

did you hope to skewer? Your sister? Septa Mordane? Do you know the first thing about sword fighting?"

All she could think of was the lesson Jon had given her. "Stick them with the pointy end," she blurted out.

Her father snorted back laughter. "That is the essence of it, I suppose."

Arya desperately wanted to explain, to make him see. "I was trying to learn, but..." Her eyes filled with tears. "I asked Mycah to practice with me." The grief came on her all at once. She turned away, shaking. "I asked him," she cried. "It was my fault, it was me..."

Suddenly her father's arms were around her. He held her gently as she turned to him and sobbed against his chest. "No, sweet one," he murmured. "Grieve for your friend, but never blame yourself. You did not kill the butcher's boy. That murder lies at the Hound's door, him and the cruel woman he serves."

"I hate them," Arya confided, red-faced, sniffing. "The Hound and the queen and the king and Prince Joffrey. I hate all of them. Joffrey lied, it wasn't the way he said. I hate Sansa too. She did remember, she just lied so Joffrey would like her."

"We all lie," her father said. "Or did you truly think I'd believe that Nymeria ran off?"

Arya blushed guiltily. "Jory promised not to tell."

"Jory kept his word," her father said with a smile. "There are some things I do not need to be told. Even a blind man could see that wolf would never have left you willingly."

"We had to throw rocks," she said miserably. "I told her to run, to go be free, that I didn't want her anymore. There were other wolves for her to play with, we heard them howling, and Jory said the woods were full of game, so she'd have deer to hunt. Only she kept following, and finally we had to throw rocks. I hit her twice. She whined and looked at me and I felt so 'shamed, but it was right, wasn't it? The queen would have killed her."

"It was right," her father said. "And even the lie was... not without honor." He'd put Needle aside when he went to Arya to embrace her. Now he took the blade up again and walked to the window, where he stood for a moment, looking out across the courtyard. When he turned back, his eyes were thoughtful. He seated himself on the window seat, Needle across his lap. "Arya, sit down. I need to try and explain some things to you."

She perched anxiously on the edge of her bed. "You are too young to be burdened with all my cares," he told her, "but you are also a Stark of Winterfell. You know our words."

"Winter is coming," Arya whispered.

"The hard cruel times," her father said. "We tasted them on the Trident, child, and when Bran fell. You were born in the long summer, sweet one, you've never known anything else, but now the winter is truly coming. Remember the sigil of our House, Arya."

"The direwolf," she said, thinking of Nymeria. She hugged her knees against her chest, suddenly afraid.

"Let me tell you something about wolves, child. When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. Summer is the time for squabbles. In winter, we must protect one another, keep each other warm, share our strengths. So if you must hate, Arya, hate