



ARYA

The rains came and went, but there was more grey sky than blue, and all the streams were running high. On the morning of the third day, Arya noticed that the moss was growing mostly on the wrong side of the trees. “We’re going the wrong way,” she said to Gendry, as they rode past an especially mossy elm. “We’re going south. See how the moss is growing on the trunk?”

He pushed thick black hair from eyes and said, “We’re following the road, that’s all. The road goes south here.”

We’ve been going south all day, she wanted to tell him. *And yesterday too, when we were riding along that streambed*. But she hadn’t been paying close attention yesterday, so she couldn’t be certain. “I think we’re lost,” she said in a low voice. “We shouldn’t have left the river. All we had to do was follow it.”

“The river bends and loops,” said Gendry. “This is just a shorter way, I bet. Some secret outlaw way. Lem and Tom and them have been living here for years.”

That was true. Arya bit her lip. “But the moss . . .”

“The way it’s raining, we’ll have moss growing from our ears before long,” Gendry complained.

“Only from our *south* ear,” Arya declared stubbornly. There was no use trying to convince the Bull of anything. Still, he was the only true friend she had, now that Hot Pie had left them.

“Sharna says she needs me to bake bread,” he’d told her, the day they rode. “Anyhow I’m tired of rain and saddlesores and being scared all the time. There’s ale here, and rabbit to eat, and the bread will be better when I make it. You’ll see, when you come back. You will come back, won’t you? When the war’s done?” He remembered who she was then, and added, “My lady,” reddening.

Arya didn’t know if the war would ever be done, but she had nodded. “I’m sorry I beat you that time,” she said. Hot Pie was stupid and craven, but he’d been with her all the way from King’s Landing and she’d gotten used to him. “I broke your nose.”

“You broke Lem’s too.” Hot Pie grinned. “That was good.”

“Lem didn’t think so,” Arya said glumly. Then it was time to go. When Hot Pie asked if he might kiss milady’s hand, she punched his shoulder. “Don’t call me that. You’re Hot Pie, and I’m Arry.”

“I’m not Hot Pie here. Sharna just calls me Boy. The same as she calls the other boy. It’s going to be confusing.”

She missed him more than she thought she would, but Harwin made up for it some. She had told him about his father Hullen, and how she’d found him dying by the stables in the Red Keep, the day she fled. “He always said he’d die in a stable,” Harwin said, “but we all thought some bad-tempered stallion would be his death, not a pack of lions.” Arya told of Yoren and their escape from King’s Landing as well, and much that had happened since, but she left out the stableboy she’d stabbed with Needle, and the guard whose throat she’d cut to get out of Harrenhal. Telling Harwin would be almost like telling her father, and there were some things that she could not bear having her father know.

Nor did she speak of Jaqen H’ghar and the three deaths he’d owed and paid. The iron coin he’d given her Arya kept tucked away beneath her belt, but sometimes at night she would take it out and remember how his face had melted and changed when he ran his hand across it. “*Valar morghulis*,” she would say under her breath. “Ser Gregor, Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the

Sweetling. The Tickler and the Hound. Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei, King Joffrey.”

Only six Winterfell men remained of the twenty her father had sent west with Beric Dondarrion, Harwin told her, and they were scattered. “It was a trap, milady. Lord Tywin sent his Mountain across the Red Fork with fire and sword, hoping to draw your lord father. He planned for Lord Eddard to come west himself to deal with Gregor Clegane. If he had he would have been killed, or taken prisoner and traded for the Imp, who was your lady mother’s captive at the time. Only the Kingslayer never knew Lord Tywin’s plan, and when he heard about his brother’s capture he attacked your father in the streets of King’s Landing.”

“I remember,” said Arya. “He killed Jory.” Jory had always smiled at her, when he wasn’t telling her to get from underfoot.

“He killed Jory,” Harwin agreed, “and your father’s leg was broken when his horse fell on him. So Lord Eddard *couldn’t* go west. He sent Lord Beric instead, with twenty of his own men and twenty from Winterfell, me among them. There were others besides. Thoros and Ser Raymun Darry and their men, Ser Gladden Wylde, a lord named Lothar Mallery. But Gregor was waiting for us at the Mummer’s Ford, with men concealed on both banks. As we crossed he fell upon us from front and rear.

“I saw the Mountain slay Raymun Darry with a single blow so terrible that it took Darry’s arm off at the elbow and killed the horse beneath him too. Gladden Wylde died there with him, and Lord Mallery was ridden down and drowned. We had lions on every side, and I thought I was doomed with the rest, but Alyn shouted commands and restored order to our ranks, and those still ahorse rallied around Thoros and cut our way free. Six score we’d been that morning. By dark no more than two score were left, and Lord Beric was gravely wounded. Thoros drew a foot of lance from his chest that night, and poured boiling wine into the hole it left.

“Every man of us was certain his lordship would be dead by daybreak. But Thoros prayed with him all night beside the fire, and when dawn came, he was still alive, and stronger than he’d been. It was a fortnight before he could mount a horse, but his courage kept us strong. He told us that our war

had not ended at the Mummer's Ford, but only begun there, and that every man of ours who'd fallen would be avenged tenfold.

"By then the fighting had passed by us. The Mountain's men were only the van of Lord Tywin's host. They crossed the Red Fork in strength and swept up into the riverlands, burning everything in their path. We were so few that all we could do was harry their rear, but we told each other that we'd join up with King Robert when he marched west to crush Lord Tywin's rebellion. Only then we heard that Robert was dead, and Lord Eddard as well, and Cersei Lannister's whelp had ascended the Iron Throne.

"That turned the whole world on its head. We'd been sent out by the King's Hand to deal with outlaws, you see, but now we *were* the outlaws, and Lord Tywin was the Hand of the King. There was some wanted to yield then, but Lord Beric wouldn't hear of it. We were still king's men, he said, and these were the king's people the lions were savaging. If we could not fight for Robert, we would fight for them, until every man of us was dead. And so we did, but as we fought something queer happened. For every man we lost, two showed up to take his place. A few were knights or squires, of gentle birth, but most were common men—fieldhands and fiddlers and innkeeps, servants and shoemakers, even two septons. Men of all sorts, and women too, children, dogs . . ."

"*Dogs?*" said Arya.

"Aye." Harwin grinned. "One of our lads keeps the meanest dogs you'd ever want to see."

"I wish I had a good mean dog," said Arya wistfully. "A lion-killing dog." She'd had a direwolf once, Nymeria, but she'd thrown rocks at her until she fled, to keep the queen from killing her. *Could a direwolf kill a lion?* she wondered.

It rained again that afternoon, and long into the evening. Thankfully the outlaws had secret friends all over, so they did not need to camp out in the open or seek shelter beneath some leaky bower, as she and Hot Pie and Gendry had done so often.

That night they sheltered in a burned, abandoned village. At least it *seemed* to be abandoned, until Jack-Be-Lucky blew two short blasts and two long ones on his hunting horn. Then all sorts of people came crawling

out of the ruins and up from secret cellars. They had ale and dried apples and some stale barley bread, and the outlaws had a goose that Anguy had brought down on the ride, so supper that night was almost a feast.

Arya was sucking the last bit of meat off a wing when one of the villagers turned to Lem Lemoncloak and said, "There were men through here not two days past, looking for the Kingslayer."

Lem snorted. "They'd do better looking in Riverrun. Down in the deepest dungeons, where it's nice and damp." His nose looked like a squashed apple, red and raw and swollen, and his mood was foul.

"No," another villager said. "He's escaped."

The Kingslayer. Arya could feel the hair on the back of her neck prickling. She held her breath to listen.

"Could that be true?" Tom o' Sevens said.

"I'll not believe it," said the one-eyed man in the rusty pothelm. The other outlaws called him Jack-Be-Lucky, though losing an eye didn't seem very lucky to Arya. "I've had me a taste o' them dungeons. How could he escape?"

The villagers could only shrug at that. Greenbeard stroked his thick grey-and-green whiskers and said, "The wolves will drown in blood if the Kingslayer's loose again. Thoros must be told. The Lord of Light will show him Lannister in the flames."

"There's a fine fire burning here," said Anguy, smiling.

Greenbeard laughed, and cuffed the archer's ear. "Do I look a priest to you, Archer? When Pello of Tyrosh peers into the fire, the cinders singe his beard."

Lem cracked his knuckles and said, "Wouldn't Lord Beric love to capture Jaime Lannister, though . . ."

"Would he hang him, Lem?" one of the village women asked. "It'd be half a shame to hang a man as pretty as that one."

"A trial first!" said Anguy. "Lord Beric always gives them a trial, you know that." He smiled. "*Then* he hangs them."

There was laughter all around. Then Tom drew his fingers across the strings of his woodharp and broke into soft song.

*The brothers of the Kingswood,
they were an outlaw band.
The forest was their castle,
but they roamed across the land.
No man's gold was safe from them,
nor any maiden's hand.
Oh, the brothers of the Kingswood,
that fearsome outlaw band . . .*

Warm and dry in a corner between Gendry and Harwin, Arya listened to the singing for a time, then closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. She dreamt of home; not Riverrun, but Winterfell. It was not a good dream, though. She was alone outside the castle, up to her knees in mud. She could see the grey walls ahead of her, but when she tried to reach the gates every step seemed harder than the one before, and the castle faded before her, until it looked more like smoke than granite. And there were wolves as well, gaunt grey shapes stalking through the trees all around her, their eyes shining. Whenever she looked at them, she remembered the taste of blood.

The next morning they left the road to cut across the fields. The wind was gusting, sending dry brown leaves swirling around the hooves of their horses, but for once it did not rain. When the sun came out from behind a cloud, it was so bright Arya had to pull her hood forward to keep it out of her eyes.

She reined up very suddenly. “We *are* going the wrong way!”

Gendry groaned. “What is it, moss again?”

“Look at the *sun*,” she said. “We’re going *south*!” Arya rummaged in her saddlebag for the map, so she could show them. “We should never have left the Trident. See.” She unrolled the map on her leg. All of them were looking at her now. “See, there’s Riverrun, between the rivers.”

“As it happens,” said Jack-Be-Lucky, “we know where Riverrun is. Every man o’ us.”

“You’re not going to Riverrun,” Lem told her bluntly.

I was almost there, Arya thought. I should have let them take our horses. I could have walked the rest of the way. She remembered her dream then, and bit her lip.

“Ah, don’t look so hurt, child,” said Tom Sevenstrings. “No harm will come to you, you have my word on that.”

“The word of a *liar!*”

“No one lied,” said Lem. “We made no promises. It’s not for us to say what’s to be done with you.”

Lem was not the leader, though, no more than Tom; that was Greenbeard, the Tyroshi. Arya turned to face him. “Take me to Riverrun and you’ll be rewarded,” she said desperately.

“Little one,” Greenbeard answered, “a peasant may skin a common squirrel for his pot, but if he finds a gold squirrel in his tree he takes it to his lord, or he will wish he did.”

“I’m not a squirrel,” Arya insisted.

“You are.” Greenbeard laughed. “A little gold squirrel who’s off to see the lightning lord, whether she wills it or not. He’ll know what’s to be done with you. I’ll wager he sends you back to your lady mother, just as you wish.”

Tom Sevenstrings nodded. “Aye, that’s like Lord Beric. He’ll do right by you, see if he don’t.”

Lord Beric Dondarrion. Arya remembered all she’d heard at Harrenhal, from the Lannisters and the Bloody Mummies alike. Lord Beric the wisp o’ the wood. Lord Beric who’d been killed by Vargo Hoat and before that by Ser Amory Lorch, and twice by the Mountain That Rides. *If he won’t send me home maybe I’ll kill him too.* “Why do I have to see Lord Beric?” she asked quietly.

“We bring him all our highborn captives,” said Anguy.

Captive. Arya took a breath to still her soul. *Calm as still water.* She glanced at the outlaws on their horses, and turned her horse’s head. *Now, quick as a snake,* she thought, as she slammed her heels into the courser’s flank. Right between Greenbeard and Jack-Be-Lucky she flew, and caught

one glimpse of Gendry's startled face as his mare moved out of her way. And then she was in the open field, and running.

North or south, east or west, that made no matter now. She could find the way to Riverrun later, once she'd lost them. Arya leaned forward in the saddle and urged the horse to a gallop. Behind her the outlaws were cursing and shouting at her to come back. She shut her ears to the calls, but when she glanced back over her shoulder four of them were coming after her, Anguy and Harwin and Greenbeard racing side by side with Lem farther back, his big yellow cloak flapping behind him as he rode. "Swift as a deer," she told her mount. "Run, now, *run*."

Arya dashed across brown weedy fields, through waist-high grass and piles of dry leaves that flurried and flew when her horse galloped past. There were woods to her left, she saw. *I can lose them there*. A dry ditch ran along one side of the field, but she leapt it without breaking stride, and plunged in among the stand of elm and yew and birch trees. A quick peek back showed Anguy and Harwin still hard on her heels. Greenbeard had fallen behind, though, and she could not see Lem at all. "Faster," she told her horse, "you can, you *can*."

Between two elms she rode, and never paused to see which side the moss was growing on. She leapt a rotten log and swung wide around a monstrous deadfall, jagged with broken branches. Then up a gentle slope and down the other side, slowing and speeding up again, her horse's shoes striking sparks off the flintstones underfoot. At the top of the hill she glanced back. Harwin had pushed ahead of Anguy, but both were coming hard. Greenbeard had fallen further back and seemed to be flagging.

A stream barred her way. She splashed down into it, through water choked with wet brown leaves. Some clung to her horse's legs as they climbed the other side. The undergrowth was thicker here, the ground so full of roots and rocks that she had to slow, but she kept as good a pace as she dared. Another hill before her, this one steeper. Up she went, and down again. *How big are these woods?* she wondered. She had the faster horse, she knew that, she had stolen one of Roose Bolton's best from the stables at Harrenhal, but his speed was wasted here. *I need to find the fields again. I need to find a road*. Instead she found a game trail. It was narrow and uneven, but it was something. She raced along it, branches whipping at her

face. One snagged her hood and yanked it back, and for half a heartbeat she feared they had caught her. A vixen burst from the brush as she passed, startled by the fury of her flight. The game trail brought her to another stream. Or was it the same one? Had she gotten turned around? There was no time to puzzle it out, she could hear their horses crashing through the trees behind her. Thorns scratched at her face like the cats she used to chase in King's Landing. Sparrows exploded from the branches of an alder. But the trees were thinning now, and suddenly she was out of them. Broad level fields stretched before her, all weeds and wild wheat, sodden and trampled. Arya kicked her horse back to a gallop. *Run*, she thought, *run for Riverrun, run for home*. Had she lost them? She took one quick look, and there was Harwin six yards back and gaining. *No*, she thought, *no, he can't, not him, it isn't fair*.

Both horses were lathered and flagging by the time he came up beside her, reached over, and grabbed her bridle. Arya was breathing hard herself then. She knew the fight was done. "You ride like a northman, milady," Harwin said when he'd drawn them to a halt. "Your aunt was the same. Lady Lyanna. But my father was master of horse, remember."

The look she gave him was full of hurt. "I thought you were my father's man."

"Lord Eddard's dead, milady. I belong to the lightning lord now, and to my brothers."

"What brothers?" Old Hullen had fathered no other sons that Arya could remember.

"Anguy, Lem, Tom o' Sevens, Jack and Greenbeard, all of them. We mean your brother Robb no ill, milady . . . but it's not him we fight for. He has an army all his own, and many a great lord to bend the knee. The smallfolk have only us." He gave her a searching look. "Can you understand what I am telling you?"

"Yes." That he was not Robb's man, she understood well enough. And that she was his captive. *I could have stayed with Hot Pie. We could have taken the little boat and sailed it up to Riverrun*. She had been better off as Squab. No one would take Squab captive, or Nan, or Weasel, or Arry the

orphan boy. *I was a wolf*, she thought, *but now I'm just some stupid little lady again.*

“Will you ride back peaceful now,” Harwin asked her, “or must I tie you up and throw you across your horse?”

“I’ll ride peaceful,” she said sullenly. *For now.*