



## ARYA

**H**er eyes had grown accustomed to blackness. When Harwin pulled the hood off her head, the ruddy glare inside the hollow hill made Arya blink like some stupid owl.

A huge firepit had been dug in the center of the earthen floor, and its flames rose swirling and crackling toward the smoke-stained ceiling. The walls were equal parts stone and soil, with huge white roots twisting through them like a thousand slow pale snakes. People were emerging from between those roots as she watched; edging out from the shadows for a look at the captives, stepping from the mouths of pitch-black tunnels, popping out of crannies and crevices on all sides. In one place on the far side of the fire, the roots formed a kind of stairway up to a hollow in the earth where a man sat almost lost in the tangle of weirwood.

Lem unhooded Gendry. “What is this place?” he asked.

“An old place, deep and secret. A refuge where neither wolves nor lions come prowling.”

*Neither wolves nor lions.* Arya’s skin prickled. She remembered the dream she’d had, and the taste of blood when she tore the man’s arm from his shoulder.

Big as the fire was, the cave was bigger; it was hard to tell where it began and where it ended. The tunnel mouths might have been two feet deep or

gone on two miles. Arya saw men and women and little children, all of them watching her warily.

Greenbeard said, “Here’s the wizard, skinny squirrel. You’ll get your answers now.” He pointed toward the fire, where Tom Sevenstrings stood talking to a tall thin man with oddments of old armor buckled on over his ratty pink robes. *That can’t be Thoros of Myr.* Arya remembered the red priest as fat, with a smooth face and a shiny bald head. This man had a droopy face and a full head of shaggy grey hair. Something Tom said made him look at her, and Arya thought he was about to come over to her. Only then the Mad Huntsman appeared, shoving his captive down into the light, and she and Gendry were forgotten.

The Huntsman had turned out to be a stocky man in patched tan leathers, balding and weak-chinned and quarrelsome. At Stoney Sept she had thought that Lem and Greenbeard might be torn to pieces when they faced him at the crow cages to claim his captive for the lightning lord. The hounds had been all around them, sniffing and snarling. But Tom o’ Sevens soothed them with his playing, Tansy marched across the square with her apron full of bones and fatty mutton, and Lem pointed out Anguy in the brothel window, standing with an arrow notched. The Mad Huntsman had cursed them all for lickspittles, but finally he had agreed to take his prize to Lord Beric for judgment.

They had bound his wrists with hempen rope, strung a noose around his neck, and pulled a sack down over his head, but even so there was danger in the man. Arya could feel it across the cave. Thoros—if that *was* Thoros—met captor and captive halfway to the fire. “How did you take him?” the priest asked.

“The dogs caught the scent. He was sleeping off a drunk under a willow tree, if you believe it.”

“Betrayed by his own kind.” Thoros turned to the prisoner and yanked his hood off. “Welcome to our humble hall, dog. It is not so grand as Robert’s throne room, but the company is better.”

The shifting flames painted Sandor Clegane’s burned face with orange shadows, so he looked even more terrible than he did in daylight. When he

pulled at the rope that bound his wrists, flakes of dry blood fell off. The Hound's mouth twitched. "I know you," he said to Thoros.

"You did. In mêlées, you'd curse my flaming sword, though thrice I overthrew you with it."

"Thoros of Myr. You used to shave your head."

"To betoken a humble heart, but in truth my heart was vain. Besides, I lost my razor in the woods." The priest slapped his belly. "I am less than I was, but more. A year in the wild will melt the flesh off a man. Would that I could find a tailor to take in my skin. I might look young again, and pretty maids would shower me with kisses."

"Only the blind ones, priest."

The outlaws hooted, none so loud as Thoros. "Just so. Yet I am not the false priest you knew. The Lord of Light has woken in my heart. Many powers long asleep are waking, and there are forces moving in the land. I have seen them in my flames."

The Hound was unimpressed. "Bugger your flames. And you as well." He looked around at the others. "You keep queer company for a holy man."

"These are my brothers," Thoros said simply.

Lem Lemoncloak pushed forward. He and Greenbeard were the only men there tall enough to look the Hound in the eye. "Be careful how you bark, dog. We hold your life in our hands."

"Best wipe the shit off your fingers, then." The Hound laughed. "How long have you been hiding in this hole?"

Anguy the Archer bristled at the suggestion of cowardice. "Ask the goat if we've hidden, Hound. Ask your brother. Ask the lord of leeches. We've bloodied them all."

"You lot? Don't make me laugh. You look more swineherds than soldiers."

"Some of us was swineherds," said a short man Arya did not know. "And some was tanners or singers or masons. But that was before the war come."

"When we left King's Landing we were men of Winterfell and men of Darry and men of Blackhaven, Mallery men and Wylde men. We were

knights and squires and men-at-arms, lords and commoners, bound together only by our purpose.” The voice came from the man seated amongst the weirwood roots halfway up the wall. “Six score of us set out to bring the king’s justice to your brother.” The speaker was descending the tangle of steps toward the floor. “Six score brave men and true, led by a fool in a starry cloak.” A scarecrow of a man, he wore a ragged black cloak speckled with stars and an iron breastplate dented by a hundred battles. A thicket of red-gold hair hid most of his face, save for a bald spot above his left ear where his head had been smashed in. “More than eighty of our company are dead now, but others have taken up the swords that fell from their hands.” When he reached the floor, the outlaws moved aside to let him pass. One of his eyes was gone, Arya saw, the flesh about the socket scarred and puckered, and he had a dark black ring all around his neck. “With their help, we fight on as best we can, for Robert and the realm.”

“Robert?” rasped Sandor Clegane, incredulous.

“Ned Stark sent us out,” said pothelmed Jack-Be-Lucky, “but he was sitting the Iron Throne when he gave us our commands, so we were never truly his men, but Robert’s.”

“Robert is the king of the worms now. Is that why you’re down in the earth, to keep his court for him?”

“The king is dead,” the scarecrow knight admitted, “but we are still king’s men, though the royal banner we bore was lost at the Mummer’s Ford when your brother’s butchers fell upon us.” He touched his breast with a fist. “Robert is slain, but his realm remains. And we defend her.”

“*Her?*” The Hound snorted. “Is she your mother, Dondarrion? Or your whore?”

*Dondarrion?* Beric Dondarrion had been handsome; Sansa’s friend Jeyne had fallen in love with him. Even Jeyne Poole was not so blind as to think this man was fair. Yet when Arya looked at him again, she saw it; the remains of a forked purple lightning bolt on the cracked enamel of his breastplate.

“Rocks and trees and rivers, that’s what your realm is made of,” the Hound was saying. “Do the rocks need defending? Robert wouldn’t have

thought so. If he couldn't fuck it, fight it, or drink it, it bored him, and so would you . . . you *brave companions*."

Outrage swept the hollow hill. "Call us that name again, dog, and you'll swallow that tongue." Lem drew his longsword.

The Hound stared at the blade with contempt. "Here's a brave man, baring steel on a bound captive. Untie me, why don't you? We'll see how brave you are then." He glanced at the Mad Huntsman behind him. "How about you? Or did you leave all your courage in your kennels?"

"No, but I should have left you in a crow cage." The Huntsman drew a knife. "I might still."

The Hound laughed in his face.

"We are brothers here," Thoros of Myr declared. "Holy brothers, sworn to the realm, to our god, and to each other."

"The brotherhood without banners." Tom Sevenstrings plucked a string. "The knights of the hollow hill."

"*Knights*?" Clegane made the word a sneer. "Dondarrion's a knight, but the rest of you are the sorriest lot of outlaws and broken men I've ever seen. I shit better men than you."

"Any knight can make a knight," said the scarecrow that was Beric Dondarrion, "and every man you see before you has felt a sword upon his shoulder. We are the forgotten fellowship."

"Send me on my way and I'll forget you too," Clegane rasped. "But if you mean to murder me, then bloody well get on with it. You took my sword, my horse, and my gold, so take my life and be done with it . . . but spare me this pious bleating."

"You will die soon enough, dog," promised Thoros, "but it shan't be murder, only justice."

"Aye," said the Mad Huntsman, "and a kinder fate than you deserve for all your kind have done. Lions, you call yourselves. At Sherrer and the Mummer's Ford, girls of six and seven years were raped, and babes still on the breast were cut in two while their mothers watched. No lion ever killed so cruel."

“I was not at Sherrer, nor the Mummer’s Ford,” the Hound told him. “Lay your dead children at some other door.”

Thoros answered him. “Do you deny that House Clegane was built upon dead children? I saw them lay Prince Aegon and Princess Rhaenys before the Iron Throne. By rights your arms should bear two bloody infants in place of those ugly dogs.”

The Hound’s mouth twitched. “Do you take me for my brother? Is being born Clegane a crime?”

“Murder is a crime.”

“Who did I murder?”

“Lord Lothar Mallery and Ser Gladden Wylde,” said Harwin.

“My brothers Lister and Lennocks,” declared Jack-Be-Lucky.

“Goodman Beck and Mudge the miller’s son, from Donnelwood,” an old woman called from the shadows.

“Merriman’s widow, who loved so sweet,” added Greenbeard.

“Them septons at Sludgy Pond.”

“Ser Andrey Charlton. His squire Lucas Roote. Every man, woman, and child in Fieldstone and Mousedown Mill.”

“Lord and Lady Deddings, that was so rich.”

Tom Sevenstrings took up the count. “Alyn of Winterfell, Joth Quickbow, Little Matt and his sister Randa, Anvil Ryn. Ser Ormond. Ser Dudley. Pate of Mory, Pate of Lancewood, Old Pate, and Pate of Shermer’s Grove. Blind Wyl the Whittler. Goodwife Maerie. Maerie the Whore. Becca the Baker. Ser Raymun Darry, Lord Darry, young Lord Darry. The Bastard of Bracken. Fletcher Will. Harsley. Goodwife Nolla—”

“*Enough.*” The Hound’s face was tight with anger. “You’re making noise. These names mean nothing. Who were they?”

“People,” said Lord Beric. “People great and small, young and old. Good people and bad people, who died on the points of Lannister spears or saw their bellies opened by Lannister swords.”

“It wasn’t *my* sword in their bellies. Any man who says it was is a bloody liar.”

“You serve the Lannisters of Casterly Rock,” said Thoros.

“Once. Me and thousands more. Is each of us guilty of the crimes of the others?” Clegane spat. “Might be you *are* knights after all. You lie like knights, maybe you murder like knights.”

Lem and Jack-Be-Lucky began to shout at him, but Dondarrion raised a hand for silence. “Say what you mean, Clegane.”

“A knight’s a sword with a horse. The rest, the vows and the sacred oils and the lady’s favors, they’re silk ribbons tied round the sword. Maybe the sword’s prettier with ribbons hanging off it, but it will kill you just as dead. Well, bugger your ribbons, and shove your swords up your arses. I’m the same as you. The only difference is, I don’t lie about what I am. So kill me, but don’t call me a murderer while you stand there telling each other that your shit don’t stink. *You hear me?*”

Arya squirted past Greenbeard so fast he never saw her. “You *are* a murderer!” she screamed. “You killed *Mycah*, don’t say you never did. You *murdered* him!”

The Hound stared at her with no flicker of recognition. “And who was this Mycah, boy?”

“I’m not a boy! But Mycah was. He was a butcher’s boy and you *killed* him. Jory said you cut him near in half, and he never even had a sword.” She could feel them looking at her now, the women and the children and the men who called themselves the knights of the hollow hill. “Who’s this now?” someone asked.

The Hound answered. “*Seven hells*. The little sister. The brat who tossed Joff’s pretty sword in the river.” He gave a bark of laughter. “Don’t you know you’re dead?”

“No, *you’re* dead,” she threw back at him.

Harwin took her arm to draw her back as Lord Beric said, “The girl has named you a murderer. Do you deny killing this butcher’s boy, Mycah?”

The big man shrugged. “I was Joffrey’s sworn shield. The butcher’s boy attacked a prince of the blood.”

“That’s a *lie!*” Arya squirmed in Harwin’s grip. “It was *me*. I hit Joffrey and threw Lion’s Paw in the river. Mycah just ran away, like I told him.”

“Did you see the boy attack Prince Joffrey?” Lord Beric Dondarrion asked the Hound.

“I heard it from the royal lips. It’s not my place to question princes.” Clegane jerked his hands toward Arya. “This one’s own sister told the same tale when she stood before your precious Robert.”

“Sansa’s just a liar,” Arya said, furious at her sister all over again. “It wasn’t like she said. It *wasn’t*.”

Thoros drew Lord Beric aside. The two men stood talking in low whispers while Arya seethed. *They have to kill him. I prayed for him to die, hundreds and hundreds of times.*

Beric Dondarrion turned back to the Hound. “You stand accused of murder, but no one here knows the truth or falsehood of the charge, so it is not for us to judge you. Only the Lord of Light may do that now. I sentence you to trial by battle.”

The Hound frowned suspiciously, as if he did not trust his ears. “Are you a fool or a madman?”

“Neither. I am a just lord. Prove your innocence with a blade, and you shall be free to go.”

“No,” Arya cried, before Harwin covered her mouth. *No, they can’t, he’ll go free.* The Hound was deadly with a sword, everyone knew that. *He’ll laugh at them,* she thought.

And so he did, a long rasping laugh that echoed off the cave walls, a laugh choking with contempt. “So who will it be?” He looked at Lem Lemoncloak. “The brave man in the piss-yellow cloak? No? How about you, Huntsman? You’ve kicked dogs before, try me.” He saw Greenbeard. “You’re big enough, Tyrosh, step forward. Or do you mean to make the little girl fight me herself?” He laughed again. “Come on, who wants to die?”

“It’s me you’ll face,” said Lord Beric Dondarrion.

Arya remembered all the tales. *He can’t be killed,* she thought, hoping against hope. The Mad Huntsman sliced apart the ropes that bound Sandor Clegane’s hands together. “I’ll need sword and armor.” The Hound rubbed a torn wrist.



“Your sword you shall have,” declared Lord Beric, “but your innocence must be your armor.”

Clegane’s mouth twitched. “My innocence against your breastplate, is that the way of it?”

“Ned, help me remove my breastplate.”

Arya got goosebumps when Lord Beric said her father’s name, but this Ned was only a boy, a fair-haired squire no more than ten or twelve. He stepped up quickly to undo the clasps that fastened the battered steel about the Marcher lord. The quilting beneath was rotten with age and sweat, and fell away when the metal was pulled loose. Gendry sucked in his breath. “Mother have mercy.”

Lord Beric’s ribs were outlined starkly beneath his skin. A puckered crater scarred his breast just above his left nipple, and when he turned to call for sword and shield, Arya saw a matching scar upon his back. *The lance went through him.* The Hound had seen it too. *Is he scared?* Arya wanted him to be scared before he died, as scared as Mycah must have been.

Ned fetched Lord Beric his swordbelt and a long black surcoat. It was meant to be worn over armor, so it draped his body loosely, but across it crackled the forked purple lightning of his House. He unsheathed his sword and gave the belt back to his squire.

Thoros brought the Hound his swordbelt. “Does a dog have honor?” the priest asked. “Lest you think to cut your way free of here, or seize some child for a hostage . . . Anguy, Denet, Kyle, feather him at the first sign of treachery.” Only when the three bowmen had notched their shafts did Thoros hand Clegane the belt.

The Hound ripped the sword free and threw away the scabbard. The Mad Huntsman gave him his oaken shield, all studded with iron and painted yellow, the three black dogs of Clegane emblazoned upon it. The boy Ned helped Lord Beric with his own shield, so hacked and battered that the purple lightning and the scatter of stars upon it had almost been obliterated.

But when the Hound made to step toward his foe, Thoros of Myr stopped him. “First we pray.” He turned toward the fire and lifted his arms. “Lord of Light, look down upon us.”

All around the cave, the brotherhood without banners lifted their own voices in response. “*Lord of Light, defend us.*”

“Lord of Light, protect us in the darkness.”

“*Lord of Light, shine your face upon us.*”

“Light your flame among us, R’hllor,” said the red priest. “Show us the truth or falseness of this man. Strike him down if he is guilty, and give strength to his sword if he is true. Lord of Light, give us wisdom.”

“*For the night is dark,*” the others chanted, Harwin and Anguy loud as all the rest, “*and full of terrors.*”

“This cave is dark too,” said the Hound, “but I’m the terror here. I hope your god’s a sweet one, Dondarrion. You’re going to meet him shortly.”

Unsmiling, Lord Beric laid the edge of his longsword against the palm of his left hand, and drew it slowly down. Blood ran dark from the gash he made, and washed over the steel.

And then the sword took fire.

Arya heard Gendry whisper a prayer.

“Burn in seven hells,” the Hound cursed. “You, and Thoros too.” He threw a glance at the red priest. “When I’m done with him you’ll be next, Myr.”

“Every word you say proclaims your guilt, dog,” answered Thoros, while Lem and Greenbeard and Jack-Be-Lucky shouted threats and curses. Lord Beric himself waited silent, calm as still water, his shield on his left arm and his sword burning in his right hand. *Kill him*, Arya thought, *please, you have to kill him*. Lit from below, his face was a death mask, his missing eye a red and angry wound. The sword was aflame from point to crossguard, but Dondarrion seemed not to feel the heat. He stood so still he might have been carved of stone.

But when the Hound charged him, he moved fast enough.

The flaming sword leapt up to meet the cold one, long streamers of fire trailing in its wake like the ribbons the Hound had spoken of. Steel rang on steel. No sooner was his first slash blocked than Clegane made another, but this time Lord Beric’s shield got in the way, and wood chips flew from the force of the blow. Hard and fast the cuts came, from low and high, from

right and left, and each one Dondarrion blocked. The flames swirled about his sword and left red and yellow ghosts to mark its passage. Each move Lord Beric made fanned them and made them burn the brighter, until it seemed as though the lightning lord stood within a cage of fire. “Is it wildfire?” Arya asked Gendry.

“No. This is different. This is . . .”

“. . . magic?” she finished as the Hound edged back. Now it was Lord Beric attacking, filling the air with ropes of fire, driving the bigger man back on his heels. Clegane caught one blow high on his shield, and a painted dog lost a head. He countercut, and Dondarrion interposed his own shield and launched a fiery backslash. The outlaw brotherhood shouted on their leader. “*He’s yours!*” Arya heard, and “*At him! At him! At him!*” The Hound parried a cut at his head, grimacing as the heat of the flames beat against his face. He grunted and cursed and reeled away.

Lord Beric gave him no respite. Hard on the big man’s heels he followed, his arm never still. The swords clashed and sprang apart and clashed again, splinters flew from the lightning shield while swirling flames kissed the dogs once, and twice, and thrice. The Hound moved to his right, but Dondarrion blocked him with a quick sidestep and drove him back the other way . . . toward the sullen red blaze of the firepit. Clegane gave ground until he felt the heat at his back. A quick glance over his shoulder showed him what was behind him, and almost cost him his head when Lord Beric attacked anew.

Arya could see the whites of Sandor Clegane’s eyes as he bulled his way forward again. Three steps up and two back, a move to the left that Lord Beric blocked, two more forward and one back, *clang* and *clang*, and the big oaken shields took blow after blow after blow. The Hound’s lank dark hair was plastered to his brow in a sheen of sweat. *Wine sweat*, Arya thought, remembering that he’d been taken drunk. She thought she could see the beginnings of fear wake in his eyes. *He’s going to lose*, she told herself, exulting, as Lord Beric’s flaming sword whirled and slashed. In one wild flurry, the lightning lord took back all the ground the Hound had gained, sending Clegane staggering to the very edge of the firepit once more. *He is, he is, he’s going to die*. She stood on her toes for a better look.

“*Bloody bastard!*” the Hound screamed as he felt the fire licking against the back of his thighs. He charged, swinging the heavy sword harder and harder, trying to smash the smaller man down with brute force, to break blade or shield or arm. But the flames of Dondarrion’s parries snapped at his eyes, and when the Hound jerked away from them, his foot went out from under him and he staggered to one knee. At once Lord Beric closed, his downcut screaming through the air trailing pennons of fire. Panting from exertion, Clegane jerked his shield up over his head just in time, and the cave rang with the loud *crack* of splintering oak.

“His shield is afire,” Gendry said in a hushed voice. Arya saw it in the same instant. The flames had spread across the chipped yellow paint, and the three black dogs were engulfed.

Sandor Clegane had fought his way back to his feet with a reckless counterattack. Not until Lord Beric retreated a pace did the Hound seem to realize that the fire that roared so near his face was his own shield, burning. With a shout of revulsion, he hacked down savagely on the broken oak, completing its destruction. The shield shattered, one piece of it spinning away, still afire, while the other clung stubbornly to his forearm. His efforts to free himself only fanned the flames. His sleeve caught, and now his whole left arm was ablaze. “*Finish him!*” Greenbeard urged Lord Beric, and other voices took up the chant of “*Guilty!*” Arya shouted with the rest. “*Guilty, guilty, kill him, guilty!*”

Smooth as summer silk, Lord Beric slid close to make an end of the man before him. The Hound gave a rasping scream, raised his sword in both hands and brought it crashing down with all his strength. Lord Beric blocked the cut easily . . .

“*Noooooo,*” Arya shrieked.

. . . but the burning sword snapped in two, and the Hound’s cold steel plowed into Lord Beric’s flesh where his shoulder joined his neck and clove him clean down to the breastbone. The blood came rushing out in a hot black gush.

Sandor Clegane jerked backward, still burning. He ripped the remnants of his shield off and flung them away with a curse, then rolled in the dirt to smother the fire running along his arm.

Lord Beric's knees folded slowly, as if for prayer. When his mouth opened only blood came out. The Hound's sword was still in him as he toppled face forward. The dirt drank his blood. Beneath the hollow hill there was no sound but the soft crackling of flames and the whimper the Hound made when he tried to rise. Arya could only think of Mycah and all the stupid prayers she'd prayed for the Hound to die. *If there were gods, why didn't Lord Beric win?* She *knew* the Hound was guilty.

"Please," Sandor Clegane rasped, cradling his arm. "I'm burned. Help me. Someone. Help me." He was crying. "*Please.*"

Arya looked at him in astonishment. *He's crying like a little baby*, she thought.

"Melly, see to his burns," said Thoros. "Lem, Jack, help me with Lord Beric. Ned, you'd best come too." The red priest wrenched the Hound's sword from the body of his fallen lord and thrust the point of it down in the blood-soaked earth. Lem slid his big hands under Dondarrion's arms, while Jack-Be-Lucky took his feet. They carried him around the firepit, into the darkness of one of the tunnels. Thoros and the boy Ned followed after.

The Mad Huntsman spat. "I say we take him back to Stoney Sept and put him in a crow cage."

"Yes," Arya said. "He murdered Mycah. He *did*."

"Such an angry squirrel," murmured Greenbeard.

Harwin sighed. "R'hllor has judged him innocent."

"Who's *Rulore*?" She couldn't even say it.

"The Lord of Light. Thoros has taught us—"

She didn't care what Thoros had taught them. She yanked Greenbeard's dagger from its sheath and spun away before he could catch her. Gendry made a grab for her as well, but she had always been too fast for Gendry.

Tom Sevenstrings and some woman were helping the Hound to his feet. The sight of his arm shocked her speechless. There was a strip of pink where the leather strap had clung, but above and below the flesh was cracked and red and bleeding from elbow to wrist. When his eyes met hers, his mouth twitched. "You want me dead that bad? Then do it, wolf girl. Shove it in. It's cleaner than fire." Clegane tried to stand, but as he moved a

piece of burned flesh sloughed right off his arm, and his knees went out from under him. Tom caught him by his good arm and held him up.

*His arm*, Arya thought, and *his face*. But he was the Hound. He deserved to burn in a fiery hell. The knife felt heavy in her hand. She gripped it tighter. “You killed Mycah,” she said once more, daring him to deny it. “Tell them. You did. You *did*.”

“I did.” His whole face twisted. “I rode him down and cut him in half, and laughed. I watched them beat your sister bloody too, watched them cut your father’s head off.”

Lem grabbed her wrist and twisted, wrenching the dagger away. She kicked at him, but he would not give it back. “You go to hell, Hound,” she screamed at Sandor Clegane in helpless empty-handed rage. “*You just go to hell!*”

“He has,” said a voice scarce stronger than a whisper.

When Arya turned, Lord Beric Dondarrion was standing behind her, his bloody hand clutching Thoros by the shoulder.