

more than an hour to find the low narrow window that slanted down to the dungeon where the monsters waited.

She tossed her bundle through and doubled back to light her candle. That was chancy; the fire she'd remembered seeing had burnt down to embers, and she heard voices as she was blowing on the coals. Cupping her fingers around the flickering candle, she went out the window as they were coming in the door, without ever getting a glimpse of who it was.

This time the monsters did not frighten her. They seemed almost old friends. Arya held the candle over her head. With each step she took, the shadows moved against the walls, as if they were turning to watch her pass. "Dragons," she whispered. She slid Needle out from under her cloak. The slender blade seemed very small and the dragons very big, yet somehow Arya felt better with steel in her hand.

The long windowless hall beyond the door was as black as she remembered. She held Needle in her left hand, her sword hand, the candle in her right fist. Hot wax ran down across her knuckles. The entrance to the well had been to the left, so Arya went right. Part of her wanted to run, but she was afraid of snuffing out her candle. She heard the faint squeaking of rats and glimpsed a pair of tiny glowing eyes on the edge of the light, but rats did not scare her. Other things did. It would be so easy to hide here, as she had hidden from the wizard and the man with the forked beard. She could almost see the stableboy standing against the wall, his hands curled into claws with the blood still dripping from the deep gashes in his palms where Needle had cut him. He might be waiting to grab her as she passed. He would see her candle coming a long way off. Maybe she would be better off without the light...

Fear cuts deeper than swords, the quiet voice inside her whispered. Suddenly Arya remembered the crypts at Winterfell. They were a lot scarier than this place, she told herself. She'd been just a little girl the first time she saw them. Her brother Robb had taken them down, her and Sansa and baby Bran, who'd been no bigger than Rickon was now. They'd only had one candle between them, and Bran's eyes had gotten as big as saucers as he stared at the stone faces of the Kings of Winter, with their wolves at their feet and their iron swords across their laps.

Robb took them all the way down to the end, past Grandfather and Brandon and Lyanna, to show them their own tombs. Sansa kept looking at the stubby little candle, anxious that it might go out. Old Nan had told her there were spiders down here, and rats as big as dogs. Robb smiled when she said that. "There are worse things than spiders and rats," he whispered. "This is where the dead walk." That was when they heard the sound, low and deep and shivery. Baby Bran had clutched at Arya's hand.

When the spirit stepped out of the open tomb, pale white and moaning for blood, Sansa ran shrieking for the stairs, and Bran wrapped himself around Robb's leg, sobbing. Arya stood her ground and gave the spirit a punch. It was only Jon, covered with flour. "You stupid," she told him, "you scared the baby," but Jon and Robb just laughed and laughed, and pretty soon Bran and Arya were laughing too.

The memory made Arya smile, and after that the darkness held no more terrors for her. The stableboy was dead, she'd killed him, and if he jumped out at her she'd kill him again. She was