

the night like a common thief? One story said the king had been killed by a boar while hunting, another that he'd died eating a boar, stuffing himself so full that he'd ruptured at the table. No, the king had died at table, others said, but only because Varys the Spider poisoned him. No, it had been the queen who poisoned him. No, he had died of a pox. No, he had choked on a fish bone.

One thing all the stories agreed on: King Robert was dead. The bells in the seven towers of the Great Sept of Baelor had tolled for a day and a night, the thunder of their grief rolling across the city in a bronze tide. They only rang the bells like that for the death of a king, a tanner's boy told Arya.

All she wanted was to go home, but leaving King's Landing was not so easy as she had hoped. Talk of war was on every lip, and gold cloaks were as thick on the city walls as fleas on... well, her, for one. She had been sleeping in Flea Bottom, on rooftops and in stables, wherever she could find a place to lie down, and it hadn't taken her long to learn that the district was well named.

Every day since her escape from the Red Keep, Arya had visited each of the seven city gates in turn. The Dragon Gate, the Lion Gate, and the Old Gate were closed and barred. The Mud Gate and the Gate of the Gods were open, but only to those who wanted to enter the city; the guards let no one out. Those who were allowed to leave left by the King's Gate or the Iron Gate, but Lannister men-at-arms in crimson cloaks and lion-crested helms manned the guard posts there. Spying down from the roof of an inn by the King's Gate, Arya saw them searching wagons and carriages, forcing riders to open their saddlebags, and questioning everyone who tried to pass on foot.

Sometimes she thought about swimming the river, but the Blackwater Rush was wide and deep, and everyone agreed that its currents were wicked and treacherous. She had no coin to pay a ferryman or take passage on a ship.

Her lord father had taught her never to steal, but it was growing harder to remember why. If she did not get out soon, she would have to take her chances with the gold cloaks. She hadn't gone hungry much since she learned to knock down birds with her stick sword, but she feared so much pigeon was making her sick. A couple she'd eaten raw, before she found Flea Bottom.

In the Bottom there were pot-shops along the alleys where huge tubs of stew had been simmering for years, and you could trade half your bird for a heel of yesterday's bread and a "bowl o' brown," and they'd even stick the other half in the fire and crisp it up for you, so long as you plucked the feathers yourself. Arya would have given anything for a cup of milk and a lemon cake, but the brown wasn't so bad. It usually had barley in it, and chunks of carrot and onion and turnip, and sometimes even apple, with a film of grease swimming on top. Mostly she tried not to think about the meat. Once she had gotten a piece of fish.

The only thing was, the pot-shops were never empty, and even as she bolted down her food, Arya could feel them watching. Some of them stared at her boots or her cloak, and she knew what they were thinking. With others, she could almost feel their eyes crawling under her leathers; she didn't know what they were thinking, and that scared her even more. A couple