

his captains had brought the beast to him, from an island beyond the sunrise. ‘Have you ever seen her like she asked of me.

“And to him I said, ‘Each night in the alleys of Braavos I see a thousand like him,’ and the Sealord laughed, and that day I was named the first sword.”

Arya screwed up her face. “I don’t understand.”

Syrio clicked his teeth together. “The cat was an ordinary cat, no more. The others expected a fabulous beast, so that is what they saw. How large it was, they said. It was no larger than any other cat, only fat from indolence, for the Sealord fed it from his own table. What curious small ears, they said. Its ears had been chewed away in kitten fights. And it was plainly a tomcat, yet the Sealord said ‘her,’ and that is what the others saw. Are you hearing?”

Arya thought about it. “You saw what was there.”

“Just so. Opening your eyes is all that is needing. The heart lies and the head plays tricks with us, but the eyes see true. Look with your eyes. Hear with your ears. Taste with your mouth. Smell with your nose. Feel with your skin. Then comes the thinking, afterward, and in that way knowing the truth.”

“Just so,” said Arya, grinning.

Syrio Forel allowed himself a smile. “I am thinking that when we are reaching this Winterfell of yours, it will be time to put this needle in your hand.”

“Yes!” Arya said eagerly. “Wait till I show Jon-”

Behind her the great wooden doors of the Small Hall flew open with a resounding crash. Arya whirled.

A knight of the Kingsguard stood beneath the arch of the door with five Lannister guardsmen arrayed behind him. He was in full armor, but his visor was up. Arya remembered his droopy eyes and rustcolored whiskers from when he had come to Winterfell with the king: Ser Meryn Trant. The red cloaks wore mail shirts over boiled leather and steel caps with lion crests. “Arya Stark,” the knight said, “come with us, child.”

Arya chewed her lip uncertainly. “What do you want?”

“Your father wants to see you.”

Arya took a step forward, but Syrio Forel held her by the arm. “And why is it that Lord Eddard is sending Lannister men in the place of his own? I am wondering.”

“Mind your place, dancing master,” Ser Meryn said. “This is no concern of yours.”

“My father wouldn’t send you,” Arya said. She snatched up her stick sword. The Lannisters laughed.

“Put down the stick, girl,” Ser Meryn told her. “I am a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard, the White Swords.”

“So was the Kingslayer when he killed the old king,” Arya said. “I don’t have to go with you if I don’t want.”

Ser Meryn Trant ran out of patience. “Take her,” he said to his men. He lowered the visor of his helm.