

“It is being common-born that is dangerous, when the great lords play their game of thrones.”

—Septon Meribald (*Feast for Crows*, p. 549)

**ONE OF THE GROOMS WHO CAME FORWARD FOR THE MOUNTS OF THE ROYAL FAMILY
UPON THEIR ARRIVAL AT WINTERFELL (*Game of Thrones*, p. 33)**

Life was good at Winterfell before the War of the Five Kings. When the royal family first arrived at Winterfell, everyone was proud to be serving the most important people in the kingdom. But as soon as they got there, we soon learned that the glamorous world of the royals often brought with it heartache and tragedy.

The day they arrived was an omen of things to come. First, the king’s wheelhouse was too wide to pass through the castle gate. In most circumstances Lord Eddard would have allowed the wheelhouse to remain outside the castle gates, but this was an ornate affair, done up in oiled oak and gilded metal—much too expensive a target to remain outside the gates. The head groomsman suggested we could place a guard outside the walls, but Lord Eddard saw that as a waste of resources, and so as soon as we had taken the royal mounts to the stable, it was up to us “make it fit.” This was no easy task. First we rounded up two groomsmen and two stable boys—including my young son—to try to tip the wheelhouse to one side and roll it in on two wheels. When this didn’t work, the head groomsmen ordered the boys to slip beneath the wheelhouse and shove it as we pulled. I thought this was too dangerous a task for a boy and I said so. More than once I’ve seen some hopeless mother have to bury their child because their Lord wanted some dangerous task done in a tight corner. At my previous place of employ I was

even able to roust up a few of the lads to put together a simple piece of paper listing our requests to the lord. Once we were found out, the scribe who helped us write and my mate who talked him into it both had their hands chopped off. And now you have me here. That was the last of my organizing. I would have given anything to have had the courage to say no, but I was desperate to make this job work. Sally told me after the last time I needed to stop aggravating lords with my high talk and I told her I would. I regretted it the instant the wheelhouse slipped on the rock and pinned my son's leg beneath one of its great oaken wheels. By the time we shifted the weight off of him, it was obvious he would never be able to use the leg again.

Now I have to live with my choice to let my boy go underneath that carriage. If this were a just world, Lords would not be able to put our children into those types of positions. Or, at least, parents could feel free to say if they object without fear of losing their own jobs. My boy is a bright one, too. I always said if he'd grown up under a maester's care, he'd be able to rule the seven kingdoms. But we now with taking care of him we likely won't have enough money to apprentice him to any maester. Is it too much to ask that if our children have to work, that they never be put in those kinds of dangers? Maester Luwin was able to fashion braces for my boy so he could get around with a cane, and Lord Eddard gave the family a few silver coins when he came and visited him for a few minutes the next morning, so that was something.

THE SERVING GIRL LURCHED INTO BY JON SNOW DURING KING ROBERT'S FEAST, SENDING A FLAGON OF SPICED WINE CRASHING TO THE FLOOR (*GoT*, p. 46)

I had just gotten back to work earlier that week. After having Molly, the kitchen steward only gave me a week to get back to work and I couldn't afford to lose this job after Jack moved to King's Landing to "seek his fortunes." He promised to send for us but I think it's more likely he'll seek his fortune in whores and drink our savings away. Mom and Dad let me move back in, but Mom is sick and Dad has been looking at Peg like he used to look at me and Sarah. That's why I got out of there in the first place. Jack was no prize, but he was sweet, and willing. At first. I didn't need any of this. I needed this job.

When the feast first began, we thought we'd be able to handle it, no problem. Sure, most of us had never served a king before, but they were just human beings with human appetites, right? Wrong. Royal folk do not have human appetites. First off, they order about five times the amount of your regular guest because they like variety, you know? But half the time they don't eat what's in front of them, they only pick off the best pieces and then send it back to the kitchen—that's if their dogs and horses have eaten; if they haven't, half the time they send the leavings to their royal beasts. Second, everything has to be *juuuust* right. Kitchen prep takes forever. And we're standing around waiting to serve these "nobles." Most feast nights, I can scrape enough together to put out a nice late evening snack for Peg and Daniel. Tonight I'd be able to feed them for days. But that's before the little lord drunk himself into a clumsy stupor.

First off, their hounds were everywhere. Royals love feeding their beasts at table, and so then do all of their lords, and so do then all of their knights. The dogs were traipsing under and through tables following us around and getting in our way. And plus the hunting dogs were

shitting and eating their own shit and dragging all manner of things in from outside. And guess who had to clean it up? That's right, me; because one of the cleaning girls was sick and my seniority restarted when I came back from my "pregnancy leave." Even though I had been working there for seven years. The kitchen steward put this new little rule in right after I had Daniel because I wouldn't sleep with him. It wasn't right, I tell you. If the gods bless us with a child I shouldn't be punished for it when I come back to work. I had told my friend Lucy that if we all just stood up to him, together, he couldn't treat us this way. But she had a family to look after too, so nothing came of it. He knew I was engaged while Jack was saving to pay for a proper wedding but he wouldn't let it go. Some girls don't have morals, but I have morals.

So the dogs were everywhere and I had been mulling spiced wine for four hours. My clothes, my hair, everything smelled liked cinnamon apples and cloves. The kitchen steward had been particularly hard on me today, I could tell he didn't want to bring me back after Molly but Lady Catelyn made him swear he wouldn't fire women for getting pregnant, even if they're not married. I shouldn't have done any more than I was assigned to do. But Beth had gotten behind on her tables and I volunteered to help her out serving down in the benches even though I was assigned to the royal family—even though the steward had demoted me to junior status he still needed his best servers for the king. I knew every outcropping, every low-hanging ledge, every slippery spot. But I did not know that the young lord could not walk in a straight line, and so when he fell into me it sent a flagon of spiced wine to the floor, and almost sent a tray full of glasses. I got it cleaned up as soon as I could, but for some reason that was the last straw. The steward hung onto it for a few days but as soon as Lady Catelyn's son fell and got hurt he finally saw his chance. The steward let me go before the end of the day. No final check, no "Thank you

for your service," nothing. If I had only seen it coming I would have been able to save up a bit for my time of unemployment. I had debts to pay that were due *next week*.

Now I don't know what I'm going to do. No matter what my mother says, I'm more of a burden to them than a help if I'm not working. Maybe I should go and seek my fortunes, too. Sarah said she and Paul would take Peg and Daniel in if anything should happen to me. But could I put Molly on them too? No, there has to be another way. I have to find a way. I could make a fortune in King's Landing, though.

**THE MAN WHO MISSED A STEP WHILE FIGHTING OVER A WOMAN DURING KHAL DROGO'S
WEDDING FEAST (*GoT*, p. 85)**

It is not as if I haven't worked hard to become a great warrior. I work as hard as any man, harder than most. But try as I might, some of the more difficult Dothraki maneuvers have never been easy for me. I'm too old to try and be dishonest about it at this point. I have to accept that the Great Stallion only wanted me to have a certain amount of warrior's skill. It is a difficult thing for a Dothraki to admit, but I believe he is happier once he does. I am far more ferocious than 90% of the earth-tenders and merchants we encounter, so I should one day be more than able to provide a fertile life for my mate and my children.

I had known Maghra since childhood but that never meant anything. The only thing that ever means anything in our culture is who you can defeat in battle. There are many days when I wish it were not so. That is one of the reasons I was excited about the Khal's marriage to this

foreign wench, the Targaryen. I am an engineer. The finest in all the khalasars. I have constructed bridges, siege engines, battering rams, whatever my khal has desired. And I have been told time and again that no one's structures are as durable or as stable. Would that these were skills admired among the Dothraki. I would be a great man, rather than just an above-average man, which is how I am regarded, in all accuracy. But I would thrive in the Targaryen's Seven Kingdoms. A builder with my skills could construct magnificent carriages for dozens of slaves, wives, and babes; I could build a bridge to ford the mightiest of rivers. All I need is a little support. I have spoken to the Khal about this matter on a few occasions, but he is careful to watch how he regards my contributions, especially in front of his bloodriders. It is not a good idea for any of the khal's bloodriders to see you as a threat to their status.

For Maghra, though, it never seemed to matter. She always sat next to me or near me during feasts and ritual ceremonies. It was our custom to look at each other and imitate the faces of the Khal when he tried to inspire us. I have not met many women like her. Most women seemed to derive so much pride from how awash in blood their men were. Some women openly fought other women over the right to mate with a particularly fearsome warrior, even if the women fighting were themselves of exceptional quality.

Maghra seemed to favor my company though, despite the fact that I have had to cut my braid three times since she's known me. My rival for her affections has always been Shroggo. Although other men came and went, Shroggo and I have been consistent rivals for Maghra's attention since our teenage years. He is a shallow, willfully ignorant man. But Shroggo has had far more success in battle than I have, and Maghra's parents favor that match much more than they favor her with me. And this despite the fact that Shroggo routinely slept with slave

concubines and gave no indication that he would end this practice if he married Maghra. I have resolved to mate only with my wife.

I had every indication that Maghra would be receptive to a coupling, but I knew I needed one victory; one clear spoil of war to give her the excuse to defy her parents' reservations. The night arrived one full moon, during an attack on a settlement outside of Myr. I was magnificent that night. After taking the spoils from the villagers I killed, one of whom was very wealthy, I returned to camp with one of the larger hauls. I proposed to Maghra that night and she accepted. When her father objected, I challenged him—or a champion—to a rites-claim battle. He declared himself too old, however, and declined to name any of his sons or anyone else a champion. And so my claim on Maghra held. I know that upset Shroggo greatly. I knew he wanted Maghra's father to name him champion—Maghra's father, however, knew that to do so would have incurred the wrath of his daughter.

Every time Shroggo saw Maghra and I together, he began to publicly disrespect our intentions to be together. We had never been the best of friends, but we had conducted many hunts in the same age-set, and he had always been supportive of my attempts to improve as a warrior. Am I to challenge someone to combat who has helped so much in my development? When I confided in the Khal the fear that my honor might be threatened, he suggested I challenge Shroggo to one-on-one combat and let the Great Stallion settle it.

“If she is meant to be for you, the Great Stallion will split Shroggo's neck from ear to ear for you.”

That was the Khal's way. That was how he got to be Khal. But I wanted a better way. And I was not the only one who felt this way. More than once while riding across the *vaes* I

have heard talk amongst warriors of the tyranny of the bloodriders and their acolytes. It was impossible for every man to have a braid down to his backside, they claimed. But you would not hear talk like this in the Great Hall or at other large gatherings, only in small pockets and in hushed tones. But if someone were to one day unify these voices, to give power to this more progressive mood, it would be a new day for the Dothraki.

I wanted to be sure that Shroggo actually meant to dishonor me. And it would be unseemly for me to appoint someone to defend Maghra's honor for me. The only thing I could hope for is that Shroggo would cease this disrespectful behavior before Maghra or someone else from the khalasar began to question my honor.

Once word got out that the Khal was going to marry the Targaryen, Shroggo's torment abated somewhat. Perhaps I should have anticipated why. For generations, weddings have been occasions to settle romantic rivalries. You get said what you need to be said in front of the whole khalasar and everyone is expected to accept whatever order comes out of it. Couples reaffirm their coupling. Longtime admirers take the opportunity to mount their objects of affection. I suppose I should have suspected Shroggo would wait for some point in the ceremony to stake his claim, but when he did I had been staring at the Targaryen girl, wondering what great machines I would build for her. Suddenly I heard a rush from the crowd. Shroggo had grabbed Maghra and was attempting to mount her. The rush of the crowd was for my benefit, of course. Ever since I had expressed my intent to marry Maghra, a great many people had seen us together. There was no backing down. If I didn't challenge Shroggo now, I would be telling the entire khalasar that she was his woman.

So I leapt into action. My arakh was nearby and neatly sharpened. I charged the both of them and kicked him away before he had a chance to get his cock out. Maghra looked at me thankfully, but also with a little concern.

“Leap about and shriek wildly. If he means no harm he can back away if he sees that you are in bloodlust for me.”

She rolled to the side and I did as she asked. Shroggo had only seconds before he could relent and save face. If he took too long to consider, he would have to attack me anyway. At any rate, I didn't see relenting as a real possibility. I had finally seen what Shroggo was doing. He couldn't ever win Maghra's heart from me, so he was eliminating me from the equation. I understood. Respected it, in a way. His patience all these weeks had been remarkable.

Shroggo came rushing at me with his two blue-steel arakhs. Again, I had never quite perfected the two-handed arakh technique, but I had defeated with one arakh many men who had not quite mastered the two-handed technique. Unfortunately Shroggo had. I was in distress almost immediately. I realized that if this was a drawn-out affair, Shroggo would eventually wear me down with superior technique. I reasoned that my only chance was to perform an aggressive move right away, perhaps getting him off-balance. I immediately stepped forth, so I could pull back hard with my arakh, but then I wondered if he would anticipate my—ah, too late. I misstepped and lost my balance. I might have successfully made my move if I hadn't hesitated, but once Shroggo got over the initial shock, he saw my strategy and ducked under whatever strike I would have made. As he stepped past me, I felt his blade slide across my waist. It initially felt like he hadn't penetrated very deeply. I looked down expecting to see a thin line of red, but instead saw my own guts falling out. Ah, that's why the

pain was not so sharp and piercing—Shroggo had sharpened and oiled his blades to a remarkably fine point. I see now that he did not desire to see me suffer. Perhaps he saw me as a worthy rival or perhaps the months of us training together gave him some respect for me. At any rate, I would have to thank him when we met again in the Night Lands.

Maghra rushed over to me and, when Shroggo tried to mount her, she pushed him away. He could have persisted and, eventually, she would have let him, but instead he grabbed the nearest Dothraki wench stirred up by bloodlust and had his way with *her*, consummating his kill. His willingness to forego coupling with Shroggo over my dead body was perhaps another concession he was making to me in my last seconds. As the last ounces of life leaked out of me, I kept thinking about the Targaryen queen, and the world I maybe should have been born in. The Khal should have been able to protect me and not have it mean that he was weak. It was unjust. I could tell my death troubled him, even though he tried not to betray it. I longed for a world where those with skill and virtue could be valued, rather than the strongest always taking what they wanted. To end like this? It seemed . . . pointless, somehow.

Bah! My time is at an end.

MYCAH (p. 125)

I know I'm just the son of a butcher. I mean, I *know* it. Being a butcher's son is one of those things where everybody feels like it's their job to tell you what you are, and that you don't have much of a chance to be anything else.

“Don’t get such ideas into your head, butcher’s boy.”

“What are you gonna do, complain to the king? The son of a butcher?”

And on and on and on it went. I love my dad, but I wonder if he knew the hell he was cursing his children to by having us. Of course he did, though. He was a butcher’s boy himself. He coulda probably wrote a book on it. If he’d have learned to read.

Being a butcher’s son is one of those things where people don’t expect you to have dreams. They expect you to be sensible about your future. And I wouldn’t say I’m not sensible, it’s just that something tells me I was meant for something more. Or, at least, something else. Just because I smelled like a slaughtering block don’t mean that’s what I’m made of.

That’s why I liked spending time with Arya. She was the only person I knew who didn’t think I was “just” a butcher’s boy—and she a high-born lady at that. Not that she acted very high-born. But of all the people I’d known, the only person who thought I could become something more than a butcher was one of the Starks of Winterfell! That had to mean something, didn’t it? If someone who is high-born sees something in you that no one else sees? Everyone’s heard of hedge knights who won some tournament and was taken on by the leader of a great house. And most hedge knights were as low-born as anybody. So why not me? I had always had the feeling that I was meant for more than Winterfell. The walls of the castle always felt small to me. I wanted to see what was out there. To seek my fortune.

Arya was the same way. When my dad told me we were going along with Lord Stark’s household to King’s Landing, I knew right away we were up for adventure. Finally we’d be able to see all the people and places we’d heard about. And Arya had a proper education about all of it. Every time we played together she had some story about some great knight. Arya was the

best friend I ever had. Sometimes I wondered if perhaps this could be the beginning of a lifelong friendship, me serving duty-bound as her personal sword; travelling the land and ridding her of her enemies. But I needed some training first. I knew that much at least.

We'd lived near Deepwood Motte before we moved to Winterfell, so when we finally got to the Neck, I showed Arya some of the creatures I remember from when I was growing up. I showed her at least ten different kinds of frogs and we even saw a lizard-lion, though I made sure to keep her at a safe distance. No filthy creature was going to harm my lady before I could even swear my allegiance to her. Maybe that was something I would do when we got back to Winterfell. After a few years in King's Landing, I'd have all the training I'd need to make myself a proper squire. Squires aren't supposed to go into the service of high-borns, but Arya and I have never done things the "proper" way. I think she'll be glad to take me on as her sword. She'll have plenty of knights once she's married off to some high lord, but you can never have too many people watching your back in this world. Especially people that have been with you since the beginning.

It was a grand time crossing the Neck. Arya said she'd never seen so many different types of new flowers than she did in Deepwood Motte. My dad always told me the more water a place has, the more different types of plants and animals it had. I didn't understand why, but it made sense to me, so I passed that piece of information onto my lady.

Last week, while coming over a ridge, I spied a herd of wild horses grazing in a valley. I signaled to Arya to step lightly, so by the time she made it up to the top she was quiet as a mouse. I would never forget that moment. It was like watching any old family have dinner. We could see the ponies fighting each other for their mother's attention, the young stallions

jumping and prancing about to see which fillies would notice. The moment didn't last long, though. Nymeria had been hunting a ways behind us, but when she finally caught our scent, the stallions caught hers. In an instant they were off. I looked at Arya, she looked at me, and she was off in a flash.

“Come on!”

Nymeria chased the herd, Arya chased Nymeria, and I chased Arya. Soon enough, Nymeria broke off the chase to frolic in a river. After another five minutes or so, I told Arya we should probably get headed back. Arya needed protecting now, whether she knew it or not. In a way, I was already her liege knight, just without the knight part.

The next day, Arya found an old abandoned watchtower that looked like it was about to fall over. On the ride up to it, I saw the old bones of two soldiers who looked like they'd been the cause of each other's end. My dad always told me to stay away from the places where people haven't been given a proper burial. He says their souls become connected to that place. It made sense to me. I passed this bit of information onto my lady Arya, but she said I was being supersuspicious, or some word which was supposed to mean that I was scared. So when she motioned me to come on, I went on.

The inside of the watchtower seemed harmless enough, but I was a bit worried about what could happen to us. The walls were rotted enough for us to ride in with our horses, but now Arya wanted to unhorse and try to climb up to the watch. I thought this was a poor idea and told Arya, but she wouldn't hear of it. So I volunteered to lead. At least maybe that way if some old rotting boards gave away, she'd have time to jump clear. As we started up, I could feel Arya's hand on my shirt. That made me feel a little better. After we'd gotten about halfway up, I

could tell something was wrong. Arya's hand brushed past my skin and it was . . . cold. I almost didn't look back.

I wish I hadn't. Where Arya was, there was another little girl. She had Arya's face, but she wasn't Arya. She was dressed like a beggar and, in place of her eyes, there was *nothing*. Just two empty black pits.

"Arya!"

In response I heard a scream a few steps back down. Without thinking, I flew past beggar Arya and saw the real Arya bolting down the stairs. I don't even remember us getting on our horses. We must have been a mile away before I realized we were going in the wrong direction.

"Arya, wait, the caravan is back there!"

"Are you the real Mycah?"

"What?"

"Back at the watchtower. I saw you but you were different. You were hurt . . . terribly. You shouldn't have been alive."

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

She reached over and checked underneath my shrift and examined my shoulder, for some reason.

"Nothing. It was . . . it was so real. Why did you scream my name?"

"I saw . . . I saw another Arya as well."

“Was I injured?”

“No. No, you were fine. Let’s take the long way back to the caravan. I want to put as much distance as possible between us and that watchtower.”

“Agreed.”

When the caravan reached the Trident a few weeks later, I ast Arya if she’d want to search for some of Rhaegar’s famous rubies. Everybody knew about Rhaegar’s rubies. While my mom was pregnant with me, my dad had gone to the Trident himself to see what treasures he could find. He told me there were so many thieves and cutthroats around when he arrived, however, he figured he’d be best off going back home and taking care of his wife. Anything of value would have been found long ago, he said. He was usually right about stuff like that, but I had to find out for myself. We set out as soon as she had finished combing out Nymeria’s hair. When we got to the Ford, I set off to claiming my fortune.

Except, there was not much to be had. Weeds and thickets had grown over the battle site and there was no way to for certain tell where Rhaegar fell. We dismounted and began our search, but prospecting is tired, thirsty work. After an hour or so, we took a break and decided to do some sword training. I was better than Arya at that point but she could definitely cause major damage if one wasn’t paying attention. She had been able to learn and pass on some basics by watching her brothers, and I had taken what I’d learned from her and come up with a few moves that I had gotten pretty good at. And then I heard a laugh, and my blood turned like ice.

I knew right away who it was. I had heard that same laugh while the prince was training with the Stark brothers back at Winterfell. It was a sort of high-pitched cackle that seemed to

scream out how much better than everybody he was. I straightaway went over all the things my dad had told me about acting around royalty. I was to be obliging in all things, but not simple, as royals did not have patience with simpletons. I was to give clear answers, but *never* say too much unless it was something I was sure they'd want to hear. The prince was with Sansa Stark. The way Sansa usually looked at me made me feel three feet tall, and I was taller than her. Arya screamed at her to leave, but the prince kept his eye on me.

“And who are you, boy?”

I told him, and hoped he'd get bored and go away. He didn't though. The only thing to make him happy would be to show him I was scared. If I just acted frightened, that would satisfy him and he would go away. But it wasn't that easy. He asked me to pick up the stick I had been using to spar with Arya, but I knew that was a shit idea. “Never *ever* pick up arms against a royal,” my dad had told me. “You can get hanged for just thinking it.”

I thought that was probably not possible, but my dad was usually right about things like that. I tried to tell the prince that Arya was fine with us sparring, but he didn't seem interested. So I had three choices: Either I pick up the stick and spar with him proper, which would probably get me killed; I could spar with him and let him win, which would probably get me killed; or I could do nothing and keep hoping he'll get bored. As he took out his sword, I considered running, but to where? Sooner or later I'd have to go back to the caravan. So I stood there. I stood there as he came right up to me, stinking of wine. My dad always told me that drunkards were unpredictable, but what about royal drunkards? Would they be more sensible than low-born drunkards? He put his sword up against my cheek, and I'm not sure if he meant to but he actually cut my face before Arya jumped in. My fearsome lady. She did what I could

never do. She picked up my stick and gave the prince a crack on the head. Waiting for the prince to get bored doesn't seem to have worked. So I ran.

The cut, I knew, made a difference. If I could get back to my dad and explain what happened, he might be able to explain to Lord Eddard what happened and I could show him the cut to prove that I hadn't done the Prince any harm. I started to cry. It wasn't because of the pain, it was because I realized then how much I hated how much power the royals have over us. I hated the fact that they could just humiliate me in front of my lady because they think it's funny. What gave *him* the right? I had done nothing, *nothing*, dishonorable, but I was the one what got punished; and not properly punished by my dad or Lord Stark or someone with the wisdom of years, but by a snooty prince shorter than me. It just don't seem right when you really figure it. Then I heard the scream. The prince's scream. I doubled back to see Nymeria killing the Prince! He must have raised his hand against Arya when she hit him and now he was screaming at her wolf to get off him. I ran off again, and this time I didn't come back. I knew what this meant. The death of a prince? Even if I made it back to my dad, I've heard of royals killing off whole families for less. I couldn't go home. This could mean the death of them all. Maybe if I got lost for a few weeks. They'd look for me for a while, but once they'd figured I'd gone I'd have a chance if I could get Arya to put me under her protection. She might be able to speak for me to let me go back to my family.

As it got darker, I settled on my plan. But the next day, I found Arya.

"What are you doing here?"

"Mycah, I'm so happy to see you. I was afraid you'd run off."

“It’s good to see you too, Arya, but what are you doing here? Why aren’t you with your Lord Father?”

“I can’t go back to those people. That Joffrey is a monster, but my father’s going to kill me for what I did.”

“He’s not going to kill you. He loves you.”

“You don’t know my father. He went over and over about how to conduct yourself before a prince, and I ignored everything he said. He already tells me I need to be more respectful of rules, what do you think he’s going to say now?”

“It’s true, you probably will get into trouble, but what were you supposed to do? That prince was about to poke my eye out. And isn’t it the job of lords to protect their commonfolk?”

“It is.”

“So that’s what you were doing, just like Lord Eddard woulda done. Sure, it’s against a prince, but the idea is the same. No lord is supposed to sit back and let their commonfolk be hurt.”

“That’s true.”

“You were just doing your duty as a lady of Winterfell.”

“I never thought about it like that.”

“Us commonfolk need protecting sometimes. We shouldn’t need it, but we do. I know King’s Landing’s got them Gold Cloaks, but everywhere else we just gotta hope our lord takes his duty serious.”

“I think most lords do the best they can, Mycah.”

“You wouldn’t think that if you spent a little time in my shoes, Arya. It’s like there’s laws for nobles, and then there’s whole other laws for us smallfolk.”

“Well, there’s not much we can do about it.”

“You could do something about it, Arya. You could stand up for what’s right once you’re Lady of Winterfell.”

“Maybe, someday.”

“Anyways, you better get back to your dad.”

“Alright. But not right away.”

It took me three days to get her to finally let herself get caught, but if you want to know the truth that was the best three days of my life. We hunted, we fished, we explored. We didn’t spar, though—I wasn’t really in the mood anymore after that business with the prince. In fact, I had been thinking a bit more about what I really wanted to with my life. When the prince had that sword to my eye, I saw that playing at arms was a serious, painful business. Was I really ready to give my life up to it? I rather enjoyed butchering, actually, learning about the different parts of a cow’s body. Would it be so bad?

I followed Arya back towards the castle where they had been staying since she ran off, but stayed far away enough so that no one could see me. At least I thought I had. While I was looking at the castle, a knight come running up behind me. I couldn’t see him in the moonlight at first, but once he got a few gallops from me I could see it was the prince’s knight, the one they called the Hound. He wasn’t likely to take me alive. I guess I’d known that from the first day, really. Arya, protect *me*? Against the queen?

I picked up a stick and tried to figure out a good way to use it. Maybe by throwing it at the horse's legs, I could trip him up, and get the jump on the old knight. That's a trick of old Barristan Selmy, my favorite knight. But a few feet from me, the Hound stopped his horse and dismounted. I charged. I whacked him once! twice! but he caught the third one with his sword, and kicked me down. I charged again, stabbing, thrusting, until I looked up and saw him . . . smiling.

"Alright, I'll give you one shot. Here's my sword. If you can do it, I'll let you live."

He handed me his sword. I lifted it, heavy in my hands. I raised it to strike—

And I ran. As fast I could. Maybe his little game gave me just enough time to get to the treeline. It's just a few feet away. Behind me, I could hear his horse's footsteps. But I was almost there, now. I heard the destrier's steps speed up, though. This ain't right at all. I didn't do nothing dishonorable. I don't mind being a butcher, really. If he could only hear my side of the sto—

ONE OF THE COMMONS PUNCHING AND CLAWING OVER THE GOLD ANTLER THE HOUND

TOSSED INTO THE CROWD AT THE HAND'S TOURNEY (*GoT*, p. 248)

Just a little bit of gold. That's all it was, really. So small, so easily misplaced. But that little bit of gold could feed my family for a week. Literally. One day I sat down and did the math. I'd been working as an accountant for the fourth-best armorer in the city for six years, so I've seen all manner of armor design come in for commission. One day I sat right down and did the

math. The full suit of armor Renly Baratheon wore to the Hand's tourney cost a total ten gold coins. The suit itself cost four, but the helm with the gold antlers cost the remaining six. The man actually paid more on this little decoration than he did on the whole rest of the suit! I knew how valuable that antler was. I couldn't just let it get away. Especially not since I got ill. I don't even know what happened to me. One day I just couldn't get enough water to drink. I drank and drank and couldn't quench my thirst. Now, I can't go a day without eating something sweet. Fruits, candies, whatever. If I don't get enough, I get blackouts and spells. I told Lorry I could still do my job, but after a couple of spells he got someone else to do his numbers.

Just a little bit of gold. That would be enough to pay a doctor to get some proper care. My mates told me they had medicine for my affliction, but it was a pretty penny. I don't understand how a man could be so hard. Everyone gets sick sometime, don't they? Rich man or poor man? Warrior or smith? I couldn't understand what could drive a man to turn his back on his fellow tradesman when he knows very well that if it were not for the blessing of the Seven he could be in this same spot? Lorry didn't build that armory, he inherited it from his grandfather. What makes him deserve to live a long healthy life and I have to waste away like some animal? No one in my family has ever held such an important position as an accountant. And I spent enough nights in the barn studying because I knew this was my only chance at living a life where I wasn't shoveling shit. And then just because I fall a little under the weather and miss two deadlines, you're going to let me go? Just like that? Without even a thank-you-for-your-service, here's-a-few-silver-stags-to-tide you over? What did they think people did when they lost their jobs? I had bills to pay *now*. And Prudence was not a patient woman. She never was. She believed she took a step down to marry me and if too much longer goes by where I

can't put food on the table . . . I don't even want to think what she would do. I know what she would do. She'll have to make a sensible decision for her and the kids. Both the baker and our landlord have been very clear about her options.

Just a tiny little stinking piece of filthy gold. A worthless piece of metal. What made gold so special, and not iron or tin? Is it just because it's pretty? Because it looks good on the necks of wives and girlfriends? Or is it just an agreement some high lords made with each other and ever since then it's been so? I did the math one day. One of Sir Renly's suits of armor would feed eight families for a week and three families for a month. If the high lords of Westeros were to donate just one of their garish suits of armor—not the functional ones, mind you, we need those—I'm talking about the outlandish ones, with colored steel that shone in the right light, and pearl-enameled buckles in the shape of an octopus or a man pissing or some other ridiculous brand, strewn with white-silver studs cascading over flowing ruby *Jesus!* Had any of them ever thought for one second how much the money it takes to make one of those suits would help the people the armor is supposed to protect? It would be one thing if Lorry spread the wealth by hiring more workers or giving more local contracts, but he doesn't. He wants to be a noble someday, so he spends his wealth buying political favors and hoarding the rest.

Just a filthy stinking piece of yellow. It wasn't real, like flesh or bone, or people, something that mattered. People killed each other every day over this filthy piece of metal that some high lords agreed had *value*. And don't think for a moment other people didn't see how unfair the whole rotten deal is. When I shared my numbers with my mates, Charlie, Lord Tyrell's blacksmith, had a scribe write them up proper and put them on a "politely worded request" he phrased it, that we could start a program, like, see? Me and Reginald thought it up. We figured

that if every high lord or other was to donate one of those ridiculous suits of armor to fund a program to take care of people when they was sick, we could get the word out that that lord was the type of bastard you could throw your support behind. The power of the people has always been what's shaped King's Landing, we knew. Even when high lords think they're controlling us, it's the people on the street that actually gets things done; and we got our own rules, and our own justice. They can hurt our bodies but they can never kill our *will*; the will of the people. So we figured if we could get a whole district to back this lord or the other, well that had to be worth more than whatever they got from taking their pieces of shit armor out three times a year and parading them in front of their silly bitches and then putting them back in storage to rust. Charlie always said Tyrell was a smart fellow; he'd get it wouldn't he? He got it, alright. Charlie, that is. Two weeks after we submitted the "politely worded request," Charlie was accused of stealing from the Tyrells' kitchen. He was hanged before his forge could cool off. That was the end of my organizing days.

Just a little tiny piece of golden filth. There's only one person between me and the antler, an old crone that sells me apples. She's closer, but I'm faster. Just as her hand closed in on it, I came hard into her and body-slammed her from the side. She got the antler, though, so I punched her in the jaw once, twice, until she kneed me in the groin, and slipped out from under me. I reached back to grab her hair, but by then someone else had clawed the antler out of her hand, a big bloke with a scar across his eye. I figured I wouldn't push it. I had snatched the old crone's purse.

MORREC (b. 279 - d. 301)

Diversify.

That's what my pop was always telling me.

Diversify.

It's the only way to get over in this rat-piss world, is what he'd usually follow it up with. He should know. My family's been in service for generations. My pop, he was one of the senior grooms for Lord Tywin Lannister. I was little so I don't remember that time very well except that we lived in a big house and had sweets once a week. Those times didn't last, though. After Robert's Rebellion, dozens of groomsmen moved into Lannisport, refugees from all the fighting. Before long, there were ten men younger than him that could do his job for half the pay. But once they let him go, Pop didn't have anything to fall back on. He'd never learned another trade so, when the next call for a bunch of soldiers came out, he took it.

"Never give your life fighting for some high lord's honor," he'd always said to me, real quiet like, even when no one else was around. "If you find one that would do the same for you, you serve him till the end of your days."

Well, I knew what Pop meant even then—it was impossible. You would never find a high lord who would give his life for a common born because it was impossible for high lords to believe that any part of your life could be superior than any part of theirs. My pop laid it out for me one day: "From the times they's just babies, high lords are taught to believe that their concerns are supreme. It's what lets them believe they're special. So they don't think nothing of

lopping off a few heads or taking a few of our women as long as it'll bring them a bit of pleasure.”

The night before my pop's first military assignment, I'd never seen him so low. As far as he was concerned, he was risking his life for nothing he could believe in.

“Diversify,” was the last thing he said to me before he left the next morning. I've never forgotten it.

I took to grooming quickly, but even as I improved faster than the other boys I worked with, I studied other crafts. On breaks, I'd sneak into the kitchens and learn cooking tips from the cooks. At parties and events, I'd work as a server and watch where the high lords' manservants stood, how often they spoke first, and when they chose to leave their lord to his own devices. When a slot for a manservant for Lord Lancel opened up, I got the job because the butler had made the interviews in Harrellton Hall, which most people confused with Harrold's Gardens, a more popular section of the castle. No one ever went to Harrellton Hall, which I suppose was part of the test. Anyway, the other three boys vying for the post had all gone to Harrold's Gardens first. The first two boys realized their mistake as soon as they got there and didn't see the butler. The third boy didn't know of Harrelldon Hall's existence at all and had to ask a page for directions. Anyway, the butler was impressed and let me work as manservant for Lord Lancel.

After a few weeks of serving Lord Lancel, I mentioned to him how much I loved his courser, and would consider it a fine honor to groom him. This was queer, as most high lords did not want their house servants working near the horses because of the smell. But I knew that I could become even more valuable to Sir Lancel if I had two jobs he really needed people for.

Since he'd just slept with his current groom's daughter and was looking for an excuse to reassign him, he was open to the idea—on the condition that I take a bath before coming in for duty. It would also save him a great deal of coin since I only accepted a 50% raise. I was still cheaper than employing two people. But this 50% raise would make a huge difference at home. Sally, the girls, and I would be able to move into a larger apartment, which we had talked about for years. So she got her dream view, one overlooking Blackwater Bay.

It was only after a few cross-country trips that I got to display my credentials as a cook. I had long been friends with the Lannister's cook and he let me cook a few meals while we were on the road. But the one person who I really wanted to taste it tasted it: Lord Tyrion. Working in Lord Tyrion's retinue, everybody knew, was a dream job. He was drunk half the time and gave out legendary tips. Every person who worked for Tyrion was as happy and fat as the little lord himself. I guess he liked it that way. At any rate, on the night I made my special quail with mushrooms and wine, I managed to slip behind Lord Tyrion towards the end of the meal to see how he liked it.

"Exquisite. What was your name again?"

"Morrec, milord."

"How long have you been cooking for Lancel, Morrec?"

"I'm not his cook, milord, I'm his manservant, milord."

"A manservant that can cook like that? What else can you do?"

"I'm also milord's groom, milord."

"Well, you are being wasted on Lancel. He doesn't know how to appreciate talent."

And that was all it took. By the time we got to King's Landing, I was working for Lord Tyrion as a sort of jack-of-all-trades, really. He had no need for a cook or a manservant, but I replaced his groom and would replace his cook or manservant in case of illness. I was also the official traveling man. Since I was so well diversified, Lord Tyrion would take me whenever he traveled and leave his normal staff so's to lighten the load. I really wasn't given much of a choice in this, but I knew I needed to do it if I wanted to keep this job.

So when the royal family packed up to visit Winterfell, I knew I'd be gone from Sally and the girls for weeks. I hated being gone from them that long, but I was not given a choice. Most of the journey was pretty by-the-book, until milord decided he wanted to see the Wall. Of all things. He wanted to step off the edge of the world. What began as a long trip was slowly turning into a nightmare. And gods, was it cold. I thought I knew cold, but I don't know how people even lived this way. Why would people live up here when they could live in the Summerlands, or Dorne? It put everyone in a foul mood, even the little lord, who was seldom in a foul mood despite his family of evil cunts. Like when I made up a stew just like he likes it and he told me it needed more pepper. I had made it the same way for five years and now all of a sudden it needed more pepper? It wasn't my stew that had gone bland, it was milord's joy for life. The north was too miserable to enjoy anything in. We eventually got on our way, though. If only we had come to the Inn at the Crossroads a night earlier or a night later. Any night than the night we came. And us not too far from King's Landing! The way I counted we would've been there in six days! But instead, that bitch Lady Stark dared to take my master prisoner! According to her, he had paid to use a knife to kill her son, or some such nonsense. Lord Tyrion is many things, but between the reading and the drinking I don't know where he'd get the time

to hatch a murder plot. Anyway the northern bitch insisted on seizing Lord Tyrion then and there and, seeing as he did not have a personal guard, we did not have much of a chance.

I've heard both stories about how this could go from here. If a lord was sort of forward thinking, he might reassign the servants of the lord he kills, putting them to work for him. If that was the case, it would probably only be a month or two before they gave me enough leeway to make an escape. Maybe sooner. If the lord liked to do things the old way, however, as soon as a lord is killed, his staff has to be killed as well. I never quite got that one so I ast about it when I was a little tyke. Turns out the Andals used to believe that when high lords died, they needed to kill their chiefs servants so that they would have people to serve him in the afterlife. Later on, though, lords starting doing it just to make sure word couldn't get out about what they'd done until they were good and ready. Anyways, most lords today don't go in for the superstitious nonsense, and with Westeros having more people than ever before, news travels faster than ever before. Big news about the death of a lord usually gets home long before the lord's servants would. So that was my only two ways out of this, I figured.

We started up the Eastern road, towards the Vale. But right away there was something off. Once we left the Riverlands, nearly every sentry post we came to was unmanned. And the ones that were manned seemed majorly understaffed. I couldn't understand it but I knew what it meant—we were on our own. Whenever some lord decides not to man sentry towers, it's either because he's going off to war or bringing all of his people in the protect the castle. Almost right away, we picked up a tail. We saw their fire at night and heard their hoots and hollers and we knew it was directed towards us. Once the Northern Bitch's master at arms told us to start sharpening arrows, I knew this might be it. If I could get away in the heat of battle, I

just might be able to find my way home. It would be slow going, but if I had my bow, I could shoot enough food along the way to get me back to Sally and the girls.

The first attack was pretty awful. I didn't know what I was doing here or why there were no Vale knights anywhere around for miles. Were they just going to let their main highway turn into some kind of no-man's land? We lost three men, but we knew that wasn't the end of it. On the second day they came back, but the Northern Bitch's master at arms and the sellsword Bronn made sure that was the last of it. After that attack they followed the thieves' tracks back to their camp and slaughtered everyone there. It was a little late for me, though. Halfway through the attack, one of the thieves come sneaking up behind me and let me have it with an axe in the back and on my arm. The sellsword Chiggen came riding up and got him off me. I think I saw him take an arrow in the belly before I passed out.

The next day was a sort of fever dream, really. I just remember riding, and I remember being happy that no thieves attacked us. And that night, for the first time ever, milord cooked for me! Can you imagine that? He fed me, too. We had never really had much of a talking relationship, so I took milord's new generosity as a chance to do that.

"Milord?"

"Yes, Morrec?"

"Is this the Vale?"

"It is."

"I thought them knights of the Vale was supposed to be extra fierce. Where was them fellers when we was having all of our troubles, do you think?"

“The Lady of the Vale has been . . . especially protective of her son. She’s cut down patrols and pulled back many of her knights to the Eyrie.”

“All them knights to protect . . . one little boy?”

“I know it seems rather ridiculous. But he’s a very important little boy.”

“My girls are important.”

“Oh, you have a family?”

“I do. I married the best woman in the world, name of Sally.”

“I’m sure she misses you very much. And you have daughters? How many?”

“Two. Aleiysha and Rachel.”

“I’m sure they’re very proud of their father.”

“Aleiysha is. Rachel’s always telling me I should speak up for myself more. She’s always telling me I need to respect myself more, that I had a *right* to chase my dreams—“

“Morrec, perhaps it’s time you got some rest.”

“She’s always been passionate like that. That fire . . . maybe she gets it from me mum; she was all full of spit and fangs. I wouldn’t be surprised if Rachel puts her money where her mouth is, though . . . starts up some kind of movement . . . equal working rights for all people, no matter how you’re born. Everybody is created equal, Lord Tyrion . . . “

“Morrec, you need to save your strength. You were very badly hurt.”

“It’s a good idea . . . “

“Yes, perhaps, but it’s not realistic. It’s not the world we live in, and who’s going to change it? All the good lords are dead and the rest are villains, I’m afraid. So what we need to

do is get you all better in *this* world so you can get back to Sasha and your little girls. Morrec . . .
? Morrec?”

THE GIRL AT CHATAYA’S BROTHEL WITH LIGHT RED HAIR AND A POWDERING OF FRECKLES

ACROSS THE BRIDGE OF HER NOSE (*GoT*, p. 318)

The night Daniel died, I knew there was changes comin’.

I heard my parents arguing the whole next week.

“Listen, Mercy, you know I thank the Seven they have blessed us seven times, but I don’t know what else we can do.”

“I will not sell her to that woman.”

“Chataya can take care of her ten times better than we can. And think of what that money could do for our other six children.”

“Think of what those men are going to do to your daughter.”

“It’d be one thing if she could help out on the farm, but with her leg the way it is . . .”

We had had three seasons of blight. Papa said it was the worst streak he’d ever seen. The first two seasons, he was optimistic, but this season things got much worse. When Mum told Papa she was with child this last time, he didn’t have the gleam in his eyes he’d had for my younger sisters and brothers. He just sighed and said “We’ll do the best we can.” We had already been down to having turnip stew with a crust of bread a night as it was. Mum hardly ever ate. So when one day she had trouble giving milk, I knew that was trouble.

"I think I'm gonna run away."

"What? Are things truly that bad?"

"Worse."

"You know we'd take you in, but Ma and Dad says we got enough troubles as it is."

"Papa wants to sell me to one of those traders to work as a whore."

"That's awful."

"He says the money would take care of my brothers and sisters, though."

"I suppose it would help them more than running away."

"Maybe."

Still, I never thought he'd do it. I brought it up with Mum one night.

"Are you going to make me go live in one of those houses with sinful women? I don't want to leave you and Papa."

"Don't worry about it, dear. We'll figure something out."

It didn't get any better though. One night Papa came in and had a talk with me.

"You know we love you, darling, but we can't take care of you no more. Living in the city you'll get three hot meals a day, a warm bed. Now, I'll be honest with you, it kills me to think that any man's gonna lay a hand on my little girl. But the truth is, the types of men you're gonna meet are gonna be able to do a whole lot more for you than any of the poor young blokes around here. I heard dozens of stories of men falling in love in these places and whisking them women right out of there and making them honest in front of the Seven. I'm sure any man that takes a look at you is gonna fall down in front of his feet and want to marry you right there."

“You think so, Papa?”

“I wish I could take care of you until you’re old and grey, darling. But the fact is, I don’t know what we would do if we were to lose another one of your little brothers or sisters. I don’t know if it will be much help, to think of them when it . . . when it’s going on.”

Then my dad started to cry, which I’d never seen him do, and it scared me so I wanted to make him feel better.

“It’s alright, Papa.”

But it wasn’t alright. I hated him for what he was doing to me. I hated that he couldn’t take care of us. But I didn’t know what choice I had. With my leg the way it was, I couldn’t help the family as much as the oldest child should be able to. Everybody knew it. I didn’t know why the Seven had placed this burden on me, but I trusted that the Maiden had some plan for me that I couldn’t understand yet.

Papa was right about one thing, though. Miss Chataya’s home was amazing. I’d never seen that much silk, and silver, and velvet in one place ever in my life. And the food! It’s like they went to the grocers every day. The first night, I ate so much I made myself sick.

“Slow down, honey, the food isn’t running away from you.”

Natalya was nice to me right away. Most of the other women mostly ignored me.

“Have you been working here long?”

“I first came here when I was just a little older than you, when Chataya’s aunt was running the place.”

“What? But you’re *old*. How come someone hasn’t whisked you away?”

“First of all, 28 is not old. Second of all, what do you mean whisked away?”

“It’s just that you’re so beautiful. Papa says rich men are always coming to places like this and whisking the pretty ones away and marrying them.”

“Marrying them?! Your dad . . . Yeah, I guess that happens sometimes, but it just hasn’t been my luck. I’m sure it will happen to you, though.”

“I hope so. Natalya, is it . . . gonna hurt?”

She turned around and looked me dead in the eye.

“Yes. I’ll be honest with you. Most of the men that come in here are not the gentle type. I’ll teach you a little trick. Sometimes when I’m with some of rougher ones, I’ll just close my eyes and go to a little place inside of myself that’s all mine. Your body is not you. Who you are is right there”—she touched me over the heart—“inside. A man can have your body, but he can’t have *you*. Who you *are*. There’s a place inside of you that no man can enter unless you want him too. When it gets rough, you just go to that place and know that he can never get there, no matter what he does.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

One day, the big night came. Chataya told me that I would be having a client and that I was to do whatever was asked of me. No one ever said “sex” around here, but I knew that’s what she meant. I was going to have sex tonight. Some man I had never met was going to put his penis inside me. I was sort of sick and terrified, but, strangely, it was not as bad as how I felt the night Daniel died. At least, this was going to mean something, it was going to help my family. My little brother’s death had meant nothing. He was born and he died and we buried him in the back and hardly anyone in the world even knew he ever existed. That wasn’t right. He probably would have wanted more from life. He was probably laying in his little wooden

casket saying, *That was it? That's what life was about? Big deal.* That wasn't right. Maybe what I was doing tonight could keep it from happening to little Samuel, or Becca, or Lemuel, or Ainsley, or Gretchen, or Hans. And that's when I realized it. I had found my space inside me that no one could touch. Out in the back of our farmhouse, in the grave with little Daniel, keeping him company, keeping him warm.

He was finally here. I lay on the bed, feeling like I had to pee except I had just gone. I stank of the perfume they sprayed on me. I looked between my legs to try to see if I was ready. I did not look ready. Imagine my surprise when in walked . . . King Robert! I had never in my wildest dreams imagined that . . . was it the *king* who was going to whisk me away? Was I . . . was I going to be *queen*? Wait, isn't there already a queen?

As it turns out, I didn't really have much time to be scared—he got right down to it, not much chatter. But surprisingly, he *was* gentle. Oh, it hurt like high heaven, but he actually tried to make it less painful. He started slow at first and even asked me a couple of times if it was okay. I said yes, but it was awful. He was big and hairy and stinky and his thing was *big* and I got sore pretty quick. My mum told me some sort of spit was supposed to make it go in easier but I guess either him or me didn't have enough of it. After a minute or so, I went to my place inside myself with Daniel. He was playing in a corner, and I was reading to him. I never got to read with the real Daniel cuz we didn't have books and we'd never had enough to pay for me to learn to read. But in my spot where no man could touch me I could read, and Daniel understood, and we were both warm and there was lots of food and he was happy. I knew while the king was fucking me that I could never really take care of Daniel in real life, but now I'm doing it and it takes the pain away some.

The king came and saw me every week after that, and he told Chataya I was not to be with no one else, so I spent most of my days cleaning or cooking or laying around in silk sheets. I'd be lying if I didn't say it was the most boring and awful existence I could have imagined. My whole life was waiting for the king and then recovering from the king. From my window I could see boys and girls my age working with their parents, learning a trade. I wish I could *do* something. I wish I could learn something. Maybe when the king whisks me away I'll finally be able to learn to read.

Once I got pregnant, I knew it couldn't be long now. I had a future king in me now, didn't I? I wasn't sure how that worked, but I knew my baby had to be somewhere down the line for kingship now, didn't he? I knew that bastards were looked down on, though. I knew that's what my baby was, a bastard. But he was the king's bastard.

One thing did change once I got pregnant—King Robert stopped coming. I thought he would visit a few times, but I knew how busy was. But once Barra came, I thought he would come to see her, but he never did. I'm not sure if my getting pregnant made him angry with me. I didn't know if there was anything I could have done to prevent it. I'm sure he was very busy. The Hand of the King came to check in on us once, though.

Chataya has been saying how it's time I started to earn some real money again. Maybe my next client will be the one. And maybe he'll look into little Barra's eyes and fall in love with her the way I have. She's so cute! It can only be a matter of time before we're whisked away.

I always liked horses. More than humans sometimes, if you want to know the truth. High lords talk about being noble but if you really want to see noble, chase a team of horses, I always say. They look after their own. They respect one another. Horses treat you right when you treat them right and they bash your brains in when you mistreat them and that's the way it should be. If the world was more like that, I wouldn't have no complaints. But it ain't never been, not as far as I can tell.

I been master of horse at Winterfell longer than most people there can remember. Have I had a chance to move on, to get a higher-paying job or one with more responsibilities? Sure. I make a lateral move into the lord's guard and I'm making 15 percent more right out of the gate. But if I took what they call a more administrative role, I wouldn't have the chance to work with my horses as much. And that wouldn't suit me.

That's what I'm in it for, if you really want to know the truth. Don't get me wrong, I'm as loyal to Lord Stark as anyone at Winterfell. I always told my boy Harwin that Lord Eddard's the first real northern lord since I was a boy. Sure, Lord Rickard was strong, but even he had a habit of picking up southern ways. Not his boy, though. A real northern man, gods as my witnesses. But if you really want to know the truth, I'd be right as rain being master of horse for any of those high lords. First off, they got stables like you wouldn't believe. All the air and space you could want. Next, they got the resources to treat these animals the way they deserve to be treated. They're well-fed and well looked after when they gets ailings. I got no stake in who wins no game of thrones. Most humans are just idjits up and down either way. I bet horses would run a fair kingdom, though. A decent kingdom. But a world where the only good jobs mean all of a sudden you live and die by the whims of a lord? What kind of sense did that

make? The only place where I can get work at a decent stable is working for one of these high lords, and they're always massacring each other. Last time Lord Eddard went off to fight up in the Iron Islands, I figured out a way not to go. First off, it was the Iron Islands, but second, I knew it was gonna be a bloody business. I could train one of the guards to maintain your horses I told him, in a fight I was a liability. He seemed to like that logic good enough. If you want to know the truth, I've been in my share of scuffles and I don't mind dusting it up if I'm doing it to help protect or defend someone who needs it but, if you want to know the truth, I can't stand to see the state war puts horses in. They ain't meant to be war animals. They get scared and confused and they don't know what's going on and I just didn't wanna be a part of it. I seen it during Robert's Rebellion and that was enough.

I didn't have that excuse when he asked me to go King's Landing. True, I wouldn't have my stables, but I had always wondered what types of facilities they got for animals in King's Landing. Do they really take care of them or do they only pretty them up for parades and tourneys? There's a way you can make horses look healthier than they are if you got a hankerin. It's just cruelty, though, if you ask me. So I went, and things seemed fine at first, but that all changed when Lord Eddard was attacked and Jory was killed. If it was up to me, I would have accepted orders to go back to Winterfell the next day. Common law and order don't matter for nothing when these lord are fightin' for power and we were in the capital city for God's sake. This was for all of the marbles. But Lord Stark seemed to be convinced that King Robert would protect him, which would have been fine if Robert had been in charge. But that bloody oaf spent all hours of the day drinking and whoring and dishonoring his throne. King Robert

wouldn't have made it as a horse. He would have been kicked out of the herd to starve for not pulling his weight. So when he died, I could see the writing on the wall, sure as day.

Lord Eddard didn't ask us to pack up until the day the king died but secretly I had been preparing for a week before. War with the Lannisters would have to mean he'd have to consolidate and streamline while he was still in King's Landing. Once we got to the North, he could call his bannermen and settle this attack on its warden. The day after the king died we were making good progress. Desmond and three of his men had been helping with the loading. All of a sudden, though, we heard fighting coming towards us. Desmond and I shared a look. It was finally going down, right when we were about to take our leave. It didn't seem fair. With so many of Lord Stark's men gone, we didn't stand a chance against an all-out Lannister offensive. Not here in the capital. Lord Stark probably doesn't even know this is coming. He's probably happily up in his tower trying to reason with these animals—no, that's an insult to animals. Monsters. All along he's been trying to reason with monsters but he don't realize monsters don't play by rules. They just eat and eat and they don't care who gets caught up. They don't care if maybe you would just as soon find another job, in another big stable, tending the horses of another high lord. It didn't make much difference. I was the Stark master of horse, and that's all that would matter. I liked horses better than humans in most cases, if you want to know the truth.

I grabbed an axe and threw on a helm, while Tristan grabbed his mace. Desmond and his men were still gearing up to rush into the fray when Lannister guards and gold cloaks reached us. What were the gold cloaks doing here? They slew Desmond's two guards before they could grab their shields but Desmond took one of them down before he succumbed. Tristan and I did

our best, but it was close quarters and they all had on proper armor. We held our men at bay for a little while but as soon as the guards who were fighting Desmond moved onto us, it was nothing doing. Instead of trying to take me and my axe on one by one, they just gangrushed me and pinned me down and worked me over with their halberds. After a minute or so of that, they all sort of took off in a rush.

I pulled myself up in a position that didn't hurt as much and looked over at Tristan. They had stuck a sword right through his neck. Time to sleep . . .

Time to . . . *wake!* Arya! Arya Underfoot! Where did she come from? This poor girl. She probably has no idea what's happening.

"Arya Underfoot, you must . . . warn your . . . your lord father."

Oh lord, they're gonna do the most horrible things to her when they get their hands on her. Those people are monsters. Not like horses. Horses are good. Horses are—

MASHA (b. 239 - d. 539)

I learnt real quick that soldiers only protect you when they're under orders. I learnt that real quick the summer after my 13th birthday. Soldiers was always around, but that summer they was a whole mess of 'em all heading down to the Stepstones to fight in the War of the Ninepenny Kings. Most of 'em were okay, but almost all of 'em never looked at me above my chest, which had tripled in size since last summer. My mum taught me how to dress and walk so they wouldn't show so much, but that summer was hot, and I couldn't go walking around in them robes. One group of soldiers passing through couldn't stop messing with me while I was

servicing 'em at our family's inn. After most everyone had gone to sleep, I made the fool mistake of taking the trash out after dark instead of waiting till morning. That same group of soldiers was out back behind the inn drinking and gambling. I don't know why, but as soon as I saw them, I stopped for a moment, which I never shoulda done. It was like when a fawn freezes. Those bastards could smell my fear. Maybe if I woulda kept on walking like I was none the wiser, they woulda not bothered with me.

"Well if it isn't our saucy little serving wench. What are you doin' out at this hour, my darling?"

"I'm the innkeep's daughter. And I'm just taking out the trash, but I can do it in the morning so's not to bother you."

I turned around to go inside, but one of them had been behind me the whole time.

"Don't go in. Have a drink with us."

"I'm only 13."

"A woman grown," one of them said.

The next moment was one of them life-changing moments. My plan was to scream for me mum, and right before I did I took a deep breath to make sure she'd hear me. But one of the soldiers had quick reflexes and put his hand over my mouth right in that instant.

"There's no need to go doin that, love. You'll wake the neighborhood."

They stopped pretending to be nice after that. They drug me to the barn and all three had their way with me. That was my first time with a man, and it was with three grown rude filthy men and it hurt for a week afterward. I thought I might be lucky enough to find someone gentle after that, but no such luck. Two years later, a soldier who was staying at the inn

grabbed me from behind as I was leaving the outhouse. He took me to the woods and put himself inside my mouth. He liked to talk, and kept telling me how lucky I was to be with the new master-at-arms for some such and such lord. All I knew was that he had rough hands and smelled like garlic. After a few minutes of that, he forced my face into the grass and put himself inside me from behind. I thought if I kept my legs closed he wouldn't be able to get in, but it turns out a man can still stick it in you like that. That was my second time being with a man. My bitch friend Rella let it get out somehow that I had now been with four soldiers and the boys in my village started to get the idea that I was doing something to make it happen. Like, I flashed my chest at them or something. I swear I did everything to make myself look smaller but most of them found a way to grab an eyeful or a handful. Anyway, none of the decent boys in the village would talk to me after that, only perverts who wanted some quick fun.

I remember them all. When I was 20, a group of soldiers from the Stormlands stayed at the inn. They didn't even bother to wait outside. Mum had gone to sleep, by now I was doing most of the work anyway, and I was just cleaning up. There were only four men left drinking, but I assumed they were almost finished. While I was wiping down the last table, one of them took his sword and cut my blouse open. I cried out, but in a second, a big mean-looking one was in my face.

"Listen girly, my mates and I have been on the road a long time, and we need to blow off a little steam. But if our lord hears upstairs, he's gonna flog us all. If that happens, we're going to come back and we're going to do you and your mum. You understand?"

"Please," I said. "Could you please . . ."

"Please what?" he said, but he wasn't really asking.

“Nothing.”

I laid down and let them take their turns. What was the use? I turned my head to the side and closed my eyes and tried not to cry as much as I wanted to. Only two of them actually put there's in me. One of them couldn't make it hard so he made me put it in my mouth. After a while he got bored of that and started to smack me. The fourth didn't want to, he said, cuz he was married. If that was true I don't know what he was doing with these others.

The only relationship that meant a damn to me by then was Chataya from the next village over. At first I liked her cuz she was gentle, and thought of my feelings, but before I knew it I was in love.

I got raped again the next year, this time by a handsome knight with a cruel streak. He kidnapped me one day while I was at the market and took me into the woods. There, in a cave, he had set up cozy little den for us. He tied me up by hands, stuck cotton in my mouth, and wrapped a leather thong around my head so I couldn't spit it out. For the rest of the day, he took turns whipping me and fucking me in the most unnatural ways. He wouldn't do it regular, and it hurt like high hell. While whipping me, he would make me repeat what he said, most of it just random verse from the Book of the Seven. He pinched and bit my nipples, he even drew blood on one of them. I wondered what I had done to make him treat me so, but I knew the answer didn't matter. A few hours after nightfall, he simply got on his horse and rode off, without a word. I struggled for an hour to get free, but I was so tired I musta fell asleep. When morning came, I found that the dew allowed my hands to slips through their ties. I went to Chataya's house and cried all day. She took care of me, and then gave me the best advice of my life.

“Sourleaf.”

“What?”

“My grandma told me. The same thing was happening to her. People just assumed she was a whore cuz she was an inkeep’s daughter. One summer a sourleaf bush sprung up in our yard, and she was immediately hooked. It wasn’t till the end of summer that she realized that her teeth were getting stained red! She stopped chewing the sourleaf, but she also realized something—the soldiers had stopped flirting with her. She asked her husband, my grandpa, what he thought, and he said he thought she looked cute with red teeth, and that was it. She’s never had a problem with soldiers since.”

“And so she just walked around with red teeth?”

“Yeah, kids would get scared of her and the village gossips made fun, but those crones didn’t have to go through what my grandmother had to. With people like you and my grandmother, great beauty can be a curse. Without a strong family or the right friends, soldiers will always see you as an easy target. If you report them, chances are your complaints will be either ignored or forgotten. That’s exactly how most of their liege lords popped their cherries. High-born lords use peasants as practice before they get married to their high-born ladies. That’s when it really ‘counts’ for them.”

“Sourleaf.”

“People will laugh, but they wouldn’t if they knew why you did it.”

People laughed, they laughed to high hell. Children were the worst. I had always loved the little shits, but they ran screaming when they saw my red smile. Once I got in the habit of always having honey cakes prepared, though, they came running back soon enough. But, most

importantly, I was never raped again. Well, one time after, but he ended up marrying me so's I don't know if it counts. Anyways, it kept the soldiers off me for years. Sourleaf.

When Lord Tywin's men come into town, it felt different right away. First, they come in and didn't ask for no room, but just started to set up shop in the common hall, like I wasn't even running a business. I went upstairs and got a few things. I thought it might be best to leave. Whatever was happening, it seemed like it would be better if I was far away. But when I got downstairs, the soldiers wouldn't let me go. I was being "detained." So I took a seat and waited.

That night, Lord Tywin himself come strutting through my door. He didn't look mad, though, so I thought I might get out of this thing.

"Are you the innkeep Masha Heddle?"

"Um, well Lord Tywin, if you need a place to stay, you can certainly—"

"Are you Masha Heddle?"

"Um . . . "

"Oh for god's sake, bring in the stable boy."

They had beaten Chenneth to a bloody swollen mess.

"Is this your employer?"

"Yesh."

"And was it you who allowed my son to be kidnapped right from under your roof?"

"I was not a party to that, Lord Tywin. I tried to tell Lady Catelyn that what she was doing was unjust."

“And yet you allowed it to happen.”

“I did not allow it, sir.”

“Then how did he come to be her prisoner?”

“The Lady Catelyn told all them knights to arrest him.”

“Knights for whom you were providing food and shelter.”

I knew then that this conversation was only ever going to go one way.

“I—“

“Let the guards have at her and then hang her out in the yard. We need a reminder for anyone who dares crosses a Lannister.”

I couldn't believe it. You can't just take me out into the yard now? What was it with high-borns giving women to their soldiers? I mean okay maybe if you're trying to humiliate an enemy, say, you serve up his wife to your soldiers. But nowadays it seems like they just do it out of habit, like giving a dog a treat. Anyway, I was fat enough now and old enough now that most of the Lord's boys took a pass once they took me out back. Thank god for that. But there's always got to be someone. Turns out they had a halfwit in their company and decided to turn him on me. And this halfwit had a big one, and my parts hadn't been working right down there in years, so it'd be a stretch to call it sex. Just someone moving their thing inside of me, painfully. And he wouldn't fucking stop. He just kept at it, cuz all his mates were laughing. He didn't stop until everyone that had come over to have a look finally got bored and left. As he left I called him a halfwit and he kicked me.

As they put the rope around me, I was surprised how numb I felt. I woulda thought I'd be steaming, especially cuz I didn't do nothing wrong. But in a way, I'd just gotten so used to

these people having their way with me. I didn't feel like nothing but an old coat or shoe, just a piece of property to be used up and then thrown aside by some high-born cunt. I didn't have no more tears for them. I had cried out all the tears I had. I just sort of stared ahead and thought about what Lord Tywin had made me. I wasn't Masha no more. Now, I was "a reminder." It's funny to think that my whole life, I was just training to become "a reminder" for someone else. Well, not funny, really. Actually, sort of—

**THE GIRL NO OLDER THAN DANY WHO A DOTHRAKI RIDER SHOVED OVER A PILE OF CORPSES
AND THRUST HIMSELF INSIDE AFTER DEFEATING THE LHAZAREEN (*GoT*, p. 556)**

What makes the Dothraki think they are better than us? Murder? Savagery?

I ask you. What makes them think that they are so superior that they have the right to simply come in and destroy our community just because they have the strength? Is it the fact that they train from childhood to bring misery to people? Is that all the Dothraki value?

I heard what they think about us: "She is nothing, khaleesi. The riders do her honor."

What did this person know about me? I've never even seen a Dothraki before today, although of course I'd heard of them. Did he know about what I wanted to do with my life, or who I wanted to help? Since I could talk, everyone in my community has said that I was a natural counselor. I knew how to listen, my mama said, and my advice was both wise and just. Many people have minds that are in disquiet, and they cannot act properly in civilized society, and I wanted to help them. I was to start training with the town counselor the next moon day.

But this is my most challenging case. I'd heard the Dothraki thought they had a superior culture, and a part of me was eager to find out why, even though I knew the day I did would probably be my last day on earth. Still, I was baffled. Where was their nobility? Where were their poets, and actors, and scientists, and engineers? Or was this a poet shoving himself inside me right now? How can they think they are better than us when they act worse than animals? All my life, my family and community has been nothing but supportive and loving. My father worked hard to put food on the table for his family and treat people with kindness and respect. We had lived in that town for generations and we had never attacked another people just because we could. Of course, all the men in the town train for war, but we are a peaceful society. We tend our flocks and we go to bed at night with a free conscience. So how can these people sleep at night, knowing the misery they've brought to people?

We always knew there was a chance that a khalazar might one day attack our town. We weren't naïve enough to believe that we were completely safe. But our faith teach us to control only what we can control, and know that we are only a part of a great system. People die, communities are destroyed, and others ones are reborn and take their place. It is very foolish to believe that there is someone watching over you who will make sure no harm comes to you. Life is harm. Life is exactly one half harm. And when it befalls you, it is your duty to accept it as part of the great balance. I am trying to accept my fate as this man is violating me. I am trying to accept that it makes up for all of the good that has happened in my life. That's why I didn't fight. But that doesn't mean it isn't painful and humiliating. My mother told me that if this happens that it would not go against our beliefs to cry, so I did. I wonder if he knows he's fucking me on top of my mother's corpse?

As awful as this is, the thing that really gets me is this complete stranger calling me “nothing.” *Nothing?* Did he really think our men slept with sheep? *Is that why you think you have the right to murder my family? Or maybe that is something Dothraki mommies and daddies tell their little psychotic warriors so they don’t feel as bad for their savage customs. What makes me “nothing” and you “something?” That sword on your hip? I do not think so. I think rather that I am superior to you. I don’t think you could experience what I am going through and survive. I think we are the superior people, Dothraki scum. You are just the storytellers for your own story. You tell yourself you are superior in order to excuses the vile and cruel acts that you do to other people. Doing me honor?!*

I have reached my diagnosis. The Dothraki have brainwashed themselves. They are a vile disgusting odious people, and the fact that they think that their culture is superior to anyone’s is a sad joke. They have brainwashed themselves into psychosis. And they go around the world unleashing their sick stories on everyone they meet, thinking they are bringing them honor. But this is not honor. It is a sad, sad joke. And they leave no one in their wake to laugh.

**ONE OF THE WOUNDED MEN LEFT BY THE ROADSIDE DURING TYWIN LANNISTER’S FORCED
MARCH TO RIVERRUN (GoT, p. 637)**

Last year, I left old Sadie by the side of the road to die.

She was a good enough dog, and loyal, but she had been sick for a long time. She'd had a growth growing out the side of her neck and we could tell she was in pain. She couldn't move around like she used to and plus it was starting to stink up the house.

"Please, Daddy, don't kill Sadie!"

"She's got to go, Jacob. She doesn't have much longer for this world."

"I know. I know she . . . she probably won't go on much longer but, but what if she does? What if there's a miracle? We'll never know if we kill her."

"There's not gonna be no miracle, son."

"But what if there is?!"

"Well, either way, we can't keep her no more. It's no good to have her inside the house. She's got the stench of death on her, and it's not good for your little brother and sister."

"I know. I know, and I been thinking. What if we just took her out somewhere, gave her a fighting chance?"

"What?"

"Gerold says that animals ain't supposed to live with people, anyway. He says that animals is meant to live free and be wild, off to their own affairs. That is they had the choice, any animal would rather live off in the wild with their own kind than with humans."

"I told you to stop hanging around that boy."

"Is it true, though, Dad?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But that's not the world we live in."

“Well I was thinking if we just took Sadie out there . . . not abandoning her, really, but freeing her. Taking her back to nature where she can die free. That’d be alright, wouldn’t it, dad?”

“Just leave her out there? I don’t know, Jake. Sounds a mite cruel to me.”

“No! Cruel is just cutting her down without any warning and she wouldn’t even know what’s going on!” He started to tear up now, and that just broke my heart in two. “At least if we let her go, she’d be able to know what was happening. She’d be able to make peace with her gods and such. And for a little while, she’d be free! Please, dad. You can’t just cut her down when she might have some time left in her. Please.”

To be honest, I knew Jake was gonna win this one. He was a good boy, and never asked for much. He did his chores, helped his mother, and looked after his brother and sister. I couldn’t think of a good reason to say no, so I didn’t.

“Alright, I’ll take her out tomorrow.”

“Can I come?”

“No, you’d best say goodbyes here.”

And that was just how I done it. The next morning I took old Sadie out like it was another one of our hunts. She could barely keep up with me, though, and about a mile or so outside of our village I started carrying her. She whimpered and moaned so, I could tell she was hurting. When I’d found a nice secluded spot along the kingsroad, I set her down.

“Alright, old girl, this is the end of the road. You been a good companion for my little ones and a fair to middling hunting dog. I’m sorry to see you go, but I gotta.”

And you know, the funniest thing, she actually seemed to understand. She looked at me with those big brown eyes and, for the first time in her life, when I started to walk away, she didn't try to follow me. She just sort of laid down her head on her paws and whined a little. Before long, she was just a dot on the horizon.

I wonder if that's how Lord Tywin feels about me, now. A wounded dog on the side of the road that he has to say goodbye to. Nah, that couldn't be. All the years I been fighting for him. I bled and killed for that man, bled and killed for him. I even done things I didn't have to that Lord Tywin never even knew I did. I was the one who kept that innkeep from escaping the day we got to the Inn at the Crossroads. If it wasn't for me, she'da been long gone and no one woulda been the wiser. I'm the one who thought Lord Tywin might wanna talk to her, and I was right. And what do I get for it? A little gash on my leg and he just leaves me here? Some of the other boys say he's gonna send back some surgeons to look after us, but that don't seem likely. It don't make sense to spare surgeons on men who can't even fight no more.

It ain't fair, though, I'll tell you that much. I been working for Lord Tywin for ten years, chasing after who knows whatever rotten bastard's pissed him off that month. So why was it so hard to believe he'd take care of us once we got hurt fighting one of his wars? I even brought it up to the Captain of the Guard, one day. Needless to say he wasn't too pleased.

"I'm not talking about some grand medical center, I'm only talking about hiring a maester to take care of the wounded if they can't fight no more and putting aside some coin for our families for insurance. It's not our fault if we get injured in battle. But I know so many good men who get hurt so bad they can't even take care of their families after. Would it be so wrong

to set up some kind of fund, some kind of deal where them's that get hurt in battle don't have to worry about their loved ones?"

"Are you completely smashed? I knew you was a drinker, but I didn't know you was stupid too. Do you actually think Lord Tywin's gonna shell out coin for you *after* you can't fight for him anymore? With all the money he's paying you to go on the campaign in the first place? How do you think the man got so rich anyway? Paying his former soldiers *as well* as his current ones? Go back to your tent and get some shuteye. We got maneuvers in the morning."

"I know it's stupid, I know it sounds crazy but . . . well, maybe that's something that'll keep the fellas fighting for him. We all know what happened to our men in our last battle. As soon as the tide turned, half of them went running off into the forest."

"That's 'cause their cowards. You think the thought of some sort of pension is gonna keep a coward fighting once the tide of a battle has turned?"

"It might."

"And horses might fly out of my ass. You want some soldier's insurance? Train. Work on your sword work, work on your defense moves. If you don't get hurt, you don't have to worry about what happens to your family. Now cut out this kinda talk, men have been hanged for less."

He was right. Lord Tywin didn't fancy unsatisfied men, and he liked to make an example of those who were. I've had to cut down a few after the crows had been after them. Nasty business.

"You're right, sir. Goodnight."

"I know I'm right."

And that was it. I never brought it up again. I wish I had now, though. A part of me still hoped he might send some surgeons back, or even send back a wagon to take us to the nearest village. But those hopes were mighty slim. Still, I couldn't take my eyes off the train as they marched off. I kept thinking someone would get sent back to take care of us, that Lord Tywin would have a last-minute change of heart. Maybe think about all the people who'd put their lives on the line for him all these years. It wasn't just for the money. Sure the Lannisters paid well, but really, all the high-born lords paid more than anything I could make on my own. I just thought the Lannister's words meant something: Hear Me Roar. I'd roared as loud as anybody in my time. Louder, maybe. I started to roar, now, not really thinking it would make a difference just . . . just to let them know that I was alive. People started looking at me funny but I didn't care. I was a lion too, and had my pride at home waiting for me too. I wasn't just a dog that you could leave by the side of the road. I was something more. I had honor. I had . . . pride.

They didn't send anyone back, though. And before long, I was just a dot on the horizon to them.

**THE NAKED CORPSE SPRAWLED IN THE GUTTER NEAR THE STREET OF LOOMS, BEING TORN
AT BY A PACK OF FERAL DOGS WHILE TYRION LANNISTER TOOK MEASURE OF KING'S
LANDING (*Clash of Kings*, p. 47)**

Gods, help me, if only the pain would let up a little bit. I just need enough strength today to put Lisibeth down for the night and tell Gerta her night story. She's been falling asleep after five minutes this past month, so I shouldn't have to keep it up for long. Sad to say, that's

one of the hardest times of the day, right before bedtime. It's when I'm hungriest. Don't know why that is. it's not like I'm hungry all day. On days we can't get any meat, it comes and goes. But always right before I go to bed, it's like my stomach wants to remind me what a shit place we're all in.

Every day, it seems like I go through the same routine. First it's off to the bread man to see what he's got left over. Bread's been the most expensive thing in King's Landing since all the trouble started because there are so few grains in the city. The War of the Four Kings, they've been calling it. People love to come up with silly little names for disasters. I wonder if someone would like to name the little war I go through every day. The War of Rhaeyanne Trying to Feed Her Daughters. The War of the Former Seamstress Who Has to Disgrace Herself to Survive. Not too catchy, but it's real. After Patek passed on, I thought I would be alright for a while. His parents both helped out and I was working more hours than ever. But as soon as Lord Tyrion marched, they had to go because he was Tyrion's armorer and Lord Tyrion didn't go nowhere without the man what takes care of his splendid golden shiny ruby-covered brass-plated loads of horseshit. But I thought everything would be fine until the food stopped coming into the city. With no one else to help, the girls and I have had to rely on every favor I ever did anybody ever. And that helped us get by, for a while.

After the bakery, I always stopped by produce, just in case. There was never anything there. Fresh fruits and vegetables stopped coming in before grains did, but I always stop by because I once sewed an eye onto the greengrocer's daughter's doll so he says he'll save something for me if anything ever comes in. Last, I go to the only affordable butcher in my part of town, which is always in stock. This worries me. I don't know how this man is still able to get

fresh meat in. But it is less how he gets in than how he sells it. Instead of throwing out old rotting meat, he just sells it at a lower price. Every day you can see the meat he tried to sell the day before; his shelves just get greener and greener as you walk left. But some people, in their desperation, just choose what they can afford. I don't know what becomes of them. I had an old boyfriend who worked at a restaurant, I learned how to tell when meat had gone so bad it would make you sick. I had gotten pretty good at being able to find fairly fresh cuts in the rotten meat section.

I once brought this up with Janos Slynt, captain of the Gold Cloaks himself. His wife taught me how to sew.

"Commander Slynt, begging your pardon, sir?"

"What is it, Rhaeyanne?"

"You know that butcher near the Street of Looms?"

"Yes, I know the one."

"You know he's been selling meat that's not too good. Some of it's going rotten."

"I'm sure the butcher wouldn't be selling anything that was bad for his customers. People would go shop somewhere else."

"Well a lot of people in them parts can't go nowhere else. They gotta shop around where they live cuz they ain't got a donkey to lug things back in. And all the butchers with the best meat charge an arm and a leg."

"The people in that area seem well-fed to me."

"Well that's how it happens, Commander, sir, if you'll beg pardon. That's why so many folks with no money are so portly. They eat, but they eat a lot of bad food that's not good for

the body. Sweets and anything cheap and filling. You eat enough of that junk you gain a few pounds, but you die quicker.”

“Rhaeyanne . . . “

“I’m only saying if he had to put out some markings about when the meat was old, or a date when it would go bad, a lot of them people would live longer, begging your pardon, sir. If that butcher’s making people sick, that’s goes against the public health, don’t it?”

“Rhaeyanne . . . “

“That’s what you do, ain’t it? Look out for the public health?”

“Rhaeyanne, I’m going to make it very clear for you. The butcher near the Street of Looms contributes more to city taxes than anyone you know. He can sell Tears of Lys for all the city cares. I suggest you shop somewhere else.”

I didn’t see Commander Slynt no more after he was made a lord. His replacement grabbed my tits the day I told him about the butcher and that was that.

As soon as I had some of this last bit of meat, I knew it wasn’t right. I gave the girls the last of the good meat and tried to fill up on this last batch, but I couldn’t even get my dinner down. I threw the rest away but, as soon as my fever started to get up, I knew something wasn’t right. And now I get so hungry every night at the same time. For the last week, my joints been aching and my stomach’s been seizing up. I had to get some real food.

When I started walking down where the whores work, I didn’t even realize it at first. But once I realized where I was, I knew why I was there. I had only done this once before, and I swore I never would again. But I just had to tell myself that my girls would understand. They’ll understand if they have little ones someday. I spotted three young rough-looking characters

and made my way over. Maybe if I let them all have a go I'd have enough to get me and the girls through this patch. As soon as I'm not sick anymore, I'll take the girls out of the city and find work in a village tavern. A nice village tavern safe from lords and their wars.

"Will you take a look at this one?"

"Say missus, you don't look too good, you know that?"

"All my parts work fine."

As soon as we were done, though, I thought about the position I put myself in.

"Listen, missus, that was a ball, but we ain't got a cent to give you. But I am in your debt."

And in some last ditch grab for my pride, I swung out for him. He stepped aside and his fist caught my jaw. In a flash, the other were in on it with him, punching and kicking me. Once I stopped moving, they went through my clothes and then stripped them off me. As soon as they left, the pains started up. And now, my arms and legs wouldn't move. I was moving them, but nothing was happening in my body. If only I could reach for my clothes. I felt somehow if I could just get to my clothes, I'd be able to put them on and get home to my girls. But all I could do was stare at them.

Then, a seizing racking sensation came over me. All my the muscles in my body started to clench up at once, and it wouldn't stop. All my muscles started seizing and then my tongue flicked back down my own throat. Once that happened I had to start taking little breaths when I could get them, but I couldn't get enough. *Why won't my body stop shaking?* I just needed a moment; a moment to catch my breath. When I can't breathe in, the shaking is getting worse,

worse for me anymore, without anyone who can help me, me and my two daughters who are sweet and lovely but I am not long for this world—

**THE LITTLE GIRL ON THE BACK OF A MILK COW WHO ARYA STARK PASSED ON HER WAY TO
THE WALL (CoK, p. 61)**

The thing is, we didn't use to have just one cow.

A month ago, we had eight of 'em: Gwendolyn, Susanne, Catelyn, Bessa, Ingritte, Porsha, Marian, and Romeo. Technically, Romeo was a bull, of course. A very sturdy ox-bull. But all we's down to is one now. Me and my mum. Just us three.

It didn't use to be just me and my mum, either. A month ago, we lived with my Pa and my brother Jacob. One day when soldiers came to the farm, my Pa tried to be nice to them, to tell them to leave enough food for us, but they bashed him on the head and called him an enemy of Lord Lannister and took what they wanted. They bashed him so good he fell into a sleep and never woke up. Last week, some other soldiers come. They was fishes this time instead of lions, but they tried the same thing. Funny thing, there. Jacob did the same thing Pa did. Tried to be nice to these fellers and told them that if they only take half then we would pay them a special tax remissile—he called it, I think—next year. They said that was a good idea, but then when it was time for them to go they tied him up and took him with them. Said Lord Tully had done recruiting on him, or something. So then it was just me and my mum and our eight cows.

“Well little Sparkle-shine, we ain’t gonna last long here. Them soldiers has got they war faces on. We need to head south to the city.”

“Where are we gonna stay in the city, Mama?”

“With my cousin Rhaeyanne. Her and her husband have a big warm house.”

“What will we do for money?”

“They’re out there grazing.”

“Mommy, I don’t think we should go to King’s Landing.”

“We’ve got to, Sparklepuss.”

I whispered, “There’s bad men out there. We’re not gonna make it before they take our cows.”

“They’re not touching our cows.”

And they didn’t. Mama knew just about everything somebody could know about shortcuts and hiding places. I was still sad cuz of Pa and Jacob, but whenever we had to get off the road Mama would start doing these funny voices to get Romeo and the girls into a bush, or under a thicket. It made me laugh so hard! Once she had us all hiding in a creek bed while some theater people went by. I don’t how she kept the girls from mooing, but they didn’t. Romeo never mooed. He was mysterious.

“Can’t we go up and see a show?”

“Theater people will rob you as soon as spit on you.”

Once Mama said a stretch of road was too busy, and so she took us through a swamp. I wouldn’t a thought we were all gonna make it, especially Bessa, who’s afraid of water, and Susanne, who’s afraid of pretty much everything else. But Mama’s got a trick with Susanne, she

starts whoopin real loud like she's calling for a bird or something. Susanne can't stand it and it always gets her moving. When some wolves started to trail us, she drove us farther into the swamp, and then onto and over some old castle stones, and then down a ravine that led to a prairie with wildflowers. When we got round the first bend is when we lost Ingritte.

"Border crossing fee, 30 coppers."

"What border?"

"You're leaving land and heading into land. With all the troubles going on, my Lord needs to keep out vagrant types."

"I don't have any money. All I have are my cows."

"One cow would do nicely."

"But all my cows are worth at least three silvers each."

"Do you wanna cross or not?"

She grabbed Ingritte's collar and handed her over. Ingritte went right along cuz she always liked menfolk more than womenfolk. She was so vain; it made me sad to think about her getting the axe.

"Do I get change?"

"We ain't got no change lady."

Gwendolyn turned into a bridge crossing fee; Susanne was a turnpike tax; Bessa was a ferry crossing; Porsha was another bridge fee, this time for repairs; Marian another border crossing fee; and Romeo a fine we had to pay for sleeping on milord's land without paying the renter's fee.

“Weren’t none of these fees and taxes before the war started. Isn’t that a time for people to want to make a penny? Don’t ever count out what people can do, my little Sparklecheeks. We can do some great and fine things, and I thinks most times most people try to, but . . . “

I whispered, “There’s bad men out there.”

“Bad people, yeah.”

By the time we passed Lady Arya, it was down to Catelyn, me, and mum. She was dressed like a boy but I’d recognize her anywhere. I wonder what she’d say if she knew we had lived on her grandfather’s land our whole lives; that my Pa had taken me to Lady Arya’s last name day feast while serving as a courier for Lord Tully; that he’d named the cow I was sitting on after her Mum because she told him at the feast that “his manners would be the envy of all the Lords of the North,” he kept saying for something like three weeks. I don’t think Mama was too keen on that; she always called Catelyn “Little Miss Lady Cow” when Pa couldn’t hear, and sometimes when he could.

I wish we were back on the farm. I don’t know if we’re gonna make it to the city with all these taxes and fees.

“We made it all this way without getting robbed by thieves and we lose all our cows to the government.”

Now that I think about it, I think my Mama will probably find a way.

**ONE OF THE BURNT BODIES IMPALED ON SHARPENED STAKES ATOP THE WALLS OF THE
HOLDFAST THAT ARYA PASSED BY ON HER WAY TO THE WALL (CoK, p. 107)**

I'm not a Lannister man, I'm not a Tully man. I'm a "my family" man. I don't see why they couldn't get it.

And look, it's not like I don't know how dangerous this game is, I'm playing. When the Lannister forces first came to me about my loyalties, I admit I thought about what could be in it for me. I don't have a too-large holding, so I figured the Lannisters and Tullys would have their little lordly spat and maybe I could get a little something in the meantime, even out the balance a little bit from those first three years Lord Tywin kept all my "profits" to pay for the tools he lent me to start up the farm. So when the Lannister men came to me to swear an oath that I wouldn't feed or harbor any Tully men, sure, I signed the papers. I didn't want no soldiers taking up at my farm anyway and they promised me an audience with the lord himself when this business was over to address my grievances, which always meant you'd come away with some kinda settlement cuz half the time he just wanted to be rid of you. So I figured this would be something good for me and Serah and Mychael, and that we would be probably left alone cuz this village was so out of the way anyway.

I shoulda figured the Tully men would have thought of that too. Two days later they come up to the farm asking some of us to swear allegiance to Lord Hoster on account of him letting us sell our goods at the Riverrun farmer's market all these years. And sure, all of the leases have a loyalty clause and a promise not to shelter enemies, but everyone has to sign. If you don't sign, you can't do business. And the Lannister market is twice as far away, which means my fruits and veggies are twice as spoiled when I get there, and I can't even make the beginning and end of the markets because of travel time.

Like, I said: I'm a "my family" man. People could say I'm playing both sides against the middle but I'd say that's the only way to get ahead in this world. Look, I'll make it as plain as I can. The system's rigged, alright? The system's rigged against the little guy making something of themselves. Oh sure, they tell you that if you work real hard and play by the rules that one day you could be elevated to a lordship by some kindly king. But you know who gets elevated to lordships? Most often fellers who let kings ravage their wives. It's true. What else can you do for a king? They don't want us to rise up to their level no matter what they say. If we did, who'd be left to serve them?

So I agreed to lend tools and weapons from the village armory to the Tully men. Technically it wasn't breaking my agreement with the Lannisters, and as village armorer, I had the right to choose what soldiers to give out our weapons too. Most of the time, it was for the protection of the village in case of raids by bandits, but there was nothing that didn't say I couldn't give some to Tully men to protect us. It didn't say I couldn't, and to tell the truth, I didn't have much of a choice. The way they made the request, you could sort of tell. They said that the only reason I would refuse the request was if I planned on turning the weapons over to the Lannisters. This sort of thing was never a problem with the Lannisters and Tullys before, see. They had never had no problems between each other before so a feller could get away with having cross loyalties and the like. Sure, folks say it's a dangerous game, but I knew that. But I didn't understand why they couldn't see that it wasn't like I was a Tully man or a Lannister man, for true. I was, like, for Serah and Mychael. You know?

So then the Lannister men come back three days later and, boy, I could tell you, they wasn't too happy. They had gotten reports that Tully men had been receiving food and shelter

from me and I told them right then and there that that was lie, which I probably shouldn't a done cuz I knew Mother Elayne had been taking Tully boys up at her inn, on account of the Tully boys pay her in coin and not in scrip, like Lannister soldiers are forced to. The money's still good, but Elayne's got to go to Lannisport once a month to cash them in, so sometimes . . .

So then they asked me if anyone in the village had been helping Tullys in any kinda way, and I knew I couldn't tell 'em about the armory, but I figured if I told them about the bridge crossing that we let all soldiers cross for free that that would ease them up a bit, and it did for a sec. We promised no Tully men could cross the bridge and that we would have no conduct with no Tullys.

Well, you can guess what happened next. When the Tully's come back the next week for supplies and repairs, they asked us why no one was putting them up. Most folks said they wanted to stay out of war business but that kinda talk don't do nothing for soldiers. It's only stuff they end up reporting back to their lords. When they left, we knew they'd be back.

A few days later, the Lannisters came into town to make a deal to buy some weapons. I at first tried to tell them we needed the whole inventory for village defense, but that didn't seem to put 'em off. The one in charge asked to see the armory and, well I have to tell you, I was at a loss right then. It wouldn't be wrong to say I saw my life flash before my eyes. I couldn't find a way out of this one. I walked slowly to the armory, put the key in the lock, and opened it. When the one in charge seen we was only at half capacity, I couldn't even look him in the eye. The questions started coming, but he knew I wouldn't have no answers.

Almost like in a dream, like people was moving slower than life, I just caught flashes of what happened next. His soldiers going from house to house, taking supplies and food and

whatever else was needed. They even rounded up all the boys and men and took half of them and conscripted them right on the spot, on penalty of death. Boys as young as 9! It didn't look good. It didn't look good for when the Tullys would come back.

The regiment that did come back was ordered to secure a signed document of loyalty and a refusal to supply Lannister forces with food, shelter, or soldiers. The first thing they did was make a formal announcement, which meant everyone had to come out to the holdfast. When we did, it was pretty obvious we were pretty thinned out. They were to do a town census and if any able-bodied men were missing, the town would be cited for harboring the enemy.

As soon as no one was looking, I slipped around the back of the armory and ran straight for home. When I got there, I found Serah, but no Mychael.

"He's gone to the town square. I was just about to follow him."

"No."

Before we got back to the town square, we could smell the smoke. The soldiers were setting fire to everything, and anyone that tried to stop them was killed. There was Mychael, who had taken up arms like most men in the village and was sparring with a soldier on a horse. I ran up, grab the soldier off the horse from behind, and ended the skirmish with a rock. I then grabbed Mychael and Serah, and pulled them toward the holdfast. When we got to the gate, there were dozens of people trying to get in, and I knew we would have no luck. Across the way, I saw Mother Elayne waving us into her "Troubles Shelter." That's what she called it, anyway. In truth, it was just a large dugout hole in the ground, which she covered with grasses, bushes, and logs to hide it from those she don't know. Inside, she had stocked water, grains, smoked meats, and cheeses to last for months. I always used to tease her about it, said she was

wasting her time. And she would always say, "Come and say that when those pigs decide to wipe us all out."

Mother Elayne always had a dramatic flair for things. But truth is, I had gotten so used to seeing her work on that thing I forgot what it was there for. Exactly what was happening now. I grabbed Serah and Mychael and we ran across the street and down into the shelter. And then we just waited. I kept my family close while Elayne reported soldiers setting fire to all the buildings around us. After a while it seemed like it had gotten quiet. I asked Elayne if it was clear but she held her hand up, then she waved it down like we needed to be *quiet*. Soon we heard soldiers talking to Vasha, our village postmaster.

" . . . you sure about this? You are entitled to no reward if there's no one in there."

"Naw, they're there, alright. It's the only reason she ever built this thing."

I looked over at Mother Elayne, whose face froze in terror -- Vasha had always had it out for her since Mother Elayne stole her husband.

"Fine. Captain!"

"Yes, sir? Set alight all of those bushes and grasses back behind the inn. In case there is anyone in there that tries to escape, set your men around the perimeter."

"Aye, sir. Do we put the bodies in the big pit out back?"

"Yes. Also impale a few on the poles atop the holdfast to serve as warning to any other supporters of the Lannisters who might come by—"

People had already started trying to escape. I had wedged Mychael, Serah, and me into the middle of the group cuz I thought we'd be safer in numbers, but that would prove a fatal mistake. By the time we got close to the exit of the shelter, the roof was already on fire. I could

hear the screams of the people who tried to escape outside. There was just a few feet left. I looked behind me to see my wife passed out. And I was feeling a little dizzy myself. Mychael ran out past me, but I was stuck in a fit of coughing. Did he escape? I sat down for a second to catch my breath, and I looked up just as the fiery roof started to collapse on us. I don't see why they couldn't understa—

**THE SERVING GIRL AT THE WEATHERED LITTLE INN AT THE END OF DRAGONSTONE'S STONE
PIER WHO SWATTED AT THE HANDS THAT GROPED HER WHILE SHE PUSHED HER WAY
THROUGH THE COMMON ROOM (*CoK*, p. 117)**

I used to not even swat at the menfolk. It didn't do any good. But when I got home last week after a real bad night I realized I'd been crying the whole walk home. I didn't even realize I was doing it while I was doing it. And the whole walk I had been thinking about the menfolk at my tables, and how they woulda never treated me the way they did that night if they was by themselves. I know some of them boys. You get 'em by themselves and they're just as shy and awkward as they could be. But you get them around their buddies and you get a few pints in 'em and they just start to act out all these dreams of how they would act if they had the guts, I guess. Like how they would act if they was "real" men (or what they see to be real men, anyway). If they could see me putting my little ones to bed, I know they wouldn't be grabbin' on me like that; I'm just as good as any of their mums or sisters. Aw man, I'm gonna start up again.

The last time the Onion Knight come in is when I got the idea. I always admired those types of menfolk; the type that don't care about where he come from. Time was he was just smallfolk like me, but he had something he believed in so he went for it. I don't know if he thought they'd make him a Lord when he went and helped Prince Stannis like how he did, I just know he didn't let who his mother was control what he thought he could do. And now he's a proper lord. I don't know why it struck me like it did that night, but right after I give Ser Davos his tankard, he lifts it up and he says, just as easy as day,

“Might be we could take King's Landing, but how long could we hold it?”

Just like that. Just as easy as day. Having a chat about how he's gonna take over the world. Well, that's when I got the idea. A man like that, smallfolk who come from nowhere, if he can go traipsing about sacking the lords of government, I shouldn't have to suffer these shitheads harassing me when I'm at work. It's not the whole world, but it's my world.

The next morning, I started talking to the other girls at work. I had the most seniority, so they mostly listened when I had something to say. I laid out the whole plan. I told them I was gonna talk to Jorjo about protecting us at work, or we were gonna cut our hours. He didn't believe me, but he did the next week when he couldn't fill his shifts. Once he started hiring children and old folks to fill our spots, though, me and the other girls went back to work.

I still thought I could do something, though. The next week, I went to the port sheriff and I asked him if he would fine men who touched any of my girls the wrong way. I don't know why I was surprised, but I sort of was when he saw the sense in it. All it would be would be a source of revenue for him, and all he would need to make it official would be an eyewitness account, which the girls would provide. Within a few months, it became common knowledge

that you don't grab on the women at our inn. Jorjo complained at first, but before long more women started coming to the inn, not just to sleep but to eat and drink. And they were spending their own money. The inn got less rowdy, it had a more calm, safe feeling to it. I never liked working there better. But that was only until King Stannis went off to war.

ONE OF THE LORDLING FROM THE TRIDENT'S PEASANTS KILLED BY TYWIN LANNISTER'S MEN

(CoK, p. 200)

I'm not a Lannister man, I'm not a Tully man. I'm a "my community" man. And I sure as hell wasn't gonna let any of these high lords play us for fools.

Everybody knew how it went. One group comes to you and makes you swear allegiance. Now, that would be right and fine if they kept soldiers in your village to protect you when their enemies come, but they don't. They march right off happy as bees. See, lotsa folks get mad then. They don't get why these bastards can't understand that we *can't* swear allegiance to one side because we'll just get the other mad at us. Lotsa these people think the lords are just dumb. But they're not dumb. They know what they're doin'. They been doin' it since I was a pup.

Everybody in my village knew how it went. It had happened too many times before and we've lost too many good boys that we just give away to these bastards, thinking it'll keep us safe. But guess who's the first people they give up when the tide turns? The little people; the common folk. The ones they came to asking for allegiance. I spit on allegiance. We all knew what was in the wind. We just needed a plan.

“I say we go to our land’s lord and shore up the holdfast. Don’t let anyone in, Lannister or Tully.”

“And sacrifice our fields instead? Our crops will be salted or burned to the ground.”

“That’s gonna happen either way. We need to look out for our women and youngfolk.”

“I still don’t see why we can’t hold up in the forest. The path of the least resistance. Once the trout and the lion see the village abandoned, what good are we to either side?”

“You don’t know Lord Tywin. That man’s got a heart hard as iron. As soon as he sees resistance, he’ll send twice as many men, just to remind anyone else who would dare cross a Lannister.”

“Oh come off it, you talk like he’s the Devil himself.”

“The Devil’s Hand, maybe.”

“Our land’s lord should issue a declaration proclaiming himself outside the field of battle.”

“What are you on about?”

“Like, a sort of neutrality. He offers no favors and he asks none in turn.”

“He would have to renounce all lieges to anybody.”

“What about after the war? What do we do when we can’t call on anyone’s bannermen?”

“Maybe we don’t need any bannermen.”

“You’re off your rocker.”

“It’s a cold cruel world. A life with no bannermen would be short and brutal.”

“Look, you’re all acting like we have a choice. You’re acting like this a choice between death and survival. But maybe that’s not the way to look at it. Maybe it’s a choice between dying with honor or dying without honor.”

I don’t know why, but that settled it. And I don’t know where I got that dying with honor line, but it seemed to do something to people. We went to our lord with the plan and he agreed to it because, well, he mostly agrees to most anything we say when we come to him together. Not that he’s a weak man, but he’s clever enough to know that you’ve got to keep your peasants happy. Lords that are always mistreating their peasants mysteriously find their bridges burned and their work tools broken. But for the next week, while we were making preparations to protect our lands, there was just a sort of . . . calm, that descended on our village. All of the little squabbles and fights, all of the little neighborhood rivalries, it all just seemed to fade away. Neighbors who were old enemies started helping each other fortify their houses. People who usually didn’t have two words for each other were talking and sharing about life and their young folk. I don’t want to say it was like we was all making our peace with our gods, but people seemed to realize, on the dawn of the fight of our lives, that most of the little things that separate us are just awfully awfully small in the big picture, really.

It was the Lannister men that showed up first.

“We would respectfully like to declare our liege oaths revoked for now and for the immediate future. We stand as neutral combatants in what we see as an unjust war.”

“What in seven hells does that mean?”

“Just take this parchment back to your lord, commander. It’s an official seal from our land’s lord.”

“What in the seven hells is ‘neutral combatants?’”

“It’s lord’s talk. Just take the parchment.”

“Do you see this lion on my doublet? Lord Tywin doesn’t give two shits about no neutrality. If I go back to Casterly Rock empty-handed, I’m coming back with maces in them.”

“We know.”

“You know?”

“We know.”

“You know that I’m going to come back and we’re going to kill all of you?”

“Just take the parchment.”

I hoped Tywin Lannister was more reasonable than his commander. My hope—faint, but still—was that Lannister might gain a little respect for us, for us standing up for ourselves. Isn’t that how people like him got where he was? Why wouldn’t he recognize that in someone else? Why shouldn’t he admire it? Not saying I have the brains to be a lord, but if the seven had blessed me with better birth, I know I woulda been a good lord to my peasants. People just seem to go along with my ideas, and most of the time they’re happier that they did. Course, most of the time, I just tell them what they already knew. You can’t go wrong if you just do right. That’s what my grandma always said and it’s always served me right. It never made me a rich man in wealth or clothes but, in a lot of ways, I’m richer than any lord. My community, my neighbors, they *respect* me. That’s as rich as any man could ask for.

It didn’t go much better with the Tully men.

“What in the fuck’s sake is an ‘unjust war?’”

“This. This little . . . skirmish you’re in with the Lannisters. We ain’t got no problem with no Lannisters. Ain’t no Lannister ever treated me like lowborn scum. Maybe they would if they got the chance, but they ain’t. So what does some royal snot shortening some Northern savage have to do with us? Ain’t none of us ever tried to kill no Starks. You say this war is to protect Tully lands, but the only reason they’re being threatened is because of a war *you* started. Well, we’re not having any of it. We’re sitting this one out. And if that means we don’t get no banners next time we have troubles, we’re willing to take that chance.”

“Did you just call Lord Tully’s son-in-law a savage?”

“Take the parchment.”

“This don’t mean you don’t get banners, this means Lord Tully declares you all traitors.”

“God’s balls, with the traitors. Why don’t you people ever just say what you mean? You don’t want us on your side, and you don’t want us on their side either. You just want this land free of peasants so you can conduct your war without having to worry about what side we’re gonna be on that day. You know it as well as I do; there’s no loyalty in war. The only thing people care about is keeping their families safe. And that’s messy. So you’d rather just mow us over. But we’re not going to sit around and wait to be mowed anymore. We’re not going to play your little game and give you favor after favor and hope you remember. Fuck you. We’re going to live with honor, or die with honor if we have to.”

“So . . . just so I have this straight . . . you’re sending me off to Lord Tully with a . . . declaration of neutrality?”

“Don’t you see? Folks like us don’t ever win the game of thrones. *Ever*. Ain’t no one writing histories or singing songs about our exploits, see? You know how far back my family line

goes? To my grandma. And she's buried in that field right behind you. You know what my family sigil is? A fucking gravestone, because all we've ever known is death and poverty. We're done. We as a community respectfully say, 'Screw your games.' We're not on either side."

"I wish you good luck, Ser."

And he was off. "Ser," just like that. No ceremony. No kingly words. He just called me "Ser" and rode off. And in that moment—just for a moment—we both knew that I was his equal. He couldn't knight me or nothin', but he didn't have to. *I shoulda been born to this.*

When the Lannister men came back, we lasted a lot longer than I thought we woulda. Yorich, Steffan, and Paul fought off 20 men for 15 minutes while the rest of us got into positions. Our tower watchman was the next to go. He was my tailor. They brought a battering ram, so the holdfast didn't hold nearly as fast as we needed. I didn't see most of my friends die, because I was fighting on the ramparts, up above where you could see where the Trident forked and exploded into three lush river valleys. At just the right moment of sunset, one fork is green with deep forests, one is reddened by the setting sun, and in the other the waters reflect a clear blue on the mountains and in the sky. In a moment, the four Lannister guards on the rooftop with me will push me over the ramparts. As I fall, I see a red comet in the sky, and I know the gods have sent me a carriage to carry me ho—

**ONE OF THE FOUR SLAIN BY JOFF WHEN HE UNLEASHED A STORM OF ARROWS AGAINST
THOSE WHO HAD GATHERED AT THE GATES OF THE RED KEEP CHANTING FOR FOOD (*Clash of
Kings*, p. 312 [paperback])**

“Bread, bread!”

I was one of the first to be let go. Still, I had seen enough. Day after day, hour after hour, walking through the royal kitchens and seeing how these people eat nearly drove me around the bend. Little Lord Joffrey feasted every week, trying to secure the loyalty of this or that lord. So much food. You see, royals don't just eat what's on the menu. No, they like variety. They like to be able to sample things. And so the cook ends up cooking enough food for twenty for meals of eight people. And so week after week, these amazing dishes would come back into the kitchen hardly eaten. And guess where all the extra food went? Well, first Joff would feed some scraps by hand to the three hounds he allows to attend him under the banquet table. The rest? Did he donate it to the poor? Maybe to relieve some of the burden families are under these days? No, the rest went to the kennels.

“Why do the dogs get to eat all this food when bread prices are through the roof?”

“That's exactly why. The royals never give out free food. If the kings gave away leftovers, there'd be a mob at the gates the next day begging for more. That's why they never announce these feasts to the public.”

“So why doesn't he just feed the mob?”

“You're new here, ain't ya?”

I had been working as the head of inventory in the royal kitchen for nine months, which is why when the kitchen staff started to get cut, I saw the writing on the wall. I had been looking for another accounting job for two weeks before I got the axe. I didn't have any luck, though. Food prices were so high, nobody was buying anything else. So businessowners were reluctant to take on new hires. But it was my last night, I think, that did the trick. As I was

leaving the castle, I looked into the courtyard to see Little Lord Joffrey shooting at hares. Quarrel after quarrel, just amusing himself by massacring these animals. And he was just an awful shot. Beyond comical. I literally shot better than him after I broke my hand and had to relearn with my left. He was like a dim-witted child. And he could have practiced on targets, but you could see he just liked watching the little creatures die. I knew I should leave, but for some reason I couldn't take my eyes away. After a while, his gamesman started breaking the legs of the hares right before he'd set them loose. And Joffrey liked it better! *What kind of a bastard is this new king?* I started to have doubts as to whether the realm was truly safe under this boy. And then . . . and then . . . the dead hares were simply tossed off the castle wall into Blackwater. One, two, three . . . *nine*. Nine families that could have eaten that night. This had nothing to do with preventing a mob from gathering. Little Lord Joffrey simply didn't care. King Robert was an ass, but he wasn't evil. I only left after he looked over towards where I had been watching him from. Anyway, that was the night I stopped calling him "King Joffrey."

"Bread! Bread!"

It just sort of ate me up inside. But I had a family to feed like everybody else and I couldn't afford to make trouble. But when they killed the baker, I knew something had to be done. I knew that man. I knew he was a rat, but he didn't deserve to die like that. He simply forgot the one simple rule to living on the streets: make sure your friends are stronger than your enemies. The baker was from Essos or somewhere, and didn't really understand the way of things in King's Landing. He actually thought the gold cloaks were gonna protect him no matter how much he ticked people off. What he didn't realize is that gold cloaks lived in these neighborhoods, amongst us, and they knew how far we could be pushed. But morning after

morning, bread prices would be just a little higher than the day before. King's Landing tried to reason with him. One night, someone threw a rock through his window, but only took one loaf. That was a message, but he didn't get it. He thought the thief had gotten cold feet. The next week, a mob rushed his store, and at that point even the gold cloaks told him he'd better do the two and three-day-old bread giveaways that the other bakers were doing. But he just wouldn't listen. On the day that bread prices reached triple the prewar price, about thirty men, rushed his shop and baked that son of a bitch in his own oven. You should have seen him calling out to the gold cloaks who were amongst them. "Save me!" he said. They weren't wearing their cloaks, of course, but all their expressions said was, "We told you so."

"Save me," he said. That was sort of the last straw for me, if you could say there was one. The next day I went to a meeting of the "secret" town council, a bunch of gangsters that had breakfast together every Tuesday. Anyone's that's got something to say or something to ask for usually shows up. Sometimes the crowd can get pretty big and today there were almost twenty people there. Mostly everybody there was talking about food prices and the war. I'd been there before, but I never spoke. I just listened for some way I could get my family out of this. But today I talked.

"Bread! Bread!"

"Oh yeah, that's nothing. It's not like the royal family even knows what people are going through. They don't eat any less."

"Don't they?"

"I was head of kitchen inventory for nine months. From the beginning of the war to the day I was let go, not only did we not spend less on food, we actually spent *more*."

"More?" That got everyone's attention.

"Sure. Little Lord Joff's been feasting his bannermen to make assure they won't go over to Renly or Stannis. And guess where all of the extra food from those banquets go? To his kennels. He feeds his dogs better than us. And that's aside from the scraps he feeds his dogs at table."

"Seven Holy Hells."

"That right little fucker."

"I'd give my right arm to be under that goddamn table at one of those feasts. My family hasn't had a decent meal in a month."

"When's the next feast?"

"They cut it out when the Imp came back to court."

"All the same, I bet they've gotta have extra in those huge storehouses."

"Yeah, but not enough to feed all of us."

"Yeah, but he don't gotta feed all of us. He's just gotta get the message that he needs to talk to city grocers. I don't need a handout, but he's gotta put some sort of directive on them that they just can't raise their prices to whatever they please when people are starving."

"So what are we gonna do?"

"We gotta do something that's gonna get his attention."

So, we spread the word about the royal feasts, the dogs, and the fact that he couldn't shoot a hare unless someone was practically holding it down. We knew the feasts weren't going on no more, but that wasn't any of Little Lord Joffrey's doing, it was the Imp's. I might coulda seen having that Imp as king, but his little prick of a nephew had to learn a lesson.

By the next town council, it was all anyone talked about. The spoiled little king, his well-fed dogs and his crippled hares. Some gold cloaks had come around the day before asking who had started such vicious rumors but, luckily, no one ratted on me. Since the gold cloaks weren't hardly ever in the palace, none of the ones in my district had ever seen me working there. Anyway, there must have been a hundred people at that meeting. And that's when we got the idea to gather at the Red Keep the next morning.

The plan was, yell and make enough racket until the king comes out to hear our demands. When he did, Lester, our most articulate gangster, was to ask, in his most polite tone of voice, for food. It probably wasn't the best-thought out plan. But none of us had any chance of getting to see the King in court. It had already been announced that the king would hear no requests regarding food prices in court as he was doing everything within his power to solve the problem. Which means massacring bunnies is all that's in his power.

So we decided to yell. King Robert used to yell back sometimes at us when we would praise or throw curses at him. It was disrespectful to yell at a king, but the good-natured ones didn't stand on ceremony. And when it's about an issue as dire as this, some of us reasoned that the normal rules didn't apply. But as it turned out, the normal rules were actually made for situations like this.

As we headed out en masse to the Red Keep that morning, I noticed that some people had made some signs. They were all hare-themed. Some of them had a hare with a target in his back; some of them had picture of a hare with bandages around his leg. They were all hilarious but a bad idea when you got down to it.

"I don't know if Little Lord Joff is the type to see the humor in those."

“Making fun of royals is a honored King’s Landing tradition. They expect it from us.”

“I don’t know if this one does.”

When we got to the Red Keep, we started our yelling. I screamed as loud as anyone, for nearly half hour. It looked like the king was not to be roused. Then I had an idea. It was possible that we didn’t sound any noisier than the normal street traffic this time of day. We had to do something where he would know this was different.

“Rollo! I’m going to start saying something, and then I’m gonna to keep repeating it. I want you to repeat the same thing.”

“What, say the same thing you’re saying?”

“Yeah.”

“But no one will hear what I have to say.”

“No one can hear it now.”

“So, just chant along with what you say?”

“We won’t be saying much, but at least he’ll hear us. Follow my lead. *Bread! Bread!*”

And he did. Rollo started saying it with me, and then Good Benjamin noticed what we were doing and picked up on it. Before long, the whole crowd was saying the same thing together instead of a hundred voices yelling out hundred things. And people took notice. Passersby came up and joined us. And more soldiers came to the ramparts and a few courtiers came to their windows to see us. I guess they weren’t sure what to make out of an organized mob. When Joffrey did come out, he was red with anger. He knew what we were talking about. Word that he fed his dogs from the table while the city starved had spread like wildfire once it got out, thanks to yours truly. Now we were supposed to quiet down for Lester to talk, but

Lester was gone. He probably was afraid he'd be recognized which, of course he would be. This was not the most well-thought-out plan. Once the king showed up, the people who had made signs finally got their time to shine. All of the signs mocking the prince's shooting prowess shot up. In an instant, his face went dark. He scanned the crowd, and his face lingered a little too long on mine. Did he . . . *recognize* me?

Rather than respond to us, he just whispered something to his soldiers and disappeared again. I suppose we really couldn't have asked for more. At least he knew, now, that he can't do any old thing and not be held accountable. I'm glad I spoke out against him. I turned to Rollo to share that fact, when all of a sudden a red flower bloomed out the back of his head. After a second, it was clear the flower was caused by an arrow forcing itself through. Seeing the fletching and shaft sticking out of his eye confirmed it. This was a bad plan. He's ordering his men to shoot at us? His own people? For *chanting*? Robert was an ass, but he wasn't evil. I looked around and saw that the mob was scattering in the wind. This was a bad plan.

"What kind of a bastard *is* this new ki—"

THE PASSING WOMAN WHO CRASTER GRABBED BY THE WRIST WHILE HE TALKED TO JON

SNOW (*Clash of Kings*, p. 361 [paperback])

I've said it a million times and I truly believe it: "Better to die free than live a slave."

I loved living north of the Wall. I wouldn't give up my freedom for a dozen lords and ladies washing my cold hard feet. But there's one thing them southron bastards got that I *could* make use of: laws.

Laws protect people, and they keep people like my father from taking advantage of people who aren't as strong as he is. I know he protects us, I really do, but I also know that all my sisters would rather have our *own* man to protect us. The way we were living wasn't right. And it wouldn't be so bad except every time any eligible men come around, he tells us not to talk to them. Calls us his "wives"—which to most crows means something, but how can it mean *anything* when all of our marriages are just one sister consecrating another sister in a barn? We go into the barn and we say a few words and all of a sudden he's married again. But he don't pull that "wife" business when it's just us. When there's no one else around he always calls us "daughters." He only calls us "wife" to scare off men who can't protect us as well as he thinks he can. When I was a little girl I thought there was a sweetness to it: What little girl doesn't want their daddy to promise to protect them for the rest of their lives? It wasn't till I got older that I realized that he doesn't trust *any* men to protect any us better than him, and never would. Only when I became a woman did I realize that what he does with us is not just protection. I think he has us living this way mostly because . . . he just *likes* it.

And that's quite a devastating realization to have once you really accept it. I wanted to believe in him *so* much for *so* long, but you can't fool yourself forever. I suppose I was 15 or 16 when I stopped trying. I had already lost one baby boy to the white gods, and I started to notice something in his eye every time he got married. He would get so excited on the wedding night, almost like a little child. He acted like how I imagined he used to act when he was a little boy. And that thought made me so sad. I had never seen a little boy. I mean, I knew that they had to exist in the world, but I had never laid my eyes on one. I used to think that must be how the gods wanted it, but how could that be? How could people survive, how could the men we've

seen grow to manhood if the gods wanted all little boys to be sacrificed? I know it might sound like sacrilege how I'm talking, but the white gods never done nothing for me, in truth. The way we were living couldn't just be about protection. Every person should know the laughter of little boys *and* girls. How do they play together? Are the boys more fierce? It wasn't right how we was living.

But that's not what I told the crows. That's not what I tell anybody. I toe the line about saying he takes care of us whenever anyone asks because when I make him happy he doesn't fuck me. For whatever reason, my father only takes me to bed when he thinks he's got some lesson to teach me. I don't know if he even knows that's what he does, but that's what he does. So I'm mostly agreeable to him and he leaves me alone because I think he thinks I'm one of the more homely ones. Craster's Keep must be the one place in the world where being homely is a blessing.

North of the wall is the only place in the Seven Kingdoms where a person can make their own destiny. And that's true for most people, except women always seem to get the short end of the stick, no matter where we are. But if I could get out of here and make my way, I know that I would be accepted for who I am wherever I went, and no man who wasn't my father could make me do anything against my will. If I could get out of here, I could live, hunt, eat, and fall in love with who I wanted.

That's why I can't make sense of people in the south. Most of them, they have a choice, and they *choose* to be slaves. They choose to bend their knees and die in wars for rich people and "highborns," as they call them. Have you heard of anything more ridiculous than a "highborn?" How can a person be born "high?" We're all equal, squalling and helpless when we

come out of our mother's womb. It is a queer fiction to create people of different births. Me, no one really gave me a choice, but if I had a chance to get out of here, you can bet sure as hell it ain't gonna be so I can be delivered to some lickspittle holdfast south of the Wall. If I ever get the chance to get out of here, I'm heading as far north as north goes.

THE MYRAHAM CAPTAIN'S DAUGHTER

Since we lost my mama, it's been just my dad and me. I've spent my whole life either on the sea or in Oldtown. It's been pretty tough for dad since mama's been gone. Money has been tight, and he's had to take on loads and passengers that he normally wouldn't have. Many not very savory men have booked passage on the *Myraham*, but my papa says their money's just as good as anybody's. But I hope we don't have to take on these types of passengers much longer. The boat was re-christened after my mama when she died. I like to think that the *Myraham* looks after me now the same way the real Myraham looked after me in real life. I really needed her watching over me with some of these new passengers these days. They are mostly quite rude to me and many of them just expect me to be available to them in *that* way. I try to be useful to papa, and he says he wants to make a good match for me. And the one thing that he says he needs me to do is keep my maidenhead.

"You are a beautiful girl, my love, but men a lot of times are very pig-headed. They are obsessed with their women having perfect hair and eyes and skin, and sometimes as a result they miss the true beauties like you, girls who are beautiful on the inside and out."

I knew what that meant. It meant that I was homely. Well, maybe not homely, but he thinks no man is gonna be awestruck by my beauty. He was wrong, though. I was as beautiful as any of those snotty ladies we're always passing by at the market. They think they're *sooo* perfect, but it's just cuz they've got people giving them perfect makeup, and hair, and clothes. If I had all that, I'd be as beautiful as any lady. As any princess, even.

"But just because they may not want to make an honest woman out of you doesn't mean that they won't try to get something from you just the same. You've got to promise me, sweetie. You've got to promise that you will keep your maidenhead until I can find an appropriate match for you. You don't need to make friends with any of these journeymen. Your soul is as sweet as honeycakes. And once a man gets a taste of what you can do in the kitchen—"

"*Papa.*"

"I mean it. Your cooking could put any high lord's cook to shame."

"You always say that. It's just that my cooking reminds you of mama."

"With all due respect, my sweet angel, your mother could never cook like that."

"*Papa!* She'll hear you!"

"Just wait for me to find a nice merchant or grocer with means who can give you a stable family. Do you promise?"

"I promise."

And I kept my promise. For a *looong* time. Longer than I probably would have if I wasn't all my dad had. But it was just him and me, and I couldn't let him down. At least I didn't think I could. But a *prince*.

Well, not an official prince, but he might as well be. Our new passenger was the son of the high lord of the Iron Islands, and they used to be a real-life kingdom back in the olden days. This was close as I was ever gonna get to royalty. When Prince Theon came aboard, I knew that my mama had finally brought me something special. A *prince*! At first I didn't think he even knew I was alive, but the first night he invited me to his cabin was the best night of my life. We started with some wine, and he was so tender and kind. He whispered how beautiful I was and how aflame with passion he was for me. I couldn't believe my ears. I mean, I knew I had a decent face and body but . . . but I had never really had a chance to put myself together like some of those highborn ladies. I mean, I never had really good hair or make-up. I was only nine when my mama died so she never really got to teach me much of that sort of thing, and papa was useless when it came to all things womanly. But when the prince invited me to his cabin, I knew I had to do something to make myself as pretty as those snooty ladies in Oldtown. I didn't really have much to wear, a woolen dress with ruffles near the sleeves and bodice. It was simple; it was the prettiest thing I ever saw my mama wear, so I gave it a try. I must have spent 20 minutes on my hair. It was dark and fine, and if I brushed it just so, I could get a nice sheen out of it as it fell over my shoulder. I tried to sprinkle on a little blush and powder, but I don't really know if I did it right. Of course, it made no matter. As soon as I stepped on deck the wind destroyed my hair and the sea spray washed off my powder.

My prince didn't seem to mind, though. After a about an hour of his sweet words, I sort of knew what was coming. I didn't think I'd have the strength to say "no" to him if he pushed it, even though it would break my poor papa's heart. But why would the prince be saying all these things if he didn't care? Maybe . . . maybe he means to take me away! That would be the end of

it all. Maybe he really does see something in me, the things my papa sees. And he's *sooo* handsome and kind. And sweet. And strong. And young and virile, not old and stinky like most of the men my father books passage to. Maybe he had been sent to me by the gods for a reason. I had waited so long. That had to count for something didn't it?

It turns out, the sweet words didn't last once I'd let the prince have his way with me. He was kindly enough, but I could tell some of it was just to get what he wanted. But I knew what I wanted now, too. I wanted Prince Theon. I wanted to go where he went, do what he did, whatever it was. I realized something about myself after I had been deflowered and was now a woman. I needed off this ship. I needed out of this life. My father wasn't going to be able to find anyone for me anywhere near as good as prospect as the prince of the Iron Islands. I knew I was a lowborn and probably not his first choice for a wife. I knew that lords and especially princes have to be especially particular who they take to wife because they have to make family alliances. I mean, everybody knew that; they knew that those highborn marriages were just mostly politics. But maybe with me he could have the real thing. As soon as the thought crossed my mind, I felt a twinge of guilt for the prince's future lady-wife, but told myself I was being stupid. Them high-borns all have a string of lovers, men and women. The marriages are just for show. No lord marries for love. But maybe he could have it with me. It wasn't exactly what I dreamed about having as a little girl but . . . I was a woman now, and had to be practical. I had to stop seeing marriage like they talked about it in those hero's songs. That wasn't reality. If the *Myraham* brought me this prince as a gift, I wasn't about to let it slip through my fingers. It was time for me to put away childish things, and childish songs about heroes and love and honor. So, I set myself to it: I had me a prince to conquer.

Once we got near the Iron Islands, I began to drop hints. I told the prince I had never been there before, but then he started talking about farmers and miners and fishermen and the sorts of things my mama says men talk about to women when they want to seem interesting. When he was done, I got back to the business at hand. I had never offered to go off with anyone ever before other than my papa, but I offered to go along with Prince Theon. He seemed not too keen on the idea, which I knew he might not be, but I told myself I just couldn't give up on him, no matter what. I moved on to my second plan. Dad always said I could cook for any high-born, so I suggested I could do that. Then Prince Theon had an even better idea, said I could be his Iron Islands salty wife, or something like that that he called it. At any rate, it sounded perfect. He could have his royal heifer and I could cook for him and clean for him and be there for him at night. It sounded like a perfect plan to me. He kept talking but by then I wasn't listening no more. I wanted to seal our deal with a kiss, or more, and I told him so. But this time he said he didn't want to do that right then, but he wanted me to do it with my mouth. If it was gonna get me off this ship, I didn't mind. I had done it before with a boy I used to like from Oldtown. I wouldn't let him have his way with me, so I did it with my mouth because I loved him. And plus he usually only lasted a minute or two. But Prince Theon took much longer and my mouth began to ache after a while. But once he was finally finished, I took that as a yes. As far as I was concerned, I was Prince Theon's salty wife from that point on. I couldn't understand why he was still being so disagreeable, though. He said he didn't want me to go, but by now my papa knew what we were doing down in his cabin. I even told him Papa would beat me, though I hoped he wouldn't. But he . . . he said some rotten things after that about how I should be lucky if he got me with child. Lucky? Was I gonna feed a little baby on

lucky? I fully expected him to say something after that to make up for that cruel jape, but my Prince was not one for being available with his emotions. I sat there, waiting, and he left.

I almost lost hope, but then I got another sign that my mama had destined for me and the prince to be together. On the day we were supposed to leave the Iron Islands, my papa got news that King Balon wouldn't let him sail. Could it be? Could it be that me and Prince Theon were destined to be together? When Lord Theon got off, I tried to follow after him in case he wanted someone to warm his bed, but my father restricted me from leaving the ship. So day after day, hour after hour, I roamed the deck, always looking at the horizon for Lord Theon. After almost two weeks, he finally made his way back to the Myraham but was with . . . some woman. She was taller and thinner than me, but she was also about 30 years old. I knew he wouldn't want that old twig and I called out to him just to remind him what was waiting for him. At first I thought he didn't hear me but then . . . he looked up at me and looked away quickly and I knew he did. He was done with me.

But I wasn't done with me. Turns out, he was right about leaving a gift in my belly. I had tried to be careful and I used a plunger and drank bitterroot tea every time we did it, but we had been doing it a lot and he never wanted to take it out before his release. By the time we got back to Oldtown, I was getting sick near every morning. I told Papa I was sick, but I wasn't sure how long that would last. So one night, I took the few belongings that I had, and I left the Myraham. I knew there were women in Oldtown who could help me. But they took a lot of time and most of them cost a lot of money. As money was short, as it had been for a year, I had to go to a new place that I had never of before. The woman who greeted me was nice, but the smell

inside the dwelling was awful and children's playthings and cat shit was everywhere. Out of all the experiences to have the first time I was with child, this was about as low as you could go.

I began the crone's regimen of drinking a special tea she hand blended as well as all sorts of running and jumping and others sorts of actions that she said will make the baby go away. After a couple of days I started to feel that this was not going to end well. I usually didn't stay off the Myraham this long and I was never this far away from her. I don't know if the old ship could even tell where I was on this side of town. By the third day, something was definitely wrong. I couldn't get out of bed, and I starting to have awful pains in my belly. But I was told when these things worked then a lot of blood would come out of me but still no blood would come out. But the pain got worse and worse until by the end of the day, I could not think or see straight. The crones put cold towels on me but I they felt like fire after just a few minutes. I shoulda never left the Myraham. I should never let that little lord leave the ship without me. I shoulda stayed by Theon's side and had his baby on the Iron Islands. Instead, I have to stare at this shit ceiling in this cat-shit-smelling house and I can't even get up to go to the bathroom. Every time I open my eyes, the room literally starts to spin in circles, and then it goes back to where it started. Spin and stop, spin and stop. Maybe the gods are getting revenge on me for trying to get rid of a little baby. But I'm not much older than a baby myself. Maybe once this is over, my papa will take me back and marry me to some grocer or merchant. Someone who can take care of me. Someone who can make this awful pain go away. Someone who could—ah, but wait! There's, it's gone. And lo, there's my mama! She's found me even though I was clear across town! She looks so beautiful. I love you, mama. I missed you so much. Look I'm gonna have a baby! Are you proud? It's the baby of a cruel lord, though. Are you here to look after me,

like you did when I was a girl and you were a ship? Or when I was a ship and you were the crones? Why am I . . . why am I floati—

THE LATRINE BOY WHO HAD A BIG CHUNK TORN OUT OF HIS CALF BY WEESE'S UGLY SPOTTED BITCH BECAUSE HE ANNOYED HIM (*Clash of Kings*, p. 457 [paperback])

Sometimes there wasn't no pleasing Mr. Weese. He'd yell at you soon as he'd look at you. Mr. Weese was a hard man to work for but he was still good enough to give me a top job.

I'm not stupid. I know cleaning latrines ain't the most top job. That's being a lord or a king or such. But Mr. Weese made me head of all latrines, and if I'm head of all latrines in Hare and Hall, that's a top job. Hare and Hall is an old famous castle full of 'specially important people.

My mommy always called me 'specially important people but she was always saying nice things 'cuz she loved me. I miss her. Mr. Mountain cutted her head off a while back, so now she can't tell me that stuff no more.

I don't know who my dad is, but I knowed that all my life people made fun of me cuz I was a dummy. But now they can't make fun of me no more. I am the head of latrines at Hare and Hall so that makes me top man. I wasn't really a dummy. Mommy said not to call myself that. I just says it sometimes because that's what other people called me. But Mommy said not to say such things about myself and that's why I don't. My mommy loved me but she can't love me no more cuz she ain't got no head.

When I clean the latrines it's real smelly, but I like it cuz it makes it seem like the day goes right on by. I jump into the pits and start my work and sometimes I don't even notice before it's time to break for lunch. And then I go back to work again and come back out and it's nighttime and I can sleep.

I guess sleep is my most favorite part of the day. When I sleep I'm all of these great people like knights and important people like Mr. Weese. But I don't mind the smell as much because the day goes by so fast. Most of the time when I work I can sing along to the music in my head, songs my mommy taught me. I know all the words to one hundred and six two songs - - sixty two songs, I'm up to one hundred sixty two now. My mommy said she always had to learn new songs to teach me because I learned them so fast. I don't know why, my head was always good with music. Mommy said I was 'specially important because even when I was a little bitty baby I could hum whole songs back to her after she just had to sing it one time. I guess most people can't do that but it don't seem like nothing to me. Anyway, I think that's why my mommy said I wasn't no dummy.

Most of the time when I'm cleaning I sing my songs unless Mr. Weese is around. He don't like my singing and always tells me to quiet down in there. But if he's not around I usually sing because it makes the day go by quicker. But Mr. Weese don't like when I sing.

I was singing one time just minding my business and singing and the day was flowing along real good. But when I didn't notice Mr. Weese had snuck behind me. He had told me to shut up earlier but he had gone out the back so'd I thought he was gonna be gone for a while. And then he said, "I know what'll shut that boy up. Get 'im girl!" And then his bitch tore right into me.

Owwwwwwoooooooooooooooooh! Owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww! I ain't never felt pain like that before. *Owwwwoooooooooooooooooh!* That bitch tore into my leg and almost bit my leg off! Why'd she have to do that?! I woulda stopped singing again! There wasn't no call to do that! *Owwwwwwwwwwww!* It hurts so much. Why can't my mommy be here to help me? She never used to let no one mess with me! And they always tried. They always tried to trick me or get me to do some foolishness. Mommy didn't never let nobody mess with me. But this Mr. Weese is as mean as a cur! *Ooooooooooooooooooh, my leg! It hurts so much.* I tried to stop it up or wrap it up but I could see there was a big hole there, which is when I got scared and went to sleep.

When I woke up again, I was laying in the back of the dungeon on a straw mat. The bitch was staring at me and bounded out the room when I woke up. I don't know what I was doing laying around in the middle of the day so I tried to get up and that's when I remembered what Mr. Weese's bitch had done to my leg. I looked down and somebody had finally wrapped it up good. It hurt so much, though. Why, oh why? Why did he do that? It hurt so much and what if my leg don't work right no more? Why did he *do* that? It was too mean. It was so mean to me! Mr. Weese don't never try to do nothing nice for me. I miss how sometimes my granny used to do nice things for me, for no reason, just because she was my granny. But Mr. Weese wasn't no kin of mine, so I guess that's what happen when you ain't got no kin looking after you. Why was Mr. Weese so *mean*? He hurt my leg so much. I tried to get up and walk, but I got dizzy and sweaty. After I tried it one more time, I went to sleep again.

It was dark now. I lit a candle and looked at my bandage. There was blood still coming out and some other stuff. Also when I sniffed down there it didn't smell so right. Maybe tomorrow it'll be better so I went to sleep.

It wasn't no better the next day or the next, and then it started to get worse. Up above where the bitch had bit me, my leg had started to turn black and sort of shiny and hard. I wasn't sure what that meant. I hoped it meant I was getting better but wasn't no one around to tell me if it was. The bitch stayed with me most of the time, and sometimes would sniff me and put her snout underneath my hand.

"That's alright, girl. I know you was just doing like Mr. Weese told you to do. Just like I was doin. Except I was doing extra cuz I was singing when I wasn't supposed ta. But my mommy had always told me I might could maybe get good work as a singer. So I had to practice didn't I?"

"Yeah, you can't be blamed for that."

The bitch didn't really say that on account of she's a dog, but she looked up at me right at that moment and looked at me and it felt like that's what she was saying. She was a good girl. She probably wished she could have a bath cuz she was stinky. Mr. Weese should let her know she's a good girl. Most all the time, all I see is him yelling at her and making her bark at people. That ain't no way to treat a friend.

After a few days, I couldn't feel nothing in my leg no more. Everything below the bite had gone from black to green. And it started to get real stinky too. If my leg wasn't gonna get no better, it looks like they might have to cut it off before my whole body turns black and green. I didn't like the idea of being no cripple but, you didn't have to walk to sing. The best singer me and mommy saw in the Riverlands was an old fat bloke with a foot that shot off to the side. He never stood up. But people gave him so much silver he could take a shower in it. If they have to cut my leg, it was better than my face turning all black or purple.

But nobody ever come to take care of my leg. And now, I couldn't stay awake for a whole day. I kept being sweaty and passing out and waking up. And my head was hurting and I started dreaming while I was still awake. That was scary. I wish I had mommy around to tell me that weren't real like she used to. It wasn't right how Sir Mountain did her.

I was about a week past, now. I didn't really wanna get up no more. I just wanted to sleep, to get out of this world. It looks like the Seven didn't have it in their plans to make me no smarter in this world; maybe the next. I just try to be a good person. It makes a difference if you treat people good, mommy used to say. I don't think she knew Mr. Weese. He's a hard man. But he's only ever used four hundred and seventy three words to talk with me, he just rotates em' around. Mama used one thousand three hundred eighty four words with me before she was gone. She loved me so much. But I want to go to sleep, now. It hurts when I'm not sleeping.

I don't wanna wake up no more. I can't move my leg no more and the blackness done spread all the way up. I just want to sleep again.

I just want to sleep again. No more waking up.

No more waking up.

ONE OF THE CRONES TAKEN FOR A THRALL BY THEON GREYJOY'S REAPERS SINCE SHE HAD USEFUL SKILLS AND DID NOT SEEM LIKELY TO CAUSE TROUBLE (CoK, p. 540)

OhMyLord, I knowed what them Iron bastards was up to as soon as the call went out. When I was a little lassie, my village near Seagard was attacked by those iron reavers. Most

people around here forgot I been around that long, but I knowed what to do. I knowed just what they was looking for with crones: They were gonna either rape me then kill me or just kill me. Unless, that is, I could show one I could be of good use to him. They never spared no one. They always wanted to tell each other that they paid an iron price for their thievery. As soon as the call went out, I rushed out and grabbed my loom. I also grabbed all my fabrics. And then I hid, and waited.

They had made their way through most of the village before a big fat one found me under an old floorboard. He picked me up by my hair, but instead of screaming I begged for a job.

“Wait! Wait! Please, sir! I can sew! I can sew anything! I see you need new pants. I can fix those up for you by tonight. I also make boots!”

“Really? Boots?”

My ma was a tailor and my pop was a cooper. I ran the only shop in the North that sold both shoes and clothes. I was hoping to open up another shop in Seagard someday. I’d love to go back to the place where I lost my ma, pop, and my sisters and brothers. I wanted to show our family could make it back from all that. But that didn’t seem likely now. To prove that I wouldn’t cause trouble, I laid on the ground in a way that showed him I was receptive. He pawed at me for a moment, said “Maybe later,” and then tied me up. And just like that, I was an ironman’s thrall.

He did rape me for the first week or so, but I expected that. I was just happy he didn’t slit my throat and toss me overboard after, like how they like to do. After about a week of me sewing clothes old and new for him nonstop, he lost interest in me that way, mostly. He had a

salt wife onboard and she was young and sort of broken in the head, so I think that amused him.

It was a while before he'd let me sleep without shackles. Every time he was around I bowed my head and acted terrified. I know how they liked it. He had to really believe he was the scariest thing I'd ever seen. A few times he forgot to lock me up when he went to bed and when he woke up to come and check on me *I had put the shackles on myself*. I think he almost let one go right in his trousers when he saw that. *Make 'em think they got the shackles on your mind*.

A few weeks after that, my iron lord was going two and three nights in a row without locking me up. I let that go on for a little while too. Then one night, after he had left me unlocked for a week, I picked up the pack I had made, snuck into his bedroom, and slid his own knife deep across his throat. It wasn't the first time I'd killed a man. It wasn't even the first time I had killed an iron born. After they took me from Seagard, they waited until I grew up and flowered before they started raping me. I had to kill three men to get away from them that time. I didn't feel bad for this little iron lord. It serves his stupid ass right for trusting a slave. After, I did his salt wife, too. Then I snuck off his smelly ship, grabbed the nearest canoe, and made my way for the coast. If I'm not wrong, I'm just a few days from Seagard.

SOMEONE WHO SHOUTED FROM THE CROWD GATHERED TO WATCH MYRCELLA SAIL TO

DORNE

(CoK, p. 593)

This time, we were going to teach those bastards a lesson about who was in charge here. They think they can just kill a few of us off and we'll go away? We're not going anywhere. This is our city, not any stinking royal cunts'. We *are* the city.

Last time, it was mostly Eldrick's idea to send a message to the king. He had worked in the king's kitchens and told everybody at the gangster's town council about how Little Lord Joff—that's what he called the king—how Little Lord Joff was throwing feasts for great lords and throwing good hares off the side of the castle. I didn't have much love for the king before, but I shore didn't have no love for him after that. It's the throne I respect, you see. I respect the throne of the king, but if a right bastard is sitting in it, well, it's the people's civic duty to make that bastard's life a living hell until he changes or goes to war to die and leaves it open for someone worthy. So after they killed Eldrick off, I guess I pretty much took up the charge.

We had a better plan this time, though. Last time, I don't know, I guess we figured those cunts would act like human beings, that they could handle a little good-natured ribbing as long as they knew our cause was just. I guess we shoulda known better. Eldrick's the one that got us all chanting at the same time. It made a difference, I tell you. Usually when the people start to get rowdy, there's just a lot of screaming and shouting and downright pissiness and that's how the royals know they'd better do something. But since half the time ain't nobody thinks to actually talk to one of 'em first, half the time whenever they try to fix the problem they just make it worse cuz they don't know what we really want. But this time they knew what we were saying. "*Free the hares! Free bread!*" said it all. Not just that we wanted bread but that . . . well, everybody knew what had happened to the breadmaker. The royals wasn't stupid and neither

were we. We couldn't just come out and say "Feed us or you're gonna end up like that breadmaker bastard," but we knew they got the message. Only maybe they didn't quite.

But it wasn't just that. That little shit prince needed to get proper targets rather than using decent animals which ain't done nothing to him. That's one of my special peeves, I'll tell you, sorta why I'm in all this. Sure, them royals treats humans like shits and with some exceptions a lot of us got is coming. But it's like . . . it's like some of these royals are just declaring war on all the beasts of the earth. Horses, cows, pigs, chickens, It serve us right if they all teamed up on us. Serve the royal shits right as rain. They needed to free those hares, and they needed to free the bread supply to give us, the people, free bread. Because we, the people, planted the wheat, harvested it, ground it, milled it, baked it and seasoned it for your lovely clown show for buffoons.

We, the people. I was going to have to remember that.

It wasn't me who came up with the plan to stop the procession. I still wasn't sure how we was gonna do that. But Shaya the Half-Mind brought us the answer that morning. Her little boy had finally starved. We all saw it comin'. She lived on the corner outside the gangster's council and we wuz all surprised when she got pregnant. And she loved that little lad, but she just didn't have it in her to take care of him. She couldn't keep a job cuz she couldn't keep her wits about her, so begging for coins and scaps was her only means. They was doing alright till the war started. People just didn't have much to spare. People who had something gave what they could, but she just didn't have it in her to take care of him. So when she walked in that morning, still holding 'im, and laid his little body on the table and said "I want those bastards to pay," I had my plan.

Everybody stops for a grieving mother. It would take the foulest demon known to the gods' earth if someone tried to run down a grieving mother. But at first, that's what I thought they were gonna do. The king didn't stop till he was right up on top of Shaya and that's when the show began. She told me she was gonna have some words for the queen but I had no idea she was gonna rip that bitch to shreds like she did. It was pure fucking poetry, if you want to know the truth. And it was at that point that I knew these Lannister cunts were weaker than King Robert. *They let her go on and on!* They just sat there taking her shit. Half a dozen times I thought the king was gonna put an arrow through her head but they all just stood there with their mouths open, like they couldn't believe what they was hearing.

I thought there might be a chance to save Shaya and that's when I gave the signal to throw the shit at the king. That was a fine moment as well. I had a front-row seat for that one, and watched as it soiled his pretty golden hair and ran down his cheek. How I wished at that moment for some sort of magic art to capture that moment to look at forever. It's seared in my brain, though. It was a glorious sight. I didn't even have to offer up our decoy, the king outright demanded to know who threw it. What an idiot. Why would he think in a million years any of us would give up one of our own? And, can you believe it? He actually offered up the reward. A hundred golden dragons! Jerrold Girl-Hair bet me last week he'd offer a reward, but I couldn't believe it. Didn't he know that was the oldest trick in the book? How many times had we all done something together, given some shit information, and then come back to the quarter to split up the reward? Had they really not caught on? Robert stopped giving out rewards for shitty information a half year into his reign; we thought they all knew what we were doing. And he didn't even tell his son?

“He was up there,” I shouted, and off Rabbit took like a shot. I half wanted him to slow down, and give the idiot Kingsguard a chance to get close. He had to lure some of them away or it was gonna be a bloodbath. I was hoping one of them would try to actually climb up on to the rooftops. Rabbit had stories about people trying to catch him up there that could make you pee yourself. And wouldn't you know it? As soon as Rabbit took off, one of those idiot pages actually threw a bag of coins at me. It wasn't a hundred dragons, but it was enough for Rabbit and Hollister and all the planners to get a nice little bonus on top of the usual reward split. Whenever Hutch the Butch puts together a reward job, everyone in his quarter gets 1/200 of the total, and all the planners get 1/10.

As soon as a few Kingsguard took off, we started in on it. We started surging in, but everybody from different direction so it didn't look like we were coming from any one place. We started up the bread chant again. This time they got the message. And then, I don't know, it was like a madness sort of took everybody. Once they saw the Lannisters were scared, they turned into mad dogs. People started grabbing people from the procession, pulling them right off their horses. I even saw someone try and grab at the king! But a Kingsguard made them a cripple in less than a second. They're lucky to be alive. Even I wouldn'ta tried no stupid shit like that.

And just like that, there was Rabbit. He was looking over at me, smiling. He liked to do that sometime. He'd get some idiot so lost in the rooftops that he'd just drop down and walk back to where the action was. I started to smile back, till I looked behind him. Girl-Hair was making his way towards us after having ditched his bag of shit, but he was walking right in the

way of the king's palfrey. His head was bleeding, as if someone had given him a shot with a broadsword.

"Look out, Jerrol—"

He let out an awful shriek and then he was gone, like he had never been there. The king rode him down without even trying to pull up. The last I saw, the king was riding off with the Imp and a Kingsguard. He didn't even look back. And what a lucky idiot. Just by chance he happened to run down the very bloke who threw the shit on him. Girl-Hair was a soldier, though. He knew what he signed up for when he went to work for Hutch. That little shit didn't deserve to be no king. His bony ass was a disgrace to the throne.

We'd made our point, though. This is *our* city. *We* were King's Landing. Not them.

THE MAIDSERVANT WHO ATTENDS LADY TANDA'S DAUGHTER (CoK, p. 644 [paperback])

She's done it again, the poor dear.

I adore Lollys, I really do. In the three years I've been working at the Red Keep, she's the only one who has ever shown any real genuine affection. Sure, I've made a few friends, and they're dear to me but . . . no one who works here ever really makes *friends* with anyone else. See, the job one gets at the Red Keep is not really your job. As soon as anyone gets hired, some lord or lady or royal puts the screws to you to be a spy for them. It's sort of like the town crier. We are the way these highborns get their news, and everyone's got their own selection of channels. And there's no use saying no. Everybody knows the people that say no don't last,

sometimes not even the day. If you want to keep your job at King's Landing, you agree to become the spy of some highborn or another. A few of the older girls will be in the employ of two or three highborns at once and make a nice little wage. Of course, they'd be hanged if they were ever found out but it's pretty easy to fool the royals. They can hardly remember our names. And the older girls are better at it than anyone. My friend Jeyne is a spy for two lords, the Queen, and Varys. I don't even recall what her real job is, anymore.

So people don't usually make friends. It can become a job hazard because you might have to end up informing on your friends in order to keep your job or keep your head on your shoulders. And there's no way to tell what side you're on, like with the royals. We don't wear crests or sigils so whoever is held in someone's employ is a secret to everyone else unless you're close enough to them to tell you. It's bad form to come out and ask if someone is in a highborn's employ—it's like asking what someone's wages are. Jeyne only told me after wine and after we'd been working together for over a year and she thought I might actually be around for a while. But everyone else? Who knows? The kitchen workers, the scullery, the laundry—all of the employees of the Red Keep formed a gigantic unseen web, all linking back up to some unbalanced highborn. But I got it. I played the game too. And I wanted to keep my job.

Not the job I had before, but the job I have now. I used to work in the kitchens, and it was miserable. First off, it's one of the only places in the castle that men and women work together in close quarters, and so because of that maybe the men are absolutely out of their minds. It's like they literally think that all of our bodies are their personal property to touch, pinch, fondle, and pet as they please. And it makes no difference to complain to anyone

because everyone knows the Red Keep pays the best wages in the city so the kitchen manager always says the same thing.

“If you don’t like it, there’s 20 girls outside who would love to have your job. That’s why you get paid so much.”

You would think she would understand because she was a kitchen wench herself once, but keeping silent about it is what allowed her to rise to the position she’s in. And since the men know nothing will happen to them, they don’t even try to control themselves. Well, I shouldn’t say all. There are some kind men. Will never touches me and in fact always gives me a smile. And Red Jack is as harmless as a little boy, I think he’s embarrassed of how he looks. All told it’s probably accurate to say it’s three or four out of ten who grope out of habit. But that same three or four use no restraint, so it feels like ten out of ten. And don’t get me started on the pot boys. We share a common living space between our barracks and after the lights go down that living space is like a highway. Mostly it’s boys meeting their girlfriends, but there’s always one or two who just want to try their hands at you because you gave them a smile that day or even a kind look. I’ve learned to have a face of stone at work so some lovesick orphan wouldn’t take it as an invitation to try and sneak into my bed. But at least they’re our age. With the cooks, its constant propositions. Day in and day out, they try to convince you to run away at them or share their bed. Sometimes it’s funny but most of the time it’s sad and embarrassing. Aren’t there any women their age in King’s Landing? It’s is not my fantasy to have some 60-year-old man sweating on top of me trying to give me a baby he wouldn’t even be able to play with. Gross. But the absolute worse is Sven, the baker. If I turn my back on him for one second,

he's behind me, reaching around and grabbing my chest. He's even made a little game of it, and giggles whenever I'm actually trying to do my job and have to turn my back on him.

"Oh-hoo, I got you. You did not see me this time, did you?"

Did he actually think that was fun for me? At first, I used to fight him off, but he actually liked it. He would get more and more handsy and . . . *gross* . . . hard. So, now, whenever he "gets" me, I just freeze up like a statue, quiet as a mouse, and show no reaction. He'll end up calling me "boring" or "no fun" or something, but then he'll leave me alone. How can any man get any pleasure from a woman who shows absolutely no emotion from him touching her? I just don't get men. Not *all* men. Will is sweet.

I worked there for two years until Lady Tanda came to court and I was hired to be Lollys' maidservant. It was the greatest job I've ever had. We ate whatever our Lady couldn't, we got to wear the finest clothes so we could be presentable around our lady; the softest fabrics and silks. I'd never felt anything like that on my body. We even got to travel out of the Red Keep with them from time to time. But it was only a few months after I got hired that she was attacked.

And when it happened, everyone knew that no one in Lady Tanda's household had the slightest idea how to treat someone who'd gone through something like this. All they could do is tell her to be strong and "put it behind her" for family honor. After I'd heard her mom say that for the tenth time, I did something I'd never done before. After her mother left, I took Lolly's head in my hand and I told her that if she needed to, she should take all year to herself if she needed to. None of those people understood what she'd been through. I told her the story of one of the pot boys who had forced himself on me after he'd decided that I had "driven him

mad with magicks.” Whatever, no choice. Did I drive him to get drunk first too? Anyway, once I told Lollys that story, she really started to warm up, even though she still wasn’t speaking in full sentences. She would just kind of stare out the window, or at a wall, and then start to cry. But that’s when I started to find the jewels in my pocket.

At first I’d thought I’d gone mad. Twice in two weeks, a necklace and one diamond earring found its way into my things. I brought each back the next day, but I was terrified. I knew Lollys cared about me, but she could get me in real trouble by trying to be kind. I would have to talk to her today. If Lady Tanda ever found out . . .

And just like that, she did. One day she found a gold bracelet in my bag . . . right before the little cupbearer girl got off work. And she was on duty both times I found those other pieces in my pocket, now that I think about it. And the thing is . . . everybody knows about the little ones: the cupbearers, the pages, the couriers, the chimneysweeps, floorscrubbers, and latrine boys. They’re the worst. And them’s all Varys’. Everybody knows the little ones are all Varys’ except the royals, I think, but only the older girls know that they ain’t just spies. Jeyne told me one night over wine. Varys has them do all sorts of unpleasant things. Jeyne says they was the only ones around when at least seven people had ate it here in the castle. People fall off ramparts, get crushed by falling statues, and no one thinks anything of it. But the thing about them little ones, Varys get them off the street where they ain’t got no one else. I mean, they is living like little animals. And he takes them in and feeds ‘em and starts whispering to ‘em and such. And it’s like they end up being more loyal than any grown, thinking person. Them little ones have got bad seeds, all of them. We don’t talk to them and they don’t talk to us.

Once I put all that together, I didn't put up a fuss when they sacked me and replaced me with Lord Tyrion's girlfriend. I knew this was probably more dangerous than I wanted to get involved with. Dimmer girls have lost a head over less. I cleared out by the end of the day, made a date to have a drink with Jeyne the next week, stopped by Will's work station and gave him the address of my parent's house, where I'd be staying. He's a sweetheart. And he works hard. He could have been a jerk but he never was to me. And half the girls in the scullery were mad for him. I feel bad for Lollys, though. She's a hurt lonely girl swimmin' with sharks, that one is.

MIKKEN (CoK, p. 672 [paperback])

I reckon I can take just about everything life can dish out at me. But the gods are asking too much to have me sit back and watch Winterfell be taken over by Greyjoys. That wasn't gonna happen.

I owe everything I have to the Starks, me and my two little sisters. After Robert's Rebellion, my mother, father, and three sisters were as happy as can be and as harmless as can be. That's up until the Greyjoy Rebellion. Those bastards took the one time Lord Stark was off fighting for all of us to do their raping and reaving in my village at Seagard. My dad and my brother was off hunting, so I was the only man in the house when they come raiding. I did the best I could, but they got the better of me while all my little brothers and sisters could do was watch. One of those ironborn scum -- I think it was one of the Greyjoy brothers themselves in

fact -- made them hold me down while they ravaged my mother in front of me. When they was done with her, they slit her throat and then took my older sister away to be one of their "salt wives." She showed them a trick or two, though -- a few years later, she was back, and she had sent three of those ironborn scum to the grave while she was at it.

After they murdered me mum and stolen my sister, my dad and brother joined Lord Stark's army to put down the rebellion. The army was successful, but my dad and brother never came back. I heard they died bravely. I liked to think my dad drove a spear right through that Greyjoy cunt's neck. Afterwards, me and my little sisters Farlen and Palla didn't have nowhere to go but Winterfell. I had always been good with a hammer, and so Lord Stark took me on as a blacksmith's apprentice and I ain't never looked back. I don't know what we woulda done without the Starks. There's high lords and then there's Ned Stark. If there's one mistake he made, though, it's letting Balon Greyjoy go on being a lord. That was a mistake. Those ironborn don't know how to live with honor. They got no honor but thieving and raping, even the lords. It was only a matter of time before they tried something like this again. Clean up the house and award the lands to a house that knows loyalty, I said to everyone who'd listen. We needed to do 'em like Tywin Lannister did the Reigns of Castamere. That's the only language them ironborn scum understand.

But it wasn't long before I knew that wasn't gonna happen. That wasn't Lord Stark's way, it's partly why I respected the man, to tell you the truth. He's got a hero's heart in a time of villains. That's what did him in eventually. It hurt every time I thought about what those rich Southern cunts are gonna write in their history books, that Ned Stark was a traitor. Ned Stark was the last decent lord left in Westeros. I knew it the minute he brought the little Greyjoy

whelp to Winterfell as a ward. He thought it was the honorable way to keep Balon Greyjoy at bay. I can't tell you how many times I resisted the urge to take little Theon off into the woods and finally start the war with the Greyjoys I knew was coming. But Lord Stark would have had no choice but to lop off me head, which he would have done, surely, and my sisters would have been all alone.

So I stayed quiet, and trusted, and hoped for the best. And then they lopped off Lord Stark's head. And I just had a feeling it was a matter of time.

"Trust me, as soon as Balon Greyjoy heard Ned Stark was dead he started making plans, believe me." But no one did. Theon had become part of the household and had gone off to get revenge for Lord Stark. Why would Balon attack his own son's forces?

"He'll find a reason. Believe me. We should have scraped those ironborn scum off the face of the earth when we had a chance. All they understand is iron. They prey on the weak, like wild dogs. You mark my words." But no one believed me. Until the truth came clambering over the walls. I was making a new suit of armor for King Robb's return when two of 'em come into my metal shop. I swung first, but one was able to crack my knee pretty good.

I knew it. I fucking knew it, and no one would listen.

"You see? You see what kind of fucking rat piss scum we let sleep among us? King of the shit-eating bottom feeding scum of the fucking earth. All of you ironborn are fucking cowards and rapists. I'll piss down all your throats!"

That's when I saw the little lord Bran. Poor lad. I'm sure he wants to be strong, but he ain't never seen the like of these fish-eating scum. There ain't no way he's gonna be able to stand up to these shitstorms in leather, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna sit back and just let

them ease into the seat of Winterfell like a comfy chair. The usurper Theon Greyjoy attempted to speak.

“Aye, we know you for a sack of steaming dung!” *Oof*. Pussies.

“Mikken you be silent!” It’s alright lad, I can take it. I guess I’m the only one here that can take a good beating, so they think they can scare us by roughing me up a bit. But if we show we’re scared we’re all as good as dead. I shoulda choked the life out of Theon when I had a chance. This is all my fault. I knew better. I coulda kept this all from happening if I would’ve just acted! More chatter from the Greyjoy whelp.

“Damned if I will!” And I meant it. I could give a rat’s ass if the boy ceded Winterfell. I ain’t never never going to submit to no Greyjoy lord. Not while there’s still breath in my lungs.

“Bugger that. I serve the Starks, not some treasonous squid of a -- aah” Alright, I felt that one. The bald one liked to bully people with the butt of his spear. I’m gonna kill him first, just as soon as I can get a little closer. Just a little bit, just have to distract him, make him angry, and then I’ll make my move.

“If you think you can hold the north with this sorry lot o’ —“