

## ARYA

Arya's stitches were crooked again.

She frowned down at them with dismay and glanced over to where her sister Sansa sat among the other girls. Sansa's needlework was exquisite. Everyone said so. "Sansa's work is as pretty as she is," Septa Mordane told their lady mother once. "She has such fine, delicate hands." When Lady Catelwyn had asked about Arya, the septa had sniffed. "Arya has the hands of a blacksmith."

Arya glanced furtively across the room, worried that Septa Mordane might have read her thoughts, but the septa was paying her no attention today. She was sitting with the Princess Myrcella, all smiles and admiration. It was not often that the septa was privileged to instruct a royal princess in the womanly arts, as she had said when the queen brought Myrcella to join them. Arya thought that Myrcella's stitches looked a little crooked too, but you would never know it from the way Septa Mordane was cooing.

She studied her own work again, looking for some way to salvage it, then sighed and put down the needle. She looked glumly at her sister. Sansa was chatting away happily as she worked. Beth Cassel, Ser Rodrik's little girl, was sitting by her feet, listening to every word she said, and Jeyne Poole was leaning over to whisper something in her ear.

"What are you talking about?" Arya asked suddenly.

Jeyne gave her a startled look, then giggled. Sansa looked abashed. Beth blushed. No one answered.

"Tell me," Arya said.

Jeyne glanced over to make certain that Septa Mordane was not listening. Myrcella said something then, and the septa laughed along with the rest of the ladies.

"We were talking about the prince," Sansa said, her voice soft as a kiss.

Arya knew which prince she meant: Joffrey, of course. The tall, handsome one. Sansa got to sit with him at the feast. Arya had to sit with

the little fat one. Naturally.

“Joffrey likes your sister,” Jeyne whispered, proud as if she had something to do with it. She was the daughter of Winterfell’s steward and Sansa’s dearest friend. “He told her she was very beautiful.”

“He’s going to marry her,” little Beth said dreamily, hugging herself. “Then Sansa will be queen of all the realm.”

Sansa had the grace to blush. She blushed prettily. She did everything prettily, Arya thought with dull resentment. “Beth, you shouldn’t make up stories,” Sansa corrected the younger girl, gently stroking her hair to take the harshness out of her words. She looked at Arya. “What did you think of Prince Joff, sister? He’s very gallant, don’t you think?”

“Jon says he looks like a girl,” Arya said.

Sansa sighed as she stitched. “Poor Jon,” she said. “He gets jealous because he’s a bastard.”

“He’s our brother,” Arya said, much too loudly. Her voice cut through the afternoon quiet of the tower room.

Septa Mordane raised her eyes. She had a bony face, sharp eyes, and a thin lipless mouth made for frowning. It was frowning now. “What are you talking about, children?”

“Our half brother,” Sansa corrected, soft and precise. She smiled for the septa. “Arya and I were remarking on how pleased we were to have the princess with us today,” she said.

Septa Mordane nodded. “Indeed. A great honor for us all.” Princess Myrcella smiled uncertainly at the compliment. “Arya, why aren’t you at work?” the septa asked. She rose to her feet, starched skirts rustling as she started across the room. “Let me see your stitches.”

Arya wanted to scream. It was just like Sansa to go and attract the septa’s attention. “Here,” she said, surrendering up her work.

The septa examined the fabric. “Arya, Arya, Arya,” she said. “This will not do. This will not do at all.”

Everyone was looking at her. It was too much. Sansa was too well bred to smile at her sister’s disgrace, but Jeyne was smirking on her behalf. Even

Princess Myrcella looked sorry for her. Arya felt tears filling her eyes. She pushed herself out of her chair and bolted for the door.

Septa Mordane called after her. “Arya, come back here! Don’t you take another step! Your lady mother will hear of this. In front of our royal princess too! You’ll shame us all!”

Arya stopped at the door and turned back, biting her lip. The tears were running down her cheeks now. She managed a stiff little bow to Myrcella. “By your leave, my lady.”

Myrcella blinked at her and looked to her ladies for guidance. But if she was uncertain, Septa Mordane was not. “Just where do you think you are going, Arya?” the septa demanded.

Arya glared at her. “I have to go shoe a horse,” she said sweetly, taking a brief satisfaction in the shock on the septa’s face. Then she whirled and made her exit, running down the steps as fast as her feet would take her.

It wasn’t fair. Sansa had everything. Sansa was two years older; maybe by the time Arya had been born, there had been nothing left. Often it felt that way. Sansa could sew and dance and sing. She wrote poetry. She knew how to dress. She played the high harp *and* the bells. Worse, she was beautiful. Sansa had gotten their mother’s fine high cheekbones and the thick auburn hair of the Tullys. Arya took after their lord father. Her hair was a lusterless brown, and her face was long and solemn. Jeyne used to call her Arya Horseface, and neigh whenever she came near. It hurt that the one thing Arya could do better than her sister was ride a horse. Well, that and manage a household. Sansa had never had much of a head for figures. If she did marry Prince Joff, Arya hoped for his sake that he had a good steward.

Nymeria was waiting for her in the guardroom at the base of the stairs. She bounded to her feet as soon as she caught sight of Arya. Arya grinned. The wolf pup loved her, even if no one else did. They went everywhere together, and Nymeria slept in her room, at the foot of her bed. If Mother had not forbidden it, Arya would gladly have taken the wolf with her to needlework. Let Septa Mordane complain about her stitches *then*.

Nymeria nipped eagerly at her hand as Arya untied her. She had yellow eyes. When they caught the sunlight, they gleamed like two golden coins. Arya had named her after the warrior queen of the Rhoynar, who had led her people across the narrow sea. That had been a great scandal too. Sansa, of course, had named her pup “Lady.” Arya made a face and hugged the wolfling tight. Nymeria licked her ear, and she giggled.

By now Septa Mordane would certainly have sent word to her lady mother. If she went to her room, they would find her. Arya did not care to be found. She had a better notion. The boys were at practice in the yard. She wanted to see Robb put gallant Prince Joffrey flat on his back. “Come,” she whispered to Nymeria. She got up and ran, the wolf coming hard at her heels.

There was a window in the covered bridge between the armory and the Great Keep where you had a view of the whole yard. That was where they headed.

They arrived, flushed and breathless, to find Jon seated on the sill, one leg drawn up languidly to his chin. He was watching the action, so absorbed that he seemed unaware of her approach until his white wolf moved to meet them. Nymeria stalked closer on wary feet. Ghost, already larger than his litter mates, smelled her, gave her ear a careful nip, and settled back down.

Jon gave her a curious look. “Shouldn’t you be working on your stitches, little sister?”

Arya made a face at him. “I wanted to see them fight.”

He smiled. “Come here, then.”

Arya climbed up on the window and sat beside him, to a chorus of thuds and grunts from the yard below.

To her disappointment, it was the younger boys drilling. Bran was so heavily padded he looked as though he had belted on a featherbed, and Prince Tommen, who was plump to begin with, seemed positively round. They were huffing and puffing and hitting at each other with padded wooden swords under the watchful eye of old Ser Rodrik Cassel, the master-at-arms, a great stout keg of a man with magnificent white cheek

whiskers. A dozen spectators, man and boy, were calling out encouragement, Robb's voice the loudest among them. She spotted Theon Greyjoy beside him, his black doublet emblazoned with the golden kraken of his House, a look of wry contempt on his face. Both of the combatants were staggering. Arya judged that they had been at it awhile.

"A shade more exhausting than needlework," Jon observed.

"A shade more fun than needlework," Arya gave back at him. Jon grinned, reached over, and messed up her hair. Arya flushed. They had always been close. Jon had their father's face, as she did. They were the only ones. Robb and Sansa and Bran and even little Rickon all took after the Tullys, with easy smiles and fire in their hair. When Arya had been little, she had been afraid that meant that she was a bastard too. It been Jon she had gone to in her fear, and Jon who had reassured her.

"Why aren't you down in the yard?" Arya asked him.

He gave her a half smile. "Bastards are not allowed to damage young princes," he said. "Any bruises they take in the practice yard must come from trueborn swords."

"Oh." Arya felt abashed. She should have realized. For the second time today, Arya reflected that life was not fair.

She watched her little brother whack at Tommen. "I could do just as good as Bran," she said. "He's only seven. I'm nine."

Jon looked her over with all his fourteen-year-old wisdom. "You're too skinny," he said. He took her arm to feel her muscle. Then he sighed and shook his head. "I doubt you could even lift a longsword, little sister, never mind swing one."

Arya snatched back her arm and glared at him. Jon messed up her hair again. They watched Bran and Tommen circle each other.

"You see Prince Joffrey?" Jon asked.

She hadn't, not at first glance, but when she looked again she found him to the back, under the shade of the high stone wall. He was surrounded by men she did not recognize, young squires in the livery of Lannister and

Baratheon, strangers all. There were a few older men among them; knights, she surmised.

“Look at the arms on his surcoat,” Jon suggested.

Arya looked. An ornate shield had been embroidered on the prince’s padded surcoat. No doubt the needlework was exquisite. The arms were divided down the middle; on one side was the crowned stag of the royal House, on the other the lion of Lannister.

“The Lannisters are proud,” Jon observed. “You’d think the royal sigil would be sufficient, but no. He makes his mother’s House equal in honor to the king’s.”

“The woman is important too!” Arya protested.

Jon chuckled. “Perhaps you should do the same thing, little sister. Wed Tully to Stark in your arms.”

“A wolf with a fish in its mouth?” It made her laugh. “That would look silly. Besides, if a girl can’t fight, why should she have a coat of arms?”

Jon shrugged. “Girls get the arms but not the swords. Bastards get the swords but not the arms. I did not make the rules, little sister.”

There was a shout from the courtyard below. Prince Tommen was rolling in the dust, trying to get up and failing. All the padding made him look like a turtle on its back. Bran was standing over him with upraised wooden sword, ready to whack him again once he regained his feet. The men began to laugh.

“Enough!” Ser Rodrik called out. He gave the prince a hand and yanked him back to his feet. “Well fought. Lew, Donnis, help them out of their armor.” He looked around. “Prince Joffrey, Robb, will you go another round?”

Robb, already sweaty from a previous bout, moved forward eagerly. “Gladly.”

Joffrey moved into the sunlight in response to Rodrik’s summons. His hair shone like spun gold. He looked bored. “This is a game for children, Ser Rodrik.”

Theon Greyjoy gave a sudden bark of laughter. “You are children,” he said derisively.

“Robb may be a child,” Joffrey said. “I am a prince. And I grow tired of swatting at Starks with a play sword.”

“You got more swats than you gave, Joff,” Robb said. “Are you afraid?”

Prince Joffrey looked at him. “Oh, terrified,” he said. “You’re so much older.” Some of the Lannister men laughed.

Jon looked down on the scene with a frown. “Joffrey is truly a little shit,” he told Arya.

Ser Rodrik tugged thoughtfully at his white whiskers. “What are you suggesting?” he asked the prince.

“Live steel.”

“Done,” Robb shot back. “You’ll be sorry!”

The master-at-arms put a hand on Robb’s shoulder to quiet him. “Live steel is too dangerous. I will permit you tourney swords, with blunted edges.”

Joffrey said nothing, but a man strange to Arya, a tall knight with black hair and burn scars on his face, pushed forward in front of the prince. “This is your prince. Who are you to tell him he may not have an edge on his sword, ser?”

“Master-at-arms of Winterfell, Clegane, and you would do well not to forget it.”

“Are you training women here?” the burned man wanted to know. He was muscled like a bull.

“I am training *knight*s,” Ser Rodrik said pointedly. “They will have steel when they are ready. When they are of an age.”

The burned man looked at Robb. “How old are you, boy?”

“Fourteen,” Robb said.

“I killed a man at twelve. You can be sure it was not with a blunt sword.”

Arya could see Robb bristle. His pride was wounded. He turned on Ser Rodrik. "Let me do it. I can beat him."

"Beat him with a tourney blade, then," Ser Rodrik said.

Joffrey shrugged. "Come and see me when you're older, Stark. If you're not *too* old." There was laughter from the Lannister men.

Robb's curses rang through the yard. Arya covered her mouth in shock. Theon Greyjoy seized Robb's arm to keep him away from the prince. Ser Rodrik tugged at his whiskers in dismay.

Joffrey feigned a yawn and turned to his younger brother. "Come, Tommen," he said. "The hour of play is done. Leave the children to their frolics."

That brought more laughter from the Lannisters, more curses from Robb. Ser Rodrik's face was beet-red with fury under the white of his whiskers. Theon kept Robb locked in an iron grip until the princes and their party were safely away.

Jon watched them leave, and Arya watched Jon. His face had grown as still as the pool at the heart of the godswood. Finally he climbed down off the window. "The show is done," he said. He bent to scratch Ghost behind the ears. The white wolf rose and rubbed against him. "You had best run back to your room, little sister. Septa Mordane will surely be lurking. The longer you hide, the sterner the penance. You'll be sewing all through winter. When the spring thaw comes, they will find your body with a needle still locked tight between your frozen fingers."

Arya didn't think it was funny. "I hate needlework!" she said with passion. "It's not fair!"

"Nothing is fair," Jon said. He messed up her hair again and walked away from her, Ghost moving silently beside him. Nymeria started to follow too, then stopped and came back when she saw that Arya was not coming.

Reluctantly she turned in the other direction.

It was worse than Jon had thought. It wasn't Septa Mordane waiting in her room. It was Septa Mordane *and* her mother.