

# THE BLIND GIRL

Her nights were lit by distant stars and the shimmer of moonlight on snow, but every dawn she woke to darkness.

She opened her eyes and stared up blind at the black that shrouded her, her dream already fading. *So beautiful.* She licked her lips, remembering. The bleating of the sheep, the terror in the shepherd's eyes, the sound the dogs had made as she killed them one by one, the snarling of her pack. Game had become scarcer since the snows began to fall, but last night they had feasted. Lamb and dog and mutton and the flesh of man. Some of her little grey cousins were afraid of men, even dead men, but not her. Meat was meat, and men were prey. She was the night wolf.

But only when she dreamed.

The blind girl rolled onto her side, sat up, sprang to her feet, stretched. Her bed was a rag-stuffed mattress on a shelf of cold stone, and she was always stiff and tight when she awakened. She padded to her basin on small, bare, callused feet, silent as a shadow, splashed cool water on her face, patted herself dry. *Ser Gregor*, she thought. *Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling. Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei.* Her morning prayer. Or was it? *No*, she thought, *not mine. I am no one. That is the night wolf's prayer. Someday she will find them, hunt them, smell their fear, taste their blood. Someday.*

She found her smallclothes in a pile, sniffed at them to make sure they were fresh enough to wear, donned them in her darkness. Her servant's garb was where she'd hung it—a long tunic of undyed wool, roughspun and scratchy. She snapped it out and pulled it down over her head with one smooth practiced motion. Socks came last. One black, one white. The black one had stitching round the top, the white none; she could feel which was which, make sure she got each sock on the right leg. Skinny as they were, her legs were strong and springy and growing longer every day.

She was glad of that. A water dancer needs good legs. Blind Beth was no water dancer, but she would not be Beth forever.

She knew the way to the kitchens, but her nose would have led her there even if she hadn't. *Hot peppers and fried fish*, she decided, sniffing down the hall, *and bread fresh from Umma's oven*. The smells made her belly rumble. The night wolf had feasted, but that would not fill the blind girl's belly. Dream meat could not nourish her, she had learned that early on.

She broke her fast on sardines, fried crisp in pepper oil and served so hot they burned her fingers. She mopped up the leftover oil with a chunk of bread torn off the end of Umma's morning loaf and washed it all down with a cup of watered wine, savoring the tastes and the smells, the rough feel of the crust beneath her fingers, the slickness of the oil, the sting of the hot pepper when it got into the half-healed scrape on the back of the hand. *Hear, smell, taste, feel*, she reminded herself. *There are many ways to know the world for those who cannot see.*

Someone had entered the room behind her, moving on soft padded slippers quiet as a mouse. Her nostrils flared. *The kindly man*. Men had a different smell than women, and there was a hint of orange in the air as well. The priest was fond of chewing orange rinds to sweeten his breath, whenever he could get them.

"And who are you this morning?" she heard him ask, as he took his seat at the head of the table. *Tap, tap*, she heard, then a tiny crackling sound. *Breaking his first egg.*

"No one," she replied. "A lie. I know you. You are that blind beggar girl."

"Beth." She had known a Beth once, back at Winterfell when she was Arya Stark. Maybe that was why she'd picked the name. Or maybe it was just because it went so well with *blind*.

"Poor child," said the kindly man. "Would you like to have your eyes back? Ask, and you shall see."

He asked the same question every morning. "I may want them on the morrow. Not today." Her face was still water, hiding all, revealing nothing.

“As you will.” She could hear him peeling the egg, then a faint silvery *clink* as he picked up the salt spoon. He liked his eggs well salted. “Where did my poor blind girl go begging last night?”

“The Inn of the Green Eel.”

“And what three new things do you know that you did not know when last you left us?”

“The Sealord is still sick.”

“This is no new thing. The Sealord was sick yesterday, and he will still be sick upon the morrow.”

“Or dead.”

“When he is dead, that will be a new thing.”

*When he is dead, there will be a choosing, and the knives will come out.* That was the way of it in Braavos. In Westeros, a dead king was followed by his eldest son, but the Braavosi had no kings. “Tormo Fregar will be the new sealord.”

“Is that what they are saying at the Inn of the Green Eel?”

“Yes.”

The kindly man took a bite of his egg. The girl heard him chewing. He never spoke with his mouth full. He swallowed, and said, “Some men say there is wisdom in wine. Such men are fools. At other inns other names are being bruited about, never doubt.” He took another bite of egg, chewed, swallowed. “What three new things do you *know*, that you did not know before?”

“I *know* that some men are *saying* that Tormo Fregar will surely be the new sealord,” she answered. “Some drunken men.”

“Better. And what else do you know?”

*It is snowing in the riverlands, in Westeros,* she almost said. But he would have asked her how she knew that, and she did not think that he would like her answer. She chewed her lip, thinking back to last night. “The whore S’vrone is with child. She is not certain of the father, but thinks it might have been that Tyroshi sellsword that she killed.”

“This is good to know. What else?”

“The Merling Queen has chosen a new Mermaid to take the place of the one that drowned. She is the daughter of a Prestayn serving maid, thirteen and penniless, but lovely.”

“So are they all, at the beginning,” said the priest, “but you cannot know that she is lovely unless you have seen her with your own eyes, and you have none. Who are you, child?”

“No one.”

“Blind Beth the beggar girl is who I see. She is a wretched liar, that one. See to your duties. *Valar morghulis.*”

“*Valar dohaeris.*” She gathered up her bowl and cup, knife and spoon, and pushed to her feet. Last of all she grasped her stick. It was five feet long, slender and supple, thick as her thumb, with leather wrapped around the shaft a foot from the top. *Better than eyes, once you learn how to use it,* the waif had told her.

That was a lie. They often lied to her, to test her. No stick was better than a pair of eyes. It was good to have, though, so she always kept it close. Umma had taken to calling her Stick, but names did not matter. She was her. *No one. I am no one. Just a blind girl, just a servant of Him of Many Faces.*

Each night at supper the waif brought her a cup of milk and told her to drink it down. The drink had a queer, bitter taste that the blind girl soon learned to loathe. Even the faint smell that warned her what it was before it touched her tongue soon made her feel like retching, but she drained the cup all the same.

“How long must I be blind?” she would ask. “Until darkness is as sweet to you as light,” the waif would say, “or until you ask us for your eyes. Ask and you shall see.”

*And then you will send me away.* Better blind than that. They would not make her yield.

On the day she had woken blind, the waif took her by the hand and led her through the vaults and tunnels of the rock on which the House of Black and White was built, up the steep stone steps into the temple proper. “Count the steps as you climb,” she had said. “Let your fingers brush the wall. There are markings there, invisible to the eye, plain to the touch.”

That was her first lesson. There had been many more.

Poisons and potions were for the afternoons. She had smell and touch and taste to help her, but touch and taste could be perilous when grinding poisons, and with some of the waif’s more toxic concoctions even smell was less than safe. Burned pinky tips and blistered lips became familiar to her, and once she made herself so sick she could not keep down any food for days.

Supper was for language lessons. The blind girl understood Braavosi and could speak it passably, she had even lost most of her barbaric accent, but the kindly man was not content. He was insisting that she improve her High Valyrian and learn the tongues of Lys and Pentos too.

In the evening she played the lying game with the waif, but without eyes to see the game was very different. Sometimes all she had to go on was tone and choice of words; other times the waif allowed her to lay hands upon her face. At first the game was much, much harder, the next thing to impossible ... but just when she was near the point of screaming with frustration, it all became much easier. She learned to *hear* the lies, to feel them in the play of the muscles around the mouth and eyes.

Many of her other duties had remained the same, but as she went about them she stumbled over furnishings, walked into walls, dropped trays, got hopelessly helplessly lost inside the temple. Once she almost fell head-long

down the steps, but Syrio Forel had taught her balance in another lifetime, when she was the girl called Arya, and somehow she recovered and caught herself in time.

Some nights she might have cried herself to sleep if she had still been Arry or Weasel or Cat, or even Arya of House Stark ... but no one had no tears. Without eyes, even the simplest task was perilous. She burned herself a dozen times as she worked with Umma in the kitchens. Once, chopping onions, she cut her finger down to the bone. Twice she could not even find her own room in the cellar and had to sleep on the floor at the base of the steps. All the nooks and alcoves made the temple treacherous, even after the blind girl had learned to use her ears; the way her footsteps bounced off the ceiling and echoed round the legs of the thirty tall stone gods made the walls themselves seem to move, and the pool of still black water did strange things to sound as well.

“You have five senses,” the kindly man said. “Learn to use the other four, you will have fewer cuts and scrapes and scabs.”

She could feel air currents on her skin now. She could find the kitchens by their smell, tell men from women by their scents. She knew Umma and the servants and the acolytes by the pattern of their footfalls, could tell one from the other before they got close enough to smell (but not the waif or the kindly man, who hardly made a sound at all unless they wanted to). The candles burning in the temple had scents as well; even the unscented ones gave off faint wisps of smoke from their wicks. They had as well been shouting, once she had learned to use her nose.

The dead men had their own smell too. One of her duties was to find them in the temple every morning, wherever they had chosen to lie down and close their eyes after drinking from the pool.

This morning she found two.

One man had died at the feet of the Stranger, a single candle flickering above him. She could feel its heat, and the scent that it gave off tickled her nose. The candle burned with a dark red flame, she knew; for those with eyes, the corpse would have seemed awash in a ruddy glow. Before

summoning the serving men to carry him away, she knelt and felt his face, tracing the line of his jaw, brushing her fingers across his cheeks and nose, touching his hair. *Curly hair, and thick. A handsome face, unlined. He was young.* She wondered what had brought him here to seek the gift of death. Dying bravos oft found their way to the House of Black and White, to hasten their ends, but this man had no wounds that she could find.

The second body was that of an old woman. She had gone to sleep upon a dreaming couch, in one of the hidden alcoves where special candles conjured visions of things loved and lost. A sweet death and a gentle one, the kindly man was fond of saying. Her fingers told her that the old woman had died with a smile on her face. She had not been dead long. Her body was still warm to the touch. *Her skin is so soft, like old thin leather that's been folded and wrinkled a thousand times.*

When the serving men arrived to bear the corpse away, the blind girl followed them. She let their footsteps be her guide, but when they made their descent she counted. She knew the counts of all the steps by heart. Under the temple was a maze of vaults and tunnels where even men with two good eyes were often lost, but the blind girl had learned every inch of it, and she had her stick to help her find her way should her memory falter.

The corpses were laid out in the vault. The blind girl went to work in the dark, stripping the dead of boots and clothes and other possessions, emptying their purses and counting out their coins. Telling one coin from another by touch alone was one of the first things the waif had taught her, after they took away her eyes. The Braavosi coins were old friends; she need only brush her fingertips across their faces to recognize them. Coins from other lands and cities were harder, especially those from far away. Volantene honors were most common, little coins no bigger than a penny with a crown on one side and a skull on the other. Lysene coins were oval and showed a naked woman. Other coins had ships stamped onto them, or elephants, or goats. The Westerosi coins showed a king's head on the front and a dragon on the back.

The old woman had no purse, no wealth at all but for a ring on one thin finger. On the handsome man she found four golden dragons out of Westeros. She was running the ball of her thumb across the most worn of

them, trying to decide which king it showed, when she heard the door opening softly behind her.

“Who is there?” she asked. “No one.” The voice was deep, harsh, cold.

And moving. She stepped to one side, grabbed for her stick, snapped it up to protect her face. Wood *clacked* against wood. The force of the blow almost knocked the stick from her hand. She held on, slashed back ... and found only empty air where he should have been. “Not there,” the voice said. “Are you blind?”

She did not answer. Talking would only muddle any sounds he might be making. He would be moving, she knew. *Left or right?* She jumped left, swung right, hit nothing. A stinging cut from behind her caught her in the back of the legs. “Are you deaf?” She spun, the stick in her left hand, whirling, missing. From the left she heard the sound of laughter. She slashed right.

This time she connected. Her stick smacked off his own. The impact sent a jolt up her arm. “Good,” the voice said.

The blind girl did not know whom the voice belonged to. One of the acolytes, she supposed. She did not remember ever hearing his voice before, but what was there to say that the servants of the Many-Faced God could not change their voices as easily as they did their faces? Besides her, the House of Black and White was home to two serving men, three acolytes, Umma the cook, and the two priests that she called the waif and the kindly man. Others came and went, sometimes by secret ways, but those were the only ones who lived here. Her nemesis could be any of them.

The girl darted sideways, her stick spinning, heard a sound behind her, whirled in that direction, struck at air. And all at once his own stick was between her legs, tangling them as she tried to turn again, scraping down her shin. She stumbled and went down to one knee, so hard she bit her tongue.

There she stopped. *Still as stone. Where is he?*



Behind her, he laughed. He rapped her smartly on one ear, then cracked her knuckles as she was scrambling to her feet. Her stick fell clattering to the stone. She hissed in fury.

“Go on. Pick it up. I am done beating you for today.”

“No one beat me.” The girl crawled on all fours until she found her stick, then sprang back to her feet, bruised and dirty. The vault was still and silent. He was gone. Or was he? He could be standing right beside her, she would never know. *Listen for his breathing*, she told herself, but there was nothing. She gave it another moment, then put her stick aside and resumed her work. *If I had my eyes, I could beat him bloody*. One day the kindly man would give them back, and she would show them all.

The old woman’s corpse was cool by now, the bravo’s body stiffening. The girl was used to that. Most days, she spent more time with the dead than with the living. She missed the friends she’d had when she was Cat of the Canals; Old Brusco with his bad back, his daughters Talea and Brea, the mummers from the Ship, Merry and her whores at the Happy Port, all the other rogues and wharfside scum. She missed Cat herself the most of all, even more than she missed her eyes. She had liked being Cat, more than she had ever liked being Salty or Squab or Weasel or Arry. *I killed Cat when I killed that singer*. The kindly man had told her that they would have taken her eyes from her anyway, to help her to learn to use her other senses, but not for half a year. Blind acolytes were common in the House of Black and White, but few as young as she. The girl was not sorry, though. Dareon had been a deserter from the Night’s Watch; he had deserved to die.

She had said as much to the kindly man. “And are you a god, to decide who should live and who should die?” he asked her. “We give the gift to those marked by Him of Many Faces, after prayers and sacrifice. So has it always been, from the beginning. I have told you of the founding of our order, of how the first of us answered the prayers of slaves who wished for death. The gift was given only to those who yearned for it, in the beginning ... but one day, the first of us heard a slave praying not for his own death but for his master’s. So fervently did he desire this that he offered all he had, that his prayer might be answered. And it seemed to our first brother that this sacrifice would be pleasing to Him of Many Faces, so that night he granted

the prayer. Then he went to the slave and said, ‘You offered all you had for this man’s death, but slaves have nothing but their lives. That is what the god desires of you. For the rest of your days on earth, you will serve him.’ And from that moment, we were two.” His hand closed around her arm, gently but firmly. “All men must die. We are but death’s instruments, not death himself. When you slew the singer, you took god’s powers on yourself. We kill men, but we do not presume to judge them. Do you understand?”

*No*, she thought. “Yes,” she said. “You lie. And that is why you must now walk in darkness until you see the way. Unless you wish to leave us. You need only ask, and you may have your eyes back.”

*No*, she thought. “No,” she said.

That evening, after supper and a short session of the lying game, the blind girl tied a strip of rag around her head to hide her useless eyes, found her begging bowl, and asked the waif to help her don Beth’s face. The waif had shaved her head for her when they took her eyes; a mummer’s cut, she called it, since many mummers did the same so their wigs might fit them better. But it worked for beggars too and helped to keep their heads free from fleas and lice. More than a wig was needed, though. “I could cover you with weeping sores,” the waif said, “but then innkeepers and taverners would chase you from their doors.” Instead she gave her pox scars and a mummer’s mole on one cheek with a dark hair growing from it. “Is it ugly?” the blind girl asked.

“It is not pretty.”

“Good.” She had never cared if she was pretty, even when she was stupid Arya Stark. Only her father had ever called her that. *Him, and Jon*

*Snow, sometimes.* Her mother used to say she *could* be pretty if she would just wash and brush her hair and take more care with her dress, the way her sister did. To her sister and sister’s friends and all the rest, she had just been Arya Horseface. But they were all dead now, even Arya, everyone but her half-brother, Jon. Some nights she heard talk of him, in the taverns and brothels of the Ragman’s Harbor. The Black Bastard of the Wall, one man

had called him. *Even Jon would never know Blind Beth, I bet.* That made her sad.

The clothes she wore were rags, faded and fraying, but warm clean rags for all that. Under them she hid three knives—one in a boot, one up a sleeve, one sheathed at the small of her back. Braavosi were a kindly folk, by and large, more like to help the poor blind beggar girl than try to do her harm, but there were always a few bad ones who might see her as someone they could safely rob or rape. The blades were for them, though so far the blind girl had not been forced to use them. A cracked wooden begging bowl and belt of hempen rope completed her garb.

She set out as the Titan roared the sunset, counting her way down the steps from the temple door, then tapping to the bridge that took her over the canal to the Isle of the Gods. She could tell that the fog was thick from the clammy way her clothes clung to her and the damp feeling of the air on her bare hands. The mists of Braavos did queer things to sounds as well, she had found. *Half the city will be half-blind tonight.*

As she made her way past the temples, she could hear the acolytes of the Cult of Starry Wisdom atop their scrying tower, singing to the evening stars. A wisp of scented smoke hung in the air, drawing her down the winding path to where the red priests had fired the great iron braziers outside the house of the Lord of Light. Soon she could even feel the heat in the air, as red R'hllor's worshipers lifted their voices in prayer. *"For the night is dark and full of terrors,"* they prayed.

*Not for me.* Her nights were bathed in moonlight and filled with the songs of her pack, with the taste of red meat torn off the bone, with the warm familiar smells of her grey cousins. Only during the days was she alone and blind.

She was no stranger to the waterfront. Cat used to prowl the wharves and alleys of the Ragman's Harbor selling mussels and oysters and clams for Brusco. With her rag and her shaved head and her mummer's mole, she did not look the same as she had then, but just to be safe she stayed away from the Ship and the Happy Port and the other places where Cat had been best known.

She knew each inn and tavern by its scent. The Black Bargeman had a briny smell. Pynto's stank of sour wine, stinky cheese, and Pynto himself, who never changed his clothes or washed his hair. At the Sailmender's the smoky air was always spiced with the scent of roasting meat. The House of Seven Lamps was fragrant with incense, the Satin Palace with the perfumes of pretty young girls who dreamed of being courtesans.

Each place had its own sounds too. Moroggo's and the Inn of the Green Eel had singers performing most nights. At the Outcast Inn the patrons themselves did the singing, in drunken voices and half a hundred tongues. The Foghouse was always crowded with polemen off the serpent boats, arguing about gods and courtesans and whether or not the Sealord was a fool. The Satin Palace was much quieter, a place of whispered endearments, the soft rustle of silk gowns, and the giggling of girls.

Beth did her begging at a different place every night. She had learned early on that innkeepers and taverners were more apt to tolerate her presence if it was not a frequent occurrence. Last night she had spent outside the Inn of the Green Eel, so tonight she turned right instead of left after the Bloody Bridge and made her way to Pynto's at the other end of Ragman's Harbor, right on the edge of the Drowned Town. Loud and smelly he might be, but Pynto had a soft heart under all his unwashed clothes and bluster. Oft as not, he would let her come inside where it was warm if the place was not too crowded, and now and again he might even let her have a mug of ale and a crust of food whilst regaling her with his stories. In his younger days Pynto had been the most notorious pirate in the Step-stones, to hear him tell it; he loved nothing better than to speak at great length about his exploits.

She was in luck tonight. The tavern was near empty, and she was able to claim a quiet corner not far from the fire. No sooner had she settled there and crossed her legs than something brushed up against her thigh. "You again?" said the blind girl. She scratched his head behind one ear, and the cat jumped up into her lap and began to purr. Braavos was full of cats, and no place more than Pynto's. The old pirate believed they brought good luck and kept his tavern free of vermin. "You know me, don't you?" she whispered. Cats were not fooled by a mummer's moles. They remembered Cat of the Canals.

It was a good night for the blind girl. Pynto was in a jolly mood and gave her a cup of watered wine, a chunk of stinky cheese, and half of an eel pie. “Pynto is a very good man,” he announced, then settled down to tell her of the time he seized the spice ship, a tale she had heard a dozen times before.

As the hours passed the tavern filled. Pynto was soon too busy to pay her any mind, but several of his regulars dropped coins into her begging bowl. Other tables were occupied by strangers: Ibbenese whalers who reeked of blood and blubber, a pair of bravos with scented oil in their hair, a fat man out of Lorath who complained that Pynto’s booths were too small for his belly. And later three Lyseni, sailors off the *Goodheart*, a storm-wracked galley that had limped into Braavos last night and been seized this morning by the Sealord’s guards.

The Lyseni took the table nearest to the fire and spoke quietly over cups of black tar rum, keeping their voices low so no one could overhear. But she was no one and she heard most every word. And for a time it seemed that she could see them too, through the slitted yellow eyes of the tomcat purring in her lap. One was old and one was young and one had lost an ear, but all three had the white-blond hair and smooth fair skin of Lys, where the blood of the old Freehold still ran strong.

The next morning, when the kindly man asked her what three things she knew that she had not known before, she was ready.

“I know why the Sealord seized the *Goodheart*. She was carrying slaves. Hundreds of slaves, women and children, roped together in her hold.” Braavos had been founded by escaped slaves, and the slave trade was forbidden here.

“I know where the slaves came from. They were wildlings from West-eros, from a place called Hardhome. An old ruined place, accursed.” Old Nan had told her tales of Hardhome, back at Winterfell when she had still been Arya Stark. “After the big battle where the King-Beyond-the-Wall was killed, the wildlings ran away, and this woods witch said that if they went to Hardhome, ships would come and carry them away to someplace warm. But no ships came, except these two Lyseni pirates, *Goodheart* and *Elephant*, that had been driven north by a storm. They dropped anchor off Hardhome

to make repairs, and saw the wildlings, but there were thousands and they didn't have room for all of them, so they said they'd just take the women and the children. The wildlings had nothing to eat, so the men sent out their wives and daughters, but as soon as the ships were out to sea, the Lyseni drove them below and roped them up. They meant to sell them all in Lys. Only then they ran into another storm and the ships were parted. The *Goodheart* was so damaged her captain had no choice but to put in here, but the *Elephant* may have made it back to Lys. The Lyseni at Pynto's think that she'll return with more ships. The price of slaves is rising, they said, and there are thousands more women and children at Hardhome."

"It is good to know. This is two. Is there a third?"

"Yes. I know that you're the one who has been hitting me." Her stick flashed out, and cracked against his fingers, sending his own stick clattering to the floor.

The priest winced and snatched his hand back. "And how could a blind girl know that?"

*I saw you.* "I gave you three. I don't need to give you four." Maybe on the morrow she would tell him about the cat that had followed her home last night from Pynto's, the cat that was hiding in the rafters, looking down on them. *Or maybe not.* If he could have secrets, so could she.

That evening Umma served salt-crusted crabs for supper. When her cup was presented to her, the blind girl wrinkled her nose and drank it down in three long gulps. Then she gasped and dropped the cup. Her tongue was on fire, and when she gulped a cup of wine the flames spread down her throat and up her nose.

"Wine will not help, and water will just fan the flames," the waif told her. "Eat this." A heel of bread was pressed into her hand. The girl stuffed it in her mouth, chewed, swallowed. It helped. A second chunk helped more.

And come the morning, when the night wolf left her and she opened her eyes, she saw a tallow candle burning where no candle had been the night

before, its uncertain flame swaying back and forth like a whore at the Happy Port. She had never seen anything so beautiful.