

“Pray, where do you think you are going, young lady?” Septa Mordane asked.

“I’m not hungry.” Arya found it an effort to remember her courtesies. “May I be excused, please?” she recited stiffly.

“You may not,” the septa said. “You have scarcely touched your food. You will sit down and clean your plate.”

“You clean it!” Before anyone could stop her, Arya bolted for the door as the men laughed and Septa Mordane called loudly after her, her voice rising higher and higher.

Fat Tom was at his post, guarding the door to the Tower of the Hand. He blinked when he saw Arya rushing toward him and heard the septa’s shouts. “Here now, little one, hold on,” he started to say, reaching, but Arya slid between his legs and then she was running up the winding tower steps, her feet hammering on the stone while Fat Tom huffed and puffed behind her.

Her bedchamber was the only place that Arya liked in all of King’s Landing, and the thing she liked best about it was the door, a massive slab of dark oak with black iron bands. When she slammed that door and dropped the heavy crossbar, nobody could get into her room, not Septa Mordane or Fat Tom or Sansa or Jory or the Hound, nobody! She slammed it now.

When the bar was down, Arya finally felt safe enough to cry.

She went to the window seat and sat there, sniffing, hating them all, and herself most of all. It was all her fault, everything bad that had happened. Sansa said so, and Jeyne too.

Fat Tom was knocking on her door. “Arya girl, what’s wrong?” he called out. “You in there?”

“No!” she shouted. The knocking stopped. A moment later she heard him going away. Fat Tom was always easy to fool.

Arya went to the chest at the foot of her bed. She knelt, opened the lid, and began pulling her clothes out with both hands, grabbing handfuls of silk and satin and velvet and wool and tossing them on the floor. It was there at the bottom of the chest, where she’d hidden it. Arya lifted it out almost tenderly and drew the slender blade from its sheath.

Needle.

She thought of Mycah again and her eyes filled with tears. Her fault, her fault, her fault. If she had never asked him to play at swords with her...

There was a pounding at her door, louder than before. “Arya Stark, you open this door at once, do you hear me?”

Arya spun around, with Needle in her hand. “You better not come in here!” she warned. She slashed at the air savagely.

“The Hand will hear of this!” Septa Mordane raged.

“I don’t care,” Arya screamed. “Go away.”

“You will rue this insolent behavior, young lady, I promise you that.

Arya listened at the door until she heard the sound of the septa’s receding footsteps.

She went back to the window, Needle in hand, and looked down into the courtyard below. If only she could climb like Bran, she thought; she would go out the window and down the tower, run away from this horrible place, away from Sansa and Septa Mordane and Prince Joffrey, from all of them. Steal some food from the kitchens, take Needle and her good boots and a warm