

ARYA

“High,” Syrio Forel called out, slashing at her head. The stick swords *clacked* as Arya parried.

“Left,” he shouted, and his blade came whistling. Hers darted to meet it. The clack made him click his teeth together.

“Right,” he said, and “Low,” and “Left,” and “Left” again, faster and faster, moving forward. Arya retreated before him, checking each blow.

“Lunge,” he warned, and when he thrust she sidestepped, swept his blade away, and slashed at his shoulder. She almost touched him, *almost*, so close it made her grin. A strand of hair dangled in her eyes, limp with sweat. She pushed it away with the back of her hand.

“Left,” Syrio sang out. “Low.” His sword was a blur, and the Small Hall echoed to the *clack clack clack*. “Left. Left. High. Left. Right. Left. Low. *Left!*”

The wooden blade caught her high in the breast, a sudden stinging blow that hurt all the more because it came from the wrong side. “Ow,” she cried out. She would have a fresh bruise there by the time she went to sleep, somewhere out at sea. *A bruise is a lesson*, she told herself, *and each lesson makes us better*.

Syrio stepped back. “You are dead now.”

Arya made a face. “You cheated,” she said hotly. “You said left and you went right.”

“Just so. And now you are a dead girl.”

“But you *lied!*”

“My words lied. My eyes and my arm shouted out the truth, but you were not seeing.”

“I was so,” Arya said. “I watched you every second!”

“Watching is not seeing, dead girl. The water dancer sees. Come, put down the sword, it is time for listening now.”

She followed him over to the wall, where he settled onto a bench. “Syrio Forel was first sword to the Sealord of Braavos, and are you knowing how that came to pass?”

“You were the finest swordsman in the city.”

“Just so, but why? Other men were stronger, faster, younger, why was Syrio Forel the best? I will tell you now.” He touched the tip of his little finger lightly to his eyelid. “The seeing, the true seeing, that is the heart of it.

“Hear me. The ships of Braavos sail as far as the winds blow, to lands strange and wonderful, and when they return their captains fetch queer animals to the Sealord’s menagerie. Such animals as you have never seen, striped horses, great spotted things with necks as long as stilts, hairy mouse-pigs as big as cows, stinging manticores, tigers that carry their cubs in a pouch, terrible walking lizards with scythes for claws. Syrio Forel has seen these things.

“On the day I am speaking of, the first sword was newly dead, and the Sealord sent for me. Many bravos had come to him, and as many had been sent away, none could say why. When I came into his presence, he was seated, and in his lap was a fat yellow cat. He told me that one of his captains had brought the beast to him, from an island beyond the sunrise. ‘Have you ever seen her like?’ he asked of me.

“And to him I said, ‘Each night in the alleys of Braavos I see a thousand like him,’ and the Sealord laughed, and that day I was named the first sword.”

Arya screwed up her face. “I don’t understand.”

Syrio clicked his teeth together. “The cat was an ordinary cat, no more. The others expected a fabulous beast, so that is what they saw. How large it was, they said. It was no larger than any other cat, only fat from indolence, for the Sealord fed it from his own table. What curious small ears, they said. Its ears had been chewed away in kitten fights. And it was plainly a tomcat, yet the Sealord said ‘her,’ and that is what the others saw. Are you hearing?”

Arya thought about it. “You saw what was there.”

“Just so. Opening your eyes is all that is needing. The heart lies and the head plays tricks with us, but the eyes see true. Look with your eyes. Hear with your ears. Taste with your mouth. Smell with your nose. Feel with your skin. *Then* comes the thinking, afterward, and in that way knowing the truth.”

“Just so,” said Arya, grinning.

Syrio Forel allowed himself a smile. “I am thinking that when we are reaching this Winterfell of yours, it will be time to put this needle in your hand.”

“Yes!” Arya said eagerly. “Wait till I show Jon—”

Behind her the great wooden doors of the Small Hall flew open with a resounding crash. Arya whirled.

A knight of the Kingsguard stood beneath the arch of the door with five Lannister guardsmen arrayed behind him. He was in full armor, but his visor was up. Arya remembered his droopy eyes and rustcolored whiskers from when he had come to Winterfell with the king: Ser Meryn Trant. The red cloaks wore mail shirts over boiled leather and steel caps with lion crests. “Arya Stark,” the knight said, “come with us, child.”

Arya chewed her lip uncertainly. “What do you want?”

“Your father wants to see you.”

Arya took a step forward, but Syrio Forel held her by the arm. “And why is it that Lord Eddard is sending Lannister men in the place of his own? I am wondering.”

“Mind your place, dancing master,” Ser Meryn said. “This is no concern of yours.”

“My father wouldn’t send *you*,” Arya said. She snatched up her stick sword. The Lannisters laughed.

“Put down the stick, girl,” Ser Meryn told her. “I am a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard, the White Swords.”

“So was the Kingslayer when he killed the old king,” Arya said. “I don’t have to go with you if I don’t want.”

Ser Meryn Trant ran out of patience. “Take her,” he said to his men. He lowered the visor of his helm.

Three of them started forward, chainmail clinking softly with each step. Arya was suddenly afraid. *Fear cuts deeper than swords*, she told herself, to slow the racing of her heart.

Syrio Forel stepped between them, tapping his wooden sword lightly against his boot. “You will be stopping there. Are you men or dogs that you would threaten a child?”

“Out of the way, old man,” one of the red cloaks said.

Syrio’s stick came whistling up and rang against his helm. “I am Syrio Forel, and you will now be speaking to me with more respect.”

“Bald bastard.” The man yanked free his longsword. The stick moved again, blindingly fast. Arya heard a loud crack as the sword went clattering to the stone floor. “My *hand*,” the guardsman yelped, cradling his broken fingers.

“You are quick, for a dancing master,” said Ser Meryn.

“You are slow, for a knight,” Syrio replied.

“Kill the Braavosi and bring me the girl,” the knight in the white armor commanded.

Four Lannister guardsmen unsheathed their swords. The fifth, with the broken fingers, spat and pulled free a dagger with his left hand.

Syrio Forel clicked his teeth together, sliding into his water dancer’s stance, presenting only his side to the foe. “Arya child,” he called out, never looking, never taking his eyes off the Lannisters, “we are done with dancing for the day. Best you are going now. Run to your father.”

Arya did not want to leave him, but he had taught her to do as he said. “*Swift as a deer*,” she whispered.

“Just so,” said Syrio Forel as the Lannisters closed.

Arya retreated, her own sword stick clutched tightly in her hand. Watching him now, she realized that Syrio had only been toying with her when they dueled. The red cloaks came at him from three sides with steel in their hands. They had chainmail over their chest and arms, and steel codpieces sewn into their pants, but only leather on their legs. Their hands were bare, and the caps they wore had noseguards, but no visor over the eyes.

Syrio did not wait for them to reach him, but spun to his left. Arya had never seen a man move as fast. He checked one sword with his stick and whirled away from a second. Off balance, the second man lurched into the first. Syrio put a boot to his back and the red cloaks went down together. The third guard came leaping over them, slashing at the water dancer's head. Syrio ducked under his blade and thrust upward. The guardsman fell screaming as blood welled from the wet red hole where his left eye had been.

The fallen men were getting up. Syrio kicked one in the face and snatched the steel cap off the other's head. The dagger man stabbed at him. Syrio caught the thrust in the helmet and shattered the man's kneecap with his stick. The last red cloak shouted a curse and charged, hacking down with both hands on his sword. Syrio rolled right, and the butcher's cut caught the helmetless man between neck and shoulder as he struggled to his knees. The longsword crunched through mail and leather and flesh. The man on his knees shrieked. Before his killer could wrench free his blade, Syrio jabbed him in the apple of his throat. The guardsman gave a choked cry and staggered back, clutching at his neck, his face blackening.

Five men were down, dead, or dying by the time Arya reached the back door that opened on the kitchen. She heard Ser Meryn Trant curse. "Bloody oafs," he swore, drawing his longsword from its scabbard.

Syrio Forel resumed his stance and clicked his teeth together. "Arya child," he called out, never looking at her, "be gone now."

Look with your eyes, he had said. She saw: the knight in his pale armor head to foot, legs, throat, and hands sheathed in metal, eyes hidden behind

his high white helm, and in his hand cruel steel. Against that: Syrio, in a leather vest, with a wooden sword in his hand. “Syrio, *run*,” she screamed.

“The first sword of Braavos does not run,” he sang as Ser Meryn slashed at him. Syrio danced away from his cut, his stick a blur. In a heartbeat, he had bounced blows off the knight’s temple, elbow, and throat, the wood ringing against the metal of helm, gauntlet, and gorget. Arya stood frozen. Ser Meryn advanced; Syrio backed away. He checked the next blow, spun away from the second, deflected the third.

The fourth sliced his stick in two, splintering the wood and shearing through the lead core.

Sobbing, Arya spun and ran.

She plunged through the kitchens and buttery, blind with panic, weaving between cooks and potboys. A baker’s helper stepped in front of her, holding a wooden tray. Arya bowled her over, scattering fragrant loaves of fresh-baked bread on the floor. She heard shouting behind her as she spun around a portly butcher who stood gaping at her with a cleaver in his hands. His arms were red to the elbow.

All that Syrio Forel had taught her went racing through her head. *Swift as a deer. Quiet as a shadow. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Quick as a snake. Calm as still water. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Strong as a bear. Fierce as a wolverine. Fear cuts deeper than swords. The man who fears losing has already lost. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Fear cuts deeper than swords.* The grip of her wooden sword was slick with sweat, and Arya was breathing hard when she reached the turret stair. For an instant she froze. Up or down? Up would take her to the covered bridge that spanned the small court to the Tower of the Hand, but that would be the way they’d expect her to go, for certain. *Never do what they expect*, Syrio once said. Arya went down, around and around, leaping over the narrow stone steps two and three at a time. She emerged in a cavernous vaulted cellar, surrounded by casks of ale stacked twenty feet tall. The only light came through narrow slanting windows high in the wall.

The cellar was a dead end. There was no way out but the way she had come in. She dare not go back up those steps, but she couldn’t stay here,

either. She had to find her father and tell him what had happened. Her father would protect her.

Arya thrust her wooden sword through her belt and began to climb, leaping from cask to cask until she could reach the window. Grasping the stone with both hands, she pulled herself up. The wall was three feet thick, the window a tunnel slanting up and out. Arya wriggled toward daylight. When her head reached ground level, she peered across the bailey to the Tower of the Hand.

The stout wooden door hung splintered and broken, as if by axes. A dead man sprawled facedown on the steps, his cloak tangled beneath him, the back of his mailed shirt soaked red. The corpse's cloak was grey wool trimmed with white satin, she saw with sudden terror. She could not tell who he was.

"No," she whispered. What was happening? Where was her father? Why had the red cloaks come for her? She remembered what the man with the yellow beard had said, the day she had found the monsters. *If one Hand can die, why not a second?* Arya felt tears in her eyes. She held her breath to listen. She heard the sounds of fighting, shouts, screams, the clang of steel on steel, coming through the windows of the Tower of the Hand.

She could not go back. Her father...

Arya closed her eyes. For a moment she was too frightened to move. They had killed Jory and Wyl and Heward, and that guardsman on the step, whoever he had been. They could kill her father too, and her if they caught her. "*Fear cuts deeper than swords,*" she said aloud, but it was no good pretending to be a water dancer, Syrio had been a water dancer and the white knight had probably killed him, and anyhow she was only a little girl with a wooden stick, alone and afraid.

She squirmed out into the yard, glancing around warily as she climbed to her feet. The castle seemed deserted. The Red Keep was *never* deserted. All the people must be hiding inside, their doors barred. Arya glanced up longingly at her bedchamber, then moved away from the Tower of the Hand, keeping close to the wall as she slid from shadow to shadow. She

pretended she was chasing cats... except she was the cat now, and if they caught her, they would kill her.

Moving between buildings and over walls, keeping stone to her back wherever possible so no one could surprise her, Arya reached the stables almost without incident. A dozen gold cloaks in mail and plate ran past as she was edging across the inner bailey, but without knowing whose side they were on, she hunched down low in the shadows and let them pass.

Hullen, who had been master of horse at Winterfell as long as Arya could remember, was slumped on the ground by the stable door. He had been stabbed so many times it looked as if his tunic was patterned with scarlet flowers. Arya was certain he was dead, but when she crept closer, his eyes opened. "Arya Underfoot," he whispered. "You must... warn your... your lord father..." Frothy red spittle bubbled from his mouth. The master of horse closed his eyes again and said no more.

Inside were more bodies; a groom she had played with, and three of her father's household guard. A wagon, laden with crates and chests, stood abandoned near the door of the stable. The dead men must have been loading it for the trip to the docks when they were attacked. Arya snuck closer. One of the corpses was Desmond, who'd shown her his longsword and promised to protect her father. He lay on his back, staring blindly at the ceiling as flies crawled across his eyes. Close to him was a dead man in the red cloak and lion-crest helm of the Lannisters. Only one, though. *Every northerner is worth ten of these southron swords*, Desmond had told her. "You *liar!*" she said, kicking his body in a sudden fury.

The animals were restless in their stalls, whickering and snorting at the scent of blood. Arya's only plan was to saddle a horse and flee, away from the castle and the city. All she had to do was stay on the kingsroad and it would take her back to Winterfell. She took a bridle and harness off the wall.

As she crossed in back of the wagon, a fallen chest caught her eye. It must have been knocked down in the fight or dropped as it was being loaded. The wood had split, the lid opening to spill the chest's contents across the ground. Arya recognized silks and satins and velvets she never

wore. She might need warm clothes on the kingsroad, though... and besides...

Arya knelt in the dirt among the scattered clothes. She found a heavy woolen cloak, a velvet skirt and a silk tunic and some smallclothes, a dress her mother had embroidered for her, a silver baby bracelet she might sell. Shoving the broken lid out of the way, she groped inside the chest for Needle. She had hidden it way down at the bottom, under everything, but her stuff had all been jumbled around when the chest was dropped. For a moment Arya was afraid someone had found the sword and stolen it. Then her fingers felt the hardness of metal under a satin gown.

"There she is," a voice hissed close behind her.

Startled, Arya whirled. A stableboy stood behind her, a smirk on his face, his filthy white undertunic peeking out from beneath a soiled jerkin. His boots were covered with manure, and he had a pitchfork in one hand. "Who are you?" she asked.

"She don't know me," he said, "but I knows her, oh, yes. The wolf girl."

"Help me saddle a horse," Arya pleaded, reaching back into the chest, groping for Needle. "My father's the Hand of the King, he'll reward you."

"Father's *dead*," the boy said. He shuffled toward her. "It's the queen who'll be rewarding me. Come here, girl."

"Stay away!" Her fingers closed around Needle's hilt.

"I says, *come*." He grabbed her arm, hard.

Everything Syrio Forel had ever taught her vanished in a heartbeat. In that instant of sudden terror, the only lesson Arya could remember was the one Jon Snow had given her, the very first.

She stuck him with the pointy end, driving the blade upward with a wild, hysterical strength.

Needle went through his leather jerkin and the white flesh of his belly and came out between his shoulder blades. The boy dropped the pitchfork and made a soft noise, something between a gasp and a sigh. His hands

closed around the blade. “Oh, gods,” he moaned, as his undertunic began to redden. “Take it out.”

When she took it out, he died.

The horses were screaming. Arya stood over the body, still and frightened in the face of death. Blood had gushed from the boy’s mouth as he collapsed, and more was seeping from the slit in his belly, pooling beneath his body. His palms were cut where he’d grabbed at the blade. She backed away slowly, Needle red in her hand. She had to get away, someplace far from here, someplace safe away from the stableboy’s accusing eyes.

She snatched up the bridle and harness again and ran to her mare, but as she lifted the saddle to the horse’s back, Arya realized with a sudden sick dread that the castle gates would be closed. Even the postern doors would likely be guarded. Maybe the guards wouldn’t recognize her. If they thought she was a boy, perhaps they’d let her... no, they’d have orders not to let *anyone* out, it wouldn’t matter whether they knew her or not.

But there was another way out of the castle...

The saddle slipped from Arya’s fingers and fell to the dirt with a thump and a puff of dust. Could she find the room with the monsters again? She wasn’t certain, yet she knew she had to try.

She found the clothing she’d gathered and slipped into the cloak, concealing Needle beneath its folds. The rest of her things she tied in a roll. With the bundle under her arm, she crept to the far end of the stable. Unlatching the back door, she peeked out anxiously. She could hear the distant sound of swordplay, and the shivery wail of a man screaming in pain across the bailey. She would need to go down the serpentine steps, past the small kitchen and the pig yard, that was how she’d gone last time, chasing the black tomcat... only that would take her right past the barracks of the gold cloaks. She couldn’t go that way. Arya tried to think of another way. If she crossed to the other side of the castle, she could creep along the river wall and through the little godswood... but first she’d have to cross the yard, in the plain view of the guards on the walls.

She had never seen so many men on the walls. Gold cloaks, most of them, armed with spears. Some of them knew her by sight. What would they do if they saw her running across the yard? She'd look so small from up there, would they be able to tell who she was? Would they care?

She had to leave *now*, she told herself, but when the moment came, she was too frightened to move.

Calm as still water, a small voice whispered in her ear. Arya was so startled she almost dropped her bundle. She looked around wildly, but there was no one in the stable but her, and the horses, and the dead men.

Quiet as a shadow, she heard. Was it her own voice, or Syrio's? She could not tell, yet somehow it calmed her fears.

She stepped out of the stable.

It was the scariest thing she'd ever done. She wanted to run and hide, but she made herself *walk* across the yard, slowly, putting one foot in front of the other as if she had all the time in the world and no reason to be afraid of anyone. She thought she could feel their eyes, like bugs crawling on her skin under her clothes. Arya never looked up. If she saw them watching, all her courage would desert her, she knew, and she would drop the bundle of clothes and run and cry like a baby, and then they would have her. She kept her gaze on the ground. By the time she reached the shadow of the royal sept on the far side of the yard, Arya was cold with sweat, but no one had raised the hue and cry.

The sept was open and empty. Inside, half a hundred prayer candles burned in a fragrant silence. Arya figured the gods would never miss two. She stuffed them up her sleeves, and left by a back window. Sneaking back to the alley where she had cornered the one-eared tom was easy, but after that she got lost. She crawled in and out of windows, hopped over walls, and felt her way through dark cellars, quiet as a shadow. Once she heard a woman weeping. It took her more than an hour to find the low narrow window that slanted down to the dungeon where the monsters waited.

She tossed her bundle through and doubled back to light her candle. That was chancy; the fire she'd remembered seeing had burnt down to embers, and she heard voices as she was blowing on the coals. Cupping her

fingers around the flickering candle, she went out the window as they were coming in the door, without ever getting a glimpse of who it was.

This time the monsters did not frighten her. They seemed almost old friends. Arya held the candle over her head. With each step she took, the shadows moved against the walls, as if they were turning to watch her pass. “*Dragons*,” she whispered. She slid Needle out from under her cloak. The slender blade seemed very small and the dragons very big, yet somehow Arya felt better with steel in her hand.

The long windowless hall beyond the door was as black as she remembered. She held Needle in her left hand, her sword hand, the candle in her right fist. Hot wax ran down across her knuckles. The entrance to the well had been to the left, so Arya went right. Part of her wanted to run, but she was afraid of snuffing out her candle. She heard the faint squeaking of rats and glimpsed a pair of tiny glowing eyes on the edge of the light, but rats did not scare her. Other things did. It would be so easy to hide here, as she had hidden from the wizard and the man with the forked beard. She could almost see the stableboy standing against the wall, his hands curled into claws with the blood still dripping from the deep gashes in his palms where Needle had cut him. He might be waiting to grab her as she passed. He would see her candle coming a long way off. Maybe she would be better off without the light...

Fear cuts deeper than swords, the quiet voice inside her whispered. Suddenly Arya remembered the crypts at Winterfell. They were a lot scarier than this place, she told herself. She’d been just a little girl the first time she saw them. Her brother Robb had taken them down, her and Sansa and baby Bran, who’d been no bigger than Rickon was now. They’d only had one candle between them, and Bran’s eyes had gotten as big as saucers as he stared at the stone faces of the Kings of Winter, with their wolves at their feet and their iron swords across their laps.

Robb took them all the way down to the end, past Grandfather and Brandon and Lyanna, to show them their own tombs. Sansa kept looking at the stubby little candle, anxious that it might go out. Old Nan had told her there were spiders down here, and rats as big as dogs. Robb smiled when

she said that. “There are worse things than spiders and rats,” he whispered. “This is where the dead walk.” That was when they heard the sound, low and deep and shivery. Baby Bran had clutched at Arya’s hand.

When the spirit stepped out of the open tomb, pale white and moaning for blood, Sansa ran shrieking for the stairs, and Bran wrapped himself around Robb’s leg, sobbing. Arya stood her ground and gave the spirit a punch. It was only Jon, covered with flour. “You *stupid*,” she told him, “you scared the baby,” but Jon and Robb just laughed and laughed, and pretty soon Bran and Arya were laughing too.

The memory made Arya smile, and after that the darkness held no more terrors for her. The stableboy was dead, she’d killed him, and if he jumped out at her she’d kill him again. She was going home. Everything would be better once she was home again, safe behind Winterfell’s grey granite walls.

Her footsteps sent soft echoes hurrying ahead of her as Arya plunged deeper into the darkness.