



ARYA

Stoney Sept was the biggest town Arya had seen since King's Landing, and Harwin said her father had won a famous battle here.

"The Mad King's men had been hunting Robert, trying to catch him before he could rejoin your father," he told her as they rode toward the gate. "He was wounded, being tended by some friends, when Lord Connington the Hand took the town with a mighty force and started searching house by house. Before they could find him, though, Lord Eddard and your grandfather came down on the town and stormed the walls. Lord Connington fought back fierce. They battled in the streets and alleys, even on the rooftops, and all the septs rang their bells so the smallfolk would know to lock their doors. Robert came out of hiding to join the fight when the bells began to ring. He slew six men that day, they say. One was Myles Mooton, a famous knight who'd been Prince Rhaegar's squire. He would have slain the Hand too, but the battle never brought them together. Connington wounded your grandfather Tully sore, though, and killed Ser Denys Arryn, the darling of the Vale. But when he saw the day was lost, he flew off as fast as the griffins on his shield. The Battle of the Bells, they called it after. Robert always said your father won it, not him."

More recent battles had been fought here as well, Arya thought from the look of the place. The town gates were made of raw new wood; outside the

walls a pile of charred planks remained to tell what had happened to the old ones.

Stoney Sept was closed up tight, but when the captain of the gate saw who they were, he opened a sally port for them. “How you fixed for food?” Tom asked as they entered.

“Not so bad as we were. The Huntsman brought in a flock o’ sheep, and there’s been some trading across the Blackwater. The harvest wasn’t burned south o’ the river. Course, there’s plenty want to take what we got. Wolves one day, Mummers the next. Them that’s not looking for food are looking for plunder, or women to rape, and them that’s not out for gold or wenches are looking for the bloody Kingslayer. Talk is, he slipped right through Lord Edmure’s fingers.”

“*Lord Edmure?*” Lem frowned. “Is Lord Hoster dead, then?”

“Dead or dying. Think Lannister might be making for the Blackwater? It’s the quickest way to King’s Landing, the Huntsman swears.” The captain did not wait for an answer. “He took his dogs out for a sniff round. If Ser Jaime’s hereabouts, they’ll find him. I’ve seen them dogs rip bears apart. Think they’ll like the taste of lion blood?”

“A chewed-up corpse’s no good to no one,” said Lem. “The Huntsman bloody well knows that, too.”

“When the westermen came through they raped the Huntsman’s wife and sister, put his crops to the torch, ate half his sheep, and killed the other half for spite. Killed six dogs too, and threw the carcasses down his well. A chewed-up corpse would be plenty good enough for him, I’d say. Me as well.”

“He’d best not,” said Lem. “That’s all I got to say. He’d best not, and you’re a bloody fool.”

Arya rode between Harwin and Anguy as the outlaws moved down the streets where her father once had fought. She could see the sept on its hill, and below it a stout strong holdfast of grey stone that looked much too small for such a big town. But every third house they passed was a blackened shell, and she saw no people. “Are all the townfolk dead?”

“Only shy.” Anguy pointed out two bowmen on a roof, and some boys with sooty faces crouched in the rubble of an alehouse. Farther on, a baker threw open a shuttered window and shouted down to Lem. The sound of his voice brought more people out of hiding, and Stoney Sept slowly seemed to come to life around them.

In the market square at the town’s heart stood a fountain in the shape of a leaping trout, spouting water into a shallow pool. Women were filling pails and flagons there. A few feet away, a dozen iron cages hung from creaking wooden posts. *Crow cages*, Arya knew. The crows were mostly outside the cages, splashing in the water or perched atop the bars; inside were men. Lem reined up scowling. “What’s this, now?”

“Justice,” answered a woman at the fountain.

“What, did you run short o’ hempen rope?”

“Was this done at Ser Wilbert’s decree?” asked Tom.

A man laughed bitterly. “The lions killed Ser Wilbert a year ago. His sons are all off with the Young Wolf, getting fat in the west. You think they give a damn for the likes of us? It was the Mad Huntsman caught these wolves.”

Wolves. Arya went cold. *Robb’s men, and my father’s.* She felt drawn toward the cages. The bars allowed so little room that prisoners could neither sit nor turn; they stood naked, exposed to sun and wind and rain. The first three cages held dead men. Carrion crows had eaten out their eyes, yet the empty sockets seemed to follow her. The fourth man in the row stirred as she passed. Around his mouth his ragged beard was thick with blood and flies. They exploded when he spoke, buzzing around his head. “*Water.*” The word was a croak. “Please . . . water . . .”

The man in the next cage opened his eyes at the sound. “Here,” he said. “Here, me.” An old man, he was; his beard was grey and his scalp was bald and mottled brown with age.

There was another dead man beyond the old one, a big red-bearded man with a rotting grey bandage covering his left ear and part of his temple. But the worst thing was between his legs, where nothing remained but a crusted brown hole crawling with maggots. Farther down was a fat man. The crow cage was so cruelly narrow it was hard to see how they’d ever gotten him inside. The iron dug painfully into his belly, squeezing bulges out between

the bars. Long days baking in the sun had burned him a painful red from head to heel. When he shifted his weight, his cage creaked and swayed, and Arya could see pale white stripes where the bars had shielded his flesh from the sun.

“Whose men were you?” she asked them.

At the sound of her voice, the fat man opened his eyes. The skin around them was so red they looked like boiled eggs floating in a dish of blood. “Water . . . a drink . . .”

“Whose?” she said again.

“Pay them no mind, boy,” the townsman told her. “They’re none o’ your concern. Ride on by.”

“What did they do?” she asked him.

“They put eight people to the sword at Tumbler’s Falls,” he said. “They wanted the Kingslayer, but he wasn’t there so they did some rape and murder.” He jerked a thumb toward the corpse with maggots where his manhood ought to be. “That one there did the raping. Now move along.”

“A swallow,” the fat one called down. “Ha’ mercy, boy, a swallow.” The old one slid an arm up to grasp the bars. The motion made his cage swing violently. “Water,” gasped the one with the flies in his beard.

She looked at their filthy hair and scraggly beards and reddened eyes, at their dry, cracked, bleeding lips. *Wolves*, she thought again. *Like me*. Was this her pack? *How could they be Robb’s men?* She wanted to hit them. She wanted to hurt them. She wanted to cry. They all seemed to be looking at her, the living and the dead alike. The old man had squeezed three fingers out between the bars. “Water,” he said, “water.”

Arya swung down from her horse. *They can’t hurt me, they’re dying*. She took her cup from her bedroll and went to the fountain. “What do you think you’re doing, boy?” the townsman snapped. “They’re no concern o’ yours.” She raised the cup to the fish’s mouth. The water splashed across her fingers and down her sleeve, but Arya did not move until the cup was brimming over. When she turned back toward the cages, the townsman moved to stop her. “You get away from them, boy—”

“She’s a girl,” said Harwin. “Leave her be.”

“Aye,” said Lem. “Lord Beric don’t hold with caging men to die of thirst. Why don’t you hang them decent?”

“There was nothing decent ’bout them things they did at Tumbler’s Falls,” the townsman growled right back at him.

The bars were too narrow to pass a cup through, but Harwin and Gendry offered her a leg up. She planted a foot in Harwin’s cupped hands, vaulted onto Gendry’s shoulders, and grabbed the bars on top of the cage. The fat man turned his face up and pressed his cheek to the iron, and Arya poured the water over him. He sucked at it eagerly and let it run down over his head and cheeks and hands, and then he licked the dampness off the bars. He would have licked Arya’s fingers if she hadn’t snatched them back. By the time she served the other two the same, a crowd had gathered to watch her. “The Mad Huntsman will hear of this,” a man threatened. “He won’t like it. No, he won’t.”

“He’ll like this even less, then.” Anguy strung his longbow, slid an arrow from his quiver, nocked, drew, loosed. The fat man shuddered as the shaft drove up between his chins, but the cage would not let him fall. Two more arrows ended the other two northmen. The only sound in the market square was the splash of falling water and the buzzing of flies.

Valar morghulis, Arya thought.

On the east side of the market square stood a modest inn with whitewashed walls and broken windows. Half its roof had burnt off recently, but the hole had been patched over. Above the door hung a wooden shingle painted as a peach, with a big bite taken out of it. They dismounted at the stables sitting catty-corner, and Greenbeard bellowed for grooms.

The buxom red-haired innkeep howled with pleasure at the sight of them, then promptly set to tweaking them. “Greenbeard, is it? Or Greybeard? Mother take mercy, when did you get so old? Lem, is that you? Still wearing the same ratty cloak, are you? I know why you never wash it, I do. You’re afraid all the piss will wash out and we’ll see you’re really a knight o’ the Kingsguard! And Tom o’ Sevens, you randy old goat! You come to see that son o’ yours? Well, you’re too late, he’s off riding with that bloody Huntsman. And don’t tell me he’s not yours!”

“He hasn’t got my voice,” Tom protested weakly.

“He’s got your nose, though. Aye, and t’other parts as well, to hear the girls talk.” She spied Gendry then, and pinched him on the cheek. “Look at this fine young ox. Wait till Alyce sees those arms. Oh, and he blushes like a maid, too. Well, Alyce will fix that for you, boy, see if she don’t.”

Arya had never seen Gendry turn so red. “Tansy, you leave the Bull alone, he’s a good lad,” said Tom Sevenstrings. “All we need from you is safe beds for a night.”

“Speak for yourself, singer.” Anguy slid his arm around a strapping young serving girl as freckly as he was.

“Beds we got,” said red-haired Tansy. “There’s never been no lack o’ beds at the Peach. But you’ll all climb in a tub first. Last time you lot stayed under my roof you left your fleas behind.” She poked Greenbeard in the chest. “And yours was green, too. You want food?”

“If you can spare it, we won’t say no,” Tom conceded.

“Now when did you ever say no to anything, Tom?” the woman hooted. “I’ll roast some mutton for your friends, and an old dry rat for you. It’s more than you deserve, but if you gargle me a song or three, might be I’ll weaken. I always pity the afflicted. Come on, come on. Cass, Lanna, put some kettles on. Jyzene, help me get the clothes off them, we’ll need to boil those too.”

She made good on all her threats. Arya tried to tell them that she’d been bathed *twice* at Acorn Hall, not a fortnight past, but the red-haired woman was having none of it. Two serving wenches carried her up the stairs bodily, arguing about whether she was a girl or a boy. The one called Helly won, so the other had to fetch the hot water and scrub Arya’s back with a stiff bristly brush that almost took her skin off. Then they stole all the clothes that Lady Smallwood had given her and dressed her up like one of Sansa’s dolls in linen and lace. But at least when they were done she got to go down and eat.

As she sat in the common room in her stupid girl clothes, Arya remembered what Syrio Forel had told her, the trick of looking and seeing what was there. When she looked, she saw more serving wenches than any inn could want, and most of them young and comely. And come evenfall,

lots of men started coming and going at the Peach. They did not linger long in the common room, not even when Tom took out his woodharp and began to sing “Six Maids in a Pool.” The wooden steps were old and steep, and creaked something fierce whenever one of the men took a girl upstairs. “I bet this is a brothel,” she whispered to Gendry.

“You don’t even know what a brothel is.”

“I do so,” she insisted. “It’s like an inn, with girls.”

He was turning red again. “What are you doing here, then?” he demanded. “A brothel’s no fit place for no bloody highborn lady, everybody knows that.”

One of the girls sat down on the bench beside him. “Who’s a highborn lady? The little skinny one?” She looked at Arya and laughed. “I’m a king’s daughter myself.”

Arya knew she was being mocked. “You are not.”

“Well, I might be.” When the girl shrugged, her gown slipped off one shoulder. “They say King Robert fucked my mother when he hid here, back before the battle. Not that he didn’t have all the other girls too, but Leslyn says he liked my ma the best.”

The girl *did* have hair like the old king’s, Arya thought; a great thick mop of it, as black as coal. *That doesn’t mean anything, though. Gendry has the same kind of hair too. Lots of people have black hair.*

“I’m named Bella,” the girl told Gendry. “For the battle. I bet I could ring *your* bell, too. You want to?”

“No,” he said gruffly.

“I bet you do.” She ran a hand along his arm. “I don’t cost nothing to friends of Thoros and the lightning lord.”

“*No*, I said.” Gendry rose abruptly and stalked away from the table out into the night.

Bella turned to Arya. “Don’t he like girls?”

Arya shrugged. “He’s just stupid. He likes to polish helmets and beat on swords with hammers.”

“Oh.” Bella tugged her gown back over her shoulder and went to talk with Jack-Be-Lucky. Before long she was sitting in his lap, giggling and drinking wine from his cup. Greenbeard had two girls, one on each knee. Anguy had vanished with his freckle-faced wench, and Lem was gone as well. Tom Sevenstrings sat by the fire, singing. “The Maids that Bloom in Spring.” Arya sipped at the cup of watered wine the red-haired woman had allowed her, listening. Across the square the dead men were rotting in their crow cages, but inside the Peach everyone was jolly. Except it seemed to her that some of them were laughing too hard, somehow.

It would have been a good time to sneak away and steal a horse, but Arya couldn’t see how that would help her. She could only ride as far as the city gates. *That captain would never let me pass, and if he did, Harwin would come after me, or that Huntsman with his dogs.* She wished she had her map, so she could see how far Stoney Sept was from Riverrun.

By the time her cup was empty, Arya was yawning. Gendry hadn’t come back. Tom Sevenstrings was singing “Two Hearts that Beat as One,” and kissing a different girl at the end of every verse. In the corner by the window Lem and Harwin sat talking to red-haired Tansy in low voices. “. . . spent the night in Jaime’s cell,” she heard the woman say. “Her and this other wench, the one who slew Renly. All three o’ them together, and come the morn Lady Catelyn cut him loose for love.” She gave a throaty chuckle.

It’s not true, Arya thought. *She never would.* She felt sad and angry and lonely, all at once.

An old man sat down beside her. “Well, aren’t you a pretty little peach?” His breath smelled near as foul as the dead men in the cages, and his little pig eyes were crawling up and down her. “Does my sweet peach have a name?”

For half a heartbeat she forgot who she was supposed to be. She wasn’t any peach, but she couldn’t be Arya Stark either, not here with some smelly drunk she did not know. “I’m . . .”

“She’s my sister.” Gendry put a heavy hand on the old man’s shoulder, and squeezed. “Leave her be.”

The man turned, spoiling for a quarrel, but when he saw Gendry’s size he thought better of it. “Your sister, is she? What kind of brother are you? I’d

never bring no sister of mine to the Peach, that I wouldn't." He got up from the bench and moved off muttering, in search of a new friend.

"Why did you say that?" Arya hopped to her feet. "You're not my brother."

"That's right," he said angrily. "I'm too bloody lowborn to be kin to m'lady high."

Arya was taken aback by the fury in his voice. "That's not the way I meant it."

"Yes it is." He sat down on the bench, cradling a cup of wine between his hands. "Go away. I want to drink this wine in peace. Then maybe I'll go find that black-haired girl and ring her bell for her."

"But . . ."

"I said, *go away*. M'lady."

Arya whirled and left him there. *A stupid bullheaded bastard boy, that's all he is.* He could ring all the bells he wanted, it was nothing to her.

Their sleeping room was at the top of the stairs, under the eaves. Maybe the Peach had no lack of beds, but there was only one to spare for the likes of them. It was a *big* bed, though. It filled the whole room, just about, and the musty straw-stuffed mattress looked large enough for all of them. Just now, though, she had it to herself. Her real clothes were hanging from a peg on the wall, between Gendry's stuff and Lem's. Arya took off the linen and lace, pulled her tunic over her head, climbed up into the bed, and burrowed under the blankets. "Queen Cersei," she whispered into the pillow. "King Joffrey, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn. Dunsen, Raff, and Polliver. The Tickler, the Hound, and Ser Gregor the Mountain." She liked to mix up the order of the names sometimes. It helped her remember who they were and what they'd done. *Maybe some of them are dead*, she thought. *Maybe they're in iron cages someplace, and the crows are picking out their eyes.*

Sleep came as quick as she closed her eyes. She dreamed of wolves that night, stalking through a wet wood with the smell of rain and rot and blood thick in the air. Only they were good smells in the dream, and Arya knew she had nothing to fear. She was strong and swift and fierce, and her pack was all around her, her brothers and her sisters. They ran down a frightened

horse together, tore its throat out, and feasted. And when the moon broke through the clouds, she threw back her head and *howled*.

But when the day came, she woke to the barking of dogs.

Arya sat up yawning. Gendry was stirring on her left and Lem Lemoncloak snoring loudly to her right, but the baying outside all but drowned him out. *There must be half a hundred dogs out there*. She crawled from under the blankets and hopped over Lem, Tom, and Jack-Be-Lucky to the window. When she opened the shutters wide, wind and wet and cold all came flooding in together. The day was grey and overcast. Down below, in the square, the dogs were barking, running in circles, growling and howling. There was a pack of them, great black mastiffs and lean wolfhounds and black-and-white sheepdogs and kinds Arya did not know, shaggy brindled beasts with long yellow teeth. Between the inn and the fountain, a dozen riders sat astride their horses, watching the townsmen open the fat man's cage and tug his arm until his swollen corpse spilled out onto the ground. The dogs were at him at once, tearing chunks of flesh off his bones.

Arya heard one of the riders laugh. "Here's your new castle, you bloody Lannister bastard," he said. "A little snug for the likes o' you, but we'll squeeze you in, never fret." Beside him a prisoner sat sullen, with coils of hempen rope tight around his wrists. Some of the townsmen were throwing dung at him, but he never flinched. "You'll *rot* in them cages," his captor was shouting. "The crows will be picking out your eyes while we're spending all that good Lannister gold o' yours! And when them crows are done, we'll send what's left o' you to your bloody brother. Though I doubt he'll know you."

The noise had woken half the Peach. Gendry squeezed into the window beside Arya, and Tom stepped up behind them naked as his name day. "What's all that bloody shouting?" Lem complained from bed. "A man's trying to get some bloody sleep."

"Where's Greenbeard?" Tom asked him.

"Abed with Tansy," Lem said. "Why?"

"Best find him. Archer too. The Mad Huntsman's come back, with another man for the cages."

"Lannister," said Arya. "I heard him say *Lannister*."

“Have they caught the Kingslayer?” Gendry wanted to know.

Down in the square, a thrown stone caught the captive on the cheek, turning his head. *Not the Kingslayer*, Arya thought, when she saw his face. The gods had heard her prayers after all.