

## ARYA

They traveled dawn to dusk, past woods and orchards and neatly tended fields, through small villages, crowded market towns, and stout holdfasts. Come dark, they would make camp and eat by the light of the Red Sword. The men took turns standing watch. Arya would glimpse firelight flickering through the trees from the camps of other travelers. There seemed to be more camps every night, and more traffic on the kingsroad by day.

Morn, noon, and night they came, old folks and little children, big men and small ones, barefoot girls and women with babes at their breasts. Some drove farm wagons or bumped along in the back of ox carts. More rode: draft horses, ponies, mules, donkeys, anything that would walk or run or roll. One woman led a milk cow with a little girl on its back. Arya saw a smith pushing a wheelbarrow with his tools inside, hammers and tongs and even an anvil, and a little while later a different man with a different wheelbarrow, only inside this one were two babies in a blanket. Most came on foot, with their goods on their shoulders and weary, wary looks upon their faces. They walked south, toward the city, toward King's Landing, and only one in a hundred spared so much as a word for Yoren and his charges, traveling north. She wondered why no one else was going the same way as them.

Many of the travelers were armed; Arya saw daggers and dirks, scythes and axes, and here and there a sword. Some had made clubs from tree limbs, or carved knobby staffs. They fingered their weapons and gave lingering looks at the wagons as they rolled by, yet in the end they let the column pass. Thirty was too many, no matter what they had in those wagons.

*Look with your eyes, Syrio had said, listen with your ears.*

One day a madwoman began to scream at them from the side of the road. "Fools! They'll kill you, fools!" She was scarecrow thin, with hollow eyes and bloody feet.

The next morning, a sleek merchant on a grey mare reined up by Yoren and offered to buy his wagons and everything in them for a quarter of their worth. "It's war, they'll take what they want, you'll do better selling to me, my friend." Yoren turned away with a twist of his crooked shoulders, and spat.

Arya noticed the first grave that same day; a small mound beside the road, dug for a child. A crystal had been set in the soft earth, and Lommy wanted to take it until the Bull told him he'd better leave the dead alone. A few leagues farther on, Praed pointed out more graves, a whole row freshly dug. After that, a day hardly passed without one.

One time Arya woke in the dark, frightened for no reason she could name. Above, the Red Sword shared the sky with half a thousand stars. The night seemed oddly quiet to her, though she could hear Yoren's muttered snores, the crackle of the fire, even the muffled stirrings of the donkeys. Yet somehow it felt as though the world were holding its breath, and the silence made her shiver. She went back to sleep clutching Needle.

Come morning, when Praed did not awaken, Arya realized that it had been his coughing she had missed. They dug a grave of their own then, burying the sellsword where he'd slept. Yoren stripped him of his valuables before they threw the dirt on him. One man claimed his boots, another his dagger. His mail shirt and helm were parceled out. His longsword Yoren handed to the Bull. "Arms like yours, might be you can learn to use this," he told him. A boy called Tarber tossed a handful of acorns on top of Praed's body, so an oak might grow to mark his place.

That evening they stopped in a village at an ivy-covered inn. Yoren counted the coins in his purse and decided they had enough for a hot meal. "We'll sleep outside, same as ever, but they got a bathhouse here, if any of you feels the need o' hot water and a lick o' soap."

Arya did not dare, even though she smelled as bad as Yoren by now, all sour and stinky. Some of the creatures living in her clothes had come all the way from Flea Bottom with her; it didn't seem right to drown them. Tarber and Hot Pie and the Bull joined the line of men headed for the tubs. Others settled down in front of the bathhouse. The rest crowded into the common

room. Yoren even sent Lommy out with tankards for the three in fetters, who'd been left chained up in the back of their wagon.

Washed and unwashed alike supped on hot pork pies and baked apples. The innkeeper gave them a round of beer on the house. "I had a brother took the black, years ago. Serving boy, clever, but one day he got seen filching pepper from m'lord's table. He liked the taste of it, is all. just a pinch o' pepper, but Ser Malcolm was a hard man. You get pepper on the Wall?" When Yoren shook his head, the man sighed. "Shame. Lync loved that pepper."

Arya sipped at her tankard cautiously, between spoonfuls of pie still warm from the oven. Her father sometimes let them have a cup of beer, she remembered. Sansa used to make a face at the taste and say that wine was ever so much finer, but Arya had liked it well enough. it made her sad to think of Sansa and her father.

The inn was full of people moving south, and the common room erupted in scorn when Yoren said they were traveling the other way. "You'll be back soon enough," the innkeeper vowed. "There's no going north. Half the fields are burnt, and what folks are left are walled up inside their holdfasts. One bunch rides off at dawn and another one shows up by dusk."

"That's nothing to us," Yoren insisted stubbornly. "Tully or Lannister, makes no matter. The Watch takes no part."

*Lord Tully is my grandfather*, Arya thought. It mattered to *her*, but she chewed her lip and kept quiet, listening.

"It's more than Lannister and Tully," the innkeeper said. "There's wild men down from the Mountains of the Moon, try telling *them* you take no part. And the Starks are in it too, the young lord's come down, the dead Hand's son..."

Arya sat up straight, straining to hear. Did he mean *Robb*?

"I heard the boy rides to battle on a wolf," said a yellow-haired man with a tankard in his hand.

"Fool's talk." Yoren spat.

“The man I heard it from, he saw it himself. A wolf big as a horse, he swore.”

“Swearing don’t make it true, Hod,” the innkeeper said. “You keep swearing you’ll pay what you owe me, and I’ve yet to see a copper.” The common room erupted in laughter, and the man with the yellow hair turned red.

“It’s been a bad year for wolves,” volunteered a sallow man in a travel-stained green cloak. “Around the Gods Eye, the packs have grown bolder’n anyone can remember. Sheep, cows, dogs, makes no matter, they kill as they like, and they got no fear of men. It’s worth your life to go into those woods by night.”

“Ah, that’s more tales, and no more true than the other.”

“I heard the same thing from my cousin, and she’s not the sort to lie,” an old woman said. “She says there’s this great pack, hundreds of them, mankillers. The one that leads them is a she-wolf, a bitch from the seventh hell.”

*A she-wolf.* Arya sloshed her beer, wondering. Was the Gods Eye near the Trident? She wished she had a map. It had been near the Trident that she’d left Nymeria. She hadn’t wanted to, but Jory said they had no choice, that if the wolf came back with them she’d be killed for biting Joffrey, even though he’d deserved it. They’d had to shout and scream and throw stones, and it wasn’t until a few of Arya’s stones struck home that the direwolf had finally stopped following them. *She probably wouldn’t even know me now,* Arya thought. *Or if she did, she’d hate me.*

The man in the green cloak said, “I heard how this hellbitch walked into a village one day... a market day, people everywhere, and she walks in bold as you please and tears a baby from his mother’s arms. When the tale reached Lord Mooton, him and his sons swore they’d put an end to her. They tracked her to her lair with a pack of wolfhounds, and barely escaped with their skins. Not one of those dogs came back, not one.”

“That’s just a story,” Arya blurted out before she could stop herself. “Wolves don’t eat babies.”

“And what would you know about it, lad?” asked the man in the green cloak.

Before she could think of an answer, Yoren had her by the arm. “The boy’s greensick on beer, that’s all it is.”

“No I’m not. They *don’t* eat babies...”

“Outside, *boy*... and see that you stay there until you learn to shut your mouth when men are talking.” He gave her a stiff shove, toward the side door that led back to the stables. “Go on now. See that the stableboy has watered our horses.”

Arya went outside, stiff with fury. “They *don’t*,” she muttered, kicking at a rock as she stalked off. It went rolling and fetched up under the wagons.

“Boy,” a friendly voice called out. “Lovely boy.”

One of the men in irons was talking to her. Warily, Arya approached the wagon, one hand on Needle’s hilt.

The prisoner lifted an empty tankard, his chains rattling. “A man could use another taste of beer. A man has a thirst, wearing these heavy bracelets.” He was the youngest of the three, slender, fine-featured, always smiling. His hair was red on one side and white on the other, all matted and filthy from cage and travel. “A man could use a bath too,” he said, when he saw the way Arya was looking at him. “A boy could make a friend.”

“I have friends,” Arya said.

“None I can see,” said the one without a nose. He was squat and thick, with huge hands. Black hair covered his arms and legs and chest, even his back. He reminded Arya of a drawing she had once seen in a book, of an ape from the Summer Isles. The hole in his face made it hard to look at him for long.

The bald one opened his mouth and *hissed* like some immense white lizard. When Arya flinched back, startled, he opened his mouth wide and waggled his tongue at her, only it was more a stump than a tongue. “Stop that,” she blurted.

“A man does not choose his companions in the black cells,” the handsome one with the red-and-white hair said. Something about the way

he talked reminded her of Syrio; it was the same, yet different too. “These two, they have no courtesy. A man must ask forgiveness. You are called Arry, is that not so?”

“Lumpyhead,” said the noseless one. “Lumpyhead Lumpyface Stickboy. Have a care, Lorath, he’ll hit you with his stick.”

“A man must be ashamed of the company he keeps, Arry,” the handsome one said. “This man has the honor to be Jaqen H’ghar, once of the Free City of Lorath. Would that he were home. This man’s ill-bred companions in captivity are named Rorge”—he waved his tankard at the noseless man—“and Biter.” Biter *hissed* at her again, displaying a mouthful of yellowed teeth filed into points. “A man must have some name, is that not so? Biter cannot speak and Biter cannot write, yet his teeth are very sharp, so a man calls him Biter and he smiles. Are you charmed?”

Arya backed away from the wagon. “No.” *They can’t hurt me*, she told herself, *they’re all chained up*.

He turned his tankard upside down. “A man must weep.”

Rorge, the noseless one, flung his drinking cup at her with a curse. His manacles made him clumsy, yet even so he would have sent the heavy pewter tankard crashing into her head if Arya hadn’t leapt aside. “You get us some beer, pimple. *Now!*”

“You shut your mouth!” Arya tried to think what Syrio would have done. She drew her wooden practice sword.

“Come closer,” Rorge said, “and I’ll shove that stick up your bunghole and fuck you bloody.”

*Fear cuts deeper than swords.* Arya made herself approach the wagon. Every step was harder than the one before. *Fierce as a wolverine, calm as still water.* The words sang in her head. Syrio would not have been afraid. She was almost close enough to touch the wheel when Biter lurched to his feet and grabbed for her, his irons clanking and rattling. The manacles brought his hands up short, half a foot from her face. He *hissed*.

She hit him. Hard, right between his little eyes.

Screaming, Biter reeled back, and then threw all his weight against his chains. The links slithered and turned and grew taut, and Arya heard the creak of old dry wood as the great iron rings strained against the floorboards of the wagon. Huge pale hands groped for her while veins bulged along Biter's arms, but the bonds held, and finally the man collapsed backward. Blood ran from the weeping sores on his cheeks.

"A boy has more courage than sense," the one who had named himself Jaqen H'ghar observed.

Arya edged backward away from the wagon. When she felt the hand on her shoulder, she whirled, bringing up her stick sword again, but it was only the Bull. "What are you doing?"

He raised his hands defensively. "Yoren said none of us should go near those three."

"They don't scare me," Arya said.

"Then you're stupid. They scare *me*." The Bull's hand fell to the hilt of his sword, and Rorge began to laugh. "Let's get away from them."

Arya scuffed at the ground with her foot, but she let the Bull lead her around to the front of the inn. Rorge's laughter and Biter's hissing followed them. "Want to fight?" she asked the Bull. She wanted to hit something.

He blinked at her, startled. Strands of thick black hair, still wet from the bathhouse, fell across his deep blue eyes. "I'd hurt you."

"You would not."

"You don't know how strong I am."

"You don't know how quick I am."

"You're asking for it, Arry." He drew Praed's longsword. "This is cheap steel, but it's a real sword."

Arya unsheathed Needle. "This is good steel, so it's realer than yours."

The Bull shook his head. "Promise not to cry if I cut you?"

"I'll promise if you will." She turned sideways, into her water dancer's stance, but the Bull did not move. He was looking at something behind her. "What's wrong?"

“Gold cloaks.” His face closed up tight.

*It couldn't be*, Arya thought, but when she glanced back, they were riding up the kingsroad, six in the black ringmail and golden cloaks of the City Watch. One was an officer; he wore a black enamel breastplate ornamented with four golden disks. They drew up in front of the inn. *Look with your eyes*, Syrio's voice seemed to whisper. Her eyes saw white lather under their saddles; the horses had been ridden long and hard. Calm as still water, she took the Bull by the arm and drew him back behind a tall flowering hedge.

“What is it?” he asked. “What are you doing? Let go.”

“*Quiet as a shadow*,” she whispered, pulling him down.

Some of Yoren's other charges were sitting in front of the bathhouse, waiting their turn at a tub. “You men,” one of the gold cloaks shouted. “You the ones left to take the black?”

“We might be,” came the cautious answer.

“We'd rather join you boys,” old Reysen said. “We hear it's *cold* on that Wall.”

The gold cloak officer dismounted. “I have a warrant for a certain boy —”

Yoren stepped out of the inn, fingering his tangled black beard. “Who is it wants this boy?”

The other gold cloaks were dismounting to stand beside their horses. “Why are we hiding?” the Bull whispered.

“It's me they want,” Arya whispered back. His ear smelled of soap. “You be quiet.”

“The queen wants him, old man, not that it's your concern,” the officer said, drawing a ribbon from his belt. “Here, Her Grace's seal and warrant.”

Behind the hedge, the Bull shook his head doubtfully. “Why would the queen want *you*, Arry?”

She punched his shoulder. “*Be quiet!*”



Yoren fingered the warrant ribbon with its blob of golden wax. “Pretty.” He spit. “Thing is, the boy’s in the Night’s Watch now. What he done back in the city don’t mean piss-all.”

“The queen’s not interested in your views, old man, and neither am I,” the officer said. “I’ll have the boy.”

Arya thought about running, but she knew she wouldn’t get far on her donkey when the gold cloaks had horses. And she was so tired of running. She’d run when Ser Meryn came for her, and again when they killed her father. If she was a real water dancer, she would go out there with Needle and kill all of them, and never run from anyone ever again.

“You’ll have no one,” Yoren said stubbornly. “There’s laws on such things.”

The gold cloak drew a shortsword. “Here’s your law.”

Yoren looked at the blade. “That’s no law, just a sword. Happens I got one too.”

The officer smiled. “Old fool. I have five men with me.”

Yoren spat. “Happens I got thirty.”

The gold cloak laughed. “This lot?” said a big lout with a broken nose. “Who’s first?” he shouted, showing his steel.

Tarber plucked a pitchfork out of a bale of hay. “I am.”

“No, I am,” called Cutjack, the plump stonemason, pulling his hammer off the leather apron he always wore.

“Me.” Kurz came up off the ground with his skinning knife in hand.

“Me and him.” Koss strung his longbow.

“All of us,” said Reysen, snatching up the tall hardwood walking staff he carried.

Dobber stepped naked out of the bathhouse with his clothes in a bundle, saw what was happening, and dropped everything but his dagger. “Is it a fight?” he asked.

“I guess,” said Hot Pie, scrambling on all fours for a big rock to throw. Arya could not believe what she was seeing. She *hated* Hot Pie! Why

would he risk himself for her?

The one with the broken nose still thought it was funny. “You girls put away them rocks and sticks before you get spanked. None of you knows what end of a sword to hold.”

“*I do!*” Arya wouldn’t let them die for her like Syrio. She wouldn’t! Shoving through the hedge with Needle in hand, she slid into a water dancer’s stance.

Broken Nose guffawed. The officer looked her up and down. “Put the blade away, little girl, no one wants to hurt you.”

“I’m *not* a girl!” she yelled, furious. What was wrong with them? They rode all this way for her and here she was and they were just smiling at her. “I’m the one you want.”

“*He’s* the one we want.” The officer jabbed his shortsword toward the Bull, who’d come forward to stand beside her, Praed’s cheap steel in his hand.

But it was a mistake to take his eyes off Yoren, even for an instant. Quick as that, the black brother’s sword was pressed to the apple of the officer’s throat. “Neither’s the one you get, less you want me to see if your apple’s ripe yet. I got me ten, fifteen more brothers in that inn, if you still need convincing. I was you, I’d let loose of that gutcutter, spread my cheeks over that fat little horse, and gallop on back to the city.” He spat, and poked harder with the point of his sword. “Now.”

The officer’s fingers uncurled. His sword fell in the dust.

“We’ll just keep that,” Yoren said. “Good steel’s always needed on the Wall.”

“As you say. For now. Men.” The gold cloaks sheathed and mounted up. “You’d best scamper up to that Wall of yours in a hurry, old man. The next time I catch you, I believe I’ll have your head to go with the bastard boy’s.”

“Better men than you have tried.” Yoren slapped the rump of the officer’s horse with the flat of his sword and sent him reeling off down the kingsroad. His men followed.

When they were out of sight, Hot Pie began to whoop, but Yoren looked angrier than ever. “Fool! You think he’s done with us? Next time he won’t prance up and hand me no damn ribbon. Get the rest out o’ them baths, we need to be moving. Ride all night, maybe we can stay ahead o’ them for a bit.” He scooped up the shortsword the officer had dropped. “Who wants this?”

“Me!” Hot Pie yelled.

“Don’t be using it on Arry.” He handed the boy the sword, hilt first, and walked over to Arya, but it was the Bull he spoke to. “Queen wants you bad, boy.”

Arya was lost. “Why should she want *him*?”

The Bull scowled at her. “Why should she want *you*? You’re nothing but a little gutter rat!”

“Well, you’re nothing but a bastard boy!” Or maybe he was only *pretending* to be a bastard boy. “What’s your true name?”

“Gendry,” he said, like he wasn’t quite sure.

“Don’t see why no one wants neither o’ you,” Yoren said, “but they can’t have you regardless. You ride them two coursers. First sight of a gold cloak, make for the Wall like a dragon’s on your tail. The rest o’ us don’t mean spit to them.”

“Except for you,” Arya pointed out. “That man said he’d take your head too.”

“Well, as to that,” Yoren said, “if he can get it off my shoulders, he’s welcome to it.”