

wished Jon were here right now. He'd believe her about the dungeons and the fat man with the forked beard and the wizard in the steel cap.

"My daughter often forgets her courtesies," Eddard Stark said with a faint smile that softened his words. "I beg your forgiveness, Yoren. Did my brother Benjen send you?"

"No one sent me, m'lord, saving old Mormont. I'm here to find men for the Wall, and when Robert next holds court, I'll bend the knee and cry our need, see if the king and his Hand have some scum in the dungeons they'd be well rid of. You might say as Benjen Stark is why we're talking, though. His blood ran black. Made him my brother as much as yours. It's for his sake I'm come. Rode hard, I did, near killed my horse the way I drove her, but I left the others well behind."

"The others?"

Yoren spat. "Sellswords and freeriders and like trash. That inn was full o' them, and I saw them take the scent. The scent of blood or the scent of gold, they smell the same in the end. Not all o' them made for King's Landing, either. Some went galloping for Casterly Rock, and the Rock lies closer. Lord Tywin will have gotten the word by now, you can count on it."

Father frowned. "What word is this?"

Yoren eyed Arya. "One best spoken in private, m'lord, begging your pardons."

"As you say. Desmond, see my daughter to her chambers." He kissed her on the brow. "We'll finish our talk on the morrow."

Arya stood rooted to the spot. "Nothing bad's happened to Jon, has it?" she asked Yoren. "Or Uncle Benjen?"

"Well, as to Stark, I can't say. The Snow boy was well enough when I left the Wall. It's not them as concerns me."

Desmond took her hand. "Come along, milady. You heard your lord father."

Arya had no choice but to go with him, wishing it had been Fat Tom. With Tom, she might have been able to linger at the door on some excuse and hear what Yoren was saying, but Desmond was too single-minded to trick. "How many guards does my father have?" she asked him as they descended to her bedchamber.

"Here at King's Landing? Fifty."

"You wouldn't let anyone kill him, would you?" she asked.

Desmond laughed. "No fear on that count, little lady. Lord Eddard's guarded night and day. He'll come to no harm."

"The Lannisters have more than fifty men," Arya pointed out.

"So they do, but every northerner is worth ten of these southron swords, so you can sleep easy."

"What if a wizard was sent to kill him?"

"Well, as to that," Desmond replied, drawing his longsword, "wizards die the same as other men, once you cut their heads off."