

“I’m not,” Arya said, trying to brush a tangle out of Nymeria’s matted grey fur. “Mycah and I are going to ride upstream and look for rubies at the ford.”

“Rubies,” Sansa said, lost. “What rubies?”

Arya gave her a look like she was so stupid. “Rhaegar’s rubies. This is where King Robert killed him and won the crown.”

Sansa regarded her scrawny little sister in disbelief. “You can’t look for rubies, the princess is expecting us. The queen invited us both.”

“I don’t care,” Arya said. “The wheelhouse doesn’t even have windows, you can’t see a thing.”

“What could you want to see?” Sansa said, annoyed. She had been thrilled by the invitation, and her stupid sister was going to ruin everything, just as she’d feared. “It’s all just fields and farms and holdfasts.”

“It is not,” Arya said stubbornly. “If you came with us sometimes, you’d see.”

“I hate riding,” Sansa said fervently. “All it does is get you soiled and dusty and sore.”

Arya shrugged. “Hold still,” she snapped at Nymeria, “I’m not hurting you.” Then to Sansa she said, “When we were crossing the Neck, I counted thirty-six flowers I never saw before, and Mycah showed me a lizard-lion.”

Sansa shuddered. They had been twelve days crossing the Neck, rumbling down a crooked causeway through an endless black bog, and she had hated every moment of it. The air had been damp and clammy, the causeway so narrow they could not even make proper camp at night, they had to stop right on the kingsroad. Dense thickets of halfdrowned trees pressed close around them, branches dripping with curtains of pale fungus. Huge flowers bloomed in the mud and floated on pools of stagnant water, but if you were stupid enough to leave the causeway to pluck them, there were quicksands waiting to suck you down, and snakes watching from the trees, and lizard-lions floating half-submerged in the water, like black logs with eyes and teeth.

None of which stopped Arya, of course. One day she came back grinning her horsey grin, her hair all tangled and her clothes covered in mud, clutching a raggedy bunch of purple and green flowers for Father. Sansa kept hoping he would tell Arya to behave herself and act like the highborn lady she was supposed to be, but he never did, he only hugged her and thanked her for the flowers. That just made her worse.

Then it turned out the purple flowers were called poison kisses, and Arya got a rash on her arms. Sansa would have thought that might have taught her a lesson, but Arya laughed about it, and the next day she rubbed mud all over her arms like some ignorant bog woman just because her friend Mycah told her it would stop the itching. She had bruises on her arms and shoulders too, dark purple welts and faded green-and-yellow splotches, Sansa had seen them when her sister undressed for sleep. How she had gotten those only the seven gods knew.

Arya was still going on, brushing out Nymeria’s tangles and chattering about things she’d seen on the trek south. “Last week we found this haunted watchtower, and the day before we chased a herd of wild horses. You should have seen them run when they caught a scent of Nymeria.” The wolf wriggled in her grasp and Arya scolded her. “Stop that, I have to do the other side, you’re all muddy.”