

## 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, coldeyed 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 torn 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.