

ARYA

The scent of hot bread drifting from the shops along the Street of Flour was sweeter than any perfume Arya had ever smelled. She took a deep breath and stepped closer to the pigeon. It was a plump one, speckled brown, busily pecking at a crust that had fallen between two cobblestones, but when Arya's shadow touched it, it took to the air.

Her stick sword whistled out and caught it two feet off the ground, and it went down in a flurry of brown feathers. She was on it in the blink of an eye, grabbing a wing as the pigeon flapped and fluttered. It pecked at her hand. She grabbed its neck and twisted until she felt the bone snap.

Compared with catching cats, pigeons were *easy*.

A passing septon was looking at her askance. "Here's the best place to find pigeon," Arya told him as she brushed herself off and picked up her fallen stick sword. "They come for the crumbs." He hurried away.

She tied the pigeon to her belt and started down the street. A man was pushing a load of tarts by on a two-wheeled cart; the smells sang of blueberries and lemons and apricots. Her stomach made a hollow rumbling noise. "Could I have one?" she heard herself say. "A lemon, or... or any kind."

The pushcart man looked her up and down. Plainly he did not like what he saw. "Three coppers."

Arya tapped her wooden sword against the side of her boot. "I'll trade you a fat pigeon," she said.

"The Others take your pigeon," the pushcart man said.

The tarts were still warm from the oven. The smells were making her mouth water, but she did not have three coppers... or one. She gave the pushcart man a look, remembering what Syrio had told her about *seeing*. He was short, with a little round belly, and when he moved he seemed to favor his left leg a little. She was just thinking that if she snatched a tart and ran he would never be able to catch her when he said, "You be keepin' your

filthy hands off. The gold cloaks know how to deal with thieving little gutter rats, that they do.”

Arya glanced warily behind her. Two of the City Watch were standing at the mouth of an alley. Their cloaks hung almost to the ground, the heavy wool dyed a rich gold; their mail and boots and gloves were black. One wore a longsword at his hip, the other an iron cudgel. With a last wistful glance at the tarts, Arya edged back from the cart and hurried off. The gold cloaks had not been paying her any special attention, but the sight of them tied her stomach in knots. Arya had been staying as far from the castle as she could get, yet even from a distance she could see the heads rotting atop the high red walls. Flocks of crows squabbled noisily over each head, thick as flies. The talk in Flea Bottom was that the gold cloaks had thrown in with the Lannisters, their commander raised to a lord, with lands on the Trident and a seat on the king’s council.

She had also heard other things, scary things, things that made no sense to her. Some said her father had murdered King Robert and been slain in turn by Lord Renly. Others insisted that *Renly* had killed the king in a drunken quarrel between brothers. Why else should he have fled in the night like a common thief? One story said the king had been killed by a boar while hunting, another that he’d died *eating* a boar, stuffing himself so full that he’d ruptured at the table. No, the king had died at table, others said, but only because Varys the Spider poisoned him. No, it had been the *queen* who poisoned him. No, he had died of a pox. No, he had choked on a fish bone.

One thing all the stories agreed on: King Robert was dead. The bells in the seven towers of the Great Sept of Baelor had tolled for a day and a night, the thunder of their grief rolling across the city in a bronze tide. They only rang the bells like that for the death of a king, a tanner’s boy told Arya.

All she wanted was to go home, but leaving King’s Landing was not so easy as she had hoped. Talk of war was on every lip, and gold cloaks were as thick on the city walls as fleas on... well, her, for one. She had been sleeping in Flea Bottom, on rooftops and in stables, wherever she could find

a place to lie down, and it hadn't taken her long to learn that the district was well named.

Every day since her escape from the Red Keep, Arya had visited each of the seven city gates in turn. The Dragon Gate, the Lion Gate, and the Old Gate were closed and barred. The Mud Gate and the Gate of the Gods were open, but only to those who wanted to enter the city; the guards let no one out. Those who were allowed to leave left by the King's Gate or the Iron Gate, but Lannister men-at-arms in crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms manned the guard posts there. Spying down from the roof of an inn by the King's Gate, Arya saw them searching wagons and carriages, forcing riders to open their saddlebags, and questioning everyone who tried to pass on foot.

Sometimes she thought about swimming the river, but the Blackwater Rush was wide and deep, and everyone agreed that its currents were wicked and treacherous. She had no coin to pay a ferryman or take passage on a ship.

Her lord father had taught her never to steal, but it was growing harder to remember why. If she did not get out soon, she would have to take her chances with the gold cloaks. She hadn't gone hungry much since she learned to knock down birds with her stick sword, but she feared so much pigeon was making her sick. A couple she'd eaten raw, before she found Flea Bottom.

In the Bottom there were pot-shops along the alleys where huge tubs of stew had been simmering for years, and you could trade half your bird for a heel of yesterday's bread and a "bowl o' brown," and they'd even stick the other half in the fire and crisp it up for you, so long as you plucked the feathers yourself. Arya would have given anything for a cup of milk and a lemon cake, but the brown wasn't so bad. It usually had barley in it, and chunks of carrot and onion and turnip, and sometimes even apple, with a film of grease swimming on top. Mostly she tried not to think about the meat. Once she had gotten a piece of fish.

The only thing was, the pot-shops were never empty, and even as she bolted down her food, Arya could feel them watching. Some of them stared

at her boots or her cloak, and she knew what they were thinking. With others, she could almost feel their eyes crawling under her leathers; she *didn't* know what they were thinking, and that scared her even more. A couple times, she was followed out into the alleys and chased, but so far no one had been able to catch her.

The silver bracelet she'd hoped to sell had been stolen her first night out of the castle, along with her bundle of good clothes, snatched while she slept in a burnt-out house off Pig Alley. All they left her was the cloak she had been huddled in, the leathers on her back, her wooden practice sword... and Needle. She'd been lying on top of Needle, or else it would have been gone too; it was worth more than all the rest together. Since then Arya had taken to walking around with her cloak draped over her right arm, to conceal the blade at her hip. The wooden sword she carried in her left hand, out where everybody could see it, to scare off robbers, but there were men in the pot-shops who wouldn't have been scared off if she'd had a battle-axe. It was enough to make her lose her taste for pigeon and stale bread. Often as not, she went to bed hungry rather than risk the stares.

Once she was outside the city, she would find berries to pick, or orchards she might raid for apples and cherries. Arya remembered seeing some from the kingsroad on the journey south. And she could dig for roots in the forest, even run down some rabbits. In the city, the only things to run down were rats and cats and scrawny dogs. The potshops would give you a fistful of coppers for a litter of pups, she'd heard, but she didn't like to think about that.

Down below the Street of Flour was a maze of twisting alleys and cross streets. Arya scrambled through the crowds, trying to put distance between her and the gold cloaks. She had learned to keep to the center of the street. Sometimes she had to dodge wagons and horses, but at least you could see them coming. If you walked near the buildings, people grabbed you. In some alleys you couldn't help but brush against the walls; the buildings leaned in so close they almost met.

A whooping gang of small children went running past, chasing a rolling hoop. Arya stared at them with resentment, remembering the times she'd

played at hoops with Bran and Jon and their baby brother Rickon. She wondered how big Rickon had grown, and whether Bran was sad. She would have given anything if Jon had been here to call her “little sister” and muss her hair. Not that it needed mussing. She’d seen her reflection in puddles, and she didn’t think hair got any more mussed than hers.

She had tried talking to the children she saw in the street, hoping to make a friend who would give her a place to sleep, but she must have talked wrong or something. The little ones only looked at her with quick, wary eyes and ran away if she came too close. Their big brothers and sisters asked questions Arya couldn’t answer, called her names, and tried to steal from her. Only yesterday, a scrawny barefoot girl twice her age had knocked her down and tried to pull the boots off her feet, but Arya gave her a *crack* on her ear with her stick sword that sent her off sobbing and bleeding.

A gull wheeled overhead as she made her way down the hill toward Flea Bottom. Arya glanced at it thoughtfully, but it was well beyond the reach of her stick. It made her think of the sea. Maybe *that* was the way out. Old Nan used to tell stories of boys who stowed away on trading galleys and sailed off into all kinds of adventures. Maybe Arya could do that too. She decided to visit the riverfront. It was on the way to the Mud Gate anyway, and she hadn’t checked that one today.

The wharfs were oddly quiet when Arya got there. She spied another pair of gold cloaks, walking side by side through the fish market, but they never so much as looked at her. Half the stalls were empty, and it seemed to her that there were fewer ships at dock than she remembered. Out on the Blackwater, three of the king’s war galleys moved in formation, gold-painted hulls splitting the water as their oars rose and fell. Arya watched them for a bit, then began to make her way along the river.

When she saw the guardsmen on the third pier, in grey woolen cloaks trimmed with white satin, her heart almost stopped in her chest. The sight of Winterfell’s colors brought tears to her eyes. Behind them, a sleek three-banked trading galley rocked at her moorings. Arya could not read the name painted on the hull; the words were strange, Myrish, Braavosi, perhaps even

High Valyrian. She grabbed a passing longshoreman by the sleeve. "Please," she said, "what ship is this?"

"She's the *Wind Witch*, out of Myr," the man said.

"She's *still here*," Arya blurted. The longshoreman gave her a queer look, shrugged, and walked away. Arya ran toward the pier. The *Wind Witch* was the ship Father had hired to take her home... still waiting! She'd imagined it had sailed ages ago.

Two of the guardsmen were dicing together while the third walked rounds, his hand on the pommel of his sword. Ashamed to let them see her crying like a baby, she stopped to rub at her eyes. Her eyes her eyes her eyes, why did...

Look with your eyes, she heard Syrio whisper.

Arya looked. She knew all of her father's men. The three in the grey cloaks were strangers. "You," the one walking rounds called out. "What do you want here, boy?" The other two looked up from their dice.

It was all Arya could do not to bolt and run, but she knew that if she did, they would be after her at once. She made herself walk closer. They were looking for a girl, but he thought she was a boy. She'd *be* a boy, then. "Want to buy a pigeon?" She showed him the dead bird.

"Get out of here," the guardsman said.

Arya did as he told her. She did not have to pretend to be frightened. Behind her, the men went back to their dice.

She could not have said how she got back to Flea Bottom, but she was breathing hard by the time she reached the narrow crooked unpaved streets between the hills. The Bottom had a stench to it, a stink of pigsties and stables and tanner's sheds, mixed in with the sour smell of winesinks and cheap whorehouses. Arya wound her way through the maze dully. It was not until she caught a whiff of bubbling brown coming through a pot-shop door that she realized her pigeon was gone. It must have slipped from her belt as she ran, or someone had stolen it and she'd never noticed. For a moment she wanted to cry again. She'd have to walk all the way back to the Street of Flour to find another one that plump.

Far across the city, bells began to ring.

Arya glanced up, listening, wondering what the ringing meant this time.

“What’s this now?” a fat man called from the pot-shop.

“The bells again, gods ha’ mercy,” wailed an old woman.

A red-haired whore in a wisp of painted silk pushed open a second-story window. “Is it the boy king that’s died now?” she shouted down, leaning out over the street. “Ah, that’s a boy for you, they never last long.” As she laughed, a naked man slid his arms around her from behind, biting her neck and rubbing the heavy white breasts that hung loose beneath her shift.

“Stupid slut,” the fat man shouted up. “The king’s not dead, that’s only summoning bells. One tower tolling. When the king dies, they ring every bell in the city.”

“Here, quit your biting, or I’ll ring *your* bells,” the woman in the window said to the man behind her, pushing him off with an elbow. “So who is it died, if not the king?”

“It’s a summoning,” the fat man repeated.

Two boys close to Arya’s age scampered past, splashing through a puddle. The old woman cursed them, but they kept right on going. Other people were moving too, heading up the hill to see what the noise was about. Arya ran after the slower boy. “Where you going?” she shouted when she was right behind him. “What’s happening?”

He glanced back without slowing. “The gold cloaks is carryin’ him to the sept.”

“Who?” she yelled, running hard.

“The *Hand*! They’ll be taking his head off, Buu says.”

A passing wagon had left a deep rut in the street. The boy leapt over, but Arya never saw it. She tripped and fell, face first, scraping her knee open on a stone and smashing her fingers when her hands hit the hard-packed earth. Needle tangled between her legs. She sobbed as she struggled to her knees. The thumb of her left hand was covered with blood. When she

sucked on it, she saw that half the thumbnail was gone, ripped off in her fall. Her hands throbbed, and her knee was all bloody too.

“*Make way!*” someone shouted from the cross street. “*Make way for my lords of Redwyne!*” It was all Arya could do to get out of the road before they ran her down, four guardsmen on huge horses, pounding past at a gallop. They wore checked cloaks, blue-and-burgundy. Behind them, two young lordlings rode side by side on a pair of chestnut mares alike as peas in a pod. Arya had seen them in the bailey a hundred times; the Redwyne twins, Ser Horas and Ser Hobber, homely youths with orange hair and square, freckled faces. Sansa and Jeyne Poole used to call them Ser Horror and Ser Slobber, and giggle whenever they caught sight of them. They did not look funny now.

Everyone was moving in the same direction, all in a hurry to see what the ringing was all about. The bells seemed louder now, clanging, calling. Arya joined the stream of people. Her thumb hurt so bad where the nail had broken that it was all she could do not to cry. She bit her lip as she limped along, listening to the excited voices around her.

“—the King’s Hand, Lord Stark. They’re carrying him up to Baelor’s Sept.”

“I heard he was dead.”

“Soon enough, soon enough. Here, I got me a silver stag says they lop his head off.”

“Past time, the traitor.” The man spat.

Arya struggled to find a voice. “He *never*—” she started, but she was only a child and they talked right over her.

“*Fool!* They ain’t neither going to lop him. Since when do they knick traitors on the steps of the Great Sept?”

“Well, they don’t mean to anoint him no knight. I heard it was Stark killed old King Robert. Slit his throat in the woods, and when they found him, he stood there cool as you please and said it was some old boar did for His Grace.”

“Ah, that’s not true, it was his own brother did him, that Renly, him with his gold antlers.”

“You shut your lying mouth, woman. You don’t know what you’re saying, his lordship’s a fine true man.”

By the time they reached the Street of the Sisters, they were packed in shoulder to shoulder. Arya let the human current carry her along, up to the top of Visenya’s Hill. The white marble plaza was a solid mass of people, all yammering excitedly at each other and straining to get closer to the Great Sept of Baelor. The bells were very loud here.

Arya squirmed through the press, ducking between the legs of horses and clutching tight to her sword stick. From the middle of the crowd, all she could see were arms and legs and stomachs, and the seven slender towers of the sept looming overhead. She spotted a wood wagon and thought to climb up on the back where she might be able to see, but others had the same idea. The teamster cursed at them and drove them off with a crack of his whip.

Arya grew frantic. Forcing her way to the front of the crowd, she was shoved up against the stone of a plinth. She looked up at Baelor the Blessed, the septon king. Sliding her stick sword through her belt, Arya began to climb. Her broken thumbnail left smears of blood on the painted marble, but she made it up, and wedged herself in between the king’s feet.

That was when she saw her father.

Lord Eddard stood on the High Septon’s pulpit outside the doors of the sept, supported between two of the gold cloaks. He was dressed in a rich grey velvet doublet with a white wolf sewn on the front in beads, and a grey wool cloak trimmed with fur, but he was thinner than Arya had ever seen him, his long face drawn with pain. He was not standing so much as being held up; the cast over his broken leg was grey and rotten.

The High Septon himself stood behind him, a squat man, grey with age and ponderously fat, wearing long white robes and an immense crown of spun gold and crystal that wreathed his head with rainbows whenever he moved.

Clustered around the doors of the sept, in front of the raised marble pulpit, were a knot of knights and high lords. Joffrey was prominent among them, his raiment all crimson, silk and satin patterned with prancing stags and roaring lions, a gold crown on his head. His queen mother stood beside him in a black mourning gown slashed with crimson, a veil of black diamonds in her hair. Arya recognized the Hound, wearing a snowy white cloak over his dark grey armor, with four of the Kingsguard around him. She saw Varys the eunuch gliding among the lords in soft slippers and a patterned damask robe, and she thought the short man with the silvery cape and pointed beard might be the one who had once fought a duel for Mother.

And there in their midst was Sansa, dressed in sky-blue silk, with her long auburn hair washed and curled and silver bracelets on her wrists. Arya scowled, wondering what her sister was doing here, why she looked so happy.

A long line of gold-cloaked spearmen held back the crowd, commanded by a stout man in elaborate armor, all black lacquer and gold filigree. His cloak had the metallic shimmer of true cloth-of-gold.

When the bell ceased to toll, a quiet slowly settled across the great plaza, and her father lifted his head and began to speak, his voice so thin and weak she could scarcely make him out. People behind her began to shout out, “*What?*” and “*Louder!*” The man in the black-and-gold armor stepped up behind Father and prodded him sharply. *You leave him alone!* Arya wanted to shout, but she knew no one would listen. She chewed her lip.

Her father raised his voice and began again. “I am Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Hand of the King,” he said more loudly, his voice carrying across the plaza, “and I come before you to confess my treason in the sight of gods and men.”

“*No,*” Arya whimpered. Below her, the crowd began to scream and shout. Taunts and obscenities filled the air. Sansa had hidden her face in her hands.

Her father raised his voice still higher, straining to be heard. “I betrayed the faith of my king and the trust of my friend, Robert,” he shouted. “I

swore to defend and protect his children, yet before his blood was cold, I plotted to depose and murder his son and seize the throne for myself. Let the High Septon and Baelor the Beloved and the Seven bear witness to the truth of what I say: Joffrey Baratheon is the one true heir to the Iron Throne, and by the grace of all the gods, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.”

A stone came sailing out of the crowd. Arya cried out as she saw her father hit. The gold cloaks kept him from falling. Blood ran down his face from a deep gash across his forehead. More stones followed. One struck the guard to Father’s left. Another went clanging off the breastplate of the knight in the black-and-gold armor. Two of the Kingsguard stepped in front of Joffrey and the queen, protecting them with their shields.

Her hand slid beneath her cloak and found Needle in its sheath. She tightened her fingers around the grip, squeezing as hard as she had ever squeezed anything. *Please, gods, keep him safe*, she prayed. *Don’t let them hurt my father.*

The High Septon knelt before Joffrey and his mother. “As we sin, so do we suffer,” he intoned, in a deep swelling voice much louder than Father’s. “This man has confessed his crimes in the sight of gods and men, here in this holy place.” Rainbows danced around his head as he lifted his hands in entreaty. “The gods are just, yet Blessed Baelor taught us that they are also merciful. What shall be done with this traitor, Your Grace?”

A thousand voices were screaming, but Arya never heard them. Prince Joffrey... no, *King* Joffrey... stepped out from behind the shields of his Kingsguard. “My mother bids me let Lord Eddard take the black, and Lady Sansa has begged mercy for her father.” He looked straight at Sansa then, and *smiled*, and for a moment Arya thought that the gods had heard her prayer, until Joffrey turned back to the crowd and said, “But they have the soft hearts of women. So long as I am your king, treason shall never go unpunished. Ser Ilyn, bring me his head!”

The crowd roared, and Arya felt the statue of Baelor rock as they surged against it. The High Septon clutched at the king’s cape, and Varys came rushing over waving his arms, and even the queen was saying

something to him, but Joffrey shook his head. Lords and knights moved aside as he stepped through, tall and fleshless, a skeleton in iron mail, the King's Justice. Dimly, as if from far off, Arya heard her sister scream. Sansa had fallen to her knees, sobbing hysterically. Ser Ilyn Payne climbed the steps of the pulpit.

Arya wriggled between Baelor's feet and threw herself into the crowd, drawing Needle. She landed on a man in a butcher's apron, knocking him to the ground. Immediately someone slammed into her back and she almost went down herself. Bodies closed in around her, stumbling and pushing, trampling on the poor butcher. Arya slashed at them with Needle.

High atop the pulpit, Ser Ilyn Payne gestured and the knight in black-and-gold gave a command. The gold cloaks flung Lord Eddard to the marble, with his head and chest out over the edge.

"Here, you!" an angry voice shouted at Arya, but she bowled past, shoving people aside, squirming between them, slamming into anyone in her way. A hand fumbled at her leg and she hacked at it, kicked at shins. A woman stumbled and Arya ran up her back, cutting to both sides, but it was no good, *no good*, there were too many people, no sooner did she make a hole than it closed again. Someone buffeted her aside. She could still hear Sansa screaming.

Ser Ilyn drew a two-handed greatsword from the scabbard on his back. As he lifted the blade above his head, sunlight seemed to ripple and dance down the dark metal, glinting off an edge sharper than any razor. *Ice*, she thought, *he has Ice!* Her tears streamed down her face, blinding her.

And then a hand shot out of the press and closed round her arm like a wolf trap, so hard that Needle went flying from her hand. Arya was wrenched off her feet. She would have fallen if he hadn't held her up, as easy as if she were a doll. A face pressed close to hers, long black hair and tangled beard and rotten teeth. "*Don't look!*" a thick voice snarled at her.

"I... I... I..." Arya sobbed.

The old man shook her so hard her teeth rattled. "Shut your mouth and close your eyes, *boy*." Dimly, as if from far away, she heard a... a *noise*... a soft sighing sound, as if a million people had let out their breath at once.

The old man's fingers dug into her arm, stiff as iron. "Look at me. Yes, that's the way of it, at *me*." Sour wine perfumed his breath. "Remember, *boy*?"

It was the smell that did it. Arya saw the matted greasy hair, the patched, dusty black cloak that covered his twisted shoulders, the hard black eyes squinting at her. And she remembered the black brother who had come to visit her father.

"Know me now, do you? There's a bright boy." He spat. "They're done here. You'll be coming with me, and you'll be keeping your mouth shut." When she started to reply, he shook her again, even harder. "*Shut*, I said."

The plaza was beginning to empty. The press dissolved around them as people drifted back to their lives. But Arya's life was gone. Numb, she trailed along beside... *Yoren, yes, his name is Yoren*. She did not recall him finding Needle, until he handed the sword back to her. "Hope you can use that, boy."

"I'm not—" she started.

He shoved her into a doorway, thrust dirty fingers through her hair, and gave it a twist, yanking her head back. "—not a smart *boy*, that what you mean to say?"

He had a knife in his other hand.

As the blade flashed toward her face, Arya threw herself backward, kicking wildly, wrenching her head from side to side, but he had her by the hair, so *strong*, she could feel her scalp tearing, and on her lips the salt taste of tears.