

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