

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."