

## ARYA

The one-eared black tom arched his back and hissed at her.

Arya padded down the alley, balanced lightly on the balls of her bare feet, listening to the flutter of her heart, breathing slow deep breaths. *Quiet as a shadow*, she told herself, *light as a feather*. The tomcat watched her come, his eyes wary.

Catching cats was hard. Her hands were covered with half-healed scratches, and both knees were scabbed over where she had scraped them raw in tumbles. At first even the cook's huge fat kitchen cat had been able to elude her, but Syrio had kept her at it day and night. When she'd run to him with her hands bleeding, he had said, "So slow? Be quicker, girl. Your enemies will give you more than scratches." He had dabbed her wounds with Myrish fire, which burned so bad she had had to bite her lip to keep from screaming. Then he sent her out after more cats.

The Red Keep was *full* of cats: lazy old cats dozing in the sun, cold-eyed mousers twitching their tails, quick little kittens with claws like needles, ladies' cats all combed and trusting, ragged shadows prowling the midden heaps. One by one Arya had chased them down and snatched them up and brought them proudly to Syrio Forel... all but this one, this one-eared black devil of a tomcat. "That's the real king of this castle right there," one of the gold cloaks had told her. "Older than sin and twice as mean. One time, the king was feasting the queen's father, and that black bastard hopped up on the table and snatched a roast quail right out of Lord Tywin's fingers. Robert laughed so hard he like to burst. You stay away from that one, child."

He had run her halfway across the castle; twice around the Tower of the Hand, across the inner bailey, through the stables, down the serpentine steps, past the small kitchen and the pig yard and the barracks of the gold cloaks, along the base of the river wall and up more steps and back and forth over Traitor's Walk, and then down again and through a gate and

around a well and in and out of strange buildings until Arya didn't know where she was.

Now at last she had him. High walls pressed close on either side, and ahead was a blank windowless mass of stone. *Quiet as a shadow*, she repeated, sliding forward, *light as a feather*.

When she was three steps away from him, the tomcat bolted. Left, then right, he went; and right, then left, went Arya, cutting off his escape. He hissed again and tried to dart between her legs. *Quick as a snake*, she thought. Her hands closed around him. She hugged him to her chest, whirling and laughing aloud as his claws raked at the front of her leather jerkin. Ever so fast, she kissed him right between the eyes, and jerked her head back an instant before his claws would have found her face. The tomcat yowled and spit.

“What’s he doing to that cat?”

Startled, Arya dropped the cat and whirled toward the voice. The tom bounded off in the blink of an eye. At the end of the alley stood a girl with a mass of golden curls, dressed as pretty as a doll in blue satin. Beside her was a plump little blond boy with a prancing stag sewn in pearls across the front of his doublet and a miniature sword at his belt. *Princess Myrcella and Prince Tommen*, Arya thought. A septa as large as a draft horse hovered over them, and behind her two big men in crimson cloaks, Lannister house guards.

“What were you doing to that cat, boy?” Myrcella asked again, sternly. To her brother she said, “He’s a ragged boy, isn’t he? Look at him.” She giggled.

“A ragged dirty smelly boy,” Tommen agreed.

*They don’t know me*, Arya realized. *They don’t even know I’m a girl*. Small wonder; she was barefoot and dirty, her hair tangled from the long run through the castle, clad in a jerkin ripped by cat claws and brown roughspun pants hacked off above her scabby knees. You don’t wear skirts and silks when you’re catching cats. Quickly she lowered her head and dropped to one knee. Maybe they *wouldn’t* recognize her. If they did, she

would never hear the end of it. Septa Mordane would be mortified, and Sansa would never speak to her again from the shame.

The old fat septa moved forward. “Boy, how did you come here? You have no business in this part of the castle.”

“You can’t keep this sort out,” one of the red cloaks said. “Like trying to keep out rats.”

“Who do you belong to, boy?” the septa demanded. “Answer me. What’s wrong with you, are you mute?”

Arya’s voice caught in her throat. If she answered, Tommen and Myrcella would know her for certain.

“Godwyn, bring him here,” the septa said. The taller of the guardsmen started down the alley.

Panic gripped her throat like a giant’s hand. Arya could not have spoken if her life had hung on it. *Calm as still water*, she mouthed silently.

As Godwyn reached for her, Arya moved. *Quick as a snake*. She leaned to her left, letting his fingers brush her arm, spinning around him. *Smooth as summer silk*. By the time he got himself turned, she was sprinting down the alley. *Swift as a deer*. The septa was screeching at her. Arya slid between legs as thick and white as marble columns, bounded to her feet, bowled into Prince Tommen and hopped over him when he sat down hard and said “*Oof*,” spun away from the second guard, and then she was past them all, running full out.

She heard shouts, then pounding footsteps, closing behind her. She dropped and rolled. The red cloak went careening past her, stumbling. Arya sprang back to her feet. She saw a window above her, high and narrow, scarcely more than an arrow slit. Arya leapt, caught the sill, pulled herself up. She held her breath as she wriggled through. *Slippery as an eel*. Dropping to the floor in front of a startled scrubwoman, she hopped up, brushed the rushes off her clothes, and was off again, out the door and along a long hall, down a stair, across a hidden courtyard, around a corner and over a wall and through a low narrow window into a pitch-dark cellar. The sounds grew more and more distant behind her.

Arya was out of breath and quite thoroughly lost. She was in for it now if they had recognized her, but she didn't think they had. She'd moved too fast. *Swift as a deer.*

She hunkered down in the dark against a damp stone wall and listened for the pursuit, but the only sound was the beating of her own heart and a distant drip of water. *Quiet as a shadow*, she told herself. She wondered where she was. When they had first come to King's Landing, she used to have bad dreams about getting lost in the castle. Father said the Red Keep was smaller than Winterfell, but in her dreams it had been immense, an endless stone maze with walls that seemed to shift and change behind her. She would find herself wandering down gloomy halls past faded tapestries, descending endless circular stairs, darting through courtyards or over bridges, her shouts echoing unanswered. In some of the rooms the red stone walls would seem to drip blood, and nowhere could she find a window. Sometimes she would hear her father's voice, but always from a long way off, and no matter how hard she ran after it, it would grow fainter and fainter, until it faded to nothing and Arya was alone in the dark.

It was very dark right now, she realized. She hugged her bare knees tight against her chest and shivered. She would wait quietly and count to ten thousand. By then it would be safe for her to come creeping back out and find her way home.

By the time she had reached eighty-seven, the room had begun to lighten as her eyes adjusted to the blackness. Slowly the shapes around her took on form. Huge empty eyes stared at her hungrily through the gloom, and dimly she saw the jagged shadows of long teeth. She had lost the count. She closed her eyes and bit her lip and sent the fear away. When she looked again, the monsters would be gone. Would never have been. She pretended that Syrio was beside her in the dark, whispering in her ear. *Calm as still water*, she told herself. *Strong as a bear. Fierce as a wolverine.* She opened her eyes again.

The monsters were still there, but the fear was gone.

Arya got to her feet, moving warily. The heads were all around her. She touched one, curious, wondering if it was real. Her fingertips brushed a

massive jaw. It *felt* real enough. The bone was smooth beneath her hand, cold and hard to the touch. She ran her fingers down a tooth, black and sharp, a dagger made of darkness. It made her shiver.

“It’s dead,” she said aloud. “It’s just a skull, it can’t hurt me.” Yet somehow the monster seemed to know she was there. She could feel its empty eyes watching her through the gloom, and there was something in that dim, cavernous room that did not love her. She edged away from the skull and backed into a second, larger than the first. For an instant she could feel its teeth digging into her shoulder, as if it wanted a bite of her flesh. Arya whirled, felt leather catch and tear as a huge fang nipped at her jerkin, and then she was running. Another skull loomed ahead, the biggest monster of all, but Arya did not even slow. She leapt over a ridge of black teeth as tall as swords, dashed through hungry jaws, and threw herself against the door.

Her hands found a heavy iron ring set in the wood, and she yanked at it. The door resisted a moment, before it slowly began to swing inward, with a *creak* so loud Arya was certain it could be heard all through the city. She opened the door just far enough to slip through, into the hallway beyond.

If the room with the monsters had been dark, the hall was the blackest pit in the seven hells. *Calm as still water*, Arya told herself, but even when she gave her eyes a moment to adjust, there was nothing to see but the vague grey outline of the door she had come through. She wiggled her fingers in front of her face, felt the air move, saw nothing. She was blind. *A water dancer sees with all her senses*, she reminded herself. She closed her eyes and steadied her breathing one two three, drank in the quiet, reached out with her hands.

Her fingers brushed against rough unfinished stone to her left. She followed the wall, her hand skimming along the surface, taking small gliding steps through the darkness. *All halls lead somewhere. Where there is a way in, there is a way out. Fear cuts deeper than swords.* Arya would not be afraid. It seemed as if she had been walking a long ways when the wall ended abruptly and a draft of cold air blew past her cheek. Loose hairs stirred faintly against her skin.

From somewhere far below her, she heard noises. The scrape of boots, the distant sound of voices. A flickering light brushed the wall ever so faintly, and she saw that she stood at the top of a great black well, a shaft twenty feet across plunging deep into the earth. Huge stones had been set into the curving walls as steps, circling down and down, dark as the steps to hell that Old Nan used to tell them of. And *something* was coming up out of the darkness, out of the bowels of the earth...

Arya peered over the edge and felt the cold black breath on her face. Far below, she saw the light of a single torch, small as the flame of a candle. Two men, she made out. Their shadows writhed against the sides of the well, tall as giants. She could hear their voices, echoing up the shaft.

"...found one bastard," one said. "The rest will come soon. A day, two days, a fortnight..."

"And when he learns the truth, what will he do?" a second voice asked in the liquid accents of the Free Cities.

"The gods alone know," the first voice said. Arya could see a wisp of grey smoke drifting up off the torch, writhing like a snake as it rose. "The fools tried to kill his son, and what's worse, they made a mummer's farce of it. He's not a man to put that aside. I warn you, the wolf and lion will soon be at each other's throats, whether we will it or no."

"Too soon, too soon," the voice with the accent complained. "What good is war *now*? We are not ready. Delay."

"As well bid me stop time. Do you take me for a wizard?"

The other chuckled. "No less." Flames licked at the cold air. The tall shadows were almost on top of her. An instant later the man holding the torch climbed into her sight, his companion beside him. Arya crept back away from the well, dropped to her stomach, and flattened herself against the wall. She held her breath as the men reached the top of the steps.

"What would you have me do?" asked the torchbearer, a stout man in a leather half cape. Even in heavy boots, his feet seemed to glide soundlessly over the ground. A round scarred face and a stubble of dark beard showed under his steel cap, and he wore mail over boiled leather, and a dirk and

shortsword at his belt. It seemed to Arya there was something oddly familiar about him.

“If one Hand can die, why not a second?” replied the man with the accent and the forked yellow beard. “You have danced the dance before, my friend.” He was no one Arya had ever seen before, she was certain of it. Grossly fat, yet he seemed to walk lightly, carrying his weight on the balls of his feet as a water dancer might. His rings glimmered in the torchlight, red-gold and pale silver, crusted with rubies, sapphires, slitted yellow tiger eyes. Every finger wore a ring; some had two.

“Before is not now, and this Hand is not the other,” the scarred man said as they stepped out into the hall. *Still as stone*, Arya told herself, *quiet as a shadow*. Blinded by the blaze of their own torch, they did not see her pressed flat against the stone, only a few feet away.

“Perhaps so,” the forked beard replied, pausing to catch his breath after the long climb. “Nonetheless, we must have time. The princess is with child. The *khal* will not bestir himself until his son is born. You know how they are, these savages.”

The man with the torch pushed at something. Arya heard a deep rumbling. A huge slab of rock, red in the torchlight, slid down out of the ceiling with a resounding crash that almost made her cry out. Where the entry to the well had been was nothing but stone, solid and unbroken.

“If he does not bestir himself soon, it may be too late,” the stout man in the steel cap said. “This is no longer a game for two players, if ever it was. Stannis Baratheon and Lysa Arryn have fled beyond my reach, and the whispers say they are gathering swords around them. The Knight of Flowers writes Highgarden, urging his lord father to send his sister to court. The girl is a maid of fourteen, sweet and beautiful and tractable, and Lord Renly and Ser Loras intend that Robert should bed her, wed her, and make a new queen. Littlefinger... the gods only know what game Littlefinger is playing. Yet Lord Stark’s the one who troubles my sleep. He has the bastard, he has the book, and soon enough he’ll have the truth. And now his wife has abducted Tyrion Lannister, thanks to Littlefinger’s meddling. Lord Tywin will take that for an outrage, and Jaime has a queer affection for the

Imp. If the Lannisters move north, that will bring the Tullys in as well.  
*Delay, you say. Make haste, I reply.* Even the finest of jugglers cannot keep a hundred balls in the air forever.”

“You are more than a juggler, old friend. You are a true sorcerer. All I ask is that you work your magic awhile longer.” They started down the hall in the direction Arya had come, past the room with the monsters.

“What I can do, I will,” the one with the torch said softly. “I must have gold, and another fifty birds.”

She let them get a long way ahead, then went creeping after them.  
*Quiet as a shadow.*

“So many?” The voices were fainter as the light dwindled ahead of her. “The ones you need are hard to find... so young, to know their letters... perhaps older... not die so easy...”

“No. The younger are safer... treat them gently...”

“...if they kept their tongues...”

“...the risk...”

Long after their voices had faded away, Arya could still see the light of the torch, a smoking star that bid her follow. Twice it seemed to disappear, but she kept on straight, and both times she found herself at the top of steep, narrow stairs, the torch glimmering far below her. She hurried after it, down and down. Once she stumbled over a rock and fell against the wall, and her hand found raw earth supported by timbers, whereas before the tunnel had been dressed stone.

She must have crept after them for miles. Finally they were gone, but there was no place to go but forward. She found the wall again and followed, blind and lost, pretending that Nymeria was padding along beside her in the darkness. At the end she was knee-deep in foul-smelling water, wishing she could dance upon it as Syrio might have, and wondering if she’d ever see light again. It was full dark when finally Arya emerged into the night air.

She found herself standing at the mouth of a sewer where it emptied into the river. She stank so badly that she stripped right there, dropping her



soiled clothing on the riverbank as she dove into the deep black waters. She swam until she felt clean, and crawled out shivering. Some riders went past along the river road as Arya was washing her clothes, but if they saw the scrawny naked girl scrubbing her rags in the moonlight, they took no notice.

She was miles from the castle, but from anywhere in King's Landing you needed only to look up to see the Red Keep high on Aegon's Hill, so there was no danger of losing her way. Her clothes were almost dry by the time she reached the gatehouse. The portcullis was down and the gates barred, so she turned aside to a postern door. The gold cloaks who had the watch sneered when she told them to let her in. "Off with you," one said. "The kitchen scraps are gone, and we'll have no begging after dark."

"I'm not a beggar," she said. "I live here."

"I said, *off with you*. Do you need a clout on the ear to help your hearing?"

"I want to see my father."

The guards exchanged a glance. "I want to fuck the queen myself, for all the good it does me," the younger one said.

The older scowled. "Who's this father of yours, boy, the city ratcatcher?"

"The Hand of the King," Arya told him.

Both men laughed, but then the older one swung his fist at her, casually, as a man would swat a dog. Arya saw the blow coming even before it began. She danced back out of the way, untouched. "I'm not a boy," she spat at them. "I'm Arya Stark of Winterfell, and if you lay a hand on me my lord father will have both your heads on spikes. If you don't believe me, fetch Jory Cassel or Vayon Poole from the Tower of the Hand." She put her hands on her hips. "Now are you going to open the gate, or do you need a clout on the ear to help your hearing?"

Her father was alone in the solar when Harwin and Fat Tom marched her in, an oil lamp glowing softly at his elbow. He was bent over the biggest book Arya had ever seen, a great thick tome with cracked yellow pages of

crabbed script, bound between faded leather covers, but he closed it to listen to Harwin's report. His face was stern as he sent the men away with thanks.

"You realize I had half my guard out searching for you?" Eddard Stark said when they were alone. "Septa Mordane is beside herself with fear. She's in the sept praying for your safe return. Arya, you *know* you are never to go beyond the castle gates without my leave."

"I didn't go out the gates," she blurted. "Well, I didn't mean to. I was down in the dungeons, only they turned into this tunnel. It was all dark, and I didn't have a torch or a candle to see by, so I had to follow. I couldn't go back the way I came on account of the monsters. Father, they were talking about *killing* you! Not the monsters, the two men. They didn't see me, I was being still as stone and quiet as a shadow, but I heard them. They said you had a book and a bastard and if one Hand could die, why not a second? Is that the book? Jon's the bastard, I bet."

"Jon? Arya, what are you talking about? Who said this?"

"*They* did," she told him. "There was a fat one with rings and a forked yellow beard, and another in mail and a steel cap, and the fat one said they had to delay but the other one told him he couldn't keep juggling and the wolf and the lion were going to eat each other and it was a mummer's farce." She tried to remember the rest. She hadn't quite understood everything she'd heard, and now it was all mixed up in her head. "The fat one said the princess was with child. The one in the steel cap, he had the torch, he said that they had to hurry. I think he was a wizard."

"A wizard," said Ned, unsmiling. "Did he have a long white beard and tall pointed hat speckled with stars?"

"No! It wasn't like Old Nan's stories. He didn't *look* like a wizard, but the fat one said he was."

"I warn you, Arya, if you're spinning this thread of air—"

"No, I *told* you, it was in the dungeons, by the place with the secret wall. I was chasing cats, and well..." She screwed up her face. If she

admitted knocking over Prince Tommen, he would be *really* angry with her. "...well, I went in this window. That's where I found the monsters."

"Monsters *and* wizards," her father said. "It would seem you've had quite an adventure. These men you heard, you say they spoke of juggling and mummary?"

"Yes," Arya admitted, "only—"

"Arya, they were mummers," her father told her. "There must be a dozen troupes in King's Landing right now, come to make some coin off the tourney crowds. I'm not certain what these two were doing in the castle, but perhaps the king has asked for a show."

"No." She shook her head stubbornly. "They weren't—"

"You shouldn't be following people about and spying on them in any case. Nor do I cherish the notion of my daughter climbing in strange windows after stray cats. Look at you, sweetling. Your arms are covered with scratches. This has gone on long enough. Tell Syrio Forel that I want a word with him—"

He was interrupted by a short, sudden knock. "Lord Eddard, pardons," Desmond called out, opening the door a crack, "but there's a black brother here begging audience. He says the matter is urgent. I thought you would want to know."

"My door is always open to the Night's Watch," Father said.

Desmond ushered the man inside. He was stooped and ugly, with an unkempt beard and unwashed clothes, yet Father greeted him pleasantly and asked his name.

"Yoren, as it please m'lord. My pardons for the hour." He bowed to Arya. "And this must be your son. He has your look."

"I'm a *girl*," Arya said, exasperated. If the old man was down from the Wall, he must have come by way of Winterfell. "Do you know my brothers?" she asked excitedly. "Robb and Bran are at Winterfell, and Jon's on the Wall. Jon Snow, he's in the Night's Watch too, you must know him, he has a direwolf, a white one with red eyes. Is Jon a ranger yet? I'm Arya Stark." The old man in his smelly black clothes was looking at her oddly,

but Arya could not seem to stop talking. “When you ride back to the Wall, would you bring Jon a letter if I wrote one?” She wished Jon were here right now. *He’d* believe her about the dungeons and the fat man with the forked beard and the wizard in the steel cap.

“My daughter often forgets her courtesies,” Eddard Stark said with a faint smile that softened his words. “I beg your forgiveness, Yoren. Did my brother Benjen send you?”

“No one *sent* me, m’lord, saving old Mormont. I’m here to find men for the Wall, and when Robert next holds court, I’ll bend the knee and cry our need, see if the king and his Hand have some scum in the dungeons they’d be well rid of. You might say as Benjen Stark is why we’re talking, though. His blood ran black. Made him my brother as much as yours. It’s for his sake I’m come. Rode hard, I did, near killed my horse the way I drove her, but I left the others well behind.”

“The others?”

Yoren spat. “Sellswords and freeriders and like trash. That inn was full o’ them, and I saw them take the scent. The scent of blood or the scent of gold, they smell the same in the end. Not all o’ them made for King’s Landing, either. Some went galloping for Casterly Rock, and the Rock lies closer. Lord Tywin will have gotten the word by now, you can count on it.”

Father frowned. “What word is this?”

Yoren eyed Arya. “One best spoken in private, m’lord, begging your pardons.”

“As you say. Desmond, see my daughter to her chambers.” He kissed her on the brow. “We’ll finish our talk on the morrow.”

Arya stood rooted to the spot. “Nothing bad’s happened to Jon, has it?” she asked Yoren. “Or Uncle Benjen?”

“Well, as to Stark, I can’t say. The Snow boy was well enough when I left the Wall. It’s not them as concerns me.”

Desmond took her hand. “Come along, milady. You heard your lord father.”

Arya had no choice but to go with him, wishing it had been Fat Tom. With Tom, she might have been able to linger at the door on some excuse and hear what Yoren was saying, but Desmond was too single-minded to trick. “How many guards does my father have?” she asked him as they descended to her bedchamber.

“Here at King’s Landing? Fifty.”

“You wouldn’t let anyone kill him, would you?” she asked.

Desmond laughed. “No fear on that count, little lady. Lord Eddard’s guarded night and day. He’ll come to no harm.”

“The Lannisters have more than fifty men,” Arya pointed out.

“So they do, but every northerner is worth ten of these southron swords, so you can sleep easy.”

“What if a wizard was sent to kill him?”

“Well, as to that,” Desmond replied, drawing his longsword, “wizards die the same as other men, once you cut their heads off.”