

## ARYA

“High,” Syrio Forel called out, slashing at her head. The stick swords clacked as Arya parried.

“Left,” he shouted, and his blade came whistling. Hers darted to meet it. The clack made him click his teeth together.

“Right,” he said, and “Low,” and “Left,” and “Left” again, faster and faster, moving forward. Arya retreated before him, checking each blow.

“Lunge,” he warned, and when he thrust she sidestepped, swept his blade away, and slashed at his shoulder. She almost touched him, almost, so close it made her grin. A strand of hair dangled in her eyes, limp with sweat. She pushed it away with the back of her hand.

“Left,” Syrio sang out. “Low.” His sword was a blur, and the Small Hall echoed to the clack clack clack. “Left. Left. High. Left. Right. Left. Low. Left!”

The wooden blade caught her high in the breast, a sudden stinging blow that hurt all the more because it came from the wrong side. “Ow!” she cried out. She would have a fresh bruise there by the time she went to sleep, somewhere out at sea. A bruise is a lesson, she told herself, and each lesson makes us better.

Syrio stepped back. “You are dead now.”

Arya made a face. “You cheated,” she said hotly. “You said left and you went right.”

“Just so. And now you are a dead girl.”

“But you lied!”

“My words lied. My eyes and my arm shouted out the truth, but you were not seeing.”

“I was so,” Arya said. “I watched you every second!”

“Watching is not seeing, dead girl. The water dancer sees. Come, put down the sword, it is time for listening now.”

She followed him over to the wall, where he settled onto a bench. “Syrio Forel was first sword to the Sealord of Braavos, and are you knowing how that came to pass?”

“You were the finest swordsman in the city.”

“Just so, but why? Other men were stronger, faster, younger, why was Syrio Forel the best? I will tell you now.” He touched the tip of his little finger lightly to his eyelid. “The seeing, the true seeing, that is the heart of it.

“Hear me. The ships of Braavos sail as far as the winds blow, to lands strange and wonderful, and when they return their captains fetch queer animals to the Sealord’s menagerie. Such animals as you have never seen, striped horses, great spotted things with necks as long as stilts, hairy mouse-pigs as big as cows, stinging manticores, tigers that carry their cubs in a pouch, terrible walking lizards with scythes for claws. Syrio Forel has seen these things.

“On the day I am speaking of, the first sword was newly dead, and the Sealord sent for me. Many bravos had come to him, and as many had been sent away, none could say why. When I came into his presence, he was seated, and in his lap was a fat yellow cat. He told me that one of