

# MELISANDRE

It was never truly dark in Melisandre's chambers.

Three tallow candles burned upon her windowsill to keep the terrors of the night at bay. Four more flickered beside her bed, two to either side. In the hearth a fire was kept burning day and night. The first lesson those who would serve her had to learn was that the fire must never, ever be allowed to go out.

The red priestess closed her eyes and said a prayer, then opened them once more to face the hearthfire. *One more time.* She had to be certain. Many a priest and priestess before her had been brought down by false visions, by seeing what they wished to see instead of what the Lord of Light had sent. Stannis was marching south into peril, the king who carried the fate of the world upon his shoulders, Azor Ahai reborn. Surely R'hllor would vouchsafe her a glimpse of what awaited him. *Show me Stannis, Lord,* she prayed. *Show me your king, your instrument.*

Visions danced before her, gold and scarlet, flickering, forming and melting and dissolving into one another, shapes strange and terrifying and seductive. She saw the eyeless faces again, staring out at her from sockets weeping blood. Then the towers by the sea, crumbling as the dark tide came sweeping over them, rising from the depths. Shadows in the shape of skulls, skulls that turned to mist, bodies locked together in lust, writhing and rolling and clawing. Through curtains of fire great winged shadows wheeled against a hard blue sky.

*The girl. I must find the girl again, the grey girl on the dying horse.* Jon Snow would expect that of her, and soon. It would not be enough to say the girl was fleeing. He would want more, he would want the when and where, and she did not have that for him. She had seen the girl only once. *A girl as grey as ash, and even as I watched she crumbled and blew away.*

A face took shape within the hearth. *Stannis?* she thought, for just a moment ... but no, these were not his features. *A wooden face, corpse*

*white.* Was this the enemy? A thousand red eyes floated in the rising flames. *He sees me.* Beside him, a boy with a wolf's face threw back his head and howled.

The red priestess shuddered. Blood trickled down her thigh, black and smoking. The fire was inside her, an agony, an ecstasy, filling her, searing her, transforming her. Shimmers of heat traced patterns on her skin, insistent as a lover's hand. Strange voices called to her from days long past. "Melony," she heard a woman cry. A man's voice called, "Lot Seven." She was weeping, and her tears were flame. And still she drank it in.

Snowflakes swirled from a dark sky and ashes rose to meet them, the grey and the white whirling around each other as flaming arrows arced above a wooden wall and dead things shambled silent through the cold, beneath a great grey cliff where fires burned inside a hundred caves. Then the wind rose and the white mist came sweeping in, impossibly cold, and one by one the fires went out. Afterward only the skulls remained.

*Death,* thought Melisandre. *The skulls are death.*

The flames crackled softly, and in their crackling she heard the whispered name *Jon Snow*. His long face floated before her, limned in tongues of red and orange, appearing and disappearing again, a shadow half-seen behind a fluttering curtain. Now he was a man, now a wolf, now a man again. But the skulls were here as well, the skulls were all around him. Melisandre had seen his danger before, had tried to warn the boy of it. *Enemies all around him, daggers in the dark.* He would not listen.

Unbelievers never listened until it was too late.

"What do you see, my lady?" the boy asked, softly.

*Skulls. A thousand skulls, and the bastard boy again. Jon Snow.* Whenever she was asked what she saw within her fires, Melisandre would answer, "Much and more," but seeing was never as simple as those words suggested. It was an art, and like all arts it demanded mastery, discipline, study. *Pain. That too.* R'hllor spoke to his chosen ones through blessed fire, in a language of ash and cinder and twisting flame that only a god could

truly grasp. Melisandre had practiced her art for years beyond count, and she had paid the price. There was no one, even in her order, who had her skill at seeing the secrets half-revealed and half-concealed within the sacred flames.

Yet now she could not even seem to find her king. *I pray for a glimpse of Azor Ahai, and R'hllor shows me only Snow.* “Devan,” she called, “a drink.” Her throat was raw and parched.

“Yes, my lady.” The boy poured her a cup of water from the stone jug by the window and brought it to her.

“Thank you.” Melisandre took a sip, swallowed, and gave the boy a smile. That made him blush. The boy was half in love with her, she knew. *He fears me, he wants me, and he worships me.*

All the same, Devan was not pleased to be here. The lad had taken great pride in serving as a king’s squire, and it had wounded him when Stannis commanded him to remain at Castle Black. Like any boy his age, his head was full of dreams of glory; no doubt he had been picturing the prowess he would display at Deepwood Motte. Other boys his age had gone south, to serve as squires to the king’s knights and ride into battle at their side. Devan’s exclusion must have seemed a rebuke, a punishment for some failure on his part, or perhaps for some failure of his father.

In truth, he was here because Melisandre had asked for him. The four eldest sons of Davos Seaworth had perished in the battle on the Blackwater, when the king’s fleet had been consumed by green fire. Devan was the fifthborn and safer here with her than at the king’s side. Lord Davos would not thank her for it, no more than the boy himself, but it seemed to her that Seaworth had suffered enough grief. Misguided as he was, his loyalty to Stannis could not be doubted. She had seen that in her flames.

Devan was quick and smart and able too, which was more than could be said about most of her attendants. Stannis had left a dozen of his men behind to serve her when he marched south, but most of them were useless. His Grace had need of every sword, so all he could spare were grey-beards and cripples. One man had been blinded by a blow to his head in the battle

by the Wall, another lamed when his falling horse crushed his legs. Her serjeant had lost an arm to a giant's club. Three of her guard were geldings that Stannis had castrated for raping wildling women. She had two drunkards and a craven too. The last should have been hanged, as the king himself admitted, but he came from a noble family, and his father and brothers had been stalwart from the first.

Having guards about her would no doubt help keep the black brothers properly respectful, the red priestess knew, but none of the men that Stannis had given her were like to be much help should she find herself in peril. It made no matter. Melisandre of Asshai did not fear for herself. R'hllor would protect her.

She took another sip of water, laid her cup aside, blinked and stretched and rose from her chair, her muscles sore and stiff. After gazing into the flames so long, it took her a few moments to adjust to the dimness. Her eyes were dry and tired, but if she rubbed them, it would only make them worse.

Her fire had burned low, she saw. "Devan, more wood. What hour is it?"

"Almost dawn, my lady."

*Dawn. Another day is given us, R'hllor be praised. The terrors of the night recede.* Melisandre had spent the night in her chair by the fire, as she often did. With Stannis gone, her bed saw little use. She had no time for sleep, with the weight of the world upon her shoulders. And she feared to dream. *Sleep is a little death, dreams the whisperings of the Other, who would drag us all into his eternal night.* She would sooner sit bathed in the ruddy glow of her red lord's blessed flames, her cheeks flushed by the wash of heat as if by a lover's kisses. Some nights she drowsed, but never for more than an hour. One day, Melisandre prayed, she would not sleep at all. One day she would be free of dreams. *Melony*, she thought. *Lot Seven.*

Devan fed fresh logs to the fire until the flames leapt up again, fierce and furious, driving the shadows back into the corners of the room, devouring all her unwanted dreams. *The dark recedes again ... for a little while. But beyond the Wall, the enemy grows stronger, and should he win the dawn will never come again.* She wondered if it had been his face that she had seen,

staring out at her from the flames. *No. Surely not. His visage would be more frightening than that, cold and black and too terrible for any man to gaze upon and live.* The wooden man she had glimpsed, though, and the boy with the wolf's face ... they were his servants, surely ... his champions, as Stannis was hers.

Melisandre went to her window, pushed open the shutters. Outside the east had just begun to lighten, and the stars of morning still hung in a pitch-black sky. Castle Black was already beginning to stir as men in black cloaks made their way across the yard to break their fast with bowls of porridge before they relieved their brothers atop the Wall. A few snowflakes drifted by the open window, floating on the wind.

“Does my lady wish to break her fast?” asked Devan.

*Food. Yes, I should eat.* Some days she forgot. R'hllor provided her with all the nourishment her body needed, but that was something best concealed from mortal men.

It was Jon Snow she needed, not fried bread and bacon, but it was no use sending Devan to the lord commander. He would not come to her summons. Snow still chose to dwell behind the armory, in a pair of modest rooms previously occupied by the Watch's late blacksmith. Perhaps he did not think himself worthy of the King's Tower, or perhaps he did not care. That was his mistake, the false humility of youth that is itself a sort of pride. It was never wise for a ruler to eschew the trappings of power, for power itself flows in no small measure from such trappings.

The boy was not entirely naive, however. He knew better than to come to Melisandre's chambers like a suppliant, insisting she come to him instead should she have need of words with him. And oft as not, when she did come, he would keep her waiting or refuse to see her. That much, at least, was shrewd.

“I will have nettle tea, a boiled egg, and bread with butter. Fresh bread, if you please, not fried. You may find the wildling as well. Tell him that I must speak with him.”

“Rattleshirt, my lady?”

“And quickly.”

While the boy was gone, Melisandre washed herself and changed her robes. Her sleeves were full of hidden pockets, and she checked them carefully as she did every morning to make certain all her powders were in place. Powders to turn fire green or blue or silver, powders to make a flame roar and hiss and leap up higher than a man is tall, powders to make smoke. A smoke for truth, a smoke for lust, a smoke for fear, and the thick black smoke that could kill a man outright. The red priestess armed herself with a pinch of each of them.

The carved chest that she had brought across the narrow sea was more than three-quarters empty now. And while Melisandre had the knowledge to make more powders, she lacked many rare ingredients. *My spells should suffice.* She was stronger at the Wall, stronger even than in Asshai. Her every word and gesture was more potent, and she could do things that she had never done before. *Such shadows as I bring forth here will be terrible, and no creature of the dark will stand before them.* With such sorceries at her command, she should soon have no more need of the feeble tricks of alchemists and pyromancers.

She shut the chest, turned the lock, and hid the key inside her skirts in another secret pocket. Then came a rapping at her door. Her one-armed serjeant, from the tremulous sound of his knock. “Lady Melisandre, the Lord o’ Bones is come.”

“Send him in.” Melisandre settled herself back into the chair beside the hearth.

The wildling wore a sleeveless jerkin of boiled leather dotted with bronze studs beneath a worn cloak mottled in shades of green and brown. *No bones.* He was cloaked in shadows too, in wisps of ragged grey mist, half-seen, sliding across his face and form with every step he took. *Ugly things. As ugly as his bones.* A widow’s peak, close-set dark eyes, pinched cheeks, a mustache wriggling like a worm above a mouthful of broken brown teeth.

Melisandre felt the warmth in the hollow of her throat as her ruby stirred at the closeness of its slave. “You have put aside your suit of bones,” she observed.

“The clacking was like to drive me mad.”

“The bones protect you,” she reminded him. “The black brothers do not love you. Devan tells me that only yesterday you had words with some of them over supper.”

“A few. I was eating bean-and-bacon soup whilst Bowen Marsh was going on about the high ground. The Old Pomegranate thought that I was spying on him and announced that he would not suffer murderers listening to their councils. I told him that if that was true, maybe they shouldn’t have them by the fire. Bowen turned red and made some choking sounds, but that was as far as it went.” The wildling sat on the edge of the window, slid his dagger from its sheath. “If some crow wants to slip a knife between my ribs whilst I’m spooning up some supper, he’s welcome to try. Hobb’s gruel would taste better with a drop of blood to spice it.”

Melisandre paid the naked steel no mind. If the wildling had meant her harm, she would have seen it in her flames. Danger to her own person was the first thing she had learned to see, back when she was still half a child, a slave girl bound for life to the great red temple. It was still the first thing she looked for whenever she gazed into a fire. “It is their eyes that should concern you, not their knives,” she warned him.

“The glamor, aye.” In the black iron fetter about his wrist, the ruby seemed to pulse. He tapped it with the edge of his blade. The steel made a faint *click* against the stone. “I feel it when I sleep. Warm against my skin, even through the iron. Soft as a woman’s kiss. *Your* kiss. But sometimes in my dreams it starts to burn, and your lips turn into teeth. Every day I think how easy it would be to pry it out, and every day I don’t. Must I wear the bloody bones as well?”

“The spell is made of shadow and suggestion. Men see what they expect to see. The bones are part of that.” *Was I wrong to spare this one?* “If the glamor fails, they will kill you.”

The wildling began to scrape the dirt out from beneath his nails with the point of his dagger. "I've sung my songs, fought my battles, drunk summer wine, tasted the Dornishman's wife. A man should die the way he's lived. For me that's steel in hand."

*Does he dream of death? Could the enemy have touched him? Death is his domain, the dead his soldiers.* "You shall have work for your steel soon enough. The enemy is moving, the true enemy. And Lord Snow's rangers will return before the day is done, with their blind and bloody eyes."

The wildling's own eyes narrowed. Grey eyes, brown eyes; Melisandre could see the color change with each pulse of the ruby. "Cutting out the eyes, that's the Weeper's work. The best crow's a blind crow, he likes to say. Sometimes I think he'd like to cut out his own eyes, the way they're always watering and itching. Snow's been assuming the free folk would turn to Tormund to lead them, because that's what he would do. He liked Tormund, and the old fraud liked him too. If it's the Weeper, though ... that's not good. Not for him, and not for us."

Melisandre nodded solemnly, as if she had taken his words to heart, but this Weeper did not matter. None of his free folk mattered. They were a lost people, a doomed people, destined to vanish from the earth, as the children of the forest had vanished. Those were not words he would wish to hear, though, and she could not risk losing him, not now. "How well do you know the north?"

He slipped his blade away. "As well as any raider. Some parts more than others. There's a lot of north. Why?"

"The girl," she said. "A girl in grey on a dying horse. Jon Snow's sister." Who else could it be? She was racing to him for protection, that much Melisandre had seen clearly. "I have seen her in my flames, but only once. We must win the lord commander's trust, and the only way to do that is to save her."

"Me save her, you mean? The Lord o' Bones?" He laughed. "No one ever trusted Rattleshirt but fools. Snow's not that. If his sister needs saving, he'll send his crows. I would."



“He is not you. He made his vows and means to live by them. The Night’s Watch takes no part. But you are not Night’s Watch. You can do what he cannot.”

“If your stiff-necked lord commander will allow it. Did your fires show you where to find this girl?”

“I saw water. Deep and blue and still, with a thin coat of ice just forming on it. It seemed to go on and on forever.”

“Long Lake. What else did you see around this girl?”

“Hills. Fields. Trees. A deer, once. Stones. She is staying well away from villages. When she can she rides along the bed of little streams, to throw hunters off her trail.”

He frowned. “That will make it difficult. She was coming north, you said. Was the lake to her east or to her west?”

Melisandre closed her eyes, remembering. “West.”

“She is not coming up the kingsroad, then. Clever girl. There are fewer watchers on the other side, and more cover. And some hidey-holes I have used myself from time—” He broke off at the sound of a warhorn and rose swiftly to his feet. All over Castle Black, Melisandre knew, the same sudden hush had fallen, and every man and boy turned toward the Wall, listening, waiting. One long blast of the horn meant rangers returning, but two ...

*The day has come, the red priestess thought. Lord Snow will have to listen to me now.*

After the long mournful cry of the horn had faded away, the silence seemed to stretch out to an hour. The wildling finally broke the spell. “Only one, then. Rangers.”

“Dead rangers.” Melisandre rose to her feet as well. “Go put on your bones and wait. I will return.”

“I should go with you.”

“Do not be foolish. Once they find what they will find, the sight of any wildling will inflame them. Stay here until their blood has time to cool.”

Devan was coming up the steps of the King’s Tower as Melisandre made her descent, flanked by two of the guards Stannis had left her. The boy was carrying her half-forgotten breakfast on a tray. “I waited for Hobb to pull the fresh loaves from the ovens, my lady. The bread’s still hot.”

“Leave it in my chambers.” The wildling would eat it, like as not. “Lord Snow has need of me, beyond the Wall.” *He does not know it yet, but soon*  
...

Outside, a light snow had begun to fall. A crowd of crows had gathered around the gate by the time Melisandre and her escort arrived, but they made way for the red priestess. The lord commander had preceded her through the ice, accompanied by Bowen Marsh and twenty spearmen. Snow had also sent a dozen archers to the top of the Wall, should any foes be hidden in the nearby woods. The guards on the gate were not queen’s men, but they passed her all the same.

It was cold and dark beneath the ice, in the narrow tunnel that crooked and slithered through the Wall. Morgan went before her with a torch and Merrel came behind her with an axe. Both men were hopeless drunkards, but they were sober at this hour of the morning. Queen’s men, at least in name, both had a healthy fear of her, and Merrel could be formidable when he was not drunk. She would have no need of them today, but Melisandre made it a point to keep a pair of guards about her everywhere she went. It sent a certain message. *The trappings of power.*

By the time the three of them emerged north of the Wall the snow was falling steadily. A ragged blanket of white covered the torn and tortured earth that stretched from the Wall to the edge of the haunted forest. Jon Snow and his black brothers were gathered around three spears, some twenty yards away.

The spears were eight feet long and made of ash. The one on the left had a slight crook, but the other two were smooth and straight. At the top of each was impaled a severed head. Their beards were full of ice, and the falling snow had given them white hoods. Where their eyes had been, only empty sockets remained, black and bloody holes that stared down in silent accusation.

“Who were they?” Melisandre asked the crows. “Black Jack Bulwer, Hairy Hal, and Garth Greyfeather,” Bowen Marsh said solemnly. “The ground is half-frozen. It must have taken the wild-lings half the night to drive the spears so deep. They could still be close. Watching us.” The Lord Steward squinted at the line of trees.

“Could be a hundred of them out there,” said the black brother with the dour face. “Could be a thousand.”

“No,” said Jon Snow. “They left their gifts in the black of night, then ran.” His huge white direwolf prowled around the shafts, sniffing, then lifted his leg and pissed on the spear that held the head of Black Jack Bulwer. “Ghost would have their scent if they were still out there.”

“I hope the Weeper burned the bodies,” said the dour man, the one called Dolorous Edd. “Elsewise they might come looking for their heads.”

Jon Snow grasped the spear that bore Garth Greyfeather’s head and wrenched it violently from the ground. “Pull down the other two,” he commanded, and four of the crows hurried to obey.

Bowen Marsh’s cheeks were red with cold. “We should never have sent out rangers.”

“This is not the time and place to pick at that wound. Not here, my lord. Not now.” To the men struggling with the spears Snow said, “Take the heads and burn them. Leave nothing but bare bone.” Only then did he seem to notice Melisandre. “My lady. Walk with me, if you would.”

*At last.* “If it please the lord commander.”

As they walked beneath the Wall, she slipped her arm through his. Morgan and Merrel went before them, Ghost came prowling at their heels. The priestess did not speak, but she slowed her pace deliberately, and where she walked the ice began to drip. *He will not fail to notice that.*

Beneath the iron grating of a murder hole Snow broke the silence, as she had known he would. “What of the other six?”

“I have not seen them,” Melisandre said.

“Will you look?”

“Of course, my lord.”

“We’ve had a raven from Ser Denys Mallister at the Shadow Tower,” Jon Snow told her. “His men have seen fires in the mountains on the far side of the Gorge. Wildlings massing, Ser Denys believes. He thinks they are going to try to force the Bridge of Skulls again.”

“Some may.” Could the skulls in her vision have signified this bridge? Somehow Melisandre did not think so. “If it comes, that attack will be no more than a diversion. I saw towers by the sea, submerged beneath a black and bloody tide. That is where the heaviest blow will fall.”

“Eastwatch?”

*Was it?* Melisandre had seen Eastwatch-by-the-Sea with King Stannis. That was where His Grace left Queen Selyse and their daughter Shireen when he assembled his knights for the march to Castle Black. The towers in her fire had been different, but that was oft the way with visions. “Yes. Eastwatch, my lord.”

“When?”

She spread her hands. “On the morrow. In a moon’s turn. In a year. And it may be that if you act, you may avert what I have seen entirely.” *Else what would be the point of visions?*

“Good,” said Snow.

The crowd of crows beyond the gate had swollen to two score by the time they emerged from beneath the Wall. The men pressed close about them. Melisandre knew a few by name: the cook Three-Finger Hobb, Mully with his greasy orange hair, the dim-witted boy called Owen the Oaf, the drunkard Septon Celladar.

“Is it true, m’lord?” said Three-Finger Hobb. “Who is it?” asked Owen the Oaf. “Not Dywen, is it?”

“Nor Garth,” said the queen’s man she knew as Alf of Runnymudd, one of the first to exchange his seven false gods for the truth of R’hllor. “Garth’s too clever for them wildlings.”

“How many?” Mully asked.

“Three,” Jon told them. “Black Jack, Hairy Hal, and Garth.”

Alf of Runnymudd let out a howl loud enough to wake sleepers in the Shadow Tower. “Put him to bed and get some mulled wine into him,” Jon told Three-Finger Hobb.

“Lord Snow,” Melisandre said quietly. “Will you come with me to the King’s Tower? I have more to share with you.”

He looked at her face for a long moment with those cold grey eyes of his. His right hand closed, opened, closed again. “As you wish. Edd, take Ghost back to my chambers.”

Melisandre took that as a sign and dismissed her own guard as well. They crossed the yard together, just the two of them. The snow fell all around them. She walked as close to Jon Snow as she dared, close enough to feel the mistrust pouring off him like a black fog. *He does not love me, will never love me, but he will make use of me. Well and good.* Melisandre had danced the same dance with Stannis Baratheon, back in the beginning. In truth, the young lord commander and her king had more in common than either one would ever be willing to admit. Stannis had been a younger son living in the shadow of his elder brother, just as Jon Snow, bastard-born, had always been eclipsed by his trueborn sibling, the fallen hero men had

called the Young Wolf. Both men were unbelievers by nature, mistrustful, suspicious. The only gods they truly worshiped were honor and duty.

“You have not asked about your sister,” Melisandre said, as they climbed the spiral steps of the King’s Tower.

“I told you. I have no sister. We put aside our kin when we say our words. I cannot help Arya, much as I—”

He broke off as they stepped inside her chambers. The wildling was within, seated at her board, spreading butter on a ragged chunk of warm brown bread with his dagger. He had donned the bone armor, she was pleased to see. The broken giant’s skull that was his helm rested on the window seat behind him.

Jon Snow tensed. “You.”

“Lord Snow.” The wildling grinned at them through a mouth of brown and broken teeth. The ruby on his wrist glimmered in the morning light like a dim red star.

“What are you doing here?”

“Breaking my fast. You’re welcome to share.”

“I’ll not break bread with you.”

“Your loss. The loaf’s still warm. Hobb can do that much, at least.” The wildling ripped off a bite. “I could visit you as easily, my lord. Those guards at your door are a bad jape. A man who has climbed the Wall half a hundred times can climb in a window easy enough. But what good would come of killing you? The crows would only choose someone worse.” He chewed, swallowed. “I heard about your rangers. You should have sent me with them.”

“So you could betray them to the Weeper?”

“Are we talking about betrayals? What was the name of that wildling wife of yours, Snow? Ygritte, wasn’t it?” The wildling turned to Melisandre. “I

will need horses. Half a dozen good ones. And this is nothing I can do alone. Some of the spearwives penned up at Mole's Town should serve. Women would be best for this. The girl's more like to trust them, and they will help me carry off a certain ploy I have in mind."

"What is he talking about?" Lord Snow asked her. "Your sister." Melisandre put her hand on his arm. "You cannot help her, but he can."

Snow wrenched his arm away. "I think not. You do not know this creature. Rattleshirt could wash his hands a hundred times a day and he'd still have blood beneath his nails. He'd be more like to rape and murder Arya than to save her. No. If this was what you have seen in your fires, my lady, you must have ashes in your eyes. If he tries to leave Castle Black without my leave, I'll take his head off myself."

*He leaves me no choice. So be it.* "Devan, leave us," she said, and the squire slipped away and closed the door behind him.

Melisandre touched the ruby at her neck and spoke a word.

The sound echoed queerly from the corners of the room and twisted like a worm inside their ears. The wildling heard one word, the crow another. Neither was the word that left her lips. The ruby on the wildling's wrist darkened, and the wisps of light and shadow around him writhed and faded.

The bones remained—the rattling ribs, the claws and teeth along his arms and shoulders, the great yellowed collarbone across his shoulders. The broken giant's skull remained a broken giant's skull, yellowed and cracked, grinning its stained and savage grin.

But the widow's peak dissolved. The brown mustache, the knobby chin, the sallow yellowed flesh and small dark eyes, all melted. Grey fingers crept through long brown hair. Laugh lines appeared at the corners of his mouth. All at once he was bigger than before, broader in the chest and shoulders, long-legged and lean, his face clean-shaved and wind-burnt.

Jon Snow's grey eyes grew wider. "Mance?"

“Lord Snow.” Mance Rayder did not smile. “*She burned you.*”

“She burned the Lord of Bones.”

Jon Snow turned to Melisandre. “What sorcery is this?”

“Call it what you will. Glamor, seeming, illusion. R’hllor is Lord of Light, Jon Snow, and it is given to his servants to weave with it, as others weave with thread.”

Mance Rayder chuckled. “I had my doubts as well, Snow, but why not let her try? It was that, or let Stannis roast me.”

“The bones help,” said Melisandre. “The bones remember. The strongest glamors are built of such things. A dead man’s boots, a hank of hair, a bag of fingerbones. With whispered words and prayer, a man’s shadow can be drawn forth from such and draped about another like a cloak. The wearer’s essence does not change, only his seeming.”

She made it sound a simple thing, and easy. They need never know how difficult it had been, or how much it had cost her. That was a lesson Melisandre had learned long before Asshai; the more effortless the sorcery appears, the more men fear the sorcerer. When the flames had licked at Rattleshirt, the ruby at her throat had grown so hot that she had feared her own flesh might start to smoke and blacken. Thankfully Lord Snow had delivered her from that agony with his arrows. Whilst Stannis had seethed at the defiance, she had shuddered with relief.

“Our false king has a prickly manner,” Melisandre told Jon Snow, “but he will not betray you. We hold his son, remember. And he owes you his very life.”

“Me?” Snow sounded startled. “Who else, my lord? Only his life’s blood could pay for his crimes, your laws said, and Stannis Baratheon is not a man to go against the law ... but as you said so sagely, the laws of men end at the Wall. I told you that the Lord of Light would hear your prayers. You wanted a way to save your little sister and still hold fast to the honor that means so much to you, to the vows you swore before your wooden god.”



She pointed with a pale finger. “There he stands, Lord Snow. Arya’s deliverance. A gift from the Lord of Light ... and me.”