



ARYA

She could feel the hole inside her every morning when she woke. It wasn't hunger, though sometimes there was that too. It was a hollow place, an emptiness where her heart had been, where her brothers had lived, and her parents. Her head hurt too. Not as bad as it had at first, but still pretty bad. Arya was used to that, though, and at least the lump was going down. But the hole inside her stayed the same. *The hole will never feel any better*, she told herself when she went to sleep.

Some mornings Arya did not want to wake at all. She would huddle beneath her cloak with her eyes squeezed shut and try to will herself back to sleep. If the Hound would only have left her alone, she would have slept all day and all night.

And dreamed. That was the best part, the dreaming. She dreamed of wolves most every night. A great pack of wolves, with her at the head. She was bigger than any of them, stronger, swifter, faster. She could outrun horses and outfight lions. When she bared her teeth even men would run from her, her belly was never empty long, and her fur kept her warm even when the wind was blowing cold. And her brothers and sisters were with her, many and more of them, fierce and terrible and *hers*. They would never leave her.

But if her nights were full of wolves, her days belonged to the dog. Sandor Clegane made her get up every morning, whether she wanted to or

not. He would curse at her in his raspy voice, or yank her to her feet and shake her. Once he dumped a helm full of cold water all over her head. She bounced up sputtering and shivering and tried to kick him, but he only laughed. “Dry off and feed the bloody horses,” he told her, and she did.

They had two now, Stranger and a sorrel palfrey mare Arya had named Craven, because Sandor said she’d likely run off from the Twins the same as them. They’d found her wandering riderless through a field the morning after the slaughter. She was a good enough horse, but Arya could not love a coward. *Stranger would have fought.* Still, she tended the mare as best she knew. It was better than riding double with the Hound. And Craven might have been a coward, but she was young and strong as well. Arya thought that she might be able to outrun Stranger, if it came to it.

The Hound no longer watched her as closely as he had. Sometimes he did not seem to care whether she stayed or went, and he no longer bound her up in a cloak at night. *One night I’ll kill him in his sleep,* she told herself, but she never did. *One day I’ll ride away on Craven, and he won’t be able to catch me,* she thought, but she never did that either. Where would she go? Winterfell was gone. Her grandfather’s brother was at Riverrun, but he didn’t know her, no more than she knew him. Maybe Lady Smallwood would take her in at Acorn Hall, but maybe she wouldn’t. Besides, Arya wasn’t even sure she could *find* Acorn Hall again. Sometimes she thought she might go back to Sharna’s inn, if the floods hadn’t washed it away. She could stay with Hot Pie, or maybe Lord Beric would find her there. Anguy would teach her to use a bow, and she could ride with Gendry and be an outlaw, like Wenda the White Fawn in the songs.

But that was just stupid, like something Sansa might dream. Hot Pie and Gendry had left her just as soon as they could, and Lord Beric and the outlaws only wanted to ransom her, just like the Hound. None of them wanted her around. *They were never my pack, not even Hot Pie and Gendry. I was stupid to think so, just a stupid little girl, and no wolf at all.*

So she stayed with the Hound. They rode every day, never sleeping twice in the same place, avoiding towns and villages and castles as best they could. Once she asked Sandor Clegane where they were going. “Away,” he said. “That’s all you need to know. You’re not worth spit to me now, and I

don't want to hear your whining. I should have let you run into that bloody castle."

"You should have," she agreed, thinking of her mother.

"You'd be dead if I had. You ought to thank me. You ought to sing me a pretty little song, the way your sister did."

"Did you hit her with an axe too?"

"I hit you with the *flat* of the axe, you stupid little bitch. If I'd hit you with the blade there'd still be chunks of your head floating down the Green Fork. Now shut your bloody mouth. If I had any sense I'd give you to the silent sisters. They cut the tongues out of girls who talk too much."

That wasn't fair of him to say. Aside from that one time, Arya hardly talked at all. Whole days passed when neither of them said anything. She was too empty to talk, and the Hound was too angry. She could feel the fury in him; she could see it on his face, the way his mouth would tighten and twist, the looks he gave her. Whenever he took his axe to chop some wood for a fire, he would slide into a cold rage, hacking savagely at the tree or the deadfall or the broken limb, until they had twenty times as much kindling and firewood as they'd needed. Sometimes he would be so sore and tired afterward that he would lie down and go right to sleep without even lighting a fire. Arya hated it when that happened, and hated him too. Those were the nights when she stared the longest at the axe. *It looks awfully heavy, but I bet I could swing it.* She wouldn't hit him with the flat, either.

Sometimes in their wanderings they glimpsed other people; farmers in their fields, swineherds with their pigs, a milkmaid leading a cow, a squire carrying a message down a rutted road. She never wanted to speak to them either. It was as if they lived in some distant land and spoke a queer alien tongue; they had nothing to do with her, or her with them.

Besides, it wasn't safe to be seen. From time to time columns of horsemen passed down the winding farm roads, the twin towers of Frey flying before them. "Hunting for stray northmen," the Hound said when they had passed. "Any time you hear hooves, get your head down fast, it's not like to be a friend."

One day, in an earthen hollow made by the roots of a fallen oak, they came face to face with another survivor of the Twins. The badge on his

breast showed a pink maiden dancing in a swirl of silk, and he told them he was Ser Marq Piper's man; a bowman, though he'd lost his bow. His left shoulder was all twisted and swollen where it met his arm; a blow from a mace, he said, it had broken his shoulder and smashed his chainmail deep into his flesh. "A northman, it was," he wept. "His badge was a bloody man, and he saw mine and made a jape, red man and pink maiden, maybe they should get together. I drank to his Lord Bolton, he drank to Ser Marq, and we drank together to Lord Edmure and Lady Roslin and the King in the North. And then he killed me." His eyes were fever bright when he said that, and Arya could tell that it was true. His shoulder was swollen grotesquely, and pus and blood had stained his whole left side. There was a stink to him too. *He smells like a corpse*. The man begged them for a drink of wine.

"If I'd had any wine, I'd have drunk it myself," the Hound told him. "I can give you water, and the gift of mercy."

The archer looked at him a long while before he said, "You're Joffrey's dog."

"My own dog now. Do you want the water?"

"Aye." The man swallowed. "And the mercy. Please."

They had passed a small pond a short ways back. Sandor gave Arya his helm and told her to fill it, so she trudged back to the water's edge. Mud squished over the toe of her boots. She used the dog's head as a pail. Water ran out through the eyeholes, but the bottom of the helm still held a lot.

When she came back, the archer turned his face up and she poured the water into his mouth. He gulped it down as fast as she could pour, and what he couldn't gulp ran down his cheeks into the brown blood that crusted his whiskers, until pale pink tears dangled from his beard. When the water was gone he clutched the helm and licked the steel. "Good," he said. "I wish it was wine, though. I wanted wine."

"Me too." The Hound eased his dagger into the man's chest almost tenderly, the weight of his body driving the point through his surcoat, ringmail, and the quilting beneath. As he slid the blade back out and wiped it on the dead man, he looked at Arya. "That's where the heart is, girl. That's how you kill a man."

That's one way. "Will we bury him?"

"Why?" Sandor said. "He don't care, and we've got no spade. Leave him for the wolves and wild dogs. Your brothers and mine." He gave her a hard look. "First we rob him, though."

There were two silver stags in the archer's purse, and almost thirty coppers. His dagger had a pretty pink stone in the hilt. The Hound hefted the knife in his hand, then flipped it toward Arya. She caught it by the hilt, slid it through her belt, and felt a little better. It wasn't Needle, but it was steel. The dead man had a quiver of arrows too, but arrows weren't much good without a bow. His boots were too big for Arya and too small for the Hound, so those they left. She took his kettle helm as well, even though it came down almost past her nose, so she had to tilt it back to see. "He must have had a horse as well, or he wouldn't have got away," Clegane said, peering about, "but it's bloody well gone, I'd say. No telling how long he's been here."

By the time they found themselves in the foothills of the Mountains of the Moon, the rains had mostly stopped. Arya could see the sun and moon and stars, and it seemed to her that they were heading eastward. "Where are we going?" she asked again.

This time the Hound answered her. "You have an aunt in the Eyrie. Might be she'll want to ransom your scrawny arse, though the gods know why. Once we find the high road, we can follow it all the way to the Bloody Gate."

Aunt Lysa. The thought left Arya feeling empty. It was her mother she wanted, not her mother's sister. She didn't know her mother's sister any more than she knew her great uncle Blackfish. *We should have gone into the castle.* They didn't really *know* that her mother was dead, or Robb either. It wasn't like they'd seen them die or anything. Maybe Lord Frey had just taken them captive. Maybe they were chained up in his dungeon, or maybe the Freys were taking them to King's Landing so Joffrey could chop their heads off. They didn't *know*. "We should go back," she suddenly decided. "We should go back to the Twins and get my mother. She can't be dead. We have to help her."

“I thought your sister was the one with a head full of songs,” the Hound growled. “Frey might have kept your mother alive to ransom, that’s true. But there’s no way in seven hells I’m going to pluck her out of his castle all by my bloody self.”

“Not by yourself. I’d come too.”

He made a sound that was almost a laugh. “*That* will scare the piss out of the old man.”

“You’re just afraid to die!” she said scornfully.

Now Clegane *did* laugh. “Death don’t scare me. Only fire. Now be quiet, or I’ll cut your tongue out myself and save the silent sisters the bother. It’s the Vale for us.”

Arya didn’t think he’d *really* cut her tongue out; he was just saying that the way Pinkeye used to say he’d beat her bloody. All the same, she wasn’t going to try him. Sandor Clegane was no Pinkeye. Pinkeye didn’t cut people in half or hit them with axes. Not even with the flat of axes.

That night she went to sleep thinking of her mother, and wondering if she should kill the Hound in his sleep and rescue Lady Catelyn herself. When she closed her eyes she saw her mother’s face against the back of her eyelids. *She’s so close I could almost smell her . . .*

. . . and then she *could* smell her. The scent was faint beneath the other smells, beneath moss and mud and water, and the stench of rotting reeds and rotting men. She padded slowly through the soft ground to the river’s edge, lapped up a drink, the lifted her head to sniff. The sky was grey and thick with cloud, the river green and full of floating things. Dead men clogged the shallows, some still moving as the water pushed them, others washed up on the banks. Her brothers and sisters swarmed around them, tearing at the rich ripe flesh.

The crows were there too, screaming at the wolves and filling the air with feathers. Their blood was hotter, and one of her sisters had snapped at one as it took flight and caught it by the wing. It made her want a crow herself. She wanted to taste the blood, to hear the bones crunch between her teeth, to fill her belly with warm flesh instead of cold. She was hungry and the meat was all around, but she knew she could not eat.

The scent was stronger now. She pricked her ears up and listened to the grumbles of her pack, the shriek of angry crows, the whirr of wings and sound of running water. Somewhere far off she could hear horses and the calls of living men, but they were not what mattered. Only the scent mattered. She sniffed the air again. There it was, and now she saw it too, something pale and white drifting down the river, turning where it brushed against a snag. The reeds bowed down before it.

She splashed noisily through the shallows and threw herself into the deeper water, her legs churning. The current was strong but she was stronger. She swam, following her nose. The river smells were rich and wet, but those were not the smells that pulled her. She paddled after the sharp red whisper of cold blood, the sweet cloying stench of death. She chased them as she had often chased a red deer through the trees, and in the end she ran them down, and her jaw closed around a pale white arm. She shook it to make it move, but there was only death and blood in her mouth. By now she was tiring, and it was all she could do to pull the body back to shore. As she dragged it up the muddy bank, one of her little brothers came prowling, his tongue lolling from his mouth. She had to snarl to drive him off, or else he would have fed. Only then did she stop to shake the water from her fur. The white thing lay facedown in the mud, her dead flesh wrinkled and pale, cold blood trickling from her throat. *Rise*, she thought. *Rise and eat and run with us*.

The sound of horses turned her head. *Men*. They were coming from downwind, so she had not smelled them, but now they were almost here. Men on horses, with flapping black and yellow and pink wings and long shiny claws in hand. Some of her younger brothers bared their teeth to defend the food they'd found, but she snapped at them until they scattered. That was the way of the wild. Deer and hares and crows fled before wolves, and wolves fled from men. She abandoned the cold white prize in the mud where she had dragged it, and ran, and felt no shame.

When morning came, the Hound did not need to shout at Arya or shake her awake. She had woken before him for a change, and even watered the horses. They broke their fast in silence, until Sandor said, "This thing about your mother . . ."

“It doesn’t matter,” Arya said in a dull voice. “I know she’s dead. I saw her in a dream.”

The Hound looked at her a long time, then nodded. No more was said of it. They rode on toward the mountains.

In the higher hills, they came upon a tiny isolated village surrounded by grey-green sentinels and tall blue soldier pines, and Clegane decided to risk going in. “We need food,” he said, “and a roof over our heads. They’re not like to know what happened at the Twins, and with any luck they won’t know me.”

The villagers were building a wooden palisade around their homes, and when they saw the breadth of the Hound’s shoulders they offered them food and shelter and even coin for work. “If there’s wine as well, I’ll do it,” he growled at them. In the end, he settled for ale, and drank himself to sleep each night.

His dream of selling Arya to Lady Arryn died there in the hills, though. “There’s frost above us and snow in the high passes,” the village elder said. “If you don’t freeze or starve, the shadowcats will get you, or the cave bears. There’s the clans as well. The Burned Men are fearless since Timett One-Eye came back from the war. And half a year ago, Gunthor son of Gurn led the Stone Crows down on a village not eight miles from here. They took every woman and every scrap of grain, and killed half the men. They have *steel* now, good swords and mail hauberks, and they watch the high road—the Stone Crows, the Milk Snakes, the Sons of the Mist, all of them. Might be you’d take a few with you, but in the end they’d kill you and make off with your daughter.”

I’m not his daughter, Arya might have shouted, if she hadn’t felt so tired. She was no one’s daughter now. She was no one. Not Arya, not Weasel, not Nan nor Arry nor Squab, not even Lumpyhead. She was only some girl who ran with a dog by day, and dreamed of wolves by night.

It was quiet in the village. They had beds stuffed with straw and not too many lice, the food was plain but filling, and the air smelled of pines. All the same, Arya soon decided that she hated it. The villagers were cowards. None of them would even look at the Hound’s face, at least not for long. Some of the women tried to put her in a dress and make her do needlework,

but they weren't Lady Smallwood and she was having none of it. And there was one girl who took to following her, the village elder's daughter. She was of an age with Arya, but just a *child*; she cried if she skinned a knee, and carried a stupid cloth doll with her everywhere she went. The doll was made up to look like a man-at-arms, sort of, so the girl called him Ser Soldier and bragged how he kept her safe. "Go away," Arya told her half a hundred times. "Just leave me be." She wouldn't, though, so finally Arya took the doll away from her, ripped it open, and pulled the rag stuffing out of its belly with a finger. "Now he *really* looks like a soldier!" she said, before she threw the doll in a brook. After that the girl stopped pestering her, and Arya spent her days grooming Craven and Stranger or walking in the woods. Sometimes she would find a stick and practice her needlework, but then she would remember what had happened at the Twins and smash it against a tree until it broke.

"Might be we should stay here awhile," the Hound told her, after a fortnight. He was drunk on ale, but more brooding than sleepy. "We'd never reach the Eyrie, and the Freys will still be hunting survivors in the riverlands. Sounds like they need swords here, with these clansmen raiding. We can rest up, maybe find a way to get a letter to your aunt." Arya's face darkened when she heard that. She didn't want to stay, but there was nowhere to go, either. The next morning, when the Hound went off to chop down trees and haul logs, she crawled back into bed.

But when the work was done and the tall wooden palisade was finished, the village elder made it plain that there was no place for them. "Come winter, we will be hard pressed to feed our own," he explained. "And you . . . a man like you brings blood with him."

Sandor's mouth tightened. "So you do know who I am."

"Aye. We don't get travelers here, that's so, but we go to market, and to fairs. We know about King Joffrey's dog."

"When these Stone Crows come calling, you might be glad to have a dog."

"Might be." The man hesitated, then gathered up his courage. "But they say you lost your belly for fighting at the Blackwater. They say—"

“I know what they say.” Sandor’s voice sounded like two woodsaws grinding together. “Pay me, and we’ll be gone.”

When they left, the Hound had a pouch full of coppers, a skin of sour ale, and a new sword. It was a very old sword, if truth be told, though new to him. He swapped its owner the longaxe he’d taken at the Twins, the one he’d used to raise the lump on Arya’s head. The ale was gone in less than a day, but Clegane sharpened the sword every night, cursing the man he’d swapped with for every nick and spot of rust. *If he lost his belly for fighting, why does he care if his sword is sharp?* It was not a question Arya dared ask him, but she thought on it a lot. Was that why he’d run from the Twins and carried her off?

Back in the riverlands, they found that the rains had ebbed away, and the flood waters had begun to recede. The Hound turned south, back toward the Trident. “We’ll make for Riverrun,” he told Arya as they roasted a hare he’d killed. “Maybe the Blackfish wants to buy himself a she-wolf.”

“He doesn’t know me. He won’t even know I’m really me.” Arya was tired of making for Riverrun. She had been making for Riverrun for years, it seemed, without ever getting there. Every time she made for Riverrun, she ended up someplace worse. “He won’t give you any ransom. He’ll probably just hang you.”

“He’s free to try.” He turned the spit.

He doesn’t talk like he’s lost his belly for fighting. “I know where we could go,” Arya said. She still had one brother left. *Jon will want me, even if no one else does. He’ll call me “little sister” and muss my hair.* It was a long way, though, and she didn’t think she could get there by herself. She hadn’t even been able to reach Riverrun. “We could go to the Wall.”

Sandor’s laugh was half a growl. “The little wolf bitch wants to join the Night’s Watch, does she?”

“My brother’s on the Wall,” she said stubbornly.

His mouth gave a twitch. “The Wall’s a thousand leagues from here. We’d need to fight through the bloody Freys just to reach the Neck. There’s lizard lions in those swamps that eat wolves every day for breakfast. And if we did reach the north with our skins intact, there’s ironborn in half the castles, and thousands of bloody buggering northmen as well.”

“Are you scared of them?” she asked. “Have you lost your belly for fighting?”

For a moment she thought he was going to hit her. By then the hare was brown, though, skin crackling and grease popping as it dripped down into the cookfire. Sandor took it off the stick, ripped it apart with his big hands, and tossed half of it into Arya’s lap. “There’s nothing wrong with my belly,” he said as he pulled off a leg, “but I don’t give a rat’s arse for you *or* your brother. I have a brother too.”