On The Road

by sunday5

Summary

Jaime has not lost his hand but he has lost his travelling partner Brienne and needs to replace her. This girl is no Lady or Knight of the Kingsguard, however. She's a commoner with secrets of her own; and meeting her is going to be the start of a lot of trouble for both of them.

Coarse language, extreme graphic violence, sex scenes.

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Chapter Notes

An overdue disclaimer. All characters and places referred to in this story are the creation and property of G.R.R. Martin, with the exceptions of the characters of the girl, Sooty, Brodrick, Callem, the poacher, outlaws, various common folk and the town of RedHollow, which are my own creations. I do not profit financially from this story in fact seeing as I write most of it when I'm meant to be working at my actual job it is directly contributing to my poverty. Cheers.

The man sat on the side of the road with his head down, long strands of greasy hair falling to cover his face. When the girl rode up to him he raised his head and squinted at her. She stopped her horse a safe distance from him and frowned.

'What are you doing here?' she asked. 'Do you need help?' Her eyes roamed around the bush behind them, she didn't want to be ambushed by outlaws. The man looked too tired to be much of a threat to her on his own. It was impossible to tell what colour his clothes had once been, they were now just road-colour, a dingy grey. Dark patches on his pants may have been dry blood. Again, it was hard to say, from where she sat on her horse. But she didn't move any nearer. She hadn't survived this long in the world by being too trusting.

'I do need some help, actually,' the man replied. His accent was well-bred, another mystery. He raised the hands he'd been holding in his lap. Metal glinted dully between his wrists. 'Could you... is there any way you could remove these handcuffs?'

The girl shook her head. 'I only have a bow and some arrows. A small knife. Nothing to break that with.'

The man slumped back against the ditch. 'Never mind,' he said, resigned, almost cheerfully. He raised his grime-encrusted face to the late slanting sun and closed his eyes.

The girl was intrigued. Despite his filthy appearance and the fact he was shackled, he didn't strike her as dangerous. She generally had an instinct for this sort of thing, and nothing was pinging her radar about this stranger. She nudged her horse a little closer to him, and the horse's shadow fell across his face. He opened his eyes. They were green, quite striking.

'Hey. I could maybe... take you to the nearest town or something. A blacksmith could get them off for you.' He stared at her and she wasn't sure what he was thinking, or even if he was in his right mind. 'Look, I don't care what your story is. The handcuffs and...' she gestured generally at his ragged clothes. 'Whatever. Your business. I'm going through the next town though, if you need a ride.'

The man smiled, and his face cracked into many lines. His teeth were surprisingly white against his dirty and sunburnt face. Scars ran across his nose, and they looked fairly recent. 'Where are you going after that?' he asked.

It wasn't the answer she was expecting, and she hesitated. 'I'm on my way to deliver some goods and
messages to KingsLanding. I pass through a few towns on the way, usually I stop for the night and -

The man cut her off mid-sentence, quite casually, as if he were used to cutting people off. He had a sort of natural arrogance that was at odds with his current condition. 'I have an offer for you. Take me to KingsLanding and I'll pay you 500 gold coins. And buy you a new horse. That one looks a bit done in.'

The girl was offended. 'What's wrong with my horse?'

He shrugged. 'Nothing, for a delivery person. Or a trader, or whatever you are. An ugly, slow beast, but good for carrying heavy loads.'

The girl opened her mouth to defend her horse's honour, but then closed it again. Sooty was rather slow. Not her fault, the mare was getting old. And she'd never been an attractive horse.

'What's the catch?' she asked instead.

'Ah,' said the man. 'There must be a catch.'

'For 500 gold coins? Nothing's that easy. Are you a fugitive? A criminal?'

'Hmm. You could say that. I was, but my former prison guard, or more accurately, my companion, has unfortunately...' he looked away, his face clouding over with regret. He swallowed and shook his head. 'Well, anyway. She's not accompanying me any more. So I'm in need of another assistant. As you can see I have no mode of transport, and my boots are fucked.'

The girl laughed a little before she could help herself, then stopped. She peered at him, unconvinced. 'I could ask a lot of questions about that story of yours, but... ' she said.

'But. You won't,' he replied.

'No.'

'Smart girl.'

'So what's this catch, again?'

'Oh yes. That. Well, I might just require you to use less obvious routes to the Capital. Ones that don't... go through all the nearest towns, for instance. Or run into any passing patrols. Or... anyone at all, really.'

She considered this. 'That's the catch? That I keep to the back roads and avoid towns? And other people? Is that all?'

'Pretty much.' He smiled up at the girl charmingly. How anyone could be charming sitting in a muddy ditch, covered in layers of muck and in chains, was beyond her, but somehow he managed it.

'I can camp rough,' she said. 'But I'm not going to be able to get those things off your wrists.'

'That's an inconvenience for me, I must say.'

'Like I said, if we hit the nearest town...'

'No towns. Towns are out. I'll just have to live with these cuffs a while longer.'
She grinned. 'They kind of suit you.'

'Do they? It's my general Up To No Good vibe, I imagine. Always been blessed with that. At least now I look the part.'

She nodded.

'So, do we have a deal?'

'How do I know you're good for it?'

'I guess you don't. I guess you're just going to have to trust me.'

The girl smiled. She didn't trust anyone, it was her one motto in life. *Trust no-one.* But he didn't have to know that.

'Alright then. We have a deal.'

'Excellent. I would shake on it but...' the man lifted up his hands, shrugged again.

'Let's start by getting you off this road,' the girl suggested. 'Before someone comes along who recognises you, Ser NoGood.' She jumped down off her horse, and reached over to grab the man's hands and haul him to his feet. He was quite a bit taller than her, and thin. 'Can you jump on a horse with those things on? Because I have to make up a lot of ground if I'm going to go the back way to KingsLanding and still be on time for my deliveries. It might be best if we travel right through the night to get some distance between you and... whoever it is you don't want catching up with you, and quite frankly, it looks like you're about to fall over.'

They rode double with the man sitting behind her, going off-road for the rest of the evening and on into the night. The girl recognised some landmarks from having travelled through here with her mother some time ago; the gnarled curve of an old white tree trunk, the particular angle of a lone branch. The trees grew closely together and the scrub was thick. She let her mount negotiate her way through the undergrowth. Finally the bush thinned out somewhat and grass grew underfoot. Steam rose from Sooty's back as the sun finally emerged below the horizon and lightened the sky to pinkish-grey. The girl stopped as soon as she could hear the rush of the river.

'We'll rest here', she said, sliding off the horse. Her voice croaked. She hadn't slept since... *when was it again?* She stood in the dawn light resting a hand on the horses' damp shoulder, staring at dust motes spinning slowly in the air in front of her. She felt a little dizzy. *How long should we sleep for? How many days will this add to my trip?*

'Are we going to eat, too?' said the the man, 'Only, I'm starving,'

'Yeah', was all the girl could manage to say. What had she got herself in for with this stray? He could be anyone. But 500 gold coins was a hard offer to turn down. She could retire from delivery work, for one. That is, presuming he came good on his promise.

'Jump down,' she instructed.

The man swung his right leg over Sooty's back and slipped off clumsily. Without his hands to balance he stumbled on landing and fell over. The girl watched as he sat up, looked as if he might try to get to his feet, but then changed his mind and just rested his cuffed hands on his knees. His wrists were thin, the tunic hung loose on his frame. It was impossible to tell what colour his hair was. She considered offering him a hand up, but it seemed too much effort. Besides, he looked quite content sitting there.
He glanced up at Sooty beside him. His eyes narrowed in the dusty light as he considered the animal. Sooty lay back her ears.

'Soooo... your horse doesn't seem very friendly. What does it do, bite?'

'Why don't you try something and see?' the girl said. She yawned. Her hood fell off as her face tipped up. When she talked there was a lag between her brain and her words. Sleep. Need.

'You look... rather nice in the daylight,' the man said, staring at her. The intensity of his gaze was disconcerting. He cocked his head, looked almost bemused. 'How old are you?' She regarded him dumbly. 'I'm Jaime by the way. And whom do I have the pleasure of travelling with?' He again seemed perfectly at ease, as if sitting on the ground in shackles, and talking to an uncommunicative delivery girl suffering sleep deprivation, was all quite normal.

'My name is not your concern,' the girl replied. 'I never give out my name to strangers.' She yawned again, ears popping. Conversation seemed way too difficult. 'We'll sleep for a while,' she said, her words running together slightly. Gods but I'm tired. She turned to Sooty. 'I'm sorry... you want to graze,' she mumbled, then gave up any pretence of being able to speak coherently.

'Grazing is all well and good,' Jaime said. 'Anything else on the menu though? Meat, maybe?'

'Later,' the girl said, irritated. This stray didn't seem to be able to keep his mouth shut. She was going to regret this deal, she just knew it. She took off Sooty's bridle, put on her overnight hobbles. The horse wandered a few steps and started picking the grass. The girl then must have unpacked her sleeping furs and lain down, but she didn't remember doing that, or anything else, for the next ten hours.

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Late afternoon sun on her face. The air already starting to chill. The girl rolled over and sat up too quickly, her head taking a disorienting second to catch up.

She felt for the knife in its holster strapped to her waist, out of habit, then looked over and was relieved to see Jaime still in the same spot, lying on his back. Sooty stood beside him with one hind hoof cocked on its toe, lip drooping. She lifted her head at the girl's movement and made a small whuffly sound.

'Hey you,' smiled the girl. 'Time to get our friend here up and go, I think.'

She got up, feeling worse than before she'd slept. Her whole body was heavy, slow. She shook her head to clear the fuzz, stretched her arms.

Evening already? How did that happen? Ugh.

'Come on,' she nudged the man with one foot. 'Up,'

He rubbed his face, stretched his elbows apart. His eyes cracked open and he peered at her. In the fading light under the mask of dirt, his skin looked pale. Thin scars criss-crossed not only his nose but ran across his cheeks. His eyebrows were straight and dark, the eyes beneath them that startling green. 'Thought you'd never wake up,' he said.

'I'm awake now.'

'Thank the gods. It was rather a boring day. I think I dropped off myself, the horse isn't much of a conversationalist, I hate to tell you. Can we eat?'

'We'll eat as we walk.' The girl gathered up her furs and tied them into a roll, which she hung off
Sooty's saddle. She pulled some bread out of a side pocket and handed half to the man. He turned it over hopefully.

'Is that it?'

'We can catch a fish for tonight.'

'I think I may die without some kind of meat product.'

'Well that will save me some trouble,' she muttered.

'If we could find a way of getting these handcuffs off, I'm a good shot with an arrow. We could have a rabbit in ten minutes.'

'Yeah I bet.' The girl finished packing, and they started off on foot downhill through the sparse trees towards the burble of the river, Sooty following.

'I just think we'd have a better chance of making it to KingsLanding if I could help out a bit. Without, you know. These on.' Jaime walked besides Sooty, the chain hanging from his handcuffs clanking lightly. 'They're rather restricting.'

'I'm rather liking them on you,' the girl said, mimicking his accent. In truth she found it reassuring he was still cuffed. She had no intentions of finding any way to get them off.

They walked through the evening and long after the light had gone. The girl thought sleeping all day would've given her the energy to keep going most of the next night, but that wasn't the case. She couldn't stop yawning and felt achy and dull. Plus travelling in pitch blackness meant they had to walk slowly or risk tripping over logs and slipping down ditches. Sometime after midnight she gave up.

'This is crap' she said, as yet another unseen shrub smacked her in the face. She stopped. 'I can't see shit.'

'I guess that's why we're not nocturnal,' Jaime remarked.

'Yeah.' She yawned, again. 'We'll stick to daytime travelling from here on in.'

She walked on ahead until she felt out a reasonably flat patch of ground, and crouching, lit a small fire with the fire-lighter and dried wood shavings she kept in the pouch on her belt. Then with the area illuminated, she unpacked the food from Sooty's saddle bags. Jaime stood and watched what she was doing without comment. She felt as though he was assessing her, which was an unnerving sensation. She unlocked the D-ring clip on the back of Sooty's harness that she tied drag poles to, and threw the excess loops next to the tree where they fell in a heap, the links clattering. 'I won't need them any more,' she explained. 'If we're not travelling by road, I can't drag stuff.'

'Makes sense.' Jaime inspected the ground for a moment, then lowered himself to a sitting position.

'I'm cooking some dinner in a minute, after I tend to the horse. Seeing as you can't really help, maybe just sit there and rest.'

'Thank you,' he replied. He sounded sarcastic, but the girl was unsure if she was reading too much into what was just his natural tone of voice. She said nothing. Instead she turned and unhooked Sooty's harness, then scrounged around for a brush in her backpack. The horse butted her with her head. 'Oy, quit it.' The girl pushed her away fondly. Sooty's coat was rough with dry sweat and she groomed away as much as she could. Sooty grunted and extended her upper lip in appreciation. 'Is
that good? Do you like that, huh?' The girl rubbed the big horse's neck and behind her ears, trying to find all the itchiest spots. Sooty's lip stretched out even more and waggled back and forth, making the girl chuckle. 'You funny,' she murmured. Tending to her horse, her constant companion, cheered her up and relaxed her.

'As much as I loathe to interrupt a touching moment,' Jaime said from behind, 'but any time you feel like cooking food...? I fear dying of hunger is a real possibility.'

The girl finished brushing her horse, then gestured for her to go. Sooty swished her tail and walked off between the trees, vanishing from sight. The girl knocked the brush on the heel of her boot to clean it, then chucked it back into her pack.

'How do you make it come back?' Jaime asked, intrigued.

'Who?'

'The horse.'

'She always comes back. She comes when I whistle. We're far enough in the bush here that no-one will see her.'

Taking the food bag from the saddle, she laid out some folded up packets of dried beans, strips of smoked dry meat, eggs, bread and two flasks, which on sniffing evidently didn't contain water but some kind of juice. Someone in the last town she'd stopped at had given her extra supplies in return for a favour she'd done them, delivering some contraband goods. She didn't drink alcohol, but this smelled a bit fermented. She considered her options, put some things back, then took out a pot and stood up.

'I'm going to get some water, for cooking. Do you think you'll survive 'til I get back?'

Jaime put both index fingers to his lips as if considering this seriously.

She walked off before he could answer. She carefully negotiated her way down the slippery bank to the river in the dark, scooped some water into the pot, re-filled her drinking flask, then headed back up.

'Why don't we try and catch some fresh meat?' Jaime wanted to know as she returned.

'Because we needed to make good time. And that means I didn't have time to hunt.'

'Can you... hunt?' he asked, a bit sceptically.

'I'm a delivery person, I live on the road,' she snapped. 'Of course I can hunt.'

Jaime raised his eyebrows. 'Here I thought you were a smuggler.'

She grinned. 'That too.'

'Multi-talented girl.' Again the tone of insolence.

She started cooking up the ingredients for their dinner. She used the beans, dried meat and vegetables, and added some salt and other seasonings. The smell rose up in the steam; she felt her stomach clench with hunger. As soon as the bubbling liquid had thickened up enough, she poured it out into two wooden bowls and took one over to Jaime, pausing to consider the cuffs and then placing the bowl into his cupped hands.
'Careful, it's hot.'

He blew on the surface and sipped. 'Mmmm.' He gulped down a mouthful. 'This is delicious.'

'Thank you,' she said, inexplicably pleased. *Although, why do I care if he likes my cooking?*

'What is in this?'

'Herbs, spices. Various... um, shit.'

'Well. It's good shit.'

She smiled. The food, and his apparent sincere appreciation of it, gave her a warm feeling inside. She didn't know why, and couldn't think about it any more at the moment, because, she realised, she was completely exhausted.

They finished off the pot of soup, shared her water flask, and then she took the dishes down to the river to rinse them. As she got back, Jaime was coming out from behind the tree.

'Had to take a piss,' he explained.

'Oh.' She paused. 'Do... do you need help to...?'

'No, I'm good. If I do though, I'll let you know.'

'Alright. Because if it's tricky I can... undo things. And... um. Not look,' she said, awkwardly.

He grinned at her, amused by her discomfort. 'Sounds fun.'

*Oh gods get a grip. You're both humans. Humans eat, sleep, piss, shit. It's never worried you before.*

She busied herself by unrolling the sleeping things and Jaime got into her spare blanket. She heaved a thick branch onto the fire to keep it going until morning, sending up a shower of sparks, then curled into her own furs. As soon as her eyes closed she felt sleep falling on her like a heavy weight.

'G'night, girl,' Jaime said in the quietness.

She started awake, surprised. No-one had said goodnight to her since her mother.

'Goodnight,' she answered, after a pause.

Then, she slept.

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The sun was already up by the time she woke, but it was worth the late start to feel nearly normal again. It took about an hour to have a quick wash in the river, eat, call up Sooty, and reload everything into the packs and saddle bags. The girl led Sooty down to the water's edge to drink, and Jaime came along too. She left them both there while she went back to finish clearing the camp.

Even criminals on the run deserved some privacy and the opportunity to clean themselves a bit in the river, she figured, and she was hardly Lady Law-Abiding herself, so who was she to judge him?

She'd just finished covering up the signs of their camp when a sound caught her attention. It sounded almost like a horse's warning snort. Had something alarmed Sooty? The girl picked up her bow and arrows from where she'd rested them near the campsite, and crept back down the way she'd come, moving as quietly as she could. Through the trees she could see Sooty spinning in a circle, agitated. The horse snorted again. On the other side of her Jaime hopped around, trying to hold the animal still enough for him to mount. *That fucker,* the girl thought, *he's trying to steal my horse and go on alone.*
Leave me here with no supplies. So much for 500 gold coins.

She whistled, a piercing shriek that made Jaime look over at her and Sooty prick up her ears. The man still had hold of the reins. He made a last ditch effort to throw himself on Sooty's back, but the horse bucked as his weight fell across her, and reared up. Jaime clung on gamely for a few seconds, before tumbling onto the ground. Sooty snaked her head at him, and the girl ran out from the trees, gesturing at the horse to get back.

'Looks like my horse doesn't like you,' the girl said, grimly. She had her bow drawn, an arrow notched and pointed at Jaime's head. He gave her a disarming smiled, as if it were all a joke. She didn't smile back.

'I was going to ride her back up to the camp, save you the trouble,' he said. He sounded so innocent she almost believed him.

'Sure you were.'

'Turns out, the horse is a bitch.'

'Of course she is, she's my horse.'

Jaime opened his fingers in a conciliatory manner. 'If I only had these cuffs off I could help out more around here'

'I have a better idea,' the girl said.
They headed back up to camp, Jaime walking beside Sooty, the chain that had dangled from his cuffs now securely attached to the horse's harness by an old padlock and another length of chain. The girl had always known that lock would come in handy one day.

'This is hardly necessary,' Jaime grumbled, 'I thought we were a team.'

'We still are. I'm still taking you to KingsLanding. All back roads and avoiding people, like we agreed. And as soon as you pay me the money you owe for this little venture, you'll be a free man. I don't want to hang around too long in the Capital.'

'Why not? Bad debts?'

'Yeah, more like unpaid debt. Personal debt,' the girl muttered. 'History with the evil little shit sitting on the Throne right now. Very bad history. Pretty much with that whole fucked-up family.'

'Really?' Jaime sounded curious.

'The sooner they're taken down, the better. If it's by the Starks, Greyjoys, whoever. No offence,' she looked over at Jaime, 'I'm sure you can't help where you live. Most people who live there don't have a good word to say about them either though, I hear. Right?'

Jaime was staring at her strangely, as if he hadn't noticed something about her before.

'Hey, sorry if you don't like hearing the truth.' She held up her hands. 'But just ask anyone. It's not a lone opinion.'

Jaime didn't say much for a few minutes, then he sighed. 'I said I'd pay you, and I always pay my... I mean, I'm good for it. Trust me. But you really need to unlock me. I don't feel comfortable being this close to your horse. She's not my biggest admirer.'

'You tried to get on her before, didn't you? While I was asleep, that first day? I wondered why she was standing guard over you when I woke up. You know, I didn't tell you before but. Sooty seriously doesn't like other people.'

'Most people have guard dogs. A guard horse is a bit of an overkill.'

'Lucky for me I've got one.'

'Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot. The trying-to-get-on-your-horse thing? I think you're taking it too seriously.'

'Just stop talking.'

'I promise I'll not touch your horse if you unlock me from this chain. We can keep the cuffs on, no problems. This is a big mistake.'

The girl decided to ignore Jaime's griping about a situation he'd brought upon himself, and concentrated on laying out all the food supplies. She allocated enough for the day, putting what little was left into a separate bag. She prised the seal off one of the two flasks from the pack she'd been gifted and swirled the red liquid around inside. It didn't smell very nice, the vapours singed the inside of her nose.
'Wine,' said Jaime, noticing her reaction with interest. 'Fermented blackberries, I think. Or is it pure ethanol flavoured with blackberry juice? A Southern speciality I believe.'

She pulled a face. 'Try some,' he encouraged her. 'You'll like it.'

She tossed the unopened flask at him over Sooty's back, and he caught it deftly even with his hands restrained. She imagined at some time in his life he'd played some kind of sport, and been good at it. 'You can have it,' she said, re-sealing and packing away the other flask, 'I don't like wine.'

'Fine by me,' he said. He used a thumb to pry off the stopper and took a long swig. 'Ahh,' he gasped, gagged. 'That's... quite something.' His eyes watered and he coughed. The girl looked away to hide her smile. He had another gulp and coughed again.

'Why are you drinking it when it's so revolting?' she asked.

'It's growing on me,' he said through a grimace.

'Well, don't let it grow too much. We have a lot of walking to do.'

They headed upstream, the girl moving confidently now, along the back paths she'd known as a child. Only people native to this area used the narrow tracks, and while she half-expected to come across one of her Tribesmen, even an outlaw, they met no-one. Cloud covered the sky and it was warm and humid. She stopped a few times to fill her water flask and let Sooty drink. At one stop, Jaime abruptly sat down and, using his cuffs, pushed off his boots. Then he dangled his bare feet over the bank into the water.

'Blisters,' he explained, at her raised eyebrow. The look of relief on his face almost tempted the girl to do the same but she resisted. She wanted to make good time and didn't know how long the weather would stay fine. 'C'mon. We've got to go,' she said impatiently. She'd missed out on a lot of regular business by agreeing to this trip, and this stranger had better compensate her for it.

Jaime sighed and scooted backwards in a sitting position to grab his boots. He tried unsuccessfully for a while to get his foot back into one, then had a go with the other, but the chains on his wrists seemed to be preventing him from getting enough grip to pull them on. The girl watched him in silence, until one overly-ambitious yank sent his boot flying out of his fingers and into the river.

'Why'd you take them off for?' she said, annoyed, as she sprang down the bank and scooped the boot up before it floated past. She upended it and water poured out. Then she tossed it to Jaime. He reached up his hands but missed it completely; it landed in the dirt to his left, and he fell over onto his back.

'Oh my gods,' she huffed, marching over to him. Jaime sat up again, chuckling, and the girl reached down and grabbed the wine flask out of his jacket. It weighed nothing; only a small amount sloshed inside. Disgusted, she turned and threw it into the river. It arced out and landed with a splash, bobbed up and then slowly spun and disappeared underwater.

'Good shhrow,' Jaime slurred, 'but that wasn't quite emp-ty.'

'Why the fuck would you drink the whole..?' She shook her head at his idiocy. 'Honestly. Get your fucking boots.' She snatched them off him as he passed them over, then knelt down and manoeuvred one onto his right foot, pulling the straps tighter than probably necessary. Her body leaned over his lap as she reached for his left ankle, holding the matching boot in her other hand. Jaime lifted his hands up to clear the chain out of her way, and the smell of his sweat tanged in her nostrils. It wasn't unpleasant, but it made her feel strange, as if she were upside down and blood had rushed to her
'You should always get me dreshed,' Jaime murmured.

She stood up too quickly, blinked to clear the momentary loss of vision. Pressed her lips together. 'Look, I don't care that you're wasted. We've got to go.' She heaved him up by his jacket collar; he was much heavier than his skinny frame suggested. She shoved him forward and motioned to Sooty to walk on. 'If you fall over, I'll just get her to drag you by that chain.'

'I'm not wassshted,' he said. 'But... thanks for helping me with my bootssshh. No... I 'preciate it. Havin' you leaning on me... hash def'nitely been the highlight of our trip sho far,'

'Keep walking,' she said tersely. *How could he be so stupid to drink all that wine, on a hot day? Was he touched? That stuff was deadly.* She briefly felt sorry for him. He'll be sick tonight. After a while she slowed down and kept pace with him as he walked, somewhat unevenly, beside Sooty. She handed him her water flask, knocking it on his elbow when he didn't appear to notice. 'Here, drink this,' she ordered.

'I'm good,' he waved her away.

'Drink! It!' He grinned and stopped, swaying. The girl pressed the flask into his chest. 'Alright, alright' he mumbled, taking it off her. She crossed her arms and glared at him as he concentrated hard on undoing the lid, but after a while it was obvious that the task was beyond him.

'Gimme that,' she said, and took it back. Just as she unscrewed the cap, he lurched forward and bumped her arm, knocking the flask onto the ground.

'*Fuck!*' she exclaimed, as the water gurgled into the dirt at their feet.

'Shorry, fuck... shorry. Your horshe... shtepped on me...' The girl exhaled loudly in annoyance and bent down to pick up the flask. Suddenly something hard smacked into the back of her neck, and as she turned, she felt metal whip around and smash into her mouth. She was yanked backwards and sprawled onto the sand. Her hands instinctively clutched at the links of chain as they fell loose from her face; then she was wrenched forward as Jaime drew them sharply back to lash out again.

'Let go, girl,' he said, his voice calm and totally sober. He braced hard into her chest, jerking the chain to try and free it. Sooty snorted and moved sideways, taking them both a step along with her. The girl was on her knees. She tried to get a breath to talk, to give Sooty a command, but her lungs wouldn't work. She didn't let go of the chain either.

Jaime dragged her up to him and looped the chain around her neck. She could feel the solidness of his arm muscles as he seemingly effortlessly lifted her off her feet. 'Where're the keys to this lock?' His voice was quiet, urgent. 'I don't want to hurt you, but I need the key. *Where is it?*

He dropped her but kept tension on the chain, his hands feeling for her belt, under her top. The girl felt her knife slide out of its holster, the keyring ripped free. She scrambled and dug her fingers into the skin of her neck, trying to get under the metal that felt like it was crushing her windpipe. She was vaguely aware of Jaime's hands leaving her belt, and a click as he unlocked the lock from Sooty's harness, then she was pushed backwards and the chain was falling away from her.

She wheezed, got to her hands and knees. She could hear Sooty stamping and blowing in alarm. As
the red cleared from the girl's eyes she could see again; more red, this time drops of blood and saliva that splattered from her open mouth onto the sand in front of her. Her teeth had cut into her lips. She coughed, stood up. Where was that son-of-a-bitch? She took a step and toppled sideways, but Sooty's broad body was there to hold her up. The girl couldn't speak, but she gave her horse a hand signal she understood.

Ever since Sooty had been a yearling, the girl had taught her how to chase down sheep, cattle, big cats and most useful of all, people. The old horse really was the girl's secret weapon, the reason she had managed to deliver goods on her own for years without being attacked or robbed. The hand signal was clear and well-understood to the horse - Get him!

Sooty sprang away, and without her as a prop, the girl fell over. She pushed herself back up onto her heels and wiped her mouth with a sleeve; it stung and her whole bottom jaw was numb. She crawled over to her water flask where it lay half-buried in the sandy dirt, kicked aside in the scuffle. Taking a deep, painful breath, she got to her feet and balanced unsteadily. It's like I'm the drunk one. Except, he wasn't drunk.

She allowed herself a small grin of admiration at his ingenuity, then started walking in the direction Sooty had gone, following the gouged holes of hoof prints. Hearing sounds up ahead, she began to run.

Dodging between the trees, she saw Sooty first, head tossing up and down, ears pinned. She was pivoting on her hindquarters, her front legs striking out. The girl saw Jaime get up off the ground and try to duck around her, but the mare was too quick and her shoulder crashed into him, knocking him over again. The girl tried to whistle but only air hissed out of her bruised throat, and the big horse lunged forward again. Dust plumed up from the force of her front hooves landing, obscuring Jaime altogether. If that was his head, he's dead, the girl thought, with a pang of guilt and fear. She ran faster, and reached them as Sooty pranced sideways, still snorting explosively. Relief flooded through the girl as she saw Jaime was getting to his feet, albeit slowly. He didn't look so good.

The girl motioned to Sooty to stop, backing the horse away with both palms out. Sooty snorted one last defiant blast, then retreated. The girl leaned down warily and grabbed her knife off the ground where Jaime had dropped it, holding it out in front of her as she approached him. 'Were you going to stab my horse?' she rasped, the words spiking like needles in her damaged throat.

'That was the plan,' Jaime said, reaching out his still-cuffed hands to a tree trunk to steady himself. Blood poured down his face from a cut above his eyebrow. 'Until your horse... tried to kill me first.' He gave a weak laugh.

'If she'd tried to kill you, you'd be dead,' the girl said. 'She was stopping you. Like I told her to.'

'I'd hate to see how she kills people, then,' he remarked, leaning heavily against the tree. 'Must be a subtle distinction.'

'You're alive aren't you?' the girl sneered. Excess adrenaline turned to anger inside her. She might've killed you, she thought, if I hadn't got here in time. It wouldn't be the first time Sooty had stomped someone to death. What the fuck was he doing anyway, trying to run off like that? Didn't he ask for my help in the first place? She could see the fast pulse of blood pumping from the wound on his temple, it had soaked his top and fat drops were pattering from the hem of it down onto the dirt. As she got close enough to reach for his cuffs, he slid down the tree-trunk and collapsed.

She called Sooty over, re-locked the chain on his wrists to the harness, then propped him up against the tree. His head lolled and beneath the slick of blood his skin looked icy white. She held a hand to his face: still breathing.
'Fuck it,' the girl said to Sooty. 'I guess we're stopping here for the day.'
He stirred and opened his eyes as she was wiping the blood off with a wet cloth dipped in cold water. She wrung it out in the pot beside them, dabbed again. 'Don't move,' she said, submerging the cloth back in the water and then squeezing it over the cut so that water flushed down his face.

'It's fine,' he said, flinching away from her.

'I said don't move, fool,' she snapped. 'I have to clean it out. Horse's hooves are full of germs.'

He sighed heavily and sat still. She glanced at his expression and was pleased to see he looked remorseful. Or, just pissed off. Or a bit of both.

'Are you alright?' he asked.

She pointed at her lip, which felt puffed up like a sponge.

He winced in sympathy. 'Ouch.'

She continued cleaning his cut, which he didn't react to at all.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'If that means anything.'

'I don't know,' she replied acidly. 'Does it?'

'I actually am sorry. Not for running off, but for hurting you. I didn't mean to hurt you... you were just in the way.'

'Sooty doesn't take kindly to people hurting me.'

'So I noticed.'

'I mean, I'm sorry too. For sending her onto you like that. I should've just let you fuck off. But...' the girl shrugged. 'I was mad you tricked me. And I needed my knife. My mother gave me that knife.'

'Yeah. Sorry I took that. Thought I might need it.'

'You need more than a knife out here. The locals will cut you into pieces and play noughts and crosses with your guts.'

'Really? Is that a common past-time amongst your people? I guess the quality of tavern entertainment around here is quite low.'

She screwed up her face. 'Don't be patronising. *My people* just have a healthy suspicion of strangers, is all.' She smiled sweetly. 'Unless... they think there's profit to be made from them. An escaped prisoner wandering around? With maybe a reward on his head? That might pique their interest. Maybe you should go try your luck with them. I'm sure they'll escort you safely all the way back to the prison cell you recently escaped from.'

'No need to be mordacious.'

'No need to use big fucking words no-one understands.'

'I believe you just said 'Pique.'
'That's not a big word, it's a small word -'
'I think if you can say pique I should be allowed mordacious -'
'Oh please just stop talking!'
Jaime stopped talking, for a few seconds. She squeezed more water over his eyebrow. 'I'm just trying to say -' he said.
'Shhh -'
'That I'm sorry.'
The girl sighed, exasperated, and gave him a look. He shut up. She dropped the pink stained cloth into the pot and stood. 'Does that hurt?' she asked, pointing at the cut on his head.
'No.'
'Good,' she said with a wicked smile. 'Because I'm going to have to stitch it.'

He looked satisfyingly aghast at the idea. The girl gestured to Sooty to come along, and helped Jaime up by hooking one of her arms under his. He dragged his feet as they headed down to the river. 'How bad is it anyway?' he wanted to know.

'You're losing a lot of blood, head wounds are like that. And it's gaping open. Probably best to not let it keep bleeding out. I don't know if you know this, but our bodies' blood supply is actually quite limited.'

'Can't you just... stick a bandage on it?'

'I'm going to stitch it.' He looked about to protest again and she repeated firmly, 'I'm going to stitch it, so stop sooking! When I was seven I was racing my horse through the forest and ran into a tree, and a branch went right through my arm. Here,' she indicated a spot just above her elbow. 'Right the way through. I was stuck on that tree until my horse galloped home and they came looking for me. They lifted me off, and my mother stitched up my arm. I didn't cry and neither should you.'

'One: like hells a seven year old girl didn't cry over that,' Jaime said, 'and Two: I'm not bloody sooking over getting stitches. Let's not start with war stories, alright, because your branch-skewering tale would be truly, a non-event compared to what... well, let's just not start. I'm merely a tad concerned about your qualifications in the... medical area. And the hygiene of your equipment. I don't want a raging infection in my face.'

She didn't reply, kept walking towards the river. In truth she couldn't remember a thing about the incident with her mother and the stitches. She only knew the story because her mother had told it to her and others, often, as an example of her bravery. She had two scars on her arm where stitches had obviously been, but she may have been in shock or numbed by other means when they were done. Who cares, it was a good story. She loved that story.

'Infection? Hygiene?' she said, after a while. 'Why would you suddenly start caring? Only, your face don't look too professionally tended to, to me. It looks like it's been attacked by a huge cheese grater and rolled in sewerage.'

He clicked his fingers. 'That's uncanny. That's pretty much exactly what they did to it.'

She allowed a smile to creep onto her face. 'Who is this they? Where did you come from, anyway?'
'Uh-uh. No questions, remember.'

'Alright, I remember.'

They had reached the river. She filled a smaller pot with clean running water, then set about making a fire. Jaime watched her as she boiled the water and got out of the saddle bag all the things she was going to need: scissors, a needle, salt, a pot of foul-smelling ointment. She unwrapped thread and a bandage, arranged all her implements near a large dead tree trunk lying on its side, then turned to him.

'Sit down.'

He reluctantly sat on the other end of the trunk. 'Do you know what you're doing?' He eyed the thick needle she was threading.

'How hard can it be?' she said. 'I've made clothes.'

'Dear gods,' he muttered.

She moved close to him, her side touching his. She leant an arm against his shoulder to steady him, then dipped the clean cloth in the boiled water, wrung it out and held it firmly on his cut for a moment. The blood had slowed to a steady pulse. She swirled the tip of the needle back in the hot water and pressed her free hand to his forehead. 'Hold still,' she said.

'I sincerely hope you know what you're doing.'

'I'm a delivery person, trust me.'

'I feel so reassured.'

She pinched his broken skin together in the fingers of her left hand, then pushed the sharp point of the needle into the section underneath; it made a tiny but distinct cracking sound as the point went in. **His skin must be thick.** She gripped the length of metal as it slid out from the flap of skin on the top, and pulled the thread through. To Jaime's credit, he didn't even twitch. She repeated the action, and then paused to wipe some blood away with the cloth.

'I guess I deserve this,' he conceded.

'Shush.' She put the cloth down, picked up the needle again. Concentrating, she put another two evenly spaced stitches through his eyebrow. Jaime's eyes didn't even water, which surprised her. **Maybe he wasn't kidding about his war stories.**

'There, done,' she said, snipping the end of thread off with her scissors. 'I told you it wasn't so bad.'

'It kind of hurt.'

She snorted. 'Well you should pick your fights better.'

'I thought I had. I just forgot to factor in your killer horse, I don't know how that could've escaped my notice.'

'I did warn you.'

'Did you? "Why don't you try something and see...?"' he quoted her earlier comment. 'I thought that was a dare, not a warning. Maybe you should be more specific with your next fellow travellers..."Hey everyone, just for future reference? The horse is a fucking lunatic."
'Don't let her hear you say that.'

Jaime turned and held his hands up in appeasement in Sooty's direction. 'Sorry. I was being facetious.' He looked back at the girl. 'I should have known it was a lunatic. Yesterday?'

'Yeah. What of it.'

'I tried to get on your horse then, while you were dead to the world... I thought I could ride on back to the road, make it to Kings Landing by myself. That was always my plan, as soon as I saw you. Steal your horse, leave. But, yeah. Ha.' He lifted his cuffed wrists and felt his stitches gingerly with his fingertips. 'The horse had other ideas. So, I should have known.'

The girl got up and gathered her things. Well, at least he's confessing to it. That's something. 'I don't know what you were thinking, then. Seriously. Are you suffering from delusions? We're more than a week's ride from Kings Landing, not that you'd know how to get there on the back roads by yourself. If you ran into a local Tribesman out here you'd be in big trouble, especially on my horse, who pretty much everyone around here knows. If you headed off along the King's Road, in handcuffs, you might not fare any better. But yeah, good planning. Smart.' She tapped her temple sarcastically. 'And that stunt before, pretending to be drunk and then stealing my keys, because I decided I couldn't trust you? You didn't even take any supplies. You've been sitting on the road again in a day or two like how I first found you, except someone else a lot less nice than me would've found you.' She shook her head at his inexplicable behaviour. For once, he didn't say anything,

She sighed. 'Maybe if we eat something, we'll feel better.' Her mouth was throbbing, and it hurt to swallow. But Jaime had got the worst of it. Being struck in the head by a horse's hoof was no joke. He's lucky it didn't fracture his skull. He deserved it of course, for hurting her and being stupid. But she still felt bad for him.

She stood up, took the keys to the lock out of her pocket, and walked over to Sooty. She unclicked the lock and let the chain drop onto the ground. Jaime watched her in silence. She put the lock back in one of the bags, then unharnessed Sooty and told her to go.

The horse trotted a little distance away, circled, then, buckling at the knees, she thumped onto a sandy patch of ground and rolled. After two complete flips with her legs in the air she staggered back to her feet and shook herself, spraying dust in a cloud. The girl smiled inwardly, she loved watching Sooty roll off the day's work and become a free horse again for a few hours. She watched the horse until she'd disappeared into the bush, then turned back to the fire. Jaime hadn't moved.

'You're free to go, if you want,' she said. 'For whatever reason you've decided you're better off on your own... it's fine. Go, if you want.'

Jaime still didn't move off the log. He looked tired, and his forehead was swelling up.

'I mean you could've talked to me about it. You didn't have to smack me in the mouth and strangle me.'

He gave a weary grin. 'When I decided we'd be better off going our separate ways, I didn't think you'd take too kindly to not being paid 500 gold coins.'

'I'm guessing the implication here is... you don't actually have 500 gold coins.'

'Hey, I've got them. I don't know if you'll want them from me though when...' he trailed off.

'When what?' she asked.
'Nothing.'

She stared at him. 'So.'

'So.'

'Will you be heading off, then?'

He twisted his mouth up in a wry expression and looked away. 'I don't feel my normal robust self right now, to be honest. For some reason, I have a splitting headache.'

They looked at each other for a long moment. She smiled. 'I'll get us some food.'
She boiled the eggs, sliced them with her knife, tossed in the few remaining vegetables and beans. There was no meat left. The sun was starting to get low in the sky and the air had a cool bite. She was annoyed at losing so much time to this whole venture, annoyed with herself for letting a, let's face it, she thought, half-starved and sorry-looking prisoner catch her off guard as he'd done. A severe lapse of judgement on her part. She also felt shitty because she couldn't really blame him for getting away from her after she'd chained him to the horse. But that made her by comparison, a failure.

She took the meal over to the log where Jaime sat, and handed him a bowl. Then she sat down near the fire to eat hers, which was more difficult than she expected due to her swollen lip. She chewed carefully, but bits of food kept falling out on one side.

'Do you want mine?' She gave up, and handed her bowl backwards to Jaime.

'Can't you eat?' he asked, taking it. He sounded genuinely guilty, which made her feel a little better. It didn't stop him eating her food though. She sipped from her water flask, trying not to think about how hungry she was. Shouldn't have given him my food. What's left now, bread? Great. She stared into the flames, trying to stifle the feelings rising in her that this was all so unfair. Why did I get talked into doing this, anyway? I could be at Blackhills tavern by now, sleeping in an actual bed. I could be getting some decent jobs. Not gallivanting through the bush for the promise of riches that have a high likelihood of not even existing. Because I felt sorry for some vagrant.

The girl had been independent a long time. For years she'd supported what was left of her family in the hills with the money she made delivering both legal and illegal goods, and kept herself below the radar of soldiers and law-men. Beholden to no-one, a free entity. Her mother had always told her that was how it should be, that she was safe because she was free. All she had to do was be discreet and fair with her customers, keep to her own business, and she'd live happily ever after. No-one can hurt you, if they can't see you, her mother had said. But now her mother was gone. And the girl didn't believe in happily ever after stories.

Impulsively, she got up and went over to the packs, hunting through them until she found the second flask of wine. She took it with her back to the fire and sat down.

'Are you going to drink that?' Jaime asked.

'Some.' She didn't normally drink. She liked to have all her wits about her. She liked to be in control. But tonight she felt strangely rebellious, like the day had gone to shit, her stomach was churning with hunger, and now this was going to be her reward for putting up with it all. Never mind that she didn't even like wine, had never drunk more than a cup or two at family gatherings. And that had been home-made, mild and dry. Not this potent brew. She flicked the top off the flask with her thumb and it popped into the air and was immediately lost in the dim evening light. She took this as a sign that she wouldn't be putting it back on.

'Do you think that's wise?' Jaime asked, although he sounded more amused than concerned. 'Drinking on an empty stomach.'

'As much as I value your feedback, Jaime-ee,' she emphasised the last syllable,' If that even is your actual name... I think I can make my own decisions.'

'Of course. I'm simply advising.'
Fuck advice.'

Jaime smirked. 'You remind me of someone.'

'Really? Is he fucking amazing?'

Sniffing the contents of the open flask didn't calm her stomach much, it made her distinctly queasy. It smelled astringent, with a hint of rotten fruit. She held the flask away from her nose, and behind her Jaime chuckled.

'She, actually. And yeah, she's pretty amazing. Look, that so-called 'wine' you have there? It will knock you out. I can smell it from here.'

'You had some. How bad can it be?'

'I only had those first couple of mouthfuls, and trust me, it was pretty bad. The rest I dumped out along the way.'

'Clever,' she said. She lifted up the flask and tipped it into her mouth. As soon as she felt the liquid brim against the back of her teeth she closed her lips and swallowed without tasting. Immediately a searing rush of fumes spread up into her nose and eyes, like she was on fire inside her skull. She put her head down, pressed her lips together to stop from coughing, but some still splurted out of the corner of her lip. She made a strangled sound, wondered if she was going to hurl it right back up again.

Jaime laughed, and as she raised her head, blinking the tears from her eyes, she stifled a laugh too. 'Steady, no need to hurt yourself,' he said.

'I'd think you'd be happy,' she shot back. 'Save you the trouble of doing it.'

'Hey, I'm sorry you took that assault on your self personally. I just don't do captivity very well. But, it was wrong of me, and I promise, I won't try it again.' Jamie made everything sound like a joke, even the fact he'd attacked her, and she knew she should've cared, but she didn't. Right now, she couldn't be bothered caring about anything.

'Sure. Sure you won't.' She took another big gulp of the wine. It burned down her sore throat and she felt as if steaming flames jetted from her nose and eye sockets. But in a couple of seconds that faded and the pain in her neck and lip faded with it. She felt as light as the glowing sparks dancing and swirling up out of the fire. She burped quietly. Ridiculous, that she'd been so disapproving of him drinking this stuff earlier. I really can be an uptight bitch sometimes. She twisted around and offered the flask to him. He was still laughing at her. 'Go on, have some. I insist,' she said, with saccharine sweetness.

'I don't know if I should... that looks positively toxic.'

She shook the flask to tempt him. 'If you don't, I'll have to drink it all myself, and then you'll have my death on your conscience.'

'I think you're presuming I have a conscience,' Jaime answered. He tipped his head to one side as if to stretch his neck. Rested his elbows on his knees. 'Nevertheless, I feel obliged to rescue you from suicide by alcohol poisoning.' He leaned over and took the proffered flask. The girl sat up and swivelled her legs around to face him. He brought the wine to his mouth with exaggerated caution, and pulled a mock-horrified face. She was already giggling by the time he sipped experimentally from it.
'Fuck, this is worse than I remembered.' He swigged at it and screwed up his face, shaking his head madly from side to side before swallowing. 'Your turn.' He passed it back.

'Does that help?' she asked.

'Does what help.'

'Pulling that face?'

'Yes it does, as a matter of fact. If you don't pull that face, this crap will corrode your gums and all your teeth will fall straight out. Don't say I didn't warn you, girl.'

She lifted it up to her mouth, already recoiling from the pungent aroma. 'How is... she began, starting to laugh for no real reason except that Jaime was suddenly also laughing, 'How is this, this sh... even wine?'

'Look, they call it wine. I don't know what goes into it. I don't know how they process it. I'm fairly sure it's the main reason most citizens of the South die young.'

'Yeah isn't wine s'posed to be,' she stopped laughing long enough to sniff at it again, 'at least somewhat enjoyable?'

'You're expecting too much,' Jaime said, 'Stop smelling it for one thing. We already know it smells like the septic pit in the King's whorehouse and tastes worse. Just scull it down, and try not to let it come in contact with any of your sensory organs on the way.'

'How do you know what the King's septic pit smells like?'

'So I've been told.'

'Oh. So you've been told.' She did as he'd suggested, tipping a good quantity of liquid straight down her throat. This time she coughed and laughed so much she nearly toppled over. Jaime leaned down and grabbed her arm with his cuffed hands, helping her sit upright again. He took the now three-quarters-empty flask off her and rested it against the log he was sitting on.

'Good?' he asked, when she stopped spluttering.

'Realllly tasty,' she said. Her face felt hot and her mouth numb. She felt wonderful, actually. 'Let's go for a walk.'

Jaime looked doubtful.

'C'mon, I need a walk,' she declared, standing up. 'And you're coming with me.'

'I realise you're slightly delirious from having drunk enough Southern rotgut to kill a goat, but it's getting dark and I may have concussion. Plus, I'm a bit restricted.' He raised his hands to demonstrate.

'Fuck.' She sat down again. 'That's so inconvenient.'

'True.'

The girl pouted, looking around for the wine flask. When she couldn't see it, she crawled over to the fire and patted the ground with her hand until she found her water bottle. She crawled back to Jaime and sat in front of him again.
'Thirsty?' he asked.

She nodded and tried to flip open the top, but it was stuck. She frowned and dug her thumb under the lid with no success, until Jaime reached down and took it off her. He deftly unscrewed the lid and handed it back. This was so ironic to her that she burst out laughing and couldn't stop. Jaime had to take the water off her so she wouldn't spill it all.

'Come here,' he said, patting the spot next to him on the log, where she'd sat when she'd stitched his cut earlier. She scrambled up onto it, it was quite big and weathered smooth, the surface curved around like a horse's girth. She could still put her feet flat on the ground either side with her legs slightly bent.

'Water now,' she said. Her voice didn't come out quite right. Jaime was regarding her with such amusement she wondered what exactly was so funny. She reached for the flask and he held it up out of her grasp, pushing her hands down with his cuffs. 'No, girl,' he admonished. 'You'll only spill it on yourself.' He waited until she sat back compliantly, then he brought the container down to her face and angled it up so that a few drops trickled onto her lips.

The cool water felt good. It ran onto her tongue and she swallowed. 'Don't move,' he said in a soothing voice. 'Your mouth is all swollen.' He put the flask down, then rubbed the ball of his thumb gently across her bottom lip. The sting of it made her gasp a little and her lips parted. Jaime stared at her, for a long time. It felt like a long time, anyway. She could feel her heart jumping in her chest. Jaime seemed to be searching her face. 'You even look like her,' he said, under his breath. Then he bent his head and softly pressed his lips to hers.

His beard was scratchy and she hesitated, then relaxed. Blood rushed to her face, the alcohol surged through her body, and her inhibitions were dissolved like sand castles before a tidal wave. She hummed in her throat with pleasure. The small sound had the same effect on Jaime as a gust of oxygen to a glowing ember, his breath grew rough, his hands tightened on her top and the weight of his body pushed her backwards. She opened her mouth wide and their tongues twisted against each other. She could taste her own blood from the cut on her lip, but felt unable to stop herself, as if she were in a dream. A dream where she could do whatever she wanted.

Jaime's chest was a solid wall but she pressed her hands into it and shoved at him, until he reluctantly pulled his mouth off hers and sat back. 'What...?' he complained, his eyes almost black in the warm glow from the fire, widening as she put her fingers under her top and lifted it over her head. 'Hey...' he breathed. She pulled her undershirt off in the same way, then stood up, swaying a bit as she straddled the log with her legs. Her knife holster unfastened next, she threw it away towards the packs.

'What are you thiiiiinking?' she teased, slurring her words a little.

'Wish I wasn't wearing these handcuffs, for one,' he growled, not taking his eyes off her.

She laughed, lightly, easily. She felt as weightless as a feather. She hooked her thumbs into the waist of her pants and pushed them down, lifting up one leg and stepping free of them. Jamie didn't move but she could hear him breathing heavily. Now she had on only the strip of cloth that was her underwear. Basking in the intensity of his gaze, she undid the fastening on the side and the material fell down one leg to her ankle. She kicked her foot, and then she was naked.

She sat back down on the log, her knees apart.

Jaime stared at her as she leant in towards him. 'What are you thinking, now?' she whispered. She reached over and, with the back of her fingers, brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes.
'I'm thinking,' he said, his voice ragged, 'You should drink more often.'
Secrets

She woke up. Felt warm and peaceful and more relaxed than she'd been in a long time. She lay still, savouring the rare feeling of contentment. Then, she remembered. The images that sprang into her consciousness in all their raw and vivid detail made her inhale sharply and her face grow hot. Oh. Fuck. But this was going to be an awkward morning.

She flipped back the blankets and got to her feet. Upright, her head spun. Her mouth felt twice its normal size. It was before-dawn cold and she quickly pulled on her jacket, shook the sand out of her discarded pants and shuffled into her boots. A surreptitious glance behind her at Jamie's blanket-covered form confirmed that he was still asleep. Or at least pretending to be. Either way, she didn't have to deal with him right now. Which meant she had some time to process her thoughts. Oh but... those thoughts. Dear gods. Where to start? She could hardly keep from burying her face in her hands at the memory.

Did a warg infiltrate my body last night? Because that was not my normal manner of behaving.

She decided distraction was the best remedy. The fire looked cold and dead, of course she hadn't banked it before falling asleep. Or, passing out. Whichever had happened. Their food supply was pretty low, there was another thing to preoccupy herself with. Good.

She grabbed her holster where it lay on the ground, checked the knife, pouch and keys were all still attached. I may be the stupidest delivery person ever, but today luck is with me, she thought, gratefully. She set to work gathering up the smaller branches around the clearing, using the sturdiest one to stir up the ashes and uncover a still-glowing log. Air fanned a tiny wisp of blue and orange flame out of its centre, and as it licked along the length of black wood she fed it twigs and watched it grow. Satisfied, she grabbed the pot and walked over to the river.

A movement downstream caught her attention, and she stopped. A man in familiar Tribesmen garb was casting his net out into the current. He saw her and after a moment, raised his hand in greeting. She waved back. He tied his net off to the trunk of a tree and started making his way towards her. She glanced back up behind herself. The undergrowth was thick by the river bank, and from where she stood, the camp they'd made last night couldn't be seen.

'What are you doing in these parts?' the man called out as he approached, keeping his eyes on the rocky river bank so as not to slip.

'The usual. Deliveries,' she replied. 'How are the fish today? Are you pulling in any of those big trout I've seen being sold down at the Corner?'

He didn't take her lead and talk about his catch. He walked up to her slowly, a smile on his face that didn't reach his eyes. 'Deliveries, eh? Well. Thought you worked the King's Road and down into the villages. Who's up here in need of your services?' His tone was friendly but the girl felt uneasy. She recognised him from the markets they both frequented. He was always trying to scam someone, a natural-born salesman. Those who bought from him didn't find out until they got home that their purchases were invariably a few short, often not even the actual items he spruiked them as. The girl knew; in the past she'd picked up wares for a pittance and delivered them to him, whereby he sold them on for five times as much. She had to admire those qualities in a person.

This morning though, she didn't want him around. Her head throbbed badly, the sun was too bright, and even normal conversation seemed an ordeal. Let alone the necessary lies she'd have to spin to send him on his way.
'The Dryfields down in the valley needed some wine urgently, an unexpected arrival,' she told him. 'Some long-thought-dead family member turning up, with most of his limbs still attached. A profitable detour for me.' The girl tried to keep her voice steady, casual. She could smell the fish on the man's hands, and it made her stomach roil.

'Dryfields, now there's a name you don't hear often,' he said. 'Is old man Dryfield still a recluse down there? Still making his little pots of secret spices?'

'I wouldn't think so. He's been dead nearly a year.' The girl knew the man knew this too, but it was all part of the game. She just didn't feel like playing today. She felt like vomiting.

The man sniffed the air, looked up the way she'd come. 'You got a fire going up there?'

'Yeah. Stopped for a cup of tea.' The girl held up her pot. She was trying to breathe through her mouth, the stench of old fish infused in his clothes and skin was overpowering.

'Ah, nothing better on a cold morning. You got a spare cup?' The man smiled pleasantly.

'I'm travelling light,' she said. 'The trip was short notice, I didn't even pack a change of clothes.'

'Maybe I could share your cup,' the man said, stepping in close. The girl forced herself to control her instinct to step back. His over-familiar tone and invasion of her personal space was nothing she hadn't dealt with before. If only she didn't feel so nauseous, and her brain would stop thudding against her skull.

'I have a weird fever,' she said. 'I probably wouldn't.' Under her shirt, her fingers brushed on the bulge of her knife by her hip.

'Really? A fever.'

'Yeah. Dizzy spells. I couldn't even ride my horse the last few miles, I thought I was going to fall off.'

At the mention of her horse, the man stepped quickly away from her and looked around. 'Your horse, I remember that beast. Is it... nearby?'

'I could whistle her up for you.'

'That's alright, no need.' The man backed away, turning in the direction of his fishing spot further down the river. 'Safe travels. I'll see you around the usual.' He hurried over the rocks, occasionally glancing up into the trees as if checking for horse-shaped figures charging at him. The girl smiled to herself. Sooty's reputation had taken many years to develop, but now she was a local legend.

Once the man had gone, the girl walked down the bank and, using some fallen branches as footholds, leaned over and dipped the pot into the current. The fast-moving water was cold as liquid ice. She brought up her wet hand and wiped it over her face; the wind stung her wet skin but it had the desired effect of clearing her head and settling her belly. She gulped down some water from the pot, re-filled it, and headed back to the camp, feeling slightly more awake.

Jaime was also awake. He was lying on his side looking in her direction as she came through the trees, propped on one elbow with his cuffed hands out of the blanket. His left eyebrow was smudged black with bruising that nearly closed his eye, but he still looked pleased with himself. 'Hey,' he said. 'Hey,' she replied. There was a long silence.
Self-conscious, she went to the fire to hang the pot over it, but fumbled and slopped water over the side. A cloud of steam hissed up at her. Flustered, she began poking at the coals with a stick, aimlessly, but she was so aware of Jaime's presence that she couldn't concentrate on anything else. Nor could she think of a single thing to say to him.

'How are you feeling this morning?' His voice, slightly gravelly from sleep, sent little shudders through her body. *Ugh. Pull yourself together,* she chided herself. *You're stronger than this, you can cope with a... temporary loss of control... without losing your shit like a 12 year old after her first kiss.*

'Fine'. She didn't look up. 'You?'

'I'm feeling much improved,' he said. 'I had this amazing dream.'

'Do tell.' She looked over at him with what she hoped was worldly nonchalance, but her mouth twitched. Despite her jittery nerves and the disorienting sense of everything she knew from yesterday being unfamiliar today, she found that what she wanted, more than anything, was to keep looking into Jaime's eyes. It was difficult to tear her gaze away.

'I forget.' He yawned, showing his straight white teeth. 'Soooo...' he feigned a brief interest in his surroundings before his gaze returned and captured hers again. 'That wine was something else, huh? I can't remember a thing about last night.'

She raised her hand to her mouth to hide her smile.

'It was an unmemorable evening,' she said, airily. 'I seem to recall we played cards at one point.'

'That's right,' he snapped his fingers. 'I think I lost my shirt to you. You should've warned me you were such a shark.'

'Where's the fun in knowing everything about someone?'

'Where indeed,' he agreed.

She looked into his green eyes and got the distinct feeling that things were slipping slowly out of her control. It was hard to pull back, hard to focus on what needed to be done today, when all she could think of was yesterday. She forced the disquieting images out of her head. 'I had a visitor down by the river,' she said, abruptly. 'Let's get out of here.'

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By the time they'd packed up, the sun had lightened the sky to pale grey and it was almost warm. They headed upstream along the river, doubled on Sooty's broad back. They needed to make up time. Although they kept to the cover of the trees, she checked every so often for a narrowing of the river banks, a place they could swim across. Bridges, according to her people-shy companion, were with towns and main roads on the Things To Avoid list. Despite the delays, she figured they were less than a day's ride from RedHollow, a small village she knew well. She could leave Jaime in hiding somewhere and go buy, borrow or steal something with a big enough blade to smash his cuffs off. That should make him happy. Why his happiness was suddenly important to her was something she decided to examine another day. For now, she simply accepted that it was.

_We're going to have to get across this river, but it's nice weather,* she mused. *I'm a good swimmer, so's Sooty. Can Jaime swim? Well, Sooty can drag him along. Drying our clothes will be the problem. Probably everything in the packs is going to get wet, I'll have to keep the lighter and tinder dry somehow. Will our clothes dry over a fire, overnight? She supposed she could cuddle up to_
Sooty to keep warm, but what about Jaime? Using Jaime to keep warm was a thought she also pushed aside for the time being.

Jaime was quiet, for once. She noticed that he was looking around at their surroundings more, and wondered if he was familiar with this area.

'Let's stop and eat', she decided, when the sun was at its high point above them.

She reined in Sooty, and jumped off. Jaime watched as she pulled the food bag open and got out the only food they had left; bread. He looked like he wanted to comment on the meal options again, but restrained himself.

'Are we close to where we're meant to cross? Near that village you told me about?' he asked instead.

'Why? Keen on getting them off?' She nodded at his wrists.

'It's been a long time,' he said. 'I'll have to learn to do everything all over again, with hands.'

'Well, be thankful you have hands. There are people around here who love to chop hands off,' she cautioned.

Jaime grinned. 'I'm pretty quick with my hands, when they're not chained together. I doubt anyone could hold one down long enough.'

'You'd be surprised how many single-handed folks around here once had that same belief,' the girl said.

Jaime tossed his crust of bread into the bushes. 'Gods, could we get some decent food at this village of yours, too? Something that was once running around on four legs would be good.'

They rested a while, her on the ground, Jaime leaning on a large rock. Sooty took the opportunity to graze some tussocks of grass growing in the splotchy sunlight that filtered through the leaves overhead. The girl allowed her thoughts to drift to last night. Jaime. Her. The look in his eyes, his lips. The feel of him inside her.

'You were so chatty yesterday,' Jaime interrupted her daydream. 'Now today you've gone all quiet.'

He took the water off the stone she'd set it down on, unscrewed the cap and sculled the rest of the contents. She glanced over at him while he was drinking. His head tipped back, adam's apple moving up and down; the tendons in the V of his neck standing out. He'd washed his skin clean in the river but his hair was still so dirty it looked black and fell in thick strands down the side of his face. She remembered the dry texture of them as she'd brushed them out of his eyes with the back of her fingers. She didn't realise she was staring until he turned to look at her.

'Um,' she said. She folded the rest of the bread back into the cloth and stowed it into the saddle-pack, turning her back to him and inwardly cursing her lack of composure.

He walked over and stood behind her. She could feel his body warmth on the back of her neck. The chain from his wrists clanked as he held the water bottle out to her over her shoulder.

'About last night -' she turned around. He waited, watching her. She could feel her cheeks heating up. 'I'm sorry if I was... forward.'

'I'm not.'
She sighed. 'Alright, I'm not either, not really. When I woke up today I... I thought I'd made a big mistake.'

'What do you think now?' he asked.

'I don't know. I'm trying not to... think about it too much.'

'Too much? So you are thinking about it.'

'Well. Sometimes.' She laughed a little. 'Got me.'

Jaime leaned back, appraised her seriously. 'Do you trust me?'

'As far as I trust anyone.' No, she thought. 'But I feel safe with you, if that counts for anything.'

'After I get these cuffs off, you may change your mind.'

'Do you trust me?' She turned his question back on him.

'I don't even know your name.'

'No-one uses it much. I'm just the Delivery Girl.'

'Surely your family don't call you 'The Delivery Girl'.'

She looked away over the river. The water shimmered, dark shapes moving under its surface. 'My family are... there's just my sister and me. Her kids. My mother died many years ago, and my father killed himself. He could cope with my mother dying, but not... not everything else.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.' Jaime said, sincerely. 'Losing family is hard.'

'I had a little brother,' she continued, gazing away to the far banks of the river and beyond it, to the grassy hills sprinkled with white flowers, the purple shadows of clouds scudding across them, as if Jaime hadn't spoken. 'We weren't living together. He was only 13. I was already on my own then, delivering. He lived with our father.' Her eyes didn't focus on the view, as pretty as it was. Her eyes looked inside herself and saw someone who was still an essential part of her, even though she had no idea where his blood had soaked into the earth, where his bones lay, or what animals had picked them clean.

'I have a brother too.' Jaime sympathised. 'I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt him. What happened to yours?'

'He was killed,' she said, turning at last to face Jaime. Her voice was cold. 'Murdered.'
They walked until late afternoon, but the river never looked like narrowing. The girl could clearly remember a place where fallen earth and boulders from an old landslide had pushed one bank out and created a bottleneck, where the distance to the opposite bank was greatly reduced, but she couldn't remember exactly where it was. She was also wary that other travellers with shady intentions, who needed to keep off the major thoroughfares, would likely be around at a non-traditional river crossing. Seeing as it was pretty much the only safe spot to cross, if bridges were not on your agenda.

At a high point of ground she stood on a ledge of rock that jutted out and looked along the river into the distance, squinting her eyes to try and better make out any narrowing in its snaking shape.

'What's the verdict?' Jaime asked. He was sitting on the ground behind her, using Sooty's body to block the sun. The man and horse appeared to have settled into an uneasy truce. Away from the cover of the trees it was uncommonly hot. Midges hung in a dense cloud near the water.

'Still nothing'. She turned and stood facing the trees, trying to decide whether to keep going, or take another break until it cooled down. Her clothes stuck to her skin and her mouth felt dry even though she'd just had a drink. Of course, the hangover wasn't helping. She was tempted to jump in the water, but the current had become fast-flowing and unpredictable, full of whirlpools. The bank was steep, stony and falling sharply into black pools that she knew were very deep.

She looked over at Jaime. His hair was wet with sweat, and he held his arms out in front of him to keep the metal chain away from his body. The cuffs reflected light as he moved them, stretching his fingers.

'I'm sorry you're stuck with those,' she said, nodding at the manacles. 'I wish we'd reached the Hollow today, and I'd been able to get a hold of something to remove them.' As she said these words, she recognised a shift in her normal view of the world. Beyond her family, it was unlike her to care about other people's problems. Normally she could detach, stay distanced. Jaime had gotten to her. The metal must be burning his skin, she thought, and she could almost feel the burn on her own wrists.

Jaime puffed air out with his lower lip to blow his limp fringe off his forehead, where it was sticking to his stitches. 'Thank you for feeling sorry for me. I feel sorry for you too, being stuck with me. I haven't been very trust-worthy. I'm causing you serious delays. You're no doubt ruing the day we met.'

'Well, yes and no,' she said. She couldn't help smiling, and it gave away her thoughts.

'There have been good moments,' he admitted.

'Yep.' She blushed. Her face was already red from the hot day, hopefully Jaime wouldn't notice. She stammered on, 'I... I figure it had been... um... a while since you... had a good moment. Like the other night. A moment.' Best shut up now, you're making a fool of yourself.

Jaime was gracious enough not to make fun of her. 'Well, yes. It has, had, definitely been a very long time. I only had ever been, previous to you I mean, been with one girl. Intimately. So... it was a bit of a first for me, as moments go.'

Jaime paused. The silence between them dragged on a bit too long. 'Look, are we speaking about
fucking each other last night? Because if you're talking about the stew, I mean, that was great too - '
he feigned innocent bewilderment.

She burst out laughing. 'You're - ' she wiped at her eyes, trying to stop laughing, unsuccessfully.
'You're really funny. Yeah, that's what we're talking about. Idiot.' She raised her water bottle to her
mouth, took a gulp.

'I thought so.' Jaime said, dead-pan. 'I mean, to be honest, your stew really wasn't that great.'

She spluttered into laughter again, spraying water. 'I know. Well. I have other skills.

'Yes. You do.'

'I hope it was enjoyable, even though it wasn't with, y'know. Your girl.'

'It was, very. Enjoyable.'

She took a deep breath, let it out. They looked at each other. She felt soft inside, like when she'd
drunk the wine, like little bubbles were fizzing all around her body. 'Thanks. For making me laugh.
I... I don't laugh much. It's nice.'

'Hey, it's nothing.' Jaime smiled. 'You seemed a little down back there, talking about your brother. I
hope I cheered you up.'

'You have. Thank you. It's hard to talk about him. I feel like I unburdened on you too much, I don't
know why. Normally I don't talk about him. It still hurts, a lot. To talk about him.' The girl bent her
head, the sun prickling the back of her hair.

'How long has it been? Since...?'

'Over a year, now.'

'Well. Time will make it better.'

'No. I don't think so.' She straightened up. 'C'mon let's keep going.'

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'What's that?' she said, as Sooty halted. The girl peered out into the fast growing dusk, the sun now
gone and the temperature dropping so rapidly that puffs of steam rose from her lips.

'Did you hear something?' Jaime asked behind her.

'Sooty did. Her ears...' she pointed at the horse's ears which were pricked straight up, her neck raised
and her whole body beneath them still.

The girl slid down off the saddle. 'You stay here,' she whispered to Jaime. The sound of hoof beats
came faintly up ahead, and for a second she thought of turning back and running, but then the
distinct, much closer sound of a man's boots made her freeze.

'Hey!' A voice called, out of sight in the darkness. The figure of a man moved into view on the track,
carrying a dim light, then two more. They stared in the direction of Sooty where she stood behind a
screen of tangled branches, maybe trying to decide what she was. The girl stepped out away from the
horse, so they could see her.

'Hey,' she greeted them. 'We're travellers. There's only two of us, on our way to RedHollow.' She
walked towards the men as one of them raised his lantern, stopping when she was close enough in the circle of light thrown by it for them to see her. A fourth man had come up and now stood beside the others, leading a pack horse. She recognised this particular man, he lived in RedHollow and had a large family of unruly kids, who he supported by being an accomplished poacher of game from nearby estates.

'I know you,' a different man said.

The girl held out her hands, palms up. 'I used to frequent these parts often.'

'Not usually this side of the river, though,' the man said. 'These tracks are more for hunters, not travellers. Why didn't you cross at the bridge, if you want to get to the Hollow?'

The girl looked slightly embarrassed. 'I think... I think I got lost. It's been a while since I've been here. We went off the road chasing a goat and then it got dark and, we must have missed the bridge.' She smiled guilelessly.

'Well there's not another bridge for many miles. You'd best turn back. These tracks wander all over, you'll only get more lost.'

'Yes, I think we will do that. We were about to make camp for the night. Tomorrow we'll head back to the bridge.'

'And what is your business there, Delivery Girl? Are you trading goods?' the poacher asked. The back of his horse was laden with the corpses of deer and pheasants, they'd obviously done well for themselves.

'Just passing on messages, mainly,' the girl said, casually. 'Some salt and spices from further North. Maybe buy an axe.'

The poacher looked curious. 'What sort of an axe?'

'Or a broadsword. Cutlass. Hatchet. Anything with a heavy blade, easy to swing.' She shrugged. 'I may visit Cole, if he's still the smith at the Hollow. If the army haven't recruited him yet.'

'Nah, his leg keeps him out,' the poacher said, and the other men laughed at this. 'That leg injury comes and goes whenever it's convenient! Yes, Cole's still there. A good friend of your father's. I'm sure he'll have a decent blade for you.'

She nodded. She hoped they might be on their way without further questions, but the group seemed in no great hurry. The first man who'd spoken leaned on a tree and picked at his teeth, spat, then said 'So, why the axe? Is delivery work so slow these days that you're planning a new career slitting logs?' He grinned at her. 'Or is it an executioner you have your mind set on? I always thought you'd make a fine one. Old Sooty there,' he gestured behind the girl to where her horse still stood half-hidden in the shadows, 'would definitely be an asset in that line of work.'

She kept the smile on her face. 'You know how it is,' she said. 'With the war on. A girl alone can't be too careful.'

'This damned war,' the man agreed. 'With so many men away fighting, the one's left are finding it hard to keep order in the villages. The King, the Starks, the Lannisters, the Baratheons, all at each other's throats. None of them care about us. Desperate times. Crazy times.'

The girl smiled and nodded. 'I try to stay out of politics,' she said, pleasantly. 'I wouldn't even know who was who.' This wasn't far from the truth. She knew of the boy King and his family and wished
them all dead, despite never having laid eyes on them. But that was for personal reasons, and not because she had an allegiance to any House. Who ran the country was of no concern to her. She'd keep on slipping under their notice, skirting the laws, as she'd always done.

'I'd say there's little difference between them all in the end,' the man said.

'Brodrick is somewhat of an expert in the matter,' one of the other men volunteered. 'Being an ex-soldier and all. He's fought for the North many times in minor skirmishes, been to the Capital to talk tactics with Robert Baratheon and his Kingsguard, back when he sat on the Throne. Brod here knows them all.' The man leaning against the tree acknowledged this. 'I've seen the whole Royal Family in the flesh,' he said.

The girl tuned the conversation out. As if she cared who he knew. Unless he was an assassin she could hire to cut the boy King's heart out, she didn't give a flying fuck about his name-dropping. She wished they would hurry up and leave.

'I was sorry to hear about your father,' the poacher said, changing the subject. 'The war has many victims.'

The girl felt herself stiffen. 'He wasn't a war victim,' she said.

'And yet the death of his son was the reason behind his own death. I realise he took his life, girl, but the reason behind what happened to his son? Yours is not the only loss.'

The girl's heart rate began to increase, she felt a tightness in her chest and her fists clenched. She recognised in herself the signs of a furious rage, and struggled to control her voice. 'My brother wasn't a war victim, either,' she said. 'He was murdered.'

'Yes,' the poacher answered. 'But we all know why.'

The girl gritted her teeth. She forced herself to breathe steadily, to focus; she gripped her hands together as hard as she could. Anything to stop the overwhelming anger inside of her from rising up and spilling over into words or actions she knew she'd regret. Calm down, she told herself sternly. There are four of them, and one of you. These men are not the enemy. The King and his family are the enemy. Calm down.

'Well, good luck in your travels, Delivery Girl,' the poacher said. 'I hope you find your way back to the bridge alright, and if Cole can't help you out, the Innkeeper at the Crossroads always has spare steel.'

'I don't ever go to the Crossroads any more,' she said, a chill settling on her spine at the name. 'But thank you for the information.'

The men nodded and made as if to go on past. The girl moved aside to give them room, and watched as they headed along the track. As they drew level with the spot where Sooty was standing, the man they'd referred to as Brodrick paused. 'Who's your companion up there?' he called back.

'A vagrant,' she said. 'Some unfortunate prisoner of the war I picked up along the road.'

Brodrick stared up at the shapes of Jaime and Sooty, Jaime with his head down and face in shadow. 'His clothes don't look local. Why are you with him? You never travel with others.'

'Turns out I knew him years ago... he's from a town on my route. I'm just dropping him off, as a favour for an old acquaintance. Please just keep going, she thought.
'Hey, you!' Brodrick shouted at Jaime. 'Got a name?'

'Don't bother, he had his tongue removed by his captors,' the girl said. 'Poor fellow.'

'Come on Brod, we've still got hunting to do,' the poacher urged. Brodrick stared at Jaime a while longer, as if trying to place something, then unwillingly turned away. The girl waited until they'd disappeared around the corner, then whistled Sooty over and scrambled up onto her back. With a sharp tap of her heels, the horse and her two riders trotted briskly off into the woods, breaking into a gallop as soon as they were safely out of earshot of the men.

Finally when she thought she'd put enough distance between them, the girl slowed Sooty to a walk. They weaved between the trees, now almost in total darkness.

'Bit close for comfort, that,' Jaime said.

'Uh-huh. I was worried you might try and say something, or pretend you were a local. That's why I said the tongue thing.'

'I can fake a local accent just fine.'

'Yeah, I don't think so,' the girl scoffed. 'Your voice is way too upper-class.'

'I spent a lot of time around Lords, growing up,' Jaime explained a bit too defensively, she thought. 'Before I turned to crime. Obviously.'

'Obviously.' They continued on through the bush, steam rising from Sooty's coat as the night cooled. The horse was a little spooked from their gallop, and jogged nervously. The air in the girl's lungs felt cold.

'I'm enjoying sitting behind you on this horse,' Jaime said. 'The motion is very pleasant.'

'Nice change of topic,' she said.

'We could talk about my background if you really want,' he said, unconcerned, 'It's not that interesting. Or we could talk about how I like touching you. By touching you I mean, of course, fucking you.' His tone when he said such blunt things was so unapologetic, she had to giggle. She dug him in the stomach with her elbow.

'Shhh,' she said. 'I'm trying to find us a place to sleep. Stop distracting me.'

'And will you be... sleeping in my blankets tonight? Or not? I don't think I can stand the suspense.' She ignored him, save for an exhalation of breath through her nose.

'Come on.' Jaime wheedled. 'Give me something.'

'You have another girl, who's important to you, back home. Am I right? And I don't really need complications,' she said finally.

'That's not really answering me.'

'You're so annoying. I'm regretting ever... fucking you.' She couldn't help smiling as she said it.

Jaime groaned melodramatically behind her. 'Was I that bad? I promise I can do better.'

Sooty shied sideways and nearly unseated him. He had to grab at the girl's jacket, and almost pulled
her off with him.

'Fuck this horse,' he grumbled.

The girl started giggling again despite herself.

'On second thoughts, that's probably a bad idea,' Jaime clarified. 'While your horse does have a certain savage charm... alas I rather think she hates me.'

'Awww, poor Jaime. All the girls hate you.' The girl put on an exaggerated sad voice.

'I don't think this one really hates me. Or else she wouldn't be flirting with me so much.'

'Me, flirting with you?'

'Yep. It's so obvious. Embarrassing really.'

'Oh, you're so full of shit.' She reined Sooty in and jumped off. Jaime slid down after her. She strode determinedly around to the other side of her horse and started unpacking. Jaime caught up with her, ducking under Sooty's neck. She turned to walk away with an armful of camp supplies, and he fell in step next to her.

'Are you right?' she asked tartly. He stepped his leg across hers. Even in the dim light she could have avoided it, but she deliberately allowed her leg to hit up against his. 'Hey, stop tripping me, girl,' Jaime said softly. 'You know I'm chained up. We could fall over.' He used his arm to steady her.

He smelled of smoke and dirt and sweat. She could breathe his scent in forever. Against all her best intentions, and even without the effects of any alcohol to blame, she could feel herself sliding back into some place crazy, some place intoxicating. Some place where rational thought did not exist.

'What about your other girl?' she said, clinging to a last piece of sanity.

'I'm not thinking of her right now,' Jaime whispered.

They were standing so close, legs between each other's legs, the warm vapour from their words drifting around them; she felt dazed. The darkness around them and Jaime's body heat made her unsettled. Disturbed. She wanted something, more than last night. Wanted it with a desire so fierce, she felt stunned.

'I can't do this,' she blurted, and broke away. He didn't try to stop her, maybe he was too surprised. She walked off, quickly putting a safe distance between them. Her head reeled with half-formed thoughts, none of them helpful. Oh fuck, oh fuck, but what am I going to do about him?
The next day dawned clear again, windless. She hadn't slept very well, and the imminent heat and non-existent river crossing made her irritable. She got up before the sun rose, took her fishing staff from the pack and headed down to the river. She unwound the line and cast it out into the pockets of still water under the rock shelves, as her father had once shown her, but nothing was biting except mosquitoes.

She walked back up to camp, dispirited and hungry. The one lump of bread they had left was too hard to bite into. Jaime got up, his eye looking noticeably purple, and they sat by the dead fire, drinking tea and chewing mint. The girl took off her jacket and tied it around her waist, but even with only a loose shirt on she felt lethargic. Even worse, despite the glow of sunburn on his face and his stitches crusting over, Jaime seemed more determined than ever to aggravate her. As they walked along the winding track, he talked almost constantly.

'Are you sure this is the right direction?'

'See this river? There's only one direction.'

'We don't seem to be getting anywhere.'

'We are. It's just taking a little longer than I planned.'

'I think I'm delirious from hunger.' He grinned. 'Or sexual frustration. Both, probably.'

'Seven fucking hells. Have you never heard the saying Silence is a virtue?'

'Hmm, that does sound familiar. Although like most virtues, it's overvalued. Funny thing is, lately I seem to be surrounded by strong silent types.'

'Maybe the gods are trying to tell you something,' the girl muttered.

'I'd listen to the gods more if their guidance were actually useful. Like, where do we cross this river? Send an enquiry, could you.'

'Look, I'm fairly sure we missed the river crossing when we took off last night. You want to turn around, go back? Run into the poacher and his band of rogues again? Because we can do that, if you want. I'll even cut your tongue out so they don't get suspicious.' She smiled with malice. 'Trust me, I'll enjoy doing it.'

'You were much better company yesterday,' Jaime remarked.

'Shhh.' The girl swung about and put a hand up to stop him. 'I mean, actually shhh.' She listened. Treading lightly, she padded down to the edge of the river and peered in. The plop and splash she'd heard was what she'd hoped. Turning around without moving her feet, she mouthed 'Fish' at Jaime, then held her hands apart to indicate a good size. He gave her an encouraging thumbs up.

The girl lowered herself onto her stomach and slid forward, until her arms were free of the overhang and could move above the water. Just below her, drifting back and forth in the eddying currents, a large fish rested. Its scales were silver and pink, and its mouth opened and closed, releasing small bubbles that floated to the surface and hung there like fat beads.

The girl let the weight of her left arm slide off the bank and down towards the water. The fish turned
its eye back to her, but didn't react. Smoothly, slowly, the girl's hand dipped into the water. Curled under the fish's belly. Time froze and she centred herself; her eyes and mind and body were one. The only things that existed were her hand, the water, and a silvery fish. The fish flipped its tail. The girl's arm straightened in a flash and she caught the fish, tossing it up into the air. With her right hand she batted it onto the bank where it landed with a wet splat and flapped in the dirt. Jaime grabbed a stick and stabbed it behind the gills, skewering it into the ground.

'Well done,' he said.

'It's easy. We grew up on this river, as kids. We used to tickle trout all the time. My brother was better at it than I was.' She beamed. Jaime's approval pleased her. Why does he have that effect on me? 'Let's keep going a while longer, we'll cook it for lunch.' She carried the stick with fish attached up to Sooty, opened her pack and using the edge of the pot, slid the still twitching fish off the stick and in. She replaced the lid.

'You've got decent reflexes, girl. You should carry the bow with you,' Jaime suggested, 'I saw a rabbit before. We could have a feast.'

She decided to take his advice and removed the bow from where it hung on the side of Sooty's saddle, along with three arrows. As she slid the arrows into her belt, she became aware that the entire front of her top was soaked from lying on the muddy bank, making the material cling revealing to her chest. She looked up and saw by Jaime's expression that she wasn't the only one aware of it.

She held his gaze, daring him to say something. There was a long pause, then he let out an exaggerated puff of air.

'Damn, but it's hot today.'

'I've cooled off,' she replied, smiling. She pulled the clinging top away from her skin, shook it a little in a futile effort to dry it out. The wet mud and Jaime's attention had given her goosebumps all over. Jaime was actually quiet for a while, and she found herself missing his talking. I have no idea what I want, she thought. Help.

They walked for a while longer, staying as much as possible under the shade of the trees. They didn't see anything rabbit-like, or anything else living at all, except the insects that buzzed incessantly over their heads. The bush wilted in the heat. Finally around a bend a bridge came into sight, and they stopped. The narrow track they were on crossed over the wider bridge-road, the packed gravel surface worn smooth by the wheels of passing wagons.

'I thought we'd agreed, no bridges.' Jaime objected. As she knew he would.

'It's this, or swimming. And before you answer that, I know at least five people who have drowned in this channel in the last few months.'

'I don't have a great recent history with bridges.'

'This one is not that frequented. At night, virtually deserted. We'll have to wait around for the rest of the day to be really safe, but once it gets dark hardly anyone comes past here. I mean, a few brigands and outlaws but... nothing too hazardous.' The girl started leading Sooty to a thicket of bushes some distance from the road, onto higher ground. From there they could see the flat ribbon of roadway curving away beneath them, straightening over the river, and then continuing on downstream. No-one else was around. Jaime looked unconvinced.

'The last time I made the decision to cross a bridge my companion was captured at sword-point. I
dove into the water and barely escaped with my life.'

The girl frowned. 'Was your companion a fugitive also?'

'I thought we agreed, no personal questions.'

'Hey, your story,' she pointed out.

'I was merely explaining my luck with bridges. Do you know how hard it is to swim in handcuffs?'

'Let me guess. Not as easy as it sounds?'

'We should reconsider this idea,' he frowned. 'Ride back the way we've come, find that place you know where we can wade across.'

'Like fuck we will. That's hours back. Forget that. RedHollow too, we've gone too far past now.'

'Then how are we to get these off?' Jaime shoved his shackles toward her, a rare flash of raw emotion on his face. 'Wasn't that the whole point of crossing the damned river?'

She stepped away, annoyed. 'Calm yourself. Yes, ideally, we would have gone into the Hollow. That was the plan. But things don't always work out how you planned them, do they? We have to cross the river anyway, to get to KingsLanding. Might as well cross here as anywhere. We're not far from the King's Road, I can get some steel for your cuffs at... at the Inn there. If I have to.'

Jaime slumped down on the ground. It was cooler in the leafy bush than on the river bank. Dappled shade patterned their skin. He sighed. 'Can we at least light a fire, cook that fish?'

'Alright. We'll keep an eye out for travellers.'

Across the dark water, tiny figures could be seen making their way along the road, in the direction of the main thoroughfare to the Capital. They streamed in from the adjoining lanes and arteries that led off its length. The girl considered uneasily how much harder it was going to be keeping inconspicuous from here on. The countryside was getting too populated.

Together, her and Jaime gathered a small stack of twigs, lit them, just enough to burn the trout's skin black. Then they put out the fire and ate the flaky pale flesh with their fingers. The day continued to warm up, and they sat on the hill in the cover of trees and watched the far traffic. She kept her bow slung on her shoulder. No rabbits came by. No-one used the bridge. A distant horse and cart trudged up a laneway on the other bank, shimmering in the heat, and a short time later four soldiers strode along the same lane, turning towards the King's Road and not in the direction of the bridge. The girl and Jaime sat side by side, watching the men's tiny forms marching like grey and blue ants until they were out of sight.

'North soldiers.' Jaime said.

'The Young Wolf,' she mused. 'King in The North.'

'The all-conquering Robb Stark.'

'Is that his name? Robb. Huh.'

Jaime turned to stare at her. 'Do you really not know his name?'

'I know his name,' the girl said, defensive. 'The Young Wolf. Like I said.'
'But his name. Robb Stark.'

'I know his name is Stark, fool. I may not spend as much time as you hanging around Lords,' she snipped, 'but I do know the Houses and... such. I don't need to know his name's Robb to know who he is.'

Jaime shook his head. 'Just how ignorant can one be?' he said to himself, the disdain evident.

'Oh spare me,' the girl huffed. 'Just because I'm not obsessed with the finer details of the Nobility.' From Jaime, the criticism stung. She felt judged, provincial. 'I live on the road, alright? With my horse. I do a job, I deliver shit, and the people I deliver to don't give a fuck about what all that lot in their castles are doing. My sister and her kids live in a small cottage in the hills outside Goldgrass. When I'm home, we don't spend much time discussing all the Lord's and Ladies' names.'

'Fine,' Jaime said, holding his hands up in a sorry-I-spoke gesture. But she wasn't finished.

'Do you even know how many Robbs I've met? Robb the tanner, Robb the merchant, Robb the fucking village half-wit. Wasn't the last King named Robb? It's only the most common name in these parts. I don't need to know the Stark boy shares the name Robb, alright? He's the Young Wolf, King in the North, to me.' She listed more examples, tapping her fingers as she counted them off. 'The Boy King, the Queen Regent, The Imp, The Kingslayer... That's what we call them where I come from. We don't need to know anything else.'

Jaime said nothing. The girl waited a while, angry, picking up acorns and tossing them into the shrubbery. The leaves stirred, but there was little breeze and the air felt muggy. When Jaime still didn't talk, she looked over at him, contrite. 'Sorry I... I get a bit touchy. It's the heat. Thank you for telling me. Now I know, his name is Robb.'

Jaime remained quiet. He wasn't even looking at her, he seemed lost in thoughts of somewhere else, someone else. His face was set, the lines around his eyes harsh. Dirt so ingrained it stained his pores. He looked, above all, tired. Tired of her, of his handcuffs, of travelling. Of everything.

'Robb is such a common name,' the girl carried on, regretting her earlier snark. 'Maybe you should have used it as your alias. Instead of Jaime, I mean.'

He did glance at her then, sharply, an unreadable expression on his face.

'Take it as a tip from me, for next time you're on the run.' She smiled, willing him to smile back at her. She didn't like this version of Jaime, distant and unreachable. She wanted the fun one back. After what seemed like a long time, a ghost of a smile appeared. He still looked tired.

Suddenly he stood up, stretching his bound hands above his head, rolling the kinks out of his shoulders. He started walking down towards the river. 'Thanks for the tip,' he said as he left, 'but I kind of think I look like a Jaime.'

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The girl skipped to catch up with him, Sooty following behind her. She was startled by a rustling in the bushes, and she slid the bow down off her shoulder. A shape moved in the periphery of her vision, but when she turned her head she saw nothing.

'Something's there,' Jaime said.

'Yeah, but it's gone now.' She shrugged the bow back up her arm. 'It's too hot, let's get a drink.'
They went down the bank to re-fill the water flask, and took turns drinking from it. Sooty balanced with her front hooves in the mud, back hooves on the bank, her muzzle submerged in the water up to her nostrils. With each swallow, her ears twitched. A cloud of tiny insects swarmed around their heads. The girl's eyes itched and behind them a dull but persistent pain throbbed in her skull. After a minute's hesitation - *fuck it* - she untied her jacket from around her waist, dunked it in the river and lifted it high over her head. Cold water streamed onto her hot skin. She re-soaked it, tossed it to Jaime and he wiped his face and neck with it. His eyes took in the lines of water running down her neck into her thin top, droplets trickling around the contours of her breasts.

'You should take that top off,' he said, the old teasing back in his voice.

'Is that what you think.'

'It is a long time until night,' he said, a glint in his eye. 'We could get very bored.'

A scuffling sound again caught their attention. The girl's eyes scanned the trees and bushes along the bank.

'Down river,' Jaime whispered, and she turned and looked where he was indicating. A black goat with a white belly was standing on a pebbly verge, drinking. It had short sharp horns and a white stripe along its jaw. Behind it, a smaller goat stood in the trees, its tail flicking.

The girl brought the bow to her side and eased an arrow out of her belt. She notched it in the string without looking down, her eyes glued to the goats. Then she raised the bow up and took aim.

As if sensing their impending death, both goats spun and darted off into the trees, their pointy hooves kicking up a spray of wet pebbles. One of them stumbled before leaping away; the girl's arrow lodged quivering in its shoulder.

She ran along the bank, jumping from rocks and down into the shallows, but when she reached the spot where the goat had been drinking there was only a couple of drops of blood shining on the grey stones. *Damn*. She looked up the path they'd taken as they fled, then ran back to where Sooty and Jaime waited.

'Missed it,' Jamie stated the obvious.

'No,' she said, 'I got it. The big one. It just.. didn't die.'

'It didn't die, because you didn't hit it anywhere that actually counts. That's called a miss.' Jaime said. 'C'mon, let's go back up before someone comes along and sees us.' They trooped back up the hill, their clothes drying as they went. 'We should ride after it,' the girl said half-heartedly, frustrated at her off shot.

'What would be the point, it's long gone now,' Jaime said.

They sat back down on the ridge, stared out onto the road. After a few minutes, they heard the sound of hooves and watched as a coach slowly rumbled past beneath them and made its way across the bridge. For the next few hours, a steady trickle of wayfarers passed by. A couple of children, aged around seven or eight, ran along the far bank of the river, occasionally throwing things into the water. The soft sound of their chatter and squeals drifted over on the breeze.

'They remind me of my sister's kids,' the girl said, watching them. She was lying on her stomach on the soft leaves and mulch, resting her chin in her hands. 'Two girls, that's what she has.' She turned to Jaime, who was stretched out on his back nearby, his head propped on one of their packs, elbow bent over his face to block the sun. 'Got any kids?' she asked.
Jaime's voice was muffled beneath his arm. 'I think that counts as a personal question.'

'Oh, get over your issues.'

'I do have kids, actually,' he said, yawning. 'Three.'

'Do you miss them?'

'I never had much to do with them. I was away a lot, when they were growing up.'

'I know, I feel like that with my nieces. That I'm missing them growing up, y'know?' The girl watched the two distant children vanish on up the road. 'Every time I go back they've gotten so big. They're wonderful, though. When they're not your own, they're even better.' She turned on her side towards Jaime. 'Have you got nieces or nephews?'

He hesitated. 'What?' he said, rubbing his eyes.

'Nieces. Nephews. Those things your brother or sister has running around.' She stared at him and he stared blankly back, as if she had started speaking a foreign language. She clicked her fingers in front of his eyes. 'Hello? Anyone home?'

'My sister has them, yes,' he said, slowly. She wondered if he had heat-stroke.

'Oh. Do you see them, much?'

'No.' He sat up, yawned again. 'I'm not much of a kid person.'

'You seem like you would be.'

'Appearances can be deceptive,' he grinned, suddenly playful again. His mercurial moods were giving her vertigo. 'You, for instance. Sitting there with your fair hair and your big eyes, like an innocent maiden.' She was startled, and he reached over his cuffed hands and pinched a lock of her hair between his fingers. 'Strawberry blonde. I was always a fool for blondes,' he continued in a low voice, running the smooth strand through his palm.

'I... uh. I always think it's more, uh... red,' she stuttered. The look on his face was so dreamy he almost looked to be in a trance.

'Red-tinged, perhaps. Red hair must be in your family somewhere. But you my dear girl, are most definitely blonde.'

The girl swallowed. In the far recesses of her mind, a warning sounded; the way he had switched from one mood to another with no apparent reason, his weirdness around some subjects. He didn't want her to pry into his background and that was fine, everyone was a liar. Even so, something else wasn't quite right. But as he leaned in to kiss her, the warning grew so faint she couldn't even hear it any more. Well, she could. But *fuck warnings.*
Jaime's mouth pressed against hers, his tongue hard on her tongue. The taste of him was what she imagined heat must taste like: spicy, sweet, salty, addictive. The wet warmth of the kiss reached all the way down into her belly, spreading a blissful sedative that seeped into all her limbs and paralysed them. Around her, the leaves trembled and the insect life hummed; on the road carts rolled by and children yelled, but the girl had no awareness of any of it. Only Jaime's mouth. The taste of him.

Jaime's hands came up between them and she felt the metal of the cuffs digging into her chest. 'Fucking hells,' Jaime swore softly, as he broke their kiss. His breath in her face was delicious. She was intoxicated by it. She leaned forward but he pushed her back. Shifted himself around until he was kneeling beside her. Then he raised his hands and looped them over her head.

The girl knelt up too, as he drew her in towards him. His bound wrists slid down the curve of her spine, his fingers splayed out to hold her steady. She kissed him lightly, he groaned and bit at her neck. 'If I had these cuffs off, you know what I would do?' he muttered. She hoped he wasn't expecting an answer. She didn't feel capable of talking right now. The part of her brain that dealt in coherent speech had completely checked out. So she could only make a small grunting noise as he straightened up, grabbed her hips as far as the restraint on his hands allowed and turned her around so that she faced away from him. His arms tightened to hold her there, and his mouth nipped at her neck.

'I'd fuck you like this,' he said. His hands dropped to her pelvis and he pulled her forcibly towards him, her bottom hitting against his crotch. 'I like it this way. Do you?' He nuzzled her collar bones, bit her skin again. When she didn't answer, just moaned quietly in her throat, he added 'I think you'd like it.'

The girl almost couldn't breath fast enough, her pulse hammered and she felt weak yet electrified at the same time. She reached behind her to pull down her clothing, frantic to feel his skin against hers, his hard flesh pushing into her, filling her up. A sharp sound registered in her dulled brain, but she ignored it. Her fingers fumbled on the waistband of her pants. Fucking clothes, how difficult were they to get off in a hurry? The sound came again, a horse's snort, and the ground under the girl's knees vibrated a little with heavy hoof thuds. She paused, the fog in her mind lifting. Sooty? Was that Sooty? She put her hands on the top of Jaime's forearms as they wrapped around her waist, gripped them. It was like being enclosed by iron bands.

'Stop,' she panted urgently. 'Stop for a... for a second.'

Reluctantly, she thought, Jaime relaxed his hold and raised his head from her neck. They listened. A horse's snort sounded again, in the direction of the trees where Sooty had wandered off to graze. The stamping sound of nervous hooves, and along with that something even more sinister: a strange, low, hissing grumble, a deep, broken rasp. It was loud enough to make the hairs on her arm stand up. Like the malevolent chuckle of a demon. The girl had never seen a demon, or believed in one. But if she did, that's exactly what it would sound like.

'What in gods name...?' Jaime said, and the girl felt him freeze behind her. She herself turned cold with fear. She'd lived nearly her whole life in these parts, and had not once heard a sound like that before.

Slowly, she lifted Jaime's arms and ducked under them, easing herself to her feet as silently as she could. Standing up made her momentarily dizzy. The air on her flushed cheeks was still warm, the trees thick all around her, languidly rustling their leaves. She stared into the darkness of their dense
foliage. Beyond a few yards into the bush, everything was just shifting shapes and shadow patterns.

'What was that... growling?' Jaime asked, also getting to his feet. His voice was still husky with recent lust. He cleared his throat. 'I'm going to take a stab in the dark here and say it wasn't your horse.'

'Sooty's in there, though.'

'Maybe we should... Jaime glanced down at the bridge. 'Relocate ourselves. Post haste.'

'Not without Sooty.' She took a breath.

Jaime knocked one arm into her shoulder with some force. 'Don't fucking whistle for it, girl! Are you mad?'

She glared at him, stepped away and grabbed her bow from the ground. 'Fine. I won't whistle.' She notched one of the two arrows she had in her quiver, lifted the curved weapon and got a good grip on the feathered end of the arrow. She headed towards the trees. 'Are you coming?' she whispered back, harshly.

'You are wholly, irreparably deranged,' Jaime said. 'To think this a good idea. And you are seriously going to need more than two fucking arrows.'

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They crept through the bush, placing their steps cautiously, trying not to break twigs or scuff dried leaves. The ground underfoot was spongy and thick with mulch. A ticking of beetles and occasional fluttering of a bird somewhere overhead were the only sounds. The girl controlled her breath; in, out, calm, steady. The fear had left her, replaced with a cold determination. When she felt this way, nothing could sway her. This is how a good hunter must be, she knew. Totally focused, totally ruthless.

In a ditch up ahead, hidden by a tangle of blackberry branches, she could see something moving. She stopped mid stride, sank lower to the ground. Jaime beside her did the same. He had a broken stump of dead wood in his hands. It was riddled with ant holes and looked as if it might crumble to sawdust at any moment. But Jaime's face was as determined as hers, he didn't look trepid or unsure. He looked excited, alive with the thrill of the hunt. And curious.

The growling noise came over them again, jagged and threatening and very close by. Also a fetid smell with it. Rotten meat and piss. A musky wild animal smell. Was it a bear? The girl had heard bears before, they didn't sound like this. A big cat? How big did they get, anyway? She jabbed her finger at the spot behind the screen of blackberries, to indicate what they both already knew; that's where it was. Whatever it was.

Jaime rose up from his squatting position and craned his head to see over the hedge. Took a couple of steps forward. Froze again. The girl waited for a moment, and when it didn't appear as though Jaime was destined to be immediately torn limb from limb, she carefully followed his lead. Her bow was held out straight in front of her, the string tightly drawn back. Peering over the spiky twigs and berries, she could see a shape crouching in the shady thicket in front of them, not more than five yards away.

Her first thought was Sooty, because of the size, but then she came to her senses and realised horses don't crouch. It had its head down and there was a crunching, grinding sound like granite being smashed with a roller. Another spine-tingling growl, snarling up from the depths of its being. 'Holy mother of Seven gods,' Jaime whispered in awe. 'Have you ever seen a wolf that big before?'
'It's eating my goat,' she noted. They were mouthing the words at each other, basically lip-reading.

'I think it is its goat, now.'

'Where's Sooty?'

'I don't much know, or care.' Jaime's mouth exaggerated each silently enunciated word. 'Let's go.'

They began to back away. Everything was in high intensity focus to the girl. The pad of their footfalls, the foul smell of the wolf, the streak of sunlight shining along the smooth shaft of her arrow which stuck out of the goat's body as it was lifted up in the wolf's jaws. It must have seen us, smelled us. Lucky it's eating. We might live another day yet, she thought. They backed up for what seemed like eternity, placing each step behind themselves so gently on the ground that sticks bent and didn't break under them. Finally they were far enough distance away that Jaime indicated they turn around. They took off running out of the thick bush and back into the relative clearing of the spot they'd been using as a rest stop.

'Not even Robb Stark's wolf is that size,' Jaime puffed. 'I think our waiting-around-til-night-fall plan has been somewhat compromised.' He picked up the pack on the ground that he'd rested his head on. The remainder of their gear had been strapped to Sooty. 'Come on,' he turned to the girl, where she stood in the clearing. Seeing her face, he rolled his eyes. 'Oh, don't even.'

'Sooty is my horse, she's saved my life before. A lot of times, actually. She was here just now, we heard her. We need to find her!'

'The horse is not stupid, she's seen the size of that wolf and run for it. I'm with her.'

'Think for just a... Jaime, please,' the girl begged. 'It's too early, there's still too much traffic. And Sooty'll come back, I know she will.'

'You don't know anything,' he said, and his eyes looked sad, but hard. 'Nothing.'

She felt herself anger again. 'What is with your reckless bullshit? Patience is a virtue, fool!'

'Oh!' Jaime mocked, pulling a sorry-what-was-I-thinking face. 'Is that up there with silence? Because I have sat alone in a cage, chained to a stake, for seven months; I think I've practised the virtues of patience and silence long enough to make me a damn saint. So, my dear girl,' he adjusted the pack on his shoulder, 'You can stay here and commit suicide waiting for your beloved horse to your heart's content. I have a life to get on with.' He turned and with surprising agility for someone with his hands in chains, ran off lightly down the slope, angling towards the road that led onto the bridge. His boots skidded a little as he negotiated the steep gradient. Within seconds the top of his head was gone from view down the ridge.

Fuck off then! the girl thought bitterly. A pain stabbed in her ribcage. Her chest felt tight. Taking my pack too, what little is in there. You won't get far in daylight, with any luck someone will pick you up and return you to the cage where you belong. You treacherous, blackguarded, fucking arse. She looked back into the trees, half-expecting a monster wolf to prowl forth and rip her to shreds. She'd almost welcome it as an improvement to her day. But all was still. Sooty was nowhere to be seen or heard, either.

She dithered, holding the bow loosely, then took the arrow from it and stuck it back in her belt. She walked further up the hill, searching the ground for hoof prints. Her heart pounded from running and heightened emotion, she couldn't focus. She didn't dare whistle, not so close to that creature in the forest. As she tried to gather her whirling thoughts into some sense of order, the sound of hoof beats
came from the road below and she looked over hopefully.

But it wasn’t Sooty. Three men in dirty black coats, hoods pulled low over their faces, were riding towards the bridge. She recognised them immediately as outlaws. And not the good kind, the bend-the-rules but still have basic humanity, kind. These men were brutal miscreants who would disembowel a child for a loaf of bread and not even be hungry. She’d crossed paths with them before, and survived to tell the tale, mainly thanks to Sooty. But now Sooty was gone, she was losing her mind, and the one who was going to find himself right dead in the path of these particular felons was Jaime.

'Fuck,' the girl cursed, out loud. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck fuck!' She took out the arrow again, set it in the bow, and ran down the hill to the bridge.
Outlaws

It was slipperier than she expected getting down the gradient from the forest to the road. She was moving too fast and her heels slid out from under her. She went down the slope on her behind, jumping off at the end. It was a heavy landing and she pitched forward onto her hands, the pebbly surface skinning both palms. *Ouch.*

As she scrambled to her feet, she was aware her stealthy entrance had not gone unnoticed. About fifty yards down the road, the trio of horsemen stopped, swinging their mounts around as one.

It was almost dusk; the light beginning to fade out into the edges of the sky and all around the countryside turning grey. The time of day that crept up on you unnoticed, until you looked at something a distance away and realised it was unclear. The girl watched as the outlaws turned to face her, but she couldn't pick out their faces or eyes. They were just a black mass of horse legs and cloaks, like a mythical multi-headed creature. Without Sooty, the girl felt very alone, and small.

Glancing further beyond the men, she could see a figure with head bowed, shuffling closer to the bridge. Jaime had evidently thought he couldn't outrun three horsemen and had chosen to look harmless instead. He didn't know these outlaws targeted harmless. *He's alone too,* the girl reminded herself. She dusted her sore palms on her top, shifted the bow back up her shoulder.

*Here goes nothing,* she thought, taking a deep breath.

She started walking towards the men, her boots crunching on the gravel. They stood and waited for her in the dimming light. One of them turned to look back at Jaime, as if undecided which one of these lone travellers was easier pickings. He reined his mount around and separated from his fellow outlaws, obviously figuring that they could have both.

'Hey!' the girl called out, to distract him.

The man who had turned around paused, but another outlaw, with a long black beard pointing like a dagger from under his hood, motioned him to continue. 'Hold that one for me,' the bearded man instructed, and the instructee kicked his horse forward and rode up to the retreating Jaime.

The other two outlaws, the bearded one who sat higher on a taller horse and a smaller man, rode on toward the girl. The clop-clop of their horse's hooves sounded like the slow beat of warning drums. The girl could see that the man who'd ridden after Jaime had easily caught up to him. Jaime didn't even try to run off, just hunched over to make himself inconspicuous. *If only he knew how futile that was,* the girl thought.

'Well hello there, beautiful,* the bearded man said, as he neared. His voice was soft and high, but more menacing for it. He rested his crossed arms on the pommel of his saddle and leaned forward to leer at her. She supposed he was attempting a smile. She gave him one of her own.

'Hello Draw,* she greeted him. Looked over at the smaller man, nodded. 'Guts.' Guts was a teenager, with a long thin face and a vacant look. The only time the girl had seen any sign of life on it was when he was disembowelling a villager who'd bought the last bag of salt ahead of him at a market. His eyes had shone then with pure joy.

'You remembered our... hey, she remembered our names!* Draw said in mock-delight, turning to look at Guts. Guts didn't change expression. He sucked spit through his teeth, and it made a squeaking sound.
Draw nudged his horse right on up to the girl, so that his stirrup was level with her shoulder. A massive curved scythe hung from his hip and nearly brushed against the girl's cheek. It was so polished and lathed she could see her reflection in its surface. She didn't back away. She could hear no-one else coming down the road, it was late in the day and people everywhere were finished their business and gone home, or settling into their camps. Good people, anyway. The lawless and the ne'er-do-wells, of course, were just waking up.

She looked down the road and saw with dismay that the third man had dismounted and was holding some kind of weapon at Jaime's neck. They were too far away for her to see what it was, or whether Jaime's face was showing his regret that he hadn't run like fuck while he still had half a chance.

'Fancy seeing you here,' the girl looked up at Draw, looming over her on his destrier. Sooty would barely reach to this horse's withers. 'It's been a while.'

'Too long,' said Draw in his pleasant voice, for all the world as if their last encounter had not involved attempted rape and mass violence.

'New horse?' she asked, politely.

'The last one was too traumatised by your mare, Delivery Girl,' Draw snickered quietly. 'He weren't ever quite the same after that nag of yours kicked 'im in the head and trampled 'im. I notice though,' he looked around in an exaggerated fashion,' that you appear to be less one killer horse this evening.' The smile he beamed down at her was terrifying.

'She's around,' the girl said. She marveled at how calm her voice sounded. 'Aren't you also less some companions? I'm sure I remember more of you.'

'How kind to notice. Well, Will was sent to the Wall some time back. You remember, Guts's brother? Deserted, and got his head lopped off by Lord Stark himself. Went mad too, I hear. Saying all sorts of rubbish. Sanity don't run in that family, do it, Guts?' Draw glanced over to his silent partner. Guts stared back at him with the intelligence of a dead fish.

'Shame,' the girl said. 'Will was the only one of you I liked'

Draw laughed heartily. 'Ahh... Delivery Girl.' He drew his sabre from his hip so swiftly that she didn't see the motion, just felt the cold sharp tip of it dimpling the skin under her chin. He applied a little pressure to tip her head back, so he could meet her eyes. 'You just never got the chance to know us better.'

The girl couldn't answer. Moving her jaw would result in the blade piercing her throat. The outlaw inclined his head slightly, and she obediently dropped the bow from her shoulder. It clinked onto the road.

'Bale! Bring that one up here!' Draw called out to his third companion, and the girl saw out of the corner of her eye Jaime being brought up to join them. She didn't dare move her head to look at him. 'Well, well, ain't this cosy?' Draw said. He was positively glowing with elation. 'Let's start by turning out all your pockets and you, pretty boy,' he turned to Jaime, who still had his head down, 'empty that pack.'

Jaime dropped the pack on the ground and knelt to try and open the straps.

'Handcuffs, huh?' There was a silence, where the girl could see something getting put together in Draw's mind. 'Hey Bale. What was we hearing just the other day?'

Bale, a large man with no front teeth, grinned slowly as recognition dawned.
'Guts, remember that kid down in RedHollow, the one said all the North soldiers was there yesterday? Remember who he says they was ever so keen to find?'

Guts stared at Draw and smiled, too. The smile reminded the girl of the vacuum created when catfish open their mouths and suck in all life in the immediate vicinity.

The girl swallowed. The sharp metal dented into her flesh. She licked her lips.

'Oh, we has hit the fucking jackpot with this one, lads,' Draw chuckled.

The girl whistled, as loud and long as she could. The sound hung in the still evening air, clear as a church bell.

At the same time, Jaime swung his hands up and knocked Bale's pick-axe out of his hands. Draw spun his horse around and aimed his massive scythe into the centre of Jaime's chest. He was so quick, Jaime didn't have time to react, let alone pick up Bale's axe from the ground. Draw's blade pressed into his shirt. A patch of blood bloomed from the scythe's touch, soaking the material, and Jaime stumbled backwards into the ditch.

The girl whistled again.

'Shit that whore up!' Draw shouted, and Guts jumped off his horse, took two lanky steps and held a serrated fishing knife in the girl's face. She stared into his deserted eyes with all the bravado she could muster. Up this close, she noticed the teeth of the knife had bits of dried flesh stuck to them.

'Now now, Jaime, don't over-excite yourself, I wouldn't want to kill you,' Draw said, dismounting and striding to the fallen Jaime with lithe ease. 'Besides, the party's just starting. We have to fuck your friend first.'

He just had time to haul Jaime up out of the ditch when a putrid stench washed over the group. Rotten meat and musk and urine. The horses pranced and shied, tossing their heads, their breath puffing out white clouds in the darkening air. Draw looked uncertain, his hand fisted in Jaime's tunic, unwilling to let go. Bale wrinkled his nose at the smell and tried to get the panicked horses under control. They dragged him backwards but he held onto their reins grimly. Guts kept his eyes on the girl, angling his narrow knife along her cheek.

Along with the smell came a padding noise, the quiet click of claws. Then Bale gave a short surprised yelp, and something splattered wetly on the ground. The horses, freed, galloped madly on up the road, their hoof beats rattling on the stones.

The girl held her nerve and Guts' gaze, although her bowels cramped with fear. Guts refused to break eye contact first. Behind him, a shadow grew, grey and black and blending in with the night. Draw yelled something, but Guts didn't have a chance to take his partner's no doubt very useful advice. The teenager's head was ripped clean off his skinny body, and the girl was suddenly drenched in blood.

She sat down, hard. 'Just keep still,' she hissed to Jaime. 'Just don't move.'

Draw appeared stunned at this unexpected turn of events, but only momentarily. He leapt away from Jaime and sprang towards the wolf, who was shaking Guts' head wildly and sending a red arc of blood across the road. Draw showed no fear as he plunged his blade towards the animal's neck, his face was a portrait of determined courage, right up until the wolf dropped Guts' head and pounced. The outlaw fell back and was lost beneath the wolf's teeth and claws.

The girl blinked to clear her eyes of blood, rolled backwards into the ditch. She started crawling
towards Jaime. He was already in a crouch moving away from her. She tried to breathe evenly, tried to move as quickly and quietly as she could. Thorns jabbed into her knees and sharp rocks cut her hands. Blood trickled into her eyes but she didn't stop to wipe it away.

They crawled for what seemed forever, the girl expecting at any moment to be lifted clear of the ditch in sharp jaws. Finally, Jaime turned and pulled himself up to the side, their path ending in a bank. The girl sat up and looked past him and saw the struts of the bridge rising overhead. The rush of the river was loud.

'Here, girl.' Jaime reached both hands down and pulled her up onto the road. They squatted there, looking back along where they'd come. The sun had gone completely and it was too dark now to see anything except a vague black shape lying far away on the road.

'Is it gone?' the girl whispered.

'I think so. Taken the bearded blackguard with it. It's a shame, we could've really used that blade of his.'

'You wanna go back and get it? It's fine, I'll wait here,' she replied, weakly.

'It's good you still have a sense of humour,' he quipped.

She staggered on numb legs with Jaime across the final stretch of road and onto the bridge, their footsteps ringing hollow on the planks. After crawling for so long, her knees didn't straighten properly. Her palms were on fire with every splinter and nettle embedded in them. She could feel the mask of blood on her face drying; when she blinked it cracked. Below her feet, the black water rushed past in dizzying motion, making the bridge seem to sway and lurch.

Jaime tapped her arm to stop, pointed. She looked up and saw a man stumbling along in front of them. He seemed to be dragging something. They hurried to catch up to him, and Jaime blocked his path. Bale, holding his axe in one hand and his guts in the other, took another few tottering steps. He wobbled but stayed stubbornly upright.

'How did you make it this far? That's very impressive,' Jaime said.

Bale bared his toothless lips, pink froth in the corners of his mouth, but didn't seem quite capable of speech.

'I guess the wolf didn't want you. He must've been frightened off by that pick you have there. The one you told me you'd cave my head in with?' Jaime looked at the man expectantly. 'Forgotten so soon? Never mind. We're here for you now.' Jaime leaned over and took the pick-axe out of the man's grip. Bale's mouth foamed as it opened and closed, and thin ropes of spit fell to the bridge's planks. 'Kingsssslaaay...’ he spat wetly.

Jaime tossed the axe to the girl, and she caught it. Then he firmly guided Bale over towards the side of the bridge, keeping his body angled away so that he didn't brush up against the contents of Bale's stomach. At the piers, Bale made a last effort to wriggle away, but Jaime held him fast. The man grabbed at the struts and clung on. His intestines flopped onto the deck. Jaime looked at them with distaste, then crouched down, grabbed the man's ankles in both hands and hoisted him straight up. Bale flailed his arms as he tilted over the wall of the bridge and down, turning end over end, into the churning blackness.

The girl walked to Jaime's side, and together they peered after the outlaw's descent. She picked up the loops of his insides and flung them after him. The water swelled and charged on, heedless.
'You're not very squeamish, are you?' Jaime said.

'My father was a butcher. We used to have pig's heads in the bathtub most days.'

'Well. You have quite the talent for it.'

'Thanks,' she replied, wiping gunk from her face with a forearm. 'And you have quite the talent for pushing people off stuff.'

'I've had practise,' Jaime shrugged.
Chains

Once across the bridge, they immediately headed down the steep embankment that dropped to the river. Jaime insisted on getting off the road, and the girl had to wash her face and hands. She knelt on the stony inlet and scrubbed at her skin, removed her bloody top and soaked it in the ice-cold water. Even after she'd wrung it out several times, it still stained maroon.

Jaime sat on a boulder under one of the bridge's support beams, resting his chin in his hands. He was, miraculously, still holding their one remaining backpack. 'So, what now?' he asked. It sounded more like a philosophical statement than an actual question requiring an answer, so the girl ignored him and kept rinsing her clothes and dunking her hair, in a futile effort to rid them of the remains of Guts.

'I don't know about you, but I'm starving,' Jaime commented.

'There's no food,' the girl said. She twisted her wet hair, picked at a glob on her top with her fingernail.

'Not here. But there's people around, there must be houses, Inns. Isn't the Crossroads nearby?' Jaime turned his head to look back up the bank, to where the road cornered right and ran along the river, downstream. 'That's the Riverroad, isn't it?'

'No, but it leads onto it,' the girl said.

'And then we're... how far from the Inn?'

'I'm not going to that Inn, alright?' she snapped.

'They'd have food there. Got any coins in this pack of yours?' Jaime began unstrapping it, rummaging through the contents. The girl marched up to him and snatched it out of his hands.

'I do have some coins, and they're mine to spend where and when I see fit. It's hours walk to the Crossroads, for your information. Only a short ride, but in case you haven't noticed, we're less one horse. And, I kind of need her.' The girl stared out across the river to where they'd been the day before, hoping to see some kind of movement in the trees that might, possibly, be Sooty. But there was nothing but blackness.

'Can't you steal another horse? I'd have thought a girl of your experience would have a knack for that.'

'I don't need another horse!' she retorted. 'I need my horse!' There was a pain in her chest so real it was suddenly hard to breathe. It was worse than the pains in her hands or knees. She refused to face the likelihood that Sooty may be gone forever, shook her head to clear the thought from it. 'I've had her since she was a foal, and I was seven. I taught her everything she knows. She's the best horse in the... oh, whatever. Like you'd understand.'

'Well, definitely better than the one who ran you into that tree branch and impaled you,' Jaime agreed. He pulled his tunic away from his body, wincing a little. 'But we need to deal with more immediate problems. I'm sure Sooty can look after herself for a while.'

The girl peered at Jaime. 'Are you hurt?'

'Not badly,' he grinned, but his forehead creased.
'Let me...' the girl came over to him, pushed aside his hands and felt the cut in the tunic material on his chest, clean as if from shears. She pulled up the hem with a sinking dread and inhaled sharply when she saw the gash from Draw's scythe leaking dark red down Jaime's torso.

'It's nothing,' he muttered, trying to move her away. 'Let's just get out of here.'

She gently touched the raised edges of his wound, feeling the width apart of them, the warm wetness on her fingers. 'This needs to be stitched, it will fester.'

'Not in the next few hours it won't. Let's worry first about getting somewhere we're safe from every passing brigand who wants to cleave our heads in. And getting some food. Then you can inflict your maester's skills on me all you wish.' Jaime stood up, impatient. 'And we have this, remember?' He retrieved the pick-axe the girl had left on the bank while she was washing. 'We'll get these chains off, too.'

Reluctantly, the girl followed him up the escarpment. The pale strip of road angled away from the river, stretching into the distance and thankfully deserted at this time of night. Trees clustered in on both sides, their branches reaching across to entwine twiggy hands with each other. Somewhere a bird hooted, and night insects trilled beneath the ground. At least the flies had retired.

'What was it that outlaw said to you, on the bridge?' the girl asked.

'He didn't say anything.'

'He was trying to say something. Before you pushed him off. He was... saying a word.'

Jaime frowned as if seriously trying to remember. 'I think he may've said 'Kill me,' or similar.'

'But he grabbed hold of the side of the bridge when you tried to lift him over it... that doesn't make sense.' Something else was tickling at the back of the girl's mind, something from the conversation they'd had with the outlaws. She'd had no time to think on it then, but now it was nagging her. An itch she couldn't quite reach. *Something one of the men had said, but what had it been?*

Jaime looked bored. 'He was carrying his intestines in his hand. I don't think you can expect much sense from him.'

The pair started walking, staying in the forest's shadows but following the road. A gibbous moon hung low in the sky, like a yellow egg. Soon they came to a junction where their path met a highway. They stopped, well back from the verge. They were more likely to run into patrols or other travellers here.

'The Riverroad,' Jaime said. 'About six miles to the Inn, I'd guess.'

'There are bound to be folks about,' the girl said.

'Time to get these off, then,' Jaime said, passing her the pick-axe. 'If I'm not in chains then I'm of much less interest to the general public.'

They sat a little way from the road, under the cover of some bushes. The moon shone bright enough to see by, and the air was crisp. Sounds travelled further on clear nights, the girl knew, so she was concerned at the noise this was going to make, and who might hear it. To distract herself, she turned the axe's handle over and over in one hand, getting a feel for it. It was a light weapon, compact, the tapered end sharpened to a fine edge. She selected the blunt end to face down, and swung it a few times for practise.
Jaime sat on the grass and laid his cuffed hands out on a small log, his hands stretched as far apart as they could. 'Whenever you're ready,' he said, looking up at her.

'I haven't broken a chain apart before,' the girl warned.

'There's nothing to it. Just look at a place in the middle and hit it fucking hard.'

'This is more a stabbing sort of weapon, not a smashing one.'

'Are you going to fail before you've even tried, girl? Just hit the godsdamn chain.'

The girl sighed, took a deep breath and hefted the axe above her head.

'I hope your aim with an axe is better than your aim with a bow,' Jaime said, cheerfully.

'You don't need hands, right?' she said, a hint of a smile.

'I have faith in you.'

She brought the pick-axe down with all her strength. It bounced off the chains with a resonant clang, almost hitting her in the face on the rebound.

Jaime let out a pained grunt at the shock of the blow to his wrists. He shook them, straightened them out on the log. 'Again.'

The girl raised the axe and swung a second time, and again the axe ricocheted off without breaking the chain. The echoing ring of it resounded through the trees, too loud for the girl's liking. Her palms burned from the recoil.

'Fuck,' Jaime said. He bit down on his lip. His fingers splayed at the agony the metal cuffs were inflicting on his wrists through the blow's force. 'Again.'

'No, this thing is too light,' the girl argued. 'And people two villages away can hear this.'

'Use the pick end, not the mallet end. Cut the links, or prise them apart,' Jaime insisted.

The girl did as he bid, hacking with the pick, but the pointed edge just keep skipping off the chain's curved links rather than biting in. She tried to lever the links apart but the iron rings were unyielding. After she'd sliced her hands twice, she threw the axe down, the handle slippery with her blood. 'This is useless. We need something heavier.'

Jaime looked seriously pissed. He smacked his hands on the log, gave his cuffs a fierce yank apart as if he could rid himself of them by sheer force of will. Then he lay backwards on the ground in frustration, glaring up through the overhanging leaves with a furious expression and mouthing curse words, presumably at the gods. The girl crossed her arms, pressed her cut hands into the crook of her elbows, and waited for him to calm down.

'Are you done?'

He said nothing, just lay on his back in smouldering silence.

'I'll leave you here, head for the Inn,' the girl said. 'I should be gone three hours at the most, less if I cadge a ride off a local. I'll get a broadsword or proper axe. Then I'll come back.'

'You won't come back,' he said.
'Yes, I will. I promise.'

Jaime rolled onto his side. 'I wonder how long until North soldiers come along here, pick me up?' he mused.

'Stop being so hopeless! It achieves nothing,' she said, irritated. 'I've lost my horse, I'm going to a place I swore I'd never go to again, to get what you want, so the least you can do is quit crying about your fucking handcuffs.'

He eyed her sullenly, said nothing. She took the pack off him and untied a pouch inside. Tipped out a handful of coins and some jewellery, considered them, then stuffed the lot into the pocket of her pants. She took the water flask and drank some, then put it back. 'I'm leaving you the pack with a blanket in it, and the pick-axe,' she said. 'You could cause some damage with it if you had to. Even cuffed.'

'What about you? You lost your bow back at the bridge.'

'I'll survive.'

He looked a little grateful, at least. 'So, tell me. What is it you have against the Crossroads?' he asked, sitting up, some of the normal irreverence back in his voice. 'What haunts you there? Did you get ripped off in a trade gone wrong? Some soldier confiscate your illegal bounty? I'm dying to know what memory was so bad you swore never to return.'

The girl just stood there and looked at him a long moment. The moon shone its light on the road and made every rut in it shimmer like a wave. A low mist rose off the land, smudging the sharpness out of the world. She thought about not answering Jaime's question. Thought about lying. Then she opened her mouth and the words just spilled out.

'It's where my brother was killed.'

Jaime looked at her, stunned.

'He... I don't know where, exactly. It might've been at the Inn, or in the forest, or on the road, or by the river... I don't know. I mean, he died, I know that. Everyone around here knows that. But where he took his last breath, where his bones lie... I don't know.' She breathed in, stared unseeing at the trees, clenched and unclenched her fists. 'I wish I knew. I would come here all the time, then. Bring flowers for his grave. A nice headstone. I'd sit at the place where he was buried, and talk to him. Tell him I missed him. Tell him all about Sooty; he loved Sooty.' The girl smiled sadly. 'About his nieces, how they're growing up. They're such cheeky kids, just like him. Redheads, too. One day soon they'll be older than he ever was.' She choked on the bitterness of her words. 'How is that... right?'

She paused, struggling to hold herself together. 'If I knew where he was, I'd come here all the time. But I don't. I probably never will. So this place is, like you say, haunted for me.'

Neither of them spoke. Finally, the girl released a long-held breath, turned to go. 'Well. See you in a little while.'

She started off down the road, her footsteps tapping, her figure fading into the mist.

Jaime stood up, stared after her. 'Your brother... his name was Mycah?' he asked quietly. But of course, he already knew the answer. And of course, she didn't hear him. She'd already vanished into the fog.
The girl kept to the verge as she walked. The moonlight made uneven patches on the road merge together, so although she could see well enough to know where she was going, she kept stumbling on unexpected bumps and dips.

Everything was silvered by the mist, and the trees cast stripy black shadows in her path. She found herself stepping over them, jumping the wide ones. *If only I don't tread on a shadow then...* she thought, before stopping herself. *Then... what? Everything will work out? Sooty will come back? She's probably half-way home to Goldgrass by now.* The girl's thoughts flicked to Jaime. *Then Jaime will stay with me?*

She hadn't consciously realised what it was she actually wanted, until just then. But as soon as the want crystallised itself in her mind, she smothered it like a runty whelp. *Let's try and stay somewhat in the realms of reality, shall we?* she chastised herself.

She walked for over half an hour when the sound of hooves came from up ahead. Two riders emerged from the veil of fog wisping across the road, and reined in when they saw her. They wore chainmail and leather armour, with dark blue coats and smooth grey helmets. Their shields bore the sigil of a snarling wolf.

'Hold, girl,' one of them called out, as she made to walk past. She halted, looked up at them blandly.

'A moment of your time,' the soldier said. His tone made it clear that this was not a request but an order. His horse shifted restlessly and tossed its head, the bit clacking against its teeth. 'A late night for a lone girl on the Riverroad,' he observed.

'Yes. I was unfortunate enough to lose my horse, and all my belongings.' She gestured up the road. 'Is it far to the Inn? I've been walking for hours.'

'Not far,' said the soldier. He studied her. She felt uncomfortable, having spent most of her life avoiding the attention of soldiers, lawmen and all persons of authority.

'We heard a clanging noise earlier, coming from this direction. Any idea what that may have been?'

'Yes, I'm afraid that was me. My horse had lost a shoe and I was trying to bang it back on. She didn't take kindly to my amateur farrier skills, and took off on me.' The girl smiled. 'Damn horses.'

'I see. Well that would explain the noise we heard from our camp. So, girl. Do you live around here?'

'In, ah... RedHollow. My family live here and I'm visiting them.'

'What's your name?'

She hesitated fractionally. 'Robberta.'

'Well, Robberta, if you're from the Hollow then you'd know there has been a cordon of soldiers there since last night, searching for an escaped prisoner. We're sending out patrols throughout the Riverlands, and everyone is being questioned as to who they may have seen on their travels.' The soldier regarded her closely. 'This man is very dangerous. He is travelling alone and shouldn't be approached in any circumstances.'

'Oh,' the girl said. There was a silence. 'Well, thanks for letting me know.'
'You haven't run into anyone of that description?'

'Of what description?' the girl asked innocently. 'It's just, 'dangerous' 'escaped prisoners' don't tend to wander around advertising that fact. In my experience.'

The soldier looked stern. 'Have you seen,' he emphasised curtly, 'any lone man, unkempt, acting suspiciously, in these parts?'

She pondered the question, then snapped her fingers. 'There's a dead body over the bridge, that way.' She pointed. 'I think maybe attacked by a wild animal or something... my horse shied at it when we crossed. That's probably your fellow. You should check it out,' she smiled helpfully. 'As long as you don't need a head. I think that was... absent.'

The soldiers looked at each other, then at her. She waited.

'We will check that out come the dawn,' the main one said.

She nodded.

The soldiers swung their horses' heads around and began to ride back the way they'd come.

'Wait!' called the girl, hurrying up to them. 'D'ya think you could possibly give me a lift?'

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The Stark soldiers dropped her near their camp further up the road, and she thanked them, wished them luck in locating their missing prisoner. She headed on along the Riverroad until out of sight, then cut through the bush towards the river. She was only about a mile now from the Crossroads Inn, and long-forgotten landmarks rose at her out of the darkness. A gate, a corner, a cluster of willow trees. Her pulse began to race. Despite the chill night air, sweat dampened under her arms and she felt short of breath.

Seven hells but I hate this place, she swore, then reminded herself that Jaime was expecting her back soon, with tools. Jaime, who had nothing to do with the bad memories taunting her here, who was right now being hunted by soldiers and she his only help. Something melted inside of her at the thought of him; his wry smile, the way his fringe fell into his green eyes. It's nothing, I'm just fond of him, is all. She pressed on.

Making her way along the riverbank, she stared out into the swirling current. Despite her best efforts, with each step closer to the Inn more bad thoughts tormented her. Was this where you died, little brother? Here? Besides the water, or further over here, among this copse of trees? Is this where you ran for your life? You were a fast runner. I was so proud of you. Were you scared at the end? Were you in pain? She felt cold fingers grab at her heart and squeeze it. Am I walking over your bones, now? Is this the soil fed with your blood?

The girl stopped, shaking, unable to go on. The Inn was close, she could smell the smoke from its chimneys, but she needed to compose herself. She sat down on the bank and looked across into the far distance, imagining for a brief moment that she saw Sooty running through the trees on the other side. She knew it was only the shadows that clouds made as they drifted across the moon, but she whistled anyway. In the still air, the sound seemed to hang, reverberating across the black water.

She whistled again. After several minutes had passed, she picked up some pebbles on the ground beside her and skipped them onto the river. They leapt lightly across the surface, kicking up little white splashes that caught the light. I could only ever get four skips, little brother, she thought, you once got seven. Caught up in her memories, she didn't hear the footsteps until they were
directly behind her.

'What are you doing?'

The girl jumped up and spun around, her heart thudding. 'Fuck!'

The boy stepped back. 'Sorry I... we heard whistles. What are you doing?'

The girl put her hand to her chest, feeling a stab of adrenaline from the shock. 'What the fuck are you doing sneaking up on me like that? If I'd had my bow with me you'd have an arrow in your neck by now!'

The boy didn't look intimidated at her outburst. Instead, he scowled. His slight frame was semi-shadowed, shaggy brown hair falling in his face. Aged about 13, the girl thought. Here I am in the very place where my own brother died, yelling at another boy his same age. What is wrong with me?

'Sorry,' she said, in a more normal voice. 'You startled me.'

'Do you always swear so much?' the boy rebuked her. His accent, unlike her own, was well-bred.

'Yeah, unfortunately I do.'

'Are you lost?'

'No.' The girl pulled a face at that ridiculous notion. 'I'm on my way to the Inn. I need to buy an axe. Or, a sword. You wouldn't have, or know where I could get one, would you?' She stuck her hand in her pocket, pulling out her moneypouch. 'I can pay you.'

The boy shook his head, his fierce expression charmingly at odds with his long-lashed grey eyes. 'We need ours.'

'Ve?' The girl laughed. 'Who's this we? Are there more of you kids running around out here at night? It's not safe, you know. Ghosts haunt this place.'

'I don't believe in ghosts,' the boy said, scathing.

The girl grinned. 'Well aren't you just the fearless Knight.' She bowed dramatically. 'I'm so glad you're here now to protect me, brave one.'

The boy smiled a little, and without the scowl he looked even younger than she'd first thought. 'My friends and I are having a rest, something to eat. We're on our way somewhere too. They're watching me, there in the bushes,' he pointed. 'In case you were, mad or something. Tried to bite my head off.'

The girl looked into the bushes but couldn't see a thing. She didn't like being spied on. 'Are they satisfied now that I'm not the head-biting type?'

The boy ignored her question, and glanced around, before fixing her with his intense stare again. It was cute, but unnerving, at the same time. He narrowed his eyes. 'Why were you whistling? Did you lose your dog?'

'Not a dog. A horse.'

'You taught your horse to come when you whistle?' The boy looked impressed. 'I had a... um, a dog once who came when I whistled. But I never tried to teach a horse.'
'It's easy, just start them young,' the girl advised. 'My horse protects me and everything.'

'I lost my dog, too. Around here... she was protecting me too but, she ran off.' The boy's eyes glazed over no doubt at the memory of his own, similar, loss. Then he shook himself out of it. 'Where's your horse, now?'

'She's gone. Scared off by a big -' the girl stopped herself, not wanting to terrify this kid with tales of monster wolves lurking nearby,' - a big badger. It was growling and... yeah. You know horses. Scared of their own shadows.' She shrugged.

'Oh. I'm sorry. I guess it was carrying all your stuff too. What happened to your hands?'

The girl regarded her open palms as if only just noticing them, oozing blood and pus and criss-crossed with their many abrasions. 'I fell over.'

The boy looked unconvinced. 'On what, a pile of knives? Hey. Why don't you come and have something to eat with us? 'Cause you lost all your stuff and we have food. We've got bread and cheese, and my friend caught a fish. Come on.' He turned and vanished into the darkness of the trees like a sprite. The girl's mouth watered at the mention of food, and she paused, then followed. Remember Jaime is waiting for you, and he's hungry too. Don't stay too long.

In the thick scrub, it was hard to see further than an arm's length in front of her. She smelled smoke, and then the glow of a small fire appeared, hidden by a thicket of brush. The boy led her into a campsite where another shorter, fatter child sat on a fallen branch by the fire, chewing on a hunk of cheese. The girl stopped so that he could see her clearly. 'Hey,' she said. 'Your friend said I could, share some of your food?' The scent of cooked fish and toasted bread filled her nose, and her empty stomach spasmed.

'Arya is always givin' away stuff,' the fat boy grumbled. 'We aint even got enough food left for us.'

'Well if you hadn't eaten it all on the first night, we'd have more, wouldn't we?' said a man's voice behind them. It sounded vaguely familiar and as the girl turned, a huge smile broke across her face.

'What the fuck are you doing here?' she asked, delighted. 'Gendry!'
Gendry's arms wrapped around her, crushing her into a hug. She wasn't really a hugger, but she had to admit it was kind of nice. He smelled of burnt wood and metal.

'Where have you been hiding this last year and a half?' he said, stepping back and holding her out at arm's length. 'Arya, HotPie, this is... what name you goin' by these days?'

The girl turned and gave the skinny kid next to them a closer inspection in the light of the flames. 'Is your name Arya? Gods, I thought you were a boy! I had a brother about your age. I was thinking of him when you... surprised me. I guess that's why.'

'Nah,' the kid called Arya said, shrugged. 'Most people think I'm a boy.'

'You're too pretty to be a boy.'

The kid glowered and Gendry laughed. Even HotPie snorted through his mouthful of cheese. 'It's only 'cause she don't know you well enough that she ain't hit you yet,' Gendry guffawed. 'Just don't go callin' her a Lady, trust me. It hurts.'

The girl smiled politely at what was obviously an in-joke.

'Where's your brother?' Arya asked.

'What?'

'You said you had a brother. Where is he?'

The girl narrowed her eyes, irked by the kid's needling. 'I don't know,' she replied, in a tone that warned the topic was now closed.

Arya looked unsatisfied by this answer, but moved straight on 'What's your name?'

'Hey kid, settle.'

'I'm not a kid,' Arya said indignantly, 'and I only asked who you were.'

'Well, I called myself Robberta before, to some nosy-arse soldiers.'

'Is that your name?'

'No.'

Gendry interrupted the escalating tension, a hint of worry in his voice: 'Soldiers? Were they Lannister soldiers?'

'Nah. Those are the red ones, right?' The girl deliberately didn't volunteer any more information. Whatever it is you all are running from, it's not my business. Just like mine isn't yours. Arya opened her mouth to possibly fire off another twenty questions, but Gendry shook his head slightly and she closed it again.

Gendry turned back to the girl, put his hand on her shoulder. She noticed how broad his arms were, how much he'd filled out since she'd last seen him. 'Well, it's good to see you, Robberta' he grinned. 'The Capital was a duller place without your visits.'
'I still go there,' the girl said,' I just don't hang about. Drop and run, on market day.'

'Yeah, it's got kind of crazy there I heard, with the war and everything.' A crease formed between Gendry's eyebrows. 'I missed you on Steel street. I could always see you from Mott's doorway at the end of every other month, you and that ugly horse. And I hate to say this girl, but -' he looked her up and down, 'You don't half look like shit.'

'I don't half feel like shit, too,' she grinned tiredly.

'Is that blood on your top? And your hands...'

'Sunburn.'

Gendry raised his eyebrows, but let it go. 'Days have been stinking hot lately,' he agreed.

'And some idiots say winter is coming.' The girl tried to laugh and ended up coughing instead. When she looked up, the kid Arya was fixing her with a dirty look.

'Fire always burns brightly right before it dies out,' Arya said. The girl smiled at her thinly. *Weird kid.*

'You look in need of some food and a bit of a sit down.' Gendry patted her shoulder, squeezed a little with his strong fingers. The girl thought he might go in for another hug, so she stepped over to the fire and held out her hands as if to warm them. The heat on her scabs made them sting, but she ignored it.

Gendry intercepted the cooking pan on the way to HotPie's mouth, tipping a portion of the food from it onto a thick slice of bread, slapped some cheese on top, and a scoop of white fish. He handed this to the girl. 'Thanks,' she smiled gratefully at them all, and tried to resist cramming the whole lot into her mouth at once. In the end the bite she took was almost too big to chew.

'Mmmm,' she mumbled appreciatively.

'Have a seat,' Arya offered, then turned to Gendry. 'How do you two know each other?'

'Ahhh, she used to deliver stuff to the markets in KingsLanding, a while back. We talked a few times, I shod her horse, she brought me gear I wanted if I asked nice... what was that posh looking shield you got me that time?' Gendry looked at the girl, but she still had a mouthful of food and couldn't talk, so he kept going, 'Remember? With the serrated gauntlet, and the spikes and the... *lantern* on it? That thing weighed a tonne, I think I pulled a muscle just gettin' it from the street to the back of the workshop. Never used it o'course, but damn it looked impressive.'

The girl swallowed. 'Ah yes, the Lantern Shield. Dazzling the enemy in the eyes while simultaneously breaking their sword and then stabbing them to death. I'm sure it looked good on parchment. As long as it impressed the *Ladies*.'

'You liked it well enough.'

'I could hardly pick the damn thing up, it near killed me and Sooty dragging that shield all the way from Deepwood.'

'Sooty's strong as an ox. Where's she at these days?'

The girl's cheeks were full of food again, and before she could answer, Arya spoke for her: 'Is that her horse? She said she lost it. That's why she was whistling before.'
'Oh I'm.. hells. I'm sorry,' Gendry said.

The girl kept chewing, nodded, smiled. *Eat this food, get out of here,* she thought.

'So where you off to, on your way to the Capital?' Gendry asked.

The girl finished her food, and tried a jest, 'Not if you're not there any more, Gendry.' It was obvious her heart wasn't in it though, and the teasing fell flat.

'Gah, don't make like you fancied me, not after avoidin' me for years.' Gendry turned to Arya, who was listening intently. 'I used to annoy the crap out of this girl, followin' her 'round the market like a puppy. Hey, remember when I called you My Queen for the entire day? You was paradin' around wearin' that choker of jewels you was meant to deliver to some Lady, and your hair all up in a fancy 'do; you was just like her.'

'Like *fuck!*, the girl shuddered. She glanced at Arya. 'Sorry.'

'A younger, scruffier, more foul-mouthed version of her, mind,' Gendry elaborated, with a grin.

'I think peering into the smithy's furnace all day made you go blind.'

'You never even seen the Queen, girl. What would you know.'

'Yeah commoners like me don't know what we look like. Never had a mirror, me,' the girl rolled her eyes. 'Don't go dragging me into your royal fantasies, just 'cause everyone was always telling you how much you look like The King.'

'Yeah, the old, dead one.' Gendry rubbed his head with one hand, as if self-conscious. 'The new one, not so much.'

'The boy King? Ugh. I hear he's a corrupt little coward, so,' the girl couldn't help herself. 'Maybe he won't be King long. Maybe someone will drive a big lance right up his arse and hoist him like a flag for the crows to pick his eyeballs out.' Too late, she regretted her vitriol, would have bit it back if she could.

The other three stared at her, and Gendry looked a bit startled. *Why'd you go and say that for?* the girl scolded herself. *You don't know where their loyalties lie. Don't let old friendships slip you up.

'I'm sorry, I'm just... it's been a long day. You know those days that go on forever?' The girl yawned, stretched her legs. The food and the sitting had made her weary. 'I still need to get to the Inn, buy something, before it closes. Thank you so much, though, for the food.'

'If you can wait five minutes I'll come with you,' Gendry said. 'We was just finishing up gatherin' enough firewood to last us the night. Wasn't we, HotPie?' He gave the fatter kid a hard look, and HotPie reluctantly put down the pan and slowly followed Gendry out of the circle of firelight, still licking his fingers.

The girl stared into the flames. They leapt up and fell back like grasping hands. Sparks drifted upwards on columns of smoke and winked out in the blackness. Now that it was just the two of them, Arya's dogged attention was hard to shake.

'Are you travelling on your own?'

'Yeah. I like my own company.'
'We've been walking for days, you're the first person we've seen.'

'You'll see more people around here, soon enough. Not all of them friendly. Can you use that sword?' the girl pointed to the steel resting against Arya's seat.

'Yeah. I'm good at it,' Arya's lips turned up with a hint of pride.

'You look like you'd be quick. Quick beats strong, every time. Especially if you get 'em in the neck, right there.' The girl mimed a sword thrust. 'Dead.'

Arya looked pleased, the way another type of girl would if you praised her sewing. 'I knew someone used to say that.'

'Meh, I know a lot of people. I guess we have mutual friends.'

'Were you and Gendry... ?' Arya looked awkward.

'Fuck no! I mean, sorry. No. We were just friends,' the girl laughed a little. 'Just used to talk sometimes, when we ran into each other, you know?'

'Do you live in KingsLanding?'

'No. I... well I grew up around here, actually. But I haven't been back here for a while.'

'Why not?'

The girl looked pained, it was on the tip of her tongue to tell Arya it was none of her business. But then she sighed. 'Just bad memories,' she said, quietly. 'My brother he... died here. I just miss him sometimes, is all.'

Something stirred in the depths of Arya's grey eyes, a kind of knowing coldness, and they glazed over like frost settling on a puddle. 'I have bad memories of this place, too.'

The girl felt a chill breeze rise up her spine, like ghostly fingers brushing against it. She shuddered, pulled her jacket closer around herself. The fire crackled and spat, and it almost sounded like voices whispering. Arya went on, with a soft intensity, 'But you don't need to worry. I'm going to make it right. I say their names before I go to sleep.'

'Who's names?' the girl asked, unnerved, wondering if this kid was quite right in the head.

'My enemies.'

'What enemies?'

'You have to know your enemies.'

'Huh?'

Arya looked up, away from the fire, and her big eyes were black like holes in her head. As if she didn't have any eyes. 'When a dog is sent to kill someone, is it the dog's fault? Or the one who sent it?'

The girl shivered. This kid was creeping her out. 'I'd say... a dog doesn't know any better. Like, with my horse; if I told her to attack someone. It's my fault, not hers.'

'But people don't have to do what other people tell them. Do they?'
'I don’t know,’ the girl said. ‘Maybe. Sometimes. It's complicated. What is this about?’

Arya’s eyes glittered like shards of ice. ‘In the end, it doesn’t matter how a person dies. How someone dies isn’t... who they are.’

‘What do you mean?’ the girl said. The food and warmth had lulled her, but now she sat upright on the edge of her seat. ‘What the fuck are you even talking about?’

‘If your brother died here you shouldn’t be afraid. I had a friend died here, and a wolf, too. They were buried together. I always think the wolf is looking after him.’ Arya’s voice was flat, emotionless. ‘She was a good wolf. She wouldn’t hurt anyone.’

The girl started trembling, dug her nails into her hands. She waited for Arya to say something else but the silence stretched on, broken only by the snap of twigs in the fire.

‘Your friend... where was he buried?’ she heard herself say, as if from a great distance. Blood rushed in her ears. She dug her fingernails into her palm to keep from shaking, heedless of the fresh blood that leaked from them. Was this the answer, here? Will I get resolution for you Mycah, here with this strange kid who once knew you, on this day that never seems to end?

The girl thought that if time stood still now she could be happy, because right at that moment, before Arya opened her mouth to speak, there was a faint flicker of hope. Hope that Arya would finally be the one to give her the answer she so desperately wanted. Needed.

‘I don’t know where,’ Arya shook her head, and the hope flicked out.

‘He wasn’t trying to kill the boy King, like everyone says!’ the girl whispered, tears welling up and blurring her vision. ‘He would never hurt... anyone!’

‘I know,’ Arya said.

There was a loud crash as a log was thrown and splintered onto the fire, sending the sparks whirling and jumping crazily. The girls started, looked up. Gendry dusted his hands, as HotPie staggered up behind him, barely able to see where he was going over a massive pile of branches.

‘Come on then,’ Gendry said, ‘You girls finished gossipin’? Let's go.’
Gendry and the girl left the small campsite and went out into the darkness. They followed the river downstream, in the direction of the Inn. She'd refused his offer of extra food for her journey, insisting that him and his friends keep what supplies they had left for themselves. A part of her was relieved to be away from Arya and her unsettling words, but an equal measure wanted to run straight back and demand a thousand answers.

Gendry suggested that for cutting metal links the best tool was a long-handled axe with a downward curving, preferably wedge-shaped, head. He started to outline the merits of crucible-processed steel over cemented, but the girl wasn't listening. All she could hear was Arya saying: 'I had a friend died here, and a wolf too...'

There had been talk of a wolf who was said to have attacked the Prince that day, along with Mycah. Was it possible that Arya had been there? Had she and Mycah really known each other? Or was Arya some kind of witch?

_Or, have I simply read too much into the whole conversation by the fire, too tired and upset to hear anything except that I wanted to hear?_

'Who is that kid you're travelling with?' she asked Gendry, interrupting his steel-processing review.

'Arya?' He said the name somewhat guardedly.

'She's a bit... odd. Don't you think?'

'No more than anyone.'

'She's kind of obsessed with death. Revenge. More than... most little girls.'

'She's older than she looks,' Gendry said. 'And besides, she's been through a lot. Everyone copes with stuff in their own way.'

'Who is she, exactly?'

'What do you mean? She's a refugee from the Capital, like me, and HotPie.' Gendry looked shifty.

'Oh you're the worst liar, Gendry Waters. I know you three are on the run from Lannister soldiers, and you want to protect her, of course. That's fine. You always had a soft spot for urchins. But this is me you're talking to. _The_ least likely person in all the seven Kingdoms to dob anyone in for anything.'

'I dunno if I should say, she'd kill me. She ain't even told me everything.'

'It's _me_, Gendry. Here I thought our history together meant something.'

He avoided the girl's gaze, conflicted. Finally he stopped walking and turned to face her, talking quietly although the riverbank was otherwise deserted. 'Alright, but you can't breathe a word of it to no-one.'

'Promise.'

'She's a Lady. A Highborn. You know Lord Stark? Guardian of the North and such? Until he got his head lopped off for treason after the old King died?'
The girl nodded. 'Yeah, how the war started and all that. I got the gist of it.'

'Well, she's his kid. Grew up in fucking Winterfell.'

'Really? A proper little Lady.' The girl turned this information over in her mind, trying to match it up with what else she knew. 'So why's she's slumming it out in the wilderness with lowlifes like you and Hotdog?'

'HotPie. And us lowlifes are better company than none. She wanted out of the Capital. When her father was executed, she thought it wisest to leave, and join us lot headed for the Wall.'

'You at the Wall?' the girl laughed. 'You spent all your life in an armoury with your shirt off, where it was hot enough to melt your chest hairs. You whine about frosty mornings.'

Gendry grinned and shoved her. 'Didn't have no choice did I? Like most of 'em.'

'Why was Arya in the Capital with Lord Stark in the first place?'

'Because he was appointed Hand of the King when the other one died. And her sister was engaged to the Prince. Now King. O'course none of that worked out real well in the end.'

The girl must have looked a bit lost, because Gendry sighed. 'I know you pride yourself on knowing as little as humanly possible 'bout the Nobility.'

'Hey, I'm not totally ignorant,' she bristled. 'I do know the basics.'

Gendry smirked. 'Sure you do. I bet you couldn't even tell me the King's full name.'

'The old one or the new one?'

'Either.'

'King Robert Baratheon.'

'Well that was too easy. Name a Lord.'

'Any?'

'Any,' he challenged.

'The new Lord of Winterfell, King in the North? I believe his name is...' she paused and tapped her chin as if thinking. 'Lord Robb Stark.'

Gendry looked suitably impressed. 'What's got into you, you takin' lessons?'

As they walked on, the girl kept prying. 'So, this Arya kid. She was travelling with the old King, King Robert's, party when they came through here about a year and a half ago?'

'I guess.'

She thought for a while, then nodded.

'Why you wanna know all this for, anyhow?' Gendry asked.

'I merely care who you're travelling with,' she said innocently. 'Can't have a friend of mine wandering around the countryside with just anyone.'
'I would be touched,' Gendry put his hand to his heart, 'if I'd ever known you to care about another person, outside of your own family. And your horse.'

'That hurts. I care about people.'

'Only so far as you can use 'em.'

'Gendry!' she mock-punched him.

'Lucky I like bein' used.'

The trees began to thin out, and they reached a dirt track that led away from the river. 'This is the way to the Inn', the girl said. 'Do you think it'll still be open?'

'It's an Inn. Pretty sure they stay open.'

They started along the narrow track, keeping watch for other travellers or soldiers. The silhouette of the Crossroads Inn loomed into view, its turrets towering over the surrounding trees. A few wagons and carts were parked at the side, and there were a couple of low building that the girl remembered as stables and staff quarters. A bell tower sat behind them. Light shone faintly from the open doors. Gendry and the girl stopped and crouched behind a hedge that marked the tended property of the Inn, scanning the gardens for anyone either of them would rather avoid.

The dirt track they'd been following ran through a gap in the hedge and disappeared around the corner of the out-buildings, where untrimmed shrubs and weeds probably hid a back entrance for deliveries and staff. Before the hedge was a wide ditch, which under the moonlight looked black with sludge. A haze of mosquitoes danced around it, and unknown creatures scuttled and splashed. The girl wrinkled her nose at the stench.

'What is that?'

'Looks like a drainage ditch. From the kitchens, most like,' Gendry said. 'If there's rats I ain't going near it.'

She gave him a look, pointedly appraising his thick biceps and wide shoulders. 'You scared of rats?' she joked.

Gendry held one hand to his stomach, looking pained. 'I could tell you stories.'

The girl took a step, her boot squelching into the water-logged ground. 'This stinks.'

'Yeah. And... there's rats.'

'I don't recall you being so squeamish, Gendry. I'm sure the rodents here in Riverlands are of no lesser quality than those on Steel street.' She took another slurping step. 'Ugh, this place is a fucking swamp. They probably dump all the muck from the bathrooms out here too. Sewerage waste.'

'We could go 'round the front but then we're out on the King's Road. Could be soldiers there,' Gendry said.

As if on cue, voices came from the stables, and a couple of men walked out, leading three horses apiece. They hitched them to a rail and began to saddle them. The girl looked over at Gendry, and he shook his head. 'What if there's Lannister soldiers in there?' he whispered.

'I haven't seen red soldiers for months, they're all holed up in KingsLanding.'
'I don't wanna risk it, for the sake of the others.'

'It's alright,' the girl assured him. 'You stay here, I'm just going to check things out.'

'Don't be long,' Gendry said. 'I think there's leeches here too. I ain't mad keen on leeches neither.'

The girl rolled her eyes and crept away from him along the hedge. She skirted around the worst of the boggy ground, sneaking past the men saddling the horses, keeping behind the parked wagons and in the shadows. She came out on the King's Road, and walked up to the front door of the Crossroads Inn. It had been so long since she'd been here that she felt like a stranger. *I used to play in these gardens, feed the cart-horses, sit under my father's table playing marbles while he had a pint after work. It seems like a lifetime ago.*

Walking up the paving stones, the smoke and smells seeping from cracks under the entrance arch awakened old memories. For a moment the ghosts of everyone from her past stood beside her on the step. She paused to clear her head, then pushed the heavy door open and went in.

Inside, the air was stale and hazy with wood-smoke, thick with the fumes of old food, old sweat and the mud from hundreds of boots. The rows of bench seats on either side of the room had a few people in them, some fast asleep or passed out with their heads in their arms, but overall the place wasn't crowded. It was more run-down than the girl remembered, she guessed the war wasn't great for business. Table tops were cluttered with empty plates and glasses, cobwebs hung in faintly drifting ribbons from the ceiling.

She strolled up the aisle, her clothes and hair dishevelled enough not to look out of place among the equally grimy clientele. Well-practised at avoiding eye-contact, she slipped unnoticed past a table of card-players, a troubadour strumming an instrument, and a fat man bawdily singing along. On the last table, a group of men were laughing uproariously. No-one paid her any attention. Slouched on the bar, a man not much older than herself gave her the once over.

'Help you?'

'Yes,' the girl said. 'I'm looking to buy an axe, and I heard you were selling.'

He yawned, showing a haphazard shelf of yellow teeth. 'Might be. Depends what you got.'

'Twenty coins, and two fine rubies.' She patted her pocket.

The man looked bored. 'I have nothing to suit your budget.'

'How about you tell me what axes you have for sale, and we'll discuss it further.'

'How about you double your offer and I'll peruse my inventory.' His watery eyes regarded her with a cunning she recognised. Years of haggling and bartering at markets around the country had made the girl an expert in knowing when she was about to be ripped off. And this was undoubtedly one of those times. Inwardly she cursed, but she didn't have time to spare, nor any other options right now. Jaime was relying on her. She'd already been away too long.

'Thirty coins, two rubies.' The coins and stones in her purse were everything she had to show for the last three month's deliveries. She thought of her sister and nieces, how much they relied on her earnings just to survive. She thought of how dark and cold the nights were in Goldgrass without oil for the lanterns, how the girls needed new jackets.

'Thirty coins?' the InnKeeper shook his head. 'I may have a small skinning knife for that price.'
The girl fixed him with a steely glare. 'Cole at RedHollow sells broadswords for thirty coins.'

'Then I suggest you go and buy off him.'

'Fine.' The girl pulled out her pouch, weighed it in her hand. She leaned forward keeping a smile on her face and hissed: 'I have exactly thirty-five coins and a number of different stones here. Their combined worth is twice that of any weapon you keep out the back of this degenerate establishment. I want a heavy, long-handled axe capable of splitting metal, and it's only because I'm in a good mood that I don't go back outside, bring my horse into your bar and have her rearrange your teeth with her hooves.'

The InnKeeper didn't look particularly intimidated, he was the landlord of a notorious Inn, after all. But some of her bluster must have impressed him, or maybe he'd heard stories, because he returned her fake-smile with one of his own and disappeared out the back. The girl sat down on a nearby vacant bench and waited.

The group of men who'd been so loud behind her were finishing up their drinks. One of them drained his glass and belched loudly. 'Glad you're so sure of yourself, Locke. I still reckon we shoulda kept 'er for bear-bait.'

'What, and risked the wrath of the Tyrells and the Lannisters? You 'eard what she said,' replied the man evidently called Locke, who sat directly behind the girl. He mimicked a woman's voice, "He'll pay a lot for me. Unharmed." No-one wants their property all spoiled now, does they?'

The girl sat very still, suddenly paying attention.

'He's only gonna kill 'er anyways,' the first man said, and burped again.

'No, she reckons they was... special friends.' Here the men laughed so much one of them sounded like he was dying. When they finally got their breath back, Locke went on, 'And like Roose says, the Tyrells will wanna hear what she has to say 'bout the whole Renly situation. So, that's how it is, lads. Find yerselves some other whore to have fun with.'

'Still. Was lookin' forward to seein' 'er in a dress.' The men sniggered.

'Put yer fuckin' bear in a dress it'll be a sight prettier.' Locke said. 'Ain't the promise o' riches better than ten minutes of entertainment?'

'Woulda got more 'n ten minutes out of 'er. She looked like she coulda put up a half-decent fight.'

'Shut yer gob. What's done is done.' Locke banged his empty glass down. 'Time we was off. Has Zollo saddled them horses yet?'

'How do we even know 'e's gonna pay us anyfing? He might just pay Steelshanks, seein' as that's who she's wiv. How do we know 'e's even gonna be in KingsLanding when she gets there?'

'Well look around, numbnuts. Where is he, then? We searched that fucking river for two days. The Riverlands is positively swarmin' with North soldiers. If he were here, think they'd 'a flushed 'im out by now. Not like he knows how to go bush, does he? He's a fuckin' toff.'

'Nah. He could be fish food. Stark soldiers don't care no more. Who can blame 'em. Most of 'em is sick of this war an' just wanna fuck off home. The King in the Norf is too busy stickin' his sword into his new lady love to even care how little his men give a fuck 'bout his war any more.'

Locke stood up and the other men followed him, pulled on their long coats. 'Never you mind. House
Bolton knows what side to throw its hat in with.'

'Yeah. The winnin' side.' They all laughed again as they walked out.

The girl didn't stir, didn't move a muscle. She listened to the men's footsteps fading down the steps and her mind was whirling. She tried to put together what they'd been talking about. Was it Jaime? His companion, who'd been captured, had she been a woman? A woman who was claiming that if they returned her to Jaime 'unharmed' that he'd pay 'a lot' for her?

A lot? Like 500 gold coins?

*Maybe Jaime really is rich enough to make good on these promises, these men seem to think so. Is he a Lord in KingsLanding, someone valuable to the Tyrells and Lannisters? A spy? Someone captured by the North during the war, maybe a General or a Captain? Has everyone really given up on finding him?*

Or, was this conversation nothing to do with Jaime at all?

She just didn't know anything any more.

'Hey, girl.'

She looked up and saw that the InnKeeper was leaning on the bar, a long-handled, downward-curving, wedge-headed axe in his hand. She stood up, handed him the pouch of coins with one hand while taking hold of the axe with the other. It was heavy and she hefted it up to her chest, the steel resting on her shoulder.

The InnKeeper nodded at her, and she turned and walked out. No-one left at the tables paid her any attention.
'She reckons they was ...special friends.' Locke's comment rang in her ears. She couldn't think about what it all meant right now, if anything, she was so very tired. There were random words circling in her head like puzzle pieces but she couldn't put them together. *Concentrate on getting out of here first. Puzzles can wait.*

She walked straight past the group of Northmen, as they rode out onto the King's Road. One of them stopped his horse next to her and she hesitated, but he leaned over the other way and vomited noisily onto the flagstones. The girl kept walking, clutching the axe to her chest.

Past the stables, ducking between the wagons, onto the track that led to the river. 'Gendry!' she whispered, peering through the gap in the hedge. If possible, the smell of the drains had got worse. 'Here,' he whispered back, invisible in the hedge's shadow.

She made to jump over the boggy ditch but misjudged the distance and landed ankle-deep in slush. She swore, tried to keep her other boot clear but overbalanced and had to put it down. Cold water rushed into both boots, her toes curled at the gritty consistency. She tried to move but the ooze was tenacious. She felt like she was sinking.

Gendry appeared in front of her, keeping his distance. 'Gods teeth, are you stuck? In the shit ditch?'

'Stop fucking laughing and help,' she suggested irritably. She yanked upwards with one leg and then the other, but was worried she was going to fall forward onto her hands and knees. 'Take this,' she demanded, holding out the axe, 'It's weighing me down.' Gendry was laughing properly now, but he did manage to reach over and grab the axe from her.

'This ain't even heavy,' he said, twirling it in one hand like a baton.

'And stop showing off. It's heavy *for me*, alright?'

'Are you planning on getting out of that muck any time soon?'

'I'm stuck.' She put her hands on her hips. She could struggle out if she really tried, but it was late and she was exhausted. Gendry tossed the axe to one side and grabbed her forearm, linking them. He hauled her up out of the sludge. It clung to her ankles, made a sucking, popping sound when it finally gave her up. Gendry put his other hand on her waist and lifted her clear of the marsh entirely, putting her down on firmer ground.

'Since when did you get so strong?' she said. She took a step and her boots swilled with liquid. The bottoms of her pants wrapped around her legs, coated in filth.

'That smells... kind of bad,' Gendry observed, a wide smile on his face.

'No shit.' The girl squelched over to her axe and retrieved it. 'Even worse, I just got seriously ripped off by that godsdamned InnKeeper for this thing.'

'What did he sting you?'

The girl shook her head. 'Everything. All I had. Thirty-five coins and all my gems, too.'

'Ouch,' Gendry sympathised. 'I made them same axes and sold 'em in KingsLanding for fifteen coins
'apiece.'

'Yeah.' She frowned. 'You're not really helping.'

They walked back along the track to the river, Gendry carrying the axe, the girl sloshing with every stride. At the riverbank she sat down and took off her boots, rinsed them one at a time in the fast-flowing current. She put them upended on the grass to drain and waded in, letting the churning water clean the mud from her pants. It was icy cold, but served to wake her up. She leaned down and rubbed the material between her fingers, feeling the oily dregs lifting away.

'You probably got leeches on you,' Gendry remarked. He swung the axe in a chopping motion, pausing before it hit the ground and then re-hoisting it effortlessly. He sliced the weapon sideways, making an arc parallel to the ground. In his big hands, it looked like a child's toy.

'Spare me your leech obsession. They can't actually hurt you.' Satisfied that she was at least relatively clean, the girl waded back out of the river. 'Arya asked about us, you know.'

'Did she?' Gendry rested the axe head on the ground. He looked amused, but pleased.

'I think she feels a bit possessive of you.' The girl wrung out the ends of her pants, started pulling on her boots.

'What did you say?' He sounded worried, and it annoyed the girl for some reason.

'Don't panic. I said we were just friends.'

He smiled and nodded. Rubbed one hand across his head in a bashful gesture. 'Good.'

The girl thumped her boot on the ground with more vigor than was necessary, shook it out. 'Just be careful. She's not like us, Gendry.'

'What does that mean?'

'She's Highborn.'

'Highborns is people too,' Gendry said, defensively. 'Arya's no different from you and me. She thinks of me and HotPie as if we was her own family.'

The girl snorted. 'Really? Well I never met a member of the Nobility who cared for commoners beyond what they could get out of them. Goods, services, labour, protection... once they got it from you they tend to toss you aside faster than yesterday's ashes.'

Gendry had an obstinate expression on his face. The girl recognised it, knew it meant he had his mind set. 'With all respect,' he said tightly, 'You ain't exactly hung out with much Nobility to know what you're talking about.'

The girl stood up and faced him. 'What's that s'posed to mean? You think I'm too common to understand how they think? You think you're better than me now, 'cause you been hanging out with Lady fucking Stark? Maybe she was over-tired, but Gendry's stubbornness infuriated her. 'I met a lot of people in my work, more than you. I know how the ones in castles think of the ones that sell them their goods, build them their keeps and sow their crops. Shoe their horses, make their armour.'

She glared at him to drive home the point. 'I'm just saying, open your eyes. Don't play your royal fantasies; don't go being a hero for some little Lady, who won't even remember you when this is all over.'
Gendry returned her glare. 'I know what I'm doin'.

'Good. Well don't forget to be calling her M'Lady.' The girl simpered sarcastically, made a poor attempt at a curtsey.

'Stop bein' such a cockweed,' Gendry sighed. 'I ain't seen you act like this before.'

'Yeah well. I guess we've been moving in different circles.'

'Hey, I grew up in the same circles as you, girl, had to look after meself same as you. Y'think it's easy bein' a bastard in KingsLanding? I know about them that's got Royal blood and them that's got peasant blood, and I know what side I'm on. I ain't stupid.'

Abruptly, Arya's words floated into the girl's head. 'Know your enemy.'

She paused. She didn't know why those words occurred to her right now, but they made her hold back what she was about to say. She looked away from Gendry, out over the river. Her mind emptied of all other thought. Gods, but I'm tired. She felt a little delirious. The rushing of the waves filled her head, and she imagined the water pouring into her skull, washing it clean of all the confusion swirling within it.

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

'You grew up in KingsLanding,' she said, turning back to face Gendry. 'What do you know about the Royal family?'

'Nothin.' He looked sulky. 'Is this 'bout how I think I'm better than you, again? 'Cause I can assure you that workin' all the daylight hours in Mott's smithy don't leave much time for hobnobbing with the Royals.'

'No, forget that,' the girl waved his assumptions away. 'I'm sorry I said all that. That's not what I mean. I just wondered what you know of them. As people. You must've seen them, right? During... parades and stuff?'

'Yeah. I seen 'em. We left after the old King died, though, so I ain't seen much of the new King. When he was a Prince, he was kind of skinny. Blonde hair. All the Royal kids had blonde hair.'

'The old King, what was he like.'

'Fat.'

'Who else was there?'

'The King's brother was on the Council... he left the Capital around when we did, when the war started. He was a bit soft lookin'. Like he ain't never got his hands dirty.'

'They're both dead now though, right? I don't care about them.

'Yeah. So, the Queen... yeah. Beautiful. Meant to be the most beautiful woman in the Seven Kingdoms, but I dunno 'bout that. I never seen her up-close. Then there was her brothers, the Lannisters. The Imp was always drunk, I heard. Or in brothels. Or, drunk in brothels. The Kingslayer was said to be the best swordsman in the Kingdoms, but I don't know 'bout that either. That's all I know, really.' Gendry shrugged. He spun the axe restlessly in one hand.

'Thanks.' The girl smiled. Felt bad for arguing with him. 'How do you do that, anyway?' She
motioned for him to give her the weapon.

'Do what?' Gendry grinned, handing her the axe.

'You know. Make it look so easy.' The girl heaved the axe to her shoulder, but when she went to lift it higher the weight made her feel like she was going to tip. Gendry stepped in behind her, folded his arms under hers. 'Lift it up with both arms, close to your body, like this,' he adjusted her grip. 'Then look where you're aimin' to hit. Don't take your eyes off the spot. Push up all in one go, then let the weight of the head bring it down.' He demonstrated, taking her arms along in the movement with his. 'This blade pulls to the right a bit, so aim 'bout an inch or so to the left of what you wanna hit. You should get it.'

She tried on her own. It was hard to get it off her shoulder, and the head swung down faster than she expected. It landed with a thud on an angle off her left, the blade buried deep in the dirt.

Gendry pressed his lips together. 'Mmm-hmm. Were you... aimin' for that?'

'Aim?' the girl puffed. 'I can't even barely lift the thing.'

'You'll get a feel for it,' Gendry assured her.

'Fuck.'

They walked along the bank. She felt despondent. How was she going to accurately cut the chain without risking Jaime's hands? She had no more coin to purchase anything else. She didn't even have a horse to carry this thing back on. Gendry had done his best in advising her on what to buy, but unlike him, she hadn't spent the last ten years smashing shit with hammers.

'You'll get it,' Gendry said again, encouragingly. 'You're a tough girl. You gotta learn to handle an axe if you're gonna be tough.'

The moon was high above them in the centre of the sky, the stars scattered and smudged all about, like light shining through a threadbare cloak. It must be well past midnight, she thought. They reached the spot where she'd sat skipping stones earlier, and there they stopped.

'You could stay here the night, you know. Head off in the morning,' Gendry offered.

'Nah. The kids'll be sleeping. I don't want to wake them up.' She rested the head of the axe on the ground, leant on it. 'Besides, I got places to be.'

'Well.' Gendry smiled shyly. 'C'mere.' He pulled her into a hug. She felt herself relax in his embrace, the solid warmth of him. She felt sad, and didn't know why. He stepped back. 'Good luck with gettin' that... chain issue sorted.'

'You should come with me, you could cut the chain like that,' the girl snapped her fingers.

'I would if I could but... ' Gendry looked into the trees, to where somewhere nearby a small campfire burned. 'I can't leave the others. Arya, HotPie. They need me.'

'Of course. Tell them thanks for the food. And, thank you for coming to the Inn with me.'

'It was a pleasure,' Gendry said. 'Worth it to see you stuck in shit.'

She pretended to look hurt. 'Hanging out with the posh kids is making you cruel, Gendry Waters.' They grinned at each other. The girl looked at the ground, thinking. 'Speaking of Arya...'
'Don't start this again.'

'Shh, it's not that,' she laughed. 'I just wanted to know if... did she ever talk to you about a dog she had?'

'A dog?' Gendry looked uncertain.

'Yeah. One that she taught to come when she whistled. It ran off one day.'

'I dunno, I don't think so.' He wrinkled his brow as if struggling to remember. 'There was this one time when we was at Harrenhal, eatin' dinner.'

'You were at Harrenhal?'

'Yeah, that's where we been since the war started. We got captured by Lord Lannister's men.'

'You're lucky you got out when you did. I heard hundreds of people were killed there.'

'Yeah I owe Arya for that one.'

'Anyway,' the girl prodded, not wanting to hear about Arya's no doubt amazing escapade. 'The dog?'

'Oh yeah. Well it weren't a dog, as such, it were a wolf-pup. Arya said she had this wolf-pup, back when she lived in Winterfell. They all did.'

'A wolf-pup?' The girl couldn't stop herself rolling her eyes, just a little. 'Fucking Highborns, always have to be different.'

'I'm ignoring your classist digs,' Gendry said, in a morally superior tone. 'Anyhow, we were talkin' about... gettin' back at people who done you wrong, or somethin', and she's told us 'bout this wolf she had, that attacked some teenager who was hurting a friend of hers. And then she had to make it run away, so they couldn't find it.'

'They were buried together... She was a good wolf. She never hurt anyone.' Arya's words, speaking in the girl's head again. She rubbed her eyes. 'No, that can't be right. The wolf died. It didn't run away.'

'Well, I dunno what wolf you're talking about,' Gendry went on, 'But Arya's wolf definitely ran away. She said it bit the teenager on the hand, after he was held a sword to her friend's face. She was the one made the wolf go.'

The girl saw clearly in her mind's eye the face of Guts, on the bridge-road, his thin lips curved in a smirk as he held his knife to her face, angled it along her cheek. She saw the shadow loom up behind him. Suddenly the vision blurred. She blinked. Now there was a different face in front of her, still with a similar smirk, but holding a massive sword to her cheek. It was bright daylight, and around them was the river bank, the water burbling loudly, not a road at dusk. Instead of Guts' dusty black coat, this teenager had on a brown tunic made of finest leather, with long sleeves made of silk. A jewel glittered on his finger as he angled the sword, pressing deeper. His hair was clean and blonde, and his eyes were light, but when he looked into hers they were Guts' eyes, full of sadistic pleasure. She felt the cold bite of the steel on her cheek, and the hot blood running down.

A grey and black flash leapt behind the teenager, growling, and clamped onto his sword arm. Then she was falling backwards and the vision blew away like smoke.

She blinked again and stepped back. She was standing next to Gendry, and it was night, the crickets
burring in the earth, mist in the trees. Gendry had his hand on her arm, his forehead creased with concern. 'Hey, are you alright? You wanna sit down a minute?'

'I'm fine,' she pushed him away. She smiled. 'It's alright, I'm fine. Thank you.'

And thank you Mycah, she thought. Thank you for showing me. Now, it all makes more sense.
The axe weighed heavier on her shoulder with every minute she walked away from Gendry. At first she could manage it without too much difficulty, but soon the strain on her muscles began to tell and she listed to one side. It became more and more difficult to balance and she found herself bumping into trees, stumbling over dead branches. Every jolt bruised her shoulder. Once she trod heavily into a hole and the jar sent a spike of pain up her knee. She had to sit for a few minutes, flexing and rubbing her leg until the burn dulled. At least two hours walk to get back to Jaime, she thought. I'm fucked.

Pressing her knuckles into her closed eyes, she tried to squeeze the waking dreams from them. Sometimes she swore she could hear voices talking to her; Arya whispering Know your enemy, or Locke in his semi-drunk loudness We searched that river for two days, or the poacher from RedHollow, shaking his head and telling her solemnly Yes, but we all know why. Sometimes she heard Sooty nickering, but when she listened again it was only the gutteral chatter of a fox.

Fatigue and stress were causing her imagination to run away from her. She couldn't shake the feeling that her brother was there, but as she didn't believe in ghosts, this was frightening rather than reassuring. Knowing it was impossible to see into the past as she had, didn't make the vision seem any less real. Was Mycah trying to show her what had happened to him, or was an evil spirit trying to trick her? This place really is haunted, I shouldn't have come back. Nothing good can come of it. But somehow she managed to block everything out and keep walking.

By the time she came out of the bush and onto the Riverroad, her shoulder ached as if someone had punched it repeatedly. She switched the axe to the other side, again, but that meant putting more weight on her sore knee. She dragged the axe behind her, the head catching on every rut and wrenching her arm. It seemed she'd been walking for hours but when she turned around and looked back she saw she'd barely gone a few hundred feet. Against her will, she let the axe handle drop onto the road, and her legs gave out too. Sitting on the pebbly edge of the gutter with her legs bent up she couldn't decide what part of her hurt more. Her shoulders, her hands, her knees, her heart. When she thought of Gendry and the kids, Arya and Hotpie, she felt inexplicably lonely. She didn't know how to deal with this either, as she'd never before been lonely. She'd always had Sooty, and that had been enough.

Time passed and a calm numbness settled on her. The shroud of mist all around gave the sensation of utter isolation, she was wrapped in a chilled blanket, trapped in the middle of a spider's cocoon. Slowly swirling fog clung to her skin like a cold sweat. She could see the axe lying besides her and it seemed quite impossible to pick it up and start walking again.

There came a distant crunch of footsteps, and then moving through the fog were darker shapes; a group of men, crossing the road in front of her. They were walking purposefully and near-silently, all with long coats and boots. The way they moved with an easy stealth made the girl think they were well-practised in travelling unnoticed. One of them turned his face towards her briefly, and she was sure he'd see her sitting there and stop, but he gave no sign. He had a scruffy beard and an eye-patch, his skin jagged with scars like a patchwork quilt. They passed by, and once their footsteps faded it was hard to believe they'd ever been there.

The girl wondered if she was still awake or had fallen asleep.

Just as she was summoning up the energy to reach for the axe handle, the ground vibrated beneath her hands. Hoof beats this time, and the creaking of wheels. Out of the dark loomed a horse and cart. From her view on the roadside, she couldn't see the driver or his load, only the shaggy head and long
thick legs of the cart-horse towering over her, its round belly splashed with white patches like it'd walked through a snowdrift.

The cart stopped. A figure leaned from the driver's seat. 'You alright down there?'

The girl stood up. Gently, she held her hand out to the horse. It snuffled, breath hot on her raw palms. The smell of apples and pumpkin and leather. Whiskers brushed her fingers. She placed her hand flat on the horse's sleek neck, behind its ears where there was an almost liquid softness, feeling the steady comforting heat.

'You right, girl?' the driver asked.

'Nugget looks well,' she said, stroking his fur.

'That you, Delivery Girl?' the man pushed his hat back off his head. 'Well, I never. Haven't seen you 'round here for a while.'

'I need to get down the road a ways,' she said. 'Can you...?'

'Hop up.'

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At the junction where the smaller road forked off the highway toward the bridge, she thanked the driver and jumped down. He lifted his hand and she nodded, not having a hand free herself to return the gesture. It was hard to balance the axe, the loaf of bread, the bag of apples and the whole pumpkin that he'd given her.

Nugget plodded off into the night, and the girl staggered away from the road into the forest. She headed in the direction of the spot where she remembered her and Jaime had been, until the load she was carrying became too unstable and she dumped everything behind a bush. She stood, trying to get her bearings in the dark. Looking for a fire. He probably didn't make one. Too risky.

There was a sick anxiety in her stomach, a growing unease that Jaime had been captured while she was gone, or killed, or that he'd continued on his journey without her. Losing Jaime suddenly felt inevitable. She couldn't even see the point of looking for him, it was so obviously hopeless. Everything she'd done had been for nothing.

She sniffed. Smoke. She started walking again, faster, following the scent of it, pushing past bracken as tall as her waist, ducking under ferns. The moon trickled its light down through the branches overhead and she could see a line of greyish smoke curling up through the trees like a crooked finger. She walked over to the fallen log shielding the remains of a small fire. Jaime lay on his side with the blanket folded under his head. His eyes were closed and his breathing was deep, even.

The girl just watched him, her chest swelling as if it would burst with an indescribable emotion. Relief? Thank all the gods that you're still here. You didn't leave me. You trusted I'd come back.

She tiptoed around the log, stepped carefully over the pack at Jaime's feet, knelt down besides his hands. He was holding the pick-axe between them. His clothes were more tattered than she'd realised, the material of his tunic ripped in numerous places and worn through. The largest tear was where Draw's scythe had gashed his chest, and the girl could see through it to where the wound looked as if it had been closed. He must have stitched his own cut, with my needle, she thought, amazed at his resourcefulness. He can't be a common criminal, more likely a soldier, or someone familiar with battle injuries. Her eyes lifted to Jaime's face. His hair appeared to be recently washed, and fell in slick strands against his neck.
She was momentarily mesmerised by how peaceful he looked, younger and relaxed in the hazy light. His damp skin gleamed, now clean of dirt, and under the short beard his cheeks and jaw made strong symmetrical angles. His crooked nose was the only flaw in the perfection of his face, but to the girl this only enhanced its allure. *He's beautiful. Even skinny, even in rags, chained. How could I not see that he's the most beautiful man to ever exist?* She wanted to run her fingertips along his cheeks, to prove to herself he was actually real, and not just another hallucination. She wanted to cup his jaw, smooth her thumb over his curved lips. Even in sleep he looked like he was smiling.

She leaned over a little. He smiled, properly. She squeaked in surprise as his hands grabbed her arms and pulled her into him, rolling so that he pinned her legs underneath his. 'Jaime,' she gasped, startled.

His eyes opened and he grinned sleepily at her. 'I thought you were just going to stare at me forever,' he said. 'I thought you were never going to get around to kissing me.'

'I would have -' she protested, but then his lips covered hers, warm and insistent and irresistible, and there was really nothing left to say.
Jaime’s kiss was both comforting and exhilarating, she felt simultaneously safe and euphoric. They kissed for a long time, she was dazed, intoxicated, she could have kissed him forever. She broke contact only to whisper 'Were you alright? Did anyone come past?'

He shook his head, staring at her mouth. 'I missed you.'

'I was only gone a few hours.'

'Huh. It felt longer.' He nuzzled her neck. She could feel how hard he was through the material of his pants. She tried to squirm closer but the chain and thick bands of the cuffs dug against them. After another minute, Jaime heaved a frustrated sigh and rolled onto his back, releasing her. The chain clanked as he moved his hands.

'I have so much to tell you,' she said. Undeterred by his restrictions, she climbed on top of him. His lips quirked up. 'Aren't you tired? Where's this energy come from?'

'You inspire me,' she said.

He allowed her to lift his hands over his head, but when she went to kiss him again he brought the cuffs down and blocked her. 'No.'

'I know you want to -'

'I do want to. But not like this. Did you bring something back to remove these things with?'

'Yeah. An axe.'

'How big?'

She grinned. 'Fucking big.'

He smiled at her. 'Let's wait 'til tomorrow, then.' He gently but firmly pushed her off him. 'Lie down. Sleep now.' She turned and curled up, pushing herself snuggly into the curve of him. His warmth and steady breath began to draw out all her hurts, like a poultice to her tired body and unsettled mind. An opiate trickling through her senses. Jaime breathed in deep at the nape of her neck. 'G'night, girl.'

'Goodnight.'

She slept like the dead.

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Bright morning sun. She held the axe in both hands, remembering Gendry's words. 'Aim bout an inch to the left. Let the weight of the head bring it down.' She felt distinctly nauseous.

Jaime sat bestride a large dead tree trunk in front of her, the chain between his hands stretched taut out in front of him. He looked much more enthusiastic than the girl felt.

'Let's do this,' he said.
Sunlight sparkled along the links, remnants of fog lifting into the air as a breeze whipped up from the direction of the river. The girl adjusted her grip, altered her stance, stalling for time. She wasn't one bit confident about swinging the heavy axe with any degree of accuracy whatsoever. Anxiety jagged through her, and her palms hurt. Muscles twinged anew as she hefted the weapon to her shoulder. The roof of her mouth was dry.

'Don't make me wait,' Jaime warned.

'I feel nervous. I think... I should have another practise shot.'

'Fuck's sake. You already practised on the pumpkin. Stop over-thinking. Just do.' He looked about to explode with impatience as she hesitated again. 'If you don't swing that axe in the next five seconds girl, I'm seriously going to... .' He shook his head.

The girl licked her lips, took one sweaty hand off the handle to wipe it on her top.

'One...' Jaime said.

'Alright, alright.'

'Two...'

She heaved up the axe and fixed her eyes an inch to the left of the chain's centre link. She tried to forget his hands were there. As she swung out and down, the axe arced through the air almost of its own volition. The jolt when it hit jarred up her arms and she let go of the handle.

They both stared at where it had landed. The steel head was sunk into the log, a long crack splitting the wood both directions from the point of impact. Jaime's right hand was perilously close to the blade, the edge of his thumb almost grazing it. The girl felt sick at the sight.

Jaime moved his left hand out to the side and the chain rattled, dropped free to the ground. He sat up, moved his right hand out to the other side. 'By the gods,' he breathed. He spread both arms as far apart as they could go, threw his head back. 'Thank fuck.' He started laughing.

The girl felt dizzy with relief, laughed as well. Jaime grabbed the axe, wrenched it out of the log and in one easy motion with his right hand, brought it down deftly on the edge of the cuff that encircled his left wrist. The point of the blade slid through the metal like butter, and the cuff gaped open. The skin on his wrist was encrusted with dirt and stained black from the metal. Jaime switched the axe to his left hand and chopped again; the second cuff fell free.

'We did it,' the girl cried, clapping in delight. Jaime jumped up and grabbed her and they danced around the campsite like kids at a name-day party. They threw the chain and the cuffs into the bushes and cheered. Finally they were spent and sprawled out on the ground.

'You did good,' Jaime said. 'I knew you would.'

'Luck,' she downplayed, blushing.

'Luck works. So.' He stretched languorously. 'We should maybe think about getting going soon.'

'That's another thing I had to tell you... ' The girl crossed her legs. 'I got a lift with a local trader last night, and he told me he was heading through to KingsLanding tonight. He offered to take us with him.'

Jaime frowned. 'I don't think so.'
'I know him, he's alright. He's a good person and, he won't care about you.'

'No. Forget it.'

She got to her feet, brushed the leaves off her legs. 'If you say. But we're going to find it pretty tough walking the rest of the way to KingsLanding. I don't think Sooty is coming back. If she were anywhere around she'd have found me by now.'

'We can't stay here, the Riverroad will only get busier the longer we wait. Let's get our gear packed, think as we walk.'

'If we can wait until evening, just consider the trader idea -'

'I have,' Jaime declared. 'It's a bad idea.'

'Why can't we just wait?' He can be so infuriating, she thought.

Jaime lounged back against a tree with casual grace. Unrestricted by the handcuffs, he reminded the girl of a big cat sunning itself. 'Well, let's see. That man-eating wolf we saw yesterday, for one thing.'

'That wolf won't...' She paused, not wanting to sound ridiculous. 'It wasn't trying to attack us.' At Jaime's frankly incredulous look, she stammered on. 'It... it was protecting us.'

'You didn't happen to eat any wild mushrooms whilst you were gone, did you?'

'I know it beggars belief but... you know how I whistled for Sooty? Right before the wolf came? I think when it saw me being threatened by those outlaws, it was like another time, another time when it... also attacked someone.'

Jaime yawned. 'Girl. If you think it was anything other than pure good fortune that we weren't the ones ripped apart by that animal, you're deluded. I told you not to whistle.'

'If I hadn't whistled, we'd be dead. Well, I would be. You'd be back wherever you came from, maybe minus some limbs.' Jaime opened his mouth to say something else no doubt scathing, but she hurried on. 'There was a wolf, a pet wolf, it escaped from around here. Around the time my brother was killed.'

Jaime still looked doubtful, but raised an eyebrow at her to continue.

The girl started slowly, wanting him to understand. 'The wolf belonged to a girl, a Lady, called Arya Stark. I don't expect you to know who she is but, she was travelling with the King's party when they came through here, her father was Lord Stark, of Winterfell. He was Hand of The King. And her sister was promised to the boy King. That's what's so... incredible. Unbelievable, really. But it's true! Arya was there with my brother and the boy King.' The girl drummed her fingers anxiously on her thigh as she talked. 'My brother never attacked him, he attacked my brother. And then Arya's wolf attacked the boy King. All this time, everyone was wrong, just like I always knew they were!'

Jaime stared at her. She'd expected some reaction but he gave her nothing. Finally he said, 'So...this girl, Arya's, wolf just attacked someone? For what reason...?'

'Because he was hurting my brother!'

'Why?'
'Because the boy King likes hurting people? I don't know. Some people just do. It makes them happy, to cause pain to others. It's their thing. Those outlaws were like that, and the boy King is too. Arya tried to protect my brother, maybe the boy King tried to hurt her as well, I don't exactly know, but then the wolf attacked him.'

Jaime's expression didn't alter. He gave no sign of recognising any of the names she'd spoken. He crossed his arms. 'And you know all this -' he asked sceptically, '- The way it happened, the motives of those involved... how?'

'A.. a friend of mine was at the Inn last night. He knows Arya. She told him.'

Jaime considered her for a long moment, his face inscrutable. At last he sighed. 'Look, girl. I'm sorry about your brother. Truly. I believe you when you say he wasn't at fault. I believe what you say happened the way you say it did. But..' He rubbed his temple where the healing stitches were irritating.

'But?'

'Do you really, honestly believe that the same wolf that used to belong to this, Arya Stark person, is still in the area, more than a year later, protecting people? It's an animal.'

She knew it sounded unlikely. She knew trying to convince Jaime of it was beyond pointless. Nevertheless, she knew it was true.

She decided not to bother persuading him further, and started organising their things instead. Gathering up the rest of the food from the trader into a pile, kicking dirt onto the fire to hide it. Scattering the charred logs into the undergrowth. 'Well, at least now you know why I hate the boy King so much.'

Jaime turned away, but not before she saw the flash of exasperation. 'His name's Joffrey.'

'And?' she snapped.

'And, I'm educating you. If we're going to talk about this. He was a Prince then, not a King, boy or otherwise, and his name is Joffrey.'

'Fine.' The girl picked up a blackened branch and threw it forcefully into the bushes. 'At least now you know why I hate fucking Joffrey so much.'

Jaime reacted to her raised voice with a pained expression that told the girl he considered she was being immature, and it annoyed him to even have to witness it. 'It wasn't him killed your brother, you know,' he said, as the girl stalked around in a huff collecting their gear. 'Joffrey. He would have had someone else -'

'I know. His henchmen. But he gave the order. So I don't blame them. They were just... following orders.'

'Oh, I see. You hate Joffrey, but you don't hate the men who hunted down and killed your brother because they were just following orders?' Jaime snorted air through his nose. 'I don't like to be the one to shatter your illusions but these people love killing. It's what they do best. I'd wager they could've let your brother escape, if they'd wanted, but where's the fun in that? They chose to pursue him. It was a game. The thrill of the chase, the hunt. The man who actually killed him? He would have enjoyed it.'

'I think... what I think is...' It was getting hard to breathe, to talk, but the girl tried her best to stay
composed. 'I would like to think that they... whoever it was who...' She drew in a shaky breath, released it. 'The person who killed my brother. I'd like to think it was difficult for them and that they felt... it was a job and they had no choice but to do it.'

'Then you're more naive than I thought.'

'Why are you saying this?' Her voice cracked. 'Because you want me to hate the man who killed him, too? Alright, I hate him too! He never met my brother before, they never spoke a single word to each other, this man never knew one thing about him, he only took his life, based on a lie. You want me to hate him too, alright I hate him too!' She had the urge to scream, to punch something.

Jaime held out his hands as if she were being unreasonable. 'I'm sorry this is distressing you. Your brother's death is defining your life and maybe it's a good thing for us to talk about it now. Get it out, before we go on. You need to know I'm only trying to help you -'

'Help me? By telling me how my brother probably died? How thoughtful of you.' The girl paced around the campsite, not even pretending to clean any more. 'Do you think I haven't imagined it all myself, a thousand times? Do you think I didn't hear the stories, about how they had to put all the pieces of him in a sack to carry; how he was cut in half; how his skull was split right down between his eyes with such precision that each half had the same number of teeth in it? How my father begged for them to give him his son's remains but by then he'd been thrown away, like rubbish? Do you think I don't lie awake and wonder which of these stories are the truth and which aren't, and if the truth is maybe something else even worse? But please, do continue,' she gestured, sarcasm choking her words, 'because listening to you tell me how much those who did these things enjoyed doing them is really fucking helpful.'

Jaime watched her, coolly. 'You are so full of hate towards the people you think are to blame, but there's more than one side to every story. And you don't know the whole story.'

'I know my brother never attacked the Prince. I know the Royal family, the King and the Queen, whoever else was there, they could've stopped him being killed, but they didn't!'

'Why would they? They only heard what they heard. Attacking a Prince is a crime punishable by death. And Joffrey was actually attacked, I take it?'

'By the wolf. By Arya. Not by my brother!'

'Then it's a shame that your brother had to pay for the Stark girl's crimes, isn't it?' Jaime had had enough and stepped in front of her, caught her arms as she tried to pass him. She struggled to pull away, but he was unyielding. 'Come here, girl.' He wrapped her into him and held her there, pressed tight to his warm body. She could hear his steady heartbeat. She tried half-heartedly to push away, but then gave up and let herself be held.

Jaime's voice reverberated in her ear from deep in his chest. 'Shhh. Listen to me. You don't see this clearly because you haven't grown up in their world. You're a commoner and that's alright,' He stroked her hair tenderly, smoothed it away from her face. 'It's one of the things I love about you. You see people as equals, no matter where they were born, and that's a great quality to have. But Princes and Kings... they live in a whole different world, one where they can't lose face. I mean, ever. They have to be respected.'

The girl listened, the low rumble of his words reassuring. He went on: 'The whole reason Kings are Kings is not because they're any better than anyone else. They might have bigger armies, but armies don't follow people who they don't respect. Kings become Kings because they can convince other people that they should be, and it's a powerful thing, having that respect. Powerful but fragile. Do
you understand?' He looked down at her face. She nodded. That's why, if someone shows up a
King, or a Prince, to be weak, or cowardly, or wrong; if someone shows them up to be a normal
flawed person just like everyone else, especially in front of others, then there have to be
consequences. Do you understand?

She nodded again. Having Jaime's solid body around her, his body heat, had a tranquilizing effect.
What he was saying didn't matter as much as that he was holding her. She hiccuped. He walked her
gently over to the log and they sat down. He hooked her hair behind her ear, pressed his lips to her
forehead.

'So. Here's what I think.' He tipped her chin up so that she had to look at him. 'There were two boys
fighting, as boys do, and have done, since forever. Impressing girls, boosting their status,' he
shrugged. 'Normal boy stuff. One of them wins and one of them loses. I don't need to spell out to
you who has to win when one of them is a Prince. Do I?'

'No,' she said quietly.

'Look, your brother had no business even being in that situation, he was a commoner like you, but
thanks to his... friendship with the Stark girl, unfortunately, there he was. So. It still could have ended
with a few bruises, nothing serious. Your brother could have walked away with a scrape or two, let
Joffrey have his win, and everything would have been fine. Until the Stark girl... what?'

'Hit him? Made her wolf attack him?' The girl's voice was barely a whisper.

He nodded. 'Escalated the situation. Irretrievably. A Prince, any Prince, simply can't overlook being
made a fool of. There have to be repercussions. That's why your brother is dead. Because some little
rich girl with a pet wolf couldn't control her temper.'

'She wouldn't have meant that to happen,' the girl said, but even as she defended Arya out loud a
cold thing uncoiled in her gut, full of venom.

'The worst things are often done with the best intentions. Or at least, good intentions are an easy
excuse.' Jaime said. His rhythmic stroking of her hair was soothing. 'Arya would have known full
well she was protected by her father, Lord Stark. It's easy to be an impulsive little brat and humiliate
a Prince when your father is Hand of the King. And when your sister is promised in marriage to said
Prince? Why, you're practically family. I mean, what's going to happen to you, right? Especially
when your new so-called friend, a common villager, with a lowly butcher for a father, is
conveniently right there to pay the price for it. I'm so sorry, girl,' Jaime kissed the top of her head,
'But it sounds to me like Arya Stark was not any kind of friend to your brother. She used him for her
own purposes, she used him as a scapegoat, and now he's dead because of it.'

They were silent for a long time then, the only sound the wind picking up in the trees, and the distant
call of birds.

Finally the girl shifted and sat up. 'I'm sorry we have to talk about this. You're right. Everyone there
that day let my brother down. I have nothing but hate for any of them.'

'Hate is a strong emotion to carry around with you,' Jaime said. 'What are you going to do about it?'

'I want people to pay, but... what can I do?' She laughed bitterly. 'I'm no-one.'

'Maybe you should try to let it go,' he suggested.

'Would you? If someone hurt your family?'
He was quiet a moment. 'No.'

'Then don't ask me to.' She leant away from him. 'One day soon they will all get what's coming to
them.'

'The belief that bad people ever get what they deserve is sadly unfounded -'

She put her finger to his lips to shush him. He lifted his hand and caught her wrist, turned it over.
Then, he kissed her palm, on the cuts and the grazes, softly, taking away the hurt, and she felt each
feather-light touch all the way down into her belly, like little sharp tendrils of fire. He licked her
wrist, pulled her arm in towards him and planted little kisses up to her elbow. By the time he stopped,
she was panting. He put his fingers on the hem of her top and curled them underneath, his knuckles
grazing her bare skin.

'I don't want to talk about this any more,' he said.

'No,' she agreed, faintly.

Jaime ran his hands up either side of her waist, his thumbs rubbing under her ribs, then moving up
further, brushing the swell of her breasts. His fingertips skipped lightly across her nipples and she
gasped as the heat inside her flared up fiercely. Then he reached for the hem of her top again and
lifted it up, pulling it over her head.

She closed her eyes as the material covered her face, and by the time she could see again, Jaime's
head was bowed and his mouth was on her breasts. She threaded her fingers into the back of his hair,
tipped her head back. The sensations that rushed through every nerve and fibre of her body were
exquisite, almost unbearable. Jaime's hands were touching her, caressing her flushed skin, leaving
liquid fire in their wake. She lifted her arms, tried to stand. Tried to undo the cord of her pants. He
restrained her hands and stopped her. 'Let me,' he said. 'I've been wanting to do this since I met you.'

The girl sat and waited in excruciating anticipation as Jaime, deliberately taking his time, undid the
cord around her pants and then her underwear, and they fell loose to her knees. He stood and pulled
her upright, letting the material pool around her ankles. His lips pressed on hers, hard, his mouth
open and demanding. She kicked off her last remaining clothes, the breeze gusting up cool on her hot
skin. Jaime's hands moved down her spine to the dip at the base of it, almost spanning the width of
her hipbones with his wide-spread fingers. Inside she felt like she was dissolving. The muscles of his
arms tensed around her as she eagerly tugged at his clothes and pushed him down to the ground.

He broke their kiss and sat down, leant back lazily, let her straddle him. She knelt on either side of
his lap and removed his top, as he watched her intently with dark eyes. The green in them shone like
wildfire. The girl felt like she was burning up everywhere his gaze lit her.

Her fingers lingered on the healing cut in the middle of his chest, before she bent and gently kissed it.
Then she moved her mouth over and grinning, bit lightly at his nipple. He drew in a sharp breath and
suddenly his hands were gripping her firmly around her hips. He sat up and pushed her backwards
all in one movement. She thought she had good reflexes, but by the time she hit the ground he had
her pinned. She could feel his arm under her thigh, his palm cupped around her buttock. He looked
at her and smiled as he leaned his weight inexorably against her, forcing her leg higher. Her head
spun and her body melted. She was mindless.

Jaime leant forward over her and, supporting himself on one hand, he slid the other hand up to the
crook of her knee, securing her leg there. The girl arched her back, groaned, tried to wriggle against
him but he held her still effortlessly. 'Uh-uh, girl,' he said, his voice rough with desire, barely
controlled. 'Don't think you're calling the shots any more. This time we're going to do it my way.'
It was mid-morning by the time Jaime and the girl finally left the campsite. The air was clear and breezy, colder than the day before and with a hint of rain to come.

The girl didn't care about the weather. She was feeling so relaxed, in fact, that nothing short of the threat of a tornado would likely have fazed her. Whatever concerns she'd had earlier about travelling on foot now seemed insignificant. Her muscles were loose, the joints of her limbs felt slack, and her insides were all mushy as if she'd been lifted and shaken vigourously until all the parts of her were mixed together.

They crossed the Riverroad, avoiding a couple of farmer's carts, and headed into the trees on the other side. No-one heeded them. The trees did not grow as thick here, and the copses were separated by open fields. The land which had been flat along the riverbank now rose into hills, dipped into valleys. Little clumps of purple and white wildflowers appeared here and there among the grass, which reached to their knees. Normally the girl would be oblivious to nature's common beauty, but today she found herself noticing how rich the colours were, how pleasant the contrast between lime green and rich purple.

The ceaseless rush of the river had been a constant background noise, as well as supplying water and direction for a week. Its absence meant having to find other water sources and ways to navigate. But this didn't trouble the girl, either. All the stresses and nagging aches of her mind had been quieted along with those of her body. She felt rejuvenated.

With outstretched hands she brushed the tips of the grasses, hummed a tune as she walked. Every so often Jaime would look over at her, and she'd catch his eye and smile. Once he took her arm as they negotiated a ditch, and as he let go his hand dropped and he entwined his fingers in hers for a few steps. It felt like little bubbles of happiness were released by his touch and popped straight into her bloodstream. She tried to get a grip on herself, tried to keep the dreamy look off her face, but it was difficult when her feet didn't even feel like they were touching the ground.

After a while, the sound of upcoming traffic broke into her reverie. Jaime, a little ahead of her, carrying the axe on one shoulder and the pack on the other, stopped at a grove of trees just before the cleared land fell away down a long slope to the highway. She stopped beside him, and they watched the stream of wagons, riders and pedestrians meandering both ways along the King's Road.

'It's busy,' he observed.

'Yeah. The direction we're going, it'll only get busier.'

They watched a squadron of blue and grey soldiers ride past, maybe thirty men in all. The armour of men and horses glinted in the sun, the bits and stirrups jingled, and their wolf banners whipped and snapped in the stiff breeze. Jaime's expression was pensive. The girl wondered what he was thinking, but then she was distracted by the way his long fringe lifted off his forehead in a wave and curved down to flatten against his neck in the wind. She had an almost uncontrollable urge to brush the thick locks with her fingers. Clean and in the bright daylight, she noticed for the first time that his hair was a dark blonde and shone like burnished gold.

Another patrol of North soldiers went along the road below them, this time almost twice the number.
'Lots of military,' he mused. 'No point even trying to cross over. We can stay on this side of the King's Road all the way to the Capital.'

The girl had to drag her eyes away from his face in order to collect her own thoughts. 'There's not as much cover close to the road, we'll have to go right around towards Maidenpool, then cut over to Duskendale. I know the trails but on foot, it could take us...' She started to add up the hours and days in her head. There were a lot.

'As long as you know how to get us there, girl. Once we pass Maidenpool we're almost out of the reach of Northmen. I don't mind if it takes a little longer.' Jaime turned from the disappearing soldiers to face her. 'Long trips don't worry me when I enjoy the company.'

The girl felt her heart surge with delight at his words, and then almost immediately deflate at the flip-side implication: the time she had with Jaime was limited. Once they reached KingsLanding, they would go their separate ways. He would be home, and her home was somewhere very far away.

She shook off the thought. *Why dwell on what has yet to pass?* 'I'm glad you're enthusiastic about a long journey. I think it could run into weeks, and we're kind of short on supplies.'

'I don't care about supplies,' he said.

'The axe is our only weapon, we have no horse, the apples and bread won't last beyond today, and we only have one blanket. It looks as though the weather is changing and -'

'I don't care about blankets.'

She realised he was staring at her the way she'd stared at him before, as if trying to memorise every detail of her face. When his gaze dropped to her mouth, the girl totally forgot what she'd been going to say. She was drawn to him as if by a magnet, and closed her eyes as he curled one hand around the back of her neck.

'It's strange to feel this way about someone else,' he said, almost to himself, sounding genuinely mystified. 'I never thought I could.' He ran one hand through her hair to the ends, watching the strands fall from his fingers. It made her scalp tingle deliciously.

'Do you wish you didn't?' she heard herself asking.

He gave a slight shrug. 'There is no point wishing to feel one way or another. We can't help what we feel.'

'It's better than when we hated each other.'

'I never hated you, girl,' he disagreed. 'And you never hated me.'

'Not even when you strangled me with that chain?'

'No. I didn't do that because I hated you. I didn't know you then. You were just an obstacle to be overcome. A... nothing.'

'And what am I now?' she asked.

He tilted his head and regarded her with half-lidded eyes. 'Now, you are most definitely a something.' His fingers tugged on her hair and she obediently tipped her face up to be kissed. His lips and tongue fitted against hers so seamlessly it was as if they'd been made to fit together; as if the whole point of her mouth even existing was simply to kiss his. After a time that may have been a
minute or an hour, she had no idea, he pulled himself away. 'A very, very distracting something,' he
said in a low voice.

She moved away from him, breathless. *If we don't stop behaving like this, I'm going to have to add
another few weeks to our journey*, she thought. *Not that I would mind.*

They retreated back from their view of the King's Road, and the girl led the way up to where she
knew a track cut through the hills. They followed this until midday when they came to a depression
in the ground under a rocky hillock just higher than their heads, sheltered from the wind. She
suggested they stop and eat.

Jaime agreed, although he didn't look the slightest tired, despite having carried the heavy axe and
pack for hours. On the contrary, since getting rid of his manacles he seemed possessed of a cocky
confidence and easy swagger. While the ragged clothes and long hair were the same, his presence
had definitely changed. The girl doubted she could have recognised him as the same man she'd first
encountered sitting by the roadside. He was like a caged wild animal that had been released and now
prowled free looking for something to sharpen its claws on.

*Or maybe it's me who's changed,* she thought. *Maybe I see him through different eyes.*

They shared the apples. She watched him eat, watched him hold the water flask, thinking all the time
of how well she knew his mouth, the touch of his hands. How he looked when he was naked, what
sounds he made when he was at his most unguarded, when ecstasy overcame all else. It was a weird
kind of intimacy, in that she felt she knew so much about him, but at the same time nothing.

'So are you ever going to tell me why you were being kept a prisoner?' she asked.

'Are you ever going to tell me your name?' He turned the questioning back on her, quite slickly, she
thought. *He's good.*

'If I do, will you tell me why you were being kept a prisoner?'

He grinned at her persistence. 'No.'

She threw her apple core at him, and he evaded it by falling backwards onto the ground. She lay
back too, on the soft grass. Picked a stem, chewed on the juicy end.

'Your girl. What's she like?'

'You just don't know when to give up, do you?' he teased.

'I'm only curious.'

'Curiosity rarely leads to happiness. People always want to know things they'd be so much better off
not knowing.'

'Humour me. Lie if you want,' she said. 'Not like I'm ever going to meet her.'

Jaime was quiet for a minute, as if thinking how best to respond. After a while he rolled onto his side
and propped himself on one elbow. He studied the girl, and she wondered if in his head he was
doing some kind of comparison. 'Well, she's blonde,' he finally said, and the girl figured he had been.

'Is that the only similarity?'

He laughed and half-shook his head, almost as if she'd said something obvious or ironic. She waited
for him to explain, but he didn't.

'What?' she finally prompted.

'Well. She can also be a real pain in the arse.'

The girl returned his laugh. 'Maybe that's just a woman-thing.'

'You could be right.' He thought some more, still staring at her as he did so. His stare was starting to make her feel hot and restless, although the sky was now overcast and the air chilled. Jaime went on: 'She's strong. Determined. But, she's complicated. Most people misunderstand her. That's only because they don't know her like I do.'

'She's lucky,' the girl said.

'Because she loves me?' Jaime smiled wryly. 'I'm not an easy person to love. I can't solve her problems, I go missing a lot. Loving me is a burden more than a good fortune.'

'I meant because you love her,' the girl replied. 'I hope she appreciates it.'

Little spits of rain began to swirl in the gusts. The girl sat up, grabbed their pack. 'I wish we still had the packs that were on Sooty. The waterproof tarp and spare furs. We're gonna get drenched.'

Jaime took the pack off her. 'We'll find shelter if it starts pouring. But this is just a shower.' He stood in front of her in the blustery wind, his skin shining from the droplets, hair tangling wildly. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet, close into him. Then he said quietly in her ear, 'We're being followed.'

The girl's heart skipped a beat. She didn't move her head, but flicked her eyes along the treeline over his shoulder. 'Kiss me,' he instructed.

She pressed her lips on his lightly. 'How do you know?'

'I heard them,' he murmured against her mouth. 'About half hour ago. I was sure I saw someone too, on the track behind us, but they were some way back and I wasn't sure. But while we've been here, there's been movement on top of that little hill, near the rocks. So now I'm sure. Don't look. Keep kissing me.'

She did as he told her, nerves prickling with apprehension. Are we about to get ambushed? How could I miss being followed? I'm normally so careful. But she knew why. Because thinking about Jaime every second didn't leave room for thoughts of anything else. She berated herself for being so undisciplined. What good is feeling blissful if that feeling gets us both killed?

Jaime held her forearms and pulled back a little to look into her eyes. 'Stop doing that now or I can't concentrate' he said, with a smile. She wondered how he could look so relaxed with the possibility that arrows may hit them at any moment, but his eyes sparkled with a barely contained excitement. Alright this is what's going to happen. We're going to go over to that levee, underneath the rocks, together, as if we were going to... enjoy ourselves. I know it will be hard to pretend but, just do your best.' He smiled again, and the craziest thing was that she felt like smiling back. He continued, 'When we get directly underneath the rocks I'm going to turn you around and kiss the back of your neck. Then - we run, up the sides of the hill. You go right, I'll go left, and whoever's up there will be trapped.' He looked positively thrilled at the prospect. If he could have purred she was sure he would have.

She, in contrast, was silently freaking out. There was so much could go wrong with this scenario that
she didn't even know where to start. Somehow, she allowed herself to be walked over towards the levee by Jaime, who played the ardent admirer convincingly the whole way; stroking her waist and nibbling her ear.

They stopped under the overhang of the hill, faced each other, the cluster of rocks blocking the spatter of rain. The air around them in the sheltered pocket was still. It was like the eye of the storm. *Whoever's up there has the perfect shot at us,* the girl thought, panic tightening her throat. *Barely yards away, directly above us. Fucking hells.*

Jaime pressed her up against him, and she felt his hardness. *This is turning him on. Dear gods, the man has a death wish.*

He turned her around, slowly, lifting her hair up with one hand. As every second ticked past she expected the hiss of an arrow and a steel barb to sink into her flesh. She felt cold air on the nape of her neck, and then the soft touch of his lips. 'Now,' he whispered.

She sprang away, the adrenaline spiking through her body giving her wings. She made it up the hill in about five strides, took a sharp turn behind the rocks, skidded on loose gravel and nearly fell over. She saw a man running, and Jaime from the other direction make a flying leap and tackle him to the ground. The girl ran over and jumped on the man's head, held tight until he stopped thrashing.

'Lie still,' Jaime growled. 'You're not going anywhere.' His voice was so authoritative that the girl wasn't surprised when the man almost immediately obliged. She got off his head now he wasn't struggling, keeping one of her knees on his back.

'Who are you and why are you following us?'

The man mumbled something into the dirt and Jaime nodded at the girl; she stepped off the man and withdrew the sword from the scabbard on his belt as she did so. Jaime stood, dragging the interloper up by the scruff of his jacket collar. Although nearly as tall as Jaime, the man was gangly and young. About her own age, the girl thought. Then she saw his face and realised she knew him.

'You're Callem. Cole's son, from the Hollow,' she said. 'I thought I recognised Cole's steel.' She lifted up the sword, which even at a cursory glance was extremely well-crafted.

The man flinched from her fearfully, his pale face imprinted with pebbles where he'd been pushed into the ground. He actually appeared terrified, which bemused her.

He knows me, and Jaime's not that scary, she thought.

'Th-they're tracking you. Th-they sent me on ahead to report back when you stopped t-t-to rest,' Callem stuttered. He seemed keen to unburden himself. Jaime tightened his grip on the collar and the young man cringed. 'P-please don't kill me!'

'I'm not going to kill you. Or rather, not immediately.' Jaime looked to be in his element, intimidation obviously being one of his fortes. 'So, you're the scout. Why didn't you go straight back and report that we were resting as soon as we stopped here?'

Callem looked so petrified he was beyond words. The girl wondered if he was about to piss himself. It made her want to giggle, the effect Jaime was having on this poor kid.

When there was no reply, Jaime clicked his teeth together, which the girl had to admit was rather a threatening sound. 'Were you hoping to watch us fuck? Is that why you hung around?'

'N-n-n-no,' Callem choked out. Tears glimmered in his eyes as Jaime twisted the material at his neck. *'No? That's a shame, you could have had a happy memory to take to the grave with you. You could have pictured this girl here,'* Jaime gestured in her direction, *'moaning in pleasure, when the time*
comes for me to slit your throat with that sword she's holding.'

'Let him be,' the girl admonished. 'He's barely older than a kid. He doesn't know what he's doing.'

Jaime smiled at Callem, but this didn't have any sort of reassuring effect on the young man. He gasped for breath and wriggled like a fish on a hook, which made Jaime smile even wider before he said, 'Tell me how many others are following us, and exactly where they are.'

'T-t-t-twelve men, villagers from th-the Hollow. Brodrick is leading them. Th-the-they're hiding in the trees back down the t-t-t-track about half a mile.' Callem started crying, snot leaking from his nose and snail-trailing down his cheek.

'Have you seen us?' Jaime asked.

The young man's face was turning a puce colour, his eyes bulged in their sockets. He shook his head frantically.

Jaime considered him for a moment longer, then abruptly let him go. Callem staggered backwards and fell over. Jaime turned away. 'Get up. This girl here likes you for some reason, so thank her for saving your life. If you breathe a word to anyone of having seen either myself or this girl, ever, I will personally find you and kill you in a manner that will make you wish to every god you've ever heard of that you'd never been born. My family will find you if I can't.' Callem stumbled to his knees, retching and coughing desperately to get air.

'What are we doing?' the girl asked, sword in one hand, surprised that Jaime had actually released the boy.

'We're going to turn the tables on some villagers,' Jaime said matter-of-factly.

'Yeah... um. Are you fucking mad? He said there are twelve of them!'

'Twelve villagers from RedHollow. Not twelve soldiers.'

The girl must've looked thoroughly unconvinced, because Jaime sighed, reached over and grabbed Callem's arm to help him to his feet. 'How did you find us, boy? Go on, tell her how you tracked us here.'

The boy coughed again, gagged. 'The-the-the- the horse.'

Jaime looked over at the girl to make sure she'd got that. 'Your horse. They have your horse, and they're using her to find us.'

The girl felt her heart stop completely, then start up again at a gallop in her chest. She gaped at Callem. 'Sooty? They have Sooty? But she would never go with anyone else...' she trailed off at the guilty look on the boy's face. Callem rubbed his neck and spat blood onto the ground, his tongue testing for loose teeth. 'Th-they have ch-ch-ch-chains,' he said.

There was a long silence. Rain slanted down, wind chased grey clouds across the sky.

The girl frowned, looked down at the sword in her hand thoughtfully. Suddenly she tossed it over the boy's head to Jaime, who caught it in his left hand. The clouds opened up, and sunlight shivered down the blade; Jaime spun it with a lazy flick of his wrist and the steel flashed.

'How do you go with a sword?' she asked.
Jaime shrugged. 'I go alright.'
Swords

The drizzle spat in their faces as Jaime and the girl back-tracked through the trees. The further they went along their previous route, the more apprehensive the girl became. Her earlier euphoric mood had evaporated into the rapidly darkening sky, and low thunder grumbled. She clutched the long-handled axe to her chest. Their pack had been left behind, to be collected sometime later. Or, not the girl thought. In which case, to be found eventually by some wandering Tribesman, who may spare a passing thought as to who it once belonged to.

'You know he might go straight back and tell them,' she said, recalling how Callem had fled down the hill as if the Red God himself were on his heels.

'He might,' Jaime agreed, unconcerned. 'It matters little. Half a mile is not far.'

They jumped down a culvert, ducked under the sweeping leaves of a willow tree. White butterflies sheltering under it scattered into the air like confetti. The girl wiped grit from her eyes and shifted the axe to her shoulder, trying to think only of Sooty, of seeing Sooty again, and not of the dozen armed men who wanted to capture and probably kill them, who they were now deliberately seeking out.

'So, are you clear on what you're doing?' Jaime said, as they moved furtively in a crouch along a dry creek bed that bordered the track.

'Getting killed?' she replied, testily.

'Your humour is as always, refreshing,' Jaime said, grabbing her arm to pull her up the steep bank and into an area of thick bracken, 'but I do actually need to know that you understand what we're doing.'

'Oh what we're doing?' she said, anxiety making her snippy, 'Well, while I'm getting killed I guess you'll also be getting killed, only a little less quickly. That sword looks pretty good on you, so it's possible you may take out five or six similarly-sworded men before the seventh, eighth or ninth one manages to overpower you in a bloody melee -'

'Shh, girl,' Jaime clamped his hand on her mouth with unexpected force. He stopped so that he could slide his hand down and grip her chin, turning her face to his. 'There will be plenty of blood, but I assure you none of it will be ours. Now, I know you're scared. But answer me. What did I tell you to do once we reach these villagers?'

Along with the controlled urgency of his tone, the girl couldn't ignore the anticipation in it. She despaired of his attitude. We're likely going to be captured or cut into little pieces and he's enjoying himself? I may be agreeing to do this, but at least I know it's madness.

What did I tell you?' Jaime repeated, giving her chin a little squeeze to get her attention. Unnerved by his baseless confidence, she repeated his instructions back to him. 'I'm hanging back until you distract them by... ' she gestured at the sword he held with such familiar ease by his side that it appeared to be an extension of his arm. '...by fighting. Until it's chaos. Then I go get Sooty.'

'Very good,' he nodded. 'Get your horse. That's all you need to do. I know you know some of these villagers, but remember they made their choices.'

'I just don't understand what you're going to be -'

'I'm going to be killing people,' Jaime cut her off. 'If that troubles you, you may wish to avert your
eyes.' His own eyes simmered with a restless energy that was becoming increasingly familiar to the
girl, as if he were alight from within. As if inside of him a flame was preparing to roar into an inferno
as soon as he gave it enough oxygen. She wondered if he'd always been this foolhardy, and if so
how it was that he still lived.

'You're one of those men, aren't you?' she said, narrowing her eyes. 'The kind who only feels alive
when they're fighting or fucking.'

Jaime stifled a laugh and almost let her go. 'Very insightful, girl, you truly have a gift. I guess today
is my lucky day.'

She jerked herself free of him. 'I'm sorry I lack your enthusiasm. But they have my horse, so let's do
this.'

They hurried through the trees until they reached an area of open marshland, where the track had
been built up with soil and sediment to cross over a shallow pond. Jaime dragged her down beside
the muddy dam that had been created by this crossing. Further along, the track curved around behind
a thicket of trees and out of sight.

'Why here?' she asked, squirming into the long reeds which grew thick around the murky dam. The
wind blew the reeds flat one way and then the other, skittered over the water and howled back into
the trees. The long grasses all around shook, and coldness from the damp earth seeped into her
clothes.

'They won't expect an ambush on low ground, in the open. Most attacks are from hills or higher up,
to give the attackers the advantage.'

'So what's our advantage?' she wanted to know.

He didn't answer, just kept looking along the track.

After around five minutes that felt like centuries, the girl could hear sounds gradually separate from
the howling wind; multiple boots scraping on dirt, metal jingling, hoof beats. It sounded like a small
army. She scrunched lower into the reeds.

'Gods, we're going to die,' she muttered.

'Have faith, girl. We won't die today.'

She felt sick with nerves, the taste of apple and bile in her throat. 'You're completely fucking insane,
aren't you? I'd almost look forward to proving you wrong if only it weren't going to be so painful.'

He held a finger to his lips. His eyes shone a light, bright green, blazing with certainty and
excitement in equal measure. He looked lit up, inspired, ready to leap into the embrace of chaos and
death as if they were old friends. Suddenly he leaned over and kissed her. She was too stunned to
even respond.

'Trust me,' he whispered. Then he crept low over to the side of the track and sank down into the
shadows, by the base of the little overpass.

The girl kept still, peering through the weeds and cattails. She couldn't see Jaime any more. The air
on her wet clothes was cold, but she didn't feel it.

She heard the tramp of footsteps growing closer, metal clanking. She could see movement, a mass of
bodies, coming around the corner of the track from behind the trees. A horse at the front with its head
bent down being led by a long rope, another horse at the back with packs on, and between the two animals rows of men on foot, marching with a sense of purpose.

The horse in front had an awkward hobbling gait, its bent head bobbing with every stride due to the two chains that ran from each bit ring to down under its belly and around its hind legs, where leather straps on its fetlocks linked them. Raw skin glistened in patches along the horse's flanks where the metal had chafed, and dried sweat coated its fur like powder. Unable to lift its neck higher than its knees, the horse groaned as it breathed, and froth ran in long streams from its champing, gaping mouth. The girl almost didn't recognise Sooty, didn't want to recognise her, but Callem's words made it true.

'They have chains'. The girl gripped her axe tighter, fought back the impulse to charge immediately into the midst of the villagers and free her horse. She knew she had to wait. But every dragging, clanking hoof beat closer was a stab to the heart. How could they do this to you, Sooty? Any sympathy she may have had for the villagers was gone, blown away by the cruel sight of Sooty's foaming mouth. Any nerves she'd had dissipated with it. All she felt was a cold determination settle in her guts. You want to have my horse, you fuckers? Let's see how much you like having her once I cut her chains.

Now the group of men were clear of the trees. Now they were approaching the dam, their footsteps rhythmic and sure. Now they were crossing the overpass.

The girl bowed her head, stilled her mind. She heard a splash, and a thud, and the sharp smack of a blade as it sliced into flesh. Jaime. She heard the footsteps falter and disunite. She heard a villager yell out in alarm, a micro-second of silence, followed by the hissing of numerous swords being unsheathed simultaneously. The clash of steel on steel.

Chaos. Her cue. She pushed herself up out of the reeds and vaulted onto the track.

Men on all sides of her, running, their attention on Jaime. Jaime meeting them as they came at him, his sword a silver blur, overhand, underhand, upswing, backswing, striking so hard that sparks flew, but moving easily as if in a dance he’d practised every day. The men were drawn into his orbit and then flung out of it, sideways or backwards or face-down, blood bursting and splashing from perfectly timed slashes, their lives gushing out of them before they realised it was done.

The girl was momentarily awed but didn't let herself dwell on it. She turned and dodged between the men as they moved forward. A scream that sent needles down her spine, bodies colliding; she didn't look back. Zig-zagging around boots and hurdling legs, then she was at the front and there was Sooty's broad rump and dreadlocked tail. 'Sooty,' she said, and the horse rolled her eye back and whinnyed in reply.

The girl sensed a movement to her right and instinct threw her under Sooty's belly. She rolled, just as the man who was holding the lead-rope brought his mace down into the spot she'd vacated. Sooty's big hooves stamped on the ground, sending the lengths of chain attached to her fetlocks twisting and writhing like fat snakes.

The girl righted herself on the opposite side of her horse, used the momentum of the roll to swing the axe up. 'Hey girl, whoa girl,' she soothed, as Sooty began to desperately plunge and paw, making the chains impossible to see in the clouds of dust. The man with the lead-rope hauled back on it fiercely and Sooty fell to her knees; her nose snorting dirt.

The girl could sense someone else approaching from behind, but she didn't turn or allow herself the distraction. If I am killed now then at least let Sooty be free, she prayed to gods she didn't believe in, as she brought the axe crashing down without any conscious aim. A blow struck her from behind on
the shoulder and she was knocked sideways, the axe wrenched from her grasp.

She hit the side of the track on her stomach and couldn't breathe. In front of her she saw Sooty's white flecked mouth arc upwards as she tossed her head, the chains sweeping free in a long trail beneath her. *I did it,* the girl thought, relief flooding through her.

Sooty also realised she was free. The big horse heaved herself up off her knees and swung her now-unrestrained head around like a battering ram, collecting the man on the end of the lead-rope as he tried to turn, and sending him flying through the air with a grunt. Then on her hindquarters she spun around so fast, all the girl could see was an explosion of gravel. Hooves lashed out with startling speed and the man tumbled sideways, his arms cartwheeling.

Another man ran forward from where he'd been standing behind the girl, holding the club he'd used to strike her with. This time he brought it down between Sooty's ears, but Sooty lunged into the blow and it glanced off her thick chest. The club flipped into space and the man was sucked under Sooty's bulk like an undertow, his body squelching sickeningly under her hooves.

The girl crawled over to the edge of the track. She couldn't see her axe anywhere and the club was lost in the frenzy of Sooty's trampling. Everywhere was haze and dust and people falling and shouting. Sooty squealed and kicked out and someone's head tipped backwards with a crack. The girl climbed to her feet, pain shooting through her shoulder as she moved.

She whistled and Sooty was by her side, jigging and stomping. The loose chains running from her bridle and hind legs slithered like tentacles in the dirt.

The girl scrambled up onto the horse's back and wound her fingers into her mane as Sooty reared again. Incredibly, the only men around them were sprawled at improbable angles, dark splotches and bloody hoof prints littering their bodies and the ground. The other packhorse stood uncertainly in their midst, unsure exactly what it should be doing.

From atop Sooty's back the girl could see further down the path to where Jaime and three men were still standing. Even as she clicked Sooty forward, Jaime stepped to one side to avoid a parry, then slashed his own sword down faster than the girl's eyes could follow. His opponent buckled at the waist like a puppet with the strings cut, and even before this man had hit the ground Jaime had already pivoted and thrust again, skewering the second man through the base of his neck. Jaime's blade withdrew smoothly and the man froze in mid-stride, before falling slowly through the dust, an imprint of him seeming to hang as an after-image in the disturbed air.

The third and last man had already lost his sword but bravely scooped up a dropped weapon and attacked. Jaime deflected his strike as if they'd rehearsed it beforehand, and with a casual flick of his sword sliced the man's leg from groin to calf. The wound yawned open, steam rose from it into the air. The man gasped and went down on one knee, still holding his weapon, a machete. He strained to stand up, but his leg failed and he leant on the weapon to keep from toppling sideways.

Jaime sauntered over, appearing eerily untouched despite the carnage around him. He reached across and knocked the machete away.

The man fell onto one hand. His breath was laboured and when he looked down he seemed amazed at the amount of blood already slick on the ground as his femoral artery pumped it out. He sat back heavily, legs outstretched, the circle of red widening around him until he looked to be sitting on a shiny crimson cloak.

The girl rode Sooty up to Jaime and the man. She saw now that the man was Brodrick, the one who had given Jaime so much attention that evening near RedHollow. Jaime stood and watched him
bleeding out, without expression. Sooty stopped beside him. For a while, the only sound was Brodrick's ragged breathing and the trickling of his life running out onto the sand.

Finally, he lifted his head and looked up at the girl. 'What are you doing, Delivery Girl?' he croaked. 'I wouldn't have thought it of anyone, but 'specially not you.'

Jaime stepped forward. 'Silence!'

'Why do you care?' the girl answered, ignoring Jaime and addressing Brodrick. 'You're not a soldier anymore, you should have let us be. If I choose to aid a prisoner to escape, then that's my business.'

'You're betraying the whole of the North with your actions! Lord Robb Stark would have -'

Jaime opened his mouth to speak, but the girl got in first. 'What do I care of the North? Or Lord Stark? What have they ever done for me and my family? I have looked after my family, I owe no-one loyalty.' When Brodrick didn't immediately respond, she went on, angry: 'Twelve villagers, who knew me and my family... to recapture this one prisoner? For what? Some misplaced sense of honour towards a Lord who wouldn't even know your fucking name if you died for him?'

Brodrick laughed then, softly, his chest shaking, leaning on his arms which were now wrist-deep in his own blood. 'You have no idea, do you, girl? Dear gods, you really have no idea.'

'I said, silence!' Jaime ordered, lifting his sword and pressing the tip of it into Brodrick's cheek.

'Leave him!' the girl cried out, but Jaime pressed the steel deeper.

The girl slid down off Sooty and grabbed his arm. 'Leave him!'

Jaime's arm tensed. Brodrick, his face now so white that he looked like a ghost, kept his eyes fixed on the girl. His voice was mocking. 'Oh the irony. Your brother tried to kill the boy who is King, and now... this? You must really hate Kings, Delivery Girl.' He laughed again, weakly. 'Seeing as you have such a thing for Kings -'

With one swift movement Jaime's blade ran through Brodrick's cheek and out the back of his skull. The girl dragged at his arm but to no effect, and as he yanked his sword out, Brodrick's last words bubbled out through the hole in his face. The ex-soldier slumped face down, and slowly keeled over.

'He was dead already, it was a mercy,' Jaime said.

The girl shoved at him, hard. 'He wasn't dead, he was talking to me!'

'He said your brother tried to kill the King, I presumed you'd want him dead.'

'You presumed wrong!' she glared. 'What did he mean, that I must really hate Kings?'

Jaime wiped his sword on Brodrick's coat. 'He was merely trying to provoke you. Last words never have the great significance people think they do.'

The girl didn't answer him, just stared at Brodrick's fallen body as the rain fell harder, in a torrent, diluting the pool of blood and washing it away in pink ribbons around her feet.
Rain

The rain came down in sheets. The girl wandered between the bodies, stepping over outstretched hands, avoiding the streams of bloody water winding in every direction across the track and out into the dam. No-one but her, Jaime and the horses stirred. She knew she should be checking for weapons, coins, anything that may be of use, as Jaime had told her, but she felt incapable of doing so. She just walked, her mind blank.

She stood in the middle of the bodies and counted them. *It's like when my father slaughtered pigs,* she thought, *but he never slaughtered this many at once.* She was thankful that most of the men were lying face-down and she didn't have to recognise them.

Jaime was going through the saddlebags on the packhorse, then he mounted it and rode over to where Sooty stood on the side of the track. The packhorse reached its nose over to sniff Sooty's, and she snorted softly before turning her head away.

The girl came across a man lying curled sideways with an arm across his face, as if he were just resting. She nudged him with her toe, and he rolled limply onto his back. His open eyes filled with water as the rain poured down.

*The poacher,* she thought. *I was talking to you only days ago. What made you come after us? Who will support your children now?* She stared at his grey face, trying to make sense of a world that seemed to have become incomprehensible.

'Take his coat,' Jaime said, riding up behind her. When she did nothing, he jumped down and went over to the poacher, pulled the heavy oilskin jacket off the stiffening limbs. It matched the one he was now also wearing, long and black. Jaime handed it to the girl. 'Put this on,' he insisted. 'You're soaked.'

The girl hadn't noticed, but when she went to push her arms through the too-big sleeves, she saw that she was shaking all over. Water dripped off the end of her nose and her clothes were plastered to her skin. Her shoulder sent spikes of agony whenever she moved.

Jaime came over to stand in front of her. He pulled the sides of the coat closed, fastened them; fixed the hood so it covered her head. She felt like a toddler being dressed by a parent. It was just really difficult to get her body to cooperate.

'Ve have to go,' Jaime said. 'We don't have long before... this is discovered. It's out of the way here, in the hills, but these will start to smell soon. We need a decent head start.'

'I figured you as a soldier,' the girl said in a flat voice. 'But this is... ' she looked around at the dead scattered haphazardly across the track, lost for words. An icy wind whipped through the marsh. 'I don't know what this is.'

'Your horse killed half of them,' Jaime dismissed. As if it were nothing.

*Sooty only killed three. Why try to minimise what you just did?* she thought. Said out loud: 'I've never seen anyone fight like that. Ever.'

Jaime looked impatient. 'How many soldiers have you seen fighting, girl? Not many, I'd wager. These men were just villagers, untrained. They were foolish to come after us. Any soldier could have done the same.'
No they couldn't. Not like that. Not with every strike hitting exactly where it should; not without being so much as touched by an opponent's blade, But, nice try.

She decided to keep her thoughts to herself until she could make better sense of them. 'Was Callem... here?' she asked instead.

Jaime shook his head.

The girl felt a small rush of relief. 'I guess he didn't tell them. I guess he listened to you.' She was glad, for at least that one small thing.

'Or else he decided to go tell someone else,' Jaime said, ominously. 'Now, let's leave. Or am I going to have to carry you?' He swung back up onto the packhorse in an easy movement, gathered the lead-rope in one hand. The horse pirouetted and tossed its mane. Somehow simply by having Jaime astride of it; balanced perfectly as if born in the saddle, the packhorse had transformed from a humble beast of burden into a spirited destrier. Just another thing he's apparently incredibly talented at, the girl thought. It wouldn't have surprised her at that moment if Jaime had grown wings and flown away.

*We're alive, against all the odds. We have horses, I have Sooty, and weapons, food, a tent. I should be celebrating. Why then do I feel so... nothing?*

She turned from the sight of him and walked back over to Sooty, who lifted her head at her approach. The horse's flanks heaved and her eyes were dull. The girl stroked her neck, murmured calming words. She hooked the bridle from behind the horse's ears and gently slid it off. The bit came out of Sooty's mouth slimy with blood where the pressure of the chains had cut into her lips. The girl dropped the leather to the ground, then ran her hands over the many cuts and contusions all over the horse's body. The chest wound from the club was starting to swell and felt warmer than the rest of her.

The girl knelt and unstrapped the restraints from Sooty's hind fetlocks. Her hooves were stained red and there was a spray of blood all up the inside of her legs.

The girl wrapped the lead-rope around the horse's neck and tied it in a knot, jumped onto her back. They walked first to the dam, where Sooty lowered her head and immediately began to suck in water in huge gulps.

*I don't think you've had anything to drink since I lost you*, the girl thought.

'Don't let her drink too much,' Jaime warned, riding up beside them. 'It's not good for horses to drink a lot when they're hot, and -' he gestured towards the overpass. The girl looked to where he'd pointed, and saw the run-off from the rain cascading down from the blood-soaked track into the dam. Little red strands and globs slipped through the pinkish waterfall. The girl, nauseated, pulled up Sooty's head and turned her away.

They kicked the horses into a canter and rode off through the rain.

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An early darkness fell with the storm. Thunder cracked and boomed and the trees appeared again and again out of the night in the flares of lightning. They rode further into the bush for another few hours, until the girl thought they must be on the outskirts of Maidenpool. Rain fell in a veil from the hood of her coat. Sooty began to stumble. As they reached the base of a steep ridge the girl reined in. 'We have to stop and rest,' she called out.
Jaime wheeled his horse around, looked behind them. He seemed to be listening for something, through the patter of the rain. 'Just a little further,' he urged. 'Another hour or so.'

'Sooty can't go on... she needs to rest.' The girl had already dismounted and began to run her hands over the horse again. All around her the night was black without dimension, but she concentrated on Sooty's warm fur, feeling for increasing heat or lumps. Sooty's breathing was strained.

Jaime dismounted too, came over. 'What's wrong with her?'

'Nothing's wrong with her,' the girl snapped. 'She's just tired.'

Jaime must have known better than to argue, and he helped take the horses over to the ridge and unpack a thick tarpaulin. They set it up against the cliff-face to make a sheltered area, weighed down the edges with stones, then dragged up some dead branches and lit a fire. The wet wood hissed and smoke drifted in slow coils. Jaime stripped off his sodden outer clothes and wrung them out. In the glow of the flames his skin shimmered as the muscles beneath flexed, his wet hair shone. He looked perfect, like a sculpted deity come to life. Like the lives of those men he took have made him more alive, the girl thought, although she knew that was insane even as she thought it.

She dipped a cloth into boiled water and cleaned Sooty's abrasions. The swelling on the horse's chest was the size of her hand, burning hot. There was little blood, but she could feel a thumping pulse through the skin. She smeared ointment on the area and applied a dressing.

Sooty's head drooped, she barely reacted to the girl's ministrations. Her eyes were filmy. Beside them, the packhorse grazed on the long grass, but Sooty showed no interest. The girl tipped fresh water from the flasks into a pot and dipped Sooty's muzzle in it, but the horse turned her head away.

'It's alright girl, never mind,' the girl said, rubbing Sooty's neck. 'You don't have to eat and drink tonight, you can just rest. It's going to be alright, now. Everything's going to be fine.' She didn't know who she was trying to reassure more, her horse or herself. Sooty snorted and sighed deeply.

Jaime came up beside them, dressed in a clean top he must have found in one of the packs. 'I cooked some food,' he said. 'Come and eat something.'

'I've never seen her this tired before,' the girl said. 'I think I need to go into Maidenpool tomorrow, buy some tonic. There's a woman there I know, she has healing things.'

'Tomorrow,' agreed Jaime. 'Now, come and eat, and get out of those clothes before you freeze. Your horse will manage for a while without you.'

The girl packed up her medical things and followed Jaime back to the fire. She sat on the dry ground under the ridge, inside the shelter, hands between her knees. The fire was warm and steam rose from her wet clothes, but she felt cold all the way through, like she would never thaw out even if she sat there for a thousand years. Jaime handed her a bowl of food and she ate from it, tasting nothing.

'Are you hurt?' Jaime asked.

She moved her shoulder slightly. Pain throbbed inside, and she knew the next morning she'd barely be able to move it. 'Not bad. Just a bruise,' she said.

'I'm sorry about...' Jaime looked away, ran his hand through his hair. 'Those villagers. But you have to remember, it was us or them.'

'I know,' she said. She still didn't look at him.
'They would have killed you, you know. If they'd caught us. I'm the one they wanted, you were expendable.'

'I know.'

There was a long silence. Finally Jaime sighed. 'If you hate me because I saved your life... then so be it.'

'I don't...' She didn't know what she felt. She couldn't decide if it was nothing at all, or so many conflicting emotions that it was impossible for any one of them to affect her.

Jaime picked up another log and put it on the fire. Sparks rose and fluttered. 'Have you ever killed someone, girl?'

'Sooty has... trampled people. Other times.'

'I don't mean your horse. I mean you,' he said. 'Have you ever killed a person?'

'I've seen people killed before. I'm fine with it.' The girl stared into the fire, at the shapes of tree limbs gleaming incandescent orange in the coals.

Jaime stood up and walked over to her, took the still half-full bowl out of her hands. He put it on the ground and lifted her up into his arms. She didn't resist when he peeled off her soaked clothes. She was shivering uncontrollably and he wrapped her in a blanket. Then he led her over to the sleeping furs and lay her down.

He kissed her on her neck, her breasts, down her body. His hands were warm and sure and she responded to the rising feelings he woke in her. She wanted to be mindless again, to not think, only feel; to lose herself in sensation. He lifted her legs and spread her open, pushed up into her as if he owned her. She shuddered and gasped at the pure pleasure of it. Jaime's eyes burned as he moved on top of her. But when she closed her eyes, she saw again the sword going into Brodrick's cheek, the blood spilling out. She saw the same light in Jaime's eyes then, and knew that he'd felt the same way killing Brodrick as he was feeling now.

Outside, a brief rattle of hail on the tarpaulin, and then the slow drumming rain.

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Author's note, this chapter is dedicated to BookWorm848, (sorry it's a depressing one) who has gone to the trouble of reviewing multiple chapters, so is obviously an awesome human being.
The warm light of the fire flickered over Jaime and the girl as they rested in that state of sleepy wakefulness, where bodies are spent but minds still wander. Gusts of wind shook the shelter, the rain hummed, and drops ran along the overhang of rock and plopped from the corner to the ground in little splashes.

The girl's head was on Jaime's chest, and the sound of his slowing heartbeat was comforting and strangely familiar. There must have been a time, before conscious memory, that she'd been an infant held close and carried in her mother's arms, and known that everything was as it should be in the world. It must have felt exactly like this, because the girl recognised it as if from a long ago dream; a dream she'd forgotten but had somehow spent her whole waking life searching for since.

Jaime laid his arm across hers, rubbed his thumb along her wrist. He twined his fingers with her fingers. The girl liked the feel of his calloused palm and the way their hands looked linked together; hers small and brown, his paler and broad, the knuckles scabbed and veins running blue under the skin. She thought that if they stayed this way forever she wouldn't mind.

She'd been solitary for such a long time, most of her life, with only fleeting acquaintances and Sooty for company. Having another person's arms around her at night was so different and yet, perfect. She wondered how she'd lived without it until now and not known it was missing. She realised she'd been content with her life in the same way that someone who lived in a dark room is content; until the day a door they didn't even know existed, opened. Even if just to give them a brief glimpse outside before slamming shut forever, they could never then go back to being content in the room.

'Your skin is so soft,' Jaime said, 'and... tanned.' He stretched his forearm alongside hers to emphasise the contrast in their colouring.

'I'm in the sun a lot,' she said.

'Mmm.' Jaime drew circles on her skin with his fingers. 'And your hair is fair. It's uncommon.'

'Uncommon how?'

'Just an unusual combination,' he observed.

The fire crackled and the trees out in the night shook and sighed. The girl could hear the breathing of the horses nearby, and the scrape of their hooves on the rock.

'My mother was dark and my father was fair. I guess that's why,' she said. It was not something she'd ever thought about. Her skin and its qualities had not been of enough interest to anyone before to comment on. 'My sister and brother were both fair.'

'And did they also inherit your horse skills?' Jaime asked.

'That's from my mother. My father wasn't interested in horses. Beyond making sausages out of the broken down ones.'

'Most village horses are not worth much more than sausage-meat.'

'Hey,' she protested with a grin. 'Sooty is a village horse.'

'Present company excepted, of course.'
'Village horses can be as good as any horse. You just have to train them right.'

'Is that so?' Jaime mocked her, but kindly. 'And how many war-horses, purpose bred for battle, have you ridden, girl?'

'Not as many as you, it seems. And your point is?'

'My point is that training can only do so much. You can't compare a war-horse, the superior conformation and proven bloodlines with a... a village nag. No matter what training you give it, it will never match up. Apologies to our mutual friend over there, but that's the truth.'

'Horses are horses,' the girl insisted, stubborn. 'They don't know their pedigrees.'

'Well, we shall have to agree to disagree.'

'My mother said that a good horse was one you could rely on in a tight spot, who would run towards a fight and not away from one. She said looks don't matter, in a fight.'

'Did your mother know a lot about fighting on horseback, then? Growing up in a village and married to the local butcher?' Jaime teased. 'I can only begin to imagine her wealth of horse and battle-related knowledge.'

'Actually,' the girl jabbed him in the ribs in rebuke, 'my mother didn't stay long in the village. She didn't... it didn't suit her. She left when I was young and we lived with the HillTribes up until when she died. And before the village, she came from somewhere far away, on a ship, when she was less an age than I am now. Where she came from, her people knew more about horses than any pampered, privileged Knight or Nobleman in Westeros.'

'Your family history just gets more and more intriguing,' Jaime's arm curled around her waist. 'So, let me get this right. Your father was the village butcher and your mother was a foreigner from across the sea, who left the boring village life after you were born to live wild among the HillTribes? Your early influences must have been... varied.'

'You say 'varied' like it's akin to being raised by wolves. My background may not be what you consider ideal, but to me it was normal.'

'I guess I'm surprised,' Jaime admitted. 'Surprised at myself, mainly. I wouldn't have thought it was possible for me to feel a... a connection, to you at all. Given our widely differing backgrounds.'

'I don't know your background so I'll have to take your word for it that they are 'widely differing."

'Let's just say, the HillTribes did not feature prominently in my upbringing.'

'You really missed out,' she quipped.

'Apparently so,' he agreed dryly. 'I'm sure it would have been excellent though, to learn how to live without soap, table manners or civilisation.'

'Yeah. It's a miracle I even walk upright,' the girl retorted. 'And I'm sure with all your first-hand experience of living with the Tribes you'd know what you're talking about.'

She felt Jaime let out a little puff of air behind her and knew he was smiling. 'I concede my opinions of HillTribes are based on limited first-hand knowledge. Like your, rather scathing, opinions of Knights and Noblemen. Unless you fitted in a few years in a castle between everything else?"
The girl snorted. 'I don't need first-hand knowledge to know what it would be like to grow up in a castle, do I? Having servants to wipe my arse, and cutting off people's heads if they looked at me funny. Having a fucking army to boss around. How hard could it be? Piece of piss.'

There was a short silence.

'Maybe,' Jaime said. 'I wouldn't know.'

'Anyway. Why are you interested in my background all of a sudden? Are we getting married?'

They both laughed.

'Well, you know, it would be useful to know how many goats your Chief requires for the wedding,' Jaime said. 'No, girl. I'm just... curious about you.'

'Let's talk about your background,' she suggested, with a mischievous smile.

Jaime buried his face in her neck. 'Let's... not.'

'I'll make it simple for you. You can just answer yes or no. Did you grow up in a castle?'

Jaime groaned. 'I refuse to play this game.'

'Were you the ward, or bastard son, of some Nobleman?'

'No.'

'See, it's easy! You can do it. Are you really, really, staggeringly rich?'

Jaime sighed. 'This wasn't part of our original deal.'

'When I agreed to the original deal, I wasn't aware it was going to be so complicated. Or, life-threatening.'

Jaime propped himself up on one arm and adjusted the blanket over them where it had slipped down.

'Did you think the 500 gold coins were just to put up with my jokes?'

'I think I deserve more of an explanation,' the girl said, serious now. She forced her thoughts back to the villagers, drenched in blood. *How easy it is to be distracted from uncomfortable thoughts when Jaime is beside me. I wish I'd known from the start what this would involve.*'

'Why?' Jaime shifted one leg across hers and leant over her, keeping his weight on his elbows.

'Would you have said no?'

'If I'd known everything that would happen? I... I think I might have...' It was disconcerting having Jaime on top of her. His eyes reflected the fire.

'Might have... what? Said no to everything that has happened?' Jaime asked, in a husky voice. He planted a kiss on her collarbone, one on the top of each of her breasts. His fingers smoothed strands of hair back from her face and sank into the back of her head, digging in gently. 'Said no to all the... experiences we've had?' He kissed the side of her mouth, lightly, his lips barely grazing her skin. Nuzzled at her neck.

'Your experiences are not that... ahh... irresistible,' the girl gasped, trying to remain indifferent, but failing utterly.
Jaime smiled. His knee moved between her legs, nudged them apart. Both hands cupped the back of her head and his thumbs held her jaw so she couldn't turn her head away. 'Interesting,' he said. 'Because you've been so very resisting. Of such... experiences.' He moved his body so that he was now positioned fully between her legs. His tongue licked along the contours of her mouth, then his lips pressed firmly against hers and demanded entry as his body did the same.

The girl arched her back, reflexively. She knew soon he was going to be inside of her again, and she was going to moan, and shudder, and lose herself completely to him. She was going to shatter into thousands of pieces of herself and come together in a new way, wholly aware of what had been missing in her life before she met him. And Jaime would have proven his point. She wouldn't say no to him, about anything. Even if it meant risking her life. Even if what she had with him was just a brief glimpse through a door that was already closing.
Maegi

The morning dawned grey, the sun an occasional glimpse behind the clouds. The girl woke with a restless energy and a premonition, the feeling that things had changed. *Today is different, somehow,* she thought. All around her the land gleamed, washed clean by the rain. *Is this a new start for me?*

She felt excited but anxious, and flipped back the blanket. Jaime's leg was hooked over hers, and she eased out from under his weight. Her shoulder was stiff, and she winced as she got to her feet. She pulled on her clothes that dried by the fire as quickly as she could; they were still damp and smelled of burnt food. The packhorse grazed in front of her, but she couldn't see Sooty. Her anxiety flared.

Behind her, Jaime stirred, yawned. 'Are you making tea?' he asked, rolling over.

'No,' she said.

She went out into the wet grass, hurried around the corner of the ridge. Straight away she could see Sooty lying down. The horse's curved ribcage rose above the sea of grass like the hull of an upturned boat. *Horses lie down sometimes, it doesn't mean anything's wrong,* the girl thought as she ran over, but she already knew that it was.

She could see Sooty's belly moving up and down with each breath, but when the girl knelt down beside her it was obvious Sooty couldn't get up. The earth around her hooves was muddy from her struggles to stand, and she made little grunts in her throat. The girl felt the horse's body carefully all over, but none of the wounds seemed to have worsened from last night, although the dressing on her chest was seeping. The girl put her ear to Sooty's belly and listened for the usual gurgles and swishes that meant the horse's insides were working normally. She couldn't hear anything. *That's bad.*

She sat on the grass and lifted the horse's big head to rest it in her lap. She stroked the bones of the long nose, brushed away the flies that gathered in the corners of her eyes. Sooty blinked and snorted. Groaned softly.

'I'm going to get help for you,' the girl whispered. 'But I need you to hang in there. Don't you give up on me now.' She cradled Sooty's head and rested her cheek on the horse's cheek. She didn't want to leave her even for a minute, because if Sooty's life was over then surely she should be here with her at the end. But then she decided not to think like that and got up, placing Sooty's head gently back on the ground. 'I'll be as fast as I can,' she promised.

She sprinted back around the corner of the ridge to the shelter, nearly colliding with Jaime, who was dressed and leading the packhorse. The girl ignored him and ran to the packs that were on the rocks, near the now extinguished fire, waiting to be loaded. She started going through them, loosening cords and pulling things out.

'Were there coins, in the packs? Did the villagers have any coins?' she asked, urgently.

'Why?' Jaime said. When the girl didn't reply but just kept scrabbling through the packs, he said, 'Where's Sooty?'

'Sooty's not good.'

Jaime let out a long breath. The girl didn't look at his face but she knew the expression that would be on it.
'We can't stay here -' Jaime began, but the girl cut him off: 'Where are the fucking coins?'

Jaime unbuckled a satchel he had slung around his shoulder, and pulled out a pouch. Tossed it to her. She snatched it out of the air and went to push past him, but he caught her arm. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to Maidenpool, to buy stuff for Sooty. Medicines. I think it's her... I think she has colic. Or something, from not eating, or not drinking, or drinking contaminated water or...' the girl shrugged Jaime's hand off. 'I won't be more than an hour.'

'We don't have an hour,' Jaime said. 'There are people following us and even with the rain washing away our tracks it won't take them long to -'

'Why do you care, you can just kill them all again,' the girl snapped. 'You're good at that.'

'These people might not be villagers. They might be soldiers,' Jaime countered. 'You need to stay with me. I can't protect you if you're away from me.'

'Then come with me.'

Jaime shook his head, impatient. 'This is a bad decision, girl. You need to use your logic and not your emotions.'

'I'm not going anywhere without Sooty,' she said stubbornly.

'Fuck!' Jaime raised his hands and looked at the sky in frustration. 'She's a horse. I know you... consider her to be a friend, and... I know you love her, alright? But she's a godsdamned horse. There are thousands of horses -'

The girl turned from him and ran, before he could physically stop her, down the slope to the trees, refusing to listen to another word.

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Maidenpool was not far. A small creek bordered the wall around the town and a cobbled lane wound through it. The thatched roofs of the houses clustered around a central market place, but the girl didn't want to go into town today. She kept to the outskirts and circled the municipality, around the vegetable plots and orchards, the freshly turned earth steaming in the sun. It was still early enough in the day for most of the residents to be sleeping.

She saw one fisherman mending his skip, but he didn't see her. She paced herself so as not to tire too quickly, but she'd always been a good runner. By the time she reached the hut she was looking for she estimated that less than half an hour had gone by.

The hut was set back from any nearby houses, surrounded by tall trees that cast a permanent shadow, with a thin dirt footpath leading to the only door. There was a low fence surrounding a garden that seemed at first sight, impenetrable. Brambles and thistles clutched at the girl's clothes as she passed, and behind the overgrown shrubs, strange flowers grew in pots. Plants from lands the girl had never been to were hidden under common weeds. From cages and hanging baskets draped with cloth, or encased in sheets of metal to shield their contents from prying eyes, things chirped and whined.

The air in the garden was thick with smells, some bitter, some sweet, but all completely foreign. The girl had been here before, though, and didn't allow herself to be distracted. She knew that if there was anyone, anywhere, in all the places she'd been to, in all the years she'd travelled around Westeros, who could help Sooty... this was surely the person.
She reached the front door but turned right without knocking. Another, narrower, path ran under a small barred window and on around the side of the hut. She followed it, ducking gingerly to protect her sore shoulder, under the almost-invisible, gossamer wire strung with hundreds of tiny gold bells. They tinkled in unison. By the time the girl had reached the trapdoor behind the hut's fallen-down porch, unseen beneath a carpet of vines and moss, it had already propped open.

'Maeg? It's me, Ivezh's daughter,' the girl said. She crouched down so the person on the other side of the black slit could see her face. The door lifted, and smoke the colour of a bruise gusted into the air. It smelled like cinnamon, and metal.

'Come in, girl. Daughter of Ivezh, my blood sister,' the woman on the steps said. Her voice was soft and musical, and she spoke as if she were singing each sentence. Then she turned and descended the steps, back into the smoky interior of the underground room. The girl went down the steps behind her, pulling the door closed above their heads.

The steps were more than she'd remembered, or maybe Maegi had lowered the floor. It seemed to take minutes to reach the bottom. The girl stepped into the wide circular space, with smooth featureless walls rising to the height of the steps, the ceiling fading into the darkness and a thick layer of purplish smoke hovering overhead. Around the walls were pots on stands over little fires, and shelves cluttered with objects.

'You need help,' Maegi said, as if someone had already told her. As if she'd been expecting the girl's visit. She stood in the centre of the room, her hands clasped together, the brown fingers protruding from the wide sleeves of her robe as spindly as bird's feet. 'I will help you if I can. You are my blood-sister's child, that makes you mine too.'

'Thank you, but I have coins to pay. You know I don't believe in that blood-relations thing, Maeg,' the girl said, frowning. 'Coming over on the same ship doesn't make you sisters. Just... good friends.' She didn't want Maeg to think she was somehow responsible for her well-being. She hadn't been to this place for years, and didn't really plan on coming back again any time soon.

A memory surfaced then, of how coming here with her mother had terrified her once. She couldn't remember exactly why, now. The place seemed harmless, just very hazy.

'Whether you believe or not makes no difference,' Maegi said, in her musical voice. 'Your mother and I were united by slavery, the horse girl and the girl from the Shadowlands. Men thought to buy and sell us like livestock, to use our bodies, but we swore to be free. We made a pledge. That is why we are sisters. With no family, we make our own family.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know Maeg, I get it. You had a bond.' The girl had heard it before and wasn't interested. She coughed in the smoke, which seemed to have coated her mouth in a tacky film. *Whatever is being cooked in those pots is potent. She should put in a fucking chimney.* 'I do need your help, though. I need some medicine for my horse, who is very sick. She... she can't stand up and her belly is... there's no sounds in there, I think - I -'

'Hush, girl,' the older woman said. Suddenly she was standing next to her, holding one of the girl's hands in her own. The girl blinked. She hadn't seen Maegi take a step, or move her hands. *The smoke in here really plays tricks,* she thought. Maegi's skin felt soft and brittle, like very old parchment. 'Your horse. She ails. She is poisoned?'

'I think she has colic.'

'A stomach poison, from bad water.' The woman nodded and stared into the girl's face. Her eyes were black. Cold radiated up the girl's hands, up her arms and into her sore shoulder, down her
'Do you have medicine for her?' the girl asked, wanting to be gone.

'Yes, my child,' Maegi said. 'Come.' She led the girl to the shelves along the wall, where the room curved around the steps. From here, the girl could see that the space continued on into the dark, like a tunnel. She turned to look at the shelves beside her, fascinated by the strange things crowded along them.

At eye-level, a yellowish spiralling bone jabbed out of a red velvet frame. It was about as long as her arm, wider at the base and narrowing to a tip. The girl paused, then looked at the next object, a flattened scaly skin that might have belonged to a lizard. She reached her hand out but Maegi stopped her.

'Don't touch what you don't know,' the older woman said. 'These things are not what they seem.' She was holding an opaque bottle in one hand with a long tube coming out of it.

'Is that the medicine?' the girl asked. She was distracted by a thin open case on a shelf above her head. A silver arrow of impeccable quality nestled amongst some kind of pale straw, which glowed in the dimness. I miss my bow and arrow. I would buy another, the girl thought. 'Are you selling this stuff?' she asked, pointing. 'Does that come with a bow?'

Maegi smiled. 'The arrow of misfortune fits any bow. Longbow, short recurved bow, double bow, it can even be the bolt for a crossbow. But you are better off keeping your eyes on the unicorn horn and the basilisk shed. They will only cause you temporary pain.'

'Is it poisoned?' the girl wanted to know. Her eyes kept straying back to the silver of the arrow’s shaft, the faint light from the straw surrounding it pulsing like a beacon. Drawing her in.

'It's so well made. Faultless.

'The arrow is soaked in a poison, or what you may call a poison if you didn't know of such things. Black lotus root, blind bloodfly paste, manticore venom, and other... things.' Maegi smiled and fluttered one hand. 'It will strike in the heart of any on whom it is fired, for the barbed head seeks out the life of its target and the shaft will turn in flight. You can never miss, with this arrow.'

'Amazing,' the girl said, impressed. 'What's the stuff it's in? That shining stuff?'

'Ghostgrass. It absorbs the curse so that the case is safe to touch.'

'What curse? I thought you said it was poisoned.'

'It is, both. Or neither.' Maegi shrugged as if descriptions were meaningless. 'Whoever touches the arrow itself will take enough of the... poison into their blood that they will suffer a terrible misfortune in...' she flapped her hand vaguely again, 'a day, a week, two weeks. A fall, drowning, in their sleep, a sickness, murdered, executed.' She smiled. 'But, they will die.'

'Oh.' The girl was disappointed. She'd been rather keen on the arrow that never-missed. This is why I hate magic. Too complicated, and always a hidden catch. She took the vial of medicine from Maegi instead, and swirled it round. 'Will this make my horse better?'

'Yes. The tube goes into one nostril, down to the stomach. Then lift the animal's head and tip the contents, all at once.'

'Thank you. And... one more thing.' The girl blushed a little as she asked. 'Would you have any um...
moon tea? I've... I've run out.'

Maegi laughed. 'Of course, child.' She turned away and pulled a small packet of dried herbs from a drawer. She pressed them into the girl's hand along with the vial. 'Is this man not the one for you then, that you do not want his babies?'

'No, it's not that Maeg,' the girl said. 'I don't want anyone's babies.' As she said it, a tiny thought unfurled inside her, that perhaps it might be nice to have Jaime's baby. Not now, of course, or any time soon but... if ever I were going to have one. I mean, if I had to. Jaime's would be nice.

'What is his name?' Maegi asked. Her black eyes bored into the girl's.

'Well, he calls himself Jaime. But that's not really his name,' the girl answered, flustered. But just as she said it, something floated loose from the tangled mess in her mind, a recent memory, of Draw the outlaw. On the bridge-road. She clearly heard him say again, in that lisping tone: 'Now now, Jaime, don't over-excite yourself...'

The floor felt like it tilted and righted itself. Draw called him Jaime. It's not an alias. His name really is Jaime.

'Jaime,' said Maegi, her eyes dark and intense. 'Like Jaime Lannister. The Kingslayer.'

This time it felt like the room spun around and then suddenly stopped, because the girl found it was hard to keep her balance. 'No,' she said, automatically. But the pieces of her mind clicked into place like tumblers in a lock, and she knew.

Yes.
The girl didn't remember leaving Maegi's hut but somehow she must've done, for she found herself walking back past the orchards and the garden plots, the morning sun glistening on the leaves and everything bright and smelling like wet earth. Then she was skirting the walls of the town and following the creek back to where the trees sloped up into the hills. Putting one foot in front of the other. She had a skinny drawstring bag slung over her shoulder, but she didn't remember paying for the things inside. Nothing seemed quite real any more. One thought repeated itself in her head, to the exclusion of all others:

Jaime is the Kingslayer.

It wasn't as though she didn't believe it, because it was immediately, completely, believable. It all made sense where it hadn't before; the discrepancies in Jaime's story that she'd not wanted to examine too closely, his accent, his education, his worth to the Northmen, his innate sense of superiority. So obvious now, that he was different from herself. Arya and Gendry, the men at the Inn, Brodrick and the outlaws, they'd all talked but she'd refused to listen.

Jaime is the enemy I've spent all the last year hating.

She'd wanted so much to believe he was someone like her. A commoner. A soldier, maybe, but someone on her level. A lowborn, a villager, a guard, a sellsword, a criminal. She realised now that her subconscious had wanted the happy-ever-after fiction so much, that it had ignored any evidence that deviated from it.

There is no such thing as happy ever after stories, she told herself, disgusted. You know that, better than most. You thought you were so worldly. But along comes a charmer with a handsome face and a cock he knows how to use, and suddenly you're as blind as the greenest maiden.

She clamped down on the thoughts, smothered them, lest they destroy her. She still had to get back to Sooty. Sooty was all that mattered now. She had to stay focused, for Sooty.

Still the images crowded into her head. Jaime's green eyes darkening when he looked at her, his fingers entwined in her fingers. Jaime's quirky smile when he said something irreverent. Jaime kissing her softly, his hands touching her face.

Everything is a lie. Remember that. We can't help what we feel; maybe so, but feelings are shields that hide the truth. Your feelings for Jaime are all based on a lie. She told herself this sternly, over and over again, as she trudged up the hill away from Maidenpool. Each step was becoming more of an effort, her boots dragging. Her body was rebelling against taking her any closer to the confrontation she wished to avoid. The thought of Sooty, and the medicine in her drawstring bag, were all that kept her going.

Hoof beats interrupted the girl's thoughts, and she looked up to see the packhorse cantering towards her through the trees. The sight of Jaime on its back made her stomach somersault with alarm, and her first instinct was to run away. I thought I had more time, but here he is, riding towards me. She didn't run but froze instead, and lowered her gaze to the grass in front of her.

'Thank the gods I found you, girl! We need to go. There are Northmen coming this way, they're at the ridge,' Jaime said, urgently, as the horse skidded to a stop in front of her. He had his arm
stretched out, his hand reaching for hers to pull her up beside him. 'Quickly.'

The girl almost didn't trust herself to speak. Now that he was actually here, so much hurt and betrayal rose up inside her, she was sick with it. She just wanted him gone. She never wanted to have to look at him again, at his beautiful, lying face.

'I'm not going with you,' she said, through gritted teeth.

Jaime wheeled his horse about as it tried to keep moving, sweat lathering its sides. 'Come on, girl' he said impatiently. 'They're close, maybe only a couple of miles away, on horseback. If we leave now we still are odds to evade them.' When the girl didn't respond, Jaime jumped down and strode briskly towards her, holding the reins of the agitated horse in one hand. 'These men are not villagers. I've encountered them before, and I don't much want to again. And trust me, neither do you.'

'Trust you?' the girl said. 'That's funny.'

Jaime reached her and went to take her arm, maybe to drag her with him. She looked right at him then, and something in her eyes must have startled him, because his hand stopped in mid air. 'What's wrong with you?'

The girl stared at him as if he were a stranger she'd only this moment met. She saw with a new clarity his arrogance and his entitlement, she saw the same hands that held her close at night were also the hands that brought death to so many without care or remorse. 'Was it amusing to you, all this time?' she asked. 'It must have been entertaining.'

'What the fuck are you...? We don't have time for riddles!' Jaime tried to settle the horse as it spun and stamped.

'Was it amusing,' she hissed, 'listening to me talk about my brother, how he died, on that day with the King's party at the Crossroads? You must have had a good laugh to yourself, seeing as you already knew all about it, seeing as unlike me, you were there. With your sister the Queen, and all the rest of your family.'

A brief shock flashed across Jaime's face, then he clenched his jaw and looked down. The girl thought he was going to deny it, but he didn't say anything for a long time. Finally he sighed and ran one hand through his hair. 'Fuck,' he swore, softly. He closed his eyes, at least having the gall to look ashamed.

'I promise you, girl. I didn't kill your brother. I didn't... order him killed.'

'No you were just one of those who rode after him, weren't you? One of those you told me who rather enjoyed that sort of thing.' Despite everything the girl held her breath, her heart thundering, waiting with every last shred of hope she had for him to prove her wrong.

Jaime rubbed his brow, pinched the skin between his fingers. The girl could see he was struggling for words, and her heart sank slowly the longer he didn't speak. At last Jaime dropped his hand to his side and looked skywards, defeated. 'I didn't enjoy it,' he said, under his breath.

It felt to the girl as if a giant hand had reached down and wrapped around her chest, her throat, crushing her insides in an unbearably constricting vice. Mycah I'm sorry, she thought. I've been such a fool.

A wind sprang up and rustled the leaves of the trees, clouds swept across the sun.

'I know you must hate me more than anyone else in the world right now,' Jaime said.
'No,' said the girl, her voice strangled. 'I hate myself more. For being so fucking stupid.'

Jaime looked behind himself, through the trees, listening. He turned back to face her, determined. 'You can hate me as much when we're not in immediate danger. You can hate me the rest of your life, but you do need to have a life. Just... come with me.' There was a pleading tone to his last words which the girl had never heard from him before. She wondered how much it cost him to use it. Here I am a commoner, a no-one, and here a Lord is, begging. She almost could have laughed out loud at the insanity, if she had breath to spare. Not that it mattered any, because after today she didn't intend to speak to him again.

'I'm not coming with you, now or ever,' she choked out. 'And if you come near me, it had best be to kill me, because I'd die before I let you touch me again. Kingslayer.'

A hard change shuttered down over Jaime's expression, he looked cold and distant. He stared at her, then abruptly he turned and vaulted onto the horse. 'As you wish, girl,' he said, not looking her way again, but down the hill, towards his future. Then he gave the excited horse its head and it surged forward with pent-up energy, kicking clods of dirt high into the air.

The girl watched Jaime until the trees closed around him, until the galloping hoof beats were lost in the rising wind. She tried to summon up anger, or hatred, because at least that would be something, but inside she just felt empty, like the chrysalis of a cicada that looked so alive until one fingertip crumbled it to dust.
Well, fuck him anyway.

The girl plodded up the hill, feeling nothing but a listless indifference. Her body walked, breathed, performed all the basic functions, it was just infected with a dull torpor. She welcomed the lack of caring, about anything, as a relief from the hurt she knew would hit her soon enough.

Later, she would fall down that hole later. *Maybe I can feel nothing forever. Gods be good.*

The ridge where she had camped with Jaime the night before came into view, and with it a band of men and horses milling around, how many exactly she couldn't be bothered counting. The men were dismounted and appeared to be scanning for tracks. The girl had heard them and knew they were there, but so was Sooty. After only a brief falter, she heedlessly continued on.

The men didn't immediately notice her, but when they did they all stopped what they were doing and turned in her direction. They wore black and grey vests, chainmail, leather coats with fur-lined cloaks, and had various weapons and shields either on their person or slung over their saddles. Two of the horses had banners strapped to them, which fluttered red and black in the breeze. If they were surprised to see her, they didn't show it.

She walked up to them, pointed to the distant shape of Sooty beyond them in the grass. 'That's my horse.'

The men didn't reply, but looked wary. A couple drew their swords. Three of them stepped to the side and glanced behind the girl, then up along the ridge-line. The rest of the group formed a line across the girl's path, blocking her way to Sooty.

'There's no-one with me,' the girl said in a tired voice. She couldn't care less about these people. 'I'm not armed. I have nothing of value.' She stopped. Some of the men's faces looked vaguely familiar, but all she wanted to do was get to Sooty and help her, then leave here and go home. Whoever these men were, whatever they wanted with Jaime, it was no longer her concern. *Jaime is no longer my concern.*

'I just want to get to my horse,' she said, when no-one spoke.

One of the men stepped forward, drew a large knife from its sheath and held it relaxed by his side. His belt was also hung with a sword, and a strange pale object that flopped as he moved. A scar curved under his right eye, and a beard and moustache made his gaunt face look longer. His eyes though, were gimlet-sharp, they reminded her of a crow's eyes. The same bright curiosity. 'That your dead horse up there, girl?' he asked.

'She's not dead,' the girl stated.

The man raised his brows in an exaggerated look of disbelief as he approached. 'That right? Only, I seen a lot of dead horses in me life, an' from here, that one looks to be one of the deadest.'

'I have medicine, in my bag.' The girl couldn't give a fuck about playing his stupid games. 'Just let me treat her. I'm not here to give you trouble. I don't care what you or your men are doing.'

'You know what we're doing,' the man drawled, stopping in front of her and crossing his arms. The edge of the diamond-shaped knife was now level with the girl's neck.
'And I don't care.' She became aware that the three men who had been checking the surrounds had now come to stand behind her, and she was almost fully enclosed in a circle. A prickling unease invaded her lethargy, but she dismissed it.

'Where's your travellin' partner?' the scarred man asked.

'He's gone. That way,' she pointed back through the trees in the direction Jaime had taken.

The man regarded her with his shiny eyes a moment longer. 'You two have a fallin' out?'

'I made a mistake,' the girl said.

'Yes.' The man ran one finger down the side of his cheek, smiled in a way that made the girl take notice. 'You have.'

Up close, she got a whiff of something rotten, and she noticed with apprehension that the object dangling from the man's belt was a hand, or what remained of one. The last two fingers were just white bones held together with little scraps of tendon. The joints of both fleshless digits curled in as though trying to cling to something. Dried blood that looked not more than a day old smeared the thin rope that was tied around the stump end.

She began to get the creeping feeling that of all the mistakes she'd made this last week, not going with Jaime might turn out to be her biggest one.

'Who's hand is... is that?' she asked, hesitantly.

'A young man called Callem Cole. From the Hollow, I believe. Found him wanderin' around a ways back. He were very helpful,' the man said. 'He were ever so cooperative.'

'I know you,' the girl said. 'You were at the Inn.'

'So we was. I seen you there too,' the man, who she now recognised as the one called Locke, agreed. He nodded, went on in a conversational tone. 'If I recall, you was askin' for a long-handled axe capable of splitting metal. That's a big axe, for a little girl, ain't it?'

She didn't reply, beginning to regret ever opening her mouth.

Locke picked his teeth with a thumb nail, his eyes fixed beadily on the girl. 'I remembered you again later when we seen them villagers from RedHollow, headin' off all secretive-like, just after the North soldiers told 'em about the large reward on a certain somebody's head. They had with 'em a big ugly horse that they was usin' to track. Now I ain't a learned man,' he bowed his head with false modesty, 'but I got meself a good memory. And I remembered how I knew of a delivery girl once, had a big ol' horse like that. Followed her everywhere, like a dog, it did. Bad-tempered beast it was, too. So I says to meself, 'Weren't that the self-same girl I seen buyin' axes to break chains with at the Inn recently? What a coincidence.'

He stroked his beard in thought and paused, as if to see if the girl was enjoying their chat as much as he evidently was.

She kept her mouth pressed shut, so Locke continued on with his story. 'And then after a bit of snoopin' around, as luck would have it, we chanced apon the Cole boy. He were ever so cooperative, did I mention? A real talker. He tells us he seen a certain delivery girl and one Ser Jaime Lannister in the flesh, gettin' all cosied-up with one another. Lookin' like they was about to fuck like rabbits. Well, I says to meself, if that ain't happy news.'
The girl breathed evenly, deeply, tried not to let her rising tension show. *He doesn't want you. He'll let you go. Don't panic.*

Locke was clearly relishing having her as an audience. 'Here's the thing. Y'see, we had given the Kingslayer up for dead, when he gave us the slip by jumpin' off a bridge. Ain't seen hide nor hair of him, since. And so we'd gone and sent his lady-friend back to KingsLanding, after she sweet-talked us into thinkin' the Kingslayer would pay a reward for her. Roose said we had to keep the Lannisters and Tyrells on side. But just between you an' me,' he leaned in conspiratively to the girl, and she could again smell the decaying scent of the detached hand, 'I always had a twinge of regret 'bout that decision. Thought we maybe been a little bit hasty. So imagine me joy at finding out Jaime were not only still in the Riverlands, but he's gone and got himself another lady-friend.'

She held her voice steady. 'It's the Kingslayer you want, not me. And like I told you, he's already gone.'

'Yes. And ain't it a wonderful thing,' Locke said, 'that we have you to bring him back for us?' He motioned with his head and two men grabbed the girl's hands from behind, twisted them harshly together. She felt rough-braided rope loop and tighten around her wrists.

'The Kingslayer cares nothing for me,' she argued, her voice rising, her previous apathy now fully replaced with a dreadful foreboding. Locke had two finger to his lips, and a look on his face that told her he was going to enjoy what happened next. She felt such keen fear then that she thought she might piss herself, or vomit, or lose all control of her muscles.

'Vee shall see, won't we?' He lifted one finger, and the two men holding her arms pushed her down to a sitting position, while another two stepped forward and took hold of her legs. She kicked, fought to free herself, understanding too late her predicament. Her right boot was pulled off, and her ankle pinned to the hard flat ground. Her foot looked small and white against the dirt.

'Your fuck-friend is probably a good distance away by now,' Locke said, with the carving knife in one hand and a smile that made his black eyes glitter like gems in a cave. 'So do try and scream loudly.'
She expected them to cut off her foot, but that would have been too quick. What they wanted took more time.

The girl threw her body from side-to-side, but the weight of four men was impossible to shake. A dark-skinned man knelt and took hold of her foot, and she heard Locke say 'Slowly, Zollo.' Then the coldness of steel on her skin.

The pain was astonishing. Breathtaking. She went into shock, her body writhed and all her muscles contracted to try and escape the intensity of it, but there was no escape. She screamed.

Time stretched out. She realised that time was not constant. A minute spent in agony was the longest minute in the world, it was an endless present. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else even existed. Just white-hot, excruciating, unbearable pain. She thought she knew what pain was but she realised she'd had no idea. Not even an inkling. She would have torn off her leg to escape it if she could. Chewed it off with her own teeth. She screamed and screamed and it didn't even sound like her. It didn't even sound human.

She couldn't breathe, but she had to, to scream again. Blood ran down her chin and she gurgled and spluttered. She was dimly aware she must've bitten her tongue, and hadn't even felt it. The pain in her foot was all-consuming. She would have given them anything, said anything, betrayed anyone, for them to just stop, please gods just please please stop, but the men didn't want anything from her, except her screams. She blacked out for a second of blissful nothingness, but they tipped water on her face to rouse her. She thought it couldn't get any worse and then they started on her other toe.

For infinite minutes, she forgot who she was, where she was, why this was happening, everything, she was just a mass of shrieking nerve endings and suffering . Then, abruptly, the pain lessened.

She gulped in air, the relief from fierce agony like a cool wave washing over her. Her heart thumped in her ribcage. She was grateful for the respite, however brief it may be. The men holding her arms and legs released their grip, their attention on further down the hill. She couldn't have stood up, anyway. Compulsive shivering had taken over her muscles.

Above the wind she heard the tattoo of hooves. A horse and rider came weaving up through the trees, the horse dripping with sweat from having galloped flat out a considerable distance. Flecks of white from its nostrils blew back to streak onto its chest.

Jaime dismounted and came walking towards them. The wind-tossed trees bowed their leaves as he passed. The girl couldn't believe he was real. Only the pain had been real, only the pain existed. Jaime seemed an apparition.
Apparently he was real enough though, for all the men, without exception, to stand upright and draw their weapons. Shields were raised. Swords lifted. Zollo wiped his blood-slippery hands and took up his curved arakh. The only sounds were the girl's uncontrolled breaths, the rush of the wind and Jaime's approaching footsteps. Locke wrapped his fist in the girl's hair, jerking her head up as it lolled forward.

Jaime glanced first in her direction and grimaced slightly. Because of Locke's grip, the girl couldn't look down at her foot, even if she'd wanted to. She wondered idly how bad a mess it was, to make Jaime grimace.

He stopped far enough away to be just out of reach. His hands by his sides, sword still in its scabbard. The men fanned out to face him, leaving Locke and the girl in the centre of the group. Jaime was their sole focus. His presence was mesmerising.

Ironically in this moment when dying never seemed more likely, the girl felt so alive. She saw with a new clarity the men's chainmail and heavy weapons, the shields, the number of them. She saw Jaime standing there on his own, all careless charisma, and knew beyond doubt he was hopelessly outnumbered.

She felt detached about the dying part. *As long as I never have to feel that pain again,* she thought. *Dying I can handle.*

Jaime surveyed the scene in front of him with mild distaste, as if he'd turned over a stone and uncovered an assortment of cockroaches. He sighed. Drummed his fingers on his thigh, and waited.

Locke spoke first. 'So glad you showed up, Kingslayer. We wasn't sure you was coming.' He dragged the girl up by her hair to a kneeling position beside him. 'From the Queen, to a Noblewoman, to a slut. Yer standards is slippin'.'

'At least I have standards,' Jaime said, in a conversational tone. As if he had all the time in the world to stand there and chat .

'I did tell her to speak up, so's you could hear her.' Locke grinned.

'Oh, I could hear her just fine.' Jaime's gold hair whipped across his face and in the overcast light his green eyes were grey. 'She was telling you to go fuck yourself.'

The two men appraised each other in silence for a moment, taking one another's measure. The girl wondered what Jaime was thinking. It was impossible to guess beneath his composed expression. *Now he's seen how many he's up against, does he regret coming back? Will he turn around again, and leave?*

'Yer lookin' well, Kingslayer,' Locke said. 'Shame. I did like you filthy and in chains.'

Jaime unsheathed his sword in a smooth motion, and the men closest to him took a cautious step back. 'Do you use that line often? No wonder you have no luck with women.'

Locke twisted the girl's hair and pulled her head back so that blood and saliva ran down her throat and she choked. 'Speakin' of which. You seem to be gettin' a mite careless with yours. Leavin' them behind to my tender affections.' He tutt-tutted. 'Being one of the Kingslayer's whores is turnin' out to be a hazardous occupation, ain't it.'

Jaime didn't even blink, let alone make any move towards Locke. 'If you're envious of my prowess with women, I could give you some tips,' he said, coolly. 'Try not cutting bits off them. I find that works wonders.'
The girl swallowed her own blood and prayed Jaime had some plan to save her. But he kept his distance.

'You got all the clever lines, Kingslayer,' Locke said, unimpressed. 'But I got meself a big knife and what's left of yer lady-friend's foot on its blade, so I'd watch your tongue in case I decide I don't like one of yer jokes.' To illustrate, Locke leaned down and turned the point into the raw flesh where her toes had been, and the girl let out a sob, unable to stop herself. 'So why don't you just save us all some time and put that sword o' yours down.'

Jaime did nothing. The girl could see his jaw clench, and he glanced over their heads into the distance, but otherwise he looked uninterested.

Locke smiled. 'You can stand over there long as you like, Kingslayer. We ain't gonna come at you, like them poor villagers, so you can cut us down one by one. But while yer standing there, ask yerself. Is she still gonna be fuckable without a foot?' Locke paused as if inviting Jaime to answer. 'Some men like that sorta thing though, don't they, and I heard you have odd tastes.' He raised the knife from the girl's ankle and held the point of it to the corner of her right eye. 'How 'bout without an eye? You still fancy her then?'

'Stick it up 'er and fuck 'er bloody,' Zollo snickered in heavy accented speech. He was standing to one side of Locke with his curved arakh poised.

Jaime sucked a breath in through his teeth and turned to Zollo. 'Let me guess. You don't have much luck with women, either?'

'The women Zollo is lucky with don't get no say in the matter,' Locke said. 'Now be a good boy Jaime, and put yer sword down before some whore gets hurt.' The knife blade slid into the girl's eye an incremental bit more, and she trembled all over. Tears spilled unbidden down her face as the steel started to bite.

Still Jaime didn't move, although his face hardened. He appeared to be in no hurry to resolve the situation. The girl didn't understand. It was almost as if he were stalling for time, although what benefit that could possibly be was beyond her comprehension. Surely he hadn't come back here just to watch her get tortured.

'She's not my whore,' Jaime said. 'Just a local who was helping me to navigate.'

'Navigate?' Locke said. 'Is that what you call it now? I heard these savages is particularly skilled in navigation.'

Jaime shifted his weight, flexed his fingers on the handle of his sword.

'Not that it woulda taken much, I imagine,' Locke went on in a goading tone, 'Probably didn't even have to give her a posy hey? I imagine she just spread her legs for you right off. Her kind is like that.'

Zollo chortled at this.

'Zollo here, he 'ad a passing acquaintance with this girl's mother, years back. Bein' an ex-Dothraki, he knows a savage slut when he sees one. Never without a horse or a cock between her legs, or both, from what I heard. And apples don't fall far from trees. Ain't that right Zollo?'

Zollo growled in agreement. 'Jus' like 'er mother.'

Jaime raised an eyebrow. 'I didn't realise our mothers so wholly determined our character. I am sorry I never met either of your mothers. They must have been pleasant women. Regardless, there's no
reason to hurt this girl.'

'But there is. 'Cos here you are.' Locke, obviously tiring of Jaime's delaying tactics, got a firmer grip on the girl's hair and nodded at Zollo. Zollo raised his blade and stepped towards Jaime. The Dothraki's bare shoulder bulged from his sleeveless vest, muscles rippling under his coppery skin.

'That's right. Here I am.' Jaime agreed, and for the first time his eyes flashed. He spun his sword in one hand restlessly. 'So let the girl go, and come and get me.'

But Locke clicked his tongue, pressed the knife deeper. Fresh blood leaked down the girl's cheek, pain slithered all up and down her nerves. 'Yer a slow learner, Kingslayer. I told you already to put the sword down.'

Jaime smirked at the ridiculousness of that suggestion.

Locke was fast losing patience. 'You fancy yerself against us. Sure you do. Cut Zollo down easy, few others. But how long you think it would take me to pop this girl's eyeball out like a grape? How many other body parts you figure I could chop off her, while yer busy with my men? Shall we try it 'n see?' Locke angled the knife further into the girl's eye socket. It felt like flames licking up her face.

Jaime's gaze looked behind them again, along the ridge. He shook his head. 'The girl is on your side. She didn't even know who I was.'

'That right?' Locke addressed the girl, easing the pressure on the blade a fraction.

She nodded, her face burning.

'Yer didn't know he were Jaime Lannister?' Locke laughed. 'That is amusin'. And now that you know, you feel all bad 'bout betraying the North, is that it, girl?'

The girl managed to gasp out, 'I don't care about... about the North. His nephew killed my brother.'

'His nephew?' Locke snorted. 'The japes just keeps comin'. I don't believe the Kingslayer's got no nephews, girl. Rumour has it he 'as a son though, who loves a bit of killing. Joffrey, his name is. Heard of 'im?'

The girl couldn't reply. It felt like the knife scraped against her skull.

Jaime's voice was serious. 'Let the girl go, or I'll kill all of you.'

'No, Kingslayer, I don't think you will. I think what you'll do is put yer sword down, and let Zollo here tie yer hands up. Then an' only then, I'll let this whore go free, to run off and fuck as many other men who's names she don't know as she likes.'

There was a strained silence, where none of the men moved, but the air was thick with tension.

*It's going to be now, I'm going to lose my eye,* the girl knew, and even though part of her wanted it to be over, the pressure of the knife hurting so much she couldn't stand it any longer; even so, she felt terrified. She started to whimper.

Jaime's eyes narrowed and focused on something behind the men, then he gave a small but definite nod. Before any of the men could react to this, he suddenly lunged forward and swung his sword, striking Zollo's arakh out of his hands. The men converged on him but the girl couldn't see what happened next, because a sharp, hot blaze flared in her eye, blinding her. Almost as quickly, the cold steel was gone and she fell over onto her side.
Her vision clouded, cleared to a blurry haze. She was lying in the dirt. Through a reddish mist she could see Locke getting lifted off his feet by a tall Knight in silver armour, bigger than Jaime. This sight was so improbable that the girl thought she must have passed out again and be hallucinating. In this miraculous vision, Locke's figure was hefted up and hurled onto the ground like a ragdoll, while the Knight simultaneously blocked and slashed with his massive sword, fending off Locke's men on all sides.

The girl lay there, hands still tied, blinking away blood as it ran relentlessly into her good eye. Her stomach heaved and she retched. The world rolled and went black, then after an indeterminate time her sight returned and settled into an out-of-focus, two-dimensional view.

Most of Locke's men appeared to have fled, because the sound of fighting had quieted, and in its place there were different voices, talking. The girl could hear Jaime say, 'I knew we'd make a good team, wench,' before his footsteps crunched over to where Locke lay winded in the dirt. The girl saw that the tall Knight was there as well, holding a sword to the Northman's throat.

She watched as Jaime's legs stopped beside them, watched his boot as he raised it and trod on Locke's arm, just below the elbow, to keep it steady. The Knight and Jaime appeared to exchange a look then, although their legs didn't move. Locke's fingers clutched at the air. He said something muffled, that may have ended in 'Don't -' before Jaime interrupted him.

'The next time you want to remove someone's body parts,' Jaime said, 'you'll have to use your left hand.' Then Jaime's sword flashed down and neatly sliced through Locke's right wrist, sending the hand tumbling into the dust.
The girl didn't think she passed out again, but time was definitely skipping. Moments were coming at her in short unconnected bursts, without anything linking them together.

She was on the ground by herself, then she was sitting up somewhere else, surrounded by people she didn't know, who were moving their mouths but she couldn't quite grasp what they were saying. Then the big Knight, who had very blonde hair, she noted with a detached curiosity, was cutting the rope around her hands. Then the Knight was gone and Jaime was carrying her. Or maybe she only imagined that, because then she was propped up in the back of a stationary wagon, her legs hanging down off the tray, with no recollection of how she got there.

People talking all around her, things happening, so much activity and bustle. She felt thankfully disconnected from it all, though. Her mind had simply wandered off to a quieter place. It was nice there. Peaceful. Maybe they'd given her something for the pain, because things hurt much less than she figured they should. Which was good.

She wasn't dead, as far as she could tell. Which was another good thing she supposed, although in this new place she was inhabiting, alive or dead were both just concepts that existed without values attached to them like 'good' or 'bad'. She liked her new place, especially the relatively painless aspect of it. She suspected that lurking outside her fuzzy cocoon, the real world was somewhat more unpleasant. She wasn't in any hurry to find out.

More time passed in dulled nothingness.

She was looking up at the sky and the patterns the trees made, rippling in the wind, when she became vaguely aware that Jaime was sitting next to her. With an effort, she turned her head and looked at him.

'Girl!' his lips formed the word, then some other words; he was snapping his fingers in her face. She could see him talking to her but she couldn't figure out how, or even why, she should talk back. She looked at him passively until he gave up and went away.

She was content watching the sky again when out of nowhere an icy, wet wave smacked her forcefully in the face, and she gasped. Inhaled water, gasped again and coughed. Reality hit her hard. Her skin and hair and clothes were freezing cold and she was drenched. And furious.

'What... the fuck!' she exclaimed.

'Was that really necessary?' Jaime said in an amused voice, speaking not to her but to the blonde Knight who was standing next to him holding a now-empty jug.

'She was in shock,' the Knight shrugged, channelling a Highborn woman's voice like a ventriloquist's doll. 'Try her now.'

'Girl, can you hear me?' Jaime said.

The girl wiped her eyes, realised that one half of her head was encased in some kind of material that wrapped completely around it. Her right foot was also encased in the same material up to her ankle. She was soaked and shivered all over, teeth chattering. Glared at Jaime and the Knight with as much loathing as she could muster.

'Are you t-trying to drown me you stupid f-f-ucking fools.' The whole right side of her body, from
her toes up into her skull began throbbing with an acute pain that increased the more she became conscious of it.

The Knight smiled at Jaime and said, 'I'll leave you to it then. Good luck,' before turning and walking away. The girl couldn't figure out why he had a feminine voice but there were more pressing concerns. Now that she was, whether she liked it or not, fully cognizant again, she remembered, and started hunting around for her drawstring bag. Where was it? Did someone take it?

'How are you feeling?' Jaime asked, sitting down next to her. He laid his sword between them on the wooden planks of the wagon's tray.

'I have never, ever felt worse in my whole entire life,' she retorted, searching through the packs stacked near her in the wagon. 'Where's the bag I had over my shoulder, the black one? I need it.'

'I'm glad you're feeling better, girl. I was worried about you. I thought you'd turned into a simpleton or a mute there for a while.'

'Where's my bag? Have you seen it? Did that big Knight take it?' The girl hopped upright onto her good foot, but Jaime immediately restrained her before she overbalanced. She pushed him away and sat back down on the edge of the wagon. The world dipped and lurched and she clutched at the planks with both hands until it was still.

'You can't walk so don't try again,' Jaime warned.

'I need my bag. The medicine. I need to treat Sooty,' she muttered.

'Sooty? We're on the other side of Maidenpool, on the road heading towards KingsLanding. Forget Sooty.'

'What?' How were they on the other side of Maidenpool? When did that happen?

'Sooty is dead, girl.'

'She's not -'

'You need to forget about her! We're not going back. Forget about everything that happened today, you can't change it now. Just rest and... think about getting back on your feet again. Getting on with the rest of your life.'

The girl stared at him incredulously. 'What rest of my life? Without Sooty, what delivery work can I do? And...' she spluttered with sarcasm, 'get back on what feet?'

Jaime spoke slowly and encouragingly, as if to a small child. 'It's only a few toes. Who needs toes anyway? You'll learn how to walk again. You're lucky Brienne arrived when she did.'

'Brienne?' The girl was confused, then realised he was talking about the Knight. 'Is... is that giant a she?'

'Yes, and you owe that giant your life, so try and be grateful when you see her next. A thank you wouldn't go astray.'

'Grateful for having half a foot?' she sniped. The pain was creeping up the scale from tolerable to not, and she breathed faster in anxious anticipation of it. 'And my eye? What of that?'

'Your eye will be...' Jaime glanced at her bandages and then away. Smiled unconvincingly. 'Your
eye will be fine.'

'Don't lie to me. Just be truthful for fucking once.'

'Maester Qyburn will look at your injuries in a little while. He's busy with someone else at the moment, but then Brienne's going to take you to see him. You can ask him all those questions.'

She breathed in a shuddering breath, let it go in a rush. The anger ran out of her like water down a drain, and was replaced by deep despair. Sooty was dead. *All the times you saved me, and I couldn't save you. I told you I was coming right back, and I didn't. What is left to live for, now you're gone?*

'What happened to... Locke?' She felt sick even saying his name. At the memory of the cold steel pressing behind her eye, nausea washed over her.

'Ah, Locke. After we removed his hand, he decided he didn't much want to hang around. I did invite him to a private audience with my father in KingsLanding, but he declined that offer.' Jaime was smug with satisfaction. Then he must have noticed the girl's face because his expression changed back to concern. 'Hey. It's alright. He can't hurt you any more.'

'I thought I was going to die. I thought you weren't coming back,' she said, in a remote voice.

'Then you don't know me very well.'

'Evidently.'

'Do you have such a low opinion of me, girl? I'm not completely without scruples.' Jaime ran a hand over his face, as if wounded by her judgement. 'I owed you. You came back for me with those outlaws on the bridge-road, and I came back for you with Locke and his men. So, we're even. I always pay my debts, in case that was another thing you didn't know about me.'

'I didn't, but I'm really finding out a lot about you today.'

Jaime was quiet for a while. 'Sorry,' he finally said. He truly did sound sorry.

'Sorry for being Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer?'

He gave a short, mirthless laugh. 'I'm not sorry for being who I am. That would be rather complicated. I'm sorry that you didn't... I'm sorry if I misled you. Into thinking I was someone else.'

A memory came to the girl then. They were standing on a hill above the King's Road, and Jaime was gazing at her as if he wanted to imprint her face in his mind forever, as if she were the most beautiful thing in all of the Seven Kingdoms. And then he'd kissed her in a way that made her believe it, too. She wondered how she could have been so wrong. About everything.

The pain from her injuries spiralled up and up, higher and higher. She tried to ignore it, because it was suddenly important to know something. 'All the times we... when we... ' She stopped. Knowing who he was now just made what they'd done together so awkward, but she forced herself to keep talking. 'When you and I were...'

*Seven hells, why is this so difficult? Just say it already! When. We. Fucked. But she couldn't.*

'When we were intimate?' Jaime said, tactfully.

She nodded, not looking at him. 'I have your seed in my belly. What were you thinking?'

'I guess I wasn't thinking,' Jaime admitted. 'When I was... putting it there.'
'Well maybe you should've.'

'Hey. I seem to remember the first time, I was in chains and had recently been knocked out by your horse. I seem to remember you climbing on top of me.'

The reminder of her impulsive actions stung. 'Are you saying you didn't want to?'

'No. I'm saying don't act like I am solely responsible for what you may or may not have in your belly.'

'I didn't know who you were! I thought you were some... some common criminal!'

Jaime looked irritated. 'Well, maybe you should be a bit more discriminating about who you are intimate with in the future,' he said.

The girl breathed heavier into the rapidly engulfing pain. The insinuation of his words hurt almost as much. She looked down at his sword lying between them in the wagon. The sounds of other people around them had lessened. Everyone had moved further away, leaving them alone. 'And what of Joffrey?' she enquired, as if she didn't care one way or another. 'Is he your son?'

Jaime must have expected she was going to ask this question, but he still hesitated to answer it. He looked down at his hands, swallowed, rubbed his forehead. She waited, her insides a coiled spring.

'If you're asking me about the validity of some unsubstantiated rumour...'

'I'm asking you if you and the Queen fucked and Joffrey was a result of it.'

He winced, didn't reply. Sighed again.

The girl felt a dark rage rising in her, at his silence. *Don't I deserve an explanation?* 'Joffrey killed my brother, and you knew that. So the seed in my belly could be another Joffrey. I could have a baby that is a brother to the one person who destroyed my life.'

Jaime looked away, unable or unwilling to discuss it. 'I'm going to go now. Brienne will come get you soon. Maester will give you something for the pain. Take all he gives you, alright?'

He stood and went to pick up his sword. Quick as a flash, the girl snatched it first, flipped it around and held it to his neck. He looked momentarily surprised, but didn't make any effort to disarm her.

He just smiled ruefully and shook his head.

'I always said you had decent reflexes, didn't I, girl?'

She didn't answer, held the sword steady and straight. Her grip on it was sure, unwavering, she felt fully in control of herself for the first time since she'd woken up that morning.

'Brienne's not going to be happy to see you pointing a sword at me, you know,' Jaime said. 'She doesn't take too kindly to people threatening me.'

'I'm not threatening you,' the girl said, her voice hard.

'What are you doing then? Killing me? Go on, you can do it.' Jaime put his hands flat on the boards of the wagon and sat back, relaxed. 'Just push the blade into my neck. As long as you nick the jugular vein, I should bleed out well before anyone gets here.'

She didn't move. In her mind's eye, she pictured doing exactly as he said. The keen edge would slide in easy, the blood would spurt out, and Jaime would be dead. She wondered how she would feel...
about it. Wondered if it would make anything better.

'I could get revenge for Mycah by killing you,' she whispered.

'Then do it. Revenge is as good a reason as any. What are you waiting for?' Jaime spread his hands wide, turned his head to expose his neck. 'The blade is sharp. And you could be famous.'

'Slaying the Kingslayer.'

'That's right. They'd write poems about you.'

'I don't care for poetry.' She paused, then lowered the sword a little. 'I've never killed anyone.' She dropped the sword lower still. 'The first person isn't going to be you.'

Jaime's eyes softened. 'You don't have the nature for revenge, girl. Some people have it in them, they live for it, but not you. There's no shame in letting things go. Just let it go.'

The girl felt drained. She opened her mouth to reply when without warning a hand grabbed her wrist from behind and bent it back, forcing the sword to fall from her fingers. Then she was lifted up by her jacket. The movement caused stabbing pains to shoot up her leg and she yelped.

'Are you still delirious?' Brienne growled, outraged. 'This man risked his life for you and you repay him by trying to kill him? Where is your sense of honour?'

'Ask him about fucking honour!' the girl spat as she struggled to get free.

'She wasn't trying to kill me,' said Jaime, standing up. He picked his sword off the ground and sheathed it. 'We just had a misunderstanding.'

'There won't be any more misunderstandings,' glowered Brienne, hauling the girl off with her. The girl kicked and twisted, but it was useless. It was like being held by a tree.

'Put me down, it.. it hurts!'

Brienne stopped abruptly and brought the girl around to face her. The girl's feet dangled above the ground and she felt like she was being slowly strangled. The Knight stared at her with resolute blue eyes, the colour of a cloudless sky.

'I don't know who you are, or what your story is,' Brienne said, speaking firmly so the girl would be in no doubt that she meant every word. 'But Ser Jaime is under my protection until we reach KingsLanding. I had to stop him from rushing single-handedly into a battle he had no hope of winning today, to save your sorry skin, and I won't allow that to happen a second time. If you raise so much as a finger to him again, I will kill you myself. Do you understand?'

'I.. I wasn't... he -'

'Do you understand?' Brienne demanded, giving her a little shake, as if she were a naughty dog.

There was nothing else for the girl to do but nod, so she did.
The elderly man was always meticulous in packing away his tools. For each pocket and pouch in his bag there was an ointment or powder belonged to it; for each strap or sheath there were scissors or a scalpel to fit. Everything in its proper place. Maester Qyburn hated disorder. Work places must always be kept tidy.

Once the bag was re-packed, he tipped the pot of discoloured water out onto the ground, bundled up the bloody rags and other detritus and threw them onto the small fire he had burning. Re-filled another pot with fresh water from a flask, then hung the pot over the flames to boil. He was ready for his next patient, but he was tired. His sore hip was giving him trouble, from leaning forward for hours. It had been a long day, and it still wasn't over.

He lowered himself onto the circular stump of a tree he'd been using as a seat, positioned by a similar one for his patients. Steelshanks had helped him set up the make-shift treatment area earlier, under the shade and sheltered from the wind. Steelshanks himself had been his first patient, with a long gash to his forearm that needed several stitches. Locke's men may have died or fled, but they didn't do either without putting up a fair fight.

Steelshanks could not have been in a better mood though, despite his cut. He was chatty and cheerful throughout the suturing procedure. He even smiled once. Quite out of character for the normally taciturn soldier, but Qyburn wasn't surprised. Steelshanks had, after all, just gone from escorting a disgraced and little-known Noblewoman, of somewhat dubious worth to the Tyrells or Lannisters, to now escorting Jaime Lannister himself. He'd already sent a messenger boy on his fastest horse back to his liege Lord, Roose Bolton, to let him know of the good news.

As the Maester stitched and cleaned, Steelshanks had commented that he hoped Roose would receive the news before setting off to the wedding of Lord Frey's daughter at the Twins. Apon hearing of the Stark's attendance at the event, apparently Jaime Lannister had sent his regards. Roose would love to hear that, Steelshanks said. It would make his day.

Qyburn knew Steelshanks’ happiness was partly relief. After the initial shock of seeing Jaime Lannister again, everyone's next thought had been that he was about to get himself killed or captured. Locke had evidently seen a way to get his hands on the reward that he considered unfairly snatched from him when Roose insisted he give up the Tarth woman. Never one to take orders or vows of loyalty seriously, Locke. Always seeking the profit in it for himself, Qyburn mused. Well, it would have worked out for him too; Jaime Lannister confusing bravery with foolhardiness as Knights are prone to do, if not for the Tarth woman. She'd been the one demanding they investigate that gods-awful screeching in the first place.

Qyburn was by nature a curious man, but that sound had not made him want to run towards it. Quite the opposite. It sounded like a sinner being tormented in the deepest of the Seven hells, but Lady
Tarth is an awfully pig-headed woman.

Qyburn shook his head as he pondered the strange ways the gods worked. He was more a man of science, but sometimes events played out with such effect it made one believe a higher power must be in charge. If Steelshanks' party hadn't been riding past close enough to hear that shrieking, if they'd not been delayed in their travels by stopping to treat the Cole boy, if they'd been ten minutes longer here, or another decision had been made there... well, the outcome could have been very different.

As it turned out, investigating those hellish screams was the first in a series of blessed decisions. They'd encountered the Kingslayer also headed toward the sound from another direction, and he'd immediately sent them around behind the ridge to ambush Locke's men, while he, as he'd put it, 'Bought some time'. Steelshanks had been reluctant to go along with this, but Jaime was as fired-up as a man could be, Qyburn remembered, so it hadn't seemed like a good idea to start arguing with him. He only would have left and gone on alone if they'd declined to help him.

Qyburn himself had been sceptical the plan would work. Locke had more men, and without the element of surprise the odds would have favoured him. But then, Qyburn thought, I under-estimated the Kingslayer's gift of the gab. His skill in being captivatingly irritating. Jaime had indeed succeeded in distracting Locke and his men long enough, and completely enough, for Lady Tarth, Steelshanks and his men to come around from behind the ridge, and Locke was subsequently disarmed, his men disadvantaged.

So, it had been a good day. For Steelshanks, for Jaime and Lady Tarth, neither who had suffered injury, and for Qyburn himself, who's appearance at KingsLanding would be looked on much more favourably now that he was accompanying Jaime Lannister. It was a fortuitous decision to come on this trip. And the only damage out of the whole incident had been to two commoners. Yes, the gods had surely been smiling today, whether Qyburn had personal faith in them or not.

The old man rested his hands on his knees and considered asking a passing someone for a cup of tea. His mouth felt parched. If only anyone were still nearby, he thought. Unfortunately his previous patient, the Cole boy, had driven any interested observers away by screaming his lungs out during the cleaning of his stump. Two of Steelshanks' men had been required to hold the boy to his seat. There was a limited supply of milk of the poppy, and the boy had already had his share.

Such a waste of medicines and gauze, on a commoner lad. A waste of time to stop for him in the first place, the old man rued. Infection had already set in when they found the boy sitting by the King’s Road yesterday, and it was a tricky procedure to slice away the bad flesh and sterilise what little then remained of his arm. And for what? The boy is a poor villager, with no gold. 'My father is a smith, he will pay you with steel and weapons,' he'd said, well, what use are they to me? I'm a man of science and practitioner of alchemy, not a Knight. But again, Lady Tarth had insisted.

The Maester sighed, stretched his fingers out to relieve the ache in the joints.

He only had the one more patient to treat before he could have some long-awaited supper and retire to his sleeping furs, and she had not uttered a peep since being tied to a tree by Lady Tarth. Had not so much as twitched, even during the Cole boy's wailing. So Qyburn wasn't in a hurry to begin on her. He needed a break to reflect. He sat back against a tree and meditated for a little while. He might have dozed off.

'Are you ever going to get around to treating that girl?'

Qyburn started, opened his eyes. The light was dimmer, evening having fallen. Lady Tarth was standing over him and scowling down like an angry bear.
'I was about to see to her,' the Maester said, mildly. He had lived long enough and dealt with enough disapproval of his methods to not be intimidated by grumpy Knights. Even grumpy bear-like women Knights.

'Ser Jaime has requested news of her condition. He would have come down to see you himself, but luckily for you he's busy discussing travel itineraries with Steelshanks. I told him you were currently tending to the girl and wouldn't want to be disturbed.' Lady Tarth narrowed her incongruous blue eyes. 'And I hate lying.'

Qyburn regarded her with solicitude. 'I was considering how to best treat the girl's rather... complicated... lacerations.'

'Were you? It looked like you were taking a nap.'

'My mind needs peace and quiet to function properly.' He got up, set about arranging his equipment. Lady Tarth loomed beside him, her presence off-puttingly oppressive.

'Perhaps you could fetch the patient?' Qyburn suggested, to get her out of his space.

The woman marched over to the tree where the commoner girl was tied, and undid the knots in the bindings. She half-carried her around to the little fire and sat her down on the seat opposite Qyburn. He nodded his thanks and hoped the woman would now leave, but she remained standing steadfast behind the girl's seat.

Qyburn switched his attention to the patient in front of him. 'What is your name?' he enquired, smiling. He found most people responded well to his kind smile, which he'd been told made him look like a benevolent grandfather. This patient though, looked particularly hostile.

His first impression was of wariness like a wild animal, and on closer inspection her appearance did nothing to alleviate Qyburn of this notion. Apart from the obvious recent trauma to her foot and eye, she was also covered in numerous other scratches and scabs, most noticeably on the palms of her hands. The top half of her face was half-swathed in bandages, the mouth below them set in a mutinous straight line. What hair showed through was stiff with dried blood, but was otherwise a pale copper colour, cut shorter than most women's hair to barely reach her shoulders. Qyburn guessed this was for convenience, if she lived as she looked she did; wild.

He studied the rest of her body. Her clothes were basically village garments that were now, like her hair, copiously stained with blood. She was thin, even for a commoner, and her skin was dark from the sun but also from some foreign breeding. Essos, he surmised. Although there was so much dirt and muck covering nearly every inch of her, it was difficult to get an accurate idea. All in all, he couldn't remember when he'd last seen a more pitiful specimen. Is this really a good use of my considerable expertise and knowledge? Treating savages?

As she hadn't yet answered Qyburn's question, he wondered if she was deaf or mentally impaired. 'Do you have a name, my dear?'

'Tell him your name,' Lady Tarth commanded, giving the girl a slight push.

'Robberta,' the girl said.

'Robberta. Good,' Qyburn smiled again. 'And how old are you, Robberta?'

'Twenty-five.'

Lady Tarth snorted. 'You're hardly older than a child. Why bother lying?"
Qyburn busied himself measuring out some powder into a cup and adding it to a pitcher. He stirred in a dropper of oil. *Now why did Jaime Lannister risk his life for this scrawny little thing? A mystery.* Sometimes, when he wasn't sure of the facts about a person, he found it useful to take his time preparing his medicines and allow them to fill the silence. This girl didn't look too chatty on her own, nor was the Tarth woman on a normal day, but he sensed the two of them together may create enough antipathy for the desired information to sprout forth. They weren't exactly bonding.

'Does this mean your name is also a lie?' Lady Tarth demanded to know, seeming determined to get some truths about this person they'd all put so much effort into saving.

Showing a distinct lack of gratitude, the girl grunted. 'It's a name. Use it.'

'I'd prefer to use your *real name.*'

'Why? Jaime didn't care.'

'Do I look like Ser Jaime?'

'No. He's prettier than you.'

'Everyone's prettier than me,' Lady Tarth shrugged. 'You think that provokes me, girl? Pretty is not something I concern myself with. And have you seen yourself lately?'

Qyburn unwrapped the bandages from around the girl's foot that he'd used to staunch the bleeding with earlier. She'd been nearly comatose then, and unresponsive to his removal of three of her toes. There was no saving them after Locke's men had removed all the nails, skin and flesh. Qyburn began to pick off some loose bits of remnant skin with his tweezers. The girl sucked air in through her teeth but held still.

'When can I leave?' she asked Lady Tarth, as Qyburn painted on ointment.

'Leave? You need your wounds treated daily for at least a week, and you need to rest and let them heal. You'll stay with us until you can walk on your own, and we're going to KingsLanding, so that means you are too. You and the Cole boy both.'

'Where's my bag? Did you take it?'

'Why, do you have weapons in it?'

'No! I need... I need stuff for... *Fuck!* Can I see Jaime?'

'Ser Jaime. And, no.'

'I'm not calling him Ser fucking Jaime, for fuck's sake,' the girl muttered, as Qyburn re-wrapped her foot in a clean bandage.

'You really need to stop swearing so much. It makes you sound common.' Lady Tarth was clearly fed up.

'I *am* common.'

'And I'm ugly,' Lady Tarth pointed out. 'Should I also choose to walk with a hunchback and squint?'

'Do what you want. I need my bag, and I need to talk to Jaime.'

'Once you convince me that you're not going to try and attack him again at the earliest chance -'
'You don't even understand! I need to take the stuff in my bag because Jaime... because I could be...'
The girl shut her mouth, but too late. What she hadn't said hung loud in the silence.

Qyburn, head down, gave a small smile. *Could be... with Jaime's child? And tried to attack him? Now there were secrets worth knowing.*

'No, girl. It's you who doesn't understand,' Lady Tarth said, stiffly. 'But you need to get a whole lot smarter, fast, before you open your mouth around the wrong people and make a huge mistake.' The tall woman walked from behind the seat to stand in front of the girl. 'Understand this, for your own good. Ser Jaime is a member of the Kingsguard. It's a prestigious position with certain expected standards. He is also a valued member of the most powerful family in Westeros.'

The girl didn't respond, so Lady Tarth continued.

'Ser Jaime is who we're taking to KingsLanding, *Ser Jaime* is who I took a vow to deliver safely, and *Ser Jaime* is who Steelshanks and his men will be rewarded for when we arrive. You, on the other hand, are of less worth or interest to anyone than horse manure. The Maester here would not even be treating you if Ser Jaime hadn't requested it. So before you go alienating every single person around you with your attitude, because you think no-one understands you, start *understanding* your own situation a little better. Or you're going to find things very hard when we reach KingsLanding.'

Lady Tarth then addressed the Maester.

'Maester Qyburn? Please return *Robberta* here to the wagon with Callem when you're done. The back locks from the outside. I will try and locate her bag and make sure she gets it. Then come up to the main fire and get some supper. Thank you.' With that, she turned and walked away.

The girl said nothing.

Qyburn began to unwrap the bandage covering her head. She didn't look at him. 'Is your eye hurting you, Robberta? ' he enquired in a gentle tone. As the wrappings fell loose, the swollen right side of her face was revealed in the flickering fire light, making her appear deformed. A grotesque.

'No,' she said, but flinched.

*What do you look like under all this swelling?* Qyburn wondered. *Under the injuries and blood and filth and dirty peasant clothes? Certain people in the Capital might be rather more interested in you than Lady Tarth thinks. You, and the Kingslayer's baby that you might be carrying in you. The Queen, for instance. Lord Tywin. They might be very interested.*
Riding along the road to Duskendale mid-morning, Brienne felt her horse go lame. She pulled up, spent ten minutes leading the animal around trying to figure out which leg it was favouring, then another five trying to prise out the small but obviously sharp stone that had embedded itself under the horse's shoe. Steelshanks was noticeably impatient with the delay.

'We don't have a spare horse, M'Lady,' he said. 'If yours can't be ridden, then go sit in the wagon with the injured. We have no more time to waste.'

You'd like that, Brienne thought. Having the woman who refuses to act like one be relegated to sitting in the cripple's wagon. Leaving the men, the real soldiers, riding together up front, telling war stories and comparing the size of their balls. She gave up wrangling the stubborn stone and put down the hoof, watched the horse refuse to put weight on it. Damn horses. I never have any luck with them.

Jaime rode over to her and dismounted. 'Take mine,' he said. 'I don't mind sitting in the wagon for a while. I could do with stretching out for a day or so.'

Brienne eyed him, doubtful. 'What's wrong with your mount that you're offering it to me? Does it buck?'

'Why does everything I do have to be under such suspicion?' Jaime replied. 'He's a pack animal we picked up from some villagers, but a good horse for all that. An honest if somewhat plain-looking creature. You'll get along with him fine, wench.'

She ignored his jibe and took the reins of the horse. It was nice of him to give it up, she supposed. But since when does Jaime Lannister do anything that doesn't directly benefit Jaime Lannister? As Brienne tied her lame horse to the other horse's saddle-horn and swung herself up, and as Jaime headed off towards the wagon, she couldn't help thinking that what was in the wagon was the real reason behind his unexpected chivalry.

That girl is going to be trouble.

They rode without stopping for the rest of the day. Brienne let the packhorse lag behind the others, to give herself space to think, and not have to make conversation with men she suspected laughed about her behind her back. Nothing new there, but even after a lifetime of it I need a break sometimes, she decided.

She let her mind drift to something Roose Bolton had told her, before she'd left Harrenhal. Had Arya Stark really been located, as he claimed, and was she waiting with Sansa at the Capital, to be exchanged for the Kingslayer? As much as Roose had saved Brienne from whatever Locke and his men had planned, she didn't really trust the man one iota.

She remembered the first time Roose had ridden up to them, as Locke's men trawled the river relentlessly for the missing Jaime, and she herself was tied to a tree. She'd been tied there for two days and nights, as Locke hadn't stopped searching for the real prize ever since it had slipped tantalisingly through his fingers. Ever since Jaime had dropped his sword, took two running steps and dived head-first over the side of that bridge. Who'd have thought anyone would even attempt that? Especially wearing manacles.
The drop was maybe fifty feet, Brienne estimated, into swirling rapids. *He must have been exhausted from our fight too, it was a foolishly impulsive thing to do.* She remembered how Jaime had told her to jump with him, but wearing full armour she knew she'd have sunk. Instead she'd lunged to try and stop him, but he was too quick. The last thing he'd said to her was, 'Tell them we're in love.'

*It was absurd,* she thought, heat rising in her cheeks at the memory. *I hadn't known what he meant. We despised each other. Locke's men could see we'd been fighting. The whole idea was ridiculous.* But during a lull in the search one evening, when the ex-Dothraki, Zollo, had approached her and she'd run out of options, she had found herself blurring the words out. Locke sitting nearby listened to her attempts to convince him the Kingslayer would pay a reward for her return. *Undamaged.*

Maybe Locke didn't quite believe it, *who would?* but it bought her a little bit of time for one night, and then the next morning Roose had shown up unexpectedly, and she didn't need to worry about Zollo any more. At least, not until she saw him again yesterday, facing off with Jaime while she took down Locke behind him. She smiled. *Revenge really does feel as good as everyone says it does.*

Brienne's thoughts went back to that evening by the river with Locke's men, even though it still made her cringe. *I didn't use Jaime's exact words. I didn't say we were in love.* She'd said they were 'special friends', which was both idiotic and embarrassing, and Locke's men had predictably almost wet themselves laughing when she'd said it. But there was no way she could use the word 'love' in regards to Jaime Lannister, even as a lie to save herself. It was just... impossible.

*Why had those words stuck in my throat? My life was at stake, I can't tell an empty lie?* Brienne shook her head, feeling inexplicably hot and short of breath.

She hadn't been the main focus for the Dreadfort men, anyway. Locke had been a man obsessed. He'd split up his men and combed both banks up and down the river all night, for miles, then resorted to diving into the water at daybreak and looking for bodies. Brienne hadn't thought she'd care one way or another if they pulled the Kingslayer dead from the river, but she'd found herself holding her breath every time one of the men surfaced, dreading that they'd have found his drowned corpse. *You didn't expect to care about his well-being, but somehow he got to you. Life is full of surprises.*

Then when Roose had arrived, he'd called off the hunt. Wherever Jaime was by then, it obviously wasn't in the river. And so Brienne had found herself sent off to Kingslanding with Steelshanks and his entourage. She had hoped more than honestly believed that Jaime would also find his way back, somehow. He'd made the same vow to Lady Stark as Brienne had, and as long as he was alive she intended on tracking him down and holding him to it.

The funny thing was when she had seen him again, Brienne had not even recognised him. The man she saw galloping through the trees on a mission to save some poor victim of injustice, unshackled, fearless, his long gold hair flying out behind him, was like a true Knight in shining armour from legend.

*The Kingslayer I knew was a thin and unkempt wretch, covered in filth and weakened from months of imprisonment. I'd bested him in a fight, just, that day on the bridge. But then yesterday, to fight alongside him against Locke's men...* Brienne mulled over the scene in her head. Although having a fair idea of his sword skills, having grown up hearing about them endlessly; still, to witness them in real life was something else. She was glad this time they were fighting on the same side. Not that she would ever, in a thousand years, let on to Jaime that she had been impressed.

*He doesn't need any more fawning admiration. He's had it in spades since he was sixteen, when he was made the youngest ever member of the Kingsguard, an honour I had to endure countless taunts and struggles to finally achieve, against every hardship. And then he betrayed that honour, as if it*
meant nothing. No, the Kingslayer doesn't need my praise.

Besides, the new version of Jaime Lannister still aggravated her. Don't fool yourself, she thought. He's still the same shit-for-honour smart-arse he always was. He hasn't changed that much.

Brienne realised she'd fallen way behind the rest of the party. The packhorse jogged and turned its head to look at her, as if requesting permission to catch up. She gave it a pat. 'You're a smart horse. And not even plain-looking. The Kingslayer doesn't know good-looking when he sees it.' Then she gave the horse its head and they cantered up to the others.

It was night, and Brienne sat across from Steelshanks and Jaime, as they finished off the last of a flask wine after supper. The air was cold away from the fire, and even though she was tired, Brienne was reluctant to leave the warmth for her sleeping blankets.

Jaime poured her another cup of wine, and she took it gratefully.

Steelshanks and his men had already filled Jaime in on everything he'd missed while being held captive, most importantly Stannis' defeat at KingsLanding, and Joffrey's wedding plan changes. Jaime's reaction to all the news had been reserved; maybe he was just trying to process everything all at once. When he heard Tyrion was married to Sansa Stark, he did smile a little. 'He'll like that,' he'd said.

He was wearing clean clothes and had washed himself in the creek running behind their camp. His hair was still damp and his skin shone. Despite trying not to, Brienne couldn't stop glancing at him. He has that effect on people, she noticed. If Jaime is around, he commands attention, by virtue of some kind of effortless, compelling quality he doesn't even deserve. She sipped her wine, forced her eyes away from him and stared into the flames instead.

'So.' Steelshanks said in his gruff voice, giving Jaime a knowing leer. 'How was your day in the wagon?'

Jaime didn't react to the insinuation. He yawned. 'Boring.'

'Your little commoner friend not much of a conversationalist then?'

'Not on however much milk of the poppy that Maester has doped her up with. She didn't even know I was there. I had a new bow to give her, she lost her old one. But she didn't even wake all day.'

'I'm sure she'll perk up. What's the story with you and her, anyway?'

'There's no story. We were travelling together and... that's it.'

'Well you're a better man than me, Jaime. I can never travel long with women without wanting to fuck them or kill them. Or both.'

Jaime looked over at Brienne. 'You listening, wench? You're still alive, I think Steelshanks fancies you.'

Brienne rolled her eyes as Steelshanks guffawed. 'I think our Maid of Tarth here would kill me first. Anyhow. I'm off to bed. See you two in the morning.' He belched, drained his cup and set it down on the ground, before heading into the darkness.

Brienne waited until he'd gone, then gave Jaime a look. 'You know what was refreshing? Not being called 'wench' for two whole weeks.'
He raised his cup. 'It was refreshing not being called Kingslayer for a while, either. Here's to us.'

'Was it worth it?' Brienne asked.

'Was what worth what?'

'Not being called the Kingslayer for a while. Was it worth it when she found out?'

Jaime threw the dregs of his wine into the fire and watched it sizzle. He took a long stick and broke apart one of the logs so that the dying flames leapt up.

'Don't give me grief about this, alright? It has nothing to do with you. But since you ask, what she did or didn't call me wasn't the only part that was refreshing. And yes. It was worth it.'

Brienne gulped down her drink. 'That's nice. But I wouldn't be so eager to give her a bow and arrow. You'll be the first one killed with it.'

'She's not going to kill me with a bow and arrow, wench, please.' Jaime pulled a face. 'Her aim was terrible even when she had both eyes.'

_I refuse to find humour in someone else's misfortune_, Briene told herself sternly. But her mouth twitched.

'You can laugh, you know. She would have,' Jaime said, catching her almost-smile.

'Robberta,' Brienne said.

Jaime cocked an eyebrow.

'She gave that as her name. To Qyburn.'

'Oh. Really? Robberta, huh.'

'Yep.'

Jaime considered this a moment. 'How did he get that out of her?'

'He just... asked her. And she told him.'

'Well it's definitely not her name then. I asked her numerous times and she never told me.'

'Maybe she just didn't like you enough.'

'Oh, she liked me enough.' Jaime smirked.

Brienne narrowed her eyes. 'I know you lied to Steelshanks just before. About nothing happening between you two.'

Jaime didn't reply, stirred the fire.

Brienne watched him carefully. 'Poor thing doesn't know what she's doing or saying. Her head's all a mess.'

'I'll straighten things out with her,' Jaime said. 'She can rest up and then... We just need to talk. Sort everything out.'

'Sort out what 'everything?''' I realise you feel responsible for her injuries, and if you... if she's...''
Brienne blushed at the indelicate subject matter but ploughed on, 'If she's with child, then Qyburn can probably do something about that.'

Jaime was silent.

'So what else is there to sort out?' Brienne persisted.

'Everything,' Jaime said, ambiguously.

'Dear gods. I hope you're not planning something stupid because your cock led you astray.'

Jaime chuckled. 'As much as I love hearing you say cock; no offence, but maybe you aren't the best person to be giving me advice on such matters.'

'Actually, I'm exactly who should be. I don't have one, so therefore I can see clearly, and you can't.'

'Thank you for your heart-felt concern as to my welfare, but I can assure you it's unnecessary.'

'It's not your welfare I'm concerned about.'

'You think I won't look after her? I'm going to look after her, she's going to get a nice, safe job in the Capital that doesn't involve traipsing around the countryside on horseback risking getting raped or mutilated every minute, so relax.'

Brienne contemplated him for a moment. 'That's a very kind thing you're doing, organising a job for a poor common girl with no skills beyond smuggling. I didn't know you had such a charitable heart.'

'She can't do her delivery work any longer, her horse died. So. She has to do something else.'

'Her horse died? When?'

'Yesterday. Up around the corner of that ridge you came over, when you surprised Locke.'

'I didn't see any dead horse.'

Jaime poked the fire so as to avoid her gaze. 'It was probably further down. Regardless. We couldn't have taken it with us, anyway. The thing would have killed all our grooms at the Royal stables. It was seriously unfriendly.'

'Why would the girl's horse have been... kept at the Royal stables?'

When Jaime again refused to answer, Brienne felt her frustration rise. 'Excuse my cynicism, but does this nice, safe job in KingsLanding you have lined up have less to do with making amends to someone you've wronged, and more to do with keeping her close for your own personal use?'

Jaime expression was equal parts guilty and smug. 'I never said I was a saint.'

'No, and you mustn't be too clever either.' Brienne scowled at his lack of foresight. *His whole life he's used to getting his own way because of who he is. He thinks he owns the damn world. Renly used to talk about your family sometimes. He said the only difference between them and a nest of vipers was that vipers aren't as poisonous. Why didn't you just leave her to Locke and his men? Don't you think that's kinder than what your family will do to her when they find out about her dalliance with you?*

'Better than you,' Jaime said. 'I don't plan for them to find out anything.'
'I thought you'd changed, ' Brienne shook her head. 'Grown up, learned restraint and compassion. But you haven't have you, Kingslayer? You're still stupidly impulsive, and you still only really care about yourself.'

'You don't know the first thing about me. I'm not who you think I am. But,' Jaime tossed the branch into the fire, 'I could care less what you or anyone like you thinks of me.'

'That would be all well and good if your lack of care only affected yourself. Listen to me,' Brienne sat forward and regarded him gravely. 'Let the girl go outside the Capital. Let her go home.'

When Jaime looked at her his eyes glowed red in the flames. 'No-one's going to hurt her. Ever again. And she's not going anywhere. So back off, wench. You're not leading me around on a chain any more.'

Brienne sculled the rest of her wine and got up. 'Unfortunately.' She left him sitting there, and walked off into the night.
Steelshanks Walton was a straightforward man, dour by nature, blunt in speech and unapologetic for it. In his experience, most decent soldiers were of the same sort. Not given to grandstanding or glib tongues, the men who lived and died by their prowess in battle were direct and uncomplicated, and said the truth of things how they saw it.

Jaime Lannister, while famous for his act of treason against his former King, and born into a family known for its treachery and political manoeuvrings, appeared nonetheless to be at heart a simple soldier, like Steelshanks himself. He certainly fought better than any soldier Steelshanks had met before, and to achieve that level of physical skill required a clear aim and single-minded diligence. In Steelshank's view, these attributes in a person usually precluded other more devious qualities, such as political ambition or scheming.

So when Steelshanks had first asked Jaime what the story was with the commoner girl, he'd taken his answer at face value. 'Travelling companions', nothing more. Steelshanks had fished for a few more details the next day, even straight out asking if Jaime had 'fucked her', in the hope he might hear some juicy tidbits to dwell on in the cold nights alone in his own blankets. But Jaime had been dismissive, saying he was not and had never been a man to be tempted by random women, no matter how available. He took his vows as a member of the Kingsguard seriously, and taking advantage of a lowborn girl was beneath someone of his status.

Steelshanks, priding himself on being able to detect bullshit a mile away, had believed both these things to be true of Jaime Lannister. He'd put the issue aside and given it not another thought for most of the week.

Jaime wasn't very sociable with the men of the Dreadfort. Apart from spending rather a lot of time talking to the Tarth woman late of an evening, he wasn't around much. His frequent absences from the evening meal and around-the-fire conversation were put down by Steelshanks to him being tired, preparing mentally to see his family again, or just having a solitary character. His preference to sit in the wagon instead of ride his horse was also put down to fatigue. But as the week went on and they journeyed ever closer to KingsLanding, it began to dawn on Steelshanks that Jaime's version of events regarding his 'travelling companion' was missing certain important elements. Namely, the reason behind why he appeared to be completely obsessed with her.

*Looks like he has the Lannister talent of deception after all*, Steelshanks thought that evening by the fire, catching a glimpse of Jaime ducking into the back of the parked wagon yet again, despite having not five minutes before excused himself from their campfire chat by citing a headache. A *persuasive liar, but a liar nonetheless*. Steelshanks recalled how earlier that day when they'd stopped to water the horses and prepare food, Jaime had taken the Maester aside and questioned the amount of anaesthetic he was administering to the injured commoners.

*Well, not the commoner boy, he didn't give a shit about him, only the girl, and Jaime didn't so much as question the dose, as basically demand Qyburn reduce it immediately, in no uncertain...*
Steelshanks remembered. Jaime had said he didn't see why the girl had to be drugged daily to the point of being senseless. When Qyburn had argued that without it, the pain would be too stressful, Jaime had disputed this by saying she had to get used to her disabilities at some stage, and a bit of pain was a small price to pay for being conscious. Also that the girl was 'no weak, sensitive maiden,' and would cope fine.

Qyburn had nodded ingratiatingly and said he'd reduce her dose gradually over the next few days. The Maester had warned that removing it altogether would cause vomiting and other unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. Jaime had reluctantly agreed to this. 'By the time we reach KingsLanding, I want her completely off it. No dependence whatsoever,' he'd ordered.

_He has plans for the girl at KingsLanding_, Steelshanks thought. _A half-wit could see he's both protective and possessive of her_. Jaime was totally ignoring the Cole boy, who had arguably suffered worse injuries, yet couldn't let a few hours pass in any given day without checking in on the girl. _I'll be a blind Knight's squire if he isn't acting like a man bewitched._

Steelshanks was bothered by this realisation, not least because he hated to have the wool pulled over his eyes by convincing liars, but also because he was counting on the return of Jaime to his family as being a simple exchange of man for gold. Sure, the Maid of Tarth had other plans that involved getting the Stark girls as well, but as far as Steelshanks was concerned that had nothing to do with him. He planned to present Jaime to his father Lord Tywin, receive goodwill to his liege Lord from the Royal family, and receive personal compensation in the way of gold for his work in escorting Jaime safely. That was it.

The potential complications of Jaime's involvement with a common girl were not anything Steelshanks was remotely keen on being a part of. In fact, it had the possibility of casting a tarnish on the entire endeavour, and more importantly, affect the size of Steelshanks' reward.

He swilled the rest of his wine and decided to make it his mission for the next day to get to the bottom of the matter. His own honest nature, and mistaken presumption of Jaime's similar nature, may have caused Steelshanks to be initially fooled, but he was no fool. He would ask around, keep his eyes open, then confront the Kingslayer with his suspicions and demand to know what his intentions were at KingsLanding. That way, the Dreadfort men would be forewarned as to any awaiting nasty surprises.

The opportunity to investigate came earlier than Steelshanks had expected, as his men readied their horses the next morning. Jaime was riding his horse again for once, as the Lady of Tarth's lame gelding had finally come good and was sound enough for her to ride. As Steelshanks tightened his own mount's girth and pondered if he should approach Jaime today with hard questions, the man himself approached Steelshanks first.

'A moment of your time?' Jaime asked, although the tone was not that of a request.

Steelshanks put down the flap of his saddle and turned to face him.

'The weather has been kind to us. How long would you say until we reach the Capital?' Jaime wanted to know.

'Less than a week now. Maybe three or four days, depending on the terrain and our horses.'

'I'm pleased to hear it. It's been a long time, I fear I shan't recognise the place.'

'The Capital don't change,' Steelshanks grunted. 'Same shit, different aresholes.'
'Well observed,' Jaime smiled. 'I have been considering how best to deal with some... issues on our arrival. Brienne and the two villagers. Brienne will no doubt be a target for the Tyrells wanting vengeance for Renly. The wench says she had no part in it, and I believe her. I would ask that you and your men be mindful of that likely confrontation.'

Steelsanks said nothing, thinking only *The Maid of Tarth and her innocence or guilt is no concern of mine.*

Jaime seemed satisfied though, taking his silence for consent. 'And the villagers. I would install them in the servant's quarters in the Red Keep, until they are fit to... resume normal lives. Neither deserved what happened to them, they were casualties of those seeking to capture me, and I feel responsible. I would like them to be treated kindly until they fully heal. I would ask that you claim them as part of your own party from the Dreadfort, and during your stay in the Capital I want no mention of them to be made to anyone else there.'

'The villagers are not my -' Steelsanks began.

'I know. They are not your concern. How much gold would it take for them to be?'

Steelsanks grinned. 'We could discuss it.'

'Later,' Jaime agreed, also smiling. He mounted his horse and rode away.

Steelsanks watched his departure with shrewd eyes. *But first I must determine the girl's worth to you, Kingslayer. Keeping your secret may cost you more than you're thinking.*

For the remainder of the day, Steelsanks paid close attention to the wagon and the people who attended on the two inside. Qyburn administered to their wounds, The Maid of Tarth brought them their meals, and during a rest stop not far from a shallow stream, the Tarth woman carried the girl out to the running water and helped her to wash. The Cole boy accompanied them, looking pale and weak with the stump of his arm heavily bandaged.

Steelsanks spied on the trio unobtrusively, from a sparse patch in the surrounding hedge. The Tarth woman presumed them to be out of sight of the rest of the travelling party, and undressed the girl to her underwear, including removing the wrapping from her maimed foot. She then lowered her into the water. The girl squeaked at the chill and the brisk current, then laughed. She seemed untroubled by being virtually naked in front of either the woman or the Cole boy.

*An uninhibited little hussy*, Steelsanks decided. *Most likely the Cole lad is already enamoured of her, spending all day together in the closed wagon.* He glanced at the boy and wasn't surprised to see him staring with poorly disguised fascination at the near-naked girl bathing not five feet away. While the two females chatted, the boy looked struck dumb and barely spoke, giving only a self-conscious smile when the girl directed a question to him.

Steelsanks knew of the boy's pronounced stutter and general reluctance to speak at all, to anyone, because of it. But even apart from this, his shyness around the girl was noted. *The boy appears quite smitten.*

Steelsanks had no more reason to stay and watch longer, having come to the conclusion that the girl was freely-natured and the boy was infatuated, but he lingered anyway. There was something entrancing in the easy way the girl bent to splash water over her shoulders, the lithe grace of her movements as she leant backwards on her hands to rinse her hair. She was obviously a person who had spent her life in outdoor pursuits, as shown by her lean physique, and all-over olive skin colour. Even on her breasts, Steelsanks noticed, as the clear droplets of water turned her slip
translucent. *Either she sun-bakes topless or it is her natural hue.* Steelshanks could feel himself grow hotter as he watched, and forced himself to turn away. *Little harlot. Your face may be disfigured and hidden by bandages, but with a body like that you would not want for male attention. You could have a face like a mule and many a man would pay a lot of gold for that to warm their blankets, even for an hour.* Steelshanks' desire for gold being greater than any of his physical desires, this last thought pleased him greatly as he made his way back to the camp.

Steelshank's next move was to question all his men as to any prior knowledge of the girl. It didn't take long to discover that she had apparently been a delivery person of sorts, although Noble seats such as the Dreadfort and Harrenhal had not been included in her custom. The illegal nature of most of her deliveries made them more often to be to other common-folk, and those unlikely to report her.

While intriguing, it was not really information that was particularly helpful to Steelshanks, in determining why exactly Jaime Lannister was acting as he was. It was hardly likely that her proclivity to petty crime was what interested him. Her physical charms didn't explain it, either. If rumours were true, Jaime had no need or care of that. His own sister's charms were reportedly all he cared for. Not that Steelshanks gave a rat's arse about the Lannister's odd cravings, from a moral perspective.

Steelshanks' enthusiasm for his self-appointed detective work waned by mid-afternoon, with hardly half his men questioned. Only two claimed to have actually seen the girl before, and none knew anything beyond that she was a trader with flexible values. He'd almost decided to leave the mystery unsolved, when he asked the question to one of the Cooks and got a bite.

'Yeah, I know the Delivery Girl,' the man said, not looking up from peeling the pile of turnips that sat in front of him in a basket. 'Used to unload her goods ev'ry month or so at the Capital when I worked there for Baker Dallyn, two years ago.'

'What do you know of her?' Steelshanks asked. 'Name? Age? History with the Noble houses? Family? Background? Anything?'

'None o' that. I only ever seen her out and about a cuppla times, y'know? Maybe talked to 'er once or twice. She said she could get me this ingredient we was thinking of using in our cakes. Made anyone who had a bite develop such a craving for it, that they would be desired to return every day for more o' the same. I left the Bakery soon after that, so I don't know if she ever did supply it. But I heard Baker Dallyn is now fair making a killing with them cakes.'

Steelshanks turned away, disappointed to just hear more of the same tales.

'I only paid attention to her that one day, because of her muckin' around with the jewels,' the Cook added.

'What jewels?' Steelshanks asked, pausing.

'The choker of jewels she were wearin'. I presume it belonged to one of her customers, but she were playing around with it, taking the piss, like. Talkin' posh. She's wearing the jewels, see, and prancin' around in some tart's borrowed dress. Normally she was all, wearing boy's clothes and the like, and her hair in braids or somethin', all covered up with a hood. But this day she had pinned it up in a style like all the Southern Ladies wear, and she was actin' the fool with this young apprentice from Mott's smithy. Anyhow,' the Cook went on, scrubbing the peeled turnips in a bowl of water. 'The two of 'em was being like the Royals, y'know? For a laugh. He were calling her 'Your Grace,' and bowing and kissing her skirt, and everyone around were laughing and lovin' it. 'Cause with her hair up and the jewels and the dress, that Delivery Girl were the spitting image of her.'
'Of who?' Steelshanks still wasn't quite clear on the point of this story.

'The Queen, o'course,' the Cook said. 'She were the spittin' fucking image of the Queen.'

Steelshanks almost laughed out loud at the obviousness of it. *Well, well, well, Kingslayer. It seems there is more to the story after all. 'Just travelling companions' my arse.*
Her world was dreams, and they were all bad. Murky and confusing, drenched in menace. She was trapped, she was running, she had to do something, or get somewhere, but always some dark presence was stopping her. Sometimes she was alone in a small room with no windows or door and it was terrifying; sometimes she was outside and there were figures of people all around but she couldn't talk to them or see any of their faces. She didn't know if they were friends or enemies, if she had to save them or flee from them.

In one dream she saw Mycah, running away through the trees. She ran to catch up but when she put her hand to his shoulder and turned him around, it was the poacher's white face that she saw, dead eyes filling with rain. She woke sweaty, cold, with her heart hammering. Only she woke into yet another dream. She ran and ran, trying to escape them.

The girl didn't know how much time passed, but one morning she opened her eyes in the dark and felt the rough boards of the wagon against her cheek. She lay there, listening to Callem snoring quietly nearby, smelling smoke from a fire outside, and horses. Her mouth tasted like ash. After a while, she rolled over and stared up through the slatted walls of the covered wagon at the grey, predawn sky. She knew she was awake, properly awake this time. Because one thing about dreams was that nothing hurt in them, and right now her foot and face were hurting like fuck.

She didn't mind though, because the sensation of being clear-headed was worth it. The pain throbbed at a constant but tolerable level. Like a toothache that flares up only when touched or knocked. She waited impatiently for Callem to wake, so that she'd have someone to talk to.

'Y-y-you've b-been really, really out of it,' was what he told her, as they ate the breakfast Brienne brought over for them. The girl was starving, she felt hollow inside with hunger. Callem noticed and gave her half of his food, but even then she felt as if she hadn't eaten at all.

Nine days, Callem said. Nine days? The girl wouldn't have believed it, but he had no reason to lie. It's too late now to take any moon tea. If Jaime's seed has taken root in me, what's done is done. The girl felt strangely at peace with this being out of her control.

When she asked about Jaime, Callem looked surprised and said Jaime had been there every day, didn't she remember? No, the girl thought, disappointed. I remember nothing. Since the Maester had first treated her injuries, everything ran together like mud. She remembered holding a sword to Jaime's neck, and Brienne dragging her away. It was strange to think of Jaime being there, when she had been, as Callem said, really, really out of it.

After begging Brienne when she returned to collect their bowls, the girl got a second helping of food, before Steelshanks' men began to move out. She didn't ask if Jaime could come and visit her today, but she did ask if she could have a bath. Brienne agreed: 'If we stop near anywhere suitable.' That afternoon, they'd gone out to a shallow stream and washed. The girl felt invigorated by the cool water, her senses re-awakened.

Afterwards, Brienne sat with her in the wagon as they had some soup. For the past hour they'd talked about all sorts of things, and the girl felt that if they weren't exactly best friends, at least Brienne wasn't actively threatening to kill her any more. They'd even talked about Jaime. Ser Jaime.
The girl had seen the damage to her foot when it was unbandaged. In contrast to the robust solidity of the wrapping, the puny shortened foot with its three shiny puckers of skin was altogether depressing. The two small remaining toes stood lonely and bereft, like the only survivors of a massacre.

'Well,' the girl had said, 'I guess two are better than none. Right?'

'Right,' Brienne had agreed, a little too heartily.

The girl couldn't think of anything else positive to say, although a number of jokes came to mind. She'd decided not to bother making light of things, or pretend that the disfigurement didn't worry her. Truth was, the sight of her foot made her sick to her stomach.

Now sitting back in the wagon, after they'd eaten, Brienne suggested, 'You should try walking tomorrow.'

The girl didn't reply. As if she could read her thoughts, Brienne went on, 'Lots of people walk and run just fine without toes.'

_Ugh. What does 'just fine' mean, anyway?_ the girl thought. 'How about my eye? Can we take the patch off? It itches.' The bandages around her head had been replaced with a large patch, and she could feel a pull underneath the material, as if the skin from the corner of her eyelid to her ear was stretched too tight.

Brienne shook her head. 'The Maester told me the longer you keep the eye away from light, the better chance it has to heal and, maybe work again.'

'Maybe? Like, how does he mean?'

'He said if the nerve wasn't too damaged, then there's a chance you might be able to see some...' Brienne waved her hand vaguely, '...movement, shadows, that sort of thing.'

'Well, thank the gods.' The girl didn't even attempt to hide her sarcasm. 'I mean, as long as I can see fucking shadows.'

Brienne regarded her sternly. 'You still have one good eye. You can still see.'

The girl frowned. 'Is it ugly, too?'

'Your face is too swollen and bruised to know what you'll look like. You'll have a scar... but scars add character they say,' Brienne said. 'There are worse things in life than scars.'

The girl sighed, looked away. _Lame, blind, ugly. What worse things?_

Brienne patted her on the shoulder, obviously not practised in reassurance but doing her best. 'I'm sure that whatever you were before, you will be again. If you weren't ugly before, a scar won't make it so. And I don't believe you were ugly. Ser Jaime doesn't like ugly women.'

'He likes you,' the girl said without thinking, then blushed. 'I mean, not that you are...'

Brienne snorted, unconcerned by her tactlessness. 'Ser Jaime and I... well. We used to hate each other, but now... we've talked a lot these last few days, and we understand each other better. But, we're very different people.'

'You're not so different. And he likes you, I can tell. He told me to say thank you to you, that first
day, for saving me. I didn't... and I should have.' The girl grabbed Brienne's hand in both of hers, squeezed it. 'I'm sorry, Brienne. You've been amazing and I've been ungrateful. Thank you for rescuing me.'

Brienne looked uncomfortable at the praise. 'I only rescued you to protect Ser Jaime, you know.'

'Fuck off you did. You rescued me because you're a good person, and a Knight, and I needed rescuing.'

'Well. Hmm.' Brienne stood up, fussed around with collecting the bowls and spoons. 'You're rescued and that's all that matters. Rest now, and heal. We'll be in KingsLanding very soon.' She reached for the gate that closed the back of the wagon, but the girl didn't miss the concerned look on her face.

'I've been to the Capital plenty of times,' the girl said, scooching backwards to avoid the hinges as they closed. 'I can take care of myself in that cesspit.'

'I hope so,' Brienne said, as she swung the gate shut.

Jaime didn't visit the wagon that day, nor the next. Neither did Brienne. The travelling party continued as usual, not stopping to rest until evening. The girl and Callem entertained themselves by betting on which direction pebbles would roll as the wagon tilted over bumps. They discussed RedHollow and their childhoods. One of Steelshanks' men brought them food. Outside, people were talking around the fire in hushed voices. There was definitely something going on. Whatever it was though, it evidently was not anything the commoners needed to know.

Late at night, and the girl couldn't sleep. Maybe sleeping for nine days straight had spoiled her of the need for sleep in the foreseeable future. It was deathly quiet and black as pitch in every direction, but she felt so awake her skin tingled and her ears hummed.

A light approached, flickering as it passed along the slats. Footsteps, the back of the wagon creaking as it was unlocked and opened, then a man stood there in the glow of the lantern, holding a bowl of something that steamed. Jaime. Of course, it was Jaime.

The girl sat up, stretching her legs out in front of her along the wooden floor. He looks different. Maybe I just forgot how good he looked.

Jaime glanced at the bolts on the gate. 'I don't know why they lock you in here, girl. It's not like you're going to be hopping off at any great speed.'

She grinned. 'I know. I'm not exactly a high-risk prisoner.'

'But still, a prisoner of sorts. It seems we've swapped sides.'

'Yeah.' The irony wasn't lost on her. 'This side is much less fun.'

Jaime put the bowl of stew he was carrying down next to her so she could reach it. 'I heard you were hungry.'

She was. She picked up the bowl, took out the spoon and licked it. 'So.' She felt shy. She'd thought she'd known him, but now he seemed like a stranger.

'It's good to see you. Awake.' Jaime put the lantern on the ground.

'Where's Brienne?'
'She's not feeling well. She had some bad news today.'

'Of what?'

'Someone she was close too, that she'd sworn a vow to - you know how she is with vows. Takes every one of them like a personal commandment from the gods. Anyway, this person, they ah.. died. At a wedding. And our Maid of Tarth is taking it rather hard.'

'Oh. Who died?'

'I thought you didn't care about the Nobility.'

'I don't. I just like to know which of them are still alive so I know who I need to steer clear of.'

'Well. I'm afraid it was our good friend the King in the North himself,' Jaime said, sounding remarkably unperturbed. 'Robb Stark. His new wife. And his mother, Catelyn. And.. most of his men.'

There was a short silence while they contemplated the untimely deaths. Then the girl clicked her fingers.

'Damn,' she said. 'The one Lord who's name I know goes and dies. Typical.'

Jaime chuckled. 'I told the wench you had a black sense of humour. She didn't believe me.'

'Do you mean Brienne? You shouldn't call her wench, you know. She doesn't like it.' The girl held the bowl up and scooped out a spoonful. The steam rose into her face and her mouth watered.

'She doesn't like most of the things I do. How would you know she dislikes what I call her, anyway?'

'Because... I've known her longer than two minutes. And you know full well she hates being called that, that's why you do it.'

'No doubt why she calls me Kingslayer too, I imagine.'

'A real hate/hate relationship you got going there. Do you always annoy everyone you travel with so much?' She gulped down a mouthful of stew. It was delicious.

'What can I say, it's a gift,' Jaime shrugged.

The girl didn't reply, concentrated on eating. She chewed and swallowed, savouring every bite. All too soon it was gone. She tipped the bowl up to get the last drops, wishing she had another one.

'I could teach you all the Lord's names. If you want,' Jaime offered.

The girl put the bowl down and looked at him, curious.

'I could teach you a lot of things. The names of all the important people in Westeros, what they do, who controls what, who's loyal to who. I could teach you how to fight with a real sword instead of a bow and arrow. I could get someone to teach you how to... dress and talk properly, do your hair and... whatever else you need.'

The girl kept staring at him as if he'd lost his mind. Why would I want to learn those things? Maybe the sword-fighting might be useful but... the rest?

Jaime looked stymied by her silence. 'You don't have to learn all that, if you don't want to. I like you
how you are. But regardless. You don't have to worry about delivering stuff any more, or earning for your family. Alright? I'm going to make sure you and your family always have enough, from now on. As soon as we get to KingsLanding I'm going to send someone to... where does your sister live again?

'Goldgrass.'

'Yes, Goldgrass. Well, I'm going to make sure her and her children want for nothing. I owe that to them, because of you helping me. Getting my chains off, and looking after me, and trusting me, even when you had no reason to. So, you don't have to worry about those sorts of things any more.'

The girl stared at him until she was sure he was quite finished. Then, she laughed. 'What in Seven hells are you on about? You don't have to do that. But you could pay me the 500 gold coins you owe me. That's enough.'

Jaime looked away from her, frustrated. 'Of course. We'll talk about this later.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Alllllright then. Are you feeling quite normal?'

'I feel fine.'

'Only, you're acting kinda weird. Is having to adjust to spending time with proper folk again driving you insane?' she joked. 'Is that why you decided to come slumming down to the commoner-wagon, with me and Cal?'

'Cal now, is it. When did you two get so familiar?'

'We've known each other since we were three. I think we used to run round naked in the river together.'

'Really.' Jaime looked distinctly unimpressed. 'Have you two been reminiscing?'

'Yes, actually. Quite a bit. He'd started as an apprentice smith in his father's business a couple years ago. Now he might have to re-think that, with his arm and all.'

'Any reminiscing about naked swims in the river?'

The girl stifled a giggle. 'Are you... jealous? Of Cal?'

'Well. He is getting to sleep in here with you. I could have reason.'

'He sleeps there, and I sleep there,' she pointed out the different areas in the far depths of the wagon. Cal's blanket-covered form snored lightly from out the darkness. 'There's no touching.'

Jaime regarded her with a serious expression. She hoped he wouldn't start on about teaching her a bunch of useless stuff again. But he didn't. After a while he said, rather unnecessarily she thought, 'May I sit down?'

She pulled an of-course face. 'I don't own the wagon.' What's got into him?

He sat on the edge of the platform facing her, leant back against the panels. He didn't say anything for a time, then he asked: 'Do you... hate me?'

The girl considered this carefully, before she spoke. She figured he hadn't asked just to receive a pat answer, a trite politeness. There had been too many lies between them already.
'You... your family... killed my brother. My father killed himself because of it. So, your family, killed both.' She paused, but when Jaime opened his mouth to speak she shushed him with a raised finger. 'And... your lying about who you were, to get me to help you, caused me to become involved in - things - that I otherwise wouldn't have done. Because of that Sooty is dead, I am injured and... maybe more. My life is - changed. Forever. Because of you, and your family, and your lies. I don't think I can ever forget that.'

Jaime said nothing. It was as if he knew anything he said at this point wouldn't be enough.

Finally the girl continued. 'But even so.' Her voice was so soft she was barely audible. 'Even so. I have never felt as happy as... you made me feel. I've never felt that way before, ever. Being with you is like... it made me feel complete.' She shook her head in genuine wonder. 'Why is that? How can that be?'

'I don't know,' said Jaime, quietly. 'I don't understand it myself.'

'Everything you've done and by any measure I should hate you, but all I can think about is how good it felt when we were together.'

'Yeah.' Jaime gave a short laugh. 'It is madness.'

'Brienne says -'

'Oh dear gods, don't listen to what Brienne says.'

'She says it's just animal instinct. Like any beast has to another, when they rut, and that it passes and isn't real.'

Jaime looked pained. 'You really have to stop having these girly chats with Brienne. I'm not sure she's an expert on rutting.'

'She's been so nice to me. She cares about me and Cal.'

'I care about you, girl. I'm sorry about everything. I never meant to hurt you, or for you to be hurt.' He sounded so sincere, almost as if he were hurting himself.

'I care about you, too,' she said. *There's no use lying to myself about it. I care about you, I think about you all the time, my head is drowning in thoughts of you.*

It was quiet again except for Callem's breathing at the back of the wagon.

'You said you'd rather die than let me touch you again,' Jaime said, at last. 'I was wondering if that's... still applicable.'

'Um.' She wasn't sure how to respond. 'When I said that, I was really mad at you.'

'And now?'

'I don't know. I guess I'm not... as mad.'

'So touching is...?' His lip curved up and he had a gleam in his eye that immediately put her on edge, and sent an excited flutter through her.

'What kind of touching are we talking about?'

'Just touching.' He let his right hand rest on her unbandaged ankle, the small weight of it warm on
her bare skin. He rubbed his thumb along her calf.

A pulse started beating inside her, a steady thrum deep in her belly. 'Cal is asleep, you know.'

Jaime looked irked at the mention of Cal again. 'And how is the Cole boy,' he said with scorn, 'coping with being a cripple?'

'Speaking for the cripples, we're doing just fine,' she replied, terse. He is so rude.

'You're hardly a cripple.'

'An easy definition for you to make. I don't see you missing any limbs.'

'Toes are digits, not limbs, strictly speaking. And... I don't care about a few missing toes.' He ran his hand up her leg to above her knee, pushing up her long night-shirt. His fingers curved around the inside of her thigh and she shivered involuntarily.

'Well as long as you don't care,' she said, trying to be flippant. Jaime's hand began to stroke her sensitive inner thigh in soft, teasing circles. It was extremely distracting. He's so insulting, I should knock him away. But even as she told herself this, she knew that she wouldn't.

He shook his head at her and grinned lazily. 'I don't care one bit,' he said. He moved his hand further up her thigh to the crook of her pelvis, then put his left hand under her other knee and bent her leg up so her bandaged foot rested on the wagon planks beside him. She let him move her legs where he wanted, entranced by the feel of his hands on her skin and the deliberate certainty of his actions. She only tensed against him as he went to push her knee outwards.

'What are you doing?' she asked, breathless, although she knew.

'Open your legs and I'll show you,' he murmured.

She froze, conflicted.

Jaime looked at her and his green eyes burnt with a fierce desire. His voice was thick. 'Don't fight me, girl. I hate it when we fight.'

She didn't know why she was protesting. Lust rolled over her in dizzying waves. She felt like she shouldn't want to do this as much as she did, because he was the Kingslayer, her enemy. Oh gods but I do want to, more than anything. 'Callem is... he's just there. He'll wake up and hear us,' she said, desperate to convince herself that this was a reason to stop.

'I don't care.' Jaime leaned over her as his hand pushed her knee firmly outward, and she let him. Allowed his right hand to drop between her spread legs, all the time thinking she should move away, or resist, but doing neither. Jaime's palm pressed against her and sparks shot straight into the centre of her body and raced outwards along her nerves like molten fire. It was, simply, bliss.

'It's only animal instinct. It isn't real.' She remembered Brienne's words, but they suddenly didn't even make any sense.

Jaime's fingers eased beneath her underwear and brushed along her cleft. It was a surprise to herself that she was so wet, his fingers sliding easily between her folds like a torch melting butter.

'I guess...' he paused, smiled. 'I guess you like that.'

'Uh-huh.' There didn't seem to be any point denying it.
His fingers moved again, slow, sure. His breath warm on her cheek. She turned her face to the side, refusing to look at him. She thought of telling him to stop, that this was unwise, foolish, but even as she thought those words his fingers built a rhythm inside her and she felt such a jolt of pure pleasure that she arched her back and drew in air sharply, cried out. She buried her mouth in her arm to stop any more sounds coming out, but her breath still came in pants.

Jaime bit lightly at her neck. 'After everything you've been through,' he said in a low voice, 'I think you deserve to feel something good.' His hand moved between her legs, soft and quick, and her whole world shrank to only that movement, that feeling, nothing but the hot, sweet ecstasy of it. She couldn't help herself, she made little whines in her throat, shuddered and sighed, as her whole body wound up tighter and tighter with each slippery, exquisite stroke, and when her orgasm washed over her she gasped out loud at the intensity of it.

'Oh, Jaime,' she said, stunned, her heart thudding crazily, trying to catch her breath. 'What... the fuck. Jaime.'

He kissed her, which stopped her saying any other inane nonsense. 'Shhh,' he said, sitting up only long enough to undo his pants and push them down. Then he was on top of her again, his hands on her hips, pulling her in so that she was lying down fully underneath him. He leaned over and kissed her again, his mouth open, tongue hard and wet.

'We're going to fuck now,' he lifted his head just enough to whisper against her lips, as his breath quickened. 'If that's alright with you.'
Callem Cole was not someone who craved adventure or excitement. He hadn't grown up wanting to be a squire or an outlaw, hadn't idolised Knights, dreamt of notoriety or thought of travelling to far lands. He never imagined proving himself in battle or winning tournaments. Those things seemed to him to be highly risky endeavours, and Callem had always been cautious, even as a child.

The only thing he'd ever planned to do was become a respected smith like his father, and live a peaceful life in the village where he was born. One day he would marry a local girl and love her forever, support her and their children by taking over the business after his father passed on. Hopefully he'd be able to leave it to his own sons in turn. Callem had a natural talent for shaping and tempering steel, and his careful nature and creativity enabled him to make pieces of similar quality to his father's.

So how did I end up here? he thought, for not the first time. Without a good part of his arm, unlikely to work the furnace again, and en route to KingsLanding, a place he'd never been to, nor much wanted to go. With a childhood friend whom he remembered mainly as someone with a penchant for getting into trouble so often that he was always either covering for her or saving her from the various misadventures and scrapes she found herself in.

But here he was. And here she was. Still with all the same attributes that had made her such a trouble-magnet as a child, still headstrong and with scant regard for rules or norms, and now with new attributes to boot. Long legs. Caramel coloured skin and dark brows and lashes. Light chestnut hair streaked with sun and a wide mouth that was hard to look away from whether it smiled or pouted. Breasts.

Callem had barely seen the girl in years, the last time only briefly and from a distance, at her brother's funeral. There had been no body to bury, and only a handful of people willing to publicly admit any grief for a boy who'd committed such a treasonous act as attacking their future King. He'd brought disgrace to their village. The girl had been crying on her father's shoulder, and Callem had wanted to help her, but didn't know how. At the time it'd seemed easier to just do nothing, keep his distance.

There were many in the village muttered that the girl had too much of her mother's savage blood, that she'd been a bad influence on her younger brother as they grew up so that it was no wonder he'd turned out how he did. But Callem knew this was projection after the fact, and that the girl was no worse than any other child, her mother no worse than any other foreigner trying to adjust to a new life.

The girl had left the village straight after the funeral and not come back again. Even when the butcher slit his own throat in the bath, with the knife he used to skin pigs, she hadn't returned.

When I next saw you, kissing the Kingslayer that day in the rain, I felt that same urge to help you, Callem thought to himself, sitting in the wagon. I knew you didn't know what you'd gotten yourself into, you didn't know who he was. I still want to help you, if you'd let me.

Callem remembered waking last night and lying in the dark, keeping his breath even and slow, listening to the girl and the Kingslayer together. He hadn't moved, or said anything to her later. But when she'd got up that morning glowing with contentment, he'd wanted to ask her what in Seven hells she thought she was doing. You know who he is now! You know, and still you let him do that! Every time that she'd hummed a tune, laughed at nothing, or smiled secretly to herself, Callem had wanted to grab her and shake some sense into her daft head.
Don't you know how stupid you're being? Don't you realise how dangerous he is, how totally wrong for you? A man that famous and powerful will use and discard you like a shit-rag. He won't want to marry you forever, or support you and your children. But the Kingslayer terrified Callem, so he hadn't yet spoken a word of his misgivings to the girl.

'Your turn,' the girl said, giving him a nudge with her foot. The Lady Knight had gotten hold of a pack of cards from somewhere for them, and for the past two hours they'd been playing a traditional village game, using acorns to bet with. So far Callem was winning by miles. The girl was an easy opponent. Whenever she had good cards, it was written all over her expression as if she'd shouted it out loud.

Like now. Callem watched as she tried to keep a straight face but even with an eyepatch, her other eye gave her away. Maybe she doesn't play cards much. She really has no idea how to bluff. Or, maybe she's distracted and not really thinking about cards at all.

Callem turned his cards over to fold, thwarting her win.

'You're too lucky,' she said, throwing her cards down, but she didn't look like she cared. She'd lost every turn so far, yet radiated happiness. She sung the words to a melody under her breath, and smiled as she shuffled the pack to deal again.

It was on the tip of Callem's tongue to say something to her. I'll tell her some tales I've heard of the Kingslayer. How he pushed a child from a window, how he brutally killed his own cousin and an innocent guard. How he attacked Lord Stark unprovoked and killed his men in King's Landing. I mean, I hate to ruin her good mood, but she needs to see reason.

The girl was easy to talk to. Normally, Callem was reticent to speak to anyone unless he really had to, because of his stutter. But she always let him finish his sentences, never appeared impatient or frustrated, and not once interrupted or predicted what he was going to say, no matter how long it took him to say it. Callem opened his mouth to tell her what he knew, when there was the sound of the back of the wagon being unlocked and then Maester Qyburn was there, peering in.

This time when he removed Callem's bandage and examined the wound, the Maester declared it no longer required his attention. The stitches were removed and the stump painted with a drying ointment. 'Ser Jaime says you're to ride from now on,' the old man informed him.

What, on a horse? Callem was unsure how he'd go controlling it with one hand. But the Maester shoed him off towards the men watering their horses at the nearby pond. The Kingslayer wants her all to himself, Callem suspected, but knew there was little he could do about it. Maybe once they reached King's Landing, tomorrow, they'd have some time alone together again. Maybe she'll listen to me then.

He wandered off and observed the girl as she attempted to hobble around the rest stop, Qyburn accompanying her in case she fell over. But she didn't. She managed to make it a full lap around the pond, albeit very slowly and awkwardly. Good for her, Callem thought, wanting to clap and cheer her effort. She's going to cope fine. If she can walk without toes, then maybe one day I can work steel without a hand.

Callem noted that the Kingslayer was also watching her, although trying to be discreet about it. When she got back to where she'd started, he came over to Maester Qyburn and dismissed him. Then the Kingslayer helped the girl up into the wagon. Callem saw his hand linger around her waist, saw him lean over and whisper in her ear. The girl laughed and Callem turned away, frustrated. I want to help you, but I can't. Would you even listen to me?
The Lady Knight noticed Callem walking aimlessly around and took him with her. She helped him get on her mount when it was time to ride off, and then sat behind him so he didn't have to control anything. He was grateful for her kindness, and he had to admit that riding in the fresh air was a pleasant change from being cooped inside. But when he saw the Kingslayer leave the wagon, re-mount his own horse and ride past them to the front of the procession, looking satisfied and smug, Callem felt anger rise in his gut. He wished to all the gods that he had both his hands again and could punch that smirk right off the man's sickeningly handsome face.

_He'd kill me. But it would almost be worth it._

They stopped for the night, with Steelskanks confident that tomorrow evening they'd reach the Capital. Callem helped Brienne with the horses and preparing the meal, as best he could. None of the men paid him any attention at all, which was fine with him. Brienne said he could take the girl her food, so he carried it over carefully with one hand.

She was delighted to see him when he undid the gate. 'Gods it's been boring as fuck without you in here, Cal,' she said.

He handed her the bowl and sat down to keep her company as she ate.

'I-I saw you w-w-walking before,' he said. 'G-good job.'

'Thanks. It wasn't as bad as I expected, y'know? Running is gonna be the tricky bit. I saw you riding with Brienne. Lucky you.'

'Yeah, it w-w-w-as f-fun.'

'I can't wait to ride a horse again. I don't think I've ever gone so long without being on one my whole life.' Callem noticed that she looked sad for the first time all day, and guessed she was thinking about her own horse, Sooty.

He remembered the black horse as a foal, how no-one could catch it or handle it. The farmer who'd owned its dam and sire had offered it free to anyone who could take the unruly beast away. As it grew bigger it had begun to chase the village dogs and cats, trying to trample them if they strayed anywhere near. Callem remembered the day the farmer had gathered some men together to shoot it with arrows as it was becoming too great a menace, but the girl had followed them to the paddock and as the horse galloped towards them, had stepped out into its path without fear.

She'd led it out of there with just a strand of baling twine around its neck. The only person who hadn't been surprised had been her mother, who'd simply nodded and said, 'That one will do. A horse that runs towards a fight is a good horse.'

_She has a way with horses. But that horse was one in a thousand, a freak of nature. She won't find one like that again_, Callem thought.

The girl shovelled in the food as if she hadn't eaten in days. 'So, you're all good now, huh? How long d'ya think you'll hang 'round the Capital for?' she asked, with her mouth full.

'A day or t-t-two. As long as it t-t-takes me to f-find a lift back, I guess,' he shrugged. 'How 'b-bout you?'

She looked down, her expression giving away her thoughts as clearly as it always did. 'I dunno. Maybe a little longer.'
The Kingslayer won’t want you around. He has his sister in the Capital, his job on the Kingsguard. You were just a toy, to keep him amused.

'I c-can wait. We could get a lift b-b-back together,' Callem suggested.

She smiled, handed him the empty bowl. 'Sure.' But her face told him she was bluffing. *She's a terrible bluffer.*

That night, Callem was woken from his spot near the fire by a hand shaking him. He started upright with an exclamation, but the Kingslayer held a finger to his lips and frowned for him to be silent.

'Come with me. I need your help with something,' he said, quietly.

*Needs my help... with what?* Callem got up and put on his coat and boots, which took a while because of his single hand. The Kingslayer stood and watched him with arms crossed, but offered no assistance. Finally when Callem was ready to go, they walked out into the night to where a horse was standing by a tree already saddled, with a pack hanging from it. Callem hesitated, but the Kingslayer grabbed him and lifted him onto the animal's back. Then he untied the reins from the branch, swung up behind him and they rode out.

Callem didn't dare ask where they were going. He gripped the pommel of the saddle tightly with his hand and tried not to let his imagination run away with him. But the further they rode through the dark trees, twisting and doubling back without any apparent direction, the more apprehensive he became.

After about half an hour, the horse turned onto a road running through the forest. The Kingslayer reined it in, jumped down. Callem clutched at the saddle, reluctant to follow. *Will he kill me now, far from the camp? Will he simply abandon me here in the woods?*

'Stay on there,' the Kingslayer said. 'He's yours now.'

Callem must have looked bewildered.

'Take the packhorse and ride North along this road to where it joins the King's Road. From there, you'll be back in RedHollow in under two weeks. The horse is from the village, he knows where to go. There's enough food for you, and blankets, in the pack.'

'B-b-but -'

'Don't ask questions. Just go.' The Kingslayer waved at him impatiently. 'I'll walk back, I know the way.'

Callem shook his head. 'W-what about... ?'

'The girl? Nice of you to care about her well-being. You almost got her killed, you know. I warned you when I spared your life that day, that if you ever breathed a word of having seen us to anyone, I'd kill you. You did though, didn't you? You told Locke, and he found the girl because of it.' The Kingslayer regarded him coldly. 'She was tortured because of you.'

'Th-they- they pulled out the nails and p-p-peeled the skin off t-t-two of my f-f-fingers! Th-they c-c-cut the flesh off. T-til there was just b-b-bones!' Callem tried to make the older man understand. He felt again the horrible dread fill him, as Locke's men had held his splayed hand to the stone. The unbearable agony as they'd begun to carve into his fingers. They'd said they were going to do all his fingers the same, but he'd talked after two. When they'd chopped his hand off, it had been a relief.
'Two fingers?' the Kingslayer scoffed. 'You didn't last very long, did you?

*I'm no-one brave, no-one heroic. I'm not a Knight or Lord, only a villager. I'm sorry that I'm not like you, invincible,* Callem thought.

'I'm j-j-just a smith's s-s-son,' was what he said.

'Yes, you are. So go home and be a smith. Or whatever you can be...' the Kingslayer snorted, '...one-handed.'

Still Callem didn't move to turn the horse.

The Kingslayer clenched his jaw. 'If you're concerned about the girl, don't be. She has a different future ahead of her. One that doesn't involve villages, and smiths, and delivering other people's goods for them. She won't serve anyone any more, she'll have servants. Maids, handmaidens, people to look after her. Whatever she wants, she'll have.' He gave Callem a look as if daring him to say anything of it, as if even talking about the girl made him feel protective of her.

'W-w-what if Ivvy doesn't w-want all that?' Callem asked.

The Kingslayer looked at him with barely concealed contempt. 'She wants me, and the rest comes with it, so - ' Suddenly, he stopped. 'What did you call her?'

'I-I-Ivvy,' Callem stuttered.

'Is that her name? Ivvy?'

'I-i-it's short f-f-for Iv-v-v-' Callem took a breath. 'Iv-ve-ve-ve-ve-' He strained to pronounce the name, but knew he wouldn't be able to. Hardly anyone could, let alone someone with a speech impediment.

After watching him struggle fruitlessly for about a minute, the Kingslayer sighed. 'Never mind. Just fuck off, before I change my mind about sparing your life.'

Callem knew he had no choice in the matter. He picked up the reins and kicked the horse on. The horse pricked its ears and turned towards the North, its hoof beats picking up eagerly, as if it could hardly wait to get home.
Kings

Brienne knocked on the back of the wagon, holding a mug of tea in one hand, a stack of folded clothes in the other. In the chill dawn, her boots crunched on the frosty grass and the mug steamed.

'It's me,' she said, not wanting to startle the girl. But she needn't have worried, the occupant of the wagon was already sitting up, alert. She seemed to Brienne to be someone easily woken, who it would be difficult to sneak up on. *She's no doubt had to be, in her line of work. If your life is travelling around the country on your own and a different bed each night, you probably can't afford to be a deep sleeper.*

Brienne unlocked the gate, then handed over the mug and put the girl's clean clothes down on the floor. After some scrubbing, they'd come up serviceable, asides from a few stains. Brienne peered further into the wagon. 'Is Callem here?'

The girl shook her head. 'No. Why?'

'He appears to be missing. Ser Jaime's horse, too.'

'What? What do you mean, missing?'

'I mean, it appears he decided to go home early.' *And a good thing it is too, however it may have happened. At least one commoner has been spared.*

'Why would Cal have...? He wouldn't have. He couldn't even get on a horse with one hand by himself.' The girl looked alarmed. 'Brienne, you have to go find him. He could be hurt somewhere!' *If the Kingslayer had wanted to hurt him, he wouldn't have given him his horse,* were Brienne's cynical thoughts.

'Maybe he just decided it was time to go home. If he took the horse last night, he'll be long gone by now. But I think he'll be fine,' she assured the girl. 'When you go back through RedHollow next, be sure to check in on him.'

The girl cupped the tea, her expression bereft. 'But Cal was... he was going to stay with me and... maybe head home together.'

*Don't fool yourself that you would have been allowed to go home with him,* Brienne thought. *I'm afraid you're to be a pawn in a game of power that you don't even understand. But I already have enough girls to rescue. And I took no oaths for you.*

'Callem leaving is for the best. Now drink your tea, we're leaving ourselves soon. It will be a long day, we won't be stopping until we reach the Capital.'

The girl looked somewhat consoled. She sipped from the mug. 'Are you alright, Brienne? I heard you had some bad news. That your... that a friend of yours died.'

*She was more than a friend, Lady Catelyn was a true, honourable person, a mother with a warrior's heart. I swore my sword to her, and now like Renly, I have failed her. I must be cursed.* Brienne felt bitterness surge inside at another injustice done, turned away so the girl wouldn't see the pain on her face.

'Her death does not change things,' she said, in a strained voice. *I will keep my promise, even if*
you're dead, Lady Stark. Death doesn't undo the oath.

'Your vow, you mean? What is it you have to do?'

'I have to find and return some...' Brienne paused, not wanting to reveal to this girl that two girls younger than herself were in danger. '... some people to their rightful home. I took an oath to keep them safe, and I will. Ser Jaime is also sworn to ensure this happens.'

'Oh. Well, I hope you find them.'

_I intend to._ The Stark girls had better be at KingsLanding, or I shall turn Westeros inside out to find them. And Ser Jaime had best aid me, or I'll turn him inside out with it.

'I hope so too.'

'Who are they?' the girl gulped at her tea. 'Maybe I know of them. I know a lot of people in KingsLanding.'

Brienne gave a small smile. _I'm sure you do, girl. Traders and bakers, beggars and minstrels. Sellswords and cut-throats and girls in brothels. Criminals and commoners._

'They are no-one you'd know,' Brienne said. 'Now get dressed, it's time for your walk.'

They negotiated the camp, the girl leaning a little on Brienne's arm for balance. The Dreadfort men bustled around them, re-packing provisions and sleeping blankets, feeding their horses. By the end of the walk, the girl was moving unaided. Her shortened foot caused her to list to one side, but it was nevertheless an impressive achievement. Brienne was proud of her.

Back at the wagon, she unwrapped the bandages and cut a strip of cloth from them with her sword. Then she wrapped only the end of the girl's foot, twice around the missing toes, leaving the heel bare. She took the girl's boots that had been sitting to the side, unworn for many days, and gently fitted one onto the padded-out limb. 'How does that feel?'

'It feels... really good.'

'Put the other one on. You're going to need boots to walk in KingsLanding. I can't imagine the streets are particularly clean.'

'No,' the girl agreed. 'There's more puddles of shit than cobblestones.' She strapped on her other boot, stood up to test them. 'Hey, I feel like my old self again. Can we ditch the eye-patch too?'

Brienne regarded the girl's eager face closely. It looked different. Under the material of the patch the swelling had mostly subsided, the bruises faded to just shadows on her cheek. The shape of the girl's face troubled Brienne as she studied it, even with the patches' covering._It's as I feared. You are a beauty. Which will be your undoing unless you are very careful, and unfortunately I don't think you have the first clue about the truth of it._

'No, girl, keep the patch on. Keep your hair back too, and the hood of your coat up, and your head down. Try not to get sunlight on your face, to allow the eye to heal fully.'_Keep your village rags on, and put some dirt on your face and hands. Do not attract any attention whatsoever_, she wanted to add.

The girl frowned. 'Alright, keep out of the sun. Got it.' She handed the now-empty mug back to Brienne. 'Will I be seeing you at the Capital?'
'I don't think so. Ser Jaime has arranged for suitable accommodation for you, but I have my own
problems to deal with.' Brienne took the mug, reached under her coat and pulled out a skinny
drawstring bag. 'Before I forget; this is yours. I found it, mixed up with with the packs from the
Dreadfort.' She passed it to the girl, who's eyes lit up in recognition.

'My bag. It has medicines in it, not that I need them now. But thank you.'

'I'm sorry I did not find it sooner.'

'It was already too late, by the time I could have used them. Did you... check it for weapons before
letting me have it?' The girl looked a little shame-faced.

'I'm not worried about you trying to kill Ser Jaime any more,' Brienne said.

'I wouldn't have killed him - not really. I mean, I was just... just -' she tried to explain her actions, but
seemed to be unable.

'Don't worry, girl. I don't hold it against you. Ser Jaime can be insufferable. I've considered it myself
many a time.'

The girl giggled, relieved.

Brienne backed away. 'So, I'm going to go ride with the others now. If I don't see you again before
the Capital, stay safe, alright? Keep your wits about you. You can walk now. With practise, you'll be
running soon.'

'As fast as before, y'think?' the girl asked, hopefully.

'Maybe not. You'll just have to stop getting into those situations that required you to run so fast,
before.'

The girl grinned. 'I will. Thank you again for everything, Brienne. You stay safe, too. Good luck
with getting your people home.'

Brienne nodded solemnly, and closed the gate behind her as she left. Keep your luck for yourself,
girl. You're going to need it.

Brienne rode behind Jaime, on her gelding. Jaime seemed unconcerned with losing his own mount,
and restless about reaching KingsLanding. They lagged behind the others a way, the horse
unaccustomed to the double weight.

'Does this thing go any faster?' Jaime complained.

'He would, without your weight on his back,' Brienne said.

'You weigh more. Don't fall off, will you? You know what they say about the bigger they are.'

'I'd forgotten how much shit you speak, Kingslayer. Thank you for reminding me, I was almost
warming to you.'

'Gods forbid, we can't have that. It will upset the natural order of the universe,' Jaime joked, as the
road widened and became increasingly crowded with travellers heading in the same direction. Jaime
had donned a long coat and cowl, and none gave him a second glance as they clopped past. ' Are
you worried about Loras? He's bound to have some questions.'
Brienne thought she could almost smell the stink of the Capital in the air, although they were still many miles away yet. 'I bested the boy once, I could again,' she shrugged.

'I'll wager you could, but Loras will not stand alone this time. Let's hope he is open to seeing your side.'

'It's the Stark girls I care about, not Ser Loras and his Kingsguard.'

'They're my Kingsguard, wench, not his.' Jaime shifted in the saddle uncomfortably. 'I'll be glad to get off this animal, I don't think it was designed to carry two such lumps as us.'

*Your tired insults hardly register with me any more, Kingslayer. They pass over like wind on grass.* 'Maybe you should have been more careful with your own mount, then.'

'The Cole boy stole it in the night. Am I to blame for his craven ways?'

'Did he steal your sleeping blankets too? I notice you didn't have any to pack this morning. Stealing a blanket from beneath a sleeping body is quite some feat, with only one hand.'

'Craven and talented, that one.'

Brienne was silent, her thoughts turning again to the deaths of Lady Catelyn and her son. Since she'd first heard the news she'd tried to hide her despair from the men, tried to be strong. But sometimes she was struck with an ache that reached right to the marrow of her bones. After a time, Jaime seemed to intuit what was upsetting her, and he said, 'I haven't forgotten our vows, you know.'

'I wouldn't let you.'

'No, I dare say you wouldn't. Robb Stark was no friend of mine, his mother either. But it was wrong what happened to them. A coward's act. There is no shame to grieve for it.'

Brienne didn't answer, but his words gave her small solace. *He is not all bad. Oftentimes he can be surprisingly kind.*

'Speaking of weddings, I wonder if we'll return in time for Joffrey's?' Jaime mused.

'If so, I imagine the Capital will be busy. Do you think they're expecting you?'

'Probably. Word would have come from Roose Bolton that I was found.'

'Are you keen to see your family again?'

'Yes. It's been... I don't even know how long. My brother and my sister... ' Jaime's voice trailed off and Brienne couldn't see his face, but he sounded wistful. 'I can only hope they're coping alright without me. I love them both, but when I'm not there to keep the peace, they do tend to tear one another apart.'

'And what of the girl?' Brienne asked.

'I told you already not to concern your pretty head about it. Steelshanks is being paid gold to claim she's his. He'll take her to the servant's quarters, I'll arrange a Septa to attend to her there.'

'And how do you know you can trust Steelshanks?'

'Because he's being paid a lot of gold.' Jaime sounded rather resentful as to the amount. *Steelshanks is wily, he will have figured out the girl means a lot to you, and demanded a comparable*
bribe, Brienne guessed.

'Gold doesn't always buy loyalty you know,' she warned Jaime.

'The girl will be fine,' he dismissed. 'I need some time alone to see my family, then I'll check on her. By then she'll have had a few hours to adjust to the attentions of Septa, the clean clothes, good food and comfortable bed. Once she's used to the finer things in life she won't want to leave.'

'You don't really believe that, do you?'

'No, not really.' Jaime sighed. 'But. Anything's possible.'

They crested a hill, and in the distance Brienne could see the line of the sea. It would not be long now, she knew, before Kingslanding came into sight. They'd be there before nightfall, the orange and red sun only beginning to drop low on the horizon.

'I could be heir to Casterly Rock,' Jaime went on, conversationally, as if the topic were unrelated to anything they'd discussed before. 'If I wanted.' He fell quiet, and Brienne wondered if he were picturing in his mind some idyllic vision of himself and his commoner girlfriend running around his childhood home, like fawns gambolling in a field of flowers. It would not surprise her. Lust makes men such fools, draws veils over their logic and dulls all reason. Reckless decisions seem to come naturally to the Kingslayer, even without his having fallen for someone so overwhelmingly unsuitable. And with his romantic history, that's really saying something.

Out loud, Brienne simply said, 'Your father would never let you take her to Casterly Rock.'

'I never suggested such a thing. But if I'm Lord of the Rock, I believe I can do as I like.'

'Dream on, Kingslayer.' Brienne refused to even consider his fantasist delusions. 'And you'd have to resign as Kingsguard. You'd never do that.'

'No, probably not.' Jaime sighed, again. 'But, still. Anything's possible.'

'No, it's not.' Brienne snapped, annoyed by his idiocy. 'And while we're on the subject. During the next day or so, in which you may be occupied with Joffrey's upcoming wedding or celebrating its outcome, as well as reacquainting yourself with your... family', one member of them in particular, she thought, 'What, perchance, will the girl be doing?'

'Well it's doubtful she'll be getting an invite,' Jaime said. They reached the top of another hill and he nudged Brienne in the ribs, pointed out to the side. Where the road curved around below them and sloped, the spiky battlements and towers of Kingslanding came into view, black against the bleeding sky. The stench of it rose up to greet them on the sea breeze, burnt and decayed and yet fragrant with sweetness. It was repulsive and alluring, ripe and rotten, all at once. Likewise, Brienne felt anticipation and dread tangle within her, as her horse headed down the road towards the Capital.
The wagon lurched one final time as the driver reined in his horses. The vibrations from driving over uneven cobblestones stilled, and the girl waited impatiently for the bolts to be drawn back.

Cooler evening air rushed in, tainted with the distinctive scent of the Capital. She knew from experience that after half an hour or so of breathing it in you barely noticed, but it still made her screw up her nose. She scrambled to the opened end of the wagon, swung her legs over and dangled them off the edge. *Good riddance wagon,* she thought, *I won't miss you.*

Jaime stood nearby, the rest of the travelling party remaining mounted further away, in the centre of Cobbler's square. All around them crowded the hulking mass of the city, the ramparts and towers of the Red Keep squatting above them on the hill, oppressive even in the dimness. *It takes a while to adjust to this place,* the girl remembered. *After being on the road. How people live their whole lives here, I can't imagine.*

'I'm going to be a busy, for a while,' Jaime said. He talked quietly so none but her could hear. 'I have to go see my family, help Brienne attend to... things. The goldcloaks at the city gates told us that in two days -'

'Joffrey's wedding. I know.' Listening from inside the wagon as they'd entered the Capital, she'd heard the guard announce that the Red Keep was overcrowded with wedding guests. They'd set up numerous tents and pavilions in the outer and middle wards of the castle, and the Inns were full to capacity, he'd informed the Northmen. 'His Grace King Joffrey is to be wed two days hence. Are you lot here for the festivities?'

*The goldcloaks didn't recognise Jaime,* the girl thought. *He won't like that. I wonder how different he looks? Or are they simply not expecting to see him, and so not paying attention?*

Now she pushed off the wagon's boards and stood in front of him. It felt good to be upright, balancing on both feet. 'When will I see you, then? You owe me coin.' She stretched her arms, casual, trying to act as if coins were all she cared to see him for again.

But Jaime was having none of her indifference. He smiled and leaned forward to take her elbow, as if assisting her to stand, although she already was. 'I haven't forgotten what I owe,' he said, his voice soft, as his hand moved from her arm to brush against her hip. He rested it there and she could feel the warmth of his fingers through her clothes. 'I'm leaving three Dreadfort men here with you, and Steelshanks will return soon. He'll take you some place safe, and I'll come see you as soon as I'm able.' His thumb stroked her waist, teasing, and made her wish they were alone.

'Where will I be staying? An Inn?'

'They're all full, apparently. So no. Not unless you wish to spend the night surrounded by drunken Dornishmen trying to impregnate anything that moves, and Tyrell bannermen passed out on benches.'

'That sounds right up my alley.'

His hand pinched her flesh through the material of her top. 'I think your alley needs to be upgraded. Especially since I may want to spend time in it.'

She grinned at him cheekily. 'You're always welcome in... my alley.'
'Shhh girl, you're going to make it hard for me to ride out of here.' Jaime straightened up, gave her an all-over appraising look. 'You look good, better than I've seen you since... Locke.' He smoothed a strand of hair down the side of her face, for no reason she could tell, except maybe he was just looking for excuses to touch her. 'When I next see you, I may not recognise you at all.'

'Why?' she asked, suspicious. 'What deviousness have you planned for me?'

'Nothing, girl,' he looked innocent. 'Or should I say... Ivvy.'

She gaped at him, too surprised to feign ignorance of the name. He chuckled. 'The look on your face.'

'How did you...? Who?' she demanded.

'The Cole boy, of course. His last night by the fire we had a friendly chat, and he told me your name. I never thought you looked much like a Robberta.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'Was it you made him leave, as well?'

'He wanted to go. I merely lent him my horse and a blanket.'

I bet you did. She stared hard at him. 'Say it, then.'

'What?'

'My name. If you know it.'

'I'm not quite sure on the pronunciation. How do you say it?' His eyes dared her.

'It requires practise to get right,' she replied sweetly, then gestured to the rest of the group. '...and it seems as though people are waiting for you. Ser Jaime.'

'Ser Jaime is it now? Don't start showing me respect this late in our acquaintance. I've grown rather fond of your general insolence.' He gave her a last smile, then turned away. 'I will see you later, then. To... practise.'

'Later, then,' she replied, forcing briskness to her words. I miss you already. How pathetic.

Jaime paused, half-turned back. As if he'd forgotten something, but he just looked at her for a long moment. In the dim light his face was shaded, and the sunset leaking behind the castle walls edged his silhouette in gold.

'I don't want to lose you, Ivvy,' he murmured.

The girl was puzzled. Why would you lose me? I am in no urgent rush to be elsewhere, and I visit the Capital every month or so anyway. I'm sure we'll find ways to see each other.

'You won't,' she reassured him.

He nodded, and left.

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The night grew colder, and threatened rain. She hugged her coat around herself and buried her chin in the collar. Huffed on her hands to warm them. The Dreadfort men talked amongst themselves, discussing how soon they'd be returning to the North, who may or may not be present for the Royal Wedding, but ignoring her.
She was almost dozing off by the time Steelshanks' horse came clip-clopping out of the dark square towards them. Steelshanks dismounted, gave the driver instruction to tend to his horse along with the wagon horses, then indicated to the girl she accompany him on foot. She grabbed her bag and slung it across her shoulder. The three other Dreadfort men fell in behind as they set off.

She limped, but not badly. Her padded-out boot was coping well. 'Is it far?' she asked.

'Not far,' Steelshanks grunted.

The Sept of Baelor passed to their right, they turned one way, then another, the streets at first familiar then less so as they went onto other, narrower ones. Raucous voices rang out from all directions, and light spilled from taverns and Inns. People stumbled out into gutters and music rose and faded as they passed. It appears the celebrations have started early, the girl thought. King Joffrey, to be married in two days. I can only pity the poor bride.

The lanes became so narrow that she could have touched the walls of the buildings on either side with both hands. In the dark, following the black shape of Steelshanks' jacket, the girl had no real idea whereabouts she was. Her delivery work had kept her to the markets and main streets of industry. She'd never had cause to wander the rest of KingLanding. She was surprised when they stopped outside the bronze gates of the Red Keep, by a door in the wall.

'Why are we here?'

'Ask Ser Jaime the whys of it. I'm just the one takin' you,' Steelshanks said.

'We could have walked straight down the Street of Seeds from Cobbler's square but we went...'

'Yeah. The long way.'

'Why?'

Steelshanks didn't answer, just leaned over and pulled the girl's hood closed around her face. Then he rapped on the door and a guardsman let them in. They went through into the castle grounds, and the girl couldn't suppress a shudder. I never thought I would enter this place, she thought. Me, in the Red Keep? I have spent my whole life avoiding the Nobility, guards and soldiers, and here I am surrounded by the fuckers.

There were tents set up in every available space, along with open canopies hung between posts, and people. So many people, everywhere, a crush of humanity. The girl felt suffocated, panicky. Some of the crowd were settling themselves in for the night, but many were still rowdy and festive. Wedding guests she presumed, although not having been inside the Red Keep before, she had no idea how it normally looked. But surely it doesn't usually have hundreds of people, horses, dogs and marquees covering every inch of it.

Steelshanks, his men and the girl went past them all, skirted the castle walls and on into a building in the corner. Up some stairs. Her leg was beginning to ache, and she was glad when they reached a heavy oak door at the end of a landing which Steelshanks unlocked, holding it open for her to go in ahead of him.

The room was airy with wide windows, silk curtains blowing inwards from the breeze. Candles burned in sconces set by the doorway, and the walls hung with ornate drapes and tapestries. A large bed with intricately patterned coverlet sat off to one side, the bedhead made of some rich material inlaid with tiny jewels that shimmered in the flickering light. The whole place smelt of jasmine and roses.
The girl hesitated before entering, dumbstruck. The rugs on the floor looked plush, and her boots were dirty. *Come to think of it,* she thought, gazing into the room, *all of me is dirty.*

'I ain't standing here all day,' Steelshanks grumbled. 'I'm sure there's Inns in Fleabottom still open if you'd prefer.'

*Maybe I would,* she thought. *This is terrifying.*

The girl wiped her boots as best she could and hobbled into the room. She stood there, unsure quite what to do. She didn't really want to touch anything.

Steelshanks pointed to some folded clothes left on the bed. 'Them's yours,' he said. 'There's a bath tub through there, y' can heat water over the stove. Two of me men will stay outside the door, if you need 'em.' He made as if to leave.

'Thank you!' she blurted out, suddenly feeling ungracious.

'Y' can thank me when I come back with your Septa in the morning.'

'My... whaaaat?'

'Makes a change from black market deliveries, don't it?' Steelshanks laughed, and closed the door behind him.

*You're telling me,* she thought. She stared at the closed door for a long time, wondering what the fuck she'd let herself in for.
Cersei

It was late, but Cersei was still awake. Her head was buzzing with the final preparations for the wedding, and despite her long bath and the waft of lavender from the scented candles by her bedside, it was impossible to sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she'd start going through lists again.

She'd hand-picked every server for the feast, personally scrutinised each course. All seventy-seven of them. *Maybe the roasted swan first, then the peacocks? Snails or pastries for the first entree? A thousand guests to entertain and impress, and not one must be left in any doubt as to the wealth and power of Lannisters. Nor the folly of opposing them. Singers or pyromancers, to start? Jugglers or musicians to finish?*

She surrendered to her insomnia, and got up from the bed. On bare feet she walked to the window seat and sat, gazing out into the darkness. She could hear the faint sounds of revelry from the guests camped below, and wondered how many flagons of the King's best ale they had already consumed. No matter. *This wedding will be worth every penny it costs. There will never be another like it.*

Her mind drifted to the things she had been through in her life, to get to this point. The childhood of endless tutors and instructors at Casterly Rock, when she'd rather have been outside riding and playing with her brother. The separation from him when she'd been taken to KingsLanding, her father's stifling expectations of her. The years with her brutish and abusive husband Robert, enduring the humiliation of their loveless farce of a marriage. The bruises she'd had to hide from Jaime. The schemes she'd devised to enable her to be with Jaime.

*It was all worth it, for this. My son, the King, about to be married to a wealthy house, creating an alliance that will topple our enemies once and for all. Me, by his side. In the end, all the suffering was worth it.*

The door to her room whispered open and she turned her head, startled.

The man standing inside the doorway was both instantly recognisable and a stranger. Cersei's stomach leapt into her throat. All her thoughts of seating plans and menus were blown away like dust, at the sight of his different yet achingly familiar face.

'Jaime,' she said, rising to stand. She drew her thin nightgown around her, goosebumps prickling her skin. 'Is it really you?'

'Dear sister,' he said. They stared at each other. 'Did you miss me?'

She trembled at his voice; wanted to run to him but pride stilled her feet. *He has been gone so long, leaving me here to rule the Kingdoms alone. I should not be the one to go to him. Let him come to me.*

Jaime walked across the room with the same easy stride she'd known forever, the same tilt of his head as he stopped and regarded her. He had a scruffy beard, and his hair was long and darker than Cersei remembered. But the confidence she loved, the arrogance, it was all still there. *My warrior, my protector, my other half. He is home with me where he belongs.*

Cersei expected him to sweep her into his arms, and her lips formed words of mild protest. *I am busy with wedding preparations, we have 300 guests from Dorne here, Father plans to wed me off again like some broodmare, our cursed little brother has defied me in everything. This last year had been so challenging for her. Jaime must realise I need his support, he cannot just expect me to succumb to*
his desires without murmur.

But Jaime did not touch her. His green eyes took in her face and her tousled hair, the thin material of the gown and her bare legs, but he made no move.

'Did you miss me?' he asked again.

'I've been busy,' Cersei said. She felt the night breeze from the window flatten her nightgown against her body in a way she knew would reveal her curves. Her loose hair wisped against her face, the fragrance of lilac soap sweet on the strands.

'As have I,' Jaime replied. 'It's a war out there.'

*Why does he not put his arms around me?*

'It's a war in here as well,' she snapped, irked by his coolness. 'Have you any idea how trying it's been organising this wedding? A thousand guests to please. Father is betrothing me to every likely candidate in Westeros and the Imp has been undermining every move I make. Myrcella has been -'

'Shhh,' Jaime said. 'I know. I'm sorry you've had to deal with so much, without me.' He raised his hand, brushed the hair from her face.

His touch made her hold her breath. *I always loved his hands, the feel of them.* She realised how much she had missed it, and tears unaccountably burned in her eyes. There was no-one else she could cry in front of, only Jaime. No-one was ever allowed to see her weakness but him. All the tears unshed since he'd been gone now threatened to spill over.

'I was lost without you, Jaime. I was afraid the North would send me your bones.' She raised her face, desperate to feel the press of his lips on hers. 'I am not whole without you.'

Jaime's eyes softened at her tears, and his hands ran down both sides of her body, lightly, as if unsure. Cersei had had enough. She pulled at his top, impatient, lifting it over his head. It was a poor, nondescript tunic, stained and worn through, and she discarded it with distaste. She wanted the strange, commoner garments gone from him, wanted to feel only his familiar warm skin.

For a moment Jaime relaxed, but when she tugged at his breeches he froze. She continued to unlace him, could feel he was hard beneath her hands. He restrained her. 'Come and sit down, Cers,' he said, taking her wrists gently.

He led her over to the bed and they sat side by side. In the candle light his bare chest was rippled with hard muscle and new scars, leaner than last time she'd seen him. She had to force herself not to reach over and stroke it.

*What does he want?* she thought irritably. *If not to embrace me, then what? If he wishes to whine of the perils of his journey then I have a hundred more important issues to deal with.*

But his next words threw her. 'Remember that time travelling home from Winterfell,' Jaime began. 'At the Crossroads, when Joffrey was attacked?'

Cersei was bewildered. 'What?'

'By the wolf. Do you remember?'

'Of course I remember! But what does this have to do with -'
'The boy who was killed, do you know what... happened to his body?'

Cersei stared at her brother as if he'd gone completely mad. *The trip must have exhausted him, he is not himself at all.* 'I wouldn't know,' she said tightly.

Jaime looked thoughtful, as if this ridiculous trivia were something he'd dwelt on. 'I thought maybe he was buried somewhere, in the area. But I couldn't recall. I was hoping you might.'

'Probably dumped in the river with the body of that wolf. Or in a pit one of the guards dug in the woods. Or fed to the hounds. Why are you asking this?'

'I passed through the area on my travels and it reminded me. That boy... he didn't deserve what happened to him -'

'For the love of the gods, Jaime, you're being absurd! He attacked Joffrey and was punished for his crime, he was commoner scum! I don't remember the little traitor's name let alone the whereabouts of his corpse!' Cersei huffed through her teeth.

Jaime looked at her, an enigmatic expression on his face. 'His name was Mycah,' he said.

Cersei felt a rush of frustration at his odd behaviour, but kept calm. *He is not deliberately meaning to vex me. He is confused, overwhelmed. Returning to me after such an absence has addled his mind.* Instead of letting her annoyance show, she slowly licked her lips and watched Jaime's eyes drop to her mouth. She took a deep breath that caused her breasts to swell.

Jaime didn't move, entranced. *No more talk of unimportant matters, no more distance between us.* Cersei shrugged the thin straps of her gown off her shoulders and it slipped to her waist. *Let him be with me, he will forget what ails him and become as he was. Part of me.* She wanted to pull him to her, for their bodies to mesh together. She wanted their skin to peel back and the blood to run freely between each other's veins; for their ribs to break apart and their hearts to merge as one. She wanted them to be inside each other, completely.

Jaime's eyes were dilated and dark, but still he didn't reach for her. It was silent in the room, save for their breathing. The longer time stretched on, the more disconcerted Cersei became.

*What's got into him? It's been a long time, but surely that should only increase the desire? Could he have been unfaithful to me?* she wondered. Another, harsher voice in her head reminded her that she had been, after all. Not that any of those other men had meant a thing to her, and she felt no regret for them. *But I've always known my twin and I are the same person in different bodies. I am him and he is me. If I am capable of infidelity, than so is he.* She pushed this troubling thought aside.

'I love you,' Cersei said smiling, despite a sudden pang of fear in her heart. Her voice on the verge of breaking. 'You swore to always love me.'

Jaime smiled back. It was an ambiguous smile. She couldn't tell if he was pleased at her words or humouring her. *He wouldn't lie to me, not Jaime.* But the other voice said *Why not? You have lied to him a thousand times.*

'I do love you, sweet sister,' Jaime sighed, tearing his eyes from her. He stood up. 'I will always love you. But I'm tired, and it's late. Let's talk again tomorrow.'
Steam had transformed the small room into a cloud. She was floating in the middle of a warm, white, fragrantly-scented cloud. Her hair hovered around her head in silky strands, her limbs felt weightless and all of her felt... clean.

*If this is how the Nobility live then I can see the attraction.*

The girl stretched her feet out, luxuriously. Unlike the battered metal tub from her childhood, which required an upright, knees-to-the-chest position, this bath was shiny white and long enough to lie down. Three large pots of heated water had it the temperature of shallows on a hot summer's day, and adding the contents of a bottle sitting on a nearby shelf had released the heady aroma of flower gardens in bloom. The whole experience was a far cry from what she was used to; a quick wash in the icy water of the river with mud squelching between her toes.

*I may stay here for the rest of the evening,* she contemplated. *Maybe forever.* She could already feel her fingertips wrinkling. Sliding further down into the water until her mouth was submerged, she blew bubbles. She lifted her right foot up into the steamy air, and considered it critically. While it still looked as if it didn't belong to her, she no longer recoiled from it in revulsion.

*Soon, it will look normal to me. It will just be my two-toed foot, as much a part of me as the other.*

The girl had removed her eye-patch before stepping into the tub; the inside of it had been crusted with unidentifiable little flakes. She'd rinsed it out and draped it over the sink to dry. Now with cautious fingers she felt along her right cheekbone to the corner of the eye-socket, tracing the raised edge of scar-tissue. It was numb, like touching someone else's flesh. She waved her hand at the side of her head and thought she could see flickering, but wasn't sure. She held her hand over her good eye, and everything dimmed.

*Well, it's dark in here. Daylight will give me a better idea.* She remembered Brienne advising her to keep the patch on as long as possible. But the sooner she knew if she was truly blind on her right side, the sooner she could stop hoping she wasn't, and move on.

Soaking in the warmth and calm of the bath, her mind wandered, predictably, to Jaime. Moments replayed in her head with searing clarity: Jaime on top of her, his hips moving to their own rhythm as he began to lose control. His fingers gripping her waist to keep her just where he wanted her; his mouth hot on her neck. His breath catching in his throat. *Oh, Jaime.* She shivered, smiled. No matter what she did, her thoughts always circled and returned to him like ravens to their roosts. *Is Jaime also, at this same moment, having a bath? Shaving his beard, cutting his hair? How will he look, when next I see him?* Mere hours had passed, but already the longing to see him again was overwhelming.

The girl noticed the surface of the bath was oily and speckled with grit. *This must be what Jaime meant when he said he may not recognise me.* Going by this water, I'll be several shades of dirt lighter. She sat up, reached for the towel on the floor. Sitting around in a tepid pool of her own filth wasn't that appealing any more.

After pulling out the plug, the bath looked rather less white. Her skin, though, shone. Back in the larger room, wrapped in a towel, she examined the tray that had been left on the side board with suspicion. She didn't recognise the things on it, but figured by the presence of cutlery and plates that they were, in fact, food. *Was that a snail?* She prodded a jellied cube with something suspended in it, then finally settled on a ring of what she guessed was pastry.
She nibbled a corner, was surprised to like it. After polishing off the rest in two bites she sat down on the bed, sinking unexpectedly deep into the mattress. How was anyone meant to sleep on this? It would be like drowning. The dozens of jewels on the bedhead winked in the candle-light, each one worth twice what she earned in a month. More. This fucking bedhead could feed my whole village for a year. This thought annoyed her so much that she dragged the counterpane off onto the floor and sat on it instead.

Her black drawstring bag lay near her boots and clothes, where she’d discarded them earlier. In these surrounds their shabbiness was glaringly apparent. Brienne had done a decent job in washing them, but even so. The jacket was threadbare and numerous rips needed stitching. The colour of the top and pants could best be described as a mixture of faded and stained. The girl sighed and turned from them, to the new pile of clothes that had been left for her on the bed.

Plain underclothes, a dress. The fabric cool beneath her palms as she unfolded and smoothed it flat. Pale green like new maple leaves, embroidered with a simple lace pattern. I never wear dresses. Impractical garments. But still. She was compelled to pick it up, hold it out. If she wanted to blend in amongst Ladies and their handmaidens, maybe she should dress as they did. But more than that; she wanted to try it on. She was curious.

The material slipped down over her head and fell in heavy folds to cover her feet. When she stood up, the skirt rippled against her legs, clung to her skin. Walking to the open window, the hiss of the hem unnerving as it brushed along the floor. She was scrubbed clean and raw, and the dress left too much of her exposed. What would Jaime think, of me in this dress? She imagined his hands sliding the straps off her shoulders, and felt weak.

She leaned on the sill to breathe in the wind and let it dry her hair. The window faced away from the courtyards and the noise from the crowd was muted. Directly below was a small balcony belonging to the room on the lower floor, then beyond that a dark path wound around the walls of the Keep. Looking down made the girl's head spin. She'd never liked heights. How anyone lived in those castle towers she couldn't begin to fathom.

Was Jaime in one of those towers? Staring out into the night, she felt adrift. Her focus for so long had been making it to KingsLanding. A lot had happened in such a short time, she'd just reacted. Kept on moving rather than thinking. But here, alone, in this strange room, uncertainty caught up. What happened, now?

As soon as Jaime paid her what he owed, the next obvious step would be to buy a new horse and head on back to her family in the North. She pictured herself riding out the gates of Kingslanding, leaving Jaime behind. She frowned. No. It was all wrong, like a badly told fairytale.

You always knew you this would happen, she thought, yet now the time had come it didn't seem possible. It was easier to accept losing toes, or sight, than losing Jaime. As if the very cells of her body had rearranged themselves to incorporate him, and without him she could no longer function.

He's become more important to me than.. anything. I've changed, and I can't go back.

The girl turned from the window. She sat back on the floor, cross-legged, and at the sight of her maimed foot she grimaced and reached for her boots. Soon it may look normal to me, but not yet. Putting on her familiar old boots, the bandages stuffed into the toes of the right one, made her feel better. She picked up her bag, thinking about the few things inside. All that she owned in the world.

'I don't want to lose you': Jaime’s last words. The surety of them wrapped around her, daring her to dream. He must feel the same way I do. Maybe... there was some way to make this work. She turned
possibilities over in her mind, tentatively exploring each one. It would be strange because their worlds were unknown to each other, but she was willing to try and maybe he was, too. In between her deliveries and his duties as a Kingsguard... whatever they even were. She realised she hadn't the faintest clue what being a Kingsguard entailed. What being a member of the Royal Family entailed. Her lifelong ignorance of all things Nobility-related was proving to be a huge disadvantage in this situation.

*He guards the King,* she supposed. But the King didn't need to be guarded every minute of every day, did he? The Kingsguard must get time off sometimes. And there was more than one member of the Kingsguard, so they must share the duty around. Did they have dinner breaks?

*Fuck, I really have no idea what Highborns do all day.*

She decided to quit worrying until she talked to Jaime. In the meantime, she consoled herself with the thought that he was powerful, famous and rich, therefore if he wanted to see her, he could make it happen. His family... well. She'd never much liked the concept of Royalty, and she'd hated this specific King and Queen for over a year. Still hated them, truthfully. Which wasn't ideal, sure. But had she been too quick to judge? After all, Jaime was remorseful over what happened to Mycah, maybe the others were, too. 'You have to let it go,' Jaime had said.

*I can let it go. For you, Jaime, I can.*

She slung her bag over her shoulder and lay down, comforted by the closeness of her meagre belongings. Everyone deserved a second chance, even enemies. Plans could change, retribution become unnecessary. Jaime's family were only people, like her. *We're all just people. Past is past. Surely, we can sort out our differences.*

She woke before dawn, took a second to remember where she was. The candles had burned out and the room was dusted in grey light. Had it been a dream or had she heard voices? It was quiet, then she heard them again. The men stationed outside her door, Steelshanks' men. Talking.

*I'd forgotten they were there. Have they had anything to eat all night?* The girl threw off the counterpane and got up, yawned, found the tray of food. She carried it over to the door and knocked. The voices paused, then there was the rattle of a key in the lock and the door pushed inwards. The men, leaning on either side of the doorway, stared at her.

'Hey. I thought you might be hungry,' she said, holding out the tray.

*Lanterns in sconces illuminated the doorway but beyond it was blackness. The faces of the men were shadowed, unreadable, and they didn't speak for a disturbingly long time. It was almost as though they had no idea who she was. Then one of them gave a friendly grin. 'Starvin,' he said.*

He took the tray off her, picked up a pastry and bit into it, then passed the tray to his companion. They both ate quickly, wiping their fingers on their coats. Their eyes never left her as they ate. When they'd finished, they handed the tray back.

The girl nodded politely and went to close the door, but the first man held his hand out and stopped it.

*Her heart stuttered a beat. His hand on the door, preventing it from closing. She didn't know why this was alarming, but it was. They had the key, they could've come in at any time. They had been left here to protect her. But the man's hand on the door made her suddenly cold.*

She was uncomfortably aware of her bare arms, her hair curling loose around her face, the snugness
of the bodice around her breasts.

'Nice of you to think of us, girl,' the man said, brushing crumbs off his beard. He had a square jaw, large hands. 'Was you lonesome in here, on your own?'

'No,' she said.

Both men continued to stare at her in ominous silence and she took a step back. They glanced at each other, an unspoken understanding passing between them. Then they stepped forward into the room and the second man closed the door behind them, locking it with the key on his belt. Then he stood in front of the door, arms crossed. The look on his face unmistakeable.

Fuck, the girl thought. Fuck. She backed another step, and her knees bumped up on the bed. She couldn't understand why this was happening, was unprepared for it. Was it the dress? Have they not seen women in dresses before? Jaime will kill them. But Jaime wasn't there. She clutched her bag in front of her.

'You look reeeeal diff'rent,' the man with the beard said, slowly advancing towards her. 'No wonder he kept you hidin' in that wagon. Who'da thought that under all them old clothes and all them bandages an' shit you was... this.'

'Steelshanks told you to stand guard outside my door,' she warned, sidling away.

'Yeah. He did. He's gettin' gold off of the Kingslayer for sayin' you's one of us.' The man's gaze went from her face to her chest, his voice thickening. 'Like the gold you're gettin' for fuckin' him.'

'I'm not getting gold for... for that.'

'Steelshanks says you is. We have gold too.' The man took a coin from his pocket and twiddled it between two fingers, as if to entice her. 'Lookit you, all prettied up. And you's one of us now, ain't you? So let's all of us have a little fun.' He crouched low and held his hands apart, as if daring her to run.

The girl reached the wall and climbed up onto the bed. There was nowhere else to go. The only door was locked. She was angry more than frightened. If this is going to happen, then I'm not giving in without a fight. I may not have a knife or Sooty, I may be wearing a dress, but I'm still me. I have good reflexes. Even Jaime said so.

She remembered lying on a river bank not so long ago, watching a fish, her hand curling under it. Time froze and she centred herself exactly as she'd done then; her eye and mind and body as one. The only things that existed were her legs, the bed, and the man in front of her.

Without warning the man's arm flashed out to grab her ankle. But his fingers closed on empty air, the girl having already drawn her leg back. With all her strength she kicked him full in the face. The impact sent pain shooting through her foot but the crunch of his nose was thrilling.

As the man fell backwards, holding both hands to his face and cursing, the other man lunged across the room towards her. The girl sprang off the bed, cleared him by inches, and by the time he'd turned around she was at the window. He yelled 'No!' but her boots barely skimmed the sill before she leapt out into the air.
Kingsguard

Qyburn returned to his room amidst a definite disturbance. He was whistling but stopped, as a group of Steelshanks' men rushed down the stairs that led from the top floor, looking as if they couldn't get away from the building fast enough. Voices from above sounded seriously aggrieved. Qyburn waited until the men had cleared out and there was no danger of his being knocked over in the stairwell, then made his way cautiously up the steps.

A group of men gathered at the end of the landing. Steelshanks was there with two other Dreadfort men, and four men dressed in the gold armour and white cloaks of the Kingsguard. Steelshanks stood by an open door, next to one of his men, who was holding a blood-stained cloth to his nose. A Kingsguard, clean-shaven and with short blonde hair, had his hand fisted in the other Dreadfort man's shirt, pushing him up against the wall. It took Qyburn a few seconds to realise it was Ser Jaime Lannister.

The man he was holding wasn't resisting but his expression was stubborn. Ser Jaime's expression was, to put it mildly, not happy.

'I've already questioned your friend here, so if your answers differ from his by a bee's dick I shall not hesitate to throw you off this railing.'

'That won't be necessary,' the Dreadfort man said. 'He told you what 'appened, as gods' truth.'

'Now I'd like to hear it from you.'

'She jumped outta the fuckin' window. What's t' say?'

Jaime, looking frustrated, dropped his grip and stepped back abruptly so that the man stumbled. 'Why did she?'

'Cause she were spooked. She thought she didn't really wanna be here no more. She weren't used to the place, bein' common and all.'

'Why were you even in her room when she had this... epiphany?'

'She invited us in for some food.'

'Your job was to stand outside her door, not partake in fine dining with her.'

'She insisted. Asked was we hungry, and did we wanna eat somethin', seein' as we ain't ate nothin' since the morning, so we did.' The man sounded sulky about his lack of supper, and shuffled his boots on the stone floor.

Jaime watched him closely, like a hawk its prey. 'So she feels sorry for you two greedy lackwits, and offers you some of her food. And then... what? She says she doesn't like the general ambience and just... leaps out the window?' Jaime tilted his head, curious. 'Before either yourself or your fellow witless wonder here can stop her? You've got four feet between you, and she's got one. Pray enlighten me as to how the fuck this happened.'

'She's quick. Ser.'

'Yes, obviously. But what did she say before she jumped? Exactly.' Jaime's intent gaze didn't waver from the man's face.
'She - she said -' the man's eyes flicked to his fellow guard's, and he licked his lips. 'She said she were leaving 'cause she wanted to go back home.'

Jaime sighed. He turned away and shook his head, as if disappointed. Then he spun back on his heel with surprising speed, drew his sword, and smashed the hilt of it up into the man's face. The man sagged and fell to his knees with a breathy grunt, then slowly rolled onto his side.

'Your friend said that she left because she wanted to see the festivities. You really should try to get your stories straight.' Jaime sheathed his sword and regarded Steelshanks with coldness. 'I hold you responsible. We had an agreement that she'd be safe.'

Steelshanks didn't seem intimidated. 'I kept me side of it. Not my men's fault she thinks she can fly, is it.'

'Your men are liars, as I've just demonstrated. Bad liars at that. They'll be lucky if I allow them to see tomorrow. If you fail to find her...' Jaime left the threat unsaid. It was somehow more menacing.

'I have the rest of me men out looking for her now. They'll find her.'

'Best hope they do, or my father shall hear word of this.'

'Of what?' Steelshanks looked unrepentant. 'We lost one of our whores who was travellin with us from the North? What would Lord Tywin care of that?'

In the dim dawn light of the landing, Jaime's eyes gleamed incandescent with rage. Qyburn half-expected him to re-draw his sword and smite Steelshanks' head off with one stroke. When the Kingslayer spoke it was clear he was holding his fury in check only with great difficulty. 'I would not press me to take my issues with you to my father. He may hear many things from my mouth. You may find yourself accused of offences that will prevent you from ever returning to your precious North, or anywhere else, outside of our deepest dungeon.'

'I was paid gold to take the girl to this room last night an' leave guards by the door,' Steelshanks muttered. 'Which I done.'

'Gold you have not yet received. And nor will you, *not one coin*, if she isn't found.' Jaime's whole being simmered with pent-up aggression.

Steelshanks clenched his jaw, but was smart enough to say nothing more that could fan the Kingslayer's already volatile mood. Instead, he just nodded stiffly.

Jaime gestured to the other members of the Kingsguard who stood nearby, addressing them in a tone that brooked no argument.

'I want this girl located immediately. I owe her a debt that is yet unpaid, and her safety is compromised by the crowds gathered here for the King's wedding. I know you all have many important duties today, but for the next hour I want you three helping the Dreadfort men search. Ask everyone, look everywhere. It's of the utmost urgency.'

'What's she look like?' one of the Kingsguard wanted to know.

'Septa left a dress here last night, green with white pattern. She'll be wearing that.'

The Dreadfort man standing besides Steelshanks made a sound for the first time, snuffling through the bloody cloth held to his nose. Qyburn realised he was laughing. 'You'll recognise her when you see her,' the man snorted wetly. 'Trust me, you'll recognise the bitch.'
'What's that mean?' the Kingsguard asked.

'Just go find her!' Jaime seethed. His tightly-held restraint finally shattered, he turned to the Dreadfort man who'd spoken and grabbed him by the collar. The man swung a punch, but Jaime ducked, then dragged him forward and hurled him with sickening force into the side of the railing. The railing thrummed with the impact and the man almost tipped over it before rebounding back and onto the floor. He left a slick trail of blood shining along the balustrade in his wake.

The men of the Kingsguard, obviously deciding under the circumstances it was wisest not to linger, hurried past Qyburn without pause. Only one, a man with a curved nose and pointed beard who Qyburn knew as Kettleblack, glanced his way, and held eye-contact for an unsettling moment. Qyburn looked down and studied the floor, as if he could decipher clues from it.

Jaime came last, and despite ignoring the Maester's presence up until this point, he now stopped and fixed him with a harsh stare. Qyburn felt as if the slightest misstep on his part may result in his being grievously hurt in some manner, so he kept his features arranged into what he hoped conveyed a meek yet convincing concern.

'Where have you been?' Jaime narrowed his eyes. 'Your room is directly below this one. When we searched the rooms just before, you were absent.'

'I had to see someone, about my possible work here.'

'At this early hour? The sun has barely risen. Were you abed when the girl supposedly leapt from her window?'

'Yes, I was. Fast asleep. I recall waking at a thump on my balcony. But by the time I had got out of bed and gone to the door leading out, there was no-one there.'

'So you’re saying the Dreadfort men speak the truth on this? She did jump?’

'I would rather not speculate on their honesty, Ser. But it certainly sounded as though something landed on my balcony, earlier. It was loud enough to wake me, although I do tend to light sleeping more often than not these days. My age, you see. Slumber is not as deep nor refreshing as it once was, when I was younger.’ At the increasing impatience on Jaime's face, Qyburn hastily re-focused. 'I thought something may have fallen from above, a heavy pot or similar. But as I said,’ he shrugged with regret,’ upon inspection of the balcony, there was nothing.’

Jaime slumped back against the stairwell. He ran a hand across his face and his expression changed suddenly from belligerence to defeat. 'Gods, Qyburn. Where could she be? She can't get far, she's a damn cripple. All of Steelshanks' men are out searching around the fort again, but I've already looked thoroughly myself. There's nowhere to hide there. You're a man of wisdom, what's your wise advice? Because,' he laughed despairingly, 'I could dearly use some right now.'

Qyburn sensed the desperation in Jaime's words, but desperation could switch back to anger in a heartbeat, he knew. So he took some time to consider his careful response. 'Could she be mixed with the wedding guests? There seem to be quite a large number about.'

'No, the Dornish would know a stranger among them, and none I've talked to so far have seen her.'

'Then perhaps she has left the Keep entirely.'

'The guards at the gates have told me no-one left from any of the gates during the night. I have them alerted now, so if she does try to leave one of them will get word to me.'
'It seems as if you are doing everything possible. In that case,' Qyburn smiled gently, 'she must turn up somewhere, before long. The girl is used to looking after herself, is she not? The Red Keep is no more dangerous than the open road.'

Jaime frowned. 'You have little knowledge of the Red Keep, I see.' He pushed off the wall, his face once more composed. His eyes hard. 'If you see the girl, or hear anything of her whereabouts, make sure to inform me immediately. Only me, no one else.'

'Of course, Ser,' Qyburn said, bowing his head.

Jaime strode past and on down the stairs, his boots clattering on the stone. Qyburn waited for Steelshanks, who was unceremoniously heaving his two guardsmen to their feet. Neither looked to be in good shape, their gaits unsteady and their faces misshapen and blood-splattered.

'It's as you predicted,' Qyburn said, as they approached. 'The Kingslayer's paramour has indeed caused trouble for us.'

'Yeah. Not that these two and their cocks helped any.' Steelshanks shoved his men towards the stairs, and Qyburn followed them down.

'Where have they looked for her?'

'Around the fort. In all the rooms. Out askin' questions of the Dornish. If she's wanderin' round someone's gotta have seen her. There's fuckin' hundreds of them out there.'

'And yet she is not found.'

'No, and she better hope I ain't the one to find her,' Steelshanks growled. 'I'll wring her troublemakin' little neck.'

'Seeing what she will say of your men when she's found, it may be best if she never was,' Qyburn suggested slyly, as they reached the ground floor.

Steelshanks glared at him with suspicion. 'I still have gold to collect. I don't need the Kingslayer havin' an excuse not to pay up.'

'You said so yourself, Lord Tywin will pay that gold. What will he care about a missing commoner from the Dreadfort? Roose has already sent word, informed Tywin that you were Jaime's escort. You got him home safe, therefore the gold is owed. Even Ser Jaime's golden tongue can't spin a convincing enough tale to fool his father any different. You'll get your gold.'

'And the girl?'

'She's a common lass, they are, by definition, common.' An odd, high-pitched chuckle escaped from Qyburn's lips, before he could stop it. 'Does it matter what happens to one?' He rubbed his palms together over and over, enjoying the dry hiss of his skin on itself.

'You seem to know more than you're lettin' on, old man.'

The Maester didn't answer, just smiled ingratiatingly.

It had the opposite effect. Steelshanks continued to glare at him with undisguised distaste. 'There's something really wrong with you, Qyburn. You give me the fuckin' creeps. But, I hope you're right. As long as I get me gold out of this deal, I'll be leavin' tomorrow, before the whole wedding circus. And I won't never have to set eyes on your smarmy ol' face again, long as I live.' The Dreadfort
soldier suppressed a shudder as he firmly guided his two injured men along the path to their rooms. He didn't look back.

Qyburn watched them go. _You mock me, Steelshanks Walton. Underestimate me, as many have done in the past. But no matter. What would a simple soldier like yourself know of the sciences, of the dark arts, of exploring the greater mysteries of life itself? You would never understand, and so my explanations would be wasted on you._

He could feel the morning sun warm on the pate of his head, and around him people strolled and shouted, laughed and milled about. But Qyburn didn't bother to look and see if Jaime's missing girl was amongst them.

He cast his mind back, to a few hours earlier. The Queen had been reluctant to see him before the sun was even risen, but he'd insisted to the guard outside her chambers that it was very important and couldn't wait. He remembered with pleasure how the Queen's initial hostility had quickly become interest as he'd begun to explain, and finally a sad comprehension had dawned in her green eyes, as if something she hadn't understood before now made sense. Although he could see the news he brought pained her sorely, she had in the end been most grateful for his help.

When the Queen had passed him over the key to the small store-room hidden below the Kitchen Keep, her beautiful face had softened.

'You have done the right thing by coming to me, Maester, with this... little problem. I can trust you to keep this a secret from anyone else, until I can think how best to deal with it? It would benefit neither of us, but especially not you, if my brother were to find out of your visit to me.'

'Of course, Your Grace,' Qyburn had said.

Discretion was certainly in his own best interests. And the Queen's gratitude would be useful when it came time to suggest his own solution to her little problem. _But let her concentrate first on the King's wedding. She has a lot on her mind, at this busy time_, he'd thought, as he left her room with the key hidden in the folds of his cloak.

Now it was done, and surprisingly easily. Kettleblack had come along at the Queen's command and helped escort them from Qyburn's room, his Kingsguard whites lending authenticity to their story. In the pre-dawn darkness, their companion wrapped in Qyburn's old cloak, they were inconspicuous. And no-one had been around to see. Once safely inside the hidden room, Kettleblack and Qyburn had moved some storage things to make a small bed along one bench, and there were a few sacks in there for blankets.

She hadn't seemed to mind the sparse accommodation. But her type was used to that.

'When will Jaime come to get me?' was all that she cared about.

'Soon,' Qyburn had promised.

'I'm not going back to that room again, with those fuckers around,' she'd scowled. Her arm was smeared with rust from where she'd slid against the balcony rail as she'd fallen, her elbow was grazed, and her green dress had mud on the hem from walking through the Keep, but otherwise she looked lively. _One thing about commoners, they are resilient_. Kettleblack certainly couldn't keep his eyes off her. He'd had a glazed look about him from the minute he'd seen her, and his mouth hung open a little whenever she moved.

'You don't have to go back there, my dear girl,' Qyburn had assured, with his sincerest smile, the one
he knew wrinkled the corners of his brown eyes. 'You're lucky I was awake when you jumped, to let you into my room. You're lucky too, that we found this place for you. Those men can't get you in here.' True to his word, he had locked the iron-fortified door securely behind him as he left.

Remembering it now, the old Maester felt a glow of contentment inside his bones. The store-room had walls six inches thick, and not a single window. He'd been informed that it was sound-proof.

As he retired to his own room, Qyburn resumed his whistling. *No, the Queen's little problem won't be going anywhere. Not ever again.*
Kettleblack searched with his fellow two Kingsguard for over an hour. Closer to two, before they called it off. Any later in the day and the Queen would notice and want to know why they weren't at their daily positions, and Jaime had specifically said it was none of her concern and that there was no need for her to know.

*But she knows more than y' think, Kingslayer. More than you, least ways.*

In the Round room, Jaime looked tired. 'She must be somewhere. Why haven't you found her?'

Loras spoke for the three Kingsguard men. 'We've looked in all the outer wards, around all the outbuildings and staff quarters, gone through guest's rooms. And some of the Tyrells weren't too happy about us barging in on them, neither. So unless you want us to search through the inner Keep..?'

'No. That won't be necessary.' Jaime heaved a sigh and rolled his head back to stare at the ceiling. On the table top, his hands opened and closed restlessly, as if they needed something in them. A sword handle. A knife. Someone's throat.

'Near every one of the Dornish and their servants have been questioned, but they hadn't noticed anyone... anyone who wasn't one of their own party, or anyone at all who was wearing a green dress with white pattern...'

Jaime closed his eyes.

'...we asked questions of most of the royal staff and servants without... well, we were as discreet as we could be... without...'

'Fuck,' Jaime interrupted Loras' account. He sat up abruptly. 'This is impossible.' His eyes swept the room like a cold wind. 'She's one girl, why can't we find her. I don't understand.'

'I'm sure we'll find her eventually, Ser,'

'No, eventually isn't good enough. I need her found now, before anything happens to her.'

'Nothing's probably happened, she's, well, maybe she's with someone.'

'Who would she be with?' Jaime's already cutting tone sharpened.

'I don't know, Ser;' Loras said, nervously.

'She probably with some Dornishman down an alley,' Kettleblack volunteered. 'Learnin' all about the wonders of his Sunspear.' Loras smiled at this play on the Capital of Dorne, and then turned away to hide it.

Jaime's jaw ticked and he pinned Kettleblack with an icy stare. But it didn't affect Kettleblack. He was contentedly humming inside, secure in the knowledge that he had what Jaime wanted so badly. It was a nice warm feeling, superiority.

'I hope she isn't,' Jaime warned. 'It would be rather incompetent of you to miss something as obvious as two people fucking in an alley, wouldn't it?'

Kettleblack shrugged. 'Where there's a will there's a way. And there's no will quite so compelling to
Jaime leaned swiftly across the table and grabbed the buckle of Kettleblack's white cloak, where it fastened beneath his neck. The strength in the grip was daunting, and Jaime's voice when he spoke was deathly serious. 'If you don't curb your tongue I will cut it out.' Everyone at the table froze. This was no idle threat, just hard fact.

'Jesting is all, Ser.' Kettleblack swallowed, caught unawares by the murderous sincerity in the Kingslayer's eyes. Don't push your luck, he reminded himself. It's fun to stir the pot, but the man looks dead keen to crush someone's skull between his fists. He must really have it bad.

Jaime released his grip and sat back. 'You're all dismissed,' he said, curt.

The Kingsguard men stood up from their seats and filed out. Kettleblack resisted the urge to loosen his cloak where it remained bunched tight under his chin, and made a point not to hurry as he walked. He hooked a thumb in his sword belt. Who is fuckin' Jaime Lannister, to make an arse o' me in front of my peers? If I weren't already laughing at him behind his back I'd be mightily pissed.

Kettleblack chanced a quick look behind him as he reached the door to the room, and saw Jaime was still upright in his chair, staring into space. On his face was such raw pain and anguish that Kettleblack blinked in surprise, unsure he'd seen right. It was as if someone had reached into the sitting man's chest, pulled out his heart and now held it bloody and dripping out in front of his eyes.

Kettleblack turned away, disturbed, feeling like a peeping tom who'd accidentally spied on something so intimate he couldn't ever speak of it to anyone.

'Stew? Is that all she's getting?' Kettleblack lounged back in the seat opposite Cersei, grinning at the food she presented to him. He plucked a bone from the brownish gruel, and popped it between his teeth.

'You said she was a peasant, I'm not sure what you expect they eat?' The Queen's smile was as insincere as it always was.

'Well you shouldn't a gone t' the trouble. Does she get any wine with it?' He laughed amiably. 'Never mind.'

Cersei hovered on the cushion's edge, trying as always to look fully in control of herself, but having consumed over a cask of wine by midday already, failing rather more than usual. She looked as though she wanted to speak but couldn't find the right words.

'Well, I'll be taking this down t' the girl, then,' Kettleblack said, unbending his tall frame in preparation for rising to his feet. Cersei arranged her face into a slightly curious but nonchalant expression.

'This girl. She travelled with Jaime and... and Qyburn said they, they... well anyway.' Cersei fluttered her pale hand as if the details were trifling. A hesitation. 'Qyburn said she was... pretty? In a common sort of way, I'm sure.' She pulled a face, as if it really wasn't the slightest important.

What does she want me to say, the wench is ugly? Kettleblack knew full well the Queen was fishing for reassurance, but it was more amusing for him to fan her insecurities.

'Aye, she ain't bad,' he said, with an exaggerated leer.
'As Qyburn said. *Pretty.* Cersei pronounced the word with such spite that it may as well have been the direst insult. 'Young, I take it? Youth has its own fleeting bloom.'

'Yeah. Young,' he agreed. Cersei stared at him but he just sucked on the bone and grinned back.

Finally she sighed. 'It's just that I find it extremely hard to believe that Jaime is... infatuated with this thing. Qyburn said he was... very attentive to her, always with her, fawning over her...' Cersei's face grew more and more despairing as she went on, before she caught herself and snorted a laugh. 'I mean it's all so ridiculous. Jaime would never be interested in someone like that... that way. Qyburn, I'm sure he means well, to come and tell me himself, he must have had such qualms about the whole thing but... well, really. Jaime just feels pity for cripples and poor folk sometimes. He was definitely not himself last night when he... he wasn't at all himself. Quite... unlike him. It's clear now though, he holds himself responsible for this thing's misfortunes, and is feeling guilty.' As if realising she'd let her words run away from her, the Queen stopped. Although it looked as though she still had a lot more to say.

'That'd be it,' Kettleblack said, with a lazy shrug. 'I find meself feeling *responsible* for pretty girls all the time, an' all.'

'Your insinuations are uncalled for,' Cersei snapped. 'It's bad enough Qyburn being mistaken about such a thing, without your tasteless japes. Please refrain from them, or you'll not be on my Kingsguard much longer.'

'Yes Y'Grace,' he smirked.

Cersei stood up and walked to the window, pausing only long enough to glance irritably outside as if the mild sunny day were mocking her with its pleasantness, before pacing back. The train of her gown swirled as she turned. It was low-cut and corseted, the skirt full and glittering with lines of inlaid gems, the long sleeves almost reaching the floor. The effect was majestic, imposing. *She's a passionate woman,* Kettleblack thought, his groin stirring. He shifted his position.

Cersei clasped her fingers together to stop them fidgeting. 'The last thing I need is this kind of distraction. I'm up to my neck in demands and duties as it is. Jaime coming back now and disrupting things like this is hugely inconvenient, especially if he doesn't intend to help me organise this wedding. I'm meant to be supervising the walk-through for the servers right now, and then I have the seating details to attend to. And into all this he returns, bringing back some *stupid* little, some *conniving* little... little *slut,*' Cersei struggled to keep her tone neutral. 'I mean what could he possibly be *thinking* with this... this lunacy?'

'Well, he's probably thinking with his -'

'Enough! Hold your tongue!' Cersei rounded on him, green eyes flashing. Kettleblack's heart beat faster. *Oh but I do love it when she gets roused. Her cheeks all flushed, and them spitfire eyes. Come on then, my sweet. Let me have it.*

But she said nothing more, just trembled and worried her hands together.

'I'll be going then,' Kettleblack said after a longish silence. He stood up, took the tray. Cersei nodded, her mouth twitching. The rage had left her and she looked small and deflated in her wide-sleeved, ornate gown. Like a child playing dress-ups.

She did look uncannily like her. Something he hadn't told the Queen, as yet. A juicy tidbit he could drop into a conversation later maybe, if he wanted to provoke a reaction. Qyburn hadn't mentioned it
either as far as he knew; maybe the old goat's eyesight was going the way of his hair. *Maybe the old lech wants to keep that information to himself, along with whatever else he's planning.*

Kettleblack had noticed the weird similarity in the girl straight off. When he'd walked into Qyburn's room early that morning he'd been lost for words, which was unheard of for a smooth-talker like himself. Totally taken aback. The girl had turned to face him and he saw she had a recent and impressive-looking scar curving like a scythe imprint above one cheek, but then her apricot-coloured hair fell in a thick wave to cover it. All he saw after that was the same eyes, same lips, same cheeks; it was startling. *I mean, she's younger, her skin colour's different, her hair a different shade but... well, fuck.*

The Queen's regal features and superb bone structure on a commoner...? Gods be good, the incongruity was delicious. *Like seeing a shiny rare jewel in a pile of pig's muck; you can't really believe it's there, and that no-one has snatched it up yet.*

He thought it all over again as the girl stood in front of him now, watching him with unfriendly eyes as he set the food tray down on the bench. *Unfriendly, perfectly almond-shaped eyes, with dark lashes. Bedroom eyes. Oh, my sweet.* As soon as she opened her mouth though, the illusion of unattainable beauty was somewhat dampened.

'What are you looking at, fuckwit?' she said, in an accent straight from the lowliest village shack. Kettleblack laughed inside. Even his mum sounded classier than this little wench. And that was saying something.

'You, honey,' he charmed, with his best lop-sided smile. Girls usually loved the way one side of his mouth tilted up, they said it was cheeky. Irresistible. *How come I never seen this one before?* he mused. *If she's been out on the road as Qyburn says, well I been out on the road myself for years. Where has this tasty morsel been all my life?*

'Where's Jaime?' the girl glowered, hands on hips. She stood with legs planted apart, causing the dress to pull tight around her hips in a distracting manner, and under the long hem she appeared to be wearing dirty old black boots. They matched the dirty black bag she kept slung over her neck. Kettleblack didn't know what to make of her. But that only made him more interested.

*I don't think she knows how to wear a dress properly. She don't seem to be using her feminine wiles on me at all, to try and get herself out of here.* He pondered if she even knew what she looked like. *She probably don't look like this when she's out on the road. She probably looks like a thousand other dirty little delivery boys in grubby old coats and hoods two sizes too big for them.* Could tell under all the dirt what they ever looked like.

*So no flirty come-ons from this one, then.* Kettleblack was disappointed. Although her hostility was in itself exciting. And the way she stalked about the room with no thought to how that damn dress outlined every bounce of her breasts... Between the Queen and this one he was going to explode.

The wench may not be an obvious seductress, but she had snared the Kingslayer, according to Qyburn, and that was no easy task. He'd give her credit for that one. Bit of a coup. Seeing as good old Ser Jaime had never apparently been the type to play around. Ever. Which Kettleblack had always found a bit fucking odd, if you asked him. *Something's wrong with a man who don't take advantage of his position and handsome face to get his cock wet every now and then.*

But turns out the Kingslayer was less a paragon of restraint than he'd pegged him as. Being locked up in some gods-forsaken Northern cage for close to a year would mess with anyone's head, Kettleblack supposed. *Being away from all your normal comforts, only yourself and some nubile young tart prancing about? Sure and it only takes a moment of letting your guard down, a bit of*
unintentional body contact and all of a sudden, your cock takes over. No matter what your vows or your morals, who’s at home waiting for you. Before you know it, you're pumping your bastard up into some whore's belly, and then a lifetime of taking responsibility for it. Lord knows, Kettleblack knew all about that. Minus the taking responsibility part, of course.

'Ser Jaime is currently elsewise occupied. He won't be seein' you today,' was what he said to the girl. Much to her evident disgust. She scowled in half a dozen different ways and stamped around the small room, while he waited, enjoying the show. She had a limp, and the soft swell of flesh above her bodice jiggled with each step. His hands itched to squeeze it. A fiery little slattern, I bet you'd be a handful. More than a handful. I wouldn't mind some scratches from you, honey. I wouldn't mind you putting up a bit of a fight, it would make the reward at the end all the sweeter...

Deep in his reverie, Kettleblack was ill-prepared for the speed in which the girl snatched up the food tray and hurled it as his head. He dodged to one side but the sharp edge caught his brow and hot stew splashed across his white cloak. For an instant anger flared in him, and it must have shown on his face, because the girl laughed.

Laugh at me, would you slut? Kettleblack imagined himself back-handing the glee off her face, then ripping off that infuriating green dress. You wouldn't find my cock so funny, I don't think.

He collected himself and rubbed his eyebrow. I'll have to give you credit for being a dab shot with a full tray of food, too, he admitted wryly to himself. It was fairly amusing, when he thought about it. 'You're quite the feisty one, aren't you,' he said.

'I want to see Jaime! Have you even spoken to him? Does he know I'm here?' she snarled. Her fists clenched and through her full lips her teeth partly bared. She looked like a proper savage, and the prospect of wrestling her into submission now seemed fraught with real risk. Kettleblack revised his fantasies to include some kind of restraining device. I mights need tie her up first, for safety's sake.

'Honey, I was talkin' to him just before. Ser Jaime's very busy right now, all of 'em are. Your chuckin' your food around ain't gonna help the time go no faster.'

'I don't like it in here, it's suffocating,' she complained. 'Tell Jaime I want out. Out of... I want out of the Red Keep.'

'Now, now. He only wants to see y' safe. Too many people out there, would take advantage of the likes o' you.' This ain't even a lie. That dress wouldn't last five minutes outside the Red Keep.

'Tell Jaime I need to see him. Please,' the girl said. Her tone had lost all its antipathy, and the corner of her lip quivered. Kettleblack felt sorry for her. Only a young'un really. None too bright. No fuckin' idea about the Kingslayer or his family, or that old pervert Qyburn. Oh well, she'll learn soon enough. Or not. None o' my business really, any of it.

He stooped to pick up the tray, shook it to get rid of the last drops of broth, and flicked stew remnants off his cloak. 'I'll let him know, honey,' he said. 'Don't worry. I'm sure he'll come sort y' out soon enough.' And if not him, then someone will. So either way, you'll be sorted out.

He turned sideways and opened the door with the key, keeping one eye on the girl in case she tried to run past. But she just stared at the floor with her hands limp by her sides, misery etched on her face. She looked very frightened and very young, and Kettleblack unexpectedly had the urge to simply put his arms around her and comfort her. Just a hug, a small human kindness. For a brief instant, he even considered opening the door wide and saying Go for your fucking life, kid. But of course he didn't do any of that, and by the time he'd relocked the door behind him and started strolling across the yard, the momentary compassion had faded so completely he barely remembered
thinking it.
Tywin

Lord Tywin Lannister summoned his eldest son to the Tower of the Hand, for the second time that day.

The first meeting had been brief, a mere formality, with Jaime seeming preoccupied and Tywin just relieved to note that he was in good health and spirits, for all his ordeals. Not that outwardly he'd admit it to anyone, but there had been moments in the past year where Tywin had imagined Jaime's death, or even worse, disfigurement. He didn't know how he would have coped if Jaime had been returned disabled in any way. Tywin was a man who put great store in utility as a measurement of a person's worth. And Jaime was his main hope for the future of the Lannister empire. There was a lot riding on him, whether his son realised it yet or not.

Tywin had presented him with the sword he'd had crafted from Eddard Stark's steel, and Jaime had been sufficiently grateful. But there was still more he wished to gift him. Now that Jaime was back with his family, where he belonged, Tywin felt content, unburdened by the thoughts of his death. *Thank the gods justice prevailed.*

While he sat waiting for Jaime's second appearance, Tywin was less focused on worst-case scenarios and more on practical issues. Jaime had proved himself both resourceful and resilient in surviving his long imprisonment, and the ensuing manhunt to recapture him. Certainly, he'd made a tactical error in battle that had allowed Robb Stark to capture him in the first place, but no military leader is immune to every enemy cunning. Tywin himself had been caught out by the Young Wolf's plans. So there was no shame in that, and plenty of prestige in escaping unharmed as Jaime had done.

Tywin allowed himself a small flare of pride. He would never show it, believing outright praise to be an unnecessary indulgence, but inwardly he was pleased. *At least one of my children has real strength and tenacity. Lannister traits. He deserves this reward.*

Tywin only hoped that Jaime would recognise and seize the opportunity he was about to be presented with. Despite his battle courage, Jaime's underlying motivations and passions were often a mystery to his father. Tywin had once liked to believe, when his children were much younger, that Jaime was of a similar character to himself. Politically astute, ruthless, ambitious. But as the years went on, Tywin reluctantly had to admit that this wasn't the case. The boy was too prone to unrealistic chivalry, too swayed by emotion. Too idealistic.

_He may not be as much like me as I'd originally desired, but he has other noble qualities, that have served him well as a member of the Kingsguard,_ Tywin mused. _But now is the time for him to choose a different life, away from that of being a glorified bodyguard; away from the vile rumours that dog him regarding his sister. Now is the time for my son to stand up and accept his destiny, to be the man I have invested in him to be. A true Lannister, Warden of the West, worthy of his title._

Minutes crawled by and Tywin sighed. *What's keeping him?* Tywin drummed his fingers on the desk. Shuffled through the sheaf of financial tables in front of him, noticing a stray miscalculation entered on the ledger and correcting it with a flourish of his quill. He could not abide sloppy calculations. Or lateness.

*Has the guard even delivered my summons?* He considered calling for another guard, and having the previous guard's position revoked. *Having his head's position revoked from his neck.*

Fortunately for the guard's well-being, Jaime came walking in through the door to the solar right at the tail end of Tywin's fraying patience. Unfortunately, he appeared even more distracted than he had
been the last time he'd entered. This immediately irked Tywin, who not only had been kept waiting for what he considered to be an unacceptably long period, but who also detested not having anyone's full attention.

'Jaime. At last you grace me with your -'

'You wanted to see me, Father? I am right in the midst of something.'

'Yes. Take a seat.' Tywin indicated with a tilt of his head. But Jaime remained standing, tapping a rhythm on his sword hilt with a forefinger. The red leather-gripped and lion's head-pommelled sword that Tywin had presented to him only hours before. The noise of the tapping grated.

'I'm in some hurry, if this could wait until...?' Jaime asked.

'It can't.' Tywin swallowed his annoyance. He regarded his son with cold authority, allowing a deliberate lengthy pause before continuing. 'I believe the Tarth woman you returned with has been causing some problems, with an oath she apparently made to the dead. Concerning Sansa Stark. With my grandson's upcoming wedding, you'll appreciate I do not need this sort of... irritation.'

'I owe the Tarth woman a debt, but I will speak with her. Until the wedding is over, I promise she'll not trouble you.' Jaime looked keen to wind things up. This only caused Tywin to prolong the time until his next utterance. 'Until the wedding is over? Does he mean he considers the matter not yet resolved? Tywin re-shuffled his papers, turned down the flame on the oil lamp. He would not be rushed by Jaime's impertinence.

'You are aware, I take it, that Cersei dismissed Ser Barristan from the Kingsguard on grounds of age?'

'Yes, what of it?'

'Now that the precedent has been set, it should be possible to also release you from your vows.'

Jaime frowned and his gaze jumped about, edgy and restive. He didn't seem to be taking this news as seriously as he should. Nevertheless, Tywin went on.

'I have decided you should resign from the Kingsguard and assume your rightful position as Lord of Casterly Rock. We will soon find a suitable wife for you, and a squire, and such.'

This was a generous proposal by any standards, let alone Tywin's. But coming as it did a surprise, Tywin was fully prepared for Jaime to react with some reservation, even initial protest. Leaving behind familiar past-times, that once defined a person, is difficult. Becoming Lord of the Rock would mean giving up many of the things Jaime currently valued. The Kingsguard. His sister. Corrupting influences both, but long a part of Jaime's life. He may need some time to see the full benefit of my offer.

But what Tywin hadn't counted on was Jaime hardly reacting at all. Inconceivable as it was, Jaime appeared to barely register what had been said.

'Can we discuss this later? Only, I'm extremely busy. Security for the wedding and... Cersei has been trying to locate me all day. The table setting details are sending her witless. ' Jaime pulled a you-know-how-she-is face, and actually turned to go.

Actually turned, to actually leave, without being dismissed.

Tywin was rendered momentarily speechless at this unexpected rebuff. To mislike my plans is one
thing, but to ignore them? What in Seven hells has got into him? Tywin drew a steadying breath, summoning all the power of his many titles and reputation. His tone when he spoke was severe and uncompromising.

'I'm speaking of your future as Lord of Casterly Rock. Your duty, to House Lannister. I would have thought it deserved your attention rather more than catering to your sister's whims on cutlery placement.'

'I apologise Father,' Jaime said, sounding distinctly unapologetic. 'But this is not the time to talk of this. I have a lot on my mind.'

'Then I suggest you clear it immediately, as I'm far from finished.' Tywin steepled his long fingers in front of him. He remained silent, while Jaime looked fit to burst with impatience. Pondering his son's inexplicable agitation, Tywin's mind caught on a detail he'd not intended to mention at all, thinking it of little consequence; nothing more than a product of Cersei's paranoia. When she's in her cups she sees all sorts of conspiracies. But now, Cersei's recent ramblings snagged him as having possible significance. He looked thoughtfully at Jaime.

'Your sister came to see me before. She had some... curious allegations.'

Jaime was too smart to let his feelings show in any obvious way, but Tywin noted how his son's body stilled, and the newly-minted attention to his words. Your emotions have always been your weakness. Tywin felt growing unease as his misgivings crystallised. Jaime's voice was studiously casual. 'Allegations of what?

'You. Commandeering the Kingsguard early this morning in the hunt for some... commoner.'

'Not the entirety of the Kingsguard. And I am the Lord Commander. I am free to commandeer them as I see fit.'

'No man is free to do everything he sees fit, are you deluded?'

'I required one hour from them. It is none of my sister's concern. Nor yours.'

Tywin felt his previous contentment diminish, his pride in his son shrivel, as each one of Jaime's surly reactions confirmed his suspicions. The very suspicions that Tywin had dismissed as ridiculous to Cersei, not an hour since. Disappointment rose bitter in his throat. I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, Jaime, but you have let me down. I would not have thought you such a fool. I thought you better, better than your siblings and their promiscuity; better than myself. Tywin struggled to block out the reminders of his own deviance. He was a sinner himself, but he could not bear at that moment to see his own failings reflected back to him through his son. He strove daily to deny his sins, but now they mocked him. Like father, like son. Weak-willed. Lustful.

I held you in higher regard. My first son, my heir. I had hoped you more able to resist temptation. The truth as it sunk in shook Tywin's carefully maintained poise, and infuriated him beyond measure. Along with the realisation that Jaime's character was so flawed, was the resentment that a lesson Tywin had thought indelibly imprinted in his son's mind had been unlearned. Again? I have to deal with this kind of travesty... again?

'I would have thought you, especially, would know the gravity of your indiscretion,' Tywin hissed. Jaime remained blindly defiant. 'There has been no indiscretion. The girl we were seeking to locate helped me on the road. Without her... I never would have survived long enough for Steelshanks and his men to find me. She got rid of my manacles, risked her own life to -
'Spare me the pathos.'

'I owe her 500 gold coins. A horse. I owe her protection from the crowds here in the Red Keep.'

A muscle in Tywin's cheek began to throb. *I cannot believe what I'm hearing. The absurdity of it.*

'You owe a commoner nothing. A Lannister never owes a commoner anything.'

'I owe her a great deal.'

'No. You owe *me* a great deal, as your father. I'm offering you Casterly Rock, a marriage to a highborn girl and...'

'I don't care about highborn girls, or your Rock. I don't... I don't wish to discuss any of this now, as I said. Now if I may...?" Jaime didn't wait for an answer but swung on his heel and began to stride for the door.

'You can have the girl,' Tywin said, quietly.

Jaime froze in mid step, and turned back. 'What?'

'You heard me.'

Jaime stared at his father for a long moment. His green eyes seethed. Then he marched back towards the desk, a look on his face as if he may walk right over it and throttle his father on his seat. Tywin remained sitting calmly, not moving even when Jaime leaned right over the dark wood of the tabletop and put his face inches from Tywin's own.

'You know where she is? Tell me.'

Tywin kept his expression composed, but inside he smiled. It was satisfying to at last get the desired reaction. *Now you're paying attention, aren't you, son? Now you want to discuss matters. After all I have offered to you, all which you have thrown back at me. The ingratitude. The sheer wilful stupidity. But you will not make me a laughing-stock with your whore. You will learn the hard way.*

'The girl is innocent of any wrong. What have you done with her? Jaime demanded.

Tywin rested his forearms on the desk, his fists cupped. 'I never thought to be in this situation again. When I mentioned this matter to you, I had hoped to be mistaken. I had hoped your sister was being hysterical but... I see now that is not the case. I am sorely disappointed in you, Jaime. I had thought you more -'

'I don't care what you think of me,' Jaime interrupted, brusquely. 'You said I could have the girl, so tell me where she is.'

Tywin held his son's gaze, frustrated by the disrespect. But he showed nothing more than cool contempt.

Jaime had never defied him so openly. The imprisonment and journey had returned to him a son who was a virtual stranger, one Tywin no longer recognised. *His delusion over this whole sordid situation is astounding. He has taken leave of his sense. The commoner has ruined my son, my precious heir, corrupted him with her filth. She will pay dearly.*

'I'm afraid I do not know the present whereabouts of the commoner girl. Perhaps you should ask your sister.' Tywin mouth was taut, his words clipped. 'But rest assured she is contained, and will be properly dealt with in due course. An indecency such as what has occurred will not go unpunished.'
Jaime's eyes as he stepped back grew hard and dead, but Tywin continued on, undeterred.

'She will be tied to a post in the square and scourged, and if she survives, her life may be spared on the condition she leaves KingsLanding forever. You can have her before she goes, if you still want her. And then you shall not speak of her again.'

'You cannot - '

'I am your Lord father,' Tywin retorted, rage burning like acid in his gut. 'I can do as I see fit.'

'You are not my father,' Jaime said. He turned away.

Tywin opened his mouth but there was a sudden disconnect between his brain and his words. He could only stare and say nothing, as Jaime walked out of the room without looking back.
The Kingsguard stood outside the door, while Qyburn came in carrying a bowl and a pitcher. The girl briefly considered making a run for it. The doorway was narrow, but the Maester was old, she could take him. The Kingsguard though... he had a swagger and there was the solid definition of muscle beneath his sleeves. It would be a mistake to give that one an excuse to put his hands on her. The lazy lust in his eyes whenever he looked her way made her feel soiled. She shuddered.

And where would I go, anyway? I don't know where Jaime is. I can't get past the guards at the gate of the Keep.

The bowl plinked as Qyburn set it down on the stone floor. 'A hearty meal, to keep up your strength. And...' he pulled a candle taper and flint out of a pocket in his cloak, '...for the dark.'

Why would I need to keep my strength up? What am I to be doing? The girl didn't bother asking questions, though. She distrusted both men by now. She wouldn't waste her breath on them any more. Why did I ever trust them? Trust-no-one, her one motto in life. When had she forgotten it?

They tell me Jaime's coming to get me, but they lie.

She eyed the tray. Stew. The meaty smell made her stomach turn over.

'Are you not hungry?' Qyburn enquired, in his soft voice.

'No.' The smell was rancid, she wished they'd take it away. She was thirsty though, very thirsty. She reached for the pitcher. Behind Qyburn, the Kingsguard standing by the door caught her eye and gave a small shake of his head. She hesitated, her hand hovering over the container.

'Dreamwine,' Qyburn encouraged. 'To help you sleep.'

Her gaze flicked again to the Kingsguard, but he was looking out into the laneway. Had he been warning her not to drink it? Why?

Godsdamn but she was thirsty. Who do I trust? Neither one has given me reason to.

Qyburn's gentle smile as she picked up the pitcher and brought it to her lips wasn't reassuring. He pretends to be what he's not. But thirst took over. She gulped down the liquid without tasting, its refreshing coolness soothing her parched throat. Her stomach though, wasn't as pleased. Nausea rolled and churned. She took a breath, concentrated on not retching. After a minute the queasy feeling passed.

'I'm going into town to buy some supplies, so I won't see you until evening of the morrow. But never fear. You'll be well taken care of in my absence,' Qyburn told her. She ignored him, staring at the floor like a petulant child. In the faded light cutting in from the doorway, dust motes floated like tiny sprites. She stared at Qyburn's shoes, willing him to leave.

'When I return, we shall do some work together,' he went on. 'Would you like that?'

As if it matters what I want. She scowled at his feet. 'Jaime...'

'Ser Jaime has arranged for you to help me with my work, just for a little while.'

'What sort of work?'
'Well, it's very complicated,' he chuckled. He knelt down to be at her level. 'I've been studying for a great many years, a great many. More than you've even been alive. In that time I've developed a lot of interesting theories, scientific theories. Of course theories are all well and good. But now I have been given the opportunity to test the hypothesis - a valuable opportunity,' the old man's voice lit up with giddy excitement at odds with his age, before he seemed to get a hold of himself. 'Of course I can't expect you to understand, my dear. But nevertheless, your assistance in these studies will be invaluable.'

'I know nothing 'bout science,' she muttered. Her head felt heavy, and the ground moved in an unsettling wave.

'You won't have to.'

Despite knowing it was useless, the girl heard the words come out of her mouth before she could stop them. 'Can I see Jaime?' Disgusted at her pleading tone, she clenched her jaw shut.

'Of course. After our work.' Qyburn's promises slipped through his lips like snakes. Liar. Annoyed with herself for showing weakness, she tipped the wine pitcher up to her mouth again. It didn't quench her thirst but it was better than nothing. This time the sour fumes overcame her. Tears stung her eyes and she blinked.

'Well. I'll see you soon, dear.' Qyburn stood up, brushed his knees clean from the grimy floor. The Kingsguard held the door wide for the old man to pass through, and watched as the hunched grey cloak retreated out of sight down the pathway. Then he turned his head back to the girl. Grinned.

She shot eye-daggers at him. He winked, went to close the door behind him, then paused. For a moment he looked unexpectedly serious.

'You shouldn'ta drunk that shit, honey,' he said.

'Fuck off.'

The Kingsguard regarded her with an expression she couldn't decipher. Pity? Then he closed the door the rest of the way, and the key rattled finally in the lock.

It must be night, the air chilling. Each breath billowed in front of her face like steam. The small amount of natural light that seeped in under the door dimmed, until she was surrounded by blackness utter and engulfing. I'm not afraid of the dark, she told herself. But this wasn't the dark of a moonless night sky, the dark of trees and night animals chirping, and space. This was the dense dark of a walled room, the air musty and stale. Suffocating blackness. The kind where she couldn't tell if her eyes were opened or closed. Blindness would be preferable.

She forced herself to breathe, forced her jittery heart to steady. It's just a room. You don't like small rooms, is all. You're used to being outside. But there's nothing to fear in here. There's no-one in here but you.

But still she felt the walls creeping closer, crowding in. She wrapped her arms tight around her knees and made herself as small as she could. She squeezed her eyes shut, tried to ignore the pervading sense of dread.

A falling sensation, weightless and spinning. Kingsguard was right, I shouldn't have drunk that fucking wine. She was afraid to sleep, but dreams came at her anyway. She heard her mother speaking to her in her head: 'Nobility will just use you, take from you whatever they want.' She tried
to picture her mother's face but the memory wouldn't come. It had been too long. Only her words. 'A horse that runs towards a fight is a good horse.'

Sooty, where are you Sooty? Can you really be dead? The girl could hear Sooty's low snorts, see her comforting bulk looming nearby. But when the shape lifted its head it was the triangle-shaped head of a wolf, the yellow malevolent streaks of eyes.

The girl shook her head violently, scattering the images but not the sick feeling of falling. Wake up! Dreams can't hurt you! They're only dreams!

Jaime was there, his voice echoing as if down a tunnel, 'I don't want to lose you, lose you, lose you.' She knew it was only a dream, but she called out to him anyway. He couldn't hear her, and then he was gone. She looked down, and there was a babe curled at her feet, about two or three years old, was it herself? A skinny little thing with blonde hair, but when she looked up she had green eyes. Then she vanished as well and there was only the endless, impenetrable black.

The girl's teeth chattered so hard she was convinced they would break. She lit the candle, hands shaking. She wanted the light to drive away the visions, but the twitching shadows revealed by its glow only increased her fear. Something lurked in the periphery of her sight. Something monstrous. Stop it, there's nothing here. The girl moved the candle in a sweep around the area in front of her, throwing skittish light over the boxes and bags and sacks stacked around the room. Steeling herself, she leaned down and peered under the bench. But there were no monsters there.

Of course not. Monsters didn't live under benches.

Monsters smiled with crinkly brown eyes, and called you 'dear.' Brought you wine and candles.

The light kept the dreams at bay until the effects of the Dreamwine gradually wore off. Then she felt only cold. Cold to snap her bones. The material of her dress was thin, she pulled a burlap sack over her bare arms. Inside her boots, her feet were completely numb. She may as well have no toes for all she could feel the ones she had left. The candle was dying and she blew it out. Closed her eyes, her teeth still spasmodically chattering, and fell at last into a dreamless sleep.

A noise wakes her. She sits up, presses her back into the corner. The air feels different, as if the door had opened and a fresh wind gusted in. She feels someone else's presence, there in the dark. She fumbles blindly on the floor for the stub of the candle, lights it with a scrape of flint.

The flame wobbles into life and she places it carefully on the dusty bench beside her. In the pale circle of light, she sees someone sitting near the door. For a second the girl's heart jolts with terror, then she realises it's just a boy.

'How did you get in here?' she asks sharply. She wonders if she's dreaming, but her dry mouth and renewed thirst feel real. The cold bites at her fingers, and her breath smokes in the air.

'The old man brought me. Same as you,' the boy says. His accent is rough, like hers. The girl feels her tension ebb a little. Was Qyburn here again, as I slept? She's relieved, at least, to not be so utterly alone. After a moment, she waves the boy over.

'Come over by the light. Are you scared of the dark?'

'Nah,' he says, with all the bravado only a kid can muster. But he shuffles closer to the candle.

'Are you cold?' she asks.
'Freezing,' he says.

The girl pushes the candle closer to him, although the flame is weak and the heat from it negligible. 'How come you were in the Red Keep?' she frowns. 'It's not safe, you know.'

He shrugs. 'I travelled up with someone.'

_Bet you wish you hadn't,_ the girl thinks. She wants to say she doesn't trust Qyburn's bony old arse as far as she can kick it, but decides against worrying the kid. He's younger than her, and there's no point scaring him. Controlling her own fears is hard enough, without having some poor waif to reassure as well.

The boy scratches his nose and wrinkles his forehead. Something in the gesture is almost familiar.

'I always wanted to see the Red Keep,' he says. 'To see where all the Kings and Queens live.'

The girl looks around pointedly at their dingy surrounds and gives a short laugh. 'Is it all you expected?'

He grins back. 'I didn't really have no expectations.'

His smile... his face dips into the light and the girl see the spray of freckles across his cheeks, the copper glow of his hair. _He looks older - that's why I didn't recognise him straight away. But now she does._

'You shouldn't be here,' she says, her voice catching. The candlelight gleams on his skin; he looks remarkably healthy. Considering. His eyes when he smiles at her are bright. There are no scars old or new on his face, and his long limbs in the village clothes look strong. As he reaches his lanky arms across to warm his hands, he bends easily with the suppleness of the young. There is no blood, no gaping halves of skull from her nightmares. No hacked up pieces of flesh, no severed spinal cord, no jagged shards of bone. He looks good. Considering everything he's been through.

'I came in with you,' the boy says. 'Don't you remember?'

He holds his hands close to the candle, the tip of the guttering flame nearly licking his palm.

'I'm sorry,' is all she can say.

'What's wrong with me, sis?' he asks, puzzled. The flame burns through his hand, it cannot touch him.

'Nothing, Mycah. Nothing is wrong with you,' she tells her dead brother.

She looks at the space between them. Her breath cloud hanging alone in the air.
Cersei knew Jaime would be waiting. She was expecting him.

It was late by the time she climbed the stairs to her quarters, after spending all evening coordinating schedules with the various entertainers in the great hall, but Jaime didn't disappoint her. The moment Cersei reached the landing she felt his hand on her arm, as he stepped forward from where he'd been leaning in the shadow of the curved wall. His grip was firm as he steered her toward her bedchamber.

'How nice to see you, brother,' she said pleasantly, wincing at the pressure from his fingers. 'Are you here to aid me in replacing the candles in the hall, they are getting low -'

'Later,' he growled. 'We need to talk.'

'Later we will be busy with the wedding, and several lights in the hall have burnt out complete -'

'Have your handmaidens attend to the damned candles.' Jaime was unrelenting. The guard stationed outside Cersei's door stood to attention, as Jaime marched her over. 'Your Grace, Ser -' the man nodded, but Jaime jerked his head at him to go.

'The Queen and I have business to discuss. Leave us.'

Cersei smiled graciously at the guard as he looked to her for confirmation. 'Important wedding business -' she concurred, before Jaime flung the door open and propelled her inside. She stumbled a little, both from Jaime's impetus and the considerable amount of strongwine she had consumed while finalising the menus.

Maybe she should have eaten something as well, but the saffron-infused partridge she'd nibbled at breakfast hadn't mixed well with the morning tumbler of wine. She'd filled herself with more wine instead. Trying to calm my nerves. It hadn't worked. I would have thought the glasses contained nothing but flavoured water, except that when I stood up the room spun. Now she clutched at Jaime's breastplate to steady herself, turning to bring her face up close to his.

'Jaime,' she breathed, lips parted. 'You are... most eager to be alone with me.'

He held her off him with one hand, slammed the door behind them. 'Where is the commoner girl, Cersei?' he demanded, his tone resolute.

'I don't know what you're -'

'Don't lie; don't sweet-talk me, sister. Not now. I talked to Father and I know you have her.'

Cersei set her mouth in a stubborn line. How dare you command me. With deliberate lack of haste she brought her hands up to the net in her hair and released it, so that it fell in golden ringlets over her shoulders. She tossed her head. 'Discussing commoners, really. Must we suffer through such unpleasantries? I don't remember you being this boring, brother.'

'I warn you, I'm in no mood to be trifled with.' Jaime's green eyes smoked.

'No. You do seem rather upset. You haven't been yourself since you returned. Mayhaps Pycelle could fetch you a tonic to relieve your confused state of mind.' A tonic to restore your sense, you addled fool.
Jaime gave her arm an insistent shake. 'Are you going to tell me where she is or do I have to -'

'What? Hit me?' Cersei's voice dropped to a low hiss. 'Are you going to beat me, to find out the whereabouts of your little... whore?' Before Jaime could respond, she yanked herself free of him and swirled away. On her bedside table was a decanter, and Cersei's hands trembled as she uncapped it. The crystal lid tinkled against the spout. She managed to slosh half the contents into a goblet and raise it almost to her mouth before Jaime's hand closed around hers and halted its path.

'Stop, you've had too much to drink already.'

'Unhand me! Why shouldn't I drink, I have a great many responsibilities, many duties, and no-one is helping me! Even those who are sworn to love me are - are -' she gulped in distress, tears welling up. Inside she couldn't help but rejoice, as she felt their hot wetness slide down her cheeks. See? See what your cruel betrayal has done to me?

'Cersei, enough.' Jaime pressed her hand holding the goblet down. 'You don't need any more to drink.' Carefully, he prised her fingers off the stem and set the glass back on the table.

'I need you, Jaime. I need your help.' She revelled in the tremors that ran through her body, her eyes blurring with tears that she knew made them shimmer like emeralds. She sensed Jaime's determination begin to ebb as she wept harder. He sounded uncertain.

'I will be with you tomorrow at Joffrey's wedding, I promise. By your side, where I belong. But I have to know where the girl is. It's very important.'

'Qyburn said that you... ' Cersei choked, unable to finish the vile accusation. She hugged her arms around her own waist so that her breasts heaved.

'Cersei just - just stop it.' Jaime sighed, taking both of her arms in a gentler grip than before, and bringing her around to face him. 'Qyburn is a sly old man, inventing tales to try and curry your favour. He wanted to work in KingsLanding, and he concocted this lie to have you agree to his plans. Now, where is the commoner girl?'

'I don't know. She's with Qyburn. He's taken her somewhere... somewhere out of the Keep.'

'What? When?'

'Today, while you were talking to Father.' Perfect timing his leaving was too. I couldn't have planned it better myself; he was gone well before you could confront him. Sometimes the gods are good. He left the Keep and went into the city.' This much was true. The Maester needed to purchase supplies, he'd said. Equipment, utensils, sedative potions, other things Cersei hadn't bothered to listen to. He had in mind to perform certain experiments, relating to the nature of life and death, the gruesome details of which Cersei had no desire to know. She simply gave him the coin he needed and sent him on his way. 'He smuggled the girl out with him, dressed in an apprentices' cloak. They've gone to an Inn or somewhere, he won't be back until after the wedding.'

'I told you not to lie to me, sister,' Jaime scoffed. 'The girl is wild, two guards couldn't restrain her, let alone a feeble old man on his own.'

'Restrain her? Why would you think she needed to be restrained?' Cersei laughed through her tears. 'She went with him willingly enough, she couldn't wait to get out of the Keep. She wanted to enjoy herself at the local taverns, to earn some coin from the local men drunk enough to pay extra for a... pretty face. She is pretty, isn't she?'

'You've seen... her face?' Jaime looked genuinely confused.
'Of course, when she left with Qyburn,' Cersei sniffed. 'Though there are prettier whores in our brothels, dear brother.'

Jaime's evident disbelief irriated her. *Why does he doubt that I've seen her? How damn pretty can a slut be?* Cersei swallowed her ire and laughed again. She liked the sound of her own laugh, even in her distraught state she admired its melodic tone. *What's wrong? Does it trouble you that your precious whore isn't faithful? Did you really think a common harlot would care who's cock she has between her legs?*

'You've always been a hopeless liar,' Jaime shook his head. 'It's something I love about you.'

'I lie to you all the time,' she spat, mocking. 'You're just too stupid to see it.'

Jaime's voice softened, then. 'Did you lie about loving me?'

'No more than you have.'

Jaime flinched and loosed his grip on her arms. His expression was wounded. 'I wouldn't lie about loving you. Cersei, I always loved you.'

She took advantage of the freedom to lift her hand and strike him as hard as she could across his mouth. The impact of the blow stung her palm and one of her fingernails ripped along its quick. Jaime didn't try to defend himself. He didn't move at all. For a moment he was so still Cersei wondered if she'd gone too far. *The Jaime I know would never harm me, but this isn't the Jaime I know.*

'What are you going to do, hurt me?' she dared, her heart racing with exhilaration.

'I would never hurt you.' His eyes wide. Across the newly clean-shaven skin of his jaw, her hand-print stained red. 'It's me. Jaime.'

Cersei knew he told the truth. Others would hurt her, but not Jaime. Never Jaime.

'Then why does this whore matter to you? Why are you here, demanding to... to know her whereabouts, why are you being so... so... so hateful to me?' Cersei sobbed anew, more tears spilling down. She wiped them on her sleeve.

'She doesn't matter to me. You're wrong.'

'Tell me then that you didn't touch her. Tell me you didn't!'

'I just want to repay a debt, to someone who helped me. But... but it's nothing. The girl is nothing. Don't make this out to be something more than it is.'

Cersei buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking.

'Shsh Cers, shhh now.' Jaime pulled her into him. 'You're hysterical, over something that doesn't even exist. The stress of this wedding is getting to you. And you can't handle the godsdamn wine; you're not Robert.' His broad palm was warm on her hair, as he held her head to his chest. 'We're Lannisters, we should be working together on Joffrey's wedding, not fighting over rumours and falsehoods.'

In his embrace, Cersei's shuddering eased. Gradually, she calmed. His words once again reassuring, not accusing. His arms around her so familiar and secure.
'I'm sorry,' Jaime said. 'I'm sorry you thought I had... that I wasn't there for you. It's difficult, sometimes. To be everything everyone wants you to be.'

'I need you with me,' Cersei whispered.

'I know. I know.' He kept stroking her hair.

'It was hard with you away... no-one is on my side, Jaime. They don't respect me, they... they try to undermine me all the time, they resent me because I'm better than they are.'

'You're imagining things, Cers. Who is this 'they'? No-one resents you. People are on your side. I'm on your side.'

She let herself melt into his comforting warmth. 'I thought of you often while you were gone, you know,' she told him. It was true. All the times Kettleblack's hands had touched her, all the times his mouth had been on her, she had imagined they were Jaime's hands, Jaime's mouth. I wanted him to be you.

Jaime drew back, held her hands in his, rubbed his thumb across her wrist. He bent his head as if to kiss her neck and she shivered in anticipation, but instead she heard him murmur, 'Where did Qyburn say he was staying?'

Cersei pulled her hands away as if they'd been burned. 'I thought you said it didn't matter.'

'I just want to sort it out now, Cers. Before the wedding.'

She stared at him. To think I almost believed you. Too much wine, and I'm a fool.

'In Eel Alley.' She played along, forcing indifference into her voice. There were dozens of Inns on Eel Alley. It would take hours to search them all, hours before Jaime realised Qyburn wasn't there.

'I'll see you tomorrow, sister.' Jaime pressed his lips onto her forehead, heedless of her stiff posture. 'I love you.'

Cersei didn't respond, only squeezed her arms around herself to try and wring out the stabbing pain she felt inside, as she watched her brother hurry out the door. I know you do love me, Jaime. We belong together, always.

She couldn't let anything come between them.

Cersei had to know, she had to see for herself. To get the thing to confess. She waited until she was certain Jaime had left the Keep, watching from her window as the shadow of horse and rider passed beneath the torch-lit arch of the gates. Then Cersei retrieved her key to the store-room from a drawer, and donned a shawl made of heavy velvet, with a frayed hood. She slipped out of her room and down the stairs, across the deserted drawbridge as the stars glimmered above her. The night air was crisp and chilled in her lungs. The sound of chaotic merriment from the Dornish camped around the grounds was louder than ever, but down the twisty lane behind the Kitchen Keep no-one stirred.

At the rough-hewn wooden door, Cersei paused. Should I have brought Kettleblack with me? Jaime said the thing is wild. What if she tries to attack me? But then Cersei steeled herself. A lion is afraid of no-one. And she had to know.

She turned the key in the lock and held the lantern out in front of her. The air from inside was icy and smelled of something damp that had never dried. Mouldy wheat and pickled jars of things gone
sour. Cersei stepped through the door cautiously, swinging it closed behind her. The last thing she wanted was for it to escape. In the swaying light of her lantern, nothing moved.

A bundle curled on the floor, near the furtherest corner. Cersei watched it unravel and stretch, like a cat, blinking in the light. It was wearing a simple green dress and its reddish blonde hair, tousled from sleep, cast black shadows over its face.

'Get up,' Cersei snapped. 'Do you know who I am?'

The peasant yawned. Insolent wretch. 'Who are you?' its husky voice rasped, sounding more like the croak of a hideous swamp creature than a person. Then it coughed. 'D’ya have any water?'

What am I, a cup-bearer? 'No,' Cersei said.

'I'm so thirsty,' the wretch sighed. It sat up, crossed its legs and pushed the messy tangle of hair off its face. Cersei froze, feeling as if all the blood in her veins had turned to frost. It can't be. It's not possible. But it was.

She was sitting there. Wrinkling her dust-smeared nose and rubbing her arms to try and ward off the bitter cold. Cersei's younger self was sitting there, wearing filthy old boots with soles worn through, a black bag across her thin bare shoulder, squinting into the light cast by the lantern. A terrifying scar like a crescent moon clawing from one eye to the base of an ear. Her eye, her ear, her own younger face. Cersei gaped, stunned.

The thing has my face.

Most people might overlook it. But Cersei had spent hours when she was younger gazing at her reflection in mirrors and windows and the surfaces of still water. She knew every contour of her face back then, the way each symmetrical angle and curve came together so pleasingly. When she'd been pregnant with Joffrey, the age this commoner was now she realised, Cersei had been particularly radiant, and had studied her reflection daily, awed by its perfection. The only person who knew that face better than herself had been Jaime.

And here it was again, blinking in the brightness of a lantern, dirty and scarred. Her face, on a peasant. A no-one.

Cersei tripped on the trailing hem of her gown as she stepped back, almost fell. She felt sick, the taste of wine and bile rushing into her throat. She leaned on the wall to steady herself, then snatched her hand away as it brushed against thick cobwebs. Get a hold of yourself, you are a lion of Lannister. Fierce and brave. Cersei wrenched her gaze from the horrifying image of her own double and saw a pitcher of wine on the floor. She considered picking it up to see if it was empty. She desperately needed a drink.

Now you know, now you know why. Cersei took a deep breath, and another. Her head cleared. This trickery would not defeat her. Whatever accursed sorcery caused this, she would not flee from it. But she could feel her heart beating too fast in her ribs, and her skin prickled all over with fear.

'Are you... the Queen?' the thing-in-her-likeness said. Its accent was awful, coarse and lowborn. As the shock wore off, Cersei glared at it, gripping the handle of the lantern so tight her knuckles showed through white. 'Yes. I am.' Her own accent sounded more imperious than ever, in contrast.

The commoner regarded her with curiosity, and Cersei wanted to rip her own expression off the girl's skin, leave only a bloody skull that could resemble no-one. 'You look like Jaime,' the common girl said, thoughtfully.
There was no other recognition. Maybe youth cannot see its future self, as age so easily remembers its youth, or maybe the commoner spent no time in front of mirrors. Maybe all this girl saw when she looked at Cersei was an older woman in a regal gown, with ivory skin rarely touched by the sun, and sharp cheekbones where her own were plump, and eyes hollowed with the weight of years and cynicism. *Maybe the whore is blind.*

This girl frightened Cersei in a way she couldn't remember being before. She knew without a doubt Jaime had been lured by the false promise of it. *Of course he had, men are such damned fools.*

He had fallen in love with Cersei when she was younger, after all, back when they had run through the woods together like little animals, hunted and wrestled and come home covered in dirt, without care. When their hair had been tangled, and their nails black with soil, when they had been children with children's freedoms. Before their assigned roles had sent them on different paths. *What had Jaime said? 'The girl is wild.' I used to be wild, too. He looks at this thing and he sees me, as I once was. Before ambition and motherhood and responsibility tamed me. Back in that last age when Jaime and I truly were one person in two bodies.*

Cersei felt as if everything was slipping from her grasp. *Gods help me. How can this be happening?* She tried desperately to gather her wits. *I am a lion. A lion is not weak, a lion does not cower.* With an effort she regained her poise and managed to give the commoner a polite smile.

'So you travelled here, with my brother?' she queried. *How many times did you spread your legs for him, you foul witch?*

The common girl nodded. 'Jaime.'

The sound of his name repeated in that horrid accent enraged Cersei, but before she could bring herself to say anything, the commoner spoke again.

'Do you love your brother?'

'Of course,' Cersei replied, narrowing her eyes at the odd question. *More than you know.*

'As I loved mine,' the common girl said, returning Cersei's smile.

*As if I care one whit about your ill-bred siblings.* Cersei couldn't stand being near it any longer - *I must leave* - when with a swift motion the girl shrugged off the drawstring bag from around her neck and reached inside. 'I have a gift for you, Your Grace,' she said. 'For the King's wedding. If you would be so kind as to... receive it.'

Cersei watched suspiciously as the commoner pulled out a skinny case, removed the lid and held it up.

'What is it?' Cersei asked, mesmerised by the glowing light pulsing around the length of silver that nestled inside.

'An arrow, Your Grace. It's extremely well-made, and powerful. From the lands across the sea. Does the King like to hunt?'

'He has a crossbow, yes. How is it powerful?' Cersei wanted to know. Something about the way the silver shaft gleamed in the dim light; she suddenly longed to have it. It was magnificent. *Joffrey. Joffrey would love it.*

'It never misses,' the girl said.
'Is that right?' Cersei smiled. *Mayhaps I will have him come down here and use it on you.*

'It would mean a lot to me and my family if you would accept this gift, for the King. On his wedding day.' The girl bowed low and held it out. Cersei considered her.

*This girl has features like mine, but inside, she is just a base, worthless slattern; a creature with no ambition beyond survival, no higher thought in its head than where its next meal is coming from. An immoral, uncivilised, slovenly wretch. Barely a step up from the beasts in the fields.* Never would this thing have spoken and understood the different languages of the world, seen a royal tournament in all its finery, or sat around a council deciding the fate of Kingdoms. Never used political wiles to cultivate allies and crush enemies. *Gods, it probably cannot even write its own name.*

And yet, Jaime had not cared. He had betrayed her, Cersei, with all her culture and fine breeding, all their shared history and understanding, for the dream of his lost youth and the false beauty of a dumb slut.

*How dare a thing like this exist. It is beyond inconceivable.*

Father would have it flogged, Qyburn would experiment on it. *But no, that was not enough.* This imposter must be destroyed, Cersei decided. Destroyed utterly, until not one speck of it remains. As if it had never existed at all. *Not one hair or drop of blood must be left to contaminate mine or Jaime’s lives. I will deal with it, today. Kettleblack will do it. Or if he refuses, I will hire a sellsword.*

Cersei’s mind settled at this thought. *It is done.* She breathed in, let her breath out slowly as she gazed at the commoner bowed at her feet. *Why did I let you scare me? You cannot take what is mine. I am the Queen, and you are no-one.*

She reached down and took the proffered case containing the arrow from the girl's grubby hands. 'I accept your gift, on behalf of King Joffrey,' Cersei said. There was a faint warmth coming from the case even with the lid on, and she could feel a thrilling power emanating from it. Whoever this insidious whore was, wherever she came from, an arrow of such high quality deserved a better owner. As Cersei left the commoner in her dank little room, and re-locked the door, she kept thinking of how much Joffrey was going to love this gift.

*I can't wait to give it to him.*
Tyrion Lannister wasn't much for sleeping. Never had been. He thought the night hours generally were better spent reading, drinking, or entertaining whores. And he'd made prior plans for this particular night; plans that involved leaving his Lady wife Sansa peacefully abed in their apartment on top of the Kitchen Keep while he snuck out to visit his whore, Shae. It was all previously arranged with Varys, and he'd been looking forward to it immensely all day. He'd stolen out along the hall and got as far as the door to the kitchens before his carefully made plans went awry.

*I made no plans at all to be accosted by my agitated big brother and obliged to agree to some harebrained scheme of his, for reasons that barely make any sense, so how is it that that's exactly what I find myself doing?*

'I'm not quite grasping this, could you just repeat the whole thing over again? Starting with the part where you thought bringing the dirty vagabond you became completely cuntstruck by back to KingsLanding was a brilliant idea.'

'I know this must be hilarious for you, after all these years...'

'I mean, I'm impressed,' Tyrion shook his head in wry admiration. He was perched on a bench just inside the double doors of the darkened kitchens, where Jaime had dragged him. It was well away from the sleeping quarters but they kept their voices hushed just in case. 'I knew you were hot-headed, but even I didn't think you had it in you to besmirch the honour of House Lannister so thoroughly for the sake of a... what is she again? A village whore?'

'No, she's -'

'A Hilltribe's whore?'

'She's a... Tyrion, please. You're the only one I can trust with this. It's important. Or I wouldn't ask.'

'Yes, it must be terribly important. I can't imagine you risking Cersei cutting your cock off elsewise.'

'Gods, you really are the most *hypocritical* arse-'

'No, no, don't get me wrong. Jaime, I'm not judging,' Tyrion held out his hand in a pacifying gesture. 'I understand. But as much as I adore it when our family name is dishonoured by anyone other than myself, I still don't see why your whore takes priority over mine.'

Jaime ground his teeth together. 'I love you dearly little brother, but if you keep calling her that I'm going to have to hurt you in a way that will ensure you won't be of any use to any whore in the near future.'

'You're very touchy on this subject, aren't you? You know when I say 'whore' it's with the utmost respect and admiration.'

'She's a *delivery person,*' Jaime gritted out. 'Not a whore.'

'Well I trust she's more comely than the local delivery person here in the Keep. And less beardy.'
'Seven hells if you could take anything seriously for once in your life,' Jaime ran a hand through his close-cropped hair and sighed in frustration. Tyrion almost felt sorry for him, but fought it back. *I have my own problems to deal with. I don't need Jaime's.*

'I'd love to help out. Truly. Obviously, you fucking random delivery persons and lying to our sister and father about it is something I wholeheartedly support in every sense. However, I'm a married man. With responsibilities. My own wife is sleeping in our bedchamber right now...'

'And luckily, you've already snuck out on your way to see Shae. Good, your wife won't notice you missing.' Jaime gave an unexpected grin. Tyrion rolled his eyes. He felt as if he were being cornered. *He thinks I'm a pushover, that I'll do anything to help him. Because our whole lives, that's exactly what I have done.* Tyrion glared at his brother with a lifetime's resentment.

'I don't know why you get to ride off into the night to confront drunken strangers in scummy Inns while I have to stay behind to watch Cersei... I mean why do I get the dangerous job?'

'Pfft. She's not dangerous if she doesn't see you.'

'She clearly saw your face though, didn't she?' Tyrion winced. 'It looks red even from here.'

Jaime touched a hand lightly to his jaw. 'She misliked my line of questioning. I always underestimate Cersei's penchant for violence. You'd think after all these years I'd know her better.'

Sympathy surged again in Tyrion; he almost relented, but again he stifled it in time. *Damn Jaime, he always does this to me.* Tyrion cast his mind about desperately, searching for another excuse.

'Why do you presume that when you find this Maester he'll be any more forthcoming as to this... *delivery person's* whereabouts? I'm sure the old man's well in Cersei's pockets.'

'Because, unlike with our sweet sister, I can punch the fuck out of him until he tells me. That puts me somewhat at an advantage.'

'If you ever feel squeamish about punching our dear sister, let me know. I'd be only to happy to help out.'

'Just help me out tonight, little brother. With this one thing. Please.'

Tyrion squirmed on his seat, trying not to weaken. 'You do realise Joffrey is getting married tomorrow, I mean you are aware of that fact? We are all of us Lannisters expected to be attending the Queen's breakfast in the ballroom in the morning?'

'I'll be back before dawn.'

'Really? So, you know which Inn this Maester's staying at, perchance?'

'Not one on Eel Alley,' Jaime frowned, tapping a finger restlessly on the edge of the bench. 'Asides from that, it's anyone's guess.'

'Ooh good, that only leaves a few hundred Inns to search, then. You're right, it should take you no time at all, especially considering how not-at-all crowded every Inn in the Capital is on the eve of the King's wedding, and how not-at-all rowdy or uncooperative the patrons of them will be. Excellent. I'll reserve a spot for you at the breakfast table, shall I, save you a couple of honeycakes, and when our Lord father demands to know where his eldest son is for such an important event, I'll simply say you're out picking up some *deliveries.*'
'Fuck, Tyrion,' Jaime dropped his head into his hands. 'I thought you of all people would understand. I don't need this shit from you.'

'Oh, I am sorry. My mistake. I was obviously the one came searching you out in the middle of the night, dragging you away from your prior appointments, to beg favours. Do accept my sincerest apologies for disturbing you,' Tyrion hopped down off the bench as if to leave, but Jaime grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him back.

'I forgot what a terribly irritating little man you are, sometimes, I swear. Look, all you have to do is -'

'Keep an eye on our dear sister yes, yes, you said.'

'It's not asking much.'

'No, it's not like she's going to be at all suspicious to see me skulking about, in any way, whatsoever.'

'Skulking is what you do best.' Jaime smiled, in that charming way he had. Tyrion was well aware that Jaime had spent his whole life winning people over with that irresistible smile, but even with that awareness he still found himself susceptible to it. Gods help me, I can't say no to him. It was like swimming against a strong tide, and Tyrion had never been any good at swimming.

'I was rather hoping to spend the night with my concubine, not our bitch-sister,' was the best he could mutter, but his older brother had already sensed the inevitable victory, and was preparing to go.

'Such is life,' Jaime quipped, with an annoying philosophical shrug, as he stood up and adjusted his sword.

'Such is your life, dear brother. Why must I become involved in this... ' Tyrion pulled a face, even as he knew he'd lost the battle, '...ridiculous love triangle you have going on here.'

'Because, we're brothers,' said Jaime, flashing another heart-stopping smile. 'I appreciate this, little brother. I owe you one. Remember, wait until I've left. She won't do anything until she sees me leave.' Jaime wrapped his strong arms around Tyrion in a quick and surprising bear-hug, squeezing the air from his lungs, then was off down the hall before Tyrion could recover enough to protest further.

He listened to Jaime's boots echoing on the stairs. I can't believe I'm doing this, Tyrion thought, rueful. He reluctantly trudged down the hallway, shivering as a cold breeze wafted up the stairwell from the ground floor. From there only a brisk walk to the Holdfast where his sister's quarters were. So many troubles of my own, and I'm wasting my time trying to prevent my witless brother from bringing shame to our House because his cock made him think he fell in love? Tyrion pulled his cloak tight around himself. What is this cruel jape the gods play on me? Surely, surely by everything that makes sense in the world... it should be the other way around?
Tyrion went down the servant's steps to the ground floor, and paused. If he continued on down the stairs to the cellar underneath, and along a hallway, he'd be beside the dragon skulls. Shae was waiting there. It had been a little trickier than usual to organise the liaison, with the added hassle of avoiding the hundreds of rowdy wedding guests occupying the outer ward.

Shae. Probably wearing little or nothing, anticipating his arrival. In contrast to his wife Sansa's distant demeanour of polite, resigned loathing, Shae was cheeky and eager. Shae, with her dark hair and devilish smile, her dirty whispered words. Shae, the one happiness in Tyrion's otherwise underwhelming life.

Fuck Jaime. Fuck Jaime's damsel in distress, fuck my nephew's wedding, and fuck my sister most of all. Gods be good, this whole mess will sort itself out with minimal input from me. Cersei won't go anywhere tonight, Jaime will find the Maester in the first Inn he comes to, and I can still meet up with Shae later. Tyrion took a moment to make sure the gods at least understood his resentment of the whole situation, before he reluctantly turned away from the cellar steps, and Shae, and went out the door of the Kitchen Keep.

Along the path that bordered the godswood and past the rookery, to the Holdfast and Cersei's sleeping quarters. The air was clear and cold, and the sounds of Dornish songs sung in tuneless mass rose and fell behind him, amid muffled shouts and whistles. Tyrion wondered if there would be any respite from the noise tonight at all. Possibly. They've reached the communal singing stage, I think the next stage is passing out.

Near the drawbridge to the Holdfast, he stopped. There were shadows here deep enough to lose a horse in, let alone a very small man. The stone blocks pressed cold against his back, and the scar across his nose felt tight in the icy air. He tried not to think of Shae's warm skin. Her hot, soft mouth. Of course, trying not to think of something only ensures it's the only thing you can think about. Godsdamn it.

Jiggling from foot to foot to prevent his toes from cramping, he imagined standing in the kitchens earlier and telling Jaime the hard truth. 'Is our sister being difficult? A tad unreasonable, you say? She's only been completely batshit evil for the last 20 years; what a shame you've been so focused on what was under her skirts that you willingly overlooked all that. You've turned a blind eye, been complicit in her wrongdoings, compromised your own honour, and told yourself it was all for love. And now she's turned on you? Who'd have fucking thought. Best of luck, brother, laying in that bed of your own making.'

Why didn't I say it? Is it because I'm a coward?

Tyrion considered this. He was often cowardly, but he knew this wasn't the reason he hadn't been honest with Jaime. It was because his brother was, in the end, the glue that held the Lannisters together. When Jaime had problems, they all had problems. He was his father's golden boy, his sister's protector, the one person guaranteed to treat Tyrion with kindness. The one person who, growing up, Tyrion could rely on, laugh with, and trust. That's the reason I can't throw Cersei's true nature in his face. Because without Jaime keeping the peace, the family tears itself to pieces. The truth wouldn't only hurt him, it would hurt all of us.
The Lannisters. Was there a more formidable family, anywhere in Westeros? One a Queen, one Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, their bastard son a King, their father the King's Hand. Tyrion himself, Master of Coin. Their combined power over the Seven kingdoms was well nigh absolute. Between them they controlled the political, military and financial forces of the Realm. United they were a stronghold. But divided?

Fractures form from within. A seemingly small wound, left unchecked, can spread. Mighty structures can be brought crashing down from a tiny weakness, a fissure, that grows, widens, splits apart, until mountains fall. Dynasties, even. This Tyrion knew. He was only too aware of the simmering hostilities between him and his father and sister. Neither had any fondness for the dwarf who killed his own mother. Their bonds were based on a harsh concept of 'family,' one that considered love a mere distraction to the ultimate goal: an enduring legacy named 'Lannister'.

Tyrion huffed on his cupped hands, tucked them under his cloak. He had an uneasy feeling in his stomach. Was a fracture forming within House Lannister even now, creeping insidiously outwards? Were they all just desperately hanging on, maintaining a thin pretence of solidarity, while inside, decades-old slights and fears festered and poisoned? Was paranoia setting in like grubs to fruit, eating their family from the inside out?

With Jaime returned healthy and unharmed, we should be strengthening our position, Tyrion thought. But it doesn't feel that way. My brother hasn't slotted back into his sorely-missed role as peace-keeper. Quite the opposite, in fact. We need the old Jaime now more than ever, but somewhere in the filth and confines of Robb Stark's Northern prison, the old Jaime went missing. And the rest of us can't seem to handle the new one.

Look at how I reacted, to his confessions just now, Tyrion realised. With disbelief and resistance. I wanted to bloody strangle him. Instead of trying to understand, I refused to accept it. I was thinking 'How can Jaime do this? Loyal, strong-willed Jaime, who puts family first every time. I've always been a fuck-up, but Jaime? He's the good son.' I only cared how he'd let me down, by not being who I wanted him to be.

I guess we have more in common than I ever realised. Maybe we should run away to Dorne together. There, Lords can wed baseborn girls, I hear. The Lannister brothers and their common wenches, living happily ever after.

He grinned crookedly as he pictured it. Him, Shae, his brother and his brother's delivery girl. No Cersei to be seen. Totally unrealistic of course, but a man can dream.

The tapping of footsteps interrupted his thoughts. Cersei, wrapped in a heavy velvet coat over a white gold-trimmed silk gown, and carrying a lantern, came trapping over the bridge with purposeful intent. Despite waiting for this exact eventuality, Tyrion still startled. He held his breath until she'd passed by, then slunk after her. He kept well back in the trees, following the sound of her footsteps, and emerged from the godswood just in time to glimpse her pale skirts disappearing around the corner of the Kitchen Keep.

Is she going to my room? To grill me about Jaime and his cheating ways? Tyrion scurried as fast as his short legs could carry him across the yard to head her off, but when he reached the door that led up to his apartments all was quiet. The stairs were likewise deserted. Strange.

He caught his breath, looked all around, but his sister appeared to have vanished. Like a ghost. He peered down the laneway behind the Kitchen Keep, which he'd seen her enter into only minutes ago. The narrow space between the high stone walls wound like a tunnel, black as pitch, but didn't lead anywhere except to here. Tyrion checked the stairwell again, went half-way up and then returned just to make sure, but nothing. My sister is as venomous as a sea-serpent and twice as slippery.
Where in seven hells has she slid off to?

Tyrion sat on the bottom step and wondered if Shae was still waiting for him in the cellars. She probably figured he'd been delayed. He wondered if she was wearing much. Maybe a coat. *She never wears much underneath.*

Only the thought of Jaime's disappointment stopped Tyrion from rushing straight down there to check. *If I hurry, I can still make it back. Wait for me, Shae.* He got up and looked down the laneway again, then began to creep slowly into the blackness, feeling his way along the wall with his fingers. If Cersei had suspicions she was being followed, he was right now walking straight into her trap.

*What could I even say I was doing? 'Oh hey sister, fancy meeting you here in this little-used laneway that leads pretty much nowhere, in the middle of the night. What a coincidence.'*

In the overhang of the tall buildings, it was too dark to see anything. A few more hesitant steps, and he decided it wisest to stop and have a think.

After all, it wasn't likely that Cersei was going to kill Jaime's delivery girl tonight, on her own. Death was unavoidably messy. Too many leaking fluids. His sister was only too happy to kill people, as long as it wasn't her hand actually wielding the blade. And that gown she was wearing was one of her favourites; Tyrion was positive she'd never risk getting it stained. Blood was near impossible to get out of a delicate material like silk.

Jaime's whore was most likely not in imminent danger.

*Jaime said she wasn't a whore, but... semantics.* Whether the wench had actually whored herself out to other men previously or not, her act in seducing Jaime Lannister could only mean she planned to get her hands on wealth, status and possibly Casterley Rock. *There are cheap whores and there are ambitious whores, it's all just a matter of degree.*

Tyrion hadn't always been so cynical. He'd used to believe in love for it's own sake, love between commoners and Nobles, love pure and simple. He'd used to be quite the naive romantic, once. But life experience had taught him better.

*Life experience, and a sharp lesson courtesy of Father and Jaime, years ago. Yet Jaime is the one seems to have forgotten it.*

Tyrion would never forget. He closed his eyes every night and saw her face. Tysha. Dark haired, slim, an infectious smile. And a whore, like Shae. He obviously had a type. Tyrion idly wondered what Jaime's 'type' was.

*I've slept with hundreds of women, it's possible my type is fairly flexible. Jaime might be rather more particular in his tastes.*

The light from a lantern suddenly splashed on the path up ahead, a few yards in front of him. Tyrion tensed and crouched low, preparing to run. As if she'd materialised from out of the wall, Cersei stood for a moment in the glow, preoccupied with some package she was carrying. Then, thankfully, she turned in the opposite direction from Tyrion and headed back the way she'd come. He waited until her steps had faded, then hurried over to where she'd been.

With palms flat, he felt the outline of hinges; a door, hidden behind the base of a turret. A small room built under the kitchens. Going by the faint whiff of vinegar hanging in the air, maybe an old pickling room. Tyrion had no knowledge of it. He pushed on the handle but, obviously, it was
locked. There was no other way in, everything was stone.

*Is Jaime's delivery girl in there?* Tyrion got down and peered through the thin gap under the door that he could feel with his fingers. There were no sounds inside, no light either. *Well, it's hardly likely that Cersei had a night-time craving for old pickles, so it's a safe bet I've found Jaime's missing girl.* He got up, wondered who else may have a key. Probably the Maester that Jaime was seeking out. Tyrion wasn't quite sure what to do next.

*I could wait here to make sure nothing happens to Jaime's delivery girl. I could return to my room and get some sleep. Or I could go see if, by some miracle, Shae is still waiting for me.*

Tyrion sighed. Why bother trying to salvage anything good from this night, it was almost over. Shae would be long gone, she wasn't anywhere near as stupid as he was. He may as well commit himself to this folly.

He sat down and made himself as comfortable as possible in the dark, damp, weed-infested doorway. Which was, by any measure, still very uncomfortable. The temperature was below freezing, and he huddled into his thick wool cloak. *Good night, Jaime's delivery girl,* he thought. *I hope my brother derived great pleasure from his illicit liaisons with you, because tonight you've totally ruined mine.* He closed his eyes, and dreamt of Tysha.

Tyrion woke a few hours later as the sky brightened. He sat up, rubbed the crick in his neck, and examined the door in the dawn light. Even lit, it was concealed by the turret's edging and was barely noticeable.

*Well, you're on your own for a while, delivery girl.* Tyrion knew he couldn't wait here any longer. He had to be at the wedding breakfast so as not arouse Cersei's suspicions, and cover for Jaime if he was still absent. *Please don't be absent, dear brother. I'm not continuing this farce for the rest of the damned day. Witnessing Joffrey being feted and celebrated at his wedding is going to be a painful enough ordeal, without having to keep up a steady stream of lies and excuses as to why you aren't around.*

Tyrion made it back to his bedchamber before Sansa awoke. There was no word of Jaime coming to see him. He had Pod help him change clothes, and was out in the crowded bailey by the time the sun had risen, dodging between legs and boots. Behind him he heard the spine-chilling sound of Cersei's tinkling laughter, and he turned.

She had her back to him and was talking to a man with slicked-back black hair. Tyrion saw her drop a pouch into the man's hand; it chinked heavily with the weight of substantial coin. Then Cersei switched her attention and moved off, to charm some unsuspecting Tyrell.

Tyrion waited until she'd left, then 'Ser!' he called out to the black-haired man. 'A quick word.' Tyrion marched through the tightly packed mob, stomping on people's toes and elbowing kneecaps until they parted, and he reached the man's side.

'I was wondering if you might be able to do something for me. I'm in urgent need of someone to watch over something today, while I'm elsewise occupied at the King's wedding.'

The black haired man regarded Tyrion thoughtfully, one hand on the long dirk at his hip, the other in his pocket. Before he could reply, Tyrion's arm was grasped and he was spun around. 'There you are, little brother,' his sister exclaimed gaily. She sounded almost pleased to see him, which would be unheard of.
Cersei mustn't have got more than a couple of hours sleep either, but her green eyes sparkled, and her skin shone. 'Sansa is already seated in the ballroom, she said you'd gone for a walk. Have you seen Jaime? He's not in his tower, and the breakfast is about to start. Then, Joff will be receiving his gifts.'

'I can scarcely wait,' Tyrion said. 'But no, I haven't seen our brother. I'm sure he'll not be far away.'

'I hope so,' Cersei sighed, and pressed her hands together under her chin in girlish prayer. 'It's going to be such a big day. I'd hate for him to miss any of it.'

She started to walk back towards the ballroom, still clutching Tyrion's arm. He wrenched it free of her. 'One moment, dear sister. I just have to...' he held up a finger, then quickly ducked back through the throng of guests as they pushed forward. His eyes scanned for the black-haired man, and finally sighted him at the outskirts of the crowd, strolling away.

Tyrion ran to catch up and tugged on his shirt hem. 'Wait up! About that job I need you to do -'

'I'm sorry, M'Lord Tyrion,' the man said, with an oily grin. 'No can do today. I already got a better offer.'

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, with probably only 3 remaining in this story, is dedicated to polly and snowlover, who both left lovely reviews and have awesome usernames. My dog is called polly. She's a great dog.
Revenge

After the Queen left, taking with her Joffrey's wedding gift, the girl stared into the darkness for a long time. Silence humming in her ears, the walls of the room thick enough to mute outside sound. The faint scratching of a rat or other small creature, from under the door. Then, silence again.

The girl felt empty, but light as well. As if she were so full of nothingness that she could disintegrate completely. Evaporate into the stale frozen air, vanish into infinite dusty particles.

*Then when the Queen suspects what I've done to her son and returns to get me, I'll be already gone.*

Of course, the girl knew that wouldn't be what happened. When they came back for her, she would be killed. This was a given, but it wasn't something she wanted to think about in any detail, so she put it out of her mind for now. She was under no illusions that her crime would go unnoticed. But she figured she had some hours left, to sit quietly, and breathe, and feel her heart beating, and be alone with her thoughts. To savour her unlikely victory, even if no-one but herself really understood what it was.

She thought about the woman who had come in to see her. The cold-eyed, beautiful Queen, with all of Jaime's arrogance and ruthlessness, but none of his warmth. When the girl had realised who was standing there, and what an amazing opportunity it was, a bolt of clarity had struck like lightning. It was fate, destiny, luck, all at once.

She'd had no inkling that the Queen would wake her up, no idea why a Queen would want to talk to her at all. But, it was perfect. The gods had handed her this one moment and all she'd had to do was seize it. So she had. By gifting the Queen the arrow she'd bought from Maeg in Maidenpool. The arrow of misfortune, Maeg had called it. Bought with the slain villager's coin, after she'd first found out Jaime was the Kingslayer. Back before Locke, and the injuries, and Brienne, and Kingslanding. Back when she had all her toes, and two eyes that worked, and Sooty was alive. A lifetime ago.

*Have I always meant to use that arrow to avenge Mycah?* Truth was, the girl didn't even remember buying the case, or what had been her actual intention for it at the time. Everything that had happened that day was a blur of confusion and later, incapacitating pain. She only knew she'd had to keep the bag close to her, so it couldn't fall into innocent hands.

But now the Queen had the case. And soon, Joffrey's hands would be the ones to open it, take out the arrow, admire its gleaming perfection. The girl had never met Joffrey, never would, but she pictured a golden-haired boy with cruel eyes, smiling as he notched the beautiful weapon into his crossbow. And then... what did Maeg say? *Whoever touches the arrow... will suffer a terrible misfortune. A day, a week, two weeks... But they will die.*

And the Queen would be the one to have brought her son's own death to him. *Will you know that's why he died?* The girl thought of the older woman again, of her crisp, regal voice, the look of disdain etched onto her features.

*You won't know why I wanted your son dead, but that doesn't matter. You probably don't even remember the incident at the Crossroads with Joffrey, and my brother. The butcher's boy. You probably never knew his name. You wouldn't have known that the butcher killed himself as well, because of it. And you definitely wouldn't have known about me.*

Arya Stark had said 'Know your enemy.' Arya was right. But how could the Queen ever know her enemy? How could Joffrey? When the enemy was someone they had no idea even existed. A
common delivery girl. A no-one.

It was dark again without the Queen's lantern, but the girl didn't mind. She looped her arms around her drawn-up legs, and rested her chin on her knees. Thirst still tormented her, shivers still shook her body and her teeth continued to chatter, but these were mere bodily reactions. Her mind was calm. A sense of peace descended. 'I did it, Mycah', she whispered. 'I did it.'

If her brother, in any of his apparitions, remained with her, there was no sign. The girl wished she had a candle left, but the stub had melted away to a puddle of tallow on the bench. There'd been no sign of Mycah when the Queen was there, but perhaps now they were alone again? The girl yearned to cut through the blackness and be able to see, for a minute. To see his face, for one minute more.

You don't scare me any more, brother, she told him. Just in case he were still there, in some shape or form, that she didn't understand but realised she didn't have to. I thought... if I ever believed in ghosts, which I didn't, but... I thought you would be a vengeful ghost. I thought your appearance would be horrifying. Because I had imagined what happened to you, so many times. The way you were killed became everything to me, I couldn't get past it. But Arya was right about that, too. How someone dies isn't who they are. You were still you, existing somewhere in another reality, another world, how you would be if you were still alive in this one. Adventurous, happy, brave. I just forgot who you were, is all.

The girl smiled. A tingling sensation ran through her, a feeling very much like joy.

You were not vengeful, Mycah. Her brother had been an uncomplicated person. A person who forgave the wrongs done against him, who didn't hold a grudge. Who moved on, who let things go.

But I am not that person.

Dawn light finally creeping in across the floor. Dust floating in a haze, motes spinning and whirling like eddies of water. Pools of cool, refreshing water. The girl lay with her cheek against the floor, dreaming of water. Drops, trickles, streams of water, pouring down her throat.

I could drink a whole flask in one gulp. I would even drink that awful Dreamwine again. Anything to quench this thirst. She tried to remember when she'd last had any water, and guessed it was two nights ago, when she'd been in the room with the bath. I would drink that whole bath, my own dirt and all.

She hadn't eaten since then either, despite having been brought those bowls of stew. She wasn't hungry. The thought of food made her nauseous; water alone obsessed her.

She remembered following the river with Jaime, for a week, how the constant burble of it had been background noise to them. She thought if she were ever by some miracle to get back to the Riverlands, she would take a running leap straight into that river, and never mind if she drowned.

Suddenly the door juddered in its frame, loud in the silence. The lock clicked. Instinctively, the girl scrambled to sit up. She scuffled around behind her and grabbed a sliver of wood lying nearby, that had possibly broken off an old crate. The width of her pinky finger, it was rotted and she knew it would snap before it even broke skin. She clutched it anyway.

The door creaked open and a man stepped quickly inside, his movements easy and graceful. His coal-black hair emphasised the lean hardness of his face, as he closed the door and stood there, in no great hurry. He folded his hands in front of himself, rocked back slightly on his heels. His tall boots were of beaten leather, and made no sound when he moved. A wide belt hung with a dirk that
reached to his knee.

The girl stared at him. She knew he was a cut-throat. She knew he had killed many people for gold, maybe hundreds, and that doing so never bothered him at all. This man was beyond normal morality.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, dropping the splinter of wood. Although, she knew.

'I could ask you the same thing,' he replied, with a grin.

'I asked you first,' she said. 'Bronn.'

He regarded her, still with that grin playing on his thin lips. 'It's Ser Bronn of the Blackwater now. I've moved up in the world since y' last seen me.'

She smiled, bowed. 'Please excuse me. What are you doing here, Ser Bronn?'

He scratched his neck and chortled softly. 'Well. I'm here to kill you, Delivery Girl,' he said. 'So, this is awkward.'
Bronn

Bronn leaned lazily back against the door, and appraised the small room. 'Nice place they put you up in. Does it come with room service?'

'Yeah. Royalty even drop in,' the girl said. Her face was smeared with dust, and her voice raspy, as if she'd been screaming for hours. Bronn recognised her immediately, of course. She was not the sort of person you forgot in a hurry.

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. He wondered where her savage horse was. Dead probably. _Wouldn't abide being apart from her for a minute, and had an unfortunate habit of attacking anyone that got in the way._ He wondered if she had been screaming. _Getting that eye injury can't have been a pleasant experience._ Finally, he wondered what in seven hells could have happened to the Nobility-shy, authority-avoiding, reclusive delivery girl he used to know, to bring her to this. Locked up in the Red Keep, and dangerous enough to the Queen to have her pay for her death.

_and luckily for the wench, valuable enough to Lord Tyrion Lannister to have him pay more to save her. Funny how life turns out, sometimes._

'Aint seen you in a while.' Bronn drawled. 'Almost didn't recognise you.'

'I washed my hair and I'm in a dress. What of it?'

'Yeah. You grew up, too, by the looks.' He couldn't help but notice her new curves. She used to be such a skinny little thing, like a boy. 'But whatever you done; I don't think it was a real good idea to be having that face 'round these parts. It's just gone and rubbed certain folks up the wrong way.'

'What d'ya propose I do with it? It's my fucking face.' She scowled, coughed.

'You coulda dirtied it up a bit. Covered up some of that pretty.'

'Pretty? Ha.' She jabbed a finger at her eye. 'Have you missed this, pray?'

'Scars are sexy,' Bronn said, keeping his expression neutral even as hers twisted with disbelief.

'I walk with a limp, too,' she told him, standing up and demonstrating a few steps forwards and back. Then she turned and fixed him with a familiar childish glare, as she'd done years ago when she was a kid and anyone had dared to contradict her. She didn't even pretend to look frightened. _She aint changed that much, _he thought. _Still fucking difficult._

He shrugged. 'Makes yer bum wiggle.'

'I'm glad you think this is all an improvement. Should've maimed myself years ago. So.' She kept staring at him, but he said nothing. 'You're here to do me in, huh?'

He inclined his head, nodded. _You could at least try and look worried, girl. I'm standing here with a weapon and a reputation, and you can't even make an effort to take me seriously._

'Do you have any water at least?' she sighed. 'I'm dying of thirst.'

He couldn't help a grin sliding across his face at that. 'Can't have that can we? How would I kill you then?'
'That's right. You couldn't. So, do you?'

'Tell you what. I ain't got none on me, but there's a cart waiting outside. All you gotta do is be dead for a half hour, and once I get you outta here we'll get all the water you like. Fuck it, we'll have wine.'

She grinned too, and he could see her visibly relax. *Maybe she really was worried.* 'Thought you meant to kill me?'

He crooked a finger at her. 'C'mere.' She walked up to him, frowning. 'Hold out your arm.'

She held it out, unafraid. 'Is this going to hurt?'

'Not at all,' he said, taking her wrist in a firm grip. Of course it would, but he needed her to be still. With one smooth stroke he drew his dirk diagonally across her forearm, and for a second her skin gaped like a mouth before blood welled and spilled along the line like a split gourd.

The girl's arm jerked reflexively, but Bronn held tight and turned it over, letting the drops run off her wrist and splatter to the floor. Neither of them spoke, just watched the red splashes patterning on the stone like watercolour roses. After a minute the flow eased, and he shook her hand a little, then let go. She pressed the arm against her side and winced.

'No, didn't hurt at all,' she snipped, rather ungraciously he thought.

'Would you rather it was your throat?'

'The Queen paid you to kill me, didn't she.'

'She did, and I have. Now get yer dead self in the cart outside before I change my mind and leave you here.'

She didn't need to be told twice. Slipping out the door as Bronn held it open for her, she blinked for a moment in the early light and took a deep breath. Stumbled slightly. He helped her up onto the covered wagon, which the Queen had arranged as a way for him to dispose of the body, then stepped back. His eyes scanned up and down the deserted laneway. 'Under the canvas, make it snappy.'

The girl lifted the edge of the heavy material and immediately recoiled. 'What the fuck is...?'

'Dead bodies, what you think? Pigs, a horse, chickens... maybe an urchin or two in there. Some Dornish revellers partied a bit too hard. Busy night, for corpses. Now c'mon, no time to be squeamish.' He motioned with his chin, arms crossed.

The girl grimaced and crawled on top of the heaped cadavers. A couple of bloated flies buzzed and resettled. She wriggled down until she was lying flat, sandwiched between a week-old pig and a headless man. Bronn winked. 'Comfy?'

'Never been more so,' she assured him.

'Not a peep from you til we get out.'

She nodded.

'Good. Hold yer nose.' Bronn dropped the sheet and tucked it under. Threw a pile of sacks across the material to weigh it down, then he went around to the driver's seat. He swung himself up and clicked
The outer wards were nowhere near as crowded as earlier, most people having headed for the Sept to take up vantage positions for the King and his new bride as they emerged. Bronn steered around the nearly empty pavilions, and detritus of last night's revelry. At the gates, a brief conversation. The guards knew he shouldn't be driving the undertaker's cart, but they must've been appraised by the Queen that he'd be coming through, because they had no questions. As Bronn passed under the portcullis, he had to veer his cart sideways to avoid a horse and rider galloping through in the opposite direction. 'Mind your fucking wagon!' the man shouted, and Bronn turned his head to hide his face. *Ser Jaime Lannister. No need to complicate things.*

Out in the streets of the Capital, Bronn let out the breath he didn't realise he'd been holding. *So far, so good. Maybe I can please everybody yet. The Queen thinks the girl's dead and disposed of... who's to tell her she aint?* The horse jogged down the street of Seeds towards Cobbler's Square. The wheels creaked and bounced on the cobblestones. In the square, a few solitary traders were setting up their stalls in preparation for the afternoon's festivities. Bronn reined in a good distance from them, and got down.

The girl lay still amongst the bodies with her eyes closed as he lifted the covering. The scar on her face added to the effect, she did make a very convincing corpse. He wrinkled his nose. *Ugh. That really is putrid.* 'Having fun with your new friends? Up.'

She opened her eyes and scrambled out. Bronn grabbed her arm and held her hidden beside him, as he tugged on the headless man's jacket, dragged the breeches from the stiff legs. 'Get that dress off and put these on,' he ordered. Without hesitation, the girl pulled off her green dress as if relieved to be rid of it, balled it up, and lobbed it onto the bodies. Bronn gaped a little at her bare breasts, then forced his mouth to close. *Always was uninhibited. Fuck me.*

The girl dressed in the dead man's clothes, which were at least three sizes too big for her but she held them on with a belt sashed tight around her waist. Then she used a strip of hessian torn from one of the sacks to tie back her hair. Flipped up the hood, and was lost in the shadows of it.

Bronn smiled. 'You look like a filthy beggar.'

Her teeth flashed in the hood. 'Good.'

'Come on, let's go. The Queen don't like vagrants hanging around the Capital, causing trouble.' Bronn took her elbow to guide her, but she leaned back into the wagon and grabbed her black bag that had been tucked down the side. Then she let him walk her over to a stone bench set into the wall, where a saddled and bridled white horse, streaked with mud, stood with its head down.

'Can I get some water now?' the girl whined. Bronn gave her a push toward the bench. 'He'll have some for you,' he said. The girl took two steps and stopped when she saw the small figure of a man sitting in the shade.

'Who are you?' she asked suspiciously.

The dwarf looked up at Bronn and feigned disappointment. 'Did you not tell her who was meeting her here? I'm hurt, Bronn. I would at least like to take credit for saving a peasant's life, considering how rarely I do it. And especially considering how personally risky this venture is.'

Bronn chuckled. 'She wouldn'ta known you, anyways. She ain't well versed in who's who amongst you lot.'
'Well, that's refreshing,' Tyrion said. 'An uneducated peasant, my favourite.'

'Are you the Imp?' the girl asked, in a distasteful tone of voice Bronn knew would cause the dwarf to bristle.

'Yes I am, sweetling. And you must be the *whore*,' Tyrion countered.

'I'm no whore. I'm a butcher's daughter.'

'Let's not quibble over titles. I don't have much time before I need to be back by my wife and sister's side for King Joffrey's wedding feast, an hour's hence. They think I'm a little ill-disposed, but there's only so long a shit can take. And dear Joffrey will be devastated if I were to miss any of his big day.'

The girl made a snorting sound. 'Did he get all his presents yet?'

'I believe so,' Tyrion replied, thoughtfully. 'He didn't like mine too much, which is a shame.'

The girl laughed and the hood fell back as her chin lifted. 'Maybe he'll like the others.'

Bronn could see Tyrion staring with fascination at the girl's face, revealed in the morning light. The dwarf tipped his head to one side and rested one finger on his chin as he studied her. 'Interesting,' he said, at last.

'What's so interesting? My scar?' the girl said, annoyed. 'Like you can talk.'

'No, not your scar. Although it is impressive; not quite up to the standard of mine but we can't all be so lucky. No, I was just noticing your resemblance to my dear sister. Which is... interesting.'

'What resemblance?'

'It makes me take an instant dislike to you, I must say.'

'I'm nothing like that fucking *evil* bitch!' the girl snapped with vehemence.

'Well, that response does make me like you a little more. And your face certainly goes some way toward explaining... reasons. Behind certain family member's recent... irrational behaviour. Your being a whore, and crippled, also counts in your favour, as I've always had a soft spot for those things. But let's not dwell on me, as I said, time is short. Bronn!'

'Yes M'Lord?'

'Can you transport me back to the Keep for the feast on your... cart?'

'Yeah. I'll get you back. You may not smell so good by the time we get there, though.'

'Even better, I'll say it's my bowel problem. Now you... what's your name, girl?'

Bronn interrupted before the girl could be rude again. 'She don't give her name out to strangers, as a general rule.'

Tyrion sighed. 'I see. Uneducated and ungrateful with it. I'm so glad I decided to play the hero here. My bloody brother owes me a lot more than 500 gold coins for this.'

At the mention of his brother, Bronn noticed the girl's defensive expression soften. She looked hopeful and yearning, desperate and sad, all at once. Her mouth opened and Bronn wondered if she was going to be stupid enough to ask if she could see him, but she must've realised how impossible
that was, so she just said quietly, 'Jaime.' On her lips, the name sounded like a prayer.

'Yes. My brother. He told me last night that he owed you a debt, so I'm honouring it for him. While he... gallivants around the city on a fool's mission. I have realised that you're trouble, girl. Trouble I don't need, trouble my sister doesn't need, and trouble my brother, despite what he thinks at the moment, definitely doesn't need. Not that I care about my sister, in fact I am enjoying deceiving her very much, but I am rather fond of my brother. To my endless detriment.'

'Jaime,' the girl said again, this time barely louder than a whisper.

'It's better this way.' Tyrion said, briskly. 'At least you're alive. Which I've always found to be beneficial. Now, off you go.'

The girl looked confused. Tyrion pointed at the white horse nearby. 'Your steed awaits. And in the saddlebags, 500 gold coins. I believe that was the deal you made?'

'Yes but, but... how?'

'Luckily I'm Master of Coin. A tedious job, but it does have its perks. There's a full water flask and some food in there, too. Hurry up girl, before I begin to dislike you again.'

The girl turned without another word and started towards the horse, hobbling on the uneven stones. Bronn looked down at Tyrion and smirked. 'Ain't that your father's horse?'

'That muddy old thing?'

'Yep. The mud you smeared on it don't do much to disguise it.'

The dwarf looked affronted. 'Now why would I give a commoner my father's best war horse? Lord Tywin Lannister is always a champion of the small folk, and benevolent towards whores everywhere, besides. Flogging and raping whores for minor transgressions would never cross his mind. It would be unjust in the extreme for me to give away his horse to a poor wretch, when he's done so much for the poor wretches of the world already.'

Bronn listened to this speech with patient cynicism. 'Right you are then. Just looks a hell of a lot like your father's war horse.'

'Well, it can hardly be. I believe my father's war horse ran away from the stables this morning. No one has seen it anywhere. Funny how a horse can just disappear like that.' Tyrion's eyes widened in innocence.

'Funny,' Bronn agreed. They watched the girl as she drank deeply from the water flask, wiped her mouth, then gathered up the horse's reins. 'You think she can get on, with that limp she's got?' Tyrion wondered.

'Trust me. She were born on a horse, that one,' Bronn said. 'Mother were a horse savage, you know.'

'Really? And her father a butcher, she said?'

The girl had mounted and was riding the great white stallion towards the gates. With her hood back in place and her baggy clothes, the guards showed no interest at her approach.

'Nah,' Bronn shook his head. 'She took him to be, but that butcher weren't her father. No way known. She looked nothing like her brother or sister. You ask me, someone else got in there, for that one.'
'Who?' Tyrion wanted to know.

'Her mother were attractive, and travelled around a lot, too. Coulda been anyone. Coulda been your Lord father himself for all I know,' Bronn shrugged.

'You do seem well acquainted with her. What's her name?'

Bronn laughed, then cleared his throat. 'Ivezhzheana,' he pronounced, the consonants low and guttural.

Tyrion raised his eyebrows. 'Are you sure that's her name, or are you not feeling well?'

'If I were gonna make up a name, you think I wouldn't have chosen one a bit easier to say? Means 'wild and beautiful', I believe. Or... 'don't touch my goat.' One or the other.'

Tyrion was suddenly impatient and hopped off the bench. 'Enough of the wild girl. Let's get back before my sister pitches a holy fit. She wasn't too keen on Jaime's absence at the ceremony, she'll be even less keen if neither of us are there for the feast.'

Bronn considered telling Tyrion he'd passed Jaime entering the Red Keep, as he himself had been leaving it, but decided not to bother. The Lannister brothers would catch up soon enough, and then it was entirely Tyrion's business to tell Jaime all, part, or any, of what actually happened this morning. Bronn would get gold in his pocket from the Queen and Tyrion both, and, in the end, that was really all that mattered.
Ivvy rode out of KingsLanding with 500 gold coins and a white warhorse. Her arm stung where Bronn's blade had sliced it, and her empty stomach rolled and clenched, but her head was clear.

What will 500 gold coins buy? A new life for me? A new life for my sister and her children?

It was more than she'd expected, yesterday. Maybe more than she deserved. All the decisions she'd made had led her right on up to death's door. Step-by-step, she saw that now, each ill-considered choice another move closer to her demise. Like a fated path laid out for her and she had followed it. Ever since she'd first kissed Jaime, and believed herself to be invincible. Believed she could do whatever she wanted, have whoever she wanted, and no-one could stop her. Maybe ever since she'd first laid eyes on him sitting there by the roadside, and instead of continuing on her way as she should have done, she'd brazenly gone on up and talked to him.

You aren't invincible. You can't do whatever you want. You can't have whoever you want. Somethings can never be yours, no matter how much that hurts.

But you do have a life at least, she reminded herself. A life far from KingsLanding. She could never go back, she knew that much. But as the Imp had said, being alive had benefits.

I have a life, far from Jaime. But don't think about Jaime.

She urged the charger into a brisk trot, along the road heading North. He responded immediately to the merest brush of her heels. The air was fresh and cool, with a sharp breeze biting at her bare hands. Behind her, the sprawling silhouette of the Capital gradually receded. The noise and odours faded, the road became less crowded. She enjoyed being on the back of a horse again; the rise and fall of his swinging gait, the steady clop of iron shoes. Dodging between loaded wagons and barrows, the weak sun glittering on the melting muddy frost heaped in the ditches. It felt good. Fuck, it felt great.

Despite shaking with nerves as she'd ridden through the gates, her palms slick with sweat on the reins, the guards had barely glanced in her direction. After having resigned herself to the certainty of dying, it seemed too simple to now be free. But, despite everything, here she was. Each breath she inhaled to her lungs, mingled as it was with the dust and manure kicked up by passing traffic, tasted sweeter than any she'd drawn before. Every rocking surge of the stallion's strides carrying her further away from KingsLanding felt like a blessing.

Further away from Jaime. But don't think about Jaime.

She wondered if the Queen would be feeling victorious now. Watching her son, King Joffrey, at his wedding feast, Jaime by her side.

You'll think you've won. You'll think I am dead, and you have your son and your brother both.

But not for long.

Ivvy smiled.

I don't have Jaime. Or my brother. But maybe... She thought of the now ever-present nausea that had settled in her guts, the way even the smell of food made her sick... maybe one day soon I'll have a son. Or daughter. A little blonde daughter, with green eyes.
Green eyes, like the Queen. Blonde hair, like Joffrey. But without the black rot inside of them. So, Queen. Maybe we're even. You took my brother away from me, and I took your child. I gave you back your brother, but not before he gave me a child.

There was a symmetry to it that pleased her. Even as the memories of Jaime came crowding in, his eyes, his hands, the feel of him, his voice, his laugh; Ivvy blinked hot tears from her eyes and shook her head to focus, but even so... Even so. She could almost see past the pain and find the rightness in it.

500 gold coins. Maybe I'll call into RedHollow on my way home. See how the poacher's kids are doing. She thought of the poacher lying on his back, his white eyes filling with rain. He died for a reward that would have helped him raise them. Maybe now I can help them.

And Callem, maybe he would be there too. Cautious, shy, sensible Cal, who'd got mixed up in something beyond his control. Ivvy felt a warmth spread through her at the thought of Callem. I wonder how you're coping at your father's smithy business, with only one hand? Do the horses stand still for you to shoe them? I wonder if you ever feel as though something is missing in your life? Something or someone. Like a lame, half-blind girl, who is good with horses, and bad at most everything else?

She reached down and scratched the stallion's neck. His crest was hard and smooth, but he didn't even twitch an ear as she stroked him, just continued on ahead without pause. It made Ivvy remember how much Sooty had loved a scratch, the faces she had pulled in enjoyment. Ivvy sat back up in the saddle, and felt sad.

Ahead of her around a serpentine bend was a market set back off the highway, in an area of trampled grass. Horses with spotted coats shifted their big, feathered hooves and shook their ratty manes, while dogs with ribs like palings slunk between the wheels. The carts parked in a semi-circle were high-sided, covered with material, keeping the goods in them hidden from prying gazes.

Ivvy knew this place. She knew the sly-eyed vendors who peddled their banned wares here, who sold services that were frowned on inside the Capital. She knew they could pack up and clear the entire area in less time than it took a soldier or law-man to travel from one bend in the road to the other. She knew, because for many years she had also sold her goods and services here. The whiff of illicit dealings, the seedy undercurrent of forbidden trade... it was all so reassuringly familiar.

She turned her horse towards the market. The gypsy horses eyed the stallion as he approached, flicking their ears. A tan dog yipped and danced around his legs, nipping at the air. The people manning the stalls slid their eyes towards her, probably noticing the quality of her horse compared to theirs, then turned away. It was as if they acknowledged she was one of them. The horse was not, presumably stolen or otherwise ill-gained, but she was. Ivvy rode past, as light rain began to spit in her face.

A skinny child appeared suddenly from behind a tree like a wraith, dragging a goat by a rope around its neck. The stallion didn't react to any of the distractions, just continued obediently on until Ivvy halted him at the back of the parked vehicles, behind a sloping windbreak made of logs and greased canvas. One edge of the material was loose and snapped in the wind, with a sound like a whip cracking.

*The stallion has no initiative*, Ivvy realised, as her mount stood silently without moving a hoof. *Sooty would be snorting, wary of the sounds and the sights, but this horse just responds to my commands blindly. He doesn't turn towards noises to investigate, he doesn't spook or lay back his ears. He doesn't enjoy scratches and he doesn't have an opinion. He simply does what he's told, and no more.*
Ivvy realised what was troubling her most about the horse. Not only was he clearly an animal much too well-bred for a peasant, and therefore bound to arouse suspicion, but he was too well-trained. He was a servant not a partner. In a fight, he would wait for orders, not use his smarts. He would never alert her to dangers she couldn't see. An enemy could raise a sword to cut off this stallion's head, and he wouldn't even move unless she told him to. *If this was what the King's family considered a great warhorse, then no wonder they've all been holed up in KingsLanding, waiting for the war to end.*

Ivvy sighed, squinting into the increasing drizzle. The little gypsy girl with the goat had followed her around to the back of the market and was now staring at her. Ivvy stared back. The goat had horns shaped like snakes and yellow eyes. The kid looked around eight or nine but may have been older. She had a deformity in her face that made her mouth skew oddly, her teeth jut out. But she didn't appear afraid of strangers. With a finger made entirely of dirt she pointed at Ivvy's white stallion and lisped, 'Whath hith name?'

Ivvy shrugged. 'He doesn't have one.'

'He'th niceth,' said the little girl. 'Should give him a name.'

Ivvy gestured at the goat. 'What's your goat's name?'

'Lightning.'

'That's a powerful name for a goat. Is he fast?'

'Yeth,' said the little girl, with a hint of pride. 'I can ride him.'

Ivvy almost laughed but stifled it. *The kid is resourceful. Can you ride a horse, too?*

'Yeth.' The girl wiped her mouth self-consciously where spit had gathered in the corners of her twisted lips. 'But I'm not allowed to ride the cart hortheth.'

'Oh.' Ivvy thought for a moment. 'Do you go to the Capital, much?'

'No we never go there,' the little girl said.

Ivvy nodded, then jumped down from the saddle. She ran her hand down the stallion's neck, rubbed his withers, but he showed no sign of having felt it.

Ivvy unstrapped the saddle bags, hefted one onto each shoulder. She turned to face the little girl, who was watching her shrewdly.

'Are you giving me your horth?' the little girl asked, as if she'd been expecting it. As if strangers gave her horses everyday. Ivvy was surprised. She herself had only made the decision a moment earlier. *The kid is perceptive. Resourceful and perceptive, she'll go far.*

'Yes,' Ivvy said. 'If you want him. He does need a name, though.'

The little girl dropped the end of the rope she'd been clutching, allowing the goat to wander off towards the trees. She tilted her head and regarded the stallion. 'I'll call him Thunder.'

'Good name,' Ivvy agreed.

As she walked off through the slanting rain, she didn't look back.

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Out on the road she put her head down and pulled her hood tight. No-one would be looking for her.
on foot. If anyone was even looking for her. No-one knew she was still alive, except Bronn and the
Imp, and who would it benefit them to tell? Not even Jaime. But don't think about Jaime.

She thought instead about her brother. Mycah.

*I still don't know where you died or where you were buried. But that doesn't really matter. You aren't
there anyway. You're with me, I know that now. You were always with me.*

It had taken her a long time to understand; she'd almost lost her own life to understand it. How a
person dies, where they die, means nothing. It's who they were when they lived that counts.

500 gold coins. Maybe I'll buy a fucking headstone anyway, put it up some place you liked to go.
Maybe on the river bank, near the Crossroads, where we used to skip stones. Maybe near
RedHollow, where we tickled trout. Maybe that wolf will come by, seeing as she tried to protect you
and all. Seeing as she protected me.

Ivvy thought she would like that. *Will you be there sometimes, Mycah, if I make a place to come and
visit you? Will you talk to me again?*

The loud clip clop of hooves interrupted her thoughts, and she stepped to the side of the verge to let
the horse and wagon pass. But as the tray drew alongside the driver leaned over, tipped his hat back
and chuckled.

'Delivery Girl,' he said. 'That you again?'

Ivvy looked across at Nugget's shaggy head and white flecked belly, then up at the driver. She could
smell the lingering scent of pumpkins and apples. She grinned.

'You needin' a lift?' the farmer said. 'I'm heading back to the Riverroad. Should be a week or so's
trip. But there's plenty of room to sleep in the wagon, now the produce is sold.' He reined in Nugget
and rested his gnarled hands on one knee, looked Ivvy up and down. 'If you're all done and finished
here, that is.'

'Yes,' Ivvy said. 'I am.'
He strode along the path from the stable block, not remembering where he was meant to be going, his thoughts full of her. His mind skipping erratically about, unable to settle on any one thing.

Qyburn... so many different versions of what was true. The old man's words still buzzing like flies in his head. Jaime hadn't liked hitting him, but at the same time he hadn't hesitated. Each blow had released a new and improved truth.

By the time he'd located Qyburn at an Inn on Silk street, it was almost dawn, Jaime's eyes were dry from countless smoky rooms, and fatigue was throbbing in his temple. Realising the Maester had lied to him all along, that he'd had her all along... Jaime felt his head start thudding anew. *Fuck you old man. I wish I'd hit you harder.*

Jaime weaved through abandoned tents and picketed horses in the outer wards, praying Cersei was still returning from the ceremony. He remembered how he'd thought only of his sister every day, for months, while chained to a stake in that stinking Northern pen. In his mind he'd wanted nothing more than to be with her. He'd known that everything would be right, if only they were together again. His other half.

But the reality of Cersei was somehow... wrong. Her skin was too pale, the scent of her powders and fragrances cloying. Her cultured voice grating to his ears, her airs and practised poses irritating. The cold smile that never reached her eyes. The elaborate gowns and hair styles so pretentious and affected.

But that was unfair. His sister hadn't changed.

*She just wasn't you. That's why she was wrong.*

And today was Joffrey's wedding day. Jaime cursed to himself. *The biggest fucking event on the Lannister social calendar, and I could care less about it.* The marriage would be official by now, and everyone would soon be back in the Red Keep for the feast. Jaime dodged a scullery maid balancing a pole on her shoulders, reached the kitchen keep and turned down the laneway behind it. He wanted to run, but his legs felt heavy with dread.

*Will you still be there? Alive?*

The recessed door to the store-room was closed, but Jaime's sword striking the bolt made it shudder and swing open. He kicked it wide. For a moment he saw her there, sitting with her back against the far wall, smiling up at him with relief. The rare, infectious smile of hers, that hit him like a punch in the gut and cut through all the artifice of title and class, reputation and prejudice. The way she looked at him and saw him only as a man. To her, he'd been no Ser or Kingslayer, no son of an important House, no heir to a castle, nor infamous villain. She had loved him for who he was, and he would never find that again. *People's expectations of me, from the moment I was born. People's preconceptions of me, before we even meet. It's never been possible for anyone to really see me. But you did.*

Then his eyes adjusted to the gloom and she was gone.

The room was empty, save for debris and shelves stacked with decaying foodstuff. Jaime stepped through and crouched in a shaft of sunlight just inside the doorway. He put his fingertips to the floor
and touched the congealing splatters of blood shining there. His eyes flicked over the area. *How much blood was here, soaked into the dust? Enough?* He brushed straw aside, pressed the black pools beneath to test their depth. Rubbing his fingers together, the sticky liquid still felt warm. But maybe it was just the sun.

*How long ago did your blood run onto these stones? How little time did I miss you by?* Jaime’s heart felt too big for his chest, beating painfully against a ribcage that seemed to have shrunk. A memory swam up to him from some hidden depth of consciousness; a boy’s body draped across a horse, shadowed by the huge bulk of the armoured rider behind it, only a small hand visible as it flopped loose. Blood wreathing the skinny wrist; trailing down it like a dark vine that splashed red flowers onto the grass below.

*I should have told you, about that night. Your brother.*

Kneeling in the store-room, Jaime had the overwhelming urge to scrape frantically at the stained floor with his hands, gather together all the spilt blood, every drop. He wanted to find her and put her back together again. *I have to tell you... why didn’t I tell you?* The air in the windowless room was suffocating; it was hard to breathe. Jaime stood up and staggered out.

Hurrying back along the laneway, he stumbled a little on a broken cobblestone. Aware now of being completely, utterly exhausted. He’d been physically tired many times before, but this was different. His entire body, his whole being, felt defeated.

*Where are you? Are you alive? Please, by all the gods, if you can hear me...*  

The main courtyard was emptier than usual, only a couple of kitchen staff and serving wenches crossing with supplies. One stopped to adjust the load she was carrying, and as she puffed limp hair from her face, Jaime saw it was her. Her wide lips, her cheekbones... then he blinked, and she was gone.

The serving girl gaped at him, revealing a missing front tooth. Jaime frowned, and she quickly cast her gaze down and kept walking.

He leaned against a wall of an outhouse. Closing his eyes, the burning in them was like ground glass under the lids. He rubbed them harshly with his thumb and forefinger, as if he could erase the memory of the past few days, ever since he’d returned to KingsLanding.

If only he could go back, to when he last touched her waist and stroked her warm skin. He would never have trusted Steelshanks or his men to take care of her. He would never have let that evil schemer Qyburn draw one breath in the Capital. If he could go back even one day, he would tell his father to go fuck himself, he would wrap his hands around his sister's graceful neck and choke the truth out of her, while there was still time. He would, he would have...

What? Scooped you up and ridden straight back out of KingsLanding? To go where, and live how? Jaime shook his head, in denial. *Would I have done that, given up everything that matters to me? Brienne said I couldn't, and I agreed with her. My family, the Kingsguard; I am those things. They define me. I am a Lannister, I am a knight. But I thought I could have you, too. I didn’t know I had to choose.*

Fuck,’ Jaime muttered, opening his eyes and staring unseeing out into the courtyard. People were trickling in through the main gates of the Red Keep, as the King’s wedding procession began to slowly return.

*You're gone. I lost you.*
He understood then with sickening clarity that the thing you want most desperately to keep is the very thing that slips most easily from your hands.

*When did I fall in love with you? What moment was it, exactly? When you smiled at me? When you sent your horse to attack me, and then stitched up my wounds? When you kissed me? When you faced down three armed outlaws for my sake? When you walked miles through the night to get an axe for my chains? When you defended your brother's memory, against all the evidence?*

*Or was it before any of that, when I looked up from the gutter and first saw your face?*

There was, at most, an hour left before the feast. Cersei, Joffrey, Tyrion, Tommen, his father, his men, all expecting him: Ser Jaime Lannister, eldest son of Lord Tywin Lannister, of House Lannister, Captain of the Kingsguard. His role, his duty, was to be standing there beside them all.

*I can still see you. Everywhere I look, I see you.*

Jaime pushed up off the wall, spun away from the returning wedding guests. It was a short walk back to the stables and as he entered, a groom was putting his horse into the stall.

'I just unsaddled 'im Ser...'

'Saddle him again.'

Jaime rode out of the gates and turned the opposite direction from the stream of traffic. He could see the gold tips of the Royal carriages gleaming through the bobbing heads of people. The horse was bone-tired but he kicked it into a trot, and headed along a side street towards Market Square.

The two guards stationed at the Mud gate stopped slouching and stood to attention at his approach. 'Ser?' One of them looked confused, uncertain perhaps if he should intervene. 'Your presence is required at the King's Wedding. Is there some other matter of... of greater importance?'

'Yes,' Jaime said, and he realised he'd never meant anything more. 'There is.'

He didn't pause but continued straight on past the guards as they dithered over their duties. Out on the road, he dug his heels into the horse's flanks and it surged into a weary canter. The air was damp and clammy with approaching rain, his face felt chilled without the insulating beard he'd worn for almost a year. The back of his neck was similarly cold below his cropped hair.

Would you even recognise me, if I saw you again?

Increasing desperation spurred him on along the road, searching the faces of the smallfolk and traders as they passed. Looking for her build, her limping walk, the red-gold tint of her hair under a hood. The tilt of her nose, the way her brows slanted like arrows. Her curving mouth. So many times he thought he caught a glimpse of her, but each time he rode closer the face that turned toward him was wrong. Each unfamiliar face became more hideous than the last, until Jaime began to feel the gods were mocking him, and he were surrounded by gargoyles instead of people. He criss-crossed the little settlements set up outside the Capital, riding his labouring horse back and forth until it tripped and almost fell.

He reined in at the edge of a camp by the King's Road, and dismounted. His own legs wobbled to support him. The wind cut through his cloak like a frozen knife and he shivered. *I must get back to the Red Keep, right now, the wedding feast will be starting. Cersei will be looking for me. There'll be seven hells to pay if I miss it.* But suddenly it seemed to Jaime that his whole life of feasts and accolades, privileges and status, was just one long fake pretence, which he had acted his part in diligently and never even questioned why.
But if that is not me, then who am I?

Rain began to drizzle down, a grey veil, obscuring the features on those who continued on past him as he stood there by the road. The horses and livestock and pedestrians and wagons, all merged into an amorphous blob, an undulating creature moving across his vision. Not even real, a monstrous hallucination.

Jaime couldn't trust his own sleep-deprived eyes any more. He leaned back on the sweaty shoulder of his horse to steady himself.

You're long gone. I only hope you're still alive, and safe. Wherever you are.

He closed his eyes, rested his head on the saddle.

A commoner. Fierce, compassionate, loyal, brave. The opposite of every sly, self-serving sycophant surrounding me at court. Who would have known. A common girl would be the most un-common person I ever met.

His tiredness dragged at him like an undertow.

Your face made me notice you, but what was inside made me love you.

I only wish I'd told you, about that night. About your brother.

As if he were dreaming, Jaime saw the forest around the Crossroads as he'd ridden through it back then. More than a year ago, but he saw it again now as if it were happening to him for the first time. The moon full and blue-white, so that the landscape appeared bleached of colour, the shadows like fathomless pits. His horse's hooves the only sound in the stillness as he moved through the trees. Hunting a boy. A boy who had threatened his bastard son, Prince Joffrey. A boy that Cersei had demanded be found and made to pay. A peasant, a butcher's son.

Jaime had separated from the main hunting party who were concentrating on the river banks, and ridden up into the thicker forest behind the Inn. It was hours since they'd begun the search, and no-one had found any sign of the boy. Even after the Stark girl was located and brought in, the boy remained elusive. Despite Jaime's determination to avenge the honour of his family, and self-righteous anger that anyone, particularly a lowborn, would dare threaten his own blood, he couldn't help but feel a grudging admiration for the little fugitive. All the men at the Royal's disposal, and one mere boy was getting the better of them?

In his waking dream, Jaime rode once more through the silent trees, coming unexpectedly across the red-headed boy hiding in a thicket. The kid's clothes were torn, and marks of tears streaked through the dirt on his round cheeks. He looked exhausted. When he'd turned and seen Jaime there, his eyes had widened in fear and he'd risen as if to flee. But Jaime, for reasons he didn't even understand, had held a finger to his lips. The boy froze, unsure. Then Jaime had turned his horse's head away and ridden back the way he'd come.

He had returned to the main hunting party and said nothing.

The Hound had found the kid anyway, a few hours after. Inevitable, really. Jaime had known deep down the boy couldn't stay hidden forever. The next morning, he'd wondered why he'd ridden away. Was it weakness? An aberration? He'd pushed a boy even younger than that one from a window not long before, and justified it as the right thing to do.

But now, with his eyes closed, standing on the road side in the humming rain, Jaime remembered that moment when he and Mycah had stared at each other. One a knight of the Kingsguard, one a
butcher's boy, and Jaime had recognised their common humanity. And spared him.

_I wanted to tell you._ He was the last person to see her brother alive apart from the man who'd killed him, and maybe this would mean something to her.

_I was afraid you would say I should have done more to save him. But I couldn't have saved him._ Mycah was already dead from the moment Joffrey had held the sword to his cheek. _I lied when I told you it could have ended in just a few bruises, if only Arya hadn't interfered. Joffrey meant to kill your brother. It was inevitable._

Jaime opened his eyes, dizzy. The grey sky above him spun, the rain fell harder. It dripped from the ends of his hair as the strands plastered against his skull. It fell into his eyes, and he couldn't tell if that was why he was crying.

_I'm sorry about your brother, I didn't want him to die._ One small act of pointless mercy, in a lifetime of callous acts? In the end, does it mean anything?

_But maybe sparing Mycah wasn't an aberration. Maybe that was who I am._

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Chapter End Notes

A.N: So sorry for the unforgivable delay. If you can bring yourself to forgive me :) the final chapter will be up next week. It will be a new POV, from someone we haven't had yet. Thank you for bearing with me.
The sunset faded out around the tree-line, like diluted red paint. The thin scent of the hare she was tracking was suddenly obliterated by a gust of wind, which brought with it a cacophony of new, stronger scents. Metal, leather, smoke, horse sweat, men. Clear and crisp, as if she were seeing them.

The wolf paused in her hunt and lifted her head, to better detect the approaching odours. Leaving the hare and crouching lower, she turned and crept towards the outskirts of the trees. As she picked her way delicately through the bracken and curling ferns, the frost on them brushed white crystals onto her fur. She crested a hill and sank to the ground. Now she could see the ribbon of grey road winding away below her into the dusk.

Wind howled up the slope, laying the long grass flat. Smells washed over her nose and created a picture in her mind. Too many horses to consider any one of them as prey, she decided. A pity. Horse flesh is juicy, and better than a measly hare. And too many men. She should leave, go back and pick up the scent of her original dinner. But humans still held a fascination for her, even after all this time. She felt drawn to them, a reminder of when she'd been part of a human family. The wolf stayed lying flat on her stomach and watched the road, waiting.

The soldiers that came trooping around the bend were unfamiliar. Not local soldiers. They were from the warmer lands further towards the sea. The wolf disliked it there, had only ventured that far South once, when she had followed the human child who'd been her family then. The wolf had been wary of the vast salty water that boomed and crashed, and stretched out into the horizon without end. She hadn't liked the too-hot days that made her lethargic, nor the biting insects that came with them. Her human's tracks had been lost in the huge walled city, which swarmed with so many other humans it was impossible even for her keen nose to distinguish between them. So she'd returned to the freshwater river and the cold forest. Since then, she'd rarely ventured beyond what was now her territory.

Her human child had come back here, though. The wolf knew they would meet again, one day, as they shared a bond that could never be severed. But for now she kept her distance. Her human was in the company of a pack of other humans, and from experience, the wolf had found humans were either fearful or aggressive towards her. No matter, she was both cunning and quiet. She knew how to see without being seen.

The Southern soldiers passed by underneath her vantage point on the hill, their gold shields and breast plates glinting in the rapidly vanishing daylight. The babble of their shouts and laughter. Always too noisy, humans. A few of their horses shied and spooked uneasily, picking up the predator's scent. But the humans were, as usual, oblivious to her presence. They had terrible noses, she knew. More or less useless. Dull senses, slow, and constantly chattering like birds.

Nymeria watched them with her yellow eyes, focusing on the man who rode out in front. He was flanked by two riders carrying banners and torches that flickered and flared in the wind. Unlike the other soldiers he wore no helmet, and his short hair gleamed as gold as the armour they all wore. The wolf recognised his scent, distinct from the rest. He was the one with the girl, that day by the bridge. The girl who the wolf had defended, when the outlaw was going to kill her.

Nymeria thought back, the memories of that evening playing out again in her head. The girl's whistle, which had summoned her down from the forest, as she'd once been taught by her own human. Then the boy outlaw, who had reeked of death and cruelty, holding his knife to the girl's
face. The scene had triggered a rage in the wolf so fierce she'd attacked him without thinking. Buried her fangs deep into his scrawny skull and ripped his head clean off. She ran her tongue over her teeth at the sweet memory, almost tasting the blood.

*Now here was the same man who'd been with the girl, this time with soldiers.* Back in the wolf's territory, even though she knew he didn't belong here. The girl belonged here, but he didn't.

The wolf had seen the girl only a few days ago, at the little village by the river. Nymeria had been scouting for stray livestock, and the girl had either heard or sensed her. She'd stopped collecting dead branches and looked up, to where the wolf was hidden in the grass. She hadn't seemed afraid of her, like most humans. Just curious. But then a one-armed boy had come out of a village hut and called her inside, and the girl had gone.

Now the squadron of soldiers disappeared on down the road, their smells and noises gradually lost like the light. The night closed in behind them, silent and dark. Just how the wolf preferred it. She rose and headed for the river, forgetting the hare, and her hunger. A new destination in mind.

Seeing the man again, remembering the girl, and her own human child, had stirred up thoughts. Made her unsettled. She loped through the trees with long strides, towards a place she knew well. Sleet drifted and settled on her coat as she pushed through the bushes bordering the riverbank. Across a small clearing, and there to a dip in the ground. The place she was seeking. The place where her sister cub was buried.

She remembered it clearly. It was more than a year ago, but wolves don't forget. She had smelled her sister's body down there, for days after the men had left. They'd dug the hole in a hurry, five men with shovels and pickaxes, impatient to be gone. Tossing the dirt aside without care. A grave shallow but wide, to fit both wolf cub and human boy.

Nymeria had watched from the trees, a shadow with sharp eyes. Watched as they'd heaved in the two bodies, animal and human, then scraped the dirt back and packed it down hard on top. Dragged branches and logs to heap over it and hide it from scavengers.

But still. For days Nymeria could smell the bodies down there. She'd prowled and sniffed and whined, circling the patch of disturbed earth, not wanting to leave the spot where the smell of her sister still lingered. She'd slept there for three nights. But eventually the scent had faded, and in the end she'd left and followed her human to the South.

Now Nymeria came to this place only occasionally, usually when her hunting trails brought her here. Shrubs had sprung up over the patch of bare dirt, even the sapling of a small tree. The wolf sniffed at the familiar ground, although it no longer held a trace of blood, or hint of flesh or bone. But still. Tonight, she wanted to be here. She curled up in the hollow of depressed earth, dropped her long snout onto the cushion of her paws, and dozed.

The familiarity of the place was compelling and comforting. She lay there in the darkness, her breath a ragged cloud in the air. Visions ran through her head. Running with her sister cub, playing with her human. Springing with bared jaws onto the fair-haired boy holding the sword, her teeth biting into his sleeve. Drinking his blood, and his fear. Hearing his panicked yelping. Nymeria dreamt, and the tip of her tail twitched with pleasure.

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Some time later, when the sun had not yet risen and the river was hidden in a thick quilt of fog, a sound awakened her. Hoof beats crunching on frost. Nymeria, feeling hunger rumble in her belly, lifted her head and tensed her legs. Stared out unblinkingly into the clearing.
A horse. Just one this time. Easy prey.

The lone horse grazed in front of her, in the misty pre-dawn light. The wind was behind it and it was unaware of the wolf's presence. Its brick-shaped head swept from side to side as its teeth nipped the fresh grass and shoots with ruthless precision.

It was a solid horse, black as the centre of a cave. Black as soot. Without a single white hair anywhere on its body. Its coat was dotted with whorls where scars had healed under the fur, and its tail was so long that knotted strands of it trailed on the ground. Its shaggy mane fell in its eyes. Suddenly the breeze must've shifted, and the horse, alerted, raised its big head and stared straight at the wolf.

The animals faced each other, frozen. The horse didn't spook or shy like the others, just flared its nostrils and put its ears back in a threatening way. Nymeria sensed that this was not a horse that considered itself to be a prey animal. This horse looked like it would run towards a fight rather than away from one.

I was wrong. This one isn't dinner. This one is definitely to be avoided.

Nymeria yawned, sat up, and scratched her nose with a hind claw.

Oh well. There's always hares.

She could hear the horse snort defiantly behind her, as she turned away from it and slunk off into the fog.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone who read, gave kudos to, or reviewed my story I had a great time writing it, I hope you enjoyed reading it as much.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!