

## ARYA

Each night before sleep, she murmured her prayer into her pillow. “Ser Gregor,” it went. “Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei.” She would have whispered the names of the Freys of the Crossing too, if she had known them. *One day I’ll know, she told herself, and then I’ll kill them all.*

No whisper was too faint to be heard in the House of Black and White. “Child,” said the kindly man one day, “what are those names you whisper of a night?”

“I don’t whisper any names,” she said.

“You lie,” he said. “All men lie when they are afraid. Some tell many lies, some but a few. Some have only one great lie they tell so often that they almost come to believe it... though some small part of them will always know that it is still a lie, and that will show upon their faces. Tell me of these names.”

She chewed her lip. “The names don’t matter.”

“They do,” the kindly man insisted. “Tell me, child.”

*Tell me, or we will turn you out,* she heard. “They’re people I hate. I want them to die.”

“We hear many such prayers in this House.”

“I know,” said Arya. Jaqen H’ghar had granted three of her prayers once. *All I had to do was whisper...*

“Is that why you have come to us?” the kindly man went on. “To learn our arts, so you may kill these men you hate?”

Arya did not know how to answer that. “Maybe.”

“Then you have come to the wrong place. It is not for you to say who shall live and who shall die. That gift belongs to Him of Many Faces. We are but his servants, sworn to do his will.”

“Oh.” Arya glanced at the statues that stood along the walls, candles glimmering round their feet. “Which god is he?”

“Why, all of them,” said the priest in black and white.

He never told her his name. Neither did the waif, the little girl with the big eyes and hollow face who reminded her of another little girl, named Weasel. Like Arya, the waif lived below the temple, along with three acolytes, two serving men, and a cook called Umma. Umma liked to talk as she worked, but Arya could not understand a word she said. The others had no names, or did not choose to share them. One serving man was very old, his back bent like a bow. The second was red-faced, with hair growing from his ears. She took them both for mutes until she heard them praying. The acolytes were younger. The eldest was her father’s age; the other two could not have been much older than Sansa, who had been her sister. The acolytes wore black and white too, but their robes had no cowls, and were black on the left side and white on the right. With the kindly man and the waif, it was the opposite. Arya was given servant’s garb: a tunic of undyed wool, baggy breeches, linen smallclothes, cloth slippers for her feet.

Only the kindly man knew the Common Tongue. “Who are you?” he would ask her every day.

“No one,” she would answer, she who had been Arya of House Stark, Arya Underfoot, Arya Horseface. She had been Arry and Weasel too, and Squab and Salty, Nan the cupbearer, a grey mouse, a sheep, the ghost of Harrenhal... but not for true, not in her heart of hearts. In there she was Arya of Winterfell, the daughter of Lord Eddard Stark and Lady Catelyn, who had once had brothers named Robb and Bran and Rickon, a sister named Sansa, a direwolf called Nymeria, a half brother named Jon Snow. In there she was someone... but that was not the answer that he wanted.

Without a common language, Arya had no way of talking to the others. She listened to them, though, and repeated the words she heard to herself as she went about her work. Though the youngest acolyte was blind, he had charge of the candles. He would walk the temple in soft slippers, surrounded by the murmurings of the old women who came each day to pray. Even without eyes, he always knew which candles had gone out. “He

has the scent to guide him,” the kindly man explained, “and the air is warmer where a candle burns.” He told Arya to close her eyes and try it for herself.

They prayed at dawn before they broke their fast, kneeling around the still, black pool. Some days the kindly man led the prayer. Other days it was the waif. Arya only knew a few words of Braavosi, the ones that were the same in High Valyrian. So she prayed her own prayer to the Many-Faced God, the one that went, “Ser Gregor, Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei.” She prayed in silence. If the Many-Faced God was a proper god, he would hear her.

Worshippers came to the House of Black and White every day. Most came alone and sat alone; they lit candles at one altar or another, prayed beside the pool, and sometimes wept. A few drank from the black cup and went to sleep; more did not drink. There were no services, no songs, no paeans of praise to please the god. The temple was never full. From time to time, a worshiper would ask to see a priest, and the kindly man or the waif would take him down into the sanctum, but that did not happen often.

Thirty different gods stood along the walls, surrounded by their little lights. The Weeping Woman was the favorite of old women, Arya saw; rich men preferred the Lion of Night, poor men the Hooded Wayfarer. Soldiers lit candles to Bakkalon, the Pale Child, sailors to the Moon-Pale Maiden and the Merling King. The Stranger had his shrine as well, though hardly anyone ever came to him. Most of the time only a single candle stood flickering at his feet. The kindly man said it did not matter. “He has many faces, and many ears to hear.”

The knoll on which the temple stood was honeycombed with passageways hewn from the rock. The priests and acolytes had their sleeping cells on the first level, Arya and the servants on the second. The lowest level was forbidden to all save the priests. That was where the holy sanctum lay.

When she was not working, Arya was free to wander as she would amongst the vaults and storerooms, so long as she did not leave the temple, nor descend to the third cellar. She found a room full of weapons and

armor: ornate helms and curious old breastplates, longswords, daggers, and dirks, crossbows and tall spears with leaf-shaped heads. Another vault was crammed with clothing, thick furs and splendid silks in half a hundred colors, next to piles of foul-smelling rags and threadbare roughspuns. *There must be treasure chambers too*, Arya decided. She pictured stacks of golden plates, bags of silver coins, sapphires blue as the sea, ropes of fat green pearls.

One day the kindly man came on her unexpectedly and asked what she was doing. She told him that she had gotten lost.

“You lie. Worse, you lie *poorly*. Who are you?”

“No one.”

“Another lie.” He sighed.

Weese would have beaten her bloody if he had caught her in a lie, but it was different in the House of Black and White. When she was helping in the kitchen, Umma would sometimes smack her with her spoon if she got in the way, but no one else ever raised a hand to her. *They only raise their hands to kill*, she thought.

She got along well enough with the cook. Umma would slap a knife into her hand and point at an onion, and Arya would chop it. Umma would shove her toward a mound of dough, and Arya would knead it until the cook said stop (*stop* was the first Braavosi word she learned). Umma would hand her a fish, and Arya would bone it and fillet it and roll it in the nuts the cook was crushing. The brackish waters that surrounded Braavos teemed with fish and shellfish of every sort, the kindly man explained. A slow brown river entered the lagoon from the south, wandering through a wide expanse of reeds, tidal pools, and mudflats. Clams and cockles abounded hereabouts; mussels and muskfish, frogs and turtles, mud crabs and leopard crabs and climber crabs, red eels, black eels, striped eels, lampreys, and oysters; all made frequent appearances on the carved wooden table where the servants of the Many-Faced God took their meals. Some nights Umma spiced the fish with sea salt and cracked peppercorns, or cooked the eels with chopped garlic. Once in a great while the cook would even use some saffron. *Hot Pie would have liked it here*, Arya thought.

Supper was her favorite time. It had been a long while since Arya had gone to sleep every night with a full belly. Some nights the kindly man would allow her to ask him questions. Once she asked him why the people who came to the temple always seemed so peaceful; back home, people were scared to die. She remembered how that pimply squire had wept when she stabbed him in the belly, and the way Ser Amory Lorch had begged when the Goat had him thrown in the bear pit. She remembered the village by the God's Eye, and the way the villagers shrieked and screamed and whimpered whenever the Tickler started asking after gold.

"Death is not the worst thing," the kindly man replied. "It is His gift to us, an end to want and pain. On the day that we are born the Many-Faced God sends each of us a dark angel to walk through life beside us. When our sins and our sufferings grow too great to be borne, the angel takes us by the hand to lead us to the nightlands, where the stars burn ever bright. Those who come to drink from the black cup are looking for their angels. If they are afraid, the candles soothe them. When you smell our candles burning, what does it make you think of, my child?"

Winterfell, she might have said. I smell snow and smoke and pine needles. I smell the stables. I smell Hodor laughing, and Jon and Robb battling in the yard, and Sansa singing about some stupid lady fair. I smell the crypts where the stone kings sit, I smell hot bread baking, I smell the godswood. I smell my wolf, I smell her fur, almost as if she were still beside me. "I don't smell anything," she said, to see what he would say.

"You lie," he said, "but you may keep your secrets if you wish, Arya of House Stark." He only called her that when she displeased him. "You know that you may leave this place. You are not one of us, not yet. You may go home anytime you wish."

"You told me that if I left, I couldn't come back."

"Just so."

Those words made her sad. *Syrio used to say that too*, Arya remembered. *He said it all the time*. Syrio Forel had taught her needlework and died for her. "I don't want to leave."

“Then stay... but remember, the House of Black and White is not a home for orphans. All men must serve beneath this roof. *Valar dohaeris* is how we say it here. Remain if you will, but know that we shall require your obedience. At all times and in all things. If you cannot obey, you must depart.”

“I can obey.”

“We shall see.”

She had other tasks besides helping Umma. She swept the temple floors; she served and poured at meals; she sorted piles of dead men’s clothing, emptied their purses, and counted out stacks of queer coins. Every morning she walked beside the kindly man as he made his circuit of the temple to find the dead. *Silent as a shadow*, she would tell herself, remembering Syrio. She carried a lantern with thick iron shutters. At each alcove, she would open the shutter a crack, to look for corpses.

The dead were never hard to find. They came to the House of Black and White, prayed for an hour or a day or a year, drank sweet dark water from the pool, and stretched out on a stone bed behind one god or another. They closed their eyes, and slept, and never woke. “The gift of the Many-Faced God takes myriad forms,” the kindly man told her, “but here it is always gentle.” When they found a body he would say a prayer and make certain life had fled, and Arya would fetch the serving men, whose task it was to carry the dead down to the vaults. There acolytes would strip and wash the bodies. The dead men’s clothes and coins and valuables went into a bin for sorting. Their cold flesh would be taken to the lower sanctum where only the priests could go; what happened in there Arya was not allowed to know. Once, as she was eating her supper, a terrible suspicion seized hold of her, and she put down her knife and stared suspiciously at a slice of pale white meat. The kindly man saw the horror on her face. “It is pork, child,” he told her, “only pork.”

Her bed was stone, and reminded her of Harrenhal and the bed she’d slept in when scrubbing steps for Weese. The mattress was stuffed with rags instead of straw, which made it lumpier than the one she’d had at Harrenhal, but less scratchy too. She was allowed as many blankets as she wished;

thick woolen blankets, red and green and plaid. And her cell was hers alone. She kept her treasures there: the silver fork and floppy hat and fingerless gloves given her by the sailors on the *Titan's Daughter*, her dagger, boots, and belt, her small store of coins, the clothes she had been wearing...

And Needle.

Though her duties left her little time for needlework, she practiced when she could, dueling with her shadow by the light of a blue candle. One night the waif happened to be passing and saw Arya at her swordplay. The girl did not say a word, but the next day, the kindly man walked Arya back to her cell. "You need to rid yourself of all this," he said of her treasures.

Arya felt stricken. "They're mine."

"And who are you?"

"No one."

He picked up her silver fork. "This belongs to Arya of House Stark. All these things belong to her. There is no place for them here. There is no place for her. Hers is too proud a name, and we have no room for pride. We are servants here."

"I serve," she said, wounded. She liked the silver fork.

"You play at being a servant, but in your heart you are a lord's daughter. You have taken other names, but you wore them as lightly as you might wear a gown. Under them was always Arya."

"I don't wear *gowns*. You can't fight in a stupid *gown*."

"Why would you wish to fight? Are you some bravo, strutting through the alleys, spoiling for blood?" He sighed. "Before you drink from the cold cup, you must offer up all you are to Him of Many Faces. Your body. Your soul. *Yourself*. If you cannot bring yourself to do that, you must leave this place."

"The iron coin—"

"—has paid your passage here. From this point you must pay your own way, and the cost is dear."

"I don't have any gold."

“What we offer cannot be bought with gold. The cost is all of you. Men take many paths through this vale of tears and pain. Ours is the hardest. Few are made to walk it. It takes uncommon strength of body and spirit, and a heart both hard and strong.”

I have a hole where my heart should be, she thought, and nowhere else to go. “I’m strong. As strong as you. I’m hard.”

“You believe this is the only place for you.” It was as if he’d heard her thoughts. “You are wrong in that. You would find softer service in the household of some merchant. Or would you sooner be a courtesan, and have songs sung of your beauty? Speak the word, and we will send you to the Black Pearl or the Daughter of the Dusk. You will sleep on rose petals and wear silken skirts that rustle when you walk, and great lords will beggar themselves for your maiden’s blood. Or if it is marriage and children you desire, tell me, and we shall find a husband for you. Some honest apprentice boy, a rich old man, a seafarer, whatever you desire.”

She wanted none of that. Wordless, she shook her head.

“Is it Westeros you dream of, child? Luco Prestayn’s *Lady Bright* leaves upon the morrow, for Gulltown, Duskendale, King’s Landing, and Tyrosh. Shall we find you passage on her?”

“I only just *came* from Westeros.” Sometimes it seemed a thousand years since she had fled King’s Landing, and sometimes it seemed like only yesterday, but she knew she could not go back. “I’ll go if you don’t want me, but I won’t go *there*.”

“My wants do not matter,” said the kindly man. “It may be that the Many-Faced God has led you here to be His instrument, but when I look at you I see a child... and worse, a girl child. Many have served Him of Many Faces through the centuries, but only a few of His servants have been women. Women bring life into the world. We bring the gift of death. No one can do both.”

He is trying to scare me away, Arya thought, the way he did with the worm. “I don’t care about that.”



“You should. Stay, and the Many-Faced God will take your ears, your nose, your tongue. He will take your sad grey eyes that have seen so much. He will take your hands, your feet, your arms and legs, your private parts. He will take your hopes and dreams, your loves and hates. Those who enter His service must give up all that makes them who they are. Can you do that?” He cupped her chin and gazed deep into her eyes, so deep it made her shiver. “No,” he said, “I do not think you can.”

Arya knocked his hand away. “I could if I *wanted* to.”

“So says Arya of House Stark, eater of grave worms.”

“I can give up *anything* I want!”

He gestured at her treasures. “Then start with these.”

That night after supper, Arya went back to her cell and took off her robe and whispered her names, but sleep refused to take her. She tossed on her mattress stuffed with rags, gnawing on her lip. She could feel the hole inside her where her heart had been.

In the black of night she rose again, donned the clothes she’d worn from Westeros, and buckled on her swordbelt. Needle hung from one hip, her dagger from the other. With her floppy hat on her head, her fingerless gloves tucked into her belt, and her silver fork in one hand, she went stealing up the steps. *There is no place here for Arya of House Stark*, she was thinking. Arya’s place was Winterfell, only Winterfell was gone. *When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives*. She had no pack, though. They had killed her pack, Ser Ilyn and Ser Meryn and the queen, and when she tried to make a new one all of them ran off, Hot Pie and Gendry and Yoren and Lommy Greenhands, even Harwin, who had been her father’s man. She shoved through the doors, out into the night.

It was the first time she had been outside since entering the temple. The sky was overcast, and fog covered the ground like a frayed grey blanket. Off to her right she heard paddling from the canal. *Braavos, the Secret City*, she thought. The name seemed very apt. She crept down the steep steps to the covered dock, the mists swirling round her feet. It was so foggy she could not see the water, but she heard it lapping softly at stone pilings. In

the distance, a light glowed through the gloom: the nightfire at the temple of the red priests, she thought.

At the water's edge she stopped, the silver fork in hand. It was real silver, solid through and through. *It's not my fork. It was Salty that he gave it to.* She tossed it underhand, heard the soft *plop* as it sank below the water.

Her floppy hat went next, then the gloves. They were Salty's too. She emptied her pouch into her palm; five silver stags, nine copper stars, some pennies and halfpennies and groats. She scattered them across the water. Next her boots. They made the loudest splashes. Her dagger followed, the one she'd gotten off the archer who had begged the Hound for mercy. Her swordbelt went into the canal. Her cloak, tunic, breeches, smallclothes, all of it. All but Needle.

She stood on the end of the dock, pale and goosefleshed and shivering in the fog. In her hand, Needle seemed to whisper to her. *Stick them with the pointy end,* it said, and, *don't tell Sansa!* Mikken's mark was on the blade. *It's just a sword.* If she needed a sword, there were a hundred under the temple. Needle was too small to be a *proper* sword, it was hardly more than a toy. She'd been a stupid little girl when Jon had it made for her. "It's just a sword," she said, aloud this time...

...but it wasn't.

Needle was Robb and Bran and Rickon, her mother and her father, even Sansa. Needle was Winterfell's grey walls, and the laughter of its people. Needle was the summer snows, Old Nan's stories, the heart tree with its red leaves and scary face, the warm earthy smell of the glass gardens, the sound of the north wind rattling the shutters of her room. Needle was Jon Snow's smile. *He used to mess my hair and call me "little sister,"* she remembered, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

Polliver had stolen the sword from her when the Mountain's men took her captive, but when she and the Hound walked into the inn at the crossroads, there it was. *The gods wanted me to have it.* Not the Seven, nor Him of Many Faces, but her father's gods, the old gods of the north. *The Many-Faced God can have the rest,* she thought, *but he can't have this.*

She padded up the steps as naked as her name day, clutching Needle. Halfway up, one of the stones rocked beneath her feet. Arya knelt and dug around its edges with her fingers. It would not move at first, but she persisted, picking at the crumbling mortar with her nails. Finally, the stone shifted. She grunted and got both hands in and pulled. A crack opened before her.

“You’ll be safe here,” she told Needle. “No one will know where you are but me.” She pushed the sword and sheath behind the step, then shoved the stone back into place, so it looked like all the other stones. As she climbed back to the temple, she counted steps, so she would know where to find the sword again. One day she might have need of it. “One day,” she whispered to herself.

She never told the kindly man what she had done, yet he knew. The next night he came to her cell after supper. “Child,” he said, “come sit with me. I have a tale to tell you.”

“What kind of tale?” she asked, wary.

“The tale of our beginnings. If you would be one of us, you had best know who we are and how we came to be. Men may whisper of the Faceless Men of Braavos, but we are older than the Secret City. Before the Titan rose, before the Unmasking of Uthero, before the Founding, we were. We have flowered in Braavos amongst these northern fogs, but we first took root in Valyria, amongst the wretched slaves who toiled in the deep mines beneath the Fourteen Flames that lit the Freehold’s nights of old. Most mines are dank and chilly places, cut from cold dead stone, but the Fourteen Flames were living mountains with veins of molten rock and hearts of fire. So the mines of old Valyria were always hot, and they grew hotter as the shafts were driven deeper, ever deeper. The slaves toiled in an oven. The rocks around them were too hot to touch. The air stank of brimstone and would sear their lungs as they breathed it. The soles of their feet would burn and blister, even through the thickest sandals. Sometimes, when they broke through a wall in search of gold, they would find steam instead, or boiling water, or molten rock. Certain shafts were cut so low that the slaves could

not stand upright, but had to crawl or bend. And there were wyrms in that red darkness too.”

“Earthworms?” she asked, frowning.

“Firewyrms. Some say they are akin to dragons, for wyrms breathe fire too. Instead of soaring through the sky, they bore through stone and soil. If the old tales can be believed, there were wyrms amongst the Fourteen Flames even before the dragons came. The young ones are no larger than that skinny arm of yours, but they can grow to monstrous size and have no love for men.”

“Did they kill the slaves?”

“Burnt and blackened corpses were oft found in shafts where the rocks were cracked or full of holes. Yet still the mines drove deeper. Slaves perished by the score, but their masters did not care. Red gold and yellow gold and silver were reckoned to be more precious than the lives of slaves, for slaves were cheap in the old Freehold. During war, the Valyrians took them by the thousands. In times of peace they bred them, though only the worst were sent down to die in the red darkness.”

“Didn’t the slaves rise up and fight?”

“Some did,” he said. “Revolts were common in the mines, but few accomplished much. The dragonlords of the old Freehold were strong in sorcery, and lesser men defied them at their peril. The first Faceless Man was one who did.”

“Who was he?” Arya blurted, before she stopped to think.

“No one,” he answered. “Some say he was a slave himself. Others insist he was a freeholder’s son, born of noble stock. Some will even tell you he was an overseer who took pity on his charges. The truth is, no one knows. Whoever he was, he moved amongst the slaves and would hear them at their prayers. Men of a hundred different nations labored in the mines, and each prayed to his own god in his own tongue, yet all were praying for the same thing. It was release they asked for, an end to pain. A small thing, and simple. Yet their gods made no answer, and their suffering

went on. *Are their gods all deaf?* he wondered... until a realization came upon him, one night in the red darkness.

“All gods have their instruments, men and women who serve them and help to work their will on earth. The slaves were not crying out to a hundred different gods, as it seemed, but to one god with a hundred different faces... and *he* was that god’s instrument. That very night he chose the most wretched of the slaves, the one who had prayed most earnestly for release, and freed him from his bondage. The first gift had been given.”

Arya drew back from him. “He killed the *slave*?” That did not sound right. “He should have killed the *masters*!”

“He would bring the gift to them as well... but that is a tale for another day, one best shared with no one.” He cocked his head. “And who are you, child?”

“No one.”

“A lie.”

“How do you *know*? Is it magic?”

“A man does not need to be a wizard to know truth from falsehood, not if he has eyes. You need only learn to read a face. Look at the eyes. The mouth. The muscles here, at the corners of the jaw, and here, where the neck joins the shoulders.” He touched her lightly with two fingers. “Some liars blink. Some stare. Some look away. Some lick their lips. Many cover their mouths just before they tell a lie, as if to hide their deceit. Other signs may be more subtle, but they are always there. A false smile and a true one may look alike, but they are as different as dusk from dawn. Can you tell dusk from dawn?”

Arya nodded, though she was not certain that she could.

“Then you can learn to see a lie... and once you do, no secret will be safe from you.”

“Teach me.” She would be no one if that was what it took. No one had no holes inside her.

“*She* will teach you,” said the kindly man as the waif appeared outside her door. “Starting with the tongue of Braavos. What use are you if you

cannot speak or understand? And you shall teach her your own tongue. The two of you shall learn together, each from the other. Will you do this?"

"Yes," she said, and from that moment she was a novice in the House of Black and White. Her servant's garb was taken away, and she was given a robe to wear, a robe of black and white as buttery soft as the old red blanket she'd once had at Winterfell. Beneath it she wore smallclothes of fine white linen, and a black undertunic that hung down past her knees.

Thereafter she and the waif spent their time together touching things and pointing, as each tried to teach the other a few words of her own tongue. Simple words at first, cup and candle and shoe; then harder words; then sentences. Once Syrio Forel used to make Arya stand on one leg until she was trembling. Later he sent her chasing after cats. She had danced the water dance on the limbs of trees, a stick sword in her hand. Those things had all been hard, but this was harder.

*Even sewing was more fun than tongues*, she told herself, after a night when she had forgotten half the words she thought she knew, and pronounced the other half so badly that the waif had laughed at her. *My sentences are as crooked as my stitches used to be*. If the girl had not been so small and starved, Arya would have smashed her stupid face. Instead she gnawed her lip. *Too stupid to learn and too stupid to give up*.

The Common Tongue came to the waif more quickly. One day at supper she turned to Arya, and asked, "Who are you?"

"No one," Arya answered, in Braavosi.

"You lie," said the waif. "You must lie gooder."

Arya laughed. "Gooder? You mean *better*, stupid."

"Better stupid. I will show you."

The next day they began the lying game, asking questions of one another, taking turns. Sometimes they would answer truly, sometimes they would lie. The questioner had to try and tell what was true and what was false. The waif always seemed to know. Arya had to guess. Most of the time she guessed wrong.

“How many years have you?” the waif asked her once, in the Common Tongue. “Ten,” said Arya, and raised ten fingers. She *thought* she was still ten, though it was hard to know for certain. The Braavosi counted days differently than they did in Westeros. For all she knew her name day had come and gone.

The waif nodded. Arya nodded back, and in her best Braavosi said, “How many years have *you*?”

The waif showed ten fingers. Then ten again, and yet again. Then six. Her face remained as smooth as still water. *She can't be six-and-thirty*, Arya thought. *She's a little girl*. “You’re lying,” she said. The waif shook her head and showed her once again: ten and ten and ten and six. She said the words for six-and-thirty, and made Arya say them too.

The next day she told the kindly man what the waif had claimed. “She did not lie,” the priest said, chuckling. “The one you call *waif* is a woman grown who has spent her life serving Him of Many Faces. She gave Him all she was, all she ever might have been, all the lives that were within her.”

Arya bit her lip. “Will I be like her?”

“No,” he said, “not unless you wish it. It is the poisons that have made her as you see her.”

*Poisons*. She understood then. Every evening after prayer the waif emptied a stone flagon into the waters of the black pool.

The waif and kindly man were not the only servants of the Many-Faced God. From time to time others would visit the House of Black and White. The fat fellow had fierce black eyes, a hook nose, and a wide mouth full of yellow teeth. The stern face never smiled; his eyes were pale, his lips full and dark. The handsome man had a beard of a different color every time she saw him, and a different nose, but he was never less than comely. Those three came most often, but there were others: the squinter, the lordling, the starved man. One time the fat fellow and the squinter came together. Umma sent Arya to pour for them. “When you are not pouring, you must stand as still as if you had been carved of stone,” the kindly man told her. “Can you do that?”

“Yes.” *Before you can learn to move you must learn to be still*, Syrio Forel had taught her long ago at King’s Landing, and she had. She had served as Roose Bolton’s cupbearer at Harrenhal, and he would flay you if you spilled his wine.

“Good,” the kindly man said. “It would be best if you were blind and deaf as well. You may hear things, but you must let them pass in one ear and out the other. Do not listen.”

Arya heard much and more that night, but almost all of it was in the tongue of Braavos, and she hardly understood one word in ten. *Still as stone*, she told herself. The hardest part was struggling not to yawn. Before the night was done, her wits were wandering. Standing there with the flagon in her hands, she dreamed she was a wolf, running free through a moonlit forest with a great pack howling at her heels.

“Are the other men all priests?” she asked the kindly man the next morning. “Were those their real faces?”

“What do you think, child?”

She thought *no*. “Is Jaen H’ghar a priest too? Do you know if Jaen will be coming back to Braavos?”

“Who?” he said, all innocence.

“Jaen *H’ghar*. He gave me the iron coin.”

“I know no one by this name, child.”

“I asked him how he changed his face, and he said it was no harder than taking a new name, if you knew the way.”

“Did he?”

“Will you show me how to change my face?”

“If you wish.” He cupped her chin in his hand and turned her head. “Puff up your cheeks and stick out your tongue.”

Arya puffed up her cheeks and stuck out her tongue.

“There. Your face is changed.”

“That’s not how I meant. Jaen used magic.”



“All sorcery comes at a cost, child. Years of prayer and sacrifice and study are required to work a proper glamor.”

“*Years?*” she said, dismayed.

“If it were easy all men would do it. You must walk before you run. Why use a spell, where mummer’s tricks will serve?”

“I don’t know any mummer’s tricks either.”

“Then practice making faces. Beneath your skin are muscles. Learn to use them. It is your face. Your cheeks, your lips, your ears. Smiles and scowls should not come upon you like sudden squalls. A smile should be a servant, and come only when you call it. Learn to *rule* your face.”

“Show me how.”

“Puff up your cheeks.” She did. “Lift your eyebrows. No, higher.” She did that too. “Good. See how long you can hold that. It will not be long. Try it again on the morrow. You will find a Myrish mirror in the vaults. Train before it for an hour every day. Eyes, nostrils, cheeks, ears, lips, learn to rule them all.” He cupped her chin. “Who are you?”

“No one.”

“A lie. A sad little lie, child.”

She found the Myrish mirror the next day, and every morn and every night she sat before it with a candle on each side of her, making faces. *Rule your face*, she told herself, *and you can lie*.

Soon thereafter the kindly man commanded her to help the other acolytes prepare the corpses. The work was not near as hard as scrubbing steps for Weese. Sometimes if the corpse was big or fat she would struggle with the weight, but most of the dead were old dry bones in wrinkled skins. Arya would look at them as she washed them, wondering what brought them to the black pool. She remembered a tale she had heard from Old Nan, about how sometimes during a long winter men who’d lived beyond their years would announce that they were going hunting. *And their daughters would weep and their sons would turn their faces to the fire*, she could hear Old Nan saying, *but no one would stop them, or ask what game they meant to hunt, with the snows so deep and the cold wind howling*. She wondered

what the old Braavosi told their sons and daughters, before they set off for the House of Black and White.

The moon turned and turned again, though Arya never saw it. She served, washed the dead, made faces at the mirrors, learned the Braavosi tongue, and tried to remember that she was no one.

One day the kindly man sent for her. “Your accent is a horror,” he said, “but you have enough words to make your wants understood after a fashion. It is time that you left us for a while. The only way you will ever truly master our tongue is if you speak it every day from dawn to dusk. You must go.”

“When?” she asked him. “Where?”

“Now,” he answered. “Beyond these walls you will find the hundred isles of Braavos in the sea. You have been taught the words for mussels, cockles, and clams, have you not?”

“Yes.” She repeated them, in her best Braavosi.

Her best Braavosi made him smile. “It will serve. Along the wharves below the Drowned Town you will find a fishmonger named Brusco, a good man with a bad back. He has need of a girl to push his barrow and sell his cockles, clams, and mussels to the sailors off the ships. You shall be that girl. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“And when Brusco asks, who are you?”

“No one.”

“No. That will not serve, outside this House.”

She hesitated. “I could be Salty, from Saltpans.”

“Salty is known to Ternesio Terys and the men of the *Titan’s Daughter*. You are marked by the way you speak, so you must be some girl of Westeros... but a different girl, I think.”

She bit her lip. “Could I be Cat?”

“Cat.” He considered. “Yes. Braavos is full of cats. One more will not be noticed. You are Cat, an orphan of...”

“King’s Landing.” She had visited White Harbor with her father twice, but she knew King’s Landing better.

“Just so. Your father was oarmaster on a galley. When your mother died, he took you off to sea with him. Then he died as well, and his captain had no use for you, so he put you off the ship in Braavos. And what was the name of the ship?”

“*Nymeria*,” she said at once.

That night she left the House of Black and White. A long iron knife rode on her right hip, hidden by her cloak, a patched and faded thing of the sort an orphan might wear. Her shoes pinched her toes and her tunic was so threadbare that the wind cut right through it. But Braavos lay before her. The night air smelled of smoke and salt and fish. The canals were crooked, the alleys crookeder. Men gave her curious looks as she went past, and beggar children called out words she could not understand. Before long she was completely lost.

“Ser Gregor,” she chanted, as she crossed a stone bridge supported by four arches. From the center of its span she could see the masts of ships in the Ragman’s Harbor. “Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei.” Rain began to fall. Arya turned her face up to let the raindrops wash her cheeks, so happy she could dance. “*Valar morghulis*,” she said, “*valar morghulis, valar morghulis.*”