



ARYA

The outriders came on them an hour from the Green Fork, as the wayn was slogging down a muddy road.

“Keep your head down and your mouth shut,” the Hound warned her as the three spurred toward them; a knight and two squires, lightly armored and mounted on fast palfreys. Clegane cracked his whip at the team, a pair of old drays that had known better days. The wayn was creaking and swaying, its two huge wooden wheels squeezing mud up out of the deep ruts in the road with every turn. Stranger followed, tied to the wagon.

The big bad-tempered courser wore neither armor, barding, nor harness, and the Hound himself was garbed in splotchy green roughspun and a soot-grey mantle with a hood that swallowed his head. So long as he kept his eyes down you could not see his face, only the whites of his eyes peering out. He looked like some down-at-heels farmer. A *big* farmer, though. And under the roughspun was boiled leather and oiled mail, Arya knew. She looked like a farmer’s son, or maybe a swineherd. And behind them were four squat casks of salt pork and one of pickled pigs’ feet.

The riders split and circled them for a look before they came up close. Clegane drew the wayn to a halt and waited patiently on their pleasure. The knight bore spear and sword while his squires carried longbows. The badges on their jerkins were smaller versions of the sigil sewn on their master’s surcoat; a black pitchfork on a golden bar sinister, upon a russet

field. Arya had thought of revealing herself to the first outriders they encountered, but she had always pictured grey-cloaked men with the direwolf on their breasts. She might have risked it even if they'd worn the Umber giant or the Glover fist, but she did not know this pitchfork knight or whom he served. The closest thing to a pitchfork she had ever seen at Winterfell was the trident in the hand of Lord Manderly's merman.

"You have business at the Twins?" the knight asked.

"Salt pork for the wedding feast, if it please you, ser." The Hound mumbled his reply, his eyes down, his face hidden.

"Salt pork never pleases me." The pitchfork knight gave Clegane only the most cursory glance, and paid no attention at all to Arya, but he looked long and hard at Stranger. The stallion was no plow horse, that was plain at a glance. One of the squires almost wound up in the mud when the big black courser bit at his own mount. "How did you come by this beast?" the pitchfork knight demanded.

"M'lady told me to bring him, ser," Clegane said humbly. "He's a wedding gift for young Lord Tully."

"What lady? Who is it you serve?"

"Old Lady Whent, ser."

"Does she think she can buy Harrenhal back with a horse?" the knight asked. "Gods, is there any fool like an old fool?" Yet he waved them down the road. "Go on with you, then."

"Aye, m'lord." The Hound snapped his whip again, and the old drays resumed their weary trek. The wheels had settled deep into the mud during the halt, and it took several moments for the team to pull them free again. By then the outriders were riding off. Clegane gave them one last look and snorted. "Ser Donnel Haigh," he said. "I've taken more horses off him than I can count. Armor as well. Once I near killed him in a mêlée."

"How come he didn't know you, then?" Arya asked.

"Because knights are fools, and it would have been beneath him to look twice at some poxy peasant." He gave the horses a lick with the whip. "Keep your eyes down and your tone respectful and say *ser* a lot, and most

knights will never see you. They pay more mind to horses than to smallfolk. He might have known Stranger if he'd ever seen me ride him."

He would have known your face, though. Arya had no doubt of that. Sandor Clegane's burns would not be easy to forget, once you saw them. He couldn't hide the scars behind a helm, either; not so long as the helm was made in the shape of a snarling dog.

That was why they'd needed the wayn and the pickled pigs' feet. "I'm not going to be dragged before your brother in chains," the Hound had told her, "and I'd just as soon not have to cut through his men to get to him. So we play a little game."

A farmer chance-met on the kingsroad had provided them with wayn, horses, garb, and casks, though not willingly. The Hound had taken them at swordpoint. When the farmer cursed him for a robber, he said, "No, a forager. Be grateful you get to keep your smallclothes. Now take those boots off. Or I'll take your legs off. Your choice." The farmer was as big as Clegane, but all the same he chose to give up his boots and keep his legs.

Evenfall found them still trudging toward the Green Fork and Lord Frey's twin castles. *I am almost there*, Arya thought. She knew she ought to be excited, but her belly was all knotted up tight. Maybe that was just the fever she'd been fighting, but maybe not. Last night she'd had a bad dream, a *terrible* dream. She couldn't remember what she'd dreamed of now, but the feeling had lingered all day. If anything, it had only gotten stronger. *Fear cuts deeper than swords*. She had to be strong now, the way her father told her. There was nothing between her and her mother but a castle gate, a river, and an army . . . but it was *Robb's* army, so there was no real danger there. Was there?

Roose Bolton was one of them, though. The Leech Lord, as the outlaws called him. That made her uneasy. She had fled Harrenhal to get away from Bolton as much as from the Bloody Mummies, and she'd had to cut the throat of one of his guards to escape. Did he know she'd done that? Or did he blame Gendry or Hot Pie? Would he have told her mother? What would he do if he saw her? *He probably won't even know me*. She looked more like a drowned rat than a lord's cupbearer these days. A drowned *boy* rat. The Hound had hacked handfuls of her hair off only two days past. He was

an even worse barber than Yoren, and he'd left her half bald on one side. *Robb won't know me either, I bet. Or even Mother.* She had been a little girl the last time she saw them, the day Lord Eddard Stark left Winterfell.

They heard the music before they saw the castle; the distant rattle of drums, the brazen blare of horns, the thin skirling of pipes faint beneath the growl of the river and the sound of the rain beating on their heads. "We've missed the wedding," the Hound said, "but it sounds as though the feast is still going. I'll be rid of you soon."

No, I'll be rid of you, Arya thought.

The road had been running mostly northwest, but now it turned due west between an apple orchard and a field of drowned corn beaten down by the rain. They passed the last of the apple trees and crested a rise, and the castles, river, and camps all appeared at once. There were hundreds of horses and thousands of men, most of them milling about the three huge feast tents that stood side by side facing the castle gates, like three great canvas longhalls. Robb had made his camp well back from the walls, on higher, drier ground, but the Green Fork had overflowed its bank and even claimed a few carelessly placed tents.

The music from the castles was louder here. The sound of the drums and horns rolled across the camp. The musicians in the nearer castle were playing a different song than the ones in the castle on the far bank, though, so it sounded more like a battle than a song. "They're not very good," Arya observed.

The Hound made a sound that might have been a laugh. "There's old deaf women in Lannisport complaining of the din, I'll warrant. I'd heard Walder Frey's eyes were failing, but no one mentioned his bloody ears."

Arya found herself wishing it were day. If the sun was out and the wind was blowing, she would have been able to see the banners better. She would have looked for the direwolf of Stark, or maybe the Cerwyn battleaxe or the Glover fist. But in the gloom of night all the colors looked grey. The rain had dwindled down to a fine drizzle, almost a mist, but an earlier downpour had left the banners wet as dishrags, sodden and unreadable.

A hedge of wagons and carts had been drawn up along the perimeter to make a crude wooden wall against any attack. That was where the guards

stopped them. The lantern their sergeant carried shed enough light for Arya to see that his cloak was a pale pink, spotted with red teardrops. The men under him had the Leech Lord's badge sewn over their hearts, the flayed man of the Dreadfort. Sandor Clegane gave them the same tale he'd used on the outriders, but the Bolton sergeant was a harder sort of nut than Ser Donnel Haigh had been. "Salt pork's no fit meat for a lord's wedding feast," he said scornfully.

"Got pickled pigs' feet too, ser."

"Not for the feast, you don't. The feast's half done. And I'm a northman, not some milksuck southron knight."

"I was told to see the steward, or the cook . . ."

"Castle's closed. The lordlings are not to be disturbed." The sergeant considered a moment. "You can unload by the feast tents, there." He pointed with a mailed hand. "Ale makes a man hungry, and old Frey won't miss a few pigs' feet. He don't have the teeth for such anyhow. Ask for Sedgekins, he'll know what's to be done with you." He barked a command, and his men rolled one of the wagons aside for them to enter.

The Hound's whip spurred the team toward the tents. No one seemed to pay them any mind. They splashed past rows of brightly colored pavilions, their walls of wet silk lit up like magic lanterns by lamps and braziers inside; pink and gold and green they glimmered, striped and fretty and chequy, emblazoned with birds and beasts, chevrons and stars, wheels and weapons. Arya spotted a yellow tent with six acrons on its panels, three over two over one. *Lord Smallwood*, she knew, remembering Acorn Hall so far away, and the lady who'd said she was pretty.

But for every shimmering silk pavilion there were two dozen of felt or canvas, opaque and dark. There were barracks tents too, big enough to shelter two score footsoldiers, though even those were dwarfed by the three great feast tents. The drinking had been going on for hours, it seemed. Arya heard shouted toasts and the clash of cups, mixed in with all the usual camp sounds, horses whinnying and dogs barking, wagons rumbling through the dark, laughter and curses, the clank and clatter of steel and wood. The music grew still louder as they approached the castle, but under that was a

deeper, darker sound: the river, the swollen Green Fork, growling like a lion in its den.

Arya twisted and turned, trying to look everywhere at once, hoping for a glimpse of a direwolf badge, for a tent done up in grey and white, for a face she knew from Winterfell. All she saw were strangers. She stared at a man relieving himself in the reeds, but he wasn't Alebelly. She saw a half-dressed girl burst from a tent laughing, but the tent was pale blue, not grey like she'd thought at first, and the man who went running after her wore a treecat on his doublet, not a wolf. Beneath a tree, four archers were slipping waxed strings over the notches of their longbows, but they were not her father's archers. A maester crossed their path, but he was too young and thin to be Maester Luwin. Arya gazed up at the Twins, their high tower windows glowing softly wherever a light was burning. Through the haze of rain, the castles looked spooky and mysterious, like something from one of Old Nan's tales, but they weren't Winterfell.

The press was thickest at the feast tents. The wide flaps were tied back, and men were pushing in and out with drinking horns and tankards in their hands, some with camp followers. Arya glanced inside as the Hound drove past the first of the three, and saw hundreds of men crowding the benches and jostling around the casks of mead and ale and wine. There was hardly room to move inside, but none of them seemed to mind. At least they were warm and dry. Cold wet Arya envied them. Some were even singing. The fine misty rain was steaming all around the door from the heat escaping from inside. "Here's to Lord Edmure and Lady Roslin," she heard a voice shout. They all drank, and someone yelled, "Here's to the Young Wolf and Queen Jeyne."

Who is Queen Jeyne? Arya wondered briefly. The only queen she knew was Cersei.

Firepits had been dug outside the feast tents, sheltered beneath rude canopies of woven wood and hides that kept the rain out, so long as it fell straight down. The wind was blowing off the river, though, so the drizzle came in anyway, enough to make the fires hiss and swirl. Serving men were turning joints of meat on spits above the flames. The smells made Arya's mouth water. "Shouldn't we stop?" she asked Sandor Clegane. "There's northmen in the tents." She knew them by their beards, by their faces, by

their cloaks of bearskin and sealskin, by their half-heard toasts and the songs they sang; Karstarks and Umbers and men of the mountain clans. “I bet there are Winterfell men too.” Her father’s men, the Young Wolf’s men, the direwolves of Stark.

“Your brother will be in the castle,” he said. “Your mother too. You want them or not?”

“Yes,” she said. “What about Sedgekins?” The sergeant had told them to ask for Sedgekins.

“Sedgekins can bugger himself with a hot poker.” Clegane shook out his whip, and sent it hissing through the soft rain to bite at a horse’s flank. “It’s your bloody brother I want.”