

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. "Here 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