

Three of them started forward, chainmail clinking softly with each step. Arya was suddenly afraid. Fear cuts deeper than swords, she told herself, to slow the racing of her heart.

Syrio Forel stepped between them, tapping his wooden sword lightly against his boot. "You will be stopping there. Are you men or dogs that you would threaten a child?"

"Out of the way, old man," one of the red cloaks said.

Syrio's stick came whistling up and rang against his helm. "I am Syrio Forel, and you will now be speaking to me with more respect."

"Bald bastard." The man yanked free his longsword. The stick moved again, blindingly fast. Arya heard a loud crack as the sword went clattering to the stone floor. "My hand," the guardsman yelped, cradling his broken fingers.

"You are quick, for a dancing master," said Ser Meryn.

"You are slow, for a knight," Syrio replied.

"Kill the Braavosi and bring me the girl," the knight in the white armor commanded.

Four Lannister guardsmen unsheathed their swords. The fifth, with the broken fingers, spat and pulled free a dagger with his left hand.

Syrio Forel clicked his teeth together, sliding into his water dancer's stance, presenting only his side to the foe. "Arya child," he called out, never looking, never taking his eyes off the Lannisters, "we are done with dancing for the day. Best you are going now. Run to your father."

Arya did not want to leave him, but he had taught her to do as he said. "Swift as a deer," she whispered.

"Just so," said Syrio Forel as the Lannisters closed.

Arya retreated, her own sword stick clutched tightly in her hand. Watching him now, she realized that Syrio had only been toying with her when they dueled. The red cloaks came at him from three sides with steel in their hands. They had chainmail over their chest and arms, and steel codpieces sewn into their pants, but only leather on their legs. Their hands were bare, and the caps they wore had noseguards, but no visor over the eyes.

Syrio did not wait for them to reach him, but spun to his left. Arya had never seen a man move as fast. He checked one sword with his stick and whirled away from a second. Off balance, the second man lurched into the first. Syrio put a boot to his back and the red cloaks went down together. The third guard came leaping over them, slashing at the water dancer's head. Syrio ducked under his blade and thrust upward. The guardsman fell screaming as blood welled from the wet red hole where his left eye had been.

The fallen men were getting up. Syrio kicked one in the face and snatched the steel cap off the other's head. The dagger man stabbed at him. Syrio caught the thrust in the helmet and shattered the man's kneecap with his stick. The last red cloak shouted a curse and charged, hacking down with both hands on his sword. Syrio rolled right, and the butcher's cut caught the helmetless man between neck and shoulder as he struggled to his knees. The longsword crunched through mail and leather and flesh. The man on his knees shrieked. Before his killer could wrench free his blade, Syrio jabbed him in the apple of his throat. The guardsman gave a choked cry and staggered back, clutching at his neck, his face blackening.