

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