

those who would truly do us harm. Septa Mordane is a good woman, and Sansa... Sansa is your sister. You may be as different as the sun and the moon, but the same blood flows through both your hearts. You need her, as she needs you... and I need both of you, gods help me.”

He sounded so tired that it made Arya sad. “I don’t hate Sansa,” she told him. “Not truly.” It was only half a lie.

“I do not mean to frighten you, but neither will I lie to you. We have come to a dark dangerous place, child. This is not Winterfell. We have enemies who mean us ill. We cannot fight a war among ourselves. This willfulness of yours, the running off, the angry words, the disobedience... at home, these were only the summer games of a child. Here and now, with winter soon upon us, that is a different matter. It is time to begin growing up.”

“I will,” Arya vowed. She had never loved him so much as she did in that instant. “I can be strong too. I can be as strong as Robb.”

He held Needle out to her, hilt first. “Here...”

She looked at the sword with wonder in her eyes. For a moment she was afraid to touch it, afraid that if she reached for it it would be snatched away again, but then her father said, “Go on, it’s yours,” and she took it in her hand.

“I can keep it?” she said. “For true?”

“For true.” He smiled. “If I took it away, no doubt I’d find a morningstar hidden under your pillow within the fortnight. Try not to stab your sister, whatever the provocation.”

“I won’t. I promise.” Arya clutched Needle tightly to her chest as her father took his leave.

The next morning, as they broke their fast, she apologized to Septa Mordane and asked for her pardon. The septa peered at her suspiciously, but Father nodded.

Three days later, at midday, her father’s steward Vayon Poole sent Arya to the Small Hall. The trestle tables had been dismantled and the benches shoved against the walls. The hall seemed empty, until an unfamiliar voice said, “You are late, boy.” A slight man with a bald head and a great beak of a nose stepped out of the shadows, holding a pair of slender wooden swords. “Tomorrow you will be here at midday.” He had an accent, the lilt of the Free Cities, Braavos perhaps, or Myr.

“Who are you?” Arya asked.

“I am your dancing master.” He tossed her one of the wooden blades. She grabbed for it, missed, and heard it clatter to the floor. “Tomorrow you will catch it. Now pick it up.”

It was not just a stick, but a true wooden sword complete with grip and guard and pommel. Arya picked it up and clutched it nervously with both hands, holding it out in front of her. It was heavier than it looked, much heavier than Needle.

The bald man clicked his teeth together. “That is not the way, boy. This is not a greatsword that is needing two hands to swing it. You will take the blade in one hand.”

“It’s too heavy,” Arya said.

“It is heavy as it needs to be to make you strong, and for the balancing. A hollow inside is filled with lead, just so. One hand now is all that is needing.”