

CAT OF THE CANALS

She woke before the sun came up, in the little room beneath the eaves that she shared with Brusco's daughters.

Cat was always the first to awaken. It was warm and snug under the blankets with Talea and Brea. She could hear the soft sounds of their breath. When she stirred, sitting up and fumbling for her slippers, Brea muttered a sleepy complaint and rolled over. The chill off the grey stone walls gave Cat gooseprickles. She dressed quickly in the darkness. As she was slipping her tunic over her head, Talea opened her eyes and called out, "Cat, be a sweet and bring my clothes for me." She was a gawky girl, all skin and bones and elbows, always complaining she was cold.

Cat fetched her clothes for her, and Talea squirmed into them underneath the blankets. Together they pulled her big sister from the bed, as Brea muttered sleepy threats.

By the time the three of them climbed down the ladder from the room beneath the eaves, Brusco and his sons were out in the boat on the little canal behind the house. Brusco barked at the girls to hurry, as he did every morning. His sons helped Talea and Brea onto the boat. It was Cat's task to untie them from the piling, toss the rope to Brea, and shove the boat away from the dock with a booted foot. Brusco's sons leaned into their poles. Cat ran and leapt across the widening gap between dock and deck.

After that, she had nothing to do but sit and yawn for a long while as Brusco and his sons pushed them through the predawn gloom, wending down a confusion of small canals. The day looked to be a rare one, crisp and clear and bright. Braavos only had three kinds of weather; fog was bad, rain was worse, and freezing rain was worst. But every so often would come a morning when the dawn broke pink and blue and the air was sharp and salty. Those were the days that Cat loved best.

When they reached the broad straight waterway that was the Long Canal, they turned south for the fishmarket. Cat sat with her legs crossed,

fighting a yawn and trying to recall the details of her dream. *I dreamed I was a wolf again.* She could remember the smells best of all: trees and earth, her pack brothers, the scents of horse and deer and man, each different from the others, and the sharp acrid tang of fear, always the same. Some nights the wolf dreams were so vivid that she could hear her brothers howling even as she woke, and once Brea had claimed that she was growling in her sleep as she thrashed beneath the covers. She thought that was some stupid lie till Talea said it too.

I should not be dreaming wolf dreams, the girl told herself. *I am a cat now, not a wolf. I am Cat of the Canals.* The wolf dreams belonged to Arya of House Stark. Try as she might, though, she could not rid herself of Arya. It made no difference whether she slept beneath the temple or in the little room beneath the eaves with Brusco's daughters, the wolf dreams still haunted her by night... and sometimes other dreams as well.

The wolf dreams were the good ones. In the wolf dreams she was swift and strong, running down her prey with her pack at her heels. It was the other dream she hated, the one where she had two feet instead of four. In that one she was always looking for her mother, stumbling through a wasted land of mud and blood and fire. It was always raining in that dream, and she could hear her mother screaming, but a monster with a dog's head would not let her go save her. In that dream she was always weeping, like a frightened little girl. *Cats never weep,* she told herself, *no more than wolves do. It's just a stupid dream.*

The Long Canal took Brusco's boat beneath the green copper domes of the Palace of Truth and the tall square towers of the Prestayns and Antaryons before passing under the immense grey arches of the sweetwater river to the district known as Silty Town, where the buildings were smaller and less grand. Later in the day the canal would be choked with serpent boats and barges, but in the predawn darkness they had the waterway almost to themselves. Brusco liked to reach the fishmarket just as the Titan roared to herald the coming of the sun. The sound would boom across the lagoon, faint with distance but still loud enough to wake the sleeping city.

By the time Brusco and his sons tied up by the fishmarket, it was swarming with herring sellers and cod wives, oystermen, clam diggers, stewards, cooks, smallwives, and sailors off the galleys, all haggling loudly with one another as they inspected the morning catch. Brusco would walk from boat to boat, having a look at all the shellfish, and from time to time tapping a cask or crate with his cane. "This one," he would say. "Yes." *Tap tap*. "This one." *Tap tap*. "No, not that. Here." *Tap*. He was not much one for talking. Talea said her father was as grudging with his words as with his coins. Oysters, clams, crabs, mussels, cockles, sometimes prawns... Brusco bought it all, depending on what looked best each day. It was for them to carry the crates and casks that he tapped back to the boat. Brusco had a bad back, and could not lift anything heavier than a tankard of brown ale.

Cat always stank of brine and fish by the time they pushed off for home again. She had grown so used to it that she hardly even smelled it anymore. She did not mind the work. When her muscles ached from lifting, or her back got sore from the weight of a cask, she told herself that she was getting stronger.

Once all the casks were loaded, Brusco shoved them off again, and his sons poled them back up the Long Canal. Brea and Talea sat at the front of the boat whispering to one another. Cat knew that they were talking about Brea's boy, the one she climbed up on the roof to meet, after her father was asleep.

"Learn three new things before you come back to us," the kindly man had commanded Cat, when he sent her forth into the city. She always did. Sometimes it was no more than three new words of the Braavosi tongue. Sometimes she brought back sailor's tales, of strange and wondrous happenings from the wide wet world beyond the isles of Braavos, wars and rains of toads and dragons hatching. Sometimes she learned three new japes or three new riddles, or tricks of this trade or the other. And every so often, she would learn some secret.

Braavos was a city made for secrets, a city of fogs and masks and whispers. Its very existence had been a secret for a century, the girl had learned; its location had been hidden thrice that long. "The Nine Free Cities

are the daughters of Valyria that was,” the kindly man taught her, “but Braavos is the bastard child who ran away from home. We are a mongrel folk, the sons of slaves and whores and thieves. Our forebears came from half a hundred lands to this place of refuge, to escape the dragonlords who had enslaved them. Half a hundred gods came with them, but there is one god all of them shared in common.”

“Him of Many Faces.”

“And many names,” the kindly man had said. “In Qohor he is the Black Goat, in Yi Ti the Lion of Night, in Westeros the Stranger. All men must bow to him in the end, no matter if they worship the Seven or the Lord of Light, the Moon Mother or the Drowned God or the Great Shepherd. All mankind belongs to him... else somewhere in the world would be a folk who lived forever. Do you know of any folk who live forever?”

“No,” she would answer. “All men must die.”

Cat would always find the kindly man waiting for her when she went creeping back to the temple on the knoll on the night the moon went black. “What do you know that you did not know when you left us?” he would always ask her.

“I know what Blind Beqqo puts in the hot sauce he uses on his oysters,” she would say. “I know the mummers at the Blue Lantern are going to do *The Lord of the Woeful Countenance* and the mummers at the Ship mean to answer with *Seven Drunken Oarsmen*. I know the bookseller Lotho Lornel sleeps in the house of Tradesman-Captain Moredo Prestayn whenever the honorable tradesman-captain is away on a voyage, and moves out whenever the *Vixen* comes home.”

“It is good to know these things. And who are you?”

“No one.”

“You lie. You are Cat of the canals, I know you well. Go and sleep, child. On the morrow you must serve.”

“All men must serve.” And so she did, three days of every thirty. When the moon was black she was no one, a servant of the Many-Faced God in a robe of black and white. She walked beside the kindly man through the

fragrant darkness, carrying her iron lantern. She washed the dead, went through their clothes, and counted out their coins. Some days she still helped Umma cook, chopping big white mushrooms and boning fish. But only when the moon was black. The rest of the time she was an orphan girl in a pair of battered boots too big for her feet and a brown cloak with a ragged hem, crying “*Mussels and cockles and clams*” as she wheeled her barrow through the Ragman’s Harbor.

The moon would be black tonight, she knew; last night it had been no more than a sliver. “What do you know that you did not know when you left us?” the kindly man would ask as soon as he saw her. *I know that Brusco’s daughter Brea meets a boy on the roof when her father is asleep, she thought. Brea lets him touch her, Talea says, even though he’s just a roof rat and all the roof rats are supposed to be thieves.* That was only one thing, though. Cat would need two more. She was not concerned. There were always new things to learn, down by the ships.

When they returned to the house Cat helped Brusco’s sons unload the boat. Brusco and his daughters divided the shellfish amongst three barrows, arranging them on layered beds of seaweed. “Come back when all is sold,” Brusco told the girls, just as he did every morning, and they set forth to cry the catch. Brea would wheel her barrow to the Purple Harbor, to sell to the Braavosi sailors whose ships were anchored there. Talea would try the alleys round the Moon Pool, or sell amongst the temples on the Isle of the Gods. Cat headed for the Ragman’s Harbor, as she did nine days of every ten.

Only Braavosi were permitted use of the Purple Harbor, from the Drowned Town and the Sealord’s Palace; ships from her sister cities and the rest of the wide world had to use the Ragman’s Harbor, a poorer, rougher, dirtier port than the Purple. It was noisier as well, as sailors and traders from half a hundred lands crowded its wharves and alleys, mingling with those who served and preyed on them. Cat liked it best of any place in Braavos. She liked the noise and the strange smells, and seeing what ships had come in on the evening tide and what ships had departed. She liked the sailors too; the boisterous Tyroshi with their booming voices and dyed

whiskers; the fair-haired Lyseni, always trying to niggle down her prices; the squat, hairy sailors from the Port of Ibben, growling curses in low, raspy voices. Her favorites were the Summer Islanders, with their skins as smooth and dark as teak. They wore feathered cloaks of red and green and yellow, and the tall masts and white sails of their swan ships were magnificent.

And sometimes there were Westerosi too, oarsmen and sailors off carracks out of Oldtown, trading galleys out of Duskendale, King's Landing, and Gulltown, big-bellied wine cogs from the Arbor. Cat knew the Braavosi words for mussels and cockles and clams, but along the Ragman's Harbor she cried her wares in the trade tongue, the language of the wharves and docks and sailor's taverns, a coarse jumble of words and phrases from a dozen languages, accompanied by hand signs and gestures, most of them insulting. Those were the ones that Cat liked best. Any man who bothered her was apt to see the fig, or hear himself described as an ass's pizzle or a camel's cunt. "Maybe I never saw a camel," she would tell them, "but I know a camel's cunt when I smell one."

Once in a great while that would make somebody angry, but when it did she had her finger knife. She kept it very sharp, and knew how to use it too. Red Roggo showed her one afternoon at the Happy Port, while he was waiting for Lanna to come free. He taught her how to hide it up her sleeve and slip it out when she had need of it, and how to slice a purse so smooth and quick the coins would all be spent before their owner ever missed them. That was good to know, even the kindly man agreed; especially at night, when the bravos and roof rats were abroad.

Cat had made friends along the wharves; porters and mummers, ropemakers and sailmenders, taverners, brewers and bakers and beggars and whores. They bought clams and cockles from her, told her true tales of Braavos and lies about their lives, and laughed at the way she talked when she tried to speak Braavosi. She never let that trouble her. Instead, she showed them all the fig, and told them they were camel cunts, which made them roar with laughter. Gyloro Dothare taught her filthy songs, and his brother Gyleno told her the best places to catch eels. The mummers off the Ship showed her how a hero stands, and taught her speeches from *The Song*

of the Rhoyme, The Conqueror's Two Wives, and The Merchant's Lusty Lady. Quill, the sad-eyed little man who made up all the bawdy farces for the Ship, offered to teach her how a woman kisses, but Tagganaro smacked him with a codfish and put an end to that. Cossomo the Conjuror instructed her in sleight of hand. He could swallow mice and pull them from her ears. "It's magic," he'd say. "It's not," Cat said. "The mouse was up your sleeve the whole time. I could see it moving."

"*Oysters, clams, and cockles*" were Cat's magic words, and like all good magic words they could take her almost anywhere. She had boarded ships from Lys and Oldtown and the Port of Ibben and sold her oysters right on deck. Some days she rolled her barrow past the towers of the mighty to offer baked clams to the guardsmen at their gates. Once she cried her catch on the steps of the Palace of Truth, and when another peddler tried to run her off she turned his cart over and sent his oysters skittering across the cobbles. Customs officers from the Chequy Port would buy from her, and paddlers from the Drowned Town, whose sunken domes and towers poked up from the green waters of the lagoon. One time, when Brea took to her bed with her moon blood, Cat had pushed her barrow to the Purple Harbor to sell crabs and prawns to oarsmen off the Sealord's pleasure barge, covered stem to stern with laughing faces. Other days she followed the sweetwater river to the Moon Pool. She sold to swaggering bravos in striped satin, and to keyholders and justiciars in drab coats of brown and grey. But she always returned to the Ragman's Harbor.

"*Oysters, clams, and cockles,*" the girl shouted as she pushed her barrow along the wharves. "*Mussels, prawns, and cockles.*" A dirty orange cat came padding after her, drawn by the sound of her call. Farther on, a second cat appeared, a sad, bedraggled grey thing with a stub tail. Cats liked the smell of Cat. Some days she would have a dozen trailing after her before the sun went down. From time to time the girl would throw an oyster at them and watch to see who came away with it. The biggest toms would seldom win, she noticed; oft as not, the prize went to some smaller, quicker animal, thin and mean and hungry. *Like me,* she told herself. Her favorite was a scrawny old tom with a chewed ear who reminded her of a cat that

she'd once chased all around the Red Keep. *No, that was some other girl, not me.*

Two of the ships that had been here yesterday were gone, Cat saw, but five new ones had docked; a small carrack called the *Brazen Monkey*, a huge Ibbenese whaler that reeked of tar and blood and whale oil, two battered cogs from Pentos, and a lean green galley up from Old Volantis. Cat stopped at the foot of every gangplank to cry her clams and oysters, once in the trade talk and again in the Common Tongue of Westeros. A crewman on the whaler cursed at her so loudly that he scared away her cats and one of the Pentoshi oarsman asked how much she wanted for the clam between her legs, but she fared better at the other ships. A mate on the green galley wolfed half a dozen oysters and told her how his captain had been killed by the Lysene pirates who had tried to board them near the Stepstones. "That bastard Saan it was, with *Old Mother's Son* and his big *Valyrian*. We got away, but just."

The little *Brazen Monkey* proved to be from Gulltown, with a Westerosi crew who were glad to talk to someone in the Common Tongue. One asked how a girl from King's Landing came to be selling mussels on the docks of Braavos, so she had to tell her tale. "We're here four days, and four long nights," another told her. "Where's a man to go to find a bit of sport?"

"The mummers at the Ship are doing *Seven Drunken Oarsmen*," Cat told them, "and there's eel fights in the Spotted Cellar, down by the gates of Drowned Town. Or if you want you can go by the Moon Pool, where the bravos duel at night."

"Aye, that's good," another sailor said, "but what Wat was really wanting was a woman."

"The best whores are at the Happy Port, down by where the mummers' Ship is moored." She pointed. Some of the dockside whores were vicious, and sailors fresh from the sea never knew which ones. S'vrone was the worst. Everyone said she had robbed and killed a dozen men, rolling the bodies into the canals to feed the eels. The Drunken Daughter could be sweet when sober, but not with wine in her. And Canker Jeyne was really a

man. “Ask for Merry. Meralyn is her true name, but everyone calls her Merry, and she is.” Merry bought a dozen oysters every time Cat came by the brothel and shared them with her girls. She had a good heart, everyone agreed. “That, and the biggest pair of teats in all of Braavos,” Merry herself was fond of boasting.

Her girls were nice as well; Blushing Bethany and the Sailor’s Wife, one-eyed Yna who could tell your fortune from a drop of blood, pretty little Lanna, even Assadora, the Ibbenese woman with the mustache. They might not be beautiful, but they were kind to her. “The Happy Port is where all the porters go,” Cat assured the men of the *Brazen Monkey*. ““The boys unload the ships,’ Merry says, ‘and my girls unload the lads who sail them.’”

“What about them fancy whores the singers sing about?” asked the youngest monkey, a red-haired boy with freckles who could not have been much more than six-and-ten. “Are they as pretty as they say? Where would I get one o’ them?”

His shipmates looked at him and laughed. “Seven hells, boy,” said one of them. “Might be the captain could get hisself a courty-san, but only if he sold the bloody ship. That sort o’ cunt’s for lords and such, not for the likes o’ us.”

The courtesans of Braavos were famed across the world. Singers sang of them, goldsmiths and jewelers showered them with gifts, craftsmen begged for the honor of their custom, merchant princes paid royal ransoms to have them on their arms at balls and feasts and mummer shows, and bravos slew each other in their names. As she pushed her barrow along the canals, Cat would sometimes glimpse one of them floating by, on her way to an evening with some lover. Every courtesan had her own barge, and servants to pole her to her trysts. The Poetess always had a book to hand, the Moonshadow wore only white and silver, and the Merling Queen was never seen without her Mermaids, four young maidens in the blush of their first flowering who held her train and did her hair. Each courtesan was more beautiful than the last. Even the Veiled Lady was beautiful, though only those she took as lovers ever saw her face.

“I sold three cockles to a courtesan,” Cat told the sailors. “She called to me as she was stepping off her barge.” Brusco had made it plain to her that she was never to speak to a courtesan unless she was spoken to first, but the woman had smiled at her and paid her in silver, ten times what the cockles had been worth.

“Which one was this, now? The Queen o’ Cockles, was it?”

“The Black Pearl,” she told them. Merry claimed the Black Pearl was the most famous courtesan of all. “She’s descended from the dragons, that one,” the woman had told Cat. “The first Black Pearl was a pirate queen. A Westerosi prince took her for a lover and got a daughter on her, who grew up to be a courtesan. Her own daughter followed her, and *her* daughter after her, until you get to this one. What did she say to you, Cat?”

“She said ‘I’ll take three cockles,’ and ‘Do you have some hot sauce, little one?’” the girl had answered.

“And what did you say?”

“I said, ‘*No, my lady,*’ and, ‘*Don’t call me little one. My name is Cat.*’ I should have hot sauce. Beqqo does, and he sells three times as many oysters as Brusco.”

Cat told the kindly man about the Black Pearl too. “Her true name is Bellegere Otherys,” she informed him. It was one of the three things that she had learned.

“It is,” the priest said softly. “Her mother was Bellonara, but the first Black Pearl was a Bellegere as well.”

Cat knew that the men off the *Brazen Monkey* would not care about the name of a courtesan’s mother, though. Instead, she asked them for tidings of the Seven Kingdoms, and the war.

“War?” laughed one of them. “What war? There is no war.”

“Not in Gulltown,” said another. “Not in the Vale. The little lord’s kept us out of it, same as his mother did.”

Same as his mother did. The lady of the Vale was her own mother’s sister. “Lady Lysa,” she said, “is she...?”

“...dead?” finished the freckled boy whose head was full of courtesans. “Aye. Murdered by her own singer.”

“Oh.” It’s nought to me. Cat of the Canals never had an aunt. She never did. Cat lifted her barrow and wheeled away from the Brazen Monkey, bumping over cobblestones. “Oysters, clams, and cockles,” she called. “Oysters, clams, and cockles.” She sold most of her clams to the porters off-loading the big wine cog from the Arbor, and the rest to the men repairing a Myrish trading galley that had been savaged by the storms.

Farther down the docks she came on Tagganaro sitting with his back against a piling, next to Casso, King of Seals. He bought some mussels from her, and Casso barked and let her shake his flipper. “You come work with me, Cat,” urged Tagganaro as he was sucking mussels from their shells. He had been looking for a new partner ever since the Drunken Daughter put her knife through Little Narbo’s hand. “I give you more than Brusco, and you would not smell like fish.”

“Casso likes the way I smell,” she said. The King of Seals barked, as if to agree. “Is Narbo’s hand no better?”

“Three fingers do not bend,” complained Tagganaro, between mussels. “What good is a cutpurse who cannot use his fingers? Narbo was good at picking pockets, not so good at picking whores.”

“Merry says the same.” Cat was sad. She liked Little Narbo, even if he was a thief. “What will he do?”

“Pull an oar, he says. Two fingers are enough for that, he thinks, and the Sealord’s always looking for more oarsmen. I tell him, ‘Narbo, no. That sea is colder than a maiden and crueller than a whore. Better you should cut off the hand, and beg.’ Casso knows I am right. Don’t you, Casso?”

The seal barked, and Cat had to smile. She tossed another cockle his way before she went off on her own.

The day was nearly done by the time Cat reached the Happy Port, across the alley from where the Ship was anchored. Some of the mummers sat up atop the listing hulk, passing a skin of wine from hand to hand, but when they saw Cat’s barrow they came down for some oysters. She asked

them how it went with *Seven Drunken Oarsmen*. Joss the Gloom shook his head. “Quence finally came on Allaquo abed with Sloey. They went at one another with mummer swords, and both of them have left us. We’ll only be five drunken oarsmen tonight, it would seem.”

“We shall strive to make up in drunkenness what we lack in oarsmen,” declared Myrmello. “I for one am equal to the task.”

“Little Narbo wants to be an oarsman,” Cat told them. “If you got him, you’d have six.”

“You had best go see Merry,” Joss told her. “You know how sour she gets without her oysters.”

When Cat slipped inside the brothel, though, she found Merry sitting in the common room with her eyes shut, listening to Dareon play his woodharp. Yna was there too, braiding Lanna’s fine long golden hair. *Another stupid love song*. Lanna was always begging the singer to play her stupid love songs. She was the youngest of the whores, only ten-and-four. Merry asked three times as much for her as for any of the other girls, Cat knew.

It made her angry to see Dareon sitting there so brazen, making eyes at Lanna as his fingers danced across the harp strings. The whores called him the black singer, but there was hardly any black about him now. With the coin his singing brought him, the crow had transformed himself into a peacock. Today he wore a plush purple cloak lined with vair, a striped white-and-lilac tunic, and the parti-colored breeches of a bravo, but he owned a silken cloak as well, and one made of burgundy velvet that was lined with cloth-of-gold. The only black about him was his boots. Cat had heard him tell Lanna that he’d thrown all the rest in a canal. “I am done with darkness,” he had announced.

He is a man of the Night’s Watch, she thought, as he sang about some stupid lady throwing herself off some stupid tower because her stupid prince was dead. *The lady should go kill the ones who killed her prince. And the singer should be on the Wall*. When Dareon had first appeared at the Happy Port, Arya had almost asked if he would take her with him back to Eastwatch, until she heard him telling Bethany that he was never going

back. “Hard beds, salt cod, and endless watches, that’s the Wall,” he’d said. “Besides, there’s no one half as pretty as you at Eastwatch. How could I ever leave you?” He had said the same thing to Lanna, Cat had heard, and to one of the whores at the Cattery, and even to the Nightingale the night he played at the House of Seven Lamps.

I wish I had been here the night the fat one hit him. Merry’s whores still laughed about that. Yna said the fat boy had gone red as a beet every time she touched him, but when he started trouble Merry had him dragged outside and thrown in the canal.

Cat was thinking about the fat boy, remembering how she had saved him from Terro and Orbelo, when the Sailor’s Wife appeared beside her. “He sings a pretty song,” she murmured softly, in the Common Tongue of Westeros. “The gods must have loved him to give him such a voice, and that fair face as well.”

He is fair of face and foul of heart, thought Arya, but she did not say it. Dareon had once wed the Sailor’s Wife, who would only bed with men who married her. The Happy Port sometimes had three or four weddings a night. Often the cheerful wine-soaked red priest Ezzelino performed the rites. Elsewise it was Eustace, who had once been a septon at the Sept-Beyond-the-Sea. If neither priest nor septon was on hand, one of the whores would run to the Ship and fetch back a mummer. Merry always claimed the mummers made much better priests than priests, especially Myrmello.

The weddings were loud and jolly, with a lot of drinking. Whenever Cat happened by with her barrow, the Sailor’s Wife would insist that her new husband buy some oysters, to stiffen him for the consummation. She was good that way, and quick to laugh as well, but Cat thought there was something sad about her too.

The other whores said that the Sailor’s Wife visited the Isle of the Gods on the days when her flower was in bloom, and knew all the gods who lived there, even the ones that Braavos had forgotten. They said she went to pray for her first husband, her true husband, who had been lost at sea when she was a girl no older than Lanna. “She thinks that if she finds the right god, maybe he will send the winds and blow her old love back to her,” said one-

eyed Yna, who had known her longest, “but I pray it never happens. Her love is dead, I could taste that in her blood. If he ever should come back to her, it will be a corpse.”

Dareon’s song was finally ending. As the last notes faded in the air, Lanna gave a sigh and the singer put his harp aside and pulled her up into his lap. He had just started to tickle her when Cat said loudly, “There’s oysters, if anyone is wanting some,” and Merry’s eyes popped open. “Good,” the woman said. “Bring them in, child. Yna, fetch some bread and vinegar.”

The swollen red sun hung in the sky behind the row of masts when Cat took her leave of the Happy Port, with a plump purse of coins and a barrow empty but for salt and seaweed. Dareon was leaving too. He had promised to sing at the Inn of the Green Eel this evening, he told her as they strolled along together. “Every time I play the Eel I come away with silver,” he boasted, “and some nights there are captains there, and owners.” They crossed a little bridge, and made their way down a crooked back street as the shadows of the day grew longer. “Soon I will be playing in the Purple, and after that the Sealord’s Palace,” Dareon went on. Cat’s empty barrow clattered over the cobblestones, making its own sort of rattling music. “Yesterday I ate herring with the whores, but within the year I’ll be having emperor crab with courtesans.”

“What happened to your brother?” Cat asked. “The fat one. Did he ever find a ship to Oldtown? He said he was supposed to sail on the *Lady Ushanora*.”

“We all were. Lord Snow’s command. I told Sam, leave the old man, but the fat fool would not listen.” The last light of the setting sun shone in his hair. “Well, it’s too late now.”

“Just so,” said Cat as they stepped into the gloom of a twisty little alley.

By the time Cat returned to Brusco’s house, an evening fog was gathering above the small canal. She put away her barrow, found Brusco in his counting room, and thumped her purse down on the table in front of him. She thumped the boots down too.

Brusco gave the purse a pat. “Good. But what’s this?”

“Boots.”

“Good boots are hard to find,” said Brusco, “but these are too small for my feet.” He picked one up to squint at it.

“The moon will be black tonight,” she reminded him.

“Best you pray, then.” Brusco shoved the boots aside and poured out the coins to count them. “*Valar dohaeris.*”

Valar morghulis, she thought.

Fog rose all around as she walked through the streets of Braavos. She was shivering a little by the time she pushed through the weirwood door into the House of Black and White. Only a few candles burned this evening, flickering like fallen stars. In the darkness all the gods were strangers.

Down in the vaults, she untied Cat’s threadbare cloak, pulled Cat’s fishy brown tunic over her head, kicked off Cat’s salt-stained boots, climbed out of Cat’s smallclothes, and bathed in lemonwater to wash away the very smell of Cat of the Canals. When she emerged, soaped and scrubbed pink with her brown hair plastered to her cheeks, Cat was gone. She donned clean robes and a pair of soft cloth slippers, and padded to the kitchens to beg some food of Umma. The priests and acolytes had already eaten, but the cook had saved a piece of nice fried cod for her, and some mashed yellow turnips. She wolfed it down, washed the dish, then went to help the waif prepare her potions.

Her part was mostly fetching, scrambling up ladders to find the herbs and leaves the waif required. “Sweetsleep is the gentlest of poisons,” the waif told her, as she was grinding some with a mortar and pestle. “A few grains will slow a pounding heart and stop a hand from shaking, and make a man feel calm and strong. A pinch will grant a night of deep and dreamless sleep. Three pinches will produce that sleep that does not end. The taste is very sweet, so it is best used in cakes and pies and honeyed wines. Here, you can smell the sweetness.” She let her have a whiff, then sent her up the ladders to find a red glass bottle. “This is a crueller poison, but tasteless and odorless, hence easier to hide. The tears of Lys, men call it. Dissolved in wine or water, it eats at a man’s bowels and belly, and kills as a sickness of those parts. Smell.” Arya sniffed, and smelled nothing. The waif put the

tears to one side and opened a fat stone jar. "This paste is spiced with basilisk blood. It will give cooked flesh a savory smell, but if eaten it produces violent madness, in beasts as well as men. A mouse will attack a lion after a taste of basilisk blood."

Arya chewed her lip. "Would it work on dogs?"

"On any animal with warm blood." The waif slapped her.

She raised her hand to her cheek, more surprised than hurt. "Why did you do that?"

"It is Arya of House Stark who chews on her lip whenever she is thinking. Are you Arya of House Stark?"

"I am no one." She was angry. "Who are *you*?"

She did not expect the waif to answer, but she did. "I was born the only child of an ancient House, my noble father's heir," the waif replied. "My mother died when I was little, I have no memory of her. When I was six my father wed again. His new wife treated me kindly until she gave birth to a daughter of her own. Then it was her wish that I should die, so her own blood might inherit my father's wealth. She should have sought the favor of the Many-Faced God, but she could not bear the sacrifice he would ask of her. Instead, she thought to poison me herself. It left me as you see me now, but I did not die. When the healers in the House of the Red Hands told my father what she had done, he came here and made sacrifice, offering up all his wealth and me. Him of Many Faces heard his prayer. I was brought to the temple to serve, and my father's wife received the gift."

Arya considered her warily. "Is that true?"

"There is truth in it."

"And lies as well?"

"There is an untruth, and an exaggeration."

She had been watching the waif's face the whole time she told her story, but the other girl had shown her no signs. "The Many-Faced God took two-thirds of your father's wealth, not all."

"Just so. That was my exaggeration."

Arya grinned, realized she was grinning, and gave her cheek a pinch. *Rule your face*, she told herself. *My smile is my servant, he should come at my command.* “What part was the lie?”

“No part. I lied about the lie.”

“Did you? Or are you lying now?”

But before the waif could answer, the kindly man stepped into the chamber, smiling. “You have returned to us.”

“The moon is black.”

“It is. What three new things do you know, that you did not know when last you left us?”

I know thirty new things, she almost said. “Three of Little Narbo’s fingers will not bend. He means to be an oarsman.”

“It is good to know this. And what else?”

She thought back on her day. “Quence and Alaquo had a fight and left the Ship, but I think that they’ll come back.”

“Do you only think, or do you *know*?”

“I only think,” she had to confess, even though she was certain of it. Mummern had to eat the same as other men, and Quence and Alaquo were not good enough for the Blue Lantern.

“Just so,” said the kindly man. “And the third thing?”

This time she did not hesitate. “Dareon is dead. The black singer who was sleeping at the Happy Port. He was really a deserter from the Night’s Watch. Someone slit his throat and pushed him into a canal, but they kept his boots.”

“Good boots are hard to find.”

“Just so.” She tried to keep her face still.

“Who could have done this thing, I wonder?”

“Arya of House Stark.” She watched his eyes, his mouth, the muscles of his jaw.

“That girl? I thought she had left Braavos. Who are you?”

“No one.”

“You lie.” He turned to the waif. “My throat is dry. Do me a kindness and bring a cup of wine for me and warm milk for our friend Arya, who has returned to us so unexpectedly.”

On her way across the city Arya had wondered what the kindly man would say when she told him about Dareon. Maybe he would be angry with her, or maybe he would be pleased that she had given the singer the gift of the Many-Faced God. She had played this talk out in her head half a hundred times, like a mummer in a show. But she had never thought *warm milk*.

When the milk came, Arya drank it down. It smelled a little burnt and had a bitter aftertaste. “Go to bed now, child,” the kindly man said. “On the morrow you must serve.”

That night she dreamed she was a wolf again, but it was different from the other dreams. In this dream she had no pack. She prowled alone, bounding over rooftops and padding silently beside the banks of a canal, stalking shadows through the fog.

When she woke the next morning, she was blind.