

# THE KING'S PRIZE

The king's host departed Deepwood Motte by the light of a golden dawn, uncoiling from behind the log palisades like a long, steel serpent emerging from its nest.

The southron knights rode out in plate and mail, dented and scarred by the battles they had fought, but still bright enough to glitter when they caught the rising sun. Faded and stained, torn and mended, their banners and surcoats still made a riot of colors amidst the winter wood—azure and orange, red and green, purple and blue and gold, glimmering amongst bare brown trunks, grey-green pines and sentinels, drifts of dirty snow.

Each knight had his squires, servants, and men-at-arms. Behind them came armorers, cooks, grooms; ranks of spearmen, axemen, archers; grizzled veterans of a hundred battles and green boys off to fight their first. Before them marched the clansmen from the hills; chiefs and champions astride shaggy garrons, their hirsute fighters trotting beside them, clad in furs and boiled leather and old mail. Some painted their faces brown and green and tied bundles of brush about them, to hide amongst the trees.

Back of the main column the baggage train followed: mules, horses, oxen, a mile of wayns and carts laden with food, fodder, tents, and other provisions. Last the rear guard—more knights in plate and mail, with a screening of outriders following half-hidden to make certain no foe could steal up on them unawares.

Asha Greyjoy rode in the baggage train, in a covered wayn with two huge iron-rimmed wheels, fettered at wrist and ankle and watched over day and night by a She-Bear who snored worse than any man. His Grace King Stannis was taking no chances on his prize escaping captivity. He meant to carry her to Winterfell, to display her there in chains for the lords of the north to see, the kraken's daughter bound and broken, proof of his power.

Trumpets saw the column on its way. Spearpoints shone in the light of the rising sun, and all along the verges the grass glistened with the morning

frost. Between Deepwood Motte and Winterfell lay one hundred leagues of forest. Three hundred miles as the raven flies. "Fifteen days," the knights told each other.

"Robert would have done it in ten," Asha heard Lord Fell boasting. His grandsire had been slain by Robert at Summerhall; somehow this had elevated his slayer to godlike prowess in the grandson's eyes. "Robert would have been inside Winterfell a fortnight ago, thumbing his nose at Bolton from the battlements."

"Best not mention that to Stannis," suggested Justin Massey, "or he'll have us marching nights as well as days."

*This king lives in his brother's shadow,* Asha thought.

Her ankle still gave a stab of pain whenever she tried to put her weight on it. Something was broken down inside, Asha did not doubt. The swelling had gone down at Deepwood, but the pain remained. A sprain would surely have healed by now. Her irons *clacked* every time she moved. The fetters chafed at her wrists and at her pride. But that was the cost of submission.

"No man has ever died from bending his knee," her father had once told her. "He who kneels may rise again, blade in hand. He who will not kneel stays dead, stiff legs and all." Balon Greyjoy had proved the truth of his own words when his first rebellion failed; the kraken bent the knee to stag and direwolf, only to rise again when Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark were dead.

And so at Deepwood the kraken's daughter had done the same when she was dumped before the king, bound and limping (though blessedly unraped), her ankle a blaze of pain. "I yield, Your Grace. Do as you wish with me. I ask only that you spare my men." Qarl and Tris and the rest who had survived the wolfswood were all she had to care about. Only nine remained. *We ragged nine*, Cromm named them. He was the worst wounded.

Stannis had given her their lives. Yet she sensed no true mercy in the man. He was determined, beyond a doubt. Nor did he lack for courage. Men said

he was just ... and if his was a harsh, hard-handed sort of justice, well, life on the Iron Islands had accustomed Asha Greyjoy to that. All the same, she could not like this king. Those deep-set blue eyes of his seemed always slitted in suspicion, cold fury boiling just below their surface. Her life meant little and less to him. She was only his hostage, a prize to show the north that he could vanquish the ironborn.

*More fool him.* Bringing down a woman was not like to awe any northmen, if she knew the breed, and her worth as a hostage was less than naught. Her uncle ruled the Iron Islands now, and the Crow's Eye would not care if she lived or died. It might matter some to the wretched ruin of a husband that Euron had inflicted upon her, but Eric Ironmaker did not have coin enough to ransom her. But there was no explaining such things to Stannis Baratheon. Her very womanhood seemed to offend him. Men from the green lands liked their women soft and sweet in silk, she knew, not clad in mail and leather with a throwing axe in each hand. But her short acquaintance with the king at Deepwood Motte convinced her that he would have been no more fond of her in a gown. Even with Galbart Glover's wife, the pious Lady Sybelle, he had been correct and courteous but plainly uncomfortable. This southron king seemed to be one of those men to whom women are another race, as strange and unfathomable as giants and grumkins and the children of the forest. The She-Bear made him grind his teeth as well.

There was only one woman that Stannis listened to, and he had left her on the Wall. "Though I would sooner she was with us," confessed Ser Justin Massey, the fair-haired knight who commanded the baggage train. "The last time we went into battle without Lady Melisandre was the Blackwater, when Lord Renly's shade came down upon us and drove half our host into the bay."

"The last time?" Asha said. "Was this sorceress at Deepwood Motte? I did not see her."

"Hardly a battle," Ser Justin said, smiling. "Your ironmen fought bravely, my lady, but we had many times your numbers, and we took you unawares. Winterfell will know that we are coming. And Roose Bolton has as many men as we do."

*Or more*, thought Asha.

Even prisoners have ears, and she had heard all the talk at Deepwood Motte, when King Stannis and his captains were debating this march. Ser Justin had opposed it from the start, along with many of the knights and lords who had come with Stannis from the south. But the wolves insisted; Roose Bolton could not be suffered to hold Winterfell, and the Ned's girl must be rescued from the clutches of his bastard. So said Morgan Liddle, Brandon Norrey, Big Bucket Wull, the Flints, even the She-Bear. "One hundred leagues from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell," said Artos Flint, the night the argument boiled to a head in Galbart Glover's longhall. "Three hundred miles as the raven flies."

"A long march," a knight named Corliss Penny said.

"Not so long as that," insisted Ser Godry, the big knight the others called the Giantslayer. "We have come as far already. The Lord of Light will blaze a path for us."

"And when we arrive before Winterfell?" said Justin Massey. "Two walls with a moat between them, and the inner wall a hundred feet high. Bolton will never march out to face us in the field, and we do not have the provisions to mount a siege."

"Arnolf Karstark will join his strength to ours, never forget," said Harwood Fell. "Mors Umber as well. We will have as many northmen as Lord Bolton. And the woods are thick north of the castle. We will raise siege towers, build rams ..."

*And die by the thousands*, Asha thought. "We might do best to winter here," suggested Lord Peasebury. "*Winter* here?" Big Bucket roared. "How much food and fodder do you think Galbart Glover has laid by?"

Then Ser Richard Horpe, the knight with the ravaged face and the death's-head moths on his surcoat, turned to Stannis and said, "Your Grace, your brother—"

The king cut him off. “We all know what my brother would do. Robert would gallop up to the gates of Winterfell alone, break them with his warhammer, and ride through the rubble to slay Roose Bolton with his left hand and the Bastard with his right.” Stannis rose to his feet. “I am not Robert. But we will march, and we will free Winterfell ... or die in the attempt.”

Whatever doubts his lords might nurse, the common men seemed to have faith in their king. Stannis had smashed Mance Rayder’s wildlings at the Wall and cleaned Asha and her ironborn out of Deepwood Motte; he was Robert’s brother, victor in a famous sea battle off Fair Isle, the man who had held Storm’s End all through Robert’s Rebellion. And he bore a hero’s sword, the enchanted blade Lightbringer, whose glow lit up the night.

“Our foes are not as formidable as they appear,” Ser Justin assured Asha on the first day of the march. “Roose Bolton is feared, but little loved. And his friends the Freys ... the north has not forgotten the Red Wedding. Every lord at Winterfell lost kinsmen there. Stannis need only bloody Bolton, and the northmen will abandon him.”

*So you hope, thought Asha, but first the king must bloody him. Only a fool deserts the winning side.*

Ser Justin called upon her cart half a dozen times that first day, to bring her food and drink and tidings of the march. A man of easy smiles and endless japes, large and well fleshed, with pink cheeks, blue eyes, and a wind-tossed tangle of white-blond hair as pale as flax, he was a considerate gaoler, ever solicitous of his captive’s comfort.

“He wants you,” said the She-Bear, after his third visit.

Her proper name was Alysane of House Mormont, but she wore the other name as easily as she wore her mail. Short, chunky, muscular, the heir to Bear Island had big thighs, big breasts, and big hands ridged with callus. Even in sleep she wore ringmail under her furs, boiled leather under that, and an old sheepskin under the leather, turned inside out for warmth. All those layers made her look almost as wide as she was tall. *And ferocious.*

Sometimes it was hard for Asha Greyjoy to remember that she and the She-Bear were almost of an age.

“He wants my lands,” Asha replied. “He wants the Iron Islands.” She knew the signs. She had seen the same before in other suitors. Massey’s own ancestral holdings, far to the south, were lost to him, so he must needs make an advantageous marriage or resign himself to being no more than a knight of the king’s household. Stannis had frustrated Ser Justin’s hopes of marrying the wildling princess that Asha had heard so much of, so now he had set his sights on her. No doubt he dreamed of putting her in the Seastone Chair on Pyke and ruling through her, as her lord and master. That would require ridding her of her present lord and master, to be sure ... not to mention the uncle who had married her to him. *Not likely*, Asha judged. *The Crow’s Eye could eat Ser Justin to break his fast and never even belch.*

It made no matter. Her father’s lands would never be hers, no matter whom she married. The ironborn were not a forgiving people, and Asha had been defeated twice. Once at the kingsmoot by her uncle Euron, and again at Deepwood Motte by Stannis. More than enough to stamp her as unfit to rule. Wedding Justin Massey, or any of Stannis Baratheon’s lordlings, would hurt more than it helped. *The kraken’s daughter turned out to be just a woman after all*, the captains and the kings would say. *See how she spreads her legs for this soft green land lord.*

Still, if Ser Justin wished to court her favor with food and wine and words, Asha was not like to discourage him. He made for better company than the taciturn She-Bear, and she was elsewhere alone amongst five thousand foes. Tris Botley, Qarl the Maid, Cromm, Roggon, and the rest of her bloodied band had been left behind at Deepwood Motte, in Galbart Glover’s dungeons.

The army covered twenty-two miles the first day, by the reckoning of the guides Lady Sybelle had given them, trackers and hunters sworn to Deepwood with clan names like Forrester and Woods, Branch and Bole. The second day the host made twenty-four, as their vanguard passed beyond the Glover lands into the thick of the wolfswood. “*R’hllor, send your light to lead us through this gloom,*” the faithful prayed that night as they gathered about a roaring blaze outside the king’s pavilion. Southron knights

and men-at-arms, the lot of them. Asha would have called them king's men, but the other stormlanders and crownlands men named them queen's men ... though the queen they followed was the red one at Castle Black, not the wife that Stannis Baratheon had left behind at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. "*Oh, Lord of Light, we beseech you, cast your fiery eye upon us and keep us safe and warm,*" they sang to the flames, "*for the night is dark and full of terrors.*"

A big knight named Ser Godry Farring led them. *Godry the Giantslayer. A big name for a small man.* Farring was broad-chested and well muscled under his plate and mail. He was also arrogant and vain, it seemed to Asha, hungry for glory, deaf to caution, a glutton for praise, and contemptuous of smallfolk, wolves, and women. In the last, he was not unlike his king.

"Let me have a horse," Asha asked Ser Justin, when he rode up to the wayn with half a ham. "I am going mad in these chains. I will not attempt escape. You have my word on that."

"Would that I could, my lady. You are the king's captive, not mine own."

"Your king will not take a woman's word."

The She-Bear growled. "Why should we trust the word of any ironman after what your brother did at Winterfell?"

"I am not Theon," Asha insisted ... but the chains remained.

As Ser Justin galloped down the column, she found herself remembering the last time she had seen her mother. It had been on Harlaw, at Ten Towers. A candle had been flickering in her mother's chamber, but her great carved bed was empty beneath its dusty canopy. Lady Alannys sat beside a window, staring out across the sea. "Did you bring my baby boy?" she'd asked, mouth trembling. "Theon could not come," Asha had told her, looking down upon the ruin of the woman who had given her birth, a mother who had lost two of her sons. And the third ...

*I send you each a piece of prince.*

Whatever befell when battle was joined at Winterfell, Asha Greyjoy did not think her brother likely to survive it. *Theon Turncloak. Even the She-Bear wants his head on a spike.*

“Do you have brothers?” Asha asked her keeper.

“Sisters,” Alysane Mormont replied, gruff as ever. “Five, we were. All girls. Lyanna is back on Bear Island. Lyra and Jory are with our mother. Dacey was murdered.”

“The Red Wedding.”

“Aye.” Alysane stared at Asha for a moment. “I have a son. He’s only two. My daughter’s nine.”

“You started young.”

“Too young. But better that than wait too late.”

*A stab at me, Asha thought, but let it be.* “You are wed.”

“No. My children were fathered by a bear.” Alysane smiled. Her teeth were crooked, but there was something ingratiating about that smile. “Mormont women are skinchangers. We turn into bears and find mates in the woods. Everyone knows.”

Asha smiled back. “Mormont women are all fighters too.”

The other woman’s smile faded. “What we are is what you made us. On Bear Island every child learns to fear krakens rising from the sea.”

*The Old Way.* Asha turned away, chains *clinking* faintly. On the third day the forest pressed close around them, and the rutted roads dwindled down to game trails that soon proved to be too narrow for their larger wagons. Here and there they wound their way past familiar landmarks: a stony hill that looked a bit like a wolf’s head when seen from a certain angle, a half-frozen waterfall, a natural stone arch bearded with grey-green moss. Asha knew them all. She had come this way before, riding to Winterfell to persuade her



brother Theon to abandon his conquest and return with her to the safety of Deepwood Motte. *I failed in that as well.*

That day they made fourteen miles, and were glad of it.

When dusk fell, the driver pulled the wayn off under the tree. As he was loosing the horses from the traces, Ser Justin trotted up and undid the fetters around Asha's ankles. He and the She-Bear escorted her through the camp to the king's tent. A captive she might be, but she was still a Greyjoy of Pyke, and it pleased Stannis Baratheon to feed her scraps from his own table, where he supped with his captains and commanders.

The king's pavilion was near as large as the longhall back at Deepwood Motte, but there was little grand about it beyond its size. Its stiff walls of heavy yellow canvas were badly faded, stained by mud and water, with spots of mildew showing. Atop its center pole flew the royal standard, golden, with a stag's head within a burning heart. On three sides the pavilions of the southron lordlings who had come north with Stannis surrounded it. On the fourth side the nightfire roared, lashing at the darkening sky with swirls of flame.

A dozen men were splitting logs to feed the blaze when Asha came limping up with her keepers. *Queen's men.* Their god was Red R'hllor, and a jealous god he was. Her own god, the Drowned God of the Iron Isles, was a demon to their eyes, and if she did not embrace this Lord of Light, she would be damned and doomed. *They would as gladly burn me as those logs and broken branches.* Some had urged that very thing within her hearing after the battle in the woods. Stannis had refused.

The king stood outside his tent, staring into the nightfire. *What does he see there? Victory? Doom? The face of his red and hungry god?* His eyes were sunk in deep pits, his close-cropped beard no more than a shadow across his hollow cheeks and bony jawbone. Yet there was power in his stare, an iron ferocity that told Asha this man would never, ever turn back from his course.

She went to one knee before him. "Sire." *Am I humbled enough for you, Your Grace? Am I beaten, bowed, and broken sufficiently for your liking?*

“Strike these chains from my wrists, I beg you. Let me ride. I will attempt no escape.”

Stannis looked at her as he might look at a dog who presumed to hump against his leg. “You earned those irons.”

“I did. Now I offer you my men, my ships, my wits.”

“Your ships are mine, or burnt. Your men ... how many are left? Ten? Twelve?”

*Nine. Six, if you count only those strong enough to fight.* “Dagmer Cleftjaw holds Torrhen’s Square. A fierce fighter, and a leal servant of House Greyjoy. I can deliver that castle to you, and its garrison as well.” *Perhaps,* she might have added, but it would not serve her cause to show doubt before this king.

“Torrhen’s Square is not worth the mud beneath my heels. It is Winterfell that matters.”

“Strike off these irons and let me help you take it, Sire. Your Grace’s royal brother was renowned for turning fallen foes into friends. Make me your man.”

“The gods did not make you a man. How can I?” Stannis turned back to the nightfire and whatever he saw dancing there amongst the orange flames.

Ser Justin Massey grasped Asha by the arm and pulled her inside the royal tent. “That was ill judged, my lady,” he told her. “Never speak to him of Robert.”

*I should have known better.* Asha knew how it went with little brothers. She remembered Theon as a boy, a shy child who lived in awe, and fear, of Rodrik and Maron. *They never grow out of it,* she decided. *A little brother may live to be a hundred, but he will always be a little brother.* She rattled her iron jewelry and imagined how pleasant it would be to step up behind Stannis and throttle him with the chain that bound her wrists.

They supped that night on a venison stew made from a scrawny hart that a scout called Benjicot Branch had brought down. But only in the royal tent. Beyond those canvas walls, each man got a heel of bread and a chunk of black sausage no longer than a finger, washed down with the last of Galbart Glover's ale.

One hundred leagues from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell. Three hundred miles as the raven flies. "Would that we were ravens," Justin Massey said on the fourth day of the march, the day the snow began to fall. Only a few small flurries at first. Cold and wet, but nothing they could not push through easily.

But it snowed again the next day, and the day after, and the day after that. The thick beards of the wolves were soon caked with ice where their breath had frozen, and every clean-shaved southron boy was letting his whiskers grow out to keep his face warm. Before long the ground ahead of the column was blanketed in white, concealing stones and twisted roots and deadfalls, turning every step into an adventure. The wind picked up as well, driving the snow before it. The king's host became a column of snowmen, staggering through knee-high drifts.

On the third day of snow, the king's host began to come apart. Whilst the southron knights and lordlings struggled, the men of the northern hills fared better. Their garrons were sure-footed beasts that ate less than palfreys, and much less than the big destriers, and the men who rode them were at home in the snow. Many of the wolves donned curious footwear. Bear-paws, they called them, queer elongated things made with bent wood and leather strips. Lashed onto the bottoms of their boots, the things somehow allowed them to walk on top of the snow without breaking through the crust and sinking down to their thighs.

Some had bear-paws for their horses too, and the shaggy little garrons wore them as easily as other mounts wore iron horseshoes ... but the palfreys and destriers wanted no part of them. When a few of the king's knights strapped them onto their feet nonetheless, the big southern horses balked and refused to move, or tried to shake the things off their feet. One destrier broke an ankle trying to walk in them.

The northmen on their bear-paws soon began to outdistance the rest of the host. They overtook the knights in the main column, then Ser Godry Farring and his vanguard. And meanwhile, the wayns and wagons of the baggage train were falling farther and farther behind, so much so that the men of the rear guard were constantly chivvying them to keep up a faster pace.

On the fifth day of the storm, the baggage train crossed a rippling expanse of waist-high snowdrifts that concealed a frozen pond. When the hidden ice cracked beneath the weight of the wagons, three teamsters and four horses were swallowed up by the freezing water, along with two of the men who tried to rescue them. One was Harwood Fell. His knights pulled him out before he drowned, but not before his lips turned blue and his skin as pale as milk. Nothing they did could seem to warm him afterward. He shivered violently for hours, even when they cut him out of his sodden clothes, wrapped him in warm furs, and sat him by the fire. That same night he slipped into a feverish sleep. He never woke.

That was the night that Asha first heard the queen's men muttering about a sacrifice—an offering to their red god, so he might end the storm. “The gods of the north have unleashed this storm on us,” Ser Corliss Penny said.

“False gods,” insisted Ser Godry, the Giantslayer. “R'hllor is with us,” said Ser Clayton Suggs. “Melisandre is not,” said Justin Massey.

The king said nothing. But he heard. Asha was certain of that. He sat at the high table as a dish of onion soup cooled before him, hardly tasted, staring at the flame of the nearest candle with those hooded eyes, ignoring the talk around him. The second-in-command, the lean tall knight named Richard Horpe, spoke for him. “The storm must break soon,” he declared.

But the storm only worsened. The wind became a lash as cruel as any slaver's whip. Asha thought she had known cold on Pyke, when the wind came howling off the sea, but that was nothing compared to this. *This is a cold that drives men mad.*

Even when the shout came down the line to make camp for the night, it was no easy thing to warm yourself. The tents were damp and heavy, hard to raise, harder to take down, and prone to sudden collapse if too much snow

accumulated on top of them. The king's host was creeping through the heart of the largest forest in the Seven Kingdoms, yet dry wood became difficult to find. Every camp saw fewer fires burning, and those that were lit threw off more smoke than heat. Oft as not food was eaten cold, even raw.

Even the nightfire shrank and grew feeble, to the dismay of the queen's men. "*Lord of Light, preserve us from this evil,*" they prayed, led by the deep voice of Ser Godry the Giantslayer. "*Show us your bright sun again, still these winds, and melt these snows, that we may reach your foes and smite them. The night is dark and cold and full of terrors, but yours is the power and glory and the light. R'hllor, fill us with your fire.*"

Later, when Ser Corliss Penny wondered aloud whether an entire army had ever frozen to death in a winter storm, the wolves laughed. "This is no winter," declared Big Bucket Wull. "Up in the hills we say that autumn kisses you, but winter fucks you hard. This is only autumn's kiss."

*God grant that I never know true winter, then.* Asha herself was spared the worst of it; she was the king's prize, after all. Whilst others hungered, she was fed. Whilst others shivered, she was warm. Whilst others struggled through the snows atop weary horses, she rode upon a bed of furs inside a wayn, with a stiff canvas roof to keep the snow off, comfortable in her chains.

The horses and the common men had it hardest. Two squires from the stormlands stabbed a man-at-arms to death in a quarrel over who would sit closest to the fire. The next night some archers desperate for warmth somehow managed to set their tent afire, which had at least the virtue of heating the adjacent tents. Destriers began to perish of exhaustion and exposure. "What is a knight without a horse?" men riddled. "A snowman with a sword." Any horse that went down was butchered on the spot for meat. Their provisions had begun to run low as well.

Peasebury, Cobb, Foxglove, and other southron lords urged the king to make camp until the storm had passed. Stannis would have none of that. Nor would he heed the queen's men when they came to urge him to make an offering to their hungry red god.

That tale she had from Justin Massey, who was less devout than most. “A sacrifice will prove our faith still burns true, Sire,” Clayton Suggs had told the king. And Godry the Giantslayer said, “The old gods of the north have sent this storm upon us. Only R’hllor can end it. We must give him an unbeliever.”

“Half my army is made up of unbelievers,” Stannis had replied. “I will have no burnings. Pray harder.”

*No burnings today, and none tomorrow ... but if the snows continue, how long before the king’s resolve begins to weaken?* Asha had never shared her uncle Aeron’s faith in the Drowned God, but that night she prayed as fervently to He Who Dwells Beneath the Waves as ever the Damphair had. The storm did not abate. The march continued, slowing to a stagger, then a crawl. Five miles was a good day. Then three. Then two.

By the ninth day of the storm, every camp saw the captains and commanders entering the king’s tent wet and weary, to sink to one knee and report their losses for the day.

“One man dead, three missing.”

“Six horses lost, one of them mine own.”

“Two dead men, one a knight. Four horses down. We got one up again. The others are lost. Destriers, and one palfrey.”

*The cold count*, Asha heard it named. The baggage train suffered the worst: dead horses, lost men, wayns overturned and broken. “The horses founder in the snow,” Justin Massey told the king. “Men wander off or just sit down to die.”

“Let them,” King Stannis snapped. “We press on.”

The northmen fared much better, with their garrons and their bear-paws. Black Donnel Flint and his half-brother Artos only lost one man between them. The Liddles, the Wulls, and the Norreys lost none at all. One of

Morgan Liddle's mules had gone astray, but he seemed to think the Flints had stolen him.

*One hundred leagues from Deepwood Motte to Winterfell. Three hundred miles as the raven flies. Fifteen days.* The fifteenth day of the march came and went, and they had crossed less than half the distance. A trail of broken wayns and frozen corpses stretched back behind them, buried beneath the blowing snow. The sun and moon and stars had been gone so long that Asha was starting to wonder whether she had dreamed them.

It was the twentieth day of the advance when she finally won free of her ankle chains. Late that afternoon, one of the horses drawing her wayn died in the traces. No replacement could be found; what draft horses remained were needed to pull the wagons that held their food and fodder. When Ser Justin Massey rode up, he told them to butcher the dead horse for meat and break up the wagon for firewood. Then he removed the fetters around Asha's ankles, rubbing the stiffness from her calves. "I have no mount to give you, my lady," he said, "and if we tried to ride double, it would be the end of my horse as well. You must walk."

Asha's ankle throbbed beneath her weight with every step. *The cold will numb it soon enough*, she told herself. *In an hour I won't feel my feet at all.* She was only part wrong; it took less time than that. By the time darkness halted the column, she was stumbling and yearning for the comforts of her rolling prison. *The irons made me weak.* Supper found her so exhausted that she fell asleep at the table.

On the twenty-sixth day of the fifteen-day march, the last of the vegetables was consumed. On the thirty-second day, the last of the grain and fodder. Asha wondered how long a man could live on raw, half-frozen horse meat.

"Branch swears we are only three days from Winterfell," Ser Richard Horpe told the king that night after the cold count.

"If we leave the weakest men behind," said Corliss Penny. "The weakest men are beyond saving," insisted Horpe. "Those still strong enough must reach Winterfell or die as well."

“The Lord of Light will deliver us the castle,” said Ser Godry Farring. “If Lady Melisandre were with us—”

Finally, after a nightmarish day when the column advanced a bare mile and lost a dozen horses and four men, Lord Peasebury turned against the northmen. “This march was madness. More dying every day, and for what? Some girl?”

“Ned’s girl,” said Morgan Liddle. He was the second of three sons, so the other wolves called him Middle Liddle, though not often in his hearing. It was Morgan who had almost slain Asha in the fight by Deepwood Motte. He had come to her later, on the march, to beg her pardon ... for calling her *cunt* in his battle lust, not for trying to split her head open with an axe.

“Ned’s girl,” echoed Big Bucket Wull. “And we should have had her and the castle both if you prancing southron jackanapes didn’t piss your satin breeches at a little snow.”

“A *little* snow?” Peasebury’s soft girlish mouth twisted in fury. “Your ill counsel forced this march upon us, Wull. I am starting to suspect you have been Bolton’s creature all along. Is that the way of it? Did he send you to us to whisper poison in the king’s ear?”

Big Bucket laughed in his face. “Lord Pea Pod. If you were a man, I would kill you for that, but my sword is made of too fine a steel to besmirch with craven’s blood.” He took a drink of ale and wiped his mouth. “Aye, men are dying. More will die before we see Winterfell. What of it? This is war. Men die in war. That is as it should be. As it has always been.”

Ser Corliss Penny gave the clan chief an incredulous look. “Do you *want* to die, Wull?”

That seemed to amuse the northman. “I want to live forever in a land where summer lasts a thousand years. I want a castle in the clouds where I can look down over the world. I want to be six-and-twenty again. When I was six-and-twenty I could fight all day and fuck all night. What men want does not matter.



“Winter is almost upon us, boy. And winter is death. I would sooner my men die fighting for the Ned’s little girl than alone and hungry in the snow, weeping tears that freeze upon their cheeks. No one sings songs of men who die like that. As for me, I am old. This will be my last winter. Let me bathe in Bolton blood before I die. I want to feel it spatter across my face when my axe bites deep into a Bolton skull. I want to lick it off my lips and die with the taste of it on my tongue.”

“*Aye!*” shouted Morgan Liddle. “*Blood and battle!*” Then all the hill-men were shouting, banging their cups and drinking horns on the table, filling the king’s tent with the clangor.

Asha Greyjoy would have welcomed a fight herself. *One battle, to put an end to this misery. Steel on steel, pink snow, broken shields and severed limbs, and it would all be done.*

The next day the king’s scouts chanced upon an abandoned crofters’ village between two lakes—a mean and meagre place, no more than a few huts, a longhall, and a watchtower. Richard Horpe commanded a halt, though the army had advanced no more than a half-mile that day and they were hours shy of dark. It was well past moonrise before the baggage train and rear guard straggled in. Asha was amongst them.

“There are fish in those lakes,” Horpe told the king. “We’ll cut holes in the ice. The northmen know how it’s done.”

Even in his bulky fur cloak and heavy armor, Stannis looked like a man with one foot in the grave. What little flesh he’d carried on his tall, spare frame at Deepwood Motte had melted away during the march. The shape of his skull could be seen under his skin, and his jaw was clenched so hard Asha feared his teeth might shatter. “Fish, then,” he said, biting off each word with a snap. “But we march at first light.”

Yet when light came, the camp woke to snow and silence. The sky turned from black to white, and seemed no brighter. Asha Greyjoy awoke cramped and cold beneath the pile of sleeping furs, listening to the She-Bear’s snores. She had never known a woman to snore so loudly, but she had grown used to it whilst on the march, and even took some comfort in it now.

It was the silence that troubled her. No trumpets blew to rouse the men to mount up, form column, prepare to march. No warhorns summoned forth the northmen. *Something is wrong.*

Asha crawled out from under her sleeping furs and pushed her way out of the tent, knocking aside the wall of snow that had sealed them in during the night. Her irons *clanked* as she climbed to her feet and took a breath of the icy morning air. The snow was still falling, even more heavily than when she'd crawled inside the tent. The lakes had vanished, and the woods as well. She could see the shapes of other tents and lean-tos and the fuzzy orange glow of the beacon fire burning atop the watchtower, but not the tower itself. The storm had swallowed the rest.

Somewhere ahead Roose Bolton awaited them behind the walls of Winterfell, but Stannis Baratheon's host sat snowbound and unmoving, walled in by ice and snow, starving.