



ARYA

The sky was as black as the walls of Harrenhal behind them, and the rain fell soft and steady, muffling the sound of their horses' hooves and running down their faces.

They rode north, away from the lake, following a rutted farm road across the torn fields and into the woods and streams. Arya took the lead, kicking her stolen horse to a brisk heedless trot until the trees closed in around her. Hot Pie and Gendry followed as best they could. Wolves howled off in the distance, and she could hear Hot Pie's heavy breathing. No one spoke. From time to time Arya glanced over her shoulder, to make sure the two boys had not fallen too far behind, and to see if they were being pursued.

They would be, she knew. She had stolen three horses from the stables and a map and a dagger from Roose Bolton's own solar, and killed a guard on the postern gate, slitting his throat when he knelt to pick up the worn iron coin that Jaqen H'ghar had given her. Someone would find him lying dead in his own blood, and then the hue and cry would go up. They would wake Lord Bolton and search Harrenhal from crenel to cellar, and when they did they would find the map and the dagger missing, along with some swords from the armory, bread and cheese from the kitchens, a baker boy, a 'prentice smith, and a cupbearer called Nan . . . or Weasel, or Arry, depending on who you asked.

The Lord of the Dreadfort would not come after them himself. Roose Bolton would stay abed, his pasty flesh dotted with leeches, giving commands in his whispery soft voice. His man Walton might lead the hunt, the one they called Steelshanks for the greaves he always wore on his long legs. Or perhaps it would be slobbery Vargo Hoat and his sellswords, who named themselves the Brave Companions. Others called them Bloody Mummerns (though never to their faces), and sometimes the Footmen, for Lord Vargo's habit of cutting off the hands and feet of men who displeased him.

If they catch us, he'll cut off our hands and feet, Arya thought, and then Roose Bolton will peel the skin off us. She was still dressed in her page's garb, and on the breast over her heart was sewn Lord Bolton's sigil, the flayed man of the Dreadfort.

Every time she looked back, she half expected to see a blaze of torches pouring out the distant gates of Harrenhal or rushing along the tops of its huge high walls, but there was nothing. Harrenhal slept on, until it was lost in darkness and hidden behind the trees.

When they crossed the first stream, Arya turned her horse aside and led them off the road, following the twisting course of the water for a quarter-mile before finally scrambling out and up a stony bank. If the hunters brought dogs, that might throw them off the scent, she hoped. They could not stay on the road. *There is death on the road*, she told herself, *death on all the roads*.

Gendry and Hot Pie did not question her choice. She had the map, after all, and Hot Pie seemed almost as terrified of her as of the men who might be coming after them. He had seen the guard she'd killed. *It's better if he's scared of me*, she told herself. *That way he'll do like I say, instead of something stupid.*

She should be more frightened herself, she knew. She was only ten, a skinny girl on a stolen horse with a dark forest ahead of her and men behind who would gladly cut off her feet. Yet somehow she felt calmer than she ever had in Harrenhal. The rain had washed the guard's blood off her fingers, she wore a sword across her back, wolves were prowling through the dark like lean grey shadows, and Arya Stark was unafraid. *Fear cuts*

deeper than swords, she whispered under her breath, the words that Syrio Forel had taught her, and Jaen's words too, *valar morghulis*.

The rain stopped and started again and stopped once more and started, but they had good cloaks to keep the water off. Arya kept them moving at a slow steady pace. It was too black beneath the trees to ride any faster; the boys were no horsemen, neither one, and the soft broken ground was treacherous with half-buried roots and hidden stones. They crossed another road, its deep ruts filled with runoff, but Arya shunned it. Up and down the rolling hills she took them, through brambles and briars and tangles of underbrush, along the bottoms of narrow gullies where branches heavy with wet leaves slapped at their faces as they passed.

Gendry's mare lost her footing in the mud once, going down hard on her hindquarters and spilling him from the saddle, but neither horse nor rider was hurt, and Gendry got that stubborn look on his face and mounted right up again. Not long after, they came upon three wolves devouring the corpse of a fawn. When Hot Pie's horse caught the scent, he shied and bolted. Two of the wolves fled as well, but the third raised his head and bared his teeth, prepared to defend his kill. "Back off," Arya told Gendry. "Slow, so you don't spook him." They edged their mounts away, until the wolf and his feast were no longer in sight. Only then did she swing about to ride after Hot Pie, who was clinging desperately to the saddle as he crashed through the trees.

Later they passed through a burned village, threading their way carefully between the shells of blackened hovels and past the bones of a dozen dead men hanging from a row of apple trees. When Hot Pie saw them he began to pray, a thin whispered plea for the Mother's mercy, repeated over and over. Arya looked up at the fleshless dead in their wet rotting clothes and said her own prayer. *Ser Gregor*, it went, *Dunsen*, *Polliver*, *Raff the Sweetling*. *The Tickler and the Hound*. *Ser Ilyn*, *Ser Meryn*, *King Joffrey*, *Queen Cersei*. She ended it with *valar morghulis*, touched Jaen's coin where it nestled under her belt, and then reached up and plucked an apple from among the dead men as she rode beneath them. It was mushy and overripe, but she ate it worms and all.

That was the day without a dawn. Slowly the sky lightened around them, but they never saw the sun. Black turned to grey, and colors crept timidly

back into the world. The soldier pines were dressed in somber greens, the broadleaves in russets and faded golds already beginning to brown. They stopped long enough to water the horses and eat a cold, quick breakfast, ripping apart a loaf of the bread that Hot Pie had stolen from the kitchens and passing chunks of hard yellow cheese from hand to hand.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Gendry asked her.

“North,” said Arya.

Hot Pie peered around uncertainly. “Which way is north?”

She used her cheese to point. “That way.”

“But there’s no sun. How do you know?”

“From the moss. See how it grows mostly on one side of the trees? That’s south.”

“What do we want with the north?” Gendry wanted to know.

“The Trident.” Arya unrolled the stolen map to show them. “See? Once we reach the Trident, all we need to do is follow it upstream till we come to Riverrun, here.” Her finger traced the path. “It’s a long way, but we can’t get lost so long as we keep to the river.”

Hot Pie blinked at the map. “Which one is Riverrun?”

Riverrun was painted as a castle tower, in the fork between the flowing blue lines of two rivers, the Tumblestone and the Red Fork. “There.” She touched it. “*Riverrun*, it reads.”

“You can read writing?” he said to her, wonderingly, as if she’d said she could walk on water.

She nodded. “We’ll be safe once we reach Riverrun.”

“We will? Why?”

Because Riverrun is my grandfather’s castle, and my brother Robb will be there, she wanted to say. She bit her lip and rolled up the map. “We just will. But only if we get there.” She was the first one back in the saddle. It made her feel bad to hide the truth from Hot Pie, but she did not trust him with her secret. Gendry knew, but that was different. Gendry had his own secret, though even he didn’t seem to know what it was.

That day Arya quickened their pace, keeping the horses to a trot as long as she dared, and sometimes spurring to a gallop when she spied a flat stretch of field before them. That was seldom enough, though; the ground was growing hillier as they went. The hills were not high, nor especially steep, but there seemed to be no end of them, and they soon grew tired of climbing up one and down the other, and found themselves following the lay of the land, along streambeds and through a maze of shallow wooded valleys where the trees made a solid canopy overhead.

From time to time she sent Hot Pie and Gendry on while she doubled back to try to confuse their trail, listening all the while for the first sign of pursuit. *Too slow*, she thought to herself, chewing her lip, *we're going too slow, they'll catch us for certain*. Once, from the crest of a ridge, she spied dark shapes crossing a stream in the valley behind them, and for half a heartbeat she feared that Roose Bolton's riders were on them, but when she looked again she realized they were only a pack of wolves. She cupped her hands around her mouth and howled down at them, "*Ahoooooooooooo, aoooooooooooo*." When the largest of the wolves lifted its head and howled back, the sound made Arya shiver.

By midday Hot Pie had begun to complain. His arse was sore, he told them, and the saddle was rubbing him raw inside his legs, and besides he had to get some sleep. "I'm so tired I'm going to fall off the horse."

Arya looked at Gendry. "If he falls off, who do you think will find him first, the wolves or the Mummies?"

"The wolves," said Gendry. "Better noses."

Hot Pie opened his mouth and closed it. He did not fall off his horse. The rain began again a short time later. They still had not seen so much as a glimpse of the sun. It was growing colder, and pale white mists were threading between the pines and blowing across the bare burned fields.

Gendry was having almost as bad a time of it as Hot Pie, though he was too stubborn to complain. He sat awkwardly in the saddle, a determined look on his face beneath his shaggy black hair, but Arya could tell he was no horseman. *I should have remembered*, she thought to herself. She had been riding as long as she could remember, ponies when she was little and later horses, but Gendry and Hot Pie were city-born, and in the city

smallfolk walked. Yoren had given them mounts when he took them from King's Landing, but sitting on a donkey and plodding up the kingsroad behind a wagon was one thing. Guiding a hunting horse through wild woods and burned fields was something else.

She would make much better time on her own, Arya knew, but she could not leave them. They were her pack, her friends, the only living friends that remained to her, and if not for her they would still be safe at Harrenhal, Gendry sweating at his forge and Hot Pie in the kitchens. *If the Mummies catch us, I'll tell them that I'm Ned Stark's daughter and sister to the King in the North. I'll command them to take me to my brother, and to do no harm to Hot Pie and Gendry.* They might not believe her, though, and even if they did . . . Lord Bolton was her brother's bannerman, but he frightened her all the same. *I won't let them take us,* she vowed silently, reaching back over her shoulder to touch the hilt of the sword that Gendry had stolen for her. *I won't.*

Late that afternoon, they emerged from beneath the trees and found themselves on the banks of a river. Hot Pie gave a whoop of delight. "The *Trident*! Now all we have to do is go upstream, like you said. We're almost there!"

Arya chewed her lip. "I don't think this is the Trident." The river was swollen by the rain, but even so it couldn't be much more than thirty feet across. She remembered the Trident as being much wider. "It's too little to be the Trident," she told them, "and we didn't come far enough."

"Yes we did," Hot Pie insisted. "We rode all day, and hardly stopped at all. We must have come a long way."

"Let's have a look at that map again," said Gendry.

Arya dismounted, took out the map, unrolled it. The rain pattered against the sheepskin and ran off in rivulets. "We're someplace here, I think," she said, pointing, as the boys peered over her shoulders.

"But," said Hot Pie, "that's hardly any ways at all. See, Harrenhal's there by your finger, you're almost *touching* it. And we rode all day!"

"There's miles and miles before we reach the Trident," she said. "We won't be there for *days*. This must be some different river, one of these, see." She showed him some of the thinner blue lines the mapmaker had

painted in, each with a name painted in fine script beneath it. “The Darry, the Greenapple, the Maiden . . . here, this one, the Little Willow, it might be that.”

Hot Pie looked from the line to the river. “It doesn’t look so little to me.”

Gendry was frowning as well. “The one you’re pointing at runs into that other one, see.”

“The Big Willow,” she read.

“The Big Willow, then. See, and the Big Willow runs into the Trident, so we could follow the one to the other, but we’d need to go downstream, not up. Only if this river *isn’t* the Little Willow, if it’s this other one here . . .”

“Rippledawn Rill,” Arya read.

“See, it loops around and flows down toward the lake, back to Harrenhal.” He traced the line with a finger.

Hot Pie’s eyes grew wide. “*No!* They’ll kill us for sure.”

“We have to know which river this is,” declared Gendry, in his stubbornest voice. “We have to know.”

“Well, we *don’t*.” The map might have names written beside the blue lines, but no one had written a name on the riverbank. “We won’t go up *or* downstream,” she decided, rolling up the map. “We’ll cross and keep going north, like we were.”

“Can horses swim?” asked Hot Pie. “It looks *deep*, Arry. What if there are snakes?”

“Are you sure we’re going north?” asked Gendry. “All these hills . . . if we got turned around . . .”

“The moss on the trees—”

He pointed to a nearby tree. “That tree’s got moss on three sides, and that next one has no moss at all. We could be lost, just riding around in a circle.”

“We could be,” said Arya, “but I’m going to cross the river anyway. You can come or you can stay here.” She climbed back into the saddle, ignoring the both of them. If they didn’t want to follow, they could find Riverrun on their own, though more likely the Mummerys would just find them.

She had to ride a good half mile along the bank before she finally found a place where it looked as though it might be safe to cross, and even then her mare was reluctant to enter the water. The river, whatever its name, was running brown and fast, and the deep part in the middle came up past the horse's belly. Water filled her boots, but she pressed in her heels all the same and climbed out on the far bank. From behind she heard splashing, and a mare's nervous whinny. *They followed, then. Good.* She turned to watch as the boys struggled across and emerged dripping beside her. "It wasn't the Trident," she told them. "It *wasn't*."

The next river was shallower and easier to ford. That one wasn't the Trident either, and no one argued with her when she told them they would cross it.

Dusk was settling as they stopped to rest the horses once more and share another meal of bread and cheese. "I'm cold and wet," Hot Pie complained. "We're a long way from Harrenhal now, for sure. We could have us a fire —"

"*NO!*" Arya and Gendry both said, at the exact same instant. Hot Pie quailed a little. Arya gave Gendry a sideways look. *He said it with me, like Jon used to do, back in Winterfell.* She missed Jon Snow the most of all her brothers.

"Could we sleep at least?" Hot Pie asked. "I'm so tired, Arry, and my arse is sore. I think I've got blisters."

"You'll have more than that if you're caught," she said. "We've got to keep going. We've *got* to."

"But it's almost dark, and you can't even see the moon."

"Get back on your horse."

Plodding along at a slow walking pace as the light faded around them, Arya found her own exhaustion weighing heavy on her. She needed sleep as much as Hot Pie, but they dare not. If they slept, they might open their eyes to find Vargo Hoat standing over them with Shagwell the Fool and Faithful Urswyck and Rorge and Biter and Septon Utt and all his other monsters.

Yet after a while the motion of her horse became as soothing as the rocking of a cradle, and Arya found her eyes growing heavy. She let them

close, just for an instant, then snapped them wide again. *I can't go to sleep*, she screamed at herself silently, *I can't, I can't*. She knuckled at her eye and rubbed it hard to keep it open, clutching the reins tightly and kicking her mount to a canter. But neither she nor the horse could sustain the pace, and it was only a few moments before they fell back to a walk again, and a few more until her eyes closed a second time. This time they did not open quite so quickly.

When they did, she found that her horse had come to a stop and was nibbling at a tuft of grass, while Gendry was shaking her arm. "You fell asleep," he told her.

"I was just resting my eyes."

"You were resting them a long while, then. Your horse was wandering in a circle, but it wasn't till she stopped that I realized you were sleeping. Hot Pie's just as bad, he rode into a tree limb and got knocked off, you should have heard him yell. Even *that* didn't wake you up. You need to stop and sleep."

"I can keep going as long as you can." She yawned.

"Liar," he said. "You keep going if you want to be stupid, but I'm stopping. I'll take the first watch. You sleep."

"What about Hot Pie?"

Gendry pointed. Hot Pie was already on the ground, curled up beneath his cloak on a bed of damp leaves and snoring softly. He had a big wedge of cheese in one fist, but it looked as though he had fallen asleep between bites.

It was no good arguing, Arya realized; Gendry had the right of it. *The Mummies will need to sleep too*, she told herself, hoping it was true. She was so weary it was a struggle even to get down from the saddle, but she remembered to hobble her horse before finding a place beneath a beech tree. The ground was hard and damp. She wondered how long it would be before she slept in a bed again, with hot food and a fire to warm her. The last thing she did before closing her eyes was unsheathe her sword and lay it down beside her. "Ser Gregor," she whispered, yawning. "Dunsen, Polliver, Raff the Sweetling. The Tickler and . . . the Tickler . . . the Hound . . ."

Her dreams were red and savage. The Mummers were in them, four at least, a pale Lyseni and a dark brutal axeman from Ib, the scarred Dothraki horse lord called Iggo and a Dornishman whose name she never knew. On and on they came, riding through the rain in rusting mail and wet leather, swords and axe clanking against their saddles. They thought they were hunting her, she knew with all the strange sharp certainty of dreams, but they were wrong. She was hunting them.

She was no little girl in the dream; she was a wolf, huge and powerful, and when she emerged from beneath the trees in front of them and bared her teeth in a low rumbling growl, she could smell the rank stench of fear from horse and man alike. The Lyseni's mount reared and screamed in terror, and the others shouted at one another in mantalk, but before they could act the other wolves came hurtling from the darkness and the rain, a great pack of them, gaunt and wet and silent.

The fight was short but bloody. The hairy man went down as he unslung his axe, the dark one died stringing an arrow, and the pale man from Lys tried to bolt. Her brothers and sisters ran him down, turning him again and again, coming at him from all sides, snapping at the legs of his horse and tearing the throat from the rider when he came crashing to the earth.

Only the belled man stood his ground. His horse kicked in the head of one of her sisters, and he cut another almost in half with his curved silvery claw as his hair tinkled softly.

Filled with rage, she leapt onto his back, knocking him head-first from his saddle. Her jaws locked on his arm as they fell, her teeth sinking through the leather and wool and soft flesh. When they landed she gave a savage jerk with her head and ripped the limb loose from his shoulder. Exulting, she shook it back and forth in her mouth, scattering the warm red droplets amidst the cold black rain.