

## ARYA

At Winterfell they had called her “Arya Horseface” and she’d thought nothing could be worse, but that was before the orphan boy Lommy Greenhands had named her “Lumpyhead.”

Her head *felt* lumpy when she touched it. When Yoren had dragged her into that alley she’d thought he meant to kill her, but the sour old man had only held her tight, sawing through her mats and tangles with his dagger. She remembered how the breeze sent the fistfuls of dirty brown hair skittering across the paving stones, toward the sept where her father had died. “I’m taking men and boys from the city,” Yoren growled as the sharp steel scraped at her head. “Now you hold still, *boy*.” By the time he had finished, her scalp was nothing but tufts and stubble.

Afterward he told her that from there to Winterfell she’d be Arry the orphan boy. “Gate shouldn’t be hard, but the road’s another matter. You got a long way to go in bad company. I got thirty this time, men and boys all bound for the Wall, and don’t be thinking they’re like that bastard brother o’ yours.” He shook her. “Lord Eddard gave me pick o’ the dungeons, and I didn’t find no little lordlings down there. This lot, half o’ them would turn you over to the queen quick as spit for a pardon and maybe a few silvers. The other half’d do the same, only they’d rape you first. So you keep to yourself and make your water in the woods, alone. That’ll be the hardest part, the pissing, so don’t drink no more’n you need.”

Leaving King’s Landing was easy, just like he’d said. The Lannister guardsmen on the gate were stopping everyone, but Yoren called one by name and their wagons were waved through. No one spared Arya a glance. They were looking for a highborn girl, daughter of the King’s Hand, not for a skinny boy with his hair chopped off. Arya never looked back. She wished the Rush would rise and wash the whole city away, Flea Bottom and the Red Keep and the Great Sept and *everything*, and *everyone* too, especially Prince Joffrey and his mother. But she knew it wouldn’t, and

anyhow Sansa was still in the city and would wash away too. When she remembered that, Arya decided to wish for Winterfell instead.

Yoren was wrong about the pissing, though. That wasn't the hardest part at all; Lommy Greenhands and Hot Pie were the hardest part. Orphan boys. Yoren had plucked some from the streets with promises of food for their bellies and shoes for their feet. The rest he'd found in chains. "The Watch needs good men," he told them as they set out, "but you lot will have to do."

Yoren had taken grown men from the dungeons as well, thieves and poachers and rapers and the like. The worst were the three he'd found in the black cells who must have scared even him, because he kept them fettered hand and foot in the back of a wagon, and vowed they'd stay in irons all the way to the Wall. One had no nose, only the hole in his face where it had been cut off, and the gross fat bald one with the pointed teeth and the weeping sores on his cheeks had eyes like nothing human.

They took five wagons out of King's Landing, laden with supplies for the Wall: hides and bolts of cloth, bars of pig iron, a cage of ravens, books and paper and ink, a bale of sourleaf, jars of oil, and chests of medicine and spices. Teams of plow horses pulled the wagons, and Yoren had bought two coursers and a half-dozen donkeys for the boys. Arya would have preferred a real horse, but the donkey was better than riding on a wagon.

The men paid her no mind, but she was not so lucky with the boys. She was two years younger than the youngest orphan, not to mention smaller and skinnier, and Lommy and Hot Pie took her silence to mean she was scared, or stupid, or deaf. "Look at that sword Lumpyhead's got there," Lommy said one morning as they made their plodding way past orchards and wheat fields. He'd been a dyer's apprentice before he was caught stealing, and his arms were mottled green to the elbow. When he laughed he brayed like the donkeys they were riding. "Where's a gutter rat like Lumpyhead get him a sword?"

Arya chewed her lip sullenly. She could see the back of Yoren's faded black cloak up ahead of the wagons, but she was determined not to go crying to him for help.

“Maybe he’s a little squire,” Hot Pie put in. His mother had been a baker before she died, and he’d pushed her cart through the streets all day, shouting “*Hot pies! Hot pies!*” “Some lordy lord’s little squire boy, that’s it.”

“He ain’t no squire, look at him. I bet that’s not even a real sword. I bet it’s just some play sword made of tin.”

Arya hated them making fun of Needle. “It’s castle-forged steel, you stupid,” she snapped, turning in the saddle to glare at them, “and you better shut your mouth.”

The orphan boys hooted. “Where’d you get a blade like that, Lumpyface?” Hot Pie wanted to know.

“*Lumpyhead*,” corrected Lommy. “He prob’ly stole it.”

“I did *not*!” she shouted. Jon Snow had given her Needle. Maybe she had to let them call her Lumpyhead, but she wasn’t going to let them call Jon a thief.

“If he stole it, we could take it off him,” said Hot Pie. “It’s not his anyhow. I could use me a sword like that.”

Lommy egged him on. “Go on, take it off him, I dare you.”

Hot Pie kicked his donkey, riding closer. “Hey, Lumpyface, you gimme that sword.” His hair was the color of straw, his fat face all sunburnt and peeling. “You don’t know how to use it.”

*Yes I do*, Arya could have said. *I killed a boy, a fat boy like you, I stabbed him in the belly and he died, and I’ll kill you too if you don’t let me alone*. Only she did not dare. Yoren didn’t know about the stableboy, but she was afraid of what he might do if he found out. Arya was pretty sure that some of the other men were killers too, the three in the manacles for sure, but the queen wasn’t looking for *them*, so it wasn’t the same.

“Look at him,” brayed Lommy Greenhands. “I bet he’s going to cry now. You want to cry, Lumpyhead?”

She had cried in her sleep the night before, dreaming of her father. Come morning, she’d woken red-eyed and dry, and could not have shed another tear if her life had hung on it.

“He’s going to wet his pants,” Hot Pie suggested.

“Leave him be,” said the boy with the shaggy black hair who rode behind them. Lommy had named him the Bull, on account of this horned helm he had that he polished all the time but never wore. Lommy didn’t dare mock the Bull. He was older, and big for his age, with a broad chest and strong-looking arms.

“You better give Hot Pie the sword, Arry,” Lommy said. “Hot Pie wants it bad. He kicked a boy to death. He’ll do the same to you, I bet.”

“I knocked him down and I kicked him in the balls, and I kept kicking him there until he was dead,” Hot Pie boasted. “I kicked him all to pieces. His balls were broke open and bloody and his cock turned black. You better gimme the sword.”

Arya slid her practice sword from her belt. “You can have this one,” she told Hot Pie, not wanting to fight.

“That’s just some stick.” He rode nearer and tried to reach over for Needle’s hilt.

Arya made the stick whistle as she laid the wood across his donkey’s hindquarters. The animal *hawed* and bucked, dumping Hot Pie on the ground. She vaulted off her own donkey and poked him in the gut as he tried to get up and he sat back down with a grunt. Then she whacked him across the face and his nose made a *crack* like a branch breaking. Blood dribbled from his nostrils. When Hot Pie began to wail, Arya whirled toward Lommy Greenhands, who was sitting on his donkey openmouthed. “You want some sword too?” she yelled, but he didn’t. He raised dyed green hands in front of his face and squealed at her to get away.

The Bull shouted, “Behind you,” and Arya spun. Hot Pie was on his knees, his fist closing around a big jagged rock. She let him throw it, ducking her head as it sailed past. Then she flew at him. He raised a hand and she hit it, and then his cheek, and then his knee. He grabbed for her, and she danced aside and bounced the wood off the back of his head. He fell down and got up and stumbled after her, his red face all smeared with dirt and blood. Arya slid into a water dancer’s stance and waited. When he came close enough, she lunged, right between his legs, so hard that if her

wooden sword had had a point it would have come out between his butt cheeks.

By the time Yoren pulled her off him, Hot Pie was sprawled out on the ground with his breeches brown and smelly, crying as Arya whapped him over and over and over. “*Enough*,” the black brother roared, prying the stick sword from her fingers, “you want to kill the fool?” When Lommy and some others started to squeal, the old man turned on them too. “Shut your mouths, or I’ll be shutting them for you. Any more o’ this, I’ll tie you lot behind the wagons and *drag* you to the Wall.” He spat. “And that goes twice for you, Arry. You come with me, boy. *Now*.”

They were all looking at her, even the three chained and manacled in the back of the wagon. The fat one snapped his pointy teeth together and hissed, but Arya ignored him.

The old man dragged her well off the road into a tangle of trees, cursing and muttering all the while. “If I had a thimble o’ sense, I would’ve left you in King’s Landing. You hear me, *boy*?” He always snarled that word, putting a bite in it so she would be certain to hear. “Unlace your breeches and pull ‘em down. Go on, there’s no one here to see. Do it.”

Sullenly, Arya did as he said. “Over there, against the oak. Yes, like that.” She wrapped her arms around the trunk and pressed her face to the rough wood. “You scream now. You scream loud.”

*I won’t*, Arya thought stubbornly, but when Yoren laid the wood against the back of her bare thighs, the shriek burst out of her anyway. “Think that hurt?” he said. “Try this one.” The stick came whistling. Arya shrieked again, clutching the tree to keep from falling. “One more.” She held on tight, chewing her lip, flinching when she heard it coming. The stroke made her jump and howl. *I won’t cry*, she thought, *I won’t do that. I’m a Stark of Winterfell, our sigil is the direwolf, direwolves don’t cry*. She could feel a thin trickle of blood running down her left leg. Her thighs and cheeks were ablaze with pain. “Might be I got your attention now,” Yoren said. “Next time you take that stick to one of your brothers, you’ll get twice what you give, you hear me? Now cover yourself.”

*They're not my brothers*, Arya thought as she bent to yank up her breeches, but she knew better than to say so. Her hands fumbled with her belt and laces.

Yoren was looking at her. "You hurt?"

*Calm as still water*, she told herself, the way Syrio Forel had taught her. "Some."

He spat. "That pie boy's hurting worse. It wasn't him as killed your father, girl, nor that thieving Lommy neither. Hitting them won't bring him back."

"I know," Arya muttered sullenly.

"Here's something you don't know. It wasn't supposed to happen like it did. I was set to leave, wagons bought and loaded, and a man comes with a boy for me, and a purse of coin, and a message, never mind who it's from. Lord Eddard's to take the black, he says to me, wait, he'll be going with you. Why d'you think I was there? Only something went queer."

"*Joffrey*," Arya breathed. "Someone should kill *him*!"

"Someone will, but it won't be me, nor you neither." Yoren tossed back her stick sword. "Got sourleaf back at the wagons," he said as they made their way back to the road. "You'll chew some, it'll help with the sting."

It did help, some, though the taste of it was foul and it made her spit look like blood. Even so, she walked for the rest of that day, and the day after, and the day after *that*, too raw to sit a donkey. Hot Pie was worse off; Yoren had to shift some barrels around so he could lie in the back of a wagon on some sacks of barley, and he whimpered every time the wheels hit a rock. Lommy Greenhands wasn't even hurt, yet he stayed as far away from Arya as he could get. "Every time you look at him, he twitches," the Bull told her as she walked beside his donkey. She did not answer. It seemed safer not to talk to anyone.

That night she lay upon her thin blanket on the hard ground, staring up at the great red comet. The comet was splendid and scary all at once. "The Red Sword," the Bull named it; he claimed it looked like a sword, the blade still red-hot from the forge. When Arya squinted the right way she could see

the sword too, only it wasn't a new sword, it was Ice, her father's greatsword, all ripply Valyrian steel, and the red was Lord Eddard's blood on the blade after Ser Ilyn the King's Justice had cut off his head. Yoren had made her look away when it happened, yet it seemed to her that the comet looked like Ice must have, after.

When at last she slept, she dreamed of home. The kingsroad wound its way past Winterfell on its way to the Wall, and Yoren had promised he'd leave her there with no one any wiser about who she'd been. She yearned to see her mother again, and Robb and Bran and Rickon... but it was Jon Snow she thought of most. She wished somehow they could come to the Wall before Winterfell, so Jon might muss up her hair and call her "little sister." She'd tell him, "I missed you," and he'd say it too at the very same moment, the way they always used to say things together. She would have liked that. She would have liked that better than anything.