



ARYA

The small square keep was half a ruin, and so too the great grey knight who lived there. He was so old he did not understand their questions. No matter what was said to him, he would only smile and mutter, “I held the bridge against Ser Maynard. Red hair and a black temper, he had, but he could not move me. Six wounds I took before I killed him. Six!”

The maester who cared for him was a young man, thankfully. After the old knight had drifted to sleep in his chair, he took them aside and said, “I fear you seek a ghost. We had a bird, ages ago, half a year at least. The Lannisters caught Lord Beric near the Gods Eye. He was hanged.”

“Aye, hanged he was, but Thoros cut him down before he died.” Lem’s broken nose was not so red or swollen as it had been, but it was healing crooked, giving his face a lopsided look. “His lordship’s a hard man to kill, he is.”

“And a hard man to find, it would seem,” the maester said. “Have you asked the Lady of the Leaves?”

“We shall,” said Greenbeard.

The next morning, as they crossed the little stone bridge behind the keep, Gendry wondered if this was the bridge the old man had fought over. No one knew. “Most like it is,” said Jack-Be-Lucky. “Don’t see no other bridges.”

“You’d know for certain if there was a song,” said Tom Sevenstrings. “One good song, and we’d know who Ser Maynard used to be and why he wanted to cross this bridge so bad. Poor old Lychester might be as far famed as the Dragonknight if he’d only had sense enough to keep a singer.”

“Lord Lychester’s sons died in Robert’s Rebellion,” grumbled Lem. “Some on one side, some on t’other. He’s not been right in the head since. No bloody song’s like to help any o’ that.”

“What did the maester mean, about asking the Lady of the Leaves?” Arya asked Anguy as they rode.

The archer smiled. “Wait and see.”

Three days later, as they rode through a yellow wood, Jack-Be-Lucky unslung his horn and blew a signal, a different one than before. The sounds had scarcely died away when rope ladders unrolled from the limbs of trees. “Hobble the horses and up we go,” said Tom, half singing the words. They climbed to a hidden village in the upper branches, a maze of rope walkways and little moss-covered houses concealed behind walls of red and gold, and were taken to the Lady of the Leaves, a stick-thin white-haired woman dressed in roughspun. “We cannot stay here much longer, with autumn on us,” she told them. “A dozen wolves went down the Hayford road nine days past, hunting. If they’d chanced to look up they might have seen us.”

“You’ve not seen Lord Beric?” asked Tom Sevenstrings.

“He’s dead.” The woman sounded sick. “The Mountain caught him, and drove a dagger through his eye. A begging brother told us. He had it from the lips of a man who saw it happen.”

“That’s an old stale tale, and false,” said Lem. “The lightning lord’s not so easy to kill. Ser Gregor might have put his eye out, but a man don’t die o’ that. Jack could tell you.”

“Well, I never did,” said one-eyed Jack-Be-Lucky. “My father got himself good and hanged by Lord Piper’s bailiff, my brother Wat got sent to the Wall, and the Lannisters killed my other brothers. An eye, that’s nothing.”

“You swear he’s not dead?” The woman clutched Lem’s arm. “Bless you, Lem, that’s the best tidings we’ve had in half a year. May the Warrior

defend him, and the red priest too.”

The next night they found shelter beneath the scorched shell of a sept, in a burned village called Sallydance. Only shards remained of its windows of leaded glass, and the aged septon who greeted them said the looters had even made off with the Mother’s costly robes, the Crone’s gilded lantern, and the silver crown the Father had worn. “They hacked the Maiden’s breasts off too, though those were only wood,” he told them. “And the eyes, the eyes were jet and lapis and mother-of-pearl, they pried them out with their knives. May the Mother have mercy on them all.”

“Whose work was this?” said Lem Lemoncloak. “Mummers?”

“No,” the old man said. “Northmen, they were. Savages who worship trees. They wanted the Kingslayer, they said.”

Arya heard him, and chewed her lip. She could feel Gendry looking at her. It made her angry and ashamed.

There were a dozen men living in the vault beneath the sept, amongst cobwebs and roots and broken wine casks, but they had no word of Beric Dondarrion either. Not even their leader, who wore soot-blackened armor and a crude lightning bolt on his cloak. When Greenbeard saw Arya staring at him, he laughed and said, “The lightning lord is everywhere and nowhere, skinny squirrel.”

“I’m not a squirrel,” she said. “I’ll almost be a woman soon. I’ll be one-and-ten.”

“Best watch out I don’t marry you, then!” He tried to tickle her under the chin, but Arya slapped his stupid hand away.

Lem and Gendry played tiles with their hosts that night, while Tom Sevenstrings sang a silly song about Big Belly Ben and the High Septon’s goose. Anguy let Arya try his longbow, but no matter how hard she bit her lip she could not draw it. “You need a lighter bow, milady,” the freckled bowman said. “If there’s seasoned wood at Riverrun, might be I’ll make you one.”

Tom overheard him, and broke off his song. “You’re a young fool, Archer. If we go to Riverrun it will only be to collect her ransom, won’t be no time for you to sit about making bows. Be thankful if you get out with

your hide. Lord Hoster was hanging outlaws before you were shaving. And that son of his . . . a man who hates music can't be trusted, I always say."

"It's not music he hates," said Lem. "It's you, fool."

"Well, he has no cause. The wench was willing to make a man of him, is it my fault he drank too much to do the deed?"

Lem snorted through his broken nose. "Was it you who made a song of it, or some other bloody arse in love with his own voice?"

"I only sang it the once," Tom complained. "And who's to say the song was about him? 'Twas a song about a fish."

"A floppy fish," said Anguy, laughing.

Arya didn't care what Tom's stupid songs were about. She turned to Harwin. "What did he mean about ransom?"

"We have sore need of horses, milady. Armor as well. Swords, shields, spears. All the things coin can buy. Aye, and seed for planting. Winter is coming, remember?" He touched her under the chin. "You will not be the first highborn captive we've ransomed. Nor the last, I'd hope."

That much was true, Arya knew. Knights were captured and ransomed all the time, and sometimes women were too. *But what if Robb won't pay their price?* She wasn't a famous knight, and kings were supposed to put the realm before their sisters. And her lady mother, what would she say? Would she still want her back, after all the things she'd done? Arya chewed her lip and wondered.

The next day they rode to a place called High Heart, a hill so lofty that from atop it Arya felt as though she could see half the world. Around its brow stood a ring of huge pale stumps, all that remained of a circle of once-mighty weirwoods. Arya and Gendry walked around the hill to count them. There were thirty-one, some so wide that she could have used them for a bed.

High Heart had been sacred to the children of the forest, Tom Sevenstrings told her, and some of their magic lingered here still. "No harm can ever come to those as sleep here," the singer said. Arya thought that must be true; the hill was so high and the surrounding lands so flat that no enemy could approach unseen.

The smallfolk hereabouts shunned the place, Tom told her; it was said to be haunted by the ghosts of the children of the forest who had died here when the Andal king named Erreg the Kinslayer had cut down their grove. Arya knew about the children of the forest, and about the Andals too, but ghosts did not frighten her. She used to hide in the crypts of Winterfell when she was little, and play games of come-into-my-castle and monsters and maidens amongst the stone kings on their thrones.

Yet even so, the hair on the back of her neck stood up that night. She had been asleep, but the storm woke her. The wind pulled the coverlet right off her and sent it swirling into the bushes. When she went after it she heard voices.

Beside the embers of their campfire, she saw Tom, Lem, and Greenbeard talking to a tiny little woman, a foot shorter than Arya and older than Old Nan, all stooped and wrinkled and leaning on a gnarled black cane. Her white hair was so long it came almost to the ground. When the wind gusted it blew about her head in a fine cloud. Her flesh was whiter, the color of milk, and it seemed to Arya that her eyes were red, though it was hard to tell from the bushes. “The old gods stir and will not let me sleep,” she heard the woman say. “I dreamt I saw a shadow with a burning heart butchering a golden stag, aye. I dreamt of a man without a face, waiting on a bridge that swayed and swung. On his shoulder perched a drowned crow with seaweed hanging from his wings. I dreamt of a roaring river and a woman that was a fish. Dead she drifted, with red tears on her cheeks, but when her eyes did open, *oh*, I woke from terror. All this I dreamt, and more. Do you have gifts for me, to pay me for my dreams?”

“Dreams,” grumbled Lem Lemoncloak, “what good are dreams? Fish women and drowned crows. I had a dream myself last night. I was kissing this tavern wench I used to know. Are you going to pay me for that, old woman?”

“The wench is dead,” the woman hissed. “Only worms may kiss her now.” And then to Tom Sevenstrings she said, “I’ll have my song or I’ll have you gone.”

So the singer played for her, so soft and sad that Arya only heard snatches of the words, though the tune was half-familiar. *Sansa would know*

it, I bet. Her sister had known all the songs, and she could even play a little, and sing so sweetly. *All I could ever do was shout the words.*

The next morning the little white woman was nowhere to be seen. As they saddled their horses, Arya asked Tom Sevenstrings if the children of the forest still dwelled on High Heart. The singer chuckled. “Saw her, did you?”

“Was she a ghost?”

“Do ghosts complain of how their joints creak? No, she’s only an old dwarf woman. A queer one, though, and evil-eyed. But she knows things she has no business knowing, and sometimes she’ll tell you if she likes the look of you.”

“Did she like the looks of *you*?” Arya asked doubtfully.

The singer laughed. “The sound of me, at least. She always makes me sing the same bloody song, though. Not a bad song, mind you, but I know others just as good.” He shook his head. “What matters is, we have the scent now. You’ll soon be seeing Thoros and the lightning lord, I’ll wager.”

“If you’re their men, why do they hide from you?”

Tom Sevenstrings rolled his eyes at that, but Harwin gave her an answer. “I wouldn’t call it hiding, milady, but it’s true, Lord Beric moves about a lot, and seldom lets on what his plans are. That way no one can betray him. By now there must be hundreds of us sworn to him, maybe thousands, but it wouldn’t do for us all to trail along behind him. We’d eat the country bare, or get butchered in a battle by some bigger host. The way we’re scattered in little bands, we can strike in a dozen places at once, and be off somewhere else before they know. And when one of us is caught and put to the question, well, we can’t tell them where to find Lord Beric no matter what they do to us.” He hesitated. “You know what it means, to be put to the question?”

Arya nodded. “Tickling, they called it. Polliver and Raff and all.” She told them about the village by the Gods Eye where she and Gendry had been caught, and the questions that the Tickler had asked. “Is there gold hidden in the village?” he would always begin. “Silver, gems? Is there food? Where is Lord Beric? Which of you village folk helped him? Where did he go? How many men did he have with him? How many knights? How

many bowmen? How many were horsed? How are they armed? How many wounded? Where did they go, did you say?" Just thinking of it, she could hear the shrieks again, and smell the stench of blood and shit and burning flesh. "He always asked the same questions," she told the outlaws solemnly, "but he changed the tickling every day."

"No child should be made to suffer that," Harwin said when she was done. "The Mountain lost half his men at the Stone Mill, we hear. Might be this Tickler's floating down the Red Fork even now, with fish biting at his face. If not, well, it's one more crime they'll answer for. I've heard his lordship say this war began when the Hand sent him out to bring the king's justice to Gregor Clegane, and that's how he means for it to end." He gave her shoulder a reassuring pat. "You best mount up, milady. It's a long day's ride to Acorn Hall, but at the end of it we'll have a roof above our heads and a hot supper in our bellies."

It *was* a long day's ride, but as dusk was settling they forded a brook and came up on Acorn Hall, with its stone curtain walls and great oaken keep. Its master was away fighting in the retinue of *his* master, Lord Vance, the castle gates closed and barred in his absence. But his lady wife was an old friend of Tom Sevenstrings, and Anguy said they'd once been lovers. Anguy often rode beside her; he was closer to her in age than any of them but Gendry, and he told her droll tales of the Dornish Marches. He never fooled her, though. *He's not my friend. He's only staying close to watch me and make sure I don't ride off again.* Well, Arya could watch as well. Syrio Forel had taught her how.

Lady Smallwood welcomed the outlaws kindly enough, though she gave them a tongue lashing for dragging a young girl through the war. She became even more wroth when Lem let slip that Arya was highborn. "Who dressed the poor child in those Bolton rags?" she demanded of them. "That badge . . . there's many a man who would hang her in half a heartbeat for wearing a flayed man on her breast." Arya promptly found herself marched upstairs, forced into a tub, and doused with scalding hot water. Lady Smallwood's maidservants scrubbed her so hard it felt like they were flaying her themselves. They even dumped in some stinky-sweet stuff that smelled like flowers.

And afterward, they insisted she dress herself in girl's things, brown woolen stockings and a light linen shift, and over that a light green gown with acorns embroidered all over the bodice in brown thread, and more acorns bordering the hem. "My great-aunt is a septa at a motherhouse in Oldtown," Lady Smallwood said as the women laced the gown up Arya's back. "I sent my daughter there when the war began. She'll have outgrown these things by the time she returns, no doubt. Are you fond of dancing, child? My Carellen's a lovely dancer. She sings beautifully as well. What do you like to do?"

She scuffed a toe amongst the rushes. "Needlework."

"Very restful, isn't it?"

"Well," said Arya, "not the way I do it."

"No? I have always found it so. The gods give each of us our little gifts and talents, and it is meant for us to use them, my aunt always says. Any act can be a prayer, if done as well as we are able. Isn't that a lovely thought? Remember that the next time you do your needlework. Do you work at it every day?"

"I did till I lost Needle. My new one's not as good."

"In times like these, we all must make do as best we can." Lady Smallwood fussed at the bodice of the gown. "Now you look a proper young lady."

I'm not a lady, Arya wanted to tell her, I'm a wolf.

"I do not know who you are, child," the woman said, "and it may be that's for the best. Someone important, I fear." She smoothed down Arya's collar. "In times like these, it is better to be insignificant. Would that I could keep you here with me. That would not be safe, though. I have walls, but too few men to hold them." She sighed.

Supper was being served in the hall by the time Arya was all washed and combed and dressed. Gendry took one look and laughed so hard that wine came out his nose, until Harwin gave him a *thwack* alongside his ear. The meal was plain but filling; mutton and mushrooms, brown bread, pease pudding, and baked apples with yellow cheese. When the food had been

cleared and the servants sent away, Greenbeard lowered his voice to ask if her ladyship had word of the lightning lord.

“Word?” She smiled. “They were here not a fortnight past. Them and a dozen more, driving sheep. I could scarcely believe my eyes. Thoros gave me three as thanks. You’ve eaten one tonight.”

“Thoros herding sheep?” Anguy laughed aloud.

“I grant you it was an odd sight, but Thoros claimed that as a priest he knew how to tend a flock.”

“Aye, and shear them too,” chuckled Lem Lemoncloak.

“Someone could make a rare fine song of that.” Tom plucked a string on his woodharp.

Lady Smallwood gave him a withering look. “Someone who doesn’t rhyme *carry on* with *Dondarrion*, perhaps. Or play ‘Oh, Lay My Sweet Lass Down in the Grass’ to every milkmaid in the shire and leave two of them with big bellies.”

“It was ‘Let Me Drink Your Beauty,’” said Tom defensively, “and milkmaids are always glad to hear it. As was a certain highborn lady I do recall. I play to please.”

Her nostrils flared. “The riverlands are full of maids you’ve pleased, all drinking tansy tea. You’d think a man as old as you would know to spill his seed on their bellies. Men will be calling you Tom Seversons before much longer.”

“As it happens,” said Tom, “I passed seven many years ago. And fine boys they are too, with voices sweet as nightingales.” Plainly he did not care for the subject.

“Did his lordship say where he was bound, milady?” asked Harwin.

“Lord Beric never shares his plans, but there’s hunger down near Stoney Sept and the Threepenny Wood. I should look for him there.” She took a sip of wine. “You’d best know, I’ve had less pleasant callers as well. A pack of wolves came howling around my gates, thinking I might have Jaime Lannister in here.”

Tom stopped his plucking. “Then it’s true, the Kingslayer is loose again?”

Lady Smallwood gave him a scornful look. “I hardly think they’d be hunting him if he was chained up under Riverrun.”

“What did m’lady tell them?” asked Jack-Be-Lucky.

“Why, that I had Ser Jaime naked in my bed, but I’d left him much too exhausted to come down. One of them had the effrontery to call me a liar, so we saw them off with a few quarrels. I believe they made for Blackbottom Bend.”

Arya squirmed restlessly in her seat. “What northmen was it, who came looking after the Kingslayer?”

Lady Smallwood seemed surprised that she’d spoken. “They did not give their names, child, but they wore black, with the badge of a white sun on the breast.”

A white sun on black was the sigil of Lord Karstark, Arya thought. *Those were Robb’s men.* She wondered if they were still close. If she could give the outlaws the slip and find them, maybe they would take her to her mother at Riverrun . . .

“Did they say how Lannister came to escape?” Lem asked.

“They did,” said Lady Smallwood. “Not that I believe a word of it. They claimed that Lady Catelyn set him free.”

That startled Tom so badly he snapped a string. “Go on with you,” he said. “That’s madness.”

It’s not true, thought Arya. *It couldn’t be true.*

“I thought the same,” said Lady Smallwood.

That was when Harwin remembered Arya. “Such talk is not for your ears, milady.”

“No, I want to hear.”

The outlaws were adamant. “Go on with you, skinny squirrel,” said Greenbeard. “Be a good little lady and go play in the yard while we talk, now.”

Arya stalked away angry, and would have slammed the door if it hadn’t been so heavy. Darkness had settled over Acorn Hall. A few torches burned along the walls, but that was all. The gates of the little castle were closed

and barred. She had promised Harwin that she would not try and run away again, she knew, but that was before they started telling lies about her mother.

“Arya?” Gendry had followed her out. “Lady Smallwood said there’s a smithy. Want to have a look?”

“If you want.” She had nothing else to do.

“This Thoros,” Gendry said as they walked past the kennels, “is he the same Thoros who lived in the castle at King’s Landing? A red priest, fat, with a shaved head?”

“I think so.” Arya had never spoken to Thoros at King’s Landing that she could recall, but she knew who he was. He and Jalabhar Xho had been the most colorful figures at Robert’s court, and Thoros was a great friend of the king as well.

“He won’t remember me, but he used to come to our forge.” The Smallwood forge had not been used in some time, though the smith had hung his tools neatly on the wall. Gendry lit a candle and set it on the anvil while he took down a pair of tongs. “My master always scolded him about his flaming swords. It was no way to treat good steel, he’d say, but this Thoros never used good steel. He’d just dip some cheap sword in wildfire and set it alight. It was only an alchemist’s trick, my master said, but it scared the horses and some of the greener knights.”

She screwed up her face, trying to remember if her father had ever talked about Thoros. “He isn’t very priestly, is he?”

“No,” Gendry admitted. “Master Mott said Thoros could outdrink even King Robert. They were pease in a pod, he told me, both gluttons and sots.”

“You shouldn’t call the king a sot.” Maybe King Robert had drunk a lot, but he’d been her father’s friend.

“I was talking about Thoros.” Gendry reached out with the tongs as if to pinch her face, but Arya swatted them away. “He liked feasts and tourneys, that was why King Robert was so fond of him. And this Thoros was brave. When the walls of Pyke crashed down, he was the first through the breach. He fought with one of his flaming swords, setting ironmen afire with every slash.”

“I wish I had a flaming sword.” Arya could think of lots of people she’d like to set on fire.

“It’s only a trick, I told you. The wildfire ruins the steel. My master sold Thoros a new sword after every tourney. Every time they would have a fight about the price.” Gendry hung the tongs back up and took down the heavy hammer. “Master Mott said it was time I made my first longsword. He gave me a sweet piece of steel, and I knew just how I wanted to shape the blade. Only Yoren came, and took me away for the Night’s Watch.”

“You can still make swords if you want,” said Arya. “You can make them for my brother Robb when we get to Riverrun.”

“Riverrun.” Gendry put the hammer down and looked at her. “You look different now. Like a proper little girl.”

“I look like an oak tree, with all these stupid acorns.”

“Nice, though. A nice oak tree.” He stepped closer, and *sniffed* at her. “You even smell nice for a change.”

“You don’t. You *stink*.” Arya shoved him back against the anvil and made to run, but Gendry caught her arm. She stuck a foot between his legs and tripped him, but he yanked her down with him, and they rolled across the floor of the smithy. He was very strong, but she was quicker. Every time he tried to hold her still she wriggled free and punched him. Gendry only laughed at the blows, which made her mad. He finally caught both her wrists in one hand and started to tickle her with the other, so Arya slammed her knee between his legs, and wrenched free. Both of them were covered in dirt, and one sleeve was torn on her stupid acorn dress. “I bet I don’t look so nice *now*,” she shouted.

Tom was singing when they returned to the hall.

*My featherbed is deep and soft,
and there I’ll lay you down,
I’ll dress you all in yellow silk,
and on your head a crown.
For you shall be my lady love,
and I shall be your lord.
I’ll always keep you warm and safe,
and guard you with my sword.*

Harwin took one look at them and burst out laughing, and Anguy smiled one of his stupid freckly smiles and said, “Are we *certain* this one is a highborn lady?” But Lem Lemoncloak gave Gendry a clout alongside the head. “You want to fight, fight with me! She’s a girl, and half your age! You keep your hands off o’ her, you hear me?”

“I started it,” said Arya. “Gendry was just talking.”

“Leave the boy, Lem,” said Harwin. “Arya did start it, I have no doubt. She was much the same at Winterfell.”

Tom winked at her as he sang:

*And how she smiled and how she laughed,
the maiden of the tree.
She spun away and said to him,
no featherbed for me.
I’ll wear a gown of golden leaves,
and bind my hair with grass,
But you can be my forest love,
and me your forest lass.*

“I have no gowns of leaves,” said Lady Smallwood with a small fond smile, “but Carellen left some other dresses that might serve. Come, child, let us go upstairs and see what we can find.”

It was even worse than before; Lady Smallwood insisted that Arya take *another* bath, and cut and comb her hair besides; the dress she put her in this time was sort of lilac-colored, and decorated with little baby pearls. The only good thing about it was that it was so delicate that no one could expect her to ride in it. So the next morning as they broke their fast, Lady Smallwood gave her breeches, belt, and tunic to wear, and a brown doeskin jerkin dotted with iron studs. “They were my son’s things,” she said. “He died when he was seven.”

“I’m sorry, my lady.” Arya suddenly felt bad for her, and ashamed. “I’m sorry I tore the acorn dress too. It was pretty.”

“Yes, child. And so are you. Be brave.”