop by the harbor wall to sell their weavings. Grazdan zo Galare asked that he be granted a portion of their earnings. "They owe their skill to me," he insisted. "I plucked them from the auction bloc and gave them to the loom."

Dany listened quietly, her face still. When he was done, she said, "What was the

name of the old weaver?" "The slave?" Grazdan shifted his weight, frowning. "She was... Elza, it might have been. Or Ella. It was six years ago she died. I have owned so many slaves, Your Grace."

"Let us say Elza." Dany raised a hand. "Here is our ruling. From the girls, you shall have nothing. It was Elza who taught them weaving, not you. From you, the girls shall have a new loom, the finest coin can buy. That is for forgetting the name of the old woman. You may go."

Reznak would have summoned another *tokar* next, but Dany insisted that he call upon one of the freedmen instead. From that point on she alternated between the former masters and the former slaves. Many and more of the matters brought before her involved redress. Meereen had been sacked savagely after its fall. The stepped pyramids of the mighty had been spared the worst of the ravages, but the humbler parts of the city had been given over to an orgy of looting and killing as the city's slaves rose up and the starving hordes who had followed her from Yunkai and Astapor came pouring through the broken gates. Her Unsullied had finally restored order, but the sack had left a plague of problems in its wake, and no one was quite certain which laws still held true. And so they came to see the queen.

A rich woman came, whose husband and sons had died defending the city walls. During the sack she had fled to her brother in fear. When she returned, she found her house had been turned into a brothel. The whores had bedecked themselves in her jewels and clothes. She wanted her house back, and her jewels. "They can keep the clothes," she allowed. Dany granted her the jewels, but ruled the house was lost when she abandoned it.

A former slave came, to accuse a certain noble of the Zhak. The man had recently taken to wife a freedwoman who had been the noble's bedwarmer before the city fell. The noble had taken her maidenhood, used her for his pleasure, and gotten her with child. Her new husband wanted the noble gelded for the crime of rape, and he wanted a purse of gold as well, to pay him for raising the noble's bastard as his own. Dany granted him the gold, but not the gelding. "When he lay with her, your wife was his property, to do with as he would. By law, there was no rape." Her decision did not please him, she could see, but if she gelded every man who ever forced a bedslave, she would soon rule a city of eunuchs.

A boy came, younger than Dany, slight and scarred, dressed up in a frayed grey *tokar* trailing silver fringe. His voice broke when he told of how two of his father's household slaves had risen up the night the gate broke. One had slain his father, the other his elder brother. Both had raped his mother before killing her as well. The boy had escaped with no more than the scar upon his face, but one of the murderers was still living in his father's house, and the other had joined the queen's soldiers as one of the Mother's Men. He wanted them both hanged.

I am queen over a city built on dust and death. Dany had no choice but to deny him. She had declared a blanket pardon for all crimes committed during the sack. Nor would she punish slaves for rising up against their masters.

When she told him, the boy rushed at her, but his feet tangled in his *tokar* and

he went sprawling headlong on the purple marble. Strong Belwas was on him at once. The huge brown eunuch yanked him up one-handed and shook him like a mastiff with a rat. "Enough, Belwas," Dany called. "Release him." To the boy she said, "Treasure that *tokar*, for it saved your life. Had you laid a hand on us in anger, you would have lost that hand. You are only a boy, so we will forget what happened here. You should do the same." But as he left the boy looked back over his shoulder, and when she saw his eyes Dany thought, *The harpy has another son.*

And so her day crept by, tedious and terrifying by turns. By midday Daenerys was feeling the weight of the crown upon her head, and the hardness of the bench beneath her. With so many still waiting on her pleasure, she did not stop to eat. Instead she dispatched Jhiqui to the kitchens for a platter of flatbread, olives, figs, and cheese. She nibbled whilst she listened, and sipped from a cup of watered wine. The figs were fine, the olives even finer, but the wine left a tart metallic aftertaste in her mouth. The small, pale yellow grapes native to these regions produced a notably inferior vintage. *We shall have no trade in wine*, Dany realized as she sipped. Besides, the Great Masters had burned the best arbors along with the olive trees.

In the afternoon a sculptor came, proposing to replace the head of the great bronze harpy in the Plaza of Purification with one cast in Dany's image. She denied him with as much courtesy as she could muster, struggling not to shudder. A pike of unprecedented size had been caught in the Skahazadhan, and the fisherman wished to give it to the queen. She admired the fish extravagantly, rewarded the fisherman with a plump purse of silver, and sent the pike down to her kitchens. A coppersmith had fashioned her a suit of burnished rings to wear to war. She accepted it with fulsome thanks; it was lovely to behold, and all that burnished copper would flash prettily in the sun, though if actual battle threatened she would sooner be clad in steel. Even a young girl who knew nothing of the ways of war knew that.

The slippers the Butcher King had sent her had grown too uncomfortable. Dany kicked them off, and sat with one foot tucked beneath her and the other swinging back and forth. It was not a very regal pose, but she was tired of being regal. The crown had given her a headache, and her buttocks had gone to sleep. "Ser Barristan," she called, "I know what quality a king needs most."

"Courage, Your Grace?"

"No," she teased, "cheeks like iron. All I do is sit."

"Your Grace takes too much on herself. You should allow your councillors to shoulder more of your burdens."

"I have too many councillors. What I need is cushions." Dany turned to Reznak. "How many more?"

"Three and twenty, if it please Your Magnificence. With as many claims." The seneschal consulted some papers. "One calf and three goats. The rest will be sheep or lambs, no doubt."

"Three and twenty." Dany sighed. "My dragons have developed a prodigious taste for mutton since we began to pay the shepherds for their kills. Have these claims been proven?"

"Some men have brought burnt bones."

"Men make fires. Men cook mutton. Burnt bones prove nothing. Brown Ben says there are red wolves in the hills outside the city, and jackals and wild dogs. Must we pay good silver for every lamb that goes astray between Yunkai and the Skahazadhan?"

"No, Magificence." Reznak bowed. "Shall I send these rascals away, or will you want them scourged?"

Daenerys shifted on the bench. The ebony felt hard beneath her. "No man should ever fear to come to me. Pay them." Some claims were false, she did not doubt, but more were genuine. Her dragons had grown too large to be content with rats and cats and dogs, as before. *The more they eat the larger they will grow*, Ser Barristan had warned her, *and the larger they grow, the more they'll eat*. Drogon especially ranged far afield and could easily devour a sheep a day. "Pay them for the value of their animals," she told Reznak, "but henceforth claimants must present themselves at the Temple of the Graces, and swear a holy oath before the gods of Ghis."

"It shall be done." Reznak turned to the petitioners. "Her Magnificence the Queen has consented to compensate each of you for the animals you have lost," he told them, in the Ghiscari tongue. "Present yourselves to my factors on the morrow, and you shall be paid in coin or kind, as you prefer."

The pronouncement was received in sullen silence. *You would think they might be happier*, Dany thought, annoyed. *They have what they came for. Is there no way to please these people?*

One man lingered behind as the rest were filing out; a squat man with a windburnt face, shabbily dressed. His hair was a cap of coarse red-black wire cropped about his ears, and in one hand he held a sad cloth sack. He stood with his head down, gazing at the marble floor as if he had quite forgotten where he was. *And what does this one want?* Dany wondered, frowning.

"*All kneel for Daenerys Stormborn, the Unburnt, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Khaleesi of Great Grass Sea, Breaker of Shackles and Mother of Dragons,*" cried Missandei in her high, sweet voice.

As Dany stood, her *tokar* began to slip. She caught it and tugged it back in place. "You with the sack," she called, "did you wish to speak with us? You may approach."

When he raised his head, his eyes were red and raw as open sores. Dany glimpsed Ser Barristan sliding closer, a white shadow at her side. The man approached in a stumbling shuffle, one step and then another, clutching his sack. *Is he drunk, or ill?* she wondered. There was dirt beneath his cracked yellow fingernails.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Do you have some grievance to lay before us, some petition? What would you have of us?"

His tongue flicked nervously over chapped, cracked lips. "I... I brought... "

"Bones?" she said, impatiently. "Burnt bones?"

He lifted the sack, and spilled its contents on the marble.

Bones they were, broken bones and blackened. The longer ones had been cracked open for their marrow.

"It were the black one," the man said, in a Ghiscari growl, "the winged shadow. He come down from the sky and... and... "

No . Dany shivered. *No, no, oh no.*

"Are you deaf, fool?" Reznak mo Reznak demanded of the man. "Did you not hear my pronouncement? See my factors on the morrow, and you shall be paid for your sheep."

"Reznak," Ser Barristan said quietly, "hold your tongue and open your eyes. Those are no sheep bones."

No , Dany thought, *those are the bones of a child.*

REEK

The rat squealed as he bit into it, squirming wildly in his hands. The belly was the softest part. He tore at the sweet meat, the warm blood running over his lips. It was so good that it brought tears to his eyes. His belly rumbled and he swallowed. By the third bite the rat had ceased to struggle, and he was feeling almost content.

Then he heard the sounds of voices outside the dungeon door.

At once he stilled, fearing even to chew. His mouth was full of blood and flesh and hair, but he dared not spit or swallow. He listened in terror to the scuff of boots and the clanking of iron keys. No, he thought, please gods, not now. It had taken him so long to catch the rat. If they catch me with it they will take it away, and then Lord Ramsay will hurt me.

He knew he ought to hide the rat, but he was so hungry. It had been two days since he had eaten, or maybe three. Down here in the dark it was hard to tell. Though his arms and legs were thin as reeds, his belly was swollen and hollow, and ached so much that he found himself remembering Lady Hornwood. After their wedding, Lord Ramsay had locked her away in a tower and starved her to death. In the end she had eaten her own fingers.

He crouched down in a corner of his cell, clutching his prize. Blood ran from the corners of his mouth as he tore at the rat with his teeth, trying to bolt down as much of the warm flesh as he could. The meat was stringy, but so rich he thought he might be sick. He chewed and swallowed, feeling the small bones crunch between his teeth.

The sounds were growing louder. Please gods, he isn't coming for me. There were other cells, other prisoners. Sometimes he heard them screaming, even through the thick stone walls. The women always scream the loudest. He sucked at the raw meat and tried to spit out the leg bone, but it only dribbled over his lower lip and tangled in his beard. Go away, he prayed, go away, pass me by, please, please.

But the footsteps stopped just when they were loudest, and the keys clattered right outside the door. The rat fell from his fingers. His heels scabbled at the straw as he tried to push himself into the corner.

The sound of the lock turning was the most terrible of all. When the light hit him full in the face, he let out a shriek.

"That's not him," said a boy's voice. "Look at him. We've got the wrong cell."

"Last cell on the left," another boy replied. "This is the last cell on the left, isn't it?"

“Aye.” A pause. “What’s he saying?”

“I don’t think he likes the light.”

“Would you, if you looked like that?” The boy hawked and spat. “And the stench of him. I’m like to choke.”

“He’s been eating rats,” said the second boy. “Look.”

The first boy laughed. “He has. That’s funny.”

I had to, he thought. The rats bit him when he slept, gnawing at his fingers and his toes, even at his face, so when he got his hands on one he did not hesitate. Eat or be eaten, those were the only choices. “I did it,” he mumbled, “I did, I did, I ate him, they do the same to me, please...”

The boys moved closer, the straw crunching softly under their feet. “Talk to me,” said one of them. He was the smaller of the two, a thin boy, but clever. “Tell me your name.”

My name. A scream caught in his throat. They had taught him his name, they had, but it had been so long that he’d forgotten. If I say it was wrong he’ll take another finger, or worse, he’ll... “Please,” he squeaked, his voice thin and weak. He sounded a hundred years old. Perhaps he was. How long have I been in here?

“Reek,” said the larger of the boys. “Your name is Reek. Remember?” He was the one with the torch. The smaller boy had the ring of iron keys.

Reek? Tears ran down his cheeks. “I remember. I do.” His mouth opened and closed. “My name is Reek. It rhymes with bleak.” In the dark he did not need a name, so it was easy to forget. Reek, Reek, my name is Reek. He had not been born with that name. In another life he had been someone else, but here and now, his name was Reek. He remembered.

He remembered the boys as well. They were clad in matching lambswool doublets, silver-grey with dark blue trim. Both were squires, both were eight, and both were Walder Frey. Big Walder and Little Walder, yes. Only the big one was Little, and the little one was Big, which amused the boys and confused the rest of the world. “I know you,” he whispered, through cracked lips. “I know your names.”

“You’re to come with us,” said Little Walder.

“His lordship has need of you,” said Big Walder.

Fear went through him like a knife. They are only children, he thought. Two boys of eight. He could overcome two boys of eight, surely. Even as weak as he was, he could take the torch, take the keys, take the dagger sheathed on Little Walder’s hip,

escape. No, it is too easy. It is a trap. If I run, he will take another finger from me, he will take more of my teeth.

Serve and obey and remember who you are, and no more harm will come to you. He promised, his lordship promised. Even if he had wanted to resist, he did not have the strength. It had been scourged from him, starved from him, flayed from him. When Big Walder pulled him up and Little Walder waved the torch at him to herd him from the cell, he went along as docile as a dog. If he had a tail, he would have tucked it down between his legs.

Out in the yard, night was settling over the Dreadfort and a full moon was rising over the castle's eastern walls. Its pale light cast the shadows of the tall triangular merlons across the frozen ground, a line of sharp black teeth. The air was cold and damp and full of half-forgotten smells. The world, Reek told himself, this is what the world smells like. He did not know how long he had been down there in the dungeons, but it had to have been half a year at least. What if it had been five years, or ten, or twenty? Would I even know? What if I went mad down there, and half my life is gone? But no, that was folly. The boys were still boys. If it had been ten years, they would have grown into men. He had to remember that. I must not let him drive me mad. He can take my fingers and my toes, he can put out my eyes and slice my ears off, but he cannot take my wits unless I let him.

Little Walder led the way with torch in hand. Reek followed meekly, with Big Walder just behind him. The dogs in the kennels barked as they went by. Wind swirled through the yard, cutting through the thin cloth of the filthy rags he wore and raising gooseprickles on his skin. The night air was cold and damp, but he saw no sign of snow, though surely winter was close at hand. Reek wondered if he would be alive to see the snows come. How many fingers will I have? How many toes? When he raised a hand, he was shocked to see how white it was, how fleshless. I have an old man's hands. Could he have been wrong about the boys? What if they were not Little Walder and Big Walder after all, but the sons of the boys he'd known?

The great hall was dim and smoky. Rows of torches burned to the left and right, grasped by skeletal human hands jutting from the walls. High overhead were wooden rafters black from smoke, and a vaulted ceiling lost in shadow. The air was heavy with the smells of wine and ale and roasted meat. Reek's stomach rumbled noisily at the scents, and his mouth began to water.

Little Walder pushed him stumbling past the long tables where the men of the garrison were eating. He could feel their eyes upon him. The best places, up near the dais, were occupied by Ramsay's favorites. But there were strangers too, faces he did not know. Some wrinkled their noses as he passed, whilst others laughed at the sight of him.

At the high table the Bastard of Bolton sat in his lord father's seat, drinking from his father's cup. Two old men shared the high table with him, and Reek knew at a glance that both were lords. One was gaunt, with flinty eyes, a long white beard, and a face as hard as a winter frost. His jerkin was a ragged bearskin, worn and greasy. Underneath he wore a ringmail byrnie, even here at table. The second lord was thin as well, but twisted where the first was straight. One of his shoulders was much higher than the other, and he stooped over his trencher like a vulture over carrion. His eyes were grey and greedy, his teeth yellow, his forked beard a tangle of snow and silver. Only a few wisps of white hair still clung to his spotted skull, but the cloak he wore was soft and fine, grey wool trimmed with clack sable and fastened at the shoulder with a starburst wrought in beaten silver.

Ramsay was clad in black and pink; black boots, black belt and scabbard, black leather jerkin over a pink velvet doublet slashed with dark red satin. In his right ear gleamed a garnet cut in the shape of a drop of blood. Yet for all the splendor of his garb, he remained an ugly man, big-boned and slope-shouldered, with a fleshiness to him that suggested that in later life he would run to fat. His skin was pink and blotchy, his nose broad, his mouth small, his hair long and dark and dry. His lips were wide and meaty, but the thing men noticed first about him were his eyes. He had his lord father's eyes; small, close-set, queerly pale. Ghost grey, some men called the shade, but in truth his eyes were all but colorless, like two chips of dirty ice.

At the sight of Reek, he smiled. "There he is. My sour old friend." To the men beside him he said, "Reek has been with me since I was a boy. My lord father gave him to me, as a token of his love."

The two lords exchanged a look. "I had heard your serving man was dead," said the one with the stooped shoulder. "Slain by the Starks, they said."

Lord Ramsay chuckled. "The ironmen will tell you that what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger. Like Reek. He smells of the grave, though, I grant you that."

"He smells of nightsoil and stale vomit." The stoop-shouldered old lord tossed aside the bone that he'd been gnawing on and wiped his fingers on the tablecloth. "Is there some reason you must needs inflict him upon us whilst we're eating?"

The straight-backed old man in the mail byrnie studied Reek with flinty eyes. "Look again," he urged the other lord. "His hair's gone white and he is three stone thinner, but this is no serving man. Have you forgotten?"

The crookback lord looked again and gave a sudden snort. "Him? Can it be? Stark's ward. Smiling, always smiling."

“He smiles less often now,” Lord Ramsay confessed. “I may have broken some of his pretty white teeth.”

“You would have done better to slit his throat,” said the lord in mail. “A dog who turns against his master is fit for naught but skinning.”

“Oh, he’s been skinned, here and there,” said Ramsay.

“Yes, my lord. I was bad, my lord. Insolent and...” He licked his lip, trying to think of what else he had done. Serve and obey, he told himself, and he’ll let you live, and keep the parts that you still have. Serve and obey and remember your name. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with meek.

“There’s blood on your mouth,” Ramsay observed. “Have you been chewing on your fingers again, Reek?”

“No. No, my lord, I swear.” Reek had tried to bite his own ring finger off once, to stop it hurting after they had stripped the skin from it. Lord Ramsay would never simply cut off a man’s finger. He preferred to flay it, and let the exposed flesh dry and crack and fester. Reek had been whipped and racked and cut, but there was no pain half so excruciating as the pain that followed flaying. It was the sort of pain that drove men mad, and it could not be endured for long. Sooner or later the victim would scream, “Please, no more, stop it hurting, cut it off,” and Lord Ramsay would oblige. It was a game they played. Reek had learned the rules well, but the one time he had forgotten and tried to end the pain himself with his teeth, Ramsay had not been pleased, and the offense had cost Reek another toe. “I ate a rat,” he mumbled.

“A rat?” Ramsay’s pale eyes glittered in the torchlight. “All the rats in the Dreadfort belong to my lord father. How dare you make a meal of one without my leave?”

Reek did not know what to say, so he said nothing. One wrong word could cost him another toe, even a finger. Thus far he had lost two fingers off his left hand and the pinky off his right, but only the little toe off his right foot against three from his left. Sometimes Ramsay would make japes about balancing him out. He does not want to hurt me, he told me so, he only does it when I give him cause. His lord was merciful and kind. He might have flayed his face off for some of the things Reek had said, before he learned his true name and proper place.

Lord Ramsay filled his cup with ale. “Reek, I have glad tidings for you. I am to be wed. My lord father is bringing me a Stark girl. Lord Eddard’s daughter, Arya. You remember little Arya, don’t you?”

Arya Underfoot, he almost said. Arya Horseface. Robb’s younger sister, brown-haired, long-faced, skinny as a stick, always dirty. Sansa was the pretty one. He remembered a time when he had thought that Lord Eddard Stark might marry him to

Sansa and claim him for a son, but that had only been a child's fancy. Arya, though...
"I remember her. Arya."

"She shall be the Lady of Winterfell, and me her lord."

She is only a girl. "Yes, my lord. Congratulations."

"Will you attend me at my wedding, Reek?"

He hesitated. "If you wish it, my lord."

"Oh, I do."

He hesitated again, wondering if this was some cruel trap. "Yes, my lord. If it please you. I would be honored."

"We must take you out of that vile dungeon, then. Scrub you pink again, get you some clean clothes, some food to eat. I have a little task for you, and you'll need your strength back if you are to serve me. You do want to serve me, I know."

"Yes, my lord. More than anything." A shiver went through him. "I'm your Reek. Please let me serve you. Please."

"Since you ask so nicely, how can I deny you?" Ramsay Bolton smiled. "I ride to war, Reek. And you will be coming with me, to help me fetch home my virgin bride."

TYRION

He drank his way across the narrow sea.

The ship was small and his cabin smaller, and the captain would not allow him abovedecks. The rocking of the deck beneath his feet made his stomach heave, and the wretched food they served him tasted even worse when retched back up. Besides, why did he need salt beef, hard cheese, and bread crawling with worms when he had wine to nourish him? It was red and sour, very strong. He sometimes heaved the wine up too, but there was always more. "The world is full of wine," he muttered in the dankness of his cabin. His father had never had any use for drunkards, but what did that matter? His father was dead. He ought to know; he'd killed him. A bolt in the belly, my lord, and all for you. If only I was better with a crossbow, I would have put it through that cock you made me with, you bloody bastard.

Below decks there was neither night nor day. Tyrion marked time by the comings and goings of the cabin boy who brought the meals he did not eat. The boy always brought a brush and bucket too, to clean up. "Is this Dornish wine?" Tyrion asked him once, as he pulled a stopper from a skin. "It reminds me of a certain snake I knew. A droll fellow, till a mountain fell on him."

The cabin boy did not answer. He was an ugly boy, though admittedly more comely than a certain dwarf with half a nose and a scar from eye to chin. "Have I offended you?" Tyrion asked the sullen, silent boy, as he was scrubbing. "Were you commanded not to talk to me? Or did some dwarf diddle your mother?"

That went unanswered too. This is pointless, he knew, but he must speak to someone or go mad, so he persisted. "Where are we sailing? Tell me that." Jaime had made mention of the Free Cities, but had never said which one. "Is it Braavos? Tyrosh? Myr?" Tyrion would sooner have gone to Dorne. Myrcella is older than Tommen, by Dornish law the Iron Throne is hers. I will help her claim her rights, as Prince Oberyn suggested.

Oberyn was dead, though, his head smashed to bloody ruin by the armored fist of Ser Gregor Clegane. And without the Red Viper to urge him on, would Doran Martell even consider such a chancy scheme? He may clap me in chains instead, and hand me back to my sweet sister. The Wall might be safer. Old Bear Mormont said the Night's Watch had need of men like Tyrion. Mormont may be dead, though. By now Slynt may be the Lord Commander. That butcher's son was not like to have forgotten who sent him to the Wall. Do I really want to spend the rest of my life eating salt beef and porridge with murderers and thieves? Not that the rest of his life would last very long. Janos Slynt would see to that.

The cabin boy wet his brush and scrubbed on manfully. "Have you ever visited the pleasure houses of Lys?" the dwarf inquired. "Might that be where whores go?" Tyrion could not seem to recall the Valyrian word for whore, and in any case it was too late. The boy tossed his brush back in his bucket and took his leave.

The wine has blurred my wits. He had learned to read High Valyrian at his maester's knee, though what they spoke in the Nine Free Cities... well, it was not so much a dialect as nine dialects on the way to becoming separate tongues. Tyrion had some Braavosi and a smattering of Myrish. In Tyrosh he should be able to curse the gods, call a man a cheat, and order up an ale, thanks to a sellsword he had once known at the Rock. At least in Dorne they speak the Common Tongue. Like Dornish food and Dornish law, Dornish speech was spiced with the flavors of the Rhoynish, but a man could comprehend it. Dorne, yes, Dorne for me. He crawled into his bunk, clutching that thought like a child with a doll.

Sleep had never come easily to Tyrion Lannister. Aboard that ship it seldom came at all, though from time to time he managed to drink sufficient wine to pass out for a while. At least he did not dream. He had dreamt enough for one small life. And of such follies: love, justice, friendship, glory. As well dream of being tall. It was all beyond his reach, Tyrion knew now. But he did not know where whores go.

"Wherever whores go," his father had said. His last words, and what words they were. The crossbow thrummed, Lord Tywin sat back down, and Tyrion Lannister found himself waddling through the darkness with Varys at his side. He must have clambered back down the shaft, two hundred and thirty rungs to where orange embers glowed in the mouth of an iron dragon. He remembered none of it. Only the sound the crossbow made, and the stink of his father's bowels opening. Even in his dying, he found a way to shit on me.

Varys had escorted him through the tunnels, but they never spoke until they emerged beside the Blackwater, where Tyrion had won a famous victory and lost a nose. That was when the dwarf turned to the eunuch and said, "I've killed my father," in the same tone a man might use to say, "I've stubbed my toe." The master of whisperers had been dressed as a begging brother, in a moth-eaten robe of brown roughspun with a cowl that shadowed his smooth fat cheeks and bald round head. "You should not have climbed that ladder," he said reproachfully.

"Wherever whores go." Tyrion warned his father not to say that word. If I had not loosed, he would have seen my threats were empty. He would have taken the crossbow from my hands, as once he took Tysha from my arms. He was rising when I killed him. "I killed Shae too," he confessed to Varys.

"You knew what she was."

"I did. But I never knew what he was."

Varys tittered. "And now you do."

I should have killed the eunuch as well. A little more blood on his hands, what would it matter? He could not say what had stayed his dagger. Not gratitude. Varys had saved him from a headsman's sword, but only because Jaime had compelled him. Jaime... no, better not to think of Jaime.

He found a fresh skin of wine instead, and sucked at it as if it were a woman's breast. The sour red ran down his chin and soaked through his soiled tunic, the same one he had been wearing in his cell. He sucked until the wine was gone. The deck was swaying beneath his feet, and when he tried to rise it lifted sideways and smashed him hard against a bulkhead. A storm, he realized, or else I am even drunker than I knew. He retched the wine up and lay in it a while, wondering if the ship would sink.

Is this your vengeance, Father? Have the Father Above made you his Hand? "Such are the wages of the kinslayer," he said as the wind howled outside. It did not seem fair to drown the cabin boy and the captain and all the rest for something he had done, but when had the gods ever been fair? And around about then, the darkness gulped him down

When he stirred again, his head felt like to burst and the ship was spinning round in dizzy circles, though the captain was insisting that they'd come to port. Tyrion told him to be quiet, and kicked feebly as a huge bald sailor tucked him under one arm and carried him squirming to the hold, where an empty wine cask awaited him. It was a squat little cask, and a tight fit even for a dwarf. Tyrion pissed himself in his struggles, for all the good it did. He was up crammed face first into the cask with his knees pushed up against his ears. The stub of his nose itched horribly, but his arms were pinned so tightly that he could not reach to scratch it. A palanquin fit for a man of my stature, he thought as they hammered shut the lid and hoisted him up. He could hear voices shouting as he was jounced along. Every bounce cracked his head against the bottom of the cask. The world went round and round as the cask rolled downward, then stopped with a sudden crash that made him want to scream. Another cask slammed into his, and Tyrion bit his tongue.

That was the longest journey he had ever taken, though it could not have lasted more than half an hour. He was lifted and lowered, rolled and stacked, upended and righted and rolled again. Through the wooden staves he heard men shouting, and once a horse whickered nearby. His stunted legs began to cramp, and soon hurt so badly that he forgot the hammering in his head.

It ended as it had begun, with another roll that left him dizzy and more jouncing. Outside strange voices were speaking in a tongue he did not know. Someone started pounding on the top of the cask and the lid cracked open suddenly. Light came flooding in, and cool air as well. Tyrion gasped greedily and tried to stand, but only

managed to knock the cask over sideways and spill himself out onto a hard-packed earthen floor.

Above him loomed a grotesque fat man with a forked yellow beard, holding a wooden mallet and an iron chisel. His bedrobe was large enough to serve as a tourney pavilion, but its loosely knotted belt had come undone, exposing a huge white belly and a pair of heavy breasts that sagged like sacks of suet covered with coarse yellow hair. He reminded Tyrion of a dead sea cow that had once washed up in the caverns under Casterly Rock.

The fat man looked down and smiled. "A drunken dwarf," he said, in the Common Tongue of Westeros.

"A rotting sea cow." Tyrion's mouth was full of blood. He spat it at the fat man's feet. They were in a long dim cellar with barrel-vaulted ceilings, its stone walls spotted with nitre. Casks of wine and ale surrounded them, more than enough drink to see a thirsty dwarf safely through the night. Or through a life.

"You are insolent. I like that in a dwarf." When the fat man laughed, his flesh bounced so vigorously that Tyrion was afraid he might fall and crush him. "Are you hungry, my little friend? Weary?"

"Thirsty." Tyrion struggled to his knees. "And filthy."

The fat man sniffed. "A bath first, just so. Then food and a soft bed, yes? My servants shall see to it." His host put the mallet and chisel aside. "My house is yours. Any friend of my friend across the water is a friend to Illyrio Mopatis, yes."

And any friend of Varys the Spider is someone I will trust just as far as I can throw him.

The fat man made good on the promised bath, at least... though no sooner did Tyrion lower himself into the hot water and close his eyes than he was fast asleep.

He woke naked on a goosedown featherbed so deep and soft it felt as if he were being swallowed by a cloud. His tongue was growing hair and his throat was raw, but his cock felt as hard as an iron bar. He rolled from the bed, found a chamberpot, and commenced to filling it, with a groan of pleasure.

The room was dim, but there were bars of yellow sunlight showing between the slats of the shutters. Tyrion shook the last drops off and waddled over patterned Myrish carpets as soft as new spring grass. Awkwardly he climbed the window seat and flung shutters open to see where Varys and the gods had sent him.

Beneath his window six cherry trees stood sentinel around a marble pool, their slender branches bare and brown. A naked boy stood on the water, poised to duel with a bravo's blade in hand. He was lithe and handsome, no older than sixteen, with

straight blond hair that brushed his shoulders. So lifelike did he seem that it took the dwarf a long moment to realize he was made of painted marble, though his sword shimmered like true steel.

Across the pool stood stood a brick wall twelve feet high, with iron spikes along its top. Beyond that was the city. A sea of tiled rooftops crowded close around a bay. He saw square brick towers, a great red temple, a distant manse upon a hill. In the far distance sunlight shimmered off deep water. Fishing boats were moving across the bay, their sails rippling in the wind, and he could see the masts of larger ships poking up along the bay shore. Surely one is bound for Dorne, or for Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. He had no means to pay for passage, though, nor was he made to pull an oar. I suppose I could sign on as a cabin boy and earn my way by letting the crew bugger me up and down the narrow sea. He wondered where he was. Even the air smells different here. Strange spices scented the chilly autumn wind, and he could hear faint cries drifting over the wall from the streets beyond. It sounded something like Valyrian, but he did not recognize more than one word in five. Not Braavos, he concluded, nor Tyrosh. Those bare branches and the chill in the air argued against Lys and Myr and Volantis as well.

When he heard the door opening behind him, Tyrion turned to confront his fat host. "This is Pentos, yes?"

"Just so. Where else?"

Pentos. Well, it was not King's Landing, that much could be said for it. "Where do whores go?" he heard himself ask.

"Whores are found in brothels here, as in Westeros. You will have no need of such, my little friend. Choose from among my serving women. None will dare refuse you."

"Slaves?" the dwarf asked pointedly.

The fat man stroked one of the prongs of his oiled yellow beard, a gesture Tyrion fond remarkably obscene. "Slavery is forbidden in Pentos, by the terms of the treaty the Braavosi imposed on us a hundred years ago. Still, they will not refuse you." Illyrio gave a ponderous half-bow. "But now my little friend must excuse me. I have the honor to be a magister of this great city, and the prince has summoned us to session." He smiled, showing a mouth full of crooked yellow teeth. "Explore the manse and grounds as you like, but on no account stray beyond the walls. It is best that no man knows that you were here."

"Were? Have I gone somewhere?"

"Time enough to speak of that this evening. My little friend and I shall eat and drink and make great plans, yes?"

"Yes, my fat friend," Tyrion replied. He thinks to use me for his profit. It was all profit with the merchant princes of the Free Cities. "Spice soldiers and cheese lords," his lord father called them, with contempt. Should a day ever dawn when Illyrio Mopatis saw more profit in a dead dwarf than a live one, he would find himself packed into another wine cask by dusk. It would be well if I were gone before that day arrives. That it would arrive he did not doubt; Cersei was not like to forget him, and even Jaime might be vexed to find a quarrel in Father's belly.

A light wind was riffling the waters of the pool below, all around the naked swordsman. It reminded him of how Tysha would ruffle his hair during the false spring of their marriage, before he helped his father's guardsmen rape her. He had been thinking of those guardsmen during his flight, trying to recall how many there had been. You would think he might remember that, but no. A dozen? A score? A hundred? He could not say. They had all been grown men, tall and strong... though all men were tall to a dwarf of thirteen years. Tysha knew their number. Each of them had given her a silver stag, so she would only need to count the coins. A silver for each and a gold for me. His father had insisted that he pay her too. A Lannister always pays his debts.

"Wherever whores go," he heard Lord Tywin say once more, and once more the bowstring thrummed.

The magister had invited him to explore the manse. He found clean clothes in a cedar chest inlaid with lapis and mother-of-pearl. The clothes had been made for a small boy, he realized as he struggled into them. The fabrics were rich enough, if a little musty, but the cut was too long in the legs and too short in the arms, with a collar that would have turned his face as black as Joffrey's had he somehow contrived to get it fastened. At least they do not stink of vomit.

Tyrion began his explorations with the kitchen, where two fat women and a pot boy watched him warily as he helped himself to cheese, bread, and figs. "Good morrow to you, fair ladies," he said with a bow. "Do you perchance know where the whores go?" When they did not respond, he repeated the question in High Valyrian, though he had to say courtesan in place of whore. The younger fatter cook gave him a shrug that time.

He wondered what they would do if he took them by the hand and dragged them to his bedchamber. None will dare refuse you, Illyrio claimed, but somehow Tyrion did not think he meant these two. The younger woman was old enough to be his mother, and the older was likely her mother. Both were near as fat as Illyrio, with teats that were larger than his head. I could smother myself in flesh, he reflected. There were worse ways to die. The way his lord father had died, for one. I should have made him shit a little gold before expiring. Lord Tywin might have been niggardly with his approval and affection, but he had always been open-handed when it came to coin. The only thing more pitiful than a dwarf without a nose is a dwarf without a nose who

has no gold.

Tyrion left the fat women to their loaves and kettles and went in search of the cellar where Illyrio had decanted him the night before. It was not hard to find. There was enough wine there to keep him drunk for a hundred years; sweet reds from the Reach and sour reds from Dorne, pale Pentoshi ambers, the green nectar of Myr, three score casks of Arbor gold, even wines from the fabled east, from Meereen and Qarth and Asshai by the Shadow. In the end, Tyrion chose a cask of strongwine marked as the private stock of Lord Runcetford Redwyne, the grandfather of the present Lord of the Arbor. The taste of it was languorous and heady on the tongue, the color a purple so dark that it looked almost black in the dim-lit cellar. Tyrion filled a cup, and a flagon for good measure, and carried them up to gardens to drink beneath those cherry trees he'd seen.

As it happened, he left by the wrong door and never found the pool he had spied from his window, but it made no matter. The gardens behind the manse were just as pleasant, and far more extensive. He wandered through them for a time, drinking. The walls would have shamed any proper castle, and the ornamental iron spikes along the top looked strangely naked without heads to adorn them. Tyrion pictured how his sister's head might look up there, with tar in her golden hair and flies buzzing in and out of her mouth. Yes, and Jaime must have the spike beside her, he decided. No one must ever come between my brother and my sister.

With a rope and a grapnel he might be able to get over that wall. He strong arms and he did not weigh much. With a rope he should be able to reach the spikes and clamber over. I will search for a rope on the morrow, he resolved.

He saw three gates during his wanderings; the main entrance with its gatehouse, a postern by the kennels, and a garden gate hidden behind a tangle of pale ivy. The last was chained, the others guarded. The guards were plump, their faces as smooth as a baby's bottom, and every man of them wore a spiked bronze cap. Tyrion knew eunuchs when he saw them. He knew their sort by reputation. They feared nothing and felt no pain, it was said, and were loyal to their masters unto death. I could make good use of a few hundred of mine own, he reflected. A pity I did not think of that before I became a beggar.

He walked along a pillared gallery and through a pointed arch, and found himself in a tiled courtyard where a woman was washing clothes at a well. She looked to be his own age, with dull red hair and a broad face dotted by freckles. "Would you like some wine?" he asked her. She looked at him uncertainly. "I have no cup for you, we'll have to share." The washerwoman went back to wringing out tunics and hanging them to dry. Tyrion settled on a stone bench with his flagon. "Tell me, how far should I trust Magister Illyrio?" The name made her look up. "That far?" Chuckling, he crossed his stunted legs and took a drink. "I am loathe to play whatever part the

cheesemonger has in mind for me, yet how can I refuse him? The gates are guarded. Perhaps you might smuggle me out under your skirts? I'd be so grateful, why, I'll even wed you. I have two wives already, why not three? Ah, but where would we live?" He gave her as pleasant a smile as a man with half a nose could manage. "I have a niece in Sunspear, did I tell you? I could make rather a lot of mischief in Dorne with Myrcella. I could set my niece and nephew at war, wouldn't that be droll?" The washerwoman pinned up one of Illyrio's tunics, large enough to double as a sail. "I should be ashamed to think such evil thoughts, you're quite right. Better if I sought the Wall instead. All crimes are wiped clean when a man joins the Night's Watch, they say. Though I fear they would not let me keep you, sweetling. No women in the Watch, no sweet freckly wives to warm your bed at night, only cold winds, salted cod, and small beer. Do you think I might stand taller in black, my lady?" He filled his cup again. "What do you say? North or south? Shall I atone for old sins or make some new ones?"

The washerwoman gave him one last glance, picked up her basket, and walked away. I cannot seem to hold a wife for very long, Tyrion reflected. Somehow his flagon had gone dry. Perhaps I should stumble back down to the cellars. The strongwine was making his head spin, though, and the cellar steps were very steep. "Where do whores go?" he asked the wash flapping on the line. Perhaps he should have asked the washerwoman. Not to imply that you're a whore, my dear, but perhaps you know where they go. Or better yet, he should have asked his father. "Wherever whores go," Lord Tywin said. She loved me. She was a crofter's daughter, she loved me and she wed me, she put her trust in me. The empty flagon slipped from his hand and rolled across the yard.

Grimacing, Tyrion pushed himself off the bench and went to fetch it, but as he did he saw some mushrooms growing up from a cracked paving tile. Pale white they were, with speckles, and red ribbed undersides as dark as blood. The dwarf snapped one off and sniffed it. Delicious, he thought, or deadly. But which? Why not both? He was not a brave enough man to take cold steel to his own belly, but a bite of mushroom would not be so hard. There were seven of the mushrooms, he saw. Perhaps the gods were trying to tell him something. He picked them all, snatched a glove down from the line, wrapped them carefully, and stuffed them down his pocket. The effort made him dizzy, though, so afterward he crawled back onto the bench, curled up, and shut his eyes.

When he woke again, he was back in his bedchamber, drowning in the goosedown featherbed once more while a blond girl shook his shoulder. "My lord," she said, "your bath awaits. Magister Illyrio expects you at table within the hour."

Tyrion propped himself against the pillows, his head in his hands. "Do I dream, or do you speak the Common Tongue?"

"Yes, my lord. I was bought to please the king." She was blue-eyed and fair, young and willowy.

"I am sure you did. I need a cup of wine."

She poured for him. "Magister Illyrio said that I am to scrub your back and warm your bed. My name — "

" — is of no interest to me. Do you know where whores go?"

She flushed. "Whores sell themselves for coin."

"Or jewels, or gowns, or castles. But where do they go?"

The girl could not grasp the question. "Is it a riddle, m'lord? I'm no good at riddles. Will you tell me the answer?"

No, he thought. I despise riddles, myself. "I will tell you nothing. Do me the same favor." The only part of you that interests me is the part between your legs, he almost said. The words were on his tongue, but somehow never passed his lips. She is not Shae, the dwarf told himself, only some little fool who thinks I play at riddles. If truth be told, even her cunt did not interest him much. I must be sick, or dead. "You mentioned a bath? Show me. We must not keep the great cheesemonger waiting."

As he bathed, the girl washed his feet, scrubbed his back, and brushed his hair. Afterward she rubbed sweet-smelling ointment into his calves to ease the aches, and dressed him once again in boy's clothing, a musty pair of burgundy breeches and a blue velvet doublet lined with cloth-of-gold. "Will my lord want me after he has eaten?" she asked as she was lacing up his boots.

"No. I am done with women." Whores.

The girl took that disappointment entirely too well for his liking. "If m'lord would prefer a boy, I can have one waiting in his bed."

M'lord would prefer his wife. M'lord would prefer a girl named Tysha. "Only if he knows where whores go."

The girl's mouth tightened. She despises me, he realized, but no more than I despise myself. That he had fucked many a woman who loathed the very sight of him, Tyrion Lannister had no doubt, but the others had at least the grace to feign affection. A little honest loathing might be refreshing, like a tart wine after too much sweet.

"I believe I have changed my mind," he told her. "Wait for me abed. Naked, if you please, I expect I'll be a deal too drunk to fumble at your clothing. Keep your mouth shut and your thighs open and the two of us should get on splendidly." He gave her a leer, hoping for a taste of fear, but all she gave him was revulsion. No one fears a

dwarf. Even Lord Tywin had not been afraid, though Tyrion had held a crossbow in his hands. "Do you moan when you are being fucked?" he asked the bedwarmer.

"If it please m'lord."

"It might please m'lord to strangle you. That's how I served my last whore. Do you think your master would object? Surely not. He has a hundred more like you, but no one else like me." This time, when he grinned, he got the fear he wanted.

Illyrio was reclining on a padded couch, gobbling hot peppers and pearl onions from a wooden bowl. His brow was dotted with beads of sweat, his pig's eyes shining above his fat cheeks. Jewels danced when he moved his hands; onyx and opal, tiger's eye and tourmaline, ruby, amethyst, sapphire, emerald, jet and jade, a black diamond and a green pearl. I could live for years on his rings, Tyrion mused, though I'd need a cleaver to claim them.

"Come and sit, my little friend." Illyrio waved him closer.

The dwarf clambered up onto a chair. It was much too big for him, a cushioned throne intended to accommodate the magister's massive buttocks, with thick sturdy legs to bear his weight. Tyrion Lannister had lived all his life in a world that was too big for him, but in the manse of Illyrio Mopatis the sense of disproportion assumed grotesque dimensions. I am a mouse in a mammoth's lair, he mused, though at least the mammoth keeps a good cellar. The thought made him thirsty. He called for wine.

"Did you enjoy the girl I sent you?" Illyrio asked.

"If I had wanted a girl I would have asked for one. I lack a nose, not a tongue."

"If she failed to please... "

"She did all that was required of her."

"I would hope so. She was trained in Lys, where they make an art of love. And she speaks your Common Tongue. The king enjoyed her greatly."

"I kill kings, hadn't you heard?" Tyrion smiled evilly over his wine cup. "I want no royal leavings."

"As you wish. Let us eat." Illyrio clapped his hands together, and serving men came running.

They began with a broth of crab and monkfish, and cold egg lime soup as well. Then came quails in honey, a saddle of lamb, goose livers drowned in wine, buttered parsnips, and suckling pig. The sight of it all made Tyrion feel queasy, but he forced himself to try a spoon of soup for the sake of politeness, and once he had tasted he was lost. The cooks might be old and fat, but they knew their business. He had never eaten so well, even at court.

As he was sucking the meat off the bones of his quail, he asked Illyrio about the morning's summons. The fat man shrugged. "There are troubles in the east. Astapor has fallen, and Meereen. Ghiscari slave cities that were old when the world was young." The suckling pig was carved. Illyrio reached for a piece of the crackling, dipped it in a plum sauce, and ate it with his fingers.

"Slaver's Bay is a long way from Pentos," said Tyrion, as he speared a goose liver on the point of his knife. No man is as cursed as the kinslayer, he reminded himself, smiling.

"This is so," Illyrio agreed, "but the world is one great web, and a man dare not touch a single strand lest all the others tremble." He clapped his hands again. "Come, eat."

The serving men brought out a heron stuffed with figs, veal cutlets blanched with almond milk, creamed herring, candied onions, foul-smelling cheeses, plates of snails and sweetbreads, and a black swan in her plumage. Tyrion refused the swan, which reminded him of a supper with his sister. He helped himself to heron and herring, though, and a few of the sweet onions. And the serving men filled his wine cup anew each time he emptied it.

"You drink a deal of wine for such a little man."

"Kinslaying is dry work. It gives a man a thirst."

The fat man's eyes glittered like the gemstones on his fingers. "There are those in Westeros who would say that killing Lord Lannister was merely a good beginning."

"They had best not say it in my sister's hearing, or they will find themselves short a tongue." The dwarf tore a loaf of bread in half. "And you had best be careful what you say of my family, magister. Kinslayer or no, I am a lion still."

That seemed to amuse the lord of cheese no end. He slapped a meaty thigh and said, "You Westerosi are all the same. You sew some beast upon a scrap of silk, and suddenly you are all lions or dragons or eagles. I can bring you to a real lion, my little friend. The prince keeps a pride in his menagerie. Would you like to share a cage with them?"

The lords of the Seven Kingdoms did make rather much of their sigils, Tyrion had to admit. "Very well," he conceded. "A Lannister is not a lion. Yet I am still my father's son, and Jaime and Cersei are mine to kill."

"How odd that you should mention your fair sister," said Illyrio, between snails. "The queen has offered a lordship to the man who brings her your head, no matter how humble his birth."

It was no more than Tyrion had expected. "If you mean to take her up on it, make her spread her legs for you as well. The best part of me for the best part of her, that's a fair trade."

"I would sooner have mine own weight in gold." The cheesemonger laughed so hard that Tyrion feared he was about to rupture and drown his guest in a gout of half-digested eels and sweetmeats. "All the gold in Casterly Rock, why not?"

"The gold I grant you," he said, "but the Rock is mine."

"Just so." The magister covered his mouth and belched a mighty belch. "Do you think King Stannis will give it to you? I am told he is a great one for the law. He may well grant you Casterly Rock, is that not so? Your brother wears the white cloak, so you are your father's heir by all the laws of Westeros."

"Stannis might grant me the Rock," Tyrion admitted, "but there is also the small matter of regicide and kinslaying. For those he would shorten me by a head, and I am short enough as I stand. But why would you think I mean to join Lord Stannis?"

"Why else would you go the Wall?"

"Stannis is at the Wall?" Tyrion rubbed at his nose. "What in seven bloody hells is Stannis doing at the Wall?"

"Shivering, I would think. It is warmer down in Dorne. Perhaps he should have sailed that way."

Tyrion was beginning to suspect that a certain freckled washerwoman knew more of the Common Speech than she pretended. "My niece Myrcella is in Dorne, as it happens. And I have half a mind to make her a queen."

Illyrio smiled, as his serving men spooned out bowls of black cherries in sweetcream for them both. "What has this poor child done to you, that you would wish her dead?"

"Even a kinslayer is not required to slay all his kin," said Tyrion, wounded. "Queen her, I said. Not kill her."

The cheesemonger spooned up cherries. "In Volantis they use a coin with a crown on one face and a death's head on the other. Yet it is the same coin. To queen her is to kill her. Dorne might rise for Myrcella, but Dorne alone is not enough. If you are as clever as our friend insists, you know this."

Tyrion looked at the fat man with new interest. He is right on both counts. To queen her is to kill her. And I knew that. "Futile gestures are all that remain to me. This one would make my sister weep bitter tears, at least."

Magister Illyrio wiped sweetcream from his mouth with the back of a fat hand. "The road to Casterly Rock does not go through Dorne, my little friend. Nor does it run beside the Wall. Yet there is such a road, I tell you."

"I am an attainted traitor, a regicide and kinslayer." This talk of roads annoyed him. Does he think this is a game? "What one king does another may undo. In Pentos we have a prince, my friend. He presides at ball and feast and rides about the city in a palanquin of ivory and gold. Three heralds go before him with the golden scales of trade, the iron sword of war, and the silver scourge of justice. On the first day of each new year he must deflower the maid of the fields and the maid of the seas." Illyrio leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Yet should a crop fail or a war be lost, we cut his throat to appease the gods, and choose a new prince from amongst the forty families."

Tyrion snorted through the stump of his nose. "Remind me never to become the Prince of Pentos."

"Are your Seven Kingdoms so different? There is no peace in Westeros, no justice, no faith... and soon enough no food. When men are starving and sick of fear, they look for a savior."

"They may look, but if all they find is Stannis — "

"Not Stannis. Nor Myrcella. Another." The yellow smile widened. "Another. Stronger than Tommen, gentler than Stannis, with a better claim than the girl Myrcella. A savior come from across the sea to bind up the wounds of bleeding Westeros."

"Fine words." Tyrion was unimpressed. "Words are wind. Who is this bloody savior?"

"A dragon." The cheesemonger saw the look on his face at that, and laughed. "A dragon with three heads."

JON

A white wolf moved through a black wood, beneath a pale cliff as tall as the sky. The moon ran with him, slipping through a tangle of bare branches overhead, across the starry sky.

"Snow," the moon murmured.

The wolf made no answer. Snow crunched beneath his paws. The wind sighed through the trees. And far off, he could hear his packmates calling to him, like to like.

They were hunting too. A wild rain was lashing down upon his black brother as he tore at the flesh of an enormous goat, washing the blood from his side where the goat's long horn had raked him. In another place, his little sister lifted her head to sing to the moon, and a hundred small grey cousins broke off their hunt to sing with her. The hills were warmer where they were, and full of game. Many a night his sister's pack gorged on the flesh of sheep and cows and horses, the prey of men, and sometimes even on the flesh of man himself.

"Snow," the moon called down again, cackling.

The white wolf padded along the man trail beneath the icy cliff. The taste of blood and bone and sinew was on his tongue, and his ears rang to the song of the hundred cousins, but he had lost his other brother, grey-furred and smelling of the sun. Once they had been six, five whimpering blindly in the snow beside their dead mother, and him alone, the pale one, crawling off into the trees on shaky legs as his litter mates sucked cool milk from hard dead nipples. Now only four remained of the six born that day, and one of those was lost and gone.

"Snow," the moon insisted.

The white wolf ran from it, a white arrow flying past the ice, racing toward the cave of night where the sun had hidden, his breath frosting in the air. On starless nights the great cliff was as black as stone, a darkness towering high above the wide world, but when the moon came out it shimmered pale and icy as a frozen stream. The wolf's pelt was thick and shaggy, but when the wind blew along the ice no fur could keep the chill out. On the other side the wind was colder still, the wolf sensed. That was where his brother was, the grey brother who smelled of summer.

"Snow." An icicle tumbled from a branch. The white wolf turned toward the sound and bared his teeth.

"Snow!" The wolf's fur rose bristling, as the woods dissolved around him. "Snow, snow, snow!" The cries were accompanied by the beat of wings. Through the gloom a raven flew.

It landed on Jon Snow's chest with a thump and a scrabbling of claws. "SNOW!" it screamed into his face, flapping its wings.

"I hear you." The room was dim, his pallet hard. Grey light leaked through the shutters, promising another bleak cold day. In his wolf dreams it was always night. "Is this how you woke Mormont? Get your feathers out of my face." Jon wriggled an arm out from under his blankets to shoo the raven off. It was a big bird, old and bold and scruffy, utterly without fear.

"Snow," it cried, flapping to his bedpost. "Snow, snow."

Jon filled his fist with a pillow and let fly, but the bird took to the air. The pillow struck the wall and burst, scattering stuffing everywhere just as Dolorous Edd Tollett poked his head through the door.

"Beg pardon," the steward said, ignoring the flurry of feathers, "shall I fetch m'lord some breakfast?"

"Corn," cried the raven. "Corn, corn."

"Roast raven," Jon suggested. "And half a pint of ale."

"Three corns and one roast raven," said Edd. "Very good, m'lord, only Hobb's made boiled eggs, black sausage, and apples stewed with prunes this morning. The apples stewed with prunes are excellent, except for the prunes. I never eat prunes myself. Well, there was one time when Hobb chopped them up with chestnuts and carrots and hid them in a hen. Never trust a cook, my lord. They'll prune you when you least expect it."

"Later." Breakfast could wait; Stannis could not. "Any trouble from the stockades last night?"

"Not since you put guards on the guards, my lord."

"Good." A thousand wildlings had been penned up beyond the Wall, the captives Stannis Baratheon had taken when his knights had smashed Mance Rayder's patchwork host. Many of the prisoners were women, and some of the guards had been sneaking them out to warm their beds. King's men, queen's men, it did not seem to matter; a few black brothers had tried the same thing. Men were men, and these were the only women for a thousand leagues.

"Two more wildlings turned up to surrender," Edd went on. "A mother with a girl clinging to her skirts. She had a boy babe too, all swaddled up in fur, but he was dead."

"Dead," said the Old Bear's raven. It was one of the bird's favorite words. "Dead, dead, dead."

They had free folk drifting in most every night, starved and half frozen creatures who had run from the battle beneath the Wall only to realize that they had no place to run to.

"Was the mother questioned?" Jon asked. Stannis Baratheon had smashed Mance Rayder's host to pieces and made the King-Beyond-the-Wall his captive... but the wildlings were still out there, the Weeper and Tormund Giantsbane and thousands more.

"Aye, m'lord," said Edd, "but all she knows is that she ran off during the battle and hid in the woods after. We filled her full of porridge and sent her to the pens, and burned the babe."

Burning dead children had ceased to trouble Jon Snow; live ones were another matter. Two kings to wake the dragon, he remembered. The father first and then the son, so both die kings. The words had been murmured by one of the queen's men as Maester Aemon had cleaned his wounds after the battle. Jon had been shocked when they were repeated to him. "It was his fever talking," he had said, but Maester Aemon had demurred. "There is power in a king's blood, Jon," he warned, "and better men than Stannis have done worse things than this." The king can be harsh and unforgiving, aye, but a babe still on the breast? Only a monster would give a living child to the flames.

He pissed in darkness, filling his chamberpot as the Old Bear's raven muttered complaints. The wolf dreams had been growing stronger, and Jon found himself remembering them even when awake. Ghost knows that Grey Wind is dead. Robb had died at the Twins, betrayed by men he'd believed his friends, and Grey Wolf had perished with him. Bran and Rickon had been murdered too, beheaded by that turncloak Theon Greyjoy... but if the dreams did not lie, their direwolves had escaped. At Queenscrown, one had come out of the darkness to save Jon's life. Summer, it had to be. His fur was grey, and Shaggydog is black. He wondered if some part of his dead brothers lived on inside their wolves.

Jon filled his basin from the flagon of water beside his bed, washed his face and hands, donned a clean set of black woolens, laced up a black leather jerkin, and pulled on a pair of well-worn boots. Mormont's raven watched with shrewd black eyes, then fluttered to the window. "Do you take me for your thrall?" Jon asked the bird. When he folded back the window with its thick diamond-shaped panes of yellow glass, the chill of the morning hit him in the face. He took a breath to clear away the cobwebs of the night as the raven flapped away. That bird is too clever by half. It had been the Old Bear's companion for long years, but that had not stopped it from eating Mormont's face once he died.

Outside his bedchamber a flight of steps descended to a larger room furnished with a scarred pinewood table and a dozen oak-and-leather chairs. With Stannis in the

King's Tower and the Lord Commander's Tower burned to a shell, Jon had established himself in Donal Noye's modest rooms behind the armory.

The grant that the king had presented him for signature was on the table beneath a silver drinking cup that had once been Donal Noye's. The one-armed smith had left few personal effects: the cup, six pennies and a copper star, a niello brooch with a broken clasp, a musty brocade doublet that bore the stag of Storm's End. His treasures were his tools, and the swords and knives he made. His life was at the forge. Jon moved the cup aside and read the parchment once again. If I put my seal to this, I will forever be remembered as the lord commander who gave away the Wall, he thought, but if I should refuse...

Stannis Baratheon was proving to be a prickly guest, and a restless one. He had ridden down the kingsroad almost as far as Queenscrown, prowled through the empty hovels of Mole's Town, inspected the ruined forts at Queensgate and Oakenshield. Each night he walked atop the Wall with Lady Melisandre, and during the days he visited the stockades, picking captives out for the red woman to question. He does not like to be balked. This would not be a pleasant morning, Jon feared.

From the armory came a clatter of shields and swords, as the latest lot of boys and raw recruits armed themselves. He could hear the voice of Iron Emmett telling them to be quick about it. Cotter Pyke had not been pleased to lose him, but the young ranger had a gift for training men. He loves to fight, and he'll teach his boys to love it too. Or so he hoped.

Jon's cloak hung on a peg by the door, his swordbelt on another. He donned them both and made his way to the armory. The rug where Ghost slept was empty, he saw. Two guardsmen stood inside the doors, clad in black cloaks and iron halfhelms, spears in their hands. "Will m'lord be wanting a tail?" asked Garse.

"I think I can find the King's Tower by myself." Jon hated having guards trailing after him everywhere he went. It made him feel like a mother duck leading a procession of ducklings.

Iron Emmett's lads were well at it in the yard when Jon emerged, blunted swords slamming into shields and ringing against one another. Jon stopped to watch a moment as Horse pressed Hop-Robin back toward the well. Horse had the makings of a good fighter, he decided. He was strong and getting stronger, and his instincts were sound. Hop-Robin was another tale. His club foot was bad enough, but he was afraid of getting hit as well. Perhaps we can make a steward of him. The fight ended abruptly, with Hop-Robin on the ground.

"Well fought," Jon said to Horse, "but you drop your shield too low when pressing an attack. You will want to correct that, or it is like to get you killed."

"Yes, m'lord. I'll keep it higher next time." Horse pulled Hop-Robin to his feet, and the smaller boy made a clumsy bow.

A few of Stannis's knights were sparring as well, on the far side of the yard. King's men in one corner and queen's men in another, he did not fail to note, but only a few. It's too cold for most of them. As Jon strode past them, a booming voice called after him. "BOY! YOU THERE! BOY!"

'Boy' was not the worst of the things that Jon Snow had been called since being chosen lord commander. He ignored it.

"Snow," the voice insisted, "Lord Commander."

This time he stopped and turned. "Ser?"

The knight overtopped him by six inches. "A man who bears Valyrian steel should use it for more than scratching his arse."

Jon had seen this one about the castle; a knight of great renown, to hear him tell it. During the battle beneath the Wall, Ser Godry Farring had slain a fleeing giant, pounding after him on horseback and driving his lance through his back, then dismounting to hack off the creature's pitiful small head. The queen's men had taken to calling him Godry the Giantslayer. Whenever he heard that, Jon remembered Ygritte, crying. I am the last of the giants. "I use Longclaw when I must, ser."

"How well, though?" Ser Godry drew his own blade. "Show me. I promise not to hurt you, lad."

How kind of you, thought Jon. "Some other time, perhaps. I fear that I have other duties just now."

"You fear. I see that." Ser Godry looked at his friends, grinning. "He fears," he said again, for the slow ones.

"You will excuse me." Jon showed them his back.

Castle Black seemed a bleak and forlorn place in the pale dawn light. My command, Jon Snow reflected ruefully, as much a ruin as it is a stronghold. The Lord Commander's Tower was a shell, the Common Hall a pile of blackened timbers, and Hardin's Tower looked as if the next gust of wind would knock it over... though it had looked that way for years. Behind them all the Wall rose huge and pale. Even at this hour it was acrawl with men, builders pushing up a new switchback stair to join the remnants of the old. Othell Yarwyck had put all of command on the task, and they worked from dawn to dusk. Without the stair, there was no way to reach the top of the Wall save by winch. That would not serve if the wildlings should attack again.

Above the King's Tower the great golden battle standard of House Baratheon cracked like a whip on the roof where Jon Snow had prowled with bow in hand not long ago, slaying Thenns and free folk beside Satin and Deaf Dick Follard. Two queen's men stood shivering on the steps, their hands tucked up into their armpits and their spears leaning against the door.

"Those cloth gloves will never serve," Jon told them. "See Bowen Marsh on the morrow, and he'll give you each a pair of leather gloves lined with fur."

"We will, m'lord, and thank you," said the older guard.

"That's if our bloody hands aren't froze off," the younger added, his breath a pale mist. "I used to think that it got cold up in the Dornish Marches. What did I know?"

Nothing, thought Jon Snow, the same as me.

Halfway up the winding steps, he came upon Samwell Tarly, headed down. "Are you coming from the king?" Jon asked him.

Sam nodded. "Maester Aemon sent me with a letter."

"I see." Some lords trusted their maesters to read their letters and convey the contents, but Stannis insisted on breaking the seals himself. "How did Stannis take it?"

"Not happily, by his face." Sam dropped his voice to a whisper. "I am not supposed to speak of it."

"Then don't." Jon wondered which of his father's bannermen had refused Stannis homage this time. He was quick enough to spread the word when Karhold declared for him. "How are you and your longbow getting on?" he asked Sam.

"I found a good book about archery," the fat youth said, "but doing it is harder. I get blisters."

"Keep at it. We may need your bow on the Wall if the Others turn up some dark night."

"Oh, I hope not," Sam said, shuddering.

Jon found more guards outside the king's solar. "No arms are allowed in His Grace's presence, my lord," their serjeant said. "I'll need that sword. Your knives as well." It would do no good to protest, Jon knew. He handed them his weaponry.

Within the solar the air was warm. Lady Melisandre was seated near the fire, her ruby glimmering against the pale skin of her throat. Ygritte had been kissed by fire; the red priestess was fire, and her hair was blood and flame. Stannis stood

behind the rough-hewn table where the Old Bear had once been wont to sit and take his meals. Covering the table was a large map of the north, painted on a ragged piece of hide. A tallow candle weighed down one end of it, a steel gauntlet the other.

The king wore lambswool breeches and a quilted doublet, yet somehow he looked as stiff and uncomfortable as if he had been clad in plate and mail. His skin was pale leather, his beard cropped so short that it might have been painted on. A fringe about his temples was all that remained of his black hair. In his hand was a parchment with a broken seal of dark green wax.

Jon took a knee. The king frowned at him, and rattled the parchment angrily. "Rise. Tell me, who is Lyanna Mormont?"

"One of Lady Maeg's daughters. Sire. The youngest. She was named for my lord father's sister."

"To curry your lord father's favor, I don't doubt. How old is this wretched girl child?"

Jon had to think a moment. "Ten. Or near enough to make no matter. Might I know how she has offended Your Grace?"

Stannis read from the letter. "Bear Island knows no king but the King in the North, whose name is STARK. A girl of ten, you say, and she presumes to scold her lawful king." His close-cropped beard lay like a shadow over his hollow cheeks. "See that you keep these tidings to yourself, Lord Snow. Karhold is with me, that is all the men need know. I will not have your brothers trading tales of how this child spit on me."

"As you command, Sire." Maeg Mormont had ridden south with Robb, Jon knew. Her eldest daughter had joined the Young Wolf's host as well. Even if both of them had died, however, Lady Maeg had other daughters, younger than Dacey but older than Lyanna. He did not understand why the youngest Mormont should be writing Stannis, and part of him could not help but wonder if the girl's answer might have been different if the letter had been sealed with a direwolf instead of a crowned stag, and signed by Jon Stark, Lord of Winterfell. It is too late for such misgivings, he reminded himself. You made your choice.

"Two score ravens were sent out," the king complained bitterly, "yet we get no response but silence and defiance. Homage is the duty every leal subject owes his king. Yet your lord father's bannermen turn their back on me, save the Karstarks. Is Arnolf Karstark the only man of honor in the north?"

Arnolf Karstark was the late Lord Rickard's uncle. He had been made the castellan of Karhold when his nephew and his sons went south with Robb, and he had been the first to send a raven in reply to Stannis's demand for homage, declaring his

allegiance. The Karstarks have no other choice, Jon might have pointed out. Lord Rickard Karstark had betrayed the direwolf and spilled the blood of lions. The stag was Karhold's only hope, as Stannis knew as well as Jon. "In times as confused as these even men of honor must wonder where their duty lies," he told the king. "Your Grace is not the only king in the realm demanding homage."

"Tell me, Lord Snow," said Lady Melisandre, "where were these other kings when the wild people stormed your Wall?"

"A thousand leagues away, and deaf to our need. I have not forgotten that. Nor will I. But my father's bannermen have wives and children to protect, and smallfolk who will die should they chose wrongly. You ask much of them, Sire. Give them time, and you will have your answers."

"Answers such as this?" Stannis crushed Lyanna's letter in his fist.

"Even in the north men fear the wrath of Tywin Lannister," said Jon. "The Boltons make bad enemies as well. It is not happenstance that put a flayed man on their banners. The north rode with Robb, bled with him, died for him. They have supped on grief and death, and now you come to offer them another serving. Do you blame them if they hang back? Forgive me, Your Grace, but some will look at you and see only another doomed pretender."

"If His Grace is doomed, your realm is doomed as well," said Lady Melisandre. "Remember that, Lord Snow. It is the one true king of Westeros who stands before you."

Jon kept his face a mask. "As you say, my lady."

Stannis snorted. "You spend your words as if every one were a golden dragon. I wonder, how much gold do you have laid by?"

"Gold?" Are those the dragons the red woman means to wake? Dragons made of gold? "Such taxes as we collect are paid in kind, Your Grace. The Watch is rich in turnips, but poor in coin."

"Turnips are not like to appease Salladhor Saan. I require gold or silver."

"For that, you need White Harbor. The city cannot compare to Oldtown or King's Landing, but it is still a thriving port. Lord Manderly is the richest of my lord father's bannermen."

"Lord Too-Fat-To-Sit-a-Horse." The letter that Lord Wyman Manderly had sent back from White Harbor had spoken of his age and infirmity, and little more. Stannis had commanded Jon not to speak of that one either.

"Perhaps his lordship would fancy a wildling wife," suggested Lady Melisandre. "Is this fat man married, Lord Snow?"

"His lady wife is long dead. Lord Wyman has two grown sons, and grandchildren by the elder. And he is too fat to sit a horse, thirty stone at least. Val would never have him."

"Just once you might try to give me an answer that would please me, Lord Snow," the king grumbled.

"I would hope the truth would please you, Sire. Your men call Val a princess, but to the free folk she is only the sister of their king's dead wife. If you force her to marry a man she does not want she is like to slit his throat for him on their wedding night, but even if she accepts her husband, that does not mean the wildlings will follow him, or you. The only man who can bind them to your cause is Mance Rayder."

"I know that," Stannis said, unhappily. "I have spent hours speaking with the man. He knows much and more of our true enemy, and there is strength in him, I'll grant you. Even if he were to renounce his kingship, though, the man remains an oathbreaker. If I suffer one deserter to live, it will encourage others to desert. No. Laws should be made of iron, not of pudding. Mance Rayder's life is forfeit by every law of the Seven Kingdoms."

"The law ends at the Wall, Your Grace. You could make good use of Mance."

"I will. I'll burn him, and show the north how I deal with turncloaks and traitors. I have other men to lead the wildlings. And I have Rayder's son, do not forget. Once the father dies, his whelp will be the King-Beyond-the-Wall."

"Your Grace is mistaken." You know nothing, Jon Snow, Ygritte used to say, but he had learned. "The babe is no more a prince than Val is a princess. You don't become King-Beyond-the-Wall because your father was."

"Good," said Stannis, "for I will suffer no other kings in Westeros. Enough of Rayder. Have you signed the grant?"

And now it comes. Jon closed his burned fingers and opened them again. "No, Your Grace. You ask too much."

"Ask? I asked you to be Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. I require these castles."

"We have ceded you the Nightfort," said Jon Snow.

"Rats and ruins. It is a niggard's gift that costs the giver nothing. Your own man Yarwyck says it will be half a year before the castle can be made fit for habitation."

"The other forts are no better."

"I know that. It makes no matter. They are all we have. There are nineteen forts along the Wall, and you have men in only three of them. I mean to have every one of them garrisoned again before the year is out."

"I have no quarrel with that, Sire, but it is being said that you also mean to grant these castles to your knights and lords, to hold as their own seats as vassals to Your Grace."

"Kings are expected to be open-handed to their followers. Did Lord Eddard teach his bastard nothing? Many of my knights and lords abandoned rich lands and stout castles in the south. Should their loyalty go unrewarded?"

"If Your Grace wishes to lose all of my lord father's bannermen, there is no more certain way than by giving northern halls to southron lords."

"How can I lose men I do not have? I had hoped to bestow Winterfell on a northman, you may recall. A son of Eddard Stark. He threw my offer in my face." Stannis Baratheon with a grievance was like a mastiff with a bone; he gnawed it down to splinters.

"By right Winterfell should go to my sister Sansa."

"Lady Lannister, you mean? Are you so eager to see the Imp perched on your father's seat?"

"No," said Jon.

"Good. It will not happen whilst I live, Lord Snow."

Jon knew better than to press the point. "Sire, some claim that you mean to grant lands and castles to Rattleshirt and the Magnar of Thenn."

The king's eyes turned to hard blue stones. He ground his teeth and said, "Who told you that?"

"Does that matter?" The talk was all over Castle Black. "If you must know, I had the tale from Gilly."

"Who is Gilly?" the king demanded.

"The wet nurse," said Lady Melisandre. "Your Grace gave her freedom of the castle."

"Not for running tales. She's wanted for her teats, not for her tongue. I'll have more milk from her, and fewer messages."

"Castle Black needs no useless mouths," Jon agreed. "I am sending Gilly south on the next ship out of Eastwatch."

Melisandre touched the ruby at her neck. "Gilly is giving suck to Dalla's son as well as her own. It seems cruel of you to part our little prince from his milk brother, my lord."

Careful now, careful. "Mother's milk is all they share. Gilly's son is larger and more robust. He kicks the prince and pinches him, and shoves him from the breast. Craster was his father, a cruel man and greedy, and blood tells."

Stannis furrowed his brow. "I was told that the wet nurse was this man Craster's wife."

"Wife and daughter both. Craster married all his daughters. Gilly's boy was the fruit of their union."

"Her own father got this child on her? We are well rid of her, then. I will not suffer such abominations here. This is not King's Landing."

"I can find another wet nurse. If there's none amongst the wildlings, I will send to the mountain clans. Until such time, goat's milk should suffice for the boy, if it please Your Grace."

"Poor fare for a prince... but better than whore's milk, aye." Stannis drummed his fingers on the map. "If we may return to the matter of these forts... "

"Your Grace," said Jon, with chilly courtesy, "I have housed your men and fed them, at dire cost to our winter stores. I have clothed them so they would not freeze."

Stannis was not appeased. "Aye, you've shared your salt pork and porridge, and you've thrown us some black rags to keep us warm. Rags the wildlings would have taken off your corpses if I had not come north."

Jon ignored that. "I have given you fodder for your horses, and once the stair is done I will lend you builders to restore the Nightfort. I have even agreed to allow you to settle wildlings on the Gift, which was given to the Night's Watch in perpetuity."

"You offer me empty lands and desolations, yet deny me the castles I require to reward my lords and bannermen."

"The Night's Watch built those castles... "

"And the Night's Watch abandoned them."

"... to defend the Wall," Jon finished stubbornly, "not as seats for wildlings and southron lords. The stones of those forts are mortared with the blood and bones of my brothers, long dead. I cannot give them to you."

"Cannot or will not?" The cords in the king's neck stood out sharp as swords. "And to think, I offered you a name."

"I have a name, Your Grace."

"Snow. Was ever a name more ill-omened?" Stannis touched his sword hilt. "Just who do you imagine that you are?"

"The watcher on the walls. The sword in the darkness."

"Don't prate your words at me." Stannis drew the longsword he called Lightbringer. "Here is your sword in the darkness." Light rippled up and down the blade, now red, now yellow, now orange, painting the king's face in harsh, bright hues. "Even a green boy should be able to see that. Are you blind?"

"No, Sire. I agree these castles must be garrisoned - "

"The boy commander agrees. How fortunate."

" - by the Night's Watch," Jon finished.

"You do not have the men."

"Then give them to me, Sire. I will provide officers for each of the abandoned forts, seasoned men who know the Wall and the lands beyond, who know how best to survive the winter that is coming. In return for all we've given you, grant me the men to fill out the garrisons. Men-at-arms, crossbowmen, raw boys. I will even take your wounded and infirm."

Stannis stared at him incredulously, then gave a bark of laughter. "You are bold enough, Snow, I grant you that, but you're mad if you think my men will take the black."

"They can wear any color cloak they choose, so long as they obey my officers as they would your own."

The king was unmoved. "I have knights and lords in my service, the scions of noble Houses old in honor. They cannot be expected to serve under poachers, peasants, and murderers."

Or bastards, sire? "Your own Hand is a smuggler."

"Was a smuggler. I shortened his fingers for that. They tell me that you are the nine-hundred-ninety-eighth man to command the Night's Watch, Lord Snow. I wonder what the nine-hundred-ninety-ninth might say about these castles. The sight of your head on a spike might inspire him to be more helpful." The king lay his bright blade down on the map, along the Wall, its steel shimmering like sunlight on water.

"You are only lord commander by my sufferance. You would do well to remember that."

"I am lord commander because my brothers chose me."

"Did they?" The map lay between them like a battleground, drenched by the colors of the glowing sword. "Alliser Thorne complains about the manner of your choosing, and I cannot say he does not have a grievance. The count was done by a blind man with your fat friend by his elbow. And Slynt names you a turncloak."

And who would know one better than Slynt? "A turncloak would tell you what you wished to hear and betray you later. Your Grace knows that I was fairly chosen. My father always said you were a just man." Just but harsh had been Lord Eddard's exact words, but Jon did not think it would be wise to share that.

"Lord Eddard was no friend of mine, but he was not without some sense," said Stannis. "He would have given me these castles."

Never. "I cannot speak to what my father might have done. I took an oath, Your Grace. The Wall is mine."

"For now. We will see how well you hold it." Stannis pointed at him. "Keep your ruins, as they mean so much to you. I promise you, though, if any remain empty when the year is out, I will take them with your leave or without it. And if even one should fall to the foe, your head will soon follow. Now get out."

Lady Melisandre rose from her place near the hearth. "With your leave, Sire, I will show Lord Snow back to his chambers."

"Why? He knows the way." Stannis waved them both away. "Do what you will. Devan, food. Boiled eggs and lemon water."

After the warmth of the king's solar, the turnpike stair felt bone-chillingly cold. "Wind's rising, m'lady," the serjeant warned Melisandre as he handed Jon back his weapons. "You might want a warmer cloak."

"I have my faith to warm me." The red woman walked beside Jon down the steps. "His Grace is growing fond of you."

"I can tell. He only threatened to behead me twice."

Melisandre laughed. "It is his silences you should fear, not his words." As they stepped out into the yard, the wind filled Jon's cloak and sent it flapping against her. The red priestess brushed the black wool aside and slipped her arm through his. "It is may be that you are not wrong about the wildling king. I shall gaze into the flames and pray for the Lord of Light to send me guidance. My fires show me much and more, Jon Snow. I can see through stone and earth, and find the truth in the

darkness of men's souls. I can speak to kings long dead and children not yet born, and watch the years and seasons flicker past, until the end of days."

"Are your fires never wrong?"

"Never... though we priests are mortal and sometimes err, mistaking this must come from this may come."

Jon could feel her heat, even through his wool and boiled leather. The sight of them arm in arm was drawing curious looks. They will be whispering in the barracks tonight. "If you can truly see the morrow in your flames, tell me when and where the next wildling attack will come," he said, pulling free of her.

"R'hllor sends us what visions he will, but I shall seek for this man Tormund in the flames." Melisandre's red lips curled into a smile. "I have seen you in my fires, Jon Snow."

"Is that a threat, my lady? Do you mean to burn me too?"

"You mistake my meaning." She laughed. "I fear that I make you uneasy, Lord Snow."

Jon did not deny it. "The Wall is no place for a woman."

"You are wrong. I have dreamed of your Wall, Jon Snow. Great was the lore that raised it, and great the spells locked beneath its ice. We walk beneath one of the hinges of the world." Melisandre gazed up at it tenderly, her breath a warm moist cloud in the air. "This is my place as it is yours, and soon enough you may have grave need of me. Do not refuse my friendship, Jon. I have seen you in the storm, hard pressed, with enemies on every side. You have so many enemies. Shall I tell you their names?"

"I know their names."

"Do not be so certain." The ruby at Melisandre's throat gleamed redly. "It is not the foes who curse you to your face that you must fear, but those who smile when you are looking and sharpen their knives when you turn your back. You would do well to keep your wolf close beside you. Ice, I see, and daggers in the dark. Blood frozen red and hard, and naked steel. It was very cold."

"It is always cold on the Wall."

"You think so?"

"I know so, my lady."

"Then you know nothing, Jon Snow," she whispered.