



ARYA

When Arya saw the shape of a great hill looming in the distance, golden in the afternoon sun, she knew it at once. They had come all the way back to High Heart.

By sunset they were at the top, making camp where no harm could come to them. Arya walked around the circle of weirwood stumps with Lord Beric's squire Ned, and they stood on top of one watching the last light fade in the west. From up here she could see a storm raging to the north, but High Heart stood *above* the rain. It wasn't above the wind, though; the gusts were blowing so strongly that it felt like someone was behind her, yanking on her cloak. Only when she turned, no one was there.

Ghosts, she remembered. *High Heart is haunted*.

They built a great fire atop the hill, and Thoros of Myr sat crosslegged beside it, gazing deep into the flames as if there was nothing else in all the world.

"What is he doing?" Arya asked Ned.

"Sometimes he sees things in the flames," the squire told her. "The past. The future. Things happening far away."

Arya squinted at the fire to see if she could see what the red priest was seeing, but it only made her eyes water and before long she turned away.

Gendry was watching the red priest as well. “Can you truly see the future there?” he asked suddenly.

Thoros turned from the fire, sighing. “Not here. Not now. But some days, yes, the Lord of Light grants me visions.”

Gendry looked dubious. “My master said you were a sot and a fraud, as bad a priest as there ever was.”

“That was unkind.” Thoros chuckled. “True, but unkind. Who was this master of yours? Did I know you, boy?”

“I was ’prenticed to the master armorer Tobho Mott, on the Street of Steel. You used to buy your swords from him.”

“Just so. He charged me twice what they were worth, then scolded me for setting them afire.” Thoros laughed. “Your master had it right. I was no very holy priest. I was born youngest of eight, so my father gave me over to the Red Temple, but it was not the path I would have chosen. I prayed the prayers and I spoke the spells, but I would also lead raids on the kitchens, and from time to time they found girls in my bed. Such wicked girls, I never knew how they got there.

“I had a gift for tongues, though. And when I gazed into the flames, well, from time to time I saw things. Even so, I was more bother than I was worth, so they sent me finally to King’s Landing to bring the Lord’s light to seven-besotted Westeros. King Aerys so loved fire it was thought he might make a convert. Alas, his pyromancers knew better tricks than I did.

“King Robert was fond of me, though. The first time I rode into a mêlée with a flaming sword, Kevan Lannister’s horse reared and threw him and His Grace laughed so hard I thought he might rupture.” The red priest smiled at the memory. “It was no way to treat a blade, though, your master had the right of that too.”

“Fire consumes.” Lord Beric stood behind them, and there was something in his voice that silenced Thoros at once. “It *consumes*, and when it is done there is nothing left. *Nothing*.”

“Beric. Sweet friend.” The priest touched the lightning lord on the forearm. “What are you saying?”

“Nothing I have not said before. Six times, Thoros? Six times is too many.” He turned away abruptly.

That night the wind was howling almost like a wolf and there were some real wolves off to the west giving it lessons. Notch, Anguy, and Merrit o’ Moontown had the watch. Ned, Gendry, and many of the others were fast asleep when Arya spied the small pale shape creeping behind the horses, thin white hair flying wild as she leaned upon a gnarled cane. The woman could not have been more than three feet tall. The firelight made her eyes gleam as red as the eyes of Jon’s wolf. *He was a ghost too.* Arya stole closer, and knelt to watch.

Thoros and Lem were with Lord Beric when the dwarf woman sat down uninvited by the fire. She squinted at them with eyes like hot coals. “The Ember and the Lemon come to honor me again, and His Grace the Lord of Corpses.”

“An ill-omened name. I have asked you not to use it.”

“Aye, you have. But the stink of death is fresh on you, my lord.” She had but a single tooth remaining. “Give me wine or I will go. My bones are old. My joints ache when the winds do blow, and up here the winds are always blowing.”

“A silver stag for your dreams, my lady,” Lord Beric said, with solemn courtesy. “Another if you have news for us.”

“I cannot eat a silver stag, nor ride one. A skin of wine for my dreams, and for my news a kiss from the great oaf in the yellow cloak.” The little woman cackled. “Aye, a sloppy kiss, a bit of tongue. It has been too long, too long. His mouth will taste of lemons, and mine of bones. I am too old.”

“Aye,” Lem complained. “Too old for wine and kisses. All you’ll get from me is the flat of my sword, crone.”

“My hair comes out in handfuls and no one has kissed me for a thousand years. It is hard to be so old. Well, I will have a song then. A song from Tom o’ Sevens, for my news.”

“You will have your song from Tom,” Lord Beric promised. He gave her the wineskin himself.

The dwarf woman drank deep, the wine running down her chin. When she lowered the skin, she wiped her mouth with the back of a wrinkled hand and said, "Sour wine for sour tidings, what could be more fitting? The king is dead, is that sour enough for you?"

Arya's heart caught in her throat.

"*Which* bloody king is dead, crone?" Lem demanded.

"The wet one. The kraken king, m'lords. I dreamt him dead and he died, and the iron squids now turn on one another. Oh, and Lord Hoster Tully's died too, but you know that, don't you? In the hall of kings, the goat sits alone and fevered as the great dog descends on him." The old woman took another long gulp of wine, squeezing the skin as she raised it to her lips.

The great dog. Did she mean the Hound? Or maybe his brother, the Mountain That Rides? Arya was not certain. They bore the same arms, three black dogs on a yellow field. Half the men whose deaths she prayed for belonged to Ser Gregor Clegane; Polliver, Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, the Tickler, and Ser Gregor himself. *Maybe Lord Beric will hang them all.*

"I dreamt a wolf howling in the rain, but no one heard his grief," the dwarf woman was saying. "I dreamt such a clangor I thought my head might burst, drums and horns and pipes and screams, but the saddest sound was the little bells. I dreamt of a maid at a feast with purple serpents in her hair, venom dripping from their fangs. And later I dreamt that maid again, slaying a savage giant in a castle built of snow." She turned her head sharply and smiled through the gloom, right at Arya. "You cannot hide from me, child. Come closer, now."

Cold fingers walked down Arya's neck. *Fear cuts deeper than swords*, she reminded herself. She stood and approached the fire warily, light on the balls of her feet, poised to flee.

The dwarf woman studied her with dim red eyes. "I see you," she whispered. "I see you, wolf child. Blood child. I thought it was the lord who smelled of death . . ." She began to sob, her little body shaking. "You are cruel to come to my hill, cruel. I gorged on grief at Summerhall, I need none of yours. Begone from here, dark heart. *Begone!*"

There was such fear in her voice that Arya took a step backward, wondering if the woman was mad. "Don't frighten the child," Thoros

protested. "There's no harm in her."

Lem Lemoncloak's finger went to his broken nose. "Don't be so bloody sure of that."

"She will leave on the morrow, with us," Lord Beric assured the little woman. "We're taking her to Riverrun, to her mother."

"Nay," said the dwarf. "You're not. The black fish holds the rivers now. If it's the mother you want, seek her at the Twins. For there's to be a *wedding*." She cackled again. "Look in your fires, pink priest, and you will see. Not now, though, not here, you'll see nothing here. This place belongs to the old gods still . . . they linger here as I do, shrunken and feeble but not yet dead. Nor do they love the flames. For the oak recalls the acorn, the acorn dreams the oak, the stump lives in them both. And they remember when the First Men came with fire in their fists." She drank the last of the wine in four long swallows, flung the skin aside, and pointed her stick at Lord Beric. "I'll have my payment now. I'll have the song you promised me."

And so Lem woke Tom Sevenstrings beneath his furs, and brought him yawning to the fireside with his woodharp in hand. "The same song as before?" he asked.

"Oh, aye. My Jenny's song. Is there another?"

And so he sang, and the dwarf woman closed her eyes and rocked slowly back and forth, murmuring the words and crying. Thoros took Arya firmly by the hand and drew her aside. "Let her savor her song in peace," he said. "It is all she has left."

I wasn't going to hurt her, Arya thought. "What did she mean about the Twins? My mother's at Riverrun, isn't she?"

"She was." The red priest rubbed beneath his chin. "A wedding, she said. We shall see. Wherever she is, Lord Beric will find her, though."

Not long after, the sky opened. Lightning cracked and thunder rolled across the hills, and the rain fell in blinding sheets. The dwarf woman vanished as suddenly as she had appeared, while the outlaws gathered branches and threw up crude shelters.

It rained all through that night, and come morning Ned, Lem, and Watty the Miller awoke with chills. Watty could not keep his breakfast down, and young Ned was feverish and shivering by turns, with skin clammy to the touch. There was an abandoned village half a day's ride to the north, Notch told Lord Beric; they'd find better shelter there, a place to wait out the worst of the rains. So they dragged themselves back into the saddles and urged their horses down the great hill.

The rains did not let up. They rode through woods and fields, fording swollen streams where the rushing water came up to the bellies of their horses. Arya pulled up the hood of her cloak and hunched down, sodden and shivering but determined not to falter. Merrit and Mudge were soon coughing as bad as Watty, and poor Ned seemed to grow more miserable with every mile. "When I wear my helm, the rain beats against the steel and gives me headaches," he complained. "But when I take it off, my hair gets soaked and sticks to my face and in my mouth."

"You have a knife," Gendry suggested. "If your hair annoys you so much, shave your bloody head."

He doesn't like Ned. The squire seemed nice enough to Arya; maybe a little shy, but good-natured. She had always heard that Dornishmen were small and swarthy, with black hair and small black eyes, but Ned had big blue eyes, so dark that they looked almost purple. And his hair was a pale blond, more ash than honey.

"How long have you been Lord Beric's squire?" she asked, to take his mind from his misery.

"He took me for his page when he espoused my aunt." He coughed. "I was seven, but when I turned ten he raised me to squire. I won a prize once, riding at rings."

"I never learned the lance, but I could beat you with a sword," said Arya. "Have you killed anyone?"

That seemed to startle him. "I'm only twelve."

I killed a boy when I was eight, Arya almost said, but she thought she'd better not. "You've been in battles, though."

“Yes.” He did not sound very proud of it. “I was at the Mummer’s Ford. When Lord Beric fell into the river, I dragged him up onto the bank so he wouldn’t drown and stood over him with my sword. I never had to fight, though. He had a broken lance sticking out of him, so no one bothered us. When we regrouped, Green Gergen helped pull his lordship back onto a horse.”

Arya was remembering the stableboy at King’s Landing. After him there’d been that guard whose throat she cut at Harrenhal, and Ser Amory’s men at that holdfast by the lake. She didn’t know if Weese and Chiswyck counted, or the ones who’d died on account of the weasel soup . . . all of a sudden, she felt very sad. “My father was called Ned too,” she said.

“I know. I saw him at the Hand’s tourney. I wanted to go up and speak with him, but I couldn’t think what to say.” Ned shivered beneath his cloak, a sodden length of pale purple. “Were you at the tourney? I saw your sister there. Ser Loras Tyrell gave her a rose.”

“She told me.” It all seemed so long ago. “Her friend Jeyne Poole fell in love with your Lord Beric.”

“He’s promised to my aunt.” Ned looked uncomfortable. “That was before, though. Before he . . .”

. . . *died*? she thought, as Ned’s voice trailed off into an awkward silence. Their horses’ hooves made sucking sounds as they pulled free of the mud.

“My lady?” Ned said at last. “You have a baseborn brother . . . Jon Snow?”

“He’s with the Night’s Watch on the Wall.” *Maybe I should go to the Wall instead of Riverrun. Jon wouldn’t care who I killed or whether I brushed my hair . . .* “Jon looks like me, even though he’s bastard-born. He used to muss my hair and call me ‘little sister.’” Arya missed Jon most of all. Just saying his name made her sad. “How do you know about Jon?”

“He is my milk brother.”

“Brother?” Arya did not understand. “But you’re from Dorne. How could you and Jon be blood?”

“*Milk* brothers. Not blood. My lady mother had no milk when I was little, so Wylla had to nurse me.”

Arya was lost. “Who’s Wylla?”

“Jon Snow’s mother. He never told you? She’s served us for years and years. Since before I was born.”

“Jon never knew his mother. Not even her name.” Arya gave Ned a wary look. “You know her? Truly?” *Is he making mock of me?* “If you lie I’ll punch your face.”

“Wylla was my wetnurse,” he repeated solemnly. “I swear it on the honor of my House.”

“You have a House?” That was stupid; he was a squire, of course he had a House. “Who *are* you?”

“My lady?” Ned looked embarrassed. “I’m Edric Dayne, the . . . the Lord of Starfall.”

Behind them, Gendry groaned. “Lords and ladies,” he proclaimed in a disgusted tone. Arya plucked a withered crabapple off a passing branch and whipped it at him, bouncing it off his thick bull head. “Ow,” he said. “That hurt.” He felt the skin above his eye. “What kind of lady throws crabapples at people?”

“The bad kind,” said Arya, suddenly contrite. She turned back to Ned. “I’m sorry I didn’t know who you were. My lord.”

“The fault is mine, my lady.” He was very polite.

Jon has a mother. Wylla, her name is Wylla. She would need to remember so she could tell him, the next time she saw him. She wondered if he would still call her “little sister.” *I’m not so little anymore. He’d have to call me something else.* Maybe once she got to Riverrun she could write Jon a letter and tell him what Ned Dayne had said. “There was an Arthur Dayne,” she remembered. “The one they called the Sword of the Morning.”

“My father was Ser Arthur’s elder brother. Lady Ashara was my aunt. I never knew her, though. She threw herself into the sea from atop the Palestone Sword before I was born.”

“Why would she do that?” said Arya, startled.

Ned looked wary. Maybe he was afraid that she was going to throw something at him. “Your lord father never spoke of her?” he said. “The Lady Ashara Dayne, of Starfall?”

“No. Did he know her?”

“Before Robert was king. She met your father and his brothers at Harrenhal, during the year of the false spring.”

“Oh.” Arya did not know what else to say. “Why did she jump in the sea, though?”

“Her heart was broken.”

Sansa would have sighed and shed a tear for true love, but Arya just thought it was stupid. She couldn’t say that to Ned, though, not about his own aunt. “Did someone break it?”

He hesitated. “Perhaps it’s not my place . . .”

“*Tell me.*”

He looked at her uncomfortably. “My aunt Allyria says Lady Ashara and your father fell in love at Harrenhal—”

“That’s not so. He loved my lady mother.”

“I’m sure he did, my lady, but—”

“She was the *only* one he loved.”

“He must have found that bastard under a cabbage leaf, then,” Gendry said behind them.

Arya wished she had another crabapple to bounce off his face. “My father had *honor*,” she said angrily. “And we weren’t talking to *you* anyway. Why don’t you go back to Stoney Sept and ring that girl’s stupid bells?”

Gendry ignored that. “At least your father *raised* his bastard, not like mine. I don’t even know my father’s name. Some smelly drunk, I’d wager, like the others my mother dragged home from the alehouse. Whenever she got mad at me, she’d say, ‘If your father was here, he’d beat you bloody.’ That’s all I know of him.” He spat. “Well, if he was here now, might be I’d beat *him* bloody. But he’s dead, I figure, and your father’s dead too, so what does it matter who he lay with?”

It mattered to Arya, though she could not have said why. Ned was trying to apologize for upsetting her, but she did not want to hear it. She pressed her heels into her horse and left them both. Anguy the Archer was riding a

few yards ahead. When she caught up with him, she said, “Dornishmen lie, don’t they?”

“They’re famous for it.” The bowman grinned. “Of course, they say the same of us marchers, so there you are. What’s the trouble now? Ned’s a good lad . . .”

“He’s just a stupid liar.” Arya left the trail, leapt a rotten log and splashed across a streambed, ignoring the shouts of the outlaws behind her. *They just want to tell me more lies.* She thought about trying to get away from them, but there were too many and they knew these lands too well. What was the use of running if they caught you?

It was Harwin who rode up beside her, in the end. “Where do you think you’re going, milady? You shouldn’t run off. There are wolves in these woods, and worse things.”

“I’m not afraid,” she said. “That boy Ned said . . .”

“Aye, he told me. Lady Ashara Dayne. It’s an old tale, that one. I heard it once at Winterfell, when I was no older than you are now.” He took hold of her bridle firmly and turned her horse around. “I doubt there’s any truth to it. But if there is, what of it? When Ned met this Dornish lady, his brother Brandon was still alive, and it was him betrothed to Lady Catelyn, so there’s no stain on your father’s honor. There’s nought like a tourney to make the blood run hot, so maybe some words were whispered in a tent of a night, who can say? Words or kisses, maybe more, but where’s the harm in that? Spring had come, or so they thought, and neither one of them was pledged.”

“She killed herself, though,” said Arya uncertainly. “Ned says she jumped from a tower into the sea.”

“So she did,” Harwin admitted, as he led her back, “but that was for grief, I’d wager. She’d lost a brother, the Sword of the Morning.” He shook his head. “Let it lie, my lady. They’re dead, all of them. Let it lie . . . and please, when we come to Riverrun, say naught of this to your mother.”

The village was just where Notch had promised it would be. They took shelter in a grey stone stable. Only half a roof remained, but that was half a roof more than any other building in the village. *It’s not a village, it’s only*

black stones and old bones. “Did the Lannisters kill the people who lived here?” Arya asked as she helped Anguy dry the horses.

“No.” He pointed. “Look at how thick the moss grows on the stones. No one’s moved them for a long time. And there’s a tree growing out of the wall there, see? This place was put to the torch a long time ago.”

“Who did it, then?” asked Gendry.

“Hoster Tully.” Notch was a stooped thin grey-haired man, born in these parts. “This was Lord Goodbrook’s village. When Riverrun declared for Robert, Goodbrook stayed loyal to the king, so Lord Tully came down on him with fire and sword. After the Trident, Goodbrook’s son made his peace with Robert and Lord Hoster, but that didn’t help the dead none.”

A silence fell. Gendry gave Arya a queer look, then turned away to brush his horse. Outside the rain came down and down. “I say we need a fire,” Thoros declared. “The night is dark and full of terrors. And wet too, eh? Too very wet.”

Jack-Be-Lucky hacked some dry wood from a stall, while Notch and Merrit gathered straw for kindling. Thoros himself struck the spark, and Lem fanned the flames with his big yellow cloak until they roared and swirled. Soon it grew almost hot inside the stable. Thoros sat before it crosslegged, devouring the flames with his eyes just as he had atop High Heart. Arya watched him closely, and once his lips moved, and she thought she heard him mutter, “Riverrun.” Lem paced back and forth, coughing, a long shadow matching him stride for stride, while Tom o’ Sevens pulled off his boots and rubbed his feet. “I must be mad, to be going back to Riverrun,” the singer complained. “The Tullys have never been lucky for old Tom. It was that Lysa sent me up the high road, when the moon men took my gold and my horse and all my clothes as well. There’s knights in the Vale still telling how I came walking up to the Bloody Gate with only my harp to keep me modest. They made me sing ‘The Name Day Boy’ and ‘The King Without Courage’ before they opened that gate. My only solace was that three of them died laughing. I haven’t been back to the Eyrie since, and I won’t sing ‘The King Without Courage’ either, not for all the gold in Casterly—”

“*Lannisters*,” Thoros said. “Roaring red and gold.” He lurched to his feet and went to Lord Beric. Lem and Tom wasted no time joining them. Arya could not make out what they were saying, but the singer kept glancing at her, and one time Lem got so angry he pounded a fist against the wall. That was when Lord Beric gestured for her to come closer. It was the last thing she wanted to do, but Harwin put a hand in the small of her back and pushed her forward. She took two steps and hesitated, full of dread. “My lord.” She waited to hear what Lord Beric would say.

“Tell her,” the lightning lord commanded Thoros.

The red priest squatted down beside her. “My lady,” he said, “the Lord granted me a view of Riverrun. An island in a sea of fire, it seemed. The flames were leaping lions with long crimson claws. And how they roared! A sea of Lannisters, my lady. Riverrun will soon come under attack.”

Arya felt as though he’d punched her in the belly. “*No!*”

“Sweetling,” said Thoros, “the flames do not lie. Sometimes I read them wrongly, blind fool that I am. But not this time, I think. The Lannisters will soon have Riverrun under siege.”

“Robb will beat them.” Arya got a stubborn look. “He’ll beat them like he did before.”

“Your brother may be gone,” said Thoros. “Your mother as well. I did not see them in the flames. This wedding the old one spoke of, a wedding on the Twins . . . she has her own ways of knowing things, that one. The weirwoods whisper in her ear when she sleeps. If she says your mother is gone to the Twins . . .”

Arya turned on Tom and Lem. “If you hadn’t caught me, I would have *been* there. I would have been *home*.”

Lord Beric paid no heed to her outburst. “My lady,” he said with weary courtesy, “would you know your grandfather’s brother by sight? Ser Brynden Tully, called the Blackfish? Would he know you, perchance?”

Arya shook her head miserably. She had heard her mother speak of Ser Brynden Blackfish, but if she had ever met him herself it had been when she was too little to remember.

“Small chance the Blackfish will pay good coin for a girl he doesn’t know,” said Tom. “Those Tullys are a sour, suspicious lot, he’s like to think we’re selling him false goods.”

“We’ll convince him,” Lem Lemoncloak insisted. “*She* will, or Harwin. Riverrun is closest. I say we take her there, get the gold, and be bloody well done with her.”

“And if the lions catch us inside the castle?” said Tom. “They’d like nothing better than to hang his lordship in a cage from the top of Casterly Rock.”

“I do not mean to be taken,” said Lord Beric. A final word hung unspoken in the air. *Alive*. They all heard it, even Arya, though it never passed his lips. “Still, we dare not go blindly here. I want to know where the armies are, the wolves and lions both. Sharna will know something, and Lord Vance’s maester will know more. Acorn Hall’s not far. Lady Smallwood will shelter us for a time while we send scouts ahead to learn . . .”

His words beat at her ears like the pounding of a drum, and suddenly it was more than Arya could stand. She wanted Riverrun, not Acorn Hall; she wanted her mother and her brother Robb, not Lady Smallwood or some uncle she never knew. Whirling, she broke for the door, and when Harwin tried to grab her arm she spun away from him quick as a snake.

Outside the stables the rain was still falling, and distant lightning flashed in the west. Arya ran as fast as she could. She did not know where she was going, only that she wanted to be alone, away from all the voices, away from their hollow words and broken promises. *All I wanted was to go to Riverrun*. It was her own fault, for taking Gendry and Hot Pie with her when she left Harrenhal. She would have been better alone. If she had been alone, the outlaws would never have caught her, and she’d be with Robb and her mother by now. *They were never my pack. If they had been, they wouldn’t leave me*. She splashed through a puddle of muddy water. Someone was shouting her name, Harwin probably, or Gendry, but the thunder drowned them out as it rolled across the hills, half a heartbeat behind the lightning. *The lightning lord*, she thought angrily. Maybe he couldn’t die, but he could lie.

Somewhere off to her left a horse whinnied. Arya couldn't have gone more than fifty yards from the stables, yet already she was soaked to the bone. She ducked around the corner of one of the tumbledown houses, hoping the mossy walls would keep the rain off, and almost bowled right into one of the sentries. A mailed hand closed hard around her arm.

"You're *hurting* me," she said, twisting in his grasp. "Let *go*, I was going to go back, I . . ."

"Back?" Sandor Clegane's laughter was iron scraping over stone. "Bugger that, wolf girl. You're *mine*." He needed only one hand to yank her off her feet and drag her kicking toward his waiting horse. The cold rain lashed them both and washed away her shouts, and all that Arya could think of was the question he had asked her. *Do you know what dogs do to wolves?*