

ARYA

Her father had been fighting with the council again. Arya could see it on his face when he came to table, late again, as he had been so often. The first course, a thick sweet soup made with pumpkins, had already been taken away when Ned Stark strode into the Small Hall. They called it that to set it apart from the Great Hall, where the king could feast a thousand, but it was a long room with a high vaulted ceiling and bench space for two hundred at its trestle tables.

“My lord,” Jory said when Father entered. He rose to his feet, and the rest of the guard rose with him. Each man wore a new cloak, heavy grey wool with a white satin border. A hand of beaten silver clutched the woolen folds of each cloak and marked their wearers as men of the Hand’s household guard. There were only fifty of them, so most of the benches were empty.

“Be seated,” Eddard Stark said. “I see you have started without me. I am pleased to know there are still some men of sense in this city.” He signaled for the meal to resume. The servants began bringing out platters of ribs, roasted in a crust of garlic and herbs.

“The talk in the yard is we shall have a tourney, my lord,” Jory said as he resumed his seat. “They say that knights will come from all over the realm to joust and feast in honor of your appointment as Hand of the King.”

Arya could see that her father was not very happy about that. “Do they also say this is the last thing in the world I would have wished?”

Sansa’s eyes had grown wide as the plates. “A *tourney*,” she breathed. She was seated between Septa Mordane and Jeyne Poole, as far from Arya as she could get without drawing a reproach from Father. “Will we be permitted to go, Father?”

“You know my feelings, Sansa. It seems I must arrange Robert’s games and pretend to be honored for his sake. That does not mean I must subject my daughters to this folly.”

“Oh, *please*,” Sansa said. “I want to see.”

Septa Mordane spoke up. “Princess Myrcella will be there, my lord, and her younger than Lady Sansa. All the ladies of the court will be expected at a grand event like this, and as the tourney is in your honor, it would look queer if your family did not attend.”

Father looked pained. “I suppose so. Very well, I shall arrange a place for you, Sansa.” He saw Arya. “For both of you.”

“I don’t care about their stupid tourney,” Arya said. She knew Prince Joffrey would be there, and she hated Prince Joffrey.

Sansa lifted her head. “It will be a *splendid* event. You shan’t be wanted.”

Anger flashed across Father’s face. “*Enough*, Sansa. More of that and you will change my mind. I am weary unto death of this endless war you two are fighting. You are sisters. I expect you to behave like sisters, is that understood?”

Sansa bit her lip and nodded. Arya lowered her face to stare sullenly at her plate. She could feel tears stinging her eyes. She rubbed them away angrily, determined not to cry.

The only sound was the clatter of knives and forks. “Pray excuse me,” her father announced to the table. “I find I have small appetite tonight.” He walked from the hall.

After he was gone, Sansa exchanged excited whispers with Jeyne Poole. Down the table Jory laughed at a joke, and Hullen started in about horseflesh. “Your warhorse, now, he may not be the best one for the joust. Not the same thing, oh, no, not the same at all.” The men had heard it all before; Desmond, Jacks, and Hullen’s son Harwin shouted him down together, and Porther called for more wine.

No one talked to Arya. She didn’t care. She liked it that way. She would have eaten her meals alone in her bedchamber if they let her. Sometimes they did, when Father had to dine with the king or some lord or the envoys from this place or that place. The rest of the time, they ate in his solar, just him and her and Sansa. That was when Arya missed her brothers

most. She wanted to tease Bran and play with baby Rickon and have Robb smile at her. She wanted Jon to muss up her hair and call her “little sister” and finish her sentences with her. But all of them were gone. She had no one left but Sansa, and Sansa wouldn’t even talk to her unless Father made her.

Back at Winterfell, they had eaten in the Great Hall almost half the time. Her father used to say that a lord needed to eat with his men, if he hoped to keep them. “Know the men who follow you,” she heard him tell Robb once, “and let them know you. Don’t ask your men to die for a stranger.” At Winterfell, he always had an extra seat set at his own table, and every day a different man would be asked to join him. One night it would be Vayon Poole, and the talk would be coppers and bread stores and servants. The next time it would be Mikken, and her father would listen to him go on about armor and swords and how hot a forge should be and the best way to temper steel. Another day it might be Hullen with his endless horse talk, or Septon Chayle from the library, or Jory, or Ser Rodrik, or even Old Nan with her stories.

Arya had loved nothing better than to sit at her father’s table and listen to them talk. She had loved listening to the men on the benches too; to freeriders tough as leather, courtly knights and bold young squires, grizzled old men-at-arms. She used to throw snowballs at them and help them steal pies from the kitchen. Their wives gave her scones and she invented names for their babies and played monsters-and-maidens and hide-the-treasure and come-into-my-castle with their children. Fat Tom used to call her “Arya Underfoot,” because he said that was where she always was. She’d liked that a lot better than “Arya Horseface.”

Only that was Winterfell, a world away, and now everything was changed. This was the first time they had supped with the men since arriving in King’s Landing. Arya hated it. She hated the sounds of their voices now, the way they laughed, the stories they told. They’d been her friends, she’d felt safe around them, but now she knew that was a lie. They’d let the queen kill Lady, that was horrible enough, but then the Hound found Mycah. Jeyne Poole had told Arya that he’d cut him up in so

many pieces that they'd given him back to the butcher in a bag, and at first the poor man had thought it was a pig they'd slaughtered. And no one had raised a voice or drawn a blade or *anything*, not Harwin who always talked so bold, or Alyn who was going to be a knight, or Jory who was captain of the guard. Not even her father.

"He was my *friend*," Arya whispered into her plate, so low that no one could hear. Her ribs sat there untouched, grown cold now, a thin film of grease congealing beneath them on the plate. Arya looked at them and felt ill. She pushed away from the table.

"Pray, where do you think you are going, young lady?" Septa Mordane asked.

"I'm not hungry." Arya found it an effort to remember her courtesies. "May I be excused, please?" she recited stiffly.

"You may not," the septa said. "You have scarcely touched your food. You will sit down and clean your plate."

"You clean it!" Before anyone could stop her, Arya bolted for the door as the men laughed and Septa Mordane called loudly after her, her voice rising higher and higher.

Fat Tom was at his post, guarding the door to the Tower of the Hand. He blinked when he saw Arya rushing toward him and heard the septa's shouts. "Here now, little one, hold on," he started to say, reaching, but Arya slid between his legs and then she was running up the winding tower steps, her feet hammering on the stone while Fat Tom huffed and puffed behind her.

Her bedchamber was the only place that Arya liked in all of King's Landing, and the thing she liked best about it was the door, a massive slab of dark oak with black iron bands. When she slammed that door and dropped the heavy crossbar, nobody could get into her room, not Septa Mordane or Fat Tom or Sansa or Jory or the Hound, *nobody*! She slammed it now.

When the bar was down, Arya finally felt safe enough to cry.

She went to the window seat and sat there, sniffing, hating them all, and herself most of all. It was all her fault, everything bad that had happened. Sansa said so, and Jeyne too.

Fat Tom was knocking on her door. "Arya girl, what's wrong?" he called out. "You in there?"

"No!" she shouted. The knocking stopped. A moment later she heard him going away. Fat Tom was always easy to fool.

Arya went to the chest at the foot of her bed. She knelt, opened the lid, and began pulling her clothes out with both hands, grabbing handfuls of silk and satin and velvet and wool and tossing them on the floor. It was there at the bottom of the chest, where she'd hidden it. Arya lifted it out almost tenderly and drew the slender blade from its sheath.

Needle.

She thought of Mycah again and her eyes filled with tears. Her fault, her fault, her fault. If she had never asked him to play at swords with her...

There was a pounding at her door, louder than before. "*Arya Stark, you open this door at once, do you hear me?*"

Arya spun around, with Needle in her hand. "You better not come in here!" she warned. She slashed at the air savagely.

"*The Hand will hear of this!*" Septa Mordane raged.

"I don't care," Arya screamed. "Go away."

"*You will rue this insolent behavior, young lady, I promise you that.*" Arya listened at the door until she heard the sound of the septa's receding footsteps.

She went back to the window, Needle in hand, and looked down into the courtyard below. If only she could climb like Bran, she thought; she would go out the window and down the tower, run away from this horrible place, away from Sansa and Septa Mordane and Prince Joffrey, from all of them. Steal some food from the kitchens, take Needle and her good boots and a warm cloak. She could find Nymeria in the wild woods below the Trident, and together they'd return to Winterfell, or run to Jon on the Wall.

She found herself wishing that Jon was here with her now. Then maybe she wouldn't feel so alone.

A soft knock at the door behind her turned Arya away from the window and her dreams of escape. "Arya," her father's voice called out. "Open the door. We need to talk."

Arya crossed the room and lifted the crossbar. Father was alone. He seemed more sad than angry. That made Arya feel even worse. "May I come in?" Arya nodded, then dropped her eyes, ashamed. Father closed the door. "Whose sword is that?"

"Mine." Arya had almost forgotten Needle, in her hand.

"Give it to me."

Reluctantly Arya surrendered her sword, wondering if she would ever hold it again. Her father turned it in the light, examining both sides of the blade. He tested the point with his thumb. "A bravo's blade," he said. "Yet it seems to me that I know this maker's mark. This is Mikken's work."

Arya could not lie to him. She lowered her eyes.

Lord Eddard Stark sighed. "My nine-year-old daughter is being armed from my own forge, and I know nothing of it. The Hand of the King is expected to rule the Seven Kingdoms, yet it seems I cannot even rule my own household. How is it that you come to own a sword, Arya? Where did you get this?"

Arya chewed her lip and said nothing. She would not betray Jon, not even to their father.

After a while, Father said, "I don't suppose it matters, truly." He looked down gravely at the sword in his hands. "This is no toy for children, least of all for a girl. What would Septa Mordane say if she knew you were playing with swords?"

"I wasn't *playing*," Arya insisted. "I hate Septa Mordane."

"That's enough." Her father's voice was curt and hard. "The septa is doing no more than is her duty, though gods know you have made it a struggle for the poor woman. Your mother and I have charged her with the impossible task of making you a lady."

“I don’t *want* to be a lady!” Arya flared.

“I ought to snap this toy across my knee here and now, and put an end to this nonsense.”

“Needle wouldn’t break,” Arya said defiantly, but her voice betrayed her words.

“It has a name, does it?” Her father sighed. “Ah, Arya. You have a wildness in you, child. ‘The wolf blood,’ my father used to call it. Lyanna had a touch of it, and my brother Brandon more than a touch. It brought them both to an early grave.” Arya heard sadness in his voice; he did not often speak of his father, or of the brother and sister who had died before she was born. “Lyanna might have carried a sword, if my lord father had allowed it. You remind me of her sometimes. You even look like her.”

“Lyanna was beautiful,” Arya said, startled. Everybody said so. It was not a thing that was ever said of Arya.

“She was,” Eddard Stark agreed, “beautiful, and willful, and dead before her time.” He lifted the sword, held it out between them. “Arya, what did you think to do with this... Needle? Who did you hope to skewer? Your sister? Septa Mordane? Do you know the first thing about sword fighting?”

All she could think of was the lesson Jon had given her. “Stick them with the pointy end,” she blurted out.

Her father snorted back laughter. “That *is* the essence of it, I suppose.”

Arya desperately wanted to explain, to make him see. “I was trying to learn, but...” Her eyes filled with tears. “I asked Mycah to practice with me.” The grief came on her all at once. She turned away, shaking. “I *asked* him,” she cried. “It was my fault, it was me...”

Suddenly her father’s arms were around her. He held her gently as she turned to him and sobbed against his chest. “No, sweet one,” he murmured. “Grieve for your friend, but never blame yourself. You did not kill the butcher’s boy. That murder lies at the Hound’s door, him and the cruel woman he serves.”

“I hate them,” Arya confided, red-faced, sniffing. “The Hound and the queen and the king and Prince Joffrey. I hate all of them. Joffrey *lied*, it

wasn't the way he said. I hate Sansa too. She *did* remember, she just lied so Joffrey would like her."

"We all lie," her father said. "Or did you truly think I'd believe that Nymeria ran off?"

Arya blushed guiltily. "Jory promised not to tell."

"Jory kept his word," her father said with a smile. "There are some things I do not need to be told. Even a blind man could see that wolf would never have left you willingly."

"We had to throw rocks," she said miserably. "I *told* her to run, to go be free, that I didn't want her anymore. There were other wolves for her to play with, we heard them howling, and Jory said the woods were full of game, so she'd have deer to hunt. Only she kept following, and finally we had to throw rocks. I hit her twice. She whined and looked at me and I felt so 'shamed, but it was right, wasn't it? The queen would have killed her."

"It was right," her father said. "And even the lie was... not without honor." He'd put Needle aside when he went to Arya to embrace her. Now he took the blade up again and walked to the window, where he stood for a moment, looking out across the courtyard. When he turned back, his eyes were thoughtful. He seated himself on the window seat, Needle across his lap. "Arya, sit down. I need to try and explain some things to you."

She perched anxiously on the edge of her bed. "You are too young to be burdened with all my cares," he told her, "but you are also a Stark of Winterfell. You know our words."

"*Winter is coming*," Arya whispered.

"The hard cruel times," her father said. "We tasted them on the Trident, child, and when Bran fell. You were born in the long summer, sweet one, you've never known anything else, but now the winter is truly coming. Remember the sigil of our House, Arya."

"The direwolf," she said, thinking of Nymeria. She hugged her knees against her chest, suddenly afraid.

"Let me tell you something about wolves, child. When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives."

Summer is the time for squabbles. In winter, we must protect one another, keep each other warm, share our strengths. So if you must hate, Arya, hate those who would truly do us harm. Septa Mordane is a good woman, and Sansa... Sansa is your sister. You may be as different as the sun and the moon, but the same blood flows through both your hearts. You need her, as she needs you... and I need both of you, gods help me.”

He sounded so tired that it made Arya sad. “I don’t hate Sansa,” she told him. “Not truly.” It was only half a lie.

“I do not mean to frighten you, but neither will I lie to you. We have come to a dark dangerous place, child. This is not Winterfell. We have enemies who mean us ill. We cannot fight a war among ourselves. This willfulness of yours, the running off, the angry words, the disobedience... at home, these were only the summer games of a child. Here and now, with winter soon upon us, that is a different matter. It is time to begin growing up.”

“I will,” Arya vowed. She had never loved him so much as she did in that instant. “I can be strong too. I can be as strong as Robb.”

He held Needle out to her, hilt first. “Here.”

She looked at the sword with wonder in her eyes. For a moment she was afraid to touch it, afraid that if she reached for it it would be snatched away again, but then her father said, “Go on, it’s yours,” and she took it in her hand.

“I can keep it?” she said. “For true?”

“For true.” He smiled. “If I took it away, no doubt I’d find a morningstar hidden under your pillow within the fortnight. Try not to stab your sister, whatever the provocation.”

“I won’t. I promise.” Arya clutched Needle tightly to her chest as her father took his leave.

The next morning, as they broke their fast, she apologized to Septa Mordane and asked for her pardon. The septa peered at her suspiciously, but Father nodded.

Three days later, at midday, her father's steward Vayon Poole sent Arya to the Small Hall. The trestle tables had been dismantled and the benches shoved against the walls. The hall seemed empty, until an unfamiliar voice said, "You are late, boy." A slight man with a bald head and a great beak of a nose stepped out of the shadows, holding a pair of slender wooden swords. "Tomorrow you will be here at midday." He had an accent, the lilt of the Free Cities, Braavos perhaps, or Myr.

"Who are you?" Arya asked.

"I am your dancing master." He tossed her one of the wooden blades. She grabbed for it, missed, and heard it clatter to the floor. "Tomorrow you will catch it. Now pick it up."

It was not just a stick, but a true wooden sword complete with grip and guard and pommel. Arya picked it up and clutched it nervously with both hands, holding it out in front of her. It was heavier than it looked, much heavier than Needle.

The bald man clicked his teeth together. "That is not the way, boy. This is not a greatsword that is needing two hands to swing it. You will take the blade in one hand."

"It's too heavy," Arya said.

"It is heavy as it needs to be to make you strong, and for the balancing. A hollow inside is filled with lead, just so. One hand now is all that is needing."

Arya took her right hand off the grip and wiped her sweaty palm on her pants. She held the sword in her left hand. He seemed to approve. "The left is good. All is reversed, it will make your enemies more awkward. Now you are standing wrong. Turn your body sideface, yes, so. You are skinny as the shaft of a spear, do you know. That is good too, the target is smaller. Now the grip. Let me see." He moved closer and peered at her hand, prying her fingers apart, rearranging them. "Just so, yes. Do not squeeze it so tight, no, the grip must be deft, delicate."

"What if I drop it?" Arya said.

“The steel must be part of your arm,” the bald man told her. “Can you drop part of your arm? No. Nine years Syrio Forel was first sword to the Sealord of Braavos, he knows these things. Listen to him, boy.”

It was the third time he had called her “boy.” “I’m a girl,” Arya objected.

“Boy, girl,” Syrio Forel said. “You are a sword, that is all.” He clicked his teeth together. “Just so, that is the grip. You are not holding a battle-axe, you are holding a—”

“—*needle*,” Arya finished for him, fiercely.

“Just so. Now we will begin the dance. Remember, child, this is not the iron dance of Westeros we are learning, the knight’s dance, hacking and hammering, no. This is the bravo’s dance, the water dance, swift and sudden. All men are made of water, do you know this? When you pierce them, the water leaks out and they die.” He took a step backward, raised his own wooden blade. “Now you will try to strike me.”

Arya tried to strike him. She tried for four hours, until every muscle in her body was sore and aching, while Syrio Forel clicked his teeth together and told her what to do.

The next day their real work began.