

cloak. She could find Nymeria in the wild woods below the Trident, and together they'd return to Winterfell, or run to Jon on the Wall. She found herself wishing that Jon was here with her now. Then maybe she wouldn't feel so alone.

A soft knock at the door behind her turned Arya away from the window and her dreams of escape. "Arya," her father's voice called out. "Open the door. We need to talk."

Arya crossed the room and lifted the crossbar. Father was alone. He seemed more sad than angry. That made Arya feel even worse. "May I come in?" Arya nodded, then dropped her eyes, ashamed. Father closed the door. "Whose sword is that?"

"Mine." Arya had almost forgotten Needle, in her hand.

"Give it to me."

Reluctantly Arya surrendered her sword, wondering if she would ever hold it again. Her father turned it in the light, examining both sides of the blade. He tested the point with his thumb. "A bravo's blade," he said. "Yet it seems to me that I know this maker's mark. This is Mikken's work."

Arya could not lie to him. She lowered her eyes.

Lord Eddard Stark sighed. "My nine-year-old daughter is being armed from my own forge, and I know nothing of it. The Hand of the King is expected to rule the Seven Kingdoms, yet it seems I cannot even rule my own household. How is it that you come to own a sword, Arya? Where did you get this?"

Arya chewed her lip and said nothing. She would not betray Jon, not even to their father.

After a while, Father said, "I don't suppose it matters, truly." He looked down gravely at the sword in his hands. "This is no toy for children, least of all for a girl. What would Septa Mordane say if she knew you were playing with swords?"

"I wasn't playing," Arya insisted. "I hate Septa Mordane."

"That's enough." Her father's voice was curt and hard. "The septa is doing no more than is her duty, though gods know you have made it a struggle for the poor woman. Your mother and I have charged her with the impossible task of making you a lady."

"I don't want to be a lady!" Arya flared.

"I ought to snap this toy across my knee here and now, and put an end to this nonsense."

"Needle wouldn't break," Arya said defiantly, but her voice betrayed her words.

"It has a name, does it?" Her father sighed. "Ah, Arya. You have a wildness in you, child. 'The wolf blood,' my father used to call it. Lyanna had a touch of it, and my brother Brandon more than a touch. It brought them both to an early grave." Arya heard sadness in his voice; he did not often speak of his father, or of the brother and sister who had died before she was born. "Lyanna might have carried a sword, if my lord father had allowed it. You remind me of her sometimes. You even look like her."

"Lyanna was beautiful," Arya said, startled. Everybody said so. It was not a thing that was ever said of Arya.

"She was," Eddard Stark agreed, "beautiful, and willful, and dead before her time." He lifted the sword, held it out between them. "Arya, what did you think to do with this... Needle? Who