

JON

Queen Selyse descended upon Castle Black with her daughter and her daughter's fool, her serving girls and lady companions, and a retinue of knights, sworn swords, and men-at-arms fifty strong. *Queen's men all*, Jon Snow knew. *They may attend Selyse, but it is Melisandre they serve.* The red priestess had warned him of their coming almost a day before the raven arrived from Eastwatch with the same message.

He met the queen's party by the stables, accompanied by Satin, Bowen Marsh, and half a dozen guards in long black cloaks. It would never do to come before this queen without a retinue of his own, if half of what they said of her was true. She might mistake him for a stableboy and hand him the reins of her horse.

The snows had finally moved off to the south and given them a respite. There was even a hint of warmth in the air as Jon Snow took a knee before this southron queen. "Your Grace. Castle Black welcomes you and yours."

Queen Selyse looked down at him. "My thanks. Please escort me to your lord commander."

"My brothers chose me for that honor. I am Jon Snow."

"You? They said you were young, but ..." Queen Selyse's face was pinched and pale. She wore a crown of red gold with points in the shape of flames, a twin to that worn by Stannis. "... you may rise, Lord Snow. This is my daughter, Shireen."

"Princess." Jon inclined his head. Shireen was a homely child, made even uglier by the greyscale that had left her neck and part of her cheek stiff and grey and cracked. "My brothers and I are at your service," he told the girl.

Shireen reddened. "Thank you, my lord."

"I believe you are acquainted with my kinsman, Ser Axell Florent?" the queen went on.

“Only by raven.” *And report.* The letters he’d received from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea had a deal to say of Axell Florent, very little of it good. “Ser Axell.”

“Lord Snow.” A stout man, Florent had short legs and a thick chest. Coarse hair covered his cheeks and jowls and poked from his ears and nostrils.

“My loyal knights,” Queen Selyse went on. “Ser Narbert, Ser Benethon, Ser Brus, Ser Patrek, Ser Dorden, Ser Malegorn, Ser Lambert, Ser Perkin.” Each worthy bowed in turn. She did not trouble to name her fool, but the cowbells on his antlered hat and the motley tattooed across his puffy cheeks made him hard to overlook. *Patchface.* Cotter Pyke’s letters had made mention of him as well. Pyke claimed he was a simpleton.

Then the queen beckoned to another curious member of her entourage: a tall gaunt stick of a man, his height accentuated by an outlandish three-tiered hat of purple felt. “And here we have the honorable Tycho Nestoris, an emissary of the Iron Bank of Braavos, come to treat with His Grace King Stannis.”

The banker doffed his hat and made a sweeping bow. “Lord Commander. I thank you and your brothers for your hospitality.” He spoke the Common Tongue flawlessly, with only the slightest hint of accent. Half a foot taller than Jon, the Braavosi sported a beard as thin as a rope sprouting from his chin and reaching almost to his waist. His robes were a somber purple, trimmed with ermine. A high stiff collar framed his narrow face. “I hope we shall not inconvenience you too greatly.”

“Not at all, my lord. You are most welcome.” *More welcome than this queen, if truth be told.* Cotter Pyke had sent a raven ahead to advise them of the banker’s coming. Jon Snow had thought of little since.

Jon turned back to the queen. “The royal chambers in the King’s Tower have been prepared for Your Grace for so long as you wish to remain with us. This is our Lord Steward, Bowen Marsh. He will find quarters for your men.”

“How kind of you to make room for us.” The queen’s words were courteous enough, though her tone said, *It is no more than your duty, and you had best hope these quarters please me.* “We will not be with you long. A few days at the most. It is our intent to press on to our new seat at the Nightfort as soon as we are rested. The journey from Eastwatch was wearisome.”

“As you say, Your Grace,” said Jon. “You will be cold and hungry, I am sure. A hot meal awaits you in our common room.”

“Very good.” The queen glanced about the yard. “First, though, we wish to consult with the Lady Melisandre.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Her apartments are in the King’s Tower as well. This way, if you will?” Queen Selyse nodded, took her daughter by the hand, and permitted him to lead them from the stables. Ser Axell, the Braavosi banker, and the rest of her party followed, like so many ducklings done up in wool and fur.

“Your Grace,” said Jon Snow, “my builders have done all they can to make the Nightfort ready to receive you ... yet much of it remains in ruins. It is a large castle, the largest on the Wall, and we have only been able to restore a part of it. You might be more comfortable back at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.”

Queen Selyse sniffed. “We are done with Eastwatch. We did not like it there. A queen should be mistress beneath her own roof. We found your Cotter Pyke to be an uncouth and unpleasant man, quarrelsome and niggardly.”

You should hear what Cotter says of you. “I am sorry for that, but I fear Your Grace will find conditions at the Nightfort even less to your liking. We speak of a fortress, not a palace. A grim place, and cold. Whereas Eastwatch—”

“Eastwatch *is not safe.*” The queen put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “This is the king’s true heir. Shireen will one day sit the Iron Throne and rule the Seven Kingdoms. She must be kept from harm, and Eastwatch is where the attack will come. This Nightfort is the place my husband has chosen for our seat, and there we shall abide. We— *oh!*”

An enormous shadow emerged from behind the shell of the Lord Commander's Tower. Princess Shireen gave a shriek, and three of the queen's knights gasped in harmony. Another swore. "*Seven save us*," he said, quite forgetting his new red god in his shock.

"Don't be afraid," Jon told them. "There's no harm in him, Your Grace. This is Wun Wun."

"Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun." The giant's voice rumbled like a boulder crashing down a mountainside. He sank to his knees before them. Even kneeling, he loomed over them. "Kneel queen. Little queen." Words that Leathers had taught him, no doubt.

Princess Shireen's eyes went wide as dinner plates. "He's a *giant*! A real true giant, like from the stories. But why does he talk so funny?"

"He only knows a few words of the Common Tongue as yet," said Jon. "In their own land, giants speak the Old Tongue."

"Can I touch him?"

"Best not," her mother warned. "Look at him. A filthy creature." The queen turned her frown on Jon. "Lord Snow, what is this bestial creature doing on our side of the Wall?"

"Wun Wun is a guest of the Night's Watch, as you are."

The queen did not like that answer. Nor did her knights. Ser Axell grimaced in disgust, Ser Brus gave a nervous titter, Ser Narbert said, "I had been told all the giants were dead."

"Almost all." *Ygritte wept for them*. "In the dark the dead are dancing." Patchface shuffled his feet in a grotesque dance step. "I know, I know, oh oh oh." At Eastwatch someone had sewn him a motley cloak of beaver pelts, sheepskins, and rabbit fur. His hat sported antlers hung with bells and long brown flaps of squirrel fur that hung down over his ears. Every step he took set him to ringing.

Wun Wun gaped at him with fascination, but when the giant reached for him the fool hopped back away, jingling. “Oh no, oh no, oh no.” That brought Wun Wun lurching to his feet. The queen grabbed hold of Princess Shireen and pulled her back, her knights reached for their swords, and Patchface reeled away in alarm, lost his footing, and plopped down on his arse in a snowdrift.

Wun Wun began to laugh. A giant’s laughter could put to shame a dragon’s roar. Patchface covered his ears, Princess Shireen pressed her face into her mother’s furs, and the boldest of the queen’s knights moved forward, steel in hand. Jon raised an arm to block his path. “You do *not* want to anger him. Sheathe your steel, ser. Leathers, take Wun Wun back to Hardin’s.”

“Eat now, Wun Wun?” asked the giant. “Eat now,” Jon agreed. To Leathers he said, “I’ll send out a bushel of vegetables for him and meat for you. Start a fire.”

Leathers grinned. “I will, m’lord, but Hardin’s is bone cold. Perhaps m’lord could send out some wine to warm us?”

“For you. Not him.” Wun Wun had never tasted wine until he came to Castle Black, but once he had, he had taken a gigantic liking to it. *Too much a liking*. Jon had enough to contend with just now without adding a drunken giant to the mix. He turned back to the queen’s knights. “My lord father used to say a man should never draw his sword unless he means to use it.”

“Using it was my intent.” The knight was clean-shaved and windburnt; beneath a cloak of white fur he wore a cloth-of-silver surcoat emblazoned with a blue five-pointed star. “I had been given to understand that the Night’s Watch defended the realm against such monsters. No one mentioned keeping them as pets.”

Another bloody southron fool. “You are ... ?”

“Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain, if it please my lord.”

“I do not know how you observe guest right on your mountain, ser. In the north we hold it sacred. Wun Wun is a guest here.”

Ser Patrek smiled. "Tell me, Lord Commander, should the Others turn up, do you plan to offer hospitality to them as well?" The knight turned to his queen. "Your Grace, that is the King's Tower there, if I am not mistaken. If I may have the honor?"

"As you wish." The queen took his arm and swept past the men of the Night's Watch with never a second glance.

Those flames on her crown are the warmest thing about her. "Lord Tycho," Jon called. "A moment, please."

The Braavosi halted. "No lord I. Only a simple servant of the Iron Bank of Braavos."

"Cotter Pyke informs me that you came to Eastwatch with three ships. A galleas, a galley, and a cog."

"Just so, my lord. The crossing can be perilous in this season. One ship alone may founder, where three together may aid one another. The Iron Bank is always prudent in such matters."

"Perhaps before you leave we might have a quiet word?"

"I am at your service, Lord Commander. And in Braavos we say there is no time like the present. Will that suit?"

"As good as any. Shall we repair to my solar, or would you like to see the top of the Wall?"

The banker glanced up, to where the ice loomed vast and pale against the sky. "I fear it will be bitter cold up top."

"That, and windy. You learn to walk well away from the edge. Men have been blown off. Still. The Wall is like nothing else on earth. You may never have another chance to see it."

"No doubt I shall rue my caution upon my deathbed, but after a long day in the saddle, a warm room sounds preferable to me."

“My solar, then. Satin, some mulled wine, if you would.”

Jon’s rooms behind the armory were quiet enough, if not especially warm. His fire had gone out some time ago; Satin was not as diligent in feeding it as Dolorous Edd had been. Mormont’s raven greeted them with a shriek of “*Corn!*” Jon hung up his cloak. “You come seeking Stannis, is that correct?”

“It is, my lord. Queen Selyse has suggested that we might send word to Deepwood Motte by raven, to inform His Grace that I await his pleasure at the Nightfort. The matter that I mean to put to him is too delicate to entrust to letters.”

“A debt.” *What else could it be?* “His own debt? Or his brother’s?”

The banker pressed his fingers together. “It would not be proper for me to discuss Lord Stannis’s indebtedness or lack of same. As to King Robert ... it was indeed our pleasure to assist His Grace in his need. For so long as Robert lived, all was well. Now, however, the Iron Throne has ceased all repayment.”

Could the Lannisters truly be so foolish? “You cannot mean to hold Stannis responsible for his brother’s debts.”

“The debts belong to the Iron Throne,” Tycho declared, “and whoso-ever sits on that chair must pay them. Since young King Tommen and his counsellors have become so obdurate, we mean to broach the subject with King Stannis. Should he prove himself more worthy of our trust, it would of course be our great pleasure to lend him whatever help he needs.”

“*Help,*” the raven screamed. “*Help, help, help.*”

Much of this Jon had surmised the moment he learned that the Iron Bank had sent an envoy to the Wall. “When last we heard, His Grace was marching on Winterfell to confront Lord Bolton and his allies. You may seek him there if you wish, though that carries a risk. You could find yourself caught up in his war.”

Tycho bowed his head. “We who serve the Iron Bank face death full as often as you who serve the Iron Throne.”

Is that whom I serve? Jon Snow was no longer certain. “I can provide you with horses, provisions, guides, whatever is required to get you as far as Deepwood Motte. From there you will need to make your own way to Stannis.” *And you may well find his head upon a spike.* “There will be a price.”

“*Price,*” screamed Mormont’s raven. “*Price, price.*” “There is always a price, is there not?” The Braavosi smiled. “What does the Watch require?”

“Your ships, for a start. With their crews.”

“All three? How will I return to Braavos?”

“I only need them for a single voyage.”

“A hazardous voyage, I assume. *For a start,* you said?”

“We need a loan as well. Gold enough to keep us fed till spring. To buy food and hire ships to bring it to us.”

“Spring?” Tycho sighed. “It is not possible, my lord.”

What was it Stannis had said to him? *You haggle like a crone with a codfish, Lord Snow. Did Lord Eddard father you on a fishwife?* Perhaps he had at that.

It took the better part of an hour before the impossible became possible, and another hour before they could agree on terms. The flagon of mulled wine that Satin delivered helped them settle the more nettlesome points. By the time Jon Snow signed the parchment the Braavosi drew up, both of them were half-drunk and quite unhappy. Jon thought that a good sign.

The three Braavosi ships would bring the fleet at Eastwatch up to eleven, including the Ibbenese whaler that Cotter Pyke had commandeered on Jon’s order, a trading galley out of Pentos similarly impressed, and three battered Lysene warships, remnants of Salladhor Saan’s former fleet driven back

north by the autumn storms. All three of Saan's ships had been in dire need of refitting, but by now the work should be complete.

Eleven ships was no wise enough, but if he waited any longer, the free folk at Hardhome would be dead by the time the rescue fleet arrived. *Sail now or not at all*. Whether Mother Mole and her people would be desperate enough to entrust their lives to the Night's Watch, though ...

The day had darkened by the time he and Tycho Nestoris left the solar. Snow had begun to fall. "Our respite was a brief one, it would seem." Jon drew his cloak about himself more tightly.

"Winter is nigh upon us. The day I left Braavos, there was ice on the canals."

"Three of my men passed through Braavos not long ago," Jon told him. "An old maester, a singer, and a young steward. They were escorting a wildling girl and her child to Oldtown. I do not suppose you chanced to encounter them?"

"I fear not, my lord. Westerosi pass through Braavos every day, but most come and go from the Ragman's Harbor. The ships of the Iron Bank moor at the Purple Harbor. If you wish, I can make inquiries after them when I return home."

"No need. By now they should be safe in Oldtown."

"Let us hope so. The narrow sea is perilous this time of year, and of late there have been troubling reports of strange ships seen amongst the Stepstones."

"Salladhor Saan?"

"The Lysene pirate? Some say he has returned to his old haunts, this is so. And Lord Redwyne's war fleet creeps through the Broken Arm as well.

On its way home, no doubt. But these men and their ships are well-known to us. No, these other sails ... from farther east, perhaps ... one hears queer

talk of dragons.”

“Would that we had one here. A dragon might warm things up a bit.”

“My lord jests. You will forgive me if I do not laugh. We Braavosi are descended from those who fled Valyria and the wrath of its dragonlords. We do not jape of dragons.”

No, I suppose not. “My apologies, Lord Tycho.”

“None is required, Lord Commander. Now I find that I am hungry. Lending such large sums of gold will give a man an appetite. Will you be so good as to point me to your feast hall?”

“I will take you there myself.” Jon gestured. “This way.”

Once there, it would have been discourteous not to break bread with the banker, so Jon sent Satin off to fetch them food. The novelty of newcomers had brought out almost all the men who were not on duty or asleep, so the cellar was crowded and warm.

The queen herself was absent, as was her daughter. By now presumably they were settling into the King’s Tower. But Ser Brus and Ser Malegorn were on hand, entertaining such brothers as had gathered with the latest tidings from Eastwatch and beyond the sea. Three of the queen’s ladies sat together, attended by their serving maids and a dozen admiring men of the Night’s Watch.

Nearer the door, the Queen’s Hand was attacking a brace of capons, sucking the meat off the bones and washing down each bite with ale. When he espied Jon Snow, Axell Florent tossed a bone aside, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and sauntered over. With his bowed legs, barrel chest, and prominent ears, he presented a comical appearance, but Jon knew better than to laugh at him. He was an uncle to Queen Selyse and had been among the first to follow her in accepting Melisandre’s red god. *If he is not a kinslayer, he is the next best thing.* Axell Florent’s brother had been burned by Melisandre, Maester Aemon had informed him, yet Ser Axell had done

little and less to stop it. *What sort of man can stand by idly and watch his own brother being burned alive?*

“Nestoris,” said Ser Axell, “and the lord commander. Might I join you?” He lowered himself to the bench before they could reply. “Lord Snow, if I may ask ... this wildling princess His Grace King Stannis wrote of ... where might she be, my lord?”

Long leagues from here, Jon thought. If the gods are good, by now she has found Tormund Giantsbane. “Val is the younger sister of Dalla, who was Mance Rayder’s wife and mother to his son. King Stannis took Val and the child captive after Dalla died in childbed, but she is no princess, not as you mean it.”

Ser Axell shrugged. “Whatever she may be, at Eastwatch men claimed the wench was fair. I’d like to see with mine own eyes. Some of these wildling women, well, a man would need to turn them over to do his duty as a husband. If it please the lord commander, bring her out, let us have a look.”

“She is not a horse to be paraded for inspection, ser.”

“I promise not to count her teeth.” Florent grinned. “Oh, never fear, I’ll treat her with all the courtesy she is due.”

He knows I do not have her. A village has no secrets, and no more did Castle Black. Val’s absence was not spoken of openly, but some men knew, and in the common hall at night the brothers talked. *What has he heard?* Jon wondered. *How much does he believe?* “Forgive me, ser, but Val will not be joining us.”

“I’ll go to her. Where do you keep the wench?”

Away from you. “Somewhere safe. Enough, ser.”

The knight’s face grew flushed. “My lord, have you forgotten who I am?” His breath smelled of ale and onions. “Must I speak to the queen? A word from Her Grace and I can have this wildling girl delivered naked to the hall for our inspection.”

That would be a pretty trick, even for a queen. “The queen would never presume upon our hospitality,” Jon said, hoping that was true. “Now I fear I must take my leave, before I forget the duties of a host. Lord Tycho, pray excuse me.”

“Yes, of course,” the banker said. “A pleasure.”

Outside, the snow was coming down more heavily. Across the yard the King’s Tower had turned into a hulking shadow, the lights in its windows obscured by falling snow.

Back in his solar, Jon found the Old Bear’s raven perched on the back of the oak-and-leather chair behind the trestle table. The bird began to scream for food the moment he entered. Jon took a fistful of dried kernels from the sack by the door and scattered them on the floor, then claimed the chair.

Tycho Nestoris had left behind a copy of their agreement. Jon read it over thrice. *That was simple*, he reflected. *Simpler than I dared hope. Simpler than it should have been.*

It gave him an uneasy feeling. Braavosi coin would allow the Night’s Watch to buy food from the south when their own stores ran short, food enough to see them through the winter, however long it might prove to be. *A long hard winter will leave the Watch so deep in debt that we will never climb out*, Jon reminded himself, *but when the choice is debt or death, best borrow.*

He did not have to like it, though. And come spring, when the time came to repay all that gold, he would like it even less. Tycho Nestoris had impressed him as cultured and courteous, but the Iron Bank of Braavos had a fearsome reputation when collecting debts. Each of the Nine Free Cities had its bank, and some had more than one, fighting over every coin like dogs over a bone, but the Iron Bank was richer and more powerful than all the rest combined. When princes defaulted on their debts to lesser banks, ruined bankers sold their wives and children into slavery and opened their own veins. When princes failed to repay the Iron Bank, new princes sprang up from nowhere and took their thrones.

As poor plump Tommen may be about to learn. No doubt the Lannisters had good reason for refusing to honor King Robert's debts, but it was folly all the same. If Stannis was not too stiff-necked to accept their terms, the Braavosi would give him all the gold and silver he required, coin enough to buy a dozen sellsword companies, to bribe a hundred lords, to keep his men paid, fed, clothed, and armed. *Unless Stannis is lying dead beneath the walls of Winterfell, he may just have won the Iron Throne.* He wondered if Melisandre had seen *that* in her fires.

Jon sat back, yawned, stretched. On the morrow he would draft orders for Cotter Pyke. *Eleven ships to Hardhome. Bring back as many as you can, women and children first.* It was time they set sail. *Should I go myself, though, or leave it to Cotter?* The Old Bear had led a ranging. *Aye. And never returned.*

Jon closed his eyes. Just for a moment and woke, stiff as a board, with the Old Bear's raven muttering, "*Snow, Snow,*" and Mully shaking him. "M'lord, you're wanted. Beg pardon, m'lord. A girl's been found."

"A girl?" Jon sat, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hands. "Val? Has Val returned?"

"Not Val, m'lord. This side of the Wall, it were."

Arya. Jon straightened. It had to be her. "Girl," screamed the raven. "*Girl, girl.*" "Ty and Dannel came on her two leagues south of Mole's Town. They were chasing down some wildlings who scampered off down the king-sroad. Brought them back as well, but then they come on the girl. She's highborn, m'lord, and she's been asking for you."

"How many with her?" He moved to his basin, splashed water on his face. Gods, but he was tired.

"None, m'lord. She come alone. Her horse was dying under her. All skin and ribs it was, lame and lathered. They cut it loose and took the girl for questioning."

A grey girl on a dying horse. Melisandre's fires had not lied, it would seem. But what had become of Mance Rayder and his spearwives? "Where is the girl now?"

"Maester Aemon's chambers, m'lord." The men of Castle Black still called it that, though by now the old maester should be warm and safe in Oldtown. "Girl was blue from the cold, shivering like all get out, so Ty wanted Clydas to have a look at her."

"That's good." Jon felt fifteen years old again. *Little sister.* He rose and donned his cloak.

The snow was still falling as he crossed the yard with Mully. A golden dawn was breaking in the east, but behind Lady Melisandre's window in the King's Tower a reddish light still flickered. *Does she never sleep? What game are you playing, priestess? Did you have some other task for Mance?*

He wanted to believe it would be Arya. He wanted to see her face again, to smile at her and muss her hair, to tell her she was safe. *She won't be safe, though. Winterfell is burned and broken and there are no more safe places.*

He could not keep her here with him, no matter how much he might want to. The Wall was no place for a woman, much less a girl of noble birth. Nor was he about to turn her over to Stannis or Melisandre. The king would only want to marry her to one of his own men, Horpe or Massey or Godry Giantslayer, and the gods alone knew what use the red woman might want to make of her.

The best solution he could see would mean dispatching her to Eastwatch and asking Cotter Pyke to put her on a ship to someplace across the sea, beyond the reach of all these quarrelsome kings. It would need to wait until the ships returned from Hardhome, to be sure. *She could return to Braavos with Tycho Nestoris. Perhaps the Iron Bank could help find some noble family to foster her.* Braavos was the nearest of the Free Cities, though ... which made it both the best and the worst choice. *Lorath or the Port of Ibben might be safer.* Wherever he might send her, though, Arya would need silver to support her, a roof above her head, someone to protect her. She was only a child.

Maester Aemon's old chambers were so warm that the sudden cloud of steam when Mully pulled the door open was enough to blind the both of them. Within, a fresh fire was burning in the hearth, the logs crackling and spitting. Jon stepped over a puddle of damp clothing. "*Snow, Snow, Snow,*" the ravens called down from above. The girl was curled up near the fire, wrapped in a black woolen cloak three times her size and fast asleep.

She looked enough like Arya to give him pause, but only for a moment. A tall, skinny, coltish girl, all legs and elbows, her brown hair was woven in a thick braid and bound about with strips of leather. She had a long face, a pointy chin, small ears.

But she was too old, far too old. *This girl is almost of an age with me.* "Has she eaten?" Jon asked Mully.

"Only bread and broth, my lord." Clydas rose from a chair. "It is best to go slow, Maester Aemon always said. Any more and she might not have been able to digest it."

Mully nodded. "Dannel had one o' Hobb's sausages and offered her a bite, but she wouldn't touch it."

Jon could not blame her for that. Hobb's sausages were made of grease and salt and things that did not bear thinking about. "Perhaps we should just let her rest."

That was when the girl sat up, clutching the cloak to her small, pale breasts. She looked confused. "Where ... ?"

"Castle Black, my lady."

"The Wall." Her eyes filled up with tears. "I'm here."

Clydas moved closer. "Poor child. How old are you?"

"Sixteen on my next nameday. And no child, but a woman grown and flowered." She yawned, covered her mouth with the cloak. One bare knee peeked through its folds. "You do not wear a chain. Are you a maester?"

“No,” said Clydas, “but I have served one.”

She does look a bit like Arya, Jon thought. Starved and skinny, but her hair’s the same color, and her eyes. “I am told you have been asking after me. I am—”

“—Jon Snow.” The girl tossed her braid back. “My house and yours are bound in blood and honor. Hear me, kinsman. My uncle Cregan is hard upon my trail. You must not let him take me back to Karhold.”

Jon was staring. *I know this girl.* There was something about her eyes, the way she held herself, the way she talked. For a moment the memory eluded him. Then it came. “Alys Karstark.”

That brought the ghost of a smile to her lips. “I was not sure you would remember. I was six the last time you saw me.”

“You came to Winterfell with your father.” *The father Robb beheaded.* “I don’t recall what for.”

She blushed. “So I could meet your brother. Oh, there was some other pretext, but that was the real reason. I was almost of an age with Robb, and my father thought we might make a match. There was a feast. I danced with you and your brother both. *He* was very courteous and said that I danced beautifully. You were sullen. My father said that was to be expected in a bastard.”

“I remember.” It was only half a lie. “You’re still a little sullen,” the girl said, “but I will forgive you that if you will save me from my uncle.”

“Your uncle ... would that be Lord Arnolf?”

“He is no lord,” Alys said scornfully. “My brother Harry is the rightful lord, and by law I am his heir. A daughter comes before an uncle. Uncle Arnolf is only castellan. He’s my great-uncle, actually, my *father’s* uncle. Cregan is his son. I suppose that makes him a cousin, but we always called him uncle. Now they mean to make me call him husband.” She made a fist. “Before the war I was betrothed to Daryn Hornwood. We were only waiting till I

flowered to be wed, but the Kingslayer killed Daryn in the Whispering Wood. My father wrote that he would find some southron lord to wed me, but he never did. Your brother Robb cut off his head for killing Lannisters.” Her mouth twisted. “I thought the whole reason they marched south was to kill some Lannisters.”

“It was ... not so simple as that. Lord Karstark slew two prisoners, my lady. Unarmed boys, squires in a cell.”

The girl did not seem surprised. “My father never bellowed like the Greatjon, but he was no less dangerous in his wrath. He is dead now too, though. So is your brother. But you and I are here, still living. Is there blood feud between us, Lord Snow?”

“When a man takes the black he puts his feuds behind him. The Night’s Watch has no quarrel with Karhold, nor with you.”

“Good. I was afraid ... I begged my father to leave one of my brothers as castellan, but none of them wished to miss the glory and ransoms to be won in the south. Now Torr and Edd are dead. Harry was a prisoner at Maidenpool when last we heard, but that was almost a year ago. He may be dead as well. I did not know where else to turn but to the last son of Eddard Stark.”

“Why not the king? Karhold declared for Stannis.”

“My *uncle* declared for Stannis, in hopes it might provoke the Lannisters to take poor Harry’s head. Should my brother die, Karhold should pass to me, but my uncles want my birthright for their own. Once Cregan gets a child by me they won’t need me anymore. He’s buried two wives already.” She rubbed away a tear angrily, the way Arya might have done it. “Will you help me?”

“Marriages and inheritance are matters for the king, my lady. I will write to Stannis on your behalf, but—”

Alys Karstark laughed, but it was the laughter of despair. “Write, but do not look for a reply. Stannis will be dead before he gets your message. My

uncle will see to that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Arnolf is rushing to Winterfell, ’tis true, but only so he might put his dagger in your king’s back. He cast his lot with Roose Bolton long ago ... for gold, the promise of a pardon, and poor Harry’s head. Lord Stannis is marching to a slaughter. So he cannot help me, and would not even if he could.” Alys knelt before him, clutching the black cloak. “You are my only hope, Lord Snow. In your father’s name, I beg you. Protect me.”