

“Dark wings, dark words,” Ned murmured. It was a proverb Old Nan had taught him as a boy.

“So the fishwives say,” Grand Maester Pycelle agreed, “but we know it is not always so. When Maester Luwin’s bird brought the word about your Bran, the message lifted every true heart in the castle, did it not?”

“As you say, Maester.”

“The gods are merciful.” Pycelle bowed his head. “Come to me as often as you like, Lord Eddard. I am here to serve.”

Yes, Ned thought as the door swung shut, but whom?

On the way back to his chambers, he came upon his daughter Arya on the winding steps of the Tower of the Hand, windmilling her arms as she struggled to balance on one leg. The rough stone had scuffed her bare feet. Ned stopped and looked at her. “Arya, what are you doing?”

“Syrio says a water dancer can stand on one toe for hours.” Her hands flailed at the air to steady herself.

Ned had to smile. “Which toe?” he teased.

“Any toe,” Arya said, exasperated with the question. She hopped from her right leg to her left, swaying dangerously before she regained her balance.

“Must you do your standing here?” he asked. “It’s a long hard fall down these steps.”

“Syrio says a water dancer never falls.” She lowered her leg to stand on two feet. “Father, will Bran come and live with us now?”

“Not for a long time, sweet one,” he told her. “He needs to win his strength back.”

Arya bit her lip. “What will Bran do when he’s of age?”

Ned knelt beside her. “He has years to find that answer, Arya. For now, it is enough to know that he will live.” The night the bird had come from Winterfell, Eddard Stark had taken the girls to the castle godswood, an acre of elm and alder and black cottonwood overlooking the river. The heart tree there was a great oak, its ancient limbs overgrown with smokeberry vines; they knelt before it to offer their thanksgiving, as if it had been a weirwood. Sansa drifted to sleep as the moon rose, Arya several hours later, curling up in the grass under Ned’s cloak. All through the dark hours he kept his vigil alone. When dawn broke over the city, the dark red blooms of dragon’s breath surrounded the girls where they lay. “I dreamed of Bran,” Sansa had whispered to him. “I saw him smiling.”

“He was going to be a knight,” Arya was saying now. “A knight of the Kingsguard. Can he still be a knight?”

“No,” Ned said. He saw no use in lying to her. “Yet someday he may be the lord of a great holdfast and sit on the king’s council. He might raise castles like Brandon the Builder, or sail a ship across the Sunset Sea, or enter your mother’s Faith and become the High Septon.” But he will never run beside his wolf again, he thought with a sadness too deep for words, or lie with a woman, or hold his own son in his arms.

Arya cocked her head to one side. “Can I be a king’s councillor and build castles and become the High Septon?”