

ARYA

The heads had been dipped in tar to slow the rot. Every morning when Arya went to the well to draw fresh water for Roose Bolton's basin, she had to pass beneath them. They faced outward, so she never saw their faces, but she liked to pretend that one of them was Joffrey's. She tried to picture how his pretty face would look dipped in tar. *If I was a crow I could fly down and peck off his stupid fat pouty lips.*

The heads never lacked for attendants. The carrion crows wheeled about the gatehouse in raucous unkindness and quarreled upon the ramparts over every eye, screaming and cawing at each other and taking to the air whenever a sentry passed along the battlements. Sometimes the maester's ravens joined the feast as well, flapping down from the rookery on wide black wings. When the ravens came the crows would scatter, only to return the moment the larger birds were gone.

Do the ravens remember Maester Tothmure? Arya wondered. *Are they sad for him? When they quork at him, do they wonder why he doesn't answer?* Perhaps the dead could speak to them in some secret tongue the living could not hear.

Tothmure had been sent to the axe for dispatching birds to Casterly Rock and King's Landing the night Harrenhal had fallen, Lucan the armorer for making weapons for the Lannisters, Goodwife Harra for telling Lady Whent's household to serve them, the steward for giving Lord Tywin the keys to the treasure vault. The cook was spared (some said because he'd made the weasel soup), but stocks were hammered together for pretty Pia and the other women who'd shared their favors with Lannister soldiers. Stripped and shaved, they were left in the middle ward beside the bear pit, free for the use of any man who wanted them.

Three Frey men-at-arms were using them that morning as Arya went to the well. She tried not to look, but she could hear the men laughing. The pail was very heavy once full. She was turning to bring it back to Kingspyre

when Goodwife Amabel seized her arm. The water went sloshing over the side onto Amabel's legs. "You did that on purpose," the woman screeched.

"What do you want?" Arya squirmed in her grasp. Amabel had been half-crazed since they'd cut Harra's head off.

"See there?" Arnabel pointed across the yard at Pia. "When this northman falls you'll be where she is."

"Let me *go*." She tried to wrench free, but Amabel only tightened her fingers.

"He *will* fall too, Harrenhal pulls them all down in the end. Lord Tywin's won now, he'll be marching back with all his power, and then it will be his turn to punish the disloyal. And don't think he won't know what you did!" The old woman laughed. "I may have a turn at you myself. Harra had an old broom, I'll save it for you. The handle's cracked and splintery —"

Arya swung the bucket. The weight of the water made it turn in her hands, so she didn't smash Amabel's head in as she wanted, but the woman let go of her anyway when the water came out and drenched her. "Don't *ever* touch me," Arya shouted, "or I'll *kill* you. You get *away*."

Sopping, Goodwife Amabel jabbed a thin finger at the flayed man on the front of Arya's tunic. "You think you're safe with that little bloody man on your teat, but you're not! The Lannisters are coming! See what happens when they get here."

Three-quarters of the water had splashed out on the ground, so Arya had to return to the well. *If I told Lord Bolton what she said, her head would be up next to Harra's before it got dark*, she thought as she drew up the bucket again. She wouldn't, though.

Once, when there had been only half as many heads, Gendry had caught Arya looking at them. "Admiring your work?" he asked.

He was angry because he'd liked Lucan, she knew, but it still wasn't fair. "It's Steelshanks Walton's work," she said defensively. "And the Mummers, and Lord Bolton."

"And who gave us all them? You and your weasel soup."

Arya punched his arm. “It was just hot broth. You hated Ser Amory too.”

“I hate this lot worse. Ser Amory was fighting for his lord, but the Mummern are sellswords and turncoats. Half of them can’t even speak the Common Tongue. Septon Utt likes little boys, Qyburn does black magic, and your friend Biter *eats* people.”

The worst thing was, she couldn’t even say he was wrong. The Brave Companions did most of the foraging for Harrenhal, and Roose Bolton had given them the task of rooting out Lannisters. Vargo Hoat had divided them into four bands, to visit as many villages as possible. He led the largest group himself, and gave the others to his most trusted captains. She had heard Rorge laughing over Lord Vargo’s way of finding traitors. All he did was return to places he had visited before under Lord Tywin’s banner and seize those who had helped him. Many had been bought with Lannister silver, so the Mummern often returned with bags of coin as well as baskets of heads. “A riddle!” Shagwell would shout gleefully. “If Lord Bolton’s goat eats the men who fed Lord Lannister’s goat, how many goats are there?”

“One,” Arya said when he asked her.

“Now there’s a weasel clever as a goat!” the fool tittered.

Rorge and Biter were as bad as the others. Whenever Lord Bolton took a meal with the garrison, Arya would see them there among the rest. Biter gave off a stench like bad cheese, so the Brave Companions made him sit down near the foot of the table where he could grunt and hiss to himself and tear his meat apart with fingers and teeth. He would *sniff* at Arya when she passed, but it was Rorge who scared her most. He sat up near Faithful Ursywck, but she could feel his eyes crawling over her as she went about her duties.

Sometimes she wished she had gone off across the narrow sea with Jaqen H’ghar. She still had the stupid coin he’d given her, a piece of iron no larger than a penny and rusted along the rim. One side had writing on it, queer words she could not read. The other showed a man’s head, but so worn that all his features had rubbed off. *He said it was of great value, but*

that was probably a lie too, like his name and even his face. That made her so angry that she threw the coin away, but after an hour she got to feeling bad and went and found it again, even though it wasn't worth anything.

She was thinking about the coin as she crossed the Flowstone Yard, struggling with the weight of the water in her pail. "Nan," a voice called out. "Put down that pail and come help me."

Elmar Frey was no older than she was, and short for his age besides. He had been rolling a barrel of sand across the uneven stone, and was red-faced from exertion. Arya went to help him. Together they pushed the barrel all the way to the wall and back again, then stood it upright.

She could hear the sand shifting around inside as Elmar pried open the lid and pulled out a chainmail hauberk. "Do you think it's clean enough?" As Roose Bolton's squire, it was his task to keep his mail shiny bright.

"You need to shake out the sand. There's still spots of rust. See?" She pointed. "You'd best do it again."

"You do it." Elmar could be friendly when he needed help, but afterward he would always remember that he was a squire and she was only a serving girl. He liked to boast how he was the son of the Lord of the Crossing, not a nephew or a bastard or a grandson but a trueborn son, and on account of that he was going to marry a princess.

Arya didn't care about his precious princess, and didn't like him giving her commands. "I have to bring m'lord water for his basin. He's in his bedchamber being leeches. Not the regular black leeches but the big pale ones."

Elmar's eyes got as big as boiled eggs. Leeches terrified him, especially the big pale ones that looked like jelly until they filled up with blood. "I forgot, you're too skinny to push such a heavy barrel."

"I forgot, you're stupid." Arya picked up the pail. "Maybe you should get leeches too. There's leeches in the Neck as big as pigs." She left him there with his barrel.

The lord's bedchamber was crowded when she entered. Qyburn was in attendance, and dour Walton in his mail shirt and greaves, plus a dozen

Freys, all brothers, half brothers, and cousins. Roose Bolton lay abed, naked. Leeches clung to the inside of his arms and legs and dotted his pallid chest, long translucent things that turned a glistening pink as they fed. Bolton paid them no more mind than he did Arya.

“We must not allow Lord Tywin to trap us here at Harrenhal,” Ser Aenys Frey was saying as Arya filled the washbasin. A grey stooped giant of a man with watery red eyes and huge gnarled hands, Ser Aenys had brought fifteen hundred Frey swords south to Harrenhal, yet it often seemed as if he were helpless to command even his own brothers. “The castle is so large it requires an army to hold it, and once surrounded we cannot *feed* an army. Nor can we hope to lay in sufficient supplies. The country is ash, the villages given over to wolves, the harvest burnt or stolen. Autumn is on us, yet there is no food in store and none being planted. We live on forage, and if the Lannisters deny that to us, we will be down to rats and shoe leather in a moon’s turn.”

“I do not mean to be besieged here.” Roose Bolton’s voice was so soft that men had to strain to hear it, so his chambers were always strangely hushed.

“What, then?” demanded Ser Jared Frey, who was lean, balding, and pockmarked. “Is Edmure Tully so drunk on his victory that he thinks to give Lord Tywin battle in the open field?”

If he does he’ll beat them, Arya thought. He’ll beat them as he did on the Red Fork, you’ll see. Unnoticed, she went to stand by Qyburn.

“Lord Tywin is many leagues from here,” Bolton said calmly. “He has many matters yet to settle at King’s Landing. He will not march on Harrenhal for some time.”

Ser Aenys shook his head stubbornly. “You do not know the Lannisters as we do, my lord. King Stannis thought that Lord Tywin was a thousand leagues away as well, and it undid him.”

The pale man in the bed smiled faintly as the leeches nursed of his blood. “I am not a man to be undone, ser.”

“Even if Riverrun marshals all its strength and the Young Wolf wins back from the west, how can we hope to match the numbers Lord Tywin can send against us? When he comes, he will come with far more power than he commanded on the Green Fork. Highgarden has joined itself to Joffrey’s cause, I remind you!”

“I had not forgotten.”

“I have been Lord Tywin’s captive once,” said Ser Hosteen, a husky man with a square face who was said to be the strongest of the Freys. “I have no wish to enjoy Lannister hospitality again.”

Ser Harys Haigh, who was a Frey on his mother’s side, nodded vigorously. “If Lord Tywin could defeat a seasoned man like Stannis Baratheon, what chance will our boy king have against him?” He looked round to his brothers and cousins for support, and several of them muttered agreement.

“Someone must have the courage to say it,” Ser Hosteen said. “The war is lost. King Robb must be made to see that.”

Roose Bolton studied him with pale eyes. “His Grace has defeated the Lannisters every time he has faced them in battle.”

“He has lost the north,” insisted Hosteen Frey. “He has lost *Winterfell*! His brothers are dead...”

For a moment Arya forgot to breathe. *Dead? Bran and Rickon, dead? What does he mean? What does he mean about Winterfell, Joffrey could never take Winterfell, never, Robb would never let him.* Then she remembered that Robb was not at Winterfell. He was away in the west, and Bran was crippled, and Rickon only four. It took all her strength to remain still and silent, the way Syrio Forel had taught her, to stand there like a stick of furniture. She felt tears gathering in her eyes, and willed them away. *It’s not true, it can’t be true, it’s just some Lannister lie.*

“Had Stannis won, all might have been different,” Ronel Rivers said wistfully. He was one of Lord Walder’s bastards.

“Stannis lost,” Ser Hosteen said bluntly. “Wishing it were otherwise will not make it so. King Robb must make his peace with the Lannisters. He

must put off his crown and bend the knee, little as he may like it.”

“And who will tell him so?” Roose Bolton smiled. “It is a fine thing to have so many valiant brothers in such troubled times. I shall think on all you’ve said.”

His smile was dismissal. The Freys made their courtesies and shuffled out, leaving only Qyburn, Steelshanks Walton, and Arya. Lord Bolton beckoned her closer. “I am bled sufficiently. Nan, you may remove the leeches.”

“At once, my lord.” It was best never to make Roose Bolton ask twice. Arya wanted to ask him what Ser Hosteen had meant about Winterfell, but she dared not. *I’ll ask Elmar*, she thought. *Elmar will tell me*. The leeches wriggled slowly between her fingers as she plucked them carefully from the lord’s body, their pale bodies moist to the touch and distended with blood. *They’re only leeches*, she reminded herself. *If I closed my hand, they’d squish between my fingers*.

“There is a letter from your lady wife.” Qyburn pulled a roll of parchment from his sleeve. Though he wore maester’s robes, there was no chain about his neck; it was whispered that he had lost it for dabbling in necromancy.

“You may read it,” Bolton said.

The Lady Walda wrote from the Twins almost every day, but all the letters were the same. “I pray for you morn, noon, and night, my sweet lord,” she wrote, “and count the days until you share my bed again. Return to me soon, and I will give you many trueborn sons to take the place of your dear Domic and rule the Dreadfort after you.” Arya pictured a plump pink baby in a cradle, covered with plump pink leeches.

She brought Lord Bolton a damp washcloth to wipe down his soft hairless body. “I will send a letter of my own,” he told the onetime maester.

“To the Lady Walda?”

“To Ser Helman Tallhart.”

A rider from Ser Helman had come two days past. Tallhart men had taken the castle of the Darrys, accepting the surrender of its Lannister

garrison after a brief siege.

“Tell him to put the captives to the sword and the castle to the torch, by command of the king. Then he is to join forces with Robett Glover and strike east toward Duskendale. Those are rich lands, and hardly touched by the fighting. It is time they had a taste. Glover has lost a castle, and Tallhart a son. Let them take their vengeance on Duskendale.”

“I shall prepare the message for your seal, my lord.”

Arya was glad to hear that the castle of the Darrys would be burned. That was where they’d brought her when she’d been caught after her fight with Joffrey, and where the queen had made her father kill Sansa’s wolf. *It deserves to burn*. She wished that Robett Glover and Ser Helman Tallhart would come back to Harrenhal, though; they had marched too quickly, before she’d been able to decide whether to trust them with her secret.

“I will hunt today,” Roose Bolton announced as Qyburn helped him into a quilted jerkin.

“Is it safe, my lord?” Qyburn asked. “Only three days past, Septon Utt’s men were attacked by wolves. They came right into his camp, not five yards from the fire, and killed two horses.”

“It is wolves I mean to hunt. I can scarcely sleep at night for the howling.” Bolton buckled on his belt, adjusting the hang of sword and dagger. “It’s said that direwolves once roamed the north in great packs of a hundred or more, and feared neither man nor mammoth, but that was long ago and in another land. It is queer to see the common wolves of the south so bold.”

“Terrible times breed terrible things, my lord.”

Bolton showed his teeth in something that might have been a smile. “Are these times so terrible, Maester?”

“Summer is gone and there are four kings in the realm.”

“One king may be terrible, but four?” He shrugged. “Nan, my fur cloak.” She brought it to him. “My chambers will be clean and orderly upon my return,” he told her as she fastened it. “And tend to Lady Walda’s letter.”

“As you say, my lord.”

The lord and maester swept from the room, giving her not so much as a backward glance. When they were gone, Arya took the letter and carried it to the hearth, stirring the logs with a poker to wake the flames anew. She watched the parchment twist, blacken, and flare up. *If the Lannisters hurt Bran and Rickon, Robb will kill them every one. He'll never bend the knee, never, never, never. He's not afraid of any of them.* Curls of ash floated up the chimney. Arya squatted beside the fire, watching them rise through a veil of hot tears. *If Winterfell is truly gone, is this my home now? Am I still Arya, or only Nan the serving girl, for forever and forever and forever?*

She spent the next few hours tending to the lord's chambers. She swept out the old rushes and scattered fresh sweet-smelling ones, laid a fresh fire in the hearth, changed the linens and fluffed the featherbed, emptied the chamber pots down the privy shaft and scrubbed them out, carried an armload of soiled clothing to the washerwomen, and brought up a bowl of crisp autumn pears from the kitchen. When she was done with the bedchamber, she went down half a flight of stairs to do the same in the great solar, a spare drafty room as large as the halls of many a smaller castle. The candles were down to stubs, so Arya changed them out. Under the windows was a huge oaken table where the lord wrote his letters. She stacked the books, changed the candles, put the quills and inks and sealing wax in order.

A large ragged sheepskin was tossed across the papers. Arya had started to roll it up when the colors caught her eye: the blue of lakes and rivers, the red dots where castles and cities could be found, the green of woods. She spread it out instead. THE LANDS OF THE TRIDENT, said the ornate script beneath the map. The drawing showed everything from the Neck to the Blackwater Rush. *There's Harrenhal at the top of the big lake,* she realized, *but where's Riverrun?* Then she saw. *It's not so far...*

The afternoon was still young by the time she was done, so Arya took herself off to the godswood. Her duties were lighter as Lord Bolton's cupbearer than they had been under Weese or even Pinkeye, though they

required dressing like a page and washing more than she liked. The hunt would not return for hours, so she had a little time for her needlework.

She slashed at birch leaves till the splintery point of the broken broomstick was green and sticky. “Ser Gregor,” she breathed. “Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling.” She spun and leapt and balanced on the balls of her feet, darting this way and that, knocking pinecones flying. “The Tickler,” she called out one time, “the Hound,” the next. “Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei.” The bole of an oak loomed before her, and she lunged to drive her point through it, grunting “Joffrey, Joffrey, Joffrey.” Her arms and legs were dappled by sunlight and the shadows of leaves. A sheen of sweat covered her skin by the time she paused. The heel of her right foot was bloody where she’d skinned it, so she stood one-legged before the heart tree and raised her sword in salute. “*Valar morghulis*,” she told the old gods of the north. She liked how the words sounded when she said them.

As Arya crossed the yard to the bathhouse, she spied a raven circling down toward the rookery, and wondered where it had come from and what message it carried. *Might be it’s from Robb, come to say it wasn’t true about Bran and Rickon.* She chewed on her lip, hoping. *If I had wings I could fly back to Winterfell and see for myself. And if it was true, I’d just fly away, fly up past the moon and the shining stars, and see all the things in Old Nan’s stories, dragons and sea monsters and the Titan of Braavos, and maybe I wouldn’t ever fly back unless I wanted to.*

The hunting party returned near evenfall with nine dead wolves. Seven were adults, big grey-brown beasts, savage and powerful, their mouths drawn back over long yellow teeth by their dying snarls. But the other two had only been pups. Lord Bolton gave orders for the skins to be sewn into a blanket for his bed. “Cubs still have that soft fur, my lord,” one of his men pointed out. “Make you a nice warm pair of gloves.”

Bolton glanced up at the banners waving above the gatehouse towers. “As the Starks are wont to remind us, winter is coming. Have it done.” When he saw Arya looking on, he said, “Nan, I’ll want a flagon of hot spice wine, I took a chill in the woods. See that it doesn’t get cold. I’m of a mind to sup alone. Barley bread, butter, and boar.”

“At once, my lord.” That was always the best thing to say.

Hot Pie was making oatcakes when she entered the kitchen. Three other cooks were boning fish, while a spit boy turned a boar over the flames. “My lord wants his supper, and hot spice wine to wash it down,” Arya announced, “and he doesn’t want it cold.” One of the cooks washed his hands, took out a kettle, and filled it with a heavy, sweet red. Hot Pie was told to crumble in the spices as the wine heated. Arya went to help.

“I can do it,” he said sullenly. “I don’t need you to show me how to spice wine.”

He hates me too, or else he’s scared of me. She backed away, more sad than angry. When the food was ready, the cooks covered it with a silver cover and wrapped the flagon in a thick towel to keep it warm. Dusk was settling outside. On the walls the crows muttered round the heads like courtiers round a king. One of the guards held the door to Kingspyre. “Hope that’s not weasel soup,” he jested.

Roose Bolton was seated by the hearth reading from a thick leatherbound book when she entered. “Light some candles,” he commanded her as he turned a page. “It grows gloomy in here.”

She placed the food at his elbow and did as he bid her, filling the room with flickering light and the scent of cloves. Bolton turned a few more pages with his finger, then closed the book and placed it carefully in the fire. He watched the flames consume it, pale eyes shining with reflected light. The old dry leather went up with a *whoosh*, and the yellow pages stirred as they burned, as if some ghost were reading them. “I will have no further need of you tonight,” he said, never looking at her.

She should have gone, silent as a mouse, but something had hold of her. “My lord,” she asked, “will you take me with you when you leave Harrenhal?”

He turned to stare at her, and from the look in his eyes it was as if his supper had just spoken to him. “Did I give you leave to question me, Nan?”

“No, my lord.” She lowered her eyes.

“You should not have spoken, then. Should you?”

“No. My lord.”

For a moment he looked amused. “I will answer you, just this once. I mean to give Harrenhal to Lord Vargo when I return to the north. You will remain here, with him.”

“But I don’t—” she started.

He cut her off. “I am not in the habit of being questioned by servants, Nan. Must I have your tongue out?”

He would do it as easily as another man might cuff a dog, she knew. “No, my lord.”

“Then I’ll hear no more from you?”

“No, my lord.”

“Go, then. I shall forget this insolence.”

Arya went, but not to her bed. When she stepped out into the darkness of the yard, the guard on the door nodded at her and said, “Storm coming. Smell the air?” The wind was gusting, flames swirling off the torches mounted atop the walls beside the rows of heads. On her way to the godswood, she passed the Wailing Tower where once she had lived in fear of Weese. The Freys had taken it for their own since Harrenhal’s fall. She could hear angry voices coming from a window, many men talking and arguing all at once. Elmar was sitting on the steps outside, alone.

“What’s wrong?” Arya asked him when she saw the tears shining on his cheeks.

“My princess,” he sobbed. “We’ve been dishonored, Aenys says. There was a bird from the Twins. My lord father says I’ll need to marry someone else, or be a septon.”

A stupid princess, she thought, *that’s nothing to cry over*. “My brothers might be dead,” she confided.

Elmar gave her a scornful look. “No one cares about a serving girl’s brothers.”

It was hard not to hit him when he said that. “I hope your princess dies,” she said, and ran off before he could grab her. In the godswood she

found her broomstick sword where she had left it, and carried it to the heart tree. There she knelt. Red leaves rustled. Red eyes peered inside her. *The eyes of the gods*. “Tell me what to do, you gods,” she prayed.

For a long moment there was no sound but the wind and the water and the creak of leaf and limb. And then, far far off, beyond the godswood and the haunted towers and the immense stone walls of Harrenhal, from somewhere out in the world, came the long lonely howl of a wolf. Gooseprickles rose on Arya’s skin, and for an instant she felt dizzy. Then, so faintly, it seemed as if she heard her father’s voice. “When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives,” he said.

“But there is no pack,” she whispered to the weirwood. Bran and Rickon were dead, the Lannisters had Sansa, Jon had gone to the Wall. “I’m not even me now, I’m Nan.”

“You are Arya of Winterfell, daughter of the north. You told me you could be strong. You have the wolf blood in you.”

“The wolf blood.” Arya remembered now. “I’ll be as strong as Robb. I said I would.” She took a deep breath, then lifted the broomstick in both hands and brought it down across her knee. It broke with a loud crack, and she threw the pieces aside. *I am a direwolf, and done with wooden teeth*.

That night she lay in her narrow bed upon the scratchy straw, listening to the voices of the living and the dead whisper and argue as she waited for the moon to rise. They were the only voices she trusted anymore. She could hear the sound of her own breath, and the wolves as well, a great pack of them now. *They are closer than the one I heard in the godswood*, she thought. *They are calling to me*.

Finally she slipped from under the blanket, wriggled into a tunic, and padded barefoot down the stairs. Roose Bolton was a cautious man, and the entrance to Kingspyre was guarded day and night, so she had to slip out of a narrow cellar window. The yard was still, the great castle lost in haunted dreams. Above, the wind keened through the Wailing Tower.

At the forge she found the fires extinguished and the doors closed and barred. She crept in a window, as she had once before. Gendry shared a

mattress with two other apprentice smiths. She crouched in the loft for a long time before her eyes adjusted enough for her to be sure that he was the one on the end. Then she put a hand over his mouth and pinched him. His eyes opened. He could not have been very deeply asleep. "*Please*," she whispered. She took her hand off his mouth and pointed.

For a moment she did not think he understood, but then he slid out from under the blankets. Naked, he padded across the room, shrugged into a loose roughspun tunic, and climbed down from the loft after her. The other sleepers did not stir. "What do you want now?" Gendry said in a low angry voice.

"A sword."

"Blackthumb keeps all the blades locked up, I told you that a hundred times. Is this for Lord Leech?"

"For me. Break the lock with your hammer."

"They'll break my hand," he grumbled. "Or worse."

"Not if you run off with me."

"Run, and they'll catch you and kill you."

"They'll do you worse. Lord Bolton is giving Harrenhal to the Bloody Mummerys, he told me so."

Gendry pushed black hair out of his eyes. "So?"

She looked right at him, fearless. "So when Vargo Hoat's the lord, he's going to cut off the feet of all the servants to keep them from running away. The smiths too."

"That's only a story," he said scornfully.

"No, it's true, I heard Lord Vargo say so," she lied. "He's going to cut one foot off everyone. The left one. Go to the kitchens and wake Hot Pie, he'll do what you say. We'll need bread or oatcakes or something. You get the swords and I'll do the horses. We'll meet near the postern in the east wall, behind the Tower of Ghosts. No one ever comes there."

"I know that gate. It's guarded, same as the rest."

"So? You won't forget the swords?"

“I never said I’d come.”

“No. But if you do, you won’t forget the swords?”

He frowned. “No,” he said at last. “I guess I won’t.”

Arya reentered Kingspyre the same way she had left it, and stole up the winding steps listening for footfalls. In her cell, she stripped to the skin and dressed herself carefully, in two layers of smallclothes, warm stockings, and her cleanest tunic. It was Lord Bolton’s livery. On the breast was sewn his sigil, the flayed man of the Dreadfort. She tied her shoes, threw a wool cloak over her skinny shoulders, and knotted it under her throat. Quiet as a shadow, she moved back down the stairs. Outside the lord’s solar she paused to listen at the door, easing it open slowly when she heard only silence.

The sheepskin map was on the table, beside the remains of Lord Bolton’s supper. She rolled it up tight and thrust it through her belt. He’d left his dagger on the table as well, so she took that too, just in case Gendry lost his courage.

A horse neighed softly as she slipped into the darkened stables. The grooms were all asleep. She prodded one with her toe until he sat up groggily and said, “Eh? Whas?”

“Lord Bolton requires three horses saddled and bridled.”

The boy got to his feet, pushing straw from his hair. “Wha, at this hour? Horses, you say?” He blinked at the sigil on her tunic. “Whas he want horses for, in the dark?”

“Lord Bolton is not in the habit of being questioned by servants.” She crossed her arms.

The stableboy was still looking at the flayed man. He knew what it meant. “Three, you say?”

“One two three. Hunting horses. Fast and surefoot.” Arya helped him with the bridles and saddles, so he would not need to wake any of the others. She hoped they would not hurt him afterward, but she knew they probably would.

Leading the horses across the castle was the worst part. She stayed in the shadow of the curtain wall whenever she could, so the sentries walking their rounds on the ramparts above would have needed to look almost straight down to see her. *And if they do, what of it? I'm my lord's own cupbearer.* It was a chill dank autumn night. Clouds were blowing in from the west, hiding the stars, and the Wailing Tower screamed mournfully at every gust of wind. *It smells like rain.* Arya did not know whether that would be good or bad for their escape.

No one saw her, and she saw no one, only a grey and white cat creeping along atop the godswood wall. It stopped and spit at her, waking memories of the Red Keep and her father and Syrio Forel. "I could catch you if I wanted," she called to it softly, "but I have to go, cat." The cat hissed again and ran off.

The Tower of Ghosts was the most ruinous of Harrenhal's five immense towers. It stood dark and desolate behind the remains of a collapsed sept where only rats had come to pray for near three hundred years. It was there she waited to see if Gendry and Hot Pie would come. It seemed as though she waited a long time. The horses nibbled at the weeds that grew up between the broken stones while the clouds swallowed the last of the stars. Arya took out the dagger and sharpened it to keep her hands busy. Long smooth strokes, the way Syrio had taught her. The sound calmed her.

She heard them coming long before she saw them. Hot Pie was breathing heavily, and once he stumbled in the dark, barked his shin, and cursed loud enough to wake half of Harrenhal. Gendry was quieter, but the swords he was carrying rang together as he moved. "Here I am." She stood. "Be quiet or they'll hear you."

The boys picked their way toward her over tumbled stones. Gendry was wearing oiled chainmail under his cloak, she saw, and he had his blacksmith's hammer slung across his back. Hot Pie's red round face peered out from under a hood. He had a sack of bread dangling from his right hand and a big wheel of cheese under his left arm. "There's a guard on that postern," said Gendry quietly. "I told you there would be."

“You stay here with the horses,” said Arya. “I’ll get rid of him. Come quick when I call.”

Gendry nodded. Hot Pie said, “Hoot like an owl when you want us to come.”

“I’m not an owl,” said Arya. “I’m a wolf. I’ll howl.”

Alone, she slid through the shadow of the Tower of Ghosts. She walked fast, to keep ahead of her fear, and it felt as though Syrio Forel walked beside her, and Yoren, and Jaqen H’ghar, and Jon Snow. She had not taken the sword Gendry had brought her, not yet. For this the dagger would be better. It was good and sharp. This postern was the least of Harrenhal’s gates, a narrow door of stout oak studded with iron nails, set in an angle of the wall beneath a defensive tower. Only one man was set to guard it, but she knew there would be sentries up in that tower as well, and others nearby walking the walls. Whatever happened, she must be quiet as a shadow. *He must not call out.* A few scattered raindrops had begun to fall. She felt one land on her brow and run slowly down her nose.

She made no effort to hide, but approached the guard openly, as if Lord Bolton himself had sent her. He watched her come, curious as to what might bring a page here at this black hour. When she got closer, she saw that he was a northman, very tall and thin, huddled in a ragged fur cloak. That was bad. She might have been able to trick a Frey or one of the Brave Companions, but the Dreadfort men had served Roose Bolton their whole life, and they knew him better than she did. *If I tell him I am Arya Stark and command him to stand aside...* No, she dare not. He was a northman, but not a Winterfell man. He belonged to Roose Bolton.

When she reached him she pushed back her cloak so he would see the flayed man on her breast. “Lord Bolton sent me.”

“At this hour? Why for?”

She could see the gleam of steel under the fur, and she did not know if she was strong enough to drive the point of the dagger through chainmail. *His throat, it must be his throat, but he’s too tall, I’ll never reach it.* For a moment she did not know what to say. For a moment she was a little girl again, and scared, and the rain on her face felt like tears.

“He told me to give all his guards a silver piece, for their good service.” The words seemed to come out of nowhere.

“Silver, you say?” He did not believe her, but he *wanted* to; silver was silver, after all. “Give it over, then.”

Her fingers dug down beneath her tunic and came out clutching the coin Jaen had given her. In the dark the iron could pass for tarnished silver. She held it out... and let it slip through her fingers.

Cursing her softly, the man went to a knee to grope for the coin in the dirt and there was his neck right in front of her. Arya slid her dagger out and drew it across his throat, as smooth as summer silk. His blood covered her hands in a hot gush and he tried to shout but there was blood in his mouth as well.

“*Valar morghulis*,” she whispered as he died.

When he stopped moving, she picked up the coin. Outside the walls of Harrenhal, a wolf howled long and loud. She lifted the bar, set it aside, and pulled open the heavy oak door. By the time Hot Pie and Gendry came up with the horses, the rain was falling hard. “You *killed* him!” Hot Pie gasped.

“What did you think I would do?” Her fingers were sticky with blood, and the smell was making her mare skittish. *It’s no matter*, she thought, swinging up into the saddle. *The rain will wash them clean again.*