

Father said the Red Keep was smaller than Winterfell, but in her dreams it had been immense, an endless stone maze with walls that seemed to shift and change behind her. She would find herself wandering down gloomy halls past faded tapestries, descending endless circular stairs, darting through courtyards or over bridges, her shouts echoing unanswered. In some of the rooms the red stone walls would seem to drip blood, and nowhere could she find a window. Sometimes she would hear her father's voice, but always from a long way off, and no matter how hard she ran after it, it would grow fainter and fainter, until it faded to nothing and Arya was alone in the dark.

It was very dark right now, she realized. She hugged her bare knees tight against her chest and shivered. She would wait quietly and count to ten thousand. By then it would be safe for her to come creeping back out and find her way home.

By the time she had reached eighty-seven, the room had begun to lighten as her eyes adjusted to the blackness. Slowly the shapes around her took on form. Huge empty eyes stared at her hungrily through the gloom, and dimly she saw the jagged shadows of long teeth. She had lost the count. She closed her eyes and bit her lip and sent the fear away. When she looked again, the monsters would be gone. Would never have been. She pretended that Syrio was beside her in the dark, whispering in her ear. Calm as still water, she told herself. Strong as a bear. Fierce as a wolverine. She opened her eyes again.

The monsters were still there, but the fear was gone.

Arya got to her feet, moving warily. The heads were all around her. She touched one, curious, wondering if it was real. Her fingertips brushed a massive jaw. It felt real enough. The bone was smooth beneath her hand, cold and hard to the touch. She ran her fingers down a tooth, black and sharp, a dagger made of darkness. It made her shiver.

"It's dead," she said aloud. "It's just a skull, it can't hurt me." Yet somehow the monster seemed to know she was there. She could feel its empty eyes watching her through the gloom, and there was something in that dim, cavernous room that did not love her. She edged away from the skull and backed into a second, larger than the first. For an instant she could feel its teeth digging into her shoulder, as if it wanted a bite of her flesh. Arya whirled, felt leather catch and tear as a huge fang nipped at her jerkin, and then she was running. Another skull loomed ahead, the biggest monster of all, but Arya did not even slow. She leapt over a ridge of black teeth as tall as swords, dashed through hungry jaws, and threw herself against the door.

Her hands found a heavy iron ring set in the wood, and she yanked at it. The door resisted a moment, before it slowly began to swing inward, with a creak so loud Arya was certain it could be heard all through the city. She opened the door just far enough to slip through, into the hallway beyond.

If the room with the monsters had been dark, the hall was the blackest pit in the seven hells. Calm as still water, Arya told herself, but even when she gave her eyes a moment to adjust, there was nothing to see but the vague grey outline of the door she had come through. She wiggled her fingers in front of her face, felt the air move, saw nothing. She was blind. A water dancer sees