

ARYA

Fear cuts deeper than swords, Arya would tell herself, but that did not make the fear go away. It was as much a part of her days as stale bread and the blisters on her toes after a long day of walking the hard, rutted road.

She had thought she had known what it meant to be afraid, but she learned better in that storehouse beside the Gods Eye. Eight days she had lingered there before the Mountain gave the command to march, and every day she had seen someone die.

The Mountain would come into the storehouse after he had broken his fast and pick one of the prisoners for questioning. The village folk would never look at him. Maybe they thought that if they did not notice him, he would not notice them... but he saw them anyway and picked whom he liked. There was no place to hide, no tricks to play, no way to be safe.

One girl shared a soldier's bed three nights running; the Mountain picked her on the fourth day, and the soldier said nothing.

A smiley old man mended their clothing and babbled about his son, off serving in the gold cloaks at King's Landing. "A king's man, he is," he would say, "a good king's man like me, all for Joffrey." He said it so often the other captives began to call him All-for-Joffrey whenever the guards weren't listening. All-for-Joffrey was picked on the fifth day.

A young mother with a pox-scarred face offered to freely tell them all she knew if they'd promise not to hurt her daughter. The Mountain heard her out; the next morning he picked her daughter, to be certain she'd held nothing back.

The ones chosen were questioned in full view of the other captives, so they could see the fate of rebels and traitors. A man the others called the Tickler asked the questions. His face was so ordinary and his garb so plain that Arya might have thought him one of the villagers before she had seen him at his work. "Tickler makes them howl so hard they piss themselves," old stoop-shoulder Chiswyck told them. He was the man she'd tried to bite,

who'd called her a fierce little thing and smashed her head with a mailed fist. Sometimes he helped the Tickler. Sometimes others did that. Ser Gregor Clegane himself would stand motionless, watching and listening, until the victim died.

The questions were always the same. Was there gold hidden in the village? Silver, gems? Was there more food? Where was Lord Beric Dondarrion? Which of the village folk had aided him? When he rode off, where did he go? How many men were with them? How many knights, how many bowmen, how many men-at-arms? How were they armed? How many were horsed? How many were wounded? What other enemy had they seen? How many? When? What banners did they fly? Where did they go? Was there gold hidden in the village? Silver, gems? Where was Lord Beric Dondarrion? How many men were with him? By the third day, Arya could have asked the questions herself.

They found a little gold, a little silver, a great sack of copper pennies, and a dented goblet set with garnets that two soldiers almost came to blows over. They learned that Lord Beric had ten starvelings with him, or else a hundred mounted knights; that he had ridden west, or north, or south; that he had crossed the lake in a boat; that he was strong as an aurochs or weak from the bloody flux. No one ever survived the Tickler's questioning; no man, no woman, no child. The strongest lasted past evenfall. Their bodies were hung beyond the fires for the wolves.

By the time they marched, Arya knew she was no water dancer. Syrio Forel would never have let them knock him down and take his sword away, nor stood by when they killed Lommy Greenhands. Syrio would never have sat silent in that storehouse nor shuffled along meekly among the other captives. The direwolf was the sigil of the Starks, but Arya felt more a lamb, surrounded by a herd of other sheep. She hated the villagers for their sheepishness, almost as much as she hated herself.

The Lannisters had taken everything: father, friends, home, hope, courage. One had taken Needle, while another had broken her wooden stick sword over his knee. They had even taken her stupid secret. The storehouse had been big enough for her to creep off and make her water in some corner

when no one was looking, but it was different on the road. She held it as long as she could, but finally she had to squat by a bush and skin down her breeches in front of all of them. It was that or wet herself. Hot Pie gaped at her with big moon eyes, but no one else even troubled to look. Girl sheep or boy sheep, Ser Gregor and his men did not seem to care.

Their captors permitted no chatter. A broken lip taught Arya to hold her tongue. Others never learned at all. One boy of three would not stop calling for his father, so they smashed his face in with a spiked mace. Then the boy's mother started screaming and Raff the Sweetling killed her as well.

Arya watched them die and did nothing. What good did it do you to be brave? One of the women picked for questioning had tried to be brave, but she had died screaming like all the rest. There were no brave people on that march, only scared and hungry ones. Most were women and children. The few men were very old or very young; the rest had been chained to that gibbet and left for the wolves and the crows. Gendry was only spared because he'd admitted to forging the horned helm himself; smiths, even apprentice smiths, were too valuable to kill.

They were being taken to serve Lord Tywin Lannister at Harrenhal, the Mountain told them. "You're traitors and rebels, so thank your gods that Lord Tywin's giving you this chance. It's more than you'd get from the outlaws. Obey, serve, and live."

"It's not just, it's not," she heard one wizened old woman complain to another when they had bedded down for the night. "We never did no treason, the others come in and took what they wanted, same as this bunch."

"Lord Beric did us no hurt, though," her friend whispered. "And that red priest with him, he paid for all they took."

"Paid? He took two of my chickens and gave me a bit of paper with a mark on it. Can I eat a bit of raggy old paper, I ask you? Will it give me eggs?" She looked about to see that no guards were near, and spat three times. "There's for the Tullys and there's for the Lannisters and there's for the Starks."

"It's a sin and a shame," an old man hissed. "When the old king was still alive, he'd not have stood for this."

“King Robert?” Arya asked, forgetting herself.

“King *Aerys*, gods grace him,” the old man said, too loudly. A guard came sauntering over to shut them up. The old man lost both his teeth, and there was no more talk that night.

Besides his captives, Ser Gregor was bringing back a dozen pigs, a cage of chickens, a scrawny milk cow, and nine wagons of salt fish. The Mountain and his men had horses, but the captives were all afoot, and those too weak to keep up were killed out of hand, along with anyone foolish enough to flee. The guards took women off into the bushes at night, and most seemed to expect it and went along meekly enough. One girl, prettier than the others, was made to go with four or five different men every night, until finally she hit one with a rock. Ser Gregor made everyone watch while he took off her head with a sweep of his massive two-handed greatsword. “Leave the body for the wolves,” he commanded when the deed was done, handing the sword to his squire to be cleaned.

Arya glanced sidelong at Needle, sheathed at the hip of a black-bearded, balding man-at-arms called Polliver. *It’s good that they took it away*, she thought. Otherwise she would have tried to stab Ser Gregor, and he would have cut her right in half, and the wolves would eat her too.

Polliver was not so bad as some of the others, even though he’d stolen Needle. The night she was caught, the Lannister men had been nameless strangers with faces as alike as their nasal helms, but she’d come to know them all. You had to know who was lazy and who was cruel, who was smart and who was stupid. You had to learn that even though the one they called Shitmouth had the foulest tongue she’d ever heard, he’d give you an extra piece of bread if you asked, while jolly old Chiswyck and soft-spoken Raff would just give you the back of their hand.

Arya watched and listened and polished her hates the way Gendry had once polished his horned helm. Dunsen wore those bull’s horns now, and she hated him for it. She hated Polliver for Needle, and she hated old Chiswyck who thought he was funny. And Raff the Sweetling, who’d driven his spear through Lommy’s throat, she hated even more. She hated Ser Amory Lorch for Yoren, and she hated Ser Meryn Trant for Syrio, the

Hound for killing the butcher's boy Mycah, and Ser Ilyn and Prince Joffrey and the queen for the sake of her father and Fat Tom and Desmond and the rest, and even for Lady, Sansa's wolf. The Tickler was almost too scary to hate. At times she could almost forget he was still with them; when he was not asking questions, he was just another soldier, quieter than most, with a face like a thousand other men.

Every night Arya would say their names. "Ser Gregor," she'd whisper to her stone pillow. "Dunsen, Polliver, Chiswyck, Raff the Sweetling. The Tickler and the Hound. Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei." Back in Winterfell, Arya had prayed with her mother in the sept and with her father in the godswood, but there were no gods on the road to Harrenhal, and her names were the only prayer she cared to remember.

Every day they marched, and every night she said her names, until finally the trees thinned and gave way to a patchwork landscape of rolling hills, meandering streams, and sunlit fields, where the husks of burnt holdfasts thrust up black as rotten teeth. It was another long day's march before they glimpsed the towers of Harrenhal in the distance, hard beside the blue waters of the lake.

It would be better once they got to Harrenhal, the captives told each other, but Arya was not so certain. She remembered Old Nan's stories of the castle built on fear. Harren the Black had mixed human blood in the mortar, Nan used to say, dropping her voice so the children would need to lean close to hear, but Aegon's dragons had roasted Harren and all his sons within their great walls of stone. Arya chewed her lip as she walked along on feet grown hard with callus. It would not be much longer, she told herself; those towers could not be more than a few miles off.

Yet they walked all that day and most of the next before at last they reached the fringes of Lord Tywin's army, encamped west of the castle amidst the scorched remains of a town. Harrenhal was deceptive from afar, because it was so *huge*. Its colossal curtain walls rose beside the lake, sheer and sudden as mountain cliffs, while atop their battlements the rows of

wood-and-iron scorpions looked as small as the bugs for which they were named.

The stink of the Lannister host reached Arya well before she could make out the devices on the banners that sprouted along the lakeshore, atop the pavilions of the westerners. From the smell, Arya could tell that Lord Tywin had been here some time. The latrines that ringed the encampment were overflowing and swarming with flies, and she saw faint greenish fuzz on many of the sharpened stakes that protected the perimeters.

Harrenhal's gatehouse, itself as large as Winterfell's Great Keep, was as scarred as it was massive, its stones fissured and discolored. From outside, only the tops of five immense towers could be seen beyond the walls. The shortest of them was half again as tall as the highest tower in Winterfell, but they did not soar the way a proper tower did. Arya thought they looked like some old man's gnarled, knuckly fingers groping after a passing cloud. She remembered Nan telling how the stone had melted and flowed like candlewax down the steps and in the windows, glowing a sullen searing red as it sought out Harren where he hid. Arya could believe every word; each tower was more grotesque and misshapen than the last, lumpy and runneled and cracked.

"I don't want to go there," Hot Pie squeaked as Harrenhal opened its gates to them. "There's ghosts in there."

Chiswyck heard him, but for once he only smiled. "Baker boy, here's your choice. Come join the ghosts, or be one."

Hot Pie went in with the rest of them.

In the echoing stone-and-timber bathhouse, the captives were stripped and made to scrub and scrape themselves raw in tubs of scalding hot water. Two fierce old women supervised the process, discussing them as bluntly as if they were newly acquired donkeys. When Arya's turn came round, Goodwife Amabel clucked in dismay at the sight of her feet, while Goodwife Harra felt the callus on her fingers that long hours of practice with Needle had earned her. "Got those churning butter, I'll wager," she said. "Some farmer's whelp, are you? Well, never you mind, girl, you have

a chance to win a higher place in this world if you work hard. If you won't work hard, you'll be beaten. And what do they call you?"

Arya dared not say her true name, but Arry was no good either, it was a boy's name and they could see she was no boy. "Weasel," she said, naming the first girl she could think of. "Lommy called me Weasel."

"I can see why," sniffed Goodwife Amabel. "That hair is a fright and a nest for lice as well. We'll have it off, and then you're for the kitchens."

"I'd sooner tend the horses." Arya liked horses, and maybe if she was in the stables she'd be able to steal one and escape.

Goodwife Harra slapped her so hard that her swollen lip broke open all over again. "And keep that tongue to yourself or you'll get worse. No one asked your views."

The blood in her mouth had a salty metal tang to it. Arya dropped her gaze and said nothing. *If I still had Needle, she wouldn't dare hit me*, she thought sullenly.

"Lord Tywin and his knights have grooms and squires to tend their horses, they don't need the likes of you," Goodwife Amabel said. "The kitchens are snug and clean, and there's always a warm fire to sleep by and plenty to eat. You might have done well there, but I can see you're not a clever girl. Harra, I believe we should give this one to Weese."

"If you think so, Amabel." They gave her a shift of grey roughspun wool and a pair of ill-fitting shoes, and sent her off.

Weese was understeward for the Wailing Tower, a squat man with a fleshy carbuncle of a nose and a nest of angry red boils near one corner of his plump lips. Arya was one of six sent to him. He looked them all over with a gimlet eye. "The Lannisters are generous to those as serve them well, an honor none of your sort deserve, but in war a man makes do with what's to hand. Work hard and mind your place and might be one day you'll rise as high as me. If you think to presume on his lordship's kindness, though, you'll find *me* waiting after m'lord has gone, y'see." He strutted up and down before them, telling them how they must never look the highborn in the eye, nor speak until spoken to, nor get in his lordship's way. "My nose

never lies,” he boasted. “I can smell defiance, I can smell pride, I can smell disobedience. I catch a whiff of any such stinks, you’ll answer for it. When I sniff you, all I want to smell is fear.”