

ARYA

The river was a blue-green ribbon shining in the morning sun. Reeds grew thick in the shallows along the banks, and Arya saw a water snake skimming across the surface, ripples spreading out behind it as it went. Overhead a hawk flew in lazy circles.

It seemed a peaceful place... until Koss spotted the dead man. "There, in the reeds." He pointed, and Arya saw it. The body of a soldier, shapeless and swollen. His sodden green cloak had hung up on a rotted log, and a school of tiny silver fishes were nibbling at his face. "I told you there was bodies," Lommy announced. "I could taste them in that water."

When Yoren saw the corpse, he spat. "Dobber, see if he's got anything worth the taking. Mail, knife, a bit o' coin, what have you." He spurred his gelding and rode out into the river, but the horse struggled in the soft mud and beyond the reeds the water deepened. Yoren rode back angry, his horse covered in brown slime up to the knees. "We won't be crossing here. Koss, you'll come with me upriver, look for a ford. Woth, Gerren, you go downstream. The rest o' you wait here. Put a guard out."

Dobber found a leather purse in the dead man's belt. Inside were four coppers and a little hank of blond hair tied up with a red ribbon. Lommy and Tarber stripped naked and went wading, and Lommy scooped up handfuls of slimy mud and threw them at Hot Pie, shouting, "Mud Pie! Mud Pie!" In the back of their wagon, Rorge cursed and threatened and told them to unchain him while Yoren was gone, but no one paid him any mind. Kurz caught a fish with his bare hands. Arya saw how he did it, standing over a shallow pool, calm as still water, his hand darting out quick as a snake when the fish swam near. It didn't look as hard as catching cats. Fish didn't have claws.

It was midday when the others returned. Woth reported a wooden bridge half a mile downstream, but someone had burned it up. Yoren peeled a sourleaf off the bale. "Might be we could swim the horses over, maybe the donkeys, but there's no way we'll get those wagons across. And there's

smoke to the north and west, more fires, could be this side o' the river's the place we want to be." He picked up a long stick and drew a circle in the mud, a line trailing down from it. "That's Gods Eye, with the river flowing south. We're here." He poked a hole beside the line of the river, under the circle. "We can't go round west of the lake, like I thought. East takes us back to the kingsroad." He moved the stick up to where the line and circle met. "Near as I recall, there's a town here. The holdfast's stone, and there's a lordling got his seat there too, just a towerhouse, but he'll have a guard, might be a knight or two. We follow the river north, should be there before dark. They'll have boats, so I mean to sell all we got and hire us one." He drew the stick up through the circle of the lake, from bottom to top. "Gods be good, we'll find a wind and sail across the Gods Eye to Harrentown." He thrust the point down at the top of the circle. "We can buy new mounts there, or else take shelter at Harrenhal. That's Lady Whent's seat, and she's always been a friend o' the Watch."

Hot Pie's eyes got wide. "There's ghosts in Harrenhal..."

Yoren spat. "There's for your ghosts." He tossed the stick down in the mud. "Mount up."

Arya was remembering the stories Old Nan used to tell of Harrenhal. Evil King Harren had walled himself up inside, so Aegon unleashed his dragons and turned the castle into a pyre. Nan said that fiery spirits still haunted the blackened towers. Sometimes men went to sleep safe in their beds and were found dead in the morning, all burnt up. Arya didn't really believe that, and anyhow it had all happened a long time ago. Hot Pie was being silly; it wouldn't be ghosts at Harrenhal, it would be *knights*. Arya could reveal herself to Lady Whent, and the knights would escort her home and keep her safe. That was what knights did; they kept you safe, especially women. Maybe Lady Whent would even help the crying girl.

The river track was no kingsroad, yet it was not half bad for what it was, and for once the wagons rolled along smartly. They saw the first house an hour shy of evenfall, a snug little thatch-roofed cottage surrounded by fields of wheat. Yoren rode out ahead, hallooing, but got no answer. "Dead, might be. Or hiding. Dobber, Rey, with me." The three men went into the

cottage. “Pots is gone, no sign o’ any coin laid by,” Yoren muttered when they returned. “No animals. Run, most like. Might be we met ‘em on the kingsroad.” At least the house and field had not been burned, and there were no corpses about. Tarber found a garden out back, and they pulled some onions and radishes and filled a sack with cabbages before they went on their way.

A little farther up the road, they glimpsed a forester’s cabin surrounded by old trees and neatly stacked logs ready for the splitting, and later a ramshackle stilt-house leaning over the river on poles ten feet tall, both deserted. They passed more fields, wheat and corn and barley ripening in the sun, but here there were no men sitting in trees, nor walking the rows with scythes. Finally the town came into view; a cluster of white houses spread out around the walls of the holdfast, a big sept with a shingled wooden roof, the lord’s towerhouse sitting on a small rise to the west... and no sign of any people, anywhere.

Yoren sat on his horse, frowning through his tangle of beard. “Don’t like it,” he said, “but there it is. We’ll go have us a look. A *careful* look. See maybe there’s some folk hiding. Might be they left a boat behind, or some weapons we can use.”

The black brother left ten to guard the wagons and the whimpery little girl, and split the rest of them into four groups of five to search the town. “Keep your eyes and ears open,” he warned them, before he rode off to the towerhouse to see if there was any sign of the lordling or his guards.

Arya found herself with Gendry, Hot Pie, and Lommy. Squat, kettlebellied Woth had pulled an oar on a galley once, which made him the next best thing they had to a sailor, so Yoren told him to take them down to the lakefront and see if they could find a boat. As they rode between the silent white houses, gooseprickles crawled up Arya’s arms. This empty town frightened her almost as much as the burnt holdfast where they’d found the crying girl and the one-armed woman. Why would people run off and leave their homes and everything? What could scare them so much?

The sun was low to the west, and the houses cast long dark shadows. A sudden clap of sound made Arya reach for Needle, but it was only a shutter

banging in the wind. After the open river shore, the closeness of the town unnerved her.

When she glimpsed the lake ahead between houses and trees, Arya put her knees into her horse, galloping past Woth and Gendry. She burst out onto the grassy sward beside the pebbled shore. The setting sun made the tranquil surface of the water shimmer like a sheet of beaten copper. It was the biggest lake she had ever seen, with no hint of a far shore. She saw a rambling inn to her left, built out over the water on heavy wooden pilings. To her right, a long pier jutted into the lake, and there were other docks farther east, wooden fingers reaching out from the town. But the only boat in view was an upside-down rowboat abandoned on the rocks beneath the inn, its bottom thoroughly rotted out. “They’re gone,” Arya said, dejected. What would they do now?

“There’s an inn,” Lommy said, when the others rode up. “Do you think they left any food? Or ale?”

“Let’s go see,” Hot Pie suggested.

“Never you mind about no inn,” snapped Woth. “Yoren said we’re to find a boat.”

“They took the boats.” Somehow Arya knew it was true; they could search the whole town, and they’d find no more than the upside-down rowboat. Despondent, she climbed off her horse and knelt by the lake. The water lapped softly around her legs. A few lantern bugs were coming out, their little lights blinking on and off. The green water was warm as tears, but there was no salt in it. It tasted of summer and mud and growing things. Arya plunged her face down into it to wash off the dust and dirt and sweat of the day. When she leaned back the trickles ran down the back of her neck and under her collar. They felt good. She wished she could take off her clothes and swim, gliding through the warm water like a skinny pink otter. Maybe she could swim all the way to Winterfell.

Woth was shouting at her to help search, so she did, peering into boathouses and sheds while her horse grazed along the shore. They found some sails, some nails, buckets of tar gone hard, and a mother cat with a litter of new-born kittens. But no boats.

The town was as dark as any forest when Yoren and the others reappeared. "Tower's empty," he said. "Lord's gone off to fight maybe, or to get his smallfolk to safety, no telling. Not a horse or pig left in town, but we'll eat. Saw a goose running loose, and some chickens, and there's good fish in the Gods Eye."

"The boats are gone," Arya reported.

"We could patch the bottom of that rowboat," said Koss.

"Might do for four o' us," Yoren said.

"There's nails," Lommy pointed out. "And there's trees all around. We could build us all boats."

Yoren spat. "You know anything 'bout boat-building, dyer's boy?" Lommy looked blank.

"A raft," suggested Gendry. "Anyone can build a raft, and long poles for pushing."

Yoren looked thoughtful. "Lake's too deep to pole across, but if we stayed to the shallows near shore... it'd mean leaving the wagons. Might be that's best. I'll sleep on it."

"Can we stay at the inn?" Lommy asked.

"We'll stay in the holdfast, with the gates barred," the old man said. "I like the feel o' stone walls about me when I sleep."

Arya could not keep quiet. "We shouldn't stay here," she blurted. "The people didn't. They all ran off, even their lord."

"Arry's scared," Lommy announced, braying laughter.

"I'm *not*," she snapped back, "but *they* were."

"Smart boy," said Yoren. "Thing is, the folks who lived here were at war, like it or no. We're not. Night's Watch takes no part, so no man's our enemy."

And no man's our friend, she thought, but this time she held her tongue. Lommy and the rest were looking at her, and she did not want to seem craven in front of them.

The holdfast gates were studded with iron nails. Within, they found a pair of iron bars the size of saplings, with post holes in the ground and metal brackets on the gate. When they slotted the bars through the brackets, they made a huge X brace. It was no Red Keep, Yoren announced when they'd explored the holdfast top to bottom, but it was better than most, and should do for a night well enough. The walls were rough unmortared stone ten feet high, with a wooden catwalk inside the battlements. There was a postern gate to the north, and Gerren discovered a trap under the straw in the old wooden barn, leading to a narrow, winding tunnel. He followed it a long way under the earth and came out by the lake. Yoren had them roll a wagon on top of the trap, to make certain no one came in that way. He divided them into three watches, and sent Tarber, Kurz, and Cutjack off to the abandoned towerhouse to keep an eye out from on high. Kurz had a hunting horn to sound if danger threatened.

They drove their wagons and animals inside and barred the gates behind them. The barn was a ramshackle thing, large enough to hold half the animals in the town. The haven, where the townfolk would shelter in times of trouble, was even larger, low and long and built of stone, with a thatched roof. Koss went out the postern gate and brought the goose back, and two chickens as well, and Yoren allowed a cookfire. There was a big kitchen inside the holdfast, though all the pots and kettles had been taken. Gendry, Dobber, and Arya drew cook duty. Dobber told Arya to pluck the fowl while Gendry split wood. "Why can't I split the wood?" she asked, but no one listened. Sullenly, she set to plucking a chicken while Yoren sat on the end of the bench sharpening the edge of his dirk with a whetstone.

When the food was ready, Arya ate a chicken leg and a bit of onion. No one talked much, not even Lommy. Gendry went off by himself afterward, polishing his helm with a look on his face like he wasn't even there. The crying girl whimpered and wept, but when Hot Pie offered her a bit of goose she gobbled it down and looked for more.

Arya drew second watch, so she found a straw pallet in the haven. Sleep did not come easy, so she borrowed Yoren's stone and set to honing Needle. Syrio Forel had said that a dull blade was like a lame horse. Hot Pie

squatted on the pallet beside her, watching her work. “Where’d you get a good sword like that?” he asked. When he saw the look she gave him, he raised his hands defensively. “I never said you stole it, I just wanted to know where you got it, is all.”

“My brother gave it to me,” she muttered.

“I never knew you had no brother.”

Arya paused to scratch under her shirt. There were fleas in the straw, though she couldn’t see why a few more would bother her. “I have lots of brothers.”

“You do? Are they bigger than you, or littler?”

I shouldn’t be talking like this. Yoren said I should keep my mouth shut. “Bigger,” she lied. “They have swords too, big longswords, and they showed me how to kill people who bother me.”

“I was talking, not bothering.” Hot Pie went off and let her alone and Arya curled up on her pallet. She could hear the crying girl from the far side of the haven. *I wish she’d just be quiet. Why does she have to cry all the time?*

She must have slept, though she never remembered closing her eyes. She dreamed a wolf was howling, and the sound was so terrible that it woke her at once. Arya sat up on her pallet with her heart thumping. “Hot Pie, wake up.” She scrambled to her feet. “Woth, Gendry, didn’t you hear?” She pulled on a boot.

All around her, men and boys stirred and crawled from their pallets. “What’s wrong?” Hot Pie asked. “Hear what?” Gendry wanted to know. “Arry had a bad dream,” someone else said.

“No, I heard it,” she insisted. “A wolf.”

“Arry has wolves in his head,” sneered Lommy. “Let them howl,” Gerren said, “they’re out there, we’re in here.” Woth agreed. “Never saw no wolf could storm a holdfast.” Hot Pie was saying, “I never heard nothing.”

“It was a *wolf*,” she shouted at them as she yanked on her second boot. “Something’s wrong, someone’s coming, get *up*!”

Before they could hoot her down again, the sound came shuddering through the night—only it was no wolf this time, it was Kurz blowing his hunting horn, sounding danger. In a heartbeat, all of them were pulling on clothes and snatching for whatever weapons they owned. Arya ran for the gate as the horn sounded again. As she dashed past the barn, Biter threw himself furiously against his chains, and Jaqen H'ghar called out from the back of their wagon. "Boy! Sweet boy! Is it war, red war? Boy, free us. A man can fight. *Boy!*" She ignored him and plunged on. By then she could hear horses and shouts beyond the wall.

She scrambled up onto the catwalk. The parapets were a bit too high and Arya a bit too short; she had to wedge her toes into the holes between the stones to see over. For a moment she thought the town was full of lantern bugs. Then she realized they were men with torches, galloping between the houses. She saw a roof go up, flames licking at the belly of the night with hot orange tongues as the thatch caught. Another followed, and then another, and soon there were fires blazing everywhere.

Gendry climbed up beside her, wearing his helm. "How many?"

Arya tried to count, but they were riding too fast, torches spinning through the air as they flung them. "A hundred," she said. "Two hundred, I don't know." Over the roar of the flames, she could hear shouts. "They'll come for us soon."

"There," Gendry said, pointing.

A column of riders moved between the burning buildings toward the holdfast. Firelight glittered off metal helms and spattered their mail and plate with orange and yellow highlights. One carried a banner on a tall lance. She thought it was red, but it was hard to tell in the night, with the fires roaring all around. Everything seemed red or black or orange.

The fire leapt from one house to another. Arya saw a tree consumed, the flames creeping across its branches until it stood against the night in robes of living orange. Everyone was awake now, manning the catwalks or struggling with the frightened animals below. She could hear Yoren shouting commands. Something bumped against her leg, and she glanced down to discover the crying girl clutching her. "Get away!" She wrenched

her leg free. “What are you doing up here? Run and hide someplace, you stupid.” She shoved the girl away.

The riders reined up before the gates. “*You in the holdfast!*” shouted a knight in a tall helm with a spiked crest. “*Open, in the name of the king!*”

“Aye, and which king is that?” old Reysen yelled back down, before Woth cuffed him into silence.

Yoren climbed the battlement beside the gate, his faded black cloak tied to a wooden staff. “*You men hold down here!*” he shouted. “*The townfolk’s gone.*”

“And who are you, old man? One of Lord Beric’s cravens?” called the knight in the spiked helm. “If that fat fool Thoros is in there, ask him how he likes *these* fires.”

“Got no such man here,” Yoren shouted back. “Only some lads for the Watch. Got no part o’ your war.” He hoisted up the staff, so they could all see the color of his cloak. “Have a look. That’s black, for the Night’s Watch.”

“Or black for House Dondarrion,” called the man who bore the enemy banner. Arya could see its colors more clearly now in the light of the burning town: a golden lion on red. “Lord Beric’s sigil is a purple lightning bolt on a black field.”

Suddenly Arya remembered the morning she had thrown the orange in Sansa’s face and gotten juice all over her stupid ivory silk gown. There had been some southron lordling at the tourney, her sister’s stupid friend Jeyne was in love with him. He had a lightning bolt on his shield and her father had sent him out to behead the Hound’s brother. It seemed a thousand years ago now, something that had happened to a different person in a different life... to Arya Stark the Hand’s daughter, not Arry the orphan boy. How would Arry know lords and such?

“Are you blind, man?” Yoren waved his staff back and forth, making the cloak ripple. “You see a bloody lightning bolt?”

“By night all banners look black,” the knight in the spiked helm observed. “Open, or we’ll know you for outlaws in league with the king’s

enemies.”

Yoren spat. “Who’s got your command?”

“I do.” The reflections of burning houses glimmered dully on the armor of his warhorse as the others parted to let him pass. He was a stout man with a manticore on his shield, and ornate scrollwork crawling across his steel breastplate. Through the open visor of his helm, a face pale and piggy peered up. “Ser Amory Lorch, bannerman to Lord Tywin Lannister of Casterly Rock, the Hand of the King. The *true* king, Joffrey.” He had a high, thin voice. “In his name, I command you to open these gates.”

All around them, the town burned. The night air was full of smoke, and the drifting red embers outnumbered the stars. Yoren scowled. “Don’t see the need. Do what you want to the town, it’s naught to me, but leave us be. We’re no foes to you.”

Look with your eyes, Arya wanted to shout at the men below. “Can’t they see we’re no lords or knights?” she whispered.

“I don’t think they care, Arry,” Gendry whispered back.

And she looked at Ser Amory’s face, the way Syrio had taught her to look, and she saw that he was right.

“If you are no traitors, open your gates,” Ser Amory called. “We’ll make certain you’re telling it true and be on our way.”

Yoren was chewing sourleaf. “Told you, no one here but us. You got my word on that.”

The knight in the spiked helm laughed. “The crow gives us his *word*.”

“You lost, old man?” mocked one of the spearmen. “The Wall’s a long way north o’ here.”

“I command you once more, in King Joffrey’s name, to prove the loyalty you profess and open these gates,” said Ser Amory.

For a long moment Yoren considered, chewing. Then he spat. “Don’t think I will.”

“So be it. You defy the king’s command, and so proclaim yourselves rebels, black cloaks or no.”

“Got me young boys in here,” Yoren shouted down.

“Young boys and old men die the same.” Ser Amory raised a languid fist, and a spear came hurtling from the fire-bright shadows behind. Yoren must have been the target, but it was Woth beside him who was hit. The spearhead went in his throat and exploded out the back of his neck, dark and wet. Woth grabbed at the shaft, and fell boneless from the walk.

“Storm the walls and kill them all,” Ser Amory said in a bored voice. More spears flew. Arya yanked down Hot Pie by the back of his tunic. From outside came the rattle of armor, the scrape of swords on scabbards, the banging of spears on shields, mingled with curses and the hoofbeats of racing horses. A torch sailed spinning above their heads, trailing fingers of fire as it thumped down in the dirt of the yard.

“*Blades!*” Yoren shouted. “Spread apart, defend the wall wherever they hit. Koss, Urreg, hold the postern. Lommy, pull that spear out of Woth and get up where he was.”

Hot Pie dropped his shortsword when he tried to unsheath it. Arya shoved the blade back into his hand. “I don’t know how to swordfight,” he said, white-eyed.

“It’s easy,” Arya said, but the lie died in her throat as a *hand* grasped the top of the parapet. She saw it by the light of the burning town, so clear that it was as if time had stopped. The fingers were blunt, callused, wiry black hairs grew between the knuckles, there was dirt under the nail of the thumb. *Fear cuts deeper than swords*, she remembered as the top of a pothelm loomed up behind the hand.

She slashed down hard, and Needle’s castle-forged steel bit into the grasping fingers between the knuckles. “*Winterfell!*” she screamed. Blood spurted, fingers flew, and the helmed face vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. “Behind!” Hot Pie yelled. Arya whirled. The second man was bearded and helmetless, his dirk between his teeth to leave both hands free for climbing. As he swung his leg over the parapet, she drove her point at his eyes. Needle never touched him; he reeled backward and fell. *I hope he falls on his face and cuts off his tongue*. “Watch *them*, not me!” she screamed at Hot Pie. The next time someone tried to climb their part of the

wall, the boy hacked at his hands with his swordshort until the man dropped away.

Ser Amory had no ladders, but the holdfast walls were rough-cut and unmortared, easy to climb, and there seemed to be no end to the foes. For each one Arya cut or stabbed or shoved back, another was coming over the wall. The knight in the spiked helm reached the rampart, but Yoren tangled his black banner around his spike, and forced the point of his dirk through his armor while the man was fighting the cloth. Every time Arya looked up, more torches were flying, trailing long tongues of flame that lingered behind her eyes. She saw a gold lion on a red banner and thought of Joffrey, wishing he was here so she could drive Needle through his sneery face. When four men assaulted the gate with axes, Koss shot them down with arrows, one by one. Dobber wrestled a man off the wall, and Lommy smashed his head with a rock before he could rise, and hooted until he saw the knife in Dobber's belly and realized he wouldn't be getting up either. Arya jumped over a dead boy no older than Jon, lying with his arm cut off. She didn't think she'd done it, but she wasn't sure. She heard Qyle beg for mercy before a knight with a wasp on his shield smashed his face in with a spiked mace. Everything smelled of blood and smoke and iron and piss, but after a time it seemed like that was only one smell. She never saw how the skinny man got over the wall, but when he did she fell on him with Gendry and Hot Pie. Gendry's sword shattered on the man's helm, tearing it off his head. Underneath he was bald and scared-looking, with missing teeth and a speckly grey beard, but even as she was feeling sorry for him she was killing him, shouting, "*Winterfell! Winterfell!*" while Hot Pie screamed "*Hot Pie!*" beside her as he hacked at the man's scrawny neck.

When the skinny man was dead, Gendry stole his sword and leapt down into the yard to fight some more. Arya looked past him, and saw steel shadows running through the holdfast, firelight shining off mail and blades, and she knew that they'd gotten over the wall somewhere, or broken through at the postern. She jumped down beside Gendry, landing the way Syrio had taught her. The night rang to the clash of steel and the cries of the wounded and dying. For a moment Arya stood uncertain, not knowing which way to go. Death was all around her.

And then Yoren was there, shaking her, screaming in her face. “*Boy!*” he yelled, the way he always yelled it. “Get *out*, it’s done, we’ve lost. Herd up all you can, you and him and the others, the boys, you get them out. *Now!*”

“How?” Arya said.

“That trap,” he screamed. “Under the barn.”

Quick as that he was gone, off to fight, sword in hand. Arya grabbed Gendry by the arm. “He said go,” she shouted, “the barn, the way out.” Through the slits of his helm, the Bull’s eyes shone with reflected fire. He nodded. They called Hot Pie down from the wall and found Lommy Greenhands where he lay bleeding from a spear thrust through his calf. They found Gerren too, but he was hurt too bad to move. As they were running toward the barn, Arya spied the crying girl sitting in the middle of the chaos, surrounded by smoke and slaughter. She grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to her feet as the others raced ahead. The girl wouldn’t walk, even when slapped. Arya dragged her with her right hand while she held Needle in the left. Ahead, the night was a sullen red. *The barn’s on fire*, she thought. Flames were licking up its sides from where a torch had fallen on straw, and she could hear the screaming of the animals trapped within. Hot Pie stepped out of the barn. “*Arry, come on! Lommy’s gone*, leave her if she won’t come!”

Stubbornly, Arya dragged all the harder, pulling the crying girl along. Hot Pie scuttled back inside, abandoning them... but Gendry came back, the fire shining so bright on his polished helm that the horns seemed to glow orange. He ran to them, and hoisted the crying girl up over his shoulder. “*Run!*”

Rushing through the barn doors was like running into a furnace. The air was swirling with smoke, the back wall a sheet of fire ground to roof. Their horses and donkeys were kicking and rearing and screaming. *The poor animals*, Arya thought. Then she saw the wagon, and the three men manacled to its bed. Biter was flinging himself against the chains, blood running down his arms from where the irons clasped his wrists. Rorge

screamed curses, kicking at the wood. “Boy!” called Jaqen H’ghar. “Sweet boy!”

The open trap was only a few feet ahead, but the fire was spreading fast, consuming the old wood and dry straw faster than she would have believed. Arya remembered the Hound’s horrible burned face. “Tunnel’s narrow,” Gendry shouted. “How do we get her through?”

“Pull her,” Arya said. “Push her.”

“Good boys, kind boys,” called Jaqen H’ghar, coughing.

“Get these fucking chains off!” Rorge screamed.

Gendry ignored them. “You go first, then her, then me. Hurry, it’s a long way.”

“When you split the firewood,” Arya remembered, “where did you leave the axe?”

“Out by the haven.” He spared a glance for the chained men. “I’d save the donkeys first. There’s no time.”

“You take her!” she yelled. “You get her out! You do it!” The fire beat at her back with hot red wings as she fled the burning barn. It felt blessedly cool outside, but men were dying all around her. She saw Koss throw down his blade to yield, and she saw them kill him where he stood. Smoke was everywhere. There was no sign of Yoren, but the axe was where Gendry had left it, by the woodpile outside the haven. As she wrenched it free, a mailed hand grabbed her arm. Spinning, Arya drove the head of the axe hard between his legs. She never saw his face, only the dark blood seeping between the links of his hauberk. Going back into that barn was the hardest thing she ever did. Smoke was pouring out the open door like a writhing black snake, and she could hear the screams of the poor animals inside, donkeys and horses and men. She chewed her lip, and darted through the doors, crouched low where the smoke wasn’t quite so thick.

A donkey was caught in a ring of fire, shrieking in terror and pain. She could smell the stench of burning hair. The roof was gone up too, and things were falling down, pieces of flaming wood and bits of straw and hay. Arya put a hand over her mouth and nose. She couldn’t see the wagon for the

smoke, but she could still hear Biter screaming. She crawled toward the sound.

And then a wheel was looming over her. The wagon *jumped* and moved a half foot when Biter threw himself against his chains again. Jaqen saw her, but it was too hard to breathe, let alone talk. She threw the axe into the wagon. Rorge caught it and lifted it over his head, rivers of sooty sweat pouring down his noseless face. Arya was running, coughing. She heard the steel crash through the old wood, and again, again. An instant later came a *crack* as loud as thunder, and the bottom of the wagon came ripping loose in an explosion of splinters.

Arya rolled headfirst into the tunnel and dropped five feet. She got dirt in her mouth but she didn't care, the taste was fine, the taste was mud and water and worms and life. Under the earth the air was cool and dark. Above was nothing but blood and roaring red and choking smoke and the screams of dying horses. She moved her belt around so Needle would not be in her way, and began to crawl. A dozen feet down the tunnel she heard the sound, like the roar of some monstrous beast, and a cloud of hot smoke and black dust came billowing up behind her, smelling of hell. Arya held her breath and kissed the mud on the floor of the tunnel and cried. For whom, she could not say.