

GAME OF THRONES

A NEW ORIGINAL SERIES FROM HBO

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GEORGE R.R.
MARTIN



A STORM OF
SWORDS



PRAISE FOR

A GAME OF THRONES

“Reminiscent of T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, this novel is an absorbing combination of the mythic, the sweeping historical, and the intensely personal.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“I always expect the best from George R. R. Martin, and he always delivers. *A Game of Thrones* grabs hold and won’t let go. It’s brilliant.”

—Robert Jordan

“Such a splendid tale and such a fantistorical! I read my eyes out.”

—Anne McCaffrey

“Martin makes a triumphant return to high fantasy ... [his] trophy case is already stuffed with major prizes, including Hugos, Nebulas, Locus Awards and a Bram Stoker. He’s probably going to have to add another shelf, at least.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A vast, rich saga, with splendid characters and an intricate plot flawlessly articulated against a backdrop of real depth and texture.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“The keen and complex human characters and the convincing force of their surroundings operate as magic ... setting George R. R. Martin’s first fantasy epic well above the norms of the genre.”

—*Locus Magazine*

“It is perhaps the best of the epic fantasies—readable and realistic.”

—Marion Zimmer Bradley

“The major fantasy of the decade ... compulsively readable.”

—*The Denver Post*

“George R. R. Martin is one of our very best science fiction writers, and this is one of his very best books.”

—Raymond E. Feist

“We have been invited to a grand feast and pageant: George R. R. Martin has unveiled for us an intensely realized, romantic but realistic world ... if the next two volumes are as good as this one, it will be a wonderful feast indeed.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“I would be very surprised if this is not the major fantasy publishing event of 1996, and I’m already impatient for the next installment.”

—*Science Fiction Chronicle*.

“A colorful, majestic tapestry of characters, action and plot that deserves a spot on any reader’s wall ... the pages seem to pass in a blur as you read.”

—*Albuquerque Journal*

“George Martin is assuredly a new master craftsman in the guild of heroic fantasy.”

—Katharine Kerr

“A *Game of Thrones* offers the rich tapestry that the very best fantasy demands: iron and steel within the silk, grandeur within the wonder, and characters torn between deep love and loyalty. Few created worlds are as imaginative and diverse. George R. R. Martin is to be applauded.”

—Janny Wurts

“A dazzling fantasy adventure ... with a great cast of characters that weave a tapestry of court intrigue, skullduggery, vicious betrayal and greathearted sacrifice.”

—Julian May

“Terrific, incredibly powerful, with phenomenal characterizations and exquisite writing.”

—Teresa Medeiros

“The characterization was superb, the story vivid and heartbreaking ... when is the next one coming out?”

—Linda Howard

A CLASH OF KINGS

“A truly epic fantasy set in a world bedecked with 8,000 years of history, beset by an imminent winter that will last ten years and bedazzled by swords and spells wielded to devastating effect ... here he provides a banquet for fantasy lovers with large appetites.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Martin amply fulfills the first volume’s promise and continues what seems destined to be one of the best fantasy series ever written.”

—*The Denver Post*

“High fantasy with a vengeance.”

—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

“Rivals T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*.”

—*The Des Moines Register*

“So complex, fascinating and well-rendered, readers will almost certainly be hooked by the whole series.”

—*The Oregonian*

A STORM OF SWORDS

“One of the more rewarding examples of gigantism in contemporary fantasy ... richly imagined.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“George R. R. Martin continues to take epic fantasy to new levels of insight and sophistication, resonant with the turmoils and

stress of the world we call our own.”

—*Locus Magazine*

“Martin creates a gorgeously and intricately textured world, peopled with absolutely believable and fascinating characters.”

—*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

“High fantasy doesn’t get any better than this.”

—*The Oregonian*

“A riveting continuation of a series whose brilliance continues to dazzle.”

—*The Patriot News*

“Enough grit and action to please even the most macho ... a page-turner.”

—*The Dallas Morning News*

“The latest and the best in a powerful ... cycle that delivers real people and a page-turning plot.”

—*Contra Costa Times*

“Martin’s epic advances his series with gritty characterizations, bold plot moves and plenty of action.”

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

Book One: *A Game of Thrones*

Book Two: *A Clash of Kings*

Book Three: *A Storm of Swords*

Book Four: *A Feast for Crows*

Book Five: *A Dance with Dragons*

Dying of the Light

Windhaven (with Lisa Tuttle)

Fevre Dream

The Armageddon Rag

Dead Man's Hand (with John J. Miller)

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

Dreamsongs, Volume I

Dreamsongs, Volume II

A Song of Lya and Other Stories

Songs of Stars and Shadows

Sandkings

Songs the Dead Men Sing

Nightflyers

Tuf Voyaging

Portraits of His Children

Quartet

EDITED BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

New Voices in Science Fiction, Volumes 1–4

The Science Fiction Weight-Loss Book

(with Isaac Asimov and Martin Harry Greenberg)

The John W. Campbell Awards, Volume 5

Night Visions 3

Wild Card I–XXI

A STORM OF SWORDS

**BOOK THREE OF
A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE**

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



BANTAM BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Storm of Swords is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2000 by George R. R. Martin

Excerpt from *A Feast of Crows* copyright © 2005 by George R. R. Martin

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Bantam Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

BANTAM BOOKS and the rooster colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Bantam Spectra, a division of Random House, Inc., in 2000.

ISBN 978-0-553-57342-8

eBook ISBN 978-0-553-89787-6

Cover art copyright © 2011 by Larry Rostant

Cover design by David Stevenson

Maps by Jeffrey L. Ward

Heraldic crests by Virginia Norey

www.bantamdell.com

v3.1_r7

A NOTE ON CHRONOLOGY

A Song of Ice and Fire is told through the eyes of characters who are sometimes hundreds or even thousands of miles apart from one another. Some chapters cover a day, some only an hour; others might span a fortnight, a month, half a year. With such a structure, the narrative cannot be strictly sequential; sometimes important things are happening simultaneously, a thousand leagues apart.

In the case of the volume now in hand, the reader should realize that the opening chapters of *A Storm of Swords* do not follow the closing chapters of *A Clash of Kings* so much as overlap them. I open with a look at some of the things that were happening on the Fist of the First Men, at Riverrun, Harrenhal, and on the Trident while the Battle of the Blackwater was being fought at King's Landing, and during its aftermath ...

George R. R. Martin

for Phyllis
who made me put the dragons in

Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

A Note On Chronology

Dedication

Maps

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61

Chapter 62
Chapter 63
Chapter 64
Chapter 65
Chapter 66
Chapter 67
Chapter 68
Chapter 69
Chapter 70
Chapter 71
Chapter 72
Chapter 73
Chapter 74
Chapter 75
Chapter 76
Chapter 77
Chapter 78
Chapter 79
Chapter 80
Epilogue

Appendix: The Kings and Their Courts

The King on The Iron Throne

The King in The North The King of The Trident

The King in The Narrow Sea

The Queen Across The Water

King of The Isles and The North

Other Houses Great and Small

House Arryn

House Florent

House Frey

House Lannister

House Martell

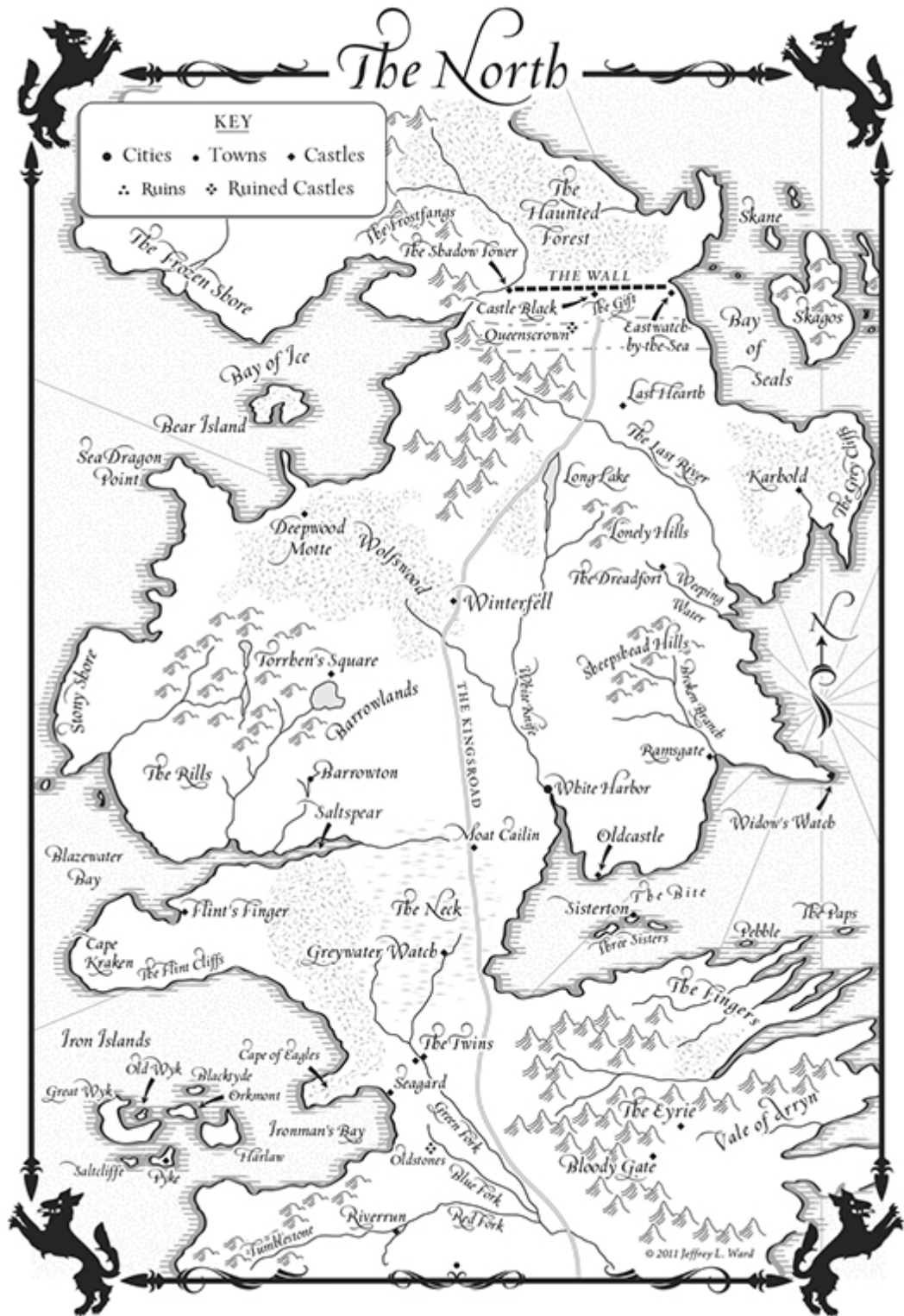
House Tully

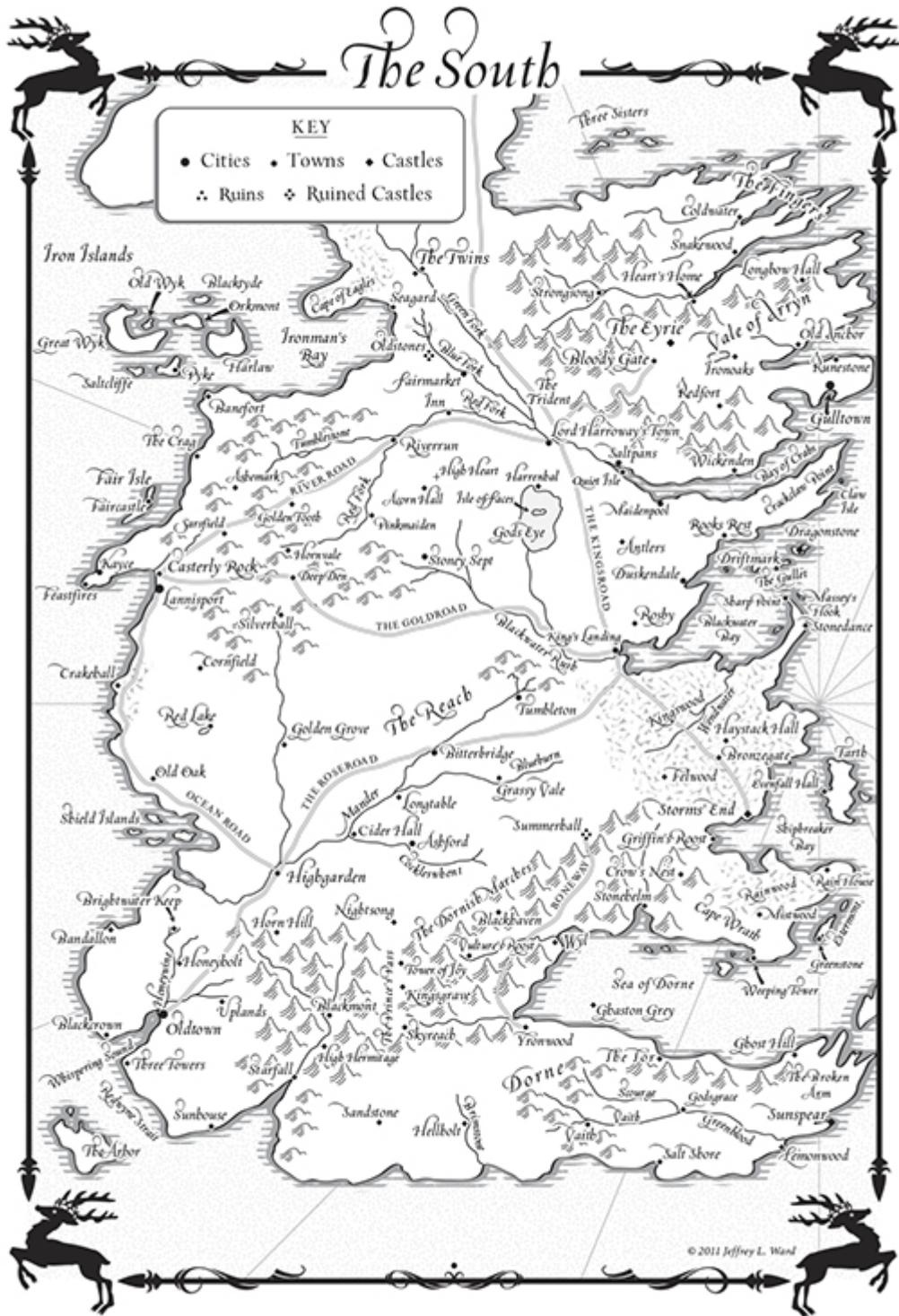
House Tyrell

Rebels, Rogues, and Sworn Brothers

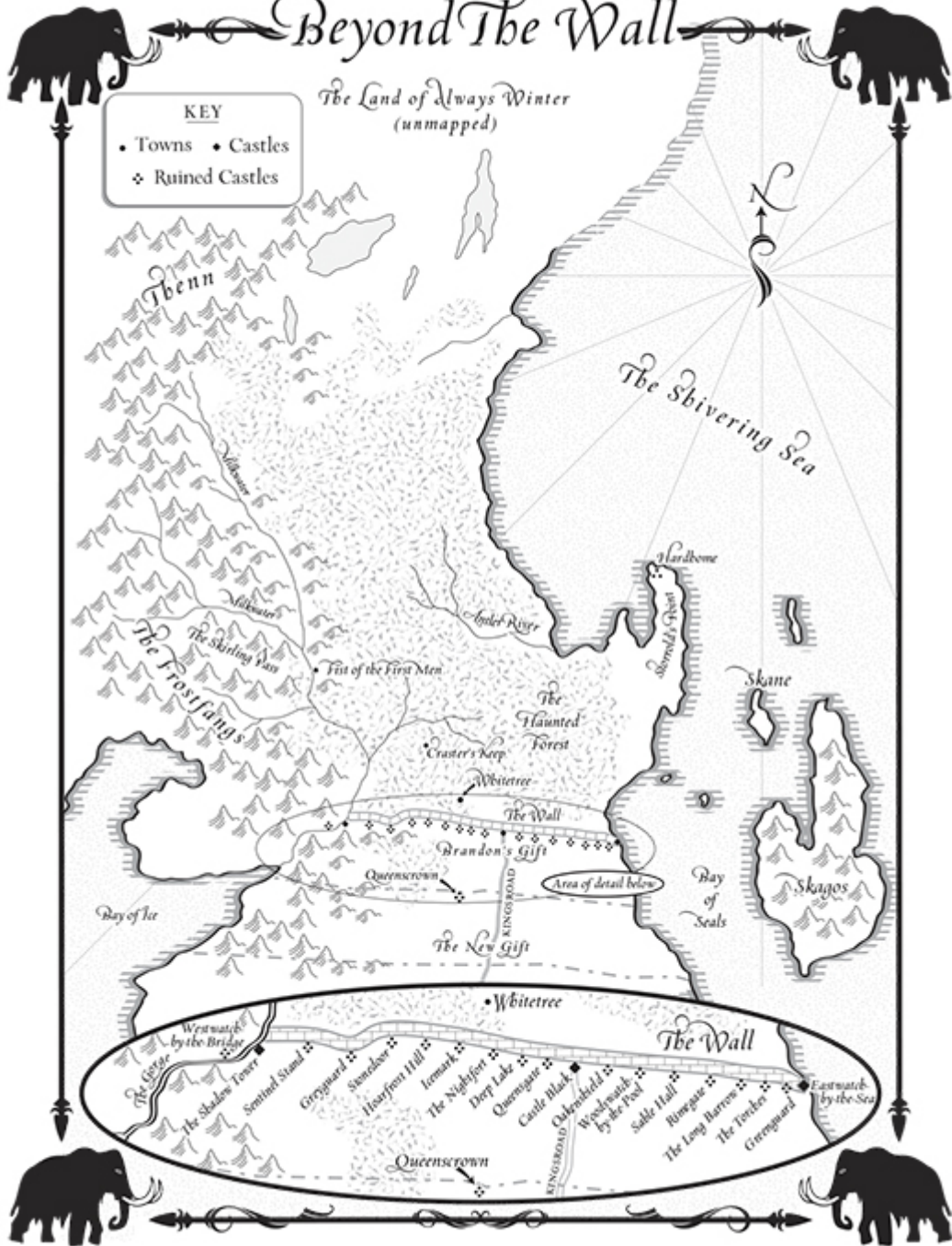
The Sworn Brothers of The Night's Watch

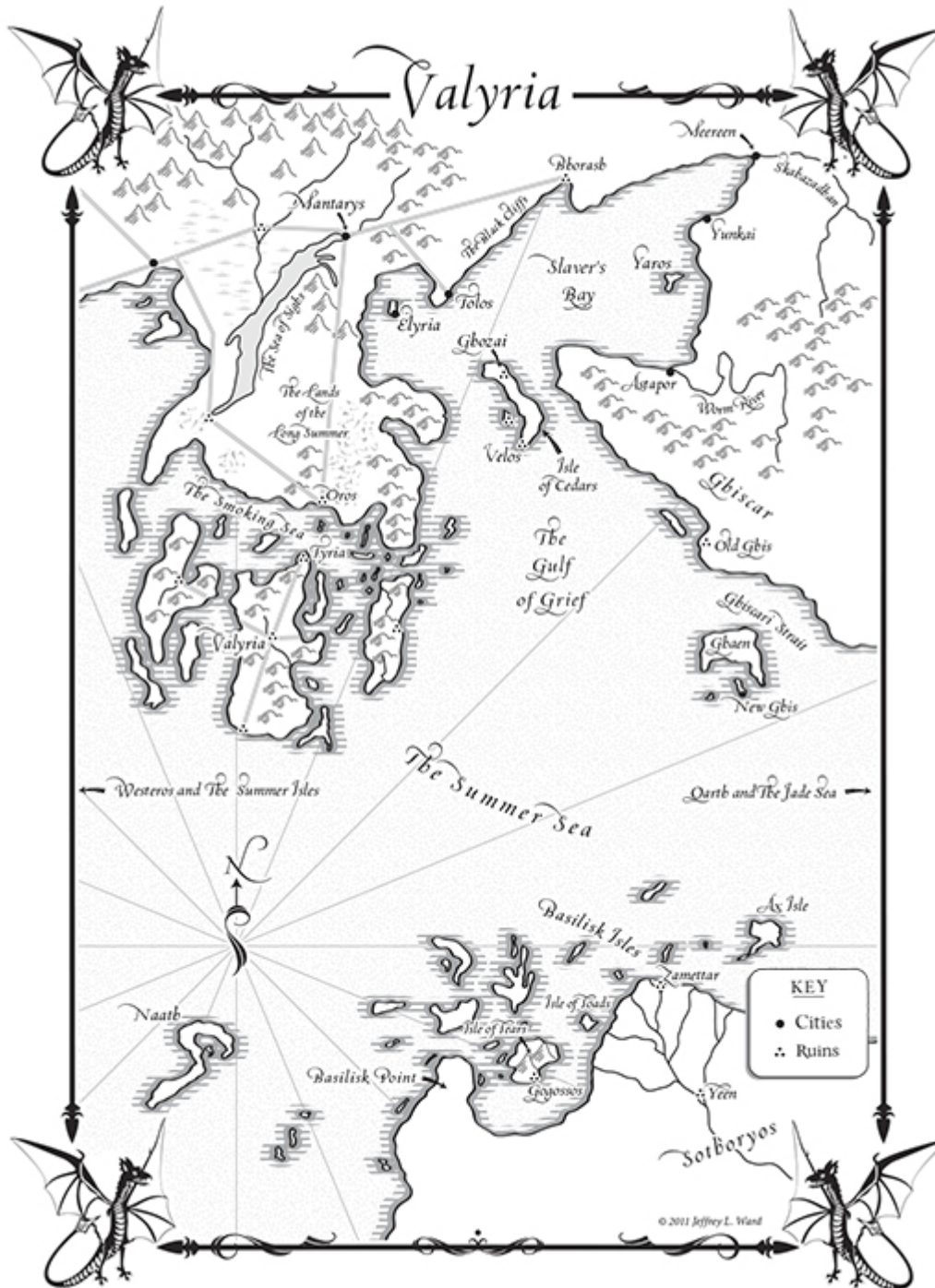
*The Brotherhood Without Banners an Outlaw Fellowship
the Wildlings, or the Free Folk*
Acknowledgments
About the Author
Preview of A Feast for Crows





Beyond The Wall





Click here to view the maps in greater detail:
<http://atrandom.com/sosmaps>



PROLOGUE

The day was grey and bitter cold, and the dogs would not take the scent. The big black bitch had taken one sniff at the bear tracks, backed off, and skulked back to the pack with her tail between her legs. The dogs huddled together miserably on the riverbank as the wind snapped at them. Chett felt it too, biting through his layers of black wool and boiled leather. It was too bloody cold for man or beast, but here they were. His mouth twisted, and he could almost feel the boils that covered his cheeks and neck growing red and angry. *I should be safe back at the Wall, tending the bloody ravens and making fires for old Maester Aemon.* It was the bastard Jon Snow who had taken that from him, him and his fat friend Sam Tarly. It was their fault he was here, freezing his bloody balls off with a pack of hounds deep in the haunted forest.

“Seven hells.” He gave the leashes a hard yank to get the dogs’ attention. “*Track*, you bastards. That’s a bear print. You want some meat or no? *Find!*” But the hounds only huddled closer, whining. Chett snapped his short lash above their heads, and the black bitch snarled at him. “Dog meat would taste as good as bear,” he warned her, his breath frosting with every word.

Lark the Sisterman stood with his arms crossed over his chest and his hands tucked up into his armpits. He wore black wool gloves, but he was always complaining how his fingers were frozen. “It’s too bloody cold to hunt,” he said. “Bugger this bear, he’s not worth freezing over.”

“We can’t go back emptyhand, Lark,” rumbled Small Paul through the brown whiskers that covered most of his face. “The

Lord Commander wouldn't like that." There was ice under the big man's squashed pug nose, where his snot had frozen. A huge hand in a thick fur glove clenched tight around the shaft of a spear.

"Bugger that Old Bear too," said the Sisterman, a thin man with sharp features and nervous eyes. "Mormont will be dead before daybreak, remember? Who cares what he likes?"

Small Paul blinked his black little eyes. Maybe he *had* forgotten, Chett thought; he was stupid enough to forget most anything. "Why do we have to kill the Old Bear? Why don't we just go off and let him be?"

"You think he'll let *us* be?" said Lark. "He'll hunt us down. You want to be hunted, you great muttonhead?"

"No," said Small Paul. "I don't want that. I don't."

"So you'll kill him?" said Lark.

"Yes." The huge man stamped the butt of his spear on the frozen riverbank. "I will. He shouldn't hunt us."

The Sisterman took his hands from his armpits and turned to Chett. "We need to kill *all* the officers, I say."

Chett was sick of hearing it. "We been over this. The Old Bear dies, and Blane from the Shadow Tower. Grubbs and Aethan as well, their ill luck for drawing the watch, Dywen and Bannen for their tracking, and Ser Piggy for the ravens. That's *all*. We kill them quiet, while they sleep. One scream and we're wormfood, every one of us." His boils were red with rage. "Just do your bit and see that your cousins do theirs. And Paul, try and remember, it's *third* watch, not second."

"Third watch," the big man said, through hair and frozen snot. "Me and Softfoot. I remember, Chett."

The moon would be black tonight, and they had jiggered the watches so as to have eight of their own standing sentry, with two more guarding the horses. It wasn't going to get much riper than that. Besides, the wildlings could be upon them any day now. Chett meant to be well away from here before that happened. He meant to live.

Three hundred sworn brothers of the Night's Watch had ridden north, two hundred from Castle Black and another hundred from the Shadow Tower. It was the biggest ranging in living memory, near a third of the Watch's strength. They meant to find Ben

Stark, Ser Waymar Royce, and the other rangers who'd gone missing, and discover why the wildlings were leaving their villages. Well, they were no closer to Stark and Royce than when they'd left the Wall, but they'd learned where all the wildlings had gone—up into the icy heights of the godsforsaken Frostfangs. They could squat up there till the end of time and it wouldn't prick Chett's boils none.

But no. They were coming down. Down the Milkwater.

Chett raised his eyes and there it was. The river's stony banks were bearded by ice, its pale milky waters flowing endlessly down out of the Frostfangs. And now Mance Rayder and his wildlings were flowing down the same way. Thoren Smallwood had returned in a lather three days past. While he was telling the Old Bear what his scouts had seen, his man Kedge Whiteye told the rest of them. "They're still well up the foothills, but they're coming," Kedge said, warming his hands over the fire. "Harma the Dogshead has the van, the poxy bitch. Goady crept up on her camp and saw her plain by the fire. That fool Tumberjon wanted to pick her off with an arrow, but Smallwood had better sense."

Chett spat. "How many were there, could you tell?"

"Many and more. Twenty, thirty thousand, we didn't stay to count. Harma had five hundred in the van, every one a horse."

The men around the fire exchanged uneasy looks. It was a rare thing to find even a dozen mounted wildlings, and *five hundred* ...

"Smallwood sent Bannen and me wide around the van to catch a peek at the main body," Kedge went on. "There was no end of them. They're moving slow as a frozen river, four, five miles a day, but they don't look like they mean to go back to their villages neither. More'n half were women and children, and they were driving their animals before them, goats, sheep, even aurochs dragging sledges. They'd loaded up with bales of fur and sides of meat, cages of chickens, butter churns and spinning wheels, every damn thing they own. The mules and garrons was so heavy laden you'd think their backs would break. The women as well."

"And they follow the Milkwater?" Lark the Sisterman asked.

"I said so, didn't I?"

The Milkwater would take them past the Fist of the First Men, the ancient ringfort where the Night's Watch had made its camp. Any man with a thimble of sense could see that it was time to pull up stakes and fall back on the Wall. The Old Bear had strengthened the Fist with spikes and pits and caltrops, but against such a host all that was pointless. If they stayed here, they would be engulfed and overwhelmed.

And Thoren Smallwood wanted to *attack*. Sweet Donnel Hill was squire to Ser Mallador Locke, and the night before last Smallwood had come to Locke's tent. Ser Mallador had been of the same mind as old Ser Ottyn Wythers, urging a retreat on the Wall, but Smallwood wanted to convince him otherwise. "This King-beyond-the-Wall will never look for us so far north," Sweet Donnel reported him saying. "And this great host of his is a shambling horde, full of useless mouths who won't know what end of a sword to hold. One blow will take all the fight out of them and send them howling back to their hovels for another fifty years."

Three hundred against thirty thousand. Chett called that rank madness, and what was madder still was that Ser Mallador had been persuaded, and the two of them together were on the point of persuading the Old Bear. "If we wait too long, this chance may be lost, never to come again," Smallwood was saying to anyone who would listen. Against that, Ser Ottyn Wythers said, "We are the shield that guards the realms of men. You do not throw away your shield for no good purpose," but to that Thoren Smallwood said, "In a swordfight, a man's surest defense is the swift stroke that slays his foe, not cringing behind a shield."

Neither Smallwood nor Wythers had the command, though. Lord Mormont did, and Mormont was waiting for his other scouts, for Jarman Buckwell and the men who'd climbed the Giant's Stair, and for Qhorin Halfhand and Jon Snow, who'd gone to probe the Skirling Pass. Buckwell and the Halfhand were late in returning, though. *Dead, most like.* Chett pictured Jon Snow lying blue and frozen on some bleak mountaintop with a wildling spear up his bastard's arse. The thought made him smile. *I hope they killed his bloody wolf as well.*

“There’s no bear here,” he decided abruptly. “Just an old print, that’s all. Back to the Fist.” The dogs almost yanked him off his feet, as eager to get back as he was. Maybe they thought they were going to get fed. Chett had to laugh. He hadn’t fed them for three days now, to turn them mean and hungry. Tonight, before slipping off into the dark, he’d turn them loose among the horse lines, after Sweet Donnel Hill and Clubfoot Karl cut the tethers. *They’ll have snarling hounds and panicked horses all over the Fist, running through fires, jumping the ringwall, and trampling down tents.* With all the confusion, it might be hours before anyone noticed that fourteen brothers were missing.

Lark had wanted to bring in twice that number, but what could you expect from some stupid fishbreath Sisterman? Whisper a word in the wrong ear and before you knew it you’d be short a head. No, fourteen was a good number, enough to do what needed doing but not so many that they couldn’t keep the secret. Chett had recruited most of them himself. Small Paul was one of his; the strongest man on the Wall, even if he was slower than a dead snail. He’d once broken a wildling’s back with a hug. They had Dirk as well, named for his favorite weapon, and the little grey man the brothers called Softfoot, who’d raped a hundred women in his youth, and liked to boast how none had ever seen nor heard him until he shoved it up inside them.

The plan was Chett’s. He was the clever one; he’d been steward to old Maester Aemon for four good years before that bastard Jon Snow had done him out so his job could be handed to his fat pig of a friend. When he killed Sam Tarly tonight, he planned to whisper, “Give my love to Lord Snow,” right in his ear before he sliced Ser Piggy’s throat open to let the blood come bubbling out through all those layers of suet. Chett knew the ravens, so he wouldn’t have no trouble there, no more than he would with Tarly. One touch of the knife and that craven would piss his pants and start blubbering for his life. *Let him beg, it won’t do him no good.* After he opened his throat, he’d open the cages and shoo the birds away, so no messages reached the Wall. Softfoot and Small Paul would kill the Old Bear, Dirk would do Blane, and Lark and his cousins would silence Bannen and old Dywen, to keep them from sniffing after their trail. They’d been caching

food for a fortnight, and Sweet Donnel and Clubfoot Karl would have the horses ready. With Mormont dead, command would pass to Ser Ottyn Wythers, an old done man, and failing. *He'll be running for the Wall before sundown, and he won't waste no men sending them after us neither.*

The dogs pulled at him as they made their way through the trees. Chett could see the Fist punching its way up through the green. The day was so dark that the Old Bear had the torches lit, a great circle of them burning all along the ringwall that crowned the top of the steep stony hill. The three of them waded across a brook. The water was icy cold, and patches of ice were spreading across its surface. "I'm going to make for the coast," Lark the Sisterman confided. "Me and my cousins. We'll build us a boat, sail back home to the Sisters."

And at home they'll know you for deserters and lop off your fool heads, thought Chett. There was no leaving the Night's Watch, once you said your words. Anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms, they'd take you and kill you.

Ollo Lophand now, he was talking about sailing back to Tyrosh, where he claimed men didn't lose their hands for a bit of honest thievery, nor get sent off to freeze their life away for being found in bed with some knight's wife. Chett had weighed going with him, but he didn't speak their wet girly tongue. And what could he do in Tyrosh? He had no trade to speak of, growing up in Hag's Mire. His father had spent his life grubbing in other men's fields and collecting leeches. He'd strip down bare but for a thick leather clout, and go wading in the murky waters. When he climbed out he'd be covered from nipple to ankle. Sometimes he made Chett help pull the leeches off. One had attached itself to his palm once, and he'd smashed it against a wall in revulsion. His father beat him bloody for that. The maesters bought the leeches at twelve-for-a-penny.

Lark could go home if he liked, and the damn Tyroshi too, but not Chett. If he never saw Hag's Mire again, it would be too bloody soon. He had liked the look of Craster's Keep, himself. Craster lived high as a lord there, so why shouldn't he do the same? That would be a laugh. Chett the leechman's son, a lord with a keep. His banner could be a dozen leeches on a field of

pink. But why stop at lord? Maybe he should be a king. *Mance Rayder started out a crow. I could be a king same as him, and have me some wives.* Craster had nineteen, not even counting the young ones, the daughters he hadn't gotten around to bedding yet. Half them wives were as old and ugly as Craster, but that didn't matter. The old ones Chett could put to work cooking and cleaning for him, pulling carrots and slopping pigs, while the young ones warmed his bed and bore his children. Craster wouldn't object, not once Small Paul gave him a hug.

The only women Chett had ever known were the whores he'd bought in Mole's Town. When he'd been younger, the village girls took one look at his face, with its boils and its wen, and turned away sickened. The worst was that slattern Bessa. She'd spread her legs for every boy in Hag's Mire so he'd figured why not him too? He even spent a morning picking wildflowers when he heard she liked them, but she'd just laughed in his face and told him she'd crawl in a bed with his father's leeches before she'd crawl in one with him. She stopped laughing when he put his knife in her. That was sweet, the look on her face, so he pulled the knife out and put it in her again. When they caught him down near Sevenstreams, old Lord Walder Frey hadn't even bothered to come himself to do the judging. He'd sent one of his *bastards*, that Walder Rivers, and the next thing Chett had known he was walking to the Wall with that foul-smelling black devil Yoren. To pay for his one sweet moment, they took his whole life.

But now he meant to take it back, and Craster's women too. *That twisted old wildling has the right of it. If you want a woman to wife you take her, and none of this giving her flowers so that maybe she don't notice your bloody boils.* Chett didn't mean to make *that* mistake again.

It would work, he promised himself for the hundredth time. *So long as we get away clean.* Ser Ottyn would strike south for the Shadow Tower, the shortest way to the Wall. *He won't bother with us, not Wythers, all he'll want is to get back whole.* Thoren Smallwood now, he'd want to press on with the attack, but Ser Ottyn's caution ran too deep, and he was senior. *It won't matter anyhow. Once we're gone, Smallwood can attack anyone he likes. What do we care? If none of them ever returns to the Wall, no one*

will ever come looking for us, they'll think we died with the rest. That was a new thought, and for a moment it tempted him. But they would need to kill Ser Ottyn and Ser Mallador Locke as well to give Smallwood the command, and both of them were well-attended day and night ... no, the risk was too great.

"Chett," said Small Paul as they trudged along a stony game trail through sentinels and soldier pines, "what about the bird?"

"What bloody bird?" The last thing he needed now was some mutton-head going on about a bird.

"The Old Bear's raven," Small Paul said. "If we kill him, who's going to feed his bird?"

"Who bloody well cares? Kill the bird too if you like."

"I don't want to hurt no bird," the big man said. "But that's a talking bird. What if it tells what we did?"

Lark the Sisterman laughed. "Small Paul, thick as a castle wall," he mocked.

"You shut up with that," said Small Paul dangerously.

"Paul," said Chett, before the big man got too angry, "when they find the old man lying in a pool of blood with his throat slit, they won't need no bird to tell them someone killed him."

Small Paul chewed on that a moment. "That's true," he allowed. "Can I keep the bird, then? I like that bird."

"He's yours," said Chett, just to shut him up.

"We can always eat him if we get hungry," offered Lark.

Small Paul clouded up again. "Best not try and eat *my* bird, Lark. Best not."

Chett could hear voices drifting through the trees. "Close your bloody mouths, both of you. We're almost to the Fist."

They emerged near the west face of the hill, and walked around south where the slope was gentler. Near the edge of the forest a dozen men were taking archery practice. They had carved outlines on the trunks of trees, and were loosing shafts at them.

"Look," said Lark. "A pig with a bow."

Sure enough, the nearest bowman was Ser Piggy himself, the fat boy who had stolen his place with Maester Aemon. Just the sight of Samwell Tarly filled him with anger. Stewarding for Maester Aemon had been as good a life as he'd ever known. The old blind man was undemanding, and Clydas had taken care of most of his

wants anyway. Chett's duties were easy: cleaning the rookery, a few fires to build, a few meals to fetch ... and Aemon never once hit him. *Thinks he can just walk in and shove me out, on account of being highborn and knowing how to read. Might be I'll ask him to read my knife before I open his throat with it.* "You go on," he told the others, "I want to watch this." The dogs were pulling, anxious to go with them, to the food they thought would be waiting at the top. Chett kicked the bitch with the toe of his boot, and that settled them down some.

He watched from the trees as the fat boy wrestled with a longbow as tall as he was, his red moon face screwed up with concentration. Three arrows stood in the ground before him. Tarly nocked and drew, held the draw a long moment as he tried to aim, and let fly. The shaft vanished into the greenery. Chett laughed loudly, a snort of sweet disgust.

"We'll never find that one, and I'll be blamed," announced Edd Tollett, the dour grey-haired squire everyone called Dolorous Edd. "Nothing ever goes missing that they don't look at me, ever since that time I lost my horse. As if that could be helped. He was white and it was snowing, what did they expect?"

"The wind took that one," said Grenn, another friend of Lord Snow's. "Try to hold the bow steady, Sam."

"It's heavy," the fat boy complained, but he pulled the second arrow all the same. This one went high, sailing through the branches ten feet above the target.

"I believe you knocked a leaf off that tree," said Dolorous Edd. "Fall is falling fast enough, there's no need to help it." He sighed. "And we all know what follows fall. Gods, but I am cold. Shoot the last arrow, Samwell, I believe my tongue is freezing to the roof of my mouth."

Ser Piggy lowered the bow, and Chett thought he was going to start bawling. "It's too hard."

"Notch, draw, and loose," said Grenn. "Go on."

Dutifully, the fat boy plucked his final arrow from the earth, notched it to his longbow, drew, and released. He did it quickly, without squinting along the shaft painstakingly as he had the first two times. The arrow struck the charcoal outline low in the chest

and hung quivering. “I *hit* him.” Ser Piggy sounded shocked. “Grenn, did you see? Edd, look, I hit him!”

“Put it between his ribs, I’d say,” said Grenn.

“Did I kill him?” the fat boy wanted to know.

Tollett shrugged. “Might have punctured a lung, if he had a lung. Most trees don’t, as a rule.” He took the bow from Sam’s hand. “I’ve seen worse shots, though. Aye, and made a few.”

Ser Piggy was beaming. To look at him you’d think he’d actually *done* something. But when he saw Chett and the dogs, his smile curled up and died squeaking.

“You hit a tree,” Chett said. “Let’s see how you shoot when it’s Mance Rayder’s lads. They won’t stand there with their arms out and their leaves rustling, oh no. They’ll come right at you, screaming in your face, and I bet you’ll piss those breeches. One o’ them will plant his axe right between those little pig eyes. The last thing you’ll hear will be the *thunk* it makes when it bites into your skull.”

The fat boy was shaking. Dolorous Edd put a hand on his shoulder. “Brother,” he said solemnly, “just because it happened that way for you doesn’t mean Samwell will suffer the same.”

“What are you talking about, Tollett?”

“The axe that split your skull. Is it true that half your wits leaked out on the ground and your dogs ate them?”

The big lout Grenn laughed, and even Samwell Tarly managed a weak little smile. Chett kicked the nearest dog, yanked on their leashes, and started up the hill. *Smile all you want, Ser Piggy. We’ll see who laughs tonight.* He only wished he had time to kill Tollett as well. *Gloomy horse-faced fool, that’s what he is.*

The climb was steep, even on this side of the Fist, which had the gentlest slope. Partway up the dogs started barking and pulling at him, figuring that they’d get fed soon. He gave them a taste of his boot instead, and a crack of the whip for the big ugly one that snapped at him. Once they were tied up, he went to report. “The prints were there like Giant said, but the dogs wouldn’t track,” he told Mormont in front of his big black tent. “Down by the river like that, could be old prints.”

“A pity.” Lord Commander Mormont had a bald head and a great shaggy grey beard, and sounded as tired as he looked. “We

might all have been better for a bit of fresh meat.” The raven on his shoulder bobbed its head and echoed, “*Meat. Meat. Meat.*”

We could cook the bloody dogs, Chett thought, but he kept his mouth shut until the Old Bear sent him on his way. *And that’s the last time I’ll need to bow my head to that one,* he thought to himself with satisfaction. It seemed to him that it was growing even colder, which he would have sworn wasn’t possible. The dogs huddled together miserably in the hard frozen mud, and Chett was half tempted to crawl in with them. Instead he wrapped a black wool scarf round the lower part of his face, leaving a slit for his mouth between the winds. It was warmer if he kept moving, he found, so he made a slow circuit of the perimeter with a wad of sourleaf, sharing a chew or two with the black brothers on guard and hearing what they had to say. None of the men on the day watch were part of his scheme; even so, he figured it was good to have some sense of what they were thinking.

Mostly what they were thinking was that it was bloody cold.

The wind was rising as the shadows lengthened. It made a high thin sound as it shivered through the stones of the ringwall. “I hate that sound,” little Giant said. “It sounds like a babe in the brush, wailing away for milk.”

When he finished the circuit and returned to the dogs, he found Lark waiting for him. “The officers are in the Old Bear’s tent again, talking something fierce.”

“That’s what they do,” said Chett. “They’re highborn, all but Blane, they get drunk on words instead of wine.”

Lark sidled closer. “Cheese-for-wits keeps going on about the bird,” he warned, glancing about to make certain no one was close. “Now he’s asking if we cached any seed for the damn thing.”

“It’s a raven,” said Chett. “It eats corpses.”

Lark grinned. “His, might be?”

Or yours. It seemed to Chett that they needed the big man more than they needed Lark. “Stop fretting about Small Paul. You do your part, he’ll do his.”

Twilight was creeping through the woods by the time he rid himself of the Sisterman and sat down to edge his sword. It was bloody hard work with his gloves on, but he wasn’t about to take

them off. Cold as it was, any fool that touched steel with a bare hand was going to lose a patch of skin.

The dogs whimpered when the sun went down. He gave them water and curses. "Half a night more, and you can find your own feast." By then he could smell supper.

Dywen was holding forth at the cookfire as Chett got his heel of hardbread and a bowl of bean and bacon soup from Hake the cook. "The wood's too silent," the old forester was saying. "No frogs near that river, no owls in the dark. I never heard no deader wood than this."

"Them teeth of yours sound pretty dead," said Hake.

Dywen clacked his wooden teeth. "No wolves neither. There was, before, but no more. Where'd they go, you figure?"

"Someplace warm," said Chett.

Of the dozen odd brothers who sat by the fire, four were his. He gave each one a hard squinty look as he ate, to see if any showed signs of breaking. Dirk seemed calm enough, sitting silent and sharpening his blade, the way he did every night. And Sweet Donnel Hill was all easy japes. He had white teeth and fat red lips and yellow locks that he wore in an artful tumble about his shoulders, and he claimed to be the bastard of some Lannister. Maybe he was at that. Chett had no use for pretty boys, nor for bastards neither, but Sweet Donnel seemed like to hold his own.

He was less certain about the forester the brothers called Sawwood, more for his snoring than for anything to do with trees. Just now he looked so restless he might never snore again. And Maslyn was worse. Chett could see sweat trickling down his face, despite the frigid wind. The beads of moisture sparkled in the firelight, like so many little wet jewels. Maslyn wasn't eating neither, only staring at his soup as if the smell of it was about to make him sick. *I'll need to watch that one*, Chett thought.

"Assemble!" The shout came suddenly, from a dozen throats, and quickly spread to every part of the hilltop camp. "Men of the Night's Watch! Assemble at the central fire!"

Frowning, Chett finished his soup and followed the rest.

The Old Bear stood before the fire with Smallwood, Locke, Wythers, and Blane ranged behind him in a row. Mormont wore a cloak of thick black fur, and his raven perched upon his shoulder,

preening its black feathers. *This can't be good.* Chett squeezed between Brown Bernarr and some Shadow Tower men. When everyone was gathered, save for the watchers in the woods and the guards on the ringwall, Mormont cleared his throat and spat. The spittle was frozen before it hit the ground. "Brothers," he said, "men of the Night's Watch."

"*Men!*" his raven screamed. "*Men! Men!*"

"The wildlings are on the march, following the course of the Milkwater down out of the mountains. Thoren believes their van will be upon us ten days hence. Their most seasoned raiders will be with Harma Dogshead in that van. The rest will likely form a rearguard, or ride in close company with Mance Rayder himself. Elsewhere their fighters will be spread thin along the line of march. They have oxen, mules, horses ... but few enough. Most will be afoot, and ill-armed and untrained. Such weapons as they carry are more like to be stone and bone than steel. They are burdened with women, children, herds of sheep and goats, and all their worldly goods besides. In short, though they are numerous, they are vulnerable ... and *they do not know that we are here.* Or so we must pray."

They know, thought Chett. *You bloody old pus bag, they know, certain as sunrise. Qhorin Halfhand hasn't come back, has he? Nor Jarman Buckwell. If any of them got caught, you know damned well the wildlings will have wrung a song or two out of them by now.*

Smallwood stepped forward. "Mance Rayder means to break the Wall and bring red war to the Seven Kingdoms. Well, that's a game two can play. On the morrow we'll bring the war to him."

"We ride at dawn with all our strength," the Old Bear said as a murmur went through the assembly. "We will ride north, and loop around to the west. Harma's van will be well past the Fist by the time we turn. The foothills of the Frostfangs are full of narrow winding valleys made for ambush. Their line of march will stretch for many miles. We shall fall on them in several places at once, and make them swear we were three thousand, not three hundred."

"We'll hit hard and be away before their horsemen can form up to face us," Thoren Smallwood said. "If they pursue, we'll lead them a merry chase, then wheel and hit again farther down the

column. We'll burn their wagons, scatter their herds, and slay as many as we can. Mance Rayder himself, if we find him. If they break and return to their hovels, we've won. If not, we'll harry them all the way to the Wall, and see to it that they leave a trail of corpses to mark their progress."

"*There are thousands,*" someone called from behind Chett.

"*We'll die.*" That was Maslyn's voice, green with fear.

"*Die,*" screamed Mormont's raven, flapping its black wings. "*Die, die, die.*"

"Many of us," the Old Bear said. "Mayhaps even all of us. But as another Lord Commander said a thousand years ago, that is why they dress us in black. Remember your words, brothers. For we are the swords in the darkness, the watchers on the walls ..."

"The fire that burns against the cold." Ser Mallador Locke drew his longsword.

"The light that brings the dawn," others answered, and more swords were pulled from scabbards.

Then all of them were drawing, and it was near three hundred upraised swords and as many voices crying, "*The horn that wakes the sleepers! The shield that guards the realms of men!*" Chett had no choice but to join his voice to the others. The air was misty with their breath, and firelight glinted off the steel. He was pleased to see Lark and Softfoot and Sweet Donnel Hill joining in, as if they were as big fools as the rest. That was good. No sense to draw attention, when their hour was so close.

When the shouting died away, once more he heard the sound of the wind picking at the ringwall. The flames swirled and shivered, as if they too were cold, and in the sudden quiet the Old Bear's raven cawed loudly and once again said, "*Die.*"

Clever bird, thought Chett as the officers dismissed them, warning everyone to get a good meal and a long rest tonight. Chett crawled under his furs near the dogs, his head full of things that could go wrong. What if that bloody oath gave one of his a change of heart? Or Small Paul forgot and tried to kill Mormont during the second watch in place of the third? Or Maslyn lost his courage, or someone turned informer, or ...

He found himself listening to the night. The wind did sound like a wailing child, and from time to time he could hear men's

voices, a horse's whinny, a log spitting in the fire. But nothing else. *So quiet.*

He could see Bessa's face floating before him. *It wasn't the knife I wanted to put in you, he wanted to tell her. I picked you flowers, wild roses and tansy and goldencups, it took me all morning.* His heart was thumping like a drum, so loud he feared it might wake the camp. Ice caked his beard all around his mouth. *Where did that come from, with Bessa?* Whenever he'd thought of her before, it had only been to remember the way she'd looked, dying. What was wrong with him? He could hardly breathe. Had he gone to sleep? He got to his knees, and something wet and cold touched his nose. Chett looked up.

Snow was falling.

He could feel tears freezing to his cheeks. *It isn't fair, he wanted to scream.* Snow would ruin everything he'd worked for, all his careful plans. It was a heavy fall, thick white flakes coming down all about him. How would they find their food caches in the snow, or the game trail they meant to follow east? *They won't need Dywen nor Bannen to hunt us down neither, not if we're tracking through fresh snow.* And snow hid the shape of the ground, especially by night. A horse could stumble over a root, break a leg on a stone. *We're done, he realized. Done before we began. We're lost.* There'd be no lord's life for the leechman's son, no keep to call his own, no wives nor crowns. Only a wildling's sword in his belly, and then an unmarked grave. *The snow's taken it all from me ... the bloody snow...*

Snow had ruined him once before. Snow and his pet pig.

Chett got to his feet. His legs were stiff, and the falling snowflakes turned the distant torches to vague orange glows. He felt as though he were being attacked by a cloud of pale cold bugs. They settled on his shoulders, on his head, they flew at his nose and his eyes. Cursing, he brushed them off. *Samwell Tarly, he remembered. I can still deal with Ser Piggy.* He wrapped his scarf around his face, pulled up his hood, and went striding through the camp to where the coward slept.

The snow was falling so heavily that he got lost among the tents, but finally he spotted the snug little windbreak the fat boy had made for himself between a rock and the raven cages. Tarly

was buried beneath a mound of black wool blankets and shaggy furs. The snow was drifting in to cover him. He looked like some kind of soft round mountain. Steel whispered on leather faint as hope as Chett eased his dagger from its sheath. One of the ravens *quorked*. “Snow,” another muttered, peering through the bars with black eyes. The first added a “Snow” of its own. He edged past them, placing each foot carefully. He would clap his left hand down over the fat boy’s mouth to muffle his cries, and then ...

Uuuuuuuuhooooooooooooo.

He stopped midstep, swallowing his curse as the sound of the horn shuddered through the camp, faint and far, yet unmistakable. *Not now. Gods be damned, not NOW!* The Old Bear had hidden far-eyes in a ring of trees around the Fist, to give warning of any approach. *Jarman Buckwell’s back from the Giant’s Stair, Chett figured, or Qhorin Halfhand from the Skirling Pass.* A single blast of the horn meant brothers returning. If it was the Halfhand, Jon Snow might be with him, alive.

Sam Tarly sat up puffy-eyed and stared at the snow in confusion. The ravens were cawing noisily, and Chett could hear his dogs baying. *Half the bloody camp’s awake.* His gloved fingers clenched around the dagger’s hilt as he waited for the sound to die away. But no sooner had it gone than it came again, louder and longer.

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuhooooooooooooooooooooo.

“Gods,” he heard Sam Tarly whimper. The fat boy lurched to his knees, his feet tangled in his cloak and blankets. He kicked them away and reached for a chainmail hauberk he’d hung on the rock nearby. As he slipped the huge tent of a garment down over his head and wriggled into it, he spied Chett standing there. “Was it two?” he asked. “I dreamed I heard two blasts ...”

“No dream,” said Chett. “Two blasts to call the Watch to arms. Two blasts for foes approaching. There’s an axe out there with *Piggy* writ on it, fat boy. Two blasts means *wildlings*.” The fear on that big moon face made him want to laugh. “Bugger them all to seven hells. Bloody Harma. Bloody Mance Rayder. Bloody Smallwood, he said they wouldn’t be on us for another—”

Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.

The sound went on and on and on, until it seemed it would never die. The ravens were flapping and screaming, flying about their cages and banging off the bars, and all about the camp the brothers of the Night's Watch were rising, donning their armor, buckling on swordbelts, reaching for battleaxes and bows. Samwell Tarly stood shaking, his face the same color as the snow that swirled down all around them. "Three," he squeaked to Chett, "that was three, I heard three. They never blow three. Not for hundreds and thousands of years. Three means—"

"—*Others.*" Chett made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob, and suddenly his smallclothes were wet, and he could feel the piss running down his leg, see steam rising off the front of his breeches.



JAIME

An east wind blew through his tangled hair, as soft and fragrant as Cersei's fingers. He could hear birds singing, and feel the river moving beneath the boat as the sweep of the oars sent them toward the pale pink dawn. After so long in darkness, the world was so sweet that Jaime Lannister felt dizzy. *I am alive, and drunk on sunlight.* A laugh burst from his lips, sudden as a quail flushed from cover.

"Quiet," the wench grumbled, scowling. Scowls suited her broad homely face better than a smile. Not that Jaime had ever seen her smiling. He amused himself by picturing her in one of Cersei's silken gowns in place of her studded leather jerkin. *As well dress a cow in silk as this one.*

But the cow could row. Beneath her roughspun brown breeches were calves like cords of wood, and the long muscles of her arms stretched and tightened with each stroke of the oars. Even after rowing half the night, she showed no signs of tiring, which was more than could be said for his cousin Ser Cleos, laboring on the other oar. *A big strong peasant wench to look at her, yet she speaks like one highborn and wears longsword and dagger. Ah, but can she use them?* Jaime meant to find out, as soon as he rid himself of these fetters.

He wore iron manacles on his wrists and a matching pair about his ankles, joined by a length of heavy chain no more than a foot long. "You'd think my word as a Lannister was not good enough," he'd japed as they bound him. He'd been very drunk by then, thanks to Catelyn Stark. Of their escape from Riverrun, he recalled only bits and pieces. There had been some trouble with

the gaoler, but the big wench had overcome him. After that they had climbed an endless stair, around and around. His legs were weak as grass, and he'd stumbled twice or thrice, until the wench lent him an arm to lean on. At some point he was bundled into a traveler's cloak and shoved into the bottom of a skiff. He remembered listening to Lady Catelyn command someone to raise the portcullis on the Water Gate. She was sending Ser Cleos Frey back to King's Landing with new terms for the queen, she'd declared in a tone that brooked no argument.

He must have drifted off then. The wine had made him sleepy, and it felt good to stretch, a luxury his chains had not permitted him in the cell. Jaime had long ago learned to snatch sleep in the saddle during a march. This was no harder. *Tyrion is going to laugh himself sick when he hears how I slept through my own escape.* He was awake now, though, and the fetters were irksome. "My lady," he called out, "if you'll strike off these chains, I'll spell you at those oars."

She scowled again, her face all horse teeth and glowering suspicion. "You'll wear your chains, Kingslayer."

"You figure to row all the way to King's Landing, wench?"

"You will call me Brienne. Not *wench*."

"My name is Ser Jaime. Not Kingslayer."

"Do you deny that you slew a king?"

"No. Do you deny your sex? If so, unlace those breeches and show me." He gave her an innocent smile. "I'd ask you to open your bodice, but from the look of you that wouldn't prove much."

Ser Cleos fretted. "Cousin, remember your courtesies."

The Lannister blood runs thin in this one. Cleos was his Aunt Genna's son by that dullard Emmon Frey, who had lived in terror of Lord Tywin Lannister since the day he wed his sister. When Lord Walder Frey had brought the Twins into the war on the side of Riverrun, Ser Emmon had chosen his wife's allegiance over his father's. *Casterly Rock got the worst of that bargain,* Jaime reflected. Ser Cleos looked like a weasel, fought like a goose, and had the courage of an especially brave ewe. Lady Stark had promised him release if he delivered her message to Tyrion, and Ser Cleos had solemnly vowed to do so.

They'd all done a deal of vowing back in that cell, Jaime most of all. That was Lady Catelyn's price for loosing him. She had laid the point of the big wench's sword against his heart and said, "Swear that you will never again take up arms against Stark nor Tully. Swear that you will compel your brother to honor his pledge to return my daughters safe and unharmed. Swear on your honor as a knight, on your honor as a Lannister, on your honor as a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard. Swear it by your sister's life, and your father's, and your son's, by the old gods and the new, and I'll send you back to your sister. Refuse, and I will have your blood." He remembered the prick of the steel through his rags as she twisted the point of the sword.

I wonder what the High Septon would have to say about the sanctity of oaths sworn while dead drunk, chained to a wall, with a sword pressed to your chest? Not that Jaime was truly concerned about that fat fraud, or the gods he claimed to serve. He remembered the pail Lady Catelyn had kicked over in his cell. A strange woman, to trust her girls to a man with shit for honor. Though she was trusting him as little as she dared. *She is putting her hope in Tyrion, not in me.* "Perhaps she is not so stupid after all," he said aloud.

His captor took it wrong. "I am not stupid. Nor deaf."

He was gentle with her; mocking this one would be so easy there would be no sport to it. "I was speaking to myself, and not of you. It's an easy habit to slip into in a cell."

She frowned at him, pushing the oars forward, pulling them back, pushing them forward, saying nothing.

As glib of tongue as she is fair of face. "By your speech, I'd judge you nobly born."

"My father is Selwyn of Tarth, by the grace of the gods Lord of Evenfall." Even that was given grudgingly.

"Tarth," Jaime said. "A ghastly large rock in the narrow sea, as I recall. And Evenfall is sworn to Storm's End. How is it that you serve Robb of Winterfell?"

"It is Lady Catelyn I serve. And she commanded me to deliver you safe to your brother Tyrion at King's Landing, not to bandy words with you. Be silent."

"I've had a bellyful of silence, woman."

“Talk with Ser Cleos then. I have no words for monsters.”

Jaime hooted. “Are there monsters hereabouts? Hiding beneath the water, perhaps? In that thick of willows? And me without my sword!”

“A man who would violate his own sister, murder his king, and fling an innocent child to his death deserves no other name.”

Innocent? The wretched boy was spying on us. All Jaime had wanted was an hour alone with Cersei. Their journey north had been one long torment; seeing her every day, unable to touch her, knowing that Robert stumbled drunkenly into her bed every night in that great creaking wheelhouse. Tyrion had done his best to keep him in a good humor, but it had not been enough. “You will be courteous as concerns Cersei, wench,” he warned her.

“My name is Brienne, not *wench*.”

“What do you care what a monster calls you?”

“My name is Brienne,” she repeated, dogged as a hound.

“Lady Brienne?” She looked so uncomfortable that Jaime sensed a weakness. “Or would *Ser* Brienne be more to your taste?” He laughed. “No, I fear not. You can trick out a milk cow in crupper, crinet, and chamfron, and bard her all in silk, but that doesn’t mean you can ride her into battle.”

“Cousin Jaime, please, you ought not speak so roughly.” Under his cloak, Ser Cleos wore a surcoat quartered with the twin towers of House Frey and the golden lion of Lannister. “We have far to go, we should not quarrel amongst ourselves.”

“When I quarrel I do it with a sword, coz. I was speaking to the lady. Tell me, wench, are all the women on Tarth as homely as you? I pity the men, if so. Perhaps they do not know what real women look like, living on a dreary mountain in the sea.”

“Tarth is beautiful,” the wench grunted between strokes. “The Sapphire Isle, it’s called. Be quiet, monster, unless you mean to make me gag you.”

“She’s rude as well, isn’t she, coz?” Jaime asked Ser Cleos. “Though she has steel in her spine, I’ll grant you. Not many men dare name me monster to my face.” *Though behind my back they speak freely enough, I have no doubt.*

Ser Cleos coughed nervously. “Lady Brienne had those lies from Catelyn Stark, no doubt. The Starks cannot hope to defeat you

with swords, ser, so now they make war with poisoned words.”

They did defeat me with swords, you chinless cretin. Jaime smiled knowingly. Men will read all sorts of things into a knowing smile, if you let them. *Has cousin Cleos truly swallowed this kettle of dung, or is he striving to ingratiate himself? What do we have here, an honest muttonhead or a lickspittle?*

Ser Cleos prattled blithely on. “Any man who’d believe that a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard would harm a child does not know the meaning of honor.”

Lickspittle. If truth be told, Jaime had come to rue heaving Brandon Stark out that window. Cersei had given him no end of grief afterward, when the boy refused to die. “He was *seven*, Jaime,” she’d berated him. “Even if he understood what he saw, we should have been able to frighten him into silence.”

“I didn’t think you’d want—”

“You *never* think. If the boy should wake and tell his father what he saw—”

“If if if.” He had pulled her into his lap. “If he wakes we’ll say he was dreaming, we’ll call him a liar, and should worse come to worst I’ll kill Ned Stark.”

“And then what do you imagine *Robert* will do?”

“Let Robert do as he pleases. I’ll go to war with him if I must. The War for Cersei’s Cunt, the singers will call it.”

“Jaime, let go of me!” she raged, struggling to rise.

Instead he had kissed her. For a moment she resisted, but then her mouth opened under his. He remembered the taste of wine and cloves on her tongue. She gave a shudder. His hand went to her bodice and yanked, tearing the silk so her breasts spilled free, and for a time the Stark boy had been forgotten.

Had Cersei remembered him afterward and hired this man Lady Catelyn spoke of, to make sure the boy never woke? *If she wanted him dead she would have sent me. And it is not like her to chose a catspaw who would make such a royal botch of the killing.*

Downriver, the rising sun shimmered against the wind-whipped surface of the river. The south shore was red clay, smooth as any road. Smaller streams fed into the greater, and the rotting trunks of drowned trees clung to the banks. The north shore was wilder. High rocky bluffs rose twenty feet above them, crowned by stands

of beech, oak, and chestnut. Jaime spied a watchtower on the heights ahead, growing taller with every stroke of the oars. Long before they were upon it, he knew that it stood abandoned, its weathered stones overgrown with climbing roses.

When the wind shifted, Ser Cleos helped the big wench run up the sail, a stiff triangle of striped red-and-blue canvas. Tully colors, sure to cause them grief if they encountered any Lannister forces on the river, but it was the only sail they had. Brienne took the rudder. Jaime threw out the leeboard, his chains rattling as he moved. After that, they made better speed, with wind and current both favoring their flight. “We could save a deal of traveling if you delivered me to my father instead of my brother,” he pointed out.

“Lady Catelyn’s daughters are in King’s Landing. I will return with the girls or not at all.”

Jaime turned to Ser Cleos. “Cousin, lend me your knife.”

“No.” The woman tensed. “I will not have you armed.” Her voice was as unyielding as stone.

She fears me, even in irons. “Cleos, it seems I must ask you to shave me. Leave the beard, but take the hair off my head.”

“You’d be shaved bald?” asked Cleos Frey.

“The realm knows Jaime Lannister as a beardless knight with long golden hair. A bald man with a filthy yellow beard may pass unnoticed. I’d sooner not be recognized while I’m in irons.”

The dagger was not as sharp as it might have been. Cleos hacked away manfully, sawing and ripping his way through the mats and tossing the hair over the side. The golden curls floated on the surface of the water, gradually falling astern. As the tangles vanished, a louse went crawling down his neck. Jaime caught it and crushed it against his thumbnail. Ser Cleos picked others from his scalp and flicked them into the water. Jaime doused his head and made Ser Cleos whet the blade before he let him scrape away the last inch of yellow stubble. When that was done, they trimmed back his beard as well.

The reflection in the water was a man he did not know. Not only was he bald, but he looked as though he had aged five years in that dungeon; his face was thinner, with hollows under his

eyes and lines he did not remember. *I don't look as much like Cersei this way. She'll hate that.*

By midday, Ser Cleos had fallen asleep. His snores sounded like ducks mating. Jaime stretched out to watch the world flow past; after the dark cell, every rock and tree was a wonder.

A few one-room shacks came and went, perched on tall poles that made them look like cranes. Of the folk who lived there they saw no sign. Birds flew overhead, or cried out from the trees along the shore, and Jaime glimpsed silvery fish knifing through the water. *Tully trout, there's a bad omen*, he thought, until he saw a worse—one of the floating logs they passed turned out to be a dead man, bloodless and swollen. His cloak was tangled in the roots of a fallen tree, its color unmistakably Lannister crimson. He wondered if the corpse had been someone he knew.

The forks of the Trident were the easiest way to move goods or men across the riverlands. In times of peace, they would have encountered fisherfolk in their skiffs, grain barges being poled downstream, merchants selling needles and bolts of cloth from floating shops, perhaps even a gaily painted mummer's boat with quilted sails of half a hundred colors, making its way upriver from village to village and castle to castle.

But the war had taken its toll. They sailed past villages, but saw no villagers. An empty net, slashed and torn and hanging from some trees, was the only sign of fisherfolk. A young girl watering her horse rode off as soon as she glimpsed their sail. Later they passed a dozen peasants digging in a field beneath the shell of a burnt towerhouse. The men gazed at them with dull eyes, and went back to their labors once they decided the skiff was no threat.

The Red Fork was wide and slow, a meandering river of loops and bends dotted with tiny wooded islets and frequently choked by sandbars and snags that lurked just below the water's surface. Brienne seemed to have a keen eye for the dangers, though, and always seemed to find the channel. When Jaime complimented her on her knowledge of the river, she looked at him suspiciously and said, "I do not know the river. Tarth is an island. I learned to manage oars and sail before I ever sat a horse."

Ser Cleos sat up and rubbed at his eyes. “Gods, my arms are sore. I hope the wind lasts.” He sniffed at it. “I smell rain.”

Jaime would welcome a good rain. The dungeons of Riverrun were not the cleanest place in the Seven Kingdoms. By now he must smell like an overripe cheese.

Cleos squinted downriver. “Smoke.”

A thin grey finger crooked them on. It was rising from the south bank several miles on, twisting and curling. Below, Jaime made out the smouldering remains of a large building, and a live oak full of dead women.

The crows had scarcely started on their corpses. The thin ropes cut deeply into the soft flesh of their throats, and when the wind blew they twisted and swayed. “This was not chivalrously done,” said Brienne when they were close enough to see it clearly. “No true knight would condone such wanton butchery.”

“True knights see worse every time they ride to war, wench,” said Jaime. “And *do* worse, yes.”

Brienne turned the rudder toward the shore. “I’ll leave no innocents to be food for crows.”

“A heartless wench. Crows need to eat as well. Stay to the river and leave the dead alone, woman.”

They landed upstream of where the great oak leaned out over the water. As Brienne lowered the sail, Jaime climbed out, clumsy in his chains. The Red Fork filled his boots and soaked through the ragged breeches. Laughing, he dropped to his knees, plunged his head under the water, and came up drenched and dripping. His hands were caked with dirt, and when he rubbed them clean in the current they seemed thinner and paler than he remembered. His legs were stiff as well, and unsteady when he put his weight upon them. *I was too bloody long in Hoster Tully’s dungeon.*

Brienne and Cleos dragged the skiff onto the bank. The corpses hung above their heads, ripening in death like foul fruit. “One of us will need to cut them down,” the wench said.

“I’ll climb.” Jaime waded ashore, clanking. “Just get these chains off.”

The wench was staring up at one of the dead women. Jaime shuffled closer with small stutter steps, the only kind the foot-

long chain permitted. When he saw the crude sign hung about the neck of the highest corpse, he smiled. “*They Lay With Lions*,” he read. “Oh, yes, woman, this was most *unchivalrously* done ... but by your side, not mine. I wonder who they were, these women?”

“Tavern wenches,” said Ser Cleos Frey. “This was an inn, I remember it now. Some men of my escort spent the night here when we last returned to Riverrun.” Nothing remained of the building but the stone foundation and a tangle of collapsed beams, charred black. Smoke still rose from the ashes.

Jaime left brothels and whores to his brother Tyrion; Cersei was the only woman he had ever wanted. “The girls pleased some of my lord father’s soldiers, it would seem. Perhaps served them food and drink. That’s how they earned their traitors’ collars, with a kiss and a cup of ale.” He glanced up and down the river, to make certain they were quite alone. “This is Bracken land. Lord Jonos might have ordered them killed. My father burned his castle, I fear he loves us not.”

“It might be Marq Piper’s work,” said Ser Cleos. “Or that wisp o’ the wood Beric Dondarrion, though I’d heard he kills only soldiers. Perhaps a band of Roose Bolton’s northmen?”

“Bolton was defeated by my father on the Green Fork.”

“But not broken,” said Ser Cleos. “He came south again when Lord Tywin marched against the fords. The word at Riverrun was that he’d taken Harrenhal from Ser Amory Lorch.”

Jaime liked the sound of that not at all. “Brienne,” he said, granting her the courtesy of the name in the hopes that she might listen, “if Lord Bolton holds Harrenhal, both the Trident and the kingsroad are likely watched.”

He thought he saw a touch of uncertainty in her big blue eyes. “You are under my protection. They’d need to kill me.”

“I shouldn’t think that would trouble them.”

“I am as good a fighter as you,” she said defensively. “I was one of King Renly’s chosen seven. With his own hands, he cloaked me with the striped silk of the Rainbow Guard.”

“The *Rainbow* Guard? You and six other girls, was it? A singer once said that all maids are fair in silk ... but he never met you, did he?”

The woman turned red. "We have graves to dig." She went to climb the tree.

The lower limbs of the oak were big enough for her to stand upon once she'd gotten up the trunk. She walked amongst the leaves, dagger in hand, cutting down the corpses. Flies swarmed around the bodies as they fell, and the stench grew worse with each one she dropped. "This is a deal of trouble to take for whores," Ser Cleos complained. "What are we supposed to dig with? We have no spades, and I will not use my sword, I—"

Brienne gave a shout. She jumped down rather than climbing. "To the boat. Be quick. There's a sail."

They made what haste they could, though Jaime could hardly run, and had to be pulled back up into the skiff by his cousin. Brienne shoved off with an oar and raised sail hurriedly. "Ser Cleos, I'll need you to row as well."

He did as she bid. The skiff began to cut the water a bit faster; current, wind, and oars all worked for them. Jaime sat chained, peering upriver. Only the top of the other sail was visible. With the way the Red Fork looped, it looked to be across the fields, moving north behind a screen of trees while they moved south, but he knew that was deceptive. He lifted both hands to shade his eyes. "Mud red and watery blue," he announced.

Brienne's big mouth worked soundlessly, giving her the look of a cow chewing its cud. "Faster, ser."

The inn soon vanished behind them, and they lost sight of the top of the sail as well, but that meant nothing. Once the pursuers swung around the loop they would become visible again. "We can hope the noble Tullys will stop to bury the dead whores, I suppose." The prospect of returning to his cell did not appeal to Jaime. *Tyrion could think of something clever now, but all that occurs to me is to go at them with a sword.*

For the good part of an hour they played peek-and-see with the pursuers, sweeping around bends and between small wooded isles. Just when they were starting to hope that somehow they might have left behind the pursuit, the distant sail became visible again. Ser Cleos paused in his stroke. "The Others take them." He wiped sweat from his brow.

"Row!" Brienne said.

“That is a river galley coming after us,” Jaime announced after he’d watched for a while. With every stroke, it seemed to grow a little larger. “Nine oars on each side, which means eighteen men. More, if they crowded on fighters as well as rowers. And larger sails than ours. We cannot outrun her.”

Ser Cleos froze at his oars. “Eighteen, you said?”

“Six for each of us. I’d want eight, but these bracelets hinder me somewhat.” Jaime held up his wrists. “Unless the Lady Brienne would be so kind as to unshackle me?”

She ignored him, putting all her effort into her stroke.

“We had half a night’s start on them,” Jaime said. “They’ve been rowing since dawn, resting two oars at a time. They’ll be exhausted. Just now the sight of our sail has given them a burst of strength, but that will not last. We ought to be able to kill a good many of them.”

Ser Cleos gaped. “But ... there are *eighteen*.”

“At the least. More likely twenty or twenty-five.”

His cousin groaned. “We can’t hope to defeat eighteen.”

“Did I say we could? The best we can hope for is to die with swords in our hands.” He was perfectly sincere. Jaime Lannister had never been afraid of death.

Brienne broke off rowing. Sweat had stuck strands of her flax-colored hair to her forehead, and her grimace made her look homelier than ever. “You are under my protection,” she said, her voice so thick with anger that it was almost a growl.

He had to laugh at such fierceness. *She’s the Hound with teats*, he thought. *Or would be, if she had any teats to speak of.* “Then protect me, wench. Or free me to protect myself.”

The galley was skimming downriver, a great wooden dragonfly. The water around her was churned white by the furious action of her oars. She was gaining visibly, the men on her deck crowding forward as she came on. Metal glinted in their hands, and Jaime could see bows as well. *Archers*. He hated archers.

At the prow of the onrushing galley stood a stocky man with a bald head, bushy grey eyebrows, and brawny arms. Over his mail he wore a soiled white surcoat with a weeping willow embroidered in pale green, but his cloak was fastened with a silver trout. *Riverrun’s captain of guards*. In his day Ser Robin

Ryger had been a notably tenacious fighter, but his day was done; he was of an age with Hoster Tully, and had grown old with his lord.

When the boats were fifty yards apart, Jaime cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back over the water. *“Come to wish me godspeed, Ser Robin?”*

“Come to take you back, Kingslayer,” Ser Robin Ryger bellowed. *“How is it that you’ve lost your golden hair?”*

“I hope to blind my enemies with the sheen off my head. It’s worked well enough for you.”

Ser Robin was unamused. The distance between skiff and galley had shrunk to forty yards. *“Throw your oars and your weapons into the river, and no one need be harmed.”*

Ser Cleos twisted around. *“Jaime, tell him we were freed by Lady Catelyn ... an exchange of captives, lawful ...”*

Jaime told him, for all the good it did. *“Catelyn Stark does not rule in Riverrun,”* Ser Robin shouted back. Four archers crowded into position on either side of him, two standing and two kneeling. *“Cast your swords into the water.”*

“I have no sword,” he returned, *“but if I did, I’d stick it through your belly and hack the balls off those four cravens.”*

A flight of arrows answered him. One thudded into the mast, two pierced the sail, and the fourth missed Jaime by a foot.

Another of the Red Fork’s broad loops loomed before them. Brienne angled the skiff across the bend. The yard swung as they turned, their sail cracking as it filled with wind. Ahead a large island sat in midstream. The main channel flowed right. To the left a cutoff ran between the island and the high bluffs of the north shore. Brienne moved the tiller and the skiff sheared left, sail rippling. Jaime watched her eyes. *Pretty eyes, he thought, and calm.* He knew how to read a man’s eyes. He knew what fear looked like. *She is determined, not desperate.*

Thirty yards behind, the galley was entering the bend. *“Ser Cleos, take the tiller,”* the wench commanded. *“Kingslayer, take an oar and keep us off the rocks.”*

“As my lady commands.” An oar was not a sword, but the blade could break a man’s face if well swung, and the shaft could be used to parry.

Ser Cleos shoved the oar into Jaime's hand and scrambled aft. They crossed the head of the island and turned sharply down the cutoff, sending a wash of water against the face of the bluff as the boat tilted. The island was densely wooded, a tangle of willows, oaks, and tall pines that cast deep shadows across the rushing water, hiding snags and the rotted trunks of drowned trees. To their left the bluff rose sheer and rocky, and at its foot the river foamed whitely around broken boulders and tumbles of rock fallen from the cliff face.

They passed from sunlight into shadow, hidden from the galley's view between the green wall of the trees and the stony grey-brown bluff. *A few moments' respite from the arrows*, Jaime thought, pushing them off a half-submerged boulder.

The skiff rocked. He heard a soft splash, and when he glanced around, Brienne was gone. A moment later he spied her again, pulling herself from the water at the base of the bluff. She waded through a shallow pool, scrambled over some rocks, and began to climb. Ser Cleos goggled, mouth open. *Fool*, thought Jaime. "Ignore the wench," he snapped at his cousin. "Steer."

They could see the sail moving behind the trees. The river galley came into full view at the top of the cutoff, twenty-five yards behind. Her bow swung hard as she came around, and a half-dozen arrows took flight, but all went well wide. The motion of the two boats was giving the archers difficulty, but Jaime knew they'd soon enough learn to compensate. Brienne was halfway up the cliff face, pulling herself from handhold to handhold. *Ryger's sure to see her, and once he does he'll have those bowmen bring her down*. Jaime decided to see if the old man's pride would make him stupid. "Ser Robin," he shouted, "*hear me for a moment.*"

Ser Robin raised a hand, and his archers lowered their bows. "*Say what you will, Kingslayer, but say it quickly.*"

The skiff swung through a litter of broken stones as Jaime called out, "*I know a better way to settle this—single combat. You and I.*"

"*I was not born this morning, Lannister.*"

"*No, but you're like to die this afternoon.*" Jaime raised his hands so the other could see the manacles. "*I'll fight you in chains. What could you fear?*"

“Not you, ser. If the choice were mine, I’d like nothing better, but I am commanded to bring you back alive if possible. Bowmen.” He signaled them on. *“Notch. Draw. Loo—”*

The range was less than twenty yards. The archers could scarcely have missed, but as they pulled on their longbows a rain of pebbles cascaded down around them. Small stones rattled on their deck, bounced off their helms, and made splashes on both sides of the bow. Those who had wits enough to understand raised their eyes just as a boulder the size of a cow detached itself from the top of the bluff. Ser Robin shouted in dismay. The stone tumbled through the air, struck the face of the cliff, cracked in two, and smashed down on them. The larger piece snapped the mast, tore through the sail, sent two of the archers flying into the river, and crushed the leg of a rower as he bent over his oar. The rapidity with which the galley began to fill with water suggested that the smaller fragment had punched right through her hull. The oarsman’s screams echoed off the bluff while the archers flailed wildly in the current. From the way they were splashing, neither man could swim. Jaime laughed.

By the time they emerged from the cutoff, the galley was foundering amongst pools, eddies, and snags, and Jaime Lannister had decided that the gods were good. Ser Robin and his thrice-damned archers would have a long wet walk back to Riverrun, and he was rid of the big homely wench as well. *I could not have planned it better myself. Once I’m free of these irons ...*

Ser Cleos raised a shout. When Jaime looked up, Brienne was lumbering along the clifftop well ahead of them, having cut across a finger of land while they were following the bend in the river. She threw herself off the rock, and looked almost graceful as she folded into a dive. It would have been ungracious to hope that she would smash her head on a stone. Ser Cleos turned the skiff toward her. Thankfully, Jaime still had his oar. *One good swing when she comes paddling up and I’ll be free of her.*

Instead he found himself stretching the oar out over the water. Brienne grabbed hold, and Jaime pulled her in. As he helped her into the skiff, water ran from her hair and dripped from her sodden clothing to pool on the deck. *She’s even uglier wet. Who would have thought it possible?* “You’re a bloody stupid wench,” he

told her. “We could have sailed on without you. I suppose you expect me to thank you?”

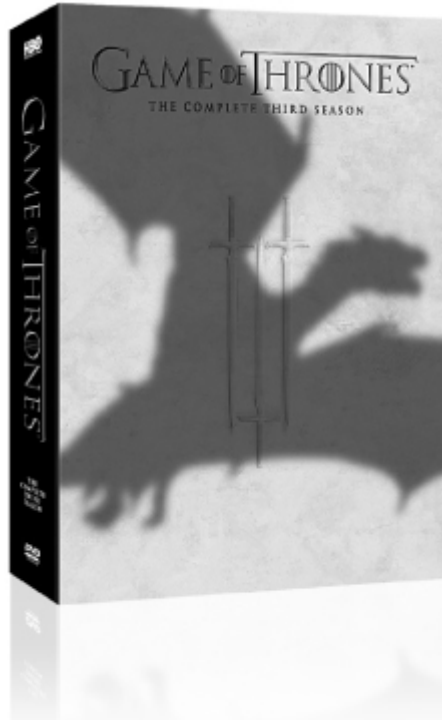
“I want none of your thanks, Kingslayer. I swore an oath to bring you safe to King’s Landing.”

“And you actually mean to keep it?” Jaime gave her his brightest smile. “Now there’s a wonder.”

GAME OF THRONES®

THE COMPLETE THIRD SEASON

AVAILABLE NOW



WITH HOURS OF BONUS CONTENT INCLUDING
INTERACTIVE GUIDES, EXCLUSIVE HISTORIES,
AUDIO COMMENTARIES, AND
NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN FOOTAGE.

GET SEASONS 1 & 2 ON DVD, BLU-RAY™
AND DIGITAL DOWNLOAD TODAY

HBO® © 2014 Home Box Office, Inc. All rights reserved. HBO®
and related service marks are the property of Home Box Office,
Inc.