Obligatory disclaimer: I don't own ASOIAF; that honour goes to GRRM.

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24th Day of the 8th Moon

Arya Stark, Winterfell

Ser Roderick was incredibly strict, and so was Lyra. Neither even entertained the notion of allowing her training with a sword - even a small, arming one. Thus, Arya was stuck to her original plan - she had to master the bow and dagger to begin even pushing the idea. The dagger was not flashy or exciting enough, but the bow…

The idea of taking down many foes from afar was just oddly appealing. A true master marksman had to be able to wield a bow proficiently with both hands.

Ser Roderick and Lyra were proficient archers but could not claim to be masters of the bow. The only one in Winterfell had been Jacks, a guardsman with a brown beard who went south with her father. Theon was close enough but supposedly lacked the experience to be considered a true master.

With a huff, Arya wiped away the sweat pooling on her brow and threatening to spill into her eyes. Grasping the bow in her right hand, she straightened her posture and, with a single motion, placed the arrow on the bowstring, pulled it, and released.

A dull *thunk* heralded the arrow sinking into the coiled straw target a couple of inches from the centre.

"You must put all of your focus on where you want the arrow to land," Theon's bored voice came from the side as he eyed the coiled straw shy of fifteen yards away. "Imagine it in your mind, and your body will adjust… with time."

"I'm trying," Arya huffed breathlessly. The Greyjoy was no less demanding than Lyra and Roderick, who were now fussing over her sister.

With an annoying smirk, Theon grabbed an arrow, and with a smooth, almost lazy motion, it flew towards the furthest target seventy yards away, hitting the innermost circle.

"Now, all you have to do is practice until it feels as natural as breathing!" Nodding to himself, the annoying Greyjoy sauntered away, seemingly bored. Probably to flirt with the maids or some women in Wintertown, as usual.

Gulping a mouthful of cold air, Arya shook her head, focused, grabbed another arrow, and continued practising. Archery was… *fun*.

Even Sansa was not as good as her anymore - it was the first discipline where Arya *finally* outdid her shining sister.

Everything was so different after she realised that using her left hand felt far easier and more natural a fortnight ago. Not only that, but everything was far less challenging using her left hand, including *stitching*. Even embroidering a simple direwolf was not an insurmountable task, much to her mother's chagrin. Still, the Lady of Winterfell grudgingly accepted Arya's left-handed ways, especially since it meant a visible improvement in the traditional womanly arts.

Arya still hated dresses, dancing, and the silly tittering the other girls did, though.

The practice time ended, and the training yard quickly emptied as most headed to eat luncheon. Not Arya and Lena Harclay, both remaining behind to practice some more. The ten-year-old girl, chestnut-haired with a heart-shaped face, was the sole granddaughter of the Harclay chieftain by his heir and one of the many ladies-in-waiting the princess had summoned.

Myrcella had called in eight noble ladies from the North, all younger than her and with Rosamund, she now had an entourage of nine, with only one yet to arrive. Lena was not the only one who took to steel instead of silk - Serena Umber, a surly, tall girl who could easily be mistaken for a boy, trained with axes but wasn’t much for talking.

Arrows flew and flew towards the coiled straw, and after the quiver was empty, Arya had to retrieve them all. Two out of every ten hit the edge of the central ring, an improvement from the last sennight when she barely managed one. Rinse and repeat, and soon her back began aching from the exertion, followed by her fingers.

“We should eat,” Lena’s squeaky voice halted Arya.

Her stomach rumbled hungrily, striking down the protest before it left her tongue. “Fine,” Arya pushed away a few sweat-soaked strands of hair dangling before her eyes and grudgingly peeled her gloves off.

Quickly unstringing the training bow and leaving it on the stand, she impatiently dashed towards the kitchen. Judging by the heavy footsteps behind, Arya didn't need to turn around to know Lena was trailing in her wake. Of course, her minder Porther was also shadowing her at a distance, but the man-at-arms usually stood out of sight, and Arya was already used to his presence.

The rest of the guardsmen were somewhat jittery, with many stonemasons and workhands swarming around Winterfell. The First Keep was being torn down, and the clinking echoes of chisels and hammers could be heard all the way from here. There was even a brick kiln built in one of the yards nearby. Robb had ordered all of them watched carefully, and there was always a score of sentries keeping an eye.

Arya didn't know what to think of Myrcella's new idea, but she wouldn't truly miss the rickety old ruin or the broken tower. Yet, there was something oddly satisfying in the idea of a new building.

“We aren’t going to the Great Hall to join Lady Stark?” Lena’s voice made her scowl. The girl had arrived two days ago and looked like a lost duckling after her brothers had left.

“I don’t want to,” Arya tried to hide the annoyance in her voice but probably failed. Nowadays, she couldn’t eat with her siblings and mother without being drowned by the maddening titters and giggles of the new girls that were part of Myrcella’s household. Gods, Arya almost wished she had joined her father in the south. Almost. “Feel free to join them if you wish.”

Lena remained silent and continued trailing after her. The youngest Stark daughter still didn't know why the young Harclay girl was following *her* around of all people.

She passed by the kennels, looked at the closed hunter's gate where a handful of sentries were playing dice, and quickly unlatched the dark wooden door that led directly into the kitchen.

As Arya stepped inside, all she could see was shaggy grey fur, and a wet, sticky tongue greeted her straight to her face.

“Nymeria!”

Her attempts to push away the direwolf that was already taller than her were in vain, and Nymeria only stepped aside once she was satisfied with covering her face with slobber.

Thankfully, someone handed her a rag to wipe away the face, and Gage pointed her at a bucket of water. Arya quickly ran over to wash away the feeling of stickiness.

“Lady Arya, your p-companion,” the head cook coughed, “has been sneaking here and simply wouldn’t leave unless we give her a nice slice of salted pork.”

All she could do after wiping her face again was groan. “Again?”

Nymeria was curiously gazing at her with her dark golden eyes and dark grey tail swaying behind her slowly with contentment. The kitchen was an enormous room, walls lined with blackened stone and the rafters were high above, darkened by the smoke.

“Aye,” Gage’s balding head bobbed as he eyed the innocent-looking direwolf that still had grease over her snout with exasperation. “Neither of us dare chase her away either.”

None of the staff seemed afraid of Nymeria - most were fondly exasperated more than anything else. Scullery maids were toiling over vegetables and dirty dishes, and a young boy was filleting a butchered cow on one of the sturdy tables. A pair of younger cooks were working around a giant dark cauldron, one placing firewood below while the other was stirring the steaming contents with an enormous brass ladle. Many of them waved at her with a smile, courtesy of her torturous jaunt as a servant.

"I'll get her to behave," Arya promised guiltily and petted the big grey, furry head of her companion. Her father had been very stern about training their direwolves, and she admitted that without Robb's reminders, she oft forgot about it. "Do you have a meal to spare?"

“I still have some smoked venison and freshly baked bread,” the cook smiled, patted his belly, and turned around. “Turnip, grab a generous portion for Lady Arya!”

No matter what, Arya couldn't escape the embroidery lessons, even if she was no longer bad at stitching.

Especially not when her Lady Mother and Lyra Mormont were supervising. So, after a hot bath, she found herself together with the other girls, needle and cloth in hand.

They had changed rooms too, the previous one too small to comfortably host a dozen of them. The cosy chambers were on the upper second floor of the Great Keep, with weather-worn tapestries on the walls depicting either the coat of arms of House Stark or the feats of some previous Lords of Winterfell.

They were split around two tables - the bulky Serena Umber, Wylla Manderly with her garish green braid, Jeyne Poole, and the tall and coltish Brenda Dustin were with Sansa, Myrcella and Catelyn.

Shaggydog's black form was sitting lazily by her mother as usual, and one could see the direwolf far more oft with the Lady of Winterfell than Rickon, much to her youngest brother's woe. Still, any free moment and the shaggy, green-eyed menace would make his way to Arya's pregnant mother. She only hoped this sibling would be a girl, so Arya would no longer be the youngest daughter.

Lady and Grey Wind were curled on each side of Myrcella's chair like two grey rolls of fur. Truth be told, Arya had little doubt that Nymeria would probably be doing the same if she were here - the direwolves seemed to have an odd affinity towards her unborn kin.

"Arya, don't daydream with a sharp needle in hand," Lyra Mormont snapped, breaking her out of her thoughts.

The girl sighed but murmured an apology - no stitches meant *no* training. Suppressing her annoyance, Arya returned to embroidering a grey scarf.

Aside from the she-bear, Arya's table had the younger girls - the bubbly Rosamund Lannister, Eddara Tallheart, Lena, the always prim and proper Lyanna Mormont, and the newly arrived Lysara Liddle. She was just shy of a year older than Arya and had lovely auburn locks woven into a long northern braid with dreamy eyes.

"So you're the girl from the song?" Eddara Tallheart turned to Lysara. It was a rare thing; the mousy-looking girl usually preferred to stay quiet and observe.

"The song?" The Liddle's daughter blinked in confusion. With her pale, unblemished skin and vivid grey eyes, Lysara was very pretty and would undoubtedly grow into a beauty in a few years.

"The White Huntsman and the Maiden Fair," Lyanna Mormont said, reverence clear in her voice. "It's not oft a young maiden gets immortalised by the bards!"

At that point, even Lyra had stopped embroidering a brown bear upon the collar of a green tunic and looked curiously at the girl in question. Arya placed down the shawl and inched closer, curious to hear more of Jon.

“Ah,” Lysara sighed, her gaze turning even more dreamy. “Jon Snow did save me that day.”

Arya shuddered, another vapid girl lusting over her missing brother…

“Tell us more,” Lena urged with an excited squeak, making Arya roll her eyes.

"I thought I was going to die," the girl's face grew pale, but she quickly smiled. "The tree I had climbed was thicker than a grown man's shoulders, yet the beast was rocking it as if it were a twig. Then he came, like a knight out of the tales."

Lyanna giggled. “Did he have a white horse?”

"No horse at all! Only two hunting spears and a bow. The bow turned to be of no use, and Jon threw the first spear, but the bear was too fast, and he missed." All of them shuffled closer to avoid missing out on a single word of the tale. "Then, his hounds showed up-"

“Not the direwolf?” Arya interrupted. Her brother never had dogs - only the snowy white direwolf pup with reddish eyes. At least Jon had a faithful companion with him, no matter where he was.

"Ghost was there too, but so were four other hounds," Lysara said, impatiently shooting her a heated glare. "The dogs distracted the bear for a moment, but it was just enough for Jon to leap and drive his spear into the beast's eye!"

Lena scrunched up her brow as she scratched her cheek. “Isn’t jumping against such a beast very dangerous?”

"Very," Lyra agreed. "But, I asked old Liddle himself - the bear was over eight feet tall on all fours, and the hide was as hard as steel. Most bears are hunted with a large pack of hunting hounds to drive them out of the bush and run down the beast ahorse with bear spears or surrounded and poked to death by many long spears. Yet the young Snow had neither option, and the larger the bear, the harder it is to hunt…"

It was little wonder she knew this; the Mormont maiden did live on Bear Isle, after all.

“The bear did manage to strike him and sent him rolling fifteen yards into a tree,” the auburn-haired girl admitted with a small voice. “I made my way to him, only to see so much blood, and he had the gall to ask me *‘are you unharmed, my lady’?”*

The last part was spoken in a poor imitation of Jon’s voice, sending the rest of the girls into giggles and titters and making Arya scowl.

Jon was not like that!

Her brother cared little for giggly maidens, and the few who had approached him during harvest festivals were softly rebuffed. Worse, this reminded her of when the royal family was here, and Sansa, Jeyne, and Beth were gushing over how handsome Joffrey was.

“How was he wounded?” Arya’s question sounded more like a growl, but it made them stop daydreaming.

“Well, the claws had raked him, but nothing the Old Lena couldn’t fix - Jon was back on his feet in a sennight!”

Lysara's enthusiastic outburst seemed to grab her Lady Mother's attention, and Catelyn glanced at the elder she-bear meaningfully just as Arya was about to ask who the heck was 'Old Lena'. Not that it mattered - as long as Jon was fine.

With a cough, the elder Mormont sister interrupted her sister’s coming question. “Enough of this. We’re here to practice embroidery, not gossip like washerwomen.”

After a few minutes of cautious silence, they continued to gossip, but at least in hushed tones, and Arya couldn't bring herself to listen about the silly gushing over her missing brother. With a sigh, she grabbed the needle and focused on the grey shawl instead. The rest of the lesson flew away before she knew it, and in the end, Arya had almost a perfect black direwolf embroidered onto the piece of fabric.

“Very good,” there was unmistakable pride in her mother’s voice as she inspected the shawl, making Arya try to fight off the heat rising in her cheeks. “You definitely have talent - if you keep up the hard work, you could easily put any seamstress to shame.”

Arya nodded wordlessly at the praise, not knowing what to say - not that she ever cared about doing something as boring and silly as tailoring - that was all for smallfolk.

However, the day did not seem to be over just yet - Lannister banners had been noticed approaching from the kingsroad.

It was a rare occasion that sent her Lady Mother and Myrcella into a frenzy to prepare for a proper reception - the visitors from Casterly Rock were expected at least a sennight later. When a letter from Lord Dustin arrived reporting that a Lannister retinue had landed at Barrowton, everyone was quite surprised.

Arya couldn’t even remember the last time a delegation from Casterly Rock had graced Winterfell, which meant it had been at least half a century, if not more - probably since the Ironborn had attacked the Stony Shore the last time.

Half an hour later, House Stark was at the yard just behind the looming east gate - the inner walls might have been a hundred feet, but the pair of crenellated bulwarks flanking the inner gate were even taller and bulkier.

Robb, Ice in its sheath held on his waist, Catelyn, and Myrcella were at the front, While Sansa, Arya, and Rickon stood just behind them, with the direwolves obediently sitting on the ground. Yet, Arya could feel all four were tense - their hackles were all raised. Of course, at least three dozen guardsmen were in the surroundings along with Ser Roderick and even more along the wall - it was as if a foe was coming, not a delegation of guests.

Soon enough, the procession entered - the golden lion on crimson fluttered proudly above them, and by the looks of it, the banner was made out of *silk*.

At the front, atop a buckskin steed, rode a portly, balding man with broad shoulders garbed in a fine red doublet and gilded cloak. Behind followed a score of mounted, disciplined men-at-arms clad in half-plate and red cloaks, flanking three gaudy wheelhouses.

The man leading the Lannisters quickly dismounted and bowed courteously. “Lord Robb Stark.”

“Your visit is unexpected…” Myrcella subtly leaned in to whisper something in his ear. “Ser Kevan Lannister.”

Robb’s reply was even and calm as the surface of the still pool of water before Winterfell’s Heart Tree.

“My brother, the Lord of Casterly Rock, sent me urgently as soon as he heard his granddaughter had wed on such short notice,” the man coughed, slightly abashed. “While he could not attend, Lord Tywin decided congratulations and gifts were not remiss and best given in person.”

Two girls left the carriage at the forefront. One looked the same age as Myrcella - but a tad plumper, with her hair being a shade of yellow so dark it was almost brown, and the other was younger - shorter than Arya but looked exactly like a younger version of the princess, albeit with a round face. There seemed to be apprehension in her green eyes, and she looked like a flighty doe - ready to run at the first sign of danger. Both were shivering from the cold despite being almost wrapped in thick, fur-lined cloaks.

Robb had already waved a servant with a platter of bread and salt.

“Welcome to Winterfell,” her brother inclined his head as Ser Kevan partook in the rite of hospitality and mentioned to the two maidens behind. “These are Lady Cerelle Lannett and my niece, Joy.”

No surname being mentioned… probably meant the girl was a bastard. Arya threw a closer look, and while Joy’s gown was almost pristine, it was not of as fine make as the ones the plump Cerelle wore.

By the time evening came, Arya had another lesson with Luwin and was already feeling dead tired - her body was sore from the training, and it was a struggle to keep her eyes open. It seemed that the two girls from the Westerlands were here to stay as Myrcella's new handmaidens as if there weren't enough tittering ladies running around Winterfell.

Cerelle followed Myrcella like a lost duckling, and Joy was still eyeing the direwolves as if they would leap and tear her apart.

Dinner was a humble feast in the Great Hall, where Ser Kevan Lannister presented the wedding gifts before Robb, part of which would be Myrcella's dowry for her personal use. Five bolts of the finest silk from Yi Ti, a pair of intricate golden bracelets depicting stags, direwolves, and lions playing in an open field, with rubies, emeralds, and sapphires encrusted in the place of the eyes. There was an addition of two bags of exotic Essosi spices, a pair of hunting hounds, three young peregrine falcons and a snowy eagle for hawking, along with an old, crotchety-looking hander for the birds.

That was far from everything, and it seemed that there was some credence to the rumours of Lannisters shitting gold - one heavy chest filled to the brim with dragons was presented to Robb and another four to Myrcella. The other ladies gaped in wonder, probably never seen so much gold in one place. Though the exact amount had not been mentioned, Arya felt it was nearly a hundred thousand dragons, if not more.

Regardless, none of the gifts seemed to excite Myrcella more than the four birds - it seemed that the princess had a love for hawking. It was rare here in the North; most falcons, hawks, and eagles that remained in the cold also seemed to hunt for messenger ravens.

Arya's lingering doubt that Joy was born on the wrong side of the blanket was quickly confirmed - the Lady of Winterfell had placed the young girl at the very edge of the table after even Lena and Lysara, the daughters of the clan chieftains who were technically not proper nobility.

Dinner was quick to end, and with a yawn, Arya headed back to her quarters together with Nymeria, mind already drifting to her warm feathered bed.

As she was climbing the stairway in the Great Keep, she heard some hushed whispers and took one of the unused hallways with the empty rooms. Peeking cautiously around the corner, Arya saw Cerelle and Joy being dragged by Myrcella into one of the empty bedchambers.

Curiously, Arya approached as quietly as possible and planted her ear on the door to hear the muffled words clearer. Nymeria curiously followed, her paws producing no sound even over the stony floor of the hallway.

“-you work for me now,” Myrcella’s usual melodic was so cold Arya shivered.

“But princess, we’re just to be simple ladies-in-waiting–”

“Come now, don’t play such a game with me, *Cerelle*. My grandfather wouldn’t have sent either of you if there wasn’t something to benefit him. Perhaps he wanted someone keeping an eye on me, and if he could gain a gleam to Winterfell’s happenings, it would be two birds with one arrow. Isn’t that right, Joy?”

“...Yes,” the reply was so faint that Arya almost missed it.

“From now on, you either report to *me,* and any word that goes towards my grandfather would have to be approved by me, or when the time comes, you can forget about any comfort or a good marriage.”

“But-”

“What could you do, Cerelle?” Myrcella’s voice turned sardonic. “I’m the daughter of the king and the next Lady of Winterfell, while you’re just a nobody from a small house and a bastard daughter begotten on some commoner by a fourth son-”

With a gulp, Arya slinked away from the door and almost ran towards the staircase, followed by her direwolf, mind spinning from what she still heard. But the youngest Stark daughter was too tired to think about what she had just heard.

Two minutes later, Arya was already in her room, and the sight of the bed made her forget everything.

25th Day of the 8th Moon

On the morrow, Arya wondered if last evening had been some sort of dream or if it truly happened, yet Cerelle and Joy looked quite unsettled in the Great Hall when they were breaking their fast - far more than yesterday.

It never even occurred to her that the two blonde noblewomen were sent here as spies. The thought alone that someone wanted to spy on House Stark angered Arya. Yet Myrcella had caught on to the possibility immediately and not only confronted but possibly turned them over. The Realm's Delight was not only a pretty face to look at, but it seemed there were sharp claws underneath the veneer of kindness, silk, and gold.

Any plans for training were forgotten when Robb and Myrcella agreed to go out hawking with Ser Kevan. Most of the ladies-in-waiting did not seem interested in joining, but Arya relished the chance to go out riding if nothing else.

Concern and vexation warred on Kevan's face as their party watched the iron portcullis at the Hunter's Gate winched upwards. "Must you come with us, niece?"

"Don't try to dissuade me, uncle," Myrcella sniffed. "I'm pregnant, not ill or a cripple."

That seemingly silenced the older Lannister, but Arya could see that Robb still hovered closely to his wife out of worry or something else. That didn't stop her brother from speaking hushedly with the Lannister knight as they passed underneath the gatehouse, over the drawbridge and through the outer wall.

Arya could try to argue that her good-sister was prone to vomiting every now and then, and that did suspiciously seem like an annoying ailment, but she remained quiet. Neither of the pregnant ladies had gone round yet, but Catelyn and Myrcella had a certain glow to them.

The sky was azure from west to east; only a single cloud could be seen far to the north. Pleasant coolness lingered in the air - it was not noon yet, and the sun hadn't had the chance to warm up the forest. The party was not too large - a dozen guardsmen accompanied them, along with Nymeria and Grey Wind, who were already running around the surrounding trees, inspecting everything curiously. This was the first time her direwolf had left Winterfell.

Lyra Mormont was riding along, garbed in leathers, with a dagger on her belt and a bow on her back. Out of Myrcella's retinue, Lena Harclay followed her as usual, and even Serena Umber decided to join.

As they crossed the small field separating the curtain walls from the wolfswood, Arya nudged her spotted gelding and made her way to Theon, who had his bow and quiver of broadheads ready. “You won’t try hawking?”

"I'd rather hunt a deer," the Greyjoy said, shaking his head and palming his bow.

Arya wondered if she would be allowed to hunt like her brothers once she became a good enough archer. Yet another question had been nagging her far more persistently since yesterday. “Do you know why Winterfell has no hawks and falcons?”

Theon just shrugged his shoulders lazily, “How would I know?”

“Lady Arya,” one of the guardsmen with brown hair streaked with grey, Ardo, chimed in. “All the birds of prey in the castle perished during Robert’s Rebellion. That winter grew so cold stones cracked open at its worst. Even the maester’s ravens were not untouched - only a handful had survived. By the time Lord Stark returned from the war, old Hargon, the falconer, had died from the chill, too.”

Well, that definitely explained things. Winter was inevitable - a harsh truth heralded by the words of House Stark. Yet, all Arya had seen was summer - the last time there had been winter, she had been nought but a toddler who could barely walk and had no memories of it.

It was hard to wrap her mind around the sheer concept of a cold so fierce that even stone would crack like an egg… After all, the summer suited her just fine with its pleasant warmth and soft cold.

Their group headed northward by the edges of the forest into a hilly area just by the edge of the Wolfwood.

“This is a good spot for hawking,” Ser Kevan decided as he looked around.

Myrcella had already slipped her left hand into a thick leather glove, and one of the hooded black-feathered falcons was brought over. The piece of leather covering the bird’s head was softly removed, and the princess swung her hand, letting the bird fly around.

Theon slunk into the treeline, bow in hand.

"What if the bird doesn't come back?" Arya found herself asking as she dismounted her horse and tied the reins to a nearby tree.

"It's been trained since young," it was the hoarse voice of the falconer, an old, wiry greybeard with an impressive mane of hair. "Any trained bird would return to the glove only because they know there is food there."

Surely enough, Arya followed the man’s gaze, and Myrcella was clutching a chunk of raw meat.

Kevan Lannister and Robb had taken a falcon each, leaving only the snow eagle.

“Want to try, m’lady?”

Under the old hawker’s gaze, Arya didn’t hesitate for long.

Before long, a thick leather glove was on her hand, and the majestic bird, apparently named Ava, was gently placed there, leather straps into her grip.

With trepidation, Arya pulled off the soft leather hood, revealing the eagle’s white head. The bird blinked a few times before shaking out its feathers and looking around. The eagle was slightly larger than the three falcons, and she could feel its weight on her arm, which was quickly tiring. But as Arya’s gaze met the eyes of the bird, she felt as if an odd understanding had taken place, as if a vague connection had formed between them.

Releasing the grip on the leather straps, Arya swung her hand with some struggle, and the eagle launched into the air.

She turned to the greybeard, who handed her a piece of raw meat. “Now what?”

“Well, some handlers might beat the bush and whistle to alert their hawks at signs of prey, but I don’t think that would be necessary.”

“Why?”

“Ava is very good - look, she already spotted something,” Arya followed to where the man was pointing, and surely enough, the eagle dived into some bushes.

A squirrel had been caught; surely enough, Ava was pecking flesh from her dead catch a few moments later. It was a brutal yet quite fascinating sight.

When the bird returned to the glove with a bloody beak, Arya decided she didn't dislike hawking. It did help that she found the eagle interesting. However, the bird was quickly hooded with a piece of leather again and tied to her perch.

It didn’t pass long for Arya to feel restless as the rest roasted a wild mallard Kevan had caught. She strode curiously to the edge of the forest, hesitantly followed by Lena once more.

“We shouldn’t stray too far from the group,” the younger girl said fearfully.

“Go back if you’re afraid.” Arya didn’t even bother to hide her scowl and continued into the forest - she was no longer a little girl to be babied around!

It was her first time without anyone hovering over her head and telling her what to do in the wolfswood, and everything looked interesting - from the small chirping creek that made its way like a snake to the old trees and bushes around the ground.

Only a few errant rays of sunlight passed through the canopy above. Many of the trees were old - the bases of their trunks were broader than Arya was tall. The sight stretched to seemingly no end - the forest was enormous in a way that made her feel small and insignificant.

“Something scared away the birds,” Lena quivered beside her, and Arya realised the wolfswood had grown silent.

She heard the rustle of leaves and whipped her head to the sight - only to see a handful of strangers cross the shallow stream nearby.

They dressed like neither huntsmen nor farmers; all had shabby, weather-worn clothes with crude weapons.

“Poor lasses,” it was the biggest man standing at the front with a bald head, and she could swear Lena whimpered. Arya didn’t like how they were looking at her. “What’s two of ye doing alone in the wolfswood?”

"We're not lost. My brother is here too," she mumbled as she took a step back. There were only five, but just as Arya stepped back, she turned her head only to see two more behind her. "He'll be here shortly."

The lie felt heavy on her tongue as the brutal realisation hit - Robb didn’t even know she had walked so deep into the forest…

“Is that a silver pin I see on your cloak?” A second man asked, gaunt and grey, with his stony gaze sinking over the direwolf head that clasped her cloak.

"Pretty," it was a woman's voice, albeit rough. Arya wouldn't even think her one - she was tall and lean, with the same hardy, weather-worn face as the rest, with a long black spear crowned by a rusty steel tip.

“Come here and let me take a look,” urged the big man. It was more of a… demand, no, a threat.

“That looks like a wolf’s head to me, Stiv,” a short woman with a face that reminded Arya of a frog spoke up.

"This one must be a Stark's daughter," said the gaunt man. His clothes were filthy and so shabby it looked like they would fall apart with some exertion - tears patched up here and there by green and brown, but everything had faded into dull grey. The cloak looked like it had been black once, and only the Night's Watch wore black cloaks…

“The pin, lass,” the big man held out his hand as Arya’s mind was frozen with indecision.

“I like their cloaks too,” the short woman eyed them greedily. “Might be a tad small, but it’s the finest make I’ve seen.”

Everything was so silent that her heart thundered like a drum, and her ears buzzed with an annoying thrum. Yet, the next moment, everything erupted into chaos.

Feathered shafts sank into the chest of two of the men, blood spurting everywhere. Growls, furious yells, and the sound of hoofbeats merged into a dull cacophony as everything around her moved, yet all Arya could do was watch the bald man slump on the mossy ground, the soil greedily drinking the crimson

blood. Even more corpses fell to the ground, and she felt as if she was surrounded once more by a ring of steel, blood, and death.

Even without looking back, she somehow knew Nymeria and Grey Wind had pounced on the two men behind her, taking both down.

“WINTERFELL!”

The sound of hooves grew thunderous, and all Arya could do was watch with morbid fascination as Robb charged at another man. The wildling brandished his axe and tried to avoid her brother, but Robb’s face was twisted in a furious snarl as Ice cleaved through the air. The dark, rippled steel glinted in the sun, slicing through the wooden shaft as if made of straw, and the savage’s wrist was cleanly cut along with his head, which rolled to the side, spraying blood everywhere as the body flopped down bonelessly.

Howls and grunts of pain were mixed with the sound of horses neighing and the battle cries. And the stench, oh the stench. It was terrible -the smell of piss, shit, and guts mixed with something metallic that just made her gag. Everything was wrong, just *wrong*. A lance skewered another savage, and Arya just closed her eyes and tried to tune out the sound and smell of death around.

Arya!

The cry felt distant and unimportant.

“Arya!” Suddenly, she became aware that someone was shaking her. Arya blinked, only to see the concerned face of Robb splattered with blood. “Are you hurt?”

It was as if the world returned with a slap. The small brook was swarming by the guardsmen who accompanied their party, and Theon, for once, had lost his smile and looked grim instead. Grey Wind stood over a corpse, blood dripping from his snout, while Nymeria had torn off an arm from the short woman and was carrying it around like some trophy.

“I’m fine,” she eked out, surprised by the hoarseness of her voice. “They wanted my direwolf pin.”

The concern on her brother's face morphed into relief and then into anger, and Arya realised that she would be in a lot of trouble when they returned to Winterfell…

While the ground was littered with corpses, one wildling was still standing. The tall woman was now surrounded by two horsemen with blades pointed at her; her spear was thrown on the ground nearby. "Mercy, m'lord!"

“A dead enemy is a thing of beauty,” Theon proclaimed, and Arya whipped her head to see the Greyjoy sit proudly near an old pine, bow ready with two arrows in his hand, as his dark eyes inspected the small clearing.

“Deserters of the Night’s Watch,” Robb uttered with cold fury as his gaze glared at the corpses with faded black cloaks. “Working with *wildlings*, of all things.”

“They must be either foolish or desperate to come so close to Winterfell in such numbers,” one of the newly recruited guardsmen, Lom, muttered.

“Shall we bury them?” Asked Quent.

“Hack off their heads and send them to Castle Black,” Robb decided. “Let the wolves feast on the rest.”

“Lord Robb,” it was Ardo, the old guardsman, as he pointed with his spear at the remaining woman. “What do we do with this one?”

“Give me my life, m’lord Stark,” she kneeled, “and I am yours.”

Robb’s eyes were as cold as ice. “What would I do with an oathbreaker?”

“I broke no oaths - the black crows don’t let women join them.”

“I say give her to the wolves,” Theon sauntered over. The woman’s eyes went to Grey Wind, who was now feasting over his ‘catch’. The woman shuddered, and even some of the guardsmen looked queasy. “Come now, she’s just a wildling.”

“Maybe this lot were looking for Mance Rayder,” Quent suggested.

“And they found him quickly,” Greyjoy barked out in laughter. “Might as well send the last one to the savage king, lest he feel lonely.”

The jape elicited a few laughs from the guardsmen but only made the woman look around fearfully. Robb raised his hand, and everyone immediately quieted.

“Do you have a name?” He asked her after slowly inspecting as if he had been trying to see through the savage woman.

“Osha, as it pleases the lord,” the words came out sour from her mouth, but she remained kneeling on the ground.

“You shall be questioned,” Robb decided. “Quent, bind her hands - we shall bring her to Winterfell with us!” The guardsman approached her cautiously as if she were a rabid dog. “Osha, for your sake, I hope you prove more forthcoming than Rayder was. You shall live or die by the truths you give us.”

Osha reared back in surprise as her hands were being tied, “The Mance is dead?!”

“Aye, Robb lopped off his head four moons ago.” Theon said gleefully. “He was slinking around in the dark around Winterfell like some vermin.”

Her brother looked at Arya at that moment, and she opened her mouth to explain-

“Don’t.” Robb interrupted with an icy glare. “I care not what foolishness possessed you to run off into the forest with the poor Harclay girl, but you certainly won’t be joining me again. Save your explanations for Mother.”

Arya finally remembered that Lena was with her, and her eyes wandered until she found her newly found shadow - she was busy vomiting the contents of her breakfast on the ground. The realisation sunk in - gods, she was going to be in so much trouble.

Author’s Endnote: Starring: Myrcella ‘*Even kittens have claws*’! the Princess, Arya ‘*I do whatever I want anyway*’! Stark and Robb ‘*What did I do to deserve a sister like this?*’ Stark.

I honestly didn’t expect my planned Arya chapter to flow so smoothly or get so long.