A Red Sun Rises

by Tempest_Rulz

Summary

Mercenary Damon Salvatore is cocky, arrogant, and makes snow angels outside Winterfell's walls. Katherine Pierce is a mysterious woman who charms kings and subdues armies. Elena Gilbert doesn't even know of the seven houses and doesn't see why there's no sugar on the Wall. And Robb Stark? Well, he pulls them all into his web. Friendships will form, enemies will be made, and blood is on the menu.

Notes

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Chapter 1

A Red Sun Rises

How had it all come to this? The blood, the screams, the death. Men fell all around him, dead before they could even utter a cry of horror, their throats torn from their necks. His sword dripped with red. Katherine, Damon; these faces and names were at once as familiar to him as if he had known them his whole life, and yet they had become alien.

"Katherine, behind you!" shouted Robb. His wife turned, her dark eyes made darker by bloodlust and her teeth gleaming white in her crimson grin. Her beauty was otherworldly and terrifying as she snapped the neck of the man who had thought attacking her from behind would give him a better chance. The white muslin of her dress had turned red long ago.

And Damon. Cocky, smiling Damon who had jested with Arya, flirted with Sansa, and built snow fortresses for them to fight in. Oh, he was still cocky, there was no doubt about it, but the speed and the grace with which he moved, and the fact he didn't need a sword to take out someone's heart...

The Freys' halls echoed with the screams of the dying and the snarls of those who simply refused to die. The flagstones were painted dark red.

How had it all begun?

Chapter 1

At first, Damon thought he was dead. Not undead-dead, as he had been for the past century and a half, but dead-dead. He was a little disappointed in himself, actually, not least because he couldn't exactly remember how he had died.

Then he realized the cold he was feeling in his bones wasn't rigor-mortis, and it wasn't the apathy and nothingness of the afterlife. It was just freaking cold outside, and for some reason, he was lying in the mud. Well, it would have been mud if it hadn't been frozen.

He sat up, rubbing the heaviness from his eyes and blinking several times. Everything around him seemed foreign. A few hardy pines stood against the biting north winds and the grass clung stubbornly to the rolling hills, braced against the snow that was sure to come with those dark clouds. Breaking the landscape was the blackness of a leather jacket, and the person who wore it.

The last thing Damon remembered before waking up in this freezing hellhole was the blast of light knocking them back as the door of Silas' tomb had been opened. Who had been with him? Not Elena, fortunately. She was still –relatively– safe somewhere that was not the same temperature as a meat locker. At least, he hoped that was the case. He hoped he'd done the right thing by sending her away right before he and Klaus and Bonnie had opened the tomb.

Well, he said 'sending' because that was the best word for it he could come up with, but chasing had been closer to the truth. The only way to keep her safe had been to keep her away, and the only way to keep her away was to severe all ties between them. She only fancied herself in love with him anyway because of the sire bond. Once she was human again, all of it would have just been a sweet nightmare that would haunt him for the rest of his immortal existence.

"Bonnie?" said Damon as he bent down over the unconscious girl. Not his most favourite person in the world, and the feeling was mutual. Should he look on the bright side at least and be grateful
that it wasn't Klaus? Although, Klaus would not be in need of rescuing in a situation like this.

"Hey, wake up, witchy," said Damon. He patted her cold lifeless cheeks. Her lips were tinged with blue. He tried to rub some warmth back into her arms and hands, but he knew that unless they found shelter—it seemed unlikely—and fire, she was never going to wake up from this coma. For the first time in his life, Damon wished he were a werewolf. They might be smelly and uncultured and dumber than most creatures—that brawn had to be compensated for—but they had higher body temperatures than...say...the average vampire.

"Shit," he muttered. Human-Elena would not forgive him if Bonnie died on his watch. He might not hold much hope for her still retaining those feelings for him once she turned human again, but he still had hope, and he wasn't going to put an end to it. He fed her a bit of his blood—just a wee bit. He didn't give blood freely, especially not to people he didn't like. However, this was just the right amount. It kept her alive, but weak enough so she wouldn't give him a brain aneurism, as she was prone to doing.

The wind blew his words away. He took off his jacket and wrapped it around the freezing witch. This jacket, as lacking as it was, was better than nothing, right? Not that he actually liked Bonnie, but she was possibly the only person in the world who knew how to take them back to the United States of America where temperatures were more reasonable and where Elena was.

What was that moving on the horizon? A lone struggling man, running from something. Oh good. Dinner. "Be right back," he muttered to Bonnie, just for the sake of saying something. Damon didn't do silence well for long periods of time. The man was wearing a heavy fur cloak against the cold, and he kept glancing backwards. In fact, he glanced backwards so much he didn't notice Damon straight in front of him.

"Hey, buddy," said the vampire with a grin. "Going somewhere in a hurry? Outstanding parking ticket? Or have you been bear poaching?"

"I suggest you get out of my way," said the man, drawing his sword. He was a skinny thing. Couldn't be older than twenty. Malnourished, bad teeth, easy prey.

"And I'd suggest you be nice to me," said Damon, staring into the man's eyes. "You won't scream, and you won't remember a thing afterwards."

The man lunged at him, and if Damon hadn't been a vampire, he'd have been cleaved in half by the giant steel blade. As it were, the swing missed him by several inches as he moved to one side with inhuman speed, and before the man knew what was going on, the vampire had twisted his sword arm behind his back, making him drop the weapon.

"O-kay," said Damon. Compulsion didn't work? Was this man on vervain? He sniffed. It didn't smell as if he was on vervain.

"Look, if you're here to kill me, do it, but I'm not going back there."

"Back where?" asked Damon.

"The Wall! Isn't that why you're after me? Because I deserted? Look, I know I took an oath, but you didn't see what was out there. They were dead, but they weren't, and they killed that whole family. They got the others. They almost got me."

"If it's undead you're worried about, then this really isn't your day," said Damon.

And that was the end of that conversation. Later, as he wiped the blood from his lips and let the
body drop, he wondered what the man had been going on about. He had no vervain in his system, but he was immune to compulsion. He spoke of the living dead. And a wall. But he was quite sure it wasn't the Great Wall of China he was referring to. He'd been to China before, and this wasn't it.

He picked up Bonnie again and continued on his way...somewhere. If there was one human, there were bound to be more, right? He hoped. And the man had been running. Where the hell were his pursuers? He didn't have to wait long to find them.

A group of horsemen were approaching. Yes, horsemen. They even had those funny pointy medieval helmets and spears and everything. Either he'd stumbled into a really dedicated group of medieval cos-players, or there was something very wrong about this whole situation. He was more inclined to choose the latter. Still, people were people, and Bonnie needed help.

He started running towards them in a human fashion, all the while shouting for help. It grated on his pride to have to ask for anything from any human, but even he had to admit he wasn't invincible. Not everyone had the luxury of being a bastard vampire-werewolf hybrid.

Although, if they refused to help him, he might just pull a Klaus and slaughter them all, and skin their horses to make a tent.

Leading them was a weathered man who Damon presumed to be in his forties, or perhaps even younger. In these conditions, most humans would age prematurely.

The man reined in his horse right before Damon. If they had gotten any closer, Damon might have had to make horse-steak tartare. It was Intimidation 101 and he knew these tricks better than anyone. It had been a while since he'd tried them with a horse, though. For him, it was Lamborghini all the way.

"What is your business here?" demanded the man. His face was covered with a thick beard which glistened with ice crystals, and he wore enough fur to resemble an Ice Age human. Perhaps this was what this was. An ice age.

"We're lost," said Damon. Technically true. After all, if he didn't know what universe he was in, then it counted as being lost. "We wandered off the path and could not find it again." He took a deep breath. The word that came next was one he never used if he could help it. It tasted bad. "Please. My friend needs help." He glanced down at the unconscious Bonnie in his arms. She looked pathetic, which could only help their cause.

The man motioned to some of the people behind him. Two armoured men dismounted. One wrapped a fur cloak around Bonnie carefully as the other offered another cloak to Damon. The vampire accepted it and thanked the man – a foreign action, as Damon Salvatore never said thank you if he weren't being sarcastic. However, Stefan occasionally got things right, and until Damon figured out where they were, it would be best if he took a page from his brother's book and exhibited some of the manners that had been drilled into him since birth. It wasn't because he needed the cloak, but it would stand out if he didn't need it. Being Human 101.

"What is your name?" asked the leader, more kindly this time. Damon supposed he looked pretty harmless—which couldn't be further from the truth, but King Arthur didn't know that, and Damon wasn't about to correct him.

"Damon," he replied. "That's Bonnie."

"Daemon, as in Daemon Blackfyre?"
"As in Damon Salvatore."

"Well, Damon Salvatore," said King Arthur. "The gods are either smiling on you or you have some
dumb luck. It was no small miracle that both you and your friend are still alive. But, there still
remains the question of what two young people are doing out here all alone. This is hardly the
place for a lovers' tryst."

Damon flashed him a winning grin –the type that either charmed everyone or made them want to
punch him in the face, depending on the context. Although they hardly ever did try to punch him in
the face, because they knew if they did, he'd rip them a new grin all of their own.

"We're wanderers, sir," he said. Technically not untrue. He'd led quite a nomadic life in his pre-
Elena days. "We go where there's work, and take what work we can get." Substitute 'work' with
'blood' and that was a very apt description of his life. Also, compelling people was hard work too.
So was unearthing long buried immortal witches, stopping an apocalypse or several, killing
hybrids, and staking originals. In fact, those were highly specialized and skilled jobs. Oh, and he'd
been a soldier once upon a very very very very long time ago. But that had been a low skill job and
since he'd deserted, he didn't think it was worth mentioning on his resume.

"Do you know who I am, Damon Salvatore?" asked Arthur.

Damon was sorely tempted to answer with something extremely intelligent, but refrained. He
doubted they would appreciate his wit.

"Am I supposed to?" he asked.

"Show some respect," said a younger man sharply. "It is to Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, that
you speak."

Eddard –what was wrong with Edward, apart from the fact the name belonged to a sparkly
vampire?– Stark raised a hand. "He meant no harm by it, Robb," he said.

"Forgive me, my lord," said Damon. Lords were tricky creatures; extremely volatile in nature,
oftentimes petty, and prone to one eighty degree mood swings. However, their veins all produced
excellent vintages, thanks to the better than average food. He had not had very much experience
with lords in general, having been turned after the feudal age, but the ones he had tasted –mainly in
England and parts of continental Europe– had been very good indeed. "I did not know."

Eddard waved away his apology.

"I cannot fault you for not knowing," he said. "Although I am surprised a man as well-spoken as
yourself would be ignorant of the great houses of Westeros."

Ah, so they were in Westeros, were they? Where the hell was that? Somewhere in the west, he
supposed, which wasn't very helpful, as everything was relative because the world was round. He
wondered if these people knew that. Possibly not.

In such a situation, it would be best not to say anything. Indeed, there were times –rare times–
when even Damon Salvatore would keep his mouth shut.

"What do you do, Salvatore?" asked Eddard.

"Everything," said Damon. "But I am a fighter first and foremost."

"You are a soldier?"
"More a freelancer, but I could consider a more permanent position if you are offering. My lord."

Eddard chuckled while his men and young Robb, presumably some male relative of his, most likely his son, looked on in perplexity. "You have some courage, young man. We'll talk about it when we get back to Winterfell."

A panicked shout caught Eddard's attention. A horseman was galloping up to them, panic in his eyes. "M'lord, we found him," he said.

"Where is he?" asked Eddard.

"You should come and see this."

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Robb Stark stared at the corpse of the man, so pale and drained of blood. His throat had been ripped out, but instead of the pool of gore one would expect in such a situation, there was… nothing.

"What could have done this, Father?" he asked. "The wound looks too small to have been made by a bear." No, he didn't believe in the farfetched tales the nurse had told him when he'd been a boy. There was nothing beyond the Wall except Wildlings and Dire Wolves and all manners of natural beasts. Dead things did not come back to life, and they certainly did not eat naughty children. Or Night's Watch deserters.

"Bandits?" asked the young man beside him doubtfully.

"There are bite marks," said Robb to his constant companion and his father's ward, Theon Greyjoy.

"Fair enough," said Theon. "A wolf, then?"

"Perhaps," said Ned. However, he seemed doubtful. He turned to his men. "Bury him." He didn't want anyone else to find the body and wonder if the old wives' tales were true.

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Winterfell was as cheerful as its name implied. Dark stone, glistening with ice crystals. The portcullis was raised with a groan to admit the lordly party. Within were the sounds of goats and chickens and dogs and horses. The smell of unwashed human pervaded the whole courtyard. Baths, obviously, were a foreign concept to these people. The cold was the only thing stopping an epidemic of flees or the plague from spreading among them.

The unconscious Bonnie was quickly given over to the care of female servants and the 'maesters' – apparently the only people with decent education, rather like priests in medieval Europe. He supposed it would be suspicious if she healed too quickly because he gave her too much blood. However, no one would notice a drop or two in her nasty herbal teas, right? And no, that wasn't a sign of him caring.

Damon was taken to the barracks, where he was "fed" and "watered". The rations of cold meat and coarse bread were barely edible. He forced some down just for show, resolving to go hunting tonight. Even if military men might not be the best of choices, there were plenty of outlying farms with farmers and farmers' daughters. If he was back by dawn, who would know? Despite popular belief, he could be subtle. How else could he have survived for so long?

He attracted curious stares from the soldiers as magnets attracted iron filings. He just couldn't help it. One look at him, and they would know he wasn't one of them. He was just too handsome and charmingly debonair.
"You don't look like much of a fighter," said one of the men with a little more than a sneer in his tone.

"They say not to judge a book by its cover, but then I don't suppose you've ever read a book," said Damon, lifting his cup in mock salute.

Another man snorted.

"And I suppose you have?" came Eddard Stark's voice. The men parted to let him through and bowed when he passed them. Damon, taking his cue from the others, also bowed.

"My lord," he said.

"I see you have settled in, Damon Salvatore," said Eddard. "Excellent. I would like to see what you can do."

A great many things, but this human façade was putting a little limitation on his flair.

He followed Stark and his men outside, where a small crowd had gathered to try and catch a glimpse of the very handsome stranger who had stumbled his way into this little town slash military boot camp. There was the normal part of the place, which had stalls with chicken corpses hanging by their feet, bunches of herbs, crates of vegetables, and a limited array of iron swords that looked as if they belonged in Hollywood's prop storage. Then there were the barracks with the seasoned male humans and all the testosterone that came with it. He heard them whispering as he passed, saying something about "soft southerners". Soft, was he? Well, they were softer.

The practise yard was basically a fenced off square of mud. Too many feet trampled any brave new shoots of grass attempting to grow there. Men had gathered around the yard to watch this spectacle. They really needed a new form of entertainment around here. Say, what about a circus? Contortionists made for excellent companions.

Another man got into the yard with Damon as his friend cheered him on. "Show the boy a thing or two!" one of them called. Damon's opponent was stocky, but short, and he wielded a sword like it was an extension of his arm. The vampire, on the other hand, was not going to be an easy adversary. He'd trained vampire hunters and ripped hearts out of hybrids before. And before that, he'd been a confederate soldier. A terrible one—a deserter, actually—but even so, he still learned a thing or two about stabbing people with long cold remorseless pieces of metal.

He teased his opponent mercilessly, dodging and parrying with ease, and adding in a few humiliating glances with the wooden practise sword. He didn't take it seriously. If he did, the man would be dead with a wooden sword protruding from his chest. He practically wrote the manual on stabbing people with wood. In the front and in the back, but mostly in the heart.

Within a minute, his opponent was disarmed, and he had a sword to his throat. "Good warm up," said Damon. "Who's next?"

The men of Winterfell were not men who would deny a challenge. They were proud Northerners, and slightly disdainful of their 'softer' southern counterparts. There was nothing soft about Salvatore, however, as he beat man after man after man without so much as running out of breath. "I can do this all day, my lord," he said to Ned as he gave him an over-exaggerated bow.

"He is very skilled," said Ser Rodrik Cassel, Winterfell's arms master.

"He is arrogant," said Ned. "He fears nothing. I cannot control a man like that."
"Men like this Salvatore are not controlled, milord," said Rodrik. "They are unleashed."

"He is a wild card."

"We have his friend. He will behave, if not for his own sake, then for hers."

Ned looked at Rodrik, a loyal man who had served him for years. His words were not without reason. To be honest, he could use a fighter like Damon. He wasn't Tywin Lannister, and he did not have the money to amass all the best warriors under the sun beneath his banner. But he could have Damon Salvatore. Who knew? He might even prove to be useful once winter came.

"All right, he stays," said Ned.

Warmth. Delicious warmth. Bonnie relished it. Somewhere not so far away, there was a crackling fire. "Good, you are awake," said a strange voice. The witch immediately opened her eyes to find herself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. All her memories came back to her at that instant. Silas, the tomb, the spell. What had happened? It had gone wrong, as far as she knew, but how wrong exactly? And why was she covered in furs instead of a normal comforter?

"Where am I?" she asked, sitting up immediately, only to find that her body was weak.

"You're in Winterfell, child," said the stern but kind nun who sat by her bedside, an embroidery hoop in her lap. What on earth? The room smelled of herbs and fresh…rushes? Bonnie remembered the medieval research paper she had to do. They used rushes in the medieval world to cover their floors and sometimes added lavender or lilacs as a primitive air freshener. This was exactly it. Had the spell gone so wrong as to transport her back in time? And where the hell was Winterfell anyway?

"Where?" she could only repeat.

"Winterfell. Do you not know where that is?" The nun seemed very surprised by her ignorance.

"I haven't heard of it."

"It is in the north."

"Like…Alaska?" Please let it be Alaska, she thought. Alaska was ten thousand times better than medieval Siberia or something like that. Were there even people in medieval Siberia?

"It is the North, not Alaska…what is Alaska?"

"Who are you?"

"I am the Septa in Winterfell. Mordane is my name."

"Where is the North?" asked Bonnie. If not Alaska, then Canada at least? Please let it be Canada, she thought.

The 'septa' looked at her as if she were crazy. "In Westeros, child. By the seven, do you know nothing?"

She heard the blood roar in her ears. The flames in the hearth flared and the wind suddenly rose outside in an almost human howl, voicing her terror and confusion and anguish. The old woman stood up abruptly. It was her sudden movement that dragged Bonnie back to the present, and she managed to stop it before any more trouble could be caused.
"That was strange," said Mordane, looking at Bonnie oddly. Bonnie ignored her comment.

"How did I get here?" she asked, more calmly this time. There could be no more accidents. Most people didn't like witches. It wasn't that she couldn't deal with people who wanted to kill her, but she didn't really want to have to.

"Your friend Damon intercepted Lord Stark on the road," said Mordane.

"Damon?" He was hardly a friend, but he was a familiar face, and for Elena's sake, he had tried to limit the number of times he had had to hurt her. Right now, even Damon was better than nothing. Hell, she might even settle for Klaus. But Damon was better than Klaus. "Where is Damon?"

"Last I heard, he was beating all the men at sparring and charming the ladies," said Mordane. She pressed her thin lips together in a barely veiled expression of disapproval. Damon tended to have that effect on people. Bonnie warmed up to Mordane a little more.

"Can I see him?" asked Bonnie.

"A word of advice, child. Stay away from men like him. A decent woman shouldn't even know someone like that."

"There's nothing going on between Damon and me," said Bonnie. "And there never will be anything." No way. Damon was obsessed with Elena. It was always Elena, and it always would be. Not that Bonnie would choose any differently. She'd pick Elena over Damon too.

The septa tsked but rose to summon Damon anyway. The vampire entered moments later, wearing a smug grin on his face. Bonnie considered wiping it off for him, but she needed him to tell her what was going on so they could corroborate their stories. Somehow, even dressed in loose trousers and a long tunic belted at the waist, Damon still looked like a rebel without a cause. As much as she did not like him, she could not deny he was a very good looking specimen of the masculine species.

"Bonnie Bennet."

"Damon Salvatore."

They stared at each other. Bonnie broke the silence first. "What's going on, Damon? How are we here? Where are the others?"

"No idea to the first and no idea to the second either," said Damon.

"What did you tell them?"

"That you and I are travellers from the south and you're just under my protection. Oh, and I'm a merc now."

"A what?"

"Mercenary."

"You don't have to say it like that. I know what a mercenary is."

"Just had to be sure. Hey, you don't have to look at me like that. You're safe. The Starks—they rule this…uh…place— they've taken us in."

"And obviously they've invited you in."
"It wasn't hard to get an invitation. It's a universal truth that I have a certain charming way about me." Damon shrugged. "We're safe here for now, until we figure out what to do and how to get back. Although, I suggest you keep that freaky side of yourself hidden."

"Duh," said Bonnie.

"They don't say that in Winterfell. You should learn to fit in if you want to live here."
It was cold. No, it was freezing. It was effing freezing. It wasn't quite so freezing that Elena was prepared to swear yet. She was, after all, a vampire. But there were very many questions running around in her head chasing their tails. Or tales, rather, for there had to be some story behind how she had ended up here in…what the hell was this place? It was snowing, and it looked as if it had been snowing for the last millennia or so, so definitely not Nova Scotia. The last thing she remembered was Damon sending her away. But surely he hadn't meant for her to go this far away? Where was 'this' anyway?

She heard the whistle cutting through the howling wind, and if her reflexes hadn't been enhanced, thanks to a recent mutation, also known as 'turning', she would have been shot. Instead, she caught the arrow. What kind of rude person just shot at someone like that? Unless it was a vampire hunter?

"Do not move!"

Men in black –not those Men in Black– surrounded her. They wore furs against the cold, and dozens of sword were levelled at her person. Okay… Elena reminded herself to breathe and raised her hands, still holding the arrow she'd caught. "I don't want to hurt anyone," she said. Well, more like shouted. She was competing with the wind.

"Who are you?" demanded an imposing old man. He wasn't very tall, but Elena felt dwarfed by him anyway. His hair was thin, but he had a long white beard to make up for it, not that he looked anything like Santa Claus.

"Nobody, really," said Elena.

"What is your name, girl?" asked the man.

"It's Elena, and I'd appreciate it if you used it. I am nobody's 'girl'."

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.
"Should I? Look, I don't want any trouble. I just want to know where I am, and I'd like to go home."

"You are here, yet you do not know where you are?"

"Why am I supposed to know all of these things? No, I have no idea where I am, except it's freaking freezing, and I don't know who you are, or who you are, or who any of you are."

"You do not speak as if you are common born."

"And you do not speak as if you're from this century!"

The girl appeared out of nowhere, dressed in the most outlandish of clothing. What sort of woman wore trousers and no furs on the Wall? By rights, she should have been freezing to death right there and then, with her limbs turning to ice, but she was talking and moving as if everything about her was just fine. Snowflakes stuck to her long dark eyelashes and the wind whipped her hair about her face. Jeor Mormont had almost forgotten what women looked like. The Wildling Craster's many wives and daughters and daughter-wives hardly counted. This girl had a decidedly southern look about her, and an air that spoke of a protected upbringing. There was no doubt that she would be considered a great beauty anywhere.

"What is your house?" he asked of her.

She paused. "…Hufflepuff?" she said as if she were asking him what her house was.

Behind him, there was a snort from Ser Alisser. Mormont ignored him.

"I have never heard of a noble house called Hufflepuff, girl. What is your family name?"

"It's Gilbert, and I really resent being called 'girl' by anyone. Who the hell are you people anyway? You know, swords went out of fashion about a century and a half ago."

Swords went out of fashion?! What in the world was she talking about? But before he could question her further, there was a shout. Two brothers of the Night's Watch supported a third between them. The man was bleeding heavily, dying. Droplets of ruby fell upon the snow. They spread and bloomed before they froze, and even the falling flakes could not cover the dark rosettes quickly enough.

There was a change in Elena's expression. Her eyes darkened, and moving faster than anyone could see, she was by the wounded man and drinking big greedy gulps from his wound before anyone could react. The horror that knotted in Mormont's chest could not be described. She was one of them! But before he could slay her, she suddenly bit her wrist, her unnatural fangs sinking into smooth pale flesh, and then put the wound to the man's mouth. "Drink," she told him. Blood still stained her mouth, but her eyes had returned to normal, and her colour was much improved.

The man drank, and before their eyes, his wound closed. It was unbelievable, a miracle, and Mormont had long given up on miracles. "How…?" he whispered.

"It's a long story," said Elena. She wiped the blood away from her lips with the back of her hand. She stood there awkwardly, wary, as if ready to fight her way from out of here at any time. Mormont had no doubt she would put up a very good try, and he could not afford to lose men like this. Besides, she had not hurt anyone, and her blood…

Well, that was a very big factor in his next decision.
"Come inside and tell me everything," he said.

The clacking of practise swords sounded dully from the practise yards. Robb was getting tired. Sweat ran down his face and his sword arm ached from parry after parry. Fighting on the defensive was not a good thing and only a man losing the fight would do it. He was losing the fight.

"You could always yield, my lord," said Damon as he easily stepped out of the way of Robb's attempt at a lunge. No matter how quickly Robb moved or how suddenly he changed his pace, Damon always seemed to be one step ahead, and he was always faster. And he was always smirking.

"That's presuming you could beat me, Salvatore," said Robb, flashing Damon a smirk of his own. The response lost some of its impact because he was slightly breathless. What man wouldn't be after half an hour of rigorous duelling? Besides, it was just slightly.

Robb's step faltered. He wasn't even sure how it happened, but the next moment, he'd been disarmed, and his practise sword was lying several feet away.

"Your presumption was correct, my lord," said Damon. "You know, as usual."

Robb let out a frustrated sigh. "I swear, you know what I'm going to do before I do it," he said.

"If you don't like losing, you could...you know, just not fight me."

"I could, but then you'd be bored."

"True, that, and you have to learn from the best, of course, being the lord's son and all."

"I sometimes had doubts as to whether you have any notion of my station. Now I know you do, and you simply choose to ignore it."

Damon grinned. "It took you a while to find that out," he said.

"Why have I not tried to kill you yet?"

"Because you're smart enough to know you can't even if you tried."

"I would say you were insufferable, but I am afraid you would take it as a compliment."

"Why, thank you. It takes a man of a certain quality to test your mettle, Lord Robb." The older man gave him an extravagant mocking bow. "To say I pushed the upper limits of your tolerance is a compliment of the highest order."

Robb shook his head. He was used to it by now. Damon had no respect for anything or anybody. His acrid sense of humour agreed with Ned's son, and part of Robb envied the older man for his seeming lack of fear, although his father had warned him that it was foolhardiness, rather than courage. Still, men wanted to be Damon, and women just wanted Damon.

Life settled back into normalcy in Winterfell, and Ned thought nothing more about insolent Salvatore and his quiet dark-skinned friend, save for when the young mercenary beat Robb in the practise yard during sparring practise. Now the young lord of Winterfell trained everyday with Damon and made it his life's sole purpose to beat him. Robb swore that no matter how much he improved, Salvatore always stayed just that tiny bit ahead. "It's like he's teasing me, Father," said
"Any man can wield a sword well with enough practise," said Ned, looking up from his papers and briefly smiling at the boy. No, young man now. It was so hard to see one's children as being grown, no matter how tall they were or how old they were. "But only a lord can wield men." In the hearth, the fire crackled as a servant added some pine cones. Ned's study only held a few books and a large wooden desk where he often did his work. The narrow windows admitted little light, but it kept the heat in.

Even though Winterfell did not have very many people, there were still many minute matters to attend to. As lord, he oversaw everything, and there was a lot of everything. As a result, he spent many hours inside his study dealing with disputes between merchants and farmers and gauging the price of grain.

"You should try wielding Damon," said Robb. He flexed his ink-stained fingers and glanced out the window, wishing he could be outside instead of cooped indoors learning to deal with duties he would one day take over. "You'd have better luck getting Arya to embroider."

"Salvatore is in a category all of his own," said Ned. He handed Robb a sheaf of papers; letters sent in from the chieftains of the surrounding villages. "What do you think of this?"

Lately, reports had been coming in from the outlying settlements around Winterfell about a strange predatory beast that attacked unwary peasants or travellers. The victims reported being seized by something immensely strong and then being bitten, but the beast never killed. Its prey only suffered puncture-like bite wounds, and they healed relatively quickly. However, it was always people who got attacked. The livestock that were left outside overnight were absolutely fine.

"It's odd," said Robb. "I've never heard of anything like this before." He turned to Maester Luwin. "Do you know what it is, Maester?"

The old man shook his head. "Never has such a beast been recorded. People say it never makes a sound, and no one has ever seen it. It is so quick and so silent. They only feel the bite, and some do not even remember how they acquired their wounds. There is very little to go on."

"I am going to send you out to the villages to investigate the matter," Ned told his son. "The peasants are frightened. They need to know we will protect them."

Robb nodded, although Ned could see it in his eyes he was a little dismayed by the task. It was too mundane. His son dreamed of bigger things. "At once, Father," he said.

"Where is Transylvania?" asked Arya eagerly. The girl had a smudge of dirt across the bridge of her nose, but she didn't seem to notice or care. All the children's eyes were wide, and Damon loved the way they leapt backwards whenever he suddenly leaned forward to impersonate Dracula. Scaring children and giving them nightmares were all good fun. Now, if only he could scare Jon, who sat on a bale of straw sharpening his sword with long smooth strokes of the whetstone while listening to the story and not saying anything. Unfortunately, Eddard Stark's bastard seemed to have Stefan's sense of humour and imagination. Damon would have to fix that.

"It's not actually a real place, Lady Arya," said Damon, improvising on the tale. He didn't want to explain how Transylvania existed when no one else in Westeros had seen it.

"I wouldn't mind being Dracula," said Theon. "Three beautiful women adoring me, worshipping me…I could live with that."
"You wouldn't be living," said Jon quietly. "Dracula died before he became a vampire."

"So he has no heartbeat, and he does not need to breathe, but he can move and fuck, and he can do it forever," said Theon. "That's not being dead. That's life."

"What is dead may never die," said Damon with a condescending grin. No one seemed to notice the condescending part.

"Precisely!" exclaimed Theon. "It's perfect! I would be an excellent vampire."

"There's no such thing," said Robb. They all turned to see him approaching them, armoured and with a groom leading his horse behind him.

"And you would know this how, my lord?" asked Damon.

"Because no man is so evil that even Death would reject him and make him immortal," said Robb. "He impaled two thousand of his own people on stakes, going up their anus -" 

"Damon," said Jon sharply as Arya's eyes widened.

"You get the idea. They lived for days after," said Damon.

Robb snorted. "No such thing ever happened. If it had, it would have been recorded in the histories, and I would not have been as bored in my lessons. And no, I really do not have the time to discuss this. Some of us actually have responsibilities."

"Where are you going, Robb?" asked Arya. "Can we come?"

"I don't think so," said the eldest Stark boy. "Father has sent me to investigate the animal attacks."

"Do you think a vampire did it?" said his sister eagerly, not put off at all by his refusal.

"Don't be ridiculous, Arya. Vampires are just like the white walkers; monsters made up by nurses to scare children into going to bed," said Robb. "They're not real. Most likely we're dealing with a strange oversized parasite, like a giant tick."

A giant tick? What an utterly inappropriate comparison. Damon was hardly a 'tick'. But then, he expected too much of people's imaginations. The men of Winterfell were highly practical. They did not believe in legends, and occasionally believed in the gods. That was despite the fact they lived in a world that had dragons. Or used to have dragons. Thankfully, the fire-breathing nasty beasties were extinct. He supposed dragons to them were like pterodactyls to modern Americans.

"Well, has anyone seen it?" persisted Arya.

"No, but it's not a vampire," said Robb. "Dead people do not rise to haunt the living."

"You seem very sure, milord," said Damon.

Robb snorted as he mounted his horse. "The day I believe in dead men rising from the grave to drink the blood of the living is the day I see it myself, Salvatore. And I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon," he said.

"How are you going to catch the beast, Robb?" asked Jon, speaking up for the first time.

"It attacks men outside after dark, does it not?" said Robb. "Well, here's a man waiting for it after
Well, if Robb was *that* enthusiastic…

…who was Damon to deny him?

The flames crackled in the hearth and orange light flickered on the stone walls. Bonnie tried not to think about them. If she concentrated too much, they would go out of control. In a strange twisted way, Winterfell was probably one of the best things that had ever happened to her. Sure, she was in a completely strange place away from all her friends and family –Damon didn't count– and she had no idea if she would ever see them again. But it was a new start for her. No magic, no witches, hybrids, no Silas. She was just Bonnie Bennet, companion to Lady Arya Stark because she was the only one who could keep up with her.

"Ow," she hissed as she stabbed her finger with the needle again. Honestly, she did not know why Septa Mordane complained about Arya's needlework. Bonnie was a thousand times worse. She was supposed to be embroidering a flower, but she might as well have been working on a piece about the Conquests of Aegon. There was certainly enough blood involved.

"I see the needlepoint isn't going so well, Bonnie?" came a voice from the door. Bonnie looked up to find herself enraptured by the grin of one Theon Greyjoy. Lord Stark's ward was not the handsomest man in Winterfell –would be either Robb or Damon or Jon, and she was veering towards either Robb or Jon– but he was seemingly the friendliest. At least, he was the friendliest towards Bonnie. It wasn't to say that the others were not kind to her. Lord and Lady Stark had been more than kind, giving her a position as Arya's maid and allowing her to stay even though they didn't really know her all that well. Robb was always distantly polite and superior, and Jon was quiet and serious and always called her Mistress Bennet, making her look behind her to see if he was talking to someone else. But it was Theon who went out of his way to ask her how she was. She might not have had the most successful dating career –they either worked for the enemy or died, or it got complicated– but even she could tell that Theon was more than just being friendly.

And, funnily enough, despite his cheesy pick-up lines which he tried once or twice on her, she was responding to him. She didn't do alpha males like Robb Stark, or lone wolves like Jon Snow. And she definitely did not respond well to jerkasses like Damon, who probably trademarked the term. But Theon, with his quick smile and his eagerness to please…that worked.

"It's fine," she said, holding up her embroidery for him to see. "A few more drops of blood and maybe we'd have the sacking of…some fortress or another. Lady Arya's right. Needlepoint is a pain in more than one way."

Theon chuckled. "Then I suppose Lady Stark found Arya the perfect companion."

"Why aren't you out with the others, Lord Theon?" she asked. "I thought you were going riding."

"So did I, but then I changed my mind," said Theon. "Jon and Salvatore can look after the little ones well enough on their own. You, on the other hand, seem to need rescuing."

"From what?" asked Bonnie.

"From yourself," said Theon. "Why are you here when the sun is shining and there's actually good weather? With winter coming, it's not going to last."

"What do you have in mind, my lord?"
"Well, I have a few ideas, but you would slap me for most of them." Yes, she'd slapped him once for making an inappropriate comment to her. Since then, he had realized that she wasn't one of the girls at the brothel who would take his bullshit as long as it came with gold. As far as Bonnie was concerned, it had been a win-win situation. Theon learned an important life lesson, and she gained respect.

Theon offered her his arm. "For now, however, I was thinking we should go for a walk before the sun goes down. I don't want to be eaten by a vampire."

"Believe me, milord, that's not going to happen. Any vampire worth his salt—fangs, rather, ought to be afraid of us."

The last rays of the sun slipped beneath the horizon, leaving splashes of red and purple in the sky. The stars were beginning to come out like a dusting of snow upon a frozen lake. Columns of smoke rose from chimneys made of mud bricks. Behind him, Robb heard the men going about building up fires and the villagers preparing the evening meals.

So far, all was quiet, and there was no sign of any wild beast or Count Dracula roaming about. Somewhere in the woods, an owl hooted softly as it woke. The trees became nothing more than tangled shadows. There were fewer people out now. The villagers were shutting their doors against the night. The village behind the next hill had been attacked just a few nights ago. The creature never attacked the same place twice in a row and these people feared they would be next.

Robb, on the other hand, was counting on it. He wanted to be the one to catch the 'vampire'. The phantom accolades already sounded in his ears. He knew it was a little silly. It was just an animal, no matter how frightening, and they were hardly going to hail him the new Aegon for capturing it. Besides, he did not know if the creature was going to strike this village tonight, or whether it was going to strike tonight at all.

But still, he dreamed of how he would be given a hero's welcome when he went back to Winterfell with the beast in a cage. He had no idea what it would look like, but he was certain it would not look anything like a man with fangs.

Somewhere, a dog barked and a cow lowed. A crying baby was quickly hushed by its mother. He sighed. Well, that was the end of that. There was no vampire and no giant tick. There was not even a small tick. Not that he actually wanted a tick. Those were nasty.

He stared at the sky and wandered aimlessly outside the village's palisades. If he'd been at home, he'd have been jesting with Theon or teasing Jon for not having a sense of humour, and maybe settling yet another one-sided food fight between Sansa and Arya. Oh, and stopping Bran from trying to steal his dessert. He wondered what was for dessert tonight.

Something flew by his ear, and before he knew it, a weight crushed him to the ground. Something suspiciously like a hand covered his mouth. Whatever it was, it was strong. Sharp pain lanced through his neck. He tried to reach his sword, but it was in vain. The creature had him completely pinned, and he could not even shout for help. His struggles only made the creature's fangs sink deeper as it drank from him. Hot blood ran down the neck of his shirt and soaked the fabric. He heard breathing close to his ear, and then a sigh of satisfaction that was almost human, but more animalistic than most men.

And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the creature was gone with just a brush of wind.

Robb scrambled to his feet. "To arms!" he cried, having finally found his voice. "To arms!"
"Milord?" asked one of the men.

"It was right there," panted Robb, looking around frantically, but he could see nothing. The ring of light cast by the torches was woefully small. "It attacked me."

"You're bleeding!"

"I know. It bit me," said Robb. "We need to get inside. Now. It won't return so soon, I don't think, but I'd rather not risk it. Tomorrow, we ride at first light for Winterfell."

Robb had been attacked? Jon threw down the bow and rushed to the gates, fearing the worst for his brother. He had to push his way past the crowds that had gathered. Their hushed whispers were not soft enough to evade him. There was a monster prowling about. A monster that preyed on men and drank their blood. It had no form, it stalked the night unnoticed, and it disappeared without a trace when dawn came. It was something from beyond the Wall, they said. It had come down south with the cold. Winter was coming, and with it, unspeakable terrors that, until then, had belonged in children's nightmares and fanciful tales.

He reached the gates just as Robb dismounted, a bandage around his neck. He was a little paler than usual, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. Catelyn fell on her son, inspecting every inch of him. Ned was more restrained, but there was no mistaking the worry in his eyes.

"I'm all right," said Robb, reassuring his mother. "The bleeding took longer than usual to stop, but it has stopped, and the wounds are not deep."

"Nevertheless, come inside and have Maester Luwin examine you," said Catelyn, practically shoving Robb towards the keep. Jon fell into line behind the others, making sure to not be noticed.

"I told you," whispered Arya. "It's a vampire."

"There's no such things as vampires, Arya," snapped Sansa half-heartedly, although it seemed as if she were trying to convince herself rather than her sister.

Arya stuck out her tongue at Sansa.

Jon felt, rather than heard, Damon fall into step beside him. Without saying anything, the older man handed him a head of garlic.

"What is this for?" asked Jon. Then he remembered Damon's tale, and Count Dracula's revulsion for garlic. "You cannot be telling me that you believe in this vampire nonsense?"

"What other explanation is there?" asked Damon. "Besides, it can't hurt."

Despite not wanting to admit it, Jon agreed. He silently took the garlic and pocketed it, reminding himself to take some to his brothers and sisters later.

Bonnie tried not to look at Damon. If she did, she probably would have given him a brain aneurism right there and then. It wasn't as if he didn't deserve it. Eating villagers was bad enough, but biting Robb Stark? Was he trying to be discovered? Instead, she focused on pounding the leaves and bark into a poultice as per Maester Luwin's instructions.

Robb winced as the bandage was pulled away from his neck. The dried blood made its removal a bit more difficult than it ought to have been.
"You are lucky the wounds are not very deep, milord," said Luwin as he examined Robb.

"It never tried to kill me," said Robb. "It could have, but it did not want to. I think the creature, whatever it is, it only drinks. It does not kill."

"It has never killed," agreed Ned. "I suppose that is one thing to be thankful for. But it is a concern, especially since the king is coming."

"The king?" said Robb.

"Yes, the king," said Ned. "He sent word by raven this morning. He will be here in two months' time. I would like for the beast to be gone before then. The last thing I want is for it to be venturing inside Winterfell and attacking the royal party."

"That will not be an issue, milord," said Damon with a bow. "My men and I will make sure it doesn't come within Winterfell's battlements."

"You don't have any men, Salvatore," said Ned, raising an eyebrow.

"I will if you give me some."


Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Haha, Damon's got responsibilities. Scared now?
To say that Damon was pissed off was an understatement. Yes, Ned had put him in charge of ten men –ten! He'd killed the same number before in the space of ten minutes– and under the command of Ser Hagan Sigimund, a lieutenant under Ned who was well known amongst the men for never really amounting to much. When Damon had asked to be put in charge of men, he'd never thought he'd be taking orders from anyone other than Ned. Robb seemed to find this horribly funny. Damon only wished he'd bitten him harder.

Ser Hagan Sigimund was the man who had called Damon a 'soft southerner' when he had first arrived in Winterfell. Since Damon had challenged his ability to read –and it turned out that Sigimund couldn't read– they had…not been on friendly terms. However, he wasn't worth so much that Damon would call him an enemy. More like…a nuisance. But now that he had been put in charge of Damon, he had been elevated to constant irritation, and a day did not go by when Damon didn't want to rip his throat out.

Except that would be too big a bread crumb. The Starks weren't that dumb.

"With all due respect, Ser Sigimund, I don't think traps with hunks of venison is going to do much to attract the beast," said Damon.

"Your purpose is to obey, not question, Salvatore," said Sigimund, who clearly relished the prospect of forcing Damon to do useless and mundane tasks just because he could.

"Has this beast ever shown any inclination for eating animals, much less dead animals?" asked Damon. "It eats live people, although I wonder if it might not mistake you for something else."

"Well, then, Salvatore," said Sigimund. "Since you are so eager, you may stay outside Winterfell's walls all night and reflect. Who knows? Maybe you're right and the beast only eats live men."

Dammit. Damon knew he'd pushed the man's limits. They weren't averse to corporal punishment in Winterfell. Not that he was afraid of it, but the problem would be once he healed immediately
before their eyes. Now *that* would raise questions.

So he had no choice but to stand in the snow.

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There had been a purpose in putting Damon under Hagan Sigimund's command. Ned had wanted to subdue Damon's spirit, even if just a little. The man was too arrogant. He acted as if he were a lord, rather than a soldier. True enough, he had the accomplishments of a lord—he played music better than Robb who, admittedly, was tone-deaf—and the bearing of one, but he was *not* a lord, and it would be best for him to understand that. Perhaps standing in the snow for a couple of hours would convince him that he could not do whatever he wanted and get away with it.

He heard the murmurs before he saw it, but when he did…

Even Lord Stark was allowed to be speechless sometimes.

Damon had built a snow sculpture outside Winterfell. But it wasn't just *any* snow sculpture. It was a sculpture of Sansa.

Somehow, in the four hours that he had been out there without the appropriate clothing, he had not frozen. Not only that, but he also seemed to have enjoyed himself.

Ned was *almost* ready to relent when he saw Sansa's face upon beholding the sculpture, but Damon was far too unaffected by his recent punishment. When would he get the idea?

"Damon Salvatore," he said as he walked through the gate, followed by crowds and crowds of people who wanted to see the marvel that he had created in Sansa's likeness. "Did you not understand you were meant to be reflecting?"

"Well, I *was* reflecting, my lord," said Damon as he dusted snow off his bare hands. "But a man can only admire his own reflection for so long and the puddle got snowed over."

To Ned's right, Robb hid his inappropriate and ill-timed laugh with a cough. Otherwise, no one said anything. No one *could* say anything.

"Come inside, Salvatore," said Ned. "You must be freezing." He gave up.

As if one Sansa was not bad enough, now there were two. Arya scowled at the snow sculpture which still glistened in the sun. It was too cold for the snow to melt. Everyone was commenting on how beautiful it was, and in turn, how beautiful Lord Stark's eldest daughter was.

"Why did you have to make a sculpture of Sansa of all people?" she demanded of Damon. It was childish and she knew it, but she wished someone would make a snow sculpture of her.

"Yes, why did you?" asked Robb, who was worried for an entirely different reason. Everyone knew Sansa liked Damon. Not just liked him. She *like*-liked him. Sansa thought he was the most handsome man in all of Winterfell, with his ice blue eyes and his smirk. Arya thought Robb and Jon were a lot more handsome, but she didn't say anything. Sansa would never agree with her.

"Because I wanted to make something beautiful, and Lady Sansa is the most beautiful thing in Winterfell, no offence, Lord Robb," said Damon, winking at Sansa. The older girl blushed prettily and her eyes practically glowed as she smirked at Arya. Dear seven! She was going to be insufferable for the rest of the week. No, the rest of the *month*.
"Thank you, Damon," said Sansa. "You flatter me."

"It's not flattery when it's true, my lady," said Damon. Arya felt sickened. She didn't understand how anyone could be beguiled by Sansa. Didn't they know how mean she was? She'd spread so many lies about Arya that no one wanted to be friends with her. The girls all whispered behind her back. She'd even tried to say Arya was a bastard, until their mother put a stop to it. But she had their father wrapped around her little finger, and both their mother and Septa Mordane thought she was a perfect little lady, and Robb adored her. It was always Arya who was in the wrong. Arya had provoked Sansa. Arya had ruined Sansa's dresses—well, she had, but it was in retaliation! And now Damon thought she was perfect? Arya had thought he would be too smart for that. Obviously not.

She turned away from real Sansa to snow Sansa. Ugh. That was a new word of disgust she'd learned from Bonnie. It encompassed everything from boiled cabbage to preening sisters. And then suddenly, she remembered the slingshot in her pocket.

The youngest Stark girl was well known for her excellent aim. No one ever praised her for it, unlike the way they praised Bran when he hit a tree while practising archery in the forest, provided it was the right tree. That didn't happen too often so it was worthy of praise, she supposed. But they all knew she could hit whatever she wanted, particularly when it came to a slingshot. It took a moderate-sized stone, and quick moment to aim. Snow flew everywhere as the head of the sculpture shattered.

There. Now neither of the two Sansas were smirking.

"Arya!" cried Sansa.

"Aw, come on!" said Damon. "It took me ages to get her nose right!"

Arya shrugged. She wasn't sorry. Not really. She knew she hadn't hurt Damon's feelings—that was impossible—and she didn't really care about Sansa's.

"Arya, come, you should not have done that," chided Robb gently, ever trying to be the peacemaker between the two girls. It never ever worked. Mainly because he always took Sansa's side. The only other person who understood the real Sansa took Arya's side was Jon, and Jon wasn't here. Besides, even if Jon did say anything, no one listened to him. "You should apologize to Sansa and Damon."

The girl stayed silent and stared at her brother. Fine, this time, it had been unprovoked, but it was in retaliation for all the times Sansa had done things to her and she hadn't been able to get her back for it.

Damon crossed his arms and leaned back against the battlements, that smirk on his face.

"After all the work Damon put into it, you just ruined it!" exclaimed Sansa.

"Damon was supposed to be reflecting anyway," said Arya, stubbornly holding her ground.

"But he got sick of looking at his own face, which is unsurprising, really," murmured Robb.

Damon pretended to be offended. "Do you mean to say I'm not pretty, my lord?" he said in a ridiculously high pitched voice as he jutted out his bottom lip and widened his eyes. Robb snorted and shoved him away.

"How can a mercenary like you be so ridiculous?" he demanded.
"You don't survive for as long as I have by being serious, Lord Robb," said Damon, returning back to normal. They seem to have forgotten about the girls already, much to Arya's satisfaction and Sansa's dismay. "What's the point of living if you can't have fun?"

"Most people would not see it that way," said Robb.

"Most people don't have my brilliance," said Damon.

"My father does not see it that way."

"Now you're just baiting me."

Robb looked disappointed. "I was hoping you might say something inappropriate so we can sentence you to reflect on your actions again. I want to know how long you can bear to look at your face."

"Forever," said Damon. "I mean, you've seen my face, right?"

The kitchens on the Wall, as this place was called, looked nothing like a proper kitchen. There were a few wood stoves, and that was it. Sometimes, they became dung stoves because they only thing they could burn was faecal matter, thawed and dried. The stench was sometimes overpowering, but it was the warmest place in all of Castle Black.

"You cannot stay here without serving some known purpose," Mormont had said to Elena. "I want to keep the secret of your blood and your…birth this way. Secret."

So Elena had volunteered to cook without understanding that there wasn't actually anything to cook with. There was grain of various sorts, depending on the benevolence of the nearby lords, who, more often than not, forgot the Night's Watch even existed. Usually, only the Starks of Winterfell cared enough to send anything.

There was snow, which could be melted to make water. The lack of maple syrup, or syrup of any kind, made snow cones an impossible dream.

And then there was the lichen that was tough enough to grow on rocks under snow. She tended to mix it into the gruel-stew stuff so no one would notice. The men had an aversion to greens scraped off the rocks, and her first attempt at a dressing-less lichen salad had been soundly rejected by all.

"No sugar?" she had asked the head cook when she'd first arrived. He had simply stared at her as if she'd asked for truffle flakes. "All right. No sugar. What about salt? Come on, salt and sugar are the basics. Okay, what about pepper?"

He'd stared at her a bit more.

"One would have thought you'd grown up a Lannister, the way you go on about salt and sugar and pepper," he'd said, thrusting a pot at her. "There's grain and water, and dried meat enough for a meat stew."

That had been several weeks ago. Since then, she'd tried her best to improve the fare to the point where she was now the sous-chef and in charge of a small group of cooks of her own. They were now working at the stoves, stirring gruel and stews and cutting meat as she directed them. Oh, her friends would laugh. The only thing she'd been able to make at home had been pasta and the occasional caesar salad with store bought salad green mixes and dressing.
When she thought about how her life had come to this, she had to laugh. A few months ago, she'd just been a regular girl from Mystic Falls, going to school, attending dances, and freaking out over algebra tests. Sure, she'd been dating vampires and trying to end immortal hybrids, but even that now seemed normal in comparison to this. People didn't simply teleport to different universes—well, obviously she knew they did now.

Lord Mormont had been kind to her. He'd allowed her to stay while she figured out what to do with the rest of her immortal life, provided she helped out and provided blood when needed. In return, the men each had to take turns feeding her their blood. Meanwhile, he oversaw her education when he could, trying to help her remember the great houses of Westeros and basic current affairs. Unfortunately, he just didn't have that much time, and she was mostly left to muddle it out for herself. She still called the crown prince Jeffrey rather than Joffrey from time to time.

Without knowing it, she began to sing Katy Perry's 'I Kissed a Girl', out of tune and missing half the words in the verses, as she took stock of what was in the pantry. Hmm…the men would probably need to go hunting soon. They were running low on dried meat and smoke-cured blood sausages—

"That would be a sight to see," came a voice from the door.

Elena looked up to see the First Ranger, Benjen Stark. He was a tall thin man with wary blue eyes that seemed perpetually narrowed, as if he was inspecting something in great detail. He could not have been more than thirty five, yet the harsh climate had left their mark on him. His face was lined from years of exposure to the wind and cold.

She stopped singing immediately and blushed. "Oh, I didn't realize I was singing, or that you were there…"

"You can pretend I'm not here if you want to continue singing," said Benjen, knowing very well that she couldn't. "I was rather enjoying the song."

A compliment from Benjen Stark was hard to come by. In all the time she had been on the wall, he had watched her incessantly, as if he were afraid she would betray the Night's Watch. Although he also appreciated the numerous times that her blood had healed wounded brothers. That was the only reason why he even tolerated her presence.

"Are you looking for something, First Ranger?" she asked.


"Are you allowed to head south?" she asked.

"I have Night's Watch business at Winterfell," he answered, and it did not sound as if he was going to elaborate. She didn't ask for further details, knowing fully well she could find out later if she so chose. The men of the Night's Watch might be the dregs of society or people so tough that hell itself would spit them back out, but human nature being what it is, they enjoyed a good bit of gossip as much as the next desperate housewife. Especially since there was not much else to do on the Wall.

"Can I ask you a favour?" she asked. He looked up and examined her with his piercing blue eyes that would have made her human-self shrink back and mumble an apology. But Vampire Elena was better than this. "I was wondering if you could bring back some onions and carrots? And grain. Oats would be best. And salt. We desperately need salt."
Benjen raised an eyebrow at her. "Onions, carrots and salt, Elena Gilbert? You seem to forget that we are of the Night's Watch, and we are not here to eat fine food."

"Men who eat well fight better," said Elena. "Please."

"I'll see what I can do." With that, he filled his bundle with a few of her grain cakes and sausages, and left the kitchens in the hands of the cooks again.

It was almost time for dinner. She left the other cooks to serve it to the men while she ladled out a bowl of meat stew for Maester Aemon. She always took his meals to him.

He was full of knowledge about Westeros, and she was desperate and wanting to learn. Like Mormont, he had been extremely kind to her, and he'd often taken time to tell her stories about Westeros. He spoke to her about conquerors on dragon's backs, and of the plague of White Walkers which had swept across Westeros before a god or something rather drove them back. She always enjoyed hearing those stories. They were like fairy tales, except this was the history of Westeros.

He, in return, was curious about vampirism and often wondered if her coming signalled something more. "There has never been true immortality in Westeros," he had said when she had revealed to him that vampires lived forever. "This gift, Elena Gilbert, is something men would fight wars over. It would be best if the secret never left the Wall."

She placed the bowl in a pot packed with sack cloth to try and keep it warm, along with a few grain cakes fresh out of the oven. Aemon's study was quite a distance away from the kitchens and she didn't want the food to get cold during the time it took for her to get there. Vamp speeding would have made everything easier, but she tried to limit that so as to not frighten the men.

The maester was in his study, mixing herbs, as she usually found him. Although he was blind, he knew each plant by feel and smell so well that he did not even need to see them.

"Elena, would you pass me the wormwood, please?" he asked without even needing to turn around.

"I don't know how you know it's me," said Elena, setting down the small pot before going over to the shelf where the jars of herbs are kept. She sniffed all of them, trying to remember what wormwood smelled like. She grimaced when she found it—not something she would want to ingest—and then handed the dried leaves to the master, who added them to the paste he was making.

"I have ears," he said. "You have the softest step of them all, and when I smelled that soup and your grain cakes, I thought, 'Who else could it be?'"

He wiped his hands on a thin linen towel and bid her sit down at the old wooden table, darkened with age and with cracks running through it. Scrolls and maps lay scattered. She surmised it had been here even before Aemon had arrived, and that was saying something.

"What is the motto of House Lannister?" he suddenly asked her.

"What?" asked Elena.

"Motto. House Lannister. Come, child, you know this."

She tried to think back. House Lannister was represented by a lion. Their motto had something to do with a lion and a feminist liberation song back in the real world…

"Hear me roar," she said.
"That took you a little longer than it should."

"I spent all day in the kitchens. My sinuses need clearing and I need a drink," she said.

"Well, it was not very hospitable of me not to offer you one."

"Maester Aemon, you don't have to--" But he had already opened up a vein in his wrist. A thin trickle of blood fell into a pewter cup. He timed it long enough so that there would be at least a couple of mouthfuls for Elena before closing up the vein and smearing another poultice on it. This one was almost black, but tinged with red…

"Vampire blood is truly miraculous," said Aemon. "I only used a few drops, but this has already saved many wounds from festering."

Elena shyly took the cup of blood and tentatively took a sip.

It burned her mouth, her throat, as if she were swallowing live flames. She choked, spraying blood everywhere. Still, the pain remained until the maester quickly handed her a cup of water to quench the fires burning within her.

"A curious reaction," said Aemon.

"What did you eat?" she gasped.

"Nothing different from any of the men," said the maester. He fixed his blind eyes on her, and for a moment, she saw the young man he used to be. Behind the mask age had given him, his bone structure still remained. He must have been handsome when he had been young. "I do wonder…" he whispered, half to himself and half to Elena. Then he shook his head.

"I am boring you, Elena," he said. "A beautiful young woman like yourself should not be wasting your time with me, or on the Wall. You belong amongst the trees and grass and the sunlight."

"I have all the time in the world, Maester Aemon," said Elena. "You and Lord Mormont have been so good to me. To be honest…I'm afraid of what I'll find out there, down south."

"A much more pleasant climate, for a start," said the old man. "You cannot stay here forever. This…it is not for you." He placed a gentle hand on her arm. "You were meant for greater things, Elena. Don't squander your gifts."

The air had gotten a little chillier. Winter was coming, as it had been for the last seventeen years of Robb's life. He was a Stark. Winter was always coming. To be honest, right now, he was a little more concerned about the beast that lurked in the woods outside Winterfell. He still didn't believe in vampires, of course, but like Jon had said, there was no harm in carrying around some garlic just in case they were real. He hadn't enjoyed being bitten.

It had been humiliating.

Frost was beginning to form on the dark-leafed ferns that carpeted the forest floor. Their horses' hooves sounded dully on the frozen mud. He examined every tree, every twig, determined to find any sign of the beast.

"Why are you so sure it's going to be in this part of the woods?" asked Damon.

"Because I was attacked not two miles from here," said Robb. "Stark blood does not spill for free."
"Yeah, but it's probably long gone by now, my lord. Have you noticed? It tends to move around a little bit."

"Predators often haunt familiar territory," said Robb. No, nothing. The only broken twigs had been broken by them.

"A nice choice of words, particularly considering the nature of the beast we're hunting."

"It's not an undead vampire, Damon," said Robb. "Corpses do not rise from the dead." Still, he discreetly patted his pocket where the garlic lay. He would have to go about investing in some silver stakes too. It couldn't possibly hurt much, except his money pouch. But he had more than enough silver and nothing much to spend it on.

"I don't know, Robb," said Jon dubiously.

"Dracula is a tale Damon made up to scare Arya and Bran and Rickon," said Robb. "I think you're a little too old for such things, Jon."

"Yeah, I kind of did make it up," said Damon with a smug grin. "But that's not to say there aren't any vampires. Every good tale is based on truth."

"And what did you base yours on?" asked Jon.

"Something else that I heard somewhere down south east," said Damon with a shrug, leaving Jon a sceptical believer of vampires and Robb a disbelieving roller of eyes.

Theon chose to hang back and not get involved. Ever since Salvatore's arrival in Winterfell, all his exploits had been overshadowed. In the past, Robb had always been the better fighter and diplomat, and Jon had been known to occasionally make poignant observations. But Theon had always had his sexual prowess and knowledge to fall back upon.

Now Damon was the conqueror of women's hearts and beds, and he did it all without paying them, leaving the young Greyjoy with no specialty to call his own. The younger noblemen in Winterfell had, in pre-Salvatore times, gone to Theon for advice on all matters to do with women. They now turned to Damon with a kind of awe reserved for men who forged their own path in the barren terrain against all expectation. Not that Robb had ever gone to Damon for advice on anything. He was the lord's son. It all came to him quite naturally. The problem was sifting through the women who were interested in the heir to Winterfell, and the women who were interested in Robb.

"Shhh…" Damon suddenly halted. "Listen."

"What?" said Robb, who heard nothing, not even a bird. "Is it the beast?"

"Depends on what kind of beast you're thinking," said Damon. He dismounted and carefully pushed his way through the underbrush. The frost melted and left wet trails on his breeches. Robb followed him, sword drawn, not wanting to be ambushed yet again.

Then he heard it too; high pitched whining, like the sound of mewling babies.

They pushed on, following the sound until they came to a particularly dense patch of vegetation which something had burrowed through. The rigid corpse of the largest wolf Robb had ever beheld lay on its side. It was too cold for flies, but the rats had begun their work in the night. A broken arrow shaft protruded from the animals' side, and the fur around it was matted with dark blood.
The whining and snuffling was quite loud now, and it was coming from within the burrow. Robb looked back at Jon. They did not need to say anything to one another.

"You know, I know more about wolves than most people, and I really don't recommend--"

Neither of them listened to Damon. Robb pushed aside the wet bracken at the opening. A pair of yellow eyes stared back at him. And then another pair. And another.

"Dire wolves south of the Wall," breathed Theon. "How is this possible?"

"They, you know, like, walked?" said Damon.

Theon looked as if he were about to punch the dark haired soldier, but then thought better of it. One did not simply punch the man who beat everyone else in sparring. Robb ignored them and proceeded to reach inside the burrow. It wasn't the smartest thing he could have done. Little wolves had teeth too. But he was curious. He had never seen a dire wolf before, and certainly not wolf pups.

"Do you think they'd make a nice scarf for Lady Sansa?" asked Damon. That was definitely to be ignored. Although Robb could use a new fur collar for his cloak. But no. Wolves did not wear wolves. That was simply wrong.

The pups were cold and hungry. He pulled two out and handed them, squirming and protesting, to Theon. Another three were deposited into a protesting Damon's arms. The largest grey one, clearly the leader of this small pack, growled at him. Robb immediately took a liking to that one.

"What are we going to do with them?" asked Theon.

"Take them back to Winterfell, I suppose," said Jon. "It's fitting. Wolves for Starks, and there's one for each of the Stark children."

"I hope that big wolf isn't symbolic," said Damon, looking at the carcass. He only shrugged when Robb glared at him.

He motioned to the others to follow him. There was no point in hunting for the beast anymore this day. It wasn't as if they could track anything very well—and that was being optimistic since they had found no sign of the creature and he was pretty sure it hadn't been a dire wolf—while carrying five wolf cubs.

Jon lingered by the burrow, examining the carcass of the mother. And then he reached into some ferns by the burrow and drew out one last pup, smaller than the others, and white as snow.

"That's the runt of the litter," said Theon with a grin. "That's yours."

Then he swore.

Little wolves had...calls of nature too.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And so we see the arrival of the dire wolves. We're trying to move them along towards the events of the show, but Damon does seem to love creating trouble and
slowing things down. We've messed with the timeline a little bit here, you will have noticed.

Thanks to everyone who's commented, given kudos, or added this story to their bookmarks!
The King and I

Chapter Summary

Benjens warns Ned about supernatural threats. Theon probes into Damon's history. Arya loses yet another battle to Sansa and decides on a possible career path. Jon shares the joy of giving.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: We don’t own anything. Robb, Jon, etc. remain the property of Mr Martin and Damon, Bonnie, Katherine, and their supernatural friends are creations of LJ Smith and Julie Plec.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Damon had never met a king before. He’d been born in an age when they'd guillotined kings and started calling each other ‘citoyen’. But Kath—he'd heard other vampires talk about eating kings, and apparently, they made for very good eating.

Now that he was witnessing a royal procession in person, it was hard to blame the French for guillotining all the aristocrats. Standing in the cold for what seemed like hours on end with nothing to do was not his favourite pastime. In fact, it made him positively hungry; perhaps he could go invite the King for a ‘meal’ later on. After all, Damon Salvatore never missed the opportunity to try something new. Then again, he supposed his new employer wouldn't really appreciate it, and there were limits to even what he would risk. There was leaving breadcrumbs, and then there was throwing whole loaves of bread out to a starving mob.

Not that they had any clue what his breadcrumbs actually meant. It was hilarious watching Jon carefully add garlic to everything he ate. But, to keep up the act, Damon refrained from biting him. He probably wouldn't taste as good as Robb anyway, for his diet was poorer than the other Starks, and he simply lacked a sense of humour.

The wheels of the grand carriage clattered on Winterfell's flagstones. The polished ebony was gilt with golden leaves and flowers. Curtains veiled the occupants within. A woman's hand, adorned with many fine rings, lifted the curtain and Damon caught a glimpse of a beautiful golden-haired woman, not quite middle-aged, but not quite young either. She had to be Cersei Lannister. Or Baratheon. Probably Baratheon now, since she'd married Robert Baratheon. Lady Catelyn had taken her husband's family name so why not the queen?

As for the king himself, he rode behind the carriage upon a black stallion. Robert Baratheon was hard to miss. As a shooting target, rather. His girth was as wide as his horse's chest and his crown fit him ill. His face was ruddy from exertion, as if he were about to burst a vein or clot an artery. Or both. All of a sudden, not being able to taste this king didn't seem like such a loss. Damon wagered he would be a burger to Robb's filet mignon. All that grease? Not a fan.

Everyone knelt when Robert appeared. Damon wondered if he could ever get himself into a
position where all worshipped him, as things ought to be. He'd probably have to conquer a kingdom first, and *that* took far too much paperwork. And dedication. He'd get bored.

To be quite honest, Robert wasn't quite as obese as some people back home. He, at least, was capable of walking by himself, and when he died, they probably wouldn't need a crane to lift off the roof to remove his body. The lack of peanut butter and chocolate ice cream milkshakes probably helped.

The king slowly approached Ned Stark with what he probably considered a firm stately step. It wasn't *quite* a waddle, but it was getting close.

Robert stopped in front of the kneeling lord of Winterfell and bid him rise with a gloved hand.

Ned slowly rose. Neither man spoke. There were no smiles, no sounds. It was like watching two old dogs trying to decide whether they had enough energy to fight.

"You've grown fat," said Robert.

The tension broke as the two men began laughing and embraced each other. It wasn't until later that Damon found out they were old friends from way back when Robert was a normal sized human being not at risk of heart disease and type two diabetes.

It was all hands on deck, as they would probably say where Theon came from. Not that anyone in Winterfell would understand references to ships and things. Even though she was Arya's companion, Bonnie had been roped into helping with tonight's feast to celebrate the king's arrival, although her biggest task yet lay before her.

Robert, of course, had brought gifts for Lord Stark and his family. Unfortunately, his gift to Arya consisted on a lemon-coloured monstrosity with a full skirt and fluffy white lace cuffs on the sleeves and at the neck, and it would be rude of Arya not to wear it to the feast. Bonnie still had not figured out how to persuade her to wear it. If they'd had to swap places, the witch would have burned it. With magical fire so it couldn't resurrect.

A film of sweat covered her face and she was getting a rather effective, if a little sticky and eggy facial, as she leaned over to stir the custard. Making dessert for seven people was one thing. Making dessert for seventy was another thing entirely. Sometimes, her magic ban became really inconvenient. Also, custard in her world came in packets. You just had to add water and eggs. Her pores were definitely going to be open by the end of it, and if they had mud masks in Winterfell, she would have had baby smooth skin.

"Hello Bonnie," said a voice behind her, startling her so much that she almost blasted him back. Luckily, she didn't because it was Theon, who was trying his best to copy Damon. It was kind of cute, in a sad way. He hadn't figured out the key to the Damon-effect yet. Theon cared too much about how people thought of him. Damon just didn't give a damn. Unless other people's names started with 'E' and ended with 'lena'.

"You scared me, Lord Theon! I almost dunked your head in the custard!"

"That would make it squid-flavoured," remarked Damon, coming in behind Theon. Goddess! Did he have to be here? It seemed he was omnipotent and omnipresent half the time! No trouble in Winterfell happened without him knowing about it. Granted, ninety-nine per cent of trouble in Winterfell was caused by him, either directly or indirectly. Why, she'd caught Jon trying to stick garlic under everyone's beds, convinced that it was going to save them from potential vampire
attacks. She'd let him, in the end. He was a sort-of lord, after all, and garlic wasn't going to do any harm, even if it couldn't do any good. Besides, if winter came, and it would most definitely come, according to the Starks, they would have an extra garlic supply to flavour the food.

And yes, he had almost been funny in his earnestness except Jon Snow was not to be laughed at under any circumstances whatsoever.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" she demanded of Damon. Theon she could excuse.

"Not really," said Damon. "I can hardly engage in beast hunting with the king present, lest the queen and the young princes and princess be alarmed by the presence of a mysterious predator lurking just outside the walls."

Bonnie prayed to the goddess that whenever Damon went out in search of a snack, he would be discreet. The last thing anyone needed was for the entire imperial army –royal army?– to descend upon Winterfell to become the next Van Helsing. That would certainly make life difficult.

"And Robb and Jon are waiting for the arrival of their uncle from Castle Black," said Theon, trying to use a wooden spoon to steal some custard. Bonnie batted him away, but slipped a meat tart into his hand. He grinned at her. "I knew there was a reason I liked you so much."

"Where's my tart?" demanded Damon. He licked crumbs from his fingers, having already stolen a couple. Tucked discreetly amongst the folds of his robes was a bottle of very fine vintage. Now, Bonnie didn't understand wine. She drank it, and she liked it, but she couldn't really tell a good vintage from a bad one. However, judging by the dusty wax seal, Lord Stark had obviously kept these well hidden in case of special occasions.

"Get out before the head cook realizes," she whispered to them.

"I always knew you'd take care of me, Bonnie," said Theon with a wink as he bit into his steaming meat tart. Bonnie smiled as she heard his sharp intake of breath when he burned his tongue, but she did not glance back at him, knowing he would already be fleeing down the hall with Damon to evade the head cook, who, while a servant, inspired fear and awe in almost everyone. She, after all, had full say over what was on the menu. Lady Stark hardly ever made requests, although this was one special occasion that she did, and Lord Stark was usually happy with whatever ended up on the table.

The custard was finally done and even. No mean feat in a medieval world. Bonnie wiped her hands on her apron. The hardest task was yet before her.

Just how was she going to convince Arya to dress up as a lemon meringue pie?

Winterfell looked the way it always had. Strong walls, not fancy, but they did what they were supposed to do. No one recognized him as he rode through the streets which he had wandered through so many years ago as a boy, occasionally stealing apples and chasing pigeons with Ned and Brandon. They still looked the same, but he had changed. Even though he would always remember it fondly, this was no longer his home.

"Uncle Benjen!" The boy's voice pulled him from his reverie. Bran ran towards him, eyes bright and face red from the biting winds. The boy's hair was tousled as if he had been running around outside for a while even though he was in a dress tunic with a wolf embroidered on the chest.

Benjen dismounted and caught him up. "You grow any bigger, Bran, and I won't be able to do this anymore," he said with a grunt. Had it really been so long? It had seemed like yesterday that he had
been the same age and size. Well, perhaps he had been a little taller. Bran had inherited Catelyn's stature.

"I saw you coming from a mile off," said Bran. "The others are waiting in the courtyard."

Benjen lifted the boy into the saddle and swung back in behind him. The other children were indeed waiting in the courtyard. Robb and Jon had idly taken up teaching Arya to shoot arrows to pass the time while Rickon watched and clamoured to have a go. The girl hit the bull's eye nine times out of ten. They, however, abandoned their bows and arrows as they rushed to greet him, with Jon hanging back slightly, as he usually did.

"Father will be very glad to see you," said Robb. And Ned was, in his own way. His brother had never been one to express much outwardly, but he embraced Benjen and immediately ordered the servants to bring out hot food and wine, for which the ranger was glad. After all the 'stew' he had had on the wall and the tough-as-leather oatcakes that Elena Gilbert made, he was more than ready for some proper fare, even if it was just meat and potatoes.

Ned was always glad to welcome his brother back to Winterfell. To be honest, he was quite worried about the situation at the Wall, what with that Night's Watch deserter having his throat torn out and now the mysterious blood drinking beast prowling about his city. He planned to use his influence over Robert to persuade him to send more men to the Wall. Not that he believed in grumpkins and snarks, but it did not hurt to be prepared.

As Benjen ate, Ned told him of the happenings in Winterfell. Farmers had feuds and lords squabbled over land. Oh, and of course the beast. Benjen paused in the middle of spooning potatoes into his mouth.

"A blood drinking beast, you say?" he asked.

"It certainly seems like it," said Ned. "Robb was bitten—he's fine now, as you can see. The beast has never killed. Arya is convinced it is a vampire and insists on putting garlic by her door."

He chuckled. Children were so susceptible to tall tales, particularly ones told by charming mercenaries with boundless imagination. Cat had had to tell Damon to stop telling Rickon these stories because he refused to go to sleep at night now, convinced there was something terrible hiding under the bed. No matter how many times Robb or Jon or Bran or anyone else poked swords beneath it to prove there was nothing except dust and a few old shoes, he would not be swayed.

"Arya might be right," said Benjen. "There are strange things in the world, Ned; stranger than you think. The Others have been sighted beyond the Wall, and besides the Others, there are…others."

It was Ned's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Others and Others? What other Others can there be?"

"Just be careful, Ned. You never know what might happen."

"No!"

Arya stared in horror at the…the…the…she had no words for it. Why did she have to wear this?!

The dress was neatly laid out on the bed, its ruffled yellow skirt threatening to swallow everything that came close. Nymeria growled.
"It's the latest fashion in King's Landing, milady," said Bonnie. She didn't sound as if she thought much of King's Landing fashions, which made Arya like her more. Then again, she was trying to force her into the monstrosity, so she wasn't feeling too benevolent towards her maid right now.

"It's got ruffles! And lace!"

"It has got everything, milady," said Bonnie.

"Why do I have to wear this? Bran doesn't have to wear anything like it. Neither does Rickon, or Robb, or Jon, not even Sansa!"

"With all due respect, milady, but I don't think anyone would want to see Lords Bran, Rickon, Robb, or Jon dressed as such."

Arya couldn't help but giggle at the image. Oh, if only she could somehow get her brothers to dress up like this, particularly Robb! Now that would be something worth seeing.

"Do I have to?" she asked.

"Lady Stark said it is a gift from the King, and it would only be polite for you to wear it to the feast held in his honour," said Bonnie, lifting the dress off the bed and holding it out. "I think only the bravest person would dare to wear such a colour."

"I suppose I have no choice," sighed Arya. "All right, you can put it on me, but I don't want to look in the mirror."

The lace was scratchy, and the full skirt tangled up her legs, making it hard to run or walk, or even move. From the bed, her wolf Nymeria cocked her head as if she were also questioning the king's taste in fashion. The youngest daughter of House Stark had to take a deep breath and remind herself of her proud lineage before she stepped out the door.

Sansa was going to love this.

For the love of everything holy and unholy, someone had to stop that hurdy gurdy! It was giving him a headache with the wailing, grating strains that passed for music. Damon downed more wine, hoping the alcohol would numb the pain. It didn't. How he longed for some proper jazz, or maybe the Beatles. Hell, he'd even take Mozart right now. Some damned violin sonata was better than this. All right, perhaps he was exaggerating a little, and a hurdy gurdy wasn't the worst instrument he'd ever heard. The Chinese lyre could take that honour. But it was definitely an acquired taste, and the Starks definitely needed lessons on how to throw a good party.

At the front, Robert was bored enough to kiss a serving girl full on the lips while his wife watched on, her expression as flat as the beer that was being served to the soldiers down the very other end of the hall.

Apart from a brief moment at the beginning of the feast, where he had announced the betrothal of Sansa to Joffrey –it seemed like a terrible idea to Damon, betrothing teenagers to one another, but that was the way they did things in these parts, he supposed– Robert had not been sober the entire evening. More wine went to the king's table than anywhere else. He had tried to grope Bonnie, who was helping with the serving tonight, until Catelyn had executed a timely save and distracted the king long enough for the witch to escape.

Damon poured himself some sour wine from a metal jug. It was almost abrasive to the taste, but it was better than flat beer. If Ned thought this was a party, then what was a Stark funeral like? Well,
at least he wasn't working the party, like some unfortunate people were.

"Hey, Bonnie," he whispered as Bonnie passed him by, carrying an empty jug that needed refilling. "Do you think you can get me something better than this?" He indicated his cup.

"You have already had too much," she said. Obviously someone needed a drink more than he did. She retreated back to the kitchen where further supplies were waiting to be brought out.

"She is exquisite," said Theon. Damon had been so busy lamenting the lack of good alcohol that he hadn't even noticed the Ironborn coming up behind him.

"What are you doing down this end of the hall with the rest of us rabble, Lord Theon?" asked Damon.

"Can I not visit a friend?"

"You have friends?"

Theon scowled at him. "You know, Robb's right. I'm surprised we haven't killed you in your sleep already."

"Like I said before, you're not capable of it."

A few girls passed by, dressed in their finest with tiny white flowers woven into their hair. There weren't a lot of flowers available in the vicinity of Winterfell. The most abundant form of vegetation was brambles, and unless one wanted to play Jesus in an Easter pageant, a crown of thorns wasn't the most attractive look.

Two of the girls, walking arm in arm, passed Theon and Damon. They smiled at the two men in a way that beckoned to them, saying, 'Come hither.' A year ago, Damon would not have said no, but in situations like these, he particularly remembered how long Elena would take to dress up, putting her hair in a ridiculous beehive style for the sixties' dance, and applying fake blood for Halloween.

And he missed her.

It wasn't that he had remained entirely faithful and sexless during his stay in Winterfell, but they had been mere dalliances with the girls at the brothel, who were very happy with the fat purse of coins he left with them afterwards. It was business, straight and simple. These girls…they were different. He recognized them as being the daughters of Ned's bannermen's knights. He couldn't remember what their names were, but he knew they weren't the sort of working girl he could go and…erm…see and then pay and forget about. They expected emotional attachment. He did not want any emotions involved on either side.

"What are you waiting for, Damon?" asked Theon. "Those girls clearly want to be chased, and you, my friend, are a hunter."

"Sorry, buddy. I'm accounted for."

"Wait, you have a woman? And you did not say anything?"

Perhaps the wine was stronger than he'd thought it was. And it had kind of grown on him too. Perhaps he simply missed Elena and his old life. "First, why would I? Secondly, Elena does not belong to me or anybody else."

"So her name is Elena, is it?" asked Theon, forgetting about girls with flowers in their hair. The
men edged their chairs closer, all keen for a bit of juicy gossip. Seriously, they were worse than desperate housewives. "Now we really need to know."

Arya toyed with the peas on her plate, pushing them to one side, and then back across again. They had long since gone cold. She didn't really like peas. All around her, people were laughing, and Sansa, in particular, was giggling more than usual as she snuck glances at Joffrey Baratheon.

"He's so handsome," the older Stark girl whispered to her friend Jeyne Poole.

"He looks like a girl," Arya muttered under her breath. It was true! The prince's face was smooth, and his golden hair flopped over his eyes. If she had to pick the handsomest man in the room, she most definitely wouldn't have picked him. She didn't actually know who she would pick yet. Probably the Kingslayer in his shining armour. She really really wanted a sword like his one day.

"I think Lord Robb is looking very handsome tonight," ventured Jeyne Poole. Unfortunately, Robb was too enthralled by the tragic tale of Damon and Elena which Theon was forcing out of the former. Otherwise, if he had heard Jeyne, how embarrassing would that have been for both of them? At least it would have been interesting for Arya.

"I will admit he is not completely hideous," said Sansa, "but he is not handsome, Jeyne. Damon, on the other hand, is." And on and on, they continued to compare men, discussing who was handsome and who was not, and who had the best dress—obviously not Arya. The youngest Stark girl almost felt nauseous from the inane babble.

Down the other end of the hall, the servants seemed to be having a much better time. The soldiers had gotten drunk and had become rowdy, and some of them had begun dancing with the serving maids. She fidgeted in her seat, wishing she could go and play with Nymeria or practise archery. She'd even settle for going to bed.

Her new dress rustled as she moved, and Sansa turned to frown at her for behaving inappropriately, and then she smirked. Her sister had been smirking at her all evening ever since she'd seen the hideous dress. Even serious Jon had had to bite his lip. Arya had not seen what she looked like in it, and she did not want to. Ever.

There was something in Sansa's smirk that always made her blood boiled. She hated how self-righteous she was, how proper she was, and how everyone always seemed to love her best even though she was mean and she lied. All the time. And no one cared because she was pretty and proper and a lady.

Sansa returned to giving Joffrey shy sly glances and whispering to Jeyne about him. Having nothing better to do, Arya looked back down at her plate at the uneaten peas. They were round and some of them were quite hard because they had not been cooked properly, just like miniature rocks, actually…

Her slingshot was cleverly hidden in the folds of her hideous ruffled skirt. She pulled it out and took aim. The green projectiles flew in a perfect arc across the dinner table, just as Arya intended them to. She watched them leave the sling, and watched them descend…

…right down the front of Sansa's dress. All right, she hadn't meant for them to go quite that far.

Sansa gasped in shock and anger, while Jeyne Poole's eyes widened. As did Bran's. Sansa stood up so abruptly that her chair toppled backwards. Her face was pale, save for two red spots on her cheeks—Arya thought they clashed badly with her hair, which everyone said was red but was
actually caroty. "How could you, Arya?" she asked, her voice full of hurt and humiliation. "Why do you always have to ruin things?"

A hush fell in the entire hall as everyone craned their necks to see what was going on. The Imp quietly sipped his wine and gave Arya a knowing look, as if he knew exactly why she did what she did. And…he almost seemed to approve?

"What is going on, Sansa? Arya?" asked Catelyn.

"She threw food at me, Mother," Sansa kept her voice muted and 'dignified', but her words were clear enough for everyone to hear them.

"Peas," elaborated Bran in a loud whisper. "They went down her…" He helpfully pointed down the front of his own tunic. Traitor.

Arya saw her mother striving to control her temper. When she was angry, she would press her lips together tightly in disapproval in a way that made even Robb afraid because she so seldom did it. At least, not with them.

"Is this true, Arya?" she asked calmly.

Arya bit her lip. Perhaps it had not been one of her best ideas. But…but…it was Sansa! Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father looking at her, his face stern and hard. She nodded. "It's true," she said. "But I didn't mean for the peas to go where they did."

Catelyn sighed. "You need to apologize to your sister, Arya."

Yes, that was the worst part. Sansa never properly accepted apologies, particularly not from her, and Arya hated to admit that she'd lost to her sister. Again. And that little smirk that Sansa would have while Arya muttered her apology…she just wanted to…wanted to…oh, she knew perfectly well what she wanted to do with Sansa and her smirk. It was just that she'd always been too scared to do it, and somehow, even though she hated her, as in really really really hated her, Sansa was still her sister, and one could not do such things to one's siblings. It wasn't right.

Beneath the table, Bran tugged at her sleeve. No one was on her side in this one. "I'm sorry," she muttered, looking down at her now empty plate. She kicked the heavy wooden table leg, wishing people would just stop looking at her and mind their own business. No, that was never going to happen.

Sansa gave her a disdainful look, but nodded. "I accept your apology," she said, not meaning a word of it. "Mother, may I be excused from the table? I need to change my dress."

"Of course," said Catelyn.

After Sansa left, Arya told Catelyn she did not feel well, and wished to go to bed. Catelyn knew exactly knew why her younger daughter was not feeling well, but she let her go without a word.

Once she was out of the noisy, hot hall, she began to run through the stone corridors lit only with smoky torches, not caring that she was tripping over the skirts of her hideous yellow dress and not really knowing where she was going. She just wanted to get away from them all.

"Arya!" She heard footsteps behind her, but she kept running anyway. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Not her brothers, not her parents…

Jon caught up to her in a few steps. The long ruffled skirts didn't exactly lend her speed, and he had
much longer legs. In the flickering firelight, his eyes seemed like pools of darkness, but even so, she saw his sympathy.

"If you're going to tell me how I shouldn't have thrown peas at Sansa, don't," she said.

"I wasn't," said Jon. "I just wanted to give you something."

He presented a long package wrapped in oil cloth to her. Arya took it curiously, wondering what it could be. She unwrapped it to reveal the pommel of a very light sword, beautifully crafted, and just her size. The blade was thin and bendy, but not so bendy that it couldn't do damage. On the contrary, in fact, it was very very sharp.

"I had the blacksmith make it for you especially," he said with a small smile. "Do you like it?"

Arya flung her arms around Jon, never more grateful to him as she was now. "It's the best present I've ever had," she said as she buried her face in the front of his tunic. He smelled of horse and sweat and leather polish. "I love you, Jon."

"I love you too," said Jon, patting her back.

"I'm going to call it Needle. Will you teach me to use it?" she asked when she released him. "Maybe we can go hunt for the vampire together. Can you imagine it? Arya Stark, vampire hunter."

Jon laughed. "Go to bed, Arya. I'll think about it."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Not counting Benjen, who has an unfair advantage on the vampire front because of Elena, Arya might just be the most clued in as to what’s been going on because she’s young enough to allow herself to believe in illogical things like vampires. I have so much fun writing her point of view.
Chapter Summary

Theon uncovers Damon's past, or so he thinks. Damon laments the lack of social media. Jon makes an important decision. Bonnie makes a significant contribution to the Starks. Benjen confirms his suspicions about the happenings in Winterfell.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: We don't own anything. Robb, Jon, etc. remain the property of Mr Martin and Damon, Bonnie, Katherine, and their supernatural friends are creations of LJ Smith and Julie Plec.

Arya had launched her projectiles at the most opportune moment possible. That little interruption distracted Theon from his onerous line of questioning about Elena and Damon's relationship. It had gone to the point where Damon missed Facebook. On Facebook, all he'd have to do was put 'it's complicated', and people would know not to ask or else he'd just block them. Also, Theon would have soon been too distracted by Angry Birds or harvesting peas on Farmville to continue interrogating him.

But here, in Winterfell, the peas had had to fall down Sansa's top to halt the Ironborn Inquisition.

The men had been hounding him for details, and because he wasn't giving them any, beyond the fact that yes, there was a girl called Elena whom he really cared about and yes, they were separated and now he didn't know where she was or what had happened to her, they were now making up their own version.

"You wouldn't have been the first nobleman to be exiled and reduced to a sell-sword after chasing the wrong piece of skirt," said Theon with a grin as he clapped Damon on the back. That could not have been further from the truth, but Damon wasn't about to indulge their need for gossip by correcting the Greyjoy hostage.

"Do you miss her?" Robb suddenly asked.

Really? Did Robb Stark have to get involved? He would have loved to tell him that yes, he did miss her, and he should just shut the fuck up about her because rubbing it in wasn't making it feel any better.

But one could not tell the son of one's liege lord to shut the fuck up, so Damon settled for a curt nod instead and hoped Robb would get it.

Much to his credit, Robb understood, and when Theon opened his mouth to pour out more questions, the young Stark gave him one of those wintry stares of his. In land-locked Winterfell, wolves were much more powerful than squid rings.
"Let's have some music," said Damon. The men needed something else to focus on other than the great and non-existent scandal of the sell-sword and the lady. He did not fancy being blindsided by questions in the days to come. "I mean some proper music. This is putting me to sleep."

"Damon −" began Robb, but he was already off speaking with the conductor before commandeering one of the fiddles. He'd played the fiddle in his early youth as a confederate soldier. Music choices had been terribly limited back then, particularly when one had been a soldier on the losing side. Later, he'd learned the violin. They were hardly his favourite instruments, but in the absence of a piano or an electric guitar, this would have to do. It was better than the cantankerous hurdy gurdy. He tweaked some of the pegs to tune the instrument and tried out a few notes.

Robb supposed there could have been a worse song for Damon to play, but on seeing King Robert's wistful expression and Queen Cersei's ice cold demeanour he supposed there were very few worse songs.

Damon's voice was not that of a troubadour's, but there was a certain quality to it; an edge, if one could call it that, like a steel blade beneath velvet. He sang of a doomed love story, where a boy fell in love with a dying girl and was overwhelmed with grief at her passing. What had possessed him to sing of such a thing, and at a feast, no less? Robb did not consider himself sentimental, but there was something very tragic about this whole thing, and he had to wonder. Did Damon lose Elena like that? Had he met her, knowing she would die, but loved her anyway?

But then, all love was like that. They were all mortal, and anyone who fell in love did so knowing that the one they loved would one day wither and die. It was simply a matter of how long and who would die first.

Some of the ladies seemed as mesmerized by the musician as much as by the song. Sansa, having returned with a new dress, this one in mint green, sat staring at Damon, her eyes luminous and shining, as if she were drinking in the sight of him. His sister was smitten, and just about all of Winterfell knew it. Whether Damon could return her affections was another matter entirely. It made Robb feel better about the whole situation. He liked the man at arms well enough, but he would never let a man like that near his sister, and he pitied poor Elena who'd had the ill-judgement to get involved with him.

The night was clear. Jon took in a deep breath, smelling hay and smoke and horse manure along with the slight taint of cured leather. A crescent moon hung above him, illuminating the clouds of exhalation. If Arya loathed such feasts, then he hated them even more. The strains of music and the sound of merrymaking floated through the night to mingle with the contented snorts of horses nosing at their feed. He went to where his horse was tethered. The animal's ears flicked forward when he recognized the sound of his footsteps.

Jon pulled out two carrots he had pilfered from the kitchens when no one had been looking. "Here you go, old chap," he said. He fed one to the greedy horse before biting into the other one and leaned against the wooden post, looking up at the sky.

"Shouldn't you be inside with the other young people?" came Benjen's voice as he emerged from the shadows of the archway that led toward the main hall.

"Shouldn't you be inside with the other old people?" asked Jon.

Benjen chuckled. "Fair enough," he said. "To be truthful with you, I find myself fearing inane
small talk with people I neither know nor like. But you, you are young, and there is dancing inside."

"Lady Catelyn didn't want me there. She thought the royals would be offended by a bastard sitting in their midst. Besides, I don't dance." It wasn't entirely true. Robb had taught him how to dance in private, and if he needed to dance because his life somehow depended on it, he could do it decently enough. But no one ever asked him to dance. The noblewomen thought him too lowly, and the servant girls were too afraid of him. He didn't fancy sitting in a corner watching all the others. "Uncle Benjen, when you leave, can I go north with you?"

"Now, why would you want that?" asked Benjen. He removed a flask from his hip and took a swig from it.

"I want to take the black. You know I want to."

Ever since Jon had learned of the Night's Watch and the work they did on the Wall, protecting Westeros from whatever dangers lay beyond it, he had wanted to become a brother; to make something of himself. He was a bastard and he served no purpose save to remind Lady Catelyn of his father's unfaithfulness. The Wall would be different.

"Maybe next time," said Benjen.

"You have said that every time."

"You're young, Jon. You're not ready. Live a little before you throw your life away and dedicate it to the icy wastes. Fall in love, find a woman, sire a few bastards of your own. And then, if you still want to take the black, I'll take you then."

"I'm ready, uncle," Jon insisted. "And I will never sire any bastards." He would never condemn a child to such a life as he had had; to be an outcast amongst his own kin, to weather cold stares from your father's wife, to be treated as lesser than everyone else. Catelyn hadn't even allowed him to sit in on Robb's lessons, fearing that if he could read or write, he would one day pose a threat to Robb.

Benjen gave him a knowing smile. "We'll see," he said.

The boy's earnest face reminded Benjen of himself when he had first decided to go north to join the Night's Watch. Oh, he still believed in what they did, in theory, but reality was very different from what Jon thought it was. He had not the heart to tell the boy the truth. Ever since his nephews had been very small, Benjen had told them valiant tales of the brothers' feats. Most of them had been embellished beyond recognition.

"Your father tells me you and Robb have been trying to hunt down a strange beast that has been attacking villagers around Winterfell," he said to change the subject.

"It bit Robb," said Jon. "Do you think it could have come from beyond the Wall?"

More like some strange land beyond the spheres of this realm. One part of Benjen wanted to tell Jon about the most recent addition to the Brotherhood. But he had sworn to keep her a secret.

"It could have been anything," said Benjen.

"Arya and Bran believe it's a vampire –that's a blood-drinking animated corpse, if there is such a thing."
What do you believe?

I don't know what I believe anymore.

With the king in Winterfell, life took on a new turn. Not only were there several more mouths to feed, but all of a sudden, Damon found himself actually needing to practise decorum lest some ill-tempered royal, also known as Joffrey Baratheon, decided to take his head.

Robb, being of an age with the prince, was frequently expected to keep him company. And since Damon had been ‘relieved’ of his duties under Ser Sigimund, he’d been expected to keep Robb company and guard him from visitors of an unsavoury nature. Not also known as Joffrey Baratheon.

Robert had brought with him the Kings Guard; guardsmen so unlike the ones in Winterfell they might as well have been from another planet. They wore golden armour, and had as much a sense of humour as Jon. Except, of course, Jaime Lannister.

"You know, they call him the Kingslayer," Robb had mentioned to him once. Damon didn't think he warranted such a title. He'd killed one king. If killing one of something warranted a title, then he, Damon Salvatore, ought to be known as Hybrid Slayer or perhaps Vanquisher of Originals.

The unknown and unquantified 'they' also said Jaime Lannister was the best swordsman in all of Westeros. That, Damon was sorely tempted to prove. Or disprove, rather.

With a lack of suitable entertainment in Winterfell, the boys often spent their time in the practise yards and the girls…well, the girls did what girls did. Frankly, sewing kits were no good unless one could use the needles to practise acupuncture. But he doubted Lady Stark would appreciate his creativity when it came to needles. She already disapproved of Robb's association with him.

Watching Joffrey and Robb spar was, however, one of the more entertaining things Damon had seen or done since he'd bitten the latter. They were ill-matched, with Robb being a far superior swordsman. Neither of them were good losers, so Robb was hardly going to go easy on Joffrey just because he was a prince. After all, he was a little lordling himself; if not equal in rank, they were at least quite close in status.

Joffrey's practise sword flew from his hand into the mud and Robb pointed his sword at the prince's throat for the third time that day. It was hard to get tired of watching that, with Robb's hint of a smirk—he made quite a good disciple, that one, and Damon was quite proud of him— and Joffrey's barely veiled rage.

"This isn't fun," he said. "Only children play with wooden swords. Real men fight with steel."

"That can be arranged, Your Highness," said Robb.

"Live steel is too dangerous, Your Highness, milord," said Ser Rodrik who could spot a disaster in the making when it was right in front of his eyes. Sooner or later, Robb and Joffrey were bound to clash, and if Damon had to bet on someone, he would put his money on Robb every time.

And then he would discreetly make sure that he won, of course.

"What do you know about it?" snapped Joffrey. "Bring me my sword! Let's see how a Stark holds up against steel."

"Done," said Robb, who had been wanting to beat Joffrey yet again.
"I will allow blunted tourney swords, and that is it," said Ser Rodrik.

"Are you training women here, Ser Rodrik?" called out Joffrey's sworn shield, also known as a glorified babysitter. Half the man's face had been burned off. Damon supposed his face couldn't have looked much better beforehand anyway. He tried to hide the burns with his scraggly bits of hair, but it didn't work.

"I am training knights, ser" replied Cassel coldly. He kept his voice under well-maintained control, but it was as hard as sharpened steel.

"I killed my first man at twelve," said the Hound with a sneer. "How old is this one?" He pointed his chin at Robb. "Fourteen?"

"Seventeen," said Robb. If looks could kill, he would have finished off what the fire had started. "I would be more than happy to oblige his highness, Ser Sandor."

"Your Highness." The men all looked up as the Kingslayer himself approached the practise yard, armour gleaming and golden head bared in the sun. He cut an impressive figure, to be sure, and even though his voice was not loud, it held a hard warning edge. "It would not be the best idea. Perhaps some other time, when you are older."

Joffrey scowled. However, perhaps it was because Jaime was his uncle, or because he actually respected the Kingslayer, he did not offer any rebuttal or resistance. "This is stupid anyway," he said. "One day, I will be king, and you will bend your knee to me, Stark."

"Until then, Your Highness," said Robb. Joffrey stormed off, no doubt to find some other way to amuse himself. Some poor innocent puppy was going to suffer. The men watched him go, too intimidated to utter a word. Robb continued to glare at Joffrey's retreating back as if he would like nothing more than to plant his wooden sword right between his shoulder blades. Damon would have advised him to veer slightly left of the spine and to try and find a gap between the ribs. Wood didn't cut through bone very well. He ought to know.

"Lord Jaime Lannister," called Damon. All eyes turned to him. Ser Rodrik shook his head at him discreetly, but the vampire ignored him. "They have said you are the best swordsman in the realm. Is this true?"

"So they say," said Jaime, raising an eyebrow at his impudence, but he did not seem angry. Huh. A worthy opponent, then; there was nothing Damon liked better than to unsettle men who were in complete control of their tempers.

"I would very much like to pit my skill against yours and prove it true. Or not."

Jaime laughed. "You have some nerve, young man," he said. "What is your name?"

"Damon," said the vampire.

"Like Daemon Blackfyre?"

"Like Damon Salvatore."

"Damon Salvatore." Jaime tried that name out slowly on his tongue, as if tasting it. "I shall remember that name. Alas, I will have to decline your offer today. I have duties I must attend to." He turned on his heel and strode away, his white and gold cloak fanning out behind him.

"A pity he declined your offer, Salvatore," said Robb. "I would have liked to see him beat you."
In, and out. In, and out. The thread slid smoothly through the fabric. Her stitches were neat and tiny and even. Another image was already forming on the linen. It was an elaborate pattern of intertwining leaves and larks fluttering amongst pale spring blossoms. This was only an initial design, but eventually, she intended to use it for her wedding gown. Sansa Stark was not going to let inferior hands sew the dress in which she would cross the threshold of her intended's palace.

Every time she thought of her wedding, it was always the same scene. The sun would be shining, and the crowds adoring. The golden spires of King's Landing gleamed, never mind that they were made out of stone and were reddish in colour rather than golden, so her father had said. She wasn't going to let reality ruin her daydreams. She would wave to the cheering smallfolk, resplendent in her gown of azure and gold, her hair twisted up like the queen's. They, in return, would carpet her path with flowers as her carriage passed. Joffrey would be there in the background, dressed in the Lannister red and gold he so favoured. She could never picture his expression, but that hardly mattered. She was the people's princess. They loved her for it. She'd even dreamed of her wedding once and it had looked exactly like that, except Arya had then thrown mud at her from the crowd and ruined things as she always had.

And, instead of Joffrey, her future husband had had dark hair, blue eyes, and a wicked wicked grin.

"Lady Sansa, the princess is speaking to you," said Septa Mordane quietly. She had been so engrossed in her daydreams that she had not even heard the princess!

"Forgive me, Highness," said Sansa. "I am afraid I dream too much."

"I hope it's not about Joff, Lady Sansa," said Myrcella. Her brow furrowed.

Sansa had the good sense to blush. Well, it had kind of been about the prince, except it had mostly been about her becoming princess and eventually queen. And the king was always interchangeable.

"I was merely wondering about the tale your bannerman, Damon Salvatore, told us. Is there really a vampire in Winterfell?"

"Oh, don't heed that silly man, Your Highness" said the princess' septa. "There is no such thing as vampires. He made it up just to scare you and the princes. The queen asked me to have words with him. Prince Tommen is now too afraid to venture outside."

"You could always put garlic in your room if you're scared, Your Highness," Arya butted in, brazen as usual.

"Don't be ridiculous, Arya," said Sansa. "The princess doesn't need garlic. There's no such thing as vampires. I have never seen anything that does not have a reflection."

"That's because you're so busy looking at yours," muttered her sister. Her hair, as usual, was scraggly and unkempt, rather like the tail of Jon's horse. Was it really so hard to comb it every once in a while? Did she not understand that a woman's greatest weapon was her beauty? Septas and septons said it was shallow to put so much stock in appearance, but then people judged you by yours anyway.

Sansa knew her face was the greatest asset she would ever own, aside from her Stark name and Tully relations. Even from a young age, she had always understood that. Unlike Robb, she would never inherit anything. Unlike Jon and Bran and Rickon, she would never be able to eke out a living on her own. No respectable woman would. The only way to secure her future was to marry, and marry well, and to do that, she needed to appear as the perfect wife. Beauty could be as...
effective a weapon as a sword. Why couldn't Arya understand that? She worried about her sister sometimes, for she seemed to believe that she could be a knight. Sansa could only hope that in time, Arya would grow up and realize how foolish she was.

The sky was so close, yet so far. Bran reached for the stone above him, his fingers finding nooks and crags and crannies where no one else could see anything. His mother had sworn he could climb before he could walk, and she had done everything to try and stop him ever since. Nothing had ever worked.

The thing was, whereas some other people, such as his mother, were afraid of heights, Bran loved them. Being high up so close the sky made him feel free, as if he was alone in the world and the gods were trying to tell him something only he could hear. He wondered if, one day, he might climb high enough to pluck the moon from the sky or rest his head on a bed of soft fluffy cloud. What would they feel like? Would the moon be cool like a silver mirror, or burning hot like a piece of metal that had been heated beyond red in the forge?

For now, he satisfied his need to be close to the sky with the towers of Winterfell. They weren't nearly tall enough, but he liked sitting on the parapets and looking down. Everything below would seem so small, like little ants scurrying around, even his father or Robb.

He heard the strange noises, like the grunts of animals, before he reached the window. That was odd. No-one ever came up here. Curiosity drove him. He slowly and carefully made his way around the tower to the window…

Her little boy looked even smaller surrounded by furs, his face pale and his head bandaged. Blood slowly seeped through the white linen. Maester Luwin shook his head slowly at Catelyn as he rose from the boy's bedside. Her eyes were dry. This was beyond tears, beyond weeping, for no words could express a mother's grief when faced with the very real prospect of losing a child. What would she do to swap places with him? Actually, the question was what wouldn't she do?

'Why do you always have to climb?' she cried out silently as she took Bran's small limp hand in her own. He did not answer. His eyes remained closed and his breathing was so shallow it was barely there.

He had never fallen before, not even when it had been raining and the stones had been wet and slippery. There had never been one with a surer step than Bran. Why today? Why ever?

The servants brought her meals up to the sickroom. She let them sit there until the steam faded away and the fat congealed around the meat. Maester Luwin and his assistants constantly came in and out. They tried to soothe her with reassuring words as they spooned medicine and honey mixed with water into Bran's unresponsive mouth, but deep in her heart, she could hear what they were really saying. There was no hope. It was only a matter of time.

But how could a mother simply accept that? She never would, not until she had tried everything and Bran drew his last breath. So she kept sitting by his bedside as the day grew dark and faded into night, hoping he would wake up and tell her how he fell.

She lost count of the number of days, the number of nights, the meals uneaten and the words unspoken. No one, not Ned, not Robb, not Sansa nor Arya could persuade her to leave Bran's bedside to take rest. She couldn't rest while her child's life hung in the balance. She prayed. She had never prayed so fervently, hoping that somewhere out there, someone would take pity on an innocent child.
"Lady Catelyn?" Someone was calling to her, and they had been doing so for a while. Catelyn raised weary eyes, noting with dull surprise that it was night time yet again. Bonnie Bennett stood awkwardly at the door with a fast cooling bowl of something in her hands.

"I am not hungry," said Catelyn.

"It is not for you, milady," said Bonnie. She looked down at the floor. "I...I...brewed this for Lord Bran. It's a remedy passed down from my mother and my grandmother. I know I'm just a maid, and I'm not learned like Maester Luwin but perhaps..."

"The maesters have tried everything and none of it has worked," said Catelyn. "What hurt can it do to try?" She took the bowl from the girl and stirred the dark contents. It smelled of medicinal herbs and something else. She hesitated and glanced up at the maid, who still had not moved.

Bonnie took the bowl back from Catelyn and spooned a little bit of the potion into her own mouth before handing it back.

It had gotten to the point now where Bran could not swallow on his own, not even reflexively. With every spoonful, they had to rub his throat to help him take the medicine. But it seemed to Catelyn that with each spoonful, his colour improved, and his breathing became easier. His eyelids twitched. The movement was so small as to be almost unnoticeable, but she saw it.

"Quickly, fetch Maester Luwin!" she cried.

Well, well. There was a vampire in Winterfell indeed, but that was a good thing. Not for the first time, Benjen was glad for the presence of the undead. There was no doubt that the potion brewed by young pretty Bonnie Bennett contained vampire blood. However, he was not going to expose her for what she was. She had saved Bran's life, and if she had to drink from a villager or two each night and occasionally bite Robb — all right, perhaps biting Robb was not so acceptable, but it had only happened once— then maybe it was worth it. With winter coming and threats brewing, they would have need for more vampire blood before the end.

He didn't say anything as he watched the girl hurrying across the courtyard with a basketful of herbs for Bran's medicine. He had to be right about her. Ned had said she and her friend Damon had arrived just before the attacks started, and she had the same unassuming and harmless look as Elena. It was fitting, really, that the most powerful of creatures seemed the most harmless. Wasn't that always the case in life?

The ranger made his way slowly to the stables. He was eager to get back to the Wall. Robert had reluctantly promised to pledge more men to the Wall after Benjen had spent what felt like hours trying to persuade him that there was a point to all of it. He did not believe in the reports of White Walkers or Wights at all.

Benjen knew all the Night's Watch would get would be the very dregs of the realm that no one actually wanted to deal with, but they were desperate for more men. It didn't really matter what they got anymore. Well, it did, but men no longer saw it as an honour to serve the Watch.

"Uncle Benjen!"

Benjen sighed. Well, men no longer saw it as an honour unless they were named Jon Snow. He could understand the boy's eagerness. He wanted a place to call his own, something he could claim, a purpose in life. What else did young men want, ultimately? Robb was the heir to Winterfell, and even Theon Greyjoy served a purpose as a hostage. But Jon had no purpose in
Winterfell. He was much like Benjen when he had been a young man just emerging from the cusp of boyhood.

"Uncle Benjen, I have thought about it, and I am ready," said Jon. "I want to come north with you."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And we're almost leaving Winterfell behind. The gang is going to be split up! And, of course, Jon finds out some rather important truths about his new friends very soon. Thanks for all your patience, guys! We're slowly getting to the meat of the sandwich!

The song that Damon sings at the feast is 'Love You To Death' by Kamelot. It seemed appropriate.
Jon cast one last look around his room. It was the one he had grown up in and the only space he could call his own in Winterfell, yet even that had been borrowed, for he had always been reliant on the hospitality of Lady Catelyn. His few belongings were already stowed away in two packs on his horse. There wasn't much; just some clothing, whet stones, and provisions that he would need for his journey. Everything else he left on the shelves. There was a small wooden carved wolf that he had treasured as a boy and his small wooden practise sword. His father had given him and Robb one each on their fifth name day. Well, it had been Robb's name day. Jon never knew when his was and no one had ever told him. When his brother had his name day, he knew he was one year older too.

"I suppose that's it then?" said Damon. Jon almost drew his sword. Why did Damon always have to appear without warning when he was least expected to? If he did that a few more times, he might begin to suspect the sell-sword was one of the 'grumpkins and snarks' from beyond the Wall that Tyrion Lannister liked to mock.

"I know you do not approve, but I do not need your approval," said Jon, putting down the wooden sword on the shelf. He would leave all these things behind. That was in the past. He now faced a future of honour and purpose, and no one could say anything to convince him otherwise.

"Hey, I'm not your mother," said Damon. "Why should I care if you decide to throw your life away on some frozen waste?"

Thoughts of a previous conversation came unbidden to Jon. He still didn't know why he had told Damon of his decision to join the Watch. And no, he did not believe he had "subconsciously" asked for advice.

"Why would you want to join some celibate brotherhood and freeze your balls off on some wasteland guarding against fairy tales no one else seems to believe in?"

That had been the question Damon had asked while Robb had been occupied with business with
Ned and King Robert. Theon had gone to visit the brothel, leaving Damon and Jon with a lot of
time on their hands and no mood to do anything.

It was what everyone said to him whenever he mentioned joining the Watch, which was not all that
often. But he had happened to make the mistake of mentioning it to Damon, thinking that he of all
people would understand, being someone who had had to make his own way in the world. And
there was more honour in taking the black than becoming a sell-sword, which was the only other
path Jon could see himself taking.

He and Damon had been trying to teach Ghost to fetch sticks, with limited success. The pup had
been looking at them as if saying, "What is the point of this? At least throw me a bone." Jon had
given up. Damon had not.

"I want to make something of myself, Damon," Jon had said. "Don't you?"

"So you take the path that everyone else expects you to take because you're a bastard."

"I don't see what else there is for me, unless I want to become like you."

"There's nothing wrong with being a sell-sword. I ended up in a pretty good place, didn't I?"

"Not everyone is as lucky."

"And not everyone has Robb as a brother. If I were you, I…well, I wouldn't say I'd milk it, but, you
know…I'd definitely make use of the connection, if you get my meaning."

But the last thing Jon wanted was to be a burden to Robb. He wanted to forge his own path, to
make his name known for its sake alone, not because he was Robb's half-brother.

"I have made my choice. I don't even know why I'm talking to you about it."

"You're talking to me about it because you're not sure what you want and subconsciously, you want
my advice because I've got the experience, the intelligence, and everything else that you haven't
got.

"In fifty years, a hundred years, a hundred and fifty years, it won't matter that you were born on the
wrong side of the sheets, Jon Snow. What they will remember is what you made of yourself after
that."

"I can't even think of what will happen next year, Damon. I don't really care about what happens
next century."

Perhaps he had lied, both to himself and to the sell-sword. He did care what they thought of him in
a century. Would they whisper his name with admiration, or would they simply forget him, just as
everyone else seemed to forget him?

"Hmm…" said Damon. "Maybe. Just don't say no one warned you when your idyllic future goes
sour."

"Are you sure you're not subconsciously trying to convince me to stay because you have no idea
how you are going to tolerate yourself without my companionship?"

"Whoa, Jon Snow, are we using big words now?"

"There is one thing that the Wall definitely has over Winterfell now that you're here. I won't have
“Heh, you wouldn’t have had the pleasure of my presence in Winterfell for much longer anyway. Lord Stark is taking me with him to King’s Landing when he takes up the mantle of the Hand of the King.”

The wagons, loaded with their dark oilcloth covered bundles and all the provisions they were going to need for a month long journey –two months, if things got tough– waited in the courtyard. It seemed as if all of Winterfell had come out to see off Lord Stark. Damon had never really appreciated how many people there were in the city, or the high regard in which they held the ruling house, until now.

A fine powdery rain had started falling, darkening the flagstones and casting a haze over everything. He drank in the sights and sounds and smells of the first city he had ever encountered in Westeros. It was hard to believe, but he would actually almost miss this place.

"Write to me as soon as Bran wakes up," Ned said gruffly to Catelyn as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. Although not a man given to great displays of emotion, he was easy to read as…well, not even a book. He was more like one of those short succinct articles in newspapers written to accommodate the comprehension abilities of the lowest denominator in the masses. He hated to leave at a time like this when his son hung in the balance between life and death, but his duty called, and Eddard Stark would always put duty first. He was even more chronic than non-ripper Stefan.

"I will," said Catelyn. "Look after yourself and don't work too hard. You know how you can get."

"I promise I will remember to eat and sleep," said Ned.

He embraced Robb and patted Theon on the shoulder. Arya and Sansa would be coming with them to the capital and Jon would be riding with them to the Crossroads –they were very creative with names in Westeros.

Robb embraced Jon tightly. "Look after yourself, Snow," he said.

"And you too, Stark," said Jon, dredging up the most pathetic smile in the world. Damon could understand what they were feeling. He missed Stefan too, as he had done during the several times they had been separated, not that he would actually admit it. However, the Salvatores always had the chance of meeting each other again, whether it was fifty years later or a hundred years later. But unlike the Salvatores, Robb and Jon didn't have that luxury. Fifty years was more than a lifetime for the two young north men.

"Promise you'll write back," said Robb when he finally released Jon.

"You know I can't," said Jon.

"Then find someone who can help you. Promise me."

"I'll try."

As for the vampire, he had very few goodbyes to say. Oh, the girls would miss him, of course, but they were already setting their eyes on new targets, such as the acting lord of Winterfell. If that was their goal, Damon wished them good luck. Robb was…picky.

Bonnie was the only person who hugged Damon goodbye, but even that was a guise to exchange
words with him that she didn't want others to hear.

Because Bran was yet to wake, Catelyn had requested that she stay behind to continue brewing her 'secret concoctions' for him. Damon had been rather reluctant to donate any more blood towards the cause. The boy was going to live. That was good enough for him. But Bonnie had insisted, saying he owed the Starks. Which he sort of did, but that was never anything he would actually admit, either out loud or to himself.

However, he actually liked Ned's sons well enough to relent at the very last, and now there were several vials of Sang de Damon sitting in a cold corner of a store room somewhere for Bonnie's potions.

"Behave," she hissed into his ear.

"Define that, witchy," he whispered back as he patted her back and pretended to say that he would miss her. He wouldn't. Not really. He doubted she'd miss him either.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he advised Theon once Bonnie was convinced that she'd convinced him to at least restrain himself from drinking any royals while in King's Landing – he was still curious, but it seemed a reasonable enough request.

"But there is nothing and no one you wouldn't do," said Theon. A look from Catelyn made him shut up with an apologetic look.

"With you out of the picture, Salvatore, it will be much easier to make sure he behaves," said Robb.

"I'm just afraid you'll get bored, milord," said Damon, bowing to him.

"Bored? Relieved is probably a better word," said Robb. "You have no excuse to not write back. I want to know everything about King's Landing; everything you hear, see, smell, taste…anything."

Was it just him, or did Robb seem a little envious? He was stuck in grey little Winterfell while his brother and his sisters all went off on adventures in distant places he had never been to. Envy was probably a very reasonable thing to be feeling in his case.

"Is that another way of saying you'll miss me, Lord Robb?" asked Damon.

"Hardly," said Robb. "Now go. If you tarry any longer, they will simply leave you behind."

The vampire bowed low with a flourish. "As you command, Lord Stark," he said.

Howling winds blew from the north. The landscape had become…well, he'd say 'stark' but that would be a bad pun, apparently. The grass grew sparser as they continued their way up north. The sun never shone, and all the streams and springs seemed to be frozen. Whenever anyone wanted water, they needed to break the ice to get to it. Sometimes they needed to boil ice for water.

It had been several days since Jon had parted from his father at the Crossroads. He missed him. He missed Winterfell. But he was determined to carve a place in a world that did not want him and nothing in the world could possibly make him turn back, no matter what Damon or anybody said.

Thick forests entangled them in their boughs, and the men were always on guard for predators…or other things. Only the dwarf, Tyrion Lannister, seemed unconcerned about whatever dangers lay on the road as he embarked on his quest to "piss off the Wall". He would sit contentedly reading by the fire. Jon had never seen anyone devour books the way he did, and he could not possibly see
what was so interesting or useful about squiggles written on vellum.

"Why do you read so much?" he asked him one night as he sharpened his sword. The feel of stone against metal, the steady rhythm, and the ringing that reverberated with each stroke were comforting and familiar. Orange flames crackled, sending sparks up into the night sky like tiny stars rising to meet their greater distant cousins already up in the heavens. The sparks flared and swirled for a transient moment before fading away into black nothingness, none of them ever making it higher than the first branch of the shortest tree. The firelight made the asymmetry of the dwarf's face even more prominent, and his eyes were cast in shadows beneath his heavy brows.

"You whet your sword often, yes?" said Tyrion without looking up from his page.

"Yes," said Jon.

"You have your sword. I don't have a sword, but I have my mind and a mind needs books the way a sword needs a whetstone." At his confused silence, Tyrion finally looked up. "Swords do not change the world, young bastard. Ideas do."

"What did you call me?" asked Jon as he stiffened.

"I called you a bastard," said Tyrion quite calmly. "For that is what you are, Jon Snow. The sooner you learn that, the better. I am a dwarf, or the Imp, if you like. I own it."

The idea of simply accepting he was a bastard, and the fact that ideas rather than swords shaped the world was almost more than Jon could comprehend right now. It went against everything he had been taught; everything he had ever known.

He returned to sharpening his sword in silence.

Robb knocked on the door slowly, quietly, as if he were afraid of disturbing Bran's rest. Which was ironic, really, because everyone actually wanted him to wake up; the sooner the better. However, a few moments later, his mother opened the door. Her red hair, once so like Sansa's, was dull and tangled, and she seemed to have aged ten years.

"How is he?" asked Robb as he entered the sickroom and closed the door behind him.

"He sleeps still," said Catelyn.

"Has Bonnie been by with the medicine?"

His mother nodded. For a moment, Robb felt a little guilty, for he had taken the maidservant away so she could help Maester Luwin sort through the daily documents which came to the lord's attention. His father had taken the maester's assistants to King's Landing, and it was hard to find someone whose reading comprehension was at the right level to replace them. Bonnie read better than most, and she had been of invaluable aid to the maester who would otherwise have been swamped with paperwork.

And just like Bonnie, there were other duties that Catelyn needed to attend to. He watched her as she sat back down by Bran's bedside, weaving a prayer circle with depictions of the seven southern gods.

"You have to come out at some point, Mother," said Robb. "Rickon needs you. He's six, and he's scared. He spends all day clinging to my legs, asking what's going on and I don't know how to explain it to him." He tried to be firm and gentle, the way his father always was.
"They say he will never walk again," Catelyn blurted out suddenly.

Robb paused. Never walk again? He could not ever imagine Bran not climbing. His mother had always wanted him to stop climbing, but this was just a cruel trick by the gods. He didn't know which ones, and he didn't care. If they could do this to his brother, they were not his gods.

They remained silent, watching the light from the candles and the hearth flicker over Bran's face. And then there was more light, more than there ought to be. Robb ran to the window. He could see the orange glow lighting up the night sky and hear the shouts of panicking men. The town below the castle was aflame.

"You stay here," he said to his mother as he rushed out the door. "I will be back."

Men were already running around trying to douse the fire haphazardly. It hissed at them like an angry snake whenever someone threw water into the flames with no effect at all. They danced from roof to roof, taking hold on the tar tiles and straw thatching easily. The roofs caved in as they were eaten away by the fire.

Robb quickly organised the men the best he could. He could not fight the fire if he randomly attacked it, he knew, but he could contain it until it burnt itself out. Buckets and buckets were water were brought in and thrown onto the edge of the flames and the buildings that had yet to catch fire. Besides, there were more important things to worry about.

Winterfell was not the most flammable of places. The cold and damp meant hardly anything ever caught fire, at least not accidentally. There had been the occasional incident where someone had not been watching their hearths or had fallen asleep and knocked over a candle, but this…

This had to be deliberate.

Why would someone deliberately start a fire in Winter Town of all places? As far as he knew, the usual inhabitants had very few grudges against each other; at least, not grudges so big that they would risk destroying half the town to get vengeance. So it had to be something else.

He turned to the man-at-arms closest to him and tried to recall his name. Fagan? Dagan? He couldn't really remember; what he did remember was that he was the opposite of Damon's favourite person in all of Winterfell. "Tell the men to arm themselves. There may be an attack tonight. Bar the city gates. No one gets in or out without my say so," said Robb.

"But it is a fire, milord," said the man in confusion. Yes, he could see why the clever sell-sword had disliked him. He was as dull as Rickon's toy dagger and less useful.

"The fire is a diversion for something else," said Robb.

"It doesn't have to be. It could be an accident--"

Robb cut him off before he could complete his syllable. "If you are afraid of fighting the enemy, then perhaps you ought to fight the fire."

"Milord, I am a knight--" Robb did not let him finish. He snatched an empty bucket from one of the men thrust it at Damon's-least-favourite-person and pierced him with one of his scathing Tully glares. The man scurried off.

"Did I just see you touch a bucket?" asked Theon incredulously.

"Yes, you did," said Robb, snatching up another bucket and thrusting it into the Greyjoy's arms.
"And look, I did it again."

"What am I supposed to do with this?" asked Theon.

Robb rolled his eyes. "You see what Bonnie is doing?" The girl was getting more water on her skirts than anywhere near the flames, but at least she would not be burned, and she was trying to help. He had to give her a little credit for that. "Help her."

Theon stared at him as if he wanted to slam the bucket over his head.

"Now, Theon," said Robb. As an afterthought, he added: "Please." There. That ought to keep him happy.

At first, it seemed futile, but the prolonged efforts of the men, and the lack of things to burn, killed it by morning. But the fire was not his main concern. All night, he was tense, wondering when the attack would come. Part of him wanted it to come, the sooner the better. He knew he could lead the men into battle. He had been trained to lead his whole life, and he was itching to do it. Another part was afraid; afraid that he would not live up to everyone's expectations.

The attack never came. Smoke wreathed the blackened streets of the town. A red gash appeared on the horizon. It remained quiet and sullen. He had made the men arm themselves in the middle of the night for nothing. What would they think?

"Robb!" Theon ran towards him, his face covered in soot. Beside him was Bonnie, also covered in soot. Both were unharmed. "Robb…Lady Stark…Bran…" Robb did not wait for him to catch his breath so he could utter a complete sentence.

He ran towards the sickroom.

The journey had been exciting at the beginning, but as it wore on, Arya began to feel it was more of the same thing over and over again. Every day, they would ride, stopping several times for rests and meals. At least in Winterfell, she was able to practise archery with her brothers. Now there was no one except Sansa, and she was off riding with Joffrey, not that Sansa would practise archery with anyone. Or sparring. Arya wished someone would teach her to spar. Jon would have, but he was at the Wall now and she didn't know when she'd see him again.

She sat by the quickly flowing river which rushed over the round rocks as if it were hurrying to get somewhere. Where else could it go but the sea? She began setting leaves, like little green boats, on the surface of the water and watching them bob away, turning on the currents and sometimes getting dashed against stones, wondering if they would make it to the sea. She had never seen the sea before. Robb had, and he'd said it was wild and wet and windy and grey; awe-inspiring, but not very fun at all. Boats would sooner be dashed against the cliffs than sail out onto the open ocean.

Horses and men passed by her as if she were simply another rock or log by the side of the river. No one took any notice of Sansa's little sister who wasn't nearly as pretty and who didn't know how to sew.

"Lady Arya." Arya looked up. A boy of thirteen, covered in dirt and freckles, was approaching her. His clothes were torn and stained with old blood from the animals his father killed. "Me da jus' lemme go. We were cuttin' up a pig fer t'night, see."

Arya couldn't care less about tonight's pig. She was just glad to see her friend. Mycah was the butcher's son. He wasn't particularly bright, he smelled like meat that had been left out for too long, and had a face that looked like it had been squashed into the ground by falling piece of pork, but he
was her friend and the only one who was happy to help her practise sword fighting. Mycah swore he would become a knight someday, somehow. He hadn't figured it out quite just yet, but he was so certain he would get there one day.

She had to admit he wasn't too bad with a sword. Well, stick. She was the only one with a sword, and she didn't have anyone to stick the pointy end into. The sticks were almost the right length, and this would have to do for now until she found someone who was actually willing to teach her. She had her eye on Damon, actually, but he was too busy with 'duties', although she had seen him do nothing except wander around aimlessly, ribbing the men and offering pleasant flatteries to Sansa. Oh, and spending a lot of time standing guard outside her father's tent whenever he discussed matters with King Robert. That was an actual duty, she supposed.

Mycah struck the back of her hand with his stick. It would bruise later and Septa Mordane would scold her for it, but she didn't care. The sting and ache only made her want to win all the more. Was this what the men called 'battle fever'?

"Arya! What are you doing?"

She had been so engrossed in her sparring that she had not noticed Sansa and Joffrey riding up, Sansa upon her mare and Joffrey on his stallion the colour of molten sunlight. Sansa covered her nose as she approached and pulled to a stop beside the two of them. "Ladies do not fight with butcher's boys," she said in that haughty tone of hers that made Arya want to throw her into the stream. Or something. The sight of Sansa emerging from the water dripping and screaming with her hair and gown ruined would be very satisfying.

"Is that your sister, Sansa?" asked Joffrey, sounding louder than usual.

"Unfortunately, Your Highness," replied Sansa.

Joffrey dismounted a little unsteadily. As he neared, Arya smelled the summerwine on him.

"What is your name, boy?" he asked Mycah.

The boy's eyes were round with fear upon beholding the rich cloak and tunic of the prince, and the sword that hung by his side. Joffrey slowly drew his blade, which he called Lion's Tooth. Arya had remarked on it before to Damon that it was odd for him to name it after his mother's house rather than his father's.

"He can hardly name it 'Stag's Antler' unless he wants to be known as a cuckold forever," the man-at-arms had said. Arya had laughed then. She wasn't laughing now.

The blade rang lightly as it scraped against the side of the scabbard. Joffrey levelled it at Mycah, the tip pointing directly at his face. "What is your name, I asked."

"His name is Mycah, Your Highness. He's the butcher's son," said Sansa with disgust. She covered her nose as if something smelled bad.

"He's my friend," said Arya.

"Do you know what the penalty is for hurting my betrothed's sister, butcher's boy?" asked Joffrey.

"He didn't hurt me. We were sparring. It was an accident!"

Joffrey ignored her. "Take up your stick and let's see how well you spar, Ser Butcher," he sneered. Mycah shook his head. Dim as he was, he understood that he could not take up arms against a
"Pick up your stick! Or do you only fight little girls?" The tip of the sword drew blood from Mycah's cheek.

She had to do something. She knew that look in Joffrey's eyes. It was the same look in the kitchen cat's eyes as he toyed with a mouse before he killed it just because he could. "Stop it!" she screamed, and before anyone could do anything to stop her, she'd struck Joffrey on the back of the head with her stick. Too late she remembered Damon advising Bran to hit at the temple rather than anywhere else because it was easier to kill a man that way.

The impact of the blow made Joffrey fall to the ground on his face and cracked her stick in two. "You!" snarled Joffrey. He forgot Mycah as he scrambled to his feet and lunged at Arya. She dodged, and just in time, or else he would have gutted her like a pig.

"Run, Mycah!" Arya shouted. The boy wasted no time in doing so.

Joffrey lunged at her again, but before he could strike, Nymeria had leapt at him. He yelled in fright and confusion as the pup's sharp teeth sank into his sword arm, making him drop his sword. "Damned dog! I'll have its pelt for a rug!" Yes, Joffrey, if only he could just dislodge her from his arm. At this rate, Nymeria would be making a rug out of Joffrey's pelt. It wouldn't be a very good rug, but it would be even more satisfying than…anything else Arya could think of.

She picked up Joffrey's sword before he could reclaim it and threw it as far as she could into the rushing river. It disappeared beneath the currents with a splash. Hopefully it would be washed all the way out to sea.

"Come, Nymeria!" she said. The wolf let the prince go. He still lay cradling his arm and screaming obscenities, but now more a like a snivelling trembling child than a prince who could rule the world. There would be consequences, Arya knew. She didn't wait to find out what they would be. The safety and shadow of the wood beckoned.

Ned called her name until his voice was hoarse, yet he had found no sign of his daughter or her direwolf. When he had first heard that Arya had attacked Joffrey, he had found it hard to believe, but the bite marks on the prince's arm were hard to deny.

The forest was so dark that even with torches, he could only see the silhouettes of the tangled trees and branches. White vapours swirled about his legs and the torch light illuminated the clouds emerging with each breath. An owl hooted and crows cawed as they were disturbed by the searchers.

"Anything, Salvatore?" he asked. The younger man had better eyes, and better tracking skills. Damon straightened himself from his crouch and dropped his handful of leaves.

"Not at all, milord," he said. "Are you sure she would not have gone back to camp?" He turned around slowly, blue eyes narrowed, as he surveyed the surrounding trees and underbrush. "Because the only thing that's been through here recently is a doe."

"If she had returned to camp, they would have sent word," said Ned.

Suddenly, there were shouts in the distance; panicked shouts and screams. Ned's heart almost stopped as he thought of what the knights could possibly have found to make them scream like children waking from nightmares. Had someone found his daughter? How was she? Where was she? He began to run, ignoring the pleas from his men for him to wait for them in case there was...
any danger. If there was danger, then he had to be there to protect Arya. He had to−

"It came out of nowhere!"

"It grabbed him!"

"What was it?!"

Men were running in all directions, their faces white with terror even in the dark. Some of them were so terrified they could not even talk and could only blabber when Ned demanded what was going on.

On the ground lay a broken body. Relief made Ned go weak at the knees even as concern seized his heart. The man's mouth was open in a silent scream, his face frozen forever in terror.

Two thin streams of blood trickled from the puncture wounds in his neck.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Ooh, who can that possibly be?
Sansa has doubts about her betrothal. Damon learns he's not alone. Jon finds the Wall to be quite different from what he expected. And meanwhile, Essos and the Westerlands get unexpected visitors.

**The Kingsroad**

Arya heard them calling her name long before she saw the menacing orange light from their torches. She heard her father among them, but she did not come out. If luck was on her side, they would pass her by without seeing her as she huddled between the roots of a gnarled tree. She shivered and held onto Needle's hilt more tightly. The night air was cold, and her clothes were damp from dew. She was tired and hungry and her eyes were swollen from crying after she'd sent Nymeria away, knowing fully well that they would not spare the wolf. She had bitten the prince.

Mist pooled on the forest floor, obscuring her further from sight, even if they should come this way. They seemed to be coming, but at times their voices faded away again when they took a wrong turn.

Then she started as wind brushed by her, and she thought she saw something move in the darkness; too big to be an owl, and too fast to be a deer or any other animal. She remembered how Robb had described the attack. There had been a little bit of wind as the creature—the vampire—had closed in on him. Her heart constricted in terror and she searched the darkness desperately to try and find whatever it was.

But nothing bit her.

Moments later, she heard the screaming of the knights and she knew that she had been very lucky. Perhaps the vampire had thought her too small to be good to drink.

Her father had renewed his shouting with vigour. She was almost tempted to run out into his arms and wait for him to protect her, but that was silly. He was the Hand of the King now. Unlike in Winterfell, he didn't make the rules anymore.

"Lady Arya?"

She gasped and fumbled for her sword, only for Damon to catch her arm. "Please don't do that," he
'How did you find me?'

He shrugged. 'I'm good,' he said. He crouched down so he was on eye level with her. 'What do you say? Go out and face the music?'

'I don't want to,' she said.

'You can't stay here forever, milady. You'll freeze, starve, and otherwise die a horrible death, especially with that thing out there.'

'Is it a vampire?'

'Maybe, maybe not.' Damon offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet. 'You probably don't want to stay and find out. Cheer up. Your wolf's safe. They won't catch her, and you're Eddard Stark's daughter. They wouldn't dare to do much to you.'

She saw the torches and the men wandering in groups of threes and fours. It was too good a chance to forgo. Prey was rare in these parts. She was simply passing through on her way...well, she didn't know where. This was not her land; unfamiliar territory. But she had not survived so long by being inflexible. So long as there were people, there was drink. And as long as she had drink, she would survive. Thrive, even. Forensic science here was rudimentary at best. In fact, it didn't seem to exist at all. Life was cheap and no one cared if people died or went missing.

The man walked right beneath her branch. She pulled him up, armour and all. It was not so different from picking up a bottle from the wine cellar. His blood was sweet and salty and hot and without the taint of pollution or artificial flavouring. She let the body drop when he stopped struggling and screaming.

His companions began screaming. The smell of fresh ammonia wafted up. Really? She expected little boys to wet their pants. Not men.

She stuck to the shadows. Ah, here was Damon. He ran by beneath the trees, not bothering to look up. Tut tut. He ought to know better. One of the men, the older, serious one, was shouting for him. Lord Eddard Stark, without a doubt. She'd heard the rumours that Damon had found employment with one of the great houses.

He pulled the little girl up from amongst the roots of the gnarled tree. Was it just her, or did he seem...domesticated? With a few more glances around him, but not above him, he led her away as quickly as she could walk.

More torches were coming her way. Time to go.

Her sister looked a sorry sight, covered in dirt and leaves, with twigs in her hair. Tears had made pale tracks in her dirty face.

'Your daughter and her wolf attacked my son, the heir to the Iron Throne,' Queen Cersei said to Ned, her voice as hard as the diamonds she wore about her throat.

'The prince attacked me first,' Arya insisted. 'Nymeria was just trying to defend me.' She turned to Sansa. 'Sansa, you were there. Tell them!'
Sansa looked first at the queen, and then at Joffrey, and then finally at her sister. She could tell the truth, that Joffrey had tried to hurt the butcher's boy, and then Arya, and the wolf had only been trying to help. But then, if she did that, would she still be Joffrey's betrothed? How could he love her if she betrayed him?

"Prince Joffrey never attacked you," she said. "He was just playing, but then you got too serious, as you usually do."

Joffrey smirked.

"He hurt Mycah, Sansa!" said Arya.

"The butcher's boy was being rude. He deserved to be taught a lesson." Oh, she saw the body, even if it was just a glimpse. She still wanted to vomit whenever she thought of it. If there was a way to unsee things, she would pay a thousand gold dragons for it.

"And he learned it," said Joffrey. "The dog cut him just about clean in half, didn't you, dog?"

Behind Joffrey, the Hound said nothing.

"Well, that's that, then," said Cersei. "I am sorry, Lord Stark, but your daughter must be punished."

"She's only young, my queen," Ned pleaded. "Arya, tell his highness how sorry you are."

Arya looked as if she'd swallowed something horrible, but even so, she managed to mutter an apology.

"You might be sorry, but crime cannot go unpunished, little Arya," said Cersei. Her voice seemed kind, but her eyes were cold. "And since the wolf that attacked the prince is not here, another wolf shall take its place."

No. They couldn't take Lady! But she was the only wolf here. She turned to Cersei, about to plead, but the look in the queen's eyes stopped her cold. There would be no mercy from her. Why would she relent? A Lannister always paid their debts, and she was a Lannister in every way, from her golden head down to her gold-embroidered slipper. But she had to try. Lady was hers! She was innocent!

All the pleas in the world fell on deaf ears. It was through tear-blurred eyes that she saw the guards move outside to where Lady was chained, unwary and trusting the way she always was. She wished she could tell them the truth now, that it was Joffrey who started everything. Yes, she had wanted to get back at Arya for all the times she'd ruined things, but this…she'd never wanted this!

"Stop!" said her father. "The wolf is of the north. I shall do it myself."

Did it matter who did it? Lady was still going to die and it was her fault because she'd been too scared of the consequences to tell the truth.

Ned commanded Damon and Jory to take her and her sister back to their tents. She held onto Damon and wept, but even his soothing murmurs couldn't calm her. And when she finally did close her eyes due to exhaustion, all she saw was Joffrey's smirking golden face.

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Winterfell

Catelyn summoned them to the very centre of the Godswood beneath the Heart Tree, the only place
where no one else would be able to hear them. The dagger she carried within the folds of her cloak weighed her down, and she was as nervous as if the Valyrian steel blade was pressed against her throat. They came, curious and sombre at the same time; Robb, Theon, Ser Rodrik, Maester Luwin.

The red leaves rustled and the pool beneath the Heart Tree's branches remained still and black like the dragon glass her nursemaid had told her about as a child. The face of the tree wept tears of blood. She fancied it was crying for Bran.

"Bran did not fall."

The four simple words rendered them all still and silent.

"Do you mean to say he was pushed?" asked Robb, his voice filled with quiet rage like a storm that was about to burst.

"I don't know for certain," said Catelyn. "But I do not believe he fell by accident, and whoever tried to kill him then tried to finish him off for whatever reason. Bran saw something when he climbed the tower that day, and whatever it was he saw, the Lannisters are behind it."

"Word must be sent to father," said Robb. "I will go."

"No," said Catelyn. "You are lord of Winterfell now in your father's absence. I will go."

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**The Wall**

The Wall loomed before them, an unending line of rock and ice, like a giant sleeping serpent that had petrified over the centuries. How many men had lived here, died here, and etched their existences here? The Wall had been here before the Targaryens, and it would be here after the Baratheons were long gone.

Their horses' hooves thudded dully on the frozen ground. As they got closer, the Wall became even more imposing, and Jon almost fancied that any one at the top would only have to stretch up with an arm to touch the clouds. It was silly, of course, but it certainly felt that way.

The gates of Castle Black opened with a groan like an old man reluctantly woken from a sound sleep. The number of steps they had to walk up before they even reached the doors of the keep confounded Jon. He felt sorry for the servants who were having to carry up crate after crate of supplies. His legs ached even though he wasn't carrying anything.

They finally reached the top after what seemed like an interminably long time. Jon's legs were numb both from cold and exertion.

The men were already opening the crates to reveal the vegetables Benjen had brought from Winterfell.

"You brought my onions! I could kiss you right now, Benjen Stark, except you and I both know we'll regret it," said a beautiful high voice that obviously did not belong to any brother of the Night's Watch…

He should have expected something like this, really. Elena in all her exuberance over onions and carrots would be a surprise to anyone coming to the Wall. Jon's expression was almost laughable, and Benjen had never seen anyone's eyes grow this wide before, not even when Robert Baratheon first beheld his sister Lyanna.
"There's a girl on the Wall…" whispered Jon.

"She takes care of all our meals. Do not underestimate her," said Benjen.

"But there's a girl on the Wall…"

"Yes, Jon, are we still on that point?"

"She's pretty."

"Oh, are we on that point now?"

He ought to have anticipated that reaction too. Despite the oversized tunic and the men's trousers she wore, Elena was indeed an uncommonly pretty girl. There had been a reason why he had not offered to take her to Winterfell, despite the Lord Commander's not-discreet suggestions. He could only imagine the mess that would ensue if Robb ever saw her.

"You didn't say you were going to be bringing anyone back with you, First Ranger," said Elena as she approached them, having instructed all her cooks to take the supplies to the store rooms and told one of them to add some onions to tonight's stew. Hair escaped from the loose twist at the nape of her neck and the cold had made her cheeks rosy. It was either that, or she'd just eaten.

"This is Jon Snow, a relative of mine. Jon, this is Mistress Elena."

"Just Elena will do... do you mind if I call you Jon?"

"I do not mind at all," said Jon. Was that... was that a smile? Benjen looked from Jon to Elena and then back at Jon again. They were both very good looking young people, he would give them that, and they were the same age. Elena might be a few months older, but just a few months.

A cough behind him reminded Benjen that he had brought someone else to the Wall. Tyrion Lannister probably needed no introduction, but he stepped forward anyway. Standing amongst tall men in black with swords strapped to their hips, the dwarf stood out as much as pretty Elena did. Perhaps even more.

"Tyrion Lannister," he said. "Of House Lannister, obviously. Oh, please don't bother curtseying."

"Good, because I wasn't planning to."

It wasn't often that Tyrion Lannister was rendered speechless, although it wasn't for lack of trying on Benjen's part. But somehow Elena Gilbert had managed it.

"Beautiful and deadly," said Tyrion with a smile as he quickly recovered. "Perhaps you are capable of doing something to warrant a sentence to the Wall after all." Was Elena flirting with Tyrion Lannister? He was a Lannister after all, and any girl would be able to overlook his stature to see the gold behind him. Especially one as intelligent as Elena.

Elena blushed and looked away from Tyrion.

"Would you like anything to eat?" she asked. All right, perhaps she wasn't that good at flirting with Lannisters after all. "You must be hungry after your long journey."

"We can wait until the evening meal," said Benjen. "We shall stop bothering you, Mistress Elena. I should show Jon to his new quarters and perhaps Lord Tyrion could come and select his" said Benjen.
"Oh, I can take Jon, First Ranger," said Elena. "I'm going that way. It won't be any trouble at all. I'm sure Lord Mormont will want to talk to you and Lord Tyrion. He's in his study."

It made sense to go and report back to Mormont, but did he really want to leave Jon and Elena alone? Well, Elena was not going to eat him, he supposed, and Jon would be quite safe with her. At least physically.

Elena made the decision for him. "Come on," she said to Jon. "The recruits' quarters are this way, close to Maester Aemon's study." And she continued to explain the workings of the Night's Watch, such as she understood them to be, as she led him away.

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**Essos**

The drums were loud and the screaming louder. It was what the Dothraki considered music, she supposed. She would have to get used to it if she was to be Khal Drogo's wife. The wind from the sea blew the smell of brine and fish towards her and dispersed the scent of blood and spilled guts.

Flies buzzed around the dishes. She didn't want to taste any of them. Nor the beverages that passed as wine amongst the Dothraki. It smelled like milk gone bad. Her new husband, although handsome in his own way, she supposed, seemed terribly bored and he hardly looked at her. The corners of his lips finally turned upwards when two of his warriors got into a heated argument over a serving girl and began killing each other. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't. She knew she couldn't. She was to be queen to these people, and they would think her weak. Blood and death and killing was just part of their...lifestyle. That, of course, did not mean she had to enjoy it, or even approve. Just as well she hadn't eaten anything all day, or else they would all have made a dramatic reappearance.

Even though it was warm, she had to suppress a shiver. She felt terribly exposed amongst all these men. The nearly translucent fabric of her gown seemed to reveal more than it hid. It was hardly protection from their stares and gazes as they assessed her body, as if she were a brood mare to be sold and traded for a crown.

A man, probably an eastern trader judging by his colourful turban and long flowing robes, presented her with a box of live writhing snakes. Plain black mixed with black diamonds on creamy backgrounds. Pale tongues flicked in and out. Their scales gleamed in the sunlight, like the dragons her brother would tell her about when he was in a good mood. That seldom happened, but that wasn't to say it never happened. She glanced at where Viserys sat with Illyrio, his hair so pale that it might as well be white. Like hers.

Viserys wore a satisfied smile, but that was steadily fading as Drogo continued to ignore him. He was impatient for his army. How he was going to persuade the sea-fearing Dothraki to set sail for Westeros was still a mystery, but Viserys never troubled himself with trifling details like that. He had his eye on the bigger picture.

Another man approached the two of them. He spoke Dothraki, but his skin was pale, although darkened by years spent in the sun. His hair, too, was a light brown, almost blond, even though it now veered toward grey and was receding.

Khal Drogo greeted him. From his tone, it seemed to be a welcome. The other man responded with a bow and then turned to Daenerys, handing her a stack of books. "A gift for the Khaleesi," he said in the common tongue. "Books with tales of the First Men and the Andals." His face was kind, and she was most grateful to him. Even though she did not know his name or where he came from, she felt as if he were family.
"Are you from my country?" she asked.

"I haven't been, not for a while, Khaleesi," he said.

"What is your name, ser, so that I may properly thank you?" she asked.

"Ser Jorah Mormont of Bear Island," he replied.

She thanked him for the thoughtful gift and carefully set the books aside. He bowed again and stepped down to allow the next well-wisher through.

When she first saw him, her breath died in her throat, and she had to remind herself that she needed to keep breathing. She was a Khaleesi of the Dothraki now, not a silly little girl who swooned when she saw a handsome boy.

But he was handsome, although not in a conventional way, she supposed. She had not really met that many men. His white shirt billowed about him. He had left the top couple of buttons undone. His light brown hair, almost blond, but not quite, curled tightly about his head. His lips were so red and full that they were almost feminine, but they somehow suited his face and his wicked grin. But it was his eyes that made her pause.

They were as blue as the seas of Pentos and deeper, as if they had seen many lifetimes of men, yet they were still full of life and mischief. It was like looking into the eyes of a young man and an old sage at the same time. Later, if one were to ask her how she had felt upon first beholding him, she would not have been able to describe it with words, but she would never forget that feeling.

"Khaleesi," he said as he bowed low and presented her with a small rolled up piece of parchment bound with string. "Ser Jorah did not tell me he was bringing me to a wedding. I am afraid my gift is a little inadequate, but I pray you will accept it anyway."

She slowly unrolled the parchment. It was a drawing; a very beautiful drawing of a girl with flowing pale hair and large sad eyes, sitting amongst merry makers and gifts at her own wedding but looking so very alone. It took her a while to realize it was her. He must have had drawn her just then!

"Do I really look so sad?" she asked. He only smiled, or perhaps smirked.

"You look like a new bride," he said simply. Yes, indeed. A new bride who did not want to be.

She watched him as he retreated to his place, seated beside Jorah among the Dothraki warriors.

Last came Illyrio's gift, and what a gift it was. At first, she'd thought they were stones, but their shapes were too uniform to be just rocks. They looked like...

"Dragon eggs?" she whispered, hardly daring to believe it, hardly daring to touch them. How long had it been since anyone had beheld a dragon egg?

"From Asshai, where they have lain in waiting for so long that they have turned into stone," said Illyrio. "But they are still beautiful."

And they were beautiful; so perfectly shaped, with patterns of scales on their shells, emulating the scales that would have been if its petrified occupants had hatched. She set them down carefully back in their box. "Thank you, Magister," she said. "It is a most kingly gift." The eggs were a reminder of what had been lost, and of why she was marrying a man whose words she did not even understand. Remembering the reason made it all a little more bearable. But still, the lemon tree
outside her window beckoned. Why had she been born a Targaryen? She sometimes envied the servant girls and their petty worries and little dramas. She wanted to fall in love with a man first before she married him.

Ser Jorah's friend saluted her with his horn of sour milk, called Kumiss, and grimaced a little when he took a sip. "That was an assault to the taste buds," he remarked to Jorah before drinking it all down without a flinch. Such a fascinating man with such a strange name.

Niklaus Mikaelson.

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**The Westerlands**

Where the hell were they? And if being lost wasn't bad enough, she had to be lost with Rebekah of all people. God, she hated that bitch. And her whole family. At least Klaus wasn't here, which was a relief for one Caroline Forbes. She wasn't sure she'd keep her sanity if he were here right now. Actually, was she still sane? She looked around her. The trees were unfamiliar, but that was hardly surprising. Biology was one of her least favourite subjects and she'd never been very interested in plants. She'd neglected her cactus so badly that it had died.

In fact, her knowledge of plants, native and introduced both, was so poor, that she would not have known they were no longer in Nova Scotia if not for that castle looming in the background carved into a cliff like Petra, except Petra was in the desert and they were surrounded by greenery. She could tell trees from sand, at least.

"Where are we, Stefan?" she asked, glad that he was there to keep the peace, at least. If he weren't there…fine, she wouldn't have killed Rebekah because she wouldn't have known where to begin, but she certainly would have tried.

"I don't know," said Stefan. "I've never seen anything like that castle before."

"Not even in Europe?" said Caroline, who felt her hope fading more and more with each passing moment.

"No," said Rebekah. "The design is basically European, but no country in Europe has architecture like that. Besides, how many functioning castles do you think there are? I mean, in the normal world."

"What other world is there besides the normal one?" demanded Caroline. No one answered her. Indeed, no one knew the answer.

Stefan did not want to go anywhere near the castle, preferring to wing it in the wild until they figured out what was going on, but during a momentous twist in the history of the world, both Caroline and Rebekah voted for seeking out the castle-owners –castellans, Rebekah said– to ask for directions.

"We could be wandering for days before we find anything that might give us even a hint as to where we are," said Rebekah. "Do you see or hear or smell any sign of modern civilization here? There's no pollution, no cars, not even tobacco smoke."

It was…true, Caroline realized with alarm. Where were they?! Africa? But Africa didn't look like this. She'd flipped past Discovery channel before.

"It's best to stay off the road," said Stefan. "We don't know what we're facing here."
"As if we can't deal with them," asked Rebekah.

"We're not ripping innocent people apart!" said Caroline.

"If they attack us, they're not innocent," said Rebekah.

"Is this how you always deal with new places? And you wonder why you don't have any friends."

Rebekah glared at Caroline, but one look from Stefan silenced them both. Hm…it seemed Rebekah still had feelings for him. She wasn't sure whether that was a good or bad thing.

The air was warm, and birds trilled. Again, Caroline didn't know if these were alien birds or American birds. Birds were birds. She preferred not having to drink them if she could help it. They were bony and hard to catch.

"Listen," said Rebekah suddenly.

"What?" asked Caroline. The older vampire rolled her eyes.

"Have you ever heard of this large herbivorous animal commonly known as a horse before?"

Now, where was that invincible white oak stake? Caroline really wanted it now. She wasn't of Rebekah's line, so it was a-okay to kill her, right? Klaus would forgive her. He would forgive her anything if she pouted enough. At least, that was what she suspected.

But there was no white oak stake anywhere to be found, and the horsemen were upon them. She was reminded of the Legend of Sleepy Hollow. Fortunately, the horsemen all had heads.

They surrounded them, a wall of gold and red surcoats bearing a rearing cat of some sort. Lion or tiger or panther or whatever. Spears, gleaming in the afternoon sunlight, were levelled at them. Seriously, some Renaissance players took their games far too seriously. Or maybe this was a movie?

"Only brigands or spies travel off the road," said a helmeted man who seemed to be the leader. "Which are you?"

"Neither," replied Stefan. "We are travellers and we are lost."

The men murmured amongst themselves. Obviously they weren't brigands. And who the hell called robbers brigands anyway? Wasn't that, like, a really old word only used in bodice ripper novels? Not that Caroline didn't like those—she and Elena had had this system going on where they would trade novels, but that had kinda stopped ever since Elena had gotten her own rogues to romance—but they weren't real. Or even remotely historically accurate.

"Look at their strange garb. They are obviously strangers," said another of the men. It was hard to tell who or what they were. Their visors hid most of their faces except for their eyes.

"Maybe we should take them to Lord Tywin," remarked another.

"Is there actually anything behind that visor of yours?" said the first man. "If you think you ought to bother Lord Tywin with such trivialities, perhaps you should just take off your own head right now. Obviously it isn't any good."

"Who's Lord Tywin?" asked Caroline.
A/N: New characters! Well, old friends for most of us, I'm sure. Thank you so much for commenting, bookmarking, and giving kudos. Both myself and my writing partner are really glad that we're not the only ones enjoying the journey, and I hope you guys continue to enjoy.
Chapter Summary

A new menace haunts the back roads. Jon makes new friends and so does Damon. Ned tries out his investigation skills.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: We don't own anything. Robb, Jon, etc. remain the property of Mr Martin and Damon, Bonnie, Katherine, and their supernatural friends are creations of LJ Smith and Julie Plec.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

King's Landing

King's Landing could not be more different from Winterfell, what with the dry warmth and the pink sandstone. The Red Keep, which was what they called their palace, dominated the horizon. Damon supposed it couldn't be called the Pink Keep. It just didn't have the same ring to it, y'know? It was the tallest building in the city, with flags of black and gold waving proudly from the battlements, beckoning to weary travellers to shelter within its halls. Of course, they were the most inhospitable arena in all of Westeros. Countless people had died in there; men, women, children, babies, unborn babies, cats, rats, puppies. And all for a spiky iron chair. So perhaps it didn't come from Ikea, but was it really worth it?

Still, he wasn't about to complain as the familiar smells of a proper metropolis hit him. Heavy perfumes mingled with roasting meats being sold by vendors in the markets and horse shit left on the pavement. There was sweat and disease and rotting garbage and raw sewage running down the gutter in the middle of the street. This might be a barren and dangerous place for some people—he worried about straight-talking Ned Stark sometimes— but for him, it was a ripe, rich hunting ground. Who would notice a few homeless people going missing? Certainly not the city guard, which seemed to exist solely to maintain order and the security of those who could afford to pay them.

The Stark household was settled in the Tower of the Hand which was, disappointingly, not shaped like a hand. Before Ned could even dismount, however, he had already received a request to attend a small council meeting, leaving Damon wondering whether there was a big council.

He helped Sansa out of the carriage, just as any gentleman ought to. She smiled prettily at him. Poor thing had terrible taste in men; him and Joffrey? Neither of them was going to be able to make her happy, although Damon supposed he was less capable of making her miserable.

Arya hopped down, as out of place as a wolf in New York City.

"It's too hot," she said.
"It will get cold enough when that winter of yours comes, Lady Arya," said Damon.

"I think it's beautiful," said Sansa. "It's so big. Don't you think so, Damon?"

The vampire smiled, remembering the tall glass spires of the Big Apple and the never-ending cacophony of Hong Kong. This was more like Florence of Venice; quaint and pretty, but not particularly bustling with financial activity. It had all the prerequisite statues and interesting architecture and a complete lack of modern urban design. He wondered what little Sansa would think of that. Sometimes, he was actually tempted to tell the Starks –gasp!– the truth.

"It has its charms," said Damon.

The girls' septa ushered them away to their rooms to freshen up before dinner, leaving Damon and Ned's squire Jory Cassel, Rodrik's son, to organise the household guard, which took all of two hours, leaving him all night to explore the city. One of the many boons of being vampire was that one did not need to sleep. Ned had very little furniture, and very few guards as well. His northern simplicity clashed with the relative luxury of the capital. He would be miserable here.

And Damon was right, as usual. Ned came back muttering things about tournaments and debts and Lannisters. It reminded Damon of Wall Street and the Global Fiscal Crisis. Hmm…Occupy King's Landing? Government bail-out? But the Lannisters were the government. Robert was the Queen of England. He left Lord Stark to his mutterings. If he hadn't cared a whit about Wall Street, he didn't see why King's Landing would be any different. Adventure and hedonism awaited him out of sight of the Lord Hand.

The streets were teeming with people, rich men and beggars alike. Lanterns cast an orange glow through the winding pathways that separated the city into blocks and quarters.

The beggars, sitting beneath walls and on the steps of the narrow streets, held out bowls to him as he passed them, begging for alms as if their rheumy eyes and bad teeth could move him. He supposed that made him an asshole, but he didn't have that kind of money to spare and more importantly, he didn't really care. Unless, of course, he was hungry and needed to eat a beggar. It was probably nicer to put the poor idiots out of their misery anyway.

A small bare-footed child ducked into the shadows. Was that not the same boy who had been sweeping the leaves from the courtyard?

Moans of pleasure and the smell of sex drew him down a bustling alley and into one of the most ostentatious places he had ever beheld. Filmy silk curtains billowed in the balmy breezes, preserving no one's privacy. Naked women lounged on cushions of every colour in the rainbow and more, pouring wine for men who showered them with gold and lewd praises.

Upon seeing Damon, a few of the girls draped themselves all over him and ushered him to one of the low couches. "What can we do for you tonight, ser?" one of the women asked. She smelled of another man. Damon politely removed her from his person. No leftovers for Damon Salvatore. If he was going to have to pay, he wanted fresh.

"A man with discerning taste, I see," said a fully clothed man who emerged from behind a beaded curtain. His salt and pepper hair was cropped short, as was his beard. One look at him, and one could tell that he was no ordinary man. His clothes were impeccably made from the finest materials money could buy, in stark contrast –bad pun– to the northerners' leather tunics. Ned's ceremonial robes looked positively shabby in comparison and Robb's favourite new doublet was provincial. Yet Damon knew for certain that for this man, this was just yet another outfit for everyday use. Soldiers wore chainmail. Men like this one used clothing as both armour and
"You must be the proprietor of this fine establishment," said Damon. "Your girls must be commended for their enthusiastic welcome."

The man chuckled. "Yes, they are very friendly and accommodating," he said. "But you are not the usual sort of client who would set foot inside one of my pleasure houses. I suspect it was more your demeanour than your gold that attracted them."

"Are you kidding me? You couldn't buy a face like mine for a million gold dragons," said the vampire. "I'm Damon."

"Daemon, as in Daemon Blackfyre?"

"Damon as in Damon Salvatore." He was getting sick of this Daemon Blackfyre. Sure, he might have almost conquered Westeros, with 'almost' being the keyword, but how many mind-controlled hybrids had he killed?

"You're not a humble man, are you, Damon Salvatore?" asked the man.

"I'm an honest man," said Damon. "I would never lie about my own worth. But that might be an alien concept to you, Lord Baelish."

Petyr Baelish, Master of coin and the head of the Westerosian version of the CIA or NSA, laughed. "Very clever of you to know who I am," he said.

"I have ears. And you obviously knew who I was before I even stepped through that door."

"What gave me away?" Baelish asked. He took Damon through a series of doorways, through curtains and past half-open doors of rooms where carnal activities of all kinds were going on, until they came to a large study at the back. Couches were arranged around the sides and cushions sat neatly upon them as if nothing untoward ever happened her. However, even the burning incense could not mask the scent of fresh sex. Two women. Interesting.

"You're just about the only man here who's fully dressed, for one," said Damon as he settled in one of the armchairs and accepted a cup of wine. "And…uh…if I were you, I'd get rid of those corpses in your backyard." The smell of putrefaction was no stranger to Damon. They were only at the very early stages of decay, having been acquired while still very fresh for the requests of one or possibly more clients with very specific…requirements. Perhaps the corpses were 'made' as they had been in the Victorian era.

Baelish laughed. "There's more to you than meets the eye, Salvatore," he said. "But then, is that not always the case with sell-swords like yourself?"

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**The Neck**

*He waited on the road, peering out from behind the tall grasses and the gnarled trees that lined each side, waiting for an unlucky merchant's caravan to pass by.*

*The stars gave little light and the road gleamed pale while everything else was cast in shadow. The moon hid behind her veil of clouds, afraid to come out.*

_Afraid of them, or of something else?_
Around him, the men were whispering. "Hey Hood," said Toad, whose face resembled a toad's backside, not that anyone ever said it to his face. "Did you ever hear Bard talk about that creature from up north? The dead one, I mean, the one that used to be a man and then died and then started drinking blood? What was his name? Dracula or something."

"Count Dracula," said Bard, who had once been a bard, but found robbing to be a much more lucrative profession. Yes, they were all very creative with their names.

Hood shook his head. Whoever thought of such an idea? Then again, it was Toad, and Toad believed whatever anyone else told him if he thought it sounded interesting enough.

"Stop yer yammerin'," hissed Chief who was, obviously, the chief of their little group of mismatched...what were they? Not brothers, certainly. They mostly cooperated because they had to. "There's a pig comin' down the path. We're gonna stick 'im."

As their prospective victim drew closer, Hood saw it was a girl. A very slight girl, with swaying hips and long dark hair hidden beneath a scarf. Gods, how long had it been since he'd had a woman? Too long.

"Oooh," said Toad. "I'm thinkin' tonight's me lucky night. I'm up for some fun and games."

"You can think?" said Bard.

They surrounded her. She was easy prey. What was one woman against twenty men?

"Well, I wasn't expecting a welcoming committee," she said. Why wasn't she afraid? A shudder suddenly went down his spine. Any other woman would have screamed at their sudden appearance, but then, what manner of woman would travel the back roads alone? The stars glittered in her eyes; dark pools of shadow a man could drown in.

"Well? Cat got your tongue? Let me see..."

The screams died in their throats. Bard tried to run. She disappeared and reappeared in front of him before breaking his neck with one hand. Her face...her face!

The long teeth gleamed in what meagre light the veiled moon and stars had to offer. Blood dripped down her chin as she lifted her face from Chief's neck. His body dropped to the ground like a limp doll.

He didn't wait to see more. He ran. Behind him, he heard Toad beseeching her, begging for mercy. "Please! Please!"

"Aw, don't you want to play anymore? I thought you liked fun and games."

Bard's tale was wrong. It wasn't Count Dracula. It was Countess Dracula.

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The Wall

Parry, feint, strike. The other boys were no match for him. They waved their swords like sticks and were more likely to cut themselves than their opponents if they were ever given sharpened steel. Ser A lisser rolled his eyes as the boy scrambled to his feet, holding his hand over his bleeding nose. Jon risked a smirk and gazed at the circle of recruits surrounding him. "Next!" barked A lisser, who would have liked nothing more than to see Jon Snow beaten.
Out of the corner of his eye, Jon saw Elena passing by the practise yard with a basketful of onions and carrots for this evening’s meal. No matter how unattractive she tried to make herself by dressing in men’s clothing and tying up her dark hair in a messy twist at the nape of her neck to try and blend in with the brothers, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld. He could never forget the moment when he had first seen her, eyes luminous and cheeks red from the cold. No; if her goal had been to blend in with the rabble which now called itself the Night’s Watch, she had failed miserably.

She caught his eye and smiled at him briefly. That was enough to make him lower his guard, allowing the recruit called Rast to strike him hard enough to bruise. Jon whirled around to block the next blow. Rast was strong, but undisciplined, and his swings were wild and inaccurate. His blade slipped down Jon’s, who managed to trap it with the guard and then wrenched it out of his hand.

"Well, you have just proven you are the least useless person here, Lord Snow," said Ser Alisser. His tone was mocking, and even though he had not been here for long, Jon had had to suppress many urges to break his nose too. It would probably have improved the aesthetics of his face. "Go and clean up, the lot of you, and then report to the kitchens. Try not to cut off your fingers with the vegetable knives."

The recruits trudged away one by one, trailing their swords behind them like men who had been defeated again and again. Which, of course, they had. There was a sense of satisfaction in that. They were not worthy of the Night’s Watch and he had just proved it.

So no, he had not expected it when they attacked him in the recruits’ armoury. And, having just disarmed, he was in a very bad position.

They pinned him to the wall and held a knife to his throat. The edge was not as sharp as it could have been, but it was perfectly capable of slitting him from ear to ear. "You broke my nose," snarled the tall thick-necked boy. Grenn, Jon remembered. Well, it sounded a bit more like "You broke by dose", with his nose being truly broken and out of commission.

"It looks better on you," scoffed Jon. They pressed the blade closer to his neck. He would not show fear; not to these rapists and murderers and thieves. He was a Stark of Winterfell, his father had told him. Starks did not bow to rabble.

"You think you're so much better than the rest of us? I wonder if you'll bleed if—" Grenn did not get to finish his threat before he was flung away and slammed against a rack of practise swords by none other than Elena herself.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded. Behind her, Tyrion Lannister stood in the doorway. He shared a trait with all diplomats and courtiers; his expression gave no hint as to what he was thinking.

"Get out of the way, wench," said Rast, who still held Jon against the wall.

With movements so graceful and almost faster than the eye could follow, she had him pinned against the wall instead, her arm against his throat and almost cutting off his air. For the briefest moment, her eyes seemed to darken, but it happened so quickly that Jon was not sure he had actually seen it. "Call me 'wench' again and I won't be so merciful," she said. She glared at the remaining man who still held Jon, a thief by the name of Pyp. Jon vaguely registered that he could have easily dealt with the thief, but he was too in awe and too outraged to act. Pyp scowled as he slowly let go and stepped away, unwilling to be the third recipient of her wrath.
"I didn't need your help," said Jon when she finally released Rast, who slipped away as quickly as he could.

"Oh really?" she said.

"I can handle myself. I don't need you to rescue me." It wasn't completely a lie. "They couldn't have done anything to me. If they did anything, Lord Mormont would have had their heads on spikes as an example. They're just jealous because I'm better than them."

"Are you? In what way?" Her voice was low, as if she were trying to rein in her temper.

"I'm a better fighter and a better man. I am no brigand or murderer or rapist."

"You are very quick to judge, are you not, my lord?" He almost winced at her tone. No, she was not happy with him at all. But what right had she to be displeased?

"It's the truth."

"Let me tell you another truth. Not everyone has had the benefit of being trained to fight by the best teachers money can buy since they were eight!"

"Five."

"That's beside the point. You may be a better fighter and you may not be a criminal, but you're an entitled, arrogant, conceited, spoiled little lordling who thinks he's better than everyone else just because he was born in a castle instead of a stable. If you want respect here on the Wall, Jon Snow, you'll have to earn it, and as far as I'm concerned, you haven't."

With that, she snatched up her basket of laundry and stormed out the door, leaving the men staring at her retreating back in silence.

"These men will one day watch your back, Snow," said Tyrion. His face still showed absolutely no expression. It was rather unnerving, as if he were talking to a statue or someone who was not really alive. "It would be in your best interests not to make them your enemies. If you insist on having enemies, my father always said he preferred his dead and buried."

Jon looked around the small dark armoury, with the broken sword racks and worn shields. All old, all dilapidated, and no one cared. They didn't even care enough to send grain. And why should they? This was the asshole of the world, where men came to die long slow deaths of cold and cynicism. Outside, it was beginning to snow, and Alisser was yelling at the next bunch of unfortunate recruits. "Everyone knew what this place was, but no one told me anything except you," he said to the dwarf. "My father knew, and he left me here to rot anyway."

"Grenn's father left him too, outside a farmhouse when he was three," said Tyrion suddenly. Jon glanced at the thick-necked boy whose nose was still bloodied. The other boy scowled and looked down. Was that shame? Anger? Why should he care?

"Pyp chose the Wall rather than losing his hand after he was caught stealing a wheel of cheese," the dwarf continued. The thief, too, looked away. "His little sister had not eaten in three days. None of them had been trained by a master at arms like your Ser Rodrik. I doubt any of them had held a real sword before they came here, or even eaten a full meal."

Jon wanted to ask why he was telling him all these stories, but he knew exactly why Tyrion was doing it. Knowing these stories…it changed the way things looked. Men came to the Wall because they had nowhere else to go. Perhaps…
"One more thing," said the dwarf. He handed him a letter. "Your brother Bran is awake."

King's Landing

The Hand's Tournament. Ned rubbed his temples. Really, Robert? Was this necessary? He certainly wanted no tournaments. In fact, he had never liked them, and it didn't even have anything to do with his sister or Rhaegar or that cursed title of the Queen of Love and Beauty. He had not been in King's Landing a week before his desk was inundated with matters of state. Salvatore had suggested using his waste basket as an 'in-tray' for documents. Ned was half considering it. But he had a duty to Robert and to the realm. Whatever the king wanted, the king got, and if that was a tournament that would put him a further eighty thousand gold dragons in debt to the Lannisters, then so be it. Robert couldn't care less about money. He never had. Even during the Rebellion, it had been others who had taken care of the figures.

And then there was the troubling matter of Jon Arryn's death. Had it really been a disease? His mentor had always been a healthy man. How could he have been taken so quickly? And Lysa's letter about the Lannisters, and the attack on Bran…

Grand Maester Pycelle had said Jon had been looking into a book of lineages and genealogies of the great houses of Westeros. Said book now sat beside the pile of paperwork awaiting his perusal. The tome was thick, with the distinct smell of vellum, both decaying and new, for it was added to each time a son was born to one of the great houses. His name was there, as was his father's and brother's before him. Robb's was after his, along with Bran and Rickon.

He flipped through some of the pages. The cover alone, faded and flaking with age with its gold embossed lettering almost completely rubbed away by generations of readers' hands, was enough to intimidate most people, to say nothing of the content. What had Jon wanted with it?

It mixed into a confused jumble until he hardly knew what was going on inside his head, much less what was happening outside it. He needed air. The atmosphere of King's Landing was stifling, and it wasn't just the heat. Sometimes he felt as if he couldn't breathe, as if there was a weight on his chest crushing the life out of him. Was Cat right? Should he have refused Robert's request? After all, there were more capable men who could do this job. But there weren't other men who would protect Robert Baratheon as Eddard Stark would…

"Milord, Lord Baelish is here to see you."

Jory's voice jolted him out of his thoughts. Ned remembered Baelish. His brother had spoken of him once in jest, a long long time ago, back before the whole Lyanna-Rhaegar disaster, back before Westeros had burned with war, before his whole existence had shattered. How Brandon had sneered at the little boy who had tried to fight for the girl he adored. And now Brandon was dead and Littlefinger was the Master of Coin.

"I never got to congratulate you on your appointment as Hand," said Baelish once Jory had been dismissed. "Come, take a walk with me, Lord Hand. You look like you could use some air."

Ned wanted to say he was no wilting maiden, but the truth was, he did need some air. Fresh air. Cold air. He'd have better luck finding a yellow rose in Winterfell than finding cold air in King's Landing, at least until winter came, which it always did in time.

He allowed Littlefinger to lead him into the gardens. It was so tamed that the plants didn't resemble plants. They had been cut into shapes representing the sigils of all the great houses. There was the wolf, a snarling lion, a rearing stag…no dragon, of course. The Targaryens were gone.
"I hear you're reading a boring book," Baelish remarked. The slight man who now walked beside him bore little resemblance to the boy in Cat and Brandon's stories. The years changed everyone; they made some men decay while other men grew. If it were possible, Ned would give just about anything to be young again. He was still strong—for thirty seven was not so old—but sometimes, after long periods of exertion, he would find himself short of breath. He used to be able to tire Robb out in sparring. Now Robb tired him out. And Sansa and Arya tired him out even more quickly.

"Did Pycelle tell you?" asked Ned. He probably did. "He talks too much."

"He never stops," said Littlefinger. "Have you heard of Ser Hugh of the Vale?"

Who? Ned shook his head. There were too many petty knights in Westeros. Did Littlefinger expect him to know all of them?

"It's not surprising, given he was only recently knighted," said Petyr. "He was only a squire until his master's untimely death. Jon Arryn's squire."

Ned paused. "Why was he knighted?" he asked.

Littlefinger smiled. Along the path, gardeners prepared the land for planting new things. Sansa had taken a liking to carnations. Other servants tidied up the hedges. Ned ignored them as he waited for an answer. Littlefinger remained silently smiling.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Your wife wrote to me before you arrived," said Petyr. "I promised Cat I would help you. I keep my promises."

Well, well, not in King's Landing for one week, and the Hand's Tower was already inundated with spies. Damon kept a note of everyone Baelish pointed out to Ned, mentally adding to his list of people to use and exploit and distrust. Baelish did not name all the spies, of course. Some of his remained discreetly tucked away in shadowy corners, invisible to almost every eye. Others, particularly little birds trapped in a big fat spider's web, he had not noticed before. There were septas, gardeners, cleaners...anyone and anything could be a spy. These people didn't need bugs and high tech gadgets to gather information. It might have been a bit slower, and the spies might die more often, but people were cheap.

The list could possibly also serve as a menu. After all, if a spy disappeared, their masters would assume they had been caught by the spied upon.

And why would Ned be reading a boring book, of all things, and why would Baelish care to mention it? In the past, Ned had kept his reading to documents and letters and Damon had never seen him with a book before. He kept his spot by the door, pretending to be bored and chewing on an apple. The two men might be talking softly enough to evade human ears, but to vampire ones, their words could not be clearer.

"Is there someone in your service you trust completely?" Baelish asked of Ned.

"Yes," said Ned.

"The wiser answer was no, milord."

They spoke more of sending a man to question this Hugh of the Vale, and about an armourer Ned's mentor had visited before his death. Then Baelish took his leave.
Ned summoned Jory—Damon was a little insulted that he had not sent for him instead—and told him to find Ser Hugh, leaving Damon trying to find a time to slip into Ned's study to look at that boring book. Or perhaps he could seek out that armourer. Or perhaps…

A little shadow tried to slip by him. Said little shadow did not remain a shadow for very long.

"And just where do you think you're going, milady?" Damon asked as he grabbed Arya by the back of her shirt. "And why are you in Lord Robb's cast-offs?"

"Shut up, Salvatore," said Arya, sounding quite a bit like the above-mentioned older brother. "I'm trying to hide from Septa Mordane. She's trying to make me embroider the sigils of every single damned house!"

"Oooh, wash your mouth out, little lady," said Damon. "I don't think your father would like to hear you curse, and he's not quite out of earshot yet."

"You try embroidering stags and lions and wolves and fish and not curse," said Arya. "I want to learn swordplay, Damon."

"We don't always get what we want," said Damon with a smile. Not particularly true, in his case, but he didn't want any more people accusing him of being a corrupting influence on Lord Stark's children. Particularly not the girls. Robb he could get away with, and Jon did not have the prerequisite sense of humour.

"Well, I'm the lady, and you're just the guardsman," said Arya. "So my word is your command. Let. Me. Go."

"You forgot the magic word," teased Damon. Oh, he loved riling people up, and Arya Stark was so easy to rile. Kind of like Jon, actually.

"Now."

He sighed. "Two more chances," he said. "Come on, milady, before Septa Mordane comes. You know she will catch up."

"Father!"

Damon turned around. Oops.

"Damon Salvatore," said Ned. "I might have known. Arya, what are you doing in your brother's clothes? Does Robb know his shirt is missing?"

"He gave this to Jon years ago," said Arya. "And Jon left it behind when he left."

"That is not the point, Arya," said Ned. "Why are you not in the solar with your sister and septa?"

"Because I've been in there for the past four hours stitching and undoing my stitches. I'm never going to get the Tyrell rose right. Do you know how many petals a rose has, Father? That's right, neither do I."

They heard Septa Mordane's voice coming closer and closer, calling Arya's name in that disapproving tone of hers. Damon and Ned exchanged glances.

"Go to your room, Arya," said Ned. "We'll talk later."

"If there's nothing else, milord—" began Damon, but he was interrupted by Jory's return.
"Lord Stark," he said.

"What did Ser Hugh say?" asked Ned.

Aha! Here was the key to all the secrets of the boring book. He wouldn't even have to read it himself!

"He said he was a knight, and he wouldn't speak with anyone who wasn't," said Jory.

"Did you tell him I sent you?" asked Ned.

"I did, and he said he would speak with you personally, but not with me," said Jory, who almost seemed irritated. Considering Jory was one of the easiest going men anyone had ever met, then Ser Hugh had to be a downright dick. Almost as bad as Damon himself.

"Why didn't you just say you were a knight?" asked Damon.

"Because I told him I wasn't," said Jory.

"And why would you do that?"

"He called me 'ser', and I said I was no 'ser'."

Ned sighed. "I will speak with him myself," he said.

"Wait, milord," said Damon. "Do you think it wise? Why would you, the Hand of the King, speak with a lowly Ser Nobody in person?"

Ned seemed thoughtful. "How good are you at lying, Salvatore?" he asked.

He had no idea.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It's slowly getting there. The changes and ripples in history are slowly accumulating. You know how you shake a can of soda and the pressure builds inside but you can't really see it until you open it and then it all sprays out? This is like that. Thank you to everyone who's commented, bookmarked, and left kudos!
Persuasion

Chapter Summary

Jon and Elena find common ground and Elena sows doubt in Jon's mind. Caroline and Rebekah try to settle into their new lives, but it's hard. Rumours of monsters reach The Twins. And who wants to be a millionaire? Damon Salvatore, of course.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: We don't own anything. Robb, Jon, etc. remain the property of Mr Martin and Damon, Bonnie, Katherine, and their supernatural friends are creations of LJ Smith and Julie Plec.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Castle Black

A knock came on the door as she sat by the fire, passing a needle through the fabric and pulling the thread tight again and again. "Come in," said Elena without looking up from her mending. It never ever seemed to end. The moment she fixed one garment, another would be torn. Not that she minded making herself useful but sometimes she just got overwhelmed by the sheer amount of mending that needed to be done. Okay, maybe it was because she had to unpick as many stitches as she sewed –this was not like darning a sock or two occasionally or replacing a button.

The door creaked and Tyrion Lannister stepped inside. Snow dusted his rich cloak of velvet and fur. "That was quite a display in there," he said. He saluted the crackling fire, holding his hands to the flames and letting the warmth thaw them. "Very impressive."

"And stupid, too, you were going to say?"

"I swear, I sometimes wonder if you can read my mind," he teased gently.

"I know it was stupid," said Elena. She tied off the thread and broke it with her teeth. "Jon Snow was right. I shouldn't have interfered, but I saw him in danger, and…" She sighed. "I shouldn't have said all those things to him."

"What are you doing here on the Wall, Elena?" asked Tyrion. "It is clear you are no common girl." He sat down and poured himself a drink from the pewter jug she always kept on her table. "Water? One would have thought the head cook would have had a secret stash of some sort."

"I'm the second cook, not the head cook," said Elena. "He most certainly has moonshine, although I wouldn't drink it if I were you. But you did not come here to talk to me about illicit alcohol, did you, Lord Tyrion?"

"I want to know where you learned to fight like that," said the dwarf.
"I live on the Wall. Even idiots can learn by osmosis." Shit. _Osmosis?_

"I am not familiar with that term," said Tyrion. A crease appeared between his dark eyebrows, so uncharacteristic of a Lannister. Or so she'd heard. She'd only ever seen one Lannister before, so she couldn't really say.

"It's the act of passively absorbing something," said Elena. "You know, particles moving from an area of high concentration to an area of low concentration through a semi-permeable membrane—"

She paused. _Was she supposed to know all this?_

"And you still want to convince me that you _are_ a commoner?"

"I'm not a lady if that's what you mean."

"See, I'm not convinced of that. You read, you write, you use large words that even I have never heard before, and you fight like a woman trained to kill. Farmers don't teach their daughters that."

She stayed silent and listened to the hollow howls of the wind outside and the sound of cracks appearing in the wood as the heat split it in the fire, remembering a time when she had had no idea how to fight, when she had not even thought that Westeros existed, when the biggest concern in her life had been how she ought to break up with Matt.

Tyrion stood. "You can't run from your past forever, Elena," he said. "And you shouldn't; not a woman like you."

Jon was cutting up carrots when Elena came in and donned her apron. She made no overture towards him, and he was not going to make the first move. What was there to say, anyway? She thought him a little lordling and unworthy of respect. Well, she could think that. Why should he care?

But her words stung. He had thought there had been...never mind. He was to be a brother of the Night's Watch. Nothing could have happened anyway, even if she had regarded him highly, which she didn't. Although she had looked so very beautiful when she had been angry, and he was almost angry at himself for being angry with her...that didn't even make sense.

He finished up his carrots and moved onto the small hill of onions. His eyes watered, and he was struggling to see through his tears as the gases stung his eyes. He never thought vegetables could be worth hating—except tasteless soggy cabbage boiled until it was grey—but he now hated onions.

Elena suddenly slammed Rast's hand onto the main table and planted a knife right between his third and fourth fingers, barely missing the web of skin connecting the digits.

The knife quivered as it stood upright on the table, mirroring the movement of Rast's legs. "You touch me again, and I will cut off your balls and serve them up to you medium-rare with a side of mashed potatoes and gravy," said Elena. "Have I made myself clear?"

Silence. For the first time since their fight, Grenn and Jon exchanged glances. They were united in their wonder of this woman, and the very disturbing question; would she actually do it? As much as Rast deserved it, none of them actually wanted to have his balls, cooked medium-rare or otherwise, served anywhere near mashed potatoes. It sounded like a most unpalatable dish and it would most definitely have ruined the potatoes. Besides, the serving would be undoubtedly very small.

The rapist nodded, his eyes flicking from the knife still quivering between his fingers, and the
The furious face of the beautiful woman who had completely emasculated him before all his peers. It didn't matter whether he still had balls or not.

"Go and cut up some more firewood," Elena said. "The shed is empty and needs to be filled."

Once Rast was gone, she glared at all the rest of them. Jon tried to turn his attentions back to his onions, but he kept looking at her until she could finally stand it no longer. "What?" she asked. Some of the anger still remained, but most of her temper seemed to have dissipated. In fact, she seemed almost embarrassed.

"Would you really have done it?" Pyp blurted out suddenly. He was in charge of stirring a large pot of something to stop the food from sticking to the bottom, but he, like Jon, had paused in his work.

"Yes, no, maybe," said Elena.

"Threats are only good if you carry them out," remarked Jon. He reached out to pull the knife out of the table. It was deeply embedded. He tried harder, wondering at what sort of strength someone would have to possess to stab wood that deeply. Elena seemed so delicate, being just a little taller than Sansa and even slimmer, with fine wrists more suited to playing music and embroidering cushions than defending herself against rapists on the Wall.

"You people really don't get the concept of soft power, do you?" asked Elena.

Grenn and Pyp looked at her blankly, clearly not understanding at all. Jon finally managed to remove the knife.

"I don't think there was anything soft about what you did," he said, returning the ruined instrument to her. The tip had been broken off, so violently had she plunged it into the thick wood. "Off the record, I wouldn't have stopped you if you had cut off Rast's balls and served them up to him medium rare with a side of mashed potatoes and gravy, as long as you only served them to him."

"You're impossible," said Elena.

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The Westerlands

The man took off his helmet, revealing his shoulder-length tousled blond hair. Caroline realized with a start that he was not very much older than her, and he was…pretty hot. In that arrogant, jerk-like way that had been patented by Klaus.

"I am Daemon Lannister," he said.

Oh, so his name was Daemon, was it? That explained a great deal. Perhaps all the Damons and Daemons in the world had a lot in common as far as personalities were concerned.

"I think we should just kill them, Daemon," said another of the knights who had kept his helmet on. His voice cracked in the middle of his sentence as it tried to figure out whether it was the voice of a boy or the voice of a man. How old was he? Thirteen?

"Now, is that any way to treat ladies, brother? Why not shove their heads into burning coals while we're at it?" said Daemon. "If you really want blood on your hands, I believe Ser Gregor is looking for a squire."

He turned back to the three travellers. "But then, what to do with you?"
"If you know what's good for you, you'd leave us right alone," said Rebekah.

"It would be remiss of me not to offer you the best of Lannister hospitality now that fortune has seen fit to arrange our meeting." Daemon smiled as he said this.

"Well, since you're being so kind…" said Rebekah. Caroline tried her best not to roll her eyes. It wasn't a very nice thing to do. But seriously, Rebekah, did she have to flirt with every cute boy she came across?

Yes, she probably did, because she was insecure and shallow and spoiled.

Daemon offered Rebekah a hand and hauled her up behind him in his saddle. Caroline shared a horse with the young knight who had suggested killing them, Daemon's brother Jorge—who was fourteen—and Stefan was left to walk. These people clearly thought women were delicate little flowers that couldn't do a thing. It was so medieval!

'Look around you, Caroline. This is probably a medieval society,' she thought to herself. The horse jolted her up and down so badly she thought her arse had gone numb by the time they rode through the city gates, which were, on their own, several storeys high. Casterly Rock, if Daemon was to be believed, was one of the greatest cities Westeros had ever seen. It sat above a series of gold mines which were the source of his family's immense wealth, and thus power.

He was a cousin of a cousin of Lord Tywin Lannister, the tyrant who ruled this place with an iron fist—golden fist?—and mostly he talked about all his family's achievements, which were numerous, boring, and hard to remember. Caroline felt it would be fair to say Daemon thought Lannisters made the sun rise and set each day.

Instead of taking them to a hotel or an inn or someplace nice where they could refresh themselves, Daemon brought them directly to the barracks.

Gleaming armour and flashing shields almost blinded her as they came to a large open area. Never before had Caroline seen so many men moving in unison. Oh, what the hell, she'd never seen that many people before in her life, not even at the Fall Out Boy concert at the Virginia Beach Amphitheatre. And that had been jam packed. Rows upon rows of spears and horses were all lined up in the neat formations, reminding her of movies about Roman centurions.

Watching over them was an old man on a horse. His back was straight, as if he were a much younger man, and his pale blue eyes betrayed no emotion.

"Very impressive," said Rebekah. "Men moving and walking together in rows and lines. Like lemmings."

"I take it you're not really that impressed, Mistress Rebekah," said Daemon.

Rebekah gave a feminine snort. "Even sheep can do this if you give them enough incentive."

Finally, the old man turned to look at them. It had to be the lemmings and sheep comparisons. No military commander would have appreciated them. His armour was even more polished than his men's, with overlapping plates that made him look like some sort of lizard. Or armadillo. No, he probably wouldn't appreciate that comparison either.

"Daemon," he said. His voice was deep and strong, reminding Caroline of a pipe organ in a concert hall.

For a second, Daemon looked as if he was about to panic, but then he composed himself and rode
to where the old man sat on his horse.

"Lord Tywin," he said as he dismounted and bowed, all the while motioning for them to do the same.

"I see you've brought in stragglers," said Tywin. Yep, Caroline could believe a man like that ruled a city. The president himself wasn't as impressive. Or as rude. She was so not a straggler!

"Hey, mister, it's not like we actually wanted to be here," she said before she remembered Stefan had said to let him do all the talking. Oops?

Tywin looked down at her. There was still no expression on his face, but there were far too many wrinkles for him to have been botoxed up to the eyebrows. He probably didn't have botox anyway.

"You have a sharp tongue," he said.

Why, thank you.

"But you'll need something sharper if you want to survive here."

Nope, fangs not allowed, although it was very tempting to show him her teeth. Tywin Lannister turned back to Daemon, who was shuffling from foot to foot nervously, as if he were activating his fight-or-flight response. It was veering towards flight. Caroline supposed she ought to be scared of the old man, but...she just wasn't. Maybe she just didn't have very good self-preservation instincts. After all, she'd dated a werewolf and Damon and she wasn't afraid of the most powerful vampire-werewolf-hybrid-thing that ever lived when she really should be.

"Look, maybe I was rude, my lord or whatever it is I'm supposed to call you, but we are not stragglers."

"Do not test my patience," said Tywin. "I am not known for it."

Caroline had another smart retort on the tip of her tongue, but Stefan clapped his hand over her mouth.

"Forgive her, my lord. She is tired after a long journey and knows not what she is saying," he said. Why did he sound all Old Testament biblical now?

Tywin looked him up and down. "Daemon, take our guests to their quarters."

"The dungeons?" asked Jorge.

The Lannister patriarch's eyes flicked towards the boy's pimply face before turning to Daemon. "And send your brother to me," he added.

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**King's Landing**

Damon arrived at the tourney grounds just as they were carrying the corpse away on a stretcher. Oops. He had thought he would get himself knightly armour and then sign up in the tourney first. Forty thousand gold dragons; he could do with forty thousand extra gold dragons. Frankly, he'd never been so poor in his entire existence. Visa gold cards didn't mean anything in Westeros. They only did the real deal.

"Well, that's that then," he remarked to Jory as they followed Ned and an older knight into the tent
where the Silent Sisters, the undertakers of Westeros, were making the body Ser Hugh of the Vale pretty again.

"It's just his luck, I guess, drawing a straw to go against the Mountain," said Jory.

"Or maybe he just sucked," said Damon.

Jory gave him a look but could think of no response to that.

"How was the match chosen?" asked Ned as he watched the sisters sew up the wound on the dead man's neck. Blood still seeped from the gash. Hmm... Damon was getting a bit peckish now. It was a pity that pretty Ser Hugh would never be on the menu. Oh well, there was a tournament, and there were tourists here to watch the blood sports, and there were still plenty of beggars on the streets. People who complained about the American government's lack of social welfare ought to see Robert Baratheon's policy on the matter.

"Straws were drawn, as usual," said the older knight. His name was Ser Barristan Selmy, and he was Jaime Lannister's boss. He had to be about sixty, but he walked like a man of thirty, and according to rumours, he was still the best swordsman in Westeros. Damon wondered if he could possibly rile up the man enough for him to duel him. But nah. Bullying old men wasn't very nice. It was almost like kicking a puppy, and he was no Joffrey.

"Yes, but who held the straws?" said Ned, partly to himself and partly to... well, himself. He shouldn't talk aloud to himself in Westeros. It wasn't safe. Although, if he were the type to keep a journal, Ned Stark would be the man who would leave it around for the world to read. Kind of like Stefan. They certainly shared some suspiciously similar traits.

Well, it was back to square one, but he would leave that for next week. This week, he had a tournament to win.

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**The Twins**

It wasn't half as impressive as London Tower Bridge, but it did what it was supposed to do. Then again, if there had been a large enough log, it would have done the same job. The much celebrated bridge of the Twins wasn't even wide enough to allow for four lanes of traffic. She supposed it would be easy to defend, and Westeros didn't seem to be prosperous enough to have traffic congestion issues, because this was a true bottleneck.

"Halt!" said one of the guards. Freys. They smelled like day-old microwave fish dinners. "There is a toll for crossing this bridge."

She sighed. Well, she ought to have guessed. Walder Frey had a reputation for being lecherous, miserly, and every unflattering adjective in both the Oxford and Merriam-Webster dictionaries. She pulled out a copper from her money pouch.

The guard raised an eyebrow.

"That's not enough," he said.

"But that is all I have, ser," she said, widening her eyes just a little bit, as if she were afraid of him, which she wasn't. Not in the least. Frankly, he would have made for a mid-morning snack at best, although there was some doubt as to whether he was fit for vampire consumption.

"Not quite..." said the guard, eyeing her appreciatively. His fellow guard, an older man, rolled his
eyes. Perhaps some Freys actually took their jobs seriously. The younger man ignored him and stroked her cheek with fingers tipped with dirt-darkened nails. Well, if he wanted to play that game…

"Well, ser," she said. "The other side of the river seems to offer a little more…privacy."

He smiled. "There's a clever girl."

She was clever indeed. It was time for lunch anyway.

They found him the next day, floating face down in the river, his throat ripped open by teeth or claws or something else entirely new. And they remembered the tales of a monster called Dracula.

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**Castle Black**

Jon Snow moved so beautifully and gracefully. Elena could not help but stop and watch from one of the wooden balconies outside the kitchens which overlooked the practise yard. He didn't see her. Indeed, he seemed to be making an effort to not look in the direction of the kitchens. How was it possible for someone to look so handsome in that hideously bulky practise armour? Although, he'd probably look better without it.

But he was…up himself. So…proud, and conceited, and arrogant, and dismissive of the feelings of others. Personality counted for a lot, and he hadn't even said thank you after she had saved him from getting his throat slashed.

She leaned against the rail, which was still covered in ice after last night. Her warmth melted it and icy water seeped through her sleeves, startling her back into reality. What was she doing? Meals needed planning, laundry needed drying, socks needed darning, house histories needed remembering; there were a billion things she ought to be doing right now. She didn't have time to watch Jon Snow teach the boys—wait, teach the boys?

She took a closer look. Yes, he was teaching them, and not just beating them to the ground again and again and again while Ser Alisser watched on as if this was his own Coliseum. Grenn actually remembered he had feet now, and Pyp wasn't doing an Irish jig anymore. Jon was telling them how standing on their side meant their enemy had a smaller target to hit and was demonstrating slowly for them. Ser Alisser huffed and crossed his arms as his job was slowly usurped by a teenager.

Because, although it was sometimes hard to remember, Jon was younger than she was. With a start, she realized she'd thought of him as being a man rather than a boy, as if he were in the same league as Stefan or Damon.

Although, when it came to conceitedness and arrogance, he was nowhere near Damon Salvatore levels.

"It seems he might have taken our words into consideration after all," came a voice from behind her.

"Lord Tyrion, don't you have better things to do than talk to a cook?"

"Now, why would I forgo the chance for your delightful company, Mistress Elena?" said Tyrion as he joined her. His head barely stood above the railing.

"I think most men would question the delightfulness of my company."
"In case you have not noticed, I am not most men," said Tyrion. "You hurt his pride, you know."

"You know what he can do with his pride?"

Tyrion laughed. "You don't really mean that, do you?" he said. "I've seen the way you look at him. Not that I blame you."

What? How *did* she look at Jon Snow?

She straightened herself and resolved to go back inside the kitchens, where she would *not* think about Jon Snow, but found herself walking down the stairs towards the practise yards where the boys were just finishing up. Jon paused when she approached him, but he said nothing. His dark eyes betrayed very little. She took a deep breath.

"You did well today," she said.

He nodded, but still said nothing. God, did he have to make it so awkward?

"Look…about yesterday…I shouldn't have said all those things to you."

The corners of his mouth turned up just a little. "Is that an apology, Mistress Elena? Because I didn't hear anything that sounded like 'sorry'."

He was impossible!

"Don't push it, Jon Snow," she said, emphasizing her point by prodding him in the chest ineffectively through the thick practise armour. He seized her hand as she did so and pulled her against him unexpectedly. She was so surprised that she couldn't pull away in time, and then she realized she didn't actually want to. His hand was warm from activity, and there were beads of sweat cooling on his forehead. She realized how long his dark eyelashes were, how nice it would probably feel to tangle her fingers in his dark curls, how he had perfectly formed lips which were now slightly parted, how heavy their breaths were becoming…

Someone cleared his throat. Both of them leapt apart as if cold water had been poured on them.

"Lord Commander," said Jon. Elena simply stood there, wanting the ground to open up and swallow her whole. What had she been thinking? Obviously she hadn't been thinking about anything at all; not the fact that they were in public, not the fact that she still harboured feelings for someone else…

"You're on watch tonight, Snow," said Mormont, as if he hadn't just seen them almost about to kiss. Behind him, Benjen raised an eyebrow but said nothing. They left them both standing in the middle of the practise yards, not sure of how to react. Around them, the other recruits had formed a wide circle and they were all staring.

"I should go and prepare," said Jon.

"I have food to cook," Elena stammered at the same time.

"So…until later, then?"

She nodded. "So…we're good? Friends?"

"You want to be friends with me even though I am…what was it that you called me? An entitled arrogant conceited spoiled little lordling who thinks he's better than everyone else just because he
was born in a castle instead of a stable?” He smirked at her.

"You remembered every word?"

"I don't forget an insult. You owe me, Elena Gilbert."

It was hard to see through the swirls of snow that just kept falling from above as he and Benjen climbed out of the winch elevator. It obscured what was below, as if there was an endless chasm right at their feet. The flurries danced before his eyes, like little animals inviting him to join them in play. Snowflakes stuck in his hair and beard. Snow had never been so beautiful before.

"I wanted to be here when you first saw it," said Benjen.

"It's beautiful," said Jon. The vast blackness held so many opportunities. For a moment, he felt as if he were at the top of the world. Perhaps he was, for he knew of no higher place than the Wall, save for perhaps the Eyrie.

He let his eyes take in the vastness of the Wall that stretched to either side of him, but then he stopped. Was that someone standing on the edge, being buffeted this way and that by the wind? He didn't even need good visibility to see who it was, for there was only one girl on the Wall.

"Elena!" he cried.

"What do you think you're doing?" shouted Benjen.

"I'm flying!" replied Elena, turning only to look at them briefly. Her arms were outstretched, as if she thought they were wings. Out here, with her cloak dusted with snow and her dark hair streaming behind her, she almost did look as if she could fly. But he knew she couldn't.

"Come back down here now!" shouted Jon. "You'll fall to your death!"

"The wind is blowing me back from the edge," said Elena. "I'm not going to fall unless I jump." The wind reddened her cheeks and snow stuck to her long eyelashes. She closed her eyes and remained exactly where she was, not quite falling, but not quite "flying" either.

"Where is she from?" Jon asked his uncle.

"I am more interested in where that alcohol is from," said Benjen. "Obviously she imbibed some. Plenty of it, I would say."

"I am not drunk, First Ranger, although the cook does have a stash of moonshine. I would rather clean floors with it than drink it though." She finally did come back down to safety, much to Jon's relief. With shock, he realized how much she had become part of the Wall for him. He couldn't imagine it without her and all her strangeness and threats and warm smiles that made the wind feel less icy for the rest of the day. He wanted to run his hand through her hair and dislodge the ice crystals that had lodged in it. He wanted to reach out and touch her face to see if her skin was as soft and smooth as it looked. He–

What was he thinking?

"I see you will not be lonely on your first watch even if I leave you here," said Benjen. He clapped Jon on the shoulder. "Just as well. I have to prepare for my journey." He turned to Elena. "Are the supplies ready?"
She nodded. "The meat and oatcakes should keep you going for several months if you supplement them with hunting."

"Where are you going?" asked Jon.

"Beyond the Wall," said Benjen. "There have been attacks on several wildling villages and Mormont has asked me to investigate. I ride at dawn."

"Then let me come with you," said Jon.

Benjen shook his head. "Not this time," he said. He patted Jon on the arm. "When you are a ranger, then we'll talk."

He left Jon and Elena standing in the swirling snow. "He always says that," said Jon.

"I don't know very much about the Night's Watch, but I think you have to swear your oaths first before they let you go gallivanting off on adventures beyond the Wall," said Elena.

"When I was young, and Uncle Benjen would come to Winterfell, he'd tell me all these stories about his adventures in the north. Now that I think about it, half of them probably weren't true, but I want to see it with my own eyes anyway." Jon peered into the distance, as if staring hard enough was going to make everything come into focus.

Elena paused. "I always meant to ask. Why did you come to the Wall? You're not like Pyp and Grenn and the others. Why choose the Wall, of all things?"

"What's my name?"

She laughed. "Are you having me on, Jon Snow?"

"Snow," said Jon. "I'm a bastard."

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," said Elena.

"I came here because it was the only way I could carve a place for myself. There was no other path I could take."

"So you came here because you felt you had no choice?"

"I don't."

"There's always a choice," said Elena. "You can choose to follow the path society expects you to take, or you can forge your own path and do what you believe in. So let me ask you again. Why do you want to join the Night's Watch?"

For honour, for a chance to prove himself, for a place in the world, to be remembered. But suddenly, all of that seemed...meaningless. Hadn't Damon pointed out there were other ways? And...did he really want just that? It didn't seem nearly enough. All of a sudden, the darkness beyond the Wall felt just a little cold and empty. He glanced at Elena, so beautiful and fierce and alien. Why would he want to take the only known path just because it was known and expected? Here was a girl—a girl—who had made her own place on the Wall. And if Elena could defy expectations like this, why couldn't he? Why couldn't he be Jon Snow, the first of his name and the first of his kind? Why couldn't he have everything that he wanted?

These questions frightened him. Never before had he questioned his duty. It simply wasn't the
"Can I give you a suggestion?" she asked. "Before you take your oaths and bind yourself to the Wall for eternity, ask yourself: What is the reasoning behind your decision, and is it what you really truly want?"

She walked away. He wanted to call after her and ask her what she meant and why she was telling him all of this. He didn't. Instead, he stared into the snow flurries in the darkness and felt himself falling and becoming lost with the white flakes into the abyss below.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Have you noticed that all the chapter titles reference an existing book or movie? This one references Jane Austen's novel Persuasion. Just a little bit of fun that we're having.
A Knight's Tale

Chapter Summary

Damon climbs the social ladder at King's Landing, a new recruit arrives on the Wall, and Walder Frey gets an unexpected guest.

King's Landing

The crowds murmured in anticipation, waiting for the next bout. There was an unknown from Crackclaw Point who was to ride against Gregor Clegane. All bets were on The Mountain. No one knew this Ser Lancelot Hardy, although some claimed to have spotted him from a distance and had said he had looked rather slight in comparison to the leviathan that was Clegane. It seemed like some poor joke that the boy was called Lancelot, in Ned's opinion. Arya had pointed out it sounded just like 'lance a lot'.

The tilting field had been cleaned up after Ser Hugh's unfortunate bout. Fresh dirt had been spread over the bloody patch and the ground had been smoothed, awaiting the Mountain's next victim. All the stands had been filled, and even Cersei was back by her husband's side, although she simply seemed bored as she usually was by anything Robert was interested in.

A cheer rose as the two knights rode out and saluted the crowds and the King. The hulking figure of Gregor Clegane was well known in King's Landing and every part of Westeros. One did not even need to see past his visor to know the cruelty in his face.

The strange knight, on the other hand, oddly kept his visor down as he rode past the lines of people who were waiting for his fall. Was he terribly disfigured? But he held himself well even though his armour was cheap, as if he were a man who wasn't used to bowing to anyone. When Ned caught a glimpse of his eyes through the slit of his visor, there was something that seemed…familiar.

The trumpet sounded, signalling the beginning of the joust. Sansa's hand tightened about Ned's arm while Arya leaned forward in her seat. He patted the older girl's hand comfortingly. "He seems to know what he's doing," he said. He hoped he knew what he was doing.

The knights charged toward one another. Both of them lowered their lances simultaneously and levelled them at their opponents' shields. Gregor bore three black hounds on a yellow background, and Hardy bore a white tree on green. Their horses' hooves sent sand flying as they drew closer and closer. The thudding of their iron-shod feet echoed the thudding of Sansa's heart.

Wood splintered upon impact and flew in every direction, but Ser Lancelot did not fall. In fact, he hardly flinched when Gregor's lance smashed into his shield. The broken end slid off as he angled his shield just ever so slightly to deflect the blow. Gregor, on the other hand, had been pushed backwards.

The herald waved his white flags to signal the end of the bout. Ser Lancelot's mount pranced before the crowds, enjoying the cheers as much as he was. The stallion was of a strange mottled grey hue, and his white mane flew like banners in the wind. Sansa clapped with the rest of them, wishing the knight would take off his helmet so she could see his face. He had to be handsome. How could he not be?
As the ground was smoothed again for the next bout, he rode up to where they sat in the stands. He bowed to her father from his saddle, and then held out a single beautiful white carnation to Sansa. "Thank you, Ser Lancelot," she said as she accepted it. "How did you know carnations were my favourite?" Her father frowned, but she didn't care. It was as if Ser Lancelot Hardy had ridden out from one of the old romantic tales the bards sang of. He embodied everything she had been looking for in King's Landing; pageantry, chivalric love, and the triumph of good over evil.

Again and again, the knights rode against one another. The crowd became more and more excited when Ser Lancelot remained in his saddle each time Gregor's lance struck his shield. "Clegane is tiring, and my coin purse seems a little lighter already," said Lord Baelish.

"Do you know anything about Lancelot Hardy?" asked Ned.

"He's a Hardy of Crackclaw Point," said Lord Baelish. "A distant cousin of Lord Lukas Hardy. The Hardys hardly venture beyond their own lands. This is the first time I have seen one in King's Landing in fifteen years."

The sun had risen high in the sky and was beginning its slow descent towards the horizon. Cicadas buzzed in the trees about the tourney grounds. The tilting halted for two hours while the king took his afternoon meal and the crowds went off in search of refreshment from the many vendors who had set up their stalls near the tourney grounds. The smell of hot potatoes and skewers of meat made Sansa's mouth water until Lord Baelish remarked someone had been caught using rat meat in their pasties. After that, she stayed away from the stalls and only ate what the servants brought them.

Occasionally, she would glance at where Joffrey sat by his father, engrossed in Robert's tales of the glory days, when he had been the jousting champion. The king's meal had been set out beneath the trees. The tables were almost collapsing with food. One more berry, and the legs would probably have given out.

A maid brought her delicate little pastries with chicken and mushrooms cooked in a creamy sauce and little slices of a long round loaf topped with crushed berries and whipped cream. They were the most delicious things she'd ever tasted. The bread was crusty on the outside, but the centre was so soft and light it just about melted on her tongue.

The afternoon session brought more of the same, except the bets had been increased, and the crowd was even more excited than before. The knights had switched to fresher mounts, and Ser Lancelot had yet to remove his helmet. Arya cheered each time he remained in his saddle after Clegane struck his shield.

And then the Mountain's horse lost its footing. Lancelot's lance struck the very centre of his shield. Wood splinters flew in every direction as the lance cracked down the centre from the impact of the blow all the way to the base of the weapon. The crowd was hushed as Gregor Clegane flew backwards and landed with a loud clang on the ground. Then a cheer went up for Ser Lancelot; a thunderous roar that drowned out everything else.

Hardy raised a gauntleted hand to wave. He dismounted. And then he removed his helmet. Sansa gasped.

"Aww, don't cry now, Greg old boy," said Damon to the vanquished Mountain. "At least you get the consolation prize. What was it? Oh yes. No gold dragons."

Gregor Clegane seized his sword from his trembling squire and lunged for Damon, his great broadsword raised for the kill. "No!" screamed Sansa, but even before her scream died down,
Damon had easily sidestepped the blow. To add insult to injury, he kicked Gregor's feet out from beneath him, just as he had done so many times with the men in Winterfell.

"Missed me," he sang. He threw his helmet to the crowd. The smallfolk fought over it, each clamouring to have a piece of the man who would become this tournament's champion. Gregor swung his sword again, determined to quieten that insolent mouth Sansa had come to adore.

"Missed again!"

"Father!" begged Sansa. "You have to do something! You have to save him!"

"He seems… fine, Lady Sansa," said Lord Baelish as Damon somehow shoved Ser Gregor into the sand and danced out of the way before the furious hulk of a man could even reach out to hit him.

Baelish leaned forward to whisper into her father's ear. "I am going to lose my one hundred gold dragons, but this… This is worth a thousand."

Each time he missed, Gregor grew angrier and angrier. His swings became more reckless and erratic, and he seemed to forget that his opponent had yet to actually strike him. Apart from knocking him off his horse, that was. That didn't count. That was a fair joust and everyone knew it.

Damon continued to taunt him, as if he were baiting one of the direwolf pups and leaping out of the way just as Gregor almost reached him. He was so beautiful and graceful, like a falcon dipping and swooping upon currents in the sky, while the Mountain became clumsier and clumsier like a tired bear being attacked by wolves on all sides. But there was only one Damon.

"Come on, Greg!" said Damon, spreading his arms wide as if exposing himself as a target. "I'm not even breaking a sweat here!" And he wasn't, while it poured down Gregor's face, making dirty tracks on his skin.

Gregor charged at him like a wild beast that had been stung by a bee. What he forgot was that the bee was, firstly, hardly a bee, and secondly, some bees were incredibly venomous.

Damon sidestepped the sword with an expression that almost embodied boredom and then, moving faster than Sansa's eye could follow, he grabbed Gregor's arm and twisted it, forcing him to release his sword. The great weapon dropped, sending up a spray of sand as it did. Gregor roared in pain and anger and the crowd roared in elation.

"Go Damon!" shouted Arya as she stood and punched the air with both fists in the most unladylike manner before their father dragged her back down into her seat. But, for once, Sansa didn't mind. If she hadn't been so well brought up, she would have done exactly the same thing. Instead, she clapped as hard as she could as her heart soared with pride.

Damon scooped up the sword. In his hand, it seemed to weigh no more than a needle. "What an incredibly… ugly sword," he said. Gregor growled at him, but a defanged dog posed no threat to anyone. He swung it experimentally. "Efficient for taking off a head, though."

"Stop this madness in the name of your king!" shouted Robert.

Gregor had the grace to stop growling, although he never stopped glaring at Damon. The younger man, on the other hand, bowed gracefully and offered Gregor's broadsword to the king. "Your Grace," he said.

"You are not a Hardy of Crackclaw Point," said Robert.
"No, Your Grace," replied Damon.

"Are you even a knight?"

"No, Your Grace."

"Only knights can win tourneys." Robert's voice was stern, as it hardly ever was. "Kneel."

Oh Seven! What was going to happen? Was Robert going to punish Damon? He couldn't! "Father, don't let him hurt Damon," Sansa begged Ned. "Please don't let the king punish him!"

"Hush hush," said Ned. "Damon can look after himself."

She wasn't sure. When King Robert took the sword from Damon, using both hands to lift it because it was so heavy, she almost screamed. Or fainted. Or both. But the blood of the wolf was stronger in her than anyone had ever thought, including herself. She remained silent, and the only sign of her fear was her vice-like grip on her father's hand.

Robert levelled the blade at the kneeling Damon. The guardsman's blue eyes gazed up at the king's brown ones. There was utter silence as the king placed the sword on Damon's shoulder, next to his neck and so close to the skin that if he had moved it any closer, he would have drawn blood. The king tapped him once on each shoulder. "Rise a knight, Ser...who in the seven hells are you?"

"Damon Salvatore," said Ned as he stood. It seemed he had finally regained his power of speech. "He is one of my men at arms. Missing since this morning."

"Not anymore, he isn't. He's one of your knights, now," said Robert. "Your only knight. Daemon...as in Daemon Blackfyre?"

"I'm getting rather sick of this Daemon Blackfyre," said Damon.

The king laughed. It started off as a low rumble at first, and then grew until it became a full-hearted guffaw. Even the queen smiled a little as she looked at Damon. How could she not? Sansa thought he had never looked as handsome in his life, with his dusty armour, helmet-messed hair, and those beautiful laughing blue eyes. And now, he was Ser Damon Salvatore. The bards' tales could not have been better.

"How did you find this one, Ned?" Robert asked.

"Actually, he found me," replied her father.

"He reminds me of me," said Robert, clapping Ned on the shoulder. "Well, if I can't joust, he can do it in my stead."

She heard them before she even saw them.

"What were you thinking?" her father was asking. He sounded angry; in fact, he sounded angrier than she had ever remembered hearing before.

"Forty thousand gold dragons is a lot of money, Lord Stark," said Damon. "Can you blame me?"

"I brought you to King's Landing to protect my household, not for you to go gallivanting off pretending to be a knight!"

"I'm not pretending, milord. I am a knight."
"Only in name," said Ned. Sansa recognized that tone. Damon was about to endure one of Eddard Stark's long-winded treatises on honour and duty and what it meant to be a knight of Winterfell even though northerners didn't actually believe in knights and Damon was the first. She'd have to have heard it one hundred times at least, and he had never even directed the speech at her before. Usually her brothers bore the brunt of it. Her father was not a very verbose man, except when it came to this topic. She had to save Damon.

"Ser Damon, congratulations," she said as she ducked inside the tent. And then she paused.

Damon wasn't wearing a shirt. She had occasionally seen her brothers shirtless before, so the shape of a man without a shirt was not completely alien to her. However, she had never found the male form to be so interesting. The muscles on his stomach were hard and sculpted. His skin was pale and smooth, and there was a trail of hair from his navel leading down to…

She blushed.

Arya bumped into her from behind and pushed past her. "You have to teach me what you did just then," she said.

"What are you girls doing here?" demanded Ned.

Wait…what? Yes, why was she here again, apart from just to see Damon? Oh, yes. "We just wanted to congratulate Ser Damon on gaining his knighthood," stammered Sansa, forcing herself to turn to her father. "Obviously, it is not an appropriate moment."

"I've seen Jon with his shirt off before," said Arya. "It looks exactly the same."

"Out, the both of you," said their father. Normally, Sansa would have argued or cajoled him into letting her stay a little longer. Mostly the latter, as she had learned long ago the power of wide eyes and sweet words and a little pout. But today, she was still so dazed from what she had seen she simply nodded and did as she was told.

Outside, she touched the white carnation she had put into her hair.

Oldstones

She needed a drink and this rain was making her hair go frizzy.

She hated frizz. It was so plebeian. Her boots sank into the mud. When would these people learn about paving the roads? It would make their economic development so much smoother. No wonder ninety-nine per cent of the population lived in poverty. Did they even know the meaning of the world 'progress'? Then again, perhaps it was an achievement for them if they didn't regress. She hoped Riverrun would be better than this, although she wasn't holding out hope that it would be like the City of Lights.

A thin column of smoke rose in the distance behind some trees with broad leaves that sheltered her somewhat from the rain. Smoke meant people, and she didn't care if they were friendly or hostile. Either way, they were edible. She pushed her way through the underbrush. The brambles and barren blackberry bushes tore at her skirts. She needed a new skirt. Preferably of silk.

The dismal looking hut didn't seem very promising at first. A few famished looking sheep huddled under the rafters. Well, if worse came to worst… She didn't want to think about it. She hadn't even liked mutton as a human. A horse shoe had been nailed to the worn wooden front door. Interesting. They had the same superstitions as medieval European commoners back in her day. She rapped on
"What?" snapped a voice inside. Definitely. Good, she was not going to have mutton tonight. The door was opened by a gnarled old shepherd who looked as if he were as old as the forest itself. A smoky dung fire filled the hovel with the scent of burnt sheep shit. But it was better than standing in the rain.

"Please, I'm lost," she said. "I'm a travelling bard and I got caught in the storm."

"Go away," said the shepherd.

"I'm cold and hungry. Won't you invite me in?" She tried to compel him, but he was too stubborn and not stupid enough.

"I said go away!" he snarled and raised his stick.

"So rude," she said. She stepped closer. Her foot went over the threshold.

Over the threshold?

Well, this was an interesting development. She tried to reach through the doorway with her hands. Nothing. No magical barrier stopping her from going inside without an invitation.

She stepped inside. It felt so good to release her fangs, like scratching an itch that had needed to be scratched a long time ago. "Like I said," she said to the now terrified shepherd. "I'm hungry."

And there was even cheese to go with her drink.

King's Landing

One more Ser Loras Tyrell to beat, and he would be the owner of forty-thousand shiny gold dragons. Hmm…perhaps he could buy himself a house. Or several. It was dusk when the time for the last joust came around. Loras Tyrell could be considered handsome, he supposed. They called him the Knight of the Flowers because of his house's sigil. Could they get any more Tudors than the rose? Although, Henry Tudor was supposed to have been very handsome.

His armour was etched with floral patterns which reminded Damon of his grandmother's good crockery. Without the pink, of course. The two of them bowed to each other and the king before taking up their lances.

"You can't carry the Hardy shield anymore," Ned had told him before the bout. He had presented him with a Stark shield; a grey snarling wolf on a white background. "Remember, you are now a knight in the service of House Stark. Do not disgrace the name."

His horse pawed at the ground, gouging deep grooves in the sand. Too late he noticed the scent of Loras' horse and that of his own mount's arousal. The trumpet had already sounded.

The stallion surged forward, all testosterone and eagerness, forgetting that he actually had a job to do. His steps were unsteady as he collided against the barrier again and again, trying to break it down with the weight of his body. The wooden barrier shook, but held. It was meant to prevent exactly that from happening. It was one thing to have knights fighting. It was another thing to have fighting horses.

The tip of Loras' lance snapped on Damon's shield. The horse, in his excitement, stumbled and
threw Damon out of the saddle. The vampire slapped the ground and rolled to his feet. He was not going to thrash about in the sand like one Gregor Clegane. The crowds cheered as Loras thundered pass.

Damon's horse rounded the corner to get to the other side of the barrier. "Go get her, boy!" he shouted to the stallion, which tried to mount Loras' mare from behind un成功fully before he was dragged away by four grooms. The crowd was laughing hard now, and even though he had lost, they cheered for him. Well, there had never been a knight with as much charm as he had. He took a bow.

Loras came to find him after the match, happy and contented now that forty thousand gold dragons were steadily making their way into his coffers. "Good fight," he said. He held out a hand to Damon, and the vampire took it. "Even if you did lose and then tried to set your horse on me."

"You cheated," said Damon, "and after all the cockteasing you did, the old boy deserved some."

"I'll admit, it was a little unfair of me, but forty thousand gold dragons is a lot, and there is no consolation prize."

Damon grinned. "Fool me once," he said.

Loras also grinned. "You know, Lord Renly holds the most magnificent balls. I heard he would be giving one soon. Perhaps you'd like to come?" he said.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," said Damon. The sun slipped completely beneath the horizon, leaving the faintest streak of purple that would fade as the night set in. The crowds, still buzzing with excitement, were beginning to disperse. Vendors packed up their stalls, their purses clinking with coppers and occasional silvers. He was going to need to go hunting tonight. Today's exertions had left him hungry. The taverns at Flea Bottom would be spilling over with travellers and drunkards no one would miss.

"I hope you know exactly what you have achieved today, my friend," said a man's voice as Damon set aside his breastplate. The younger squires and pages would polish his armour and his Stark shield. Being the newest and only member of House Salvatore, he would have to get his own sigil now. He already had one in mind.

"Lord Baelish," Damon greeted his visitor with a bow. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Well, well," said Baelish. "You have been going from strength to strength since you came here. A knighthood and the beginnings of a friendship with House Tyrell; should I begin watching my back?"

"If you can turn your head around one hundred and eighty degrees, why ever not?" asked Damon. "I mean, all the way around, that is."

Baelish laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "Come, let us celebrate your victory tonight. Drinks and other tasty things are on the house."

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**The Twins**

The stone bridge spanned the river. Its arches dipped into the swirling waters which foamed and seethed as they crashed into them. Banners depicting a much less impressive bridge flew from the parapets of the towers guarding both ends. It was wide enough to admit four horses walking abreast, and it would only take fifty men guarding the bridge to stop the onslaught of an army of
thousands.

Elijah, on the other hand, numbered just one. He had no idea how he had come to be here; only that he was here. When the men confronted him and demanded he tell them the reason he was here, he convinced them to take him to their lord, and they, intimidated by his well-spoken manner and perfect teeth as well as his calmness, did as he asked.

Walder Frey was a lecherous old man of ninety who still thought he had the sexual prowess of a man one third his age. His eyes and intellect, however, remained as sharp as they had ever been in his youth. Which was to say that neither were very keen, but they were keen enough to realize that Elijah was no ordinary wanderer.

Three thousand dollar suits tended to have that effect.

Elijah vaguely mentioned he was a traveller and a scholar, and when Frey had sneered and demanded he pay the toll to cross the bridge or be thrown in the dungeons, he calmly struck down the guards surrounding him without breaking a sweat or killing them.

"What is your price?" Frey asked him then. His crackling voice was magnified by the silence of his halls, where a hundred of his spawn surrounded him. They all feared him. Elijah could smell it on them.

"Price?" said Elijah.

"You heard me," said Frey. "Every man has a price. You're more useful than all my sons combined. So, name yours."

Elijah smiled. Money didn't matter to him, but this was a strange new world, and he had to begin somewhere. The Twins was as good a place as any.

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**The Wall**

Ser Alisser was making him fight them one by one again. Pyp eyed him warily and while the swelling on Grenn's nose had subsided, the bruising had spread beneath his eyes, making him look like a corpse that had been left to go livid. The first time Jon had seen one of those, he had struggled to keep the contents of his stomach in his stomach.

However, whereas he would have obediently and routinely beaten them in the past, he recalled Tyrion and Elena's words. These men weren't supposed to be his enemies; whether he liked it or not, they were in the Night's Watch together, and they would one day be his brothers and watch his back.

"You need to keep moving. You never want to be too predictable, and staying still is very predictable," he said to Grenn. He turned to Pyp. "You're getting better, but you still move your feet too much and not moving your sword."

He could see them still wondering why he was doing this. Ser Alisser's disapproval grew as they gradually almost forgot he was there.

The other boys, too, Jon helped and instructed until they were actually capable of some basic moves. It would take a lot more work, but since Ser Alisser seemed happy enough to not do the work required, Jon was more than happy to do it in his stead. After all, Tyrion Lannister was right. He didn't need these men as his enemies.
This was not going to end well. Sam knew that as soon as he saw the practise yards. None of the boys there looked like him. They all knew how to hold a sword and they all seemed to like hitting people. He could feel their eyes on him as he splashed his way through the puddles and got his boots thoroughly muddy. Sam had never liked the mud, and he liked hitting or getting hit even less. He didn't know what was worse; dying in a 'hunting accident' or dying by a hundred blunt practise blades. Maybe he was being a bit dramatic, but it was possible. All they had to do was hit the right spot. Or just hit him a lot.

Sam didn't want to die.

He took a deep breath when Ser Alisser told him to tell the boys his name. The cold of the air on the Wall actually hurt, and despite the cumbersome armour he wore, he felt wholly exposed and vulnerable.

"Samwell Tarly, of Horn Hill," he mumbled.

"What was that?" said Ser Alisser. "Louder!"

Sam shrunk back. He didn't like sudden loud noises either.

"Samwell Tarly, of Horn Hill," he repeated a little louder this time. He finally looked up at the faces all staring at him. They bore incredulity, pity, and glee. That last one was the worst. "I mean, I was of Horn Hill, but I−" He stopped himself. They didn't need to hear the whole story. From their faces, they probably didn't want to. "I've come to take the black."

There was a snort from one of the boys. Sam didn't know which and he didn't care to. Perhaps a hunting accident would have been easier. A flash of pain, and he would have simply ceased to exist.

But Sam didn't want to die.

"You mean you've come to take the black puddin'?" laughed one of the others. It wasn't fair. He didn't even like black pudding, and the other man wasn't that much thinner, although he could hold a sword better. Sam could count the number of times he'd held a sword on one hand.

"Rast, see what he can do," said Ser Alisser. Well, at least he could put one more name to one more face, not that it did him any good. No matter what they were called, they could kill him with one hand and blindfolded. He didn't really need to know the name of his killer.

It was as if someone had frozen him when Rast charged, sword raised. He didn't know how it happened, but his sword somehow slipped from his hand. He fell back when Rast struck his chest plate.

"I yield!" he cried.

"Get up and hit him!" shouted Ser Alisser somewhere in the far distance. All he could see were boots and more boots surrounding him. Sam just wanted to get away. Somehow. The muddy flagstones were cold and slippery beneath him. He tried to move, but his knees seemed to lack the strength. Rast continued to hit him again and again and again and again.

He. Was. Dead.
Serendipity

Chapter Summary

Jon discovers a shocking secret. Sam gets the help he needs. Benjen returns. Edmure Tully makes a friend.

The Wall

Jon could stand it no longer.

"Enough!" he said. There was training, and then there was just pointless cruelty. The boy from Horn Hill had probably never actually held a sword in his life. Elena was wrong; not all lords' sons had the benefit of learning from masters-at-arms like Ser Rodrik from the age of eight or five. "He yielded, Rast." The rapist glared at him, but as Grenn and Pyp closed in, he stepped away from the cowering boy. He knew he couldn't beat Jon alone, let alone all three of them at once.

Jon hauled Tarly to his feet. Ser Alisser smirked. "Well, well," he said. "Looks like the bastard's in love."

Jon had to remind himself to not react. He was illegitimate, and if Tyrion Lannister could own a name like 'the dwarf' or 'the Imp', he could own the name 'bastard'. The fault and dishonour, after all, were not his.

"You'd best get ready to defend your Lady Piggy," said Ser Alisser. He turned to the remaining three. "You three ought to be sufficient to make the pig squeal. All you have to do is get past the bastard." There was one thing to be said for Ser Alisser. He didn't vary his insults very much. "Lady Piggy" was the highest point his creativity had ever reached.

Grenn visibly grimaced at the thought of having to fight Jon when the latter was on a mission, no matter how pointless said mission seemed. But he had no choice. Ser Alisser ruled this little kingdom of recruits with a hard fist. They had to do as he commanded.

Rast lingered behind as Grenn and Pyp rushed at Jon. At the last moment, Pyp hesitated, leaving Grenn to face him alone, not that it stayed that way for long. Metal clashed as Jon blocked the strike and forced Grenn's weapon to the side where it would be out of the way and useless before shoving his elbow into his chest and forcing him backwards. Pyp charged. The slighter man was better at dodging Jon, and it took another two exchanges before he, too, staggered back. As he did so, Rast saw his chance to strike Jon from behind. He did not hold back; all his hatred and disdain was put into that one blow. His only regret was probably that it had not been a real sword. Jon grunted and then swung around to engage him, kneeing him again and again in the stomach before he fell to the ground in a heap, much like the Tarly boy a few moments ago. He might have missed the stomach a few times and struck lower accidentally. His aim couldn't possibly be that accurate.

Ser Alisser scoffed at their efforts. "You think you can protect him? He'll be watching your back out there, and a fat lot of good that'll do you."

"I saw what happened," said Elena. Jon looked up from sorting through the pile of sweaty practise
armour and setting aside the pieces that needed repairing or replacing. It was mind-numbing work, leaving him plenty of space to think. Only, he didn't really want to think. The future held too many possibilities; too many uncertainties. "It's a brave thing that you did, defending that boy."

"And a lot of good that will do him once we're out there in the wilds," said Jon.

"He doesn't ever have to set foot beyond the Wall," said Elena. "There are plenty of mundane tasks that need doing. God knows I see more than enough of them." She paused.

"What is it, Elena?" he asked. "You didn't come here just to talk to me about Tarly, did you?"

"It's going to sound stupid," she said.

He laughed. "I spent a whole morning with Ser Alisser and Rast. I think I can handle it."

"I was wondering if you could teach me how to use a sword," she said.

It was his turn to be silent. "Why?"

"I thought it would be useful to know," she said. "This is a dangerous place, and you're a good teacher. I mean, we'd have to do it in secret, of course, and it would take up your time...never mind. I'm sure-"

Jon reached out to catch her arm. "I'd be more than happy to," he said.

"Really?" Her eyes lit up. "There's a courtyard behind the kitchens. No one ever goes there after dark."

"Tonight, as the moon rises," he said. It might not be dishonourable or against the rules of the Watch, but somehow, it seemed deliciously forbidden.

The moon peeked out from behind the clouds like a great pale eye, surveying everything in its silver gaze. Nothing escaped it; not the man watching on the Wall, not the brothers sneaking off to Mole's Town to dig for 'treasure'—read: whoring—and certainly not the young recruit trying to dart from shadow to shadow from the sleeping quarters to the kitchens, with a white wolf trailing him.

But the moon had seen thousands upon thousands of years of secrets and it had never betrayed a single one of them, so Jon felt safe.

The courtyard behind the kitchens was usually used for offloading goods coming north to the Wall. Crates were stacked by the side next to the storage sheds, ready for re-use if necessary. Most of the time, they ended up as emergency firewood. Dark lichen sprouted up from the cracks between the flagstones. At first, Jon couldn't see Elena, but in the silence of the night, he heard her breathing, and as he looked around, he found her hanging by her fingers from the door frame of one of the storage sheds and pulling herself up again and again. It seemed to be some sort of uncomfortable and odd exercise.

When she saw him, she dropped down. "Hey," she greeted him. She greeted Ghost much more enthusiastically as the wolf bounded up to her. *He* knew who was in charge of all the meaty bones and the animal knew exactly how to get one.

"Sorry, boy, no bones tonight," she said as she ruffled his ears as if he were a dog.

The first thing Jon noticed that was different about her than during the day was the usual twist she
wore her hair in was gone. She'd tied her hair up with a leather thong tightly at the top of her head, letting the gathered strands hang down like the tail of a horse, but in a much prettier manner.

The second thing he noticed was that she was wearing a leather jerkin and an ill-fitting quilted gambeson like the boys usually wore when they were practising, but in her case, it only drew attention to her womanly curves and made him wonder about what she looked like without all these bulky layers.

Dammit! Honourable men didn't think about such things!

"I brought the swords and armour," he said. He sounded pathetic, like a little boy who was too scared to speak because he liked a girl.

"Great," she said. "Um…shall we start?"

Starting seemed like a good idea.

He helped her tie on the cumbersome armour and handed her one of the two practise swords. It looked awfully big compared to her, but there was something very alluring about a pretty girl trying to hold a sword.

"Now, try to hit me–Ow!"

She'd struck him on the leg before he'd even finished his sentence. A woman who showed no uncertainty; he liked that.

"I'm sorry−" she began, but before she could finish, he lunged. She dodged, and he barely maintained his balance as she hooked her foot around his leg and tried to pull it out from beneath him. She was fast, and there was something very familiar about her fighting style, although he just couldn't remember where he'd seen it before.

Well, at least he knew she was more than capable of hitting –although he'd known that already. That was a better start than Tarly ever had.

"Your grip on your sword is too tight," he said after they had exchanged a number of blows and parries. Her technique was far from excellent, but somehow he only got a few hits in because she was so damn fast. No matter how much he sped up or slowed down, she could always keep up with him or simply dance out of the way. And her flexibility was phenomenal, achieving moves that most normal men wouldn't have. At least not without dislocating a limb. Not that she managed to hit him now that he was blocking her blows. She wasn't quite that good yet.

He set aside his sword and moved behind her, with his arms on either side of her body, to help her correct her stance and reposition her hands on the hilt. "You want your grip to be secure, but not so tight that you are stiffening your wrists. They need to move. Think of a sword as being an extension of yourself. It's part of you."

He was leaning in so close that her hair brushed his cheek. It really was as soft as he had imagined it to be, and he took the chance to breathe in her scent of wood smoke and something entirely alien; something soft and feminine. He moved with her as she swung the sword, guiding her movements as she went through the different sets of moves Ser Rodrik had taught him and Robb when they had been boys.

"You're doing well," he said once they'd gone through all the sets. "Now, remembering what I've taught you, try to hit me after I finish speaking."
"Are you done now?"

"You just want to hit me, don't you?"

"I have to say there's something very entertaining about it."

They exchanged a few more passes. Elena was a quicker learner than most, and her speed worked to her advantage.

"Are you sure you've never held a sword before?" he asked.

"The only time I'd ever held one was when I was bringing stray practise swords back to the armoury," she said. "You have no idea how they seem to grow legs and go wandering."

"Well, I'll let you in on a secret, so long as you don't tell anyone I said it," he said. "You fight better than many of the men."

"Really?" She turned around. "You're not just saying that because I'm actually crap and you want me to feel better, are you?"

"Have you ever heard me dole out undeserved praise?" he asked.

"You're not a bad teacher, you know, Jon Snow," she said. That smile made spending a night out in the cold and missing out on sleep and dirty banter completely worth it. "All joking aside, thank you. I don't know of anyone else here who would give up their evenings and nights to teach me sword-fighting. If you ever need my help, just ask. I'll do what I can."

Jon thought for a moment. "Well, there is something you can do for me," he began.

Sam groaned as he sank onto the hard narrow cot that served for a bed for recruits. His bones ached. His joints ached. His muscles ached. Even his stomach ached after a less than satisfactory meal when Rast had taken his oatcake. He closed his eyes and prepared to go to sleep. Why couldn't they have mattresses? After all, straw wasn't all that expensive. Perhaps he should just go sleep in the stables. The horses had straw.

"Sam," said Jon.

He sat up immediately. Was someone actually talking to him? He knew Jon had been trying to look after him in his own way, but he'd never actually spoken to him before outside of practise. Jon stood above him, his eyes dark and unreadable. "What, what?" asked Sam as he began to panic. He didn't know why. After all, Jon would never hurt him.

Would he?

"Come with me," he said.

Sam hesitated, but he desperately wanted to be Jon's friend. He was so good at everything. Everyone respected him, or at least were afraid of him, and he wasn't afraid of anyone or anything, not even Ser Alisser. So he followed Jon as the other boy led him through the maze that was Castle Black, keeping to the shadows all the time with his wolf trailing behind. The animal made Sam nervous too, but he was too scared to say anything about it.

Samwell Tarly was a coward.

"Where are we going?" he whispered to Jon as the two of them peered around the corner to make
sure no one saw them. He kept a tight grip on the three practise swords and the three suits of practise armour Jon had made him fetch.

"You'll see," said Jon.

Sam slowly realized that they were heading for the kitchens in the most roundabout way possible. Jon liked midnight snacks? Who knew? And who knew one could get midnight snacks on the Wall? But then, Jon seemed to get along very well with the second cook; the pretty one. The girl.

When he had first come to the Wall, he had never thought he would ever see a girl again. He had been quite sad about it. But then he saw her; a glorious vision appearing from the steam of the kitchens, ladling out stew for the hungry and tired recruits. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen from a distance. He'd never actually seen her up close because he was always too afraid to look up when she was around, much less say anything to her. It was as if his throat dried at the very sight of her.

They finally came to a courtyard hidden behind the kitchens. A lone sack of something hung from the winch used to haul large animal carcasses up into the air so their blood could be drained for blood sausages.

"There you are," said Elena, emerging from the shadows. "I thought you weren't coming."

"I said I'd come," said Jon as he took the swords and armour from Sam and handed one set to the girl. Sam simply looked at the ground. Wasn't it interesting how the lichen looked in the cracks in the stone?

"You're Samwell, right?" said Elena. Oh dear seven! She was talking to him! Girls didn't talk to him, apart from his mother, and she didn't count. Gods, gods, gods, gods, what was he supposed to do?

Jon nudged him.

"SamwellImeanyesmynameisSamwell," he blurted out.

"I think he means to say, yes, his name is Samwell," Jon translated.

Sam nodded. It seemed like a safe thing to do, and he was capable of doing that much at least.

"Don't be mean, Jon," said Elena.

"I wasn't!" protested Jon half-heartedly. Jon could as mean as he liked. At least he could do all the talking and Sam could continue examining the lichen. Was it just him, or did the lichen look like thousands of tiny little swords all stuck together?

"I don't think we've been properly introduced," Elena continued, ignoring Jon for the meantime. "I'm Elena Gilbert."

"I don't know how to talk to girls," Sam mumbled. He thought he'd said it too softly for anyone to be able to hear him, but Elena chuckled.

"It's just like talking to boys," she said. "Air comes up through your voice box, you make sounds, and your lips move to shape those sounds into syllables which you then combine to form words… you get the idea."

"He doesn't know how to talk to boys either," whispered Jon so loudly that everyone could hear
him.

Hey! That wasn't fair! "I talk to you," he said, finally looking up at Jon. And then he looked right back down because both Elena and Jon were looking at him. Jon thrust a sword and a set of armour at him.

"Suit up," he said. "We are going to make you into a brother of the Night's Watch."

His breath sounded harsh even to his own ears. The cold air burned as it went down. His heart was hammering in his chest so loudly he felt as if it would burst out through his ribs at any minute. He swallowed as he clenched his fists and confronted his opponent's blank face.

"I don't like hitting things," said Sam.

"Just hit the damn sandbag, Sam," said Jon. "It doesn't have feelings!"

Obviously it did, because the sandbag hit back harder than he did.

His stomach burned. He couldn't breathe; not really. It was as if there was a great weight crushing him and he was fighting futilely against it.

"You can do it, Sam!" called Elena. "Just pull yourself up into a sitting position. That's it! That's it! You're almost there!"

Sam fell back flat onto his back. The moon and stars were probably all laughing. Jon certainly was.

They had to know what was going on. Pyp pretended not to notice as Jon and Sam sneaked outside. As if Sam could sneak. Although, lately, he had seemed much improved and Pyp wasn't sure that it had anything to do with them threatening to have Jon's wolf bite off certain parts of Rast's anatomy in the middle of the night if he didn't leave Sam alone. After all, that would not account for Tarly suddenly growing a set of his own. Why, he'd even threatened to hit Rast in the practise yards today if he didn't stop calling him 'Lady Piggy', and then he'd actually gone through with the threat. It wasn't a bad punch either; a quick jab, short and sharp. It had certainly stunned the lot of them into silence.

He nudged Grenn's leg beneath the table and the two of them followed Jon and Sam. It was hard to see outside. It had begun to snow, and the Night's Watch didn't have the budget to light the necessary lanterns. Most brothers carried their own torches if they wanted to wander outside after dark. Of course, the brothers sneaking off to Mole's Town never did, for obvious reasons. Sam and Jon hadn't been carrying a torch either. Were they sneaking off to Mole's Town? Well, if they were, then Jon had a lot of explaining to do. Why didn't he bring him and Grenn as well?

However, the two seemed to be creeping towards the kitchens. Typical Sam. But why was Jon going there?

Grenn bumped into him from behind and they almost fell down in a heap on the flagstones which were slowly becoming white. They found their balance just in time. Even if Jon didn't hear them, Ghost would.

Jon and Sam went behind the kitchens into the courtyard where goods were offloaded. Sam was beginning to grumble about why he had to come even though it was snowing and no one with one ounce of sense would train in the middle of a storm. Then they heard her voice. They just had to
Sam continued to punch the sandbag in the background while they had their own lesson. Their practise swords had long been abandoned as they faced each other in the moonlight.

"One step forward, one step back," Jon was saying to Elena as he guided her through the moves.

Elena giggled as she stepped on his feet again. "God, I'm a terrible dancer," she said.

"I'm not disputing that," said Jon. "And again."

There were no lights save for one dim lantern, and no music save for their voices and the sound of the wind, but somehow there was more beauty in this bumbling dance than any of the feasts Jon had been to. He certainly enjoyed this dance more than any other. Elena's eyes shone, and she probably didn't know it, but she was biting her bottom lip in concentration. It did something to Jon, even though he wasn't exactly sure what it was that it did.

Without realizing he was doing it, he reached out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Elena's ear. It did no good, as the wind was howling and determined to blow her hair out of place. They didn't say anything to one another. He simply smiled. "Shall we start again?"

"My goodness, Jon Snow," said a voice that really oughtn't be here. "You certainly have done well for yourself."

"Pyp, Grenn," said Jon. He turned around slowly to face them. "What are you doing here?"

"I would ask you the same thing," said Pyp.

"We're training," Sam panted as he came over. His hands were wrapped in bandages and the sandbag he'd been hitting was still swaying. "Well, I'm training, and they're dancing. I've never seen such bad dancing in my life."

"Training," Grenn repeated, looking at Elena and seeming a little dazed.

"Yes, Grenn, training," said Jon. "There's nothing against that, is there? In fact, now that you're here…" He turned to Elena. "Mistress Elena, I am intrigued by your unarmed combat methods and I have no doubt that we would benefit from some instruction."

"You want me to teach you to fight?" said Elena.

"Would you not be willing to do so?" asked Jon. "After all, I have been training you in the art of the sword."

"Fine, since you asked so nicely," she said as she rolled her eyes.

The snow had stopped when Benjen Stark rode through the portcullis of Castle Black, more dead than alive. Behind him, being dragged on a makeshift sleigh, were the bodies of Othor and Jafer Flowers, two of the other rangers he had ridden out with.

Jon pushed past the crowds of brothers who had gathered around as Benjen was being helped off his horse. "Uncle Benjen!"

"What's he talking about?" Jon asked Yoren, probably the only person who would answer him.

"He's been saying that ever since he rode through those gates," said Yoren. "They say the cold and the dark, it sometimes does something to your head."

"Blue ice," whispered Benjen. "Cold." His skin was almost the colour of snow and he shook. Mormont ordered him to be taken to the infirmary. Jon followed, but was stopped at the door by the Lord Commander himself.

"He's in capable hands, Snow," he said. "Maester Aemon will take care of him." He turned to Elena. "The maester has asked for your assistance."

"Of course," she said, and then she, too, disappeared inside the dark confines of the infirmary, where even the roaring fire in the hearth could not completely banish the chill emanating from within.

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**The Riverlands**

Spears of grass gleamed silver in the moonlight by the side of the road. Her feet made little imprint in the dirt, which had been packed down by centuries of hooves and feet and wheels. Horses' hooves thundered down the road, drawing closer and closer. Riders at this hour? She kept walking. They would catch up to her sooner or later, and she wasn't afraid. If they were hostiles, she'd take care of them. If they were friendly…

Well, she liked having friends.

She glanced backwards as the riders came around the corner, banners flying. Trout. Tully men. Their armour gleamed and it was well made. Certainly not just Tully soldiers, then.

They made to ride past her, but then the lead rider reined in his horse.

"It is a rather late hour to be wandering the roads, mistress, is it not?" he asked. His copper hair, now greying, was beginning to recede.

"But with lords such as yourself patrolling them, surely the roads would be safe regardless of the hour, Ser?" she said.

"You have the honour of speaking to Lord Edmure, of House Tully," he corrected her. "But you are correct. No bandit would ever be brazen enough to accost travellers this close to Riverrun."

She curtseyed to him. Lord Edmure Tully? Hmm…he was a little weathered for her taste –she liked smooth skin— and she couldn't exactly eat him because then she'd have to kill him and all his men. Right now, it would not benefit her to draw attention to her existence by killing important lords. "Are you trying to frighten me, my lord, with all this talk of bandits?" she asked.

"Well, we cannot have that, my la—mistress. If you desire it, mayhap you could accompany myself and my men back to the city? For your own safety."

"Thank you for your kind offer, my lord, but seeing as you are on horseback, I am afraid I would only slow you down."

"Have no fear, mistress, for I have a spare horse," he said. He motioned for his squire to dismount. The boy did so with a scowl in her direction. She smiled prettily and allowed him to lift her onto the horse's back. She sat side-saddle, even though the saddle wasn't made for it. But no proper lady
would straddle a horse. Not like the way she would straddle a man.

Edmure looked her up and down appreciatively as he fully took in her appearance for the first time. He seemed a little dazed. Men usually were by her beauty. "Is it safe to sit thus on a horse?" he asked.

"I have had some experience with horses," she replied. "My skirts do not allow me to ride properly."

"We will go slowly, then," he said.

Had she ever mentioned she loved chivalry?

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**The Wall**

She came and found him on the battlements at night, keeping watch over the vast blackness below. The wind had picked up again, and little twisters of snow formed along the length of the Wall every now and then before disappearing as suddenly as they had come into existence. They weren't very different from the lives of men, really. The Wall had seen eight thousand years. How many men must it have seen come and go? Their lifespans must seem to it as the snow twisters seemed to him.

"He's sleeping now," said Elena as she came to stand beside Jon. "Maester Aemon says he should recover in the next few weeks. Apart from the cold and lack of nourishment, he seems fine. There were no injuries that we could find apart from a few fading bruises."

"He wasn't fine, Elena," said Jon. "I've never seen him like this before. This is Benjen we're talking about. He's not afraid. Not like this."

"Maybe he simply never let you see him afraid," said Elena. "Parents do that."

"He's not my parent," said Jon.

"They don't have to actually have taken part in creating you to be your parent," said Elena. "He might as well be just another father to you."

"We've known each other for a little more than a month, and yet there seems to be nothing I can hide from you," said Jon. He finally turned to face her. "And sometimes, I don't think I want to—"

He didn't get to finish. Ghost began to snarl.

The howl on the wind was most definitely *not* the wind.

From the dark haze a white figure emerged. It was more like an outline of a man than a man, and the only feature Jon could make out was its glowing blue eyes.

He unsheathed his sword. "Get back behind me, Elena!" he shouted. The figure charged. Jon thrust his sword into Jafer's stomach, but it did absolutely nothing to deter him. The man, if he could still be called that, wrapped his fingers about Jon's neck and slammed his head onto the stone. Stars burst in his vision. Jafer was so strong. His fingers were slowly crushing Jon's windpipe and nothing he did could dislodge the man's icy grip.

And then Jafer released him. He saw a shadow pass before his eyes and the ice-man was bowled over. Jon scrambled to his feet only to see Elena lunge at Jafer. Her back was to him, but he knew,
at that moment.

He knew she was no mortal woman.

Jafer charged at her, but she was faster and stronger. Dodging his icy outstretched hand with movements so fast that she just seemed like a blur, she wrenched his arm behind his back. As she did so, she turned around so Jon could see her face.

That face.

Gone were the soft beauty and the large shining eyes. Instead, her eyes had become pools of black. Her veins, like cracks in marble, were showing prominently around them.

And her teeth.

She sank her fangs into Jafer's neck. One hand kept a hold of his arm as the other reached beneath his chin.

And then tore his head off. Just like that. The head rolled a few feet and stopped; the eyes were still blue and glowing and the mouth agape in a silent roar or scream. It was hard to tell what it was trying to do now that it was separated from the voice box.

The body staggered about. Jon snatched up the charcoal brazier with his bare hands, not caring if he got burned or not, and flung it at still moving but headless and harmless wight. As the body became ash, the eyes ceased to glow. He threw the head into the flames anyway, just in case.

And then he turned to Elena; beautiful, dangerous, otherworldly Elena. At that moment, everything made sense. Dracula, the beast in Winterfell, Damon's stories…

"You're a...you're a...a vampire," he whispered. "You're Damon's Elena!"
Love in the Time of Winter

Chapter Summary

Jon says goodbye. Damon plays with dangerous animals. Elena heads out into the world. And Hoster Tully gets an excellent idea.

The Wall

The uproar died down by the time the sky lightened and night slowly turned into day. Not that it made any difference, as it was almost always dark on the Wall, and no one had gotten any sleep anyway. While Elena and Jon had dealt with Jafer, the wight of Othor had attacked the sleeping quarters and slaughtered a dozen brothers before he was finally brought down, cut to pieces and then thrown into the flames to burn.

The legends, the bedtime stories, wights and dragons, walkers and vampires, the old tales and the new; they were all true. Jon couldn't believe it had all been before his eyes and he simply hadn't seen. How blind had he been anyway?

He made Elena him everything about how she wasn't even of Westeros –that, he had guessed, but he'd thought she was from some city in Essos or something like that– and how she had come to be at the Wall. It had all seemed to be a fortuitous accident that she had been here to meet him while Damon had ended up in Winterfell, where Bonnie, who was a witch, had been able to use his blood to brew the potion that saved Bran. What were the gods playing at? Or were they simply moving the pieces about the board and laughing at them as they stumbled around with no sense of direction and no idea what was going on?

"So…everything Damon ever told me, about vampires and about himself; everything was a lie," he finally stated flatly when Elena finished her story. "He convinced me to tuck garlic into every corner of Winterfell while he must have been laughing his head off behind my back. That bastard."

"I do believe he was perfectly legitimate," said Elena. "Not that it did much for his personality."

"Yet…you love him anyway." He couldn't have her. She was Damon's Elena.

"It's complicated," said Elena. "I have feelings for him, but… He sent me away, Jon, and even I don't know whether my feelings for him are because I actually care or because of the sire bond."

"You should go to him," he said. "He's in King's Landing with my father."

"Maybe. In time," said Elena. She covered his hand with hers. "Not yet. I'm not ready."

"Elena…" He leaned towards her, seemingly against his own will and better judgement. But she'd said it was 'complicated', hadn't she? And she wasn't really with Damon right now. She could be with him if she'd wanted to be with him, but she wasn't. She was here with Jon Snow. So…did that mean…

Her eyes darkened, and her fangs extended slowly as the two of them drew closer.

"I'm sorry," she said as she pulled away. "I just…need to feed."
He caught her hand. "Here," he said. He rolled up his sleeve to expose his wrist.

"Jon, I can't—"

"Why not? Damon bit Robb." Oh yes, now that would be a sight to see if he ever got to tell Robb that it had been Damon who had attacked him that night. And then Damon had convinced them to send Damon to hunt Damon. It was positively Damonic.

Jon offered his wrist to Elena. "I'm not afraid," he said. And he wasn't. If she'd wanted to hurt him, she could have done it a long time ago. "I want to see the real you."

"I'm still me. Vampire is just one aspect."

"I want to see all your aspects, Elena."

She took his wrist shyly. He reached out to touch her mouth as her face changed and her fangs extended. How was it possible? He didn't understand any of it, yet it was right here before his eyes. How could something so terrible as a blood-drinking undead being be so alluring and beautiful at the same time? Instead of feeling repulsed, he just wanted to know more about her. He wanted to know everything. Yes, her saving his life probably had something to do with it.

He sucked in a breath as her fangs sank into his wrist. It hurt, but not as much as it ought to. There was something very intimate about blood-sharing. Then she suddenly pushed him back as she retched, bringing up the mouthfuls of blood she'd just consumed. It dribbled down her chin and onto the front of her tunic. "It burns," she gasped. "It's burning!"

When Aemon finally emerged from Elena's quarters, he assured Jon she was going to be fine. "It is a curious reaction," he said. "But it's not the first time it has happened, and ultimately it did her no harm."

"But why would she react like that?" asked Jon. "There was...another vampire in Winterfell. He drank from my brother. That never happened to him."

"I am not certain," said Aemon. "But could it be possible..." His blind eyes stared into the distance, into the past.

"What is it, Maester?" asked Jon.

"Never mind," said Aemon as he patted Jon's hand. "You should rest. I heard you fought bravely against the wight."

"Elena did most of the work. I simply threw fire at it," said Jon.

"How?"

Jon explained to Aemon exactly how he'd snatched up the charcoal brazier and how the body had turned to ash almost instantly. Aemon reached for his hand and touched the palm. There were no blisters; not even the slightest sign of a burn. Jon had simply assumed he hadn't touched the brazier for long enough.

"Could it be?" Aemon whispered, and Jon had the sense that he wasn't really talking about the wight.
King's Landing

The mystery of the boring book remained that; a mystery. Despite listening in on Ned murmuring to himself while flicking through the bone dry pages –there was something to be said for lying on the roof; no one ever looked up, and one felt quite alone and invincible so high up. Maybe Bran had been onto something– and going along with him whenever he went to visit that overpriced armourer, Damon still couldn't see what the big deal was.

So what if the armourer's apprentice was Robert's bastard? The man probably had several hundred judging by the way he went at it. What was so special about this one apart from the overpriced armour he made? It wasn't as if he could amount to anything. One, he couldn't read, and two, Cersei would never ever let one of her husband's bastards supersede her legitimate children.

And Gendry Waters' bull helmet? So Conan the Barbarian.

Being a knight meant his life settled into the new normal after the furore and the excitement of the tournament had passed and people went back to their mundane and trivial little lives. He was still a guardsman for the Starks, albeit one with his own sigil now.

He'd chosen the raven. So what if it was the Westerosian equivalent of a carrier pigeon? He'd had a pet raven once, before he'd eaten it. One did what one had to do to survive. So now, in honour of his murdered bird, he wore a black raven on a red background. For the blood, of course. There was no Damon Salvatore without blood.

There were some differences in his life now. For one, he frequented Baelish's brothel a lot, sometimes for a little something on the side, but mostly to eavesdrop.

In fact, he'd been there when his new squire, some hapless boy whose name he constantly forgot – Burt? Kurt? He alternated between the two to keep things interesting– had come in with a message from the Queen. It had taken him several minutes to actually convey it. All the sex around him and the fact that one of the Queen's servants had approached him had deprived him of what little speech ability he'd had in the first place.

Damon extracted himself from the attentions of two of Baelish's lovely ladies –and reluctantly pulled himself away from the rather inane, but possibly important, conversation Grand Maester Pycelle was having with a whore next door. "Come again?" he said to Burt-Kurt.

"Th-the-the Queen..." said Burt-Kurt.

The vampire rolled his eyes. The squire hadn't been his choice. Ned had probably chosen him to dampen his style. "That'll be all, ladies," he said to the girls as he threw a couple of coins at them. They'd been amateurs. Seriously, Petyr needed to up his style. What about a little pole dancing? They reluctantly left after fluttering their eyelashes at him a little more, enticing him to come back to them with more coin.

"Give it here." He held out his hand to his squire, who silently handed over the note. His eyes were already wandering, following the girls' retreating backsides. Poor thing was probably still a virgin.

The note was written in a lovely neat hand and sealed with Cersei's own red wax seal depicting a lion.

She'd invited him to lunch with her tomorrow. Just as well he'd already sent the design for a tuxedo to the tailor. He was going to need that.
This was the man she'd envisaged she'd marry when she'd been a girl. And now, he appeared like a vision amongst the hedges and the roses of the gardens, wearing the strangest jacket she had ever seen. She rather liked it. Its sharp lines emphasized his narrow waist and proportionately broad shoulders; the very vision of youth and invincibility. As it had been with the first time she had ever seen him, it was his smile that drew her in.

"Your Grace, you look positively radiant," said Damon as he kissed the back of her hand. He let his lips linger as he glanced up at her with those piercing blue eyes of his. Such beautiful eyes. Such a beautiful man. She'd own him one day.

"Ser Salvatore," said Cersei. She did not rise from her seat as she indicated the chair opposite her. Between them lay a spread of some of the best delicacies the Red Keep's kitchens had to offer. A servant moved to serve them, but Damon intervened.

"Allow me," he said. The knife became an artist's tool in his deft hands as he sliced the meat and offered her the choicest cuts.

"I must say, Your Grace, I am honoured that you even know my name," he said.

"The whole city knows you, Damon—May I call you Damon?" she said. She took up her goblet and sipped at the chilled wine.

"That's my name," said Damon.

"No man dares to talk to me like that," said Cersei. No man except Jaime, but he was different.

"Maybe it's time someone did, Your Grace," said the knight. "It must be boring to be surrounded by the simpering and bowing and the little flatteries that don't mean anything."

"Are you professing to be different from all the other courtiers I have ever met?" said Cersei. "They number more than the stars."

"I am not professing to be different. I am different."

For a moment, Cersei forgot she was queen. She forgot the bitter years spent with Robert living in the shadow of a dead girl. She could look into his eyes forever—she shook herself out of it. Salvatore was a mere knight, and a Stark knight at that, although he was nothing like those uncouth northerners. He was much too handsome, much too intelligent, much too ambitious. His phenomenal rise from nobody to knight proved that. She invited him to walk with her through the gardens while the servants cleared away the dishes.

"I remember when you sang for us in Winterfell," said Cersei. "I thought you insolent then, but I couldn't help but watch you. And I'd always wondered what manner of man would sing such a song in front of my husband."

She faced him. "I admire you, Damon," she said. "I want us to be friends."

"I like having friends, Your Grace," said Damon. His smile was innocent. Too innocent.

"But I hope you will choose your friends wisely," said Cersei. He would be hers. One day. Soon.

So Cersei wanted to be friends, did she? Unfortunately for her, Damon chose his friends very carefully, just as she'd advised him, and as far as he was concerned, he could throw her further than he could trust her. A woman like Cersei Lannister didn't have friends. She had minions
and allies.

However, he wasn't about to say no to her face. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Shakespeare had written those immortal words more than two centuries before Damon's birth, and they were as relevant now as they had been then. And Cersei had been scorned far too much already by her husband. One only had to see the way she indulged Joffrey's little whims to see a glimpse of her true nature. Only a woman who craved love would indulge him like that. Only a woman with no scruples would be able to love him. Perhaps they ought to modify Shakespeare's words just a little.

After all, hell hath no fury like a Lannister scorned.

He was intercepted by Ned's household guard as soon as he stepped through the front door, having been summoned by the Hand. Damn Baelish. Did he have to tell him? Given the choice, Damon wouldn't have let Ned know at all. God knew he was about the only man in the city with no spies running about being his eyes and ears. And he needed someone to do that for him. Who better than a vampire that saw and heard everything?

Ned was in his study, paging through the boring book and tapping its yellowed pages with his finger. He slammed the book shut when Damon came in and closed the door behind him. There would be speculation as to what happened behind this door this afternoon, and all the eyes and ears that were watching in the Tower of the Hand would be passing on this little titbit as if it were second-hand smoke. Cersei would hear of it, no doubt, but he could always say he was gaining Ned's trust. While not entirely false, it ought to be ambiguous enough for Cersei to think that Damon Salvatore wanted to be her minion. As if that could ever happen.

"What did the queen want with you?" asked Ned. His voice was falsely calm and his grey eyes flashed dangerously. Well, as dangerous as Ned Stark's eyes could ever be. Robb was about a thousand times better at that whole flashing eyes thing. Maybe it was the baby blues.

"She wanted my delightful company and my friendship, my lord," replied Damon. He leaned closer towards Ned's desk to get a glimpse of the book. Did Ned use bookmarks? "I'm sure you understand what that infers."

Ned rubbed a hand over his tired face. "And what did you say?"

"Only that I liked having friends," replied Damon.

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Ned.

"I only said I liked having friends. I never said I was her friend." He sighed. Did he really have to be so direct? Robb would have understood. Then again, Ned was hardly Robb. "Look, Varys has his little birds, Littlefinger has his—well, fingers, I suppose—" Ned looked at him oddly. "—and the queen has her…everything else. You're the only one in this city running around blind, deaf and dumb." Ned frowned and gripped his desk a little tighter than he should have. Apparently, Lord Stark did not enjoy having his flaws pointed out to him. Damon ignored that. No pain, no gain, and all medicine tasted bitter. He leaned in closer.

"Bottom line, you need to stick your nose in places where they don't belong, and since the queen likes me as much as she is capable of liking anyone…"

The two men stared at one another, Ned critically analysing, and Damon just enjoying watching his face as the wheels and cogs churned in his mind while he wondered whether he could trust him. Ned's fingers continued to tap against the book. Did he always do that when he was thinking hard?
Damon hadn't noticed it before.

"I took you in against my better judgement when you had nowhere else to go," said Ned. "You may be a knight now, but you are still my knight."

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**Riverrun**

She plucked the harp string with her finger to test its sound; perfectly clear and pure like the sound of metal hitting glass, as it ought to be, and in tune too. Then again, she would never let a harp go out of tune. The halls of Riverrun were high and vaulted, with good resonance, making for an excellent auditorium. From the inside, the roof resembled the ribcage of some giant animal, as if she were Jonah in the whale’s belly.

Oil lamps hung from the rafters, and in the centre was a large iron chandelier which illuminated the centre table where the lords sat discussing matters which were, supposedly, too complicated for her womanly mind to understand.

Edmure Tully had invited her to play for him and his father and uncle during their dinner. "Dinner is merely an excuse to discuss matters of state," Edmure had said. "They are terribly tedious, but some music would improve my situation to no end. I have always liked music, but it is not seemly for the heir of Riverrun to learn to play an instrument. Indeed, my father does not like it when I invite bards into our halls. He seems to forget that Rhaegar Targaryen was a great statesman, warrior, and musician."

"Then why invite me, my lord?" she had asked.

"Do you always do as you are told?" he had asked in return. She had simply smiled at him. What obedient little girl would go wandering about the back roads of Westeros, after all?

The city of Riverrun was prosperous. Water surrounded it on three sides. If they flooded the moat in the front and raised the drawbridge, the city would have become a veritable island. Merchants came in and out, bringing silks and spices from the south, and taking back with them carts of dried fish.

People in Riverrun ate a lot of fish.

But, of course, fish was the food of commoners. Currently, Lord Hoster Tully, his brother Brynden Tully, and Edmure were feasting on a pig stuffed with boiled eggs and berries, and white bread so soft that one could make a bed out of it quite comfortably.

"So, what do you think of Eddard Stark’s appointment as Hand of the King, Edmure?" Hoster Tully was asking. His face had so many lines in it she wouldn't have been surprised if she were to find dust in those cracks. While he tried to maintain the illusion of health, she could smell the disease on him. Hoster Tully was not long for this world.

"Well, I suppose Cat must be missing her husband," said Edmure.

Brynden Tully looked as if he wanted to facepalm. That was, if Westerosians knew about facepalming, which she assumed they did because it was universal. They simply might not have a term for it.

They called Brynden the Blackfish, not because he bore any resemblance to a killer whale, but because his sigil was a black trout. Hmm, someone couldn’t time their baked fish properly.
"When House Stark rises, so too does House Tully," said Blackfish.

"Then we need only sit back and reap our rewards," said Edmure. His silliness was endearing.

"Forgive me, my lords, for I could not help overhearing," she said as she stopped playing. Three pairs of eyes, all blue, turned to her. "Lord Stark, I believe, has a unique opportunity before him. Now, I may only be a bard and a silly little girl, but if I were in his place, I would seek to surround myself with friends and people I can trust. And who better to trust than one's own family?"

"Now there's an answer," said Blackfish.

"And how exactly would he surround himself with friends?" asked Hoster Tully. He leaned forward slightly. Men always did that in her presence.

"The Hand of the King may appoint anyone to the Small Council, or dismiss them from it. And perhaps, in time, the Small Council may become the Big Council." She fluttered her eyelashes for effect.

"Summon my scribe," said Hoster. "I would write Eddard Stark a letter."

"But, Father—" protested Edmure.

"Who said it was going to be you?" said Hoster.

Poor Edmure.

__________________________________________________________

The Wall

So, this was why the improvement had been so drastic and why they had been pulling strange moves during training. He had always known the girl and the bastard were both bad news. And now…well, now he could get rid of at least one of them. Ser Alisser smiled grimly as he watched them from above. They thought they were so clever, picking a seldom used courtyard for their little meetings. But then they had not been clever enough to keep silent.

He turned to go. He would give them this night, and then it would be the end of the cosy little gang. Mormont would never send the bastard away, not now, but the girl…

Well, the girl was never meant to be here in the first place.

__________________________________________________________

When the Lord Commander summoned her, she knew it wasn't good news. Elena knocked softly on the door. In fact, she knocked so softly she had to knock again before he heard her.

"Come in," he barked.

She slowly let herself in, aware that she wasn't the only one who Mormont had invited. Both Yoren and Tyrion Lannister were already nursing horns of ale, while Alisser stood to one side, his grim smile turned on full volume.

"You wanted to see me, Lord Commander?" said Elena. Was she in trouble just because she'd revealed her true identity to Jon? It couldn't be helped. She'd had to do it or else he would have died.

"Sit down, Elena," said Mormont. "Do you know why you're here?"
She shook her head. There could be a billion reasons.

"The Wall is no place for women," said Mormont, "no matter how extraordinary. We took you in because you had nowhere else to go, but it has recently come to my attention that you have grown close with a few of the…recruits."

At that, Ser Alisser actually showed teeth. He was that pleased.

"Is it true that you have been fraternizing with a few of the boys at night behind the kitchens?"

"We were just practising combat," said Elena. "Sam needed help."

"Your task was never to train the recruits. That is Ser Alisser's domain," said Mormont.

This was not fair! It wasn't as if Alisser had been any good with training any of them, beyond getting them to try and beat each other to a pulp. Sam was confident enough to hit back now, and he was less round than he had been thanks to the exercise regime she and Jon enforced. But any protestations would have been futile, and it might actually have added to the trainer's satisfaction. That, she was definitely not going to do.

So she stayed silent.

"Yoren and Lord Tyrion leave for King's Landing tomorrow morning," said Mormont. "You will go with them."

The sun's rays dribbled through the clouds in pathetic streams. The horses were loaded. This was it.

Elena stood before Jon, dressed once more in the jacket and jeans she had been wearing when she had first appeared on the Wall. Her hair was hidden beneath the hood of the cloak Aemon had given to her. Tucked in her pocket was a precious map from the maester's library. He'd made her write down all the major houses on the back, along with their house words and their sigils, in case she forgot and needed to look them up quickly.

"I don't want to say goodbye," she said to Jon.

"We'll have to say goodbye at some point; we knew that from the beginning. You can go back to Damon," said Jon.

When he said Damon's name, the guilt she thought she'd forgotten began to gnaw at her again. On the one hand, she would love to see him again, if only to figure out how she really felt. And even if it was the bond manipulating her, Damon loved her more than he had ever loved anyone in the world. He would always be her pillar. But then, on the other side, already so far away, was Jon. She'd watched him grow from a bitter boy into a leader of men. She wanted to continue watching him grow, to help him, to teach him to laugh. He needed to learn to laugh.

"I'll miss you," she said.

"Elena, I…" He let his voice trail off. There was so much to say, but no words and time to say it. She understood him anyway. Instead, she took off her necklace; the one she had teleported with. It had been her mother's. It was just an old fashioned silver locket that had been passed down through generations of Gilbert women until it had come to her. She really ought to have given it to her own daughter or daughter-in-law when the time came, but…well. That was never going to happen.
She pressed the necklace into Jon's gloved hand and closed his fingers around it. And then she just had to do it. For the first time since they'd met, she threw her arms around him.

He stiffened in surprise as Elena wrapped her arms about his neck and buried her face in the crook between his neck and shoulder. Then he allowed himself to hold her. Just this once. It was only going to be once. He would never get the chance again. She felt so small, like a little bird that would fly away from him at any moment. She was going to fly away back to her Damon, who had so much more to offer her. *He* wasn't going to live out his life in a frozen wasteland.

Her soft lips brushed his cheek in a kiss.

"Goodbye, Jon Snow," she whispered.

"How much are you willing to bet that Jon Snow won't make it to his vows?" he heard Tyrion Lannister murmur to Yoren none-too-softly.

"I'm not a Lannister. I don't have free money to give away," the Night's Watch recruiter replied.

"The words hardly registered. He didn't think much of what Tyrion and Yoren thought. His mind was on the girl in his arms; the girl he was about to lose.

It was all too brief for Jon. Elena pulled away from him and never looked back again.

He'd lost her. He'd lost her forever.

But she hadn't given Damon her necklace. She'd given Jon Snow her necklace.

**King's Landing**

She hated King's Landing. She hated Sansa. She hated her septa. Most of all, she hated Joffrey.

Arya stabbed the needle into the pin cushion again and again and again, wishing it was Joffrey's heart rather than just a pin cushion. Her embroidery lay on her lap, mostly unfinished without form or beauty. She wished her father had left her in Winterfell.

"Arya, stop that!" said Septa Mordane sharply. Arya ignored her and continued to stab her embroidery needle into the cushion. In fact, she stabbed it more viciously than before. That one was for Mycah. That was for Lady. That was for Nymeria. And that one was for herself.

Septa Mordane lifted her out of her seat as if she were a child playing with her food at the table rather than a girl of eleven. She hated how she did that. She never did it to Sansa, not even when Sansa was being the most spoilt little brat one could ever imagine. When it came to Septa Mordane, Sansa could do no wrong. It just wasn't fair!

It was just as well that her father came in at that moment, or else she might have just accidentally mistaken the septa's hand for a pin cushion.

"What's going on?" he asked. Arya loved him, but sometimes, he was so…

Was she allowed to call her father just a little bit silly? It was quite clear what was going on. Then again, he didn't spend very much time in the solar with the girls, so perhaps he could be forgiven for not knowing how things worked, particularly between her, Sansa, and Septa Mordane. A day never passed without the septa reprimanding her for not being ladylike, as if *that* was something to aspire to. She didn't want to learn to simper and flutter her eyelashes at boys just so she could lure
in a husband the way the stale bread and mouldy cheese lured rats into the traps in Winterfell's kitchens. She wasn't sure she even wanted to get married. It sounded so awfully boring. Sure, she could run a household if she really needed to, but did she really have to?

"Arya would rather behave like a beast than a lady," said the septa.

"I was practising," said Arya.

"For what?" scoffed Sansa, finally looking up from her embroidery as if she'd just realized the rest of the world existed. Her pretty mouth was turned down in a frown. She saved her smiles for people she thought worthy, like Joffrey and Damon. Seriously, it was pathetic.

"The prince," said Arya.

"Arya!" Ned said, aghast. "Please do not say such things."

"He killed my friend, Father! And Sansa was a liar. If she'd told the truth, Mycah would be alive and so would Lady! Seriously, Sansa, it's not as if the truth is the plague."

"You…!" For once, Sansa was speechless. Arya one, Sansa zero.

"Father, she's trying to sully my reputation," said Sansa as she rallied. "And if Arya really wants to see a liar, she need only look in the mirror."

Why, that little−!

"Enough!" said Ned. The room fell silent. Arya had never seen her father so…angry before.

"Go to your room, Arya," he said, more calmly and softly this time. For the first time, Arya noticed how tired her father looked and how much older he seemed. But she was too upset to care. She was tired of it all too; she just wanted to go home. She wished the King had never come to Winterfell.

But, like Damon said, you couldn't always get what you wished for.

She shook off the septa's hands and stormed off to her room. Closing the heavy door behind her, she opened the coffer containing her clothes and dug to the very bottom where she'd hidden her sword. If Jon were here, things would be so much better. At least she'd have someone to talk to.

She tried to practise with Needle, pretending she was driving it deep into Joffrey's heart and watching herself move in her blurry mirror. It didn't look right, and it didn't feel right. How did Robb and Jon do it back home? She tried to remember.

A knock came on the door.

"May I come in?" asked her father.

Well, she couldn't say no. Besides, she wasn't really angry at her father. She was just angry at the world. She opened the door to let him in. His presence seemed to fill the little room.

"Where did you get that?" he asked as soon as he saw her sword. Oops. She hadn't meant to let him see it.

"It was a present," said Arya.

Ned held out his hand for it, and she reluctantly handed it over, afraid he would confiscate it. After all, what lord would let his daughter play with a sword? She'd certainly never heard of such a lord.
"This is castle-forged steel," said her father. "It's Mikken's work."

"Jon gave it to me," Arya admitted.

"You miss them, don't you? Your brothers," said Ned. He sat down on Arya's bed and patted the spot beside him. She sat down and let him pull her against him. She'd always liked leaning against him when he told her stories when she had been small. That hadn't happened very often, because her father usually had very little to do with her. He had too many duties as lord. If he had any time to spend with his children, he was always spending time with Robb and teaching him how to be lord.

"I want to go home," said Arya. "I don't like it here."

He kissed the top of her head before he gave her back Needle. "A sword is not a toy, Arya," he said. "If you're going to own one, you should know how to use it."
A Case of Identity

Chapter Summary

Arya gets a surprise. Damon plays CSI but forgets his search warrant. Robb meets some of Jon's new friends. And Edmure becomes even more enamoured by Riverrun's newest bard.

King's Landing

It was a preposterous idea that Cat was in King's Landing. Why would she be in King's Landing?

Still, Petyr Baelish had been a good friend — thus far — and Ned was inclined to trust him.

Until they came to the doorway of the brothel.

Ned was vaguely aware that killing his only friend in King's Landing was probably not the best thing to do, but this insult was beyond any reason. He could barely see through the haze of red that clouded his judgement. A Stark's honour was all he had, and a Stark never forgot an insult.

For a moment, a look of utter surprise flitted across Baelish's face as Ned slammed him against the wall and pinned him there, with his arm pressing up against his neck, almost cutting off his air but not quite. However, he regained his composure soon enough. "What is this?" he asked Ned in a tone not dissimilar to the one the lord of Winterfell used to try and mediate between his daughters. Just like with Sansa and Arya, Ned would not be placated by it.

"You said you were going to bring me to see my wife!" snarled Ned.

"And I am —"

"Why would she be here?"

He was about to threaten him into telling the real truth. Was this a trap? Was he trying to besmirch his honour? Was he trying to be funny because it wasn't funny!

"Ned!"

The hiss above caught his attention. Cat? His grip on Baelish slackened. She was such a strange sight in the surrounds of one of King's Landing's most notorious pleasure houses, like a turtledove amongst butterflies. Cat jerked her head, indicating he should come inside. It was an action he'd seen a thousand times. She used it with the boys when she wanted them to do something. She used it with him when she wanted him to do something. The familiar gesture made his heart lighten even as he wondered why she possibly needed to come here and why she had gone to Petyr Baelish of all people. He forgot about the Master of Coin he was still pinning to the wall and went inside.

It had been an interesting morning of debatable productivity. For Damon, the day had started just after midnight, in Flea Bottom, when he had found a particularly unsavoury sell-sword forcing people to give up their purses at knife point. The sell-sword now stewed with a pot of brown, feeding the very people he had robbed, with his blood drained first, of course. His sword was left for some lucky man to find. No one would care, maybe except the people eating him. It was Flea
Bottom. One could not even see the shadow of a city guard there, much less an actual guard.

And now he was taking a well-earned rest after yesterday's guard duty and before today's, enjoying the hospitality of his latest untrustworthy friend Petyr Baelish. What he hadn't known before was that he wasn't the only one from Winterfell taking advantage of Baelish's munificence.

"No, no, no, no," he said. The girl on the pole pouted. "You're not climbing up a fire escape pole. You are lifting yourself up on thin air. The pull of the earth has no effect on you, got it?"

"Why can't we just fuck?" she asked. "I'm good at that."

Damon rolled his eyes. "Because that's just boring. If I wanted a fuck, I wouldn't have to pay this kind of money," he said. Actually, he wasn't paying anything. He couldn't afford Baelish's whores. In exchange for…services rendered, he was teaching them to pole dance. They were awful at it. Their arms were weak, their bellies, although flat in general, were flabby, and their voluptuous legs had no muscle definition. Westerosian men liked their women soft. They only knew soft women.

Perhaps it might have been easier to teach them body sushi –body pastries in this case– but that would leave them enough breath to talk, and he wanted to listen in on the conversations going on next door.

Pycelle he could tune out. The man was practically senile when he was with whores. It was only when the whores left and he was making himself respectable again that his true nature revealed itself as a sly old fox that only emerged from its lair after dark. Rather, it was Ned Stark, Catelyn Stark, and Petyr Baelish who had caught his attention.

"I know that knife," Baelish was saying of the Valyrian steel dagger with the gold-gilt handle that the assassin had left behind when he had failed so miserably to kill a comatose boy. "It's mine."

Awkward pause. Damon wondered if Ned had already killed him like he had been about to do outside.

"Well, it was mine until I lost it in a bet," continued Baelish, obviously still alive.

"To whom?" demanded Ned.

"Tyrion Lannister."

Damon frowned. Something was not right. He'd always taken Tyrion Lannister to be an intelligent man; one who would not need to kill nine-year-old boys –or was it ten?– to protect himself. And even if he were to kill a nine-year-olds, or ten-year-olds, why would he send incompetent assassins with such a distinctive incriminating dagger? And what motive did Tyrion Lannister have? He'd spent most of his time in Winterfell in the library or antagonizing his sister at feasts by enjoying himself.

Something smelled fishy, and it had nothing to do with the grilled sea bass he'd eaten.

The report rounded up the end of a rather bad day. First, he was almost strangled by Eddard Stark for trying to help him –and he did not even get an apology for it – and now Hoster Tully was trying to get his entire family into the Small Council? He hadn't even heard of Kamren Tully! And they would slaughter Edmure, no doubt. Poor Edmure.

Petyr crushed the intercepted letter in his hand. There would be no Tullys on the Small Council if he could help it. In fact, there would be no one else except himself on the Small Council if he could help it, although he simply couldn't. And what if Stark finally did figure out that surrounding
himself with people he could rely on would be the safest way? Petyr had worked too hard to get himself to where he was today to be displaced or have his power diluted by *Ned Stark's* machinations.

No, it simply wouldn't do. There would be a lot of negotiations ahead. Surely there was something else the Tullys would want. Trade? Non-fish dinners?

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**Winterfell**

The road to Winterfell was dominated by grey grassy tundra on both sides. Only a few hills and hardy trees broke up the landscape. The grass that grew was tough and spiky, with blades that could probably cut flesh if one were not careful enough. A letter from Jon to his brother, scribed by Sam, crackled between her clothes as she moved with the horse. She hadn't read it yet, and she hadn't asked what was in it. From what he had told her, Jon was particularly close with Robb. Already, that gave her a good impression about the acting lord of Winterfell.

As they turned south-west toward the city, things suddenly became greener and more alive, even though they were still seeing more plants and deer than people. Soon they came across little villages with thatched roofs and mud-brick chimneys. Peasants looked up from their work in the fields as they rode by between the seas of tawny wheat that waved as the wind passed by. The peasants' backs were permanently bent from the work they did, and their faces looked so gaunt and old, yet most of them were probably only in their thirties or forties.

"Winter is harsh for the smallfolk," said Tyrion. "And winter is coming, as it always is."

"How long do winters usually last?" asked Elena. She was never going to get used to the fact that the seasons were not regular in Westeros. They didn't even have spring or fall! Fall was her favourite season, what with carving pumpkins and dressing up in scary costumes and the anticipation of Christmas.

"It depends," said Tyrion. "Sometimes a year. Sometimes seven."

She shuddered to think of how the peasants would cope. Probably as well as refugees in the Congo. Or worse.

The turrets of Winterfell rose from the landscape like it had always been a part of it. Climbing plants crept up the base of the outer city walls. She wasn't sure it qualified as a city. It didn't look quite...populated enough. She recognized the market Jon had described to her, complete with a statue of Brandon the Builder.

"Beads for the pretty lady?" asked a child who held up a basket of wooden bracelets and necklaces for her to examine. More people of all ages tried to sell them things. She followed Tyrion and Yoren's example and ignored them. Not that she actually had money; not even a single copper.

The great hall reminded her of an old medieval cathedral without the frescoes and the stained glass windows and all the pretty things that came with a cathedral. The first thing she noticed was how dark it was and how it smelled of pine smoke. Fresh rushes had been laid on the floor, and they crackled as she walked over them. Robb Stark sat at the very front, his back straighter than a spear.

His features were sharper and harder than Jon's, and he had the most piercing blue eyes she'd ever seen, apart from Damon's. He set his mouth in a grim line when he saw them. Beside him sat an old man—presumably Maester Luwin—and a young man who had to be Theon Greyjoy.
"Lord Robb, we meet again," said the dwarf with a bow. Elena lingered at the back, unsure of what to do. Should she curtsey? Should she say something? No, probably not. She wouldn't do anything until Robb Stark actually acknowledged her. Unlike Jon, who simply behaved like a lordling – although he was much improved now– Robb was actually a lordling. And unlike on the Wall, where she had some sort of status and where the pecking order had been partially established through threats and violence, they were a little more formal here in Winterfell.

She fidgeted, causing Jon's letter to crackle again. It made her feel a little better, as if the letter with his words on it could act as some sort of protective amulet. And if all else failed, she could always bring out Damon's name, right? Jon had said Robb and Damon were friends, in a manner of speaking.

"Tyrion Lannister," said Robb. "Why are you here?"

"Am I not welcome in Winterfell? And for your information, I am looking for your brother Bran? Is he here? I would very much like to see him," said the dwarf.

Robb told Theon to bring Bran, and then turned his icy gaze back to the three visitors. His dark brows drew together a little closer when he saw her, but then he swallowed his surprise as if nothing had happened. Elena wasn't even sure she'd seen his expression change.

"I had a somewhat warmer welcome the last time I was here," Tyrion remarked.

"Any man of the Night's Watch is welcome in Winterfell," said Robb.

"Any man of the Night's Watch, but not I, eh, boy?" asked Tyrion.

She gasped. He did not call Robb Stark a boy! He was like…she didn't know... but maybe… Alexander the Great? He was the only boy-king she could remember. Oh, and Tutankhamen, but he was more famous for being dead than alive. It wouldn't be an apt comparison at all.

"I'm not your 'boy', Lannister," said Robb. His voice remained calm, but it bore an edge. A sharpened blade, she supposed, would be considered peaceful until it was actually used against someone. "I am lord of Winterfell while my father is away."

"Then you might learn a lord's courtesy," said Tyrion.

And he might as well just have stuck out his neck and be done with it. If Jon took insults badly, how would Robb take them?

The skin around Robb's lips whitened a little, but Bran's timely arrival in the arms of the simple giant Hodor saved them all from the consequences of Lannister snark and Stark temper. The boy was dark haired like both his brothers, with sad dark eyes like Jon's. He dangled limply in the giant's arms, unwilling to be here, resigned to the idea that he would never walk again. Her heart was seized with pity. He was only nine.

Tyrion greeted him with a little more gentleness in his voice than she had ever heard and then proceeded to ask him if he remembered anything about his accident before giving him a design for a saddle that would allow him to ride again. The hopeful expression on the boy's face was almost enough to warm the chill of the halls. "Will I really be able to ride again?" he asked.

"Indeed," said Tyrion with a smile. "And on horseback, you'll be as tall as any of them."

Robb's voice, when he spoke next, was just a degree warmer than it had been before. "You have done my brother a kindness," he said. "The hospitality of Winterfell is yours." Clever Tyrion.
Everyone liked presents.

Tyrion scoffed. "Thank you, but no thank you," he said. "There's a brothel outside your walls. I'll find a bed there and we'll both sleep easier." He brushed past Yoren and Elena, and as he did so, he winked. That dwarf! No, one really did not need to feel sorry for him. He could take care of himself just fine. And really, that mental image of him...no, she could not think about that. Not that it was ever going to go away.

Robb watched him go, his mouth slightly open as if he wanted to say something scathing, but simply had no idea what to say. He changed his mind about trying and turned his attention to the two remaining visitors. "Any man of the Night's Watch is welcome here," he repeated, "but I never expected to welcome a woman of the Night's Watch."

"I'm not really of the Watch, my lord," said Elena, dipping an awkward curtsey that made Robb raise his eyebrow. Just the one, mind you.

"We took her in when she had no place to go, m'lord," said Yoren, "but now I am taking her south to King's Landing."

"Is there any news from the Wall?" asked Robb.

"I have a letter from Jon Snow, my lord," said Elena. She withdrew the wrinkled letter and handed it to Robb. He took it without taking his eyes off her. She was beginning to wonder if she was naked or something, judging by the way everyone was staring at her. She supposed a woman coming from the Wall was rarer than tropical fruit here.

"You know my brother?" asked Robb.

"Jon and I are..." What were they? "We're friends."

"If there are girls like that on the Wall, I'm taking the black," Theon leaned over to whisper. Robb gave him a withering look before he unfolded the letter and scanned it. For the first time since she'd met him, she could almost believe he was just a teenager thrust into a position of great power and responsibility.

"You'd still have to be celibate, Lord Theon," she said.

Robb gave a lordly snort. "That is never going to happen, Mistress..." His voice trailed off. "Elena? Damon's Elena?"

That was starting to get annoying. Why did everyone seem to think she belonged to Damon or something? First Jon, and now Robb Stark too?

"I am no one's Elena. I belong to myself."

"He said you'd say that," Theon murmured. "It's no wonder he's been completely spoiled for all others."

"Be polite, Theon," said Robb before he focused on Elena again. "Any friend of Jon's is a friend of mine." For the first time, he smiled, and she realized how handsome he really was. Those Stark boys were really blessed when it came to genetics.

"Forgive me for seeming too bold, my lord," she said, "but I was wondering...is Bonnie around?"

"Do you know Bonnie?" blurted out Theon before Robb could stop him.
"I've known her ever since she convinced me to eat mud when we were three," said Elena. "She said it was cake."

The squealing and the hugging and the tears must have scared all the other denizens of Winterfell, including the indomitable Lord Robb, but Bonnie hardly cared as she hugged her best friend. Knowing that she was alive and here...words could not describe how she was feeling. It was so good to know that she was not alone in Westeros with Damon. That had been a nightmare.

"How did you cope? It was the Wall," she asked Elena late that night when the rest of the castle were sleeping. The two of them couldn't sleep. They had far too much catching up to do!

"It's the Wall, not the Heart of Darkness," said Elena. "It was actually...pretty good. But enough about me. What about you?"

Bonnie told her everything. "And now I'm a scribe until they can find a better replacement. I hope to the goddess the ink stains aren't permanent," she said. "What are you going to do now that they've chased you off the Wall? Do you think you'd stay here? With me?"

Elena smiled and took both Bonnie's ink-stained hands in her own. The candle flickered as a little wind escaped through the shutters. "Maybe," she said. "It certainly doesn't seem like a bad prospect particularly if the boys like blood sausages, but I think I'd like to head south first. Damon's in King's Landing."

Of course. Damon.

Riverrun

The arrow struck the rabbit, skewering its heart and killing it instantly. She reined in her horse. "It's a perfect shot, my lord," she said.

"I would expect it to be perfect," said Edmure, but he sat a little straighter in his saddle as he sent his squire to fetch the kill. The leaves on the boughs above them shook gently in the warm breeze which brought the scent of the nearby river, fish guts and all, to them. The skirt of her new dress rippled. She smoothed it down; the fine wool was soft against her skin.

The limp body of the little rabbit, with its eyes already turning glassy, was added to their collection of trophy animals, including a brace of partridges, three other rabbits, and a squirrel. The handful of nuts they had found in the late squirrel's burrow did not count.

Edmure suddenly sighed. "I will miss this when I go to King's Landing," he said.

"Have you heard back from Lord Stark?" she asked.

"No, not yet," said Edmure, "but I expect we shall receive a reply any day now. I suppose it is a good opportunity to prove to my father and my cousins that I am capable."

It was either that, or confirm the suspicion that he really was not.

"Why should you need to prove anything to anyone, my lord?" she asked.

"You speak sweet words, Mistress Bard."

The sky darkened and began to rumble. Fat drops of rain plopped onto the leaves, gathering into
even bigger drops before falling on the hunters below. Within moments, they were drenched. Edmure tried to shelter her with his cloak as they made their mad dash back to the castle. Alas, his cloak leaked.

People gave them sidelong glances when they rode into the city side by side. Their whispers, incoherent at first, grew louder. Edmure stiffened and gripped his sword so hard his knuckles turned white as someone sneered and wondered out loud what position she liked to do it in best.

She placed a hand on his arm. "My lord," she said.

He turned to her. "They are disparaging your character. I should have their heads."

"Leave them," she said. "they are not worth your time."

"You have a kind heart," said Edmure. "I am not so forgiving."

Silly Edmure. He was so earnest. She had only met him a week ago and he was already helplessly smitten. Little did he know he was only a diversion. After all, what was a girl to do? She had spare time in spades and nothing to do with it.

King's Landing

Saying goodbye this time was even harder. He was not used to seeing his wife leaving him. Even on the few occasions when she had gone to Riverrun to visit her family, he had been more irritable than usual until her return. Usually he was the one leaving things behind.

"I wish I could see the girls," she said. "I miss them."

"No one must know you're here," he said as he stroked her cheek. The years had made her softer, less sharp than the fiery Catelyn Tully he had married. "The girls are doing well and settling into the capital." Well, Sansa was doing well, although he didn't like how close she was getting with the Lannisters. As for Arya, well, she would be happier with him soon, he thought. He had a surprise for her. He hoped she would like her present more than Sansa liked hers. Didn't all girls play with dolls until they got married? Then again, he knew nothing about girls. He was pretty sure his daughters were not normal and they had been less normal than usual ever since the arrival of one Salvatore. Hopefully, they weren't fighting over him.

Catelyn pulled her hood over her head to cover her prominent red Tully hair. "Look after yourself, Ned," she said.

He would have asked her to look after herself too, but he wasn't very good with saying these things. Instead, he bent down to kiss her, pulling her against him. Kissing her still made him a little nervous, as if he were a young man of twenty trying to figure out whether his bride actually liked him or not. Love and respect had grown out of their many years of marriage, but he still wondered whether he had ever been in love with her and she with him.

Her cloak fluttered about her as she rode away, Rodrik being her ever loyal guard. They blended into the crowds of King's Landing, just another two travellers passing through.

A surprise? Arya hoped it would be a good surprise. She wouldn't be angry at her father for getting her a really bad present –because none of his presents had ever been particularly good, but she loved him for trying anyway– but she was hoping that for once, he would get it right. Hopefully it wasn't a doll. She hadn't ever played with dolls except for when she and Bran had beheaded them
when they'd played The Rebellion, much to Old Nan's dismay. Arya hadn't understood what was so
terrifying about it. The dolls' heads could be re-attached so they could be beheaded over and over
again. Theon had laughed and said that he pitied the man who would become her husband.

Her father brought her to the empty room that overlooked the gardens which she knew he
sometimes used for practise. That seldom happened now, for her father had exchanged his sword
for the pen. It was a poor trade in Arya's opinion. She'd always loved watching him teaching her
brothers to spar when he had the time, and she had wished that he would spar with her. It had never
happened. Fathers never sparred with their daughters.

A strange little man with dark hair and swarthy skin waited for them, his hands clasped behind his
back. He was dressed in strange clothes and boots that folded over at the top.

"Who are you?" asked Arya.

"Arya, be polite," said her father with a smile. He seemed very pleased with himself. "This is your
new dancing master."

Dancing master? This was his idea of a nice surprise? Well, maybe he got credit for trying…

"I am Syrio Forel, First Sword of Braavos," said the little man. "I will teach you to dance, to move
with the grace of water, to perceive as a warrior ought…" From behind his back, he produced two
wooden swords.

Seven hells! This wasn't a dancing master. This was…!

"Is this really for me? You're not joking?" she asked, turning to her father.

"Like I said, you own a sword. You need to know how to use it," said Ned. He gave her a little
nudge forward. "Go on."

She happily bounded forward and took one of the swords Syrio offered her. Soon, she forgot all
about Ned being there.

He looked left. He looked right. He looked up, just in case Ned had gotten into the habit of hiding
in the rafters—highly unlikely, but not completely impossible. Nope. The Hand's study was
thankfully devoid of hands right now. Damon closed the door softly behind him. The book sat to
one side of Ned's desk next to piles of carefully arranged vellum pages. The man was slightly OCD
when it came to organizing his documents, and God knew he had enough of them.

Damon carefully opened the book so as to not disturb anything and pulled out a jar of pink powder
from his pocket.

Westerosians weren't known for their stringent hand-washing habits, and as anyone knew, dirty
hands left marks which weren't always visible to the naked eye. And fresh fingerprints would
always show up stronger than old ones.

He didn't have time to ponder over the seriously boring and meaningless lineages on every page.
After all, Jon Arryn had already done the leg work. He dusted every page with the pink powder—
he'd tried to find something that looked a bit more like traditional fingerprint powder, but
unfortunately, the only thing fine enough had been women's blush.

He liberally dusted each page with powder and then swept the excesses back into the jar, taking
care not to spill any on Ned's desk. It left behind pink streaks and blots of varying degrees of
concentration. Most of these pages came away pretty clean, having not been touched in the past
decade or so. And then he came to the Baratheon page.

The marks were *everywhere*, and they were fresh, particularly around Joffrey's entry. Damon
quickly dusted a few more pages. The Lannister page, too, was covered in fresh fingerprints. He
flicked between the two.

Somebody Baratheon, black of hair.

Somebody Lannister, golden haired.

Somebody Baratheon, black of hair.

Somebody Lannister, golden haired.

Robert Baratheon, black of hair. That was not very accurate because Robert's hair was more
brown, and now it was beginning to turn grey.

Jaime Lannister…well, he didn't need to read that entry. He'd met the man and he was as blond as
any of them.

Joffrey Baratheon, too, was blo–

Fucking hell.

And then the door opened.

Damon grabbed the book with all its incriminating pink marks and escaped through the only exit
available, and he could only hope no one saw him hanging out the window of the Hand's study.
Safe Haven

Chapter Summary

Elena meets with an old friend. Rebekah, Stefan, and Caroline get new jobs. Tyrion gets into hot water. Damon has to start dealing with his problems.

Inn of the Kneeling Man - Riverlands

It grew warmer as they progressed southward. Elena drank in the sights and sounds—all right, most of it was forest and farmland and one got used to that pretty quickly, but there were occasionally trading caravans that passed them, carrying colourful goods from King's Landing and beyond, making her wonder what was beyond. Tyrion insisted that once they arrived, she should let him help her pick out some fabric for a few proper dresses. "I may not be a good swordsman, nor am I even a decent archer, but I know my fabrics," he said.

"That would be very kind, Lord Tyrion," she said.

Yoren snorted and said nothing, but she could practically taste his disapproval for the frou-frou fashions of King's Landing. Then again, this was the man who wore nothing but black, and thought personal hygiene consisted of wiping his hands on his dirty tunic before eating.

Another letter rustled beneath her clothes. This one was from Robb. He'd mentioned that he'd written her a recommendation to his father and he had been very kind about it. Elena was beginning to like the Starks very much. They were old-fashioned, sometimes snobby, but honest and generally good people, and they seemed to be such a close family, and Bonnie confirmed it. Then again, anyone who could tolerate Damon after such a short period of acquaintance got a gold star in her book.

"You never did tell me what that letter says," said Tyrion.

"I don't know what the letter says, milord," said Elena. "I didn't read it."

"Really?" He seemed intrigued by the idea of not reading a letter not meant for her eyes.

"I don't read other people's letters," said Elena. "That's just rude."

"Well, I do and I'm not averse to being rude." He held out his hand for the letter.

"If you think I'm going to give the letter to you, I don't think you know me very well."

Tyrion gave a dramatic sigh. "Where is your sense of curiosity?" he asked.

"Where's your sense of propriety?"

He pursed his lips and shrugged. "To be honest with you—and you should savour this moment because I am seldom honest with anyone— I don't think I ever had one."

Elena rolled her eyes, and then stopped in mid-roll because one was not supposed to roll one's eyes at a lord. "Well, milord, you're still not getting that letter," she said.
"You're no fun at all," said Tyrion. They rode on, with Elena keeping her eyes trained firmly on the road in front of her. The horse's rhythm lulled her into a safe cocoon, and she let her mind wander. How far were they from the Wall now? She tried to calculate the date. The new recruits would be swearing their oaths soon. She'd wanted to be there for their graduation. After all, she'd helped to train at least one of them. And how was Benjen's recovery? He'd been lucid when she'd left, but still weak and unable to remember very much about his ordeal, not even the words that he'd kept on muttering.

She would write as soon as she reached King's Landing to let them know she'd arrived safely and to ask all these questions that were running around in her mind.

King's Landing. She didn't know what to expect. Tyrion had described a gleaming metropolis with every joy and grief humanity could hope to experience. He particularly enjoyed scaring her with stories of past violence in the aptly named Red Keep. "People think it's named for its red stone, which is, by the way, pink. I think it's named rather for the blood that has been spilled in its halls," said Tyrion.

Yoren seemed to think it was the very pit of humanity where men's spirits wasted away through crime, poverty, or luxury.

About an hour before nightfall, they passed a little ramshackle inn filled to the brim with travellers seeking rest for the night. If it had been up to her, Elena would have chosen to continue through the night. It was not that the inn's patrons seemed to be people of the most unsavoury kind; they were unwashed, with hard faces and bloodshot eyes. She could deal with men. What she couldn't deal with was the prospect of bed bugs and fleas and God knew what else made its home in this place. It most certainly didn't seem as if it had a cleaning service. She would never complain about those little dingy motels Damon had made her stay in during their road trip to South Carolina again. At least they'd had showers.

Tyrion and Yoren seemed to have no such qualms. "I'm looking forward to a good meal and some strong stout ale," the dwarf remarked.

"I'll settle for some bread and meat and a bed," said Yoren.

Elena looked around. Well, at least the abundance of unsavoury people would mean she would surely come across a criminal or something rather that she could drink. If all else failed, there was always the wildlife, and not the invertebrate ones.

The little dining room was absolutely crowded, with nary so much as an empty surface. Elbows bumped elbows as men shovelled their meals into their mouths or mulled over pewter tankards of ale.

"Is there no room available?" Tyrion asked the inn keep. The dirty little man stopped wiping a cup with his equally dirty apron –just as well vampires did not get food poisoning from germs, or else she'd have been making a beeline for the door– and looked around the crowded room. No, obviously not.

Tyrion sighed and then pulled out a golden coin. Of course. Lannisters and their gold.

"You can have my room," said a man from the corner. His armour was terribly dirty, but beneath the dirt, Elena saw few hints of rust. Obviously he was a man who knew how to care for his armour. And he knew how to take care of himself too. A gold dragon was worth spending the night outdoors or in a stable. What did a room in this inn cost? Probably not a gold dragon. She knew that much.
"I'm much obliged, my friend," said Tyrion as he tossed the coin at the man. He caught it deftly and bit it just to make sure it really was gold.

The dwarf made to go and sit down by the man, but then he paused by a group of travellers who seemed cleaner than most.

"Lady Catelyn?" said Tyrion.

What the hell was Jon's stepmother doing in a place like this?

No one noticed her as she sat in the corner. The dead bard's harp sat on a stool next to her. It had a good sound, and it matched her voice well, judging from the coins that clinked in her money pouch. All right, half of that had been from the bandits. Waste not, want not. That wasn't to say her audience hadn't paid her well either. In fact, Edmure and his family had paid her very well, but it had been time to leave before the poor young lord of Riverrun became too attached.

He had been sad to see her go. In fact, he had not so subtly implored her to stay. But Riverrun was not her be all and end all. There was a whole world out there waiting for her, and greater families than the Tullys to seduce. If all else failed, she could simply return. Absence made the heart grow fonder.

Her hood kept her face in shadow as she watched the developments unfolding before her. It was no secret that the Lannister queen had little love for the Stark Hand, and she was curious to see how this would end. Probably not prettily, either way. But what was more interesting was the girl who stood by the dwarf.

Elena, Elena, Elena. When would she learn how to stay out of trouble that she couldn't get herself out of?

Catelyn Stark rallied her father's minor vassals to her cause, accusing the dwarf of having tried to murder her son. Twice. He couldn't have been very good at murder, could he?

They surrounded the dwarf and his company. Elena clenched her fist and her eyes narrowed. Surely she didn't think—then again, Elena didn't really think, and she'd always been delusional.

"No, no, no," Tyrion Lannister said. "I know that look, Elena. That's the same look my brother gets whenever he's about to do something stupid."

"You expect me to do nothing?" Elena whispered so softly that only those closest to her, and herself, of course, could hear.

"Yes," said the Lannister dwarf. At least someone had a brain. "I'm a Lannister. They can't hurt me, or else my father will stick all their heads on spikes. He's fond of doing that." He patted her hand like someone comforting a little girl, which was exactly what Elena was. "I'll be fine."

The Stark and Tully men bound the dwarf's hands with rough hemp rope and blindfolded him with black cloth torn from a cloak. Half of the inn's patrons, including the irritating tone-deaf vagabond who thought himself a bard—he was an insult to the profession—left with them. The false bard was already trying to compose songs about dead dwarfs and half-sized spikes for his head. Spikes, of course, were one-size-fits-all.

"Are you just going to let them take him?" Elena demanded of her remaining companion. He wore black. Hmm…a man of the Night's Watch, perhaps? But what was Elena doing with a man of the Night's Watch?
"It's not my business," said the man. "It's not yours either."

"But we have to do something!"

"Yes, we do. We'll continue on our way and I'll deliver you to Lord Stark as was planned. What you do after that is your business."

Lord Stark? Well, it seemed as if Damon and Elena were going to get a lovely reunion. She'd love to be there for it, but her life could not revolve around those two pathetic lovebirds. Rather, she was more interested in what Catelyn Stark had in mind. It couldn't have been a very good idea, considering what the Lannisters were. This was a diplomatic disaster in the making. Tywin Lannister would never let this pass, and neither would Queen Cersei; if not for familial affection, then for familial reputation.

She had to head back north. Where there was a disaster, there would be opportunity, and where there was opportunity, she always thrived.

**Casterly Rock**

"What can you do, girl?"

Rebekah resented being called a girl, but she supposed an old man who had no idea who or what she was wouldn't really know better. And Tywin Lannister was probably condescending to everyone and anyone he ever met.

"I can fight," she said.

A knight snorted. "You're a woman. Women don't fight."

"I could beat you with one arm tied behind my back," Rebekah said to him with a smile. No, no fangs. She had to resist the urge. Oh, if only Elijah could see her self-control now. He was always chiding her about not having any.

Tywin's eyebrow twitched. "You," he said to the knight. "Bind her arm behind her back and then you will fight her."

"Milord, it would not be honourable to fight a woman, particularly not if she is further disadvantaged--"

"Are you afraid you'll lose?" said Rebekah.

The man gaped at her. His mouth opened and closed like a fish's out of water.

"If you win, girl, I'll make you a knight," said Tywin. "If you lose, however--"

"I don't lose," said the vampire. As an afterthought, she added: "My lord."

With her left arm bound tightly behind her back, the girl seemed as if she would definitely lose. She had no idea, but Amory Lorch, while intellectually challenged, had slaughtered men like cattle in battle and he had no qualms about killing women and children. But there was something about the girl and her self-assuredness, and for the first time in many years, Tywin's curiosity was piqued. Looking at her and Lorch, one got the feeling that she was lioness toying with a bristling house cat.
Lorch lunged at her, but she was too quick for him as she moved out of the way with the grace and ease of a dancer. The hold of the ground seemed to have no effect on her at all as she swung behind him and slammed the pommel of her tourney sword into the back of his head. Lorch staggered and whirled around, only to find himself facing her boot. Blood and teeth flew. The girl was still unharmed and not even breaking a sweat. "At least try to make it a challenge, ser," she taunted.

The practise grounds were hushed. What had seemed like a good easy win now turned into something that made them all hold their breath. No man in living memory had seen a woman fight so confidently.

She delivered a kick to his midsection that made him double over, and then for good measure, struck his backside with the flat of her sword hard enough to send him sprawling. He fell forward into the dirt and as he lay there, she planted one small booted foot on the back of his neck.

"Do you yield?" she asked.

The reply was muffled by a mouthful of dust.

"I didn't hear you," said the girl, as if there could have been any other option for Lorch.

"That's enough, Rebekah," said Tywin. She'd had her fun, and she'd proven herself. Now he had a promise to fulfil and history to make. She turned to face him, her eyes full of sparkle and glee and satisfaction. Her full lips, her golden hair, her face so full of hopes and ambition for the future, her spirit not yet made bitter by years of reality; she reminded him very much of a younger, less jaded, badly trained Cersei.

"Kneel," he said.

No man uttered a word. Not that anyone dared. He unsheathed his sword and tapped the kneeling girl once on the right shoulder, and once on the left. "Arise, Lady Rebekah Mikaelson, knight of Casterly Rock."

Caroline couldn't believe it! Rebekah, a knight? She couldn't think of a less chivalrous person. Had she compelled Tywin Lannister? But it didn't seem like it, and besides, she'd tried compelling people here, and the only one who had did as he was told was Jorge Lannister. As everyone knew, and as she very quickly learned, he didn't have two brain cells to rub together, poor thing. If not for his brother Daemon, he'd have been dead of stupidity a long time ago.

After Rebekah had been knighted, Tywin turned his attention to Stefan.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Stefan Salvatore," the vampire replied.

"Salvatore...as in Damon Salvatore?" asked Tywin. He narrowed his eyes.

Silence. A thousand thoughts bombarded Caroline's mind, all obscuring each other. Damon was here too? How did he get here? Where was he? How did Tywin know him? And was it a good thing or a bad thing to be associated with Damon?

"Yes," said Stefan. "He's my brother."

"He is in King's Landing serving Eddard Stark, the Hand of the King." The old man's voice betrayed no emotion, so Caroline couldn't tell what his opinion on Damon was. And where was
King's Landing? Who was Eddard Stark, the Hand of the King? Was that...like...a very important person? And Damon was serving someone? Damon? She was almost sure Tywin had gotten the wrong person. The Damon she knew didn't work for anyone or anything except himself unless that other person's name began with an 'E' and ended with 'lena'.

"I did not know, my lord, although Damon does as Damon pleases, and I'm usually the last one to know."

"Yet here you are, thousands of miles away from King's Landing," said Tywin. Uh oh. He was suspicious.

"We were separated when we were...exiled," said Stefan.

Exiled? That was a nice way to put it. Time travelled, more likely. Or dimension jumped? Or maybe it was like fanfiction, where ordinary American girls suddenly 'bamfed' into Middle-earth or Narnia and fell in love with Legolas or Aragorn or Faramir or Peter or Edmund or Caspian.

Yes, bamf was a good word for it. A good nonsensical word for a nonsensical situation.

But one could hardly use the word 'bamf' with the likes of Tywin Lannister. Was he like a king or something? If not a king, he had to be a duke or a count or a baron or something like that. Freaking aristocracy.

"And are you willing to serve House Lannister, Stefan Salvatore, even though your brother is in the service of House Stark?"

"Who he serves is his business, my lord," said Stefan. "I would be honoured to serve you."

"You are a pragmatic man, Stefan Salvatore. I can respect that."

And then, just like that, Stefan too, was recruited into the Lannister army as a man at arms, leaving Caroline the only one with no purpose to serve. Now there were high expectations to live up to.

"I don't fight as well as the other two, my lord," she said. "But I'm good at planning things. Events, parties, you name it, I can probably plan them."

"Maester," said Tywin.

An old man in a shapeless grey tent shuffled forward. His back was hunched from sitting in a bad posture for far too long each day, and he squinted from bad eyesight, but there was shrewdness in those myopic eyes.

"You said you needed a new clerk, Maester Ayjax?"

The 'maester' person nodded. "I do, my lord."

"Then it's settled."

Great. Rebekah was a knight, Stefan was a soldier, and she was a clerk.

She supposed it could have been worse. They could have tried to make her Rebekah's squire instead.

King's Landing
After the quietness and relative monotony of the Wall, the noise and life of King's Landing slammed into her like a punch to the gut. Her head reeled from it all, from the vendors to the stench to the beggars at the sides of the cobbled streets they rode through. The horses' hooves created a clattering rhythm, only to be drowned out by shouts and peddlers advertising their wares. The marketplace in Winterfell was one thing. This was another creature entirely.

"It's frightening at first, eh?" asked Yoren. Elena only nodded as she tried to re-acclimatize herself. She could do this. She'd been to Virginia Beach before. Just the once, and she'd gotten lost. In fact, she might have remained lost if not for her cell phone and this handy app called Google Maps. Unfortunately, Google hadn't penetrated the Westerosian yet.

She stuck by Yoren, afraid that if she got lost in this seething mire of humanity, she might be lost forever.

The Tower of the Hand rose like a monolith from ancient times. It probably was ancient. The heavy wooden doors opened for them with a groan. As in Winterfell, Yoren was welcomed with geniality and admitted into the presence of Lord Eddard Stark. Elena swallowed, not sure of what to expect. Robb had been perfectly kind and accommodating—especially after he learned she was "Damon's Elena"—but could she expect the same from his father? And what if Damon was there? How would she react if she—when she saw him? She couldn't say. He had, after all, chased her away. He'd wanted her to leave him.

The Hand's study, in comparison to King's Landing's luxury, was spartan. Only one very generic tapestry of a wolf adorned the wall. Piles of parchment were neatly arranged on the desk, and there was one book on the otherwise empty bookshelf. Starks weren't big readers.

Yoren bowed, and Elena, unable to hide behind Tyrion's colourful and oversized character now that he was Lady Stark's prisoner, attempted an awkward curtsey.

"I ask your permission, m'lord, to take recruits back to the Wall," said Yoren.

"You will have your pick of men from the dungeons," said Eddard Stark. She could see the family resemblance between him and Jon, perhaps more so than between him and Robb, although she had spent a lot more time with Jon, so perhaps that affected her perception. His brown hair was tied back out of his face with a leather thong, and his brown eyes seemed kind, if a little reserved. "But I suspect you didn't come to see me just to ask me for men.

"I bring tidings from the north," said Yoren. "But perhaps the young lady might be a better person to tell you, m'lord."

Oh God. "Come forward, girl," said Jon's father. "You come from the north?"

"You could say that, my lord," said Elena, her throat suddenly dry. "I…uh…have a letter from Lord Robb." She fumbled for the crumpled letter and stepped forward to place it on his desk before quickly stepping back into place.

"How do you know my son?" Eddard's eyes narrowed as he broke the seal of the letter and scanned the first few lines.

"Well, I…"

Voices came from outside. "Run, kitty!" crooned a voice that could only belong to…

Damon came in, idly flicking through a pile of papers in his hands. "We have a situation, my lord. Some supplier's been price gouging grain and now the mob is calling for a lynching—" He stopped.
He looked as handsome and debonair as ever. His dark hair flopped in an unruly manner over his forehead, and he was wearing a loose white linen shirt tucked into a pair of well-fitting black trousers and knee high boots.

"Elena?" he whispered.

"Hey Damon," she said.

He was wandering through the halls towards Ned's study when something small and furry streaked by his feet. He reached down to snatch the yowling cat up by the scruff of its neck. It hissed at him and tried to scratch him.

"Here, cat!" Arya called as she rounded the corner. She skidded to a stop when she saw Damon dangling the cat in the air.

"What are you doing tormenting the cat, my lady?" he asked, genuinely curious. It seemed like quite a pointless activity when cats could probably be easily lured out with a bit of chicken liver or old fish. That was, if one did not mind the Hand's Tower smelling of rotting fish guts for the rest of the week.

"I'm not tormenting it. You're tormenting. *I'm* chasing it," said Arya.

"I can see that," said Damon. The cat lashed out with a paw, all claws extended. Damon held it further away from him just in case.

"Syrio says I have to catch it because I need to be as quick and quiet as a cat," said Arya. "And why do you care? You're not my father."

"I don't care," said Damon. He set the cat down and it streaked off again, with Arya falling further and further behind. She was going to be at this for hours at this rate. "Run, kitty, run!"

"Shut up, Damon!" Arya called back.

The vampire grinned to himself and then composed his expression before he went through Ned's door. It wouldn't do to let him know that he'd been teasing his daughter again. He knew he could always simply refrain from doing it, but Arya was so easy to tease! The only other 'friends' he had here were Jory and Baelish, and neither of them ever rose to the bait. One was simply too good natured, and the other was far too smart and reasonable. The only thing that had come close to snarking had been the one line in a letter from Robb addressed to Ned remarking on how all the troubles in Winterfell seemed to have stopped now that Damon wasn't there to cause them anymore.

"We have a situation, my lord. Some supplier's been price gouging the grain and the mob is calling for a lynching—"

He forgot all about mobs and cats and suppliers when he looked up. All the papers in his hands fell to the floor. No, it couldn't be, but it was. She was standing there in front of him, dirty, tired, her hair tangled and her clothes wrinkled like she'd slept in them. But it was her. Elena Gilbert. A girl he'd thought he would never see again.

"Hey Damon," she said, almost shyly.

"You two know each other?" asked Ned. He glanced down at the piece of parchment in his hand again. Damon vaguely noted that the writing on it was Robb's. "You are Damon's Elena."
"I don't know why everyone seems to think I have to belong to someone! My lord." Elena's outburst jolted Damon out of his daze.

"How did you get here?" he asked her before Ned could say anything.

"By horse, I guess?" said Elena.

The dirty man behind her –black cloak, straggly hair, humourless expression; he had to be Night's Watch – pressed his lips together impatiently. "You can become reacquainted with your lover later, girl," he said. "There are more pressing matters Lord Stark must know." He stepped forward and leaned down to whisper to Elena's words for her ears only. "And I thought you were with Jon Snow?"

Jon?!

The Night's Watch man looked at Damon and narrowed his eyes. "Can he be trusted?"

"Ser Salvatore can be trusted insofar as any man in King's Landing can be trusted," said Ned. Damon would have liked to say something snarky, but his mind was a blank and he just couldn't think of anything.

He didn't know what was more shocking; the fact that Elena and Jon had something going on, or the news that Lady Catelyn had kidnapped Tyrion Lannister and was in the process of causing a diplomatic disaster.

Ned rubbed his face and proceeded to tap Robb's letter with his fingers while Elena and the Night's Watch brother told him all about how it had transpired and what Lady Catelyn had said to Tyrion Lannister before she had taken him. He did it a lot these days, tapping on things. It had only been a few months, but his work as the Hand was taking its toll on Ned. He seemed to have aged years. At this rate, he'd be digging himself an early grave. Or perhaps he had a crypt all prepared and picked out in Winterfell?

"Thank you for telling me, Yoren," said Ned. "I appreciate it."

"As a man of the Watch, I shouldn't be getting involved, but Benjen and I are friends," said Yoren.

Ned nodded. "You will have a bed here tonight, and tomorrow you shall have your pick of the men in the dungeons," he said. "As for you, Elena Gilbert, Robb has recommended I take you into my household as a companion for Sansa and Arya. He says you have nowhere else to go."

Damon didn't know how he felt about that. Living with Elena when he didn't know how she felt about him? What about the sire bond? He wanted her to have her free will back…at least, angel! Damon did. Demon! Damon was perched on his other shoulder telling him that it didn't really matter. He had Elena, and no one, not Stefan and most definitely not Jon Snow was going to take her from him. With anyone else, it wouldn't have mattered, but this wasn't just anyone. This was Elena. She made him want to be better simply by being herself. He couldn't enslave her with a blood bond. That was Klaus' modus operandi, and look how well that turned out for him. Also, it was Elena. He didn't want a puppet. He wanted her.

"If there's nothing else, my lord, I shall see if the city guard needs any aid." Damon bowed and left the room, hoping that everything would somehow right itself.
Dear Jon

Chapter Summary

Elena settles into King's Landing. Arya makes a new friend. Pyp and Grenn investigate Jon's secrets. Stefan establishes a new pecking order. Meanwhile, the story of the lady knight spreads.

King's Landing

Seeing Damon again was strangely liberating and terrifying. She still cared for him deeply, and she was happy that he was here, because at least she wouldn't be surrounded by unfamiliar faces in a hostile place. But that pull she'd felt towards him back in Mystic Falls when she'd first been turned, that desire to make him happy regardless of cost, that need to just be with him all day and all night…it was gone. It was as if she could breathe again in his presence, and a great weight she hadn't even known about had been lifted from her chest.

Elena was no longer bound to Damon, and while she would always love him, she was no longer in love with him. Those feelings had burned fiercely like a supernova, and but they had burned themselves out.

Or perhaps the ice on the Wall had quenched those fires. She didn't know. It was confusing, and this revelation frightened her. Without the bond, it was suddenly like she was a boat adrift on the wide sea after her anchor had been broken. They would have to talk about it sometime, but how did one talk about such things? She didn't want to see him hurt. That was the last thing in the world she wanted.

She was so deeply mired in her thoughts that she almost forgot to answer Lord Stark's question, and if hadn't been for Yoren giving her a nudge, she might just have gone on without answering it.

"Yes, of course I will be Lady Sansa and Lady Arya's companion, if you think I'm the right person for the job, my lord," she said. "I can't thank you enough for taking me in, Lord Stark."

"Do your job well, and I will consider your debt repaid," said Eddard. "Sansa and Arya are growing, and they need someone closer to their own age to help them learn their roles. I trust my son's judgement and I admire anyone who can tame Damon Salvatore." Was that a smile? Yes! It was a smile!

The clothes she was given were simple and functional. But to Elena, who had spent months on the Wall dressed in clothes scrounged from the men's discarded garments—and considering the…erm…wealth of the Watch, that said something for the state of her appearance during those few months—the dress was the prettiest thing she had ever owned in Westeros. It was made of light grey linen and it went over a long white undershirt, with laces at the front so she wouldn't actually need someone to help her with it. That would defeat the point. She was the lady's maid. She didn't get a maid herself.

She tied her hair back in a long braid. Well, it was time to face the music, or rather, her new employers. She felt as if she knew them already, with everything Jon had told her about them. A
knock sounded on her door.

"You ready?" asked Damon as he opened it and peeked around.

She whirled to face him, having expected someone else. "Damon! You scared me! Listen. We need to talk…"

"Now is not a good time, Elena," said Damon. King's Landing had made him harder to read, for he had learned the art all politicians seemed to possess of having absolutely no expression whatsoever. He was still Damon, but not quite the same Damon as when she had left him at his behest. Then again, she wasn't quite the same Elena either. "Come on. You don't keep Sansa and Arya waiting. It's just not done."

She followed him down the stone hallway, past narrow windows that gave her glimpses of the palace grounds below. It was a long way to fall if one were to –accidentally or otherwise– jump out one of them.

The solar was bathed with mellow yellow sunlight. A pretty red-headed girl sat with her head bowed over a piece of beautifully intricate embroidery, the likes of which were never seen in the modern world save for in really really expensive collections of designer clothes at haute couture shows. An old woman sat beside her with the mending, her hair swathed in cloth like a nun. That, she supposed, was the septa. Jon had described her in rather unflattering terms. In one corner, stabbing the fabric but not really making any progress, was a smaller dark haired girl. Elena hid a smile. Arya was exactly as Jon had described her; a skinny sparrow with a sharp beak.

Sansa looked up and smiled when she saw Damon. "Ser Damon, what a surprise to see you here," she said as she glanced at him from beneath long eyelashes. How old was she? Thirteen? Fourteen? Well, all right, with his looks, Damon would make any teenaged girl swoon.

"A good surprise, I hope," said Damon. "I thought I would bring your new handmaiden to meet you."

"A handmaiden?" said Arya.

"Indeed, my lady, by your father's orders," said Damon. "Allow me to present Elena Gilbert. She'll be your companion from now on."

"Elena, like your Elena?" blurted out the younger girl. Even the septa stared.

Damon's eyes darkened, but his smile never slipped out of place. "No," he said. "She's just Elena. Not mine or anyone's Elena."

He bowed and slipped past Elena through the door. As he brushed her shoulder, he leaned down ever so slightly and whispered.

"I won't stop fighting for you."

Arya glanced at their new maid while pretending to work on her embroidery. The patch of stitching grew smaller every time she looked, for she seemed to be unpicking more stitches than she was making them. At this rate, she would be left with nothing but a piece of blank linen with as many holes as Joffrey would have when she was finished with him. In her dreams, anyway. Oh, if only Sansa would do it. She could; she was always spending time with him and his mother these days, which sounded like more fun than sitting here with Septa Mordane bending over embroidery. At least she wasn't completely alone anymore, and she was no longer the worst at needlework.
Elena's brow was furrowed in concentration as she tried to get her stitches just right, and stabbing her finger more often than Arya did. But she looked so beautiful while she did it. No wonder Damon liked her. For once, there was someone prettier than Sansa. It was about time someone showed her sister she was not the gods' gift to mortals.

Septa Mordane sighed. "No, child, your stitches must be small and close together. Oh, look at all those stains! Have you never done embroidery before?"

Elena shook her head. "It wasn't something my parents thought I'd needed to learn," she said. "I'm not a lady. Only ladies learn to embroider."

"And only ladies are taught their letters, yet you are learned," the septa pointed out.

Yes, it was a bit of a mystery. How did Elena know Damon? Without realizing it, Arya leaned forward to better examine the older girl. She had a terrible posture, but her figure was beautiful; even she understood that. Her fingers were long and fine, and her fingernails were neatly trimmed, not cracked and rough like a peasant girl's. Her hair was glossy, so obviously she had enough to eat all her life. No, she was most definitely not a commoner.

The sun touched the top of the window.

"It's time for my dancing lessons," Arya announced, throwing down her needlework with glee and jumping to her feet.

"Arya, ladies do not shout," scolded the septa.

Arya rolled her eyes. "May I please be excused? It is time for my dancing lessons," she said in her best Sansa voice as she curtseyed.

The septa nodded with less disapproval, not detecting any of the dripping sarcasm. Or perhaps she hadn't put enough in.

"Lady Arya, may I accompany you?" asked Elena.

"Elena, you have yet to do one correct row of stitches," said the septa. In that moment, Arya recognized a kindred spirit. Elena didn't want to be here in the solar practising her needlework either!

"She must come with me," she said. "Septa Mordane, she's my maid."

"Companion," the septa corrected her.

"How can she be my companion if she isn't accompanying me?" There. No one could deny that logic.

"I promise I will come back and complete the stitches," said Elena. Perhaps it was those large pretty eyes. Or maybe the septa wasn't as cruel as Arya had thought. Although, whenever Sansa asked for something, regardless of how unreasonable it was, she always got it. Maybe it was the 'lady' effect. Damn, she needed to learn that.

"All right," said Septa Mordane. "But you will return before dinner, the both of you."

Arya grabbed Elena's hand as they ran from the room. It wasn't until they were half way down the corridor that they stopped, breathless, and started giggling with no good reason at all.
"Will you keep a secret?" asked Arya.

"Of course," said Elena. "As long as it's not a life or death secret, in which case I will have a responsibility to tell your father, my lady."

"He knows it," said Arya. "Syrio's not really my dancing master. He teaches me swordplay. Jon gave me a sword and my father said I should learn how to use it if I'm to keep it." She paused. "Did you know Jon on the Wall?" she asked.

Elena had such a pretty smile; it wasn't false at all. Sansa had never given anyone an unfalse smile before, except for Damon. Damon was special. It made her want to throw up her lunch.

"I did, my lady," said Elena. "We're friends. He taught me swordplay."

What? Jon taught Elena swordplay? Why didn't Jon ever teach her swordplay? It wasn't fair! Then again, she could hardly be angry at Elena for it. She was so nice.

"Then you really must practise with me." Her father couldn't have picked a better maid than if he'd actually deliberately tried. But then, she'd heard Robb had recommended her. Clever Robb.

Syrio was waiting and pacing in the room. At that rate, the grooves on the stones would be all worn away. He raised an eyebrow when he saw Elena behind Arya. "Who is your friend, child?"

"This is our new maid Elena," said Arya. "She fights too."

"All fight when their lives depend on it," said Syrio. He suddenly tossed Elena a sword. Arya couldn't help but be impressed as the older girl caught it the first time. She hadn't been able to do that.

"You have good reflexes, Elena," said Syrio. He said her name in a pronounced way, placing an emphasis on the first syllable so it sounded like 'Eee-lena'.

Syrio tossed Arya the other practise sword. She could catch it now as easily as Elena had caught hers. "Now," said the Braavosi. "Let's see how well you two dance."

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**The Wall**

*Dear Jon,*

*I hope you're well, and that this letter finds you safely. Your father and brother have been very accommodating and kind and I cannot repay them enough. I have entered Lord Stark's service as Lady Sansa and Lady Arya's 'companion', which is really a better word for a maid. I know you're laughing. Stop laughing. All right, maybe you can laugh a little bit. But it's really not that funny because I can't embroider, my sewing is crooked, I keep getting bloodstains on my work, and the only dance I know is the one you taught me. I try to practise on my own when there's no one around, but it's not the same.*

*You know what I am acing? Swordplay. Lord Stark hired a sword master for Lady Arya, and I accompany her to her lessons when I can. Sometimes Syrio (that's his name, Syrio Forel) lets me practise with Lady Arya so she can learn to deal with someone with a different style. He says I have excellent footwork. I tell him the credit's mostly yours. Just mostly, mind. One does not have the footwork I do without some natural talent.*
An odd round winking face with an impossibly wide smile and no nose had been drawn here. Jon remembered it was called an 'emoticon'. Elena had told him all about those.

King's Landing cannot be more different from Castle Black. It's hard to describe; you have to see it to really understand. There are people everywhere, which makes things difficult and easy at once. We're never lacking onions, for one, nor carrots or any other vegetable. But sometimes it's so loud you can't hear yourself think. I like going to the market to explore, though. You know what I found the other day? I didn't know what they were at first, but Jory Cassel started laughing uncontrollably when the nice man selling them asked me if I wanted to buy some.

Bulls' testicles. Yes, they eat bulls' balls in King's Landing. And it's not bullshit.

Anyway, Lady Sansa is asking for me, and I should really go. Say hello to Sam, Grenn, Pyp, and Benjen for me, and give Maester Aemon my love and regards.

Yours,

Elena

P.S. Damon sends his regards. It's actually Ser Damon now. Greetings, Frosty. I trust you are protecting us all from the zombie apocalypse and that your brains haven't been eaten yet?

(Jon laughed. Of course Damon would appropriate the pen. He'd written to the Wall just once before, and he'd called Jon 'Frosty the Snowman' before explaining Frosty was a snow sculpture that moved and played with children until he melted. Jon didn't really like the sound of that because he didn't melt, and he was not a snow sculpture! Just a Snow. And what was a 'zom-bee' and what was an 'ay-poke–' Never mind. He gave up. He couldn't even read the word, much less say it. They probably weren't words.)

P.P.S. Sorry about that. Damon's gone now. He's got work to do, he says. I'm not sure what work he could possibly have. Lady Arya says he stands around doing a whole lot of nothing. By the way, P.S. stands for post script which is a note you put after you've signed a letter, just in case you thought it was some secret code, and P.P.S. stands for post post script which is the note you put after the post script. Okay, I really have to go now. One does not make Lady Sansa wait, but I'm sure you know that.

The necklace winked in the moonlight shining through the cracks in the shutters. His breath misted on its silver surface as he dangled the locket before him, just watching it swing and thinking. Elena's letter had arrived earlier that day. He must have read it a thousand times, for he could remember it word for word. How he had brushed his fingers over that familiar round tidy script and the ink blots, pretending it was her voice that was saying these words to him and trying to imagine her in her new King's Landing clothes, looking like the lady she was as she bent over the piece of parchment. She still hadn't mastered using a quill yet, judging by the number of blots and smears.

When he closed his eyes, he saw her again; Elena in the snow holding her arms out like wings and saying she was flying, Elena stepping on his toes whenever they danced while torchlight flickered in her eyes, Elena's lips on his cheek when she had kissed him goodbye.

Elena asking him why he wanted to be in the Night's Watch.

He still couldn't form an answer that would satisfy both of them. Everything he could think of seemed either false or forced, whereas it hadn't before. What had changed? He knew exactly what.
The necklace continued to swing in its lazy arc. He was watching it, but not really watching it. His mind was full of questions and doubts and they swam around and around, screaming in the silence of the darkness.

The locket was yanked from his hand. Jon leapt from the narrow cot. "Give it back, Pyp," he just about snarled. Ghost, at the foot of the bed, did snarl.

"You've been flashing this thing in my eyes for the past two hours," said Pyp. "Some people are trying to sleep here, Jon. What's this anyway?"

"What are you doing up?" whispered a sleepy Sam on the cot at the right side of Jon's. "It's not dawn yet."

"Go back to sleep, Sam," said Jon. "Pypar, give it back!"

"It's pretty plain. I can't imagine it's worth stealing," said the thief as he turned it over in his hands, and then his eyes widened as he recognized it. "Seven hells! It's Elena's necklace!"

"Now I can't go back to sleep," said Sam. He tried to swing his legs over the side of the cot. It took a few tries before he managed to get disentangled from his blanket and rolled off the side, miraculously landing on his feet. "Elena gave you her necklace?"

"What's that noise?" said Grenn with a groan. "I don't know about you, but it's still dark outside."

"Elena gave Jon her necklace!" whispered Pyp and he dashed over to show Grenn before Jon could successfully reclaim his token.

"Shut up!" said Rast from the other end of the room.

"You shut up," the four of them said in unison, but they tried to keep their voices as low as possible after this, not wishing to wake the rest of Castle Black. Instead, they crowded around in a huddle. Jon finally managed to get the necklace back and put it back on. The locket nestled coldly against his heart before his body heat warmed it.

"She loves you," said Sam.

"She's with my friend Damon Salvatore," said Jon.

"The cocky sell-sword who became a cocky knight because he was cocky in front of the king? That Damon Salvatore?" asked Grenn.

"Yes, that Damon Salvatore," said Jon. Damon would make himself known everywhere, including the Wall where they always got the news last. He didn't know why he had chosen the raven as his sigil, although perhaps there was sense behind it. The raven was an animal associated with the dead after all. And his words, 'Tender is the night'? There was nothing tender about vampires and the other creatures that haunted the dark places of time. Unless, of course, said vampire happened to be Elena.

"Well," said Sam sagely. "Elena didn't give Damon her locket, did she?"

"She loves you," said Pyp. Jon looked around at his friends. Their eyes were gleaming in the darkness as they stared at him. "What are you still doing here, Jon, when there's a girl like that out there waiting for you?"

"You don't have to stay, not like us," said Grenn. "You should go to her."
"Yes, you should," said Pyp.

"I'm with them," said Sam.

"I've wanted to be a ranger since I was old enough to understand," said Jon by way of protest. It seemed like a pretty pathetic protest and not really an adequate argument. In his head, he could hear Elena's voice asking him whether it was still what he wanted.

"Men are allowed to change their minds, Jon," said Pyp.

"Well, at least they are before they take their oaths," said Sam. "Just promise you'll think about it, Jon."

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**Casterly Rock**

The tension in Tywin Lannister's study was so stifling, Stefan would not have been surprised if lords started dying of asphyxiation right there and then as they stood before the patriarch of House Lannister.

Tywin slowly set down a little piece of parchment. It curled up on itself, as if afraid to let him see its words again, so much had they angered him. His face was schooled, and there was almost no difference to his heart rate, but Stefan could tell the difference from his slightly heavier breathing as his body took in more oxygen to prepare for a fight or flight response. With Tywin Lannister, it was always a fight response. The lion did not run from anyone.

"It seems like the wolf has bitten off more than he can chew," he said.

"Bitten off what, my lord?" asked one of the bannermen.

"A stunted lion, but a lion nonetheless."

No one said anything. They all knew Tywin didn't think much of his youngest, but he was still a Lannister, no matter his size, and no one ever took a Lannister prisoner without all the other Lannisters trying to get him back. It was more about the family's reputation than anything else, just like his family, except his family never had armies to play with. Thank God for small favours. As Stefan had very quickly learned during his short time in Tywin's service, the Lannister reputation was almost everything. Military might and money made up for the rest.

"Salvatore," said Tywin.

Stefan stepped forward and bowed. "My lord?"

"You will raid the Riverlands," said Tywin. Him? Why him? "Clegane will be your second in command. Burn the villages, raze their crops, salt their fields. Do not fly our banners, but let the word spread. I want Eddard Stark to know about it."

Stefan glanced at the ill-tempered giant who stood on the opposite side of the room just a few feet away; the giant who had been defeated and humiliated in front of the crowds of King's Landing by one Damon Salvatore. He'd been wanting to taste Salvatore blood ever since, and one Salvatore brother was as good as another as far as he was concerned. He didn't have very discerning tastes.

"Yes, my lord," said Stefan. It was a test. He wasn't sure what Tywin was looking for, but putting a Salvatore and a Clegane together, with a knighted Clegane under the un-knighted Salvatore, was an experiment of some kind. It had to be. Otherwise, he was just asking for trouble. But then, maybe
trouble was exactly what he was looking for.

Gregor pounced on Stefan as soon as they were out of earshot and pinned him to a wall. Even he was not stupid enough to disobey Tywin in front of Tywin. But outside, he was quick to assert his authority as the most vicious oaf that ever lived. Well, at least, he tried.

"Lord Tywin might have made put you in command, but I don't listen to Salvatore dogs," he growled.

"Lord Tywin put me in command and I will be in command, Clegane," said Stefan. Hadn't he learned his lesson from Damon already? What made him think that another Salvatore would be easier to take down? Although, he would probably have to do a rinse and repeat in order for him to get the message. "You will remove your hand from my person before I remove it from yours."

If only he'd had a camera to capture the look on Clegane's face as he easily wrenched his arm away from his neck, as if he were no stronger than a newborn child, and then pushed him aside. The men stared at him, some in disbelief, and some in awe. Sometimes, he didn't hate being a vampire.

Their eyes followed him. He commanded some of them to prepare brigands' clothing, and others to ready the gifts that they would leave for the Starks. This wasn't about killing as many people as possible. This was about sending a message, and unlike Damon, he didn't believe in killing the messenger.

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The Riverlands

They burned, they screamed, and they whimpered as they were rounded up while their houses were torn down and their crops were systematically torched and the earth was salted. Stefan had to remind himself he was doing them a favour. If it had been up to Clegane, they would all be dead or maimed. He couldn't exactly save them all. His name might be Salvatore, but he was no saviour. Right now, he was in a strange land trying to make a way for himself and his friends. He had to put them first.

"Take everything you can take," he said to his men. They were more than happy to do as he asked, because they were allowed to keep whatever they wished. There was very little to take. The villagers, while not too badly off by commoner standards, had little of value. The soldiers callously tossed treasured trinkets aside and turned over tables and beds just for the sake of it.

He whipped around at the sound of terrified screams. Clegane. Again. The Mountain was pinning down a girl who could not be more than fifteen. She tried to fight him. He struck her. She continued to fight as he tore off her clothes. He made to hit her again, but his hand never made it down.

Stefan bodily hauled him from the girl. "What did I say? We raid, we burn, we tear things down. No rape, and no killing unless there's resistance," he said, keeping his voice calm but loud enough so everyone could hear. It would be easier for them all if they simply gave up and surrendered. "This is in direct violation of my orders, and my orders are Lord Tywin's orders, Clegane. Do you know what the consequences are?"

"You dare to threaten me, Stefan Salvatore?!" Stefan had never actually seen anyone turn purple before in his life, and it had been a very long life.

The Mountain swung a fist the size of a war hammer at him. Stefan easily dodged. He seized the Mountain's arm, and slammed the side of his gauntleted hand down onto the unprotected inside of
the elbow. Something snapped. Probably a ligament or a tendon. He didn't really care as long as something broke. The Mountain roared in pain and anger, and was quickly shut up by a backhand to the face from the vampire. He threw the giant to the ground, where he scrambled to his feet and glared at anyone who dared to come near him.

"I could end you now," said Stefan. "But I won't. Just remember a dog only has one life." He would have liked to do nothing more than rid the world of that monster, but he doubted Tywin would appreciate it.

He heard the sound of someone rushing at him before one of the villagers slammed into him and almost knocked him to the ground. He must have taken Stefan's mercy as a sign of weakness. As though he could defeat the man who had taken down the Mountain unarmed.

Stefan seized him by the throat, and before anyone could see what he was doing, he had plunged a little dagger into the base of the man's skull where the spine joined with it. The blade met with little resistance as it went in, right through to the cerebellum.

The man went stiff, and then limp. Stefan let the man's body fall to the ground, still twitching with life.

"Bury him," he said. He could not let his emotions get in the way. No, he could not. If he felt those feelings, then he would want to turn them all off. And he could not turn them off right now! He needed all his senses if he were to survive and help his friends survive too.

"He's still alive, ser," said one of the men.

"I know," said Stefan. "Bury him."

There was very little resistance after that.

The village looked very pretty from a distance. It was surrounded by greenery and wooden palisades that looked as if they had been erected more than a century ago, and a little winding dirt path went through the middle. On either side were cute little round thatched straw and stone huts with chimney holes in the centre of the roof. How very quaint. Some of the richer villagers, like the blacksmith, actually had a cottage with mud brick walls.

The path led to the very heart of the settlement; a merry little pub which was already attracting a great many farmers tired from tilling the fields. She ducked inside without many people noticing her and sat in a shadowy corner, as she was wont to do. She ordered a bowl of thick hearty fish stew and a tankard of the only wine they served. Oh, she missed bubbly.

The fish was good and fresh, with white flaky meat, but she hadn't come here for the food. Well, it was part of it. Even vampires occasionally craved non-blood products. Two men who were too well dressed to be mere villagers came in, quietly discussing the recent raids in the Riverlands. They were the tallest people in the whole of the pub, and the only two blonds.

"Nice little village, this one," one of them was saying. "Do you think Salvatore will want raze it too?"

"The Mountain will want to raze it, but he can't. Stefan Salvatore is too smart for that, and he won't risk his position as Lord Tywin's newest favourite."

Stefan was here too? Well, well. It wasn't entirely unexpected, she supposed, now that she knew Elena and Damon were both here too. Who was next? Baby Gilbert? He wouldn't last. The Bennett
witch? She might last, until they decided to burn her for being a witch. Or perhaps an original or two? She hoped it would be the nice one who liked her, although she wasn't counting on it.

"He's not Lord Tywin's newest favourite. The pretty one is," said the first.

"Salvatore is pretty." He had good taste, that second man.

"Not in that way. The other pretty one. The blonde little lady knight. Lady Mikaelson."

Lady Mikaelson? How did Rebekah manage that? She hadn't met her yet, but from what she'd heard from Elijah and from what she'd observed when she had been –ahem– keeping an eye on Stefan during the thirties, Rebekah had been a bit of a brat. Very pretty though, if one liked freckly dumb blondes. Lord Tywin Lannister couldn't be that bright if he'd made Rebekah a knight.

"She's not a lady," said the second man. Amen. "She's a knight. You should call her ser."

"She's not a ser. She's a woman. 'Ser' is an honorific that you use for a man."

"Oh shut it and drink your wine."

"It's not wine. It's ale."

"I'll 'ail' you if you don't shut up."

Well, if Rebekah Mikaelson was in the south, then here was just one more reason not to go there.
War, Hate, and Misunderstandings

Chapter Summary

Sansa uncovers a dangerous and thrilling secret. Damon takes responsibility and tries to protect his new friends. Stefan makes a gruesome discovery and wonders who else is in Westeros. Daenerys dodges an assassination attempt and doesn't really learn much more about the enigma that is Niklaus Mikaelson.

King's Landing

Damon's Elena. She'd been a story in Winterfell; someone to imagine and wonder about. Who was this woman who had gained Damon Salvatore's adoration? She'd seen the way Damon had looked at her. It was as if he could sustain himself on the sight of her alone. No one ever looked at Sansa that way, not even Joffrey who professed to love her.

Sansa touched the dragonfly necklace he had given her as an apology for all his past bad behaviour. It was a beautiful necklace; there was no doubt about it, and he had been behaving much better since. Why, he'd even picked her a flower while they'd been out riding two days ago, and she'd pressed it in a book beside Damon's carnation. But even so, no man had ever looked at a woman the way Damon looked at Elena.

She raised an eyebrow as Elena stabbed her finger yet again and muttered a curse. It certainly wasn't her needlework skills that had enticed Damon. But she was well-spoken, learned, and undeniably beautiful, just as Damon was undeniably handsome and most definitely not a commoner by birth. Whoever they both were, they just had to be important people.

"How do you know Damon?" she asked suddenly. Septa Mordane was away on some errand or another –she didn't really care to know– and she had thought the girls would behave with Elena watching them. What she really didn't know was Elena and Arya sometimes played at sparring when they thought no one was watching. But unlike Arya, Elena had made it look graceful and feminine. Although, Damon's occasional participation might have changed Sansa's mind about swordplay and women. If he liked women who could fight, then perhaps there was some merit in a lady learning how to use a sword.

"He and his brother saved my life several times when we lived in the same town, milady," said Elena. Damon had a brother? Sansa made a note of that in her mind. She'd find out more about him later.

"And where is your town?"

"It's in the south."

Getting answers out of her was harder than sums. "What is it called?" asked Sansa.

Elena set down her embroidery and looked up. For a while, Sansa thought she would have to command her to answer, but then the older girl sighed. "Mystic Falls."

Mystic Falls. It was such a strange sounding name, and she had never heard of it. But then, Elena
'Elena' and 'Damon' were both Targaryen names. So their families must have been close with the Targaryens at some point…

"How did you end up at the Wall, and Damon in Winterfell?"

"We were exiled," said Elena. "Someone was hunting us, and while we were running, we were separated." This had to be it! Elena was an important noblewoman on the run from someone, which was why she'd had to learn to fight, and Damon was her defender! And somewhere along the way, they'd fallen in love, and become separated…

She glanced at Arya. For once, it was not with disdain.

"Who was hunting you?" asked Arya. Her embroidery was completely forgotten. What was she trying to make? Mountains? Never mind. They crowded around Elena, determined to get more out of her than Theon had gotten out of Damon. The older girl seemed easier to cajole and she had already taken on the look of a hunted rabbit, as if she was terrified that they would find out the truth and then turn her in…

Who would be hunting her anyway? The one person who hated Targaryens and their supporters the most, of course! It was so obvious! Gods, this was so dangerous, her being in King's Landing, although Sansa would be the last to tell fat King Robert anything. But then, she couldn't put Damon and his lady in danger. She wouldn't tell anyone. It was all just so romantic, like something out of the stories she loved to hear and the songs the troubadours sang.

"Your family were Targaryen loyalists, weren't they?" asked Sansa.

"I…"

"They must have been, or why else would you have been hunted out of your home? You're not a peasant girl. You can read and write and fight, but you'd never had the chance to learn embroidery and the womanly arts because you were always running for your life, and Damon and his brother were your protectors!"

Arya was getting into it. Her eyes shone. "Is your name even Elena Gilbert?" she asked.

"Milady…" began Elena. She was so flustered they had to be right. She was using a false name, and she'd been at the Wall because it was the furthest anyone could ever hope to run! But then they'd sent her right back into danger.

"You don't have to worry, Elena," said Sansa. "We won't tell anyone, we swear. Isn't that right, Arya?"

Her sister nodded; for once, they were in agreement. An exiled, hunted lady and her brave, loyal knight; even the tales couldn't get any better than this!

And at that moment, their father came in. They sprang back. Arya knocked over the sewing basket, and Sansa couldn't locate her needle. Hopefully someone wouldn't sit on it in the future. As for Elena, she still looked as if she were in shock. But Ned noticed none of that.

"Pack your things, girls," said Ned. "We're going back to Winterfell tomorrow."

At once, the excitement that had been fluttering in Sansa's heart turned to lead. After King's Landing, home seemed so dull. She wanted to see more of the real city, to attend tournaments and
see knights admiring her beauty. "But why, Father?" she asked.

"Please, Sansa," said her father.

"Look on the bright side, Sansa," said Arya. "You don't have to marry Princess Joffrey anymore."

"He does not look like a girl, Arya. He's a fierce little lion with a golden mane, and I will be his queen one day." To be honest, losing the chance of being queen was a thousand times worse than losing Joffrey. She'd had that dream again about her wedding, and her dream-husband, who she would never ever name to anyone, had been black-haired and blue-eyed again. It had been even more exciting that way, actually. But the crown; the crown was absolutely necessary.

"Little lion?" echoed her father. His eyes widened, suddenly realizing something. Sansa would have asked him what—because she was in the mood for asking questions today— but Lord Baelish's timely arrival saved him from the Sansa inquisition.

It was only delayed. She'd discovered Elena and Damon's secret. She would discover this one too.

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If only there was a way to ascertain Joffrey's paternity. Unlike home, there was no such thing as a paternity test in Westeros. He could always try to drink Joffrey to identify his blood type before trying to determine his paternity that way, but that would mean he would have to taste the crown prince and the queen and a whole lot of blond noblemen, namely the entire Lannister family—

*Lannister.* Surely Cersei would have better taste? Then again, she was married to Robert. Even Varys would be an improvement, and her family members were all decent-looking, with the best looking one being Jaime…

But no. That was her twin. There was wrong, and then there was wrong.

Anyway, it hardly mattered. Why did he care if there was an inbred Lannister on the throne? It was Ned who would care, and it was Ned that Damon had to worry about if he ever found out the truth. Eddard Stark was an honest and honourable man who would never let an imposter succeed his best friend, and if he denounced the little golden haired shit, the proverbial shit would hit the fan.

He wiped down the book carefully to make sure there was no pink powdery residue left to cause suspicion. Not that anyone would think to tie him with make-up. He was too pretty to need make-up. As he worked, he listened for footsteps outside his room. It was a pretty plain room with a curving wall and a window cut in the stone. He lived on one of the middle bottom levels, which made sneaking out without anyone noticing him a little easier than it would have been had he been living up near the top. The Hand and his family lived in the upper apartments. That was where all the interesting things happened.

A door slammed downstairs, followed by rapid angry footsteps. Damon quickly stuffed the book, pink powder residue mostly gone but not quite, onto his bookshelf which was cluttered up with books he'd purchased as well as piles of rubbish that he'd somehow accumulated while trying to investigate the secret—which was no longer secret. He made sure the spine was facing inwards so no one would be able to recognize it. Who hid a book on a bookshelf, right?

He stepped outside to see the whole household in an uproar. "What's going on?" he asked Jory.

"We're going home, Damon," said the squire.

"Wait, what?" But they'd only just arrived!
"Lord Stark had a disagreement with the king and he has resigned as Hand. No, Damon, I don't know what it was they disagreed about, and I didn't ask."

Well, of course Jory didn't ask. Jory never asked. It was his one great flaw which he shared with just about every man under Stark employ. They blindly obeyed without ever questioning why, like sheep in wolves' clothing. Well, if Jory couldn't tell him, and Ned wouldn't tell him, then there was one man who could and possibly would, given the right incentives.

Then again, it would be hard to ask Petyr Baelish anything if Petyr Baelish was upstairs talking with Ned Stark.

"These are dangerous times, Damon. Try not to do anything stupid. Actually, just don't do anything," said Jory.

"But stupid is so much more fun!" protested Damon. However, upon seeing Jory's face, he sighed. "Fine." Stark men had no humour. He closed the door behind him. He would have to replace the book very very soon. It would stay hidden for now, but once they were gone, and the servants started cleaning up the Tower of the Hand for the next Hand, they would find it, and then they would start suspecting something.

He went upstairs to see if the ladies needed any help in packing up their things. Half of the boxes, when they had moved from Winterfell, had belonged to them. Well, Sansa mostly. She had a lot of things. Now she had even more, with all the dresses she'd bought, and all her presents.

But packing was only secondary. He wanted to be on the same level as Ned and Baelish so he could hear what they were saying, and helping the girls was as good an excuse as any.

He caught snatches of their conversation as he went up the stairs. There was a lot of mention of honour and mercy –on Ned's part– and necessity and Targaryen girls and babies –on Baelish's part. Robert wanted to kill some pregnant exiled Targaryen princess, it seemed, and Ned didn't. Well, that sounded like Ned, giving up one of the most coveted jobs in the realm because of his conscience. The one thing you could expect of an honest man was that he could always be counted upon to do something really really stupid.

And then Baelish was enticing Ned to delay his departure for one more hour to go to his brothel. Not for fun, mind. Ned didn't know how to have fun. What he did know how to do was ceaselessly chase Jon Arryn's tail. Trail, rather. It would be awfully bad if he did figure it out. But this hour might just be what Damon needed to put the book back. He could always go up under the pretence that Ned had sent him to overlook the packing up of his study. He was a knight. Hardly anyone would question him.

Ned's study was mostly empty by the time he got there. The desk had been left where it was, its wood worn smooth by generations of Hands. It would remain long after every one of them ceased to exist. The shelves had been mostly emptied. Damon made sure no one was paying him any attention, and then slipped the book back on the shelf. There. Now if anyone happened to find it there, they wouldn't suspect anything.

As he closed the door behind him, he glanced back at the Hand's study with more than just an ounce of regret. Only a few pieces of parchment on the floor indicated that Ned Stark and his household had ever been here. That, and the incriminating book which he hoped no one would notice until much much later. He could have done something great here. A knighthood was the first step to nobility, and not every knight in the realm had been invited to lunch with the queen. Although, now that he knew Cersei's secret, it was probably better to stay away from her. She would kill anyone who knew to keep her precious Joffrey safe.
Well, he was immortal. There would always be other chances for him. Besides, he wasn't going to lose everything. Baelish was still an untrustworthy friend, but a friend nonetheless, and he'd made himself known to Loras Tyrell. He could do something with those two. He just wasn't sure what he would do yet. No, not a threesome. Loras wouldn't mind, but it was so not his and Baelish's thing.

He was in the middle of helping to bring the last of Sansa's coffer down the stairs –just how many dresses did that girl have, anyway?– when he heard shouts coming from the courtyard. The coffer landed with a thud as he dropped it. Something smashed inside, and too late he noticed Elena's writing on the chest saying 'Fragile'. Oops. Whatever.

The vampire raced outside and pushed aside the servants who were blocking his way. "What the fuck happened here--" he began to ask Jory, since the unconscious Ned was not going to answer. Besides, one did not say 'fuck' to a lord. But...where was Jory? He looked around for the squire. "Where the hell is Jory Cassel?" he demanded.

"Dead," said Baelish, walking in through the gate. He was as calm as he usually was, but there was something that almost seemed like worry in his eyes. "Your lord was attacked by Jaime Lannister."

"Jaime Lannister, was it? Damon had wanted to fight him for a long time. Now he had the perfect chance and the perfect reason. He was a knight of House Stark. He was supposed to defend his liege, wasn't he? He made to go, but Baelish placed a hand on his chest to stop him in his short-lived path to incomplete vengeance.

"Don't," said Baelish. "Jaime Lannister is long gone by now, and if you go after him, it will only do Eddard Stark more harm. You don't want that, do you?"

Damon wasn't sure what he didn't want. He knew he wanted to fight Jaime Lannister and let him know that he wasn't the be all and end all. No one hurt Damon's friends without paying, and Damon took all his friends' wellbeing very seriously for the most part, barring a few occasions when he'd had to snap their necks, because he had so few of them. Friends, that was. And he never snapped a friend's neck unless he knew for certain they had resurrection rings or were vampires.

"And however flawed his plan, don't you think he would have had a reason? Best to keep watch and see what happens," said Baelish.

He left Damon standing in the courtyard supporting –or rather, carrying– the unconscious Ned Stark, taking his city guard with him. Damon stared at the man's retreating back, wondering once again what sort of world and mess he'd gotten himself into, and whether or not he should try and fix it.

Or whether he could fix it.

He took Ned to his chambers himself. The man was not a giant, but he wasn't light either, and it was simply easier for Damon to do it rather than passing him onto the servants. Plus, there was ‘special tea’ to brew, and he didn't actually trust very many of the servants save for the ones they'd brought from Winterfell. As time had passed, he'd uncovered more spies, not that he could have killed any of them, because that would have raised suspicions.

The smell of blood –Starks had good blood– was making him a little bit hungry again. But drinking Ned was not an option. He would have to satisfy himself with one of Cersei's spies – he was allowed to make an exception just the once, wasn't he? Consider it revenge of the lowest order. He would work up the scale eventually. Salvatore's always paid their debts too. Except for when they owed Klaus, but he was an exceptional case. And she-who-must-not-be-named.
A running Elena almost crashed into him, and if they hadn't had quick enough to react, all three of them would have gone down in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, doing the injured Ned no favours. "Oh my God, what happened?" she said.

"Jaime Lannister happened," said Damon grimly. "You all ready to go? We're leaving as soon as he's patched up. Jory's dead. It looks like I'm in charge now."

"Oh God, how?"

"I'm not God, but I can tell you it most likely had something to do with Lady Stark taking Tyrion Lannister, and Jaime likes his brother as much as I like mine, it seems. Yes, I have omniscience although I'm not as omnipotent as I would like to be. It's best you don't get involved in all these political shenanigans, Elena. Go and get Arya and Sansa ready."

"Arya's missing," said Elena. "I need to find her."

"How about you take care of Lord Stark, and I will go look for our wayward Joan of Arc. You take care of him yourself. I don't trust anyone else. Not at a time like this."

Before Elena could come up with any better suggestions—not that she could, because it was best for everyone if no one realized he was also capable of healing people, as that would raise too many questions—or ask any more questions, he passed Ned Stark to her and disappeared around the corner before she could say anything.

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The Fever

The fire crackled and gave off a lot of smoke. Cooking had never been her forte. The fish's skin blackened and turned into charcoal before she could take it off the spit. It was a pathetic excuse for a trout, all thin and bony. It had not even had more than a mouthful of blood that tasted like mud, and she was still so hungry after drinking it that she now had to eat its charred mortal remains. She felt more like Renfield than Dracula right now.

She'd never hit such a low point since the first days of her exile when she'd sat by a road and cried. She tried to think of all the possibilities that awaited her in the north. Perhaps Prince Charming was waiting for her there.

She was hungry enough to eat Prince Charming.

Her horse cropped grass nearby. She needed it, so she didn't eat it. Did she leave Edmure a thank you note? Perhaps she ought to send a box of chocolates later. But they didn't have chocolates in Westeros. They were so deprived.

Hoof beats approached. She looked up and abandoned the charcoal stick that had once been a wriggling fish so juicy sweet.

The two men approached her. Their horses were sweaty from a hard ride. "Where is Barrowton?" asked one of them without so much as a greeting. To quote the most irritating organism in the history of the Galactic Empire, how rude!

She considered not answering and simply taking what she wanted, but no. She was bored—it was so easy to get bored in Westeros—and she wanted to play.

She pointed out a difficult and rough 'road' through the forest, knowing fully well it did not lead to Barrowton. She had, after all, obtained a map. They did not even bother questioning her before
riding into the sunset. How romantic.

She ate what meat there was on the fish and then settled in to wait. The men returned when the moonlight was casting silvery grey shadows on the mottled carpet of fallen leaves and withered grass. "You lied to us, bitch!" snarled one of the –was that a man or a grumpkin?

He was on foot, with twigs in his hair and mud all over him. She had to use all her self-restraint to stop herself from giggling. As it were, she only snorted.

"Oh, you think it's funny, do you?" asked the second grumpkin. "We are going to make you sing."

"I don't think it's funny," she said. "I think it's hilarious that you think I have anything to be afraid of." She flexed her fingers. "I mean, look at me." With that, she snapped his companion's neck. She would have ripped his throat out, but that was a wonton waste of blood.

The remaining grumpkin tried to run, but she blocked his path wherever he turned.

"Please, have mercy!" he begged. The smell of hot ammonia hit her. Really?

"Well, since you said please," she said. He looked hopeful before she snapped his neck too.

Dinner was served.

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Stefan found them drained of blood by the roadside, the horror still in their dead glassy eyes and their necks at odd angles. Both of them had two puncture wounds on their necks.

He had the men bury them and spoke sharp words to anyone who dared to mention anything to do with Dracula or vampires.

Who had done it? Damon? But Damon was in King's Landing, and Rebekah and Caroline were both with Lord Tywin.

Then who was it?

Could it be Klaus?

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**Vaes Dothrak**

She heard of his deeds wherever she went. They called him the White Death from the West. He feared nothing. The tribes and free cities trembled at his name and rogues of every kind rallied to his banner because they knew they would reap the spoils of his victories.

"*He is a brigand who has gathered a band of followers,*" Drogo said dismissively in that strangely rough yet musical language of his. "*He is nothing.*"

Daenerys didn't tell him she still kept the sketch he had drawn of her on her wedding day; of her in her flowing dress and with such wistful eyes. Looking at the picture made her feel as if he understood her even though they had only exchanged a few words. Niklaus Mikaelson. What an odd name. The truth was, she had never stopped wondering about him. He had ridden off right after her wedding, and she had never seen him since, but they kept whispering his name. All she could remember was the wicked smile and the soothing velvety tones of his voice. There was something about a man who could create such beauty and such terrible destruction with the same pair of hands.
She mentioned nothing of Niklaus to Drogo. Her husband was kind and loving and she had come to care for him, but there was always something standing between them like a glass barrier. It had nothing to do with language, for she was quickly learning the Dothraki tongue. It had more to do with something on a deeper level. They did not have much in common.

For Drogo, life was about conquests and glory and protecting his people and his family. There was little else beyond that. He had no curiosity for what lay beyond the horizons he knew, no hunger to see the great cities in the west, and no desire to live in anything other than a tent of skins. As far as he was concerned, Vaes Dothrak was the greatest city that ever existed. The rest of them were merely pens for sheep and goats for the khalasar to raid whenever they needed supplies or slaves. As for music and art, there was nothing better than the battle cries of warriors and their blood painting the sand.

But the man who had given her that drawing; he understood what it was like to see beyond what his eyes beheld. When Daenerys thought of him, she saw opportunity and freedom. Niklaus Mikaelson would not be constrained by expectations. He was unpredictable, unfathomable. That little bit of mystery was what drew her to him.

With her child quickening in her womb, the khalasar settled in at Vaes Dothrak, giving gifts of slaves and horses and expecting gifts in return.

"Is that not exactly the same as trading?" Daenerys asked Jorah as they strolled through the markets, looking at everything they had to offer. It was, after all, 'free', so long as you had gifts to give.

"It's not called trading," said Jorah wryly.

Chickens clucked, ducks quacked, and sheep chewed straw slowly in their pens, watching Daenerys and her retinue with sleepy eyes.

She saw him from a distance. His tall lean figure in that billowing white linen shirt was unmistakable, and beneath his arm, he carried rolls of parchment and a box of brushes and paints. When he saw her, he swept a low courtly bow, his eyes gleaming with wickedness. "Khaleesi," he said.

"Lord Niklaus," she said. "We meet again."

"Please, call me Klaus, for I am no lord," said the man.

"Niklaus, where have you been?" asked Jorah.

"Here and there, my friend," said Klaus.

"So I have heard," said Jorah. "You've made quite a name for yourself, White Death."

"The cities needed pruning. They were becoming a little overpopulated and inundated with unneeded goods."

"Is that how you see it?" asked Daenerys. "Pruning?" She had pruned her lemon trees in Pentos, but it had never been in such a violent way.

"It is the law of nature, Khaleesi. The predators keep the prey numbers steady. If the prey populations become too big, then what would they eat? It would all collapse."

"By the way you say it, it sounds as if you are doing them a favour," said Daenerys.
"I believe I am, Khaleesi," said Klaus. He looked up at the rest of her retinue, who seemed to be
wondering what Daenerys was doing talking to him. "Shall we walk together, Khaleesi, since it
seems the gods had intended for us to meet today?"

"I would like that," she said, "Klaus."

"I will be not be joining you, I am afraid," said Jorah.

"Why not, Ser Jorah? It is a beautiful day for a walk with friends, is it not?" asked Klaus.

"Sadly, some of us are not free men and I have duties I must attend to," said Jorah. He bowed to
her. "Khaleesi, since you are in such fine company, will you give me leave to depart for a while?"

"Of course," said Daenerys. He probably had more important things to do than accompany a young
girl while she looked at market stalls and talked with enigmatic painters. "Take as long as need, Ser
Jorah. I am sure Klaus will keep me safe."

They passed by stalls with goods from Westeros. Klaus showed her his brushes and his paints, and
she asked if he would paint her a portrait.

"It would be my greatest pleasure," he said. "An artist can hardly ask for a lovelier subject."

She felt heat rushing into her face as she blushed, delighted by his praise. Drogo, even when he
was calling her the moon of his life, could not elicit such a reaction from her. What was it about
Klaus and his voice? And those eyes; she loved looking at those ancient ageless eyes.

A wine merchant called out to her. She was glad for the distraction, for her thoughts became too
confusing at that moment. His fragrant barrels reminded her of the wine she used to drink in
Pentos. He offered her a taste of his best Dornish red, and she was about to accept when Jorah
intervened. Where had he come from?

"Why don't you taste it first?" Jorah said to the merchant. The merchant remained smiling, but his
eyes froze.

"Oh, no," he said. "I can't. This wine is too fine for the likes of me."

Something in the back of Daenerys' mind gave her warning. "Drink it," she said to him.

"Well, if the Khaleesi commands it," said the merchant. He made to raise the cup to his lips, but
then he threw it into Jorah's face, blinding him. The man began running, darting and dodging
between the stalls while the Dothraki chased after him, shouting for the bystanders to stop him.

Out of nowhere, Klaus appeared in the middle of his path and seized him, lifting him up by the
throat with one hand. "Where are you off to in such a hurry, mate?" he asked. The man scrabbled at
Klaus' hand, but it had no effect. Klaus' fingers began to tighten and his grin widened.

"I want him alive, Klaus," said Daenerys, stopping him before he could accidentally get rid of
useful evidence.

"If the Khaleesi so commands it," said Klaus. He seemed a little disappointed that he would not be
able to crush the man's windpipe with just one hand, but Daenerys thought it was too quick a death.
Besides, she needed to know who had sent him. She had her suspicions, but she needed
confirmation.

He threw the man into the arms of the waiting Dothraki who bound him like a sheep being
prepared for slaughter. The would-have-been assassin spat and swore, but his voice was hoarse from just having been strangled.

Klaus bowed to Daenerys. "Until we meet again, love," he said just loudly enough for her and her only.

Then she blinked, and he was gone.
Chapter Summary

Damon's associates draws Ned's suspicions. Caroline gets a promotion. Jaime arrives at Tywin's camp and makes a new acquaintance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

King's Landing

Someone had broken off the spear, but the head still remained buried in Ned Stark's ankle. It took the maester an hour to work it out, not daring to move it too much in case he damaged the tendons or bones.

The door opened. Robert filled the doorway with his immense girth, his face grim and for one of those rare moments in his life, sober. Or relatively, anyway. "How is he?" he asked gruffly to mask his concern. While Elena could not agree with any of Robert's policies—he had all of one which seemed to dictate he leave all the work to other people while he had fun—she was touched by his concern for his friend. He was loyal, at least, which was a lot more than one could say for some other kings.

"He's unconscious still, Your Grace," said the maester with a bow as Elena dipped a curtsey. She was getting better at it. Sansa had been teaching her. "His leg will mend, but he will walk with a limp for the rest of his days, I fear."

"If I ever catch that brother of yours, I will break both his legs," Robert said, and it was only then that Elena noticed he had not come alone. Cersei had come. It was the first time she had seen the queen—or the king, for that matter, but the queen was more impressive. She'd heard a lot about Cersei, of course, both from Sansa and from Damon. The former had spoken of her grace and beauty and cold eyes. The latter had warned Elena to stay away from her and out of her notice. "Think of her as the jealous evil bitch queen in Snow White, whichever version is nastier," he had said. "Don't be Snow White."

The maester gave her a prescription for a tea to brew for Lord Stark. She hurried off to find the ingredients. No one would be touching this medicine except her. Damon had said not to trust anyone, right?

She checked the ingredients, just to make sure they were all safe, and tried to remember what Maester Aemon had taught her about herbs. Milk of the poppy, better known as opium. Or maybe heroin. That was for the pain, by the way, not to make Lord Stark high. Elderflowers, in case he contracted a fever and to help the body fight off infection. It all seemed to be in order. The servants left her to it. None of them wanted to offend her. Her position as Sansa and Arya's handmaid and as Damon's...friend seemed to give her an elevated status amongst them. She made sure no one was watching, and then pricked her finger, allowing several drops to fall into the tea, stirring it until the red was dispersed throughout. If one had really keen eyes, one might notice a reddish tint. Otherwise, it was just a murky unpalatable brew.
By the time she returned with the steaming cup, the king and queen were leaving. She kept her eyes down as she curtsied again. The maester was gone, too, leaving Ned alone and sitting up on his bed, his face drawn with pain as he played with the pin shaped like a hand pointing downwards.

"My lord?" she said.

"Shouldn't you be with Arya and Sansa?" he asked.

"Lady Arya is at her lessons with Master Forel," said Elena. She was not about to tell him that his daughter was still missing and Damon was out looking for her. At least, not yet. "Septa Mordane is with Lady Sansa. I took the liberty of brewing your tea for you. Bonnie gave me the recipe."

"Bonnie Bennett did my son a great turn," said Ned. "It was her medicine that saved his life." He held his hand out for the cup and grimaced when he tasted the contents before downing it in one gulp. Then he glanced down at his bandaged leg and foot, amazed. "Robb was right to send you to King's Landing."

It was the closest thing to praise she'd ever heard him say. She turned around to leave, but today was a day for visitors, it seemed. Arya barged in, looking like she'd crawled out of a sewer somewhere. She smelled of old dust and there was a cobweb in her hair. Even Damon behind her wasn't quick enough to stop her from rushing to her father and throwing her arms around him. "They want to kill you! I heard them! They want to kill you like they killed the other Hand!" she said as she buried her face in her father's chest.

"Who?" asked Ned.

"I don't know," said Arya.

"What happened?" Ned looked at both the one who had found her and the one who was supposed to be looking after her.

"She got lost chasing a cat into the dungeons," said Damon, jumping in to save Elena before she could say anything to get herself into trouble. Not that Elena knew what to say.

"I heard two fat men talking about a war and savages and killing you and somebody trying to kill Bran," said Arya. She looked up at him with large round eyes. "You're not going to die, are you?"

"Of course not," said Ned. He didn't really sound that confident.

Burned crops, houses razed to the ground, salted earth, live burials and rotting trout; these were no ordinary brigands.

"Did they bear any standards?" asked Ned of the terrified villager whose son had been buried while alive but paralyzed. He'd seen the body, and it had made him cold. The tiny wound at the base of the man's skull had looked too small and too clean for such a horrific death. There hadn't even been that much blood.

"None, Your Grace," said the old man. Then again, he couldn't possibly be that old. His boy had been Robb's age. The villagers huddled together in the centre of the throne room, looking very out of place and very frightened of all the finery and the armed guards. Tears made pale tracks on their dirty faces. All of them had lost something, or someone, to the so-called bandits.

"This is the Hand of the King you are addressing, not the King," said Beric Dondarrion, the young Lord of Blackhaven who had been in King's Landing for the tournament.
The already frightened man shrank back further, but his son's terrifying death must have given him more courage than anyone could have expected. He continued on. "There was a man, taller than any other by a head. He wielded a big sword that was as tall as a man and that could cleave a tree in half."

Murmurs rippled through the throne room. They all recognized the Mountain's description when they heard it.

"He tried to take Ham's daughter by force, but the other one, the one who killed my son, he stopped him. The big one called him Stefan Salvatore."

All around the court, men exchanged glances with one another. Ned tightened his grip on the head of his cane. Salvatore. It was not a common name. In fact, until Damon turned up on the doorstep of Winterfell, he had never heard it before. His bannerman had a lot of explaining to do.

"Lord Beric Dondarrion," he said. Beric stepped forward. He was not a particularly handsome man, but he had honest eyes and a keen, brave heart. It would take a brave heart to confront the Mountain. It briefly occurred to him that the only men he had seen who could manage the Mountain on the battlefield or the tilting grounds were Jaime Lannister and Damon, but with another Salvatore out there, he didn't trust Damon even though he might be one of the few men left to trust in King's Landing. "I charge you, ser, with bringing the false knight Gregor Clegane and his commander to justice."

"My lord," said Pycelle. "Would that be wise?"

Ned ignored him. "And summon Tywin Lannister. He is to come to King's Landing to answer for the crimes of his bannermen. He will arrive in two weeks or be named an enemy of the Crown." All the courtiers murmured to one another, but they quietened when he gave them a look.

"A bold move, my lord," said Baelish. He leaned closer as if he had something for Ned's ears alone. "But bold is not always clever."

"I am acting in the name of the King while King Robert is absent," said Ned.

The gauntlet had been thrown down. The men bowed and left to do his bidding.

Ned suddenly felt a shiver go through him. Winter was coming. He shook it off. He had faced winters and wars before. He could face Tywin Lannister with the authority of the king behind him. It was time to break the lion's hold on the throne. For now, they might as well be sitting on it.

He returned to the Hand's Tower. "Jory, summon Damon Salvatore," he said to his squire, but then he remembered; Jory Cassel was dead. He didn't even have a squire now. "Summon Damon Salvatore," he repeated to one of the guards. The man bowed. He returned to his almost empty study and looked around the stone room. Just a few days ago, he had thought he would never see it again. He frowned when he saw the heavy volume with its cracked leather cover and faded gold lettering on the spine. The book. Had it been there all along on his bookshelf? He picked it up and flicked through it, brushing his fingers over the pages. His brow furrowed further when he noticed something powdery on them and his fingers came away tinted with a little bit of pink. Had someone else been reading it? Was that why he hadn't found it? Who? He rubbed the powder between his fingers. A woman, maybe? Sansa?

Cersei?

When the guard told him Ned wanted to see him, Damon thought nothing of it. It was only natural,
with him being the one in charge of protecting Ned's household now that Jory was gone. He found Ned looking at the book again.

"You wanted to see me, my lord?" he asked. His eyes flicked to the book briefly. Uh oh. Ned was on the Lannister page. Well, at least it wasn't the Baratheon page.

"Is there something you would like to tell me, Damon?" asked Ned. His voice was cold and calm. What now? Did he find out about the vampire thing? Did someone tell him about his friendly banter with Sansa? Didn't he know it was just friendly banter with a little girl who read far too much into it?

Or was it about the book? No. It couldn't. He'd been careful, hadn't he?

"Is there something I should tell you, my lord?" he asked. He wasn't going to give anything up without some hint of what it was that Ned knew. No point in telling him what he didn't know. Sometimes to keep people in the dark was to keep everyone safe. Because if Ned found out he'd been engaged in a bit of G-rated flirting with Sansa, he'd be in a spot of trouble even if he meant nothing by it.

"I was hoping you might tell me," said Ned. He pulled out a crumpled piece of parchment and pushed it across the desk towards Damon. It was a report about raids across the Riverlands. The body count wasn't high, but someone had been paralyzed by a knife to the brain and then buried alive. There was a mention of a particularly giant brigand who seemed more interested in killing things than taking them. Could Gregor Clegane be anymore obvious?

"Interesting," said Damon. "But it wasn't me."

"Does the name Stefan Salvatore mean anything to you?"

He froze. Stefan was here too? He glanced down at the parchment again. Surely… "He's my brother," said Damon, passing the parchment back to Ned. "We were separated when we were exiled."

"He's serving the Lannisters," said Ned.

Stefan had always had exceptionally bad judgement. No, it wasn't projection.

"Look, my lord, I don't exactly keep a track of everything my brother does," said Damon. "The thing is, I'm not the demon or angel perched on his shoulders telling him what to do. Stefan does whatever Stefan pleases and I'm usually the last to hear about it."

"How can I trust that you don't share his allegiances?"

"How can you trust that he doesn't share my allegiances?" He sighed. Ned was still suspicious, and he couldn't exactly allay that fear without explaining the whole teleportation thing, and that would open a whole new can of worms. "The truth is, this is the first I've heard of Stefan since we were separated."

Ned sighed and tapped the book. His fingers were on Jaime's name. "I've trusted you this far, Salvatore," he said. "Don't betray that trust."

"I don't say this to just everybody –in fact, I've never said it to anyone except Elena– but you can trust me."

He paused. Did he actually mean that? Since when did he turn into chivalrous white knight Ser
Damon? It was these Starks. What were they doing to him? Whatever it was, it needed to stop. Like, right now. Or yesterday.

Blackwater Rush Crossing

It didn't really make a lot of sense to Caroline at first. Why was Tywin sending Stefan and the 'Mountain Who Rides' –he wasn't that big– to raid villages in the Riverlands? All right, maybe she'd been a bit upset that Stefan was going to leave her all alone in a strange military fortress with only Rebekah and squinty, dry, grumpy Maester Ayjax for company.

Ayjax had made her deliver messages and file books all day long. She hadn't even gotten time to read the books, not that she'd find them all that interesting, judging by the titles they had. Westeros had not yet developed novels. It was all epic poetry or brief poetry or military treatises or medical treatises or some history of some conquest; all dry stuff. But reading that would probably have been better than learning a new confusing book-filing system that didn't make as much sense to Caroline as Tywin's decision to send Stefan and Clegane to raid Riverlands villages.

For a while, she had thought she would at least get toned arms out of all that heavy lifting. Then she had become depressed again as she had remembered she was a vampire. Her arms were going to be as toned as they had been when she'd been turned, and the heavy lifting wasn't going to help at all.

But then Tywin marched out with his army, and for some reason, Caroline was commanded to move out with them. She supposed Maester Ayjax was too old to ride with the armed forces anymore, and since Tywin needed clerks, she was as good as any. As good as any, meaning he had several other clerks he could have taken, but he'd chosen to take her instead. Or so Daemon had said.

"It's an opportunity hundreds would kill to have, Caroline," he said. "Usually Lord Tywin doesn't even remember his clerks' names. Then again, you are the prettiest clerk he's ever had."

"I hope that's got nothing to do with it," said Caroline as she finished filling in her chart documenting how many spears the Lannister army had. Which was a lot. She'd counted two hundred thousand after making the men tie them up in bundles of twenty and then stacking them in tens. The parchment was covered in blots –could someone please invent a proper pen?– from her inadequate quill skills.

"Why not?" asked Jorge. Oh, sweet Jorge. He was really just a little boy in a man's armour. They shouldn't even really let him play with a sword. It wasn't that he didn't know how to use it; he simply didn't know when to use it. After his initial eagerness for killing Caroline and her friends, he'd taken to following her around like a puppy. If she had an errand that needed running, Jorge would always be more than happy to help. She just didn't trust him to get it right. Daemon, on the other hand, proved to be a great source of sarcastic commentary, and she had learned to go to him if she had questions about Westeros and Lannisters in general.

The two brothers could not be more different, but Daemon loved Jorge and had always protected him, ever since they had lost both their parents as children. Their father, Lord Gerion Lannister, had been Lord Tywin's youngest and most reckless brother. He had died in a hunting accident, while their mother had died shortly after Jorge had been born. The younger boy barely remembered his mother and father. As far as he could remember, he had always been raised by his uncle Lord Kevan.

"Because I want to be picked for my skills, not my face," said Caroline.
Jorge remained quiet as he absorbed the information and tried to understand it.

"Why do you think it is that Lord Tywin sent Stefan and Gregor Clegane to raid the Tullys?"
Caroline asked Daemon. "I mean, it's not as if he needs the money and I doubt the villagers have much to offer him anyway. Although...I suppose Catelyn Tully-Stark did take Lord Tyrion..."

His smile curved ever upward.

Her eyes widened. "It's a message!" she exclaimed. "Either he wants to threaten the Tullys into making Catelyn give Lord Tyrion back... But why dress up as brigands? Why not just go and demand him? He's Tywin Lannister. One word from him and half of Westeros trembles."

"I should think not," said Daemon. "He's Lord Tywin Lannister, actually, but not a force of nature."

"I don't mean literally," said Caroline, whacking him on the arm and forgetting that he, too, was a Lannister and a lord. He didn't seem to mind. "Well, maybe I do mean literally. There's no one in the world that's not afraid of him." She considered it. Stefan had mentioned leaving trout behind, and trout was the sigil of House Tully. Besides, everyone recognized Gregor Clegane. He was a bit hard to miss.

"The raids are bait for bigger fish," she said, half to Daemon and half to herself. "But who's he baiting?"

"A good question."

That was not Daemon or Jorge. All three of them whipped around in alarm. Caroline hurriedly dipped a bad curtsey—and almost lost her footing—as Daemon and Jorge both bowed.

"Lord Tywin," said Daemon.

Tywin ignored him. "Follow me, Caroline Forbes," he said. Even though she was vampire, and therefore the predator at the top of the food chain, Tywin Lannister somehow had a way of making her feel like a silly little girl who'd been sent to the principal's office. She probably should be even more scared of him, but her self-preservation skills had never been all that sharp.

Okay, now she was literally going to the principal's office, except worse. Daemon's jaw was tense, and Jorge was simply so terrified and awestruck he'd let his mouth drop open as he stared at Tywin's retreating back. It was probably a good thing Tywin didn't see him. Or maybe he did, and simply chose to ignore him. No one knew what the patriarch had said to the boy that day after he'd mistakenly thought he'd told Daemon to take Caroline, Rebekah, and Stefan to the dungeons, and Jorge never talked about it, not even to his brother whom he'd worshipped ever since he'd been old enough to understand.

Tywin's command tent was the largest tent in the camp. It housed a long table upon which there should always be a decanter of wine. The decanter was missing today. She stood awkwardly and looked down at the trampled grass while Tywin sat down behind his desk and began to look at reports. For a long while, he ignored her, as if he'd forgotten she was there, but she knew better. He was trying to unnerve her. Well! Caroline Forbes would not be intimidated by such an old trick!

At last, he spoke. "Do you know what happens to those who know too much, and then say it?" he asked.

"Loose lips sink ships?" said Caroline.

"Indeed. A very apt phrase for it, although there are no ships at present," he said.
"So who's the bait for?" asked Caroline. "My lord." She almost forgot that again.

"Who is Catelyn Stark's husband?"

Why was he asking her all these questions? It almost felt as if he were teaching her, but Tywin Lannister didn't teach random people. He definitely didn't teach clerks.

"Lord Eddard of House Stark, the Hand of the King," she recited. She had to thank Daemon for his lessons after this. "And since Stefan and Clegane are illegally terrorizing villagers, as Hand of the King, he has to do something about it, like ride out and arrest them. But what next?"

"Do you really think I would send my men out to be arrested, as you put it?"

"You want him to ride out…so you can arrest him and then make his wife release Lord Tyrion. Is that it, my lord?"

Tywin did not reply. Instead, he indicated the silver tray on the table where his decanter of wine usually stood. "I need a new cupbearer," he said. "The other was incompetent. You will do."

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**Riverrun**

He had sent out scouts to look for her, but Edmure received no news of the fascinating lady bard. No one seemed to know who she was or where she was. He sighed as he toyed with his empty cup in the silent hall. The land was no longer safe, what with all those brigands killing indiscriminately and terrorizing innocent people, and he worried for her. He had offered to ride out and deal with the scoundrels personally, but both his father and his uncle Blackfish had objected.

So what if he didn't have a plan right now? He'd come up with one sooner or later. Sooner, rather than later. If he had been allowed to ride out, he would have been in a better position to look for her. He couldn't forget her beautiful dark eyes and long flowing hair, so curly and wild. He longed to touch it.

"Have we heard back from Ned Stark yet?" asked his uncle as he strode into the hall.

"No, but Petyr Baelish sent word. Very pretty ones too."

"Did they have any substance or are they like your favourite honey cakes, all air and no bite?" asked Blackfish as he stuffed three of the said honey cakes into his mouth, chewed a couple of times—not nearly long enough to savour the taste—and swallowed them in one gulp.

"He thinks I would not like being in the Small Council," said Edmure. "He has offered us other things." In fact, Edmure was almost at the point of writing to Petyr and asking if he knew of a certain lady bard. Petyr knew everything.

"Littlefinger and his games. I should have known," said Blackfish. "Well, if we keep bombarding him, I'm sure he'll relent eventually."

Edmure hoped not. Petyr was probably right about how he would not enjoy being a Small Council member.

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**Blackwater Rush Crossing**

A Lannister always paid his debts. No one took a Lannister prisoner and got away with it. No one,
not even if said Lannister was a half-sized Lannister.

Although attacking Ned Stark in the streets of King’s Landing and then stabbing him in the ankle probably wasn't the best way to get his brother back, in hindsight.

Golden lions on red banners reared in the wind. Jaime dismounted. He had been wearing the white of the Kingsguard for so long that donning the red and gold of his house felt a little alien to him.

Donning the red and gold meant he was in his father's domain again.

Jaime Lannister feared nothing and no one, except Tywin Lannister. He could already hear his father's cold tones inside his head, berating him for his idiocy, as if he didn't already know how hare-brained his scheme had been.

But someone needed to take care of Tyrion, and if not Jaime, then who?

He decided not to go and see his father just yet. He was holding court with a few of his uncles and some trusted bannermen. Jaime could wait. In fact, if he could put off this meeting forever, he would. At least until Tywin had forgotten his attack on Ned Stark. Sometimes, he wished his father could grow as senile as Pycelle pretended to be. It would make life a whole lot easier for everyone. And who knew? Perhaps it might be easier to love a senile Tywin than one who was in full control of his mental faculties. Although, un-senile Tywin would tell him that love was an unforgivable crime that must be rooted out of the hearts of men at all cost. Yes, he adored his father too.

The Lannister camp was bordered by a little river, hidden from view by some gnarled trees from which hung tattered curtains of moss like the skeleton of a forgotten hall. He wandered to the river, letting his feet lead him while he thought of how he could explain himself to his father in a manner that would incur the least amount of wrath. Perhaps he should be grateful that he was himself rather than Tyrion or Cersei. At least his father actually liked him as much as Tywin was capable of liking anyone. All of his father's children disappointed him in one way or another.

He stopped. Well, well, what had he here?

Her back was to him; a beautiful pale contoured back with dimples just above the pert buttocks. Blonde tendrils of hair, darkened by water, clung to her damp skin on which sparkled beads of moisture. The dappled sunlight on her made her seem as if she were glowing from within.

She turned her head to the side when she registered his presence. Her profile was as beautiful as her back. "Did your mother never teach you it is rude to spy on a lady while she's bathing?" she asked.

"My mother is dead," said Jaime. "Did your mother never tell you real ladies do not bathe in the open?"

"My mother is also dead," said the girl. She turned around to face him, not at all shy or afraid about being naked in front of a strange armoured man bearing a sword. Yes, she was a type of rarely seen beauty with even rarer audacity. Or foolhardiness. Jaime hadn't decided which it was yet. Was she one of the camp followers? Hmm...he thought not. She was too well-spoken. "Since you're here, you might as well make yourself useful and pass me my towel." She jerked her chin in the direction of the towel hanging, neatly folded, on one of the lower branches. He tossed it to her, half hoping it would fall into the water so she would scream at him in fury and have to run back to wherever she came from naked and wet, but she snatched it deftly out of the air and proceeded to dry her hair as she waded to the shore. Her hair. She didn't even bother wrapping the towel around herself.
She stepped onto the shore and picked up the pile of clothes lying folded beneath a tree as if he weren't still watching her naked form.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She smiled mischievously, as if she knew more than he did. Of course she did. At least, she would know who he was. He was Jaime Lannister. "Wouldn't you like to know?" she asked. She slipped away through the trees as he watched her go, wanting to follow her, but not allowing himself to.

Chapter End Notes

Who could Jaime possibly have found?
Jaime finds the answers he's been looking for and has further bonding moments with Tyrion. Caroline learns an important lesson. Ned confronts Cersei about her long kept secrets. Edmure makes some enquiries.

Along Blackwater Rush

People thought being a cupbearer simply meant carrying cups around. That was what Caroline had thought. She had been so so so wrong. Being a cupbearer included fetching and delivering documents and maps, making sure Tywin got his meals on time and while they were still hot, and basically running a lot of errands. So it wasn't really that different from being Maester Ayjax's assistant, except her new boss was scarier, and she was fetching more than just books.

She carefully filled the silver decanter and put it back on the tray. The wine smelled delicious, although it was reserved solely for the likes of Lord Tywin. Not even knights got to drink it.

As an afterthought, she added another decanter of water and put together a bowl of fruit; no berries, because they tended to go off very quickly, but there were pears and apples. Tywin and his advisors could do with some snacks during their long boring dry conferences, couldn't they? Besides, if they only had wine to drink, then their brains probably wouldn't continue to function as well as they ought to during councils.

She hurried back towards the command tent. The other servants and soldiers stepped aside to let her through. Some nodded in greeting, while others looked as if they would like nothing more than to plant a shank in her back the moment it was turned. To have been handpicked by Tywin Lannister was no small thing.

She was in such a hurry that she almost crashed into an armour-plated chest, and probably would have had she not been a vampire and thus in possession of super-quick reflexes.

"Don't you ever look when you walk?" asked the man. His sandy hair was tousled from the wind, and he had the same self-satisfying smirk Damon and Klaus and their ilk had perfected and trademarked. Which wasn't to say he wasn't good looking, but she had no time for charming jerks right now.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Sorry, my lord," he corrected her.

"Forgive me, my lord." She dipped a quick curtsey and tried to go, but he caught her arm.

"That is the worst curtsey I have ever seen," he said. He commanded one of the men to take her tray to the command tent. Was he trying to sabotage her?! She was the cupbearer! She wasn't supposed to have other people do her job for her! She made to protest, but he held up a finger.

"Every little girl needs to know how to curtsey properly," he said, as if he were doing her a favour.
He was insufferable! Was he related to Daemon, by any chance?

"Now, do it again, and try to remember you're a dying swan, not a dying duck."

"Not that I'm not grateful for your instruction, my lord, but I really don't have time for this," she protested.

"You do, and you will thank me for it," he said.

Over the next eon or so, he tortured her with the right angle to bend her knees at, how to dip her head so that her neck was curved and extended in just the right way so if someone wanted to take her head off from behind, they would have the best access to her neck. At least, that was what it felt like.

"Come on," he said as she made her umpteenth curtsey. "It's not that hard. My sister mastered it when she was four."

"Well, good on your sister, my lord," she said. She was going to lose her job. No, she was going to lose her head, and no number of good curtseys was going to save her.

When he finally released her, she rushed back to the command tent, where she ought to have been half an hour ago. It was with a little relief that she saw the man had delivered her tray of wine, water, and fruit without mishap. She took her place in the corner, hoping the sharp-eyed patriarch would not have noticed how long she'd been gone for.

"When I appointed you my cupbearer, I did not expect you to delegate others to do your work for you," he said without looking up from the letter he was writing.

"I'm sorry, my lord," she said. "I was waylaid by the rudest knight and he made me practise curtseying to him for half an hour until he thought I was doing it correctly."

At that moment, the very same knight ducked inside the tent.

"And that's him right there!" said Caroline before she could stop herself.

The knight smirked, but otherwise ignored her. "Father," he said. Oh dear God…

"Jaime," said Tywin. He finally set down his pen and looked up. "Leave us, girl."

Caroline had never been more glad to escape.

After his nothing-short-of-miraculous escape from mad Lysa Arryn's grasp and then from the hill tribes, or rather, with the hill tribes who were now his 'allies', Tyrion had expected a warmer welcome. But as such, no one seemed to have noticed that he had returned, let alone cared that he was back and without any help at all.

As he neared his father's tent, he could already hear Tywin's voice lecturing Jaime about "family" and "the Lannister name" and "reputation" and "legacy" and "power". Ah, the good old "Family is Power" speech. He and Jaime even had a name for it.

"Lions do not concern themselves with the opinions of sheep," Tywin was saying as Tyrion ducked inside the tent.

"Anyone miss me?" he asked rather unnecessarily.
"You're alive," said his father.

"Sorry to disappoint," said Tyrion. At least Jaime looked slightly glad that he was back. That was always something.

"I have come to expect disappointment," said Tywin.

Tyrion reasoned with himself that this was his father, and Casterly Rock would grow legs and move before Tywin changed.

Although he counted himself an optimist and always had a faint and fading hope that it would happen one day, when his father would actually not disapprove of something he did. It was a child's hope and something he had not yet managed to grow out of.

He motioned to Bronn, his new friend who liked him more for his money than his personality. Why exactly, Tyrion couldn't tell. After all, he had a perfectly charming personality. The mercenary, who had seemed so fearless, came inside almost shyly –Hah, Bronn as the shy wilting wallflower? Now there was an image.— followed by the chiefs of the hill tribes he had…er…well, subdued wasn't quite the right word for it even if he would have liked to use it.

"These are my friends, Father," he said. In his peripheral vision, he could see Jaime trying not to laugh. As if he had any right to laugh, since he didn't actually have any friends to speak of. One by one, he introduced them: Shagga, son of Dolf, chieftain of the Stone Crows; Timett, son of Timett, of the Burned Men; Ulf, son of Umar, of the Moon Brothers; Chella, daughter of Cheyk, of the Black Ears. With each introduction, Tywin's face became more and more expressionless and Jaime became more and more amused, possibly because he'd been saved from hearing the rest of the "Family is Power" speech, regardless of what variations their father added.

"And you are?" Tywin suddenly asked of Bronn. His father was asking direct questions? He must be even more annoyed than Tyrion had originally thought.

Bronn looked as if he were about to introduce himself, but then thought better of it. "You wouldn't know me," he said. It was a very accurate statement.

Tyrion ploughed on. There was nothing for it. He had made a deal with the hill tribes, and a Lannister always paid his debts, no matter how big or small or ridiculous they were. "I promised my friends weapons and armour in exchange for their help." Really, Jaime, could that grin get any bigger? If he continued to find this so amusing, he might just burst from holding in his laughter.

His father almost seemed dumbfounded. Of course, Tywin Lannister was never dumbfounded or surprised or anything that was undignified. Then, much to everyone's surprise, but mostly Tyrion's, he waved his assent.

Tyrion escaped with his 'friends' and Jaime more quickly than he had escaped from the Eyrie. He would rather face a thousand Lysa Arryns than his father's wrath. When they were finally free, Jaime at last allowed himself a chuckle. "So, they helped you," he said.

"They didn't kill me," said Tyrion.

"That's helpful," said Jaime. "How did you get out anyway? I did not think my attack on Ned Stark had any effect, or that word had even spread that far."

"I heard," said Tyrion. "Rumours spread very quickly, brother. Men gossip, for they can only amuse themselves so much with drink and fornication."
"You seem to do well enough with just the latter two," said Jaime. They left the armourers at the mercy of the hill tribes. The men were most reluctant to help, but they could not refuse a Lannister, particularly not sons of Tywin.

"Well," said Jaime. "Now that you're back, I could use a little help."

"I live to serve, brother. What can I do for you?"

"I need to find someone in this camp."

"Do you have a name?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be asking."

"Who is he?"

Jaime paused. "She," he said.

Tyrion had to stop and absorb this. Jaime was looking for a girl? The man who had wasted the prime of his life in the Kingsguard because of his love for their sister? Well, if he'd found someone else, Tyrion would certainly be the last to protest. Anyone would be an improvement on Cersei.

"You must at least know what she looks like," said Tyrion.

"In great detail," said Jaime. He smirked. "I came across her while she was bathing in the river. She was most impertinent and seemed to mistake me for her maidservant." He proceeded to describe her in great detail, from the gold of her hair and the red of her lips to her well-endowed breasts and buttocks and long lean legs.

Why was it that Jaime had all the luck? While he'd been outwitting mad Arryns and the only lady he'd come home with was Chella of the Black Ears (Bronn was fairer, but didn't really count), his brother found naked golden-haired beauties in the river.

"Well, I'll help you," said Tyrion. "If only because I want to see this vision of yours."

He had looked and Tyrion had looked, and of all the places she could be, she was sparring with the men on trampled mud. Jaime could recognize that golden hair anywhere. It was braided and pinned up now, out of the girl's way, but then, it didn't exactly work as a disguise. The question was why was she in armour and fighting his father's men?

Man after man fell to her speed and strength. She wasn't terribly skilled with a sword, but her agility impressed even him. It seemed that no matter how quickly her opponent moved, she was always quicker. He joined the small crowd surrounding the fighters. They cheered for their friend. Their friend was tiring while the girl wasn't even breaking a sweat. For the first time in many years, he felt something…

Well, it made him uncomfortable.

"I feel like I'm bullying little boys here," she said to the men as she planted her foot on yet another man's chest and pointed the tip of her practise sword at his throat.

Jaime began to clap slowly. It was as if he broke some sort of spell. The men, who had not noticed him, parted to let him through. The girl looked up. Surprise flashed across her face briefly and she released the man beneath her foot. "Bravo," said Jaime as he approached her. "Although perhaps
you might have an undue advantage."

"What do you mean?" Her voice was sharp.

"Just as the Kingsguard would never harm a king, no chivalrous man would harm a lady."

"Are you all chivalrous then?" she asked the men.

"Of course!" they said almost unanimously.

"Are you saying we're not?" demanded one of the bolder soldiers.

"And what if I am? Are you going to fight me to defend your honour again?" asked the girl.

"M'lady, I could never harm a woman. That is simply not done," said the man.

"Yet you beat your wife," muttered the man beside him.

"You…! Slander!"

"Enough of your foolery," said Jaime. "Leave us."

The men bowed and trooped off, some casting curious glances in his direction. The girl made to go.

"Not you," he said. "You will stay."

"Is there something you want, Lord Jaime?"

So she knew exactly who he was, yet she had chosen to ignore it that day at the river, and she was barely showing him the deference he deserved now.

"I would speak with you. Let us begin with the simple matters, shall we? Your name."

"And what if I choose not to give it?"

"Then I would take it from you."

"By the blade, or by something else?"

He raised eyebrow. Well, she most definitely was not shy, but they had already established that. "Since you are so keen," he said. He drew his blade. She raised hers.

Their blades clashed. She was fast, but she lacked finesse. However, with her kind of agility, it was hardly necessary when duelling with common men.

Jaime was no common man. He led her on, keeping his eyes on hers and paid no attention to their blades. Her eyes were bluish-grey, like steel, and she had freckles across the bridge of her nose. The old wives said they were kisses from the sun. Cersei had never had freckles. She had always been too wary of the sun's effect on her skin to get them.

The girl countered all his blows. Of course he never let her get past him either. That would simply not do. He was Jaime Lannister after all. It was dragging on for far too long than it really ought to. He hadn't shown her everything, but he really shouldn't need to. She was a girl who didn't really know how to wield a sword. That much was obvious from the way she held it and the way she swung it with no judgement.
He pretended to falter and left his guard open. She fell for it. She lunged. He discarded his blade and seized the hilt of hers, pulling her towards him. Their chest plates met. He drew his dagger with his other hand and would have pointed it at the back of her neck, except she caught his wrist. Her grip was most definitely not a lady's.

"Not so fast, my lord," she said.

"If I had truly intended to kill you, you would not have lived," said Jaime.

"If I had intended to kill you, you would deader," she said.

"A pity we cannot test that theory," he said.

"Why ever not? You need only say the word, my lord."

She lifted her head. He could feel her breath. If he bent down just a little, he could kiss her if he wanted to. Of course he didn't.

"Now that I have defeated you, your name, Ser," he said.

"Who says you defeated me, my lord?" She really was impossibly stubborn, which only made her more...interesting.

Someone cleared his throat behind them. Of course Tyrion had been spying all along, as he was wont to. "I should have known that, despite all your learning, you do not know the meaning of the word privacy, dear brother," said Jaime.

"You are in a public place, Jaime. There is no privacy to speak of. Besides, how could I not be here at this momentous occasion, when Jaime Lannister has finally been defeated, and by a lady, no less."

"See? Lord Tyrion is the wisest and fairest of them all," said the girl.

Tyrion bowed while Jaime seethed and decided to finish what Lysa Arryn had started and failed to complete. Sometimes little brothers did not deserve to live.

"I would very much like to know the name of the beautiful maid who defeated my brother, if only so I can sing her praises," Tyrion continued.

The girl smiled, all dimples and sweetness. "Rebekah Mikaelson, Lord Tyrion. I am honoured to make your acquaintance."

She discreetly admired his green eyes. He was cute, she'd grant him that, and a little older than what she'd normally prefer, but perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing. Things had never ended well before when she'd been with boys. Perhaps a real man was what she needed.

'No, Rebekah, you do not need a man,' she scolded herself. It would be nice to have one, but men were not a necessity, unlike good shoes.

Ever since the fight in which she had let him off lightly—for that was the only reason his pride was still intact—she began to see Jaime Lannister everywhere. No, she was not hallucinating about it. It never seemed to be on purpose. They would simply encounter one another while they went about their business. He pretended to ignore her most of the time as she did him, but today, he'd invited her to walk with him and it wasn't as if she could say no even if she had wanted to.
The funny thing was that she hadn't actually wanted to. It could only be because she was bored with the same old same old and Jaime represented something new, or so she told herself.

"I am curious, Rebekah," he was saying as they strolled through the camp, past carts loaded with supplies and weapons and past men drilling with one another. Horses whuffed and steel clashed while soldiers laughed and camp followers in translucent dresses giggled. The ground was soft beneath her booted feet after the powdery rain of the past few days. It had done a number on her armour and she had spent hours oiling it. She needed a squire, and fast.

The men gave her and Jaime a wide berth, although there were more than just a few glances cast in their direction. "How did you come to serve in my father's army?"

"He said he'd make me a knight if I beat another of his, my lord," she replied. "So I beat Amory Lorch. Lord Tywin is a man of his word."

"Well, Lannisters always pay their debts," said Jaime.

"So I've heard," she said. "And I also heard you were in King's Landing serving the king. Why is it that you are here, and not there?"

"There was a horse and a road and the horse was moving and I was on it," said Jaime. "I do believe it's called riding."

He was insufferable, just like Nik! She considered just turning around and walking away to avoid strangling him—because that would be very bad—but decided to sit it out and see what else he could come up with. Jaime Lannister was not like all the other boys she'd ever been with. Not that she was with him. But she could not deny that their first meeting had been...magnetic. When she had first seen him staring at her with a mix of admiration and desire, there had been a frisson. They'd both felt it. He was as alien to her as she was to him.

"Did you ask me to walk with you just so you could insult my intelligence, my lord? By the way, that was a 'how', not a 'why'."

He smirked. "I merely think a woman of your intellect would be able to deduct that when a storm comes, perhaps seeking shelter is the wisest course of action."

"Yet it was you who caused the storm." Yes, she'd heard, but she wanted to hear it from him. It was her greatest goal to date; making Jaime Lannister admit out loud he'd done something stupid.

"Must you judge me at every turn?"

"Should I answer that?"

He chuckled. "You know, you did not defeat me. My brother would simply seize every opportunity to bring me down to his level. As you know, my lady, that is very far to fall."

"I object," said Tyrion. Where did he come from? She hadn't even heard him. Rebekah had to give the 'littlest lord' some credit. For someone who seemed so ungainly, he was certainly a master of stealth and very good at going unnoticed unless he wanted to be seen. "You are not that tall, Jaime."

"Perhaps I ought to leave you to it, my lords," she said. Without waiting for a response from either of them, she curtseyed and left.

"Thank you for your continued timely interruptions, brother," said Jaime when he thought she was
out of earshot. She had to suppress a giggle. "We were having a perfectly good conversation."

"I was not aware that Kingsguard conversed with women, Jaime," said Tyrion.

"A conversation is hardly fornication, Tyrion," said Jaime. "You really ought to know the difference."

Obviously, Jaime Lannister had never heard of sexting.

**King's Landing**

There was no one who knew how to ruin one's day like Robert Baratheon, but his northern fool of a friend came pretty close. Cersei Lannister was not a woman who could be summoned, save by her father, the most powerful man in all of Westeros. Eddard Stark came limping down the garden path, his face grim and humourless as usual, but his limp was not as pronounced as it ought to be for a man who'd just had a spear in his leg. "Your Grace," he said. He gave her a stiff little bow. Not nearly adequate enough.

"I hear you 'summoned' me," she said, not even bothering with pleasantries.

"I wanted to speak with you, yes," he said. He couldn't even see he was standing on a knife's edge; the sharp edge. If he weren't her sworn enemy by fault of being Robert's best friend, she might have even pitied him. Oh yes, she knew about his investigations. He had not been subtle about them, going to the smithy ever so often just like Jon Arryn before him and requesting that book from Pycelle. Hadn't Arryn's fate been enough to warn him that it was not a good idea? But then, Eddard Stark had always had a particularly bad sense of self preservation. He really should learn from his charming bannerman Damon. It was better to be her friend than her enemy. A Lannister always paid her debts.

"Your children," he continued. "They're all Jaime's, aren't they?"

Did he just say that to her face? "How did you know?" she asked. Her smile felt frozen on, as it had been for the past seventeen years of marriage with Robert.

"Lucky guess," said Stark.

"Oh, don't judge," said Cersei. "It's not as if Robert was ever sober enough to get a child on me. Sometimes I even wondered if he remembered I existed. On our wedding night, he stumbled into my bedroom reeking of wine, fumbling with me like I was one of his whores."

She remembered that night all so clearly; the night when her heart broke, when bitterness replaced what youthful hope she had had, when she realized the only man she could ever trust was Jaime because he had loved her enough to take the white cloak. She had endured Robert's rough and badly aimed thrusts because she had believed it would get better, that he would come to love her when he knew her. He had hurt her. He hadn't even cared or noticed and she'd forgiven him for that because she'd put it down to the wedding wine.

But the final straw came with his shuddering release that had brought her no satisfaction. He had whispered a name into her ear, but it had not been her name. Even now, the sound of his voice echoed in her mind like an icy wind across the frozen wasteland that was her heart, freezing her further, until she could feel nothing but disdain for that once fierce handsome man she had once, briefly, foolishly, loved.

Love was a fool's emotion. People who loved only got hurt, and she was *never* going to be hurt by
anyone ever again.

But, of course Eddard Stark would never understand. He was a man. He had far fewer restrictions than a woman ever would have. No one would ever judge him for having other women on the side, just as no one judged Robert for visiting the whorehouse more often than he visited her bed. But if anyone knew of her men, they would make her walk naked through the streets of King's Landing. Even as queen, she was in a cage; a gilded cage full of every comfort a mindless animal could possibly want, but a cage nonetheless.

A lioness would never be content to be caged.

"Take you children as far away as you can," he said. "Robert will know the truth when he returns from his hunt, and I do not want more innocent blood spilled on these stones."

She wanted to laugh. Was he really telling her this? Because, really, if he wanted to tell Robert, he should have just gone and done that. Starks and their honour; it was going to kill them all. Although, it wouldn't really have mattered whether he told Robert or not, because Robert was a dead man.

"Is that a threat, Lord Stark?" she asked. "Are you not afraid? I am a Lannister of Casterly Rock. My father is the most powerful man in all the seven kingdoms."

"I am not afraid," he replied. "I know how to kill my enemies."

"So do I," she said. Yes, she did. A woman might not know how to wield a sword, but one did not need a sword in hand to deal out death and destruction.

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**In Transit**

*Dear Petyr,*

*Thank you for your kind letter and your enquiries regarding our family. My father is well although he is still often short of breath. He asks after you. We have seen so little of one another since your departure from Riverrun.*

*Eddard Stark has not yet replied to our enquiries about positions on the Small Council, but I am certain that a man in his position has many responsibilities. Perhaps he might have mentioned it to you?*

*I write not only to ask about Eddard Stark. I would request a favour of you, old friend. I am looking for someone and I understand you would be able to help me since you have eyes everywhere, I am told. Her name is Katherine Pierce. She is a travelling bard. I met her travelling south to Riverrun; from whence I do not know, and I do not know where she is headed. Perhaps you might have heard of her? There are not many women who are bards and she is exceptionally beautiful.*

*I do not much care for the affairs of the Small Council, but I am eager for any news of Katherine.*

*I await your reply with impatience.*

*With respect,*

*Edmure Tully*
Enemy of the State

Chapter Summary

Ned gives Damon some serious responsibilities. Elena confronts a Clegane. Jon makes --or rather, doesn't make-- an important decision. Robb babysits Bran.

King's Landing

Bad things never came on their own. First, he'd heard, after the fact, that Ned had gone to confront Cersei with the one thing Cersei Lannister should \textit{never} be confronted with, and now the king was dead by pig. The drunken idiot had gone and gotten himself gored by a boar, and he'd died right after he'd dictated his will to Ned, before Damon or Elena could get there in time with their 'special tea'.

"No, no, no," said Damon when Ned told him of all the new developments. "You cannot stay here in King's Landing and put the rightful king on the throne, whatever that means. It doesn't matter if Joffrey's an inbred little bastard. My lord." He was losing his cool here; he'd never met anyone so...so...so...honestly naive as Ned Stark. "He would have been a shit king even if he had been a Baratheon, and he can continue being a shit Baratheon king in the same vein as his father, or foster father."

"Watch your tongue, Salvatore," said Ned sharply. "Robert Baratheon was the rightful king of Westeros."

"And now he's dead, my lord," said Damon. "And you need to start taking care of your own." If only Robb were here. Robb would have talked some sense into his father. He probably would have said the same thing as Damon more or less, perhaps with fewer obscenities, but the main thing was he was Ned's son, and Ned would have listened to him.

"Get ready to leave, Salvatore," said Ned. "I'm putting my family under your protection. Take them back to Winterfell. No matter what happens to me, you must protect them."

The man just couldn't stop making bad decisions, could he? But what else could Damon do except say yes? Well, he \textit{had} considered knocking Ned Stark out and then just taking him back to Winterfell, but that would attract far too many unwanted questions, and it would be impossible to pull off.

"What are you going to do, my lord?" he asked.

"It is best if you did not know."

The thing was, bad things always came in threes.

With Robert out of the way, there was no time to waste. Joffrey was angry at having been woken up, but for once, his mood was of no concern to Cersei. "Come, my love," she said as he scowled at her. "Today is the day you will sit upon the Iron Throne."

He stopped scowling after that, because even Joffrey couldn't choose a few more minutes of sleep
over the throne. She had him dress in robes of deep red. Wine and blood. Or perhaps just blood, because blood would be spilled. She could already feel it.

"Summon Eddard Stark," she said. "Tell him he will come to the throne room immediately and pay homage to the new king." She hoped he would come, if only to see the look on his face when he realized there was no way he could win against her. She was a Lannister. Lions did not lose to wolves.

The pen fell from his hand. Cersei Lannister moved quickly. Too quickly. Robert's body was not yet cold, and already she had declared Joffrey king? It was unthinkable.

Baelish's city guard were ready. Everything was in place. All he needed to do was say the word, and Cersei and her children would be hunted to the very ends of the earth. Could he do it? But he had to, for Robert's dynasty. For House Baratheon. It was the right thing to do. He had offered mercy and Cersei hadn't taken it. He looked out the window across the calm city going about its own business as it did every morning. It was as if they hadn't lost a king at all. They did not know a war was looming, or they did not care. It seemed almost a shame to ruin that peace.

But it had to be done, for it was just and right. He finished the letter he was writing to Stannis informing him of his brother's death and the Lannisters' treachery and rolled it up before sealing it with black wax. He pressed his signet ring to it, leaving the impression of the wolf's head.

"Damon," he said.

"My lord," said the knight. "Whatever it is you're planning, it's probably a bad idea."

Ned ignored him. "You're taking the girls home today," he said.

"And yourself?"

And what about himself? Ned didn't know. The north beckoned to him invitingly. He could leave this all behind and forget about the throne and Lannisters and go home. He had his lands to rule, and the men of the south never bothered him. He could leave now and the world would be none the wiser. Joffrey would be king, Sansa would marry someone else much worthier of her, and his family would be whole again.

But he had a duty here. Just one last duty.

"I will follow," he said.

"If you have to go ahead with it, you should take me with you. I'm useful."

"I know you are, which is why you must protect my daughters, Damon." Suddenly, apprehension seized him. From a young age, he had been taught to never show fear, to never feel fear, and thus far he had managed it, but not today. How could a parent not fear for his children's safety? If he succeeded, he would be a king maker. If he failed…

He gripped the mercenary's arm. Grey eyes met blue. "Promise me, Damon," he said. "No matter what happens, you will protect Arya and Sansa."

"I don't make promises lightly, my lord," said Damon. "I promise."

"Good," said Ned. "Now, I need you to take this and send it to Stannis Baratheon. Do not let it out of your sight until you have tied it to the raven's leg and sent it off yourself."
Castle Black

They sat gathered in the courtyard before the Lord Commander. Elena had called this a ‘graduation day’. It had stopped snowing, but snow was piled up against the walls, and the air was still cold enough to make one's lungs burn with each breath. Water condensed on the tips of their noses. Jon wondered if there were ice crystals forming on his face.

"Some of you might ask: Why are you here?" the Lord Commander was saying as clouds of steam issued from his mouth. Echoes repeated his words back at him as it reverberated in the otherwise silent courtyard. Birds wheeled overhead in the currents above, too high to care about the goings on of men below. Jon wondered if Elena knew about the fact that today was the day when the recruits took their oaths. He wanted to ask her what he ought to do. What did he want?

"Why are you here?" Mormont asked again. "Do you fight for a king, a lord, the honour of a house? Or do you fight for glory, or gold, or a woman's love?" At that moment, his eyes fell on Jon, and it seemed as if he were aiming his words directly at him. "No. You stand for the realm, and all the people in it."

The realm and all the people in it made Jon feel nothing. It had been the glory and honour of the Night's Watch that had first enticed him. Now even that did not seem to be enough. Something had shifted.

"I still feel no different," murmured Sam to Jon.

"You are no different," Jon whispered back. From his position at Mormont's side, still a little pale but otherwise well on his way to being on the mend, was Benjen. His brow furrowed as he frowned at the two of them for talking. Oops? But that was not his word. That was Elena's word, and Damon's.

"Are there any who still keep the old gods?" asked Mormont.

Jon stood. "I do, my lord," he said.

"There is a weirwood about a mile outside the Wall. You may say your oaths there," said Mormont.

"If I may, Lord Commander, I would like some time to consider my decision," said Jon. All eyes turned to him. "I want to take my oaths for the right reason so there will be no chance for regret in the years to come."

Sam stood as well. "I need time to think about my decision too," he stammered.

Benjen's eyes bored into Jon, and he felt as if his uncle could hear what was going on inside his head. He could almost hear their judgements; from Benjen, from Mormont, and most definitely from Ser Alisser. Jon Snow was forsaking the Watch for a woman, they were thinking. And Sam, of course, always did whatever Jon did.

"You will have time," said Mormont. He did not sound pleased.

"If we may, Lord Commander, Grenn and I also need time to think," said Pyp. Both he and Grenn rose to their feet. Grenn simply nodded. Jon felt horribly exposed, but standing with three of his friends was better than standing on his own. But they really shouldn't be standing with him! Well, Sam had no reason not to, if he wanted to think about his decision, but what other option did Pyp and Grenn have besides going back to King's Landing and facing their other sentences?
"We want to be sure we are taking our oaths for the right reasons, not just because we are afraid of what else lies ahead," said Pyp. "For we cannot rightly fight for the realm if all we want is to save our own skins."

"Idiots," muttered Rast, but at the front, Mormont seemed impressed by Pyp's reasoning, even if he didn't believe him entirely.

Their tasks were assigned anyway, just in case they went ahead with their oaths. Grenn and Pyp were to be rangers if they ever took theirs, and Sam naturally became a steward, and despite not taking his oaths yet, he was to assume his duties immediately. Maester Aemon had needed someone else to help him ever since Elena had left, and Sam was the most well-read out of all the recruits—and possibly out of all the brothers, excepting the maester himself.

And Jon was to become a steward.

The shock, even though he was not sure he would stay to become a brother yet, was great. Him? But he fought better than any of the rangers who had been appointed! Him, a steward?!

"Mormont would have made you his personal steward if you had decided to take your oaths," said Benjen afterward. "But you are not wrong to delay it."

"You do not think me a coward?" asked Jon.

"Too many men take their oaths for the wrong reason. Some wanted adventure, some wanted glory anyway, and some because they felt they had no other path. It takes courage to make your own decisions against all expectations," said Benjen. "If you do decide to become a brother, I would not want you to regret it either. And if you decide not to, there will always be other paths for you to take."

"Damon Salvatore became a knight because he was cocky in front of the king," said Jon with a little smile.

"I do not recommend that path of being cocky to the king," said Benjen. "Now go ahead. Just because you haven't taken your oaths does not mean you may shirk your duties."

Jon nodded and watched his uncle limp off, relying less and less on his cane. "I thought he'd be angrier," said Sam.

"So did I," said Jon. He turned to Grenn and Pyp. "What were you two thinking? It's not as if you have another choice beyond what fate awaits you at King's Landing."

"I was hoping you might be able to help," said Pyp.

"Your father's the Hand of the King," Grenn blurted out. "We were thinkin' that maybe if you did go south to find him, you might be able to have him ask the king to pardon us."

"It was just an idea," said Pyp, looking down at his feet.

Jon sighed. What could he do? He knew their stories, and he knew them. Would it really be so unthinkable to give them a second chance?

"I will ask him if I ever see him," he said. It might even distract his father from the fact he had forsaken the Watch.
The Wolfswood

He had never thought he would hear his brother laugh again. Bran whooped as he leaned forward in his saddle, relishing in the feel of the speed and strength of the horse beneath him and the feel of the wind in his hair. "Don't go too fast," Robb called as he watched Bran from his seat on a fallen tree. Moss had grown over the rough bark, creating a soft green cover.

Bran ignored him as if he were Catelyn calling out to him whilst he was climbing. If he'd listened, he probably would never have needed his special saddle in the first place. He supposed he really did have to thank Tyrion Lannister, even if he was a Lannister. Or half a Lannister. Maybe made him twice as tolerable.

The birds trilled in the branches above as pale sun illuminated the translucent leaves, casting green light below. Soft breezes from the south flew by, bringing the smell of shrubs and hardy late summer flowers. They would be gone soon as the ice encroached from the north, but winter was already here.

"There will be war," said Theon as he sat beside Robb. "The Lannisters put a spear through your father's leg and killed Jory Cassel and your mother has taken Tyrion Lannister prisoner. Are you really going to do nothing about it?"

"We keep the peace," said Robb, even though he didn't want to. But that was what his father would have wanted.

"Since when did you turn into a coward, Robb Stark?" asked Theon.

"And since when did Greyjoys become such an authority on cowardice. Oh yes, I remember, when Balon Greyjoy surrendered and handed over his only living son as a hostage. Perhaps you should worry about your family, and I shall worry about mine," said Robb.

He was not a coward. He simply was not as rash and reckless as Theon wanted him to be. He was the lord of Winterfell now. He couldn't afford to be rash and reckless, no matter how much he admired the foolhardiness of some men. If he had been Damon, he would have ridden off in a heartbeat to challenge the Lannisters, but he was Robb Stark, and Robb Stark had responsibilities.

Suddenly he realized it was too quiet. Bran had stopped whooping and cheering. In fact, Bran was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Bran?" he said as he leapt to his feet, his hand on his sword. The birds continued to sing. He heard nothing else.

"I don't know," said Theon. "He's not my brother."

He would speak with Theon later. "Bran!" he called. No answer.

He ran through the underbrush, the woods suddenly turning into a dangerous place perfect for ambushes by enemies of any kind, whether they be wild animals, men, or…

No, there was no such thing as vampires.

But there were wildlings. Four men and a woman— at least, he thought it was a woman— had seized Bran. They had cut him from his saddle, and were in the process of searching him for gold. So enamoured were they by their spoils that they did not see him. He charged at them from behind. They had made the mistake of turning their backs to him and not posting a guard. His sword cleaved through skin and bone and brain matter as it went down through one of the men's skulls,
but while the blade remained embedded in bone, he braced himself for the blow he knew would be coming. The woman struck him from behind. The blunted wood-axe bounced off his armour, but it drove the rings into him, and if he hadn't been wearing a quilted gambeson, the chainmail would have become embedded in his flesh. He struck out with his foot and kicked her out of the way. The other two engaged him. He disarmed one of them who was wielding a club. The man screamed as his fingers were sliced cleanly off. Another tried to hold in his entrails as Robb gutted him from navel to sternum.

"Robb!"

He whipped around to find one of the men had seized Bran and had a knife to his throat.

He cursed himself for his recklessness. What had he been trying to prove? That he was not a coward? That hardly needed proving, and now Bran was a hostage, and he had no way of getting him out of that situation.

At least, not until he saw the figure moving up behind the man.

"You harm a hair on his head, and I will have yours," Robb said to the man, keeping his voice calm and even so as to not alert him to the maidservant's presence. She only needed to catch him off-guard, and Robb estimated he would be able to finish them all off if they did not have Bran. His brother scrabbled at the man's arm, but to no avail. "Spare him, and I will spare your life."

"And if you don't put your sword down, I'll slit his throat from ear to ear," snarled the man. He did not sound like a wildling, and his armour and black cloak were too well made. A Night's Watch deserter, then?

"Behind you, Stiv!" shouted the wildling woman. Damn her! The man called Stiv whirled around before Bonnie could strike him with the rock in her hand, but at that moment, he loosened his grip on Bran.

The boy fell to the ground as the club-wielder, now missing two fingers, lunged for him, and ran right into Robb's blade. The look of surprise on his face would have almost been comical, but Robb was in no mood to laugh. He ran for Bran, only to have the woman charge at him again, taking up her comrade's fallen club.

Something whistled through the air. An arrow sprouted from the back of Stiv's neck as he grappled with Bonnie. Robb shoved the woman to the ground and pointed his sword at her neck. "What were you thinking?" he demanded of Theon, who stood with his bow in hand, still raised, and his hand reaching for another arrow in his quiver.

"About saving Bonnie, and you as well, although the gods only know why I try," replied Theon. "You could have hit Bran, or her!"

"I don't miss, if that's what you're implying, Robb Stark."

Robb had to admit, the Ironborn always got his shot. It was something Robb had always admired him and envied him for, because no matter how good he became, he would never be as good an archer. It grated at him, no matter how many times his father told him he did not need to be as good an archer as Theon or as good a fighter as Damon, so long as he could command and wield men like them.

Instead of responding to Theon, he turned to Bonnie and commended her for her courage in attempting to save Bran, no matter how badly it had turned out for her. She was loyal. Of that
much he could be certain.

"What is going to happen to her, my lord?" asked the maid, pointing her chin in the direction of the wildling woman, if she could be called a woman.

Her hair was shaggier than the coat of a bear in winter, and the layer of dirt on her was so thick it was almost impossible to discern the colour of her skin.

"Finish her and leave her to the beasts," said Theon. "Or maybe the vampire will come. Although I haven't heard of it around Winterfell for a while."

"Have mercy, m'lords!" begged the wildling woman.

"And why would I show mercy to an oath breaker?" asked Robb, still levelling his sword at her.

"I'm one of them Free Folk. I didn't swear no oaths to you or your father, and I didn't break none either."

She had a point, he had to admit. "Bind her and take her back to Winterfell," he said to Theon. She looked like she could be useful, as he wanted to know why there were wildlings south of the Wall.

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**Winterfell**

Bonnie sorted through her basket of herbs and fungi she had gathered from the Wolfswood as the wildling woman Osha quietly scrubbed the floor on her hands and knees, the chains around her ankles and wrists clanking as she moved. At first, the witch paid her no heed, but then she suddenly came to realize that the scratching of bristles on stone had stopped. She looked up to find Osha staring at her, her face full of unbridled curiosity.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"You've got power," said the wildling. "You have that look about you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Bonnie. How could she possibly know? But Bonnie herself knew nothing about wildlings. Perhaps they were more attuned to nature and magic than Westerosians were.

The wildling woman gave her a look, as if saying, 'What kind of southern idiot do you take me for?'

"I've seen things north o' the Wall," continued Osha. "Things that your little lord don't believe in, but I'd done seen 'em, and they're as real as you an' me. Maybe it's a good thing you're here. They're going to need whatever it is you've got."

Deciding that she'd had enough judging for a day, and that Osha was getting far too close to the truth than she was comfortable with, she took her herbs away to the maester's quarters where she could sort them out in peace, but even long after she was gone, she could still feel the wildling woman's eyes on her back.

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**King's Landing**

She didn't want to go back to Winterfell, back to the monotonous boredom of having only Jeyne Poole for company and of dreaming that one day she would meet a great lord. "It's the worst
possible time to leave," Sansa was saying to Septa Mordane as they walked down the sunlit halls of the Tower of the Hand. It looked so inviting and luxurious with their beautiful columns of limestone, unlike the drab grey walls of Winterfell, which were stained with soot from the smoky torches in their old metal brackets. No matter how many hangings her mother tried to put in the halls, they would never be beautiful. "Why can't we stay for Joffrey's coronation? I'm to be his queen, after all. What do you think, Elena?"

The older girl smiled serenely. "I am sure Lord Stark has his reasons," she said. "It is not in my place to question him."

Sansa resisted the urge to yell. She had thought that Elena of all people would understand! She had travelled so far and seen so much. This was Sansa's first glimpse of the real world, and she wanted to see more of it, not to go back to her father's own little corner and remain in the shadows forever. Suddenly, Elena stiffened and dropped the bundle in her arms. Her whole demeanour changed, as if she were about to run.

"Elena, what's wrong?" asked Sansa.

"Hush," said Elena. "Fighting."

Why would they be fighting? Sansa wanted to ask, but Elena and Septa Mordane hurried her towards her room, leaving her no breath to talk. The stones were hard beneath Sansa's soft new kid-skin slippers, and her legs became tangled in her skirts. She didn't know why, but she was frightened. Why would there be fighting, and in the Red Keep of all places? She expected the rabble to fight from time to time, but what did men in the Red Keep have to fight about? There was no tourney on. Screams came from outside as men and women of her household died. Why? How? She did not understand, and if it had not been for Septa Mordane and Elena holding her arms on either side, she probably would have stumbled and fallen from the shock.

Men in the uniform of the Kingsguard and the Lannister guards intercepted them. Thick ruby droplets trickled down their bared blades and fell onto the pale stone beneath their feet. No. No.

"Elena, get Sansa to her room and barricade the door," said Septa Mordane. The old woman placed herself between Sansa and the men, her face harder and more impassive than ever before. But even the hard old septa would never be able to hold off those guards. She had nothing. They had swords, and they'd used them already.

"Come, Sansa," said Elena. Sansa allowed herself to be dragged along. Shadows flashed past her vision as they passed through the colonnaded hall around the outside of the tower. The sounds of fighting were clearer and closer now. Glints of steel cast blinding light into her eyes.

"Why are we going this way?" she demanded when Elena took another turn and led her towards the kitchens. "Septa Mordane said to go to my room!"

"That's a dead end," said Elena. "I'm getting you out of here."

They rounded another corner. Sansa crashed into Elena's back as the other girl suddenly stopped.

"Lady Sansa," said the Hound. He stood before them, a terrifying ruined spectre of a man. "The King requires your presence." He smiled, making the scars on the burned side of his face constrict and stretch most terribly.

"If the king wants me, he can come and get me himself," said Sansa. She hated the Hound and his ugly scars, and Joffrey knew that. Why would he send him of all people to fetch her?
"I am afraid my lady must decline the king's request," said Elena. She kept herself in front of Sansa, using her slight frame as a shield between her and the monster that was a Clegane.

The Hound gave a grim chuckle, and then he lunged for Elena as if to push her out of the way. She was quicker. In fact, Sansa had never seen anyone move so quickly, save for Damon. Elena evaded the man's charge, trapping his arm beneath hers and then aiming for his neck. He barely managed to evade her blow which would have –hopefully– broken his neck. She flung him back. He staggered a few steps.

"Run, Sansa!" she shouted. Sansa wasted no time. She ran. The sound of combat continued. Steel struck stone. She heard the Hound's snarl and Elena's growl. She had to get out like she said. The girl almost tripped on the steps but she threw her hand out and clutched the wall just in time and continued running. Where was her father? Where was Damon? How could they let this happen?

Bodies lay scattered at her feet, beheaded, shot, trampled, with their brains splattered on the ground. Silverware and clothing were strewn all over. Faces that had once smiled at her now stared blankly back, their mouths opened in silent screams of horror forever more. Bile rose.

Then she screamed as someone seized her arm. "You're coming with us, Lady Sansa," said the Kingsguard.

"What do you hope to achieve here, girl?" asked the Hound. He watched her movements warily. His sword was pointed at her, but he made no move to charge. Elena knew she had the ability to fight him until he lost out of sheer exhaustion, but that was not the point. She had to find Sansa and Arya and Damon and get out of here. She was not going to achieve anything by defeating Sandor Clegane.

"Don't you ever get tired of being treated like an attack dog?" she asked as she slowly moved backwards, never taking her eyes off her opponent.

"What's it to you?"

"I'm saying you're a man. Be a man, not a hound." The window was behind her. She vaulted backwards. The ground rushed to meet her. Twigs cracked as she fell through the boughs of the trees waiting below. She landed on her feet. As a human, her legs would have broken, but vampires had stronger bones. She saw Sandor peering out the window in disbelief, but she didn't wait for him to find out that she was not dead.
Chapter Summary

Damon reveals his true self. Ned gets a glimpse of the future. Baelish gets an unexpected visit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

King's Landing: The Red Keep

Never be on the defensive. Arya was trying not to. Wooden swords clacked. Syrio tapped her shoulder again. "Dead," he said.

"How many times is that today?" she asked.

"Does it matter? You can only die once," replied the Braavosi.

Too late did Arya hear the sound of iron-shod feet pounding the flagstones outside before the men came in. Their red and white cloaks fanned out behind them and then became still as they took their places in the doorway before herself and Syrio. Silver and gold visors hid their faces, except for the one at the very front. She recognized Ser Meryn Trant, one of the knights from the Kingsguard who had gone to Winterfell with King Robert.

"You're coming with us, Arya Stark," he said. "Your father wants you."

At first, Arya thought nothing of it, but when Syrio stopped her from stepping forward, she noticed their swords were covered with fresh blood.

"Oh, so Lord Stark employs Lannister men and Kingsguard now, does he?" asked Syrio. He seemed relaxed, letting his sword arm hang by his side, the wooden hilt loose in his grip, but Arya knew better. She'd seen him take guard immediately from this position. Unlike her, he didn't need to prepare himself, and there was no sign that he would strike until he did.

"Out of the way, foreigner," said Ser Meryn. "This is not your business."

"Ah, but it is," said Syrio. He glanced at Arya. "Leave now. This is no child's game. Go."

One of the Lannister men rushed at Syrio. The little Braavosi easily sidestepped and struck his head with the wooden sword so hard it sent him hurtling into one of the pillars. The other men converged on him. He moved like water, never stopping, and never ungraceful. His movements came to him as if he were born with a sword in his hand, although Arya could believe it.

"Go!" he shouted to her again.

She ran, darting for the back door that led down to the dungeons because that was the only path open to her. Her heart was beating so loudly she could barely hear anything else. She had to find her father. Find her father. Where was her father? How could he have allowed this to happen? She thought they were going home today!
Voices at the bottom of the steps made her crouch down in the shadows, and then she couldn't resist peering back into the room where she had spent so many happy hours practising with Elena and Syrio. The Braavosi circled Ser Meryn. The latter's heavy armour stopped any blows from the wooden sword. Meryn grabbed the wooden blade. Down came the steel. The wood splintered, leaving Syrio with only a stump. No matter how skilled he was, Arya knew. Men with swords always won against men without.

Meryn swung at Syrio. The man jumped out of the way, but the sword sliced through his sleeve. "You know what I tell death?" asked the Braavosi. "Not today."

Meryn made to charge again, but he suddenly stiffened and jerked, arching his back in silent agony while his mouth worked to scream. The man was lifted off his feet as red liquid rained down onto the flagstones with a splatter, splashing onto the black leather boots behind him.

Damon peered around his dangling body. She had never been so glad to see anyone in her life, not that she was going to hug him. All right, part of her wanted to fling herself into Damon's arms, but she had more self-control than that. Instead, she stayed hidden in the shadows. Besides, she did not know this Damon.

Blood stained his face and dripped from his chin. Fury darkened his eyes, and veins snaked up beneath his skin, while his teeth were terrifyingly white and sharp against his blood-reddened lips. He raised Ser Meryn as if he were a puppet, his hand deeply embedded in the man's back. "I was ambushed and I was shot," he said. "And now I'm just pissed off."

The ambush came without warning. Well, it was an ambush and the lack of a warning was kind of the whole point. Arrows flew in over the walls as Damon had been making sure the coffers were being tied down correctly. Two armour-piercing crossbow bolts –pointless, considering he wasn't wearing armour, but he supposed they were being thorough– struck him in the side, and one in the lower abdomen. The Lannister flood rushed in, killing everyone in their path. Of course, they ignored the prone man lying on the flagstones with three arrows in him. Their mistake. Damon didn't like getting ambushed, and he liked getting shot even less.

He moved before they could scream a warning. Warm sweet blood anointed him. He was baptized in life and death. If one did not look too closely, one could have mistaken him for wearing red gloves. There was great satisfaction in plunging his hands into the chest cavities of men to seize their still beating hearts. He wanted to see the life of his enemies leave their eyes and their fear as they realized what it was that had killed them. Bones broke beneath his fingers. A spinal column was unsheathed as he wrenched a man's head from his shoulders. He used that like a whip, except it wasn't very effective because the vertebrae kept breaking off. Oh, how he had missed this. Hopefully Elena wouldn't see. If she did, he would plead self-defence.

Some of them made to run, but no human could outrun a vampire, particularly not within a walled compound. Their skulls were crushed against stone. It was time someone painted the Red Keep fifty shades of crimson.

No matter what happens, you will protect Arya and Sansa.

Killing Lannister men was not the point. He had made a promise to Ned Stark, and somehow, he felt a compulsion to keep it. He didn't know why. Perhaps the Stark honour had corrupted him. But he had to find Elena and the girls and get them out of here before Cersei's men got them. Or was it the girls and Elena? Never mind. It was all the same. Besides, he needed to kill everyone who had seen his true form.
He sped into the tower. Bodies littered every corner and the halls, arms and legs askew at awkward angles. Amongst them was Septa Mordane's corpse lying in a pool of sticky blood. Her eyes were beginning to cloud over. Damon ran through the halls, checking room after room until he finally came to what he had dubbed the dance studio.

Well, that wasn't fair. Seven against one, and Forel only had a wooden practise sword. If it had been steel, the Braavosi would not have even needed his help. But as it was, the wooden sword splintered and broke as Ser Meryn Trant's blade came down upon it. The wooden blade clattered to the floor, leaving in Forel's hand only the stump which was no good for anything except staking vampires at close range, and that was not the objective here at all.

The Kingsguard all wore plate armour. From the front, they were just about unassailable human tanks. However, their armour was tied at their backs. The weakness was very small; too small unless one had an impossibly good aim. For a human, at least.

Damon's fingers plunged through fabric, skin and flesh. Splintered bone scratched the back of his hand. He wrapped his fingers around Trant's pulsing heart. It fluttered furiously against his hand like a captured butterfly as panic seized the man before it stopped.

Damon yanked his hand out of the man, his fingers clutched around the fresh lump of muscle which, a few seconds ago, had been pumping blood through his body. Meryn fell to the floor like a broken doll, red liquid oozing from the hole in his back.

"How is this possible?" whispered Syrio. He took a step back from the vampire, but he did not turn and run. A brave man, although possibly not the smartest man. Then again, perhaps he knew he could not flee from the best predator the world had ever known.

"Because I'm Damon Salvatore," said Damon. He retracted his fangs. This was more blood than he had had in centuries. That was one great thing about medieval conflict, he supposed. There was no such thing as human rights or crimes against humanity. You came, you conquered, and you killed. Then you had lunch. "You can come out now, Arya. I'm not hungry anymore." He'd known she was there the whole time. Her heart had been beating so quickly he could have danced to it.

"You're a vampire, aren't you?" she asked as she emerged. Her voice bore the same cold tone as her brother's would have if he had been the one coming across such a situation. She was most certainly Robb Stark's sister.

"Well, you're observant, I'll give you that," said Damon.

"You're a vampire and you ate garlic," said Arya. "Were any of the things you told us true?"

"Well, I do like blood," said Damon. He took a sip from the torn vein protruding from Trant's heart. Vile men did not necessarily mean vile blood.

He cleaned his face up with a corner of Ser Meryn's white cloak and began to strip one of the Lannister guards of his armour. The man was still alive, but quickly ceased to be when Damon broke his neck as if his bones were made of glass. He donned the armour, red cloak and golden helmet and all. No one would be able to tell he was a Stark man rather than a Lannister man.

Then he stripped Meryn of his armour and clothes, and before anyone could stop him, he'd taken up a knife and begun to carve a large D on his chest.

"Don't put your name on him, Damon!" cried Arya.

"I wasn't going to!" What? Him? Of course he hadn't been about to carve his name on the body!
Well, okay, perhaps the thought had crossed his mind once or twice, or maybe five or six times, but he wasn't going to do it now.

Dead flesh was easy to write on. Living people had the bad habit of struggling when one tried to carve things into their skin. He tied a rope tightly about Trant, wrapping it once around his neck, around his arms, and then back up around his neck again. Then he secured the rope to one of the columns and threw the body out the window.

The rope slithered out like a snake and went taut as it reached its full length.

"Now, let's go," said Damon.

"I know a way," said Arya. "Follow me."

The body hung from the window, like a grotesque doll swinging in the wind. Meryn Trant's glassy eyes still betrayed the horror he had known right before he'd died.

"Cut him down," whispered Cersei. Too many people had seen it already. The body fell with a dull thud as the rope was severed. His heart lay on the ground below the window from which both it and the body had been tossed. Someone had ripped it out from Meryn from behind and then left it there like an offering to the gods, or perhaps to taunt the men who found it, but that was not what made Cersei's blood chill.

Whoever had killed him—the Stark man who had killed him and almost all the other men who had been sent—had left a message in large bloody block letters carved onto the man's front.

DRACULA WAS HERE

Arya waited impatiently with Syrio for Damon's 'ree-con-nay-sonce' mission in the Red Keep. Everyone was saying her father had been arrested for treason, and the vampire had admitted that yes, it was probably true, and he had known that her father had been planning something for a little while, and nothing Damon had said had been able to dissuade him.

The terror of the past few hours had caught up with her. She swallowed, trying not to cry, because tears were for cowards and Sansa, but she wanted to do nothing more than sob. Her father was captured, her sister and Elena were missing, and Septa Mordane was dead. Why had they come to King's Landing? They should have stayed in Winterfell with Robb and Bran and everything would have been fine!

Around them, bakers' boys continued to make their deliveries as Arya crouched in the shadows of the little abandoned house Damon had found for them. Only broken furniture, cobwebs and a single sad broom remained. The previous 'tenants' of the house had been easily evicted. Disease-ridden beggars and vagabonds wandered around aimlessly. Her stomach grumbled, but the very thought of food made her feel a little sick.

Damon dropped down from the hole in the roof, his stolen armour tied up in a bundle on his back. She supposed it would be very strange for a Lannister guardsman to be running around in Flea Bottom. Damon, however, seemed to know the place better than a Stark man-at-arms ought to.

"They have Sansa," he said. Arya had never seen him so serious before. There was no humour in his ice blue eyes. "Ned's been put into the Black Cells. They are probably planning on doing… well, un-nice things to him."
Arya bit her lip. She'd heard stories of the Black Cells. Men went mad in there or died of hunger or thirst.

"What now?" asked Syrio. "Oh, no, Salvatore. You may have the strength of one hundred men and the swiftness of wind, but even you cannot steal Lord Stark from the Black Cells and expect success."

"I just want to talk to him," said Damon. "He should at least know what is going on, and he might know more than what we do. There may yet be hope." She perked up at that word. Her father had a chance? Well, he did have a vampire on his side. That had to count for something, right? Damon was probably ancient and had all sorts of tricks up his sleeve. If there was anyone who could get her father out, it was Damon.

"I don't think Cersei has forgotten that Robb still guards the north, and I don't know about her, but even I know not to mess with Robb," said the vampire.

"Except bite him," muttered Arya.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt anyone," said Damon.

"How do you plan on reaching Lord Stark?" asked Syrio.

"I have my ways and my friends," said Damon.

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**King's Landing: The Street of Silk**

It had gone a little awry, and Petyr would be the first to admit that, but so long as everyone, including Ned Stark himself, listened to Sansa's sweet pleadings, it should all right itself in the end. Little Sansa did not have Cat's fire, but she probably had more sense than both her father and mother combined. However, just in case Ned was being particularly Starkish, Petyr had started buying up armouries and weapons forges. When there was war, lions and wolves slaughtered each other in the thousands, and the humble carrion bird would pick at their leavings and grow fat and full. He was going to be that humble carrion bird.

He went through the numbers in his head as he wandered into the darkened room. Had the servants forgotten to light the lamps? Did he really have to do everything himself? He made to light one.

"So, I heard you held a dagger to Ned Stark's throat while his men were slaughtered," said a familiar voice from the shadows. He stopped. "Tell me why I shouldn't rip out your throat now. And don't even bother alerting anyone. You'll be dead before you can open your mouth."

"Damon," said Petyr. He did not bother turning around. If Damon wanted to be seen, he would be seen. If he didn't, then he had a feeling that no matter how hard he tried to spot him, he wouldn't be able to. On the other hand, if Damon had wanted him dead, he probably would have done it already. Everyone wanted something, and everyone had their price. "I merely prevented dear Ned from throwing himself onto the blades of his enemies, as you know he would have done."

The mercenary emerged from behind Petyr's desk. In the dark, his eyes were pits so deep a man could fall in and never get out. "I heard about the massacre of Lannister men and poor Ser Meryn, and I wondered if you had a hand in it," continued Petyr.

"The Red Keep should actually be a shade of red, or else it would just be the Pink Keep, don't you agree?" asked Damon. The man examined his fingernails.
"How did you do it? No one else survived," said Petyr.

"Cersei likes me," said Damon.

What was that supposed to mean? Had Cersei let him go deliberately? Was Damon in league with the queen? But that made no sense. If he was in league with the queen, then why would he be here now hiding? Unless Cersei was using him to do her dirty work? How much did Damon know anyway?

"I need your help, Baelish, and after what you did to my liege, I figured you owe me."

"It would depend on the details," said Petyr. "You still haven't told me what you want."

"It would be next to nothing for a man of your means," said Damon. "I mean, you don't want to be Ser Meryn's friend, do you?"

Petyr did not like threats, even valid ones. Particularly not valid ones. "Evidently you need me alive or else you would not be here." He poured two cups of wine and drank from one to indicate it was not poisoned.

Damon took the other cup and downed it in one gulp before sitting down. "Nice wine. Oaken barrel, about seven years old?"

"Very good, Ser Salvatore," said Petyr. "Now, how about we discuss this like civilized men?"

"You can try," said Damon. "But remember, I am of the north. We are not exactly known for our great and sophisticated civilization."

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**The King's Landing: The Red Keep**

The Black Cells were aptly named. No light could penetrate the three foot thick stone walls situated so far beneath the Red Keep that one had to wonder if the other side of the world were beneath their feet. But it was too cold to be near the core of the planet, or even the mantle. It was just as well Damon didn't really need any light to see. The ability to see in perfect darkness was one of the first boons about being a vampire he had discovered.

Moisture dripped from the walls. It smelled of death and decay and old bone and mildew. He heard Ned's breathing before he saw him. The man's leg wound had opened again and started bleeding during the struggle, but otherwise, he seemed unharmed. For now, Ned was sleeping. Damon kept to the deepest shadows behind one of the stone walls several feet away, aware that there would be other eyes watching the former Hand. Certainly there were eyes watching Damon. When one contacted one of the premium spy masters in King's Landing, one could expect every move to be documented.

But Damon had an undue advantage.

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*He was back in the north again. The boughs of the Wolfswood formed a canopy above his head, but he could see glimpses of blue sky between the deep green leaves. It was one of those rare summer days. Small white flowers bloomed on the grasslands that stretched out towards Winterfell. A thrush had a snail in its beak nearby and was in the process of smashing the shell against a tree root. A warm breeze brushed his face. It smelled of fresh grass and sun-warmed soil."

"You like it?"
Ned whipped around. "Damon?" he asked. "What are you doing here? What am I doing here? They took me to the Black Cells." He didn't bother saying that this was not the Black Cells.

"Don't get too excited," said Damon. "This is a dream, nothing more. What I'm about to tell you, however, is very real."

"How is this possible? Why would I dream of you of all people?"

"Because I made it so," said Damon. "I don't know if you've realized, but I'm not an ordinary person. In fact, I am a very extraordinary person. You know that story I was telling your children about vampires? It's kind of based on fact."

Ned took a step back as Damon's eyes darkened and his teeth elongated and sharpened.

"Yes, Ned. I am vampire, and I am in your dreams because I needed a place to talk to you in private. Don't worry. If I'd wanted to hurt you, you'd never have lived this long."

It was true. He had trusted Damon so much that if the man—vampire—had wanted to kill him, he would have had plenty of opportunities.

"Where is Arya?" asked Ned.

"Arya's safe with Forel and me," said Damon. "Cersei has Sansa. I don't know if I can get her out."

"I know," said Ned. "Varys told me she had pleaded for my life, and Cersei might spare me if I confessed, but you and I both know the truth. I know too much, as do you."

"So what are you going to do?" asked Damon.

"I don't know, Damon. But no matter what happens and what I decide, you must take Arya back to Winterfell. Tell Robb everything that has transpired here. Stannis is the rightful heir to the throne and Robb must support him."

"Bleh," said Damon.

Ned gripped the vampire by both shoulders. "Promise me."

"No, I won't," said Damon. "I'm not gonna put stick-up-his-ass Stannis on the throne! He wants to ban fun, Ned! I'd rather support..." Here, he paused as if trying to think of a suitable replacement for Stannis, as if there could be one. Stannis was the rightful king and heir!

Damon's face lit up as the answer came to him. "Robb!"

The emphatic manner in which Damon pronounced his son's name sent a shiver down Ned's spine. How had Robb inspired so much loyalty in so short a time, and in a man such as Damon? And Robb on the Iron Throne? Unthinkable! But...what if...

No, he couldn't. It would be the ultimate dishonour!

"No, Damon. Not Robb. StannisBaratheon is the rightful heir to the throne!"

"I don't give a flying fuck. I might have even considered honouring your request if you'd said Renly, but Stannis? Nobody likes Stannis. The man wants to end all brothels. Then he'll probably want to ban sex, and make drinking illegal. What? What are you going to do about it? Hit me? I'm in your head, buddy, controlling your dream. So go on, hit me. But if I'm gonna have to support a king, and I'm not really a monarchist unless I'm the monarch, then my money's on Robb."
Black storm clouds moved across the blue skies, obscuring the sun and casting a shadow over them. Damon began striding away towards Winterfell, except it had now turned into King's Landing, and from every parapet and battlement in the Red Keep, the wolf was flying proudly.

"Do not turn your back on me, Damon Salvatore! There is only one rightful king, and that is Stannis! Not Joffrey, not Renly, and most definitely not Robb!"

He suddenly found himself transported into the throne room, standing in a pool of blood, but instead of Robert, Stannis, Renly, Joffrey, or even a young Jaime Lannister sitting there, he saw his son, crowned in gold with a sceptre in one hand and something that looked like a ball of metal in the other.

"No, no," whispered Ned. He looked about wildly. No one else was there, except Damon. The vampire grinned, showing his sharp white fangs.

"Well, if you really don't like it..."

All the wolves turned into ravens as he spoke, and instead of Robb sitting on the Iron Throne, Damon now sprawled there as if he had always been there with a golden goblet of blood in his hand. "King Damon Salvatore has a nice sort of ring to it, don't you think?"

Ned woke up drenched in sweat. "Damon!" he roared. His voice echoed, shouting the mercenary's name back at him.

"Bad dream, my lord?" asked Varys. The smoky torch he held seemed impossibly bright.

"It's nothing," said Ned. "I thought I saw someone."

"Your bannerman," said the Spider. He crouched down and offered Ned a small loaf of bread. Ned tore into it hungrily, but it tasted like ash on his tongue. Damon would dishonour House Stark with his treasonous ways, and Robb was young enough to be influenced. "Did you know he's currently making the most surprising visit to the queen? Yes, he's up there now. I do think Cersei is quite enamoured with him."

Who said men couldn't multi-task? All he needed to do was establish the initial connection with Ned, and voila, secret message delivered. He would probably need to get another drink tonight, though. He discarded the dark hooded cloak he had worn down into the Black Cells. Now that he'd gotten Ned all up to speed, it was time for part two.

He had explored every part of the Red Keep upon first arriving in King's Landing, and he knew it as well as he knew his own house. Cersei's quarters faced the south west so she would receive all the warm winds and most of the light from the dying sun each day. Tapestries depicting lions and men dressed in red and gold announced that he had arrived at the borders of her domain. He'd never seen Casterly Rock save in rather inaccurate and amateurish paintings, but he imagined that the halls of Casterly Rock wouldn't look too different as far as the décor went.

"I wish to see Her Grace," he said to the guardsmen who stood outside her door.

"The queen is occupied at present," they replied.

He heard Cersei's soft tones, and Sansa's equally soft but insistent attempts to change the subject. Good girl. There might yet be hope for her. Certainly there was more chance now that Damon was here. While he might not wish to honour Ned's ridiculous demands regarding heirs to the throne,
abandoning the girls was not an option.

"The Queen will want to see me," he said. "You do know who I am, yes?" No, obviously they didn't, but judging by the looks on their faces, they were assuming he and Cersei had relations beyond that of a sovereign and her subject. "I wonder what she would do if she ever finds out you kept me waiting outside her door? Hmm…you do have such beautiful eyes. It's a pity you do not know how to use them properly, so I suppose you really have no use for them." They still stared at him, but refused to move.

Did he have to do everything himself? Servants these days.

Chapter End Notes

What is Damon doing to do now?
Chapter Summary

Damon hatches a plan to rescue Sansa and Ned. Elena makes a shocking discovery and makes a decision. Cersei prepares for Joffrey's coronation. Petyr Baelish's spies meet untimely ends where they least expect to.

King's Landing – The Palace

The little dove thought herself an eagle. "Sansa, darling, your father has committed grave offences against the crown. The only way you can help him is to write to your brother and tell him to come to King's Landing to swear his allegiance to his king," Cersei said. She was reaching the end of her patience. Starks. They were all infuriating in their own way.

"My father is Lord of Winterfell, Your Grace," said Sansa. "It should be he who swears the oath of allegiance to the crown, not my brother."

"Your father is a traitor, Lady Sansa," said Baelish. Something akin to fear flickered across Sansa's face, but she schooled it into a mask. The soft little mouth hardened.

"He was misguided and misled by men who would seek to destroy him," she said. "He would never betray the crown. King Robert was his best friend! Please, Your Grace, you must believe me. Please give him a chance to see the error of his ways, I beg of you. He will be loyal."

"I believe you, Little Dove," said Cersei, "but others will not trust the word of a man who has denounced the king. Your brother must be the one to swear allegiance to the crown. His honour is not yet stained."

Pycelle leaned down close to her ear. "Perhaps it might be prudent to persuade her by more forceful means," he whispered. Cersei glanced at him in distaste. She knew he wasn't the senile and kind old man he pretended to be, but did he have to be so barbaric? It was in very bad form to physically harm a lord's daughter, even that of a traitorous lord. There would be so much to lose than to gain. Although, if Sansa continued like this, it might be the only path to pursue.

"Does the traitor's seed bear fruit?" asked Pycelle, addressing Sansa now.

"It must have been Lord Renly. He tricked my father. Everyone knows he always wanted to be king," she said, not looking at Pycelle at all but keeping her eyes focused on Cersei.

The two women stared at one another. Blue met green. They were both so stubborn. Sansa was young yet, but she would grow up one day. Cersei both anticipated and feared to see what the little dove could become.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the door opening. Who would dare to interrupt her? She was in no mood to see more annoying courtiers or advisors who never gave any good advice. If she wanted to get anything done, she needed to do it herself.

But the man who came in made her forget almost all her annoyance with useless counsellors and
stubborn Starks.

"Your Grace." His sultry tones brushed her like a kiss. Well, all right. She didn't mind this interruption so much. Sansa whipped around at the sound of her bannerman's voice. Was that joy? Hope? Alarm?

"Ser Damon Salvatore," said Cersei. "How timely that you should come at this hour."

"I could not help but overhear your conversation with Lady Sansa, Your Grace," said Damon as he straightened from his bow. His blue eyes gleamed. Cersei wanted them to gaze upon her alone and with adoration. He did have the most beautiful eyes of any man, no, any person she had ever met. And he knew which way the wind was blowing. Intelligence in a man was dangerous and thrilling. "If you will allow me to have a word with Lady Sansa, Your Grace?"

Hmm…could she trust him? But he was here, and she wasn't going to let Damon out of her sight. If he tried anything…well, it would be a pity, but she had to remember that he had once been one of Ned Stark's knights. In fact, hadn't he been Ned Stark's only knight? Cersei leaned back, and upon hearing no objection from her, he turned to Sansa.

This was difficult. He'd never had to deal with such delicate situations before in his life. Actually, he had, but then he'd always just ripped his way through them with no thought for the body count. If his plan failed, someone's plan always worked out. Just as long as his enemy's plans didn't work out.

But he had to care about the body count now. The objective wasn't to save himself or even the currently absent Elena. Sansa was already in the grasp of the enemy, and this enemy was a lot brighter than Klaus.

And dealing with Klaus had been troublesome enough.

"My lady, consider your father's position," he said. "It would be in all our interests—" Here, he waved his hand around the whole room so it actually meant everyone. "—if Lord Robb comes in person to King's Landing to swear his allegiance to His Grace. Writing to Lord Robb and having him swear allegiance may be the only way to secure your father's pardon."

"Damon…" whispered Sansa.

He hoped his look was piercing and poignant enough for her to get the idea.

"Lord Robb is Lord of Winterfell now," Damon ploughed on. God, this was hard! Not that he believed in God. He had to put on a show for both Cersei and Sansa and they both had to believe he was on their side. He was not a two-faced bitch like…she-who-must-not-be-named. "Your father cannot be a lord of this realm, considering his treason, but as a lord's father, he may yet escape the traitor's fate. His fate, and the fate of your house, rest in your hands." He mentally crossed his fingers and hoped Robb was as smart as he thought he was and could read between the lines. Because if he did come…

Well, even Damon couldn't save him then.

Sansa looked up at him with such hurt in her eyes. Despite all her bravado, she was still just a little girl; too little to play in the dangerous games of political machines; Cersei and her ilk weren't really people. Poor little Sansa had thought he had come to rescue her rather than to convince her to partake in this plot to nullify the threat of House Stark forever. But she still trusted him. She nodded.
Cersei dictated the letter to her, and she dutifully wrote down every word in her careful and still a little childish handwriting. There were more ink blots than usual as her hand shook just a little, and she was struggling not to cry.

The guards took her away after she was finished, and Cersei commanded Pycelle to send the little rolled up piece of parchment, sealed with red wax, with all haste. She was eager to be rid of the Starks, yet here was a wolf in lion's clothing standing right before her. How come all women had bad judgement when it came to him? Then again, she wanted him, and desire made people blind.

"Will you dine with me, Ser Damon?" she asked him when everyone had left.

"It would be my honour, Your Grace," he said. Well, widows got lonely, and he was extremely charming. It was understandable. He pulled a chair towards him and sat down without having been given permission to do so. Cersei looked him up and down like he was a new stallion to be broken or a piece of meat that she was trying to decide how to cook. Not that she knew how to cook anything.

"I have been wondering, how did you…escape?" asked Cersei. "No one from the Stark household lived."

She probably meant to ask why his head was not on a spike. Oh, he'd seen them. They were crude, but what could he expect? These people hadn't had a renaissance yet. They probably thought heads on spikes were the heights of sophistication on par with paintings of women with no eyebrows.

"I had no need to escape, Your Grace, considering I was not there," he said.

"Oh?" asked Cersei. "And where might you have been?"

"Things to do, places to see, people to talk to," said Damon. He let her draw her own conclusions from that.

"And by people you mean…a few ladies of debatable repute in the city, along with their master?" asked Cersei.

"Well…what can I say, Your Grace? I am merely a man, and men have needs and little control over them. Although, my tastes do not veer in the other direction, if you get what I mean."

She laughed. "You were wasted on Eddard Stark," she said. He poured wine both for her and for himself. It was the good stuff; sweet, but not too sweet, with hints of plum and strawberries. Servants brought in platters of delicacies, with two roasted quails in red wine and blueberry sauce, so tender one could almost eat the bones, soft herbed bread with a thin flaky crust, still warm, to be eaten with garlic butter and carrot soup with garlic. Then there were lamb racks rubbed with rosemary and garlic and cooked until the insides were still just a little bit pink, and crabs fried with garlic and shallots.

There was a lot of garlic. Perhaps his Dracula stunt had shaken her more than she was showing.

No matter; garlic was delicious on most things except ice cream.

As before, he served her rather than allowing the servants to do it. Let her think he could be tamed. Cersei was a woman who did not love things, but she liked to own them. In fact, there was quite a bit of similarity between her and she-who-must-not-be-named. The latter, of course, was far more dangerous and unpredictable, for while Cersei only thought she was brilliant; she-who-must-not-be-named actually kind of was.
"So, now that Robb Stark is Lord of Winterfell, what is going to happen to the *old* Lord Stark?" asked Damon. He ripped apart a crab to get at the sweet white meat within. They were impossible to eat politely and using just utensils. The juice ran down his fingers. He licked it off. Tasty, but not as tasty as fresh Lannister. Or Stark. But he had acquired a taste for Lannister men over these past couple of days, and Kingsguards with vile personalities didn't taste vile either. "Surely we can't have two of them. It would be awfully confusing."

"The matter will be dealt with accordingly," said Cersei.

"Let me guess; head, spike, wall?"

"Nothing so vulgar, I hope," said Cersei.

"Poison in the night, then, like Jon Arryn? Oh, don't look so surprised, Your Grace. The expression does not suit you."

"He is of no use to us dead. Alive, he may yet be a collar and leash for his handsome son. I would have thought you'd know this already."

Oh, good. If Cersei didn't want Ned dead, it would be a whole lot easier to formulate a plan to rescue him.

He grinned back at her. "I'm a man. We are not so subtle or farseeing."

Cersei leaned back. "You have spent some time with the Stark boy, yes?" she asked as she daintily sipped her wine and allowed her servant to dissect her crab for her. She stabbed some of the sweet white flesh with a tiny silver fork.

"Yes, I trained with Robb Stark, Your Grace," said Damon, carefully not referring to Robb as 'Lord Robb', although, truth be told, it was easier to refer to him as just Robb than with an honorific. It had never gelled with him, calling anyone a lord.

"What do you make of him?" asked Cersei.

"Responsible, as far as a boy can be responsible," said Damon. As if he was one who could talk about responsibility, considering the word had only recently half-entered his vocabulary. "But a boy still, and raised by Eddard Stark."

"Do you think he will come?"

"If there's one thing the Starks value more than honour, then it is family, Your Grace. He will come. Most likely with a horde of stinking ill-mannered northmen behind him."

"Pity," said Cersei. "He is such a handsome boy."

Cersei had no taste in men. Then again, she had fallen for Jaime Lannister…and him, of course. Actually, he'd just say Cersei had eclectic tastes.

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**King's Landing – The Tower of the Hand**

The Tower of the Hand stood silent and abandoned. The bodies from earlier had been removed, but stale blood and brains still stained the stones. Elena heard no sound save for the distant hooting of an owl and the scurrying and squeaking of rats converging on a severed limb that had been forgotten beneath the bushes. She swallowed her disgust and held any fear that she felt at bay.
What had happened? She was hearing a thousand and one rumours about Lord Stark committing treason, but that didn't sound like him. He was one of the most honest people she'd ever met. She hunted about the grounds in the hopes of finding survivors from the Stark household who had hidden themselves away during the massacre, listening carefully for palace guards and Lannister men. She knew who the enemy were; that much was clear.

The rooms were all abandoned. Clothes and books and papers lay scattered. Vases had been shattered. She carefully checked each level, but found them to be all the same. Blood stains, sword marks, broken things. The door to Damon's room was ajar. She peeked inside, knowing that if he were still alive —and he had to be, because that Dracula stunt couldn't and wouldn't have been pulled off by anyone else— he would have been long gone by now, and they had been separated for long enough that she didn't know where he would go right now while the city was in full lock down and no one could get out.

His books were strewn about the floor. He had amassed an eclectic collection of folk tales, history, and poetry. Someone had smashed a jar of pink powder on the floor while they had been searching through his things. Why did Damon have blush? She didn't really want to know.

Her room was in the Hand's family quarters, next to Septa Mordane's. She'd seen the septa's head on the wall atop a spike, along with so many other people she had once known. The image had been burned into her memory. Elena removed a loose flagstone in her room beneath her bed, where she kept her wages. Thankfully no one had searched the maid's room too thoroughly and her small box of coins remained where she had left it. She emptied it. There were three silvers and a handful of coppers. If she needed more, she could steal it. She had learned some time ago that while compulsion didn't work in Westeros, she also had no need of an invitation to get into someone's house. It was a win-lose situation.

Suddenly, she slumped down against the wall, feeling the wild urge to laugh and cry at the same time. Elena Gilbert had been reduced to sneaking around in the night and stealing money. How low could she go? She'd failed to protect Sansa, failed to protect Arya, and now both of them were missing, presumably taken by Cersei Lannister. Damon was missing, and she didn't know where to find him. She didn't know why any of this was happening.

Elena wiped her tears from her face angrily. "Don't be stupid," she whispered into the darkness. Now was not the time to have a nervous breakdown, if ever there was a time to have one. She left her room and never looked back again. Lord Stark's quarters were in even more disarray. She had no idea why she had come here, or what she was looking for. Perhaps she thought she might be able to find clues as to why he had been taken.

Papers were scattered all over the floor, some covered in bloody boot prints. Most of these detailed the mundane goings on in the seven kingdoms, with reports on the monthly deficits —King Robert had had a debt ceiling higher than the Congress'—, taxes, raids on the Riverlands, and unused paper.

But paper was one of those things that retained memories. In the light of the moon, which cast stark shadows wherever there was a shadow to be cast, she saw faint impressions on one of the blank sheets from a letter Lord Stark had been writing on the sheet of paper above it.

She scrabbled around in her pocket, looking for the piece of charcoal that she always kept there in lieu of a pencil. Quills and ink were inconvenient tools with which to make quick notes. She lightly brushed the charcoal over the paper. The impressions on it remained pale.

The letter was addressed to Lord Stannis Baratheon, King Robert's brother.
Her eyes widened.

No wonder Lord Stark had denounced Joffrey! She quickly folded up the piece of paper and stuffed it in her pocket. What was she supposed to do with this information? She searched the room further in case there were more secrets like this the soldiers had missed when they had raided the place. For a moment, she felt guilty as if she were intruding on Lord Stark's privacy—all right, she was, but she was doing it so she could figure out just what had happened and then let Jon and Lord Robb know.

Indeed, Robb Stark needed to know about this. Finally, at the end of a confusing day, just as the moon was reaching its apex over the sleeping city, Elena had her destination.

She looked under the bed, feeling around for anything that might remotely resemble her loosened flagstone. And she found it. A coincidence, or fate? It had not been disturbed for some time, because there was a thick layer of dust over it, and a spider had begun to make its home above it. She felt a little bad about wrecking its hard work as she removed the stone and reached down cautiously. Just because she was a vampire did not mean she didn't care about being bitten by poisonous things.

She found a bundle of notebooks tied together with string. The graceful flowing writing on the pages was unfamiliar to her, but she recognized the books for what they were; diaries kept over several years detailing the life of the Hand who had come before Ned Stark, with all his observations about King's Landing and brief abbreviated notes.

She'd found Jon Arryn's diaries. She'd never known anyone in Westeros to have kept a diary before. She quickly went to the last volumes, skimming over the pages.

Towards the end of his life, his entries became briefer and more furtive. The second to last volume remained unfinished. Maybe Arryn had become too ill to write by then. Then there was a blank book, its pages inviting another pen. She didn't know why she did it, but she tied the notebooks back together and added them to her meagre bundle of belongings. The men had left the pens and ink alone. She supposed Lord Stark wouldn't mind her pilfering his stationary supplies. She would pay him back if she ever saw him again.

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**King's Landing – Flea Bottom**

It wasn't hard to slip out of his room through the window and make his way across the rooftops to Flea Bottom where Arya and Forel waited. No one noticed the shadow jumping from house to house. Night time was a vampire's best friend. On the way, he grabbed a quick snack. The drunk's blood tasted of cheap booze, but it revived him considerably. Creating Ned's elaborate dream had tired him.

"What took you so long?" Arya hissed when he dropped down through the broken roof of the abandoned house.

"Is that how you greet the man who brings you dinner?" he asked. He handed her a wrapped bundle of bread, cheese, and fruit, along with a skin of watered wine. Forel and Arya fell upon the food, with the former being a much more dainty eater than the little Stark could ever be.

"Did you see my father?" asked Arya through a mouthful of cheese.

"I did," said Damon. "He's all right for a man who is in the Black Cells. I told him not to worry about you because you're with me."
"I think that is legitimate cause to worry," said Forel.

"Shut up," said Damon. "What would you have done? Died defending her? Anyway, Cersei doesn't want him dead. She wants to use him to control Robb, who should know about all of this in a couple of days because Sansa wrote to him. Yes, I saw her too, and I'm gonna try and get her out."

"What about my father?"

"Like I said, Cersei's not going to kill him."

"So what is she going to do?"

Damon paused, and decided to be honest. "I don't know," he replied. "I'll try to get him out if I can, but I don't think it will be as easy as getting Sansa out. He's too useful to her, and if we're not careful, not only will it not help him or Sansa, they might get you too."

"But you have to try!"

Damon crouched down. He hated dealing with emotional kids. He wasn't someone's dad! And he never wanted to be! Baby vampires didn't count, and he didn't like looking after those either unless they were named Elena. "Listen," he said. "I made a promise to your father that no matter what happens, I'm going to get you back to Robb. And I'm going to do that regardless of what else happens." Regardless of what else happened. His mind automatically went to Elena, lost out there somewhere. Was she still in King's Landing? He had neither heard nor seen a sign of her up in the Red Keep.

He must have betrayed something in his expression, because Arya stopped demanding that he rescue everyone.

"I have to head back," he said when they were finished. "I have to stay in the Red Keep from now on if I'm to get Cersei's full trust and get Sansa out. Stay here, and stay hidden."

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Winterfell

Robb crushed the letter in his hand. They'd taken his father and his sisters. And now they wanted him to swear loyalty to that little golden-haired shit? Well, they wanted him in King's Landing, did they? He'd go, but he wouldn't be going alone.

"Rally the banners," he commanded. "If they want me to go to King's Landing, I'll go to King's Landing with an army so large they won't be able to see the end of it." He quickly wrote two letters; one to his mother at the Eyrie, and one to Jon on the Wall. He didn't know why he wrote the latter one, considering Jon had probably already sworn his oaths and couldn't leave. But Jon needed to know, and Jon was his brother. There was no one he trusted more.

"Are you frightened?" asked Theon once they were alone.

Robb held up his hand. He couldn't keep it still. "My hand is shaking. I must be," he said, trying to muster a smile but he couldn't really.

"Good," said Theon. "It means you're not stupid."

Robb nodded. His blood rushed by his ears so quickly it sounded like a torrent after the snowmelt. "Winter is coming for all of us, Theon," he said. "I need to see Bran."
King's Landing – The Palace

The servants hurried about, carrying hangings and trestle tables, while banners were being hung throughout the great hall in preparation for new Higg King of Westeros' grand coronation ceremony. The hall had probably not been decorated and cleaned in such a way since Robert's coronation, or perhaps his wedding. But the atmosphere was probably even worse than that fateful day. There was an undertone of fear as they all wondered what would happen to them if the new king was not pleased. The cruelties of Prince Joffrey were well-known, and becoming King Joffrey was probably not going to improve his personality much.

Cersei, ever the proud mother, surveyed the preparations with satisfaction. "You are a man with a keen eye, Ser Damon," she said. "What do you think?"

The pomp and ceremony was all very well, but... "Forgive me for saying so, Your Grace, but the flowers do not match," he said.

"Oh?" said Cersei. "Tell me more."

Damon fingered one of the flower arrangements, stroking the petals of the white roses. "In my homeland, flowers have meanings, and in this case, white roses represent purity, innocence, secrecy and silence, and much better suited to a new bride than a new king."

"What would be your suggestion, then?"

"I would say... black calla lilies, for one, to symbolize the rebirth of the kingdom under King Joffrey's rule. And then golden swords of victory, which in my homeland we call the gladiolus, to symbolize victory against his enemies and those who would oppose him. And in the centre, a single red sugarbush blossom to represent his strength of character. Coincidentally, these are the colours of both His Grace's houses. What do you think, Your Grace?"

"I approve," said Cersei. She ordered the servants to dispose of the roses and to replace them with Damon's suggestions. The cost would be great, but she was sparing no cost in glorifying her son. Besides, it was very hard to run out of money when your family owned all the money.

The Riverlands

There were two strange men following her. They'd been following her since morning when she'd left the ramshackle excuse for an inn. They weren't even being particularly subtle about it. Frankly, she was insulted. Did they think she was that stupid? At least they could have maintained a larger distance and varied it every now and then. Instead, they'd kept themselves about twelve yards behind her constantly. It was as if she had invisible strings tethering them to her.

Well, she liked it when men chased her. The market was busy this morning. Hawkers were selling fish of all sizes. Their scales gleamed like armour in the sun, and their mouths were open in silent aquatic screams. Not that fish could scream; they hadn't evolved voice boxes.

She ducked around a large round barn filled with hay and instantly jumped onto the thatched roof. She almost laughed out loud as she watched them going in circles around the barn trying to look for her. No one ever looked up.

"Let's split up," one of them told his companion. They split up, one going clockwise, and one going anti-clockwise. They encountered each other at the halfway point, looked about in confusing, and continued on their way. She waited until she was tired of the little show – how many circles could
they walk in anyway before they realized she was not there?– and swooped down to snag one of them while his companion was on the other side of the barn.

She liked hot breakfasts. His struggles ceased as she drained all of him and then she let the body drop in front of his friend.

The man began screaming. She dropped down in front of him. "Shhh, it's all right. No need to be scared. Were you looking for me?"

"You're Katherine Pierce!" he said. He backed away from her. Did she have breakfast on her face?

"It appears you already know me, but I do not have the pleasure of knowing you," she said. "What is your name, and who do you work for?"

"I work for Lord Petyr Baelish, Master of Coin and trusted advisor to King Joffrey Baratheon."

"And what would a man such as Lord Petyr Baelish want with a humble bard like me?"

"That is not for you to know."

"But I am curious, ser. You see, it's one of my flaws."

She sauntered up to him and took his hand. He had fine hands, more like a courtier than a soldier. She placed it on her breast. His breaths became very shallow.

Then she snapped his little finger.

He yelled and screamed and tried to run, but she had a good grip on him now. The market was a noisy place full of shouting fishermen and fishwives. No one heard him. "Come now, don't be such a baby. All you have to do is satisfy my curiosity. Then you'll be free of me."

"I don't know why he wants you! It has something to do with Edmure Tully! He sent a letter!"

"Thank you," she said. She broke his other little finger to make a point. He screamed again. It was getting annoying, so she silenced him forever.
Damon moves forward with his plan to get into Joffrey's inner circle. Jon makes an informed decision about the direction he wants to head in. Robb rallies the banners. Theon makes a promise to Bonnie. The Stark camp gets an unexpected visitor.

King's Landing

That afternoon, Joffrey summoned Damon to attend to him. In his right mind, Damon would never have listened to a spoilt little boy who didn't know that all his power was borrowed and actually belonged to his grandfather, but he was not in his right mind, apparently. Damon Salvatore, in his right mind, wouldn't be trying to rescue Ned Stark or Sansa Stark either, especially not while Elena was out there and missing. It wasn't as if he owed them that much. But here he was, trying to worm his way into Cersei and Joffrey's good graces in order to lower their guard and find the perfect chance to spirit the Starks out of King's Landing.

"You sent for me, Your Grace?" asked Damon after he had paid the young king homage.

"Mother tells me you had the most brilliant idea for flower arrangements in the throne room for my coronation tomorrow," said Joffrey. He lounged on his chair, a lion cub pretending to be a grown stag. His crown seemed too heavy for his scrawny little neck, but his head was obviously big enough for it, for it did not fall over his eyes as Damon had expected it to. Perhaps it was best to never expect anything of kings; that way, one could never be disappointed. Cersei sat beside him. Damon had to wonder whether it was her idea that Joffrey saw him this afternoon. At least he was making headway with one of them. "It's a rather womanly thing for a knight to know, don't you think?" Joffrey continued.

"Perhaps a little, Your Grace" said Damon. "But in my place, it is never detrimental to have useless skills because one never knows when they might become useful. A courtier needs to be well-rounded in order to better serve the needs of his sovereign."

"Well said," said Joffrey. "You speak too well for a northerner."

"I own, Your Grace, that I was born in the south." Hah, let the Union take that! They might have had the bigger guns and more men during the Civil War, or the War of Northern Aggression, depending on one's mood, and they might have won by a margin, but the south had all the style. Although not anymore, unfortunately. Culture tended to degenerate when there was no money, and when people did not move with the times.

"Where in the south?" asked Joffrey.

"It is a town too small and too far beneath your notice, Your Grace," said Damon.

"Yet here you are, in King's Landing, a knight. How did you get from the south to Winterfell?"

There was a huge temptation to say that he'd walked, or ridden, or used some mode of transport, but this wasn't like talking to Robb or Theon. He actually had an objective he wanted to achieve here,
and normal Damon wouldn't be able to do that. The vampire tried to keep that in mind as much as possible, even though the very sight of Joffrey made him see red. Literally. He'd never tasted Lannister before, especially not such concentrated and pure Lannister.

Rather, he told Joffrey a rather vague and fictional tale about how he had been exiled due to some circumstances he had rather not talk about. However, instead of being like Robb, who respected other people's privacy, or Theon, who was overly creative and came up with his own conjectures, Joffrey pushed him for the details.

"There was a girl, Your Grace," Damon said. "Our fathers did not approve of us being together." Or rather, his father had not approved of him being with she-who-must-not-be-named, on account of her having fangs and all. "But I insisted. My father disowned me, and we left. Then later she left me."

"Why?" asked Joffrey. Really, did everyone in Westeros like sappy crappy romantic stories like this?

"For my brother," said Damon.

"Stefan Salvatore?" said Cersei.

Indeed, she had chosen Stefan over him—not that he cared. But this line of conversation was reminding him that Stefan was also in Westeros, but serving the wrong side. He would never have thought that Stefan of all people would serve the Lannisters. Their philosophies were so different. After all, Lannisters murdered babies. Even Klaus hadn't done that! Or had he? He wasn't quite sure, not being one to keep track of Klaus' body count unless it really counted.

"Yes, indeed, he who buries people alive," said Damon.

Joffrey smirked at that, his eyes sparkling with excitement. It seemed he quite liked the idea of doing that.

"Take a walk with me, Salvatore," said Joffrey. Cersei made to get up, but he stopped her. "Mother, you should rest. This is men's business."

Oh no, he didn't just go there! But he did, and Cersei could do nothing because Joffrey was not only just her darling son, but secondly, and more importantly, the king. The boy led Damon to the battlements where the heads of the traitors were displayed. He recognized a few of the Stark household. A raven perched on the head of the steward, pecking out the clouded-over eyes. It flew away as they approached. But heads did nothing to Damon. He had ripped off enough in his lifetime. Death was his friend, not Joffrey's.

"Mother watches over me like a hawk," said Joffrey. "Sometimes I think she doesn't trust me." Really, he brought him out here to talk about his mommy issues? One would have thought he would have had more pressing daddy issues.

"Perhaps she has reason to be worried, Your Grace," said Damon.

"What are you talking about?" Joffrey whipped around, anger blazing in his green eyes. If he were really Jaime Lannister's biological son, then he really did not bear very much resemblance to Jaime. The latter was always rather calm and laidback about everything. Of course, being the best swordsman in the realm and son of the most powerful man probably had something to do with it, but even so, he was a true lion; lazing around all day relaxing in the sun and generally not worrying about anything because he knew he was better than any other animal on the planet. Joffrey, on the
other hand, was a hyperactive kitten who scratched the furniture and everything else and tried to piss on every corner of the house.

"Only that you are surrounded by enemies, Your Grace, or those who would seek to control you," said Damon. "The lords all have their own armies and their own keeps. Your grandfather Lord Tywin has the most powerful army of all and the most gold."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Joffrey. He forgot his anger. Damon smiled. Well, what did a megalomaniac with both self-esteem and parental issues want? Power, of course, and Damon was going to say exactly what he wanted to hear.

"I believe all the soldiers in the realm should answer to one king and the king alone, not their individual lords. There should not be seven kingdoms but rather, just one."

The boy-king's eyes gleamed as he dreamed of being Westeros' emperor. Hah! He had such a long way to go before he could be Caesar. In fact, Damon didn't even think he was a candidate. Joffrey was more the Caligula type.

But Joffrey didn't know any of that. "I like you, Damon," he said. "Tomorrow you will be at my coronation. Perhaps I might have further need of your counsel."

What was Damon doing? She had to trust he had a plan, and that he was still loyal to her and her father. Sansa lay wide awake, wondering if her letter had reached Robb yet. It probably had. Ravens were much faster than riders because they could go straight to their destinations rather than have to follow the winding paths which could add days to a journey.

She dared not close her eyes. Whenever she closed them, she could only remember how Joffrey had sent men to slaughter her household and Septa Mordane's eyes being plucked out by birds.

Where was her sister? Where was Elena? And should she really trust Damon?

"Sansa." It was such a soft whisper that she thought she was just dreaming at first, or that perhaps it was the wind. But then he repeated her name again, louder this time. Sansa sat up and looked at the window. Damon stood on the narrow ledge and leaned against the window frame, looking as if he had walked through the front door, which he most definitely hadn't because there were guards posted outside. How had he gotten in?

She threw her thin robe around her shoulders and padded across to the window. The flagstones were cold beneath her feet, but she did not want to waste time locating her shoes. Damon leapt lightly down, making no sound as he touched the floor.

"Does anyone know you're here?" she whispered. All right, silly question. Of course they didn't, because they would never have allowed him to see her in private. He was still known as her father's only knight. "How did you get in?"

He only glanced back at the window. Did he climb? But this was at least one hundred feet in the air, and the tower they had put her in was as straight as a spear with very few footholds and handholds. "How?" she whispered again. She sounded like one of Cersei's exotic pet birds the Dornish had given her one year. It knew how to talk, but it could only repeat what it heard multiple times, so it always said the same thing. It liked to curse. King Robert might have talked to the bird more than he had talked to his wife.

"I'm Damon Salvatore," he said. No, it wasn't an adequate explanation, but Sansa didn't care. She threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around him as she sobbed into his tunic, so relieved to
see a friendly face and to know that he was on her side.

He was, wasn't he?

"Hey, hey," he said as comfortingly as he could. He patted her back awkwardly and then pried her off. "Listen, I don't have much time, but I just want you to know I'm going to try and get you and your father out of here, all right? He's fine, mostly, I mean, besides the whole Black Cells thing. Cersei doesn't want to kill him. Arya's safe with Forel."

"How are you going to get us out?" whispered Sansa.

"We'll think of that when we get there," said Damon. "First I have to get close to Cersei and Joffrey."

"All right," said Sansa. "What should I do?"

"Just continue on as you are, being a good scared little girl," said Damon. "You can do that, can't you, my lady?"

"You do remember who you are talking to, do you not, Ser Damon?"

He grinned at her. Suddenly, she felt a lot better. She watched him clamber out the window, as nimble as a bird on a current. And then she remembered.

"Elena was with me," she said. "When it happened. She was with me. She tried to protect me from the Hound, but they caught me anyway. You have to find her, Damon. It's not safe for her here."

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**Castle Black**

Jon crushed the letter in his hand and threw it against the wall of the recruits' dormitory. He'd read it a dozen times and each time, it made him angrier and more desperate. First they'd driven a spear through his father's leg, and now they'd taken him, accusing him of being a traitor. Lannister treachery knew no bounds. His father's entire household had been slaughtered, his sisters were hostages, and they had put his father into the darkest of cells to await his death. Then he retrieved the letter, smoothed it out, and read Robb's words again.

There was no news of anyone else. But then, he hadn't expected the two vampires to be mentioned. They were too insignificant, and probably no one knew or cared what had happened to them.

He rose from his cot and began to strap on his armour and his sword. Elena had once asked him what he really wanted. He hadn't been able to answer her then, but now he knew. Robb was rallying all the men in the north, and he could not simply sit by and let his brother ride into battle against the unconquered might of the Lannisters alone. He might not have the Stark name, but he was a Stark all the same.

"What are you doing?" asked Sam as he raised his head from his pillow. Perhaps the gods had meant for him to befriend the bumbling good-hearted boy. It had been Sam who had passed on the letter, for Mormont had not wanted him or Benjen to find out. The boy had snuck the letter to him at dinner beneath the table. And yes, Jon had gone out to tell Benjen as soon as he'd absorbed the news. His uncle was as furious and desperate as he was, but unlike his uncle, Jon had a choice.

"I'm going to find my brother and save my father," said Jon.

"You're leaving?" Pyp suddenly sat up too. It seemed as if 'Jon Snow's Business' was simply
another name for 'Everyone Else's Business' these days.

"About time," said Grenn. "I was wonderin' when you'd leave, considering you really have no reason to stay."

"I'll come with you," said Sam.

"Sam, it's dangerous," said Jon.

"More dangerous than out here?" said Sam. "I'd have made a terrible brother anyway. Maybe your brother might need a scribe." He fumbled around for his things, gathering the few precious books he had and bundling them up in a sheet. The others helped him locate his sword under his bed where it had lain ever since he'd arrived at the Wall, and he strapped it on after some difficulty. He no longer used the last notch on his belt.

"I wish I could come with you," said Grenn.

"Me too," said Pyp.

"You can't," said Jon. "I will send word as soon as I find my brother, and if I'm not too late, I will secure your pardons one way or another."

"You'd better," said Pyp.

He gripped both Pyp and Grenn by the arm, not knowing what else to say, and before he could overthink it, he quitted the room with Sam following him as he always did, making his way to Mormont's study. It was only right to take leave of the Lord Commander. Mormont had had high expectations of him. He knew that. He also knew Mormont would be very disappointed in his decision. Family, however, would always come first. Jon knew that now.

"Come in," Mormont said when Jon knocked on the door. He opened the door nervously, letting a few flurries of snow escape inside. Sam stayed in his shadow, preferring not to be noticed at all unless he really needed to be.

"Are you going somewhere, Snow, Tarly?" asked Mormont. He had been writing a letter, but now he set his quill in the pen holder.

"We are here to take leave of you, Lord Commander," said Jon. "I am going to find my brother."

He waited for a reprimand. Mormont put the tips of his fingers together, forming a tent with his hands. "I was afraid this might happen," he said. "You gave him the letter, didn't you, Tarly? After I told you not to."

"I'm sorry, Lord Commander," stammered Sam. "But it wasn't right to not let Jon or the First Ranger know. Jon needed to make a... a... an informed decision." He was trying very hard not to quake in his boots, Jon could tell. Mormont pinned them both to their spots with a look.

"Are you certain this is what you want, Jon Snow?" he asked.

"It is, Lord Commander," said Jon.

Mormont sighed. "You could have made a great brother of the Night's Watch; Lord Commander, even. But if this is your choice, I have no power to stop you."

"If I help my brother save my father and when my family is safe, perhaps then I might return," said
"You won't," said Mormont. "A brother's love is a powerful thing, and add to that a woman's love... Men have fought wars for less." He turned to Sam. "And you mean to follow him, Tarly?"

"I do, my lord," said Sam.

"Then you should leave before it's too late."

The two of them bowed. Jon didn't know how he felt as he strode past the now familiar sights of Castle Black, knowing that Mormont was right, knowing that as soon as he left this place, he would probably never return. He wanted too much. Damon was right. Elena was right. He didn't want to follow a set path just because it was expected of him. He wanted to forge his own path in the world, not away from it. At least, not until he had actually seen it.

Benjen was staring into the flickering tongues of flame in the hearth when they found him in his cramped quarters, with his fist balled up against the wall as he leaned forward, deep in thought. The crease between his brows seemed to have become permanent.

"I'll wait outside," Sam whispered as he closed the door behind Jon.

"You're going to join Robb, aren't you?" Benjen asked without looking up.

"You know me," said Jon.

"What happened to the boy who was so sure he wanted to become a brother of the Watch?"

"Circumstances change, Uncle Benjen. People change," said Jon.

"I was a boy of fifteen when Ned rode off to war, leaving me in Winterfell. I wanted to fight for Lyanna's honour and avenge my father and brother then, but I couldn't because duty demanded I stay. Now you go to war, Jon, while I must stay behind again." He finally looked up, his blue eyes burning with helpless rage and determination. For the first time, Jon wondered why he had joined the Watch. They had never really spoken of it. "Kill them for me, Jon."

"I will," said Jon. The two men embraced.

"Now go," said Benjen, pushing Jon away towards the door. "Tell Robb and my brother I send my greetings, and give my love to your sisters and Bran and Rickon."

"I will," said Jon. He opened the door and made to step out back to the snow and to the war that awaited him in the south.

"And Jon," Benjen suddenly called.

"Yes?"

"When you and Elena wed, I expect an invitation."

Jon felt his face grow hot. His mind had been so filled with thoughts of his father and sisters that he had not even thought of Elena— all right, perhaps that was not correct, for he had thought of her as well when he had made his decision to go south in search of Robb. He needed to find her. Someone had to do it, and since Damon was missing too, it left him, didn't it?

They chose to cut through the mess hall on the way to the stables. It was a quicker way, as the mess hall was placed in the middle of Castle Black so as to be the most accessible. "So you're
leaving the Watch for a woman," Ser Alisser taunted, horn of ale in one hand and a hunk of either cheese or lye soap in the other. "I should have expected it of a bastard, and a traitor's bastard, no less."

Jon didn't know what had gotten into him. Perhaps it was the prospect of knowing that he would never have to follow Ser Alisser's orders again. "Careful, Ser Alisser," he said. "Men might mistake that tone for jealousy."

"Why would I be jealous of a traitor's bastard, Lord Snow?"

Jon simply smiled. "Just look at me, and then in the mirror," he said. "Wait, you actually probably shouldn't."

There were muffled sniggers from around the hall.

Damon would be proud.

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**Winterfell**

The halls were filled with the noise of men in armour and their raucous banter. Their great swords clanked against their armour as they moved. Robb surveyed them from his seat, Theon on one side and Bran on the other. These men had followed his father into battle long before he had even been born; men like the Greatjon and Rickard Karstark and Roose Bolton.

But unlike him, they had not been born to rule. He knew it in his blood. Somehow, he had always known that Winterfell was too small for him. Wolves did not live in cages. There was a world out there, and he wanted it. He'd always wanted it, but then he had denied himself because his father had said he shouldn't. Now look what had happened to Ned.

He listened to their banter and their stories of their feats, mostly of conquering wildlings and fighting great beasts in the wild. It was all brute strength, but there was little brilliance in it. His eye wandered to Bolton's impassive face. Roose Bolton was a man of very few words and colourless eyes. In fact, the black pinpricks of his pupils were the only colour present. One could easily believe that he kept the skins of his enemies in a chamber in his halls.

"I would show those soft southerners a thing or two," said the Greatjon. "M'lord, if you put the army under my command, I'll make those Lannisters piss their pants and flee with their tails between their legs, and they'll regret they ever came north."

"I shall lead the army, not anyone else," said Robb quietly.

There was silence.

"You?" said the Greatjon. "You're a boy so green you piss grass! Why should I take orders from you?"

It was not a question worthy of an answer, so Robb didn't answer him and simply pinned him with a look. Perhaps it had been too subtle.

"If you do not put me in charge, I swear, Robb Stark, I'll take my men back north!" the old man declared. Jon Umber rose to his feet like the crazed giant in his house's sigil. His chair toppled behind him and crashed onto the flagstones. His sword was halfway out of his sheath when a grey blur pounced on him. He roared in surprise and pain. Red spurted. Grey Wind dropped his two severed fingers onto the table. The wolves were well-trained enough, but no one had ever taught
them table manners. At once, all the lords rose to their feet, not sure of what to do. Robb remained seated.

"It is treason to draw a sword in your lord's presence," he said, sounding bolder than he felt. What if the Greatjon did take his men back up north? What then when all the other bannermen deserted him? But they wouldn't, because he couldn't let them. His father's life depended on this. His sisters depended on this. He drew strength from them and from his purpose. Lannisters thought they ruled the world. He would prove them wrong. "But doubtless you only meant to lay it before my feet."

They stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. He saw himself through their eyes; youthful, but full of quiet rage and determination and a sense of purpose. For the first time, he knew what he wanted to do and he could see his prize ahead.

Then the Greatjon began to laugh. "I suppose you could use another sword. One is hardly enough for you, m'lord," he said.

One by one, they offered him their swords.

The Umbers and the Karstarks, the Boltons and the Manderlys; tonight they came under one banner.

Robb Stark's banner.

Men were strange creatures. But then, everyone knew they were from Mars. However, Westerosian men might as well be another species altogether. Bonnie could not see how Jon Umber could be so happy after losing his fingers, or how that would convert him to Robb's cause, but it had.

Her hands shook with anticipation as she took away the basin of bloody water. Maester Luwin had washed and bandaged Umber's wounds, but he was not able to re-attach the fingers. Just as well it was only Umber's left hand. She doubted the giant would be as genial about it if it had been his sword hand that had been savaged.

The men's enthusiasm and excitement were affecting her more than she had thought possible. She'd seen bloodlust before. Vampires were rather prone to it. But this was a different sort of bloodlust. They were marching off to war against the most powerful house in all of Westeros. She could feel it in the air. North men were fond of fighting, and it had been a while since they had had a decent fight under a courageous young lord eager to prove himself.

She washed out the cloths and the basin in the courtyard outside the maester's turret, putting it on its side against the wall so it could dry.

"Bonnie." She whipped around. Theon was there, in full armour.

"Lord Theon," she said. In front of her, he always lost the swagger he had around the other girls in Winterfell. Sometimes she amused herself with thinking that perhaps she, of all people, was able to draw out the real him. It couldn't have been easy for him, living in the Stark household as a guest all the while knowing that his father had handed him over as a hostage. Was it any surprise he had developed armour and a mask?

"I ride out with Robb tomorrow morning," he said. He fingered the pommel of his sword. "I wanted to say goodbye."

She slowly approached him, knowing how difficult it had to be for him to wear his emotions so
obviously on his sleeve without his usual false bravado. "I don't really know how to do goodbyes, my lord," she said.

"I don't like goodbyes," said Theon.

"Then don't say it," said Bonnie. She leaned forward on tip-toes. He stiffened as she kissed his cheek. The beard on his cheeks was soft. Then she turned around, her face burning with excitement and the rush of adrenaline that suddenly flooded her. Did anyone see? No, no one did. Thank the goddess.

"I'll bring you back spoils from Casterly Rock itself," Theon suddenly called after her. "We'll storm castles and win victories. You'll hear stories of my great feats and deeds. You just wait, Bonnie Bennett!"

North of the Twins

Grey and white banners fluttered in the breeze. She heard horses munching hay contentedly in their stalls, unaware of what their masters were planning. White tents dotted the countryside like so many dirty sheep, with soldiers ducking in and out of them. Spears glinted in the dying sun, casting occasional flashes of light into her eyes. Men greeted each other as if it were the end of just another ordinary day, but there was the smell of excitement and anticipation on them. Adrenaline had its own peculiar scent, and it made blood taste just that much better.

She skirted around the edge of the camp, identifying where all the different houses had set up their tents. The centre tent, obviously, would have to be Robb Stark's. It was the biggest, and it was from that tent that she could hear snatches of conversation.

"Halt!"

Had they only just noticed her? She had been expecting to be caught for a while. Robb Stark needed to up his security, or else all his military secrets would be out in the open. Or at least in Lannister hands.

"Who are you and what is your business here?"

She slowly turned around and curtseyed. "I am a bard, ser," she said. "I travel north for Winterfell."

The man narrowed his eyes as he assessed her. He wanted to believe her, she could tell, but he was also the suspicious type, despite his lack of observational skills. He took her by the arm and dragged her into the camp. "Lord Stark will decide what you are," he said.

Well, she'd been wanting to make the acquaintance of young Lord Stark for a while now.
The Vampire's Diary

Chapter Summary

Jaime goes to war and leaves Rebekah behind. Robb gets a new bard and makes a new acquaintance. Elena runs into trouble on the streets of King's Landing. Damon walks on very thin ice.

Along Blackwater Rush

The noose was tightening. Lions usually didn't fish for trout, but when the trout was allied with the wolf, one must always take the trout first. They were easier and, against the lion, they were utterly and completely defenceless.

Jaime took stock of his troops. His father had given him thirty thousand men with which to take the Riverlands, despite the fact Kingsguard were never supposed to lead men into battle. Then again, his father had never wanted him to be Kingsguard and had been trying to get him out of it ever since he had joined.

"Lord Jaime!" He turned around slowly. Ah yes, he had been wondering when Rebekah would come to find him. It had been amusing, playing cat and mouse with her, although it was a little more cat and cat. Sometimes he had chased, and sometimes she had chased, and he was satisfied when she did more chasing than he did. It was no secret amongst the men that they were…

Well, they had been up to something.

"Lady Rebekah," he said, a smirk on his lips.

"I hear you are riding to take the Riverlands," said Rebekah. She came to a stop in front of him. Wisps of golden hair escaped from the crown of braids she wore her tresses in. She looked positively wild. "Take me with you."

"No, not this time," said Jaime. She was feisty and fearless, but she had never seen real battle before. It was not a place for young girls, no matter how skilled and brave. Perhaps later, in a less important battle, he might let her ride by his side. But the Riverlands were too vital, and it could become very bloody indeed.

Then he wondered why he cared. He couldn't explain it. She was beautiful, yes, but he never minded corrupting and breaking beautiful things, although it seemed impossible to corrupt Rebekah further than she had already been corrupted. No amount of violence seemed to faze her.

But he did not want her hurt.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"You are young, hot-blooded, untested. A siege can be quite a dangerous place for little girls. Falling rocks, burning arrows and…flaming rocks."

"Flaming haystacks and pots of boiling tar," Rebekah corrected him.
"When they are coming for you, they might as well be flaming rocks," he said. "That's when the fear sets in and the smell of blood is so thick in the air you can almost taste its saltiness at the back of your throat. You will want nothing more than to run."

"That is not going to be an issue, I promise," she said. "I am a knight, my lord, but what sort of knight am I if all I do is beat soldiers in practise every day with tourney swords?"

"Like I said, not this time. You are not ready."

"And I will never be ready if I do not see battle. Please, my lord."

*Please?* She really was desperate to kill something, wasn't she? He had never heard her plead before. It was a victory for him.

"You will see battle soon enough," said Jaime. It sounded too much like a promise, but he surmised she would fight as a Lannister knight before the war was done, whether she was actually ready or not. But why grant her wish so quickly? There would be time later. And then she would probably wish for peace.

She let out an angry breath, her grey eyes sparkling with indignity. He liked her this way, bristling like an angry lioness. No, not a lioness. She was not a lion. He could not even compare her to any other animal because her sigil was a strange golden knot shaped like a gourd lying on its side on a purple background. She had said it symbolized infinity. He had said she was delusional if she thought anything was infinite. She had given an elegant snort and then picked 'Always and Forever' for her house words.

"Now, how about a token to wish me victory?" he asked.

"You're impossible," she said, but her anger seemed to be fading already. She would probably try and ask his father for permission to fight now that he had refused her. He prided himself on being able to read Rebekah Mikaelson, although, as Tyrion had said, she wore everything on her sleeve. She bent down to pluck a wildflower that had managed to grow within the boundaries of the camp despite the number of men and horses that trampled over the ground. The small blossom, so delicate and white, showed some resilience.

"Flowers bloom and fade so quickly, my lady," said Jaime. "So much for always and forever. How about something a little more permanent?"

When he had said permanent, he had meant a handkerchief or maybe a lock of hair, even.

So it came as a total surprise when she took one confident step forward, stretched up on her toes, and brushed her petal-soft lips against his cheek, letting them linger just a little bit too long to be appropriate. "Is this permanent enough for you, my lord?" she whispered. Her breath brushed his skin like a caress.

Jaime smiled. "That seemed fleeting, but it will do for now," he said.

She smirked right back at him and turned to leave.

"I will be leaving at dawn. Perhaps you can see me off then."

She looked over her shoulder. "Why would I need to say goodbye? You should be back soon enough."
North of the Twins

The scouts reported Jaime Lannister had marched north with thirty thousand men to ravage the Riverlands. His uncle Edmure had been captured, and Riverrun was under siege. Robb traced his finger over the route the Lannisters had taken. If he did not relieve the siege at Riverrun, never mind rescuing his father; he would not be able to save himself if all the supply routes to the north were blockaded by Lannister men.

And there lay the problem. To go south to relieve the Riverlands, he needed to cross the Twins, a bridge controlled by the notorious Walder Frey, a man with no honour and no allegiance to anyone except himself.

"M'lord," said one of his guardsmen. "We have found a woman wandering outside the camp. She says she is a bard."

Robb's first thought was that she was a spy. He could use a Lannister spy right now, if only to interrogate her for information. "Bring her in," he said.

"What if she is a spy?" demanded Theon.

"Then all she will see are a bunch of confused north men with no idea what to do about the lions in the south," said Robb. He quickly rearranged the maps, shifting the pieces to give a false idea of where his men were.

The girl was brought in. Her face was hidden in shadow by a hood. She carried a harp on her back. Her wrists were fine and her nails well-shaped. Perhaps she was a bard; perhaps not.

But when she threw back her hood, he started. "Elena?" he said.

"I am afraid you have mistaken me for someone else, my lord," she said softly. Her voice flowed like silk. "I am Katherine. Katherine Pierce. Elena is my sister, but we were separated years ago. My lord knows of her? Is she well?"

He was young; perhaps the same age as she had been when she had been turned. From his bearing, one would have thought he would have been at least thirty, but he was just a boy, and a rather cute one at that, with ice-cold blue eyes that could burn through someone and dark curly hair he kept well-trimmed. His voice, used to giving commands, was not ungentle. The dazed expression on his face when he first beheld her was beyond adorable.

Robb Stark quickly recovered and sat down on the fur covered seat that served as his throne. The other men took their seats around the sides of the tent. He indicated she should step forward.

"Your sister was well when I last saw her," said Robb. "I do not know now, for she was part of my father's household in King's Landing."

Well, she wouldn't exactly cry if Elena ended up dead. Rather, she was more interested in Damon.

"And Damon?"

"You know Damon too?"

"Damon was a close friend. We lived together and played together when we were young." Old and young were relative.

"How is it that you are called Katherine Pierce when your sister is Elena Gilbert?" asked Robb.
"Our names were changed when we were exiled," said Katherine, not missing a beat. "There were men hunting us."

"And what was your original name?"

Should she tell him? But why not? It wasn't as if he would know its significance.

"Petrova," she said.

"That is a foreign name," said Robb. "I do not know of it."

"I wouldn't expect you to, my lord. It is only significant to a few."

"My men tell me you are a bard," he said, changing the subject entirely.

"I am," she said.

"And you travel alone from place to place?"

"I do."

"It is not safe for a woman to travel alone in the wild during these turbulent times," said Robb.

"I have no family and no friends to rely on," said Katherine. "I have no choice." She let a little quiver slip into her voice, as if she were trying to keep herself from crying. As she spoke, she lifted her chin just a little. Robb Stark's eyes softened, but he continued with his line of questioning. Clever boy, to be so suspicious. If he had been like Damon, or the Damon of old, he would have simply taken her at her word.

"How can I be sure you are not a spy?"

"Then it is your word against mine, my lord, and I can do nothing about that. But you may search me if you wish. I carry nothing beyond the clothes on my back and the tools of my trade."

And search her they did. Politely, of course. Every pocket was turned out, revealing a few coins, some coils of replacement harp strings, and a handkerchief. In Westeros, she was a poor woman, but she could sense her fortunes were about to change.

"Why are you here?" asked Robb.

"I was in the Riverlands when I heard wind of the Lannisters' invasion, so I fled north for safety's sake," she said. Not entirely untrue. She had been at the very northern borders of the Riverlands on her way to Winterfell when she had heard the news of Jaime Lannister's men sweeping across the Riverlands like the Golden Horde of her time, except not on the verge of disintegration. Which was a bit of a pity for Robb Stark and his Tully relatives.

"What were you doing in the Riverlands?"

"Making my living. A girl has to eat, my lord. I played for your uncle Lord Edmure and your grandfather Lord Tully when I was in Riverrun. They were most kind."

Robb nodded and then turned to consult with his men while Katherine was taken outside to await her fate. The young man at his side who, if Katherine's intel was correct, was Theon Greyjoy, was a great supporter of keeping her here.

Jon Umber, the great bear of a man, thought it was best to keep her prisoner. He had no finesse and
no tact. Sometimes one had use for men like that. This was not one of those times.

Her presence attracted many curious glances from the men. She simply kept her eyes down, as she surmised Elena would have done.

Darkness deepened and the moon rose like a smirk in the sky. Campfires were lit and the last of the red faded on the horizon into a deep purple. Smoke smelling of burning fat and roasting meat rose in columns. Finally, she was summoned back within the tent. This summoning and waiting was one part of the Renaissance she had chosen to forget. She had only just remembered how much she had hated it. But that was part of the art of dealing with lords. One had to seem grateful for any attention received. At first, anyway.

"Play for me, Mistress Katherine," said Robb.

Robb had no ear for music, for that was Sansa's strength, not his. But he was mesmerized by the sight of Katherine's fingers dancing over the strings of her harp. On her face was an expression of utmost calm, as if she were weaving a world through her music. Theon tapped his foot in appreciation, although whether he appreciated the music or musician more, one could not tell.

But Robb most definitely appreciated the musician.

As she finished her song, she let her hands hang suspended in the air for just a moment, and as she put them down in her lap, it seemed as if the entire tent released a breath no one knew they were holding in the first place. No one dared to applaud her. Instead, they all turned to Robb.

"My men will have need of lighter diversions," he said. "You will stay and be my bard, Mistress Katherine."

The girl sank in an elegant curtsey, so unlike her sister's bumbling attempt and thanked him so prettily he wanted to help her up. He resisted. It was such a juxtaposition, to have so fine a lady in so rough a place as a military camp. But Katherine was no lady. She was a travelling bard. Although...did he really believe it? There had to be more to her. She didn't bear much resemblance to any of the other bards he had ever seen.

"Your men have need of lighter diversions, or do you?" whispered Theon. Robb glared at him. As if he could think of anything of that kind right now, with his father imprisoned by the Lannisters and his sisters held captive in the Red Keep. However, he did not say anything. If he had to be honest about it, he had almost forgotten everything else when he had been watching Katherine. At that moment, he had understood how men—as in the late King Robert—could start wars for a woman's love.

The herald's timely arrival interrupted his thoughts. "Lady Catelyn has arrived, m'lord," he said.

"Bring her here," said Robb.

The mystery of Katherine and her hypnotic effect on him—and seemingly every other man in the vicinity—could wait.

Lady Catelyn Stark must have been quite a beauty in her youth. Although her skin was wrinkled with experience, in the right light, the sharpness of her cheekbones still showed. Her hair remained lustrously red, and she had bright eyes that must have charmed many men in their day. Behind her was a familiar face.
"Mistress Bard," said the Blackfish. "What a coincidence that you are here as well."

"Ser Brynden," said Katherine.

"Who is this?" asked Catelyn, looking from Blackfish to Robb and then finally to Katherine.

"She is my bard," said Robb. "You know her, Lord Blackfish?"

"She played for us in Riverrun," said Blackfish. "An excellent bard, I recall, with a clever sharp tongue."

"Your praise is unwarranted, my lord," said Katherine. "Now His Grace might begin to have unrealistic expectations of me."

"My mother and uncle must be thirsty," said Robb. "Katherine, pour them wine."

Catelyn seemed to have an undue interest in her, much like her son, although in a completely different manner. Her eyes kept on flicking between the two of them, while Robb pretended he was not watching Katherine as she moved about the tent, topping up empty cups with watered down wine before going out to fetch more wine, always staying close enough to the command tent so that she could hear everything that was going on.

Poor unlucky Edmure had been captured by the Lannisters, it seemed, and now Robb was making plans to relieve the Riverlands and break the Lannister invasion. As she listened, she could not help but grow more and more impressed by his understanding of all matters military. He thought of all possibilities for defeat as well as all possibilities for victory. His mind was quick, his decisions sure, and the men listened to him almost as if in rapture. It was so easy to forget that he was only a boy of seventeen. They didn't breed them like that in the twenty-first century.

She had chosen rightly. Robb Stark would be her entry into Westeros' society. She would make him the next Alexander, the next Caesar, the next Napoleon. Who knew? Perhaps his name would one day supersede all of theirs. But, of course, he would need her help.

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**King's Landing**

_Dear Diary,_

_I don't know why I'm even writing this down, but I suppose if I don't, I will go insane. Hell, maybe I am already insane. I mean...how can I be sure this isn't just a crazy dream? Lord Stark's purported treason, Joffrey's parentage, Jaime and Cersei Lannister..._  

_How do I even describe everything that has happened? The Wall was so much simpler. Sure, I might be hurting my head over how many different ways I can serve lichen to the men, but compared to this, that was trivial. I am trivial in the grand scheme of things._

_I am hiding in an alleyway. No one notices me. No one bothers to notice me, and I want to keep it that way. I have no idea where everyone is. Sansa and Arya are probably taken, and Damon's missing. King's Landing is so big. I've searched everywhere I can think of for him, but I've found no sign of him. No bodies, no nothing. Although I suppose he'd hide any remnants of his meals the way I have been doing. I've been going from street to street, ducking into the shadows whenever I see city guards or Lannister men, or anyone in a uniform. It's like the Bourne Identity, but I'm not Jason Bourne. I'm Elena Gilbert. This shouldn't be happening to me. I'm a high school girl. I'm a cheerleader. I'm even a vampire, but I'm not some sort of political fugitive. At least, I shouldn't be! What am I doing here? I have no idea. All I know is that it can't continue like this._
It's been days, and I have heard nothing more.

Yoren. Yoren is in King's Landing. I will go back north. I know Lord Mormont doesn't want me at the Wall, but I can go to Winterfell. I need to go to Winterfell. I need to tell Robb Stark everything I know.

Elena blew on the ink to dry it and then tucked the notebook and the pen inside her bundle before peering outside. Night was falling. If there was a good time to sneak out, it was now. She wrapped the shawl she'd stolen off a washing line around her head. No one took any notice of the woman hurrying through the streets. They all thought she was a common housewife who was late in going home to do the cooking.

Yoren had mentioned he only ever stayed at one inn whenever he came to King's Landing, on account of it having the best sausages and black ale. That was where she would go. She would go back north with him, at least until Winterfell.

But tonight, the city guard were extra vigilant. If anything looked suspicious, they checked it out. Three of them stopped her. "What are you doing out so late, woman?" their leader asked. His helmet hid his face, and she didn't care much to see it in detail anyway. One city guard was interchangeable with another. They all worked for Cersei.

"I'm going home, ser," she said.

"And where is home?"

Shit. That was justified. She had very little idea about the layout of King's Landing. In all her time here, she had mostly spent it with Sansa and Arya within the Tower of the Hand. Occasionally, she had gone to the market to look for ribbons and trinkets with Sansa. The only places she knew were the tower and the market. For that reason, she had stayed close to them, except not too close to the Red Keep, where security was higher and she was more likely to be caught.

"River Row," she said. "This is my street."

"You don't sound like a common fish wife," said the city guard.

Was that the type of people who lived in River Row? She had no idea. It's not as if she'd had Westerosian civics class. All she had ever been taught was the general history of the place, the names and words of the great houses, and embroidery!

"Well, I wasn't born one, ser," she said as she tried to duck past them.

"Where on River Row do you live? It's a long street," said another of the guards.

She couldn't just walk into a house! "It's not far from here, ser," she said. "Now, if you will excuse me, I really must get going."

"We will escort you," said the first guard. "It is not safe on the streets these days when the night deepens, especially not for a pretty little thing like you."

Was he leering at her? The nerve of him. At the Wall, dealing with douchebags had been very simple. She just regularly had to beat someone up. Now... Tact had never really been her thing. She was Elena Gilbert, not Katherine Pierce.

"That is a very kind offer, ser, but it won't be necessary," she said as she backed into an alleyway between the crooked houses made of mud bricks, looking for a way to escape. There were wooden
beams slung between the houses for hanging clothes upon, and ledges at the windows. "I can take care of myself."

"Please, I insist, mistress," said the guard. He moved to grab her by the arm. She was quicker. She grabbed his wrist as he reached out, and as she did, she slammed the side of her hand into his neck, right into his windpipe. He fell to the ground clutching at his neck as the other two guards lunged for her. She threw one against a wall, slamming his head against the brick so hard she heard his skull crack in several places. The remaining city guard made to flee, but she could leave no witnesses. His neck cracked beneath her hands and he fell down, blood running from his nose and mouth. She stood above them, her breathing coming in short shallow gasps even though she wasn't actually that puffed. What had she done? What was this? She stared at her hands and the blood that was now drying on them.

It had been as if a red curtain had fallen down on her consciousness. All she had thought about had been how they had been going to kill her and how she had needed to kill them first. With shaking fingers, she closed the eyes of the men. But she shouldn't waste anything. Their blood was still fresh with fear and adrenaline. She drank her fill. More than her fill; getting food was tricky and dangerous these days.

She left the bodies deep in the dark recesses of a sewer to let the rats have their fill too. They were the only ones who ever fared well.

Damon hummed to himself as he wandered back into the Red Keep after his delivery of food to Arya and Forel. This time, he had included a set of boys' clothing. Everyone was looking for Lord Stark's youngest daughter. No one was looking for a dirty little street kid whom Damon was beginning to call Renfield. On account of her being associated so closely to vampires, that was, not because she suffered from the same psychiatric syndrome. She resented the name and the character.

So far, everything was going according to plan. Cersei was trusting him more and more. Joffrey was trusting him more and more. He couldn't say the same about everyone else in the court. Petyr Baelish, of course, knew what was going on, and Varys was a suspicious itsy bitsy spider.

Maybe it wasn't such a coincidence that he was humming the tune to that exact nursery rhyme.

When he reached his room, however, he paused. Something didn't feel right. It ought to be silent, but it wasn't. Someone was inside, breathing quietly and sitting so still they might as well be dead, but they weren't. In any case, a dead body in his room was not a good thing.

He carefully pushed open the door. A single candle flickered in the darkness, illuminating Cersei's face. "Where were you?" she asked. Uh oh. He knew that tone. Many people might not be able to detect the cold edge that came into her voice whenever she was suspicious, but Damon had come to know her well enough. He would have to tread very carefully.

"Your Grace," he said. He bowed low. "I had not known you would come. If I had, I would have made this place a little more presentable."

"I ask again, Damon Salvatore, where were you?" She swivelled around to face him, her back
straighter than the edge of a blade. There were two ways this could go. One, he could blow his
cover and kill her and then get the hell out of here with Arya. Possibly the worst idea ever. Two, he
could persuade her it was all just an innocent misunderstanding. Tricky, but possibly manageable if
he turned on all his charm.

"I was out for a walk, Your Grace, and I lost track of time," said Damon. "The Street of Silk is
quite alluring."

He had lost track of time just a little bit, in the Street of Silk and elsewhere. His search for Elena
was not making as much progress as it ought. He had been trying to think of all the places she
could be hiding, but no matter how many rundown inns he spied upon in Flea Bottom or which
dark alleyways he wandered, he could find no sign of her. That was probably a good thing. If she'd
been caught by the city guard, he would have known. They would have mentioned something, and
she'd probably have tried to defend herself. If she was successfully hiding from him, then she
would also be successfully hiding from the authorities that wanted her head on a spike.

"Is it now?" asked Cersei, sounding interested. Damon grinned in the darkness and lit a few more
candles.

"Forgive me, Your Grace, but you know me. I am only a man."

"And the flesh is weak, I know," said Cersei. "Well, Damon, it was only an honest mistake, but do
not let it happen again."
Good Guys Wear Black

Chapter Summary

Joffrey has a new architectural project. Damon gives helpful advice. Jon uses unconventional means to search for Robb. Catelyn negotiates for Robb's passage south and meets someone she does not expect.

King's Landing

Joffrey was bored. Why did he have to listen to all these old fools with their long-winded advice? There shouldn't even be any question as to what happened to that traitor Stark. There was only one thing to do with men who committed treason. But his mother seemed to have other ideas, and idiotic Sansa Stark was on her knees begging for her father again. She was beginning to sound like Mother's favourite bird.

She was a pretty bird, though, and he liked seeing her on her knees and caged like this. Perhaps he would give her a present.

He leaned against the arm of the throne and almost cut himself on one of the swords. It wasn't comfortable at all. One had to sit so straight for fear of cutting oneself.

"If Eddard Stark is truly repentant, then it would be best if you pardoned him, and he could be sent north to the Wall to live out the rest of his days in penitence," his mother had told him. Why did she always tell him what to say? He was no parrot from the south. She always said he needed to be patient, that he needed to learn, but he was done with being patient! He was a man now. A king! He did not listen to weak women's dictates.

But Mother was usually right about a lot of things, so he would wait and see. And everyone seemed to want him to pardon Stark. He didn't know why, but even his father, strong and fierce as he had been, listened to his small council.

He dutifully repeated what his mother had told him to say, all the while grating against the leash and collar she had put on him. What did she think he was, her pet king?

Sansa thanked him for his mercy. Oh, he would like to look into her face when he crushed that hope in her eyes.

Now that would be something.

He looked around at all his advisors. There was something about them that didn't sit right with him. It was the expression in their eyes when they looked at him.

"I'm done for today," he said, and despite his mother's protests, and he left with his dog at his heel. Damn them all to the seven hells! They were his subjects, but they listened to his mother, not him! In their eyes, he was still a spoiled little boy who didn't know anything! Well, they were wrong and he would prove them wrong!
"Summon Ser Damon," said Joffrey to the Hound. He could do with someone who actually understood, not a bunch of old men past their use. If he could replace all his small council with men like Damon Salvatore, he would.

The dog returned moments later with Salvatore in tow. "Your Grace," he said.

"Walk with me," said Joffrey. It was good to get away from all the annoying cloying voices. In the quiet of the garden, he could actually think. He'd been doing a lot of that since he'd become king, going over in his mind what his father would have done in such a situation.

"They hate me, Damon," he suddenly said, realizing what the problem was. Even when he had been little, there had been rumours behind his back, talking about his so-called cruelty. He'd just been curious about that pregnant cat! And he'd been the king's son! Surely if servants did not know their place, he was within his right to correct them? "They hate me."

"It doesn't matter if they hate you, Your Grace, so long as they fear you," said the older man.

"Do they fear me?" asked Joffrey.

"Only if you give them reason to, Your Grace," said Damon.

He slowly digested what Damon was saying. It made sense. If they feared him, they would obey out of fear. Even if they loved him, they would dare to defy him, wouldn't they? But fear; he knew just how powerful fear could be.

"I hear in the east, they pit prisoners against wild beasts in an arena built entirely for blood sports with high walls so the beasts don't jump out," said Damon suddenly.

"How barbaric," said Joffrey, all of a sudden wanting to see Eddard Stark being ripped apart by hungry lions. "Barbaric, but interesting nonetheless. I shall have to look into it. What does such an arena look like? I have never seen one."

Damon smiled. "If you wish, Your Grace, I could draw you a plan."

"Do," said Joffrey. "I want an arena."

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**Winterfell**

The roads felt alien and familiar all at once as Jon and Sam neared Winterfell. He wondered what people would say about him leaving the Wall, but then he decided he didn't really care enough about their opinions.

The cold followed them southward. Frost set on the ground before the sun's rays faded completely, and it never really fully melted the next day. Ghost would run ahead, investigating familiar nooks and crannies they had passed by almost a year ago. He was the size of a pony now, and he was still growing.

"I don't like this," Sam whispered.

"You're the one who insisted on coming," said Jon.

"I mean, can't we spend the night in a village inn or something?"
"There are no villages."

At night, the wolves howled around them in the distance, and smaller animals scratched the ground. Sam started at every sound. Jon would have laughed if he had been in the mood for laughing. But he wasn't. Every time he closed his eyes, he would see his father and hear his promise that they would talk about his mother one day. He would remember the brush of Elena's lips on his cheek and the smell of her hair. Her necklace hung about his neck, and the locket lay next to his chest, just above his heart. He had to save them both. Any other possibility was unthinkable.

The woods petered out to become rolling hills and tundra, grey and inhospitable. The walls of Winterfell soon crowned the distant horizon, flags fluttering from its turrets as if nothing had happened; as if its masters were safe inside.

"It's huge," breathed Sam, looking at everything with wide eyes as they rode through Winter Town. And he hadn't even seen the great hall yet! Horn Hill couldn't have been very big if he was this impressed by Winter Town.

Ghost loped along in front of them, constantly looking backwards as if telling them to hurry up. The few people who were on the streets pointed and whispered as Jon passed them. He heard the word 'deserter' a few times. Fools. If he were a deserter, would he have dared to ride into his father's city while knowing what the Stark stance on deserters was? He ignored them. The boy who had left would have cared. The man who returned didn't.

Although, he couldn't help but feel anticipation rising like a wave inside him as the great gates of the keep opened to let him in. The servants stared at his black cloak as he dismounted. They, of course, were too well-trained to say anything. If anyone had to pass judgement on him, it would be Robb, or Bran, or perhaps his father when he returned.

Like he had mentioned before, it was a matter of when, not if. He would accept no other option.

"So it is true, then," said Maester Luwin. The old man came forward to greet him. "We dared not believe it when we heard the rumours of you riding through Winter Town. It is very soon for the Watch to send you back."

"They did not send me back," said Jon. "I chose to come."

The maester's brow furrowed. "Surely..." he whispered.

"I never took my vows, Maester Luwin," said Jon. Did everyone think he was an idiot?

"What happened? You were so intent on becoming a brother."

"Elena happened," muttered Sam. Thankfully, the maester's hearing was no longer as sharp as it had been, and he did not catch it.

"Where is Bran?" asked Jon, not bothering with niceties. They could wait. Time was of the essence.

"He waits for you--"

"Jon!" A projectile almost knocked him down, and he had to spend a bit of time trying to regain his bearings before he realized Rickon had flung himself at him and was clinging to his middle as if he were the only thing keeping him anchored to this world. He had grown so much! And what had happened to him? He looked positively wild, with smudges of dirt on his face and his hair all long
and lanky. It stuck out in every direction.

Ghost and Shaggydog circled one another as they became reacquainted.

"Everyone's gone, Jon," Rickon said to Jon tearfully when Jon finally managed to disentangle himself as gently as possible. "Father's gone. Mother's gone. Robb's gone. But you're back!"

"Yes, I'm back," said Jon, not having the heart to tell the little boy that he was only back briefly so he could find out which direction Robb had taken. Rickon practically dragged him to the great hall by the hand.

"Bran! Look who's here! It's Jon! Jon's back!"

Bran looked so small sitting in their father's seat. His knees were covered by a blanket of softest wool that any sheep could grow. His face was pale from too many hours spent indoors, and while he was not as thin as he had been when Jon had first left Winterfell, he was not the old Bran Jon remembered. His wolf lay at his feet, content just to be by his side. She lifted her head when she saw Ghost come in.

"Hello Bran," said Jon, not sure of what to say. He tried not to look at his brother's legs, covered by the blanket as they were. He knelt before him so they could be on eye level. As a boy, he remembered how much he hadn't liked having to look up at people taller than him.

At first, Bran did not react, but then he flung his arms around Jon's neck. Jon hugged his brother to him. His poor brother. "I missed you," said Bran. "I thought I'd never see you again, and I never got to say goodbye."

"We would have seen each other again, regardless," said Jon.

"They say you deserted."

"A man cannot desert if he never swore his oaths."

"I thought you wanted to be a brother of the Night's Watch."

"People change, Bran. When I received Robb's letter, I knew exactly what I wanted, and it wasn't a black cloak. That's why I am here. I've come to follow Robb. Do you know where he has gone?"

"Nobody knows. He marched south to rescue Father. He said he was going to King's Landing."

Jon had no doubt that Robb was eventually going to reach King's Landing, but even as boys, his brother had shown some kind of mind for military matters, and not just on the sword-fighting front. Simply charging forward down the Kingsroad for King's Landing didn't sound like him at all, which could only mean Robb meant to keep his path secret.

Good for Robb. No good for Jon. He tried to think about where Robb would go after rallying the banners. He would still need more men and more allies, and the easiest ally to get would be…

The Tullys. Although, the Riverlands was a big place, and with Riverrun under siege by a far larger Lannister force, going straight there didn't seem to make much sense either.

He asked Bran for fresh horses and provisions, all the while trying to ignore the look of dismay on Rickon's face.

"You're leaving too!" the boy screamed. "No! No! I won't let you!"
Jon tried to calm him down. He was good at that. At least, he used to be. But Rickon refused to be placated. He beat his tiny fists against Jon's chest and then wrested himself free before running down to the crypts, leaving a hall full of grown men staring after him with no idea what to do.

"He thinks everyone's abandoned him, my lord," said a soft female voice behind him. "He's only six, poor thing. I would not presume to tell you what to do, but someone needs to explain to him what is going on."

Bonnie.

Jon slowly turned around. Bonnie Bennett, of a long line of Bennett witches. He could use a witch right now. It surprised him how easily he could accept the existence of magic and grumpkins and snarks and vampires and all the terrible creatures Old Nan liked to talk about and that they had liked to make fun of her for. But when one loved a vampire, he supposed everything else came naturally.

"Mistress Bennett, may I have a word in private?" he asked.

He led her into the Broken Tower where nobody went, particularly not since Bran's non-accident. Bonnie followed Jon, wondering what he could possibly want with her. He hadn't even let his friend Sam come. But she trusted Jon Snow. He believed in honour even more than Lord Robb did.

The floor of the tower was littered with leaves. All traces that someone had been there not so long ago and had pushed Bran out the window were gone. He turned around to face her, his expression inscrutable. "I know what you are," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"Don't play games, Mistress Bennett. I know you're a witch descended from a long line of powerful witches," he said.

She paused. How…?! Then she remembered. "Elena told you, didn't she?" she asked.

"She told me everything," said Jon. "I'm not going to hurt you, but I need your help. I need to find Robb, and I know you have a spell that can locate him using my blood and a map."

"And two candles," said Bonnie. "But I don't use magic anymore, my lord."

"Why?"

"Did Elena not tell you? Things…happen when I use magic."

"I thought things were supposed to happen when one used magic. Properly, that is."

"I suppose the better way to say it is that things don't happen the way I want them to. It's complicated, but the easiest way to put it is that I am not in complete control of my powers."

"Mistress Bennett, listen to me. I really need to find Robb so I can help him save my father… and Elena." The earnestness in his dark eyes burned into her when he said Elena's name. He gripped her by her shoulders. "I need your help. Please."

She hesitated. Should she risk it? The last time she had tried to use a spell, she had transported people to another dimension. But it was a simple locator spell that Jon was asking for, and ever since arriving in Westeros, she had not felt anything particularly odd. In fact, she had almost felt
normal again, as if it had been before all the craziness had started happening in Mystic Falls. "Meet me here tonight," she finally said. "Bring the map, two candles, and a clean knife."

He nodded. "Thank you," he said. At least he was trying to be polite about it.

"And Lord Jon, no one must know about this."

"I know the importance of secrecy," said Jon. "No one will hear it from me, Mistress Bennett."

"Please, it's Bonnie. If we're going to work together like this, then we should at least be on first name terms."

"Very well, Bonnie," said Jon. "And I am just Jon."

He did everything she asked, lying to Sam and saying that he wanted to visit some old friends in Winterfell so that Sam would not follow him. Sam would never betray him purposefully, but he wasn't ready to know about vampires and witches just yet. He would tell him in time. Actually, he'd probably let Elena tell him.

Bonnie was waiting for him in the tower in the complete darkness to make sure no one knew they were there. They found a shadowy corner with no windows and set down the two candles. Jon made to take out his tinderbox, but the wicks suddenly ignited all on their own.

Magic.

Bonnie spread out the map between the two candles and held out her hand for the knife. He winced a little when she cut his hand. Blood welled up and dripped onto the map, landing on no one spot in particular. "That's enough," she said. She handed him a handkerchief to bind up his wound with.

Then she leaned over the map and began to murmur. Her words were foreign, powerful. He felt it in the air. It grew thicker and thicker as if there was a gathering of tiny invisible insects.

*Fes matos tribum nas ex viras,*

*Sequitas sanguines,*

*Ementas asten mihan ega petous.*

*Fes matos tribum nas ex viras,*

*Sequitas sanguines,*

*Ementas asten mihan ega petous.*

The words surrounded him, the sounds holding no meaning for his mind, but in his heart he could feel their power and strength. It felt unnatural but right at the same time. He watched on, fascinated and a little scared. The blood on the map began to gather of its own accord into one single drop situated right above Winterfell. It slid down south, leaving a red trail behind, past Greywater Watch, and stopping just north of the Twins.

North of the Twins
The towers of the Twins loomed before them, tranquil at their positions guarding either side of the river. The bridge of the Freys was Robb's only path, and his only obstacle to the Riverlands. The light from the dying sun glinted orange on the swirling waters beneath the bridge's great stone arches.

He gave the command for the men to make camp here tonight. Catelyn looked upon her son, whom she had cradled in swaddling clothes as he had mewled for milk. It hadn't seemed like such a long time ago, but Robb was no longer her little boy. He was a man. Perhaps for the first time, she saw him as the men did, and he was magnificent.

"Walder Frey will not let us across," Bolton was saying.

"But he's your bannerman!" Theon said to Robb. His eyes flicked to Catelyn.

"Walder Frey is my father's bannerman, yes," said Catelyn, "but he has always been a bitter vile man who holds neither loyalties nor allegiances. You do not want to cross him."

"I do not want to cross him, but I need to cross his bridge," said Robb. "Perhaps if I spoke with him on the matter and offered him concessions, he might reconsider."

"Let me talk to him," said Catelyn. "I have known him since I was a girl. Perhaps he would look more kindly upon me." She tried to sound as convincing as possible, for she had to be strong; for Robb, for Ned, for the girls, for Bran and Rickon all the way back in Winterfell. But she wasn't so sure. Walder Frey had never looked kindly upon anyone.

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The Twins

The Freys' narrow cavernous halls made her footsteps sound a thousand times louder than they really should. Or perhaps that was the beating of her heart. "Lady Catelyn Stark," a strange Frey man-at-arms greeted her. Then again, this man was too refined to be a regular Frey soldier. He wasn't young, nor was he old. In fact, she could not place his age at all. His eyes spoke of wisdom gained from experience of countless years, but his face was still smooth. He held himself well, like a courtier at Riverrun, or even King's Landing. In fact, his whole demeanour reminded her of the new Petyr Baelish. Thinking of Petyr Baelish made her blood boil. She had trusted Baelish and Baelish had betrayed her.

"Welcome to the Twins, my lady," said the soldier. He gave her a courtly bow. "My lord Frey waits for you within."

He opened the great door for her. She stepped inside and waited a little for her eyes to adjust to the light, or the lack thereof. Walder Frey's great hall had very few windows and it perpetually smelled of mildew from the moisture coming up from the river. The guardian of the Twins sat at the very end, with light from one of the few windows streaming down on his face and illuminating those lecherous eyes and the bad teeth. How was it that some men could reach the age of ninety and be as strong as he was? Around him sat his hundreds of children, as silent as statues; as if they were merely there to decorate his halls rather than actual people.

"Lady Catelyn Tully," he said in his rasping voice. His eyes roved over her body. She suppressed a shudder.

"I hope you are well, my lord," she said, keeping her voice calm and neutral. If Ned had been here, he would have taken Frey's head for disrespecting her. But Ned wasn't here.
"What brings you here?" he asked, ignoring her greeting. "Your kind never comes to me unless you want something."

"The Lannisters have taken my husband prisoner, you may have heard, my lord. You have sworn oaths to my father's house. I ask that you open your gates and join forces with my son to march south to deliver my husband from the Lannisters," said Catelyn.

Frey laughed. "What concern is that of mine? Lannisters, Starks, they're all the same to me. What's in it for me?"

He was unbelievable! Did oaths mean nothing to him? Then again, he was Walder Frey. Nothing was sacred in his eyes.

"You are still my father's bannerman, are you not?" she asked. Even he would not be brazen enough to break his oaths out in the open.

"I am," said Frey.

"And as my father's bannerman, are you not sworn to ride out when he calls the banners?"

"I was readying to ride out, or rather, my sons were, but then your idiot brother got himself captured by the Kingslayer. I heard he bowed as easily as a kitchen wench."

She had to remind herself she was doing this for Robb and for Ned. Robb, Ned, Robb, Ned. Their names became a refrain to a hymn in her mind.

"May I speak with you alone, my lord?" she said. She would ask, beg, grovel even, if that would get her son the passage he needed to ride south to save her husband, but she would rather not have to do it in front of all his sons and daughters and the gods knew who else he had assembled here.

Frey gave a wave of his hand, his fingers gnarled from age with great knobby joints. His descendants filed away one by one. The soldier who had brought Catelyn inside made to leave also.

"Not you," said Frey. "You will stay."

"My lord," said the man with a bow. Catelyn looked from Frey to the younger man questioningly. Obviously, Frey placed quite a bit of stock in this man.

Frey noticed Catelyn's expression. "My long lost bastard," he said. "Newly legitimized, and more useful than all my sons combined, perhaps yours as well." He cackled at his own wit. "He was the one who recommended I stockpile weapons before the war started, and now we've made a tidy sum out of it. He's the man with all the answers, this one."

Something flickered across the man's face, but it was gone so quickly that Catelyn thought she had imagined it. She could think of it later. As it was, she ignored the insult to Robb for now.

"I swear, all the others are waiting for me to die," said Frey. "Now, why should I let your son cross my bridge?"

Catelyn glared at his bastard son.

"Anything you can say to me can be said in front of him," said Frey. "Now, my lady, what can your son offer me in return? There must be something. Good things."
"My son commands a host of twenty thousand men," said Catelyn. "They are camped outside your fort."

"They will be twenty thousand corpses when Tywin Lannister is done with them," sneered Frey.

"You swore an oath to my father's house."

"And I also swore an oath to the king; the same oath that your father and your husband swore. If I had the sense the gods gave a fish, I would deny you passage and let the Lannisters take you."

Her breath hitched in her throat, but she forced herself to remain calm.

"I don't give a shit about the Lannisters either, what with their gold and banners and power. They never paid us any heed. If they want my help, they are going to have to ask for it."

"But I am asking you now, as are my sons and brothers and husband and father," said Catelyn.

He snorted. "Your father did not attend my recent wedding, nor the previous one, or the one before that. There was not even a response to my invitation. Not one single wedding gift came from Riverrun. You great lords are all alike. You look down on me and my house."

One would have thought that attending one of Walder Frey's weddings would have been quite enough. He seemed to have one every year. She had lost count of the wives he had gone through.

"We did send them invitations, and nice ones too, did we not, Elijah?" Frey continued.

"My father has been ill of health lately," said Catelyn.

The old man snorted, not caring at all that his liege lord was ill.

"What do you think, Elijah? Should we say yes to these people who denied their hand in marriage to my daughter when I asked, and who refused to foster my grandsons, and wouldn't let my son foster their son, and who did not even send gifts to my wedding?"

"Mayhap my lord would like to think it over," said Elijah. "And I am sure Lady Catelyn is tired. She has, after all, been marching all day and the hour is late."

"Indeed, it is late," said Frey. "Forgive my lack of hospitality. Will you dine with us, Lady Catelyn?"

"I would be honoured," said Catelyn. What did they mean to do? Hold her here as a hostage to deter Robb's forces until the Lannisters arrived? But what if Frey reconsidered her request? If she refused, it would be seen as an insult.

Elijah led her to a guest chamber overlooking the river. "If you have need of anything, Lady Stark, please do not hesitate to ask," he said as he bowed and turned to take his leave.

"You do not bear much resemblance to your half-brothers," she remarked, "neither in appearance nor comportment."

"Do your children look very much alike, my lady?" he asked.

Catelyn had to confess that they did not, for Sansa and Rickon had the red hair of the Tullys while Robb, Arya, and Bran took after their father in terms of colouring. Thinking about her children sent a pang through her heart. She wanted nothing more than to hold them in her arms again and to protect them from all the evils in the world.
"It is a noble cause that your son fights for," said Elijah. "Few would have the courage to march against the greatest house in Westeros. But then, one could hardly expect anything else of a man who was raised by such a mother. I shall leave you to rest, my lady. The evening meal should be ready in an hour. I shall come back to fetch you then."

He bowed again and left her still staring after his retreating back as he returned to Frey's side. She couldn't believe that he was a Frey, no. And what was the meaning of that flattery? Did he support Robb? Was he trying to put her off-guard?

She would know in an hour. This dinner might well seal their allegiance to House Stark, or it would be her end.

_A/N_: We know book Robb has red hair, but Richard Madden doesn't, no matter what they say.
A Series of Unfortunate Events

Chapter Summary

Elijah gets a new job. So does Katherine. Robb finds himself in a predicament and ponders his future happiness. Jon gets surprising visitors during the night. As does Jaime, although it's more an early morning affair. All in all, everyone's having a terrible day.

The Twins

"So you would suggest that I grant them passage, Elijah? How do you like your new name? Elijah Frey?" asked Walder. He faced the mirror while his young wife ran a comb through his lanky thin hair. It was a surprise that he still had any use for a comb. Although, truth be told, he didn't really.

"You honour me with your name, my lord, although I am not certain what I have done to deserve it," said Elijah. He would much rather not have to call himself Frey, but for now, he was keeping hidden and working his way up, and to be counted amongst the nobility, even if it was minor, couldn't really hurt much.

Except his reputation, of course.

Then again, he had no reputation as yet. Who knew? Perhaps he might even be able to raise the Freys’ out of the mud, although he very much doubted it. Salmon might swim upriver when the time came, but they always died at the end of the journey. Elijah Mikaelson was no salmon.

"So, tell me why I should let them pass and make myself an enemy of the Lannisters?" he asked.

"The Lannisters can win this war without us," said Elijah. "They will never thank us for not letting the Starks across, but the Starks are desperate. They will do anything, give us anything, for the crossing. You could ask whatever you wish of them, as long as they have the power to give it."

" Hmm, I do like that," said Walder. He coughed . His wife brought him a copper basin which he hawked into. Elijah felt sorry for the poor frightened girl who had imagined every future but this when she had been little. "What do you think, a Frey-Stark marriage? It has a ring to it, does it not?"

North of the Twins

What could possibly be keeping her? Robb tried not to think about his mother while he discussed the lay of the land and possible plans of attack once they crossed the Twins. Lacking a squire himself, Katherine was currently serving as one, pouring the men drink. When she finished, she sat quietly in the corner to take up her embroidery, although Robb had the strange feeling that despite her proclamations that she was a silly little girl, she could understand everything that was going on. To be quite honest, he could have easily gotten any of his bannermen's sons to squire for him, but the truth was he liked having Katherine there. She never got overly excited, and she was not nervous at all even around men who made killing their mode of living. Perhaps Arya had had a point about letting girls become knights.
He pored over the maps. There were lions all over the place. The pieces representing himself and his bannermen made for a small pack of wolves all gathered at the crossing. Damn the troll on the bridge.

"My lord!"

The guard's shout made him and all his gathered war council look up. A man dressed in the red and gold of the Lannisters was shoved inside, his hands bound behind his back with thick rope. Quicker than the eye could follow, Theon had turned over the map, spilling the pieces everywhere.

"We found him counting our men," said the guard who had caught the spy.

"Are you an idiot?" demanded Theon of the guard. "He could have seen our plans! Now we'll have to kill him. Not that we wouldn't have done it anyway."

A spy. A spy could be used both ways. Robb placed a hand on Theon's chest to hold him back.

"How many did you get up to?" he asked the trembling Lannister man, a boy just a few years older than Bran.

"Twenty thousand, maybe more, my lord," said the man.

"Are you frightened?" said Robb.

"I should be, shouldn't I?"

"You have courage. I can respect that. I won't kill you if you deliver a message for me."

"What?" demanded the Greatjon. "He knows how many men we have!"

"Mercy is sometimes a virtue, Lord Umber," said Bolton. "Too much, however…"

Robb smiled. "Tell Tywin Lannister that twenty thousand northmen are riding south to see if he really does shit gold."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Katherine's fingers pause above her embroidery. Did she know what he meant to do? Up until now, she had acted as if they hadn't been there discussing the most sensitive secrets in front of her. But in truth, she had been listening all along.

"Why would you tell him that?" asked Theon.

"Send him back? Are you touched, boy?" demanded the outraged Greatjon.

"Call me boy again, and that will be the last word you ever speak," said Robb.

Should he tell them? He couldn't. The fewer people who knew of the plan forming in his mind, the smaller chance there would be of it ever reaching Tywin Lannister's ears. His father had trusted men too easily. He was not going to make the same mistake. He was saved from having to fob off his men's questions by his herald's timely interruption.

"Lady Catelyn returns, my lord," said his herald.

"Send her in immediately," said Robb. She was safe, which had to mean that Frey had granted them crossing, did it not? He turned to the spy. "You may go. He dismissed the boy, who bowed to Robb and then left as if he had grown wings on his boots. Moments later, Catelyn ducked inside.
"Well?" he asked his mother before Catelyn had even sat down. "What did he say?"

"Lord Frey has agreed to your request," said Catelyn. "He has granted us passage across the bridge, and all but four hundred of his men will march with us." She hesitated.

"What are his conditions?" asked Robb. There would be conditions; he had been prepared for that much.

"His grandsons will be fostered at Winterfell," said Catelyn. Reasonable.

"His son Elijah will squire for you." Fair enough.

"Arya will marry one of his sons when she comes of age." A little bit hard to imagine, but Arya would have to make her sacrifices for the sake of the family.

"And…"

"And?" said Robb. He did not like the pregnant pause, so laden with dread and possibilities.

"And when the war is over, you will marry one of his daughters," said Catelyn slowly, as if that made it any better. "Whichever one you choose."

Theon snorted. They had all heard of the beauty of Frey girls, or rather, the lack thereof. Robb glanced at the graceful figure of Katherine, who was still moving about the tent, tidying up the half-empty plates with the remains of their dinner. To have to watch a girl like that, and then think about a Frey girl…

"Have you seen his daughters?" asked Robb.

"I have," said Catelyn.

"And?"

"There was…one who might be suitable."

The things he did for family. At least, he tried to tell himself this. He reminded himself that he needed this bridge to save his father, and he could learn to live with a wife of Frey blood and look past her warts and all. After all, he was the young lord of Winterfell, and he would have had to make a marriage of political benefit sooner or later. No matter how much he liked pretty bards, there was too much standing between them.

"I accept his terms," said Robb.

Family.

Family.

Family.

There was no 'me' in family.

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**The Riverlands**

They said he was his squire, but in truth, Elijah Frey was there to be his father's eyes and ears, and Robb knew it. His mother had said Frey placed a lot of trust in this newly legitimized bastard son
of his. He looked the man up and down. It was very hard to make a judgement about him. Everything seemed... fluid. He seemed to be about ten years older than Robb, but he sometimes looked as if he knew secrets no one else knew. He was soft spoken and polite, not at all like Frey. Robb had met Walder Frey briefly during the crossing, and the man had been foul, bordering on rudeness. He had swallowed it because he had needed that bridge.

"Do you understand what your duties are?" he asked.

"I do, my lord," said Elijah.

"You will take care of my horse, my armour, my weapons," said Robb. "And you will ride by my side into battle."

Elijah bowed. "Yes, my lord," he said. Yes, very polite. He must have been raised elsewhere.

"Where are you from?" asked Robb.

"I was born in a small village just north of the Neck, my lord," said Elijah.

"Yet you speak as if you were raised to be a lord." Which was more than he could say for Walder Frey.

"My mother was a learned woman," said Elijah. "She taught me the importance of presenting myself as the man I want to be."

The response presented more questions than it answered. Robb wondered which noblewoman Walder Frey had despoiled to produce Elijah. Probably some gentle southern lady who had been very very blind.

He waved Elijah away as Roose Bolton, Rickard Karstark, and his uncle the Blackfish came in with more reports of Jaime Lannister's incursions.

"Jaime Lannister has grown bold," said Robb.

"He has reason to be," said Karstark. "He has ten thousand more men than we do, and his father behind him with thirty thousand more men who know we're coming because you told him." Karstark. He would have to find one way or another to tame him.

"They are drunken on victory, and drunk men don't make good decisions," said Robb. "Does he know that we have crossed the Trident?"

"Not a clue," said Blackfish. "My outriders made damn sure of that. We shot down all the ravens."

"Good," said Robb. "Keep shooting them down. No word must reach the Lannisters."

"I don't see what good that will do," said Karstark. "They still outnumber us."

"Aye, but they're soft southerners, my lord Karstark," said the Greatjon. "I say we outflank Tywin Lannister and confront the Kingslayer directly. He's the one who has your uncle hostage, my lord."

"We can't outflank them," said Karstark. "I say we charge at Tywin Lannister head on and defeat his army before Jaime Lannister can respond. If we capture Tywin Lannister, the war will be over. A lion without a head is a pretty useless lion."

"With all due respect, my lords," said Katherine all of a sudden, "what is the likelihood of that ever happening? One out of one hundred? One out of a thousand? Tywin Lannister did not get to where
he is through incompetence." For a moment, there was silence. One, no one had really noticed that she was there, except for Robb, and two, no one had expected a common woman to interrupt a war council so... Well, in such a spirited manner.

Then Karstark broke the silence. "What do you know about it, woman?" he demanded.

"Tywin Lannister has the largest standing army in all of Westeros," said Katherine, completely unfazed by his anger. "They are well-trained, disciplined, and I may not know much about warfare, but I do believe if a small pack of wolves confronts a larger pride of lions head on, all you will have in the end are dead wolves."

"So you recommend just sitting here and letting them smash us, then, girl?" demanded Karstark.

"Wolves are pack animals," said Elijah. No one had noticed he was there either. He had been an excellent squire thus far, for he knew when he was needed, and when he wasn't. "They take down other animals not because they are bigger or stronger, but because they have strategy. From what I have observed in the wild, one wolf in a pack would isolate the intended prey from the rest of the herd and chase it towards the other stronger wolves lying in ambush, and together, surrounding it on all sides, they take it down."

Robb smiled. "Lord Bolton, take your men to pull Tywin Lannister's tail," he said. "I have a rather longstanding dispute with the young lion that I would like to resolve."

And it seemed he needed new pack members if a girl and a Frey could see the situation more clearly than his war council.

Well, well, if it wasn't the one and only Elijah. Elijah Frey. Please. She wanted to laugh. Who was he trying to kid? He was a thousand year old original vampire reduced to serving as a seventeen year old boy's squire, although the fact that this seventeen year old boy was going to be the next Alexander the Great probably made it less ridiculous.

Katherine had had to refrain from laughing, or even looking in his direction too much when she had first seen him walking meekly through the camp following one of the Stark men. He had seen her too, she knew, and he had been surprised, but he had schooled his expression into one of impassivity immediately afterwards and they now both politely regarded each other as strangers, knowing fully well that to show any sign of familiarity was to raise unwanted suspicion. They would be able to talk soon enough, at any rate, she expected. If there was anything she was good at, it was subterfuge.

She was very good at it.

With Elijah now squiring for him, Robb technically had no need of her services, but he insisted on keeping her around to do odd jobs about his tent, practically acting as his housekeeper. She wasn't particularly fond of her job, but she was growing fond of Robb Stark despite herself. He had a very good head for strategy, and it didn't hurt that he was very cute. He knew when he had to commit little evils to do a greater good, and he was willing to do it. But when it came to her, he was surprisingly gentlemanly and mild-mannered, completely unlike his gruff fellow northmen or his friend Theon Greyjoy who only stopped making lewd comments at her after Robb had commanded him to cease and desist.

She sighed as she cleared away yet another load of dirty plates to take back to the mess tent where they would be washed in barrels of slightly cleaner water with bits of old food floating on top. This was the lowest she had ever fallen in her five hundred years of existence. Even when she had been exiled and on the run, she had been a gentlewoman with beautiful dresses and she had never had to
clear up a single table in her life. Until now.

If it had been anyone else but Robb Stark, she would have left immediately, but something about him was keeping her here. He made it bearable.

Also, when one hit her lowest point, she could only head upwards. This world, what with its kings and queens and lords, offered a very tall ladder for her to climb. She had always been an excellent climber, and this was a more solid rung than most.

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**The Neck, somewhere near the Kingsroad**

With Lord Jaime taking care of the Riverlands, Lord Tywin had sent Stefan north to continue raiding northern villages, terrorizing them into submission and disrupting Robb Stark's supply lines. It wasn't hard. Once he'd buried that man, word had spread like wildfire about the man who buried people alive. Very few villages dared to resist him, which was for the best. He loathed what he had to do, but he had to survive in this harsh new reality where the words 'human' and 'rights' had never been uttered in the same breath. For his 'achievements', he had been made a knight already. Not that anything he was doing was remotely knightly.

The road was still and silent in the night, and so dark that it was almost impossible to see, if one were a regular man. The moon was new and the stars were mostly blocked by clouds. The leafy canopy above blocked all the rest. Stefan, of course, was no ordinary human being. Vampires, being creatures of the night, did not need light to see anything. The wind howled as it blasted them with its icy breath, making it known that Lannister men were not welcome in the north. It also brought something else; the smell of horses, wolves, and unwashed northman.

Yes, northmen smelled different, although Stefan suspected if southerners started subsisting on hard bread and salted roast meat with little seasoning, they would start smelling the same as well. He motioned to the men to be ready. Soon he could hear them. There were two, actually, with one asking when they might be able to stop for the night and find shelter, and the other insisting that the pair should push on because they needed to catch up with 'Robb' before he moved.

Robb Stark.

Well, he wouldn't be doing his job correctly if he let any of Robb Stark's allies or friends slip through his fingers. This one, however, he would not be burying in the ground. He wanted him alive.

Jon ignored all of Sam's protests and pleas to stop for the night. It wasn't as if they would be able to get much shelter or rest out here anyway, and sometimes bandits haunted these roads. He wanted to find some place defensible before they stopped.

"The horses are tired," Sam said. "And isn't Ghost tired too?"

At the sound of his name, Ghost glanced backwards and cocked his head to the side, as if he was wondering why Sam was dragging him into it because he was not going to show any sign of tiredness if Jon did not. He continued trotting on, before suddenly stopping, one paw raised in mid step.

"Ghost?" asked Jon.

An arrow whistled past Jon's ear, and if it wasn't for the fact that the archer had misjudged the wind, it probably would have hit him. He drew his sword. "Sam! Sword!"
"What?!" said Sam. "I can't do this!"

"You have to!"

Men burst out from the side of the road. Torches were lit. They were surrounded by at least a dozen men. The party of bandits was not big, but it was more than big enough. At best, Jon had three fighters, including Sam. Sam was not really a fighter.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" said their leader. He was a handsome man, possibly of a similar age to Jon. His hair was cropped short, and he had deeply set eyes which, in the dark, became pools of shadow. "Surrender now and no harm will come to you."

Jon clutched his sword more tightly.

"Take them alive," said the man.

"Alive? What do we want with them, Salvatore?"

"Question me again, and I will bury you."

Salvatore. He only knew of two Salvatores in existence, and this was not Damon.

Jon thought he knew about vampires. He knew they didn't like vervain, but he didn't have any vervain. They didn't like wood either, and that he had plenty of all around him. He looked around at the men, their hostile southern features illuminated unnaturally by the flickering orange torchlight, making them seem more like monsters than men. If they had been just men, he would have been able to charge through their ranks, perhaps, but there was a vampire. But if he could ride down Stefan Salvatore and take his head, then hopefully their ranks would break.

"Now, Ghost!"

Ghost leapt at the men, a white blur in the darkness. Some scattered. Torches were dropped and extinguished when they rolled on the ground, trampled beneath iron-shod feet and hooves. Jon dug his heels into his horse's flanks and charged at Stefan Salvatore. Salvatore sidestepped him easily and grabbed the animal's bridle, making his mount rear in fear.

Jon was thrown from the saddle. The ground drove his breath from his lungs.

Salvatore was almost upon him. "Elena!" shouted Jon.

Immediately, the vampire's expression changed and he glanced around wildly. Jon seized the chance. Snatching up a fallen branch, he thrust it into the vampire's side, aiming for the heart. He would send his condolences to Damon later. Damon would understand, right?

Stefan roared in pain as he sank to his knees and his eyes darkened as his fangs extended. However, he must have had immense self-control, because he retracted them an instant later. That lull, however, was enough to save Jon. He scrambled to his feet and flung himself at another man who looked as if he were about to gut Sam. The other boy had fallen from his horse and was valiantly trying to put his new sparring skills to use, but alas, he was rather unused to actually having to fight for his life.

And these men were good; better than most of the rangers on the Wall, in fact. He would never be able to defeat them, even without the presence of a vampire. He grabbed Sam. "Run!" he shouted. "Come, Ghost!"
They didn't bother looking back as they ran blindly into the underbrush. Brambles tore at their hands and clothing. Branches smacked them in the face. Roots tripped them. But they ran as if all the walkers from beyond the Wall were after them. They could still hear the shouts of the men, but they were getting further and further away.

It was almost dawn before they stopped running, and by then, neither of them had any idea where they were.

Then it began to rain.

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### Outside Riverrun

They wouldn't hold for very long. Sooner or later, Riverrun would capitulate. He had taken most of the Riverlands, beyond a few futile raids by remnants of Tully forces. Once the castle fell, all of the Tully lands would be, technically, under Lannister rule.

With that in mind, Jaime didn't know why he needed to have his men build wooden fortifications. It wasn't as if the Tullys could just sally out and confront him head on. They didn't even have Edmure anymore! Although, come to think of it, that probably helped the Tully cause. Poor Edmure.

However, being the good little boy that he was, Jaime did as his father told him and had his men cut down trees to build wooden fortifications, but he saved them the trouble of having to build ones that faced the forest behind them. They were already grumbling about blisters on their hands. What was going to attack them from the forest anyway?Sprites? Ghosts? Walkers? Maybe even vampires? Perhaps his father had taken that northern tale a little too seriously. It was thrilling, to be sure, what with the blood and ancient castles with forgotten secret passages and monstrous immortal counts with fangs and fair ladies in need of rescuing by valiant men.

But surely Tywin Lannister was far too sensible a man to believe in tales of men who rose from the dead to drink the blood of the living while having an unnatural fear for garlic, of all things. It was a ridiculous story made up to scare children. Jaime Lannister was not scared.

All was quiet outside. With all the new fortifications, he didn't see the point in having so many sentries, so he only kept a few on watch and sent the rest to bed. After all, the boys needed their beauty sleep. Did his father not say that well-rested men were deadlier than any blade?

The new moon gave no light, and the stars were not much better. The men spoke to each other softly around the camp fires. Some sang songs about sailing out to fish in Lannisport while their less musically inclined companions hummed along or beat rhythms out on empty dinner bowls. Horses snuffled at their hay, and the war hounds gnawed on bones left over from tonight's soup.

He idly thought that perhaps he ought to go and raid some villages on the morrow just to break up the monotony, and he was almost regretting not bringing Rebekah with him. She would have entertained him and improved the view from where he stood inside his tent, at least. None of the camp followers were to his taste. He'd never made use of them. He was not Tyron; if Jaime Lannister wanted a roll, he shouldn't have to pay for it.

With a sigh, he lay down on his camp roll and stared at the ceiling of his tent. The lamp burnt out by itself, but there was enough torchlight and fire light coming from outside to see by, not that there was anything to see.

He didn't know when he fell asleep, but he dreamed.
Rebekah stood before him, her hair loosened from their customary braids. The golden tresses fell over her shoulders, but they could not cover the round swell of her breasts and the deep pink nipples. Darker hair hid the junction between her legs. Behind her, the river sparkled, and red and gold banners flew from Riverrun's battlements.

She held out her hand to him, beckoning him to join her in the river.

"I will come if you promise to help me wash my back," he said as he grinned, reaching out to take her hand. She stepped backwards, keeping just out of reach. Gradually, her face changed into Cersei's. They really were very similar, the two of them, except Rebekah had no wiles to speak of.

"They are attacking from behind us, my lord," she said.

"They are attacking us from behind, my lord!"

He opened his eyes. This was not the way he wanted to be woken up, during the darkest hour before dawn by a panicking soldier telling him that Robb Stark's army had suddenly materialized from the wood behind their camp. Why hadn't he listened to his father and built those damn fortifications facing the wood? And didn't he have scouts?! Oh, wait. He'd sent them to bed.

He leapt out of bed and pulled on his boots. "Help me with my armour." He only managed the breast plate and the gauntlets, and did not even bother with a cloak. Cloaks only ever got in the way during a fight anyway.
Not Quiet on the Western Front

Chapter Summary

The legend of the Young Wolf begins. Jaime's day goes from bad to worse. Elijah and Katherine get breakfast.

Outside Riverrun

"It will be dangerous, my lady," said Robb.

The girl only smiled in her calm and infuriating way while he tried to convince her that riding out into battle with him was not a good idea. "I will be careful, my lord," Katherine said. "I always am."

"Battles are chaotic. There will be arrows flying in all directions, and it will be impossible to be careful," he said, trying further to convince her that she really should stay in the camp and wait for his triumphant return, but she was having none of it.

"How many battles have you seen, my lord?" she asked.

Damn her! She knew this was his first! The question did not deserve an answer, so he did not answer it, but his silence only served to make his argument moot. So he just glared at her instead and hoped that the force of his will and the severity of his eyes –Damon had always said he had a gaze capable of piercing the soul– would be enough to make her stay.

It wasn't.

"I am a bard, my lord," she said as she placed a hand on his arm. He would never have allowed it if she had been anyone else, but she was Katherine. He allowed her more liberties than he would like to admit. "How am I to write songs about your victory if I am not there to witness it?" Her beautiful dark eyes were framed by the longest eyelashes. How could anyone have such beautiful eyes? He could look at them forever, and they had this almost magical way of wearing him down and making him agree with whatever it was she said. It had to be magic. How else would he explain it?

"Fine, but you will wear armour and stay by my side where it is safest," he said.

"Would it not be the most dangerous, since all the Lannister spears and arrows will be looking for you, my lord?" she asked.

"I will have my honour guard, and nobody aims at the front of the army where I will be, or else all the arrows would fall short," he said. "Just stay by me, or else you will be staying here." He had to put his foot down at some point, although it was so very hard to be firm with her. Other parts of him were growing firm…no, not now. This was the wrong time. He had a battle to win. He needed to save his father.

Why was he even explaining himself to himself, at any rate?

"Thank you, my lord."
Robb turned to Elijah. His new squire had witnessed everything, but he had had the tact to act as if he hadn't. "You will stay by my side and guard Lady Katherine. If a single hair on her head is harmed, you will answer for it."

"Yes, my lord," said Elijah.

He had Katherine go and seek out a suit of armour that fitted her, warning her that if she could not find one, she could not come. Elijah helped him with his armour, deftly buckling the straps and adjusting everything so it was strapped on tightly, but not so tightly that he could not move or breathe. Perhaps there was merit in having a squire who was older than oneself. Younger boys tended to fumble and be nervous. Elijah Frey was never nervous and he always performed his tasks efficiently, contrary to everything he had ever heard about Freys.

Outside, the men were waiting for him to give the signal. He had made them sleep during the day so they would be fresh for battle. It was past midnight. In a few hours, dawn would come. The dawn had been growing later and later. He looked upon the thickets of spears rising from the mist and thought of the two thousand men he had sent in Tywin Lannister's direction. He would thank them for their sacrifice today.

"Robb!"

His mother came striding towards him, her cloak billowing out behind her. "Let me ride with you," she said.

"No, Mother," said Robb. "It is too dangerous."

"Your bard is riding with you. If it is not too dangerous for her, it is not too dangerous for me."

What was it with women riding into battle this morning? Perhaps Katherine, being a bard rather than a lady, had never learned that women, being more delicate and weaker than men, were not supposed to go onto the battlefield, but his mother really ought to know better!

"I need to know that you are here guarding the camp," he tried to reason with her. She would have none of it. At the end, he had to compromise with her. So long as she rode at the back with Ser Rodrik, she would be allowed to accompany the main force. At no point was she to get involved, and if things were to go awry, she was to run immediately.

The weary Lannisters, tired from a hard day's work of building fortifications, none of which were facing the right direction, were mostly resting. Their campfires had burnt low, and only a few sentries remained armed. A few gathered about barrels of water. At least Jaime Lannister had the sense to not allow his men to imbibe too much alcohol, but even that wouldn't help him.

Robb and his men emerged like phantoms from the forest. Their dark northern clothes melded perfectly with the shadows. He had ordered the men to bind the horses' hooves in cloth so they could move in silence. Mist swirled about them, making it seem as if they really were ghosts rather than men.

They formed their lines opposite the Lannister camp. The sentries still hadn't seen them through the fog and the dark, just as Robb had intended.

"Sound the advance," he said.

It was rare for someone of her age to have new experiences. She had seen a great many battles from afar, watched men graduate from crossbows to rifles and from the most primitive cannons to
sophisticated guns and rocket propelled grenades, and then she had combed the battlefield afterwards, dining on the dying. It might seem callous, but what sane human being or vampire would say no to a free all-you-can-eat buffet? However, this was the first time she had ever ridden into battle.

The armour was pinching her in all the wrong places; tight across some areas and far too loose in others. It couldn't be helped. Men and women had such different shapes, and Katherine considered herself to be particularly feminine in many ways. It would probably pay to get another suit made. This was Robb's first battle, but it wouldn't be the last, and it looked as if accompanying him into battle would become her long-term employment rather than a short-term job. Perhaps he would even commission a suit of armour for her. He liked her more than well enough for that.

Speaking of Robb, he looked particularly handsome in his armour this morning. It wasn't that he was wearing something different, because he wasn't, but there was something about the determined hard set of his mouth and his ice cold blue eyes. He might have only been seventeen, but he wasn't a boy. He was her young Caesar. Armour and chainmail suited him.

Then again, he probably looked better out of it. She'd only ever seen glimpses of his body when she'd brought him water for his quick baths. He used a screen, but it wasn't a very good screen, and it had gaps. She wouldn't say she was a peeping-tom, but she was a curious sort of person, and she always let curiosity get the better of her. One could even say it was her weakness.

And anyway, what she had seen had been totally worth it. In fact, he had bathed just the night before, and although he had Elijah now, he preferred it when she carried out the 'domestic' duties.

"Why do you need to bathe just before a battle, my lord? War is a messy business and you will only get dirty again on the morrow," she said as she passed him a jug of hot water to rinse off the rough soap on his skin. Perhaps she ought to make him another soap. The lye soap he was using was so unpleasant. He bathed outside just behind his tent, with only a screen to separate him from prying eyes such as her own. Through the gaps in the linen screen, for Robb Stark was too practical a man for silk, she saw him pour the water over his head. His wet skin gleamed in the flickering torchlight. Grey Wind stood guard, making sure no one approached his master except those who were authorized, Katherine included.

"A leader must appear inspiring," he said. "I cannot be covered in dirt and grime and expect the men to respect me as a lord rather than as an untried common soldier." He brushed the water from his face, shook his head to get most of the water out of his hair, and then held his hand over the screen and demanded firstly his towel and then his clothes, which she dutifully passed to him. It was a pity he wasn't the type of lord who needed someone to help him dress. She would have gladly obliged.

When he emerged, his wet hair was sticking out in all directions, and his linen shirt clung to his still damp skin. He invited her to sit with him a while by the fire while he dried off more thoroughly. At first, they sat cross-legged on the floor in silence. She wanted to reach out to touch him, but feared it might be construed wrongly. Robb had to do the chasing.

She watched the firelight and shadow dance over his face as he traced shapes in the dirt with his index finger, on which he wore his signet ring depicting a snarling wolf's head. She wondered whether she had ever seen anything quite so beautiful as Robb Stark in profile while he was deep in thought. Eventually, he spoke.

"The Lannisters have more men than we do," he said. "Even without Tywin's men, Jaime Lannister has a force of thirty thousand surrounding Riverrun. They don't expect us, so we have the
advantage of surprise. My main concern is that they will flank us."

He drew out Riverrun in the dirt and the layout of Jaime Lannister's fortifications, all of them facing the castle rather than the woods, before proceeding to explain to her where he would place all his men, and how he expected Jaime Lannister to arrange his.

In a moment of impulse, he got her to fetch a few of his wooden lion and wolf pieces so he could show her how he would move to completely annihilate the enemy. As she passed him the pieces, their hands briefly touched. It was as if a jolt of electricity passed through them. She quickly pulled away, as she ought, and he seemed shocked by the contact. His fingers were calloused from years of training with swords and bows and any other weapon he had deemed fit for use, but his hands, while strong, were slender and graceful like an artist's hands. Or a lover's hands.

"The best plan is simple," he said.

Katherine smiled and said nothing, for she preferred many-layered plans like a delicate French gateau, with layers of melt-in-your-mouth pastry, custard, cream, and fruit, amongst other things. When one bit into it, there were many flavours and textures combined. That was a good plan.

Although, the best plans always ensured victory, and sometimes one could get a lot of pleasure from a simple one-layer crepe with a sprinkle of lemon juice and sugar.

"Jaime Lannister is trapped between the wood and his own fortifications. The key is to make sure they cannot surround us, so our lines must be as long as theirs at least. We will be more thinly spread, but they will not be fully prepared," Robb continued, oblivious to her silence. "We will come in from the northwest through the woods. They will not be able to see us nor how long our lines are."

He arrayed the wolves so their lines were longer than the lions, and then moved the piece on the left flank forward. "The Lannisters' right flank will see there is a gap, so they will charge and lose formation."

"Why not move both flanks up at the same time and surround them completely?" she asked, reaching out to touch the wolf piece on the Starks' right flank. He caught her hand before she could, and he did not let go.

"What does a rat do when it cannot run at all?" asked Robb. "It will bite. Men who have nowhere to run will fight their very hardest. Jaime Lannister is the best swordsman in all the seven kingdoms; a legend. If it had been any other man, I might have been less wary, but if anyone can cut his way through our lines, it is him." He pointed to the open right flank at the north east of Riverrun. "So we give him and his men somewhere to run to, and then—" Here, he got a carved trout and placed it a little further away from the opening. "—my uncle Blackfish will catch them and make sure they don't escape. We'll take Jaime Lannister, alive if possible, and trade him for my father."

"And where will you be, my lord?" she asked.

"Here." He pointed to the wolf piece at the very centre. "At the front."

"All the greatest generals lead from the front," said Katherine.

"I intend to be one of them."
Jaime Lannister was having a bad day. It was chaos around him, and he could not get his messengers through to his flanks, nor could their messengers get through to him, which meant no one had any fucking idea what was going on. He needed more competent sub-commanders.

He had told Tytos Brax to hold when Robb Stark's left flank had moved forward, but of course Brax could not resist the bait. They had turned to meet the enemy, exposing the Lannisters' right flank. After that, he knew his only chance was to kill Robb Stark and he had charged with his men for Robb's centre.

Horns sounded in every direction. Most of them were Stark horns. The northmen's battle cries all merged into one to create a singular howl. His blade cleaved through skin, bone, and flesh, cutting men from head to sternum at times with a single strike. Anyone who came near him fell, but even Jaime Lannister was only one man.

"Hold the lines!" he roared to his men, but he could not be everywhere at once. While his main force held, it would be for nought if all the other men broke away.

"My lord, the Starks are pushing our left flank back!" shouted his messenger.

"Tell Gawen Westerling to stay exactly where he is!"

Red and gold banners fell and were trampled into the mud as men fled the battlefield. Deserters were cut down by their commanders, but in some cases, even the commanders fled.

Jaime's horse reared with a furious scream, his sharp iron-shod hooves cutting flesh and smashing skulls as Stark men tried to surround him. He lashed out with his back hooves, sending men's broken bodies flying into their comrades behind them. Jaime finished off the rest. A surrounded enraged lion was a dangerous lion.

Through the sprays of blood, the waves of rushing men, the thickets of spears, and the waving grey and white banners, he saw Robb Stark. The cub had become a wolf, and he was a fiercer wolf than his father had ever been or would ever be. He had not thought much of the boy when he had first met him at Winterfell. He had been wrong, and he would not make the same mistake today.

If he killed Robb Stark, then hopefully the battle would be over and the northmen would scurry back to their little lairs beneath the ground.

Behind them, the sky was beginning to grow light. It turned purple, and then red, as if it, too, were stained with the blood of Jaime's men. "Rally to me!" he shouted as he raised his sword. Ruby droplets flew off his blade while others created an ever changing red lattice over the steel as he pointed it in Robb Stark's direction.

Lions did not run from wolves even when they knew they were losing. Everyone knew that.

He had to be strong for the men. He was their lord now, and he was leading them either to victory or to their deaths. But he couldn't show his nervousness; not to the men, not to Katherine, not even to himself. His heart was thudding in his chest, but he kept his breathing steady.

Arrows flew into their midst from desperate Lannister archers hoping that their projectiles might, in the off-chance, find the greatest target of them all; himself. Most of them passed over his head. He blocked one accidentally with his sword, although it would have only hit his armour anyway. He charged into the fray when the Lannisters rushed forward, riding down more enemies than he cut down. Anyone who fell was trampled by the feet and hooves of the men and horses who came behind him.
"The Lannisters are running, my lord," cried his messenger, a boy who had been so eager to squire for him that he had not been able to speak to Robb at all even when asked questions. But he was speaking now. The boy's face was flushed with the excitement of victory, but they had not won yet. "The Lannisters' right flank broke, and their left flank ran when they saw the others running." What? The left flank broke too? Well, he hadn't been expecting that quite just yet, as in not before they had even engaged in battle. Perhaps he had overestimated them and Lannister men weren't actually as disciplined as he had thought. Or maybe Jaime had gotten Tywin's leftovers.

"Tell Jason Mallister to close in on them," said Robb. He was surprised at how calm he sounded. He sent the same order to the Greatjon. There was still a chance the Lannisters could break through. He would never say it out loud, but his men simply were not as good as Tywin's soldiers. Compared to the Lannister army, which was trained to move as a unit and fight as an army, the northmen might as well have been common brigands. They were driven on by the smell of victory now, but if their lines broke even just a little, then everything he had tried to create here would break with it. There would be no rallying them.

"Are you ready for this?" Theon asked him.

"I don't really have a choice, do I?" asked Robb grimly. "Katherine, stay--"

Where in the seven hells was Katherine?!

She had been by his side just a moment ago, unfazed by the smoke and smell of battle. "Elijah!" he shouted.

His squire had disappeared too.

There was nothing for it. He could not think about all the possibilities right now. There could only be one thing on his mind. Only a few red and gold banners remained waving in the wind, the golden lion stained with the blood of slain men.

"Forward!" shouted Robb.

There was something to be said for the organic diet of Westerosians. They tasted so much better. Armour rattled and torn banners snagged in the black branches of the trees as the soldiers passed by where she lay in waiting on the Starks' right flank and the opening which Robb had left as a baited trap for the fleeing Lannister men.

Some of the Lannisters supported wounded comrades, but most of them were more worried about their own lives to care about the injured. It really wasn't hard to dart out and drag one of them away from the group without anyone noticing. One bite to the throat silenced the man forever. He was dying anyway. The wound in his leg had been infected, and sooner or later, the gangrene would have killed him if Blackfish didn't. What did it matter who killed him as long as he was dead? Not that she minded helping. People were fragile, and their lives cheap.

Although tainted with the slightest hint of disease, the man had been in his prime when he'd died. His hot salty blood was nectar to a hungry vampire. There was no hint of preservatives or anything else that usually tainted the blood of modern humans.

"We should get back before Robb Stark misses us," said Elijah.

"Aw, you're cute when you're scared," said Katherine as she let the drained corpse drop. Waste not, want not.
"I am not scared, but do you really want Robb Stark to find out what we are?"

She didn't answer as she carefully dabbed away any traces of blood on her lips. Obviously, a man as smart as Robb would find out sooner or later, but she wanted him to know in her own sweet time. "Have I missed any?" she asked.

Elijah wiped the last of the blood away from the corner of her mouth. "Better," he said. "Let's go, Lady Bard. You have a song to write. A great many, actually, I would say."

She rolled her eyes at him. Yes, yes, she would sing a song for the northmen about their victory. She had plenty in her repertoire she could pilfer from and considering their tastes in music—next to none—they should be quite easy to please.

Her horse had wandered off during the time she had taken to ambush and feed on the Lannister men. She wiped at the blood on the front of her surcoat. She had had no dresses that fit over the armour, and Robb wouldn't let her wear the shiny chainmail over her dresses. In the end, she'd had to borrow some young bannerman's son's spare gambeson, surcoat and trousers. Now she'd gotten blood all over them. It couldn't be helped. She could simply say she got cut off from Robb's force and was nearly hurt but Elijah saved her. That would explain the blood on his surcoat too, and no one would suspect them of having sneaked in breakfast.

Jaime charged straight for Robb. The Stark boy's guards rushed to meet him head on, thinking him a vanquished foe. Idiots. He cut them down and tasted the saltiness of their blood as some of it splashed onto his face. Blood had a curious quality to it; it almost tasted like life, or at least life lost. It wasn't actually unpleasant if one did not know it was blood, but because of the nature of the liquid, most men were repulsed by it.

A Frey man, on foot, stepped into his path. Jaime—barely—recognized the bridge on his surcoat. Did he have a death wish? Well, he'd give it to him. At the last minute, the man dropped and rolled. Jaime's mount screamed as he crashed to the ground. His back hooves flew through the air as his body somersaulted like a perverted version of the acrobats Jaime had liked watching as a child before his mother had died. After that, Lord Tywin Lannister had not hired any more acrobats because Joanna had enjoyed their antics, and they reminded him of her too much.

Jaime threw himself from the saddle just in time to avoid being crushed by his horse. The animal pawed at the air, one front leg spurting blood where the hoof should be.

The Frey man still stood, covered in horse blood, but very much unharmed. He lunged for Jaime. Yes, a Frey had charged at Jaime Lannister. What was this, a world where everything suddenly turned backwards? Jaime met him. Their blades clashed. He tried to let the other man's sword slide down his so he could trap it with the guard and wrench it from him, but the Frey was too clever for that. He struck out at Jaime's legs, forcing him to step backwards or else lose his balance. He had to admit, apart from Ser Barristan Selmy, he had never fought anyone so strong, so fast, and so sure of his skill. In fact, there was something about the Frey that reminded him of another extremely fast and agile opponent he had sparred with recently.

Unlike Rebekah, however, the Frey had excellent swordsmanship. Jaime had the distinct feeling he was being toyed with.

He deliberately left an opening. The Frey fell for it and lunged forward, just as the little lady knight had taken the bait. Maybe he wasn't so good after all. Jaime dropped his sword and caught the Frey's sword arm while preparing to plunge a dagger into the other man's face with his other hand, only to find he could not move his wrist.
"Not so fast, my lord," whispered the Frey as he forced Jaime's hand back. He wasn't even sure what happened next, but the Frey suddenly swung him around and threw him into the jaws of what seemed like a dozen slavering wolves baying for his blood. They pinned him to the ground and would probably have attempted to kill him had the Frey not suggested that Robb Stark would have wanted him alive. Then they trussed him up like a pig ready for slaughter—not that he let them do it easily—and dragged him before their little lordling.

Jaime Lannister was having a very bad day.

**Next chapter:** Katherine teaches the northerners an iconic slice of French culture.
Chapter Summary

Katherine plays the role of a bard for the northerners, although the result is not what Robb expects. Rebekah finds a new purpose in life as a Lannister knight. Damon gets the feeling that his plan to save Ned and Sansa has a few too many holes in it.

Outside Riverrun

"My lord!" Katherine ran to Robb's side. Her hair, having lost the leather thong she had tied it back with, flew wildly about her face. She couldn't very well be a maiden in distress if her hair was immaculate, could she? He saw her and without answering, offered her his gloved and gauntleted hand. She caught it. He hauled her into the saddle behind him.

"Where were you?" he demanded, not as Lord Stark, but as simply Robb Stark.

"My horse stumbled and I fell," she said. "Elijah saw and came after me." Elijah could thank her later for making up his excuse. Technically, she could have stayed away and returned to Robb after the battle, but the truth was…

Well, what was the truth? That she didn't want to leave him alone in this final charge with Jaime Lannister after his blood? That she had wanted to be there to defend him in case the Lannisters, in one final surge, actually managed to get him?

Although, that was probably never going to be a problem. Jaime Lannister was engaged in combat with Elijah. He was practically bullying poor Jaime. After all, Elijah versus human? She'd put her money on Elijah every time, unless it was human! Elena. Men had this irritating habit of becoming completely useless around her.

Elijah danced out of the way of Jaime Lannister's sword as if this fight had been choreographed. She had to admit, Tywin's son was a creature of beauty even in this state, covered in dirt and blood and God knew what else while fighting for his life. He moved like water, his movements smooth and natural as if he had been born wielding a sword. She was almost sorry when Elijah finally tired of the game of cat and mouse and went in for the kill, or rather, capture.

It took six men to bind the golden lion and bring him before the lord of wolves. As they forced him to his knees, he looked up at Robb and smirked. "Let's finish this, Robb Stark, man to man," he said. "We'll save a lot of lives. You fight for the Starks, and I fight for the Lannisters. We could end this war right here and right now, just you and me. I'll even let you choose the weapons. Sword, spear, axe, bow...teeth?"

"Wits?" asked Katherine. Jaime's face darkened. "The sad truth is, my lord, that you have lost. You should learn to lose with dignity."

The men laughed. "Come on, pretty man," said Jon Umber as he made to haul Jaime away. Robb didn't even have to do anything except be kingly and hold himself above this petty tantrum that Jaime was throwing.
"I should kill you, but you're more useful to me alive than dead. For now," said Robb. He turned to his men. "Take Lord Jaime to his new accommodations."

The men cheered as he was dragged away, but Robb's face remained unsmiling. The war had only just begun, and they were very far from winning. Robb knew that. Katherine knew he knew it. It wasn't just his looks that had drawn her to him, after all. Well, originally it had been just the looks, because he was positively dreamy, but there was so much more to him than just a pretty face and a really nice body.

"One victory does not make us conquerors," said Robb as he looked out across the sea of faces, holding each man's gaze briefly so they knew he was addressing all of them as men, and not just as a fighting force. "Have we saved my father and delivered my sisters from the hands of the Lannister queen? Have we freed the north from those who would have us on our knees? No. But today we have showed them the Lannisters can be defeated. They, with all their gold and might and power, are no match for northern steel. Lions may have claws, but wolves have teeth."

Edmure could hardly believe it when he first saw the grey wolf standard. Could it be? But how could it be any other? He craned his neck to try and see more. The bars of his prison limited him, making it difficult for him to see anything beyond the chaos of running Lannister men who had just woken up. But that was definitely a wolf's head on that banner, not a misshapen, discoloured lion.

The last time he had seen Robb, the boy had been a squalling, demanding, red-faced babe with almost no hair on his head. At that time, Edmure, still a child himself, had thought him the ugliest creature alive. The proud young man now riding towards him looked nothing like the Robb Stark he had known. Had it really been that long ago?

He impatiently tried not to rattle the door of his cage while Robb's squire—a Frey, no less—undid the lock and opened the door. "Uncle," said Robb.

"Nephew," said Edmure. He still wasn't sure how Robb Stark had gotten here so quickly, or how he had managed to defeat Jaime Lannister.

"I trust you have not fared too badly?" said Robb.

He shook his head, at a loss as to how to talk to this young lord. Then he forgot all about Robb Stark when he saw who rode with him.

"Katherine?" he whispered. Of all the places for her to be, she was here. He had searched for her everywhere, but she was here.

"Lord Edmure, well met," said Katherine. She dipped her head in deference. What was she doing on the battlefield, in armour, and riding by Robb Stark no less? He tried to say something to her, but what could he say? It was pretty obvious how she had come to be by Robb's side. He might not know his nephew, and it seemed he might not know Katherine all that well after all, but he understood the dynamics between highborn men and women of lower rank. He should have expected it. Why would a woman like Katherine Pierce settle for a Tully who had gotten himself captured when she could have that handsome young Stark who won battles against Jaime Lannister?

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**Riverrun**

Their raucous laughter drowned out the delicate tones of the harp. "Stop that dirge!" cried the
Greatjon, flinging his bear-like arms into the air. Ale flew from his tankard and onto the man next to him. Nobody seemed to mind. Robb nursed his own tankard, having only taken the barest of sips to make it look as if he were joining in the celebrations. It was bitter; very bitter.

He could not stop thinking about the two thousand men he had sent to their deaths. He could see their faces. They had trusted him to lead them to victory. He had led them to victory, but they were not here to see it. Theon had said the bards would sing songs of them, and Katherine was singing about them, but how would they hear? They were dead.

"Play us something cheerful!" roared the Greatjon, oblivious to Robb's troubles.

Katherine thought for a while and then set down her harp before striking up a beat by tapping her hand on the table. For a moment, Robb met her eyes. They were shining and full of mischief. Clearly, she wasn't upset about the two thousand dead men. Her clear voice rang out across the camp. The men sat or stood enraptured. The Greatjon had asked for something cheerful, but wasn't this just a little too cheerful?

_Arise, arise, arise ye northern sons!

The day of glory has arrived!

Take up arms against the tyrant.

The blood-stained standard has been raised!

The blood-stained standard's been raised!

Listen, you out in your fields!

Murder these treacherous lions.

They charge right into your arms

To cut down all your wives and sons.

To arms, northern sons!

Form your battalions!

March on! March on!

Cleanse the impure blood!

It in your fields will run!* 

To say that the men loved it was an understatement. They called for her to sing it again. And again. And then they began joining in on certain lines and beating their fists against the table or stamping their feet when they forgot the words. They particularly loved the idea of impure blood running in the fields and murdering lions, and whenever Katherine mentioned blood-stained standards, they called it the bloody flag.

"My lord, you have not eaten," said Elijah.

He started. "The food is not to my taste," said Robb. No one else had noticed that he had not touched his food, except his sharp-eyed squire. He didn't want any concern on his part, or on anyone else's part, for that matter.
"Then let me bring you something else, my lord," said Elijah.

"That will not be necessary," said Robb. "I am not feeling particularly in need of food tonight."

"You won a great victory, my lord," said his squire. Why could he not simply let him sit and think? "You should be celebrating with the men. They will expect it."

He was right, of course, but that did not mean Robb was not irritated by it, so he simply said nothing, indicating the conversation was over. If Elijah was the squire he thought he was, he would not try to say any more on the matter. He would eat what he wanted and drink what he wanted when he wanted.

He tried to imagine what his father would do in such a situation. Then again, his father was thought to be aloof and distant because he wasn't very good at smiling, and look where that had gotten him. Perhaps he was not the best man to emulate in such an instant.

So he forced himself to smile and drink his bitter ale before handing his cup to the young page serving him and demanding water instead.

Robb stood at his command table with all the maps spread out before him. The lines depicting borders and rivers and roads and the spots representing important locations blurred. He knew he ought to rest, but whenever he tried, all he could do was imagine hearing the dying screams of the diversion force. He had their blood on his hands. His father had once said that a lord was a father to all his people, but what sort of father knowingly sent his children to die?

He barely noticed when Katherine came in, as she did each night, with a jug of hot water so he might wash, but he became more aware of her presence as she moved to tidy up around his tent. Suddenly he felt the need to unburden himself on someone. Being a lord was lonely. Everyone thought him above them, and maybe he was, but that did not mean he did not sometimes yearn for someone to whom he could be just Robb.

"Have you ever wondered what the blood of two thousand men would look like, spilled?" he suddenly asked out loud.

"Red, just like the blood of one man, except more, my lord," said Katherine after a fleeting moment of hesitation, although she spoke without reservation.

"My hands will never be clean," he continued.

"You did not kill those men, my lord," said Katherine.

"I sent them to die. That's as good as killing them, isn't it?"

She set down the cloth she was folding and slowly approached the command table. For a moment, he thought she might reach out to place her hand on his shoulder and to offer some superficial gesture of comfort. Other women would. They would seek to drown his doubts in their softness in the hopes of becoming the next Lady Stark. But Katherine did not.

"Would you rather twenty thousand men have died instead?" she asked. "People live, people die. It depends on whether their deaths had meaning. This is war. You did this for us, for your family, for your father. You cannot falter now, my lord."

"You are not afraid?" he asked.
"Of you, my lord?"

"I've killed men."

"I'd better not give you a reason to kill me, then."

He took in her smile, just slightly flirtatious, but closed, as if she hid secrets no one else knew about. Most boys would be at least slightly shaken or affected after their first battle. This girl seemed to have taken it all in stride, despite having fallen and probably almost gotten killed, judging by the amount of blood that had stained her clothes. Did nothing ever unnerve her?

"That song," he said, changing the subject. "How did you think of it?"

"I know what men want, and I give them what they want, to a certain degree," she said. "I should leave you to rest, my lord. King's Landing is a long way away."

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The Green Fork, the Riverlands

The news had spread like wildfire, dousing the celebrations for their recent meagre victory. Rebekah was loath to believe it. She still couldn't really get her head around it. Jaime captured? It wasn't possible. But it was true. Even Lord Tywin had said so himself, so matter-of-factly that one would have thought he didn't care. If only she had insisted on going with him. She bet they were both regretting his decision to make her stay right now.

She paced some distance away from the command tent, awaiting the lords to come out so that she might ask Lord Tywin to send her after Jaime. It wasn't as if she was doing anything at the camp. Out there, she could be of more use to everyone. The lords filed out, despondent after such a major defeat. They had thought Robb Stark a little country boy. Robb Stark had just proved that he had much more in common with Genghis Khan than with Curly from Oklahoma.

Only Lord Tyrion remained within the tent with Lord Tywin.

"You will go to King's Landing to take up the seat of the Hand in my place," Lord Tywin was saying.

"But... why me?" asked Tyrion, who was clearly not expecting it. Rebekah had not expected it either, not because Tyrion wouldn't have done a good job with it –he was far cleverer than anyone gave him credit for and he made her laugh sometimes with his little quips– but because they all knew just how much Lord Tywin thought of him.

Lord Tywin's opinions of his children seemed to be proportionate to their heights.

"Because you are my son," said the Lannister Patriarch.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then she heard Tyrion hop off his chair without a word, taking his cup of wine with him. As he came out, he saw her, and his face seemed to drop even more. "He's given up on Jaime, Rebekah," he said softly.

"What? How? What do you mean, my lord?" she asked.

Tyrion glanced backwards. "Isn't it obvious? I'm his son, he said."

"But you are," said Rebekah.
Tyrion sighed. "Do you really believe he would say that if he hadn't already crossed Jaime's name off the list? He's sacrificed Jaime in the name of House Lannister."

But he couldn't! And Jaime wasn't lost to them yet! He still lived and she was going to get him back. She'd kill every Stark if she had to! No, it wasn't because she cared. No, not at all. She just wanted him because he was hers. And he was funny and sometimes sweet—more often than not, he wasn't—and he was hers. Hers! Not Cersei's, and definitely not Robb Stark's.

She took a few deep breaths. Rage and emotion would not convince Lord Tywin. He liked calm reasoning, and unleashing her inner Niklaus on him was not going to work.

The guards were reluctant to let her inside, and it was only when Tywin told them to let her in that she managed to get access to him.

"The men tell me you have been creating more of a fuss than usual in the practise yards," said Tywin. He did not look up from his map and his letters.

"My lord, if it pleases you, I would go after Lord Jaime," she said.

"It would not please me," he said.

"But he's still alive out there! You cannot mean to abandon him to the Starks!"

He gave her a look that probably usually froze everyone in their proper place, which was beneath him. But Rebekah was used to those. Niklaus had been rather fond of throwing them everywhere and they had lost their impact. Besides, there was nothing Tywin Lannister could do to her that her brother couldn't beat. "The Starks are not foolish enough to harm him," said Tywin.

"So you're just going to leave him there to rot?"

"The Lannister pays his debts. For every blow the Starks deal to us, we will deal two."

"With all due respect, my lord, that's not going to help Lord Jaime."

"Have you ever fought in a war before, girl?" asked Tywin.

"I have been involved in the aftermath if that's what you mean," said Rebekah.

"War demands sacrifices."

"You won't have a house left if you keep sacrificing everything."

He raised his eyebrow. She knew she was pushing it. She'd seen Nik talk to his subordinates often enough to know that this was the edge of No Man's Land. But she was a woman.

"If, by some miracle, I let you go gallivanting off on this…adventure, how would you propose going about it?"

Charge in, get Jaime, and kill everyone that got in her way, of course. But she didn't say it. Lord Tywin would never allow her to go if that was her plan.

"They would never expect it," she said as calmly as she could. Breathe, Rebekah. Breathe. "I'm a girl. They'll think I'm a camp follower."

He had to—grudgingly—admire her spirit. As for her tact, well, there was none, and she still hadn't
managed to tell him what her strategy was.

"So your entire stratagem relies on you being a woman," he said slowly, enunciating each syllable just so she could realize how foolish she was being, and that this was not actually a stratagem.

"It's only part of it, my lord," she said. "I could infiltrate their camp as a camp follower—" She was dedicated to Jaime, he'd give her that, but her loyalty was only useful only if it could be applied correctly. "—and when I see an opportunity, I can break Lord Jaime out."

That was a plan that Jaime would have come up with all on his own without any aid. It even rivalled his son's plan to kill the Hand of the King in the streets of King's Landing. And he hadn't even followed through on that because it "wouldn't have been clean".

He pointed at the Lannister banner displayed prominently behind him. "No one marching under this banner will take one step into Stark controlled territory unless I allow it."

"Then I won't," said Rebekah. Did she mean to give up, or perhaps it meant she was finally using her intellect? Perhaps her pretty face and her skill in fighting had ensured that she had never had to use it before.

"And what will you do?"

"Leave the banners behind," said Rebekah. Her brows drew together as she thought more deeply about it. "Perhaps I would march under the Stark banner instead."

"And how would you accomplish such a thing?"

"As a camp follower."

"Does a camp follower gain access to military secrets?"

"If she's good."

"The Starks need warm bodies, not for their own comforts, but to replenish their ranks." He would have to say everything for her after all.

"But I don't think they take women as soldiers," she said.

"They will take whatever bodies capable of holding a sword," said Tywin. "Obviously not as a man at arms, but perhaps as someone who fights in exchange for coin."

"Like a merc? Mercenary, I mean, my lord."

"But," he continued, as if she hadn't spoken at all, "no one hires mercenaries who are alone."

"I don't suppose I can take Daemon?" Daemon? He was not throwing away a useful Lannister in pursuit of some little girl's foolish dream.

"You will take twenty of my personal guard," he said. "They are not well-known, and they will follow your orders so long as they do not contradict mine. Roose Bolton, the lord of The Dreadfort, is recruiting men. They will not believe that a woman is capable of leading, unless she were to use other tactics to keep the men in check." Since she was so willing to sell her body for Jaime's sake, she shouldn't mind taking a few lovers.

"You will go to The Dreadfort, enlist, and report back to me. My men will be familiar with the system with which we are to keep in contact. You will send back any information you find that
may be useful. You will not attempt to free my son under any circumstances. Do you understand?" She probably wouldn't even see him.

She seemed unhappy about that, but was smart enough to not push her luck further. "I understand, my lord."

Good. "However, should any unprecedented opportunity arise, you have my leave to take advantage of it."

"Like drunk Starks?" she asked.

"Like leaving Jaime in a fort with very few men behind while Robb Stark rides to war. In such a case, you will negotiate a release in my name."

She practically beamed at him. "Thank you, my lord."

"Now go. I have had enough folly for one day."

In this particular game, it was wise to have as many pieces in play as possible. Rebekah Mikaelson might yet prove to be an unexpected boon.

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**King's Landing**

The snaggle-toothed unwashed illiterate rabble was baying for blood as the guards led Ned through the street. His limp had gotten bad again, although Damon wasn't exactly surprised. The damp in those cells did nothing for anybody. Ned blinked in the bright sunlight. In the crowd, he spotted Arya, hair now cut short, with Forel in his disguise of a cloak that Damon had removed from one of his previous dinners.

The Sept of Baelor crowned the very top of Visenya's Hill, surrounded by a plaza of white marble that reflected the heat during summer and...well, one could hardly see the ground during winter when everything was covered in snow. Blue veins ran through the marble like expensive salty strong French cheese. Some of the tiles had cracked from the extremes of cold and hot and the late king Robert had not cared enough to have them fixed. He also hadn't had the money, what with his fondness for expensive tourneys.

Seven crystal minarets, or towers, rather, because minarets were distinctly Islamic, rose from the sept around the marble dome. He had never been inside the sept, not being the religious type, but it looked at least as big as the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. And just like the Hagia Sophia, there was a large statue on the plinth outside, although instead of Justinian upon his large column astride his warhorse –now destroyed by the Ottomans– there was only a stone Baelor the Septon King with his blessed benevolent smile which made him look perpetually stoned. Damon took his place behind Sansa and Joffrey, standing beside Sandor Clegane. He didn't mind. He just looked all the more handsome for it.

Rocks and food were thrown at Ned. Some hit. "Traitor!" they shouted. God, common people in Westeros were even more stupid than rednecks back home. Even _they _needed the fancy trappings of Fox News and yelling pastors with microphones to put ridiculous ideas into their heads.

Although, Westerosians had a boy-king in fancy dress. Did that count? Ah, men at their very best. People liked to see other people in pain. He should know.

The guards forced Ned onto his knees on the steps outside the sept. Ned looked at Sansa, who smiled encouragingly. The plan was that he would confess to treason, and Joffrey, being the
benevolent king that he was, in the image of Baelor, would spare his life and pack him off to the Wall to spend the rest of his days with Jon. There was something wrong with the picture but he couldn't quite place it. It had something to do with good kind benevolent merciful King Joffrey. Maybe he needed a plan B, but it was too late for that now.

"I have committed treason," began Ned. The entire plaza fell silent. "I have betrayed my friend the late King Robert Baratheon who placed his trust in me. Instead, I sought to displace his son and the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, King Joffrey Baratheon, and to seize the throne for myself. For that, I am truly regretful." He turned to Joffrey. It grated on Damon's nerves to see that tall, honourable, silly man have to simper at Joffrey's feet. Yes, he was biased. No, he didn't care. He would laugh at the day Joffrey would have to do the same at Robb's feet. Yes, he really really wanted to see that. It would only be justice.

"Your Grace, I beg your forgiveness," said Ned.

"Traitor! Treason!" shouted the crowd. "Kill the traitor!" Crowds were annoying and they seemed to know four words in total.

Joffrey raised his hand to quieten them. An expectant silence followed. All eyes were focused on the boy. He had their undivided attention. Crows wheeled overhead in the grey sky. Steaming bird shit fell with a plop on Baelon's shoulder. At least they were sensible enough to not pay any attention to Joffrey's imminent ramblings.

But even Damon couldn't help but watch the king as he opened his mouth and began to speak.

*Adapted from the French National Anthem, La Marseillaise. There is hardly a more suitable anthem for Robb's Rebellion. ;) With all those songs in her mind, Katherine hardly needs to compose anything new.

Next chapter: Damon considers Plan B.
No Man Left Behind

Chapter Summary

Joffrey fulfils a lifelong dream. Damon executes "Plan B". Sansa learns who she can and can't trust. Elena tries to head back up north.

King's Landing

They loved him. At that moment, as they were all waiting for him to pass judgement, they loved him. It might not have mattered so long as he was feared, but he liked feeling loved. They knew he wasn't a little boy. He was their king, and they loved him for it. He couldn't disappoint them. Their calls for blood still rang in his ears. He remembered his mother's words just before they had come to the sept.

"We need the Starks to tame the north," Cersei had said. "Send him to the Wall to live out the rest of his days and keep his son here. Your kingdom will be safe then."

Bollocks. He was the king! The lion! The lion had no need of the wolf. He could tame the north himself! They loved him. They wanted Stark blood. He wanted Stark blood.

"My mother and my betrothed would have me pardon the traitor," said Joffrey. The crowd's faces fell. "But they have the soft hearts of women, and they know not what they ask of me. So long as I am king, no treason will go unpunished." He turned to Ser Ilyn Payne. Sansa's eyes widened as she realized what he was going to do. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his courtiers start.

"Joffrey, my love~" Cersei murmured, but he ignored her. What did she know? The people loved him! He was their king! Drunk on their cheers, he saw nothing but red.

"Ser Ilyn Payne, bring me his head," he said.

"No!" screamed Sansa. "Please, Your Grace! You promised! Please, don't! Father, no! No!"

What could he have done? Snap Joffrey's neck? But no, there were too many guards. He should have killed that despotic golden-haired inbred little Lannister spawn in his sleep when he'd had the chance. Ned Stark would be avenged. Robb would see to it, and as Robb's friend, he'd help.

The smell of blood was fresh on the air. In that one instant when Joffrey had called for Ilyn Payne's sword, Damon saw his plan unravel. He saw the whole world unravel. There would be no going back now; no peace with the Lannisters. There would be war. If King's Landing had been dangerous before, it was even more dangerous now.

Ned's head rolled to a stop just at the edge of the steps, before it could fall into the crowd below. Oh shit. He hoped Arya hadn't seen it. The kid was probably going to be fucked up enough already without seeing her father's severed head. Blood spurted from Ned's body as it fell forward. It was a little hard to connect the body with the living and breathing man who had tried to teach Damon what it really meant to be a knight.

And this was coming from a vampire who had beheaded several people in his lifetime. Although,
he'd never actually seen someone he liked get beheaded before. Sansa fell in a dead faint. He caught her before she hit the stones and brained herself. What was he to do? He carried her back to her litter and left her in the care of her maids as the royal party turned to return to the Red Keep. The crowd was still cheering. Ser Ilyn Payne was holding up the head to show them.

Well, time for Plan B, which was...he would figure something out. It wasn't safe for Arya to remain in King's Landing, and he had just about no chance of getting Sansa out now. Robb would be on the warpath, and Sansa Stark was one of the many weapons the Lannisters could use against him. They were going to keep a thousand eyes on her.

No matter what happens and what I decide, you must take Arya back to Winterfell.

He had promised Ned he would try to keep his daughters safe. Sansa would be safe enough for now. Cersei would be doubly careful not to let Joffrey harm her, at least not while Robb still lived. She wouldn't kill Arya either, but Damon wasn't going to let her have another hostage to use against Robb. Friends just didn't do that. Sansa would hate him, but he could live with it. Besides, she was a smart girl. She would understand why he had to do what he was going to do.

Right?

She was going to kill them! Kill them all! Syrio barely managed to hold her back as the sword was raised. Arya didn't see him fall, but she didn't need to; her father was dead and not the gods, not Sansa, and not Damon had been able to save him.

"This place is not safe for us, child!" hissed Syrio as the crowd rose to a frenzy of cheers and adulation for Joffrey. Joffrey was first on her list. And then it would be the queen. And Ilyn Payne. They would all pay for it!

Syrio dragged her away, through the narrow alleyways, scaring flocks of stupid fat pigeons on their way. Their little hideout still looked the same, but everything had changed. In the silence of the broken house, she finally felt the hot tears flow down her cheeks, and she let go of a breath she never knew she had been holding in. Syrio held her as she beat her fists against him. When she finally ran out of energy, she simply let him hold her as she cried. The day darkened and turned into night. Even her tears were exhausted.

"I am going to kill them! I will kill them all!"

"You will, but not yet," said Syrio. "If you tried now, you would die, and what do we say to death?"

"Never, if I can help it," said Damon, dropping down through the hole in the roof. "Come on. We have to get out of here."

Damon. That lying, cheating vampire! "You said you'd save him! You promised!" Arya raged against him, trying to hit him as best as she could. He caught her hands and held her still.

"I said I'd try, and I also promised your father no matter what happens, I'm going to get you back to Winterfell. If it wasn't for that, I'd leave you here."

"What about the other little lady?" asked Syrio.

"I can't get Sansa out; not now," said Damon. "She's the key to holding the north, if anything should happen to Robb. Cersei has a thousand pairs of eyes watching her."
"You're leaving my sister with Joffrey? What sort of knight are you?" demanded Arya. She might not really love Sansa all that much, and it was all Sansa's fault that their father was dead, but they were still family, and Damon was sworn to protect them!

"The practical kind who doesn't believe in miracles," said Damon. "Sansa will be safe. She's cleverer than you think, and Cersei won't let Joffrey kill her."

"But…!"

"Listen, you think I wanna do this? I had to leave Elena behind as well. Elena." Arya fell silent. She wasn't the only one who had lost people. Damon loved Elena more than anyone else in the world. She knew that.

He hauled her to her feet. "Poor little orphan boys don't have swords." He suddenly snatched Needle from her.

"Hey! That's mine!" She made to snatch it back, but Damon held it out of reach and strapped the little sword to his own belt instead.

"Not anymore, it isn't. If you behave on the road and do as you're told, maybe I'll give it back," said Damon. Arya knew she couldn't do anything about it. She had to rely completely on Damon now. He probably meant well, but did he have to be so mean about it? If her father were here, he would not have dared– but her father was gone. All she had were Damon and Syrio.

"And you'll need a new name and a new identity," said Damon. "I suppose you could be my pesky little brother, and I can call you 'Stefan'."

"Like your real brother?"

"Makes it easier to remember," said Damon. "And you can't call me Damon. I'm thinking…"

"I can call you Jon," said Arya. "Like my brother." Damon gave her a look. She just shrugged. "Makes it easier to remember."

"And I do believe this is where we must say farewell, my friends," said Syrio.

"You're not coming with us?" demanded Arya.

"This is not my war, little one." Syrio bent down so he was on eye level with her. "Listen to your brother, young Stefan, and if you should ever come to Braavos, ask for Syrio Forel. They will know where to find me. Now, once more, what do we say to death?"

"Never, if I can help it," said Arya.

Syrio laughed softly and patted her cheek. "He is a quick learner, your brother," he said to Damon.

The streets of King's Landing were dark and abandoned tonight, with only drunks loitering about. There were no guards in Flea Bottom, which was like another country, completely not part of Joffrey's kingdom. No one took any notice of the 'young boy' and the dark little man carrying the singing 'drunk' on their shoulders through the streets. They all assumed they were taking him home to bed.

The entrance of the sewers wasn't very wide, but Arya was very small, and Damon wasn't all that big either. The vampire easily removed the metal grating. The smell was the worst. It made her
want to vomit, but she held it in. No point in making the 'water' fouler than it already was. She was never going to get the smell out of her skin and hair. Although, there was something honest about filth; it was foul, but it never pretended it wasn't. Unlike people.

At times, she had to be carried by Damon as they waded through the dark muck, going ever downwards. "All sewers lead to an outlet," the vampire had said.

Rats the size of cats crawled around on the ledges. She'd heard horrifying tales about how they could eat babies, but all of them scurried away as Damon approached, as if they instinctively knew that he was the greatest hunter beneath the skies and, for now, the earth as well. Bloated dead rats floated in the muck as they travelled through the winding stone tunnels dug so many aeons ago that no one rightly remembered how they went anymore. But if they continued to follow the slope downwards, Damon said, they would eventually reach the river or the sea.

She just followed him, praying that he knew what he was doing. Soon they heard the splashing of the surf. They had reached the sea.

Salty waves washed away the filth on their bodies and chilled their skin, making hers look like that of a plucked chicken. She clung to Damon as the vampire swam past King's Landing. She shivered. The Red Keep loomed over them. Lights flickered in the many windows, and occasionally the wind would bring snatches of laughter and conversation. They were celebrating, the bastards! "I'll kill them all," she whispered.

"Yeah," said Damon. "That's a lot."

"You could kill them all," said Arya.

"Uh huh." His powerful strokes pulled them away from the place where all her enemies were as the moon sank towards the horizon and the eastern sky grew purple before turning into a warm orange.

Her father was dead, but the world went on as if nothing had happened.

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Dear Diary,

I don't know what to think. Damon was there. I saw him on the steps of the Sept with Sansa and Joffrey and the queen. He was there with Lord Ned, and then he returned with the queen to the palace. Why didn't he do something? Has he switched sides?

Do you know that feeling when you see something and all you wish now is that you can unsee it? I've seen death before. I've seen my brother cut off someone's head on my front doorstep. But this... you never expect something like this to happen to someone you know. You don't expect this to happen to a girl like me. I'm a political fugitive. Isn't it funny? I haven't even voted before in my life, and I was never part of any of the activist groups. I was a cheerleader. Now I'm a political fugitive.

I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what anyone is doing. Nothing is certain and I don't know what's real anymore. Who do you trust? Who do you believe? Who do you serve? Is there anyone here who isn't a liar? But I'm a liar. Maybe you have to be a liar to survive here.

I need to go north. I saw Yoren heading into the inn earlier. I am waiting now for it to grow dark so I can sneak through his window. He has a lot of boys and prisoners with him. I think he'll be setting off soon, and it's a good thing I found him before he's gone. Otherwise, I don't know how else I'd get back up to Winterfell.
She tucked the little book away. Her hands shook. God, she needed to get away from King's Landing, away from this place of treachery and death and a place where she could trust no one.

Yoren was staying in a room on the third storey. She'd been spying on him all yesterday so she knew exactly where he was. She clambered up using the beams sticking out of the mud walls as footholds. The room was dark, with not a single candle to light it up. There was a bed and a low table, and that was it. The floorboards were bare. She huddled in a shadowy corner, listening to the sounds of men eating and brawling below.

Eventually, as the night deepened, she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. The door opened with a groan and Yoren came in, his whole demeanour more sombre than it had been. He must have been at the execution as well. Just thinking about it made Elena want to cry. Poor Lord Ned. Poor Sansa. Poor Arya. Poor Jon.

The little oil lamp did not cheer up the room much, but it gave enough light to reveal her hiding place.

"Gods above! What are you doing here?" he hissed as he hurriedly slammed the door shut.

"I didn't know who to go to, Yoren," said Elena.

"What about your lover Damon?" said Yoren. "He seemed to be doing well."

"I don't know what he's doing, and I had no idea he was with the queen until I saw him up there," said Elena. "And he's not my lover."

"Well, I don't know why you think I can help," said Yoren. "You can't go back to the Wall."

"I need to get to Winterfell. I have to tell Lord Robb what's happened," she said. "And I need a disguise. It would be odd for a lone girl to be travelling north when there's a war about to start, and they'll be looking for me because I fought Sandor Clegane."

"That was clever of you," said Yoren.

"I had to protect Lady Sansa," said Elena.

"And you did a fine job on that, Elena Gilbert. I'm sure Jon Snow would appreciate the gesture."

"Look, I don't care what you think of me and my attempts to be a good friend; I just need you to let me travel with you and your boys as one of your boys."

Yoren looked at her incredulously. "You don't mean to say you think you can disguise yourself as a boy, do you?" he asked.

"Why not? I can cut my hair."

"Your hair's the least of your problems. Boys don't have bodies that look like that."

"Fine, I'll bind my breasts and dress in loose clothing and put dirt on my face."

Yoren harrumphed. "If I weren't Benjen's friend, I would definitely have said no."

"But you are Benjen's friend," said Elena.

"If you get caught, you're on your own."
Jon examined the ground. The recent rain had washed away their footprints, and he could only hope that they had made this trail of snapped off twigs and broken leaves, rather than a deer or something else. He glanced up at the sun. They should be heading in the right direction. He remembered they had veered right off the Kingsroad. Of course, it also didn't mean they had kept a straight path after that.

"Are we lost?" asked Sam.

"No," said Jon. They were not lost, merely momentarily disorientated for the past three days. That was what Damon would say. They had been heading southeast, yet they had not come across the Kingsroad.

They had sustained themselves on whatever Ghost and Jon could catch with hastily made snares. Ghost was better at hunting. He wasn't so good at sharing his kills.

Jon sighed as he dropped the handful of wet leaves he was examining. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Robb would be long gone from the Twins by now, he suspected. There was no point in planting an army there, not if he wanted to rescue their father. Well, it didn't matter. He couldn't do anything until he could establish where he and Sam were first. And then he could try and find out where Robb's army was and determine where he would go to next. He and Robb had played with Robb's wooden soldiers all the time as boys until Lady Catelyn had put a stop to it. Robb had always been so much better at the games of war, and Cyvasse as well. Jon could never tell what he was going to do next. Then again, Robb had always made up the rules.

He couldn't make up the rules now.

Suddenly, Ghost stiffened and sniffed the air.

"What is it, Ghost?" asked Jon.

The wolf began to growl softly, as he tended to do when he was suspicious. Moments later, Jon heard it. Someone was pushing their way through the underbrush. A little girl, no older than Sansa, burst through the trees, her hair wild. Her basket was still hanging over her arm, but whatever had been in it had fallen out in her haste to get away from her pursuers.

When she saw them, she screamed and tried to change directions, but the trees and underbrush were too thick. Jon grabbed her arm. "What are you running from?" he asked.

"Let me go!" she screamed as she clawed at him.

Two unkempt men emerged from the forest, their eyes wild and hungry for blood. Salvatore's men? They were... what would Elena say? Screwed. Wait, Salvatore's men had been disciplined. These were bandits. Jon could deal with bandits.

"Ghost, at them!"

The wolf hurtled at the men, aiming for the throats. It took a while for them to realize what it was that was attacking them, and by the time the second man did, the first man was already on the ground gasping in futility for breath while blood bubbled at his neck and ran from his nose and mouth.

The second man turned to run, only to find Jon in his way, sword drawn. "This is not your day, is it?" he asked.
The man seemed unable to speak. He simply howled wordlessly and charged at Sam. Sam screamed in panic in unison with the girl and tried to fumble for his sword, only he seemed to have forgotten that he had belted it to his left rather than his right.

By the time he found his sword, Jon was already there between him and the bandit. Jon stuck out a foot. The bandit went flying onto his face and skidded in the mud before crashing into a tree, stunned. Jon drove the sword home, between the ribs slightly to the left of the spine, where the heart was. The thrashing body stilled.

The girl was still cowering in fear with her back against a tree while Ghost sniffed at her curiously and cocked his head to the side. "Ghost, no, bad," Sam was saying. He turned to the girl. "It's all right. He's perfectly harmless."

Ghost licked blood off his muzzle.

"Ghost, to me," said Jon. He sheathed his sword. The wolf trotted over and stood beside him. The girl simply stared.

"Are you all right?" Jon asked her.

She looked from him to Sam, and then back at him again before nodding. "Thank you," she said in a small voice. She let Sam take her hand to help her to her feet and smiled weakly at the poor Tarly boy. Sam seemed more afraid than she was. Oh, right. Girls. He would have thought Elena would have cured him of it. Then again, Sam had come to see Elena as being someone like his mother.

"Would you be able to tell us where this is?" asked Jon. "We're travellers."

"You're lost," said the girl. Perhaps she wasn't as timid as she had first seemed when running from those rapists.

"Very," said Sam. "He won't admit it, but we're very lost."

"We're trying to find the Kingsroad," said Jon, ignoring Sam. He wasn't contributing anything to the conversation.

"Then you're very lost," said the girl with a little smile. "I can show you the Kingsroad. You ain't far but it can be tricky, this forest. It's like them trees want to keep you here if you don't know your way around."

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**King's Landing**

The mirror shattered. A hundred pale little faces surrounded by orange hair looked back at Sansa reproachfully, as if taunting her. She should have known better than to trust Damon Salvatore, they seemed to be saying.

"I should have known! The Salvatore traitor will pay," Cersei raged. She threw another cup at the wall. That shattered too, splashing the lees at the bottom onto the stone. They ran down the wall like droplets of clotted blood. Sansa said nothing. Yes, Cersei should have known, just as she should have known.

Damon had left. They couldn't find him anywhere in the palace this morning. His bed had been untouched, and he had taken all his money. He had left her here all alone in the hands of the enemy, after promising he would try to get her out!
But he had left with her sister and left her behind.

"Well," said the queen. Her bosom heaved as she breathed deeply. "It's no great loss. He's a traitor. He should have died with the rest of them, but he is nothing, even if he is alive." She motioned to the servants without saying a word. They began cleaning up the pieces of shiny broken glass on the floor, each carrying a piece of Sansa's face, it seemed. She saw an eye there, an ear here. They would tear her to pieces here in King's Landing. There was no one to turn to, no one to trust.

No, hadn't she learned? She could not trust anyone.

Cersei sat down at her desk, littered with papers and missives, half of them declarations of kingship and war by Renly and the other half by Stannis. "You can't trust men, Little Dove," she said. "They're fickle. They use you and when you have outlived your use, they discard you."

"I trust the king, Your Grace," said Sansa.

Cersei laughed. Well, the corners of her mouth turned up, she showed teeth, and she made a noise that sounded like a laugh, but her eyes remained hard and cold like emeralds. "Then you're a foolish little dove," she said. "Joffrey is my son, and I love him more than anything else in this world, but he is just like any of them. He's not like…"

Her voice trailed off. It seemed to Sansa that her mask slipped just a little, but it was back in place again before she could even blink. The girl took up her needle and slowly threaded it. She would make something for Joffrey and be the king's good meek little betrothed. Damon had given her some good advice, at least. Not that she could forgive him for this betrayal. No one left her behind. No one!

"Your Grace, a raven from Lord Tywin has arrived," said one of Cersei's maids. Cersei took another sip of wine from a new cup and held out her hand for the tiny little scroll. Would it have something about Robb? Sansa knew that her brother had left Winterfell with an army to try and save her and their father. At least she could rely on Robb to be on her side.

Cersei's expression changed as her eyes scanned the little scroll. Suddenly, she stood so quickly that her chair fell backwards. She swept her hand across the desk in rage. There was a terrific noise like a thousand windows shattering as pens and ornaments spilled and fell crashing to the floor. A glass paperweight smashed on the tiles, cracking them and sending sharp crystal shards flying. They lay on the ground like frozen tears. Papers snowed. Ink mingled with wine atop the letters, the deep red obliterating words as it slowly crept over them.

"Out!" she screamed. "All of you, out!"

The servants scurried to obey. None of them wanted to be on the receiving end of the queen's wrath. Sansa escaped with them back to her room, where there was a wide open window offering her tantalizing glimpses of unreachable freedom. She stayed there until dark with the ghosts of her past, stroking the straw like hair of the hideous doll her father had given her.

It was only later that she found out what had made Cersei so furious, and when she did, she sank to her knees and thanked the Warrior for granting Robb victory.

Next chapter: Robb reacts to the bad news and makes an important decision.

We've made a video trailer for this story! Check it out here if you have time. :) (It may contain hints/spoilers for what's going to happen.)
Robb and Katherine have a heart to heart moment. Catelyn confronts Jaime, who decides to tell the truth for once. Jaime plans his escape.

The Riverlands

The news arrived by raven that morning. The golden light made everything seem unreal; the trampled grass was a brighter green, more vibrant, and more like a scene in a painting or a tapestry than part of the real world. Fingers of mist crept between the tents and pooled in the shade beneath trees while light sparkled on leaves as the frost was just beginning to melt. The bird's black wings blighted the brightness of the morning and cast longer, darker shadows than they should in the slanting pale sunlight.

The message was brought to Robb by Elijah while the former was breaking his fast with bread, cheese, and water. It was bland food, but it was food, and Robb had no desire to eat those charred little fish his uncle Blackfish was so fond of. They tasted like cinders and had a similar texture to crumbling leather.

His spirits were higher than they had been since he had set out from Winterfell. With one victory behind him –Katherine had been right; two thousand was a lot less than twenty thousand, after all– he was preparing to push south. His father would understand when they got him out of King's Landing. What happened afterwards, well, that was anyone's guess. He had not thought about it when he had set out with twenty thousand angry northmen behind him.

"Where to next, my lord?" asked Katherine as she refilled his cup.

"Now that would be telling, wouldn't it, Lady Katherine?" said Robb. "I would not share military secrets with my lady mother. There is no reason why I should share them with my bard. Especially since you are probably going to sing them for all the world to hear."

"Do you really think that little of me, my lord?" she asked with a little pout, much more delicate than the one Sansa had mastered in order to manipulate their father into doing anything. Thinking of Sansa and his father made him a little more sombre.

"It's just a precaution," said Robb. "I cannot risk anything right now. King's Landing is closer than ever, but there is still a long way to go, and no end in sight. I don't even know what will happen once I reach its walls. They have never been breached before."

"There's always a first time, my lord," said Katherine. "Nobody thought Jaime Lannister could be defeated either."

Elijah ducked inside the tent. As usual, his face was passive and unreadable. "My lord, we have news from King's Landing," he said. "Lord Bran sent word to Lord Hoster Tully."

"What is it?" asked Robb. He cut himself another slice of cheese, having abandoned any attempt to eat the crust of the bread. He'd need teeth as hard as Grey Wind's to do that. He tried offering it to
Grey Wind. The wolf cocked his head at him as if saying, "Are you serious? I am no dog" in a tone that Damon was likely to use. Then he stalked off in the hopes of finding a more palatable breakfast. Robb placed the crust back on his plate. Katherine could take it back to the cooks for bread pudding later.

Elijah glanced at Katherine. The bard took the hint and curtseyed to Robb before leaving the two men alone in the tent.

"I did not know," said Elijah. Robb snatched the raven scroll from his squire and scanned the words. He scanned them again. And again. Was this a bad dream? His father couldn't be dead. Why would they kill him? His blood roared in his ears. He heard, but did not hear, what Elijah was saying. He did not see the men staring at him as he charged out gripping his sword so hard that the patterns of the hilt were being pressed into the flesh of his palm and creating mirroring marks. He was more than ready to cut down a few Lannisters. There was a Lannister in the camp. But wait. No. He needed Jaime Lannister alive, for he was the only thing Tywin Lannister cared about in this world. Death was too kind for him. Alive, he was a living monument to every mistake the Lannisters had ever made.

Some of the men almost made to stop him, but then they thought better of it and got out of his way. They were smart. If they hadn't, he would have cut them down where they stood.

The gods were false. Or else they didn't give two shits about those who worshipped them and they played with men the way boys played with toy soldiers. His blade sent bark flying as it struck the tree. The tree remained standing strong and silent. He wanted to see it fall. He wanted it to bleed. Notches appeared on the edge of his sword. He didn't care. He hacked, wishing it were a live Lannister. Each strike sent vibrations up his arms, down to his very bones. His shoulder ached and every breath of cold air he sucked in, smelling of smoke and horse shit and river scum, burned as it went down. The pain could not distract him from the pain in his heart. He had failed. All he had done, it was for nought. His father was dead. His sister was the mouthpiece of the Lannister queen.

Lannisters always paid their debts, didn't they? Well, they would pay for this. Starks always claimed what others owed them.

The fires had burned to cinders in their rings of stone. The remnants of food on the tables had cooled and congealed into an inedible mass. Katherine's harp lay silent. In fact, they seemed to have forgotten her as they sat around Robb, discussing their next plan of action.

"The course of action is clear," declared Rickard Karstark. "We move our forces south and join with King Renly."

"Renly Baratheon is not the king," said Robb quietly, but so clearly that all the hundreds of bannermen, men-at-arms, and squires crowded around him heard him.

"You cannot mean to hold to Joffrey, my lord!" said Karstark. "He put your father to the sword!"

"That still does not mean Renly is king," said Robb. "He is Robert's youngest brother, and just as Bran cannot be lord of Winterfell before me, Renly cannot be king before Stannis."

"Do you mean to declare for Stannis then?" demanded Galbart Glover. Really? Is that what he thought of Robb? Clearly he didn't know very much at all. Then again, considering his sigil was a metal glove, heads probably didn't have much significance in his family.

"M'lords!" said Jon Umber, his voice like rumbling thunder deep in his throat. He lurched to his
feet, a little affected by drink, but clear headed enough. In fact, he was at that stage of drunkenness where everything he said was honest. The other bannermen's murmuring quietened, but did not cease.

"M'lords!" This time they were all silenced. How was it that they did not fall silent when Robb spoke? He was their liege, not Jon Umber.

Umber looked around at them, his giant figure cutting an impressive silhouette in the darkness. With his furs on, he looked every bit the abominable snowman. "Here is what I say to those two kings," he said. And then he hawked and spat onto the ground. See? Drunken honesty. Although Katherine suspected he was just as cultured even when sober. He was a northerner through and through.

"Renly is nothing to me!" said the Greatjon. "Not Stannis either. Why should either of them rule over me and mine from some flowery seat in the south? What do they know of the Wall?" Frozen wasteland. "Or the Wolfswood?" Lots and lots of trees. "Even their gods are wrong!" Oh, Katherine knew exactly who they should all be worshipping, all right, and for once, Umber was not wrong. Their gods were _all_ wrong, weeping weirwoods included.

The men, and even the camp followers, laughed at that. Northerners did not think much of the southern Seven with their fancy names and statues. In fact, they didn't think much of anything fancy at all, and had no taste. Excepting a few, of course. Although, she had to say she rather enjoyed their rustic simplicity. Playing them was almost like taking candy from children at times. Then again, she had toyed with Edmure. That had been mean.

"It was the dragons we bowed to, and now the dragons are dead," the Greatjon continued.

She knew what he was insinuating, but still she could not help but hitch a breath when he finally said it. "Why shouldn't we rule ourselves again?" he asked more quietly, turning back to face Robb. The entire camp fell silent in pregnant anticipation. That question held so many possibilities and so much potential. He drew his sword. The metal rang cleanly through the night as the blade scraped against the sides of the scabbard. He pointed at Robb.

"There sits the only king I mean to bend my knee to," said Umber. "The King in the North!" He knelt, offering his blade to Robb and bowing his head as he waited for an answer.

Robb stood, his back so straight one might have mistaken him for a carved statue of himself. Gone was the uncertainty that had been hovering over him all evening. He had thought no one, save Elijah, had noticed, but Katherine had seen. But now a different Robb stood before her. _King Robb._

Lord Manderly stood. "I will keep my peace with that," he said. "They can have their castles, and their iron chair too." He unsheathed his sword and offered it to Robb as he knelt. "The King in the North!" Well, Katherine liked the iron chair, but Robb could take that later once they finished dealing with other more pressing problems first. Like Tywin Lannister.

And then it came to Theon Greyjoy. "Am I your brother?" he asked. "Now and always?" Now and always? Wasn't that a little too original Mikaelson? She looked to Elijah just in time to see his lip twitch ever so slightly.

"Now and always," said Robb. His devotion to the Greyjoy was admirable, but Katherine always had a niggling feeling about Theon. It was the way he was constantly seeking approval and attention, and he was always just a little too cheerful to be believable. She could trust Theon Greyjoy as much as she could trust Niklaus Mikaelson. Although, she didn't really trust anyone.
But why did she care? If Robb trusted him, that was his problem, not hers. She tried to convince herself of that, but she couldn't shake the feeling. She wanted Robb to succeed. Moreover, she wanted to help him succeed. She didn't want him to be just the King in the North. She wanted him to rule all the lands from the Wall to Dorne. And perhaps beyond. She could make him Alexander and Julius Caesar and Augustus and Charlemagne. No Greyjoy and no Glover was going to stop that.

But why did she want that?

Theon knelt and did homage to the boy he had once sparred with in the courtyard of Winterfell.

 Afterwards, all the bannermen, all the men-at-arms, and even the squires, joined in the chant. "The King in the North! The King in the North!" Their swords gleamed in the dying firelight and starlight, but their eyes were brighter. Their chants brought out the men from their tents to see what was going on. Even the camp followers chanted along with the men although they were mostly in it for the party rather than the historical significance of the event.

Katherine didn't join them. She never followed the crowd and she would never ever join in a mob's chant. But a song was bubbling in her mind already. All right, so she was plagiarizing Les Misérables just as she had plagiarized the Marseillaise –the French were very good at revolutionary songs, even if they weren't particularly good at successful revolutions– but it was fitting. She would not chant the King in the North with the rest of them, but she would give them a song to sing for Robb. After all, she was Robb's bard, wasn't she? She had to earn her keep.

She wandered back to her tent, which Robb had ordered to be erected near the heart of the camp, close to where his was. Not many bards got their own tent, but the men didn't begrudge her this small luxury. They liked her music too much. She smirked a little. It wasn't fair on all the other bards. The only reason she was this good at 'composing' was because she stood on the shoulders of many giants. Then again, why play fair when it didn't guarantee victory? Elijah probably knew but he was a good person and therefore did not pop her bubble.

In the relative silence of her tent, as she listened to the cheering and speeches outside –Robb was particularly good at giving rousing impromptu speeches, which made him a great deal better than modern politicians who had speech writers– she tweaked the lyrics and had almost gotten it perfect when Elijah came in to summon her.

"The king has requested your presence, Mistress Pierce," he said, emphasising the word 'king'.

"Did you expect it?" she asked him. They whispered in Bulgarian and did not look at each other as they walked through the camp. There was a huge advantage in knowing several languages. It was like their own secret code.

"I had an inkling," said Elijah. "Our young wolf is ambitious, and not wrongly so. He is capable."

"You like him more than your new father then?"

Elijah smiled and said nothing. He had never had much luck in fathers, just as Katherine hadn't had much luck with hers.

Robb was looking at his map again when she arrived. He had removed his furs, and no one had lit the candles yet. The only light inside his tent came from the little brazier that burned at the centre. The flickering firelight cast deeper shadows onto the planes of his face, making his features even sharper than before. "Your Grace," she said as she dipped a curtsey.
"You have adapted to my new title very quickly, Lady Katherine," he said as he looked up.

"I am no lady, Your Grace," she said.

"If I say you are one, then you are," said Robb. "I notice you left as they were proclaiming me king. Do you not agree with them?"

"It is not in my place to say," said Katherine.

"I give you leave to speak freely."

She looked up at his face. He was entirely sincere; perhaps too sincere. A good king had to have a level of duplicity in him. Robb would need to perfect that in the coming days, and quickly.

"There is nothing that would please me more than to see you crowned, Your Grace, but I have to wonder if it is not too early," she said.

"Explain," he said.

"To be king is to have a target painted on your back, Your Grace," she said. "Before, the Baratheon brothers thought you only sought to avenge your father. Now, Renly and Stannis Baratheon will see you as a threat to their respective sovereignty." She traced her fingers along the edge of the map, along the borders of Storm's End where Renly had fled to after King Robert's death and declared himself king. "Renly has fielded one hundred thousand men. I imagine Tywin Lannister would be able to field three times that number should he mobilize all his resources. Apart from Stannis, who has legitimacy on his side, we are the weakest."

"I am only the King in the North," said Robb. "They can have their Iron Throne. I don't want it."

"When the Baratheons took over, did they envision that they would be the kings of Southern Westeros, or all of Westeros, Your Grace? No king would look kindly upon anyone carving up his kingdom."

"I suppose not," said Robb. "I wouldn't." He paused. "What would you have suggested?"

"I would have suggested you ally yourself with Renly, and let him and Tywin fight. When they are bruised and battered and bleeding, then you would have swept in and taken everything."

Robb was silent for a moment. He stared at her, his eyes nothing but pools of shadow in the darkness. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet. "I had always known you were more than just a bard. I have hundreds of bannermen, and dozens of advisors, yet none of them had thought to tell me the implications before they named me king."

"Either they did not think of it, or they thought to make you king to further their ambition of becoming great lords who helped to found a kingdom, Your Grace," she said.

"And you? What is your purpose of telling me all this?"

"I want you to win."

Robb smiled. "If you had not been a woman, I would have put you on my war council," he said.

"That would have been a terrible idea," said Katherine. "Your bannermen would have been scandalized. They would say I have bewitched you."

He shook his head and turned to face the banner with a grey direwolf which was the only
"Who's to say you haven't?" he said softly, thinking she couldn't hear. She pretended she hadn't heard, but smiled inwardly. He had already held out for longer than she had expected. It had taken Stefan all of a week to succumb, and Damon had fallen within the first twelve hours. Elijah had been an exception, because she had developed feelings for him first before he had reciprocated, but she had been young and inexperienced and human when she had first met him, while he had been cynical and worldly. Robb Stark was only seventeen.

"If there is nothing else, Your Grace, I should leave you to rest," she said. "I have to write a song for your coronation."

"I look forward to hearing it," said Robb, having recovered from his little talking-to-himself moment. She curtseyed again and turned to leave.

"Lady Katherine,' he suddenly called. She paused in her steps. "From now on, I want you to always be as frank with me as you were tonight. I need the truth."

Would they just stop that racket? Some people were trying to sleep here. Jaime shifted to try and make himself more comfortable. The ropes bit into his wrists. They had bound him very tightly to the stake, as if afraid he would escape. They were right to be afraid.

The northmen's tuneless voices continued to assault his ears, singing about cleansing the impure blood. He would have to thank that lady bard for this sleepless night, and all the other ones that came before it ever since he had been captured. Couldn't she have at least come up with a song that the northmen were actually capable of singing in tune? He supposed that was impossible.

He tried to close his eyes to get whatever rest he could. He would need his strength if he were to ever get out of here. His father would not give a single copper for his ransom. That would be weakness, and Tywin Lannister had no weaknesses. If he wanted freedom, he would have to get it himself.

The crack of a twig underfoot made him open his eyes again. Catelyn Stark stood above him, an angry she-wolf in grey and russet. There wasn't much trout left in her.

"Lady Stark," he said. "You look lovelier than ever. Widowhood becomes you. It must be lonely for you, though, sleeping in an empty bed. I suppose I could be of service, even though I'm not at my best."

He wasn't expecting it when she swung at him and slammed the rock into the side of his head. Light flashed before his eyes and he tasted blood where his teeth had cut into the inside of his cheek. She had some strength in her arm, that woman. Maybe it was something in the northern water.

"I will kill you and send your head in a box to your sister," she hissed.

He laughed. She could try, but she wouldn't. She knew he was the only thing that could help her get her daughters back. They were still in King's Landing, yes? "Then you should hit me again," he said as he cocked his head to the side. "Right here, above the ear. Hit me, and then hit me again."

She didn't. Ah, mothers. He knew all about *those*.

"You want the world to believe that you do not fear death," she said.

"I don't," he said. "Only two things are certain in life; death and taxes, and if you know how, you can evade the latter. Why be afraid of something that's inevitable?"
"Oh, but there is a place in the deepest of the seven hells reserved for you, ser, if the gods are just," said Catelyn. Was she really that naïve? Jaime had never put his trust in the gods' justice. Sometimes he didn't even think they existed, and even if they did, the gods were cruel little omnipresent omnipotent bastards who enjoyed toying with the lives of men and then laughing at their cries of despair. The only entity he would ever trust was himself.

"And what gods are those? The trees your husband prayed to? Where were the trees when they cut off his head? If the gods are good and just, then why is there so much injustice in the world?"

"Because of men like you," said Catelyn.

"There are no men like me," he said. "There is only me. And if I can defy the will of the gods, what does that make me?" She looked as if she were about to strike him again, but she refrained.

"My son," she said. "What happened to him?"

"Didn't they just proclaim him…what was it? The King in the North?" said Jaime.

"Bran. How did he come to fall?"

"I believe I pushed him out of the window." She was so shocked by his admission that her eyes lost their hardness for a moment and she simply stared at him.

"Why?" she whispered.

"I had hoped the fall would kill him," said Jaime. Not one of his proudest moments, but he would do anything for survival, and anything for Cersei. It seemed to him that the two were one and the same. He had given up a future as the lord of Casterly Rock for her. He had given up everything for her. Killing a boy seemed like a small thing compared to all of that. Cersei was his life. It had become rather hard to separate the two.

Catelyn Stark staggered away, as if drunk on what he had just told her. She was in shock. Her ire would come back, no doubt, but he had hoped that mentioning one child would remind her of the other two children who were currently lost to her. She was a mother through and through, and unlike her son, who thought of thrones and freedom for his people, she only thought of her family and her children. In a way, she was similar to Cersei, who was so protective of her children that she refused to let anyone else get too close. Certainly not him, and at first he had asked her why an uncle would not be allowed to show affection to his nephew and niece, and then he had gradually stopped asking. It was just the way Cersei was. She was always too unreasonably suspicious. If she could learn to trust, once in a while, like Rebekah…

Unbidden, the image of Rebekah as he had last seen her came to him. News of his capture would have spread throughout the Lannister ranks by now. He wondered how she would be reacting. Probably not well. She was rather predictable in that sense, but then what came next was anyone's guess. She believed she was crafty, but she was entirely too transparent. He knew people like her, and she was capable of doing some incredibly stupid things that clever people like himself would never think of.

Actually, he was hoping that she would do something very, very stupid.

Next chapter: Sansa takes measures to look out for herself in King's Landing.
Chapter Summary

Catelyn confronts Katherine about her motives for getting close to Robb. Robb takes matters into his own hands. Sansa takes measures to ensure her safety.

Somewhere on the River Road

Jaime Lannister had pushed Bran out of the window. Why had he done it? Bran must have seen something. Jaime…and Cersei. She remembered the long blonde hair she had found in the tower. It must have been them! The news was hard to swallow. Her poor, poor son. He did not deserve this. None of them did!

Men parted as Catelyn passed them and they stopped what they were doing to bow to her. Usually, she would acknowledge them, but this morning, her head was still reeling with the revelation. She had caught the wrong Lannister, and Ned–

Ned would probably still have tried to expose Joffrey for what he was, and Sansa and Arya would still be lost. At least she had something else to bargain with now, if only he was hers to use.

Robb was inside his tent breaking his fast. It was one of the few moments when he was alone, and possibly one of the times during the day when it was possible for his mother to ask him for something like this. But he wasn't alone.

Ever since she had first appeared in the camp, Catelyn had seen how Robb had looked at Katherine, with a sort of awe that characterized a smitten man. She was extremely beautiful and clever; it was little wonder that her son was attracted. But Robb was promised to another, and Catelyn did not like how close they had been getting. Katherine was reeling Robb in like a fish on a line.

The girl curtseyed when she saw her. "I would like to speak with my son the king," Catelyn said, keeping her eyes focused on Robb.

"What is it, Mother?" he asked.

"Alone," said Catelyn.

Katherine curtseyed to Robb. She did some very pretty curtseys that were even better than Sansa's. "I take my leave, Your Grace," she said.

Robb nodded. Catelyn sat down on one of the wood and canvas folding stools placed around the tent. "Mother, are you well?" asked Robb. "You look ill. Should I send for the maester?"

"There is no need," said Catelyn. She glanced at the entrance of the tent. "Robb, I wish you could follow your heart, but you must remember you are promised to another."

"How can I forget?" said Robb. "Katherine is simply my bard, and I find she does efficient work."

"Do you like her?"
"What does it matter? I am to marry the Frey girl whose name I don't even know," said Robb. "But you did not come to simply talk to me about Katherine, did you?"

"What do you intend to do with the Kingslayer?"

"He is leverage over Tywin Lannister," said Robb "and a reminder of our victory against the Lannisters. The fact that he is in chains should be a blow to their pride."

"Do you forget that your sisters languish in King's Landing under his sister? If we trade--"

"No," said Robb. "The Lannisters will not trade Arya and Sansa for Jaime. I would not do it in their place. Cersei might, but she is not the one who has a say. And even if I wanted it, which I do not, there is no guarantee that Tywin would honour the agreement."

"You would leave your sisters as Cersei Lannister's captives?" said Catelyn.

"For now, I cannot get them out," said Robb. "But I promise you, we will get them back. Do not worry, Mother. The Lannisters would be fools to harm them. I still have the Kingslayer."

When? And what would they get back? She could not bear the thought of her daughters suffering and in fear in King's Landing, having watched their father die and now knowing that their brother was not going to trade Jaime Lannister for them, all in the name of leverage over a man who probably wouldn't care. It almost seemed as if Robb was not concerned at all, or he had even forgotten that he was their older brother! He was too bewitched by his bard. She rose to leave. Robb called out to her, but she refused to hear any more. Was that what a crown did to men? Did it make them cold and selfish or bitter and drunken? In her haste to leave, she did not watch she was going and almost crashed into Katherine who was carrying a tray with decanters of water and wine. Somehow the girl managed to step out of the way and evade the imminent collision, all the while not spilling a single drop of liquid.

"Do you never look when you walk?" she demanded of Katherine. The very sight of her made her ire rise. She was distracting Robb too much. Catelyn fought to control her temper, but the revelation of the cause of Bran's fall, the sleepless night that had followed, and the thought of the terrors that faced her daughters had frayed her mind and her self-restraint.

"Forgive me, my lady," said Katherine.

Catelyn waved to one of her guards and told him to take the tray to Robb's tent. "I would walk with Mistress Pierce alone," she said.

Any other girl would have been frightened, but Katherine's expression remained unreadable and impassive. She had a good carriage, a narrow waist, and good-sized hips for birthing children. Her dark eyes were luminous and framed by thick dark eyelashes. Her skin was perfect, without any scarring from the pox like so many other girls had. Most of Walder Frey's daughters had had the pox and one could tell. No wonder Robb had fallen for the bard. He was only a man. He couldn't see her true nature behind her beauty.

"What do you want, Mistress Pierce?" she asked.

"What do I want, my lady? What do you mean?"

"I mean, what do you want here?"

"I only want to serve His Grace."
"But you will never have him," said Catelyn. "He is promised to another, and even if he weren't, you would never become his queen. Remember who you are. Remember what you are."

Their gazes met. Katherine did not look away. "I am whatever His Grace needs me to be, my lady," she said in a low steady voice that suddenly bore a colder, harder edge. For a moment, Catelyn felt as if she were staring at something beyond her comprehension. Katherine didn't seem like any of the other young women she had encountered. Her face might be young, but at that moment, her eyes told of years, perhaps even centuries of experience. She wasn't simply feigning courage. She was not afraid because she knew, in her heart, that she had already won the first battle and she had a plan for the rest of the war.

"If there is nothing else, my lady," said Katherine, "my presence is required." She curtseyed again and left Catelyn watching her retreating back.

"I don't like her," said Catelyn. Robb turned around from contemplating the wolf banner that hung on the wall of his tent. He had never been too close with his mother. She had taken over the girls' education while his father had nominally taken over his. In reality, both his parents had had little to do with him until he was a grown man, and he just didn't know them all that well.

Not that it was any challenge to attempt to read his mother. She was a Tully married to a Stark. Neither house was known for their strengths in subtlety.

"Who, Mother?" asked Robb, although he half knew the answer already. He had had to overhear it from the rumour vine, but the thing about an army was that the men gossiped, and many men had witnessed Cateyn having words with Katherine. Robb had overheard a page whispering to Elijah with glee about the confrontation. Elijah had warned the page to mind his own business and to not let his lips flap about lest he lose them.

"You know who I mean, Robb," said Catelyn. "Katherine Pierce. She is dangerous. I have known women like her all my life. She is leading you astray for her own gains, Robb."

"Am I that easily led astray, Mother?" asked Robb. He felt his ire rise and made himself calm down. His mother only wanted what was best for him, and she was overly emotional right now with his father dead, his sisters captive, and Jaime Lannister taunting her with the fact that he had pushed Bran. "You underestimate me."

"They say she is your…your…"

"You should not listen to all those rumours. They don't know half of it. Katherine Pierce is nothing more than my bard, I promise you. The men like her songs and I enjoy her wit."

"You should send her away, or at least keep her at a distance. She comes and goes as she pleases, and she sees more of you than I do."

She wasn't going to give up, was she? "Curious, Mother," said Robb. "Clearly I missed your coronation."

"Robb, please," said Catelyn.

"I am the king, and I say Katherine remains exactly where she is as she is."

"Have you forgotten you are as good as married?" asked Catelyn. "Walder Frey would not take kindly to it if you were to go back on your word."
"Then it is a good thing I am not going to go back on my word, isn't it?" He turned back to the standard, although he had forgotten what he was thinking about already. "That will be all, Mother."

She took a breath as if she wanted to say something more, but she left him alone. He heard her skirts rustling as she walked away. How could his mother have such irrational hatred for a girl as good and sweet as Katherine? Sure, she had a bit of a mean streak and a lot of fire, but that only made her all the more interesting and alluring.

Did he say alluring?

Well, it was only natural. She was a very beautiful woman. In fact, apart from her twin sister Elena, Robb had never seen anyone more beautiful. All men liked looking at beautiful women. Unless that man was Renly Baratheon, in which case Damon Salvatore or Loras Tyrell would be more to his taste.

Suddenly, he felt a need for company. Katherine's company, to be exact. He made sure his mother was gone and then ducked outside his tent. "Your Grace," said Elijah, who was always there when Robb needed him.

"Where is Lady Katherine?" he asked.

"I believe she is in her tent composing a new song," said Elijah. "Shall I fetch her, Your Grace?"

"There is no need. I will go to her myself," said Robb.

"Who is this woman that the king in the north would go and find her himself?" came a most surprisingly unwelcome voice behind him. It was Theon. The Greyjoy came striding towards him and executed an exaggerated bow.

"What are you doing here, Theon?" asked Robb.

"I wanted to see my brother," he said. "So, who is this girl? Let me guess, Lady Katherine?"

Robb said nothing.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let us go and find the mysterious lady bard then," said Theon. There was a wicked gleam in his eye. "What are you going to do after you find her, though, Your Grace?"

"We are going for a walk," said Robb.

"Then I'll come with you. A young decent woman like her needs a chaperone when walking with an unmarried man, and I can think of no better candidate than myself to protect her honour."

"I'm sure you know all about women's honour," said Robb. But he didn't want to have to actually send Theon away. Not that he didn't want him to go away, but he couldn't say it. He didn't want them to think that there was anything going on between him and Katherine. He didn't want to admit that there was something between the two of them, and he didn't understand what it was. Suffice to say that the day was always brighter when he saw her, and the nights became less cold and dark. She made him feel not so alone.

Katherine was in her tent replacing the strings on her harp. She rose to her feet when she saw Robb and Theon and dipped a deep curtsey. "Your Grace, Lord Greyjoy," she said. "To what do I owe the honour? My little humble space is not quite prepared for a royal visit."
Behind Robb, Theon stood taller, puffed up his chest, and practically preened at being called 'Lord Greyjoy'. Robb ignored him.

"I was merely out surveying my troops," lied Robb. "I was wondering if you would be amenable to taking a turn about the camp with me?"

"The pleasure would be all mine, Your Grace," said Katherine. Robb almost offered her his arm, as he would do any noblewoman, but he resisted the urge. She was not a noblewoman, not really, and he did not want to fuel the rumour mill.

"You, keep ten paces back," Robb said to Theon in a low voice. "In fact, make that twenty. Go and walk with Elijah."

Theon gave him a doleful look but fell back as commanded. They moved away from the main camp. It was safe enough to be some distance away from the army as long as they were within sight of the sentries. It would give Robb a chance to speak with Katherine.

"My mother wanted me to send you away," he said to her.

"If Your Grace wishes me to leave, then I will go, even though I am loath to," said Katherine.

"You like it here? In this dirty camp full of loud uncultured northmen?"

"You are not an uncultured northman, Your Grace."

Robb chuckled. She was toying with him. "That was not what I meant," he said. "But you must have known better circumstances than these."

"And I have known much worse," said Katherine. "I wouldn't swap this for anything else if I could help it, Your Grace. I like being in the company of friends. Don't you?"

He did, but a king had no friends, for he had no equals. Although, with Katherine, he could forget that for a little while. He appreciated her for that, and a great deal more. "I am to be married to Walder Frey's daughter when the war is over," he said.

"I have heard, Your Grace," said Katherine. "Do you know your bride's name?"

"Bridge, I suppose," said Robb.

"She is a beautiful bridge," said Katherine. "Sturdy, with ample curves. Big, if you like that sort of thing. But she isn't the most beautiful bridge I've ever seen. At least she doesn't take much after her lord. No warts or hairs growing out of places where there shouldn't be hairs, but there is lichen and moss—"

"Will you just stop?" laughed Robb.

"Why? Does Your Grace wish me to stop?"

No, he didn't, and he didn't know why he didn't want her to stop her relentless teasing. He decided to stop overthinking the situation and simply enjoy the moment of being a man in the company of a woman he admired and adored. There would be time enough later to be King Robb again.

King's Landing

The head of the crossbow bolt, with its tip pointed directly at her, was shiny grey and shaped like a
bevelled gem. She never took her eyes off it. She had heard the men say before that a crossbow could pierce armour, and she had none save for the hope that Cersei would need her alive to somehow control Robb. The stone floor was cold beneath her knees and the air felt colder. How had she ever thought Joffrey handsome?

"You have been summoned here to answer for the crimes of your brother," said Joffrey. He narrowed his eyes and adjusted his aim. His finger hovered just above the trigger. One wrong move, one slip, and she would be dead. "By some treachery, he slaughtered Uncle Jaime's brave soldiers and took my uncle captive, and he now has the gall to declare himself the King in the North!"

"I am not to blame for my traitor brother's crimes, Your Grace," she sobbed, hating the very sound of her pathetic voice echoing in the empty halls. The courtiers and ladies, who had once been so polite and kind to her, now remained silent. Most were frightened for her, but they were more frightened for their own sake. There would be no succour from them. If her own trusted bannerman had abandoned her, then why should they help?

"Ser Preston," said Joffrey. "I'd like to send Robb Stark a greeting. Mother says I'm not to kill her because we need her, but I want the traitor to remember that I am his king and he will pay for his crimes. Hit her."

What? He couldn't! Oh, but he could, said a taunting little voice in her head. He was the king, and who was she? A traitor's daughter, and now a traitor's sister; a girl no one wanted to help. She could not run. There was no place to run to.

Preston Greenfield looked at her with no pity and no feeling. She was just an object the king had ordered him strike, and he would strike like a fighting dog well trained by its master. He hauled her to her feet and it was all she could do to remain standing; her knees felt so weak.

She could not close her eyes as the gauntlet flew towards her face. She cried out as pain exploded. Lights burst in her vision. She tasted blood as her lip was split. The metal cut into her cheek. Her hand flew to her poor bruised face. The courtiers gasped around her, but still, no one said anything.

He raised his hand to hit her face again, but Joffrey stopped him. For a moment, she wondered if it was over. Maybe even Joffrey was capable of mercy. Her hope was snuffed out in an instant.

"Not her face. I like her pretty," Joffrey said.

Greenfield's fist struck her stomach, driving all breath from her and making her double over as pain lanced through her. He made to hit her again, but the timely arrival of the Hound proved to be her unlikely saviour. He did not so much as glance at her, but addressed Joffrey directly.

"Your Grace," he said as he motioned to the two Gold Cloaks behind him. Between them, they held a frightened looking man with lanky hair holding a lute. "We found this man singing a pretty little song in Flea Bottom about your father, the late King Robert."

"Oh, I love songs," said Joffrey. He made to sink down into the comfort of the Iron Throne but then remembered it wasn't very comfortable and sat instead with his arm propped up by the elbow, rather than leaning backwards into the swords. Sansa imagined all those swords impaling him and took in a few deep breaths to help with the pain. "Go on, play it for me."

The bard looked at the Gold Cloaks holding him and then at the impassive face of the Hound. "If it...if it please you...Your-Your Grace," he stammered. A stool was brought for him so he could hold his lute on his lap. The first few notes quavered, and his voice was weak and out of tune, but
the words delivered what they were supposed to say regarding King Robert's death by boar and unmanning by Lannisters. It would have been funny if Sansa hadn't known what this would cost the bard. As it was, she didn't have the urge to laugh at all so she didn't need to suppress anything.

When the bard finished, he looked down at the floor and kept his fists clenched so they would not shake so much. No one dared to say anything, or even move. Courtiers were so quick to forget. They had forgotten their pity for Sansa already, for instance, just as they had forgotten her father, and the only reason they remembered Robb was because Robb kept besting Joffrey when it came to being king. Rumour had it that he had gotten his own bard who had composed a most rousing barbaric anthem for the northmen to sing. Sansa would have dearly liked to learn that song so that she might sing it to herself as well.

Joffrey's lone lazy claps cut through the silence. As soon as the king clapped, the courtiers started clapping slowly as well, for fear that to not follow his example was to draw his ire. "Bravo," he said.

"I'll never sing it again, Your Grace," he stuttered as he fell to his knees. The lute hit the floor with a loud discordant twang. Strings snapped. He was beyond saving now, but perhaps he could prove to be useful yet. If there was one thing Joffrey loved and respected, it was violence; the more extreme, the better.

"Which part of you do you like better, your hands or your tongue?" asked Joffrey.

"I beg pardon, Your Grace?" asked the stupid bard.

"I believe I was quite clear. If you could only have one, which would it be? Your hands or your tongue?"

"Your Grace," said the bard. He looked about him for escape. There was none. "A man needs hands. Please, Your Grace, I swear —"

"Tongue it is then," said Joffrey with glee. "Ser Ilyn Payne, I do not believe there is a man more acquainted with tongues than you."

Ser Ilyn Payne, that hateful silent man with his glaring eyes and puckered mouth like a dried apricot, picked out his preferred pincers and knife from a velvet lined tray of implements offered to him as if they were rare delicacies to be tasted. Not that he could taste anything without a tongue. The bard started begging, and then he began screaming wordlessly as Payne gripped his tongue with the pincers.

Blood spurted from his mouth. There was so much, but not as much as when her father—

No, she could not think about that, not that she could help herself. She saw him every night when she closed her eyes. Her poor dear father who had tried so hard to make them all happy, and the last thing she had said to him was that she hated him and only wanted to marry Joffrey! What a little fool she had been indeed. If only she could see him again, she would tell him how sorry she was that she had made him stay in King's Landing. It was her fault.

But she would avenge him. One day. What had Damon's little plan been again before he had lost his nerve and fled with Arya? Get close to Joffrey and Cersei. She knew she couldn't get close to Cersei, who hated her. But Joffrey…Joffrey didn't really hate her. He simply hated everyone.

"Wait," she called as Ser Ilyn Payne made to throw away the bard's severed tongue. It was hideous, and she would probably never eat ox or pork tongue again. But that didn't mean no one else would.
"Your Grace, I think he should be fed his tongue to make him eat his words."

Joffrey's brow furrowed, and then his eyes lit up with delight and perhaps...a newfound respect for her? She hoped so. Part of her hated herself for doing this to the poor bard, but he was dead man anyway, and she needed her vengeance.

"You heard my lady, Ser Ilyn," said Joffrey. "Cut up his tongue and feed it to him. Make him *eat his words.*" He really liked that idea, it seemed. That was good.

No one dared to say anything as the bard gagged on slivers of his tongue, seared slightly in the flames of the brazier before being shoved down his throat. The smell of burned flesh permeated the throne room. They all remained silent except for the choking of the former bard, but they all moved aside to let Sansa through. She passed by them without looking at them, holding her head high just as her mother had taught her.

She would survive this. She would avenge her father, and anyone who had ignored her plight, anyone who had struck her or insulted her, anyone who had ever hurt her or hers; she would make them pay.

**Next chapter:** Daenerys, having lost her husband and just about everything else, marches through the desert to follow the red comet and finds that hope comes in all forms. Meanwhile, Rebekah takes command of an elite force and plans a daring rescue.
Deliver Us From Evil

Chapter Summary

Joffrey shows Sansa his new toys. Rebekah gets her first command. Daenerys finds hope in the most unlikely of places.

King's Landing

Joffrey summoned her that afternoon. Sansa hoped there would be no more crossbows involved. No one had known, but she had thrown up after she had returned to her room that morning. She would never get the smell of the bard's burning tongue out of her hair, and to think that she had been the one who had suggested it! But she had to be whatever Joffrey wanted her to be if she were to survive and help Robb and accomplish whatever she wanted to accomplish. Clearly she was the only person she could rely on. Everyone thought she was a weak pathetic silly little girl, and she would give them what they wanted to see.

She dressed up her face the best she could, covering the bruises with pale powder that made her look like a ghost. She felt like a ghost of the old Sansa. The old Sansa was dead. From its perch beside the mirror, the hideous doll smiled at her; a toy for the girl her father had seen in his eyes.

The Hound was waiting for her outside. He never said anything to her, and she, in turn, pretended he was nothing more than Joffrey's dog. Which was exactly what he was, by the way. Joffrey made her take his arm, as if he were still the gentle handsome prince that a silly little girl had once fallen in love with. She wondered how she had never seen the cruelness in his smile and the coldness in his pale eyes.

"I want to show you something, my lady," said Joffrey. He led her around the outside of the Red Keep, to the walls above the gates and onto the narrow bridge that led to the battlements, where…

Oh, gods, no! She averted her gaze, unable to look at her father's dead face, his eyes clouded over in death and his hair matted with blood. She couldn't. She couldn't!

"Look up at them," said Joffrey with a smile as if he were pointing out his favourite toys and hoping she liked them too. "See, there's your septa." He pointed at something that bore very little resemblance to the real Septa Mordane she remembered. Her eyes had already been plucked out by birds. She tried to tell herself that these weren't really them, and that her father's soul had gone somewhere else; a better place beyond the spheres of this world that the septas and septons always talked about. A place where he would find peace and watch over them.

She looked at them as if they were the heads of dolls and tried not to mind the smell. She imagined Joffrey's head up there, Cersei's head, the Hound's head, Ilyn Payne's, Preston Greenfield's; they were all up there staring into nothing while their mouths were forever open in silent screams. One day, she would put them up there; that she solemnly swore. "It's impressive, Your Grace," she said.

"One day, I'll make you a gift of your traitor brother and mother's heads, and that traitor Damon's too. You liked him, didn't you?" asked Joffrey.

"He's a traitor. I have no love for traitors, Your Grace." she said. Her voice was dead. Suddenly,
she realized just how narrow the bridge was, and how it would only take a little nudge to make Joffrey lose his balance. It was a very long way to fall. Bones would smash, organs would explode, and there would be no more little lion. There wouldn't even be a whole head left for a spike on the wall. She took a step forward, but a strong hand grabbed her arm.

"Here, little bird," said the Hound as he dabbed at her swollen lip with his handkerchief – the *Hound* kept a handkerchief? Who knew? – in a surprisingly gentle manner. "You're bleeding again."

"Thank you, ser," she said, too shocked to say anything else. He must have known what she was going to do and he had stopped her. But why hide it? Why not tell Joffrey and have her killed?

"Save yourself some pain, girl. Give him what he wants," he whispered.

Oh, she intended to. Up to a certain point. A wolf was patient when lying in ambush for prey bigger than she was.

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**The Green Fork, The Riverlands**

Rebekah surveyed her twenty men by the flickering torchlight. It was still a little surreal to think that Lord Tywin had given her the command over them. They were hardened warriors, with impassive faces and an impeccable track record. Then again, *she* was a thousand years old and had seen more wars than these guys had. The problem was that they didn't know that.

"Many of you might be asking, why am I in charge?" she said to them.

"Lord Tywin put you in charge, my lady," said one of them who was called Fredyric Yew. Well, at least that was settled. "We would not question his command."

"Others will wonder. Roose Bolton's men will question why a woman is in charge of a band of mercenaries."

They glanced at each other knowingly; clearly, they had thought of it long ago. They simply hadn't thought of a solution. She sighed. The Lannisters were going to owe her big time.

"The only reason a band of fine men such as yourselves would follow a woman is because I sleep with all of you, and you can't get enough of me." Jaws dropped. "Now, I don't mean to do all of you, but the act has to be real at least some of the time for the northerners to believe it."

They gaped at her. "My lady," said Fredyric. "Surely, you do not mean for us to--"

"That is exactly what I mean. Do I have volunteers or should I just pick one?"

Some of the men laughed nervously, while others smirked at each other and elbowed their companions. Some of them were becoming red-faced.

"You go."

"No, you. I don't want Lord Jaime to kill me if he finds out."

"I don't see what Lord Jaime has got to do with this," said Rebekah.

The men shut up immediately until Fredyric spoke again. Was he their official spokesman or something, and she hadn't been told about it? "My lady, I'm sure you've heard that Lord Jaime can
be quite possessive," he said, less confident this time.

"Well, it's a good thing I don't belong to him, then, isn't it?" she said.

"Well, following orders…is not really a crime," said Fredyric.

"Will Lord Jaime see it that way?" asked someone else. "He is not known for interpreting orders well."

"How's he going to find out? I'm not going to tell him. Are you?" said Rebekah.

They stood silently.

Really, they were going to make her stand up here and wait for them to get over their fear and awe of Jaime Lannister? She zoned in on one, a young man who reminded her a little of Matt with his tousled hair and shy eyes. He had marvellous cheekbones, and he was the reddest of them all. Even if she weren't working, she might have had him anyway just for the hell of it. The men parted to let her through.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Jaymse Moreland," he said as he kept his eyes pointed at the ground. "I am the youngest son of Lord Robin Moreland."

"Have you been with a woman before?"

He nodded, still not looking up at her. She lifted his chin with two fingers so he was forced to look her in her eye. "Not like this you haven't," she said. "Look at me. Are you afraid?"

"Very much, my lady."

"Of Lord Jaime, or of me?"

"Both, I guess."

"Well, I give you permission to not be afraid, at least not of me." He was going to need some teaching, this one, but with some help, he would make for an excellent lover and a very good cover. The other men were still gaping at her, although some of them were looking more eager now. Well, they had better get in line because this was a one off thing, and not all of them were going to get the chance. It wasn't first in, first served, either.

"We leave on the morrow," she said to the men.

"Yes, my lady," said Fredyric. The others echoed him and dispersed.

Jaymse tried to go as well, but she held onto his hand. "Not you," she said.

She led him to her tent and dismissed the guards standing outside. Since when had she needed them anyway? She wouldn't mind a maid though. The tent flap obscured them from sight. Inside there was only a narrow camp cot and a small wooden coffer for all her belongings, but she did have a soft woven rug of dyed wool. She could have had an animal pelt—all she would have needed to do was hunt down something big and impressive— but those were so vulgar.

Jaymse stood in the middle of her tent, unsure of what to do. "Help me remove this," she said as she tugged at the straps of her armour.
"My lady, we're not in the Bolton camp yet," he said.

"No, but you need to look convincing as my lover," she said.

"I don't think I can."

"You can, and you will. You are a soldier, are you not, Jaymse Moreland?"

"I am."

"And you are sworn to obey Lord Tywin's command, are you not?"

"I am."

"For now, my command is Lord Tywin's command," said Rebekah.

"Surely he did not mean for you to...debase yourself like this, my lady," said Jaymse.

"There is no other way to infiltrate the Boltons and get close to Lord Jaime," said Rebekah. "I am a woman. Women have no place in armies except as camp followers, or perhaps leaders of bands of mercenaries who are also their lovers." She sat down on the cot.

"Then why do this at all? Why not let other men do it for you?"

"Because no one ever suspects a woman of being capable of anything. My greatest disadvantage is also my greatest boon, Jaymse."

"I understand that, but...would it not be easier to pretend that you are not in charge while you are really the one giving the orders?"

"Are you saying I should get someone else to do the dirty work?" she asked. Why hadn't she thought of that? "I suppose that is an acceptable second option, although I always believe that if you want something done, you have to do it yourself. Get Fredyric. I need to speak with him."

Jaymse ducked out of the tent and returned moments later with the older man in tow. Fredyric looked uncomfortable as he glanced from her to Jaymse and then back to her again before looking at his feet and shifting from side to side, as if he would like nothing more than to just run. Really? He was Tywin's personal guard? He was far too twitchy for that, it seemed.

"Do you know why you're here?" she asked.

"I presume it concerns something of great importance," said Fredyric.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course it's important. You didn't think I summoned you here for a threesome, did you?"

Jaymse turned bright red. Fredyric cocked his head and his feet stilled. His heart rate, however, seemed to double. "You still haven't told me why I am here, my lady," he said.

"Jaymse suggested that I should pretend that someone else is in charge while I give the orders. You're the oldest, aren't you?"

The man nodded. "I am twenty nine," he said.

"Good. The oldest should be in charge," she said. Actually, she was much older, but Westeros was a sexist place. "Now, I'm not going to sleep with everyone, so if I'm going to be someone's..."
"playmate, I'm going to go with the leader."

Fredyric's eyes widened. But he couldn't say no. Orders were orders, and she had logic on her side. Why would she sleep with the minion when she could have the boss? Jaymse looked immensely relieved. Was he really that scared? It was actually kind of cute.

"There is one thing I meant to talk to you about," said Fredyric. "Are you sure it's wise for you to go? You are...how shall I put it? Very recognizable. You are the only lady knight in all the seven kingdoms, your beauty is legendary--" Rebekah had to stop herself from preening. One, of course it was legendary, and two, he was trying use flattery to get her to do something she probably wouldn't do otherwise. "--and Lord Tywin himself knighted you. The story has spread and become...well, it is a tale well told. Roose Bolton is not known for being unobservant. He will know who you are. There aren't many beautiful golden-haired women who can fight. In fact, I believe there's only one."

"And your point is?" asked Rebekah.

"Well, I am saying perhaps you could...delegate this task to someone who is more suited to it and oversee it from afar," said Fredyric.

She stood to her full height, which wasn't that impressive compared to theirs, but she wasn't a short little girl either. "Lord Tywin gave me this task, and I will be there to see it done," she said. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"I only have House Lannister's best interests at heart, my lady."

"As do I. So we are of an accord, then."

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King's Landing

"We need to find Arya Stark. She and her sister are the keys to the north, and perhaps the keys to your Uncle Jaime's freedom," Cersei was saying. She'd been saying it ever since she'd found out her new favourite Damon Salvatore had been a Stark traitor all along. Joffrey was beginning to get annoyed with her. He ignored her for the time being and examined the wall. Hmm, he could do with a mosaic of himself with his booted foot on a vanquished enemy. A grey dire wolf, perhaps?

He whipped around. "You just want Uncle Jaime back, don't you?" he demanded. If Robb Stark does exchange my uncle for his two sisters, then he's a weak fool. Then again, he's a Stark, so he would. They value their women too much."

"But just in case, perhaps our armies should search for Arya Stark, and you should ask your grandfather for help," pressed his mother.

"A king does not ask," said Joffrey. What did she take him for? A twelve year old boy? He was the king. He was the king! "He commands his subjects, and grandfather is my subject. If it weren't for his incompetence, Uncle Jaime would never have been captured and I would have Robb Stark's head by now." He paused. "You know, I heard a disgusting rumour about Uncle Jaime. And you," he said. Cersei's face stilled. "It had better not be true." It couldn't be! He was a Baratheon. He was Robert Baratheon's son!

"You should not believe everything you hear, my love," said his mother finally. "Those rumours are salacious and false; no doubt the work of those who would seek to undermine you."

That was all very well and good, but if people believed it, they'd want to put another Baratheon on
the throne, wouldn't they? That was unacceptable.

"How many bastards did Father have?" asked Joffrey.

"And why would that matter?" asked Cersei.

"Because I say it does."

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**Essos, The Red Waste**

She could see no end to this red sand and rock. It went on and on and on and on, an infinite mass of land that she needed to cross. How could one cross something that was infinite? With each step she took, nothing changed. No, nothing was infinite; not even the Red Waste. Daenerys felt the sun burning her even though she could not burn. But even dragons needed water, and there was none to be found. She saw the air shimmer and almost thought there was water in the distance, but it was only a mirage. There were too many of those in the desert. They taunted her thirsty and exhausted people, raising their hopes high only to drop them so hard that they only became more battered each time.

They came to the broken remains of a once great city. Its walls had crumbled and red sand had infiltrated every crack and every street. It had been carved out of the red rock eons ago. Its tall towers had long since fallen. One of them lay on its side. White bone poked out of the sand. And another. Some still had scraps of desiccated flesh clinging to them. For others, their skin had dried on their bones, making a cruel mockery of the living face that had once talked and smiled and wept. "We will make shelter here," she said to her khalasar. And what a khalasar it was. They numbered just twenty and they were starved and dehydrated. They ate the last of Silver. She had wanted to bury her horse, her first gift from Drogo, when she had died, but Jorah had convinced her that her people needed the meat more. They had butchered her friend and shared out her remains amongst themselves. Silver's death had saved them then, but for what? So they could die further in the desert in this broken city which was a tomb to so many others?

She leaned against a fallen wall and rested in the shade. Her maids Irri and Doreah settled her dragons, in their wooden cages, beside her. They screeched and squawked when they sensed her presence and she cooed to them in High Valyrian until they calmed down and slept.

She had been following the red comet for days, and what did she have to show for it? Of the three bloodriders she had sent out, only Rakharo had returned, and only part of him, at that. She had heard nothing from the other two, and she could only hope that they were not dead and something else was keeping them. What was she doing? Did she even know what she was doing? Was she leading her people to their deaths and was being too stubborn to admit it? No, she couldn't think like that. She was a Targaryen, the Mother of Dragons. She had a destiny to take back what had been wrested from her family.

Jorah silently offered her his water skin. She took it but only drank one mouthful. The liquid, stale and warm as it was, soothed her parched throat. Her tongue felt thick and cumbersome in her mouth. "How much do we have left?" she asked.

Jorah sighed and looked away. She saw he didn't want to have to tell her the truth, and she knew that the truth was no good.

Suddenly one of her riders began to shout. "Horses!" he cried. "Horses are coming!"

Daenerys climbed to her feet. She staggered a little as the heat and thirst made stars cloud her
vision and all she could hear was blood rushing through her head. She reached out with a hand to steady herself and felt Jorah catch her.

"Khaleesi," he said. His voice was full of concern.

"I am fine," said Daenerys. "Who is it?"

Her vision cleared as the stars disappeared. She could see it now. There was a herd of horses led by one rider. The horses were laden with goods. The shifting hazy air made it difficult to make out how many horses there were and just who the rider was.

As the horses and rider drew near, his features became clearer. His white shirt billowed in the hot wind, and the scarf he wore about his head to protect him from the sun fluttered out behind him.

"It's Niklaus," whispered Daenerys. "Ser Jorah, it's Niklaus Mikaelson!"

Very few of her khalasar knew the common tongue, but they recognized Klaus' name. Some of the riders immediately reached for their weapons. White Death was well known to them.

"Stand down," she said. Klaus was a friend…or was he? She had trusted wrongly once and it had ended in the death of her husband and son. But he had no reason to harm her. He was a brigand chief who terrorized settlements and family groups if there was something he wanted from them. There was nothing he could want from her. Unless he wanted her dragons? How could he have heard about them? Then again, he had found them out here in the Red Waste.

He was as handsome as she remembered him to be, his eyes matching the colour of the faultless and merciless blue sky above them. He dismounted, his boots sending up a little cloud of red dust as he landed. His colour looked far too well for a man who had been riding for as long in desert as he had been doing.

"Klaus," said Daenerys. "What are you doing here?"

"Khaleesi, is that any way to greet an old friend?" he said. He was wearing that infuriating smirk on his face that she was not in the mood for right now.

"Are you? A friend?" she asked.

"I believe you just hurt my feelings," he said.

"Niklaus," said Jorah. "Where is the rest of your band?"

"Well, they wanted to desert me when I commanded them to march with me. What else do you do with disobedient minions? Let's just say they can't disobey me anymore." He shrugged as if he had just told them he'd just painted a new picture and it wasn't very good.

"You killed all your men?" said Daenerys.

"That sounds so vulgar, love," he said.

"How dare you?" she demanded. "I am Daenerys Stormbborn, the Mother of Dragons, and rightful heir to--"

"Well, if the khaleesi finds my company to be unpleasant, I will leave," said Klaus. "With my food and water." He made to turn away.

Food and water! But she could not back down. She was a Targaryen! What was he? A painter? A
A killer.

But he had come to her all the way out here in the Red Waste with food and water and the intention of aiding her. That much she could see now. He had even killed his men because they hadn't wanted to come with him, although that could simply be because he did not like it very much when people did not listen to his commands.

"I would like it if you stayed," she said.

"You are a queen, love," said Klaus. He reached out to tuck a stray strand of hair that had escaped from her braids behind her ear. "Queens do not ask."

"But you are not a man I can command, are you?"

"Well, I do rather hate people telling me what to do."

"Then I do not know how to ask you to stay."

He smiled. "That will do for now, Your Grace." He gave her an exaggerated bow.

The food and water was distributed out. Well, Daenerys had her bloodriders ration it out fairly. Gods forbid that Klaus actually be seen doing anything remotely resembling kindness. He stood by and made sarcastic remarks about how one would choke or the other would die of gluttony. Most of her people did not understand him, and they would hardly care that he was insulting them. He had saved their lives. Daenerys forbade them from eating or drinking too much. Their bodies were not accustomed to it and if they overindulged, they would kill themselves.

"Why are you not eating, Khaleesi?" asked Jorah. In her excitement, she had forgotten her own hunger and thirst. Jorah handed her a wrinkled apple. "I do believe our friend was trying to hide the best things from us."

"I am insulted, Ser Jorah," said Klaus. He stroked his horse's nose. He had tethered all his animals in the shade and was giving them mouthfuls of water out of a golden bowl, no doubt part of the loot that he had reclaimed from his men after he had killed them. Why was it that he could show kindness to animals, but not people?

"Thank you Ser Jorah," she said as she took the fruit. It looked as if it had seen a few too many days, and its skin, once shiny and waxy, was now dried and wrinkly like an old man's face. She bit into it. The tangy sweetness exploded on her tongue and reawakened her hunger. She devoured it, relishing every bite and every drop of juice. Jorah handed her a silk handkerchief, embroidered with the initials N.M. in golden thread, with which to wipe the juice from her mouth. It was only a bite of food—an apple here, a few bits of dried meat there, some mouthfuls of stale water that tasted of sun-warmed leather—but it had given her people, and her, she supposed, more hope than they had felt in a very long time.

Klaus had given her hope. White Death had given her hope? Really?

"How did you know where to find me?" she asked him.

"I have eyes and ears," said Klaus. "I came as soon as I heard of Khal Drogo's...untimely demise. Your husband's successor has sent out raiding parties. Needless to say, the ones who found me would not be returning home with any spoils."
She ought to be disgusted. They had been her people, but the only thing she could feel was satisfaction. They had abandoned her. Why should she care? Unwarranted kindness was a mistake she would never make again.

The sun, which had broiled them without mercy during the day, was beginning to set. Its slanting rays made the red earth even redder, until it seemed stained with the blood of all those who had died here, and all those who would die soon. The sky was ablaze with the fires that she would unleash on those who had wronged her and those who would oppose her. Fire and blood; that was what she would bring.

**Next chapter:** Rebekah sacrifices her vanity for Jaime's sake. Daenerys ponders the enigma that is Klaus. Tyrion celebrates Joffrey's nameday. Elena makes her way north with Yoren and his Night's Watch boys.
She's the Man

Chapter Summary

Rebekah prepares to infiltrate the Starks. Daenerys tries to find Klaus' redeeming qualities. Tyrion wishes Joff a happy nameday and ruins it in doing so. Elena goes north.

A secret camp south of Harrenhal

The hair dye smelled foul. In Rebekah's whole life, which had been a very long life, she had never ever dyed her hair. Why would she have even tried? People wanted hair like hers. Blonde had been the ideal hair colour for millennia, and she wasn't vain, but she knew her hair was particularly pretty.

"Urgh," she said as she rinsed out the excess dye and pushed her tangled wet hair out of her face. It was now the colour of Jaime's boot polish –he'd tried to get her to polish his boots once. She'd been very tempted to shove his face into said polish, but then she'd been very mature and thrown the polishing rag at him instead– and she could hardly recognize that mousy girl looking back at her from the makeshift mirror she'd crafted temporarily out of one of the men's shields.

They had left the camp some days ago, keeping their operation extremely secret. She couldn't even get Caroline to help her mix the dye –otherwise, she would have dyed her hair red. She would have looked hot as a redhead. She sighed. Her hair was an acceptable sacrifice. She was doing this all for Jaime. Not that she cared about him or anything.

"How do I look?" she asked. Jaymse cocked his head to the side. Ever since he had found out that he was not to be her lover after all, he had become a whole lot friendlier.

"Different," he replied. "You're not as…noticeable as before." She gave him a look. "It's a good thing," he quickly amended. "You don't want to be noticeable."

"Do I look pretty enough for someone to want to sleep with me?" she asked.

"When it comes to lust, men hardly ever look above the neck," said Jaymse. That wasn't true. Damon had looked above her neck, and he had most definitely not been in love with her. She'd found out about that the hard way, and he had paid for it the hard way too.

She dried her hair and put it in one long braid down her back. God, she looked so vulgar. Or like Elena. Her clothes, too, left much to be desired, for they had gotten her something that hardly covered the body and looked translucent. Wasn't clothing supposed to make someone look better, cover up inappropriate bits, or keep a person warm? This 'dress', such as it was, did none of the above.

Fredyric gave a low whistle when he saw her, and then stopped mid-whistle. The men simply stared, some with awe and some with open lust at her very much exposed cleavage. "They're called breasts," she informed them. "At least half the population has them, as did the late King Robert, may he rest in peace."
Jaymse snorted. "Since when did you grow a sense of humour?" she asked. He had the sense to not answer.

Fredyric cleared his throat and managed to tear his gaze away from her cleavage. "One last thing, my lady," he said. "While you may not look like Rebekah Mikaelson, there is still the matter of your quick wit. A camp follower would not be so spirited."

"So I should be seen and not heard?" What was this? The Victorian era? At any rate, that only applied to children even during those constrictive times, and she was no child.

The men gave each other funny looks.

"It would not be a bad way to put it, my lady," said Jaymse. The only reason he still had a head after that was because he was only trying to be helpful.

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**The Red Waste**

The khalasar made to settle for the night in the meagre protection of the old castle's skeleton. This was a harsh and barren place, and this was probably the safest place to settle. She would have them post a guard, as always. "Might I make a suggestion, Khaleesi?" said Klaus suddenly.

"You are going to say it whether I allow it or not," said Daenerys. "What is it?"

"It would be wise to rest during the day and walk during the night when the air is cooler. Your people would be less likely to die of heat exhaustion."

Daenerys stilled. It seemed so obvious, yet why had she not thought of it before, and why had no one else thought of it? Klaus smirked, immediately negating any feelings approaching gratitude that she might have had.

"We are not moving anywhere," said Daenerys to cover up her foolish mistake. It was embarrassing, and she would never admit to it. A queen could not have flaws. "We are waiting for news of my scouts."

"I've heard of your scouts," said Klaus. "Some of the khals did not take too kindly to them."

"What do you know of them?"

"Only that one was killed. Nasty business, dismemberment by horse."

"They will burn for it," she promised. "And the others?"

"Nothing," said Klaus. "I've been out here for days, tracking that red comet, same as you." He seemed amused by it all, as if people getting pulled apart by horses or dying of thirst and starvation in the desert was something to be laughed at.

"Do you find this amusing?" said Daenerys.

"A little," said Klaus.

"Then you must share the joke with me, because I cannot see it." Her patience with him was wearing thin.

"That is your problem, love," he said. "You take everything too seriously. Death is only not funny when it happens to people you care about. Wait, did you care about them? Although, you seem
quite willing to sacrifice the lives of those you care about to chase a burning lump of rock and ice orbiting the very same sun this planet revolves around. I find it admirable, really, to be ready to sacrifice what you love for your ambitions. Do you think it a success, each mile you lead them further into the Red Waste where they will all eventually be buried in tombs of sand?"

"That comet appeared on the night my dragons hatched," said Daenerys. "It heralds my coming."

"I would say I am too old to believe in coincidences, but sometimes they happen. You'd best not hope for some divine miracle, Your Grace, and that is all I will say on the matter."

"I know you think me a little girl, Niklaus Mikaelson. Viserys thought the same too. Look at where he is now."

"I did enjoy the tale of the golden crown for the dragon prince, although wasn't it Khal Drogo's idea? You should not claim credit for a dead man's achievement when he is not here to defend himself."

"How dare you? I am Daenerys Stormborn, Mother--"

"Of dragons, a Khaleesi of the Dothraki, and rightful queen and heir to the Iron Throne. I know of your titles. You need not remind me."

"And do you remember the words of House Targaryen?"

"Fire and blood. I assure you, Your Grace, I am quite familiar with both."

"You do not want to be my enemy, Niklaus Mikaelson."

"I came all this way for you. Are you not curious as to why?"

"You wouldn't tell you even if I commanded you." She stared him down, willing him to look away. He did not. Instead, he delved into another of his packs— they almost seemed to be magic, because they contained everything they could ask for in the middle of a desert—and withdrew a deep blue fabric, embroidered with silver stars. He shook it so its folds unraveled to reveal a beautiful cloak of soft fabric, as light and smooth as silk, capable of keeping its wearer warm in the cold and cool in the heat. He put it around her shoulders with surprising gentleness.

"Desert nights can be cold," he said.

She did not thank him, and he did not seem to expect her to. But she held the cloak around her shoulders and watched him finally turn around to stalk away into the setting sun. She didn't know if he would be back. This was Niklaus Mikaelson. She did not understand him at all. Truth be told, she was only just beginning to understand men in general, and there was so much she still did not know about them. This one man, in particular, was composed of so many opposing traits that she did not know how to make a head or tail of them. He was a killer, but he could be surprisingly gentle with a great appreciation for art and beauty. He looked young, but seemed as old as the stars. He abhorred kindness, yet he had shown her kindness.

Perhaps he really did mean to use her for some means or another, but she was willing to take that risk. And really, who said she couldn't use a man like him?

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**King's Landing**

Sometimes Tyrion did wonder if Joffrey was Robert's son after all. Mouths buzzed all around him
even as he rode into King's Landing, whispering of the horrors they or their neighbours had witnessed. Almost everyone in the city knew of a child or perhaps a young man or woman who had been chased down and stabbed, cut, gutted, drowned, pushed or otherwise driven to their deaths. The oldest had been seventeen; the youngest, not a month old yet.

The great hall was in the middle of redecoration when he arrived. Gone were the flowers and the tapestries. Craftsmen were carefully lining up mosaic tiles in the shape of a golden lion – Joffrey had heard the rumours, hadn't he? – and the finished work would be bigger than the largest dragon skull, which Joffrey had had brought up from the dungeons where Robert had thrown them. Robert had liked his great hall to be...well, Robert hadn't cared, and it had been Cersei who had chosen the decorations during his reign, and she had liked things to be light and cheerful while elegant and cold at the same time. Her son liked gore and death.

No one was in the great hall right now, nor was there anyone in the throne room. He was dutifully informed by dear Cousin Lancel – as pretty and dull as ever – that the king was celebrating his nameday on the battlements overlooking the sea with a tournament and the small council was in session with the dowager queen in attendance in her son's place. Well, well, Cersei certainly wasted no time in making herself important. Who was king here, really?

He decided he would be an awful uncle if he did not go up to the battlements to wish a happy nameday to his least favourite nephew – he would have liked to say they weren't related, but it was rather hard to do so with Joffrey being the spawn of both his sister and brother – and besides, he should like to see Myrcella and Tommen. Then he would go and ruin his sister's day by existing. Doubtless she had hoped Lysa Arryn or Robb Stark's diversion force would have killed him. She would most definitely be cursing the gods that it was Jaime who had been taken instead of him.

The smell of wine and blood hit him before he even saw Joffrey, and someone had pissed themselves because there was the slight taint of urine as well. From his memory, the middens weren't that close by.

"Beloved nephew!" he cried when he saw Joffrey. The boy looked up in shock, his satisfied smirk disappearing from his face in an instant. Ah, how he loved the fact his mere appearance could ruin someone's nameday. "We looked for you on the battlefield." They hadn't. "You were nowhere to be found." True, that.

Someone intelligently offered him a cup of wine. He picked it up and took a sip. Ah, the good stuff. Robert Baratheon was not yet cold in the grave and dear Joff was raiding the old king's finest in the cellars already. Robert might not have left much of a legacy, but at least he had left good wine. This Dornish red was perfectly aged, smooth, with just a hint of dryness to temper it, and tasted of honey and cherries even though neither were involved in its creation.

"I was here, ruling the kingdoms," said Joffrey defensively. He did not dare to be rude, not even to his least favourite uncle. Perhaps there was hope for him after all.

"And a fine job you've done," said Tyrion. The north was in revolt, as was the south, and even in King's Landing ripples of discontentment were spreading through the population. What was a great king without a few great enemies?

Robert had done a better job, and he hadn't done anything.

He greeted Myrcella and Tommen with much less sarcasm and more enthusiasm. They were sweet children, and it was a pity that neither of them were the firstborn son of Cersei Lannister. Myrcella, at age thirteen, was just coming into the first bloom of womanhood. Her girlish figure was transforming, and the pink gown she wore today, no doubt chosen by her mother, accentuated that.
He complimented her on it, and she beamed at him.

Little Tom was still the round-faced boy he knew, with more interest in the finer things in life than war and blood. That was a good thing, as far as Tyrion was concerned. Gaining the kingdoms involved blood. Keeping them involved a little more finesse. And a bit of blood, but not much, and preferably it would be spilled where it would remain unseen by those who did not wish to see it. Joffrey only knew blood, and as far as he was concerned, blood had to be seen by everyone. "You've grown so much!" he said to Tommen, who had a tendency to expand sideways rather than upwards as his mother would have liked.

"Mother says I'll be as tall as Uncle Jaime soon," said Tommen.

"You're going to be taller than even the Hound, but much better looking," Tyrion assured him. At least one part of that statement was going to be true. Behind the royal children, the Hound pressed his lips more tightly together and said nothing. There was no lost love between Tyrion and the Cleganes. One could not lose something that had never existed in the first place.

"That one doesn't like me," he remarked to Bronn. The sellsword raised an eyebrow.

"I really can't see why," said Bronn.

"We heard you were dead," said Joffrey. He had probably hoped that Tyrion had died.

"I'm glad you're not," intercepted Myrcella. "We would have missed you, wouldn't we, Tom?"

"I'm glad too, my dear," said Tyrion. "Death is so boring and so final, especially with the world becoming so interesting all of a sudden." Then he saw Sansa, dressed in the same pink as Myrcella and looking out across the ocean with narrowed blue eyes as unfathomable as the deepest trenches of the sea where Greyjoys said monsters lurked. It had been her father's death that had made the world so interesting all of a sudden. Poor little girl. She was so young and so delicate.

"My condolences for your loss, Lady Stark," he said.

"My father was a traitor, my lord," she said, her voice so cold it might as well have been Cersei speaking to him. "I am glad he is dead and I do not mourn him."

When he had first met Sansa Stark, he had thought her a pretty entitled little lady who knew how to smile prettily, dance, and charm young men. Now he had to change his evaluation of her. Robb Stark had the military genius, Ned Stark had had his honour, and Catelyn Stark, her fiery temper. Sansa Stark, however, was the survivor. She was adaptable. Quite surprising, really. He had already heard the remarkable tale of the bard who had been made to eat his words. He could not imagine this pretty little creature sitting before him right now, dressed in a modest grey-blue gown, making such a suggestion. She turned her attention away from him and back to the sea. There was no knowing what she was thinking.

Were they being afraid of the wrong Stark?

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**Near Sow’s Horn, The Kingsroad**

The road north was colder and muddier than she remembered. Maybe it had something to do with her mood. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that winter was coming. Elena kept her head down and tried not to look anyone in the eye in case anyone noticed her. Just yesterday, she’d had to almost break someone’s hand for daring to pinch the butt of the ‘pretty boy’. Maybe Yoren had been right, and her disguise was no good after all.
At night, they slept in barns and abandoned houses when they could find them – there were a lot of them now that both winter and war were brewing. As they went further north, Elena heard tales of the most vicious brigands raiding villages, led by a man taller than everyone else they called the 'Mountain Who Rides', also known as Gregor Clegane, Sandor's brother, and a handsome young man known by the name of Stefan Salvatore. Refugees were fleeing in droves, and the road was lined with fresh graves, with most of them dug up again. Half rotting bodies were abandoned at the roadside, the few valuables they had been buried with taken by grave robbers.

It was hard to believe that it was Stefan who was responsible, at least for part of this atrocity.

She'd heard of Stefan's presence in Westeros before then, of course, but she had not wanted to believe it. Burying people alive? That was not something that even Klaus would have done, yet Stefan had done it, and to a man who had simply tried to protect his family. She'd asked Damon what was going on, but he had not been able to tell her anything except it didn't seem as if Stefan was in Ripper mode yet.

Some of the boys complained of sore feet and aching bones and most of them had to be threatened into doing anything that remotely resembled chores. She quickly rounded up a bunch of them to be cooks.

"Is it always like this?" she murmured to Yoren without looking at him.

"Sometimes it's worse," remarked the brother, pretending he wasn't speaking to anyone. "Most recruits for the Night's Watch aren't like your Jon."

"I know that," she said. "He's not 'my Jon', and the one with no nose is vile. I don't think you'll make anything out of him except wildling bait."

"I don't think the wildlings will want him," said Yoren.

The sad group trudged on. Most of them were just boys with nowhere to go; petty criminals like Grenn and Pyp who had stolen food or necessities in order to survive and orphans who had no one to raise them and whose only chance for survival lay in the most barren place on earth.

"What are you here for?" asked the fat boy everyone called Hot Pie because of his background as a baker's boy. His voice intruded on her thoughts. He had never been a particularly tactful child, and until someone had uncovered his story, he had insisted he was a murderer. He couldn't exactly describe his murder very well. From what she'd heard – overheard, rather; one had very little to do on the road except think and eavesdrop on other people's conversations – he had been kicked out by his master because he'd been caught eating one too many pies, thus earning himself the nickname of 'Hot Pie'. He had insisted they had been cold until Gendry Waters, the tall, dark-haired armourer's apprentice, had asked whether he'd like to be called 'Cold Pie' instead.

"I killed a city guard," said Elena. Three actually, although that was not exactly why she was here. She had killed the guards in order to get here.

"You're lying," said Hot Pie. "How can you kill a city guard? You're skinnier than my arm."

"Your arm is not skinny," said Lommy Greenhands, the dyer's apprentice who still smelled of chemicals and the alum used to set the dye.

"Are you saying I'm fat?"

Once those two started, they would not stop for hours. Well, they would not have stopped if Elena had not suddenly thrown up her hand, indicating for them both to shut up. Then she ran up to the
front where Yoren was leading the sorry looking band. "Horsemen coming from the south," she informed him.

"This is the Kingsroad," he said. "There are supposed to be travellers on it."

"Armoured horsemen?" she said. He paused.

"We'll see what they are. We are of the Night's Watch. We care not for the affairs of the realm and they will have no reason to harry us."

"What if they're looking for me?"

"Then you run."

She stayed behind Yoren as the horsemen approached. Despite her rough new haircut –she had been sad to have to hack off the shiny brown hair her mother had so loved– and the bandages that flattened her breasts, she still didn't look very much like a boy and anyone smarter than Hot Pie could see it.

As the horsemen drew closer, the sun glinted on their golden cloaks and golden armour.

"Are you in charge?" one of them called out to Yoren as he reigned in his horse.

"I am," said Yoren. He took the stick he was chewing out of his mouth. The Goldcloak handed him a rolled up piece of parchment dripping with wax seals. "By order of the King and the Queen Regent, we are here to bring one Gendry Waters back to King's Landing. We understand he is here in your party."

_Gendry?_ Whatever did he do? He hadn't boasted of his crimes like the others had. In fact, the only time he spoke was to keep the others in check, and she had thought him a rather good influence on the unruly boys and just what they needed on the Wall. She glanced at the boy, who looked as surprised as anyone else that the queen and king knew he existed.

"And what is this Gendry Waters guilty of?" asked Yoren.

"Just hand him over," said the Goldcloak leader.

Yoren handed the parchment back, seals unbroken. Elena knew he couldn't really read all that well and official documents always had that heavy overbearing unnecessarily formal tone. It was what little people did to make themselves feel big. "Do we have a Gendry Waters here?" he called. They all remained silent. Even Hot Pie understood it was all just an act. Yoren knew them all by name. If he had meant to hand the boy over, he wouldn't have asked that superfluous question.

"No, no Gendry here," said Yoren to the Goldcloak. "And if you don't get out of my way, me an' my boys will just walk right over you."

Weapons were drawn, but the Goldcloaks were outnumbered and they knew it.

"We'll be back, and you'll be sorry," snarled the leader before he turned tail and galloped back to the city.

Elena watched them go, an uneasy feeling in her stomach. They wouldn't give up so easily, especially not with royal orders. Not unless they wanted their heads on spikes too, although would their heads warrant places on walls? They weren't that important, after all. But she knew they meant it when they said they would be sorry.
"We should have killed them," she murmured to Yoren.

"What, and attracted more of them?" said Yoren. "Since when did you become so bloodthirsty? I am of the Night's Watch. I don't interfere with the affairs of lords and ladies and kings and queens, and they don't interfere with us. It's always been that way."

"It would have delayed them," said Elena. "These people are from King's Landing. They don't understand the meaning of mercy." She glanced back at the ragged train of boys who now thought Gendry must have done something really bad, and was perhaps even the bastard of the dead Hand. "We should move off the Kingsroad and take some of the back roads at least. They won't find us as easily then."

"You worry too much," said Yoren. "You've been bitten once, so now you think everything is out to bite you."

"I'll do the biting, thank you very much."

No matter who did the biting, however, it was Yoren who made the important decisions about which path to take, and he simply refused to take the back roads. The boys would not be able to take it, he said, and what about the cart of prisoners? The foreign one, whose name Elena had never managed to learn and who reminded her of Elijah somewhat with his dangerous smoothness, offered to get out of the cart and walk. Yoren bluntly refused.

As night fell, they found an abandoned holdfast. In his haste to get away, the previous occupants had left all their furniture and belongings behind. A loaf of what had once been bread, now fluffy with mould, sat on the table with something that might have been meat stew slowly decaying next to it. Whatever they had been running from, they had been terrified of it. Or them.

Snores surrounded her as she sat against a wooden post inside the house, wide awake, with far too many thoughts running around in her mind. She tried to calculate how long it would take for the Goldcloaks to ride back to King's Landing and then come back to find them with reinforcements. How far had they walked today? Not far enough, and they were still on the Kingsroad. It wouldn't be hard for horsemen to catch up with them before they even neared the Wall.

"You can't sleep either?" asked Gendry. She had been so deep in thought that she hadn't heard him.

"What does it look like?" asked Elena.

"Can I sit down?" asked the boy, indicating the spot next to her.

"It's a free country," she replied, before she remembered that it wasn't. Gendry sat down anyway. For a while, they said nothing. Then he broke the silence.

"I wouldn't be able to sleep either if I were you," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked. Shouldn't he be worrying about himself, rather? It had been him the Goldcloaks had wanted, not her.

"If I were a pretty girl travelling with this lot, I'd be sleeping with a knife in my arms," he said.

"Is it that obvious?" she asked, even though she knew it was.

"You're too tall to not have a man's voice if you really were a boy, and boys don't look like this." He made an hourglass figure in the air. The cheek of him! She elbowed him and he began to laugh before she hushed him.
"What did you do to get yourself here?" she asked.

"My master didn't want me," said Gendry. "What did you do?"

"I killed Goldcloaks. Three of them."

"That's what you told the Pie," said Gendry, giving her a look. "What about the truth?"

She gave him a look of her own.

"You?" said Gendry.

"Yes, me," said Elena. "Why didn't your master want you?"

"He said I was bad luck," said Gendry. "And maybe I am. People who talk to me keep dying." He paused. "You're trying to distract me. How did you kill three Goldcloaks?"

"Knife, heart, dark," said Elena. It was more teeth and carotid arteries, but she wasn't going to tell him that. "What do you mean, people who talk to you keep dying?"

"They just do," said Gendry. "You shouldn't talk to me if you don't want to die." A little late for that.

"I don't believe in superstition," said Elena. "Who died?"

"Lord Stark," he said. "He came to see me before he died. Then the Hand before him. Lord Arryn."

Both Lord Ned and Jon Arryn had gone to see Gendry? But why? She remembered the imprint of the letter Ned had written to Stannis and the diaries Jon Arryn had left behind. There hadn't been anything definitive, but both Ned and Arryn had known about Joffrey's parentage, and they had been searching for Robert's bastards...

Gendry Waters. "Do you know who your father was?" she asked.

"That's a strange question to ask a man," said Gendry. "And no. It could have been one of those Goldcloaks for all I know. It could be Lord Stark like everyone else's saying." She didn't correct him, for she already had her suspicions; she just didn't think she was ready to voice them, nor was Gendry ready to hear them. It was a strange thing for an armourer's apprentice to find out he was the son of a king. It would be even worse if her suspicions were wrong and she accidentally told him he was Robert's son and he wasn't.

The ground beneath her rumbled just a little. At first, one might have mistaken it for a particularly deep and loud snore, but she was vampire. She could tell the difference, and it wasn't a snore.

"Riders," said Elena. "They're back."

**Next chapter:** Elena shows her true colours. Daenerys receives news from Qarth. Klaus exercises some diplomacy.
Daenerys receives news from Qarth. Elena shows her true colours. Damon and Arya run into trouble while trying to get away from King's Landing to find Robb.

A/N: We're posting this chapter early because we'll be on a plane tomorrow. Enjoy! Next week will be back to normal.

Essos, The Red Waste

The sands of time trickled by interminably. Daenerys watched the wisps of clouds float by above, so faint that they might as well not be there. The red comet continued to fly on. A lump of ice and rock with a tail of fire; was that really all it was, like Klaus said? And if it was, what did that mean for her and for her dragons? Was it really just a coincidence?

But she could not falter now. She had gone too far. To turn back was to die, and she was not going to die. She was the last true dragon; the one who would see the name of House Targaryen restored. No daughter of Aegon ever admitted defeat. Never.

The sky changed colour as the stars faded away. Deep purple turned into striations of red and gold and orange, painting the clouds with fire. She stroked the heads of her dragons as they butted her hands and screeched, demanding food. They would not grow if they had nothing to eat, and she needed them to grow big and ferocious like the dragons of old. They were the key to reclaiming the throne that was rightfully hers.

"Ugly little critters, aren't they?" came an insolent mocking voice behind her.

"Only a fool would insult children in front of their mother," said Daenerys without turning around to see who it was. Klaus settled himself on the rock beside her without invitation.

"I suppose there is a certain fascination surrounding ugly things," he said. "I have no doubt they will be the fascination of all of Westeros before long, although they would have to survive to adulthood, wouldn't they? How long do you think you can last out here in the desert? A day? A week? A week and a half? I'd take bets, love, but you have no money. Which one would die first? Pretty Irri? Sunburned Jorah, maybe, who, by the way is completely miserable, thanks to you."

"If it were any other man speaking those words to me, he would have lost his tongue," said Daenerys. "But since you have proven to be a loyal subject thus far--" Klaus gave a snort of laughter, which she ignored. He could laugh at her all she liked, but he was still riding under her banner. "--I will tolerate you for now. And what do you mean? How am I making Ser Jorah miserable?"

"Oh come, love," said Klaus. "Grown man, all alone and exiled and wallowing in self-pity. And then you come along, all young and beautiful with your silver hair and purple eyes. You'd have to be wearing blinkers to not see."

"What are you saying, Niklaus?" she demanded. Ser Jorah? No! He was her friend!
"You know exactly what I'm saying," said the man. He grinned at her. His grin reminded her of one of her dragons when it was about to roast a tasty morsel of meat. And she was the morsel.

"You are spreading poisonous unfounded rumours, Klaus," said Daenerys with a sly smile. She was no morsel for Klaus to devour. "Maybe it is some other man who is obsessed with my silver hair and purple eyes." After all, who had given her a drawing of her again?

"I am merely stating the facts, my queen," said Klaus. "Although maybe your poor bloodrider, too, may have been interested. However, that is hard to confirm, considering his head—"

"Khaleesi!" Irri was beckoning to her. "It's Kovarro! Kovarro has returned!"

She clambered to her feet, not caring if she seemed too eager. The heat of the desert day made the image of the rider hazy, but she recognized the colour of his horse. The patches of red and white made it very distinctive.

"Oh, he has a body this time," said Klaus. "And his head is still on it. That's a good sign."

She ignored him. He was intolerable, sometimes, but he had his uses and, dared she say it, his charms. Kovarro just about fell out of his saddle in his eagerness to greet her. He fell at her feet. "Qarth," he said. "The Qarthians want to invite you to their city."

"Qarth," said Daenerys. She turned to Jorah and to Klaus. "What do you know of Qarth?"

"Only that the land outside its gates is known as the Garden of Bones," said Jorah gravely. She wondered if it was true, what Klaus had implied. But it was not possible, was it? He was so much older than her, and he had a wife. Or, at least, he had had a wife. No, he was just a dear friend. "Every time they close their gates, the garden grows."

"Hmmm…" said Klaus. "I like them already."

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**The Kingsroad**

Elena crouched in the shadows with Gendry, ready to run, but not quite willing to leave just yet. She didn't know what to expect; how many men the Goldcloaks would have brought with them, what they were planning on doing. Yoren had told them to stay back and rescue as many boys as possible if anything should go wrong. They had barred the wooden doors and were now looking through the narrow windows. Not that it would really matter, because the doors were old and already damaged from a previous raid. They would not hold for long.

"I said you'd be sorry, didn't I?" smirked the Goldcloak who had first confronted them. All around him were Redcloaks. Of course he would have gotten Lannister men. They surrounded the holdfast, with torches in their hands as if ready to set the place ablaze if Yoren did not comply. They probably were going to burn it regardless.

"Aye, but I'm not a good listener," said Yoren. He gripped his sword so tightly that his knuckles were white, but he did not draw it. Ever since he had suffered a shoulder injury some years ago, he had not been able to fight as well as before.

"Just hand him over, and no one will be hurt," said the man leading the Lannister guardsmen.

"And who are you?" asked Yoren.

"Ser Amory, of House Lorch, bannerman of Lord Tywin Lannister," replied the knight.
"Well, Ser Amory," said Yoren. "You'll have to tell me which 'he' you are talking about."

"Gendry Waters," said Lorch.

"Who?" said Yoren.

"Maybe you are remiss in your duties and you do not know the names of your…charges. In that case, open the gates in the name of the king and we will find him, if you are so incompetent," said Lorch.

"I don't care which of the four kings you invoke. The Night's Watch takes no part in the realm's wars."

Lorch signalled to his men. They marched forward. The wooden building shook as the men threw themselves against the doors. If they had had any archers, now would have been the time to use them, but they had none; just scared boys with practise swords or sticks.

"Get the boys," Yoren murmured to Elena. "There's a way out through the kitchens."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I don't run from lions. Go!"

She didn't want to leave him behind, but what could she do? Knock him out? That wasn't the main point. The war might not be the Night's Watch's problem, but it was her problem. She was one of the Stark household now and she had an obligation to find Lord Robb—well, King Robb now—and tell him everything that she knew. And, of course, there were the boys and the other prisoners.

The panicky boys followed her without much hesitation. They had as much will to fight as Samwell Tarly had had at first. She passed by the chained prisoners who had been in the cage and had been released to spend their night indoors, and she had been about to leave them—only the very worst prisoners went to the Black Cells, after all, and she had no pity for murderers and rapists—but one of them, the cheeky foreign one with the red and white hair, grabbed her ankle.

"Free me, pretty girl. A man can fight."

"What are you in for?" she asked.

"A man got caught," he said.

Perhaps it was just a feeling, or maybe it was those ever changing eyes, or the rather more polite mannerisms, but Elena felt less repulsed by him than she was by the other two. Or perhaps it was just sheer shallow bias because his fellow prisoners simply oozed 'unsavoury' from every pore, from the noselessness of the big hairy one to the dead-looking white flesh and filed teeth of the mute one. The latter hissed at her like an animal when she went near. She let loose a low growl in her throat. Was it an animal's instinct to know who the bigger predator was? He shrank back.

Elena yanked loose the foreigner's chains. His brow furrowed as he looked up at her and then back down at the chains which she had just broken, but he had no time to question her. At that moment, the doors fell and the Lannister men flooded in. She heard Yoren and the older men rush out to meet them, and then she heard them die.

"Search every corner, every cranny!" Amory Lorch was shouting. "I want the prisoners rounded up and I want Gendry Waters. Give me Gendry Waters and nobody needs to die!" He was lying. It was obvious. If he got Gendry, why would he need the rest of them?
"Quickly!" hissed Elena.

"Let me go, boy!" snarled the hairy man who was still chained to a post.

"No time," said the foreigner. "And he is not amiable."

"You!"

Elena ignored him. "Let's go," she said to the boys.

"Shouldn't we just hand over Gendry?" asked Hot Pie.

"You heard him," added Lommy.

"I'm just as capable of killing you as they are, and I'm right here," she said. "Now shut up and move." When did she become such a badass? Westeros was getting to her.

More Lannister men burst up the stairs, swords bared and dripping with the blood of the slain. "Kill--"

Elena didn't wait for the speaker to finish. Her fingers tore through his throat in an instant and he fell to the ground in a gurgling heap. The others gaped at her, not sure of what to expect of this slight, effeminate 'boy'. At least, not for the split second she needed to kill another man and scare them all into turning tail and running back down the stairs the way they had come. A few particularly brave men tried to cut her down, but she dodged their swords and pushed them aside, clearing a path to the stairs that led down to the holdfast's kitchens. "Come on!" she shouted.

The boys didn't need to be asked twice. They saw their chance to escape and they charged at the door, overwhelming the confused Lannister men. One fell with a shard of plate in his neck, and she glanced up to see the foreign prisoner nod in her direction. They ran, only to be confronted by even more men rushing up the stairs. It was going to be a bloodbath in this narrow staircase. They had to get out somehow.

She punched the wall, feeling her knuckles split and the wood splinters tear open the skin on the back of her hand and arm as her fist went through. It was easier than she had thought it would be. The wood was half rotten. The wounds on her hands and arms healed almost immediately and she couldn't hide them quickly enough. "What the..." whispered Gendry. His awe went ignored as she ripped a hole in the wall. It was only a seven foot drop. No one had ever died from a seven foot fall, right? It hadn't been on the news before so she assumed it had never happened. "This way!"

She leapt and landed on her feet. The deadly foreigner also leapt, followed by Gendry and some of the braver boys, or maybe just the ones who were more eager to live. But it wasn't enough. The remaining boys were seized by the Lannister men. She made to go for them, but Gendry grabbed her arm. "You can't. They'll kill you!" he hissed.

"This way," said the foreigner.

The darkness of the forest, which many of the boys had sought to avoid, now became a source of refuge from the baying hounds and shouting men. Orange globes of light created by the men's torches followed them. The mist muffled the barking of the dogs, which sounded a lot further away than they actually were.

Hot Pie's breaths became ragged as he stumbled on, trying to keep up. He probably wouldn't have if Gendry hadn't kept a grip on him and dragged him along. "We're going to die! We're going to die!" he kept on gasping in between choking sobs. Or perhaps he was just choking because of a
lack of air.

"Shut up!" hissed the older boy. "Do you want them to find us?"

The shadows and mist closed in around them, so thick that even the torchlight could hardly penetrate more than a few feet. Hot Pie stumbled again. Gendry made to haul him to his feet. Again. This was not working. At this rate, the dogs would find them in the next half hour.

"Get up the trees," she said to them.

"No one looks up unless they are looking for something," said the foreigner.

"They won't look up," said Elena. "Wait here. I'll lure them away."

"A girl will die," he said nonchalantly.

"No, a girl won't," she said, which seemed to impress him.

"I'll come with you," said Gendry.

"No, you look after them," she said. "When you get the chance, run." Before he could object any further, like she knew he would, she disappeared into the mist.

The shadows were her friends. It was exhilarating to feel the wind on her face again as she put on the speed, relishing in her power and the strength that the night gave her. She was vampire and this was her hunting ground.

The first man was always very easy to get. She dragged him into the trees before he could even scream and tore out his throat as he began to. Hot blood splashed onto her face, sweet and life-giving. His companion turned around to see where he had gone, and shouted out in panic when he saw the body drop, before he, too, was dragged into the darkness, only to be thrown out with his neck snapped and his head dangling by a flap of skin. For the first time in her entire life, she let loose, drinking as much as she wanted, killing as much as her nature urged her to, and not even thinking about it. The thrill coursed through her veins along with their blood as it became her blood. The smell of their fear and adrenaline was intoxicating. She had never felt anything quite like knowing that these seasoned soldiers were all terrified because of her. She held their lives in her hands, and she was going to crush them.

She attacked from all directions, herding them together deeper into the woods. Torches were dropped and extinguished. The dark, too, became her weapon. The dogs tried to flee, but even they were not spared, although she killed them humanely. She could not allow them to return to their masters, where they might just have a chance of helping them find Gendry and the others again. They had gotten too close already.

The blood on her face cooled. She couldn't hear any more heartbeats except her own while the bodies—or bits of bodies—lay around her. Eyes were wide open in horror, while limbs were skewed at impossible angles. They looked like little broken dolls.

What had she done? Had she turned ripper? What was happening? She looked at her hands, covered in so much gore that it became a pair of gloves. What had she done? 'Nothing that you wouldn't do again,' said a voice in her head.

She tore off a piece of cloak and wiped off as much of the blood as she could. It smeared across her skin. Tonight, she had been a true vampire, a true monster of the darkness, and she didn't even feel that much remorse about it.
When she returned to where she had left the others, she found them still in the trees. The foreigner—she had to ask his name. It seemed terribly rude to keep calling him 'the foreigner', even if it was just inside her head—had made himself quite comfortable. Hot Pie, on the other hand, had quite frozen with fear.

"You can come down now," she said. "They're gone, and they won't be coming back."

"What happened?" asked Gendry. He dropped down to the ground. "We heard them."

"I took care of them."

"A man is impressed," said the foreigner. He moved like a cat, all lean muscle and sinew. "A girl is quite a killer."

"You're a girl?" whispered Hot Pie, who had to be helped out of the branches because he was that scared. Really, of all the things to be surprised at, he was surprised by the fact that she was girl? Then again, it was Hot Pie. "And you killed them? But you couldn't have if you're a girl."

"Come on," said Elena, ignoring their questions. "We should continue north."

"Not I," said the foreigner. "This is where we part."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Where a man will go," he said.

"Can I at least know your name, since I saved you?"

The man smiled in his mysterious way. "Jaqen H'ghar," he said. "A man will not forget." He took a coin from beneath his leather jerkin. It wasn't any currency Elena recognized. "If you should ever want to find me, say valar morghulis to any man from the east and show him this coin. He will take you to Braavos."

"And they will know Jaqen H'ghar there?" she asked, taking the coin. It was only polite, for she doubted she would ever go to Essos. Her place was here. She had to find Lord-King Robb, and perhaps, one day, she would see Damon and Jon and all the others again.

"Jaqen H'ghar is dead," said the man. He passed a hand over his face. It was no longer his face.

The rabbit tasted like wood soaked in water and then smoked. "Couldn't you at least have left some juice in it?" Arya asked Damon as she tried to tear at the tough meat. She was a Stark, not a real wolf, and her teeth weren't that sharp.

"Would you rather I drink you instead?" he demanded. Damon was grumpy because he hadn't had human blood in two days. Bunny blood, he said, tasted like 'shit'. If he had been around her brother or father, he wouldn't have dared to say such a word in front of her. Not that Arya minded.

"You wouldn't dare," said Arya.

"Why? I drank Robb."

"I am so going to tell him."
"You'll have to find him first. Now tuck in or else I'm just gonna start walking and you're gonna have to walk with me if you don't want to be left behind."

He wouldn't leave her behind. He'd come this far with her. If he had wanted to leave her behind, nothing would have stopped him. She quietly and sullenly forced down a few bites of meat, trying to pretend it was a delicious meal of broiled venison with berry sauce. By the old gods and the new, how different this was. The thought of adventure had once held so much promise, but now that she was in one, it was terribly dull. Sometimes, she even wished she were back indoors again with Sansa and Septa Mordane, trying to embroider a wolf's head on a handkerchief and then jumping up and begging her father to release her when he came to visit.

No, she wouldn't cry. There was a funny lump in her throat and it hurt, but she wouldn't cry. Crying was for silly little girls. And this rabbit wasn't even good enough for a wolf to eat. Besides, she'd had enough of it. She wasn't hungry anymore. However, she didn't want to waste the meat, in case there would be no time to stop and hunt later. Damon might be a very good hunter, and it might not take as long as it would if someone else had been doing it, but they were out here in the wild trying to find Robb. They couldn't exactly waste time doing unnecessary things like hunting because she had thrown away the remains of an unfinished meal.

She wrapped the rabbit in a somewhat clean rag and tucked it in her pack which she had fashioned out of cloth. It hung awkwardly across her body and she had to keep hoisting it up on her shoulders because it kept trying to fall off. Damon helped her to adjust it.

"I think we should go to Winterfell first before we try to find Robb," she said. Who knew where Robb was? Hadn't he marched out to try and save them?

"What do you think I'm doing?" asked Damon.

"Then why are we heading south?" asked Arya.

"Because Cersei would expect us to head north," said Damon. "All the roads will be guarded. I mean, sure, I can probably take them out, but that's an unnecessary hassle. So yes, I'm looping south and then we'll head back up north, and once you're back in the city, I'll go find your brother."

"No! I'm not going to be left behind! I want to help!" Damon was not going to leave her behind the way he left Sansa behind. All right. Perhaps it was different, because at least he hadn't left her in Joffrey and Cersei's clutches,

"Let's see what Robb says, 'kay?"

Since when did Damon defer to Robb so much? Oh, right. Since he decided he didn't want to be the one to tell her no because that would be too responsible and 'uncool'.

"If you're going to leave me behind, you might as well have the guts to tell me instead of letting Robb do it. Besides, don't you have to find him first?"

"I'm just the bannerman. I don't have any right to--" He suddenly fell silent.

"What is it?" asked Arya.

"Shh!" Damon's eyes darkened. "Run."

She didn't ask why. Suffice to say that she trusted him enough to know that when he was like this, it meant it was really serious. A couple of times, she almost fell, except Damon was holding her hand and was dragging her along. When she fell the third time, he hoisted her off her feet so
suddenly she didn't even have time to cry out in surprise. The ground and the trees around them became a blur of brown and green. She had never really appreciated how quickly vampires could move, but not quickly enough, it seemed. The horses and dogs were gaining on them. Couldn't Damon move faster than this? He could, couldn't he? She'd seen him, or rather, hadn't seen him all those times when he had appeared without warning.

Damon suddenly stopped in his tracks. All around them were the gleaming swords and glinting armour of Cersei's men. Eleven red cloaks and one white cloak fluttered in the breeze.

"Damon Salvatore," said the Kingsguard leading them. He was the fat cowardly one with no hair who had come with Robert to Winterfell. "I shall enjoy this. I wonder what Her Grace will say when I march her former favourite back to King's Landing. Tell you what. I don't want to ruin your pretty face. If you hand over the girl, I might just give you a quick death."

"See…I don't understand why people start counting their chickens before they hatch, Ser Boros," said Damon. "How do you know I'm not going to start making scrambled eggs?"

"Shoot h--" Boros Blount had not even finished giving his order before his horse reared in fear. Blood flew as the animal's throat was torn out. Arrows flew in all directions, hitting Lannister men and horses as they tried to aim for the speeding vampire. Boros Blount was shouting at them to stop shooting at him.

Damon grabbed Arya before dropping and rolling, kicking out the legs of horses as he did so and clearing a path for her. "Run!" he snarled.

**Next chapter:** Damon tries his best to get along with Arya. Daenerys arrives at Qarth. Caroline is at odds with Stefan's new persona. Robb focuses on a new target. Klaus tries his hand at diplomacy.
Negotiations With a Vampire

Chapter Summary

Damon deals with his pursuers. The Qarthians receive Daenerys, and Klaus helps her to negotiate their way into the city. Robb's campaign heads in a new direction. Stefan returns to Tywin's camp, and Caroline wonders if he's the same vampire who left.

In the Kingswood

He hadn't wanted to vamp-out, but what choice did he have? They had forced his hand—teeth, rather—and he wanted lunch. The Lannister men either tried to spear him or run from him. Ignoring the arrow in his stomach, he charged straight for the archer who didn't have the time to nock another arrow to his bow. His fingers tore through his throat before he snatched the bow and quiver from him. They weren't the only ones who could shoot, and he could reload more quickly.

An arrow sprouted in the eye of one of the Lannister men. He hadn't even fallen before Damon was onto the next man, snapping his neck with an oft-practised manoeuvre. There was no time for flair. He took up the dead man's sword and slit the throat of his companion who thought that now was a good time to bag himself a Salvatore.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Ser Boros make to go after Arya, having acquired another horse. Oh no no no. He couldn't have that. The horse reared and tried to turn backwards when Damon appeared before it, his mouth dripping with blood. "Where are you off to?" he asked Blount.

"Demon!" shouted Boros.

"That's my name," said Damon. He dodged his sword easily and cut the girth strap of Blount's saddle. The knight tumbled to the ground in a heap of jowls and armour and waving arms and legs like a baby just discovering the use of his limbs. It would have been funny to toy with him the way a child used a magnifying glass to torment an ant, but there were others getting away as they spoke. This was messy.

Blount charged. He was a good fighter—good enough to be Kingsguard—but his name was not Buffy and he was not destined to slay vampires. Damon parried the blow and kicked the man's legs out from beneath him before crushing his windpipe.

The others were torn between not wanting to go back to the queen after having sighted Arya Stark and not caught her and not wanting to be ripped apart by the vampire. He supposed they could lie, but they weren't smart enough to do that. However, when Damon turned, they decided they preferred the former, only Damon didn't like that. Now gorged with blood, he was faster than their horses could ever hope to be on a good day. He appeared in front of them. Their horses stopped and refused to go forward or do anything their riders were telling them. "You shouldn't leave without saying goodbye. That's just rude." He caught an arrow that would only have flown by his ear. "Really?"

They didn't get a chance to justify themselves.
Damon had one thing to say about the Kingsguard and the Lannisters’ household guards. They tasted better than most Westerosians, and that was saying a lot. In fact, they were probably up there with Robb Stark. King Robb Stark now, he supposed.

Most of the horses had fled or died, but there was one that had remained. It was a little nervous, but being an extremely well-bred warhorse, blood was part of his every day existence. He snorted and flattened his ears as Damon approached. He tried to snap at the vampire.

"Hey, stop that," said Damon. "You're lucky I'm full, or else I would've eaten you." He found a water skin hanging from the horse's saddle, as well as some emergency provisions. He used the water to wash off most of the blood from his hands and face. His clothes were dark enough so the blood wouldn't show up. He would have to wait until he reached the next village to steal some clothes off a clothesline.

Arya's trail was not hard to find. The girl had not yet learned to hide her tracks, which was a good thing for Damon. He found her hiding beneath an overhang in the forest just off the road and she nearly brained him with a rock when he startled her. He caught it before it hit him.

"That would have hurt, you know," he said.

"You'll have healed," said Arya. Then she flung herself at him and clung to him again. Oh shit. What was he supposed to do? He liked her better when she was all angry and feisty. He patted her back awkwardly and tried to pry her off him. She released him after a moment. "I would have been unhappy if you'd died," she said.

"Me too," said Damon. "Been there, done that, not to my taste."

"Can I have Needle back now? I feel better with a weapon."

Damon thought about it. It probably wouldn't help her much if they were attacked again, but maybe he could start teaching her how to defend herself. It was risky to hope that she would be able to run away every time they were attacked. But no, she was trying to manipulate him here. He was not falling for it.

"No," he said.

"Why not?" she demanded. "Damon, give it back! It's mine!"

"Just because you were nice to me for all of five seconds does not mean you get undeserved rewards."

"I'm going to tell Robb."

"Forget the sword. You'll only cut yourself. Look, here's a horsey!" He paused. "Hey, it looks a bit like you. Do you think we should call him Arya?"

The new rock missed his head by an inch.

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Qarth, Essos

Daenerys had never seen walls so high or so thick. White bones crested amongst the waves of sand. Something cracked beneath her foot. She lifted it immediately to find that she had crushed someone's skull. The ruined face, with only holes for eyes, grinned at her through its broken teeth.
Jorah walked closely behind her, while Klaus wandered off to the side. He unearthed another skull from the sand and dusted it off, clearing the dirt from the holes where the eyes and nose used to be and then pouring sand out of the space that had once contained a brain.

"What are you doing?" asked Daenerys.

"I need a new cup for my collection," he said with a shrug.

"Niklaus, please," said Jorah.

"What?" asked Klaus. "It's not as if this fellow has any use for his skull anymore. Or it could have been a woman. Ah, a baby's skull. Too bad it's broken."

Daenerys sighed and turned back to the gates of Qarth. The gates remained closed.

"I thought they were receiving us," she said.

"And here we are," called a voice from the top of the wall. She squinted. The sun was bright behind them, glaring and merciless. She could see nothing but shadows where men stood. They looked very small from down here. Then again, she imagined she also looked very small from up there.

"I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen," she called up.

"Yes," said the same voice. "We have long desired to lay our eyes upon the Mother of Dragons and her children. You do have them, yes? Your children?"

"I do," she said.

"We do not see them," said the voice. It flowed like silk, but felt like the foul oil that sometimes bubbled up from beneath the ground. Some people said it was a cure for skin diseases. Daenerys was of the idea that it was the cause instead.

"I imagine it would be difficult to see them from up there," she said. "If you would but come down, then perhaps I would allow you the privilege of seeing them."

"Qarth did not become the greatest city that ever was and ever will be by opening its gates to barbarians and brigands, even if they are kings of barbarians and brigands."

"If you desire it, Your Grace, I could bring them down here for you," Klaus whispered. "I think I could teach them some manners. They could do with a lesson or two in that department."

One part of Daenerys really wanted to see it; White Death in action, teaching a lesson to those who thought themselves above her. But the adult in her knew that this was not the way to convince the Qarthians to let them inside their city. At least, not yet.

"Later," she whispered to him. To the Qarthians, of which she had counted thirteen, she said, "You promised you would receive me."

"And here we are, and there you are," said the silky voice that she now wanted to silence forever.

"I find it hard to see how you can receive me from up there," she said.

"If you do not appreciate our hospitality, then perhaps we should...take our leave, Your Grace."

She drew herself up to her full height. "I am Daenerys of the House of Targaryen," she said, more
loudly and firmly this time. "No man denies me. Turn me away, and I will burn you to cinders and none shall remember that Qarth, the greatest city that ever was, had ever stood."

"Well, best of luck to you, my lady," said the oily voice.

"Klaus, about that lesson in etiquette," said Daenerys. "Now may be the time to re-educate these Qarthians and justify your title of White Death."

"I knew you wouldn't be able to resist, love," he said with a smile. He bowed, brought her hand to his lips, and kissed it.

She blinked. There was a rush of great wind, and when she opened her eyes, Klaus was gone from her side and up on the top of the wall, with the thirteen figures stepping away from him.

"Now," she heard him say. "About that gate…or would you prefer to do some gardening?" She couldn't see his face, for it was too far away, but she could hear the glee in it. He wanted them to do some gardening.

"Khaleesi," said Jorah worriedly. She held up her hand to indicate he should wait, all the while never tearing her gaze from the scene on the wall. For a moment, nothing seemed to move. Even the wind had gone quiet.

Then a voice rang out. "Stop this madness!" it cried.

The great gates opened with a groan and a crash. A tall man with skin the colour of ebony, clothed in the most beautiful fabrics of blue and gold that Daenerys had ever seen, stepped out. He was well past his prime, well-fed, to put it politely, but he emitted an air of authority. "I, Xaro Xhoan Daxos, too, am one of the thirteen, and I will vouch for your safe conduct through Qarth."

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Rosby, near King's Landing

Stefan was back. Lord Tywin had recalled him after what had seemed like months of those bloody raids across the Riverlands. The men kept whispering stories about men being buried alive, and of entire villages being methodically, almost mechanically, wiped out of existence as the Stefan killing machine had swept north. Caroline hadn't wanted to believe it at first, but the stories kept coming. Why would they have kept coming if they were lies?

So when she heard Stefan had been summoned back to the camp, she didn't know what to think. Was he still her friend Stefan Salvatore? Or had he become something that even Damon or Klaus had failed to achieve?

She kept her eyes focused on her tray of wine, water, fruit, and cheese –Lord Tywin liked that assortment– when she went inside the tent. Stefan stood before Tywin, resplendent in his new golden armour and red cloak. "I have sent Gregor Clegane to Harrenhal to secure the fortress ahead of my arrival," Tywin was saying. "Do you know why you are here?"

"No, my lord," said Stefan.

"You are to go with Lord Daemon up north," said Tywin. "Robb Stark's supply lines are stretched. We will break their lines, and the Starks will be without food and gold. Without anything to feed or pay their men with, the enemy will have to turn back without fighting. You will be Daemon's second in command. At no point are you to engage directly with the Stark forces."

"I understand, my lord."
"Good," said Tywin. "Now leave me."

Caroline set down the tray on his long council table. Tywin must have known she was there, but he pretended she wasn't.

"What is your opinion of Stefan Salvatore?" he suddenly asked out of the blue. She paused in mid-curtsey. Did he really want an answer? Still, Tywin Lannister wasn't the type of man who said anything unnecessarily.

"He is my friend, my lord. I don't think I can be objective," she said.

"I do not need you to be objective. Tell me what you think."

"He's loyal to his friends," Caroline began. "He has a long memory. He's clever, and sensitive, and he gets things like human nature. But...sometimes...he can be mentally unstable. Especially around blood."

Tywin raised an eyebrow. Right, she'd just made her friend sound like a nutjob. "He likes blood too much when he...sees it. He can go a little bit overboard with the violence sometimes."

"But he has not done so yet," said Tywin. What?! So burying someone alive was not going overboard? Oops. Had she said that out loud? Yes, it seemed like she had.

"You should be more careful of what you say, Caroline Forbes," said Tywin.

"I'm sorry, Lord Tywin," she said. "But I just don't get why...why he thought that was necessary."

"Cruelty, when dealt out with a greater purpose in mind, is useful." She simply gaped at him. "If he had not buried that man, there would have been more resistance and more death. Extreme cruelty executed swiftly is far kinder than small amounts of cruelty doled out over time. The first inspires fear. The second inspires hatred. Do you understand?"

She nodded mutely. She could see it from his point of view, but she still found it hard to swallow. She curtseyed and he turned back to his work, effectively dismissing her.

She found Stefan striding in the direction of Daemon's tent, no doubt to discuss their next plan of attack. She grabbed him by the shoulder. He turned around. "Tell me it's not true," she said.

"And hello to you too, Caroline," said Stefan. "I should be congratulating you, shouldn't I? Lord Tywin's cupbearer, and in such a short time."

"Tell me you didn't bury that poor man alive." At least he could tell her he'd made sure the man had been dead first, couldn't he?

"I can't do that," said Stefan. His voice was devoid of emotion and any other sign of humanity. He stared directly at her face, not even blinking. Oh God, it was true. It was true! She shoved him. Hard.

"How could you?"

"I had to establish my reputation, Caroline," he said. He glanced around and then pulled her between two tents where no one would notice them. "This is a harsh world. These are harsh men. Compassion is looked upon as a weakness. We have to act like them, Caroline, if we want to survive here. It's best you realized that."
She didn't know this man who stood before her. His voice and eyes were harder than the cold steel strapped to his hip. Her gaze roved over his face. He remained impassive. "I hope it's all just an act and you don't wake up one day to find you've lost yourself, Stefan Salvatore," she said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have duties to attend to, ser."

Near the Blue Fork

The map covered the entire table and spilled over its edges. Carved wooden lions and wolves and stags dotted its surface. Robb looked down at the lines and dots. This was Westeros spread out before him. If only he could own it like he owned the map.

"We should head west and take the war to the Lannisters," the Blackfish said. "The Riverlands need time to recover, Your Grace. We cannot fight any more battles here if you should wish to field men and supplies from it in the future."

"If we go west to invade the Westerlands, Tywin would be forced to pull men away from King's Landing to defend his own borders, leaving King's Landing open for attack," said Robb as he pointed to the four pointed star that marked the very centre of Westerosian politics.

"Then you can sweep down south and attack Joffrey," said the Blackfish.

It sounded too simple. Too easy. Nothing was ever this easy. "Tywin Lannister wouldn't need to pull back from King's Landing," said Robb, mostly to himself but partly to the Blackfish. "Even at full strength, our forces are half the size of his, and our supply lines are stretched thin. He knows that." He pointed to the Riverlands, with all its carved trout and the wolf camped squarely beside Riverrun. "The lords of the Riverlands are eager to reclaim and settle their territories. They will not want to march west."

"Milksops," said the Blackfish with a derisive snort. He didn't think much of his fellow countrymen. He should have been born in the north, where the land was harsh and the men were harsher. "They will fight if you force them, Your Grace. They are your bannermen."

"Willing men fight better than reluctant men, and I will need their support, Uncle," said Robb. He did not look up. The roads were like the veins and arteries of Westeros, and whoever controlled all of them would control the entire body, for without roads, no army could get supplies, and the army would wither and die. Veins and arteries, of course, took blood to and from the heart, and Westeros had two hearts. One was in King's Landing, and the other, further north, was Lord Harroway's Town, where the Kingsroad, the River Road, and all three forks of the Trident met.

The town itself, however, was not defensible. It was one of the busiest trading towns because of its position, but there was no castle. There was, however, Harrenhal just to the south of it. If he had Harrenhal, he would control the roads to the north and if he controlled the roads, he would be able to stall Tywin's supply lines should the Lannisters push north. If he had Harrenhal, he would control the taxes levied on trade in Lord Harroway's town and be able to field supplies and men from the villages and towns surrounding the fortress.

The problem was that Harrenhal was a Lannister stronghold. The scouts reported that Tywin himself was riding for the fortress, once the greatest Westeros had ever seen, after Jaime's defeat at Riverrun. He meant to hold it until Robb's men tired of the war, winning by attrition. If Robb wanted the fortress, he would have to take it before Tywin arrived.

Currently, it was garrisoned by one Gregor Clegane. Again, he wished he had Damon with him, for Damon Salvatore was a man whose name was even more esteemed—in that manner—than
Clegane's. Well, if he couldn't do it the Damon way, he would have to do it the Robb Stark way. Which was probably better than the Damon way, come to think of it.

"Tell Wylis and Wendel Manderly they are to take their three thousand men to raid the Westerlands," he said. "I want a banner flown for every ten men. I want the Lannisters to know we are coming for them."

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**Qarth, Essos**

Why did they have to be so diplomatic? Klaus had been looking forward to ripping a few heads off, particularly that of the fat flabby one who called himself the King of Spice. Even the amount of cologne he bathed in couldn't hide the scent of fungi growing in the creases between his rolls of fat. He wouldn't try drinking him, of course. A man his age had to watch his cholesterol levels.

"Well, that's all nicely settled then," said Spice, giving Klaus a nervous and hate-filled smile. He loved this semblance of politeness. It was so easy to crack. Klaus returned the smile.

"I am somewhat sorry that we did not get to continue our conversation," he said. "Although, it's probably for the best. I imagine gardening is not your forte."

He followed the other twelve down the steps to the gate where he rejoined with the lovely Daenerys and her shocked bedraggled band of barbarians. She needed new staff. She was a queen, after all, and she needed to look the part. No more of those Dothraki rags for her; he would see her clothed in the finest Qarthian silks. His skills of persuasion were somewhat diminished here in Essos—and also in Westeros if he ever got there, he assumed—but he could still threaten and blackmail and steal along with the best of them.

The Qarthian nobles stared at him as he passed them by. He smirked, knowing that they were all wondering what he was and they wouldn't believe him even if he told them. And he rather liked being the enigma. Klaus the Indestructible. Klaus the Eternal. His legend would spread. This was only the beginning.

The unreasonably reasonable black man with an agenda led Daenerys and her party through the wide paved streets of Qarth. Hanging gardens adorned the city everywhere, making true the words that travellers used to describe it a jewel of the desert. If he had seen Babylon in its zenith, he would imagine it would have looked something like this.

People whispered about the Dragon Queen and her dragons, which were still being babied and given free rides in their wooden cages. The awe was nauseating. Sometimes, looks could be deceiving, and given recent events, he believed he was owed more respect than he was being shown. Unlike those scaly Chihuahuas. Sure, they could burn down a city, but so could he, given enough gasoline.

The unreasonably reasonable diplomat who called himself Xaro Xhoan Daxos lived on the outskirts of the city in a large sprawling compound the size of a small town. What he lacked in taste, he made up for in quantity. All his ornaments were made of either gold or expensive wood. They clashed with one another, and the house had the feel of a crowded antique shop, with too many things cluttering up too little space. He was new money. Everything about him was overcompensation made flesh. Daxos was afraid that people didn't know he was rich.

"Thank you," Daenerys said to him once they were within the walls of the compound. She put on a strong front, this one, but she was just a little girl inside, albeit a little girl with claws and fire. "I will not forget your kindness, Xaro Xhoan Daxos."
"The pleasure is all mine, Khaleesi," said the merchant prince. He bowed to her in what he assumed was a respectful manner. "Please, allow my servants to show you to your quarters. You must be tired after your long journey."

Daenerys motioned for Irri and Doreah to follow.

Now, Klaus had no intention of resting. This was hostile territory. Just because they were in a ceasefire did not mean that they had finished fighting the war, as Israel and Palestine knew all too well.

"Xaro Xhoan Daxos, a prince amongst merchants," he said, once Daenerys was gone.

"A prince? A king would be more fitting," said Daxos.

"Well, a king has no equals and you have twelve of them," smirked Klaus.

"They are hardly my equals," said Daxos. He did not seem to like the insinuation that he wasn't really that amazing after all.

"Have you tried telling them that?" asked Klaus.

"Everything in due time, Niklaus," said Daxos. "In business, everything is about timing."

"I know all about timing, mate," said Klaus. "Now, I've heard a great deal about Qarth, the greatest city that ever was or ever will be. Perhaps you would not mind if I saw it for myself? No, why would you? Well, cheerio."

**Next chapter:** Rebekah earns the trust of the northerners. Gendry and Hot Pie launch their criminal careers. Jon and Elena encounter people they did not expect to meet on the road.
Rebekah finds that sometimes, her plans do work. Gendry and Hot Pie devise a new way to earn income, with startling results. Jon learns that not all bandits were created equal and tries his hand at criminal activity. Also with startling results. Elena finds that being the deliverer of bad news can sometimes end in very unexpected things.

Near High Heart

"We need to do something to make them trust us."

The question was, what? Robb Stark wasn't stupid, and there wasn't any reason why his men would be. Okay, there were stupid people everywhere, but one could not rely on that alone. The campfire had burned low until there were only glowing embers left, and even they were beginning to grow cold. Rebekah propped her chin on her hand and rested her elbow on her knee as she sat cross-legged beside the campfire and listened to the men discuss what they could do. She stuck another stick into the embers to try and stir up some flames. She didn't like total darkness, despite being a creature of the night—she supposed she was also a lady of the night now. The dark was so cold and impersonal and so devoid of anything worth living for.

Ideas were bandied about. Most of them involved raiding. Raiding Lannister lands would hardly have an effect, with no one there to see them do it. It had to be like Stefan and Clegane's little venture into the Riverlands, except turned back against the Lannister forces.


"Amory Lorch is not a man to cross, Moreland," said another man. "If he catches you, he'll have your head."

"It'll be my head he'll try to take, and we all know he can't," said Rebekah. "You're under my command so responsibility would fall on me."

"And Amory Lorch already hates you, my lady," Fredyric pointed out.

"I guess that's settled then," said Rebekah. "Amory Lorch it is, but I'm not doing it in this farce of a dress."

"You're not going at all. You're the whore," said Fredyric. "It would be very odd if Bolton men were to find us fighting alongside a whore."

"I am not a whore. I am a courtesan."

"What's a courtesan?" asked Fredyric.

"Never mind. But if you call me a whore again, I might just rip off your balls. Slowly."

"You wouldn't."
"Try me."

They didn't.

Amory Lorch had been completely unprepared and absolutely furious. They hadn't made off with everything, but they had made off with a lot, and what they hadn't made off with, they'd burned. And was it any surprise that Tywin's personal guards had beaten him? Fredyric and his company had been selected for their skill. Lorch...well, God knew why Lorch was a knight, although he fitted the earliest definitions of the word to a tee. After all, thug on horseback was the only way to describe him.

Now they wandered through the wilderness as close to Stark territories as they could without looking as if they were deliberately pretending to be bait.

"At least we have salted pork," said a man called Felip.

"You're not eating all our spoils," remarked Jaymse. "If you eat them, how will we convince the northmen that we actually raided anything?"

"We took some coin," said Felip.

"Yes, and they wouldn't suspect us of being in Lannister employ if we handed over gold dragons and only gold dragons."

It took a day and a half, but eventually they did find a northern raiding party, possibly also on their way to raid Amory Lorch. The northmen surrounded them. Their furs were rank with grease and sweat and they kept their hair long and matted. Just what was the difference between northerners and wildlings again? She should have asked.

After the discipline of the Lannister camp and their much superior hygiene, it was a shock to the system. That wasn't to say that the Lannister camp had been sterile like a lab, but it was a sight better than...this. The northmen lived like the Mongol hordes, who were forbidden by Genghis Khan's Yasa laws to bathe in the rivers or wash their clothes, for fear of offending one water god or another; Rebekah wasn't too clear on that because she hadn't been very interested in them.

The company gave up without much of a fight and Fredyric convinced the leader of the horde that they were sellswords who had gotten a windfall but wouldn't some work either.

"What's to stop us to taking everything and sending you on your merry way?" asked the northern horde's...chieftain? War leader? Certainly not 'general' or 'commander'. They didn't look civilized enough to have such ranks.

"Nothing," said Fredyric. "But you'd have to ask the permission of my sword. She's tasted lion blood and, as you can see, we reap results."

"Who the hell says that?" called someone in the back. Did they have no concept of the hierarchy?

"Bah! Fancy southerners and their fancy words."

"It only has four letters in it."

"What?! You can read?!" The men laughed at the poor unfortunate literate soul.

"Where's your books?"
"'Ere, give me your sword. You can have this feather."

The laughing and teasing continued as they were marched back to the northerner's camp, and their spoils were confiscated.

"Since when did we take prisoners, Mik?" asked another of the men, possibly someone holding a semi-important rank.

"Lord Bolton said we needed every man who wasn't a Lannister," said the man called Mik. "We could do with a few more sellswords."

She stayed back behind Fredyric with her eyes down like a meek little whore as Fredyric put his case before the man who wasn't Mik. It wasn't hard to convince him, considering the Starks needed as many men as they could get, and Fredyric and his company looked a sight better than the other sellswords wandering around, with lice and fleas and God knew what else. Probably syphilis.

"Pretty little thing, that," remarked the recruiter. Damn, had she been noticed already? Of course she'd been noticed. Even in this state, she was prettier than all of them combined. "Are you going to share her?"

"For a price," said Fredyric. He hooked an arm around Rebekah's waist and yanked her against his body in what he thought was a possessive manner. She looked up at him and smiled, trying to look as if she were on the verge of tears rather than the verge of laughter. His hand was shaking slightly, not enough to be seen but she could feel it, and he was being far too proper. If he wanted to be convincing, he should be groping her buttocks, not keeping his hand firmly north of her hip. Unless he was fondling her breast, of course, which he wasn't.

They were admitted into the Stark army without further questioning. Her bared breasts—for that dress kept on flapping open without the use of double-sided tape—attracted a lot of attention and curious glances from the men, and other camp followers cast her dirty looks. She supposed that even though she hadn't bathed for days, she still looked and smelled a great deal better than they did, what with their love handles, cold sores, tangled hair and lurid caked on make-up. Didn't they know that caked-on make-up only made the lines on their faces more prominent, and the shadows around their eyes deeper? With make-up, less was always more. Unless it was red lipstick. One could never have enough red lipstick, provided they stayed within the lines of the lips. Obviously, these girls didn't know that. Most of them bare more resemblance to the Joker from Batman than Helen of Troy.

She strained her ears to listen for any news regarding Jaime or Stark movements. Mostly the men talked about mundane things, like how awful the rations tasted and how there was a Count Dracula running around. Lovely Damon had been spreading tall tales again. Was he trying to get found out or something?

Their particular contingent would be moving south to join with Robb Stark's main army soon, she heard, and Stark had already sent men west.

West? Did he mean to attack Lord Tywin on his home turf? That was a bold move, and if Robb Stark went west, would that mean Jaime would be taken west as well? It would be easier to rescue him in Lannister territories than in Stark or Tully ones. Was this intel trustworthy?

Well, she would find out soon enough, perhaps even from the Young Wolf's mouth.

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**Around the Kingsroad**
Their money had run out. Gendry supposed it was partly his fault for eating so much. And Hot Pie's, too. The girl, Jeremy, as she called herself, although he was pretty sure that wasn't her real name because she'd been using it since the beginning, had refused to rob travellers for money except the few that she was forced to kill after feeding on them. At first, he had been terrified of what she was. Who would have thought that those stories about vampires were real? Although she was nothing like Count Dracula, and she didn't mind garlic or sunlight at all.

But gradually, he had become used to it and he was grateful for her presence on the road, in case anything bad happened. However, he still wasn't very keen on feeding her. Hot Pie could feed her. He had more blood to spare. Gendry actually needed his because he was the only one who occasionally managed to catch dinner. Apart from people, the girl wasn't particularly good at hunting other kinds of prey. She'd brought back one rabbit once; a tough old rabbit that probably would have died within the next week, but it had been better than nothing, even though the meat had been stringy, tasteless, and tough. Jeremy's main problem was that most animals were too lovable to kill, and she couldn't kill anything young. One did not even need to consider Hot Pie. He had almost eaten nightshade berries at one point.

Their lack of hunting ability meant they needed to buy food, and without money, they couldn't do it. 'Jeremy' had insisted she could slowly adjust to the idea of killing furry animals –she'd had the nerve to suggest that they try eating beetle grubs roasted over a fire instead– but since she was so eager to get to Winterfell, Gendry hardly felt they had time for her to stop and adjust.

So it fell to him and Hot Pie to…uh…replenish their funds. 'Jeremy' used a lot of big words and Gendry had been picking up on them.

The problem was that it was harder than it sounded. Pickings were scarce on the road, even if it was the Kingsroad. That, and Gendry and Hot Pie had no idea how to rob anyone. They were a blacksmith and a baker, not bandits. "Remember, we don't kill them unless we have no choice," Gendry reminded the fat boy.

"I'm not afraid to kill," said Hot Pie.

"Sure," said Gendry.

"I'm not! I've killed someone before! There was a boy and he stole my pie so I kicked him and kicked him and kicked him and--"

"Shut up, unless you want to either scare away everyone or have Jeremy find us! You know how she is. She'll probably drag us north to the Wall by our ears." Hot Pie shut his pie hole.

They picked their way through the woods as quietly as they could. Jays and magpies scolded them from above. The sun was setting behind the trees and the mountains in the west, although instead of the orange sunsets Gendry was used to in King's Landing, sunsets here on the road were blue and grey like cold steel, and one did not even notice them until it simply became too dark to see.

He suddenly raised a hand to stop Hot Pie from going any further. He heard someone humming an unfamiliar tune.

Sam hummed to himself as he gathered the firewood. Jon would probably have finished gutting their dinner by now. He was in a far better mood now that they had found the Kingsroad and were steadily making their way south. The boy wondered what it would be like to meet Jon's family. He had heard enough about them to feel as if he knew them already. Well, a little bit. Just as he felt as if he knew the white walkers because he'd read about them. Although, Jon always insisted that
reading was not the same as experiencing. However, books were as close as Sam ever got to the real world.

At least, before this, he supposed. He had to say, this adventure was growing on him. It was much better to travel with a friend, and to know that there were endless possibilities at the end of it rather than a wall of ice where the men were harder than stone. And, of course, he would like to see Jon reunite with Elena. His father Randyll Tarly had always scoffed at the tales and songs about fair maidens and brave knights, but Sam had always been a bit of a romantic. He loved the tales and he always imagined he would rescue a fair maiden. In reality, it was more likely he would be rescued by a fair maiden, but it didn't stop him from dreaming.

He imagined what their reunion would be like. Would there be tears? Would Jon ask Elena to marry him? It would be a beautiful wedding. He'd only been to his cousin's once when he had been very young, and the bride had cried. Elena wouldn't cry when she married Jon. He didn't think she would anyway, although his mother had explained that women sometimes cried when they were very happy. His cousin's bride hadn't looked all that happy, but what did he know? He'd been very young then.

He added another stick to the pile in his arms. Dinner first. Wedding plans later. Jon wouldn't let him talk about them anyway. Sam was so engrossed in his little musings that he did not notice the two people stepping out of the shadows until one of them addressed him.

"Hand over all your money and we won't kill you!"

He paused, still holding his stick in mid-air. The speaker had been a chubby little boy. Beside him was a much taller boy with muscles that bulged on his arms. His dark hair was cut short, and he looked very hungry and angry and mean. Both of them were armed with swords. They didn't look as if they knew how to use them, but did it matter? It was two against one! And Sam didn't really know how to use his sword either.

"I'm sorry. I don't have money!" he shouted, and then he turned and fled, the firewood still in his arms. He managed not to scream until the two boys pounced on him. He tried to throw the sticks at them, but in his haste, he simply threw them all into the air and they fell around him like ineffective arrows. "Give us your money!" the fat boy was screaming.

Sam tried to scramble away, but his legs became tangled in his cloak. The other two were crushing him as they tried to reach for his pockets and tear his sword away from his belt. His sword! He reached to his right side for it, only to remember he'd belted it to his left today.

"Jon!" he shouted. "Help, Jon!"

The hare's fat dripped into the fire and made it crackle. Jon lifted the spit off the fire to examine the animal. It was still a little undercooked. In fact, it was at vampire juicy levels. He set it on the fire again and turned the hare slowly. Ghost hardly blinked as he watched it with his head cocked to one side. "You've already had dinner," Jon told him. "That look might work on Sam or Elena, but it won't work on me." They had caught a brace of hares, both him and Ghost. Sharing in their little party wasn't quite fair, as the wolf always at least got half of the kill, while he and Sam had to share the remainder. Sometimes he wondered who was the master and who was the pet.

Suddenly, he looked up, hare forgotten. Sam was shouting for him. They were under attack! He sprang to his feet, sword drawn, and ran in the direction of the screams to find Sam being accosted by two bandits. Only two? Usually bandits hunted in larger packs, but as of late, a lot of smallfolk were turning to robbery, thanks to the raids and the burned crops. He hadn't heard much about
anything—no news from King's Landing or the Twins at all—but he'd heard about Stefan Salvatore and Gregor Clegane's fine work.

Jon dragged the larger man off Sam and flung him against a tree, stunning him for a moment. The man recovered before Jon could run him through and dived for his dropped sword, only to find that Jon had kicked it out of the way. He levelled the tip of his sword at the man's neck. Well, boy, actually. The bandit looked younger than him, although not by that much. Perhaps it was the lack of a beard. Well, it was just his luck that he had tried to rob Jon Snow; now the robber would become the robbed. "Hand over your money, and I might just spare you," he said.

"We don't have any money," said the boy as he raised his hands into the air.

The other bandit screamed as Ghost sank his teeth into his calf and dragged him off Sam. He was just a little boy, and a fat clumsy one at that. "Jeremy!" he screamed. "Jeremy!"

Jon heard a rush of wind coming towards him, and then a blurry shadow knocked him to the ground. He cried out as his attacker twisted his hand to make him drop his sword and pressed his arm against his neck to cut off his air. Then, as suddenly as he had appeared, he released him.

And Jon realized he wasn't a 'he'.

"Jon?" whispered the girl. He would know that voice anywhere. She clambered off him and he sat up. His neck was still sore from almost having been crushed. Her long locks had been hacked off in the roughest manner, the rags she now wore were worse than what she had worn on the Wall, and there was dirt on her face, but he knew her just as surely as he knew his name was Jon Snow.

"Elena," he whispered. It wasn't clear who fell into whose arms, but what did that matter? Elena was in his arms, and he was in hers. He held her to him tightly and felt her bury her face against his neck and shoulder. They sank to the ground as if they were the only two people in the world. He stroked her hair, hardly daring to believe that she was here. He didn't ever want to have to let her go just in case this was a dream. If he let her go, he might just wake up and find he was still at the Wall, never to see her again. "I'm here now. I'm here, Elena."

She wrapped her arms tightly about him as they sank to the ground. Jon. It was Jon! "Did I hurt you?" she asked when she finally pulled away. She cupped his face with both hands and brushed a stray lock of hair away from his forehead. He looked a bit older and a bit worldlier than he had been before, and his beard was rather long.

He shook his head. "I'm fine," he said. She gently took his hand anyway to examine his wrist. He winced, and the wrist was beginning to swell.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's just a sprain," he said. "I've had worse."

He might have had worse, but he needed that wrist now more than ever. It was his sword arm. Before he could object, she sank her fangs into her wrist. Blood welled up from the two puncture wounds. "Drink" she said.

"Elena, I don't—" he began.

"Take it. It's going to waste anyway," she said. He couldn't argue against that. Tentatively, he put his lips to her wrist as if he were kissing it. The idea of drinking blood probably repelled him a little. It had certainly repelled her at first, until she had gotten used to the idea. The swelling faded
immediately. Jon's eyes widened as he flexed his wrist. Her wounds healed, leaving no trace.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "I had thought you would be in King's Landing."

"After what happened to Lord Stark, I couldn't really stay. I'm so sorry, Jon," she said.

"Why? What happened?" He narrowed his eyes. Could it be possible? Word would have reached the Wall, at least. Wasn't that why he was here, having… deserted?

"What happened to my father, Elena?" he pressed.

Behind them, even Hot Pie had stopped whinging about his leg. Or rather, Gendry had shut him up. Jon's eyes bored into her as he gripped her shoulders. If she had been human, she would have bruised.

She hesitantly began the tale with what she knew, from the moment when the Tower of the Hand had been attacked and when she had lost Sansa and Arya. She told him about seeing Damon standing behind Cersei when Lord Ned had been brought before the Sept of Baelor. Jon's fist tightened and he swallowed rapidly.

"Joffrey had him…had him…executed." The very thought of it made her want to cry again, and she felt her eyes burn as tears formed. She hated to be the one who had to tell him.

"No," he whispered.

"I'm so sorry, Jon," she said. It wasn't enough. He had just lost the only parent he had ever known.

"No," he repeated, his voice harder this time. "It can't be. You must be mistaken, Elena."

"I wish I was," she said.

"It can't be!"

Ghost whined, sensing Jon's distress.

Elena didn't know what she could do, so she took him into her arms, stiff and unyielding as he was. Her touch seemed to unlock something in him. He struggled against her, sucking in deep breaths. She never let him go. "Cry if you need to," she said. "I'm here."

Jon fought against Elena's embrace, refusing to believe what she was telling him, but knowing it to be true. His father was dead. His journey south… what had he come for? He had failed, ultimately. His father was dead. Gone. His head on a spike on a wall in the Red Keep. His breath stuck in his throat. It couldn't get past that painful lump there. He swallowed to get rid of it. His eyes burned as he tried to keep the tears at bay. Elena still held him against her even though he was pushing her away, although he didn't know why. Perhaps if he accepted her touch, it meant that it was true.

One hot tear slipped down his cheek. And another. He stopped struggling. She continued to stroke his hair as he sank against her and rested his head against her chest, as if he were a little boy. "It's all right to cry," she whispered. He didn't want to cry, but his body refused to listen to him. More tears came. He sucked in gasps of air. The sun went down in the west, leaving him alone in the darkness. Finally he just stilled, too exhausted to fight the truth.

She pressed a gentle kiss on his forehead. He finally lifted his head and looked up at her, with those luminous dark eyes and the kind heart. He didn't know what possessed him, but he leaned
forward tentatively. She didn't pull back.

That first kiss was so full of fire that it eventually melted through the ice that seemed to surround his heart. A spark passed between them. It conveyed everything they wanted to say that words could not convey. The need became urgent. She was the first to push her tongue between his parted lips to taste him, and he returned the favour. One hand grasped the back of her head while he fumbled at her clothing, undoing the ties that kept her modesty intact. She was better at it and had removed his furs and jerkin before he managed to get rid of her tunic.

His desire, his pain, his anger, and his grief all intermingled and drowned out anything else he might have felt during his first time with a woman. Her chest had been bound with linen bandages and he couldn't see how he could begin to unravel them. She solved his problem by ripping through all of them. Her breasts sprang free. He was already hard and straining against his breeches, and his fingers became clumsy as if they no longer belonged to him. She undid the ties of his trousers and braies to free him. He spread his cloak out and lay her down on it. Somehow, her breeches and under things had disappeared. She pulled his head down as he moved over her, straddling her body on his hands and knees. She was so beautiful. He let himself explore her as he had done so many times in his fantasies, tracing his fingers down the sides of her breasts and over her soft, smooth skin. Was this really real? But it had to be. It felt very real.

Elena arched her back as he brushed his fingers over her hardening nipples. Her fingers raked down his back and broke through his skin, finally allowing him to give voice to the pain in his heart. She gripped his buttocks, and before he knew it, she had flipped him over so that she was straddling him at the hips and he saw her in all her glory, a goddess of the night rising up in the darkness, illuminated by the single torch that had been left in the clearing.

She leaned down to trace a line of feathery kisses from the base of his jaw, starting from just beneath his ear, lightly nipping his earlobe as she did so, down to his collarbone and his chest. Wherever she touched, she left a line of hot desire that built up. He had never thought he could feel like this, so aware and in oblivion at the same time. Thought was drowned out by sensation and the baser instincts. He needed her. He needed her. He needed her.

She circled his nipple with her tongue. He repeated her name like prayer. *Elena. Elena. Elena.* He was a traveller lost in a snowstorm, and she was his shelter. He pulled her head up again to kiss her. The contours of their bodies melded with one another's perfectly. They devoured one another until it wasn't clear where one ended and the other began. "I don't want to hurt you," he managed to whisper.

"You won't," she said.

When he entered her, it was as if all his emotions came to the surface. He could bare all of himself, his body and soul, to her without fear, because she would understand. She was part of him. He filled her completely as she guided him into a rhythm not unlike the waves that wind created on the surface of a lake. The ripples grew larger, their crests grew higher. With each wave of pleasure and fire, she brought him closer and closer to the edge.

He arched his back as they reached their release together. He cried out wordlessly. Her voice joined his. The sound was so primal it would have not been out of place in this forest five hundred years ago, or even five thousand. It was a sound that had existed ever since the first man and woman walked the earth together. In that moment, they were one and whole. Complete in one another.

The wave faded gently. She still rode him even after his release until she was spent. She bent down to kiss him, more tenderly this time, as she sank onto him and rested there. They lay entwined
together, her with one leg flung over his body and her head resting on his chest with her ear over his heart. He held her close in his arms. "I'm going to kill them all, Elena," he whispered. "All of them. But I can't do it alone." She lifted her head and met his gaze. He stroked her hair. Her poor hair. "Will you help me?"

"Of course I'll help you," she replied. He smiled. How wonderful she was; how generous and kind and strong and beautiful. She embodied everything that was good and right in the world.

"I love you, Elena," he whispered. "I'm in love with you."

A/N: Hope you enjoyed that!

Next chapter: Sam gets acquainted with his new travelling companions. Elena ponders Jon's declaration. Jon makes a shocking proposal. Daenerys settles in Qarth but has growing suspicions about her new friend's agenda. Jaime is serenaded by northerners and gets new lodgings. Robb sets down some boundaries for Katherine.
Chapter Summary

Sam gets to know his new companions. Daenerys and Klaus ponder what their Qarthian hosts want. Jon and Elena make a promise to one another. Jaime is serenaded by the northerners.

Somewhere on the Kingsroad

"I'm so sorry, Jon." When Sam heard those words and saw the expression on Elena's face, he knew it couldn't be good. And it only became worse as the story unfolded. He knew how much Jon cared for his family, and now his family was broken. Ghost whined. Sam shushed him. He wondered what he should do, what he could do, to help. There was nothing in all the books he had ever read that advised him on how to help a grieving friend, especially not one who was as stoic as Jon Snow.

It was just as well that Elena was here. When she took Jon into her arms and held him no matter how he struggled and fought, Sam knew the best thing he could do was to give Jon space and Elena some time to work her magic. Ghost whined again, and when Sam tried to shush him again, he clamped his teeth around the boy's sleeve and practically dragged him away. Ah, so Ghost agreed too, didn't he?

The sky was getting darker. If he left those two here all on their own, they wouldn't be able to see anything very soon. So he lit a torch and stuck it in the ground so they would still be able to see, and then he beckoned to the other two boys, the two bandits, who had tried to rob him, and invited them back to their campsite. He was being so generous.

"My leg hurts," whimpered the fat one—the even fatter one.

"Serves you right for trying to become a bandit," said Sam. "Ghost could have ripped it right off." The bite marks couldn't be that deep. Ghost had shown remarkably good self-restraint. He felt much more confident now that he knew they weren't going to hurt him, and if they tried, Ghost would deal with them. Also, he was pretty sure Jon and Elena would hear and they would come to his rescue if need be. He just didn't think there was going to be any need.

"I'm sorry we tried to…rob you," said the taller boy. "We're not really robbers. We're just hungry."

"Well, we have dinner all made up," said Sam. He was hungry too, now that he mentioned it. Ghost dragged him all the way back to the edge of the campfire, where he finally released him and pawed at the ground in front of the smoking fire and hare.

The skin had turned to charcoal and black greasy smoke was rising from it.

Sam swore under his breath and quickly took their ruined dinner off the fire. No wonder the wolf had been so distressed! Could it be salvaged?

They cut away the burnt bits. Luckily, the meat beneath was still edible, if a little tough and dry. He shared out the meat between the three of them, setting aside a portion for Jon and Elena should
they want it. The fat boy, Hot Pie, tried to protest until Sam threatened to set Ghost on him again.
The wolf simply stared at his master's dinner with unavering attention.

"So…who are you?" asked the tall one. Gendry, his name was. Sam wished his arms could look
like Gendry's.

"I'm Samwell Tarly, of Horn Hill," said Sam. He licked his fingers clean and wiped them on his
handkerchief. "Jon is Jon Snow, formerly of Winterfell. Lord Eddard Stark is —was his father."

"Are you brothers with him, Gendry?" asked Hot Pie.

"No," said Gendry.

"But you're—"

"You're the one who keeps saying I'm Lord Stark's bastard. I'm not. Most likely not." Gendry
turned back to Sam. "How does he know…her?" He glanced back in the direction of the clearing
where they had left the other two. He seemed rather unhappy about it, actually, now that Sam
thought about it.

"Elena? They met on the Wall. We all met on the Wall," said Sam. He liked answering questions.
It made him feel knowledgeable and important. It was a little bit silly, of course, but he still
enjoyed the feeling. There were so many questions he had himself, like how Elena could be so fast,
and why those boys thought she would be able to help them against Jon. She was, after all, a girl,
and girls could not beat boys, right? Unless their name was Sam.

"Don't deserters get their heads cut off?" asked Hot Pie. He had tied some rags around the wounds
in his leg. They would probably need to be treated. While not deep, Ghost wasn't known for his
dental hygiene.

"We didn't desert," said Sam. "We never took our vows. We simply left."

"Oh," said Hot Pie.

"Elena…her name is Elena?" asked Gendry. "That's a Targaryen name."

Sam paused. "Why, so it is," he said. Why hadn't he noticed it before? "I don't think she's
Targaryen." Everyone knew Targaryens had silver hair and violet eyes. Although… perhaps
Elena's family had been Targaryen supporters. Maybe that was why she had been on the Wall,
because she had been hunted and she was trying to hide!

"Does Elena know Jon very well?" asked Gendry.

"I think they were friends before I went to the Wall. She gave him her necklace when the Lord
Commander sent her away," said Sam. They were probably more than just friends now. He had
never been with a girl before, but he had heard the men talking about it. His brother Dickon had
never been quiet about his conquests. He knew how it worked. Perhaps he hadn't been wrong to
start planning Jon's wedding.

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Essos, Qarth

She had never known luxury, even in Pentos. The Dothraki Khalasar, of course, had not even been
able to offer her the comforts of a proper bath with oils and salts, much less five different types of
them. It was easy to forget everything else and simply allow her generous host to spoil her.
Unfortunately, there was a voice in her head that stopped her from feeling completely at ease, and it was no surprise to her that it bore an uncanny resemblance to Klaus' voice. He knew more than he let on, although she had her own suspicions about her gracious host. After all, men like Daxos did not become rich by performing acts of charity.

"I am not interrupting anything, am I?"

She opened her eyes. "Niklaus, do you understand what a closed door implies?"

"Knock and it shall be opened unto you," he said with a smirk.

"Did you? Knock?"

"I did. Softly. You didn't hear it, Your Grace. What troubles you, my queen?"

"You."

He laughed, clearly enjoying her frustration. Daenerys resolved to be calm in the face of all things Klausian just so he would not have the satisfaction of amusing himself at her expense. He handed her a goblet of rich red wine.

"Drinking in the bath?" she asked as she accepted it.

"It's Dornish," said Klaus. "I thought you might like to try it, Your Grace, considering you never got to the last time."

The wine was chilled from the bowl of ice in which the pitcher sat. It was a nice contrast with the hot, almost boiling bath water. He perched on the edge of the bath, seemingly unaware of the proper sort of behaviour in this situation, which was to turn away instead of admiring her as if she were a piece of art.

"Are you here for a reason, or do you merely want to intrude on my well-deserved comforts?" she asked.

"I've just wandered around the city. Are you not curious to see what sort of place we have arrived at?" he asked.

"I have a feeling that you're about to tell me anyway," said Daenerys. She leaned back against the sloped edge of the tub, where the metal had been moulded specifically to fit the shape of one's neck and shoulders. The soap bubbles had dispersed somewhat, and they did nothing to preserve her modesty. Not that she had any in the first place; not after Drogo. And Klaus did not seem to mind at all and hardly even looked.

"It's all very impressive, with their high walls, hanging gardens, and whatnot," he said, sounding not at all impressed. "Our host is quite a character, it seems. He's not well liked, but he is well feared. I think you're the most interesting thing that has happened to this place for a long time. They couldn't stop talking about you, but they all ran away when they saw me."

"Can you blame them, after what you did?"

"That? That was a parlour trick. You should see what I'm really capable of."

"Spare me your boasting, Niklaus," said Daenerys. "Do you think you're so different from any other man I've met? You're simply a little paler and faster."
"I am different. You've only just skimmed the surface of my talents."

"Then prove it to me," said Daenerys. She sat up. "Prove that you're not just another brute with a sword."

"I could tell you things about Qarth that no other man would be able to tell you," said Klaus. "I hear the King of Spice is most displeased—"

"Is there something you can tell me that I don't already know?"

"Have patience, Your Grace. I haven't gotten to the good part yet. Spice is annoyed that he didn't get you first. It appears that our merchant friend has goals beyond trading."

"Well, that's obvious," said Daenerys. "Since when are men ever content with what they have?"

"He's single," said Klaus. "Daxos, I mean. Not Spice, although I suspect he is too. He has to be, looking like that. But, to get back on topic, Daxos has also been buying things that would not look out of place in a bride's trousseau."

Daenerys had no idea what a 'true-sow' was. She hoped it wasn't a pig and assumed that it had something to do with marriage and weddings.

"Well, it's not entirely impossible that he would want the Targaryen name, but what can he give me in return?"

"I believe that is a question he is in a better position to answer than I am, and one that he would be happy to answer."

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Somewhere on the Kingsroad

"I'm in love with you, Elena."

She brushed her fingers along the side of Jon's face, tracing his features; the oft furrowed brow, the strong jawline, the lips she had often wondered about kissing. She kissed him again as he whispered those words. She cared for him, cared deeply, even, and she loved him in her own fashion, but was she in love with him? She didn't know. Jon did not seem to notice the fact that she had not answered him. She continued to trace her fingers along the lines of his body, stroking the smooth skin and the hard muscles beneath. She toyed with the silver locket he wore about his neck. Had he worn her necklace ever since she'd given it to him?

Gradually, his breathing slowed and deepened as he fell asleep, still holding her. She pulled the edges of the cloak over him in case he got cold. Red eyes were reflected in the torchlight as Ghost padded over and sat down beside them. She patted the cloak, inviting the wolf to join them. He didn't need to be asked twice as he curled up by Jon's other side, with his head resting in Jon's lap. Jon shifted in his sleep, but he was too exhausted to wake up.

"What should I say to him, Ghost?" she whispered. "He said he loves me. I don't know if I should say it back."

The wolf blinked at her. Was that what she had come to? Talking to a wolf about her love life? The moon had risen like a cold pale eye in the sky watching everything impassively as it had done for the past million years. She closed her eyes. They could talk about it in the morning.

Jon's steady heartbeat lulled her to sleep, and she dreamed. She dreamed of home, of Damon and
Stefan, of being human again, of becoming vampire.

She dreamed of the future in Westeros, and she dreamed of Jon.

When he woke, Jon wondered where he was. Then he remembered he did this every morning, because he was on the road and he slept in a different place every night. The next thing he became aware of was that he was not alone. There were two weights pinning him down. Ghost was using his leg as a pillow and Elena was using his chest. Then he realized was that he was naked and lying on his cloak while Elena's—too small to be an adequate blanket—had been drawn up in an attempt to cover the two of them. If they had not been sleeping in such an intimate huddle, they would probably have all died of cold sometime during the night.

But he had not felt the cold at all. How could he have? Last night...

Last night.

How could he? He had taken advantage of her desire to comfort him. Was he really that sort of man? Maybe there was some truth to what they said about bastards.

Elena stirred and slowly her eyes fluttered open. She rubbed them with the back of her hand. "Hey," she said with a smile. Instead of pulling away from him, she snuggled up closer and then stretched up to kiss him on the cheek, just beside his mouth. "Good morning." Well, she didn't seem to be unhappy with him. It gladden him to see that. Was it a bad thing to have done if she didn't regret it at all? Or perhaps she was still too asleep to realize what had happened.

"Elena, about last night," he said. "We need to talk."

She stilled and her smile faded. "I'm sorry," she said.

"You're sorry? What for?" Was she sorry that she had given herself to him? It felt as if there was a rock inside his belly. It was dragging him down, making it hard for him to breathe.

Ghost whined and wriggled further up so he could take part in the conversation. Without realizing it, Jon placed a hand on his head and stroked his ears, finding strength from his wolf's presence. He could deal with Lannister men, Stefan Salvatore, and even wights. He didn't know how to deal with this.

"I took advantage of your grief. I shouldn't have. You're not ready," she said.

"Elena, no. You didn't take advantage of me," said Jon. "You couldn't have. I took advantage of you."

"You didn't," said Elena. "I wanted it. Did you want it?"

If only he hadn't. But he could not deny it, nor did he really want to now that he knew she did not have any regrets about it. He didn't even know how to say how much he had wanted her, actually. He kissed her, tentatively at first, on the lips. They were soft and willing; eager, even. "Very much," he said when he pulled away. "I wanted you very much."

"Then I don't really see what either of us have to be sorry about," she said as she cupped his face.

"Will you marry me, Elena?"

That made her pause. "Jon, I..."
"I took your honour, Elena, and I love you. It is the right thing to do. I may be a Snow, but my brother is the Lord of Winterfell now and as long as he remains so, we will want for nothing."

"I don't care if you're a Snow or Ice or Hail anything else to do with the cold. None of that matters to me. It's just that I don't think I'm ready. I'm only eighteen, Jon. Where I come from, eighteen year old girls don't tend to get married. Besides, marriage is just a piece of paper. I care about you very much, and you care about me. Is that not enough?"

There was nothing but truthfulness in her eyes. He drew her closer to him so they fitted against each other completely, and no one, not even an attention-hungry Ghost, could separate them. He wondered what his father would say. Then again, his father had never placed such restrictions on him. It had been Robb who had had to live with all the rules. And Elena was not really a girl who believed in the rules. Besides, she made sense. What was marriage except a contract, more often than not made more for political reasons than for love? "I can live with that," he said.

"Then let's cement it," said Elena. Jon did not know what 'to see-ment' meant, but he knew what Elena wanted. Ghost cleverly got out of the way after giving them a doleful look and then went off to hunt for breakfast. They hardly noticed his absence. He straddled her on his hands and knees as he bent down to kiss her and delighted in the way her body responded to his touch. He wanted to leave his mark on her; to let the world know that she was his and he was hers.

Near the Blue Fork

How many days had it been? Jaime had lost count. It was easy to lose count when every day was the same. He was fed black bread and plain boring water and sometimes beer that tasted like fish piss; just enough to keep him from starving. The men would jeer at him and call him names—not very creative names, mind. They were still northmen. He would ignore them. They would chain him to a cart whenever they needed to move camp, while the lords seethed and called for his head. Again. One would have thought that they would have stopped after the first time they had tried it, and Robb Stark had said no.

Robb Stark was cleverer than all the northmen combined, although that wasn't saying much. And that defeat at Riverrun could be attributed entirely to Jaime's bad luck.

His current lodgings, such as they were, were always near the centre of the camp where it would be most difficult to break him out. From his position, he could see most of the movements of the Stark camp pretty clearly, particularly in relation to those who were closest to Robb Stark. There was the Frey squire, of course, although that was only to be expected, since he was squiring for Stark. And then there was the pretty bard, Katherine Pierce.

He had seen her confrontation with Catelyn Stark. He hadn't heard what was said, but judging by Catelyn's face afterwards as the girl had walked away back towards her son's tent, dangerous words had been exchanged. However, this was the first time he had seen Katherine Pierce up close, and he wasn't surprised that the Stark boy was smitten already.

"Robb Stark has good taste," he called out to her. His voice wasn't loud, but she stopped in her tracks and turned slowly to face him.

"Lord Lannister," she said. "I don't believe we've been officially introduced."

"Do we need to be?" said Jaime. "I know you are Katherine Pierce, and as for me… Well, everyone knows me." She did not glare at him or roll her eyes the way he wanted her to. He continued anyway. What else could he do? "Robb Stark must be much comforted, to have you
soothing him after his father's tragic death." She came closer to the bars of his cage, a little smile upon her lips. She did not defend herself. "Tell me, does he howl your name in bed, or does he simply just howl? He doesn't seem like the quiet type. And does he like you on your back, or your hands and knees? The latter, I would think."

"You're fishing, Lord Lannister," said Katherine. "Everyone knows lions do not know how to catch fish. You had a trout in your paws, but you let the wolf steal it away." She walked away, and he felt a little smug even though it wasn't much of a win. But it was a win, or at least he thought so. He'd take what he could get for now.

The singing started when the sun went down. It was soft at first, but he heard the words clearly.

*Look down, look down!*

*Don't look her in the eye.*

*Look down, look down!*

*You're here until you die.*

He looked up. Well, well, he was being *serenaded* by the northmen. It was laughable. Did they all think they were bards now? Although it was hard to get this song wrong. The words were simple and the tune wasn't that much harder.

Another northerner caught his eye and then proceeded to mime the actions of a lovesick idiot by clasping his hands in front of his chest, fluttering his eyelashes (Badly. In civilized circles, this was known as blinking), and looking upwards towards the heavens.

*I know she'll wait.*

*I know that she'll be true!*

Jaime stiffened. Were they singing about Cersei? The northerner grinned and showed his crooked yellowed teeth. His fellow barbarians responded more loudly.

*Look down, look down!*

*They've all forgotten you!*

Had they forgotten him? His father? Cersei? Tyrion? He wasn't sure. Then he shook his head angrily. How could he let a *song* get to him? It wasn't even a particularly good song. The singing became louder until it seemed to be surrounding him on all sides, assaulting his ears and his mind. He tried to ignore it, but he had to wonder if there was any truth to it.

The northmen started stamping their feet and waving their ale tankards about in glee.

*Look down, look down!*

*You'll always be a slave.*

*Look down, look down!*

*You're standing in your grave.*

No, he wasn't going to die here. He was *not* going to die in a cage built for him by Starks. It was just a song. They were trying to drive him mad. They would not succeed. He was Jaime Lannister.
He did not care for the opinions of sheep, or wolves, for that matter, although he would have to endure their bleating.

It didn't stop after just one round. The song started up again at irregular intervals all through the night, cutting through the dark peace just as he thought he was falling asleep. It happened again, and again, and again, and again, and again.

And again and again and again and again.

He would nod off, and then he would be jolted awake. His eyes felt as if someone had poured sand into them, and his mind as if someone had filled his head with fog that made it impossible to breathe. Northmen singing in unison! Was there any worse torture than that?

It wasn't until dawn that the singing finally stopped, and by then, the noise of the camp made it impossible to rest.

Katherine came to find him later that morning. She smirked when she saw him.

"Did you not sleep well last night, my Lord Lannister?" she asked. "Did the wolves' howling keep you awake?"

"Very clever, my lady," he said. "Do you think to break me like this?"

"Not at all. I was merely amusing myself, since I was so very bored. And because I can. Did you like the new song? I have so many more."

Gods, no. It wasn't so much the music, although the words were vile and pricked his mind like little needles. But they had succeeded in keeping him awake all night. Tyrion had once told him of a torture method he'd read about; sleep deprivation could kill and it was one of the most painful ways to die, according to his book. He had to hope Robb Stark didn't want him to die.

Was it ironic that his salvation lay with Stark?

"You are not to deprive Jaime Lannister of sleep for more than two nights." When he had first heard it, he'd thought the men were jesting. But then Robb had gone out to hear the song for himself, and it really was incessant, even if the words were fitting. No one had really known how it had all started, but Robb hadn't needed to ask. There was only one bard he knew of in the camp.

Not that he didn't enjoy the whole tale and he really, really liked the look on Jaime Lannister's face when he'd heard that song –if only he had some way of immortalizing it for posterity– but he needed Lannister alive.

"Forgive me, Your Grace," said Katherine. She did not sound contrite enough to be forgiven, not that Robb could help but forgive her. "He was disparaging your character. I did not like it."

"He is a Lannister and my captive," said Robb. "I would not pay any heed to what he says, unless he's leaking his father's secrets, in which case I am all ears."

"I don't think he knows anything anymore, Your Grace. He is simply a nice reminder of our victory. Although, he has become rather dirty and sorry looking of late."

"He is a prisoner, Katherine. He is not supposed to have silken cloaks and golden armour."

"Why ever not, Your Grace?"
He looked at her. What was she playing at now? "Jaime Lannister was a legend. He still is, in some ways, but to look at him now, you would only see a man," she said as she took a turn in the small confines of his tent, her hands clasped in front of her. He realized that by walking slowly in circles around him, as she did, she was showing off her figure to the best effect. Her skirts swished. He couldn't help but watch her, mesmerized by her movements. Then she stopped and turned to face him. "Would you rather have defeated a legend, or a man?"

"A legend, of course," said Robb. Understanding dawned on him. He called for Elijah.

"Summon the smith," he said. "I want golden manacles made, and a golden cage. Lannister can have his cloak back, and his armour too."

They bathed him and dressed him up like a joke, with his Lannister red cloak, all freshly laundered, and his golden armour. Although he suspected his original armour had been melted down and this was just a cheap imitation that would not save him from the first hit with an arrow. Starks were nothing if not misers. The manacles, too, were gold plated with embossed lions on them. Katherine's touch, no doubt. Only a woman would pay so much attention to the fine details. The insides of the manacles were rough, so they rubbed the skin on his wrists raw. He didn't think Robb Stark was creative enough to come up such an idea. It had to be that Pierce woman.

The bars of his new cage were not plated with gold, but they were shiny and polished and strong. There was a golden placard in the front. It said: "Ser Jaime Lannister, Kingslayer."

"I don't see why we shouldn't have put 'male' and 'human' on it," said Katherine to Elijah Frey as she surveyed her handiwork. Was it just him, or was there something between those two? "He is, after all, both of those things."

"He is a prisoner, not a zoo animal," said Frey.

"Same difference," said Katherine.

Jaime pretended they were not there. They were beneath his notice, this girl and this squire, but somehow, it was this very same girl who had made him into this parody of himself and this very same squire who had defeated him in single combat. They weren't what they seemed. No, they weren't just a girl and a squire. There was more than that, and he was going to find out what they were after he got himself out of here.

And then he would pay his debts.

**A/N:** Song from Les Miserables, modified to suit the situation. Katherine is a huge plagiarizer.

**Next chapter:** Rebekah finally finds Jaime and plans to rescue him, only to have her operation thwarted by a familiar face. Robb prepares to take Harrenhal. Edmure makes a brilliant move to advance his military career and contribute to Robb's campaign.
Chapter Summary

Rebekah does her best to help Jaime with his predicament. Robb has a brilliant plan, but Edmure's plan is better. Or so Edmure thinks.

Near the Blue Fork

Finally, they were where she wanted to be; Robb Stark's main camp. He was still in the Riverlands and seemingly doing nothing of import. Rebekah decided not to send word back to Lord Tywin. She doubted he would be impressed by a letter that said, "Stark doing nothing."

It was much tidier than the auxiliary forces she and Fredyric and company had been riding with, although their level of hygiene was still far, far beneath those of the Lannisters. They were assigned to the outskirts of the camp, where Rebekah went about her 'daily chores' of fetching water for the men, doing their laundry, and 'servicing' Fredyric whenever he asked. Which was never, so she actually had to remind him from time to time that she was supposed to be his personal courtesan.

All the while, she kept her ears open, listening for keywords like 'Lannister' and 'Jaime'. Or 'Kingslayer'. The men seemed to think it was an insult of some kind, but she thought it was sexy. Not every man was capable of killing a king.

They did talk about him and his new cage and his new manacles, all made of shiny gold plated steel, except his armour, which was just gold plated iron and was more a costume than anything.

They talked about how a Frey had managed to take down the Kingslayer, and then made fun of his prowess. Overrated? They should have tried to fight him themselves.

They talked about how they had kept him awake all night with a song that had been written to mock him especially, and even now, it remained one of the northmen's favourite songs.

The songs themselves disturbed her the most. Ever since she had heard of 'Arise Northern Sons' fittingly plagiarizing the tune and most of the words from the French national anthem, she had known that there was someone from her world in the Stark camp, but she hadn't been sure of who it was. Now she knew that Robb Stark's favourite bard was called Katherine Pierce.

She didn't really know Katherine, or Katerina, as her brothers had called her. All she knew was that she looked just like irritating little Elena Gilbert, but a thousand times more dangerous. Most people couldn't elude Nik for five hundred years, but Katherine had. And now she was on the Stark side.

But no matter. She wasn't going to let some little bitch stop her in her mission. She hadn't done anything except plagiarize other people's national anthems and musicals, at any rate.

Nobody took any notice of the mousy little courtesan who went about her daily business amongst them. In her lifetime, she had learned that, when in a strange place where one did not belong, all one had to do was pretend that one had every right to be there, and everybody else would simply
accept it. She drew closer and closer to the centre of the camp where they kept Jaime in his cage. The bastards had even put a placard on it as if he were some specimen on display at a museum or a zoo. He was sleeping fitfully, his wrists raw and bleeding from the chafing of the specially made manacles. The cage wasn't large enough for him to stretch himself out fully. She wanted to do nothing more than to break him out of that cage, but Lord Tywin had given very specific orders. She bit her lip. There had to be something she could do for him.

She slipped inside his dreams.

He saw her again, clothed only in a white silken robe that the wind blew against her curves so that it lay like a second skin on her. She beckoned to him. "You're not bringing me more bad news, are you?" he asked as he sauntered over to her. This wasn't real. He knew he was in a cage somewhere in the Riverlands, but who was he to question this sweet escape, if only for a little while? He supposed he really ought to be working his way out of the cage, but his plans were of the type that took a long time to bear fruit. Besides, Catelyn Stark hadn't been visiting lately and he doubted he could tug on Robb Stark's heartstrings. Oh well, a little indulgence wouldn't hurt.

"Why would you ask that?" she said, cocking her head to the side.

"I've come to see you as a harbinger of bad news. Remember the last time you were in my dream? You were telling me that the Starks--"

"Oh yes, that time they fucked you in the arse."

He scowled at her. Dream-Rebekah was every bit as irritating as real Rebekah.

"You don't need to put it so crudely," he said. "I thought you were a lady. And that is not what happened."

"Oh? So what did?"

"Every bit as clueless as ever, I see," said Jaime. "I like keeping you in the dark. In fact, I almost won."

"Pfft," said Rebekah. She blew air through her lips so quickly that they fluttered and made a rude buzzing noise. He recalled that was called either a strawberry or a gooseberry or some other berry.

"I thought my dreams were supposed to be more pleasant."

"So you do know that this isn't real," she said.

"Does this look like my shiny cage to you? But you're not real either. In fact, you're just another part of me; the irritating part that I want to suppress," He was talking to a spectre. Was he really that grateful to see a friendly face? Although, he had to admit, this view was a sight better than what he had grown used to. Karstarks were not famed for their beauty and he hadn't seen Lady Katherine for a while since that song.

They were on the banks of the little river where they had first met. The trees cast dappled shadows on the slick damp rocks and the green grass. The air was fresh. He'd almost forgotten what fresh air smelled like. She drew so close to him that their bodies were pressed together, and his linen shirt --why was he out walking in just a linen shirt?-- and her silk robe were the only barriers between them.
He pulled her to him, feeling the heat of her flesh passing through the thin fabric. "I want something from you," he whispered.

"What is it that you want?"

"I want you to give yourself to me."

Why ever not? He had suffered enough these last few days and impulse control had never been one of his strengths, even if he did pride himself on his loyalty to Cersei. However, dreaming was innocent enough. He deserved something sweet. He had to wonder why he was dreaming so vividly about Rebekah when he knew so little about her and he had only just met her. Well, did he care? Not really. He tore off her silk robe as she ripped open his shirt.

"No, bad girl," he said as he caught her delicate pale wrists in his hands. "You don't do anything I don't tell you to do."

"What's the fun in that?" She wrested herself free of him and finished off his poor shirt. He slammed her against the trunk of a tree before pressing his lips against hers.

They devoured one another. The feel of her lips on his skin was almost too real to be a dream, but what else could it be? Her fingers left trails of fire and desire wherever she touched. Dream-Rebekah was most definitely not a virgin. He doubted the real Rebekah was either.

They lay by the banks of the river afterwards, admiring the light in the leaves and the glimpses of blue sky in between. He had almost forgotten what it felt to be free again. "Well, that was fun, but this is my dream. Now leave me be."

"You're an asshole, you know that?" she asked.

"I just know what I want, and I want to have this space all to myself."

"Too bad," she said. She stayed right where she was. Wasn't this supposed to be his dream? He shoved her away. She elbowed him in the ribs. He tickled her under the arms. She squealed and kicked him hard in the shins.

"That calls for retaliation," he growled as he lunged for her. He grabbed her by the waist and threw her into the water, where she sank before rising up again, screaming murder and thrashing. She was so dramatic, this Rebekah of his.

The mind was a marvellous thing. One could hide inside it at any time, although he had never been so immersed in a dream before while knowing it was a dream. He almost did not want to wake from it.

But he had to wake. Sleeping wouldn't get him out of this prison any sooner. "I must go," he said.

"Of course you must," said dream-Rebekah. "As do I." Her hair became brown and limp, as if she had not washed it for a while. It made her almost unrecognizable. She stood and put on her clothes, only her white silk robe had now become a flimsy translucent dress with mud on the hem like those the camp followers wore. There was dirt and soot on her face and arms where her skin had been immaculate before. "Don't think you're alone, Jaime. And don't think anyone's forgotten you. I haven't, and I'm going to get you out of here somehow."

He laughed. "You?" he said. "I don't think so. But do share."

"You might be surprised at what I can do," she replied. "Be careful of Katherine Pierce. She's
Jaime woke with a start. It was completely dark, and very few men were about. It had been a pleasant dream, and he was sorry that it had ended. However, he was a practical man, and practical men did not dwell on dreams, no matter how real they felt. The torches barely cast any light, but he was used to the dark and he could see everything well enough. A camp follower was picking her way between the white tents. She wore a thin threadbare cloak that hardly looked like it could block the wind, and her muddy skirts flapped about her ankles, exposing pale slender calves.

"What are you doing here, girl?" asked the Karstark in charge of the guards who kept watch over him. Jaime couldn't really remember his name. It was just a Karstark.

"I…" said the girl. There was something familiar about the voice.

Karstark took up a torch and brought it near the girl's face. Jaime's eyes widened.

"I don't remember seeing you around, and I would," said Karstark.

"A compliment from you, Karstark," Jaime drawled. "She must be so flattered."

"Keep your tongue to yourself, Lannister, or else I'll cut it off," snarled Karstark. He kicked the bars of Jaime's cage for emphasis. "You, girl. Why haven't I seen you before?"

"I'm new," stammered Rebekah. It was Rebekah, but not as she had been when she had given him that kiss for a token. She was mousy-haired and dressed like a whore, like in his dream. "I heard that the Kingslayer was here. I just…"

"You wanted to see?" said Karstark. He laughed. "Well, here he is." He waved the torch in Jaime's face. Jaime pretended to not mind either of them, but his mind was churning. How in the seven hells had Rebekah gotten here? How was it that he had dreamed of her in her disguise just then when he hadn't seen it before?

"What's your name?" asked Karstark. He was looking Rebekah up and down, trying to decide whether she was good enough to be bedded. Of course she was. What was the silly girl thinking, dressing up as a camp follower? Or maybe that was exactly her plan. Get close to Karstark, kill him…and the world would be short one doughty northman.

How was that going to help, exactly?

"Becky, ser," said Rebekah.

Or maybe she could befriend him and steal his keys? Now that was a more encouraging line of thought.

"Well, little Becky, you know you shouldn't be here," said Karstark.

"I'm sorry," said Rebekah. "It won't happen again, I promise, ser."

"I'll let it go this time, if you'll do something for me," said Karstark. He leered at her. Jaime didn't know why, but he felt a twinge of…anger? He didn't want the northern bastard to sully her. She
was a Lannister knight!

"Ser?" said Rebekah.

"Come," said Karstark. He took her by the arm and she went with him, albeit dragging her feet. As she was led away, she glanced back at Jaime in his cage. Their eyes met and she held his gaze. Then she disappeared behind another tent, and he tried to go back to sleep, but he found that he couldn't.

Rebekah had come for him, just as her dream-self had said she would. Was he Jaime Lannister the oracle now? He had never really believed in the gods before, nor any of the grumpkins and snarks in the old wives tales. He'd scoffed at the Night's Watch for believing that they were guarding Westeros against anything other than a few stray wildlings. But now, he didn't know what to think. What was going on, or was this captivity just slowly driving him mad?

The Manderlys had done well in their foray into the Westerlands, raiding and ravaging and copying exactly what Stefan Salvatore had done to the Riverlands, except on a larger scale. The scouts reported the Lannisters had sent out forces from Harrenhal, the closest garrison, leaving it almost empty, save for three thousand men and one Gregor Clegane.

"Send more men to the Westerlands to reinforce Wylis and Wendel Manderly," said Robb to the Blackfish. "I want the Lannisters to believe that I am moving my entire force west. And send word to Edmure. He is to garrison the village of Goat's Head."

"It's not five miles from Harrenhal," said the Blackfish.

"That's the idea. Gregor Clegane will not tolerate an enemy garrison so close to his fortress. If he's anything like the man we've heard about, he will ride out. And when Harrenhal is emptied, who better to fill it than us?"

Blackfish grinned. He seemed to like the idea, and he went out immediately to arrange for the Manderlys' reinforcements, which were nothing more than a diversion force, really, leaving Robb alone. However, as always, he wasn't alone for long.

Theon came in only moments later. "I hear you're moving west, Your Grace," said Theon.

"I am," said Robb. Eventually. "What brings you here, Theon?"

"Why did you not tell me?" asked Theon. "I thought we were brothers. I could have helped."

"You will ride by my side, as you always do, Theon," said Robb.

"I mean, I could get us more men, and ships. Think about it. My father is Balon Greyjoy, Lord of the Iron Islands. If I convince him to join our cause, we could attack the Lannisters from both land and sea! They'd be trapped between your sword and my ships."

If it could be done, it could prove to be a valuable addition to his campaign.

Katherine came in with his dinner as she usually did at that hour and then made to leave again, but he motioned to her to stay behind. She settled in her usual corner and took up her embroidery.

"Robb," said Theon."Let me help you."

Robb gripped Theon by the shoulders. "Thank you, Theon," he said. "Go to Pyke, and bring me
back your ships."

"You'll hear from me soon enough," said Theon. "Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone." There was a new light in his sea-green eyes that Robb had never seen before in all the years he had known him. Theon had always needed to prove himself. He had been outshone by Robb in everything (except archery, but that was just according to Theon), and he had ever been in his shadow. Now he finally had the chance to show his quality.

Katherine waited until Theon was gone before she set down her embroidery and came to stand behind Robb. He turned as he felt her presence. "I am almost certain they know how to read in Pyke, Your Grace," she said.

"You do not think I should have let him go?" said Robb.

"I only think that a letter in Theon's hand, delivered by a trusted advisor, should suffice."

"Theon is Balon Greyjoy's heir. There is hardly anyone better to persuade him to join our cause." The look on Katherine's face did not change. "You do not trust Theon."

"Have I become this easy to read now, Your Grace?" she asked.

"I have learned a little about you, my lady," said Robb. "I trust Theon. Do you trust me?"

"With all my heart," said Katherine.

"Then trust me when I say we can trust him." It came out before he realized he'd said it.

We.

Robb Stark had to be moving the war west. Why else would he be sending reinforcements to the Manderlys? Was it funny that he was accidentally sending Lannister men? Although, Rebekah didn't want to go. She couldn't leave Jaime behind! She knew he had seen her that night, even though he had pretended he hadn't.

But what could she do? Break him out now? She mentioned it to the men, who looked at one another. Finally, Jaymse spoke, and his voice was gentle, as if he were speaking to an emotionally traumatized child. "We don't have the time to plan it without exposing ourselves, my lady," he said. "Originally, we had thought that perhaps we could take the place of Lord Jaime's guards, but that takes time to arrange. Lord Tywin would be most displeased if anything were to happen because we were too rash."

He was right, of course, but she wasn't ready to hear it. She lunged at him, moving so quickly that the men sprang back in surprise. She stopped short of actually putting her hand on Jaymse's throat because he was only trying to help, and he had been her friend all along.

"Rebekah," he said softly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I hate seeing them mock him like this."

"Did you go and see him like I said you shouldn't?" asked Fredyric.

"He knows I'm here."

Fredyric's eyes widened and he almost pinned her against the wall of the tent before he remembered that this was a tent, and it would collapse if he tried it, and two, he wasn't supposed to
touch her like that because she would rip off his hand. "What if you were found out?" he hissed.

"I wasn't," said Rebekah. "I let him see me." It was a bit more than that, but she was not going to share The Dream with the men. "Karstark thought I was just a silly curious camp follower. He let me go. For a price."

"Do you know how dangerous that was?" said Fredyric.

Dangerous? Probably not. Disgusting, definitely. She'd had to remind herself that she couldn't simply break Karstark's neck because that would have blown her cover. It wasn't the first time she'd used sex to blind people, although she had always chosen more attractive targets. Back in her world, she'd been able to compel people unless they were on vervain. "If you can find me a reason to stay, I can probably get close to Stark," she said. "I could kill him."

They paused. "You could?" said Fredyric.

"Men are all the same," said Rebekah. "All I'd have to do is get him in bed." It was a little more complicated than that, because she'd have to avoid the notice of his current lover, who, by all accounts, was a raging jealous possessive bitch who had this unpleasant tendency for spying and knowing everything. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning," said Fredyric. "Are you sure about this? If you could…you'd end the war. At least on this front."

"I intend to," she said.

"What if you fail?" asked Jaymse.

"That's simple," said Fredyric. "They'll cut off our heads or hang us, slowly, and then put our heads on spikes."

"You'd be dead. You wouldn't know how quickly or slowly they'd do it," said Rebekah. "And it won't happen. They won't know."

Karstark was not on duty tonight, which was a good thing. Not that she couldn't have avoided him if she wanted to, but Rebekah also didn't want to stay so hidden that Robb Stark wouldn't see her. She had cleaned herself up, although she'd retained her unattractive limp brown hair. The blonde would be too conspicuous. She would have to rely on her other, less well-known assets.

She had waited until Katherine had left to feed –how was it that Stark, for all his genius in the battlefield, had not noticed that his lover disappeared mysteriously every now and then and always returned with rosier cheeks?– before approaching the centre of the camp. She saw him first just walking amongst the men and talking to them. If he hadn't been the enemy, she would have found him to be cute, with his dark hair, blue eyes, classically beautiful sharp features, and extremely kissable lips. Actually, he was still cute, but he had to die.

She took in the number of guards he had, and tried to calculate how difficult it would be to get his notice without seeming too obvious about it. She was on the verge of stepping out from her hiding place when she saw him.

His clothes were different, but somehow, even in medieval Westeros, he had kept his modern haircut. He looked so much better in that than in the chin-length locks he used to wear before shorter hair for men became popular.
Elijah stood before her eyes as he followed Robb Stark like a shadow, decked in Frey colours wearing the blue twin towers upon a silver background. Could she take on both of them? Robb Stark with a rock, and Elijah with a stake? She had the advantage of surprise. But then Elijah turned in her direction.

She couldn't flee fast enough.

They hadn't expected her to succeed. In fact, they hadn't even expected her to try. But Jaymse was not surprised when Rebekah burst back into the tent, although the panic in her eyes made him worry. She was prone to overreacting and getting emotional, but he had never seen her this scared before. In fact, one of Lady Rebekah Mikaelson's greatest flaws was that she didn't know how to be appropriately frightened of things she ought to be frightened of. It was her weakness, and what drew him to her. It made her so free.

"What's wrong?" asked Fredyric. "What happened?"

"We can't do it. I can't do it. We need to leave," said Rebekah. She sank to her knees and she was even paler than normal, as if she had seen a ghost. "Stark's squire, he knows me."

"Did he see you?" asked Fredyric.

Rebekah shook her head. "I don't think so. Otherwise, we'd be hearing from him."

"Stark's squire is a Frey," said Jaymse. "How would you come to know the Freys?"

"I had a life before I became...this new me," said Rebekah. "I've known Elijah my whole life, all right? Just trust me on this one. He's dangerous, and I need to leave before I accidentally bump into him again. That would jeopardize everything."

"Then it is extremely fortunate that we ride for the Westerlands tomorrow at dawn with the reinforcements for the Manderlys. We'll be able to leave then."

Dawn couldn't come quickly enough.

Goat's Head Village, near Harrenhal

Edmure folded up the missive from Robb and tucked it into his sleeve. Was it just him, or was it actually strange to be taking orders from a seventeen year old boy? The very same seventeen year old boy who seemed to have won Katherine's loyalty? He supposed Robb was king, and his success in the battlefield had been phenomenal. But Edmure could be every bit as good as that, if only he were given the chance. Attacking and garrisoning Goat's Head? He'd had to look at the largest map in Riverrun intently for a great deal of time before he'd even found that village. It didn't even exist on the smaller maps because it was such a tiny insignificant patch of dirt.

But Robb wanted him to garrison it, so here he was, with two thousand riders because Robb's orders had explicitly stated that he was to be there before the main army arrived, presumably to besiege Harrenhal, although why he wanted Goat's Head was anyone's guess. To secure the road? That was the most likely explanation.

He took out the order again. He'd folded and unfolded the parchment so many times that the places where the parchment had creased had now grown thin, with tiny holes beginning to appear in the intersections. He scanned it again, looking for any other clue as to why he was here, guarding what seemed like the last place on earth that needed guarding.
Goat's Head was nothing more than a few peasants' huts that sprang up like wilting brown mushrooms in the shadow of Harrenhal, except it wasn't close enough to the road to be of any use. It had no natural defences, and no built defences either. The population numbered all of eighty-seven, and the inhabitants lived off what they could grow on their miserable little farms, and what they could scrounge from the forests nearby.

"My lord," said the guard who stood at the tent's entrance. "The scouts have reported that Gregor Clegane has ridden out with a thousand men and garrisoned the stone mill overlooking the road and more men flock to his banner every day."

Had the gods finally answered his prayers? This was the chance he'd been waiting for to prove himself! He could defeat Gregor Clegane, take that mill, and secure the road –the mill was a much better position for securing the road to Harrenhal; perhaps Robb hadn't known about it? Or maybe this was his plan all along; to lure out the Mountain so that he, Edmure Tully, could sweep in and take his head and give it to Robb for his eighteenth nameday which, if he remembered correctly, was two days away. Or was it three?

"Prepare the men," he said. "We ride out tonight."

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**The Stone Mill**

The mill was dark except for a few windows illuminated by candlelight. That had to be where the Mountain Who Rides slept. Edmure had heard of the immensity and cruelty of the man, although he had never seen him in person. Well, he was going to be Edmure Tully, the man who conquered the Mountain. The bards would sing of his victory.

Clegane's men had set up camp around the base of the mill. A few torches flickered, and the camp was surrounded by wooden barricades with spikes pointing outwards. Any cavalry that tried to charge at the camp would be impaled upon those sharpened logs. But Edmure did not intend to charge it with cavalry.

He gave the signal for the men to shoot. Fiery arrows rained down upon the unsuspecting Lannister men. There were shouts of panic as their tents and supplies were set alight. The horns sounded, low and clear, cutting through the silence of the night to wake up the remaining men.

The gates of the camp opened and the Lannisters rushed out to meet them, with a giant of a man leading from the front. Yes, yes! That was Edmure's prey.

"Onwards for the king!" shouted Edmure as he raised his sword. Tonight, Edmure Tully would win a great victory against the Mountain Who Rides. Robb Stark wasn't the only one who could win battles.

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**Next Chapter:** Robb gets a surprise nameday gift. Katherine shows another side of herself. Gregor finds out that, sometimes, the fun really isn't worth it.
Mission Impossible

Chapter Summary

Edmure gives Robb an unwelcome nameday gift. Robb challenges his bannermen's ideas and beliefs as well as his own. Gregor encounters irresistible bait. Katherine endeavours to get Robb a better present and gets a new pet along the way.

Robb's Camp: Outside Harrenhal

The skeleton of the once great fortress of Harrenhal appeared over the horizon. At first, Robb only saw the blackened and melted towers, charred by dragon fire, and then the whole fortress came into view. The Targaryens were gone, but all of Westeros was still in awe of the power they had once wielded, and he could only envy them and scorn them at the same time. What could he do with a couple of dragons? He could only dream.

He had the men make camp some twenty miles away from Harrenhal, so as to not spook the Lannister garrison within into barricading themselves inside the fortress. And then he sent out scouts to enquire as to why there were no Lannister raiding parties to be seen. Had the rumours about the Mountain Who Rides been entirely wrong?

Edmure's arrival explained everything. His uncle strode in with triumph in his face, having come not from the village of Goat's Head, but from the mill that, up until two days ago, had been garrisoned by Gregor Clegane and a thousand of his men.

"Happy nameday, Your Grace. We have won a great victory!" announced Edmure. "We have taken the mill overlooking the road and we now have safe passage to Harrenhal's gates."

Robb kept his voice calm. "And Gregor Clegane?"

"He fled like a dog with his tail between his legs all the way back to his hole and barricaded himself in it," said Edmure with a self-satisfied expression. If he'd had feathers, he might just have preened. How could his uncle be such a...such a...such an innocent?

"How many men did we lose in taking the mill?" asked Robb.

"Two hundred and seventeen."

"How many men did you have?"

"About two thousand."

"You do realize you have been decimated, yes? I told you to garrison Goat's Head for the purpose of luring Gregor Clegane and his forces out."

"And I did."

"Did I tell you to attack him? Gregor Clegane does not have a single strategic thought in his head, yet he has outsmarted you. You were meant to lure him out and keep him out so when the main army got here, we could sweep in and take an empty Harrenhal. Instead, he has barricaded himself
inside one of the most impenetrable fortresses in Westeros awaiting the arrival of Tywin Lannister's army, and I have a mill."


"And I am sure it is a beautiful mill, Your Grace," Katherine suddenly said. "It is a pity we do not have any grain to grind."

Edmure glared at the bard, but Robb was in no mood to reprimand Katherine or defend his uncle. What could he do now except withdraw—strategically—and attack elsewhere? He could not afford to stay and besiege Harrenhal and wait for Tywin to come and face him on the open field. If the scouts were correct, he would arrive within two weeks.

Unless he could actually take Harrenhal before then, which he couldn't; not by storming it, at least. But how else did one take a barricaded fortress? The Mountain would never come out now. He would suspect a trap.

"Pull back from the mill," he said quietly to Edmure. He had lost his chance to take Harrenhal.

"We should confirm it, Your Grace," said Katherine suddenly. Her voice, although not louder, seemed firmer than usual and it cut through the tense quietness like a knife.

"What do you mean, Lady Katherine?" asked Robb. He wasn't supposed to take the opinions of a bard into consideration during war councils, but since no one else was saying anything, he didn't see why he shouldn't listen to her.

"Gregor Clegane's head. You said earlier there was not a single strategic thought in it," said Katherine.

"I did," said Robb.

"We should cut it open just to make sure it's true, Your Grace," said the bard. The men rose to their feet seemingly all at once.

"Who's going to do it? You?" demanded the Greatjon.

"Do not speak of things you do not understand, Mistress Pierce," said Edmure coldly.

"This is not one of your songs, woman," growled Karstark.

"No, it is not, my lord Karstark," said Katherine. She finally stood, her bearing as regal as that of any queen, not that it was hard to outshine Cersei Lannister. The playful girl Robb knew seemed to have transformed into something much more terrifying and much more beautiful. There was confidence in her voice and the way she held herself.

There was power.

"This is war, and much must be risked in war." She turned to Robb. There was a little smile on her lips, just like the one she'd had before she'd taught all the men the song about Jaime Lannister standing in his grave. However, it was fleeting, and before he could say anything, it was gone. "If you would give me two hundred men, Your Grace, I will bring you Gregor Clegane's head."

The outrage that burst forth was even stronger than before. It was a flood that could no longer be held back by the dam of politeness. The Greatjon cursed and said that she would take those two hundred men to their deaths. Karstark said she would bring about the ruin of the north.
"Now, now, Lord Karstark," said the Greatjon more calmly. "Losing two hundred men is hardly the same as bringing about the ruin of the north. But those are two hundred lives, Your Grace."

"Your Grace, you cannot possibly mean to give this…this…woman the command over two hundred men?" said Edmure. Robb glanced at the Blackfish. Even he was frowning. Only Elijah seemed calm as he removed cups, bowls and little chairs out of harm's way so raging northerners would not spill or break things unnecessarily.

"Why not?" said Robb. They fell silent, all looking at him as if he were mad. Except Katherine, of course. "What is the worst she can do? Maybe we can add a barn to the mill." Then he regretted it. He was sending a woman out into battle? What was the world coming to? She would die! He didn't want her to die.

But it was too late to take back his words. And, perhaps…who knew? Katherine was a constant source of surprises. She'd ridden into battle before with him, and she had been completely unaffected. She understood the movements of armies. She had travelled alone all through Westeros, running from those who would hunt her down and kill her. And if Tywin Lannister could have his lady knight, why couldn't Robb Stark have a woman in his army too?

He dismissed the men before they could protest more, but had Katherine remain behind.

"I am grateful for your faith in me, Your Grace," she said. "Very few men would have dared to place his trust in a woman. You will not regret it."

"Do you know what you are doing?" he asked her. "War is…brutal."

"I have seen the brutality of war, Your Grace," she said.

"Gregor Clegane is known for his cruelty. He is not to be underestimated."

"Yet Tywin Lannister put him under the command of an unknighthed and untested Stefan Salvatore. I know Stefan. I know his ways."

"He will underestimate you because you are a woman. That is your advantage," said Robb. "Do you have a plan of attack?"

"Please do not worry about me, Your Grace," said Katherine. "I know what I am doing, and I am afraid I will not be giving you a barn to go with your nameday mill."

Elijah delivered the letter with breakfast the next morning. Katherine had already left. To do what, Robb had no idea, and he did not like being the one kept in the dark. It wasn't right. He was the one who kept people in the dark. No one kept him in the dark. Except Katherine, it seemed. Of course, he was Robb Stark, and he had some inkling about what would happen. A woman leading two hundred men into battle; even a cautious Mountain would be tempted. But he should wait for Katherine to surprise him.

He had never seen his name written in such flowing script. Well, it wasn't really his name, because he wasn't called 'Your Grace the King', but no one wrote his name anymore, and, apart from his mother, and no one called him by it either. To be king was to lift oneself up above all the others and to be utterly alone.

There were actually two letters, with the second enclosed within the first in a separate sealed envelope. On the second envelope, she had written, "Do not open unless at the uttermost end of need." He set it aside. What was the 'uttermost end of need'? He was never at the 'uttermost end of
need’. At least, he didn't think so, and he hoped he never would be. Curiosity burned at him, but he resisted. Katherine must have had a reason for writing that. Was it a farewell letter? He hoped not. Now that she was gone, he realized just how much he didn't want her to leave.

He read the first note instead. Her writing was as beautiful and graceful as her person. The letters flowed in straight lines across the parchment, and there was not a single ink splotch in sight. Her hand was strong and confident, unlike most feminine script he had seen. There was no doubt that she had been brought up as a noblewoman. Even his mother's script was not as immaculate.

Your Grace,

By the time you read this, I will have ridden out to meet Gregor Clegane on the battlefield. I thank you for your faith in me and I beseech you not to worry. There may be times when you may come to doubt me and your choice to put your faith in me. There may be times when you will wish to send out reinforcements to save me, from myself or from my enemies. The time will come for that, but it is not this time.

You will, no doubt, have noticed the second letter. Please do not open it until fear grips your heart, Your Grace, and when defeat seems certain.

Yours,

Katherine

He smoothed out the parchment, not really understanding half of what she meant. The only thing he could read was that she wanted him to trust her. Well, he had trusted her thus far. It would be cowardly to not continue to trust her simply because of unfounded misgivings. He put the second letter inside his chest plate, keeping her words next to him. Somehow, that gave him some comfort. Was he becoming sentimental? He shook his head. What was Katherine doing to him?

Goat's Head Village: Near Harrenhal

No wonder Edmure had been supremely unimpressed with the village of Goat's Head and wanted the mill next door. Now that Katherine saw it, she couldn't really blame him. The village looked like a random gathering of hovels. The people were miserable, their bodies bent from the weight of hardships and hunger. Women aged before their time, and only the smallest of the children knew how to smile. Even by Westerosian standards, this was a miserable excuse for a village.

And, of course, the perfect place for alms giving. There were no better victims than those who did not have hope. If you gave them hope, you became their god, not that she imagined they would remain hopeful for long.

She had taken one hundred of the men as her guard, leaving the other hundred behind to raise the alarm when what eventually must happen happened. She flew wolf standards, and had dressed as if she were going out for a daytime picnic rather than a battle. In the pale morning sun, Harrenhal cast long shadows, and the fortress itself was nothing but a dark spectre against the grey sky. Anyone looking out over the fortress' walls would be able to see her and her men delivering grain and money to those poor unfortunate souls who probably didn't deserve any of it. But wasn't that what charity was? Giving to those who didn't deserve it?

It only took a few hours. She heard the thunder of hooves and the roars of mingled battle calls. Dogs were terrible at resisting juicy bait.
Robb Stark’s favourite bard—his mistress, most likely—had ridden out to give alms not five miles from Harrenhal and with only one hundred men guarding her? At first, Gregor couldn’t believe it. He had wanted to see this girl in the flesh for a while now, especially since that irritating excuse for a song she had written about him, comparing him to a slinking dog that scurried behind the lion, scavenging on the lion’s leavings. And then at the end of the song, she had taken it back, saying comparing him to a dog was an insult to scavenging curs everywhere.

Katherine Pierce’s fame had spread. They said she was beautiful and young and Robb Stark prized her above all other women. She had bewitched him, they said, and he listened to her counsel on everything, even matters of state! Robb Stark had gone soft in his head if he ever took notice of what came out of a woman’s mouth.

It was too good a chance to forgo. If he could take that girl…he could only imagine the fun he could have, and how that would hit back at Stark morale. Losing that mill to Tully had been humiliating. He relished in the thought of having her soft supple flesh beneath his hands, of pulling her head back and fucking her. He would taste her helplessness like the finest nectar, and he would rip her open. He would teach her a hard lesson about singing songs about him, and then she would sing for him. She would sing quite different songs for him then. He liked the idea of defiling something Robb Stark loved.

He found her exactly where his scouts had said she would be, handing out little bags of grain and coin to those hapless creatures whose blood would soon be watering the patch of dirt they called home. There would be no Salvatore to stop him from doing what he wanted this time.

Anyone who tried to stop him was cut down. He liked the colour red; especially this shade of red. There was never enough of it. The thing about blood was that regardless of whether it was royal, noble, or common, it all looked the same when spilled. The smell of it made him giddy. He was good at killing and destroying. It was the only thing he had ever been good at, and he took great pride in his art.

The girl screamed when she saw him and tried to run, but her skirts were cumbersome. Stupid bitch. Her northern whelp should have stopped her from coming. He seized her and threw her to his men, who bound her like a pig ready for slaughter. Oh, he would enjoy her.

"Ser, Lord Tywin would be most impressed with today’s catch,” said his second in command. The man was irritating in the extreme, always reasoning with Gregor about what he should or shouldn’t do, all beginning with the phrase 'Lord Tywin would want' and ending with 'as Lord Tywin commanded' or some variation of the two. It never varied that much. It all translated to 'Gregor Clegane was not allowed to do anything'.

"Lord Tywin would want her in his custody. She would be quite an excellent prisoner, and she has made quite a name for herself with her songs."

Translation: "You shouldn't touch her, Gregor."

Gregor glared at the man, and then at the bound and sobbing girl. "Take her and lock her up," he growled. "Lord Tywin will deal with her when he arrives." He grabbed her by her hair and yanked her head back. "And then I'll make you scream for me."

"You'll regret it, Clegane," she said amidst her tears. "Soon, you'll wish you'd never been born."

He laughed. "Empty threats do nothing to me except make me hard, bitch. You'll learn that soon enough."
Robb’s Camp: Outside Harrenhal

Captured? Captured?! He should never have let her go. Robb knew it. It had been a mistake; a moment of irrationality. What had he been thinking? She was a woman, untried in battle, and he had sent her to confront Gregor Clegane. He paced in his tent. He should go and get her. He should never have placed his trust–

She had said that he would doubt her, that he would want to save her. She had told him not to. And there was that second letter.

Robb removed it from where he had put it beneath his chest plate, next to his heart. "Do not open unless at the uttermost end of need." This was the uttermost end of need. She had predicted it! And she had a contingency plan. Brilliant, brave woman! He tore open the envelope.

Prepare the armies and ride to Nameday Mill. As the moon rises, approach the main gates of Harrenhal, as close as you can get without being seen. There will be three flashes of light and the gates will be opened for you, Your Grace. I will deliver you the Mountain’s head on whatever platter I can find in that miserable hell they call Harrenhal.

XOXO

K

Harrenhal

She had put on a good act, Katherine thought. All she had had to do was imagine how Elena would have reacted to the situation. It was true to character.

They had chained her up in one of the dark dank dungeons and unwisely forgotten to take out all her hairpins. In fact, they hadn't even touched her hair or searched her for weapons. Perhaps they had thought her not a worthy enough opponent?

Her men had been taken prisoner along with her and if she were to take the fortress, she would need their help. Well, she didn't really, because if she had had Elijah here, they would have been quite sufficient. But that would just have been unrealistic, and Robb wasn't ready for the truth yet.

Condensation ran down the stone walls to pool on the floor below. Mildew grew in the cracks and corners. It smelled as if something had died here and had been left to rot. Something probably had died here.

The time was about right. She could feel the night closing in. Even with a daylight amulet, night was when a vampire felt most alive. The locks of her manacles opened with quiet clicks. It had taken her two seconds to do each one of them. The lock on the door took one second. And even if she couldn't have picked the locks, she could have simply broken them because they were rusty. But, again, realism was important.

The guard was leaning against the wall, dozing. He woke when Katherine took his dagger from his belt, but she stabbed him in the throat before he could scream. Fresh blood spurted out like a fountain. She caught a mouthful. Delicious.

She dragged the body inside and stripped it of the armour and red cloak. She took off her dress and donned the dead man's uniform. There was no point in even attempting to put him in the dress. She simply draped it over him. It was dark. By the time they realized he wasn't her, it would be too late. She took the heavy ring of iron keys. There were just three, actually, and only one matched the
metal of the locks on all the doors of the cells. Seriously? That was just lax. If she ever had a
dungeon, there would be a different key for every door, or at least every wing. Yes, she would have
a multi-winged dungeon.

The helmet hid her face, although she doubted it would matter if anyone saw it. They wouldn't live
to tell anyone else. The men, believing the prisoners secure, were not paying attention to her as she
strode down the hall towards them. Slit throats were the easiest. Men with their throats cut couldn't
really scream because the air would just escape through the openings in their necks. Clegane
should really have placed more guards on the northmen. It would have made breaking them out
slightly more difficult, although by no means impossible.

The key took some jiggling before it would turn the lock. She could have used a hairpin and
unlocked the door more quickly. The men looked up with bleary eyes when she came in. "What do
you want?" demanded the man who had been her second in command. Robb needed new staff.
They were all incompetent.

"I want you to kill every man you can find who is still awake, and try not to alert anyone, hmm?"
said Katherine.

"Lady Katherine?"

"No, it's Gregor Clegane," said Katherine, rolling her eyes. "What are you waiting for? We have a
fortress to take."

As the Greeks had done to the Trojans more than three thousand years ago, so did Katherine to the
Lannisters. The gatekeepers, half drunk on the so-called victory earlier today and feeling secure
behind their high walls, were killed without a sound. Katherine climbed to the top of the
battlements and looked out across the darkened hills. No mortal eyes would have been able to
make out very much beyond shadows that could have been either trees or men, but she saw the
northern army waiting exactly where she had asked them to wait.

She took up one of the gatekeepers' fallen shields and hid the light from lantern that hung from the
battlements before taking the shield away again.

One flash.

Two flashes.

Three flashes.

The gates of Harrenhal groaned softly as if they knew the fortress was about to be flooded by
Starks.

The dark mass that was the northern army began to move.

It was as Katherine had promised him. The gates of Harrenhal were open and waiting to welcome
the King in the North. There had been a moment when he had doubted her and her plan, even after
reading that second letter. It seemed too simple, and how was she to open great gates such as these
when she was a prisoner?

But she had done it, and the Lannisters were still none the wiser. It wasn't until the main army was
halfway in that they realized there was something wrong. The horns cut through the night. The
men burst out of their sleeping quarters, half dressed, disorientated from sleep, and badly armed.
They didn't stand a chance against the northmen who slaughtered them where they stood.
Until a furious roar that chilled even Robb to the bone rang out across the confines of Harrenhal and beyond. Men who had not managed to get out of the way quickly enough were cleaved in half by the monster that was The Mountain Who Rides. Men and horses backed away from him in fear. No one wanted to engage him. Robb had never seen anyone so immense. Gregor Clegane was even taller than the Greatjon, and his face was twisted with cruelty. He wielded a great sword that looked as if it would weigh as much as a man. How had Damon been able to defeat him? They would eventually overwhelm him with numbers, but Clegane would take down too many of his men. Their morale would take a blow. If only he could clear the field and have archers take down the Mountain, but this was a fortress. There were few, if any, open spaces.

Robb glanced at Elijah. The man had defeated Jaime Lannister. Could he possibly…?

"Clegane. Here. Up."

The Mountain turned and looked up. So did everyone else. Katherine stood on the steps behind him, having emerged from…wherever she had been. She was dressed in stolen Lannister armour and was wielding a stolen Lannister sword. Her hair was loose about her shoulders and the wind blew the brown curls away from her face, making her look like a wild creature of the night. In the moonlight, her eyes were nought but dark shadows. She slowly descended, her steps sure and firm. There was no fear in her. Did she even know the meaning of fear?

"Didn't I say you'd regret it?" she said. Before Robb could say anything to tell her to get out of the way, the Mountain charged at her. Except, instead of running in the other direction, as any person in their right mind would do, Katherine waited for Clegane to get to her before she spun to the side and stuck out her foot. He tripped and stumbled and almost fell flat on his face except he stopped himself by stabbing his sword into the dirt.

She moved like a dancer in full control of her movements, and her enemy's too. Her slender build belied her strength as she swung at Clegane. He barely managed to lift his sword quickly enough to block the blow. Sparks flew as the edge of her sword connected with the flat of his. He staggered backwards, and before he could recover, she had kicked out his legs from under him. He fell. Again.

There was silence as the men, both Stark and Lannister, watched her. Robb had never seen anything so beautiful as she circled the fallen Mountain. "Get up," she said. "I'm not finished yet."

The Mountain climbed to his feet, using his sword to haul himself up. He lunged at her again, although this time, she didn't even bother meeting him. She kicked him in the back, using his own momentum against him. How many times could a man fall? Well, they did say practise made perfect.

"You'd better not let me get you, bitch!" he roared. "I'll fuck you until you're split open down the middle!"

"Aw, it's making threats," said Katherine. "Isn't it just adorable?"

The men laughed nervously. There was nothing "adorable" about the Mountain.

She was a tempest, as swift as the wind and as unstoppable as winter.

She was a force of nature.

Again, Clegane charged at her. Again, she knocked him down without so much as breaking a sweat. She toyed with him the way a cat toyed with a mouse before delivering a killing bite. The
mouse always knew it couldn't win the fight or get away, and the cat always knew that victory was hers. The giant stumbled and staggered. Each time he lunged at her, he became slower and slower. Sweat poured down his face. She looked as if she could do this all night and all day too.

Well, if she didn't get bored.

"I'm bored," Katherine announced. "Let's see if there is actually something in that head of yours."

Robb thought she was going to take it off there and then. It wouldn't have actually been a challenge for her, as she had already proven time and time again.

"Bitch!" Clegane didn't even have the energy to come up with something a little more creative. He made one last charge for her. She moved out of the way and behind him. Her blade flashed, cutting through the tendons behind his knees. He fell crashing to the dirt. Something cracked and broke when she slammed her foot against his wrist to make him let go of his sword.

Katherine pressed her knee to the small of his back and yanked his head backward by his hair. She knocked his skull a few times with her knuckles. "Just as I thought. Hollow," she said.

The Blackfish began to laugh. "Consider me corrected, my lady," he said.

"Is that an apology for underestimating me, Lord Blackfish?" she asked.

"I do not apologize. You ought to know better than that," said the Blackfish.

Clegane was bound in chains and led before Robb. He tried to fight, but with his legs out of commission and his arms restrained, there was little he could do. Still, he waited until the men had stepped away from him so Robb could pass judgement on him. And then he suddenly lunged for Robb, as if meaning to crush him with his immense weight. His mouth was open in a wordless howl. Glistening strands of saliva hung from the yellowed teeth that ought to be considered fangs, stark against the red cavernous maw.

Elijah moved in front of Robb, but it was Katherine who grabbed one of the chains and yanked the Mountain back so hard that he fell onto his back, wheezing and coughing. By some miracle, he was still alive, and his head was still attached.

Katherine waggled her finger at Clegane as if he were a naughty child. "Tut tut," she said. "Bad Gregor." She turned to Robb, who was still a little too stunned to make a clever remark. He wracked his mind for something to say, but his mind was just reeling with a million questions. How could Katherine have subdued the Mountain just like that? It didn't make any sense. "I know I promised to give you his head, Your Grace, but now that I see him, I think I would like a pet. Please?"

She could not possibly mean Clegane! That was the most unpleasant pet he could ever imagine. But then, many would say the same of wolves. Not that Grey Wind was a pet.

She widened her eyes and looked at him the way Sansa would whenever she wanted something from him. He had never been able to resist that look of his sister's and he was even less able to resist Katherine's version. Well, she had already proven she was not the regular sort of woman. The regular sort of pet just wouldn't suit her well enough. He looked long and hard at the vanquished man, if he could still be called that. It wasn't a bad idea, actually. First, they had taken Jaime Lannister, and now they had Gregor Clegane. Keeping him alive and humiliated would be a reminder of all the Stark victories against Lannister might.

"You will feed it yourself," he said, echoing the words his father had uttered so long ago when he
and Jon and Theon and Damon had returned to Winterfell with an entire litter of wriggling wolf pups. "You will train it yourself, and if it dies, you will bury it yourself."

**Next chapter:** Gregor learns the price one must pay for offending Katherine. Robb gives Katherine a huge surprise. Elijah has to make an important decision.

**A/N:** We're going to update on early Saturday morning (GMT) from now on because of changed circumstances.
Katherine enjoys the spoils of her victories. Jaime finds a silver lining to his huge black cloud. Robb gives Katherine a surprise. Elijah makes an important decision.

Harrenhal

Jaime blinked. And blinked again. This was not a dream. It wasn't even a nightmare. It was a bit of a joke, although it was the most unfunny one he had ever encountered. Gregor Clegane in a cage with a pink collar that had his name embroidered on it? Well, there was an iron collar as well, and that was really the thing that kept him contained; that, and the mile of chain they seemed to have used on him. But the pink collar; who on earth had thought of such a thing? He would take his cheap mockery of Lannister armour any day.

They had carted him inside Harrenhal as soon as the fortress had been secured. The surrounding villages had been apathetic to the Mountain's defeat. In fact, some of them practically rejoiced when they heard it and went to plead their cases with Robb Stark, beseeching him to kill the man who had terrorized them and their families for weeks. They were here now, looking at their tormentor who had reached a new state of low.

"He should die for his crimes," the oldest Karstark said. He was still chafing at the fact that he had not been allowed to kill Jaime. "I'll do it myself if that girl won't do it."

"He's Lady Katherine's pet," said Jon Umber. "You can't touch him without her permission."

"Why are we wasting food and space and air to keep him alive?" demanded Karstark. "His head should be on a spike!"

That would probably be a kinder fate than the one that awaited him right now. Katherine Pierce had special talent when it came to breaking people. If Jaime had been in Clegane's place, he would have rather torn his own throat out with his fingers than wear that pink collar.

Food was brought to both of them. Katherine must have actually liked Jaime, because he did not have a pink bowl with his name written on it. How on earth had she procured a pink bowl and in that hideous shade? He hadn't even known it existed, until now.

Speaking of Katherine, she came gliding through the parted crowds, looking as dainty and pretty as ever. She didn't look as if she could harm a flea, much less The Mountain Who Rides. But then, he ought to have learned by now that he shouldn't judge women based on their appearances. Rebekah had surprised him with her ferocity and strength too. Why shouldn't Katherine be a predator in prey's clothing?

The men bowed to her as if she were the Maiden incarnate. He doubted she was much of a maiden. No, there was too much of a knowing sway in her hips.

"How do you like your new house, Gregor?" she asked in that sweet mocking voice of hers. "All the accessories match."
Gregor glared and growled at her, but he could say nothing. All threats meant nothing if one were behind bars. He had probably run out of interesting things to say sometime between encountering her and being beaten by her. He began to eat his food, using his hands to shovel the rancid meat into his mouth.

Her hand snaked out to grab his wrist. Jaime looked on in fascination, his own meal forgotten for now. In fact, the crowds around the cages seemed to have forgotten that there was a lion as they amused themselves with watching the giant ape. "Animals do not eat with their hands," Katherine informed him.

"Fuck off, bitch!" snarled Gregor. He tried to pull his wrist away, but lacked the strength to do so. How was she so strong? Unless, of course, Clegane had been **severely** weakened, but if that were the case, he wouldn't need those chains.

"Stop your yapping, or I will cut your vocal chords to make you nice and quiet," said Katherine. "Hmm…animals don't have opposable thumbs."

Soon, Gregor Clegane didn't have them either.

Finally, the celebrations had died down. They had been loud and rowdy as the euphoria of the completely unexpected victory had sunk in. Only one hundred and fifty, or thereabouts, men had died in the entire attack on Harrenhal. In exchange, the north was completely secured and the northmen had a foothold in the south. The Lannisters could not march up north even if they had plans of doing so, not that a man of Tywin Lannister's intellect would sally forth alone into enemy territory. That was more a Jaime Lannister sort of strategy.

Many of the men had sought their beds, for they had been making merry since the morning until the sun had set and the fires had died down. The last to leave were the Blackfish, Elijah, who had not partaken in the drinking very much, and, of course, the woman who had made this all possible.

"I should go, Your Grace," she said when the two of them were eventually left alone. Robb had dismissed Elijah after the Blackfish had left. The squire deserved some well-earned rest. He leaned against the railing of the stone balcony, watching the moon rise. It was a full moon, so close to the earth and so large that it felt if he reached out, he could almost touch it.

"Stay," he said to her. He turned around to look her in the eye. She looked good in his new quarters, standing amongst the vacated chairs which would usually hold the members of his war council. A giant map of Westeros which Clegane had been using occupied most of the main table. The carved wooden wolves and lions had already taken their new positions on it. The moon's light made the fabric of her dress seem silver and the shadows accentuated her womanly curves.

"What will the men say, Your Grace?" she asked.

"I don't care what they say," said Robb. He slowly approached her. She did not move away. He wanted to touch her, just to make sure she was real. Slowly, he reached out. She made the first move and stepped up to him before seizing his head and pulling him down to kiss him on the lips.

She tasted sweet and hot like the wine she had just drunken. Her lips were soft, but insistent. Her deft fingers loosened the ties of his tunic. He had kissed women before, but not like this. He bit her bottom lip gently, demanding entry. She let him in, but reciprocated by pushing her tongue into his mouth. The fire travelled through his body, through his heart, his limbs, from the very top of his head to the very tips of his fingers. He tangled the fingers of one hand in her long soft hair, holding her close so she couldn't escape from him. She hooked one leg around his hip as her kisses became
more urgent and heated. She didn't want to escape.

He lifted her off her feet and she wrapped both her legs around him. His hands pushed her skirts up about her hips, feeling the smooth supple skin and the firm muscles beneath. They fell upon the table and the giant map, with Katherine's dark tresses spreading over the south. Wolves and lions were swept to the floor, where they landed with unheard clatters. He shed his tunic and his undershirt and the two of them fumbled with the laces of her dress. She tugged impatiently at the gown and slipped out of it the way a butterfly slipped out of its cocoon. Only her shift remained. There was a ripping sound as Robb tore it off her.

"That was my best shift," she said with a little smile on her lips. He adored that smile.

"I'll get you a new one," he said as he stepped back to admire her in all her perfection, as the gods had intended for her to be when she had been born. Maybe there were gods after all. They weren't very good gods, but they occasionally did something right. He trailed a line of kisses down her throat, to her collarbone, and then on each of her breasts. He had seen naked women before, but none aroused him the way Katherine did. He wanted her so much. There had never been such a need in him before.

He allowed it when she rolled the two of them over so he was on his back on the map and staring up at her beauty. Her hair fell like curtains on either side of her face through which he could see the light of the moon. He brushed back her hair so he could see her face. "You're so beautiful," he whispered as he ran his thumb down the side of her cheek.

"I know," she said. She bent down to kiss him, more slowly this time, coaxing the fire in him until it became a roaring furnace that could not be sated by anything except the touch of the very woman who was stoking the flames. His thoughts no longer formed words, not that words could describe or convey what he wanted to say. A chilly wind blew in from the window, making him even more aware of the heat between him and Katherine.

He flipped her over again and positioned himself between her open thighs. He could feel her wetness against him. "Robb," she whispered. It was the first time she had ever said his name. He wanted to hear it again.

"I want you, Katherine," he said. His voice was husky with desire.

"Then take me," she invited.

He didn't need to be asked twice. He thrust himself inside her, allowing her warmth to envelope him. She took him completely. Their bodies melded together as they moved as one.

He cried out her name. At least, he thought it was her name. It could have been some wordless howl for all he knew. It was as if he could see all the truths in the world, but only one of them mattered at that moment.

He loved her.

They rode the waves together, cresting and falling and going higher and higher until they could go no higher. She came to the peak more slowly while he took the steep slope. She reached it first, and he joined her with a violent shudder. He threw his head back as his senses overtook him, crying out wordlessly at the same time as she breathed his name.

He collapsed on her, gasping for breath. They lay entwined together for a while, not speaking while he traced his name on her skin, raising goose pimples and making her shiver.
"Are you cold?" he asked.

"A little," she said. He pulled up his heavy cloak, which had been one of the first items to be discarded, and covered them both with it while he rubbed her arms with his hands.

"Better?" he asked.

"Better," she said as she snuggled up to him. He put his arms around her and held her close, with her head lying on his chest beneath his chin.

"I am not your first, am I?" he murmured. He felt her stiffen in his arms. She sat up, her face taking on a guarded expression, but even as she put her shields up, he glimpsed more vulnerability in her at that moment than he had ever done in all the months he'd known her.

"No, Your Grace," she said. She stuck out her chin defiantly, but there was a slight quiver in her voice.

"Did he hurt you?" He felt a surge of anger against this stranger. If he ever found him, he would…

Well, he'd come to it when that happened. Suffice to say that the man who had hurt Katherine would suffer a fate worse than Clegane's, if there was such a thing.

"He left me after he put a child in my belly," said Katherine.

"Where is the child now?" He shouldn't ask, but he wanted to know.

"They took her away. I never saw her again," she replied. She swallowed, and her eyes took on a distant look. He was immediately sorry for asking.

Robb drew her back into his arms and held her. The more he learned about her, the more he…he…he didn't even know how to say it or describe it. She was so strong and fragile, so beautiful and terrible. She was both black and white, night and day. She was a bundle of opposing attributes that somehow formed the perfect creature. "I will never leave you," he said. "I promise."

She clung to him and rested her cheek on his chest. He wondered if she was going to cry. Most girls would have cried. Katherine, however, did not. Thus they remained, with her lying in his arms with her ear against his heart. He stroked her hair, getting his fingers tangled up in it. It was soft and silky and the curls always bounced back into shape even when he tried to stretch them out.

"Do you realize we're still lying on the table?" he finally asked.

"We just made love on top of all of Westeros," said Katherine. The weakness he had seen in her was gone, replaced by her usual mischief.

"An exciting thought," said Robb. "Although I have to say I have lain on more comfortable surfaces before." Something was digging into his back and he pulled it out from beneath him. It was the carved flayed man, tied spread-eagle and hanging upside down. He let it drop to the floor where it joined a pile of wooden lions. "I have just realized I have yet to thank you for this." He indicated the room, the moon outside, and the sleeping fortress below.

"Consider it a late nameday gift, Your Grace," said Katherine.

"What about an early wedding gift?"
blue eyes, so earnest and innocent and utterly sincere. What was he thinking? Wait. That was the whole point. He wasn't. "What do you mean, Your Grace?" she whispered, feigning innocence. He believed in her so completely when he really shouldn't. There were so many lies, so many acts. Silly boy; he didn't even know who it was he was proposing to.

"You are an intelligent woman. You ought to know what I mean," he said. "I am asking you to be my queen."

"Is that wise, Your Grace? You are promised to the Freys. They would not take kindly to it if you broke your word."


"We have time, Your Grace," said Katherine, placing a hand on his chest. He was getting more worked up and flustered, probably having expected her to say yes from the very beginning. "We can wait. When the war is over, you can decide then."

She was respected by his soldiers, but the bannermen were another matter, and Robb needed his bannermen's support until he got rid of them. The Freys were petty creatures; she had gleaned that much from Elijah. What would they do if they found out that their daughter was not to be queen after all?

"But I do not want to wait," said Robb. He took both her hands in his. "I…care for you, Katherine. Deeply. I even think I love you. Who knows when the war will end, and whether you and I will still be alive by then?" He stared into her eyes, searching her face for clues. "Do you love me?"

"More than anything," Katherine assured him. It was an automatic response; one that she would utter whenever a boy asked her that very question. She had said it to Damon, Stefan, and countless others. But when she said those words to Robb, her stomach suddenly clenched as she recognized one significant difference.

She actually meant it.

How had it happened? She hadn't even noticed herself falling. She admired his military aptitude, his determination, his willingness to try new things and his almost unwavering faith in her. But love? No. But it was. It was foolish to love a king, she knew. How many queens had actually loved their kings? Catherine of Aragon had loved Henry, and look what had happened to her. Well, she was an idiot. Kings liked the thrill of the chase. It was like shopping for shoes. But it seemed that this Katherine was following in the doomed footsteps of the previous Catherine despite knowing better.

Well, she was no Catherine of Aragon, because she was not deluded by the promise of romance. She understood kings and men. Robb was a rare type, to be sure, and bore no resemblance to Henry. Plus, he needed her, perhaps a bit more than she needed him. Clearly, someone had to advise him on how to rule and it wasn't going to be dear Uncle Edmure.

Hmm... should she lead him on a chase and pique his interest even further? But Robb was a wolf, not a dog that liked chasing his own tail like a certain Salvatore. If she said 'maybe' too many times, she knew Robb would stop asking. She couldn't let this chance slip away. Queen Katherine the Great. It had a good ring to it.

"Then will you? Will you be my wife?" asked Robb again.
"I will," she said. "You know I have nothing. I have no wealth, no name worth mentioning, no support anywhere."

"You are everything," he said. She loved the way he held her then, as if he never wanted to let her go. They could keep their betrothal secret and the engagement long, so by the time they announced it to the world, there would be no need for the Freys or Robb's bannermen's support. What they did not know could not hurt anyone.

At least, not anyone that mattered.

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The Woods Outside Harrenhal

He led her out in the dead of the night. "Where are we going?" Katherine asked Robb. He helped her over the fallen boughs of trees as a gentleman ought.

"It wouldn't be a surprise if I told you," he said with a wicked grin.

"Am I going to like this?" she asked.

"I hope so," he replied.

Maybe it was a date. Did Westerosians go on dates? She didn't remember it in Renaissance Europe, but there were some marked differences between Westerosians and Europeans, such as their utter lack of devotion to their religions. Aegon the First had been a clever man for diminishing the power of the faith until the clerics became irrelevant. The so-called holy warriors in Europe had been a huge nuisance with their witch burnings and whatnot. It had been extremely difficult to find a witch to make a daylight amulet for her during those days because the Inquisition had kept torturing and killing them. Granted, any witch worth their salt lived, but they had also gone into hiding. If not for Klaus flushing them out, she probably would never have found one.

They came to a clearing in the forest. An old septon stood beneath a tree bearing a single lantern. Was this what she thought it was? Oh, Robb! There was no denying the sweetness of the gesture, but could his timing get any worse? Besides, she had always imagined her wedding would be a lavish affair in a huge vaulted cathedral with golden arches or the equivalent. She'd walk down the aisle with twelve maids holding the train of her gown as adoring crowds parted and watched her movement in awe. Her bridegroom, on the other hand, would not be any different from the one she had now.

Robb turned to her, his eyes shining. She smiled back at him and took his hand, moving her thumb over the calluses on his palm. Somehow, she didn't have it in her to pop his bubble of happiness. And...despite all her misgivings, she felt...something that she had never thought she would ever feel for another person. He made her happy. He didn't always do what she wanted, but she didn't want a man like that. Had Robb Stark tamed and domesticated her? No, no. That would not do. She would be a proper queen to him, ruling by his side, supporting him, lying to him to protect him if necessary. Perhaps this wasn't such a bad move on his part, even though he had unwittingly made it. If she hadn't been his wife, she might have eventually distanced herself from him and moved on. Now Katerina Petrova, with all her wiles and intelligence and her scheming mind, was bound to Robb Stark forever, and she would not let him fail.

They invoked the new gods, repeating the words as the Septon read them out from an ancient book marked with water stains. The words meant nothing, for this was something that was beyond what a few sounds shaped into syllables and strung together to form words and sentences could convey. The light only illuminated the two of them, casting everything else in shadow so they were
surrounded by darkness on all sides. Their hands were bound together with a long length of linen, holding them fast so that they could not be parted even if they had tried right now.

They were joined for eternity.

Starks were not known for their subtlety. If it had been up to Katerina herself, Elijah had no doubt that she would have preferred to keep this affair quiet until the end of the war. But Robb Stark, eager to share his happiness, had summoned all his bannermen and presented them with their new queen who still looked no different than she had when she had been just a bard.

The men were delighted, for they loved Katerina and considered her to be one of their own. To have her as queen gave them all hope that perhaps, one day, they, too, could rise to the top. The bannermen were outraged each in their own way. With some, like Jon Umber, the disbelief was palpable. With others, it was more subtle, expressed only through the most minute changes in expression. But Elijah had been alive for ten centuries, and humans were easy to read. No matter where they lived or when they lived, those reactions and expressions meant the same thing in every language.

"I don't think they like me," Katerina leaned over to whisper to Robb. She didn't really care that they didn't like her, save for the fact that they might prove to be the termites that would undermine her powerbase. If he knew her, then he would imagine she was going to bring in the exterminators very soon. She had never been very fond of the idea of noblemen all having their own fiefs and demesnes, ruling over them like miniature kings. He had seen the way she had looked at the bannermen even before she had become queen. She would never forget those who had spoken against her, and she could read men as well as he could, despite the lack of centuries. Like Octavian Augustus—who Elijah was actually too young to have known personally—she would sweep the north clean of warring factions and unite them under hers and Robb Stark's banner. Perhaps that could be her new name. Katerina Augusta.

One by one, either graciously or grudgingly, the bannermen paid their respects to the new queen as custom dictated. Some were barely courteous and showed her less respect than they had when she had been a bard. Elijah approached the royal couple last, being not only a squire but also the representative of House Frey. He supposed he counted as a bannerman in some strange way since Walder Frey had randomly decided to adopt him. Actually, it was ludicrous, but here he was, a Frey.

"I believe congratulations are in order, Your Grace," he said to Katerina. He raised her hand to his lips, something that he had done only once before many years ago when he had first met her as a fresh faced girl so full of hope for the future despite her exile to England, where she had done rather well for herself. Even back then, she had been a survivor. "I wish you all the happiness in the world. I really do, for the both of you." He meant it. Robb Stark was good for her, it seemed. The boy had taught her what no one else had been able to; he had taught her to care about something and someone beyond herself and her ambitions.

"Thank you, Elijah," said Katerina. "You have been a good and true friend to me. I shall not forget it."

Elijah bowed and accepted her thanks. Perhaps she even meant it. He turned to Robb. The boy king, for all his aptitude for ruling and winning battles, was still just a boy. His happiness emanated from every bit of him and he could not stop smiling and glancing at his new wife as if she represented everything that was right in the world. Evidently, Katerina had not told him much about herself yet, because Robb Stark was not the type to act like a lovesick Damon Salvatore. "Alas, Your Grace, I think my time here is drawing to a close," he said.
"Are you leaving us, Elijah?" said Robb.

"I must go back to my lord father, Your Grace," said Elijah. For a moment, a shadow flickered over Robb's face as he most likely remembered the fact he had once been promised to one of the Frey girls. He could hardly be blamed for choosing Katerina instead. At least, Elijah would not blame him.

"Please give your father my regards," said Robb. "You will always have a place here, Elijah, should you decide to return."

The vampire thanked him. There was potential in the boy, and he had more dignity and nobility than anyone else who was vying for the throne. He would have liked to stay, if only to see that potential realized, but the sole purpose for making him Stark's squire was so that he could watch him, and he had done an excellent job, no doubt, by not being aware of his plans to elope. Frey would be expecting him to return. And besides, he had a feeling he would be more useful as a scion of the Freys for now than as Stark's squire. The old Frey would need an explanation and perhaps warnings against doing anything incredibly stupid.

Next chapter: Tywin receives a gift from Robb. Queen Katherine devises a new sigil. Robb makes yet another surprising announcement. Renly receives an unexpected visitor. Damon embarks on Plan F to reach Robb. Unrest develops amongst Jon and his merry men, and Elena gives Hot Pie an ultimatum.
Northern Promises

Chapter Summary

Tywin receives an unexpected gift. Robb's ideas of self and kingship are challenged and he has to make a difficult choice. Renly makes a new friend. Damon embarks on his next plan to find Robb.

Near Harrenhal

Caroline tried to shrink into herself even as she went around topping up the cups of the lords sitting at Lord Tywin's war council. Even though it was not hot, the tent was stifling and she felt suffocated by the tension. No one was saying anything. She tried to not even let the water make any trickling noises as she poured it. Wine was not allowed at this council session.

Lord Tywin glared at his bannermen and advisors, his green eyes so cold they could probably have frozen something if he had focused the ice beams. Well, that was the feeling, anyway. As far as Caroline knew, the Lannister patriarch had no such superpower. He would probably have liked it.

In his hand was a small piece of parchment removed from the person of a dying messenger that morning. The man had only been able to utter one word before expiring of his wounds, and of all the words he had chosen, he had said, "Harrenhal." The man's blood had dried on the back of the parchment, but it was what was on the front that mattered. Was it not a little incredible to think that such a tiny thing was a cause of Lord Tywin's ire and all this trouble that came with it? Then again, the parchment was only a teensy weensy representation of the cause, really.

"Harrenhal has fallen," said Tywin slowly, looking at each and every one of his council members. "It was taken by a woman and two hundred men. Who is Katherine Pierce?"

Oh, Caroline could tell him stories to fill an entire library, and for a moment, she was almost tempted to, but self-preservation got the better of her. If she told Lord Tywin about Katherine and what she really was, then she'd have to explain all about vampires and how she and Rebekah and Stefan were all scions of the night and were responsible for most of the 'animal attacks' that had been happening in the vicinity of the Lannister camp recently. Well, Caroline and Stefan had been drinking animal blood, so the responsibility for the human casualties fell squarely on Rebekah's shoulders. But still, it seemed like an awfully bad idea to disclose such information at such a sensitive time.

"She is Robb Stark's bard, my lord," said Lord Kevan. "She has been composing… rousing tunes for the northmen ever since Stark's victory in the Riverlands."

"You should not be too concerned about her, my lord," said Amory Lorch. "She is just a woman." How fitting that this was the very same man who had been defeated by Rebekah. "Katherine Pierce is no threat."

"She turned the Mountain into a molehill," said Tywin.

There was silence until the council was saved by the timely arrival of another messenger who delivered a wrapped package sealed with a black wax seal depicting a snarling wolf's head. Tywin
broke the seal to unwrap the package. Two long objects dropped out, followed by a curled up note. As he read the note, his expression became harder, even though Caroline had not thought it possible. He smiled grimly passed the note to Kevan, who frowned as he read it. She tried to peek over his shoulder to see what was written, but the curling script was too hard to make out from a distance.

"What are these?" Tywin placed two objects in the middle of the table. They were off-white, elongated, with rounded joints still connected by shrivelled ligaments while the bases were covered with something leathery, but the tips had been carved to resemble the tops of the melted towers of Harrenhal.

"They look like carved bone, my lord," said the confused Lorch.

"They are thumbs," said Tywin.

"They are large thumbs," remarked Kevan.

"They are Gregor Clegane's thumbs," elaborated Tywin. Oh fudge. "A consolation gift from Robb Stark for losing Harrenhal and to celebrate his wedding. It appears Katherine Pierce is now Katherine Stark." His expression was back to its usual neutrality. Had he thought of something? Caroline suddenly shivered. Tywin Lannister versus Katherine Pierce?

Bring on World War Vee.

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**Harrenhal**

With Elijah gone, she had lost her only possible co-conspirator, not that she minded. Katherine had always been on her own from the very beginning. It had been nice to have friends, but they were a luxury rather than a necessity. Besides, she had a husband now. It was rather inconvenient that her husband's bannermen all seemed to dislike her presence and her influence, not that she would tolerate their dislike for long.

Dividing and conquering were her specialties and the northmen hardly liked each other to begin with. The only reason they were even in this together was because of Robb, but if not managed well, they would desert him, and their armies with them. Unless, their armies deserted them first.

Men were fickle creatures. They liked glory, pride, wealth, and sex, not necessarily in that order. While they prided themselves on their loyalty and honour (pride), wealth and the chance to rise up through the ranks (glory and wealth) would always win them over, and they would always follow the person who could give them that. She had no intention of making the bannermen even more powerful, however. They already had too much authority as it were. If it had been up to her, there would be no bannermen, and all the armies would wear Stark colours. Or Pierce colours.

Upon her marriage, Katherine had established her own house sigil. It was a red two-headed eagle, one head looking to the past and one to the future. Its wings were out spread and it extended its talons to grasp its pray. It flew upon a black and yellow background, split horizontally. Very Roman, but the Romans had had a way of conquering things and maintaining an empire that lasted so long and had so much influence that every subsequent western empire had tried to model itself on theirs, the latest one being the United States of America.

She had asked Robb for the permission to establish her own Praetorian Guard; five hundred men handpicked by her to be the most elite of elites. She liked the idea of being an *imperatrix*. Each of them had been tattooed with a rather stylised design of the two-headed eagle on the back of their
necks for easy identification even when they were in disguise for undercover jobs. The tattoo was small, about the size of a coin, and usually hidden by the northerners' long hairstyles.

"I still don't really feel like a queen," she remarked to Robb as she helped him dress, strapping on his armour which, in her opinion, hid far too many of his positive physical attributes.

"Then I will give you all the trappings of queenship until you feel like one," said Robb. "Starting with a dressmaker, perhaps?"

"Your Grace is too kind," said Katherine.

"Robb, remember? We promised to use our own names in private."

She smiled and cupped his face with her hand, drawing him forward so she could kiss him. He would have probably taken her right back to bed until his self-control won out and he pulled away.

"If you continue to distract me like this, wife, I will never make it to the war council," he said. "Now that we have Harrenhal, we have to plan our march south towards King's Landing."

"If I may suggest something?" said Katherine.

"You know you have my permission," said Robb.

"We need men and we cannot field as many as Renly can. He has one hundred thousand men who are not doing anything at present except fighting tournaments for his amusement while he prepares for war against Stannis. Don't you think his spearhead is pointed in the wrong direction? I mean, besides Loras Tyrell."

Robb blushed a little. That was so cute. However, he recovered, cleared his throat, and focused on the more important point. "What can we do about that? Would you have me ally with Renly?"

"Renly is not our friend at the moment. He doesn't like that you're taking the northern part of what he deems to be his kingdom."

"The north is independent now."

"Exactly why he doesn't like you, and we need people to like us, Your Grace." She gave him a pointed look. He frowned.

"Are you saying I should submit to Renly?" he asked. "You once told me that had you been in my place, you would not have become king."

"It would be unexpected, and temporary. Think about it. Our new friends can distract Tywin for us until we are fully prepared, and then we strike and clean up what's left."

"But the bannermen would object."

"They are your subjects, are they not? If they object to your commands, they cannot be very good subjects." She smiled. There would be objections, no doubt, and the dissenters would have to be put down. She would get an army, and she would be able to root out her adversaries. It was a win-win situation in her book.

Near the Antlers

When Robb announced his decision to abdicate and submit to Renly, everyone thought he had gone
mad, and he hardly blamed them. He almost felt as if he had gone half-mad himself. But Katherine was right about one thing: he needed Renly's men and this was the only way to get them. If he continued to proclaim himself the King in the North, very soon there might not even be a north to rule. Once the plan was fulfilled, they would cease their grumbling.

He looked at each and every one of them in the eye. "Renly is a good and fitting king," he said to the men. "I may have once thought because he was the younger, he could not be king before his brother. But these are extraordinary times, and in extraordinary times, we must do away with ordinary customs. Winter is coming, and they say it will be the longest winter ever known to man. The kingdoms need to be united and only Renly can do it."

The Greatjon's mouth was hanging slack with rage and shock, and he looked as if he were trying to think of words to say, but he couldn't. Robb saw their disappointment, their incredulity. Some of them turned their eyes accusingly to Katherine, who stood behind him, a silent support this whole time. They would never understand. They had courage, but they did not have the minds needed to rule the seven kingdoms. His new wife, bard though she was, did have such a mind. If his bannermen had had their way, they would have had him charge straight down south to besiege King's Landing.

"Your Grace, you cannot! What is Renly to us?"

"For the past seventeen years, the kingdoms were held together by the friendship between my father and King Robert," said Robb. "Now it will be held together by the friendship between myself and His Grace King Renly. My decision is made."

He left the Blackfish in Harrenhal, for he trusted no one else with it, and headed south with a small force, taking the back routes to avoid confrontation with any potential Lannister forces. It was easier to hide a thousand men than it was to hide ten thousand, and they could move more quickly this way.

Rolling hills gave away to rocky terrain. Sheer cliffs rose wherever he looked, while winding silver rivers and the narrow unpaved roads were swallowed by the deep green forests lush from the rain that the storms brought. More than once, the men had to dismount and push aside a fallen tree. Mosses decked the tree trunks in green velvet cloaks, making him feel as if he were in an old abandoned hall from the times of the First Men, and these had been the courtiers to some ancient king. The air was warm and moist with the scent of rotting leaves, which wasn't unpleasant, but it was something that Robb was hardly accustomed to. "It's perfect for an ambush," he murmured to Katherine.

"We have seen no sign of people," said Katherine.

"That is the point of an ambush."

"Nobody even knows we are here." She placed a hand on his arm. "You are nervous."

"I cannot be nervous," he said. He couldn't feel the warmth of her hand through the chainmail and quilted gambeson that he wore.

"You need not be," said Katherine. "Renly will welcome you with open arms. As for the men, they will worship you once they realize what it is you are doing."

"I should think it would be you they would worship. The idea is all yours."

"They would never believe me to be capable of such a thing. I am only a bard, and a woman."
Robb wanted to lean over to kiss her then, to let her know that she was not just a woman and a bard. She was his wife, his queen. Well, she wasn't a queen at present because he had temporarily ceased to be king, but she was still Lady Stark. But he refrained, knowing that the bannermen who rode with him, including the very vocal Greatjon, and his mother would not approve. He had already pushed them very far. It would not be wise to push them again so soon. Once they became accustomed to the idea, then perhaps. For now, he would show some self-restraint to appease them.

Instead, he kissed Katherine's hand. "Consider that a reminder of what I will do to you tonight," he whispered.

Duskendale

Renly himself came out to greet him personally. It wasn't hard to see why so many flocked to his banner. He was ten years Robb's senior, and had a ready smile that would warm anyone's heart, except perhaps Stannis'. His crown was composed of many golden antlers joined together. "Horns are the symbol of a cuckold," Katherine whispered to him.

"Hush," said Robb. He could not think that of Renly like that, or else he would never stop grinning! He doubted any king, regardless of how amiable he was, would take very well to a man who thought him a cuckold. Considering that Renly was married to Margaery Tyrell, who had a bit of a reputation, Robb wouldn't be surprised if the antlers were particularly apt for the youngest Baratheon brother.

"I don't think he would mind if he were," Katherine continued to whisper. "And even if he did mind, I think your pretty face is exactly what is needed to soothe his aching heart."

"Shhh!" he hissed. He felt heated blood flood his face.

Robb and his company dismounted. "Your Grace," he said as he bent one knee and knelt before Renly.

"Lord Stark," said Renly. He indicated that they should all rise. "I am very sorry for your loss. Your father and I did not always see eye to eye, but he was a good and honourable man, and I respected him greatly."

"Your Grace is too kind," said Robb.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance at last," continued Renly. The company started to walk towards the centre of Renly's camp while Robb's men were led away to be settled in their tents and the horses were taken to be fed and watered. "Many songs have been sung about your victories in the Riverlands and Harrenhal. That was beyond spectacular. I doubt many men would be able to boast that he defeated both Jaime Lannister and the Mountain Who Rides in succession."

Margaery Tyrell finally spoke. Her voice was smooth like honey and it flowed over a man's senses. She wouldn't be considered a great beauty, but there was something very alluring about the animation in her face and her low-cut dress, which clung to her body, showing it off to its best effect. It was a very impressive body. "His Grace and I were rapt as we listened, were we not, my dear?" she said as she looped her arm around Renly's. He smiled and patted her hand as if she were his favourite sister rather than his wife. "Your bard, I have heard, is one of a kind, although it seems she is no longer your bard." With that, Margaery turned to Katherine. The latter smiled at dipped a curtsey.

"I am whatever my lord needs me to be, Your Grace," said Katherine.
"Rumour has spread of your beauty, but I think the truth exceeds whatever pretty words your brother bards can compose," said Margaery.

"I am sure they are simply jealous of both her beauty and skill," said Renly.

"You are too kind, Your Graces. But, I must admit, when it comes to words, my brother bards lack the skills to adequately string a sentence together, much less a decent song. That is no slander on my part, for it is merely fact."

Renly laughed. "Too true," he said. "Did you hear about that poor idiot in King's Landing who wrote that awful song about Robert's death and implicated Cersei Lannister? I do believe Joffrey had his tongue ripped out and Lady Sansa Stark encouraged him to feed the bard's tongue to him to make him...what was it? Eat his words."

"Sansa?" said Robb. He could ill imagine it. His sister loathed the sight of blood. How could she make a man eat his own tongue? Or even think of such a thing? It was very... Damonic.

"Sansa did that?" whispered his mother. Obviously, she was thinking the same thing.

"It was horrifying, but poetic," said Margaery. "Do you not agree, Lady Stark? You were once a poet."

"There would be a sort of justice in it, if it were truly slander," said Katherine. "But I suspect there is more truth in that song than in most rumours."

"Do you pity the man, then?" asked Renly.

"I do not, Your Grace. One may know the truth. One may also know better than to say it out loud to those who do not want to hear it."

Margaery disentangled herself from her completely uninterested husband and linked her arm through Katherine's as if they were two young girls in each other's confidence. Sansa had often walked around Winterfell like that with Jeyne Poole. "It seems we think very much alike, Lady Stark. I hope we can be friends."

"I would like that very much, Your Grace," said Katherine.

"Good. It can be so lonely here, to be surrounded by men who know nothing beyond fighting and duelling and drinking."

"I do object to that, my dear," said Renly, but he was not angry.

"But you are an exceptional man, Your Grace," said Katherine.

"Indeed," said Margaery. "I was speaking of men like my brother in general." Behind her, Loras sighed and looked to the heavens as if begging for strength.

"Do you mean to say, Katherine, that I am one of those men who know nothing beyond fighting, duelling and drinking?" Robb teased. He wasn't in the mood for teasing for he was still feeling disturbed by thoughts of Sansa and seared pieces of human tongue, but the others seemed to be enjoying themselves so much, and as Lord Stark and warden of the north, he could not be relegated to the background.
"You must have something exceptional about you, my lord, or else I would not have paid you the least bit of attention," said Katherine with a smile. She winked at him when he pretended to be offended.

"I think, Lady Stark, we shall be the very greatest of friends," said Margaery.

"Of that, I have no doubt, Your Grace," said Katherine. "And please, do call me Katherine."

"Then we shall not stand on ceremony. When are alone, you shall call me Margaery."

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**Somewhere south of the Kingswod**

"Face it, Damon, you have no idea where Robb is," said Arya. Damon counted to ten and reminded himself that he was doing all of this to protect Arya Stark and strangling her to death would achieve nothing. And it was true. He had no idea where Robb was, since he was moving around everywhere and the only things Damon could find were the remnants of his camps and the remnants of Lannister caravans that had been raided. There were rumours everywhere about how the main Stark army could be anywhere, from Riverrun to Goldengrove to Harrenhal. He supposed he could go to Harrenhal, which was now Stark territory, but no one knew him there, and no one knew Arya either. He had a teensy weensy feeling they would not trust him much if he turned up and announced he was Damon Salvatore, the king's friend.

Once again, he cursed the lack of cell phones. He and Arya were still meandering somewhere south of the Kingswood avoiding Cersei's men, and he couldn't decide whether to head northwest or northeast. In fact, they were closer to Storm's End than to any other–

Storm's End was Renly Baratheon's seat, and hadn't Renly's best bud Loras Tyrell invited Damon to one of the youngest Baratheon's famous balls? The rumours about Renly Baratheon were always the same. He had declared himself king, with support from the Tyrells, and was now holding tournament after tournament as he mustered support from all the Baratheon bannermen. Thus far, his army numbered somewhere between fifty thousand and one hundred and fifty thousand. The people he interrogated–and then ate–hadn't been too sure of the exact numbers.

"We'll go to Renly," said Damon.

"Renly, like fat King Robert's brother?" asked Arya.

"Is there any other?" asked Damon.

"I thought we were going to find Robb!"

"At this rate, we're never going to find Robb until the war is over," said Damon. "Loras Tyrell's a friend. He probably won't help, but he won't turn me away and Renly has nothing against Robb for now so he's not too likely to use you as a hostage. We can look for Robb while we are in Renly's camp. I'm sure his scouts have had better luck."

Arya looked sceptical, but he was the adult here and she was the child, regardless of whether she was the lady or not. And she wasn't, because she had never been a 'lady' as such. They turned southeast, towards Storm's End. Renly wasn't there, and Loras wasn't there, for they had ridden north to take everything east of King's Landing, but surely people there would be good enough to send word to their dearly beloved king to apprise him of the situation.

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**Somewhere in the middle of nowhere...**
"Where are we going?" asked Hot Pie.

"To find my brother," Jon replied. The orange light from the fire made the planes of his face sharper so that he seemed more like a man and less the seventeen year old boy he really was. Then again, he had never seemed seventeen. Elena had often wondered whether Jon had ever been truly young in the sense that she understood the word 'young'. One could say that Damon was younger at heart than Jon was.

"Who's your brother?" asked Hot Pie. He licked the fat from their dinner off his fingers and looked hungrily at everyone else's portions.

"Have you been listening at all?" said Gendry. He tore the last of the meat from his portion and tossed the bones to Ghost who looked at him as if he were daft. He was not a dog, and he would not eat bones that humans didn't want, thank you very much. Unless there was marrow in it, then he would happily use his strong jaws and sharp teeth to show these weak primates how it was really done. But they'd been eating squirrels; he'd get more gristle than marrow for his pain. "The new king of the north."

"The King in the North," corrected Jon. "It is an old title borne by his ancestors. He's taken it up again."

"Why are we going there?" demanded Hot Pie. "He's a dead man. He's stupid for attacking the Lannisters. Everyone knows the Lannisters are going to squash him. I mean, the Lannisters have Ser Jaime Lannister the Kingslayer!" Not at present, considering he was mouldering in a cage somewhere in Robb Stark's camp.

Jon froze. At his side, Ghost growled. Elena stilled. Jon could take insults to himself well because he had been taking them for much of his life. However, he would never tolerate any insult directed at his brother. The bond between the two of them was stronger than anything Elena had known, even the bond between Damon and Stefan. Although, now that she thought about it, that had always seemed a little strained, so perhaps it was not an apt comparison.

Jon turned slowly to face Hot Pie, seemingly calm. Then again, wolves were not known for their rage before they attacked. "If you were a real man, you would say it to his face," he said. His voice was quiet, but cold, and it cut through the tense silence the way a sword could cleave through bone when wielded correctly. "However, since he is not here, I will deal with you in his stead." He moved so quickly no one knew what he was doing. Gendry sprang back at the sudden movement, and Elena simply didn't know how to react. Her mind was screaming at her to do something, but her limbs seemed to have disconnected from her nervous system.

Jon grabbed Hot Pie by the hair, causing the boy to first yelp and then scream as his hair was almost ripped from his scalp. He dragged Hot Pie close to the fire and shoved his face close to the flames. Elena smelled ammonia as Hot Pie let go of his bladder. "Elena! Help! Gendry! Please! No! No! No!"

"Jon!" Elena finally found her voice. "Stop!" She dragged the two of them back. Even with her vampire strength, it was a struggle to restrain Jon. Ghost continued to growl, ready to finish what Jon had started if his master should choose to give the command. She gripped Jon's wrist with bone crushing force, making him release Hot Pie. "Jon, look at me!"

Perhaps it was the desperation that had crept into her voice without her knowing it, but he did turn to look at her, although she had never seen that cold anger since…well, she had never seen it, not even on the Wall when she had called him arrogant and conceited. "You don't want to do that, Jon."
"No, I really think I do," he said.

"You're overreacting. Hot Pie's just being…his usual stupid unthinking self. You should know better than to pay him any heed."

"No one insults my brother in front of me." With that, he turned on his heel and stormed off into the darkness. Ghost followed him.

Elena turned back to the others. Sam looked worried, but he said nothing as he began to clean up the remnants of their meal. Gendry helped him, leaving Hot Pie still cowering in a ball quite far away from the fire, shivering and shuddering. She ought to feel pity for him, but all she could think about was Jon and how much she wanted to find him so he wouldn't need to be alone in the dark. "You will apologize," she said to Hot Pie. "Otherwise, you can leave, and the Lannisters can gut you like a suckling pig and string you up by your intestines." She didn't wait for him to reply and followed Jon into the woods.

Next chapter: Elena takes the next step in her relationship with Jon. Jon decides on a plan to find Robb. Damon and Arya encounter trouble on the road. Renly confronts Stannis. Jaime feels like a zoo animal.
Mean Girls

Chapter Summary

Jon and Elena take their relationship to the next stage. The Baratheon brothers 'bond'.
Robb must try to keep the peace. Katherine meets her new best friends.

Somewhere on the Kingsroad

In his blind plunge to get away, Jon had left a clear trail, which was just as well, because if he really put his mind to it, Elena had a feeling she probably would have a lot of trouble tracking him. She wasn't particularly good at tracking things. Stefan had tried to teach her, but they'd been interrupted by supernatural drama and the sire bond. And then…well, blood bags didn't really need to be tracked as such. Since her arrival in Westeros, it had been a steep learning curve.

His trail suddenly ended, but Ghost sat at the foot of a tree. He whined when he saw her but made no move to go to her. She looked up to see Jon ensconced amongst the branches of the tree, with one leg dangling down. "Jon?" she said.

"Are you done defending him yet?" he asked.

"I'm not defending him," said Elena. "I just thought you didn't really want to kill him. He will be nothing but respectful to the king from now on." Jon did not reply. "Can I come up?"

"I don't own the tree."

Elena clambered up. The branches were wide and sturdy, making excellent perches for creatures that did not have the feathers or hollow bones of birds. She sat on the branch beside Jon, leaning against the trunk and feeling the bark dig into her skin. Away from the fire, the stars looked very bright, like a scattering of icing sugar on bluish black silk. She couldn't recognize any of them.

"It feels strange to hear people call Robb the king," said Jon suddenly.

"Why? I don't know your brother very well, but he looks the way I always imagined a young king would."

Jon laughed. "Robb looks kingly?" he said.

"I think so."

"Well, he is handsome, to be sure," said Jon. "More handsome than I am."

"You're very handsome, Jon," said Elena. "I should know. I've seen more of you than anyone else has."

He reached over to take her hand. "There are so many things I want to do with you right now in this tree," he whispered huskily. His hand was warm, and she felt his pulse quicken at the thought of all these 'things'.

"We could try," she said. "But we'd probably fall and it would probably hurt."
"Probably," said Jon. He got out of the tree and made to be all gentlemanly and helped her get out of it too. She didn't really need his help, but she accepted it because it felt like a normal thing to do. And he needed someone to humour him right now.

As soon as her feet touched the ground, his lips were on hers. His beard, which had been left to grow for a while now, scratched her face, leaving trails of heat on her skin. She wrapped her arms about his neck as he leaned forward, forcing her to lean back and rely on his hold on her waist so she wouldn't fall to the ground. He lowered her gently onto the bed of leaves before they finally pulled away for a breath.

He tugged at her hair. It had grown to that unmanageable length where it was too short to tie back but too long to keep her bangs out of her eyes. "It's growing back," he said.

"Of course it is," she said. "It's hair."

"I miss your hair."

"Shut up and kiss me."

He quite happily obliged. It took all their self-restraint to not rip off their clothes. Alas, they only had one change of clothes, and they did not know when they might happen upon a village or a town where they might appropriate some from a washing line, or even buy some. Not that they had any money. Perhaps people might want to curry favours with Jon's brother and give them clothes?

He pulled her tunic over her head. His had already disappeared off somewhere. He took her nipple into his mouth. She arched her back as he brushed his tongue over the sensitive surface, feeling the sensation shooting down to the tips of her fingers and the soles of her feet, and between her legs where she wanted him the most.

"Jon!" she gasped.

"Patience, Elena. You taught me," he said wickedly. He was one quick learner. He reached down into her trousers and slipped two fingers into her while he continued to suckle on her breasts, bringing her to new heights as he moved his fingers inside her, slipping them in and out of her. He curved his middle finger. She cried out when he hit the right spot that made her muscles clench around his digit. It seemed to kindle a fire in her belly and…lower.

He was driving her crazy. So crazy! But this was all crazy; Westeros, teleporting, meeting Jon. It was all crazy, but it was also real. She had never felt more alive than she felt now. Every nerve on her body was sending signals to her brain. She had never felt so much, nor had her senses ever been so aware. She smelled the rich earthy scent of rotting leaves, of life returning to where it had come from, of Jon's masculine musk of sweat and something else that was uniquely him, and the fresh tones of the moist wind bringing the promise of rain. She heard his breathing as he tried to control his urge to simply take her.

"Open your eyes, Elena. I want to see your pleasure."

Her gaze met his. His dark eyes glittered almost feverishly. He wanted her too. "Jon," she gasped. "Now. Please." She clenched her muscles around his fingers as she tried to withhold her release for him.

He slipped off her trousers and straddled her. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he thrust himself in. They cried out at the same time. She let him ride her this time and she let him guide her. She came before he did, but the pleasure only intensified when he joined her. He threw back his
head and cried out her name. He shuddered when he reached his release, and then collapsed on top of her while her pleasure ebbed away into a warm glowing sensation that always came after good sex.

"I love you, Elena," he whispered as he kissed her neck and nuzzled her hair. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Jon."

She and Jon led their company from the front while the others followed. Their grumbling about sore legs and aching muscles had long since ceased. Well, it had mostly been Hot Pie who had grumbled, because Gendry and Sam both knew better. Hot Pie, too, now knew better than to say anything in Jon's presence. He was too afraid to after Jon's outburst and Elena's threat to leave him behind.

Ghost trotted far ahead, poking his nose into interesting looking hollows beneath the roots of trees in the hopes of catching a rodent for a snack. He only occasionally shared his snacks.

"Where are we headed?" asked Elena.

"Riverrun," said Jon. "The last I heard, Robb had ridden south to aid the Riverlands. I'm not sure whether he is still there now, but I am sure that as his closest allies, they will know where he is, at least. Bran didn't know where he had gone. It seems my brother is very fond of keeping his movements secret."

"It's a smart thing to do," said Elena. "If no one knows where he is, they can't exactly attack him."

"They can't exactly find him to help him either," said Jon. He reached out to take her hand and laced his fingers together with hers. She grinned. It felt so...normal. Well, as normal as anything could be in Westeros. They were off on their way to help a rebel king. There was actually nothing normal about that. But at least there was some sense of certainty. She could be happy with Jon without feeling guilty because she wasn't tearing a pair of brothers apart. Moreover, he loved her without ever having to have been burned by Katherine.

"Where is Riverrun?" asked Gendry. "Is it far?" Elena didn't have too clear an idea herself. She did, however, have a map, and it had been useful from time to time.

"If we continue at this pace we have been going, Master Smith, we will reach it precisely when the war is over and when we will be of no use to anyone," said Jon.

Elena laughed, more for the fact that Jon was actually joking rather than because it was a good joke. It was good to see him open up and cheerful at the prospect of being able to see the king soon.

"It should take about two weeks' hard marching," said Jon. "If we are very fast, we can even cut that down to a week. I hear they have smoked fish in Riverrun." That was a hint.

Somewhere in the South

"Are we there yet?"

One, two, three–

"Damon, are we there yet?"
"Damon, are you listening to me? Are we there yet?"

Damon pasted on his dangerous 'I am going to eat you' grin and looked down at the pesky thing riding in the saddle in front of him. How in all the hells had he ended up pledging his loyalty to her? "Do any of these rocks look like castles to you, hmmm?" he asked.

"No," said Arya.

"Then no, we're not there. Unless Storm's End is in the middle of nowhere, then we're nowhere close. And if you don't shut up, we are never going to get there before I kill you, 'kay?"

"You can't kill me," said Arya. She sounded very sure of herself, which only irritated Damon further because he knew the threat was completely empty.

"I can gag you," said Damon. "Robb would forgive me."

"Are you sure?" asked Arya. "He doesn't like you that much, and he will like you even less when I tell him that you--"

"Hush," said Damon, his annoyance at the girl forgotten as he spied men travelling on the road. He didn't know if they were innocents or if they were working for Cersei. Or, if his luck held, they would be Renly's men. They were close enough to Storm's End, right? At any rate, they had travelled long enough to be in Baratheon territory. He spurred the horse forward to meet the men on the road. They looked to be sellswords heading north, but he did not put too much stock in appearances these days, not after having seen just how many forms spies could take if they wanted.

"Evening, friends," he said. "Where is it that you're headed to?"

The leader of the band of seven stopped and looked at Damon with a cocked head, trying to decide if he was worth either robbing or talking to. He held his sword across his shoulders behind his neck, with one hand holding the hilt while the other held the very tip of the scabbard. Their horses looked like they had once pulled ploughs on a farm somewhere. "To Duskendale to join King Renly's forces," he said at last. "Where are you off to, friend?" His companions were fingering their weapons while pretending not to. There was no honour amongst thieves. Damon held off killing them for a moment. They knew things he didn't, and he needed that information.

"How fortuitous," said Damon. "We were hoping to join King Renly's forces too. He's at Duskendale, you say?"

"Aye, with Ser Loras Tyrell and two hundred thousand men. The northern king, the Stark boy, took off his crown and swore fealty to Renly." Robb had sworn fealty to Renly? But he'd only just declared himself king! It wasn't like Robb to flip-flop like this. He was a wolf, not a fish. Well, he was part fish, but still. No, this sounded like it was some part of a greater plan, and it sounded more like Katherining than Starking.

It didn't surprise Damon one bit. Katherine's presence in the northern army was no news to him. Everyone had heard of the Starks' new bard who had composed a most rousing anthem for them without giving any credit to the French soldier who had actually composed it. And when he'd heard of her victory at Harrenhal, he knew that she had somehow clawed her way up to the top again. Poor Robb. He needed to be rescued.

Arya was about to open her mouth. Damon pinched her arm to make her shut up. "Then we're heading to Duskendale too," he said.
"You and the runt?" The man looked at Arya, amused. "Not a very pretty thing, is she? Might look better once she's cleaned up a bit, though." The look he gave them was not exactly friendly. Damon's hand moved to the hilt of his sword. It was a pretty thing, with an ivory handle and a pommel wrought in the shape of flowers and vines. He had taken it from Ser Boros.

"My sister," he said. "It's easier for her to travel like this."

"What sort of sellsword travels with his sister?" laughed another of the men.

"The kind who has one," said Damon. "Well, we'd best be on our way. Don't want to miss any of the action."

"It's been a long journey. We could use a new horse," said the first man.

"Sure," said Damon.

"What are you doing?" demanded Arya. He ignored her.

"Why don't you come here and get it from me yourself, friend?"

The ring of sellswords closed in on him. One of them was pointing a crossbow at either his head or chest. Or Arya. Could he be faster than the bolt? Yes? No? Well, probably not, but he could be faster than the man's trigger finger.

"Get out of the saddle, and give us that pretty sword too," said the leader. As he talked, his beard moved like it was a separate organism altogether. "There's seven of us and one and a half of you. Don't think you can try anything. Come on. Get down. We don't want to hurt that pretty face."

One of the men came too close to try and grab Arya for a hostage. Damon grabbed him first and held him by the neck out to the side with one hand, so that he dangled with his feet inches above the ground. "I don't think you quite understand the situation, buddy," said Damon. "See, I'm a Salvatore."

"Stefan Salvatore." The horror with which they whispered his brother's name was almost comical. They were more afraid of bunny drinking Stefan than of serial killer Damon! Although, was it Mopey Stefan or Ripper Stefan who was carrying out Tywin Lannister's orders right now?

The man's trigger finger twitched. Damon pushed Arya down before the arrow flew. He was expecting its trajectory and he ducked as it left the bow. It flew past his ear with a high-pitched whistle and landed somewhere far away. "Missed," said Damon. He threw his dying hostage at them. The horses, unused to battle, reared at the sight of the huge projectile. "Hold on for the ride!" he shouted to Arya as he spurred the horse onwards. Finally, some action! So what if it wasn't really helping anyone at all? Well, Renly didn't need to waste his money on sellswords like these. He needed high quality soldiers.

He cut off the head of the man who had fired the crossbow at him. No one took a pot shot at Damon Salvatore and got away with it. Unless it was Klaus, but Klaus had never actually tried to shoot him. The rest of them scattered, and only a Starkishly brave one tried to charge at him. He struck a glancing blow on Damon's arm. The vampire grabbed the man's limb and the sellsword screamed as Damon tore his arm out of its socket. Muscle ripped like paper, exposing the red flesh and pearly white cartilage of the joint. Blood spurted out in time with the man's heartbeat. His agony was abruptly ended when his face was crushed by a hoof.

The first sellsword tried to ride away, but Damon's horse was far superior to his farm animal. He caught up to him, but did nothing. Yet.
"Hey, kid, want a present?" asked Damon. He took Needle from his belt. The sword looked more like a dagger compared to him. He offered it, handle first, to Arya, who grabbed it. "First lesson–"

"Stick them with the pointy end!" shouted Arya. She thrust forward with the sword, all eagerness and no skill. Well, it was her first. The sellsword tried to dodge, but Arya's aim was actually all right for an eleven year old who'd never had any formal training before (although he suspected Jon had taught her a few things over the years).

The man shouted and cursed as the sword went into his arm.

Damon lost patience and grabbed him by the back of his tunic, throwing him to the ground. The man screamed as he hit the hard-packed dirt, injured arm first.

Damon wheeled his mount around as the plough horse went off in search of greener pastures. He dismounted. The man scrambled to get away. Damon's boot on his chest stopped that. Arya dismounted after him. "I did it!" she breathed, her eyes wide as she looked at her blooded sword. "I hit him."

"Congratulations," said Damon in a bored tone. "If it had just been you, he still would have killed you."

"Then when are you going to teach me to fight properly, like you do?"

"Trust me, you're never going to be able to fight like I do."

"What are you?" asked the pathetic human as he clutched at his wound. Heh, injured by an eleven year old girl. Things couldn't get much worse for him.

Then again, Damon had been wrong before.

"Like I said, I'm a Salvatore," said Damon.

"I know who you are, Stefan Salvatore," said the man. "What are you?"

"Beep. Wrong Salvatore."

He sank his fangs into the man's throat, letting the sweet and salty blood run down his throat. The man struggled wildly in his grasp but he was an antelope that had been caught in a lion's jaws. Or a wolf's. Ravens unfortunately, didn't have such big beaks. He didn't let go until his prey stopped moving. The corpse fell to the ground with a dull thud to join its companions. Their eyes still bore the terror they had felt in life right before he had ended their miserable existences.

"I'm Damon," he said. "Nice to meet you too."

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Near Duskendale

The wind carried their banners high and proud. Wolf and stag flew side by side, as they had once did seventeen years ago when Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark had raised their swords against the mad King Aerys. Now Renly Baratheon and Robb Stark were raising arms against mad King Joffrey.

Yet it was not Joffrey that they were riding out to face, but Stannis. The other Baratheon met them by the edge of the cliff. Robb heard the surf dashing against the rocks below. If anyone were to ambush anyone else here, one would only have to drive the panicked soldiers over the cliff and
they would all be broken at its foot, their bodies and blood washed out to sea. There would be no bones to bury or burn.

The two Baratheons stopped several feet from one another. They couldn't be more different. Stannis, with his greying hair, thin unsmiling lips, and steel grey eyes, looked as hard as the rocks which he had been given by Robert after the Rebellion had ended. He had none of Renly's charm, and no one would want him for a friend. Beside him rode a red-haired woman in a red dress, with a red jewel at her throat.

Robb had heard of Stannis' foreign witch. He had never believed in witches or magic.

"Stannis, my dear brother," said Renly. "You look…grey."

"Renly," said Stannis.

That was the extent of their greetings to one another. The two self-proclaimed Baratheon kings stared at each other, as if they were two little boys hoping the other would blink first. Then again, it was hard to imagine Stannis had ever been a little boy who had played games. He seemed to have been born this way, hardened and humourless as he was.

"Why is your stag on fire, brother?" asked Renly finally.

Margaery leaned over to whisper into Katherine's ear. "Because it's venison," she said.

It took all of Robb's self-control to keep a straight face. He was quite certain that was not what had been on Stannis' mind when he had commissioned the banners, but when one thought of a stag on fire, he supposed 'venison' would be somewhere in one's train of thought.

"His Grace has been chosen by the Lord of Light, Lord Renly," said the witch. He had to wonder who had the real power here; the woman rode as if she were Stannis' queen and his equal, or Stannis himself? "You would be wise to submit to the Lord."

Renly laughed. "Submit to Stannis? I have one hundred and fifty thousand men and more rallying to my banners as we speak. How many do you have, brother? Ten thousand? Forgive me if my counting is inaccurate, brother, but I do believe I have several times more men than you do."

"The Lord of Light has no need for armies," said Melisandre.

Renly ignored her. "Face it, brother. You will never be king. People love me. No one even remotely likes you. Why don't you go home, think about it, and eat a peach?"

"You think this is all a game, Renly," said Stannis. "Tell me, have you ever been to war? No? Well, I have. I guarded Storm's End when Robert told me to while he rode off to start the Rebellion. I kept it with five hundred men while we were assailed from all sides. This is not a tournament, brother."

"No, it isn't," said Renly. "It's war, and it's the side with the most numbers that wins, usually. I don't have to have fought to know that, brother."

Stannis pressed his lips so tightly together they seemed to disappear altogether. He turned to Robb, boring through him with his steel grey eyes. Robb held his gaze.

"And you, Robb Stark," he said. "Where is your honour? Your father would have supported my claim to the throne because he knew it was right and just."
All eyes turned to him. "We are all united in our desire to see the false king Joffrey deposed of, sires," he said. "Whatever disagreements you might have, might they not be set aside for now until the Lannisters are vanquished? And then perhaps we may settle them in an amicable way as befitting of two scions of a royal house."

"You have a smooth tongue, Young Wolf," said Melisandre. She looked him up and down. He did not like the hunger in her eyes. "But the Lord of Light will rule over all, make no mistake about that, and King Stannis is his chosen."

"You may have your Lord of Light, brother," said Renly. "I shall keep my armies, and let us see what is greater; your fire god, or my spears."

The scene from Jaime's cage would always look the same. There were men staring at him, and there were men mocking him. He could see dirty white tents, hobbled horses, and men moving to and fro carrying supplies or eating supplies, much like mindless worker ants he and Tyrion had liked to antagonize when they had been boys. It didn't matter whether they were Stark's men or Renly's men. Of course, now that Clegane had put himself into an even direr situation, he diverted most of the attention away from Jaime.

"I must admit, even I am impressed, Lady Katherine," said Loras Tyrell as he peered through the bars of Clegane's cage. "But why would you keep such a hideous beast as a pet?"

"I would much rather have the other one as a pet," said Margaery Tyrell. She smirked in Jaime's direction, appraising him the way she would appraise a horse. Of course she would want to ride him, but he had high standards. Nothing short of a real queen would be able to mount him, although he had to wonder if Katherine Stark counted as a real queen, a false queen, a demoted queen, or something else entirely.

"The Kingslayer is my lord husband's trophy," said Katherine. "It would be wrong to appropriate him for myself." She neglected to mention that she was the one who tormented him the most. Who else would have thought of these chafing manacles and the cage so small a man could never stretch himself out in it? Not to mention the songs and the sleep deprivation and the raw meat.

"I wouldn't mind having a trophy like that," said Loras. "You were awfully silent today at the cliff, my lady. I would have thought that you, of all people, would have had a few choice things to say about Stannis and his newest obsession?"

"It was not in my place, Ser Loras," said Katherine.

"You seem troubled by it," remarked Margaery.

"Merely curious as to how a foreign priestess would have been able to ensnare a man like Stannis. I have heard much about him. He does not seem to be the kind of man who would fall prey to beauty."

"If anyone were to ask for my opinion," Jaime began, making all three of them look at him.

"We haven't, but do go on," said Katherine.

"Stannis wouldn't know true beauty if it stood naked in front of him." His mind suddenly flicked back to the day he first met Rebekah, the essence of naked beauty. Stannis wouldn't know how to appreciate it.

"No, indeed," said Loras. He was practically licking his lips while looking at Jaime. Well, dreams
were healthy. The three of them eventually grew tired of staring at Robb Stark's limited menagerie and wandered off, still jesting amongst themselves. Jaime rather missed them, actually. Regardless of who they were mocking, he had enjoyed listening to their conversations. It at least gave him something to focus his mind on. Without them, all he could think about was how he would escape, and how in the seven hells Rebekah intended to get him out.

She probably couldn't. For all her courage in infiltrating the Stark camp, she wouldn't know how to get him out of it. He hadn't seen her for a long time, at any rate, except for in disappointing dreams when she unlocked the doors of his prison, only to get them both captured as soon as they got out. He would wake to find himself still in his cage, with the cramps growing worse every day.

Night fell. He heard whispers of Petyr Baelish coming to visit Renly. Typical Baelish, playing both sides. Or was he? One could never tell what Littlefinger was going to do. The only thing one could trust him to be was dishonest. He listened hard while pretending to be asleep so his guards would feel comfortable enough to talk amongst themselves. Mostly it was inane babble about which camp follower gave the best service and how the ale tasted like fish piss but they'd drink it anyway because it was better than water –he wasn't sure how fish piss was better than water but then again, he hadn't actually stooped down to *taste* fish piss before. Some of them mentioned how Littlefinger had gone to visit Lady Catelyn Stark, bearing a large chest. Some of them thought it was treasure. Others said it was her husband's bones. Yet more said it was the bones of her husband and her daughters. The latter he discarded. Even Joffrey would know better than to kill the Stark girls. Stark men had no brains.

He must have dozed off, because when he next woke, the entire camp was in a panic.

"What's going on?" he demanded of his guard. He couldn't hope, but was it possible that his father's forces had come? Would he be free of this cage?

"King Renly is dead," said the guard, a boy who could not be more than twenty. Ah, to be that young and naïve again. Then the boy realized who he had actually answered and poked his spear through the bars of the cage. "Shut up, *Kingslayer!*" He said it so venomously that it sounded as if he was accusing Jaime of killing yet another king. Renly as king always made Jaime laugh. King of the dinner parties, perhaps, and maybe of the balls, but he would never actually hold the Iron Throne.

By dawn, it seemed half of Renly's camp had emptied as his men all defected to Stannis.

**Next chapter:** Robb and Katherine explore religion. Theon bites the hand that fed him. Bonnie treads on thin ice and plays the diplomat.
Chapter Summary

Robb and Katherine explore religion and Robb has a "revelation". Bonnie realizes that she can't trust anyone and she must become a deceiver herself to survive and protect the people she cares about.

Chapter 42: The Other Baratheon Boy

Duskendale

Renly lay in state on a bed of green velvet. He seemed to be at peace, which contradicted the horror of his death. Catelyn had claimed to see a shadow trickle through the slit between the tent flaps before taking on the shape of a man. The shadow assassin had stabbed Renly from behind, and before anyone else could see it, it had vanished, leaving all blame on Brienne of Tarth. Catelyn had taken the giant of a woman under her protection, declaring that she was innocent and that it had been a shadow that had killed Renly. Hmm, that might be problematic.

"Do you believe it? The story of the shadow man?" Robb whispered to Katherine as they came to pay their respects to the late king. He blinked in the dimness until his eyes adjusted. Katherine considered feeding him more carrots.

"The red woman has real power," Katherine whispered back. "I don't like witches. They are tricky creatures."

"You have had dealings with them, then?"

"I have travelled very far in my lifetime. I have seen many things. Let's just say the world is full of surprises, and not all of them pleasant."

Margaery and Loras stood by Renly's side. The former, in her black cloak and gown, looked every bit the dignified grieving widow. She had left off the adornments she so loved and had pinned back her beautiful shiny brown hair from her face. Loras looked more upset than he had any right to be. Then again, Katherine was more than willing to believe the rumours about him and Renly. The alliance between Renly and the Tyrells had not been due to his marriage with Margaery.

"I am so sorry for your loss, Your Grace," said Robb. He bowed and kissed Margaery's hand when she offered it.

"It is kind of you to come and see the king before he is laid to rest with his forefathers, Lord Stark, Lady Stark. You are the only ones who have actually come," said Margaery. She looked from Robb to Katherine. "Where will you go now?"

"Abandon him, as everyone else seems to have," said Loras angrily.

"Brother, please," said Margaery. She placed a hand on his arm to calm him. "Lord and Lady Stark must look to their own, just as we must look to our own. You cannot blame them for that."

"I cannot thank you enough for your kindness, Your Grace," said Katherine. "These are hard times,
and we must all make hard decisions. I have treasured our friendship, and I hope we can still remain friends."

"Always," said Margaery. She took Katherine's hands in her own. "Wherever you are, wherever you go, I hope you will write to me. I shall miss you."

"And I, you, Your Grace," said Katherine. "If the gods are kind, they will allow us to meet again."

Men continued to move out. Tents were taken down. In some cases, they were simply abandoned. People were fickle; they went wherever their fortunes lay. Loyalty was irrational. Katherine and Robb rode back to their camp in silence, each deep in their own thoughts. She could not presume to guess what he was thinking about. Robb Stark was not an easy man to read. Whenever she thought she understood him, he could always surprise her. That, perhaps, was one of the reasons why she…

She sighed. It was an irrevocable truth; she loved Robb more than she had ever loved anyone else in the world. What was the world coming to? Katherine loved someone else besides Katherine? It was silly. It was weak. But it made her happy. And it wasn't that weak. Robb Stark was Julius Caesar in the making. She just had to keep him on the right path.

"There goes our plan to use Renly's men," Robb said to her with a sigh.

"The plan hasn't changed," said Katherine. "We will simply swap Baratheons."

"Stannis will not be so easy to win over, especially since he saw me with Renly," said Robb.

"But Melisandre likes you," said Katherine. He gave her a look that bordered on alarm. Robb Stark did not do alarm. She placed a hand on his arm to reassure him. "I saw the way she looked at you. I'll try not to be jealous."

"What if I want you to be jealous?" he suddenly said with a wicked grin. "I'd like to see you fight for me."

"Be careful what you wish for, my lord," said Katherine. She steered her horse closer to his so their legs were touching. "I can be very possessive, and when I am possessive, I can get quite violent."

"I have seen you violent before," said Robb. "I rather liked it."

"If you continue on this line of talk, I will never get around to telling you how we will ensnare Stannis and his red priestess."

"I am all ears, my lady wife."

She did not say anything. Such a plan was best not to be divulged in the open. She waited until they reached their camp and were safely inside Robb's tent. The Starks weren't moving anywhere at present, at least not until Robb decided on his next plan of action. She listened carefully to make sure no one was eavesdropping. Tywin Lannister had spies in her camp. She had kept them there, knowing they might prove to be useful from time to time. They had been instrumental in spreading the rumour that Robb had been planning on moving westward.

Robb sat down and propped his feet, boots and all, on his desk. When she gave him a look, he simply smirked until she whacked his boots playfully.

"You will make a fine mother," he said. "You'll know exactly how to deal with our wayward sons."
"Be sensible, my lord," she said. She poured them both cups of wine. "Like you said, Stannis will not be easy to win over. But Stannis is a zealot. He believes in Melisandre and her god more than anything. He believes her god has given him Renly's army, and perhaps he has. The thing you must remember about zealots, Robb, and men in general, is that they will always look more kindly upon those who are similar to themselves. To win over Stannis, you must first win over his fire god."

"A little difficult, considering he does not exist," said Robb as he lifted his cup to his lips. Then he paused. "He probably doesn't exist."

"He does if Stannis says he does," said Katherine. "At least, for now. You will have to convert. Make a spectacle of it. Burn your seven pagan gods and your bleeding trees as an offering and as atonement for past blasphemies. Instead of us going to Stannis, Stannis will come to you."

"What if the gods grow angry?" Oh, the poor darling actually believed they could be real! It was beyond adorable, but now was not the time to be cute.

"The gods will understand, my lord," said Katherine. "And if they don't, then they are not gods, and we need not worry."

"The men will like this even less than submitting to Renly."

"You are their lord, not the other way around," said Katherine.

"They made me king."

"And you threw away that crown. When you next wear one, it will be one of your own making."

The seven stood in a circle atop pyres so high that no man would be able to reach them without doing some climbing. Father, Mother, Warrior, Maiden, Smith, Crone, and Stranger were all enthroned on piles of wood doused with oil. Their wooden faces were benevolent, stoic, and noble and it almost seemed as if they were looking on in compassion and pity upon their foolish followers who were about to burn them.

That was, if one believed such things. Robb wasn't sure if they were real, because if they were, they were pretty pathetic excuses for gods. One would have thought they would at least occasionally answer the prayers of their followers. But men kept dying, families kept being torn apart, and winter was still coming.

The hardest part was finding the weirwood sapling. They hardly grew this far south, but it was what Katherine wanted, and what Katherine wanted, Katherine had an uncanny way of getting. Robb felt a pang as it was brought out, that little tree with hardly any leaves on its branches. He remembered how his father would pray to the weirwood in Winterfell every morning. What would he say to him now? He couldn't really remember his father's voice anymore. He had always been an admirable and distant figure. Robb had strived to be like him once. Maybe if his father had stayed where the weirwoods grew in more abundance than anywhere else in the world…

But no. It had not been the trees protecting him in Winterfell, but the remoteness of the north.

"You're doing the right thing," said Katherine. "They may not understand you now, but they will in time. Religion is only ever good for controlling the masses. Those who control them must never believe the rhetoric that they preach."

The burning of the seven hadn't elicited much of a response from the northmen, but when a weirwood was brought out, everything was changed.
"What is going on?" demanded his mother. He had left her out of it, knowing that she would object. She still believed in the gods despite everything that had happened, and she still put her faith in them regardless of what they had done for their family. Or, rather, what they hadn't done.

"Exactly what you see, Mother," said Robb. He did not let his trepidation show. Maybe she was right and he and Katherine were both wrong. Maybe the gods were real and he would anger them by dishonouring them thus. But he was not going to put his trust in abstract entities he had neither seen nor heard. Like Katherine said, there was no proof they actually existed and it was incumbent upon those who preached their existence to prove that they were real.

"You cannot, Robb!" said Catelyn. Her voice became higher as her frenzy grew. "Stop this madness. You will bring ill fortune upon all of us!"

"Ill-fortune has already visited," said Robb. "You prayed to them every day for Bran's recovery, and for Father's safe return. And I prayed too. Did we get anything that we asked for? These are seven statues and a tree. They are not gods. The Lord of Light gave Stannis an army. He will give me justice."

"Are you daft, boy?" demanded the Greatjon. He pushed through the circle of men surrounding the clearing. Night had fallen, and the only light came from the dim stars and the torches below, standing ready for the immolation of the gods of his mother and father. "Burning the god of your father and his father before him?! Do you want to bring down divine wrath upon us? And all for what? Stannis' red witch and her false god?"

He was fond of the Greatjon, and the man was as loyal as a bannerman could ever be, but he could not tolerate this insubordination. "Seize him," he said to the Praetorian Guard. The faceless five hundred, handpicked by his wife, were silent and obedient, and deadly. They had not yet been tried in battle, but he had seen them move in unison. Where Katherine had learned to train men like that, he did not know, but he was convinced that this 'village' she came from was no ordinary village. "I will not have anyone blaspheme in the presence of the one true God."

"Well said, my lord."

He turned. Stannis and his red priestess had come, and just on time too. Melisandre rode beside Stannis as she always did. The sole remaining Baratheon king had brought a great force of men, far outnumbering Robb's. He reined in his horse right in front of Robb. Despite his great victory over his brother, there was still no hint of a smile.

Robb knelt, as did Katherine. The men, seeing their lord kneel, could only follow in his example. "Your Grace," said Robb. "Lady Melisandre. You honour us with your presence."

"Rise, Robb Stark," said Stannis.

"We had to come when we heard," said Melisandre. "It is a great occasion, Lord Stark, when a man finally sees the light. But let us not delay your offering to the Lord."

"But, first, tell me," said Stannis. "Why this sudden change of heart?"

They'd been prepared for this. "I dreamed," said Robb as he and Katherine had rehearsed. Rather, as he had rehearsed while Katherine had held the mirror and told him off for laughing too much at the ridiculous story until he had actually dreamed it. "I was walking in a dark valley surrounded by white bones of men and the shadow of death. There was a white tree before me."

"As I neared the tree," Robb continued, "it suddenly burst into flame. I saw its tears, but it was not really burning. The inferno grew so bright I could not bear to look at it. Then a voice in the flames spoke to me."

"What did it say?" whispered Melisandre.

"He said to me, 'I have chosen you, Robb Stark. Prepare a way for the Lord and make paths straight for him,'" said Robb. "'The true God of the First Men, whom your forefathers have forsaken, has returned to reclaim what is His and He has sent you to be His herald.'"

Robb bowed deeply to Stannis. "I could not place that voice when I first heard it, for it surrounded me like the roar of the wind and the crackling of fire, but now I know. It was your voice, Your Grace." He lifted his head to meet Stannis' gaze. The image was so vivid in his mind that he could almost believe it was real. How in the world did Katherine pull out stories like that?

When Stannis next spoke, his voice was softer, as if he were in awe. "Rise, Robb Stark, Herald."

Robb stood and turned back to the seething Greatjon who was cursing the gods for letting him be born into the world. The man just didn't know when to stop. Robb had no other choice. Umber would be the first sacrifice. It took four Praetorians to hold the giant down. He stood before his bannerman and his old friend. Well, as far as a king could have a friend. "You have sinned before the Lord of Light. You have eyes, yet you do not see. You defy your lord and the one true God. I am sorry, but I must do what must be done," he said. The words sounded mad and tasted bad in his mouth. He swallowed to keep the bile from rising up. He was sickened by what he was going to have to do and what he was saying. It didn't feel like him. It wasn't him. Yet, it had to be done. It was for the war and for Westeros; it was all for Westeros. He needed Stannis' men and Stannis had to be convinced of his utter devotion to his fire god. "Your blood and the flames will wash you of your sins."

The edge of his blade was keen. It cleaved through skin, flesh and bone. The Greatjon's head fell to the ground with a dull thud, his lifeless eyes still holding the rage and betrayal he had known just before death.

"Throw him into the tree's pyre." He might not have believed in the trees himself, but Jon Umber had. He could go with his god, and maybe find peace. Robb hoped he would find peace, and that he would understand. Katherine had warned him that this could happen, and he should not feel guilt if it did, but a little was inevitable, even if he was doing all of this for the North and for his family.

The flames engulfed the pyres as soon as the torches touched the oil-drenched wood. The gods looked on. In the flickering firelight, it seemed that their faces were becoming contorted in pain. No lightning struck him down, nor did it seem that the world had changed except for the silence that surrounded him. All he could hear was the crackling of flames. Katherine took his hand without saying a word and interlaced her fingers with his and, at that moment, he knew he was doing the right thing.

"He will bring light," declared Melisandre. "For the night is dark and full of terrors."

"She doesn't know half of it," said Katherine. Her facial expression remained unchanged, but he heard the mockery in her voice.

"Vampires?" he whispered back.

"Perhaps," she said. "The hearts of men are darker."
Winterfell

Bonnie dried her hands on her apron. Finally, the potatoes were all washed and peeled. Whatever had possessed her to volunteer to help? Oh, right, she was reverting to her helpful-Bennett-witch persona again and it wasn't exactly as if she could do very much to help out except for the most menial of tasks. With no ladies around, there was no need for a ladies' maid, and Lord Bran was at his lessons with Maester Luwin. He had managed to convince the old man to let them sit outside today because the sun was 'shining'. In Winterfell-speech, it meant the cloud cover wasn't as thick as usual and looked closer to white than black.

The boy had been having dreams of a three eyed raven. Luwin said they were only dreams, but Osha was more than certain that they portended something, and whatever it was, it probably wasn't good. The wildling woman kept trying to mention it to Bonnie with that knowing look in her eye. How was it that she could keep it from Lord Stark, and then Lord Robb, but not Osha the Wildling? Lord Jon didn't count, as he had had to be told by Elena. Her best friend obviously hadn't gotten the memo that they were supposed to keep vampire and witch business completely and absolutely secret.

She wondered what had happened to Elena. When the letter had reached Lord Robb, it had made no mention of anyone except Lord Stark, which was reasonable enough, but it didn't exactly make Bonnie feel any better. Elena was a vampire, yes, but she was a baby vampire and apart from Caroline, she was the most kind and caring and compassionate of vampires; they weren't exactly traits that enabled survival in a world like the one they lived in now. Damon would try to look after her, but there had been no news of Damon either.

"It's time to meet with your subjects, my lord," Luwin said.

Bran gave him a look that clearly said, 'Do I have to?' He didn't enjoy this any more than his brother had. Just because he had lost the use of his legs didn't mean he had ceased to be the boy who loved to climb. She had a feeling that there was more to Bran Stark than what met the eye.

"It is your duty as lord of Winterfell," Luwin reminded him.

"Hodor," said Bran.

"Hodor," replied the happy giant. He lifted Bran up and carried him into the great hall. Bonnie remained outside to tidy up the parchments and the maps. Suddenly, the gates burst open and Ser Rodrik rode in, his white hair wild like a mane about his bald head. How was it that men retained hair on their faces long after the hair on their heads was gone? He barged into the great hall, despite the fact the guards were trying to tell him that Bran was passing judgements and resolving his people's disputes. How could they leave a nine year old boy to do that? He was supposed to be playing with Lego or whatever passed for Lego here. She had long considered designing him a wheelchair, but the problem was she had no idea how they were supposed to be constructed except for the fact that they had wheels.

Later, she learned the reason behind Ser Rodrik's urgency.

"Did you hear?" the kitchen maid whispered to the cook. "Torrhen's Square's been taken by the Ironborn. They said they put every man and boy to the sword and took all the women as captives!"

"I always knew there was something wrong with the Greyjoys," said another kitchen maid. "Can't trust a Greyjoy, me ma told me."
"You bedded a Greyjoy," said the first.

"He offered me two silver stags. Think I was going to turn that down?"

"I heard Lord Bran sent Ser Rodrik and two thousand men to take it back," said the first maid, who had the smug look of someone who was in control of all the information.

"We haven't got two thousand men," snapped the cook. He thrust a large earthen bowl of bubbling stew at the first maid. "Take this out to the little lords. If it gets cold, I'll have you whipped."

Considering it was still past boiling point, it wasn't likely.

She said nothing as she took a bit of bread and sausage and some pickled cabbage to make herself a sandwich for dinner. Greyjoys. So far inland? It made little sense. And they knew Lord Robb had Theon. Would…whatever Theon's father's name was –probably something Greyjoy– really risk the life of his son? But then, he wouldn't be the first father to sacrifice his son in the name of some 'greater good' (read: personal gain). He had the equipment to make more, like that English guy John Marshal. She only knew about him because of Elena and Caroline's infatuation with those historical bodice rippers back in the day when the most important things in life were boys and making the cheerleading squad.

Night brought little change. Bonnie always marvelled at how quiet it was. Mystic Falls was not a big place by any means, but even then, there would be the humming of the refrigerator in the background or perhaps the ticking of the old grandfather clock that sat in her living room. Sometimes, a car would pass, and there would always be lights coming in from the outside. But in Winterfell, which was by no means a small town in Westerosian terms, there were no lights save for a few dim torches flickering on the walls. In the dark, one could see the stars so much more clearly, like diamonds scattered on a dark cloth. The sky she had known had always been polluted by light coming from the ground. She had been trying to teach herself how to identify all the constellations. They were all different here in Westeros.

She heard splashing in the far distance. The fish were rather lively in the moat tonight. Then she heard the drawbridge crashing down.

The men began to scream.

The walls were practically unguarded, as Theon had expected. Most of Winterfell's men were away at Torrhen's Square. They should never have left poor little Bran Stark in charge. But, then again, the northerners were not known for their intelligence. Bran had no mind for military matters, unlike his older brother, and even Robb could never have foreseen this! They would forever sing of Theon Greyjoy and his fearless Ironborn who took Winterfell with fifty men! Forget Robb Stark and his puny victories against the Lannisters. Forget Damon Salvatore and his insignificant rise to knighthood. The name of Theon Greyjoy would make men tremble in fear and women sigh with longing for such a man in their beds. Never again would he come second place to Robb Stark. Let him have his pretty bard. She wasn't that pretty anyway.

The gates opened with a groan. Somebody needed to oil the hinges. Groaning gates made surprise night attacks inconvenient. How inconsiderate of them. The remaining garrison was sound asleep and many of them barely woke in time to get their throats cut. The hot blood of the northerners drenched him. These were men who had laughed at him and sneered at him behind his back. They thought nothing of him because their lord had ridden home victorious with him in tow as a hostage. No more. No man would laugh at Theon Greyjoy now. The sea had come to Winterfell, and it was going to drown it.
The Ironborn swarmed in like so many…no, not squid. Krakens. They were the kings of the sea, and of the land now too. He heard a woman screaming and his men laughing. "Wait," he said. "Not that one. Take the others. That one's mine." Pretty Bonnie Bennett would make a pretty little mistress for the Prince of Winterfell.

"Theon?" said Bonnie as she pushed Dagmer away. "What the hell is going on? What are you doing here? I thought you were with King Robb."

"You are safe," said Theon, gripping her by the shoulders. "And I am the lord of Winterfell now."

She stared at him as if she could not comprehend it. What was so hard to understand? Did she not think he could take Winterfell for his own?

"And King Robb?" she asked. Robb Stark! Why was it always Robb Stark?!

"Robb Stark is no king of mine," he said. "I serve the one true king of Westeros, Balon Greyjoy of the Iron Islands, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm!"

"You…" Her voice came out as a whisper.

The flames from the burning garrison and the torches on the wall suddenly leapt higher and became so bright it almost seemed as if day had dawned early. She stared at him, her dark eyes so full of…full of what? He couldn't read her.

Then she knelt. "My lord," she said.

"It's Prince Theon now," he said. "You would do well to remember it. Rise, my lady. From now on you need not bow to anyone, not like the way we used to. Stand by me, and you will be rewarded. But betray me…" He glanced over to where Dagmer had moved onto another of the kitchen wenches. The girl had her ankles up around his ears, and she alternately whimpered and crying as he grunted with each thrust.

"I know which side the tide is on, Your Highness," said Bonnie. She kept her eyes on his, and her voice was steady. "What happens to Bran and Rickon now?"

As soon as the situation became clear, Bonnie realized she couldn't do anything to resist Theon and his men that would have anything akin to a positive impact. Sure, she could probably try to kill them all. She hadn't used any Expression magic ever since arriving in Westeros, however, and she wasn't sure whether she still could or whether it had all disappeared, along with the magic's tendency to go completely out of control. Besides, even if she could kill them all or at least incapacitate them, then what? People in Winterfell viewed magic with suspicion at best. If they saw her killing people with her power, it would be Salem all over again.

She couldn't save everyone. She had learned that a long time ago. The only thing she could do, therefore, was to pretend to support Theon and go along with him while doing her best to keep Bran and Rickon safe. Magic would be a last resort.

A grey day dawned. Theon rounded up every person living in Winterfell—there weren't that many of them because most of the Starks' civilians lived in farms outside the city walls—in the courtyard. It had begun to rain, and soon all of them were drenched to the bone.

Sitting on the edge of a bale of hay and looking very small indeed was Bran. He looked at her with not a small amount of hurt, thinking that she had betrayed him. If only there was a spell that could put her thoughts inside his head. The boy had been manifesting magic. Bonnie had been a witch for
long enough to see it. Those dreams of his, they weren't merely manifestations of his imagination. They meant something. Each witch or warlock started off as a psychic. Had she not started off with visions and then graduated onto greater things?

Bran shivered in the cold. Theon whispered something fiercely into his ear. The boy took a deep breath.

"I yield Winterfell to Prince Theon," he said.

**Next chapter:** Damon and Arya meet some old friends and some new ones, and Damon has to use all his wits to survive the meeting.
Damon runs into hostile forces and tries to use his charm to get into no harm. Unfortunately, things do not go according to plan.

Chapter 43: Brother Vampire Soldier Spy

Somewhere in the south

Renly was dead? But...he'd only just joined the war! Oh, this was hopeless. He supposed he was a Baratheon, and Baratheons hardly had a reputation for competence, but this was just beyond pathetic. He had gotten himself killed by either a shadow monster or a very tall and ugly woman. The gossip-mongers didn't seem too sure of the details. All he knew was that Renly was dead and Robb had gone over to Stannis' side. He seemed to be switching lieges as if he were changing clothes, and he'd managed to convince Stannis that he really had converted to his fire god's -lost- cause by killing Jon Umber, which was either a stroke of great luck or a stroke of genius.

It reeked of Katherine.

"Are we going to join Stannis now?" asked Arya. She was tired, for she hadn't slept well since... well, since ever. Half the time, she'd be lying awake thinking about avenging her father and then she'd be dreaming about it in her sleep. She'd mutter, "Kill them, kill them all." Presumably, that meant Joffrey and company. He wasn't sure how she planned on killing them, but he never pointed out the fact that he knew she planned to kill them or that he found it a little ridiculous that she was plotting their murders when there was no way in hell she could succeed on her own. Children needed dreams, and he didn't need to kill the dream. Life would do that soon enough.

"No, we are not," said Damon. "Robb isn't there anymore."

"So where are we going?"

He considered his options. Loras Tyrell was no longer one of them. Who knew which side he would side with? Definitely not Stannis, who had killed his one true love Renly. Unless he wanted to stab Stannis in the back? But he hadn't heard of any Tyrells joining the Lord of Light Cult and he wasn't going to risk it, in any case. If he was on his own, then maybe, but he was babysitting.

"Let's go to Harrenhal," he said. "I don't know who's there, but there will be some of Robb's people there."

"That's where we should have gone in the first place," grumbled Arya.

"Nobody knows you and nobody knows me," said Damon. "Even if we go there, there's nothing that says they won't clap us in irons and leave us in the dungeons to rot."

"They wouldn't do that! I'm Robb's sister!"

"They don't know that. Remember those guards in King's Landing? You don't exactly look like a
Stark lady."

"That's because I'm not a lady."

Damon sighed. That was all very well, but he could not help but think that travelling with Sansa might have been easier. She might have complained every bit as much as Arya, and she would completely object to sleeping in the wild, but at least if they ever met up with Stark men, she would be able to convince them that she was a highborn lady and they should actually take her to their lord. Arya? Not so much.

He turned the horse back towards the north. To the burned fortress it was! Was there any other choice? He hoped that whoever it was that was guarding Harrenhal, it wasn't someone that he'd insulted before. Mind, he hadn't met many of the Stark bannermen so it was unlikely that he had, but one never knew. Some people were just jealous.

"How long until we get there?" asked the girl in front of him.

"As long as it takes," he replied.

"That's not an answer."

"It's all you're gonna get."

"You know, I am going to tell Robb everything that you've done." She twisted around to pin him with a stare.

"Trust me, he'll agree with me."

"My brother is too smart to do that."

She turned around and pointed her nose in the air and ignored him for the rest of the afternoon, which was exactly what he wanted. Never again was he going to babysit, promise to a friend or no! Arya Stark was turning out to be a nightmare, and Damon Salvatore did not have nightmares. He had dreams where people tried to screw with him, mirroring real life situations, and he always came out on top.

Oh, and she needed another haircut soon. Her hair was getting long, and even though long hair was not going to help her look much more ladylike, it was a dead-giveaway and he couldn't have that. No one was looking for a mercenary and his little brother. Everyone would be looking for Damon Salvatore and Arya Stark, although perhaps separately. No one except the people who had seen them together knew that they were together. Cersei most certainly didn't know that he'd smuggled the girl out. All she did know was that Damon had left her.

Perhaps he shouldn't have? No matter. It was too late to do anything about it anyway.

And why was he thinking about Arya's welfare again? It wasn't as if she ever considered him.

They stopped near a village that evening. Damon robbed money off a woodcutter who he then ate, and then he bought Arya a hot bowl of stew –and hoped it wasn't a Bowl of Brown, although that tended to be a Flea Bottom specialty– at the tavern full of mercenaries, failed bards, drunken blacksmiths and tired farmers. It was dark inside the tavern and everyone kept to themselves. Some people stared at the striking looking stranger who deigned to grace them with his presence.

"Is that a bit of heart?" Arya said. She spooned up a piece of meat that had valves and cross-sections of chambers and something that looked curiously like a heartstring. He ought to know.
He'd dissected enough hearts in his time. All vampires inevitably developed an expert knowledge of human anatomy.

"Do you care?"

"I don't like eating hearts," said Arya.

"If you don't want it, I'll have it." He nursed his tankard of ale. The food might be subpar, but the ale was dark and rich and frothy, smelling heavily of hops and malt. It was bitter, but it left a sweet aftertaste in its wake. When Westerosians put their mind to it, they were better at making Irish Guinness than the Irish.

"No!" she wolfed the rest of it down, only stopping briefly because she'd burned the roof of her mouth. She wiped the bowl clean with the hunk of dark dry bread that had been provided and looked more content than she had for ages.

They made their way back into the wilds. It was safer than staying at the village where they might actually have to talk to people. Besides, Damon wasn't keen on the inn's hygiene. It looked like there would be bedbugs.

He tied the horse to a tree, attaching a separate rope to the bridle so that it would be long enough for the animal to lie down if he wanted. He did, settling on his side and laying his head on the ground. After the initial hostility, an understanding seemed to have developed between the vampire and the stallion. The latter knew the former was not going to hurt him, and the former just didn't really care enough for horse.

The horse's belly, however, made for a great warm pillow during the cold nights. Arya curled up against the horse. The animal whuffed sleepily and shifted a bit to make himself more comfortable. He had gotten used to this sleeping arrangement, and truth be told, it had to be better than what he had gotten while being Ser Boros' horse.

"Damon?" asked Arya suddenly.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"Do you ever get…bad dreams?"

"Go to sleep, Arya."

"I get bad dreams. Don't you?"

Shit. Now he had to be a child psychologist? Arya was going to end up worse than before she'd tried to talk to him about her problems.

"Not really," said Damon.

"I keep seeing it. Syrio wouldn't let me look, but I saw Joffrey and Sansa and Father up there. And I keep dreaming about that moment, when…"

"Do you want me to do something to stop that?" asked Damon.

"Can you? Make it stop?"

"I can give you a better dream."

She frowned at him, wondering how he was going to do it. She might know he was a vampire, but
he hadn't told her all his secrets yet. A man needed to retain some mystery. "Just close your eyes," he advised. "I'll do the rest."

For once, she did as she was told. He reached out with his mind and conjured up a nameless battlefield. He put Arya on horseback, arrayed in armour, fighting alongside her brothers. Wolves and lions collided, all teeth and claws and slavering jaws. In her sleep, the girl smiled.

He had her ride up to confront Joffrey who, inexplicably, was wearing a lion sigil rather than a stag. Blooper. He changed it. Arya's imagination did all the rest.

The two of them fought, and Joffrey was unhorsed within three blows. He begged her for mercy as he cowered on the ground. Arya smiled and raised her dream sword, a weapon that rivalled Excalibur in magnificence, and cut his head off. Damon added the sound effects and the blood splatter. Unrealistic, but it would do for now until this dream became reality, as it would at some point. Well, it wouldn't be Arya but he was sure that she could live with it so long as Joffrey died. The only question was when. He didn't think it would be too soon. Robb might be winning battles, but in the long run, Tywin still had more men and thus more staying power. He could afford to wear Robb out. Hopefully Katherine was Katherining her little heart out to change the tide.

Damon leaned back against a tree and closed his eyes, although he wasn't really sleeping, but keeping an ear out for any noises that shouldn't be in a forest during the night.

They started again in the morning. Mist hovered over the ground while the sun hid behind a blanket of grey cloud. The fog only cleared when it started to rain powdery rain that looked just like mist anyway. The light droplets, so miniscule they were barely visible, balanced on the extended fibres of their cloaks, but soon, enough of it had gathered to soak into the fabric itself. Arya shivered and wrapped her cloak closer about herself.

"Do you want to stop and find shelter?" asked Damon. He didn't. The rain didn't bother him at all, but he didn't think anyone would appreciate it—and by anyone, he really meant Arya's brother—if she died of cold.

The girl shook her head. "We need to get to Harrenhal," she said. "I'm fine."

"Yeah, I'm not sure we're gonna be fine for much longer."

While they had been speaking, a thicket of horsemen had emerged from the rain. At first, they might have been mistaken for shadows cast by a hill, but they were moving, and they were drawing closer and closer to the two of them. Damon made out a damp golden lion upon a bloody battlefield. Their golden armour and scabbards gleamed dully. He counted about two hundred of them. This wasn't just some random scout party he could just kill.

"Halt, in the name of the king!" called the lead rider. They surrounded Damon and Arya. The men made no move to draw their swords. Well, that would give him two extra seconds, during which he could kill three men, but that wasn't going to help in the grand scheme of things. He would have to play this by ear, and he would have to play it smart. "What is your purpose on the road, traveller?"

"I'm here to join Lord Lannister's campaign, friend," said Damon.

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**In the Stark Camp**

They gathered in the dark, not daring to light a fire or even too many candles. They didn't know who could be watching. Robb Stark's eyes and ears were everywhere. His whore's eyes and ears
were everywhere.

"Our father was an honourable man who served Robb Stark loyally and truly," said Jon Umber the Younger, whom everyone called the Smalljon. "Look what he got for it!" He spat. "That's what I think of Robb Stark and his new whore-queen." He looked around at the dark faces and glowing eyes. They all felt the same way. Robb Stark had fooled them all. They had all thought him Eddard Stark's son and expected him to be like his father. He was nothing like his father.

"Uncle Jon cannot go unavenged," said Harald Umber, the son of his father's second brother. "He has been a father to me. I will see the blood of those who killed him spilled. Justice still exists. The gods are just."

"And Robb Stark has committed sacrilege. He has burned the likenesses of the gods and the gods of the First Men!" said Smalljon, getting angrier and angrier. His father would have revenge. For now, he would do as these southerners did, wearing a false mask and smiling as he plunged a sword in to the back of his enemy.

In Lannister territories

Arya stiffened. Surely Damon didn't mean it! But she said nothing, and he did mean it. Although it wasn't as if he could say anything else if he wanted to walk away from this without having to kill everyone. Maybe even Damon didn't always want to kill everyone. Maybe he couldn't.

"Now, why would you want to do that, friend?" asked the Lannister soldier. She wasn't sure what rank he was, but she was certain that he wasn't their friend.

"Everyone knows the Lannisters and their gold, friend," said Damon. "You have heard the phrase, 'a Lannister always pays his debts', I'm sure."

The man laughed.

"And that little runt?"

"My servant," said Damon. Whatever happened to being 'brothers'? If Damon thought she was going to polish his boots and fetch him wine and blood, he definitely had another think coming. However, she would do it if she absolutely had no other choice, because, whether she liked it or not, he was the only person she could rely on if she was to get back to her family. He might be absolutely terrible at tracking her brother down, but he was useful whenever she really needed some people dead.

The soldier considered the two of them for a while. Arya knew they looked like an odd pair; the handsome cocky mercenary and his skinny dirty servant. Suddenly, he drew his sword. The blade came out with a ring.

Damon's sword flashed and blocked the other man's blade as it came towards them. He caught the guard of the other man's weapon with the tip of his blade, circling it in such a way that he wrested the weapon from the man's hand and flung it several feet away.

There was silence. Damon sheathed his weapon again. "Did I pass?" he asked.

The man began to laugh. "Come," he said. "Our camp is not far." He motioned for another man to retrieve his sword. Damon followed him.

"Are we really going to do this?" whispered Arya.
"Yep," said Damon so softly she probably wouldn't have heard him if he wasn't so close. He kept his eyes focused forward, pretending that he wasn't actually speaking to her. "I suppose you'll be relegated to the mess hall or the stables now, little runt. Now that I'm going to be a knight, I'm sure they'll give me a squire."

"But what about my brother?"

"He doesn't matter. For all we know, he could be lying dead in a ditch somewhere." Ah, so he didn't mean it because there was no way in the seven hells Robb could be lying dead in a ditch somewhere with no one knowing about it.

She understood why he was doing it, but it didn't mean she wasn't scared, or that she didn't have her doubts. Damon's plans had a way of...well, it was Damon. If he hadn't been a vampire, and if he hadn't been this handsome, he would have died a long long long time ago. It was safer for her to be distanced from him while he went and did his damonic things, just in case anything went wrong and the Lannisters wanted to hunt him down or something. It wasn't as if he wouldn't be able to get word to her if he really wanted. He'd know exactly where she was, and if there was one thing that he was good at, it was sneaking.

With that in mind, she decided she was going to be brave and set her mind upon the day when she would see her family again so she could stop worrying. The horse's gait was smooth beneath her. She secretly called him Demon, after his rider, and he seemed to respond to the name well enough. She played with the rough strands of his mane, tangled and unkempt after their long journey in the wild.

The Lannister camp was nestled amongst the rolling hills. At first, she thought it was a flock of sheep. There were rows upon rows of white tents and red and gold banners hanging limp in the still air. Even the rain and the weather could not dull their colours. She smelled smoke from camp fires that were struggling to remain alight in the dampness, the sweat of men and horses, and the smell of fresh pines that had been cut down to make the wooden barricades.

"You see that outcrop of rock over there?" whispered Damon. He jerked his head slightly in the direction of a large rock that loomed in the distance, sticking out from the side of a hill. It was the perfect place to jump off and fly, if one had wings. She could imagine a dragon of old doing it. "If anything happens, wait for me there. I'll find you."

"You'd better," she whispered back. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't cry! It was just stupid Damon. She didn't even like him! But he was her only 'friend' in the world right now, and she was frightened of leaving him. Although she still wasn't going to hug him. He'd been mean to her and she wouldn't forgive that for a long time.

Arya was taken away to the mess tent to be fed. There was no such luxury for a new soldier. Damon was given armour, and he kept his own sword. He struggled a little bit to figure out all the straps and the pieces of disjointed leather that did not seem to belong on a human body at all.

"I thought you were a mercenary," said his recruiter with a smirk. Colyn Moreland, the second son of Lord Robin Moreland, was a moderately clever man with little mind for professional development, which was why he was still leading bands of outriders while his younger brother Jaymse was serving as one of Lord Tywin Lannister's personal guards and had much more chance of career advancement. Colyn didn't really mind. At least, that was what Damon had gleaned from the men's banter as they had ridden back to the camp. "Haven't you seen armour before?"

"If I had wanted to learn to put on fiddly pieces of armour, I'd have been a lady's maid," said
Damon, wishing someone would hurry up and invent zips. Maybe he'd have to do it and usher in a fashion revolution. He held up a piece of rectangular leather that had an equal chance of being a leg guard or an arm guard. But then there were two other bigger pieces. Presumably, leg guards would be larger than arm guards.

When Damon was finished, Colyn tugged at the armour to make sure it had been fastened on correctly and to straighten it so the new recruit looked more presentable. No one paid them any heed as they trudged through the camp to the practise yards, to do what, he wasn't sure. They seemed to be just hanging out and chilling. There were already dozens of men there, cheering on the sweating and bruised men battling it out on a patch of mud not unlike the one in Winterfell. It was fenced off with raw logs that had been split in half, more to mark the boundaries than anything else. Men perched on the posts with tankards of ale that smelled so far beneath the ale he'd had at that nameless tavern. A dirty blond young man was breathing heavily as he circled his older and more experienced dark haired opponent. It seemed unfair, for the older man was given a flimsy wooden sword and a shield that looked as if it was going to fold at the very first impact.

"Stark prisoner," said Colyn. "They're good for amusement and a little exercise. That's all they're good for." That didn't seem accurate, because the young Lannister soldier was steadily losing. He was covered in mud, presumably from having been knocked over so many times.

"Come on, m'lady," sneered the older man. Obviously a northerner. He could be blind and he'd still be able to tell the difference. "This ain't one o' your dancing' lessons."

The younger man lunged. He was holding his sword too far out, and too low. The older man knocked it aside and slammed his wooden shield into the boy's face, sending him flying into the mud for one last time. It was a total knock out. Damon had the slight urge to say, "ding ding!" However, he suspected that would not be appreciated.

There was silence. The men stopped calling out encouragements –for the young Lannister soldier–and insults –for the northman. The northman glared at all of them as if daring someone else to try and kill him. His stare settled on the commanding officer.

The commanding officer was young, about Damon's age back when he'd first been turned. Blond hair, green eyes, aristocratic bearing; he had to be a Lannister of some sort. In fact, there was more than just a little family resemblance between him and Jaime Lannister, and by extension, Joffrey mostly-Lannister Baratheon. He had that same self-satisfied smirk and the same way of standing as if he was better than everyone else in the world and he knew it.

Of course, he wasn't, but he didn't know that.

The officer clapped slowly in mockery. "It was a well fought match, although perhaps not well-matched. It takes no skill to beat a child. Perhaps you should fight someone more suitable." He beckoned to Damon.

Damon stepped into the arena and bowed to the commanding officer. "Your name?" asked the blond.

"Jon," said Damon. He and Arya were still using the aliases that they had been using on the road, except he supposed he'd have to stop calling her 'Stefan' now. There was another Stefan in the Lannister army and that name might just raise suspicions. Then again, it was not an uncommon name in Westeros. There was a Steffon too, and he'd met a Stevyn before. Although, the safest way was to not talk to her at all if he could help it. He probably couldn't.

"Let's see whether you can do the Westerlands prouder, Jon," said the officer.
Damon grinned. His grin slipped a little when the man was given a sharpened steel blade. It wasn't that he minded sharpened steel, but he didn't really want to kill northmen. Oh, well. Best not to get too cut up about it. This masquerade was all for Arya's sake.

He unsheathed his own sword. The man, although strong and experienced, was tired and underfed. And he was human. He stood no chance against a vampire who had been eating as well as any vampire should be over the past couple of weeks, feasting on bandits, travellers, and refugees. Damon spun around as his opponent charged and slammed the pommel of his sword into the back of the man's head, sending him flying.

A cheer rose from the watching crowd. They thought he was going to salvage their pride. Well, he would, for now. The last laugh would be on them. "C'mon," said Damon. "I've met barmaids who danced better than you."

The northman charged again, all fury and instinct and no finesse at all. Damon trapped the man's arm beneath his own and slammed his forehead into the man's nose. As the man staggered back, dazed and with blood running from his nose, the vampire twisted his wrist, making him drop his sword before throwing him to the ground and planting a boot on his throat.

"So," said Damon. "What's it gonna be?" He looked up at the men. "Well?"

There were calls for death and calls for 'mercy'—obviously they wanted to play again. The commanding officer grinned. "Well, Jon—"

He didn't finish. The crowds parted to let a very familiar figure through. The vampire clapped slowly with exaggerated deliberateness as he approached the little arena. Oh, fuck. This was Stefan's battalion? The universe had to be screwing with him!

"Hello, brother," said Stefan. "That was well fought. Although I suspect that it wasn't a fair fight, Damon."

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**Next chapter:** Damon meets his new lord's family. Everyone reacts to the religious furore Robb has ignited. Elijah worries for his friends. Robb must soothe ruffled northern feathers or face the consequences of his actions.
Skyfall

Chapter Summary

Damon and Stefan's family reunion hits a snag. Sansa makes a promise. Elijah worries for his friends. Robb attempts to appease his men.

Chapter 44: Skyfall

Near Sow's Horn

Damon glared at Stefan. Thank you, brother, for ruining his brilliant plan to re-infiltrate the Lannisters.

"Don't steal my lines, and currently, I'm known as Jon around these parts," said Damon. "Well, well. What a coincidence! You look very dashing in that red and gold outfit of yours. Mind giving me the name of your tailor?"

The silence was louder than any words that could have been spoken by anyone. How much trouble was he in? Stefan wasn't going to let him die. They were brothers. He could be certain about that much. But otherwise…well, there was no knowing what Lannister-loving Ripper would do. Was he the Ripper? He didn't seem to be, but then the Ripper had had a charming side too. Usual broody Stefan didn't know charm.

"Your brother, Stefan?" said the commanding officer. He unfolded his arms and let his hands hang by his side, not quite hovering above his sword, but getting close to it. "As in Damon Salvatore, the Starks' only knight?"

"Yes, Lord Daemon," said Stefan.

"Can there be any other?" asked Damon. So much for being Jon.

"Damon Salvatore," said the other Daemon. Oh dear, things were going to get confusing, weren't they? The only other Damon-Daemon he knew about was Daemon Blackfyre. "What madness has possessed you that you would come here after your spectacular betrayal in King's Landing?"

"Let's just say I like being on the winning side, my lord," said Damon. The other Daemon smiled. It was not a friendly expression. Damon was used to non-friendly smiles. Somehow, for some strange reason, they were quite often directed at him.

"I have always wondered which Salvatore was the better fighter," said the blond young man.

"That's me, undoubtedly."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," said Daemon. "I have a proposition for you, Damon. You will fight your brother. If you win, you may stay. If you lose, however--"

"That's a moot point. I don't lose," said Damon, cutting him off before he could say anything else.
"If you lose," said Daemon, not missing a beat as he continued from where he had been cut off, "you die."

Stefan held out his hand. His squire—who was a lot more efficient than Burt-Kurt could ever hope to be—handed him his sword. It was a plain weapon with no additional flourishes, unlike Damon's stolen weapon, but it fit well in Stefan's hand, and it seemed to have no balancing issues. It suited his brother, who had never been one for flair anyway. Stefan was efficient when he didn't get hung up on morality.

No one said a word as the two brothers entered the arena. They stood facing one another. Neither raised his sword to take guard. "Are you sure you wanna do this, Stef?" asked Damon. "You and I both know I'll win. You don't want to be embarrassed in front of your men, do you?"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Damon," said Stefan. "You haven't been winning so far, have you? I'm not the fugitive here."

"How do you know they weren't strategic retreats?"

"Well, your lord is dead, and you have been running ever since. I'd hardly call that strategic."

"My ex-lord is dead. Although I'd like to point out that his son is kind of kicking your ass right now." More accurately, Robb was kicking the Lannisters' asses with Katherine's help. At least, he had been doing so ever since she had joined in on the game at Harrenhal.

Stefan's charge was so unlike him and so unexpected that Damon barely managed to lift his sword up in time. But he had always been the more athletic brother, and he had been the one who had received military training as a human. He spun out of the way to strike a blow at the back of Stefan's legs, hitting his calves with the flat of his blade hard enough to make his brother stumble. He recovered almost immediately, however, and whipped around to swipe at Damon's mid-section. Damon bent over backwards and the sword barely missed his torso. "Oops," said Damon. "Missed me."

"Don't get too cocky, Damon. That has always been your weakest point."

"I'm not being cocky. I'm just stating a simple fact. I'm better at this than you, Stefan. Always have been."

They danced around each other, almost as if they had choreographed the moves. Damon knew how Stefan fought, and vice versa. Although, recently, they had both learned new tricks. Stefan was more careful around Damon, while Damon baited him to try and discover what his new strengths and weaknesses were. His brother, despite everything, was still too honest a man. Or vampire. It had never really been that hard to read him.

Damon feinted, deliberately leaving an opening for Stefan. Stefan lunged at him, as if making to run him through. The older Salvatore dropped his sword and caught Stefan's wrist, twisting it to make him drop his sword. He kicked the weapon away as soon as it fell to the ground. With his other hand, he moved in to strike at Stefan's throat, but his brother seized his arm. "Not so fast, Damon," he said.

"Plan B," said Damon. He slammed his forehead into the bridge of Stefan's nose. His brother lost his balance and reeled backwards. Damon hooked his foot behind Stefan's ankle and pulled his leg out from beneath him as he bore down upon him with his weight.

The two of them fell to the mud, with Damon pinning Stefan to the ground. "Just like old times,"
said Damon. He turned to the other Daemon. "Like I said, my lord; I don't lose."

"It seems that you don't," agreed Daemon.

"So?" said Damon.

"A Lannister always pays his debts," said Daemon. Ah, so he was Daemon Lannister, was he? Good to know.

Damon got off Stefan and offered him a hand to pull him up. Stefan glanced at the hand sceptically before accepting the offer. "Good fight, brother," said Damon.

"You're only saying it because you won," said Stefan.

"True, that. But, with you, it's always a good fight."

Stefan clapped him on the shoulder. "It's good to have you on our side, brother," he said in that far-too-cheerful manner that always made Damon suspect he was either in Ripper mode or planning something. He was going for the latter this time, since no one had reported any villagers or soldiers with their heads torn off and then stuck back on. "There are people who are eager to meet you. Lord Tywin, no doubt, will have questions."

Hah! Did he think he could scare Damon Salvatore with Tywin Lannister?

"I look forward to answering them, brother," said Damon. "Lead the way."

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King's Landing

All eyes were upon her, staring at her in pity and some in scorn. Sansa heard the blood roar in her ears. Her old bruises were still healing, all hidden by her clothes, of course. The stone floor was hard beneath her knees. It was painful to kneel there for so long, but pain had become a regular occurrence in her life, lately.

"Your traitor brother has committed blasphemy," said Joffrey as he levelled his crossbow at her. He wouldn't shoot. He wouldn't dare. She might be young, but she wasn't stupid, and she'd learned to listen. She knew she was their key to the north should anything happen to Robb. They couldn't kill her and even Joffrey was clever enough to know that. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"It was Robb Stark who committed blasphemy, not I, Your Grace," she said. "I love and respect the gods with all my heart." Still, she could not keep the tremor out of her voice. They weren't allowed to kill her. It wasn't as if anyone did anything to stop Joffrey from tormenting her, having her beaten in public. A body could take a lot, she had learned. She'd never thought she'd survive her first beating, but she had. Perhaps she was stronger than anyone had thought, even herself.

Joffrey scoffed. "You are all of the traitor's seed," he said. "Whatever crimes your brother commits, you will pay for." He had said almost exactly the same thing after Harrenhal had fallen. Sansa had to wonder if he were truly angry or if he really just wanted an excuse to hurt her. Punishing her was just a pastime to him. He needed more things to keep him occupied.

Her heart thudded in her chest. What was it going to be this time? "Ser Preston," said Joffrey. "Strip her."

He couldn't! Oh, but he could and he would. He was the little king, wasn't he? Whatever he
wanted, he got, and the only people who dared to say no to him either died or had armies to back up their refusals to obey. Sansa had no wish to die and she had no armies. She was just a weak little girl with a pretty face and tears that failed to move the stone heart of King Joffrey. Did he even have a heart? With parents like his, it was doubtful.

There was a ripping sound as the delicate silk of her dress was torn right down the middle. She whimpered. The ruined dress dropped from her body, leaving her standing only in her thin, white, silk shift. It was almost translucent and it skimmed her budding womanly curves. She tried to hide herself with her hands as she sobbed with shame and looked down at the floor, unable to meet the eyes of anyone in the throne room.

"I said strip her, Ser Preston," said Joffrey, more impatiently this time. The ruined shift joined the dress on the floor. Cold air brushed her skin. She tried to hide her breasts and her lower regions. Some of the men were openly leering at her. If only she wasn't weak like this! If only she was as haughty as Cersei, as fierce as the Lady Knight and as strong as Katherine Pierce! They would never dare to do this to any of them, not if they valued their lives.

Preston Greenfield took off his sword and undid his belt. The first strike landed across her lower back. The belt curled around to hit her soft stomach. She stumbled forward. Some of the ladies gasped. The pain shocked her so much that she couldn't do more than let out a strangled whimper as she tried to make herself smaller so that there would be less to hit.

"Stop covering yourself, my lady," said Joffrey with a smirk. "You're beautiful and I want the world to see it. Stand up straighter."

Her knees were weak as she let her arms fall, but she still did not look up. She couldn't. The second fell upon her shoulders, creating a searing line across them. The buckle drove the breath from her lungs. She retreated into the dark place in her mind as the blows fell; into the place where everything was as she wanted them to be and not as they truly were. No one could hurt her there. It was safe. She was strong. She would kill Joffrey – and that was not just a dream. He would die by her hand. That was a promise she made to herself and to her father. One part of her realized that he wouldn't have wanted this for her, that he wouldn't have wanted his little lady to become a killer, but surely he wouldn't want this for her either?

"Now, what is it again, this time, Your Grace?" asked a voice that cut through the pain and her thoughts. Little footsteps, followed by big ones, echoed through the silent throne room. Tyrion Lannister waddled in, having drawn himself up to his full, unimpressive height. "It's all very well to beat defenceless little girls, but winning battles would actually be a little more productive," he said. He held his fingers and thumbs half an inch apart. With his other hand, he motioned slightly to his guardsman, who took off his cloak and wrapped the stained, smelly piece of clothing around Sansa. She hugged it tight about her. She risked looking him in the eyes.

The man was about her father's age, with a crooked nose, receding hair and bad teeth. "Thank you," she mouthed at him. He shrugged.

"Now," continued Tyrion. "It just happens so that I am in need of advice from Lady Sansa on how to redecorate my new quarters as befitting the acting Hand of the King." He held out a hand to Sansa. What was he playing at?

"Don't you dare do this, Imp," snarled Joffrey. Tyrion ignored him while Sansa took his hand. His stubby fingers were warm.

"Imp!" shouted Joffrey at their retreating backs.
"I thought it was twisted little demon monkey," remarked Tyrion to Sansa. To Joffrey, he said, "Until…supper, your Grace."

The Twins

Burning the gods? Katherine had overreached. Elijah stared into the candle flame, although he was not really seeing it. Did she know what she was doing? He sighed even as he thought that question. Of course she thought she did. Katherine liked the dramatic, and it had won Stannis over, hadn't it?

And it had most definitely been Katherine's idea because Robb Stark wouldn't have thought of such a thing on his own. He wasn't that kind of person. She was turning him into…well, her, Elijah supposed, and the Stark boy had been looking for a change for some time. It was little wonder, considering the type of father he'd had and a lack of others to teach him. Sometimes, one had to remind oneself that he was still very young, just eighteen.

Elijah had been a bit of a fool at eighteen, if he remembered correctly. There were some things that immortals conveniently 'forgot'.

Robb Stark was at that age when he was open to foreign influences, when he would rebel against the old ways and try new things and Katherine was the answer to everything he was looking for. It was little surprise that he would listen to her. Besides, so far as Elijah could see, burning the gods of his father was a small price to pay for an army such as Stannis'. He didn't believe for a second that either of them intended to actually remain Stannis' loyal subjects. The newest god-king of Westeros was being used.

"They'll kill him for this," cackled Walder Frey. "That Stark whelp might as well have slit his own throat and be done with it."

"Unfortunately, they won't kill him," said Elijah, turning away from the candle flame. Walder Frey had been ranting about the Starks for so long now that whenever he started, it was enough to send Elijah into a trance. Elijah had been trying to convince him to demand compensation and concessions from the Starks, but the old Frey preferred to seethe and rage. One had to wonder whether he actually rather enjoyed being angry at them instead. Perhaps it made him feel younger and less dead.

"But he burned their gods!"

"I'm sure the Tullys have cut down weirwoods from time to time as well," said Elijah. "You, yourself, my lord, have a chest made out of weirwood. It's a fine building material here in the south. I don't see the northerners launching a crusade."

"What's a crusade?"

"A war for an idea, my lord."

"You shouldn't make up your own words, Elijah. It makes you sound like a whelp who's never fucked a woman."

Walder Frey considered copulation to be the crossing line between boyhood and manhood.

"Of course, my lord," said Elijah with a bow.

"They won't string him up, you say?"
"How much do you care for the gods, my lord?"

"I spit upon them."

"Then there's your answer."

Walder Frey sighed. "Why must you always be right, Elijah?" he asked. "I suppose the great lords never get their comeuppance and they can just walk over all the rest of us."

**Near Sow's Horn**

He had never thought that Eddard Stark's son would have such daring, but then, he had been rather surprised by everything he'd done ever since the war had begun. Tywin set down the raven scroll. Burning the gods of his father and mother? Daring, genius, and a risky move. It was something that Tywin himself might have done if he had needed to make a statement. If only that was his son instead of Eddard Stark's. He would have been worthy of his legacy. He had the makings of a young king and with a queen like that to push him, he had the potential to be great.

That was a problem.

He tented his fingers together. Robb Stark had to be eliminated before he became too great a foe. He had enemies, but he was managing them beautifully. None of them dared to rise up against him. His bannermen must not like him, but Tywin's own bannermen didn't actually like him either, and he didn't need them to like him. He only needed them to fear him because, in the end, men would only ever love themselves. All that talk of honour and valour; it was just a screen of smoke for them to hide their dark selfish secrets behind and only a fool would believe that there was any substance to smoke.

He picked up a fresh sheet of parchment and put a paperweight over it before dipping his quill in the ink again.

"My lord," said the guard outside. "Ser Salvatore wishes to have an audience with you. He says he has brought someone you might like to meet."

It wasn't like Stefan Salvatore to request anything, much less an audience. The boy kept his head down and proved his worth through his work, and through that, Tywin knew that he wanted to be more than just a knight who raided villages. He could use Stefan Salvatore. Frankly, he was one of the better bannermen that he had.

"Who is it that he has brought?" he asked without looking up from his letter. He began.

**Lord Frey** …

"It's Damon Salvatore, his brother," said the guard. "Shall I tell them to come back later."

"No," said Tywin. He moved another sheet of parchment over his current letter and began to write something completely unrelated. Damon Salvatore, the only true Northern knight, sellsword turned bannerman, defeater of Gregor Clegane on the tourney field, turncoat. Cersei wanted his head. There was no one in the seven kingdoms who did not know the name of Damon Salvatore. He would like to see what all the furore was about.

Tywin Lannister. Grown men shivered at the sound of his name. No, really. He'd seen it before. They'd literally shake and laugh nervously. The old man sitting in front of him and ignoring him
had the bearing of a king and the demeanour of Damon and Stefan's father before Stefan had decided to commit patricide.

Daemon Lannister's contingent had been due to return to the main camp for some time. They had merely been sweeping the area and it had been just Damon's luck that he had bumped into them. Banners flapped in the wind. It was growing stronger, the wind, bringing the northern chill Damon had gotten so used to. Winter was coming. The Starks were always right eventually. However, he would have to point out to them that summer was also coming. It was not as close, nor did such words sound quite as impressive, but it was an optimist's outlook. The Starks were obviously not optimistic. He wondered if the Lannisters were. Then again, their words were 'Hear me roar'. They just wanted the world's attention. Should he give it to them? They certainly had it now, what with having the biggest army, owning all the money, and that whole fiasco with the lineages of the royal children.

When they had first entered the command tent and Stefan had announced his presence, Tywin Lannister had been answering letters. He was still answering letters, even though the two Salvatores had been standing there for more than ten minutes, and Damon was getting impatient. He knew that Tywin was perfectly aware of his presence, although he wasn't sure if the true ruling king of Westeros realized that he was trying to read his letters upside down as he wrote them. The scratching of the tip of the quill on the parchment was the only thing he heard.

Tywin finished off the letter and sealed it with his signet ring before setting it aside. Finally, he looked up at the two vampires standing at attention inside his tent.

"I did not ask for your attendance, Salvatore," he said.

"I have someone I would like to present to you, my lord," said Stefan. "This is--"

"Damon Salvatore," said Tywin. His voice was deep and resonant, and it wasn't a voice that needed to shout in order to be heard. Damon could imagine that Tywin Lannister had never shouted in his life.

"That's me, my lord," said Damon with a bow.

"I have heard much about you."

"Nothing good, I hope, my lord?"

Tywin pinned him with an icy stare. He had pale green eyes that looked as if the colour had faded with age and too much sun. He waved a hand dismissively at Stefan. "Leave us."

Damon considered sitting down in one of the chairs without permission to make a statement. He wasn't afraid of Tywin Lannister and it was about time someone showed the old lion that. Ravens were the harbingers of ill news and death. They weren't afraid of anything, not even of things that they really ought to fear, if only for survival's sake. He decided against it. As satisfying as it would be, he wasn't here to prove a point. He was here to infiltrate the Lannisters and to keep Arya hidden until such time as they discovered Robb's whereabouts.

And, considering Tywin Lannister was Robb's greatest enemy, the two of them had to clash at some point, right? Damon fully intended to switch sides at the most pivotal moment. Of course, he hadn't taken into consideration how he was going to get to Arya in the middle of the battle. It seemed like a terrible idea to tell Robb that he'd been forced to leave his sister in the hands of the enemy. Come to think of it, he'd already done it once. Would doing it twice make it twice as worse?
"Is there a good reason I should not send you to King's Landing, Damon Salvatore?" asked Tywin. "The Queen is hunting for you. Or rather, just parts of you."

Damon did not so much as blink. Instead, he held Tywin's gaze, although he refrained from smirking. This was not Ned Stark. Tywin Lannister would not tolerate his insolence. He tried to remember what it had been like when he had been answering his own father's questions. Giuseppe Salvatore had been quite similar in temperament although he hadn't had that many soldiers and he hadn't owned the world. Damon's father had sailed to the New World from Italy as a young man and made his fortune in trade, building himself up until he became one of the founding fathers of Mystic Falls. He had never let his sons forget that, nor had he ever failed to let them know whenever they disappointed him. Damon had done it often. In fact, Damon couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been a disappointment.

"Because you could use a man like me, my lord," said Damon. "I know which way the tide is turning, and I don't know about you, but I like to win."

"And should the tide turn again?" asked Tywin. "Would go back to Robb Stark, then? Perhaps we should make an example out of you."

"The tide would have to turn first, my lord," said Damon, keeping his gaze levelled at Tywin. Men like him respected courage. To look away was to show weakness. Damon continued. "Robb Stark might have won a few battles, my lord. So what? You have the bigger army, the money, and the experience. I'm not a military strategist, but mathematically speaking, doesn't the side with more always win in the end? The last time I counted, there are five Lannister men for every Stark man."

Tywin Lannister almost threatened to smile. It was like the smile of a shark before it closed in on a kill. Of course, Tywin didn't actually smile. To do so was to create a miracle and give men cause to hope or fall onto their knees and pray for mercy. "Sit," he said.

Damon dropped into one of the fold-out chairs —shouldn't the richest man in Westeros have something more comfortable?— and placed his right foot on his left knee.

"Girl," said Tywin. "Bring refreshments."

Moments later, a familiar blonde appeared bearing a tray of wine, water, and fruit. She almost dropped the entire tray when she saw Damon, and if his reactions hadn't been quick, she probably would have. He caught the tray before everything spilled over and handed it back to her.

"You don't wanna be doing that, blondie," he said as he smirked at her. Well, well. The gang was becoming more complete day by day.

Caroline simply gaped. Her mouth opened and shut, but no sound came out.

Tywin dismissed her with a wave. Since when did all of Damon's friends become obedient lapdogs? First Stefan, and now Barbie, the baby vampire who defied Klaus and never listened to anyone? Why couldn't she have been as obedient when Damon gave her commands?

"You are a practical man, Damon Salvatore, " said Tywin. He poured himself a cup of wine and then set the decanter back on the tray. He made no move to offer Damon a cup, but the vampire went ahead and served himself anyway. All the while, the patriarch watched him with those cold hard eyes. Did he ever blink? It didn't look like it. "I can respect that. But you have… How shall I put this? Shamed the queen with your antics."

"Nobody knew anything, my lord," said Damon. "I was discreet."
"Not as discreet as you had thought."

He remained silent for a moment, sipping his wine. Damon couldn't tell what was going on behind that façade of his. It was like speaking to a corpse wearing a death mask. It looked like a man, and it talked like a man, but it wasn't really a man. He wouldn't be surprised if, instead of a heart, the head of House Lannister had cogs and wheels, or maybe a circuit board. Then again, he could hear a pulse. Blood made the world go around. It wouldn't be hard. He could move in and kill him before anyone could stop him. But then he'd be dead from a thousand arrows, and that didn't appeal.

"You must be punished for your betrayal of House Lannister. Your brother will see to it. Depending on how well you do, only then will I decide your fate."

Shit. That was not good. Any punishment that drew blood could really give the game away. But, then again, it was Stefan's call. Stefan would know better, right?

Somewhere between Duskendale and Maidenpool

The men were unhappy with him. He couldn't blame them for that. The Greatjon had been loyal and what had he gotten for it? A quick clean death? He had deserved better. But Robb had needed a sacrifice to convince Stannis. He thought of his fallen friend. In death, he had done more for the northern cause than he ever could have in life. He'd bought Robb an army.

'Wherever you are, I hope you understand what I'm trying to do,' he thought. 'I am sorry.'

The usually garrulous northmen were dour this morning and instead of jesting with one another and calling out loudly, they were murmuring and grumbling. He saw Umber's son and nephews among them. They looked away when they noticed he was watching them. They would never forgive him for killing their father and uncle for no good reason at all. He could not make them see. This was a move so far beyond their fields of vision. They were good men, but if they'd had their way, they would be marching upon King's Landing's gates on their own.

Good men didn't live for long in Westeros.

He turned to his grumbling men. Their faces were still in shadow even though the sun was rising behind him. He signalled to them to halt. It had been a long night and they were tired. This was as good a place as any to rest for a while, surrounded by tall rocks and rolling hills.

"Gather the men," he said. "I have something to say to them."

The praetorians did as he asked. They came together slowly, like flocks of migrating geese at a lake shore.

"In recent days, I have heard ripples of discontent," he began as he looked down at them. How he must seem to them from his place high upon one of the rocks, silhouetted against the rising sun that stained the sky with blood. He didn't really know what to say to them. He could not tell them the truth. "I do not begrudge you that."

Silence.

"I can hear your thoughts," he continued. "How could I have burned the gods of my father, his father, and his father before him? How could I have forsaken my roots? But I ask you this: Where were the gods when Aerys Targaryen burned my grandfather alive and watched while my uncle strangled himself to death trying to reach his sword? Did the gods have the power to intervene, but
chose not to? Did they laugh as they watched the false king Joffrey Lannister murder my father? Did they let my brother fall but left him alive because it amused them?

"If that is so, then they are the disease, not the cure. Or perhaps they tried to intervene but failed. Then they are weak. If they have neither the will to act nor the ability to protect those who worship them, then how are they gods?" He met their gazes.

"I have committed blasphemy. Why, then, have they not struck me down?" He raised his hands to the heavens as he said this, challenging them, daring them to punish him for his sins. Half of him feared that they might do so. But nothing happened. A bird chirped.

"The truth is simple. They are not gods. They are trees to which we have attributed godhood for far too long. No more. We will not live in the ignorance of ages past any longer. The only god with real power is the one who gifted Stannis an army with which to tear down the walls of King's Landing. He will be the one who gives the north justice."

The common foot soldiers began to murmur and talk amongst themselves. One man suddenly raised his sword. "Robb Stark!" he shouted.

It set off a reaction that even Robb had not anticipated. More men raised their swords in salute. "Robb Stark! Robb Stark! Robb! Robb! Robb!" Each time they said his name, they saluted him once until it seemed as if they were a sea of metal in a storm of fury and passion. But, even as they shouted his name like a prayer, he saw some amongst them glowering at him with anger smouldering in their eyes. His bannermen, his father's old friends who had wanted a second Eddard Stark to lead them, or simply let them live as they pleased, were coming to the realization that he was nothing like his father, and they didn't like it.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see that Katherine had followed him up. He said nothing. She bowed and knelt. "My king," she whispered. He caught her before her knees could touch the ground. He lifted her up. It was this woman who had started him on this path, whether to greatness or destruction, he didn't know, but he did know one thing; he was not going to be his father. He was going to exceed him so greatly that whenever people thought of House Stark, they would think of Robb Stark.

Next chapter: Damon finds out his fate. Robb finds out about the latest betrayal. Robb and Katherine try out their literary abilities. Cersei receives a preposterous list of demands.
Stefan gets payback for all the years of misery suffered at the hands of his brother. Arya tries to help Damon. Robb reacts to Damon's betrayal and writes a letter to get it all off his chest. Cersei distracted by Stannis' joke ... or is it a joke?

Chapter 45: The Black Letter

Along Blackwater Rush

Stefan fought to keep his mouth closed. Him, punish Damon? He glanced at his brother. Damon tried not to show it, but he could see a tinge of worry on his face, not because he was afraid of the pain, but because they both knew that if Damon healed in front of everyone, the game would be up. Their secret would be exposed and then…who knew what would happen next? Westeros might not be ruled by religious fanatics, unlike medieval Europe, but Stefan doubted they would take very kindly to blood-drinking immortals. The idea was too new and the threat they posed was too great. Humans had always feared and hated what they did not understand.

Stefan bowed in acquiescence to Tywin's command and both he and Damon left the command tent in silence.

"So..." began Damon.

"How much blood have you had lately, Damon?"

"I don't really keep count, but let's just say I haven't eaten so well since the last world war."

"This is serious, Damon," said Stefan. "If you..."

"I know, Stef. " It wasn't clear who shoved who inside Stefan's tent, not that the thin walls afforded much privacy, so they kept their voices to the barest of whispers. Anyone listening outside might have thought that Stefan had already murdered him. Or perhaps vice versa. One could never really tell with the Salvatore brothers and he wanted to keep it that way. The less people knew about them here, the better. "You think I don't worry about that?"

"Well, there is a way," said Stefan as he produced a knife. He felt his lips twitch. Before Damon could demand of him what 'stupid' idea he had, he lunged for his brother and plunged the dagger into his neck. Blood spurted out from the severed artery. Damon snarled and gripped Stefan's wrist, but the initial surprise and the loss of blood had already weakened him a little. Still, it didn't stop him from pulling the dagger out and attempting to stab Stefan in the heart with it. It was metal. No one would die.

Blood sprayed onto the tent walls as Damon drove the dagger into Stefan's thigh, staining the cloth a darker shade of red. He was glad that, as a knight, he didn't get a white tent. Now that would have been suspicious, especially considering the amount of blood that was being spilled.

Eventually, the two brothers pulled apart, panting. "So what now, Stef?" asked Damon. "Are we
two immortals to be locked together forever in a never-ending fight?"

"You know you need to be weak when you undertake your punishment," said Stefan. "Lord Tywin
wants blood, and nobody wants to see you heal."

"Are you sure you're not just jealous because I stole your girlfriend?" asked Damon.

"There is nothing to be jealous of," said Stefan. "It wasn't real."

Damon sighed. He must have known that Stefan was right. He withdrew his own dagger and slit
his own wrist. Blood welled up and dripped onto the ground, darkening the soil beneath. The dirt
soaked up the blood, luckily, because if it pooled, people would start asking questions about why
Damon was still alive. The wound healed. Damon did it again. "It seems such a waste," he
remarked.

"Then don't waste it," said Stefan. He put a basin beneath Damon's wrist to catch the blood. They
were at war and medical supplies were rare in Westeros. Vampire blood was a useful commodity
and Stefan wasn't so altruistic that he actually wanted to donate.  

Arya stared at Damon. He looked awful, with no colour in his face except for the dark purple-grey
circles around his eyes. His skin was the colour of candle wax that had been left too long in the
holders. Looking at him, Arya had to wonder if she were looking at a man or a corpse. Damon
moved with none of his usual grace and strength. What had they done to him? She swallowed. No,
she would not cry, especially not for Damon. He'd been so mean to her! But he was her only friend
now, and she didn't want him to die. She especially did not want to see him die. She pushed her
way through the legs of the throngs of men who had gathered to watch the great Damon Salvatore
be humiliated and punished for his betrayal of the Lannisters. She didn't know what was going to
happen, only that it had been up to Stefan Salvatore to decide. Stefan Salvatore wouldn't hurt his
own brother too badly, right?

She clenched her teeth and fists as Damon was chained to the post. He was shirtless. She
remembered how Sansa had practically become speechless at the sight of the vampire's bared chest
and torso. His skin was so smooth. Her eyes widened as the long tail of the whip cut through the air
with a whistle and then squeezed them shut as it landed with a loud crack. Damon grunted softly.

She opened one eye. A long red line had appeared down his back. He wasn't healing; why wasn't
he healing? He was a vampire! Had Stefan done something to him? She looked away as the lash
fell again and swallowed rapidly. She didn't want to see this. It made her insides tighten and her
stomach churn as if she had eaten something nasty. Except there was nothing inside it because she
hadn't eaten anything all day. She'd been that nervous.

But there was something about the sight that attracted her attention again. She wanted to see if only
to make sure that Damon was still alive. His shoulders tensed with each lash and his back was
slowly becoming a net of red lines criss-crossing over each other, but he still had yet to cry out.
How brave must he be? Wait, he'd said something about vampires and pain once. When you healed
that quickly, you tended to get hurt a lot more. She'd seen him get shot before and he hadn't so
much as blinked. But that had been during a fight when the heat of battle had taken over his head.

And why was she caring? She shook her head angrily. No one noticed the little errand 'boy' as they
all placed bets on how many lashes Damon would last until he started screaming. She wanted to
place a bet herself and say that he wouldn't scream at all, but that would be drawing too much
attention. She couldn't afford to do that.
Instead, she slipped away from the crowds. Damon was weak because he was half starved. He
would need blood and since she now worked in a mess tent where animals were being slaughtered
every day, getting a little bit of blood shouldn't be a problem. He'd hate it, but he would take it
anyway because even little children ate their vegetables when they were starving. He could go
hunting for something better later.

The mess tents were mostly deserted, with the men having gone to watch the head cook looked up
briefly when she came in. "They're going to make fillets out of your master," he said with a smirk
when he saw her, and then he went back to cutting up the deer that one of the men had brought in.
For Lord Tywin, of course. Because, apparently, mutton wasn't good enough for him.

Arya ignored him and ducked into the shadows where there were a few sheep waiting to be cut up.
Their eyes were glassy and open and their tongues lolled out, not unlike the dead men she'd seen.

She hauled one of the sheep towards her so that its head dangled over the edge. Once, during a
family hunting trip, her father had shown her and her brothers how to drain the blood from an
animal. He'd slashed the animal's throat and hung the carcass from a tree. Sansa had been
completely disgusted by it all.

The throat of the sheep had already been cut when it had been killed. Arya held a bowl beneath it,
letting the remaining blood drip slowly into it. There wasn't much left and she had to move onto
the other sheep before she even had something that would be worth more than three mouthfuls.
Damon drank a lot of blood.

Suddenly, she heard Stefan Salvatore's voice. She stiffened but stayed in the shadows and willed
her heart to be calm. He was a vampire. He could hear her heartbeat if it was too loud. She
breathed in and out slowly, thinking of herself as one of the rocks or trees outside. They never
panicked, never moved, and no one ever took any notice of them.

The cook bowed to Stefan. "Ser Salvatore," he stammered. "Is there...is there anything I can do for
you?"

"I have come for my boar," said Stefan.

"Yes, yes, of course," said the cook hurriedly. For the first time, Arya noticed the huge cloth-
covered mound on the wooden table a few feet away. The cook dragged off the cloth to reveal a
monstrosity with hook-like tusks and wiry bristles for fur. It was, however, undoubtedly very dead.

Stefan motioned for the other kitchen attendants, who had come back in now that the show was
over, to help him carry the boar.

Arya pushed the bowl of blood beneath the table where no one would be able to see it and stood up
slowly. Stefan turned and focused his eyes on her. She'd never noticed that they were green before,
just like the Lannisters'. A funny thought suddenly struck her. Damon had blue eyes like Robb and
the Tully side of her family, and Stefan had the same eye colour as the lions he served. Was it fate?
Or maybe the gods just thought this was funny too.

"I can help with that, Ser," she said.

"This one came with your brother, Ser," said the cook.

"Did he, now?" asked Stefan with interest. His voice was like that of a lord's, without the harsh
rasping quality that so many men had, and he spoke without the mocking tone that was always in
Damon's voice. "Yes, Colyn Morland did mention his servant."
"His squire," said Arya. Servant indeed.

"You're a very bold little squire, then," said Stefan. "What's your name?"

She had to think quickly. She couldn't say 'Stefan' like she and Damon had discussed because that was Stefan Salvatore's name! "Harry," she said. "My name's Harry."

"And how old are you?"

"Nine," she said. They'd discussed that too and apparently, she sounded far too young to be an eleven year old boy.

"Well, Harry," said Stefan. "You can take one of the legs." Was it just her, or did his voice sound a little gentler when he was talking to her? She didn't know very much about Damon's brother, mainly because Damon had never talked about him very much. She knew that they did love each other, but it was confusing now that they were fighting on different sides, and purely by chance, it seemed. What if it had been Stefan that her father had found on the road instead of Damon and Bonnie? Would Stefan have become House Stark's only knight, then? And would he be as loyal? Well, he probably would have come up with a better idea to save her father and Sansa, but she didn't think he would be as fun with her and her brothers and sisters. And he buried people alive.

She took up one of the boar's hind legs. It was extremely heavy. It might have looked spindly on the boar itself, but up close, it was actually thicker than her leg. She wrapped both arms around it, trying not to mind the smell and the prickling of the bristles through her clothes.

The other kitchen boys smirked at her but they dared not say anything while Stefan was there. They followed him through the camp, dodging carts and men on horseback as they steered the pig through small spaces until they reached his tent.

"Leave it here," he said. The other boys didn't think much of it and left, but Arya lingered there just a little while too long for Stefan not to notice her hesitation.

"Is he going to be all right? Ser Damon?" she asked.

Stefan smiled at her. How that smile changed his whole face! She'd thought him cold before, but he did have a warm smile that looked very kind, even if it was only an illusion. Maybe that was why Elena had fallen in love with Stefan first but then she'd switched to Damon when she'd realized what a monster he was.

"He will be fine," said Stefan. "Now, shouldn't you be going back before the cook misses you?"

She didn't want to go back just yet without seeing Damon, but she knew that she couldn't really help him and he would be fine in the end. He was Damon Salvatore. He'd been shot full of arrows before and he'd been fine. Stefan was still looking at her and there was something worryingly close to pity on his face. It made her feel very uncomfortable.

"Yes, Ser Stefan."

Damon thought he was such a genius, waltzing in here and 'winning' over Tywin Lannister. He had no idea that Stefan had deliberately fallen for this trap in the fight; that he had deliberately lost. Of course, Stefan was not going to tell him, or anyone, for that matter. His brother did not have the slightest inkling of how thin the ice beneath his feet was. One wrong step, and he would be dead, vampire or no. This wasn't Mystic Falls, and Tywin wasn't Klaus. They all knew as well as one another that Damon wasn't really loyal to House Lannister or to House Stark. Damon was only ever
loyal to himself, his brother, and Elena. Everything else depended on those three people.

"Stefan!" Caroline hissed his name. He turned and found her beckoning to him from behind one of the tents. He checked to make sure no one was watching and followed her to where they kept all the horses hobbled. Nobody was there, for the stable boys and pages were all off running errands.

"Did you know Damon's here? Our Damon?" she said.

Since when did Damon become their Damon? But he let that slide. It was one way of differentiating between Daemon Lannister and Damon Salvatore. " Didn't you hear?" he asked. "He was whipped before the whole camp."

"Wait, what? Damon was whipped?" asked Caroline.

"Never mind," said Stefan. "It's not important. He's going to be okay."

"Well, he deserves to be whipped," said Caroline. Then she paused. "Wait, did he heal?"

"If he had, do you think I'd be standing here talking to you? Relax, we took care of it."

"Why does nobody ever tell me anything?" she demanded. "Who found him anyway?"

"Remember, I'm his brother," said Stefan.

"Yeah, sometimes I forget that," admitted Caroline.

"I was the one who discovered him," said Stefan. "Do you think anyone else would have known? He didn't exactly come here and announce that he was Damon Salvatore."

"I suppose even he's not dumb enough to do that," Caroline conceded. "But what is he doing here?"

"If he is to be believed, he wants to join the Lannister cause," said Stefan.

"I don't believe it."

"Neither do I, and Lord Tywin doesn't either," said Stefan. "But it doesn't really matter. He's here, and not with the Starks. He's their only knight. If word ever gets out, it's a bit of an 'up yours' to the Starks."

"What if he's working for them?"

Didn't Caroline know well enough by now? "That would imply he actually cares about the Starks," said Stefan. "I can't see that happening."

"Well, I wouldn't have said you'd have made the perfect Lannister knight a few months ago, but look what happened to you," said Caroline.

"But I am not Damon," said Stefan. "Don't worry, Caroline. I will keep an eye on him."

**Harrenhal**

Robb slammed his fist onto his command table, making the figurines on the map jump. "Damon. Salvatore," he said. His voice was so low it was almost a growl. First Theon, and now Damon had betrayed him. They were all betraying him and leaving him. They knew he was winning battles, but he was losing the war. That was why they were all turning their backs on him.
"Robb," said Katherine. She placed a hand on his arm. Something about her voice and her light touch made him force himself to breathe slowly and to think about the situation in a more distant manner. He had abdicated, at least for now, so the target painted on his back had faded somewhat. He had Stannis' men on his side, and they were getting ready to launch a two-pronged assault on King's Landing. Everything was going according to plan. If it worked, the Lannisters would no longer hold the capital. Once Westeros was his, and only then, would he dole out retribution to those who had wronged him. The Lannisters, obviously. Joffrey, Theon. Damon. He placed his hand over his wife's, marveling at the fineness of her bones and the smoothness of her skin. He squeezed her hand.

"Salvatore has gone over to the Lannisters," he said. "I know you care for him, but when I see him again, I will have his head."

"I know, my love," said Katherine. "If he has truly betrayed you, then I would expect nothing less."

"But you think he has something else in mind?"

"All I am saying is that Damon may yet surprise you. He has turned his back on the Lannisters once. Why turn back now, when we are at a stalemate? Why not wait until there is a clear predictable result?"

"You know him," said Robb. "What do you think he wants?"

Katherine paused. "If he had wanted to side with the Lannisters, he could have stayed in King's Landing and sided with them then. Maybe he is simply doing what he needs to do to survive until he can find his way back to us." She didn't sound convinced.

"Tell me what you really think, Katherine. I told you once that I want you to tell me the truth, no matter how much you think it might hurt me," he said.

"In one word, he's improvising."

Robb stared at her. "Improvising," he said slowly, as if the word were in a foreign tongue and he had never heard it before.

"Making it up as he goes along," said Katherine. "Why else would he be with the Lannisters one day, against them the next, and then back with them the following day?"

Robb blinked. "What does he hope to achieve?"

Katherine sighed. "With Damon, it would be beyond my abilities to say, but if I had to take a guess, I would say it has something to do with Elena."

"You think he's doing this because he's trying to keep her safe, or maybe just trying to look for her?" asked Robb.

"His life is Elena these days," said Katherine. "It's very sickening."

"I find myself strangely relieved," said Robb. "You do not think he has betrayed me?"

"Betrayal means he actually planned something. I would have preferred it. Alas, I do not think he has betrayed anyone except Cersei."

"I hope you are right," said Robb. He wanted to believe Katherine very much. Damon had been his friend. But then, all his friends had betrayed him. He had betrayed his friends too. Jon Umber had
trusted him, and he had killed him to make a lie look more real. Was this what being king meant? Did kings ever have friends, or did they only have subjects that they used and discarded as needed?

Katherine moved behind him and rubbed both his arms as if to warm him up. "Come, my husband, we have a letter to write. We promised the king we would write one for him."

It was all part of the plan to keep the Lannisters distracted and off guard while the real plan went ahead, with Stannis moving his men inland so that his army could attack King's Landing from the south through the Kingswood, where the Lannisters would not expect it. To move so many men without Tywin's spies noticing was difficult, which was where the letter came in. Let the Lannisters be so...distracted by their 'overtures' for peace that they wouldn't realize what was happening on their own doorstep. Of course, one letter couldn't do all the work, which was where the ghost fleet came in. It was actually very real, for there were two hundred ships in it, all to be manned by skeleton crews, with flimsy catapults that were more suited to Katherine's favourite stage dramas --she called them 'plays'-- than actual warfare, considering they were made of glue and flimsy wooden boards and could not actually be fired.

Robb summoned his scribe, a frightened young man who had tried to become a maester but had ended up quitting before two years was up. Nevertheless, he wrote well, and swiftly. He didn't need the man to be able to think; he just needed to be able to write things down as he said them.

"We want Joffrey's head on a silver platter," said Katherine, "in retribution for what he did to your father, my love." She poured both herself and Robb cups of sweet wine with a bite.

"A **golden** platter," Robb amended. "Joffrey is a Lannister through and through and a Lannister should use gold."

The scribe crossed out the word 'silver' and wrote 'golden' above it. It was the most ridiculous plea for peace anyone could ever imagine but, the truth was, if it had even had the possibility of being believable, then Tywin would have become suspicious. Since this was so beyond the realms of reality, the Lannister patriarch would think it was just a boy and a girl playing tricks rather than any real political move. It would, however, anger Cersei.

"The Lannister army will be disbanded," Robb continued as he tried to think of the most outrageous demands possible. "And Tywin Lannister will take the black." Katherine laughed and just about clapped her hands in glee like a little girl rather than the lady of Winterfell. Robb had to admit that he was getting into this. If only he could see the look on Tywin's face when he heard this read out to him! He had never met the man before in his life, but based on what he had heard, he had already formed an image. Would it make him burst a vein, he wondered? Hopefully. Then he wouldn't have to bother with this war, and fewer men would need to die.

He offered Katherine his hand, and she took it, letting him twirl her around inside bed chamber as if they were in a ballroom, even though the only music was the sound of their voices, their laughter, and the scratching of the scribe's quill.

"Cersei Lannister, of course, will become a septa and never interfere with matters of state ever again," said Katherine. "On the upside, Jaime Lannister will be freed to also take the black with his father. That should make them a little happier." She rubbed her leg against Robb's, and all of a sudden, he was regretting the generous allowance he had given her to make new clothes for herself. There was far too much fabric separating the two of them.

"Cersei Lannister a septa? I can hardly imagine it. And the day Jaime Lannister becomes a man of the Night's Watch, I will forsake my name and take up yours, my lady wife," said Robb.
"It is hardly more ridiculous than Tywin Lannister taking the black," pointed out Katherine.

"Fair point," said Robb. "Or as you say, too shady."

"Touché," Katherine corrected him.

"Too-shy."

"Too-shay."

He gave up trying to pronounce the strange word and dipped her down low so the only thing stopping her from falling to the ground was his arm around her waist. "What would I give to see this all come true?"

"They may soon wish they had complied," said Katherine.

"I like the way you talk," said Robb. "And Myrcella and Tommen will take the name of Hill and leave King's Landing to never return again. Casterly Rock will become part of the Baratheon lands, and all debts to the Lannisters will be written off." That was a lot of money, but he supposed it was rather just a side dish to the main course, considering what they were demanding of the Lannisters.

They fell into a heap on his bed, breathless and giggling at the silliness of it all. One could dream, right? "They will never acquiesce to such terms," said Robb as he bent down to kiss Katherine's slender neck. The skin at her throat was so soft. He nipped gently at it and noted with satisfaction the way bumps were raised on the surface of her skin wherever he touched her.

"We don't expect them to," said Katherine. Her hands were wandering down his body and deftly moving in on his belt buckle. He strained against the ties of his breeches, wishing that she would hurry up and free him already.

"Will that be all, my lord?" stammered the scribe. Robb paused in his attempt to make his wife speed up. Damn. They had forgotten all about the scribe.

"Write up the letter and take it to the King for his final perusal, and then have one of the Lannisters take it to Cersei once the King has approved of it," said Robb. He didn't bother waiting for the scribe to bow and run out of the room. His guards knew enough to not let anyone else in after a certain hour. He brushed Katherine's hair back from her face. Even though he knew she was his wife now, he could never stop marvelling at her beauty, with her perfect skin, luminous brown eyes framed with lashes so long they could not possibly belong to a mere mortal, and her full lips, just slightly parted, waiting for him to kiss them. He had prided himself on being a rational man before, but he had fallen quite irrationally in love with this woman. He could barely remember back to a time when she had not been in his life.

"I love you," he whispered into the crevice between her breasts. He kissed both of them, letting his lips just lightly touch the cool skin and then grinning with satisfaction when she arched her back to bring her body up closer to his. Her bodice was getting in the way. He slowly untied the laces, just slightly parted, waiting for him to kiss them. He had prided himself on being a rational man before, but he had fallen quite irrationally in love with this woman. He could barely remember back to a time when she had not been in his life.

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She flung off his belt and moved onto the ties of his breeches, quickly undoing them and letting him free. At the same time, he slipped off her gown, leaving her only in her thin linen shift. Her dark nipples poked up from beneath the translucent fabric. He resisted the urge to suckle them through the linen. It would be better to make her wait. He slowly eased the hem up her legs, running his hands over the lean suppleness. She hooked one leg around his waist and then with a
well-practised move, flipped him over so that she was on top and straddling him. Her hair fell like curtains on either side of her face, casting them both in shadow.

"Not so quickly, my lady," he whispered. He grabbed her buttocks and then rolled over so he was straddling her again. "It's my turn to be on top."

"Are you afraid of letting me be on top?" said Katherine. "Don't worry. I'll play nice."

"I didn't know that playing nice was the point of this whole…exercise," said Robb. "How disappointing." He pulled the shift over her head and ran his tongue over her nipples, circling one, and then the other. "I must say, however, that I like you like this, all gentle and submissive. I may keep you this way for a while."

"How boring," said Katherine. "Perhaps we shall have to change that." He groaned as he felt her wrap her fingers along the length of his hardness. Her hands were hot, and the heat spread all over his body, until he was consumed by his need for her. She, however, kept just out of reach, teasing him with her fingers. She knew just where to touch, and how to touch to make him writhe. And as he did so, she rolled him over again.

"You have no honour, my lady, to take a man unawares while he is distracted," he managed to gasp out.

"And you are talking too much." She silenced him with a kiss, pushing her tongue into his mouth, stroking the ridges at the top and sucking on his tongue when he reciprocated. All the while, her hands never stopped their work.

"No, Katherine. Not like this. I want you. Properly."

She guided him inside her, keeping in control the whole time. She liked being in control, his wife. In some ways, they were quite similar to one another. Normally, he would have expected two people such as themselves to clash, but as it were, he felt more whole with her here.

He felt her muscles clenching about him and he groaned as she drew out his pleasure. "Open your eyes, Robb," she whispered. He hadn't even realized he had closed them. She held his gaze as she rode him, moving her hips in time with his involuntary upward thrusts. With one final cry, he spilled his seed inside her. She threw back her head as she came. Something about her face changed. She was still beautiful, but there was something darker.

"Katherine. Your eyes…" he whispered.

She collapsed onto him and kissed him on the lips, nipping him just hard enough to draw a little blood. "You were saying?" she asked.

"Never mind," he said. He was pretty sure he had imagined it. The light inside his bed chamber wasn't exactly the best.

But the feeling stayed with him throughout the night even while she slept beside him, her head resting on his shoulder and her silky hair covering his chest. He stroked her hair slowly, wondering about her.

Who was Katherine, really?

King's Landing
The terms were preposterous! Joffrey's head? Myrcella and Tommen taking the name of Hill? Her father and Jaime taking the black? Her becoming a fucking septa? Cersei read the letter again, convinced that this was Stannis' idea of a joke.

But Stannis had no sense of humour, so he obviously meant every word, didn't he? She crushed the letter into a ball in her fist and threw it at the wall. It bounced off harmlessly and began to unravel, its words taunting her and mocking her. Then she picked it up and tore it up slowly and carefully.

"Maybe you should let me read that first, dear sister," said Tyrion. She handed over the half torn letter to him, letting him put the quarters together. He had liked puzzles as a child. He scanned the letter, his brows drawing together ever more closely as he went on. "You are right. Such a letter does not deserve to be read, although I had not thought that Stannis, of all people, would have had a flair for the dramatic. And I am very insulted that he has left my fate out." He put the pieces together and tore them up into miniscule little pieces, none of which were big enough to contain a single word. Then he gathered up the scraps and threw them into the flames. The fire flared as it consumed those ridiculous demands.

"How will we respond?" asked Cersei.

Tyrion remained silent. If he had been Jaime, he would have found some way to make light of the situation and maybe even force her to laugh, but he was most definitely not Jaime.

"We will write back, politely, but making it very clear that under no circumstances are such terms acceptable," Tyrion finally said. "And then we will lay out terms of our own that are more acceptable to us."

"Or we could not answer, and simply wait for Father to crush him."

"Stannis has an army of one hundred and fifty thousand men, give or take a couple of thousand," said Tyrion. "Robb Stark has bent his knee to him. Stannis now has men in both the south and the north. It will not be easy to deal with him."

"Well, I am not interested in peace with him," said Cersei. "In case you haven't noticed, dear brother, peace is not an option."

"We do not have to be interested. We simply have to feign interest to keep him off his guard."

Cersei felt a headache coming on. With Jaime still a prisoner of the Starks, Joffrey going out of control and spending excessively on redecorating the throne room, the threat of Stannis' impending invasion of King's Landing, and Robb Stark's very disturbing victory at Harrenhal –she had heard the rumours about his dangerous new weapon– she hadn't been getting very much sleep. When she looked in the mirror, she could hardly recognize herself. Just yesterday, she had discovered a grey hair. A grey hair.

"Do what you have to do," she said, getting up from her chair.

"Oh," said Tyrion. "I had expected more…resistance."

"You are the acting Hand of the King," she said. "You should have to work for your title."

Next chapter: Damon and Stefan bond over serving the same master. Caroline suspects that Damon is up to no good, and so does Tywin. Jaime sees a thread of a chance for freedom and grabs it with both hands. Robb gets a reply to his (Stannis') letter.
Prison Break I

Chapter Summary

Caroline attempts to advise Tywin on what to do with Damon. Damon and Arya bond further. Jaime makes a dash for freedom.

Somewhere along Blackwater Rush

Did Stefan have to be so earnest about that whole flogging thing? Sure, it was still very far from Rebekah and the bear traps, but really. Damon grimaced as Stefan hauled the pig inside the tent. "I can't help but think you're enjoying this just a bit too much, brother," he said. His wounds were not healing. He wanted blood. Like, now. "Are you really that mad at me for stealing your girlfriend?"

"Maybe I'm paying you back for all the times you made my life a living hell."

Damon shrugged. The movement pulled at the open wounds and he wished he hadn't done it. "You're a better man than that, Ser Stefan. Out of the two of us, you're the true knight. Stefan Salvatore doesn't need revenge. He's the hero. He's got the hair and everything."

"Most heroes in literature want revenge in some way or another," said Stefan.

He dumped the pig in front of Damon. At first, the older vampire was a little lost as to what he was meant to do with it. Then he realized.

"Pig's blood?" he said. "Do you remember Carrie? That didn't turn out well."

"If you don't want it," Stefan began. Damon glared at him. He needed blood right now and he'd take any blood until he was in a suitable condition to go and hunt down something more to his taste. Tywin Lannister, perhaps. He was feeling vengeful.

Then again, vengeful was not suicidal.

He sank his teeth into the pig's neck and drew in a mouthful of that foul tasting blood. It almost made him choke. Drinking petroleum wouldn't have tasted that much different. Still, he forced himself to keep it down and drank another mouthful. And another.

Stefan dragged the pig away from him. "That's enough," he said. "If you heal too quickly, they'll grow suspicious."

"Come on, Stef! You're doing this on purpose!"

"If you want to heal more quickly, you should probably conserve your energy. And that look never worked on anyone. You know that."

"I just don't get how some people can have that miracle puppy dog look that can get them anything," said Damon. He didn't get how it would get anyone anything. Puppies were...puppies. He supposed they were hilarious in some ways, but they were only puppies and they were selfish creatures just like himself in the end. And he was cuter.
But there was nothing else he could do. If he went outside and ate a guard right now, the game would be up. If he tried to hunt…well, he wouldn't be able to. He needed more of that damn pig, or even just a couple of rats. How far the mighty had fallen.

He must have fallen asleep because he was rudely awakened by someone touching him on the shoulder. His hand snaked out to grab whoever it was.

"Damon," hissed Arya.

He opened one eye. "What are you doing here?"

She rolled her eyes. "How lovely to see you, Arya. I’m so glad you came to see me," she said.

"That doesn't sound the least bit like me and you know it," said Damon.

"I brought you this," she said, holding out a bowl to him. It was full of a thick dark liquid. Blood. He grabbed the bowl and gulped down its contents, not caring that it was a little less than fresh. It was gamier than the pig. Sheep.

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked.

"I will be once I get more blood," he said. All that animal blood tasted foul, but it helped. However, it didn't help enough. He looked at her. In the darkness, her face was pale and her dark eyes were even darker. She kept on looking at his face. The girl was trying to put on a brave expression, but he could smell her fear. "If you really want to help…"

"You're not going to eat me," she hissed.

"I bit your brother and he was fine with it," said Damon. "Well, he was fine, anyway. I’m not sure whether he will be gracious about it if he ever finds out."

Arya hesitated. Damon could practically see her weighing her options. She was like her father in that way; whenever Ned Stark had been thinking about something in depth, it had been very easy to tell.

"Just one sip," said Arya. She bent her head to one side and offered it to him.

"No, not like that," said Damon. That gesture had a sort of intimacy that made even him uncomfortable, considering it was Arya Stark. "Give me your wrist."

He gently pricked her skin with his fangs and opened up the vein to let the blood trickle into his mouth. She flinched but did not pull away. He tried to be as gentle as possible and he stopped after one mouthful. She was so small and young that it was all she could afford to give. He opened up his own wrist. Two droplets oozed out. He couldn't afford to lose any blood, but it would be suspicious if Arya went around wearing fang marks.

"Drink this," he said.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

She watched him with wary eyes, but she did as she was told. It was good to know that she understood the importance of obeying Damon.

"Hey, look!" she whispered as the wounds on her wrist healed, as did his.
"Yeah," said Damon. "Now go away and don't bother me unless you have more blood."

Caroline couldn't help but worry about it, despite Stefan saying that there was no such need. It was Damon. The only thing one could expect of Damon was that he was unpredictable, and he did stupid things, and somehow, his plans didn't always fail because he had some sort of dumb luck that stopped him from getting himself killed. Maybe it was those baby blues. It was very hard to resist those baby blues. She kept thinking about them as she went into the command tent to clean up the remnants of morning tea. Lord Tywin had returned to his work, as if he had never moved. She refilled his cup with water and made to leave with her arms laden with a tray of used crockery.

"What do you think of Damon Salvatore, girl?" asked Tywin suddenly, making her almost drop the tray. Again. This was not a good trend.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?"

"What do you think of Damon Salvatore?" Tywin enunciated each word slowly. This was his way of being nice. Well, perhaps 'nice' was stretching it, because the word probably wasn't in his vocabulary, but he treated her better than he treated anyone else. "You knew him, did you not?"

"I did, my lord," said Caroline. She paused. How did she put it in a way that wasn't a rant? And where would she begin? "He's impulsive, selfish, arrogant, conceited and he's only ever loyal to himself. He's manipulative, and he uses people."

"You do not think highly of him," said Tywin.

"No, I don't, my lord." She hesitated.

"You do not find him to be handsome?" He pierced her with that penetrating stare of his, as if he could see right through into her deepest thoughts. Sometimes she wondered whether he was telepathic. But then he'd know all about her vampirism, wouldn't he?

"Once, a long time ago," she admitted. "But I saw through him eventually, my lord. That is a mistake I will never repeat."

"You do not trust him."

"No. I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him, my lord."

"Are there no redeeming qualities about Damon Salvatore, then?"

She paused. "He does love Stefan in his own twisted way. If you really want to know about Damon, my lord, I think Stefan would be the one to ask."

Tywin had one of the pages summon Stefan. The vampire bowed before Tywin. "You sent for me, my lord?" he asked.

"Do you trust your brother?" asked Tywin.

"No, I don't, my lord," said Stefan. "I love my brother, but I will never trust him. He will not be loyal to House Lannister, but I am sure you already know that."

"Yet you sought my approval to allow him to join the ranks of my men."

"Because he can be useful," said Stefan. Tywin leaned back in his seat and said nothing as he waited for Stefan to elaborate. Caroline frowned, not sure of what he could be talking about.
"Damon may still have links to the Starks, and Damon thinks he's cleverer than anyone else," said Stefan. "You could use him to pass on information that might work to your advantage, my lord. And if that fails, my lord, we will still have won over House Stark's most famous bannerman."

Tywin formed his fingers into a tent as he considered this. Finally, he spoke. "You will watch him," he said. "When he is well enough, he will serve with you under Daemon's banner."

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**Harrenhal**

Of course the Lannisters had said no. Robb wouldn't have expected anything less of them. Stannis had sent the messenger to his camp bearing Cersei's reply, written on her behalf by her brother the dwarf. "You are a brave man for daring to return," said Robb to the young Lannister boy, who was probably about his age, but seemed younger because he was so thin after so many months of being a prisoner of war. "What is your name?"

"Alton Lannister, my lord," said the boy. "Ser Alton Lannister."

"See to it that more suitable accommodations for Ser Alton are found," said Robb.

"My lord, I am afraid that would take time," said his new squire, who, while not inefficient, was nowhere near as good as Elijah. "In the meantime, the Kingslayer's cage may be the most comfortable accommodations we have for prisoners."

"Then put him in the Kingslayer's cage until a new one can be built. No doubt Jaime Lannister will appreciate the company," said Robb.

"Thank you, my lord," said Alton. He had to be of such a minor branch of the Lannister family that he had not learned any of the arrogance all of Tywin's children seemed to possess. A cousin of a cousin, perhaps?

"The Lannisters' new terms are just as untenable as our own," remarked Katherine as she read the letter over Robb's shoulder. "Roose Bolton to become the Lord of Winterfell while you go and live out the rest of your days in King's Landing? Stannis to take the black? I think they're learning."

"They learned from the best, after all," said Robb. The terms really were untenable, and Katherine hadn't even read out the worst of them yet.

His wife continued. "Katherine Stark to marry Jaime Lannister in compensation for all offences against House Lannister. Hmmm, Jaime's cute."

"Is that a hint for me to make him not cute?" asked Robb. How could she even say that?! Oh, right. She was baiting him and trying to make him jealous. After having known her for so long—all right, a few months— he was finally beginning to understand her game.

"Are you jealous, my lord husband? You are beyond adorable when you are jealous."

"Why would I be jealous of Jaime Lannister and his gilded cage? And you should stop reading letters that are not meant for your eyes, my lady. It is not what a gentlewoman would do."

"Ah, but I do loathe rules about what I can or cannot do," she said. "Besides, you would have shared it with me eventually, and can I help but see when you lay it so clearly before my eyes?" She kneaded his shoulders as if she were manipulating dough. He had to admit, it felt good. She knew just where the knots were and how to get them out of his muscles. Where did she learn all of this?
"I lay things clearly before you, my lady, but you are still shrouded in mist," he said. He took her right hand, turned it over, and kissed her palm. She stopped kneading his shoulders.

"Do you think I am keeping secrets from you, Robb?"

"I don't know. Usually, I am very good at reading people, but with you, I can tell nothing. I know nothing about you beyond the fact that you have a sister, you were involved with both the Salvatore brothers, you had a child before and she was taken from you, and you were exiled. But I do not know where you come from, who your father was, or even your nameday. Is Katherine even your real name?"

He glanced up at her, not sure what he was looking for. Her expression had grown melancholic. She sat down next to him. "My real name is Katerina," she said. "Of House Petrova, that you know. But I have been Katherine for so long that I probably would not answer if anyone were to call me Katerina. I was born on the fifth night of June in a little village called Global. My house was too insignificant to be even called a proper house, because my father was a glorified yeoman with pretensions of grandeur rather than any proper nobleman. The only way he could get any higher in life was by marrying off his daughters to highborn men."

"I suppose he got what he wanted," said Robb. "His daughter married a king. Or a former king, rather."

"He is no family of mine," said Katherine. "He disowned me for bearing a child out of wedlock. I am no longer his daughter."

He could not imagine how that would be like, not only to lose her honour and any hopes for the future, but to be cast out as well. How had she survived so long on her own with not a friend in the world? How strong had she had to be?

"And Elena? She was exiled too. She didn't…"

"Elena did not have a bastard, no," said Katherine. "But she knew what would happen to her if she stayed, and she didn't want it. She was in love with the Salvatore brothers. She left with them, and somewhere along the way, they were separated. I don't know how. I wasn't there to witness it."

She sounded so lost and forlorn that he regretted asking her. He kissed her hand again. "I shouldn't have asked," he said. "I'm sorry I made you relive that pain."

"You had every right to know who you married," said Katherine.

"Katherine, Katerina, it makes no difference to me," he said. "You are still my wife and I still love you no matter what you call yourself." He kissed her hand again. "Come to bed. It is late."

Was his cage not cramped enough? Now they had to put someone else inside it with him? Dirty golden hair, green eyes; they did say he was a Lannister, didn't they? Elton Lannister? Olton Lannister?

"Ser Jaime," whispered the boy. Well, Jaime hadn't expected the boy to actually address him. Usually people were too frightened to because he was…

Well, Jaime Lannister, of course.

"You probably don't recognize me, but I squired for you. At Willem Frey's wedding."
He'd been to a Frey's wedding? What happened? Had he been particularly bored or drunk that day? Or maybe both? Actually, it would make sense, because he had no recollections of attending any Frey weddings. "What's your name again?" he asked.

"Alton, my lord," said the boy. "Your squire was sick that day at the joust, and when I asked to be your squire, my father was so furious because he was afraid I would embarrass our family in front of the family. I remember how your golden armour gleamed and how the women threw flowers at your feet."

Now that the boy mentioned it, he did remember a tournament where his squire Brian had been so ill from the fish soup he had eaten the night before that he had vomited all over his saddle. The boy hadn't even been able to stand properly, let alone help him put on his armour. Ah, how far had he fallen? Well, not to worry. This cage and these chains were just a temporary setback, and now that he had his eager young cousin here with him, he might just have a chance.

"I remember now," he said. "You were a much better squire than I was at sixteen."

"Is that really true?" said Alton. His entire face lit up as if someone had told him he could be freed within the next hour. Well, he would be free if Jaime's plan went according to plan, at least in spirit.

"I squired for Ser Barristan Selmy when we were fighting against the Kingswood Brotherhood. I was so nervous that I was everywhere that I shouldn't be, more a hindrance than a help, really."

Alton grinned as if Jaime's story and praise were the greatest gifts he could ever receive. Of course, they were, but that was beside the point.

"Those were the days," said Jaime, adding a wistful note into his voice. "Now, look at us. To tell you the truth, I'm not made to be a prisoner. Eddard Stark, I imagine, was the model prisoner until the end. Sadly, good prisoners seem to breed good jailers." And they married better ones although Katherine Stark had been a terrible prisoner, as far as he knew. Harrenhal was the perfect example.

"So...is it impossible to get out then?" whispered the boy even as he tried to put on a brave face to hide his disappointment or despair. If he had wanted to be free, he should never have come back in the first place. Oh well. He preferred it this way. Better Jaime free than Alton.

"Actually," said Jaime slowly. "I have been thinking, now that you're here, this just might work." The boy crept closer, careful not to draw the attention of the pacing Karstark who was guarding them. His back was turned to them, and he was rounding the corner to the other side of the area where the prisoners were kept. It was a very large space full of pens and miserable sods who sat chained to their posts like obedient pigs ready for slaughter. Apparently, wild animals had been sneaking into the Stark camp at night, and at least three men had been killed. People were starting to talk vampires again. Idiots. To compare those northerners to a bag of bricks was to insult the bricks.

"What is it?" asked Alton. His eyes were so wide that there was white all around his irises. There was so much hope in those eyes; it would almost be a pity to snuff it out.

"I just need you to do one thing for me," said Jaime. He leaned in as if sharing a conspiracy with him. "Die."

With that, he slammed his manacled wrists against the side of the boy's head, right on the temple. He felt the skull cave in just a little, but not enough to kill him. He did it again, and again, and again, until the bone cracked and blood was spurting out with each blow.
Alton clawed at the straw-strewn floor of the cage. He spasmed and convulsed, with bloody froth at the corner of his mouth from his smashed nose. His face was unrecognizable from the blood. Jaime had been locked in here for a long time and fed food not even fit for a beast. It did something to a man's aim. Once Alton was perfectly still, he lay back, closed his eyes, and waited.

"What in the seven hells?!" Karstark finally realized that all was not well with his prisoners, and he fumbled at the keys at his belt until he found the right one—it took a while; there were three of them—to open the door of Jaime's cage.

As he bent down over the still body of the boy, Jaime looped his chains around his neck and held. He ignored the way edges of the gold-plated cuffs cut into his wrists and how the roughened insides of the manacles were rubbing his skin away. He could afford to lose a little skin if it meant gaining his freedom. Karstark scrabbled at Jaime's shackles around his neck. His legs kicked as if he were attempting to swim to the surface for air, banging them against the bars of the cage. Northerners were either stupid, or very, very deaf. Either way, that bode well for Jaime.

He held on until Karstark stilled, and then held on for a little longer. Sometimes people pretended to be dead. At other times, they were merely unconscious. It was best not to risk it. When he was finally sure that Karstark was dead, he grabbed the keys, not that he expected to find the keys to his manacles among them. He had seen that particular key hanging from Katherine Stark's neck like a piece of jewellery. Robb Stark had given it to her because she had been the one who had come up with the idea of these confounded golden shackles that were meant to mock him. And yes, he felt very mocked. He was not going to attempt to steal it from Katherine Stark's neck. That woman was dangerous. Rebekah had warned him of it, and Gregor Clegane's fate was further warning.

The night was quiet, with only a few northern guards mingling near the fires. They quietly whispered about their lord's new-found god and the burning of their ancestral gods. Some of them were worried that would call down divine wrath upon them. Jaime could only hope that the gods were good at holding grudges. However, he wasn't counting on it.

No one seemed to notice a man in chains creeping in between the tents, getting ever closer and closer to the edge of the camp. He stuck to the shadows. There was nothing to be afraid of in the dark if it belonged to you. If you were in a bright place, however, then the dark was very scary indeed because you could not see what lurked there.

He made it perhaps one hundred yards away when the warning horn sounded. No matter how still he tried to stay, or how he placed himself flat against the ground and behind a mound of dirt, they still found him. It wasn't easy to hide in shiny golden armour. He tried to run then, but he had been starved and weakened, and his muscles were cramping from the lack of movement over the past few months. He tripped, and they rode him down.

Sharp pain lanced through his side as a booted foot struck him. Blood poured into his eyes from a head wound. It wasn't deep, but head wounds tended to bleed a lot, and he couldn't see anything much after that. They trussed him up with so many chains that he wondered if there was any left for the other prisoners, and then dragged him back to camp behind their horses. If he stumbled, they continued to drag him.

"What is this?" asked a feminine voice. Oh gods. Katherine Stark. He blinked to clear the blood out of his eyes. The woman stood before him like a goddess. What in the world was she wearing? Her dress was unlike any other he had ever seen. It covered everything, but only served to emphasize her sensual qualities despite its conservativeness. The neckline was low enough so that her breasts, pushed up by her corset, were very prominent, and it made her narrow waist even narrower. If she hadn't been his enemy, he probably might have even bothered with her. Actually, even as his
enemy, he still thought she was an extremely beautiful woman.

In the same way that those jewel-coloured venomous snakes from Essos and Sosseros were beautiful. He wouldn't touch those with a lance, and he wouldn't touch this one with a lance either.

"Is this how you treat guests, Lord Karstark?" asked Katherine.

"He killed my son! He killed both my sons! I want his head on a spike!" raged the older Karstark.

"We don't always get what we want, my lord," said Katherine, admonishing him as she would a small child. "I am sure you have the hammer and anvil to make many more sons."

Jaime laughed despite himself, but was quickly silenced when someone yanked on the chain attached to his collar, cutting off his breath painfully and abruptly. Stars appeared in his vision.

"That is enough. Dead hostages are no use to anybody."

"I want justice!"

"Justice, of course, will be served, in accordance with Lord Stark's will."

Oh dear. That did not sound like a good thing. But, Robb Stark was a generally reasonable boy, and he knew that he needed Jaime because of his sisters in King's Landing.

Robb Stark was discussing matters of state in his council chambers with his bannermen, namely Roose Bolton. Apart from his wife, he seemed to have one person in his so-called court that was useful.

"I want him dead!" said Karstark. Good tactic. If screaming at Lady Stark did not work, perhaps screaming at Lord Stark would yield better results. Karstark logic. No one said it had to make sense.

"We need him alive, Lord Karstark," said Robb Stark calmly. "He is useful leverage against Tywin Lannister."

"He killed my sons! I want revenge! I want him dead!"

For a moment, Jaime wondered if Stark was going to follow his wife's footsteps and tell Karstark that people did not always get what they wanted.

"Do you think, Lord Karstark, that I do not want him dead as much as you do? He pushed my brother out the window and made him a cripple. His son killed my father."

"That is very unfair. Joffrey and I are not related. Much," said Jaime. Stark ignored him and continued.

"But killing him won't bring your sons back, Lord Karstark. Keeping him alive, on the other hand, could be useful to our cause." He motioned to the guards. "Take him back to his cage, and have another set of shackles made for his legs. Obviously my lord Lannister has a little too much freedom."

Next chapter: Caroline gets a promotion. Robb's campaign encounters another speed bump. Katherine reaches out to Damon.
The Devil Wears Red and Gold

Chapter Summary

Caroline gets a surprising promotion. Katherine reaches out to Damon. Robb's campaign encounters another speed bump.

Tywin Lannister's Main Camp

This day began just like any other for Caroline Forbes. She got up before the crack of dawn, not because she was insomniac—she would give anything for a lie-in— but because Lord Tywin got up at dawn and therefore the entire world had to be up before then so his breakfast and morning letters would be ready. Why couldn't he just be like a normal old person and have a snooze? Oh, right. He was a Lannister. He liked saying that a lot, as if he were afraid that the world would forget his last name.

After washing briefly with a bucket of woefully cold water and tying her hair back in a messy bun—she would also give anything for shampoo and conditioner—she rushed down to the kitchen to prepare the tray with a pot of tea, two eggs, toasted bread with butter scraped over the surface, and a little meat—preferably not mutton. Lamb was okay. Usually, it was salted pork, but today it happened to be smoked pheasant.

Lord Tywin was already up and dressed by the time she ducked inside his tent with his meal. His back was to her, and he was reading a letter. "What is it today?" he asked, meaning the breakfast.

"Bread, eggs and smoked peasant—I mean pheasant!"

Tywin looked up from his letter and raised his eyebrow, and then turned back to his letter again. She put the tray on the dining table, poured him a cup of tea, and then made to leave, except he suddenly spoke. Usually, he did not acknowledge her departure at all.

"My daughter is distracted by a joke from Robb Stark and Stannis Baratheon."

"But I thought Stannis Baratheon didn't make jokes," said Caroline in genuine surprise. Everyone said Stannis was a humourless stiff, didn't they? Or was everyone wrong? It wouldn't have been the first time.

"I should have said it was Robb Stark's idea of a joke," said Tywin. He put down the letter and sat down to breakfast. He pointed at a pile of books on his desk. "Tidy that up."

Of course, Lord Tywin. Immediately, Lord Tywin.

"Mind you, my lord, Robb Stark and Stannis Baratheon together are a bit of a joke," said Caroline in a distracted manner as she sorted the books in alphabetical order just the way he liked them. What was it with important men and their inability to put things back? If he hadn't taken all of them out at the same time, it would have been so much simpler. She didn't get paid enough for all of this. Should she ask for a raise? Women needed to be assertive, right?

"Do you believe it is a matter to be laughed at that Stannis Baratheon commands the largest force
"in Westeros?" he asked.

She froze. Oops. "What I mean is that I think it's a joke that Katherine Pierce-Stark can trick Stannis Baratheon into believing that she's capable of submitting to anyone, much less Stannis. I mean, they don't have a single thing in common, aside from being terrible people, that is. She's always smiling as she stabs you in the back, and from what I hear, Stannis frowns as he rewards his loyal subjects by chopping off their fingers. Yeah, I don't know how that works either…" She trailed off. Tywin was staring at her without so much as blinking.

"I'm sorry, my lord," she said. "I have a tendency to go on. But you know me."

"It would be convenient if Katherine Stark can betray him before he attacks King's Landing," said Tywin. He took a sip from his cup of tea.

"Well, I don't think she's going to operate on our timeline, my lord," said Caroline. "She'll betray him whenever she's ready to. No one can make Katherine do things."

"Perhaps we could make Stannis believe otherwise," mused Tywin.

"Oh, believe me, you'd have a hard time," said Caroline. "If Katherine wants you to believe something, she'll make it seem so real that reality seems false by comparison."

"You are an admirer of hers, I take it?" he asked.

"I hate her evil guts!" declared Caroline. "She's a vengeful, backstabbing, evil, bloodthirsty, immoral, psychopathic bitch!" She was so passionate in describing Katherine, that she forgot she was talking to Tywin Lannister, the true king of Westeros. Then she remembered. "Sorry, my lord."

"You have a very strong opinion of someone you have never met."

"Oh, I have met her. We…lived in the same village for a time. We were best enemies."

"I suppose you did not win that war," he said, going back to his breakfast.

"It's still going," said Caroline. "Stefan's helping, and Stefan knows her better anyone does, maybe except Damon. But that's because Damon's equally evil. I don't trust anything he says." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. Again. I'm rambling."

"What is the one thing you wanted most when you were a child?" he asked.

"What?" repeated Caroline. Why was he asking her that?

"I believe the question was quite clear."

"No, it was clear. I just…never mind." She just never thought he'd care.

"Well, I really wanted this doll—"

"Not that young of a child."

"Well, I wanted my father to come home," she said.

"Reasonable enough," said Tywin. "And what do you want now?"

"To make a place for myself here, I suppose," she said. "This is all so new to me, my lord. I don't even know what my place is right now. I guess I want some corner of the world to call mine, if you
could put it that way. I don't know how else to put it."

Tywin nodded slowly as if thinking. He probably was thinking. That brain of his never stopped working!

"I require a presence in King's Landing; someone to be my eyes and ears. Tyrion has failed me, and this letter only further proves my daughter is much less clever than she thinks she is."

"Stefan would be quite good at it," said Caroline.

"I need someone who will pass unseen," said Tywin. He gave her an unmistakable pointed look.

"You don't mean…me, do you, my lord?" He said nothing and returned to cutting up his toast and dipping it into the egg yolks. "But I'm a terrible spy! I always get found out! Well, except that once. Katherine so fell for it."

"You have experience in the matter?" he said.

"You could say that, my lord," she said.

"You may have failed in the past, but you will not fail me. Is that understood, Lady Caroline?"

"But I'm not—"

He gave her another unmistakable pointed look. "One more thing, Lady Forbes. You will need your own house words and sigil. I expect to see them by tomorrow morning. You may go."

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**Harrenhal**

Jaime had tried to escape? Why hadn't she been there? She could have helped him to get out! The news only reached Rebekah after the Manderlys had retreated back into Stark and Tully territory to await further orders from Robb Stark, and Rebekah and her band of 'mercenaries' had returned with them. Lord Tywin was not going to be pleased with their lack of progress in anything. Not only had they failed to pass on the news of Robb Stark's plans to take Harrenhal, marriage, abdication, and subsequent alliance with Stannis, but they also did not know why or what he was going to do next.

Rumour had it that Stannis was preparing to sail for Blackwater Bay and attack King's Landing from the water. His engineers had been building war ships and siege engines for the ships. But that was all Stannis. No one knew what the Starks planned on doing.

There was one good thing about all of this. With Robb Stark now married to Katherine Pierce, Elijah 'Frey' had gone back to the Twins and his 'father', halving the chance of Rebekah being recognized.

Jaime looked even more battered and tired than he had before, not that she could see him very clearly without getting too close for comfort. The guards around him were a lot more vigilant now, and from what she had heard, no one was allowed to unlock the door of his cage without permission from Robb Stark or Katherine Stark.

How was she going to get him out? She knew she wasn't supposed to even try, but how could she not? He was right there! If she would go to such lengths to save Niklaus from being killed, then she would go a lot further to try and save Jaime Lannister, who at least had never ever stabbed her in the heart and locked her in a box for any amount of time.
She longed to be able to discuss this with someone, but the men could not know. They were all very intent on obeying Tywin's orders and passing on intel about the Starks, no matter how badly their stint at being super Lannister spies had started. Saving Jaime was not even on their to-do list, unless Robb Stark left him somewhere alone. Robb Stark was too smart for that, and that Katherine would never have let him do it anyway.

Rickard Karstark was going to be a problem. He was brash, insubordinate, more a nuisance than a danger, but still a threat in his own way. He needed to be dealt with.

The problem was his ten thousand men. Robb needed those men and Katherine understood that better than most. It was pretty much taken for granted that the Karstarks would always own half of Robb's army, and she didn't like that at all.

Then again, she had never had much use for facts if they didn't suit her. Rather, she would change them until the reality she had envisioned became the reality. There was one good thing about Karstark; there was very little going on up there in the cerebral department. Hmm…now if only his men realized that he was not worthy of leading them. Then they could do whatever they wanted with him and no one would give a damn. Perhaps Damon being part of the Lannister forces wasn't a bad thing for them after all. Actually, she had never thought that it was bad. If he had turned on Robb, well, she could deal with Damon Salvatore, and if he hadn't, he was very well placed to help her carry out her diabolical master plans. It beat him carrying out his own versions of 'diabolical' plans. Since when had any of Damon's plans ever worked out the way he had thought they would?

"What are you smiling about, Katherine?" asked Robb. She had been so embroiled in her thoughts that she hadn't heard him come in. He took off his gloves and ran a hand through his tousled dark hair. It was getting long, and it kept getting in his eyes in a way that annoyed him immensely.

Perhaps she could propose a haircut after an intimate bath. After all, a lord or a king always had to appear immaculate. Let that hair grow a little longer, and he would become indistinguishable from all the other medieval northmen. She would, of course, stop short of introducing the powdered wig in Westeros. It had never been her favourite men's fashion trend.

"Just thinking," said Katherine.

"About?"

"Rickard Karstark."

Robb raised an eyebrow. "Should I be worried and jealous that my wife's eyes are straying?" he teased.

"Please, don't even go there, Robb Stark. You're making me ill," said Katherine. She gave him a playful little shove. He grinned.

"So, why is Rickard Karstark on your mind?" he asked.

"Isn't he on yours?"

He was silent for a moment.

"I must admit, I have been thinking about him too."

"Maybe it's my turn to be worried and jealous that my husband's eyes are straying." She put her finger between her teeth and let her hand hang down while she smirked, as if she were contemplating what a certain someone would taste like. No, not Rickard Karstark.
He snorted.

"What do you think of him?" asked Katherine.

"He is… vexing at times. But I must tolerate him. He has ten thousand men and they are very loyal to him. That's half our numbers."

"That's what I don't like, people assuming that he owns half your army."

"But he does."

"Does he have to?"

"Do I even want to know what you're thinking?"

"Yes, yes you do, but you're not going to."

"Katherine…" There was a slight hint of warning in his voice. She simply smiled angelically at him and batt he her eyelashes in a way that she knew he didn't really respond to, but she was teasing him. No, the very well-placed Damon was going to do that for her. She just needed to arrange a way to get a message to him somehow. She smiled. It was just like the old days, when she had had to 'sneak' around with Damon behind Stefan and Giuseppe Salvatore's back. Well, she would use the old ways then, with a twist.

She kissed Robb on the lips. "All I need you to do is treat Rickard Karstark as if he were your most trusted bannerman. Give him what he wants, barring Jaime Lannister's head. Praise him inordinately, favour him above all others; I'll do the rest."

King's Landing

"How could he?!!" Cersei was perplexed. Damon had betrayed her. He had betrayed House Lannister, and yet their father had taken him in under his banner, to serve as a Lannister knight! He did not deserve such an honour. In fact, the only thing he deserved was a painful and prolonged death. "How could Father trust a traitor? He left us!"

"Maybe the reason he left was because you weren't pretty enough to keep him here," Tyrion pretended to whisper. It was so loud that if there had been anyone else in the room, everyone would have heard him. As it were, there was no one. "It's not like you're Jaime."

She refrained from throwing a cup at him. One, it would be a waste of good wine on someone who really didn't deserve it, and two, Father had to have had some reason for making the little monkey the acting Hand of the King, although she could not possibly think why. Instead, she downed all the wine in the cup and slammed it onto the table, making the writing implements jump. Stacked documents slid over and spilled onto the floor. She ignored them.

"Jaime tried to escape," Tyrion continued. She forgot her annoyance with him for a moment.

"And?" she said.

"He didn't succeed."
Lannister Frontline Camp

They didn't trust him. *That* much was obvious. Damon might not be the brightest of the lot – although he sometimes did wonder, because everybody mostly seemed stupid to him– but they weren't exactly hiding it. Well, mostly it was Caroline who wasn't hiding it, and what Caroline thought was probably what Stefan thought, at this stage. His brother had just been a little too nice and charming.

Nice and charming Stefan meant suspicious up-to-something Stefan. Could he be a little less obvious about it, please? He supposed he should be grateful. It would have been worse if they had been suspicious and he hadn't been aware of it. His own safety wasn't the main problem. Damon could always outsmart them or resort to his usual plan of backstab, rip, and kill to get himself out of problems.

The problem was Arya. There was no guarantee if he resorted to his usual fail-safe plan –it was mostly fail-safe, unless there was vervain or more powerful vampires involved– of killing everything, that he would be able to get her out safely. She was the weak link in the two-link chain, and he should really leave her behind, but he couldn't. He had made a promise to her late father, and as much as he liked to say that he didn't care, he actually did. Also, Robb would hate him. As in more than he probably hated him now. Rumour had it that Robb had been…rather upset when the news of Damon's defection had reached him.

He wished he could pass on word to Robb, to let him know that he had his sister, and could he please devise some method by which Damon could give her back? Babysitting was seriously cramping his style.

He propped up his feet on the desk in his tent –at least he was given his own tent, now that he had been acknowledged to be a knight– and twirled a quill between his fingers. The Lannister scouts had passed on reports of approximately where the Starks were camped. They hadn't passed them onto him, of course, but he had been eavesdropping. Was it possible to get Arya, sneak out, and cross over to the Stark side? It would be risky, but when was anything completely without risk? There was no fun in life if there was no danger of failure.

He summoned a servant and asked for wine. He needed a drink. Technically, it would have been nice to have something stronger than wine, like whisky or perhaps some vodka or even blood, but Westerosians didn't do shots. The warmth of the alcohol (or blood) would help him to concentrate and make his brain function better. All those 'facts' about alcohol slowing down cerebral action? Lies. No, honest.

Another servant came in moments later with a tray containing a jug of wine, some cheese –one could not have wine without cheese, after all; he was no alcoholic– and a tin cup. No one, not even Tywin Lannister, had wine glasses. The metal cups gave the wine and every other beverage in Westeros a peculiar flavour. He poured himself a cup and selected a slice of cheese, only to frown.

Hidden amongst the yellow blocks that passed for cheese was a yellow parchment flower. The last time he had seen such a flower had been in 1864, before the roundup of the vampires and before his life had changed forever, for better or for worse. He made sure no one was looking, straining his hearing to ensure that there was nobody outside his tent spying on him, before picking up the flower. It was a simple piece of origami, but back in the Civil War days, he had thought it the height of sophistication. Only one lady he knew was capable of making such works of art out of secretive love notes.

'What are you up to, Katherine?' he wondered. The flower came apart in his hands to become a square of parchment. There was nothing written on it; at least, not upon first glance. Back in the
day, both he and Katherine had been very fond of theatrics and the thrill of sneaking around behind his father and Stefan's back, even though just about everyone knew that she had been involved with both the Salvatore brothers.

He smoothed out the parchment and held it above the candle's flickering flame, not letting it touch the dry sheet in case it caught fire. *That* was not the point. He exposed every surface of the parchment to the heat, moving it slowly in circles above the candle. Faint brown lines emerged, linking together to form letters and then words. The scent of scorched honey was too faint for mortal noses, but if he concentrated, he could smell it.

"Bingo," he whispered.

There were only a few words written on the sheet of parchment in a simple shifting cypher that they had used to elevate the thrill of their game. To further safeguard the message, she had written the note in his father's native Italian.

It set a meeting place and a time.

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**Tywin Lannister's Main Camp**

Caroline didn't sleep at all that night. She had been making a list of all acceptable phrases to use as her 'house words'. What defined the Forbes family, apart from the fact that her ancestors had once helped to found a town and possibly slain a lot of vampires? Although, now that she knew the whole story, she now knew the entire Forbes family had been used by a vampire and a Lockwood werewolf.

Thinking of Lockwood werewolves made her think about Tyler. She missed him so bad! Even if he weren't returning her calls, it would have been nice to be able to just call his phone and listen to his voice on voicemail. Now she didn't even have that. Love like that was forever.

"Love is forever," she whispered to herself. Those were good words. It defined her family well, because no matter what differences they had with one another, they were all bound by love.

Light crept over the horizon. The sky turned dark grey and then charcoal grey before settling into just grey. It was Westeros; what had she expected anyway? She rolled up her parchment. It had three phrases on it. Coming up with house words was hard, and she hadn't even started on the sigil yet. What was she supposed to have anyway? Most houses had animals. Rebekah had chosen the infinity symbol, predictably. Maybe...shoes? Tywin probably wouldn't appreciate it. Hey, what about a cup? She was a cupbearer. What animal did she identify with the most? Well, she liked pretty things, so maybe a butterfly. Yes, a butterfly would be her sigil. It was so much cooler than a trout. And lions were clichéd. Not that she was going to tell Tywin.

Lord Tywin was up by the time she appeared in his tent with his breakfast. There was a wrinkly apple this time, along with what passed for as bacon in the camp. Personally, Caroline thought it looked like fossilized leather and not particularly palatable. She wondered if the cooks had been pilfering supplies and replacing it with leather instead, but that thought passed as quickly as it had come. The cooks wouldn't dare.

"Well, I've thought of my house words, my lord," she said while she played with her daylight ring. Yes, she was nervous. It was natural to be nervous in front of Lord Tywin.

"Continue," he said.
"Love is forever," said Caroline. "You said house words defined a family, right? Well, I've thought about it and what really defines my family is that we love each other despite our differences."

His gaze was inscrutable. He indicated she should pour his tea. "Rhaegar Targaryen loved Lyanna Stark," he suddenly remarked while she poured it. "And now the Targaryens are no more. Love is fleeting. Temporal."

"But Rhaegar never stopped loving Lyanna Stark," Caroline pointed out.

"His body rots in an unmarked grave," said Tywin.

"How do you know their spirits haven't gone to a higher plane? A better place? An afterlife? My village was haunted, so I'm sure the dead don't just cease to exist." Then she realized that this was probably not the right thing to say to Tywin Lannister, who only nominally believed in the seven gods. Or was it eight? Was the Lord of Light part of the pantheon?

"Such... fantasies will not serve you well at court," said Tywin.

"I'm sorry, Lord Tywin," she said.

He sighed. "Perhaps those should be your words, considering you apologize all the time."

"Sor–Actually, I'm not sorry. I was just trying to be polite, my lord, but you are incredibly judgemental and hard to please."

He didn't even blink. "That is because the rest of the world will judge you far more harshly than I. If you are to thrive at court, first you must learn to survive. You will be surrounded by enemies and they will not take your rise to power kindly."

"I guess I know who I'll have to thank for it," she muttered. She didn't even want to go to court! He was making her! If he heard her complaint, he pretended not to.

"Your words should inspire fear in your enemies and admiration in your friends," he said.

"Blood is forever?" she asked heatedly. That was relevant, considering she needed to drink it forever, but she wanted to be defined by more than her need for a certain beverage that was hard to come by outside of a slaughterhouse, hospital, or battlefield.

"Blood is immortal," he corrected her. "That will do. And your sigil?"

"A butterfly–" she began, but then she cut herself off. He probably would never let her have a butterfly for her sigil. And all the dragons were taken!

"Maybe I should just have a human skull as a sigil," she said.

Tywin gave her another look. It said everything that she needed to know about what he thought of her ideas. She wracked her mind for something else suitable. No hearts, no spades, no diamonds, and no clubs. That left her with...

"What about this? May I, my lord?" She glanced at his desk with its piles of parchment and the quills. He gave a slight nod.

She quickly sketched out the shape. It wasn't the least bit original, but no one would know. France had never existed in Westeros, even if people were singing the French national anthem and thinking that it was the Stark anthem. If Katherine could plagiarize shamelessly, so could she.
"What is it?" said Tywin.

"It's a lily of the valley," said Caroline. "In my village, we called it the fleur de lis." Thank you, high school French. "I could have a yellow one on a blue background?"

"What do flowers and blood have in common?"

"What about a red one, then? On a white background?"

"Red and white are not auspicious colours," said Tywin.

"What about a red flower and a yellow background?" That should please him, right?

"A golden flower on a red background," he decided for her. Why did she even bother trying? "The flower grows amidst a field of blood, but it remains unstained, perfect, immortal."

A/N: Sorry, we had a computer glitch so the chapter is late!

**Next chapter:** Robb doesn't understand Katherine's plan but he does it anyway. Damon finally meets up with Katherine. Daemon Lannister gets an important tip-off.
Cruel Intentions

Chapter Summary

Damon meets with an old frenemy. Robb is not enjoying his stumbles in the dark. Lady Caroline Forbes arrives at King's Landing.

Harrenhal

What was Katherine playing at? Favouring Karstark above all others? Well, if she wanted to make him popular with his bannermen again, then it wouldn't be remiss to treat them better than he had done so over the past few months. But most of her suggestions to Robb about how to treat Karstark were ridiculous! Gold, whores, taking his opinion into consideration; he felt as if Karstark were lord instead of him. And why just Karstark? Personally, Robb favoured Bolton.

Then again, Bolton didn't hate him, so winning his favour might not be as important in Katherine's eyes as winning over those who did.

"Are we sending more supplies and gold to Lord Karstark again, my lord?" asked Bolton.

"And camp followers," said Robb. "The men need their distractions."

"Forgive me, my lord, but this is the third time you have given him more than is needed," said Bolton. "Do you not think this a little excessive?"

"Lord Karstark has not been feeling amenable towards me lately. He controls a significant number of my men. Besides, the men on the frontlines fight hard," said Robb. It was hard to say that with a straight face. "And they have brought us victories." Yes, in minor skirmishes where one would expect a superior northern force to win. If Karstark had lost those, it would have been extremely difficult to explain to the men—and to himself, for that matter—why he was still 'favouring him above all others'.

Bolton gave him a look but was wise enough not to say anything. Robb had been lenient not just in giving supplies to Karstark but also in praising him inordinately for winning those tiny skirmishes that he was sure Sansa could win if he'd given her that many men to lead into battle.

At that moment, Karstark strode in, a gleam in his eyes and his step proud. He had grown bolder ever since Robb had not admonished him seriously at all for not respecting him that time when he'd demanded Jaime Lannister's head. "Good news, my lord," he said with a bow that wasn't really much of a bow. Robb pasted on his smile. He had to pretend. He had to wear a mask for the world to see. Here, he was not Robb Stark; he was Lord Stark and future king of Westeros. "I have won you a great victory!"

"Pray, do tell us about your victory, Lord Karstark," said Bolton rather drily. They sat back to prepare for a rendition of an exaggerated tale of how the brave northerners had surprised a 'large' group of Lannister men and routed them, stealing all their supplies which probably wouldn't cover the amount of supplies expended in obtaining them.

Karstark launched into a story of how he had surrounded a camp of several thousand Lannister
men, led by one Daemon Lannister, and routed them. Of course, Daemon Lannister had escaped for he had been a tricky bastard who had dressed up as one of the soldiers and, along with him, the traitor Damon Salvatore, his brother, the monstrous Stefan Salvatore and another thousand men had escaped. But they had captured supplies.

Of course, Robb hadn't known that Daemon Lannister, Tywin's oft overlooked nephew, had even **had** several thousand men to begin with. And, if it was a routing, then how in the world did the most important men escape with another thousand men?

But he did not point that out. "The north is indebted to you, Lord Karstark, for your victories and efforts on the front," said Robb.

"We'll need more supplies if we are to continue winning, my lord," said Karstark without so much as a blink. He couldn't believe that he still had the courage to ask for more after all that Robb had given him. He was going to beggar the north.

"I already have men bringing you three thousand gold dragons and two hundred wagons of supplies, as well as two hundred camp followers."

"Forgive me, my lord, but that will not be enough," said Karstark. "My men have fought hard. It is by their blood that the Lannisters are kept at bay."

"Then name what you need. I will endeavour to deliver it to you," said Robb.

"We need to re-arm, to forge new weapons. And the men need their entertainment."

"Then five thousand gold dragons and two hundred and fifty wagons of supplies," said Robb. "I am afraid it would be difficult to find so many camp followers on such a short notice."

"I understand, my lord," said Karstark. He bowed. "I thank you for your generosity." Robb wasn't feeling so generous, but he nodded.

**Katherine had better have a plan.**

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**South of Harrenhal**

He waited. It was dark, and through the mist he could see pinpricks of light from both the Stark and Lannister camps. Robb was so close, yet so far. Damon crouched on the outcrop of rock. All his senses were honed to the maximum. He could even hear the sound of beetle grubs scratching in the rotten log beside him as they burrowed through the moist wood.

"Red and gold look good on you," said a female voice.

"You're late," said Damon. He slowly rose to his feet and turned around. Katherine looked the way he remembered her to be...from 1864. Was she really going to revive Civil War fashions in Westeros? Well, they would all think her a genius and a pioneer, he supposed, just as Cersei had thought him the most stylish man alive when he had debuted the tuxedo. Actually, scratch that. He was the most stylish man alive.

"I had to wait until Robb fell asleep," said Katherine.

"Speaking of Robb, I have his sister Arya. Can you take her back to him?"

"No can do," said Katherine. "I don't like children. I didn't ask you to meet me here to talk about
Arya Stark. We have a problem."

"Lemme see. Tall, imposing, never smiles, last name Lannister, first name Tywin?"

"Tall, balding, hairy, first name Rickard, last name Karstark, actually," said Katherine. "And you are going to help me get rid of him."

Damon smiled. "What makes you think that I would help you instead of, say, call my guards, capture you, and hand you over to Tywin Lannister?" he asked.

"Well…you could…" said Katherine. She drew the words out slowly, as if she had never thought of such a thing and was just now considering the possibility that Damon would betray her. "He would send you on your merry way after giving you a pat on the head, no doubt, but on the other hand, your friend would be very angry. You remember him? Robb Stark? My husband?"

"Yeah, I'm still trying to let that sink in," said Damon.

"You care about what he thinks, don't you? Otherwise, you would have handed Arya Stark over to the Lannisters."

Damn. Well that fell down. "I could be using her as leverage over both sides," he said.

"The thing is, to do that, both sides would need to know you have her in the first place. So far, I'm the only one who knows and I don't care."

"Fine, so maybe I still like Robb. What's on your mind?"

"Karstark is an arrogant man who thinks he owns half of my army."

"You mean Robb's army."

"I'm his wife. What's his is mine. But let's just make it very clear that it is not Rickard Karstark's. Now, he's a brash northman who thinks he's better than everyone, especially the soft, pampered southerners." She gave him a knowing look before proceeding to tell him exactly where Karstark was camped.

"So you want to use the Lannisters to do your dirty work," said Damon.

Katherine shrugged. "What other purpose do the Lannisters serve apart from doing my dirty work?"

"Fair point. I'll point Daemon Lannister in the right direction. He's not me, but he's got a decent enough brain, I suppose."

She cupped his cheek. A hundred and forty six years ago, that touch would have melted him. Right now, he just grinned and removed her hand. "Save it for your hubby, Katherine Stark," he said. "Me, I'm immune to you, and I'm only doing this for Robb. Let's just make that very clear."

"Oh my, I do think Robb is the new Elena."

Damon laughed. Robb was nowhere near as pretty, and no one could compare to Elena, but Damon supposed he would be sad if anything was to happen to him. And he did want Robb to win.

"Meet me here tomorrow night, same time," said Katherine. "Let me know how it goes."
Damon found Stefan drilling the soldiers diligently, watching them go through the moves that could save their lives in the heat of battle. Of course, he could always have just turned them, but then there wouldn't be enough blood to feed the lot of them. That was the problem with vampire armies. Demand always outstripped supplies.

Stefan looked as if he belonged, and it was a strange feeling to think of his brother as a military man. They had both been to war before, of course, but Stefan had been a medic. Now here he was, a knight and a commander. Then again, Damon was a knight too. This world was changing both of them; for better or for worse, he couldn't say.

"Hey, Stef, can I talk to you in private?"

"I am a little occupied, Damon."

"Yeah, but it can't wait."

Stefan turned. He had a newfound confidence in his step, as if for the first time in one and a half centuries, he was right where he ought to be. He didn't need to rein in his darker side completely, but he was still in control of himself. That had never happened before, at least not as far as Damon could remember. Perhaps this was where he was supposed to be all along. Westeros was a perfect world for vampires in many ways.

"What's so urgent?" he asked. Damon smiled.

"Well, I was out for a walk last night, getting dinner," he began. Stefan got the meaning. He commanded the men to keep drilling and then followed Damon to the edge of the camp.

"I hope that they weren't our men," said Stefan.

"What? I wouldn't do that," said Damon. "Like I said, I was out getting dinner, and I spotted a rather curious group of northern soldiers camped about twenty miles east of here. They weren't doing anything. Just camping, by the looks of it. I thought you should know."

Stefan regarded him with narrowed eyes. "And why would you tell me?"

"You still don't believe me?" asked Damon. "All right, then. Come on. Let's go get lunch, and I'll show you. What can it hurt?"

Still, Stefan hesitated, but he at last relented and followed Damon. It was almost like the old times again, the two Salvatore brothers sneaking around behind the backs of the authorities, whether they be parental or otherwise. Damon avoided the area where he and Katherine had met the night before, and took Stefan right to the edge of the camp, just behind the treeline so they would not be seen. Karstark was camped just beside a forest, like Katherine had said he would be. His tents stretched further than the eye could see, just squares of dirty white against the dreary green and grey of the landscape. Occasionally, parties of men would ride in and out of the camp. People were bringing in supplies, and scouts would come with news of activity in the area.

"All right, Damon," said Stefan. "They're where you said they would be. What's your game?"

"There is no game. I'm on your side, brother." He shrugged. "I just thought you should know."

"You're late again." That was the first thing Damon said to her when they met at the same outcrop of rock the next evening. Everything was veiled in shadow, but that suited her perfectly well because no one had seen her leaving Robb's chambers.
"You're just early," said Katherine. She knew she was late, but she was never going to admit it. She didn't need to explain herself to anyone. It had been a little difficult to get away, as Robb had been staying up late again. He had been doing that far too often. It was beginning to take its toll on him, creating shadows beneath his eyes and furrows in his too-young brow. She had slipped a little blood into his cup of wine just the other night to make sure he didn't get sick from the fatigue. She'd finally convinced him to go to bed by saying that he was no good to anyone half-alive, and that she didn't really want to be a widow all that soon. And then she had lain in his arms until he had drifted off.

Besides, she always had to be late, just to be careful, in case Damon decided to do something stupid, like set up an ambush for her.

"What do you have for me?" she asked.

"Well, Daemon's found Karstark, and he's making plans to harass his patrols and his supply trains," said Damon. "Why is Karstark not with Robb's main camp?"

"He's a law unto himself. Robb gives him broad orders about what he needs to achieve. How he does that is up to him."

"Hmm…I guess you don't like not being complete control."

"You know me all too well, Damon."

"It's been a steep learning curve. Now what do we do?"

"Now we keep on passing juicy gossipy morsels to Daemon Lannister and let him decide what moves to make," said Katherine. "You will tell me everything, won't you?"

"What if I decided not to?"

"But you wouldn't jeopardize Robb's campaign now, would you? You know he needs Karstark gone."

"Why don't you just kill him? It's not like you can't."

Katherine sighed. Same old typical Damon.

"An assassin in the dark, as if that would not be suspicious," she said. "Killing isn't the solution to everything, Damon. We are vampires. Just because we can doesn't mean we should. Robb needs the loyalty of Karstark's men before he can get rid of Karstark, and Karstark needs to lose the loyalty of his men before he can be safely disposed of."

"I guess Robb's a very lucky man then, that his wife will do all the dirty work for him," said Damon. He sounded a little bitter. She supposed she couldn't blame him, her poor sweet innocent Damon. But he just didn't have that drive that she so admired in a man. Stefan had had potential, being so young, but Damon had simply never taken anything seriously enough. Robb had an abundance of seriousness and drive.

"Speaking of my very lucky man, I should get back before he notices that I'm missing. I don't want him asking too many questions just yet. Those breadcrumbs that you left for him regarding the existence of vampires, Damon? They were more like bread loaves, and Robb's not stupid. Sooner or later, he is going to put two and two together, and I would rather it be on my own terms."
"You were right, Salvatore, as always," said Daemon. He and Stefan strolled between the carts of supplies they had taken from the Karstarks, including several thousand gold dragons intended for the northern soldiers and also three hundred camp followers. Well, the northerners definitely would not be happy. Withholding their pay was one thing. Withholding their whores and their pay? He would be surprised if there weren't a few riots soon. Even the well-disciplined Lannister army could not function without the camp followers. They were the oil that smoothed the gears of the war engines. "I can see why Lord Tywin places so much faith in you."

"Lord Tywin does not have faith in anyone but himself, my lord," said Stefan.

"That is true," conceded Daemon, "but he trusts you more than most, which is the highest praise you can ever get. I do believe you are a better scout than all my scouting parties combined."

Stefan did not say that it was Damon who had alerted him to the Karstarks' location and who kept on passing on the patrol schedules, delivery schedules, and every little detail to do with the enemy camp. At least, he was not going to include Damon's name in this until he could figure out his end game. Westeros had made his wily brother even trickier. Then again, he would have to be tricky to play the political game in King's Landing and in the northern court. Before he had defected, rumour had said that he had been rather close with the Stark family, particularly Robb Stark.

"What are we to do with all this gold?" asked Daemon.

"We could share it out amongst the men," said Stefan. "Although, I do not think our raids have made much impact on the northerners beyond annoying them."

"A good point," said Daemon. "Perhaps you and I should take our cuts, and then Roose Bolton shall receive a rather surprising gift of gold, compliments of Rickard Karstark."

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**King's Landing**

King's Landing smelled. Caroline smelled it before she saw it, for the breeze coming in from the sea blew the scent of sewage and rotting garbage towards the land; towards her. "You must be so excited, my lady," said her new maid. Yes, she had a maid now. Several, actually. "King's Landing is a wondrous place, or so I've heard. They say the tallest buildings are so high that if you reach out when you're on the top level, you can almost touch the clouds. I should like to touch a cloud."

"They'd probably just feel wet and cold," remarked Caroline, who was not looking forward to arriving. She had heard a great deal about King Joffrey's court and none of it had been good. There was a lot of talk of gladiatorial bouts and cutting out people's tongues and cooking them before feeding it back to the unfortunate victim. And then, of course, there was the fact Stefan's burials of live people were seen as something to be lauded. On some level, she understood the need for a little bit of extreme cruelty from time to time, but it was all so...so...horrible.

"My lady?" asked her maid.

"Are you nervous?" she asked suddenly.

"A little bit," replied the girl. She had yet to learn the names of everyone in her household, but she was pretty sure this one was called Mari. Common people in Westeros didn't have last names. "But you shouldn't have to worry, my lady. You're beautiful, and Lord Tywin himself sent you." She said 'Lord Tywin' in the same way some people would say 'God' or 'Christ the Saviour'.

Or the way people said 'The One Ring' in *The Lord of the Rings*. 
The truth was that Caroline had plenty to worry about. Tywin himself had mentioned how many people would be jealous of her rapid ascent. And then there was that whole thing about people who failed Lord Tywin Lannister. There was only one person in the world who was allowed to do that and live and his name was Jaime. The thing about rising to the top was that once you reached a certain stage, there was a long, long way to fall.

And it was so very easy to fall. One only had to look at Ned Stark. Katherine and Damon didn't count. Both of them had sigils that had wings. Birds did not fall to their deaths.

The first thing she saw of King's Landing were the tops of its towers rising above the horizon, growing taller and bigger with each step she took towards it. Beneath her, her horse sensed it was at the end of its journey and increased its pace. She'd wanted a carriage, but Lord Tywin's representative had to be on horseback. "There's probably going to be lots of hay for you," she whispered to her horse.

The teeming chaotic humanity that swirled within King's Landing was a shock to her system after spending so much time in an ordered military camp where spartanism was the fashion of the day. That wasn't to say all of King's Landing was ostentatious, but amidst the beggars and the regular folks just trying to eke out a living in an environment that was no less harsh than the battlefield, although in a different way, there were those whose dress and conduct marked them to be of higher station.

Caroline carefully guided her horse around the crowds and the obstacles, taking care not to have her horse step into the piles of steaming refuse that sometimes littered the streets. If there was ever an epidemic, this city was screwed. At least the sewers were underground, which was something to be thankful for.

Nobody took much notice of her, save for the few hard-sell vendors who kept encouraging her to buy their dubious cosmetics and jewellery. Although, she had to admit, she was looking forward to a little bit of self-pampering after months of slumming it out in the barracks. Tywin Lannister might be the true king of Westeros, but he didn't live like a king. Or even just a regular person from the modern era.

Mari's voice interrupted her dreams of a hot bath with bubbles. Lots and lots of fluffy bubbles. "We're here, my lady," she said. "The Red Keep."

"It's pink," remarked Caroline, who knew fully well that the palace did not derive its name from the colour of its stones, but rather the blood that had been spilled inside it. Its high walls, so smooth and beautiful now, had, during different occasions in history, been stained with the blood of kings and queens and baby princes and princesses. She didn't even want to think about the number of regular people—people like herself—who had died here over the years. Under Joffrey's reign, someone probably died here every day.

A small group of people had gathered to goggle at 'Lady Forbes' who had been sent by Lord Tywin Lannister himself.

"She's pretty," someone whispered.

"Is she the lady knight?"

"She's nothing special."

"What is she wearing?"
What on earth was wrong with what she was wearing? Sure, maybe it wasn't the latest fashion or whatever, what with the dress' practical slim sleeves as opposed to the big flappy wings that seemed to be all the rage, but it had been sewn especially for her and it fit like no other garment she had ever owned. It was golden yellow to match the *fleur de lis* in her sigil. The slits in the skirt that allowed her to sit astride the horse revealed the tan leggings she wore underneath. They matched her new riding boots. She currently didn't have a lady's wardrobe, but Lord Tywin had given her the money to buy one. She had to look the part.

She smiled at them brilliantly as she allowed one of the pages to give her a leg down from her horse. Well, she wasn't going to let their petty remarks get to her. She had a job to do here in King's Landing, and they were just jealous anyway. They were lucky she was her and not Rebekah. If she had been Rebekah, they would all have been drained of blood in their sleep for making remarks like that about her.

She took off her riding gloves and handed them to Mari. "Can you prepare a bath for me in my room, please?" she asked. "I need to go find Lord Tyrion and report to him."

"Of course, my lady," said Mari. She had a little confused frown on her face. About what, Caroline didn't know, because everything she had just said had been quite straightforward and obvious.

She had her guards wait at the bottom of the Tower of the Hand while she went in to see Lord Tyrion. She hadn't had too much to do with Lord Tywin's youngest son—in fact, the most interaction she'd had with his sons was when Lord Jaime had tormented her with curtseying lessons—but from what she'd heard of him, he was supposed to be extremely clever. And he'd have to be, to be Hand of the King. That was like the Secretary of State.

The winding stairs seemed never ending. For a moment, she was tempted to vamp-speed up them, but then reminded herself that it would be a terrible idea for people to find out about her being a vampire. Westeros wasn't exactly known for being open and accepting of people that were different.

She came to the closed door of the Hand's study, where his servants had said he was. A middle-aged man with a hard face and cold shrewd eyes stood guard there. She remembered him as being Tyrion's sell-sword friend, although she couldn't remember his name.

"Lady Forbes," said the man.

"I'm sorry, I don't remember your name," she said.

"Bronn," said the man. He grinned. "Well, m'lady, we both have come very far since we last met."

"Um…yeah," said Caroline, who couldn't really see how far Bronn had come. Wait. She remembered the dossiers she had put together to help her make head and tail of the situation in King's Landing before she had come. The new captain of the City Guard was called Bronn. "I guess nepotism is well and healthy?"

"Don't use big words around me, m'lady. I'm just a simple sell-sword."

"And the captain of the City Guard," said Caroline.

"That too," said Bronn.

"Well, congratulations. I need to see Lord Tyrion. I have a message for him from Lord Tywin."

"He's not here, I'm afraid. He's a busy man, the Lord Hand."
"Erm, I can hear him inside," said Caroline. She gave Bronn a look. What did he take her for? And idiot? Or just deaf? "I'll just wait out here."

"Suit yourself, but shouldn't you be resting after your long journey, m'lady?" asked Bronn.

"Let me get one thing very clear. I'm not some delicate silly little flower that you need to coddle and patronize, okay?"

"Of course," said Bronn in the same way that Klaus would say it whenever she insisted he was a terrible person. Which he was, but compared to some of the people she now knew, he seemed like a… well, not quite a saint, but just a very regular human person. "So…that flower on your sigil…"

"Is strong and beautiful."

"Of course."

Presently, the door opened, but Bronn immediately slammed it shut, although not quite as quickly as he would have liked. All right, Caroline cheated a little bit, but she grabbed onto the handle. Lord Tywin had given her a great deal of responsibility and she was not going to disappoint him. And if there was something Tyrion wanted to keep from his father, she was going to find out.

She pushed the door open. A beautiful girl with dark hair—suitably mussed, considering what sort of activity she had been engaged in before, but she had made an admirable effort of putting it back into order—stood there. She was dressed in the uniform worn by maidservants in the Red Keep, so Caroline assumed that was what she was. The girl bowed. "My lady," she said. She had a bit of an accent. Where was she from?

Caroline nodded at her, not sure of how to react when people called her 'my lady'. How had Marie Antoinette done it in the movies? Then again, Marie Antoinette was not someone she wanted to emulate. Quite literally.

Tyrion sat on the bed, thankfully covered with blankets, but Caroline's imagination was going on overdrive…

It was not something she ever wanted to think about. EVER. Maybe she was still kiddie pool shallow. But even the deep pool had a shallow end, right?

"Lady Caroline Forbes," he said. "For someone who serves as Father's eyes and ears, you are very far away from him. Tywin Lannister is capable of a great many things, but even he cannot magically appear from thousands of miles away."

"Are you sure, my lord?" asked Caroline.

He paused. "Quite," he said. "So, what brings you here to my domain?" He lay back and poured himself a cup of wine. She could most definitely see the family resemblance between the two Lannister brothers.

"I thought I would come and say hello, since, well, I'm going to be living here, and you're the only person I know, my lord."

He gave a humourless laugh. "So, how is my lord father? Let me guess; dour, imposing, with no chance of growing a sense of humour?"

"Is that a trick question? I don't like those," said Caroline. "And I was only visiting to be polite. How was I supposed to know you had a friend over?"
"A friend? Hardly. Don't you know? Tyrion Lannister doesn't have friends, except the ones he pays, although he's quite fond of whores. Isn't that right, Bronn?"

"Gold and whores only enhance our friendship," said Bronn. He examined his nails, as if there was anything worth examining. They were stubby and horrible. Just like him.

"I find that very sad, Lord Tyrion," said Caroline. "People you pay aren't your friends. They'd stab you in the back once you stop."

"That's why the gold never stops flowing," said Tyrion.

"I would drink to that, but I'm on duty," said Bronn.

"Like you never drink on the job," said Caroline.

"Not in front of the man who pays me, I don't," said Bronn.

"Well, this has been a most enlightening visit," said Caroline. "I shall let you get back to your work, Lord Tyrion. I'm sure you're very busy as the acting Hand of the King."

Next chapter: Caroline tries to make new friends in King's Landing. Katherine reveals a vital truth to Robb. Catelyn takes matters into her own hands and Jaime finally gets his chance. Rebekah, of course, gets yesterday's news.
Silver Linings Playbook

Chapter Summary

Caroline tries to make new friends. Robb wonders if there is anybody in the world he is able to trust. Jaime finally gets his chance. Rebekah finds out that her news sources are extremely slow or unreliable.

Chapter 49: Silver Linings Playbook

King's Landing

Her cheeks burning with embarrassment and awkwardness, Caroline turned and it was the only thing she could do to not flee down the hallway, back to the safety of her own chambers.

In her haste to get away, she bumped into someone. "Forgive me," she said, mostly out of habit. Those words were so constantly on her lips that she might as well have had them as her unofficial house motto.

"No, the fault is mine," said the other girl. Caroline looked at her properly for the first time. She could guess who she was, of course. Red Tully hair, tall northern build, features like a porcelain doll, and a facial expression so sad that she could put all the crying Madonnas to shame; Sansa Stark.

"It was my fault, really," said Caroline. If there was one person –with a name and face– that she did feel sorry for in King's Landing, then it was Sansa. There was nothing the poor girl had done to deserve any of this. She didn't really know what kind of man her father had been, but the sins of the father were not the sins of the daughter. She was paying for her family's crimes. The only reason she was still here was because that power hungry Robb Stark was trying to become king himself, not caring that his sister was here, suffering.

"You must be Lady Sansa," said Caroline.

The girl nodded. "We have not been properly introduced, I'm afraid, my lady," she said.

It felt so odd to be called 'my lady'. Caroline doubted she would ever get used to it. Sure, as a child, she'd played at being princess with Elena and Bonnie, but little girls eventually grew out of the princess phase.

"I'm Caroline Forbes," she said as if she were introducing herself to a potential friend at a new school. "I'm new."

"Lady Caroline Forbes?" said Sansa. Recognition flashed across her face and she immediately became even more wary than before. They might not have modern media in King's Landing, but word got around very quickly here.
"That's me," said Caroline.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Forbes," said Sansa.

"Please, call me Caroline," said Caroline. "Lady Forbes sounds so stiff and old." Sansa stared at her with those wide blue eyes. The girl seemed frightened of everything; of the castle she lived in, of Caroline, and even of her own shadow. Not that Caroline could blame her. She had no idea how long she would be permitted to live, or where danger lay. Caroline had been in the same situation before with Katherine and Klaus—until Klaus had suddenly developed this creepy fascination for her—and she wouldn't wish it on anyone. What Sansa really needed was a friend.

It wasn't going to be easy. She was a Stark, and Caroline was loyal to Lord Tywin. Their friends were trying to kill each other. She might as well try to be friends with Rebekah, considering they were on the same side. However, unlike the evil bloodslut, Sansa actually deserved a friend. She was only a little girl! She should have been experimenting with make-up, going shopping, and talking about boys and dances.

"The pleasure was all mine," said Caroline. The response didn't sound as if it had come from her mouth. It was as if she were playing a character out of one of the BBC's Jane Austen adaptations. Wait, she was playing a character in a surreal fantastical drama scripted by the one and only Lord Tywin. She almost laughed. She'd always harboured dreams of becoming an actress and a huge movie star. She'd just never thought it would be like this.

"Forgive me, Lady Caroline, but I must be going," said the girl smoothly. "The queen has summoned me."

"Likewise," said Caroline. "I mean, the queen hasn't summoned me but I have...stuff to do. Maybe I'll...see you around?"

She left before Sansa became even more afraid of her and her modern mannerisms. She knew she could be a little overbearing sometimes, but she couldn't help it, especially not with helpless little girls like Sansa. No matter how difficult she made it, Caroline was determined to be her friend. Everyone needed a friend; it was just that in Westeros, very few people knew how to admit it.

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**Harrenhal**

Karstark's incompetence was beginning to seriously test Robb's patience. He slowly lowered the raven scroll but suddenly slammed it down onto the table, making the wooden lions, wolves, bridges and flayed men jump from their places on the map.

"This is the fourth time that Rickard Karstark has had his supplies raided," said Robb. "More of his food is getting burned than eaten. I think the Lannisters have placed a spy within his trusted circle. They know all his movements. We do not even know where they are camped. Now his men's payments have been taken, and he wants me to lend him gold."

None of his gathered bannermen or counsellors said anything. Bolton simply retained his impenetrable stare. Blackfish sighed and looked down at the floor.

"Lord Bolton," said Robb. "You are good with gold and finances, yes? I want you to see to the matter personally. I trust will know what is appropriate." He would have to tolerate Karstark for now until there was an opportunity to somehow rid him of his power. He still wasn't sure how Katherine intended to accomplish it, and no matter how many times he asked her and how many ways he approached it, she still wouldn't tell him anything, saying that it was best that he was able
to truthfully deny things when things occurred. What said things were, he still had no clue.

With the Lannisters knowing Karstark's every move, it was a terrible inconvenience, as Karstark was now incapable of achieving anything on the field. Not that he had been particularly useful before.

"My lord," said Bolton after everyone, save for Katherine, had left. "There is something you should know."

Robb turned to his most trusted and efficient of bannermen, apart from his uncle the Blackfish. Bolton was a man of few words, but when he spoke, it mattered.

"Yesterday, I received word that my camp had received a gift of gold from Rickard Karstark. Five thousand gold dragons, to be exact."

"That is no small sum," said Robb.

"Yes, but considerably smaller than what he had lost. When I asked him why he was sending me money, he denied everything."

Robb sank into his seat. A dread chill spread from his heart. He could see the map in front of him and Bolton's face, but he was not really seeing. What was going on? Was it really a Lannister raiding party that had taken Karstark's gold, or was it something else? It would not have been difficult for his bannerman to dress up his own people as Lannisters and then raid the gold. Men were greedy, he knew that, and Karstark had been chafing against his rule for some time now. What was he planning?

Roose Bolton left him to his mulling, with only Katherine to keep him company…

Katherine.

She had said she would bring the unruly bannerman to his knees before him. She didn't mean to destroy him by Lannister, did she? And what about the gold that Bolton had received?

He looked at her, his beautiful queen. No, just Lady Stark at present, but he knew he would wear a crown again. She was still sketching something by candlelight. He peered over the top so he could see it. It was full of angles and lines, and if he looked at it from a distance, it could almost look like a two-headed eagle.

"It's a tattoo for my Praetorian guard to identify them from the others," she said without looking up. Really, he swore that sometimes she could read his mind, whereas he could never know what she was thinking about. It was a rather unequal relationship. "I'm thinking of getting a pin made for myself as well."

"Katherine, did you have anything to do with the raids on the Karstarks?" he asked.

"Me? How could I? I have not left this camp, and I have never had any chance to speak with the Lannisters before."

He narrowed his eyes. Her tone was too flippant and innocent, usually a hint that there was something more to the story. Wait, she hadn't had any contact with the Lannisters directly, but there was one Damon Salvatore serving under the Lannisters right now, and Katherine knew him very well, did she not?

"I need to know, Katherine," he said.
Could she be working with the Lannisters? His wife? Was everyone betraying him now? First Theon, then Damon, and now Katherine?

At his silence, she finally looked up. His pain must have been evident on his face, because she immediately set down her drawing and went over to him to kneel by his feet, while taking his hand in hers. He pulled it away. Could he trust her? Who could he trust? How much did he know his wife? What if this had all been part of her plan to ruin the north and take power through him?

"Robb," she whispered.

"What are you doing, Katherine?"

"I had hoped to keep you out of this. Plausible deniability." What in the seven hells was that? She looked outside and then dismissed the guards before returning to his side, kneeling again at his feet and gazing up at him with those beautiful dark eyes that had entrapped him from the first moment he had seen her.

"I never told you this, all right? If anyone asks, you must say you knew nothing of it."

He stared at her without saying anything. She sighed.

"I admit, I am partially responsible for Karstark's defeats. He owns far too much of your army. How can you win a war when half your men answer to someone else? I had to undermine his authority and make him appear weak in front of the men so when the time comes to mitigate the Karstark threat, they would be more than happy to help you do it. He had to lose embarrassingly. He had to appear incompetent and selfish. So I told the Lannisters where to find him, and they did the rest."

"How?"

"How would you do it if you were in my place?"

He shook his head. He was tired, confused. He just wanted answers. Katherine sighed.

"Well, Damon Salvatore is well-placed in the Lannister camp to pass on interesting titbits of information."

Damon Salvatore. "So, he really is still on my side?" asked Robb.

Katherine smiled. "Does it seem like that he was ever on your side?"

Robb shook his head. "I don't know what to think anymore. My own wife went behind my back to plot against my bannerman. How can I trust you?"

"I didn't want you to know because I wanted you to maintain the image of the benevolent lord. You are a king, Robb, and to be king is to present an illusion of yourself. The illusion would lose its lustre should it be known that you were involved in plotting the downfall of your bannerman."

"And can we trust Damon?" There it was again. We. But what else could he do but trust Katherine? It all made sense. Karstark needed to be dealt with. He was what she would call the 'weakest link in the chain'.

"I don't, but he did exactly as I asked," said Katherine. "And...I hadn't wanted to tell you this for fear it would distract you..."
"What is it?"

"He has your sister."

"Sansa?"

Katherine shook her head. "No. Arya. He took her out of King's Landing and she is disguised as a serving boy in the Lannister camp. I cannot be certain why he hasn't handed her over to the Lannisters yet, but if he were truly a Lannister man, he would have done so already."

"What if he is merely waiting to see which side has the upper hand? If I win, he will use her to curry favour with me, and if Tywin Lannister wins, he will hand her over." He looked to his wife. "You know him better than I do. What do you think he is planning?"

Katherine smiled. "Do you want my honest opinion on it?"

"I have told you before that you are to tell me only the truth."

"I think he has no idea what he's doing and he's making it up as he goes along. Think about it. He could have gotten himself a good position in court had he stayed in King's Landing. He was Cersei and Joffrey's favourite for a time. But he abandoned them and gained himself the label of 'traitor' for his pains. Why? To get Arya out of the city. Now he's back with the Lannisters. My guess is that he was caught and he had to improvise."

Was that supposed to make him feel better? Well, a little. His friend might not have abandoned him; that was one thing. But didn't that mean Arya was with a man who didn't have a single notion of what a plan was (or even how to spell it) and no inkling of what he was doing? Would not that not mean she was in acute danger? What was that proverb that Katherine liked to use? Every silver lining had a cloud.

Catelyn didn't like what was going on. Actually, she didn't like that she didn't know what was going on. She hardly ever got to see Robb anymore, for he spent far too much time sequestered with his new wife. Katherine was going to be the ruin of him, and all she could do, as his mother, was watch while he spiralled down that path to self-destruction.

"I don't like her," she confided in Brienne. "I know she's clever, and she has given us Harrenhal, but she is taking him away from me. I'm losing him."

The lady knight stood stoically at the doorway of her quarters, which had seen better days. Many better days. "You will always be Lord Stark's mother, my lady," she said in that low voice of hers. "Nothing can change that, not even Katherine Stark, with all her abilities to bring men to their knees."

"You have no idea of the power a girl like that can wield over a man like Robb," said Catelyn.

Brienne did not look impressed. The woman put no stock in the womanly arts of pleasing and charming and seduction. She thought it all silly, and could not understand why a woman like Katherine Stark, who was capable of taking down Gregor Clegane in a fight, would ever bother to dress prettily, laugh prettily, and make eyes at anyone. It would be very hard to explain that those were also her weapons, and she had used them all on Robb to win him over to her side.

Thinking about Robb made Catelyn think about her other two boys. Her poor, poor Bran and Rickon. No one had heard of them or from them since they had received the news that Theon had
taken Winterfell. What would that traitor do to them? They were only children, but Theon had done the unspeakable. He had betrayed the family that had taken him in and raised him as one of their own. There was more darkness in the hearts of men than in the terrible night that Stannis' red witch spoke of.

Catelyn put her cloak around her shoulders and headed out to catch a few breaths of cool night air to clear her mind. The men bowed as she passed, but she was too preoccupied with her own thoughts to acknowledge them. Brienne marched behind her in silence. Catelyn appreciated that about her. It left her a lot of time to think. Although, did she really want to think that much?

She passed by Jaime Lannister's cage as she usually did, just so she could look him in the eye and see the man who had ruined her son's life and the man who might also prove to be her daughters' salvation.

Her daughters' salvation. Catelyn looked around abruptly, afraid that someone might have been able to overhear her thoughts even though she had spoken of them to no one. It was dangerous in this camp now that Katherine had come into the picture. Everyone knew of the power she wielded over Robb, and somehow, she also seemed to know everything. Her spies could be everywhere. It wasn't enough that she had her own 'Praetorian Guard'. She also wanted to be the Varys or Baelish of the north, and Catelyn knew she was trying to undermine her at every turn to diminish her influence, firstly by isolating her son from her.

She wouldn't have cared if not for the fact that the woman had no concern for her daughters at all, and Robb seemed to have forgotten all about family now that he was bent on conquering the world or whatever it was that he was pursuing. Burning the gods of his mother and father? Going back on his word to Walder Frey? She had thought she and Ned had raised him to be better than that. 'Oh, Ned, what else can I do?' she thought.

She took a different route to her usual one, going through the ruined streets that had once been teeming with people but now only had the occasional rat, to the outskirts where hardly anyone ever went. She wouldn't try to actually leave the fortress because Katherine would undoubtedly find out about it. When she was certain that she and Brienne were alone, hidden by shadows, or at least not being watched or eavesdropped upon, she stopped.

"My lady?" asked Brienne.

"I have a favour to ask of you, Brienne," said Catelyn. The arrow was nocked and she had drawn the bow. She had to shoot now.

"Whatever you ask, I will serve, my lady," said Brienne.

"What I am about to ask you is treason."

"I owe you my life, Lady Stark."

Catelyn took a deep breath. "I need you to take Jaime Lannister to King's Landing back to his father and sister in exchange for my daughters." She stared into the other woman's eyes. She wasn't sure what she was looking for; perhaps some admonition from her about how she oughtn't to betray her son. But Brienne did no such thing.

"I will do it," she said. And when she said it, Catelyn knew that she would.

The arrow had been shot. Now she had to see if it would hit the target.
Jaime woke with a start as the lock to the door of his cage rattled. His back ached from him not being able to straighten it for months. The pain closed around his chest like bands of iron when he shifted. Sometimes they would take him out for walks to keep him healthy and alive, as if he were some kind of pet. Then again, perhaps he should simply be grateful that he wasn't actually a pet, unlike a certain Clegane. Seeing him every day in the cage next to his reminded him that there were actually worse fates in the world.

He expected to see perhaps the oldest Karstark coming to take his revenge, or maybe even Katherine Stark with some new trick that she wanted to try on him. Instead, there stood Catelyn Stark and…

"Is that a woman?" he asked. "Forgive me, Lady Stark. I must admit I am stunned by that marvellous creature you have brought. Is it to keep me company?"

The knight—he still wasn't quite sure whether he should call it a he or a she, although he was veering just slightly towards the latter—drew her sword and pointed it at his throat. What was it with the northerners unsubtle, if toothless, threats? He wasn't afraid of them. Robb Stark wanted him alive to use as leverage against his father, although he suspected they both knew how impossible that was. Tywin Lannister would let his own son die before he would be manipulated into doing anything.

"All right, all right. That was rude," he said. "Maybe you've come to take me up on my offer, Lady Stark? It still stands, although I may need a bath first."

"On your feet, Lannister," said Catelyn. She tried to keep her voice calm, but she couldn't hide the desperation and rage behind it. What was she hoping to achieve?

The she-knight bound a rope to his manacles and yanked on them, causing him to stumble forward in an attempt to stop them from cutting further into his wrists. "If I didn't need you to bring my daughters back, I would kill you," said Catelyn.

Ah, so was this what it was; an exchange of hostages? He'd let her think that. In fact, he'd been trying to remind her at every turn. She probably wasn't going to get her daughters back, despite Lannisters paying their debts and all that. He could always send her a 'thank you' letter instead. Her naivety was refreshing and surprising. Then again, she was a very different sort of creature to her good-daughter, and he was glad of it.

He straightened himself as he stepped out of his cage. The air smelled different, even though it was still the same air. It tasted of freedom and of revenge. He wouldn't forget the Starks and what they had done to him. He wasn't angry at them, but he wouldn't forget them.

Lannisters always paid their debts.

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**Somewhere close to Harrenhal**

What?! Jaime was gone? Why didn't Rebekah know about it? Her men were still wandering around the countryside with different contingents of the northern army, gathering information. How successful they were, she couldn't tell. Her brothers had mentioned how wily Katerina Petrova was. Even if Fredyric and Jaymse and the others could get anything interesting, it would more than likely be at the expense of the facts. She was never going let them get any good information. That little foray into the Westerlands had been an excellent example of a diversion, although that had been Robb Stark's rather than Katerina's.
Well, if Jaime was gone, there was no reason for Rebekah to stay. She knew she had orders from Lord Tywin but this was Jaime. She wasn't going to let him attempt to escape alone! Again! He would just make a mess of it. Again.

Sneaking out of the Stark camp was not difficult. She was just one camp follower out of many, and no one took that much notice of her. They would be much more suspicious if it had been her and her men, but it was just her. She was glad to be out of there and finally doing what she had set out to do all along. The only reason she had come was because of Jaime. The military movements mostly confused her, and she always had to stay out of Katerina's sight. It had been tedious.

She wasn't too clear on the details of Jaime's escape but rumour had it that Catelyn Stark had released him against her son's orders in order to get her daughters back, and Robb Stark was now so furious that he had put her under house arrest. It was one of those crimes for which Klaus would probably have daggered her and put her in a coffin for another couple of decades. Catelyn Stark had gotten off lightly.

Then again, not everyone was her brother.

Picking up Jaime's trail was no easy task, for there were other search parties out searching for him, and the tracks of the northmen had contaminated the tracks of Jaime and his escort, a certain female knight that Catelyn had brought back from Renly's camp. What was her name again? Brianna? Something like that. Rebekah didn't remember trivia.

Most of her 'tracking' was actually a guess. Jaime would most likely make his way to King's Landing—or rather, Catelyn Stark's knight would take him to King's Landing. Considering they were now fugitives, she doubted they would take the Kingsroad. So that left the entire myriad of back roads that led south to the capital. Great. She was no werewolf or hybrid that she could track down his scent. She could, however, follow the northmen and their bloodhounds. They were making so much racket and not taking any effort to cover their tracks at all.

Jaime's tracks stopped right at the edge of the river, where there were drag marks on the shore indicating that they had taken a boat or a raft. Clever. The bloodhounds could no longer follow them. She disappeared into the woods before the northmen saw her. She heard them swear and curse. Some of them wore the sigil of the flayed man while others wore the sun of the Karstarks.

They split up as they began to search for the place where Jaime and his escort would have to eventually make berth on the shore. They could have continued downriver by boat and they would have reached Blackwater Rush, but it was such a long way off, and even lions needed to eat and rest from time to time.

Next chapter: Sansa draws Caroline into her web. Elijah encounters 'family' problems. Jaime considers what it would be like to have a pet rock.
Die Another Day

Chapter Summary

Sansa encounters social unrest. Elijah deals with his new family problems and finds that it's the smiles that are the most threatening. Jaime takes a walk with a 'rock'.

King's Landing

Sansa sat dutifully by Joffrey while he sneered and barely waved goodbye to his crying little sister. Sansa hadn't really known Myrcella all that well, but she was just a year younger than herself and she had been kind the few times they had exchanged words. Kindness was hard to come by in King's Landing and Sansa seldom trusted it. Lord Baelish had been 'kind' to her father. Look what had happened afterwards.

"Stop your snivelling," Joffrey snapped at Tommen. Poor, fat little Tommen who looked nothing like the rest of his family save for his colouring, although there was a little resemblance between him and Lord Tyrion. The boy was gulping back his sobs as he watched his sister's barge near the ship. Poor Myrcella, to be sent so far away, all alone, to marry a boy she'd never met or possibly even heard of. She had no idea if they were going to be cruel or kind or just indifferent towards her.

But that was the fate of noble-born girls. They were all to be married off to men they didn't know, unlike women like Katherine who were free and strong enough to choose.

'Father hadn't wanted this for you,' said a little voice inside her head. Her father had tried to save her from Joffrey but she'd been too stupid to see it. He'd wanted her to marry someone she loved. Thinking about that made her miss her father terribly again and she probably would have joined little Prince Tommen, save for the fact that her tears felt all dried up. And tears were weak. She would not cry again. She had to be strong, for herself and for her family.

She stared at the back of Joffrey's head, remembering the way he had shouted for her father's head, how he had mocked her and smirked as he'd had her beaten. How easy would it be to slide a long thin dagger up the base of his skull and into his head the way Stefan Salvatore had done in his most infamous kill? He wouldn't be dead. He just wouldn't be able to move. She wanted him to know that she had been the one who had done it.

But no, she would die immediately afterwards and it would make very little difference to the war. Robb still wouldn't have the numbers and if she were dead, she wouldn't be in a position to help him anymore. Survival first, revenge second.

"Only babies and cowards cry," said Joffrey, oblivious to his betrothed's treasonous thoughts. "Are you a baby? A coward? You're a prince, not a little pig with your snuffles and sniffles."

"I saw you cry," muttered Sansa, unable to help herself. He'd been a snivelling wreck when Arya had tried to protect her friend from him.

Joffrey whipped around, his pale eyes blazing. "What did you say?" he hissed.

"Only that my little brother cried when I left," said Sansa quickly. Stupid, stupid! She should really
learn to keep her thoughts to herself. But it could be so difficult sometimes. In Winterfell, she'd –

'But you're not in Winterfell,' said the voice inside her head.

"Well, your brother is not a prince, is he?" said Joffrey.

Sansa shook her head. Well, technically, Bran and Rickon had been princes for a little while when Robb had been king. She wasn't sure why he'd suddenly decided he didn't want to wear a crown anymore, but maybe he had his reasons. She didn't know what he was doing anymore.

Myrcella waved from the deck of her ship. She was too far away for them to see her face anymore but Sansa knew it would be red from her crying. She hoped Quentyn Martell would be kinder than Joffrey. Then again, most people were. Tommen waved back. Cersei did not.

The anchor was lifted and the sails, bearing the sigil of House Lannister and House Baratheon, were unfurled. They filled up with wind like great wings taking flight. More than anything, Sansa wished she could get on a ship and go, sail to White Harbour and go back to Winterfell. She watched the sails on the horizon as they grew smaller and smaller, like little white doves against a deep blue sky being buffeted this way and that by the wind. But they ploughed on away from King's Landing until they eventually disappeared over the horizon. It must be so free to sail on the sea. There were no castle walls, no guards, just oneself and the vast expanse of unlimited ocean. No one could rule the sea, not even those who claimed to.

She tore her eyes away from the ocean and followed the royal party back to the Red Keep, back to the high walls and spying eyes and the stone-faced guards with their hard gauntlets. Luckily, she had her own carriage, a little one, but still her own, so she didn't have to ride with Cersei. The queen was the last person she wanted to be near right now, what with her grief and foul mood upon losing her daughter to the Dornish.

She spotted Lady Caroline who had not come in a carriage and had ridden to the docks on a horse. She probably regretted that now as one had to pass through Flea Bottom to get to the docks. At least, in a carriage, one was mostly protected from the filth, although there was little anyone could do about the smell. Sansa had brought a pomander for that purpose, but even so, the strong perfumes of aniseed, cloves and citrus couldn't cover it all up.

Caroline waved at her. She had a friendly open face that Sansa did like, but she was still reluctant to trust her. But Sansa needed friends, or 'friends', rather. Her father had had just the two friends in King's Landing. Perhaps if he had had more…

"Shae, could you go and ask Lady Caroline if she would like to ride with me?" said Sansa. There had to be a reason why Caroline Forbes, who was seemingly so innocent and clueless, was Tywin Lannister's favourite. If played right, she could become very useful indeed.

Moments later, Caroline came over with Shae. Up close, one could see the bottom of her skirts had been splattered with little droplets of filth. Even in her saddle, she had not been high up enough to avoid the taint of Flea Bottom.

"Lady Sansa, it was very kind of you to offer," said Caroline. She dipped the clumsiest curtsey Sansa had ever seen. Had her mother never taught her? "I was kind of dreading riding through Flea Bottom again…ooh, what's that?"

Had she never seen a pomander before? Where had Tywin Lannister found her? In some backwater No Name village?
"It's a pomander," said Sansa, offering it to Caroline to sniff.

"Oh, it smells nice," said Caroline. "And it's so pretty. What's it for?"

"To cover up bad smells. They say that's how disease travels, bad smells."

"I don't think that's quite how it works, but it's a good idea. I wanted to puke in Flea Bottom. I mean, it's a pity those people are living in that kind of squalor and I really should be more sympathetic, but they make it very hard for anyone to feel sympathetic for them sometimes, especially with their bad manners…"

Sansa had never heard anyone talk for so long without stopping. She simply stared at Caroline and let her talk. Maybe she might even say something useful. Still, she spoke in a very peculiar manner that wasn't like any village girl's, but also not like a lady's. It was interesting to listen to.

The carriage jolted along, rattling over the ruts in the road. It got worse as they approached Flea Bottom.

"I'm sorry," said Caroline. "I'm boring you. I should shut up."

"No, no," said Sansa. "It's all right. I miss having someone to talk to sometimes."

"It's more like I'm talking at you, though," said Caroline. "It's a terrible habit of mine and I really should fix it, but I can't seem to help it. I'm even like this in front of Lord Tywin…"

Well, she had to be a very brave girl if she could talk that much in front of the formidable Tywin Lannister who was capable of making Cersei silent with awe with just one letter.

Or maybe just a very silly girl.

The sounds coming from outside grew louder and louder. At first, Sansa was able to ignore it the way one ignored the droning of bees in the flower gardens (or Caroline's endless chatter), but even so, when a bee came too close, one had to shoo it away before it stung oneself.

"What's happening?" she called to Shae and the carriage driver. She could only see a little through the veiled windows but it seemed that there were mobs lining the sides of the streets.

"The crowd have surrounded us, my lady," said Shae. She sounded worried. That was not good. Suddenly she heard Joffrey's shouts. The carriage shuddered. People surged against it, toppling it the way a wave would topple a ship. Sansa screamed as she was flung sideways against the wooden wall. Cushions flew. Horses neighed and screamed outside. She felt someone grab her arm. Caroline.

The other girl hauled her out of the broken door of the carriage. The guards, both White and Gold cloaks, were trying to hold back the mob but, given enough ants, even a lion could be vanquished. Sansa could see their yellow teeth in their red maws. Strands of saliva dripped from them as if they were hungering for noble flesh. Their thin gaunt faces hardly looked like people's faces and more like monsters from one's deepest nightmares. Their sallow skin stretched over their skulls. She didn't understand what they were saying. It was all just one united roar of maddened fury.

"Come on! Let's get you out!" said Caroline. Sansa clambered to her feet. The stench of unwashed bodies and human waste hit her senses like a hammer and she almost retched. But her body was pushing her to go on and get out of here, to survive. She didn't care that she was stepping into puddles upon which rancid grease floated amongst other things. Get out, she had to get out. The tide of humanity jostled and pushed her and Caroline. It was a force stronger than any other. She
felt Caroline's grip slip from her arm.

**The Twins**

Elijah pretended not to notice the dark looks he was receiving as he strode through the corridors, a roll of parchment under his arm. The running of the Twins was not as difficult to maintain as some of the other keeps and territories, for it was neither very big nor very complicated, but there were still hundreds of little matters that needed to be dealt with. For instance, a bridge of this magnitude needed constant repairs, some of the girls had reached marrying age and Walder Frey had gotten tired of asking lords if they were interested and it was now up to Elijah to write essentially what were advertisements for the girls, with some input from the old lord of the crossing. It should really be their mothers doing this, but they were all dead.

He knew the others were jealous. Who was he, after all, to garner so much of Lord Frey's favour? He was not even a true Frey, even though Walder had treated him as one, and secondly, no one had doubted that the old Frey had sired him. (If Katherine sent one more letter teasing him about it – there had only been the one, so far, written in Bulgarian so no one would know who it was from or what it was about, but that had been one too many– he might simply cease all correspondence with her until she learned her lesson.)

Rumour had it that the Lord of the Crossing was planning on making him his heir. He paid no heed to the rumours, of course. They had no credence. No matter how much favour he received, he was still not a Frey and he had no true desire to be one. For now, he endured the name, but he intended to reclaim 'Mikaelson' one day. He couldn't leave it all up to Rebekah, now, could he?

"Ah, Elijah," said Walder Frey when Elijah came inside his study. There were very few books in the room, for the shelves were mostly filled with baubles. He supposed it was better than the modern trend of buying books to be baubles. Frey waved him over, his fingers dripping with rings too heavy for them. He looked as if he were someone halfway between the worlds of life and death and he really wouldn't look that out of place if he had worn a black hood and carried a scythe.

"Many of the smallfolk have gathered on the southern shore, begging that they be let across, my lord," said Elijah.

"Let them beg. They all know that if they can pay the fee, they may cross."

"They do not have money, my lord. These are villagers who have been displaced by the raids in the Riverlands and they seek refuge with us."

"If we let them in without requiring them to pay, people will begin to think the toll is optional," said Walder Frey. "We wouldn't want that now, would we? The toll is there for a reason and it will stay there."

"Unrest grows amongst the people, my lord."

"Then deal with them if they dare take up arms against a lord! I trust you know how."

"Of course, my lord," said Elijah.

"Just make sure you don't kill too many of them. The Tullys on their high horses wouldn't like that, now, would they?"

"I suppose not, although I hear Hoster Tully is deathly ill; too ill to worry about matters of state. It has fallen to Edmure."
Walder cackled with laughter. "I seem to remember that he isn't married," he said suddenly.

"I seem to remember that he has the nickname of Limp Fish Tully," said Elijah. Poor Edmure.

"Then perhaps we shall have to find a way to fix him, won't we?" said Walder.

"I am sure you will, my lord," said Elijah.

"By the way, there has been talk," said Walder suddenly.

"There is always talk. I suppose the subject of it is not to your liking?"

"They think I put too much trust in you, Elijah, and that you have grown too proud," said Walder. "I may allow you the honour of calling yourself a Frey, but remember that you are not. Not yet. A little humility may serve you well."

"Of course, my lord," said Elijah. He was dismissed and he knew it. He bowed and left the dark room. The villagers, he supposed, could be directed to a crossing further downstream. There was no bridge there, but the ferry fees were decidedly cheaper.

He passed by several of Frey's trueborn sons. Many of them glared at him but some of them, the younger ones, mostly, and the girls, smiled at him. He could not help but notice that many of the younger boys were starting to copy his style of dressing. Elijah had, of course, commissioned several suits and tuxedos once he had had the funds to do so. He had never been fond of medieval style dress and he probably never would be. And now he was beginning to see waistcoats in garish colours being worn around the Twins as well as sharp-shouldered jackets. They still had not figured out how the kerchief was supposed to just peek out of one's pocket.

Someone bumped into his shoulder. Deliberately. "Oh, my mistake, my lord," said Arwood Frey, one of the grandsons. Even with a near impeccable memory, it was hard to keep track of who was descended from who at the Twins. "Or should I call you uncle, now?"

"I must ask, Ser Arwood, by what merit of mine should I be called your uncle?"

"You may be called Frey, Elijah, but you will never be a true Frey," sneered Arwood. He had inherited his father's intelligence, that one. He remembered him now; Hosteen Frey, a fierce but, ultimately, dim-witted man who always spoke what was on his mind. And there was little on his mind.

Elijah simply smiled and let the insult fall away like water from a duck's back. He had lived a thousand years and heard countless of insults. Damon Salvatore alone had been responsible for more insults and offenses than he could count. They had ceased to have much effect on him, although he supposed that if he were to keep his place at the Twins, he could not let Arwood go unpunished. Subtly, of course.

"Now, Arwood," said a voice that made the two of them look away from each other. Symon Frey, one of Walder Frey's younger sons, a rather surprisingly pleasant man, although his eyes were cold, was walking towards them. "You should be more polite to your uncle. He may not be a Frey by name, but he is our kin."

"Uncle Symon," said Arwood.

"My lord," said Elijah.

"Elijah has done many things for our house," Symon continued. "Perhaps he could be an example
to you."

If looks could kill, Elijah would be dead. However, he had learned from experience (Klaus) that looks often provoked the opposite of the desired result. He smiled serenely at Arwood, who stormed off.

"He is young, yet, Elijah. You must forgive him," said Symon.

"There is nothing to forgive, my lord," said Elijah. "If there is nothing else, I believe I should be on my way. There is a rabble to deal with outside our gates."

Elijah had seen many predators in his lifetime, both natural and supernatural. All of them smiled before they struck.

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**Somewhere south of Harrenhal**

She was the most tedious company Jaime had ever encountered. He might as well have been taking a pet rock out for a walk, for all the response he had been getting from the she-knight. Well, Brienne of Tarth. He had heard of the 'Beauty of Tarth', a cruel name for a woman who had been born with neither beauty nor grace, but who, it seemed, had somehow made her way in the world by doing her very best to not be a woman. In fact, Jaime seemed to have more respect for women than she did.

"You are allowed to talk, you know," he said. "We are no longer in the Stark camp. You know, form sounds to make words? You do know how, yes?"

"Keep walking," she barked as she yanked on his chains, causing the manacles to cut into his wrists more. The open wounds wept, and he winced as his raw flesh was further tortured. He silently promised himself that whenever he got his hands on Katherine Stark, he would put her in chafing manacles with embossed eagles on them and see who was smirking then. And he would put a collar on Robb Stark and place him in a cage with label on it. It was a fitting fate. He didn't really hate the Starks, but it would be very satisfying to see them humiliated the way he had been humiliated and tormented by them.

"How are we going to make it to King's Landing without talking?" he asked.

"Put your left foot in front of your right foot, your right foot in front of your left foot, and repeat."

"Well, that's just boring. I'm bored."

"Lady Stark asked me to take you to King's Landing. She never said to entertain you."

"Do you think Lady Stark will not tire having a hulking lump of rock following her around? Mark my words, she will get rid of you when she has had enough and replace you with more charming company."

Brienne said nothing. Instead, she hacked through a thicket of brambles separating two fields and dragged him through it. The thorns tore at his clothes and every patch of exposed skin. Seriously, she was doing this to torment him. Was that part of her orders?

"We could share salacious stories," he suggested. "Surely you must have known men with peculiar tastes? No? Women, then?" He paused. "Horses?"

She shoved him in front of her, causing him to stumble. "Walk."
"Do you have any other words in your vocabulary? I remember the Starks had a simpleton in their service in Winterfell, and he could not say anything beyond his own name. You're not like that, are you?"

She was getting angrier and angrier by the moment. Perhaps if she got angry enough, she would be less cautious, and if she were less cautious, then he could somehow steal her sword and break away. He had no intention of actually getting escorted all the way to King's Landing.

He continued to plague her with jibes, commenting on her stoicism and comparing her to every insulting inanimate object he could think of. If she had been anything like the women he knew, like Cersei, or Rebekah, or even Katherine Stark, she would have responded. Seven hells, he might actually prefer being serenaded by northerners to this lack of response from her. Although, when she did react, he counted it as a victory, and she was so serious that any reaction was bound to be amusing. She wasn't allowed to really hurt him, so he simply watched her face pale or grow red alternatively while her mouth worked to come up with something suitably scathing to say to him. Usually, it consisted of her telling him what a despicable man he was, and she had nothing to say to him.

"Maybe you take pride in being a lady knight," he remarked. "You worked hard for it, I'm sure, to be respected and treated like one of the men. It cannot have been easy, growing up as you are." Her silence was telling. She had not had a brother to protect her from the cruelty of others as he had protected Tyrion to the best of his abilities. "But I have known other lady knights, and let me tell you, they know how to be ladies as well as knights."

"And why would I want to be a lady of any kind?" she asked. "Girls are all fools."

"So would you say Lady Catelyn Stark is a fool? Or perhaps Lady Katherine Stark, who took Harrenhal? What have you done that is worthy of remembrance? Apart from killing Renly, of course. Wait…doesn't that make you a kingslayer?" He paused. "Wait…does that mean we have points in common?" She glared at him. "Oh, believe me, it is very disturbing," Jaime continued. They had absolutely nothing in common. "Although, Renly wasn't really a king, I suppose. He wasn't fit to rule over anything except a twelve course dinner and Loras Tyrell's cock."

She yanked him backwards and as he stumbled, she gripped him by the chin and turned him to face her. Her eyes were so wide that he could see all the white around her blue irises. Her grip was like iron, and for a moment, he thought she would kill him there and then, oaths to Lady Stark be damned.

"You were in love with him," he whispered. "Believe me, you were probably much too masculine, even for him. He liked them pretty, like Loras."

"Say one more word and I will make you regret it," she hissed.

"What? You'll ignore me some more. I am terrified at the thought."

She ignored him but yanked on his chains some more. He hissed. If his wounds were not tended to soon, he would die of infection, and nobody would be happy. This journey looked to be the worst in his life, and it might even be his last.

**Next chapter:** Sansa and Tyrion find themselves backed into a corner. The people of King's Landing reveals their vast musical knowledge and exactly how long Katherine's reach is. Rebekah continues her search for Jaime. Jaime encounters the last thing he wants to encounter on the road.
The Hunger Games

Chapter Summary

Sansa gets a lesson in crisis management from Tyrion, who is not giving the best lesson in his life. Jaime and Brienne bump into people they don't want to meet. Rebekah has a lot of catching up to do.

King's Landing

"Caroline!" Sansa shouted, no longer wondering whether she was to be trusted. Even if she weren't, the other girl had saved her and would, presumably, want her alive for whatever purpose she had in mind. She would rather be used than be dead. She planned to use the other girl anyway.

The sound of the shouting mob drowned out her voice. She looked around wildly for gold cloaks, white cloaks, or anything that looked familiar. Anything, anything was better than this mob!

One of the rioters began to sing. Others joined in. At first, she couldn't make out the words but when she did, she felt both terrified and elated. One could always identify the cadences of Katherine's songs.

_Do you hear the people sing,
Singing the song of angry men?
It is the music of a people who will
Not be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums,
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes!

Certainly, there must be more verses, but either the rioters didn't know them or perhaps she just couldn't hear them. They repeated that one again and again and again, more like a war chant than a song. Her good-sister's reach was long if she could touch the hearts of men in King's Landing.

Someone grabbed her hand. She almost screamed and pushed whoever it was away. "My lady!" Lord Tyrion shouted. She closed her fingers around his stubby ones. His hand was clammy and hers was slippery with sweat, but she held on for all she was worth. Later, she would come to wonder why she had thought that clinging to a dwarf would help. Right now, however, she just felt the need to hold onto something that she knew.

Tyrion pulled her away to the side of the street. How he managed to see where he was going was beyond her understanding. Perhaps he knew Flea Bottom better than anyone had thought possible. They came to a narrow doorway which Sansa had to duck to get through. There were voices
pursuing them. The stairs led ever downwards and the smell of sewage only grew stronger.

The only light came from the slit at the very top. Obviously, this was not a tunnel or a dwelling of any kind. The voices of her pursuers bounced off the walls and echoed, making them sound as if they were all around her.

Then came the metal grating. It was made with black iron and screwed to the base of the stone wall. Below, Sansa heard trickling water. The sewer itself.

"Uh, that's not supposed to be there," said Tyrion as he kicked at the iron grating. It clanged and rattled but otherwise did nothing. There was no other way out. He kicked it again, more violently this time before putting his fingers through the holes and yanking at it. He might as well have asked Joffrey to be nice and charitable to the people of Flea Bottom in order to assuage their rage. It would have been more effective.

She finally saw their faces. Their eyes were not much more than holes in their skulls, their teeth mostly missing. There were three of them. "Looky what we have here," said one in the back. His voice didn't sound that old. He couldn't really be that old, but he looked ancient. His back was bent and stooped, just like the others. His lips were covered with open sores and his eyes watered.

But he was more than strong enough to kill Lord Tyrion and have his way with her, especially with help.

"Maybe we'll get ourselves some fun today," said the man at the front. Skin flaked from pink patches on his skull where no hair could grow. Sansa shuddered and quivered in fear, all the while hating herself for it. She was so weak. She couldn't defend herself even if she wanted to. "What thinkee, Mutt? She'll make a pre'y liddle wife fer me, aye?"

The other two laughed. "Y' can 'ave 'er affer we're done," said the man called Mutt. He had huge nobbly hands that were far too big for his bony frame, but whatever flesh he had on his body, it looked like wiry muscle.

"Now, gentlemen, let's not be hasty," said Tyrion.

"Ooh, the monkey talks," said Mutt.

"I believe we should negotiate? It would be beneficial for all parties involved," said Tyrion. "Imagine the king's gratitude when he learns that you saved his beloved uncle and betrothed."

"I don't want no ne-go-shite," Mutt growled. He and his friends advanced upon Sansa and Tyrion. Sansa backed up against the grating and began to kick it furiously with her heel. Tears streamed down her face. Why was she so weak? Why couldn't she be more like Katherine and the Lady Knight? She'd be able to tear these dregs of humanity into shreds then. She wouldn't be standing here quaking in fear of them while Tyrion tried to talk his way out of this even though they couldn't really understand what he was saying.

"I am a Lannister," said Tyrion. "Do you know what that means? A Lannister always pays his debts. You have heard of that, haven't you?"

"We hear a Lannister always fucks 'is sisser."

"How ridiculous," said Tyrion. "I have never done anything of that kind."

"And the monkey fucks anyfink wiv a hole," cackled the boy at the back.
"He's the imp," snapped the man in the front with the peeling scalp. "I wonder if evy-fing else is as small inside him."

"He wouldn't e'en make a good bowl o' brown," said Mutt.

"No, I would taste terrible in a bowl of brown," said Tyrion. "How would you like to eat something else other than a bowl of brown, hmm? A nice roast chicken with sage and rosemary stuffing, perhaps, or maybe pigeons' tongues stewed in sweet sauce." Pigeons' tongues? Disgusting. "It would taste a lot better than a dwarf and a lady, I assure you." A shadow crept up behind the men who were too busy jeering at Tyrion and leering at Sansa to notice. "Wouldn't that be right, Ser Sandor…and Lady Caroline?"

The Hound was the most welcome sight Sansa had seen all day. She'd never thought she would say that. Ever. His huge broadsword dripped with blood. Before any of the creatures could say another word, he cleaved Mutt in half, from head to chest, splitting him open like a melon.

The other two screamed and tried to run. The younger of the two fell as he tried to hold his innards in. Glistening purple ropes of intestine slithered out from the grin in his belly. Sansa smelled hot urine. Caroline caught the last of them. "Ew," she said as skin flaked off her on already bloody hands.

"Stop being such a girl," the Hound growled at her. He ran the man through, letting the body drop to the ground as the blood spread. Sansa stepped aside. She didn't want it touching her shoes. She could still hear the shouting outside. They needed to get to the Red Keep now where the high walls and guards with their hard gauntlets could keep them safe.

With the Hound leading at the front and Lady Caroline bringing up the rear, the four of them slowly made their way out of the passage and into the fray. Caroline tugged Sansa's sleeve. "Here," she said as she handed her a bloodied dagger. Sansa stared at it as if it would bite her. But common sense took over and she wrapped her fingers about the hilt, trying to ignore the feel of the sticky liquid on her palms. It made her fingers slippery.

"Lord Tywin said everyone should carry a dagger," said Caroline. "Come on."

It was chaos out there. Smallfolk were throwing themselves upon the swords of the goldcloaks in their anger. If they couldn't beat them, they would drown them with their blood. There was a body of one of the Kingsguard lying on the ground or, at least, most of a Kingsguard. The cloak was so stained that it could no longer be called white. Sansa wanted to feel a sense of satisfaction. This was probably one of the men who had tormented her and taken delight in her suffering. Yet all she could think of was how much she wanted to be out of here and how it wasn't fair that the mob had gotten to kill him. She should have been the one who killed him.

She kept a tight grip on her dagger. It was a beautiful one, with a gold-gilt hilt and the pommel was inlaid with mother of pearl; just the type of thing that a lady would like to wear as an ornament.

The Hound kept slashing left and right. Red matter flew from his blade as he swung it. It looked like raspberry pudding. She stumbled on numbly. She heard, but she was not listening. She saw, but she was not seeing. It was as if she were watching this riot from very far away. Her mind was blank, calm. Survive, survive.

The walls of the Red Keep were in sight. The gates had been closed against the mob that was surging against it. In the future, it wouldn't be a mob. It would be Robb and his northern army and Sansa imagined herself putting up a wolf banner on the top of the battlements. There could be no better vengeance than that. But, for now, it would be best if the mob did not manage to come inside...
and flay Joffrey's skin to hang as a banner. It wasn't that she wanted Joffrey alive but, firstly, she wanted to kill him herself and secondly, the mob wouldn't care how many they had to kill to get to Joffrey.

The Hound hammered on the gate with his huge fist. It opened a crack. When the guardsman saw Tyrion, he hurriedly widened the crack a little more so they could slip in. The mob was pushing against it, threatening to simply break it down. It took all the guards at the gate, and then some, to shove it back shut again.

"Where are all the city guards?" Joffrey was demanding of Petyr Baelish. The Master of Coin looked unruffled even though he, like everyone else, had not escaped Flea Bottom unscathed. There was a bit of eggshell dangling from his pointed beard that he hadn't managed to get rid of. "Send them all out! I want all of those scum dead!"

"Your Grace," said Tyrion. Both Joffrey and Baelish looked up.

"You lived," said Joffrey. "We thought you dead."

"As always, I prove to be a disappointment to my family," said Tyrion. "How many Goldcloaks do we have in the city, Lord Baelish?"

"Four hundred," said Baelish.

"And how many people are in Flea Bottom alone?"

"Nobody has ever bothered to count them," scoffed Joffrey. "They breed like fleas."

"But considerably more than the Goldcloaks, yes?" said Tyrion. "Let them kill each other. The fire will die down eventually and then we may clean up the ashes."

Sansa's senses returned to her and she felt as if she had just woken from the most vivid and terrifying of nightmares. She could still see the look in those men's eyes, the way they had looked at her like she had been a feast for them to savour. Her hands and knees began to shake. "Are you okay?" asked Caroline.

"I think I may need to lie down," Sansa whispered. "Where is my maid?" Shae appeared from nowhere. She was unharmed, although shocked and dirty like the rest of them. Shae had abandoned her to the mob, not that Sansa could blame her. It was all about remaining alive and everyone else be damned. She'd learned that by now. She drew herself up. She was Lady Sansa Stark of Winterfell. Her father had been the warden of the North and her brother was the Young Wolf. He wasn't the only predator in the family. "Prepare a bath for me," she commanded Shae. "I am filthy."

"At once, my lady," said Shae.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay alone?" said Caroline. "I could…"

"I will be fine, thank you, Lady Caroline," said Sansa with a smile. "I am grateful to you."

"Hey, don't mention it," said Caroline. "It's what friends do, right?"

"I do not know what I have done to deserve such a friend as you." She took Caroline's hands in her own, widened her eyes and gazed at the other girl the way she had once done with her friends back in Winterfell and with her father and brother. That look had always worked.

Caroline's smile lit up her whole face. She really was quite pretty, if a little unsophisticated. Then
again, she could be the most sophisticated person in the world putting on an act for everyone's benefit. Still, if she could win over Caroline Forbes, Tywin Lannister's favourite cupbearer would be a useful ally to have. "If you need anything, just let me know, Lady Sansa," said Caroline. "We do live in the same palace."

Somewhere south of Harrenhal on the way to King's Landing

For all her hardness and judgementalness, the she-knight was a sentimental fool like so many other female creatures that Jaime liked to pretend did not exist except as decorations to be enjoyed by cleverer eyes and minds. "You know what that peasant is thinking right now?" he said, referring to the woodsman or farmer or whatever he had been who had seen them in the woods. "He's thinking, 'I know that handsome dashing man. He's Jaime Lannister.'"

"He didn't know who we were," the she-knight insisted.

"Maybe not you, but everybody knows me," said Jaime. "I'm Jaime Lannister, son of Tywin Lannister." He paused. "Kingslayer." There had been something in the peasant's eye that he hadn't trusted. Well, he never trusted anyone except his family, and only a select few members at that, but there had been something about that peasant that he had trusted less than usual.

"Even now, he's running straight back to Robb Stark to tell him everything that he saw. That is, he would do it unless you go and stop him right now."

"He didn't know," said Brienne.

"Do you want to risk it?" he asked.

"He's innocent."

"Better to kill an innocent man than to have us killed by a not-so-innocent man," said Jaime. All right, she had no reason to trust him, but they wanted the same thing here. They both wanted to reach King's Landing alive. Brienne needed Jaime if she was to have any hope in the world of getting Catelyn Stark's daughters back. Well, there never was any hope but a fool's hope, but the she-knight was a fool. So was Catelyn Stark. He was thankful for that. If Catelyn had been anything like her good-daughter, he would have still been in that cage while she declared that she had the hammer and anvil to create more daughters. Now, Katherine Stark, there was a woman Jaime could pay attention to. Perhaps, if he had known her earlier, Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella wouldn't have existed.

"Ah, I know why you didn't want to kill him," said Jaime. "You're a woman. Despite all your… appearances, you have a soft and weak heart and you are reluctant to do the pragmatic thing, like ordinary women."

"Shut up," growled Brienne. "I've killed men for less."

"That is what you say," said Jaime. "But you're weak. You're afraid--"

Her fist was very hard and fast. White light flashed. He tasted blood from his split lip and where his teeth had cut into the inside of his cheek.

"I'm not afraid," snarled Brienne.

"Evidently," mumbled Jaime. Did she have to hit his face? At least now he had a kind of disguise.
They came to a small stone bridge. "Go on," said Brienne with less of her usual force and disgust. Was she tired? Jaime crossed halfway, and then he suddenly sat down and refused to budge.

"What?" said Brienne.

"I'm tired," he said and refrained from pouting like a petulant child. "I may have lost a little too much blood."

"Oh, come on," said Brienne. "Am I escorting Jaime Lannister or Lady Sansa Stark?"

What? Was he being compared to Sansa Stark? They had nothing in common. "It is a split lip. We have to get to King's Landing," said the she-knight.

"But I'm tired and I need a rest," said Jaime. She started towards him. *Come closer. Just a little bit closer. A little closer...*

She was close enough. He surprised her, seizing her sword with both hands. Damn these chains! She drew her other sword. The two of them faced one another. He could do this. He would be free of the hulking Stark rock and could go on his merry way back home. Now, wouldn't that be nice?

He pointed Brienne's own sword at her. It was a pity that she had two swords. "I've always wondered why anyone would need two swords."

"I guess you see it now."

"A pity. You know, we don't have to do this," said Jaime. "Either you win and you kill me and you fail Lady Stark or I win and...well, we both know how that would turn out."

"And if I don't do this?" said Brienne.

"You get to go back and say Jaime Lannister bested you," said Jaime. "Or you could go to King's Landing and I'll put in a good word for you with my father. Everyone wins." Except the Starks.

"Your father," she scoffed. No one scoffed at the name of Tywin Lannister! That was practically blasphemy! That heretic.

He lunged at her, testing her. Her stance was good, although she held the sword a little too tightly and not quite like an extension of her arm yet. Her footwork was stilted and stiff. And though it had been months since Jaime had last held a sword, his body still remembered how it felt.

Brienne almost fell for his feint but, at the last moment, blocked the swing that would have hamstrung her. All right, she wasn't bad. At all. And he was weak and stiff from not enough food, although he was glad that Katherine had switched his diet from stale bread and brackish water to raw meat. Otherwise, he would have been even weaker.

"Well, come on, then," Jaime taunted her. "Show me what you can do. You move your feet as if they are stuck in a bog. Have you ever danced? No, I suppose nobody would have ever asked you to dance."

She lunged at him as he predicted she would. She was so predictable. He danced to the side, letting her lose control of her charge. He took the opportunity to help her along by sticking out a foot. She tumbled to the ground with a clang of metal. He pointed his sword at her and smirked. He felt like himself again. Well, almost.

Hoofbeats. Both of them looked up at the same time, like prey caught out in the open. Wait…
The men, bearing banners of the flayed man, came cantering up to the bridge, led by the very same peasant who had enjoyed their mercy earlier. Lannisters always paid their debts. Peasants, on the other hand, liked to shirk their debts whenever possible.

"It's them!" he said to the leader of the riders. "That's the Kingslayer!"

Rebekah was having a bad day. Firstly, she'd gone off in search of sustenance. While the northmen might be able to bring their food with them, hers was less portable and much more perishable. No one had invented coolers in Westeros yet. It had taken awhile. Peasants were scarce around these parts. She wondered if it had anything to do with the presence of other vampires. She knew that Damon was here too, but last she'd heard, he was in the Lannister camp with Stefan and Caroline. Although, there was no guarantee that more vampires had not made it across whatever divide it was that kept Westeros separate from the world she had always known.

By the time she had gotten her meal and then found her way back, she had fallen behind and she had needed to use all her vampire observational skills to track down the northmen. She didn't even know if she were following the right band of northmen; the only reason she had chosen Bolton's mercenaries over Karstark's was because Bolton's people had been clever enough to hire her and her men.

Actually, maybe that was an indication that they were not so clever. However, by mid-afternoon, she found traces of Jaime's trail again, or rather, the scent of his blood, and this time, it was fresher. There wasn't very much of it, just a few drops on the fallen leaves on the forest floor, but it was enough for a bloodthirsty vampire to follow. It was worrying that he was wounded, although it was somewhat relieving to find that the northmen had not found this trail yet. She continued on, always keeping the river in sight, but staying beneath the cover of the trees. She didn't want anyone to see her and question what a lone woman was doing out here in the wilderness. She didn't even have that much luggage and she couldn't say that she was a traveller.

The hair dye had mostly washed out by now. If she had had to go any longer without washing her hair, she would have gone mad. After it had dried, she had put it up in a long braid down her back, like she had done when she had been a human girl.

Somewhere along the way, she had stolen a dress off a village clothesline and swapped her courtesan's outfit for that of a milkmaid's. It wasn't much of an improvement, but at least it would attract less attention, what with the milkmaid's dress not flapping open every five seconds and showing her breasts.

She continued through the night, not even bothering to take the time to sleep. She didn't need it, and she needed to find Jaime before the Brave Companions—what a name for a band of greedy, unkempt and uncouth mercenaries—did. They were not that close, but still too close for her liking.

The days grew warmer as she continued south. It was just a little warmer, but her vampire senses could feel it if she tried. Here, it seemed that the world had only just realized winter was coming. The edges of the leaves were just beginning to turn yellow and brown and orange. Squirrels scurried about gathering nuts for their burrows. How they survived was a mystery, for there were only so many nuts a squirrel could store. And how did they know how long the winters were going to last? Maybe they didn't, and maybe Westerosian squirrels were just bigger hoarders than Earth squirrels.

Along the way, she hardly came across any sign that humans even existed on this continent. They might say that all of Westeros was united under...how many kings was it right now? Four? Maybe five, if one counted the exiled Targaryens? Six, even, if one considered the fact that Tywin
Lannister might as well have been a king in his own right. Anyway, Westeros might claim to be sort-of under the rule of kings, but in truth, most of it was wild unconquered land that hadn't changed since before Aegon and his sisters came along with their dragons and burned the terror for Targaryens into the hearts of men. More or less.

So it came as a surprise to her when she found that old peasant sitting on a log and counting gold and silver coins. The man looked as if he had never seen anything more than a copper in his life. His old horse cropped grass nearby, but as Rebekah approached, the nag lifted its head and snorted. The whites of its eyes showed. Horses were sometimes cleverer than people. They knew who was dangerous.

"Good day," she said. The man finally registered that she was there. He hurriedly dropped all his coins back into the pouch and held it shut.

"Hello," he said warily.

"Lovely day for a stroll, isn't it?" she asked. "The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and the coins are clinking. Where did you get them?"

"None of your business now, is it?" he asked. "On your way, girl. It's not safe in these parts for a woman."

Normally, Rebekah wouldn't even have bothered with him, if not for the fact that the money smelled of unwashed northmen, and it could not be a coincidence that this man was sitting right where Jaime and his escort had passed about a half a day ago.

"Is that any way to talk to a lady?" she asked him.

"What do you want?"

"Well, I want you to be a bit nicer and tell me where you got those coins and how you got them. It's northern money, isn't it?"

"This is the north, girl," growled the peasant. He reached for his club, but she was faster. Before his fingers even touched the handle, she had him pinned against a tree by his throat.

"Didn't I ask you to be a little nicer?" she said. Her gums were itching. She let her fangs slide out.

He scrabbled at her hand as his face turned red and then purple. "Now, tell me everything, and I will know if you lie. Blood smells different when men lie. Where did you get the money?"

"They gave it to me after I led them to the Kingslayer! The King in the North was offering a reward for him, and I recognized him from one of the tourneys! Please!"

"Where did they go?" asked Rebekah.

He pointed in a direction, unable to speak for the fear. "Please!" He was practically sobbing.

She dropped him, and he fell to the ground, clutching his neck and gasping for breath. She picked up his money pouch. It wasn't as if he would need it anymore. He made to crawl away, and for a while, she let him until she decided that she really needed to be on her way, and he knew too much.

His blood tasted of age and of a man who mostly ate a plant-based diet, but it was sweeter than animal blood, that was for sure. The lifeless body she left for the animals to finish off. It wasn't likely that anyone would come across it before the rats and crows plucked every scrap of flesh
from the bones. There might even be hungry wolves. All the animals were looking to fill up either their burrows or bellies right now. Fresh meat like this wouldn't last long. She took the horse too. The animal tried to resist at first, but she had lived with horses for a thousand years. Niklaus had been the horse whisperer—perhaps horses weren't so smart after all—but she was a close second. A few soothing words, a few pats, and a dried up carrot from the dead man's saddlebags, and the nag became her new best friend.

—I

"I told you that you should have killed him," said Jaime. Behind him, Brienne said nothing. He turned around to glance at her. She seemed unhappy, and quite understandably so. However, knowing her, she was probably upset that she had not been able to fulfil her promise to Catelyn Stark, rather than being upset because they were both prisoners under the filthiest band of mercenaries he had ever come across. And she was afraid. They both knew what happened to women who also happened to be prisoners. The northmen had never been subtle about their intentions towards her.

"When they try to rape you, and they will, it's better if you don't fight them," he advised her. It wouldn't make the act itself any less vile, but at least she would be less likely to get her throat cut if she did not resist. Wait…was that a sign of caring? Why was he caring? He didn't recall hitting his head.

"Do you mean to say I should just give it up?" she demanded.

"Shut up!" snarled the man in front of them. "Or I'll cut your tongue out."

Jaime resisted the urge to roll his eyes. One, it would be childish and ineffectual and two, he hadn't quite gotten a feel for these men yet. How loyal were they? They were afraid of Robb Stark, that he knew, but how afraid were they of his father? Everyone feared him, right? And all men liked gold. That had always worked to his advantage in the past, and he couldn't see why these sellswords were any different. He might yet be able to persuade them to let him go for a nice tidy sum.

They bound both him and Brienne to the trees that night. The bark dug into his back while the manacles continued to chafe, and the smell of roasting birds on the fire was becoming hard to bear. He was starving, and he hadn't had anything to eat except raw or dried meat for some time. That Katherine Stark certainly knew how to make a man suffer, although he suspected that these men were going to try and best her.

"I'll take the big bitch first," said the leader of the band, a weasel-faced man they called Vargo Hoat. "And when she's good and wet, the rest of you can have her." Jaime might be a man who prided himself on having no morals whatsoever, but he could never understand how some men could find pleasure in forcing a woman against her will. Would it not be more of a victory if she gave herself over willingly?

Brienne stiffened, and there was terror in her eyes unlike any he had ever seen before. It was the very worst fate a woman could suffer, particularly a noblewoman. He surmised that she had never been with anyone before. After all, who would have her? Well, apart from these northmen. Then again, they probably did it with sheep too, so Brienne would be an improvement on their usual companions.

She started screaming and struggling when they untied her from the tree and dragged her to her feet. She towered over all of them, but there were too many. Her hands were still bound behind her back, and she was weak from a lack of food. She slammed her forehead into the face of a man who tried to kiss her. He staggered backwards, blood streaming from his nose.
They fell upon her. The idiot struggled in vain, after all his kind advice about not resisting. A kick, a punch, and she was taken down, screaming hoarsely and wordlessly. It was the most desperate sound in the world. He watched them drag her away, and it made him feel uncomfortable, chiefly because he didn't have feelings for people who did not matter. Brienne of Tarth did not matter. Although, he might owe her something. She had entertained him very well in some ways, after all, although she had not done so on purpose.

Vargo Hoat made to follow his men into the darkness, where presumably they would hold Brienne down while he took her.

"You do realize who her father is, don't you?" he suddenly said. Why was he doing this? Right, because of some misplaced sense of honour. He had thought he had gotten rid of it. Obviously not. He would have to do better next time. On the other hand, if he could persuade Hoat to do one thing, what was to say that he couldn't talk him into doing something else?

"What?" said Hoat.

"Her father, Lord Selwyn Tarth, is the lord of the Sapphire Isles. I presume you know what that means, no?"

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**Next chapter:** Jaime finds out an important truth. Daemon makes his move on the Karstarks.
Knight Crossing

Chapter Summary

Rebekah does what she does best. Jaime leaps several steps towards unravelling a mystery that's been plaguing Westeros for a while. Jon's romantic camping trip is rudely interrupted.

Somewhere rather more south of Harrenhal

Rebekah heard the screaming before she even saw the firelight. It was almost an expected fate in Westeros for women who were unlucky enough to be captured by enemy soldiers to be raped and used and abused. It had been that way back on Earth before the humans came up with ideas such as 'human rights'.

She crept closer to try and gauge how many men there were. She could probably take them all out, but there was some risk, especially if they decided to use Jaime as a hostage. Ideally, she would take them out one by one in the darkness without them even knowing what hit them. As she drew nearer, she heard Jaime talking a whole lot of nonsense about sapphire mines and the Sapphire Isles. Anyone with the slightest inkling of Westerosian geography knew that the majority of gemstones in the realm came from the mountainous regions of the east near the Vale of Arryn. Obviously, northern mercenaries knew nothing of geography. What was Jaime trying to do? Why was he trying to save his jailer? As noble as that was, it was stupid, and it was pointless.

But, it worked. Greed won out over the desire for momentary domination. They brought the woman back, bruised, but mostly unharmed, and tied her back to the tree. One of the men wandered to the edge of the camp to relieve himself after all that excitement. Rebekah was waiting for him. As soon as he was out of the circle of light, she descended upon him from the branches above, dragging him into the canopy and breaking his neck before he could scream. His blood was hot and even sweeter than that of the peasant's. She wasn't hungry, but more blood was always welcome. Gluttony was a sin that most vampires committed when they had the chance to do so. She left the body hanging in the trees. Dropping it to the forest floor would have been dramatic, but that wasn't what she was going for. Theatre had its place. This was not it.

She moved onto the next man, who was keeping watch, staring into the darkness but not really paying attention to what was going on. Was it possible for a vampire to become bloated? She had to admit, it hadn't been something she had tried before. Elijah had always preached restraint, and at any rate, Niklaus had been the glutton in their family, and Rebekah could never get to the blood before he did.

All the while, she kept an ear on what Jaime was doing —at the moment, he seemed to be trying to weasel dinner out of the mercenaries; good luck— as she went around the edge of the camp, taking out the men one by one and as silently as possible. As she felt the neck bones of her latest victim fracture, she suddenly heard Jaime grunt in pain. Wait, that didn't sound good. She peeked down. No, this was not supposed to happen! They had him on his knees, with his head pressed against the tree stump that, a moment ago, was supposed to be his dining table. He was pinned down by two men, while the mercenaries' leader, Iago or something rather, made disparaging comments about him being Daddy's little boy and poked a knife into his face.
Okay, so she was out of time to execute her perfect plan. Time for plan B.

Would the sellsword actually be idiotic enough to harm a Lannister? Then again, Jaime couldn't be sure. These were northerners. He just couldn't believe that he had been lulled into a false sense of security, and now he was in…this situation.

"I would think very carefully about what I'd say next if I were you," said Hoat. His sour breath made Jaime want to hold his own so he wouldn't have to smell it. "Well, have you got something to say?"

His famous wit and acerbic tongue failed him at that moment. He actually did have a lot of things to say, but most of them would probably result in the knife drawing blood, or worse. The sellsword had proven to be volatile and unreasonable, and Jaime just didn't know how to be polite. So it was probably best not to say anything. He did not fear death, but they probably knew that too. He didn't know what they were going to do that could be worse than death. It made him uneasy.

"You are nothing without your daddy," sneered Hoat. "You remember that—" He didn't get to finish.

"Hello," said a cheerful, high, feminine voice. The knife was removed from Jaime's face. He glanced up—as much as he was capable of glancing up right now, considering his face was being pressed into the wood of the stump. He knew that voice, however, and he did not need to see her face to confirm that it really was her. Gone were the mousy brown dyed tresses. She was blonde again, and she looked like a fresh-faced milkmaid in that woollen dress.

What in the seven hells did Rebekah think she was doing? And where had she even come from? He had wanted her to help him escape, yes, but not this way. The only thing she was going to achieve here was get herself raped or killed. Or both. And he would be powerless to do anything. Stopping them from raping Brienne was one thing, but Rebekah was another class of creature entirely. And she didn't have a father to fall back on.

Maybe she would offer them a distraction and they would forget that little quip he had made about his father?

"Lovely evening, isn't it? Cold, dark, just the right sort of atmosphere for cutting someone's throat, really."

The men closed in around her. She didn't seem perturbed at all and walked closer to Vargo Hoat with a sway in her hips. "What's your name?" she said.

"Why do you ask, girly?" he asked, looking her over like she was a piece of meat that he wanted to cut into and savour. Jaime did not like it, if only because he didn't actually relish the idea of Rebekah dying and in such an ignoble manner. She was a silly girl who probably needed to be taught a lesson, but this was too much. And he had wanted her to save him. Somehow.

"Hmm…" She smirked. "Well, I'm just making conversation. See, I want to know what name to put on the tombstone."

The men laughed. "Who said anything about killing, sweetheart?" said Hoat. "We are going to have so much fun, you an' me." He reached out to try and grab a handful of that glorious blonde hair.

What happened next was beyond comprehension. Blood sprayed out of Hoat's back and chest as Rebekah's fist emerged from his body, clutching his bloody heart. She yanked her hand out from
his ribcage as his body fell. Rebekah let the heart drop from her hand. It landed with a wet 'plop'. "I guess you can just be one of the anonymous dead, then," she said.

Even though the light was poor, Jaime could see something changing in her face. Veins rippled just beneath the surface of her skin and snaked up to her eyes, which had grown so dark that there was no white left. And her mouth—

She disappeared in a blur of movement. Heads flew off as blood shot into the air like fountains from severed necks. Before the first body even fell, she was onto the next. One could only follow her path by watching the men that dropped, with limbs torn asunder and their ribs broken as she forced her hand between them to pull out their still beating hearts. Of course, they stopped beating by the time they were out. Brienne was screaming. The men holding Jaime down had forgotten all about him as they contemplated what to do. It took a while for him to react, but when he did, he slammed his head backwards into the nose of one of his captors. The man staggered backwards. Jaime wasted no time in getting to his feet. He looped his chained wrists around the man's throat and held on, cutting off his air. The man thrashed. Jaime held. The man stopped thrashing.

The other decided that he wanted very much to keep his head and his heart, and he started running, only to have Rebekah's teeth rip through his throat. She moaned in pleasure as she sank her fangs into his neck. Oh. She was a Lannister through and through. This was no fight; it was a massacre.

The trees above were festooned with intestines and the bodies of the mercenaries. Some of them had been flung up and impaled on the branches and they hung there like broken puppets that had gotten entangled in their own strings. Blood dripped down from above like rain. Heads and hearts and other organs lay on the ground. Rebekah eventually released the man she had been…

Drinking.

She had been drinking his blood. Suddenly all those northern tales about blood-drinking creatures of the night did not seem so ridiculous anymore. Vampires were real. They just didn't mind garlic and they most definitely did not burn in the sun. And there was one on his side. He thought she was on his side, anyway. Jaime stared at her as her eyes returned to normal and the dark veins faded. Her fangs retracted to become regular teeth again. "You don't seem too badly hurt, Ser Jaime," she said. "Are you?"

He stared at her. For someone who had just killed about twenty men with nothing but her bare hands, she was relatively clean. Sure, there were splashes of blood here and there, but her braid was still intact, and she wasn't completely drenched. She had moved so quickly that she had avoided most of the blood splatter.

"Subtlety," he said.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"The name on the tombstone," he said. "It should be Subtlety."

She rolled her eyes. "I should have figured," she said. "And you're welcome."

"I never thanked you."

"I'll pretend you did. For, oh, I don't know, saving your life."

"You did not save my life. I was going to be fine. I would have dealt with them myself sooner or later. They were not going to help me. They were stupid, but not that stupid." He kicked one of the bodies.
"Uh huh. It sure looked that way. And shouldn't you be nicer to me? Since, you know, I saved your life and I can rip you to shreds and drink your blood in a heartbeat?"

"If you wanted to drink my blood, you wouldn't have attempted to save me even though I didn't need saving." She may have actually saved his life, but they both knew that it was highly unlikely. Jaime Lannister did not need saving by anybody from anybody.

They both turned to Brienne, who was still staring open-mouthed at the only other lady knight. Jaime might have been exaggerating when he had said that he had known several other lady knights and they were capable of acting like ladies. Rebekah was most definitely not a lady. At least, he hadn't seen any potential in her to be one. However, she had surprised him with this. Perhaps she was capable of subtlety at other times when she was not so thirsty for northern blood.

Then again, subtlety was dead.

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**Harrenhal**

The board was set and Robb was ready to move his pieces. Stannis was marching on King's Landing and no one knew it. They all thought he was going to attack by water. After all, it would be the most reasonable thing to do. However, Stannis was not a reasonable man.

Of course, there were still things to be done before the men were battle ready. New weapons had to be forged, armour had to be made, and grain and horses had to be bought. And then, of course, there was still the issue of Rickard Karstark and the dissatisfied Lannister was still harassing Karstark's supplies and scout parties, and the men were beginning to grumble about his incompetence. Still, Robb forbore it, ignoring his failures as if they had never happened and giving him gold and girls and horses, as Katherine had advised. He wasn't sure what his wife was trying to achieve exactly; it seemed more like undermining his own power as well as Karstark's.

The words on the report blurred in his vision. He was tired. He hadn't slept well for a very long time, what with Karstark and now what his mother had done. Just thinking about her made him so furious that he wanted to kill something, but he couldn't exactly hurt Catelyn. She was his mother, despite everything. Blood was stronger than anything else in the world. Many - well, Katherine - had urged him to discipline her, but what could he do except keep her under lock and key in her chambers? Although, Katherine had had a point. He had to treat everyone equally, regardless of whether they were his kin or not. Yet his heart would not let him. He wasn't just a lord. He was also a son.

"Are you thinking about your mother again?" asked Katherine. "You have that look on your face."

"I just don't understand why she didn't trust that I would do the right thing by Sansa and Arya. Why couldn't she see? And what did she think she could achieve be releasing Jaime Lannister? Does she actually expect him to keep his word?"

"Some of us are more naive than others," said Katherine.

"I am not one of those naive people," said Robb. "When you tell me what your plan with Karstark is?"

"The time will come," Katherine said. "We just have to wait for Daemon Lannister to make the penultimate move, and I think it will be soon. His attacks have become bolder and more serious."

"I don't have time," said Robb. "The men are starting to... complain. They think I am giving him
"I hear Tywin Lannister has a piece of wisdom that he quite enjoys passing along," said Katherine. "Lions do not care for the opinions of sheep. Neither should wolves, my lord. Let them talk. They will rejoice when you finally exact justice upon Karstark. Vengeance is best served cold."

"I like it hot," said Robb.

"No, you don't," said Katherine. "There are some things that should be hot, but not vengeance. Now, how about we entertain ourselves while we pass time?" She sat down on his lap and ran her thumb over the growing beard on his chin. He grasped her fingers and brought them to his lips.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, there isn't really much to do in a gods-forsaken place such as this, but I can think of a new thing or two that I would like to try on you, my lord husband," said Katherine with a wicked grin.

"Now I am intrigued, my lady wife," said Robb.

Time passed very quickly that night. In fact, the night passed too quickly.

South of Harrenhal

"What are we going to do with her?" asked Rebekah, jerking her chin in Brienne's direction.

"I wasn't aware we were going to do anything," said Jaime, surveying his former jailer with much amusement. "Take the partridges off the fire. We have a little time yet."

Rebekah stared at him. "You want me to serve you supper?" she asked.

"I don't see anyone else here who looks like my squire. Do you?"

"You're unbelievable!"

"Of course I am. I am me, and you had better remember that. You are, after all, a knight serving under my family."

"Would you like me to pre-chew them for you as well, my lord?" she asked as she rolled her eyes again. Hmm, making her his squire wouldn't be a bad idea actually. However, instead of taking the partridges off the fire and carving them up for him, as he had intended, she strode over to Brienne and broke her chains with one pull, as if they were no more than silk threads.

"You, take the partridges off the fire and carve them up for Lord Jaime, who obviously never learned to cut his own food. If you try anything, I'll rip your throat out. Is that clear?"

"What manner of monster are you?" Brienne whispered to Rebekah.

"The kind that just saved your life and could also rip out your tongue if you ask any more annoying questions," replied Rebekah. She placed her hands on her hips.

"While she does that, do you mind?" asked Jaime. He raised his still-manacled hands. "I'm not one for jewellery."

"Just admit you need my help," said Rebekah.
"I do not."

She glanced over her shoulder. "You there," she said to Brienne. The other woman ignored her and sullenly took the roasting partridges off the spit. "Hey, I'm talking to you, Hulk. He totally needed me, didn't he?"

"Don't count on her to take your side," said Jaime. "We are vile people and she won't talk to vile people. Will you, my lady?"

"You're a vile person. I'm a monster," said Rebekah. "Hold still." She pulled a pin out of her hair and started poking it into the keyhole of his manacles, turning it this way and that and jiggling it. The pin snapped, and the part that snapped off remained in the keyhole. No matter how many times Jaime shook the manacles, it didn't come out. He glared at Rebekah.

"Plan B then," she said with a shrug. She grabbed his manacles. "This is going to hurt a bit."

Jaime gritted his teeth as the strength of Rebekah's fingers warped the shape of the metal. She broke the chain but the manacles still remained around his wrists like bracelets reminding him of his captivity. She took his left wrist in her hands and proceeded to try and crack open the shackle like a nut. Alas, metal was more malleable than a nutshell. The metal was pressed more tightly against his flesh as she crushed it between her hands.

"Stop!" he said. At this rate, he was going to lose his hand!

They both surveyed her work. The metal had warped out of shape, but it was still firmly clamped around his wrist. "Maybe you should leave such things to people who know what they are doing," he said. He wanted to throttle her. He didn't usually lose his temper, but this was truly testing it. What in the world had made her think that she was capable of breaking manacles with her bare hands? He expected her to leave it at that and just let him eat his supper in peace, but she wasn't finished. She put her wrist to her mouth and sank her fangs into it. Cannibalism was common in Westeros amongst the smallfolk once winter came, but self-cannibalism? That was a first. However, instead of drinking herself—it wasn't an impossibility. She was a vampire. Who knew what they thought of as being appropriate behaviour?—she thrust her bloody wrist at him.

"Drink," she commanded.

He looked at her as if she were mad, but another part of his mind was urging him to try. He was curious. Why was she offering him blood? What effect would it have? It couldn't just be because he looked hungry. Blood was far less nourishing than the partridges Brienne was carving up. He took her wrist and latched onto the two puncture wounds, feeling a little disgusted but also a little…

Intrigued? Aroused, perhaps? As he drank, he felt the stinging and throbbing in his wrists lessen. All his cuts closed over and healed as if they had never been there in the first place. The manacles were going to rub the skin away again at some point, but at least for now, the wounds were not going to fester.

"So…all those northern tales about vampires. They are real?" he asked. "Although, I do seem to recall that you eat garlic."

"The fear of garlic is nonsense made up by vampires so as to avoid detection," said Rebekah. The wounds on her wrist healed. There was still a little bit of blood on the corner of her mouth and smeared across her cheek. He didn't know what he was doing when he reached up to wipe it away. The most beautiful things were also the most dangerous things, but Jaime liked danger and risk. The very thought of controlling and dominating something so powerful was thrilling. Rebekah
might be strong, but she would do anything for him. He could see it in her eyes. Despite her prowess, she was just a woman at heart, and women always reacted in a certain way towards Jaime Lannister.

"How many of you are there?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat, and a lion is just a big cat." She smiled sweetly at him.

"Let me guess, Stefan Salvatore? And cocky Ser Damon? I'd never seen a man move like that until I saw Damon Salvatore fighting the Mountain.

"And Caroline," said Rebekah, "although she's an embarrassment to the race of vampires."

Jaime ignored her commentary on Caroline. "Vampires seem to be fond of tormenting poor Gregor Clegane," he remarked. "First Damon Salvatore, then Stefan Salvatore, and now…Katherine Pierce? Or should I say Katherine Stark?"

"She is one bitch of a vampire," said Rebekah.

"Worse than you?"

"I'm the biggest bitch around."

"So I see. I do wonder, though, how you came to be so far north. Since you are here, I presume you came with my father's permission. Still, I do not believe that he intended for you to come gallivanting after me. What were his orders?"

"Your name was mentioned," she said evasively. Hah! Obviously, she didn't follow orders. Typical Rebekah.

"I had a vision of you in your disguise. You came to me in a dream before I even saw you," he said. He moved the plate of partridge away from her so she wouldn't have the chance to steal his meal. If she asked very nicely, he might share.

"Maybe I can get inside your mind," Rebekah smirked.

"Or maybe I just happen to have the gift of foresight. I knew I would be fine, didn't I?"

Rebekah rolled her eyes. "Finish your dinner, and then we're leaving," she said.

"Maybe you were dropped on your head as a child, so let me put this very clearly. I am the lord here, not you," Jaime pointed out through a mouthful of meat, using a partridge thigh bone for emphasis. "Everything you do will be under my..." What was that word? He really wanted to use it! He knew it began with the letter S. "Everything you do will be by my consent," he amended. It wasn't as good but it would have to do.

"There were more men hunting you, my lord, and I don't fancy having to save you again for the second time tonight," said Rebekah. "So hurry up and finish. I want to get a move on. The sooner we get you back to King's Landing, the sooner we can get you out of those chains, unless you like your new jewellery?"

Jaime sighed. He was a little too tired to think of something clever to say and, at any rate, she was
"Let's go," he said, standing up and stretching his legs. "We can take their horses." They picked their way between the corpses to where the horses had been hobbled for the night. Suddenly, Rebekah screamed and her iron grip closed around his arm, and her face was pale with terror. He immediately drew his—newly acquired—sword and struck out at the monstrous bloody hand that had wrapped itself around Rebekah's ankle. Its owner was one of the northerners that the vampire had not quite managed to completely kill. The severed hand continued to cling to the vampire's ankle. Rebekah shook her foot to get it off.

"You're welcome," said Jaime with a grin.

On the River Road

"All these forests look the same to me," remarked Elena.

Jon gave her a look. Hopefully, she wouldn't think he was judging her for not being able to tell between regular oaks and black oaks, because he wasn't. Much. Although, the difference was somewhat obvious and even Rickon would be able to tell. For one, the colours were all different.

"Not that I mind," said Elena. She smiled at him so sweetly he thought he would melt. Instead, he squeezed her hand more tightly. If they weren't in a hurry, he would probably have thrown her down onto the ground right there and then and made love to her very slowly and passionately. That was the way women liked it, according to Samwell Tarly. Then again, how would Sam know?

"Although, I wouldn't mind a nice hot bath in a building with a roof."

"We'll be in Riverrun soon," said Jon. "If your map is correct, which it probably is because Maester Aemon gave it to you, we're about a week away."

"Is this judging by normal speed or our speed?" asked Elena. Both of them glanced back at the suffering Samwell.

"Come on, Sam," said Jon.

"Not…all…of…us…are…vampires," puffed Sam.

"Only Elena's a vampire," remarked Hot Pie. Between Sam and Hot Pie, they had both a deficiency of physical and intellectual strength. What a merry band of misfits they were.

"At this rate we're going, my brother will be king before we even reach Riverrun," said Jon. He marched back to Sam and dragged him a couple of feet. "You don't want to miss the coronation feast, do you? There will be roasted suckling pigs with apples in their mouths, and puddings so high that they will tower above all the guests—"

"You do know that's physically impossible, right? Unless, the puddings are the size of the great hall itself," said Elena.

"They could be very hard and durable puddings that don't wobble and slide everywhere."

"In which case, you really wouldn't want to eat them," butted in Hot Pie. "I bake good puddings. My favourite is blackberry."

"Well, there will be no puddings if we miss Robb's coronation because we are too slow," said Jon...
"How do you know the reason we're not in Riverrun is because we're slow? I mean, you could be lost," said Sam. It wasn't the first time he had insinuated that he doubted Jon's navigational skills, even though he had no right to. After all, Samwell Tarly probably couldn't tell north from south or east from west unless the sun was setting or rising.

"Sam, we are on the River Road," said Jon. "Unless I've forgotten how to tell north from south, and I haven't, we cannot possibly get lost."

"How do you know it's the River Road and not some other road?" asked Sam. "I don't recognize this."

"That's because you've never been to the Riverlands," said Jon.

"You haven't either," Sam pointed out.

"And there's a river where we caught our lunch not two hours ago."

"Speaking of lunch--" began Hot Pie.

"Do you remember what we said about a diet?" asked Elena.

"Uh huh," said Hot Pie. "I don't like the sound of diets."

"Too bad. You're on one. Trust me, it's for your own good," said Elena.

"But I'm starving!"

Gendry's stomach growled. Jon sighed. They were marching much slower than he had anticipated, although he wasn't been sure what he had been expecting. After all, he was marching with Sam and Hot Pie. How fast could they be?

"Riverrun," he reminded them. "Smoked fish."

"I rather prefer smoked ham," said Elena.

"I swear, you must have grown up in a palace," said Jon as he looked at her fondly and stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. Her bones felt like that of a sparrow's. She needed to eat more. She was looking thin. Wait…did vampires ever change weight?

"Nope," she replied. "Just a normal house with a brother who always ate everything in the pantry before I could get to it."

"Sounds like Robb," said Jon with a laugh. His laughter was cut short when a bow creaked. And another. And another. Arrows were pointed at them from north, east, south and west. There were even archers in the trees. Elena tensed and looked as if she were getting ready to pounce on anyone who would dare to attack them, but Jon knew better. She was only one vampire, and one arrow in the heart could kill her. He wouldn't let her get hurt for his sake. Or for anyone else's, for that matter.

"Now, would that be Robb Stark, the self-proclaimed King in the North?" asked the leader of the band. A large scar peeked out from beneath his black eyepatch. His voice sounded as if he had swallowed a handful of gravel beforehand. On his back, he wore a large sword, probably stolen. "Although, he isn't king anymore; just Lord of Winterfell again."
"What do you mean?" demanded Jon, forgetting all about the arrows pointed in their direction. What had happened?

"Well, how does a king become…not king?" asked the man with the gravel voice.

Jon's hand flew to his sword. The arrows all turned to him. The man laughed and raised a hand to stay the arrows. "To see your face, it would seem you care very much about what happens to the Young Wolf. You need not fear; he merely abdicated."

"Robb?" said Jon. That did not sound like his brother. What was he doing?

"Ah, so you call the Lord of Winterfell by his given name," said the man. "You must be of some importance indeed."

"I am of no importance, although I do know him. Well. I was his companion, for a time."

"You have friends in high places, boy," said the man. "Perhaps he might want you back."

"He wouldn't," said Jon quickly. The last thing he needed to be was a hostage someone could use against Robb. He was not going to be sold back to his brother, particularly not by a band of what looked like robbers. "We had a…disagreement." He fell silent. What sort of disagreement could the two of them possibly have? He always let Robb win. In everything. Except, he wouldn't let him win when it came to…

"We both…had affections for the same woman," he said. This was a story good for all ages. Damon wouldn't mind him borrowing it, would he? Oh well, why did he care? He'd taken Damon's girl too. "She, quite understandably, chose him over me."

"Katherine Stark," whispered one of the men in awe. Katherine Stark?!

"Ah, the incomparable Lady Katherine Stark, conqueror of Harrenhal," said the one-eyed man. "She turned the Mountain into a Molehill. Tywin Lannister's own words, not mine."

Jon glanced at Elena, who looked very alarmed. "She was Katherine Pierce when I knew her," said Jon. "I'd never thought…"

"That your friend, or should I say, former friend, would marry her? Yes. He married a bard and broke his word to the Lord of the Crossing for the love of a woman. Not that the Lord of the Crossing means very much, especially since this bard gave him Harrenhal as a wedding present. You seem surprised."

"She is a bard. At least, she was. She wasn't even a virgin." Thank you, Elena, for being so very very honest about everything.

The men laughed. "So, you both slept with her?" asked the ginger-haired archer. "Lucky bastard." Wait, didn't robbers use obscenities for this kind of thing? Or was this one of those rare well-bred robbers? Was there such a thing? "No wonder you had a disagreement."

"I bet she was good, though," whispered someone else.

"That was not the cause of our disagreement," said Jon. "The problem was that she chose him. I would have willingly been one of her lovers, if she would have let me."

"You poor soul," said another man with dark beard and pale eyes like ice. "I may even say a prayer for you if I have time."
"Do what you want," said Jon. "Robb Stark no longer cares for me."

"That's a pity," said Redbeard. "We could have used the gold."

"But you still care," said One Eye.

"Why do you care whether I care or not?" asked Jon. "Who are you, anyway? Who do you serve?"

"We serve the people," said One Eye. "After all, someone has to do it."

"There are five kings all claiming to do it," said Jon.

"But do they really? Only we care. We are the Brotherhood Without Banners."

**A/N: Sorry, Daemon's move got delayed. X-Men, haircuts and groceries got in the way of updating yesterday.**

**Next chapter:** Robb discovers just how much he can tolerate. Daemon shows the northerners some southern hospitality. Katherine teaches her husband how to serve up her signature dish.
Great Expectations

Chapter Summary

Karstark claims his dues. Jaime and Rebekah don't get what they want. Daemon plans a party.

Harrenhal

Shouts came from outside along with the rumbling of carts and the unwelcome glare of yellow sunlight streaming in through the window and rudely hitting Robb's face. He opened one eye, dismayed to realize that it was morning already and he had no desire to get out of the pile of furs in which he lay with a very sleepy and very naked Katherine. He rolled over and resolved to get up. Katherine grumbled in her sleep when he disturbed her. "What are you doing?" she said.

"It is day. I have much that I need to do."

"I wonder why I married you sometimes. It seems you were already married to your duty before. Sometimes, I feel like a discarded mistress."

Robb tugged at her hand to haul her out of bed. "Come on, Katherine," he said, knowing that she was teasing him—although such a comparison distressed him nonetheless because he wanted to make her perfectly happy. Nay, more than perfectly happy. "We may make a timely riser out of you yet."

She protested. "It's cold!" she crooned. With one sudden yank, Robb found himself losing his balance and he fell right back on top of her, with their faces very close to each other. They laughed. This was much more fun than all the work and unpleasantness that awaited them outside of these chambers. Life was so much more beautiful inside them where the only face he saw was Katherine's beautiful one and his own reflected in her eyes.

She pulled him down and kissed him deeply. His mind was telling him that he should not become distracted, that he really needed to be up. Years of discipline by his father rebelled against this indulgence. Yet his body seemed powerless to resist and his heart was perfectly willing to fall prey to Lady of the Golden Eagle.

"Your breath smells like wet wolf in the morning," remarked Katherine.

"You started it," he said. Yes, why did his breath smell so bad in the morning while hers remained perfectly fine? It wasn't fair and it didn't make sense. Maybe it was a feminine thing. He hadn't really had that much experience with women. In fact, he had never spent the night with a woman before Katherine.

He shifted himself into a better position and accidentally poked her in the armpit. She yelped and just about leapt out of bed.

"Are you…ticklish?" he asked devilishly. Ah, yes, he was very good at that. He had "tormented" Jon when they had been boys.
"There are certain sensitive areas on a body," said Katherine evasively.

He pounced on her. She laughed and protested. And then she found his spot, pressing both his sides with her fingers. He was ashamed to say that he squawked.

"All right, it is war, my lady wife," he said.

Furs and pillows flew. Their arms and legs became entangled as they grappled with one another. Yet, he wasn't averse to cheating. He started kissing her throat, moving downwards towards her collarbone and then her breasts. She arched her back and threw back her head as he went ever lower.

The door opened and Bolton came in. "My lord," he said.

Robb immediately straightened himself. Damn his timing! "Yes, Lord Bolton?" he said. Had his bannerman never heard of knocking? He resolved to lock the door at night and not unlock it until he was ready to see people. He scrambled out of bed, with his back to Bolton, and searched for his trousers. Where had they gone?

Katherine handed them to him and then lounged back on the bed, the furs just covering the essential parts of her body.

"Well, what is it?" said Robb.

"Would Lady Stark like us to give her some privacy?" asked Bolton.

"Oh, no need," said Katherine.

"In that case, would Lady Stark like to get dressed?"

"I'm sure you have a wife, Lord Bolton," said Katherine.

"Had," said Bolton. "She passed away a few years ago."

"And you have not remarried? Oh dear, that will not do. We will have to find you a new one."

Robb wished Katherine could just be normal and get dressed. Then again, if she were normal (boring), he wouldn't love her the way he did.

Bolton dipped his head and said nothing in response to Katherine's suggestion that he be espoused again. "My lord, Lord Karstark has returned," he said.

"With another victory, I presume?" said Robb.

"No. The Lannisters came upon him unprepared and unaware while he was distracted with sacks full of grain. He managed to drive them back but not before the enemy set fire to the food and his armory."

"And who led this raid?" said Robb.

"There was no name, but there was a banner with a black raven against a field of red."

Damon fucking Salvatore. If he was trying to be a double agent, he was being terrible at protecting Stark interests.

"We will need to resupply Lord Karstark, will we not, Lord Bolton?" said Robb. This was getting
too repetitive for his tastes. He pulled his tunic over his head, wondering why all the laces had been broken.

"That is not all there is," said Bolton. "Lord Karstark was most…distressed at having been humiliated by Daemon Lannister and his forces time and again. He took his revenge."

"Rickard Karstark killed Daemon Lannister?" said Katherine. She sat up, thankfully still holding a blanket to her body so Bolton was not treated to a full view. She wrapped it around herself and rose.

"No, my lady," said Bolton. "Martyn and Willem Lannister."

Robb whipped around. "I gave express orders that those boys were not to be harmed," he said.

"Yes," said Bolton.

"What happened?"

"Karstark commanded the guards to step aside. They know how much you hold him in high regard, my lord," said Bolton.

"Leave us, please, Lord Bolton," said Katherine. Bolton bowed and left the chambers, closing the door behind him. Robb's rage spilled over then. He had managed to keep it at bay while there were others to see it but he had no need to hide anything from his wife.

"He will pay for this," he said. "They were boys, Katherine. Just boys."

"More importantly, he went against your direct orders overtly," said Katherine. "That is not to be tolerated, but it must be, for now."

"What do you mean? I have a mind to go out there and take his head myself, right here and now."

He grabbed his sword. He wasn't sure how it happened, but she was there in a moment, pressing a hand to his chest and, with her other hand, she gripped his wrist and lowered his sword.

"Not yet," said Katherine. "The time is not ripe."

"When will it be ripe, Katherine? I've waited, I've tolerated, my patience has limits."

"A great man has limitless patience to wait for the things he truly wants," said Katherine firmly. "Wait, my lord. The time will come, sooner rather than later. You will force his hand to sign his own death warrant. The men expect you to retaliate. When you do not, they will wonder why and when your vengeance comes, it will be all the sweeter."

He looked at her, ever the voice of reason, very grey morality, and utmost practicality. He had trusted her once and she had given him Harrenhal. None of her other plans have come into fruition yet but there was no reason why they shouldn't. If it had been anyone else, he doubt he would have listened, but this was Katherine. She had a way with words and her tone that always convinced him to wait and see. Perhaps it was the way of women. Men were hard and unyielding. Women were soft and seemingly pliable, but suffocation with a pillow was just as viable a killing method as any other. And it was less messy.

"I'll trust you, Katherine," said Robb. "But I do not think I can wait much longer."

"I don't think you'll have to."
He squeezed her fingers and then brought her hand to his lips. "Get dressed, my lady," he said. "I will have to speak with Rickard Karstark, regardless, and I would like you to be there with me when I do, to remind me that his life is not ripe to be plucked."

Robb lounged back on his chair, trying to think peaceful thoughts so that he wouldn't shout. And Katherine had told him to try and be like a cat, uncaring and lazy. Except he had never had much to do with cats, having been much fonder of dogs, horses, and wolves. How had Jaime Lannister done it? Well, he always spoke slowly, drawing out his words as if his listener had not the ability to fully understand the meaning and nuance of what he was saying.

"Lord Karstark," said Robb. He forced himself to speak evenly and slowly, as if he didn't care and was just annoyed that he had been disturbed by such a trivial matter. "The men tell me that Martyn and Willem Lannister are dead. I am very curious as to how it happened."

"They are Lannisters, my lord," said Karstark.

"Were," Robb corrected.

"Yes, my lord," said Karstark. "The Lannisters killed my boys and have harassed us time and again. How many of our men have fallen to Lannister blades?"

"Perhaps I should congratulate you on your valiance, then, Lord Karstark, for taking the initiative to kill two unarmed little boys who were somehow responsible for your sons' deaths. How old were they? Eleven and twelve?"

"Thirteen and fourteen, my lord," said Karstark, bristling as the other bannermen tried to hide their sniggers. Unsuccessfully, of course. They were like children sometimes.

"Oh, that's much better," said Robb, switching from Jaime to Damon. Pretending was such hard work. "I suppose they were worthy opponents for you, then."

Karstark reddened. Robb would have enjoyed it more had there been a block and a sword at the end of all of this. But, alas, it was not to be. At least, not today.

"Forgive me, my lord. I was rash."

"I was in a good mood today. I will let this go once, Lord Karstark, because I understand your grief. But do not disobey my orders again. I do not have as much patience as everyone thinks I do," said Robb. "How much did you lose?"

"All of it the supplies we buried," Karstark grumbled. "The Salvatores are fiends from the deepest pits in the seven hells. They burned everything, starting with the wine. We could not stop the flames."

"Lord Bolton," said Robb. "See to it that Lord Karstark has everything that he needs. Except the wine. I need that."

Bolton hesitated but, in the end, he did not protest even though the other bannermen did.

"My lord, Lord Karstark has failed, over and over, to defeat Daemon Lannister," said honest Wyman Manderly. The jocose and rotund north man stepped forward. "Perhaps it is time for another to step up and take his place." Murmurs of assent.

"And I suppose you think you're the one to do it," seethed Karstark.
Manderly ignored Karstark. "If you give me five thousand men, I will root out those Lannister outriders and bring you the heads of Daemon Lannister and the two Salvatore brothers."

"That will not be necessary, Lord Manderly," said Robb. "Lord Karstark has promised me a victory against the Lannisters. He will not fail me again." He turned to Karstark. "Will he?"

"No, my lord," said Karstark. He bowed, visibly shaken but relieved that nothing more had come out of this.

Yet.

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**The Riverlands**

It was all very well, raiding Karstark gold and supplies and then sending a cut off to Lord Bolton. Daemon enjoyed watching the Stark bannermen grow suspicious of one another, all the while knowing it was he who had sown this discord among them. His uncle would be impressed. But he wasn't content with just being the little lion cub who occasionally took a swipe at the wolves to antagonize them. It wasn't enough. Daemon Lannister needed a decisive victory to show everyone in the world just how much better suited he was to being a leader of men than Jaime Lannister was. Not all of them had been born with golden spoons in their mouths, and it had made his blood boil to see how Jaime was ready to throw it all away because he just couldn't see what lay before him. He didn't deserve to inherit all that power and wealth. He wouldn't know how to use it or keep it.

Daemon, on the other hand, would. He just had to show Tywin that he could do it.

"Tell me, Stefan," he said one night to his second in command while the two of them were discussing their next plan of action. "What do the northerners think of us southerners?"

"They think us soft and pampered, my lord," said Stefan. "But you know that. Why ask me? Do you have something in mind?"

"You know me, Stefan," said Daemon. "I enjoy…playing into people's expectations. Rickard Karstark is probably more than ready for a fight, especially given recent circumstances. Your brother must still have friends in the Stark camp."

Stefan furrowed his brow but said nothing. Daemon turned back to his map with a satisfied feeling in his stomach. The Karstarks hadn't found a trace of his camp, while he always knew their every move, thanks to Stefan and Damon's superior scouting skills. The two brothers, together, provided the most accurate information on the movements of the Karstarks. Daemon wasn't sure how they did it, but they did. What did the Salvatores want? Well, more of that later. For now, they would deal with the northerners.

"I think I should like to invite Rickard Karstark to dinner," said Daemon at last.

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**Near Stony Sept**

"How many more days until King's Landing?" asked Rebekah.

"Why, is your delicate white bottom hurting from the saddle?" asked Jaime. She glared at him. "I smell like stale blood and dirt," she said.

"And whose fault is it that you are a messy eater?" asked Jaime. "There is, I might point out, a
perfectly serviceable river to your left." Rebekah glanced at the river and then at her own sorry state. The brown milkmaid's dress she was wearing now resembled something dredged out of the sewers of King's Landing. She leapt out of her saddle and handed her reins to Brienne. "You, wait here and stand guard," she commanded the other woman. She jerked her head disdainfully in Jaime's direction, as if he were some sort of vagabond. Out of the two of them, only one ate people, and it wasn't the one called Lannister. "Make sure he doesn't peek."

"You didn't seem to have any qualms the last time!" he called after her, standing up in his saddle to do so. Then he sniffed at himself. Yes, he could probably do with a bath too. The weather was warm today. It wouldn't be so unpleasant. He, too, dismounted and handed his reins to Brienne. "I'd tell you to make sure she doesn't peek, but we both know she will." He winked at her.

He cast his filthy clothes on the bank amongst the grasses and the reeds and dashed into the water. How long had it been since he had bathed? Too long. The cold water made the hairs on the back of his arms stand up. He let it lap against his calves until he became more accustomed to the temperature. He waded in further.

Rebekah stood in the middle of the river, wringing out her long golden hair. All the hair dye had washed out. Her back was to him, and her dress floated beside her like some terribly deformed jellyfish. He remembered visiting the beach as a child in happier days with both his mother and father. It had been his mother's idea to go for a walk, and his father had finally relented. A jellyfish had washed up on the beach that day. His mother had warned him to never touch one.

"Coming to enjoy the scenery?" Rebekah asked without turning around.

"Your guard is incompetent," he remarked. He waded up behind her. Should he, or shouldn't he? He slowly touched her shoulder to see if she would reject him. Her skin was very smooth, just as he had imagined it. She didn't even flinch. He ran a finger down her shoulder blade, tracing a line down to the base of her spine, stopping just above her buttocks. "I cannot reach my back," he murmured into her ear. "Someone will need to help me, and I am afraid Lady Brienne is too much of a prude."

"I'll do yours if you'll do mine," said Rebekah.

"We have a deal," said Jaime. "Me first."

She led him to a shallower part of the river where she made him sit on a rock while she scrubbed his back with sand and worked out the knots with her fingers. How in the world did she know where all his aches were? If he had been a cat, he would have purred. Her hand reached around to his front, and crept downwards.

"It is a crime to molest a lord," he murmured.

"Am I molesting you, my lord?" asked Rebekah. "Pardon me. Would you like me to stop?"

"No, it is a bad habit to start something and not finish it," he said. "Not very Lannister at all."

"I would finish, but you owe me a back wash," she said. She withdrew her hand. The girl had nerve, to tease him like that! Well, two could play the game. He rubbed her back ever so slowly, running his fingers down her spine, her shoulder blades, and over the back of her neck. She shivered. Beads of water quivered on her skin. It felt hot against his. He reached forward, just as she had done to him, and lightly stroked the sides of her breasts. She leaned back against him, tilting her head backwards, with her eyes closed. Finally, she looked up at him through her dark eyelashes.
"Are you going to wash my back, or are you just going to tease me?" she whispered huskily.

"I enjoy teasing," he said. She was at his mercy, and he did not show mercy. Ever. Except she had a few tricks of her own. He felt her fingers close around his hardness. So very forward, this one. And very experienced. It was a refreshing change to not have to do all the work to get so very little reward, however delightful it was. He tried to ignore her and drew circles on her back. Her leg rubbed against his as she reached back with her other hand to grip his hair.

And then she pulled him under water. He scrabbled madly at her hands as the water closed over his head, but her grip was like iron; it was worse than those damned chains! Was she trying to kill him? She was doing an admirable job of it. He coughed up water when she finally allowed him back up, only to find that she was rubbing soaproot into his hair, very much like the way his nurse used to do some thirty years ago. Some of the suds got into his eyes, and it stung.

"Get your hands off me!" he growled.

"Your hair is filthy," said Rebekah. "A total turn off, I assure you."

"You try spending months in a northern cell and not have filthy hair–must you yank so hard?"

"It's not my fault your hair is tangled like a rat's nest."

A rat's nest, was it? He reached out blindly to grab her hair and yanked it. Hard. "How does that feel?"

Instead of replying, she dunked his head under the water again, but this time, he was determined to not go down alone. He hooked his foot behind her ankle, causing her to lose her footing, and even her quick reaction couldn't save her. They both fell with a splash, each scrabbling for dominance. Bubbles rose around their heads to the surface where the sun flickered dimly through the water. Every fish in a two mile radius must have been frightened away. Air, however, was a limitation to both men and vampires alike. They broke through the surface at the same time. Jaime's hair flopped over his eyes. It was clean, though.

"You are such a child," huffed Rebekah. "I'm not playing anymore."

"A child can't do this," he said. He grabbed her arm. She whipped around, to strike him or maybe just glare; he didn't know and didn't care to find out. He pressed his lips against hers. She tasted… he didn't know of what. Tyrion had insisted that every kiss tasted like chicken, just cooked differently. Tyrion was delusional. Neither Rebekah nor Cersei had anything in common with chicken.

Her lips parted for him. Something pricked his lip. Ah, the fangs. He had never kissed anyone with fangs before. The little sting only made him more aware of her touch. She bit his lip lightly, drawing a drop of blood. Now the kiss tasted of something; of life and death and salt and copper. The usual.

He grasped one firm rounded buttock in his hand. He had imagined how it would feel like. It felt better in life than it had in his very vivid dream. He lifted her off her feet. She immediately wrapped her legs about his waist. She was hot and ready for him. Her chest heaved as she gasped for breath between kisses. "You taste like chocolate," she whispered.

"I have no idea what that is, but I imagine it's beyond wonderful," he murmured back. His manhood was at attention, but he resisted the urge to simply take her there and then. He would not let her win him over. He was *Jaime Lannister*, and his game was just beginning. He stroked the
inside of her thigh where the skin was almost the softest, tracing his name all over her. He would possess her. "My turn to have a bite." He sat her on a rock and pulled his mouth away from hers, but he never stopped kissing her, leaving a chain of them down the side of her neck and between the valley of her breasts. She threw back her head to the sun. Little moans escaped from her mouth.

"Jaime," she whispered. The sound of his own name excited him. Cersei never said his name when they made love, just in case anyone was listening. He wondered briefly whether she had ever said Robert's name. Probably definitely not. But the thought tormented him all the same.

His mouth closed about Rebekah's hard nipple. She uttered a short cry and thrust her hips against him, all hot and wet. He held her at bay while he circled her nipple with his tongue and then scraped over it lightly with his teeth. She shuddered, just as he intended her to. He never did this with Cersei either. There was never any time.

Suddenly, he pulled away.

"The fuck?!" she gasped. Hearing her swear made him almost lose control and take her, but he was nothing if not a very controlled man.

"There is a long way to King's Landing yet," he said. The water hid his lower half. Thankfully.

"Jaime. Lannister." Her growl was murderous.

"If you behave very nicely for the rest of the way, I may give you a reward at the end of the journey," he smirked. He had no intention of keeping that promise, of course. He was a great many things; an oathbreaker, a kingslayer, a lion amongst sheep—not a slave, no matter how many times the Starks sang it. But he was loyal to those he loved. It had always been his sister and it would always be his sister.

"Fuck you," she spat.

"You would like to try, wouldn't you?" he asked. "But it's not happening."

"Let me make this very clear, Lannister," she said. "I don't need you. Watch me."

Her hand slipped slowly between her parted legs. He blinked. Was she going to pleasure herself right there and then, in front of him? Other parts of his anatomy were very aware of her but he would not give in. It was with much difficulty that he pulled his gaze away and waded to the shore, where he could seek the privacy offered by a tree.

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The Riverlands

Finally, there was news! Rickard waved the messenger away even as he looked on his map. There, not twenty miles to the south, the Lannisters had finally been sighted. The scouts had said that the fattened lions had done little of late but make merry and feast. There were music and girls and food and wine. He lurched to his feet a little unsteadily. The wine the king had sent (just one casket for encouragement) was the best he had ever had, and it made him heady. His victory against the Lannisters was looming. He would show that green boy in Harrenhal how it was done, and then perhaps in the future he could start listening to his advice instead of bending his ear to his pretty lowborn wife.

He gathered his men. "Tomorrow night, we will sleep on lion pelts!" he told them. The cheers were thunderous. Spears clashed on shields and slammed into the ground, making pits where the butts of them struck the wet earth. He could already feel the elation of victory. Those pampered
southern boys were sitting ducks waiting to be shot at.

He would kill that golden-haired brat Daemon Lannister and send his head to Tywin Lannister; it wasn't quite the same as sending him Jaime Lannister's head, but his nephew was better than those two...distant cousins of his. He thirsted for Lannister blood. He saw his son's body at the bottom of Jaime Lannister's cage every night, and it might as well have been Catelyn Stark who had put him there.

They marched at first light. There were no sign of Lannister scouting parties. It didn't strike him as odd. All those lions were drunk from their recent minor victories, as if a bee sting could truly hurt an ox. The raids on his caravans had been a nuisance, but they had not harmed his strength. The core of his force remained intact and, despite recent setbacks, and his liege trusted him although he would ned to prove himself to him once again. Perhaps that young Stark had become wiser now that he was no longer king. Perhaps he had realized that the only people he could trust were other northern men, not silly soft southern vixens like his wife and his mother. What did they know of war and the matters of men? Katherine Stark could only deal with idiots like Gregor Clegane, but when it came to real men and real battle, she hadn't a single clue. As for Catelyn Stark, she could rot in a dungeon for the rest of her days for the treason she had committed.

The camp was exactly where the scouts had said it was, set in the middle of a large flat field with nothing to protect it. Red and gold banners danced in the breeze, while the wind carried the sound of merry-making to Rickard's ears. They were singing songs about pretty women and how they cheered the air. He sneered. Even their songs were weak.

Singing turned into screaming as volley after volley of arrows rained inside the camp, piercing haunches of pork and men alike. The northmen surged in like a winter blizzard, obliterating everything in their path. The southerners were no match for them, for they were young and feeble or fat and drunken. Some of them seemed to have even forgotten that they were soldiers and flung down their weapons to surrender. Where were the phantom armies that had attacked his caravans? Perhaps the Lannisters could only fight when their enemies' backs were turned. They had no stomach for real war.

The battle seemed to be over as soon as it started. The Lannisters were all quivering in fear as Rickard rode into their camp. He dismounted and pulled an arrow out of a leg of pork. "Well, lads," he said. "It would be a pity to put all this soft southern food to waste."

**Next chapter:** Daemon provides entertainment for Karstark's party. Katherine helps Robb to cook her favourite dish. Jaime returns home.
A Moveable Feast

Chapter Summary

Robb gets the prize he's been waiting for but loses his appetite. Daemon hosts an explosive party for the northerners. Jaime returns home at last!

The Riverlands, close to Harrenhal

They were feasting and drinking. He had probably wasted too many legs of prime ham on the northmen, but in Daemon's eyes, this was worth it. He hadn't expected them to simply fall into the trap without the slightest bit of suspicion; nor had he expected them to drink until they were tottering about like old fools. Then again, Rickard Karstark was an old fool. He waited until the sun had set and the new moon, just a sliver in the sky, had risen. The Karstarks lit their torches.

"How many sentries?" he asked Stefan.

"Not many," said Stefan. "Daemon is taking care of them as we speak. He only brought part of his forces; all of five thousand men."

"A pity," said Daemon. "I would have liked to annihilate them all here and now."

Presently, a burning arrow was shot into the sky. That was their signal. Some of the northerners barely stirred from their intoxicated sleep when Daemon and the real Lannister army rode inside. Of course he had not manned the trap with real soldiers, sending instead only his oldest and youngest and most incompetent recruits. No one would care if they died.

The horn sounded too late for the drunken northerners. Many were impaled where they lay, while others milled about in panic, not really certain of what was going on. "Round them up!" commanded Daemon. "Let no man escape!"

"What of prisoners, my lord?" asked Stefan.

"A few would be useful. I do believe there can be too much of a good thing," said Daemon.

Rickard Karstark rushed out of the centre tent, half dressed and bleary eyed. "Rally to me!" he shouted to his men. Daemon doubted that rallying was the first thought on their minds right now. *Surrendering*, on the other hand…

"I want Karstark alive," said Daemon.

"By Lord Daemon's command, whoever captures Rickard Karstark alive will receive a hundred gold dragons!" shouted Stefan. Daemon gave him a look. His second in command simply shrugged. "They are northern gold dragons, my lord."

"Fair enough," said Daemon.

At this rate, Rickard Karstark was going to lose his entire army as well as his head. Now, Karstark's head was not Daemon Lannister's to take. It belonged to Robb, and while Damon was as selfish as
they went, he always believed in rendering unto Caesar what was Caesar's. And Robb was on the way to becoming a Caesar, wasn't he? Inside his own mind, at least. And the whole point of this exercise was to pass over command of Karstark's army to Robb. If all of them died, there was no point.

"Look!" he shouted. "More wolves! Go go go! Go get 'em!" He pointed his men in the wrong direction. In the dark, they couldn't tell. Behind him, he heard Karstark thundering out of the camp, and hoped Stefan was just as oblivious as the humans.

By morning, the ground was littered with northern bodies. Daemon seemed quite pleased with the result, even though they had lost a significant number of fresh recruits as well.

"Well, m'lord," said Damon, deliberately sounding like a commoner as a sign of disrespect. "They trusted you."

"Everyone we have lost can be replaced," said Daemon with a wave of his hand. "Send word to Lord Tywin to inform him of our victory. It is a pity I cannot send him Rickard Karstark, but I suppose his men fought hard to protect their lord."

"More than half the northerners escaped," said Stefan.

"No matter," said Daemon. "A victory is still a victory, and finally the illusion of northern invincibility has been shattered. I think it is a good night's work."

Harrenhal

The shouts told Robb everything he needed to know. The lion that was Daemon Lannister had finally shown his claws, and Rickard Karstark had come crawling back with his tail between his legs. He did not look up from the letter he was writing. He was a king in all but name, and kings were never shocked.

Standing some distance away from his desk, Bolton glanced out the window, where men were flocking to see what the commotion was. Rain pelted down from above, as if the gods themselves, or just the god, disapproved of Karstark's latest failure. "Where is Lady Katherine?" he asked as he signed his name.

"I imagine she is in your chambers, considering this is no weather for walking, my lord," said Bolton. "It seems that Rickard Karstark has returned with news. Perhaps it would be seemly to let him wait outside for a while."

"Then let him wait," said Robb. "There is much that I need to do. Let him contemplate the magnitude of his failure." He signed his name at the bottom of the letter and moved onto the next.

"My lord!" Karstark's cries filtered through from outside. "My lord!" Robb ignored him and continued with his writing; at least, he pretended to be concentrating on his letters. There were so many inkblots that he ignored—for the purpose of appearing 'nonchalent', a new word that he'd learned from Katherine and rather liked, for it sounded sophisticated — that he would have to rewrite all the letters again.

Karstark stumbled into the doorway, where his advance were blocked by the crossed spears of his guardsmen. "My lord!" shouted Karstark. Water dripped from his beard and pooled at his feet. Robb calmly sealed his letter and pretended to read something. He read the same line over, and over, and over again. It happened to be the opening line of a letter from Stannis that simply said,
"To Lord Stark."

Time passed interminably. He read the line several more dozen times to seem as if he had not even heard Karstark. Finally, he looked up. Bolton was watching him expectantly.

"Convene the war council in the great hall," Robb said.

Katherine arranged her skirts daintily about her. She loved the way crinolines looked—for they were very elegant and ladylike—but they were a nuisance to move around in, and even more so to sit in. There was no way anyone could comfortably sit while wearing a cage of thin steel hoops. Still, she made it seem effortless, much to Lady Catelyn's confusion. She was probably simply wondering what was beneath that skirt.

Robb squeezed her hand briefly. He appeared calm, but she knew he was nervous, and excited, too. Today, their plan would finally pay off. Damon had done a good job of preserving Karstark's armies, all things considered. They still had seven thousand men left.

She gave him a reassuring smile. The plan was foolproof, and unless Stark bannermen were unrealistically forgiving and altruistic—like their late Lord Eddard—there wouldn't be much left of Karstark come morning.

Karstark marched down the centre of the hall, flanked by two of Robb's unofficial Kingsguard. He was still clad in his dirty armour, stinking to high heaven of wet leather, sweat, and stale blood. She wrinkled her nose in distaste and retrieved her scented handkerchief from her pocket. At least Karstark had stopped dripping onto her flagstones; in the northern camp, one learned to be grateful for little blessings.

Robb gave her the signal. It was all planned and scripted and choreographed. They'd even gone over Robb's speech. Katherine clapped her hands together. "Lord Rickard, please, take a seat. Regale me with the tale of how you bravely defeated Daemon Lannister and his fierce fishermen from Lannisport. Oh, wait…"

Edmure sniggered, and then unsuccessfully tried to cover it up with a cough.

"They surrounded us in the night. By the time I realized Daemon Lannister's treachery—"

Katherine propped her chin on her hand and gave Karstark the cutest puppy eyes she could manage. "By the time you realized Daemon Lannister's treachery, the food had been eaten, the wine had been drunken, and all your brave knights were ready to be tucked into bed," she said.

"Tell us what happened," said Robb.

"He outnumbered us three to one at least, my lord," said Karstark. Hmm…maybe one needed to instate compulsory arithmetic classes for bannermen, as Daemon Lannister only had six thousand men in total. Damon's intel was trustworthy; that she knew. Unless, of course, the older Salvatore had forgotten how to count, but he was the miserly sort who kept track of every single bag of blood in his fridge. Counting was his expertise, if nothing else was.

"Reports say that there were four thousand Lannister men at the most," said Robb. "Where could the other twenty six thousand have come from?"

"It was six thousand men, my lord," said Bolton.

"Oh, yes. I suppose I forgot the retainers and camp followers and all the rest of them," said Robb.
"Still, the scouts must be reprimanded for forgetting to count twenty four thousand men."

"My lord, you know that Lannister treachery knows no bounds!" said Karstark. "For every one of my men that died, two Lannister men fell!"

"Then Daemon Lannister should have no soldiers by now," remarked Katherine.

Some men snorted while others actually booed. They were northerners, after all. They were very keen on sharing their feelings in a group setting.

"A liar as well as a failure," Bolton whispered to Robb. "Perhaps it is time someone made an example of him."

"Or maybe he just can't count," said Katherine kindly. "Stupidity has never been a crime in the north, Lord Bolton."

Robb raised a hand to stop the sniggering and bantering.

"You have served my father with loyalty and honour, Lord Karstark," he began. "But your inability to achieve... anything is a colossal failure that I cannot overlook."

"Hear, hear!" shouted the men.

Then Bolton stood forth. This was not part of the plan. What was he doing? He raised a hand. "My lords!" he said. "My ladies." He bowed to Katherine and Catelyn. "It was not mere incompetence, but treason!"

"Treason!" repeated the other lords in shock and anger.

"Slander!" cried Karstark.

"Stupidity is hardly treason, Lord Bolton," called Lord Manderly.

"Traitor!" shouted someone else.

"What's going on?" demanded Edmure.

"You know those flaps on the side of your head, Edmure?" said Blackfish. "Use them!"

"But I still don't understand," protested Edmure. Like she had said earlier; stupidity had never been a crime in the north. Or in Riverrun, for that matter.

"Silence!" commanded Robb. "Lord Bolton, whatever is on your mind, speak."

"It is treason, my lords," said Bolton. "I do not know what he intends to achieve, but I do not believe in coincidences. It is impossible for a northern force of superior strength to be defeated by southern fishermen." Also, two Salvatores. "But that is not all. I have received payments of gold, silver and jewels. From Lord Karstark."

There was silence as they all digested what he had said.

"You bastard!" roared Karstark. He lunged at Bolton, intent on strangling him with his bare hands, but he was held back by the guards. "My lord! Would you take his word over mine? Bolton is a treacherous snake. I will prove these poisonous lies false! If you would but grant me ten thousand more men, I will continue my campaign against the Lannisters until Tywin Lannister himself creeps out with his tail between his legs!"
"Your campaign, Lord Karstark?" began Bolton.

Robb held up a hand to silence him before he could say any more. The hall fell silent as Robb rose to his feet. "No, my lord Karstark," he said. His voice was soft, but none could fail to hear it and feel its power. "I will continue my campaign against the false king Joffrey. From now henceforth—" What was with the big words, Robb? "—you will be stripped of all responsibilities, all rank, and all titles. Your life, however, is not mine to take."

A murmur rippled through the crowds. "Mercy?" whispered someone incredulously.

Robb sat back down. "That I leave in the hands of those northern brothers you have betrayed."

At first, they were silent as they pondered Robb's judgement. However, as the idea sank in, that it would be the people's justice that Karstark would be facing, a cheer rippled through the crowd and reached eardrum-hurting levels. It was a thunderous approval, as unmistakable as the fact that they were all northmen. Robb motioned to the guards and the guards threw Karstark into the waiting arms of the crowds outside the hall. He was immediately swallowed by the mob, but Katherine could hear him bellowing for mercy.

"I am your lord!" he roared.

"Put his head on a spike!" they shouted. Did they have a single creative cell to share between them? No? She thought not.

"Hang him on a gibbet for the sport of the ravens!"

"Feed him to Grey Wind!"

"No! Feed him to Clegane!" Now, that had potential, although she would need to convince Gregor to eat him first. Perhaps she could make him into a pie? That way, no one would know.

"Gut him, strangle him with his guts, put his head on a spike, and then cook the rest of him and feed him to Clegane!"

"I may have been put off dinner, Katherine," Robb whispered.

"But you are always hungry," said Katherine.

"My lord, your subjects seem very keen on cooking Karstark," said Bolton.

"Then it is their choice," said Robb. "Although, if you were to pass on dinner tonight, I would not blame you."

"You must at least eat something, my lord," said Katherine. "A baked potato, perhaps?"

She smiled at him, but her mind was already distracted by other problems. Karstark was gone but the Umbers were still here and they were still very unhappy about how Robb had treated their patriarch. In fact, her little spies had told her that they had been gathering very often to discuss matters in low voices. She’d gone one night, herself, on a "walk" close to where the Umbers were stationed and heard it all. They wanted an eye for an eye. It was a reasonable response but, from where she stood, they were yet another obstacle for her to take care of. Eventually, she envisaged a world where the bannermen had no power and she and Robb alone ruled supreme. It wasn't something that Westeros had ever considered, but it had been done before by many kings in the past. Whoever said there was nothing to like about a benevolent dictatorship?
The Northern Riverlands

Elena watched the men through narrowed eyes. She'd heard whispers of the Brotherhood Without Banners. Some treated them as heroes, like Robin Hood and his band of merry men. Others said they were fiends and brigands who preyed on good honest people. At present, she was veering towards the latter. After their first meeting, they had bound and blindfolded all of them to lead them to their secret hideout. If she'd been any more of a vampirical vampire like Damon, she'd have ripped their throats out. However, she'd controlled herself for the sake of her friends' safety.

The headquarters of the Brotherhood, such as it was, was a cave hidden deep inside the forest. Its ceiling was low, and it looked as if it had been used as a lair by many other generations before. Perhaps Hill Tribes, if there were any around here. The fire reddened the interior, making it look as if it were stained with blood. The light from the flames could not dispel the shadows from the darkest corners and it was in one of these that she sought refuge.

"I'm sorry if we frightened you earlier," said one of the men. He sat down beside her without so much as a 'by your leave'. The rock might be public, but it was only polite to ask if the seat was taken. Which it was, by the way. Jon was only temporarily away, talking to the one eyed man. His name was Beric Dondarrion –the very same one that Lord Ned had sent to deal with Stefan and Gregor Clegane– and he was the leader of this ragtag band of religious anarchists.

"I wasn't frightened," she said.

"Huh," said the man. "You're a brave one, aren't you?" He bit off a hunk of bread. "I'm Anguy, by the way." He stuck out his hand.

"Huh!" said Elena. The nerve of him! Although, he seemed okay for an outlaw. "I'm Elena."

"Elena," he repeated. "That's a pretty name. How did you meet this little bastard lordling?"

"Can you please stop calling him that?" said Elena. "He has a name."

"Ah yes, Jon Snow," said Anguy. "But how did you meet him? You don't look like a northern girl."

"I travel lots and I worked for his family for a time," said Elena. "We hit it off."

"I travel lots and I worked for his family for a time," said Elena. "We hit it off."

"But he was in love with his brother's lady," said Anguy. "Not a very brotherly thing to do, that."

"How did you know Jon and Katherine weren't together first?" asked Elena.

"Huh. And Robb Stark took her. Very bad of him."

"I pity him," said Elena.

"Why? I hear Katherine Stark is a very beautiful woman. We should all be so lucky. Although, you're not bad yourself. In fact, I'd say if you cleaned up a bit, you could be just as pretty, not that I've seen her myself before."

"If I look pretty, I don't do it for a man," said Elena.

"No? But you'd do it for a little lordling, I see," said Anguy, casting an unfriendly glance in Jon's direction. "That other fellow you're with, he can't keep his eyes off you. He's starin'."

"What? Gendry?" said Elena. She would have brushed off that observation, because there was no way in hell that Gendry thought of her as anything more than a friend. Well, he couldn't, could he?
He'd never expressed any interest. Nor did he really say anything to her. However, Jon rushed over at this moment. She'd never seen him so angry before, not even when she'd called him conceited and arrogant.

He grabbed her arm. Everyone thought he was just being possessive and protective of her. "We need to be careful," he whispered. "These men intend to trade us to Robb for a price."

"What?" said Elena, and then she felt stupid for saying it. Of course they would. They were brigands.

"I'm not going to let them use us against my brother," said Jon. "And there's no knowing what they will do if they find a higher bidder."

"What are we going to do?" she whispered back into his ear.

"We're going to pretend we are going along with their plan," said Jon. "And then I'll get us out."

"Are you done marking your territory yet?" called Anguy. "Because we were having a perfectly civil conversation before you barged in. By the way, we're only ever going to sell your little lordling. Robb Stark probably doesn't even know your name, Mistress Elena, so there's no point in us forcing you to stay. Although, it is dangerous country out there, and we would be more than happy if you stayed."

"Speak for yourself, Anguy," said someone else. He gave a snort. "You just want something pretty to stare at."

"I am merely thinking of the lady's safety," said Anguy. He bowed to Elena. She simply gave a little smile. Jon glared at the archer. Everyone thought he was simply defending his woman from another man, but she knew better; he was thinking of how they were going to get out of here. At least, she hoped. She reached out to squeeze his hand to let him know that she was with him all the way, even though she had no idea how they were going to get out without some vampire antics, which she was loath to use. And could she really incapacitate so many people all at once? She counted about twenty of them. They were battle hardened men who had had enough of governments and institutions and were now looking to something else to make their lives right. In some way, she could respect that, although taking Jon hostage and forcing his brother to ransom him was way out of line.

"Get some sleep," Beric advised them, looking particularly at Jon. "It's a long march to Harrenhal."

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**King's Landing**

The smell of sewers and refuse and the unwashed bodies of King's Landing had never seemed so welcoming before. Ah, the smell of freedom! Jaime took in a deep breath, and then regretted it when a cart transporting buckets of human waste passed him by.

"Well, this is just disappointing," remarked Rebekah. "I'd expected something more impressive."

"I find it hard to imagine a city more impressive than King's Landing, save for Casterly Rock," said Jaime.

She made a rude noise. Her manners had been lacking ever since that afternoon. It made him almost want to grin every time, except even though he had won, he didn't really feel like he had. In fact, it felt as if he had missed something, as if he had been offered a feast but had only been allowed to smell it.
"This is nothing," she said. "I have seen tall spires of steel and glass that pierce the clouds like spears raised in rebellion against the heavens. I have seen sprawling networks of roads and underground tunnels so vast that you couldn't walk them all in a lifetime. There are so many people that you can kill a couple of thousand and it wouldn't even make a dent in the population, and no one would even notice they were missing."

"Who knew you were a poet?" said Jaime. Even her rude assessment of King's Landing could not dampen his spirits, although he would like to see these marvels she was talking about, if only so he could scoff at them in turn. He was back. Nobody else seemed to care, but that was fine by him. A lion did not concern himself with the opinions of sheep. Or infinity knots, for that matter. What in the world had possessed Rebekah to choose an abstract notion for her sigil? Even the least of the lesser houses could identify with some object or creature. What would a Mikaelson call himself? A knot? An eternity? It made him want to snigger just thinking about it.

"And who knew you could appreciate poetry?" asked Rebekah.

"Oh, I like it well enough if it's good," said Jaime. "Yours, on the other hand…"

Carts and wagons passed them by. They'd entered by the Dragon Gate, which was much better than the Mud Gate as that led into Flea Bottom. However, King's Landing was a large city full of riffraff and he supposed everyone had to shit. Thus the refuse cart.

He was so busy relishing in the thought of being home again and getting a hot bath that he did not bother looking at what was directly in front of him until it was too late.

A huge hulking bulk of a horse almost crashed into his steed. Jaime quickly reined the animal in before it could bolt. Northern horses were just like their human counterparts; brash, wild, but strong. And he liked the horses a great deal better than he liked northmen.

The other animal, ridden by a youth who looked as if he had never held a sword for a day in his life, reared backwards and flattened its ears and bared its teeth at Jaime, while the rider wheeled it around in circles to try and calm it down. How the boy meant to calm the animal down when he was in such an agitated state was beyond Jaime. Animals responded to people better than people responded to people. Oh wait, he wasn't calming it down.

"You imbecilic country bumpkin!" he raged at Jaime. Really? Country bumpkin?

"Perhaps, if you cannot ride, you should get off the road instead of endangering innocent people and horses," said Jaime.

"How dare you?" demanded the boy. He couldn't have been more than sixteen years of age. His hair had been trimmed with great care and he was attempting to grow a beard. Unfortunately for him, all he had to show for his efforts was a little bit of brown fuzz on his chin and cheeks. He raised his riding whip. The whole situation was absurd! Who was this nobody who would attempt to strike Jaime Lannister?

Jaime caught the whip in his fist. The boy tried to yank it back, but he refused to let it go. On a normal day, he would have pulled the little upstart from his saddle. But, this was a good day, and he felt obliged to share the cheer. The boy stared at him, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water trying to gulp for air.

"You're in luck, little lordling," he said. "I happen to be in a good mood today and I don't want to ruin it. Tell you what. I'll give you a chance."
"To do what?"

"Apologize, of course. You know how that works. You open your mouth, you say a few words showing your great regret, and if I like it, I may just let you go."

"I will not apologize to no-name farmer boy, son of another no-name farmer, from Shit Village somewhere. My father--" 

"Oh, it's another one of those," said Rebekah with a sidelong glance at Jaime. Jaime ignored her. He would not rise to her bait. Arguing with her was like arguing with a three year old. No matter who won, he would still have lost.

"Your father is not Tywin Lannister," said Jaime.

It was as if time had stilled, and Jaime, Brienne, and Rebekah alone remained aware of its passing. Everyone within earshot paused—and that was a lot of people, because most of the smallfolk in the vicinity had stopped to watch 'one of their own' take down an arrogant little lordling.

"I guess your father trumps his father," said Rebekah.

"Ty-Tywin Lannister?" whispered the boy. Young people these days. Where were their manners? It was Lord Tywin Lannister. Wait…was he showing his age? Impossible. Style never went out of fashion.

"Perhaps we have not been properly introduced," said Jaime. "I am Ser Jaime Lannister."

"My-my-my-"

"Oh, let the boy go," said Rebekah. "He's going to puke."

"Oh, all right. I am in a congenial mood today, and I suppose your apology will suffice. You may go now, but I feel it is my public duty to relieve you of your horse so you do not pose a danger to yourself or to these good people here. After all, your father would not like it if anyone were to die because of your incompetent riding."

"Of course, of course," stammered the youth. He practically fell out of his saddle in his haste to get away. Brienne took the reins of the horse, since Rebekah was being a spoilt child and refusing to behave as she ought. Perhaps he should make her his squire; that way, she'd be obliged to obey.

"You know, he didn't even ask you for a proof of identity. Maybe I should claim to be the queen," said Rebekah.

"This," he said, indicating his face, "is proof enough."

"It's nothing special. Now, Stefan, on the other hand…"

Jaime rolled his eyes. Yes, yes, Stefan Salvatore the miracle. As if Jaime Lannister couldn't bury people alive. "I will believe it when I see it," he said.

"Oh ye of little faith," said Rebekah. "Blessed are those who do not see, and yet still believe."

"Blessed is synonymous with fooled," said Jaime. "I have never been much of a religious man."

"Clearly," said Rebekah.

"I never took you for a religious woman," said Jaime.
"I know my scriptures when they suit me," said Rebekah.

"As do I," said Jaime. "Now, we are wasting time. I am looking forward to a hot meal and a hot bath. The gods know that you need one, Lady Mikaelson."

"Are you sure you're not simply looking forward to a...how shall I put this? A family reunion?"

"I want to see Lady Stark's daughters," said Brienne.

"Nobody cares what you want," said Rebekah. Jaime couldn't have put it better himself.

"What she said," said Jaime.

"You swore an oath!" said the outraged she-knight.

"Lady Brienne, brace yourself, for I am about to tell you a terrible truth," said Jaime. He turned around to gaze at her solemnly. "People...lie."

Brienne lunged at him, but he was completely prepared for that. He grabbed her arm and pulled. Hard. She fell out of her saddle and splashed into a puddle of unnamed matter.

"Oathbreaker!" she screamed.

"I thought it was kingslayer," said Rebekah. "Although that's an exaggeration, considering he hasn't exactly made a habit out of it."

"You find me someone else who has killed more than one king," said Jaime. "And then we can talk."

Brienne lunged for Jaime again. Could that woman never take a hint? "Guards!" he called. "This creature is attacking me."

The goldcloaks rushed up to restrain Brienne. It took four of them, even though she had not been fed properly for days, and they'd all been sleeping on rocks and tree roots.

"What's going on here?" demanded one of them. Jaime then noted that he wasn't wearing a gold cloak, yet the city guards listened to him.

"You seem strangely familiar. Have I beaten you before?" Jaime asked.

"Well, you have a very sharp tongue. Is your blade as sharp?" asked the man.

"Well, if it isn't Lord Tyrion's pet sellsword," said Rebekah. Oh, so that was how he knew the man. "Bronn, is it?"

"Lady Rebekah Mikaelson," said Bronn. "I almost mistook you for a milkmaid."

"Enough talk," said Jaime. "Now be a good pet and run along to your master. Tell him that his beloved brother has returned."

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**Next chapter:** Jaime takes back his rightful place in King's Landing. Jon plans a daring escape. Elena is reunited with her old flame.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Jaime reunites with his siblings. Jon and Elena and company attempt to escape from the Brotherhood...

King's Landing

She had heard the rumours but she had dared not believe it until she saw him. Jaime. Filthy, wearing scratched cheap armour that had been made to look like gold, his cloak torn and no longer red but some sort of indistinguishable brown and his beard covering his face like some confounded Northman, but it was Jaime. Cersei slowly rose to her feet, not sure of what to say. She was only wearing a robe over her chemise, for Lancel had just left. Thank the gods that Jaime had not arrived earlier. Otherwise, he would not only be a kingslayer, but a kinslayer too.

"Cersei," he whispered.

"Jaime," she said.

She took a few hesitant steps towards him. What if this was a dream? What if she woke and he was still in the northern camp, or worse…

He closed the distance between them in two strides. She could smell the masculinity of him beneath all the layers of stench. His eyes were bright. "Cersei," he said again. He reached up. The tips of his calloused fingers brushed her cheek. They were two halves of the same being, so what was she afraid of? Yet, she was afraid; afraid that others would find out, afraid that he would know of her unfaithfulness and not just with anyone but with Lancel. He had known of her other lovers, but never before had she taken another Lannister to her bed.

"You're back," she said.

"Why so surprised, Cersei?" said Jaime.

"How did you get back?"

"Well, you may be familiar with the concept of walking," he jested. "And there were horses involved."

She gave a frustrated laugh. Had he learned nothing? Was he really still the same man? Did he not know that Stannis' army was sailing towards King's Landing; thousands of fanatics ready to die for the 'rightful' king of Westeros? How could he jest?

"I thought you were gone," she said.

"Have you that little faith in me?" asked Jaime.

Well, what was she supposed to say to that? She turned away from him. "Stannis is coming."

"I know," said Jaime. "People talk, even peasants."
"He outnumbers us."

"Father will come," said Jaime.

"Father will not always be there to save us," said Cersei. Her Jaime, so naïve.

"Maybe not," Jaime agreed, "but I will be."

"He outnumbers Father," said Cersei.

"Yet, in his entire army, there is no one called Jaime Lannister," he said.

Oh, he was incorrigible and insufferable.

"However, let us not talk of such dreary matters." He leaned in for a kiss. She pushed him back.

"You're filthy," she said, "and I will not have you befouling my silks. Bath. Now."

He pouted. Actually pouted. "Why don't you come and help me?" he asked.

"Jaime!" How could he even say that? "It's...foolhardy."

"If you want intellect, go find Tyrion." She recoiled. "Stupid is so much more fun," protested Jaime. "Let's just say my recent encounter with death has given me a new perspective on life."

There was a gleam in his eye that she had not seen before. One would have thought that his latest brush with death would have given him a safer perspective but it seemed that the only thing it had given him was a greater desire to tempt fate.

She did not stop him again when he reached up to stroke the side of her face gently. Suddenly, he pulled her to him and pressed a kiss on her lips. He tasted of sweat and something that was just Jaime. He had never kissed her like this before, without the usual urgency, as if he wasn't afraid that they would be found. His insistent tongue demanded entry. She wanted to give it to him, to throw away all her worries to the wind and be like Jaime for once and never afraid of anything.

But she couldn't do that.

She pushed him away. "No, not here, not now," she said. "Later, I promise. Now go and have your bath."

"I'll hold you to that promise, Your Grace" said Jaime as he bowed and left.

Her silks had been soiled now. Streaks of dirt marred the white. It wouldn't wash out. She shed them and tossed them into the flames, watching the fabric burn and erase any trace that Jaime had ever been in here.

Jaime was back? How on earth had he gotten himself out? Tyrion almost leapt out of his chair in his surprise and eagerness to see him. Then he composed himself. He was the acting Hand of the King, not a child who missed his brother. Besides, who would miss Jaime? He was always such an arse. Jaime strode through the door as if he had never left. Tyrion didn't even care that he was leaving muddy boot prints all over his new rug.

All right, maybe he did care a little, because it was an expensive rug.

"You were the last person I expected to walk through that door," he said. "Please shut it behind you."
"What's gotten your feathers into a ruffle?" asked Jaime. He kicked the door shut and left another footprint on it. "By the way, I expected a…grander reception. A parade, perhaps."

"Father has spies in the Red Keep," said Tyrion.

"I would be surprised, and suspicious, if he didn't," said Jaime. He sat down without so much as an invitation and propped his boots on his desk. "Well? I had expected you, at least, to be happy to see me."

"This is my happy face. I'm practically beaming," said Tyrion. His face was completely straight and he knew it. The truth was, even though he was glad Jaime was back, he had a great deal on his mind and not a lot to be happy about. "Now that you're back, brother, I may need your help on a small matter."

"Stannis?" asked Jaime. He examined the grapes in Tyrion's fruit bowl – growing up in Casterly Rock, they had had to have separate fruit bowls; otherwise, Jaime would have eaten everything and left none for Tyrion– and plucked a couple of grapes from the bunch. He popped them into his mouth and grinned. "What would you have done without me?"

"The rug-cleaning bill would have been cheaper," Tyrion pointed out.

"Always such a miser with everyone except the whores," said Jaime.

Tyrion ignored him. "The problem is Caroline."

Jaime sprayed grape juice over Tyrion's face. "Caroline Forbes?" he practically choked.

"She appears harmless," began Tyrion.

"She is harmless," said Jaime.

"She's only pretending to be," Tyrion insisted. "It's the harmless looking ones that are the most dangerous, and she needs to be dealt with. Permanently, if need be. The main problem? Father liked her and one really did have to be a certain sort of person to be liked by Tywin Lannister.

"Have you tried…say…throwing good looking boys at her? Oh wait, don't throw me at her. I'm spoken for."

"Jaime, I am serious!"

"So am I! Listen. I know all about Caroline Forbes. If you really want to distract her, have her plan a ball."

"We are about to be besieged, dear brother," Tyrion pointed out.

"Yes, I know," said Jaime. "And I had thought that you would be needing my help with that problem, not Caroline Forbes."

"I can deal with the siege, brother," said Tyrion.

Jaime leaned over and flipped over one of the books to read the title. "The Great Sieges of Westeros, by…I can't pronounce this," he read. "Shouldn't you be planning for a siege instead of reading, brother?"

"It is called research," said Tyrion. "You should try it sometime. But your idea about Caroline does have merit. Who would you recommend, barring yourself?"
"Hmm…how is cousin Lancel these days?"

"Cousin Lancel is being a rather interesting character of late, almost as if he is beginning to grow one," said Tyrion. "But unless you volunteer, we are stuck with him– Or we could solve both our problems in one go. She is supposed to be good at planning, yes?"

"Dinner parties and balls and things called proms," said Jaime. "If you have a point, you should make it now, brother, before Stannis arrives."

"We could have her plan part of the siege. If she's as good as they say, then we have our problem of Stannis solved."

"Caroline Forbes against Stannis Baratheon and his one hundred and fifty thousand men?" said Jaime dubiously.

"If she fails, then the world will have one less Forbes in it."

"And three less Lannisters."

"Oh, you need not worry. I will have other preparations. Caroline, however, will be dealt with."

Jaime looked at him as if he were mad. "What is your problem against poor sweet clueless Caroline Forbes?" he asked.

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**In the Wilderness in the Riverlands**

The rock was hard and cold against Jon's back. He stared at the ceiling of the cave as the light from the dying embers of the fire stained it an unnatural red. One could be forgiven for thinking that a red haze clouded his mind. If he could kill every man in this so-called 'brotherhood' –they were thieves and robbers, nothing more– he would… well, he probably would do it. He was determined enough to not be a burden to his brother. He had come all this way to help Robb, not to make him pay several thousand gold dragons to these rogues for his freedom. If he needed Robb to pay for him, he might as well have just stayed on the Wall.

The lone guard shifted, trying to warm his back with what heat the dead campfire was giving out. The dim light illuminated the stream of steam issuing forth from his nose and mouth as he breathed. His sword was propped on his knees as he stared out into the darkness.

Darkness would be their best friend. If they could cause some sort of confusion, they could slip away before anyone could notice them. He glanced at the sleeping Elena. She lay facing him, with her cheek resting against his shoulder. As if she sensed his tension, she shifted and gave a little sigh. It was so hard to imagine that this girl could be a blood-drinking killer in the same league as Damon Salvatore. Although, Damon hadn't seemed that dangerous either; just terribly, terribly cocky and arrogant. Elena could be his best bet at escaping. However, the last thing he wanted was to put her in harm's way. If anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself. He reached out to brush away a lock of hair that had fallen over her forehead. She crinkled her brow in that way that he loved and slowly opened her eyes.

"I'm sorry for waking you," he whispered.

She blinked a couple of times and then snuggled closer to him. He wrapped his cloak around the both of them. The nights were getting colder, and even vampires had to feel the chill, especially since their bodies were cooler than those of regular people. She would feel the cold, wouldn't she? "What time is it?" she whispered back. The guard didn't hear them, for he was too intent on the
threats that were coming from without. If only he knew that the greatest predator of all lay just a few feet away from him.

"Not yet dawn," he replied. "Listen, I have an idea, but we are going to have to wait until we move out."

She was wide awake in an instant. "What do you need me to do?"

Nobody noticed her slipping away into the shadows. The darkness enveloped and protected her. She glanced back at the sleeping forms of the men and at Jon, who was pretending to be asleep but was really poised to strike. Most of them were tired from the long march during the day, except for Jon, who was tenser than a newly strung bow as he waited for her signal.

Ideally, a diversion would consist of burning something, but in order to do that, they needed something highly flammable. Unfortunately, gasoline was a bit of a rare commodity in these parts, and with the guard present, it was also impossible to steal the alcohol unless there was an initial distraction.

She flitted between the trees. The lone guard hadn't noticed her yet. She deliberately broke a branch off a tree. At the sound of the crack, he looked up and his hand immediately flew to his sword. As the branch landed, he leapt to his feet. "Beric!" he hissed, waking the leader. "There's something out there."

Elena ran in another direction and threw a rock at them from there for good measure. She'd been a terrible bowler when playing softball as a child, but her vampire state now made her a match for premier league baseball players. The rock hurtled into their midst with a force strong enough to create a small crater. Her aim was off; otherwise, she'd have had it hit someone for better impact. Nobody tried to use Jon and got away with it; not on her watch.

The ensuing shouts were loud enough to wake up everyone in the camp, including Hot Pie, who had previously been snoring loud enough for a man four times his size. "What's going on?" she heard him demand of Gendry. The blacksmith's apprentice had no answers for him.

"Stay calm. Look around the perimeter and see what's out there. Anguy, you come with me," called Beric. "Make sure our guests are safe." The men fanned out in search of their unknown assailant. She sped away and around them, always keeping out of the way of the yellow light of the torches.

"There's nothing!" called one of the men.

She cracked another branch, just to keep them interested.

"There definitely is something," hissed Anguy.

The pile of supplies in the camp suddenly flared into flames. So Jon had managed to find something to burn after all. She'd been afraid that the damp would stop him from building the bonfire he so wanted. The column of light and smoke rose high into the sky. A jar shattered as something exploded. She circled back around, listening intently for Jon's voice, although it was he who found her first.

"Have I ever told you how much I love you?" he panted as he grabbed her arm and they both ran for the safety of the forest.

"Every waking moment," said Elena. "I know I'm awesome."
"You inspire awe in me every day," he agreed.

Hot on their heels were Hot Pie, Sam and Gendry. Sam was trying his very best to keep up, but sooner or later, they were going to have to slow down for him. Between his desperate gasps for life-giving breath, Elena could hear him telling Jon the next time he had a brilliant plan, he would like to be informed first.

Hot Pie was only managing to keep pace with them because Gendry was dragging him along. Ghost practically ran in circles around them and nipped at Hot Pie's heels to make him faster. "Get the wolf away from me!" he screamed. "What's going on? Where are we going?"

Jon and Elena exchanged a glance. With the amount of noise they were making, it would only be a matter of time before Dondarrion and his men found them. But they couldn't possibly just leave Hot Pie, could they? Elena had brought him this far. She wasn't going to abandon him without a very good reason. Although, this was coming pretty close.

Ghost veered off into the forest. Jon called after him, but he did not even look back. They were so busy looking behind them as they ran that they did not bother looking at what they were running to until it was too late. A thicket of spears and arrows awaited them, although they did not belong to the Brotherhood.

"In the name of the one true king of Westeros, rightful heir to the Iron Throne and the lord of the Seven Kingdoms, state your purpose in these lands!"

Jon froze. Which rightful king were they talking about? If they were Robb's men, and he said Joffrey, they'd kill him. If they were Joffrey's men and he said Robb, they'd still kill him. If they were Stannis' men, and he said either Joffrey or Robb, he would still be dead.

"We're travellers fleeing the north," said Elena. "Creatures have come from beyond the wall. Blood drinking monsters."

"You believe those stories?" asked the soldier.

"I've seen it with my own eyes," said Elena. "The bodies were drained of blood and there were bite marks on their necks."

The men looked at them, half believing, half scornful. "Bind them," said the captain. "Lord Daemon will decide the truth of it."

Damon? Damon had betrayed Robb for titles and wealth! These had to be Lannisters.

There was nothing Jon could do as their hands were bound behind their backs with rough rope, so tightly that the blood flow to his hands were cut off.

The soldiers marched on either side of them so there was no way of escaping. Jon blamed himself. If he had been more careful, then they wouldn't have been in this predicament! It was all his fault.

"We'll be all right," he murmured softly to Elena. "I got us into this. I'll get us out."

"No talking!" said the soldier behind him. The man drove the butt of his spear into Jon's back, causing him to stumble.

"Leave him alone!" said Elena.
"Just because you are a woman, do not expect to be treated any differently," said the soldier. "Although, I suppose you could bargain for mercy."

Jon snarled and lunged at the man, only to be jerked backwards by the length of rope that was tied about his bound hands. No one could disrespect Elena like that! Although, he wasn't doing very well at defending her honour. The rope cut into his flesh. He fell, and it felt as if his arms had been yanked out of his shoulders. "No!" Elena was shouting.

"What is the problem here?" asked the captain.

"The prisoners were being insubordinate."

"Then subordinate them," said the captain. Jon bit back a cry as the man pulled him up by his hair. "Perhaps we should make an example out of this one. But I doubt Lord Daemon would approve of us damaging his goods."

There it was again, Damon. But if it was really Damon, then perhaps they would have some hope because Damon loved Elena. Jon was hauled back onto his feet. "I've shown you mercy," said the captain. "I could have just as easily slit your throat in front of your pretty friend here. Or maybe I still will."

Jon glared, but there was nothing he could do. He knew the man's words were true. So he said nothing and stumbled onwards to their doom. He would be put to the sword as soon as Damon recognized him. But Elena, she could have a chance. That thought gave him some comfort.

Elena had heard all about the discipline of the Lannister army from Tyrion, but hearing about it and seeing it were two different things entirely. It was a far cry from...well, from anything else she had ever seen before. The tents were arranged in tidy rows instead of haphazardly. The golden lion on his field of bloody victory pranced in the wind, claws extended and fangs bared. The soldiers marched on either side of them. The young commander who had captured them had been courteous enough to not put shackles around their legs so they could keep up with the rest of the marching columns.

However, as soon as they stopped, the shackles came out. "Would you mind not putting them on so tightly?" said Elena. "Circulation is actually necessary."

"No talking!" barked the young commander. He sounded like his voice had only just stopped breaking in the middle of making commands. How old could he be? Jeremy's age, perhaps?

"What is this?" asked a new voice. The men parted to let a handsome blond man through. He had piercing green eyes like all scions of House Lannister. At least, like Lord Tyrion and Prince Joffrey. Wait, he was king—no, he wasn't. Robb Stark was king. Although, that was where the family resemblance ended. The young man striding towards them was tall and lean, with an aura of calm that radiated from his person. Was this Jaime Lannister? Everyone said Jaime was the handsomest man in all of Westeros. While this man might not be the handsomest, he certainly was in the running for the title. "That is no way to talk to a lady, ser."

"Lord Daemon," said the young commander hurriedly. He bowed. "I was just telling her she shouldn't talk. She's a prisoner." Daemon? Well, that was a fitting name. He reminded her a lot of another Damon...like the one who was supposed to be commanding this garrison. Or had it been a mix-up?

"The ropes and chains do tend to give it away," said Daemon. "But, tell me, what have they done to
"We found them running in the forest," said the lower ranked Lannister man. He blushed. Oh dear. That was not anything a soldier should do, much less a soldier who was in charge of other soldiers.

"So I suppose if I were enjoying my evening stroll, as I do, I should be clapped in irons as well?"

"My lord, I--"

"Keys," said Daemon, holding out his hand. He had long slender fingers, more like that of a poet's than of a warrior's. Then again, looks could be incredibly deceiving. She ought to know this better than anyone else.

The young soldier handed over the keys and mumbled something that even vampire hearing couldn't pick up. He fled as soon as Daemon took the keys.

"I apologize, my lady," said Daemon as he unlocked Elena's shackles and then cut through the ropes around her wrists with his dagger. "He is new to his post." He released Jon next, but left his men to free the others.

Jon rubbed his wrists to get the blood back into his hands. "Thank you, my lord," he said.

"You are no common traveller, my lord," said Daemon. "I would be lying if I said I wasn't curious. What business does a lord, his lady, and his…servants be doing in the wilderness in these dangerous times?"

Something moved in the periphery of Elena's vision. It wasn't just the normal fidgeting of men. That dark hair and those blue eyes were unmistakable.

Damon. She tried to catch his gaze, which wasn't hard because he was staring right at her. The hard part was communication. She furrowed her brow, hoping that it conveyed confusion. He shrugged and pointed at her as he mouthed, 'What?' He gave her a look that seemed rather disapproving, but beyond that, she had no idea what he was trying to say.

"My name is Jon Snow," said Jon, who had not yet noticed Damon.

"Robb Stark's brother?" asked Daemon.

"His bastard brother," said Jon. He gave a bitter laugh. "It's not quite the same thing."

"Why don't we go inside to talk? Doubtless you would be tired after your travels, Lord Jon," said Daemon. "You need not worry about your servants. They will be taken care of."

"Samwell Tarly is not my servant," said Jon.

Sam cleared his throat nervously. "Of House Tarly, my lord," he said. Daemon raised his eyebrow. Even though he didn't say anything, Elena could already hear him saying, 'You're joking, right?'

Daemon paused. "So I see," he finally said. "I believe your father Randyll Tarly is a bannerman of Mace Tyrell who was, formerly, a bannerman of the late King Renly."

"I believe so," said Sam. He was doing terribly at this.

"Still, the Tyrells have not allied themselves with Stannis after recent unfortunate events. I believe in giving men the benefit of the doubt. Come with us and refresh yourself, Lord Tarly. It has been a long night."
Jon and Elena followed Daemon Lannister through the camp. She marvelled at how tidy it was. If someone were to tell her the Lannisters and their soldiers were actually all robots, she would believe them. Except Tyrion. Maybe the production machinery malfunctioned or got the wrong specs. That was kind of mean, making fun of Lord Tyrion, even if it was just inside her head.

Damon—the Salvatore version—followed closely behind them. Elena risked glancing back at him once or twice. She had so many questions. What had happened after they had lost one another in King's Landing? Was he serving the Lannisters now? Would he? But she had seen him standing behind Joffrey and Cersei, and he had done nothing to stop them from killing Lord Ned, although it wasn't as if he could have done anything. She wasn't worried about Damon betraying her; that was one thing he would never do. But Jon? She was with Jon now. Damon wouldn't...appreciate that.

There was no way out of here; at least, not without some trickery. Jon had made note of every possible exit, and so far, his count was at zero. This was not the brotherhood of brigands' cave. The Lannisters trained their men well; he didn't know much, but he knew that much. He glanced about, hoping for a weakness.

He spotted Damon glaring at them. Jon gripped Elena's hand and entwined his fingers with hers. She may have been Damon's love a long time ago, but she said she loved Jon Snow now.

Damon narrowed his eyes when he saw Jon's gesture, but apart from that, he made no indication that he saw anything or even recognized them.

They entered the tent. There was a fire burning merrily in the bronze brazier and servants were already preparing some wine, fruit, and bread. No salt. "Bring chairs for my guests," said Daemon.

"Lord Daemon," said a man from the shadows within the tent. He had been standing so still, with his back to them, that Jon hadn't even noticed him until he had spoken. He sounded vaguely familiar. He turned around. He was quite a young man, about Jon's age, with chiselled features that girls would call handsome, but Jon found them to be cold and unyielding, with too thin lips and eyes that were only pools of shadow…

Fuck the gods. Stefan Salvatore. Jon immediately averted his gaze and tried to hide his face in case the younger Salvatore brother recognized him. It had been dark that night on the Kingsroad, hadn't it? And they had only met briefly. Stefan must have tried to kill thousands of men in his lifetime. He wouldn't remember all of them, would he? Although...Jon doubted many escaped, and so recently at that. And, of course, he had shouted Elena's name to distract this Salvatore, and here he was, with Elena. There was no way in the seven hells that Stefan Salvatore would not recognize Elena.

So far, they had been lucky. Stefan was focusing intently on Daemon Lannister. "My Lord Daemon," he said. "I have news of..." Then he finally noticed that they weren't all Lannister loyalists there, and that Daemon had guests. And then he realized who those guests were. His voice trailed off into silence. Elena bit her lip and extracted her hand from Jon's grasp.

"Elena?" whispered Salvatore.

"Hello, Stefan," said Elena.

**Next chapter:** Elena becomes reacquainted with the Salvatores. Jon tells a story. Theon is bewitched.

King's Landing

The bath felt like the most heavenly thing on earth. Jaime let the water soak every bit of northern filth out of him while he sipped slowly from a goblet of white wine. Rebekah had recommended eating strawberries with the wine. He had to say, she knew how to enjoy life. She sat opposite him, lying back against the edge of the tub, also with a goblet of wine in one hand while she bit into a strawberry and sucked on the juice in a most alluring way. Her lips should really be wrapped around something else.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I must say, I have never thought of strawberries and wine before," said Jaime.

"It should really be champagne, but there is none to be found. It's wine with bubbles in it, and it's like drinking sunlight. Ideally, wine goes with cheese."

"I should like to drink sunlight," said Jaime. "The world you come from seems so very different from mine. It must have been hard, adjusting."

"It used to be like this, but things changed. I like it better this way. The strong can succeed and the weak can be left behind."

"Like Caroline?"

"Yes! Like Caroline!"

"Tell me about Caroline Forbes," said Jaime.

"Why on earth would you even think about her? She's boring!"

"Because my father has seen fit to raise her above the station she was born to, and I want to know why."

"Frankly, I'm as stumped as you are," said Rebekah. "There's nothing remarkable about her. She's just borderline pretty, and so terribly annoying and judgemental. Rebekah, you shouldn't do this. Rebekah, you shouldn't do that. Rebekah, you're an evil bloodslut!"

Jaime laughed. "Surely she must have some good qualities," he said. "Otherwise, why would my father have made her a lady?"

"Maybe she carries cups well. But seriously, the only thing she wants in life is to graduate high school—that's an educational institution where people go to learn to be mediocre—and live happily ever after with her boy toy Tyler Lockwood." She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're not interested
in *Caroline* are you?"

He made a disgusted noise. "Please, Rebekah," said Jaime. "I have standards."

"She's blonde," Rebekah pointed out. "Although possibly not closely related enough."

He probably would have throttled her there and then, and she was only saved by a savage knock on the door.

"Jaime!" bellowed Tyrion on the other side. "Just because you are the golden boy and the hero of the hour –gods know why, since you only got yourself rescued– doesn't mean you don't have to help me with our current problems of the siege and you-know-who!"

"Who?" asked Rebekah. "I mean, he's not talking about stick-up-his-arse Stannis, is he?"

Jaime ignored her question for now. "It's called a handle, you turn it and the door magically opens, Tyrion," he called. "You should try it." He smirked at Rebekah. "My apologies. My memory is not what it was. I forgot you were there."

She flicked water at him.

The door opened with a groan. Tyrion and his friend Bronn marched in, looking very serious and determined, Then they both paused.

"Hello, Lord Tyrion, Captain Bronn," said Rebekah.

"Jaime," said Tyrion. His eyes never left Rebekah's chest. He cleared his throat. "You did not say you had company."

"Oh, Rebekah hardly counts. She won't betray us, will you, sweet girl?"

Rebekah elbowed him under the water. He tried to kick her. She sat up and leaned forward, resting her arms and chin on the side of the bathtub so that the rest of her was hidden. "I'll take your secrets to the grave, my lords," she said sweetly to Tyrion.

Tyrion narrowed his eyes at her. Jaime put an arm around her. Should he tell Tyrion about the vampires? Perhaps later. "I'm not very comfortable discussing matters of state when you are so… otherwise engaged," said Tyrion. "Would you mind taking a turn on the battlements with me, brother? After you are dressed, of course."

"My brother, always ruining my diversions," said Jaime. "Can't I have a little uninterrupted… fun?"

He liked that word. It was short, sharp, to the point and easy to spell.

"There is no rest for the wicked, my lord," said Rebekah.

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**Southwest of Harrenhal**

Elena stared at Stefan. Her first true love, and now, she had nothing to say to him; at least, nothing good. It wasn't that she didn't still love him, because she did. But Jon was the most important person now and she had to protect him. Stefan had no goodwill towards Jon, and he was on the Lannister side. He'd been responsible for the deaths and homelessness of thousands of innocent villagers throughout Westeros. They hadn't even done anything to him. She'd seen switched-off Stefan and moody Stefan and out of control Stefan, but this was something else entirely. She didn't know this Stefan.
"Elena," repeated Stefan, a little louder this time.

"Stefan," said Damon. Stefan looked up. Damon shrugged. "What? I thought we were saying each other's names."

"Ser Salvatore," said Daemon Lannister, interrupting their little awkward moment. "Would you mind taking Lord Jon and his friend Lord Tarly to an empty tent to refresh themselves? I am sure they are exhausted. As for you, Damon, be a gentleman and fetch a cup of wine for the lady."

"As you wish, my lord," said Damon sarcastically. He bowed like a circus ringmaster and stalked off to pour some wine into a goblet. A golden one, of course. They were amongst lions here.

"Lady Elena, how do you know Ser Stefan?" asked Daemon. "Forgive me, I am curious. Stefan is a dear friend, but he is not very forthcoming about anything more personal the number of men in his company."

"Stefan has never been the forthcoming type," said Elena. "We lived in the same village. Mystic Falls."

"I have heard a great deal about this village from…you may know her. Beautiful blonde hair, blue eyes, cannot stop talking."

"Caroline?" asked Elena tentatively. "Caroline is here?"

"Not here," said Daemon. "Lord Tywin has sent her to King's Landing."

"But why?" Poor Caroline! She didn't deserve this! What had they done to her?

"I suppose Lord Tywin liked her," said Daemon. "But I digress. How did you come to be in the company of Robb Stark's bastard brother?"

Elena thought about it. Think. Think. What could she tell him? Nothing about vampires, obviously. Jon had spun this fantastical tale about him and King Robb fighting over Katherine, hadn't he?

"My family in Mystic Falls, they didn't approve of my…relationships," said Elena.

"With the Salvatore brothers?" asked Daemon. Damon was listening intently even though he was pretending to be busy pouring wine. Seriously, how long did it take to pour a cup of wine? Thankfully, Daemon Lannister was too interested in her to notice how long his subordinate was taking to do such a simple task.

"No," said Elena. "There was a feud between my family and theirs. When my uncle found out, he was furious. He chased me, and them, out of town and then sent people to hunt us down."

"Why did you not stay together?" asked Daemon.

"Her uncle led the village council," interjected Damon. "He had too many friends. We were separated. I went to Winterfell."

"And I ran as far away as I could, towards the north," said Elena. "I was hungry and cold and tired, and near death. The Night's Watch found me and took me in. I was never going to stay there, but while I was there, I met Jon. He'd just been chased out of Winterfell by his brother, Robb Stark. From what I hear, they both loved the same girl. Katherine Pierce?" She froze for a minute. Had Daemon ever met Katherine before? "My sister, Katherine."
"You went to the Wall while your sister went to Winterfell and found Robb Stark?" asked Daemon.

"I suppose so," said Elena. "I'm really not sure what she did. We both had...dalliances with the Salvatore, and my uncle tried to hunt us both down because he believed we had both betrayed the family."

"I can understand that," said Daemon with a little smile. "And I suppose you were also separated."

"Yes," said Elena.

"It is a pity. It seems like your sister had all the luck."

"I don't think so. I wouldn't have met Jon, otherwise."

Daemon laughed. "Would you really take the bastard brother over the heir to Winterfell, and perhaps, one day, the King in the North, or even all of Westeros?"

"We have nothing to do with Robb Stark," said Elena. "He chased Jon out of Winterfell, away from his family and the only home he'd ever known, and exiled him to an icy waste, just so he could have Katherine all to himself. Even if he did want us back, we wouldn't go to him."

"He is nothing to you, then?" asked Daemon.

"He is more than nothing. He is Jon's enemy, and by extension, my enemy."

"So, Jon Snow lost your sister, and found you. What sort of man is he?"

"What do you mean?"

Daemon leaned back in his seat and propped his boots—mud and all—on his little desk. "Well, what do you think of him? Clearly, you are quite fond of him, and I imagine you would know him better than most."

"Jon is a good person," said Elena. "He's brave, smart—" Damon snorted. Elena ignored him. "—loyal, and kind...most of the time. He'd do anything for his friends."

"And his brother?" asked Daemon.

"Once upon a time, he would have done anything for him too," said Elena.

"Yet he went after his brother's woman. How did that happen?" asked Daemon.

"Jon loved her first," said Elena. Sure, this was Damon's story, but she could borrow it for now. It wasn't as if he wanted the world to know anyway. In fact, he would rather everyone simply forgot that he'd ever loved Katherine.

"Did she love him?" said Daemon.

"He thought she did. Everybody thought she did. Except Robb Stark, I suppose." She really hoped that Katherine had not been commissioning people to write her biography. She didn't think so. Katherine Pierce was many things. Famewhore was not one of them. At least, she hoped not. Bad habits were so very easy to develop, and everyone who knew Katherine even just a little bit understood that she was not one who denied herself anything. "I guess the future lord of Winterfell won in the end."

"You can hardly blame her, Lady Elena," said Daemon. "Given the same choice, would you not
have chosen Robb Stark?"

Damon now gave up all pretences of pouring wine and simply eavesdropped.

"I love Jon," said Elena. Damon stiffened his shoulders. "I still would have chosen him."

"Even if they both loved you?"

She paused. She didn't know. The truth was, she didn't know Robb that well. He sounded like a decent enough person, for a medieval lordling, and Jon thought the world of him so he must be good. However, apart from his name, the fact that he treated his siblings well, and his extreme handsomeness, she knew nothing about Robb Stark.

"If they had both loved me, I would have had trouble choosing," she finally said, basing her answer on previous experience. Damon stiffened his shoulders.

"Ser Damon, is the wine forthcoming or is it stubbornly refusing to come out of the ewer?" asked Daemon. Damon jerked, as if suddenly brought back to life. He practically slammed the cup of wine onto the table.

"If there is nothing else, my lord, may I take my leave?" he asked, using sarcasm to cloak his distress-anger. In Damon, those two feelings were interchangeable.

Elena watched him go. She longed to run after him and explain, but what could she say? She didn't know whether saying anything would make things all right between them. Ever. She still cared deeply about Damon–loved him, even, but she was no longer in love with him. Her mother had once told her that if she truly cared, she would let him go.

Could she let him go?

Jon tried not to look at Stefan Salvatore. It wasn't that he was afraid of him. All right, maybe he was a little bit afraid. Elena had said that he had been a 'ripper' once. The meaning was very literal. She had also said she wasn't sure if he was a ripper now or just Stefan.

Although, he could never be 'just Stefan' to Jon. He was Elena's first true love. What if she still cared for him? After all, she obviously cared for Damon, who loved her very much. Why did it all have to be so complicated? As if loving the same woman as one's enemy wasn't bad enough, he also had to love the same woman as his friend. Was this life? Maybe they should have stayed on the Wall. Both of them.

Stefan led him and Sam to a small tent near the centre of the camp. It had been newly erected. There was nothing inside except two narrow cots and a small bronze brazier with a few burning embers. One lonely lamp burned.

"I know who you are," said Stefan suddenly.

"I should hope so, since I said my name aloud for all to hear," said Jon.

"I remember you from the Kingsroad," said Stefan. "You were trying to find your brother."

"Maybe I was trying to find Katherine," said Jon without so much as a pause. He had spun a good story about fighting with Robb over Katherine–based on the original pair of brothers themselves, of course– and he thought he might as well use it. He hoped Elena was also using the same story. Otherwise, they were...what did she call it? Ah, yes. SCREWED.
"Even after she abandoned you for him?" asked Stefan.

"You of all people should know how Katherine is. I thought I could have a chance if I only fought for her."

"But then you met Elena," said Stefan.

"I did," said Jon. "We met on the Wall but we had been nothing more than friends for a long time. She followed me when I left the wall to find Katherine."

"You still love Katherine, then?"

"Katherine Pierce leaves marks on you. I don't think they ever go away."

Stefan sighed. "Of course they don't," he said. "She's Katherine Pierce."

"Katherine Stark now, actually. I didn't hear of the wedding until much later. I realized then it was too late." Stefan should be able to identify with him, right? Playing on people's sympathies; when had he become so devious?

"You wouldn't be the first man she played," said Stefan.

"But then, if she hadn't played me my eyes would never have truly opened and I wouldn't have realized that her..." He could not say 'doppelganger'. That would mean he knew absolutely everything—which he did– and it wouldn't be safe. "Her sister was the true prize. With Elena, it's real."

Stefan looked as if someone had rammed a wooden stake into his stomach.

"Love is blind, Jon Snow. I'll leave you to it," he said abruptly, ending the interrogation and turning on his heel.

"Well, that went quite well," said Sam. "I didn't know you knew Katherine Stark, and I thought you liked your brother?"

Jon decided not to tell Sam the truth. It would be better that way.

Winterfell

Bonnie's footsteps made almost no sound on the stone floors of Winterfell's long hallways and winding stone staircases. These familiar places, which she had once been ready to call home, were now alien and hostile, ruled by fear of the invading Ironborn and equal hatred of them. As she passed the other servants, she could feel their steely gazes upon her. She was a traitor in their eyes, one who had bowed to Theon Greyjoy to raise her station.

She tried to ignore them as best as she could. Her old self would have condemned her like all the rest but she had made deals with the devil before (Klaus) and she would do so again if it meant keeping her friends safe.

Chill winds blew in from the north. She clutched her shawl more tightly about her as she hurried up the last few steps to Lord Stark's chambers.

Theon's chambers now.

She felt as if she were invading the privacy of the late Lord Stark who had been so kind to her and
Damon as she stepped inside. "You wanted to see me, my prince?" she said.

"Come here," said Theon. It was warm inside the chambers. A fire roared in the hearth. Hangings had been put up to stop the wind from coming in. The shutters, of course, were closed against the cold, the light, and the sight of others. Theon wore only his breeches and his face was red from having drunken a little too much. He relished in the position of being the 'Prince of Winterfell' and had gleefully sent off a letter to his father to ask for more troops to reinforce the city that had once welcomed him. "What do you see, Bonnie?"

She looked around. It was room, a cozy room, possibly where all the little Starks had been conceived. "I'm not sure what you want me to see, my prince," she said.

"Look harder," he commanded.

The snarling Stark wolf featured on every tapestry, along with scenes of jousts and great chivalry.

"Wolves," she said.

"Exactly," said Theon. "I don't want to sleep every night with the eyes of my captors looking down at me. I want you to make me new tapestries."

"I think you misunderstand me, my prince," said Bonnie. She needed patience. Patience. She thought about how she used to talk to Damon and how she would stop herself from frying his brain every time he opened his mouth. She could do this. "You do not sow, yes?"

"Of course not. I am Ironborn," said Theon. So obviously not true, because he loved sowing his wild oats.

"And I do not sew," said Bonnie.

Theon stared at her for a minute. Then he laughed. "That's good, that's funny," he said. "I never knew you were funny, Bonnie."

She curtseyed. It was a terrible pun, but she supposed he didn't have a more developed sense of humour.

"We'll have to find someone who can, then," said Theon. He moved close to Bonnie. His breath smelled of sour wine. She looked up to meet his gaze. She could kill him with one spell. It wouldn't even be a problem. Yet something in her gut was telling her that this was not the best way to go about protecting herself and the young lords. She kept Theon placated for now so that there would be a better plan. The old Bonnie would have been so aghast at what she was doing now, but she supposed everyone changed, especially in a place like this. Westeros was the place where innocence came to die. Her, Stefan, Caroline, they'd all changed, at least from what she'd heard about the other two. (Although, in some, like Katherine, it seemed to have changed her for the better, or perhaps there were simply ways for her to channel her evilness and Damon had still been Damon the last time she'd seen him, albeit with friends.)

His beard scratched her face when he kissed her. "Bonnie, my Bonnie," he whispered. "I've wanted to do this for a very long time. I've dreamed about it. Have you?"

She had wondered at one point, but any feelings she'd had for Theon Greyjoy had died when he had come marching into his adopted home with fire and steel. Still, she nodded. There was greater magic than all the spells in the world. Katherine had learned to use it. Elena had been using it even without knowing it. Perhaps it was time for her to give it a try. She reached out to cup Theon's face. Her heart was thudding in her chest. "I dared not, but I did anyway," she said.
"Now we're free. I'm the prince and I could give you anything that you wanted, Bonnie Bennett," said Theon. He unwound her shawl as he bent down to kiss her again.

A knock came on the door.

"What?" Theon almost snarled.

"My prince, the wildling woman wants to see you," said the guard outside.

"What does she want?" said Theon irritably.

"She wouldn't say, my prince," said the guard.

Theon looked at Bonnie. "Should I see her?" he asked. Bonnie knew Theon had…er… interests in Osha since the beginning too. He liked everything new and the fact that she had been so hostile had only heightened his interests, if in an unpleasant sort of way.

"I don't see why not, my prince," said Bonnie. How did those girls do it when they were being naughty and fun? She cocked her head and smirked and tried a smouldering look a la Damon Salvatore. Damn. She should have practised. "It could be fun."

"It could," said Theon. "All right, send her in."

Osha was dressed in her usual furs. Bonnie never took her eyes off the wildling woman as she came sauntering into the room. Theon might be too much of a guy to notice that something was up, but Bonnie had a feeling. Like her, the wildling had pledged her allegiance to Prince Theon. The witch simply didn't know for what reason yet.

"My prince," said Osha.

"You said you wanted to see me?" said Theon. His eyes roved down her body. Osha smiled and undid the top couple of buttons of her heavy long coat of skins. The coat fell away to reveal…well, nothing else underneath except pale skin, rounded breasts with dark nipples and a triangle of hair…

Bonnie looked away but then reminded herself of why she was here and what she had intended to do. If Theon could be thus blinded with pleasure, then perhaps whatever plan she needed to execute in order to ensure the Ironborn did not kill too many people would work more easily. The lot of them were brutes, except for Dagmer, who might have some intelligence behind those pale eyes, but it would be Theon who would be able to see through whatever it was that they were planning.

"Well, well, I knew there was a woman hidden in there somewhere," said Theon. "What do you think, Bonnie?"

"I think the more the merrier," said Bonnie. She was not the old Bonnie Bennett. She had to pretend to be Katherine or one of those women at whose feet men deposited their hearts and souls. She draped her shawl over the back of a chair, moving slowly and deliberately and trying to keep her movements from being jerky. First, she tugged off a glove, very slowly, removing it finger by finger. Theon's gaze travelled from her hand to her wrist as she let drop the glove. She did the same with the other. All the while, she never stopped gazing at him from under her eyelashes. He seemed mesmerized by her movements as she moved onto her dress and first pulled it off one shoulder and then the other before letting it slide into a puddle at her feet.

Osha began to stroke Theon's jawline, her hand moving downwards over his chest. He returned the petting absent-mindedly, his eyes wide as his brain became overloaded with hormones. The
wildling woman slipped her hand inside his pants where there was a large bulge. Bonnie swallowed whatever trepidation she had and stepped out of the puddle of fabric, dressed only in her sleeveless linen shift. She could feel the heat of the fire through the thin material. The wooden boards of the floor were still cold and a bit damp beneath her feet.

Theon held out an arm towards her. She hung back, just out of his reach. He didn't like that very much and stepped forward to pull her against his body. His other arm was still wrapped about Osha.

He was no match for the two of them. He tried valiantly, but Osha was wild and Bonnie had tricks she had learned from the movies. They plied him with wine and sex and riddles until he became so exhausted he could no longer keep his eyes open. Bonnie lay wide awake on one side of Theon while Osha slept on the other side, her leg thrown over his naked body. The witch's mind kept going over what had happened. What had she done? What had she become?

*Only what you need to become*, said a voice inside her head. A tear slipped down her face for the old Bonnie and her old life, before *any* of this crazy shit had happened. She wiped it away. It was good to say goodbye, but now she needed to move on. That was what her Grams would tell her. Would Grams understand what she was doing and why?

Rustling caught her attention. She looked over the sleeping Theon. Osha was climbing out of bed as silently as she could.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

The wildling woman stilled. Slowly, she turned. Her hand reached towards Theon's sword. Bonnie let her power free, just a little; she didn't intend to hurt anybody.

Yet.

The flames from the candles reared up and the wine started burning. Osha's eyes widened. "I'm not going to hurt you," said Bonnie. "I just want to know what you're doing."

Osha hesitated. Yet, they had known each other for long enough now, she supposed, and of all the people in the world, it was Osha who knew her secret. Perhaps the wildling also had some idea about what she could do. Even if she didn't, her imagination would have filled in the gaps. It wasn't good to mess with a witch. Many people had learned that the hard way.

"We're leaving," said Osha. Bonnie wasn't surprised. Bran and Rickon could not stay here behind hostile walls, trapped as hostages to use against their brother should Lord Robb come to take back what was his. He and Katherine had a reputation for violent reprisals (duh) and Theon wasn't going to let himself be left defenceless like Gregor Clegane had been. "And if you try to stop me, I'll cut your throat, witch or not."

Bonnie got out of bed as well. Theon was so out of it that he barely stirred. She pulled on her clothes again, forgoing the burlesque moves this time. The two women moved into a dark corner of the room where they could talk without much risk of waking the comatose Greyjoy.

"I'm not going to stop you," said Bonnie.

"You couldn't even if you wanted to." Osha paused. "I thought you were his."

"As much as you are his," said Bonnie. "My loyalties lie with the young lords. This was the only thing I could think of to do."
"You could have killed them all, couldn't you?"

"Many, but maybe not all. Fifty is a lot when you're just one witch. But where will you go?"

"South to Harrenhal," said Osha. "If the other lord were still at The Wall, we'd have gone to him, but he's gone and we don't know where."

"I could know," said Bonnie. "I can also send him a message and let him know what's going on." She could have sent a message to Lord Robb but then he'd need an explanation as to how that message could have possibly gotten to him and that would open a whole new can of worms. "You go first. I'll meet you at the tower."

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**Next chapter:** Bonnie reveals her secret to a selected few. Daemon bonds with Elena and Stefan rebonds with her. Damon tests Jon.
Chapter 57: Inception

Winterfell

She waited a good fifteen minutes, maybe twenty, maybe more. It was hard to tell time without a watch. The adrenaline in her blood made the time seem interminable.

The guards paid her no notice. Once someone became 'Theon's' woman, they almost became invisible because there were simply so many of them. Although the unpaid ones were few. However, no one knew that. She made a detour to the library. No one watched that for not only did the Ironborn not sow, they didn't really read either. There was a collection of maps lying folded in a pile in a corner, dusty now that Lord Robb wasn't here to pore over the drawn mountains and ravines with his siblings to tell them how he would have gone about conquering Westeros. That had been a game. Now he was putting it into action.

She picked out the largest and most detailed one. Jon, in his haste, had not taken that one when he had come to her for a locator spell. She tucked the map inside her cloak and crept out. Still no one to guard the books, perhaps with the exception of Maester Luwin, but he needed to sleep also and wasn't accustomed to night-time shenanigans.

Her breath mushroomed in the air outside. Condensation gathered on the tip of her nose. The cold roused her even more than she was already awake. It burned her face. She wrapped her shawl more closely around her and darted from shadow to shadow.

The entrance to the tower which imprisoned Bran and Rickon were guarded by two Ironborn soldiers. She found Osha hiding behind an overturned cart that no one had bothered to clear away. The two women nodded at each other. Osha pulled out her dagger. Bonnie had no such thing on her person, something which should be remedied in the future, for all the witches in the olden days had had athames as well as grimoires. However, she did have something else up her sleeve. The two women crept around either side of the tower behind the guards.

Bonnie felt the power flowing through her veins, into her fingertips, out of her fingertips and into her victim. He almost started crying out but she didn't give him enough time. The blood vessels burst. He dropped like all life had suddenly been sucked out of him.

"Wha–" said his companion. Osha cut his throat before he could finish.

"That's the easy part," said the wildling.

"Wait," said Bonnie. "Make two marks on their necks, like teeth."

"Like the blood demons?"
"Exactly like the blood demons," said Bonnie. "It may throw off their scent if they're worried about vampires."

"Should we be worried about them?" asked Osha.

"Vampires should always be considered a matter of great concern, but you have nothing to fear," said Bonnie. In fact, the appearance of a vampire could only be a boon to them, for it would either mean Damon had managed to extricate himself from the mess he'd made in King's Landing or Elena and Jon had come back or Lord Robb and his host and the new Lady Stark.

Or it could mean the Lannisters with Rebekah or Stefan Salvatore were coming to raze Winterfell to the ground. Since when did Damon become the good Salvatore?

Osha did as she asked, even though more than one funny look was cast in her direction. However, the wildling did not question her, assuming that Bonnie knew more than most, which she did, technically. Bran, Rickon and Hodor and the wolves were waiting for them up in the tower, all bundled up in their warmest clothing (humans only) and with a meagre pack of supplies, probably from what Osha had managed to steal from the kitchens and what they had managed to save.

"Bonnie?" said Bran.

"Bonnie!" said Rickon. He was too young to understand that everyone thought she had betrayed them and launched himself at her to hug her about the waist. "Where have you been?"

"I've always been here, just a bit busy," said Bonnie. Poor Rickon. He was so young and he had lost so much already. Now he was going to have to leave his home behind to venture into the wilderness.

"What are you doing here?" asked Bran, a little more suspicious of her motives.

"I've come to help, my lord," said Bonnie. She pulled out the map and spread it out on the floor. She took two candles out of their holders. Bran and Rickon's eyes widened when the wicks lit seemingly on their own.

"Hodor," said Hodor.

Bonnie stood the candles up on either side of the map. "I'm going to need blood," she said. "Your blood, my lord, forgive me."

Bran looked to Osha, who nodded. The boy held out his hand. He flinched when the blade sliced through skin but he watched with some fascination as Bonnie held his hand over the map so that blood dropped onto it.

Bonnie held her hand over the map and muttered the spell under her breath. The droplets of blood gathered to form one large drop which travelled south and finally stopped and pooled at a spot somewhere in the wilderness beside the Kingsroad rather far from Harrenhal.

Well, any attempt to get a message to Robb through Jon Snow was going to be hopeless, at least for the time being.

"What's that?" asked Bran.

"That's where Jon is," said Bonnie. She muttered the spell again, this time replacing Jon with Robb in her mind. The blood travelled across the map and pooled on Harrenhal, where she had expected. "And that is where Lord Robb is."
"I thought Jon was with Robb."

"He was looking for Lord Robb."

"I guess he didn't find him," said Bran drily.

"Do you still want me to tell Lord Jon that you are coming?" asked Bonnie.

"Do," said Bran.

She plucked a hair from his head. No one said anything as she tore a corner off the map and scribbled a message on it using a burnt stick from the unlit hearth. Then she screwed it up and held the ball over the candle flame. The ball remained floating even after she took her hand away. Shaggydog cocked his head and made a half-hearted snap at it but he was quickly pulled back by Rickon.

The parchment burst into flames and disappeared. "It is done," said Bonnie.

"You're a sorceress, aren't you, like out of the stories?" whispered Bran.

"I'm a witch," said Bonnie.

"I always knew magic was real, even if Maester Luwin always said it didn't exist," said Bran. His eyes shone in the candlelight. "Is Jon really going to get the message now?"

"He will," said Bonnie.

"Why didn't you send it to Robb instead?"

"Because Lord Robb does not know what I am."

"Then how did Jon know?"

"Because Elena told him."

"Damon's Elena?"

"Jon's Elena, now." Bonnie blew out the candles. "How will you get out?"

"It's best if you didn't know," said Osha. "The fewer people who know, the better."

"You could come with us," said Rickon. "She can, can't she?" He looked so hopeful. Bonnie couldn't help it. Her heart broke for him, this littlest Lord Stark.

"I want to," she said. "But I can't."

"Don't you want to be with us anymore?" asked Rickon. The other words did not need to be spoken. He wondered why everyone had left him and his brother behind; his father, his mother, his oldest brothers and his sisters.

"I want that," Bonnie assured him. "But I have to stay here so I can help Lord Robb keep the people of Winterfell safe."

"Why is everyone helping Robb? It's not fair!" Hmm, sibling rivalry was alive and well, it seemed.

"Robb is the lord, Rickon," said Bran sharply, sounding much older than his nine years. "Bonnie is
his subject. She is right. She can help a lot more by staying here than by coming with us. We'll be all right. We'll find Robb in Harrenhal."

"But won't it be dangerous? Will Theon hurt her?" asked Rickon.

"I'm a witch," said Bonnie. "I will be fine." She glanced outside. The sky was still dark, but dawn would come soon. Night would not extend its protection for them for much longer. She almost laughed at that. Night had once been a dangerous time when invincible vampires ruled. Now it was her time, sheltering her as she snuck around beneath the nose of a boy upon whom she had once looked with affection. Now she could only loathe him and pity him. When Lord Robb got back, it wouldn't be pretty.

She swung by her own quarters to quickly change into new clothes. It would give her an excuse as to why she'd been out in the middle of the night, because she wanted to look pretty for Prince Theon. She brushed her hair and put on her modern lingerie. It wasn't the sexiest set that she owned, but it was a decent set and Theon had probably never seen anything like it. Then she slipped on a lacy, silky robe that she'd guiltily spent far too much money on back in more innocent days before covering herself with her heaviest woollen dress and cloak. Her warm Westerosian underwear she regretfully left behind.

The guards leered at her but none of them made any move on her. They knew she was Theon's and therefore out of bounds. Or, at least, she hoped that they knew she was out of bounds. Otherwise, there would be a lot more ruptured blood vessels in brains amongst the Ironborn.

Theon was still sleeping. He'd rolled over and he lay on his stomach now. All the cruel and desperate lines had been smoothed from his face. He looked almost innocent now, like the boy he must have been when he had first come to Winterfell.

She removed her cloak and robe and slipped into bed with him, putting his arm over herself. Since when had she turned into a femme fatale? All those vampires would laugh to see her now.

The Riverlands, Southwest of Harrenhal

What was Elena doing? Stefan had to admit he had no idea, although he didn't like that she had come with Jon Snow. In fact, he hated it like he had hated nothing before. It wasn't that he particularly disliked Jon Snow, although he couldn't honestly say he liked the boy in any way, but he was a Stark; perhaps not in name, but in blood. In the end, blood was what mattered. He and Damon were proof enough of that universal truth.

He glanced back at the tent where he had left Snow and Tarly. They seemed calm, and they weren't talking about anything suspect. There was no mention of Robb Stark, except for Tarly asking why Jon had never told him about Katherine before. Of course, that was hardly surprising. No man wanted to say he had been rejected, especially not by Katherine. His own brother had been in denial for a century and a half. Compared to that, Jon Snow was doing quite well.

He paused. Perhaps Snow was coping too well. He knew Katherine and he knew the hole she could leave inside a man. Those kinds of wounds didn't just heal. But then, Jon had had the fortune to meet Elena very early on, and she'd been there for him all along. Perhaps that was the difference between him and Stefan and Damon. Elena.

But maybe he was still in denial at heart, and Elena was someone he was using to fool himself. Perhaps he didn't love her for her, but because she looked like Katherine. With that in mind, he headed towards Lord Daemon's tent, where his superior was still conversing with his former love,
or perhaps his one true love.

"So…it must be quite strange for you, a rich landowner's daughter finding herself in such a circumstance," said Daemon. "More wine?"

"It is very good wine," said Elena. "I must admit, I've missed it." She needn't worry about saying the wrong things after getting drunk. Elena had been no lightweight as a human and as a vampire, he'd never seen her intoxicated before. "It's been quite freeing in some ways, actually. In the past, I've always had constraints and expectations from people around me. Now I can just do what I want and be who I want because I want it."

"Wanting seems to be very important to you," said Daemon.

"It's good to have goals in life, I find, Lord Daemon," said Elena.

"I'll drink to that," said Daemon with a small laugh. The two of them clinked their goblets together.

"And what about yourself, Lord Daemon? You're young, handsome, clever. Surely you have goals of your own?"

"Aha. I know a flatterer when I see one. You may be very…alluring, Elena, and if my eye had not been caught by someone else, I may just have chased you. You may know her, since you know Caroline. Rebekah Mikaelson?"

Stefan almost spat and Elena did spit. "Rebekah?!" she gasped. "Wow, I did not see that coming. Sorry, but she didn't seem like your type. She's so spoilt and selfish and shallow. You're obviously her type. You're handsome and male."

"Perhaps my taste in women is not as refined as I had once thought," said Daemon a little more defensively. Anyone would, if one had admitted to liking Rebekah. Stefan tried to forget all the memories of the twenties that Klaus had restored to him, even if he had had fun. "But I cannot control what my heart feels."

"Love works in mysterious ways, my lord."

"Like with Jon Snow. He lost Katherine. He found you. I think he's the lucky one."

"Now you're being flattering."

"Ask Stefan. I speak the truth and only the truth."

It was at that moment that Stefan realized that Daemon had known he'd been there listening in all along. Sometimes, he swore that man was actually a vampire. He came in sheepishly. "My lord," he said.

"Lord Stefan, did your mother never teach you it was rude to eavesdrop?" asked Daemon.

"My mother died of the coughing sickness when I was very young," said Stefan.

"I'm sorry. That was in poor taste."

"There is no need, my lord. It was a long time ago."

Daemon stood. "Stefan will take you to your lodgings and look after you, I am sure, Lady Elena. I would like to continue our conversation at a later date, but for now, I have many duties to attend to."
"Of course," said Elena. "It was a pleasure to meet you, my lord, and I hope I haven't taken up too much of your time."

"The pleasure, my lady, was all mine." Daemon took her hand in his and bent over it. His lips lingered above the skin before he finally placed a kiss on the back of her hand. All the while, he never stopped looking into her eyes. Stefan, on the other hand, narrowed his. Elena, to her non-credit, blushed. Daemon left the two of them alone, facing each other and not saying anything.

"Your tent is all prepared," said Stefan. "Lord Daemon had them erect a larger one for you."

"That was very kind of him," said Elena. "And you, Stefan?"

"What about me?"

"I'm worried about you. I've heard all these things and I don't want to believe them."

Stefan looked down at the little shoots of grass they were crushing beneath their feet as they walked before finally turning back to Elena, looking her in the eye. "Believe them," he said. "They're true."


"That Stefan lost you, remember?" asked Stefan. Who was she to judge him? He was only trying to survive, and unlike her, he didn't have that universal charm, at least not with the people who mattered. Clearly, she had done quite well for herself, and as usual, she had made the silliest decision and picked little Jon Snow.

Even as the thought formed in his mind, he felt guilty. He hadn't liked what he'd had to become either. It was just that he'd learned to live with it. He couldn't expect Elena to approve. The girl who would approve of such things would not be the same Elena he had known and loved. And still loved. "I had to protect us," said Stefan. "Otherwise, it would have fallen to Caroline."

"I can't imagine that," said Elena.

"This is a harsh world we live in now. The rules are different. We have to adapt."

"Like Katherine adapted?"

"Maybe she had a point."

"Maybe there's another way."

"You served the Starks, you said," said Stefan. "I have no doubt you did it well and loyally. And the only one to show you any kindness is the bastard outcast."

"Not everyone is like the Starks," said Elena.

"Lord Tywin isn't," said Stefan. "He's never lied about who or what he is. And he rewards people based on merit. He'd...appreciate you."

Her brow furrowed in that confused way that he loved. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I had wanted to say that he would have liked you, but the truth is Lord Tywin isn't the type of man who would like anybody," said Stefan. "The closest he has ever come to liking someone is Lord Jaime." He paused. "And Caroline."
"It's been a long day, Stefan. There's so much to process. I think I'll just turn in and have bit of a nap. Good night…well, I suppose it's morning."

"Well, Good morning, then, Elena."

Damon didn't trust Jon. Oh, he trusted that Jon was actually still on Robb's side, all right. It took more than one Katherine Pierce to tear apart a pair of brothers like that, even if she had come rather close with the Salvatore brothers. However, he didn't buy the story. The timing was all wrong. Jon had left for the Wall before Katherine had ever shown her face anywhere near Robb Stark. Of that, he had been entirely certain. Therefore, Jon was a big fat liar who was making up this whole story about fighting over Katherine with Robb to make the Lannisters trust him. Damon was far too smart. And, perhaps, he just knew the incriminating details.

What he wasn't sure of was the exact nature of Jon's relationship with Elena, although he could take a wild guess and most likely be right. She was Elena, and it wasn't as if Jon had even tried to hide the fact that he was head over heels in love with her. Damon supposed, in a way that made his stomach churn, that out of him, Stefan, and Jon, it was Jon who loved Elena the most. After all, he had never been affected by a previous love affair with Katherine.

Or had he?

He strode past the many tents and the men who were going through their morning drills. Jon was sleeping in his tent nearer to the edge of the camp than to the centre of it. He wasn't that important. He heard the snoring before he saw them. Boys. They could sleep anywhere. He looked around for the direwolf. Good, it was absent. At least the wolf wasn't a total idiot. Ghost Stark was the only smart Stark. Or was he really Ghost Snow since his daddy was a Snow?

Jon didn't even notice him coming in. He was that tired, and his mind was young and untried. Hmmm…should he have a bite? Nah. It would a little too obvious, especially with so many people about. And he doubted that even Jon Snow could sleep through being eaten alive. This called for a little more subtlety.

It was almost as easy as slipping into Ned's dreams.

_He was back in Winterfell. It looked exactly the same as he remembered it, except this time he was in Robb's room, and he was peering out at it from the tight confines of a chest. The spears and swords of toy soldiers poked at his back, his legs, and his bottom. The lid was pressing down on him. Why the hell was he in there? Damon been in Robb's room before, but this was quite different. For one, there was a shelf full of yet more toys. There were more toy soldiers—geez, Robb had been a military nut even as a kid—so bright and shiny and fun-looking, and there was a mobile depicting forest animals hanging from the ceiling. The animals looked so real that they almost seemed to move. (Again: what the hell?) On the shelf, there was also one book, and it looked big and inviting.

Damon realized that not only was he in Jon's dream, but he was also looking at the world through Jon's eyes. Specifically, a very young and innocent Jon Snow. Young Jon Snow itched to read the book that Robb loathed, but was too afraid to open it.

Robb burst into the room. At least, Damon assumed it was Robb. This little boy was far shorter than the Robb he remembered and his hair was tousled with sweat. His blue eyes shone. A smattering of freckles dotted the bridge of his nose._
"It's safe now, Jon," declared Robb. "Mother's gone. She thinks you've run off into the Godswood." Jon climbed out of the chest and looked around. Robb an arm around the terrified young Jon's shoulders. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

"She was so angry, Robb," said Jon in a small voice. "You should have seen her face when I asked Lord Stark what my mother's name was."

Poor Jon-Jon. Was there any way to fast forward all this sappy childhood sentimentality? Yes, yes, it had been a rather crap childhood, but at least his brother had loved him. Damon set about renovating Robb's room and making Robb and Jon grow up in the dream. Then he inserted Katherine.

"Elena?" asked Jon in surprise. "What...? How...?"

"It's Katherine," Damon made 'Katherine' say. "Jon, I expected better of you."

Nightmare!Katherine put an arm around Nightmare!Robb, who was suddenly all grown up and smirking. "Why don't you join us? It must be so lonely for you, all alone on the Wall."

"We don't need him, Katherine," said Nightmare!Robb. "We never needed him."

"Don't be jealous, Robb. There's room enough for the three of us."

"No!" said Jon. "I know what you are, Katherine. I know what you do. But know this. I. Love. Elena."

"You can love both, Jon," said Nightmare!Katherine. Damon made her drape herself over him.

"Katherine, I have never loved you and I will never love you. Like I said, I know exactly what you are," said Jon as he shoved her away. Bow chicka wow wow!

"Well, have it your way." Nightmare!Katherine's eyes darkened and her fangs extended. She grabbed Jon and sank her teeth into his neck, tearing through skin and muscle, as he struggled fatuously in her grasp...

Jon sat up, dagger in hand, soaked in cold sweat and gasping for breath. His neck had a phantom pain where Katherine had bit him...in his dream. In reality, Damon stood above him, smirking. "Morning, sleepyhead," he crooned. "Nice dream?" Bastard! He knew exactly what he'd been dreaming of, since he was more than certain that the nightmare had been Damon's doing. Elena had told him all about dream manipulation. Damon loved it.

"Stay out of my head, Salvatore," snarled Jon, still pointing the dagger at Damon.

"Which Salvatore would that be, hmmm? You know, there are two," said Damon.

"It applies to both." Jon finally sheathed his dagger. He couldn't exactly stab Damon, considering he'd just heal and then everybody would be suspicious. "What are you doing here?"

Damon ignored his question. "So, you love Katherine? Huh."

"I loved her. Note the past tense."

"I thought you were illiterate. Have you ever met her, by the way?"

"Of course I have," said Jon. "She looks just like Elena."
"And nobody could have told you that, I'm sure," said Damon. "Where did you meet her?"

Jon gave up. There was no way in the seven hells that he would be able to fool Damon. He'd been there all along and he knew exactly why Jon had gone to the Wall. It had had nothing to do with a girl. "What do you want, Damon?"

"To know the truth." Damon sat down on the edge of the narrow cot and leaned in close to Jon. "Which side are you on, Jon Snow?" he whispered.

"That is a question I should be asking you, Damon Salvatore," said Jon. "If I remember correctly, you and Robb Stark were close."

"Pfft," said Damon. "I'm a sellsword. A sellsword doesn't fight for the losing side."

"Neither do I," said Jon.

"But you're not a sellsword. You're not clever like me. You're stubborn and stupid—I mean, honourable. And you're Robb's brother."

"He broke all bonds of brotherhood when he stole Katherine from me," Jon said in a louder whisper. "As to the answer to your question. If you mean we are united in our hate for Robb Stark, then yes, we are on the same side."

"All right, all right. I get it," said Damon. "You hate Robb Stark and sided against him with the Lannisters because of Katherine. Right. Maybe I should tell him. Or, more precisely, I'll tell Katherine, who will tell Robb."

Jon forgot all pretences. His eyes widened. "You're in contact with Robb?" he whispered, looking around to make sure no one was listening to them. One could never be too careful, especially not with Stefan Salvatore around.

"Hah! Traitor!" Damon said.

Jon paled and his heart almost stopped. He immediately drew his dagger.

"Just kidding. If I'd been lying, though, you'd have been screwed," said Damon. "But yes, I am in contact with your brother, or rather, Katherine, who conveys my messages to Robb. I hope. By the way, you've never even met your new sister-in-law, have you?"

"I don't know if I'd actually want to," said Jon. "But why didn't you tell me you were working for Robb?"

"I wanted to see whether you could prove me wrong on the subject of you intelligence, or lack thereof," said Damon. "I'd say you failed."

"Yes, yes," said Jon. "I know you don't really think much of me, and I don't really care."

"Do you care that I have Arya with me?"

Arya! He'd thought she'd be a hostage with Sansa in King's Landing!

"If you want to get back to Robb, I think it's high time you met your new sister," Damon continued, as if he hadn't just mentioned to Jon that his little sister was free and safe! Well, relatively. She was still in a Lannister camp. "Maybe those puppy dog eyes will garner a better result than I did."

"I don't understand," said Jon.
"She wants me to stay here," said Damon. "I don't want to stay here, especially not with Arya. I don't trust her to keep herself out of trouble." He got up and patted Jon's shoulder. "I'll be meeting her tonight. Wanna come?"

"Of course," said Jon. "I'll do my very best to convince her."

"Oh, and one more thing before I go," said Damon.

"Yes, Damon?" said Jon.

Damon's face suddenly lost all of its mischief. "One mistake, Jon Snow; that's all it takes. And then you will be walking Elena to the chopping block," he said.

Next chapter: Theon realizes he may have bitten off more than he can chew. Katherine finds a new distraction. Jon meets the latest addition to his family. Jaime and Tyrion prepare for the siege.
CSI - Westeros

Chapter Summary

Theon wonders if there is more to the world than one can see. Stefan begins to undermine Jon. Damon, Jon and Katherine make a deal. Jaime and Tyrion disagree on matters of state.

Winterfell

Theon had sweet and befuddled memories of a night spent in the arms of two women. He smiled to himself like a cat that had not only gotten the cream but the chicken also. Pale beams of sunlight sliced through the shutters. Curled up against him was another body, a warm body, just one body.

Where was the other? He opened one eye. Bonnie was still asleep, although she must have changed sometime during the night because she was wearing something most delicious and provoking, covering the parts of her body he wanted to see most. But where was the wildling? He supposed she could have crept off. He didn't care as much now that he'd had a taste of her wildness and she wasn't new anymore. He would have himself a proper lady for a mistress. Bonnie would do for now.

Someone banged on his door. "My prince!" called Dagmer. Before Theon could answer, his first mate barged in. "The two Stark boys have escaped."

All his good mood vanished like the sun on a winter's day. He sat up. "When? How?"

"Last night," said Dagmer. His face darkened even further, as if that was possible.

"Did anyone see anything? Where were their guards?"

Dagmer looked at the dishevelled Bonnie who was now fully awake and clutching a sheet to her body. "We need to speak in private," he said to Theon.

Theon hastily threw on his clothes and followed Dagmer outside. "What happened?" he demanded. "I tell you to guard a cripple and a six-year-old and both of them escape?"

"You should come and see this."

Two bodies lay in the guard chamber. For one of them, it was easy to see how he had been killed for his throat grinned widely and red. The other, however, bore no mark except two puncture wounds on the side of his neck.

Like fang marks. Distant memories of Damon's stories echoed in his head. Dracula, vampires, blood. The drying wounds on the side of Robb's neck.

"No one saw anything?" he demanded.

"Nothing," said Dagmer. "They say there is a blood drinking monster around these parts."

"How were they found?" asked Theon.
"Lying at the base of the tower, dead, this one lying in a pool of his own blood."

*Lying in a pool of his own …*

"Wait," said Theon. "If it *had* been one of those creatures, and I am not saying that it would be because they cannot be real, there should not have been so much blood. The other victims found have all been drained and that would make sense because they *drink* blood. Why would they let it go to waste like this?"

He prodded the other body, all the while trying not to feel disgusted. What was dead could never die, and he was *Ironborn*. He was the son of Balon Greyjoy, the rightful king of Westeros! A few droplets of blood oozed from the puncture wounds.

"Turn him over and strip him," said Theon. The men looked at him quizzically but did as he asked. The corpse's back was livid with pooled blood. "This one is still full of blood. If the creature did kill him, then it only took a sip. He did not die by vampire."

"Then what?" asked Dagmer. "He bears no other wound."

"I don't know," whispered Theon. He really did not know. There was something living amongst them that was capable of killing without leaving a trace. It had tried to blame vampires and it would have succeeded if Theon had not been clear-headed enough to see through its little disguises. "It doesn't matter. I want those boys found and returned immediately." But how had they *gotten* away? Had that creature, whatever it had been, taken them? "Where's the wildling woman?"

"They say the wildlings have magic," whispered one of the Ironborn."

"There's no such thing," snapped Dagmer."

"Then how did Gunnaf die?" said the man. "There was magic."

"If you do not shut up about magic, it doesn't take magic to mount your head on a spike," said Dagmer."

"There is no magic," snapped Theon. "It's probably poison." *Vampire*. "I want those boys found or else I'll mount all your heads on the wall!"

"You? Are you going to do it yourself, then?" sneered one of the men."

"I was raised in the north. They wield the sword themselves here," said Theon."

"There are fifty of us here and one of you, my prince," said Dagmer."

Insolent bastards, the lot of them! They were rebelling against him! They would all pay for it later.

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**Daemon's camp in the Riverlands, Southwest of Harrenhal**

Something wasn’t quite right with Jon Snow’s story. Perhaps it was Stefan's own bias that was making him say that. The more he thought about it, the more his doubt grew. It was obvious that Snow was in love with Elena. He gazed at her with adoration akin to the way pilgrims had gazed at statues that had been purported to cry tears that healed sickness. But his story, it was quite flawless, he had to admit, and any other man might have been fooled, except he had *lived* through it. Two brothers, check. Willing to share, check. Abandoning one for the other, check. Katherine liked using similar tricks. She never used the same trick twice; at least, not the exact same trick.
He let Snow think that he was safe for twenty-four hours. In those twenty-four hours, Snow said very little and did very little beyond eating, sleeping and sneaking glances at Elena. He watched the way they acted (as if they had a secret; he'd known Elena long enough to tell).

He noticed he wasn't the only stalker that Jon Snow and Elena had. "So how was it, having Katherine back in Winterfell?" he asked Damon. "Any desire to relive the glory days?"

"Not at all. I was a little busy keeping her claws off Robb Stark," said Damon. "But you know how she is. If she wants something, she has to have it."

"You always had a stunning success rate when it came to Katherine. And Jon Snow loved her?"

"He made me look sane," said Damon. "I was rather impressed. If you thought I was obsessed, you should have seen him. He was a bastard boy who had nothing and was generally treated as if he didn't exist. Katherine, you know her. She paid him attentions, gave him little smiles, kind words. He was hooked from the very beginning. It's exactly like what she did with us."

Precisely. It was too similar. He didn't buy it. "Poor Jon Snow," he said outwardly.

"Don't pity him," grumbled Damon. "He got Elena."

"You know as well as I do that I do not care for Elena anymore."

"Uh huh," said Damon. He made no other commentary.

Snow was currently teaching his overweight friend how to use a sword properly. The boy was more afraid of his own weapon than he was of his opponent's.

The two commoners who had come with Elena stood on the sidelines, watching. One was a blacksmith's apprentice and Daemon had put him to work in the forges, helping to repair weapons and armour. He looked at Jon Snow with envy. Stefan had noticed the way that he also stared at Elena every time she walked past him. He didn't think that she'd noticed the way she was being admired, in typical Elena fashion. Perhaps she was too preoccupied with Lord Daemon's attentions. If she put her mind to it, she could have had anybody.

But she had chosen Jon Snow.

"Lord Jon, a moment of your time?" called Stefan.

Snow paused, allowing Tarly to actually get a hit in. Tarly was promptly disarmed.

"Ser Salvatore," said Snow. His voice was cold and guarded, much like his expression. The wind whipped his hair about his face. It looked like it could do with a good cut and wash. He set down the practise sword. Stefan indicated that they should walk. He wasn't stupid, that was for sure, because he seemed to be most unsure of Stefan's motives. However, he knew he had no choice.

"I apologize if our first encounter on the road gave you a bad impression," Stefan began. "I had thought that, perhaps, you had been someone important to Robb Stark for I believed I had heard you talking about him."

"It was a very long time ago," said Snow. "You were only carrying out your duties. I cannot fault you for that."

"Elena seems to have settled in very well," said Stefan. "Lord Daemon is quite taken with her."

Snow said nothing but nodded. "She and Katherine both had a way with people. Men, especially,
when it came to Katherine, could not help but love her." He thought he sounded wistful. He hoped Snow would bite.

"I have experienced, myself, the power of her smiles and words," said Snow quietly.

"How did you meet?"

"She was a travelling bard. She came to Winterfell and she performed for my father. I thought I had never seen anything or anyone more beautiful. Apparently, Robb thought so too."

"How was she with you?"

"Feisty," said Snow. "She never hesitated to tell me what she thought of my behaviour." Katherine? Open with someone? Well, yes, she could have been pretending, but if she had been meaning to reel someone in, she would not confront them. Instead, she would tell them exactly what they wanted to hear while saying very little. Deep conversations had never been the food of her romances. She would flirt and flirt some more until her victim's mind was in utter bewitchment. By then, one word from her could decide the happiness of that poor man. In Damon's case, it had condemned him to a century and a half of desperation and hope for something that did not even exist.

Stefan remained silent, waiting for more. Unlike others, however, who would have filled up that silence with possibly incriminating words, Snow did not say anything. He was about to ask further about how the battle for Katherine's affections had gone down, but as soon as he opened his mouth, he heard someone calling him.

The messenger boy had obviously been running for a while and looking for him rather hard. "Ser Salvatore," he puffed. "Lord Daemon…wants you…in his tent."

"Now?" asked Stefan.

The boy nodded. "Yes, Ser," he said.

"I'll be there," said Stefan. "Forgive me, Lord Jon. It seems that duty calls. I must leave you for a little while."

Jon returned his bow. "I look forward to continuing our conversation," he said. He sounded as if he would have liked anything else more.

Daemon was waiting for him, along with a man dressed in the uniform of one of Lord Tywin's personal guards. The man's face was streaked with dirt and sweat. He had been riding hard, from the looks of it. "Lord Daemon," said Stefan. "You wanted to see me?"

Daemon said nothing but handed him the letter bearing Tywin's seal. It was short and to the point. Stefan was to leave immediately for King's Landing.

"Immediately, my lord?" asked Stefan.

"Has Lord Tywin ever suffered delays in carrying out his commands?" Daemon asked in return.

"If I could have one more day, there is something about Jon Snow…"

"Stefan, Lord Tywin wants you to help defend King's Landing against Stannis Baratheon. Do you really think Jon Snow would be an adequate excuse to delay your departure to supervise my two cousins?" He said it mockingly. Stefan had always known that Daemon didn't think much of Jaime,
and even if he did consider Tyrion to be passably clever, no one could imagine Lord Tyrion as being the military type.

"What if Jon Snow's story is a lie?" said Stefan. "What if he's really here on Robb Stark's behest? The greatest threats are often the ones we overlook."

"To assist my two cousins, then, as they are sorely in need of men," said Daemon.

"And what of Jon Snow?"

"Are you saying that I cannot deal with Jon Snow?" asked Daemon.

"I fear there is more to him that meets the eye. Just… be careful, my lord."

He didn't voice his real concerns, but he couldn't stop thinking about Elena. If Jon Snow really was lying through his teeth, then it meant…no more Jon Snow.

Then he felt guilty. Elena had suffered enough losses. How could he so callously and selfishly take away someone she cared about as deeply as she did Snow? Even if he were a rival, he would have to show Elena that he wasn't good enough for her first.

Stefan refolded the letter and tucked it into the chest plate of his armour, well aware of the importance of such a promotion. The higher he rose, the more capable he was of protecting those he cared about and the more danger he would be in himself. He bowed to Daemon.

"Farewell, my lord," he said. "I'll not soon forget what you have done for me. And I do hope that you will consider my…words."

"Keep well, Ser Stefan," said Daemon. "I imagine I'll be calling you something different very soon."

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**Harrenhal**

Spearheads gleamed in the feeble morning sun, glinting like the scales of a fish. A very spiky and bristling fish. Robb stood atop the battlements. The wind was blowing him backwards. He had slept well last night; better than any night ever since he had taken up his father's mantle as lord. His troops were strong and his position was good. He was ready for war.

"Good morning, my lord husband," said Katherine as she came up to stand beside him. Instinctively, he reached out to take her hand and bring it up to his lips.

"Good morning, my lady wife," he murmured. "You are up very early." Katherine was the type of girl who liked to sleep until uncivilized hours in the afternoon, he had learned, and then stay up until dawn. Night was her time. The darkness, she said, inspired her more than the day.

"I couldn't sleep," said Katherine. "Did you know there is yet another plot against you?"

"There are always plots against me and there will be so long as there are Lannisters about."

"It's not plotting against you if you know about it," said Katherine. "Your enemies can't betray you; only your friends can."

Friends. He had been betrayed by many friends. Well, one. But Theon had been his greatest friend and the betrayal still stung. "Who?" he asked.
"The Umbers," said Katherine. "They haven't been happy with you since you took Jon Umber's head, not that I would have urged you to choose any differently. However, they have been more careful ever since Karstark."

It made sense that they would want to avenge their father. It was even honourable, in Robb's eyes. But he was the king and he had had his reasons. If he had killed Umber only to have his sons and nephews kill him, then that sacrifice would have been completely wasted. "The Umbers wouldn't fall for the same trick," he said.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't expect them to. Even they are not so foolish," said Katherine. "But there is more than one way to kill men and the Lannisters are a very versatile weapon." She whispered into his ear.

"Will it work?" he asked. It seemed a ridiculous plan on the face of it, but then, any plan that employed the use of new methods always seemed mad until it played out beautifully, as most of Katherine's did.

"Oh yes," said Katherine. "They hate you right now. But I do need you to do one thing for me. You will be completely oblivious."

"I always am when it comes to your demonic plans, dear wife," said Robb. She smiled as if she knew a secret that he didn't.

Katherine pursed her lips and looked at her sketch of Robb. The likeness was not very good. There was just something about his expression, especially his eyes. She just couldn't get it right.

She dropped the piece of charcoal and wiped her fingers on a white linen handkerchief before leaning back in her chair. It was no use. She just kept thinking about the Umbers and what they were planning (an assassination, at this point in time, but the Small Jon wasn't so certain that it would work) and how she needed to bite them before they bit her.

There were many different paths she could take but all of them required a certain level of persuasion, perhaps of the Lannister sort. That was harder than it looked. She couldn't do it herself because that would just raise red flags everywhere and anonymous letters were fishy at best. Unfortunately, Elijah was currently not here. Damon could possibly do it, but it was dangerous to deploy him at every turn. She didn't want to blow his cover and lose her spy. She also didn't want to lose him.

But, on the other hand, what was the point of having a spy if she couldn't use him? Damon needed to learn how to be an effective agent and not just her mouthpiece in Daemon Lannister's ear, whispering bad ideas. Although, bad was a matter of perspective.

She set aside the sketch for a later day and put on her cloak. Everyone was used to her taking long solitary walks by now. Robb constantly chided her for it, telling her how dangerous it was, but she always laughed it off and distracted him with kisses, assuring him that she would be fine. Who would dare attack his wife beneath the shadow of his gaze? He wasn't completely convinced, but since she always returned, he mostly let her be.

She left the note beneath the rock where she and Damon had arranged to deliver their correspondence today. Now all she had to do was play the waiting game. There was a reason why her name wasn't "Patience".
Wilderness in the Riverlands, Southwest of Harrenhal

Her note had said to meet her here, in this hidden deposit of boulders south of Harrenhal, halfway between the fortress and where Daemon was camped. Damon was getting sick of being bossed about by Katherine. This is for Robb, he reminded himself. Then he laughed. Since when did Damon Salvatore have friends or worry about having them?

He visited their dead drop as he did each morning, quite dutifully. It had been a shifting cipher in French this time. Luckily, he still remembered their games and he had not shirked on his language lessons. She liked mixing up the languages so no one would ever be able to crack the code.

It didn't exactly mess with his plans, per se. He'd been planning on getting her to meet with him, anyway, for he, Jon and Katherine had something very important to discuss, namely the question of Arya. Fuck Katherine. (Oh wait. Been there, done that, had been rather underwhelming.) He needed to get Arya back to Robb and he had new ammunition to use against Katherine now. Damon knew that she knew almost all his tricks—he still had a few good ones left—but she would be wholly unprepared for sweet, innocent, and sincere Jon Snow. His whole plan was anchored on the probability that the she-demon would not be able to resist those large, brown, puppy-dog eyes. He couldn't take care of all of the kids while buttering up to Daemon Lannister at the same time, especially now that Stefan was gone.

Now that he knew Jon was on Robb's side, they all had to be doubly careful no one else found out. Actually, it was a good thing that Stefan was gone. He was far too perceptive for anyone's good.

Still, Stefan was no longer here to help him babysit. Elena and Jon were probably all right, but he also had to mind Arya as well as Jon and Elena's new...children. How long had they been a couple again? And did Damon even want to think about it? Probably not. Thinking about such things made his mind go to dark places.

Like how snappable Jon Snow's neck was and how no one would know if he sequestered the body somewhere in the forest. Perhaps he should have a taste to see just how different bastard-Stark was from legitimate-Stark.

He shook himself out of it. Elena would not like it if he stooped so low as to kill a friend. Although one would have thought that an honourable man like Jon Snow would have poached a friend's girl. So, actually, he was perfectly justified.

'You chased Elena away,' said a tiny, taunting, annoying voice in his head. It sounded a lot like himself when he was teasing someone. He shook his head again to get rid of it. Walking beside him, Jon Snow was completely oblivious, which was just as well.

"Let's go through this one more time, Jon Snow," said Damon as Jon clung to his back. He was quite a bit heavier than Arya but they were still making good time because Damon was an excellent vampire. "You remember what our plan is? You widen your eyes at Katherine when you see her. Simper, beg, do whatever you're best at, and ask her very nicely to let us all go back to Robb's camp."

"Yes, yes," said Jon impatiently. "We've been over this, although I don't see how I can convince her if you can't. You and her have...history."

"Which is precisely why you can do what I can't, as much as I hate to admit that there is something you are capable of which I am not," said Damon.

They kept to the shadows that were cast by the disc-shaped moon. Only a few wisps of cloud were
in the sky, and they were illuminated as if they were little islands for higher beings to rest upon.
"Do you trust her, Damon?" asked Jon suddenly.

"Not at all," said Damon. "'Trust' and 'Katherine' do not belong in the same sentence unless there is a 'do not' in there somewhere. Why?"

"Should we not warn Robb, then?" asked Jon. "Why are we working with her?"

"As if Romeo would believe us," said Damon. "Besides, I think Robb's one of those insufferable individuals who may actually be able to rely on her. But your guess is as good as mine."

Jon did not seem to find that answer adequate, but they were already there at the meeting place. Katherine was standing with her back to them while she looked over the lands that she fancied would one day be her domain.

"Well, I heard about poor dear Lord Rickard," said Damon. "Nasty business, that. How did it go again? Arms pulled off by horses and then strangled with his own intestines?"

"I know," said Katherine. She sounded disappointed. "Northerners play far too rough. He died in five minutes."

"What does my dear king have to say about that?" asked Damon.

"He didn't say anything," said Katherine. "You bore me with your questions." She turned her dark eyes to Jon Snow, who was fixated by them and stood rooted to his spot.

"She looks just like Elena, Damon," he whispered.

"I did explain that doppelganger thing, didn't I?" asked Damon.

"Well, hello there," said Katherine. She smiled sweetly at him, as if she hadn't just heard him talking about her in the third person. "Who might you be, darling?"

"Jon," said Jon.

Damon gave Jon a nudge.

"Jon Snow," said Jon.

"Ah, I have heard so much about you, my dear Jon," said Katherine. "I feel as if I've known you forever already, brother."

Damon rolled his eyes and hoped Jon could still remember why he was here. And it wasn't to gawk at a girl who looked just like his own girlfriend. He should be used to how pretty Elena was by now, shouldn't he? Maybe he needed to intercede on the clueless bastard's behalf.

"Enough of that," said Damon. He snapped his fingers in front of Jon's face. "Hey, buddy. Snap out of it. We have business to discuss, Katherine. Now that I've done your dirty work for you, don't you think it's time for me to come home?"

"Damon, where do you think you'll be the most effective? Acting as Robb's glorified bodyguard, or embedded within the enemy ranks, a trusted general of Daemon Lannister? Who, by the way, probably likes you because you made him look good and you two share a name. In a manner of speaking."

"I have Arya with me," said Damon. "Each moment we stay in the Lannister camp is another
moment where she has a chance to be discovered and captured. What would Robb say about that?"

That made Jon react. "The camp is a dangerous place for a girl like her," he said. "It's dangerous for all of us. Daemon Lannister is not to be trifled with. He's clever, he's observant, and he already suspects that we may not hold Lannister interests at heart."

"Then you should learn to convince him that you do," said Katherine.

"We will, but what purpose does Arya serve in the camp?" Jon persisted.

"It would be a dangerous trip, crossing over No Man's Land," said Katherine.

"We'll bring her here," said Jon. "And then you will take her to Robb. And her mother, of course."

He widened his eyes, placating her silently with his gaze. Good boy, Jon. Damon saw something melt in Katherine. She probably wanted to pinch Jon's widdle cheeks. Both kinds of cheeks. Against the innocent charms of the sweet Snow child, Katherine was defenceless.

"Well, I could do that, but you'll have to do something for me."

"Name it," said Jon.

"Well, it's more a question of what both you and Damon and Daemon can do for me," said Katherine. Jon's eyes widened even further. Seriously, this was not natural. Before Jon could come to the wrong (or right) conclusion, she continued. "I have a problem."

"And what would that be?" asked Damon before Jon could say anything laughable which, knowing Jon, he probably would.

"The Umbers."

"Didn't you just kill Jon Umber?"

"And from there the problem arises," said Katherine. "Not everyone can see the big picture as I do and the Umbers are being petty."

"You killed their father," said Jon. "I can hardly say they are being petty if they do not like you."

"They blame Robb," said Katherine.

Jon fell silent. When he next spoke, his voice had developed a harder edge. "What do you want us to do?"

"Stop being such a pushover, Jon!" protested Damon.

"Quiet, Damon," said Katherine. "Your turn to speak will come."

Damon blew a raspberry.

Katherine focused the power of her gaze on Jon. Even though Jon had armour in the form of Elena, he was male and he could never be completely immune to eyes of the older Petrova doppelganger. One needn't mention his poor clueless brother who fell at the first opportunity available. "I need you to help me to convince Daemon Lannister that the Umbers are ripe for persuasion," said Katherine.

"You want them to join the Lannister cause?" asked Jon.
"You have, haven't you?"

"Not truly!"

"I don't intend for them to ever make it that far," said Katherine. "Once they're safely over on the other side, if all things go smoothly, then Daemon Lannister will receive some interesting information that they are not, in fact, willing to serve the Lannister cause, in which case Daemon Lannister will do the killing for us. The fact is that I need to rely on you to make Daemon Lannister mistrust the Umbers."

"And what if the Umbers won't be persuaded?"

"Then we will have to make sure that they are caught in the act of attempting to kill Robb, and then Robb may dispose of them without any complaints," said Katherine. "They are already thinking about it. Again, however, they will need some encouragement to act in a rushed manner before they are ready."

"Don't look at me," said Damon. "I serve the Lannisters now."

"Who said it had be so obvious? They need not know who is providing them with information and supplies," said Katherine. She examined her fingernails in a bored manner. "I am only telling you out of courtesy. Focus on Daemon Lannister. Convince him to be convincing. The rest I'll deal with." She smiled again. "And you, Jon Snow, you still owe me a favour."

"So long as it is not inappropriate, I will do as you ask," said Jon. "If you take Arya back. I know you are more than capable of defending her should the need arise, Katerina."

"The word inappropriate has so many different meanings for different people."

"I will do it so long as it befits a loyal subject of my king, Robb Stark," said Jon.

"You love him, don't you?" asked Katherine. Jon nodded. "I love him too. Maybe our love for him is why I am willing to do this for you. Very well. Bring Arya to the rock beneath this clearing tomorrow night. And, Damon, I expect snacks." She winked at Jon. "You could do for a start."

"Actually, I probably wouldn't do," said Jon.

"You have something about you, Jon Snow," said Katherine.

"I believe your people would call it 'spunk', Your Grace," said Jon.

Katherine started to laugh, but then something fell from the sky to take their attention away from Jon's use of colloquialisms. It was a balled up piece of parchment. Now, now, who was having a parchment fight out here?

Damon scooped it up and unfurled it. His brow furrowed. "It's from Bonnie," he said. "Bran and Rickon are getting out of Winterfell."

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**King's Landing**

Gulls wheeled overhead, wailing as if somebody would care for their ills. Nobody did. A few of the bolder birds circled above a fishing boat that was pulling in a scant catch. Jaime looked over the river. The water ran ever towards the sea, where there were no limits. He slowed his pace to keep with Tyrion's short steps.
"This is the weakest point," said Tyrion. "The Mud Gate. This is where Stannis will launch the attack."

Indeed that was what their father had told them about sieges, whenever he had deigned to tell them anything. "Attacking the weakest point is all well and good, brother, but isn't it a bit too obvious?" said Jaime. "Wouldn't he also expect us to think of it and thus prepare the defences? If he were clever, he would do something different."

"So what would he do, Jaime?" asked Tyrion.

"Do I look like Stannis to you?" said Jaime.

"Right," said Tyrion. "Defence of the Mud Gate it is."

Something didn't feel quite right, like there was a snake squirming in his stomach, although that was impossible. And it was just Stannis Baratheon, one hundred and fifty thousand men or not. Although…he was allied with Robb Stark now, was he not? And Robb Stark had Katherine Stark. Nothing that involved Katherine Stark was ever a good thing. Or maybe he was overestimating the girl. Stark was still not king and he was nowhere nearer to King's Landing than he had been before. Harrenhal had to be just a fluke. After all, Gregor Clegane had been guarding it. Like Robb Stark had said, there was not a single strategic thought in his head. Jaime doubted there was anything in Clegane's head by now. A woman like Katherine would tire of such a plaything quickly, and she'd probably turned his skull into a cup. It was a good thing that he had, firstly, been Robb's captive, and secondly, gotten out when he had. Not that Robb Stark wasn't a tricky little shit in his own right, but Katherine was trickier.

"My sources have it that Robb Stark has mobilized his forces in the north," said Jaime.

"You mean the letter that Father sent to me and that you read," said Tyrion.

Jaime ignored him. "I think we should post men above all the gates, just in case."

"So they can stand around and do nothing while the Mud Gate is overrun?" asked Tyrion. "Father told us to always concentrate our forces."

"He told me," said Jaime. "You were eavesdropping."

"Well, we are not spreading out our forces like butter scraped over too much bread."

"So we're down to using food metaphors now, are we? Why don't you go and plan a dinner party with Caroline Forbes instead? Because, brother, let's be honest here. Out of the two of us, which one of us has seen more battles?"

"I was in the one that we won against the Starks," said Tyrion.

"Because of Father," said Jaime. If Tyrion hadn't been so short, he would have hit him. Probably. "If I heard correctly, you were unconscious for all of it."

"I was not! It was only most of it!"

"Perhaps there can be a compromise, my lords," said a new voice; one which neither of them remembered.
Next chapter: Jaime and Tyrion make a new acquaintance. Theon launches the Ironborn Inquisition. Arya goes home!
Chapter Summary

Jaime and Tyrion reach an impasse. Stefan adds his two cents. Theon hunts wolves. Arya comes home.

King's Landing

"Perhaps there can be a compromise, my lords."

Jaime slowly turned around. The speaker was a handsome young man, possibly about twenty years of age, with chiselled features and green eyes that glinted in the sun. His hair was almost like burnished copper. If Jaime had been a girl, he would have swooned.

"Stefan Salvatore," said Tyrion. "How convenient. How did you get here?"

"You might be acquainted with the concept of riding, my lord," said Stefan Salvatore, the miracle, the saint, the devil; the vampire. He might look young, but his years had given him a sort of arrogance and confidence that few men possessed.

"A clever man with a quick wit," said Tyrion. "I like that. Although, you must be very brave to interrupt a discussion on matters of state between the Acting Hand of the King and the supposed heir to Casterly Rock?"

"Lord Tywin sent me, my lord Tyrion," said Stefan. "He believes King's Landing could use some reinforcements since Stannis Baratheon marches on its gates."

"And what sort of compromise would you propose, Ser Stefan?" asked Jaime.

"Every man, woman, and child has eyes. Theoretically speaking," said Stefan. Yes, theoretically, unless one Stefan Salvatore had had them gouged out. Possibly even burned. "Do we not need more men, my lords?"

"How many did you bring?" asked Tyrion.

"Three hundred," said Stefan.

"Three hundred," said Jaime. "Just enough to compose my victory speech."

"They are probably illiterate," said Stefan.

"And how will they help us?" said Tyrion, steering the conversation back onto the right path.

"Not much. But, let me pose this question to you; how many men are in King's Landing? And by men, I don't mean fighting men."

"Several hundred thousand," said Jaime. "Do you mean to throw them to Stannis?"

"No, but we can dress them up as soldiers, and Stannis would be none the wiser," said Stefan.
"So…we are throwing them to Stannis," said Tyrion.

"I like it," Jaime intercepted.

Stefan seemed to almost roll his eyes, but thought better of it. "They can watch above the gates and they could signal if they see enemies approaching," he said.

"Oh," said Jaime. "And here I thought you were like Rebekah. Of course, when and if Stannis does attack elsewhere, he will be far too busy cutting down those poor wretches that we'll have enough time to respond. I can see why Father thinks so highly of you."

Stefan bowed his head at the compliment. Tyrion narrowed his eyes at the vampire. "Now that you have finished contributing to a conversation of which you had no part, you may go," he said.

"No," said Jaime. "Stay, Stefan. I would like to hear more of your ideas. Rebekah tells me that you are very well acquainted with Katherine Stark, formerly known as Katherine Pierce."

"Fraternizing with the enemy, Ser Salvatore?" said Tyrion. "Is that not a little dangerous?"

"It was a very long time ago, Lord Tyrion."

"Still, I imagine if my father ever found out…"

"I would expect Lord Tywin to know already," said Stefan. "After all, it was no secret that she played both my brother and I against one another."

"Oooh, I love scandalous love stories with no happy endings," said Tyrion. "Why don't we have a drink and you can tell me all about it?"

"I would be happy to oblige, Lord Tyrion, when we have the time," said Stefan. "For now, let me arrange to have men posted above the other six gates." He bowed and left the two brothers.

"He's rattled," Tyrion said with glee. "I wonder what Father will think of his little favourite consort ing with Robb Stark's wife. Knowing Father, he would likely take advantage of it and use whatever feelings Katherine Stark has for Salvatore against her." Jaime wasn't too sure it would work, mainly because Katherine Stark didn't have feelings. But then, he had been wrong once or twice before. He might be wrong about her. Although, if he were any judge of character, he would say that a woman like her would never give up a chance to be queen, not even for the man she loved most. It would be like Father giving up all his titles and lands for Mother. He couldn't see that happening ever.

"We have a city to defend," Jaime reminded Tyrion before he became too sidetracked with taking down vampires. He had no idea what he was getting himself into, and as his older brother, it was Jaime's duty to protect him. Besides, the more vampires they had, the better. Their blood healed, and they were going to need some miracle healing blood sooner or later. Also, they were efficient killers as both Rebekah and Stefan had proved. Caroline had yet to live up to the reputation of vampires as being vicious creatures that stalked the night, but she was still young and untried.

"I'm sure you can take care of that, dear brother," said Tyrion. "After all, you've been in more battles than I have."

"Then I shall expect you to deliver the seal of the Hand of the King to my door," said Jaime.

"Wait, what?" said Tyrion.
"Well, defending this city is the task of the Hand, is it not?" asked Jaime.

"You're Kingsguard," said Tyrion. "Your duty is to defend the king, and the king is in King's Landing."

"If I really wanted to defend the king, I would get him out of this city before Stannis' fire god burns it to the ground," said Jaime. "Casterly Rock would be quite safe, don't you think? And Joffrey can throw people – traitors down the cliffs. That should keep him amused."

"I can already hear Father," said Tyrion. He put on a deep disapproving voice. It didn't sound at all like their father's. "A Lannister does not run."

"Joffrey is a Baratheon," said Jaime. The rumours were foul and untrue. As if he could ever produce such a little imbecile.

"But, in all honesty, I think Stefan Salvatore will cease to be Father's little pet very soon, and I will have won myself a new friend," said Tyrion.

"What do you mean?" asked Jaime.

His brother smiled. "Just ask Cousin Lance – actually, you shouldn't."

"Tyrion," warned Jaime.

"I like Cousin Lancel," said Tyrion. "He's very helpful." That was it. He needed to question Lancel. Was this another one of Tyrion's games? A diversion so that he would go chasing after Lancel and forget about his brother's ridiculous grudge against Caroline Forbes? "Anyway, Jaime. You don't have time to chase after the likes of Lancel. You have a city to defend, remember?"

"No seal, no deal," said Jaime.

"Fine," said Tyrion. "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself."

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**Winterfell**

When Theon returned to Lord Stark's chambers – Bonnie couldn't think of them as being anything else – he had lost all traces of relaxation and playfulness. He strode over to her and seized her by the arm. "Where are they?" he demanded. His grip was strong, like iron.

"My lord, what are you talking about?" said Bonnie quite honestly.

"I know you loved them, like you loved Ned Stark and Robb Stark."

"Loved who?" asked Bonnie. She had to remain calm. Most liars got caught out because they panicked. Osha had been wise not to tell her. If she didn't know then she wouldn't be able to leak the secret no matter what Theon did. She just hoped he'd believe her and leave her alone. Otherwise, this other little secret of hers was going to have to come out a lot sooner than she liked.

"Do you know anything about it? Their escape?"

She kept her gaze on Theon's face, but not staring so hard that he felt she was trying too much to convince him. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"I don't believe you," he said. He seized her by her hair and shoved her face close to the flames and glowing coals in the hearth. She struggled with him, desperately, but he was too strong. She felt the
heat. Sweat ran down her face in the place of tears. She was too terrified and angry to cry. It would have been so easy. The flames were her friends, not his. But she refrained from doing so. Now was not the time to show the world what she could do and Theon could not be trusted. He was too unstable, he needed too much affirmation from the outside. And if he was willing to do this to her, then it meant the boy she had once liked was dead.

"Please! I don't know! I really don't!"

Theon held her there for a moment longer but suddenly released her. Freed from the pressure that was pushing her forward, she fell back. The tears finally came. She scrambled away from Theon, who was staring at his hands. "I…" he said. "Did I hurt you?"

She didn't answer him but made for the door. He did not chase after her, for he seemed to be in shock as well. She retreated to the safety of her own chambers. People stared at her as she ran past them, some probably rejoicing in her fall from grace. The younger maids, at least, seemed to be wholly unsympathetic. She wouldn't have expected them to be. The Ironborn had been far from civilized and Bonnie was one of the few young women who had managed to escape the wrath of their desperate egos.

Her chambers were small and dark, but they were hers and safe. She had put wards on the door. It would be impossible to break down unless someone took a battering ram to it and there just wasn't enough space there for one.

A thrush perched on her window. It flew away when she charged in and sat down on the narrow bed. Her tears gradually subsided. What would she do now? She might have to re-evaluate her own situation and her plan to keep Theon in control by being the angel on his shoulder. She wasn't sure he had room on his shoulders for an angel, for there were too many devils whispering into his ear.

She heard the men riding out to find Bran and Rickon and she prayed to all the gods in the world that Osha knew exactly how to hide them and that Jon was hopefully in a position to help them. Short of going with them, she had done all she could. Now she had to turn her attentions to Winterfell itself.

Wolfswood

They lost their tracks somewhere in the Wolfswood. That forest was a Stark place. Their old gods whispered here, possibly even more than in the Godswood. The trees and the land had hidden Bran and Rickon Stark from him. Theon had a mind to burn it all down but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Besides, they needed the lumber. The dark branches stretched out above him like the rafters of a great green roof. He could only see glimpses of the sky and it was growing dark and grey like a storm was coming.

The dogs sniffed the ground, ears pricked and tails raised as they searched for where the scent trail began again, but they were moving in circles. Then, suddenly, one of the dogs barked, short and clear. He'd found something. Theon and the men rushed to follow the animal. He took them out of that dark, oppressive forest. A stone farmhouse perched on the edge. The dogs ran over to the low grey stone wall, so old that one could see more moss and lichen than stone, that surrounded it and began barking and baying. They'd found them!

An old cart sat unused in the mud at the front of the house. A sow snuffled while her piglets squealed. The noise was insufferable and Theon felt the sudden need to gut them all to silence them. He had to focus. Bran and Rickon had to be found first and then he would teach them a lesson. He would…think of it later.
Dagmer banged his fist on the door. The force of his blows made the house shake. The old farmer's wife opened the door just a crack. The woman was probably just a little older than Catelyn Stark but a hard life and a lack of food made her back stooped, her hair grey and her skin as thin as parchment that had been screwed up and flattened too many times.

"We're looking for two boys," said Dagmer. "One small, one's a cripple, travelling with a giant and a wildling."

"I'm sorry, m'lord," said the woman. "They're not here." Her voice quivered and her pale eyes were wide with fear.

Theon stepped up. "We just want to talk to them," he said.

"I haven't seen them," said the old woman. She looked as if she were about to faint at the sight of him and all his men.

Her husband finally appeared through the gate, pulling along a thin and stubborn donkey while two boys (his sons?) followed along behind lugging some firewood. He stopped when he saw the men. Theon repeated the questions to the old farmer who also replied that he had not seen Bran or Rickon.

"Are you telling me the truth?" he asked.

"We're simple folks, m'lord," said the farmer. "We wouldn't lie to lords."

"Wouldn't you?" asked Theon. He turned his eyes upon the two boys. "Your sons?"

"Just orphan boys the young lord sent to us to help us with our work," said the farmer.

"The young lord?" said Theon. People in the north still loved the Starks and saw him as nothing more than a temporary interloper. They waited for Robb Stark's return as if they were waiting for summer to come back.

"I mean, Bran Stark," said the farmer fearfully. "Please, m'lord. I forgot. I'm sorry."

"Search the place," barked Theon.

The men fanned out. Crates were turned over, bales of hay were poked and scattered. The dogs barked madly at everything; the chickens, the pigs, the other skinny mangy dogs that growled and cowered back. Theon looked at everything himself, not trusting his men to be careful enough. They had been the ones who had let his most valuable hostages escape in the first place! If Robb ever came for him, and Robb would at the first chance he could, Bran and Rickon were his only shields against the vengeance of Stark and Pierce wrath.

One of the dogs was running in circles inside the barn where holes in the thatching let in streams of light. It leapt at a pile of firewood. Clumps of fur clung to the broken branches; grey and tan fur that was long and coarse. Wolf fur.

"They were here," growled Theon. Obviously, they were long gone, and the old man and woman had lied to him.

The farmer and his wife would not live, but those boys might just prove to be the solution. Sure, they looked nothing like Bran and Rickon Stark, but they were more or less the same height.
Daemon Lannister's Camp, the Riverlands, Southwest of Harrenhal

It was Jon. He was dressed in Lannister clothes – they didn't suit him at all – but he was still her brother Jon all the same. His hair was still as messy as ever, although he now smiled and she thought he had never been more handsome.

Jon put a finger to his lips. Arya nodded. She could keep quiet. Not that there was anyone here to hear. When she had heard about Jon, she had not dared to believe it, but this really was Jon, with Elena.

She ran towards him and tried to put her arms around him. His armour made him bulky. "You look ridiculous," she said.

"And you look like a boy," said Jon.

"That's the idea," she replied. For a moment, it was as if they had never left Winterfell, but everything had changed.

"We cannot stay long," said Jon. "Listen, Arya, we're taking you back to Robb."

She couldn't believe it. Finally, she was going home!

Well, not home to Winterfell, but at least home to Robb and her mother. She flung her arms around Jon again. This was the best day of her life! Well, the second best day. The best day would be when she ripped out Joffrey's heart. "You're coming with me, right?" she asked as she looked up at him, and then at Elena and Damon. "Aren't you all coming?"

"I'm afraid not, little one," said Jon as he ruffled her hair like she was still a child. She let him, because it was Jon. If Damon tried, he'd find himself missing some fingers. "We're taking you to Lady Katherine, Robb's new wife. She'll take you to Robb. But we have to stay here so we can help Robb."

"But it's so dangerous!" she whispered.

"He'll be fine," said Damon. "He's got me."

"That gives me no relief," Arya scoffed, although she secretly was relieved. Damon might not be very clever sometimes, but at least he always knew how to kill people to get out of trouble. That was better than nothing.

"Do you want to go or not?" asked Damon. He sounded a little irritated. "Because, if you do, we have to leave. Now. Before anyone catches us."

"You'll be all right?" Arya asked. She let go of Jon and looked at both him and Elena. Poor Elena looked so sad and thin without her pretty long hair. She frowned when she saw Elena reach over to hold Jon's hand. Jon squeezed her fingers and they were giving each other this funny look like they were the two happiest people in the world.

Were they married? Arya really wanted to ask, but now did not seem like the right time to do it. Or any time, for that matter. It was such an awkward question, and Elena did say they were just friends, didn't she? Although, that had been a very long time ago, and adults were stupid and fell in love. At least, the adults in Sansa's favourite stories did. But neither Elena nor Jon were stupid, right? Then again, Robb wasn't stupid and he still went and fell in love and got married. Oh well, if Jon did get married, he couldn't do much better than Elena and Elena deserved someone good, like Jon and not like Damon.
"We'll be fine, Arya, I promise," said Jon.

"We'll look after each other," said Elena.

Arya gave Jon one last hug. She'd only just gotten him back, and now she had to say goodbye again! Her eyes burned with stupid girly tears. She was not going to cry. "Promise you'll come soon?" she said.

"I promise I'll come as soon as I can," said Jon. "Now, you be good and follow Damon. You shouldn't keep Lady Katherine waiting."

"Will I like her? Is she pretty?" asked Arya.

"She looks just like me," said Elena.

"But she's a lying, manipulative, cold-hearted bi-- bad influence," said Damon, amending his word choice after a very cold stare from Jon.

Arya reluctantly let go of Jon to take Damon's hand. The vampire still hadn't given back Needle. She was going to have to tell Jon that so Jon would make him give it back. Soon. But not now, when they were in such a hurry.

Damon threw her onto his back. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist so she wouldn't fall off. Truth be told, she would have liked riding Damon more than riding a horse if it weren't for Damon's terrible attitude towards everything. He was so fast that everything except the stars became blurs and streaks when they started moving. It almost felt as if she were flying. No one even saw them leaving the camp, which was the idea, she supposed. The wind rushed into her face so quickly she could barely open her eyes and she had to keep her mouth shut. Otherwise, she'd swallow so much air that she'd be sick. And possibly also a few flies.

Damon took her deep into the forest near the Lannister camp. They must have travelled for miles before they came to a little clearing amongst the trees by a bubbling brook so narrow that Rickon could have stepped over it without a problem.

A lady was waiting there, alone. She was dressed in the strangest dress Arya had ever seen, with a huge wide skirt and lots and lots of ruffles. What was she hiding under it, and how in the world did she sit down? No wonder she was standing and looking at the moon. A hat with a feather sticking out of it perched on a head of dark curls. Some of them had been left to hang down, but most of it had been pinned up. She was even fancier than the ladies in King's Landing. Was this her new sister? Oh, gods have mercy! She was going to be worse than Sansa!

But…if she was like those other ladies, then she wouldn't be out here in the wilderness alone with no escort.

The woman turned around. Arya's eyes widened. Lady Katherine didn't just look like Elena. She was Elena's twin. Fancy that, her two brothers marrying a pair of twin sisters. "You must be Arya," said Katherine. Her voice was a little higher and smoother than Elena's, and a lot colder. She regarded the girl with dark glittering eyes that held an expression not unlike that of a cat looking at a mouse. Arya clambered off Damon's back and made a wobbly curtsey. She didn't usually curtsey to people, but somehow, it seemed appropriate for Lady Katherine.

"I am, my lady," she said.

"It is very nice to meet you, Lady Arya," said Katherine, dipping a graceful curtsey of her own. She did it perfectly, with her neck bent like a swan's. "I am sure we will be the very best of friends once
"Well, no time to waste," said Damon. He knelt down in front of Arya. All of a sudden, Arya felt like crying again. Damon might be annoying and rude and mean, but he was still Damon. He'd looked after her, saved her, and been her only friend for a very long time. It had been Damon and Arya against the world and trying to find Robb. In some ways, Arya had enjoyed the adventure and freedom of it. "You listen to Katherine and Robb now, all right? I'm not gonna be there to get you out of trouble."

"As if I need you to get me out of trouble," said Arya, but her heart wasn't in it and her voice wobbled.

"Nuh uh. You're not going to cry on me," said Damon. "No tears. I don't like tears. They make me do crazy things that I don't need to do."

Arya sniffed and blinked her tears away. When did she turn into such a silly little girl?

"Come," said Katherine. She held out a delicate hand to Arya. "It grows late, and Damon needs to return before the Lannisters grow suspicious."

Arya took Katherine's hand. It felt so small and fragile, like a little bird. That thought flew out of her head as Katherine swept her off her feet before she'd even had a chance to catch her breath. Oh dear gods, did Robb know he'd married a vampire?

"No, he does not," said Katherine.

Oh, she'd said it out loud. "Don't you think you should tell him?" asked Arya as the world flew by.

"Not yet," said Katherine. "I would appreciate it if you let me tell him in my own time, Arya. He's not ready for it."

"I don't think anybody can be ready for it."

"Robb is not a believer. I think you were, before Damon told you he was one."

That was true. She'd been convinced that the Beast of Winterfell had been a vampire (and she'd been right, hah!). But Jon hadn't been a believer, and he was all right with Elena being one, even if Arya had been shocked to learn that her gentle, sweet lady's maid was actually a blood-drinking creature of the night.

She couldn't really see where she was going. All she could hear was the sound of wind as Katherine moved through the forest, barely snapping a twig in her wake. It was only when they stopped that she knew they had arrived.

Harrenhal

"There," said Katherine as she set Arya down. "That is your brother's foothold in the south. Harrenhal."

Arya had loved the stories of Aegon's conquests as a child. She loved hearing about how dragon fire had levelled the strongest fortress ever built in Westeros. Seeing it and seeing wolf banners flying from it was the best sight she had ever witnessed. The fortress rose from the grey-green plains like a half buried monster from one of the tales Robb used to like, asleep for so long that the grass and trees had grown around it and on it. Many of its towers had been melted by dragon fire,
and they looked like twisted, charred candles, but from the looks of the others, even if they were old and some parts of them had crumbled away, Arya could put together a picture of what it had looked like in its heyday. Perhaps Robb could rebuild it once he was king.

She drank it all in while Katherine fixed up her hair and hat and straightened her skirts. "You will mention nothing of my involvement in your escape," she said to Arya.

Arya got the feeling that her new sister wasn't very good with children—which was just as well, because she was not a child. Katherine spoke in a patronizing tone, but used words and sentences that were far too adult. Arya hoped that she would improve, considering she and Robb should have a baby soon. They'd already been married for several months. Arya would love to be an aunt. She would be the best aunt ever.

"Then what am I going to tell Robb?" asked Arya.

"Tell him that it was Damon and Jon's doing, getting you here," said Katherine. "Ready?"

"I'm more than ready. I've been waiting for this for so long that my neck feels all stretched."

Normally, adults would have at least made an attempt to laugh at her joke. Katherine just smiled uncomfortably and led her towards the fortress. As they entered, Arya was awestruck by the respect that the men showed to her new sister. They parted and bowed deeply as she glided past them and then usually watched her for a little longer even after she had passed them. It was as if they were all a little bit in love with her. She felt like reminding them that this was her brother's wife. Unfortunately, as with before, no one seemed to realize that she was actually Lady Arya Stark and no one even looked at her. They probably thought she was someone that Katherine had just picked up on her travels or something.

It was dark and dim inside the fortress, as if it were inhabited by ghosts as well as men. The great gates that led into the inner halls—presumably that was where Robb was—opened with a groan. Shadows were hardly dispelled by the thin streams of light that poured into it from the windows, but Katherine and Robb had tried to make it more comfortable by putting up tapestries and setting out cushioned chairs. Well, it was probably Katherine's doing. Robb had cared about tapestries as much as the next boy back in Winterfell; they were good for hiding behind if you were desperate during games of hide and seek, and they also made for acceptable weapons to throw in the face of a sibling in pursuit.

Katherine had dug out some of the old tapestries from...somewhere and put them around the hall to keep the wind at bay even as it whistled through the cracks between the stones. They were ancient; probably as old as Aegon himself and depicted a lot of dragon fire and terrified men.

Robb stood in the centre of the room at the large table, focusing on a map covered with carved wooden wolves and lions. "Robb!" shouted Arya, no longer able to contain herself. He looked up, confused for a moment, but then his eyes widened and his face lit up. He looked tireder and older, this Robb. She wouldn't say he looked like their father, because Robb had never looked like him. That had always been Jon. But there was something about Robb that reminded Arya of Ned now; they both had that same expression in their eyes, as if the weight of the whole world rested on their shoulders and they alone could save it. Except, in Robb's eyes, there was also something else.

Arya's father had never really wanted anything beyond what he had been given. Robb wanted more. A lot more.

"I found her when I was out for my morning walk," explained Katherine. "Damon and Jon were trying to make up for your name day." What? She was Robb's sister, not a present!
"You were out alone?" asked Robb. He looked as if he wanted to scold Katherine, but he was so distracted that all he managed to do was frown.

Arya ran to her brother and flung her arms around him. He held her tight and kissed the top of her head in silence. Robb had never been her favourite brother, and she had never been Robb's favourite sister, but at that moment, Arya thought she couldn't ever be so glad to see anyone ever again, except for Jon. She wished more than anything that he was here too and not back at the dangerous Lannister camp. She couldn't help it. She started crying. The hot tears ran down her face and soaked into Robb's fine tunic, staining the grey silk threads with which the wolves on it were embroidered. "I missed you so much," she whispered.

"Shh, you're back now," whispered Robb hoarsely. Finally she let go of him and he held her at shoulder's length to look at her. "You've grown taller."

"And you've grown old," said Arya.

Robb laughed. The familiar sound of Robb's bold laugh made everything inside her warm up and for a moment, she could almost believe she was home in Winterfell again and everything was going to be all right.

Everything was going to be all right. She glanced briefly up at the sky, where she hoped her father would be. He would be gladdened to know that she'd gotten back, even if Sansa was still stuck in King's Landing. "Where's Mother?" she asked.

"I'll have someone take you to her," said Robb. "How on earth did you get out?"

"Damon," said Arya simply. She hoped that was enough.

"Damn Salvatore," said Robb with a smile. "Now I'll have to find some way to pay him back."

"He's your bannerman. It's what he's supposed to do, isn't it?" Behind her, Katherine nodded in approval.

"Maybe we'll have to make him an actual bannerman with lands," mused Robb. "But never mind that for now."

"We have more pressing matters at hand to discuss," said Katherine. "And Lady Arya needs a bath and, I think, a new dress."

Damn, she'd forgotten about that. "Must I wear a dress?"

"Arya, you are a lady and my sister. You will appear as such," said Robb. "I will brook no argument on that matter."

"But we're at war and tunics and trousers are so much more convenient and comfortable!"

"How about this? You will be allowed to wear trousers and tunics when Katherine wears them," said Robb.

"That may be sooner than you think," said his beautiful wife as she sidled up to him and put her arm around his waist. He pulled her against him possessively and kissed her right there in front of Arya. On her mouth! It was disgusting!

"Eww!" Arya couldn't resist saying. The two of them broke away laughing.
"Go on!" commanded Robb in between gasps of laughter. "Away to your bath with you. You'll make the whole place stink. You can't see Mother like this! She'll have you scrubbed so pink that your skin will fall off."

**Next chapter:** Katherine sets a honey trap for the Umbers. Jon and Damon make moves on Daemon Lannister. Catelyn gets half of her wish.
The Usual Suspects

Chapter Summary

Damon thinks of a "foolproof" plan but Jon doubts it because Jon knows nothing!
Daemon hears some interesting rumours concerning Umber intentions towards Robb.

Harrenhal

Catelyn looked out the window across to the gleaming silver rivers. All waters flowed to the sea eventually. This water she was looking at right now might be the same water that Sansa and Arya would look at in a few days in King's Landing as it ran into the sea and mingled with the vast unknown ocean that she could only dream of. She absentmindedly sewed another grey silk wolf onto Robb's new ceremonial cloak, which was a 'royal blue', according to Katherine. For once, the two women had agreed on something. Robb looked good in blue.

A dull knock sounded on the thick wood of her room's door. Her prison's door. "Come in," she said without looking at it. Just thinking about how her son had locked her in here made her heart break all over again, even though she knew that he was perfectly right to do so. She had committed treason to try and get her daughters back, and what had she received for an answer? Jaime Lannister was back in King's Landing and there was no news of her girls.

The door creaked as it opened. "Mother?"

Catelyn stiffened. Was this a dream? She slowly turned around. The dress hung off her thin frame and was baggy and tight in all the wrong places. Her hair had been hacked off in the roughest manner and resembled the mane of a horse more than anything else, but it was her.

"Mother, it's me," said Arya. "It's Arya."

Catelyn had no words. She didn't know what to say. It wasn't the way she'd envisioned it, but this was something she'd dreamed of ever since she'd heard of Ned's capture. She simply opened her arms. Arya fell into them. She smelt of Katherine's special lavender soap. That woman had been using Robb's money as if she were pouring water onto the fields, but for once, Catelyn didn't mind her spending it on expensive soaps. She buried her face in her daughter's hair, relishing in the feel of just holding her in her arms.

Daemon's camp, somewhere in the Riverlands, Southwest of Harrenhal

How were they to go about convincing Daemon Lannister? The man was what Jon imagined Tywin Lannister to have been in his youth. He was clever, charming and ambitious and after all those times of being used by Katherine, Jon had the feeling that Daemon would have realized something by now.

"We'll not say it to him directly," said Damon. Even though it was dark outside beneath the eaves of the trees, his blue eyes still gleamed. They had all come out independently —well, Jon had come with Elena because it was expected that they would take a few private moments— to avoid detection. Cold winds blew from the north. Jon wondered briefly about how his former brothers
were doing on the Wall and whether the things that went 'bump' in the night were really coming south to take them all.

"He has spies scouting around the Stark camp and I know some of Kitty-cat's minions have been tasked with spreading nasty little truths about certain people that we don't like," Damon continued, oblivious to Jon's concerns. Why was he worrying about things that went 'bump'? He should be more worried about creatures who went 'crash, bang, bam' and thought themselves invincible. "Kitty-cat loves her gossip and she misses her gossip mags. This will have to do for her, unfortunately. And then, of course, the men will talk about it and Daemon's spies will pick on those fascinating little conversations while the men are outside taking a piss or whatnot."

"Literally caught with their trousers around their ankles?" said Elena.

"There's no honester man than one who doesn't have his pants on," said Damon.

"That makes no sense," said Jon.

"But, moving on," said Damon, "after they overhear it, they will bring it to Daemon. Of course, we will be there to listen to it. And then he'll probably want your opinion, Jon."

"Are you sure it will go like that?" asked Jon. It seemed too smooth, too direct, too convenient.

"Yes, I'm sure. Any other helpful contributions you would like to make?"

"If it does go like that, I know what to say," said Jon. The problem was, he had a feeling that Damon's predictions were...not correct.

"Do you?" Damon doubted him. Jon knew that. Somehow, the vampire thought him honest and incapable of lying, despite the huge tale he'd spun for the Lannisters' benefit.

"I'll merely tell him the truth about how loyal Jon Umber had been and how Umber temper is rather well-known in the north," said Jon. "I think Daemon would be capable of drawing his own inferences from that. He never misses a chance to...well, seize the chance." Jon was rather envious of this skill of his, actually. If he had had it, he wouldn't have have been stumbling around in the dark for months while attempting to get to Robb.

"And, naturally, he'll want my opinion. I've always been the angel on his shoulder," said Damon. "If Kitty knows what she's doing, then Daemon will go right for it."

"And if he doesn't, then..." said Jon.

"He won't suspect us of being in contact with Katherine, I'm sure. It's logistically impossible," said Elena. "And how would this benefit him if the Umbers sided with his enemies."

"You might as well call him You-Know-Who, Elena," said Damon. "It's equally subtle."

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**Harrenhal**

The details of Damon's plans could use a little tweaking but, overall, Katherine was not unimpressed with it. Given enough training, he might even become useful. She burned the little note he had left for her at today's dead drop, marvelling at Robb's ability to bring together the most unlikely of people to work for him. Not that he knew it. He was quite clueless in that regard.

The Umber cousins were going through with their plan to assassinate Robb. The idiots even
planned to do it themselves. Had they never heard of hired killers? While they were not as
common as fantasy writers would have one believe, they were common enough so that if one
looked very hard, there would be several dozen quite eager for the job if tempted with enough gold,
not that they would ever show it.

Well, if they went on ahead and did it themselves, then it would be perfect because she would be
waiting for them and they would have played right into her plans. There was nothing more
damning than the hand holding the weapon.

"What are you thinking about, Katherine?" asked Robb suddenly. She looked up. Oops. She had
been caught daydreaming. She set down the poem she was penning –it wasn't very good, anyway.

"What do you mean, my lord?" she asked.

"You have that look," said Robb. "I think, after having known you for so long, I would know how
to read my wife's face." He did, did he? She gave him an innocent smile. He narrowed his eyes.
"You're planning something."

"A question to ask yourself, my husband, is when am I not planning something," said Katherine.

"Am I going to like this?"

"Who said it had anything to do with you?"

Robb flexed his ink-stained hands. He looked as if he would rather be doing anything but this. For
a moment, Katherine glimpsed the boy he must have once been before circumstances had forced
him onto this path. "Come, now, Katherine," he said. "Everything you do has to do with me."

"With a head that size, are you sure your old crown will fit?" said Katherine.

"If it doesn't, I'll have a new one made," said Robb. He waved his hand as if the size of his crown
did not concern him and rose to his feet. His eyes took on a mischievous boyish glint. "Tell me
what's on your mind. I'm bored." He pouted. Pouted. Oh, he was one quick learner, this one. She
liked that.

"It has to do with Arya," said Katherine.

"Arya?" said Robb. All pretences of being able to have fun disappeared.

Katherine got up and began to walk slowly about the room, taking care to put one foot directly in
front of the other in a straight line, giving a sway to her hips that men could never fail to be
mesmerized by. She knew he was watching her with all his concentration. Good. Between that and
her suggestion for his sister, she would be able to keep him distracted enough so she could scheme
in peace. She would tell him in time, but not right now, when his disapproval could still ruin
everything. Robb was too good and true for this world. She needed to protect him and guide him on
the right path. Where would Alexander have been without his mother's influence? The greatest of
men had great women behind them. "She is eleven, yes?"

"Yes," said Robb. "But I don't see what Arya has to do with you."

"She is family, Robb," said Katherine. "I do wish to become better acquainted with your family."

Robb gave Katherine a funny look. She had never shown that much interest in his family, an
oversight on her part, to be sure. But when his family present had consisted only of Catelyn, it had
been very hard to muster much enthusiasm. However, now that she had met Jon and that feisty
scrap of a kid, she was ready to become a slightly better wife and sister-in-law. Not that there was any room for improvement.

"She needs a female companion, one who is not your mother," said Katherine.

"Katherine, I understand that there is little love between you and my mother, but she is still my mother," said Robb.

"Oh, I would never make you choose," said Katherine. He would pick Katherine; of that she was certain. "I am just saying that Arya's character may be at odds with your mother's."

"Well, Arya has always been…special," said Robb. He suddenly frowned. "Are you going to teach her to fight?"

"Those who cannot fight still die," said Katherine vaguely. "In fact, this is a dangerous world." He had completely forgotten about her conniving look earlier on as he considered the very real possibility of Arya learning to defeat someone like the Mountain – not Gregor Clegane himself, of course, because he was now thumbless and in a cage. Katherine didn't have any intention of letting him out. Ever. He was her prize, her trophy.

"And the womanly arts?" said Robb. Since when did he take such an interest in his little sister's education or was he one of those brothers who acted as a surrogate father?

"Oh, she'll learn them," said Katherine. Embroidery was fun but ultimately useless unless one's target had a fascination with women who knew their station in life. Those were usually the boring, overbearing ones that Katherine loved to take down just for the sake of taking them down. If one lived for such a long time, one had to find some hobbies. Otherwise, a day would seem like a lifetime and meeting the sun without a daylight ring would probably be the highlight, which would negate the whole point of becoming a vampire in the first place. Katherine, herself, was in favour of a much more rounded education.

"I imagine you would teach her to sew people's lips together with thread," said Robb jokingly. "She'd like that."

"Oh, nothing so crude. There are a million things one could do with needles," said Katherine.

"Katherine, she needs to learn how to be a woman."

"I think that is something that you are born with, not something that you can learn," said Katherine.

"I mean it, a proper woman," said Robb.

"She will grow breasts in time," said Katherine. Robb reddened. It was cute, really, how uncomfortable he was when talking about certain basic biological processes, especially when they concerned women's bodies.

"As in a woman who knows the womanly arts of embroidery, sewing, and whatever it is that girls need to know. She is a lady and she will marry a lord one day and run his household for him and raise his children. What lord would have need of a woman who wields a sword, sticks needles under people's fingernails and rides a horse like a man?" said Robb.

Katherine pursed her lips and gave him a look. Whatever he was about to say, he swallowed, for he seemed to have just remembered that he had married such a woman and the bards now sang songs about her beauty and prowess. Both of them knew that she was known as one of the bloodiest and most desired female creatures in all of Westeros. She simply didn't do all those things all the time.
In fact, rarely, for she was lazy and preferred to let other people do the work.

"Do I look like a septa, Robb," said Katherine. "I mean to be her sister."

"Well, then," said Robb. He couldn't really say anything to her well-meaning intentions now, could he?

Katherine smiled to herself as she put away her pens and parchment. He watched her every move, the way the lace crinkled and rustled as she slipped her feet into dainty shoes and laced them up. She did not say anything as she stepped outside. The guards bowed. Her two on-duty praetorians took their place behind her.

"I am merely taking some air on the battlements," she said. "You need not follow me. I think I shall be quite safe with twenty thousand doughty north men guarding the fortress." The heels of her shoes clicked on the stone floor. The sky was grey again, as it always was, but stubborn sunlight pierced the heavy layer of cloud to cast random golden spots on the ground below. From the battlements, she could see very far. Little villages sprouted. Ships sailed to Lord Harroway's Town to trade goods. It looked very peaceful. Appearances could be deceiving.

She strained her eyes as much as she could. It was beyond regular human sight, but she could see it, just the very top of it.

A lion prancing on a field of blood.

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**Daemon's Camp**

There were whispers and murmurs coming from the command tent before Jon even got there. He couldn't hear whole sentences, but he did hear the words "Umbers" and "Robb Stark".

The guards announced his arrival to Daemon.

"Ah, Jon Snow, just the man I wanted to see," said Daemon. He dismissed the two men with whom he had been speaking. Jon didn't recognize them. Then again, it would be unreasonable to expect him to know everyone in the Lannister camp after just a few weeks of staying here. "Come, sit."

Daemon's tent was spacious. A large table sat in the centre. He had little furniture beyond what was necessary; a few chairs, a desk, and a bed. An ewer of watered down wine waited alongside a platter of cured meat. In one corner stood a strange lumpy object covered with a piece of golden cloth. Jon had no idea what it was.

"Is anything the matter, my lord?" asked Jon as he sat down on one of the little folding camp stools.

"I have received some rather interesting news," said Daemon. "I trust that you have heard that Robb Stark executed Jon Umber over differences in religion?" He said the last word as if it were distasteful to him.

"Yes," said Jon. His mind was still reeling from that. Robb, a fanatic? He couldn't really imagine it. Although it was probably some trick. Damon certainly thought it was a Katherinesque trick.

"Apparently, Umber's son and nephews are displeased about that."

"I would hardly expect them to be happy."

"They are displeased enough to attempt to kill Robb Stark," said Daemon.
Jon forced himself to remain calm. Yes, he had known about it, but being reminded of it always made him feel nervous on Robb's behalf.

"I would imagine they would want justice," said Jon.

"But it is a dangerous plan, don't you think, not to mention foolish? You would never do anything like that."

"They are Umbers, my lord," said Jon. "Strength has always been their strength, not thinking."

"I suppose," said Daemon. "I am not very familiar with their family. What do you know of them?"

"I have never met the Smalljon or his cousins," said Jon. "But the Greatjon had ever been a man well-known for his brash temper and bravery."

Daemon drummed his fingers on the wooden desk as he leaned back in his chair – leather-backed, carved rosewood frame, no fur covering; it looked uncomfortable.

"What about self-interest?" asked Daemon. "How much do the Umbers think of Umber interests?"

"Jon Umber first lost his fingers and then his head speaking out of turn," said Jon. He raised an eyebrow and felt the other one threatening to rise up as well.

"Perhaps not a great deal," agreed Daemon. "But I think they would understand the concept of working with someone to achieve mutual aims, yes?" He rose up and began to pace slowly. "Would they be amenable to an overture from...say, one of Robb Stark's enemies? What do they say about the enemy of your enemy?"

"Not necessarily your friend," said Jon. "Do you mean to befriend them and induce them to support our cause, my lord?"

"I think you know well enough what I mean," said Daemon. "And I don't need them to be my friends. I need them to get rid of Robb Stark and they want that as much as I do."

"It could be possible. The Smalljon may not be the same kind of man as his father was," said Jon. Obviously not, if he were planning to kill Robb! "But I am not certain."

"Perhaps he would be more willing to listen if you spoke to him."

"The Umbers remain in the Stark camp. I should imagine it would be quite difficult for me to go there right now, my lord," said Jon.

"We are at war. If Robb Stark wishes to fight it, then his bannermen cannot stay beneath his and Katherine Stark's watchful eyes all the time. I do not mean to send you now, Jon Snow. I just need you to be ready."

Daemon turned the power of his gaze upon Jon and Jon was surprised by how similar an expression he and Tyrion both had. Both were capable men who had been looked down upon their whole lives due to circumstances that they could not control.

Much like himself, actually.

"Have you ever thought about what you would be, Jon Snow?" asked Daemon suddenly. "As a bastard, and I mean this with no offence, you must have wondered about what you would do with your life."
"Bastard' is merely the circumstance of my birth, my lord," said Jon. This was a test! Strange questions like this were always tests. How would Tyrion respond? He could almost laugh at this. He was using Lannister tricks against a Lannister. He supposed there was no better trick he could use on a Lannister. They would never suspect a Sta – Snow of doing that. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Go on," said Daemon.

"And you know I tried to join the Night's Watch, but isolating myself and selflessly giving my life to protect some peasants who will neither know me nor be grateful to me was not something that appealed very much," Jon continued. "I want the world to know my name."

"And the world will," said Daemon. "You are as much Eddard Stark's son as Robb Stark."

Jon said nothing. It was true. Their father had treated them very much the same – distantly. He had been a good father, a kind father, and he had taught and loved them as well as he knew how. Even though his values of honour and integrity meant nothing in a world of vampires and Lannisters and had eventually gotten him killed and started this war, Jon could not blame him. He had done his best. It was all anyone could do, wasn't it?

"When Robb Stark is dead, and he will be dead sooner rather than later, the North shall need a new warden."

"I am a Snow, not a Stark, my lord," said Jon. "I cannot inherit."

"Trifles," said Daemon. "It is something that our beloved king could change with a stroke of his pen if Lord Tywin so pleases."

To be lord, to rule, to prove that he was worthy; Daemon had shown Jon the world and offered it to him, if only he would kneel. Jon's heart thudded in his chest. It was tempting. So tempting. And all he would have to do was …

But this was Robb. His brother, someone he'd grown up with, someone who had always stood by him and never treated him as a bastard. He could not, would not betray him. He would hate himself if he did and the whole world was not worth the love of his brother. There would be some other way to let the world remember him. Not as a traitor, however. He would find another way without Daemon's help, although possibly with Damon's. Of course, his friend and rival was more likely to lead him down the path of infamy rather than fame.

"Well?" asked Daemon.

"There's still Sansa and Arya and Bran and Rickon," said Jon.

"You are the oldest," said Daemon. "If you were a Stark, there would be no reason to oppose your rule. Jon Stark; it has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"I've dreamed that name so many times that it sounds as familiar to me as my own, my lord," said Jon.

"Sometimes, dreams really do come true." Daemon held out his hand. Jon grasped it. An understanding passed between the two men. If not for the fact that they served different lords, they could actually have been friends – or the very worst of rivals.

Harrenhal
Where in the world was today's news bulletin? It was supposed to be on at six o'clock every night (not really) and Katherine was getting impatient and worried. Perhaps she was just paranoid, but she kept on mentally listing out all the things that could possibly have happened to Damon and there were a lot of things. Not for the first time, she wondered what it would have been like if Stefan had been the one who had met Robb and Damon the Lannisters. That would have been, well, she wouldn't say preferable because it wouldn't be half as exciting with Stefan, but things would have gone a lot more smoothly.

"... and perhaps we can go to King's Landing and sue for peace with the Lannisters," Robb was saying.

"Yes, we should," said Katherine absently. "Wait...what?"

"You weren't listening, were you?" asked Robb. He speared a sliver of roasted venison on his fork.

"Forgive me, my lord," said Katherine.

Robb reached across the table to take her hand. One year ago, she would have found such a gesture sickening when she saw lovers at cafés doing it, but now that it was her and Robb, it was... touching. He was so sweet, her dear young husband, and so very innocent to the ways of the world despite his prowess in battle. She squeezed his fingers. She was trapped now. It was the sweetest anguish. She knew she would do anything for him. She had never felt that way before. It made her feel uncomfortable. Her mind was telling her that she needed to escape, and quickly, before she was mired any further. Yet she couldn't. She was already too far gone.

"What is on your mind, Katherine?" asked Robb. "You can tell me."

"I was wondering when you should re-crown yourself king," said Katherine.

"It is a little too soon, don't you think? I think it would not be appropriate until after Stannis has defeated the Lannisters and lost many of his men in doing so and perhaps not even then."

"You're right," said Katherine. "It is too soon."

They finished the rest of their meal this way, holding hands across the table. It was like being a teenager all over again. Katherine had to remind herself that her husband had yet to see his twentieth birthday. He was too young to have married, actually. They both were.

The night was clear when she finally got out. The moon was but a sliver in the sky, but the stars were more than bright enough to illuminate her way. The countryside became a blur as she sped past, using all her speed to reach the drop-off point. The branches reached out into her path almost deliberately as if the whole world was trying to catch her. She laughed in its face. No one could ever catch her. If she were caught, then it would be because she wanted it to be so.

The space beneath the rock was still empty. She perched on top of it and arranged her skirts. She was a patient woman, but her patience had limits and Damon was seriously testing them. An owl hooted. Rodents rustled in the leaves, nosing for food. She batted away a curious moth.

"You know, one hundred years ago, I would have thought this was the sweetest dream."

Damon had managed to sneak up on her? She had to be losing her touch. It would not happen again. She turned around slowly as if she had known he had been there all along.

"You're late," she said.
"A Salvatore is never late. Nor is he early –"

"You don't get to quote the Lord of the Rings at me," said Katherine. "Well?"

Damon screwed up the note he had written and came to sit beside her. It was almost as if they were friends. She could never be friends with anyone. They were either enemies or lovers, or both. Friends were for nice people.

"My buddy Jon and I have been finalizing our plans," began Damon. "You're gonna love this, Kitty-Cat."

"Careful, Damon. This cat has claws."

"And they're long and sharp, I suppose?"

"Longer and sharper than yours."

"Maybe it's time for a mani-pedi."

Katherine inspected her nails. She could do a lot to Damon and he knew it. He became more serious. "Daemon intends to send Jon, at some point, to the Umbers to negotiate a surrender."

"That is perfect. Very convincing."

"We don't know when. So long as the Umbers remain under Robb's eye, no matter how unwatchful he might be, Jon cannot meet them."

"Then I shall have to make sure that they go out far beyond the range of Robb's gaze," said Katherine. "I am sure there are lonely Lannisters with no one to play with. Leave that to me. I will think of something."

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**Next chapter:** Stefan explains his new life philosophy to Caroline. A nasty visitor comes knocking on Theon's door. Bonnie makes a discovery. Damon's career as the Lannisters' super-scout comes under threat.
The Girls Next Door

Chapter Summary

Caroline confronts the grey morality of Westeros and questions her own values. Jaime tries to prepare for the siege. Theon prepares for unwelcome visitors. Bonnie discovers a secret in the crypts. Umber plots to destroy Robb while Katherine and her little helpers plot to destroy the Umbers.

King's Landing

The last person Caroline had expected to see in King's Landing was Stefan Salvatore since, you know, he was so busy being a good little advisor to Lords Tyrion and Jaime. Oh, she'd heard about his plan to put helpless civilians on the walls, all right, and it had been inspired; like, Klaus-inspired. So when she bumped into him in the halls of the palace, she had no idea how to react. He looked the same; better than ever, actually, because he wasn't constantly angsting about killing too many people. This Stefan didn't care about those trivialities anymore.

"Ser Salvatore," she said.

"Caroline, it's me," said Stefan.

"Is it? Because, pardon me, it seems that I don't know you at all. I mean, the Stefan that I knew would never put innocent people in danger just so he could curry favour with the sons of the most powerful man of any country. Do you have your humanity switched on or off?"

"Caroline, the last I checked, there is nothing more human than self-preservation," said Stefan.

"Huh!" huffed Caroline. "So you're that Stefan now. I should have figured."

"It's not like that, Caroline. The truth is, you have never been in a war before. In war, collateral damage is necessary. I'm just trying to keep it down."

"You call this keeping it down? Forget it. You don't need to explain to me. I can see why you were Klaus' best friend. The thing is, Klaus is evil, but he admits it. He never claimed to be anything else other than evil, but you, Stefan? You make excuses as if that justifies whatever it is you do these days. From where I stand, you're no better than Damon."

She turned on her heel and strode away. She'd never felt more lost than she did now. Stefan kept pace with her, determined to make her see the dark.

"Do you know what Stannis Baratheon will do to the people of this city if he ever conquers it?" asked Stefan.

"Can it be any worse than what you're doing to them right now?"

"He will kill those who refuse to worship his fire god," said Stefan. "Do you remember the Holocaust? Salem?"

Yes, in fact, Caroline did remember them, second-hand, and she'd never thought that people would
ever, ever do that to one another again. But here she was, in a place where such things did happen and now she was facing the reality of it. Sheltered in Tywin's camp, she had never really understood the truth until now. It made her feel sick just thinking about it, and she just wanted to bury herself in her blankets and wake up back in her own house in a normal world where human life meant something, and not just as a source of food.

Still, she did not turn around. She didn't want to look at Stefan. To look at him was to face the reality that this was what she was going to have to live with now, and one day, she might have to make this very same decision herself. How could she make such a decision? It was simple; she couldn't.

Caroline walked away as fast as she could. She didn't want this. She had never wanted any of it. She had been happy to be a small town pageant queen and all she'd ever aspired to was graduating high school and getting into college. She hadn't even been thinking about what would happen after graduating from college! Caroline Forbes was not a girl who decided who got to live and who got to die.

Outside Winterfell

It was going to rain. Ramsay Snow did not mind the rain, or the snow, or anything, really. He was too elated that he was finally going to be doing something instead of staying at the Dreadfort and waiting for news of his father. The same old got boring really quickly and he did not like being bored.

Still, things had gone well for him lately. With the deaths of his half-brothers, Ramsay had been waiting for his father's notice. Clearly, his brothers were idiots for they had let Robb Stark use them as bait. He wouldn't have been such a fool. But he thanked them for being fools for now they were out of the way. He loved them for their brave sacrifice.

He had received word from his father a few days ago, with orders from Lord Stark to repel the Ironborn invasion. His sword itched for blood, any blood. At home, he had been given explicit orders not to play with the peasants without good reason at all during harvest time, and there were only so many prisoners. Also, the Starks had outlawed flaying, which limited sources of entertainment. Flaying –properly, that was– was a dying art that needed to be revived.

The towers of Winterfell emerged from the horizon. He had heard stories about what a mighty fortress it was, how deep its roots grew, and how it had been the stronghold of the Starks for generations. Well, whatever Starks had built and guarded it, Robb Stark clearly had none of their ability for fate had given him everything and he had done nothing. Ramsay scoffed at him. He should have been fostered at the Dreadfort, and then he might have learned a thing or two. What use did the world have for honour and duty?

Flags bearing a squid out of water flew from Winterfell's battlements. They were out of place. Squid on land lost their form and dried out. Ramsay would help them along.

He surrounded the fortress. There weren't very many of them, but there were even fewer Ironborn. News had it that it was just the fifty men. However, with those thick walls, it would not be difficult for fifty men to outlast an army, not that Ramsay intended to give them that chance. Breaching the wall was difficult; surrounding it was easy. The world would finally know the name of Ramsay of the Dreadfort. Perhaps his father would finally see his quality.
Lord Robb had sent men! It was about time, although not nearly timely enough. Bran and Rickon were gone, their bodies swaying, blackened and unrecognizable, from the gables of the inner gate. The only thing Robb Stark could get now was revenge. Bonnie hoped he would get it. There were no words to describe the horror, the emptiness. There was darkness in people that even vampires could not surpass. She had to wonder if all the darkness in vampires was just the manifestations of the deepest parts of their human selves. Did she also have that darkness within her? She must, if she could wish anyone dead. Hell, she would do it herself if it wouldn't attract too much unwanted attention.

"Who leads them?" Theon was demanding of Dagmer, who had come bearing the bad news that the northerners had come.


"Bolton," whispered Theon. "That cold-eyed bastard." It meant something to him, then, this name. Bonnie wasn't too sure of the significance of the noble names in the north yet, despite having lived here for quite some time now. She sat in her corner and hoped she wouldn't be noticed. She might have placated Theon for now, but it didn't he'd remain placated for long, especially with the Boltons encroaching. Not that he could suspect anyone inside Winterfell of actually being able to contact anyone because he'd helpfully killed all the ravens to prevent word from reaching Robb. Now he couldn't even send word to his own people. Bonnie was not about to offer her services.

Dagmer was still providing Theon with information about the invading force as the two men left the room for the war chambers. Every now and then, a horn blasted through the deepening night, stained red and purple in one of those rare northern sunsets that actually had colour. It looked much warmer than it actually was. Bonnie closed the shutters against the cold north wind. It whistled in through the cracks anyway. The wood couldn't keep it out, just as the gates and walls of Winterfell could not keep out northern vengeance.

She suddenly got the urge to see the army for herself, and this 'Bolton', although it was only a bastard who was leading the army – only a bastard? Since when did she start thinking like these people too? The legitimacy of one's birth meant nothing. Since Ramsay Snow was allowed to lead an army, she could safely assume that he was at least somewhat competent.

Men rushed to and fro on the walls, placing packets of arrows there for the archers in case the Boltons tried to storm the walls, not that anyone with an iota of sense would. The northerners were staying put outside and blowing their horn. A red man was stretched upside down on their banners. The horn blasted again, a harsh sound in the otherwise silent night. She realized that it wasn't a red man, but a man with no skin. A flayed man. Yes, she remembered now. That was the sigil of the Boltons. They would enjoy Klaus' company.

A sudden chill made her stomach lurch, more like a gut feeling than anything, but a witch should trust her gut feelings. A house with a flayed man for its sigil could not possibly be friendly to anyone, surely.

She went back down to the courtyard where the Ironborn were barking orders and readying siege supplies. Sacks of grain sat piled up against a wall, ready to be taken somewhere safe where it could be rationed. All the weapons in the keep had been brought out and blacksmiths were sharpening swords and spearheads. She kept her head down to avoid looking up and seeing the blackened charred bodies.

She suddenly glimpsed Maester Luwin walking about with his hands in his sleeves and his head bowed very low, as if he didn't want anyone to see him. She followed him down winding paths through the castle, passing through narrow passageways. They served as ways for the servants to
deliver food and whatever else was needed during the great feasts when the lords and ladies had no
need to see just exactly where their entertainment came from so long as it came. No one took any
notice of them, for they were all too occupied with the Boltons to worry about one woman and one
old man walking separately in the same direction.

She followed him to the crypts. A wind blew through the passageways, making the torches in the
sconces flicker. The dead did not say anything as she passed by their resting places; bearded kings
with swords on their knees, women in flowing robes. Their style of dress had not changed much
through the centuries. Some of them bore a great deal of resemblance to the late Lord Ned, and
some to Jon. Lord Robb had taken after his mother's side of the family.

Maester Luwin glanced backward. Bonnie was not quick enough to duck behind one of the statues.
Immediately, the maester's hand flew to his belt and pulled out a dagger. Since when did he carry a
dagger? Times had changed in Winterfell and not for the better.

"Who are you? Come out!" he demanded. "I'm not going to hurt you!" Clearly, he was not very
accustomed to confronting people. Still, Bonnie stepped out into the open, both hands raised. She
wasn't afraid. There were more dangerous people in the world than Maesters and she had dealt with
them before. He continued to point his dagger at her, his eyes wary. In his other hand, he gripped
his torch so tightly that his knuckles gleamed white against the liverspots.

"It's all right," said Bonnie a little awkwardly. She could confront people well enough, but she
didn't really know how to calm people down in tense situations like this. That had always been
Elena (it came with the territory; she was very good at getting through to a fight-ready Damon).

"Bonnie, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask the same of you. What are you doing down in the crypts?"

"I am here in the service of Lord – Prince Theon," said Maester Luwin a little uncertainly. And
then, more firmly,"I wanted to pay my respects to Lord Stark. He wanted me to pay his respects to
Lord Stark." He was a terrible liar.

"Now?" asked Bonnie. "In the middle of a siege?"

"I'm not interested in Theon's speeches," said Luwin. "Clearly, neither are you. What business do
you have down here?"

Bonnie had a brainwave. In hindsight, it might not have been the best one. "The dead speak to me
sometimes," she said in a wistful, spooky voice.

The maester frowned. "The dead?" he said. His hand waivered, but then he lifted the dagger again.

"Or maybe I'm just slowly going mad," said Bonnie. The old man looked at her with horror and
pity.

"Tell me about what you hear."

"It's mostly whispers in tongues I have never heard before in my life." Her predecessors had
spoken to her in that way, the witches of Mystic Falls. Why would the old Starks be any different?
"I do not understand what they are trying to tell me. I think they are displeased." It was a very
reasonable assumption, considering what had happened to the family recently. It would not surprise
her if some particularly forceful ghost came back to try and make things right. It probably would
not be Lord Ned.
Maester Luwin continued to advance on her. What an...interesting pair they made, the maester who had probably never killed anyone before and the witch who had killed too many, albeit indirectly.

She sat down on the floor and leaned her head back against the smooth slab of one tomb. A sad looking woman with a stone face gazed back down at her. Truth be told, she had never been down here before. It had always spooked her and scared her, for she had not known what she would find.

The dead had power and the crypts of Winterfell held generations of the dead. Many had passed on, she was sure, but for others, sometimes she fancied she felt their benevolent presence watching over their descendants. Legend had it that the Starks had magic. Bran was almost proof enough of that fact, what with his dreams and all that. He had mentioned it once before to her and she had never forgotten it.

"Forgive me if I do not believe you, for the dead do not speak," said Luwin.

It was so easy just to make the flames flare up. Orange tongues shot towards the ceilings. A wind blew through the tunnels, whistling and howling as it went through the narrow cracks in the stone that no eyes could see. Luwin's eyes widened. He looked about, keeping a firm grip on his dagger.

"What's going on?" The sound of Osha's voice practically made him jump. It certainly made Bonnie leap to her feet. If Osha was here, then...

"Oh, it's you," said the wildling. "I was wonderin' when you would figure it out. Took you long enough."

"Bran? Rickon?" asked Bonnie. She would have formed complete sentences if she had been capable of it at that moment in time. As it were, it had taken all of her cognitive abilities to form syllables.

"They're here," said Osha.

"Let me see them."

Luwin looked from the wildling to the witch, his bewilderment growing with each moment. "Do you trust her, Osha?" he asked.

"We don't have a choice, unless you would like to slit her throat yourself?" said the wildling. Was that a yes or a no? "She'll find out sooner or later. She's a witch."

"There's no such thing," said Luwin.

Osha snorted. "Your dead animal skins with squiggles on them don't contain all the knowledge in the world, old man," she said. "There are things out there that men don't understand and will never understand." She beckoned to Bonnie. "Maybe you can tell the little lord that there is nothing north of the Wall except terror and death and he should head south like any sensible person is doing."

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**King's Landing**

Jaime surveyed his troops. And by troops, he really meant his rabble. They were a sad looking bunch of drunks and layabouts who had probably never fought in anything outside of an alehouse brawl. Tyrion had said they were some of the best fighters they had left inside the city. Jaime was
almost certain he'd been lying.

"Form your lines," he commanded. They shuffled so slowly into formation that he was wondering if one of Rebekah's witches had gone and turned all the alley cats in King's Landing into militia men for a joke. Perhaps he should swap these for Stefan Salvatore's civilians? He might actually have a chance at defending this city with those instead of...these.

"This makes me want to reconsider which side I'm on," Rebekah whispered to him.

"What makes you think Stannis' militia or Robb Stark's militia is any better?" asked Jaime. Although he had no doubt that Katherine Stark's Praetorian Guard was much, much, much better than this. Although he supposed one should not compare militias to the Praetorian Guard, which was practically the Queen's guard. "Besides, you need not worry. The Kingsguard is better than anything the Starks and Stannis have. In all of their combined armies, there is no one called Jaime Lannister."

"Puh-leeze," she said. She rolled her eyes towards the heavens. "Why do I always get saddled with the narcissists?"

Jaime gave a funny look. He didn't know that word although he suspected it wasn't a compliment.

"Besides, I could rip through this lot in ten minutes," Rebekah continued. An exaggeration, no doubt. "It doesn't do much to inspire confidence. I suppose, when life hands you lemons, you make lemonade. Or lemon cakes, depending on your preference."

"I am trying to train my men," said Jaime. "I don't have time for you. Or lemon cakes."

"Suit yourself," said Rebekah. "Stannis will make mincemeat out of them."

"Perhaps, but it takes time to make mincemeat," said Jaime. "Time is good."

He arranged for the militia to be divided amongst the guard towers manned by civilians, overlooking all the gates of the city except the Mud Gate, where Tyrion was adamant the assault would begin. "You'll stay by my side, Mikaelson," said Jaime.

"Don't worry," said Rebekah. "I'll protect you from the big bad wolf. Or stag."

Jaime glared at her. "As my squire, you need to polish my armour." He didn't wait until she could formulate a proper scathing response to that. There was still far too much work to do, and none of them had any idea how to do it.

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**Harrenhal**

"Daemon Lannister is still in the vicinity," said Robb. He tossed the wrinkled apple into the air and caught it. "He has been a thorn in my side for far too long, and I want Jon back."

"But Jon is perfect right where he is," protested Katherine. She was embroiderying a grinning skull on her scarf. He wasn't sure why anyone would want to wear that but Katherine had always been bold and forward in her fashions. "What would he do here?"

"I need people I can trust," said Robb. He caught the apple again. "I can trust Jon. He would never betray me."

"Are you so certain?" asked Katherine softly.
"Yes," said Robb. He bit the apple with more force than he had intended. The juice ran down his chin. So much for a graceful performance. "I am tired of Daemon Lannister. He makes all my men look like imbeciles. And, please, do not say they are all imbeciles."

Katherine shrugged. "But we both know there's only one clever north man in the entire world," she said. Robb grinned. Katherine smiled. "Roose Bolton."

Robb lost his grin. "Is he, now?" He leaned over Katherine. "I imagine there are quite a few tricks up my sleeve that you haven't seen yet. After all, a clever man has no need to say that he is clever."

"But if a clever man does not show that he is clever, no one will know he is clever."

"Sometimes it is better to be underestimated," said Robb. He took another bite of his apple. A stylish man would probably leave it uneaten, but he was hungry. " Daemon Lannister craves approval too much."

"Then perhaps we should give it to him."

"What, send him, what do you call it, a gift basket?" asked Robb.

"Not in the conventional sense," said Katherine. "But surely a man like Daemon doesn't want to be underestimated. It has been a while since we have had an exchange, don't you think? In fact, not since Karstark."

"That was last week," said Robb.

"I'm sure he's getting bored. We can't have that."

"I suppose we are at war and the Umbers have been chafing at the bit, so to speak." They hadn't exactly been subtle about their dislike for him. As a man, he could not blame them. As a king, he could not tolerate them. Yet he was torn between what needed to be done and what he actually wanted to do.

Which he didn't really know. Robb Stark owed the Umbers. King Robb Stark did not owe anyone anything for everything under the sun and moon was his to take. There was such a disparity between who he had been raised to be and what he had become that he found it hard to reconcile the two. Who was he? What was he? What was he to do?

"The Umbers would do quite well to entertain Daemon," said Katherine.

"I do wonder whether Tywin has started to suspect his nephew's loyalty yet," said Robb. He tried to sound dismissive and indifferent even though he was wondering what sort of king he would become. What would be the difference between himself and Joffrey if he kept treating his bannermen in this way? The guilt gnawed at him. He pushed it aside. Guilt was not for people like him. It was for the others. "Whenever we need someone to be dealt with, we send them to Daemon. He does it very efficiently."

"Daemon is the most useful Lannister," said Katherine.

She reached out to stroke his cheek. She must have sensed what was going on in his mind. How did she do that, read his every thought? Was she an enchantress, a witch? "Benevolence is only for those who can afford it," she said. "And you're not as rich as you think, my lord."

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The Riverlands, Southwest of Harrenhal
Jon Umber breathed in the free air. Soon, Robb Stark would be gone. Soon, they would be their own masters again and that eagle-headed bitch with her praetorians and fancy southern ways would no longer hold any sway in the north. In fact, if all went according to plan, she would die with Robb Stark. The plains stretched dark green before him. Harrenhal was disappearing into the horizon as they rode away from the formidable stone fortress that had become a symbol of Stark might and Stark victory.

For now, he would have to wait. It wasn't that easy to get close to Robb Stark. He was surrounded by those Praetorians who might as well be slaves to the golden eagle. They were ever watchful and wakeful. To get past them, they would need a plan. A plan was something that Jon Umber did not have yet.

"The Lannisters have camped just beyond that ridge, my lord," said the scout he had sent out a few hours ago. Ever since Karstark's demise, other bannermen had had to take up the task of harassing Lannister forces. It wasn't easy, considering Daemon Lannister was at the helm and he was a wily young fox who revelled in tricks of smoke and shadow. Karstark had proved that.

Yet luck must have been on Umber's side, or perhaps the gods intended for them to have their revenge. If they could destroy Daemon Lannister, they could then worm their way into Robb Stark's inner circle. The Young Wolf might as well be dead then. All they needed was one moment alone with him.

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**Daemon's camp, The Riverlands**

The roiling mist crept over the grasslands from the river, devouring everything in its path. It mingled with the greasy smoke of the campfires over which meat was roasting. Damon leaned over the railings of the wooden guard-tower, keeping one eye on the scenery and another on dinner. He could smell the burnt fat dripping into the flames. Granted, he was hungering after something a little more substantial, but roasts were fun to eat.

Pinpricks of light appeared on the horizon, signalling Damon's call to *real* dinner.

Damon had known the Umbers would come. Katherine had been kind enough to tell him that, of course, but she hadn't told him *when*. When he saw the flag with the gorilla in chains (they claimed it was a giant, but it looked like a gorilla), he knew his reputation as the omnipresent scout was going to take a huge blow.

"Are there supposed to be a lot of Umbers on the horizon?" he said to his watch partner (Jon).

"It is part of the plan, is it not?" whispered Jon.

"Why don't you wear a tunic with You-Know-Who's face on it?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Nobody wears tunics with faces on them."

Damon didn't bother answering. He put his lips to the trumpet and gave one short blast and one long blast. Technically, there was no system. Trumpet meant attack. It didn't matter if it sounded like a fart.

The men immediately abandoned their cooking dinners. "To arms!" he could hear them shouting. "To your stations!"

Daemon and Elena rushed out of his tent. Damon didn't want to know what they were doing. Jon looked alarmed for a moment (not because of the Umbers) but he schooled his expression. Daemon
kissed Elena's hand and said something to her. She went around the back.

"You're losing her," Damon whispered to Jon. "But never mind that. Your chance has come to prove to Kitty-cat that you're more than just a pretty face and you can actually help You-Know-Who."

Jon glared at Damon but said nothing as he climbed down the ladder. Damon bypassed that tedious process and jumped down. The whole camp thought he was an acrobat anyway.

"How could they have crept up on us like this?" Daemon demanded as soon as he saw Damon. "How did they get past our scouts." (Translation: How did they get past you?)

"Scouts are only men, not gods," said Damon. "There aren't that many of them. I would say they only just outnumber us."

"We have the superior position," said Daemon. "They will be tired from their march and the Starks are not as disciplined as we are. We will outlast them." He paused. "My name is not Jaime Lannister."

"Very well spotted, my lord."

"I will not flip a coin and wait for the gods to decide the outcome." Daemon turned to Jon, who had just caught up. "Jon Snow, you will escort the supplies south."

"Are we retreating, my lord?" asked Jon.

"Do you like – what is that phrase Elena likes to use? – putting all your eggs in one plate?"

"Basket," corrected Damon.

Daemon ignored him. "Damon Salvatore, you will stay and guard the camp with a contingent of men. Put off engaging the Umbers for as long as you can. You will buy us time "Snow, you will rejoin with me at Stony Bridge."

"What about you?" asked Damon. "What are you doing?"

"What I do is none of your business," said Daemon.

"Where is Elena?" demanded Jon.

"I am sending her somewhere safe," said Daemon, just as Elena appeared around the corner leading four horses and walking as fast as nature would allow her to. Behind her, Tarly was tugging at his own steed and lagging woefully behind.

"I am not going anywhere without Jon," she said.

Damon wanted to tear out his hair. He settled for rolling his eyes. One, his hair was far too precious and second, he should have expected it of Elena. Here she was, in the perfect position to seduce Daemon Lannister, and what did she do? She abandoned all the progress she'd made with him to run off with Jon Snow, thus giving up all her chances of ever furthering the Stark cause. Hmm, who did that remind him of? Wait, no one. It was a uniquely Elena thing to do.

Daemon looked as if he would have liked to protest, but he simply did not know what to say. At least, nothing that would not betray his true feelings and intentions towards the miracle girl of the century, or even the millennia. Damon was a little bit proud. He had seen Elena's potential from the
very beginning (all right, she'd had Katherine's face). Although, currently, her potential was cramping his opportunities.

"Elena, it's not safe," said Damon.

"I'll be fine," said Elena. "I'll have Jon and Sam with me."

Damon snorted. "Samwise Gamgee and Frodo," he muttered. But there was no time. It was either let Elena go or all be stuck here when Umber struck with his five thousand men. Damn Katherine! Information was power and she was hoarding it.

Next chapter: The Umbers face-off with the combined Lannister, Salvatore and Snow forces.
Damon tries his hand at illicit gambling. Daemon plays a practical joke on the Umbers and is a general nuisance. Meanwhile, the Umbers are getting too far ahead of themselves.

Southwest of Harrenhal, heading towards Stony Sept

Sparse trees grew on the rocky hillsides that stretched out to Jon's right. In the rising darkness, they took on sinister forms, like phantoms reaching out from the shadows to snag at unwary men. Then again, why should he be afraid of the night?

Elena rode beside him, her face full of concentration and thinking of something else. Probably of how to keep him safe. It shouldn't be this way. It should be him keeping her safe. He didn't want to worry her.

The supply carts rattled along at a terribly slow pace. At any moment, Jon expected to hear the roar of Umber men and see the unchained giant. Mist settled at the foot of the hills, obscuring the wheels and the legs of marching men and horses. Even their breathing seemed terribly loud in the darkness.

"Do you hear anything?" Sam asked Elena. He glanced back at the long column with their few torches. The camp had long since passed out of sight.

"Nothing," said Elena. "Either the Umbers have slowed down or they're waiting for Damon to make a mistake."

"Do you think Damon will be able to hold the camp?" asked Jon.

"I don't know what Damon can or can't do anymore," said Elena. "But I have faith in him. He's clever when he puts his mind to it. He just never takes anything very seriously."

The Abandoned Lannister Camp

Damon hated playing this waiting game, especially when he was waiting for someone to come to him. It made him want to kill something, which, in these circumstances, was probably not a bad thing. The pinpricks of light grew more numerous until there was a small huddled swarm coming ever closer. They stopped some distance away. What were they doing? Building campfires and roasting s'mores? Tasty. He supposed attacking an established camp with defences that had already been built was risky, especially at night, and even the Umbers knew it.

Daemon had left almost all the banners flying and all the tents erect so the Umbers had no way of telling how many men there truly were remaining. They had lit all their torches, also to seem more numerous, but he doubted the Umbers would be fooled when morning came. Night time gave them some cover at least.
But what if the Umbers underestimated them? One had to admit, it was pretty hard to underestimate three hundred men, because they were going to be swamped by the thousands of north men. However, if he could trick Umber into thinking that there was no one in the camp and that it was ripe for taking…

Was it too risky? Daemon's plan had been for them to deter the northerners so the rest of the army could get away, but what of Damon and the three hundred? They were not Spartans, and that movie had been inaccurate anyway. There had also been some thousands of serfs. But, Daemon Lannister, surely, by now, must be known for deception (of the Katherine type) and if the Umbers saw no one, they would expect a giant trap for them to walk into, wouldn't they? Therefore, it would give Damon and the Three Hundred time to escape! The last thing the world needed was another Thermopylae and, a few hundred years down the line, a Westerosian movie about Damon Salvatore and his brave stand (and also possibly his great reveal as a vampire).

Or was his thought process being too convoluted? Truth be told, Damon didn't know much about Ned's bannermen, now Robb's, except from what Katherine had said about them. Few were useful, most were foolhardy, and brain cells were scarce. What if the Umbers saw an empty camp and believed that it was an empty camp that was ready for taking? What then? Daemon's plan hinged on the Umbers being smart. Why didn't Damon have a good feeling about that?

He sat atop the guard tower with his legs stretched out, his arm resting on one slightly bent knee. His sword sat in his lap. It had grown very dark and the few torches he had allowed the men to light did not cast very much light. In fact, it did not even reach him, much less beyond the boundaries of their camp. In the distance, the Umber camp sparkled. It looked small this far away, but Damon could make out the individual pin-pricks of camp fires. There were too many for his liking.

"Ser, we have done as you have asked and lit half the campfires needed," said one of the men. He had the bad luck of being called Wetherby. That was the only reason Damon remembered his name. "The men are wondering how long we must stay here."

"We'll stay here unless someone higher up tells you otherwise," said Damon. Higher up meaning either himself or Daemon or Tywin Lannister, although he didn't think the divine Tywin would care.

"We can't hold them if they come," said Wetherby. "We might as well dig our own graves. The men are uneasy."

"Well, I'm staying right here," said Damon. "I'll keep an eye on them. If they come, I'll blow the trumpet. Have a drink or two, relax – did Lord Daemon take all the whores?"

"Yes, he did," Wetherby said. He saluted Damon. "Would you like something to drink, Ser?"

"Wine," said Damon. He actually wanted blood but he wasn't allowed to say it. Alcohol took the edge off.

He did not sleep that night but kept watch on the Umbers. If they were to make any moves close to dawn, and that was when most sudden attacks happened because everyone thought the other side would be completely relieved and therefore unprepared by that point, Damon would know.

He frowned and strained his vision. The lights were on at the Umbers', yes, but what was that dark mass moving across No Man's Land? If they thought they could get Damon Salvatore with a surprise attack, they were sorely mistaken. "Prepare yourselves, but do it quietly," he said to the men. "They're coming." Damon stood up on the tower and cupped his hands around his mouth.
"I see you!" he called out in a sing song voice. His voice rang out clearly over the flat fields. The mist did little to muffle the sound. The black mass stopped. "I'm drunk, but not that drunk! Would you like to join us for supper? There's plenty of soft southern meats and delicacies to go around."

There was no movement. The Umbers had to be wary, right, especially after what happened to Karstark. The men waited with bated silence, their hands tight about their weapons. If the Umbers were not clever enough to get the inferences, or if they saw through Damon's bluff, they would be screwed. But, finally, he saw them turning back and returning to their own camp. No one dared to say anything, but as he leapt down from the tower, the men parted to let him through. He sensed their newfound respect for him and couldn't help but preen a little. Sure, it was Daemon Lannister who had laid down the grassroots for the bluff with his dinner parties, but even so, he had furthered it until the very threat of a Lannister supper party was capable of chasing away doughty north men.

Wait, wasn't he on the north men's side? Actually, just Robb's, and he was half a southerner by blood.

"Time to go," he said to the men.

"But we just chased them off," said one of them.

"That is exactly why we should leave. What do you think they'll do when they see us in the morning? Now, chop, chop, and be quiet about it. You, keep playing but change the tune. There's only so many times that one can listen to the Rains of Castamere."

The night was long and gave them enough time to slip away. Winter really was coming. The Umbers, if Katherine had all her calculations right, shouldn't live to see it. A dark age had dawned on Westeros and they didn't even know it. Queen Katherine, even if she wasn't a proper queen right now, would brook no dissent and no challenge. She wouldn't even tolerate any independence from her subjects. She was a dictator and had always been. Even now, when he thought back to his human youth, it had always been Katherine who had made the decisions.

They left their tents and their towers and defences behind and crept away under the cover of darkness. The torches were left burning, but by the time the Umbers realized what had happened, they would be far away, having melted away like ghosts into the mist.

Southwest of Harrenhal, heading towards Stony Sept

His horse stumbled on some loose stones but righted itself in time. Jon murmured comforting words to the horse which seemed spooked. The animal snorted. Why was it afraid of the dark when it was surrounded by so many armed men? If anyone should be scared of the dark, it should be the Umbers.

Of course, they didn't know that, which was why Katherine's plan for getting rid of them was going to work. He wondered what Robb thought of it all, or whether he had given his assent for the slow but steady destruction of all his bannermen, one by one. No king had ever attempted to do away with the power of his lords before. Sure, lords rose and fell, but there were always going to be lords. Now he knew nothing was permanent, not even things that seemed to be.

Dawn tinged the sky with red behind them. Perhaps the gods, if they existed, were trying to tell them something. Jon astutely ignored them. There were several more miles to go, but if he could reach that bridge and cross it, they would have a chance. A narrow bridge like that with an enemy on the other side? Four men could march abreast on it at the very most, according to the scouts,
and as they did, Daemon's men would shoot them down. Even the Umbers would not risk it.

As day broke, he saw the silver gleam of the river in the distance, glinting at them temptingly. Red banners were already waving on the other side. Jon breathed a sigh of relief and almost laughed at himself for doing so. Since when did Lannister banners signal safety? He glanced back. Was Damon holding the Umbers off, still, or had the vampire and his three hundred men managed to slip away into the night? Or had he just lost a friend? He hoped not. Then again, Damon had a habit of deserting armies when it suited him, usually at the most inopportune moment. He could be with Robb by now, leaving Jon and Elena – what was he thinking? Damon would never abandon Elena.

He found Daemon already poring over his maps. "I trust you encountered no trouble on the way?" he asked without looking up from the charts. He had wooden blocks with flags painted on them. House sigils. There were very few wolves compared to lions and the stags were amassed south of King's Landing.

"None at all," said Jon. "Has there been any news of Damon?"

"Damon Salvatore no longer concerns me," said Daemon. "The Umbers will not cross that bridge. They know that as they do, they will be cut down at that bottleneck. Are they skilled watermen?"

"Not that I know of," said Jon. "But there is much that I do not know of Robb Stark's bannermen."

"Despite having grown up in Winterfell?"

"I never had much to do with them. If they had any petitions, they went to Lord Stark and his heir apparent. The bastard could do as he pleased so long as he was unheard and unseen."

"And you never hid yourself to watch while the proceedings went on?"

Truth be told, Jon had not ever thought they would be very interesting and had stayed in the practice yards to try and convince Ser Rodrik that he needed to be the best swordsman in Winterfell, if not the north, if he was to make a good brother of the Night's Watch. He had sneaked in, once or twice, just to see what it was all about. His father had either not noticed or not cared, and Robb had had that glazed look in his eyes that meant he had not been paying very much attention to anything at that moment in time. He'd felt sorry for Robb then.

"Once or twice," he admitted. "But only when the matters being discussed were of little importance. The north was a settled and peaceful place during the rule of my father."

"I can imagine so," said Daemon. "Peaceful. That is a nice way of putting it. Very positive. I would think boring, rather."

"Well, we do not have any cause for songs like the Rains of Castamere, if that is what you are saying, my lord."

"Songs are good," said Daemon. "If not for music and merrymaking, then why do we live?"

Southwest of Harrenhal, Umber camp

Damn them! Damn them all! They should have attacked during the night and not paid any attention to Damon Salvatore and his dinner invitation. The Smalljon cursed himself for having faltered at the very mention of a supper hosted by the Lannisters. Just because Karstark had fallen prey to it did not mean that he would have. They had outnumbered the Lannisters and they had let that
chance slip away because they had been too afraid of a few slices of Lannister ham and a few cups of wine.

"Onward!" he shouted to his men. "Whoever brings me Daemon Lannister's head will receive one hundred gold dragons!"

"Cousin, we do not have that much gold to throw at them," murmured Harald.

"Daemon Lannister does. Once we have his head, we'll have his gold too."

They saw signs of a fleeing army. The ground was trampled, churned into mud by horses' hooves and the feet of running men. But the trail was long cold. It wasn't until they reached the river that they finally saw them, the red and gold banners taunting them on the other side and archers poised and ready to shoot should they attempt to cross the bridge.

"You're late," called Damon Salvatore as he pranced about atop his grey stallion, not even bothering with a helmet. How satisfying would it be to put an axe through that arrogant skull?

But there was nothing for it. He commanded his archers to fire at the Lannisters, but they were beyond the range of the bows. The arrows fell harmlessly into the water. He knew better than to waste them.

"We'll make camp here," growled the Smalljon. He wanted to break something, like a Lannister's neck, for instance. Barring that, he wouldn't mind tearing apart a Salvatore. Or just kill Robb Stark. That would work too. In fact, killing Robb Stark would make everything fine again and they could stop fighting the boy's stupid, pointless war in the south and go home to prepare for winter.

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Daemon Lannister's Camp, Western Bank of Blackwater Rush, close to Stony Sept

Elena ran through the camp, eager to see for herself that it was true, that Damon had returned and he was safe. She arrived just in time to see him stride towards Daemon's tent. They both stopped as they saw one another. A brown gaze met a blue one. She flung her arms around him. "I was so worried," she breathed. His embrace felt familiar and exhilarating. She remembered the first time he had done it, how surprisingly gentle he had been and not at all what she had expected from a monster that went around killing innocent people and not caring. He smelled of campfire smoke and sweat – for even vampires did unglamorous things like sweating – but he was very much unharmed and every bit his cocky self.

"I'm insulted that you doubted me," said Damon.

"You know how you are."

"What? Dashing, handsome, clever, brave."

"I think the word they like to use here is foolhardy," said Elena. She felt eyes on the back of her head and turned around to see Jon staring at them. She quickly released Damon. "Um…I'm glad you're back."

"Me too," said Damon softly. His cocky grin slipped a little. "I should see Daemon." He strode away and disappeared inside the tent. She strained her ears to see if there was anything off with his voice, like he was upset and was on the verge of going on an unwarranted killing spree, but Westeros had changed Damon too. She could no longer read him like she had once been able to.

"He seems unharmed," said Jon as Elena came over to him. She took his hand in hers, feeling the
callouses on his palms and his human warmth. His fingers tightened about hers.

"He never even crossed blades with the Umbers," said Elena.

"I'm glad," said Jon. He paused. "You are very fond of him."

"Damon and I...we have been through a lot together. It's gotten to a point where we don't remember who saved who."

"I understand."

"But I'm still in love with Jon Snow," she said.

"Well, I suppose I don't want to be friends with you," said Jon.

"We were never very good at being friends," Elena admitted. "Even when we were, I thought a lot about kissing you."

Jon laughed. "Come to bed. It has been a long night and I think we both deserve some rest."

"Just rest, Ser Jon?"

"I am not a ser, Elena."

"You deserve a knighthood."

They did not talk very much after that.

Things continued as they were, which was to say they were in a constant stalemate that neither side felt good about. Neither the Umbers nor the Lannisters dared to venture across the river because whoever attacked first would surely be the loser. Archers were posted on their hastily erected guard towers of green wood, ready to fire at will.

But how long would this last? They could stay like this forever while the war waged on around them and not winning was just as bad as losing, as far as Daemon was concerned. Besides, would he still have a commission if all he could do was sit at the end of a bridge and play music? Lord Tywin would see Daemon as being yet another useless relation that he had to suffer because they were all Lannisters. The world would laugh. If there was one thing Daemon could not stand, it was anyone laughing at him.

"Any movement from the Umbers?" he asked Damon.

"Nada, nothing," said his best scout, although why he trusted his information was a mystery. Still, it had never been inaccurate before, until the surprise Umber attack. Of course, he had other scouts to verify the facts but, so far, there had been no lies. Some misinformation was unavoidable for Damon Salvatore was not a god, no matter what he thought.

"Then they intend to stay put until Robb Stark summons them back or they begin to starve."

"Or they're chased away, but no one's brave enough to cross the river."

"No one's brave enough to risk an arrow in the heart, which is all that would happen should we make the first move."

But what if the Umbers thought they were making a move? "Damon, what do you think of
"I adore being the perpetrator of deception. If others try to use it on me, however, I tend to get a bit murderous."

"Just try?" said Daemon. "I have a feeling that you are on the receiving end of many deceptions."

"That's what you think. I must have deceived you," said Damon.

The argument could go on forever but he declined to participate. One could not truly win in an argument against a child, even if he was a grown one.

"You will take a force of one hundred men," Daemon began.

"Last time, I got three hundred."

"This time, you'll be quite safe. I want you to sneak out today, separately, so it does not seem suspicious to the Umbers, and reassemble here." Daemon pointed at a spot on his map, next to the river, but sheltered by rocks. "Conceal yourselves, rest, do not light fires. You will be eating cold cuts, I am afraid, but you may feast so long as our supplies allow it. You will bring horns. At night, when you see my signal of three flashes of light, you will blow your horns, shout, and strike your shields. Make it seem as if you are fording the river. At the next signal, you will stop and await the next one. And what is it that you like to say? Rinse and repeat."

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**Jon Umber's Camp, Eastern Bank of Blackwater Rush, close to Stony Sept**

The Lannisters were cooking. Plumes of smoke rose from their camp and waved a little before dissipating. The Umbers were doing very much the same. Jon Umber knew better than to count the smoke pillars to estimate the Lannisters' numbers. They always lit more or fewer fires than they really should have, just to confuse people. Although they couldn't light too few fires, he supposed, because then the men wouldn't have enough to eat.

A lack of food was going to be a problem very soon. Supplies were not easy to get out here on the edge of Lannister territory. In his haste to pursue the Lannisters, he had neglected to consider how the supply lines would reach them. Wagons laden down with grain and hay and other necessities moved a lot slower than armies on horseback. If they ran out of food before the supplies could reach them, then he was faced with the very real possibility of having to turn back empty-handed. What then? Robb Stark would never trust a man who had failed.

Night fell with no change to the situation. The men retired to their tents, weary after a long day of waiting for a fight that never came. It always surprised him how inaction could be just as tiring as action. Instead of fatigued bodies, however, it was the minds that needed rest. He, too, returned to his tent and lay down on his bed of furs. There was still some time. Daemon Lannister couldn't stay like this forever either, surely. It was detrimental to both sides. Sooner or later, they would need to collide.

With that thought in mind, he fell into a deep slumber.

*Horns.* His eyes sprang open. He leapt to his feet. "Lannisters!" the men were shouting outside. The Smalljon seized his greatsword from where it sat on the rack, shouting for his attendant at the same time. The man hurriedly tied on his armour, his panic making his fingers clumsy. The Smalljon didn't care. There was no time. The Lannisters were attacking them under the cover of darkness!
He rushed outside. "Rally to me!" he shouted. Mist curled about their feet and issued from his mouth as he spoke. He could barely see across the river. Everything was enshrouded, dark. The fog dispersed the sound so it was hard to pinpoint where exactly it was coming from apart from the fact that it was most definitely coming from in front of them where the Lannisters were.

The low horns penetrated the fog and surrounded them. Distant and muffled were the voices of men and the sound of clashing shields and swords. He swung onto his horse. Well, if the Lannisters wanted a fight, he would give them one!

"Tomorrow night, we sleep on lion pelts!" he cried. And wolf ones too, but one could not voice such thoughts. Honesty only ever got one killed. Had his father not proved that?

They rushed out. The sound of battle faded immediately. The night was still and quiet apart from the rushing sound of water over rocks. There were no enemy torches; no sign of the attacking lions. He stared into the pale darkness. Where were the men? The hornblowers? Where in the hells was Daemon Fucking Lannister?

Western Bank of Blackwater Rush, outside Daemon Lannister's Camp

The dew and mist made their clothes wet. Damon lay amongst the long grasses, his head just peeking over the top. His men waited. They had slept during the day and eaten a decent meal of cold meat, bread and preserved vegetables. He, of course, had hoarded the artichokes. White mist rolled off the surface of the river and spread over the ground like spilt milk. Pale wispy fingers reached up to grab at them. Wetherby rubbed his hands and blew on them.

"Why did you volunteer?" asked Damon. "You could be in a toasty warm tent right now, drinking wine and sleeping."

Wetherby shrugged. "Maybe I just like to see duped northerners. There aren't that many things one can entertain oneself with, Ser, and I wouldn't drink and sleep at the same time."

It was Damon's turn to shrug. If the man had developed a warped sense of amusement, there was nothing he could do about it. Besides, making the Umbers run around in circles and tear out their hair was pretty funny. Last time, their expectations had been thwarted, having expected a fight that had never come. Now they would almost deliver, with "almost" being the keyword. How much crueler it was to bring someone so close to the edge and not finish the job than to simply not do it at all.

The light flashed.

"One, two, three," said Damon. He lifted his hands like a conductor. The horns started blowing. The sound made the very ground rumble and buzz as if it were a nest full of hornets angry to be woken up from their peaceful slumber. Sorry, buddy, but war didn't care what time it was. So what if it was dark and winter was coming? Men had gotta do what they'd gotta do, and they just had to kill each other in the most creative and efficient ways possible. One thing modern humans had forgotten but which the Westerosians understood completely was how people could not live without conflict and bloodshed. It had always been a hallmark of humanity since the very first caveman figured out that if someone lost too much of the red stuff, they died and one could get rid of other cavemen like that.

Soon he heard the satisfactory sound of the Umbers rushing out to do battle with a phantom army. The light flashed again. He indicated for the men to stop and take a break. It never ceased to be funny each time Daemon gave the signal. The Umbers would keep rushing out to find silence and
Damon wondered what would happen if the Umbers finally caught on and didn't come out. Would Daemon then take a leaf from the Boy Who Cried Wolf and attack for real? Since if the Umbers thought it was yet another feint, they would ignore the sound of a real attacking army until it was too late. Now wouldn't that be something? Sure, half of Katherine's plan would have become redundant, but everyone would get what they wanted that way, except the Umbers. They were never supposed to get what they wanted in any version of the plan.

**Eastern Bank of Blackwater Rush, Umber Camp**

Gods curse that thrice-damned Lannister! Jon Umber looked across the river. This had to be the third or fourth time that they had thrown on their armour in haste and rushed out to greet the Lannisters, only to find nothing. Absolute silence. Not even a cricket. (They had probably all died from the cold.)

"All right, back to bed, men," he said.

"Cousin, perhaps next time, we could simply ignore it," said Harald. "It is clear that they do not intend to actually attack."

"And what if that one time we ignore them, it's real?" asked the Smalljon. "I am not Karstark. I will not underestimate Daemon Lannister. We'll all sleep in our armour tonight and keep one eye open."

**Next chapter:** The Umbers are reeled deeper into Daemon and Katherine's double trap. Jon negotiates. Jaime, Tyrion and friends prepare for the siege.
Armistice

Chapter Summary

Jon tries waving a white flag and using words. Jaime, Tyrion and Stefan continue to plan for the siege. Bronn and Rebekah 'help'.

Chapter Notes

Next week, we won't be updating because Telcontar needs to move house. We'll be back on the weekend of 23 and 24 August. :)

Western Bank of Blackwater Rush, Daemon's Camp

The whole business with the noise was repeated for three nights. Jon learned to ignore them and sleep with his pillow over his head. It actually worked quite well. One's mind could easily become accustomed to something if it were there all the time. Besides, he slept well now that he had Elena with him. It wasn't as if they were particularly quiet either, even though they tried to be.

He and Elena could possibly be the only people in Daemon's camp who were sleeping well, aside from the men who were resting during the day. The ones who kept watch during the night were well enough, but the men who had to be alert during the day and sleep during the night were haggard. When he ventured outside, some of them gave him dirty looks and he didn't know what he had done until someone made a remark that it was bad enough they had to put up with the horns; when they weren't listening to the horns, they were listening to him and Elena.

Jon felt heat flood his face. Surely they hadn't been *that* loud? Elena haughtily ignored them like the lady that she wasn't. They shut up about it. It was probably never far from their minds that one, she was Katherine Stark's sister and was probably capable of the same violence (she could be violent, but not creatively so), and two, Daemon liked her more than he liked most people, something that always made Jon feel uncertain, not that he voiced his uncertainties. He trusted Elena.

By the fourth night, both sides were tense and tired, although unlike the Umbers, the Lannisters' commander remained entirely calm and would play his harp in the sunshine sometimes, when there was sun. It was as if he did not mean to change the situation any time soon.

Yet, when Jon saw Damon Salvatore return, smug as usual, followed by some of the more rested Lannister men (for the hornblowers at least got to sleep during the day, which would have worked particularly well for the vampire, Jon supposed), he knew that they were about to move onto the next stage.

Daemon summoned him that afternoon. The blond man was playing cyvasse with himself, moving from one side of the board to the other. The black and white pieces reminded Jon of the times when Robb would try to teach him to play, behind Lady Catelyn's back, of course. She hadn't wanted Jon to learn anything that a lord might know. Robb had pointedly ignored his mother's
wishes because he'd had a greater wish to play cyvasse with (and beat) someone other than Maester Luwin.

"You wanted to see me, my lord?" said Jon.

"Sit," said Daemon. "Do you play?"

"A little," said Jon. "Not well."

"But you play," said Daemon. He sat on the other side and rearranged the pieces to their starting positions. For a long while, they did not talk except through the movements of the black and white carved soldiers on the board. Finally, when Daemon was winning, he spoke.

"How would you like to make some new friends?" asked Daemon. "I am sending you to the Umbers this evening."

"After we have, for lack of a better word, harassed them for three nights?" asked Jon.

"Especially because we have harassed them for three nights, as you have put it so succinctly," said Daemon. "We are not their real enemy. They don't care either way about the Lannisters and we don't care about the Umbers. Robb Stark, however, killed their lord and patriarch. He is the one they want and if we can help them, well, they don't really have a choice, do they?"

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**King's Landing**

The whole city was in an uproar. Everyone knew that Stannis was sailing-riding-digging-flying his way to King's Landing. With each telling, his army grew in size. First, it was one hundred and fifty thousand. Then it was two hundred thousand. That became two hundred and fifty thousand. By the end of the day, it was said that one million Baratheon and Stark men had amassed just outside King's Landing, waiting to raze the entire place to the ground and either take all the Lannister men as Katherine Stark's slaves or burn them all as an offering to the fire god.

It was almost the most ridiculous thing Rebekah had ever heard, except what was even more ridiculous was that she actually found herself being Jaime Lannister's squire; she fetched things for him, delivered things for him, and generally acted like his fucking housekeeper. Why would she do this to herself?

Jaime, Tyrion, and Stefan were poring over a map of the city, upon which there were some markers and several wooden ships. "My lord," said the scout. "Stannis Baratheon's ships have been sighted sailing along the coast. It appears he intends to invade by sea."

"How many ships?" asked Jaime. 

"Two hundred, all carrying siege engines," said the scout.

"What did I tell you?" said Tyrion.

"It's too obvious," said Stefan. "I think we're missing something."

"Sometimes, it's best not to overthink things, Salvatore," said Jaime. "Stannis is not the most complicated man in the world. Father has sent word that he is returning to King's Landing, no doubt to trap Stannis between his army and our walls before Robb Stark gets here. Let's give Robb and Katherine Stark something to talk about in bed. Tyrion, I assume what needs to be prepared has been prepared?"
"You really don't have to call it pig shit," said Stefan. "Maybe we should call it napalm?" Rebekah almost snorted. Very subtle, Stefan. She poured herself a cup of wine—using Jaime's cup, since she didn't have one of her own—and drank it before he could snatch it out of her hand. She smiled sweetly at him. He gave her a grim smile of his own that meant he had every intention of making her pay for her insolence. She'd like to see him try.

"All set and ready to go," said Tyrion.

"That pig shit—sorry, Ser Salvatore. What was it again? Nay palm? It doesn't matter what you call it. It still won't work and you'll all be dead by morning," said Bronn, who was filing his nails while lounging on the low chaise in Tyrion's study. In truth, it looked more like a brothel than a study, what with the billowing gauzy curtains Tyrion had put in the room. He'd even had the walls painted a deep blood red with golden edgings. He said it was the Lannister red. Rebekah was of the idea that it resembled a sultry salon for a courtesan.

"You're on our side, Sellsword, don't forget," said Jaime.

"I am trying very hard to forget right now," said Bronn with absolutely no regard for Jaime's station. Rebekah liked him all the more for it.

"Aw, you don't want to be friends?" asked Rebekah. She seated herself beside Bronn and batted her eyelashes playfully at him.

"Well, I don't mind being your friend, love," he said.

"Don't call me 'love','" said Rebekah. "My brother calls me that." She moved away from him immediately. Jaime regarded her with more interest than he had ever shown in anything.

"Perhaps we have more in common than I had first thought," he whispered as she passed him.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, my lord," said Rebekah. "You'll have plenty of time to lie in the gutter when Stannis arrives."

He gave her a doleful look.

"Just go and shoot the damn arrow," said Tyrion to Bronn. "I don't recall paying you to talk."

"Wars are won with steel, not some magical pig shit made by mad old men who only know how to burn things," said Bronn, returning to the more pressing matter at hand. At least one of them was capable of keeping on topic.

"Fortunately for us, burning things is exactly what we need to do," said Tyrion.

"Careful, brother," said Jaime. "You're beginning to sound like a Targaryen, although you are rather too short to be one."

"The height jokes get really old really fast, Jaime," said Tyrion. "Those stung when I was three. I thought you gave up on them when you were fourteen."

"Indulge me, brother. I feel nostalgic," said Jaime.

"The bay is narrow," said Stefan. "Stannis cannot sail too many ships towards us at once. I would estimate that each row would have only fifty ships side by side at most. Assuming there are twenty men to a ship, the napalm would take out at most two thousand men—"
"Salvatore, I can see why my father likes you. You're boring. And numbers bore me," said Jaime.

"Then I suppose victory bores you as well, my lord." Rebekah snorted wine up her nose. Stefan – one. Jaime – zero.

Jaime sniffed but remained silent.

"Well, if we can destroy fifty ships, that's one quarter of his fleet gone, hopefully along with his siege equipment. And do remember, wild–nay palm burns for quite some time. We will destroy more than fifty ships," said Tyrion.

"What about Robb Stark? Or have you forgotten about the young wolf who has never lost a battle?" asked Bronn.

"A wolf is no good without a pack," said Tyrion.

"Father will deal with him," said Jaime. "His force is small. It wouldn't be a problem."

"It's Katherine that I'm worried about," said Stefan.

"Let me tell you one thing, Salvatore," said Jaime. "Do you have any idea what manner of man Tywin Lannister is?"

"I think Lord Tywin Lannister would know not to underestimate anyone, my lord," said Stefan.

"There is no harm in making extra preparations," said Tyrion. "Although we have no men to spare."

"As a matter of fact, we do, my lord," said Rebekah. "There are plenty of fresh bodies in Flea Bottom. I'm not sure how good they are at fighting, but I'm sure they can block a few arrows and such like."

"No, we need workers," said Stefan. "We need them to barricade the gates and fortify the walls. Men from Flea Bottom are not going to do that. Besides, using them as cannon fodder is not a way to endear yourself to the local population."

"They hate everyone anyway," said Rebekah.

"And they're getting paid for it," said Jaime. "And if they fail, we put their heads on a spike."

"Very creative, my lord. I think you're catching up with the northerners," said Rebekah.

"I don't pay you to think, Rebekah," said Jaime.

"You still haven't paid me yet," scoffed Rebekah.

Jaime tossed a gold dragon away from her. "There. Go fetch." What the hell? She was not going to stand for this! It was all very well for Niklaus to patronize her. He was her older brother. It was what older brothers did. But Jaime? No. She would not let herself be abused by that arsehole. Why did she always go for the arseholes? Well, not all the time, but only the arseholes ever responded to her. And why do arseholes have to be so hot?

"I quit," said Rebekah.

"You're dismissed."
"I quit!"

"You don't get to quit," Jaime informed her. "We're all on the same horse."

"Well, that's full of sexual connotations," said Rebekah.

Stefan slammed his fist onto the table. The figurines jumped and a corner splintered.

"The wood must be rotten," said Jaime quickly.

"It must be," agreed Stefan. "The point is that we still have a city to defend, and if we don't stay on point, that's what the gates of King's Landing will look like."

"Buzzkill," muttered Rebekah.

"I like that word," said Jaime. "Buzzkill. Does it mean what I think it means?"

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**Stony Bridge, Blackwater Rush**

The white flag fluttered in the wind behind him. Jon rode with only four men, his golden armour gleaming uncomfortably. Red and gold had never been his colours. He was of the north where the primary colours were black, grey and white. Greyscale, as Damon had put it. Jon Umber was there to meet him on the bridge. He was a bear of a man with shaggy brown hair and a shaggy brown beard. The fur collar on his cloak only made his appearance that much wilder. His leather armour was old, but polished, and from beneath bushy dark eyebrows, he glared at Jon.

"So, the traitor Jon Snow," said Umber as soon as Jon drew near and reined in his horse. There was about seven feet between them and only three feet between the noses of their horses. Even Jon Umber's horse was a shaggy giant of a beast. "What makes you think I wouldn't cut off your head and send it to Robb Stark?"

"Because I come under the auspices of the white flag," said Jon. "What would they say if a messenger who came to you in peace ended up having his head cut off and sent to Robb Stark?"

"Don't use big words with me, boy. They don't make you less of a bastard."

Jon simply smiled. "No," he agreed. "But the fates might conspire to change that."

Umber narrowed his eyes. "What do you want?"

"Must we speak here, out in the open?"

Umber narrowed his eyes. But, seeing the white flag and that Jon only had four men with him and there was nowhere for men to hide for an ambush, he indicated to his people that they should part to let Jon pass. He never stopped glaring at him. Jon felt his gaze like the tips of two swords being pressed against his back. Any moment, he expected to feel one of them enter his heart. 'For Robb,' he thought.

They rode in silence all the way into Umber's camp. Men stared. More than once, he heard the whispered word of 'traitor', as if their own lord was not planning the greatest treason of all.

Guardsmen stood outside the great tent. The Smalljon walked inside as if Jon wasn't there. Jon followed him and his men tried, but they were barred from entering. A prickling feeling ran down his neck.
"No Lannisters allowed in," said the Smalljon. He waved to a few more men. They stepped forward and seized Jon, taking him by surprise.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Jon.

"Who knows what your real purpose here is?" asked the Smalljon. "For all I know, you could be here to kill me."

"If we had wanted to kill you, I wouldn't have come with just four men," said Jon. Umber seemed thoughtful. He had his men remove Jon's sword, woefully neglecting to check Jon's boots where he now kept extra daggers, courtesy of Damon's advice. He was not like the Salvatores, Elena and Katherine who had secret weapons to draw upon in difficult situations.

The interior of the Smalljon's great tent was dim. There were very few candles even though the ones that had been lit were of the same quality as the Lannisters'. Jon sat down without invitation and proceeded to pour himself a cup of that coarse northern sour wine. It tasted of home. If he left everything behind, right now, he could probably ride north towards Harrenhal.

No, he couldn't leave Elena and he had work to do here. He wasn't a little boy who missed his brother.

"So talk," said Jon Umber.

"The Greatjon was a great man," said Jon. "I didn't really know him, but I knew his reputation and I knew what he did for Robb Stark."

"The ungrateful bastard," snarled Umber.

"Robb Stark grew up expecting everything to be his by right," said Jon. (Not exactly untrue, as Robb had always been a little bit...demanding. He had been a little lord, after all.) "And Katherine Stark has only added fuel to the flames."

"Why are you talking about this? Why are you even with the Lannisters?"

"I trust you don't know the story?" said Jon. "Then again, it is not well-known. Katherine guards her reputation."

"What story?" asked Umber.

"I met her first."

Western Bank of Blackwater Rush, Daemon's Camp

Elena paced at the small platform at the top of the guard tower. The floor must have developed grooves from her pacing, but she didn't stop. She kept glancing north where she could see the mud-splattered grey tents of the Umbers. There was no news of Jon. What had happened to him? What if something happened to him?

"He'll be fine, Elena," said Damon. "You're making me dizzy."

"It's been..." Elena began, but then she stopped. Forty-five minutes was hardly any time at all when it came to negotiations of this kind. She was just really feeling the passing of the time as if it had frozen. Every minute was agony as her imagination went into overdrive. What if the Umbers
didn't believe Jon? What if they hurt him or took him back to Robb Stark? Would Robb Stark risk blowing their cover by taking Jon in or would he do a Katherine and sacrifice Jon so that his spies in the Lannister camp could remain undetected?

Damon yanked her down so hard that she fell onto her bottom. "He'll be fine, Elena," said Damon. "The Umbers aren't smart but they're honourable."

"They're trying to kill their king," said Elena.

"All right, maybe they're not that honourable, but we haven't done anything to them. Robb's the one who killed their daddy. He feels justified in killing him. Jon? Not so much. He's there as a guest and an emissary. It's not honourable to kill emissaries. Besides, he's Robb's enemy right now."

"People have broken the rules of hospitality before," said Elena. "Do you remember how we got Elijah?"

Damon shrugged. "Jon's not Elijah," he said simply. He offered Elena a wineskin. Well, at first she thought it was wine, but as soon as she put it near her lips, she stiffened. Blood.

"Don't worry, it's only peasant," said Damon. Elena gave him a look. "All right, would you feel better if I said pheasant? One letter's difference, sounds pretty much the same. The taste, though…"

Elena tried not to think of the poor peasant who had been sacrificed just so she and Damon could be satisfied. It did taste good and she was hungry. Without compulsion, the only option left open to them was to kill their victims. She had done it many times already, each time with regret. (Or not, in the case of the Lannister soldiers who had hunted her, Gendry and Hot Pie, killed Yoren, and slaughtered the entire Stark household in King's Landing.)

The blood took the edge off her nervousness. She handed back the wineskin, still looking eastward. Nothing was happening in the Umber camp, at least not on the surface.

She wasn't a religious person and never had been. But, still, she turned her eyes towards the sky and prayed for Jon's safe return.

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**Eastern Bank of Blackwater Rush, Umber Camp**

So *that* was why the bastard had left Winterfell to take the black. It sounded exactly like something that bitch Katherine would do to a decent boy. He wasn't surprised, now, that the boy had joined with the Lannisters, united as they were by a desire to destroy Robb Stark.

"We want him dead as much as you do," Jon Snow was saying. "We can help."

"And after that? What happens next? The Lannisters ride in and take what's always been ours?" said Umber. In his mind, another plan was forming. The north would need a new warden. Who better than men who loved the land and would never turn it into a southern woman's whimsical garden?

"The Lannisters don't care about the north," said Snow. "What would they do with it?"

"I suppose you want it," scoffed Umber.

"I am a Snow," said Snow. "A Snow cannot inherit. A Snow could never rule the north."
That was true, but no Snow had served the Lannisters before either, and no bard had ever become
queen. It was a time for firsts. Jon Umber did not like deviations from traditions. They had been set
down for a reason. He didn't trust Jon Snow.

But he trusted Robb and Katherine Stark less.

"And how do you propose to help us?"

"Lord Tywin might as well be the king," said Snow. "Whatever he commands, it will be done. All
you need to do is get rid of Robb Stark for us."

"We were going to do that with or without you," scoffed Umber.

"Yes, but without the Lannisters' backing, who would become the next Warden of the North?
There must always be a warden."

It made sense. When he had first started this, he had thought of nothing more than avenging his
father. But this was so much better.

"All right, boy," said Umber. "You've a glib tongue, like a Lannister. I don't like you, but you talk a
good bargain. We'll do it."

"Yourselves?" said Snow.

"North men always do their killing themselves. We're not like you pansy southerners."

"Lord Tywin Lannister didn't get to where he is using doughty northern ways," said Jon. "I would
suggest that you find others who are, perhaps, more experienced in the art of killing quietly. This is
a delicate task for pansies instead of men."

So long as Robb Stark was dead, why did he care?

"Fine," said Umber. "But I do not know of such men."

"Lord Daemon Lannister does," said Jon. "Shall I tell him what you have decided?"

"One more thing," said Umber. "I imagine you'd want to kill Katherine Stark yourself."

"Why would I want her dead? I want her to live with the regret of leaving me."

His heart was thudding so loudly in his chest that Jon was afraid Umber would sniff out his lies.
That only made him even more nervous. He told himself to calm down, that Umber would not see
through this because it was so beyond his level of comprehension that anyone would risk so much
for Robb. He must have been getting better at this because Umber did not seem to suspect
anything, or perhaps his hatred was clouding his judgement.

"Find me those men, and I will deliver you Robb Stark's head," he said. "And perhaps I could give
you Katherine Stark as a pretty little present." He stood, indicating that it was time for Jon to go.
Men were still whispering when he came out. He wondered what they wanted to do with him. Kill
him for joining the Lannister cause or were they all against Robb?

It wasn't until he was back across the bridge that he let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been
holding in until now.

A lone figure ran out of the camp, her hair flying loose from her messy braid. He didn't have to
look very hard to tell that it was Elena. He only managed to get off his horse before she flung herself at him, almost knocking him over with the force of the impact. Loving a vampire could be a very bruising activity sometimes.

"I was only gone for a few hours," he said. She said nothing and hugged him tighter. All the men were watching, some with admiration and others with jealousy. Very few understood what they had between them. In fact, of all men in the world, perhaps only Damon and Stefan Salvatore understood what it was to love and be loved by a woman like Elena.

Jon stroked her hair and kissed her on the top of her head. He understood how worried she'd been. He'd been worried too. But it was still very gratifying to see and feel it.

"What did he say?" asked Elena.

"I think we should wait until we see Lord Daemon," he only called Daemon 'lord' so no one would think they were talking about Damon Salvatore. Although Damon would need to know too.

Western Bank of Blackwater Rush, Daemon's Camp

Well, well, if it wasn't Katherine's plan working perfectly again. Damon had to give it to her. So far, everything was going so smoothly that it was surreal. Now they just had to tell her that it was working and she could prepare for the next stage, which would be Robb's attempted assassination.

Daemon was more than pleased by Jon's results. "You are turning out to be quite a surprising talent, Jon Snow," he said.

"I spoke only the truth to Umber," said Jon. "He was more than happy to deal with Robb Stark."

"Of course he was," said Daemon. "When?"

"Soon, I think, although we may have to arrange for men to do it. Can you believe that Umber had wanted to do it himself?"

Daemon laughed. "What a typical northerner," he said. "No offence meant to present company, of course."

"Leave that to me," said Damon. "I know people." He smiled brilliantly at everyone in the tent. He did, actually, know someone who might be able to carry out the task of a botched killing. Whilst making his rounds in the surrounding countryside, he had met numerous characters. Most were just peasants but if one looked hard enough, there were actually enough men in the world who would rather live by the sword than by the plough. Assassination paid better than being a simple mercenary. Of course, not everyone could be an assassin, although many mercenaries were quite keen to try it out. There were a few such men in Daemon's camp, for Damon wasn't the only merc working here. It wasn't easy to get ahead and having a general who won battles went a long way towards getting recognized.

"For a moment, Damon, I thought you were going to do it yourself," said Daemon.

"Alas, this face is just too dashing and recognizable to ignore, not to mention Katherine Stark would know me."

"Yes, I imagine that would be a hindrance," said Daemon. "Very well, find the men, but I want to see them before you send them off."
It would be done. In three days' time, Robb Stark's head would be sitting on a silver platter and House Umber would finally be free of him. Jon Umber smiled. So much for the Young Wolf. He would die like the whelp that he was.

The men grumbled, for they did not understand why they were giving up on the Lannisters after such a lot of work. They would see it soon enough. He did not see the need to share everything with his men and especially not this. Information was deadly, what with Katherine Stark and her many spies. How was it that she always knew what was going on and where everything was? She pretended to be clueless, but no one ever suspected her of being that after her conquest of Harrenhal.

"Lord Umber," said Bolton when he saw the Umbers returning to the fortress. Powdery rain had started to fall, sticking to the individual hairs on fur coats and making them glisten as if they were covered with gemstones. "We had not expected you."

"That Daemon Lannister is a wily fox," grumbled Umber. "He knew we could not maintain a prolonged stalemate, my lord."

"Daemon Lannister seems to be the next cleverest Lannister," Bolton agreed in that emotionless voice of his. "He is a difficult one."

"I must tell Lord Stark what happened."

Bolton nodded and let him pass. Well, if he could fool Bolton then he would most definitely fool that pup. It was the vixen that he was worried about.

Robb Stark received him in the Great Hall. In his absence, they had added tapestries of wolves ambushing lions under the cover of darkness. When had they commissioned tapestries to commemorate the victory at Whispering Woods? The boy sat on his 'throne' at the very end of the hall like a king, listening to petitions from his councillors about what he should do next. King's Landing was mentioned often. Katherine Stark was nowhere to be seen.

"Lord Umber," said Robb Stark. "I ought to congratulate you on such a swift victory."

"There was no victory, my lord," said Umber. He forced himself to look down at his feet instead of at that insolent blasphemer who was still wet behind the ears. "Daemon Lannister has retreated to the Western Bank. We could not risk crossing the bridge and our supplies were running low.

"So Daemon ran and you ran in the opposite direction," said Stark. "I suppose that makes sense. Lion tails can be rather fearsome." His voice bore a dry edge that almost made the Smalljon lose his temper but he held it in check. Soon, Robb Stark would come to regret everything he had ever done. He should have stayed in Winterfell and been content. Now he was going to lose everything.

Stark waved him away. The Smalljon bowed and said nothing. Let him think that he had won for now. It wouldn't be for long. He had less than a day to live.

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Next chapter: The Umbers give Robb a nasty surprise. Katherine goes for an Oscar.
Chapter Summary

The Umbers' plan come to fruition, sort of. Katherine is methodically making her way through Robb's bannermen.

Harrenhal

Everything was in place, from the angry Umbers to the assassins. It was a pity that Jon had been sensible and persuaded the Umbers not to attempt to kill Robb personally. It would have been funny to see them try. And fail, of course, because Katherine would be there. Robb was oblivious to everything, as usual. That was the way Katherine wanted it. If he suspected her of doing half the things that she had done, she imagined that there would be some rather interesting discussions.

Jon had been very insistent on giving her all the details about the assassination. He had helped Damon and Daemon – those names were beginning to sound a little like "Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum", as far as rhythm was concerned – select the men who would be carrying out the task. After reading every single detail that Jon had listed out, with Elena's help, as he had some trouble with writing, Katherine felt as if she would know the assassins the moment she glimpsed them. Robb's brother was definitely very eager to keep him alive.

It surprised Katherine, actually. One would have thought that Jon Snow, with his talent and eagerness to prove, for if this was not eagerness to prove himself, she didn't know what was, would be jealous of his half-brother and want to usurp him. Yet Jon had done everything within his power and gone beyond and over what anyone had expected of him to try and help Robb. Such devotion was alien to her. What did he stand to gain from it apart from Robb's gratitude? Besides, wouldn't Robb take it for granted?

Or was it really all an act on Jon's part, to get under Robb's defences so when the time came to betray him, it would be all the easier?

Storing that little thought in the back of her mind for now, Katherine resolved to test Jon's loyalty when the chance came. Yes, she had done some preliminary probing but he could have just been a very good actor that time. Words proved nothing. Actions, on the other hand, were everything.

She absentmindedly brushed her hair out in front of the blurry mirror. Robb had tried his best to furnish their chambers in Harrenhal so it would be fit for a lady, but there was only so much he could do. The bristles of the brush snagged on her curls. She swore quietly under her breath and tried to untangle it. Robb looked up from whatever it was that he was writing. Seeing her dilemma, he rose. He was wearing nothing but his robe and it fell open to reveal his flat stomach. The lack of light made the shadows of the ridges and planes starker and she just wanted to kiss that line of hair that led from his navel and went downward like a treasure trail.

"Katherine, you're going to tear your hair out like that," he said. "Let me."

"Aren't you too busy, my lord?"

"I am never too busy for my wife," said Robb. "And don't 'my lord' me. That usually makes me
think you're up to mischief. Unless you are, of course, in which case I demand to know what it is so I am not taken by surprise again."

"No mischief," said Katherine. "Just a few ideas for plans that haven't come into fruition yet." Not exactly inaccurate, because she didn't count it as "fruition" until the plans actually succeeded. So far, the Umbers were still alive.

Robb's hands were surprisingly gentle as he untangled her hair from the hairbrush and proceeded to undo the knots with his fingers, before brushing out her curls. "You have such beautiful hair," he said. "I hope, if we have daughters, they will all look like you."

Oh dear God, the baby question. Well, it was never going to be a problem because there would be no babies. There would be no need for them if she and Robb were both going to live forever. In time, she would turn him, when he was ready to know the truth. Not yet. He was still so innocent and naïve. It would be such a shock to his system that she wasn't sure if he could handle it.

"Come to bed," she said. "It's late." It was almost time for the attempted assassination.

"There are still many matters--"

He was cut off as she kissed him deeply and insistently. His hand came up to grip the back of her head, mussing up the curls that he had, just one minute ago, so carefully untangled. His other hand rested on her hip. She could feel his warmth on her skin through the thin fabric of her shift. It might be cold in the north, but there was plenty of fire inside this room, and she wasn't just talking about that hearth.

He hoisted her up in his arms and she wrapped her legs about his waist. The work was forgotten. It could all wait until morning anyway. They fell onto his pile of furs with him on the bottom. She bent over him and kissed him all over slowly. She undid the ties of his braies with her teeth. He stiffened when she took him into her mouth. "Katherine!" he gasped. "You…shouldn't…"

"Hush, my love," she said. "Let me do this for you."

She suckled on his erection as he tried to control himself, but in vain. She didn't want control. She wanted him to let himself go, to be free and wild the way she knew he was meant to be. His father and mother and the expectations of the world had tamed him but, deep inside, she knew his spirit was feral. Why else would he love her (fine, everyone loved her) and be friends with Damon? If there were two people in the world who were the antithesis of discipline, then it was them.

Before he lost control completely, he pulled her up. His pupils were dilated and his entire body was covered with a film of sweat. "Not like this," he whispered. His voice was hoarse with need. "I want you properly, Katherine."

"Then take me," she said.

"Not yet."

With strength that amazed her, he flipped her over and got down on his hands and knees over her. His kisses went ever downwards, mirroring what she had just done to him. She felt him lifting her skirts. She moaned. His tongue was hot. True, he could be taught to tease her a little more, but there was some natural talent going on down there. He brought her as close to the edge as he possibly dared and then plunged himself into her ready wetness. She cried out. So did he. Their voices mingled as they moved as one, riding each wave, prolonging each wave. They reached their climax together, him with his head thrown back and mouthing her name in silent ecstasy, her with a
lot less control and with her fingers raking grooves down his back, marking him as her own.

When, at last, they were both spent, they fell back together in a position commonly known as 'spooning'. Robb continued to kiss Katherine's neck and to nibble her ear. "I love you," he murmured.

"You're only saying that because you want more," she replied teasingly.

"Can't you, for once, just tell me that you love me too?"

She snuggled up further against him and kissed his hand but did not say anything. He knew the answer, or he should. She just wasn't very good with saying "I love you" and actually meaning it. Once was quite enough for a lifetime and she had done it more than once. So she pretended to sleep instead, knowing that he would never persist in this line of questioning. That was the wonderful thing about Robb. He was passionate, but not needy, and he knew she needed her space sometimes.

She only pretended to sleep whilst her husband slumbered. She drifted in and out of musings. With a million thoughts going on in one's mind at the same time, it was not difficult to keep awake. After the Umbers were gone, it would be time to turn the spearhead against the Lannisters who, by then, would hopefully be broken by Stannis, or at least bruised. With both of them licking their wounds, it would be a question of who was wounded more.

There were some shouts outside, followed by harsh barked commands. They were too far away even for her to hear, although it sounded like Umber. Then it was silent again.

The gasp of a dying man made her open her eyes fully. Hot tangy blood scented the wet night air. She did not move. The lock rattled. And rattled some more. Seriously, this was who they chose? Finally, the assassins managed to vanquish the lock. Robb had to be very tired indeed if he could sleep through this. The blades gleamed dully in the little firelight inside. A gust of cold air rushed inside as the assassins stepped in, dressed in what were, at best, costumes from fantasy game fans' conventions, with leather straps across their chests and boots of fur. Could they be a little more obvious, please? Oh wait, they probably thought this was how northerners dressed.

There were three of them. They moved towards the sleeping Robb. The dagger was raised.

Katherine reached up and caught the wrist just as it was about to come down. Her sudden movement startled Robb who rolled out of bed in one swift moment, having grabbed the dagger that he always kept under his pillow.

The other two now faced Robb. Had there ever been anything so sexy as a naked king fighting for his life? Not that his life was in any danger. She had it all under control.

"Who are you?" demanded Robb. "Who sent you?"

The two men did not answer but both charged at Robb at once. Katherine flung the third one away into the desk and before he could recover from the shock, she slammed his head onto the table so hard that it splintered. The table, not the head.

Robb ducked and weaved, his lack of encumberance making him swift-footed and quick but he was still at a disadvantage. A shallow gash on his shoulder bled freely. "Katherine, get out!" he shouted.

Had he forgotten who had handled The Mountain? She threw a length of linen about the second assassin's neck, looping it around twice before pulling it taut. The man forgot Robb and clawed at
the linen. She hauled him onto the main table where the map and the carved wooden figurines were. Lions and wolves fell as the man struggled, but in vain. She felt the bones of his neck splinter and crack as she yanked hard. The spinal cord was severed. The man fell back limply, his tongue protruding from his mouth like a grotesque slug that should not be there.

They had come out of nowhere, shadows in the darkness. Robb knew that he was bleeding but he was too angry and too excited to feel the pain. He circled the man, vaguely aware that one, there were no guards coming in and, two, Katherine was holding her own against the second man. The third man was already down, somehow. It had happened so quickly.

Where were the guards? The Praetorians? He assumed the would-be murderers would have killed the guards already but he had twenty-fucking-thousand men outside! He was aware of the glow of the fires staining the walls orange and red. The very same diversion trick that they had used when they had come for Bran. Somehow, that only made him angrier. Their family had done nothing to deserve this! Whoever harmed them would come to regret it, this he swore by his blood, for he no longer believed in the gods.

"Katherine, get out!" he shouted. They had come for him. She had nothing to do with it! He needed to protect her.

Robb and the third man were locked in a life and death struggle. The other man was stronger but Robb was more determined to live and to protect the woman he loved. The mercenary slammed Robb against the wall, making Robb see light in his vision and loosen his grip. He brought his knee up. It connected with a soft part of the man's body. The man's blood drained from his face. Robb shoved him aside and stumbled away from the wall, diving for his weapon. The stone floors were not so smooth and they scraped the skin away from his arm and side as he did so. He didn't care.

The killer charged at him again. He didn't get out of the way quickly enough and he was knocked to the ground. His dagger was flung from his hand. He grabbed the man's wrist just in time to stop him from pushing the blade between his ribs. He twisted, putting all his strength into it until the man dropped the dagger and then lashed out with his foot, cursing the fact that he was not wearing his usual iron-toed boots.

White light and pain flashed through Robb's head as the man headbutted him. He grasped at everything and anything he could use as a weapon. His hand came into contact with something on the man's belt; his eating knife. Not pausing to even think, he pulled it out and thrust it into the man's eye. The man gave a short, sharp cry which was cut short as his spirit was quickly extinguished. Blood spurted onto Robb's face and hands, mingling with his own.

He threw the body off him, his chest heaving with the exertion. The wind cooled his sweat and made him shiver. He staggered up, still holding the eating knife. Katherine was there at his side immediately. If not for her, he probably would have fallen. His injuries made themselves known to him, the pain hitting him with a vengeance. He winced as she accidentally grabbed his injured arm. His head throbbed.

"Robb, you're hurt," she whispered.

"Who were they? They tried to kill me," whispered Robb. Some part of his mind realized what a silly thing that was to say. Even a blind man would have known that they had tried to kill him. At least Katherine was not hurt. He touched his upper lip as he felt something trickle down it. His nose was bleeding. He'd never had a nosebleed before.
Katherine sat him down on the bed and busied herself with pouring cups of wine for the two of them. She must have been more frightened than she let on because she took a lot longer than usual and it seemed to Robb that she was shaking. But she managed it and brought the dark liquid over in two goblets. Robb gulped it down. It tasted more metallic than usual, as if the wine was tainted with blood, but he drank it anyway. It steadied his nerves, steeled his mind and made him feel a lot better. His wounds still hurt but the pain had faded somewhat and perhaps it was just him, but they even looked better. He touched the back of his head gingerly. There was a sticky wet patch and it was tender, still, but he could ascertain that his head was, in fact, intact. Northerners had hard skulls. He was no exception.

"They're Umber's men. I'm sure of it," said Katherine. "I had heard that they wanted to kill you to avenge their father."

"Did you know this was going to happen?" asked Robb.

"I didn't know for sure they would do it and I had no idea they would do it tonight," said Katherine. "I'm sorry."

"You're not the one who needs to be sorry," said Robb. He made to stand, but Katherine placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back down.

"I have an idea," she said. Of course she did. He gazed at her, with her sleep-and-fight tousled curls, still naked, and a lot calmer than he was. What had she seen that had given her nerves so hard that Valyrian Steel could not break her? "But we need to be quick, before someone sees you. They need to think you're dead."

She hid him under the bed. It would only be temporary as sooner or later, someone was bound to attempt to clean under there. He watched with horrified fascination as Katherine stripped one of the killers' bodies and began to methodically butcher him until he wasn't recognizably anyone and could pass for anyone at all, so long as it was a man. She smashed in the skull, sending brain matter and bone chips flying everywhere. There was so much blood that it looked as if a massacre had taken place. When she was done, she started screaming.

Her screams brought men running in. It seemed like a lot had been done but, in truth, it had only been a few minutes. His wife worked quickly. Katherine knelt weeping over the mutilated body. Her act was so convincing that for a moment, a little over-imaginative corner of Robb's mind wondered if that really was his body and he was merely a ghost, lingering at the spot of his death. The twinge he felt when he moved his arm cured him of that.

Bolton, Umber and the other bannermen burst in, followed closely by his mother and Arya, still in their night robes. His mother screamed when she saw the body and the bloody naked Katherine kneeling. She fell to her knees, her legs having lost the strength to hold her. Robb bit his lip as she crawled over to the corpse. Arya stumbled over as well, her hand pressed against her mouth as she struggled not to cry out loud.

"What happened?" asked Bolton quietly.

Katherine stood. The entire assembly could see her the way the gods had intended her to be, wild, free, dangerous, like a goddess of old who accepted human sacrifices. "Where were you?" she demanded.

"There was a fire, my lady," said Bolton. "Near the supplies. We had to put it out."

"And while you were saving hay and grain, your lord was being slaughtered," said Katherine. Her
low voice broke halfway through with pretend anger and grief. The third man chose this moment to
groan. In two strides, Katherine was above him. She hauled him to his feet. "Find this one suitable
lodgings in the dungeons," she said. "I have questions for our guest."

Robb had never seen anything quite so magnificent as Katherine, naked and covered in blood,
raging at his guards and bannermen for their incompetence. Just watching her, and feeling jealous
of the fact that all these men got to see what was his was enough to keep his mind off the
discomfort of lying on the cold hard stone floor under the bed. It was quite dusty. He would need a
bath afterwards.

Bolton offered Katherine his cloak. She ignored it and continued to shout and scream as if she were
maddened by grief. Would she do that if he really were dead? Or would she be calm and level-
headed as she usually was and adjust to the changes? His mother was still hugging the corpse and
refusing to let go, even when soldiers tried to gently pry her away so that the body could be
prepared for the funeral rites.

Arya tugged at her. "Mother," she sobbed. "Please, you can't do this. Robb wouldn't want you to do
this." His sister was trying to be brave, but she was only eleven and she had already lost so much.
He was sorry that she had to see this and wished, more than anything, that they could be let in on
the secret. But Katherine had said the genuine grief of his family would be much more believable
to their enemies.

He tried not to move so much, but his muscles were developing cramps. His bannermen were
trying to calm Katherine down, to no effect. His mother fainted from her grief and was finally
carried out. Arya followed with one last tear-filled glance at the corpse. "My lady, we cannot bring
Lord Stark back," said Bolton. "We must make preparations. When the news of his death gets out,
many will try to lay claim to the north."

"His son will have claim," said Katherine.

"But…"

"I carry his heir."

Everyone became still. It was as if they had all been frozen suddenly and Katherine alone remained
able to move. Robb dared not move, or even breathe too deeply. A child? Why hadn't she told
him?! Gods be praised, he would be a father!

Wait, he didn't believe in the gods and Katherine did not look the least bit pregnant. Still, women
knew things that were mysteries to men.

"My lady…" said Bolton. Even he looked stunned.

"Out," said Katherine quietly.

"But…"

"Out!" Her scream shook the walls and the very foundations of Harrenhal, it seemed. How could so
much rage and madness be concentrated in that one word? The bannermen hurried out, probably all
remembering what she had done to Gregor Clegane. And she had not been angry then.

The door closed behind the last of them, leaving Robb and Katherine alone at last.

She turned around. The rage that had twisted her face had faded without a trace. She smiled
angelically at him. "All gone now," she said. "You can come out."
Robb scrambled out from under the bed. What a sight they must both look, covered in blood and sweat and absolutely dusty and filthy, as if they had just emerged into the world from the womb. He placed a hand on her flat stomach.

"Are you…" he whispered.

"No," said Katherine. "But someone has to keep your seat safe for you until you can reclaim it." It made sense and there was no one he trusted more than Katherine when it came to keeping his power intact. "Come, we must get you somewhere hidden."

She hastily threw on some clothes and threw his clothes at him. Whilst he dressed (inconspicuous grey everything, including a cloak which had a hood), she began feeling the walls of their chamber, running her hands along the cracks between the stones and lifting tapestries.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Old places like this always have secrets," said Katherine. As she did so, she found what she was looking for. There was a click and a hiss, like the sound of a giant sucking air. She pushed and the wall gave away. "Like secret passages. I found this some time ago. Some people like to crochet or embroider or read on a rainy day. Me, I find secret passages."

"You really are the most extraordinary woman, you know," said Robb.

"I know," said Katherine. "This passage leads to the dungeons. Don't look at me like that. You know you will be safe there. I'll even give you the keys."

"Is this why you chose this room, because of the secret passageway? Because the one down the hallway was much more pleasant and less draughty," said Robb.

"You know me so well," said Katherine. She took up a taper. "Are you coming?"

Robb surveyed his new 'quarters', if they deserved the word. Yes, they had tried to make it as comfortable as possible, but a cave was still a cave and he wasn't about to call it anything else. He and Katherine spread rugs on the packed sandy floor and hung them up on the walls to keep out the cold. She helped him to heap up a pile of firewood at one end to create a makeshift hearth. The cave system went on for a long way and carried draughts from the outside, so at least he would not suffocate. He ran his hand over the ancient rock, wondering whether Lord Harren and his predecessors had built this, chipped away at the earth bit by bit, or whether the tunnels had always been here.

At least, he told himself, it wasn't a cell as he'd expected. There was a metal grate at one end to prevent the other prisoners from escaping through the tunnel, but he had the keys to that.

"Well, this is cozy," said Katherine. She flopped down onto the pile of heather and fur that served as his bed for now.

"If this is how you treat your husband, do I want to know how you treat your enemies?" he said as he flopped down beside her and covered them both with his heavy cloak. It was actually quite comfortable and, for once, there was nothing in the form of a pile of documents to distract him.

"This is nice," said Katherine. "I'd have been very happy if I had a place like this to stay in when I was a bard."

"It would have been cold, all on your own," said Robb.
"It was," Katherine agreed. "But I'll make sure you won't be cold, my lord." She turned over to kiss him gently on the lips.

"No," said Robb. "You wouldn't let me catch a chill, now, would you?"

Her hand slipped up his shirt and over his chest. He reciprocated by pulling up her skirts. Her thigh was supple and smooth beneath his hand. How could someone seemingly so delicate be so strong? He didn't understand it. But he probably would never understand his wife. She always kept him guessing.

"I shouldn't stay too long," she whispered. He started to protest but she put a finger to his lips. "There are bannermen to convince and prisoners to question. But I'll be back later." She winked.

"What am I supposed to do with myself?" asked Robb.

"Rest, my sweet king," said Katherine. "You've overworked yourself. Besides, aren't you supposed to be resting in peace?"

"Pieces," Robb called after her.

With Robb settled, it was time to carry out the rest of her plan. The Umbers thought they were so clever and the Lannisters were probably rejoicing. She would let them enjoy themselves for a little while before springing the biggest surprise on them. She listened at the entrance of the secret passage for a while before exiting back out into the room. No one had been in. The bloodstains were still fresh on the floor. Good. She flung off her clothes and wrapped a blanket around herself, seeming to have only just resigned herself to the terrible, terrible truth that her beloved husband was gone.

She didn't know how long she sat there, waiting, but at last, a knock came on the door and it opened even though she did not say anything. "Katherine?" whispered Arya.

"Arya," whispered Katherine hoarsely. She was good at this.

The girl came in and approached her, taking care to step around the puddles of blood. Katherine did nothing to stop her as she got onto the bed beside her. "I can't believe he's gone," said Arya softly. Her eyes stared into nothingness and Katherine could guess that she was thinking about her father and how she had lost him too. "They said you're with child." There was a little pause. "I don't think it's true. Damon said vampires couldn't have babies."

Fuck Damon, always ruining things.

"What's going to happen now?" asked Arya.

"I don't know," said Katherine. "But I'm going to keep you all safe and we'll make them all suffer, whoever did this."

"You know, don't you?"

"I have ideas," said Katherine.

"I'm going to kill them," Arya swore. "Will you teach me how?"

Katherine managed a wan smile. She was such a lovely child, Robb's sister, always wanting to fight and kill things. She reminded Katherine of a less intelligent version of herself sometimes. "I
am going to interrogate our guests," she said. "Perhaps you would like to come?"

Next chapter: The world reacts to Robb's "death". Ramsay Snow finally enters Winterfell…
Hornblower

Chapter Summary

The world reacts to Robb's "death". Katherine and Arya bond. Theon confronts the Boltons.

Harrenhal

Bolton waited along with the rest of the bannermen in the great hall. He stayed silent whilst the others whispered amongst themselves. From where he stood, close to the 'throne' that Robb Stark had once sat in, he could see the separate groups quite clearly. The Umbers stood apart from everyone else, whilst the Manderlys mingled with the other lesser houses. All were speculating as to who had done it. There seemed to be little doubt that the Lannisters were ultimately responsible, but they obviously had had help. How else would three hired killers have gotten past so many northmen, including the Praetorians? Bolton had questions himself but he kept silent.

All of them almost leapt out of their skin as the heavy doors slammed open. Katherine Stark strode in. Her hair was swept back and high, with two tendrils of ringlets falling on either side of her neck. Her dress and cloak were black as night. Her heels clicked on the stone floor. Her late husband's wolf brooch held together her cloak at the front. Her face was composed now, her lips painted a brilliant blood red. Apart from that, she wore no other adornment. Widowhood suited her.

She stepped onto the dais and sat in her husband's seat, throwing her cloak behind her in a great sweep. "Bring the prisoner," she said.

The battered man was dragged in, spluttering and terrified, but still defiant. The Praetorians forced him onto his knees.

"Well, well, what do we have here?"

"Kill me and be done with it, bitch!"

The praetorian struck him across the face with a gauntleted hand.

"Tsk," said Katherine. She waggled a finger. "Not the head. When you start an interrogation, the last thing you want is to damage his faculties and his instruments of speech." She glanced at little Arya Stark. Should the girl be here? Her mother wasn't. But Katherine obviously thought it suitable. "You want to cause as much pain with as little damage as possible." She rose slowly. The fabric of her clothes trailed after her. She held out her hand. "Where is my sewing kit?"

Arya handed her a seemingly harmless cloth pocket. She unfolded it to reveal needles of every length and size. She picked up a rather large needle, probably used for sewing leather. "Let's start with the basics, shall we?"

Jon Umber was not unused to the screams of dying men. He was a warrior, a soldier. He had killed men, seen men killed and almost been killed. But, even so, the pitiful cries of the killer he had hired chilled him to the bone and made him wonder if he had killed the wrong Stark.
Katherine twirled a needle in the air, contemplating where to next put it. Her perverted imagination knew no bounds. None of them could look away. None of them wanted to see what she would do. Needles protruded from every part of the man's body. Robb Stark's widow did not let propriety stop her. Perhaps she'd never had any.

"It's a simple question," said Katherine. "Who asked you to do it?"

"Daemon Lannister! Jon Snow! Damon Salvatore!"

"Hmm, tell me something I don't know," she said.

The mercenary kept shouting those names.

"Did you know that there are generally twenty seven bones in your hand? That means twenty seven bones I could slowly break. Oh, not to mention the number of nerves on the bottom of your feet. I think ten thousand? Twenty thousand? Oh, right, you don't know what those are for. Well, it's simple. They're for telling you how much pain you're feeling. I could demonstrate."

Katherine picked up a hot poker that had been sitting in the fire for some time. The metal glowed red and parts of it were white. She brought it close to the man's foot, hovering near the sole.

The man squeezed his eyes shut but that could not stop the scream that was ripped from him when the iron was pressed to the bottom of his foot.

"Passable," said Katherine, as if to herself. She took the iron away with bits of skin and flesh adhering to it. Umber had to look away, but something forced him to look back again. Katherine Stark was now staring very intently at the man's cock. "Bring me a feather," she instructed. A quill was offered to her by a shaking scribe. By the gods, what was she going to do now?

Her use of the feather was expert. Against his will, the man became hard and erect. Katherine took up her needles again.

Someone in the crowd fainted.

Jon Umber decided that it would be best to seek shelter for it would only be a matter of time before the man broke.

Daemon's Camp, West Bank of Blackwater Rush

Daemon stopped in mid-note. "What?" he said. It was the first time Jon had seen him at a loss for words, not that he was capable of thinking right now. It was all he could do to keep standing. Robb. Robb.

"It is true," said Smalljon Umber's emissary. "Robb Stark is dead. Katherine Stark has gone mad. She is hunting for the men behind the killing. It's only a matter of time before she finds out the truth. She was questioning one of the mercenaries when we left. Lord Umber seeks your protection, my lord."

Jon felt Elena grip his hand. It was the only thing stopping him from screaming. It wasn't supposed to happen like this! Robb wasn't supposed to die! Robb couldn't die! What had they done? He had helped do this. He squeezed Elena's fingers so hard that he must have been hurting her. He loosened his grip slightly, but his hand began to shake then. Instead, he hid it behind his back. He would avenge Robb. The Umbers were all dead men.
"Dead?" echoed Damon.

"Indeed," said Daemon. He seemed rather dazed. "That is excellent work. House Lannister is indebted to your lord and Lannisters, as you well know, always pay their debts."

He asked the messenger a few more questions and he answered. Jon did not really hear the answers for his blood was rushing past his ears and all he could hear was the sound of his failure. Daemon then dismissed the Umbers' messenger. Jon was glad. He wasn't certain how long he could have remained in control of his didn't know how he managed to stagger out and back to his own tent without anyone realizing that he was actually on Robb's side. Had been on Robb's side. Robb was gone now.

"Jon," whispered Elena. He didn't answer. He sat down heavily on his narrow pallet. How had everything gone so wrong?

"Jon," Elena repeated more urgently this time. "I don't think it's true."

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**King's Landing**

Robb was dead? Sansa couldn't believe it. But he was Robb! He was her handsome, if slightly annoying, older brother! She had never felt more alone before, not even when her father had first died. Back then, she had held onto the hope that, one day, Robb would storm King's Landing and get her out. Now that hope was dashed. Bran and Rickon were both dead. She could hardly expect Arya to come and do what her brother could not.

She dared not let loose the choking sobs that threatened to overwhelm her. What purer torment was there than to pretend to smile whilst her heart was breaking inside? Robb, poor Robb, her beautiful brother who had tried to make her smile and laugh and had teased her incessantly. As if in a dream, she became aware of the distant jubilant shouts of Joffrey, saying something about heads and platters. She felt sick and cold at the same time. Winter was coming and it had come for her family first.

"Lady Sansa," said a voice. She looked down. Lord Tyrion was gazing up at her, his deep-set eyes filled with something that looked awfully like concern, but it was a look that she distrusted more than any. No one had any concern for anyone else other than themselves. "I am sorry."

"Why are you sorry, my lord?" she made herself ask. Her voice did not sound like her own, for she was sure that had she spoken, she would have broken down crying.

"Your brother and I, we did not always...agree, but he was a good and earnest young man."

"He was a fool to think that he could win," said Sansa bluntly.

"I would not disagree there," said Tyrion. "But one can hardly blame him for trying. He had more cause than most." He reached out awkwardly and patted her arm. She curtseyed and left him. Lannisters made her sick. People made her sick.

It was a well-deserved death, as far as Jaime was concerned. Robb Stark should have died many years ago, preferably before this whole ridiculous war had started over absolutely nothing. All right, Joffrey had turned it into something but it had been nothing before. However, unlike everyone else, he was not rejoicing. Rumour had it that Katherine Stark was on a rampage after the death of her beloved husband, causing the Umbers to rapidly flee and seek refuge with Daemon. The rampage wouldn't last long. Jaime knew Katherine better than most. She was a level-headed,
rational, and merciless creature. She would let go of her grief soon enough, although her anger might not be so easily sated. And, now, Robb Stark wasn't there to stop her.

The world wasn't ready for the monster that was Katherine. No one knew just exactly how dangerous she was and what the Umbers had unleashed.

"Robb Stark almost won the war on the battlefield," said Jaime to Rebekah as they watched the sunset together, not acknowledging one another's existence. The haze that hovered over the city turned it red. Tainted sunlight fell onto the water and shattered into a thousand fragments of gold flakes that floated on the surface of the waves. "But he lost it in the bed chamber."

"The bedchamber can be a very dangerous place, which is why I suppose you avoid it," said Rebekah. He wanted to throw her over the rail then but, ironically, that would be letting her win as it would prove that she had gotten to him. Jaime Lannister would never lose to Rebekah Mikaelson, or anyone, for that matter.

"It's fishy," Rebekah continued. She leaned on the stone railing. The dying light of the sun made her hair look as if it were on fire.

"What is 'fishy'?'" asked Jaime.

"Robb Stark," said Rebekah.

"I know he was half a Tully but I don't see what that has to do with fish."

"It means suspicious," said Rebekah. She rolled her eyes. "I know Katherine. She would never have let it happen. They said she was there, you know, naked as the day she was born and covered in her husband's blood."

"I live in hope that such news could be true," said Jaime, betraying none of his own suspicions about it, nor his worries because, truth be told, he was a lot more afraid of Katherine Stark than he ever had been of little Robb Stark.

"She would never let her key to power slip so easily out of her hand," said Rebekah. "She's too careful. She wouldn't have evaded my brother otherwise."

"I suppose men will always chase after women like Katherine Stark," said Jaime. "If she really is carrying Robb Stark's child, she would be the dowager queen."

"That is not something you need to worry about. We're vampires. Vampires cannot procreate, although we do like trying."

Well, that made everything a whole lot better. There would be no Stark-vampire monstrosity stalking the earth trying to avenge its father.

"She could always pass off another woman's child as hers," said Jaime.

"And we can always tell the truth for we know she is barren," said Rebekah.

"It won't matter what we know. All that matters is what the northmen think and they are very easily tricked."

"You couldn't trick them."

"I was in the process of tricking them. You interrupted." She rolled her eyes at him again.
"Well, no matter what the truth is, I think it will be quite a show," said Rebekah. "The Lumbers will regret the day they crossed paths with Katherine."

"Umbers," Jaime corrected her.

"Whatever," she said. "I don't care about the names of dead men."

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**Daemon's Camp, West Bank of Blackwater Rush**

Jon stared at Elena. "What?" he said eloquently.

"I don't think it's true," she repeated. "The Umbers said Katherine was raging naked like a madwoman. It…doesn't sound like Katherine." She looked to Damon, who had also come inside with them. The vampire seemed equally dazed by the news of Robb's death, but he started, now, when he was required to provide answers.

"Katherine's never lost anyone before," said Damon. "Except her entire family, but we don't know how she reacted then."

"Not raging around naked," said Elena firmly. "And they said she was pregnant."

There was a child? Robb had an heir…

Wait.

"I thought…" began Jon.

"Yes," said Elena.

"But…" said Jon.

"She lied," said Damon. "And, somehow, I don't think that Kitty would have raged around naked if she really were devastated. She would have calmly taken it in stride and then patiently plotted revenge while securing her power base. This is someone who's lost everyone she's ever cared about over the years, except Stef. She's learned not to let it affect her too much. Trust me, I know." He seemed to be thinking aloud rather than reassuring Jon, but Jon was reassured anyway. Still, he needed to know for sure.

"Is there any way to contact her and ask her?" he asked.

"She might be a little busy, but I could try," said Damon. "But you, in the meantime, should rejoice and send Katherine snarky letters without atrocious spelling mistakes. Make sure Daemon gets to see them. No matter whether it's true or not, it wouldn't do anyone any good if you went and got yourself killed."

Jon nodded. "All right," he said. "But if it's…"

"Then Kitty will owe us an explanation," Damon said firmly. His blue eyes blazed with cold fire. Jon realized, for the first time, that Damon loved Robb more than anyone, including himself, had ever thought before.

"And we'll have to find Bran," said Jon. "If Robb – then Bran would be the next lord of Winterfell. We have to find him. Well, we have to find him anyhow, even if Robb isn't…you know."
The horns never stopped blowing, which made it all the easier for Osha and Bonnie to get Bran and Rickon out of the crypts without people noticing. They were all too concerned with what was going on outside to worry about what was happening within the walls of Winterfell. Still, Bonnie was ready to cast any necessary spells to shield them all from harm. Her joy at finding them alive was great, but her worry also increased. Theon obviously knew they were alive and was probably still searching for them.

Bran insisted on going inside the Godswood to say farewell before they went south in search of Robb. Luwin, being Theon's maester, could not pull himself away from the increasingly fragile-minded Greyjoy, leaving the women and Hodor to escort the boys safely out of Winterfell.

The wolves padded alongside silently. They stuck to the shadows. The torchlight could not touch every corner of the fortress and the Ironborn steered clear of the Godswood. They worshipped the sea (and looting) but there was some primal part of their minds that feared the sacred trees of the north.

Bonnie had never seen a weirwood before. Previously, the Godswood had been the domain of Lord Stark and it would have been most inappropriate for her, a servant girl, to venture there. Afterwards, there simply hadn't been that much time to explore.

The air here was thick with cold moisture and smelled of rotting vegetation. The moonlight turned everything silver and black as it drifted down between the leaves of the trees. The boughs and trunks of the ancient trees muffled the sound of the horns. One could almost forget that there was a war.

"There is a door on the other side of the Godswood," said Bran. "It's hidden. No one really knows about it. We can get out there."

"But the city is surrounded," protested Osha.

"It's not watertight," said Bran. "I have seen it. The raven showed me."

"You and your blackbirds," muttered the wildling, clearly uneasy with where this line of talk was leading.

They traipsed deeper in to the Godswood, following Bran's directions. The breezes became whispers and Bonnie could feel the echoes of magic here. There had once been magic in Westeros and there still was, in a way, but it had been dormant for so long that the whole world had forgotten what it truly was.

Until now.

The spirits surrounded her with their voices, speaking in unknown tongues, but she got their message all the same. Winter was coming and they would need to stop it, somehow. The magic that brought the winter and had built the Wall was once again at work. It had been that magic that had interfered with Bonnie's spell on Silas' tomb, sending them all here.

They came to a stop before a white tree that bowed over a clear pool so still that the moon could admire her reflection in it. Bonnie was struck by the sorrowful face on the tree that wept blood. In the moonlight, it seemed to be Lord Ned's face.

A million visions flashed before her eyes; terrifying hordes of ice zombies marching south, led by a creature that was neither human nor animal (although, of course, it had to be an animal because it
definitely wasn't a fungus, bacterium, or a plant), dragons soaring high above, beasts that should have died out ten thousand years ago at the end of the last ice age. And then, the raven. It looked at her with its three eyes, full of human intelligence and understanding. It perched in the branches of the Heart Tree, the sunlight gleaming on its black feathers. She glanced at Bran who was, inexplicably, standing on two feet beside her, and they knew that they inhabited the same reality.

"You have to come with me north of the Wall," he said. "We must go there."

"There is nothing there except ice and death," said Bonnie.

"There is something," insisted Bran stubbornly. "I just don't know what yet."

"You need to go south and find Lord Robb," said Bonnie. Even if there was something up north beyond the wall, it should not have to fall to a little boy and his wolf to find whatever it was to fix this broken world.

The raven looked at her dolefully before flapping its wings and flying off.

They were back in the Godswood again, surrounded by confused and concerned people. Bran still lay in Hodor's arms. There was no sunlight, just the sad moon, so cold and distant as she always was.

"You know I have to go north," said Bran.

"No, you don't," said Bonnie. "The spirits can be deceiving. They want their own agenda, their own thing. They could be just using you." She should know, after everything. Illusions, dreams, visions; the spirits employed these tools to get the living to do what they wanted. Selfishness and exploitation did not end with death.

"Listen to her, little lord," said Osha. "You won't find anything north. Your brothers are in the south."

"But the raven…"

"Could be a trick," Bonnie repeated. "Trust me, my lord. I have seen it before."

Bran looked dubious but he did not say anything more. They left the Heart Tree, going for the secret door that Bran had spoken of. It was covered with climbing vines, both green and withered. Osha cleared them away with Hodor's help and then the giant pushed it open. Just as Bran had said, there was no one there. The Bolton men were too preoccupied with the main gate and so was Theon. The horns echoed in the night.

"Hurry," said Osha. The door was so low she had to bend down to get through. It proved to be a bit of a struggle for Hodor but eventually, they emerged on the other side of the thick stone walls and breathed the free air. Bonnie was glad to be free of the Godswood. She didn't want to hear the voices anymore, calling her name, tugging at her, pulling her back and pulling her north.

She stayed at the little door. "Aren't you coming?" asked Rickon.

"I will be, my lord," said Bonnie. "But I just have to stay for a little while longer. For Maester Luwin."

"Will you come and find us afterwards, then?" Rickon Stark could not be further from a lord at this moment. He was just a frightened little boy who had seen every adult he had ever trusted leave him. She knelt down at his level.
"I promise," she said.

She waved to them as they were swallowed by the darkness. "Goddess keep them," she whispered. The wind began to whistle through the gap in the wall. It sounded like an almost human shriek to her, calling, Bonnie, come to us.

She shivered and went back inside, shutting the door against the voices of those unknown spirits. She couldn't go north. She needed to find Luwin, get him out of Winterfell before everything fell apart, and then find Lord Robb. Perhaps, afterwards, other people might know more about what lay beyond the Wall, like Jon, for instance.

Clouds obscured the moon as she walked back through the Godswood, keeping her head down against the whispers and the cold. She did not look at the tree with Lord Ned's face. "I tried my best," she murmured. "I can't help everyone." She was being stupid and she knew it. Just because the tree looked somewhat like him did not mean that it was actually him.

Heavy rain began to fall, making her damp. She quickened her pace. She didn't want anyone to notice that she had been gone and even a distracted Theon might eventually realize that she came and went as she pleased at all hours of the day and night.

Especially the night.

Then again, perhaps she needn't have worried. As she came out of the Godswood, the rain had become even heavier and she was soaked and shivering, her layers of wool and linen doing nothing to keep out the cold water that now ran down her skin. She hoped the boys had enough wet weather gear.

She heard Theon's shouting before she even neared the main courtyard.

"We die today, brothers!" he was saying. "We'll die bleeding from a hundred wounds, with arrows in our necks and swords in our guts!"

She found Luwin huddling in one of the archways. "He's lost his mind," whispered the maester. "I remember the day Theon Greyjoy came to Winterfell, riding behind Lord Stark and as frightened as he is today, perhaps more. He was just a little boy. A skinny little boy with a pale freckled face and wide eyes who had never been so far away from the shores of the Iron Islands. The Starks accepted him without question. Lord Robb loved him like another brother. How had it come to this?"

"You can't predict people, Maester," said Bonnie. "You can't predict anything."

The horn was still blowing. What would happen once Bolton's men stormed the keep? The Ironborn would all die, all right. She wouldn't be that sorry even though a grim satisfaction at the thought of someone's death was more a Damon thing – no. Damon would be gleefully satisfied if someone he loathed died.

"What is dead my never die!" Theon was still shouting. His men stood with crossed arms in the rain or leaned against their spears and long axes. The horn blasted again. "And whoever kills that fucking hornblower will stand in bronze above the shores of Pyke!" In his tense fervour, Theon did not notice Dagmer coming up from behind him.

Bonnie gasped as the Ironborn struck Theon in the head from behind.

Luwin sprang out from his hiding place, forgetting his own safety as his love for the boy that Theon had been took over. "What are you doing?" he demanded as two of the Ironborn hauled the
unconscious Theon up from the mud and bound him.

Dagmer did not say anything. Bonnie should have done something, but she was so in shock that all she could do was cower uselessly when Luwin suddenly gave a strangled gasp. His eyes widened. He looked down at the dagger protruding from his stomach. Dagmer pulled the dagger out. Blood spilled. Luwin fell to the ground. The man stepped over him like he was just another piece of trash lying there.

"Let's go home," he said to the Ironborn.

Why hadn't she killed them all there and then? But, another voice said in her head, she couldn't take down fifty men all at once, not even with her powers.

She waited until they were gone. Luwin had managed to drag himself over to her slowly and painfully. She met him halfway.

"Oh my God, we have to stop the bleeding," she whispered.

"It's too late for that," said the maester. "It's my time. But you must find and protect Bran and Rickon, Bonnie. You have a gift that the gods have seen fit to bestow upon you. Do not waste it. And forgive Theon. He does not know what he is doing. If you can, save him from himself and from his enemies. Perhaps he may yet be able to redeem himself."

She felt the hot tears running down her face. It wasn't fair! Why did all the good people die? Their naivete killed them and you will end up just as dead if you don't learn, said the annoying rational voice inside her head.

"I've got something in the storerooms. It'll help. Wait here for me," she said. Damon's blood might as well be put to good use. She didn't have very much left, having used most of it on Bran's rehabilitation, but she thought there might still be one or two vials left. She ran, not caring about the panicking people that milled about inside the keep, wondering how the handover would go.

The kitchen was empty, which was just as well. She didn't want someone seeing her sneaking away with a mysterious vial of something that looked an awful lot like blood. The storerooms were dark. As her eyes adjusted, she saw the strings of garlic and the crates of onions. She went straight for one corner where all the herbs were stored. Very few people touched it, for that was the domain of the maester and his little helper, in this case, her. The fact that her brews had revived Bran had given her a lot of respect amongst the servants, although she had now lost most of that respect, thanks to her status as Theon's mistress.

She found the vial, hidden carefully in the jar of wolfsbane. (No, there was no vervain, unfortunately.) No one touched it as it was poisonous but it was good for paralyzing large predatory animals and mild doses helped those with heart palpitations or cold feet and hands, so that was why they had it.

She plucked out the vial and clutched it close to her, hoping that after such a long time, the blood would still be viable. There was no fridge but she had boiled the vial before putting the blood in it to make sure the container had been as sterile as it could be. And the store rooms had been colder than a refrigerator.

She ran back outside.

But the nightmare had started. She had thought that it had started already, but that had just been a mere little tremor. The Boltons had gained entry and she assumed the Ironborn had opened the
gates for them, but they were not the saviours of Winterfell.

Fires burned, deliberately set and fuelled with oil and broken carts and ruined supplies. Several people she knew ran past the archway where she crouched, still clutching her vial of vampire blood, whilst Bolton men chased after them and cut them down. Why were they doing this? She saw Maester Luwin lying on the ground in a pool of his own blood and she had seen enough dead people to know that he was gone. Perhaps he was the lucky one. He hadn't been left alive to see his beloved home burned and ruined.

There were Bolton men everywhere. Why was Lord Robb doing this? Then, she wondered whether he knew what was going on. He loved his home. He would never destroy it, never do anything deliberately to harm it. He might be many things, now, under Katherine's corrupting guidance, but he was still Lord Ned's son. There were certain lines that he wouldn't cross.

She had to get out. She regretted not going with Bran and Rickon when she had had the chance. But she couldn't have left the maester behind. Now the maester was dead, Winterfell was in ruins and if she weren't careful, she would be worse than dead. The Boltons were rounding up the young women. They huddled in one corner, too afraid to even cry. There was no doubt what they intended to do.

"Well, well, Winterfell." Bonnie looked up to see a young man with pale eyes riding in. He wore the Bolton colours, his dark hair was unruly, but while he lacked Roose Bolton's ice-hard edge, there was no doubt that this was Ramsay Snow, his son. He surveyed everything around him with satisfaction like a devil in his domain. His eyes settled on the swinging corpses of the two orphan boys. His grin widened. "So much for the mighty Starks."

Bonnie's blood chilled at the sound of his voice. She had met killers before, dined with killers, and she, herself, was a killer. But never before had she ever heard such calm delight as that in Ramsay Snow's voice. There was something more about him and she didn't want to find out. Her instincts were telling her that no matter what darkness she had encountered, there was nothing darker than what human beings could come up with. It had not been a vampire that had started all those genocides, that mindless persecution. It had been people.

She turned and headed for the crypts. She would be safe there. No one would look where the dead dwelt. She swung by the storerooms before anyone else could get there and took whatever she could get her hands on, not even looking to see what it was that she had taken. She bundled the food and water skins into her arms and hurried away down into the dark tunnels. She heard voices above her and the faint echoes of horses' hooves. Then came the screaming.

She settled by the tomb of the woman wearing the crown of flowers. The presence of the Stark family was strong here. She looked up at the woman's serene face. All these female statues had the look of the Virgin Mary. They usually stood with their hands outstretched, beckoning to their children or lovers. She traced the name on the tomb.

LYANNA STARK

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Next chapter: The Umbers look for a new home. Jon confronts Katherine. The Starks have a mini-reunion.
Gone Boy

Chapter Summary

Daemon helps Katherine's plan to come into fruition. Jon discovers that things are not what they seem and learns to trust Katherine more.

Chapter 66: Gone Boy

Harrenhal

"Are my subjects grieving for me?" Robb asked. He would dearly have loved to be up there just to see how his bannermen were reacting. They said people always told the truth about the dead.

"I think they are in shock," said Katherine. "For all their doughty northern ways, they really are very untried and soft."

"Everyone seems soft compared to you, my lady wife," said Robb. "Tell me everything."

"All the details? Like how I questioned your alleged killer?"

"Perhaps not that. Katherine had tormented Gregor Clegane for entertainment. He could only imagine what she would do with a man from whom she wanted something that could not have been gotten by sweet persuasion.

"Anyway, he confessed and blurted out all the names of his employers, and then some," said Katherine.

"Surely the Umbers never revealed to him that they were the ones hiring him," said Robb.

"Of course not," said Katherine. "But while torture is no good for getting answers, it is excellent for coercing the wanted reactions out of men. The Umbers fled before that so now everyone believes that they were responsible. If they were clever, they would have stayed, but they are not clever."

"No," Robb agreed. "So Daemon Lannister will take care of them for us?"

"Of course he will. Daemon Lannister is a most excellent young man."

"Is he now?" asked Robb. Without waiting for her to reply, he kissed her. Having rested all day, he was now full of energy and his wife looked so beautiful when she was being devious. Which was always. She returned his kiss. He flipped her over so she was on the bottom. She protested but he would have none of it. She couldn't always be on top now, could she? "I'm bored of politics. How about we get onto making that little prince or princess that you say you're carrying?"

West Bank of Blackwater Rush, Daemon Lannister's camp

Daemon was writing a long missive addressed to Tywin Lannister when Damon found him. "You know," he said without looking up. "I never expected the Umbers to actually succeed."
"Then why did you bother?"

"I wasn't aiming for the highest branch. Something lower would have sufficed, like the slow disintegration of Robb Stark's army. Imagine, Damon, if Umber had failed, what then? He would have had no one to turn to. He would have come to us."

"He still did," said Damon.

"I did say I hadn't expected such an excellent result, didn't I? I suppose this is a quick disintegration, although I have a feeling that Katherine Stark is not going to let it fall apart this easily. She is a strong-willed woman."

"Well, that's one way of putting it," said Damon. "So what's next, my lord?"

"We wait," said Daemon. "I had hoped the Umbers would bring more men. There is only so much one can do with three thousand men against twenty thousand. We shall have to wait and see what Lord Tywin decides now that everything is changed."

My dearest Katherine,

You must be surprised to hear from me, seeing as we did not say goodbye. But I write to offer my condolences. I can only imagine how disappointed you are to have your chance at being queen ripped from you. Justice is a funny thing. It takes a while to come, but when it does, it is swift. But I am sure you knew that, because you were there. How did he die? Did he die well? Or did he die begging for his life?

"It doesn't feel right, writing this."

"Just pretend you're evil, Jon. It's for Daemon, not Katherine."

How does it feel to have everything you have ever worked for ripped from your hands just as you were so close to getting it? Do you really think you can hold the north, even with a northern child in your belly? I know the north and I can tell you now that it will not have you.

My advice to you, my Katherine, is that you run. Run as fast as you can, as far as you can, back to the gods-forsaken pits that you came from. For you will never be safe. Although Robb Stark is gone, I am not done. I will hunt you from the north to the south, from Westeros to Essos.

So flee. This is my warning to you. Call it sentimentality stemming from the love we once shared.

Jon

Damon peered over their shoulders. "You two are awful at this. You're supposed to be happy, Jon! But I suppose it'll work," he said.

Dear Lord Umber,

I believe congratulations are at hand. You have done better than I had ever hoped for. I hear Daemon Lannister now trusts you utterly and completely. I will not forget what you have done for me.

However, remember, you should not let your guard down. He might trust you now, but Daemon Lannister is a clever man. Do not give him reason to suspect you. Fail me, and you will share the
The incriminating letter lay unfurled on Daemon's desk amongst the quills and other dispatches. A half written military report sat to one side. The script was elegant, almost feminine. Damon risked peeking over to see what was written. Katherine always delivered the coup de grace with style. He had to give her that much.

Daemon's expression gave nothing away. One could not tell whether he was angry, disappointed, or simply grim because his expectations had been validated. "Where are the Umbers now?" he asked.

"Still in the camp, my lord," replied Wetherby.

"Invite Lord Umber and his kinsmen to dine with me this evening. We should thank them for their good work and we have much to discuss in terms of the future of the north."

Wetherby bowed and left to do as he had been told.

"It was Katherine Stark all along, Damon," said Daemon. "She played me like a harp string. Now she has control of the north and she didn't have to lose a single man getting it. With Robb Stark's seed growing inside her, she would be the queen regent."

"Technically, she wouldn't because Robb Stark had abdicated," said Damon. "If that gives you any comfort, my lord?"

"It does not," said Daemon. He stood and paced around in the small confines of his tent with his hands clasped behind his back. "You, too, will dine with me tonight. As will Jon Snow. And tell him that he is not only here to send gloatingly inappropriate letters to Katherine Stark. There is work to be done."

Wow, Daemon was in a foul mood. The vampire had never seen him like this before. Usually, he was so calm. But, then again, he'd had enough of being used by Katherine. No one could blame him for that. Damon could only imagine his reaction when the young Tywin-wannabe realized just how used he had been.

Everything he had ever dreamed of and everything he had not dreamed of was about to come true tonight. The North would belong to the Umbers now, if only they could find some way of displacing the increasingly mad Katherine Stark. The younger Stark boys he could simply dismiss out of hand. No one even knew where they were or whether they were still alive.

Music came from the main tent. Jon Umber could smell the mouth-watering aromas of honey glazed spicy roasted meat preferred by the southerners and the heady mulled wine they consumed to ward off the cold.

Several braziers had been placed around the tent, making the north man sweat profusely as soon as he entered, dressed as he was in his furs and leathers. He quickly shed his cloak and handed it to a polite servant who took it and hung it up as if it were made of finest ermine instead of bear. Behind him, his multitude of cousins followed in his example.

"My lord," he said as he bowed to Daemon.
"Please, my lords, sit," said the young Lannister who thought himself so regal with his well-combed golden hair and fancy embroidered tunics. But he was the one who was going to help Jon Umber take the north. So what if he liked his comforts and preferred to be as soft as a girl? He saw that Jon Snow and Damon Salvatore were already seated. The former wore no expression and the latter was as serious as he usually was, which was to say not at all. Damon took up the pitcher of wine and stood. "Wine, my lords?"

There were murmurs of assent and acceptance through his assembled kin. Well, this was nice, to have a Salvatore serving them, even though he seemed to be doing it of his own accord rather than out of duty. Perhaps he wanted the future wardens of the north to forget how he had turned his back on them when they had needed him the most. Umber wasn't one to hold grudges, however. After all, Salvatore had only turned his back on the Starks. He had nothing against that.

The meat was tender and juicy and perfectly flavoured. The wine kept flowing and the greens were ignored, although the potatoes were quickly devoured. "I must say, I have never had such good potatoes," said the Smalljon. They were buttery and covered in herbs.

"Indeed," quipped Damon. "It has been many turns of the moon since I have tasted such an exemplary vegetable." He smirked. Now, just what was so funny about that? Beside Damon, Katherine Stark's twin sister dug her elbow into his ribs.

"I believe compliments are owed to the incomparable Lady Elena," said Daemon. He raised his cup towards her. She blushed prettily and bowed her head. "It was she who planned this meal that we are now enjoying. I must, however, claim credit for the after-supper entertainment."

"Whatever it is, my lord, I am sure it will be thrilling," said Harald.

"Indeed," said Daemon. He took a sip of wine.

It was beginning to get incredibly hot inside the tent. Perhaps it was the number of fires. Perhaps it was something else.

"Forgive me, my lord," said the Smalljon. "I believe I am in need of air."

"No, I do not believe so," said Daemon. He threw a roll of parchment onto the floor in front of the Smalljon.

It was then that he noticed how many guards were stationed within the tent, how he was sitting only a few feet away from Damon Salvatore, the infamous cocky mercenary who had defeated the Mountain in a joust and, of course, Elena, who was the sister of the woman who had completely vanquished one of the most terrifying monsters Westeros had ever known and taken Harrenhal with nought more than two hundred men.

The entrance to the tent, also, was blocked by a large contingent of soldiers in golden armour and red cloaks that waved menacingly in the wind. They gleamed as if they were on fire.

"Pick it up," said Daemon.

The Smalljon slowly bent and unfurled the piece of parchment. He did not recognize the writing, but he noticed his name on it.

"My lord, this…this is a lie!"

"Of course," said Daemon. "I do believe you are rather well-versed in lying."
There was a collective ring all around him as swords were unsheathed. He reached for his own weapon and drew it from his belt. Treacherous bastards, the lot of them! If he could get to Daemon Lannister and hold that blade to his throat, he would be able to get out of here.

And go where? Not back to the north, where Katherine Stark would rip him to pieces as she did with that hired killer. Not to the south, where the Lannisters ruled. Same with the west.

Where would he go? He would think about this later. Right now, he just needed to live.

He lunged, but he hadn't gotten two steps before the soldiers bore down on him. He was strong, but so was Damon Salvatore. The slim, wiry mercenary pounced on him with so much force that it knocked him to the floor of the tent. At such a close range, his sword was useless. He dropped it and tried to wrap his hands around Salvatore's throat, but Salvatore easily wrenched his hand away as if he had nothing more than the strength of a newborn babe.

The spears and swords pointed at his face finally made him realize that this was futile. He was completely surrounded and Daemon Lannister hadn't even stood up yet. "My lord! You've been played! Katherine Stark has played us both."

"She's played me for the last time," said Daemon. "Ser Salvatore, is it not custom, where you are from, to send consolation gifts to people who are in mourning?"

"It is, my lord," said Salvatore.

"What do they send?" asked Daemon Lannister.

"Casseroles, mostly," said Salvatore.

"I do not know what those are, but I think we shall prepare a fine gift for Lady Stark," said Daemon. He waved his hand. The guards began to drag Umber and his kinsmen outside. No amount of shouting and cursing could stop them. "Damn it, my lord! What can I do to prove my loyalty? This is a Stark trick!" shouted the Smalljon.

"Wait," said Daemon suddenly.

Had he realized the errors of his ways?

"Leave that one alive." He pointed at Harald. "I have use for him."

It was done. Katherine's will was done. That somehow sounded religious and Jon didn't know why. Now, if only he could have confirmation that Robb was actually alive as Katherine had promised, then he would be quite content, if not happy (because he would not be happy until he was out of the Lannister camp and back where he belonged by Robb's side).

Jon Umber cursed and shouted and became unintelligible as he was dragged outside. His death was far swifter and cleaner than he deserved but there was some satisfaction as his head fell with a dull thud to the muddy ground and rolled once before coming to a rest, face down, in the mud. The headless body slumped to the ground. It was hauled away before the next Umber was brought to the block. They continued to shout and curse and declare their loyalty for House Lannister. Traitors, the lot of them. Jon felt only grim satisfaction as they were cut down, one by one. Harald Umber, the only one granted the gift of life, shook as he watched his kinsmen killed. Daemon had selected him for his youthful stupidity, no doubt. Even if he did not eventually die, he would be quite harmless.
At last, a row of heads and piles of bodies in carts were all that remained of House Umber. Jon looked upon them. For a moment, he wondered what his father would have thought of what he had done. This was not the man that he had been brought up to be. Would the honourable Lord Eddard Stark have understood what he had done, that it was all for House Stark?

'It doesn't matter,' said a voice in his head. 'You're alive. He's dead.' But he didn't want his father to be disappointed in him.

"Lord Jon," said Daemon, pulling him out of his grim, yet childish musings.

"Yes, my lord?" said Jon. The heads were now being loaded into a chest, packed as if they were the most precious cargo.

"How do you feel about meeting Katherine Stark again?"

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**Harrenhal**

The sentries shouted as Jon approached the gate of Harrenhal. Grey wolves ran in the wind at the top of the battlements. The sight of them made his heart leap and then seize with worry. Would they remain running for much longer? How much faith could one place in Katherine and her trickery? He still had not heard anything apart from Elena and Damon's suspicions that indicated Robb was still alive.

The heavy wooden cart behind him left deep ruts in the wet earth. It had started raining and the cold water seeped through his armour to soak his quilted gambeson, making everything colder and heavier than it ought to be.

"Open the gates!" he shouted up to the guards. "I come on behalf of Lord Daemon Lannister, bearing gifts for Lady Stark!" Whenever he said 'Lady Stark', the image of his stepmother always came to mind.

The heavy gates opened without so much as a squeak. It was as if the fortress, itself, mourned the loss of her lord and king. The sound of their horses' hooves sounded impossibly loud on the glistening black flagstones. It bounced back on the walls, making it seem as if he had more than his escort of ten men. Nominally, they were to protect him. In truth, they had been sent to watch him. He would have to be careful not to betray any emotion that he shouldn't be feeling if he truly had turned his back on Robb.

A body, hung by its feet, swung above the arched gateway. The head stood on a spike or, rather, just the skull, boiled clean of flesh and painted with garish colours. It was as if there were a competition of who could be the bloodiest between Katherine and Daemon. For now, Katherine was so far ahead that Daemon would have to massacre an entire city to catch up. Besides, he would not develop her style. Not that anyone would be sorry for it. One such person in Westeros was quite enough.

Silent guards dressed in a more elaborate version of the northern style of armour flanked him and his men and they escorted him to the great hall. He presumed these were the famed 'Praetorians', a name and position that Katherine had shamelessly copied from another empire that had come and gone long ago, just as she had copied their sigil, the eagle, and a thousand other things. Well, why create when one could simply steal with impunity?

His footsteps echoed in the long hall with the high vaulted ceiling. He could see the ribs of the roof. It was like walking inside the maw of a giant carcass that had lain here so long that it had
turned into stone. North men glared at him from every direction. Snarling wolves pounced upon surprised lions on the walls. He kept his back straight and marched on.

She sat like a queen on the seat that had once been Robb's. The bodice of her black mourning gown clung to her every curve and was low cut enough to show the valley between her breasts. Her hair had been braided back and she had draped a sheer black scarf over her head. Her face was cold and stone like. If she hadn't beckoned to him when he had entered, he might have suspected her of being a statue of herself.

"Jon Snow," she said. Her voice was low.

"Katherine," he said without bowing. The Praetorians advanced upon him. He glanced at them through the sides of narrowed eyes. Katherine lifted her hand and they stepped back, although their hands were still upon their swords. "My condolences to you, my lady. Words cannot begin to describe how sorry I am for your loss."

"I think words are more than adequate. I received your letter. Thank you for your kind sentiments. They were not appreciated."

"I am sorry that they were not adequate," said Jon. "Perhaps I could make some recompense."

Jon waved to his men. They brought Harald Umber forward and threw him at Katherine's feet. The man was a spluttering mess. The chest full of heads was carried up by two men. They set it before Katherine Stark and opened the lid. Murmurs rippled through the northerners.

"What's this?" asked Katherine.

"Lord Daemon thought you might appreciate this a little more than my letter. He is a thoughtful man, Lord Daemon Lannister, and cleverer than people expect," said Jon.

"So I have heard," said Katherine. "And I am inclined to believe it. Fancy sending you here."

"Who could be better than me?" asked Jon. "After everything that we have been through? I know you better than anyone, Katherine, including Robb Stark. I suppose, in the end, he knew very little."

"You know nothing, Jon Snow," said Katherine with a dangerous smile. She rose to her feet slowly, all languid grace, like a serpent unfurling herself. She glided down the steps. "But I would be more than happy to remedy that." Jon made himself not flinch when she pressed herself against him. She leaned in close, as if to smell him.

"Robb," he whispered so softly that none but a vampire could have heard it.

"Is fine," she murmured back into his ear.

"Prove it."

"I shall."

"Where is he?!" Lady Catelyn burst in. The guards tried to stop her but her anger lent her strength and speed. Her blue eyes blazed with fury and disgust as she looked upon him, now made more intense by the fact that he was dressed in Lannister red and gold. Her red hair, usually so sleek and ordered, was tangled and wild. "You!" she hissed. She lunged at him, her fingers curled like talons. The look of her made Jon take an involuntary step backwards.
"Restrain my lady," said Katherine. Turning to Jon, she said, "You must forgive her, Lord Snow."
Someone coughed. "She is maddened by the grief of loss." She threaded her arm through his.
"Come. Since you have delivered so fine a gift, I cannot allow you to leave without wining and
dining you. Besides, we shall have much to talk about, you and I. It has been too long."

Jon threw a look back at his men. They looked unsure of what to do, especially surrounded by
north men who looked as if they would like nothing more than to have roasted lion for it be safe
for him to go with Katherine? She didn't wait for him to decide. She pulled him along. The
Praetorians closed ranks around them and escorted them out of the great hall.

They came to a closed door which was opened to reveal a bedroom. Robb and Katherine's
chambers. "Katherine…” began Jon with a warning tone in his voice. He had to pretend
that they had a past, yes, but this was too realistic! Robb would want to kill him if he…

"Leave us," Katherine said to the praetorians. They bowed and left after exchanging a few glances
with each other.

Jon stared at Katherine. "Where is he? Why am I here?"

"The bed has room enough for all three of us," said Katherine. "Oh, you should see your face, my
dear Jon. One might have thought that I had just suggested you jump into Mount Doom. Never
mind. You would not understand that reference."

"I want to see him," Jon insisted.

Katherine ignored him and went about hiding behind one of the tapestries. He readied the stake
that he had hidden in his sleeve, just in case. If anything had happened to Robb, he would end that
demoness.

There was a click and a hiss. Katherine re-emerged from behind the tapestry. "Follow me, Lord
Jon." She held aside the heavy woven fabric to reveal a dark doorway that seemed to lead nowhere.
He cautiously went inside. What choice did he have now? Had she hidden Robb away? And why
would Robb even allow such a thing? Perhaps his brother had finally met his match and he wasn't
thinking about Tywin Lannister (who was still very far ahead, despite all of Katherine's efforts to
catch up).

The passage wound this way and that, going ever downwards. The only light came from the lamp
that Katherine carried. It might be more than adequate for a vampire. Jon could only make out the
shadows on the walls and Katherine's face illuminated in the glow. The little light reflected off the
rock's damp surface. His own breathing sounded very loud in the enclosed space.

Katherine moved swiftly. He tried his best to keep up. It might have been ten minutes later,
perhaps shorter, but he lost his patience with her. All of a sudden, he pounced and pinned her
against the wall, the stake pointed at her heart. The lamp fell to the floor and smashed on the rocks,
casting them all into complete and utter darkness. "I swear, Katherine, if any harm has come to my
brother because of your tricks—"

He didn't get to finish. With movement swifter than the mind could comprehend or the eye could
follow, she'd twisted the two of them around and slammed him up against the wall with his arm
bent at a painful angle behind his back and his face pressed against the rough rock.

"You would dare threaten me?" she whispered into his ear. "Careful, Jon. You're cute, but not that
cute, and we both know I could rip your heart out and do my nails at the same time."
Jon struggled, but in vain. He might as well have tried to move a mountain.

"What is going on?" demanded a voice that Jon had prayed day and night to hear.

"Robb!" he said. Katherine let him go.

The two brothers stood facing each other, one with a throbbing shoulder and wrist and the other holding a torch in one hand and with a vampire hanging to his other arm. Without a word, Robb handed the torch to Katherine.

"Jon," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," said Jon.

"Not just that," said Katherine. "He came to bring Daemon Lannister's condolences and to offer consolation presents of the Umbers' heads."

Jon ignored her and threw his arms about his brother, just to ensure he was real and not a dream. Robb stiffened, in typical Robb-fashion. Open affection was not really what Starks did. But he, too, in time, put his arms around Jon. The two brothers began laughing as they embraced and clapped each other's backs.

"I had thought that you had betrayed me, you know," said Robb.

"I would never!" said Jon. "You know that."

"I know that now," said Robb. "But the news came after Theon. I suspected everyone then."

"I do not blame you, although I am wounded that you have so little faith in me. And that you did not invite me to your wedding."

"It was a rushed and secret affair," said Robb. "I expect yours would be better."

"So, Jon risks death to come and see you, and you blow your cover by seeing him, and then you talk about girls, my love," said Katherine.

Jon blushed, not only because he was talking about such trivial things with Robb when there were a bajillion other things that needed to be discussed (like the fact that he had married a devious five hundred year old vampire without knowing any of it, although that was still discussing girls, he supposed), but also because he had doubted Katherine when she had proved to be a true friend to them all along. Perhaps Damon and Elena could be wrong. Perhaps Katherine really did love Robb.

"I can hardly think of a better thing to discuss than my lovely and clever wife," said Robb. He pressed a kiss to Katherine's hair.

"Stop it," said Katherine playfully. "You're making Jon blush. See?" Jon blushed further at the embarrassment of knowing that they had seen him blush. It was cyclical. Katherine turned to him. "Now do you believe me?"

"Forgive me, Katherine," said Jon. "I should not have doubted you."

"There is nothing to forgive, Jon," said Katherine. "You were overwhelmed by concern for your brother. I can understand that. On some superficial and detached level."

"You jest, Katherine," said Robb. "I am sure you have the utmost concern for your sister's
"Elena's annoying and that is all I will say about it," said Katherine. Robb raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"What is next, Katherine, now that the Umbers are gone?" asked Jon. "Surely Robb can't stay here forever."

"Indeed, I should think not," said Robb. "There will be celebrations of my death, of course, and while they are drunk with victory, I shall re-emerge, better and more handsome than before."

"That's not hard," said Jon. Robb tried to swing a playful punch at his shoulder, but he ducked in time. It was as if nothing had changed and they were still boys in Winterfell. Although he would never have dared to tease his brother thus back then, for fear of being overheard by Lady Catelyn. The notion of being afraid of his stepmother felt foreign, now, after everything he had seen.

"Well, you two enjoy your little chit-chat," said Katherine. "I need to get back up to the bedroom and make everything seem realistic. And, Jon, you'd better have an explanation for why you went off with me privately. Say I'm not averse to joining the Lannister cause if it means I can hold the North or something creative like that. I trust you know what to do?"

She smiled at the two of them and left.

"Every morning I wake up, I still have to convince myself that this is real," Robb confessed after Katherine had gone 'out of earshot'. Jon was certain that she was straining her little vampire ears as much as she could and could hear them all perfectly well. "Katherine has...changed everything."

"I can see that," said Jon. "You seem good for each other."

"And you know this because you have met her once?" said Robb. Jon so desperately wanted to tell him the whole truth but Robb couldn't be distracted by the strangeness that inhabited their world now. Besides, perhaps Katherine had her own reasons for not telling him yet. He knew better, now, than to try and thwart her plans.

They spoke of the war and Robb showed Jon his maps, which he had always loved, even as a boy. "Katherine wouldn't let me take the real ones up in my chambers," he said. "Something about keeping it realistic."

"You've always liked playing with maps," said Jon.

"It's not playing," said Robb defensively. "It's war."

The companionship was so familiar that one would have thought that they had never been parted, even though so much had changed. Jon knew he could not linger. His – Daemon's – men would be wondering. From above, they could hear Katherine's moaning filtering down. It made for an awkward moment. Then again, this was Katherine. Propriety had never been one of the factors that had inhibited her in her five hundred years of life.

Robb embraced him again. "One day, this will be over," he said. "I don't know when, but I know we can do this with you and the others on my side."

"I believe it too," said Jon sincerely. At that moment, he really felt that they could win. It might take some supernatural interference and a lot of meddling by human minds, but they would win.

"Jon?" called Katherine down the passage. "It's time to go." She and Damon were so alike
sometimes. Not that he thought Damon was pretty. She came back down. Her hair was tousled as if a man had run his fingers through it repeatedly and her lips were painted the brightest red imaginable. In the dim light, they seemed almost to be black. "And you can't go out looking like this."

"Looking like what?" said Robb. Jon was equally confused.

"Haven't you heard the latest gossip about the three of us?"

Robb narrowed his eyes.

"Jon told everyone that he and I were involved before I married you," said Katherine.

"But the two of you never met until today!"

Not true, but Robb didn't need fuel for the flames of his imagination.

"No," said Katherine, "but why else would he turn to the Lannisters? Isn't that right, Jon?"

"Yes," said Jon slowly. "Daemon Lannister thinks you stole Katherine from me and chased me off to the Wall." He put up his hands as Robb scowled. "It was the best thing I could think of at the time."

"I would never do any such thing," said Robb.

"Not even over me?" pouted Katherine.

"Well..." said Robb. Katherine smiled. Jon stopped smiling. "I wouldn't know. It's never been tested."

"Well, anyway, we have to make our reunion seem realistic. They think I wanted you dead so I could take the north," said Katherine. "And it would make sense that I would make a deal with the Lannisters so I could keep it."

"I don't want to watch," said Robb, only half in jest.

"What? I haven't even said anything yet," said Katherine.

"I think I know you well enough," said Robb. "Go on, go ahead, do what you need to do but you will not leave my earshot." He turned his back to them.

"You're just torturing yourself," said Katherine. "Some men like that, I suppose."

Katherine pressed a kiss to Jon's jawline, tracing a trail down his neck. He shivered and stiffened, fully aware that this was his brother's wife. And she happened to look just like the woman he loved with all his heart and soul and spirit and everything that he had. Katherine ruffled his hair and tangled it all up before turning her attention to his clothes.

She tugged at the laces of his gambeson to loosen them. There was a ripping sound as his under tunic was torn a little at the neck. "I'm a violent lover," she whispered.

"No details necessary," said Robb.

"It's just pretend," said Katherine. "Didn't you ever play pretend as a child?"

Jon closed his eyes and prayed that this would be over with soon. He didn't know how much longer
he could control himself for. The things he did for Robb…

Next chapter: Elena and Jon play pretend for Daemon's benefit. Robb makes a great reveal.
Katherine plays at ruling the north. Jon and Elena put on a show that Damon wishes was reality. Roose Bolton gets a surprise. Tywin makes plans. Again.

West Bank of Blackwater Rush, Daemon Lannister's Camp

Daemon raised his eyebrow when he saw Jon Snow. The men had informed him of how Katherine Stark had practically dragged him away, leaving them to speculate about what had gone on. Now that he saw the man, it wasn't hard to imagine. The smeared outlines of full lips on his neck were painfully obvious, as was his dishevelled state. Also, his arm happened to be in a sling.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"My emotions upon seeing Katherine again might have gotten the better of me," said Jon Snow. He reddened slightly as the men sniggered.

"Clearly," said Daemon.

"I was angry at her," said Snow defensively. "I tried to attack her. She didn't like that."

"Yes, the woman who turned the Mountain into a Molehill. I can imagine she restrained herself with you," said Daemon. He had always been quite curious about Katherine Stark. Now he desperately wanted to see her for himself. "What did she say?"

"She's desperate," said Snow. "She knows the north would be hard to hold, even if she carries Robb Stark's child. She would do anything to keep it."

"She would," said Daemon. "I suppose I could help her there, if I so chose. You have done very well, Jon Snow. Go, now, and have a maester tend to your arm. Also, Elena has been quite anxious about what could have taken you so long. Perhaps an explanation is in order."

"Might I recommend…a bath?" asked Damon. He smirked. "You kind of smell of perfume and it's not yours either, I might add."

"There is no time for that," said Daemon. This was fun. Jon Snow was so easy to rile up. "Elena is very eager to see him, although I would imagine there would be plenty of time afterwards."

He had never seen anyone pale so quickly in his life. One might as well have told Snow that he needed to make some explanation or another for his bad behaviour to Lord Tywin Lannister. Snow bowed and left. Part of the young commander wanted to follow him just to hear what Elena would say but he contented himself with knowing that Damon would probably share anything that should happen. The mercenary had already trotted off after his 'friend'. There was more to concern himself about now than the drama between those three.

Everything was appearing to him to be at an uncommon advantage. The widowed Katherine was not only free to rule the north, she was also free to remarry. The stepfather of Robb Stark's child would have equal say, if not more, over the north. He would be an excellent stepfather, even if he
did say so himself. He would be an even better ruler of the north.

He pulled out a fresh piece of parchment.

Elena straightened from her stretch when Jon burst inside the tent. It hadn't really helped to take her mind off things anyway. "Jon," she whispered. "What happened to you?"

"Isn't it obvious? Katherine happened. Can't you smell that attar of roses?" said Damon before Jon could even open his mouth to explain. He leaned in to sniff Jon's neck. "Very nice." Jon alternately paled and reddened. Elena stilled. Were those lipstick marks on his neck? And why in the world was his arm in a sling? He had been fine when he had left. Damon grinned. If there had been popcorn, he'd have settled back with some as he propped his dirty booted feet up on her bed to watch the show.

"What happened," she said, more slowly and firmly. Her voice was low. Dangerously so. Her heart thudded in her chest. If Katherine and Jon had…she didn't know how she would react.

"Elena, I can explain," said Jon. He lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper. "I saw Robb. He's fine." Well, that was nice, but what about Katherine? "I had to have an excuse to go off with Katherine beyond the sight of my men. She…gave me a disguise, so to speak."

"Beep!" said Damon. "Wrong answer! It's not really that difficult. Tab A went into slot B, slappy noises happened, you know how it goes. Or do you want me to draw you picture?"

Ah, everything fell into place, now, especially considering the lovely little tale of jealousy and deception that Jon had spun about himself, Katherine and his brother. Still, she didn't like the idea of Katherine kissing Jon.

"Why in the seven hells are you here?" demanded Jon. "Get out."

"I think you are in no position to give orders, buddy," said Damon.

"Quiet, the both of you," said Elena. The boys fell silent.

"Nothing happened, Elena," Jon whispered so softly that it was for her ears only. Of course, Damon was listening in. In a louder voice meant for the men outside, Jon said, "The past always catches up with you, Elena. But I don't love her, Elena. I love you. She was…a stumble, a mistake."

Elena gave a grim smile. Without warning, her hand came up.

There was a sharp crack as her palm connected with Jon's cheek. The shadows outside their tent stilled. Men were such awful gossips and busybodies. It had been that way in the Night's Watch and it was exactly the same here in the Lannister camp. "You despicable bastard!" she screamed. "I trusted you. I loved you! But I should have known. I'm so stupid! Of course you're still in love with her." Thank you, Caroline, for dragging her off to impromptu drama classes all those years ago.

She sank down onto the narrow pallet and slapped Damon's boots to get them out of the way. She pointed at the entrance of the tent. He hurried out as if escaping from an awkward situation.

"Elena, I can explain," repeated Jon desperately as he held a hand to his poor stinging cheek. There was a red handprint on it.

"I don't want to hear it!"
"But I love you!" Was it just her or was Jon being awfully realistic? "I love you and only you." Wait, he was serious. He was very good at channelling his emotions.

"Out," she said softly.

"Elena," he said, trying to approach her.

"Get out!" she screamed, pointing at the entrance of the tent again. Jon held out his hands to her helplessly. He was getting into this. His eyes glistened. Oh, no, don't cry. He bowed his head and ducked out of the tent. She drew out the feelings that she had inside her and brought tears to her eyes. She thought of her parents, of the fact that she would likely never see Jeremy again, of poor Lord Ned and how Sansa had seen him die, of the unfairness in life, of what it would be like to be betrayed by the man she loved most in the world. She sobbed and let all her frustrations and sorrows loose. Why did bad things happen to good people? It just wasn't right!

Damon came back in a good while later, after she had exhausted herself.

"Did I overdo it?" she whispered to Damon.

"A little bit, but it's fine," said Damon. "Who knew you were such a psycho?"

"Just imagine that was you and you'd just heard, for the first time, that Katherine had cheated on you with Stefan and she was trying to justify herself." Elena hiccuped. She wiped her face with her hands.

"Pfft. Don't rub it in, Elena." Still, he enveloped her in a hug. How did he know she was in need of one? She sank into his arms and felt safe and loved.

"Sorry."

"I think we should cuddle, now," he said.

"What?" hissed Elena.

"To make it seem like you're really angry at Jon," said Damon with a shrug. Elena glared at him.

"Just because I am angry at Jon doesn't mean I'm immediately going to get into bed with you!" said Elena. She shoved Damon's shoulder. She might as well have attempted to shove a mountain because that would have been more effective. Damon took on a grim smile; the sort of smile that always made people uncomfortable, no matter whose face it was on but, on Damon's, it was doubly dangerous. "I'm sorry, Damon, it's..." Well, it was what? She caught his hand. "I just meant...I don't know what I mean. I'm sorry. My mind is so...it's this whole damn war and this place. I don't know what it's turning me into."

"It's bringing out the side of you that you've always suppressed," said Damon. His expression did not lighten. "Maybe you're more like me than you think." She leaned against his chest and listened to his rapid heartbeat, wishing, more than anything, that he did not love her as much as he did, that she wouldn't have to hurt him every day by being happy with someone else. Damon deserved better.

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**Harrenhal**

Roose Bolton's footsteps echoed in the great hall. The other bannermen parted to let him pass without a word, knowing that he was Lady Stark's most trusted counsellor. And, also, he was the
only one keeping the north together, with the elder Lady Stark mad with grief and the second one…also mad with grief, but in a way that was making House Bolton's past activities seem gentle and mellow.

Katherine was scanning a letter from Daemon Lannister, her face glowing with good health. One had to wonder whether she was actually grieving or whether this had been her plan all along, to rid herself of her young and naïve lord husband so that she might rule. Looking at her, one could believe it. A little lady bard did not become a lady without some trickery inside her mind.

"Can you believe the nerve of the man?" asked Katherine as she screwed up the letter and dropped it to the floor. The ball of parchment rolled two times before coming to rest at her feet. She leaned back and crossed her legs. They could all see the outline of her slender thighs and calves. Ramsay was of age. If he were a Bolton, he would be married by now. Perhaps…

"What do the Lannisters say now?" asked Bolton.

"Daemon Lannister just made a proposal of marriage to me," said Katherine. "Over the post." She paused. "By letter," she added when it seemed none of them understood what she meant.

Bolton did not care how Daemon Lannister proposed. They could never allow Lannisters in the north. If they ever got a foothold here, they would never let go. The north belonged to those who lived there and actually cared about it.

"Well, he seems to live in a different world entirely, this Daemon Lannister," said Bolton.

"Yes, Lannisterland," said Katherine immediately. "Usually inhabited by creatures such as Jaime Lannister, known for foolhardiness, lack of self-preservation and unbridled ambition for the unachievable."

Bolton felt his lips twitch. "It was probably worth a try in his eyes."

"Possibly," said Katherine. "But, do speak freely, Lord Bolton. You look as if you have something on your mind."

How could she have known? Bolton had always prided himself on his ability to hide his intentions. This little girl, with all of eighteen or nineteen years under her belt, looked at him with her knowing eyes and saw.

"Daemon Lannister is correct in presuming that you should look to the future," said Bolton. "You mourn Lord Stark, as we all do. But the north is in a precarious position, my lady. With Lord Stark's death and the disappearance of his brothers, it is holding together by a thread."

"His sister is here and here I am," said Katherine. She placed a hand on her belly. That troublesome child would have to be dealt with.

"I understand, my lady, but the men here are not like those in the south. They will not bow to women. They are not as reasonable. They need a man to lead them."

"Then it is a good thing, is it not, Lord Bolton, that I am here?"

Silence. Time stilled and froze. The voice that rang out inside the hall brought winter with it. It was a voice that none of them had ever expected to hear again and it belonged to a man who, when Bolton had last seen him, had had a head so ruined that it had hardly resembled the head of a man. Yet, he supposed, that had not been him.
Robb Stark strode inside, his back as straight as a spear, flanked by silent, faceless Praetorians in their shining armour. A tendril of dark hair dropped over his forehead and curled perfectly. He looked perfectly well and alive. One had to peer very closely to see the fading bruises on his skin. He did not seem like a man who had looked death in the eye and escaped alive, or perhaps even better. There was an air of maturity about him that had not been there before.

Katherine rose slowly. The bannermen observed the two of them, the eagle and the wolf, as they came towards their inevitable clash. Shouldn't Katherine Stark have actually made sure that her husband really was dead before attempting to take the north?

Wait. She had been there at the murder or, rather, the attempted murder. She had been smeared in her husband's blood and screaming and crying and naked. She should have known whether he was alive or not and she would also have known which body had been his! Bolton had to use all his control to manage his surprise. Katherine and Robb Stark had planned everything. Everything Katherine had ever done, she had done it to preserve her husband's power so she could hand it back to him when he re-emerged after his enemies were dead.

Katherine's reaction upon seeing Robb Stark secured this notion. She walked down to him and kissed him soundly on the lips and he returned the kiss before taking her arm and then walking back up to the throne. Katherine took up her usual seat at his side and he sat down as if he were a king.

"Some of you may be wondering why I would deceive the world so," said Robb. "And to them, I answer, see the results. The Umbers showed their true quality, as did you all and, for that, I thank and commend you." He looked over each of them with his piercing eyes, not resembling his father very much at all at the moment. Katherine smiled benevolently. Bolton dipped a little unseen nod at the little lady bard. Well played, Katherine Stark; well played indeed. Would that she were a man. He could have followed a man like that to victory. Alas, she was completely committed to Robb Stark. Well played, Lord Stark.

"Now, onto more pressing business," said Robb Stark. "Stannis approaches the gates of King's Landing and when the storm hits, we must be ready for it."

Arya gripped the arms of her chair and tried very hard not to say something very rude about Daemon Lannister. How dared he propose to Katherine? Robb wasn't even cold in his grave yet! She would kill him too, she vowed. He had taken away her chance to kill the Umbers, except stupid Harald. Maybe Katherine would let her practise on Harald.

"You mourn Lord Stark, as we all do. But the north is in a precarious position, my lady. With Lord Stark's death and the disappearance of his brothers, it is holding together by a thread," Lord Bolton was saying. His pale eyes made her…uneasy. They looked dead. Deader than a vampire.

"His sister is here and here I am," said Katherine. She placed a hand on her flat stomach where there was no baby and never would be. How long would she be able to continue lying to them all? As soon as they found out Robb had no heir, what would they do? They needed to find Jon. He would be able to take care of everything. She would not, not even for the slightest moment, believe that Jon had betrayed Robb. He would never do that, not Jon. It was all just pretend so he could work for Robb and Katherine inside the Lannister camp.

"I understand, my lady, but the men here are not like those in the south. They will not bow to women. They are not as reasonable. They need a man to lead them," said Lord Bolton. Perhaps, next, he would say that he should lead them. Roose Bolton did not notice the door opening behind him.
Arya’s mouth fell open and she almost leapt out of her seat, except her limbs seemed to have lost the ability to move at all.

"Then it is a good thing, is it not, that I am here, Lord Bolton?" said Robb. He did not look dead. Had it happened? Had Katherine turned him into a vampire already? Last she knew, Robb didn’t know anything about vampires. He strode in, dressed in plain black clothes, but he had never seemed more handsome than he did, now. For the first time, Arya could believe that he could be king. He looked like one, even if he didn’t have a crown or any gold about him. He was a king of the night.

She was so shocked that she didn’t hear what he said next—it wasn’t important anyway. Something about proving the men’s loyalty, no doubt said to explain everything to the confused bannermen who were both overjoyed and outraged. They talked a bit about Stannis. Normally, Arya would have been very interested in any talk of battles and fighting, but she was too busy trying to think. Robb was alive. Katherine must have known. But the body, the blood…well, vampires could do a lot, she supposed and with a vampire sleeping in the same bed as him, there was no way in the seven hells three men could have killed Robb, now that she thought about it. Not unless Katherine had wanted him to die.

Which everyone had thought that that was exactly what she had wanted and that was why they had been proposing and talking about the future and all that!

Eventually, Robb dismissed his bannermen. That was when all animation returned to her. She flew out of her seat and at her brother before he could even say anything. She hugged him fiercely and let herself cry a little bit. Crying was usually silly but even Damon wouldn’t tell her not to cry in this situation. "You horrible, horrible, horrible person!" she sobbed as she pummelled him with her fists.

"Ow, Arya!" he protested. "You're not as weak as you think." Why, the little…! He pried her off him. "Does this mean you actually love me?"

"I'm not talking to you!" she said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because of this," said Robb. "It looked very real when you cried for me."

"It was real, you…you…you…!" She paused and took a deep breath after failing to come up with a good name to call him. "I won't cry for you again."

"I don't mean to give you a reason to, little sister," said Robb. He ruffled her hair. She scowled at him and smoothed it back down.

"You need to tell Mother," she said. "I'm not telling her. You're in trouble, Robb."

"We'll see," said Robb. "Come on. Lead the way, Arya. You can be my herald today."

"Can I be your squire since your last good one went away and your current one isn't very good?"

"We'll see, Arya," said Robb in that infuriatingly calm, superior way of adults that usually meant "no". It wasn’t as if he was that much older and if he wanted to say "no" then he should just say it. She looked to Katherine. Her good-sister shook her head slightly and smiled, indicating that they should leave it for now.

For now.
The wolves on the cloak glared mockingly at her. Robb would never wear it, this cloak that she had made for him. Catelyn stroked the fabric. He would have been so handsome in it. Her eyes were dry for she had run out of tears. She wasn't really seeing the dark stone chamber around her. She saw Robb as she first remembered seeing him, as a squalling, red-faced, hairless babe covered in fluid and in her blood when he had first emerged into the world. Even then, he had been insistent and demanding.

She saw him taking his first steps, determinedly climbing on top of his first pony without even waiting for his father to lift him up onto it, fighting with that traitorous bastard with a wooden sword, growing into a gangly-limbed boy who climbed trees and re-enacting the conquest of Aegon with his sister's dolls, including setting them on fire whenever the dragons had come into the game.

That boy had grown into a handsome, determined, noble young man. A young man who had been ensnared by a temptress. Now he lay cold in the ground. How could a mother bear to feel that?

She continued to stroke the cloak. "Oh, Robb," she whispered. "Robb."

They would pay for what they had done. That bastard, Katherine, all of them. She would bring them down, tear them limb from limb.

She did not turn around when she heard the door open. On the little round table in her room, her meal sat cold and untouched. The gruel had congealed into an unappetizing mess and the meat was caked with white fat. She had, however, drunken the wine. She was so cold. The wine had helped to warm her up a little.

"Mother!" Arya called to her. She did not have the strength to face her, her grieving daughter. Deep down, she knew she needed to be there for her, but she just couldn't bring herself to face reality. A future without Robb, of knowing that he had died just strides from this very chamber, butchered. "Mother, it's Robb! Robb's…"

She felt someone putting a warm fur cloak around her shoulders. The fur was soft and fine and it smelled like…

"Mother," he said.

It couldn't be. She was dreaming. She slowly turned around and looked up. Here he was, standing tall and beautiful as he had always been, his curls almost tamed, his beard neatly trimmed, and looking very well indeed. She slowly reached out with both hands to touch his face, at the same time not really daring to because she was afraid he would dissipate like the mist when she did.

But her fingers did make contact with his warm skin. She cupped his face in her hands, not saying anything. Her Robb, her son, he was…

She slapped him. Her palm struck his face with a loud crack, making his head whip to one side. He turned those cold blue eyes upon her. "Do not do that again," he said softly. That was not the request of a son but the command of a king.

"Robb," said Catelyn. Her voice broke in mid-sob. She threw her arms around him just so she could feel his solid presence. She didn't care that he was angry at her. Perhaps he even hated her. But she didn't care. He was safe. He was alive. She loved him. That was enough.

Slowly, his arms came up around her. He kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry I had to do this to all of you," he said.
"Is that an apology?" asked Arya.

"Not really," said Robb. "It is more a force of habit."

Catelyn didn't care if he was actually sorry or not. She did not know if she had felt this much joy or elation ever in her life. She was beyond words. Even though he had done what he had done, he had to have had his reasons that he was probably not willing to share with them right now.

Robb released Catelyn and pulled Katherine close to him. The two of them shared secretive smiles. For the first time, Catelyn realized how wonderful they looked together. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing. Marriage for love was a strange thing in Westeros. It happened once in a century, if that. Her own marriage had been filled with respect and friendship, but not passion in the same way as Robb and Katherine. Perhaps she ought to stop judging her new good-daughter and simply appreciate how happy Robb was with her.

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West Bank of Blackwater Rush, Daemon Lannister's Camp

Daemon screwed up Katherine's letter and squeezed it as he would her neck if he ever got his hands on it. Damon would have offered to help him if he had thought that it would work. Actually, right now, he wanted to do that to Jon's neck but he had to remind himself, constantly, that not only would it not get Elena back, he would also lose Robb as a friend. Somehow, he cared about that.

"Katherine. Stark," hissed Daemon. His face, which had already been pale in the first place, drained entirely of blood. He threw the letter with as much force as he could muster. Physics, air resistance and friction conspired to minimize the impact of such a gesture.

"She's a bitch," Damon commiserated.

"She's made a fool out of me," said Daemon. "Not once, not twice, but three times. I've become her chosen weapon. She wielded me like a sword." He turned on Damon. "Did you suspect?"

"Not in the slightest," said Damon. "The Katherine I knew never cared for anyone but herself." Daemon narrowed his eyes but there was no proof against Damon. The vampire knew he was standing on precarious ground. The young Lannister was no idiot and anyone could see the pattern in Katherine's plans. If the Starks needed to get rid of anyone, they automatically turned to Daemon Lannister.

Daemon picked up the letter again, which had only fallen a few feet away from him, and smoothed it out. "What am I going to tell Lord Tywin, Damon?" Or it could have been "Daemon". Their names sounded exactly the same. Even when Daemon was talking to himself, he could still be talking to Damon. The vampire did not answer. He didn't have a clue what one should tell Tywin Lannister regarding this latest bout of Katherining. Perhaps it would be best to say nothing, for he would find out sooner rather than later. Robb had not exactly been subtle about his re-emergence.

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Tywin Lannister's Camp, 200 miles north-west of King's Landing

Daemon had been recalled. Tywin Lannister had mentioned nothing of his falling for Katherine's tricks time and time again and, in fact, had almost praised him in front of everyone and given him more men to command. Even Damon had been commended. Jon had not, although his presence had been noted. Elena, thankfully, slipped right under the Tywin Lannister radar. Doubly thankfully, they were not required to go to King's Landing where a) Cersei hated Damon and b) Tyrion Lannister would be able to point out that Jon Snow's story was absolute bullshit and he and
Robb did not have a falling out over Katherine at all. It was possible that such subtleties might have slipped by Jaime Lannister unnoticed and Cersei probably wouldn't even have deigned to spare Jon even one glance in Winterfell. But Tyrion was clever.

One did not need to mention Stefan, who was now some big shot in King's Landing helping to defend it against Stannis since, of course, neither of Tywin's sons were up to the job. Jaime Lannister looked good on the battlefield, but that was all he was good for. And Tyrion? Well, if they'd been playing pure politics with no fighting involved, Damon would be afraid of him. However, since there was to be a show of brute strength, a dwarf with all brains and no brawn didn't stand a chance.

"Robb Stark is holding down the fort at Harrenhal," said Kevan Lannister.

"He is waiting for the perfect opportunity. As soon as we turn our backs, he will march King's Landing from the north," said Tywin, moving a wolf figurine on the map. "Combined with Stannis' forces, there will be almost two hundred thousand men marching on the city. We will be caught in a pincer and crushed."

"King's Landing will hold for as long as we need it to hold," said Daemon. "The city will hold until we get there. Lord Tywin, this is an opportunity we cannot waste. We could amass our forces and crush Robb Stark."

"How do you propose we do that when he holes himself up in his citadel?" asked Tywin.

"We lure him out. We pretend to march to King's landing. May I?" Daemon reached over to Tywin's map and placed a lion between King's Landing and the wolf in Harrenhal.

"How can we be certain that he will come?" asked Kevan.

"He is a boy who has never lost a battle. If we present him with the chance to win a great victory, he will not be able to resist," said Tywin. "Send ravens to King's Landing to inform Jaime and Tyrion that we are returning immediately. I expect Robb Stark's spies will learn of the news quickly enough."

"But we will be waiting for him here," said Kevan. "Perhaps the young wolf will finally realize that lions rule the world."

**Next chapter:** Robb invites Tywin to a play date. Daemon sees an opportunity…but is it really? Jon discovers that he is a really bad liar and if he's to live, he needs to improve. Fast.
Two Truths and a Lie

Chapter Summary

Robb gets inspiration in the bedroom. Jon and Damon meet an old friend. Jon is getting confused with his own lies (truths?) and learns that no plan survives the first contact with the enemy. Damon proves that he is Westeros' answer to Achilles (in his own mind only).

Harrenhal

"So you obviously have no intention of engaging with the Lannisters," said Katherine. "But pray tell, how do we stop Tywin Lannister from figuring that out, my love?" She kneaded his shoulders, her fingers finding just the right spots. "I don't suppose we could provoke him into doing anything rash? Like...storming Harrenhal, perhaps?"

"Unfortunately, this is Tywin, not Jaime. I think you may have confused the two, my lady wife," said Robb with a smile. He liked this 'mah sahshe' business. It felt good, and it usually led to something better. "I don't think we can fool him for long. Although, perhaps we may be able to stall him." Her hands worked their way down his back. She knew his body as well as he knew it. Wherever her hands touched, her lips soon followed. She slipped off his shirt so gently he didn't even notice it leaving his body. He reached back to grab her head and entangle his fingers in her hair. He wanted to be connected to her, fully and absolutely. He wanted to be in her, to be one with her.

"Your dress is getting in the way," said Robb.

"Then get rid of it, my lord," she whispered.

"Robb," he gasped.

"I always knew you loved yourself."

"I mean you should call me Robb."

He felt himself harden. Oh, he wanted her there and then! But she would not let him take her. Her hands and lips wandered ever so close, but never reached the one place he wanted her to touch the most.

He opened his eyes and sat up abruptly. "This is brilliant," he said. He scrambled off his bed and went over to his map. Katherine sat up too. She pouted at him.

"Why do I get the feeling that you weren't meaning me?" she asked.

"I can't believe I hadn't thought of this before!" he said, more to himself than anything else. "You're going to love this, Katherine."

"I would love it more if you came back to bed, where you belong."

He waved her over, eager to show her his new idea. "If we march here, out the front of Harrenhal,
towards King's Landing, Tywin would think we are going to meet him, yes? No doubt he will be waiting to surprise us with a welcoming committee. But what if we were cruel and merely teased him, getting ever so close but never quite reaching the place where he wants us?"

"Is this revenge?" asked Katherine.

"Listen, listen. We can take a turn here, and our troops will march back into Harrenhal through the back door, and come out the front again. One, Tywin Lannister will be expecting an army that's never going to meet him, thus delaying him from riding to Joffrey's rescue. And two, everyone will think we have an army of millions."

"Only if they never follow the head of the column," said Katherine. "And an army of millions would look very suspicious if yesterday, there were only ten thousand."

"Twenty, and you know how spies are," said Robb. "They're lazy. They only watch the gates, and the front gates at that and whenever they see something they don't want to see, they panic."

"I don't do that."

"But that's because you were a bard, not a spy. Or were you?"

"Not officially, no."

He smiled and pulled her towards him for a kiss. She tried to push him down onto his bed, but he wasn't having any of it. He flipped her over so she was trapped beneath him.

"You are a bad boy, Robb Stark," whispered Katherine.

"You're not a good girl yourself, Katherine Stark," Robb murmured into her ear. He kissed her on the sensitive spot just beneath her ear on the side of her neck. She gasped and arched her back, rubbing her hips against his.

"Do you want me to conquer you, my love?" he asked.

"I am already conquered," she said. He smiled and bent down to suckle on her breasts. They were so beautiful and perfect. She raked her fingernails down his back. Pain made the pleasure even more acute. He was aware of every nerve in his body, and possibly even in her body. He didn't know where Robb Stark ended and Katherine Stark began.

She rolled him over. "I'm not an honest woman, Robb," she said with a grin. "Perhaps I only said what you wanted to hear."

"Then I shall have to make an honest woman out of you," he replied. The game was on. He was willing to conquer her again, and again, and again, forever. And who knew? Perhaps he was ready to be conquered too.

Castle Deepwatch, 100 miles northwest of Harrenhal

Lord Tywin had given Daemon orders to attack the northerners; attack the northerners, but leave Stark's personal holdings alone. That was the order and it did severely limit Daemon's choices. But perhaps he was simply being overly cautious. After all, he did not know the exact situation and it was always better to err on the side of caution. He was not here to see the opportunities at hand.

The fortress seemed unguarded. In fact, Daemon knew it to be mostly unguarded, save by a
garrison of five hundred. Thank you Damon Salvatore. The castle itself wasn't much of a prize, as it was a small old thing, with walls that looked to be mouldering. Of course, knowing Robb Stark, he would never have left his fortresses unrepaid. He didn't claim Brandon the Builder as an ancestor for nothing. He was meticulous about such things.

The most valuable thing about this little castle was its position deep behind Stark lines. If he took it, he would divide the unyielding frontline forces of the north and make in-roads, thus forcing Robb Stark into a defensive position. Daemon had been itching to win more than just skirmishes against the Starks, and he had been used two too many times.

He wanted to win *real* victories and actually take something from the Starks. He wanted to prove, both to himself and to Lord Tywin, that he was much better and much more deserving than Golden Boy Jaime, who achieved his position through no merit of his own other than being the firstborn son of Tywin Lannister.

Daemon circled the fortress from a distance with three hundred of his men. He liked surveying things himself before attacking rather than just relying on scouts. No one knew him, so he was in less danger than important people like Lord Tywin. He brought Damon Salvatore with him. Both Salvatores made for excellent scouts, even if Damon's personality made him unfit for command. But, he didn't need another commander when he had himself.

He sent Damon out to ask the local villagers to see what they knew about the fortress. The smallfolk were ambivalent about who was king. It wasn't something Joffrey would have liked to hear, but it was the truth. All they cared about was having a roof over their heads and food in their bellies and barns come winter. Katherine and Robb Stark had been too busy fighting the war to promise them the world, so they were free for bribery.

Presently, Damon came back with a woodcutter who was both terrified and eager for the reward.

"This man delivers wood to the garrison within the fortress," said Salvatore. "He tells me the southern, northern, and eastern gates are well fortified and manned."

"But the west gate, at the back, that's got a mountain out front," piped up the woodcutter. He still wore a load of faggots on his back. At that moment, he let the bundle fall to the ground so he was in a better position to point out the mountain pass. "They think no one can get to it. It's blocked. But me, I knows a way. It's a little path, only wide 'nough for two men to walk through at the same time side by side. But if you can get through it, then you'll arrive at the gate and it's unguarded."

He looked at Daemon expectantly.

"I don't believe you," said Daemon.

"Why do I bother?" muttered Damon.

Daemon ignored him. "Tell me the truth, old man," he said. The woodcutter couldn't have been that old but his back was bent from years of work. But, in truth, he couldn't be much older than Jaime.

"Please, y'grace, I'm tellin' the truth!"

"I'm not 'your Grace'," said Daemon. "You may call me 'my lord'."

"Yes, your lord." There was a reason why smallfolk were at the very bottom to be trod on by everyone else.

"So, the truth, good man," said Daemon.
"There are a few guards, but there ain't many," said the woodcutter. "An' they're mostly sleepin' anyway."

"So you did lie to me," said Daemon.

"It might as well not be guarded!" said the woodcutter in abject terror. "Please, m'grace! I'm only a simple man. I can't count that well."

"Is that so?" asked Daemon. He tossed the man two coins. "I think that's three." Perhaps, if one's name was Jaime, although Jaime could do his arithmetic better than that.

"But that's just…" began the woodcutter. He looked down at the two coins and then back up at Daemon, wondering whether it's better to simply take the payment and run or stay for more. Avarice won out at the end. "That's just two."

"So you can count," said Daemon. "That is another lie."

"I can count up to me fingers an' toes!" said the woodcutter.

"So there are, presumably, more than twenty men guarding the west gate," said Daemon. "Another lie. Damon, this man seems incapable of telling the truth."

"Why are you talkin' to yourself, m'lord?" asked the confused woodcutter.

Daemon ignored him. "Ser Salvatore, this man cannot seem to tell the truth. Perhaps you should take away one of his…"

"No, no, please!" begged the man.

"… coins," finished Daemon.

The woodcutter shut up.

Daemon finally turned back to him again after Damon Salvatore relieved the man of one of the coppers. "Those coins were but a taste of what is to come," he said. He took out a gold dragon. The man's eyes widened to the same size as the coin. "If you lead us through this path, you will be showered with riches beyond your imagination." The woodcutter looked uncertain. He didn't want to be present when the Stark men came out, as they surely would once they heard of the castle's capitulation. They would probably have him hung, drawn, and quartered if they heard that he'd been the one who'd led the Lannisters to the back door. Of course, they could only do that if they were still alive by then.

Daemon turned to Damon. "What do you think of this mountain path?"

"It sounds legit–legitimate," said Damon. "This is the backdoor to the Riverlands. Robb Stark fields most of his men and supplies from there."

"If we make inroads into the Riverlands, it would be a huge blow to the Starks," remarked Jon Snow. Pretty Elena said nothing. She probably didn't understand much about this, but she was scowling, probably about the way they were tormenting the woodcutter. Why did she care?

"Then it is settled," said Daemon. "We will go by the mountain path."

A man stumbled in front of her. Elena glanced about on either side, where the cliffs rose high, leaving only a line of grey sky visible. Beneath their feet, a narrow, shallow brook ran, soaking the
boots of the marching men. Not everyone was as fortunate as Elena to have a horse. Jon looked back at her, his eyes searching her face and his expression asking if she was all right. She gave him a small smile and nodded. She could deal with it. She was a vampire. True, she hadn't had much blood lately as the Lannisters were too vigilant. If too many people went missing, they would begin to grow suspicious. Animal blood had made her almost want to throw up, and if Damon hadn't insisted on it, she wouldn't have even swallowed it in the first place. It tasted like drinking lukewarm sick. That was how bad it was. How could Stefan stand it? And Caroline too. Caroline had been a most picky blood-drinker back at home. But perhaps Westeros had changed them all.

But, despite the lack of fresh human blood in her system, she was fine. It was those poor marching soldiers who probably needed someone to care about them. They were tired and wondering whether they would ever reach the fortress or whether the woodcutter was just having them on. None of them dared to grumble. To do so would bring about the wrath of Daemon Lannister, who fancied himself the next Tywin, but with more charm.

The march took one whole day, but they finally glimpsed a corner of the fortress at last. Up close, it didn't look so small. It was blocky in shape, with little elegance and grace to it, but it was highly functional.

Daemon sent Damon out to scout. The latter returned with entirely expected information. The 'unguarded' gate was manned by a few sentries and was made of a wood that had grown dark with age.

"It seems that our guide is not under Robb Stark's employ," remarked Daemon. "And now, we see if Stark men have a sense of self-preservation."

Elena saw Jon's knuckles turn white as he tightened his grip on his reins at the thought of fighting his own people. She wanted to reach out to hold his hand and remind him that he needed to relax or else their cover would be blown. However, she couldn't or else she would blow another cover. All these lies! They were going to come back and bite them in the arse one day.

"You're a northerner, Jon Snow," continued Daemon. "How do you think your people will react?"

"Not all northerners are made alike," said Jon.

"Indeed, they are not," said Daemon. "But still, give us your best guess."

"They'll fight, at first," said Jon after a long thought.

"Against such odds?" said Daemon, half to himself and half to Jon. "The tale of the heroic Starks fighting to the last man; no, that simply would not do."

He turned to Jon. "Lord Stark," he said. At first, Jon looked about, presumably for his brother, of whom he always thought of as Lord Stark. Then he frowned at Daemon when he realized that it had been him that Daemon had called Lord Stark. "How good do you think you are at deceiving your fellow countrymen?"

If he was half as good at that as he was at deceiving Lannisters, then everything should go quite smoothly.

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How could he betray his own people? More importantly, how could he betray Robb? Jon had never been one of those men who believed in northerners for the north and to the hells with everybody else. Where one happened to be born and to whom one was born was simply by chance. He'd learned long ago –on the Wall, actually– not to value men based on where they were from.
But these weren't just northerners; these were his brother's people and this was his brother's fortress. He glanced at Damon, hoping for some ideas on that front, or maybe even just a reason to refuse without garnering Daemon Lannister's suspicion. The vampire furrowed his brow ever so slightly. No, there was no other way. He hoped Robb would understand. In the end, they were all doing this for him, although only the gods knew why Katherine needed all of them to be here.

"They won't know me," began Jon slowly. "But they will probably take me at my word. I look northern. I could convince them to search the surrounding countryside, and while they are gone, you could move in and take the fortress more easily. I only wonder if any one of them might have heard about what happened between myself and Stark over..." He trailed off and looked into the distance.

Of course they wouldn't have, because nothing had happened, but Daemon didn't know that. The other man took his silence and reticence to say Katherine's name as a sign of sentimentality and regret over what had, allegedly, happened. As if Robb Stark and Jon Snow would ruin their brotherly bonds over a woman. He glanced at Elena. Actually, it wouldn't be so hard to believe. He would do anything for Elena, and the gods help any man who tried to get in between them. Although, if that was what Elena wanted...

He forced himself to think back to the matter at hand instead of wondering whether Elena still had feelings for Damon, and for Stefan, for that matter. The two Salvatores most definitely had not given up on her, even if Stefan was a little less obvious about it.

"Would they know?" asked Daemon.

"Probably not," said Jon. "It was kept quite secret, of that I can assure you." He gave a bitter laugh. Oh, he knew all about bitter laughter. "As far as anyone knows, I had never met Katherine Stark before I left and I went to the Wall because I wanted to make something of myself."

"Well, luring them out is all very well," said Daemon. "But I was thinking that, if they don't know about your falling-out with Robb Stark, then they would actually simply let you, and a small number of men, inside."

"The commander of the garrison is Ser Hagan Sigimund, technically the only other knight in Stark employ," said Damon. "Well, actually the only knight in Stark employ now."

Jon stilled. Hagan Sigimund. Oh, they all knew him, all right. He was Damon's absolute favourite person, if one were being sarcastic. Sigimund would know all about Jon Snow, although he didn't know about Jon's 'affair' with Katherine. This whole scheme was a lie masked by the truth, which was masked by another lie. It was getting confusing now. Two truths and a lie.

"Does this Ser Hagan Sigimund know you?" asked Daemon.

"Oh yes," said Damon, rolling his eyes. "He was my commander for a time."

"Damon challenged his ability to read," said Jon.

"And it turned out he couldn't," said Damon.

"And then you humiliated him in the practise yards."

"He was just bad at it."

"Then he made you stand outside in the cold and snow for hours."
"I liked building that snow sculpture of Sansa."

Thinking back to those days made Jon laugh. Those had been fun days, when life had been simple and easy to understand. Now it was convoluted and further confused by the existence of the immortal undead. Not that he would have it any other way; he couldn't imagine life without a certain few vampires, especially a certain one, in it.

Daemon thought about it for a while. "I suppose Sigimund would welcome his lord's brother without a second thought if said brother came bringing a valuable prisoner. Say... a traitor that he has hated all along?"

"'Kwa'?" said Damon before he remembered that no one spoke whatever language it was that he also spoke. Jon only spoke the common tongue, and he was quite sure that Daemon wasn't much different in that respect. "I mean, what?"

"It's simple," said Daemon. "You'll be the prisoner. Think...Katherine Stark at Harrenhal. That was how she got in and opened the gates, wasn't it, by deliberately letting the Mountain take her prisoner? You'll go in this time as the prisoner and help Jon Stark take back what should have been his all along. Let's see how Robb Stark likes a taste of his own medicine." He turned to Elena and bowed in his saddle. "Lady Elena, you will stay out here, with me, where it is safe."

It sounded like a very chivalrous command, keeping the lady back where there was safety, but Jon knew better; Elena was a hostage for his compliance. If he so much as showed any chance of betraying Daemon, then he'd be condemning the woman he loved to death. Neither he nor Damon were willing to risk that.

Robb could afford to lose this little castle for a while. Surely he would understand that this was a price he needed to pay if he wanted to embed his brother and his friend in enemy ranks. If he really wanted it back, they could get it back for him at a later date.

"Then it's settled," said Jon. "Bring Ser Salvatore some irons. I have a prisoner to deliver."

"I don't suppose it could be the other way around?" said Damon.

Yes, that would be very convincing, if they were playing at taking Jon hostage. A traitor with Robb Stark's brother as a prisoner; yes, that would most definitely convince Sigimund to open the gates. Jon rolled his eyes. "Hold out your wrists, Damon," he said. "We have a fortress to take."

"I'm keeping the key," said Damon.

The things he did for Robb. And for Elena, Damon supposed. Damn Daemon, for keeping her hostage! And, as much as he might want to snap Jon's neck or do other things to the boy to get him out of his way, he knew that to let harm come to his currently least-favourite Stark brother would be to cause her pain. That was the last thing he wanted to do, to hurt Elena. She couldn't lose any more people in her life.

The chains and shackles clanked as he 'stumbled' along behind Jon's horse. His wrists had been tied to a rope, which had then been attached to Jon's pommel like a leash. They'd smeared dirt on his face to make him look more dishevelled, although Jon had refused to attempt to defeat him in combat first. That had been a wise choice. Even Damon Salvatore had lines that he would not cross. If they had tried to force him to pretend to lose to Jon Fucking Snow, there was no knowing what he would have done.

Banners of grey snarling wolves waved from the top of the grey stone battlements. What was the
Stark obsession with greyscale, anyway? If they had lived anywhere near modern civilization, they would probably be the ones who preferred black and white television to colour because it was more fantastical or detail orientated or whatever argument it was that those sticklers for black and white in the 1950s and 1960s had put forward.

Jon led a company of two hundred men. It wasn't a large company, but against five hundred unsuspecting men led by Hagan Sigimund, it was a substantial force. Of course, they never intended to confront Sigimund's men head-on. That would be stupid. They would pull a Trojan Horse—or a Katherine Stark, as they now called it in Westeros—and open the gates in the dead of the night. Jon planned to say that his men were Lannister soldiers who had become disillusioned with the lion's cause and wished to join the Stark one.

"Open the gates!" Jon called up. His voice echoed amongst the mountains as the sky gradually grew dimmer. Damon missed seeing proper sunsets where one could actually see the sun slipping away. In the north, light simply faded away and that was when you realized that it was night time already. "I am Jon Snow and I have a prisoner my brother Lord Stark would be most eager to see, but the hour grows late and I would seek shelter here before I continue on my journey to Harrenhal."

The men on top of the battlements turned to one another. Their arrows still pointed downwards, most of them towards Jon.

"How do we know you are speaking the truth, my lord, begging your pardon?" called down one of the soldiers.

"Ser Sigimund will know me," said Jon. "Tell him to come here. I would speak with him."

"You might want to go lighter on the 'would', buddy," Damon whispered. "You sound like you're trying too hard."

"Well, how should I speak, buddy?" Jon hissed back from the corner of his mouth. "This is how lords talk."

"This isn't how you talk. It's suspicious. Ease up on it."

Jon almost growled like his wolf. Damon wondered where his wolf was. Ghost was usually somewhere nearby if Jon was around, but he hadn't even seen the animal, although he had seen the remains of kills around Daemon's camp.

Presently, Hagan Sigimund came onto the wall. The pompous ass was as much a pompous ass as ever, if not more so now that he was the commander of an actual garrison that was looking after an actual castle of some importance. "Lord Jon," he called down. "If it isn't the man who has betrayed the north."

"If I truly had, I would not be standing here, alive," said Jon. "I'm sure you have heard of my meeting with Lady Katherine, Ser Hagan."

"Oh, indeed," said Sigimund. "I have heard of what happened with the Umbers. Turns out, you were tricked."

"Was I?" asked Jon. "Or, perhaps, ..." He let his voice trail off. People could come to their own conclusions. "My brother has very kindly offered me a place in his court."

"Very strange, especially after what has happened between you and Lord Stark," said Sigimund.
"Blood is more important than any woman. Robb and I, we were never enemies to begin with."
Ooh, risky. What if Daemon heard and considered that possibility? These lies could not last very much longer. They were layering on top of one another and creating more and more holes. Sooner or later, the tower would collapse like a Jenga tower reaching its limit. Damon furiously considered a way in which they could escape. For now, they would have to rely on Elena to convince Daemon that they were not Robb's friends. As strange as it was, she was their greatest safeguard if they had one in this. Her seemingly volatile relationship with Jon would convince Daemon that, perhaps, there was some credence to the story that Katherine had played both Stark brothers, considering how Elena was playing both him and Jon right now.

"Open the gates, Ser Hagan," continued Jon. "It is difficult to talk this way."

"My men tell me you have caught a valuable prisoner," said Sigimund.

"That I have. I believe you know him. Damon Salvatore?" Jon yanked on the rope suddenly, making Damon actually stumble. The vampire caught himself in time and managed not to rip Jon's horse apart and Jon along with it.

The pompous ass' barking laughter rang out. The mountains repeated it back and it continued and continued until the sound waves finally escaped into oblivion. Damon gritted his teeth. He would have to suffer Sigimund's conceit for a few more hours, and then it would be payback for all the times the man had tried to humiliate him. "Damon Salvatore? Now, that is a man I would like to meet again, and in chains too! Open the gates for Lord Jon!"

Well, at least it did the trick. The gate opened with a groan and then a crack when it reached its limits. Jon and his men rode in, still dragging Damon behind them. Sigimund came down from the keep himself to greet them, although he was much more interested in gawking and gloating at Damon. "Well, well, look at you, Salvatore," he sneered. "Not so proud now, are you? Where's your scathing wit, eh? What? Cat got your tongue?"

Damon simply glared at him. "Fuck you, Sigimund."

"I bet you wish you could," said the man. He smoothed back his thinning hair and smirked. "I wish I could be there when Lord Stark takes your head."

"The prisoner needs to be housed in a safe place for the night," said Jon. "He is prone to escaping."

"I have just the thing, my lord," said Sigimund. What in the world was Jon doing? Damon was supposed to help him take this fortress, not sit around rotting in a dungeon while Jon played at being a traitor-war hero! Why should he get to have all the fun? It wasn't fair! But he couldn't say that. So he simply glared at Jon. The boy bit his lip as if to stop himself from laughing. Oh, he was so going to get back at Snow for this! Lannisters weren't the only ones who paid their debts.

The gates closed behind them. Sigimund suddenly waved to his men. Arrows and spears were pointed in their direction.

"Oh, come on," said Damon. "I know you hate me, but don't you think that's overkill?" What was it that Katherine and Stefan had said about his mouth? Never mind. It was a pretty mouth and it was good at what it did.

"What is this?" asked Jon. He managed a look of complete and utter indignant surprise. As far as acting went, he wasn't bad. His plans, however, could use some Katherinization.

"Do you really think I would have believed that bullshit of a story?" asked Sigimund.
"It is the truth."

"I will let Lord Stark decide that," said Sigimund. He turned to his men. "Take them."

There were too many northerners and not enough Lannister men. It was something that Damon had never thought he'd think, but it was true. Jon's men tried to fight back, but they were quickly overwhelmed.

"Stop!" said Jon. They stopped and turned to look at him. The north men's spears, however, remained pointed at them. He unsheathed his sword and slowly laid it down on the ground. "You want Damon and me," he said to Sigimund.

"And the rest are Lannister men," said Sigimund. "I am not going to let them go."

They were wrestled down through a series of narrow stone corridors. Damon memorized every turn and every mark. In this corner, near the floor, someone had etched a crude picture of male genitalia – juveniles everywhere had the same sense of humour. One torch was placed slightly lower than the others, creating a wonky effect.

Jon was very like his father, an excellent prisoner. But he did keep on giving Damon what he probably thought were meaningful looks. He just looked like his usual broody self, to be quite honest, although Damon could guess what he wanted. Being the only vampire in the group made him very vital.

The cells were damp and smelled of mildew. The straw looked like it had kept the company of the last prisoner and the prisoner before that. Sigimund slammed the doors on them. The bars on the doors made narrow yellow rectangles on the dirty straw. But there were several things to be happy about. One, the bars were wide enough for a man's arm to reach through, so that meant Damon was very capable of reaching out to fiddle with the locks. Secondly, they had not thought it necessary to chain the vampire up.

Damon waited until Sigimund was gone before he started reaching out between the bars, but not for the locks. No need to fiddle with locks when one could fiddle with people. Not in that way.

"Anyone still alive out there?" he said to the broad-shouldered guard with so much hair that the beard beneath his chin could have been quite a comfortable nest for a family of birds. "Yoohoo!" Nope, nobody alive out there. "Ohhh, I don't feel so well." At first, the man ignored him. Damon continued to moan pathetically, channelling…Jeremy when he didn't want to go to school.

At last, the guard could no longer stand the noise. "Shut up, traitor!" he snarled as he stalked over to Damon's cell.

"I need to see a maester," said Damon as he lay on the straw. It felt horrible beneath his cheek. "It hurts…" He faked a cough and bit the inside of his cheek so he could spit out blood. What a waste. He heard a cough from the other cell. Shut up, Jon.

"Hey," said the guard to his friends. "Come over here. Do you think he's actually dying?"

They gathered around to look at him moaning on the ground. Each fake cough wracked his body. He'd seen these symptoms before, about one hundred and sixty years ago, when he had been a boy and Stefan had been just about oblivious. He remembered his mother's bloodstained handkerchiefs and how he and his brother had been kept out of her room, how frail she had been.

He couldn't fake the frailness but everything else, he could do.

"It doesn't sound good," remarked another of them. "Perhaps we should take him to see the
"maester, just to be sure."

"Why bother?"

"And have Lord Stark's prisoner die on us?" asked the first one who had spoken. "You know he likes doing things personally. Besides, this bastard deserves more than to die peacefully in his sleep."

"It don't look peaceful to me," said the suspicious one.

"It's not violent enough for Lord and Lady Stark."

They opened the metal door. The hinges made no sound. If there was one thing Sigimund did well, it was not skimping on the utilities' upkeep. Robb should have made him a caretaker rather than the commander of a garrison, no matter how small. He let them drag him out, still feigning weakness and disease. None of them looked as if they wanted to be too close in case whatever it was that he had (mythomania more than tuberculosis, if he had to give a self-diagnosis here) was contagious.

He waited until they had hauled him around the corner, out of sight of everyone, including his own men. His hand snaked out to grab the dagger from one of the guards' belts.

"What the…" began the guard. His sentence finished in a bloody gurgle as Damon cut his throat. The others pounced upon him, but he was too quick for them and moved out of the way easily and, as he slipped between them, his blade flashed again, severing another windpipe. Blood splashed onto his mouth. He licked his lips. Delicious. They gaped at him as if he were a god and they were in his bad books. It never got old, how it made him feel when they realized he was no mere mortal.

No, no fangs. That would leave too much of a trace and he wasn't here to tempt fate. Well, he kind of was but not that kind of fate. No one would be pleased if he revealed the secret of vampires now.

He closed in on the rest of them, using his speed and strength to their best advantage. He ducked a sword swing and thrust upwards with his dagger, plunging it deep into a man's thigh and, at the same time, lashing out with his foot. He caught him under the chin. The force of the blow snapped his neck. Blood gushed out of his now-dead artery to stain the flagstones. Red liquid ran between them, forming a dark lattice beneath the halfmoon.

The vampire whirled around to take on the last man; ironically, he was the very first guard who had come to tell Damon to shut up.

"What are you?" he croaked, too frightened to scream. Damon smelled hot urine mingling with the blood.

"I'm the grumpkin under your bed," said Damon. Grumpkin meant supernatural creature, right? He sped forward and stopped right before him. "It's been nice." He plunged the dagger into the man's neck. Blood spurted out in time with his heartbeat from his severed jugular. Damon clamped his mouth over the wound and drank as much as he could in the three gushes that came out before the heart stopped. When it did, he gently set the man down and let the rest of the blood mingle with that of his compatriots.

The others were still none the wiser. He stripped one of the corpses and donned the ill-fitting northern armour. Northerners were squat and doughty, with broad shoulders and broad everything else. Ned's family obviously had some other blood in them because neither Ned nor Robb nor Jon were built like that. And Arya was just tiny. Damon, with his Italian genes, was tall and lithe;
graceful and beautiful like a Roman statue, he liked to think. Still, he would pass for a northerner for now, perhaps a boy who had not yet grown into his leathers.

He searched the guards' bodies until he found a set of keys, estimating that he had a window of about ten minutes until they discovered the bodies and raised the alarm. It was tempting to do it all by himself. For one, it would be easier and, secondly, he would have liked them all to wonder how he had done it. However, if he managed to open the gates and pull a Katherine all by himself, people might actually be able to start putting pieces together. Even if they didn't suspect him of being a vampire because that was too far beyond their comprehension, they would think he was something else. An assassin from Braavos, perhaps.

He made his way back to the dungeons in record time and unlocked the first cell. The northerners had crammed the Lannister men into them like commuters during New York's rush hour. The men poured out, bewildered and amazed, but absolutely elated. He passed by Jon's cell.

"Damon!" hissed Jon.

"You stay put," said Damon. He waggled a finger at Jon. "Me and the boys, we have work to do. You'll just get in the way."

"Damon!" repeated Jon, a little louder this time. Damon put a finger to his lips and smiled. This was just a little payback for stealing away Elena from him. Jon had known about his feelings for Elena and yet he had done it anyway. In Damon's book, that was not friend behaviour and the little bastard deserved to be punished for it, even if it only meant locking him up in a dungeon for a couple of hours. Besides, he was probably safer in here than out there. In a way, he was still looking out for Jon and Elena's interests by locking Jon up.

Jon obviously did not understand for he grabbed the bars of his door and shook them. The metal rattled.

"Ser Salvatore, I think you should let Lord Stark out. Otherwise, he is going to continue making that noise," said Wetherby. Why was he always on these missions? Maybe Daemon just hated him that much, or he was bored. One of the two.

Jon rattled the door again and glared. "All right, all right!" whispered Damon. "Are you trying to get us killed?" Jon said nothing. He was such a child. Damon unlocked him and the last of the men.

Between them, they did not have very many weapons. Damon had stripped his victims of their weapons and there were a few spares lying in the guardroom at the entrance of the dungeons, but still not enough to go around. Instead, he took chains and handed them out. They could do for emergency garrottes if one knew how to use them. There was no time to raid the armoury even if they knew where it was.

Damon and the few with weapons went first. They came up from behind the guards on the battlements and slit their throats quietly, with neither fanfare nor flourishes. Their bodies dropped and they convulsed on the ground as they drowned in their own blood. The unarmed men then came up and took their weapons. So it continued. The guards on the ground were oblivious to their companions' deaths. They stood like statues, bored out of their minds. There was absolutely no activity outside. Daemon had wisely kept out of sight but Damon knew he was watching.

A/N: Extra long chapter this week. Aren't we nice?
Next chapter: Elena and Daemon go on a date. Sansa daydreams about what she could do before she sees her first battle. Edmure thinks circles are overrated. Katherine wishes Bolton would leave her to eat dinner in peace. Jaime and Tyrion put on a monochrome fireworks show.
Elena gains a better understanding of Daemon Lannister. Sansa prepares for a siege. Edmure doesn't get circles. Bolton ruins Katherine's appetite. Stannis launches the attack.

Outside Deepwatch Castle, 100 miles northwest of Harrenhal

Elena kept on glancing at the fortress, or what she could see of it anyway. It was a dark splotch that almost melded in perfectly with the landscape, except for its unnatural square shape. The men had set up camp for the night, not that Daemon intended to stay out here for long. For one, it was unpleasant, and two, they hadn't come here simply for the camping trip. It was expected that Jon's signal would come sometime during the night. But it was early yet. The sun was just about to set, and the hours dragged on for Elena, who could only wonder what was going on. What if they didn't believe Jon and Damon and took them all prisoner? Would Lord Robb take kindly to the two of them attempting to take his fort? Would Katherine save them?

Or would they fall in battle?

The last thought was too terrible to contemplate. She shook her head to get it out, but it kept nagging her. This was war. People died. Jon was human.

What if he were no longer human?

But he hadn't asked her to turn him yet, and she wasn't going to bring it up unless he mentioned it first.

"Lady Elena," said one of the men. She had been so busy thinking that she hadn't noticed him standing at the mouth of her tent. From the looks of things, it seemed that he'd been there for a while. "Lord Daemon requests the pleasure of your company."

"I'll be right there," she said. She couldn't keep Daemon waiting. She had to keep him happy and relaxed so he'd trust Jon and Damon, but especially Jon. If the Lannisters suspected Jon of not really being on their side, they'd be really screwed. There would be no way to explain it, unlike with Lord Robb.

Daemon was inside his tent writing a letter, but he set down his quill when his guards announced Elena's arrival. He rose to greet her, giving her a brilliant smile. He really was a very handsome man, with golden hair, lightly tanned skin from spending time outdoors, bright intelligent green eyes like a cat's, high cheekbones, and strangely feminine lips that, nevertheless, suited his face very well. If she hadn't met Jon first... well, there was no knowing what could have happened upon her first meeting with Daemon Lannister.

"Come, my lady, take a stroll with me," he said. "There is something I wish to show you." He offered Elena his arm. His voice was soft and gentle, but firm. Elena took his proffered arm and allowed herself to be led outside. His guards followed at a distance.
"I have found that there is a harsh beauty about the north," he said as they walked out of the camp.

"It is very beautiful, at least on the outside, but it masks terrible truths, my lord," said Elena.

"As do we all," said Daemon. "Few beautiful things are simply good in this world, my lady. If it is too good to be true, then it probably is."

"You are a very cynical man, my lord," said Elena. "Can you not believe that there is goodness in this world?"

"Oh, I do believe it, but then, the world will end up destroying it," said Daemon. They walked on. Daemon led her up a zigzagging path up a steep slope until they reached a small flat area where they could simply stand and look out across the Riverlands to the east and the beginning of Lannister territories in the west. Mist pooled in the valleys and settled amongst the dark green forests which carpeted the slopes of the surrounding hills. High peaks peeked out from amongst low cloud. She saw the glint of the silver sea at Ironman's Bay in the distance, lit up by the faint setting sun, and also the thin filaments of silver rivers converging at Riverrun. It looked unreal from where she stood. This was what they were fighting for; this land and the power to rule over it, even though they were all subservient to winter.

"Do you know why I could trust that guide of ours?" Daemon suddenly asked her.

"Because he knew if he lied to you, you'd kill him," replied Elena after some thought.

"Well, I suppose there is always that, if it comes down to it, my lady," said Daemon. He sounded a little surprised but mostly amused by her blunt answer. "The truth is, it was in his best interest to not lie to me. If you want people to stay loyal to you, you must first ensure that their loyalty would be beneficial to them, do you understand? Men are motivated by one thing alone, and it's called self-interest. That, and fear, I suppose, although fear for one's safety is still self-interest." He glanced at her to make sure she was listening. She was. What a horrid worldview this was, even though she knew it to be rather true. Still, she would rather believe that there was such a thing as genuine goodness and compassion in the world.

"Although," he continued, his voice taking on a musing tone, "there comes a time for all men when that rule is ignored. Do you know when that is, Lady Elena?"

"When they find a greater cause to fight for?" she asked.

Daemon laughed. "No," he said. "There is no greater cause than self-interest." He looked at her intently. "However, men forget that when they love. Love is our greatest weakness." He looked pointedly in the direction of the fortress, where Jon surely was right now. "It makes us forget what is most fundamental to our own survival."

Was Jon's love for her his greatest weakness? Was she putting him in danger simply by being? In a harsh world like this, it could be life-threatening. But she could not think like this. Life would be meaningless without love. Men like Tywin Lannister might not believe this, which was why Elena could never support him.

"Do you like music?" Daemon asked. Well, that was an abrupt change of subject.

Elena nodded. "I do, very much, my lord," she said.

"Do you play?" he asked.

"I tried learning, but I don't have the patience for it. I prefer to listen. Do you play, my lord?"
"The harp," said Daemon with a small smile. He waved one of the men over. He was carrying a large object wrapped in yellow silk. When the silk was taken away and folded, Elena saw that said object was a beautiful golden harp with lions engraved on its body. Daemon smoothed his hands over it fondly as if caressing an old friend or a lover. "Will you allow me to play for you?"

"Please," said Elena.

"It is my most prized possession, this harp," said Daemon as he struck the first note. His hands, Elena noticed for the first time, were strong but slender, with long fingers more suited to making music than war.

'And making love,' said a naughty voice inside her head.

"My father gave it to me shortly before he died," Daemon continued, oblivious to her thoughts. He plucked a light airy tune from the strings, his fingers dancing over them as he did so. It was a pretty song that made Elena think of verdant woods with sunlight streaming through the old gnarled trees while birds flitted amongst the branches. It reminded her of the forest at home during spring, before it had been tainted with too many vampire attacks.

"What happened to your father, my lord?" she ventured to ask.

"It was a miscalculated raid on the hill tribes," he said without stopping in his playing. He really was very good. "I was thirteen and my brother Jorge was three. We went to live with my uncle Lord Tywin after that, or rather, Lord Kevan. We only saw Lord Tywin when he wanted to see us. My father Gerion was their youngest brother, but he was always the odd one out in the family. Lord Tywin did not think too highly of him, even if he did love him as a brother ought."

"What happened to your mother?" asked Elena.

"She died when Jorge was born," said Daemon.

"I am sorry to hear that," said Elena.

Daemon nodded. "I always bring my harp with me, no matter where I go. It's as if my father is here with me when I play."

"You play beautifully."

He smiled. "I have become a little unpractised as of late, but I hope to rectify that. Rhaegar Targaryen was a great warrior and a harpist. I'd like to think that the former had something to do with the latter."

For a brief millisecond, his eyes flashed, and Elena thought she could glimpse something behind that handsome, affable face. It was something fierce and terrifying and it reminded her that this very same harpist was the same man who had ridden in and destroyed practically an entire Karstark army and then beheaded all the Umbers. He may seem to be the gentle musician now, but he was most definitely not that; when push came to shove, Daemon Lannister would stop at nothing to get at what he wanted.

And he wanted the world.

He suddenly shook his head. "Listen to me. I have been boring you with mundane little details about my life and making you listen to them. You, on the other hand, have barely said a word. How ungracious of me," he said. His smile was back. Elena's smile felt frozen. "Come, tell me about you. I know so little. You must have done some exceptional things to end up at the Wall."
King's Landing

As night descended, so did a sort of frenzied silence, when men replaced words with actions. They ran by Sansa, forgetting to give her their pitying looks and sneers, and she was just fine with that. All the torches in the Red Keep had been lit—to do what, she couldn't tell. Perhaps Joffrey wanted to give Stannis a glowing target to hit? The servants were carrying the heavy trestle tables from the great hall to barricade the doors, as if a few pieces of furniture could dam the flood of Baratheons and Starks. She wanted to see them drown. For a moment, she wondered whether that made her a terrible person, but then she realized she just didn't care. Perhaps she could even help?

"My lady," said Shae. "The queen has summoned you to join her in Maegor's Holdfast along with the other ladies of the court."

"Just a minute," said Sansa. "I want to see the ships."

"Now, why would you want that?" The voice came from somewhere below her. She looked down.

"Lord Tyrion," she said as she dipped a graceful curtsey.

"Stannis' ships are not something most young ladies would want to see," said Tyrion. "After all, they have come to plunder the city, and, forgive me for saying it, pillage the maidens."

"But I have heard—"

"That your brother is amongst them?" Her breath almost hitched in her throat.

"My brother is a traitor, my lord," she said.

"Oh come, now. Look around you. The walls might as well be falling down around our ears."

"I think you should have more faith in the king, my lord. And your brother."

"Since this may well be the first and last time we ever have a conversation, let me offer you some friendly advice, Lady Sansa. The only person you should ever have faith in is yourself." He bowed. It would have looked comical if the situation were not so serious.

"Besides, I think you would like nothing more than to see Joffrey's head handed to you on a silver—sorry, golden—platter by your brother and his lovely new wife, the bard."

"My brother is a traitor, and his wife is a murderess," said Sansa. "Joffrey is my one true love and I shall stand by him through ice and fire."

"You might like to tone down the theatrics," said Tyrion. He winked at her. "Subtlety is the fashion of the day, although my brother insists she is dead for some reason."

"Rebekah murdered her," said Lord Jaime as he passed them. Sansa had never really talked to him before. To be honest, he frightened her. If Joffrey was that bad, how bad was the man who had sired him? "Ripped her from limb to limb and scattered her to the four winds, in fact."

"I won't even try to understand," said Tyrion. "Your metaphors are terrible. You should not be a poet, brother."

"I am an artist with the blade," said Jaime.

"He seems to be more insufferable than before he was taken captive," muttered Tyrion
conspiratorially to Sansa.

"Lord Jaime is a very brave man," said Sansa gravely.

"I should like to think it was Lady Rebekah who was the brave woman," said Tyrion. "Well, it's best not to keep Stannis waiting. He is a very rude man who won't let civilized people finish their conversations. And if I were you, I would keep in mind that all your posturing and posing may actually make Stannis believe that what you're saying is true. He's not clever like me."

She stared after him as he retreated back to the wall and his men to fight a war that could determine whether she remained a captive in King's Landing or a free woman in Winterfell. She prayed to the Mother to have mercy on the northern men and their Baratheon allies. She prayed to the Warrior to grant Robb victory. And she prayed to the Stranger to make sure none of the Lannisters got out of this alive.

"Sansa!" Joffrey's voice interrupted her prayers. She added in a quick line to the Stranger, asking him to please make sure Joffrey died. "Good, you waited. I suppose being the daughter and sister of a traitor does not stop you from being obedient. I wanted to say goodbye before I rode off to war." Never mind that it was his own backyard. Joffrey could not be said to be defending his own backyard. That was too mundane for Joffrey the Lionheart. "I'm off to give my uncle a new smile. They say he never smiles. Well, he'll be happy to see me, or else I'll make him happy. People shouldn't be serious all the time. It's not healthy."

"I pray the Warrior will grant Your Grace a swift victory," said Sansa, forcing the corners of her lips to turn upwards in a mockery of a smile.

"Not too swift, I hope," said Joffrey. "That wouldn't be much fun. Kiss my sword. They say it's lucky." He drew the blade slowly. It rang as it scraped against the sides of the scabbard. The metal gleamed coldly in the firelight. It was so clean and virginal. Well, she supposed that sounded about right. It wasn't as if Joffrey had ever done any of his own dirty work before. He could always hide behind his mother's skirts and the Hound's sword. Although, a burning stag, a wolf, and an eagle with two heads should surely be more than a match for a lioness, her cub, and his pet dog.

She pressed her lips against the cold hard metal. She could feel the ridges decorating the flat of the sword against her skin. Her breath misted on the surface. She wondered if it would remain completely clean throughout the entire battle. If that did happen, let's just say she wouldn't be surprised, although he might just stab a dead person to prove his courage.

"When I come back, maybe I'll let you taste your brother's blood," said Joffrey. "I intend to cut off his head. Wouldn't you like that? Your father needs someone to keep him company, although it has come to my attention that someone has kidnapped him. Never mind. We'll just have to get him back. Robb Stark's wife, however, I'll keep. They say she's quite pretty, and she had been rather awful to my uncle. Would you like a friend, Sansa? Maybe I'll even let you hit her."

"Whatever it pleases Your Grace to have me do," she said.

"Oh, it would please me," said Joffrey. "But I suppose I will have to find her first." Sansa had never met her new sister, but she hoped that her reputation did not exceed reality, and that Katherine Pierce, whoever she might be, would be able to give Joffrey a taste of his own poison. Perhaps he could get a lavender collar to match with Gregor Clegane's pink one. And then Sansa could turn Joffrey's fingers into pens. Was that possible?

Joffrey strode off, his red cloak billowing out behind him like a cloud. Shae tugged at her sleeve.
"Come my lady," she said. "The queen is waiting."

"Then we shouldn't keep her waiting," said Sansa.

Near Harrenhal

"Nephew," said Edmure.

"It's 'lord' now, actually, Uncle," said Robb.

"I'm a little confused as to what we are achieving here."

"Nothing," said Robb, which only confused Edmure a bit more.

"Then I can't quite understand why we are still marching. In circles."

"Firstly, Uncle, it's not a circle. It's a circuit. Secondly, if you understood it, then it would be a clear sign that the plan isn't working."

He watched the lines of men in the rear guard march through the front gate, while the vanguard marched in through the back gate so they could go out through the front again. Those in the know would think it ridiculous, but to those who only saw part of it, they would only see an endless force of Stark men marching towards King's Landing, which was exactly what he wanted them to see. Of course, it wouldn't be particularly realistic. There were only so many northerners in Westeros, and at the rate the men were leaving Harrenhal, one would have thought that there were more northmen than Westerosians soon enough.

Tywin Lannister, however, would soon figure it out. Unfortunately, he and Uncle Edmure did not share the same levels of intelligence. Actually, they didn't have anything in common at all, apart from being the firstborn sons of important lords. In which case, Robb and Joffrey would have common traits, and that was a disturbing thought.

"How is Lady Stark doing?" Robb asked his squire.

"Lady Stark? She's still in her chambers. You said she couldn't leave, remember?" said Edmure.

"I don't recall you squiring for me, Uncle," said Robb. His uncle's face darkened. It was so hard to not tease Edmure. He knew he shouldn't, considering Edmure was his greatest ally, but really, who could resist? "I meant my wife. Katherine, not Catelyn."

"Yes, I know your wife's name, nephew," said Edmure.

"Just checking," said Robb. "And the reason we are marching in a circuit, Uncle, is so that we would appear to be doing exactly what Tywin Lannister expects us to do."

"Which is?"

"Marching towards King's Landing to help our beloved king, Stannis of House Baratheon."

"But nobody loves Stannis." Edmure's brow furrowed more, if that were actually possible.

"It's called sarcasm," said Robb. "Some call it the lowest form of humour. I say it is the heights of comedic genius."

"I believe that position belongs to puns," said Edmure.
"Puns are so last century, Uncle. If we are to survive in this new world, we need to learn to move with the times. Tywin Lannister will be wondering why we still haven't arrived. If only I could see the look on his face. Now, that would reach new heights of comedy."

Near Harrenhal

Katherine missed Robb. It was so very boringly dull to be riding beside stone-faced Roose Bolton at the back of Harrenhal. The man didn't have a single funny bone in his body. Actually, if Bolton had his way, nobody would have bones in their bodies. Never mind flaying. He'd be boning them too.

"Careful with that," she called to her Praetorian guard as they dragged yet another body back to the fortress.

"My lady," said Bolton. "I do believe that is the fifth man your Praetorians have killed tonight."

"Really? I'd thought there were more," said Katherine. "If I were the most feared man in Westeros, I would have a million eyes working for me just so everyone would keep being afraid of me…and their own shadow. You, take the body back and keep it safe. I should like to examine it later. If you get blood on the rugs, you're cleaning them." Why couldn't Bolton just go away so she could have a nice quiet dinner? She was hungry, and he was looking tastier by the minute. She had a feeling, however, that Robb wouldn't take too well to her eating his bannermen in public. Or in private, for that matter.

"Would that be appropriate for a woman of your status, examining bodies?" asked Bolton.

"Lord Bolton, you of all people should understand that I never adhere to the things that a woman of my status ought to do," said Katherine. "I don't intend to be a decoration next to my lord."

"My lady, no one would ever take you for an ornamental wife," said Bolton. She smiled. Oh, how he wished she were just arm candy. In fact, he disliked her as much as all the other bannermen; he was just smart enough to pretend to be her friend. "But, even so, would it not be simpler to allow others to handle this unpleasant matter?"

"My mother always told me that if you want anything done correctly, you have to do it yourself," said Katherine. "Would you not agree, my lord?"

"Your mother must have been quite an extraordinary woman, my lady," said Bolton.

"No, she was just an ordinary landowner's wife, but she was my mother. I'm sure there must have been something special about her."

Bolton made a noise that contained neither vowels nor consonants. "My lady, I think that man over there is lingering for far too long to be just a regular soldier," he said, changing the subject.

"Well, we'll get him too," said Katherine. The Praetorians immediately pounced on the man and subdued him with a few well-aimed blows to the legs and solar plexus. She had trained them well. Now, if only Bolton would leave her alone, she could feast.

King's Landing

The water was as black as ink. One could not tell where the night sky ended and the sea began. It was silent, but the calm was deceptive. Somewhere, out there, were hundreds of ships all headed
towards King's Landing for one purpose only; to destroy House Lannister. Jaime paced slowly on the battlements, looking out across the aptly named Blackwater. Where were the lights? Where were the ships? Was Stannis going to kill them with waiting?

"Has everything been prepared, brother?" he asked Tyrion.

"Well, well, look at that. Jaime Lannister, fretting like an old woman. For a moment, I almost mistook you for our dear sister the queen," said Tyrion.

"I simply don't want to fail just as Father expects us to," said Jaime. "I suppose you don't mind, but I rather like surprising people."

Tyrion probably would have said something else, but at that moment, Joffrey barged in, all hot air and no substance. "When the enemy arrives, I want all our ships to ram them at full– Uncle, where are my ships?!"

The bell tolled. The low vibrations rang through the city and travelled through the stones, into their very bones. It tolled again. The very first pinpricks of light appeared on the horizon, and they grew in number rapidly. Astronomically, Rebekah would say. They became bigger.

"Saved by the bell," Stefan said in a low voice so only Jaime would hear it.

"It looks like our friends have arrived," said Jaime. "I do hope we can live up to our reputation for hospitality." He narrowed his eyes. One lone ship was sailing out to meet the entire Baratheon fleet.

"I guess one fisherman didn't get the memo," said Rebekah, coming up to stand beside Jaime. Obviously, she hadn't quit.

"In other circumstances, I would have had you taken away, but–"

"Where are all the others?!" demanded Joffrey.

"Hush, nephew, in case the monsters get you," said Jaime in a bored tone.

"You cannot do that! I am your king!"

"That has ever been in the fore of my mind, Your Grace," said Jaime. "I live to serve. Now, Tyrion, what about that signal?"

"They're not close enough yet," said Tyrion. He turned to the men. "Hold."

"They're almost upon us!" shouted Joffrey.

"Hold," said Jaime.

"Something's not quite right," said Rebekah. "I have this weird feeling in my stomach."

"Did you eat dinner?" asked Jaime.

Tyrion glared at the both of them, but he didn't bother reprimanding them, as if he could. "Now!" he shouted instead. A torch was raised. It was hidden behind one section of the wall before it was brandished again. It was repeated several times. Jaime hoped Tyrion's sell-sword friend had sharp eyes. At that distance, it would only look like just another star in the sky. Except, of course, there were no stars. Even the gods had turned their eyes away. At least, he would believe that if he were the religious type, which he wasn't.
A light shot up from the rock where Bronn was. It flew into the sky and arced down, landing directly on the lonesome fisherman's ship.

The ship blossomed into green flames. It was the most beautiful and terrible thing Jaime had ever seen. To think that it could have been King's Landing itself instead of – but he'd stopped it.

The fiery tendrils snaked across the water, setting ship after ship alight with those unnatural flames. They flared. The clouds above were painted green from the light below. Around him, the men cheered, and Tyrion was positively beaming. He supposed his brother deserved some sort of accolade. He patted his shoulder.

"Not a bad show, Tyrion," he said.

"Do you hear that?" Stefan said suddenly.

"Hear what?" said Tyrion, struggling to be heard above the cheers and the shouts of 'Long live the king!'.

"Exactly," said Stefan. "Nothing."

He saw the green flares behind the city. As if the Lord's own weapon could be turned against His chosen. He was too great, even for Tywin Lannister, and the Lord had predicted all. He had sent him Robb Stark. Stannis sent up a quick prayer of thanks. He supposed there were no more doubts now. The Lord was real, and Robb Stark was His agent.

He silently sent up another prayer of thanks for the sacrifices of the few brave souls manning those ships. The Lord would reserve them a special place in His kingdom.

King's Landing was silhouetted against the glowing night sky. He could see the tiny figures of men on the walls. His brow furrowed. Why were there still men stationed on this part of the wall above the Dragon Gate? Should they not all be at the Mud Gate waiting for a landing force that would never come?

"Your Grace?" said Davos Seaworth. The reformed smuggler was looking to him for direction, just like all his men.

"It appears the Lannisters are not entirely unprepared," said Stannis. "No matter. They will die all the same." He turned around to face his men. His brothers. The Lord's chosen.

"There is a head with a crown that needs removing," he shouted. "March with me, brothers. Let us deliver the city!"

He charged before he heard their roars of approval behind him. Siege ladders, carried on the shoulders of men, passed him by. The catapults rumbled along at the back, too heavy to speed. The Lannister men on the walls waivered and then began shouting in fear. Their words were indiscernible, but he didn't need to understand what they were saying to know what they were thinking.

Ladders were propped up against the walls. Instead of throwing down rocks or shooting arrows, as they should have done, the Lannister men began trying to run in all directions and trampling one another. "Mercy!" he heard someone cry. "I'm just a baker!"

Next chapter: Jaime and Tyrion star in their own version of Thermopylae. Rebekah learns that just
because you are good at fighting doesn't mean you are any good at war. Caroline makes the wise decision to lock horns with Cersei.
Night of the Living Dead

Chapter Summary

Rebekah learns that there are limits to what she can do. Caroline butts heads with Cersei and decides to play warrior princess. Jaime inspires the troops with his heroic manner. Tyrion finds himself in an undesirable position. Stefan proves that he is worthy of his hero hair.

King's Landing

Rebekah whipped around. "They're not attacking from the Mud Gate," she said. The sounds of slaughter—peasants sucked at fighting—reached her ears. Men screamed as they were cut down by the merciless blades of the enemy. They had no eyes. They did not discriminate.

"To the Dragon Gate!" shouted Jaime.

"My lord, if we move to the gates now, they will likely have breached it by the time we get there," said Stefan.

"Then we fight them in the streets," said Tyrion. "King's Landing is a veritable maze. Even I get lost."

"But the gate is lost, my lord!" shouted another of the men.

"If you do not shut up, your head will also be lost," said Jaime. He turned to Rebekah. "How fast can you get there?"

"I can't stop an entire army by myself," said Rebekah. Six months ago, had she been awake, she might have thought differently. But that was then. She'd learned, since.

"Well, do me a favour, and try," said Jaime.

"I'm your squire! I should stay by your side!"

"A good squire obeys. Now go!"

She glared at him, but there was nothing she could do except as she was told. She was a Lannister knight, and that meant something to her these days. The Lannisters, as conceited as they could sometimes be, had given her something to fight for rather than just something to fight against. She rushed off. No one noticed there was a superhuman blur passing them by. Good. This would make keeping the existence of vampires secret much easier.

Stannis' men were pouring in. They spilled in over the walls and through the gates—Why were the gates opened? Surely there couldn't be traitors within the city? Or could there? After all, she'd infiltrated Robb Stark's camp.

She rushed into the heart of the fray, attempting to seal the breach, but it was too much, even for her. Instead, she ran to the gate and tried to slam them into the men's faces. It was already mostly open. The gates refused to budge. Damn them all to hell and back! She looked up at the gatehouse.
It was swarming with Baratheons. Well, Baratheon soldiers. There was only one living Baratheon man left and he was a big pain in the arse with a stick up his arse.

She leapt into the gatehouse through one of the windows. The landing wasn't quite perfect, but at least she didn't end up splattering against the wall. She clambered in through the window, surprising the Baratheon soldiers within. "Good evening," she said sweetly. "Goodbye." They stared at her in shock. She smiled. This was going to be like a county fair game booth. Their necks snapped like toothpicks in her hands. Some of them ran. She almost chased after them, but then she remembered why she was here. Jaime needed her to dam up the flood! She looked around. There were so many pulleys and levers and chains. Where was a girl supposed to start? She picked one of the levers and pulled at it. Nothing happened. The gears were rusted from years of disuse and they barely budged. She pulled harder. The wooden handle of the lever splintered and snapped off in her hand. She gaped at it and at the stump still connected to the mechanism that probably opened or closed the gates.

In the moment of stillness that followed her utter disbelief, for now the gates were wide open and there was no way to close them again, even if she did have the gatehouse, she realized she wasn't alone. A heartbeat sounded. She looked up to see a Baratheon soldier cowering in the shadows, having survived the massacre in which his friends had all been snuffed out.

"This is not my day," she said with a roll of her eyes. She plunged the now useless lever deep into his chest. He fell to join the others as his blood splattered onto her hands. She pulled the wooden stake out of his heart and licked the blood from her fingers one by one. One might mistake her for taking a break, but in actuality, she was thinking. She was thinking very hard. How was she going to stop the influx of enemy soldiers? Jaime had charged her with it and she wasn't going to just fail him without a fight! She wasn't going to give him an excuse to laugh at her. Again.

She jumped out of the gatehouse again. The wind whooshed by her ears. She almost—but didn't—land on a spear. The fundamentalist fire god worshippers were swarming all over the place like cockroaches! Where were the terminators? Oh, right. She was it. She tried to slam the gates shut. So what if they wouldn't budge upon first push? She swept aside the little insects in front of her, caving in their metal stag-stamped carapaces with just her hands as she did so. The gate was stubborn. She pushed harder. The hinges groaned and then snapped. She almost fell under the weight of the gate. Oh no! Jaime had told her to hold the gate. He hadn't actually meant holding it in her hands!

She threw the gate at the Baratheon mob outside. They scattered as it came towards them and landed with a dull thud. If she could get Stannis, then everything could change. She could win this war with one bite. Or stab. Or just rip his fucking heart out. Wait, Stannis didn't fuck people. He wasn't fun enough. She saw his standard inside the gates, rallying his men to him and pushing against the already thin and buckling Lannister lines. He was so focused on what was before him that he didn't notice her. She could do this. She was an original vampire!

Rebekah pushed her way towards him, determined to make that banner fall and burn. She would trample it beneath her stilettos if need be. And it was needed.

Pain lanced her chest. She saw the tip of a spear, laced with her blood, emerge from between her ribs. How...?!

Damn those Baratheon spearmen...

Caroline heard the big bang and saw the sky light up with a green glow, as if Voldemort and his Death Eaters had come instead of Stannis Baratheon! She poked her head out of the narrow
window, hoping to see more of what was happening outside. She hated not knowing, what with Stefan outside and exposed to all these dangers. Stannis had a witch, she'd heard. Witches were bad news, especially when they were evil and wanted to make everyone believe in one religion.

Although, she'd never heard of an evangelist witch before. Usually, it was the evangelists burning the witches, not the other way around. Something was wrong. She'd seen battles before—well, on the silver screen, anyway—and usually they were loud affairs, with shouting and drums and trumpets and dramatic background music (all right, that last part was solely reserved for Hollywood). There was none of that. Not that she had really expected Joffrey's royal band to play anything, not even the Rains of Castamere, but shouldn't there be a few more battle cries and people shouting, "To the King!"?

"You there," called the queen's voice. Caroline thought there was no way in hell Cersei would mean her, but she turned around to see what was going on anyway.

Cersei was looking directly at her, as was everybody else. The queen wore a blood red gown and a golden chest plate that protected nothing worth protecting. Her heart was completely exposed, if she had a heart at all. Fashion was supposed to be about form and function. Perhaps someone had forgotten to give Cersei that memo.

"Me?" said Caroline.

"Yes, you with your head stuck out the window like a target for Stannis' arrows. What are you doing?"

"Looking outside," said Caroline. She thought better of it and added, "Your Grace."

"I imagine your pretty head would look very nice on a spike," said Cersei.

"Forgive me, Your Grace, but I think it looks better on my shoulders."

The queen laughed. She might have thought it charming, but to Caroline, it was a horrible bitter sound of a life wasted and spent on a loveless marriage and thwarted ambitions. "Still, with a beautiful girl like yourself, who seems to have been able to charm my dear father, they would be more interested in your…rose."

It took Caroline a little while to figure out what that meant, but when she did, she felt the blood rushing to her head, past her ears, and flooding her cheeks. "Well, I…I…! Your Grace, I think you've had a little too much to drink."

"No, please. Enlighten me. I am curious how a woman with your…graces, such as they are, could have gained the favour of my father. He is not an easy man to please."

"I don't know. Maybe I was just capable of genuineness and honesty, unlike everyone else around him." That woman totally got on her nerves! She could see how such a mother could produce a son like Joffrey.

"You're a fiery little thing, aren't you?" said Cersei with another little 'ladylike' laugh. "I can see why my father would be fond of you. As great as he is, he is still a man and all men have carnal weaknesses."

Caroline saw red. Lord Tywin was so not like that! He might not be the world's nicest guy, but he wasn't that type of man. At least, he had never shown any untoward interest in regards to her. He'd been like a stern distant principal who, unexpectedly, had had great expectations for a student
with minimal potential. Maybe he was an optimist. She reminded herself that arguing with the
queen was not going to get her brownie points with anyone except Damon Salvatore—whom she
didn't care about—and there were bigger things to worry about right now than Cersei lobbing
drunken insults at her.

"Lord Tywin is not like that, Your Grace," said Caroline. "You should have more faith in him."

"Ser Ilyn," said Cersei sweetly as she held out her golden goblet for more wine. "I do believe there
is a problem with Lady Caroline's tongue. It can't seem to stop flapping. Perhaps you might rectify
it?"

The mute with the glaring eyes, puckered mouth, and shiny bald head stepped forward. His blade
rang lightly as he drew it just a little. Caroline didn't let him draw it all the way. In three steps, she
was before him. Her anger gave her even more strength. She had never felt such a primal and basic
instinct before, except once, when she'd been hungry and newly turned.

She wanted to kill something. Like really kill something. Not just a beetle or a grub or even a rabbit
or a deer. She wanted to kill Cersei and Ilyn Payne. Perhaps she could rip out Payne's throat—

What the hell was she thinking? She was turning into Rebekah the Bloodslut! She slammed Payne
against the wall, making the plaster crack and the mismatched plates quake on their shelves. All
eyes were on her. She didn't care that she was making a scene.

"There's no need. I'll remove myself. I'd rather die with a sword in hand than listen to you prattle
me to death while you wait for you own end. Lions eat deer, not the other way around."

She dropped Payne and left him wheezing on the floor while everyone just continued to stare at
her. Cersei looked confused, holding her cup halfway to her mouth.

Caroline yanked Payne's dagger, which looked more like a short sword, out of his belt and made
for the heavy wooden doors. It would take two men to lift the bar, or maybe just one vampire. She
felt someone grab her arm.

"Lady Caroline," whispered Sansa Stark. Her blue eyes were huge in her pale face. "If you go out
there, you'll die."

"Death comes in many forms," said Caroline. "The only thing that matters is whether it has any
meaning. Besides, it's not that easy to kill me."

"It's better not to risk it. Apologize to the Queen. She will forgive you." Oh, she was so innocent! If
Caroline had been in Cersei's place, she wouldn't forgive her for this transgression.

She had a genius thought. "Come with me," she said to Sansa.

"What?" whispered Sansa.

"I mean it. Come outside with me. It's a mess out there."

"That is no place for a lady," hissed Sansa, looking at her as if she were crazy. Perhaps she was,
just a little bit, but these were crazy times!

"Neither is this," said Caroline. "You have to be a shieldmaiden of the north, Lady Sansa, if you
ever wish to get out."

"Men fight with shields and swords," said Sansa. "Women fight with their beauty and their wits."
"How's that going for you?" asked Caroline. Sansa remained silent.

"But that's no excuse to go into certain death," she said at last.

"It's not certain," said Caroline.

"I am happy where I am," said Sansa. "I will do my duty to my king and pray for him."

They were unbelievable! All of them!

"Fine, if you want to die here, then fine, it's your prerogative. It's a free country, after all!" She hurled the bar away from the door and pushed it open. There was no one outside in the hallway. Everything was dark and quiet and the only indication that there was a battle raging was the distant screams of men and the light of fire that tainted the night sky.

She risked glancing back at the holdfast. Sansa was still staring at her, in disbelief and also, perhaps, a little respect. 'Come on, little bird,' she thought. 'The cage door is open. Fly!'

The battle surged around him and, more importantly, above him. No one ever looked down, not even if the dwarf happened to be the commander. It was something that Tyrion usually grew irritated with but, right now, he was grateful for it because if no one ever took any notice of him, no one would try to kill him. He was unseen, unheard, and alive.

For now.

When Stannis' men had come through and Jaime's current favourite had failed to hold them back by herself and disappeared –what had he expected? Rebekah was one girl, even if she was a pretty one–Jaime had told Tyrion to hold the fight in the streets for as long as he could while he 'reinforced' the Red Keep with as many men as possible...

Wait. How did the golden boy, the pride of House Lannister, and supposedly the best warrior in all the Seven Kingdoms (and possibly beyond the Narrow Sea), end up with the safest task? He didn't have time to answer the seemingly simple question as a sword flew just over his head. If he hadn't ducked in time, it would have flown right through his neck. Ordinarily, he would have basked in attention –any at all– but this was not one of those nights.

Tyrion slammed his shield into the other man's shins. Unfortunately, the other man was wearing greaves and good ones at that. Damn Stannis and his love for uniform! And why didn't the armourer cheat him and provide him with something fragile that Tyrion Lannister was capable of cracking?

The man staggered backwards, almost losing his balance. What did Jaime say? Ah, yes; kick the enemy while he was down. Tyrion swung his axe as hard as he could at the man's crotch. There was an advantage to being short sometimes. The man clutched himself between his legs as blood spurted out. Now that was a painful way to go. As the man fell, Tyrion swung at his neck. More blood sprayed as arteries were severed. His head, however, remained attached to his neck. Tyrion swung at it again and again and again until someone caught his arm.

Shit, he was dead.

"I think he is quite dead, my lord," said Stefan Salvatore.
At least, he thought it was Stefan Salvatore. It was hard to tell. The only light came from the
flickering of torches and the few flaming arrows stuck in the ground, mixed with the silvery light
of the full moon that seemed too beautiful for this night. The gods were above such petty matters
such as wars, although he supposed they would enjoy the blood sacrifices.

The creature that stood above him looked like and yet nothing like that handsome young man with
the clever tongue. His eyes were pools of blackness; not just darkness, but blackness. It was as if
the night was looking out at him from those eyes. His face was covered with blood. What was it?
He felt a chill. He seemed too calm for a man in the throes of battle fever. The way he fought; it
wasn't like a man against a man, but something more terrifying than that.

Tyrion nodded, too stunned by the fact that he was still alive to speak at all. He stepped backward
and into an open gutter. Which street were they in? Wait, it hardly mattered. Their enemies were
closing in on them and they were losing this city street by street by street. It didn't matter if it was
the Street of Silk or some alleyway in Flea Bottom. It was all part of King's Landing.

"We need to fall back," said Stefan. "We've lost too many blocks around us. If we stay any longer,
we'll be trapped."

Blocks? He realized he'd asked the question out loud as he pictured the colourful wooden building
blocks he'd inherited from Jaime and that had been almost brand new.


"Right," said Tyrion. Did dying men think funny things? He certainly had dreamed funny things
while he'd been in that sky cell. It really should be Jaime here! But Jaime wasn't here; these lucky
fellows would just have to work with him. But would Jaime run? His brother wasn't known for
running. And Tyrion was getting sick of falling into Jaime's shadow. He'd been running around for
half the night, ambushing Baratheon men in this street and then being ambushed by men in the
next. It was a huge game of hide and seek with high stakes and he was tired of it. He'd never been
very good at that game as a child; something about the inability to climb trees.

Trees. Men didn't look up, just as they didn't look down. Well, not as much as they looked forward.
"Salvatore, if we can get onto the rooftops," he said, "do you think we can...what is it that you
say? Get a jump on them?"

"No, but it would give us a better view," said Stefan. Was that a bonding moment between them?
That was odd. Tyrion had made it a rule to not like any of his father's favourites, barring Jaime.

"Why, I'm all for sightseeing," said Tyrion.

"I would have thought you would be used to looking down at this city from a height, my lord," said
Stefan. Was that a grin? How dared he? Oh well. If they were going to die, they might as well do it
with a little bit of style. There was no point in worrying. Death was inevitable.

"Mind giving me a hand?" asked Tyrion.

The younger man smiled. Tyrion felt himself being lifted up and was about to protest, except the
world then fell away from him and when he next opened his eyes, he was on the roof of a two-
storey building.

"You can fly?!" he demanded. No wonder his father liked Stefan!

"I jumped. Never mind that. Look around. Most of our streets are empty. Our men have all gone
back to the Red Keep."
Tyrion looked down. Beneath him, as in right beneath him, his men were still standing their ground and even appeared to be winning. But in other streets, they were being pushed back slowly and steadily by the Baratheons. And that was in the streets where there were men.

"We could go back by the empty streets," he said. "Why are they empty?"

"Because, contrary to popular belief, Stannis' army does not actually rival the population of King's Landing," said Stefan. "Most of his men, I gather, are still outside the city's walls and trying to push their way in through the gate."

"Round up the men, Salvatore," said Tyrion. "We're doing what we should have done an hour ago. We are 'reinforcing' the Red Keep."

Stannis' men were flooding the city street by street. It was a losing … minor skirmish, and Jaime Lannister didn't fight losing battles if he could help it. Damn Rebekah! Where was she, anyway? It was bad enough that she'd failed. Was she now too scared to face him, the coward? Well, there was no time to be thinking about Rebekah. If she wasn't back by the time he closed the gates, then she was going to be out there on her own.

"Come on!" he shouted to the men. "Get inside!" They were almost trampling each other in their eagerness to get behind those safe walls. So it came as a total surprise when he saw a pretty blonde trying to run in exactly the opposite direction, against the flow, carrying a dagger like it was a stick.

Lady Caroline Forbes, the supposedly most beautiful and accomplished little girl in all of … Mystic Falls, Tywin Lannister's favourite cupbearer, and apparently the most judgemental person on earth, according to Rebekah, was charging out like a pretty wildling wench. Hadn't she ever heard the stories where the ladies stayed within their safe towers waiting to be rescued by brave knights like himself?

"Lady Caroline, what are you doing?" he asked. "You do realize that's not the right direction, yes?"

"Lord Jaime, I…" she began. He waved away her explanation, whatever it was going to be.

"If you are going out, go find my brother. I believe he will be of assistance to you." He expected her to defend herself and to tell him that she wasn't actually planning on leaving the Red Keep. Who in their right mind would do that in this point in time? However, instead of being a sensible person, she simply nodded.

"I will," she said.

"The gates close as soon as we get all our men in," said Jaime. "If you're not back by then…"

"I'll be back with Lord Tyrion." She turned to go.

"Caroline," called Jaime. She looked back in confusion.

"Yes, my lord?" she said.

He grabbed a sword from the nearest man and tossed it to her. She barely caught it. In fact, she had to juggle it in the air for a few seconds before she did. It was a good thing she was a vampire; she wouldn't have had a chance otherwise. "What are you planning on killing with that little kitchen knife? A pigeon? I suppose if you wanted to cut your own wrist, it would be effective…" She rolled her eyes at him. Maybe she did have a little potential after all.
He didn't wait to see her leave. He had far too many men to usher inside and a king to protect, although sometimes he wished he didn't have to protect Joffrey. How could they be related? Joffrey was nothing like any other Lannister. In fact, the person he resembled the most was his father, the late King Robert Baratheon.

"I've beaten them back!" Joffrey declared. "Did you see them, Uncle? They ran! From me! I pushed them back!" The young king had shot down a few men who had then run in the face of superior numbers, and, of course, the prospect of fighting Jaime Lannister.

Jaime resisted the urge to roll his eyes. There were better things to do than listening to Joffrey right now.

Caroline ran as she'd never run before. Find Lord Tyrion. Find Lord Tyrion. One could never mistake another man for him; there weren't that many blond, green-eyed dwarves out there. The problem was that it was rather hard to pick him out of a crowd of men whose average height was five-eight.

The sword Lord Jaime had given her felt even more alien than Ilyn Payne's dagger. Everything she knew about swordplay came from watching the men spar and from Hollywood movies. The two styles were, without doubt, quite different.

Men pushed past her in their eagerness to reach the gaping gates of the Red Keep. It wouldn't stay that way for long. She had less than an hour to find the littlest lord. "Lord Tyrion!" she shouted. Her voice was drowned out by the cries of dying and angry men.

"For King Stannis!" cried the Baratheon men. She saw the burning deer flying high, more like a religious icon than a house sigil. From what she'd heard of this cult, it bore a lot of similarities to the churches back home. So much so, that Katherine Stark (nee Pierce) had seen fit to plagiarize psalms from the Bible to use as prayers to the Lord of Light. Now, Caroline wasn't a religious person by any definition, but even to her, the whole idea was preposterous, even if it was effective. From the rumours, she'd garnered that Stannis held Katherine and her husband Robb Stark in high esteem.

She pushed into the fray, hoping to spot the tousled golden head somewhere. It was like swimming through a quagmire of men and horses and blood as shields crushed her from both sides. "Excuse me!" she screamed. The men around her paused, but then resumed whatever it was that they had been doing. Wait. This was battle. People did not say 'Excuse me' or any of the phrases commonly used in civilized company.

The smell of blood started to get to her. Oh, she was so hungry. She'd been feeding on animals for some time, now that she couldn't compel people into forgetting that she'd bitten them. Squirrels and stray cats could keep her functioning, but they just weren't that satisfying. Actually, they were kind of disgusting. She wanted to sink her teeth into warm human flesh, tearing open skin and muscle to get to the juicy pulsing arteries that sprayed hot, salty blood into her mouth when she pierced them…

What was she thinking? She began to shake her head, only to end up having to lean over backwards to avoid cut in half by a claymore. The giant wielding it swung at her again. She nimbly leapt aside and was pondering how she should go about incapacitating him – has anyone ever compiled and compared the merits of swords versus fangs?— when he suddenly fell to one knee with a cry. The tendon at the back of his leg had been severed by a huge war-axe wielded by an undersized warrior.
Next chapter: Caroline and Tyrion bond. Jaime launches Operation Save Tyrion and reveals just how much he knows. Vampires and Lannisters unite to defend the Red Keep. Edmure still thinks circles are overrated and decides to take matters into his own hands. Robb plans a welcoming reception for Tywin.
Chapter Summary

Tyrion finds himself in the thick of the fray. Caroline throws discretion to the wind. Jaime begins his grand plan to defeat Stannis. Edmure finds himself facing his worst nightmare.

King's Landing

"Lord Tyrion!" cried Caroline. At last, she'd found him!

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded.

"Lord Jaime sent me to get you. He's going to close the gates! Hurry!"

She had not specified which gate, or what time Lord Jaime was going to close the gates, but Tyrion seemed to understand the urgency in her voice. "Oh, of course he is. What are the bonds of brotherhood next to self-preservation? Salvatore! Clean up your messes. We're leaving."

"Onto it!" Caroline heard Stefan shout, but she couldn't see him in the chaos and darkness, not even with her vampire vision. Tyrion grabbed her arm. "Follow me," he commanded. "And watch my back!" She could hear the question in his voice. Why in the world would his brother send a lady, formerly a cupbearer, into battle to help him? In fact, Caroline had been wondering the same thing herself. How had Lord Jaime known she'd be able to deal with it? But now was not the time to think about such things. She had to get back to the Red Keep before the gates closed!

The two of them led the remaining band of men. More had to be out there, but they were all scattered and lost, and, like water that had been tossed out, they could not be reclaimed. It made Caroline want to cry, thinking of all those wives and mothers and children all waiting for them to come home and waiting forever. War was a cruel and terrible thing and she wished she'd never seen any of it. Even after all the bloodshed and the awful things that she'd witnessed in life, she would never get used to it.

She was yanked back into reality by a shout from Lord Tyrion. At first, she couldn't comprehend what was going on. After all, there was a kingsguard and why on earth would a kingsguard attack the king's uncle? But it was right there before her. The man swung at Lord Tyrion again, slicing through his face. The dwarf staggered backwards and blood oozed, slowly at first, but then gaining pace, from the wound. The man raised his sword to finish him off.

Caroline threw herself at him and knocked him off his feet. They both crashed to the ground and rolled on the blood-soaked flagstones as they grappled for control of his sword. Caroline had lost her borrowed one somewhere in the mess. The man was heavier, but she wasn't exactly playing fair. She gave up on the sword. She'd more likely cut her fingers off than cut anything of his. Besides, she decided, who needed a sword when one had fangs? She ripped off his helmet, taking part of his neck guard with it. Pain lanced through her side. She screamed. It was a bestial sound torn from the darkest recesses of her mind. The pain touched on a basic instinct that every creature in the world had. She needed to live and she needed to retaliate.
Her gums were itching with need.

She liked arteries the best because of their thick walls and the high pressure inside them. His carotid artery popped as her fangs sank into them. He screamed but her bite was too deep. She tore into him, ripping through his windpipe. She took a huge gulp, feeling the power and life surge through her. The man flailed and tried to scream for help but only bubbles came out and battle had a way of making men's screams soundless. She finally let him go when she remembered Lord Tyrion.

She dragged him, barely conscious, out of the way to the side of the street where he wouldn't be trampled by the onslaught of men, both from the Lannister side and the Baratheon side. It was hard to tell who was who in this darkness, although it became brighter as they neared the Red Keep. She could see its battlements now, so close and yet so far away and unreachable, at least not with Lord Tyrion in this state.

His entire face was bathed in blood. It bubbled as he tried to breathe through it, although his breath was growing weaker by the second. "Oh God," she whispered. What was she to do? She could let him die and keep her secret, or she could heal him…

"Fudge it," she said to herself. She bit her wrist and held the two bleeding wounds to his mouth, hoping that it wasn't too late. "Please drink. Please, please, please don't die."

His throat moved as he swallowed her blood.

"What happened?" demanded Stefan's voice behind her.

"Someone tried to kill him," Caroline blurted out needlessly. "He was kingsguard; one of our people."

At that moment, Tyrion gasped and his eyes opened. His wound had entirely healed.

Stefan snatched back Caroline's hand. "That's enough," he said. "A few drops would have done it."

"I saw you," Tyrion said breathlessly. He felt his face and his eyes widened in surprise. "What did you do? How did you…? What are you–never mind. I'll get the whole story later."

"You were dreaming," said Stefan. "It happens when you get glanced on the head by a hammer. Good thing you had a helmet."

"Where's my helmet now?"

"It's gone," said Caroline.

"May it rest in peace," Stefan added. Caroline glared at him. How could he treat this so lightly? Someone had tried to murder Lord Tyrion! Then she sat back as the force of the truth hit her.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "I just killed someone."

"Good," said Tyrion. "Kill more."

They ran for the gates. Lord Tyrion's leonine Lannister pride would not let him be carried.

"Maintain formation!" shouted Tyrion. No one heard him. Men were crashing their bodies against the gate when they reached it, surging against it like the waves from a stormy ocean against a hard stone cliff-face.
The gates had been closed.

"Brother!" shouted Tyrion.

"Lord Jaime!" called Stefan. Perhaps it was his vampireness, but his voice carried much better than Tyrion's.

Jaime peered over the top of the wall.

"You locked me out?" demanded Tyrion.

"A harmless mistake, brother," replied the golden boy of the Lannister family with a grin. "I'll open the gates shortly."

A roar behind them made them all glance back to see the Baratheon men charging straight for the Red Keep.

"On the other hand..." said Jaime. He didn't look too pleased. He sighed. "Stay right where you are, Tyrion."

"Yes, as if I can go anywhere else!" shouted Tyrion. But Jaime was gone.

"You can't just leave us out here!" screamed Caroline.

"I think he just did," said Tyrion. He had a look of shock on his face that was even worse than the one he'd had before he'd almost been killed by that kingsguard.

"Then climb!" shouted Stefan. "Lord Tyrion, get on my back."

"Now, I usually would not object to being carried, but I am the commander of these men and I have a reputation to uphold," said Tyrion.

"Fine, you can stay right where you are then. My lord," said Stefan. "Coming, Caroline?"

She glanced back at the dwarf. But there was nothing for it. One could not save someone who did not want to be saved. She put her fingers into the cracks between the stones and hauled herself up.

"Wait!" said Tyrion. "I've changed my mind, but I want the pretty girl to carry me."

"You don't get to pick and choose," said Stefan as he hoisted Tyrion onto his back.

It was risky business, opening that gate, but he was not going to leave his brother out there, no matter what Tyrion might think. "Ready my horse," Jaime said to one of the men. He strode down the steps to face the rest of them. They were afraid and tired and the fight had hardly begun. He didn't bother with any of those long inspirational speeches his father and brother were so good at. Composition had never been his strength. He liked to be brief and to the point. "Every one of you here knows who I am. I am Jaime Lannister, and I don't lose." Last time, Robb Stark had cheated.

The men cheered for him, and he felt pride swell up inside him. He was...what was one of the words Rebekah liked to use? Awesome.

Right. Back to the task at hand. He had a brother to save.

He mounted his horse before all his men. He imagined he looked resplendent in his golden armour, which matched his golden hair perfectly. It was as if the Warrior himself had come down
to Westeros from… Asgard or Paradise (one of the hells, more likely). He was here to prove Stannis' fire god inferior.

The gates opened outwards with a groan. A wall of his own men stood between him and Stannis' people.

There was no Tyrion.

He shouted his brother's name. Tyrion couldn't have fallen that quickly. He was under the protection of not one, but two vampires, and one was a Salvatore (the better one, he thought).

"Keep your positions," said Jaime. "Any man who moves out of position dies." He dug his spurs into his horse's flanks. The animal surged forward, nostrils flaring at the smell of greasy smoke and blood. His men followed. He charged into the Baratheon vanguard as they surged to meet him. His horse bowled over men. Shield clashed against sword and flesh against flesh. Arrows flew at his head, barely missing it. He couldn't stay here. He was a target for every Baratheon arrow in the vicinity.

He swung out of the saddle and slapped his horse's rump with the flat of his blade. The animal reared in alarm and pain and charged into the men, its sharp hooves cutting through flesh like four knives. Men scattered before the animal as it made a dash for freedom. It rounded a corner and disappeared.

"Tyrion!" he shouted.

He saw something fall from the wall in the periphery of his vision. "I thought you were going to leave us out here, brother," said Tyrion from Stefan Salvatore's back. Really, Tyrion? Men were fighting and dying and he insisted on having the best knight carry him?

"What you did just then could have destroyed the morale of our men," he growled at his brother.

"It was my idea, my lord, to scale the walls of the keep," said Stefan.

"I expected better of you, Salvatore, with all your experience." Was he, Jaime Lannister, the only one here who understood how important it was to show a strong face to the men? Sure, he was trying to save Tyrion, but morale came before little brothers. He couldn't expect anything better of Caroline, he supposed.

"Salvatore, Forbes, stay out here and buy us some time. You'll stay with me, little brother."

"Me, my lord?" asked Caroline.

"You know that little act you have, pretending to be sweet and weak and helpless? Stop it. My father isn't here," said Jaime. She gaped at him in shock. For a moment, he thought she was going to cry. But she was tougher than he expected and she didn't.

"You know, my lord?" asked Stefan.

"Now is not the time for this conversation," said Jaime. "And yes, I know everything."

"Know what?" demanded Tyrion.

Everyone ignored him. The Baratheon men were pushing forward faster than Jaime could get his men in. He plunged his sword into the chest of a soldier who was barrelling towards him with an axe raised. Blood splattered onto his hands and face. At his back, Tyrion was waving his battle axe
around menacingly for show. It was nice to have someone watching his back for a change, even if he would have to do all the dirty work himself. "Now would be nice, Salvatore and Forbes, whenever you're ready."

Stefan and Caroline looked at each other. Were they really worried about their humanity at this stage? "Last I checked, there's nothing more human than self-preservation," he said.

"He knows," said Caroline.

"Yup," said Stefan.

"Well, I'm hungry if you are," said Caroline. She'd lost the sword Jaime had given her already. He couldn't remember why he'd bothered. Oh, right; because he'd thought that she'd be able to use one. Didn't all vampires know how to fight with swords?

"No fangs," said Stefan.

"But…!"

"Here," said Jaime, tossing her a spear.

They were still surrounded, but the enemy ranks were scattered and thinning. All things considered, this was not the worst situation they could be in. In fact, a few more men, and they would be in the clear.

Then he saw Lady Margaery's venison. He preferred lamb, to be quite honest.

Some said death in battle was the only death worth dying. Jaime simply preferred to not die at all and live on forever. "Tyrion, Salvatore, Forbes," he hissed. "Come with me." Together, they gathered as many of the men not on the frontlines as they could. Hopefully, those fighting would be too busy to notice that they were walking away. If they didn't do it now, they might not ever have the chance.

The gates closed with a thud. "My lord!" the men on the wall called down. "You need to see this." He didn't bother answering, but went straight up to the battlements.

More and more Baratheon men milled about below, clamouring to be let in, but instead of an unorganized rabble, they were now in columns and rows, all behind the flaming stag.

"Jaime," said Tyrion softly behind him.

"It's just Stannis, little brother," said Jaime.

"Yes, Jaime," said Tyrion with a weak smile. "Just Stannis and his legions."

"We'll be done by breakfast, I assure you," said Jaime. There were still some of his men fighting outside. There was no hope for them now. They would die there. He turned to face the remaining men. They looked to him for answers and for hope.

"They have fought well and with honour, and they died with meaning," Jaime began. "But I would much rather prefer to live with meaning. Wouldn't you?"

One man scoffed. "What honour?" he demanded. "Dead is dead."

"They died fighting," said Jaime. "You can die on your knees if that's what you'd prefer."
Ambition. He could see the Iron Throne within his grasp. The last time he'd been in King's Landing, the throne had never been a possibility for Stannis Baratheon. Robert had still been quite alive and Joffrey had been the rightful heir. This new Stannis had hope.

And Tyrion was afraid.

He glanced at Jaime; tall, beautiful, fierce, golden Jaime. His face was utterly impassive as he stood there, looking more and more like a younger version of their father. Tyrion couldn't help but envy him. They all looked to him to save them, but Jaime couldn't do that. It was up to him and he had no idea how.

"Your Grace," Jaime called down. "Welcome to King's Landing. So, how do you like Flea Bottom?"

Stannis ignored his jibe. "I must admit, I am impressed, Ser Jaime, Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, and Betrayer. When I saw the men above the Dragon Gate, I thought you had seen through my plan. Then again, I should have known better. You were never one for using your wits."

"I fooled you," said Jaime.

"You could never have fooled me. The Lord revealed the truth and they ran off like headless chickens. What were they? Farmers? Farriers? Stable boys? Tywin Lannister must be so impressed with his favourite son."

"I don't know if you've noticed," said Tyrion. "But headless chickens do not run. Otherwise, your roast chicken dinners would be flapping about in the oven."

"Uh…there was this one chicken that survived for eighteen hours without a head," piped up Caroline.

Silence. Jaime glared at Caroline, who shrank back. If only looks could kill, then Tyrion would no longer have to worry about their father's favourite cupbearer.

"Really?" asked a young Baratheon soldier from below. He wouldn't have long to live, that one.

"I'll give you one chance, Ser Jaime the Kingslayer," said Stannis. "Surrender now and I will treat you all as you deserve." That sounded promising, thought Tyrion, considering what Stannis thought of Lannisters.

Jaime pretended to look undecided as he pointed towards the sky. "Let me just think about that for a moment." He backed away from the wall and motioned to them. Clearly, he was trying to buy time for their father to arrive. Tyrion could see that, just as Stefan and Caroline could.

"There's no need to think about it," called Joffrey from somewhere else along the wall. "I have the answer right here, Uncle!"

An arrow whistled as it flew at Stannis. However, for all Joffrey's boasts about his prowess with the crossbow, the bolt missed his uncle's head by a foot and thudded harmlessly onto the ground.
Marching in circles was all very well, but Edmure was restless. How was anyone to know that this would work? Surely Tywin Lannister, of all people, would know every trick in The Book.

Or maybe this was not in The Book? What manner of miraculous book was this, at any rate? It seemed to have all the answers. Surely, if it was so great, then everyone would have heard of it. He'd only learned of it recently because Katherine had mentioned it.

However, whatever book it was, he was sure Tywin would have a copy, and he would know of this trick that Robb was pulling.

Both Katherine and Robb had mentioned that 'intelligence' was the key to winning thought that meant both kinds of intelligence; information and wits. Well, he was going to have both on his side.

He gathered his men. It was good to remember that he was a Tully and all the men from Riverrun and the Riverlands answered to him and not Robb Stark. Technically, they answered to his father, but his father was ill and all the way back home. Edmure was the heir, so he was the highest authority here. "I want to know what Tywin Lannister is doing," he said to his men. His nephew could march in circles all he liked. Edmure was going to do something much more valuable and gather intelligence.

The road was dark, and it was hard to see anything except the immediate stretch of road before their eyes. Darkness enclosed them on either side. He could barely make out the silhouettes of the sparse trees and the jagged hills in the distance. Edmure shivered. The shadows were perfect for an ambush.

"There isn't going to be an ambush," he tried to convince himself. It didn't sound very convincing as he started at all the sounds and every movement in the darkness. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled, as if his body knew something was going to happen but his mind had no idea what it was.

The roar of men suddenly surrounded him. His horse reared in fright and only his superior horsemanship managed to control it. "My lord, the Lannisters!" cried his squire.

"I can see that!" he shouted back. "This way!" He drove his heels into the flanks of his horse. The animal charged forward, ears laid back, as torchlight emerged from the dark like a storm of flames. It seemed to be coming from every direction. As the torches multiplied, he saw the banners they carried.

Tywin Lannister.

Edmure's breath hitched in his throat. Tywin Lannister, the most powerful entity in all of Westeros, a legend, was here. Every child in the Seven Kingdoms had grown up with the story of the Reynes of Castamere. And he was here to fight Edmure Tully. Even he knew better than to try. This wasn't like taking a mill from the Mountain.

He turned his horse back to try and ride back to Robb's main force, but then remembered; Tywin wasn't supposed to be able to find Robb. That was the whole purpose of marching in circles! Why in the world had he thought to come out here on his own without consulting his nephew? He'd wanted to show intelligence by gathering intelligence. Now he was going to die here.

The Lannisters began shooting at them. Their arrows fell like rain all around Edmure. "Hold your formation!" he shouted to his men, but he knew the battle was lost before it had even begun. This
was Tywin Lannister, and Edmure himself had not been ready to actually fight, much less respond to an ambush by Tywin Lannister.

Did he mention that it was Tywin Lannister leading the assault?

He glimpsed the man beneath his waving banners, as calm and immovable as the very hills themselves. He wore no helmet, as if he had no fear of death. Edmure wondered if death could ever touch him. He might be of a similar age to Hoster Tully, but the similarities ended there. Hoster Tully was a man. What in the world had possessed young Robb to take on such a power?

Wait, right. Eddard's death. Robb was delusional if he thought he could win, just as Edmure had been delusional to think that he could actually make an actual contribution to the war effort. But what did it matter? They were all going to die by the lion's claws; the trout and the wolf both.

Edmure! Robb sometimes wanted to howl at the moon whenever his uncle did or did not do something. "How many men are with him?" he asked the scout who had broken the bad news about Edmure becoming surrounded by Tywin's forces. Hadn't he made it very clear that they would not be engaging with any Lannisters? What was so very hard to understand about that?

Yet Edmure had failed to understand and now he was in trouble. The thing was, Robb could not simply let the Lord of Riverrun be slaughtered. His bannermen would not think well of him, and he needed the men of the Riverlands on his side if he was to stand a chance of winning.

"A thousand, my lord," said the scout. "When I left, they were completely surrounded on all sides and trapped in a valley. If you do not hasten to his aid, I fear–"

"It is not in your place to fear, soldier," said Robb sharply. The man fell silent immediately. Robb dismissed him and turned to the Blackfish. "We cannot leave him there."

"Edmure got himself into this. Edmure should learn to get himself out," said the Blackfish angrily, but behind the rage, Robb could hear his concern. Regardless of how idiotic Edmure's actions were, he was still family. One did not abandon family like that, even if his mother did believe he had all but forgotten Sansa.

He wracked his brains for ideas, but everything seemed to result in an unacceptable loss of men. "If it were Jaime Lannister, we could give him something shiny to chase. However, I don't think the son has inherited anything from the father."

In his frustration, Robb slapped his horse's neck, causing the animal to whinny and side-step. It wheeled around as Robb tried to calm it back down again, dancing on the tip of its hooves and upsetting a nearby ox that was pulling a cartful of supplies.

The ox bellowed and lowered its head to display its short, sharp, curved horns.

Everything shifted into place. He might not have men to spare, but he had beef. Lots and lots of it, in fact. An army not only needed horses to transport men, but oxen, also, to pull the carts that carried their supplies. In fact, he had as many oxen as he had men, and unlike soldiers, cattle were much more readily available. They weren't as expensive a commodity in in Westeros as men until winter came and everyone was scrambling for food. A cow, if given enough straw, could mean the survival of a family through those harsh frozen years.

"Untie the oxen from their carts and gather them," he commanded. "I have an idea."
**Next chapter:** Tywin discovers an unconventional reason why beef burgers are bad for one's health. The Lannister boys and the vampires confront Stannis.
Edmure learns that fortune sometimes does favour the meek. Jaime single-handedly defends King's Landing (along with ten thousand other men, his brother and three vampires). Stannis sees the hand of God working through him and he is The Lord.

Horseshoe Pass - 10 miles east of Harrenhal

Edmure Tully was a fool and fools would always end up dead, sooner rather than later. His men were tired and discouraged. However, Tywin was hesitant. It was all too easy, as if this little stumble by Tully had been carefully orchestrated and planned. Who knew what Robb and Katherine Stark had up their sleeves these days? The combination of wolves and two-headed eagles was unpredictable and volatile. What if Robb Stark had sent Edmure Tully into the ambush on purpose as bait? It wouldn't be the first time Stark had done that. He remembered Jaime's capture very clearly. Eddard Stark's son clearly did not share the delusions of his father's honour. It wouldn't be beyond him to sacrifice his uncle so when Tywin surrounded Tully, the wolves would sweep in and pin the lions down. Meanwhile, that would leave Stannis enough time to fully pillage and burn King's Landing.

"My lord, we have them!" said Amory Lorch. "They're practically in our grasp!" The fool. As if Tywin himself could not see that already.

"Hold your positions," said Tywin. "Maintain pressure on Edmure Tully and let's see what Stark has planned." He would wait just a little longer. Reports had it that Robb Stark was still marching out of Harrenhal. How many men had he amassed? Judging by Tywin's calculations, the Stark army now numbered more than one hundred thousand. If there was no trick, then they would have a huge problem on their hands. But he did not believe that Robb Stark could have gained so much strength in so little time. "On no account will any man engage with the Starks. Remember our strategy. Burn and pillage all other holdings, but leave Robb Stark's castles and men alone."

He sensed the men's curiosity and, from others who were less gifted amongst them, confusion. However, they dared not ask him questions, which was just the way he liked it. The lion did not concern himself with the opinions of sheep, and he did not share his own opinions with the sheep either. All they had to know was that there was a reason behind everything he did, and he was always right.

If all of Robb Stark's bannermen's holdings were attacked, but his remained safe, then how long would it take the northerners, being the clever people that they were, to suspect treachery on the part of the Young Wolf? To tear down the boy, he didn't need to go after him. He needed to go after his supporters.

The disturbing news of Jon Umber and Rickard Karstark's demises was only further proof that he had ambitions beyond that of just another man who wanted the throne. He knew how to go about getting it, thanks to that musician-wife of his. She wanted Westeros in her talons, and she would stop at nothing to put her husband on the Iron Throne if that was what it took.

"My lord! Circles!" shouted one of the breathless scouts he had sent to find out more about Stark's
Pinpricks of light appeared in the distance, as if a vast army of men were marching this way, and very quickly. Then the ground began to rumble and shake. But it wasn't an earthquake.

The angry bellows put fear into the hearts of Tywin's men. Archers loosed them frantically before the enemy was within range while shield-bearers looked to each other in doubt. Oxen; hundreds and thousands of oxen charged into their midst, driven on by the flaming brands tied to their tails. They gored through Tywin's ranks with no rhyme or reason or even formation. Their horns gored through weaker shields and sent men flying and horses crashing to the ground with their flanks ripped open. The first oxen died. Their compatriots trampled over their bodies and everything else in their way. The bodies built up.

"Brother!" shouted Kevan in half a panic. Where would House Lannister be without Tywin Lannister? Probably where he'd found it when he had been seventeen. Kevan was a good brother and subject, but he was not meant to lead.

"They are cattle," barked Tywin. "Hold your lines! Pikemen, lower your spears. I will remember those who run and they will pay their debt in full." He could not actually see anyone properly but they thought he was all-seeing and all-powerful.

The men's spirits rallied at the sound of his voice. They reformed their now crooked lines and did as they were told. The cattle smashed into the spears. Some of the spearmen were bowled over, but some cattle also became impaled. All the horns were blown, confusing the cattle. The others continued to come, driven so mad by the fires on their tails that they failed to realize that there was nothing but a wall of pikes in front of them. "Hold!" commanded Tywin. They could not break now. If Edmure Tully decided to retaliate, then they would say that Tywin Lannister had been driven back by Robb Stark's cows and a trout. That would not do at all for a legacy.

"Herd these animals back where they belong," he said. He turned to Kevan. "Fire drove these animals to madness. Perhaps fire will drive them back now." He turned to Amory Lorch. "Continue
to shower Edmure Tully's position with arrows. We want him distracted."

"At once, my lord," said Lorch.

"How are we to light so many fires in so little time?" asked Kevan. Once again, Tywin needed to think of everything himself. Why did he have subjects again?

"Oil," said Tywin. It was the most obvious thing in the world. Had Kevan's mind gone the way of Robb Stark's cattle? "Get all of it that you can."

"From…" began Kevan.

"The lamps," said Tywin. It would be easier if he did everything himself.

He saw the wave of oxen and their fiery brands sweeping down on Tywin Lannister's forces. Part of Robb wished it was daytime so he would be able to see the devastation in full, but night time made it all the more awe-inspiring because, in the dark, it was hard to tell that the oxen were just animals. They were more like demons at this point.

"That was positively inspired, my lord," said Katherine as she rode up to join him, looking more out of place on the battlefield than ever. She was sitting side-saddle –apparently, it was 'ladylike' to ride in this precarious position because the only things ladies should ever sit astride were their husbands and lovers (wink)– and wearing soft kid-skin gloves and her pretty new purple riding dress edged with black velvet.

"Funny you should put it that way, my lady," said Robb. "It did come to me in a fit of inspiration. I thought you might like it. We should stay back, however. Tywin Lannister might be surprised for now, but when he rallies, I fear he will drive those beasts back our way."

"More easily said than done," said Katherine. "The cattle are mad now. I don't know if you know much about these sorts of herd animals, but they lose all sense of self-preservation at precisely the wrong moment. They would jump over a cliff if that is what the rest of the herd were doing."

"As much as it heartens me to hear it, I would rather you did not test that theory yourself."

Even as he spoke, he saw the Lannisters lighting fires of their own to drive back the cattle and herd them back towards the northern forces. Some of the cattle were swerving to avoid the new fires but others just barrelled right through with no thought for their own survival. It was absolute chaos down there. The Lannisters were probably still losing men. Edmure, unfortunately, was in the thick of it and, unlike the Lannisters, the Tullys had failed to either rally or build fires.

"We need to open up the Lannister men here," said Robb. "That's the only way to stop my uncle from becoming part of the herd."

"Poor Uncle Edmure," said Katherine. "He really doesn't deserve any of this, does he? His intentions were good."

"What is it that you like to say? The roads to the hells are paved with good intentions?"

"Road, singular," said Katherine. "I think one is quite enough."

"Let us hope my uncle agrees," said Robb. "Lord Blackfish, the time is now. Take your men. Break their lines and save Edmure."
"From himself or from the Lannisters?" asked the Blackfish. "The latter I can do. The former would take a god, and that I am not."

"There is little time to waste, my lord," Katherine reminded him. The Blackfish bowed from his saddle and left to clean up the rest of Edmure's mess.

It would be almost time to retreat back into Harrenhal. Surely Tywin Lannister would realize by now that Robb did not ever mean to reach King's Landing; at least, not in the foreseeable future. He did have every intention of eventually getting to it and sitting on the Iron Throne, but for now, he was going to stay put and secure the north. Once he knew for certain that no one would be attacking him from behind, he would then sweep south and west. As for those enemies who had betrayed him up north, like Theon Greyjoy, they had better watch out.

Arrows rained down upon them in the tempest of steel, fire, and blood. Edmure dashed in one direction and then the other, desperately trying to break free of the bind he found himself in. He didn't know which way was the right way, or if there even was one! His men were being cut down one by one. Regret was too late. It wouldn't do anybody any good.

In the distance, he could see mayhem as Robb did something with fire. Horns bellowed, although they sounded odd. However, Edmure didn't really care about the odd-sounding horns at the moment. Or were they cattle? It did rather sound like the yearly farmers' fair outside Riverrun. Why would there be cattle? But why did he care? He was going to die here and never see Riverrun again. Edmure Tully slain by Tywin Lannister; it didn't sound so bad put that way. One could be slain by worse men.

Blood splashed onto his face as he cut down into one of the Lannister men, but more just kept coming. He saw a line of crossbowmen. They were never-ending and determined to take him down. It was all he could do to just try and reach them.

There were different types of death, his uncle had once told him when he had been a very small boy. That had been during Robert's Rebellion, when he'd found Catelyn rather upset because she'd thought Ned was going to die at war and never return to her or their new baby. Edmure had grown distressed along with her, and the Blackfish had taken him aside to explain that death in battle was an honourable, and perhaps even glorious and desirable thing. That had been before the days when Edmure could do no right in his uncle's eyes. Perhaps he could do something right for once, this time, and die with honour and glory so that he would bring no shame to the family name. His uncle should be Lord of Riverrun after his father, and then Robb would get it if his uncle had no sons, since Robb was the eldest male grandchild of Hoster Tully. It wasn't as if his nephew wasn't already ruling everything. Having a Tully there was practically just for show.

"Edmure!"

Edmure whipped around at the sound of his name, having not expected to ever hear that voice again. Uncle! His uncle had come for him! The Blackfish's forces cut through the Lannister bowmen like a knife. The Blackfish himself was the edge. He cleaved through men as if they were made of nothing but river clay. Age had not dulled his blade. Then again, he wasn't really that old.

"This way, Edmure!" shouted the Blackfish. "Riverlanders, rally to me! Form ranks if you want to live!" Edmure didn't waste any time in replying. He dug his spurs into his horse's sides. The tired animal gave one last surge of energy as it made a run for freedom. Even it had known that they could not have continued to survive this storm. His men followed him, their morale reawakened. They fought harder than Edmure had ever seen them do before.
"Tully! Limp Fish Tully!"

Edmure almost snarled at the sound of that most hated nickname! How dared this upstart from a no-name Lannister bannerman family call him that! He whirled his horse around again, ready to take down the insolent scoundrel, but the Blackfish grabbed his reins.

"You'll get the chance later," said his uncle. "Now ride, before you cause any more trouble!" With that, he slapped Edmure's horse on the rump with the flat of his blade. He probably wanted to slap Edmure on the rump with the flat of his blade.

Edmure wanted to protest. That was his honour at stake! But he knew that he shouldn't, because his uncle was right; he had caused enough trouble for one night by following his ideas. Gathering intelligence indeed. All he'd gotten was stupidity. Even he couldn't deny it.

Robb was waiting for them just outside Harrenhal. He greeted the Blackfish cordially, but when it came to Edmure, disapproval emanated from him so clearly that he might as well have had his standard-bearer waving a flag that said, "Lord Stark is disappointed with his silliest uncle". He would be willing to bet that Robb had never looked at Benjen Stark this way.

So Robb was disappointed in him. What was new? He could never do anything right. But how could he, when no one ever gave him a chance or even told him anything? He looked to Katherine, hoping that she might be on his side, but then he told himself he was dreaming. Katherine was smiling in that unfathomable way of hers again. How could she be interested in him when she had the ever-victorious Robb?

"Lord Stark," said Edmure by a way of greeting to his nephew.

"Uncle Edmure," said Robb. "I am glad to see that you are safe." He didn't look pleased. "Were you injured?"

"With thanks to you and my uncle, my lord, I am unharmed," said Edmure.

"I am gladdened to hear it," said Robb. "A pity the same could not be said of your men. I had doubts about whether you could be saved; not from the Lannisters, but from yourself."

The Blackfish snorted and muttered something about stealing his words. No one seemed to be particularly sympathetic towards Edmure.

"My love, it has been a long night for Lord Tully," Katherine said to Robb as Robb continued to glower. She placed a hand on his arm. "We have achieved a great victory tonight, thanks to your uncle. And, I think, it is time to return to Harrenhal. Tywin Lannister will, no doubt, have unravelled our plans and he could very well come for us now."

"Your…optimism never ceases to amaze me, although I suppose you are right."

Huh, a victory against Tywin Lannister. Tywin Lannister. When one put it that way, it didn't sound too bad; it didn't sound bad at all.

"Of course I am," said Katherine. "Tywin Lannister has suffered a defeat at the hands – sorry, hooves of cattle."

"I doubt he will come after us," said Robb. "Although I hope he does. If he does so, he risks losing King's Landing to Stannis. He has dallied with us for long enough and we can hide behind the walls of Harrenhal." Even so, he turned his horse around without another word, and they all rode back to the safety of the fortress.
King's Landing: The Red Keep

Stannis couldn't really believe what he was hearing. It made no sense. How could Robb Stark turn back, even if Tywin Lannister were standing in his path to King's Landing? He was here to fight a war, wasn't he? Why, then, was he running away from the old lion with his tail tucked between his legs? He should be fighting Tywin Lannister and keeping him occupied while he took King's Landing!

He scanned the letter again before crushing it in his fist and throwing it into the fire. The flames flared for a moment as it consumed those treacherous words, full of placating pleasantries and regret on the outside, but masking deceit and betrayal. Robb Stark had abandoned his cause. Perhaps he had never taken it up in the first place. But the Lord had touched him, had he not? Melisandre herself had said that he had been favoured by R'hllor, or had the Young Wolf tricked even a god? Ned Stark would never have done such a thing. Robb Stark was nothing like his late father.

The remnants of the wildfire and his ships were still burning on the Blackwater. Robb Stark had predicted that something would have happened at the Mud Gate. It had been his ideas that had gotten Stannis inside King's Landing. Or, perhaps, it had been a trap all along. Perhaps Stark had meant for him to become trapped inside, and after he and Tywin Lannister had finished clawing each other's eyes out, he would sweep in and claim the glory.

"Your Grace?" asked Davos.

"Prepare the men," said Stannis. He had no choice. Being crushed between Tywin Lannister's army and thick high walls of stone was not a choice. "We're storming the Red Keep by force."

Baratheon men surged up the wall, clambering up their ladders like a swarm of ants. Jaime cut them down wherever they alighted, but there was only one of him, and several thousand of them. The battering ram collided with the gates again. They shook and the chains and beams that fortified them rattled, but they held.

Still, more of Stannis' people were coming, and so far, there was no news of Tywin Lannister who, hopefully was riding down south with all haste after he'd vanquished a pesky little pup. After all, King's Landing was currently the seat of Lannister power. And his precious son was here, along with the treasury.

Jaime's armour was stained with the blood of his enemies, and he was glad that he was wearing his red cloak. Bloodstains didn't show up as easily on red, and in the dark, who would know that those splotches were not just shadows? Yes, he was vain, he knew it, and he revelled in it. Image was half of one's legacy. Could his father have had such a reputation if he'd looked like…well, Tyrion, for instance?

"The king, the king!" came the shout. It didn't come from Joffrey's side, dammit. Where in the world was Joffrey anyway? He glimpsed his king behind a wall of kingsguard, cutting down any strays who managed to get past the barricade around him. There weren't that many, and they usually weren't in a very good shape by the time they reached him. If he hadn't been such a coward, Joffrey might have even made for a decent swordsman, given enough practise, but he lacked the daring needed.

Stannis vaulted over the wall. Well, here was someone who could use with a little less daring. His sword cleaved through the head of the unfortunate soul who stood rooted to the ground in terror,
helmet and all. Jaime's eyes widened. How was that possible? The only remaining Baratheon brother was an unstoppable force. He cut down men as though they were nothing more than saplings and he a woodsman with a great axe. His men surged behind him, driven on by their king's prowess and bravery. Well, colour Jaime impressed.

Blood sprayed as Stannis severed another man at the waist, armour be damned. The iron might as well have been butter. Jaime strode up to meet him. "Well, well, Stannis Baratheon," he said. "Blood isn't a good look on you. If you'd wanted to visit us so much, you should have just written. We are family, after all."

"Ser Jaime the Kingslayer," said Stannis.

"Most people just call me the Kingslayer," said Jaime. "Although, it's not really fair, considering I've only ever slain one king. Perhaps I should add you to my list to justify the title."

Their swords clashed. Sparks flew. Jaime had never felt such raw power behind a swing and he'd never seen sparks before. As he parried Stannis' strike, he felt the vibration travel down his blade and into his arm, ringing deep in his bones. He almost staggered backwards. "You know, you're going to ruin your sword," said Jaime. With speed that belied his age and bulk, Stannis lunged at Jaime, who leapt out of the way. He kept dancing out of Stannis' reach and cutting down the other Baratheon men instead. Their prowess was natural. For a moment, he almost wondered if Katherine Stark had anything to do with Stannis' newfound strength. Robert had always been the Baratheon known for his skills in fighting, even if his skills in battle and war were...what was that term? Sub-par.

In the corner of his vision, he saw one of the men erecting the banner of the burning stag on the wall of the Red Keep. No, no, that would not do. He abandoned Stannis and ran for the standard bearer, who was being surrounded by a forest of his comrades as they rallied around the standard, protecting it as if they were protecting their king. The men rushed up to meet him when he neared, but he cut them down as they came. Their blood splashed onto his face and he could taste its metallic saltiness on the tip of his tongue. It was life and death and he held it in his hands. He came up to the standard bearer. "You're flying the wrong flag," he murmured to the man.

"On the contrary, it's the only flag that should be flown here."

How had Stannis gotten here so quickly? Jaime ducked as a powerful blow swept in an arc where his neck had been a moment ago. He darted for the banner again, but Stannis was already there. He grabbed the standard bearer by the back of his tunic and threw him at Stannis instead.

The man fell upon Stannis' sword, run through by the unnatural steel. Where could he get a sword like that?

Jaime and Stannis circled one another; a lion protecting his pride and a stag raging to get more territory. Both were dangerous. The stag might have strength on his side and very long and sharp antlers, but a lion still had claws. And teeth.

He feinted, and Stannis, falling for the trick, lunged at him. Jaime, too, darted forward, aiming the tip of his sword at the gap between the plates of Stannis' armour, between his shoulder plate and his chest plate. It should have gone through. It should have pierced him and drawn blood, if not outright killed him because, at the right angle, it would have been entirely possible to reach his heart.

But Jaime's sword simply bounced off harmlessly. In fact, Jaime himself was thrown back by the force of his own thrust. It was as if there was an invisible shield around Stannis that he could not
see. Stannis staggered back a little bit. *Just* a little bit. They both stared at one another for a moment, Jaime wearing an expression of utter disbelief and Stannis looking as if he'd seen a god.

All around him were Baratheon men. His men still had his back, but everywhere else, there was black and yellow. Like bees. Unfortunately, bees had stings. He ought to know; he'd attempted to steal honey once as a boy. Never again.

He could see fewer and fewer red cloaks about. Tyrion was still fighting with two vampires at his back. He glimpsed the blonde tousled head between the swarms of men and sought comfort in knowing that his brother was still alive and was possibly the safest among them all; safer than even Joffrey with his kingsguard.

Then the onslaught resumed, with Stannis fighting harder and faster than before, pushing Jaime onto his back foot. It was a bad situation to be in.

"Ah, Salvatore, finally," said Jaime.

Stannis frowned and did not fall for it. Stefan, on the other hand, turned and saw Jaime's little problem. Now, he'd seen vampires move before, but even so, he was completely taken aback when Stefan suddenly appeared behind Stannis.

Luckily, as was Stannis.

Stefan gripped Stannis' head in both hands. The vampire's eyes were darker than Jaime had ever seen them, and he was glad that it was night; otherwise, all the men would have noticed those dark veins snaking up his face and the way the whites of his eyes were completely obliterated by the bloodlust. He didn't know how it worked, but it did.

Stefan wrapped his arm around Stannis' neck and began to twist. Goodbye, Stannis. It had been a nice fight, but now it was time to end it. Stannis struggled wildly, scrabbling at Stefan's hands to make him let go. He drove his elbow into the vampire's abdomen, making him loosen his grip. As Stefan backed away, Stannis went for his neck and wrapped his hands around the younger man's neck and began to strangle him. His knuckles turned white with exertion. Stefan threw himself every which way, trying to dislodge his attacker, but it was no use. Stannis was too strong. It was impossible to not believe in his fire god, or that at least there was some sort of inhuman entity protecting him. Jaime had seen a vampire fight, and he knew that no human could be stronger than a vampire.

Well, Stannis had made a vital mistake. He had turned his back on Jaime Lannister. Jaime lifted his sword high and prepared to stab Stannis in the back of the head, the only part of his body that was unarmoured. A body crashed into him, throwing him to the ground. Stannis had *Kingsguard* too? What did he need them for? The man slammed Jaime's head, helmet and all, against the wall. He saw stars. He scrabbled for the man but he couldn't reach him properly. He kicked and missed.

"Hey, you!" said a feminine voice. He was never going to live this down. The gods could not let this happen! The gods were deaf.

Caroline pulled the man off Jaime. The man, who used his left hand instead of his right and wore what looked like fingerbones around his neck, elbowed Caroline in the face. There was a crack and blood spurted from her nose, poor thing.

"Ow!" said Caroline. The man ran her through the stomach. Jaime paused. Could vampires…

Caroline staggered backwards. Her eyes darkened. She pulled the sword out and whacked the man
across the face with her (other) empty hand. The man was flung back several feet, where he crashed against another group of soldiers who soon hid him from view.

"Ow," said Caroline. She held her stomach and sank to her knees. "War sucks."

"I don't know what that means," said Jaime. He offered her his hand. Obviously, she wasn't dying because if she were, she would already be quite dead. And since she wasn't dead, he surmised that she was healing already. She took his proffered hand and he hauled her to her feet.

"Next time, use the sword," he said. Caroline wasn't listening.

"Stefan!" she cried.

Stannis slammed Stefan's head into the flagstones. Jaime ran to distract him, but found himself being blocked by a wall of Stannis' kingsguard. Seriously, why did he have them? Monsters didn't need protection. Perhaps Jaime was being a little judgemental here, but he was annoyed that he was almost beaten by Stannis Baratheon thanks to some witch's spell. Perhaps he could get a witch himself? Maybe the vampires would know. They couldn't have been born this way, could they? Or could they?

He slammed his shoulder into one man, knocking him off his feet, just as Stannis threw Stefan to the ground while still holding onto his head. There was a sickening crack. The vampire's neck bent at an impossible angle. Stannis dropped his limp body. He lay there, completely still. Stannis was panting, but he turned his eyes to Jaime again.

"I believe we have unfinished business, Ser Jaime the Kingslayer," he practically snarled. He took up his sword, his impossible magic sword, and stepped forward.

"Yoohoo! Up here!" called Caroline. Stannis was almost knocked to the ground by a badly thrown rock. Caroline waved from her perch atop one of the towers before leaping down. "Yeah, you, my lord. I threw a rock at you." Good girl. She threw another pebble. Her aim was terrible and the rock flew very wide, almost hitting Jaime instead. After this, he was going to teach Caroline how to aim and how to shoot. It would probably prove to be useful in the future.

Stannis started darting towards her, but she moved so suddenly that no one could see where she went.

"Down here!" She waved again, this time from below. Stannis turned. The look on his face did not seem friendly or chivalrous. So much for honour. He could not even be kind to a beautiful harmless little girl like Caroline Forbes.

Caroline sped in all directions around Stannis while the latter tried to follow her. "To your right! I mean, to your left. Oh, wait, I did mean to your right! Up. Here. Up." She circled Stannis, appearing to be nothing more than a blur, and the more she distracted him, the cheekier and more confident she became.

Her confidence became her downfall. Jaime tried to warn her, but before the words could even get out of his mouth, she came too close to Stannis. He struck her with his arm, sending her flying backwards several feet and crashing into a group of armoured men. She lay there, stunned and winded, for a little while until a dozen spears turned in her direction. He didn't see what happened after that, because Stannis was as persistent as a stag in rutting season—bad picture there—and came for Jaime. Again. He must really hate Jaime.

"Stannis! Here! Down here! Look down!" Tyrion waved frantically to try and get Stannis'
attention. What in the world was his brother doing? Stannis was dangerous, and the vampires were out of commission! Tyrion charged at Stannis, brandishing his battle axe. Oh, of all times for Tyrion to develop courage! Stannis raised his sword, intending to brush off the littlest Lannister.

**Next Chapter:** Stannis shows his true power as Rebekah returns to the frontlines. Joffrey bloods his virgin blade. Tensions run high on the battlements...and Jaime wants food.
Jaime finds that he is the one man standing between Stannis and King's Landing. And Stannis is much more than just a man.

Chapter 73: The Perfect Knight

Jaime didn't know what came over him. Usually, his sense of self-preservation was more acute than this. But it was Tyrion, his brother, and now that he was looking at the very real possibility of his death, he found that he hated the thought of losing him. "It's a great honour, Stannis, to kill a mad dwarf," he said. "I imagine they'll sing songs about you after this." Stannis looked down at Tyrion with a start, realizing, perhaps for the first time, that it had been a Lannister that he had been about to kill. Tyrion paused at the sound of Jaime's voice. That was enough time for Stannis to recover. Jaime made to make his move but Stannis reacted too quickly. He knocked Tyrion's axe aside with his blade. That sword should not have survived, but it did.

Both Tyrion and his weapon were sent flying backwards. He landed with a clang, but at least he was still alive. Jaime lunged before Stannis could focus on Tyrion and finish him off, but he knew he could not sustain a proper spar with the magically enhanced Baratheon. He began to run in the direction of Joffrey and his kingsguard. It stood to reason that the kingsguard were the best warriors in the realm. They were, after all, protecting the most precious little idiot that had ever had the fortune of being born into the world. And Stannis wanted Joffrey's head.

"I'm sure your nephew would be quite happy to see you," Jaime called as he looked back to make sure that Stannis was following him. He might have been strong, but he was still running at the speed of a man, and not a young one, at that. Wait, how old was Stannis? Were they not of a similar age? Now there was a disturbing thought. "Your Grace, your uncle is here to pay you homage!"

Joffrey looked up from stabbing an already dead man. His pretty sword had blood on it. Good. A king in a battle should not have a clean blade. Actually, Joff could learn a lot from his uncle Stannis, so long as he did not develop an irrational devotion to a god or demon or whatever the fire god was. Joffrey the Zealot; it would be a sight to see, but it was not a sight that Jaime wanted to see.

For a moment, Stannis and Joffrey's eyes met. Then Joffrey smirked, clearly unaware of his kinsman's newfound powers. "Hello, Uncle," he said. "I see you still can't smile. I intend to help you with that. You see, I have this pretty dagger here, and I think I can give you a nice wide grin."

Stannis did not smile. He simply went straight for Joffrey, sword raised. The kingsguard immediately closed ranks about Joffrey, but Stannis simply threw them aside like broken dolls. Where in the world was Sandor Clegane? Then again, even the Hound would be no match for a maddened stag who could kill Stefan Salvatore. Joffrey's smirk thinned and the corners turned downwards into a frown, and then into a look of abject terror as Stannis quickly cleared through his kingsguard.

He fled. He actually turned tail and ran. Jaime followed him to make sure he didn't trip and fall.
upon his own sword or something like that. Perhaps his father had been right—as usual—about him being a glorified bodyguard to a madman and a drunk; now he was a bodyguard to a mad coward. No, they were not related. He refused to believe that they shared any blood, and perception was everything.

Joffrey ran inside the Red Keep. "Barricade the gates!" he was screaming as he dashed inside the chamber where the wildfire had previously been stored. Jaime tried to reach out to grab him, but the boy was too quick. Well, if Joffrey spilled something, he wouldn't cry.

"Your Grace!" shouted Jaime. "Your men need you!" But Joffrey took no heed of him. Perhaps he had been absent for far too long and young Joff had forgotten all about how terrified he was of Uncle Jaime. The door slammed in Jaime's face. It was unbelievable. The king was hiding out in a broom cupboard while his men were fighting and dying for him. Why in the world couldn't he have Robb Stark as his king instead? Wait, did he really think that? He made to bang on the door with his fist to impress upon Joffrey how important it was that the men saw him fighting on the wall, but Stannis was upon him. Jaime ducked and pivoted out of the way. Stannis' blade scraped against the door, taking a good chunk out of it and sending sparks flying, as it missed Jaime's head again. Hah! Definitely not better than a vampire, and Jaime was grateful for it.

Their swords collided again. Jaime was sent staggering backwards. He took a swipe at Stannis' middle and felt the blade glance off his chest plate. Stannis leapt back, unharmed, with not even a scratch on his armour, but he seemed annoyed that Jaime had managed to hit him again while he hadn't been able to touch Jaime.

"I suppose your god couldn't grant you better skills with a blade," Jaime remarked as he pointed his sword at Stannis. "How long do you think you can keep this up for? Clearly, Robb Stark is not coming. He's clever, that little wolf cub. My father is coming, though, you know."

"Your father," snarled Stannis. He charged at Jaime, who knocked aside his blade with the flat of his sword, but before Jaime could recover, Stannis had thrown himself bodily at him. The immense force of the impact made them both crash to the flagstones, with Jaime in the unenviable position of being at the bottom. His sword flew several yards away and landed with a cacophonous clang before it was obscured by the iron-shod feet of fighting men. They grappled for control of Stannis' sword, but as soon as Jaime's hand touched it, it began to burn him even through his gauntlet. He immediately released it. What in the world was this magic? Well, magic. Jaime knew nothing about magic except that it belonged only in children's stories.

His fist connected with Stannis' face, sending it whipping to the side. Stannis' grip on him loosened somewhat and Jaime immediately rolled over, surprising him and freeing himself, but not for long. He skidded across the stones when Stannis kicked him in the abdomen, denting his armour. He grasped about for anything he could use as a weapon, and managed to find a broken spearhead.

Jaime rolled to his feet again and stood facing Stannis. He was on the defensive and he knew it, but who else could take on the madman? Stefan Salvatore was gone, Caroline Forbes, when it came to it, was a little girl, and Rebekah was missing. He pretended to engage Stannis. In truth, he was trying to make him swing and miss and was waiting for him to tire. Stannis showed no signs of tiring. Jaime, on the other hand, was beginning to feel the ache settle into his muscles. There was only so much a man could do—normally, at any rate. He danced out of the way of Stannis' sword, taunting him with his very existence. "You missed again, my lord," he said as Stannis took a swipe at his head. It came out breathlessly. They both knew he was tiring. Where in the world was Father? He should be here by now, shouldn't he?

Stannis swung again. The sword glanced off Jaime's chest plate. Or, at least, it should have glanced
off, but as it were, if Jaime had not stepped backwards in time, the blade would have cut into his chest as if he were naked. The blow left a huge rent in his armour. There was magic afoot; there was no doubt about that.

He knew he was no match for magic. It wasn't even a fair fight. But what else could he do? Stannis' unnatural prowess was bringing down his men's morale, and he needed to do something. He was Jaime Lannister.

++He charged at Stannis. He might be stronger and faster, but Jaime still had more skill. He threw the spearhead at Stannis. It grazed his ear and drew a spot of blood. Aha! So he could bleed. He drew his dagger. It was woefully short and normal compared to Stannis' enchanted sword. But up close, it wouldn't matter. He darted in, imagining himself taking on a vampire rather than a man, aiming for Stannis' exposed throat. Stannis didn't have time to take guard with his sword. He dropped it and grappled with Jaime as the latter tried to stick the dagger into his flesh. His grip was as tight as a manacle. With his other hand, he seized Jaime by the hair and pulled his head backward. Jaime's dagger, however, remained pointed at Stannis and nothing the Baratheon could do could turn it away.

Pain lanced through his leg He cried out as he fell onto one knee. A blade from behind had pierced his leg right through, just above the knee. He felt the blade scraping bone as it was withdrawn. Blood gushed out. Stannis wrenched the dagger from his hand and threw it aside.

"There would be no honour in killing you now, Ser Jaime Lannister the Kingslayer," he said. Jaime could only struggle to keep his breathing steady as he looked up at Stannis from his kneeling position. Blood was soaking his trousers and the ground below. He was getting lightheaded.

"You'll never take the city," whispered Jaime. "My father will crush you." It was not witty in the least but he really couldn't think of anything. His vision was beginning to darken. He toppled onto his side. Part of him wanted the darkness to take him. Another part knew that if he succumbed, he would never emerge out of it. ++

Stannis seized him by his hair and hauled him up. Jaime scrabbled at his hand to make him let go. His left leg was useless and couldn't support his weight. Stannis would have dragged him away to be his prisoner, but the Baratheon was suddenly thrown back by a previously unseen force. He released Jaime as whatever it was hit him. Jaime fell to the ground again. The impact jolted his wound, making white flash before his eyes. He gripped his leg. Blood was pumping out and staining the flagstones beneath him. He tried to press on the wound to stop the bleeding. Agony lanced up and down his leg. He bit his lip to keep himself from crying out again. His enemies would not have the satisfaction of knowing that they'd hurt him.

Something pounced on Stannis, slamming him against the wall. The force of it should really have crushed him into a pulp. As it were, Stannis was only stunned. Jaime saw a golden streak before he realized that it was the streaming blonde locks of Rebekah Mikaelson. So she wasn't dead, after all. Why was he feeling happy? Well, she was distracting Stannis majorly. Good girl.

Stannis snatched up his sword and tried to plunge it into Rebekah, but she seized his wrist and was slowly twisting it back towards him. The two of them wrestled for dominion; the aging zealot and the lethal beauty.

"Nobody harms him and gets away with it," Rebekah was hissing through gritted teeth. "That makes me very, very angry."

"You cannot defy the will of the Lord, demoness," Stannis replied as he pushed back. He threw Rebekah off him. She stumbled back with a look of utter shock on her face. That probably didn't
happen too, she recovered and made for his throat again, her slender white fingers curled like talons. For a moment, Jaime thought she was simply going to rip out Stannis' throat with her teeth. She'd already killed Subtlety once. What was killing it again?

Her fingers curled around Stannis' throat or, rather, part of it. Fine, she was simply going to dig out his voice box using her fingers. He'd never seen anyone do that before, and despite the fact that his life was slowly being pumped out of his leg wound by his traitorous heart, he wanted to see it. He wanted Rebekah to win more than anything right now. Why was it? Seeing her made him… Proud.

Rebekah swung Stannis around and slammed him against the wall again. Her eyes darkened even as Jaime watched her face—more than he watched her hands, in fact. She was beautiful, and he was lightheaded, although not from her beauty.

And, was that Stefan Salvatore? The periphery of his vision was becoming blurry and the sounds of battle quite distant. His body had numbed itself to his pain and now it was as if he were looking at everything from afar. It was dangerous. 'Get yourself together,' he thought to himself.'You're Jaime Lannister. You're not going to die by Stannis Baratheon.' But there was only so much willpower could do, and it couldn't stop the bleeding. He shook his head, but that only made him dizzier. Even if he didn't die, his leg… He looked at his mangled leg. The blood was making his hands slippery. He was going to lose his leg if he didn't die. Was this the gods' way of exacting vengeance for Bran Stark? It was better to be dead than to live as a cripple. No, no. He wasn't going to die, and he was not going to lose his leg either. He had vampires on his side, dammit! And even a regular maester could fix it, if given the chance. Unfortunately, all the maesters were safely holed up in their tower. They were useful like that.

Stannis pushed back against Rebekah and slammed her against the wall instead, just as Stefan leapt on him from behind and wrapped his arm around his neck. Jaime had to be hallucinating. Stefan was dead. Stannis had broken his neck. But it looked very real, even for the visions of a dying man. Stefan and Stannis grappled, with the former having the upper hand. Stannis scrabbled at his arm. "It's payback time," Stefan growled, or so Jaime thought. He couldn't believe anything he was seeing or hearing at the moment. He thought he heard Tyrion shouting his name somewhere in the distance. He wanted to tell his brother to calm down. He thought he did, at any rate.

Stannis threw himself—and Stefan—backwards onto a wooden bench that someone forgot to remove. It broke under their combined force and weight. The wood splintered. Stefan cried out as a broken length of wood pierced his shoulder right through. His eyes lightened again, and he became as he always was. He looked human. Stannis made to finish him off by taking off his head, but Rebekah was there again. Jaime could say one thing for these vampires; they never gave up. He could admire that.

Rebekah shoved Stannis to the other side of the wall. Below them was probably a sea of men, with their spears pointed upwards, all trying to climb inside. Suddenly, it all became very clear what he must do when he realized Rebekah was trying to push Stannis off the wall and not just slam him up against it until his head cracked open. It was just that she wasn't strong enough, and no one seemed to be able to help her.

No one except Jaime.

Summoning the last of his strength, he dragged himself closer to the fight. His men—and Caroline Forbes—were keeping off the other Baratheon men for now, but if Stannis continued to be on this wall, then the battle would continue to be lost. Jaime reached out, grabbed Stannis' ankle, and pulled as hard as he possibly could. His hand and arm felt far weaker than usual.
Stannis lost his balance. Rebekah became a blur as she upended him over the wall, throwing him down headfirst into the melee below. Stannis' cry of anger grew softer and changed pitch as he plunged downwards to his death.

His strength spent, Jaime collapsed. He didn't want to move anymore. It was just so tiring. He wanted sleep…

"Oh my God!" gasped Rebekah. "Oh God, no, Jaime." She knelt by him and pulled him into her embrace. He cried out as the movement aggravated his wound. Pain was good. Pain meant he was alive. Still. For now. Since when did he became so…what was the word? Pessimistic. Well, now that Rebekah had time, she could heal him. Like, right now.

Rebekah sank her fangs into her wrist, drawing life-giving blood. Jaime opened his mouth, desperate to catch some. It would save him. It would save his leg. He didn't want to die, and he most definitely did not want to be a cripple. "Here," she said as she put her wrist to his mouth.

He sucked greedily, drawing the sweet, warm blood inside him. It tasted better than any blood, or anything, he had ever drunken. He felt strength flow back into his veins as he drank. She bent down while he fed from her and began to lick his wound. He supposed he could allow her to do this once. She needed the strength, and it wasn't as if he could put that blood back inside him anyway. It was a fair trade.

The pain and the dizziness subsided. The sounds of battle became loud and clear, although it wasn't as loud as before. He pushed himself out of Rebekah's arms and got to his feet, feeling better than he had ever since the battle had begun. "Are they retreating?" he said. It wasn't really a question. He could see Stannis' men pulling back. Killing their king would have that effect, and a lot of people had seen Stannis being thrown off the wall. No doubt they were collecting his broken body below now.

Rebekah peered over the wall. "What?" she said in disbelief.

"What?" said Jaime.

"Stannis. He's alive! Broken arm, but most definitely alive. How did that happen?"

"I'd hoped he'd break something a little more significant, like his neck," said Jaime. He searched for Stefan. The younger vampire was pulling the length of wood out of his shoulder. He looked pale, but at least he was alive, and he had Caroline fussing over him. Little Lady Forbes looked none the worse for wear, apart from a few blood and soot smears. And Tyrion was bruised and battered, but still pretending to be Father and directing men here and there, as if he knew what he was doing. He waddled over. "Is he dead?" he asked as he leaned on his axe for support. "Not you, Jaime. I meant Stannis."

"Unfortunately, no," said Jaime. "He broke his arm."

"Grumpkins and snarks," said Tyrion. "Who would have thought they were real? And, speaking of real, I was pretty sure I saw a sword go through your leg, Jaime. How can you be standing?"

Jaime glanced at Rebekah and Stefan. (The idea that Caroline was also a top predator had never really entered his mind.) Tyrion needed to know. It would be impossible to keep the secret from him for long, and now was as good a time as any. They needed to be able to use this knowledge how so ever they could, and sometimes, that little brother of his had…interesting ideas inside his head. Not that they were good ones, but they were interesting.
"He missed," said Jaime. Tyrion needed to focus on fighting. If Jaime told him about the vampires, he would never stop thinking about this and that and all the implications. And then he'd be too busy asking questions about vampirenness to actually think about the battle.

Tyrion narrowed his eyes at Jaime and eyed his blood-soaked trouser leg. All right, maybe that wasn't very believable. He would tell his little brother all about it after the battle but, for now, he would relish in the feeling of knowing he knew something that no one else knew, especially not know-it-all Tyrion. It was beyond all the realms of *his* imagination, and it wasn't something one could glean from one of those thick tomes he so often found Tyrion burying himself within. Jaime knew it because he had that magical quality that made people talk. Well, it had made Rebekah talk.

All around him, the men seemed dazed, unable to believe that there would be any form of relief. They were tired and bloodied and their courage was hanging on by a thread. They looked to Jaime. If Jaime hadn't been there, or if Jaime had fallen, he didn't know what would happen. He didn't want to think what would happen. "Gather the wounded and bring them to the maesters. It's time Pycelle and his ilk did something to prove that they deserve the air that they are breathing," said Jaime. They needed a new grand maester. Perhaps they should simply put a vampire in his place. They knew more about healing than anybody else in the world, after all.

He marched along the wall, giving the tired and wounded men encouragement, surveying his forces, and overseeing the reinforcements of the walls. The gate of the Red Keep, too, would need to be reinforced with wooden beams and chains. It looked worse for wear, having been bashed by a log one too many times. Luckily, it had held. "Someone should look for the king and tell him it's safe to come out of his cupboard now," he remarked to Tyrion.

"By that tone of voice, I think you mean me," said his brother with a sigh. It was an unenviable task.

"You are the king's uncle and the acting Hand of the King," said Jaime.

"And you're both the king's uncle *and*... and Kingsguard." Tyrion must have been more tired than he'd thought if he would almost mention such a thing out in the open. Besides, he and Joffrey weren't related. At all. It was so obvious that he was Robert's.

"I am making sure that our troops will be ready to fight when Stannis comes back, and come back he will," said Jaime. In his tiredness, he was swapping his verbs around. It sounded odd coming out of his mouth. The maester who had taught him his lessons as a child had liked to speak like that. He and Tyrion had laughed at him for it.

"Next time, it's your turn," said Tyrion.

"We don't take turns," Jaime called after him as he waddled off. Somewhere along the way, Bronn rejoined him. So the sell-sword was still alive? Why wasn't he surprised? He'd probably only just reached the Red Keep, having stuck to the relative safety of the rock outside the Mud Gate. Those who had nothing anybody else wanted were the safest. They were also, more often than not, very miserable.

"My lord Jaime, you should rest," said Rebekah. All three vampires were trailing after him as if he needed looking after. All right, he'd needed their blood all of once during this battle. Although, he could do with a little rest and some food and wine. Wait, water. He didn't know how long his vampire-blood-induced strength would last, and he was hungry and thirsty. The blood didn't change any of that.

"She's right," said Stefan. He looked much worse, with dark circles beneath his eyes. Did vampires
die from blood loss? Although, he doubted Salvatore had lost that much blood. He healed far too quickly. Still, it was he who looked the worst out of all three vampires. Little Caroline had fared the best. Well, she'd mostly kept out of harm's way, clever thing. Perhaps Tyrion had been right to be wary of her. Given enough time, she might just become something formidable and almost like Katherine Stark.

Given a lot of time.

"Have you eaten?" Jaime asked Stefan. He indicated in the general direction of a group of men piling the dead into carts and taking them away; to where, he knew not and he cared not. What he knew was that vampires healed when they fed. There was all this blood around them and it was all going to waste. There was no point in wasting time giving succour to the dying. The living needed the maesters more. The dead and dying might as well do them all one last favour and nourish the best warriors he had. Both Rebekah and Caroline had obviously thought the same, for their cheeks were rosy and their skin glowed.

Stefan shook his head. "I will find something later, my lord."

"Stefan Salvatore, why are you wasting time when there is a feast around you?" asked Jaime, making sure no one else could hear them.

"I can't…drink human."

"Then what do you drink?"

"Cats, squirrels, rabbits, deer," supplied Rebekah, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "Really, Stefan, where are you going to find a squirrel around here? You need to work, you can't do it half alive, and we need the horses."

"You know what it does to me, Rebekah," growled Stefan.

Rebekah shrugged. "I liked Ripper Stefan. He was so much more fun," she said.

"Ripper Stefan?" asked Jaime.

"He'd drink to the point where he ripped off his victims' heads," Caroline informed him. It sounded like an excellent thing. Caroline did not seem to think so. She shuddered. So, why was she out here fighting a battle again if she found killing to be so distasteful?

"And he didn't care," said Rebekah. "He'd kill, and he'd relish in it, and he was strong and beautiful." Hmm, there was history there. He'd get it out of her later. For now, he had an idea.

"Stefan Salvatore, as your liege and commander, I command you to drink from any one of these dead or dying men," said Jaime. "But do it discreetly. I don't want you ripping off heads in front of anyone."

"My lord, you cannot ask me to do that!" said Stefan.

"I can, and I have," said Jaime.

"If I do, I won't be able to stop, not even after the battle." He was desperate. Jaime could hear it in his voice and see it in his eyes.

"You fear it," said Jaime. "You fear losing control if you drink." Normally, he would have simply laughed it off, but by the look on Stefan's face, one could easily tell that he would not find it to be
so amusing, and he needed Salvatore to function, tonight especially, out of all nights. "When I was a boy, a very small boy, I couldn't learn my letters," he said. "They would turn into meaningless squiggles before my eyes and they wouldn't stay on the page. Words flipped and swirled and I was afraid of them because they showed me my weakness. Do you know what my father did?" They were all listening to him now. Tales of Jaime Lannister always captivated audiences. Although, for Caroline, it was probably Father. "He sat me down for four hours every day until one day, the words stopped moving and I could read. I hated him for it at the time, but I learned to read. So, face your bloodlust, Stefan Salvatore, and learn to control it. We need you to control it. I need you to control it." His father would be proud of his speech.

Stefan nodded, still unsure of himself, but he couldn't disobey a command, and he needed the blood. "Caroline, go with him," said Jaime. The girl nodded and obeyed without a word. Those two were close in a way that Jaime did not fully understand. In theory, he knew what friendship was. He and Tyrion were friends, he supposed, but that was because he was his kin. They were bound by blood. Caroline and Stefan? They weren't related, but they cared for one another deeply, and somehow they weren't lovers, or so they claimed. So what did they get out of it? Well, he supposed they could mutually exploit one another by manipulating emotions, but what could that possibly achieve?

Maybe they were lovers, but they were just very good at keeping it secret. Why, he wouldn't know.

"As for you," he said, deciding to ignore the strange pair for now and turning to look at Rebekah. "What happened? Stannis' men were coming in through that gate like water from a broken dam." He wasn't angry. Such things happened during battle. He himself was almost defeated by Stannis. Stannis.

"It wasn't my fault. I tried to close the gate," said Rebekah. "I got to the gatehouse, cleaned it out, no problem. But then something happened with the gears and the lever broke, so I had to go down and close them from there. By the time I got down, the Baratheons were already coming in. I tried to shut them manually and the bloody gates came off their hinges!"

Why did he ever think that it was a viable option to send a powerful, invincible vampire with no brain to guard a gate? Right, the powerful and invincible part. Well, he would never be fooled by that again. If he'd sent Caroline, he would have gotten a similar result, except the gate would still be usable.

"When I said to hold the gate, I did not mean to hold it in your hands," he said with a sigh. "What happened to them? The gates?"

"I threw them at the enemy," said Rebekah. "What else was I supposed to do?"

Perhaps he was too tired, but he laughed as he imagined the look on Stannis' face when he saw the Dragon Gate hurtling towards his head. Even his father, who seemed to have the gift of foresight when it came to his enemies' movements, would not have been able to predict that. Although, his father's enemies (Robb and Katherine Stark, mainly) would have more subtlety than that. "The hinges were obviously in need of repair in the first place," explained Rebekah.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have broken the gates, not that it matters anymore," he said. He found a guardroom with tired men chewing on hunks of bread, cheese, and drinking water from leather flasks. They hurriedly rose when they saw him and bowed. He nodded and then waited. Slowly, one by one, they filed out the door, leaving the guardroom to him. No one would disturb him here. He could rest and refresh himself for the second round of the battle. Where in the world was his father? He needed to hurry up, or else the Lannister dynasty would be finished. He supposed one of his cousins would inherit Casterly Rock, in that case. He'd never really thought of them as
Lannisters before. They were just...there. Like pets.

He sat down and leaned back against the wall, resting his head against the stone. "Why are you still standing there watching me?" he asked Rebekah. "You know, you are a terrible squire."

" Didn't I quit?" she said.

"You didn't quit. I dismissed you, and now I am reinstating you," he said without opening his eyes. "I could do with some dried meat and an apple or two. And some drink. Water, not wine. Wine makes men thirstier."

**Next chapter:** Jaime wines and dines Rebekah (or it could be the other way around). Tensions run high and inhibitions disappear. Jon and Damon have to improvise as they find themselves in an unexpected twist.
Jaime and Rebekah resolve a long-standing dispute. Jon and Damon re-enact the fall of Troy v3.0.

King's Landing: The Red Keep

Rebekah looked at the blood drying on Jaime's leg as he sat with his back against the wall, his hand still gripping the hilt of his sword. He seemed exhausted. She hadn't ever seen him so tired before. It wasn't just physical, but spiritual as well. The battle wasn't progressing well and they were running out of men. If she knew that, then he most definitely knew it.

"I'll see what I can find," she said. "No promises, though. Wait here."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said as he opened one eye.

She hurried off. There was very little –edible– food to be found. The dried meat was harder than the leather armour some of the men wore. Maybe they should just wear jerky instead. It would probably work better. The few pieces of fruit available, mostly apples, because they kept better than most things, were bruised and wrinkled and not suitable for Jaime's consumption. Hmm… there would be better things inside the palace, wouldn't there? The king wouldn't notice if part of his supper went missing. They usually gave him so much that he never finished it.

The muted silence of the palace was even more disturbing than the battle. She could hear the makeshift hospital they'd made in the great hall where the wounded were being tended to and the dying were being left to their own devices. She could smell the blood even from here. Perhaps it was worth paying the dying a little visit. She always did like doing charity work. There was no point in wasting resources on those who wouldn't make it anyway. The Westerosians were practical people. They didn't bother with idealistic and cumbersome concepts like the Rights of Men.

The kitchens, too, were silent. The cooks and servants had all fled home, where it was probably less safe, but people were silly like that. When they felt as if they were in danger, they always headed for their burrows, even if they were simply dead-ends where death would find them more easily. Survival 101: never become trapped. Although, come to think of it, Jaime didn't exactly have an escape plan either. She would have to remedy that. Maybe he was too busy to think of it.

They'd taken most of the food with them, the filthy little thieves, but they'd left some of the best of it hidden in the shadows because they'd been in too much of a hurry. She dug out some spiced dried pork, sticky with honey and moisture, an orange at the bottom of a barrel, its skin still waxy and supple, and a few hard loaves of brown bread that smelled as if it were two days old instead of a week old. She took a flagon of wine because even though Jaime might not want it, she did. He didn't say she couldn't have any, did he?

He'd kept his promise and had stayed right where he was. In fact, if she couldn't hear his heartbeat and his soft breathing, she would have thought he was dead. He was so still. She set down the food on the floor beside him. Gently, she put a hand on his shoulder and shook him awake. He was on
his feet immediately, sword half-drawn and his dagger pointing at her. If she hadn't grabbed his wrist and kept it at bay, he would have stabbed her throat.

"Paranoid much?" she said.

"Don't use made up words," he said.

"It's not made up. You just don't know what it means."

He snorted, but beyond that, he was already too busy stuffing his mouth with food to come up with another response. He saw her watching him and slowed down to eat with more gentlemanly bites. "These are not rations," he remarked through a mouthful of spicy pork.

"No, I went to the palace kitchens," said Rebekah. "The king won't miss it."

"He's probably still in his cupboard," said Jaime with a laugh. He took a swig from the leather water skin and almost spat. "I said water, not horse piss."

"I'm pretty sure that's water," said Rebekah. She took a sip of her wine straight from her flagon. Delicious.

"What is that?" asked Jaime as he pointed the mouth of his water skin at it.

"I would have thought it was pretty obvious, my lord," said Rebekah. She licked her lips.

"That is not the usual wine if you think it's delicious. I know how picky you are."

Rebekah smiled. "No, I suppose it isn't," she said. "I suppose it could be the late king's, or even the Queen's."

Jaime held out a hand. "Give it here," he said.

"But I thought you said no wine."

"Just give it." She handed it over coyly, having known fully well that he wouldn't have liked the water much and, given the choice, he would have gone for her wine, thirst be damned. Who was so stupid as to not install a source of water inside the palace anyway, or at least build the palace over a spring or something? Springs were always very pleasant features to be found in a garden. Nik had always insisted upon having them close by even though he didn't need water.

Jaime swigged from the flagon. "You're right, for once," he said. "Delicious."

She snatched it back from him and made a swipe for his spiced pork as well. He pulled it out of the way but she managed to snag some. It was very good spiced pork, still juicy and full of flavour. The honey stuck to her fingers. She licked them clean one by one, slowly, and never took her eyes off Jaime as she did it. As she moved onto her thumb, Jaime snatched her wrist.

"Bad girl," he murmured.

"I know I am," she whispered back, then she leaned forward to suck her thumb clean anyway. He didn't let her. Instead, he took her thumb in his mouth and closed his lips around it. She grinned. Perhaps Lord Jaime Lannister wasn't as tired as he looked.

"There, that's better," he said. He released her and sat back, but they both knew they weren't done with one another. It was battle. Passions were high, blood was flowing, and they didn't know if they would still be alive in another twenty four hours. Well, Rebekah knew she'd be here, but
Jaime? If Stannis broke through these gates and overran the Red Keep, it would be worse than the defeat at the Whispering Woods for Jaime Lannister. Robb Stark might have wanted to mock and humiliate him, but Rebekah always had the feeling that Katerina or Katherine or whatever she called herself these days had not really wanted to hurt Jaime too badly. Katherine liked men, and Jaime was too pretty. But Stannis? He had no appreciation for the good and beautiful things in life. He was humourless and drier than a piece of driftwood that had been afloat at sea for too long and had now come to rest on land.

She looked at Jaime as he resumed eating, although he would occasionally glance up at her with a predatory gleam in his eye, his pupils growing wider and his nostrils flaring as his carnal desire became more and more apparent. 'I'll protect you,' she thought. He could never know it. He wouldn't like it.

He sliced open the orange with his dagger. Juice bled out all over the floor and onto his fingers. He offered her a slice.

"Sharing? Now that's one thing I did not expect," Rebekah teased.

"Well, if you don't want it..." said Jaime. She took it before he could say more and sucked on it, letting the sweet nectar fill her mouth. She took a few more swigs of wine and passed the flagon to him. He poured some into his water and grimaced when he took a drink.

"If this is supposed to be my last meal in this world, then I am severely underwhelmed," he said. "Even those awaiting execution are fed better."

"Did you feed Ned Stark?"

"I wouldn't know. I was stuck in a cage in his son's camp, if I recall. The food there was...subpar." She laughed. He liked that word.

"I know," she said. "I was there."

He wiped a droplet of orange juice from the corner of her mouth. The pad of his thumb was calloused and rough and dirt and blood were encrusted under his fingernails. He licked up the drop of juice slowly. "I haven't forgotten that dream," he whispered, his voice growing husky as he leaned in closer to her. She could smell the wine on his breath. It was quite heady stuff. That, and the excitement and bloodlust of battle, always got men's carnal passions going. It certainly got hers going. He stroked her cheek slowly and tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear, as gently as if he were caressing a baby bird. She placed her hand over his. Their meal, such as it was, was forgotten.

Suddenly, he grabbed her by the back of her head and dug his fingers into her braided hair, tangling them up amongst the golden strands. He pulled her towards him and smashed his lips against hers. She tasted the wine, the orange, the spice from the pork, and something that was uniquely him. She opened her mouth to let him in. Oh, she'd dreamed about this moment, but never in the world had she thought that it would happen under such dire straits. She sucked on his tongue as it invaded her mouth, questing, stroking, writhing. Her hands were around his face, holding him in place, not that he wanted to go anywhere. He fought her as she pushed her tongue through his lips. His mouth was hot. Everything about him was hot. She forgot that they were in a guardroom bereft of any of the trappings of a civilized habitation. None of that mattered. She had Jaime.

They finally pulled away, gasping for breath, when they ran out of air. "If this is going to be the last day of my life, I should at least enjoy it," he whispered. "Seeing as I will never go down in history as an honourable, I might as well make it true." It wasn't meant for her, so she didn't respond.
Instead, she brought his hand downwards over her chest to where her heart was and placed it there. His hand was hot against her skin through the thin fabric of her tunic. He tugged at the laces holding the tunic in place and slipped it off her. She fumbled with the straps of his armour. They were so cumbersome and so stiff, or had her fingers, all of a sudden, become very clumsy?

"Have we lost our touch, Lady Rebekah?" he asked with a smirk. "But then, reality hardly ever matches up with dreams. We'll see." He got her tunic off first and started nuzzling her neck and the hollow at her throat. The stubble on his face scratched her skin, leaving trails of burning in its wake and contrasting deeply with the feathery kisses he traced all over her. He took one her nipples into his mouth, almost hesitantly, before he began to experimentally lick it. She finally managed to get his chest plate off and threw it aside. It hit the ground with a clang and slid to a dark corner.

His belt came off much more easily. There was already a bulge in his trousers and it was poking against her leg. She loosened the laces on the front of his trousers, letting him spring free. "That's better," she glanced down at his length, admiring him. He was a perfectly sculpted work of art, even covered in sweat and blood and grime. Michelangelo's David could not compete. She had to use all her restraint to not tear off his quilted gambeson. It would have been so easy to simply rip the fabric, but where would they find a replacement in such a short time?

He helped her with shedding it and tossing it aside. It was quickly followed by his linen undershirt. They weren't thinking by this point; they were past it. They might only have a day or even just a few hours. Basic instinct and human need took over. She ran her hands over his body, exploring the contours of his muscles, the hard ridges on his stomach and his arms and chest, raking her fingers down his rippling muscular back.

Jaime pushed her back so she was lying on the stone floor. It was cold and hard against her flesh. Her hair fanned out like a halo around her head as she gazed up at him. "I have you now, Lady Knight," he whispered as he straddled her, with his knees on either side of her hips and his hands, her head, pinning her wrists down. He leaned down to kiss her. She teased him and pulled away more quickly than he had anticipated, biting his lip lightly as she did so. He growled and came down for more, crushing her with his weight.

"Not so quickly, my lord Lannister," she whispered back. With a practised move, she flipped him over so that she was straddling him. "I was being nice in your dream."

He'd always done the riding. He'd never been ridden before. Jaime looked up at Rebekah; beautiful, wild, naïve, powerful Rebekah, with all her strength and delicacy and unsubtlety. Her hair had come loose from her braid. He liked it better like this, down and free. Everything about her was meant to be free.

But it didn't mean he wanted to be on the bottom. He sat up to meet her, kissing her slowly and gently. She didn't taste of blood, as he'd expected. Perhaps she kept her teeth very clean. She must do. He had never seen teeth as perfect as those of the vampires, perhaps except his own, and he knew he took very good care of his. She melted in his arms as he kissed her, all soft white skin and silky hair, with lovely rounded high breasts. He had never really looked at breasts that closely before. With Cersei, making love had been such a hurried affair. He'd never really taken the time. Perhaps Tyrion had been onto something when he had waxed drunken lyrical about the beauty of women's breasts, not that Jaime had ever wasted time in looking at Tyrion's whores. They hadn't inspired the least bit of interest. There was so much more to a woman than just her body.

He reached downwards to play with Rebekah's breasts again, enjoying the way her nipples blossomed and hardened at his touch. She arched her back as he squeezed one of them while his other hand reached down between her legs to stroke the little bud down there. Her thighs strained
against his waist as she struggled to control herself. A little moan escaped her lips. He took advantage of her moment of vulnerability and slammed her up against a stone wall, trapping her between the wall and his body. She was his to take. She was his.

She reached down to grip his hardness, her hand feeling cool against the heat, but it was a good feeling. She rubbed him and stroked him. If he had been any other man, he would have fallen to his knees, so intense was his need for her body. He needed to be inside her. However, she kept him back. He imagined very few women would be strong enough to do that. Or bold enough.

She grabbed the back of his head. He felt the wind rush by, and then a sudden stop as she slammed him up against the other wall of the guardroom. "How do you like that?" she smirked.

"I am going to punish you, my little squire," he growled.

"I bet you most squires wouldn't do this, my lord," she said as she got down onto her knees before him and took him in her mouth, just scraping her teeth lightly over the tip. He gritted his teeth as the excruciating pleasure made him want to lose control. She swirled her tongue around him. He shook. Sweat ran down his body.

"Not like this, Rebekah," he managed to gasp. It took all his control to pull her back up so he could look her in the eye. He tilted her chin back so he could gaze down at her. Then he cupped her supple buttocks. She instinctively wrapped her legs around him as he lifted her up while still kissing her.

He laid her down again. This time, she did not resist. "I want to see your eyes as I make love to you," he whispered. "I want you to say my name."

"My lord…"

"That is not my name."

She stared up at him. A myriad of expressions flickered across her face, too quick for him to register what they all were. She reached up to hold his face in her hands. "Jaime," she whispered.

"That's better," he said. She was wet and ready for him when he entered her, slowly at first, and then more quickly, thrusting himself in and out. They moved as one while grey eyes held their gaze with green ones. Her pupils widened and dilated as he brought her closer and closer to the peak of the wave. He had to struggle to not reach it before she did.

The heat that exploded between them made him almost think that Joffrey had accidentally ignited some leftover wildfire. Would that not be ironic, after all he'd done, to see King's Landing burn in green flames anyway? Although, he would rather it burned than let Stannis and Robb Stark have it.

Sharp pain pierced his neck as she sank her fangs into his flesh when she neared the heights of her ecstasy. Well, all was fair in love and war. He seized her wrist, brought it to his mouth, and bit down as hard as he could. Unfortunately, while his claws might be long and sharp, his teeth were a little less so. They left nothing more than a few imprints on her pale flesh.

"That is going to bruise, my lord," she said as she yanked her hand back to wipe his blood from her lips. Then she bit down into her own flesh before offering the trickling wounds to him. The sight of the red liquid only excited him more. He took her wrist into his mouth and sucked while she drank from him, feeling her life's essence enter him even as she took nourishment from his. They became one another; two halves of the same being.

He arched his back as it hit him. He couldn't separate pain from pleasure, or Rebekah from himself.
It was as if the heat had melded them together. It was slow and drawn out. Everything else faded away as his whole body became alive with feeling. Her muscles clenched and pulsed against him. He finally shuddered and collapsed as he crested the wave at the same time as she did. They both cried out, she, his name, and he, hers.

Wait, her name?

He fell on top of her and lay there. He was exhausted, but it was a good type of exhaustion. They didn't say anything; they simply rested. Sleep did not come. Jaime kept thinking about the future, or rather, the next few hours. This was not his usual sleeping habit. Tyrion was the one who stayed up thinking about irrelevant things. Stannis would break through the gate soon if his father did not come. They would sack the Red Keep. He would die in battle... unless he had an escape plan. Cersei... well, Cersei needed help. She was apt to give up when things became too difficult, even as a girl. She didn't understand that life was a game that you played until the very end. You could never win, but you still played.

"When they break down the gate, I want you to take the Queen far away from here," he said.

"And you, Jaime? What about you?" she asked.

"You are my squire. It's not in your place to question me," he said.

She frowned at him. "But I..." she began, although she didn't get to finish her sentence. Tyrion came barging in, trailed by his two new vampire friends, although he still cast distrustful glances at them every now and then. Oh, Tyrion, if only he knew that these two were their way out of King's Landing should everything not go according to plan.

"Well, I guess you have found sweet succour, brother," said Tyrion. "Congratulations. I thought you'd never reach this stage. Frankly, I'm surprised as to why you haven't done it sooner. There go your vows, I suppose. Now, you are the most dishonourable man in all the seven kingdoms." He raised an eyebrow at their nakedness, while Caroline simply covered her eyes. And then peeked through her fingers anyway.

Rebekah sat up, not at all embarrassed to be unclothed in front of others.

"You are never frank, brother. Is there something that you want?" asked Jaime. He too, sat up. Did they have to interrupt his fleeting moment of peace? Unless Stannis was attacking them again, he didn't really want to know.

"Well, in general, there's a battle that needs fighting, a gate that's splintering and needs reinforcing, and our dear sister is searching for you," said Tyrion. "Should I send word to her that you are otherwise preoccupied?" He looked gleeful at the thought of telling Cersei that Jaime had been with another woman. For a moment, Jaime felt a twinge of something that common mortal men must call panic. Or was it guilt? Yes, Cersei; he would have to tell her. She needed to know.

The bell sounded. Men began to shout. Fuck Stannis. He did really have the best timing. Jaime had been, literally, caught with his trousers around his ankles. Actually, his trousers were nowhere to be found.

"Help me with this," he commanded Rebekah. If she could take off his armour, she could very well put it back on. He fumbled with their discarded clothing, pulling on his trousers, his tunic, and his boots while Rebekah strapped his armour on him with speed faster than the eye could follow. Before he had even blinked four times, she was done and getting dressed herself.
Tyrion blinked. "What was that?" he asked.

"No time to explain," said Jaime. He belted his sword back on and made to leave but he was pulled back by an insistent vampire. Rebekah kissed him fully on the lips as if she never wanted to let him go. But she did, in the end. She wasn't like those other girls who would cry and plead with their men to stay behind. She wouldn't expect him to, nor would she actually want him to.

"Now, go to the queen," said Jaime. "If harm comes to one hair on her head, I will take you to account."

"And if you die, I'll bring you back and kill you again myself."

"Those are treasonous words, little squire."

"They're only treasonous if you're king."

"I'm a kingslayer."

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**Castle Deepwatch, 100 miles northwest of Harrenhal**

It was quiet; too quiet. Jon knew all about the calm before a storm, both literally and…what was that word Elena had used? Meteorically?

He glanced at Damon. The vampire did not look at him as they crept through the corridor and out into the open. Damn him and his irrational childish grudges! He knew exactly why the vampire had tried to leave him in here and it wasn't because he couldn't help. Everything that now happened between Jon and Damon Salvatore came down to one thing, or one person; Elena.

He sighed. Sooner or later, they would need to discuss this like the grown men that they were (believe it or not) but he was not looking forward to it. Nor did he know what to say. He had wronged Damon. Only, was it so wrong if Elena felt the same way? She was a person, not something to be possessed. Who she chose to be with, in the end, was up to her.

And now was hardly the time to ponder such things anyway.

He looked to the south-east, where he knew King's Landing was either already aflame or about to be. He wanted, more than anything, to be by Robb's side while he tricked Stannis and Tywin into locking horns and teeth with one another, but he knew he was of more use here where he could do some actual damage to the Lannisters. And to do that, they needed to trust him.

Sigimund and his men, believing themselves to be safe in their fortress, had gone to bed already, leaving only a few sleepy sentries to guard the walls. They shared drink amongst themselves and sat warming their hands by the charcoal braziers set up along the wall. Occasionally, they might glance out just to make sure there was no light coming from enemy torches. Of course there wouldn't be. Anyone wanting to attack this fort would do so at night under the cover of darkness, and lighting a single torch would give it all away.

It was almost time. Jon's men –Daemon's men– were ready. Damon was more than ready, just like his patroness, Katherine Pierce.

Jon always thought he ought to warn Robb of what sort of woman he'd actually married. Katherine was conniving, manipulative, selfish, and she didn't care about anyone else except herself. He had gleaned that much from the stories Damon and Elena had told him. It wasn't by chance that Robb had fallen in love with her. Katherine had seduced him with the intention of becoming his queen.
because she craved power. People like her always wanted power. Was Robb simply a rung on her ladder? He couldn't tell.

He shook his head. Even if he worried, what could he do except what Katherine had asked? He was far from Robb, and even if he did say something, would Robb believe him? He knew he wouldn't be able to believe if someone had told him anything bad about Elena. Robb was in love with Katherine. He wouldn't believe.

The moon slowly climbed to its zenith. His men—Daemon's men would be watching it too and waiting for Jon's signal to kill all the sentries and open the gates. Wisps of grey cloud floated across her serene cold face. Jon sent up a prayer to whoever was listening. There was probably no one, but it couldn't hurt, right? Or was he being foolish, like his father had been? He'd prayed, and he'd still died. Robb, on the other hand, had burned all the gods. Maybe they were punishing him by sending him Katherine.

Like a creeping pestilence, the men followed him and Damon up to the battlements. The unprepared sentries did not stand a chance. Their throats were cut before they could shout a warning. Others were shot with crossbows taken from their dead brethren where they stood, oblivious to the threat that lurked in the shadows and in plain sight. As they lay bleeding to death on the stone, their blood black in the moonlight, Jon took a torch and shielded its light once before letting it shine again. He repeated. And repeated.

"How does it feel to be a traitor?" Damon whispered, almost making him draw his sword. In fact, he would have if he'd had it.

"I owe Robb Stark nothing," said Jon. "I owe him less than nothing."

"You like it, don't you, deep down, fooling Robb?" whispered Damon. "Because even though you seem to be so good and perfect, Jon Snow, you really want to be bad. It's not bad to be bad."

"The difference between you and I, Damon, is that I don't do bad things simply for the sake of being a bad donkey."

"Badass, Jon. Badass."

**Next chapter:** Daemon Lannister learns the error of not obeying Lord Tywin. Jaime's lovers confront each other. Lions are sighted on the horizon.
Jon and Damon exact revenge on a nobody. Caroline and Rebekah face down Cersei. Robb doubts everyone, except Katherine. Jaime is satisfied that his faith was not misplaced.

Castle Deepwatch, 100 miles northwest of Harrenhal


Jon shrugged. He couldn't really see the difference, and he wasn't in the mood for Damonic tricks at the moment. Daemon's army was moving towards the gate. He motioned for the men to open it. The hinges groaned and grated. That couldn't be helped. They couldn't very well have oiled them first, now, could they?

No one woke. It was as if someone had told them how Jon needed to help Daemon take this fortress. Had they been told? But how could anyone have known? Even Katherine couldn't be everywhere at once. She wasn't omni– omni– that big word that meant everywhere and all powerful.

Or was she?

Jon shook his head. He really ought to know better, considering he knew exactly who and what she was. She was just a vampire, albeit a very devious and cunning and tricky one. Then again, vampires had never purported to be honest creatures now, had they? Even Elena had lied to him for a long time before she had finally told him the truth. Their very existence required secrecy and knowing things no one else did.

Daemon's army flooded in. The northmen were slain as they lay sleeping. Some of them tried to fight back, but they were unarmed and unprepared, much like the Lannisters at Harrenhal, or so he'd heard. The stories had a way of distorting the truth. After all, if it was a good story, who cared about the truth, even though the truth was sometimes even stranger than the tales?

Elena rode beside Daemon, looking very out of place there. Was that a new riding cloak that she was wearing? And was it red? Daemon. He must have given it to her. It was made of velvet and edged with gold. Jon had never seen a cloak this nice before in his life. For a moment, jealousy gripped him, because he could never hope to be that rich and he could never give Elena all the good things that she deserved, like this cloak. And more.

When she saw him, her face lit up, and she leapt off her horse to run to him. She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck, and at that moment, he felt, and knew, that the jealous ones were Damon and Daemon. Elena didn't care for all the gold in the world, even if she did deserve jewels and pretty dresses and a beautiful castle to live in.

"I was so worried," she breathed as she finally released him, although not fully. Her arms still hung loosely about his neck and she was gazing at him as if he were the only man in the world.
"You had no need to be," he assured her as he cupped her face and brushed a lock of hair away from her forehead. "There was nothing to worry about. Look, I'm fine."

"I'm not," growled Damon. "Your boyfriend had me chained up and locked in a dungeon."

"You seem to forget that I was also locked in a dungeon," Jon pointed out, not feeling at all sorry for it. He had needed to trick Sigimund, and it had worked, hadn't it?

"You were locked in the dungeon?" demanded Elena.

Oops. He hadn't meant to tell her that. "Well, I am not in a dungeon now," said Jon.

"How did you end up in a dungeon?" Elena refused to give up. He liked that about her, usually, but he didn't really want to go through it just now.

"It's complicated," he said.

Damon came to his rescue. "Long story short, Sigimund saw right through Jon's lies. He's a terrible liar. I should have left you--"

"Boys," said Elena. They stopped.

"Is it just me, or are you even bossier than usual?" asked Damon.

"We've a fortress to consolidate," said Elena. "Is that how you say it?"

Jon shook his head. He had no idea how to say it. Robb would probably know. He was educated, like Elena and Damon and Daemon and Stefan. Elena deserved someone who was as learned as she was and who knew how to write his own name without a struggle.

"Jon?" said Elena, jerking him out of his doubts. He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing important," said Jon.

"It's all important to me," said Elena.

He resolved to learn to write. He'd been meaning to do that for some time, actually, except there never seemed to be any time.

"Katherine Stark was onto something," remarked Daemon as he surveyed his captured prize. "I imagine Harrenhal wasn't much different." He gripped Jon's shoulder. "I thank you for your service. When I see Lord Tywin, I will tell him what you have done. There will be lands and titles in your future if this continues, my friend. Who knows? Perhaps one day you will be Lord Stark and warden of the north."

"We'll have to take the north first," said Jon as he put on a grim smile, as if he were actually pleased about this. Although, it was hard to not smirk and feel superior when a young page came to announce that Ser Hagan Sigimund, as of now, the only knight in the north, had barricaded himself inside his bed chamber and was hurling down ineffective insults at 'Jon the Bastard'.

"Well, let's have a look-see, shall we, my lord?" asked Damon with a grin. Jon knew he was looking forward to this. He and Sigimund had unfinished business.

Sigimund leaned out of his window, half-dressed, shaking a fist angrily at them. He looked terribly small from this distance. "You cur, Jon Snow! You bastard! Cur! Dog! Flea! Son of a whore!" Jon
stiffened.

"Well, that's not very nice," said Daemon.

"If you would allow it, my lord, I would give him a lesson in manners," said Damon with an extravagant bow.

"What exactly are you going to do? Well, I don't really care, so long as he is alive and unspoiled."

"I give no guarantees, my lord, for the unspoiled part."

"And I also need his tongue," said Daemon.

Damon grabbed a crossbow and raised it as if he were giving a toast. He loaded and took aim. Sigimund yelped when the crossbow bolt flew past his head. As it grazed the top of his ear, he panicked and lost his balance. Unfortunately, he had been leaning too far out the window. He almost fell, but he managed to support himself in time.

"It's time to come out and play, Ser Hagan," called Damon. "Don't you remember our little games in Winterfell? We had so much fun."

"Traitor!" shouted Sigimund.

"Maybe we should take apart your bower stone by stone, my lady," said Damon. "It's not very nice to lock visitors out."

In the end, they had to take a battering ram to the door. It was ironic, since the fortress had yielded with less fuss. The door splintered with a loud crack. Sigimund charged out screaming like a madman, wielding his sword as if it were an axe instead and going straight for Jon.

Damon knocked him down.

The vampire's grin only widened as Sigimund was brought before them, red-faced with anger and indignity. Daemon Lannister had the smug satisfied look of a lion who had just brought down a mammoth and been unharmed in the process. (Did lions ever hunt mammoths? He'd never seen one do so. In fact, Jon had never seen a real lion before and they were as mythical to him as giants and trolls.)

"Let go of me!" Sigimund raged as he struggled, but he had been bound tightly and he was being held by four men.

"Ser…Hagan Sigimund, is it?" asked Daemon. "You should have taken better care of your fort."
He tsked and wagged a finger at Sigimund as if he were a naughty child who had misbehaved.
"Whatever would your Lord Stark say if he knew you let us walk in without a fuss? I assure you, he is not so generous a man. Do you recall what happened to Rickard Karstark? Jon Umber? All the Umbers?"

Sigimund seethed, but Jon could see fear in his eyes. He could almost smell it. In fact, he believed that if his sense of smell were more powerful, he would have. Ghost always knew when someone was afraid, and Damon had said that people's scent changed when they had fear in their blood.

"They were both his trusted bannermen," Daemon continued. "Karstark was even his favourite. He'd raised him high above all others, only to drop him and watch him be torn apart by the wolves below. What do you think Stark will do to you, hmm? Maybe he'll feed you to his direwolf. On the other hand, Ser Sigimund, a Lannister always pays his debts, and I feel as if I owe you for your
hospitality and generosity in giving me your fort."

"No, no, you don't want him, my lord," Damon interjected.

"Ah, it seems that my dear friend objects," said Daemon. "What is your view, Ser Damon?"

"I think we should say hello to Robb Stark, considering we're at his doorstep," said Damon. "What do you think of a gift?"

"I'm listening," said Daemon. Sigimund's face took on a look of panic as he looked at his least favourite person in the world.

Damon smiled. His teeth looked particularly white and sharp in the moonlight. If Jon had not known better, he would have said Damon had fanged.

"I do not think a gift would be necessary," said Jon, "although perhaps we should return the things we've taken from him. Like this fine man, for example, although it would be hard to put him in a parcel. Limbs do take up a lot of room."

"They can be removed," said Damon. "Or, perhaps a token of our respect? A skull, gold-plated, of course, and with gems for eyes, to be used as a cup?"

Jon's eyes widened at that. Well, that sounded very appetizing, drinking out of the space where someone's brain used to be. He wouldn't be able to look at red wine the same way ever again, especially considering it was Damon who had suggested this skull cup idea. He wondered if Damon had ever had one before, and what drink he'd drunken out of it if he'd had. Probably not red wine, but something a little stronger.

"That's barbaric, Damon," scolded Elena. She turned to Daemon. "You wouldn't do that, my lord, would you?"

"It's tempting," said Daemon, "but I want him alive."

"He'd be better than alive," argued Damon. "He'd be immortalized!"

"But what's he ever done that's worthy of immortalization?" asked Jon.

"The only northerner worthy of immortalization is Robb Stark," said Daemon.

He had no idea how right he was. It wasn't such a far-fetched possibility. Robb was surrounded by the immortal undead. Was it really so hard to believe that one of them, either Damon or Elena or Katherine, would turn him one day, either at his behest or to save him?

Elena gave Jon a secretive smile as they shared the unspoken joke. Daemon could give her all the pretty cloaks in the world, but he could never have this. Of all the people Elena had trusted, she'd chosen him.

And Mormont and Benjen and Aemon and Sam and Gendry and Hot Pie.

Still, she hadn't kissed any of those people before now, had she? She'd only threatened to kiss Benjen when he'd brought her onions.

"We'll decide on the morrow when we are all better rested," Daemon declared.

"We'll decide, my lord? I didn't know this was a democracy," said Elena.
"I have no idea what a democracy is, but judging by your tone, I suspect I wouldn't like it," said Daemon. "But, I would not proceed without considering your opinion, my lady. Sometimes, a more subtle feminine touch is needed."

King's Landing

Caroline was feeling giddy. Others might be feeling giddy from blood loss, but she was feeling giddy and drunk on blood. Never had she glutted herself like this before. "You almost seem like a real vampire now," Rebekah remarked as she let drop a drained body. No one was watching. They were all too busy preserving their own lives.

"I can't believe he sent us away to the Queen," said Caroline.

"So he wants us to protect his sister," said Rebekah. "Is that so surprising?"

For a moment, Caroline forgot that Rebekah was an evil blood-slut. Or should it be blood-glut? No, she was definitely a blood-slut; she'd seen more of Rebekah than she had ever hoped to see. She'd also seen more of Lord Jaime than she had ever wanted, although it was hard to regret that. Could she blame Rebekah for giving into the temptation, given that she and Jaime had been doing this dance for so long? Jaime looked good. For someone his age.

Although Cersei could not be excused for her behaviour, if the rumours were real which, judging by the appearance of the King, they probably were. Not that she would ever say anything of that kind in front of a Lannister, especially not Lord Tywin.

"I can't believe you guys had sex in the middle of a battle," said Caroline.

"It was a break," said Rebekah. "What else were we supposed to do?"

Normal things, like eat, drink, wash, and sleep, but Caroline kept those things to herself. She could do with a little action herself, come to think of it. She missed Tyler so badly, and she was a baby vampire with needs. Instead, she tried to keep up with the older vampire's long strides towards Maegor's Holdfast as they left the battle behind them. She thought of Stefan on the battlements, surrounded by so much death and blood. Could he control himself? But he had no choice; he needed to, because if he went Ripper, everyone would know about them and she hoped that even Ripper Stefan knew that they needed to keep their existence a secret.

Right?

"You're in love with him, aren't you?" she asked Rebekah. That made her pause for long enough for Caroline to catch up with her. Who knew she could be so damn fast? Then again, she wasn't being weighed down by cumbersome skirts.

Rebekah turned around and pinned her to where she stood with an icy grey glare. "Caroline Forbes, I'm tolerating you for now, but if you say one more word about Jaime Lannister, I'll gladly rip your heart out of your chest and send it to Nik for Valentine's Day."

Was that a hymn that she could hear coming from within the holdfast? Rebekah rolled her eyes. Of all the things they could do, they were praying? Talk about fatuous. The gods, if they even existed, didn't care about the existence of petty mortal creatures like people. She shoved open the door.

The women, standing in their little prayer circle, looked up in fright, with blood draining from their faces as they thought the wall had been breached and the Baratheon men were coming to sully
their honour or whatever it was that these women feared the most. Ilyn Payne barred her entry. If the mute could have spoken, he probably would have reminded her of whose presence she was in or something inane like that.

Rebekah pushed him aside and approached Cersei. The whole room smelled of wine, and not the weak stuff either. Jaime's sister was half sitting and half reclining on a low couch, her cheeks tinged with red from the alcohol. "What are you stopping for?" she said to her maid. "More wine."

She and Fat King Robert would have made the perfect couple. Why in the world did she have to go and kill him?

"My queen," said Rebekah as she dipped a low curtsey. All the women were staring at her and her blood-stained men's clothing.

"Is that the lady knight?" one of them whispered.

"I hear she's Lord Jaime's lover."

"She's not that pretty."

Whoever said that would pay.

"Lord Jaime sent me to protect you," Rebekah continued as if she couldn't hear the whispers behind her. The so-called ladies covered their mouths with their hands as if that would make their gossiping any softer.

"How very kind of my brother to send me his little whore," said Cersei. Rebekah reminded herself that Jaime would not like it if she tore his sister apart here and now.

"Lord Jaime is worried for your safety," said Rebekah. "If the news of your demise, whatever form it may come in, reaches the battlements, it would sap the men's morale. Ser Ilyn is a great warrior, but he is only one man."

"And you are one girl out of many," said Cersei. She might have been beautiful when she'd been younger, but that beauty had been darkened by bitter regret and cynicism a long time ago. How unlike her twin she was. She had nothing of the youthful nature Jaime had kept with him all along.

"What do you think you are worth to him, hmm? One quick little fuck?"

"It was a long one, actually, Your Grace."

Cersei's knuckles whitened around her cup as her grip on the vessel tightened. The surface of the wine quivered. If it had been glass, she would have crushed it. Rebekah barely managed to stop herself from smirking. To be the envy of a queen was better than being a queen! Well, at least, it was better for her ego. Another part of her, the part that sometimes garnered praise from Elijah—not just brotherly adoration, but praise—told her that perhaps this was not such a great idea; that Cersei Lannister was a bad enemy to have. But what did she have to fear? She was an Original Vampire. It wasn't as if Cersei could top that.

She couldn't comprehend the staring contest between Cersei and the lady knight … what was her name again? Rebekah? What was she doing? Didn't she know the queen was dangerous? Still, Sansa felt a thrill shiver through her as she watched the two women and wished she could be more like Jaime Lannister's little blonde beauty. She wasn't afraid of anything. Sansa was so tired of being afraid, of thinking that every day may be her last. Judging by the way Rebekah held herself, she looked as if she would never have a last day, as if she was going to live and be young and
beautiful and powerful forever.

Sansa looked away and continued to sing her hymn, pretending that she hadn't noticed any of it. Her apparent stupidity was her best defence. No one really cared about hurting innocent little doves. Now, eagles with two heads were different and everyone wanted to shoot one, but it didn't seem to have done Katherine Pierce any harm. Although, she was with Robb. Even Katherine couldn't deal with Joffrey, right?

She glanced up at Shae briefly, wondering what her fiery foreign handmaid thought of the whole situation. Undoubtedly, she would have an opinion on it.

"Lady Sansa, how are you?"

Sansa started. She had been so focussed on Rebekah that she had failed to notice the other fighting woman under the Lannister banner. Caroline's blue eyes were without guile, and she looked genuinely concerned, but she knew better. The people in King's Landing wore elaborate masks to hide what they were truly like inside. She was learning. No doubt Caroline had perfected hers a long time ago, or else she wouldn't have become Tywin Lannister's favourite so quickly.

Or was she his mistress? She was certainly pretty.

"I am well, thank you, Lady Forbes, and I am most glad to see that you have returned unharmed," said Sansa. "Although I worry for my beloved King Joffrey and I pray for his safe and victorious return every moment."

"He's…safe," said Caroline. "And, please, call me Caroline. It feels so odd to be calling friends Lady this and Lady that, my lady."

"Then you must call me Sansa, Lady Caroline," said Sansa with a pretty curtsey. Ah, so Caroline didn't like Joffrey either? Well, that was hardly surprising. Joffrey was a boy whom no one could love except his mother, and even she was struggling to do it. His father—both his fathers—didn't seem to care for him at all. Fat King Robert had been disdainful, and Lord Jaime seemed to pretend they weren't even related.

"Then it's settled," said Caroline. "No more 'Lady'."

No, indeed; no more Lady. Her death should have been a warning. How could she have been so blind? But Sansa was beginning to see her blind spot. She liked dashing handsome men with swords strapped to their belts. She'd dreamed about them ever since she had been a little girl listening to the stories at Nan's knee. Joffrey had never been her prince, not even when he had been pretending, but she had made him into that, just as she had made Damon into her white knight when he was actually Arya's knight.

A woman like Rebekah would need no dashing princes and no handsome knights, even though it seemed she'd gotten one anyway. Rebekah curtseyed to the queen and backed away, but everyone knew who had won that first skirmish. Whether the bold Mikaelson would win the war remained to be seen. Cersei was a Lannister, after all.

Jaime began to regret sending the two prettiest vampires away, not because he missed looking at them, but because he could really use an extra set of fangs right now. Stefan was tearing into men left and right, spraying himself with their blood. He was a messy eater, that one, although he wasn't allowed to eat at present. Eating on the job was…what was that word? Unprofessorial?

The men were tiring more quickly than last time. Most of them hadn't had a proper chance to rest,
and the vampires certainly did not share their blood easily. The blood exchange had given Jaime strength and vigour that he hadn't known he'd had, not that he was ever going to admit it. He was going to need that additional strength if he was to face Stannis Baratheon again.

Stannis clambered over the wall, as expected, his arm in a sling and splinted. Hah! They'd broken his arm!

After all that work and pain and sweat, they'd broken his arm.

"Kingslayer," snarled Stannis, not bothering with convention and pretend niceties anymore. Well, they'd made Stannis forget his principles. That was a good sign that they'd managed to do something. Now, if only Jaime could continue doing this mysterious something until Father arrived.

"Stan," said Jaime. "I would have thought you'd have learnt your lesson, or do you want me to throw you down the wall again just to reiterate my point?"

"Big words for a defeated man," said Stannis. He charged, but with his right hand in a sling, he had lost much of his power. Still, he was unnaturally strong. Jaime feinted to the side and let him pass by, and as he did, he helped him along in his fall to the ground by kicking him in the small of his back. The power of the ground always made people fall –he'd heard the vampires talking about this thing called 'gravity'; apparently some idiot in their world had made it his life's mission to study how things fell, and why, after an apple had conked him on the head.

Stannis tumbled to the ground, his armour making a huge racket as the plates clashed against the rock. The rock came out worse off. His red witch was very good at magic, that was for certain. After this battle, he was going to get Rebekah to find him a witch, without doubt. He needed all the advantages he could get in this unnatural world.

A horn sounded in the distance. At first, Jaime took no notice of it, but then it sounded again, and the tone of it wasn't that of the Baratheon horns.

"Lions!" cried one of the men. "Lord Jaime, lion banners!"

Father.

Near Castle Deepwatch

He had not expected Jon to take Deepwatch. Robb had hoped that someone would attempt to take Deepwatch, but not Jon! He hadn't given Jon any commands to do it. Why had Jon taken Deepwatch? Had it been an act all along, with Jon pretending to be loyal to him when he had actually been lusting after Lannister titles and gold? He didn't know what to think anymore. Would Jon betray him? A couple of months ago, he would not have even thought it. But, then, he hadn't thought that Theon would have betrayed him either, and he had.

Jon, his brother, the companion of his childhood, the man he had grown up with, the one person in the world he had trusted truly and entirely, had betrayed him. It was real this time. It couldn't be anything else, could it?

Why would he do that? Was it ambition? Robb would have given him anything –well, almost anything, considering the Iron Throne was not up for negotiations– but he had turned to Robb's enemies instead.

He couldn't think clearly. It was as if his world had just shattered. The mist fell away to reveal
what an ugly place it truly was. "I thought we were brothers, Katherine," he whispered. "I suppose that was me being sentimental again. Theon betrayed me. Why wouldn't Jon?"

Something twitched in his wife's face, but he was too distraught to think of why that could possibly be significant. Images of his childhood flashed before his eyes as he recalled his best memories. Jon had been in every one of them.

But he had thought that Damon had betrayed him too, hadn't he? Many, many times? But Damon had proven true. All right, so he hadn't accomplished anything much, but that was because he was Damon and was too busy having fun and being cocky to have a plan. That was, until Katherine had somehow gotten messages through to him and Jon. Wait…

"Katherine, is there something you would like to tell me?" he said.

"I didn't tell them anything, but, contrary to popular belief, Jon and Damon have eyes and ears and are capable coming up with their own ideas, some of which might even have the resemblance of a draft plan."

"You think very highly of them," said Robb, a little worried now. A resemblance of a draft plan? Jon should know better than to plan anything without consultation! Unless he consulted Damon, which would be much, much worse.

"Actually, I do have faith in them. Time spent in the Lannister camp executing my plans should have taught them something, no matter how little. But I can assure you, my dear husband, that your brother is the last man in the world who would ever betray anybody, least of all you."

"That gives me some comfort to know that Jon has not betrayed me," said Robb, "but, in that case, can he convince the Lannisters that he has? I worry for him." It didn't seem like a very Jon thing to do, but then, the war had changed them all. He was vying to be king and pretending to not want to be king at the same time, Jon had abandoned his dreams of the Night's Watch and was now playing a spy in the Lannister camp (hard to blame him, considering he'd found a woman who looked just like Katherine), Sansa was making bad bards eat their own words, and Arya…

Well, Arya still just wanted to wave a sword around and was always complaining about how Damon had stolen hers. It was good to have constants in life.

"Well, just because you now understand doesn't mean that you can stop being miserable about it," said Katherine.

"I know that," said Robb. Jon had done so much to try and help. If he were to try and protect his brother, then he would have to continue pretending to hate him until this was all finished and Jon could return to where he belonged, at his side.

"So, about this fortress," said Katherine, "I think it's best to not let Damon and Daemon become too comfortable in it. Who knows what they'll do to it if you leave it for too long?"

"Maybe Damon will build another sculpture of Sansa."

"Or of himself, more likely."

"Everything is in place, my lady," said Robb. He didn't turn to look at her. He didn't need to, for he knew she was smiling. "You didn't really think I'd let someone like Hagan Sigimund guard anything if I didn't intend for the enemy to take it, did you?"

"I was wondering," said Katherine. She ran a hand through her hair and made a face at its state,
simply because she hadn't washed it in two days. Robb couldn't remember the last time he washed his hair.

"I am hurt by your lack of faith in my judgement, my lady wife. After all, you should know that it is not to be laughed at; I did marry you."

Katherine laughed. The sound always sent a thrill through him, even now after so many months of being married. He had come to expect tricks and deception from her. Good straightforward honesty might have been nice from time to time—like when she had led him to believe that Damon had betrayed him when he was, in fact, being one of the more useful bannermen he had— but it was not in her nature. Still, she managed to surprise him constantly. Whatever village she had come from, it must have been very different from any village in the north. When he had asked about the location of Mystic Falls, she had mysteriously said, "The Globe".

He had never found such a place on any map.

They closed in on the fortress. It blended in with the mountains at night. Its silhouette looked like any of the giant boulders that littered the mountain passes, except a little more square. Several torches blazed on the battlements.

"They number over two thousand, my lord," said Bolton. "It would not be easy to take the fortress under normal circumstances."

"But these are not normal circumstances, are they, my lord Bolton?" said Robb. "Most of Sigimund's supplies were delayed and the existing ones...well, they mainly don't exist. There is only enough grain to last them the time it took for us to get here. Besides, measures have been taken to weaken the gates beforehand."

"And the wells, my lord?"

"There was a terrible plague of rats," interjected Katherine. "They died of...rat poison. Nasty disease."

Robb smiled grimly. "Surround the fort," he said. "If Daemon Lannister is a clever man, then he will understand exactly what he must do." A Lannister surrendering to the Starks; imagine the... what was that word?

Furore.

Next chapter: Daemon realizes there is a price for disobeying Lord Tywin. Robb learns the power of music. Jaime and Tyrion must face their father's judgement and he is judging.
Chapter Summary

Robb learns the power of music. Tywin arrives in King's Landing.

Castle Deepwatch

The men hauled sacks of grain off the pile in the large barn where all the stores of the castle were kept. Daemon raised his lantern to scrutinize the supplies they had. It looked as if the northerners had been preparing for winter. They had been eating Stark grain, now, for the last couple of days. It had been handy, really, for Daemon had been running low on supplies himself. "Poor Robb Stark," he said. "Not only did he lose his castle, but I think we also took his main storehouse."

Daemon kicked a sack of grain as he grew bored with the very important task of taking stock. Then he paused. "Is grain supposed to feel like that?" he asked.

"Feel like what?" asked Jon.

"Well, sand," said Damon. He bent down to undo the top of the sack. It was dark. Damon withdrew a handful of…

Sand.

"Get Sigimund in here. Now," growled Daemon. His squire hurried off to summon the shamed knight. Sigimund was brought before them in chains. He looked even more miserable than before. Jon hadn't thought that was possible.

"Open all the sacks," said Daemon. The men undid all the sacks. Some of them contained grain. Most of them had some mixture of sand and gravel. "Tell me, what do you see?"

"Uh…uh…" said Sigimund.

"Dirt," said Damon with a curious expression that almost implied he was…

Impressed.

Luckily, the other Daemon was too preoccupied shoving Sigimund's face into said dirt. "What is Robb Stark planning?" he demanded. Sigimund tried to scream, but his mouth was being filled with dirt.

"Stop!" cried Elena. She pulled Daemon back. Jon tried to pull her back, but she was too quick for him. She grabbed Daemon by the arm and pulled him up. Sigimund was dragged up with him. The knight gasped for air, his face dusted with sand and the mud encrusted his lips. "He probably doesn't know anything!"

"Robb Stark played us," growled Daemon.

"He likes doing that," said Damon. "Well, he's obviously of no use to us – I mean Sigimund, not Robb Stark – so…"
A strange sound interrupted him. Hagan Sigimund began to laugh through his bloody and muddied mouth. It was an utterly alien sound and so completely out of place that they all stilled. "Lord Stark is coming for you! For all of you!" he cackled. He swivelled his bloodshot eyes to look at Jon. "And when he catches you, bastard, he will tear you apart!"

Jon said nothing. He pulled out his sword faster than the eye could see. Elena gasped. He plunged it through Sigimund's chest. Sigimund gurgled as blood spilled from his mouth and his eyes glazed over. But he continued laughing until he stopped breathing. His blood stained the floor of the barn and trickled towards his boots.

He had killed a fellow northerner. He had killed one of his brother's men for being loyal to his brother. Sigimund had died a fool, but he was a brave and loyal fool, at least. Would Robb understand? He would have to, wouldn't he?

"What have you…?" whispered Elena, her eyes wide.

Jon still said nothing as he sheathed his sword. She stared at him, a mix of horror and shock in her face. He wanted to tell her that he had to do it. The man had threatened him and mocked him. It was what any great man with ambition would do. Jon did not consider himself to be a great man, or even a very good one, but he was pretending to be. Daemon had to believe that he was.

"I'm going to miss him," said Damon. "Maybe we can give Robb Stark his skull cup after all. My guess is that the Little Wolf intends for us to starve here and he'll soon be turning up to make sure that we do."

"Oh, don't sound so cheerful," snapped Daemon. "Ready the men. I want us gone from here yesterday. If we are still here by the time he reaches us, he'll be drinking out of our skulls."

At that moment, one of the men came running in, breathless and panicked. "The young wolf!" he cried. "He's here!"

Daemon saw the torches emerging from the darkness, blinking one by one until he seemed to be surrounded by a sea of flickering flame. They rolled over the hills and closed up every pass through which they could have gotten away.

He knew they were trapped before he even saw the wolf banner edged in gold. Robb Stark was here, himself, to deal with Daemon Lannister. He laughed internally at that. Even the great Tywin Lannister hadn't had such an honour!

And if he didn't do something, it might very well be the last honour he had.

The Stark forces came to a stop before the walls. He couldn't count them, but he estimated there were at least ten thousand, if not more.

More torches were brought to where Robb Stark had stopped. Beside him rode his wife, a dainty little thing with tiny bones, a tiny waist, and dark hair. It was too far and dark to make out her features clearly, but he frowned when he noticed the several similarities she shared with Elena. She seemed to be quite a lovely creature, and it was hard to imagine that she had defeated and degraded Gregor Clegane until he wasn't even really just an animal. Still, perhaps he shouldn't underestimate her. Maybe it was his turn this time.

Except he wasn't going to chafe at the noose that was closing around his neck like Clegane had. He was a Lannister, after all, and not an attack dog.
Lord Tywin needed to know. But even by a raven's flight, it would be too late by the time the great Lannister patriarch got word of it. They would all be skull cups.

"He must have brought every available man he has," said Jon. "I didn't think he'd come."

"I think we may have bitten the bait in his trap," said Daemon. Did Jon Snow know this was going to happen? But judging by the look of surprise on his face, he didn't think so. Still, men were unpredictable. Yet, why waste his disguise on this? Daemon was of no consequence to the greater picture. He knew that much. His uncle wouldn't even really notice that he had been captured. Tywin Lannister had let his own beloved golden Jaime rot in a Stark cage. He couldn't care less if his nephew ended up taking his place. "But, no matter."

"You're very calm for someone who's about to die, my lord," remarked Damon in his usual insolent manner that Daemon had come to expect.

"I think you should worry more about yourself, Damon Salvatore," said Daemon. "Robb Stark doesn't like his enemies, but he takes even less kindly to former friends who have betrayed him." As he said that, he glanced at Jon Snow. The man's face was unreadable, but he was swallowing quite rapidly. Either he was anticipating his brother's storming of the fort, or he was actually afraid. "Lady Elena, perhaps it would be best if you retired to your chambers." Her and Jon's actually. Daemon wasn't sure whether they were married or not. Would anyone like Elena marry a bastard? "I am afraid things may become ugly here."

"I'm not going anywhere, my lord," said Elena as she clutched Jon's hand more tightly.

"She's a very brave woman," Daemon remarked to Jon.

"She is right here," said Jon.

"That she is." He turned to his squire. "Bring me my harp," he commanded.

"Your harp?" said Damon.

"Lesser men should not ask so many questions if they do not understand the workings of higher minds," said Daemon. Salvatore wasn't the only arrogant bastard here. "Open the gates when I start playing."

"Don't you mean barricade them?" asked Damon.

"Like I said, you should not question me," said Daemon as he perched on the edge of the battlements and settled his harp on his lap. He plucked a few experimental notes to make sure the instrument was in tune. Of course it was in tune.

The light illuminated the grey heads of the snarling wolves. His music was wasted on them. He calmed himself for a moment and focused solely on his harp and his hands to get his mind into the higher levels of consciousness. It was a familiar touch, an old friend.

And then he began.

When the first notes quivered in the night, borne by the cold winds blowing over the hills, Katherine stilled. The harp was not only plucked with delicacy and skill, but also a hidden strength seen by very few. They were calm and confident, completely unburdened by the thought of impending death or doom. The northmen could not understand such subtleties and they didn't know why they were stopping. "They've opened the gates!" one of them cried. "My lord, we can take it!"
Katherine raised a hand to silence them. "Listen, my lord," she said.

Robb did. Music wasn't his strength, but every man, woman, child and babe in the womb in Westeros knew this song. "The Rains of Castamere," said Robb.

"He's surrounded and he is playing music while he opens the gates for us," whispered Katherine, half to herself and half to Robb. Who was this exquisite creature? She had heard great things (and terrible things) of Jaime Lannister and Tywin Lannister and even Tyrion and Cersei, but no one had spoken of Daemon Lannister, a true hidden talent who ought not be overshadowed by his more extravagant relatives. It took a man of a certain mettle and fortitude to be able to be this calm while facing annihilation.

And he was beautiful too. He wasn't as broad shouldered as his cousin Jaime, but he had the same piercing eyes that had first drawn her to Robb. His face might be considered too feminine in Westeros, but in the Renaissance, he would have been fawned over by every man and woman as someone of great beauty. Sculptors would have fought to capture his image in stone and painters would use his face as the face of angels in the greatest cathedrals.

He did not glance at the army outside, but continued playing, his fingers dancing over the strings and sending sound waves vibrating through the air. Behind him, Damon and Jon stood, unsure of what was going on but trying to hide it. Jon was with Elena. Lucky Elena. Katherine wouldn't mind having a Jon Snow. Yes, she had a Robb Stark, but she was a greedy little girl.

"It's either a bluff, or he has a plan," said Katherine.

"If it's a bluff, then he is very brave," said Robb.

"And if it is a plan, then he is very dangerous," said Katherine.

"Which is it?" asked Robb.

"That I cannot say," said Katherine. "His playing...listen. The notes do not quaver. They are sure. A man who is afraid cannot play like that because his hands would be shaking. If it turns out to be a plan, we could suffer great losses on our part."

"But if it is a bluff, and we retreat, we would have lost a chance to destroy Daemon Lannister."

"Nobody cares about Daemon Lannister," said Katherine. "Have you even heard of him until recently?"

Robb shook his head. "I suppose he is not descended from the right Lannister."

And thus the underlying anger in his playing. He was a frustrated man, always being kept down by his more famous cousins and uncle when he had more charm and talent than all of them. Daemon Lannister had ambitions. He had no intention of dying here at this little no name fort having made one impulsive little mistake that had turned out to be larger than he'd thought.

But what if this wasn't a mistake? What if he had tricked them into believing he had fallen into their trap, while he was actually hiding a large force of men inside, waiting for them to charge in unawares before closing the gates and slaughtering them within while the rest of them remained helpless outside?

She almost laughed out loud at herself then. Clever, clever Daemon, to have manipulated her into thinking that. Tywin Lannister had been using him as an outrider all along. Damon had given her nothing to the contrary. He didn't have more than two thousand men and she didn't think that, at
this crucial moment, the Lannister Patriarch would actually send his nephew to take a no-name fort with a great force while he was about to lose his capital of King's Landing to Stannis. There was a small likelihood, but it was very small. Still, it gave her the excuse she needed.

"We should wait a little further," said Katherine. She didn't want Robb to call Daemon's bluff. Robb would kill him. A man like that could not be left alive, at least not in Robb's mind. But what a waste that would be. Daemon had so much potential and so much ambition. They could use that, perhaps not now, but later, when they really needed someone to undermine Tywin Lannister. There was no point in even thinking about using any other. Daemon was perfectly situated to do it. He was a Lannister, he was trusted, he was underestimated, and he really, really wanted it.

"Retreat a mile," said Robb. "We will wait to see what game Daemon Lannister is playing." He turned his horse to ride away. Katherine stayed behind, gazing up at the top of the battlements.

As the last notes faded away, Daemon finally looked up. His gaze met Katherine's. She gave him the slightest of nods, knowing that he probably wouldn't see it, per se, but he would understand anyway. She would let him live for now, and he owed her.

Lannisters always paid their debts.

They couldn't know it, but he was sweating. Still, Daemon focused on nothing else other than the music. His harp gleamed golden in the torch light. He trained his eye on the lions depicted on its body. He was a Lannister of Casterly Rock and a lion amongst men. He would not quiver in fear at the sight of wolves and eagles.

He didn't expect the northerners to understand the message he was sending, but Katherine Stark would. They spoke the same language of music and she was a clever woman. She would know. Of course, there was a chance that she would see through his bluff, but would someone like her really risk her army and her lordly husband?

The song ended, and he rested his hands on the body of the harp, his old friend. The metal was warm beneath his hands as if it were alive. He glanced down at the northern army. They hadn't moved at all. For a moment, he wondered if they had seen through it, or perhaps Katherine Stark had not caught onto the subtleties of his music.

Nobody spoke on the battlements. They were all too nervous, or perhaps just too curious, if one were Damon Salvatore.

And then, Robb Stark slowly turned his horse around to ride away, not noticing that his wife had not followed him immediately.

Katherine looked up at him. He narrowed his eyes so he could see better. Was she giving him a nod of acknowledgement? Yes, she was! A moment of understanding passed between them, from musician to musician. She must have known it was a bluff, and yet she had spared him anyway. What for? He watched her ride away. There was no time to ponder it right now. As soon as Robb Stark realized it was a bluff, he would come thundering back, all swords and arrows and merciless steel.

"Come," he said to his people. "We have to be gone before they realize they have been tricked."

"What was that?" asked Damon.

"Didn't you see Katherine and how she reacted?" asked Daemon. "She suspected I might have an ambush waiting within."
"But you do not, my lord," said Jon.

"Such is the power of music," said Daemon as he gave his harp one last loving stroke and let his men wrap it up for its journey back to safety. He supposed they wouldn't destroy it even if they destroyed him, for Katherine Stark had a great appreciation for beautiful and fine things. She was that type of woman and he knew it even though he had never spoken—well, with words—to her in his entire life. "When used well, it weaves the greatest illusion known to man and, at the same time, conveys truths that no words can."

"That was incredible," said Elena. "I don't know how you could have played so well under such pressure."

Daemon smiled. "You flatter me, Lady Elena."

The horses were ready by the time they reached the courtyard. Daemon vaulted into the saddle, elated and lightheaded. It had been a long shot, but it had worked! He was still alive!

And Katherine.

Katherine simply understood him, and he understood her.

"Well, _that_ was most definitely a bluff," said Robb when he heard that Daemon Lannister had abandoned the fortress. He sighed and placed the lion piece back onto his map. He had been so sure that he would kill at least one Lannister tonight. Instead, nobody did any fighting, and they all had to suffer through listening to the Rains of Castamere. "I suppose music doesn't tell any great truths after all."

"No, music tells the greatest lies," said Katherine. "Why else do you think there are so many pretty songs in the world? Musicians who tell the truth get made to eat their words, if I may say so."

Robb shook his head. "I don't understand music," he admitted. "I like it, but I don't understand it."

"Once you understand it, it ceases to have as much beauty," said Katherine.

"You admire Daemon Lannister, don't you?" asked Robb suddenly. He had seen the way Katherine had looked at the harpist on the wall. It had spoken of something that he had never seen her feel before, and simply thinking about it made him tighten his fist around the wooden lion, as if by crushing it, he could crush Daemon Lannister.

"He was very brave, don't you think?" asked Katherine. "And so calm. It takes a man of great strength and courage to not let his fear get the better of him."

"He turned us back with a song," said Robb. "We could have taken him."

"And you would have killed him," said Katherine. "But he's more use to us alive."

Robb swivelled around to face her. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Katherine placed her hands on his shoulders and slowly began to knead them, loosening tense muscles that he hadn't even realized had existed.

"Daemon Lannister is an ambitious man," said Katherine. "All we need to do is give him a chance to realize those ambitions, and he will tear House Lannister apart from within. Neither loyalty nor family nor love will stop a man like him once he starts."
"You mean to give him reason to think that, under my rule, he would be the Lord of Casterly Rock?" asked Robb.

"And why not?" said Katherine. "If there is always to be a Stark in Winterfell, then there should always be a Lannister in Casterly Rock."

"I don't intend for there to be a Casterly Rock when I'm done," said Robb, and then he became more sombre. "There are no more Starks in Winterfell."

"It's a temporary setback," said Katherine. "They will all pay back what they owe us, in the end."

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**King's Landing**

Jaime saw no sign of lion banners coming through the streets of King's Landing. He had no idea what was going on, but if he had to guess, then he would say that Stannis' men were keeping his father at bay at the gates, even though Rebekah had torn them down. He rallied the men to him. They needed to hold until his father came. Hope was too close. Salvation was too close. He wasn't going to die now.

A crashing sound broke through the noise of battle.

"What was that?" demanded Tyrion.

The walls shook with the sound.

"The gates," said Jaime. "Stannis is trying to break down the gate of the Red Keep. Salvatore, with me. To the gates!" He ran for the gates, leaving his brother far behind him. There was no way in the world Tyrion could keep up with his long strides. The vampire was even faster, but in his desperation, Jaime almost managed to keep pace with him. He leaned over the wall.

Stannis had brought up a battering ram, as expected. What was unexpected was that it wasn't just an old log taken from the nearby Kingswood, but something he had prepared beforehand and with painstaking detail. Jaime had never seen anything like it. The ram was huge, and it swung from a frame of wood and steel.

And its head was that of a snarling direwolf.

Well, if that was the extent of the Stark contribution to Stannis' campaign, he suspected that after the only remaining Baratheon took King's Landing –if he took King's Landing– his next target would be the Starks who had started to behave more like Lannisters. Maybe it was actually a fox on their sigil and they were just in denial about it. Robb Stark was the true mastermind. Stannis was just a piece in his game.

"Brace the gate!" Jaime shouted down to the men below. They pressed their bodies against it, but they were sent flying backwards by the impact of the ram. The gate sounded different this time, as if the metal brackets were beginning to strain and the wood was splintering beneath the assault of the wolf.

Still, the men went back, desperate to keep something between themselves and the rabid deer outside. Animals on fire didn't behave with much sense. That was the only reason a stag would try and challenge a lion.

But, just as when the gate was about to fail them, another shout rose. "Lord Tywin Lannister!" The name reverberated in the city, sending a shiver down Jaime's spine.
In the east, the sun began its relentless ascent, pushing its way past the horizon, mottling the clouds with purple bruises and smearing them with blood. The rising sun glinted on the golden armour of his father's men and he saw the prowling lion, with claws extended to strike, flying in the wind. At the head of this golden flood rode his father, a glorious figure in red and...

Well, gold.

The rear ranks of the Baratheons began to panic as they realized just how trapped they were. The hunter had become the hunted, and the besieger had become the besieged.

"Father is here!" he shouted to Tyrion. His brother slammed his axe head into the shins of a poor unfortunate who crumpled to the ground in pain, his bones shattered.

"Excellent," said Tyrion. "I was wondering when the old lion would come."

"Come, brother, let us ride out to meet him," said Jaime with a grin. They would take Stannis on two fronts and crush him there and then. There would be no more stags in Westeros after this, and the wolves would not be able to hide behind their puppets anymore. Those sly creatures would have to face them, or start running.

"Maybe we should remain – all right, Jaime." Tyrion resigned himself to the fact that there would be no more hiding.

The squires saddled Jaime's horse –his second favourite, since he'd set his favourite loose on the streets of King's Landing. It was a pity. He'd been a good mount, but Jaime supposed even the best of friends had to part ways at some point. Tyrion clambered onto his mounting block.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" he said. "Let us go and show Father that we haven't been idle, even if we did let Stannis sack half the city."

"We didn't actually let him, but he insisted," said Jaime. Father would not be pleased that they had been driven into barricading themselves in the Red Keep while the rest of the city burned. Jaime anticipated some speech about something great that their lord father had achieved against overwhelming odds.

Survival was an achievement, wasn't it?

The two brothers exchanged a glance that said more than any of the words that could have been exchanged. They both knew what to expect. If there was one thing predictable about Tywin Lannister, it was that he would always be disappointed by his children. Well, they would worry about that later. For now, they would crush Stannis' army here and he would never raise another again. Where would he find all the men? And then they could turn their gaze towards their real enemy.

"You didn't think you were going to go without me, did you?" asked the last person he'd expected to see here. Actually, that wasn't accurate, as the last person he had expected to see here was Cersei (and Joffrey too, he supposed) but Rebekah came pretty close.

"Are you not meant to be protecting the queen?" he asked.

"She'll be safe," said Rebekah. "Drunk, but safe. With Lord Tywin here, I doubt Stannis will have time to deal with the likes of her." He would have to teach her a lesson about obeying orders soon, but possibly not yet. He had to teach Stannis a lesson in affability first and it was probably easier to do it with a few more vampires. Certainly Rebekah, while not the cleverest vampire he had encountered, was the strongest, and there was something to be said about keeping the healing
blood of a vampire close at hand should he need it. It was cheating, yes, but it wasn't as if Stannis was sticking to the rules anymore with his red witch.

"I'm coming too!"

What was it with disobedient blondes today? He looked back at the maddened she-knight, her hair matted with blood – obviously not hers, because otherwise she'd be dead from blood loss– and her eyes wild. "I'm going to kill Stannis!" declared Brienne of Tarth.

"Who let her out?" demanded Jaime.

"I thought we could use some extra swords," said Rebekah.

"You're paying for that lock you broke, you know."

"I picked it."

He rolled his eyes. He had never thought that there would be any need to give very specific orders such as "do not free the prisoners of war", but apparently, there was. Still, there was nothing he could do about it at this present moment, and the she-knight wasn't looking to stick a sword into his heart, so he supposed he could live with her freedom for now.

"Unbar the gates," he said to the men. They opened with a groan, but was blocked halfway by the wolf-head ram. One of the gates fell off its hinges and clattered to the ground. It had deep gouge marks where the wolf had struck it. The Starks had done their damage, and they hadn't even been here! Well, except poor little Sansa Stark who had probably hoped that her conniving brother would swoop in and save her. No, sorry, little girl. Robb Stark was just a wolf. He didn't have wings, and he didn't have a heart either, not that the latter was necessary, or so many people said. Jaime would like to see how Robb Stark would live if someone ever tore his heart out of his chest.

The Baratheon men were in a panic. Stannis had been dragged away, they were surrounded on all sides by lions, and they were beginning to realize that maybe their king's fire god didn't really care after all. If he did care, then he would have come out from whatever hell he dwelt in to face down the only true god Westeros had ever cared about ever since Jaime had been old enough to remember.

His father tore through the streets, crushing men beneath the iron-shod hooves of his army. Jaime could see his banner flying high, claiming this as Lannister territory. Why were they not kings yet? He had liked those fleeting moments on the Iron Throne. But…was that another Baratheon banner beside the lion? Well, he would find out soon enough. Would that not be ironic, if his father, too, were being herded into the Red Keep by Stannis? Then he would have nothing to say to Jaime and Tyrion, and then they'd all be dead. Although, there was something different about this standard.

He dug his spurs into his horse's flanks. The animal surged beneath him, itching for a fight. It barrelled down many men before Jaime's sword could even get to them. The blade cleaved through skin and flesh and bounced off armour, as it should. "You're not so good with a sword, my lady," he smirked at Rebekah as he took amusement from her struggles to manage both her reins and her weapon.

"I'm a quick learner, my lord," said Rebekah. "And, as I recall, I was pretty good with yours."

He snorted and turned his attention back to the massacre. The remaining Baratheon soldiers were caught in a golden vice from which they could never escape, and they were slowly being crushed. Together, father and sons herded the deer into Cobbler's Square. All five main exits in the square
had been blocked, either by collapsed buildings or by men, or both.

They banded together, weapons raised, defiant to the end. Jaime supposed he could admire this, as troublesome as it was. It would be better if they could simply lay down their arms and surrender. However, the whole world knew that Tywin Lannister would not show mercy. It wasn't one of his strengths. For that reason, he was still more feared than the little wolves and eagles out there sharpening their claws, yowling, flapping their wings and pretending to be scary.

"For the one true king!" shouted the leader of the band. His eyes blazed with fervour and zealotry. "The Lord will reward us in Heaven!"

"That's cute," remarked Rebekah.

Tywin raised his hand. Archers raised their bows and arrows. There was a sudden shift in his father's ranks.

Jaime's eyes widened when he saw the sweeping black velvet cloak embroidered in gold and the gold and silver armour decked with the motif of entwined antlers. Renly? But he was dead! He'd been there! Well, not there precisely, but he had been in Renly's camp when that had happened!

Jaime shouldn't really be surprised if the dead came back to life. There were vampires now, and rumour had it that they were the dead who had somehow become reanimated. He highly doubted that, as none of them had felt dead. Rebekah had most definitely felt alive. But, anything was possible now. The rules of the world he had known before had been utterly destroyed and now everything was rearranging itself. He was half apprehensive, half curious, and half eager to see what was going to happen.

Wait…that was one and a half. That didn't make any sense at all. He was too tired. But, if this was his reaction, and he knew about all the unnatural things in the world, what would Stannis have thought? If Renly had really come back to life, he imagined that he would go after Stannis first. Too bad Stan had left already.

Some of the men began to scream. "Renly! It's Renly Baratheon!" Others were screaming, "The King!" They, no doubt, had been serving Renly before. Those men fell onto their knees in fear as Renly rode them down. They couldn't move even if they wanted to and judging by their weeping, some of them didn't want to, out of the shame of having abandoned him. Others were just so terrified that they were rooted where they stood, making them easy targets. Men tried to flee from the spectre of their dead king. Jaime narrowed his eyes. In life, Renly had never swung his sword half as well as he did now.

"My king!" gasped Brienne. She dismounted, despite Rebekah's protests that they didn't really know whether he was friend of foe, and dropped onto one knee before her beloved king.

"Renly" bore down on her and raised his sword to strike her down as well.

Jaime parried the blow. The vibration rang up his arm. Definitely not Renly.

The false dead man – that would be a living man, wouldn't it? – swung his whip at Jaime's face, only to have his arm grabbed by an overprotective Rebekah who had abandoned her sword in favour of her strength.

No matter how much the man tried to move his arm, he couldn't. "Let go of me," he hissed. Rebekah did so and glared at him. Jaime glared at her. He hadn't needed her to save him. Again.

"Hello, Ser Loras," he whispered. "That armour becomes you."
The remaining Baratheon men, their ranks broken by panic and Loras playing dress-up, were cut down by Tywin's men. Their blood ran in little rivers between the cobblestones and down the streets. It was such a waste. Vampires needed to eat.

But his father didn't know. Hah! Jaime knew something that Father didn't!

"Father," said Jaime. He took off his helmet and shook his lank and matted hair out. It felt heavy on his head.

"Jaime," said Tywin. His voice was inscrutable. He surveyed their surroundings. Buildings had been toppled over to block the Baratheon men's advance. Smoke rose from the several fires in the city which, if they did not put them out soon, would burn the whole place down. The grey billowing columns waved this way and that with the wind before finally dissipating into the pale grey sky above. Broken ships listed and struggled in Blackwater Bay, no doubt creating a hazard for all the merchant sailors who would venture past it on their way to trade in King's Landing. Not now, however.

Tywin's eyes were pale and cold and his lips pressed into a thin line. "I see you have escaped unscathed," he said. "I cannot say the same for the city."

He had no idea.

"It's still ours," piped up Tyrion from behind Jaime. When would his little brother learn to be quiet? Jaime couldn't very well protect him if he kept on drawing attention to himself! His tongue was going to get him killed one day. "That, I assure you, my lord father, was quite an achievement."

"Through no merit of yours," said Tywin. He rode past them without saying another word. Jaime sighed. Father still didn't think either of them were good enough; some things would never change, and all was right in this world of witches and vampires.

Next chapter: Sansa almost takes her destiny into her own hands. Caroline tries to do her duty. Damon and Jon contemplate the risks of going to King's Landing.
When the Kat's Away

Chapter Summary

Caroline tries her best to do her duty. Jaime feels that Tywin has stolen his moment of glory. Renly haunts the battlefield. Sansa tries to determine her own fate and do her part for Robb's war.

King's Landing

The battle raged on outside the holdfast. Caroline itched to go back out there. She didn't know what was going on. Someone had shouted "wolf!" and then there had been no more news since then. She didn't know if her friends were still alive. Well, one friend, actually, and Stefan had to be alive. He was…Stefan Salvatore! She didn't care about Rebekah, and while she did care about Lords Jaime and Tyrion, they weren't exactly her friends. In fact, she had the distinct feeling that Lord Tyrion didn't like her very much, for one inexplicable reason or another. He, of all people, should know not to be so judgemental.

The room had fallen silent. The prayers had stopped as the women now awaited the judgements from their gods. Sansa knelt in a dark corner, her hands lying demurely in her lap and her head bowed, but she constantly glanced up at Cersei.

The queen had stopped drinking. Her cheeks bloomed from the alcohol, but she too, was alert and listening to the shouts of dying men and the blasts of horns that told them how to die. Suddenly, she stood. "Tommens," she called. "Come here."

It was only then that Caroline realized the little prince had been in the holdfast all along, but he had been so quiet and he had made himself so small that no one had noticed him. He crept out from the shadows and approached his mother, almost shyly, while still holding his nurse's hand. He was only nine, and he was terrified. Cersei held out her hand to him. He slowly walked over to take it, his eyes full of trust.

"Mother?" he said.

"We're going out," said Cersei.

"But isn't that dangerous?"

Cersei smiled. "No, my love," she said in a gentle tone that sounded alien coming from her. "There is nothing that can threaten a lion." Caroline had never seen this side of the queen before. All she'd ever known of her was that she was a wary woman who was desperate to prove herself. She was like what Caroline had been in her human days, an insecure control freak, but with no conscience and Klaus' pathologically ruthless thirst for power. "Nothing can hurt you, I promise. We're going somewhere very safe to wait for your father's victory."

"But father's gone," said Tommen.

"Your grandfather, I mean, my love," said Cersei quickly.
Tommen trusted his mother completely. Caroline wasn't so naïve. About all things.

"Your Grace," she said. "There is nowhere safer than here."

Cersei turned around, a disdainful smile on her lips. They must have been as full as rose petals in her youth, but age and bitterness had thinned them, making them hard and cruel. "Are you going to stop me, Caroline Forbes? And here I thought you wanted to die in battle."

"I wanted to live," said Caroline. "And Lord Jaime has commanded me to protect you, Your Grace."

Cersei laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "You may stay, or you may come and protect me, whatever you wish," she said, "but you will not stand in my way."

What could she do? She couldn't very well knock the queen out, now, could she? But if she didn't do that, there was no way to stop Cersei from walking out that door. She would have failed to protect her. What would Lord Jaime say? What would Lord Tywin say?

Someone grabbed her arm. Sansa. "Are you really going back out there, Caroline?" she whispered.

Caroline nodded. "I don't really have a choice."

"Then let us come with you," said Sansa, meaning herself and Shae. "We'd rather die out there than wait for him to kill us." She glanced at the glaring mute. That was right; he'd been the one who had beheaded her father.

"All right," said Caroline. "But stay close to me, okay?"

"You talk like…someone I used to know," said Sansa with a ghost of a smile.

"You mean Damon?" said Caroline. "Trust me, I'm nothing like him. He's evil."

Sansa smiled at that, but the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. If there was someone with nothing to smile about in the world, it was Sansa Stark.

Ilyn Payne said nothing and did nothing as Cersei pulled open the door. It took her several tries, for the hinges had not been oiled in a while and the solid wood, reinforced with steel bands and studs, was very heavy. Cersei swept into the darkened hallway, her soft lambskin slippers making no sound on the flag stones. The torches had gone out in their iron sconces, and it was cold. The only light came from the fires outside, both orange and green, and they cast deep shadows onto the archways that stretched out before them. Tommen's boots hit the stones with soft slaps as he followed his mother and struggled to keep up with her long strides. Caroline brought up the rear, keeping her eyes peeled for any dangers that could be lurking in the dark. If anyone wanted to kill Cersei, now was the time to do it. But why would they assassinate her now? There was no point in using a knife in the dark when the knife the light would work just as well.

Sansa and Shae followed closely behind Caroline, making sure to keep the vampire between themselves and the queen they so loathed, even if Sansa did hide it, or try to. But Caroline could see it in her eyes and she didn't blame her one bit. She just simply had to make sure that neither the lady nor the maid tried to jump the queen while she was vulnerable. Lord Jaime had given his orders and, despite everything, Cersei was still Lord Tywin's daughter.

Their breath mushroomed in the black air. The tapestries, so colourful in the daylight, now seemed sinister, as if the figures depicting the Lannisters' enemies would suddenly come to life and leap out of those tapestries to destroy them.
They came to the doors of the throne room. They were closed and Caroline could hear nothing behind them. That wasn't right. One would have thought that if King Joffrey had wanted to hide somewhere, then it would be with the throne that everyone was fighting for.

"Open the door," Cersei commanded her.

Caroline bit back a retort. She was the queen, she reminded herself, and arguing with the queen would get her no brownie points with anyone, least of all Lord Tywin. He'd wanted her to be a real lady, hadn't he? She pressed her hands against the cold steel and stone doors and pushed. They opened with a quiet groan.

The throne faced them. It was a sinister spectre; a reminder of all the lives that had been lost while trying to fight for it. It was a merciless master that ruled over all men's hearts. Even Lord Tywin, as great as he was, could not escape its power and the lure that it presented. They did not even realize that they were all slaves.

Cersei ascended the steps, pulling Tommen up behind her. Caroline looked around warily. She'd never seen the throne room so empty and so dark before. The ghosts of the past haunted this place and no matter how Cersei had had artists whitewash, replaster and repaint the walls, it didn't change anything. All those people who had died for this throne and here in this room; she imagined she could still hear them screaming just like the men who were screaming outside.

The queen pulled the little prince onto her lap and stroked his hair, brushing the fine blond locks away from his face. It was such a normal motherly thing to do that to see Cersei doing it made Caroline feel uncomfortable. She couldn't shake the thought of who Tommen's father was. And Lord Jaime had seemed so normal.

Well, normal like Stefan and Damon.

"Do you want to hear a story, my love?" asked Cersei. Before Tommen could say anything, she began to speak. Her voice wasn't made for telling stories. Caroline remembered how her parents would read to her as a child. They'd done all the voices in the Harry Potter books and made the story come to life. Cersei still sounded like…well, Cersei.

"There was once a lion and her cub who lived in the woods," she began. Liar; lions didn't live in the woods. "At night, the little cub was afraid of the dark and all the dangers in it, for evil creatures, jealous of the lion's grace, beauty and power, lurked in the shadows, wanting to harm him."

"Like what?" asked Tommen.

"Like stags," said Cersei.

"But stags aren't evil. They only eat grass."

"They have antlers. And there are more than just stags. There are also wolves. And eagles with wicked sharp beaks and ravens with beady eyes. The little lion's mother told him not to be afraid."

"Mother, I've heard this one before," said Tommen.

"But you like it, don't you?"

The little prince didn't dare to say no, even though Caroline could tell he wasn't really into it.

Cersei continued. "One day, when you grow up to be tall and strong," she said, "all the animals in
the woods will bow to you. The wolves will bow, the stags will bow, and even the eagles in the sky will do him homage."

"The eagles don't live in the woods, do they, Mother?" asked Tommen, a little surprised. Eagles must have been the latest addition to the list of animals that would bow. Katherine bowing? Not likely. It was one of Cersei’s daydreams, but the Starks would never bow now. And Katherine had never bowed to anyone before unless she wanted something from them, and only as a last resort.

"The eagles fly above the woods and live in the trees."

Tommen bit back a correction and squirmed a little.

"All the animals in the world will bow," said Cersei as if Tommen hadn't spoken at all. She stroked his hair with one hand, while with another hand, she withdrew a small glass vial containing a dark liquid.

Caroline didn't know what it was exactly, but it was very clear what it could do. "Your Grace, he is your son! You can't poison him!" she cried.

At that moment, the doors flew open and sunlight flooded the throne room. She had no idea they'd been there for so long! She shielded her eyes and prepared to fight, but it wasn't Stannis Baratheon who came in.

She dropped into a deep curtsey. "Lord Tywin," she said. It was Lord Tywin! They were saved! Hallelu--well, that wouldn't be entirely appropriate. He said nothing to her, but looked straight to his daughter, who tried to hide the vial, but wasn't quick enough. Caroline risked glancing up. They were all there; Stefan, Jaime, Tyrion, Rebekah (of course), and even Bronn. They were all safe. She turned to look at Sansa to see what her reaction was now that there was no chance her brother would be coming to get her, but she wasn't there anymore. She wasn't anywhere.

It was an impulsive thing to do. How could she run? Where could she run? Harrenhal was so far away. Sansa wished she had paid more attention to her lessons when Maester Luwin had tried to teach her about all the places in Westeros. Perhaps if she knew more, she would be able to do more instead of waiting here for someone to get her out. She hated being so weak and helpless.

Following Caroline out seemed to be the best decision at that moment. There was no other way she could get past Ilyn Payne, and Caroline...well, Caroline was not like the others. She seemed so kind and honest. That either meant she was stupid or the most dangerous of them all. Still, having a dangerous friend wasn't a bad thing. Damon was dangerous, Katherine was dangerous, they were Robb's friends and Robb was winning all these battles. Elena had been dangerous too, and if both Damon and Elena had been here, Sansa wondered if things would have been different. Elena would have protected her even better than Shae was protecting her.

No, she needed her own dangerous friends and Caroline was a good start, even if she couldn't get out.

Still, she didn't want to be in the throne room with Cersei when Stannis’ people burst through those gates. Stannis wouldn't hurt her. He was a man of principle, they all said, and she wasn't his enemy. In fact, wasn't Robb his ally?

And, speaking of Robb, she hadn't heard anyone mention anything about his armies. Shouldn't he be helping his allies? And his sister? Or had they all forgotten her just as Damon had forgotten her?
With Cersei and Caroline so mesmerized by the sight of the throne, Sansa motioned to Shae and the two of them crept away, their soft shoes making no noise on the stone floor. That was one good thing about them, for they weren't much good for anything else. She couldn't walk to Harrenhal in these. If she were to escape, she would need supplies and better shoes.

"You should go, now, while you have the chance," she said to Shae.

"My lady," began the maid.

"Go and find Lord Tyrion," she said. "You want to be able to say goodbye before it's too late."

Shae stared at her and didn't move. Was she not in love with Lord Tyrion? Was that not why she was being hidden here as her maid? The woman hadn't been as subtle as she'd thought.

"Go," said Sansa. "I no longer have need of your services, and you should say goodbye to him." She needed to get Shae away if she were to ever get out of here.

She went back to her room. Supplies, supplies; she would need something warm for the road, because winter was coming. She would need food, and gold. She could sell her jewellery for gold, and with gold, she could buy food. Or the bandits would just rob her. She needed a weapon and someone to protect her. She had Shae, but she wanted Caroline; it was just that she couldn't think of a way to make the older girl abandon the Lannisters. For one reason or another, Caroline loved them.

Her eye fell upon the chest in which she kept her old gowns and things that nobody would have any interest in. She opened it. Inside lay the hideous doll that her father had given her. It looked a lot like Lord Varys, actually, if one thought about it. She gently took it out and stroked its straw-like hair, trying to remember her father's kind eyes when he'd given it to her, hoping that it would have made her happy. How she had scorned him then and how she missed him now! She wished she could hold him now and tell him how much she loved him. She held the doll to herself for a little while before setting it down on the bed. Wherever she went, it was coming.

And she wasn't going anywhere. She couldn't hug her father as she had hugged the doll, but she could avenge him and she couldn't do it if she ran. Robb had his armies, and Bran, Rickon, Jon and even Arya had their swords (her sister had thought she hadn't known about Jon's present; she'd been very wrong. Sansa knew things). What did Sansa have? Her beauty, her perceived innocence? No one would suspect the Little Dove. She could do what Damon had done and worm her way into Cersei and Joffrey's favour. It was always easier for friends to stab one another in the back.

Her door burst open. Her hand reached for the candlestick, the only thing in the room that could be called a weapon. She almost laughed at herself. What a silly little girl she was! She couldn't fight a sword with a candlestick! She couldn't even fight!

"It's just me, Little Bird," said the Hound. His burned face looked even more hideous in this low light and covered in blood, both his and others', but she had learned long ago not to judge by appearances. Cersei was beautiful, but she was evil and dangerous. Jaime was handsome, but he was cruel. The Hound, while hideous and while he was capable of doing some terrible things, would never hurt her. He could have, but he had never done so.

Beauty and innocence were invisible blades that cut deep into the heart without men knowing it, slowly poisoning them.

"Why are you here?" she asked.
"The wolf is at the gate and the city is burning, Little Bird," said the Hound. He sat down on her bed, soiling her silk sheets. In his hand, he held a leather skin of sour wine. He offered her some. She shook her head.

"Is my brother here?" she asked.

"He's much too clever to be part of this shitstorm."

He threw his head back and drank the rancid wine as if it were water. "The city is burning, the gates have been breached, and the king is a coward," he said.

"You shouldn't say that," said Sansa. "It's treason."

"Fuck treason," said the Hound. "Fuck the king. Fuck Joffrey!"

She needed dangerous friends, right? The Hound was dangerous, but not to her.

"I'm leaving, Little Bird," said the Hound. "Maybe you can come with me. The north doesn't sound so bad."

Sansa shook her head. "It's cold and wet and dark and there is mud everywhere."

"The cold and dark are better than burning," said the Hound.

"No," she said. "I can't leave. My place is here."

He looked at her as if she were daft. Maybe she was a little, but she wasn't going to be Robb's burden. He wasn't the only Stark who could fight. She just used different weapons, that was all.

"They'll kill you, Little Bird," said the Hound. "They'll break you."

"No, they won't," said Sansa. "Are you really leaving?"

He nodded.

"Will you wait a moment?" she asked. He watched her while she opened her writing desk and took out a quill, a sheet of parchment, and a bottle of ink. She dipped her quill into the ink and carefully scratched out a message. When she was done, she blotted it with a blotting sheet and blew on the ink to dry it further. Then she folded it, slipped it inside an envelope, and handed it to the Hound.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a letter," she said. "It's the only thing I can give you."

He seemed aghast and shocked that she had given him anything at all. He stared at it. "I... I don't read," he said, sounding ashamed.

"It's not for you," she said. "It's for my brother. If you take this to him, he'll take you in. I've vouched for you. Please, will you do this for me, Ser Sandor?"

"Don't call me that," he said as he looked away. "I'm not a 'Ser'."

"It's not a bad thing, you know," she said gently. It was working. Swords could not get past his guard, nor arrows his shield, but soft words and gentle looks broke down all his defences.

"You don't know the real Sers," he said.
"Maybe you're the only one worthy of the title."

His mouth opened and then closed again. "Only you could say such a thing, Little Bird," he said. She had him wrapped around her little finger. She felt a surge of elation. If she could tame the Hound, maybe she could tame the errant lion-stag too. But then, Sandor Clegane had a soul.

"Are you sure you won't come with me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I need to be here," she said. "I will not run like a bitch with her tail between her legs."

"Maybe they have already broken you, Little Bird," he said. Was that a touch of sadness in his voice?

"Sansa," she said. "It's Sansa."

"Lady Sansa." He bowed to her before he turned and walked away. As he did, she stood up straighter and pulled her shoulders back. She was Sansa Stark, a daughter of Winterfell, sister to the Young Wolf. She could do this. She would show them that she was no little dove, no fragile little bird. If her new sister could be the Eagle, then why couldn't Sansa be something else with claws?

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100 miles south of Castle Deepwatch

"Lord Tywin has sent word," said Daemon. He set down the little raven scroll with the tiniest handwriting on it. "He has summoned us back to King's Landing.

Wait, wait, they were going back to King's Landing? Well, that was a bad idea if Damon had ever heard of one. Tywin might have forgiven him, but he doubted Cersei would be as open-minded, and considering how Ned had fared in King's Landing, he doubted taking Jon there would be a good idea. He could fool Daemon Lannister; he couldn't fool Tywin Lannister. Out of all of Ned's children, Jon resembled him the most, although he had proven to be rather surprising recently.

"King's Landing?" whispered Elena when they had left Daemon's tent after the young Lannister had announced that Lord Tywin had written personally to summon him back to the capital. "I can't go back there. I…I killed city guards and I fought the Hound!"

"That was clever of you," said Damon.

"That's what Yoren said, but I was doing it to protect Sansa," said Elena.

"Good job," said Damon.

Elena rolled her eyes.

"You can't go back," Jon pointed out to Damon. "You're a turncoat."

"Excellent, Captain Obvious," said Damon. "Anything other clever observations you'd like to enlighten us with?"

"If a turncoat turns twice, does that make him not a turncoat or twice a turncoat, I wonder?" said Jon a little coldly. Elena glared at the two of them.

"We need solutions," she said, "and we can't afford to argue amongst ourselves."
"I'm all for leaving," said Damon. "We've been doing Katherine's dirty work for long enough. King's Landing isn't safe for any of us. Joffrey hates us, Cersei hates me –she might like you, though, Frosty, since you're pretty– and Elena is a fugitive who looks like Katherine, so Jaime Lannister will no doubt make the connection. I heard she did some pretty awful things to him."

Elena and Jon glanced at each other as they pondered their choice. Of course, Elena would go wherever Jon went, even if it was dangerous. Well, not that dangerous, since nobody knew anything about her. Except Lady Caroline Forbes and Ser Stefan Salvatore and Lady Rebekah Mikaelson and Jaime Lannister. Actually, he changed his mind. King's Landing would be very dangerous for Elena indeed, especially with Batty Bex about.

"I don't want to go running to him just so he could help me. I want to help him. I want to avenge my father," said Jon quietly. Nobody mentioned Robb's name. It would be too dangerous just in case Damon missed an eavesdropper.

Elena squeezed his arm. It was sickening to behold. But the danger of King's Landing did hold some attraction, Damon had to admit. He liked playing with fire even if he knew it would burn him. Why else in the world would he have goaded and worked with Klaus at the same time?

He sighed. What Jon had said was true; they couldn't really do much to help Robb if they were riding by his side. Robb didn't need extra bodyguards or even commanders, for he had far too many of the latter already and not enough men for them to play with. But the risk…

*This* risk was too much. There was no knowing how Jon's acting skills would hold up once he was face to face with Joffrey.

"How do you think you're going to do that if you're dead?" said Damon. Jon paused. The vampire pressed on. He really didn't think it was a viable idea. "You may have fooled this lot; trust me, Cersei Lannister wouldn't be fooled. Once bitten, twice shy, as they say."

"You didn't…!" said Jon.

"No, I didn't, but I did dump her."

"Do I even want to know?"

Damon shrugged. "We didn't even reach first base," he said. "But the truth is, King's Landing is a No Man's Land full of traps and snares for Starks to fall into, and you know it."

Jon remained silent. "What do you propose we do, then?" he finally said.

"Riverrun, or Harrenhal," said Damon. "I recommend Riverrun. Edmure Tully is there and he is more trusting than his uncle and we never know where Robb is. Besides, I hear Tully was halfway in love with Queen Bitch before she went and married you-know-who. Since Elena is her doppelganger, I imagine he would take to us quite kindly."

"How are we going to get out of here?" asked Elena.

Damon thought about it for a while. "Daemon likes you," he said. "I think you're going to be our key, Elena."

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**Next chapter:** Damon, Jon and Elena devise an escape plan. Margaery is presented at court. Rebekah and Jaime further their relationship.
Elena, Jon and Damon enact their escape plan. Margaery makes her entrance into King's Landing society. Tywin sends Jaime a clear message.

**Wherever in the wilderness**

It hadn't been easy for Damon to procure some milk of the poppy for Elena to use on Daemon when the time came. It wasn't easy to find the right time either because they were marching with all haste for King's Landing. It wasn't because Robb Stark was pursuing them, because he wasn't. For some reason, Lord Robb had not pursued them but gone back to Harrenhal, or had made it look like that he had gone back to Harrenhal. However, Daemon thought it prudent to reach the capital before Lord Tywin heard too much about him from other mouths. He wanted to be the first to tell him what happened at the fortress. Sure, it might not be the truth, but truth was perception.

Her chance finally came when they stopped to rest for the night. There was no way in the world the men could continue marching at this pace without a rest. They were elated, but exhausted, and the terrain was difficult. Daemon had chosen the most difficult path to deter any possible pursuers.

They set up camp next to a small mountain spring that bubbled up from deep underground. The water was clear and pure, tasting faintly of iron and other minerals. They were protected on all sides by towering black rocks with edges that had not yet been made smooth by time and gleamed in the moonlight like glass.

Elena stirred her stew. She'd thrown in just about every herb she had available to try and mask the bitter taste of the poppy. Drugging Daemon wasn't the *best* idea, but it was the *only* idea, which kind of made it the best idea. Damon had suggested this *other* idea which was completely unmentionable and Jon had almost staked him for it. Now Damon wasn't talking to either of them.

Bits of succulent meat floated in the soup. Daemon would eat her food, Damon had said. He liked her too much to refuse. The fire on her face made her sweat. She wiped her sweat from her brow with her sleeve.

"Lady Elena." She looked up. Daemon was looking down at her curiously. He wasn't supposed to see this! "We have cooks in the camp for this."

"I was a cook on the Wall," she said as she smiled gently at him. Her heart thudded in her chest and her body pumped adrenaline into her bloodstream, heightening already heightened senses. "I find it soothing to do this."

"You must have been the best thing that's *ever* happened to the Night's Watch. I'm sure they were sorry to let you go," said Daemon. "I should very much like to taste your cooking, if I am worthy."

"Of course, my lord," said Elena. "Perhaps…I may dine with you tonight?"

"Will you not be dining with Jon Snow?" he asked.
"He has Damon for company; Damon Salvatore," she said. "I think he can manage one night without me, my lord. He's a big boy."

"Then I would very much like to dine in your company," he said.

"But if you keep staring at me like this, I will become so distracted that I will burn the stew," said Elena.

"Then I should not let you burn the stew," said Daemon. He rose to his full height. He wasn't actually very tall, but he was very well proportioned, with long lithe legs, narrow hips, and shoulders that weren't exactly broad, but weren't skinny either. "I'll be waiting for you."

Moments later, she heard music floating on the wind as she ladled the stew into bowls. The meat was done just right and it was the best and freshest she could find. Damon had gone hunting just for this purpose. She put the bowls on the tray and some bread on a platter beside them. Along with that, she added an ewer of drugged wine. Vampires were less susceptible to chemical substances, and even if she drank and ate the same food as Daemon, it would affect her much less and a drink of blood would cure it immediately. It was for that purpose that she’d made Jon keep the deer's blood.

Daemon was playing his harp in his tent. His brow was furrowed in concentration as his fingers moved furiously over the strings. The tune that came through was strong and determined and beautiful, full of ambition and hope for the future and frustration for the present, and an underlying sadness too. His eyes were distant as he saw himself…wherever he would be, she supposed. He was far too talented to be stuck in the periphery of Tywin Lannister's army, raiding inconsequential lords and ransacking their supplies. Daemon wanted recognition and glory for what he was capable of. He had never shown it so obviously as he did now through his music.

She stood there at the entrance of his tent, rooted to the spot by the sound. He wove magic with it. Even if she had wanted to move, she wouldn't have been able to do so; as it were, she simply wanted to let the music wash over her as she was overcome by understanding for this man.

He finished the song he was playing and looked up to see her still standing there. "Lady Elena," he said. He stood and took the tray from her. "You should have let me know you were here. I can get quite lost in my music."

"I didn't want to disturb you," Elena stammered. "You play so beautifully. I could have listened forever."

"I may have a little talent," Daemon admitted, "but a Lannister may not – cannot be a musician."

He set the food down on the low table inside his tent. It had cooled to a level where it was ready to be eaten. Elena poured the wine and hoped that the stew didn't taste awful. Just because the men in the Night's Watch had liked her cooking (because she hadn't fed them pig slops) didn't mean she was actually good at it.

To his credit, he finished his stew and even wiped the bowl clean with bread. Perhaps he was as hungry as the men on the Wall had been. All the time, he never took his eyes away from her face. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable beneath his scrutiny. Did he know? Did he suspect? She poured them both cups of wine and drank a lot of her own to steel her nerves. Why she bothered, she didn't know. If it wasn't Vodka or something of that ilk, it did practically nothing to her.

Wine, on the other hand, did taste better.
"Will you play for me?" she asked once they were finished and the servants cleared away the bowls. They were both sipping from cups of wine, feeling comfortably warm and drowsy in front of the brightly burning brazier. Being a lord and a commander afforded Daemon a great deal of comforts, even on long marches, and he wasn't averse to sharing them with her.

And her alone.

"Surely you have heard enough of my music for a lifetime," said Daemon, although he seemed pleased that someone knew how to appreciate his skills outside of the battlefield.

"I could never hear enough," said Elena, and she meant it. He was the Orpheus of Westeros, a male siren, one could say. How many musicians could claim they had chased off an army simply by playing? Well, she supposed some truly awful ones would have managed it, but it hadn't been the case with Daemon.

He turned the full force of his green gaze upon her. Everything else faded away except him and her. There was more than just platonic interest in those eyes. Her breath hitched in her throat. Why? Why her again? She almost hated herself for what she was about to do to him, but she fought that back. She had to. Jon's liquid brown gaze stared at her from her mind. She was doing it for him. How she wished they weren't at war, that Daemon wasn't their enemy. "Would you like me to teach you?" he asked softly. She could only nod.

They walked over to where his harp sat covered in red silk. He whipped off the covering. She sat behind it. His calloused hands took hers. She could feel his body pressing up against her from behind her as he sat at her back, with his arms on either side of her as he put her hands in the right position.

The strings vibrated softly as he taught her how to pluck them and how to weave his magic. It wasn't something that he taught just anyone. Did his family even know he could play like this? He'd said that a Lannister couldn't be a musician. Tywin Lannister didn't seem to be a man who knew how to appreciate the finer skills in life apart from war and politicking. How in the world could Caroline stand him? Or anyone stand him, for that matter?

"I'm terrible at this," she said the next time she played a fishy note. The tune that came out wasn't even recognizably a tune.

"No, you're just new," said Daemon kindly. She felt his breath next to her ear. He shook his head as if to clear it. "Forgive me, my lady, I seem to be out of sorts this evening."

"It's been a long couple of days, my lord," she said. "You must be tired." He didn't suspect anything, and why would he? They had both eaten of the same food and drunken of the same wine. She was still fine. He didn't know her secret. "Perhaps you should rest."

"That may be for the best," he agreed. "We will continue this later, I promise."

She smiled. There would be no "later". He would hate her later for tricking him. She stood and curtseyed to him.

"Are you going to go back to Jon Snow now?" he asked suddenly.

She paused. "I could stay a little while, if you want."

"I would like that," said Daemon. His eyes looked a little glazed right now, but their power over her was no less intense. He trusted her so completely that he had showed her his more vulnerable side. She saw past the general and the warrior to see the boy that he had once been. He'd always been
alone and the responsible one. His uncles had mostly left him to his own devices and he'd had to take care of his brother. He didn't trust easily.

She helped him to remove his armour. It seemed terribly intimate and she couldn't shake the guilt that she felt even though she knew Jon wouldn't mind. She was distracting Daemon and drugging him so they could leave his camp. Daemon caught her hand. For a moment, a *frisson* passed between them. She almost yanked her hand away, but she didn't. He didn't do or say anything, but simply held her hand and moved his thumb over the back of it. Then he lay down on his narrow cot and patted the space beside him. Tentatively, she lay down and felt him mould himself around her back. His breathing grew softer and slower until she was certain that he wasn't going to wake up if she twitched.

She disentangled herself and got out of the bed. She looked down at him. "Goodbye, Daemon," she whispered. She covered him with his cloak. He shifted in his sleep.

Elena left the tent and shut the tent flaps behind her. None of the men so much as glanced at her as she passed them on her way back to the rear of the camp where Jon, Damon, and the others were waiting.

"Did it work?" asked Jon.

"I wouldn't be here if it didn't," said Elena.

"You liked him, didn't you?" said Jon softly. "You didn't like betraying him."

"It's not really betrayal," said Elena. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed his knuckles. Damon rolled his eyes while Gendry simply looked away. "He'll wake up, he'll hate us, but apart from that, nothing's happened and he even got a victory out of it. We should all be so lucky in our enemies."

"That was the stupidest plan ever and if we hadn't been lucky, you would be behind bars, Jon would be a strange-looking fruit hanging from a tree, and I would be on my way to break the bad news to Robb," said Damon. "I suppose I'd bring you lot." He meant Gendry, Sam and Hot Pie.

"Well, we were lucky and there is no bad news," said Elena. Damon glared at her and plucked at the threads at the fraying edges of the bloody hole in his tunic.

"I'm still not talking to you," he muttered.

"But you're talking," said Sam.

"I'm talking at them, Samwise Gamgee," said Damon. "Get with the plot."

"My name is Samwell Tarly," said Sam. Damon made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a picked their way between the sleeping bodies, all taking separate routes so that no one would suspect that they were sneaking away en masse. The sliver of moon gave enough light to see by, but not quite enough to betray the expressions on their faces. It hung like a conspiratorial grin. Frosty grass crunched beneath their feet and each sound seemed to ring out in Elena's ears. Every moment, she expected an angry Daemon to come after them, but he never did.

They navigated their way between the towering sharp rocks that guarded the mountain passes to the back door of Riverrun. Jon kept a firm grip on her hand, allaying her fears and worries. She trusted that he would be right, and that Riverrun would be safe for them. Why wouldn't it be? It was the capital of the Tully lands, and King Robb was half a Tully.
Every hill they climbed grew higher. Hot Pie slipped on the frozen mud and if Gendry hadn't been dragging him along, he probably would have slid down all the way again like a round toboggan. They'd made it very far from the main camp by the time the sun rose, chasing away the shadows in the hills and colouring the black outlines in green and grey instead, with a red tint that made everything seem as if it were painted over with a sheen of blood.

Still, she glanced back in the direction of the camp. Rocks and hills obscured her vision, but she knew they would realize what had happened during the night. Daemon would… She shook her head. It had had to be done. They couldn't have stayed there forever. The Lannisters were ruthless. They'd killed Lord Ned, taken Sansa hostage, and they would have done the same to Arya as well if they'd been able to catch her. Who knew what they would do to Jon? Besides, she and Damon could never return to King's Landing after what they'd done, especially not Damon. Daemon was a Lannister first and foremost. If he had known that they were still on King Robb's side, he would have sent them to die.

King's Landing

Tywin was already waiting on the steps leading up to the throne when Joffrey swept in, his sword newly cleaned and wearing a freshly laundered cloak. "Grandfather," he said to Tywin as he ascended the steps and sat upon the iron chair as if he were the conquering hero. Jaime rolled his eyes. He was too tired to put up with this farce, and all he wanted was to eat, sleep, and maybe find some entertainment. Joffrey was the last person he wanted to see right now.

Well, actually, not true, because the last person he wanted to see was Robb Stark with fresh armies.

"You have delivered King's Landing from Stannis Baratheon's treasonous intentions," Joffrey continued. Yes, yes, could they just move on now? Some people had actually bled to ensure that his head wasn't on a spike right now. "For your service to the crown, we hereby declare you the saviour of King's Landing and the hero of the Battle of the Red Keep!" As always.

Loras Tyrell then removed Renly's helmet to reveal Loras Tyrell. There was a collective gasp. Had they really thought that Renly had come back from the dead? Well, he'd always known that people were idiots.

Loras bowed to Cersei before turning to dip his head slightly to Tywin, who nodded in acknowledgement. It was the most respect Jaime had ever seen his father pay to anyone. Certainly he had not treated Robert with that kind of respect. Then again, if Loras Tyrell were here, that meant his army was also here. He was willing to bet his sword that the Tyrell army had a lot to do with their sweeping victory.

"Ser Loras?" said Joffrey with surprise. Why was he surprised? He must have known that one, his Uncle Renly was dead and, secondly, even if he weren't, there was no way in the world that Renly would have saved him. Renly had wanted Joffrey's head on a spike as much as Stannis had.

"Your Grace," said Loras with a bow. He held out his hand to someone standing behind him. Margaery. She looked very well and not at all like the grieving widow she was supposed to be. The deep azure of her dress made her grey eyes seem more blue and she wore the daintiest of perfumes. Her cheeks glowed with colour and her chestnut tresses flowed down her back.

"And who is this?" asked Joffrey. He looked Margaery Tyrell up and down. She cut a fine figure, that was true, but did he have to make his interest in her that obvious? He was still betrothed to Sansa Stark, after all. Little Sansa Stark who had the look of a frightened doe and bore so very little resemblance to her wolfish brother.
"May I present my sister, the Lady Margaery?" said Loras. Margaery dipped a graceful low curtsey that showed off her beautiful slender neck to its best effect.

"Lady Margaery, my uncle's wife?" asked Joffrey. Did he ever crawl out from under the rock beneath which he lived?

"Not truly," said Margaery. "I am afraid the late Lord Renly was far too preoccupied with other matters to deal with his husbandly duties."

Joffrey snorted. "I knew it," he said quietly, forgetting that the throne room had a terrible amplifying problem. "Well, good riddance to the traitor."

Now, Jaime was not the most political of people, nor had he been a great friend of Renly's, but even he knew not to say such a thing. Perhaps Grand Maester Pycelle had actually tried to do something useful and slip something into the king's drink to calm him down in the panic of battle. Unfortunately, it had addled his judgement.

Joffrey continued. "Then you are still…"

"A maid, yes," said Margaery.

Jaime glanced behind him to where Rebekah was standing, clasping her hands in front of her demurely. "How likely do you think that is?" he whispered. "From a scale of impossible to downright absurd?"

"They say that perception is reality, although, I believe she is as much a chaste and pure maid as I am," replied Rebekah.

Jaime grinned. "Perhaps I should look forward to deflowering that perception about you tonight."

"Hush now, my lord," she said. "Your father is watching." Jaime stared back at the front of the room. His father's eyes were indeed fixed on him. He pretended to be bored.

"I have heard tales of your valour, Your Grace," Margaery continued. "Your courage has touched my heart and I have loved you from afar even though I have never set eyes upon you, Your Grace. Do you think me too bold, too silly, to say this?"

Substitute the words 'Your Grace' with 'Lord Jaime' and that would be about right. No one would blame her at all. But she was talking about Joffrey. Maybe there was another world with another Joffrey who was brave and valorous and worthy of tales.

"No, I do not think it silly, my lady," said Joffrey, "for I, too, have heard tales of your beauty and your virtue and loved you from afar. I must say, the tales fall short of your magnificence."

Please, he needed to leave before he burst himself from holding in his laughter! One, thoughts of Margaery (and Tyrells in general) had not crossed Joffrey's mind before today, and two, he highly doubted that Margaery had very many virtues of the conventional sort. Although, he would not judge her for that. If they had met under the right circumstances, he was sure they could actually be friends, provided Loras kept his hands to himself.

The farce, however, seemed to satisfy his father, which was all that mattered, really. "Since I was a little girl, I have dreamed of a husband as brave and noble as you, Your Grace. I hope you will forgive me for this honesty."

"No, no, there is nothing to forgive," said Joffrey, very pleased with himself.
"Then, perhaps, in light of recent events, I believe it would be pleasing to all the gods of men if that love were consolidated," said Loras.

Joffrey glanced at Tywin, who gave a slight nod of assent.

"You words have moved me, my lady," he said. "I would desire nothing more than that, but I am still betrothed to my lady Sansa Stark and a king cannot cast aside his promises so easily."

"The High Septon has been consulted," said Pycelle suddenly, that sly old fox. He seemed more dishevelled than usual, and not through any deliberate action of his own. There was a feather perched on his crown of hair just above his ear and he didn't seem to notice. In fact, all the usually well-dressed lords had their clothing in complete disarray, having just clambered out of whatever holes they'd hidden in. The ladies were simply missing, still thinking that they were going to be raped and killed and plotting how to seduce the first burly northerner (or Stannis) who burst through their doors. Did no one remember to take the news to them? Cersei, Rebekah, Caroline and Margaery were the only females in the room.

"And he, in turn, has consulted the wisdom passed down to us from our forefathers in the annals of the various histories of Westeros. The ancients, in their wisdom, have stated that a promise made by a traitor is to be considered worthless. Ergo, following that logic, any promises made to a traitor or those who share the traitor's blood, by extension, are null and void. Due to Lady Sansa being –" Caroline yawned. Tywin raised a hand to halt Pycelle. The maester swallowed whatever drivel he was about to vomit and. "To put it more simply, a betrothal to a traitor's daughter would be displeasing in the eyes of the gods, and therefore, it is not a valid one. Thus, Your Grace has no obligation to honour it if you do not desire to do so. Of course, Lady Sansa herself is a lady of great virtue. Alas, one bad apple spoils the barrel, as they say."

"Then I am free to do as my heart pleases, my lady Margaery," said Joffrey, "since the gods have spoken."

"Thank the gods," muttered Tyrion. "I thought this would never be over."

And, just like that, Joffrey had a new queen-to-be and Sansa Stark…well, Jaime had the feeling that his father wouldn't let her go so easily. He shook his head. That was none of his business. Whatever it was, it would have nothing to do with him.

He rubbed a hand over his face, feeling the growth of two days' worth of stubble prickling his palm. Every part of him was filthy with grease and sweat and blood. He needed a long hot bath, preferably with help.

Joffrey held out his hand to Margaery, who took it demurely. He led her up the steps to the throne and then raised their entwined hands. The courtiers clapped politely. Jaime put his hands together once for show. Poor Margaery Tyrell had no idea what she'd gotten herself into. She had ambitions, that girl, but if there was one 'virtue' Joff had, it was that he was not easily controlled. That boy had a mind of his own and he wanted what he wanted because he wanted it. It didn't matter whether he could have it or not.

The court disbanded. Everyone was murmuring about what had just transpired. Was it really so surprising? There could be no Stark alliance now. Of course Tywin Lannister would seek a more advantageous marriage for the king. Jaime had to be thankful for his white cloak again, or else his father would be marrying him off to someone else. War was the perfect time for weddings. There was nothing like battle and blood to seal new love.
"Well, that was romantic," said a voice he had expected to hear sooner or later. Rebekah skipped to catch up with him and then slowed to a walk. She was filthy too. Excellent. He was looking forward to dunking her under the water.

"Do you think the Tyrells know what they're getting?" he asked.

"If they don't, they'll soon find out," said Rebekah. "Poor Joffrey. Margaery Tyrell will eat him alive."

"She's not you," said Jaime. Blood surged within him as he took in the sight of her half-undone braids, the smears of soot and blood on her face, and the men's clothing she wore. It did nothing to preserve her modesty. The fabric clung to her body like a mould, but it hid enough to frustrate him.

They neared his door. He turned to say something naughty to her but she had mysteriously disappeared. Damn her and her bloodsucking ways! It wasn't fair. He should be able to disappear like that too. The servants opened his door for him and closed it once he was inside. They were clever and could anticipate the needs of their masters. Their timing was also impeccable. When he came in, they had just finished pouring water into a huge steaming bathtub in his bathing chamber. They bowed when he came in. He dismissed them with a wave. "It's safe now," he said. "Nobody is going to attack me." He tossed them coins. "Take a rest."

They bowed again and left. As they closed the door behind them, Rebekah clambered in through the window. How the hell did she get up here? This was fifty feet in the air! Wait, he remembered. Vampire magic. "Why did you disappear?" he asked.

"I don't want to be the reason Lord Jaime Lannister got thrown out of the Kingsguard. What do they do to Kingsguard who break their celibacy vows?" said Rebekah.

"If they're insignificant, like Preston Greenfield, who openly keeps a mistress, nothing. If they are more important, however... Let's just say men have been executed for less."

"Then I really shouldn't be here," said Rebekah.

"But you are here. The danger of discovery only makes it more thrilling, no?" He kissed her on the lips to stop her from talking or mentioning his father, which she would. He pressed Rebekah against the wall, grinding his hips against hers. Then he pulled back.

"I think I am too tired today for this," he said. He wasn't, but he wanted her to do the chasing. "I ought to retire."

"Maybe," said Rebekah. "But I thought you were going to have a bath." She slipped into the bath that his servants had prepared for him.

"You are spoiling my bathwater," he said.

"There's enough for two. I don't want to waste it," said Rebekah as she picked up his soap.

Jaime quickly stripped off his filthy clothing and slowly lowered himself into the bath. The hot water was wonderful. It loosened tight muscles and the warmth spread through his limbs. He groaned. "Wash my back, will you?" he said. It wasn't really a question but he was asking to be polite.

Rebekah assaulted him with the bar of soap, lathering him from head to toe. "What are you doing?" he demanded. "It stings my eyes!"

"Close them!" said Rebekah.

"So you can stab me in the back? No thank you." She began to scrub his head furiously.

"Are you trying to scalp me?" he demanded. He'd wanted her to rub his back, not yank out his hair!

"I'm washing your hair," she said as she took a ladle and poured water over him, making him splutter. "It's dirty and tangled and you look like a scarecrow."

A **scarecrow**, was he? He pulled her onto his lap and slipped a finger between her legs. Cersei had never let him touch her with his hands. They hadn't had time for it. The feel of soft skin and the intricate details were not familiar to him. She gasped when he found her little bud.

"Can a scarecrow do this?" he asked as he rubbed circles around it, making her squirm. Her flesh was hot and her hips were shuddering as she tried to control herself. He slipped a finger inside her to make her spasm.

Somehow, she managed to continue and finish washing his hair, even if she was rougher than she had been before.

With his other hand, he began to stroke the rest of her body under the guise of washing her. Well, there was soap involved. She pulled away from him. How much control must she have had to do so. She began to lather up her hair. He caught her wrists.

"Allow me," he said. Her hair had become a dark gold in the water. He worked his fingers into it. It was lighter than Cersei's and softer too. Not that he had had much of a chance to play with Cersei's hair. She'd had to keep it immaculate so no one would suspect what they had done. He gently untangled the knots. She might enjoy ripping out his hair, but he thought hers was too beautiful to ruin like that.

"You're quite good at this," she said, sounding surprised.

"Better than you, at least," he said. He kissed her shoulder. She turned around to look at him, her fire having faded away into something more tameable. Who would have thought that a gentle word here and a soft kiss there would have made her obedient? He should have tried it sooner.

She parted her lips. Jaime kissed her again and deliberately bit hard so he drew blood. Vampire blood was salty and sweet at the same time, and where it touched his tongue, it made it tingle. Even just a drop made him feel less tired and sore. She healed immediately before his eyes.

"Incredible," he said. "What else don't I know about you?"

"You know that I heal," said Rebekah.

"I know that, but not much else," he said. His cock was erect and ready. "If you want something from me, you have to give me something in return."

"I'm interested in your blood, not your dick," she said. He grabbed her by the hips and impaled her on his... "dick", as she called it. She threw back her head. Her throat throbbed in ecstasy. "Tell me about you, my little vampire maid," he murmured as he thrust in and out of her. Her muscles clenched around him. It took all his control to get his words out. "I know nothing about you."

"Jaime!" she gasped.

He squeezed her buttocks. Hard. "It's **Lord** Jaime," he corrected her, although it was hard to hear
him because his mouth was pressed against her breasts. Water swirled in a tempest around them. He wanted to dominate her, to own her, to have her under his control. Yet, he wanted to see her free and wild as she had always been; a dangerous creature of the night, untameable and uncontrollable, a deadly force that no man could withstand.

Jaime Lannister would conquer the unconquerable, and only he would be able to do so.

"My lord," said Stefan Salvatore from the door. "Lord Tywin requests your presence in his study."

"Now?" growled Jaime.

"No, twenty minutes ago," said Stefan. "He said it in a forceful kind of way."

Trust Father to ruin a perfectly good morning. Jaime hoisted himself out of the bath. Water dripped from his body onto the Stefan felt uncomfortable with both his and Rebekah's nakedness, he didn't show it. Vampires didn't seem to share the same qualms a lot of lesser creatures did. Rebekah got out of the bath after him. Well, he'd known from the very beginning that nudity had never been something she'd been ashamed of, and why should she be? If the gods had intended for men (and women) to stay covered up at all times in front of others, they would have been born with clothes on, or at least thick coats of fur.

She helped him to dry off with the thick towels and as she did so, she continued to tease him. Did she not understand? One did not make Tywin Lannister wait, and he'd already been waiting for twenty minutes.

Still, there was something deliciously forbidden about this performance she was putting on for Stefan. And it probably was for Stefan's benefit, judging by the way she was casting sidelong glances at him. Stefan rolled his eyes because he was so subtle about his past affairs.

Tywin was waiting in his study, surrounded with shelves of books and piles of documents like a fortress of words and letters. Or a prison. His armour stood gleaming on a stand in the corner. Everything else was quite bare and devoid of decoration. Tywin Lannister was wealthy; he didn't need to flaunt his wealth.

"Father, you wanted to see me?" said Jaime.

His father did not look up from the letters he was writing. If he had been Tyrion, he would have tried to see what he was writing about but reading with the words the right way up was struggle enough. He wasn't going to strain his mind and vision to try and make out words that were upside down and from this distance.

Actually, if he'd been Tyrion, he wouldn't have been tall enough to see what was going on.

Finally, after Jaime felt as if he'd been standing there watching that quill dance across the page for a day (he had many virtues; patience wasn't really one of them), his father finally spoke. "I see you have found some new company," he said.

"I don't know what you mean," said Jaime, although he could guess.

Tywin gave him a pointed look before looking back down at his documents again. Yes, he did mean her. "Half of Westeros heard you in the guard tower. Do you realize what you have done, albeit unwittingly?" He smiled. It really was quite terrifying. His father had next to no lips. "A time will come when I will call upon you to serve House Lannister and if you deny me, you know what happens to those who defy me."
"So you are going to blackmail your son?" asked Jaime.

"I do whatever it takes to serve our family," said Tywin. "Robb Stark is crippled for now."

"What did he do? Go and fall out a window?" asked Jaime.

"His army has been crippled by the loss of his oxen, but he will recover. We must retake any lost lands in that time and forge new alliances."

"Like the Tyrells," said Jaime.

"You may like to think about your future. It has arrived."

"I have thought about my future," said Jaime. Find a witch and become as strong as Stannis had been on the battlefield. No, stronger. Magic was the newest weapon in Westeros, and he wouldn't be Jaime Lannister if he didn't hoard weaponry. It was a slight vice of his, but then, what warrior didn't like a good weapon?

Tywin did not speak, but he did not dismiss Jaime, which meant Jaime couldn't exactly leave and he didn't want to ask his father what else he was supposed to be doing in here.

Finally, someone knocked on the door, breaking the monotonous scratching of the quill.

"Enter," said Tywin. Little Caroline Forbes opened the door and stepped inside, dressed in a freshly laundered pink gown that would have looked ridiculous on most other people but made her look as sweet as a meadow flower. Well, she was as sweet as a meadow flower, even by human standards. How a blood-drinking creature could be so innocent was beyond him. Perhaps that was her angle. She'd used her sweetness to win his father over. Her ascent had been nothing short of miraculous. Perhaps Tyrion had been right to worry.

"I have brought it, Lord Tywin," she said. Her curtseys were still awful. Jaime would teach her again later. Or perhaps she was pretending.

Two more servants followed her inside, carrying a long wrapped bundle on a golden silk-lined tray. Jaime raised an eyebrow.

"Take it," said Tywin to him when he didn't move. Now he was curious. His father often gave him gifts, but it was never so ceremonious. Usually, he simply handed him things and expected him to infer a message from them. They weren't hard to decode. Most of his gifts said, "Become the man you were meant to be now, Jaime."

He suspected that this was one of those gifts, but his father must have been more eager to see him take on his mantle as his son than usual, or else he wouldn't be blackmailing him as well. Caroline was practically quivering with excitement. Whether it was about the gift or the blackmail, he wasn't sure.

Lying on the red silk was a longsword.

Next chapter: Caroline tells tales. Daemon returns to King's Landing and receives correspondence from a mysterious friend.
Toy Story

Chapter Summary

Jaime gets a present. Caroline tells a story. Daemon receives a mysterious missive.

King's Landing

The ruby eyes of the golden lions glared up at him. He'd never seen a scabbard so elaborate, so beautiful, and so terribly like his father. Each of the lions seemed to mirror his father's cold disapproving gaze. Well, he supposed that, this way, he would always take a piece of home with him onto the battlefield.

"What's the occasion?" he asked as he drew the sword from the scabbard. It was light and perfectly balanced. The hilt was warm in his hand as if it recognized him. He looked at the blade, admiring the craftsmanship. The steel swirled with patterns and gleamed a pale blue. Valyrian steel. Oh, how he'd wanted a Valyrian steel sword since he'd been able to say the word! No, one should not show excitement in front of Father. He wouldn't approve.

Tywin did not tell him. "It is forged from Eddard Stark's blade, Ice, I believe it was called," he said instead.

"Where's the rest of it?" asked Jaime. "Unless you have been cheated by the blacksmith, Father?"

"It would not do for the king to have a lesser sword than his uncle," said Tywin. Huh, Joffrey had one too. This lessened Jaime's excitement somewhat. Still, what would he give to see Robb Stark's face when he realized Jaime was wielding a weapon made from the remnants of that of his dead father. Revenge was a dish best served…well, hot or cold, Jaime didn't mind.

Caroline whispered something under her breath. She'd thought they couldn't hear it, but they did.

"Did no one ever tell you it is impolite to whisper behind the backs of lords?" Tywin asked her. Poor Caroline blushed pink to match her dress.

"There weren't any lords in my village, my lord," she said.

"Clearly," drawled Jaime. Rebekah had said something about a "democracy" where the smallfolk chose their own lords and everyone had a say in important decisions. It sounded inefficient, impractical, stupid, and just plain terrible. Life must have been such a pain. How would they ever get anything done? Imagine waiting for idiotic farmers and stableboys to debate about what to do while the enemy was on their doorstep. What would they know about matters beyond their own hearths and barns and something called "high school"?

"Say it out loud so we may all hear it," said Tywin.

"It's nothing, really," she said. "Just something silly."

"Go on," said Tywin. Was that a touch of amusement in his voice? Or had Jaime imagined it? But he had become very attuned to the subtle changes in his father's voice over the years and he noticed what most people missed.
"It looks like Excalibur," she said. "It's a story from...where I come from about a magical sword that was in a stone. The great wizard Merlin said that whoever pulled that sword out of the stone would become king. A boy called Arthur did, and he became the greatest king the land had ever seen."

"Excalibur, you say?" asked Jaime.

Caroline nodded. "It's just a story. I mean, it's got a wizard in it." He gave her a look. She knew fully well that there were witches. Why couldn't there be wizards? Were they not simply male witches?

"It's a good name, Excalibur," said Jaime as he tried it out on his tongue. It was exotic. No one else would have even thought of it. Well, except Katherine Stark. She hadn't been composing any of her songs and stories; she'd simply copied them. Even 'Arise Ye Northern Sons' was not original. Robb Stark's bard was a farce. "I think I'll call it that."

"It is a twin of Joffrey's new blade," remarked Tywin. "You will be presented with it when the Tyrells are formally welcomed into King's Landing and Joffrey and Margaery's betrothal is officially made known."

The sword lost some of its lustre. Was it identical? He didn't want a sword that looked just like Joffrey's.

His father seemed to be deep in thought. "Excalibur, you say?" he asked Caroline as he motioned to the servants to take the sword back.

Now, what?

Caroline nodded. "It was given to Merlin by the Lady of the Lake—she lives beneath a sacred lake somewhere—when Merlin was trying to find a way to determine who would be king. So he put it inside a stone. Many people tried to take it out, but it was a little boy, Arthur, who managed it."

"And only the rightful king could take the sword from the stone?" said Tywin.

"That's the way the story goes."

"But the true Excalibur doesn't have a twin," Jaime reminded them, lest they took that name and bestowed it upon Joffrey's sword. His father wasn't averse to using stories to get what he wanted, even if this one was more fantastical than most. Katherine Stark had been using stories left and right and, of course, Damon Salvatore had been tempting fate with his. Perhaps it was time the Lannisters had a legend of their own.

But Jaime wanted Excalibur.

"My lord, it would be impossible to put a sword in a stone," said Caroline.

"Yes," said Tywin. Jaime was about to smile and think about the look on Katherine's face when she realized she wasn't the only one who could use stories to help her cause, but then his father started enquiring about craftsmen in the city.

The device—a vice hidden inside a plaster 'rock'—would be finished within the week and it would be Joffrey who would ride out on a 'hunting trip', find the 'rock' and, in front of all his courtiers and whatever peasants were present at that moment, pull the sword out of the stone after many others tried.
Jaime, however, managed to keep the name of Excalibur so long as another appropriate name could be found for Joffrey's sword.

The throne room had returned to its former glory. The red and gold tapestries were on full display. Yellow sunlight streamed in, highlighting the motes of dust floating on the air. The courtiers and ladies seemed to have recovered from their 'ordeal' of hiding under their beds while the battle had raged outside. Rebekah smoothed out the skirts of her new dress. She'd found it lying at the end of her bed this morning, with a masculine scrawled note saying, "Wear this". It had not been signed, but who would have given her such a dress and note? There were slits in the sleeves and bodice that showed off the golden silk beneath that clung to her body like a second skin. The brocade was as rich as anything she had worn back in the Middle Ages, and of a much brighter red. She'd only braided up a few bits of her hair and let the rest of it flow down. It had grown very long.

Cersei Lannister and her minions could have their lopsided cowpats on their heads. Rebekah was not going to go down that tragic road.

There was another ruby and gold necklace to match. If people hadn't known she'd been involved with the Lannisters before, they all did now.

"Are you trying to make the Queen kill you?" Caroline whispered.

"She can't," Rebekah replied. "Even if I were human, she still wouldn't be able to touch me."

Caroline looked at her blankly. Maybe Klaus liked confused girls because clear-headed girls obviously wouldn't go for him. Rebekah sighed. "I have Jaime," she said simply. "And, even if I didn't, I have my wits."

"Puh-lease," said Caroline. She rolled her eyes. "Just because you did the dirty act doesn't mean he actually cares. He's Lord Jaime Lannister. Besides, don't you remember Damon?"

Rebekah glared at Caroline. It was so tempting to just throw Subtlety by the wayside and break her neck then and there. Instead, she rolled her eyes. "If I didn't care about Stefan's feelings, you wouldn't be alive," she said. "And maybe I don't care all that much about him. Just keep that in mind. Besides, in case you haven't noticed, I'm the lady knight. I've been running around in armour and a uniform for these past couple of months, Lady Forbes. I haven't exactly had time to get beaded chiffon dresses made." She indicated Caroline's gown. She had to admit, she was impressed by the design. Sure, Caroline had taken inspiration from modern clothing, but the design had to be her own work. The sleeves were of sheer cream silk and more sheer silk encased an under dress of white satin. It looked almost bridal except, of course, Westeros didn't understand that white was for brides. That was a purely post-Victorian construct.

"This isn't smart," said Caroline.

"Don't talk to me about smart, Caroline, because that would just be ironic," said Rebekah. Cersei could try to kill her. She wouldn't succeed.

There were hushed whispers as she passed by people. She heard them whispering her name and Jaime's. Some of the ladies gave her pointed looks. They were just jealous because they wanted Jaime for themselves. They didn't understand that he couldn't just go for vanilla. He liked the forbidden and the dangerous.

The entire court fell silent when the king was announced by the herald. Joffrey strode in with a prance in his step, arrayed all in red and gold. From certain angles, he did look a little like Jaime,
but mostly he resembled Cersei. Then again, Jaime and Cersei were twins. His short cloak was arranged to cover one shoulder only. Since when had that been in fashion in Westeros? She glanced at Caroline. The other girl smiled. "Lord Tywin wanted something new for the king," she said.

"Lord Tywin cares about fashion now?" whispered Rebekah.

"He cares about appearances. It's part of one's reputation. You'd do well to remember that the next time you step out looking like you-know-who's mistress."

They both dropped into curtseys as the king passed them. Rebekah noted with satisfaction that Caroline still wobbled when she did so. So much for appearances, Lady Forbes.

As Joffrey reached the front of the room and was about to ascend the steps, he suddenly stopped and bowed to Lady Margaery before taking her hand and kissing it. "My lady," he whispered, loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear.

"Your Grace," said Margaery.

The High Septon was waiting at the steps beneath the throne. By rights, it should have been done in the Sept, considering this was considered to be a religious ritual of some sort—religion wasn't a big thing in Westeros, thank God (pun intended)—but Lord Tywin had mentioned that holding it inside the throne room would be more meaningful and no one had dared to object. If Tywin had been younger, Rebekah suspected Margaery would have tried to woo him instead.

Joffrey led Margaery up the steps and they stood before the High Septon, who said some blessing that included all the seven gods of Westeros about blessing the impending fruitful union and peace and prosperity and blah blah blah. She was getting bored with this. She'd hated church in the Middle Ages and had only gone to flirt with the handsome young lords afterwards. This was just like that. At least there were still handsome young lords.

Jaime stood at the side of the throne arrayed in his white and gold Kingsguard uniform. She'd never seen him in it until now, to be honest. It looked good on him, making him seem as if he were composed of sunlight itself. He stared straight ahead, his eyes so green that they seemed aglow with wildfire. Their gazes met. She did not look away, nor did she smile. His lip twitched. There would be a price to pay for her insolence; she would probably enjoy that price.

Everyone thought she was simply staring at the proceedings before her, but they were so boring. At least they were much shorter than mass. She could still remember the interminable Christmases and Easters and whatever rituals those medieval humans had come up with, when they had spent hours kneeling on a carved stone floor listening to a priest drone on and on and on in bad Latin about sin and hell and death and salvation. If it hadn't been for Elijah's insistence that they at least tried to blend in, and for the company afterwards, she would never have gone. The only time she hadn't been bored to death had been during a high mass in Florence in 1478. Now that had been a memorable event.

The courtiers clapped and cheered for Margaery and Joffrey. They were an ill-matched couple. Dear King Joffrey had thought he'd found the perfect queen in Margaery Tyrell, for she was everything that Sansa Stark wasn't. Well, he wasn't wrong there. The thing was, Sansa Stark could never truly harm Joffrey, at least not in her current state, but Margaery was a clever girl who knew how to feign innocence. She was whatever Joffrey wanted her to be, whereas, in truth, it would be Joffrey who would be shaped. Not that the Tyrell girl's path would be easy to walk. If there was one thing Joffrey had inherited from his biological father, it was his determination to be free to do what he wanted. Mostly that involved torturing and killing innocence on Joffrey's part.
The door of the throne room suddenly opened to admit the herald. The man knelt before Joffrey.

"Your Grace," he said.

"Speak," said Joffrey.

"Lord Daemon Lannister has entered the city and is awaiting Your Grace's summons outside."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. They forgot about the flashy Tyrells with their –very attractive– outlandish fashions. All the courtiers had collective attention-deficit-disorder. Still, Rebekah craned her neck with the rest of them. Stories had spread of her old friend Daemon inside King's Landing, and outside of it too. They said he had defeated Robb and Katherine Stark against overwhelming odds, intimidating them with his harp song. An entire Stark army had retreated upon hearing his music and not a single Lannister had perished. Some even said the very sound of his music had slain men and put fear into the northerners.

The doors opened to admit Daemon Lannister. He looked different from the last time Rebekah had seen him. There was something more confident about the way he held himself, and there was also something harder and more impatient. He did not look at anyone except the king and Tywin as he approached the throne with long strides. He knelt before the king.

"Rise, Lord Daemon," said Joffrey.

"Thank you, Your Grace," said Daemon. His red cloak stood out starkly against his golden hair and pale skin.

"Tell us of your victory against Robb Stark," said Joffrey. "My lady and I have heard so many thrilling versions of the tale and we did not know which one to believe."

Daemon glanced in Tywin's direction. It was impossible to read the expression on his face. "Your Grace, I pray you would not believe in the tall tales spun by the smallfolk. They never let the truth get in the way of a good story," Daemon began.

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Daemon Lannister, his cousin, the new golden boy of the Lannisters. Jaime had never thought much of his cousin before. He'd left for the Kingsguard by the time Daemon and Jorge had come to live in Casterly Rock and even during the times when he had been back home, his cousins had been mere shadows on the walls. Well, not really, because Daemon had always been an annoying overreaching bastard who had thought himself the next Rhaegar, as if he could even compare.

But that was then. Now Daemon was a man who fit the armour he'd been given, and he had defeated Robb Stark with a song. Jaime had thought and fought so hard against that northern boy and what had he gotten for his pains? Chains.

He followed his father, his uncle, Daemon, and Tyrion into his father's study, which had formerly been Tyrion's. With the return of Tywin Lannister, no one needed Tyrion as the acting Hand of the King anymore. He'd been stripped of his title and pushed back into the obscure shadows. It occurred to Jaime that his father treated his children the way a child treated toys. If he wanted them, he brought them out into the light and once he didn't need them, he put them back on the shelf to gather dust.

Caroline, Rebekah, and Stefan trailed behind, no doubt summoned because they were familiar with Katherine Stark and her ways.

Stefan shut the door of the study once they were all inside.
"So, you took the Stark fortress," began Tywin.

"My lord, I…" said Daemon.

"Against my explicit orders," said Tywin. Aha! His father would never reprimand anyone in public. It was beneath him. But here, amongst family and trusted servants, Daemon was in trouble. He may have been a golden boy in the eyes of the people for having frightened Robb Stark with his rendition of the Rains of Castamere but in front of Tywin Lannister's eyes, he was a disobedient renegade who had sought to further his own glory with little thought for the overall strategy of House Lannister. Tywin Lannister brooked no disobedience amongst his ranks. Daemon had overreached.

"Forgive me, Lord Tywin," said Daemon, "but I saw the chance and I took it. I had thought that even you, with all your wisdom, might not have seen the opportunity, shut up as you have been behind high walls. I know, now, that I was mistaken."

Kevan sucked in a breath. No one told Tywin that they thought he'd made a mistake! Yet young Daemon, the orphan boy, had done so. Daemon lifted his head to meet Tywin's gaze. The Lannister patriarch did not take his eyes away from him. It was as if they had forgotten there was anyone else in the room.

"Tell me what happened," said Tywin.

"Robb and Katherine Stark are cautious people," said Daemon. "Katherine Stark, in particular."

It wasn't surprising. If she weren't wary by nature, she wouldn't have gotten to where she was now. She was a bard who became a queen. Perhaps there was a lesson there for Jaime somewhere although he couldn't really say what it was.

"When I opened the gates and played the Rains of Castamere, perhaps she thought I it had been a trap and I actually had more men than I really did," said Daemon.

"You took a gamble," said Kevan. "With your life? With your men's lives?"

"He won," said Tywin.

Silence. Jaime furrowed his brow. His father might not like disobedience, but he also admired courage and original thought. By defying his orders and surviving, Daemon had showed a lot of the latter two. Who else would have thought of such a thing? If it had been Jaime in his place... well, he still would have taken the fortress, and then he would have tried to fight his way through Robb Stark's entire army. He doubted his musical skills would send anyone into a state of awe, and music would have been the last thing on his mind anyway.

"And, did you not let the traitor Damon Salvatore escape?" asked Tywin. "Along with Robb Stark's brother who managed to trick you into believing that he was no friend of the Starks?"

"It was a miscalculation on my part," said Daemon. "I had thought that Damon Salvatore would have a greater sense of self-advancement."

Behind him, Stefan frowned. Jaime could tell he was as confused about his brother's actions as everyone else was. Now, Jaime didn't actually know Damon Salvatore all that well, apart from the fact that he was arrogant and thought very highly of his own skills in the battlefield—such confidence was warranted, he supposed, since he was a vampire. However, he had heard much of him from Rebekah and Caroline. Stefan had preferred not to talk about him at all. Jaime had thought Damon too clever a man to put such stock in his loyalty to Robb Stark. But then, all
mammals of vampires had gravitated towards the Young Wolf. One would have thought that a
two like Katherine Stark would have chosen the winning side as well.

"And Jon Snow?" said Tywin.

"He told me a great tale about how he and Robb Stark became enemies because they fought over
the same woman, Katherine," said Daemon.

Jaime almost laughed. Jon Snow had copied that story from the Salvatores!

"You are dismissed, Ser Daemon, Third Marshal of the Westerlands" Tywin said to Daemon.
Everyone fell silent. Was that a new title? Who were the first and second marshals anyway?

Daemon bowed and left, having won yet another victory.

In fact, he was the first man to achieve victory against Robb Stark.

"He must have been very calm to have convinced Robb Stark that he had an army hidden within
that fortress with just a song," remarked Kevan, looking at the door long after Daemon had gone.

"It wasn't Robb Stark he convinced," said Tywin. He turned to the vampires standing at the back.
"He is a military man. He would not have understood the subtleties of the music. It was Katherine
Stark, was it not?"

"I would imagine so, my lord." Stefan was the first to speak.

Defeating Robb Stark was one thing. Fooling Katherine Stark was another thing entirely. She was
Robb Stark's most dangerous weapon and general. Jaime looked to his father. Was he thinking that
Daemon was the answer to that problem?

Daemon felt as if he were walking in a dream. He couldn't really feel his feet touch the ground, nor
were the murmurs and whispers around him clear enough for him to make out whole sentences as he
floated through the long dark halls of the Red Keep. He had expected Lord Tywin to be
displeased with him; after all, very few people got away with disobeying his orders. The only
person who could almost get away with it was Jaime. Yet Tywin had simply reprimanded him and
sent him along on his way with a new, albeit pointless, title and a glint of approval in his eye.

He closed the door of his new quarters in King's Landing behind him quietly, trying to absorb
everything that had happened. It had terrified him to play on those walls, he had to admit, but he
had also been thrilled by the risk. And that moment when Katherine Stark had acknowledged him,
it had felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. She'd suspected, but she'd given
him the benefit of the doubt. And, perhaps, she'd wanted to give him a chance to prove himself.
She'd understood him, he thought. She'd seen through the layers of obscurity that he'd been cloaked
with his entire life and recognized the ambition and greatness that lay within his breast. She, too,
was someone whom the world had underestimated; but no more.

He sank down into one of the red velvet chairs and stroked the strings of his harp. It gleamed in the
slanting rays of sun that pierced the hazy air. It yearned to be played, but he didn't know what to
play. He didn't know how to express how he was feeling because he didn't know how he was
feeling to begin with. Something significant had just happened. He could feel it in his bones.

A soft knock came on his door. "Lord Daemon?"

"Enter," he said without getting up or turning around. It wouldn't be anyone important if they called
him 'Lord Daemon'.

A servant in the livery of House Lannister came inside. "This came for you, my lord," he said as he handed him a roll of parchment. The red wax seal, stamped with a most curious emblem that looked like a stiff tadpole had been carefully left intact, but he could see how the lines had warped where someone had warmed it to open the missive.

Not that there was any damning message contained within. Sheets of music fell onto his lap when he broke the seal. They were not songs he had seen before. The music had been written in a woman's hand, and it was the most elaborate and sophisticated music he had ever seen. There were so many layers to it and the fingering was so intricate it would take a god of music to do it justice.

He set down the music after perusing it and then put his hands on his harp to try out the first couple of sequences. They were completely new, unseen before. The woman who had penned them was a goddess of sound. When he struck the first chords, it sounded as if the dam around his soul was cracking and everything that Daemon Lannister was and was meant to be poured out. He had never felt so whole as in that moment when playing the music from his mysterious correspondent. Whoever she was, she understood him, and was that not what all men wanted very deep down? They were all alone in this world; they came into the world alone and they would all die alone. They were all particles of dust floating in the great emptiness, yearning for a connection. Sometimes, it happened, and when it happened, one held onto it.

His fingers skimmed across the strings. His eyes saw stars and beyond. He closed them, just feeling the vibration and the sound moving his spirit to dance. He had never been overly fond of dancing for it had seemed so forced, but now, he understood why people felt the need to move like that sometimes. 'Who are you?' he wondered. He thought of all the women he knew who were also musicians. Many ladies were competent with the harp and other instruments, but there were none who came to mind who would be capable of composing something like this. In fact, lady bards were rather rare…

There was only one.

Next chapter: Tyrion is let in on a big secret. Caroline engineers some Lannister propaganda. Jaime tries his hand at poetry. Daemon is tempted.

A/N: Our apologies for not updating last week. Telcontar was on a plane.
Chapter Summary

Caroline tries her hand at playing politics. Tyrion is let in on the secret. Daemon receives a mysterious letter.

King's Landing

"All right, Jaime, tell me everything." Tyrion slammed the door, bolted it, and stared at Jaime with his piercing green eyes as the latter sipped his wine and tried to think of some way of not telling him anything. If there was one thing Tyrion had inherited from their father, then it was the leonine Lannister eyes. Of course, his brother's were a lot warmer. It took a certain sort of skill to muster up that sort of coldness and Tyrion hadn't gained it yet.

"Well, there's a lot," began Jaime. "For example, although I'm sure you know this, the world is round."

"I mean about your new mistress and her friends."

"Rebekah is hardly my mistress and Caroline is not her friend. More like her worst enemy or favourite subject to torment; I can't really tell the difference."

"Tell me, Jaime," said Tyrion. "I know what I saw, or what I don't see. I know you were wounded. I know I was wounded. Yet here we are, whole, unscarred, and healthier than we have ever been in our entire lives."

"I wouldn't put it that way," said Jaime.

"By rights, you shouldn't be able to walk," Tyrion continued as if he hadn't heard Jaime at all. Jaime sighed. He supposed he couldn't keep this from his brother forever, and he shouldn't; not really. That didn't mean he didn't want to delay it, if only to relish in the feeling of knowing something that his learned bookish brother did not.

"Do you remember the tales that we heard in Winterfell about blood-drinking monsters that prowled in the dark of the north?" asked Jaime.

"Vampires, yes," said Tyrion. "I rather enjoyed the debauched tales of Count Vlad Dracula. But why are we talking about grumpkins and snarks?"

"Tyrion, prepare yourself for a terrible truth. Vampires are real," said Jaime. He took another sip of wine. Well, it was best to get it over and done with. Tyrion stilled.

And then he glared at him. "Jaime, I mean it. I want to know."

"And I am telling you," said Jaime. He'd known that Tyrion wouldn't have believed the truth even if he'd told it to him, particularly not in this blunt way that sounded fantastical. For one, Jaime Lannister was not a blunt man and secondly, Tyrion was always the more rational and mundane of the two of them, even if he did have the tendency to become romantic; a fault that Jaime did not share. "You see, the whole problem with telling the truth is that it's so stupid that no one believes
you. I don't know why I bother. Vampires are real, Tyrion. They may not fear the sunlight and they
like eating garlic but, apart from that, they are as real as you and I."

"You're a terrible liar, Jaime," said Tyrion.

On the contrary, Jaime thought he was being an excellent liar, considering Tyrion was becoming
more and more sceptical about the truth. His brother continued to glare at him and he continued to
sip his wine.

"You know me better than anyone," he said at last. "I would never lie to you." He put on his best
beatific smile. Apparently, it made people shiver because whenever they saw it, they thought he
had come up with a Tywin-style scheme. "You saw what you saw. There are vampires."

"All right, then," said Tyrion. "Name them. Rebekah, Stefan, Caroline Forbes…"

"Damon Salvatore, obviously, considering he is Stefan's brother," said Jaime. He paused. "And
Katherine Stark."

"Grumpkins and Starks," Tyrion amended.

Once, not so very long ago in the village of Green Acre, just a few miles north of King's Landing, a
woodsman came across a spectacular sight. As he was walking home with a load of faggots on his
back after a hard day's work, he stopped by the edge of the lake to take a drink and to rest his feet.
As he sat down by the edge of the lake, he noticed something glinting some distance away by the
lakeshore. Curious, he went to investigate and found that there was a beautiful blade embedded
inside a large yellow stone.

Red rubies gleamed and glittered on its hilt. 'If I can take this sword, I will never need to work
again,' the woodsman thought to himself. He pulled and pulled, but he could not take it out of the
stone. That was when he noticed that there were words carved into the rock. Being a simple
woodsman and unable to read, he went home and told the village scribe about it.

The scribe came with him and when he saw the stone and the sword, he was filled with wonder, for
carved on the stone were the words:

Winter creeps in from the north

Darkness closes; foul things come forth.

Stars extinguish in the vault of heaven.

When what is whole is torn into seven,

only the man who wields this blade

may turn seven into one again.

Caroline set down her quill and rubbed her eyes with ink-stained hands. Balls of screwed up and
blotted parchment surrounded her like a literary nest. Well, as literary as she could be. Literature
class hadn't exactly been her favourite and she'd actually loathed poetry. Now she was writing
propaganda poems for the Lannisters. Couldn't they have gotten someone else to do it? Like Stefan
or Rebekah? Stefan had to have written love poems at some point in his life, right? He'd come from
that generation of people. Caroline's generation wrote love texts with emoticons.
She didn't think Lord Tywin would be particularly impressed if she tried to put an emoticon on the stone that contained the magic sword. He could be such a snob sometimes.

She blew on the ink on the parchment to dry it, proudly reading out her work to herself again. It was the best thing she'd ever composed, poetry wise. Something creaked. She was on her feet in an instant, only to find the one and only Jaime Lannister had come inside while she had been so focused on her work. She curtseyed. "My lord," she said.

"Lady Caroline Forbes," he said, "cupbearer, poet, vampire, and I hear you embarrassed Ilyn Payne."

"He was in my way," said Caroline.

"He's lucky to be alive," remarked Jaime. Caroline watched him as he picked up all the objects in her room that could be picked up and examined them with undue interest. What did he want with her? He knew all about them and their kind – thank you, Rebekah – and such information was dangerous, particularly in the hands of someone like him. Jaime lazily picked up her finished poem and read it. Wasn't he supposed to be the non-literary brother?

His lips moved slowly as he read the words out to himself. Caroline dared not move. Did he like it? Did he think it was awful? If it didn't past the Jaime Lannister test, then it definitely would not pass the Tywin Lannister one. But she really did think it was suitable and she had worked on it for hours. Eight, at least. Even vampires needed rest, especially ones who were surviving mostly on animal blood. All she really wanted to do right now was go to bed, but she couldn't because her lord's son was right there.

Couldn't he go and read poetry somewhere else? Just because his bloodslut didn't need as much sleep didn't mean that all vampires were the same.

Finally, he spoke. "Why does it only have six lines when it's a verse about seven kingdoms?" he asked. "And you have ink on your face."

She lost it. She didn't know what had taken over her. Perhaps it was the mocking tone he spoke in that reminded her so much of Damon fricking Salvatore. She picked up one of the screwed up balls of parchment and pelted him with it. He ducked, seemingly delighted at this new game which was, to him, a lot more fun than a poetry slam. She pelted him again before her brain could register that this was a Lannister she was throwing things at. Some bounced off him harmlessly. Others simply flew wide. He gripped her wrist just as she was about to throw a sixth one at him.

"I could have you punished for this," he whispered, his voice low and dangerous like the growl of a large cat just before it was about to pounce on the unsuspecting antelope. He let her go. "But I won't, because I am a generous man." He took up her quill. His hands, which she noted were rather elegant and long-fingered, despite the large and slightly scarred knuckles from his years of swordfighting, dwarfed the delicate white feather that she used.

He dipped it into the ink and, before Caroline could protest, began to scribble on her poem. He smiled. "There, seven lines," he said. "Shall we present this to Father? And we need not mention the incident with the parchment balls."

"I didn't know you were a poet, Lord Jaime," said Caroline.

"People think they know me because they know my name," Jaime said. "They are so eager to judge." There was something else in his tone apart from his usual mocking drawl; something deeper, darker, and a little more human. "They don't know me." As suddenly as that spark of
humanity had appeared, it extinguished, leaving his eyes dark and unreadable again.

Caroline cleaned the ink off her face with a wet handkerchief and followed him through the torch-lit corridors to the study of the Hand of the King. Gone were the almost lewd tapestries Tyrion had put up. Lord Tywin preferred spartan patterns in his tapestries, and the only thing that looked decorative was the lion standard that hung behind him on the wall, reminding everyone of who was really in charge in King's Landing.

"Jaime," he said when he saw the two of them come in. If he was surprised to see his son in a discussion about propaganda literature, he didn't show it. A pile of letters sat neatly sealed on his left hand side. Caroline could make out two names in her lord's strong handwriting.

Roose Bolton. Mace Tyrell.

She thought nothing more of it. They were just two more people who were in correspondence with Tywin. Tywin had more pen pals than anyone had a right to, or would want to.

"You have finished your task?" Tywin asked Caroline.

She nodded, too nervous to speak. She hadn't looked at it since she'd finished. What if, in the half an hour between then and now, it had degraded? What if he, like Lord Jaime, found it lacking, even if it was simply in the number of lines? He'd given her such an important task. She wanted to please him.

'Stop it, Caroline,' she scolded herself. 'You're clever, you're worthy, and you don't need to keep making other people happy.'

But she wanted to make Lord Tywin happy.

Tywin read through the poem. It took a lot longer than it should for something that had only six – sorry, seven – lines. He finally set down the parchment. She craned her neck to read it upside down.

Winter creeps in from the north

Darkness closes; foul things come forth.

Stars extinguish in the vault of heaven.

Snow brings the malestrom of war.

When what is whole is torn into seven,

only the man who wields this blade

may turn seven into one again.

Tywin crossed out Jaime's line and silently handed the parchment to Caroline. "Copy this out again, without the hearts over your I's, and take it to the craftsmen. And don't let Jaime touch it."

Caroline glanced at Lord Jaime. He seemed unperturbed that his father had hated his poetry – and that he'd spelled 'maelstrom' wrongly. Perhaps he didn't know. "Should there not be seven lines?" she asked. "For symbolism. Lord Jaime suggested it would be more fitting."

"It would be, but I would rather there be six fitting lines than have it ruined by one that ought not be there."
My dearest Lord Daemon

I must admit that I am embarrassed to write to you in such a familiar manner, but I cannot help doing so. I hope you will not see this as an affront to propriety.

I greatly long to congratulate you on your new title. Being only a bard, I am uncertain what it truly entails but I am convinced that Lord Tywin would not expect a man of your talent to be placated by little more than mere ceremony. You are, after all, a very different kind of man from your esteemed cousin. (I speak of Lord Jaime, of course. We are well acquainted with one another, as you might have heard. I trust that he is well?) I have faith that you will prove yourself worthy of any title that can be bestowed upon an individual.

As you may be aware by now, my lord husband and I have the greatest esteem for Lord Tywin but we feel that, perhaps, he is, altogether, too insular and places his faith only in what he knows. That is the way of the old, I suppose, if you would forgive me for saying so. I know you love him deeply as you would your own father, but the world the changes every day and men would do well to change with it.

At present, I have no time to write more but I hope there will be further correspondence between us.

With greatest respect and admiration,

K

Harrenhal

"Why are you writing to Daemon Lannister?" asked Robb as he bent down to take a closer look at her work. She had been too absorbed in her thoughts to notice him enter her chambers. Since when had Robb become so sneaky? "Might I remind you that he is a Lannister and the enemy?"

"Your Grace, it is considered unseemly to read someone else's letter," she said with a smile.

"It is also something that you do on a regular basis, I'd wager," said Robb. "And you should know, by now, that you cannot keep any secrets from me."

"And I used to be so good at keeping secrets too."

"You're avoiding my question." He placed his hands on her shoulders and began to knead them. His thumbs found all the right spots. He'd become quite good at this. He bent down further to nibble the top of her ear.

"Maybe I just want to know him better?" She glanced up at him from between her eyelashes. A smile twitched on her lips but she fought to keep it from becoming a fullblown smirk. That would ruin the effect of innocence that she was trying for. "He is quite talented and in more ways than one."

"So, he is a lesser version of me, then," Robb murmured into her neck. She could see that he was a little uncomfortable but he was trying to hide it and it was a mite more effective than his efforts had been in the earlier days in their relationship. However, he clearly did not understand that the letter was not simply an overture for friendship's sake. Daemon Lannister would not be content to remain under Tywin for long. She intended to create a catalyst.
"It is very hard to match up to your reputation, but Daemon does his best," said Katherine. "I'm just giving him a little more incentive to try harder."

King's Landing

She pounced on him in the corridors, catching him unawares, but Jaime soon retaliated and slammed the vampire up against the wall. No one was watching. "I thought I told you to wait in my chambers," he murmured as he kissed her. "I suppose you just couldn't wait, could you, my lady?"

On the battlements, it had been different because he'd thought he'd been about to die. This carried much more risk and that just made it all the more exciting.

She held his face in both her hands. If she'd wanted, she could probably break his neck like that. He'd seen her do that to other men before. Yet, with him, she was as soft and gentle as a lamb. It took a certain sort of man to tame a creature as wild and powerful as Rebekah.

He ignored the fact that Robb Stark had tamed a woman almost as powerful and perhaps a little more dangerous. It was more like she'd tamed him, anyway.

"I got bored," she said, "and they do say boredom is the greatest sin."

"Who was your septa, again?"

"I didn't have a septa, but I did know a great number of courtesans in my life." She wrapped her legs around his waist and ground her hips against his. Why was she still wearing trousers? It was so difficult to access her when she had trousers on, the silly girl. She should have worn a dress if she'd wanted him so badly that she'd come to find him even though he was just a little bit late.

He let her go. "Not here," he whispered. Louder, he said, "Lady Mikaelson, there are matters of state which I must discuss with you in private." He held out his hand to her. She placed her little hand in his and he led her to his chambers. He shut the door quietly behind them. Somehow, they managed not to knock over too many things as he flung her over his shoulder and carried her to his bed, kicking and writhing. The pillows bounced as he dumped her on the bed. He undid the brooch that held her cloak around her shoulders. "You had a brooch made with your house sigil?" he asked as he looked at the piece of jewellery. It was quite tasteful, he had to say, with the knots woven together to form one big 'infinity' knot.

But it was still a knot, and he said so.

"Shut up," she said, even though she didn't really want him to. "You have lion brooches."

"Yes, and they look good. You should wear one of those, although…" He released her, leaving her panting on the bed, hot and impatient. There only two chests in his room. One held his clothes and the other, any personal belongings that he had, which were few. He didn't need much, at least, not in the way of material things. Jewellery was for women and people who simply lacked his own lustre.

He removed a small carved box from the latter. It was inlaid with gold and ivory. A lion's face was carved on the top. Its two ruby eyes blinked at him in the candlelight. It had once been his mother's. His father had had it made for her when they'd been courting. Jaime remembered how he and Cersei had used to watch her as she'd carefully selected pieces out of it to wear each day. Cersei had gotten most of the jewellery upon Joanna's death, but Jaime had retained a few trinkets and the box. He ran his hand over the surface and then opened the lid.
There were necklaces, rings, bracelets and a few combs; all pieces that Cersei hadn't really liked for one reason or another. He picked up a simple golden comb. Unlike the fashions of the day, it had no gems, but it had been beautifully made with a row of tiny prancing lions dancing across the top. Four of them could fit onto his fingernail.

Rebekah watched him without moving. He brushed her heavy blonde hair from her neck and kissed the back of it. As he did, he put the comb into her hair until the teeth found their grip.

She gingerly reached up to touch it. He picked up a mirror and held it up to her. She admired her reflection like the vain preening creature that she was. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

"And so much better than your knot," said Jaime as he took the mirror away. "Although I am afraid I will have to make a mess of your hair again, my lady."

They left the comb in, although it ceased to do what it was meant to do soon enough.

He moved slowly this time, teasing her and torturing her with his light kisses and touches. She retaliated in kind until it became a question of who had more self-control. He had to say, for someone of her age, her control was tremendous. Many a time, he thought he would simply give in, but pride stopped him from doing so. At least, until neither of them could hold back for any longer.

He entered her in one smooth thrust. She arched her back and bit his shoulder to stop herself from screaming while her fingernails raked down his back and drew blood. Pain and pleasure became inseparable from one another. He might have said her name. He might have simply growled deep in his throat, making sounds so primal and old that they couldn't even be considered to be syllables. She flipped him over so that he was lying on the bed staring up at her as she rode him. Her breasts moved in time with the thrusts of her hips. He'd never been on the bottom before and he tried to flip her back over to the way it was supposed to be, but she wouldn't let him. He gripped her waist instead, trying to control her movements. Her hair fell down like a golden curtain as she bent down to kiss him, cascading over his pillow and brushing his skin.

He sucked in gulps of air as the internal flame sent a shudder through him. He expelled his seed into her as she arched her back and called out his name repeatedly as though it were a prayer and he was her god. He was her god. Her thighs tightened around him and her fingers dug into his shoulders as she reached her climax with him.

Could vampires conceive? He would have to remind her to take that tea that he'd once heard Littlefinger mentioning. It would be most inconvenient to have a bastard and he intended to do this to her many, many times.

"Did you like the way I said your name?" she whispered after they were both spent. He stroked her hair slowly, letting the golden strands run through his fingers whilst she used his chest most inappropriately as a pillow.

"What way?" he murmured.

"Oh, Jaime!" she crooned in a bad imitation of what she had done before. She sat up. Her body gleamed with sweat. "You didn't really think that women, in the heights of their ecstasy, would really say their lovers' names?"

"Why did you say it then?" asked Jaime.

"For effect. You fell for it."

"I should make you bleed in retaliation for that great insult."
"Then make me bleed," she replied. Was she not going to bite herself for him again? He supposed not. Now that he could no longer claim he was weak from his wounds, she wasn't going to be that gentle caring vampire that she had been on the battlements. He fumbled for her brooch. Perhaps it was good for something after all. She tilted her head to the side to allow him access to her neck. He slowly pushed the point of the brooch in. Blood welled up and he clamped his lips around the wound before it could close over. He'd seen how quickly she could heal.

Did this make him a vampire now, since he was drinking blood and he actually liked it?

Wait, that would probably make Gregor Clegane a vampire, and he certainly wasn't one. Otherwise, he wouldn't be living a life less than that of an animal in the Stark camp.

"How did you become...what you are?" he asked.

"How did you know I wasn't born this way? Maybe I'm just, overall, a member of a superior species."

He looked at her as she pulled the sheets up over her breasts and lay on her side so she was facing him. Her head was propped up on her arm. The comb glinted. He copied her position without pulling up any sheets. It was still too hot after their frenzied lovemaking. There was something that she was keeping from him, most likely the way to become like her. Why would she want to share it with anybody?

But he wasn't just anybody. He was Jaime Lannister, and he knew Rebekah...well, perhaps 'love' was a very strong word to use, but she was definitely falling for him. He would simply need to fan the flames. If there was one person in the world who could get this secret, it would be him.

Robb Stark might also know said secret, which meant obtaining it for his own use was paramount.

So he didn't say anything and, instead, leaned forward to kiss her. She pressed her body closer to his. He smoothed back her hair from her face before tucking in the sheets around her.

"No one's tucked me in since my mother," she said as she placed her head on the pillow. Not once did she take her gaze off his face. It was as if she were trying to remember every feature until all she would be able to see in both her waking and sleeping moments was Jaime.

"Well," he said as he placed a kiss on her forehead. He lay down too and rubbed his leg against hers. There was no more vigour left in him tonight. Even lions needed to rest. In fact, if cats were anything to go by—and lions were just big cats—then his favourite activity really ought to be sleeping. She wriggled closer to him before turning around so that his body cupped hers perfectly.

He'd never slept with a woman in his bed before but he had to admit, the feel of her pert round bottom against him wasn't unpleasant. He draped his arm over her.

And when he dreamed, not only did he dream of Rebekah, but he also dreamed of Cersei and Cersei's promise.

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**Next chapter:** Rebekah and Jaime discover schisms in their relationship. Arya adjusts to life back with her family.
Rebekah finds out just how much the Lannister family loves one another. Caroline and Stefan play at damage prevention. Arya has difficulties in adjusting to family life.

King's Landing

The firelight from the Red Keep was distant; if not for the moon, Jaime would not have been able to see much, except he didn't need to see to be able to find his way here. He had come here so many times over the last one and a half decades that he knew it better than he knew himself. Almost.

The streets were quiet, save for a few drunks loitering in doorways of pubs that had long since closed their doors to business. A dog sniffed his ankle and decided that he had no food. A fisherman who smelled of his profession peered up at Jaime. "Do I know you?" he asked. His voice was slurred.

"No, you don't," said Jaime. He rounded the corner. The air here was immediately fresher. Boxes of flowers decorated the balconies. He climbed up a narrow stone staircase worn smooth over the years and opened the door at the top.

The house had been bought under a false name. Jaime had thought it quite a clever one. No one would associate "Godfrey Greystone" with him. He'd even done in purely through correspondence. It was only a very little house, suitable for a little tradesman who wanted to be something more.

Light shone out of the top window. He opened the bedroom door.

Cersei sat by the light of a single candle that flickered when Jaime came in. The dim light softened the lines on her face and for a moment, Jaime could imagine it was fifteen years ago, when they had first discovered this place where they could be together without anyone seeing or hearing them.

"You're not spending the night with your little whore, I see," she said. It was not a question.

"You are the only woman I will ever love," said Jaime. "Only you."

She stood, a female reflection of himself. He imagined he would have chafed against the bonds of feminine virtue as she did if he'd been born a woman. She was not like other women who fretted about their hair and dresses and skin and gloves and handkerchiefs.

He went to embrace her from behind. She moved away from him, evading his touch. "Cersei," he whispered. His beautiful sister. She was part of him. He'd missed her. It was the thought of her that had kept him optimistic during his months of imprisonment in the Stark camp—well, that, and the thought of Rebekah's impending rescue although, now that he was out, he would vehemently deny that he had ever thought her capable of doing that.

He stroked her skin where the sun had kissed her arms and left thousands of tiny freckles to mark where it had kissed. It was irrational to be jealous of the sun but Jaime was anyway. Only he was
allowed to kiss Cersei. The freckles dipped down into her cleavage, creating a trail for him to follow. She hesitated when he turned her around to face him. For a moment, she even seemed scared. He didn't know why but he liked it. "Are you afraid, dear sister?" he asked. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

"I'm not afraid of you," she said. She gave him a playful shove almost as if she were a girl again.

He gently cupped her face and kissed her, face to face, as he had done with Rebekah. It was new. She liked it when he took her from behind, quick and rough. He slowly slipped his hands over her soft, still smooth skin. Her flesh was soft from lack of activity. "Cersei," he murmured as he kissed his way from her jawline down to her collarbone and undid the front of her dress with his teeth.

"What are you doing?" she asked as she pushed him away. She was curious and wanted it, he could tell, but she wouldn't let herself want it and simply give in. She always stopped him from doing what she (and he) wanted. Why did she hate fun?

"I wanted to try something new."

"It's dangerous."

Perhaps it was his recent close encounters with Death, but he wasn't afraid at all. In fact, some part of him wanted someone to discover them. It gave him a thrill.

Wait…had someone put something in his wine tonight?

"We are Lions. We don't hide in the shadows," said Jaime. "That's not us."

"Maybe you don't, but it is always better to be in the shadows," said Cersei. "Our enemies cannot harm us if they cannot find us."

"I have my sword."

She stared at him. But maybe he'd gotten through to her, because she suddenly grabbed his face and kissed him as she'd never done so before, fierce and insistent.

"Fuck me," she whispered.

He lifted her off her feet and put her on the bed. The mattress had collapsed somewhat, but he didn't care. Neither of them did. He gasped her name as she gripped him by his hair and yanked his head back. So she wanted to try something different too, didn't she? He would be more than happy to oblige.

"I want to see your face when I make love to you," he whispered.

"Now," she rasped.

"Say my name." He wanted to hear her call to him in her moments of ecstasy. Would it be so hard for her to stop being the queen and simply give in and lose control?

"I can't," she said.

Why did she have to be so afraid all the time? Why couldn't she simply, for once, be reckless like Rebekah always was? Why did she have to be so contained, so in control?

"Well, I suppose this is what Lannister sibling bonding looks like."
Cersei gave a little scream and scrabbled to cover herself with her dress. Jaime sat up, reaching for his sword, only to remember that he'd taken it off some point at the beginning, along with his belt, so his trousers were somewhere around his ankles. Not the best way to start a fight; at least, not if one wanted to win it.

Rebekah stood in the doorway of the round chamber, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed. Her eyes blazed, even in the darkness. So, was she jealous? What did she expect? Upon seeing that it was her, Jaime's muscles loosened. She'd keep his secret. After all that trouble she'd gone to to save him from the northerners, including becoming a camp follower, he doubted she would do anything that would endanger his life in any way. She was easy to read like that.

He pulled his trousers back up and ran his hand through his hair. "You're quite the little spy, aren't you?" he asked. "How did you find us?"

"It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes. I followed you," she said. "You thought you were being so secretive, sneaking out."

"Not everybody's what you are," he said. Letting Tyrion know was one thing; letting his jealous sister know was another thing entirely. There was no knowing what Cersei would do if she found out there were vampires and that his lover was one of them.

"I guess old dogs can't learn new tricks," said Rebekah.

"On the contrary, I have learned many new tricks," he said before he realized that he'd admitted to being an old dog. Which he wasn't! Rebekah glared at him. Should he ask her to join them? He glanced at Cersei whose eyes were so wide that he could see white all around her irises. Probably not. "And, besides, a lion has nothing in common with a dog. Would you like me to prove it to you?"

"No thanks. I think I've seen enough." He could hear the hurt in her voice. Oh, to have a heart. That would be an interesting experience, he imagined, although not entirely pleasant.

She turned on her heel and left before he could say anything to tease her or to diffuse the situation (by inviting her to join them despite any potential protests on Cersei's part). He was a little torn. Why couldn't he just have both? Why did he have to choose? Not everything in life was a choice! He glanced back at Cersei, who was staring at him. "She knows," she whispered.

"She's known for quite some time, actually."

"Well, are you simply going to stand there? She saw us! She knows!"

"Half the kingdom whispers about it these days, Cersei," said Jaime. "No one important believes such slander. Besides, Rebekah would never betray me."

"She needs to be silenced."

"No. She's my disguise. And she's useful."

"She's outlived her usefulness."

Jaime gave her a dry smile. If only she knew the truth. But it was better that she didn't.

He buckled his belt while she was still watching. "Will you please trust me on this?"

"If anything happens to you, I can't protect you," said Cersei. She hugged herself. He kissed her on
"I know how to deal with my lovers," he said as he gave her a wink. Unlike her daughter, Cersei did not smile. "You should smile more, Cersei. It makes you even prettier than you already are."

He went outside, down the spiralling wooden staircase. The night air was cool. A lone figure stood at the bottom of the stone steps, staring at the distant moon. Ah, so she hadn't run back to her chambers to cry. That was a good start. Although Jaime suspected Rebekah was the type of woman who didn't just cry when she found out her lovers had other interests; she'd be the type of woman who ripped off their heads because she was a petty and irrational little girl. It wasn't as if she hadn't done this to others before.

"Rebekah," he whispered. She did not move. He slowly placed a hand on her shoulder. She finally turned around.

"So, have you come to tie up your loose ends?" she asked. Her face was guarded. He ran a thumb down her cheek.

"What do you mean?" he asked, pretending not to know.

"Well, now that I truly know your secret, are you going to silence me like my brother always did when I displeased him?"

"Would you like it if I was your brother?"

"No, I would kill you."

"Then I should be glad that I am not your brother," said Jaime.

"No, you are not, as I am not Cersei. What do you want?"

"I do not understand," said Jaime. "Can I not love both of you? Is my heart not big enough?"

"You don't love me," said Rebekah. "You want my blood and my body." She laughed. "That almost sounds religious." She took his hand and removed it from her face. "But the truth is that you love Cersei and you've never loved me. That's fine. I like you, Jaime, and you were fun while it lasted, but that's all it was: fun. And now that you're back to your old twincest habits, I know when to retreat."

"Rebekah, it doesn't have to be this way," said Jaime. "I know you. You're not that judgemental."

"I'm not and, if it had been the old me, I wouldn't have cared. I'd have thrown myself at you anyway. But I need to learn to respect myself. If I can't do that, then who would respect me?"

Of all the times for her to learn to 'respect herself'!

"I think I would have liked the old you better," he said.

"Maybe, but I didn't," said Rebekah. "Let's just be friends."

"I imagine we could be very good friends."

"Not that kind of friends."

She took a step back from him. Her, taking a step away from him!
"Well, it was best that it ended. I need new things," said Jaime. Nobody left him; at least, not women.

"Then why are you still standing here?" asked Rebekah. She jerked her head in the direction of the little townhouse nestled between other equally forgettable townhouses. He would have come up with something witty, except she didn't wait for him to. She suddenly disappeared with a rush of wind, leaving him all alone and without even letting him open his mouth.

Of course he would go back to Cersei. How could she have been so stupid to think that he could ever change, and that he would ever love her? Men were all bastards. Maybe Nik had had been telling the truth when he said he'd been protecting her each time he'd killed a lover of hers because he knew that they would eventually break her heart.

Rebekah stopped. Why was she running? She took in gulps of night air. There was an ache inside her chest and in her throat. No, she would not cry for him. She would not let him win. The street where the house stood was still visible behind her. It would be so easy to go back, to take him, kiss him, and tell him that she didn't mind sharing even if she actually hated sharing because she just wanted him so much.

"No, Rebekah," she whispered. "You have to learn to respect yourself. You're not a doormat. You're a thousand year old original. You're a Mikaelson. What would Niklaus say?"

She pictured her brother's taunting face. He would tear into her mercilessly if he ever saw her like this, pining over a man who'd never cared in the first place. She shook her head. She would prove Klaus wrong and she would prove Jaime wrong. She didn't need either of them.

Suddenly, she was ravenous. Her gums itched and she wanted to feel warm blood running down her throat, filling the emptiness inside. It wasn't easy to feed in King's Landing, but she was so close to the city gates that it would be a pity not to venture outside for a bite.

COUNT DRACULA STRIKES AGAIN!

If Westeros had had newspapers, that was what the headline would have said. Instead, Caroline heard the servants whispering about it before breakfast had even been served. They had fallen silent when she asked them what was going on, but little bit by little bit, she coaxed it out of them when they realized she wasn't going to bite, literally and metaphorically.

"It killed seven people," whispered the talkative Mari who had been working for Caroline ever since her first day of being a lady. "All of them were strong young men. It drained them all of blood."

Being a strong young man wasn't exactly any sort of protection when it came to fending off Rebekah, although seven was excessive, even for her. How much blood did she need, anyway? Did someone desiccate her and no one knew about it? And if she were desiccated, how could she have caught anything? It was as if she wanted the whole world to find out about their secret! Wasn't it bad enough that she'd told Jaime Lannister and Damon had been going around with vampire stories?

She marched to find Stefan. "We have a problem," she said as she barged into his room without so much as knocking. Her eyes widened. "Oh my God! Stefan!"

The two in his bed sprang apart. The girl scrabbled for sheets to cover herself with while Stefan
pulled at them to cover *himself*. Caroline simply turned around and waited for them to make themselves decent, although she almost forgot why she was here. Stefan and…who was this?

The girl was dark-haired, with doe-like eyes. She hurried past Caroline, her dress barely laced on properly, and raced out the door almost at vampire speed.

"Was that Lady Aemelie Farman?" she asked. "Like, of *House* Farman that got too scared to rebel because Lord Tywin sent a musician to play them a *song*?"

"Yes…" said Stefan. "And it was the Rains of Castamere."

"What are you doing?" hissed Caroline. Didn't he love *Elena*? What was he doing, sleeping around and with noblewomen, no less?

Stefan ran his fingers through his tousled hair. It refused to be tamed and sprang back up at irregular angles again once he lowered his hand. "Caroline, Elena and I are no longer together."

"She only left you for Damon because of the sire bond! I know, I know, the feelings must already be there in the first place, but I don't, for one *second*, think that she actually loves Damon. You're her one great love, Stefan. Are you just going to give up like that?"

"Daemon didn't tell you?"

"Damon? Why would Damon tell me anything? Anyway, hasn't he defected *again*?"

Anger flashed in Stefan's eyes. He had always been rather horrible at hiding things from her. Or from anyone, for that matter. "Elena's not with Damon," he said. "She's moved on. Didn't you hear?"

"Hear what? Nobody ever tells me anything."

"Elena is with Jon Snow. Maybe the doppelgangers really are all alike."

"Jon *who*?" asked Caroline. The name sounded somewhat familiar, but she had no idea who that was because he obviously wasn't important enough.

"Jon *Snow*, Robb Stark's bastard brother," said Stefan. "They came through Lord Daemon's camp, and when Damon left, so did they."

"You mean…Elena's *here*? In *Westeros*?" Why didn't people tell her these things? They were important! If she'd known that Elena had been here, then she would have…

She would have what? Her place was here in the Lannister household to help them. Elena had obviously sided with the Starks. What had happened to them? They were all friends and now they were all fighting on different sides. She sat down on Stefan's bed, forgetting that he was still naked.

"How was she, when you saw her?" Perhaps the Starks and Damon were holding her captive.

"She was good," said Stefan. "She looked happy, in love." He shook his head. "Maybe she's gotten tired of both of us, Damon and *me*."

"Stefan, stop it," said Caroline. "You're her epic love! You have to fight for her! I don't know this Jon Snow, but his brother's evil."

Stefan shrugged. "She loves him. She left with him. I don't even know where she is now. Maybe she's right and we all need to move on. We're living new lives now. You're a lady, I'm a knight,
Rebekah's…still herself, I suppose."

"Oh yeah," said Caroline. "That's what I came to talk to you about. She's eating peasant boys like there's no tomorrow and if you don't stop her, there probably won't be one, at least, not for us." She picked up his trousers off the floor and threw them at him. "Hurry up and get dressed!"

Rebekah's door was closed and she did not answer when they knocked on her door, but they could hear her inside, moving things around.

"How much are you willing to bet that she fought with Jaime?" asked Stefan.

"I don't get paid that much," said Caroline. "Rebekah, open up! Or we're going to break the door down!"

"Do you think that's the best idea?" said Stefan. She would have come up with something clever to say, except the door opened and it was better than any retort that she could have offered.

"What?" snapped Rebekah. There were no smears of blood down her front, no hair in disarray, no fangs. Fabric was strewn all over the floor. Spring cleaning? Dumping all of Jaime's stuff and burning it to let off steam?

"Rebekah, we need to talk," said Stefan. Good idea, letting Stefan do the talking. The crazy bloodslut was less likely to try and kill him. She might disdain both of them, but she liked Stefan's prettiness more than she liked Caroline's. "Can we come in?"

Rebekah said nothing, but she stood aside to let them in. The room was strangely devoid of…well, anything. There were a couple of chests containing everything material that she owned in this world, and on top of one of them sat a beautiful golden comb adorned with lions.

"Rebekah, listen," Stefan began. She stopped him right there in the beginning of his lecture. At least, Caroline thought it was going to be a lecture.

"Save it," she said. "I'm in no mood for one of your talks about humanity and subtlety and blah, blah, Stefan. I know I shouldn't have killed all those people and left their bodies for everyone to find. I should have carefully dismembered them and distributed them among the pots of brown. Now can you just go?"

"What happened, Rebekah? Everything was going your way. You had a title, you had Jaime Lannister –"

"I don't have Jaime Lannister," she said sharply.

"Oh, I knew it," said Caroline before she could help herself. "He broke up with you." He had better taste than she'd thought.

"No, I broke up with him," said Rebekah.

"Rebekah, that's a big fat lie and we all know it," smirked Caroline. Was that too bitchy? Oh well, Lord Tywin liked bitchy.

"I thought I was going to do the talking?" said Stefan.

"He wasn't going to give up his old habits," muttered Rebekah. Was that really…oh, God. She had to be making it up. But what would compel Rebekah to dump a guy, short of him being Damon
Salvatore? Actually, Jaime must have dumped Rebekah and the bloodslut was just covering it up. Rebekah picked up the comb, obviously a gift from said twincestuous Lannister. Wait, the twincest was libel. It had to be, right?

"But you loved him," said Caroline. "You still love him and you can't stop it, can you?"

"I don't," said Rebekah. "We're just friends now. It's better this way. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment with the tailor."

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**Harrenhal**

Stab. Stab. Stab. Stab. It was a pity this wasn't a sword or Arya's own Needle, which was more of a dagger really, but it was hers and Jon had given it to her. If one stabbed Joffrey this many times as she was doing repeatedly to this piece of cloth, he'd be more than dead.

"Arya, darling, you are trying to embroider something. This is not one of your brother's war games," said her mother. Arya loved her mother, but she did not want to sit in this room all day with her. Besides, how could she release Jaime Lannister? Even if it was for her and Sansa! They had to put Robb's cause first! Robb was going to avenge their father. Didn't she care?

But then, Arya had never understood how her mother had thought. She was so different and just like Sansa.

"I hate embroidery," she declared as she threw down the scrap of cloth on which she'd been practising. She stamped on it for good measure. Her fingers hurt more than they ever had done so before. Months of not doing any needlework had made her lose what little skill she had and now she was stabbing her fingers the way Elena always did.

Elena didn't need to do embroidery. She was powerful and strong and could rip out someone's heart in a heartbeat.

"Arya, you are a lady," scolded her mother. "Now, pick that up and start again. One day, you are going to marry a husband who will want a wife who knows the womanly arts."

"Lady Katherine doesn't embroider and she is the most ladylike of ladies, and she married a king," said Arya.

"Lady Katherine hardly understands the meaning of propriety and honour," said her mother coldly. Arya couldn't understand why her mother didn't like Katherine. She was as beautiful as Elena was, she was clever, she was brave, she could fight the Mountain, and she really loved Robb. It was disgusting when they kissed and they did it all the time, but she could deal with it, she supposed. What else did her mother want in a wife for her brother? Well, maybe someone who was kind like Elena, but Jon had Elena and, besides, Elena was too nice for Robb anyway. Her eldest brother liked the ones who were a little bit mean.

"But she wins battles," Arya pointed out. "I'm going out."

"Arya!" her mother called, but this was not Winterfell and there were no maids and septas to try and catch her. The guards outside the room bowed a she darted out. Catelyn couldn't chase after her, that she knew.

She forgot that she was wearing a dress and almost tripped over the long cumbersome skirts again. Stupid, stupid dress! Why couldn't she wear trousers? But Robb had sided with her mother on that one. At least, until Katherine wore trousers.
Nobody took notice of one little girl running through the camp. She dodged around men carrying weapons and sacks of supplies and avoided the area where the camp followers liked to be. She didn't know why those women bothered wearing clothes, considering the flimsy fabric never covered anything that needed covering. She'd asked what they were for exactly since they never really did anything that seemed important.

Now, that question had made even Robb stutter as he tried to explain that the men needed to play sometimes. It still made no sense to Arya. Play? Were they all children, then, and why couldn't they play with themselves or each other? She'd said so. The blood had practically drained from everyone's faces.

Except Katherine's. Katherine had been trying not to laugh. Arya had learned there and then that she had the most chance of getting an answer out of her new good-sister now that Damon wasn't here to answer her.

She couldn't believe she missed Damon and his cocky tongue.

Speaking of Katherine, she spotted her walking between the tents, wearing the most ruffled dress with the widest skirts she'd ever seen. Sansa would be so jealous of it. There was enough room to hide an arsenal beneath those skirts but it made her look very pretty because her waist was so little—as was everything else about her. She might be Elena's twin, but one could never mistake the two. Elena was a real girl. Katherine sometimes looked like a very beautiful doll.

Of course, no one had ever let Arya play with a doll that had swords.

"Lady Katherine," called Arya. Katherine turned.

"Lady Arya," she said. "I thought you were at your needlepoint lessons with Lady Catelyn. What brings you out here into this muck?"

"I hate needlework," said Arya. "When are you going to start wearing trousers? I hate dresses too."

"I'll wear trousers when I feel like it, and not before," said Katherine. "Now, I really do think you should be getting back. You need to learn to be a lady."

"I don't want to be a lady like my mother. I want to be a lady like you. I want to learn to fight. Please, Katherine, can you teach me? Please?" She widened her eyes the way Sansa always did to get what she wanted. It had always worked on their father, mother and on Robb. Either Arya was doing it wrong or Katherine was much cleverer than all of them. She simply bent down. Was it just her, or had she grown several inches since Arya had last seen her?

"Do you want to know a secret?" she said.

"What secret?" There were more secrets? "I already know your biggest one. When are you going to tell Robb?"

"Don't change the subject," said Katherine. "I am going to impart on you a secret that only a few women know. The men don't understand it and they have no control over themselves when we put it to use. They all fall."

"Is it a secret weapon?"

"Of sorts," Katherine smiled. "Swords are all very well, but they are weapons that one can see and prepare for. Men are not prepared for how they feel when they see a beautiful woman well-versed in all the womanly and manly arts. Not so much embroidery, perhaps, but dancing and music,
"What's that?"

"Wit," said Katherine. "A lady should know how to converse in a way that makes her seem superior to the one she is speaking to and yet makes them feel superior in turn."

"So, like you and Robb?"

"Exactly like Robb and me."

That was new. Septa Mordane had frowned upon poetry in general and she'd been all right with a little bit of music and dancing, but not too much. As to the way Katherine talked to Robb, she'd call that insolence.

"Will you teach me all of it, then?" asked Arya. "Please? I don't want to be a lady like my mother and my sister. I want to be just like you, Katherine."

Katherine smiled, showing white teeth that sometimes were used to rip out people's throats.

"Well, in that case, Arya, we can start right away. Meet me after lunch in my tent."

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**Next chapter:** Katherine teaches Arya to be a lady. Rebekah gets a makeover. Jaime and Caroline have a bonding session. Joffrey goes a-hunting and finds a surprise in the woods.
Chapter Summary

Katherine starts Arya's lessons. Rebekah tries to remake her image. Jaime hatches a new plan. Joffrey kills innocent animals.

Harrenhal

Try as she might, Katherine couldn't get rid of her shadow. It wasn't that she minded the void of light that her body created whenever it blocked the rays from a light source; it was the second shadow she seemed to have developed since Arya's return to her family.

"So, what are we going to do?" Arya asked her as she followed Katherine through the camp, sometimes running to keep up with the –much– older girl's longer stride. She was all gangly limbs and eagerness and no subtlety at all.

Katherine daintily held her skirts out of the way as she stepped over some fallen spears. This was the reason why she never ever wanted children even if she could have them. In fact, she was more than just thankful that vampires were unable to procreate. There were teas that could be drunken but they tasted awful and there was no guarantee that they always worked. And what if one ran out of tea leaves?

Of course, Robb never knew about these sentiments of hers. He thought she was just as eager as he was to become a parent.

Although, Arya's hero worship of her was endearing and the girl had the potential to learn to be so much greater. She chafed against the bonds of feminine virtue just as Katherine had as a child.

"Today, you're going to be initiated into the greatest of the womanly arts," said Katherine. Arya looked at her dubiously.

"Pretty smiles?" she asked, sounding as if she were dreading it. At least she didn't say embroidery.

"That's part of it," Katherine conceded. "Oh, don't look so glum, little sister. None of this works if you don't enjoy it. What I am going to teach you is the art of deception."

"You mean lying?"

"Most of the time, it's best done with a pretty smile," said Katherine. "Although it really depends on the circumstances."

"But I thought lying was bad," said Arya. "Although Sansa lied all the time and nobody ever knew."

"Precisely," said Katherine with a snap of her fingers in front of Arya's face. "Your sister knows of this weapon. Hers might not be very sharp yet but, in time, I have no doubt she will hone it until it is sharper than the best blade in the realm. You will have to work hard to keep up."

"You lie to Robb all the time," said Arya. There was something accusatory in her tone that
Katherine didn't like.

"It's to protect him. He's not ready to know."

"Damon told me and I'm fine and Jon knows too." The girl was persistent. "You shouldn't lie to him, at least. He's your husband. You're supposed to love him and tell him the truth. Elena told Jon because she loves him."

"You told me Elena told all of the Night's Watch," said Katherine. "She's … not very clever. I will tell Robb when the time is right. You have had a lot of time to absorb this. He doesn't have the time and he can't afford to be distracted."

"But you promise you will tell him, right?" said Arya.

"Yes, yes," said Katherine. "Now, do you actually want to learn or should I go back to doing my ladylike things?"

"Of course I want to learn!"

Katherine smiled. She would make a great woman out of Arya yet, given enough time and patience. She considered herself the patron saint of patience.

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King's Landing

What…what…what was that? Tyrion stared at the pair of long lean pale legs that were passing him by. Muscle was outlined beneath the skin of her calves. The long flowing silken skirt that led up to a very tight bodice had a high slit down one side that revealed everything from ankle to the thigh. It took a while for him to register to whom these legs belonged.

"Lord Tyrion," said Rebekah. She curtseyed.

"Lady Rebekah," said Tyrion. He swallowed his surprise. Yes, he'd always known she was pretty. He just hadn't really seen the …er… *full* extent of her beauty. He still wasn't seeing it, but this was getting close. The tailor had somehow decided to cut a hole at the back of her dress so that almost her whole back was bared. And they thought *Margaery Tyrell* had daring fashion sense?

"Jaime is going to be pleasantly surprised, my lady," he murmured. "And my sister will turn green." And she would scandalize the court, if not the kingdom, but she obviously knew that.

"Jaime isn't going to be anything," said Rebekah. "We are not involved, despite whatever malicious rumours are circling about." Now, *this* was something that he hadn't heard. And, speaking of the devil, his brother was coming down the hallway, handsome and golden as ever. He stilled a little when he saw Rebekah. She curtseyed prettily to him. He nodded at her.

"Rebekah," he said. "Forgive me for my interruption, but I need my brother."

"Then I shall be going, my lords, for I have somewhere I need to be," she said. She turned and left them. As she rounded the corner, Daemon came up to meet her. Their cousin cast a brief glance in their direction before turning back to the lady knight who was leaning flirtatiously away from him. He took her hand and kissed it. She laughed softly.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on between the two of you?" Tyrion asked once she'd left. "I thought she liked you."
"'Like' is a strong and the wrong word to use, brother," said Jaime. "We had our...fun. She wasn't as...open-minded as I'd thought." The look on his face betrayed it all. Of course, Jaime was a romantic at heart, devoted to his one true love. It was a pity that it was their sister. "You cast her off," He indicated the swaying figure of the lady knight as she strode around the corner, the heels of her shoes clicking on the polished black and white marble floor, "because of ...your oaths?"

"I take them quite seriously, unlike some, and physical charm, while pleasing, does not distract me for long" said Jaime. "At any rate, I'm not here to talk about girls, Tyrion."

"But let's do that anyway," said Tyrion. His brother was still staring after Rebekah with narrowed eyes. "Who called it off? You or her?"

"That is irrelevant," said Jaime. "I came to --"

"Oh dear, Jaime Lannister discarded by a woman. Now that's stranger than all the blood-drinking creatures in the world."

"I am already a kingslayer, Tyrion," said Jaime. "It would not be too far to leap to become a kinslayer. I'm sure father will forgive me. I am the golden boy, after all. And she bored me."

"All right, all right," said Tyrion. Poor Jaime, feeling the sting of rejection. He would get used to it soon enough, he supposed, now that there were women like Rebekah Mikaelson in the world. He would have to congratulate her on her achievement. And perhaps warn her of his father's wrath. She'd never really seen it before. "What did you come to talk to me about?"

"The hunt tomorrow. You would have known that if you had allowed me to speak."

"You're speaking now and you know I'm not a hunting man, brother," said Tyrion. They turned around and went back to Tyrion's chambers, since Jaime's were austere and bare. Tyrion had always tried to get his brother to buy a few more pieces of furniture. At least something that was comfortable. He was all about hard carved wood, no cushions. He supposed he'd had no need for comforts back in the day, but now that he had a woman to chase, he needed something beautiful. Perhaps a low couch that was good for intimacy?

"This is no ordinary hunt," said Jaime. "Haven't you heard? They've found a stone with a sword in it --"

"You do mean the other way around, don't you?" asked Tyrion, thinking that his brother's head had been addled by pretty women. "Stone in a sword. Happens only to all the swords in Westeros."

"Stop interrupting me," snapped Jaime. "If you would allow me to finish, you would know everything. Now, may I speak in peace?"

Tyrion nodded. Unlike Father, Jaime would soon forget his anger.

"I do mean a sword in a stone," Jaime continued. There's even a prophecy to go with it, courtesy of one little blonde vampire. It says that only the man who wields this sword may unite the seven kingdoms. Every superstitious fool in the realm has gone to attempt to pull it out."

"I suppose our dear nephew the king will be trying his hand at it next." Tyrion poured two cups of wine and offered one to Jaime.

Jaime ignored it. Oh dear, he was holding grudges. Oh, well, he'd forgive soon enough. Jaime always forgave Tyrion. In fact, he seemed to be the only person in the entire world who ever forgave Tyrion for crimes both actual and perceived. "Well, only he can unite the seven kingdoms,
after all," said Jaime. "But the whole court is to accompany him on this hunt and that includes you, dear brother."

"Well, that was just how I wanted to spend my day," said Tyrion. "Watching men massacring innocent animals and Joffrey confirming his right to rule."

"Nobody cares what you want," said Jaime. "Anyway, I promised Caroline I would teach her how to shoot and spar. I fear if I don't, she'll end up shooting the king."

"That would be a disaster," said Tyrion.

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of humour," said Jaime.

"You love it," Tyrion called after him as Jaime slammed the door.

"Try not to let your little whore tire you out, Tyrion," said Jaime through the door. That Jaime. He always had to have the last word.

Caroline really was quite useless at anything to do with a weapon. Arrows dotted the area behind the target. One hung off the very edge. The next arrow flew wide again to join its companions. Caroline lowered her bow with a huff.

"You might be the best I've ever seen," said Jaime. "I've never seen anyone miss a target that much before, maybe except Tyrion…when he was two." He was never one to mince words. At least, he didn't think he needed to do so with little Caroline.

"Thanks," she said sarcastically.

"I have a suggestion for next time," he said. "Try aiming." He tossed her a wooden sword. She squeaked and ducked.

"What was that for?" she demanded.

"You said you wanted to learn to spar, didn't you?"

"But I thought we were doing shooting today."

"You can do both. In battle, you rarely get the chance to decide whether you want to shoot or spar."

"Actually, you do," said Caroline as she picked up the sword from the mud, holding it with two fingers as if it would bite her or something. "You sign up for the shooting unit or whatever it's called. Artillery?"

"You mean archery?" said Jaime.

"Yeah, that," said Caroline. "Or you choose to be a swordfighter."

"Stop, before you make me roll on the ground laughing at your ignorance," Jaime leapt off his perch on the fence and drew his wooden sword to swing at her. She ducked. One moment slower and he'd have knocked her out. "I guess Jaime Lannister is still better than…Caroline Forbes. Why did you throw your sword away? It would have helped if you hadn't. Pick it up."

He disarmed her in one move, vampire or no. Although, she was a particularly bad vampire as well. After all, what vampire would feel sorry for the rabbit she'd just eaten? It wasn't even a person! He thought vampires were supposed to eat people.
The truth was, he wasn't doing this out of the goodness of his own heart, namely because he didn't have one. Caroline knew Rebekah and since Rebekah was obviously trying to manipulate him with those little dresses of hers — men had literally fallen over on the stairs when she passed them. Well, Lancel had. He'd laughed himself silly over that. What Jaime needed was some way to retaliate, and he couldn't do that if he had no information.

"Come now, Caroline Forbes," said Jaime lazily. She picked up her sword again and gripped the hilt with both hands, facing him as if she were simply going to pounce on him and try and knock him to the ground.

As if that were even a possibility.

"Rebekah is about a thousand times better at this than you," he said as he darted at her, struck her back with the blade and then danced back again while she wheeled about wildly trying to hit something.

"That's because Rebekah's had a thousand years to practise!" she panted.

A thousand — what?

"A thousand years, you say?"

"What, she didn't tell you?" Jaime gave her a look.

"Of course she did," he said. "I just never thought she was that old, that was all." One thousand years old and still looking as if she were just coming into her prime! Now that was a useful little trick if there ever was one. Was she simply long-living and well-kept?

Whatever sorcery it was, he wanted it.

"Oh my God, she didn't tell you," said Caroline. What was it with people thinking they knew better than him today? First Tyrion, and now Caroline? "She's such a bitch. She didn't tell you about immortality?"

He felt as if time had stopped — and time could stop, at least for him. If Caroline noticed his reaction, she didn't show it. She probably hadn't noticed. He simply leaned on his wooden sword and let her talk. It wasn't as if she needed any prompting. Rebekah had been withholding a lot from him, it seemed.

"Rebekah was one of the first vampires, correct?" he asked.

"Along with her brothers, Elijah —" Elijah Frey was not a Frey after all. It might not have made any difference, but being defeated on the battlefield by a thousand year old immortal was a lot better than being thrown down by a Frey. "—and Klaus. Well…his name's Niklaus, really. We're all descended from Klaus' line; me, Stefan, Damon, Katherine, Elena."

"I am not familiar with the last name," said Jaime. So there was another one out there, and with a Targaryen name, although that had to be only coincidence. So far as he knew, there were no Targaryen vampires and all the blood-drinkers came from this other world where, apparently, they educated everyone, from lords to peasants.

Of course, there weren't any lords around over there.

"Elena Gilbert," said Caroline. "She was Stefan's girlfriend — I guess you'd call them lovers, but she's with this Jon Snow now."
What was it with Ned Stark's sons and attracting vampires? Fine, Jaime had had one of his own and now he needed her back to turn him into something like her. Or could Caroline do it even if she were not one of those 'Originals'?

"So, this Klaus," he said. "He sired all of you."

"Oh no, not like that," said Caroline. She flushed crimson. "He turned a vampire who then turned someone else who turned Rose, who turned Katherine, and who turned Stefan and Damon Salvatore. And then Damon fed me his blood to heal me after I had an accident then Katherine killed me! And then I came back like this."

Jaime smiled. Apparently, this smile scared children. Unfortunately, it had never scared Joffrey. "What was it like, dying?"

"Well, I'm not too sure," said Caroline. "All the memories are very confused. I remember trying to fight off Katherine when she shoved a pillow in my face. Everything was just reduced to me, the pillow, and Katherine pushing it into my face and me trying to push her off. You can guess how that worked out."

"Charming," said Jaime. Maybe Katherine could shove a pillow into Robb Stark's face and save them all a lot of trouble. "How did you get from dying to becoming a vampire?"

"You have to die with vampire blood inside you," said Caroline. She paused. "My lord, you're not going to … You can't."

"You should know better than that, Caroline Forbes. Nobody tells me what I can or cannot do. I do as I please." He drew his dagger and took a step towards Caroline. She stepped backwards.

"Well, you'll burn in the sun," said Caroline. That gave him pause.

"You do not," he pointed out.

"You'll have to find a witch to cast a sunlight spell on you," said Caroline.

And it was back to the witches again. He really needed to find one. Imagine, the immortal Jaime Lannister. His legacy would be his own, then. It would be Jaime's legacy instead of his family's. Not even Tywin Lannister had found a way to conquer death, but Jaime Lannister could. They could overlook him, for now, all those men who thought that Daemon's star was rising, but Jaime would have the last laugh.

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**Countryside surrounding King's Landing**

It was more of a victory parade than a hunting trip. Jaime smiled to himself, knowing fully well what lay at the end of it. Well, the story was too good to waste on Joffrey, truly. That sword in the stone deserved a more worthy master. After all, King Arthur had not been a coward.

He rode behind his father, keeping his secrets to himself. Immortality, kingship, glory; in that order. Well, his father had told him to consider his future, hadn't he? He'd found one and when his father saw it fulfilled, he would be proud.

Of course, Tywin would want it for himself. He would have no need to drill the important concept of legacy into the heads of his children then. He wouldn't need his children. He wouldn't exactly get rid of them, but did Jaime really want to live forever in the shadow of his sire? No, it was best not to share such things.
The sound of the royal party had scared away nearly all the animals, save for a few stupid pigeons who had thought they were safe on their perches high in the boughs of the young evergreen trees. They finally scattered when arrows flew into their midst, killing several. The others flapped rapidly into the sky as their companions fell.

"Where are all the prey?" demanded Joffrey.

Oh, how dare these insolent animals run and hide when they heard that the king was coming to kill them; they really should have simply stood still and let him shoot them.

"No doubt they are further in, Your Grace. Let us move on," said Tywin.

Joffrey looked as if he were about to protest, but he thought better of it. No one said 'no' to Tywin Lannister. Well, currently, except Robb Stark and Stannis Baratheon, but Stannis' army had been crushed and it would be Stark's turn next.

The stone was right where Caroline's story said it would be. Jaime looked at the vampires to see if their expressions changed. Caroline looked down, and Rebekah was putting up a visible effort to not look in his direction. He smirked. Silly girl. She would not be able to resist him for long. In fact, she would be regretting that she ever tried to manipulate him with those dresses with slits and the pair of very tight trousers she was wearing today.

The craftsmen had done an excellent job of it; if Jaime hadn't known better, he might have even thought the stone was real, although it was impossible that a wizard would have stabbed a stone in reality to identify a worthy king. How would a rock and a sword know who was the better king?

The smallfolk had made a game out of pulling the sword out. Stalls had been set up selling baked potatoes and yams. Some of them had tied a rope around the pommel of the sword and were trying to pull it out with a mule. Imagine if the mechanism of the false stone had not been strong enough? They would have had a mule for a king!

Although that might be an improvement on the one they currently had now.

Yet, the vice held. It had been very well made and it would take more than a mule or Joffrey's strength to dislodge the weapon. Of course, he also didn't know how it worked; not in great detail, anyway. Jaime, on the other hand, had studied the mechanism closely. Its workings were supposed to be a closely guarded secret, but one could go very far if one were Tywin Lannister's son and a reputation for violence.

His claws were longer and sharper than dear Joff's.

"What is that?" asked Joffrey overly dramatically. He had been told of what he had to do beforehand. Unfortunately, the instructions had changed and he hadn't been informed. "Is that a sword inside a stone?"

Jaime met Margaery Tyrell's eye. She'd attempted to shoot pigeons but, alas, the targets were too small for such an inexperienced archer. If trees were prey, though, then she would have been the champion of the hunt. One could not fault her enthusiasm, even if it were all for Joffrey's sake. Jaime suddenly thought that she reminded him of Katherine Stark, what with the way she smiled so sweetly at Joffrey and knew just exactly how to make men fall at her feet. Of course, he doubted Margaery Tyrell was capable of taking down warriors and winning battles, which made her a little less dangerous, but not by much.

She smiled at him and dipped her head in acknowledgement before turning back to her beloved
King Joffrey. "Your Grace, look," she said, pointing to the inscription on the stone. "What does that say?"

Joffrey peered more closely at it and slowly read out Caroline's poetry. Caroline, much to her credit, was wearing an expression of curiosity and awe, as if she didn't know this "prophecy" by heart. It still only had six lines, which was most inappropriate for a poem about seven kingdoms but, apparently, Jaime knew nothing about poetry.

"Well, it's obvious, then," said Joffrey with a smirk. "This blade is mine to claim." He dismounted and wrapped his fingers around the hilt of the sword and pulled. Nothing happened. Jaime smirked. Bewildered, Joffrey clambered onto the stone and clasped the sword handle with both hands before straining with all his meagre might. The sword simply wouldn't budge no matter how he grunted and pulled until he was red in the face and sweating.

Eventually, it just became embarrassing and even Joffrey knew it. His father almost seemed confused. "It's just a foolish superstition," declared Joffrey as he stepped back from the stone and gave it a vicious kick. What was that plaster that they were using? It was extremely hard. Well, he was no craftsman and he was content to let them keep those secrets to themselves. It was what was inside the false rock that he was most interested in.

The royal party prepared to leave this embarrassing incident behind them. No doubt his father would have questions for the craftsmen as soon as they returned to King's Landing. Well, not that he actually cared about whether they lived or died, but he didn't just want to embarrass Joffrey. Such a desire was too provincial and narrow for Jaime Lannister.

He dismounted and strode towards the rock. The mechanism that operated the vice clicked when he pressed his foot against the cleverly hidden lever at the base of the rock. The sword hilt was warm in his hand. It slid out smoothly with a ring. He released the lever to close the vice so that the rock looked just like a rock now and no one could look inside to see the vice within.

Caroline's gasp was clearly audible and she didn't even have to feign it. Jaime lifted the sword high above his head, one foot still on the rock, and brandished it for the world to see. Joffrey's mouth dropped open. Lady Margaery simply smiled and Loras was, well, admiring him. He could look so long as he did not touch. Jaime risked looking in his father's direction. Tywin's eyes were harder than he could ever remember seeing them. Behind him, Rebekah was biting her lip and trying not to grin. No doubt she had realized what had just happened.

All around, the smallfolk had stopped their talking and were simply looking at him in awe. One of them knelt. He was quickly followed by others. The courtiers, of course, would never be so easy to fool, but even some of them looked as if they half believed that Jaime Lannister was meant to be king and not Joffrey Baratheon. Actually, would that take a miracle to convince them?

He bowed with a flourish, still holding out the sword. As he straightened himself, he took a closer look at the sword and made a great show of examining it. "Excalibur," he said, as if to himself but mostly for the benefit of his audience. "It is a good name. I shall call you Excalibur."

Next chapter: Jaime's actions sends reverberations across the kingdom. Joffrey retaliates.
The Legend of the Kingslayer

Chapter Summary

The rest of Westeros hears about Jaime's shenanigans. Tyrion tries to advance his brother's happiness. Jaime throws down the gauntlet.

King's Landing

He was every bit the arrogant golden lion, with his perfect mane of golden hair, his strong profile, broad shoulders, shining armour, and the pride in his beautiful face with those sharp cheekbones as he raised the sword for the world to see. It wasn't hard to believe that Jaime Lannister was the man who had sired Joffrey and only a fool would refuse to see it.

Sansa had not wanted to come on the hunt at first, half-convinced that the prey animal would be her. But it had been the king's command and she'd had to obey. Still, she'd kept to the back as much as possible atop her grey palfrey, while Shae rode awkwardly behind her. Sometimes, she wondered if she could simply run away. She had a horse, after all, and even weapons, for all the ladies of the court were given bows and arrows for the hunt. But she'd quickly realized that it was not a feasible solution. One, they'd simply hunt her down anyway. She wasn't the best horsewoman, or even a very good one. Secondly, even if she did break free, how in the world would she survive on the road? She'd be lying dead in a ditch and no one would ever know.

Besides, she'd vowed to avenge her father and do her part for her family's war. She couldn't do that anywhere except in King's Landing. As she looked at Jaime, a spark suddenly ignited in her mind the way falling embers from an unattended fire could start a blaze that could take down an entire town. Here was a man who craved attention and lately, he hadn't been getting it. Rumour had it that his mistress had left him and was going on about with Daemon Lannister. The whole world was singing Daemon's praises as if he were the new Rhaegar Targaryen and Jaime Lannister, the former golden boy of the Lannister clan, had been left by the wayside. Why else would he be doing this if not to remind everyone he was still someone to be reckoned with?

And he was. Despite everything, he was still Tywin Lannister's firstborn son. If she could win his protection…

She smiled shyly at him when he happened to look her way, all the while showing off his new sword—so clearly commissioned by the Lannisters that it could not possibly be a sword that a wizard had stuck into a stone in order to determine the identity of the true king of Westeros (because that would be Robb). He smiled back, or smirked back, rather. Did he even know how to smile in a mildly pleasant manner? Then again, she had thought him one of the most handsome men she had ever set eyes upon when he had first arrived in Winterfell, just as she had thought Joffrey would be her charming prince and Damon her white knight. How things changed, and in the span of such a short time.

Well, she was no longer that silly little girl. She knew she couldn't rely on anyone to save her out of the goodness of their hearts. But she could use them to save herself.

Harrenhal
Katherine almost laughed herself silly when she heard about the incident at Green Acre Village. Oh dear, she'd heard of sibling rivalry, but father and son rivalry? On this scale, it was a first. It was as if Jaime had forgotten the age difference between himself and Joffrey (about twenty years). Then again, she'd always admired the way he'd kept his inner child alive. Many men didn't do that; many men couldn't.

"Men are peculiar creatures," she said to Arya. "They have all sorts of strange manners of declaring their dominance over all others. Joffrey screams it from the rooftops. Stannis becomes a pyromaniac. Robb, of course, abdicated, although it's very temporary, I assure you. Renly held parties and Jaime Lannister steals his son's toys."

The two of them lounged inside Katherine's private study on cushions, eating nuts and fruit while Katherine was trying to teach Arya to act like a lady in a sultan's harem. She'd sneaked inside the harem of the Mughal Sultan once when she'd been in India, thinking that, perhaps, Klaus wouldn't be able to locate her there. After all, he wouldn't have thought that she'd have left Europe, right? Well, wrong, but that was a story for another time.

"It's a good story, though," said Arya through a mouthful of apple.

"Swallow, and take smaller bites," Katherine advised her. "Men don't like women who eat like men. It was a good story, but can you imagine what would happen if the rains came and washed away the paint from that stone? Or if someone else had simply broken the mechanism inside and taken the sword? Or what if, Joffrey, in a temper tantrum, exposed his whole family as frauds?"

"I'd like that," said Arya.

"As would I, but even Joffrey knows better," said Katherine. "Besides, Jaime may have the sword, but he has no army." Arya nodded. "Still, people are talking and Robb needs a story of his own soon before the legend of Jaime Lannister grows any more."

Rebekah cornered Jaime in one of the dark and seldom-frequented passages of the Red Keep. He liked to take those more than the ones with more people, preferring not to be gawked at by all. He'd been waiting for her, knowing that she wouldn't be able to resist him for long. She could pretend all she liked but, when it came down to it, she was just a girl who was in love with him. She had to be in love with him.

She pinned him to the wall with one bare knee raised. The narrow skirt of her dress had a slit that ran up from the hem to her thigh, making it rather superfluous in terms of preserving modesty. "King Arthur, huh?" she whispered.

"Jaime is a much better name, don't you think?" he asked. "Besides, I had not realized we were back on speaking terms." His voice had grown husky without him even realizing it. The nearness of her, the scent of her, her vitality and all the secrets that they shared only between the two of them—well, and Caroline and Stefan, he supposed—were making him want to take her right there and then. He ran his hand along her smooth supple thigh. She pressed closer against him and looked up. Their lips were almost touching. He would not make the first move. That would be up to her. And then, he would "respect himself". He would not acquiesce until she begged him.

"King Jaime does have a certain ring to it," she said with a smile. "But he wouldn't be my king."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because," she said.
"That's not an answer."

"Well, let's just say it's the king who makes the sword, not the other way around."

"There is no greater honour for a sword than to be Jaime Lannister's sword."

"Bold words for a bold man, but can you live up to them?"

"I've only ever exceeded my reputation. I don't see why I should change."

He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Gods, she had beautiful hair. She tilted her head back to look at him. Her pupils were dilated and her breathing became harsher and more needful. She leaned forward, her lips slightly parted. He pushed her back in place. For a moment, her confusion made him grin. "Now, now, Rebekah, I thought you were learning to respect yourself. Why the lack of commitment to such a lofty goal?"

"You know you want me," she whispered.

"On the contrary, I find myself strangely contented to have such an uncomplicated friendship with you," he said. A line appeared between her brows.

"You can't possibly mean that," she said pathetically.

"Have I disappointed you, my lady knight?" he asked. "I suppose that, if you begged, I would… oblige. I treat my friends well, after all."

"I will never beg you," she said, drawing herself up to her full height.

"A pity," he said. "I should go. There are matters that I ought to attend to." He pulled away from her, leaving her still panting after him. He turned away. She looked very beautiful when she was this angry at being denied. She could only give it out; she couldn't take it. At the last minute, he turned. "Why do you deny yourself, Rebekah?" he asked. "We both know what we want. You're just prolonging your suffering."

Tyrion stopped outside Rebekah's door, his hand poised to knock, but frozen. Should he interfere, or should he let things play out however they would? If Jaime ever found out that he had stuck his nose in his business, he might never forgive Tyrion. Then again, both Jaime and Rebekah needed a little push. Since Jaime was of the opinion that he didn't need anyone's advice, the only person he could push was Rebekah.

He sighed and rapped three times on the wooden door. It opened before he even took his hand away from the third knock.

"Oh," she said when she saw him.

"Were you expecting someone else?" asked Tyrion. He peered inside Rebekah's chambers. It was well lit with a dozen candles, their light reflecting off the several mirrors in her room. Why couldn't they both see that Jaime and Rebekah were meant for each other? They both liked reflective surfaces.

"No," said Rebekah, although it was obvious that she had thought he was Jaime. "Lord Tyrion, forgive me, I simply had not thought that it would be you. What brings you here?"

"Well, I don't have much to do anymore now that I'm no longer the Hand of the King," said
Tyrion. "May I?" He indicated the interior.

"Yes, of course," said Rebekah. "Shall I send for some tea?"

"No, but I will take wine, if you have it," said Tyrion.

"White or red, or perhaps something a little stronger?" asked Rebekah. Her hips swayed as she walked over to a low white table covered with glass decanters filled with every type of wine and alcohol anyone could possibly want. And they thought he was a drunkard! He examined each of them as closely as he could without seeming to be staring. None of them looked to be full of blood.

"Jaime told me about…your kind," he began. "I had expected that…"

"What, that there would only be blood?" she asked as she poured him a goblet full of rich golden liquid. It burned his mouth when he sipped it, but behind the sting, there was the mellow taste of plums.

"Well, I hadn't thought that liquor would be your kind of drink," said Tyrion.

"It helps with the thirst and the hunger," Rebekah explained as she poured herself a generous portion of the same liquor. Tyrion wasn't sure what it was, but he liked it. He would ask later for the name of it. "But, surely, you didn't come here to drink with me, did you, Lord Tyrion?"

"No, I did not," said Tyrion. "Although, in the future, I might consider coming here a little more often just for the drink." He sighed. Now that he was here, he wasn't really sure how to begin. "You know, Lady Rebekah, my brother is a complicated and obstinate man. But, if you are really the woman you are portraying yourself to be, then his stubbornness wouldn't be a problem."

"Out with it, Lord Tyrion. What do you want of me?" she asked.

"Me? Why would you assume that I want anything? "said Tyrion. She would obviously understand what he wanted. It wouldn't be hard for her to win over Jaime's affection if she actually tried. Between Cersei and Rebekah, he knew what he would choose, even if Cersei weren't his sister. Her personality had the charm of Gregor Clegane after losing a joust. Of course, this had nothing to do with him, no matter how much he wanted to see Cersei's face when or if Jaime made the right choice. "Come, now, Rebekah, you must know. This has nothing to do with me. It does, however, have everything to do with our dear Jaime. You won't just sit back and let him win, will you? He'll be insufferable if you do."

He drained the wine and placed the goblet back on the table. "Good night, Lady Rebekah. I should not keep you from your rest or your dinner, whatever's next." He turned to walk away. "By the way, what is the name of the wine and where did you get it?" he asked.

Rebekah did not look at Jaime when she saw him the next morning. King Joffrey had called his court together. Tyrion's challenge repeated itself over and over in her mind as it had done during the entirety of the previous night. Of course Jaime could not win! But how was she going to make sure that he lost? How could he not see what he was missing out on? Cersei was old and bitter and twisted up inside, and her looks weren't much to talk about in the first place. How could Jaime want her? Men were confused creatures. She turned her attention back to the matter at present. She would ignore Jaime and see how long it took for him to realize that he was meant to be with her.

She had no idea why Joffrey had called court –or rather, Lord Tywin had called court in Joffrey's name– after the failure of yesterday's propaganda play. No one had expected Jaime to hijack it.
People whispered about him more than usual, wondering if he really were meant to be king. During her rounds outside the palace this morning, when she'd been browsing for future possible prey, the commoners had brought up old stories of how Jaime had been found actually sitting on the Iron Throne when Ned Stark had stormed the Red Keep all those years ago. Perhaps he really had been meant to sit on it all along and now even the gods had proved it.

"If Jaime really became king, they can keep Cersei as queen," Daemon had remarked to Rebekah after she'd gone to him last night. Daemon was more than happy to keep her company, so long as she helped him puzzle over his music when he needed it. Someone had been sending him pieces of Beethoven and Debussy. Not the actual sheet music, because whoever it was had written it out from memory.

She'd giggled at his remark. If only that could happen. Now *that* would be a huge scandal, although it would also be very Targaryen and, therefore, perhaps a legitimate way of doing things in Westeros.

She turned her attention back to what was happening around her. She was wearing another one of her new outfits today, this one a long flowing white gown with a cape attached, but also a very low cut back and a thigh slit. It was shot through with iridescent threads so when she moved, she shimmered like a mirage. People were staring at her. From his spot on the other side of the room, Petyr Baelish regarded her with interest; not the interest of a man who had focused his attention on a woman, but as an entrepreneur who had seen a business opportunity. To be quite honest, she could use a 'friend' like Littlefinger, if only so she could dig her hands deeper into this pile of filth known as politics. She'd seen the way people played with and flirted with power here. Stefan had done it and even Damon and Caroline had gotten into it.

"Ser Jaime Lannister." The sound of Jaime's name made her snap to attention. She looked up to the front. Joffrey was slowly standing. His red and gold cape trailed behind him, caressing the floor like the body of a serpent before he lunged to strike. He had a satisfied look on his face. Was this revenge for what had happened yesterday? But Jaime was his family!

Joffrey had never cared much for family.

Jaime stepped out before Joffrey. Even though the latter was standing several steps above him, the former didn't have to tilt his head back that far to meet the king's gaze.

"You have been found remiss in your duty as Kingsguard," said Joffrey. "During the siege of the Red Keep, you disobeyed my direct orders and, as such, put myself and the entire population of King's Landing in dire jeopardy." That wasn't true! Jaime had done his damndest best to protect everyone in the city! It wasn't as if the king himself had even tried. *He* had been too busy trying to save his own hide.

"You have broken your vows for the sake of a harlot." Oh God, was Joffrey *really* going to bring up his mother in this? Wait, no, everyone was looking at Rebekah. It was her fault. For the first time in her life, she felt uncomfortable with the attention. Caroline glanced at her. This must be a day for firsts because the judgemental baby vampire actually didn't look judgey, for *once*. In fact, she simply looked concerned, more for Jaime than for her, but still.

"Moreover, you have killed a king before," Joffrey continued. "For these, I hereby strip you of your titles and your position as Kingsguard!"

A collective gasp went up. How could Lord Tywin let this happen to his son? Wait, this was Lord Tywin. His fatherly instincts were much the same as Mikael's, minus the murderous intentions. Although, if Lady Joanna had had a bastard, then perhaps Lord Tywin would have hunted that
child to the very ends of the earth as well.

Wait, Jaime had said that his father had never wanted him to be Kingsguard in the first place. He'd done it to be with Cersei and his father had hated it and he'd tried to get him out of it. Now he finally had the chance, what with Joffrey having set a precedent in stripping Ser Barristan Selmy of his rank.

"Your Grace, Kingsguard is for life," said Jaime. His voice seemed calm, but a vampire who knew him well could detect the slight quiver of anger in it. But his time in the Starks' camp had served him well because if she had been anyone else other than Rebekah Mikaelson, she wouldn't have heard it. After all that humiliation and pain at Robb and Katherine Stark's hands, this was almost nothing.

With 'almost' being the keyword.

"I have already rendered my judgement," said Joffrey. "Or are you questioning my decisions?" He looked down at Jaime triumphantly.

Rebekah felt someone grip her clenched fist. When had Stefan come up behind her? "He will be fine," he whispered.

"What makes you think I care?" Rebekah whispered back, although her heart really wasn't in it and it didn't come out with the flippancy that she had wanted.

Jaime continued to gaze at Joffrey. Suddenly, he turned to his fellow Kingsguard. They had their hands hovering near their swords, but no one had dared to make a move towards him. "I would gladly accept my dismissal if any one of these imbeciles can defeat me in combat," he said.

Jaime stared hard at Joffrey before looking around at his fellow Kingguard slowly. They were all well-fed and fat. He had nothing but disdain for them. Being a Kingsguard used to be a noble calling. Now it was simply a brotherhood of thugs in white cloaks.

They all held their breath as they waited to see what he would do.

"Your Grace," he said, his voice ringing and echoing in the otherwise silent throne room. "I would gladly accept my dismissal if any one of these imbeciles can defeat me in combat." He drew his sword.

The blade rang as it scraped against the sides of the scabbard. His Excalibur had not been blooded yet. Now was as good a time as any to remedy that.

The rest of the Kingsguard took a step back as he levelled the sword at them. The craftsmanship was exquisite and the blade gleamed blue. "Well?" he asked, pointing the blade at each of them in turn. No one stepped forward. They were fine if all the king wanted them to do was hit a helpless girl like Sansa Stark, but when it came to real combat, they were all useless.

Osmund Kettleback was the first to find his courage. Jaime laughed. All these noble sons and yet it was a former sellsword who had the daring. Perhaps he would do better to fight with them by his side in the future.

Their blades clashed with a resounding clang that made some of the ladies jump. Their eyes were all on him, some looking on in admiration and some in shock and disapproval. He ignored the latter. He was no Barristan Selmy to take his dismissal quietly. Neither Joffrey nor his father could treat him like a doormat and expect him to just take it. He was Jaime fucking Lannister.
Jaime forwent his usual dance and went in for the kill. He didn't want to perform. He wanted to show them how much better he was than all of them, that they were all impotent against him.

Excalibur was lighter than the swords he was used to. At first, he over-swung. It had been risky, duelling with an untried sword. Yet his body quickly adjusted and he found he could move faster than before. He darted forward before Kettleback could register what he was doing. At the last moment, the other knight raised his sword, but Jaime was prepared for that. He feinted to the left, drawing him in. Let them think he was having doubts. Jaime had never doubted himself.

By the way, where was Cersei? She would never allow this to happen. At least, not without a great deal of protesting.

Kettleback attacked him, rushing forward with blade raised. Jaime sidestepped but, at the last moment, grabbed Kettleback's arm and pulled him forward, using his force from his own charge. He swung the man around so his back was to him. While Kettleback flailed about, trying to free himself, Jaime trapped his blade in the hilt of his sword and wrenched it out of his grasp.

The weapon flew in a lazy arc through the air. It hurtled towards the crowd, right at Baelish. The sword hit the floor, sending sparks flying up from the stone. Baelish leapt out of the way. The sword spun twice before it stopped.

Jaime shoved Kettleback to the floor and drove a boot into his groin, just to make a point. Kettleback let out a strangled groan.

"On him, all of you!" shouted Joffrey. "Take him down!"

Three more Kingsguard charged a him at once. "Ah, Ser Preston Greenfield," he said as he took a step back. Three at once? Where was their honour and pride? Wait, they had none. That was why they were Kingsguard. "You always did find your courage in numbers."

They rushed towards him, closing in like a pack of wolves – was it not odd that he had just compared them to the Starks? – surrounding a lion. Even a lion could not fight off so many at once, but this was a perfect situation, if there was such a thing, to have a little fun with them.

Jaime darted into the midst of the courtiers, diving straight into where the ladies stood. They screamed as the Kingsguard followed him, scattering them like sheep. He headed straight for Rebekah. Shocked vampires were very amusing. One would think that, for creatures so powerful and with such quick reactions, she'd move out of the way. Although, he supposed if she wanted to keep her secret a secret, she wouldn't be able to use her incredible speed and strength. Although that did not stop him from using her as a shield or a weapon. She was his good little squire and she would protect her lord.

He seized her and pulled her into the path of the charging Kingsguard before she could even protest. "Oh my God!" cried Caroline as she failed to specify which god she was praying to. Err… wrong blonde. Rebekah had been smart enough to get out of the way after all.

Caroline grabbed Greenfield's blade with her hand and threw him onto his back. He would never live that down, defeated by Father's favourite lady cupbearer-mistress. The cut on Caroline's palm healed. She glared at him. He gave little bow before moving on his way.

All of the Kingsguard were involved by now, making twenty…brawlers in total. "Jaime!" he heard Tyrion shout. He ignored his brother. He was too small to be in any danger from accidental swings of swords. The courtiers were all in a panic now. He used them as obstacles for his pursuers, throwing them into their paths and forcing them to dodge around the ladies to get to him, which
they couldn't. Where was Stefan Salvatore? He could use a friend right now. No, he was too clever to get involved, unlike his two blonde companions.

Rebekah suddenly appeared in his way. If he hadn't been quick enough to pull back, he probably would have accidentally run her through. "Did you plan this?" she asked. "Because this is the dumbest thing you could possibly have done."

"I thought court was getting little dull," said Jaime with a grin. Come on, where had her sense of fun gone? He seized a girl, getting ready to fling her into Balon Swann's path, but her fiery hair made him pause. Sansa Stark?

Seeing her reminded him of something. There had been an oath...oh, yes, right. He'd promised her mother he'd bring her back to her if Catelyn Stark freed him. Using her as a human meat shield had not been part of the deal, not that he was fond of keeping his word, but he had standards and there were certain lines he would not cross. Killing little boys, fine. Killing little girls should only be done if one had a very good reason. This was not good enough. He pushed Sansa Stark behind him. "If you care about your health, you should run in the opposite direction as quickly as possible," he said to her.

The little northern lady didn't move. Was she as idiotic as her father or was she more like her good-sister, with hidden tricks up her sleeve? No, she was a Stark through and through.

**Next chapter:** Sansa finds a way to get out from under Joffrey's thumb. Rebekah must suffer the repercussions of her choices. Jaime and Rebekah rekindle their friendship. Tywin plans everyone's futures. Caroline must contemplate her place in Westerosian society.
Jaime and Rebekah reconcile amidst facing the consequences of their actions. Tywin plans everyone's futures.

King's Landing

Joffrey was shouting at his Kingsguard to bring down his uncle, the ladies were screaming, the men were exclaiming, and Sansa just wanted to flee, but she couldn't. Trapped between surging bodies, she couldn't move anywhere except be swept along by the tempest. Jaime Lannister darted in and out like a small boy playing chase with his friends. He kept on pushing people into the path of the charging Kingsguard. She saw Ser Preston shove one lady into a pillar before being thrown onto his back by Lady Caroline.

Jaime grabbed Sansa's arm. She was so terrified she couldn't even scream but, at the last moment, something flashed across his face. He was very strong and his grip was like iron. There would be bruises on her arm later. He shoved her behind him. "If you care about your health, you should run in the opposite direction as quickly as possible," he suggested. She stared at the back of his head with a thousand thoughts running through her mind. Why was Jaime Lannister protecting her?

Upon seeing that she wasn't moving like he'd said, he grabbed her arm and dragged her along. "See those doors? They open from the inside. Now, shoo," he said, pointing her in the direction of a pair of small side doors that the servants used. Finally, her blood began to flow again and the reality slammed into her. If she stayed here, there was every chance she could get hurt, accidentally or otherwise. If she was killed, how could she avenge her father? She looked at the man who had stabbed her father in the leg. He was one of them but, for now, he was on her side.

Or was he? She didn't know and she wanted to find out. She had no strength in her arm, unlike the lady knight or even Caroline Forbes. She had no money, no armies, no acerbic wit, but she had her eyes and ears and her mind. Petyr Baelish was powerful because he knew things. Varys was powerful because he knew things. Cersei, of course, had her spies everywhere. She needed to know things too.

Sansa ducked behind a pillar and stayed in the shadows. Jaime Lannister really was a beautiful man. While, at first glance, the similarities between him and Joffrey were obvious, the more she looked, the more unlike the two of them became. For one, the father—sorry, uncle (father-uncle?)—actually had a sense of chivalry, at least when it came to her. He'd flung Lady Caroline at Ser Preston without a second thought.

Her mouth fell open when Tywin Lannister drew his sword and advanced upon Jaime. All the Kingsguard stepped back without having to be told, except Jaime. A fight between two lions was terrible and beautiful to behold. The family resemblance was so strong that she wondered if Jaime was actually looking at his future self.

"Lay down your sword, Jaime," said Tywin. His voice was low and soft, but they all heard him perfectly clearly.
"I am not one of your dogs to roll over when you tell me to, Father," said Jaime. "You seem to have forgotten, Father, that I am also a lion."

Too late Sansa noticed the glance that Tywin had given to Stefan Salvatore. Damon's brother was equal to him in speed and strength. He lunged at Jaime from behind, albeit unarmed, to grapple with him. With inhuman alertness, Jaime whipped around just in time and swung at Stefan who barely managed to dodge him. He charged at Jaime, throwing him back several paces. As the two men grappled, Jaime let go of his sword to grab the dagger at his side, except Stefan seemed to have anticipated this and got it first. As the two men grappled for control of the dagger, Joffrey finally regained his composure a little and hefted his crossbow to his shoulder. "Cease, Uncle, or you'll regret it," said Joffrey. "Don't think I won't shoot you."

Tywin gave him a look.

"In the leg," amended Joffrey.

Jaime ignored the king as he seemed to be wont to do lately. He swung Stefan around and almost into a pillar. Tywin stepped up behind him and smashed the hilt of his sword against Jaime's skull. Jaime went limp. Stefan caught him before he could fall to the ground. Rebekah made to run to Jaime but Caroline pulled her back and shook her head.

Tywin sheathed his blade with a single motion and picked up Jaime's fallen sword.

"Ser Salvatore, see to it that my son makes his way back to his chambers. He needs his rest," he said. Meaning that Jaime was probably going to be locked there, possibly indefinitely. Her heart fell. She'd been so set on making Jaime her protector and now he couldn't even protect himself. Her eyes met that of Stefan Salvatore's. For a moment, it seemed as if the light shone upon him and his eyes were so very green. He looked nothing like his brother and he was nothing like Damon, but perhaps that was a good thing. Stefan Salvatore had the favour of Tywin Lannister. He was brave, men feared him, and he was good enough to subdue Gregor Clegane. The gods had taken away the lion. But they had given her a chance to tame a beautiful stallion.

There had been just one other time in her entire life when Rebekah had felt this exposed and vulnerable. The date had been April 22, 1919. Location, The Grand Opera House, New Orleans. Her father had crucified all their friends on the stage whilst the human audience had been compelled to laugh at the scene as if it were a grand comedy. Niklaus and Elijah had been with her then. They weren't here, now, as the matching piercing gazes of both Joffrey and Tywin focused on her. She did not move. There was no place to run, anyway.

She took a deep and unnecessary breath.

"There's only one thing to do with women of loose morals," Joffrey began. He smirked. She looked up at him. Something primal sparked in his eyes; it was the unconscious fear of a prey animal looking at a great predator for the first time and not really knowing what he was seeing. His smirk slipped a little. "She is your pet knight, Grandfather. I will give you leave to deal with her."

The only sound in the throne room was the sound of a thousand thudding hearts all surrounding her as her peers waited to see her fate. The women who had hated her for whatever reason smirked behind their hands, being too provincial to even know how to wield fans. She wanted nothing more than to rip out their throats right there and then. Let them behold her true form and shiver. Let them
whisper her name in the dark and quiver. If they knew, none of them would even be here. They would all be running and praying for help that would not come. But she couldn't. For Stefan's sake, at least, if not for her own and possibly even Caroline's; no one could know.

Tywin stepped down from his dais. "I shall deal with her in private. Bind her and take her to the Black Cells."

She did not resist as the least damaged Kingsguard clapped manacles around her wrists.

"My lord," said Caroline. "Please –"

"Silence," said Tywin. Caroline stopped. Rebekah felt strangely touched and was immediately annoyed with herself. Since when did she let Caroline get in her good books? She made herself forget Caroline and that uncomfortable feeling and turn her attention back to what was most important. Tywin was still looking at her.

The guards escorted her out of the throne room. None would meet her gaze. She bided her time. If Lord Tywin meant to leave her in the black cells, she would get out of her own accord. And then go where? To the Starks, where Elijah was? Maybe run back to Klaus, wherever he might be? Hah, she'd rather wander Westeros as a sellsword than let Klaus gloat.

The Black Cells lived up to their name. The mildew-coated walls sweated in the cold. Moisture gathered in the cracks of the stone. A few poor souls, little more than starved bones, stirred as the guards with their torches passed their cells. A skeletal hand reached out between dark iron bars, grasping for hope that wasn't there. She glimpsed rat-gnawed bones. The rodents were also thin. There weren't that many people down here. She wondered why Joffrey hadn't arrested the entire population of Flea Bottom yet. His rats needed feeding.

If the men expected her to be frightened of the dark, they were going to be disappointed. "Welcome to your new quarters, my lady," smirked Ser Preston who, despite losing the fight to Caroline, was still relatively intact.

"Careful, Ser Preston. I saw what my little blonde friend did with you," said Rebekah. "What would the world say if they knew?"

He scowled at her and slammed the door behind her. Muffled footsteps faded away. She strained her ears. High above her, in the distance, was the rattling of wooden wheels upon cobbledstones. Rats scratched around in gaps in the walls. Some of the braver individuals came out to investigate but quickly darted back into their holes as soon as they smelled her scent. For a lack of sustenance and things to do, she snatched one of them and bit into its neck. The blood was foul but it would do for now. She drained the little body and hid it in a pile of rotting straw. His compatriots would finish cleaning him up soon enough.

A steady drip-drip came from somewhere. The echoes were disorientating. She heard the sound of slow running water. Was there an underground river, or was it a sewer? She didn't know.

Time passed interminably. She wondered about Jaime and about what would happen to him. She shook her head. 'What would Klaus say to you now, Rebekah?' she thought. 'He would laugh at you for thinking about Jaime when you should be more worried about yourself.'

She didn't know how much time had passed before she saw the light of a smoky torch coming down the hallway.

"Rebekah, what have you done?" whispered a familiar voice.
"Jaymse?" she whispered.

"It's very clear who she's done," said a harsher whisper.

"Nice to see you too, Fredyric," said Rebekah.

"I doubt you can see anything, Rebekah," said Fredyric. "I don't even know why we're here. After all, you left us all alone in the Stark camp without even leaving a note."

"I couldn't very well let Jaime go off into the wilderness by himself," said Rebekah.

"Yes, it's always going to be Lord Jaime," said Fredyric.

"All that's in the past, Fredyric," said Jaymse. "Here." He passed a wrapped package through the bars and also a wineskin. "We've been trying to find out how long Lord Tywin means to keep you in here."

Rebekah took a swig of wine and nibbled at the bread and cheese.

"What's he said so far?"

"Nothing," said Jaymse. "But I'm sure we can drop in a good word or two to Lord Tywin, but it will be up to you to prove that you are still worth it."

"I will, if I can talk to him."

Fredyric gave a hiss. "Someone's coming," he said. He quickly snuffed out the torch and the two of them ran further down the hallway to hide in an empty cell. She hoped they wouldn't accidentally lock themselves in one.

"I don't know why he lets you off this easily," said judgy little Caroline. "But Lord Tywin has said that you're to be let out."

"I thought you didn't want me to be punished," said Rebekah.

"I didn't. It was a momentary lapse of judgement that won't happen again." She motioned to the guards. One of them unlocked the door. Rebekah slowly stepped outside of the cell.

"You're trying too hard to be a Lannister, Caroline Forbes," she said.

"And you should try harder," said Caroline. "Come on. You shouldn't make Lord Tywin wait."

"Yes, yes, Lord Tywin is very important –"

"That he is and, he said, if you don't want to be out, you can go right back in."

"He didn't say that."

"He didn't, but I imagine he would if you're going to continue to be a saucy wench."

"Saucy wench?" She'd had enough of this. "Well, if you say so. I'd rather listen to Lord Tywin's lecture than your babbling." She marched straight out into the sunlight.

"You don't even know where you're going," said Caroline. That was true. She slowed down so the baby vampire could lead the way and tried her very best not to reach out and just snap her neck for her insolence.
Tywin was waiting for her in his study. He was examining a Lannister banner hanging from his wall. He turned when she came in. "Close the door," he told Caroline.

He walked right up to Rebekah and she never looked away from his face until the last moment, when he stopped. She stared at the toes of his boots. They were ceremonial boots; more suited for dressing up than for riding or walking anywhere except indoors.

"Look at me," he said. His voice was as soft as the sound of a polished knife being drawn. Rebekah looked up.

"Do you know why you're here?" asked Tywin.

"I know you need a scapegoat," said Rebekah.

"You are greatly mistaken," said Tywin. He didn't need someone to be Jaime's fall boy? Or fall girl? "Don't flatter yourself. No one can be his scapegoat."

"But I slept with him."

"Yes, and that compelled him to draw his sword on the king, I suppose."

"Oh."

"The truth of the matter is that Jaime has fallen and he is bringing down all those who have associated with him in the past. You have relied on him more than anyone else."

"What is going to happen to Lord Jaime, my lord?" asked Rebekah.

"He is of no importance," said Tywin. "You would do well to look to your own future, Rebekah, instead of always worrying about others. Are you afraid?"

She jutted out her chin. "Fear is for children, my lord," she said.

"You are either very foolish, or very brave," he said. "Well, have you anything clever to say?"

She hesitated. "No, my lord," she said. There were no words that could remedy the situation.

"You will be stripped of your titles. Furthermore, you are dismissed from the service of House Lannister."

It hurt more than it should, but it felt almost like New Orleans all over again. In the span of one moment, she had lost everything that she had built all because of one stupid mistake. It was too late to cry or to wish that she had done things differently. At any rate, would she have done it any differently?

"I will go," she said quietly.

"No," said Tywin. "I have not given you leave to go yet."

"My lord?"

"Before, there were none in the seven kingdoms who did not know your name, Rebekah Mikaelson," he said. It sounded as if he were pronouncing some prophetic proclamation of doom. In the ensuing silence, she heard the flap of a dying butterfly's wings and the crunch of the wasp's jaws as it closed in on the helpless creature. "Now, that Rebekah Mikaelson is dead. In her place will emerge a shadow to dog the footsteps of the enemies of House Lannister. Discretion is the
better part of valour. You must have heard of it."

Rebekah nodded.

"A famous spy makes for a poor spy," said Tywin. "Officially, you will be dead to the court and to me. In reality, you will serve me in secret and answer to me alone. No one is to know of this apart from myself and my agent."

His agent?

"Who would that be?" asked Rebekah.

"How many people do you see in this room?" asked Tywin.

Caroline was there, but she was an ornament. "Two, my lord," said Rebekah. "Myself and you."

Caroline made some noise of outrage that sounded like something between a whinny and a whine.

Tywin gave them both a look. "Whatever petty grudge you have, put it aside. There are more important things to worry about," he said.

"Yes, my lord," chorused Rebekah and Caroline; two good little Lannister choir girls.

"Don't smile just yet, Rebekah. I am not finished. The rest of Westeros will not be convinced. They will need a display."

"What?" whispered Caroline.

"Do you know what happens to women who are deemed whores?" asked Tywin.

Obviously, he wasn't talking about being paid.

Jaime opened his eyes and then wished that he hadn't. His head felt as if it had been split open. He reached up to touch his temple and his fingers came away sticky with blood. If Stefan hadn't been there, he wouldn't be the one lying here. His father was no longer as strong as he had once been. He heard footsteps in his chambers and the creak of a chair as someone sat down in it. He risked opening one eye.

"You are awake, my lord," said Stefan.

"You owe me, Stefan Salvatore. I could have wounded you and revealed your secret," said Jaime. His voice was hoarser than he had meant for it to be. "What are you doing here? Am I to be guarded, now, like some common criminal?"

"According to the king, my lord, you are little better than that," said Stefan. "I do not happen to share His Grace's opinions."

"Who hit me?" asked Jaime.

"Lord Tywin did. You wouldn't stop."

"Well, of course I wouldn't," said Jaime. He tried to sit up, but that made his head reel and ache worse than before. "Would you mind fetching me a drink? Something stronger than wine and spirits."
"You didn't say the magic word, my lord," said Stefan.

"Now," said Jaime.

Stefan sighed. Had he been Rebekah, he would have refused. He bit his wrist. Jaime seized it and put his mouth over the wounds before too much of the precious blood could go to waste. The first sip cured him of his headache immediately. He tried to take another sip but Stefan rudely yanked his arm back. "That is enough for now. Too much, and the world will wonder how. Besides, you didn't say 'please'."

"Rebekah would give it to me," said Jaime.

"Rebekah is in the Black Cells."

"Why?"

"Because of you, my lord." Stefan bowed. "If there is nothing else, I should leave you to rest. Should you need anything, I will be outside."

"Are you afraid to associate with me?" asked Jaime.

"Not at all, but I fear you would not like anything that I might have to say at the moment, my lord," said Stefan.

"You forget your place, Salvatore."

"That makes two of us."

Stefan closed the door quietly behind him, leaving Jaime alone with his thoughts. And there were many. He couldn't sleep, now. With the white cloak no longer upon his shoulders to protect him, his father would be seeking to marry him off. Who? There was a lack of viable noble future wives. They were all married. Except Lysa Arryn, who was widowed. Oh gods, he needed a plan or else he was going to have to jump out that Moon Door.

He did not sleep all night. No matter however he went about it, he always came to the same conclusion at the top of the Eyrie. Unless there was some other option he could present to Father? But what? Catelyn Stark was also widowed. Unfortunately, Robb Stark would never accept him as a stepfather. Or would he if he offered the young Stark Joffrey's head? Now there was thought. He was not averse to becoming a kinslayer right now.

"Jaime," said someone. He sat up.

Rebekah stood there, her grey eyes large in her pale face. How had she gotten out of the Black Cells so quickly? Joffrey had pointed her out in front of everyone as the harlot responsible for the downfall of the great Jaime Lannister. Surely his father would never have let her go so easily, and intact, too.

"You just couldn't stay away, could you?" he said. "You have come to gloat, haven't you?"

"No," she said. What, no clever comments, no witty barbs to tease him with? This wasn't like Rebekah. "At any rate, I'm not in any position to gloat. I have come to bid you farewell, my lord. Lord Tywin has stripped me of my titles and I am to leave the city within the week."

"Where will you go?" he asked.
"Well, that's what I'm supposed to say to you," said Rebekah.

"Ah, so you aren't really leaving the city," said Jaime. "What has my father got you doing now?"

"I can't tell you that. That's top secret," said Rebekah. "You're not even supposed to know that I'm in the city. As far as anyone knows, I've been exiled."

"Since you've already broken one promise to my father, I'm sure breaking another one couldn't hurt," said Jaime. He pulled her down to sit beside him. "Come, now, Rebekah. You tell me everything."

"Not everything. Not about immortality."

"That was very cruel of you."

"I didn't want to give you false hope since I can't give it to you."

"Liar. You know perfectly well you can make me into a you-know-what."

She swung over and straddled him so she was looking down at him. She leaned down. Their noses touched.

"Rebekah…" he began. "Well, I suppose you've given up on that respecting yourself nonsense."

"If you put it that way," she said in a husky whisper as she backed away from him.

"Come, now, Rebekah. We made such a pair, you and I, and we both need friends right now."

"Special friends?" asked Rebekah.

"Very special friends," said Jaime. "We'd be even better friends if you turned me and found me a witch for the daylight spell." He would show them what he was really worth. He could only imagine his father's reaction when he emerged victorious, ever young and immortal with strength beyond that of any man. He would be his own legacy. It was something that Tywin could only dream of.

"Ring, you mean?" asked Rebekah. "Daylight ring?"

Damn Caroline. How could she lie to him?

"Right, daylight ring. Just how important is it, anyway?"

"I think your family might notice if you stayed indoors all day long."

"I could…disappear."

"Leave them? Could you?"

Could he? He didn't know. Lannisters did not simply leave their families behind. But his family had never cared much for what he wanted. Why should he care about them? He didn't reply to Rebekah's question. He lifted her into his arms. Somehow, now that she was no longer a knight, she felt lighter. He laid her down on the bed beneath him. His right hand was already pushing her skirts up over her thighs and then her hips.

"Don't rip it," she hissed as she pulled him down close to her face. "This one cost an entire gold dragon and I'm not likely to come by another one any time soon."
"Gold dragons mean nothing to me," said Jaime. "I don't like misers." Still, he slipped it off her shoulders. It wasn't really that complicated. All he had to do was be a little patient and undo the hooks at the back.

She tried to flip him over, but he resisted her. "Nuh uh. I am the lord, and you, my errant squire, will do as I please," he said as he pressed a finger to the tip of her nose.

"Since when did I start obeying your orders?" she asked. But he pinned her down and, without any leverage, she couldn't really move. He began to kiss her slowly, brushing his lips over her brow, over her eyes, the bridge of her nose, down to her lips, then tracing a line of kisses down her jawline. She shivered beneath his touch, all thoughts of resistance or fighting driven from her mind.

He nibbled her earlobe. "You're mine," he whispered.

"Nobody owns me," she whispered back, but she made no move to stop him from claiming her. He released her wrists and ran his hands down her body, tracing lines down her sides and around her breasts while he suckled on them. He began to write his name on her nipple with his tongue. She moaned and bucked her hips against him. Her fingers were tangled in his hair.

"Oh my God!"

Damn! He should have locked the door. Little Caroline Forbes was going to be so traumatized. One would have thought that a woman of her mature years would have at least made love to one man, or several. Did she have to be so scandalized by a little naked flesh?

Rebekah growled when he sat up and pushed herself into a sitting position as well. "What the fuck are you doing here?" she demanded of Caroline. "Haven't you done enough?" The other girl held a tray of food. Her eyes were wide.

"I…" Obviously she was just being her usual adorable self and was worried that Jaime would miss breakfast. Now, why couldn't Rebekah learn a few things from her? That would make his life easier.

Jaime got up. Caroline's eyes widened before she squeezed them shut. He took the tray from her. She still kept her eyes closed. "Caroline," said Jaime slowly. This was too amusing to not take advantage of. Maybe they were just in too much need of a laugh if they were turning to Caroline for amusement. "Is there something wrong?"

"I'm fine! Obviously you're being looked after. She's not supposed to be here, by the way."

Rebekah snorted and waggled her eyebrows at Jaime. He grinned back at her. "Don't be so shocked. You knew we were …what do you call it? An item?"

"On a casual basis," said Rebekah. "Oh, come on, Caroline, he's not that bad to look at."

"You, quiet, or I'll tell my father what you're doing and then you're going to lose your head or something." Jaime pointed a finger at Rebekah as he would do to a misbehaving child. She pouted but shut up. He turned back to Caroline. "Would you like to join us, perhaps?" he asked poor little Lady Forbes. "You could have a drink, first?"

"Hell, no!" She opened her eyes then, glanced down for a split second and then looked back up at him. It seemed as if she were trying too hard to look up and not let her gaze wander downwards. "Aren't you, like, old enough to be my father?"
Rebekah let out a peal of laughter. Jaime, on the other hand, no longer found it to be that funny.

"How old do you take me to be?" he asked.

"Old enough to have a kid my age," said Caroline.

"Firstly, I will never sire baby goats and, secondly, I am thirty-five, not fifty-five."

"And I'm eighteen, so if you were my father which, thank all the deities in the world, you aren't--"

"I thank them too."

"– you could have had me at seventeen."

Now that he thought about it, it was perfectly reasonable, but she was one to talk. She was immortal. As she grew up, the age difference between her and her lovers would widen until it was so large that it wouldn't matter, like his and Rebekah's. Although she always seemed younger. Time meant little to an immortal, especially one who would never grow up. Come to think of it, he would quite like to be an immortal who never grew up.

"If there's nothing else, my lord," said Caroline. "I should be going. I have…stuff."

"I am wounded, Lady Caroline, that you would choose 'stuff' over me," said Jaime.

"Oh shut up," snapped Caroline.

Rebekah rolled her eyes. "What are you doing still standing there? You can either join us, as Jaime said –"

"Ser Jaime," Jaime corrected her.

"– or you can scram. Pick one, and quickly." Rebekah patted the bed. Was little Caroline Forbes adventurous or ambitious? Perhaps not. She turned on her heel and practically ran. If she weren't so conscious of the fact there could be people watching, she would have used her unnatural vampire speed.

"She's a shy little thing," remarked Jaime as he returned to bed with the food. He set it on the low table beside the bed, thinking they could eat after their rigorous activities.

"She's a judgy little thing, but she has her uses, even if they are few," said Rebekah. "Now, where were we?"

Jaime paced in his father's study, the flashes of his red cloak distracting him at every turn. It was odd to wear red inside King's Landing when he'd worn white for so many years. For half his life, in fact. "Well, you finally got what you wanted," he said to his father, who was still pretending he wasn't in the room, despite having summoned him half an hour ago. And, like the good little boy that he was, he had trotted along to his father. Well, that would have to stop. He wasn't an accessory in his father's household; he was not a pet. He was Lannister and he would make his mark on the world. In fact, he had it in his grasp now.

He poured himself a cup of wine. The sweetness, mingled with bitterness, mirrored his emotions exactly. Kingsguard was the only thing he had achieved for himself, although Aerys had appointed him partly to spite Tywin. Yet it had limited him in ways he had not imagined when he had first joined. He had borne with those limitations, believing that he would have them for the rest of his
life. Now, for the first time in twenty-odd years, he was actually free.  

Free to do what, he didn't know, but there was a whole world out there. Things that he had not thought possible had become possible.  

His father did not say anything, nor did he even look up. Jaime hated the way he would drag out these awkward silences, making a man tenser until he was drawn as taut as a bowstring that was about to snap. He did it to intimidate men. Jaime refused to be intimidated.  

"Did it have anything to do with the sword, or have you been planning this all along?" Jaime asked Tywin. He would keep talking until his father answered. To strip him of his position was one thing. To do so in such a public way was something Jaime found hard to forgive.  

"You have seen forty years," said Tywin.  

"Thirty five," said Jaime.  

Tywin ignored him. "And what have you to show for it? You have acted as a glorified bodyguard to a madman, a drunk and a child, and you weren't even very good at it. Two out of three kings died under your watch."  

Jaime really didn't have anything to say to that. Well, he could have mentioned that he had been imprisoned by yet another king who was no longer king, but he did not want to remind himself or anyone else of that experience. He took another sip of his wine.  

"I need you to become the man you were born to be, Jaime. I needed you to become that man yesterday." His father stood and went to the window. The shadow of the black frame cast a net over his face. The glass was clouded and one could not see anything outside of the room. "It is time you took a wife."

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**Next chapter:** Rebekah goes into deep cover. Tywin gives Caroline food for thought. Margaery learns of the stakes she's up against.
Margaery networks. Katherine extends her reach. Tywin plays god and makes everyone miserable.

Chapter 85: He's Just Not That Into You

King's Landing

King's Landing was a cesspit of men. Margaery took in a deep breath. Where one might smell despair coming from the numberless poor, she smelled opportunity. She patted her discreet pouch of herbs which would, hopefully, keep all diseases at bay.

It seemed as if the entire city had made an appearance at what promised to be the most spectacular event of the year. No, it wasn't the wedding of their king. Men enjoyed the misfortunes of others much more than their fortunes.

The midday sun blazed down, warming her skin and making the foul puddles far below evaporate. That was a pity. If the wind had been blowing the other way, she could have been enjoying the sea breeze instead.

A flash of copper caught her eye. Sansa Stark had just walked out onto the stone viewing balcony with her hands clasped before her and her head bowed, as if she were scared of blows coming out of nowhere. Her grandmother's spies had spoken of the king's treatment of the young Stark girl. Apart from becoming the queen, Margaery had seen it as her responsibility to deliver the poor creature from a most unsuitable husband. Sansa must have known that Margaery had been watching her because she lifted her gaze. Their eyes met for just a second before the younger girl looked back at the floor again. Or, perhaps, she was looking at the crowd below and was glad that it wasn't her that they were gathered for.

The woman that they had all come to see had yet to make her appearance. Margaery took the time to study the she-wolf. Her lovely pale northern complexion was ill-suited to the sunnier climes of the south. She was a delicate northern blossom that had been transplanted far from her home and was wilting in the heat of southern politics. Her mother had, obviously, not prepared her for life. Neither had Margaery's mother, come to think of it, but at least she and Loras and Willas had always had their grandmother. The only clever Stark seemed to be Lyanna Stark, who had made a bid to become the queen. It was just too bad that she had picked the wrong prince.

The murmurs and conversations faded abruptly. Margaery did not join the others who were craning their necks to see the spectacle. If she wanted to see a beautiful naked woman, she'd look in the mirror.

Rebekah Mikaelson stepped out from beneath the shadow of the archway at the side of the Sept of Baelor. She held her head high. Margaery almost pitied her, but then, the former lady knight was the sort of woman who would probably hate pity.

Margaery schooled her face into an impassive mask. The High Septon (under the direction of
Tywin Lannister, no doubt) had spared Rebekah's beautiful tresses, at least. It was long enough to preserve her modesty if she had wanted it to but Rebekah seemed not to care at all. She had no reason to hide anything, Margaery supposed. There had hardly been a more perfectly formed woman in the history of the world, save for the rare few, herself included. Her skin was smooth and unblemished. Her legs were long and strong. Her belly was flat and not at all soft, and everything about her was perfectly balanced. She walked with a firm step. Nobody uttered a sound as she stepped into the sunlight.

The sun gleamed on her golden hair like a crown. She stared directly in front of her as her crimes were read out. "Whore," Margaery heard someone whisper. She glanced backwards. Cersei Lannister had a grim and satisfied smile on her face. The other Lannister twin was conspicuously absent. Perhaps Jaime Lannister cared more about his mistress than anyone had thought. Margaery tucked that little morsel away for use further down in the future. The former golden boy was not as important a target as his sister was, but he was, nonetheless, a Lannister and worth thinking about.

Margaery slowly sidled over to Sansa Stark. The younger girl was looking anywhere but down at the spectacle unfolding before her. Her pale cheeks were tinged with points of red. "One would have thought it would have taken two to commit adultery," Margaery remarked in a muted whisper. Sansa looked up.

"I beg your pardon, my lady?"

"You wonder why it's always the woman who gets punished," said Margaery, "when the man is just as culpable."

"Please, do not speak of such things," said Sansa as she looked fearfully about her. No one was paying the two girls any attention at all. They were all looking at the naked one. "What if someone hears?"

"Rebekah could not very well have caused Jaime Lannister's downfall if he had not acceded to her charms. Yet, he is nowhere to be found. Calm yourself, Lady Stark. I am to be the queen."

"And I would have thought that you, of all people, would understand that this is how the world works," said Sansa.

"It is," said Margaery. "But what fun would there be if we were all to accept incongruent moralities without remarking upon it?"

"That is the way the gods made men and women, my lady," said Sansa. A jeer rose up as Rebekah came into the sight of the commoners. Those ignorant masses did not care for the backstory. Their world was made of black and white and good and evil. Rebekah finally reacted. She turned to look at them. The front row of men quietened down so quickly that it defied nature. Margaery narrowed her eyes at the naked woman. What was it about her that even those who had come to see her shame would not dare to celebrate it? She was no ordinary woman, that was for certain. She would ask around. Someone had to know something. Someone like Lady Caroline Forbes, for instance.

"Is that Lady Forbes?" Margaery asked Sansa. She'd seen the two girls together on the day when Jaime had pulled a sword on his king. It was the perfect chance for the Stark girl to introduce her to Tywin Lannister's favourite.

"Yes," said Sansa. Caroline spotted Sansa and waved at her. People moved out of the way to let her pass.

"How are you, Lady Sansa?" asked Caroline. Now that Margaery could observe her up close, she
was astounded by how open the girl's face was. Her smile even felt genuine. She immediately became wary and alarmed. How could anyone hide their true nature so well? Even in herself, she had to admit, that there was some sly expression in her eyes that she could not rid herself of. But Caroline Forbes… no wonder she was a favourite of Tywin Lannister's. The girl embodied summer and sunshine. She had hidden her darkness so deeply that one could not see it, but it had to be there. How else could she have climbed so high?

"I am well, Lady Caroline," said Sansa with a little curtsey. "May I introduce the Lady Margaery Tyrell?"

"I have heard a great many stories about you, Lady Forbes," said Margaery. She curtseyed low; lower than she needed to, but she wanted Caroline as a friend. "However, none of them match the reality."

"I hope I haven't underwhelmed you too much," said Caroline. She blushed. "Everyone seems to think I ought to be terrifying or something."

"Terrifying? I would hardly think that, but you are more beautiful than the rumours describe."

Caroline waved away the compliment awkwardly. She was pretty, but that posture. If Margaery had slouched like that, Grandmother would have strapped her to a backboard and shoulder straps for hours a day until she improved.

She turned her attention back to the spectacle below. A few of the rowdiest commoners threw rotten fruit at Rebekah. The fermented juices ran down her skin where the overly ripe globes had struck her and burst open. Margaery could only imagine the insects buzzing around the feast, too small to be seen from this distance. What should have moved her to pity only served as a reminder to her of the snake pit that she had willingly headed into, as if one actually needed a reminder. She was not some foolish summer maid who had had her head filled with stories of white knights and chivalry. The hearts of men were dark whilst their faces were bright.

She grew bored with the long march. Rebekah would have to make her way through several streets in the city, far beyond the line of her vision, until she returned back to the Sept. Once she'd seen one moment of it, she'd seen it all. Instead, she took the opportunity to observe her neighbours in more detail. She'd already decided that Sansa Stark and Caroline Forbes were both useful friends to have. Sansa, especially, would be the key to the north if Robb Stark ever fell prey to Tywin Lannister's machinations, not that Katherine Stark would make it very easy.

For a moment, Margaery wondered what her friend was up to now, aside from falsifying her husband's death to bait bannermen, killing disgruntled vassals using Daemon Lannister and generally making herself a nuisance to all the enemies of House Stark. She'd heard about the wolf-head battering ram that Stannis had used during the siege. There had been too much artistry there for it to be solely Robb Stark's idea. It was too bad that they were to be on opposite sides on the battle lines from now on.

Well, it wasn't personal and Katherine would understand. Why had she chosen to be on the losing side? She had to be cleverer than that. It would take divine intervention to ensure the Starks' survival. Despite everything, Katherine was still just a woman, even if she was an extraordinary one. Perhaps she could persuade her to see reason?

Sansa Stark was engaged in quiet conversation with Caroline. The girl's voice was soft, weak, as if she were afraid of voicing even words, much less her own opinions. And, from what Margaery could hear, all her opinions were actually Cersei's opinions. Perhaps the little dove of the north was cleverer than the other Starks who shouted (and sang) their dissent from the roof tops and from the
battlements of Harrenhal. If the girl had any notions contrary to what her jailers thought, she kept them to herself. It was more than what her _father_ had done. She would make a good little wife for a lucky lord. What about Loras? He could do with a wife and he was most fastidious about the type of woman he wanted. Sansa Stark was adaptable. She could adjust to Loras' impossible standards, couldn't she? And, even if she couldn't, she was next in line to inherit the north now that her younger brothers were missing, presumed dead. The seat of Winterfell would make any woman a desirable wife, even if she were hunchbacked and covered in warts and smelled to high heaven. Sansa Stark was none of those things.

"Lady Sansa, I was wondering if, after this unpleasant affair, you might be inclined to show me the rest of the grounds of the Red Keep?" Margaery asked the younger girl. She started at being addressed. Her eyes became impossibly large. She had a very sweet face with a little mouth like a rosebud in the first blush of its bloom. Her figure was fine and only coming into womanhood, but she had a pleasing lightness of foot that would surely make her a wonderful dancer in the balls of High Garden. "I have a terrible sense of direction, you see. Loras teases me about it horribly. Only imagine what he would say if I became lost in my own home. I would be very much obliged if you could show me around."

"I would love to, my lady," said Sansa. She curtseyed again and tried to summon a smile that never reached her sad eyes. Poor thing. She was so young and she had no one to teach her the ways of a court, much less the court of the king. Her father, for all his power, had been a provincial lord ill-suited to the intrigues of the capital. Margaery could not imagine that Catelyn Stark would have been a much better guide for her daughter. Robb Stark had his teacher in his wife. Sansa needed a teacher too.

Margaery stilled. What was this alien feeling that she felt, this _kinship_ with the little Stark girl? Actually, she wasn't so little, because she was actually taller than Margaery herself. But these feelings. They made her uncomfortable. Never before had Margaery placed this much importance on the circumstances of others unless they were in relation to her. What need had Sansa Stark for wisdom? Margaery could gain little from imparting all the lessons her grandmother had taught her, save for the friendship that she could cultivate with Sansa before easing her into the idea of marrying Loras. That wouldn't be hard. Surely the girl would grasp at any overtures of friendship, with her in such a friendless situation. And many girls wanted to marry the Knight of the Flowers, foolishly ignorant of his personal inclinations. Sansa Stark, at least, would not know if he kissed well or not (Margaery thought not).

"I would show you my favourite walks, if you like," ventured Sansa shyly. "There are many lovely walks in the gardens that the others seldom venture into. The trees and flowers are beautiful this time of year." She hesitated. "Although, I'm sure, my lady, that you've seen much better in Highgarden, what with it being called Highgarden and all."

"How can one compare the fields of flowers in Highgarden to the cultivated walks of the Red Keep? It would be like comparing…say, doves and eagles. Each have their own beauty."

Her gaze met Petyr Baelish's. He raised a goblet in her direction. She recalled their conversation at the side of Renly's bier and wondered whether he would ever let it leak out at the most inopportune moment. He must have heard her entire conversation with Sansa Stark and he knew exactly what she wanted. She would have to be more careful in the future when she spoke. There were far more eyes and ears poking into places where they ought not be in King's Landing.

"What's Highgarden like?" asked Caroline. "I've never been out of the Westerlands and King's Landing."
"In order to get to King's Landing from the Westerlands, my lady, you would have traversed half of Westeros," Margaery teased.

"Only laterally," said Caroline. "And it was all just farms and forests and none of it was super interesting. I've only seen two cities. That's Casterly Rock and King's Landing. I've heard such a great deal about High Garden." She chattered away, seeming to have forgotten why they were all here, and with no rhyme or reason. One would have thought that if she had wanted to learn more about Margaery, she would actually let Margaery talk.

Sometimes, she had difficulty resisting the rage that burned behind her eyes and ran through every vein in her body, mingling with the adrenaline and the simple need to feed. Rebekah clenched her teeth as a mouldering apple struck her shoulder. The flies buzzed, but perhaps there was something in vampire blood that chased all the insects away. They were much more aware than the humans.

Right now, she hated all the human race and if there weren't so much at risk, she'd rip open all these bloodbags and see who would be laughing then. Probably no one.

The fruit stopped falling as she made her way back to the Sept. Those who she had called acquaintances looked away, unwilling to witness her misfortune just in case the simple act of looking could bring the same down upon them. If only they knew the whole reason. Should she be flattered that Lord Tywin wanted to keep her around to work for him; enough that he would have her march through the streets naked rather than simply send her away? Either way, it wouldn't affect him much, and he was far too practical a man not to make use of any asset available to him.

She looked about for Jaime but couldn't find him anywhere. Had he come? Or had he hidden away? She swallowed her disappointment. Maybe Klaus was right. Maybe all the men in the world were only going to be disappointments after …

After what? Niklaus' gentlemanly and chivalrous ways?

Someone draped a towel over her shoulders as soon as she stepped back into the shade. She looked up to see Stefan. Too bad he would never forgive her family for what they had done to him. He really was the best and, if she had any sense in her head, she would fight to win him back rather than chase after the unappreciative Jaime Lannister while Stefan's heart continued to be broken by that bitch Elena.

But she had never been a girl with much sense.

She gave him a small smile.

"Lord Tywin said you are to remove yourself from the Red Keep as soon as you are ready," said Stefan softly. He thrust a bundle into her arms. It was heavy with silvers and a few gold dragons. She saw chests and trunks all packed up and stowed away on a wooden cart. The mule harnessed to the cart calmly chewed at a stalk of hay. Never in her life had she been so poor. Well, she expected Tywin Lannister to supply his agents with enough resources to get them through whatever missions he needed them to do, and then some. Lannisters always paid their debts and they hardly counted coppers. "I'm sorry, Rebekah."

"It's all right, Stefan," said Rebekah. "It was only a matter of time before something like this happened. This place, it's the real world. There aren't cushions everywhere and we aren't the kings anymore."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. He hadn't touched her ever since she had been undaggered. What
an act she must have put on to move Stefan Salvatore to pity! She almost hated herself, then, for behaving in such a pathetic manner. But wouldn't he be impressed when he found out later?

She cleaned herself off in the water trough and quickly put her clothes back on, grimacing in disgust at the rough homespun that Caroline had provided for her. She was taking this far too seriously. A slightly flasher costume wouldn't have hurt. Where had she found this thing anyway? It looked and smelled like something had died and decomposed in it.

Rebekah looked back once as she walked out of the side door of the Red Keep. She hadn't expected to see him, but there he was, standing high up on the battlements, his face grim, or impassive. It was hard to tell with Jaime when he was being serious. She turned away and marched from the rat nest, but she could almost wager that he never stopped watching her until she disappeared from his sight.

My dearest Margaery,

I hope this letter finds you well and that you have not forgotten all about your poor little friend in light your triumphant entrance into King's Landing's glittering society, and as the future queen, no less! Allow me to give you my warmest congratulations. Truly, I am gladdened for you. Joffrey Baratheon could not wish for a better queen in these troublesome times when he is most in need of friends and allies. His insecurity makes you secure.

Robb and I are working very hard to ensure that you and Loras have a pleasant and long occupation of the capital and that you retain the esteem of all its citizens, especially those who matter. Lannisters are nearly as fond of paying their debts as they are of holding little grudges. I hope they will not trouble you too much over your sojourn with dear departed Renly, may the gods rest his soul.

Your family, for now, has the favour of all who dwell in the capital. They see you as saviours. Still, memories are short and many are jealous.

Take care, my dearest friend, and do endeavour to write to me as often as you can, although I suppose you will be very busy, now, with a wedding to plan. I miss you very much. We shall expect glad tidings of a new prince, soon.

Please give our deepest regards to Loras. My husband has expressed the greatest desire of furthering his friendship with your brother.

Ever yours,

Katherine Stark

The letter had gone, firstly, to Loras. The outer envelope had been addressed to him, after all. However, when he had opened it, he had found a second envelope inside with Margaery's name on it, written in unfamiliar handwriting. She should have known that it was only a matter of time before Katherine Stark took advantage of the newfound power and fortune of her friends. Margaery was surprised it had taken her so long.

She read and reread the letter so many times that she could remember it by heart. *His insecurity makes you secure.* Margaery consigned the letter to the flames and watched the edges of the parchment darken and curl in on itself. She watched it until every single word was obliterated and turned into ash. Yet the writing was clear in her mind and she could see it all. Katherine was warning her. If the war ended and Robb Stark were vanquished, the Lannisters would have little or
no need for allies. The influence that she and her family enjoyed, now, would, at best, fade into insignificance or, at worst, disappear entirely.

Margaery sat down on the low red velvet couch and smoothed her hands over the finely carved arm. It was shaped like a long, lithe, snarling lion with pointed teeth. It would have to go. She disliked such overt displays of violent power. A nice satin-covered couch with arms that depicted carved flowers—roses with thorns—would do very well for this room. The hideous antiquated tapestries so favoured by the Lannisters would have to go, too. This was her sanctuary. Joffrey could have his buck heads—he obviously did not think of the implications when he had called for the heads to be mounted on his wall—and wolf pelt rugs. Tyrells were sophisticated, sensual and subtle. Still, to appease her betrothed’s bloodthirsty nature, she might have a display of crossbows in a glass case and perhaps a few sparrow skulls on the mantelpiece. It would look ghastly, but she could tolerate a little bit of bad design if it meant she could reign as queen for a long, long time.

"If you write back to her, tell her that I am not your little errand boy," said Loras with much irritation. "By the way, I read it."

"Yes, I noticed that the seal was broken, brother," said Margaery. "Although, if you had actually read the contents of the letter instead of merely glanced at it, you would know why she had sent it to you first."

"Of course I do. I merely wanted to know what your opinion on the matter is. And while Ro—that man might want to deepen his friendship with me, I certainly want nothing to do with him. He jumped right into bed with…you know who."

He clearly had no idea why Katherine had written. She sighed. Her brother was the most beautiful of them, but the gods had not seen fit to give him much wisdom.

"We are quite safe, here. This is our house filled with our people. You may speak the names of Robb Stark and Stannis Baratheon freely instead of relying on some arbitrary code that I do not recognize," said Margaery. "Katherine, being the good friend that she is, is merely giving us a brief idea of what our possible futures might be. At best, House Tyrell could ascend to become the most powerful house in all the seven kingdoms. I should say six. At worst, well, Lannisters tend to pay every single little debt, brother, and they like certain debts more than others."

"You're referring to…" said Loras.

"Of course. But you know that already, don't you? Be careful out there, my dear beautiful brother. They'll raise you high as their champion, now, but they'll only love you for as long as they need you."

"But you're to be queen."

"Cersei was Robert's queen and Queen Rhaella was Aerys'. It didn't really help them very much."

He stood on the hill like a king. The wind was blowing every which way, but mostly from the north, and it brought with it the chill of winter. It was finally arriving instead of just coming. Yes, there was a difference. Yet, Lord Tywin seemed to be unaffected by the cold. He surveyed his men with steel-cold eyes as they went through their drills. They looked like one big square of rippling red and gold from a distance.

Caroline walked as fast as she dared. Wisps of steam swirled up from the edges of the cup's lid. She'd wrapped a scarf around it to keep the contents warm for as long as possible, but there
were no thermoses in Westeros. Someone really needed to invent them, considering how long their winters were.

"My lord," she said as she drew close to him. He glanced to the side. She offered him the cup.

"Mulled cider?" he said.

"The wind is cold," she said. She wouldn't mention how she had wanted to bring him something to warm him up because he wasn't as young as he thought he was anymore and she didn't want him to catch a chill. He frowned upon such sentiments, even if they were towards himself. Especially if they were towards himself.

She made back away and return to the city, mindful of the fact that she was no longer his cupbearer and it might not be seen as being appropriate for a lady to be carrying out the duties of one.

Tywin removed the lid and took a sip of the warm golden liquid. Well, he hadn't told her off and she still had her head so she figured she was okay.

"Look at them," Tywin said suddenly. She paused and turned to look. "What do you see, Caroline?" Caroline? He hardly ever called her by her name. Her first name, that was. He sometimes referred to her as Lady Forbes whenever he needed to refer to her, which was seldom. While addressing her, she was usually just 'girl' or 'you' and she'd grown used to it.

"Soldiers moving in unison," said Caroline. No, that answer was too obvious. He wanted her to see something else. She wracked her brain for all other possibilities. "Do you mind if I speak honestly, my lord?"

"Do you mean to say that you do not speak honestly to me?"

"No, but sometimes I have to temper my words, my lord, because I know you wouldn't appreciate the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

"Careful, Lady Forbes. Choose your next words carefully for you are walking on thin ice. You may end up incriminating yourself. But I absolve you for this moment."

"When I look at them, I think of people whose minds are controlled, like...sheep. They follow the other sheep which, in turn, follow the shepherd who might be leading them to pasture or slaughter."

"You think of my men as sheep?"

"Well, they follow orders, don't they, my lord?"

"Yes, they do, like an army of ants," remarked Tywin. Oh, well, that was a much worse comparison. Sheep, at least, were vertebrates. Call it speciesism. "But it is far better to have an army of ants led by a lion than to have an army of lions led by an ant."

"That would be like herding cats, my lord," said Caroline. "I suppose lions are cats."

"Must you always take things so literally?" He didn't really want an answer, did he? "Most men simply want nothing more than validation by who are their superiors. This is why they follow my orders."

"I think no one should need approval from anyone else but themselves," said Caroline.
"You almost sound like a Lannister," said Tywin. In his lexicon, that was praise and high praise, at that. Caroline dipped her head. She didn't want him to see her blush. "That, however, is not the main purpose in a man's life. Otherwise, recent events would make Jaime a shining beacon of success." He said it with a tone of disgust that Caroline chose to ignore.

"And what of a woman's life?"

"Are women really so different from men?"

"I suppose not, although we do prefer different things sometimes."

"How old are you, Caroline?"

"Eighteen."

"A house is nothing without heirs and as far as I know, there is only one Forbes."

Oh dear God! He wanted her to have children! Legitimate children! Which meant marriage! She hated this place and she wanted to go home where marriage was by choice and not by obligation. It had been so much better being his cupbearer.

"Unfortunately, my lord, I fell ill as a child and the maester said I would never have children."

"Have you tried?"

She blushed so much that she began to sweat. "No," she said. Not really. As a human, she'd used protection. As a vampire, she couldn't procreate. "But—"

"The maesters say many things. Most of them are not correct. One told me Jaime would never learn to read or write. Yet he did because I willed it. And you will have children, Caroline. Golden haired and fair like yourself."

Tywin really did think he was God, didn't he?

"Have you ever thought about who you would take into your marriage bed?"

She almost choked. "I haven't ever thought about getting married in the first place," she said. She had, however, thought of wedding gowns.

"It is high time you were married, do you not agree?"

Firstly, he asked an actual question in which her opinion was required. Secondly, married?

"No! I'm too young to get married! I'm a teenager! I'm supposed to s-I am, what I want, and have fun!" In her panic, she forgot who she was talking to. Tywin's gaze would have brought winter itself. She fought the urge to shrink back. He was not going to marry her off like some prize to some old lord somewhere! She might be his underling, but she was still a person!

"Most women your age already have children of their own," said Tywin.

"I am not most women, my lord."

"You have your future to think about," he said.

"I have thought about it and I imagined I would get married someday to someone I loved. An
arranged marriage was never in the books."

"Perhaps I have been too lenient with you. You will marry, Caroline Forbes. That is the only way you will secure your lands and your titles. You live here now. You must play this game."

Jaime stared aghast at his father. For one of the few times in his life, he was completely and utterly speechless. "Caroline Forbes?" he said. "How is your cup bearer a suitable wife for me?" he said to his father.

"You will do as I command," said Tywin in a bored tone. How could he be so unfeeling and insensitive! This was his family! His legacy! "Your choices at present are rather limited."

"Did she ask you for this?" demanded Jaime. Caroline. Caroline, with no name, no titles, and no lands. He could not marry her. It would be like marrying his sister – worse than marrying his sister. Rebekah's voice in his head kept on saying he wouldn't have a problem with his sister. "Well, Father, this is the first time that I've ever seen the great Tywin Lannister outsmarted. You've given her exactly what she wants on a golden platter," said Jaime.

"If that is so, then I would gladly marry you to her," said Tywin. "It would be a most advantageous match, unless you have someone better in mind?"

"Someone less whiny would be good, for a start," said Jaime. "Does Margaery Tyrell have sisters or cousins? Or maybe Margaery herself might prefer a more mature man for a husband."

"The Tyrells want a king and you cannot provide that," said Tywin.

"What about one of her cousins?"

"They are irrelevant in the larger scheme of things."

"And how is Caroline any different? She says all the wrong things, she cannot curtsey, she forgets that you are her lord half the time, and she never closes her mouth."

"A smokescreen, no doubt, if she has achieved what you say she has and manipulated me into giving you to her."

Oh dear seven, if that was the case, then his father would love her and he would never be able to escape from this…mismatch.

"One more thing," said Tywin. "You will tell her the news yourself."

"Can't you get one of your lackeys to do it?"

"Some things must be handled personally and you have always thought of yourself as the most charming creature ever to grace Westeros. An exchange of words with your future wife should not be a difficulty. You may leave."

Jaime glared at his father but there was nothing he could do. When it came to marriage, a father's word was law and this wasn't just any father. This was his father. He envied Robb Stark then, with his dead father unable to say anything about his choice to marry a bard. Father was doing this to punish him for the sword debacle and the brawl in the throne room. The punishment far exceeded the crime. This was beyond cruel. If he had to marry someone of a lesser station, why couldn't it be Rebekah? She, at least, had qualities to recommend her.
He stormed off. Right, he had to tell his future lady wife—did his father really want his cup bearer to become the lady of Casterly Rock? What was it about Caroline? Was it because he wanted to keep his mistress close but wasn't brave enough to marry her himself? "Find Lady Caroline and summon her to my quarters," he said to one of the servants.

**Next chapter:** Rebekah moves into her new digs. Sansa offers a friendly shoulder to Caroline. Tywin has more news for Jaime. Daemon begins his ascent on the Ladder.
Jaime's Choice

Chapter Summary

Caroline comes to terms with her life as a lady. Tywin gives Jaime a choice. Daemon acts on Katherine’s advice.

King's Landing

"Has Lord Tywin ever mentioned marriage to you?" Caroline asked Rebekah as she surveyed Rebekah's new house. It was one of many nondescript stone houses in Flea Bottom. This one happened to have two bedrooms, a front parlour, and a sitting room. A rich man, obviously, had lived here once but had been chased away by the influx of hopeless poor who had poured into Flea Bottom sometime about a century ago. Everything was covered in an inch of filth. The previous tenants had become meals, no doubt, for the Original. There were several freshly erected stalls selling bowls of brown outside.

"No," said Rebekah. "Why would he mention marriage to me? It's none of his business."

"Everything is his business," said Caroline.

"Wait, he mentioned it to you?"

"Why would he mention it to me but not you?" demanded Caroline. "I mean, we're equally under his banner and equally unimportant."

"I'm not unimportant," said Rebekah. "I actually have a job."

"So do I!"

"Doing what, exactly?"

Caroline opened her mouth and then closed it again without saying anything. It was true; she didn't really know what she was doing. She wished, more than ever, that Elena and Bonnie were here so she could talk to them instead. Rebekah was such a bitch. But she was the only one who could possibly understand the way Caroline was feeling right now. Stefan was too busy playing soldier to make up for his misjudgement of his brother's "surrender".

"He said I needed to marry to establish my house and my legacy. He wants me to have children!"

"That will happen when our enlightened king becomes the next Caesar rather than Caligula," said Rebekah with a snort. "Do you know who he's marrying you off to? I bet he has a triple chin and a pot belly."

Caroline glared at Rebekah for voicing her worst fear. She couldn't do this. It was so…so…medieval! The Original had already lost interest in Caroline and was tossing unwanted furniture into a pile in the centre of the backyard. Broken chairs, splintered tables, chipped jars and dirty bowls all joined in the future bonfire. God forbid that Rebekah actually clean up and reuse any of these items. Lord Tywin had given her a budget for moving and, boy, was she going to stretch it to the full.
Rebekah poured oil over the furniture and set fire to it. The flames leapt high as soon as the taper touched it. What a waste of a perfectly good candle, too. Well, she wasn't going to stay around so Rebekah could make her sweep the floor or scrape the mould off the ceiling. She hightailed out of the house whilst the Original was too distracted by the bonfire in her backyard. The stench of Flea Bottom still clung to her even as she left it and she felt bad about hating that place and the people who lived there. Being someone in power, she should really do something about it instead of being like everyone else and avoiding it like the plague. Margaery had gone there the other day to visit some orphans. Maybe Caroline could build a school. What would Lord Tywin think of that?

She was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she didn't see the man in red and gold livery approaching her until he addressed her. "My lady," he said as he bowed low. He had a Westerlands accent which made him sound like someone from Downton Abbey. "Lord Jaime has summoned you to his quarters. He has matters that he wishes to discuss with you."

Caroline wanted to tell the servant that if "Lord Jaime" wanted to see her, he could come and get her himself. He still owed her an apology for throwing her in front of Ser Preston like a vampire meat shield! She swallowed it, however. Jaime was perfectly within his rights to summon her like this. He was an entitled, spoilt brat. Part of her wanted to make him wait. Jaime probably just wanted to teach her to curtsey or maybe even –gasp!– apologize for using her as a meat shield. Still, what if it was actually important and he needed her help? Why was she such a pushover?

"Lead the way," she said.

Jaime's quarters did not match his personality at all. Or perhaps it did, for it was just as dry, although devoid of fun and humour. There were practical pieces of furniture and a bed. That was it. He didn't even have a couch. Even Caroline had a couch. And an armchair. And she'd managed to commission a large beanbag for sitting after providing the designs.

He stood facing away from her, his hands clasped behind his back, his feet planted on the floor and his spine as straight as a spear. For a moment, it was like going back in time and looking at the back of a young Lord Tywin. He turned slowly after the servant closed the door behind her. "Caroline," he said.

"My lord," said Caroline. She never looked away from his face while she curtseyed, daring him to say something about dying ducks. "You asked for me?"

"Clearly, or else you would not be here," said Jaime. "I assume, by now, that my father has spoken of your impending nuptials to you."

"Wait, what, how do you know?"

"Well, it happens so he has chosen a husband for you."

"And he wants you to tell me?"

"Yes."

"Why you of all people?"

"Because I am the unlucky victim of your scheming."

At first, Caroline didn't understand what he was saying, but the idea and meaning slowly sank in like a doe into a bog. The more she resisted the notion, the more it sank in.

"You?" she whispered.
"Well, shouldn't you be happier about it?" Jaime asked Caroline. "It's what you wanted all along, isn't it?"

"No, no. I am not marrying you! I never wanted to marry and especially not you!"

"Do not lie to me," he said.

"I'm not lying to you!" she cried. "You know me! Believe me, you are the last man in the world I could possibly be tempted to marry."

Jaime ignored her outburst.

"We don't have a choice in the matter, Caroline. A father's word is law, and this is my father we are talking about."

Rebekah's voice taunted her. "At least he doesn't have a triple chin and a beer gut."

"Why you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you think I am stupid or are you too stupid to see your good fortune? I am the most eligible bachelor in the Seven Kingdoms."

"I would rather marry…marry…"

"Joffrey?" said Jaime. "Yes, I know."

"No, I meant to say Stefan, and that would be like marrying my brother."

"That would not be so new," said Jaime.

"Why would Lord Tywin want me to marry you? I'm...nobody."

"Exactly what I thought, but then, upon reflection, I realized it could have been worse. He could have betrothed me to a Frey, in which case, I'd defect to Robb Stark."

"But you hate Robb Stark," said Caroline.

"Precisely my point."

Jaime Lannister. To be married to Jaime Lannister? She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream, to kill something. This wasn't fair! She didn't want him. She wanted Tyler! She didn't want to be some trophy wife who would sit prettily beside her husband and spend the rest of her days trapped in a loveless marriage while he went off to have fun with his other girlfriends, as she knew he would. Actually, she didn't care enough about him to care about him having affairs. She just didn't want to be chained to him forever or even for two minutes! The very thought made her sick and dizzy.

She sank into one of the chairs and hunched over with her head in her hands. The tears did come. She sobbed like the little girl that she still was inside; the little girl who'd lost her father, the little girl who never properly turned eighteen. She heard Jaime saying her name. She didn't look up at him. That was, until he thrust a handkerchief in her face. It was monogrammed J.L. Clearly a woman's work. Clearly Rebekah's work.

"Do you mean to say that this was not what you planned?" he asked her when she took the handkerchief.

"I didn't plan anything. I was happy being his cup bearer. I don't care about my legacy or my
house's reputation and I can't have any heirs. You know that."

"Well, everyone wants me so forgive me for not believing you when you said you did not," said Jaime. "We'll just have to make the best of it. After all, a man's lifetime is a blink of an eye for someone like you, Caroline."

"What are we going to do?"

"You will order a beautiful gown," said Jaime, "while I will sit back and let them make all the preparations. When the day comes, I will put a red and gold cloak around your shoulders in the Sept of Baelor and then we will...I think you know how it works, Caroline."

"No! That's not it! Isn't there something else? Couldn't you persuade Lord Tywin that there's someone else?"

"I doubt he would care even if there were, and there isn't," said Jaime curtly. "Celebrate your good fortune, Caroline. Many women would kill for this opportunity."

She turned on her heel. She needed to be alone with her thoughts for a while and arrogant conceited Jaime Lannister was not going to let her have that privacy.

Perhaps it was fate, but it was the second time that, after leaving the quarters of one of the pair of debauched Lannister brothers that she walked right into Sansa Stark.

"Lady Sansa!" she gasped.

"Lady Caroline," said Sansa. The younger girl paused. "Are you quite all right? You seem upset."

"I'm fine. I really... I just..." Just thinking about it made the tears threaten to spill over again. There was a lump in her throat that wouldn't go away and her eyes burned and blurred. Her life was ruined!

Sansa looped her arm around Caroline's. "You're not all right," she said. "Come. I might not be able to help very much, but I'm good at listening. My mother always said that a sorrow shared with a friend is a sorrow halved. I know we have not been acquainted for very long, but if you feel it is suitable, I would be most honoured to be that friend."

Caroline nodded. Sansa's niceness to her was making her want to cry even more! Here was a little girl who was being held hostage, and she was the only one who had shown her the slightest bit of sympathy over her plight, as if Sansa didn't have enough to worry about herself. Nobody else seemed to care.

"Your chambers are probably more comfortable than mine. We will sit down, call for some tea and lemon cakes and you can tell me everything, or nothing, if you so please," said Sansa. She offered Caroline a handkerchief. This one was not monogrammed, but there was a little white carnation embroidered in the corner.

Caroline took it gratefully and clenched it in her fist as she led Sansa back to her room. She'd done what she could to make it hers. The walls were in the palest pink, like the first blush upon a spring blossom, and she'd chosen cream skirting. She had a canopy style bed with translucent netting for curtains. All the furniture had been painted white. The craftsmen who had helped her build and redecorate had been dubious about her taste, but she was very pleased with the result. It was a little piece of the twentieth century in Westeros.

"This is pretty," said Sansa, looking around.
"It reminds me of my home," said Caroline. And then she burst into a fresh bout of tears.

Jaime's sword moved in silver arcs in the morning sun. If one could freeze every single movement and turn it into a painting, it would have been the most beautiful work of art. In fact, Rebekah had offered to try, but he hadn't let her, saying that her amateur hand could not possibly do him justice. Rebekah, Caroline, Jaime. How had it come to this, that they were all bound together as they were, whether by choice or not? It seemed to be the strangest trinity in the world. He wondered where Rebekah was, now, and whether she had heard. Would she come back and kill Caroline in the night? He would certainly like to see her try. It would be one good thing to come out of all of this, even if he wouldn't actually let her do it.

He thrust forward with his sword into the invisible enemy that he couldn't see, trying desperately to cut the bonds that kept him chained. He had walked out of one prison and right into another. Caroline Forbes, his betrothed. Caroline Forbes, his wife. They would laugh at him, marrying his father's cup bearer. The news had not yet spread, but it would when the wedding preparations became apparent. For now, everyone thought that they were for Joffrey's wedding to Margaery Tyrell which, because of Jaime's wedding, was being delayed so the courtiers and smallfolk would not regard Lannister weddings as being commonplace.

"I knew you would be here." His father's voice cut through his thoughts. He whipped around, sword still in hand. It wasn't Excalibur, for he had not seen the shadow of that sword since he had dropped it on the floor in the throne room. He turned to face the very cause of all his troubles. His father, a man he both loathed and loved. The man he had once wanted to be but whom he now wanted to exceed. Wait…what was that on his father's belt? Excalibur.

"Father," said Jaime. "I am surprised that you are out here so early and not scheming, plotting or otherwise planning how best to ruin other people's lives. As I recall, Tyrion is still unmarried. Perhaps now that you have taken care of me, it is his turn."

"Tyrion does not concern me," said Tywin. "Walk with me."

Jaime sheathed his sword. Even though he was tempted, he knew he couldn't defy his father outright. The two men took slow and careful steps through the gardens. Servants bowed as they passed. Neither of them treated them as if they were anything more than ornaments. Joffrey had had a new bronze statue of himself cast, one boot on a dead direwolf, crossbow in hand, and his crown perched jauntily on his head. It was a little premature, considering Robb Stark was still very much alive. And he had defied all expectations and married the woman he'd wanted, a bard, and it didn't seem to have done him much harm. The only person who actually cared was Walder Frey and who cared what Walder Frey thought?

They passed by bushes bearing the last of summer's blooms. The white petals were beginning to turn brown at the edges. The ground was littered with dead blossoms to be crushed beneath the boots of men. The smell of rotting flowers was both sickly and sweet at the same time.

"The wedding preparations are going as according to plan," said Tywin.

"I have no doubt they are," said Jaime. "Nothing that you plan can possibly go wrong."

"Has it come to your attention that Sansa Stark is newly freed from her betrothal to Joffrey?"

"I have heard. I was there when he proclaimed it to the kingdom."

"You do not suppose I would leave her to be claimed by others who have their eyes on the North."
"I am sure that you have plans for her, just as you have plans for the everybody else in the world."

"She would make a good wife."

"She would. It is a pity I already have one or will have one soon. Here's a thought. What about Tyrion?"

"Again, your brother does not concern me and he most certainly does not deserve such a reward."

"So, Daemon, then?" His father gave him a disapproving look.

"What the gods have not bound together, men may tear apart," said Tywin. "And even if they have, what need have they to meddle in the affairs of mortal men?"

Jaime was about to say that he'd always thought that his father had thought himself a god, but as the words reached the tip of his tongue, they stayed there. Why was his father telling him this? Sansa Stark would be a much better wife than Caroline Forbes. She would inherit the North should anything happen to Robb Stark and knowing his father, there were probably a bazillion—a new astronomical number that he wasn't quite sure of, but it was, according to Caroline and Rebekah, very, very large—plans in place to end the life of the false King in the North.

"Still, one man cannot have two wives, no matter how much he would like it," said Jaime, pretending to be simple and honest. He wanted to make his father say it.

"You have no need to feign stupidity, Jaime," said Tywin. The rest of that, he left unsaid and Jaime had to wonder whether his father meant that he was cleverer than that or perhaps his father simply thought he was stupid so there was no need for pretence. "Sometimes in life, one must make a choice. This is one such moment."

"I will need to consider it," said Jaime. "I do not take such things lightly." He already had an idea, of course, but a second or even a third opinion about it would be…good to have. Not Caroline's because she was biased against him and had been from the very beginning. A more objective pair of eyes, perhaps, was needed. Like Tyrion's. Possibly even Cersei's. And maybe Rebekah's, if he could find her.

"Consider it quickly," his father warned him. "I will not have someone steal the North from beneath our noses. Margaery Tyrell is already stirring Sansa's passion for a certain brother of hers."

"Relax, Father, she will not marry without your say so," said Jaime with a smile. "I take my leave." He bowed, knowing that Tywin was frustrated with his refusal to make a decision right there and then. Of course, he already knew which direction he was going to take, regardless of what anyone said. His feelings for Sansa Stark were akin to those he had for Caroline, as in very little. The little Stark was pretty, much prettier than her brother, but she was timid and shy and frightened, although he had seen her making eyes at him that day at Green Acre. Well, he was quite certain she had been making eyes at him, along with all the other women present at the time, but he hadn't been paying them much attention then.

His step had a renewed spring and if he had been Tyrion, he would have whistled. Probably something like…one of Katherine Stark's songs, just to annoy his father. Not 'Look Down'. However, he was not Tyrion and his whistling only had three tones, according to his brother. As if Jaime Lannister had the time to waste on such trivial matters as perfecting his whistle.

"Where is my brother?" he asked.

"He has not been seen all morning," replied one of the guards outside his door.
"Then why are you still standing here?"

"My lord?" Did Lancel have a distant relation that no one knew about?

"Find him."

"At once, my lord," said the guard. He and his companion hurried off. Jaime sat down inside his sitting room and poured himself a cup of wine, a smile on his face. He knew his father had not been going to sacrifice him to Caroline Forbes, no matter how favoured she was. A selection of fruit and cheese had been left on his table. He took out all the strawberries before anyone else could get to them. The sharp sweetness suited his mood right now.

Presently, Tyrion came, bleary-eyed and with hair tousled from sleep.

"Do you know what time it is, Jaime?" asked Tyrion. He had never been that fond of mornings. Towards midnight, after supper, that was when he was always at his most active.

"The sun is up," Jaime pointed out.

"Our sigil is the lion, Jaime, not the sparrow or the cock. Please do not make any inappropriate insinuations. It's too early."

"I have news," said Jaime.

"You're not taking the black, are you?" asked Tyrion.

Jaime threw an orange at him. Tyrion tried to catch it but he was too slow. The fruit bounced off his large head.

"Ow," complained Tyrion. "Well, if this is how you are going to treat me, I am going back to bed."

"No doubt you would like to go back to bed, brother, but I assure you that you will lose all thoughts of sleep after I tell you. But perhaps it is not sleep –"

"Then go on and tell me before I fall asleep right here and now."

Jaime leaned back and propped his feet up on the table. He laced his fingers together and rested his hands on his stomach, taking his time in making himself comfortable. Anticipation was half the effect. "Father invited me to take a walk with him this morning."

"Yes?" said Tyrion. "Or do you just want to gloat about that?"

"He discussed my upcoming matrimony," said Jaime.

"What colour is the bride to be wearing?" asked Tyrion.

"Ask Sansa Stark," said Jaime.

"Wait, Sansa Stark?" said Tyrion.

"Father offered me Sansa Stark instead of Caroline Forbes," said Jaime. "Of course, the final choice rests with me."

"Are you mad?" asked Tyrion. "If I were you, I would have chosen Sansa Stark without even thinking!"
"I want to know the opinions of my closest and dearest," said Jaime. "Well?"

"I'm surprised you didn't just talk to your reflection," said Tyrion. "I suppose Sansa Stark has suffered enough. I've always liked little Sansa, and I don't trust Caroline. And I'm sure Father expects you to have heirs. I doubt that would ever happen with Caroline."

"Then it's settled," said Jaime. "See, I told you that you wouldn't want to go back to sleep, Tyrion."

"One last question," said Tyrion. "Does Sansa Stark know about this?"

Daemon ran his hand over the letter. Katherine Stark knew a lot more than she betrayed. He'd read it many times already, tracing the fine sloping hand with beautiful swirls and sharp points that suited her so perfectly. Every word she wrote bore her character. He sniffed the parchment. A faint ghost of perfume lingered over it. Honey blossom. He imagined she would smell like honey blossom.

"… *I am convinced that Lord Tywin would not expect a man of your talent to be placated by little more than mere ceremony.*" He'd read that line many times.

Yet it was indeed little more than ceremony. What was the Third Marshal of the Westerlands? As far as he knew, there wasn't even a first or second marshal. The title sounded nice, but it was empty. All his titles would continue to be empty until he altered the situation. Yet, what could he do? He was just Lord Tywin's nephew. For now, he was riding on the wave of his successes against Robb Stark but that wave would ebb and they would all forget him again.

There was nothing he hated more than being forgotten. Perhaps he and Jaime were more alike than he had thought. Why else would his cousin have attempted that ridiculous trick in stealing Joffrey's sword? Everyone was talking about him, now, although not in a good way. All the court knew that the sword had been planted, along with the 'stone'.

He glanced out the window, out across King's Landing where people were trying to rebuild their lives after the rampage of Stannis' men; a rampage which Tywin's sons had failed to stop. He could have stopped it had he been here. Yet no one would recognize that unless he forced them to. There was little he could do whilst Lord Tywin made all the decisions. Of course he was going to favour his own blood and no matter how out of favour Jaime was at present, Tywin would forgive him eventually and promote him to some ridiculous post that he would be ill-suited and ill-equipped to take (such as the Lord of Casterly Rock). Who could dislodge Tywin? He was the king's grandfather.

The king. Daemon smiled and kissed the letter before rolling it up and tucking it inside his tunic again. The king would help him in this endeavour. Joffrey feared Tywin, perhaps more than anyone else, and that made him hate Tywin too for he loathed everything that he feared. He was a coward. It wasn't a bad thing; at least, not for Daemon.

**Next chapter:** Robb takes Tywin's inaction into his own hands. Jaime makes a proposal.
The Boy Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest

Chapter Summary

Robb deals with his men’s restlessness and directs it in a productive way. Jaime drops a bomb on Sansa.

Harrenhal

The knife thudded into the portrait of Joffrey. It already bore several holes in it and the face had been completely obliterated. Robb felt a little bit bad about abusing Katherine’s art, but that was the whole point of this target. He retrieved the knife from where it stuck out in painted-Joffrey’s crotch. On the other side of their room, Katherine lounged on their bed, busy at work penning music and writing letters to one Daemon Lannister. Her hair fell over the parchment like a curtain. He would never tire of watching her hands dance over everything that they did, from playing music to penning something as inane as a draft trade charter.

He quietly went over to stand behind her. Usually, she was so alert, but she was concentrating so hard that she didn't notice his presence. He read the letter over her shoulder.

My dearest Lord Daemon,

You must think me very bold indeed to write to you again, but I simply cannot help myself. Word of your delightful cousin's exploits have reached us even here. Once again, I rage against the injustice of this world when –

"There must be some method in your ridiculous letters to Daemon Lannister?" asked Robb. Katherine glanced up at him. "It cannot be because you admire him because if you did, your letters would not be dripping with so much sarcasm."

"They're not ridiculous if your name is Daemon Lannister," said Katherine.

"I suppose it is a sweet honey trap designed to draw him in," said Robb slowly. "But why exactly are you doing it and why should I put up with it?"

"Because it helps our cause, Robb," said Katherine with a mysterious little smile. "And, hopefully, he might actually fall in love with me. But all of that is secondary."

He bent down to kiss her before taking a seat behind her, with his thighs on either side of her body and her back pressed up against his chest. "You want to somehow make the Lannisters go for each other's throats, but how do you plan to do that by writing?" He picked up the unfinished letter in question between his forefinger and his thumb and scrutinized it. "You 'rage against the injustice of this world'? I know that you've never raged against anything, much less injustice, which you believe to be the inherent and undeniable truth of the world," he said.

"True and true, and it's the natural order," said Katherine. "Survival of the fittest. I'm sure I must have mentioned that at some point."

"You mention so many things that I don't remember them all precisely," said Robb.
"But if you did not know me, would you believe that I meant it?"

Would he? He couldn't really think back to a time when he hadn't known who Katherine was. He tried to think as Daemon would. If he had only just met Katherine, he would have thought her the most genteel of women (albeit one who was able to take down the Mountain). But, still, were ladies not all raised to be honest and sincere? Clearly, Sansa's septa hadn't done very well. "I suppose if I had never actually spoken to you, I would believe that you would feel indignant on my behalf if I had ever been overlooked in favour of my more incompetent relations," he said. "Like Jon."

"Jon is quite competent," said Katherine. "He has done very well for himself on our behalf."

"I would have done better," Robb protested.

"As a double agent for yourself?" asked Katherine.

"If nobody knew who I was."

"The truth of the matter is, Robb, I am merely voicing what is already in Daemon Lannister's heart. There is no more satisfying feeling in the whole wide world than when somebody says exactly what you're thinking."

Did she ever do that to him just to reel him in? Why else would he be so besotted with her? He hadn't even thought it possible. The more worrying thing was that he didn't even care. "I get that," he said. "But how is making Daemon feel validated going to turn him against the Lannisters? They are family."

"And, clearly, families don't kill each other," said Katherine.

He couldn't imagine a family that wasn't bound by respect and love. But, perhaps, that was why Jaime and Cersei had become what they were. And if the Lannisters were not bound together in the same way the Starks were, it would make sense that the only person Daemon really loved was himself. He had proven himself to be a competent commander capable of great things.

"I suppose your letters might encourage him to prove your words true; to you and to the world and, more importantly, to Tywin Lannister, who has been keeping him on the side for too long."

"Do you remember my first letter?"

"I read it but once," Robb lied. He had actually read it several times until he knew it off by heart just so he could be sure it wasn't a love letter.

"Well, the first part of that letter was to unleash him. The second part was to aim him. I hope it works. I am far from certain that it will. Since nothing is happening, I'm hoping this letter will spur him into action."

"It will work," said Robb. He rubbed her arms in reassurance. "Everything you touch turns to gold."

It began as the softest whisper of malcontent; a few quarrels that were quickly hushed when he walked by; the darkened bruises of a whore's swollen eye. His bannermen lowered their voices, unwilling to share their conversations. Fights broke out for seemingly no good reason at all. Wyman Manderly argued with Roose Bolton over the allocation of ale, of all things.
Robb's men were bored and restless. They had come to fight a war and preferably win it. Instead, they were freezing in the mud whilst crops went unharvested in the north and the status of Winterfell was, as yet, uncertain. Every night, someone would curse the cowardly lions who hid behind their high stone walls and refused to come out to play the game according to the rules that the north had dictated. The discontentment should have worried him but, at the same time, Robb knew what had to be done.

If his men were unhappy with inaction, then surely they weren't the only ones. It didn't matter whether they came from the north or the Westerlands. Men were all the same everywhere. He was beginning to see that now. He practised knife throwing in his room. This time, the blade speared the painted Joffrey's eye. Again. He was getting quite good at this. At this rate, Katherine would have to make him a new painting so he could begin anew.

"You're in a good mood today," said Katherine. Her cheeks were rosy after having taken a walk in the cold. Arya followed her inside, holding herself stiffly and sticking her nose in the air in an exaggerated fashion that reminded him so very much of Sansa. When she saw the form his target took, however, his sister broke into a wide grin.

"Can I have a go?" she asked.

"I thought you were learning to be a lady, Arya," said Robb.

"Katherine throws knives and she does it better than you do," said Arya.

"Well, I wouldn't say better," said Katherine. "But I do believe that everyone, man or woman, should know how to defend themselves. Even if one does not know how to wield steel, it is remorseless and blind and doesn't care who it slays."

"What she said," said Arya. "Please, Robb? Please? I promise I won't throw them at you."

"That's reassuring," said Robb, but he stepped back to let Arya throw knives at the picture of Joffrey. He wanted to speak to Katherine, at any rate.

"I'll be riding out on the morrow," said Robb.

"I noticed that the men were making preparations and being a lot more cheerful than they had been in the past few months," said Katherine. "What's the occasion?"

"Did you ever play that game as a child when you repeated back exactly what another person said?" asked Robb.

"We did," piped up Arya.

"I know you did," said Robb. "It drove Mother mad."

"Septa Mordane was more fun to play with," said Arya. Her knife twirled in the air and bounced off the vicinity of Joffrey's arm. "Damn."

"Arya, language," scolded Robb.

"Cuss words are useful for expressing strong emotion, Robb," said his sister in the way of someone who was repeating back a piece of wisdom that had not been created by them.

He looked to his wife. She smiled. Obviously, that piece of wisdom had come from his beloved Katherine. Was it really such a good idea to let Arya learn from her? Then again, she was a woman
who eclipsed the entirety of her sex. It would not be remiss if his sister were to learn a thing or two. Had Sansa been more like Katherine, she might have, by now, wrapped Joffrey around her little finger and the situation would be quite different.

"I think you know how annoying it is to have someone repeat everything that you say, word for word," said Robb.

"I, too, played that game, although I was more often on the receiving end," said Katherine.

"Oh?"

"I had a younger sister too. She was much younger than me…and Elena. " There was some sadness in her voice that told Robb her sister was gone.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Why are you sorry?" asked Katherine. "You didn't just want to reminisce about your childhood, did you?"

"Oh, no," said Robb. "Remember what Tywin Lannister did with us before Daemon took it upon himself to attack Deepwatch?"

"Distinctly," said Katherine.

"I intend to return the favour," said Robb. "I imagine the Lannisters are chafing at their leashes and just itching to go on a wolf hunt already, just as our men are more than ready to bag a couple of large cats."

"I'm sure," Katherine purred as she rubbed her body against his.

"I'll need you to stay and guard the keep," said Robb as he draped his arms about her. His hand reached low to grip her firm rounded buttocks.

"Ew, get a room," said Arya.

"You're in our room," said Robb. "Game over, Arya. Out."

"I assure you, I will never be so disgusting when I am old like you," declared his sister as she pranced out. Beneath her skirts, she wore her old boy's boots.

"She'll change her mind when she meets the right boy," Robb remarked to Katherine.

"Let us hope it isn't Damon," said Katherine.

"He's too old for her, and most unsuitable," said Robb.

"Does she see it that way? They have grown quite close," said Katherine.

"I will not permit it," said Robb. "Anyway, isn't he still in love with Elena?"

"He'll get over her eventually," said Katherine. "Can I not come with you tomorrow?"

"And leave who to guard the keep? Arya would love it, but I don't feel safe letting eleven year old girls run Harrenhal even for just a day. And my mother, as you know, is a terrible guard."

"I suppose I shall have to stay, then," said Katherine with a sigh. "How long will you be gone?"
"Not long, I promise," said Robb. He cupped her face and leaned in to kiss her.

"Well, don't hurry back on my account. I want you to thoroughly ruffle the Lannisters' feathers."

"Lannisters don't have feathers. They're lions. You should know that."

Clouds of steam issued from the nostrils of men and horses, creating the effect of a swirling mist enveloping the northern army as they gathered in the hours before dawn. The torches crowned themselves with orange globes limited by the hazy air. The beasts chomped on their bits and stamped their feet on the damp ground and cobblestones. Otherwise, it was all quiet.

Robb spurred his horse onward, passing ranks upon ranks of his men. They all wielded different weapons and wore different uniforms. Some favoured clubs, others great two-handed broadswords, and he didn't have those pikemen necessary to form a "fay-lanks" that Katherine liked to mention from time to time. At that moment, he saw what his wife saw whenever she looked upon his army. It seemed quite hopeless. How could he win against Tywin Lannister and his legions of red and gold clad soldiers with a bunch of ragtag northmen desperately in need of a reform? Katherine had spoken of armies that moved as one. He would be lucky if his men didn't fight each other.

He glanced back up to the top of the battlements where his wife stood, swathed in furs and bathed in torchlight. She lifted a hand to wave at him. There was a smile upon her face. She showed no trepidation. His spirit was renewed by her confidence. By now, he had come to realize that Katherine had the uncanny ability to be almost always right. Some might call him a weak husband, but it took a strong man to take the advice of those who might be more suited to give it than he. Ultimately, the credit came back to him for choosing such a wife. She inspired him to be more.

"My lord," said Roose Bolton when Robb reached the front of the army. The banners hung limp. No wind stirred the sleeping earth. The Lannisters wouldn't know what had hit them.

"Is everything prepared?" asked Robb.

"It is," said Bolton. His pale eyes were even paler in the torchlight. It seemed that the only colour in them were the pinpricks of his black pupils.

Robb turned his horse around so he was facing his men. They turned their faces towards him, expecting a great speech about how victory was at hand. "This is the beginning," Robb told them. His voice seemed thin to him, but no one complained of not being able to hear. "We have waited long enough. This is the time. Let your spears pierce the hide of the lion. Let your swords carve history! They laugh at us in King's Landing. No more!"

"No more!" echoed the men who seemed desperate for anything they could catch on to. He didn't feel so brave about it, himself. What if he had underestimated Tywin Lannister? He squared his shoulders against his doubts, even though they lingered at the back of his mind like a bad taste from soured milk. It had to work. His whole campaign, his life, hinged upon it.

"Lord Bolton, you will take the area around Banefort," said Robb. "Lord Manderly, Ashemark." One by one, he assigned his bannermen to different targets. They knew they were not to engage directly with the Lannister fighting men. He didn't have enough men for a proper battle if he were to cover such a large area and to hit as many as possible. Instead, they would do what Gregor Clegane had done and terrorize the villages and little manors, riling up the smaller castles if they thought it might yield results.
"And you, my lord?" asked Roose Bolton.

"I will take Golden Tooth. It's practically on the doorstep to Casterly Rock."

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**King's Landing**

She stared at herself in the mirror. People said she looked like her mother. The truth was, Sansa couldn't really remember her mother's face or her father's face. Their features were becoming blurred in her mind. She really wanted to remember, but certain things were slipping away, never to return. Memories were like that; they were never perfectly clear. You could not bottle them or preserve them like you could a blossom in early summer, to be kept behind glass and looked at or smelled again and again. She glanced at the ugly doll with its straw hair and wide smile and tried to imagine how it had felt like when her father had swept her into his arms after a particularly successful hunt, when he'd had a little too much to drink. Her father had never been one for hugs and the only ones he'd dared to show affection to were his youngest sons and his daughters. Especially Sansa.

Shae brushed out her long red hair. It looked more like copper in the golden mirror. The girl who stared back at her was a stranger. She could not recognize those watery blue eyes, that sad little mouth and the pale face with a dainty pointed chin. She was pretty, but sad and weak. She didn't want to be the girl in the mirror.

"How shall I dress it up today, my lady?" asked Shae. "Up or down?"

"Up, like Lady Caroline's."

"But that is so severe," said Shae. "What about some nice braids, or curls, perhaps?"

"I don't want braids or curls. Put my hair up like Lady Forbes'."

Shae shook her head but asked no questions. Sansa kept her face still and impassive as the maid pulled her hair back tightly, so much so that the skin on her face felt stretched.

A knock came on the door. One of the other maids opened the door to admit…

"Lord Jaime!" In her surprise, Sansa stood, knocking over a bottle of perfume that was identical to the queen's. She hadn't wanted to smell like Cersei but the best way to be safe was to imitate her. Or was it? Anyway, it didn't matter. Perhaps she should just get a new scent. What did strong women wear?

"I hope I have not interrupted you, my lady," said Jaime.

"You have surprised me, that is all, my lord," said Sansa. "I am sorry I am not more presentable."

"I was wondering if you would like to break your fast with me, with us," said Jaime. "After you are dressed, of course."

"Of course. I could think of nothing better," said Sansa.

"Then I await the pleasure of dining with you," said Jaime. He bowed. Sansa returned it with a curtsey. She didn't know what he wanted with her, but any attention from him could only be a good thing. She intended to turn him into her shield against Joffrey. The king was afraid of his uncle and, moreover, he was the only other man in the kingdom that he could not touch. Lord Jaime lived in the shadow and protection of Lord Tywin. The seven hells would develop a temperate climate
before she could seduce Lord Tywin, but Jaime Lannister was a vain man who would be flattered by her attentions, of that she was almost certain.

"Shae, bring me my blue and gold brocade and the lapis necklace," said Sansa. The blue of the fabric brought out the blue of her eyes. She needed to look her best.

Jaime was waiting for her in his morning room. Sheer white curtains billowed in the sea breeze. A feast had been laid out on the large round table at the centre of the room. There were plates of stewed fruit, a pot of golden honey, toasted seed bread, milk puddings in little silver cups and lemon cakes. Someone had forgotten to tell him that breakfast was not dessert.

But it was not the food that made Sansa pause. Jaime was not alone. Tyrion was with him.

"Good morning, Lady Sansa," said Tyrion. "I trust you have rested well?"

"Very well indeed," said Sansa as Jaime pulled out her chair for her. While she was a little nervous, this was a thousand times better than breakfast with the queen and the king. She wouldn't have to deal with Joffrey's jibes and barbs directed at her family. "I have never felt safer since the defeat of the traitor Stannis."

"Good," said Tyrion. "Now, brother, has anyone ever told you that one does not have dessert for breakfast."

"I shall have anything I want for breakfast," said Jaime.

"He has a terrible sweet tooth," Tyrion whispered to Sansa conspiratorially. "He is a child."

"I am quite fond of sweetmeats myself," said Sansa.

"I am too but one must have savouries at meals. Dessert should always come afterwards."

"You, brother, if I am not mistaken, prefer liquid meals," said Jaime. He sat down beside Sansa and offered her the platter of lemon cakes. She shyly took one.

"Take more," Jaime encouraged her. "You are looking too thin and pale these days, Lady Sansa. Your mother would worry."

"What do I care for her? She has betrayed my king and thus, me," said Sansa. She took another lemon cake anyway. Was this a trap? Was Jaime being nice to her so he could get her to say something incriminating? But didn't he have better things to do such as...perhaps figure out a new future for himself now that he could no longer continue on in the Kingsguard?

"But she is still your mother," chided Tyrion. "There is little love between Lady Catelyn Stark and I but one cannot doubt that she loves her children."

"If she loved me, she would submit to the rule of the rightful king and cease this silly war," said Sansa.

"But, then, that would cast doubt on her love for your brother and father," said Tyrion sagely in a way that made Sansa want to cry, but she forbore. They were baiting her. They had to be baiting her and trying to get her to say something incriminating."

"Enough talk of unpleasant Starks," said Jaime. "There is nothing like Robb Stark to ruin my appetite. Lady Sansa, how are you finding King's Landing? I know you have been here for a while. I have simply never gotten around to asking."
"I have no doubt you had many more important matters to concern yourself with, my lord," said Sansa. She bit daintily into the lemon cake. It was tangy and sweet and sticky and buttery, crusty on the outside and smooth like velvet on the inside, just as she liked them. "I like it very much here. It is not grey and dull like the north and I am with my beloved Joffrey."

"Then I am sorry that he could not see the true treasure in front of him and has cast you aside," said Jaime. He looked annoyed.

"I understand why he had to do what he did, my lord," said Sansa. "I am a traitor's daughter and not worthy of him. I wish him and Lady Margaery all the joy and happiness in the world."

"How very generous of you, my lady," said Jaime. "Have you heard anything about what you will do next in the capital?"

"I will do whatever pleases my king, my lord," said Sansa. She noticed Tyrion's eyes flicking this way and that, mostly between his brother and Sansa. Jaime himself seemed uncertain…

Wait, Jaime, uncertain? This was the man who stole the king's sword while everyone was brawling in the throne room! He was never uncertain!

"Would you ever do something that displeases him to please yourself?" asked Jaime.

"His will is mine, my lord," said Sansa. Somehow, she managed to sound as if she meant it. Jaime seemed to be on the verge of rolling his eyes. He wanted something from her but whatever it was, she wasn't giving it to him. She would not say anything incriminating. As if Joffrey didn't torment her enough already! She wasn't going to give him more excuses to hurt her.

"Ah, at last, real breakfast food," said Tyrion as the platter of meat pastries and sausages arrived. He stabbed a sausage with his fork.

"After all that he has done, have you never wanted to hurt him?" demanded Jaime. "You might have wanted to make him yours, perhaps, and in the throes of passion, bitten off his royal sausage?"

Sansa's mouth dropped open, half-chewed lemon cake be damned. Tyrion paused in mid-bite of his pork sausage.

"You must have been tempted to hurt him somehow," said Jaime, ignoring Tyrion's desperate attempts to distract him from this line of talk. "Come, tell me one thing that you have wanted to do to him. There must have been something."

"Jaime, this is not suitable for the breakfast table and in front of a lady, no less!" said Tyrion. He set down his sausage, uneaten.

Jaime ploughed on. "That would have been a fitting punishment, would it not?"

"Jaime," repeated Tyrion.

"He took your father's head. He called for your father's blood."

"Jaime!"

"It's only right that you should take his little head."

"Jaime, Father's here," said Tyrion.
"What?" said Jaime.

"Not really, but at least it shut you up. Now can you please get to the point before you scare her to death with your bloody talk?"

Sansa didn't even realize she was clutching her napkin so tightly that her fingernails were almost digging through the fabric.

"I really meant to say there must be something that you want for your future, free of Joffrey's will," said Jaime. "You cannot possibly think that any of us would believe that you want to do his will all the time! He is not a god." Not like her brother, he wasn't, but she couldn't tell Jaime that. What did he want? And why would he say all these treasonous things? It was obvious that he was getting a little frustrated, but why? There was no rational explanation for it.

"Has anyone spoken to you of anything to do with your future?" asked Tyrion.

Had they heard her talks with Lord Baelish? But that wasn't possible! Lord Baelish had been so careful. Or perhaps her little conversation with Sandor Clegane? But that had been during the heat of battle and no one had been paying her the least bit of attention!

"Jaime," prompted Tyrion.

"Has anyone spoken to you of marriage, in particular?" asked Jaime.

She'd always known that the Lannisters would not leave her alone, but marriage? Well, it made sense, she supposed, and it was inevitable, but she didn't want to get married to anyone! She wanted to avenge her father and then she wanted to go home to her family, and then take Damon to account for abandoning her. She had not forgotten. People of the north had long memories.

"No," said Sansa.

Jaime sighed. "What would you say to marriage?"

"If it is what my king commands, then I cannot say no," she said.

He made a frustrated sound.

"What if I commanded you to marry?" asked Jaime.

"I did not know you could do such a thing, my lord," she said.

"I mean, what would you say if I were to tell you that you were to marry me?"

Silence. All eyes were upon her. Tyrion had given up all pretences of eating breakfast. Sansa put her hands in her lap and toyed with the corner of her napkin. Suddenly, all the bites of lemon cake she had eaten threatened make a re-emergence into society. *Marry Jaime Lannister?*

'It could be worse,' said the practical little voice inside her head. 'And, at any rate, it's not as if you have a choice, now, is it?'

"Is it the king's will?"

"No, but it is my will," said Jaime. "Would you rather defy my will or the king's?" His voice was low and dangerous. He could hurt her all the same and no one would care. Would he hurt her?

"Oh, stop scaring the poor thing," said Tyrion. "Father commanded it."
Oh, Lord Tywin's will was Joffrey's will. Jaime made another disgusted sound and glared at his traitorous brother who had just saved his entire marriage proposal. They really should have let Lord Tyrion tell her. Jaime must never have had spoken to a girl in his life. His sister didn't count. She was a demoness of the highest order and Sansa doubted she had ever been a girl.

"Then I would do as you asked, my lord," said Sansa. She was marrying Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer, the man who had put a spear through her father's leg, her brother's prisoner, a man she really should hate but who she sought to use as a shield against his monstrous son. How funny was it? She had been betrothed to the son and now she was going to marry the father. What did that make her? Joffrey's aunt? Joffreys' aunt-stepmother? She bit her lip to stop herself from giggling at the ridiculousness of it all. They would all think her a madwoman. "May I be excused?" She didn't wait for an answer but pushed her seat away.

She went outside to look at the sea, to breathe in the free sea air. How wonderful it would be to flow with the currents to wherever they went, to be free and unhindered, to be so vast and unfathomable?

**Next chapter:** Rebekah and Sansa have a heart to heart. Tywin is disturbed by the news of Robb's activities. Caroline receives a new suitor. Daemon approaches Joffrey with the promise of a new world order.
Sansa's engagement to Jaime is made known. Daemon acts as Joffrey's muse. Robb suffers pangs of conscience. Jaime has a crisis of "morality".

King's Landing

Sansa lay awake that night in her bed long after all the lamps had been blown out. Her hair fanned out on her pillow. She was all alone, for Shae had snuck off with Lord Tyrion again, thinking that Sansa was asleep and wouldn't notice. That was fine. Everyone had secrets here. An illicit lover was hardly the worst. She clutched the doll to her chest and tried to conjure up the memory of her father's delightedly hopeful face as he had handed her the box. She wanted to hold him again and to tell him she was sorry she had been such a horrible daughter to him. She wanted everything to go back to the way they had been, when her greatest problem in life had been Arya, her brothers naught but silly boys with not a sensible thought in their heads, and Damon had been the greatest knight ever to walk the breadth and width of Westeros. It couldn't ever go back to that, now, of course. It would be stupid to wish it.

What would her father say to her new marriage? He would hate it, without a doubt. He had loathed Jaime Lannister and everything that he stood for and he had never made it a secret. Still, he had to understand. She didn't have a choice in the matter and it was the best outcome of a bad situation.

She turned over and tried to envision her future instead. Lady Lannister. She would wear red and gold and bear Jaime golden-haired sons who looked just like Joffrey. The thought made her shudder. Would they be like Joffrey? She chided herself for being so silly as to fear people who did not even exist yet. She could not afford to be afraid.

"Sansa," a voice whispered. She sat up abruptly.

"Who's there?" she asked.

The shadow on her windowsill leapt quietly down like a cat and stepped into the pool of silvery moonlight.

"Lady Rebekah?" whispered Sansa. "How did you get up here?" She clutched her doll and her blankets to her chest. Had Rebekah come to kill her?

"It's not so difficult," said Rebekah. "There are ledges everywhere."

For a moment, the two girls did not speak but regarded each other. Sansa knew that if Rebekah wanted to kill her, nobody would be able to do anything about it. Jealous women were irrational. All the poems said that.

"What do you want with me, Lady Rebekah?" asked Sansa.

"I suppose…I wanted to see Jaime's new bride," said Rebekah awkwardly.

"I am sorry," said Sansa.
"For what?"

"I know you wanted to marry him."

Rebekah laughed, then, and Sansa didn't know whether to feel relieved or even more afraid. "Me and him? It was never going to happen."

"But you love him," said Sansa.

"We would have been a disaster together, Lady Sansa. No, he's much better off with you."

"Is he really so bad?" asked Sansa.

"He's a terrible person, but I never said he was bad. But we are too alike to coexist in peace. Marriage is not really about love. It's about finding the right balance between two people."

"Oh."

"He's one of the better ones in King's Landing and you'll see it when you come to know him," said Rebekah. "What are you going to do about the wedding preparations?"

"Wedding preparations?" asked Sansa.

"Well, usually, it's the bride's mother and sisters who help her with them," said Rebekah. "But since yours can't be here, for obvious reasons, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind me helping."

"Why would you do that?"

"I'm not jealous of you, Sansa," said Rebekah. "I know that you don't want Jaime and Jaime doesn't really want you, but there's no point in you two being miserable about it. Since we're all going to be in each other's lives, now, we might as well be friends. Would you like that?"

"I would be honoured," said Sansa automatically. She wasn't exactly in the position to turn away anyone's friendship right now. And she would like someone to talk to. Rebekah knew Jaime. He was her weakness and maybe she was his. Perhaps she could use this to her own advantage.

Rebekah smiled. "I sense we're going to become good friends, my lady," she said. "What is it that they call you in court? Little Pigeon?"

"Little Dove," said Sansa a little more coldly than she had intended. She hated that name, but 'pigeon' was worse. If Rebekah noticed her tone, she made no sign of taking offence at it.

"Well, you will be the Little Dove no more. I'm going to help you become the Phoenix."

Reports flew in of bands of roving northmen spreading across the Westerlands. They made no effort to disguise who they were. Bolton, Manderly, Tully and, of course, Stark; their banners had been seen from Banefort all the way to Silverhill, a pestilence spreading from Harrenhal. With most of Tywin's men stationed in King's Landing, the Westerlands were vulnerable. At the site of each attack, the northerners had left a dead cat wearing a false mane on a spike. Robb Stark would have left dead lions if he could, but no one had seen a real lion in Westeros since Viserys the First and brought an infertile pair over from Essos for his menagerie. Since then, the creatures had passed into legend as much as the dragons, although it was rumoured that they occasionally terrorized farmers in Dorne.

There was no legend about the grey direwolf the size of a horse, however, that charged into battle
Jaime listened to the rest of the Small Council debate about the situation. It was the first time he had been at one of these meetings. He wasn't actually one of the members, yet, but his father had asked him—made him sit in on today's discussion. It would only be a matter of time before Tywin wrestled him onto the council. His father's dream would be fulfilled then.

His father's bannermen who had brought him the news were all for retaliating against Robb Stark but, so far, Tywin hadn't said anything. Jaime knew he had to react. Otherwise, it would seem too weak.

"Robb Stark has been circling the Tooth," said Tywin at last. "It is clear what he means to do."

"Father, I should hardly think that he could achieve anything with his one thousand men," said Jaime. "Casterly Rock is in no danger."

"What would you have me do, then?" said Tywin. "Ignore him, go to sleep and be caught unaware? I think not. He is testing the waters. Think of how he must have gotten there in the first place. Do not underestimate Robb Stark. You, of all people, should know what happens when that boy is underestimated." He looked thoughtful. "One has to admire his provincial style of determination and innovation."

"Then, Father, allow me to ride out to meet him."

"We will not have a repeat of what happened in the Riverlands," said Tywin. "And I do not wish to meet him in any fashion. He does not deserve that."

"Then what do you want?" asked Jaime. And why was he here? Tywin obviously did not want his opinion.

His father sent Daemon Marbrand—he should know better than to trust men called 'Daemon', regardless of the spelling variations—to seal off Robb Stark's escape route.

They spoke no more of the Young Wolf after that, even though Jaime was very interested in what Katherine Stark was doing whilst her husband was making a nuisance of himself. Was she with him? In that case, his father should be more worried. Daemon Marbrand had no idea who he was dealing with. Jaime knew what that vampire was capable of, and that was everything that no one ever expected.

"The people of the city are uneasy," Petyr Baelish was saying. "The number of slayings in Flea Bottom are unusually high."

"It's Flea Bottom," said Joffrey disdainfully. "Those savages are always gnawing at each other. I've a good mind to throw them all in an arena full of hungry bears and charge the audience."

He had such an innovative mind, did Joffrey.

Tywin gave the king a look that made him dampen his enthusiasm considerably. Which idiot in the world had suggested such bloodsports to him? Joffrey took to glaring at Jaime instead. They had never been very friendly with one another and whatever relations they'd had before, it had taken a turn for the worse. Jaime was fine with that.

"I believe the rabble is a threat that must be checked, Your Grace," said Tywin. "It could be a conflagration that consumes the city." Jaime frowned. He'd never known his father to take Flea Bottom so seriously. Then again, was it ever possible to know Tywin?
"Then something needs to be done about them," said Joffrey. "Why shouldn't we make them into a conflagration?"

"You would propose burning your own city, Your Grace?" asked Jaime.

"Why not? They're a blight on the world, that's what they are. They don't even pay taxes." He muttered something under his breath that sounded an awful lot like, "They're not worth the air they breathe."

Jaime didn't exactly disagree with that, but burning them all was extreme, and just like Aerys. After everything that he had done, how had it come to this? He supposed Joffrey only wanted to burn out the rot. It was a good line of thought for a maester. Not so much a king.

"After everything that has happened, the people need something to be joyful for," remarked Varys. He didn't really care whether anyone was happy or not, of course. What he meant was that the little people needed something shiny to distract them.

"Then we shall give them something," said Tywin. "A wedding will suffice, will it not?"

"But whose wedding would that be, my lord?" asked Petyr Baelish.

"My son has made an offer of marriage to Lady Sansa Stark and she has accepted him," said Tywin.

The table just about exploded in shock and barely concealed outrage (Joffrey).

"My congratulations, Lord Jaime," said Baelish. "I must admit to being somewhat confused, but we all seemed to be under the impression that you are already betrothed to Lady Forbes."

"That was a little joke of Father's," said Jaime, flashing a brilliant grin. His father did not smile. He didn't joke, either. "He thought it might be amusing to think of the worst match possible for me."

"So I see," said Varys. "Lady Sansa must be very pleased."

"She's never pleased at anything," sneered Joffrey. "All she knows how to do is cry."

"I do not think she enjoys crossbows as much as you do, Your Grace," said Jaime.

"It's a pity she's to be wasted on you, Uncle. She's a pretty little thing, despite her patheticness."

Jaime bowed. For once, wisdom won and he thought it best not to respond.

The Small Council soon disbanded. Jaime, with nothing to do, went back to his chambers. He was thinking of seeking out Sansa later. He would prove Joffrey wrong about Sansa if only just to see the look on his face. The sun was setting and by the time he got back, there was little more than a red outline to all the buildings of the city. Only one lamp in his chambers had been lit and it illuminated a sphere around it, but everything else was drowning in shadows. He lit a taper from the lamp to pass the flames around to the other candles.

"Jaime." He started and almost dropped the taper and only his quick reaction stopped it.

"Rebekah?" he whispered.

She stepped into the light, looking as she had in the Stark camp. Her blonde hair had been dyed again. It was the colour of dishwater. Without even realizing it, he reached out to touch her tresses. He'd loved letting the golden threads run through his fingers. It was like playing with sunlight.
Why did she have to dye it and ruin it? "I thought you were forbidden to set foot inside the Red Keep."

"Like that would ever stop me," said Rebekah. "I had to see you."

"Ah, you missed me," said Jaime. "Of course you did. Well, be a good girl and light my candles for me." He handed her the taper, expecting her to protest, but she simply did as he asked before blowing out the flame.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"It's a secret."

"And I'm me." He flopped down on his bed. "Surely you can tell me."

"I made a promise to Lord Tywin that I wouldn't say anything to anyone."

"Ah, so my father didn't just kick you out. He sought to sever our relations altogether. Or are you working for him now?"

"We struck a bargain."

"Father doesn't bargain."

"He does if you have something that he wants."

"And what does he want with you?" His father couldn't possibly also want Rebekah for himself. Everyone knew that he wanted Caroline. Rebekah didn't seem like the sort of woman who could entice Tywin.

"Nothing of that sort," said Rebekah. She lay down on the bed beside him and turned on her side so she could take in his magnificence. "I'm in Flea Bottom."

Jaime made a disgusted noise.

"Not because I can't live anywhere else, but because that's the best place to disappear," said Rebekah. "And it's the best place to do what I need to do."

"Joffrey wanted to burn down Flea Bottom."

"What Joffrey want doesn't matter," said Rebekah. "We all know who's in charge."

"Yet, here you are, defying my father and telling me things that you probably shouldn't be telling me," said Jaime.

"Well, you are who you are," said Rebekah.

For a moment, they simply stared at each other. Jaime caressed Rebekah's cheek and she leaned into his touch. "I'm going to marry Sansa Stark," he said.

"I know," said Rebekah.

"You know everything."

"Not everything."
Their lips touched, slowly and softly at first, but the searing heat that they felt drove them to desperation. Her deft fingers moved over the straps that held together his ceremonial armour. She tossed the plates to the floor. He tore at her rough woollen tunic. The wooden buttons on the front flew off and scattered to the four corners of the room. In some corner of his mind, he a strange sort of disappointment that he wasn't used to; disappointment that he had failed Cersei and betrayed her. Again.

She flipped him over so she was riding him. Her chest was still bound with bandages. He did not like this at all and tugged at them. They unravelled in a stream of white that went completely ignored. She bent down to kiss him again, running her lips over his jawline and down the sides of his neck, where his blood pulsed for her body. He felt the light scrape of hard fangs against his skin and, somehow, it made him shiver with anticipation.

"What's it like, being what you are?" he whispered. He surprised himself. Usually, he wasn't like this, but he had been wondering about her. He didn't really want to be sired by Caroline if he had a choice. It did not seem to feel right. Rebekah was his vampire.

"Exhilarating," she breathed against his collarbone. Her voice was husky and thick with lust, either for carnal pleasure or for blood. Perhaps both. The points of her fangs scraped over his skin, leaving thin lines of burning in their place. He seized her hips and tried to flip her back over, but her momentary freedom had given her a taste for it.

"I want your blood," he said.

"Only if I can have yours."

"You do not bargain with me."

"I bargain with your father."

"I am not my father."

"That you are most definitely not." She nipped his earlobe playfully. As she did so, her concentration slipped and he turned her on her back.

"That feels much better, doesn't it?" he said. He kissed her down her neck and throat, copying her movements almost exactly. She squirmed beneath him and moaned.

"Hush," he whispered. The danger made it thrilling. What would happen if someone did find them? Would his father attempt to harm Rebekah, then? And what would she do; show her true colours? Half of him wanted her to, just to see the look on his father's face. He savoured every part of her body slowly as if for the first time. She still smelled like herself, so that was a relief. There was no taint of Flea Bottom on her. Then again, she would probably kill any disease-ridden vermin that came within three feet of her. Her skin glowed from recent feedings. She arched her back as he rubbed his groin against hers. Her flesh was hot and ready for him. His cock strained against the ties of his braies. How had they managed to stay on for all this time? He fumbled with them. His fingers had all turned to thumbs in his desire and Rebekah was no better. Who would have thought that a few days of abstinence could change so much? She used to be so good at this.

You're pathetic, said a voice in his head, to be swayed by something so simple as lust. Where are your principles? Where is your code, now? You are no better than the rest of them, Jaime Lannister. You are just a man.

He wanted to silence the voice but he couldn't. He knew it was true.
The ties broke with a pop as Rebekah simply snapped them.

He seized her, then, and pressed his lips to hers to try and drown out that voice.

If someone ever asked him to describe what he tasted when he kissed her, he would never be able to say. He tasted the salt of his blood as he pricked his tongue against her fangs. He bit her lip, hard, to pay his debt. They were hardly aware of anything except the other and their own wants and desires. The voice became nothing but a murmur next to their animalistic groans and sighs. He relished in the feel of the physical, in the taste of their mingled blood. It was just them. Only them.

He plunged himself inside her, gritting his teeth to hold back his cries. She buried hers in his shoulder. Sweat made them slippery. She wrapped her legs around his hips as he ground against her. Her hands gripped his buttocks, encouraging him in, and her fingernails left half-moon indents afterwards.

At last, they both collapsed at the end of a long high. He remained comfortably spent inside her but rolled over to allow her to use his chest as a pillow.

"That was…quite something," he managed to say.

*You have betrayed the only thing that had set you apart from mortal men.*

"Absence does make the heart grow fonder," she agreed.

"Who said anything about hearts?"

She placed her hand right above where she thought his was. "Everyone has a heart," she said. "Even my brother has a heart."

"I find Elijah to be quite heartless," said Jaime, even though he knew exactly which brother she was talking about, and it wasn't the one who was serving the Freys. How had such a powerful creature come to serve the *Freys*, of all people? Maybe he was using them for some nefarious purpose.

Sleep crept up on him as he lay lazily stroking her hair. Really, she couldn't have left it alone? A hood would have covered it admirably if she was afraid that the gold would be too recognizable. Another memory of another golden head flashed before his eyes. He had betrayed Cersei and, more than that, he had betrayed himself. He had been proud of his loyalty to her. Yet, within the span of a few months, he had abandoned all of that…for what? For immortality? Perhaps that was a worthy cause, but still, it was untenable. He had become a charlatan just like all the others.

'I've come this far,' he told himself. 'I'm almost there; almost immortal. I can't throw it all away. Then all my efforts would have been for nothing.'

But Caroline…Caroline might offer to help him, if he could persuade her to do it. Their shared ordeal of forced marriages had, instead of pushing them further apart, drawn them closer together, he thought. Caroline was more like the feminine brother he had never had. Rebekah…no matter what she was and how useful she could be, she still deserved better than to be used as a vessel for immortality. He was surprised at himself for feeling that way; for feeling anything at all, in fact.

"I have to go," she whispered just as he was fighting with himself about what to do next. "I can't let anyone find me."

"Where in Flea Bottom are you anyway?"

"That's classified."
"Rebekah..." He was about to ask her what that meant exactly, although he could guess.

She placed a finger against his lips and then kissed them for good measure. She rolled off the bed and gathered her ruined clothes. There was no time to gather up all the lost buttons. His servants would simply get to gossip behind his back about what sort of wraith-like waif had entertained their master that night. He watched her dress herself. She bound her chest again and pulled the two sides of the tunic around herself. Her cloak covered everything, including the nondescript brown hair.

"I will find you, you know," he said.

"I dare you to try," she challenged. "Until next time, my lord."

Would there be a next time? Jaime didn't know.

Daemon found the king in the gardens practising with his was quite happy to see him. By quite happy, it really meant he wasn't displeased and wasn't on the verge of shooting some poor creature for sport. He swung his crossbow and took aim at a rather bad drawing of Robb Stark that had been stuck to a target. There were already several holes in the portrait. The face was unrecognizable. "If I could but meet him once on the battlefield, Daemon, I would have killed him in an instant," said Joffrey. He fired another shot at the portrait and struck it right in the chest. "There would be none of this dancing and dallying."

"I quite agree, Your Grace. We do, after all, outnumber the Starks greatly," said Daemon. "However, I do not think Lord Tywin has much intention of meeting him on the battlefield, which would make such an encounter quite impossible."

"My grandfather is afraid of a wolf pup," muttered Joffrey. He put down his crossbow and held out his hands. Two servants rushed forward, one holding a basin and the other a pitcher of water which was poured onto the king's hands. Another servant handed him a towel. He wiped his hands clean and tossed the towel at the man's face as if he were simply a towel rack. "You've defeated Robb Stark in battle, Lord Daemon."

"I would not call it a victory on my part."

"It was even better. You chased him off with a song. But it's Grandfather who's always saying no and everyone listens to him even though I'm the king." He paused. Did Daemon even need to say much at all? Joffrey was doing all the work for him. "He's supposed to listen to me, but he never does."

"Lord Tywin is a great man, Your Grace, but he has grown old and set in his ways," said Daemon. "He's too cautious, always jumping at shadows," scoffed Joffrey. "He's scared of losing and ruining his legacy. That's all he cares about."

"Lord Tywin is not a man known for taking risks," said Daemon. It wouldn't do to seem too obvious. Obviously. He wasn't the other Damon.

"Mother says he has my best interests at heart, however," said Joffrey, musing more to himself than to Daemon. "I should think, that as a man and as a king, I can look after my own interests. What I need is a bold man. Not Jaime." He spat out the name. "I ought to be leading my own armies into battle, but Grandfather won't let me. Something about a king never leading from the front. A little bit of mis-memory on the young king's part, one should think. "My father rode from the front and won great victories; greater than any that Tywin Lannister would ever achieve."
"I suppose Lord Tywin thinks it prudent if he were to ride in your stead, in case of enemy arrows, Your Grace," said Daemon.

Joffrey suddenly turned to Daemon and there was a wicked gleam in his eye like that of Jaime when he'd approached the stone to pull out the sword. "Do you suppose Grandfather actually wants the war to continue indefinitely?"

"I am sure Lord Tywin, like all of us, wants it to be resolved quickly."

"I don't think so, Lord Daemon. While there is a war, he gets to make all the decisions. He thinks I can't do without him! Well, he's wrong." Joffrey set his jaw and, for a moment, showed his true Lannister colours. He calmed down in a little while. "He has served me well, but perhaps it is time for him to rest his weary head."

What exactly did he mean by that?

Near Golden Tooth

The screams of the dying filled his ears. Robb pushed away the pity he felt for them. It was either them or his people and he would much rather Tywin's people suffered instead. Women and children were dragged from their houses and gathered in the village square. The men who had resisted were herded to one side. They did not fight, now, surrounded as they were by armed soldiers. Their scythes and hoes and rusty swords had not done them much good. Robb looked upon them and tried his best to imagine his heart inside a box, locked away some place cold and dark where it could not be affected by such common emotions as compassion and mercy. He couldn't afford it. At least, that was what Katherine would say.

"No loose ends," he murmured, half to himself and half to his men.

"My lord?" asked his squire.

"Give the order."

The women screamed and children wailed as they watched the swords come down upon the necks of their husbands and fathers. It was the same fear that Sansa had felt as she had watched their father die. None had felt pity for her then. He would not feel pity for these people now.

He turned away. It was payback for what the Lannisters had done and, at any rate, there were no innocent people. Some of these children could grow up to be the worst of rapers and murderers. At least, that was what he told himself as he ordered them to be put to death. He was changing. He could see it and he wasn't sure he liked the man he was becoming. The world had forced him on this path and forced him to grow up. Tywin Lannister had not gotten to where he was by being merciful. Come to think of it, mercy had never been good to those who had shown it. It was a dangerous medicine to be dispensed sparingly. Many times, it only exacerbated the disease.

He could almost feel his father's eyes upon him, judging him. How could his father understand? Eddard Stark had been a man of integrity and kindness and look where that had gotten him. He was a lord, yes, and a father to his people, but these were not his people.

They left the bodies piled seven feet high. The crows and ravens and foxes would feast before winter and they would live, fat and warm, to have chicks and cubs of their own.

The small remainder of villagers who had surrendered without a fight were allowed to scavenge what material goods they desired from their houses and from the houses of their dead neighbours.
before the whole village was torched.

"My lord!"

He turned. One of his scouts had returned.

"What news?" he demanded as the exhausted man just about fell from his horse.

"Lannister men, my lord," he said. "They've been sighted seven days' march from here. Daemon Marbrand leads them, an army of twenty thousand."

"Then we have outstayed our welcome," said Robb. He turned to his squire. "Prepare the cat before we leave. We can't leave that old lion wondering who is responsible."

Next chapter: Caroline finds herself thrown deeper into the marriage game and further bonds with Jaime. Joffrey confronts Sansa about Robb's doings. Sansa finds an unexpected protector. Joffrey pulls off major political shenanigans.
Chapter Summary

Caroline finds herself victimized again by Tywin's matchmaking tendencies. Jaime tries to peer under the Little Dove's mask and wonders if he's found something. Joffrey put his "master plan" into action.

Chapter 89: Much Ado About Nothing

King's Landing

Caroline's stomach filled with dread when her maid told her that Lord Tywin wished to see her in private. What more did Lord Tywin want of her? She had contemplated fleeing more than once ever since she'd become engaged to Jaime and then disengaged. What insanity was it that kept her here? Essos sounded nice this time of year.

Tywin's study was already filled with people. Jaime stood in a corner, a cocky smile on his face – as usual– and Daemon was also present. He looked more solemn and sensible than his older cousin and he did not smile. The family resemblance between the three Lannisters was uncanny, although she supposed it really shouldn't be, considering they were related. Now, if Joffrey were here in the same room, that would be freaky.

"Lord Tywin," said Caroline. She was determined to master this curtseying thing, if nothing else. "My lords."

Tywin said nothing. Daemon said nothing. And did Jaime just wink at her? She waited, the anticipation and dread growing in her stomach until she felt as if she were weighed down by rocks and was about to drown. She couldn't think of what they could possibly want with her now and why was Daemon here?

"Congratulations, Caroline," said Jaime with a grin and a wink. "You are a very lucky woman."

"I am a very lucky woman indeed, to not have to marry you," said Caroline. "I'm glad you realize it."

"Ah, but I'm not talking about that," said Jaime. "I do think you missed out on something very good when I chose not to marry you, but you are being almost adequately compensated."

"What?" Now she was completely and utterly lost. What compensation was he talking about?

"Jaime," said Tywin. There was a warning tone in his voice. Jaime swallowed whatever he had been about to throw at Caroline. She was surprised Lord Tywin had let their bickering go on for so long. Usually, he wasn't one to stand for such childish and insubordinate behaviour. She knew it hadn't been smart but Jaime just made something go off inside her. She needed to argue with him. It was pathological. For a moment, she wondered if that was what having a sibling would feel like. Elena had always been complaining about Jeremy.

Caroline clasped her hands behind her back as if she were a schoolgirl in trouble. Except no
principal in the world had the power to take a student's life. Tywin sat back. "Daemon," he simply said.

Daemon stepped forward and took her hand. Caroline stared at him. Why was Tywin matching her up with all of Rebekah's beaus in turn? Who next? The members of his personal guard? She knew Rebekah was carrying on with one of them, or had been, before. Jaymse, was it?

"My lady," said Daemon. He kissed her hand. "I would claim the honour of your hand in marriage." Pause. "If you would allow it?"

It was a proposal, insofar as Westerosians understood proposals. She appreciated Daemon's efforts, even though they both knew that there was not a choice involved. Lord Tywin had given his word and around here, Lord Tywin might as well be God. Daemon looked as happy as she was, albeit he hid it better. But she knew he had a crush on Rebekah and was in the process of falling in love with a mysterious woman who kept sending him sheet music. Modern sheet music. No prizes for guessing who that was. Although, wasn't Katherine already married or was Robb Stark not man enough for her?

"I do allow it," said Caroline stiffly. Her voice trembled. She wanted to cry and scream all over again and she'd thought she was over it! She was not a punishment to be meted out as Lord Tywin willed! "The honour would be mine, my lord."

"That was strangely civilized," remarked Jaime. "My congratulations to the both of you, Cousin, Lady Caroline. May you have a marriage with more peace than war and many little parasites running about your ankles." His grin widened even more, revealing less-than-perfect teeth. Hah! She wanted to stick her tongue out at him.

"My lord," said Daemon to Tywin. "If there is nothing else, I would take my leave. There is much that Lady Caroline and I will need to discuss about our upcoming nuptials." She was grateful. If she stood here in this stifling study for a moment longer, she wasn't sure if she could keep herself together. The last thing she wanted was to burst into hysterics in front of Tywin and Jaime but her emotions were a little out of her control at the moment. Never had she wanted to be Rebekah more. All right, perhaps she had always been just a little bit jealous of the Original, at least ever since they'd come here to Westeros. There had never been someone who had fitted in so well. She had no conscience, so all the blood and killing and death had absolutely no effect on her. She was a little slut, so she was absolutely fine with using sexual favours to climb up the social ladder. This all came to her quite naturally.

And, more importantly, she wasn't important enough for Tywin to take an interest in her personal life. Nobody was making Rebekah get married and have heirs to ensure the legacy of House Mikaelson. She supposed there were two Mikaelson brothers to do it, but nobody had even heard wind of Klaus and Elijah. It was more likely than not that they hadn't made it over. It was a pity. If Klaus heard about her upcoming wedding, he would… Actually, would she pick Klaus over Daemon?

"Actually, Lord Daemon, if you don't mind waiting a little longer, there's something I'd like to say to Lord Jaime," she said.

Tywin raised an eyebrow.

"Alone," she emphasized when Daemon made every indication that he wanted to listen in.

Tywin raised his other eyebrow.
Jaime had not expected Caroline to confront him after the delightful family conference they'd had. Shouldn't she be Daemon's problem now? Yet, here she was, asking politely to step aside with him so that they might speak in private. She strode before him, an indignant stiffness about her back. He'd never seen her shoulders so squared, nor her jaw, and he had a brief moment of regret as he thought back to the humble and timid little girl that he was to marry now. Caroline would have been...interesting. They would have made each other miserable, but misery was a lesser evil than boredom. Sansa Stark would give him the north but if he couldn't change her, he would also be bored out of his mind with her. Not that he had to have anything to do with her once heirs had been sired.

"You do realize how suspicious this looks, yes?" Jaime asked Caroline as she led him down a dim and obscure hallway and out into an overgrown part of the garden. It looked as if it hadn't been touched since he'd slain the Mad King. The thorny bushes obscured the path and the trees above crowded out the sky. Dead branches mingled with the living. Weeds choked off anything that wasn't strong enough to strangle them in turn. In the distance, a rotting pavilion sat with sagging eaves and peeling paint. The carved wooden peacocks, once blue, green and gold, had faded away to nondescript brown and grey. One of them had split right down the middle. A tree rat scampered away when it heard the racket they made, dropping an acorn. Caroline didn't seem to care. "A man and a woman going off somewhere quite alone. They will think that we've gone off for an illicit tryst."

"I don't care what they think," she said as she rounded on him. "Sansa Stark's fourteen!"

"She is of the right age to be married," said Jaime carelessly. He plucked a leaf from one of the overhanging branches that kept on getting in his face. "I assure you, she could have had much worse fates, knowing my father."

"She's a little girl!" cried Caroline.

"She will grow," said Jaime.

"You'll destroy her!"

"How?"

"I won't let you do this."

"You don't have a choice."

She stamped her foot. Jaime smirked. "You know, Caroline, one might easily mistake your righteous anger for jealousy and anger at having your plan spoiled."

"I don't give two shits about who you marry, but the only woman you deserve is Rebekah, and I'm beginning to wonder whether you actually deserve her."

"No, indeed. What have I done to deserve the wrath of the gods upon me?"

She let out an angry huff. Her grey-blue eyes were blazing and she clenched her white little hands into fists. He just wanted to laugh at her, now. Did she think she could intimidate him in any way? Well, one thing was for certain. Daemon was never going to be bored with his wife.

"I'm going to tell her," said Caroline. "Rebekah. Let's see what she has to say about it."

"You do that, and send her my regards," said Jaime.
The stench of Flea Bottom did not lessen at night. Shady figures skulked in the narrow alleys wide enough for just one person to pass through at a time. Caroline pulled her cloak about her and hoped that everyone would think she was a man. She didn't want to have to deal with anyone who caused trouble for her and if they knew she was a lone female walking about in Flea Bottom, there would be trouble. How did Rebekah manage it? Did she never show her face around here, or was there something so terrible and frightening about her that even the most hardened violent criminals didn't want anything to do with her? It wasn't that Caroline couldn't deal with such people, but she didn't want to have to explain to anyone, least of all Lord Tywin, why lots of men were turning up with their throats ripped out. Damon had already caused enough suspicion with the three city guards he had killed and then sloppily disposed of in the sewer entrances where they had been found the next day, drained of blood with their necks torn open. Jaime and Tyrion had made the connection quickly enough between that strange incident and the existence of vampires. If those two came to the right conclusion in no time at all, how long would it take Lord Tywin to figure out that there was a supernatural element in the capital?

She walked quickly and purposefully, clutching a dagger in her hand. Even if she did have to kill someone, she could always lessen the suspicion by using human weapons. Damon wouldn't think of that, now, would he? Neither would Rebekah, come to think of it.

A hooded man came out of Rebekah's house just as Caroline approached it. He cast a wary glance at her and quickly disappeared into the winding labyrinth of the slums. Caroline pushed open the door. Rebekah sat in the light of a lonely oil lamp. She had done an admirable job of cleaning out the house and of securing furniture that actually looked decent.

"Did we have an appointment?" she asked Caroline.

"I don't need an appointment to see you," said Caroline. She pulled back her hood and sat down without an invitation. "Who was that man?"

"No one that you need to worry your pretty blonde head about," said Rebekah. "Why are you here? I was just about to have dinner."

"Have you heard about Jaime?"

"What is it about Jaime that I'm supposed to have heard?"

"Jaime and Sansa. They're getting married."

Rebekah gave no indication of anger or even distress, which confused Caroline greatly. She was the most jealous bitch in the universe. Shouldn't she be furious that the man she loved (she could grudgingly give Rebekah the credit of being able to love very loyally and fiercely) was marrying another woman – another girl?

"I know," said Rebekah. "I went to see Sansa the other night."

"You did?" Sansa had said nothing about it and she hadn't seemed disturbed either. Lately, she'd been rather calm. She narrowed her eyes at the Original. "What did you do?"

"You're so quick to point fingers. Maybe I compelled her and made her my personal slave girl." Caroline wanted to throttle the Original except that would be futile. Rebekah rolled her eyes. "Nothing. I did nothing. Sansa Stark's a sweet girl. She deserves some happiness."

"And you're not mad that Jaime's not marrying you instead?"
"Why would I be? Like I said to Sansa, we would have been an absolute disaster. Can you imagine? Anyway, Sansa Stark is the key to the north and Jaime's not interested in her in any other way. Not that it's any of your business, but nothing is going to change."

"What do you mean?"

"Notwithstanding the fact that I'm forbidden by Tywin to see him right now, do you think marriage is going to keep us from being together if it was what we really wanted?"

Caroline's jaw dropped. "You're disgusting!" she cried.

"And you're still trapped by centuries of brainwashing, all done by men, of course, in the Holy Father Church. I do wonder what Lord Tywin sees in you. Personally, I suspect he's grown a little senile."

Caroline wanted to lash out at the Original, but Rebekah was a thousand years older than her. What could she do against her? Tell Lord Tywin? He certainly would not be pleased that Rebekah and Jaime were going to continue seeing each other. In fact, he would be so unhappy as to try and do something to Rebekah and that would have dire and far-reaching consequences for all vampires in the world when, to defend herself, Rebekah revealed her true nature. No, Caroline could not condemn herself and Stefan (not to mention Elena, who was somewhere out there) to such a fate, whatever it would be.

"Well, if you've got nothing else to say, shouldn't you head back, Lady Forbes, before your cover is blown? I know you snuck out to see me illicitly. Whatever would Lord Tywin say?"

"That's none of your business, is it?" asked Caroline as calmly and sweetly as she could. She had to protect Sansa from these two emotional vamp – leeches, somehow. Caroline was all Sansahad in the world.

Joffrey threw the glass paperweight at the wall. It shattered into a million shards. Sansa flinched as some of the pieces shot across the tiles and stopped at her feet. She imagined herself as that paperweight. Joffrey could smash her just as easily. "Your brother is a monster, a demon," said Joffrey. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"I have had nothing to do with the traitor, I swear, Your Grace," said Sansa earnestly. Tears filled her eyes and spilled over. None of it was an act for whilst the news of her brother's latest victories cheered her, she knew that Joffrey would take out his frustration on her. She could only hope that her betrothal to Jaime would protect her somewhat from the young king's wrath.

"Maybe I should send him a present," said Joffrey. He waved his new sword in her direction. It was Excalibur's twin. She recognized it even though the hilt had been reshaped after the incident of the sword in the stone. "How would Robb Stark like one of your fingers?"

"If one of my fingers could stop Robb Stark, I would gladly give it to you, Your Grace," said Sansa. "But he is a cruel monster without a heart."

"Maybe we should see if he does have a heart. You have ten fingers, Sansa. You can spare one," said Joffrey. She forced herself not to shake or beg. That would only make it worse. Joffrey was the one without a heart. Joffrey was the one who wouldn't care. But, then, it seemed he was right about her brother not caring also. What had he done to try and get her out? He was too much in love with his wife and too much into being led astray by her to care about his family anymore. He had a new family now.
"Your Grace, Lady Sansa is to be my wife," said Jaime quietly. She turned sharply to where he stood at the side of the room, next to his father. He hadn't spoken to her ever since he had told her that they were to be married. She hadn't been sure whether she could rely on him to protect her.

"She doesn't need fingers to be your wife, Uncle. That's not what wives are for," said Joffrey.

"Call me picky, but I like them intact. And what would they say of you, Your Grace?" asked Jaime. "They may say that while Robb Stark terrorizes your people and ravages your land, all you can do is terrorize a little girl."

His brain must have gone to the same place as Robb's mercy.

"How dare you speak to me thus?" demanded Joffrey. His green eyes blazed with rage. He turned on Jaime, nostrils flaring, sword hand stiff, as if ready to strike. Jaime showed no fear. Perhaps he didn't even know how to spell the word "fear". "I am your king!"

Jaime opened his mouth to dig himself deeper. He had that in common with her father.

"Jaime," murmured Lord Tyrion. His soft admonition went unheard by all except Sansa.

"Joffrey, my love, your uncle means no insult," said Cersei. She placed a hand on her son's arm but he shook her off. The lioness had been declawed by her cub.

"Jaime, take Lady Sansa back to her chambers," said Lord Tywin suddenly. "There are matters of state I wish to discuss with the king that are not fit for her ears." She had never heard the Lannister patriarch speak with such gentleness before. It sounded forced and unnatural. His eyes were pale and harder than emeralds. Where his son's were mischievous and his grandson's were wild, Tywin had only coldness and control in his eyes and Sansa had never seen any different in all the time she had known him. Not that she had known him for long, nor had she spoken more than four words to him ("Good morning, my lord.") but most men, in three months, would have changed expressions at least once. Tywin Lannister was a constant in every way; a never-changing fact of life. Robb could try and alter the reality of it, but he might as well try and move mountains and redirect rivers. It would be easier.

Jaime bowed to Joffrey and his father. Sansa curtseyed. She turned to go and, as she did so, she felt Jaime place his hand against the small of her back. His palm was warm and she could feel it through the silk of her dress. She suppressed the urge to shiver, and not in a bad way, as she walked out. They said nothing as they walked back to her chambers. She put one foot in front of the other and focused on that. He kept pace with her even though it was slower than his usual speed.

Jaime opened the door of her quarters for her and shooed Shae out before closing the door behind him.

"Would you really have given one of your fingers?" he asked.

"Better a finger, or even a hand, than a head, my lord," said Sansa quietly. She would not meet his gaze. His presence in her room made her tremble. This was supposed to be a safe place. She was aware of the fact that her father's last gift to her, that hideous doll, sat propped up against the wall on the low bedside table. Jaime wouldn't know that, of course, but she was wary of any sign of affection she showed towards her father or her family. Everything could be used against her.

His booted feet came into her line of vision. He reached out to take her hands in his. Despite the pale scars adorning the knuckles and the rough callouses from years of swordplay and war, he had elegant hands with long fingers that would look nice if only he ever held anything other than
weapons. Was there anything that he liked other than fighting? She would have thought that a man like Jaime Lannister would be more sophisticated than her northern brothers. And even Jon had attempted to learn to play a flute before her mother had put a stop to it.

"You have beautiful hands," he murmured as he smoothed his thumbs over their backs before turning them over so her palms were facing up. "I like them unspoiled."

"So do I," said Sansa.

"Do my ears deceive me or were you actually talking back to me, Little Dove?" he asked. He released her hands but lifted her chin with two fingers so that she had to look up into his face.

"My lord, I...I do not think it is appropriate for us to be alone, here," she stammered. Suddenly, the room felt uncomfortably hot. Sweat prickled her body. She wasn't exactly afraid and that scared her. Looking at him only made it worse because he really was very beautiful and after how he had defended her today, it made her quite aware of what he might very soon do to her. "We are not yet married."

"But we are betrothed," said Jaime. "I am perfectly entitled to speak alone with the woman who is to be my wife."

"But we are not speaking very much or about anything."

"Let us talk about you," said Jaime.

"There can be nothing about me that would be of interest to you, my lord," said Sansa.

"Were you always so meek, Sansa Stark? I remember an excited little girl in Winterfell who almost jumped to see the royal procession. What about the little girl who always got what she wanted and never settled for anything less?"

"She died when her family betrayed her and her king."

"No, she's there. She just grew up a little bit."

Who was he and what had he done to Jaime Lannister? This wasn't the insensitive, bold and cruel man she was about to marry.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked.

"Not right now," she said and pulled herself up a little taller. She wasn't actually that much shorter than he was. Well, she was taller than both Caroline and Rebekah when they weren't wearing their high-heeled shoes.

"You should be afraid," said Jaime.

Sansa dipped her head and hoped he wouldn't hear the beating of her heart like war drums inside her chest.

"Would you like to call for some tea, or something stronger, my lord?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I have no time for tea. But I would very much like to claim what's mine."

Her breath hitched in her throat. This was it. He was going to take her, whether she liked it or not, and she would have no way to stop him. What would her father say? What advice would her mother give her? His fingers ran slowly up her bodice, to the ties at the front. She held her breath
when she felt the ties loosen and closed her eyes.

Soft lips pressed against her forehead. "Good day, Lady Sansa," he whispered. When she opened her eyes, she only saw his back as he left her quarters.

She watched him go. What an odd and unpredictable man he was. One moment, he was protecting her and the next, he was warning her about himself. She didn't know what to make of him. She knew he was cruel (for he had stabbed her father and killed Jory) and that his mind was twisted and dark (he sired Joffrey on Cersei) but there was kindness in him, also. One only had to look at how he was with her. He was the Kingslayer but, then, a lot of men would be if only they had the ability to do so. Robb would like nothing more than to slay a king and claim a throne.

She didn't know how to judge men anymore. The lines between good and bad were too blurred for her to discern. She only knew who could help her and who couldn't.

Murmurs and whispers abounded as the courtiers filed into the throne room. Daemon kept his head low and avoided long conversations. Some people tried to ask him what was going on but, by and by, most simply thought that he, too, was as much in the dark as they were.

Joffrey, of course, had discussed things with him before formulating the plan. The young king was a little more perceptive than most people gave him credit for. If he had been guided correctly, he might have even been almost decent as a king. However, Cersei's coddling had spoiled him forever which, in Daemon's mind, could only be a good thing. A bad king left room for others to rise up. Good kings knew how to keep everyone in check.

The door opened with a groan. Joffrey swept in. His long cloak trailed on the floor, sweeping up all the dust. How kind of him to help the servants with their pointed his nose in the air as he marched up to the throne. His courtiers knelt but several looked up immediately after he had passed them and exchanged glances with their neighbours. Tywin stood beside the throne and gave a bow as Joffrey walked up the steps that led to the Iron Throne. The Hand of the King had pleaded bad knees as a reason not to kneel, not that anyone expected Tywin Lannister to kneel even if he had been as young and healthy as Jaime.

Cersei was suitably mystified by all of this. After all, neither she nor her father had anything to say to the court and she could not possibly think of a reason why Joffrey would have an announcement without their knowledge. She clutched the arms of her chair, her knuckles starkly white against the gold and jewel tones of her heavy rings.

Daemon risked glancing at his other cousin. Jaime stood at Tywin's right hand. Was that his new place in court, now? He supposed that the former Kingsguard would soon depart to Casterly Rock once he and Sansa Stark had said their vows. Jaime seemed not a bit worried. But he didn't know enough to be worried. He believed that so long as his father was there, nothing could go wrong. He was childish naively like that. Would he never learn and grow up? His father wasn't actually all powerful. What would any of them do without Tywin? Would Robb Stark or Stannis Baratheon have been able to march into King's Landing with impunity and take the throne that each thought belonged to him? The landscape of the war would look quite different.

Tyrion, for once, had not been left out of the family line up and was standing in Jaime's shadow. Poor Cousin Tyrion. Daemon had always wondered how he could stand watching Jaime reap glory that he didn't deserve whilst all Tyrion's own achievements were brushed under the rug.

"All rise," said Joffrey once he had seated himself. His long cloak, several times longer than he was tall, swirled about him and swooped up in the front. The red set off the paleness of his skin
and the green of his eyes. Morning sun gleamed on the king's combed golden locks. At that moment, he looked just as the young Jaime must have looked that day when Ned Stark had found him sitting on the Iron Throne, waiting for Tywin.

"You must all be wondering for what purpose you have been called here," said Joffrey. He looked down at his courtiers slowly, as he and Daemon had discussed. His gaze, at last, settled on Tywin. "As all of you will be aware, Robb Stark has recently made incursions into the Westerlands and laid waste to several towns and villages. Not only that, but the northern barbarians were permitted to leave without suffering a single loss." Not true, of course, but the losses had been minimal, for Daemon Marbrand had not managed to catch the swift moving northern forces. By the time they had arrived in the Westerlands, all they had found were smoking ruins, several dead cats dressed up as lions, and a trail leading right back to Harrenhal.

"Where were our armies?" asked Joffrey. "Where were the hosts of the king? They were here or in Casterly Rock, cowering behind stone walls, too afraid to sally forth and teach our enemies that there is a price to be paid for violating the king's peace! I blame no one, of course. My grandfather, Lord Tywin, the Hand of the King, wished only to protect the capital and his own key holdings, but at the expense of everything else. He has served the crown well all his life, but this incident shows that even the sharpest of claws grow dull with time." Joffrey smiled triumphantly as his mother's jaw grew slack and her mouth dropped open in a silent plea or protest. "You deserve rest, Grandfather," he ploughed on. "I can ask no more of you, now. You have given the crown more than enough over the years and, for that, we are all grateful."

Joffrey stood. His courtiers knelt again. His little chest practically swelled visibly as he looked out across the sea of bowed heads and shocked faces. His gaze flicked towards Daemon. Daemon gave the slightest indication that was missed by all. They were all too busy looking at Tywin and Tywin could only see Joffrey.

"Tywin Lannister, I name you the First Marshal of the Westerlands and Defender of the Crown," Joffrey declared. Empty titles were a small consolation for the defeat Tywin had suffered here today.

The young king left no time for anyone to question his decision. "As for the new Hand of the King, I trust no other with the post than Daemon Lannister, who has proven his prowess, his wisdom and his cunning, and who has shown great courage in obtaining victory against Robb Stark."

It was all he could do to stop himself from laughing at the look of disgust that crossed over Jaime's face. Behind Jaime, Tyrion stood a little straighter. If he thought anything, he didn't show it.

Joffrey called for the Small Council to meet immediately to discuss a plan of retaliation against Robb Stark. Neither Cersei nor Tywin were invited, although Jaime was, along with Mace Tyrell.

"Well played, Lord Daemon," murmured Petyr Baelish as he brushed past him once the court had been dismissed. Varys simply bowed as Daemon took his rightful place at the table, the new Hand of the King pin gleaming bronze against his deep red tunic. It suited him and he only wished Katherine could see it. She would be proud of him, no doubt, for taking her little insinuation and running with it. Would her husband have caught onto such a little detail, he wondered? She was too good for Robb Stark, that was for certain.

"Tell me, Cousin, how long did you have that little trick up your sleeve?" asked Jaime as he seized Daemon by the elbow. The older Lannister's grip was strong. Daemon calmly pulled himself free. Did Jaime really want to pick a fight in front of the Small Council?

"The king's decision is hardly a trick, Cousin," said Daemon. "Now, if you are quite done, you
should take your seat before His Grace arrives."

"I'm not finished with you, Daemon," said Jaime. "You can count on that."

"I am sure we will have many chances to work together as a family, Jaime," said Daemon amicably.

Joffrey practically pranced in. When he saw the Small Council gathered at his command, he inserted a bit more stately control into his step. The servant pulled out his seat for him.

"Now, my lords, onto the more important matter of Robb Stark. He cannot go unpunished for his crimes. He thinks he is safe in Harrenhal."

No one said anything. No one hardly even breathed as they waited for Joffrey to announce his intentions. Joffrey placed both his hands, palms down, flat on the table, and leaned forward. A flush of excitement crept up his neck and his eyes took on a look of fervour. "Assemble our armies, my lords," he said. "For we are marching to war."

**Next chapter:** Tywin bides his time and waits for Joffrey's plan to unfold. Cersei finds herself facing a new Jaime. Sansa and Rebekah make wedding preparations. Margaery cements her friendship with Katherine.


You've Got Mail

Chapter Summary

Joffrey prepares for glory. Tywin sits back and takes a well-deserved break. Sansa and Rebekah find out what they have in common. Margaery practises being a good friend.

King's Landing

The pewter cup clinked as Tywin tapped his ringed finger against it. Neither Jaime nor Tyrion said a word as they waited for their father's response to Joffrey's announcement, brought to him through Jaime. Joffrey hadn't even bothered to send word to him, but Jaime thought he ought to know. After all, most of Joffrey's armies were comprised of Tywin's men.

"One cannot help someone who does not want to be helped," said Tywin matter-of-factly. "However, I have no intention of joining in on a fool's errand. He has named me the Defender of the Crown, and that is what I shall be. Our family will remain in King's Landing to guard it." He cast Jaime a look, daring him to say something or to say that he would go with Joffrey to face Robb Stark.

"I concur, Father," said Jaime. His father raised an eyebrow in surprise. It was not that Jaime didn't want to meet Robb Stark on the battlefield, but it was a matter of principle. He was not going to be at the beck and call of Daemon Lannister. He and his father might have their differences but they were family, and anyone who tried to harm their interests was an enemy, as far as he was concerned.

"Good," said Tywin. "I had half thought that you might be tempted to go along on that futile quest."

"I am no fool," said Jaime. "Although this fool's errand is very likely to succeed..."

"And you would have us give Robb Stark the only chance he will ever have to win this war on a golden platter?" demanded Tywin.

"It was only a suggestion," said Jaime. "Besides, what are the odds that we do lose?"

"Unlike you, Jaime, I deal in certainties," said Tywin. "Robb Stark has already lost, and I have no intention of giving him the slightest chance to win. Now, I will have no more talk of this. Tell me of the wedding preparations. I expect them to be almost ready?"

Sansa pretended to be asleep. She measured her breathing and tried to let her limbs and body relax and sink into the mattress. Shae's footsteps eventually went out of her bedroom and the only light that lingered was the light from the waning moon. Joffrey would be marching out to meet Robb soon. She sent up a quick prayer to the gods, whoever was listening. No matter what Robb had or had not done, she would still rather he win than Joffrey. It was her dream to wake up one morning to great panic in King's Landing and then, when she went outside to see what the commotion was all about, she would see Robb's banners flying down the streets towards the Red Keep, with Joffrey's head on a pike at the very front and her brother bedecked in black and silver armour.
She smiled a little at the dream. She would walk down to him, then, unafraid and proud, and he would welcome her like the princess that she was. Cersei would be at her mercy. She would be kind to Caroline, who had been, in turn, kind to her. She hadn't even been angry when she had found out that Sansa was to marry Jaime and that she had been relegated to the lower-level Lannister. Except now he wasn't that low after all.

The musings entertained her whilst she waited for Rebekah. The older girl had promised to come up with plans for a betrothal and wedding gown for her and she was bringing them tonight whilst the whole castle was asleep. It wasn't in Sansa's place to wonder when Rebekah might have the time to design gowns. Didn't she have enough to worry about?

"Lady Sansa?"

Sansa sat up. A hulking shadow crouched on her windowsill.

"Lady Rebekah, you're here," said Sansa. She could never stop marvelling at how gracefully the older girl moved, how stealthy she was and how she had managed to climb up the side of the Red Keep with no rope at all. She was just like Bran had been before…

She shook the thought of her little brother out of her head. She couldn't think about them, not right now, when she had to put on a show for her new friend. Joffrey had boasted of how Theon Greyjoy had killed the two of them. To think that Bran and Arya would never conspire against her again, that Rickon would never again sneak into her room to slay the dragon beneath her bed (during daytime only, of course). The very idea brought a lump to her throat and, for a moment, she dared not speak lest she actually cried.

Rebekah had two large sacks slung over her shoulders. Sansa hurried out of bed to help her with them, not caring how cold the flagstones were beneath her bare feet. She was of the north. The cold was an old friend.

Except, upon hefting up one of the bags, she realized how light it actually was, and it had the consistency of a feather pillow. When she opened them, she realized they were full of feathers. Rebekah lit a candle from the smouldering fireplace and used that to light the barest number of lamps that they needed. She blew out the candle before unrolling two large pieces of parchment on the floor of the bedroom.

Sansa had never seen such detailed designs for a dress before. Her eyes widened as she conjured images of what her betrothal gown would look like based on the images and feathers Rebekah now presented to her.

"Is it going to work?" she whispered.

"Of course," said Rebekah. "Do you like it?"

"It's incredible," said Sansa. "I never thought…" She looked up. "You should hate me. I've stolen Jaime from you."

"You didn't steal him, my lady," said Rebekah. "You can't actually steal a person if you don't kidnap them, and you didn't kidnap him. A girl like me could never marry a man like Jaime Lannister, and I didn't want to, at any rate. However, we are going to be deeply involved, all three of us, and I want us to be friends."

"I am very fortunate to have you as a friend," said Sansa gravely.
Rebekah beamed. "And I am, too, to have you," she said. "I think I like having friends."

Sansa didn't really want to ask about why she'd never had any before.

Cersei stared at her twin as if he were a stranger to her. She couldn't recognise this Jaime. This wasn't her Jaime. Something had changed in him. She wasn't sure whether it was the captivity – from which he had returned unscathed and therefore, he should have been unchanged – or whether it had something to do with the people he now associated himself with. Ever since his return, he had grown close with that little uncouth whore and her friends. They were always whispering and changing subjects whenever someone came close enough to hear. No spy had seen anything, for Jaime and his little friends had been careful, but Cersei knew that he was keeping secrets.

They sat across from each other at the table as they always did during supper, pretending that they were a regular family that wasn't being ruined by the hideous creature that called himself their little brother. Joffrey scolded Tommen for his childish obsession with his cats and threatened to cure him of it by skinning and cooking one of them. Dear Joff had never been in a kitchen in his life and he likely never would.

"So, Uncle," said Joffrey after he had tired of scaring his brother. Joff had always been such an exuberant and spirited child and that exuberance had followed him into manhood. He had his flaws, true, but they were the growing pains of a great king. Her father had to accept that. He couldn't be in charge of everything. After all, he was not the king.

"Have you tried out Sansa Stark yet?" asked Joff. Cersei winced at the thought of Jaime, her Jaime, with Sansa. If she had been younger, that girl would have been dead somewhere down in a well, but she knew better now, and so did her father. All suspicion would point directly to her and it would be difficult to explain.

"It takes time to tame a beast, even a timid one," said Jaime calmly as he cut up a slice of beef.

"You call that a beast? She's got no character. Mind you, she is pretty. I am almost sorry that I won't get to play with her myself," said Joffrey. "But maybe I can. Maybe I'll claim my first rights."

Jaime's eyes flashed. He gripped his knife tightly, just for a second, but then loosened his hand again before dipping his head. It was a bit of a crass suggestion for Joffrey to make. She ought to talk to him later.

"How are the wedding preparations progressing?" asked Cersei, pretending that she didn't care even when she did. Where was her Jaime? Was he lost to her forever?

"I leave that in the capable hands of my betrothed and her associates." His associates, more like. Rumour had it that Stefan Salvatore, of all people, was now involved, escorting Sansa Stark through the markets in search of trinkets for her 'true-sew', a collection of some sort that every bride from their country was supposed to have. Sansa Stark might be a hostage, but she had more friends taking care of her before her wedding than Cersei had had. "All I need to do is choose the colour of the wedding cloak."

"Are you sure it's safe, leaving it in the hands of Ned Stark's daughter?" asked Cersei. "She is so young."

"I shall have to wonder whether she's planning a funeral or a wedding," said Joffrey. "Starks are so dour with their grey and black. You'll wait for my victorious return, I suppose? I want to give her
Robb Stark's head as a wedding gift. It would have been convenient if someone had not stolen Ned Stark's head, for I would have given that to her as well; a matching set."

Silence at the table. Such things could not be said, at least not out loud during a meal. But Joffrey had always been an honest boy who knew what he wanted and he did not ever compromise his beliefs. There was courage in that, even if he did lack subtlety. In fact, it was quite a Jaime thing to do, except Jaime wanted great heroics and to be the best whereas Joff’s thoughts tended towards the macabre.

"I hear your last seven suggestions for wedding cloaks were soundly rejected," remarked Tyrion to Jaime. "Your bride has taste, I will grant you that."

"She will not reject this one," said Jaime.

"Do tell," said Cersei.

"What do I care for weddings and gowns and cloaks?" said Joffrey. "There must be a celebration for the betrothal. Daemon Lannister's too, I suppose."

"Yes, we are celebrating our betrothals together," said Jaime.

Daemon Lannister. The thought of him made Cersei see red. Oh, he was never impolite; in fact, out of all her male relations, he was the most genteel of them, always with that little knowing smile on his lips, always soft-spoken, always playing music. But he had never, not once, ever shown an interest in her even when she had deigned to pay him attention. How could he resist her? Was it his association with Caroline Forbes and Rebekah Mikaelson again? Or was it something else?

She'd had him watched, but just as Jaime had yielded nothing useful, neither had Daemon. The whole world knew about his past dalliances with Rebekah so that was not worth finding out more about. The rest of his time he spent either on his wedding preparations, training the men, discussing strategy with Joffrey, or practising his music.

Although his music was interesting. Her spies told her that someone had been sending him music and no one knew where it was from. There were never any messages contained within those letters, just music, but he would occasionally smile or laugh to himself when he was playing it or perusing it. So far, none of them had managed to steal any of the music for Cersei to look at yet.

"It is such a rushed matter," remarked Cersei.

"You cannot stop love," said Jaime. He smiled at Cersei and, when he thought no one was looking, he winked.

Did he just wink at her? He did not just wink at her as if she were some common…common…

"Whatever it is, it involves feathers," said Tyrion.

"I am assured that it will be an exceedingly pleasant affair," said Jaime.

The rest of them departed after supper, but Jaime stayed behind with Cersei. They did not speak until the servants had cleared away the dishes and they were all alone. Even so, he kept his distance, standing with the long table between them.

"Well, why are you here?" she asked as she poured herself a cup of wine. Sweet, red wine, like blood. It was the only thing that warmed her icy heart now. Sometimes she wondered if the Starks were wrong and winter was already here.
"I know you do not like this," began Jaime. "But none of us have a choice."

"I am sure you are devastated," said Cersei. "You have a pretty young bride to bed, my son is to be married to a Tyrell bitch, and I am to marry her brother, a known pillow-biter."

"I have heard that Ser Loras prefers to let others bite the pillows," said Jaime. "It is better than most other choices Father could have given us, believe me, Cersei. Loras will not care what happens outside of the marriage bed. Nothing has to change."

"But everything has changed. You have your new friends, and now a new wife. You have no more need of me. Why don't you go and find your little whore? I'm sure she'll drink up your inane babbling. Oh, wait, you don't even know where she is."

"Rebekah was a mistake and Salvatore is useful on the battlefield. You know that," said Jaime. "Is it so strange that I would like to keep them close? As for Sansa Stark, she is but a hostage and a child. Surely you are not jealous of her? She wants me as much as I want her. She won't care what I do. She won't even know. I would not corrupt her mind like that, even if she could use some education." In two steps, he walked around the table and was right in front of her, as if that distance separating them was nothing at all. "I will always love you, Cersei. Only you." Their breathing was heavy. He bent his head close to hers until their lips were almost touching.

She gazed into his deep green eyes, so like her own and yet so unlike. They were two halves of the same person and neither men nor gods could separate them. Nothing could separate them.

Joffrey leaned over the map of Westeros, feeling very important and in charge as he moved the carved pieces about. Finally, he was doing what a king ought to do, and Grandfather wasn't here to get in the way and act all high and mighty and take the place that was, by right, his.

The map was ten feet long and five feet wide, with realistic mountains and valleys and rivers shaped and painted by the master artisans of the city. It looked, for all intents and purposes, like a miniature of Westeros and he was the god who was making things happen.

The golden armour he wore weighed down on him, reminding him of the gargantuan task he was about to undertake. After this battle, no one would remember the Young Wolf. His head would be on a spike. Perhaps he ought to encase it in gold to remind the world of the price when one crossed Joffrey Baratheon, the true King of Westeros. He would think of a suitable epithet later. The Young Stag didn't sound very noble. What about the Young Lion?

Beside him stood Daemon, always ready to hand him another piece of the plan whenever he asked for it, but never before. Joffrey didn't know why he hadn't paid more attention to his cousin before. He was quiet and respectful, and he actually had good ideas. There was no more of this hiding from Robb Stark. As if there was anything there that was worth being afraid of. The Mountain's defeat was a fluke, and Gregor Clegane had shit for brains anyway.

His satin cloak fell over his shoulder. He imagined what his subjects saw when they looked upon him; a young golden king, ready to take on the world, his shoulders squared and sure, his eyes gleaming with ambition. He would crush that northern rabble and with his queen by his side, too. He had already commissioned a suit of armour for Margaery. Their wedding had to be delayed, but that was fine. His uncle and Daemon's weddings would be a trial-run and then any mistakes could be annihilated before the truly important event. Besides, Margaery was as good as married to him, anyway, because her army would be riding with him.

"Lord Daemon, what do you think?" asked Joffrey. He planned on besieging Robb Stark in
Harrenhal and starving them all out.

"It would not be in character for Robb Stark to stay behind his own walls waiting to be starved," said Daemon. "Your Grace, I think he will ride out as soon as he hears news of our impending arrival. We must meet him somewhere where the terrain will benefit us. His men are skilled at fighting amongst their native forests and craggy hills."

"But they're no good in a charge," said Joffrey. "They're a mess."

"That they are, Your Grace," said Daemon.

"Then we'll meet them here, where the terrain is flat," said Joffrey, pointing to a field somewhere south of Harrenhal. "And while they are engaged in battle, the Tyrell cavalry will swoop back here and cut off any path of retreat. They won't be able to flee back up north with their tails between their legs, then. What do you think, Lord Daemon?"

Daemon paused. "But how would you ensure that he would meet you here, Your Grace? Robb Stark is a clever man, but not a brave one."

"You mean to say he will run?"

"He will not engage you on terrain that is favourable to us unless it were at the uttermost end of need."

"What if we cut off his air? If we seal off his supply routes here in the north, he will have to fight or starve," said Joffrey. This was brilliant! He was brilliant! And it just so happened that it was also flat north of Harrenhal.

"Very good, Your Grace," said Daemon.

"And then we will crush them once and for all and I'll present Sansa Stark with her brother's head at her wedding," declared Joffrey. "She is not to be married while I am away. In fact, nobody is to get married while I am away." He looked around at the lords gathered inside his war chambers. They were all staring at him in awe and a few wore looks of surprise. Had they not thought him capable of defeating Robb Stark without his Grandfather's intercession? Well!

"How many men can we raise, Lord Daemon?" he demanded.

The numbers were laid out before him. From the Tyrells, his main supporters, he would get ten-thousand infantry and two-thousand cavalry. His own men numbered eight thousand. His grandfather was not participating and neither was a single Lannister man. Daemon's fief gave him about one hundred knights and two thousand men in total. The lesser lords would all fall in line. All in all, he could muster about fifty thousand men, more than twice his enemy's. And, as every idiot knew, the side with more men almost always won.

He couldn't wait to share the news with everyone at supper and to rub Sansa's face into it. She thought she was safe now that she was to marry Jaime. Well, she was wrong and he would prove it to her.

K,

I risk all in writing to you, but I thought that, as your friend, I might do you the courtesy of letting you know that a great host of fifty thousand will be marching upon your fortress in weeks, and I shall be among them, riding with the cavalry. My king intends to meet your forces from the north
and on open ground where the smaller force would be at a disadvantage. You will have no choice but to meet him where he designates for he plans to cut off your supply routes from the north.

I do not know what you intend to do to counter this, or whether you even know what you are going to do, but I hope that when it does come to fighting, you will not see this as a personal affront to your esteemed person. I do wish that it were not so, but we are on different sides and we both must do what we must to keep the ones we love safe. My men, however, are not very keen to fight as there is very little in it for them. They will fight bravely, of course, but it is not their cause. I hope that, above all, you understand that.

Take care, my dear friend. I am eager to see you again, but you will understand if I do not write often.

I remain yours,

M

Next chapter: Joffrey holds a going away party. Sansa reaches out to Stefan. Jaime becomes a teacher.
Failure to Launch

Chapter Summary

Joffrey throws a party. Sansa seizes a slippery opportunity. Jaime indulges his talent for teaching.

King's Landing

Musicians played an unsuitably cheery tune in a corner. Cymbals clashed and the fiddles screeched whilst a bard sang praises to the High King Joffrey (embellishments were involved). Sansa sat quietly in her corner and sipped at her cup of mulled wine. Tyrion had pressed it into her hands as soon as she had come in and she had been drinking from it ever since. "Ghastly, isn't it?" remarked Jaime in a most treasonous way. Although he sat beside her, he had paid her little heed and instead, spent most of his time baiting Caroline. Sansa wondered at the easy rapport that they seemed to have between them, the Cupbearer and the Kingslayer. It was as if Caroline frequently forgot who Jaime was and Jaime tolerated that forgetfulness.

Joffrey was unusually and cheerfully drunk, downing goblet after goblet of Dornish sweet wine – he liked the pink type – and allowing Margaery to feed him bites of cheese and meat pastries. When he wasn't looking, Margaery winked at Sansa and she felt compelled to smile back. Good luck to her. Sansa didn't envy the new would-be queen at all, juggling Joffrey on one hand and Cersei in the other.

"You were obviously not present for Joffrey's last nameday celebrations," remarked Tyrion. "This is a rather pleasant affair compared to that one."

"If you recall, I was Robb Stark's guest at that time," said Jaime. "I would have liked to be there. The northerners aren't particularly good at hospitality, I have to say, although Katherine did try to entertain me."

Tyrion whistled two notes that made Jaime glare at him. The dwarf shrugged. "It's a good tune," he said.

Sansa had to wonder what it was about those two notes – and there were only two – that made Jaime lose his perpetual smirk so quickly. She hadn't heard too much about his time in captivity and she didn't dare to ask him, lest he was the petty sort who would take out his frustrations with her brother on her. Like Joffrey.

"It's a rather famous tune," remarked Stefan as he came over to join his two young(er) lieges.

"I will cut out your tongue if you sing it," said Jaime nonchalantly. Stefan raised his cup in a toast to him.

"I just realized I haven't offered my congratulations to you, my lord," said the younger Salvatore. For a moment, he sounded so much like Damon that Sansa felt a pang for Robb's errant bannerman (who could hardly be called a knight). She didn't miss Damon so much as the idea of him and the memories that he had created with her and her brothers and her parents. She missed home terribly, she realized, and simply hearing Stefan Salvatore speak was enough to bring that to the fore.
"Congratulations from you, Stefan Salvatore? Why, I hadn't thought that you would stoop down to something so common."

"There is nothing common about offering best wishes for the felicity of somebody one so esteems," said Stefan.

"The sentiment itself is common, but I shall accept it in good grace," said Jaime in an exaggerated manner.

Stefan raised his goblet and nodded in Sansa's direction. His eyes were Lannister-green, she saw, but there was little malice in them. In fact, she thought she glimpsed a gentle kindness and honour buried deeply inside him; something he had tried as hard as he could to push aside so that he might survive. Perhaps she and Stefan were not so different from each other after all.

"Thank you, Ser Stefan," she said. "It is most kind of you."

"Words are cheap," said Tyrion. "It would be better if he were to offer us his services. Alas, he is indentured to our father."

"Men must always look to their own interests first, Lord Tyrion, but I suspect you know that better than I do," said Stefan. "After all, a man can hardly help another if he cannot help himself."

"Too true, that," said Tyrion. "I may be rich but there are some things that even I cannot afford."

"Good is a matter of perspective," said Stefan.

"But there are guidelines that one shouldn't cross," said Caroline firmly, making Jaime laugh and choke on his wine. It was a strangely comfortable scene amongst all the other more disturbing revelry. It occurred to her that she had now been accepted into this new family of sorts. It almost made her laugh. Family with Jaime and Tyrion Lannister and their most trusted knight and bannerwoman? No, she could hardly imagine it. But they were all she had. And Margaery, of course. One could not discount the friendship of Margaery Tyrell.

She was quickly drawn back into a debate about morality. Caroline was the only one arguing that it was not arbitrary. Frankly, Sansa was surprised that there was any debate at all. Should Caroline simply not acquiesce to the views of her lords? And where was her betrothed?

She looked about for Daemon. He stood with Petyr Baelish, their heads bent close together, in the shadow of one of the great tone pillars. Their voices were too soft for anyone to overhear their conversations. Sansa nudged Caroline. "Will Lord Daemon not join us?" she asked innocently.

"No, I don't think so..." said Caroline. She looked very hard in their direction and became very still, as if by staring at them, she could somehow strain her hearing to listen to their hushed conversation. The others went on without her to debate the existence of honour. It was hardly a debate because all three agreed that honour was a concept created by men to control other men, and that, in truth, it did not exist at all. What would it be called if the three sides in a debate all agreed with each other? Mutual self-congratulatory back-patting?

Finally full of pastries and wine and music, Joffrey sauntered over to where his uncles and Sansa sat. Conversation ceased. Sansa shrank back from the expression on Joffrey's face. She'd seen it before, many times, usually right before he was about to kill or torture (or both, although not in that order) somebody.

They all rose to their feet to bow and curtsy to him.
"What are you doing here, hiding away in a corner like this? Will you not celebrate my impending victory, Uncle?" asked Joffrey. He spoke only to Jaime, although his eyes roved over Sansa in the background. Tyrion was ignored as if he were nothing more than a lump of rock that would get in the young king's way. Although there was nothing that Joffrey could really do to her right now whilst both his uncles were watching, Sansa still felt the residual fingers of terror close about her throat.

"I have little doubt the gods will ensure that you return victorious," said Jaime, raising his goblet and invoking deities that he had neither belief nor respect for. "But it is a little early yet to celebrate victory before the battle is won, don't you think, Your Grace?"

"It is just about as good as won," said Joffrey. He puffed out his chest. "I am leading them into battle. It won't be like your attempt in the Riverlands. You're welcome to join us, Uncle, and see how it is done."

"Thank you, but I am afraid that someone must stay home and keep everything ready for your return," said Jaime.

"You have no need to be afraid of Robb Stark," Joffrey mocked. "I'll protect you." The wine in his blood made him louder than usual.

"I am sure but, even so, I ought to stay here. Someone needs to watch our own house," said Jaime quite calmly, despite the slight tightening of his hand around his goblet.

"I suppose you're a little old now to be riding into battle," Joffrey drawled. "I'll bring you back Robb Stark's head, not to worry." Hewhirled around before Jaime could throw a (very stupid) smart comeback at him and stalked away. His eyes kept flicking in the direction of Lord Tywin who sat imperious at his place at the table, never saying anything, never changing his expression to indicate what he was thinking. As long as Lord Tywin was there, Joffrey could do nothing against Jaime. Tyrion was another matter for he did not enjoy the same level of protection but, at moments like these, nobody remembered him, nor did they recall that he was one of Jaime's weaknesses.

"I should like to see him face down Katherine," remarked Jaime after Joffrey was out of earshot. "I wonder what he would do? Quake where he stood and wet his trousers?"

"I'm not one to stand in the way of mocking our glorious king but you should be careful," said Tyrion.

"He's tiresome," said Jaime. "Persistent, but tiresome."

"I know he is, but he's a child with a stick and you…well, you don't have a stick," said Tyrion. He toasted his brother and downed all of his wine in one gulp. It was surprising how such a small person could drink so much. "So, tell me more about Katherine," he said. Sansa leaned in closer. She wanted to know too. "I own that I have never met a woman like her, but please do not tell me she is the most remarkable woman in the world. I think that place has already been claimed."

"She is quite remarkable, although she is not the most remarkable," said Jaime.

At the same time, Stefan said, "Remarkable isn't exactly the word I'd use."

Wait, Stefan knew Katherine? Did that mean Damon knew her as well? And did that mean that Katherine had either used her relationship with Damon to get close to Robb, or had Damon introduced them? The lines of relationship criss-crossed in her head and made everything very confusing and very clear at the same time.
"Can she compare to a girl who could hold her own against the men on the Wall?" asked Tyrion mildly.

Sansa started. A girl on the Wall...that had to be Elena! Tyrion knew her too? Another line was added to the diagram in her head. Somehow, they were all linked. Was it merely a coincidence, or was it something more? Were Damon and Katherine working together? Were Stefan and Damon working together? Was this all just an act to lure all of Westeros into their net so they could capture them all in one go and become the true heirs of the Iron Throne, bloodline be damned? Damon and Stefan weren't particularly successful, but Katherine seemed to be making some headway.

A shadow passed over Stefan's face, making his eyes impossibly dark.

"There was a girl on the Wall?" asked Jaime.

"Elena," said Stefan quietly. "She is Katherine's sister."

They had underestimated the Starks. They still continued to underestimate them, especially little Sansa with her big eyes, rosebud mouth and absolute silence unless when otherwise required. Stefan had noticed her long ago, the girl with the sad eyes and flaming hair who tried to be invisible but couldn't. She stood out too much, a winter rose in a court of southern blooms. Now Lords Jaime and Tyrion spoke over the top of her head like she wasn't there, but she was hanging onto every word. She probably knew Elena, what with Elena being involved with her half-brother.

"If Katherine looks anything like Elena, then she must be an exquisite woman," said Tyrion. "Small wonder that Robb Stark passed up the opportunity to marry a Frey and chased a bard instead."

"They look exactly alike," blurted out Caroline who still had not really mastered the art of discretion. "Sometimes I can't tell them apart."

All eyes in their group swivelled in her direction. "Well," she said, looking desperately at Stefan.

"They're twins," said Stefan.

"Twins," repeated Jaime. He had a delighted gleam in his eye that went far beyond his usual Damonic mischief. One would have thought he might have wanted to keep his personal preference a little more secret. Did he think that he was safe among friends? Then again, he had a bigger secret on his hands. Sometimes he wondered at the wisdom of trusting these people but now that Rebekah had told them everything, there wasn't much that they could do except kill them. And that wasn't an option.

"Oh," said Sansa as she realized something.

"Lady Sansa?" asked Jaime.

"It's nothing," she said. "I just felt...maybe I had too much to drink."

"You had one cup of wine, my lady," pointed out Tyrion.

"Yes, but I have a poor stomach for wine," said Sansa.

"Here," said Caroline as she handed her a cup of water. "You shouldn't drink on an empty stomach."
"No," said Sansa ruefully. "But now that I have, perhaps I ought to retire for the night."

"Would you like company?" asked Jaime who seemed the least likely to want to give it.

"You should not bother yourself, my lord," said Sansa. "But if Ser Stefan is not averse, perhaps he can escort me to my chambers."

"It would be my pleasure," said Stefan. What did Sansa want with him?

She got up in a rustle of silken skirts that bore more and more resemblance to the French imperial style the more he looked at it. Instead of long and flowing, like the dresses of Queen Cersei and Lady Margaery and those favoured by the ladies of the court, the skirts Sansa wore tonight were structured and full, starting with a narrow corseted waist, a tight bodice that emphasized her figure, and slim tight fitting sleeves that showed off how slender her arms were. Whenever she moved, men looked. He took back his earlier observations that she wanted to be invisible, for she clearly did not. The cerulean watered silk brought out the blue of her eyes and showed off her hair to the best effect. He saw the hand of Rebekah in the makings of this dress.

She curtseyed goodbye to her betrothed and his family. Jaime nodded, almost amiably, and went back to his barely veiled discussion about the vampires in Robb Stark's camp. Briefly, Stefan thought about Damon and wondered if Sansa was reaching out to him because he was Damon's brother.

They walked in silence through the empty corridors, their footfalls on the stone floor the only sound. They were almost at her door before Sansa ventured to talk. "I hope you didn't think I was stepping out of my place, Ser Stefan, for asking you to escort me," she said.

"No, of course not," Stefan assured her, noticing how her heart rate sped up and her heat heightened.

"The truth is, Ser, I have always admired you from afar," she began before stopping. "Forgive me. It must be the wine. I should not have said that."

Stefan stared at her. His heart did the opposite of what hers did and seemed to stop. Of course it didn't, but that was what it felt like.

"My lady, I…I don't know what to say except that I am not worthy of your admiration."

"Very few would have dared to do what you did to the Mountain," said Sansa.

"Very few know what I know," said Stefan. "It is not courage when there is a certainty of victory."

"Then you might not be brave, but you certainly are accomplished."

"Flattery makes me uncomfortable, my lady," said Stefan.

"It is not flattery if it is true," said Sansa.

He stopped and she stopped too, peering up at him from beneath long eyelashes. They were darker than her hair, almost black. It wasn't mascara. "What has brought this on?" he asked. "You have not spoken more than two words to me before tonight."

"That is not true," said Sansa. "But tonight…I suppose it is not a regular night, what with the celebrations and…" She trailed off. "Forgive me. I should not have made you uncomfortable."
"There is nothing to forgive," said Stefan. He hardly knew what to think. His heart was, if he were to be completely honest with himself, still with Elena. Hers was the face he thought about the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night. Whenever he heard anything about the Stark army, he wondered if she was riding with them or not. He saw her with Jon Snow, a boy just a little older than Jeremy but with seemingly all the weight of the world on his shoulders and a pair of old solemn eyes. The image made his blood freeze in rage and he wished he could shut off his emotions, except he knew that he couldn't if he were to survive. "The truth is, my lady, my heart… soul… my heart belongs to another."

"Elena?" said Sansa.

"How did you know?"

"She talked about a pair of brothers who saved her many times in Mystic Falls," said Sansa. Stefan reminded himself that he ought not to show surprise that she knew. "I guessed it had to be you because Damon only has one brother."

"You and Damon were close, I have heard."

She laughed. It was not the laugh of a girl of fourteen, but a terrible bitter sound. "I was innocent, stupid," she said. "How could a man like Damon love me? He has Elena to love."

"Damon is selfish and often inobservant," said Stefan.

"You love Elena."

He bowed his head and said nothing. How he wished that she was wrong. The truth was, however, that he did. Very much. Perhaps even more than before, now that she was out of reach and very far away. He missed her with an agony that was almost akin to losing her entirely, even though she still lived and breathed and walked.

"Goodnight, Lady Sansa," he said shortly. "I shall leave you here."

"But…" she protested. He was off before he could hear the rest of it, deliberately shutting out the rest of her sentence. It didn't matter that she had been trying to manipulate him and widen the chink in his armour. Everything that she had said about Elena cut to the core. He had been lying to himself all this time about how he didn't love her, because he did, and even Sansa Stark had seen it.

Silver moonlight turned everything black and white. Shae had long since retired to her own cot in a small antechamber. Or, perhaps, she had gone to find her secret lover and protector. Sansa leaned against the window. A salty breeze blew in from the sea. She licked her lips, tasting it. The ocean itself shimmered and danced and, on the other side, was Essos. All night, she had been unable to sleep as she had thought about what she had said to Stefan and how he had reacted. How stupid had she been to bring up his old lover when she had been trying to make him her new one? Lady Margaery would not have failed even half as badly. At age twelve.

How did women do it? Margaery had Joffrey wrapped around her little finger. They played with crossbows together and talked of killing things, with the older girl taking to it as if she had been born with blood on her hands and had simply never been permitted to make good of her potential. Katherine and Robb…well, Sansa didn't know the details, but Katherine was Katherine and, from all accounts, Robb couldn't be parted from her on pain of death or worse. Elena had both Damon and Stefan and while she was pretty and sweet, there was nothing very extraordinary about her unless one counted her lack of ability to do any womanly work and her courage and ability to fight.
Rebekah made more mistakes than anyone she had ever encountered but she had lived and thrived and won the affection, such as it was, of Jaime. She'd gone through the Walk of Shame but she still found the time to sneak into the palace and make dresses for her friends.

Sansa paused. One thing did link all these women. It wasn't just that they were all beautiful, but they were also capable of violence. Was that the key to men's hearts, she wondered? It was so strange a concept and so ridiculous that it made her laugh out loud and feel a sudden disdain towards the so-called 'stronger sex' (there was much debate about that now that Katherine had overturned everything the world had ever believed about women). They were ridiculous, driven by pride and vanity as much as women, only they didn't spend hours in front of mirrors. They would rather hack each other, shoot each other and destroy everything in their path and boast about that.

She still had the dagger Caroline had given her that day in Flea Bottom. She hadn't touched it since. The sharp blade had frightened her in a way that she didn't understand but now she took it out and examined it in the moonlight. The blade just about glowed. She practised a few thrusting moves with it. Where would be the best place to stab someone? Inevitably, she thought of Joffrey and how much she would like to feel his blood on her hands. The rawness of her imagination made her shrink back and drop the dagger. Sansa Stark did not think of fighting and killing. That was the other Stark sister. But, perhaps, Arya had had a point and she had been too stupid, with her head too much into those stupid girlish stories of love and honour and chivalry, to see it. Her hand closed around the hilt again. It was warm to the touch.

Tomorrow, she would find someone to teach her to use it. Not Stefan. She would have to wait a while for him to forget what she had said about Elena first. Not Shae, because she doubted her maid actually knew the proper way to use the weapon that she always kept strapped to her leg. Not Caroline, who was better at carrying cups and had lost all the swords she had ever gotten her hands on during the Battle for the Red Keep. Rebekah didn't come often enough. Tyrion was a bookish man. If she had intellectual questions, she might venture to ask him, but he preferred the axe when it came to combat.

That left Jaime.

There was nothing worse than waking up one morning and realizing that he had nothing to wake up for and certainly nothing to do. Unlike Tyrion, Jaime had no desire to lounge in bed. It bored him. Stillness bored him. He needed to be doing something. Guarding kings had been a chore but, at least, he'd had something to do then. Now he didn't even have boring duties to turn to. He supposed he could try and interest himself in the matters of state like the way his father had been trying to make him do ever since he had been old enough to talk in full sentences.

A knock came on his door. Were the servants ready with his breakfast? That was efficient of them. They had never been so efficient in his entire life. Ergo, it couldn't be a servant.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Lord Jaime? It's me. Sansa."

Sansa Stark was at his door? What did she want? Curious and interested now, he bade her enter and deliberately did not get dressed. She was the one who had interrupted his morning. He was not going to go out of his way to accommodate her.

She slipped inside, her skirts rustling. Gone was the beautiful jewelled thing she had been wearing last night. She was in a plain riding habit. Was she going somewhere? When she saw his nakedness, she paused.
"Is there something wrong, Lady Sansa?" asked Jaime. Was she shocked or simply fascinated by him?

"I...I was wondering if I might be able to ask you a favour," she said. Her gaze was fixed upon his face. Too fixed.

"I do not grant favours," he said. "But tell me anyway, and I might make an exception if I'm in a good mood."

"You're never in a good mood," she muttered.

"What?"

"I...shall not bother you, my lord." She turned to go.

"Stop," he commanded. "You have come here to ask me something, only you stand there and mock me. Tell me how I am never in a good mood."

She took a deep breath as she turned back around and he was reminded of himself as a little boy when he had been in trouble with his father over tiny little matters such as jumping over a cliff without looking at the surrounding rocks first, gluing the maester to his chair, and a variety of innocent little things like that. "You always act as if the whole world has wronged you and you are too proud to tell it," she said. "How can that be a good mood?"

Perhaps she was more observant than he gave her credit for.

"You really are Ned's Stark daughter, aren't you?" asked Jaime. "He was always quite fond of speaking his mind."

Sansa shrank back instinctively, like an animal with her spirit crushed one too many times.

"I'm sorry-"

"Why are you sorry?" asked Jaime. "It's refreshing to hear an honest voice in this city without any ulterior motive. You don't have any ulterior motives, do you?"

She shook her head, almost as if she was too afraid to speak. Did he really have that effect on her?

"At any rate, you are far more observant than your father," reassured Jaime. "Now, since you've already aired your opinions of me, you might as well carry on and tell me what you want."

"I was wondering if you could teach me to... fight," said Sansa.

"So, you'd be willing to join me out there, in the mud?" said Jaime, his eyes betraying his amusement. "Aren't you worried about ruining your dress?"

"I... I realized how stupid it must seem for me to even think of such a thing," said Sansa in a small voice.

Ordinarily he would revel in her dejection caused by his rejection, but it wasn't exactly a great feat to wound a little creature like Sansa Stark. No, it would be far more interesting to indulge her and see where it led. At the very least, he wouldn't be bored.

"You know, there is very little I loathe more than starting a task and failing to finish it," said Jaime. "You've started this. You have to finish it now."
"I will defer to your judgement, my lord," said Sansa, looking a little apprehensive. "You should do what you think is best."

He smiled, showing all his teeth, as he opened the door for her. "I promise you it won't hurt." Much.

A/N: We'll be taking a break on the weekend of March 21-22 because Telcontar needs to work the Saturday.

Next chapter: Jaime proves that just because you're good at something doesn't mean you're good at teaching it. Margaery takes Sansa and Caroline on a field trip.
Into the Wild

Chapter Summary

Sansa has her first lesson with Jaime. Margaery undertakes an intrepid field trip to the lands where the sun does not touch.

King's Landing

The midday sun glared down at the unlikely pair as Jaime slowed his pace and turned around to admire the view. Sweaty men drilled in the background, their tourney swords clashing in artificial moves meant only for show. Loras pranced about in the shade for fear of getting freckles... oh and Sansa Stark was standing awkwardly out in the open. In past years, Jaime doubted that Sansa would have allowed the sun to even touch her skin without some wide-brimmed hat and a veil to shield her. Her skin was so pale that she might as well be one of Tyrion's Grumpkins or Snarks from beyond the Wall. She really was a lot more attractive when she wasn't stuck in her room thinking of new ways to say 'my brother is a traitor to the crown'.

"Before we begin, you need to get into some proper garments," said Jaime. "Nobody fights in a dress."

"Rebekah does," said Sansa.

"Well, you are not Rebekah, now, are you?" asked Jaime. "Normally you would change in those... sheds over there."

He pointed towards where the half-dressed men were waving at Sansa. She instinctively cowered behind him. Where was her spirit? It was funny though, the dove hiding behind the lion who was about to eat her.

"Come along," he said. "I won't let them hurt you." He winked. This was getting better by the moment. Sansa followed him meekly, keeping her eyes down and clutching her little dagger very close to her, as if that tiny thing could protect her. He found the smallest suit of practise armour and led her into an empty shed that smelled of stale sweat and old blood. Masculine smells. She pressed her lips together as the scent assaulted her but, despite that, followed him inside, where she simply stood there.

"Well, get out of that dress."

"But what should I wear?" asked Sansa. Jaime held out the practise armour before he realized that she probably did not own a single pair of trousers and even if she did have one, she probably hadn't brought them. He sighed.

"Put this on over your dress," said Jaime. "The next time, I expect you to be in the proper clothing. Tunic and trousers and proper boots. Get some made."

She struggled into the bulky armour of quilted leather. It was far too big for her, having been made for someone with a much broader chest and wider shoulders. Also, no one had ever made practise armour to accommodate women's bodies. It hung off her awkwardly, at an angle. This was worse
than training a squire. The squires usually had been pages before and they knew how to put on
practise armour.

Still, he liked a challenge. He knelt down as if he were the squire (or a gallant knight) and tied the
armour on for her. As he cinched the belt tightly around her, his hand brushed against her little
waist, making her stiffen.

"There's no time to be squeamish," Jaime murmured into her ear as he straightened himself. "You
and I are going to become much better acquainted than that before the end."

He tossed her one of the practise swords he'd selected. She hadn't been expecting it and it struck her
hands bruisingly as she tried to bat it away.

"Pick it up and come outside," he commanded. "And put that butter knife away. It's not going to do
you any good." He gave his sword a few experimental swings. He'd been nice and given her the
lighter one. That would be enough niceness for one day.

Sansa fought the urge to scream as she fell into the hard-packed dirt again when Jaime struck her
shins hard and made her stumble and trip. Her palms were raw from being landed on and her
knuckles bled where he had struck her to 'teach her'. She had known that it would not be easy. Her
arms ached from having to hold the heavy sword aloft. She could barely keep it straight without it
wobbling.

She picked herself up off the ground and shook her tangled hair out of her face. The next time, she
was going to tie it back the way Caroline and Rebekah liked to tie theirs back. She accidentally
stepped on the hem of her dress and fell down again in a heap. Every part of her was sore and she
was exhausted, but Jaime didn't show any sign of needing a rest yet. Until he did, she would get no
succour.

"Well, come on," said Jaime. "You can't win a fight if you hide behind your sword."

She ran at him and tried to swing at him, but he knocked her sword aside and shoved her to the
ground before striking her so hard on the back that she let out a little whimper. Even the armour
couldn't stop her from feeling it.

"You're dead," he said, pointing the sword in her face as he smirked down at her. At that moment,
he looked so much like Joffrey. "Get up."

She did as he told her even though she just wanted to lie there with her cheek against the cool earth.

Again and again, he beat her down. Again and again, he made her get up. There had to be some
sage philosophy in that. Was he trying to teach her something? She looked at his grinning face and
decided that he just liked tormenting her as much as his son did.

He sent her tumbling head over heels the next time. She wasn't even sure how he did it as she flew
through the air in a flurry of skirts and landed on her back. Her breath was driven from her lungs.
White light flashed. The sky was nice today, with a few wisps of white cloud floating by. Was that
someone calling her name? And someone applauding? Was there a show somewhere?

"That was quite something, Uncle," said Joffrey. His face appeared in her line of vision as he
peered down at her. "Sansa? Hello, Sansa."

"She's a bit dazed, I think, Your Grace," said Margaery's voice. Her head appeared in Sansa's
vision too.

Joffrey cackled in delight. "I think she might have hit her head. You shouldn't have been so harsh with her, Uncle. Girls are delicate. You can't treat them so roughly."

Had she hit her head too hard or was Joffrey lecturing Jaime in the ways of chivalry?

"I stand corrected, Your Grace," said Jaime.

Sansa staggered to her feet and almost stumbled back down again. She used her sword like a cane. "I'm all right, Your Grace," she said. Her voice didn't sound like hers. "Lord Jaime was just teaching me."

"Good girl," said Joffrey. He patted her cheek. "You should learn to shoot a crossbow. It hurts less."

She really had to be dreaming.

"I think you have had quite enough fun for one day, Lord Jaime" scolded Margaery. The older girl took her gently and firmly by the arm before prying the sword out of her hand and dropping it as if it were red hot. It fell to the ground with a dull thud.

"I just need a little rest," said Sansa. She couldn't remember what happened afterwards.

They told her about how Jaime had carried her back up to her chambers where a horrified Shae had received her and put her to bed. They told her how the maester had said that she wasn't to ever do anything like this again because girls were delicate and should not be put through such abuse. (This maester obviously had never seen what happened whenever Joffrey made her answer for the crimes of her brother in court.)

She didn't remember any of it. The only thing she knew was that she was sore all over and Shae said the men were all quietly commending her spirit, if not her skill. She pushed down the blankets and sheets so she could see her legs. They were covered in blotches of purple-grey that were turning yellow around the edges. Her back, she was assured, looked just as bad.

Jaime and Tyrion came to see her at breakfast the next morning, bearing lemon cakes.

"You look awful," Jaime declared cheerfully as he demolished one of the two cakes. Tyrion swatted at his hand.

"They're not for you," he said to Jaime. Then he turned to her. "I hope you're feeling better this morning, Lady Sansa."

"Define 'better'," said Sansa. She winced as she tried to sit up higher. She was sore, and also starving, and that lemon cake looked very, very good. She reached out, pathetically, but her arm was stiff. Tyrion handed her the plate with a pitying look in his eyes. She bit into its tarty sweetness and savoured it. Immediately, she felt refreshed. "When can we continue?"

"With what?" asked Tyrion.

"With my lessons."

"You want to continue?" asked Jaime. His eyebrows moved towards his hairline.

"Yes," said Sansa. "Why? Did you think I would want to stop?"
"You need to look in the mirror," said Tyrion.

"Bruises heal, Lord Tyrion, although I thank you for your concern," said Sansa. She brushed the crumbs from her lips, having just realized that she had devoured the cake like an animal. Or Arya.

"Well," said Jaime. "As soon as you are capable of walking and you have a tunic and some trousers, we shall continue. Lady Caroline has had some made for herself, I believe, and while she is a bit shorter than you are, they will fit you better than, say, mine."

"I would not want to force Caroline to give me her clothes," said Sansa. She had never worn anyone else's clothes except her own. Arya was the one who had always run around in their brothers' cast-offs.

Jaime waved away her worries. "She'll do as I ask," he said. He snapped his fingers at one of the servants and told him to summon Lady Caroline's clothes. (Caroline was optional.)

Caroline did do as Jaime asked, but not without scathing him with a lecture about how he had been horrid.

Sansa, meanwhile, struggled out of bed and pulled on the clothes behind her dressing screen, no longer embarrassed if the others could hear her getting dressed or not. Her limbs and back were all stiff from the incredible amount of exercise yesterday. She'd never moved so much in her life. Eventually, she emerged from behind the screen, panting, defiant, and feeling a little sick in the stomach.

"Did you know that I count birds among the hardest animals?" asked Tyrion. "One has to admire the strength and determination of the migrating birds that move from Essos to Westeros and beyond whenever winter comes or goes. I can't remember which."

"Do you really want to do this?" Caroline asked her anxiously.

"I'm fine. I just need to get used to this," said Sansa. Her gaze was on Jaime. She couldn't let him laugh at her. She wouldn't. He wasn't laughing right now, but he was looking at her with an expression that seemed alien on his smug and arrogant face.

"Well, come along," he said.

The days passed with Joffrey ensconced in his war council chambers. Sansa heard very little of him and from him. She, Margaery and Caroline often went down to the markets, escorted, of course, to look at the wares on sale. Now that the threat of Stannis had passed, the merchants were coming back again with fine silks from the east, necklaces dripping with teardrops of pearls and bunches of rubies gleaming brightly in the sun. Men in unfamiliar livery kept trickling in. She didn't recognize many of the sigils. They were mostly from the Stormlands and from Highgarden. "Loras says His Grace was wise to gather all his men in one place," said Margaery as she held up one of the necklaces to herself. "It would have been quicker to meet at the battlefield, but they might all arrive at different times and Robb Stark would be able to destroy them one by one."

"The king is wise in his ways," murmured Sansa.

"But I do wish that these men wouldn't expect us to feed them," said Margaery. She flounced off to look at the beautiful rugs in the next stall, dyed in all tones of the jewels that this current merchant was trying to sell to her. Their guards followed and their carriage moved slowly behind them, the horses lazily sniffing at some herbs on sale once they stopped. The old woman selling them had to snatch away the plants to keep the animals from eating them.
"It's a lot of food," said Caroline. "How are we going to feed them all?"

"With a lot of money," said Margaery. "I suppose we have enough of that." She stopped suddenly and stared towards the south; towards Rhaenys' Hill.

Sansa hoped she was looking at Rhaenys' Hill, anyway.

"I feel like going on an adventure," said Margaery. "Don't you?"

"It depends on where we're going..." began Sansa, but Margaery was already in the carriage and beckoning to her. She didn't want to insult her new friend so she climbed in. Caroline followed.

"Guillem," Margaery addressed the driver. "Take us to Flea Bottom."

Flea Bottom! Was Margaery mad? Had she not heard of the riots and the filthy vermin that lived there? Why, in all the seven hells, would she want to go to Flea Bottom? Surely, if there ever was a hell on earth, that would be it. Margaery must have noticed the expression on Sansa's face, for she smiled and leaned over to pat her hand gently.

"Don't worry, dear Sansa. We shall be quite safe with my guards."

Joffrey hadn't been safe with all his Kingsguard. They'd almost ripped him to pieces. Margaery hadn't been there. She hadn't seen.

As the smell began to penetrate the interior of the carriage, Sansa wished she'd thought to bring her pomander. Or her betrothed. Alas, Jaime was not here and he couldn't tell Lady Margaery how foolish she was to be going to Flea Bottom. She turned to Caroline, willing the older girl to say something. She'd been there that day during the riots. She'd seen how the men had been about to rip her and Lord Tyrion apart. She should have told Margaery that she would not be doing such a suicidal thing, but it was too late. They were already out of the reach of the rule of law, such as it was.

The carriage's wheels rattled over the broken cobblestones and sloshed through puddles. Sansa wondered why Aegon had built such a horrid place in his city. Wasn't he supposed to be the Great? Or had he gotten bored of this part of King's Landing when he had eventually gotten to it that he had simply let it go to rot? Or, perhaps, Flea Bottom hadn't always been Flea Bottom.

Margaery lifted the curtains to look out. Sansa shrank back as far as possible so she couldn't be seen from the outside. Dirty, hungry faces that all looked alike passed by. She clutched her dagger and tried to remember everything that Jaime had taught her about where to strike a man. Not the chest, because there were far too many ribs and if her knife got caught in one of those, she would be dead, for sure.

"Stop, Guillem," said Margaery suddenly, making Sansa jerk in fright. But Margaery only wanted to get out. Yes, get out. Not out of Flea Bottom, but out into Flea Bottom! She alighted from the carriage and looked back at the two girls within. "Well, come on," she said, holding out a hand to Sansa, who had no choice but to take it. Her foot immediately landed in a puddle of unnamed sludge and she saw that Margaery was standing in the exact same puddle, the liquid staining the hem of her beautiful blue silk dress brown. The silk was ruined.

"This is where the children of the dead soldiers live," said Margaery. "I heard about it from one of my maids." Spies. It would, however, be very ungracious to refuse to see poor little children who had lost their fathers and mothers. Like Sansa herself. She steeled her nerves and followed Margaery. The smell did not improve once they were inside the dark and dank house but Margaery
seemed not to notice it. She was a ray of sunshine in the gloom. The dripping mildewed walls of the corridors did not bother her at all. The proprietress of the house shuffled out to greet her. The only bit that Sansa could see were the whites of her eyes. She mumbled a welcome, addressing Margaery as 'Your Grace'.

Margaery asked after the children and they were told that the 'little ones' were sitting in the courtyard because there just wasn't enough room for them in the sleeping quarters.

"Let me see them," said Margaery. The proprietress led them through the winding maze and into a sunlit courtyard of cracked stone. A dried fountain sat in the centre, filled with old leaves. There were at least thirty of them; unkempt, thin, with green snot stuck permanently on their upper lips. Sansa felt the urge to recoil from the sight and run the other way. Who knew what diseases these creatures carried? They weren't really people, were they?

"Oh," said Caroline. Sansa glanced sharply back at her. What now?

"Hello," said Margaery. They stared at her with wide eyes, some with thumbs in their mouths and others clutching ragged lumps of firewood which they seemed to treat as their most precious belongings. It took a while for her to realize that these were dolls. Her own doll at home seemed like a veritable beauty compared to these.

Margaery knelt down in front of a little girl with tangled dark hair. She looked to be about four but when she spoke, she sounded a lot older.

"Are you the Maiden?" she asked.

Margaery laughed. "No," she said. "My name is Margaery. What's yours?"

Sansa looked about her, at the eager faces and the hell in which they lived. She didn't know what to make of it all and stood uncomfortably at the corner. Caroline soon became enamoured of a scrap of a baby and was making awful kissing noises and gurgles at it. She even allowed it to grab her hair, which it did, and often, fascinated by the curls and lovely colour of the older girl's tresses. She would make a good mother, Sansa supposed. Daemon was lucky. She, herself, found it difficult to summon false enthusiasm for these young bodies, much less anything real. They were orphans like her. Some of them would live. Some of them wouldn't.

Another child tugged at her dress. Sansa looked down at the tiny thing and thought about diseases. She couldn't even tell if it was a male or a female. Still, with her two companions acting all motherly and whatnot, it would not do for her to be so aloof. Children, for some reason, liked her way more than she liked them.

"Hello," she said as she crouched down so she was at eye-level with the child.

"You got pretty hair," it said. "Like Mama's."

"Where's your mama now?"

It shook its head. "She fell asleep with her eyes open. Sister Pansy found me and brought me here."

"Oh," said Sansa. "Well, you're in a safe place now." It sounded contrived and awkward, but what else could she say?

"Sister Pansy says you live in the Red Keep. Are you friends with the king?"

How was anyone to answer that? She couldn't say no, but she could she really say yes? What if
Joffrey took offence to either option? "I know the king and I love him very much," she said.

"Can you ask him where my papa is?"

Sansa made many false promises that day, beginning with this one. Margaery was too busy handing out toys (she had *obviously* prepared for this visit and somehow wanted to drag them along without telling them. That was *not* what a good friend would do) but Caroline's accusing gaze kept staring at her as she made those promises. Well, what else was she supposed to say? The truth that their parents were dead and rotting and feeding the crows, or that, if they were alive, they were too busy with their own lives to worry about their children? Lies were so much prettier and, sometimes, even kinder.

**Next chapter:** Sansa continues with her training. Margaery and Joffrey prepare for war. Robb is eager for battle and hatches a plan.
A Portrait of the Monarch as a Young Man

Chapter Summary

Sansa continues her lessons with Jaime. Joffrey marches off to war. Katherine grows frustrated with Robb as he hatches up a plan.

King's Landing

Sansa wavered from one side to the other, her gaze on nothing but her own sword and Jaime's sword, trying to find an opening in his defence. He smirked at her. "Well, I suppose you could try to kill your opponent with old age," he teased. All around her were the sounds of combat. Not real combat, as Stefan and Bronn were not actually allowed to kill each other, but they looked like they were trying their very best to make it real. The ground of the courtyard, in contrast to the training yards, was of stone. There was no mud to be found anywhere. Usually, Sansa would have been glad for that but when one did as much falling as she did these days, one wanted a little mud to soften it. However, the practise yard was now filled with strange men from all over the Seven Kingdoms – mostly just certain parts of it, as there was no one from the North or from the Riverlands. Jaime hadn't thought it prudent for her to be mixing with them. So they now practised in a private courtyard in the Lannister wing of the palace and he made Stefan and Caroline and Bronn and all the other knights he could round up practise there so she could have some examples to copy.

She lunged forward, thrusting with her sword, only to find that she had miscalculated and Jaime no longer stood where he had been meant to stand. Somehow, he'd disappeared, and she couldn't stop herself from moving forward. The blow of his blade on her back knocked her breath from her body and sent her flying forwards with a grunt.

"Nice try," he said. "But you fight like a girl." He turned around to go. Suddenly, she was incensed. Not just angry, but furious. How dared he dismiss her like that, as just another girl? She was better than all the other girls, barring a few. She looked at his back and suddenly ran at him, sword raised high, more like a staff than a sword, and struck him, hard, across the shoulders. He stumbled. He did not curse as most normal men would have. Instead, he whirled around and when he did, she wasn't ready for him. What happened next exactly was beyond her memory, but she woke to Jaime lightly slapping her cheek and a terrible throbbing pain in her head.

"Sansa?" he asked. His voice echoed as if he were speaking down a long tunnel. Bells rang in her ears and it took her a while to realize that there were no bells. It was all just her.

"Sansa," cooed Jaime. He looked...worried? He patted her cheek again. "Are you awake?"

"My lord, I think we need a maester," said Stefan.

"She fell pretty hard," remarked Tyrion's sellsword.

"You hit her pretty hard," said Stefan.

"Then go get a maester," Jaime flicked his hand at Stefan in a dismissive manner. Sansa closed her eyes. The sun was shining into them and making them burn.
"Oh no," said Jaime. "Sansa, wake up."

Something wet and warm trickled through her hair. Strong arms lifted her up. "I'm taking her to my quarters. Meet me there, Salvatore," said Jaime. She let her head loll against his chest as if she were unconscious. Let him worry. He deserved it if he hit her.

The mattress was soft and cool beneath her as he laid her down on the bed and clumsily tried to make the pillows comfortable. Obviously, he wasn't used to doing anything like that. "Get Lady Caroline," he said to one of his servants. "Tell her that I don't care what she's doing. She's to come here immediately."

Stefan returned with a companion who had a shuffling step. "My…my lord," said Pycelle. "Oh… Seven!"

"Yes, Grand Maester Pycelle, time for your to prove your worth," said Jaime. Pycelle? She didn't want him touching her. He was incompetent and he had said something about a traitor's seed, as if she and her family were nothing more than weeds.

"He was all I could find in a hurry," said Stefan.

"She seems to have hit her head quite hard…" said Pycelle. The blood was a nice large clue. "How long has she been like this for?"

"She's not actually unconscious, Grand Maester," pointed out Stefan. Curse him! How did he know?

She opened her eyes to find a great number of men staring at her. "My eyes feel a bit dry," she said.

"You could have said something," said Jaime.

"I didn't feel like it. That's why I kept my eyes closed." He might have said something along the lines of "bitch" under his breath. She didn't really catch it.

Pycelle took her pulse and made her tell him how many fingers he held up. Her vision swam. Sometimes she saw two of Grand Maester Pycelle (that was two too many) and three or four Jaimes. "I'll give her a poultice," said the maester finally. "And a concoction to settle her stomach. There isn't much I can do at this point except wait. There could be bleeding on the brain but it's too early to say."

Sansa felt even dizzier at the sound of that.

"Thank you, Grand Maester," said Stefan. "If you would be so kind as to give us a list, we shall procure the herbs for Lady Sansa." He took the maester aside.

Jaime sat down and pulled his chair close to the side of her bed. His bed, rather, but she was in it so that made it hers. She didn't want to talk to him.

"You shouldn't have hit me," he said. "I am a dangerous man and you could have been killed." He paused for a long while but there was no one else to fill in the silence so he was forced to continue. Well, Sansa hadn't expected him to but he did. "I shouldn't have hit you so hard," he said. "It was my instinctive reaction." If it wasn't quite an apology, then it was an explanation and she had a feeling he didn't give out too many of those either.

Caroline burst into the room before he could get around to begging for her forgiveness. They had never spoken of the false (and, therefore, unbroken) promises made in Flea Bottom. Caroline
Forbes might not have approved, but Sansa knew that she'd been trying to do her best to look after her, so far as Caroline was capable of looking after anyone who wasn't in a position of power like Tywin Lannister.

"What have you done?" she demanded. Sansa wasn't sure whether the question was directed at Jaime or at herself. As such, Caroline received no answer.

"We'll need your help with mixing the poultice and medicines," said Jaime. "It requires a delicate touch."

Stefan came back laden with herbs which he must have gotten from the Red Keep's medicine stores or else he would never have returned so quickly. He and Caroline quickly got to work, mixing and brewing. Why the maester himself did not do this, Sansa didn't know, but she was glad that Pycelle was gone. She didn't want him near. There was something about him that didn't feel quite right although she didn't know why. He was just a doddering old man with the wrong idea about her family and the least threatening of all the people in court.

"Here, drink this," said Caroline as she brought her a cup of steaming murky liquid. "This will help."

Sansa obeyed. It tasted awful, whatever it was, so bitter and pungent that it overwhelmed all her senses, even the pain. In fact, the pain in her head faded significantly and she didn't know if it was only because she was so distracted by the bad taste in her mouth. There was a slight metallic taint on her tongue. Then again, she could have just burned it.

"Better?" asked Jaime. He had an odd look in his eye and his smirk was back.

Sansa nodded and wished she hadn't.

"Careful," admonished Caroline. Both she and Jaime gripped Sansa to steady her. She had never felt so cared about ever since she had first stepped into the Red Keep. "You'll be dizzy for a while."

"I think Pycelle was just trying to make himself look important when he talked about bleeding on the brain," said Jaime. "You don't look that bad to me."

"And, of course, you know everything, Maester Jaime," said Caroline. He threw a spare bit of bandage at her.

A grey sludge (poultice) was applied to her head wound. Sansa could only think about how it would dry and get stuck in her hair. It looked like bird droppings, to be quite honest. White linen bandages were wound around her head. Caroline wanted to cut away her hair to get to the wound more effectively, but Sansa emphatically refused. No one was touching her hair! Her protestations made Jaime laugh.

"I think you're enjoying all of this," she said in an accusatory tone.

"My dear Lady Sansa, I assure you I feel nothing but the deepest sorrow for the pain that you are suffering," said Jaime. He patted her hand. "Try and get some rest. I'm sure tomorrow will be better."

Margaery ran her fingers over her fine new armour, plated in gold and engraved with roses. She would look marvellous in it, no doubt, and nobody would ever suspect her of actually being a little scared of the fighting that was to come. She had never been in a proper battle before, having ridden
into King's Landing after Stannis had been driven away. Renly had never really fought very much before his untimely demise.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Loras.

"I have a reputation to maintain," said Margaery. "Besides, it will be quite safe. Last I heard, His Grace has gathered an army of thirty thousand and more lords pledge their forces to him every day."

"I only wonder where he might find the resources to feed all of them," said Loras. "He'd have to win almost as soon as he got there. No one would think lesser of you if you changed your mind."

"Perhaps not, but I won't be overshadowed by Katherine," said Margaery. "Why are you so worried, Loras? You know our dear friend won't let anything happen to us. She's counting on us being there. It would hardly do to disappoint her."

"I could not care less about whether Katherine is disappointed or not. She is only using us."

"As she should. Your friends are only worth being friends with so long as they are assets."

"What if there is some trick?"

"Oh dear, Loras. There is no 'what if'. There will most undoubtedly be a trick and if you ever thought otherwise, then you obviously haven't learned anything at all."

"Marg, I am trying to show concern for my sister, but she is making it exceedingly difficult."

"And I am trying to tell you that there is no need. We will never be in any danger from the Starks so long as they think that they can use us. And they probably can and we will acquiesce because everything that Katherine Stark mentioned was accurate and correct."

"What will Grandmother say of you riding into battle?"

"She would probably approve. If given the chance, she would have done it too."

Loras blew air out in disapproval. Margaery sensed her brother might be jealous. After all, the battlefield (and the tourney field) had been the one place where Margaery had not been able to surpass him in the past. This would change everything and he had no desire to live in her shadow.

Well, too bad. It wasn't as if he had achieved anything and her family now looked to her to make them great. The fate of House Tyrell rested on her shoulders, not on Loras'. There was far more at stake than her own personal glory.

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Flags snapped and slapped each other in the blustering wind as it competed with Joffrey to see who could be the loudest. The king's thin voice won, but not by very far. Sansa reached up to touch the hat that covered the bandages around her head as Joffrey prophesied victory. The army began to march out; blocks upon blocks of men, carrying metal shields and swords. Their footfalls made the ground shake. Joffrey rode at the very front. Margaery turned around and gave Sansa a little wave. She was unrecognizable in her new armour. If she'd had her helmet on, everyone might have mistaken her for Lady Katherine Stark instead of Margaery Tyrell. On her hip was a sword that Sansa was certain she did not know how to use.

She tried to count the number of men who would be gathering at Harrenhal to see her brother burn but she lost count somewhere around five thousand. The snake of soldiers had not yet terminated as
it slithered out of the gates, each segment changing colour as it went; black, silver, gold, red, green. Rumour had it there were fifty thousand men. Robb had less than half of that. How could he win?

It seemed that they stood there forever, watching Joffrey's army go on and on without end. She shivered in the cold wind. It seemed to be saying, "It is over". But then it abated and a thin ray of sunlight pierced the solid layer of black clouds that threatened to pour storms down on them. It parted the darkness and the ray fell upon Sansa's face, warming her a little. It only took one thing to make all the difference. One ray of sun, one flap of a butterfly's wings, one woman determined to be queen.

The rearguard of Joffrey's army finally marched out of the gates. They closed with a groan and a rumbling, final thud. Somebody really needed to oil those hinges. Her legs were numb from standing so long and an ache gnawed at her empty stomach which had ceased to rumble a long time ago.

"And it's just us," remarked Jaime. He pushed himself away from the edge of the battlements where he had been watching the martial procession with everyone else. He stretched like a cat, reaching up to the very highest as if he were capable of touching the sky. In his mind, he probably could and did, every day. "Well, Lady Sansa, I have made a promise not to spar with you until you are 'better', but would you kindly amuse me with a game of cyvasse over supper, perhaps?"

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at cyvasse," said Sansa. She wasn't. It was a boring game. But, to secure Jaime's loyalty, she would do anything. Almost anything. Sansa had boundaries.

"That's exactly why he wants to play against you, my dear Lady Sansa," said Tyrion. "He doesn't like losing."

"Must there be an ulterior motive for my wanting to play cyvasse with my betrothed?" asked Jaime. "After all, if I had wanted a certain win, I would have played Lady Caroline."

Caroline got ready to stick out her tongue but she caught sight of Lord Tywin and held it back, her indignity impotent against the prestige and privilege of Jaime Lannister.

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**Harrenhal**

Excitement hummed and buzzed like a hive of bees that had been stirred. The northmen, newly growing bored after their raids on the Westerlands, jumped into action again. "Does Tywin Lannister intend to march with them?" Robb asked the scout who had brought the news.

"No, my lord," said the man. "Rumours have it that Tywin Lannister will remain in King's Landing, as will Jaime and Tyrion Lannister."

"And the Tyrells?"

"Margaery Tyrell rides by Joffrey's side and the hosts of her father and brother are all present."

"I can hardly imagine dear Margaery in battle," said Katherine, looking up from her sewing. "Why, she doesn't even know how to hold a sword."

"Yes," said Robb dryly. "She seems to be under the impression that she is the next Katherine Stark."

Katherine laughed. "You have a sweet tongue, my lord," she said. "But you forget that there have been other women who have ridden into battle."
"None in recent times, save you, my love," said Robb.

The scout, having given all his information and sensing that he was no longer needed, retreated to rest and recover from his arduous journey.

"Well, I highly doubt Margaery is going to contribute very much to the battle," said Katherine. She tied off one thread and pushed another through the eye of her needle. Arya should be here to watch her do this. His sister wanted so much to be like Katherine, but she only ever learned some of his wife's attributes. "The question is, my lord, what are you going to do about the army of thousands?"

Robb grinned. "You do not seriously think I am afraid, do you? I have been waiting for this moment for…but you knew that." His frivolity faded into awe at this woman, yet again. He knelt before her and removed her sewing before taking her little hands in his. "I love you, Katherine Stark. You are the most incredible woman I have ever met. I knew you had a purpose in writing letters to Daemon Lannister, but never had I thought that…"

Katherine placed a finger against his lips to hush him. "I didn't think this would happen either, but Joffrey is a very obliging enemy, it seems. One could hardly wish for better."

"I would hardly say that Joffrey is obliging, but in your hands, he is clay."

"Not mine. Daemon's," said Katherine.

"He would never have done anything without your…encouragement." He suddenly stiffened and stood. "What am I going to do?" he asked. "If there are fifty thousand of them, maybe more, then they will outnumber us more than two times over. My men are undisciplined. You know that, Katherine. You've been saying that all along. How can they…"

"Robb, I have faith in you," said Katherine.

"That makes one of us," said Robb. "I need to think."

Katherine made to get up to leave, but he held up a hand. "I think you should remain here, Katherine. I need…a willing ear; inspiration, or a muse, as you would put it."

"All right," said Katherine. She stood up on tiptoes to kiss him on the forehead. "I will be your muse, Robb Stark, whenever you need me."

When Katherine had agreed to be Robb's muse, she had not anticipated that it meant sitting in a corner for four hours watching him play with his toy soldiers. He wouldn't let her read or give herself a mani-pedi either, for he needed her to direct all her positive thoughts in his direction, apparently.

Right now, every thought that she possessed was decidedly negative, and the Robb-related ones especially so. Even if Robb was very good to look at, four hours of doing nothing but watch him was still too much. He only ever arranged the Lannister models and then knocked the Stark models over with them before beginning all over again. Each time, the arrangement was different but the result was inevitable. Robb was always knocking over his wolves.

Katherine bent the horsewhip back and forth in her hand. The leather was supple yet not so soft that it wouldn't hurt if one got hit with it. She was feeling like using it on someone, and the top candidate was her uninspired husband. The shadows grew short and then long as the sun reached its zenith and then began its descent. The food that the servants had delivered had gone unnoticed and lay in a disgusting congealed pool of shit-coloured gravy ("Must you cut up your food loudly,
Katherine? I'm thinking.

She was about to stand up and declare that she would not have any more of this nonsense when he angrily swept all the figurines onto the floor. They fell in a clattering heap and scattered. A wooden lion came to a stop at Katherine's feet. Grey Wind, sensing his master's distress but not knowing its cause, picked up one of the wooden wolves in his mouth and went back to Robb, his tail wagging tentatively in the hopes that a game of fetch might cheer him up (Robb, not Grey Wind).

Robb took the wolf from Grey Wind and looked at it, slobber and all. He turned his intense blue eyes upon Katherine as if hoping for answers from her. They widened when he saw her flexing the whip. Did he know what she was thinking?

"Katherine, you are brilliant," he whispered.

Was Robb into BDSM? Did he even know what it was? Not that she would mind trying it out on him. He, of course, would be the one tied to the bed.

Robb, however, had turned his attention back to his board and was rearranging all the models. "A man's greatest strength can also be his greatest weakness," he said rapidly, the words coming to his mind almost too quickly for his tongue to wrap around them. "The Lannisters are orderly, they obey every command, they move as if they are one instead of many."

"And that is bad, how?" asked Katherine.

"They are predictable," said Robb. His eyes shone. "The Lannisters, on a battlefield, will line themselves into tidy rows and columns. They will march towards us slowly and steadily and hope to smash us like a hammer against an egg. Which is what we will be if we play by their rules. But what if we don't? What if we were more like your whip? If a hammer smashes against a whip, not only does it not do very much, but the whip can still wrap around it and strangle it."

"That's assuming that hammers are actually alive enough to be strangled," said Katherine sarcastically. "Do you mind skipping the terrible metaphors and just telling me what's on your mind before I use the whip on you and smush your uneaten lunch in your face?"

"You are beautiful when you are angry, Lady Stark," said Robb. He was grinning, now, and showing straight white teeth. How could his teeth be so perfect? He couldn't possibly have had any dental care. "Summon the war council. I have no idea where my squire has run off to. He's useless. I wish Elijah were here. He'd understand."

"I understand," said Katherine.

"Then why aren't you more excited?"

"I always knew you would come up with something. It took you a lot longer than I had anticipated, though. My buttocks are sore."

"Then I shall kiss them tonight until they are all better. But, for now, would you please summon my bannermen? We will have much to discuss."

"And then you will kiss my arse."

"Don't be crude, Katherine. And I like your arse."
Next chapter: Robb shares his plans. Margaery experiences what it's like to march with a proper army. Damon and company meet with bounty hunters.
Robb shares his plan with his bannermen. Margaery realizes what it means to travel with a proper army. Damon and company encounter trouble. Again.

Harrenhal

The bannermen crammed themselves into the war council chambers. They stood in rows and blocks surrounding Robb’s strategic planning table (an old dinner table covered with maps and figurines representing the armies of the great houses, not so dissimilar to the toy soldiers he’d played with as a child). Necks were craned and ears were stretched to hear how Robb planned to crush the force of fifty thousand ironclad southerners marching toward Harrenhal.

Katherine took up her place in the corner. The men respectfully, or fearfully, stepped out of her line of vision.

"Our enemy marches on our borders with fifty-thousand men," said Robb slowly, reiterating what they already knew. "In a few weeks, we will have the war we came to fight." His heart constricted for a moment as he thought of the ranks of southerners, fifty-thousand strong, or more. He had only twenty thousand and his men were in disarray at best. Would they ever win? No, they had to win. The south could not conquer the north and he could not lose. He steeled his face and his expression and thought of the fierceness of his men, the cunning of his wife, and the last time a Lannister had been brought to his knees before him. Besides, he had a plan and it was a good one. It would work.

"We have the advantage of being on our own turf," said Robb. "Joffrey's men will be tired and unfamiliar with the territory. We must fight them before can cut off our supply routes."

"They number fifty thousand," murmured Hamys Glover, one of the younger Glover sons. He hadn't intended to be overheard but the room was so quiet that everyone could hear everything, down to the softest intake of breath.

"They do," said Robb.

"That is more than twice our number."

A murmur rippled through the crowd; if he did not stop it soon, the first seed of doubt would bloom.

"They may have fifty thousand, but none of them are called Hamys Glover," said Robb. He would have liked to point out that the Lannisters didn't have a Robb Stark either but that just seemed too arrogant and conceited. His bannermen might not take his confidence as well as his wife.

Hamys bowed deeply and, when he straightened himself, his shoulders were more squared and his eyes were brighter.

"The Tyrells and their cavalry are unpredictable and our greatest threat. They might sweep around to cut off our retreat. The Lannisters will do what they always do. They intend to smash us like a
hammer with brute force," said Robb. "That we cannot allow."

"What if they do something else?" asked Bolton. "Something more…diabolical, to use a word that Lady Katherine is fond of."

"Why would they need to?" asked Robb. "They know this will work."

"Besides, our good friends in the Lannister camp have told us exactly what the Lion cub plans," said Katherine sweetly.

"As I have said, they will try to smash us like a hammer because they can," said Robb. He was about to mention the horsewhip but remembered what Katherine had said about terrible metaphors. He was no poet and he really shouldn't try to be one. He was a king, a leader of men. He did not need to weave pretty words together to entwine them in his ideas.

He placed the wolves in an outward facing arc, curved backward like a bow pointing at the Lannister army. Could it even be called the Lannister army when most of them were Tyrell men? Their forces, even here on the map, looked small compared with the blocks that represented Joffrey.

"Our cavalry is the key. They will meet the Tyrell cavalry and drive them off, separating them from Joffrey's main force." He placed a wolf to the side to represent the cavalry. As he did so, he looked up at Katherine who was still perched on the edge of her seat. Why was she wearing Targaryen colours? Not that they didn't look good on her, but she was the wife of a Stark. White and black should be her colours, not red and black. "My lady, will you lead the cavalry charge?"

The men sucked in a breath all at once. Katherine slowly rose, with her hands clasped together just beneath her breasts. Her imperious manner quelled any dissent. If anyone wanted to say anything, they quickly swallowed their words as they remembered the Mountain. And what had happened to the Karstarks and the Umbers.

Katherine hid her surprise at his request well. Up until that moment, he had not thought that he would ask her. It was so bold, so new, and the gods, both old and new, knew that the Starks never really did anything that was too out of the ordinary and that flouted the rules of common decency too much. No one but the Targaryens ever let their women ride into battle. No one, not even a Targaryen, had asked their women to ride into battle.

But it made perfect sense. If she had been a man, she would have been the best commander under his banner. Such as it was, she was still one of the best commanders under his banner. The men looked to her, loved her, feared her, followed her. After the defeat of the Mountain, who wouldn't? To ignore her talent in battle was to waste one of the greatest gifts the gods had presented them with, if there were indeed any gods out there.

"You honour me, my lord," said Katherine. "I could never refuse such a request."

Robb turned back to the map. He could worry about her later. He had faith in her abilities. Had she not given him Harrenhal when other men had given him only mills?

"Our horses are hardier and stronger and our men are better riders," said Robb. "We are more than evenly-matched against the Tyrells in that regard. You must not let them rejoin with the main army, but scatter them. Their losses will be heavy. Our losses will be heavy, but you must persevere no matter the cost. This is crucial. Do you understand? They cannot be allowed to respond in any manner."
"Yes," said Katherine.

"I shall ride at the front and centre," said Robb, pointing at the front of the arch. "This is where the battle will reach us first and where they will hit us the hardest. They will advance as one and they will come for me, thinking our formation weak and that they will be able to split us down the middle. Lord Bolton, you will take the right flank and Lord Manderly, you will take the left." He pointed at the two tips of the bow which were curved further away from the advancing Lannisters. "When the Lannisters push forward, you will be far from the fighting. Remain in your positions. Do not engage until you see that the centre is being pushed backward. The forces at the centre will be driven back. We will give our ground slowly and the bow will straighten."

"But, my lord, the lines will break," said Lord Manderly worriedly. "No army can give that much ground without breaking."

"They will not break. I will be there," said Robb quietly. He looked the lords in their eyes. "At that point, the Lannisters will believe they have won. They will come for me, confident in their victory. I will give a signal. When you see it, sweep in on their flanks."

He moved the wolf figurines so they now surrounded the Lannisters on three sides and the bow was reversed.

"My lady, at this point, you will ride back with the cavalry and cut off the Lannisters' retreat. We will surround them on all sides. Joffrey Lannister will destroy his army here on the steps of Harrenhal and never raise another. Gaining my enmity will be the greatest and last mistake he ever makes."

On the Kings Road, near Sow's Horn

The armour was heavy and restrictive, more so than even one of those whalebone corsets that had been in fashion for a time until Margaery had refused to wear them anymore. Sweat beaded beneath her helmet and on her forehead as the sun beat down upon them. In a huff, she undid the chafing chin straps and removed the ridiculous thing. Her neck was sore from trying to hold her head up with that on. The cool breeze on her damp skin and hair immediately gave her more comfort.

"You can ride in the carriage if you want, sister," called Loras from the front of the column. "That's what it's there for."

"Do you think Robb Stark's wife would do the same?" asked Margaery, careful not to speak of Katherine as if they were friends.

"No, but that woman has the heart of a man," said Loras. Was that a worshipful tone in his voice? Why did he never speak of her in such a tone? "The gods obviously made a mistake and put her in the wrong body."

Margaery cast a longing look at the carriage. There would be comfortable, soft padded seats inside, with cushions to lie on or to prop up one's sore back. And there would be sweets. She could lay down her head and sleep until they reached whatever gods forsaken plain near that ruin that Katherine called home. But she couldn't. She couldn't be seen as a lesser woman than Katherine Stark. After all, Margaery was going to be The Queen. Katherine had only been a queen and now she was just Lady Stark.

So she squared her shoulders and gritted her teeth and wondered why on earth the bards sang of the
glories of battle when there was only dirt and pain and blisters to be found. Damn Katherine. If she hadn't set the standards so high, there would have been no need for any of this.

They had been marching for weeks in the sun and rain and cold and heat. The paths became little more than muddy beaten tracks worn out by centuries of journeys and thousands of feet. Her horse became less steady as the terrain became rockier and sparser. In other places, floods and rains had washed away bridges or swept so much debris over them that the entire company had to stop and clear away the dead branches before they could move on. Her body ached in places that she hadn't even thought could ache. Her hair was lanky and greasy. She felt a thousand miles away from the beautiful and alluring Margaery Tyrell who had been left somewhere behind just outside of King's Landing.

"How long do we have until we get there?" she asked.

"We've got a few days yet," Loras replied. "Marg, really, no one will laugh at you if you take a rest inside the carriage. What do you think they'll say if you meet Katherine Stark on the battlefield half alive and looking for all the world like you've been dragged out of a sewer in Flea Bottom?"

A sewer in Flea Bottom? That wouldn't do.

"Let me know when we get close," she said.

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**Somewhere in the middle of nowhere**

Whispers floated on the air in every village, speaking in hushed tones of a great punishing host marching north and led by no other than King Joffrey Baratheon or Lannister, depending on which way the village leaned. Damon carried back the trays of food and tankards of ale to the hungry and ailing human travellers.

"Well?" whispered Jon as he took his portion of the stew. It was a poor stew of squirrel and wild vegetables, but at least it wasn't a bowl of brown. That was something to be thankful for. Hot Pie immediately dunked his head in the ale and his bread in the stew. Gendry ate as quietly as he could, as if his slightly improved manners could possibly impress Elena, whose eyes and heart were filled only with Jon.

"There's nothing new," Damon replied as he took a tankard of ale and wished that there was something stronger than this watery fish piss that passed for beer. "The host is still marching towards Harrenhal. Daemon Lannister's with them and Robb is still supposedly doomed."

"How many?" asked Jon.

"Fifty thousand, one hundred thousand, two-hundred thousand, who knows?" said Damon.

"How can you be so flippant about it?"

"Worrying isn't going to help, is it? The best thing we can do is finish up eating quickly so we can be on our way. Once we get there, we'll know."

Elena reached over and gripped Jon's hand. "Damon's right, you know," said Elena. "We can't do anything out here but once we reach your brother, it will be a different matter."

Jon fiercely ripped off a hunk of hard bread just to prove that he was going to be helpful and not starve himself. Damon felt the urge to dunk his face in the stew. Did he always have to be so
Damon bent over his own meal and tried to eat a few mouthfuls to blend in. The stew wasn't too bad, actually. Sure, the meat was a bit stringy and gamey, and the Westerosian name for the stew ("Tree rat and vegetables") was not the most appetizing, but there was salt in it and a few herbs to pick up the flavour. His standards had dropped drastically over the past couple of months.

In the corner of the dark inn, a couple of men in filthy armour sat. Their scabbards were worn and battered and the leather of their boots were so thin that the footwear might as well have been made of parchment. Damon pretended not to notice the way they were staring at their odd little party with their varying degrees of competence and wealth displayed. Who wouldn't look at Samwell Tarly and think "prey"?

He furrowed his brow at Elena. She looked confused at first and then made to glance behind her.

"Don't," Damon whispered.

"What is it?" whispered Jon. For now, his animosity had disappeared. He, of all people, had sensed that Damon thought there was danger and he, of all people, had not reacted in such a way as to draw attention to the fact that they knew about said danger.

"Those men in the corner, they've been eyeing us. Don't look, Tarly. If we act like we're completely oblivious, they may not do anything."

"Who are they?" whispered Tarly. His face had grown paler.

"Brigands, mercenaries...how should I know? I've never seen them before in my life," said Damon.

"What do they want?" asked Gendry.

"Nothing that you want to give, that's for sure," said Damon. He was surrounded by idiots! Elena's friends were all idiots. Wait, he'd known that a long time ago. She had this tendency to gather about her the most pathetic and helpless excuses for humanity and superhumanity, barring himself and Stefan, of course. Maybe Jon, but the jury was still out on that one. Perhaps it was her compassionate nature and misguided ideals that the world would be a better place if they all held hands and sang Kumbaya. He blamed the modern education system and values that made slaves of everyone except those who saw through the lies of love and peace. "But finish your food. We paid for that. Don't want to waste it."

Tarly reluctantly scooped up some stew with his hard bread and kept fighting the urge to glance at the men who were still staring at his back like it was that of an unaware piglet they would like to roast for supper. The threat, however, seemed to give Jon more motivation. He ate fiercely, like a northman generally would, and reminded him very much of an angry Ned, a sight which few, save for Damon and perhaps Ned's children, had ever witnessed.

They polished off all the food and wrapped up the remnants of the bread crusts. It would be something for the humans to nibble on and they couldn't afford to waste edible things; not if they didn't want to waste time searching for other villages and inns or hunting big game, anyway.

The rough chairs scraped against the packed dirt floor as they rose. They walked past the men in the dark corner. Soon after they'd left the doorway, Damon heard the men rise too. He didn't tell the others, knowing that the only thing they could do was panic, or overreact, in Jon's case, and Elena probably heard the same thing as him. Her shoulders tensed just a little, but she did not look
back. Good girl. She was a hunter, not prey.

They passed by some horses tethered to a withered tree near a water trough. In their need to get away quietly from Daemon's camp, they hadn't taken any steeds of their own and now Damon was beginning to regret that decision as their pace grew slower and slower by the day. There was only so much one could do with Tarly and the Pie. He wondered if he could steal the horses, but it was broad daylight and they couldn't possibly get away with it. The idea was abandoned as swiftly as it had come. They should really get out of here before the men caught up, although the chances were slim.

Damon ducked beneath the eaves of a black northern forest that reminded him distinctly of Bavaria in every way. Most of the animals had hidden away in their burrows for the day. He would have liked to travel in the night better because it made them more difficult to follow, but the Pie insisted on sleep and Jon insisted on walking at all times towards Harrenhal. If Elena hadn't stopped him, he might have marched himself to death.

The wet leaves muffled their footfalls. He could barely glimpse the sun between the boughs of the forest. The branches criss-crossed and criss-crossed again, making it almost an impenetrable canopy. That would have been useful if they had been hiding from some airborne predator hunting from above, but the gnarled trunks below were much sparser.

A twig cracked somewhere not too far away. It was beyond human hearing and neither Tarly nor the other two boys were spooked. Jon, however, was watching the two vampires for all he was worth and he must have seen something (what it was, Damon could not say) because his hand quietly went to the hilt of his sword.

Damon and Elena exchanged glances. If the bandits struck, they would be just in time for lunch. The squirrel stew hadn't been at all satisfying.

The sounds of foreign footsteps were coming from all four directions. So they planned to surround them, did they? They didn't exactly have enough people for a successful flanking.

The shadows approached them. As they drew closer, the features of their faces appeared. They were rough men, scarred from battle, weary of war, and likely just after some quick money.

"Fancy seeing you here, Damon Salvatore," said the tallest of them who looked to be their leader. "I mean, this is you, isn't it?" He unfurled a piece of parchment which had once been adhered to a wall or post by nails. On it was a drawing. The sketch was rough and wasn't nearly handsome enough, but it had enough of a likeness to him. Below the drawing was the sum of the reward: fifty gold dragons.

"He's not quite handsome enough," said Damon. "But you've got me there, friend."

The man rolled up the primitive wanted poster and smiled. "I certainly have," he said. He didn't sound like one of the rabble. His accent was too precise, even if it was a little rough around the edges, with a northern burr. Damon looked more closely at the scratched and muddied armour. It was made of boiled leather, characteristic of the soldiers in Robb's army.

"You do realize you're being underpaid, right? Mind you, I suppose where you're from, fifty is a big number beyond fingers and toes," said Damon. "What banner did you ride under?"

"What makes you think I rode under any banner at all?" asked the man.

"I could list the reasons out, but neither of us have so much time to waste," said Damon. "Let's just
"Umber," said the man. "I served under Lord Umber until Robb Stark took his head. I'm sure you're familiar with that."

Damon made a so-so gesture with his hand. It obviously wasn't universal because nobody seemed to understand what he was doing.

"Maybe your head might buy us some favour with the Lannisters..." the man's voice trailed off as he caught sight of Elena. "Katherine," he whispered. His sword left his scabbard with a hissing ring, as did his compatriots'. Their eyes became wild and feverish as they looked upon her most inoffensive figure. Jon drew his sword in response, as did Gendry. Tarly tried. The Pie looked as if he would rather be in a hole somewhere safe.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but that's not Katherine," said Damon. "Not that it will matter to you because you're not getting her either." He gave into the urge and let his fangs slide out. The cool wind on their lengths made him shiver in delightful anticipation. He imagined the heat enveloping them and filling his mouth.

The men were confused as to what they were seeing. Their heart rates sped up. Damon didn't allow them enough time to register. He pounced on the leader before he could get his sword into position. Long pianist's fingers wrapped about the gnarled dirty hair and yanked back the head to expose a length of soft white throat covered with a bristle of beard. "See what I meant about being underpaid? Fifty gold dragons is not nearly enough," he said. He sank his fangs into the flesh but did not take the time to savour the warmth. They curled around the back of the man's windpipe. Damon pulled his head back. There was the freeing feeling of tearing flesh. He spat out the length of windpipe before moving onto the next man who was too frozen in place to do anything about it. He heard Hot Pie and Sam screaming whilst Elena worked on the third man and Jon must have been dealing with the fourth.

"Damon, stop," said Elena. Why wasn't she busy guzzling like a normal vampire? Damon looked up to see the three other men subdued and cowering.

"Elena," he began.

"Stop, I said," said Elena. She glared at him. Damon reluctantly let go of the man he had been about to drink. Actually, he'd had a few gulps already, but why couldn't Elena let him feel the life ebbing out of that body? "I want to ask them some questions."

She knelt down so she was on eye-level with the man who Jon was guarding. "We don't want any trouble. Tell us everything you know about the force marching towards Harrenhal, and we'll let you go, all right?" she said. "No one needs to get hurt."

Damon opened his mouth to protest but she threw him a look that made him shut up. He did. Not because he agreed with her methods but because he could afford to wait a little while to see what she was up to.

The man glanced from Damon's bloodied fanged face to Elena's. Her lips were stained with the red of his comrades' blood, but she had retracted her fangs. And then she had those earnest liquid brown eyes that always helped.

"I don't really know anything about it," he stammered. Jon poked his sword further at the man's face, making him cower.
"It's all right," said Elena. Her voice was low and soothing. Hypnotic. He could listen to her all day. He really could. "Tell me what you know. How many are there?"

"About fifty, or maybe seventy thousand, or maybe sixty," said the man. "King's Landing has been emptied and all the surrounding lands too. People have been throwing all sorts of numbers around. The largest I heard was one million."

"That's ridiculous," snapped Jon.

"It's all right," said Elena quickly before the man could open his mouth to beg for mercy.

"I know it ain't right but that's what they're saying so I'm just telling you," he said defensively.

"And how did you know about Damon?" asked Elena.

"His picture was stuck onto the walls all over," said the man. "Dugal, there, he could read and he told us what it said. We thought that maybe if we took his head to the Lannisters, they'll take us in. We didn't know he was with you. I swear, m'lady. If I'd known that he was one of your men, I wouldn't have dared to touch him. I don't want no trouble. Please. I've told you everything I know."

"Thank you," said Elena.

"You'll let us go now? You promised."

"I did, didn't I?" asked Elena. "But you know too much." Damon perked at the sudden change of tone as Elena's voice hardened. Well, well, she was turning into a right little Katherine!

Jon dispatched the blabberer with one swift swing of the sword. Blood spurted into the air as the body toppled over. The head bounced badly and rolled a couple of feet before coming to a stop by Hot Pie's foot. Elena went for the third man as Damon turned his attention back to the man he still held.

It was quick. It was messy. It was delicious. He gathered the corpse of his victim to his body like a lover and suckled greedily on his neck. He glanced up at the horrified Gendry who had obviously never watched Elena feed before. Jon looked away as if there was something extremely private and x-rated about his girlfriend having lunch.

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Hot Pie in a strangled voice.

"I suppose…it's no worse than us eating meat," Sam tried to reason, more with himself than with anybody else.

"But we do cook it," murmured Gendry.

Elena gave a little moan of pleasure as she abandoned herself to the joys of a baby vampire feeding off a fresh human. Normally, Damon might be worried about how she'd go too far and be utterly consumed by gluttony. But he thought he'd let her indulge. She was going to need that blood. They didn't know when they might have another chance to have human again.

They buried the bodies in shallow graves where they would surely be dug up by foxes and stoats and rats eager to stuff themselves before the winter came.

"If you're done, I'd like to leave now," said Jon. "There will be more deserters, more traitors out there hoping to garner the favour of the Lannisters by either betraying us or Robb, or both. The sooner we get to Robb's side, the better."
"That goes without saying," said Damon. "What do you think we've been doing for the past couple of weeks?"

Next chapter: Margaery has trouble adjusting to life on the road. Robb doubts himself and deals with the problem of deserters. Stannis' emissary arrives in Harrenhal.
The Day Before Tomorrow

Chapter Summary

Joffrey fantasizes about being forever immortalized in the annals of history and song. Margaery experiences a critical issue. Robb deals with deserters and is still preparing for battle.

Somewhere on the Kingsroad

Joffrey felt all the weight of his seventeen years (and his armour) as he made his way steadily towards the ideal field north of Harrenhal. And Robb Stark's supply lines. His eyes were heavy from lack of good sleep. The novelty of being in the wild had soon worn off after leaving King's Landing and he recalled, once more, how tedious he found nature. Why did men sing of birds and bees? And trees. They only ever got in the way. It would be better if he shot all the birds, kept all the bees in honey farms and the trees were all cut down to build a new "co-luh-see-um" – an arena for violent sports – in his name.

He turned his attention to something else less annoying and looked upon the rows and rows of men in gleaming silver and black armour. Who needed his grandfather's men anyway? He had his own troops.

They marched in unison, their feet making the sound of drums to wake the still earth. Peasants with thin, frightened faces stared at them and shrank back to hide in their burrows and hovels. All the animals scattered like they ought before the king of all beasts. Upon his shield were the lion and the stag meeting each other in the middle. He thought there could be no finer king or leader in the history of Westeros. He would prove his family wrong about him. He would prove to the world that Aegon was not worthy of being called the Great.

Margaery had long resigned to the fact that she would not be comfortable unless she rode inside her carriage, and he imagined her gossiping with her handmaidens and eating sweets – if there were sweets to be had. He smiled indulgently. His future wife was a pretty thing, and fun, too, unlike Sansa Stark. But he still wished he could have had a taste of that red-headed creature before he had left, if only so he could boast to Robb Stark about how he had ravished his sister and made her cry out for more before he took off that insolent wolf's head. The Young Wolf indeed. He was nothing more than a cur.

"How long until Harrenhal?" he demanded of Daemon.

"Not long, now, Your Grace," said Daemon. "But we are moving to the north of the fortress."

"I don't need you to remind me," snapped Joffrey. "I'm not senile. I know that attacking his fortress would be…something about futility. Why can't we just surround him and starve him out?"

"Would that we could, Your Grace, but Robb Stark is not an idiot. He won't stay there and wait for us to surround him."

"Either way, he'll be dead all the same. We'll cut off his supply lines and then he can either die by my sword or starve to death. We cannot fail."
Daemon bowed his head and said nothing. Joffrey returned to dreaming about all the things he could do with Robb Stark once he was captured. Perhaps he wouldn't kill him straight away. Perhaps he would make him watch as the men took his whore of a wife one by one and then throw him into a pit of famished wolves to be torn apart by his own house sigil. That would be nice.

It was untenable. This could not go on. What words could describe such suffering? It was not to be borne.

"I must have a bath," declared Margaery. Her hair was lank, her body sticky with old sweat and dirt clung to her like a needy child. No matter how she tried to keep it away, it managed to get on her, and on everything else, too. The further north they went, the more everything took on a greyish taint of mud and cloud. She hadn't minded Flea Bottom so much, having known that, at the end of the day, she could simply return to her chambers and sit in a hot bath for as long as she liked and then have her maids dab perfume on her skin afterwards.

There was still perfume, but the sweet scents mixed in with the stench of travel only exacerbated, rather than ameliorated, the smell. "Is there a way, Loras?"

"There is a perfectly serviceable stream," Loras pointed out. "It's clean. I've looked. We'll be stopping soon so you may bathe then."

Bathing out in the open? Well, she wasn't shy. She leaned out of the window of her carriage and glanced at the direction that Loras was pointing in. The stream was shielded by a cover of low and hardy looking pines. Their needles were dark to the point of almost being black. What was wrong with colour? How could Katherine stand this place? Then again, she wanted her king enough. Why in the world hadn't she looked to the one in King's Landing? Margaery would never understand and be forever glad that she hadn't.

The army did stop, as Loras had promised. The carriage lurched to a halt, one wheel falling into a depression in the ground. Margaery hopped off. Her armour had lost all its sheen of newness and she vowed that until she reached the battlefield, she would not wear it. It was heavy and uncomfortable and it cut into her skin at the neck and shoulders.

Loras followed her as her escort as she and her maids traversed across the lumpy field to get to the stream. The clear water, edged with mossy rocks, ran over ground down pebbles rapidly.

"Turn around, Loras," she commanded.

"Trust me, Marg, I don't want to look," said Loras. His back was already to her. She quickly stripped off the fur-edged woollen cloak that had become quite essential up here in the north – and it wasn't even \textit{the} North yet! – and her many layers of outer and under garments. The wind was bitingly cold. She shivered. It would have to be quick. She dipped her toe into the water to test it. The cold made her foot ache. She shrank back. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad the second time.

It was just as bad, if not worse.

"Can't we take water back and heat it up?" she asked. She sounded pitiful, like a whining Sansa, but she didn't care. This was miserable. She could not bathe in such temperatures! She would catch her death of the hacking cough. And \textit{then} where would her family be? Without her, and Grandmother, the menfolk were all helpless, save Willas, who was a cripple. One only had to see what Loras had achieved in King's Landing whilst he'd been there without her. Nothing, unless one counted winning a joust by cheating, which she did not.
"Don't be a child, Margaery," said Loras. "It's just a little cold. Don't you ever wonder why Sansa Stark has such nice skin?"

"I thought you didn't notice such things," said Margaery.

"I notice beauty in all its forms, sister." He turned around. She squeaked a protest but made no move to cover herself. That was a concept that was beyond her. How could he disobey her like this? He was the worst brother in the world! Before she could say anything clever about how he only liked a mediocre kind of beauty that could be found in a looking glass, he'd scooped up some water and splashed it at her.

She gave an outraged yell of no words, then. The water was still that cold. She was surprised that it hadn't frozen yet. Anger robbed her of reason for a moment and she splashed him back. He yowled and spluttered like a cat in a bath, making her smirk.

"There," she said. "How do you like it?"

"My armour will rust!" said Loras.

"Serves you right for being a brute," she said. "Now turn back around. I am going to bathe now."

He stomped off in a huff as he was wont to do whenever something displeased him and he could do nothing about it. She didn't know why he was so irritable. His squire polished his armour with sand and grease and he rode in the rain all the time. He was just making a fuss because he wanted to be spoiled and petted and no one had done so for a while.

She quickly scrubbed herself whilst her maids worked on her hair. Her body burned and tingled from the cold. Her clothes, when she put them back on afterwards, felt delightfully warm.

How could anything so ordinary now feel like a luxury?

She glanced up at the grey sky and sighed. How many more days until they could all go home? She didn't care about the victory. In fact, it was better that Joffrey never won so the war could go on and the Tyrells could continue being important to him. And she could stay in warm King's Landing and guard their home.

"Marg, we'd better not loiter," said Loras. "The king will be waiting."

Other women could be the warrior queens, she decided. Margaery Tyrell was not one of those and she was happy to remain a lady. It was all very well to march with the army when they had all the amenities of a city, as it had been in Renly's camp, but Joffrey had little finesse and did not care for such details. He thought they could all be Katherine Stark. Well, if he wanted to live like a northern barbarian, that was his choice, but Margaery would much rather not.

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**Harrenhal**

"Open the gates!" Robb looked up from the last minute preparations. Who could it be at this hour, demanding entry into Harrenhal? It was late. The sun was setting. Tomorrow, the war would begin again.

Hurried feet rushed to his door. "My lord, it's King Stannis. He's sent word. And men."

"Then he is most welcome," said Robb. His bannermen looked at each other in surprise. They had expected to be alone in the fight, having no idea as to what Katherine's letters could achieve.
Sometimes, he wondered if her quill was mightier than a sword. It was funny to think that a feather could be more powerful than a blade of steel.

The banner of the fiery stag flapped this way and that in the wind, making the flames look as if they were moving. A small host of men was gathered outside the gates of Harrenhal. Robb marched out to meet them, wondering at their sudden appearance.

"Lord Stark," the knight at the front greeted him. He dismounted when Robb neared, and bowed. "I come at the bidding of His Grace, King Stannis of House Baratheon. He sends his greetings to you and your noble lady." The knight handed him a letter bearing the heavy waxen seal of the new House Baratheon before looking around. "Where is the esteemed Lady Stark?" he asked. Robb wondered whether he had been instructed to ask after Katherine or whether it was merely his curiosity. He knew how men were with his wife; how they were rendered speechless, in awe, at her very presence. She had a power over them that he did not understand.

"I have sent her word that a host from the king has come," said Robb. He hadn't, but he was certain that someone would have told her. One of her praetorians, maybe. They were everywhere. "You should come within with your men, Ser …"

"Onry, my lord," said the knight. "Ser Onry Dancred." He removed his helmet, revealing a youthful bearded face of fervour and honest faith. "I am at your service, Lord Stark."

"The king is too kind," said Robb. "How is His Grace?"

"His Grace is disappointed about the defeat at King's Landing, but he has not lost faith and we have regained some of our former strength, by the grace of our Lord. And your rear-guard actions, Lord Stark, of course. Lord Hoster, although he remains a heathen, has been kind to us. We will not forget it. Perhaps he may yet see the light."

Robb nodded graciously. "May the Lord…guide him," he said, feeling very self-conscious about uttering such a ridiculous thing. His grandfather would be a worshipper of the seven until the day he died. Robb would put his faith only in himself, his men, and Katherine.

He counted about another two thousand men as the Baratheon force rode inside the fortress to water their horses and feed their men. They had brought their own supplies, for which he was glad. Securing Harrenhal had ensured that his supply lines would not be so easily broken but, even so, it was a long way from the north and the Riverlands were dangerous.

Never failing his expectations, Katherine did know and she did come to greet Onry, whose eyes widened and developed a sort of unfocusedness that Robb was becoming accustomed to. "You must forgive me, my lady, for my lack of grace," said Onry as he fumbled over kissing her hand. Robb thought he had lingered over it just a little too long. "I have heard much of your fervent faith and the Lord's favour upon you. They say you brought the entire north into the Light."

"It was not I, but my lord," Katherine assured the dazzled Ser Onry. "Please, Ser Onry, rise. We are all brothers and sisters in the Light of the Lord." How in the world did she know what to say? Robb struggled to come up with even one phrase that sounded remotely religious. Perhaps he ought to start inserting "the Lord" and "Light" into his everyday speech patterns.

"I am not worthy, my lady," said Onry and he bowed lower.

Once he had recovered enough, he joined in on the discussion about the plans. Roose Bolton quickly told him, in simplistic terms, what Robb had planned for the next day. Onry looked dubious and doubtful as he frowned at the figurines arranged in an outward-facing arc. "It is not
that I do not trust that the strength of the Lord is with you, Lord Stark," he said, making Robb want
to throttle him and insist that the Lord had nothing to do with his victories at all. But that would
ruin the carefully cultivated image of the religious man that he had crafted for Stannis’ benefit and
the Greatjon’s sacrifice would be for naught. "But would your centre not break first?"

"The Lord is with us," said Robb. "We shall not break. Does His Grace not lead his men
personally? I shall follow in his example."

Lord Manderly's mouth looked pinched. Katherine, on the other side of the room, gave Robb a
small approving smile. Apparently, his attempt at being a religious fanatic did not sound as bad to
her as it had to him. Onry dared not contradict him, especially not when he invoked the Lord of Light. What in the
world made the man think that he, of all people, had the Lord's favour?

Robb disbanded his war council in good time. In effect, he had sent all his bannermen off to bed
early. They needed their rest if they were to fight at their best.

Somehow, he managed to sleep, with his arms around Katherine. He dreamed of victory with her
riding by his side. In his dream, he was arrayed in shining silver armour that gleamed almost white
in the rising sun. The wolf banners snarled and leapt across the battlefield as his armies swept
around the Lannister forces and flanked them completely and utterly. The black plume in his
helmet waved in the wind as he raised his sword. Inexplicably, it had developed the unmistakeable
blue tinge of Valyrian steel.

He gathered Katherine into his arms and kissed her soundly. "We've won!" he cried.

"I know," she said. It seemed so real, this victory, this battle, that when he woke up, he felt more
than just a little disappointed despite knowing how silly it was to dwell too much on dreams. Bran
was the dreamer, not he.

He stared into the darkness for a little while. Katherine breathed evenly next to him, her hand
resting lightly on his chest, her head nestled against his shoulder and neck. The tumble of dark
curls lay spread out on her pillow. He stared at her, wondering what other lord in the history of
time had shared a bed with their cavalry commander the night before a decisive battle.

"You're staring," she mumbled.

"How did you know?" he whispered. She shifted her weight and slowly opened her eyes to look up
at him.

"I can feel it when someone is watching me," she said.

"I like watching you," he said as he bent downwards towards her mouth. She didn't seem to care
that his breath was as stale as a dead mouse and felt like one too. He felt himself quicken to her
touch as she raked her fingers down his chest. Her hot fingers curled about his cock, making him
tense and jerk with desire for her. He moaned.

"Shh," she said against his mouth. "You don't want to wake the whole castle, do you, and shock
poor Ser Onry?"

"For the love of the gods, so what if they heard us?" muttered Robb. He did not get an answer, but
she did kiss him again. Their lovemaking was silent, urgent, sweaty. It awoke every nerve in his
body and brought to the fore just how much he needed to win this battle, if only so he could have
more mornings like this. He gripped her hips with his hands, but she was the one who was in
control as she rode him. Their hips ground against each other's. The ends of her long hair brushed
the top of his thighs as she threw back her head in silent ecstasy. Dawn was beginning to taint the
edge of the sky when they found their crest, with him releasing himself inside her and she eagerly
received him.

"I love you!" he gasped. "And I'm not just saying that because tomorrow we may…"

"Hush," she said as she put a finger to his lips. "I'll not allow you to say such things. It is a sound
plan that you have, Robb Stark. Joffrey will break. That much is certain."

"I am not certain," said Robb. "How can you be?"

"Because it's been done before," said Katherine. "I hadn't wanted to tell you until afterwards."

He sat up. "It has?"

"By a man as brilliant as you are, at least on the battlefield," said Katherine. "He lived hundreds of
years ago, in the east. His name was Hannibal."

"Did he win his war?" Robb sat up to listen to her story. At least, he thought she'd tell him the
story, but she did not continue.

"The sun is about to rise," she said instead. "We should prepare."

Few words were spoken as they donned their armour in the semi-darkness, Katherine behind a
screen and Robb in the main body of the room, aided by his silent, fumbling squire. The
atmosphere was too laden for speech. Thoughts passed one after another; victory, defeat, a red
sunrise.

Katherine poured them both cups of wine to take the edge off their nerves. "To victory," she said as
she handed him his goblet.

"To victory," he agreed. He sipped from the cup. The wine was sour and bitter and metallic, tasting
almost like the blood that would be spilled. But it was ridiculous to think that there could be blood
in the wine. One, Katherine was no barbarian and two, this was no Dornish red. He downed it all
and felt a little better about it.

They marched out together, the Lord and the Lady; it almost sounded as if they were two deities.
To their men, they might as well be. Robb offered his arm to Katherine. Just because they were in
armour did not mean they could dispense with the common courtly courtesies. There was an image
to maintain and he wanted Katherine to know how much he valued her.

The horses chomped on their bits impatiently as if they, too, knew that something large was
looming, even if it was beyond their equine minds to know what it was. Robb swung himself into
the saddle as his squire held the horse still. The gloom of the early morning made everything
different shades of black and grey and men's eyes became pools of unreadable shadow, with only
the faintest hint of colour. Only their armour gleamed, oiled and polished in preparation for a hard
battle that they had to win.

"Now," he said. "Now is the hour. There will be no quarter, neither from them nor from us." The
wind began an infernal howling and Grey Wind, not hearing any more words from Robb, thought
the speech was over, and he raised a long, keening howl of his own. It echoed and swirled with the
wind, travelling for miles, shaking the bones of the men and chilling Robb's blood, hardening it
against the fight ahead.
"Do you hear that, my brothers?" asked Katherine. Other wolves were answering Grey Wind's howl. Or, perhaps, it was a challenge. "That is the battle horn of the north. The North awakens, and she is hungry. She longs to feed on the blood of her enemies."

To hear such violence from the lips of a woman was not something that his men had ever experienced before. The viciousness of Katherine's glance, the vehemence of her speech, the red tone of her voice. The men were awakened, and so was Robb. His heart thudded and blood roared past his ears like a torrent of snowmelt after a long winter, bursting through the dams that kept the anticipation for the impossible in.

He had almost forgotten, already, that he was not alone in this.

"Do not forget that we are all wolves," he said. "We are predators of the winter, hunters of the night. They will not see us coming, but when we are upon them, they will wish they had never turned their eyes northward. They will wish they had never heard our names and they will wish, more than anything in the world, that they had stayed in their soft southern bowers like the indolent wretches that they really are. Tonight, tomorrow night, for eternity, this land will be stained red by the blood of lions. Winter is coming for the Lannisters." How was that for poetry?

"My lord!" The shout broke their concentration. A praetorian rode up, his helmet making him look at least a foot taller. Perhaps that was why Katherine had commissioned such helmets. They certainly looked impressive, if not practical. "Deserters, my lord. We've caught about one hundred of them trying to escape into the night." What a morning to try and escape, when the whole army was marching out!

The men, dirtied and bruised, were herded before Robb and forced onto their knees by his zealous (overly so, sometimes) elite guards. Robb urged his horse forward. He recognized some of them as being Karstark and Umber men, obviously dissatisfied with how he had treated their former masters. He owned that he had not been fair to Umber but Karstark had had to go. And, besides, a king or even a warlord had no room in his heart for remorse. In fact, Katherine had been hinting that leaders of men ought not to have room for hearts at all.

They looked up at him sullenly, too afraid to be angry, but certainly unhappy with him and more unhappy that they had been caught.

"Is there any reason why you're running, good strong northern men like yourselves, on the morning before battle?" he asked.

Nobody answered. There was no right answer, although there were plenty of wrong ones, and they knew it. He rode in a slow circle around them, pondering what to do. The straightforward northern way of dealing with it, and how his father would have dealt with it, would be to execute them for desertion. However, he couldn't just be a northern lord now. No, he had to be a king to all of Westeros, even if he didn't call himself a king just yet.

He circled around them again. Right now, what he needed most in the world were men. Also, everyone expected him to kill these deserters and he didn't want to be so predictable.

"I shall give you two choices," he said. "One, you may die here and now as traitors or you may ride at my side into battle, and the Lord will decide your fate." Ser Onry nodded in approval. "If you survive, you shall be given full pardon. If you die, then it is the will of the Lord and you will die with full honour, a sword in hand, on a battlefield."

The deserters looked at each other in surprise and shock. They didn't know what to make of the offer and neither did any of his bannermen.
"But, my lord, the law…" began Lord Manderly.

"My dear Lord Manderly, the law is made by men," said Robb.

One of the deserters looked up at him. There was neither honour nor shame in that face, but he was desperate to live. It was not a misplaced idea of loyalty that had driven him away, but fear. (One would have thought that so practical a man would have deserted earlier and not with the rest of these idiots. There could not have been a worse time for desertion than this, when everyone was at full alert.) "I'll fight with you, my lord," he said.

"Aye," said another. Soon there was a chorus of "Aye". Who would choose an ignoble and certain death? He had already known their answers before even they had formed them in their minds.

"Arm these men," he said to the praetorians. "They march at the front". He turned to look at the deserters again. "I hope my trust is not misplaced."

"You are our lord," said the man who had first spoken. "I would follow you, now, to the depths of the seven hells, for there is no other like you."

Robb frowned. Was he actually a deserter or was he a spy? He glanced at Katherine, who smiled. Oh. He was planted. No wonder he had been so "stupid". None of the others noticed, but he did. So long as no one else knew, it was fine. The men fell into their ranks. He kept an eye on the one who had first spoken. True enough, he wandered close to Katherine and it seemed that looks were exchanged.

The countryside shuddered from their march; the pounding of iron-shod feet, the rumble of hooves, the rattles of the supply carts. Peasants peered out from their hovels as they passed. Bird song silenced and fish darted beneath their rocks as they followed the rivers north, either to victory or to their doom. Robb knew he was not a cheerful man by nature. Failure always seemed imminent in the face of such odds, even when galvanized by the words of his wife. She rode apart from him, leading the cavalry that he had given her. He smiled grimly. Then again, with such a wife, would it be so beyond the realms of possibility for him to win?

Next chapter: Margaery and Katherine meet on the battlefield. Robb goes all in. Damon and company catch an unexpected breakfast.
Monsters, Inc.

Chapter Summary

Joffrey and Robb meet on the battlefield. Margaery gets involved in the thick of everything and makes some startling realizations. Damon and Jon bond over a common goal.

North of Harrenhal

The flat field stretched wide, with no obstruction save for the little hillock in the distance. This was no place for Robb Stark's favourite activity of ambush. Joffrey would not be caught like Jaime, with his trousers around his ankles. His scouts reported that the Starks had already arrived. How they had known to come, Joffrey did not know (spies of some sort, most likely), but it wouldn't matter. In open battle, there was no way Stark could win.

Robb Stark's armies rode out to meet him at daybreak. He watched them form their ranks with a smirk on his face. They did not stand a chance against his forces. One only had to look at their sorry state, with their boiled leather armour and tired strained faces. Their ranks curved backwards, with Robb Stark at the very front and the flanks further back. The most ragged bunch of men rode with Stark. What hell had he dragged them out from?

His pretty wife was nowhere to be seen. Presumably, she was too afraid and had never really been brave enough to ride into a real battle. It had all been a story concocted to frighten children and gullible girls like Sansa Stark, nothing more. Katherine Stark was a common whore who sang for her coppers. She was not the warrior queen everyone thought she was. He very much doubted anything to do with the Mountain was true.

The two leaders rode forward a few paces so that they might speak, accompanied by a select delegation. Joffrey had his Kingsguard, Margaery and Daemon. Robb Stark was surrounded by men in tall helmets wearing impassive masks. Were those the famed 'pray-torians'? They were nice to look at, he supposed.

"Well, well, well," said Joffrey. "If it isn't the Young Wolf. Your sister sends her regards. She is soon to be my aunt, you know. Pity, that. She's not entirely useless and I have some experience of that myself."

He saw Stark's fist clench but, somehow, he kept his northern barbarity at bay and smiled. This displeased him. He wanted Robb Stark to curse and rail and make a fool of himself! He'd been so sure he would too.

"My congratulations, Great Lion, for taming a little girl. Would that you could do the same to the rest of Westeros," said Robb Stark. His voice rang out clear across the fields. Didn't the stupid bastard know that he was about to die? Still, Joffrey had almost preened at being called the Great Lion until he remembered the vicious rumours that had been spread about his parentage, courtesy of said Young Wolf and the old man at Dragonstone. He glared, then, and he would have commanded his army to charge, except Margaery laid a gentle gloved hand on his arm. He would not lose his temper, for her sake. Robb Stark was beneath his notice and his insult ought to bounce off him like a stone from a wall.
Except large stones had caved in some of the walls of King's Landing.

At least he could be smug about the fact that, one, he was going to crush Stark right here and, two, Stark's legendary wife had not seen fit to join him on the battlefield whilst his beautiful and brave Margaery had.

"Go to your brother, my lady," said Joffrey. "Remember, you are to be my queen. You must lead your men from the front."

"At once, Your Grace," said Margaery. She cantered off to join Loras. She rode very well, probably better than that common bard.

He scanned the Stark ranks. The centre where Robb Stark and his ragged band of miscreants were – that was the weakest point. They stood alone. The flanks were uneven and would not be able to help them. Obviously, they hadn't had enough time to set up their army properly. He could break Stark's centre and then the battle, and the war, would be over.

He raised his sword, reforged from the steel of Ned Stark's. "Do you recognize this sword, Stark? No, I thought not. It looked rather different the last time you'd seen it. It's your father's sword, melted down to make something better. Maybe your sword can join the Iron Throne after I'm done with you."

Stark said nothing. Nor did he move. He must have known that he could not win if he charged.

A thunder of hooves made him look up. Banners rose from the hillock in the southeast, a golden eagle on a field of night and blood, one head looking back and one head looking forward.

"Katherine Stark," whispered Daemon.

Margaery had felt safe when this had all started. She was with her brother, she was surrounded by thousands of horsemen; what was there to be worried about?

And, yet, she could not help the terror that seized her by the throat as the horde charged down towards her in a swirl of steel and hooves, with the golden eagle flying high above, a predator with outspread talons, ready to strike and kill. She fumbled and tried to pull her sword out but, unused to the heat of battle and to controlling a panicking horse, she didn't manage to draw it until after the two armies met.

Her screams joined that of the horses as blood flew and blades flashed. The battle roared in her ears until she could no longer hear herself think or scream. The warrior leading the Stark charge was slight, but that was merely an illusion. He was vicious as he sliced through the ranks of Tyrell cavalry as if they were nothing but clay. As he neared, he lifted his visor.

"Katherine!" gasped Margaery.

"It's not personal, Margaery!" Katherine shouted over the din. At the same time, she scissored a man's neck with her two swords. The head flew off and fell into the tumult to be kicked about like a child's toy. Not personal? It certainly felt personal!

Margaery tasted the metallic blood spray as she breathed in the droplets. It made her want to be sick. She could not take her gaze off her friend as she slashed left and right. Her armour was painted with the blood of her victims. There had never been a pair of eyes so dark and luminous at the same time. If Katherine had been pretty before, she had been nothing compared to what she was now. This, she realized, was where the other woman thrived. She was not a lady, nor was she a
courtier. She could be if she so wanted, but that was not her natural state.

She was a killer.

The Tyrell cavalry was being cut off from Joffrey's main force and lured away, just as Robb had intended. Katherine had delivered. Joffrey was none the wiser as he advanced towards Robb's centre. His men's courage wavered.

"Hold," he said firmly. Grey Wind's lips curled back from his fangs in anticipation and his ears were flat on his head.

"Hold," Robb said again, mostly for his wolf's benefit. Whereas the men would turn back, he would charge the other way.

The walls of black and gold loomed and drew closer, growing taller as they did, but not any wider. Joffrey had not sought to keep his lines stretched and, instead, had simply marched forward in a perfect block formation, straight for Robb. He hadn't even kept any men in the reserves, save for the Tyrells and a very small force in red and gold. Daemon's men.

Joffrey's men pushed against his. Swords and shields met. His men were no match for the well-trained soldiers from King's Landing. "Hold your ground," he commanded them. "Steady." The signalling horn sounded. It was one thing to slowly retreat but another thing to flee. He had to keep the pace measured and slow. Sweat ran from his temples. No, he could not be afraid. It was too late for that now. It trickled down under his armour. His undershirt was damp from it. Stray arrows flew from both sides. Most of them landed on the ground or, if they hit something, bounced off shields and armour. Joffrey's men aimed straight for him. "To the king!" shouted his group of deserters. They had forgotten that he wasn't one anymore. He joined them in harvesting heads from astride his destrier. His sword cleaved through flesh and bone as he swung it. He felt the bone crack from the impact and saw light leave men's eyes. Sticky blood splattered onto his face and hands. He smelled and tasted the metallic saltiness of life.

Joffrey's helmet, with golden antlers rising from the sides, could be seen flashing between the lines of men and the raised banners and spears. He sat safely. How much had it cost? The armour, not the safety.

A spearhead appeared through the neck of the man in front of him. He fell without a word, blood gushing from the ragged fountain in his throat. It bubbled as he tried to breathe through it, but it was useless. The Lannister knight, on foot, charged straight for Robb. His stallion reared in anger and in fear, almost tossing Robb off. He hauled on the reins, desperate to get the animal back under control. It was all he could do to stay on. Panicked shouts rose around him as his men tried to get out of the way of the iron-shod hooves that could cut like knives. The horse gave one final scream and toppled over. For a moment, his foot became lodged in the stirrup, but he managed to shake it free at the final moment and he threw himself off. The breath was driven from his lungs as he landed.

"My lord!" cried one of the men.

"The standard!" he wheezed. He couldn't hear himself. He wanted to tell them to hold the standard high. It could not fall, even if he fell. If the standard fell then everyone would know that he had fallen and the formation would be broken. He pointed at the snarling wolf flying in the wind. The man understood and the rest of his comrades formed a wall of bodies about their lord, protecting him with their own flesh.
There was no other horse in the vicinity. He staggered to his feet.

Joffrey's men, seeing him fall from his horse, renewed their surge. It was all he could do to keep the men from breaking rank. If he hadn't been there, his lines would have broken into two and it would have been all over. They continued to move back until the bow became a straight line and then gradually bent backwards as the centre was forced further and further back. "Now! Sound the horns!" shouted Robb. A short blast rent the air, imposing itself even over the din of war. An answering horn sounded. He saw the banners of Bolton and Manderly move in the distance. He gritted his teeth. Now he had to hold his ground and pray to the gods that he did not believe in.

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**Somewhere in the woods, South of Harrenhal**

Damon crouched in the bushes, peering through the leaves as he waited. The crackling footsteps of something stumbling through the woods on two legs became louder. A lot of somethings. Any hopes that the others had for breakfast would be dashed this time, unless they wanted to turn cannibal (a perfectly valid option soundly rejected by all), but he and Elena would feast. The morning dew was still wet on the grass as the sun had yet to rise high enough to penetrate the darkness of the woods. He doubted it would.

The first man emerged from the underbrush. He stumbled and picked himself up, glancing back as if he were being pursued. Damon frowned. The boiled leather armour he wore, the squareness of his jaw, the furs; everything pointed to him being a northern soldier and what was a northern soldier doing so far away from Robb's army, especially now that Joffrey was marching upon Harrenhal and they were going to do battle? Obviously, he was a deserter, and not the clever type for he had not even bothered to disguise himself. Couldn't he at least have dressed himself as a peasant?

"Good morning, friend," he said as he stepped suddenly into the man's path. The man almost collided with him. "Are you in a hurry to be somewhere?"

"Get out of my way, boy," growled the soldier. He drew his sword. "I don't want no trouble, so just let me on my way."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"You got no choice."

More men stumbled through, ragged and armed and tired. He counted about a dozen of them. This number of deserters was not a good sign.

"Like I said, we don't want no trouble, but since we've had the fortune of meetin' you, you'd better give me your purse, boy," said the first deserter as his compatriots surrounded Damon.

The vampire simply smiled, knowing that the others were close by; Jon somewhere up in a tree with his bow and arrows that he had stolen, Hot Pie and Sam with slingshots, Gendry lying in wait to burst out upon any stragglers (they had intended for him to chase rabbits, but things had not transpired that way) and, of course, Elena and the wolf were in the shadows waiting like the predators that they were.

"Now, before we make things ugly, why don't you tell me why you lot, northern soldiers, by the look of you, are out here and not up there with Lord Stark fighting the invaders?"

"What business is that of yours, anyway?" demanded the man. "Just give me yer purse and get on
your way if you fancy livin'."

"Oi," said one of the other deserters. "I know 'im. Salvatore!"

"Ser Damon Salvatore?" came the whispers.

"What can I say?" asked Damon. "Come out, people. We have guests. But you knew that."

Arrows flew from the treetops into the midst of the men, scattering them. Badly aimed rocks soared at them, making them swerve and duck in confusion. One might have thought they had been ambushed by an army of hundreds instead of just three boys with projectile weapons. At the same time, Ghost leapt out, all teeth and hackles and red eyes, looking more like a demon in the shadows than any mere wolf. Elena appeared on the other side.

"Lady Katherine!" screamed someone in terror. Really? Of all the things to be afraid of, they were afraid of Katherine? What had she done to make them so scared? She'd only vanquished the Mountain and killed a couple of Robb's important bannermen using Daemon Lannister. It was just her usual Katherining.

They tried to run through their 'ranks', to charge through to freedom, but Jon's arrows were quick and Damon's sword was quicker. In a matter of minutes, half of them lay dead and the other half were frightened out of their wits and exhausted. They stood, panting, staring at Elena with the wild fearful eyes of animals trapped in snares, knowing that the hunter was coming up to finish the kill.

"Tell me," said Elena, putting on her best Katherine stance. "Why did you run?"

"You know we can't win, m'lady," said one of the men flatly. "I just… I ain't no coward, but I don't see the point in dyin' for a lost cause."

"Do you know what happens to deserters in the north?" asked Elena. Her voice was so cold that it made Damon squint at her just to make sure that she hadn't been swapped for Katherine some time in the last fifteen minutes. Nope, still Elena, but a different, harder Elena who had seen things that jarred so much with her worldview that she had been forced to change, if only just slightly. He was impressed. He hadn't thought her capable of such cool calm. At least, not without turning off her feelings, which she had no reason to do at present because she and Jon were still behaving like newlyweds most of the time.

"Please, m'lady! I've three little ones!"

"I'll give you a chance," said Elena. "Come back with me and fight. If you live, your sins will be forgiven."

The men looked at her with distrust in their eyes, but what choice did they have? It was either that, or they could die here by Damon's sword. Personally, Damon was annoyed that Elena was even considering sparing them, meaning that if he were to eat some of them now, the others would live to tell the tale. The hunger was not yet too great, but it was only a matter of time. And since when had a vampire turned down the chance to feed?

But Elena was a saint, even in times such as these. He knew she would be angry if he tried anything with their prisoners. He sighed and looked down at the dispatched corpses (courses) with their blood running freely and soaking the ground. What a waste. The trees would get a better meal than him this morning, and the rats too. It seemed to him that they spent far too much time feeding the vermin of Westeros and not themselves.

Jon jumped out of the branches in which he had been hiding, still aiming at the men. They hardly
regarded him and Damon realized that hardly anyone remembered who Jon was or what he looked like. To most people in Winterfell, he had been someone to ignore or simply Robb's shadow. Which was also something to ignore.

One of the deserters snorted and muttered something under his breath. "I ain't just another body for Robb Stark to sow his fields with."

Damon tried to make out the insignia stamped onto his worn armour. It had been covered up now with the Stark sigil but, previously, it had been a Yeti in chains. Well, this one would probably never be loyal, not after what Katherine had done to his former master. They'd be lucky if he didn't try to kill them in their sleep, and Damon didn't really believe in luck. One more word from him, and he'd be dinner, if not lunch.

They bound up the prisoners. Jon looked about as certain as Damon about this whole business but once Elena had made up her mind, there was no changing it. She was stubborn.

"I'm going to see if I can't find something," Jon declared. He gathered up his bow and whistled to Ghost. The wolf looked up from his inspection of a nearly-severed arm and loped over to where Jon stood, plumy tail wagging once he realized that food was imminent. If only he were better at sharing, for Ghost really was a very good hunter.

"Good luck, Legolas," said Damon.

"Who?" said Jon, utterly mystified. Damon simply grinned and made a shooing motion with his hand. After he had left, Damon sauntered over to Elena.

"What are we going to do with all these people?" he muttered through the side of his mouth.

"We're going to take them back to Lord Stark and make them fight, just like I promised," Elena whispered back.

"That's all well and good, but we have nothing to feed them with."

Elena opened her mouth but then shut it. She hadn't thought of that, had she?

"What do you suggest?" she asked.

Damon rolled his eyes. "What do you think?"

"No, I promised them."

Very well, he didn't need her permission if he had a valid reason. And he did. Now, all he had to do was convince them all to betray them in one way or another, starting with the former Umber boy. He was their best bet. Elena need not know the details, although Jon would no doubt help. He did not look kindly on deserters, having been both Ned Stark's son and almost a member of the Night's Watch. Gendry, of course, wouldn't help because he would do whatever Elena told him, but even Samwell Tarly understood their necessity to be free of encumbrances such as prisoners of war and Hot Pie disliked sharing his food. Elena was alone on her mission of mercy and, ultimately, it was futile for her to even try. He was just going to save her from all the trouble and heartbreak that would inevitably come. She would never forgive herself if one of her friends got hurt because of something she had decided and Damon was not going to let that happen.

Jon returned after a few hours, bearing a brace of rabbits over his shoulder. He was alone. "Damon, I need your help. Ghost felled a deer."
"Good," said Damon. He looked around. Elena was building up a camp fire and the others simply sat around looking hungry. "You." He crooked his finger at the Umber boy.

"Me?" he said.

"Yes, you, Big Ears. You're coming with me. We're not feeding you for free."

They wouldn't need to feed him, period, but he didn't need to know that.

Jon frowned at Damon.

"Trust me," Damon mouthed as he undid the ropes that tied up the boy's hands and linked him to his fellow prisoners. The boy eyed him warily and rubbed his wrists. He was such a ninny. He hadn't even been bound for more than fifteen minutes.

"What are you doing?" asked Elena.

"Ghost got a deer. We need help to get it back," said Damon. Elena hesitated. He saw the question in her eyes. Damon didn't need help to carry back any deer. He cast a glance at the bound men. No, he didn't need help from anyone to carry the beast's body back, but wouldn't that raise suspicion amongst their breakfast guests?

"Be careful," said Elena.

Brambles scratched at their leather-covered legs as they traipsed through the woods, following Jon as he led them to where Ghost was happily tearing into the abdomen of his prize. It was fresh enough so that the entrails still steamed in the cool morning air. The wolf had already taken his favourite part, the liver, and was nosing about trying to find something else nice that he liked better than muscle before he went to work on the carcass.

"Ghost," said Jon. "Come here."

Ghost lifted his head, muzzle dripping with blood. The Umber boy shrank back.

"Come on," said Damon. "Let's get to work." He started skinning the carcass, much to Ghost's consternation as the wolf realized that the spoils of his victory were being claimed for a bunch of humans who were too lazy to hunt. Damon sawed through the sinews and tendons awkwardly as he severed a haunch of meat. The dagger he carried wasn't really made for this job but it would have to do. Nobody butchered an animal with a sword.

Jon was busy with the front quarters, doing exactly the same thing as Damon. He took the head and gave it to Ghost to gnaw. The tongue would have been good eating but it was too much work to prepare. The wolf would probably also enjoy the nutrient-high brain.

In the corner of his eye, he saw the Umber boy's gaze darting this way and that, calculating how much time he had. People were so predictable sometimes. Damon had counted on him doing that. This way, Elena had no reason to be angry at what they were about to do.

He pretended not to see when the boy picked up a rock and hid it up his sleeve. He did not look up until the very last moment as he raised the rock behind Jon.

"Look out!" Damon shouted.

Jon jerked to the side in alarm. The rock struck a glancing blow on his temple. Fresh red blood sprang up. Ghost snarled, dropped the deer's skull, and lunged for the Umber boy who had been
stupid enough to attack Jon whilst the wolf had been nearby. Damon leapt to Jon's "aid", pulling him out of the way too late for him to avoid injury. Hopefully, Elena would be distracted enough by that to question why Damon had been so careless. It was only a flesh wound. Jon would be okay. He ignored the fact that, for a split second, he had considered letting Jon die and freeing the way to Elena's heart.

Ghost was still on top of the boy, dragging him through the underbrush by his leg. The boy thrashed and screamed as he tried to free himself, clawing fatuously at the moist dead leaves on the ground and gripping at tree roots, as if that could somehow save him.

"Ghost, off," said Damon. Ghost ignored him and continued his work in ripping off the leg.

The vampire sighed and let his fangs free. It felt good to lose control. A red veil slipped over his vision, tinting everything. He saw and heard everything more clearly, from the scratching of the oblivious beetle grubs in the wood to the rapid flutterings of the boy's heart. He snarled. Ghost paused and looked up in confusion at his new rival before growling in return. The boy's screams of fear faded away into whimpers of astute terror as he realized that there were more terrible monsters out there than he had imagined. Damon pounced and flung the boy up against the gnarled trunk of an old tree with moss creeping up from its roots. The impact stunned him, paralyzing him so that he couldn't even put up a feeble fight.

Damon sank his teeth into the soft flesh at his throat. Warmth enveloped his eager fangs as heat flooded his mouth. Sweet, sweet vigour of life! The fear and the adrenaline only enhanced the flavour. He drank, feeling his limbs grow stronger and more limber as he did so. He moaned and then bit deeper, tearing through the arteries. Blood spurted into his mouth with force, driven by the terrified heart.

It was all over in three beats. The heart stopped fluttering and the blood stopped being pumped out. It oozed, still, and Damon sucked and sucked on the wound until he was utterly satisfied.

He let the body drop to the ground and found Jon clutching Ghost. One would have thought that he would be used to watching vampires feed by now. And didn't Elena ever feed from him? Oh, wait, never mind. Apparently, he tasted awful and no vampire in their right mind would drink him. Apparently.

"You have blood on your nose," said Jon.

"And you have blood on your head," retorted Damon. His hand snaked out before Jon could dodge and dabbed a bit of blood from the wound. Head injuries tended to bleed a lot, thanks to the micro-arteries that ran in the scalp. He couldn't possibly taste that bad, could he?

Damon licked his finger. His tongue burned. He immediately spat several times to try and get rid of the taste that made his eyes water. It tasted like metal and jalapenos! "What the fuck did you eat?" he gasped.

"You know exactly what I eat," said Jon. "You catch most of it."

"You have a problem, Jon Snow," said Damon. "Nobody can possibly taste that bad."

"I don't see that as a problem," said Jon. He leaned against Ghost, looking a bit pale around the gills.

"Can you stand?" asked Damon. Any desire to see Jon dead had all but evaporated and he could only think of how badly hurt Elena would be if he died. Also, Robb would be incensed. Robb had
always been a much more loving brother than Damon.

"I'm fine," said Jon. "I'm just dizzy…"

It was best not to risk letting him have a brain haemorrhage. Damon bit his wrist and offered it to Jon. The man-boy hesitated.

"Come on, what's a little blood between friends?" asked Damon. "You'd do the same for me if you didn't taste like shit."

"I have been told that I taste like red hot chee-lee peppers, whatever those are," said Jon. He caught a few drops of Damon's blood on his fingers and then sucked on them. There was nothing adventurous about him at all. Perhaps he only drank from Elena directly.

Colour came back to his face immediately and he stopped looking so ill.

"We should head back," said Jon. He glanced back at the boy's body and at the cut up deer. "We'll bring back what we can but I don't think I can carry that much and Ghost makes for a terrible beast of burden."

The wolf wagged his tail and licked Jon's face.

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**Next chapter:** Jon and Damon enable Elena to make the hard choices. Daemon finally meets the object of his affections.
Chapter Summary

Katherine tests the strength of her friendship with Margaery. Daemon finally meets the orchestrator of his mysterious music. Jon and Damon plot to overthrow Elena's good intentions.

Chapter 97: She's Just Not That Into You

The Woods, Somewhere South of Harrenhal

What was taking them so long? The rabbits were skinned and already on spits. Elena paced in front of the camp fire as she kept looking in the direction where Damon and Jon had gone. She strained her hearing but the dense forest muffled most sounds. She could not hear anything beyond the men sitting around the camp fire and the noises of the forest animals as they burrowed themselves deep to get away from the humans and their fires.

Briefly, she considered going to look for them, but she couldn't really leave the others alone with their prisoners. Neither Hot Pie nor Sam could really fight and Gendry couldn't guard five men all on his own. It would be a terrible idea to let him try. Jon and Damon had to be all right. Damon was one hundred and seventy years old. He knew how to take care of himself, and he'd take care of Jon for her, wouldn't he? Worry suddenly stabbed her and her stomach clenched with phantom pain. What if Damon… no, he wouldn't do that. He'd changed. Jon was his friend.

She heard the crackle of leaves and twigs being trod underfoot and whirled around. Dried blood streaked down the side of Jon's face and Damon carried just one haunch of venison on his shoulder whilst he supported Jon on the other. Elena ran to them, looking them both over. Their clothes were soaked in blood. Some of it wasn't from the deer.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"That idiot attacked us," said Damon. He set down the haunch of venison and set about cleaning it with water from one of their skins. Without even glancing up, he started cutting the meat up into manageable cubes and sticking them onto the end of sticks which he then handed to Gendry, Sam and Hot Pie to start roasting over the fire along with the rabbits. Elena cupped Jon's face, inspecting him closely. Apart from the dried blood, he seemed almost fine. The wound was closing. Damon had seen to that. She felt a little guilty for having ever doubted him.

"Where is he now?" asked Elena. It was more instinctive than anything else, because she already knew that the boy was dead. Damon looked far too pleased with himself and his cheeks were practically rosy.

"We had no choice, Elena," said Jon. His voice was steady, making her turn her attention back to him. "He tried to kill me. If not for Damon, I might have died."

The thought of losing him was too much. She threw her arms around him and hugged him to her to assure herself that he was real and alive. She felt his arms circle comfortably around her body, holding her close. His heartbeat was strong and soaring.
"I will never forgive you if you die," she whispered. "Don't you dare die."

"I will try not to," said Jon.

It never occurred to her, until much later, to question why Damon, with all his vampire speed and senses, had been slow enough to react that the deserter had managed to actually attack Jon. It never occurred to her that Jon, having been through everything with Daemon Lannister, had now learned to lie. It never occurred to her that neither Jon nor Damon had ever intended on giving any of the deserters a chance at all. In their minds, they were either burdens or traitors and neither could be suffered to live. It only occurred to her that her friends were safe and that her decision had almost gotten someone killed.

They ate in silence, with the prisoners given a scant portion of their rations. It would be best to keep them hungry and weak, but not so hungry that they might grow desperate, she decided. She didn't trust them, not after what their comrade had tried to do. The others seemed to be of the same opinion. Sam and Hot Pie situated themselves as far away from the men as possible as they ate. Hot Pie wasn't even keen on the idea of giving them any food until Sam reasoned with him and made him understand that desperate men did stupid things.

"Are we really bringing them along?" Damon asked as they doused the fire and buried the bones from their meal.

"What else can we do? Turn them loose?" asked Elena. She couldn't see that having a good outcome.

"We could just leave them here and make sure that they stay here," said Damon.

"You mean starve them?"

"It's a kinder death than men like them deserve," said Jon darkly.

"Jon!" Elena was shocked by his vehemence.

"Elena, I know what you're thinking, that I'm being needlessly cruel," said Jon. "But these men will betray us. They have already betrayed my brother. Others like them need to be warned."

"Warned," echoed Elena. She knew what happened to traitors throughout history. In the north, deserting was betrayal. She looked from Jon to Damon and then back to Jon. She had them to think about. Jon wouldn't do anything if she refused, but was that worth it? Was she going to open him up to five more murder attempts?

"I won't let them starve," said Elena. She led Damon to the side, away from the others so that they might speak in private. "It will have to be quick."

"They won't know what hit them," Damon promised.

She swallowed the bile that threatened to well up. It tasted bitter at the back of her throat. All of a sudden, her thoughts floated like feathers and she sat down abruptly. All her life, she had tried to be a good person and to do the right thing. It hadn't always been easy, but when had it become so impossible? No matter what she chose, she would still be in the wrong.

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**Twenty Miles North of Harrenhal**

The northern horsemen could not be stopped. They fought as if they weren't men at all, as if they
were demons possessed by the spirit of the Warrior. All of this was blasphemous but that was how it seemed to Margaery. Her sword was heavy in her hand and she swung it fatuously, never catching anyone. "Margaery, get back!" shouted Loras.

She wanted to, but she couldn't! She was surrounded by men, both her own and the enemy, and Katherine was bearing down on her, a murderous grin on her face. How could she? Margaery thought they were friends! Then again, why had she been so stupid to trust in friendship? They fought for different kings and loved different men (actually, Margaery loved no man). The world fell away when she saw the flash of Katherine's blade coming down on her. A splitting pain rent her skull. She heard a loud ringing in her ears. Her head reeled. Her sword fell from her hand, another casualty of the battle. She lurched forward to grab her horse's neck to keep her balance as the animal wheeled in fright. It was only then that she realized Katherine had hit her on the helmet with the flat of her blade. She hadn't even taken her seriously enough to actually try to kill her? Actually, that was not a bad thing.

A horn sounded in the distance, heralding a boom of several other responding horns. Katherine blew her a kiss as a final insult.

"Margaery!" shouted Loras as he pushed through the wall of men, not caring whether he trampled his own or not, towards her. "Margaery, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"She hit me on the helmet," said Margaery faintly. "And she blew me a kiss."

For a moment, Loras said nothing as he digested the information. Then he burst into laughter.

"It's not funny!" protested Margaery.

"Oh, but it is," he wheezed. "To see you, now, one might have thought that you had been mortally wounded!" He guffawed as the horns continued. "Well, we have been thoroughly beaten, I admit, and we have lost enough for one day. Let Joffrey and Stark fight. I am desperately curious to know how much better our king is faring."

Daemon saw, too late, the Stark flanks closing in on their sides, sweeping up even as they did very little. Joffrey had done most of the work by pushing Robb Stark back and reversing the bow that the latter had so carefully and carefree st set out. He ought to have seen it earlier!

"Your Grace, we need to fall back!" he shouted.

"No!" said Joffrey. "We have him! Don't you see? We have him!" He pointed his sword at the direction of Robb Stark just as another horn answered the chorus. From behind them. The two-headed eagle soared over the horizon with the northern cavalry, sweeping back around from where they had beaten back the Tyrells. The horses were lathered with sweat. Foam flew from their mouths as if they were rabid. A slight warrior rode at the front and it took a while for Daemon to realize that it was a woman.

Not only was she a woman, but she had a very familiar face. He froze. Elena? But, no. The woman's hair streamed behind her. She wielded two shorter swords, a feat that few would be able to manage on foot, much less on horseback. And when she charged into Joffrey's men, they parted for her as if they were butter and she were a blade as keen as any that the Valyrian smiths had ever forged. The men pushed against each other in an effort to get away or were simply shoved by their comrades into other comrades.

"Katherine Stark," whispered Daemon in wonder. He could see her, now, and she was glorious.
Joffrey's shouts mattered little. He hardly even heard them as he beheld the vision, ensnared by the spell that she wove.

She danced amidst the red ribbons. They flew in arcs from her sword's blade. Ruby droplets hung suspended in the mid-morning sun for precious moments before they fell and were churned into mud.

"Daemon!" screamed Joffrey. He was brought back to the present.

"Protect the king!" he shouted. The men were being pressed closer and closer to one another as the Starks' noose tightened about them. The inner circle of clueless men longed to fight while the outer circle were dealing with too many. The Starks peeled them away like layers of an onion and the men inside were being pressed into the spears of their own brothers. "Come, Your Grace!" He spear-headed the charge, not caring if he rode over his own men as he did so. Joffrey could not die. If Joffrey died, Tywin would win and Daemon would once again be relegated to his dark little corner to be an ornament to the family.

Hooves smashed skulls and crushed limbs. Daemon did not even bother trying to get past the cavalry nor the infantry led by Robb Stark and Roose Bolton. Wyman Manderly was the weak link in the chain. He was not the commander the other three were.

From the south, the Tyrells swept over the hill, numbers severely depleted, but bolstered by Daemon's reserves. No one could mistake Loras' armour for anyone else's. They smashed into Wyman Manderly from the flank. If they didn't break into the ring, then at least they thinned that side enough for Daemon to push through.

"Take the king to safety!" shouted Daemon.

"I want Robb Stark's head!" Joffrey added.

"We'll have to get it another day. Your Grace," said Daemon grimly. He did not add that they didn't want to hand Robb Stark Joffrey's head on a platter instead, which was probably what would happen if they tried to press on with the battle today. They'd had their chance and the Starks had crushed it beneath their fancy new heeled shoes.

He glanced backward. Robb Stark had gotten a new horse and he rode side by side with his wife atop her dappled grey, with its shoulders and head stained red with the blood of her victims.

'We'll meet again, Katherine,' he thought.
"Look, she said it had to be quick," said Damon. "That's all."

"That's so unlike her," said Jon. He was worried. What if Elena hadn't meant for the men to be killed? What if Damon had misinterpreted it, or worse? It wouldn't be the first time the vampire had lied through his teeth and gotten away with it. Jon would trust Damon with his life. He wouldn't trust Damon to be honest.

"It's this place. It's changed her. It's changed me. It's changed you too," said Damon. Had he changed? Perhaps so. It was so hard to remain true to oneself in the face of the truth. The world was so full of evils and darkness that one had to become part of the shadows. Those in the light were only ever targetted and hunted down. He had to admit that he had worried about how Elena's goodness might end up in getting her hurt, just as his father's honour had ended up killing him. "Seeing you with blood on your face was the final touch, I think, but I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"That would just be rude," Jon agreed. Not that anyone ever gave other people horses. Even old nags on the brink of death were expensive, almost priceless, in an emergency.

"Precisely," said Damon. "So, are you in, or are you out?"

Jon gave him a look. The vampire's blue eyes were glittering dark pools in the moonlight. His skin looked paler than usual and almost glowed. "What do you think?"

"I think you never wanted to let them live in the first place."

"It was a metaphorical question," said Jon.

"Rhetorical," Damon said.

"Excuse me?" asked Jon.

"Rhetorical question. It's called a rhetorical question."

Jon had gotten used to the way Damon always drawled in that superior manner. He probably didn't know any other way to speak to others, he reasoned. He'd been a bastard (metaphorical type) for so long that he didn't know how to be polite anymore. It was very hard to change one's habits and he couldn't ever imagine letting go of habits that were one hundred and seventy years old.

He brought his attention back to the matter at hand. "How are we going to go about doing it quickly?" asked Jon. "It would be very difficult not to wake them up. Besides, only the three of us know what's going to happen. Sam and the others don't know a thing about it."

"And they won't," said Damon. "Tomorrow night, we'll put Hot Pie on first watch and leave the ropes a little loose after supper. Then we'll all go to sleep. I imagine these men wouldn't hesitate to try and kill us all or just escape. And when they wake me up, I'll do my thing and the others will think that I'm perfectly justified."

"It seems an awful lot of trouble to go to," said Jon. "Can't we just lead them out into the wilderness and kill them there?"

"And ruin Elena's reputation? I don't think so," said Damon. "If she's no longer the kind hearted saint that you fell in love with – and I know stories that might make you doubt that – then at least everyone can believe she is still that girl."

"Be that as it may, what if they don't try to kill us and run?" asked Jon. "They know what happened
to the last man who tried that. Anyone with half a head would realize that we're not as harmless as we look. You can't try the same trick twice, Damon.

"It's not exactly the same."

"It's similar enough to not be new."

Damon sighed.

"Elena's already said yes," reasoned Jon. He touched the healing scab on his temple, remembering how worried Elena had been about the wound (something about bleeding inside the skull, which had sounded quite preposterous to Jon, but what did he know?) and he knew that it was worry for himself that had driven her to take such drastic actions. It made his heart ache to know what lengths she would go to protect him, including violating her own principles. He loved her all the more for it. "Let's not create more farcical nonsense and get it over and done with. It needs not be complicated."

"So, what, we take them out into the forest and I eat them all?"

"There is no need to be a glutton either," said Jon. Could vampires get fat? He'd never asked that before. He knew they could dry out but once they had blood again, they'd be fine. Elena had said so. The thought of a fat Damon made him snort in laughter.

"I wouldn't risk it anyway," said Damon. "I'm not Stefan but even I don't know what I could do if I got that blood-drunk."

"What happened the last time you got blood-drunk?"

"I got even drunker."

All right, so he didn't want to say and it obviously hadn't been pleasant for anyone involved, so Jon did not press. "Tomorrow morning," he said. "And there will be no entrails hanging from the trees and no Ds or Draculas or anything of that sort carved into their stomachs."

"You place too much trust in Arya's stories," said Damon. "Besides, my idea's better."

Damon gave no indication that he could hear anything but he heard it all. The wind betrayed the hushed whispers by staying absolutely silent and not blowing away the words that were passed from mouth to ear as the prisoners sat huddled in their corner. He caught flashes of the whites of their eyes as they gave him fearful and hate-filled glances.

"She might have promised us," one said, "but I don't trust her. She's Katherine's sister. Even if she does keep her word, what's to stop Robb Stark from killing us?"

"What do you think we should do then?" asked another. "Damon fucking Salvatore is here."

"He is one man," said the first. "If we stay, we're definitely dead. If we run, we might still have a chance. They only have the three men and the girl."

"Katherine's sister," supplemented a fourth man. "And some of them are armed."

"They can't all be awake at the same time," said the first determined would-be escapee. "The rope is old. If we can cut it, we'll be able to overpower them in the night, catch them by surprise."

"And how will we cut it?"
The vampire risked glancing in their direction out of the corner of his eye. The first man turned around to show his companions what he had hidden in his hands. A sharp rock. Really? They'd managed to find one?

He pretended not to notice when they started working on the rope "subtly". Jon gave him a questioning look. He shook his head a little so that he knew it was deliberate and that he had seen, unlike the oblivious others who simply went about preparing for the night. Hot Pie banked the fire and wished for a few turnips to stick in the embers to roast. Elena, desolate as she had been after her decision, played with the pages of her stolen diary and wrote nothing. Not that she had any ink left to write with.

"Hey, Pie," said Damon. "Your turn to take first watch."

"What?" asked Hot Pie.

"First. Watch," said Damon, forming the words in an exaggerated manner.

"But I've already done it!"

"So have the rest of us. It's your turn again," said Damon. "If you fall asleep, I'll put you in the embers and roast you like a turnip."

The Pie gaped at Damon and then scowled.

"I could do it," said the ever unhelpful Samwell. Then again, Damon supposed he couldn't blame him. After all, no one had told him anything of the plan to kill off their unwelcome guests. Did this count as violating guest rights? They were, after all, invited against their wishes and bound in ropes. There was hardly anything conventional about this prolonged banquet.

"No, Sam, you took it last night. You need your rest," said Jon.

Still grumbling, Hot Pie tried to make himself comfortable with a thin, worn blanket rubbed bald in some places as he settled between two tree roots. He flung away the pebbles and twigs that he found, aiming them close to Damon but not quite daring to hit him. Damon lay down on the blanket that served as his bedroll and watched Jon as he approached Elena, firstly pulling her to her feet and then leading her to their shared bedroll close to the dying embers of the fire. They lay down together, with his body spooning hers. A stab of something made his stomach clench as he followed the movements of Jon's fingers up and down Elena's arm which eventually stopped when he fell asleep.

All night long, Damon lay wide awake, hearing every sound, from the crunching of a bat that had caught something tasty to the worms burrowing ever deeper beneath the earth to stop themselves from freezing. And, of course, he heard the sound of a sharp rock slicing through the fibres of the old frayed rope as the men tried to free themselves. They squabbled and bickered about how best to go about doing it; whether they should go against the weave or not. But not once did they make a move. It would have been so easy, then, to simply kill them all out of sheer boredom and frustration that he had lost Elena to Jon Snow, but the prisoners were far too aware. If one of them should escape, his secret would be out and that would do nobody any good.

So he contented himself with giving Jon awful nightmares about dying or about being dumped by Elena or Elena dying through Jon's incompetence and smirked as he sat up in a cold sweat, breathing hard. Then he felt very alone again when Elena, woken by his thrashing, comforted him and calmed him down and they sought solace in each other's touch and kisses. If they hadn't been surrounded by so many people, Damon knew that they wouldn't have restrained themselves to
simply just that.

Gradually, it grew lighter. Dawn bled into the night, tinting the horizon red. The embers had stopped glowing by then.

Hot Pie's soft snores floated on the night breeze. Everyone else was fast asleep except Jon and the prisoners, but the sound of rock cutting rope was quiet, now. They'd already succeeded. He heard them move first. They tried to be quiet, but they were only northerners. They didn't know how to be quiet.

The skin on the back of Damon's neck prickled as one of them neared him. Were they going to try and kill him? With what?

The whisper of a sword leaving a sheath made him open his eyes. "Look out!" shouted one of the northerners. The one traitorous slimy bastard who'd thought he'd ingratiate himself with them by betraying the rest of his comrades. As if they were dumb enough to fall for one of the oldest tricks in the book. Damon leapt to his feet. The men froze. One of them was poised above Elena, Sam's sword in his hand, not realizing that Jon had been awake the whole time and was ready to spring into action at any moment and would have done so earlier if Damon and the Traitor hadn't interrupted his intentions.

"Well, well, what have we here?" he asked. The first thing Elena saw was the man holding the sword. No one had anticipated her ferocity but, in retrospect, Damon wondered why he hadn't expected it. She was always protective of her loved ones, even as a human, and she had fought in her own way as a human to survive and to even thrive even though she had been persecuted by the worst of creatures.

The man – boy, really – was not fast enough and didn't even manage to move when Elena seized his sword arm and wrenched the weapon from his hand. The others, too, were awake and on their feet by now, with Tarly fumbling for his absent sword in a disoriented manner. His confusion would have made Damon laugh, but there was work to do.

Next chapter…

Katherine introduces to Robb a "new" way to deal with POWs. Elena faces the consequences of her decisions and discusses with Sam the nature of self-loathing and change. Sandor enters the picture.
The Thin Red Line

Chapter Summary

Robb faces victory and wonders what it actually means. Damon crosses the line of Elena's morality. Jon's company meets with an unexpected intruder.

North of Harrenhal

Katherine had held up her end of the plan. Robb's joy leapt to his throat when he saw her banners mingle with that of Joffrey's as her cavalry – his cavalry – cut through the forces from King's Landing. "Now!" he shouted to his men. "Rally to me!" His armour was heavy but he seemed not to feel it as he charged. He felt the vigour of his youth and the anticipation for a victory that was just around the corner. The smells and sights and sound of battle, of hot metal and blood and cold flesh and sweat, which ought to horrify any man with a sound mind and heart, intoxicated him. A cut on his cheek from an arrow that flew too close bled freely. The sting reminded him that this was real, he was alive, and it wasn't just a dream brought on by too much drinking and wishing.

He threw himself into the fray to the shouts of "Cleanse the impure blood!". If Katherine was the hammer, then he and his men would have to be the anvil. Joffrey's men, seeing him thus, were so shocked that they reeled back from him at first, unsure of what to do. But sense prevailed and they threw themselves against the Stark men. Grey Wind leapt amongst them, his teeth as sharp as any sword, although not as long.

The sight of the wolf, the living symbol of House Stark, gave further spirit to his men. They charged shoulder to shoulder with him, unafraid of the steel that greeted cried out, more in fury than in pain, as a sharp blade bit into his arm where his armour exposed it, cutting through the thick quilted gambeson and into his flesh. His own sword pierced the throat of the man who did it, up through in the soft part where the chin met the neck and into his skull. The man dropped without a word, blood spurting from all the orifices of his face.

Every thrust, every slash, every pivot brought him closer to the victory he so craved and needed. His heartbeat became one with the pulse of the battle until he could no longer distinguish between the two. He peeled away the layers of Joffrey's army as he would an onion. His sword arm ached but he continued to hack. It was life, it was death and it was everything in between. Lust for glory and the mad desire to see life drain out of his enemy's eyes numbed his ability to feel pain. Every man he killed was Joffrey in his mind. He would see that hateful face die a thousand times today.

The banner with the golden stag and lion wavered and began to move, jostled this way and that, as Joffrey and his company tried to fight their way out of the tightening snare. Robb snarled in frustration and threw himself ever more fully into the battle. He had to get Joffrey today. He had to!

"My lord!" He didn't pay heed to the warnings of his men. He cut down Joffrey's men where they stood as they defended themselves against the onslaught, but there just wasn't any room. The battlefield shrank in on itself, it seemed, and the men were all clustered together in one tiny little circle, packed as closely as sausage meat.

A dappled grey stallion charged up beside him. The rider reached down and offered a gloved hand.
Without a word, Robb grabbed the proffered hand.

Katherine hauled him into the saddle behind her in a rather inappropriate exchange of roles, for was he not the husband who ought to be rescuing his wife instead?

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" she asked. There was a strange tone in her voice that he later learned was irritation.

"Joffrey's getting away," he said.

She wheeled her stallion about, one hand holding the reins and the other holding one of her two short swords. A red lattice covered it as blood flew from the edge and the tip. The stallion's nostrils flared. It wanted more blood, more fighting. "Grey Wind!" called Robb. The wolf bounded to his side, his muzzle dripping blood.

Together, they charged through the quagmire to the edge of the melee, behind their own lines, in pursuit of Joffrey. A Lannister knight rode up to meet them. Robb lashed out with his longsword. Their blades clashed and the force almost threw Robb from the saddle and it probably would have if he hadn't been holding onto Katherine's waist with his wounded left arm. He gritted his teeth and tightened the grip of his knees about the stallion's flanks.

Katherine's hand snaked out. That pretty little hand that he was so used to seeing employed in some feminine art, whether it be embroidery a cushion or mending his shirts or writing poetry (actually, she had never ever mended his shirts, ever, for his mother guarded that task jealously), seized the man by the back of the collar and hauled him bodily from the saddle before flinging him to the ground. Robb snagged the bridle of the now riderless horse and threw himself across its back. The animal snorted, its white-edged eyes wide and rolling, ears flat against its head and nostrils flaring. Robb flailed about, trying to get himself into the right position so that instead of lying across the saddle on his stomach, he would actually be in it. It was more difficult than he had anticipated for his left arm was weak and he could not drop his sword. In the periphery of his vision, Katherine fended off any of Joffrey's men who thought this might be a good chance to end him, and the war, for good.

He finally righted himself and prayed that no one except his wife had seen him. It had only been a short while but, to him, it had seemed an eternity.

"Victory, my lord! We have victory!" shouted Ser Onry as he rode up to Robb on his way in pursuit of any stragglers from Joffrey's army. He waved, clearly ecstatic about beating back Joffrey and scoring one for his god.

"We have to seal the breach before it's too late!" shouted Robb.

"Already done," said Katherine. "Only Daemon's people and the Tyrells got out and they were never in the main battle in the first place. We've won, my love. That's what matters."

He laid his sword across his lap, then, and pulled her close, right there on the battlefield, both of them covered in the blood of men who they had just killed, and kissed her. He tasted the blood on her lips. Or, perhaps, it was on his own lips. It didn't matter. If they hadn't been in full armour and if there hadn't been thousands of men surrounding him, he didn't know what he might have done to her. He kissed her until he had no more breath left. Even when they pulled away, he kept staring at her.

"We've won," he whispered. Then he remembered. "Where's Joffrey?"
He glanced about, turning this way and that, searching, but Joffrey was gone, probably already safely ensconced within the ranks of Daemon's reserves and being taken away back somewhere safe – probably back to King's Landing behind Tywin's army and into Cersei's arms. The remainder of his men were slowly being herded closer and closer together by the northmen until they could hardly move, much less fight. Disappointment made his stomach sink and tainted the victory at hand. Still, he swallowed it. They had won. It hadn't been easy, but they finally had the victory that he needed to bolster his men's belief in him. That was the important part. Joffrey would have been nice to have but he hadn't been necessary. No, not at all.

Once Joffrey's men realized that their king had run, they simply gave up and tried to flee. But there was nowhere to go. Which was just as well, because there simply was no room in the pens and the dungeons beneath Harrenhal to keep them.

The sun dipped beneath the horizon, its rays growing ever more slanted until they shone horizontally across the land, casting long shadows. Then they disappeared too, leaving only the faint stars and the few scattered fires. "Enough," he finally said. "The battle is long over and it is dark. We've already won. Hours ago."

"They would have killed us all if they had had the chance."

"There is merit in little mercies," said Katherine coyly.

So many corpses covered the ground that one could see neither mud nor grass. Not that he could see anything in the dark anyway. But it was difficult to go anywhere without stepping on someone's skull or body or tripping over a cold solid limb that resembled nothing so much as a log put there deliberately to make horses stumble. They spent the entire night scavenging weapons and supplies.

Joffrey, in his haste to leave, had abandoned his supplies. These were much more welcome than the few prisoners who would do nothing but sap up valuable resources. Still, Katherine seemed to see merit in keeping some of them.

"Never before has there been such carnage," remarked Bolton as the sun rose again to reveal all the dead. "Not even when Aegon conquered all of Westeros with his dragons. The Stranger will not thank you today, my lord. This is a victory that they will not forget."

*Then how come it doesn't feel like I've won at all?* Robb wanted to ask, but he didn't.

Robb and Katherine went straight up to their own chambers after their return without seeing anyone. The men were tired and hungry and hurt. The speeches and ceremony could be saved for the feast afterwards. Right now, they all needed rest and tending to.

"What are we going to do with all the prisoners?" Robb asked the top of her head as she bent over his arm, dabbing at the deep cut that had rent his flesh. He hadn't felt it then but now it throbbed and stung even though he wondered why it didn't look as bad as he had thought it would be when he had first sustained it. He winced when she was too rough with him.

"Hold still," she said. From her sewing kit, she withdrew a needle and thread. He squeezed his eyes shut. He could deal with swords but there was something about that tiny, pointed sliver of metal that he could not stand. He felt it pierce the edges of his wound and wished he had some of that awful wine to dull his nerves or to, at least, take his mind off what he was feeling.

"Put them to work," said Katherine. "The north needs roads, irrigation ditches, food. All of your men are fighting. You need someone to do the work. You will need to set men to watch them, of course, but it will be fewer men than you will need to actually do the work."
"So, in other words, you are suggesting … slavery?" said Robb, raising an eyebrow.

"Prison labour," said Katherine. "There is a price to pay for raising arms against us, is there not? Would you not rather it be paid in some productive way?"

Robb was about to suggest other ways that they could pay, knowing fully well that they weren't productive, but there was a furious knocking on the door. Before either of them could answer, Arya burst in.

"Robb! Good, you're back," she said. "Mother's put Damon and Jon in the dungeons!"

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**The Wilderness south of Harrenhal**

Their broken bodies lay steaming in the early morning sun, wisps of white rising from their cooling insides like souls escaping to another realm. She tasted the coppery blood on her lips and felt it renewing her strength. The danger having now passed, Elena found herself sickened by the sight. Some of them were only boys. Jeremy's age. Jon's age. She'd promised them life and given them death. They had trusted her to keep to her word, but she had deliberately allowed Damon to entice them to rebel.

But what other choice did anyone have in this world? They killed to live. If she hadn't done this, maybe the ones lying dead on the ground would be her friends instead.

"Elena," said Jon quietly. He touched her arm as if he were afraid of breaking her. She did not move. He repeated her name. "We have to go." She could not stop looking at the corpses. Once, they had been alive. She had made them into packets of dead meat and bone and blood.

"Elena," said Jon again. Only then could she tear her gaze away. She did not speak to him. What could she say? He would never see what she had done as being wrong. She could be the worst person in the world – and she felt like the worst person in the world – and he would still think her wonderful. He followed her without a word, sensing her need for silence.

Her gaze fell upon the man who had warned them but she wasn't the only one who had noticed him. He struggled in Damon's grasp. "No!" His voice was squeezed out in a strangled gasp. "No! Please! Don't kill me!"

Damon cocked his head this way and that way, as if not comprehending him. Elena opened her mouth but she was too slow. Damon tightened his grip and twisted his neck. Bones cracked. The struggling man stilled and became limp, although his eyes still twitched a little in horror before he became completely dead.

"Damon!" said Elena.

"What? He's not trustworthy," said Damon, throwing down the body. "He betrayed his own comrades."

"He helped us!" said Elena.

"And he betrayed Robb, Elena," said Jon. "Damon gave him a quick death. It's a kinder one than the one that he probably deserved."

"Who are we to judge, Jon?" Elena demanded. "Damon's a deserter and he deserted because of a girl. You and I, our hands are covered in blood. They trusted us."
"No, they didn't," said Damon. "As they shouldn't have. We didn't trust them. You were the only one who did and they would have used it against you. Pre-emptive strike. We're Americans. We vaccinate."

Elena did not acknowledge him. "Are you really going to take his side on this?" she demanded of Jon, pointing at Damon with an outstretched arm.

"Elena, he's on our side," said Jon. "You shouldn't judge him so harshly."

"I don't believe it," whispered Elena. "You actually haven't changed at all!"

"Elena..." Jon began, but she had already turned away from him. She didn't want to hear it.

Damon dug a shallow grave and he and Gendry dragged all the bodies into the pit before covering them with merely inches of dirt; enough to hide them from human eyes but not from prowling hungry animals who would surely find them. He packed down the dirt and tossed sticks and leaves onto the grave the hide its location. "Don't want anybody following us," he said as dusted his hands.

Well, at least there was one thing he could do correctly; hiding his dirty work. At first glance, no one would have thought that anything had happened here. It was as it had once been; pristine. Then again, perhaps every inch of Westeros was a blood-soaked grave and it was just that nobody knew.

If Damon noticed that she wasn't talking – and she was certain that he did – he gave no indication of it. He jested and joked just as he always did, teasing Hot Pie and Gendry and Jon and Sam and mocking everything, as was his wont. The deaths of the men did not affect him at all. Elena supposed that time and practise had made this easy for him and killed his moral compass. She could not help but think as a human and a very specific type of human at that. In her world, people did not kill people who'd helped them.

The fire crackled and nobody except Hot Pie said anything, complaining about how hungry he was and demanding to know why Damon and Jon weren't back with food yet. Sam stirred the fire and added a few more sticks of wood. Sparks flew into the air and vanished. He stole a couple of glances at Elena every now and then. Nobody had told him anything, but he wasn't so stupid as to be unable to guess what Jon and Damon had meant to do and they wouldn't have done it without telling Elena. After the attack on Jon and the struggle every day to feed five extra mouths, there had been only one option.

It sickened him to think that they had promised the men life when death had been their lot all along. Still, it was better them than his friends and himself. Life wasn't like the stories his mother had liked him to read to her when she had sat in her bower, sewing. His father had corrected that notion. He supposed he really ought to thank his father for if he hadn't been disowned like that, he might never have seen everything that he had seen. Some of it was bad, but some of it was good and all knowledge was power.

He glanced at Elena again. She sat leaning against a tree trunk, not doing anything except staring at
the boughs above. Dappled light fell on her face. She looked tired and cold. He didn't know if her kind felt the cold. She had seemed rather impervious to it at some points, when he had been utterly numb with it and exhausted and unable to continue. Still, he took one of the blankets (stolen by Damon from some poor farmer) and went over to drape it over her shoulders.

She started when he touched her and then stilled again when she saw it was him.

"Are you all right?" asked Sam as he sat down beside her. Hot Pie could take care of the fire for a while.

"I don't know," said Elena. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders. "Thanks." For a moment, they sat without talking. Perhaps she was more like Jon than anyone had thought. Jon also needed someone to sit with him and be silent sometimes. Sam had become quite good at it. "Do you ever hate yourself?"

"More than you probably think," said Sam.

"You always seem happy."

"There's no point in being sad about the things you can't change," said Sam.

"What if it is change that you hate?" asked Elena.

"Well," said Sam slowly. He drew out the word, hoping that he wouldn't have to provide Elena with an answer that he didn't have. What did he do when he hated some change or another? He always went along with it because he was too scared to do anything about it. It didn't mean he liked it. "Change has to happen, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but what if you find that you are changing for the worse?"

Sam shook his head. He didn't know. He supposed people just got used to it. Didn't he first get used to the Night's Watch and now this, whatever it was? "Maybe, if you notice it, you're not really changing," said Sam.

"You know that's not true," said Elena. "You've changed and I'm sure you know it. It's a good change."

"I don't feel any different," Sam insisted. He paused. "I don't think Damon should have killed that man, but I suppose he had his own reasons."

"What reason except for the fact that he wanted to kill something?" demanded Elena. "At the very least, we could have taken him back to the king for a trial."

Sam didn't know what to say to that except that he agreed wholeheartedly, but that wouldn't help. It had started to rain by the time Jon and Damon returned. Water streamed down their faces and plastered their hair to their heads, washing away the splashes of blood on their skin so that the water that dripped from them was pink.

Ghost let his tongue loll out and wagged his tail slowly as he loped towards Elena, hoping for an ear scratch. Elena pretended not to see him, leaving him whining in disapproval.

"Oh good, I'm starving," said Hot Pie. He brandished a knife and waddled over to the men, but his interest was not in them.
The meat was cut up, washed and roasted, and everyone had a good meal. The world was already too full of horrible things. It would be even worse if they spent all their time thinking about every bad thing that had happened in the past. He forced himself not to and plastered on a cheerful countenance.

Smoke and the scent of roasting meat wafted towards him in waves. Despite his best efforts, Sandor's mouth began to water and the grumbling in his stomach, long silenced by exhaustion, began with renewed vigour. He'd travelled for days, avoiding towns and settlements where someone might recognize him. It didn't help that he had such a …special face, but he'd also seen his own crude portrait nailed up beside that pretty Salvatore's. He might not have been able to read, but one didn't need to be able to read to know that there were people who wanted his head on a pike. Again. Not that it had ever been on one.

There was no village out here. There wasn't even a path to follow. The smoke could not be from a settlement or a tavern and whoever was out here in this miserable shit hole roasting meat had a good chance of not knowing who he was. The temptation was too much to bear. Game had become scarce as he had made his way further north. The animals here were hardier and stronger and faster, better able to deal with the cold and with hunters. Preying on animals wasn't his specialty.

As he drew closer, taking care not to break any twigs underfoot and trying to think of a way to coerce these people into sharing their food with him, he overheard the murmur of conversation above the crackling of fat dripping into the flames. The voices were soft and genteel, reminding him of the pansies at court. Surely there could be no noble walking party out here.

He saw the fire, now, orange against the green and brown foliage. A haunch of venison hung from a spit above it, its surface blackened and glistening with grease. A fat boy kept turning the spit, his eyes focused solely on the meat and not seeing anything else. He counted five people in total, all just boys and all looked as if they were still sucking milk from their mothers' tits. They were sheep for him to slaughter, even in this state, but he really didn't want to. Slaughter them, that was. All he wanted was his pound of flesh.

He stepped into the clearing to announce his presence. Perhaps he could learn to be friendly and charming, although the practical voice in his head told him that it would not be the work of a day or two.

All five of them whipped about to look at him and he realized his mistake. His hand flew to his sword.

"Damon fucking Salvatore," he snarled.

Next chapter: Unexpected guests arrive in Harrenhal. Catelyn and Arya vie for control.
Elena and the crew meet up with an old "friend". The party is welcomed to Harrenhal.

Chapter 99: The Grudge

Somewhere in the Wilderness – South of Harrenhal

Here they were, enjoying a nice quiet meal while everyone walked on eggshells around a moody Elena (she'd get over it, Damon was sure), and then somebody just had to let the dog out (not Ghost).

"Damon fucking Salvatore," snarled the Hound.

"Oh, come on," said Damon. More like whinged. He didn't care that he was whinging. As far as he was concerned, it was fully justified. "We've only just dealt with one batch!"

Jon leapt to his feet and drew his sword at the same moment.

"Stop!" shouted Elena.

Jon paused and did not charge. Damon turned back to look at her with incredulity, but she either could not see him or was choosing to ignore him in favour of staring at the Hound.

The Hound had frozen where he stood. His eyes, one wide and one permanently bearing a squinting expression thanks to the melting burn scars that covered half his face, were focused solely on Elena. His expression was one of utter disbelief; as if he dared not believe what he was seeing. "You," he growled. "How can you be here?"

"Sandor Clegane," said Elena. She drew herself up to her full height. The turmoil that had tormented her had been put under the dust sheets again. It would resurface, but not at this moment. Sooner or later, she would lose that pesky conscience of hers when it came to her enemies. Damon hoped it would be sooner. "I should be asking you the same thing."

"You jumped out the window of the Tower of the Hand," said the Hound, ignoring Elena's last comment. "I saw you. Your brains should have been splattered all over the courtyard."

"Just because some people die after jumping out of windows doesn't mean everyone dies after jumping out of windows, Fido," said Damon.

The Hound growled and advanced one step towards Damon. Ghost finally took that to mean a threat and stood with a low menacing growl of his own. The Hound's eyes flickered towards the wolf and to the man-boy standing behind him.

"If it ain't the Bastard of Winterfell," he said.

"Take out your weapon, put it on the ground, and step away from it," said Jon. He levelled his sword at the poor maimed creature. Damon suddenly had an image of Jon fighting a dragon a la St
George, with the Hound in a padded green costume.

"I could stick my sword up your arse before you could cry for your mother," sneered the Hound. "But I didn't come here to fight. You're going after Robb Stark, aren't you?" He kept one hand on his sword and reached inside his chest plate with the other. At first, Damon tensed and got ready to pounce. His mind was so attuned to a different life that, for a moment, he'd expected Clegane to pull out a gun. But he only withdrew a folded piece of parchment. "I've a message for him."

Damon reached out to grab it before the Hound could put it away but Elena was even faster. She snatched the Hound by the wrist, holding him so tightly that he couldn't even move his arm. His look of confusion was the most entertaining thing Damon had seen in weeks. Like a madman, he flexed his muscles, but he was held in place by a slender pretty girl who had tilted her head to one side to read the writing.

"It's Sansa's handwriting," she said as she tried to pry Sandor's hand off the piece of parchment." She was almost lifted off her feet by the struggling doggy.

"It's for Robb Stark, not you!" he spat, but he had not anticipated Elena's strength. Damon made things easier and held him still so he couldn't reach for his sword at all.

"What does it say?" asked Jon. The other three, who had not known Sansa, ostensibly kept their mouths shut.

Elena pried the note from the Hounds gloved hand and unfolded it. It was creased from days of travel but the writing was still legible. "Did you read this?" she asked Sandor.

Damon tightened his grip. The Hound was not inclined to talk.

"I saved her life and she said she'd vouched for me in the letter," said the Hound reluctantly, as if talking hurt him more than Damon could.

"You didn't answer my question. Did you read this?" said Elena.

"Answer the nice lady, there's a good boy," Damon whispered in the Hound's mangled ear.

The man looked around at the hostile faces, the drawn swords, and the snarling wolf, and he knew he couldn't win. He couldn't even fight off a little girl. "I don't read other people's letters," he said in a low voice.

"Maybe he can't read," suggested Tarly. "Most of my father's knights couldn't."

"What if I told you she said you weren't to be trusted and that you had harmed her in King's Landing?" said Elena.

Jon immediately took the letter from her and put his burgeoning literacy to the test. As far as Damon knew, he had just as much reading ability as the Hound, having been denied education his entire life.

At Elena's question, Sandor stiffened. "She wouldn't do that!" he spat. Perhaps Damon wasn't very good at reading people. One hundred and seventy years wasn't that long, after all, and he hadn't the experience of, say, Tywin Lannister, but he was pretty sure that he heard vulnerability and a sense of betrayal in the Hound's declaration. "She said she'd vouch for me. I never laid a finger on her!" He glared at Elena. "You're making shit up."

Jon finished deciphering the tiny scrawled handwriting, his brow furrowed from concentration, and
looked up. "She did vouch for him," he said. "But it could be a trick. She could have been forced."

"I don't think she was," said Elena. "He had no idea what she was writing. If his intent had been malicious, he might have at least checked what she had written. It wouldn't have been too difficult. Most scribes can be bought with gold."

"He could have been afraid to show his face to a scribe," said Damon. "I sure would have remembered that ugly mug."

"He could have killed the scribe afterwards if that were the case," said Jon. "Are we really going to trust him? He's Joffrey's dog. He's probably working for him."

"Fuck Joffrey," snarled the Hound. "I serve no one. Fuck the king!"

"Which king?" asked Damon.

"All of them!" Clegane paused. "Robb Stark is no king. And he didn't order me to burn at the Black Water."

"So you're not about to fuck him," said Damon. "Good to know. It was a disturbing image, bub."

"Damon!" exclaimed Jon.

"Let him go, Damon," said Elena.

"What?" said Damon.

"I said, let him go," said Elena. Her voice carried ice and was as sharp as icicles that had frozen over several winters.

"If he could betray Joffrey…" began Damon.

"You will not lay a finger on him, Damon Salvatore," said Elena. Jon's hand was back on his sword, but this time, he was looking at Damon.

Damon sighed. He got the distinct feeling that somehow, during the last couple of weeks, he had relinquished his authority in the camp to Elena. She called all the shots now and the others all listened to her, either out of love (Jon), idolatry (Gendry) or simply because they knew and trusted her more than they knew and trusted him (Sam and Hot Pie).

"Are we really going to trust him, Elena?" asked Jon softly.

"I think we shouldn't let him go," said Gendry, finally finding the courage to voice an opinion that wasn't entirely mundane. Damon hadn't thought that he'd had a brain in there somewhere. It was good to be proven wrong, sometimes.

"I will trust you this once, Sandor Clegane," said Elena. "You know you can't fight us."

The Hound made a noise similar to the one Ghost made whenever Jon tried to claim half the kill. Damon suddenly released him and the power he'd been using to push against the vampire made him stumble forward. He growled again and rubbed his arms. "Don't expect me to kiss your feet just because you spared me," he said to Elena. "I don't forget. Now, how about some meat?"

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Harrenhal
Their journey seemed interminable. Harrenhal would never come.

But it did come, a monstrous castle looming dark and ominous in the mist, its turrets twisted and melted from dragon fire. It had a façade of something that had once been grand and beautiful but was now decayed by time.

Stark banners flapped on the battlements above.

"Open the gates!" called Jon.

"Who demands entry?" asked the guards from above.

"I am Lord Stark's brother," said Jon.

Sam held his breath. He'd heard so much about Robb Stark, the Young Wolf, that he had already formed an image of him in his mind. He imagined him to look like Jon, but grander and more imposing and definitely taller.

"Which one?" demanded the guard.

"Jon Snow."

The guard laughed. "That was not a wise name to choose, my friend," he said.

"It is my own," said Jon.

"Haven't you heard? Jon Snow is a bastard and a traitor who became a turncoat."

Oh yes, now that Sam thought about it, he remembered that story. It had been well-concocted, he'd thought.

"I am no turncoat," said Jon. Somehow, he managed to keep his voice steady despite the many arrows that were now being aimed down at them. "Lord Stark knows this. If you would tell him —"

"Lord Stark isn't here."

"Then the Lady Katherine—"

"She isn't here either," said the guard. "There is Lady Catelyn if you want to speak with her?"

"Where are they, Lord and Lady Stark?" asked Jon.

"They have ridden out against Joffrey Lannister."

Jon looked back at them. Sam knew he wanted nothing more than to join his brother on the battlefield but whilst the heart was willing, the flesh was weak and had no strength. The march had been long and hard and they were all half frozen. They couldn't stay out here much longer and not expect to fall ill at best or die.

"Is Lady Arya within?" asked Jon.

"Why do you ask for her?"

"She will vouch for us."

Arya alternated between watching her mother's needle go in and out of the fabric and at the
curtained window that offered no glimpse of the world outside. How could her mother do needlework when Robb and Katherine were out there, fighting? They'd had no news of them ever since the first report that the two armies had met on the field, when Robb's army had been pushed back, or so the messenger had said. They didn't know what was happening. Arya threw down her needlework in frustration.

"Arya?" said Catelyn.

"I can't do this," she said. "I can't sit here and wait and not know."

"It is a woman's lot to wait for news of battle," said Catelyn. "You will learn this."

"I don't want to wait for news of battle in a bower. I have a sword. I can fight."

"You will do no such thing." Her mother gave her a look that would have pinned her there to the floor when she had been younger, but she had seen too much.

"I'm going outside."

"Arya!" Catelyn reached out to try to catch her but Arya dodged from her mother's reach.

"Katherine gets to fight and she's Lady Stark!"

"Katherine is hardly a lady, Arya!"

"I don't care. She's the greatest lady I've ever seen, not like those stupid simpering girls who only know how to bat their eyelashes and cry." Arya stuck out her lower lip. Why couldn't her mother see that? Come to think of it, her good-sister was the first person in the world who had been sensible about it. She didn't think that being a girl was a reason for weakness or silliness of any kind and it certainly wasn't a reason to be boring.

"Arya, how will you ever find a husband if you continue this way?" demanded Catelyn. Her mother was growing exasperated with her but it would hardly do for her to lose her temper. Arya was the only company she had these days, locked away as she was in this gloomy room. She deserved it for betraying Robb and letting Jaime Lannister out. If she'd let him out accidentally, that would have been one thing, but she'd done it deliberately. Arya tried to remind herself that this was her mother and she'd done it to save Sansa, but she still couldn't forgive her. Hadn't she known how that man had hurt Father? How could freeing Jaime Lannister ensure Sansa's freedom anyway? Once Damon got back, perhaps she could send him after Jaime Lannister. She'd like to see the best swordsman in all of Westeros fighting a vampire.

"I don't need a husband, Mother, and I'll never want one," said Arya.

"But you must marry," said Catelyn. "Robb will agree with me."

That wasn't even an argument! She opened her mouth to say something about how Robb wasn't the gods' chosen like everyone seemed to think he was, but there came a knock on the door and it opened.

"My ladies," said the guard. "A man claiming to be Jon Snow is at the gates. He has asked for Lady Arya."

Jon waited, listening to the sound of Robb's banners snapping at each other in the wind. He had every faith that Arya would come and then the truth would be revealed. Anticipation made his
hands tremble just ever so slightly; not enough for the others to see, but he knew. Finally, he would be where he belonged, by this brother's side, fighting this war and avenging his father.

A feminine figure appeared at the top of the battlements. In the half-light of dusk, he almost mistook it to be Sansa, for Sansa had been on his mind ever since Sandor had brought that letter to them. Then he realized that it was not Sansa. He stilled.

Arya's head popped over the battlements. "Jon!" she called. "Open the gates! It's Jon!"

"No," said Catelyn. He could almost read her thoughts. Why was he, the bastard, the abomination, the shame of her life, the proof of his father's infidelity, here? Wasn't he supposed to be freezing slowly to death on the Wall, never to torment her again? The residual fear he had felt for her as a boy threatened to rear its head, but he had seen the world now; seen wonders and terrors beyond all imagination. He was a man, not a boy, and he was not afraid anymore.

"Mother, it's Jon! And Damon!" said Arya.

"I know who they are," said Catelyn. She did not speak loudly but the wind carried her voice down to Jon as if it were a living being that wanted to torment him with memories of what had been. The cold rejections, the slaps, the hard stares – they became fresh in his mind at the sound of her voice and he had to remind himself that he was beyond that. She could do nothing to him now. Robb was the lord. Robb was in charge. Perhaps he really ought to thank her, even. Catelyn Tully had made him who he was. She had made him strong.

"Open the gates," said Arya firmly, her high girlish voice belying her authority. "It's an order." Perhaps she had been spending too much time with Katherine. She'd acquired some of the vampire's imperious air. For a moment, Jon saw the lady that she could be; not just any lady like her mother, but a lady who would hold her own against the high lords. They could fear her as they feared Katherine now. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

Catelyn did not object this time. The heavy gates opened with an aging groan to reveal another set of identical gates. They had to pass through three of them before they could get inside. High stone walls surrounded them, muffling the sound of the wind and making footsteps echo. The courtyard's flagstones were covered by a layer of churned mud. The footprints of thousands of men and horses mingled there.

Arya and Catelyn descended from the battlements. The hem of the girl's dress had become some nondescript colour of mud and rain, but it had once been blue. Jon could not help but grin at the sight of her as she ran towards her. Robb had probably put her in that dress, against her will. When would his brother learn?

He opened his arms to her, ready for her to leap into them as she had always done back when life had been simple and they had all been innocently naïve.

"Seize them," said Catelyn.

"What?" Arya stopped short of her leap.

"Jon Snow and Damon Salvatore are traitors to Lord Stark," said Catelyn. "They served the Lannisters out of their own greed."

"That's ridiculous, Mother!" said Arya. "I was there!"

"Is anyone actually in charge here or shall I hand my letter from Sansa Stark to the old woman?" said Sandor Clegane. Damon glared at him and if it hadn't been for Catelyn, he probably would
have revealed his true nature there and then. Clegane didn't know yet. Nobody had seen the need to
tell him anything. He held aloft his letter from Sansa. They'd let him keep it because she'd
entrusted it to him. Now Jon regretted it.

One of the men took the letter from him and quickly darted back to Catelyn with his prize. Catelyn
read the letter slowly, running her gaze over the lines many, many times before she carefully
folded it and tucked it into her sleeve like a token. "That man is a friend. But take the others," she
said.

"I didn't do anything! I'm just a cook!" said Hot Pie.

"Be quiet!" hissed Gendry, digging the fat boy in the ribs with an elbow.

"We were agents of Lord Robb in the Lannister camp, my lady," said Damon smoothly, putting on
his nicest grin. Perhaps that had always worked for him, the cheekbones and the white teeth and
the blue eyes that were so like Robb's but, for whatever reason, Catelyn had hardened her heart
against him too. Perhaps it was his association with Jon. Perhaps it was something else. Jon didn't
remember Catelyn actually hating Damon when he'd been in Winterfell.

"You were turncoats," said Catelyn. "Seize them."

The guards stepped forward, their faces obscured by helmets.

Elena stepped in front of them. At the sight of her face, the guards immediately took a startled step
back. It might have been covered with soot from their many campfires and her hair might have
been hacked criminally short out of necessity, but there was no denying the noble blood that ran
through Elena's veins; the same blood that ran through Katherine's. Jon wouldn't be surprised to
learn that they were both royalty. They just had that look about them; the determined set of their
mouths, the glittering strength of their eyes. "You are mistaken, my lady," she said.

"Katherine?" whispered Catelyn. Such a deception could not last for long since everyone knew
Katherine had ridden out with Robb. Still, perhaps one moment's reprieve was all they needed.

"My name is Elena, my lady," said Elena. She dipped a curtsey, still a little clumsy, but much
improved from when she had first started. "I am Katherine's sister. Lord Robb knows of me. It was
he who sent me to the late Lord Stark as a maid for ladies Sansa and Arya."

"You were there?" whispered Catelyn.

"I was," said Elena. Her beautiful eyes could melt any icy heart. If there was anyone who could
convince Catelyn, then it would be Elena. Jon was sure of it.

"You watched him die," said Catelyn. "You did nothing."

Her grief and her hatred had put her far out of the reach of reason. No amount of persuasion or
pleading would move her heart, for it had turned to stone. "Put them in the dungeons."

"No, you will do no such thing," said Arya. "Damon saved me. They are not traitors."

"I am sorry, Lady Arya," said the guard.

"I wonder what my brother Lord Stark will say if he hears that you have put his friends in prison
even though I, his sister, have vouched for them?" asked Arya in a way that was far beyond her
eleven years.
The guards looked at the mother and daughter and at each other. To offend either could be lethal. But respect for age won out. They advanced upon Jon and Damon. Words would not be able to stop them and trying to fight them would only confirm their guilt. Jon hadn't expected much when he had come to Harrenhal – not position, not glory, just a place by Robb's side. He hadn't expected a prison.

They were marched deep underground, past cells packed full of Lannister prisoners. Only the Hound had been spared incarceration on account of the letter he had brought from Sansa. His face had been full of disbelief too, but he hadn't said anything. Why would he? To speak for Jon Snow before Catelyn Tully was to condemn oneself in her eyes. Arya followed them all the way down into the dungeons. "My brother will hear about this," she said. Her voice bounced off the stone walls glistening with slime and moisture. "And what do you think Lady Katherine will do to you when she hears you've put her sister in the dungeons like some common criminal?"

In some way, Jon felt quite sorry for the poor guards. Between Robb, Catelyn and Katherine, they had no place to move and no place to hide. Now, Jon knew that Katherine was not going to care very much if Elena were locked up in a dungeon – neither of them thought very highly of each other and Katherine had attempted to kill Elena before – but the guards didn't.

They stopped again, for the second time. "She's right," said the first guard.

"Lady Catelyn just wants them locked away because they might be traitors," said another. "There are plenty of pleasanter rooms upstairs where the lady can stay."

"I'm not going anywhere without the others," Elena insisted. Jon heard the panic in her voice and it was the first time since The Incident that she had shown her concern for them. He was relieved and he smiled.

"Elena, I'll be fine," he said. He gave her fingers a squeeze to assure her that what he said was true. Catelyn could put him in a cell but she wouldn't be able to do more without Robb's permission. His brother was the only one with the power of life and death in this castle. Him, and probably Katherine, who was more likely to kiss him than kill him.

"I'm innocent!" Hot Pie sobbed.

"I'm not leaving any man behind," said Elena. Jon pressed his forehead against hers. Their dark hair, his curly and tangled, hers sticking out jaggedly in every which way, mingled.

"I want you to take the room. When Robb comes back, all will be well."

"I'm still innocent!" said Hot Pie. "And I'm hungry."

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Next chapter: Robb goes on a rescue mission. Katherine loses it.
The Impossible

Chapter Summary

A reunion takes place in Harrenhal. Katherine loses it.

Harrenhal

Elena paced in the room where she'd been put. It was one of the nicer rooms in Harrenhal. Neither the roof nor the walls had caved in and the wide window gave her a sweeping view of the keep and the fields below. Most of it was black marshlands where only weeds could grow. The villagers sometimes fished or hunted there. The crops had all been either harvested and sequestered away or burnt by war. A bowl of meat stew and a hunk of bread sat on a tin plate in one corner, along with a goblet of acidic wine, but she hadn't touched it. The stew had grown cold and congealed. She wondered if they had given Jon anything to eat, how he was now, and whether Damon was hungry. She certainly was hungry for blood, right now. Damon was more able to control his urges, thanks to his age but, even so, why would he?

She sat down on the creaky four poster bed with mouldered curtains and tried to stop herself from fiddling or jiggling her knee. She couldn't sleep or do anything. Time passed so slowly. She watched the sky. The distant stars were bright but cold. She tried to pick out the constellations that Jon had taught her. It was cold and deathly damp in the dungeons and they could have no fire down there.

The lock clanked. She whipped around, expecting bad news. It was only Arya. Elena dropped into a curtsey. It was almost automatic to her, now.

"Stop that," said Arya.

"How's Jon? Have you been to see him?"

"I think he's all right," said Arya. "He's not comfortable, of course. I had the guards move them to the driest cell and bring them food and blankets. I think he misses you, though. He kept asking me how you were. I thought about breaking them out but that wouldn't really do anything, would it? Mother would hunt them down if they didn't run, and that was never the plan. Running."

She sat down on the sagging bed and tried to bounce a few times, but the mattress was just so flattened that nothing happened. "It'll be all right. When Robb comes back, he'll let everyone out, and Mother will never be able to hurt you again. He'll make sure of that."

"When is he coming back?" asked Elena. She, too, sat down and felt better for having company.

Arya stared out the wide window. "I don't know," she said. "He marched out a few days ago. We haven't had any news since. I hate it. I asked him to let me ride with him but he said no. He's going to win, though. I know he is. Katherine said he had a brilliant plan, like some cannibal way, way back in the past."

"Cannibal?!"
"That's what she said. I think. The cannibal won."

Elena was pretty sure Katherine hadn't meant to say 'cannibal', for it made no sense, but she didn't know what Katherine had meant to say so she kept quiet and hoped that Arya's faith in her other brother was not misplaced. She was still so young. Robb Stark must have appeared to be quite invincible to her when he really wasn't.

The sky turned from black to blue, with red beginning to tint its eastern-most horizon. They watched the daybreak together, eyes wide with sleepiness and worry. Arya leaned against her and Elena put her arm around the girl. A guard came with food for Elena and Arya demanded a much better breakfast than hard bread and hot water.

"Bring me some hot milk," she said. "And some of that spicy smoked pork. You can't feed Lady Katherine's sister scraps."

"You know Katherine wouldn't care what they fed me," said Elena. "And I don't need to eat."

"But you have to drink, right?" asked Arya. "Do you need a drink? You look a little grey."

Elena shook her head. "I shouldn't," she said.

"I've fed Damon before," said Arya. "It hurt, but it didn't hurt too bad."

"I'm not as controlled as Damon is."

"Let me give you some sheep's blood, at least," said Arya.

It couldn't possibly hurt to try animals again. Hiding vampirism in a keep full of humans was going to be difficult. Sooner or later, Lord Stark was going to question why people kept on turning up dead with their throats ripped out. In King's Landing, it had always been possible to hide bodies in the sewers of Flea Bottom. She doubted Robb Stark's people would be as lax in their observations as the Gold Cloaks charged with keeping order in the slums of King's Landing. How did Katherine feed? All of a sudden, she thought of the hundreds of prisoners down in the dungeons. Maybe that was the secret. Those men would have been killed, anyway. Was it any crueler to keep them alive and well-fed as blood bags? It wasn't as if they would have treated their prisoners better. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Elena felt horrible about herself. How could she think that way? They were people too; boys who had been forced to fight and who probably were not prepared for the reality of war.

"That would be very kind of you, Lady Arya," said Elena.

"Don't call me a lady. You're my sister now if you're going to marry Jon. You are going to marry him, aren't you?" Arya scrutinized Elena with those wide eyes of hers. She had yet to grow into them.

"It's very complicated," Elena said.

"You love each other. It's not that complicated," said Arya.

"Marriage always has a way of making things complicated. We're both so young and things are so uncertain. The word just…it makes a lot of issues where there were none before."

Arya cocked her head. "Or maybe you're just thinking too much about it," she said. "Robb and Katherine got married and they do exactly the same things you and Jon do. I'll get you some blood. Maybe you'll think more clearly after you've had something to drink."
She skipped off. How she was going to sneak a cup of blood all the way back up here from the kitchens or the slaughterhouses, she had no idea, but Arya had survived this long in the wilderness and in the enemy camp. She was a resourceful girl. Surely she would find a way in her brother's castle.

The girl returned half an hour later, carrying what looked like a miniature soup tureen wrapped in a cosy.

"I tried to keep it warm," she said. "Apparently, it tastes less awful when warm."

Elena smiled at her and took the tureen. Inside was a small pool of blood; more than she could possibly stomach. It smelled of sheep fat, but it was still nourishment.

"Is it really that bad?" asked Arya.

"No, it's fine," said Elena. She tentatively took a sip and tried to prepare herself for her gag reflex. She didn't know how to describe animal blood in human terms. There was nothing that could compare in the human world. Perhaps if she'd ever eaten blood sausage or haggis, she might have known, but the most adventurous thing she'd ever eaten had been a snail drowned in blue cheese sauce. She had only ever tasted the cheese sauce.

She forced herself to swallow a few mouthfuls and was contemplating telling Arya that she was full when a horn blast sounded. They both stilled. Was that the sound of a lord returning victorious to his keep, or that of an enemy army closing in on the kill?

Another horn blast cut through the stillness of the morning. Shafts of sunlight pierced the narrow windows of Elena's room and fell upon the bare stone floors. It started as a whisper but gradually grew to a roar so thunderous that it seemed the very foundations of Harrenhal shook.

"They're back!" whispered Arya. "Robb's back!"

Arya dodged around the celebrating men who were quickly getting drunk on the barrels of ale that had been brought out. Where was her brother? Where was Katherine? She couldn't find them anywhere. No one took any notice of her. As far as they were concerned, she was invisible. No, her brother was not amongst these rowdy soldiers.

"… right into the charge, on foot …"

"… didn't even feel it when he …"

"… fled like the dogs …"

The conversations mingled and overlapped with one another until she could not distinguish the end of one sentence from the beginning of the other. What had happened to Robb? Where was he?

She pushed her way through the great hall and into the hallway again, where it was quieter and less crowded. Wounded men were being assisted to the infirmary the maesters had set up. Robb wasn't in the infirmary. The rancid smell of old blood and stale sweat made her back out. She had grown far too soft in Harrenhal, living once more as the sister of a great lord.

She finally came to Robb's chambers. The heavy iron-reinforced door was closed. She listened and heard murmuring coming from within. There were no guards to be seen. She supposed he wouldn't
need them, not with Katherine around, although her brother didn't know that. Her arms strained as she pushed against the door with all her might. It was heavy and the rusty hinges gave every bit of resistance that they could. They groaned like a dying man, but the door opened.

Robb and Katherine looked up. His shirt was off and his body was streaked with blood, both his and his enemies'. Arya had never seen him look so much of a mess in her entire life. Katherine was bent over his arm, trying to sew together a long and deep cut. That was sewing worth learning.

She didn't bother with a greeting or even a simple "You're alive!". She could see that they were both alive and more or less whole. There were more pressing matters at hand. "Mother's put Jon and Damon in the dungeons!"

"What?" said Robb. He jerked his arm and tore the needle out of Katherine's hand. He swore. Katherine swore. The thread snapped and the stitches came loose. Robb's rapid movement sent droplets of blood flying all over Katherine's lap. Why couldn't she just feed him some blood and then claim it was some mysterious concoction she'd learned about back in her miracle village or something? Damon and Elena were always pulling the 'in my village' trick whenever they slipped up.

"You've got to come!"

"What are Damon and Jon doing here?" asked Katherine.

"They came," said Arya. Of course that wasn't the right answer, but why on earth would Katherine need to ask such a stupid question in the first place?

"Yes, but why have they come?" demanded Katherine.

Robb was trying to pull his shirt back on. Katherine hastily bound up his arm so he wouldn't mangle it and put it in a sling. He only managed to get his shirt half on. "Take me to them. Now," he demanded.

"You have to free Elena too," Arya insisted.

"Elena is here?" asked Katherine.

"Elena's alive?" asked Robb. Those two were being very slow today. Maybe the victory had gone to their heads a bit too much. Or maybe they'd had something to drink.

"Elena came with Jon and Damon." Arya stamped her foot in impatience. "Hurry!" Clearly, nobody was dying and there was no reason for tarrying. She grabbed Robb's hand – the one attached to his uninjured arm – and dragged him along, with Katherine following closely behind, still arrayed in her beautiful armour that made Arya stiffen with envy every time she saw it. Sansa might not think that she liked beautiful things but Arya liked beauty too. They just happened to find different things beautiful.

People stared at them, the little lady dragging the victorious half-dressed Lord Stark with Lady Stark hurrying behind them in obvious irritation. Arya didn't care that they were staring or that they might start talking behind their backs. She just wanted to get down to the dungeons and free her brother and her friends. "Katherine, why don't you go and get Elena?" Arya called over her shoulder.

"Because I don't feel like it," said Katherine, rather confusingly, but she went all the same, leaving her with Robb. She figured she would need the clout of Lord Stark to free Jon and Damon. Lady Stark could deal with the guards outside Elena's door.
The dungeons were full of clamouring new arrivals pressing their faces up against the iron bars that had not weakened with age. One could always tell who had been here the longest. They were always quieter than the newcomers who had not yet learned to accept their fate. Arya ignored the calls and the thrown insults. Words from dead men meant nothing and they were all dead in one way or another.

"Let me out of here!" She recognized the voice of the fat Hot Pie who had professed his innocence so loudly. "Please, I'll do anything! I'll cook for you!"

"Oh, will you just shut it?" Damon's voice carried a cutting edge. Hot Pie must have been at this for as long as they had been down here. Why did they ever say that boys were stronger than girls?

"Damon!" said Robb.

All five people in the cell looked up at once. Jon rushed to the bars. "Robb," he whispered, as if fearing that saying his name too loudly would make him disappear. "You've won."

"For this time," said Robb.

"And I missed it," said Jon. His face fell.

"Let's just get you out of here, first, shall we?" said Robb. He barked to a guard. "Keys."

For a brief moment, the confused man did not recognize Lord Stark in his disarray, but he soon realized his mistake when Robb threatened to have him thrown in one of the cells for non-compliance.

"At once, my lord," he said, fumbling at the heavy ring of iron keys. There were a lot of them and in his panic and haste, for he was really just a boy who was in awe of yet another boy – was her brother really that impressive? – he couldn't find the right one to fit into the lock. It seemed to everyone that he tried every key on the ring before the last one finally slotted into the key hole. The lock released with a loud clunk that echoed through the dank underground hallways and made the prisoners clamour even more loudly, not understanding why these men had been released when they were condemned to rot down here.

The party of five poured out, dirty, dishevelled but otherwise quite unharmed. Robb and Jon embraced in a way that Arya had never seen them do before. Neither of her brothers were hugging people; at least, not when it came to other men. They didn't seem to have any problems with girls, or girls that looked a certain way, at least.

Robb released Jon and turned to Damon. For a moment, the two regarded each other, then Damon sank onto one knee. "My lord," he said.

"Rise, Damon Salvatore," said Robb. "You have served me well." The others knelt, too, following Damon's example.

"Thank you, my lord!" simpered Hot Pie.

"Let's get out of here," said Robb.

The door opened. Elena stood. They were to be free at last! Then she froze.
"Hello, Elena," said Katherine. She filled the entire doorway despite being only five foot six, same as her. She wasn't even wearing any towering heels today. Her hair had been braided back out of her face and a sword hung from her jewelled belt. "Or should I say, 'Sister'?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Is this how you would greet your saviour? Come, now, Elena. You are in my home. You should be more polite. Whatever would your mother – our mother – say?"

Elena took a few steps backwards, wondering where Arya was. What purpose did Katherine have here, alone with her? Surely she hadn't come out of hospitality and a wish to greet her guest.

Katherine came inside without an invitation and sat on the bed. "I am curious, however," she said. "What are you doing here? In my house?"

"I thought it was Lord Stark's, not yours."

"What is his is also mine. We are married, after all." She examined her wedding ring.

"We're here to help him," said Elena.

"Interesting. How will you do that? Never mind. I'm sure you have no answer for that either." She stood again. "Well, come along. We wouldn't want to keep my husband waiting."

Emerging back above ground was like being born again. Jon had not realized how suffocating the dungeons had been until he breathed the uncontained air and looked upon the sky again. It seemed blindingly bright even though the clouds veiled the sun's face.

"Jon!" He looked back down to earth where Elena was running towards him, Katherine behind her. He caught her as she threw herself into his arms, not caring that Robb was smirking or that the men were staring or that Catelyn was probably wishing him dead somewhere and Arya was rolling her eyes and pretending to retch. He was back where he belonged, beside his brother with the woman he loved. He was complete.

"I'm filthy," he murmured as he nuzzled her hair, breathing in her smell.

"All the better, because now we have an excuse to take a bath," she whispered back.

"Not so quickly," said the sharp-eared Katherine. "Please, my lords, Sister, we would like a word. Not the others. They have nothing to do with this."

"Pardon me, my lady," said Sam. His voice quavered and stuttered as he tried to find the courage to form words in Katherine's presence. He glanced up at her and back down at his shoes. "But I will not be parted from Jon."

"And you are?" Katherine raised an eyebrow, clearly not as impressed with Sam's courage as Jon was.

"Samwell Tarly of Horn Hill," mumbled Sam to the ground.

"Tarly, as in Randyll Tarly, bannerman of Mace Tyrell?"

"He's my father, my lady," said Sam. "Well, he was my father, but –"

"I wasn't aware he was dead."
"He isn’t – "

"Fine, you may come." She turned to the 'praetorian' behind her with his high plumed helmet which obscured his face. "Take the other two down to the kitchens. Doubtless they're hungry. Once they're done, clean them up and put them to work."

"Katherine, they are our guests for now," chided Robb. "We don't put guests to work."

"We must all do our part for the cause, my lord," said Katherine, but she did not insist when Robb refused to budge. It seemed to Jon that Katherine was uncommonly impatient with them today and did not resemble herself very much. Had something gone wrong? Why, then, was Robb so calm about it?

People parted for them, bowing as Robb passed. Whispers of "Young Wolf" and "blessed" could be heard clearly.

"My lord," said one man. He wasn't a northerner, judging by his looks and his armour. His skin was too dark from the sun. "My lady." He bowed so deeply that if he bent down anymore, he could be touching his knees with his nose.

"Ser Onry," said Robb. "Will you be joining us for the feast later this evening?"

"Your invitation is too kind, my lord."

"It is the least I can do after the help you and your men have rendered to me."

"It was the Lord's will," said Onry with another bow. "And His Grace's. Men can only obey."

"It takes a good man to follow the will of the Lord and to do His work on earth. His Grace is wise and holy."

Onry bowed again (was this his occupation?) and let Robb past. The exchange troubled Jon, not only because he didn't know who Onry was, although he could guess, but Robb had sounded so devoted to his 'Lord'. The religiosity had come so easily to him as if he had been saying these things his entire life.

He followed Robb into the wide draughty room that served as his study. A servant knelt by the hearth to stoke the fire. Little flames caught onto the spindly kindling. Robb dismissed him and went to stoke the fire himself, using only his left hand, for his right was bound up in a sling.

"We may speak freely here," he said. "Now, Katherine, will you tell us why you are so agitated when it is a day of celebration?"

"Celebration of failure, perhaps," said Katherine. She rounded on them, brown eyes blazing with annoyance. "What are you doing here?"

"We've come to help Robb," said Jon.

"Oh, really? How?"

"Katherine, you are too clever to not see. They've come to fight alongside me," said Robb, sounding confused. Ah, so the annoyance was Katherine's only and Robb had not been hiding it all along. Jon released a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Arya sidled closer to him and reached up to clutch his hand.
"So we get two more fighters," said Katherine. "What good would that do, hmm? You were in the perfect position in Daemon's camp. You were deep in his confidences. You could have done so much and yet you threw that all way to come here to do what? To be little more than ornamentation? Maybe you can blow the bugle again, Damon."

"We've come to fight, Lady Katherine," said Jon firmly.

"I'm sure one man will make all the difference," said Katherine. She rounded on Elena. "I expected better of you. You could have seduced Daemon –"

"They've done enough, Katherine," said Robb quietly.

"Daemon was going to go to King's Landing," said Elena. "It was too dangerous for us to go with him."

"Too dangerous? There can be no victory without risk," said Katherine. "Damon, perhaps, I understand why he might not have gone, and Jon as well, but you. You could have wrapped Daemon Lannister around your little finger. You could have been Robb's eyes and ears in King's Landing. You could have sabotaged the Lannisters from within. You could have even gotten Sansa out, if you were so bent on being some angel, but no. What's that on your neck, a coconut?" Jon knew it was not a compliment, but what was a coco-nut? It had to be quite big if it could be substituted for a head – not really. "You're abso-fucking-lutely useless. All of you."

"Wow," whispered Arya.

Katherine inhaled and exhaled deeply, her hands clasped in front of her just beneath her breast. "That was not queenly," she said softly. "But I had to say it."

"Well, now, you've said it," said Damon. "Maybe you can go and take a chill pill."

"Damon, you will show Lady Stark the respect that is owed to her," said Robb coldly.

"Forgive me, my lord. It is hard to forget what she was before she was Lady Stark," said Damon. Prison had not dulled his sense of mischief. If anything, it seemed to have increased it. Then again, Katherine and Damon had known each other for a long time. Perhaps Damon felt that this long acquaintance gave him the right to tease her, no matter whose wife she was. But Robb didn't know that. Actually, it was better that he never found out the full truth about Damon and Katherine's 'friendship'.

"You are tired," said Robb. "You should take some rest while you can. I doubt we will have much of a chance for that later."

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**Next chapter:** Everyone gets a rare breather. Robb comes up with a risky plan of attack.
Chapter Summary

A reunion, a party, and a plot. What could Robb be up to?

Harrenhal

Maids trooped in with buckets of steaming water that sloshed and soaked their skirts. They poured the buckets into the giant wooden tub, one by one. At first, it seemed that the tub would never fill. But the maids kept coming anyway, faces stony as they hefted the heavy buckets and upended them in the bath.

Elena kicked off her filthy shoes which had taken her all the way from King's Landing to Harrenhal. The soles were worn almost clean through but perhaps the leather could be salvaged. The same could not be said of the rags she wore. Clean clothes had been laid out on the bed; a dusky grey woollen gown with a linen chemise, and a fur-edged cloak. All had been taken from Lady Katherine's own wardrobe. She supposed she ought to be grateful. It was so difficult to accept, however, that Katherine was now on their side and they would have to work together if they wanted to protect the men they loved.

The last of the maids went out once the bath was filled. Elena stripped off her rags and threw them into the fire. The flames took a while to catch onto the fabric. It curled slowly as it smoked, before disintegrating into cinders. She turned around to where Jon stood, his clothes in a pile at his feet. He kicked them aside and simply stood there, his arms hanging by his sides and his gaze roaming everywhere but never settling.

They stood in silence, facing each other. It was the first time she had truly looked at him in his entirety, without anything to take her attention away. In all the time they had known each other, they had never been granted the gift of solitude as they had it now. There was no fear of an imminent raid by Lannisters, robbers, brotherhoods sans banners, and all manners of other things that went bump in the night. She drank in the sight of him slowly, from his broad shoulders down to his sculpted abdomen and lower. The weeks on the road had made him lean but powerful. She took a step towards him. He hadn't moved at all and he didn't seem to know where to look. She took his hand. Dirt had been ingrained into every groove of skin and under every fingernail.

Her hands were no better.

Jon's gaze met hers. "Don't tell me you're shy, Jon Snow," she said.

"I've never done this before," he said.

"Had a bath?"

He laughed nervously. "No," he said. "I mean, yes, I've had a bath before, but we've never done this before."

"I don't understand," she said. Unless she'd dreamed all those nights. Which she hadn't.
"We've never been in a room alone before," said Jon.

"Is it any different from being in a forest alone?"

"Only it feels less like a dream and more real. We're not living in our own world anymore."

"Is that a good or a bad thing?"

He did not reply but smoothed his thumb over the back of her hand. Elena pressed herself against him. There was nothing between them. Skin rubbed against skin. The dirt made them stick to one another. She felt his heat and heard his heartbeat quicken. He bent down so their lips were almost touching, but neither of them made the move. "Come on," she said. "The water's getting cold." She climbed into the tub, still holding Jon's hand. He followed her in. Water sloshed against the walls of the tub but they succeeded in not making everything wet. The seeping heat was the best thing that Elena had ever felt in her life. How in the world could water feel so good? How had she taken this for granted her whole life?

She laughed as joy bubbled up inside her and spilled over like the famous overflowing cup of the Bible. She flicked water in Jon's face, making him laugh as well. He hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. The water had grown murky with grime, hiding everything from sight, but she felt him well enough. She bent down and kissed him. His lips were hot. Everything about him was hot, in more ways than one. He pressed her up against the wall of the tub, shaking the water and making a miniature tidal wave spill over the edge.

"Stop that!" she protested, not meaning it. "You're getting everything wet and we are supposed to be getting clean for your brother's feast. Pass the soap and scissors. I'll do your hair."

"If you think I'm letting you anywhere near my hair with sharp implements, you're sorely mistaken, Elena Gilbert," said Jon.

"You look like you've fought a battle with your hair and lost," she said. "Anyway, I've always done my brother's hair. You should trust me."

"I trust you with many things, but a man's hair is sacred."

"I never took you for a vain man, Jon Snow."

"I suppose there are many things that you still need to find out about me." His hands were moving up and down her back, mostly down, to cup her buttocks. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He hoisted her up and began to suck on her nipples, swirling his tongue around the sensitive skin and sending sensations shooting to places that were very far from her chest. Her breathing grew heavier. Steam was thick in the air, making it almost viscous. She sucked in mouthfuls of it as he worshipped her body.

"Jon," she moaned. She braced herself against his shoulders, tightening her knees around him. He lowered her slowly. She felt his hardness probing at her. She wanted him now. There was no finesse about it, no art; it was all just primal need and primal pleasure. She gasped when he thrust upward and entered her. She rocked against him, moving against him in a rhythm that he soon fell into. He gazed up at her, the water barely flattening his defiant curls. His calloused hands gripped her hips, trying to control her, but she would not be controlled.

They breathed as one with short shallow gasps. The pulsing pleasure grew and Elena fought to keep it from breaking too soon. She wanted to come with him and he obviously wanted to prolong it.
She threw her head back when it did come. Her vision darkened for just a second and became a deep magenta. Her back struck the other edge of the tub. The wood and water shuddered.

They fell back with a splash, elated and exhausted, but not so exhausted that they didn't want to try again.

"Now, your hair," she said.

Jon submitted to her, turning around and leaning back so that he was almost lying on the water. She snipped away the snarled tangles and dropped them on the floor, carefully making sure that all his hair was at an even length. He closed his eyes as she cut, quietly enjoying her touch.

Another bowl with a towel and razor sat on a table beside the tub. "Will you shave me, too?" he murmured.

Elena looked at the naked razor blade, so unlike the disposable pink safety razors that she'd used to shave her legs and armpits. The edge was thinner than a hair and could probably cut through anything with ease.

"Do you trust me with that?" she asked.

"I trust you," he said. "And then we can work on your hair."

She lathered up his chin and neck before taking the razor in hand. It felt utterly foreign to her. She'd seen such things before, of course, but they had been behind the glass of a museum display case. What if her hand shook? What if the angle was wrong? She slowly put the blade to Jon's throat. He never moved, trusting in her completely. All she could hear was the sound of the razor scraping against his skin and cutting through the stubble. She rinsed the hairs off the blade and continued to scrape at his neck and cheeks until the growth was all gone.

He looked so young, then. She had never seen him bare faced before. His lips looked even fuller and his skin was so smooth. It was like looking at a completely new person, except that was ridiculous, of course. He was still Jon.

"Which Jon do you like better?" he asked. "Wildling Jon or civilized Jon?"

"Don't be so dependent on what other people think of you, Jon," she said. "Do you like what you see? Is there a mirror in here somewhere?" She looked about the sparse room which, while much more comfortable than the great wilderness, was spartan compared to her own bedroom back in Mystic Falls.

"I know I need only look into your eyes to see the reflection of my best self," said Jon.

"I think I just vomited a little in my mouth."

They both jumped out of the water, bumping heads with each other and almost upsetting the entire tub. Jon reached out for a weapon – any weapon – and seized the blade of the razor, cutting his hand deeply. He dropped it and it fell clattering to the floor with ruby droplets sparkling on the greyish steel. It was all a waste of time. Katherine stood at the open door, dressed in a dress of such deep purple it was almost black. Her curls were piled at the top of her head, leaving only one tendril on each side to brush her golden neck and bare shoulders. A long cape extended from the back of her dress and glided on the floor behind like a peacock's tail.

"Nice view," she said, appraising Jon and almost licking her lips.
Jon hastily sat back down in the tub, still holding his bleeding hand.

"What are you doing here, Katherine?" demanded Elena. She, too, hid in the tub, even though she knew how irrational it was. Fearing nudity was an arbitrary human qualm and not even all humans had it. By rights, she had no need to be afraid of Katherine's gaze.

"I came here, out of the goodness of my heart, to remind you that you are almost late for my husband's feast," said Katherine, putting a delicate little hand to her breast in mock indigance. Amethysts decorated her fingers. "As much as I do admire you in your nameday suit, Jon Snow, I doubt the lords of the north would have the same appreciation as I do. They are dull, rough fellows, the lot of them. And that is a terrible waste of blood." She indicated his hand. "Allow me?" She made to advance but Elena stopped her by biting her own wrist first.

"As you wish," said Katherine. "But, remember, variety is the spice of life, especially immortal ones. We do get bored so easily."

"Don't listen to her," said Elena. Katherine probably kept boredom at bay without poor Robb knowing. She hoped that she would be subtle, at least.

Jon carefully took her proffered bleeding wrist as if partaking in a sacrament. Their blood dripped and mingled in the dirty bathwater. He didn't make any remark about Katherine's words as he drank from her, but the she-devil had already put into Elena's mind the stark reality of mortality. Jon would grow old one day. Just because she was immortal didn't mean time wouldn't affect her. And was she stalwart and steadfast enough to continue loving him through everything? She loved him now but he was easy to love. Sooner or later, he wouldn't be able to keep up with her strength and life.

The solution was simple. She could enact it now if she wished, but was that his wish?

Their wounds closed simultaneously. Upon seeing Jon healed, Katherine flounced away. Where on earth had she gotten those killer heels? She hadn't known that they had existed in Westeros. She took her hand back but Jon caught it. "You're troubled," he said.

"You can tell?"

"I love you, Elena," he said. "Not the person you pretend to be sometimes, but I love you. If I didn't know you, truly know you, I wouldn't be able to love you."

"I was just thinking about... time and... mortality."

"And immortality?" asked Jon.

"It's difficult not to. It's silly. Don't worry about it."

He placed a soft kiss on her neck, over her jugular. "I think, for men like me, old age is not a concern that crosses our minds often. We're more likely to die young and in the prime of our health."

"Don't say that." She cupped his face. "You will live a good, long life. We'll have a long time together."

"Maybe even eternity?" he asked. She stilled. "Forgive me. It's still too soon." He got out of the tub, water streaming from his naked skin.

"Jon, wait," said Elena. He turned around, his brown eyes solemn as if he had seen many lifetimes
of men pass by. It was times like these that made her wonder about the verity of reincarnation. "It's not the first time the thought has crossed my mind. I just didn't know if you felt the same way."

He let the words hang in the air between them, bombs waiting to drop when they least expected it.

"Come, we don't want to be late," he said.

Katherine knew she had struck a nerve and she was happy that she had gotten both Jon and Elena thinking about something other than sappy dream-like romances that couldn't possibly last. They both had good brains in their heads. Why wouldn't they just use them? Thinking about their lack of cerebral activity made her angry again and she resolved to think about it later. She needed to smile for Robb and Robb's bannermen.

To her right, Damon made uncomfortable smalltalk with the bannermen who regarded him as an interloper who had no right to be in Lord Stark's inner circle. She would have to speak to him about his attitude. Nobody wanted him to be Karstark II but the way he was going, that was where he was going to end up. And through no machinations of hers.

To her left, on the other side of Robb, Jon and Elena avoided all topics of import and talked about the future, ignoring the elephant – or should it be dragon? – in the room. They seemed to think that by adding their number to Robb's fighting force, they might actually be able to help. Katherine supposed Jon was good moral support for Robb and, if need be, she could strong-arm him into persuading Robb to see things from her perspective when her husband was being particularly Starkish.

But what was the point of Elena being in Harrenhal except as Jon's cuddle-buddy? And Damon… well, perhaps it was best that he was not in King's Landing 'helping' Robb's cause. Who knew what sort of trouble he could stir up? And it wouldn't be the good kind of trouble, knowing Damon.

Barrels of ale kept being refilled. Meat was carved off bone, still pink but no longer glistening with anything other than melting fat. Wine was poured and re-poured and the musicians reached the end of their repertoire and had to start all over again. They only knew five songs. All the others were just variations on the same five tunes.

Katherine sipped her wine and raised her goblet in a toast whenever it was required of her. The bannermen praised her courage despite the fact that she was a woman. She politely smiled back and uttered flattering nothings. As the drinking and revelry continued, people began leaving their seats to mingle and the real business of celebrating the present and planning the future could begin. Katherine picked up her cup and rose imperiously from her seat. Robb was engaged in conversation with Elena. From what she gleaned of it, they discussed little things and Elena was making a whole lot of shit up about their shared childhood. Katherine was pleased and appeased to hear that she wasn't simply on a slander campaign. There was a whole lot about learning to dance together.

"Katherine's a much better dancer than I am," said Elena. True.

"I'm sure you're just being modest," said Robb. No, Robb. It was a kind sentiment but sorely misguided.

Robb held out a hand to Elena. How gentlemanly he was; completely unlike his northern compatriots. Just in case, Katherine would seek out Jon for a dance.

Her ears pricked.
"… cannot tarry. Now is the time to strike the Lannisters while the metal is hot, Lord Bolton."

"I understand you, Lord Manderly, but it is not up to you or I to make the decision. The decision lies with Lord Stark alone. Let us be merry tonight. The next victory can wait a little longer, surely."

"I fear we will lose the will once this victory grows cold," said Lord Manderly. "Not all the men here have hearts of wolves, no matter what Lord Stark might say."

Katherine gave Robb a look. He caught it over Elena's shoulder and excused himself, passing her off to a fiendishly delighted Damon for the rest of the dance. Was Robb a Damon-Elena shipper?

"What troubles you, Katherine?" asked Robb.

"You looked well, dancing with my sister," remarked Katherine.

"I only danced with her to make her feel welcome. She is not used to such grandeur. Gods only know where Jon is right now; probably trying to coax Arya to come out in her new dress – the one that you had made for her. She thinks it looks too much like something Sansa would wear but I told her that she could either wear it or not show herself at all."

"Oh, Robb," sighed Katherine.

"Please don't tell me you were feeling jealous of your sister? I hadn't thought you capable of such base emotions." Robb cocked one eyebrow up.

"Don't flatter yourself, husband mine. You may dance with my sister as much as you wish. However, I do think there are more important matters for you to attend to than one unstable and unsure girl. Such as what you are going to do next regarding the Lannisters."

"I have been thinking about it, but is it not too soon after a victory to discuss more matters of state? I would have thought that my bannermen would want a chance to enjoy themselves."

"Your bannermen are eager for another victory such as this one, if not bigger."

"Have you heard something?"

"Let's assume that I know everything."

"Touché, but I know you don't."

"The word you're looking for, Robb Stark, I believe, is 'cute'."

"Your strange dialect confuses me greatly. Can you not accept that I am trying my very best to understand you?"

Katherine kissed him on the cheek, right next to the corner of his mouth. He seized her waist, his hands warm through the thin clinging satin. "Why is it that you never get cold?"

"Look at the roaring fires in here. I'm surprised you feel no desire to tear off your layers of linen and wool."

"Alas, I am a great lord and must maintain my comportment before my subjects."

"Great lords who feel the need to say they are great lords are not truly great lords at all."
"You tease me, my lady. But, come, show me my impatient bannermen and I will show you a plan."

The muted babbling continued to echo in the almost empty council chambers but at least he was out of the noise. Roose Bolton had little interest or patience for what would be termed 'revelries' by most of his countrymen. It was an inexcusable waste of time and probably one the reasons why the north had never been great. Something had changed in the last year, with the ascension of Robb Stark and his marriage to Katherine Stark.

At first, he had been as close to dismayed as he had been capable of being at Robb Stark's marriage with a no-name bard from a place no one had ever heard of. Robb Stark had proven himself to be just another boy at the mercy of his own whims and desires, never seeing the bigger picture beyond the pretty woman before him.

Only a fortuitous accident had made Katherine Stark what she was, but the dream was over. Robb Stark would never amount to anything. It would only be a matter of time before he stumbled again and he'd had enough of being on the losing side, watching his undeserving liege lords make one bad decision after another whilst men like him were the ones who paid for it. There was little to be done during times of peace. He'd had to bow to Ned Stark. War was opportunity. He wasn't going to let Ned Stark's son continue the tradition of beggaring the north.

Robb Stark leaned forward over the table upon which sat the representation of all of Westeros. His wife stood by his side. Normally, a woman would have no place in the war councils but the bard had proven herself to be extraordinarily cunning. Whenever Roose spoke with her, which was not often, he had the feeling that he was speaking to someone much older than he. Of course, that could not be true as she couldn't be much older than Sansa Stark. Still, it was slightly unnerving and he did not usually become unnerved.

"We need to move quickly before Tywin can regain his strength," Robb Stark said. "He never engages. If the war drags on for any longer, he will win it through attrition."

He moved his hand, from where they were in Harrenhal, westward, deep into Lannister territory. Their previous western foray had been a ruse to distract the Lannisters. This time, it would be real and they wouldn't expect it. It was too bold, even for the Young Wolf. Which was exactly why he was going to do it.

"All seven kingdoms quiver at the name of Tywin Lannister. If we take his castle, we'll prove that he is not indestructible," said Robb.

"Casterly Rock?" asked Katherine.

"Well, I'm not meaning King's Landing," said Robb. "We have Harrenhal, but while it's a strong fort, it is by no means a great one. Casterly Rock, on the other hand, is a symbol of Lannister supremacy. They live high on a hill above all the other houses. But if we can bring them down, we can crush that belief forever."

"Tywin Lannister would not be able to defend both King's Landing and Casterly Rock," said Roose softly. Perhaps, if Robb Stark could think like this, he might still… no, he would not be fooled again. "Even so, my lord, we will need more men if we are to take and hold the Lannisters' seat of power."

"That goes without saying, Lord Bolton," said the boy, sounding for all the world like the commander that he really wasn't.
"Where will we get the men?" asked Manderly.

"I think you know the answer to that, Lord Bolton," said Robb Stark. "Would you care to elaborate?"

It fell neatly into place, as he had known that it would. There was only one place where Robb Stark could get men in a hurry.

"Walder Frey holds the Twins with ten thousand men," said Roose. "They are sworn to the lord of the Riverlands, who has sworn to serve Lord Stark. By rights, the Freys should already be here, serving and, yet, the last Frey left some months ago for the Twins." He turned to Robb Stark. "One problem that we may encounter with them is the issue of a marriage promised."

Robb Stark breathed out heavily and toyed with the wooden bridge that symbolized House Frey's forces. Roose risked glancing at Katherine Stark and her thousand-mile penetrating eyes. She wore the expression of utmost serenity. Talks of the woman who she had displaced did not faze her. Then again, it would take more than words to faze a woman like her. She had probably displaced many others in her time. He was under no illusion as to her virtue, or lack thereof. In that way, they were quite alike. He, too, would do whatever it took to get what he wanted.

"Summon Lord Edmure," said Robb Stark. "I want him in Harrenhal with all haste."

**Next Chapter:** Katherine disagrees with Robb's Very Honourable Plan to deal with the Freys. A coronation takes place. Jaime goes fishing.
"Katherine?" said Robb.

Katherine looked up from new lyrics she was writing for a song to commemorate the Battle for Harrenhal. She'd dabbled in poetry before but not like this. Her little sonnets had been meant to amuse and entertain and they had never meant anything important. There were only so many words that rhymed with 'foe'. (Like beau, throw, go, woe, et cetera.)

Robb toyed with a quill and used the top of it to brush his chin. "What do you think of a visit to the Freys? To extend the hand of friendship and reconciliation, as you would put it."

"I think it's a lovely idea," said Katherine. "We ought to bring them a nice gift. Hemlock wine, perhaps?"

Robb frowned. "I do believe hemlock is poisonous," he said.

"But isn't that the idea of it?"

"Katherine!" He dropped his quill and sat up straight. "How can you even think such a thing? We would be their guests and bound by guest rights!"

Katherine felt her facial muscles pulling the corners of her smile downwards as she fully intimated Robb's intent. She stared at him. Oh, her dear sweet summer prince! How innocent he was. It was at moments like these when she remembered how young he really was. She had never felt more like a cradle robber. Why couldn't he forget his honourable Stark training and just do what every other normal person would do? Walder Frey had been wasting oxygen for far too long and it wasn't as if the Freys contributed anything to the economy or culture of Westeros.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked.

"Is it not? You just said it was."

"With the hemlock wine, yes. Or nightshade, if you prefer that. But if we are to be perfectly behaved, then I think we might as well go visit Casterly Rock and ask Tywin Lannister if we could stay for supper. We would have guest rights too. The Freys are treacherous and greedy, Robb, not to mention grudge-y and judge-y. Even if they have their daughter married to the lord of the Riverlands, it does not necessarily mean that they will help and you will have sacrificed your uncle's life for nothing." Not to mention his own life and future if things really go south.

"It is hardly the greatest sacrifice that a man can make," said Robb. "Uncle Edmure is long past the age to be married anyway."

"I seem to recall it was a sacrifice you were not willing to make."
"Well, would you have let me?"

"I would have found a way to free you. Besides, that's not really the point. I couldn't care less about Edmure's marriage. It's you that I care about."

"But this is the only way to convince the Freys to join the war. On our side."

She took his hands in hers. "Is your mind set on the matter?"

"What would you have me do?"

"The ultimate end that you want to achieve with all this scheming and planning is the loyalty of those ten thousand Frey men, is it not?"

"Of course," said Robb.

"And Lord Edmure is family. The happiness of family is paramount, is it not?"

"I would think the safety of family would be of utmost importance," said Robb.

"What if you could make your family both safe and happy?"

"And how would I do that?"

"It would be quite a simple matter of marching in under friendly pretences and offering Lord Walder and all his heirs our generous hospitality...indefinitely."

"But that is an atrocity!"

"My lord, this is war. Command him to join you, by all means. He is your grandfather's bannerman and your grandfather has pledged his loyalty to you, so by all rights, Frey ought to obey you. If he doesn't, then you may, quite rightfully, punish him."

Robb shook his head. "They Freys would barricade themselves inside their walls and I cannot waste time besieging the Twins. Besides, I already owe the Freys. I do not want to owe them more."

"Then erase the debt. Again, it is not difficult." She snuffed out one of the candles with her fingers.

Robb's eyes widened. There was absolutely no mistake about what she wanted him to do now, although he had probably suspected for a while.

"I've already said no! Do you think me the sort of man who would renege all my promises to my allies because it suits me?" he said. "Do not try and convince me. I will not be persuaded."

Katherine took his hands and kissed both of them. She had said her piece and he was not listening. Sometimes, she understood how his bannermen felt. Robb was so stubborn and opinionated. Up until now, he had quite willingly (or unwillingly) gone along with her plans but his father's shadow still loomed over him. He still thought of honour and nobility when there were no such things in the world.

"You are too good, my lord," she said. "You may not be the king the world deserves, but you are the king the world needs."

"King?" said Robb.
To His Grace, King Stannis of House Baratheon, First of his name, Lord of Dragonstone, Storm's End, and of the Stormlands, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and that the Lord is keeping you, Your Grace. Forgive me my failure to ride to your aid when you most needed me at the Battle of the Red Keep. Victory should have been yours but it was robbed from you. I swear to you, on my honour, my life, and my soul, we will not fail our duty to you again.

I have a proposition for Your Grace. To buy you the time that you need to replenish your troops and to rally your men, I shall, by your leave, take upon my shoulders the title of the King in the North once more, not for my own vanity or ambition, but so that you might have the time to do what must be done. The Lannisters will turn their spearhead towards me and thus give you reprieve.

I pray that such a bold proposal would not offend Your Grace and I eagerly await your reply.

I have the honour of being

Your most faithful and humble servant,

Robb Stark

To the Warden of the North, Robb Stark, First of his name,

The matter of proclaiming yourself the King in the North is grave indeed. We do not lightly give you leave to claim a false crown, but in light of our current circumstances, it is clear that we will need whatever time you can buy us to rebuild our forces.

Serve us well and we will ensure that you are rewarded. Betray us, and we will see the Lord's justice served.

Please give our regards to your most esteemed lady wife.

Stannis, of House Baratheon, First of his name, Lord of Dragonstone, Storm's End, and of the Stormlands, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm

The bannermen all gathered below the balcony, staring upwards with bated breath. None dared to speak as Katherine carried the crown on a purple cushion out to Robb, who was resplendent in his new blue velvet cloak. Catelyn had done an excellent job with it. Her mother-in-law had few uses but, clearly, there were some. The silver wolves embroidered on the velvet almost seemed to come alive in the dawn light and ready to leap out, snarling and snapping. Grey Wind sat serenely to one side, ever Robb's loyal companion.

There was silence and bated breath as Robb took the crown and placed it on his own head. It fit perfectly, as it ought. She had made the measurements herself.

The platinum and white gold circlet was clean and without much adornment save for the subtle etchings of the wolf-scales favoured by the northerners, culminating in two wolf heads that met each other front and centre of the crown, over a cut and polished black gem that the Westerosians all thought was a black diamond, but which was actually something Katherine was vaguely familiar with, benitoite. The gem was a thing of great beauty. She might or might not have
committed a crime in obtaining it. That merchant had been half a bandit anyway.

As Robb took his hands away from his crown, the slanting light fell upon him (purely coincidence, for even she could not do anything about the weather of the world) and made the stone glow blue.

"Hail, Robb of House Stark, first of his name, the King in the North!" she said loudly and clearly before kneeling.

"Hail, the King in the North!" the men repeated. She would have liked to have "Ave Caesar" instead but Robb had not quite reached the state of being Julius and he wouldn't have understood it anyway.

"Rise, my queen," he said. Arya then stepped forward, bearing a smaller, more delicate crown, sadly without a matching stone, on a purple cushion. The two-headed eagle glared at everyone and everything with its sapphire eyes and, around it, wolves writhed and snarled in anatomically impossible positions. Her crown was lighter and made with platinum threads woven together so what it lacked in precious stones, it made up for in craftsmanship.

She joined Robb at the balcony, looking over her domain. To the south, she could see the rolling green plains and the river and lake gleaming silver in the morning sun. To the north, there were steppes that faded away into shadows. In the west, Tywin Lannister's domain stretched out to the ocean and in the east, one could almost glimpse the tops of the mountains and hills that formed the Vale. One day, it would all be hers and Robb's.

That was, if Robb could ever learn to let go of honour for long enough to consider a more sensible approach of doing things. But, then again, perhaps that was why she had met him and been drawn to him. She was meant to be here, to save him from himself.

She reached over and gripped his hand. She would protect him. She would teach him and guide him. She would make him into a Caesar worthy of the title.

Jon gazed up at the high stone balcony, shoulder to shoulder with Damon. Arya and Elena stood on the balcony behind Robb and Katherine, being not only the subjects of the (new) king and queen but also the legally recognized family of both. The whistling wind whipped up into a roar as the shouts of 'Hail!' reached their zenith. Most of the men were drunk with victory. He was sorry to have missed the battle.

Robb's new cloak flew out behind him like wings, as did Katherine's sleeves. He almost expected them to fly at any moment. Dark clouds hung at the horizon behind Harrenhal, menacingly creeping closer, but the light before it was bright and shafts of it shone down upon Robb and Katherine and all the men through the stubborn grey veil that clung almost permanently to the face of the northern sky. Glory could not be masked.

The Hound, standing somewhere behind them, gave a disdainful snort. Jon didn't know why Sansa had put her faith in a man such as him. He obviously had little respect for both her family and her country. Yet, even Elena had insisted on trusting him. Then again, Elena insisted on seeing the best in everyone and usually, she did bring out their best. He glared at the tall scarred man who glared back with his one good eye. The other just drooped and looked very threatening as it did so. Everything about him was threatening.

Jon and Damon exchanged a glance. Would they deal with him as they had dealt with all the other bounty hunters, traitors, and deserters? Damon gave a smirk as he looked backwards ever so slightly. "Bad doggy," he mouthed to Jon, and winked. Jon hoped that, of all days, today would not
be the day when Damon decided to provoke the Hound with childish name-calling and actually cause a fight in front of all the gods and men whilst a coronation was taking place. He wouldn't put it beyond him.

Arya stepped forward proudly, carrying another crown on a purple cushion. Katherine knelt, this time. It had never been done before, as far as Jon could remember. Queens were never officially crowned. They were given cloaks at their marriages and that was it. But Katherine obviously had ambitions beyond being just any sort of queen. Oh, no. She would be a conquering queen. She would be Katherine the Great. Apparently, there had been another one before. He only worried about what her ambition might push Robb to do and whether she really did love him at all. Could women like her even love?

He joined in the shouts of 'Hail!' as Katherine rose. The men loved her for the victories she brought, hated her for her confidence and her unvirtuous, unwomanly ways, and feared her for all the obvious reasons. He did not trust her, himself, but he only cared whether she could help Robb or not. The Lannisters had Tywin and Cersei. The North needed someone of their own.

The cheers rose to a new level when Robb announced the beginning of the feast – the second one within the last five days. It wouldn't be right to have a coronation without a feast, he supposed, but could they afford it? He whispered as such into Damon's ear.

"You're about as fun as a pile of melted snow, Frosty," said Damon. "Loosen up and enjoy yourself. God knows we've earned it and they've earned it too, or so they think. Besides, this isn't a feast. This is a ball."

"That's even worse," said Jon. How much did balls cost? They never really did have such things in Winterfell. Banners of black and silver festooned the walls of the great hall and all the great tapestries had been brought out from storage. A lot of them were old and, upon closer inspection, showed signs of having been chewed on by moths. However, from a distance, they looked marvellous. The years had not faded their jewel-like colours and the figures that dominated them were so real that Jon almost expected them to jump out and join in with the festivities at any moment.

A group of musicians, sawing on their fiddles, blowing a new instrument with a reed-like mouthpiece – Katherine called them "Oh, boys!" – that made a clear, pure sound unlike any other he'd heard, and winding their wheedling hurdy-gurdies, sat in the corner and played strange new tunes that had a wonderful beat.

"We have court musicians now?" asked Jon.

"We have a bard queen," Damon reminded him. "This ale tastes like fish piss. I'm going to filch some wine from His Majesty's table. You coming?"

Jon shook his head and sipped his ale. It didn't taste that bad. It was the same ale he'd been drinking all his life in Winterfell. Surely Damon had drunken the same ale, too. Then again, he remembered that Damon always seemed to have wine. The vampire had a nose for sniffing out the cellars and his speed made him all but invisible when he was stealing from them. It wasn't as if Lady Catelyn checked the wine all the time. Even he and Robb had been able to sneak some every now and then, topping up the barrels with water as needed. It was a miracle that no one had detected it during King Robert's visit. That had been such a long time ago; a lifetime ago. When he remembered them, he remembered all of them as people he had once known but had now lost touch with.

Elena excused herself from a conversation with Lord Bolton and came to sit beside Jon.
"What did he want?" asked Jon. He didn't trust Bolton, with his colourless eyes and dark pupils. His face was too much like a stone. Nobody could ever tell what he was thinking. Then again, Jon didn't trust people in general. Most of them were petty and cruel or ambitious and cruel. They were almost always cruel in one way or another, either intentionally or unintentionally. He counted himself among that number.

"He just asked a whole lot of questions about Katherine's life in Mystic Falls," said Elena.

"What did you tell him?" asked Jon.

"About all the dances and parties and how she would flirt," said Elena. "He doesn't believe half of it but I don't think he knows what to believe. When I talked about the fashions, his eyes glazed over."

Jon chuckled. "My eyes would glaze over too if you talked about dresses."

"And shoes. Don't forget the shoes," said Elena. "So, are you going to sit here drinking by yourself or are you going to ask me to dance? I danced with your brother during the last dance but you were nowhere to be found once the music started."

"I don't dance."

"You taught me to dance." She gazed at him from beneath her long eyelashes, all of a sudden with an expression that bore a great deal of similarity to Katherine's whenever she had some mischief in mind – not surprising, since they were doppelgangers. Elena's world was full of strange things and strange words to go with them.

"I don't dance in public," said Jon.

"Maybe it's time you did," said Elena. "It's the dawn of a new age, after all." She pulled him to his feet. "Come on. I need you to make sure I don't trip over my feet."

His crown felt like a crown of thorns. The metal edges dug into his sweaty brow as he rode. Chains constricted themselves around his heart and innards, squeezing him until he found it difficult to breathe. Joffrey whipped his horse, hard, but it didn't really help matters. All he could see were the Starks sweeping in from every direction, outnumbered, and yet surrounding him all the same. They had moved so quickly that he had not even seen how they had moved. Their horses must have had wings and their gods had listened to all their prayers.

King's Landing's battlements peeked over the horizon as they drew ever closer to the capital, their numbers depleted, running with their tails between their legs.

No, not running. They had been defeated not by the military prowess of the Starks but by their trickery. What lord, what proper honourable lord would resort to such magics? Certainly none that Joffrey knew of. Robb Stark was a dastardly bastard. And if his grandfather hadn't been such a coward, they would have had those wolves.

"Make way, make way for the king!" called his herald. Joffrey took no heed of the carts and wagons that had gathered for market day. Wait, this didn't look like market day. There were no stalls and no wilting vegetables on display. Instead, the snake of people seemed to be heading out of the city with every miserable thing that they owned tied up in bundles on their shoulders or in the clattering carts that could fall apart if they should ever encounter a medium-sized rock.

"Where are they all going?" Joffrey demanded. No one answered him. He watched them near the
gates. "Wait, I don't actually care where they're going because I know, and it's nowhere. Guards, seal the gates. Not even a roach gets to pass through without my permission. And I don't mean seal it right now while the army is still riding in!" Idiots! He was surrounded by idiots or selfish cowards too afraid to take calculated risks for victory! Daemon was the only competent member in his entire fucking court. He should really kill a few just to remind them about what would happen to anyone who disappointed him. What about Jaime? No, he supposed his uncle was too far beyond his reach. For now.

He squared his shoulders. What kind of king would he be if he let his people desert him now? How dared they desert him in his hour of need? He'd hang them all first before he let them go.

Ironshod hooves clattered into the courtyard of the Red Keep. "Where is my grandfather?" he demanded.

"The First Marshal is by the river, Your Grace," said the gate guard. "He is fishing with Lord Jaime."

Jaime was coming to the edge of his sanity. He pulled the hook out of the water again. The worm had disappeared, as usual, and he had not even felt the fish nibbling. Meanwhile, his father was pulling up his second fish in as many hours. If Tywin wanted some father-son bonding time, why couldn't they have gone hunting instead, or even just done a little good, old-fashioned sparring?

Tywin hauled up the third fish – a large trout – and put the slippery, gasping, wriggling creature into the basket with the other two unidentifiable bottom-grazers that he'd pulled up earlier. He handed Jaime another worm. "You don't seem to be doing very well," said Tywin. "Why would that be?"

"If I were doing well, Father, you would not be able to teach me your lesson," said Jaime. He flung his hook out into the sea – and hooked the back of his own tunic instead.

Tywin calmly untangled him from the fishing line. "Clearly, you have yet to master the art of patience."

"I have many arts. Patience is not one of them," said Jaime through gritted teeth.

"Much like our young king," observed Tywin. "But, make no mistake. Patience, or the lack thereof, will either win this war or break our house."

His voice was so severe, with no mocking tone, that Jaime let his fishing line drop into the ocean in a subdued manner. "I suppose he lost then," he said without looking at his father. "How?"

"How he lost does not matter. What matters now is the survival of House Lannister. At any price."

"Let me ride out and meet Robb Stark," said Jaime.

"You will do no such thing," said Tywin. "We will win this war through attrition, rather than by the sword, which you have already tried, if you would allow me to refresh your memory."

"And how exactly will we win this war through attrition if we aren't fighting him?" asked Jaime.

Tywin gave him a look of disappointment. "Can his armies feed themselves if we burn all the lands that Robb Stark must ride through to reach King's Landing and Casterly Rock. I want every last field, meadow and barn burned to ashes between us and Harrenhal. And we will raid his supplies – meaning Stefan Salvatore will raid his supplies, Jaime."
"You know Katherine Stark would have some other plan to counter our moves," said Jaime. "She knows Stefan Salvatore intimately. Not that I question his loyalty, but he might be very predictable to her."

"Leave Katherine Stark to me," said Tywin. "I have not yet finished. As well as his supplies, we could attempt to turn those closest to him against him."

"You mean Jon Snow?" asked Jaime, thinking to the little bastard who had been so determined to prove himself.

"Not all in the north share Katherine Stark's affection for the young wolf. They might not be as formidable as she is but they are not to be underestimated."

Jaime felt a tug on his line. He reeled it in quickly. A little silvery spotted fish the size of his thumb wriggled at the end, struggling for life.

"There," said Tywin. "You may tell Lady Sansa that you have brought home her dinner tonight."

**Next chapter:** Edmure arrives in Harrenhal. Everyone wants to dance with Elena. Jon attempts to be a gentleman. Will he be rebuffed?
Edmure arrives at the party unfashionably late. Elena dances with everyone. Jon attempts to make peace.

**Harrenhal**

Faint music greeted him as he neared the formidable gates of Harrenhal. The gentle, cheerful sounds were completely at odds with the horrid melted towers and twisted battlements and the portcullis that looked like a mouth full of sharp teeth ready to bite down on any who ventured within. Edmure knew that was silly but he had heard too many stories of Harrenhal as a boy to not think of them every time he came here. Even the Stark banners couldn't dispel the air of death that hung over the seat of the unfortunate Lord Harren. Ghosts lived here, real or imagined, and he would always think of how many twisted blackened bodies had been pulled from these ruins. No number of torches or candles could change that. In fact, the thought of fire within these walls almost made it worse.

He stopped at the gates. "Who goes there?" asked the sentry.

Edmure gave his name and bade them open the doors. Moments later, the great gates groaned, almost as if the fortress itself were alive and resented visitors. It was not the most welcoming of places. He passed through three such gates before he reached the inner courtyard. It looked smaller than it had from the outside. The thick walls took up a lot of space. Someone led him to the great hall where he could hear the voices of laughing men, the beat of cheerful music and the clink of cups against one another. Light flooded into the dark hallway when the door opened. He almost had to shield his eyes; it was that bright.

"Uncle, welcome," said Robb, coming forward to meet him. He was resplendent in a cloak of blue with silver wolves snarling at the shoulders. He recognized Catelyn's work immediately. Beside him stood Katherine, oh beautiful Katherine. She could have been his if only she had never set eyes on the red wolf from the north. He swallowed the bitter jealousy he felt whenever he saw the two of them so happy. They looked wonderful together. Their children would be beautiful too.

Cat seemed surprised to see him. Had Robb not told her about his coming? "My lord," said Edmure with a bow.

"It's 'Your Grace' now," Katherine corrected him gently.

Again?

"Uncle, allow me to introduce my brother, Jon," said Robb. Ah, the detested Jon Snow. He had heard so much about the boy that he sometimes had wanted to ride to Winterfell and demand that Ned Stark send him away, the bastard who was proof of his betrayal to Cat. Had it not been bad enough that he had betrayed her? How could he rub her face in it every day? And that boy, to hear it, intended to usurp his nieces and nephews. His sister had always written of the way his eyes seemed so old, as if he knew everything and he was only biding his time. She had been so certain about it and, as he had grown older each day, she had lamented that she had not had the strength to
get rid of him while he had been younger. He had ensnared her children, she had written.

Yet, to look at the young man who stepped forward now, he didn't look all that...evil. Yes, it was true, he had solemn eyes, but they were hardly the eyes of a demon who would ensnare the soul of Robb Stark and drag him through to the deepest pits of the hells. Then again, looks could be deceiving.

"It is an honour to meet you at last, my lord," said Jon Snow. He bowed. At least he had manners, which made him better than...a Frey. Edmure nodded. His gaze met Cat's from where she sat at the table in the front, her hands resting on her lap, her face cold and resigned to the fact that the bastard was once again here to remind her that Ned Stark had betrayed her. Wasn't he supposed to have gone to the Wall and joined the Night's Watch? Or had Robb strayed so far from the teachings of his forefathers that he would allow a deserter to live?

"Do join in the feast, Uncle," said Robb. "You must have ridden long and hard to reach us here so quickly."

"I came as soon as I received word and did not stop until I reached your gates, Ro−Your Grace," said Edmure.

"I am glad," said Robb. Katherine handed Edmure a goblet of sweet wine as she led him to the royal feasting table, which sagged under the weight of food. Platters of meat sat scattered about, the bones showing where flesh had been carved away. Loaves of ravaged bread sat beside them and the bowls of preserves; onions in vinegar, mainly, with a few pickled cabbages which he did not touch at all.

He stopped. A girl who looked just like Katherine had put her arm through Jon Snow's. Her hair was short but that was the only difference, as far as he could tell. "Elena, this is Lord Edmure of House Tully, Heir to Riverrun and the king's uncle," said Jon Snow.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, my lord," said Elena sweetly, and she dipped a stiff curtsey.

"And I, you," said Edmure. He could not take his gaze off her. The world fell away and all he saw was that girl who looked so much like his beloved Katherine – in fact, they looked more alike than this Katherine did to the Katherine he had known. The bard he'd loved had not been a queen.

"Elena is my wife's sister," said Robb, "and a good friend to my own sisters."

"Your Grace is too kind," said Elena. She blushed prettily at the praise. Edmure's breath hitched in his throat as he felt his blood rise in the most pleasant way. Jon Snow be damned, he might just enjoy his time here in Harrenhal after all, whatever the purpose might be for his urgent visit.

He greeted his sister with a kiss on her cheek. She smiled and welcomed him, but only spoke to make Arya greet him. "Perhaps you can join in the dancing," Catelyn said to the little girl. She looked a lot like Ned Stark and not a bit like her mother. Sansa, he had always heard, was the beauty in the family.

"All by myself?" asked Arya dubiously. "That is so not done, Mother."

"I would be honoured to dance with you, my lady," said Edmure. All the while, he eyed Jon Snow and Elena as they twirled and clapped and jigged in time to the music. Elena was a terrible dancer. Jon Snow had to accommodate her at every turn.

"Go on," said Catelyn, giving her daughter a nudge.
Arya reluctantly took Edmure's hand. He was surprised by how strong the little fingers were and how many callouses were on the palms. How could Cat have let her daughter get into such a state? Then again, it looked as if Cat no longer made all the decisions. Robb had grown up and there was a new Lady Stark – no, queen – now. Cat couldn't even make sure that Jon Snow remained in his place.

He twirled his niece around. She danced stiffly and reluctantly, unlike either of his sisters when they had been her age – although, to be honest, he barely remembered them as being young girls. To him, they had always seemed old.

The tune ended. Arya curtseyed quickly and flounced off. To do what, Edmure didn't know and hardly cared. He strode up to Elena and Jon. "My lady," he said, bowing to her. "Might I have the honour of this dance?"

Elena seemed surprised but nodded her assent. Jon Snow let her go quietly. He must have known that a bastard like him could not possibly hold the attentions of a beautiful lady like Elena for long. She was too good for him. If her sister could be a queen then why couldn't she be the lady of Riverrun? It would further join their two families in an unbreakable bond.

Part of Edmure, the sensible part, told him that he was thinking too far ahead as he put a hand on her waist. He'd only just met her. She didn't know who he was. He would have to woo her first. But she was a clever girl. Surely she must see the advantage in such a union. What could Jon Snow give her? Nothing.

Elena stepped on his foot almost as soon as the music started up again. "Sorry," she said.

"Don't be," said Edmure. He pulled her a little closer to him – not too close, because that would just be too bold and too improper. How had Jon Snow been holding her? Pressed against him? Well, then. He pulled Elena just that much closer again. She trod on his foot again.

"I am a terrible dancer," she said.

She hadn't been that bad with Jon Snow. While she hadn't been good, they'd known how to move with each other. "You're not that bad," Edmure assured her, all the while thinking that if she were to become a lady of anything, she would really need to learn to dance properly.

"Excuse me, my lord, may I cut in?"

Edmure swivelled around and almost stood on Elena's foot this time. Here was a demon, with bright blue eyes, sharp features, lips the colour of open wounds, too red to be real, and a smirk so wicked that it made him want to shrink back or wipe it off his face. Either or.

"Demon," said Elena.

What?

Elena repeated the name again. Ah, so it was Damon and not 'Demon'. He'd misheard her.

"I'll take that as a yes," said the demon before Edmure could say a word, and whirled Elena away in his arms, his feet moving over the dance floor as lightly as if he were flying. Edmure could only stand there and wonder and rage silently. He sidled back up to the royal table where Cat sat watching.

"Who's that man?" he asked her.
"That one? Damon Salvatore," said Cat. She gave a mirthless laugh. "Sell-sword, knight, turncoat, spy; don't ask me what he is. Robb thinks highly of him. I think Robb is making a mistake but nobody listens to me anymore." She took a sip of wine. "I suppose I should be glad that he has found his own people to trust. I just don't know whether they are worth trusting."

"Katherine loves the king," Edmure observed.

"Maybe she does," said Cat, not committing to anything.

"She's certainly helped him."

"That I cannot deny."

"You doubt her intentions?"

"Don't you?"

Edmure had to admit that he hadn't. Then again, he'd thought that Katherine had loved him. Now it seemed she had never had any feelings for him and had toyed with him whilst waiting for someone better to come along. "I don't trust Damon," said Edmure.

"You hardly know him."

"But you know him, you don't trust him, and I trust you," said Edmure. He didn't like the way Damon was holding Elena, as if he knew her and possessed her intimately. Who did he loathe more; Damon Salvatore or Jon Snow? They were both equally bad as the other and neither of them deserved a woman like Elena.

"What do you know of her?" he asked his sister.

"From all accounts, she is a good sort of girl," said Cat. "Arya speaks highly of her. But Arya is young and easily won over."

She hadn't seemed so easy to win over when Edmure had danced with her. In fact, she hadn't even really looked at him at all that much, preferring to watch the musicians and her own feet, dancing as if she were sick of it already and was just waiting for the song to end.

In the corner of his eye, he saw Jon Snow approach his niece and bow to her. Arya made a face at the bastard and Edmure smirked to think of her refusing him, but then she allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor and the two of them joined up in a circle of four – would that be a square? – with Damon and Elena, laughing and kicking up their feet. Damon swept Arya up into the air and threw her high as if she were a child. She shrieked with fiendish delight.

"Arya!" shouted Catelyn.

"Damon!" warned Robb.

"Oh, let them be," said Katherine, pulling Robb towards her again. "They're just having a little fun. Let us have some faster music." Before Robb could protest, Katherine pulled him to the centre of the dance floor and began to confound him with a dance of rapid steps.

Soon it seemed as if spring had come for all the lords were dancing, drunken and reeling as they were. "Cleanse their impure blood!" roared Lord Manderly as he tossed his half-empty tankard into the air to make it rain beer.
Elena laughed like a gleeful child as Jon spun her around all out of control. Neither of them knew what they were doing but they didn't care. In all his life, Edmure had never seen such uncontrolled merriment. All the dances he'd ever danced had been taught beforehand. Nobody made it up on the spot. He had expected that, after everything he had heard of the refinement of Robb's court, such a thing like this would not happen. He didn't know what to think or where to look. Luckily, he didn't have much time to ponder such dilemmas. Robb, with Katherine on his arm, danced right by him and as the couple passed, Katherine reached out to grab him and pull him to his feet. "Lord Edmure, a handsome young bachelor like yourself should not be sitting on the sidelines," she chided with a little smirk.

He could barely catch a breath as he became entangled in the storm of skirts and skipping feet. The current pushed and pulled him along in time to the music. He danced with several women, most of whom he suspected were not women with good reputations, but there were a lack of ladies at the celebrations and the men refused to dance with each other. Whore mingled with lord and nobody seemed to care.

The song finished almost as abruptly as it had started, leaving him reeling and drunk with exhilaration. "More!" he called, joining his voice with the calls of the drunken bannermen. Only Roose Bolton remained unsmiling. Edmure had long suspected him of being utterly incapable of frivolity.

"No, no more, or we shall not sleep tonight," said Katherine. She held a little hand to her heaving bosom. The candle-light reflected off the thin sheen of sweat that covered her skin and made her glow. She had never looked lovelier, even though her hair was coming loose from her braids after the exertions of the dance. A groan rose.

"I propose, Your Grace, that you ought to dance with every man here to thank us for our efforts in the battle," called one of the minor lords. Glover, Edmure believed his name was.

"Hear, hear!" shouted someone else. "It's the least we deserve!"

"I, for one, cannot allow that," said Robb. "Not that I am a jealous king, for there is not much to be jealous of here, but my wife needs her rest. She, too, has done her part in the battle."

"Speak for yourself, Your Grace," said Edmure, enjoying the japing. "You simply want to keep the fairest lady in the room all to yourself."

Complaints rose.

"I protest, for the Lady Elena is every bit as lovely as her twin," remarked Bolton in that dry manner of his. Scattered laughter greeted his declaration and Elena blushed most becomingly.

"Then perhaps the Lady Elena will dance with us in her sister's stead," slurred Lord Manderly.

"I am afraid I might step on everyone's toes, my lords, if I should try," said Elena.

"Nonsense, dear," said Katherine. "And I suppose you all deserve some reward." The men cheered and Robb resignedly shook his head. "Alas, I haven't much to give except my little self." She offered her hand to a rather surprised Roose Bolton.

"Your Grace honours me," said Bolton.

Edmure advanced upon Elena, only to have his way blocked by the ruddy-faced Lord Manderly. "Might I have the honour, my lady?" he said unclearly. He offered her a hand of rough square-tipped fingers.
"The honour, my lord, is mine," said Elena without so much as glancing at Edmure. He had to swallow his disappointment and retreat back into the shadows.

Jon had to concede defeat to Lord Manderly this time. He couldn't very well hoard all of Elena's dances to himself for the whole night. A small petty voice in his head said that he'd already let her dance with both Robb and Damon and that was enough sharing. He pushed it aside. It was only one dance. It wasn't as if Lord Manderly could possibly have any claim on Elena's affections. Such jealousy was unwarranted and, to be honest, very silly. Perhaps it was the animalistic side of him. Stallions didn't like any other stallions, not even those that were so obviously not their rivals. But he was better than a stallion.

He saw Damon cajole Arya onto the dance floor again with teasing glances and a million japes. Arya would probably try her very best to step on his feet now. Their friendship confounded him greatly. He had always thought that Damon had been Sansa's friend rather than Arya's, but what they had been through had brought them close, he supposed. His thoughts dwelt briefly on his other sister, feeling guilty that they were here celebrating and enjoying themselves so much while she was still a prisoner in the jaws of the lion. For all the little cruelties that she had done to him over the years, she didn't deserve this.

The mind was a curious thing. One thought led to another and very soon one found oneself pondering a very different idea from a minute ago. Jon's gaze swept around the room and froze when he came to Catelyn. She, too, was watching him. In fact, she hadn't stopped watching him ever since Robb had let him out. A myriad of emotions threatened to swamp him. Once more, he was a little boy with no friends. But, more than that, he was a man who had gotten himself some friends. Besides, he had never been friendless. He had always had his brothers and Arya and Maester Luwin had been kind to him. Perhaps it was time to cross the chasm. Once, he had thought that impossible. Now, he had seen the truly impossible.

He slowly approached Catelyn the way he would approach a feral mare, with careful steps and no sudden movements to alarm her. She watched him. Her eyes, big and luminous in a face that had weathered too much anguish, widened when she saw that he was coming towards her and no other. He stopped within an arm's length of her and bowed. His heart thudded against his rib cage so furiously that he wondered whether the entire world could see it beating against his skin. Catelyn stood. She was smaller than he had remembered her to be. When he had been a boy, she had seemed impossibly imperious and powerful. Now she was just a woman. Time had not been able to dull the edge of his father's betrayal. Was it her heart or her pride that had been injured by a woman whose name had been taken to the grave?

"My lady," he said, swallowing the boy's fear and seeking the man's courage. He knew they were watching him; Robb, the bannermen, Katherine... Elena. "Will you do me the honour of allowing me this dance?" He wanted to offer a truce, a chance for forgiveness – on whose side he could not say but he supposed it didn't matter. Robb needed them to be united. If the past could get in the way like this, how could they possibly hope to fight against the Lannisters?

Perhaps it was the pressure of a hundred pairs of eyes upon her. Perhaps it was her own ladylike upbringing. Perhaps it was something else. She gave a stiff nod and placed her hand in his proffered one. Her cold skin shocked him. It was warm in here yet the heat seemed not to have affected her at all. Her bones were fine beneath her skin and he could see the pale blue veins snaking over the back of her hand. The other couples parted for them to come through. He caught Robb's gaze and his brother raised his goblet in the slightest salute.
The musicians, having ascertained that everyone who meant to dance had now found a partner, started up a tune. It was a traditional dance that they all knew. Briefly, he panicked and tried to remember whether he had taught Elena this one but one glance told him that even if Elena had known the dance, it wouldn't have mattered one whit for Lord Manderly had forgotten all the steps. It was a dance where one swapped partners constantly. He couldn't have chosen a better dance for Lady Catelyn.

"What are you doing?" Catelyn demanded of him as they moved through the first part, stepping forward and backward as the music dictated, their hands close but never touching.

"I only wanted to dance, my lady," said Jon.

"Your sweet Elena might be blinded by your gallantry, Jon Snow, but I am not such a fool. You want something."

They parted from each other as they wove between the other dancers, clapping as they went.

"I must congratulate you," said Katherine as he passed behind her. Her flying curls brushed his cheek ever so briefly and he caught the scent of her perfume, both smoky and sweet at the same time. "You could not have chosen a better partner to show your magnanimity."

"That never crossed my mind," said Jon. "All I wanted was to mend past quarrels and show a united front, for Robb's sake."

"In the latter, you have succeeded, but it will take more than a dance to achieve the former." Katherine allowed him to swing her about back into Lord Bolton's arms before he had to turn around quickly to catch Catelyn again.

"I know what you think you're doing, Jon Snow," hissed Catelyn. "You cannot fool me." Who would have thought that a dance could be so fraught with tension? He simply listened to her threats, both veiled and unveiled. The fault was not his anymore. He had tried. How much harder could he have tried?

"Has she bitten your balls off yet?" Damon whispered the next time the two of them crossed paths. Did no one ever stay silent whilst dancing?

"I will not deign to answer such a question," said Jon.

"You really need to lighten up," said the vampire. "You look like she has you by the balls and she's just leading you along however she wants."

"If anyone has gotten his balls caught, it's not me," said Jon. He gave Damon a pointed look that made him scowl.

"I don't even know why I try," grumbled the vampire. "You're obviously a humourless lout."

The gathered dancers clapped as the song ended. Robb stood. "As much as I'd hate to be the one to break up the celebrations, the night has long past and dawn is now upon us," he said. "Perhaps it is time we all sought our rest."

"You heard His Grace," slurred Manderly. He still held Elena's hand. "He's sending us all off to bed."

With much laughter and humming the men traipsed off. Elena skipped to Jon's side. "That was fun," she said as she looped her arm through his. "You were brave."
"Did you think so?"

"If you should fight an army of thousands on your own, I would never think you braver than you were tonight when you offered the hand of reconciliation to Lady Catelyn," said Elena.

"You're drunk," said Jon. "You start speaking like you're from Westeros when you're drunk."

"Maybe a little," admitted Elena. "The wine was very strong. I hadn't thought that I would be able to get drunk anymore but apparently that's still an issue. It doesn't make what I say less true, though." She brought his hand up to her lips and pressed a kiss on the back of it. "I'm proud of you."

Jon put an arm around her waist. The music had gone silent but they danced all the way back to their chambers anyway. The sun's first rays touched the edge of the sky, faintly outlining the hills and the fields. They stood at the balcony for a while, watching the sky gradually grow lighter. In the shadow, everything was ominous yet more beautiful. The world held its breath in the hours before morning and dreams and nightmares took flight and became real. Day would reveal the dull and ugly truth. The world had never seemed more beautiful to Jon than it did now as he and Elena held a dream in their arms, the music still in their minds. They went to bed thus, still entwined around each other. He did not try anything with her but merely held her and that was enough.

Next chapter: Edmure is shoehorned into something he does not want. Katherine crafts Plan B. Klaus makes a comeback.
Edmure takes one for the family. Katherine returns to her criminal roots. Klaus is bent on turning Dany into Black Widow.

Harrenhal

Edmure hummed a tune the next morning when he went down to break his fast with his nephew and his family. He was in a good mood after last night. He'd danced with all the girls, regardless of their station, and he wished that the celebrations had not ended so soon. Servants bowed to him as they passed him with plates of meat and bread for the king's breakfast and he nodded back at them.

The others had already started without him. The familiar smell of smoky charred fish reached his nose. Cat's favourite, for some reason, and she had always had it served even during her years at Winterfell. Edmure had always preferred the hams to those fish.

"Good morning, Your Grace," he said. "I trust you slept well."

"I did indeed," said Robb with a smirk and Edmure knew that he had done very little sleeping in his bed last night.

He helped himself to a couple of slices of salted pork and poured himself some wine.

"Uncle Edmure," said Robb suddenly. "Have you ever thought of marrying?"

"To be sure, every man in the world must have thought of marrying at one time or another and I count myself among that number," said Edmure. "But a suitable bride has not yet surfaced." He paused. "Do you mean to say, Your Grace, that you have found someone suitable?"

The pork on his plate suddenly didn't seem appetizing at all. So that was why Robb had summoned him. A marriage alliance. Edmure had always known that he could not have married for love. He didn't have the luxury of unimportance, nor did he have the daring to defy the expectations of his rank and his family. Nobody of noble birth ever married for love unless one's name was Tywin Lannister or Robb Stark.

Cat put down the butter knife and folded her hands on her lap. Katherine poured more wine for everyone.

"Walder Frey has a great many daughters," said Robb.

"No," said Edmure.

"No?" said Robb.

"I will not marry a Frey!"

"Edmure, they have ten thousand men," said Cat.
"You were supposed to marry a Frey, were you not, Your Grace?"

"Lord Edmure, you forget your place," said Robb coldly.

"I will not marry a Frey," Edmure reiterated.

"It wasn't a suggestion."

He stared at Robb. Having been summoned to Harrenhal under mysterious circumstances, this was the last thing he had expected. "You can't do that!" he spluttered.

"I think he just did," said his uncle unhelpfully.

"According to the laws of gods and men, one man cannot compel another man to marry!"

"The laws of my fist are about to compel your teeth," threatened Uncle Blackfish.

"But he has such pretty teeth," said Katherine.

"Nephew…" began Edmure.

"He is the king," said the Blackfish. "You will address him as such."

"Your Grace," said Edmure, trying another approach. "If you could not bear to do such a thing, how could you ask it of me? We are family."

"Family is very important, Your Grace," said Katherine, placing a hand on Robb's shoulder. Was she on his side in this? It would be much better with her on his side.

Robb's face softened. "And it is the reason that you must marry Walder Frey's daughter, Uncle," he said. "You are paying for my…" He glanced at Katherine. Edmure had been sure that he had been about to say "mistake" but how could he when she was sitting right there, looking more beautiful than ever? What queen in Westeros could claim that she had given her husband a fortress as a wedding gift? Edmure would not call it a mistake to have married Katherine. If he had been in Robb's place, he probably would have done the same thing.

However, he was not feeling very understanding right now since Robb was making him marry a Frey in his stead.

"There are hundreds of Frey girls," said Katherine. "The laws of probability dictate that at least one must be pretty. She might even be pleasant."

Edmure gaped. He would not! But his uncle was there and he expected it of him. His father was not aware enough to say anything. In normal times, Hoster would never have agreed to such a match but these were not normal times and suitable wives were scarce. The Freys were…wealthy and they were nominally noble. Even if they were his own bannermen.

He looked at everyone surrounding him. His nephew the king, the brave and noble and brilliant Robb Stark whom everyone called the Young Wolf, his uncle, called the Blackfish for so long that hardly anyone, including himself, remembered what his real name actually was, Katherine, the former lady bard who became a queen after defeating the Mountain in battle and who had conquered Harrenhal with two hundred men. Who was Edmure Tully next to them?
Katherine could practically see Edmure giving up. It was a pity. She had hoped that he would fight Robb on this and then, perhaps, Robb would give up this stupidity and do what she had suggested all along, honour be damned. Although Edmure could momentarily pretend to agree to it so they could distract the Freys. Alas, Edmure was much too dutiful a subject and uncle to think such rebellious thoughts when it seemed that the support for Robb's harebrained scheme was insurmountable. Edmure, oh Edmure, poor Edmure, could he not read between the lines? All the looks she was giving him, were they all going over his head?

Never mind. If subtlety didn't work, she would have to try a little more bluntness.

Having resigned himself to his fate, Edmure rose. The legs of his chair scraped against the rough stone floor and the chair almost toppled over. He bowed as if someone had inserted a rod into his spine, and left. Robb sighed.

"It had to be done, Your Grace," said the Blackfish.

"It does not make it feel better," said Robb.

"Perhaps I can talk to him," said Katherine.

"He will listen to you, Your Grace," said the Blackfish. The words hung unspoken between them. 'He loved you.' Even though he had barely known her and he still did not know her.

"Yes, do speak with him, Katherine," said Robb. He gave her a squeeze. She, too, rose and left the men to their discussions of war. No doubt she could catch up on such talk later. But, for now, she had murders to plan.

She caught up with Edmure on the battlements. He was looking out over the vast expanse of land that was theirs and towards the west, where Tywin Lannister's territory began. There were no boundaries clearly drawn. It all looked the same. "It is for this that we fight, die, and do everything that is against our will and our very nature," said Edmure.

"It is not easy," said Katherine. "But how can men live beneath such yokes as the ones that the Lannisters intend to put on all of us? There is only one way to be free."

"Are we ever free, bound as we are by rules and duty?"

"There are no rules except for the ones we make for ourselves."

Edmure turned to her, not really understanding. She smiled. "Are you really going to simply marry Walder Frey's daughter?" she asked.

"Do I have a choice?" asked Edmure.

"Have you forgotten who you are?"

"Edmure Tully," said Edmure.

"Yes, the heir to House Tully. My husband may be a king but you are very much a king in your own right when it comes to your bannermen. And Walder Frey is your subject."

"Walder Frey is a troublesome one. I don't have a choice in this, Katherine."

"There is always a choice, just as there are consequences for choices," said Katherine. "Your future wife might be pretty or she might take after her father."
Edmure gave a visible shudder.

"But you don't really have to marry her if you don't want to. I do not care about the means, only the results."

"And what results are those?"

"Ten thousand men for Robb's army," said Katherine. "That will happen with or without a wedding. The choice is yours."

"What are you saying, Katherine?" he asked.

"Walder Frey has done us a great insult," said Katherine. "He has refused our king passage across the bridge even though your father is his liege. Where was his duty to us, to you? Now he is forcing you to marry his daughter who, for all we know, may have warts, buck teeth and the manners of a mule. Why would any reasonable person tolerate that?"

"What can I do?" asked Edmure.

"Do I need to draw you a picture, my lord? You have a reputation for…honour. It's useful."

"I don't understand."

"Use your reputation as a disguise. No one would suspect you until it is too late and the plan is in motion."

"You want me to kill Walder Frey?"

"Not in a way that anyone will know about. But it would not be hard. I am sure it would not be difficult for you to send men into the Twins undetected; just a couple of hundred of your very best men, disguised —" Edmure hesitated for far too long. It was tempting. She knew.

"Katherine, I will not violate the rules of hospitality!" he said. "How could you even think of such a thing? You ought to be ashamed of yourself." He stared at her as if he did not know her. In truth, he did not, not even in the slightest. He had an idea of her that he was in love with, but that was as far from reality as Damon's idea of her had been not so long ago.

"I'm only trying to protect my family," said Katherine. She took his hand. "Can you not understand it? I will do whatever it takes to keep Robb safe. If you were in my place, would you not do the same?"

Edmure pulled his hand out of her grasp and strode away from her. From the set of his shoulders, he was doubtful and tempted and angry at himself for being tempted. Starks and Tullys; why did they have to be so fucking honourable? It would have made her life so much easier if they could be led astray.

Never mind. She toyed with the signet ring she had taken from Edmure's hand.

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**Qarth, Essos**

They needed ships, yet the generosity of the Qarthians did not extend so far. None of them placed enough faith in Daenerys, no matter that she was the Mother of Dragons. They had not yet realized
that when she sat upon the Iron Throne, she would remember them. She gazed upon the vast ocean, now sparkling gold and black in the light of the dying sun like the colours of the usurper's house. She could see no end to the water and the waves. The gods had granted her dragons but they had placed this great sea in her way. From where she stood, it didn't look so narrow. "You can't really blame them, Your Grace," said Klaus as he came to stand beside her on the stone balcony. The scent of brine and dusky blooming flowers surrounded them. Klaus' shirt billowed in the breeze. There was a smudge of paint on his sleeve. "If I were in their place, I wouldn't believe you either."

"Then how can I make them believe?" asked Daenerys.

"Men respond best when they're quaking in their boots and about to piss themselves," said Klaus. "Give them a reason to trust you or, failing that, offer them other choices that are so bad that the best choice they have is to trust you."

"What, tell them that you'll kill them all if they don't give me ships?" asked Daenerys. "You cannot solve every problem by killing people, Niklaus."

"No?" said Klaus, but she knew he was teasing her. He wasn't such an uncouth man that he couldn't understand this simple concept.

"What else have you found out about Qarth?"

"Only the usual. They are all very eager to leverage your fame to promote their own cause," said Klaus.

"I know," said Daenerys. "That is why I have arranged for a gathering tomorrow of the Thirteen so they can meet me."

"And Daxos can parade you about like a prized pet," said Klaus. He had cut his hair again so that it no longer blew about his face. The dying light only made his cheekbones more prominent and his eyes more piercing than usual.

"Perhaps he is my pet instead," said Daenerys. Klaus smiled, or rather, smirked.

"So, what are you going to do? Oooh, I know, you could threaten to put them on spits and roast them before feeding them to your beloved children. Now that would be sweet."

"I mean to talk with them. You should try it sometime, Niklaus. It's more effective than killing people."

"Based on my experience, I will have to disagree with you, Your Grace." She ignored him.

"Xaro Xhoan Daxos has provided me with a dress to wear to the gathering tomorrow," said Daenerys. She wasn't pleased with the dress, which was made of translucent blue silk with gold embroidery. It would have been beautiful if not for the fact that it exposed one breast most uncomfortably. She did not want to be so exposed to the eyes of Qarth.

"He is a very generous man," said Klaus. "And, perhaps, a man who is looking to woo you."

"Do you really think it's true that he intends to marry me?"

"How do the laws of property ownership work again? If one spouse were to, hypothetically speaking, suffer a tragedy that would deprive them of life?"

"Daxos is not that kind of man. He has been very kind."
"I was talking about his property and I would always view kindness with suspicion, Your Grace. People are only ever kind when they want something."

She found that to be sad, albeit usually true. Perhaps she was still just a silly little girl at heart who wished that the world could be perfect and everyone could just be better to each other. She could not be that little girl if she was to be queen.

"If I may offer my opinion on the subject?" continued Klaus

"No, you may not," said Daenerys. "But you will anyway."

"You know me too well, Your Grace," said Klaus. "You should pretend to fall for his charms at times. Promise him everything he wants, but give him nothing. Wind him about your little finger until he no longer knows how to think for himself. Daxos may be a shrewd and powerful man, but I have known many like him and, in the end, he is still a man. Some people say that even the most cunning of men have no defence against the wiles of common women."

She turned around to look at him. "What about you, Niklaus? You have been kind to me too. What do you want?"

"What do all men want?" he asked. "I just want it more."

The swirling patterns on her skin gleamed like golden scales, as if people weren't already watching her. But it was a good kind of attention and Daenerys was secretly glad that she had let Klaus work his magic on her with his paint brushes. The gentle strokes of the brush had been like a lover's caress, for he had been skilful and teasing. He had smiled when he had seen the hairs rise on her skin at his brush's touch.

"Khaleesi, you look lovelier than ever," said Spice, "and what a curious… costume." She never did learn his real name and she didn't think she would need to. Did they not say that of all the Thirteen, he had the most ships? Perhaps he was the first one she would need to persuade. She dipped her head in acknowledgement of his compliment that was almost a barb. She was so much more than just a pretty face for them to dress up in pretty silks. She was a queen, a khaleesi of the Dothraki and rightful heir to the Iron Throne, yet these Qarthians were too blind to see it.

Through the crowd, she glimpsed Klaus. He was speaking with a masked woman. He caught her eye and gave her a brief smirk before turning back to his companion. Well, she didn't need to talk to him either. She could talk to him whenever she wanted and now wasn't really it. She turned back to Spice. Men, she had learned, wanted what they couldn't have. Over-eagerness made them feel as if they were in control and it satisfied them. She was not going to satisfy him.

She moved past him without saying a word. To get Spice, she would need to get someone else first. Had not Klaus said that she had to seduce them one by one as if she intended to take them all as lovers? Perhaps Xaro Xhoan Daxos was more than ready to be seduced.

Then again, why was she listening to Klaus? He was a king of thieves, and his kingdom was no more. Yet…he knew things. She knew that he knew things and he could do what no mortal man could. His reach was long. No one had mentioned it yet, but in the dark of the night, she had wondered about how he had leapt on to the walls of Qarth as if they had been no higher than his knee. What did she know of him?

"Mother of Dragons." So embroiled in her thoughts was she that she had failed to notice the beanstalk thin man stepping in her way. She almost leapt backwards, more in surprise than anything. He was completely bald, with no beard or even eyebrows to speak of. His skin was paler than even her
own. His watery colourless eyes and purple lips gave him the appearance of a corpse that had been left out to dry in the icy winds of the north that Jorah had described for her.

"Hello," she managed to say in her shock. What a foolish thing to say! The conversation around her hushed.

"Well met, Khaleesi," he said with an exaggerated bow. "I am afraid I have startled you. You seem troubled."

"Not at all," said Daenerys, recovering quickly. Now that she thought about it, she might have remembered his purple robes from when he was standing atop the wall. "Forgive me, for I seem to have forgotten your name."

"I am Pyat Pree, one of the Thirteen. We have not officially been introduced yet."

Daenerys became aware that both Klaus and Jorah were making their way through the crowd to her side. Jorah was wary whilst Klaus seemed perfectly hostile. If Pyat Pree saw them, he paid them no heed for he had focused his pale eyes on Daenerys, making her feel uneasy. Yet she smiled.

"It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Indeed, it is more my pleasure than yours," said Pree. He looked about. "Are your children not with you today?"

"They have not yet been house-trained," said Daenerys. "I am afraid they would have made for terrible guests."

"A pity, for I would very much like to see a real dragon," said Pree. Him and everyone else in the world. How would the Usurper Joffrey Baratheon like to see one, hmm, perhaps bearing down on him, jaws wide open and about to burn him to a crisp? She tried to imagine what it would be like sometimes, to see her dragons soar in the skies of Westeros, laying waste to her enemies. It was difficult, for she had never seen Westeros before and therefore did not know what to picture. She imagined it would be very green, like the Great Grass Sea except the grass would be like that of Illyrio's gardens, well-trimmed, very soft, and it would grow very well in the wild.

"It would be my honour to extend an invitation to you, Mother of Dragons, for you and your children to stay with us in the House of the Undying," Pree continued.

"The House of the Undying?" said Daenerys. What a strange name for a house.

There were murmurs surrounding her now. Out of the words she heard, one was very prominent.

"I am one of the warlocks of Qarth."

"Forgive me, my lord, but I am hardly a little girl. I am no longer easily distracted by magic tricks." said Daenerys.

"Oh, but you, of all people, should know that it is real. It is everywhere." She blinked. He disappeared right in front of her, only to reappear behind her. And then some distance away. Closer, further, left, right. And then on both sides of her, for there were two of him! The gathered nobles were silent with awe. Then the murmurs and mutterings began. Pyat Pree took a bow. "The invitation stands, Mother of Dragons, whenever you should wish to come." He melted away into the crowd and vanished, like magic, leaving her breathless and in awe.

"Khaleesi, are you all right?" asked Jorah.
"I'm fine," said Daenerys. His concern was touching, but unfounded.

"You should not trust anyone here, Your Grace," said Klaus. "But I would trust him the least. I know his kind. They're tricky bastards."

"And why should I trust you?" asked Daenerys without so much as glancing at him. "I know nothing about you."

"It is true that I have given you no reason to trust me, Your Grace," said Klaus. "But I have not given you a reason to distrust me either. Although, I would ask you to take my word on this. Do not trust his kind."

"How do you know 'his kind', as you put it; what do you mean by that, Niklaus? I have not forgotten what you did, leaping atop that wall as if it were nothing more than a common wooden fence to hold livestock."

"I was wondering if you would remember, Your Grace," said Klaus. "But also remember the other witch, what's-her-name. The one you spared."

Daenerys stiffened. She turned around. "Tell me," she said. "What are you Niklaus and how do you know so much?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jorah's hand move towards his sword, getting ready to protect her should Klaus do anything…Klaus-like. Did he really think that his friend would be capable of killing her? Wait, did Klaus really have any friends?

"Tell us, Niklaus," said Jorah.

"Well, who am I to resist such a show of force?" said Klaus. "But not here. I have been given a warning, Your Grace, and when witches give me warnings, I tend to heed them."

"Witches?" said Jorah.

"You just saw a warlock clone himself, Ser Jorah," said Klaus. "Witches should not be so beyond the narrow realms of your beliefs, especially since you have encountered them before."

"I'm not sure what I saw, Niklaus, but why don't you elaborate?" said Jorah.

"I've known many witches in my life," said Klaus. "Some of them are tricky, some of them are judgemental and all of them are dangerous. The woman I was talking to, she told me that there are many in Qarth who would seek to control your dragons, Your Grace."

"They are my dragons," said Daenerys. "No one controls them but me."

"And whoever controls you controls them," said Klaus. He glanced about to make sure no one was listening. "People are curious as to what we're talking about. Laugh at something I've just said."

"What for? None of what you have just said is remotely amusing."

"I told you a joke. It's very funny, Your Grace."

Daenerys felt ridiculous, but she forced herself to laugh. Klaus grinned devilishly and even Jorah made himself smile. He wasn't much of a smiling man, however, even when there was something to smile about. Usually, when he smiled, he looked sad. Now that he was pretending to smile, he looked as if he were in pain.

"You should just keep your face straight, Ser Jorah," said Klaus. "You don't have a sense of
humour.”

"I know everyone wants my dragons," said Daenerys, still making chuckling noises that sounded so unnatural.

"They'll try and take them and you," said Klaus.

"Who? Daxos?"

"That's one of them, but there will be others."

"Daxos won't let them take my dragons if he wants them," said Daenerys. "They're safe here for now. And Daxos wouldn't dare take them from me. He knows if he did, I would tear him apart slowly and painfully." Klaus raised an eyebrow. "With your help, of course, Niklaus."

"Khaleesi, perhaps a better idea would be to make him our friend," said Jorah.

"Why must you always be sensible, Jorah?" asked Daenerys.

She looked around for Daxos. As if he had known that she wanted to see him, he appeared at her side. For such a large man, he could move very quietly.

"Forgive me, Khaleesi," said Daxos. "I am obliged to invite Pyat Pree as he is one of the Thirteen."

"There is nothing to forgive," said Daenerys.

"He and his kind seldom venture out of the House of the Undying and when they do, they always cause such a scene with their illusions and magic tricks," said Daxos. "I have something to show you, Khaleesi, if you would follow me." He offered Daenerys his arm. She looped her arm through his, aware of how the perfumed oil gleamed on his ebony skin. He doused himself liberally with it each day for, in the heat of Qarth, most people began to smell of sweat by the end of the day.

He led her through the cool covered walkways of his house, where vines clambered up the trellises and let curling tendrils drape down once they could go no higher. Everywhere she looked, there were brightly coloured blooms. Never far from her side, Jorah and Klaus followed, although at some distance so that she and Daxos might speak with some degree of privacy. She wasn't worried about Jorah, but Klaus was prone to giving his (unwanted) opinion as if the whole world needed to know what he thought of it.

"There is much I can offer you, Khaleesi," said Daxos. "But I would prefer to discuss it without an audience."

"Whatever you want to say to me, you may say in front of them. I trust them," said Daenerys.

"Trust is such a strange thing," said Daxos. He turned. "Would you do a humble merchant a favour and grant him a moment alone with the Khaleesi?"

Jorah looked worried.

"I'm not known for doing anyone any favours," said Klaus.

"Ser Jorah, Niklaus, leave us," said Daenerys.

"But, Khaleesi," protested Jorah.

"I will be quite safe with our host." Klaus, of course, would probably be eavesdropping because he
was quite the most adept man at being where he was not wanted, but it also made her feel a bit safer. Then again, Daxos was not a threat to her. Ser Jorah worried too much and Niklaus could be such a nuisance.

"Have you noticed how your manservant, the older one, looks at you?" asked Daxos suddenly once Jorah and Klaus had disappeared around the corner where they would be out of sight, if not exactly out of earshot.

"Ser Jorah? How does he look at me?"

"Forgive me, Khaleesi, I thought you knew," said Daxos.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," said Daenerys. Klaus had mentioned it once before too. Could it really be true? Daxos gave her a look.

"He is my friend and trusted advisor," said Daenerys with a little laugh. "He is not in love with me."

"I can always tell what men want, and he has the look of a man obsessed. The other, Niklaus, he is more difficult to read, but I gather he wants the world and he's using you to get it."

Daenerys smiled. "You say it as if I did not know it myself," she said.

Next chapter: Klaus picks a fight with Qarth. King's Landing begins wedding season.
Rules of Engagement

Chapter Summary

Klaus encourages Daenerys to emulate spider mating habits. Sansa and Caroline get ready to attend their joint engagement celebrations.

Qarth

"The other, Niklaus, he is more difficult to read, but I gather he wants the world and he's using you to get it."

She almost glanced back at Klaus, but didn't. Daxos was right. Such a powerful man as Klaus would want more than just being her advisor and her protector. He was her friend for now because he would want to use her to secure his own power, but what about afterwards? Klaus could not be trusted fully, that much was obvious. Yet, so long as they benefited one another, they could remain fast friends and she could trust him to look after her interests so long as they coincided with his.

"Can you tell what women want?" she asked.

"I am afraid women are even more difficult," said Daxos.

"I think you overestimate us, for we think much like men," said Daenerys. "Would you not even take a guess at what I want?"

"You are not like most other women, Khaleesi," said Daxos with a smile. "You have made it very clear, ever since you arrived, that you intended to take what you consider to be yours with fire and blood."

"I suppose I have mentioned it a few times," said Daenerys, affecting bashfulness. Men liked that. "But what do you think I consider to be mine?"

"The Iron Throne, without doubt, and perhaps more," said Daxos. "Why settle for one continent when you can have the world? You are a daughter of conquerors, Khaleesi. I saw that when I first laid eyes upon you." He stopped and turned around to gaze at her, his dark eyes inscrutable. If she was not like other women, then he was not like other men. Or perhaps he was like all men and she was just terrible at reading them.

"You are a conqueror yourself, of a different kind," said Daenerys, plucking at something, anything, to make him stop looking at her like that. She felt like a piece of meat that he was trying to claim. Perhaps she wasn't so bad at reading men after all. Klaus wasn't the only one who wanted to use her to get what he wanted. However, Daxos was more useful for now whilst Klaus was her secret weapon, and she did not intend to unleash him too often. "You have conquered all of this." She indicated his house and all the things in it.

"Mere trinkets," said Daxos.

"Still, it is more than what I have," said Daenerys. "How did you do it?"
"I came to Qarth from the Summer Islands with nothing more than the clothes on my back. I did what work I could find at the docks and stole when I couldn't find work. I have done many things, Khaleesi, that men and gods would condemn, yet here I am, with no regrets."

Jorah and Klaus rejoined them. They continued on into the shadow of the corridors within the house. Daxos led her ever downwards, winding through the darkened passages until they came to a large round stone door, reinforced with steel.

"What is behind this door could put you on the Iron Throne and perhaps more," Daxos said. "I have offered all the locksmiths and thieves on this side of the Narrow Sea their weight in gold if they could break open the lock. They all walked away empty-handed." Klaus' eyes brightened. No. The Bandit King was not going to take up the Merchant Prince's challenge! She would not allow it. He was her subject now and he would have to behave. But...it was very tempting. Perhaps she had spent too much time amongst the Dothraki, for they liked very much to take what was not theirs.

Daxos put his hand on the door. He pulled something from around his neck. "This is the only key. You need only say the word and you will have your ships and your army."

How much wealth must be in there! She could only imagine.

"This...this is all very sudden," said Daenerys. Something was not right. She could not trust anybody, she knew that. It wasn't this simple; it couldn't possibly be this simple. She needed advice.

"Consider it, Khaleesi," said Daxos. There was a gleam in his dark eyes. How had she not noticed it before? It was like that of a feverish man, only more intense and focused. He leaned forward towards her and she could smell the spice from the meat at the feast on his breath. "With my gold and your dragons, you will rule, and our children after you."

"I will consider it," she said. Promise the world, deliver nothing. Well, she hadn't promised him anything, but somehow, she just couldn't bring herself to say yes (and then go back on her word later). Daxos dipped his head, acknowledging that at least she hadn't said no. They walked back up to the main part of the house in silence. Somehow, unbeknownst to her, a great deal of time had passed. The guests were gone and the servants were clearing up the great platters of food that seemed to be mostly untouched. Where would it go?

"I am tired," she said. "Thank you, Xaro Xhoan Daxos, for an interesting day."

"I certainly hope you will sleep on my proposal, Khaleesi," said Daxos.

"She is not just a khaleesi," said Klaus suddenly. "Her Grace is the Queen."

Night had settled. Warm desert winds blew across her skin. What would it be like if the wind were cold? She had never felt the cold before, only extreme heat, for it had been warm in Pentos and even warmer in the Red Waste. Falling snow would be so pretty, she would think. Perhaps she'd even settle for rain. "I could buy a fleet," she said without turning around. The city glowed and flickered beneath her. There was so much light coming out from the windows of the many households that it almost seemed as if the city were on fire. "I could buy an army."

"But it would not really be your fleet, Khaleesi," said Jorah. "Nor would the throne truly be yours if you conquered it with a fleet and army bought with another man's money, especially not your husband's."

"Because they would see him as king and not me?" said Daenerys. She took the silence as assent.
But why had Klaus, who was always keen to make his opinion known, if only to annoy her—especially to annoy her, stayed silent? She turned around to glance at him. All of a sudden, she felt as if she were watching all the ages of time flash by in a heartbeat, like she was looking at something that was immensely old and eternal. In the light of the dozens of brass lamps that were placed about her quarters so that it was almost as bright as the day, he looked sinister. As in more than usual.

He looked at her. Or she thought he was looking at her. His eyes were cast in shadow and the planes of his face were even sharper than usual. His sensual lips quirked up in a smirk. "Your Grace, do you want to know what I think?"

"I don't know," said Daenerys. She approached him. She was the Mother of Dragons and the rightful Queen of Westeros. She was not afraid of him, no matter the great power that was contained within that lean tall body and those slender hands that looked more suited to painting and loving than to killing. "Do I?" They were so close now that she could see his pupils dilate. He was beautiful in a strange way that made him stand out amongst all other men. Some of his features might even be called feminine, but no one would ever take him to be a soft man. On the contrary, his sensuality only made him that much more dangerous.

He leaned down. She felt his breath brush her ear.

"What I think," he whispered slowly into her ear. His fingers brushed the skin of her arm and rested there, his touch cool and light and yet searing at the same time. "What I think is that you should say yes, Your Grace. And then he can quickly die of natural causes later after you're done with him."

She should have guessed. "I am many things, Niklaus," she said. "A liar is not one of them."

"Oh, but it's not exactly lying, love," he said. "You would marry him. You won't say anything about him enjoying marital bliss."

It was tempting, so tempting, but it wasn't right, a voice said in her head. People would suspect her. Unlike some others, she needed to maintain her reputation for justice. Murder of this kind was not justice. "No," she said. "I cannot and I will not. It would be murder and I cannot do that. I will tell him no and then I will get my ships some other way."

"So are you going to take the Iron Throne and the Seven Kingdoms without harming a single soul?"

She opened her mouth like a fish out of water.

"I thought not," said Klaus. "All rulers are murderers. If you're going to take back what's yours with fire and blood, you will kill men far worthier than Daxos long before you even see the beginning of the end."

He was right, but this sort of murder seemed more dastardly than fire and blood.

"I will not do it," said Danaerys.

Klaus sighed. "Is it evil to take what you want? What some would call evil, I believe to be an appropriate response to a harsh and unfair world," he said. "But, of course, Your Grace, you will do as you wish and I will be powerless to stop you, one way or another. So, where's our next pleasure trip going to be at, since we're so obviously not going to take back Westeros? I'll have a look at the maps, shall I? They say Asshai is lovely this time of year." He bowed and, without
another word from any of them, he took his leave.

"He does have a point, Khalee--Your Grace," said Jorah. "But it is for you to decide what is right for you."

The Spice King's mansion was more subtle than Xaro Xhoan Daxos'. One generation of wealth was all it took for a man to become accustomed enough to it that he no longer felt the need to show it off. Yet, it was not without ostentation, for there was ivory and gold everywhere. Even the wood had been painted to resemble ivory and, unlike Daxos' home, there were no plants to add life to the place. All the plants here were usually dried and ground up to be added to soups and meats.

Daenerys paced on the flagstones of the courtyard, as she had been doing for an hour. Each moment felt like a lifetime and her anger only grew. Where. Was. Spice? "I am not some common petitioner to be kept waiting like this," she seethed in her rage.

"If you had agreed to my proposal, you would not have had to suffer this humiliation," Daxos pointed out. To his credit, he managed to keep any smug satisfaction out of his voice, but she could guess that he was feeling a little superior right now. She breathed deeply in and out, forcing herself to remain calm. She was to be queen. How could she rule if the slightest thing made her blood rush to her head and roused her ire? She caught Klaus' eye. Yes, he was most definitely feeling smug and superior and he wasn't even bothering to hide it.

'It's not too late to change your mind,' he seemed to be saying. Except, of course, she was a queen and her decisions could not flip flop like a dying fish.

"Mother of Dragons, forgive me!" called Spice down from his balcony. Was it just her or did his pale soft flesh look particularly doughy today? It would be so easy for her to command Klaus to simply tear him apart. At least two out of three people would enjoy the sight, she was sure. He was so soft. Yet she was here to placate him and ask him for his aid. It grated on her pride. "Had I known that you were here, I would have gotten out of my bath sooner. Ah, this hot weather, I simply wither in it."

"Perhaps a pink bath would be in order," whispered Klaus so softly that no one but Daenerys could hear him. Yes, that was tempting, but unproductive.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of such a visit?" asked Spice.

Daenerys forced herself to smile –regally and benevolently all at once. "I have come to ask for your aid to take back what is mine."

Spice spread his arms. "Mother of Dragons, you are a queen. I am but a simple spice merchant. You swore to take back what is yours with fire and blood. Unfortunately, I have neither to give."

"I need ships," said Daenerys. She hated having to actually say it, and she hated it even more that she had to be looking up at him while she said it. "They say you have the biggest fleet in all of Qarth."

"And indeed, this side of the Narrow Sea," said Spice. "They take spices all over Westeros but the eastern coasts are hostile places, with lots of rocks and pirates and no safe place to make harbour. It is in the West that my sailors and goods disembark. People in the west, they pay their debts and they always pay on time."

The Lannisters. Spice was talking about Lannisters, those traitorous murderers who had killed her father, brother, good-sister, her nephews and nieces and stormed the Red Keep during the
rebellion. Of course his wealth would come from them.

"I never forget those who help me," said Daenerys. "And when Westeros is mine–"

"And I'm sure it will be yours, in time," Spice pointed out. "But, for now, it is a continent with thousands of people who have lived contentedly without your house for twenty years. You may need to convince them that they need you back."

"I will get an army and I will burn anyone who stands in my way," declared Daenerys. "I will claim the throne with–"

"Yes, yes, fire and blood," said Spice. "And I wish you good luck with that, but not with my ships."

"I was hoping you'd say that," said Klaus suddenly. What was he playing at? "I may not be able to threaten anyone with fire, but blood on its own works just as well."

"But…but…" stammered Spice. "You are a reasonable man, Lord Niklaus. I'm sure we would be able to come to a compromise without unpleasant messiness."

Klaus was there before Spice could step away from the railings of the balcony. How had he gotten up there and so quickly? Wait, this was the man who had leapt from the ground to the very tops of the walls of Qarth. A little balcony like this one was no hindrance to him. Could he fly?

Klaus grabbed Spice's ornate embroidered collar and threw him up against the wall.

"Niklaus!" shouted Jorah. Daenerys and Daxos were too much in shock to say anything. Never, in a thousand years, had Daenerys thought that he would dare to so openly flout the rules of being a guest. Then again, this was Klaus. What had she expected? Spice was stunned by his collision with the wall. She was surprised that he was still conscious. Before he could fall to the floor or even cry out, Klaus seized him again and dangled him over the edge of the balcony.

"No, no, no, you do not want to be doing this!" gasped Spice as he scrabbled at Klaus' hand, scratching so feebly that he seemed not to make a mark on it, despite the long, sharp and carefully manicured fingernails.

"Now, why wouldn't I?" asked Klaus. "It's only a short drop, mate; just two storeys, maybe even less. I don't think you'll break your neck. Your legs on the other hand…" He grinned. "Oh, yes, right, because I don't throw my friends off the balcony and I need you to be my friend so you'll give us ships. Isn't that right, Ser Jorah?"

"Niklaus," warned Jorah.

Spice's face was turning very red from lack of air. His pudgy feet, clad in beautiful silk slippers, kicked uselessly. Klaus tutted and released him. He began to scream as he fell, but the Bandit King caught his arm before he could fall all the way.

"I don't invest in blind faith," Spice managed to squeeze out.

"Do you invest in health insurance?" Klaus asked.

"Klaus!" said Daenerys in a firm voice, not unlike the one she used to tell her dragons to stop fighting over food. "That is enough. We do not drop our hosts off balconies."

He gave her a look as if to say, "We don't?" She shook her head slightly at him. He could not go too far. What would they say if she let him do as he pleased? He meant well (enough), she
supposed, but even if she got her ships thanks to Klaus’ unique brand of diplomacy, no one would ever open their gates for her again. The artist could terrorize. She was going to be the benevolent one. "Put him back, Klaus."

Klaus did so with an expression akin to that of a sullen child who had been told that he wasn't allowed another sweet.

"Thank you for your generosity," said Spice as he readjusted his now ruined collar and tried to scrape together what dignity he had left. Daenerys let him go, for now. She wouldn't forget, but she was patient. She could wait until the right time. And when the time came, Spice would not die by Klaus. He would die by fire just like all the rest.

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**King's Landing**

Sansa looked at herself in the long, full-body mirror that Shae had made Tyrion buy for her as a wedding gift. Well, she suspected that Shae had made Tyrion buy it because Lord Tyrion had planned something else for Jaime. But he had come the other day with servants carrying the mirror behind him, saying that it was an early gift to welcome his new sister into the family, as the bride seldom received gifts that were meant entirely for her.

"I am sure Jaime will enjoy looking at himself in it too," Tyrion had remarked before he had left.

She couldn't recognize the girl who stared back at her. Her face was so cold, her eyes emphasized by a dusting of silver powder—which was not really silver, but the crushed scales of some type of silver fish found off the shores of Essos. Her hair had been pinned up in a tight coil on the top of her head, almost like a beehive, and was decorated with just two small silver combs that Rebekah had designed. They were shaped like wings. Her face, surrounded by the high white collar, was pale.

"I do not look like myself," said Sansa.

"That is the idea, my lady," said Rebekah. "I will not permit you to wear those cowpats on your head anymore. They're hideous."

"It's not a cowpat," said Sansa. "It's how the queen wears her hair."

"It's a cowpat," said Rebekah dismissively. She sank her teeth into an apple. It wasn't the first time that Sansa had noticed how white and sharp-looking her teeth were. Sansa smirked at the thought of Cersei wearing a real cowpat on her head, but then she stopped herself out of fear. It was more from habit than from any founded fear that Cersei would know that they were making fun of her. But she could trust no one here, not even those who seemed to be her friends. There had to be some other reason why Rebekah was being so kind to her. By rights, Rebekah should hate her. She was to marry her lover Jaime and any fool could see that Rebekah was in love with Jaime.

However, she could see nothing wrong with the way Rebekah had dressed her up. In fact, her reflection had never looked more beautiful. She looked at herself in the mirror again. She looked as if she were made of ice. Or snow.

Just like the snow sculpture Damon had made of her back in Winterfell.

She shook her head to get the silly memory out. Damon had only ever been good for amusement. He had abandoned her just like everyone else.

"Relax, my lady," said Rebekah. "Besides, you don't have time to worry. You're already
fashionably late to your own betrothal feast."

"Late?" said Sansa. No! She couldn't be late! But…what was this 'fashionably late'?

"Fashionable ladies are never on time where I come from," said Rebekah. "They always come a little bit late for everything so when they finally do arrive, everyone has been waiting for them for enough time so all attention will be focused on her."

"But is that not very rude?" asked Sansa.

"Why do you care about what they think?" asked Rebekah. "Lions do not concern themselves with the opinions of sheep. I doubt wolves do either."

That was right, wolves didn't, or shouldn't. She straightened her back. She was beautiful, she was Lady Sansa Stark, soon to be Lady Sansa Lannister. But, once of the north, one would always be of the north. She had not forgotten the way her father had looked, kneeling on the steps of the Sept of Baelor. She would never forget, no matter what kindnesses the Lannisters showed her hereafter. Rebekah, if she intended to be her friend, was a poor and misguided girl who would only end up being hurt in the end, for one could not be the friend of a Stark and a Lannister at the same time. Sansa took a deep breath.

"I think I'm ready," said she said.

Caroline tugged at her dress. The silvery material hugged her body before cascading into a mermaid skirt that reached the floor. The girl who looked back at her from the mirror seemed haunted, almost like a ghost. She couldn't recognize her. She had swept her hair to one side so the blonde curls were all gathered next to her cheek. She was supposed to be happy, smiling, but all she could feel was a sense of abject despair. She was getting married when she neither wanted it nor felt ready to. Of all people, why her?

'You should have run when you'd had the chance, Caroline,' said that annoying voice inside her head. Perhaps she could still run. But where would she go? North, to Damon and Elena…and the Starks, and betray the Lannisters who had, so far, been so good to her? Or over to Essos where Klaus would protect her (and still betray the Lannisters).

She sighed. It was too late now. Stefan would hunt her down and bring her back and if he didn't, Rebekah would if Jaime asked her to. And did she really want to a) go to the Starks or b) go to Klaus? Choices, choices, and none of them good.

She almost jumped when there came a knock on the door. "Who is it?" she called.

"It's me, Caroline," came Daemon's voice. Oh, God! Daemon! The last person she wanted to see right now. It wasn't that she didn't like him, because he was her friend, but this was so awkward. They were going to be married when they were both in love with someone else. Not the same person, of course. "May I come in?"

"Yes, no, I don't know."

"Caroline, I am asking if I may come in, not how you're feeling about this betrothal," said Daemon patiently and with a touch of amusement in his voice. "There will be plenty of chances for us to talk about that later. Are you decent?"

"I think so," said Caroline.
Daemon opened the door. She saw him behind her in the mirror. His hair had been recently trimmed and he had shaved. The red and gold only made the green of his eyes blaze brighter. Many women would throw themselves at his feet, the great Daemon Lannister who had tricked Robb and Katherine Stark with a song. She should be counting herself lucky, but she wasn't.

"You look beautiful," he said. For the first time, he sounded awkward. Was it possible that he was feeling as uncertain about this as she did? Daemon was never uncertain! It was a trait that he shared with the other Damon.

"Thank you. You look good too," she said.

"We look pathetic," said Daemon. Wow, blatant honesty? He really must be out of sorts. "We were friends, were we not, Caroline?"

"We still are," said Caroline.

"We used to talk about everything, you and I."

"You mostly talked about Rebekah," said Caroline.

"I remember you did most of the talking about everything," said Daemon.

"That's probably true." She laughed, a little out of nervousness and a little out of genuine pleasure at remembering those simpler days when their relationship had not been complicated by this betrothal. Thank you, Lord Tywin.

"You would always forget that I was a lord," said Daemon. "I liked that."

"What, do you want me to forget it now?" asked Caroline.

"In private, you may always forget it," said Daemon. "But we, both of us, have to perform tonight." He offered her his arm. "Cheer up, Lady Forbes. There are worst fates than marrying one's friends."

"I wish I could be as optimistic as you," said Caroline. "I'm just...really scared."

"You have no need to be afraid of me," said Daemon. He patted her hand. "Smile. I am sure you will not be the most nervous bride here tonight."

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**Next chapter:** Daenerys encounters an unwelcome surprise. Party season kicks off in King's Landing. Caroline wishes she had more choices.
Chapter Summary

Daenerys loses her preciousnesss! Sansa and Caroline attend parties. Jaime is pleasantly surprised.

Chapter 106: Taken

Qarth

Without looking back, Daenerys left Spice's house. She assumed Klaus would follow her. He always did, in the end.

No one said anything on the way back to Daxos' mansion. It sufficed to say that even the least diplomatic of them (a certain bandit) knew that she didn't need them to tell her that this had been a colossal failure. It had been a naïve little girl who had gone in there to ask for ships, believing that the Qarthians would know well enough to give her what she wanted! Well, she would prove it to them. She would not forget. They would regret ever denying her.

The silence was jarring. It shouldn't be this quiet, not with half a dozen Dothraki always trying to decide what they should steal from their host (and Irri telling them that they shouldn't because Daenerys wouldn't like it). There should be the screeching of dragons demanding their food and laughter from the girls as they fed them.

The gates were slightly open. Daxos pushed them wide.

Bodies lay strewn over the courtyard. Spilled red wine mingled with spilled red blood so it wasn't clear where one ended and the other began. Fear seized Daenerys. Her heart lurched in her chest. "My dragons," she whispered. Not caring whether she stepped into the pools of blood, she dashed across the courtyard. It never even occurred to her that the attackers might still be here.

"Khaleesi!" shouted Jorah, yet it was Klaus who caught her.

"Let go of me!" she said.

"Wait," said Klaus. He went inside her quarters first. Daenerys could only hear her own heartbeat. Where were her dragons? Her children, her salvation, her only key to reclaiming her family's legacy; they were all she had left! "Your Grace!" Klaus finally called.

She dashed inside. Klaus held Irri in his arms, her head resting on his lap, with two fingers to her neck.

"Irri," whispered Daenerys. Her sweet Irri, her friend who had never abandoned her.

"She's gone," said Klaus.

"And my dragons?"

"Gone," said Klaus. Daenerys' knees felt weak. She fell back against the wall. Her dragons were
gone. Where could they have gone? They were only little. Whoever had taken them, they didn't want them; they wanted her. They were hostages.

"Khaleesi," said Jorah. He ran to catch her. His touch grounded her and made her mind focus. She needed to get her dragons back. Wherever they were, whoever had taken them, she had to get them back, and then they would pay.

Klaus began to sniff the air. "I recognize that scent," he said.

"Scent?" asked Jorah, voicing Daenerys' thoughts.

"Smell," Klaus elaborated.

"I know what a scent is," said Jorah. "But what do you mean, you recognize the scent?"

"It's a very unique scent," said Klaus. "I first came across it at the gathering of the Thirteen."

"Then you know who it is?" said Daenerys. Whatever Klaus was, whatever motives he had, she was glad that he was on her side for now.

"I may have some idea," said Klaus.

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King's Landing

She was a vision. He thought he was dreaming, that this could not be real. Silence fell over the gathered nobles and rabble – Jaime couldn't really tell the difference sometimes– as Sansa came in. No, glided in. She seemed taller than she had been before. Her skin was ice-pale against the white feathers of her dress. A high collar of long white plumes framed her face. Her arms were bare, decorated only by two simple silver bracelets, one on each wrist. The feathers trailed down to form a long train like the tail of a bird that was not yet in flight. In the firelight, she seemed to glow unnaturally from within. Next to her, all other women dulled and faded away.

He rose to his feet when she finally reached his side. What magic had they wrought to turn shy little Sansa Stark into this magnificent haughty creature? Was it just the dress, or something else? Was it possible that his mean little vampire actually had good intentions?

"My lady," he greeted her.

"My lord," she replied. He pulled out her chair for her and helped her into it. Such a skirt looked magnificent, but surely it would be difficult to move in. How she was going to sit, he still wasn't sure.

But she managed and arranged her skirts prettily about her as if she had practised before. Wait, of course she had.

She looked around, her eyes lingering a little too long on the front where the king and his bride-to-be sat. Joffrey had never stopped looking at Sansa since she had come in. "You look beautiful, my lady," Jaime said.

"You are not so bad yourself, my lord," she replied in that affected manner so characteristic of young maids who had hardly touched a man before.

"'Not so bad?'" asked Jaime. "Under most circumstances, I would be insulted."
"Fishing for compliments is not attractive, my lord," said Sansa. "You of all people should know that."

So the Little Dove had a bit of fire under that timid exterior after all. Jaime chuckled harder than he probably would have under most circumstances. In fact, under most other circumstances, he wouldn't have laughed at all.

She smiled and took a sip of her wine for liquid courage, most likely.

"I usually do not require compliments," said Jaime. "Lions do not care for the opinions of sheep. However, even a lion must make exceptions sometimes." Should he? Well, why not? He reached out to take her hand in his own. Her little hand, so soft and dainty, with perfectly manicured fingernails, with bones like a baby bird's. Little Dove indeed. She stiffened and almost made to pull away. In fact, she would have if he had not tightened his grip. She would have to get used to it. If they were to be married, then he would be touching a lot more of her than just her hand.

Gradually, she relaxed and consented to let him hold her hand and turned to gaze at him, examining him as if he were a new curious object. She was nervous, yet she forced herself to meet his gaze. There was no warmth in her eyes and her hand was cold, stiff, the bones and tendons unyielding beneath the silken soft skin. Perhaps he repulsed her simply by merit of being a Lannister. But she could not be so small-minded, could she? And he was Jaime Lannister. If he had been Tyrion, he would have understood her reticence. The music had begun playing. It was genteel, graceful, and utterly forgettable after the spectacular performances he had endured while in the Stark camp. He liked it.

"Would you care to dance, my lady?" asked Jaime. He was bored. He might as well try something new. Perhaps she might even surprise him.

"Dance?" echoed Sansa. He might as well have said "Fly". Actually, she'd like that. She would probably have liked nothing more than to fly away from King's Landing.

"Step and sway to the music," Jaime elaborated with a smirk. Just a small one. She would probably be scared by anything else.

"I…I would love to," she stammered. She looked as if she could like nothing less. He led her to the dance floor anyway. They were the first there, but they were soon joined by Stefan and the Lady… what was her name again? Anyway, it didn't matter. She was pretty though, and noble, so Stefan was doing quite well for himself. Then again, he'd had Katherine Stark before.

Sansa was stiff in his arms. He did most of the moving while she moved with him. But, evidently, she loved to dance, for she gradually loosened up and began to move with more grace than he had expected of a Stark. He led her through the steps, which seemed foreign to her, but she was a quick learner.

"You dance well, my lord," she ventured.

"Dancing is much like fighting," said Jaime.

"I suppose you're good at both."

"Of course I am. I'm good at everything."

"You're not very good at humility."

"Have you been gossiping behind my back?" he asked.
She blushed. Ah, so she had. With who, he wasn't sure, but he was putting his money on Caroline. And Rebekah. Her feathered skirts rustled as she moved and the train trailed along, tracing her movements on the dark stone floor. She was so innocent, like freshly fallen snow; so beautiful. Unfortunately, snow was bound to be trampled on and dirty. She would melt beneath the boots of men who hated to see anything pure. If she were to survive, she would have to become hard, like the ice on the Wall.

He bowed to her as the song finished and led her back to her seat. Her fingers trembled in his, as if she couldn't believe that she had danced with her future husband. At least she had the luxury of knowing what he looked like before she married him. And it couldn't possibly be a big sacrifice on her part, marrying someone like him. How many women would kill for the chance? Rebekah… well, she'd killed for him and she'd do it again, despite all her denials about caring.

"Thank you for the dance, my lord," said Sansa, reverting back to her old timid self. Jaime was disappointed. He had glimpsed a girl with potential under that surface of the Little Dove, but either Ned Stark had trained his daughter too well, or she was too used to wearing that mask.

More people had moved onto the dance floor. There was Daemon with his reluctant bride who was a terrible fighter and an even worse dancer. She seemed to think that putting her arms around her partner's neck and swaying was a dance. What in the world did they teach them at their 'schools'?

He cut off a slice of lemon cake and put it in his mouth, bored with this farce already. Hmm, he could see why his little betrothed liked them. He had a bit of a sweet tooth himself. Perhaps that was the one thing he and Sansa had in common. Would she like having a glass house for lemon trees? He would ask her after they were married and if she wanted, he would build one for her in King's Landing and one in Casterly Rock. No doubt his father wanted him to take up the mantle of lord, but Jaime wasn't ready to leave the excitement of the capital yet.

Laughter caught his attention. Stefan had swapped partners and was now dancing with Lady Aemelie, much to the amusement of everyone around them. If that display of acrobatics could be called a dance. The music had sped up and there was now a complex energetic tune playing that sounded nothing like anything Jaime had ever heard before, not even in the Stark camp where music was having its finest revolution under the rule of Queen Katherine. Sorry, Lady Stark.

The noise from the great hall followed them, yet it had faded away into a bearable murmur. Caroline could still hear the strains of music, but the sleepy hoots of owls were now louder than the wail of that gawdawful instrument that was something like a cross between bagpipes and a concertina and a strangled chicken. Her footfalls were soft on the leaf-littered path. Everything in the gardens looked different by night. It should look ominous, with all those shadows and everything cast in grey-scale by the dim light of the moon. Yet Caroline found it to be more peaceful than during the day for Joffrey was less likely to wander these stone paths in search of "amusement" during the night.

The air was cool and fresh with a touch of wood smoke coming from the palace's cleverly hidden chimneys. She took a deep breath and stared at the sky, the limitless sky, and wondered if Tyler would be looking at something on the other side of that dark canopy. She hadn't ever missed him so much as she did tonight ever since her arrival in Westeros. She wished he would simply come and take her away, far away; it didn't matter where so long as they were together. But here, her only escape from this marriage was either the evil Starks or the evil Klaus and neither sounded more appealing than actually getting married to Daemon.

"The servants said you'd left early," said a voice behind her. She jumped. Speak of the devil!
"You scared me half to death!" said Caroline.

"Forgive me," said Daemon. "I didn't mean to."

"Don't do that again. It could have dire consequences!"

"I hardly think there can be anything direr than you yelling at me," he smirked. He had no idea. Lord Jaime had not been very generous with The Secret and only he and Lord Tyrion knew. Not even Lord Tywin had been informed. It was probably best to keep it that way.

"It is not fitting that a bride should leave her own betrothal feast early," Daemon continued. He fell into step beside her. He plucked one of the last summer flowers from a bush and offered it to her. She took it before she registered what she was doing. Was this almost like...a date? To hide her awkwardness, she sniffed the flower. It had a delicate scent that she wasn't familiar with. The waxy white petals were stiff and smooth. Daemon took the flower from her hand and gently placed it in her hair, adjusting it until he liked what he saw.

"I'm sure everyone is looking at Sansa Stark," said Caroline. "She looked beautiful."

"And she left right after you did," said Daemon. "While my dear cousin also seems to have left. So I suppose none of the guests of honour have remained."

"Oh dear, I hope no one is insulted by that," she said. By "no one", she really meant she hoped that Lord Tywin was not offended by their lack of decorum.

"There is certainly talk about what the brides and grooms are doing," said Daemon. "Mostly salacious talk. It's not a bad thing. Mind you, I happen to know that Sansa Stark left alone. Jaime was dancing with Cersei. The two of them thought they were being discreet."

Was that what it was going to be like? Jaime sneaking around behind Sansa's back with Rebekah and Cersei and whoever else he wanted, Daemon poring over his mysterious music (that was so obviously sent by Katherine) and falling in love with a woman he had never met before, while Caroline pined over a boy she probably would never see again? What a sad lot they made.

"When we're...we're..." she began.

"Married, yes, Caroline, you are allowed to say it," said Daemon.

She didn't want to say it.

"Will I have to move in with you?"

"It would be expected of you to share my bed, yet it is not uncommon for husbands and wives to keep separate chambers. A lady needs her own space. Besides, you have far too many things and I don't want you cluttering up my quarters."

"You want to keep your bachelor pad, huh?"

"You could say that, although I own far more than just a pad. I am not an animal, Caroline."

"A bachelor pad is...never mind."

Daemon caught her hand. It was the first time he had touched her so intimately. She almost pulled away, but something in her made her let him. They were going to be married. If they couldn't even hold hands, how were they going to live together? His fingers were long and strong and his palms
were calloused, not from playing sports, but from holding a sword. "I know this isn't what you wanted," said Daemon. "You're a romantic soul. You love another. I understand that. But I do hope that you will be happy with me."

Caroline did not sleep the whole night. Or the night after that. Or the next one. Nor the next one. She knew she was being stupid. There were families tonight mourning the losses of fathers, husbands and sons. Her worries were First World problems compared to theirs. But she still couldn't rest. Damn that Robb Stark! Although, it wasn't his fault she had to get married against her will. She couldn't blame this on him. Instead, she wrote a letter to Tyler, which he would probably never get.

Dear Tyler, she began, and then tapped her quill against the thin parchment. What could she say?

*I'm getting married in twelve hours. I don't want to, but I have to. His name is Daemon Lannister and he's my friend.*

She screwed up the letter and threw it into the hearth. It bounced off the edge of the fireplace and added to the maze of screwed up parchment balls that surrounded it. She sighed, got up, picked them up and put them in the fire to watch them burn before returning to her little writing desk. Everything else in her room had been packed up. She was going to be moving into the rooms next to Daemon's.

Dear Tyler,

*Tomorrow is my wedding day. I feel like I would like anything else more. I never thought that this was how it was going to be. I always thought it would be you, even with all the craziness going on in our lives. But that was nothing compared to this. If you could see me now, you would laugh. I'm Lady Caroline Forbes, soon to be Lady Caroline Lannister and I don't even have a say in the matter.*

My new husband's name is Daemon. Daemon Lannister, of course. I like him well enough, but I wish he was you.

Here, she paused. How would she explain to Tyler how she had gotten up to this point? He wouldn't understand. Their experiences had diverged too wildly. He wouldn't understand why she hadn't just said no; why she was so devoted to Lord Tywin who, on all accounts, had used her 'most ill', if one were to put this in old-fashioned terms. Their paths had branched out and now they were so far from each other that she wondered if she was the same Caroline who had left.

She abandoned the letter and consigned it to the fire like all the others. Tyler would never know. He could go on living his own life and she would live her new one.

The first stains of dawn appeared in the sky. She ran a brush through her hair and put on her wedding gown. It was merely a new gown that had not been worn yet, covered with intricate blue beading on her skirt and bodice. It was the same dress that she would wear to attend Jaime's wedding later that day in the evening.

There came a knock on the door as she was carefully putting a comb into her hair. "Are you ready?" asked Stefan on the other side.

"You can come in," said Caroline. He opened the door, looking very handsome in his Lannister livery, which was all he wore these days. She took a deep breath and turned around. "How do I look?"
"Beautiful," said Stefan. They fell into an uncomfortable silence. Neither of them knew what to say to the other.

"I don't want to get married," Caroline blurted out.

"I know," said Stefan.

"I just want to go home and forget this ever happened. Why didn't I run when I had the chance? I could have gone anywhere. I could have gone into hiding." She was babbling and she knew it. Tears spilled over onto her cheeks, smudging the kohl around her eyes. "I could have gone across the Narrow Sea and found Klaus."

"How did you know? It was classified," said Stefan.

"I know how to read Lord Tywin's letters upside down as well as you do."

"Firstly, that's treason and, secondly, do you really want Klaus?"

She imagined Klaus calling her 'love' and 'sweetheart' in that annoyingly sexy way of his that always made her want to bang his head against the wall or just bang him – she wasn't sure which – and then conceded that Daemon was by far the safest option, if not the most desirable one.

Stefan wiped her tears away with his thumbs. "You're strong, Caroline. You'll get through this. I promise."

"It feels like the end of the world."

"The world's still fine, if a little volatile and cold," said Stefan. He offered her his arm.

"Rebekah won't be there, will she?"

"She's still in exile."

"She's the lucky one," said Caroline. "Nobody is making her get married."

"That is because she is not important enough to get married to anyone."

"Why am I important?"

"Some people are born great. Others have greatness thrust upon them." The older vampire was solemn. "I think, Caroline, that you are both."

"Oh, come on. You're just trying to make me feel better."

"Is it working?"

Well, it was flattering. "A little," she said. She put her arms around him and hugged him, taking comfort from his touch. "Come on. It's time to face the music. Is there going to be music?"

The streets were still dark. The lights from the brothels were distant. It was eerie to see King's Landing without the noise and bustle of the day. The air had not yet been tainted by the smell of a busy city. The sound of her carriage's rattling wheels echoed in the night. The small procession passed by a few people who had gotten up extra early to get a headstart on the day. The whole city was sleeping in anticipation of the grand wedding in the evening where there would be celebrations everywhere.
She breathed in the scent of wood smoke; her last breaths of free air before she was chained to a marriage she did not want. It sucked to be a woman in the old days. It sucked to be a woman in Westeros unless your name was Katherine Pierce-Stark. What had happened to Elena, she wondered.

A few lamps burned at the sept. The door was opened a crack to admit them, as if this was some clandestine secret wedding. Yes, a clandestine secret wedding attended by Lord Tywin Lannister. At least he was there, not that his presence was at all encouraging. Caroline gripped Stefan's arm tightly as he led her up to the altar where Daemon was waiting. It was always going to be Stefan and Daemon-Damon. She almost giggled to herself. No, it wasn't that funny. Yes, she was terrified to the point of becoming hysterical.

The bridegroom had to be commended for looking good even at such an early hour. He had trimmed his hair and combed it neatly. His red tunic – for he had chosen not to wear armour– fit him perfectly. He smiled encouragingly at Caroline, as if to remind her that things were going to be fine, and that at least they were still friends, right?

Yes, friends who were going to be forced to have sex with each other. Oh God!

She must have shown her panic on her face, for Lord Tywin frowned. As in more than usual. Why was he here? He wasn't helping.

Caroline released Stefan's hand and went up to take Daemon's. She was trembling like a vampire who was on the verge of dessicating, although her heart rate was going at one hundred miles an hour. Daemon squeezed her hand briefly. Then he took the wedding cloak of beautiful royal blue velvet, edged in gold, and threw it about her shoulders. Blue? She had thought it would be red and gold!

"It matches your dress," he whispered as he did up the clasp in the front. It was a golden lion with sapphire eyes.

"How did you know what colour my dress was going to be?" she asked.

"I took the liberty of asking your maid. She was most happy to help. You are well-loved within your household, Lady Caroline."

The sleepy septon – they had not woken the new High Septon for this because he had to be fully alert when it came to tonight's wedding – indicated that they should proceed with the ceremony. He read out a passage about the sanctity of marriage and the importance of union between two people and how children were a blessing, stumbling over words as he did so. It wasn't a sermon that he had written himself.

At last, he said, "Now, look upon each other and say the words."

Poor Caroline. Why, of all people, did it have to be her? Yet, there was some relief in knowing that Lord Tywin was "fond" of her. It gave her some measure of security. Although, would it not have been better to be not noticed? Yes, as if that could possibly have happened. Still, at least it was Daemon and not anybody else. Stefan knew Daemon. He might be in love with Katherine (without ever having spoken a single word to her, typical Katherine), but he liked Caroline and he would treat her well. Even well into the Age of Enlightenment, many women would have been lucky to make a match like this.

Of course, for a modern girl like Caroline, this was just atrocious. Stefan stood to the side and only
half listened to the sermon that the septon was reading out. His focus was on the bride, the bridegroom and, of course, the man who was responsible for them being here. Tywin Lannister never betrayed anything on his face, but even he could not control his heartrate. It was through that that Stefan estimated what he was thinking most of the time. It was still a new and inexact science. So far as he could tell, the Hand of the King was bored and he expected everything to go according to plan.

"Now, look upon one another and say the words," said the nerve-wracked and sleep-deprived septon.

Daemon took both of Caroline's hands. She was visibly swallowing with nervousness. Marriage had such different connotations for modern people than it did for people here in Westeros, for which a marriage was an alliance between two families instead of a pledge of love.

"Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger…" began Daemon.

"I, Caroline Forbes, do take you, Daemon Lannister…" began Caroline.

She froze. As did the septon. Lord Tywin's heartrate remained unchanged, even though his frown deepened.

"I'm so sorry!" said Caroline. "I…" Obviously, no one had taken the time to teach her the vows.

"What are you sorry for?" asked Daemon gently.

"I…" said Caroline.

Daemon continued on with his vows and Caroline mumbled inaudibly along with him, until the end, when she added her own flourish. "Till death do us part," she said softly.

"Am I supposed to be worried?" asked Daemon.

"What? No! I don't mean to kill you!"

"Frankly, the fact you understood what I meant is worrying in itself. Shall we kiss, my lady, and seal this union, till death do us part?"

Next chapter: It's Sansa's turn…
The Girl On Fire

Chapter Summary

Sansa gets married and Jaime realizes he has fallen into a trap.

King's Landing

Weddings were grand affairs. The guests talked incessantly about the wedding, both before and afterwards. They speculated on what the bride would wear – funnily enough, no one ever talked about the groom in such terms – and what the families thought of the match. Sansa sat very still in front of her mirror and let Rebekah work her magic. She didn't recognize herself, but she had been assured that that was the whole point. "Is it not dangerous for you to come here all the time, especially today of all days when there are so many people?" she asked.

"Don't worry, nobody saw me," said Rebekah.

"I'm not saying that anyone did, but what if someone does?"

"Trust me, they're so busy with their own business that they won't bother with yet another maidservant just running about trying to do her work," said Rebekah with a wink as she ran the brush over Sansa's eyelids, dusting gold powder beneath her eyebrows and to her temples. (Again, it was not real gold but the crushed wings of some exotic Essosian beetles.) "Perfect," the older girl declared. The red and gold glared so brightly that it hurt her eyes to look at herself. Her white betrothal gown had been given a new appearance, just as she had. Instead of snowy white, it was now bright red, fading into gold towards the hem. Where they had found such a vibrant shade, she wasn't sure. She supposed Jaime could afford the most expensive of dyes. He was, after all, a Lannister. On her head was a delicate crown of golden intertwined leaves called 'laurels'.

Her throat was bare and the only jewellery she wore were a pair of delicate ruby earrings that winked like red eyes. She wore red silk gloves that reached her elbows and she thought there was nothing prettier than silk gloves.

"I look like I'm on fire," said Sansa.

"That's the idea," said Rebekah. "It's so much better than just boring old gold patterns on red silk, don't you think?"

She had to admit, she did look magnificent and nothing like the pathetic "Little Dove" that she was.

"What am I supposed to be?" she asked. "And don't say the bride, Rebekah. I can hardly forget that."

"Well, I was thinking of a mythical creature," said Rebekah. She put the stoppers back in the jars of expensive cosmetics that had been purchased specifically for today. "A phoenix."

"I've never heard of it," said Sansa.

"A phoenix is a bird that, when it dies, is reborn from the ashes, more beautiful and stronger than ever," said Rebekah. "Today, Sansa Stark is gone, and Sansa Lannister is born. I thought it fitting."
She smiled at the results of her work.

Was it? Sansa didn't know. Inside, she still felt as she had always felt; afraid, wary, homesick. Yet she didn't want to be that way. She wanted to be Rebekah's phoenix, burning and beautiful. On fire. She took a deep breath and turned away from the mirror. It was time to face her fate – no, her destiny. She was marrying into her enemy's house. She didn't know how, but when she did figure it out, there would be no one in a better position to undermine the Lannisters than her. She would show the world that she was better; well, at least better than Damon, whose attempt had been a disaster and who had achieved nothing. Twice.

"Good luck, my lady," said Rebekah as she looked at the results of her work.

"I wish you could be there," Sansa blurted out.

"Me too," said Rebekah. "But don't worry. If you need anything, go ask Stefan." She threw on her cloak and slipped out the door. When Sansa stepped outside to enter her carriage, she could see no sign of the older girl. It was as if she had never been there at all. Nobody else seemed to have seen her.

It was a struggle to get her dress inside the carriage, what with its feathers and the large frame giving the dress its shape. She managed, somehow. Curtains shielded her from the world. She heard cheering and a fanfare of trumpets announcing her journey from girlhood to wifehood. Would such a fanfare accompany her from life to death? She felt as if some part of her was dying and, from the ashes of the old Sansa, something new was being reborn.

She alighted at the foot of the steps, the carriage being unable to go further.

People stared at her as she passed them on her way to the Sept. Her bridegroom would already be there, waiting at the altar for her, as was the custom. Her breath hitched in her throat as she neared the sept's steps. Her father had died right here. They had spent days cleaning his blood off the white stones. Was he watching her? What would he think of this marriage to Jaime Lannister, of all people? Yet, he would probably be gladdened that it was not Joffrey instead.

Said inbred Lannister was waiting for her just inside to "give her away" to his father-uncle. For a moment, he looked confused when he saw her, as if he couldn't recognize her. Behind him, Margaery Tyrell raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow and smiled encouragingly and almost with admiration. Sansa silently thanked the gods for Rebekah. At least nobody seemed to be able to tell how terrified she was behind the mask of powders and feathers that she wore.

"Lady Sansa," said Joffrey, hiding behind a mask of affability that had slipped very out of place, but no one cared to remind him of it. He offered her his arm. "You look ravishing today. My uncle is a lucky man." Why was he so smug and happy? He had just lost his entire army to Robb. Would he want to take his anger out on her because he couldn't get to Robb? And he probably would never get to Robb; not with Katherine there. That made her feel a little happier but then she soured again. She didn't have a Katherine to protect her. All she had was that big, stupid, vain, blond…

"Thank you, Your Grace," she said as she placed her hand on his sleeve, hating the feel of the cool silk and the arm beneath. He repulsed her like no other and she could not believe she had ever thought him handsome before! A sudden thought struck her. What if Jaime was no different? He did, after all, create Joffrey. She was the luckiest girl in all of Westeros.

I am a phoenix, she told herself. She was burning and beautiful and strong and not afraid.

"Although, perhaps I would be lucky too," Joffrey continued, oblivious to what she was thinking.
"Tradition decrees a king has first rights. I like tradition. Don't you?" She stiffened. Jaime wouldn't let that happen, would he? He was to be her husband! He couldn't let Joffrey take what was his! He was too proud a man, wasn't he? And vain. And he didn't like Joffrey or else he wouldn't have stolen Joffrey's moment and his sword. And Joffrey had tried to have him arrested too.

Her dress rustled as she moved. The shoes pinched her toes and the heels reminded her to hold her back as straight as a spear as she walked. There was no sound as she came into the sept. Her footfalls echoed in the vast emptiness as all of King's Landing marvelled at her and speculated about what would happen behind the closed door of her new marriage.

Spots of rainbow light fell onto the floor through the stained glass windows depicting the gods and scenes from Baelor's life. The saintly king looked sad and ghost-like, with his gaunt cheeks and skeletal hands raised to the sky in supplication. There were depictions of the seven gods of her mother, all looking down from the domed roof, their eyes unnaturally wide and their faces long.

Jaime was a resplendent golden lion in his red and gold armour. Both his pauldrons had been moulded to look like snarling lion heads. He held out a hand to her as she neared the altar, a smirk on his face as if saying to the gathered nobles, "Look at this magnificent creature. She is mine." Well, she'd rather he be possessive towards her than so indifferent that he would let Joffrey do what he wanted.

Sansa took his hand. Hers were sweaty and clammy and she was glad that he couldn't feel that through her gloves. Rebekah had thought of everything, hadn't she? All gazes were upon them. Weddings were things to be marvelled at, and the wedding of Jaime Lannister, formerly Kingsguard, Kingslayer, rumoured twincest (Rebekah's word) perpetrator was not just a marvel, but a miracle.

"You are quite lovely today, my lady," Jaime whispered while the septon was sermonizing about the blessed state of marriage.

"Only quite?" she said.

"Fishing for compliments is not becoming," said Jaime. "A wise young lady once said that, I believe."

Lord Tywin must have seen that they were not paying attention and that Jaime did not seem to be taking this seriously, for he frowned.

"What if…I forget my vows?" asked Sansa. She would rather risk Lord Tywin's displeasure than simply stand there in silence and risk breaking down into tears. She needed to distract herself with something a little more trivial.

"I think that highly unlikely," said Jaime. "And if you do, just mumble along. No one would care."

"I suppose that would suffice. You would never keep to them, after all. A man might own a woman and still be free to choose, yet a woman would neither own a man nor have the freedom of choice."

"I would not say that. Katherine owns your brother."

"I…don't suppose you'd want to take that for an example of an exemplary marriage?"

Jaime laughed, earning himself a piercing look from his father which he ignored. "It depends on how you look at it, but I am not Robb Stark and you, I think, are not Katherine."

If only she were. Then she would never be afraid of anything; she would be strong and clever and
know *exactly* what to do.

If the septon had heard them talking to each other during his sermon, he pretended he hadn't. Jaime took the cloak, a beautiful creation that looked nothing like the Lannister banner. It was completely golden, like a sheet of sunlight. The inside of the cloak, however, was crimson. On the collar were red and gold patterns with lions frolicking with wolves. Fantastical dreaming on his part?

"In the sight of the Seven," the High Septon said, "I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one, for eternity." He took a delicate length of gold silk and bound their hands together. "Look upon one another and say the words."

His little bride looked so nervous. She thought she was hiding it well, but she was too young and too unpractised. With her, he would have the north once Robb Stark was gone. It was *so* much better than--

"Wait," he said. Everyone stilled as if they had been frozen by a sudden onset of winter. He didn't care that he had said it out loud. His father had tricked him into this. Tywin had never intended for him to marry Caroline Forbes! He had given him the illusion of choice so that he would be glad to do exactly what his father wanted! He'd fallen into that trap like a fly into a pot of honey! But, it was too late now. He couldn't say, "Well, played, Father, but, all the same, I don't think I will play by your rules," and slowly applaud him. At least, not in front of everyone.

"I forgot something," he said instead. He took a ring from his hand. They'd dressed him up to a ridiculous degree for today. He placed it on the fourth finger of Sansa's hand. "With this ring, I pledge my devotion to you. May the circle be a symbol for our neverending love."

He heard audible sighs from the courtiers, generally the ladies. And maybe Loras because he was practically a lady.

He turned to the High Septon and told him to continue as if nothing was wrong but the good cheer and amusement at the proceedings he had shown earlier was gone. One part of his mind, the rational part, was saying that it was not Sansa's fault, that she had been used even more than he had, but why did he care about that? She was the symbol of his father's control over his life. Well, his father would not control his life.

They intoned the words together as so many before them had done. Neither of them meant it. The last thing Sansa Stark probably wanted was to be Jaime's and Jaime had no desire to be hers.

"You may seal this union with a kiss," declared the High Septon once they were finished. Sansa's eyes widened for a brief moment. But then she leaned forward, trembling a little, and turned her face towards him. Her lips were cool—and sticky with whatever substance Rebekah had put on them to make them *that* shade of shimmering red. He brushed them lightly with his, aware that this was probably her first, unless she'd practised kissing before in Winterfell—unlikely— or had kissed Joffrey before. He supposed he could have grabbed her there and then to show her how kissing was done properly between a man and a woman, but he did not want any lip paint on his face. It wouldn't be a good look.

The two of them turned around to face the crowd that had witnessed their union, hand in hand. His father clapped politely in the front row while Cersei glowered at Sansa and never took her eyes off the pale-faced bride who looked as if she were on fire. Sansa, to her credit, managed to hold Cersei's glare for a while before looking elsewhere to more friendly faces, like Stefan Salvatore's.

"Congratulations, Cousin," said Daemon. "You and Lady Sansa make a good match."
"As do you and Lady Caroline," said Jaime with a genial smile that was supposed to make men quake in their boots. Perhaps he should smirk less. People would be more afraid when he smiled, then. But smirking was his natural state of being. Although, right now, he didn't feel like it. They had, all four of them, been played by his father. It was all right for Tywin to play anybody else except Jaime. Nobody outplayed Jaime Lannister, not even Tywin.

All throughout, Joffrey had not stopped staring at the girl who had once been his intended. Jaime felt Sansa's grip on his arm tighten when Joffrey came to congratulate them, wearing a smirk that was completely unlike his own. "Uncle, I must say, that armour makes you look younger," said Joffrey. "That was an interesting twist to the ceremony, with the ring. Although I do hope you are not too attached to my new aunt. That wouldn't suit you at all."

"I will remember that, Your Grace," said Jaime. "That may be somewhat of a difficulty, for the Lady Sansa has many admirable virtues." A claim to Winterfell and the north being her biggest virtue.

"Yes, she is a little too virtuous for you, dear Uncle," said Joffrey. "Although perhaps I could help you on that regard. Our family does have such admiration for tradition."

Well, well, the little cub was flexing his claws. It wouldn't be a huge sacrifice on Jaime's part to indulge him a little. He was rather more curious to see how his little bride would react, however.

Goldcloaks kept the crowds at bay as the wedding procession passed through the streets on the way back to the Red Keep. The destruction wrought by Stannis and his men were still very visible. The Dragon Gate had been replaced, of course, and no one had figured out how the old gate could possibly have been found several yards outside the city. However, while rubble had been hastily cleared off the street so as to not obstruct anything important –like this – it still lay in piles by street corners. The charred skeletons of houses watched over them, as did starving people with large watery dead eyes that seemed to glow in the light of the lamps.

Jaime rode beside Sansa's carriage. Occasionally, his bride peeked out from behind the curtain that hid her from the gaze of the general public. What was she thinking? All that paint, it hid her true face. He supposed that was the purpose of it. All people wore masks. Some people just didn't need to paint theirs on.

The Red Keep had been lit brilliantly with lanterns and lights hanging everywhere, dripping from trees like fruit. Had they thought of how easy it would be for the entire garden to catch fire? Now that would make for a memorable wedding. Now, Jaime liked a feast as much as anybody but, for today, he had had enough of this farcical process. The great hall had even more lights than the gardens outside. The brides and grooms were seated to the right of the king, with Jaime aptly placed beside the Hand of the King. Tyrion had been moved somewhere further down the table.

"I don't suppose you would like to dance, my lord?" said Sansa. She had only picked at her food. Whoever had planned the meal had had a twisted sense of humour, for there were roasted doves. Well, pigeons. With their feathers gone and their skin so browned, it was hard to tell the difference.

"There is no one on the dance floor," said Jaime, rather more curtly than he had intended. Perhaps he was more annoyed than he would have liked to admit.

Sansa twisted the ring he had given her which she was wearing outside her red silk glove. "Should it not be the bridal couple that starts the first dance?"

"You have many questions today," said Jaime.
It is my wedding day. One can hardly blame a girl for wanting it to be close to perfect." Implying that it wasn't even close. The first change that she would make if she could have had a choice? The groom, perhaps. He would have gladly obliged, although he would keep her dowry.

"You forget that it is also my wedding day and I feel no desire to dance," said Jaime. He wouldn't mind, actually, but just not with the woman that his father would want him to dance with. "Since you have asked so many questions--"

"You have not answered any of them," she pointed out. He ignored her.

"I have one for you," he said. "Our beloved king is fond of tradition and, according to traditions of a bygone era, a king has the first rights to a new bride. What would you say to that?"

"If you wanted me to do it, I would, my lord, but I never took you for one who liked sharing."

"Well, hello, Rebekah. I hadn't realized that you had switched bodies with Lady Sansa tonight," said Jaime. Perhaps this marriage wouldn't be so bad. It might not have been off to the most auspicious start, but now his fiery little dove – wait, would that not be roasted dove? – was showing her potential again.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?" she said, confused. All right, now he could almost be certain that Rebekah had not found a witch and performed that body-switching spell her brother was so fond of.

"Nothing," he said. She was a blank slate. Now, Jaime had always disliked slates when it came to practising his letters. The chalk always made an awful sound on it and there was so much resistance against his chalk that he eventually just got frustrated and broke both slate and chalk. However, he had liked drawing pictures on his slate when the maester had not been looking. He was looking forward to working on this new slate. "Now that I think about it, however, my feet are restless. Shall we dance?"

She took his hand. There were small tremors running through hers but, eventually, she calmed enough to stop shaking. He would have dearly loved to know what was going on inside her head. Wait… was that a sign that he cared? No, he just wanted to know his enemy. Katherine – well, Sansa was close enough to Katherine, right? They were both female and Starks. No doubt he would discover other similarities between them later on.

The musicians were playing something bland and slow with very little rhythm. "It is a wedding, not a funeral," said Jaime to the head musician. The man paled and nodded before indicating to his fellow musicians. Within moments, they were playing a lively little tune for a dance that required couples to swap partners several times over.

"There you are," said Margaery. Sansa looked up from dessert – some sort of milk pudding with stewed fruit, which she would have loved in ordinary times but was now too tired and too nervous to enjoy. After dancing with Jaime, she had pleaded sore ankles and retired to her seat to wait for an appropriate moment to beat a hasty retreat. So far, that moment had not come yet and now Margaery was here. She gave the older girl a little smile. It wasn't that she didn't want Margaery – in fact, she was very glad that she was here to be a friendly face amongst the crowd of strangers. Jaime had remained on the dance floor after being solicited for dances by several ladies. "I've been trying to find time to talk to you tonight but you always seemed so occupied."

"It is my wedding, after all," said Sansa. "Everyone wants a piece of the bride."

"You are quite the most beautiful bride I have ever seen," said Margaery. "That dress! You must
Margaery spoke of little matters like who danced with who and who tripped, and how people were speculating about Sansa and Jaime's wedding night. "Those vulgar Kingsguard were taking bets to see whether you would still be a virgin," said Margaery. "But men are vulgar creatures, all of them, even if they pretend not to be. Still, you are lucky. Lord Jaime is very good to look at." She watched Jaime as he floated by with Caroline in his arms, laughing at her inability to dance. Jaime might be good to look at but he could be very cruel and mean-spirited sometimes.

Sansa feigned a yawn, wanting nothing more than to escape away to the quiet of her room for a few hours before she had to perform her duty to her new husband. "Forgive me, my lady, but I am afraid I am not good company tonight for I have been up since dawn," she said.

"It is your night, Lady Sansa. You don't have to be a good anything," said Margaery. "Well, at least, not for me." She winked. Sansa flushed red to match her dress and her hair. Yes, she knew what was going to happen and, yes, she was going to do it. She could not imagine anyone enjoying it, however. Not only did it sound painful, but it was also disgusting.

With some difficulty, she got her feet. Her knees were not very steady and the world seemed to swim. She reached out wildly to find balance or just something to hold onto. Knowing her luck, she would fall, face first, into her uneaten slice of wedding cake – lemon, of course.

"Steady!" said Margaery. The older girl was very nimble and she leapt to her feet immediately to help Sansa. Shae was by her side in an instant.

"Thank you," said Sansa, truly grateful that someone cared. Because her husband obviously did not. And she wasn't sure about her brother and mother either, who seemed to have forgotten her altogether and was bent on conquering the world or simply playing tricks on it and making Tywin Lannister tear out what little hair he had left as he tried to think of what they were doing next.

"Don't mention it, Lady Sansa," said Margaery. "I would have liked to think that should I be at risk of falling into the cake at my wedding feast, someone would catch me too. Friends and family look after each other, do they not?"

"Oh, yes," said Sansa. "I would like very much to be friends." She didn't think there would be any true friendship in the sense that Damon was friends with Robb or that Elena had been her friend, but friends were something that she needed very much and had far too few of.

Next chapter: Sansa and Jaime get to know one another.
Winter of Frozen Dreams

Chapter Summary

Sansa embarks on married life with Jaime and discovers a few surprises. Theon wakes up in the middle of a nightmare.

King's Landing

Cersei approached Jaime, a goblet of wine in one hand and a smirk upon her lovely lips. Her red dress was cut in a way that revealed tantalizing glimpses of her milky shoulders, untouched by the sun. "Congratulations, brother," she said. "Your bride looks resplendent."

Jaime said nothing but gazed at her. He wanted to take her right there and then, propriety be damned. Part of it was the wine talking, he realized, for he had drunken many toasts in his honour and to his felicity (liars, the lot of them). The firelight made her hair look as if it had been spun from gold. Her maids had washed it and combed it and coiled it in such a way that it just made him want to loosen those braids and run his fingers through the freed tresses in a way that she had never allowed him to do before. He realized how much he liked women's hair. Instead of doing that, however (because they were in public and everyone was watching, although they were pretending not to), he removed her half-full goblet from her hand and put it on one of the long wooden tables laden with half-finished plates of food and bowls of picked over fruit.

"Will you honour your brother with a dance, Your Grace?" he murmured as he bowed over her hand.

"A dance?" said Cersei. Her smirk faded just a bit. "Have you forgotten that we're in public?"

"It's just a dance, Cersei," he said. "There is nothing more natural than a sister dancing with her brother on his wedding day to wish him joy. If we avoid such natural associations, people will begin to wonder if all the lies and slander that they ever heard about us was true."

She acquiesced a little too reluctantly for his liking. Her hand was cool. He closed his fingers around hers and led her onto the dance floor. Sansa's gaze burned into his back. Everyone was watching him and Cersei, from his father to the lowliest servant. And why wouldn't they? They were the two best-looking people in the room. Yes, even better looking than Stefan Salvatore and Daemon, although the girls all seemed to be clawing at and climbing over each other to dance with them.

The song was slow, almost sensual. It had some interesting cadences in it of notes that were jarringly close together. Jaime found his rhythm easily. Just because he did not dance often did not mean he wasn't good at it. He simply hadn't ever needed to show anyone.

"Sansa Stark has good hips," Cersei remarked. "She'll give you healthy heirs, although hopefully without that abhorrent shade of hair."

"Must we talk about such things during the dance?" asked Jaime.

"What do you want to talk about, then?" she asked in surprise. He had never objected to her topics
of conversation before and usually just listened to her in everything. Or so she thought.

"I would imagine that one needs not talk during a dance at all," said Jaime. They danced for a little while in silence. "However, I suspect that not talking during dancing is overrated because now I am growing bored."

"Tell me, then, what do you want to talk about," said Cersei. "Swords? Horses? Chariots?"

"Nothing of the sort," said Jaime. "What would you do if you could live forever?"

"You are about to sire children. You are not a child yourself, and you haven't been for a long time. No one lives forever, Jaime. That's impossible and it's ridiculous to even think about it. We all grow old and die like leaves on a branch and, when we fall, we will be crushed beneath heavy feet and covered by others who come after us." Her voice bore a hard edge and her lips grew thin. "The only thing that will be left is our legacy."

"Hello, Father, I did not realize how fetching you could look in a dress."

"It is true whether you like it or not, Jaime," said Cersei. "And you know it. Is that not why you are asking about such a ridiculous supposition as living forever?" Her eyes burned as if she longed for him to tell her that everything they had ever been taught about life was a lie, that there was more than just a legacy, that his wild question had some truth behind it.

"Let's just pretend," he said. He leaned close to her ear. "I feel like pretending tonight. Like pretending that you are simply my sister and queen and nothing more."

"If I could live forever..." breathed Cersei. "The world would be ours. They'd all have to bow down to me some day. I would be the queen who never needed a king to put her there. I'd make it better. We'd make it better."

He listened to her speak of her ambitions, knowing that she only saw him as someone who would accompany her in her victories rather than the man who would play a part in them.

"But what does it matter?" she said, stopping herself in midsentence. "It's never going to happen."

"No," Jaime agreed. "But it's nice to dream."

"That's your problem, Jaime. You dream too much."

It was an unfair assessment because it wasn't just dreaming that he did; it was all the thinking that she and his father always accused him of not doing. He decided not to tell Cersei about the immortality that was out of her grasp, for now. It would drive her mad with desire and jealousy and he didn't need her to spook and insult any vampires. For a moment, he had wavered.

The song ended and he saw Sansa get up from her seat in a rustle of red and gold feathers.

"Look, your little bride is leaving," said Cersei. Her lip curled just a little in a sneer at the sight of the Stark girl in her plumage, putting him in mind of Katherine's golden eagle. Had Rebekah thought of that when she'd had this dress made for Sansa? "Do try not to break her delicate little bones tonight. All the king's horses and all the king's men might not be able to put her back together again."

Cersei was preparing for a burst of temper. He could see it in her, as taut as a bowstring drawn back to the very fullest. She'd hated every moment of the day; hated the fact that some other woman now had claim on him. Didn't she know that he'd always loved her first and loved her better?
Maybe he should perform one of those grand romantic gestures that she so disapproved of. No snow-white Stark and no immortal could change how much he loved her. He almost laughed out loud but stopped himself in time. She would hate him so much if he laughed and then there would be no controlling her or knowing what she might do to poor Sansa. He might not have very many feelings, but it was his duty to take care of the little girl. He was already planning on breaking his promise to her mother; he shouldn't leave her to the mercy of his sister's vengeance. Still, it amused him to think that he, Jaime Lannister, who had been Kingsguard, would now be the centre of attention of three beautiful women.

"She'll be fine," Jaime remarked. He twirled his sister around again. Her silken skirts swished and brushed against his calves. A whiff of perfume caught his imagination. It smelled of primroses and lavender on a summer evening, combined with something that was uniquely womanly and Lannister. It was a smell that he knew as well as his own. The music started up again. It was a very fast and very intimate dance, learned from, of all places, the court of Robb Stark. Had the musicians thought this through? Still, he followed the steps, taking the excuse to pull Cersei close to him. "Did anyone ever tell you how rude it is to outshine the bride at her own wedding?"

"You jest," said Cersei, but she was pleased by that. Her body was warm against his and her waist still slender and small even after three children. Had there ever been such an elegant woman in all the world? Well, his mother, he supposed, and perhaps Rebekah, with her hunter's allure. But she and Cersei were as different as night and day. The music whirled him by Stefan, who was dancing with Caroline.

"Keep an eye on Sansa for me," he whispered to the vampires as they passed. His words were too soft to be caught by human ears but, by the slight incline of Stefan's head, he knew the vampire had heard. And he would look after Sansa. Violence did not come naturally to Stefan Salvatore. There was some strange honour in him that compelled him to do things that didn't always make sense.

The music conjured up images of hot places where women were sensuous and the flowers were heavy with scent. He'd only ever heard of places like this, mostly in Dorne, but he'd always had a vivid imagination, much to his maesters' consternation, and had spent much of his schooling in far-off exciting places inside his head. He longed to forget about his pure little northern bride tonight and just take Cersei away to one of these localities where they could be alone in all the world, like the first man and woman. She would never agree to such an idea and Dorne didn't like Lannisters anyway, but one could dream a little. It was his wedding night, after all.

The dance ended. Cersei's bosom heaved with exertion and exercise had brought colour into her usually stone-pale cheeks, making her look like a young girl again. He let go of her hands without a word and bowed. Duty called him away. His father and all the world were watching. He turned and left the great hall. "Stefan," he said. "Where is Lady Sansa?"

The vampire caught up with him as naturally as if he'd always meant to do that after the dance. "She has just taken a turn about the gardens and my people tell me that she is returning to your chambers as we speak."

Jaime clapped Stefan on the shoulder. "It should be you," he said. "She deserves you."

"I don't think anyone would be pleased with that, my lord," said Stefan with a bow. "Good luck."

"You speak as if I might need it."

Sansa was walking very slowly up the steps. He caught up with her and her maid. "I will take it from here," he said. The foreign woman (he'd been told her name once but he'd forgotten it)
curtseyed and left them. Sansa looked down at the floor, suddenly finding the hem of her dress very interesting. Well, it was, with that beautiful colouration but he was certain that he was more interesting. He would not have his glory stolen by a few coloured feathers.

"Forgive me if I have startled you, my lady, but you should not be alone tonight," he said.

"You did not startle me, my lord, but I am surprised that you would leave the feast so early for my sake," said Sansa. She could still compose coherent sentences and keep her voice steady. Jaime was impressed. She must have had a great capacity for drink. He wouldn't have expected it of a little dove like her.

"I have not forgotten that tonight is your night," said Jaime.

"It is yours, too," said Sansa.

"It is ours," he said. He offered her his arm. She took it shyly. His ring glittered on her middle finger, the ruby matching the red of her gloves exactly. They walked up the stairs together, casting occasional sideways glances at each other when they thought the other was not looking. She really was just a little girl, this one, although Jaime had no doubt she would grow into an exquisite creature, given a few years.

Jaime kicked open the door to his chambers. He had not allowed anyone to decorate it in some ostentatious manner so it remained very much the same, except for a few extra coffers containing Sansa's belongings and the very low and very long gold and white satin couch that now sat in the middle of the room.

He knew the hand of Rebekah when he saw it. She was rather too obvious with her preference for delicate finery that bore little decoration but was plain in a way that elevated it above common taste. A note sat on the couch, written on pale bleached parchment and in an elegant scrawl.

For Sansa, it read. And that was it. No mention of him; no mention of weddings. She was provoking him on purpose and, strangely enough, he was provoked. She'd done enough for Sansa, but had she forgotten him entirely? He was the one that she'd spent months in the wild chasing after. He was the one that she had ruined with her wiles. If not for her, he'd still be Kingsguard and life would still be certain. He screwed up the note and threw it into the blazing fire, where it slowly blackened and charred until the elegant letters were obliterated.

He smoothed his hand over the couch, delighting in its softness. It would be rather comfortable for those times when a bed was just was the only feminine touch to an otherwise sterile and masculine space more suited to a soldier (a rich one) than a man and his new wife. There was little that was soft about it. At least, he reflected, he had not gone ahead and purchased a wolf pelt to hang on the wall. That would have been in ill taste.

Jaime paused and looked around. No, this simply would not do. In the coming days, he would refurbish it so it reflected his current status, not as a Kingsguard, but as the son of Tywin Lannister and husband to a girl who could one day inherit the north (which meant he would let Sansa add a few feminine touches; money would not be an issue). However, for tonight, he needed something better and right now, there was no time to do anything to his quarters. But there was one room that was already made up and might as well be his.

"Come," he said to Sansa.

"Where are we going?"
"Somewhere more pleasant," said Jaime. He led her through the winding corridors. The guards stood like statues as was their duty. He descended a flight of stairs, taking care to make sure that Sansa was not tripping over either her heavy dress or her dangerously high-heeled shoes.

The door was not locked. Nobody dared to come in here as if they feared the same curse that had felled Rebekah would also fell them. He opened it up to show a rather dark chamber, but no matter. He knew exactly where all the lamps were and where all the tapers were. He lit the lamps, revealing a beautiful set of rooms painted in a pale shade of tan and edged with white. The curtains of the large canopy bed waved in the breeze coming in from open windows. So someone had been in here to air it out. Excellent.

"My lord, these are Lady Rebekah's chambers," said Sansa.

"These were Lady Rebekah's chambers," said Jaime.

"Should we be here?"

"There is no should, only could, little wife. As Lady Lannister, you will learn that soon enough. Besides, everything that was hers is now mine. I paid for most of this."

He blew out the taper once all the lamps were lit and there was a fire in the hearth. He sat down on the large soft bed that was so much better than his own, because Rebekah liked her creature comforts, that spoilt thing. Sansa sat down beside him nervously. He began to take the combs out of her hair and set them down on the dressing table next to the bed, letting her beautiful red hair tumble down her shoulders. She sat stiffly but made no move to shift away from him. She reached back to undo the clasps of her dress. He caught her hand.

"Allow me," he said. "You may undress me when it is my turn."

Winterfell

Theon woke with a startling headache. It felt as if someone had split his skull open and was now poking through its contents. He tried to remember what he last remembered. Had he been drinking? No, no one had been in the mood for a drink then. They had been surrounded in Winterfell…

That blasted horn sounded right in his ear. He jumped, or he would have, had he not been tied down. "Good morning," said a strange voice he had not heard before. He opened his eyes a crack. A man with a wide grin and pale hair was pressing his face very close to Theon's. So close that Theon could see all his pockmarks. In his hand, he held a bright brass horn. So this was the hornblower!

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "How did you get in?" Surely they couldn't have breached the walls that easily. This was Winterfell. He knew just how strong the fortress was.

"My name," said the young man, "is Ramsay, son of Roose Bolton."

"I've not heard of you and I've met all of Bolton's sons," said Theon. "They're dead. All of them."

"Clearly, you haven't met them all, have you?" said Ramsay. He circled Theon. Theon tried to follow his movements but he lost track of him when Ramsay walked behind him. His neck could only stretch so far. He was tied to a wooden frame, his arms and legs spread, and dressed in…well, nothing.
"What happened?" asked Theon. He tugged at his bonds. They would not budge. "If you let me go, my father will reward you handsomely. You know who he is, don't you? He is Balon Greyjoy, the lord of the Iron Islands and the rightful king in the north."

Ramsay laughed. Theon did not see his fist until it slammed into the side of his face. He tasted blood as his teeth cut into the inside of his cheek and his lip split. White flashed before his eyes.

"You will address me properly as 'my lord'," said Ramsay. "I think you are going to need some training."

He drove a fist into Theon's stomach. The impact forced the breath from his lungs and his body instinctively made to curl up to protect himself, but he couldn't.

"You're a soft little lord," said Ramsay.

The blows fell upon him like a rain of judgement for his betrayal of Robb. The northerners laughed as they beat him. He tried to ask them to stop but they only just hit him harder. Pain became his lot. It was all he knew. He wished he hadn't done it, hadn't taken Winterfell. Why, it had been the only home he had known; the only true home, at any rate. He had had a family who had cared about him. He had had a father and a brother. Now he had lost both. He was probably going to lose his life too.

They finally grew bored when all he could utter were mewling cries. He hated himself for his weakness. His father was right. He was weak. Yara would never be like this. She would never lose Winterfell. She wouldn't kill peasant boys and pass them off as Bran and Rickon Stark either.

One guard was left outside to watch him, as if he could go anywhere right now. His entire body felt like one massive bruise. Blood kept running into his eyes and down his chin from the various cuts. He hung his head and felt the urge to weep, but what would that achieve?

Was he, Theon Greyjoy, really going to die here?

It continued for days. One unseen sunrise melded into the next and Theon wasn't sure how long he'd been down here. They sometimes fed him. Sometimes they forgot.

He heard a soft gasp and the sound of a body dropping to the floor.

"Psst," said a soft voice. Theon looked up. There was a young man with unruly dark curls and pale eyes standing before him. His guard was dead, his throat slit before he could even cry out. The young man's hand was bloody, as was his dagger.

"Who are you?" asked Theon. "Have you come to kill me?"

"No, I've come to get you out," said the man. "If I had come to kill you, I wouldn't bother with any of this, now, would I?" He indicated the corpse.

"Did my father send you?" asked Theon. He felt hope. Perhaps his father did care after all.

"No, your sister," said the man.

"My sister?" said Theon. "Yara?" Then he felt a fool for saying it. He only had one sister.

"Come, she's waiting for you," said the man. He cut Theon's bonds .

Theon almost lost his balance. He'd gotten so used to the bonds and the frame supporting him that,
for a moment, he almost forgot how to stand on his own two feet. He quickly regained his step. He rubbed his wrists to get some feeling back into them. The skin was red and chafed where the rope had bit into his flesh.

"Quickly, we don't have much time," said the man. "There's a horse waiting for you out there. I'll distract them."

"What's your name, so I may reward you when I return to my rightful place by my father's side?"

"They call me Reek," said the man.

That was an odd name but who was he to judge? The man had just saved his life!

Theon stumbled through the corridor, following Reek as closely as he could. The stones were cold and damp beneath his bare feet. Soon he was almost all numb and could hardly feel anymore. All he could think about was the open sky and freedom. The walls of Winterfell closed in around him. What had been home now turned into a prison. He remembered how he and Robb had run through these passageways as boys. Not often, because the dungeons were forbidden, but that had been what had made them so exciting. Oh Robb…

He shook his head. He couldn't think about that. Robb was his captor's son and he would be his killer if Theon lingered here any longer. They would have had to part ways at some point. One was Ironborn and one was a Stark. It had never been meant to end well. And, now, with the whole world believing that he had killed Bran and Rickon, Robb would be demanding his blood. Theon had heard about how he treated his enemies now. The Mountain had been reduced to a molehill and Houses Umber and Karstark were no more, thanks to some devilry on Robb and Katherine's part. Theon wasn't going to be the next victim of the Stark raving madness that seemed to have consumed that family.

The night was so dark that he didn't realize he was outside until a gust of cold wind from the north almost blew him over. Reek pushed him towards the waiting horse. The animal snorted at the ungainly way Theon mounted it. "Your sister is waiting at Deepwood Motte," said Reek. He slapped the horse on the rump, making the animal surge forward. The last Theon saw of him was his silhouette against a background of northern torches.

Next chapter: Jaime and Sansa discover each other and realize that they're not as diametrically opposed to one another as they'd previously thought. Walder Frey receives an unexpected letter.
Jaime thinks he's going to teach Sansa a lesson. Sansa teaches Jaime a bit about himself. Walder Frey receives an unexpected letter and Elijah vies for the position of chief conductor.

Chapter 109: Big Fish

When Jaime’s fingers came into contact with her skin, Sansa shivered. He gently undid the hooks and let the dress fall to reveal her red silk shift with lace edging. Rebekah had insisted that she wear this, saying that Jaime would love it. Did he love it?

He ran his fingers over her exposed back and shoulderblades. “What is this?” he asked, tracing the outlines of a drawing that Rebekah had done.

“The wings of a phoenix, my lord,” said Sansa. “Sansa Stark is dead and Sansa Lannister is reborn from her ashes.”

“I like Sansa Lannister. She has fire.”

“She is still afraid.”

“Courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to go on despite it,” said Jaime.

“You do not fear,” said Sansa.

“That is true,” said Jaime. “But my father said it and it sounded wise. I believe true courage to be the absence of fear itself. Only lesser men need to overcome their fears.”

“I would prefer to be unafraid,” said Sansa.

“You can. All you have to do is…be.” He undid the straps that held her *crinoline* to her. It was such a relief to be out of that cage. Yet, here she was, in another cage. Was she to be one of those caged songbirds whose only purpose was to sing and flutter about for the enjoyment of men? Those songbirds, however, if one were to set them free, would never be able to survive in the wilderness on their own. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

“Much,” said Sansa. She kicked off her shoes to let her feet rest. Yes, they had made her look beautiful and tall but no one ever said anything about how she would cease to feel her toes.

He led her to Rebekah’s white dressing table, where all the jars of cosmetics were arranged tidily. She almost protested. It felt as if Rebekah would come back any moment. But, of course, she wouldn’t come back here.

Jaime ran his hands through Sansa’s hair. She could not stop her shivering, not because she was cold, for the room was warm. His touch was soft and so different from what she’d expected. He
picked up a brush, probably the same brush that he used on Rebekah’s hair, and began to work out the tangles in her tresses, taking care not to tug too hard when the bristles caught on a knot. Her scalp tingled. She had not ever felt more afraid and more alive. It was as if every part of her body was feeling the slight movements in the air, the warmth of the fire, the sound of his breath, the nearness of him.

She stared into the mirror. Her pale face stared back at her, her blue eyes large and her lips impossibly red and, behind her, his golden figure with his confident smirk as he smoothed out her hair. “You have beautiful hair,” said Jaime.

“Likewise,” she said before she realized he probably wouldn’t appreciate compliments to his hair, of all things. Her brothers had never appreciated it when someone called them handsome (usually her mother and Arya) and would make embarrassed grunts or groans. Except Rickon, who had been too young to understand that beauty was not a masculine trait. She had never complimented her brothers. None of them even knew the word “comb”.

Thinking about her family made her want to cry again. She missed them so much. It should be her mother brushing her hair instead of Jaime Lannister, her father walking her down the aisle to her bridegroom instead of Joffrey, her brothers jesting at the wedding instead of those awful Kingsguard, and her bridegroom was not supposed to be Jaime Lannister (no adequate replacement came to mind yet)! She tried to think of something else to take her mind off it. It would not do to cry. Tears were for the weak. The Little Dove was weak; the Phoenix was not.

“Are you frightened of me?” he asked.

“No,” she said quickly. “And yes.”

“I do not think that is an answer,” said Jaime.

“I am not afraid of one Jaime Lannister but I am of the other,” said Sansa.

“There is only one.”

“Two halves of one, then. There is the Jaime who did not throw me at the Kingsguard during the brawl in the throne room—”

“It was a struggle, not a brawl,” Jaime corrected her. She ignored him.

“And then there’s the one who thinks nothing of pushing little boys out the window of tall towers.”

He stilled. Had she gone too far?

“I know why you did it,” she said, pretending not to be unnerved. It was too late now. She was his to do with as he pleased. “I don’t blame you. Not really. If I had been you, in your position, I might have done the same. We never know until we are there ourselves.”

“No judging? You’re too clever to be a Stark, aren’t you, Little Dove?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Are you giving me commands now?”

“I am your wife, aren’t I?”

He set down the hair brush and put his hands on her shoulders. “Yes, you are,” he said. She rose
and turned around to face him. His green eyes were full of mischief and sparkled in the candlelight. Slowly, she reached up to the straps of his armour. She had no idea how to put on armour and this was the first time she had done anything with it. However, she did know what to do with straps. They did not come loose easily (as expected. If armour was easy to remove, then warriors wouldn’t bother with it). She tugged. He let her fiddle.

The chest plate came off. She dropped it to the floor, careful to avoid her bare toes. Then came the lion-headed pauldrons. He suddenly looked smaller, although not less proud, once all the trappings were gone. For the first time, she could see him as Jaime Lannister, the man, not the legend.

She stood back unwittingly to take in the sight of him.

“Well, do you like what you see?” he asked.

“I…cannot decide,” she replied. “I have not seen all of it yet.”

“That’s it. You’re not a Stark at all.”

“I’m a Lannister now, remember? You should get used to my new name.”

She did not expect it when Jaime swept her up into his arms as if she weighed nothing. “I doubt I shall be having much trouble,” he murmured as he bent down to nuzzle her neck, breathing in the scent deeply as if it were the most intoxicating thing he’d ever smelled. Well, it probably was. That perfume had been expensive. He laid her down on the bed. She swallowed her fear and lifted the hem of his tunic to reveal the ridges of his muscles beneath.

“Damn, it appears we left our bath in my quarters,” said Jaime. “I want to see what’s beneath all that paint.”

“Whose fault is that, Ser Jaime?” asked Sansa.

“No matter. There should be something here that would take it away in no time.”

He began to rummage through the bottles on Rebekah’s dressing table, sniffing at some and wrinkling his nose. “Yes, here it is,” he said, selecting a glass vial. He rummaged in the coffers to find a handkerchief with the letters RM embroidered in one corner in a beautiful script, with an ‘infinity knot’ beneath it.

“Are you sure you should be stealing Rebekah’s things?” asked Sansa.

“It’s not stealing,” said Jaime. “It’s called borrowing without prior permission.”

“You’re impossible,” said Sansa. She just couldn’t help herself. He wasn’t behaving very much like the cruel lion she had expected. In fact, he was behaving more like someone’s little brother.

Sansa took the handkerchief soaked in the liquid and dabbed at her face until the paint came away and stained the handkerchief all shades of red and gold and black. Katherine’s old house colours, she noted with some amusement.

“You are beautiful,” said Jaime as he looked at her reflection in the mirror. She turned around to face him. Her heart was hammering so loudly inside her chest that it felt as if it had moved up to her throat instead. She wasn’t short, not even close, but right now, she felt very small in the presence of Jaime Lannister. She reached out to take his hand in hers, to convince herself that there was nothing to be afraid of. This hand had killed many, many people; kings, vagabonds, soldiers. But it had never harmed her before. He let her explore the calluses, the way a large predator would
tolerate the grooming caresses of a much smaller and harmless creature.

She laced her fingers through his, comparing the size of their hands and their very different functions. Hers, she used to arrange flowers and sew and embroider things. His, he used mainly for fighting and killing.

“Are you really so fascinated with my hands?” he asked.

“I…with all of you, really,” said Sansa. He would like that. “I have never been so…close with a man before.”

“Not even with…never mind,” said Jaime. He twirled a few strands of her hair around the fingers of his left hand. After having been coiled up for so long, it was now so curly that it resembled the wool of sheep more than a woman’s hair. He straightened the curl and watched it bounce back. Who knew he could be amused by such trivial things, this Jaime Lannister? She went to sit on the bed, drawing her legs up beneath her in the way that Rebekah had said was seductive because it seemed so shy. Her silk shift draped over her legs like a second skin, showing off their shapely curves.

“Will you not join me?” she asked. Was her voice quivering? It certainly sounded to her as if it were shaking, and quite a bit at that. He flopped down onto the bed, making the mattress bounce.

“I shall have to get one of these,” he remarked. “It would not do for my former squire to have a more comfortable bed than I.”

“Oh, is that what she was? You squire?”

“Amongst other things,” said Jaime. “Oh, do not appear so scandalized, dear Sansa. Or do you really think Katherine Pierce was only your brother’s bard before he married her?”

“The difference being that he married her and you are never going to marry Rebekah.”

“This is not something you should worry you pretty head about.” He stared into her eyes, still smirking, but there was something harder about his gaze. *This is not something you should worry your pretty head about if you want to keep it.*

Sansa looked down at her hands and played with the ring Jaime had given her. It was pretty and it had been an ingenious way to cover up a momentary lapse of decorum on his part. She liked the sentiment; never-ending, a cycle. She was a phoenix. She was born from the ashes. And the next time she died, she would only rise up more beautiful than before. Jaime was still looking at her with an inscrutable look in his eye. She took a chance; a breath. She reached up to touch his face. Well, it would have to start somewhere and the face seemed…safe and intimate. Why did septas not teach you these things?

He let her explore his face as she had explored his hands. She brought it close, but still, she was hesitant.

Sansa knew a little about kissing. It involved sucking and saliva and looked messy. Why were kisses considered to be fun and why would they be a gesture of desire or love? She’d seen Robb sneaking kisses with the girls in “discreet” corners of Winterfell before. She’d kissed Joffrey once – the very thought made her want to rinse her mouth out now – but this was Jaime Lannister. He could have had any woman he wanted. He’d had *Rebekah*. Suddenly, she regretted not accepting the latter’s offer to teach her how to kiss. Still, there was nothing for it now.

She slowly brushed her lips against his. It was as if he had woken from a deep sleep. He seized the
back of her head, tangling his fingers in her hair. His tongue pushed against her lips, demanding entry. She was so shocked that she let him. This was nothing like what she’d expected. **Tongue?** What did one do with one’s tongue during a kiss?

He pushed forwards more. She leaned backwards until she was lying on the bed, her hair spread out beneath her head and tickled her neck and face. He brushed away the stray strands before resuming the kiss again. She copied him, slowly poking her tongue into his mouth. It wasn’t unpleasant if she didn’t think about the fact that they were essentially sucking on each other’s saliva.

How could she satisfy a man like Jaime and keep him happy? He had only married her because he had been coerced into it and she was next in line to inherit the north if anything happened to Robb and the Lannisters were trying to get rid of Robb every single day.

Her shift was very thin. The cool material clung to every curve. It was almost like wearing nothing at all. She slipped off one of the ribbon straps that held it in place. The material fell from her shoulders to reveal her breasts. She had never bared them so brazenly before. The hairs along her arms raised and bumps appeared on her skin, making it look like that of a plucked bird.

Jaime stared at her breasts for a moment, as if mesmerized. He slowly reached up. **Was he** afraid? Was he afraid of, that she would reject him? She couldn’t. She was married to him now. In this house, in these rooms, he was the lord and she was a hostage as she always had been. A caged bird would always sing. There was little else she could do.

But she was a phoenix, not a little dove to be buffeted this way and that by the wind. She would not be subject to the will of others. They might think they had tamed her, but they never could. She was a Stark of Winterfell. It hadn’t meant much in the past when she had had the security of her family to protect her and the ground had been solid beneath her feet, but now she had leapt off the edge of the cliff. She could fly or she could fall. There was no middle ground.

She kissed him again, this time more insistently, pushing her tongue inside his mouth. Women had power. Cersei had told her all about it. Katherine had proved it. One could discount anomalies like Rebekah and Caroline, although she wasn’t sure that Caroline had not used this magic to entice Tywin Lannister. Jaime was certainly a much less formidable and much more approachable person than Tywin.

She did not stop kissing him until they had both run out of breath. It wasn’t bad, this kissing. As they had kissed, he had run his hands over her body, exploring her shape, the texture of her skin; his touch had been light, but his hands were hot and the way he touched her sent feelings into other parts of her body that he had left quite alone.

His skin gleamed in the firelight, as if the gods had breathed life into a statue of gold with emeralds for eyes and hollow emptiness where the heart was supposed to be. He bent down to kiss her neck, running his lips over the smooth skin. The stubble on his chin and cheeks left trails of fire. He went lower, still kissing her, exploring her. She stroked his hair, half terrified and half amazed that she was holding this deadly creature and he was not harming her. His tongue stroked patterns around her nipples. The intense tingling shot down to the very soles of her feet and to...down between her legs. She’d never felt this way before, never so aware of the sensations that her body was capable of feeling. She was used to pain by now. This...was not quite pain but not quite comfort either.

He kissed a trail down her stomach. She tried to resist when he parted her thighs, her muscles tensing. Her heart suddenly sped up until all she heard was the sound of it thudding and her blood rushing past her ears. She must have tightened her grip on his hair, for he paused.
“Scared already? Don’t worry, little wife,” he said. Purred. “I’ll not hurt you.” He stroked her thighs with his fingers, tracing patterns over them too, as if he was marking all of her and saying, “This is all mine”.

My dearest Lord Frey,

It would be my greatest honour to accept the bride that I rejected in the first place but who I now accept on behalf of my uncle offer my uncle as a replacement bridegroom offer my uncle, Lord Edmure Tully, heir to the lordship of Riverrun and scion of House Tully, to be the most esteemed husband of one of your most lovely daughters. I apologize most ardently for my previous indiscretion and I pray hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me. BUT, AS YOUR LIEGE LORD, I DO REQUEST THAT WE PUT OUR PAST ASIDE BECAUSE, PARDON THE PUN, WE HAVE BIGGER FISH TO FRY!!!!!! We face a common enemy, my lord, and our families must unite if we are to have a chance of defending what is ours by right. I hope you might be generous enough to set aside our pasts in pursuit of a common purpose.

I remain

your liege lord closest ally,

Robb Stark

Walder Frey laughed. His laugh turned into a cough and his little wife quickly picked up a spittoon and held it out to him before he could spit on the floor. “Can you believe that little prick?” he said, holding out Robb Stark’s letter for Elijah so he could read it.

The letter was written in Katerina’s hand but the words were definitely Robb Stark’s, for Katerina would never have considered such a thing. Well, perhaps she would consider such a thing if it were part of a nefarious plot, but the wording was all Stark and no Petrova. Elijah could see through it already. Robb wanted either men or funds or the bridge for his campaign and he thought he could offer something in exchange for what he wanted. There were some men who should not be bartered with. Walder Frey was one of these.

“He is proposing a match between one of your daughters and his uncle Edmure Tully,” said Elijah. “I recall, my lord, that you had wanted a similar thing some time ago.”

“That was then, and I had it before he snatched it from me!” seethed Walder. “Can you believe the nerve of him, offering me Edmure Tully after he’s spat in my face?” Elijah did not look up from the letter.

“I believe, my lord, he considers you to be his grandfather’s bannerman, and therefore, his as well, since he is now the lord of the Tullys,” said Elijah. “We could demand great concessions of him,
my lord; tracts of land, titles, castles, gold, anything.” They could probably demand his firstborn son and get away with it. Although, Robb Stark was never going to get any sons or daughters unless he had extramarital dalliances, and he didn’t seem as if he would even think about it, considering who he’d married.

Walder Frey snatched the parchment from Elijah and folded it up. “Perhaps Tywin Lannister might be interested,” he said suddenly. “He’ll give me more concessions. The Lannisters are fond of one-upping the competition.”

“My lord, forgive me, but Tywin Lannister has no need of our support. He already is the most powerful man in all of Westeros. Whatever he’ll give us, Robb Stark will give more.” It was not his intention to beggar the Starks but, as a member of House Frey, he had a duty to steer this wayward dynasty in the right direction and to raise them out of the ashes, so far as he was capable of doing so. Niklaus and Rebekah would laugh at him if they could see him trying to save yet another lost cause.

“You’re right about Tywin Lannister being the most powerful man in all of Westeros, boy, but remember, Robb Stark has been a thorn in his side for far too long. Lannisters always pay their debts.” Niklaus always paid his debts too, although not in the ways his debtors expected. To toy with the Lannisters was like toying with Niklaus. One did not toy with forces of nature. His one thousand years of experience had taught him that much.

But Walder Frey had finally made up his mind about something. He didn’t say anything, but Elijah could see it in his eyes. “Send word to Robb Stark,” he said. “We’ll meet to discuss our terms of cooperation.” He turned to Elijah. “You said he’d give us anything, yes? Well, we Freys are not bought so cheaply.”

To say that Elijah did *not* approve of Walder Frey’s plans would be the understatement of the century. There had been many such understatements in his life, mostly involving Niklaus. However, Elijah preferred to understate rather than overstate. But there was no persuading Walder to abandon the plan. His hatred for the Starks blinded him to every other possibility, all of which would benefit his house a lot more. Elijah had tried, he had failed and, unlike Niklaus, the Freys were not family and therefore, he was justified in giving up on them and, indeed, in taking his own measures to thwart them. He was not going to go down in ignominy as the man who had watched his friends get slaughtered without attempting to do anything about it.

“We will have musicians playing crossbows,” Frey was saying.

“My lord, forgive me for boasting, but I believe I may be of some use in that regard,” said Elijah. They turned to look to him. Symon smiled. The smile never quite reached his eyes. Elijah, however, had more to worry about than Symon Frey. “If they played only crossbows, I am sure the Starks would become suspicious.”

“There will be music, of course,” said Frey. “What do you take me for, Elijah?”

“Forgive me, my lord, but I would like to ask how many of our bowmen are as well-versed with a fiddle bow? Music has nuances. The slightest variations of tone can create a myriad of emotions that transmit to the listeners and Katherine Stark was a bard.”
“Then you must know a great deal about music, Elijah?” asked Symon.

“I must say I am not as well-versed as some, my lord, but I know a thing or two about fiddles and tunes,” said Elijah.

“Then you will direct them,” said Walder Frey.

Elijah bowed. Just having command of the bowmen would not be enough. There would be other men waiting in ambush. He supposed he could deal with the ‘musicians’ and then finish the rest with Katherine’s help, but that was a plan worthy of Rebekah. He needed more manpower and some elegance to his plan wouldn’t hurt.
Eyes Wide Shut

Chapter Summary

Jaime shows Sansa all the things he's been learning as a celibate Kingsguard. Katherine is forced to approach Damon for aid in dealing with her beloved.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

King's Landing

It was inevitable. She would have to give herself to him. She was helpless in his arms. She was his wife, his property, his key to the north. Sansa loosened her muscles and spread her legs for Jaime, closing her eyes as she did so. Would it hurt? Would it be over quickly?

He lowered his head again, down between her thighs this time. She tried to keep breathing. What was he doing down there? The first touch made her flinch. He paused, but resumed licking her. The movements of his tongue over her most sensitive and private place which, until now, no one had ever touched before, made strange sensations shoot down to other completely unrelated parts of her body. Her hips involuntarily bucked. She wanted more. There was so much pent up inside her that she felt as if she would burst. She needed a release. She whimpered. "Do you like this, Sansa?" asked Jaime. He grinned as he lifted his head. The desire didn't go away. She didn't know what it was but she knew that she wanted it. It was pathetic!

"Don't stop," she commanded, her voice sounding alien to her. There was a harsh quality to it that she had never heard before.

"What's the magic word?" asked Jaime. He stroked her between her legs with his fingers, but never touching quite the right place. She squirmed. Wasn't this his duty, to finish what he started? Was this what this whole 'making love' business was? She supposed the septas wouldn't tell girls that this was what they could expect. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any maids of marriageable age in Westeros and everyone would be having bastards.

"Please, Ser Jaime," she said.

"All right, then, since you asked so nicely."

She moaned as she gripped his hair. His touch was so gentle, but every bit of contact made fire surge through her. Her hair stuck to her sweaty face and neck. She didn't care. Her thighs tightened about his head as she thrust her hips towards him. He held her down so he could slowly apply his ministrations at his own pace. Which was too slow!

It was a revelation. She became aware of nothing else but the burst of pulsing pleasure. It was as if she could see the world anew, and although it was a harsh place, it also had its own terrible beauty. There wasn't just death, but life also and Jaime had shown it to her. Jaime came back up to kiss her. His lips were salty and he tasted of her. Strangely enough, she didn't find that disgusting at all. She wanted him to do it again. And again. And again until they were both so tired they could do nothing but sleep late into the afternoon, all celebrations and visitations be damned. For a moment,
she forgot that she was a Stark and he was a Lannister. She was just a woman who wanted a man to
pleasure her. She didn't even have to like that man as long as he knew what he was doing.

"Is that what it is?" she asked him. "Is it over?"

"Over? It's only just beginning and a taste of what I can do," said Jaime. She felt something poking
against her thigh and realized that he still had his breeches on and there was a bulge straining
against the laces. She had never seen a naked man fully before. A baby boy, yes, for she had
peeked while Bran and Rickon had been very little and the nurses had been changing them.
Whatever boys had down there, it hadn't looked pretty at all.

Her mother had explained a little bit about what happened between men and women, but she hadn't
been too clear on the details and she hadn't exactly told her very much about what a man did and
how he did it.

Jaime must have caught her staring at his crotch for he started chuckling. Heat and blood flooded
her face and she became aware again of how unnatural this was, wolf and lion bedding together.
He was her enemy. And he was old enough to be her father. In fact, he was her former betrothed's
real father.

"Well, go on, then," said Jaime. He sprawled back, all spread out like a lazy cat. "This is your best
wedding present. Unwrap it."

She gaped at him, scandalized by his terrible joke. She didn't want to unwrap it!

Or did she? Curiosity got the better of her. She pulled at the sprang free. She almost recoiled from
the shock of seeing a man like this. How did it grow so large? His manhood was erect and at
attention, ready to do whatever needed to be done. Her hand hovered near him. Should she touch
him?

"You are allowed to touch it," said Jaime. He sounded amused. "In fact, I think I would like it very
much if you did, little wife."

She had to take a while to muster up her courage before she brushed her fingers gently along its
length. The skin was smooth and hot over the hard flesh. Jaime quivered under her touch. She
suddenly realized how affected he was by her and, by extension, how much power she had over
him. She started stroking him. He closed his eyes and she could see the veins and tendons bulging
in his neck as he fought to control himself. "I'm not delicate," he whispered. He reached down, took
her hand, and wrapped it about his cock. "See?"

Sansa let go of his cock for the moment, making his brow furrow and his eyes snap open. She
kissed a trail upwards, from his groin up to his navel, and then higher, repeating the ministrations
he had given her just moments ago. He groaned as she explored him but stayed still to let her do it,
even though she knew that it was taking all of his control to do so. She kissed the hard muscles and
toyed curiously with his nipples. What did men need them for anyway? His harsh, lustful breathing
gave her the answer a moment later. She kissed them too. He tasted of salt and something that was
uniquely him. She kissed his neck. His arms came up to stroke her back. She ducked out of them.
"You don't get to have me yet, my lord," she whispered.

"You are a very naughty little wife," he whined. She had to smirk at that. Right now, he did not feel
so dangerous; more like a little boy who had been denied his sweets. Mind, she still remembered
how Robb had lost his temper when he had been denied his honeyed plums as a child and that had
been terrifying. But Jaime was obviously the type of little boy who resorted to pouting and hoped
that his cuteness would make whoever it was feel like a heartless bastard for denying him. At least,
that was the feeling she was getting from him.

She moved lower, ignoring the part he most wanted her to notice right now. His thighs were well-muscled and perfectly shaped and formed. A faint pale line ran down one leg. It was freshly healed. "Where did you get this?" she asked, tracing it.

"Stannis," he said.

"How has it healed so quickly?"

Jaime stiffened. She sat back. What secret was Jaime Lannister keeping? "The maesters in King's Landing are very good at what they do, and it was not very deep. I'm a resilient sort of man," he said. "Why are you interested in that? It's boring." He sat up and with one move, he'd flipped her onto her back again. This time, she was not afraid when he positioned himself above her. Excited, a little nervous, but she was not afraid of him.

"Will it hurt?" she asked.

"I hope not," he asked. "That's not really the point of this."

"They say the first time always hurts," she said. "Will you be gentle with me?"

"I promise." He brushed her sweaty hair away from her face and kissed her. She opened her mouth as she opened her legs for him. He shook with the effort of holding himself back, but he kept his promise and was slow and gentle when he entered her, allowing her body time to adjust before progressing further.

There was a sharp pain. She whimpered and clamped her thighs about his hips. Her fingernails dug into his back, drawing blood. He paused, allowing the burning pain to fade away into a lasting, pulsating throb before pushing himself further in. Sansa gritted her teeth, but as he pierced her through, that pain mingled with pleasure different from any she had ever felt before. It wasn't like the songs, when the heavens opened, light shone down on the two lovers (because to be lovers, they would have to at least have some affection for one another, right?), the birds all started singing and so on and so forth. But she had never been more aware of herself than she was right now, of how much she wanted to let go, to be free, to be powerful. She had tasted power just when she'd had him in her hands and he had quivered at her touch.

He grunted as he thrusted. Their hips moved in a rhythm that sometimes clashed but they eventually found their pace. Their breathing became faster and more rapid as they fought to keep on top of each surge. As each wave threatened to submerge her, she felt guilty that she was actually somewhat enjoying this. He was the enemy, the man who had stabbed her father in the leg, her brother's prisoner, her mother's goodwill gesture towards the Lannisters in exchange for her safe return to her family (and look how well that had turned out). What would they say if they saw her now?

Sansa forced herself to shut all of that out. They would simply have to understand. It wasn't as if she were doing this for fun. She was doing it for survival and the more convincing she was, the better.

Still, she could not help crying out as the pleasure exploded and she felt a great warmth inside her, as if a fire had erupted, and she knew that he had spilled his seed. He collapsed on top of her. His weight, alien though it was, felt comfortable. He rolled off her, his blond hair no longer neatly swept backwards as it always was. It was tousled from her hands and their efforts to create the newest young Lannister. It wasn't so much Jaime but the idea of actually helping the Lannisters to
continue the Lannister line that made Sansa feel a sense of sudden revulsion, but she swallowed that down. That child would be half-Stark too, wouldn't he? And that was if there was a child. If it worked every time, the world would be full of Pykes and bastards of every other sort. Then again, was it not?

"So," said Jaime. His voice had returned to normal now. He wore that infuriating, self-satisfied smirk again. "How was it?"

The Little Dove would blush. The Phoenix would have something cleverer to say. Or she wouldn't say anything at all. "It's been a long day and night, my lord. I think I would like to get some rest now," she said in her best haughty tone. Which, apparently, could be very haughty. She rolled over so her back was facing him. He did not pursue the matter. She lay awake, watching the shadows change from black and white to red tinted, feeling the throbbing between her legs and wondering if she were already carrying Jaime's heir. A tumult of feeling beset her. She wanted nothing more for none of this to have ever happened, for her father to have firmly stood his ground and taken them back to Winterfell when he had first felt the danger, for her not to have been so stupid as to have trusted the queen and Joffrey.

She felt Jaime rise with the sun. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep. He bent down over her. "Sansa," he whispered. She did not stir. The mattress shifted as he got up. She cracked open one eye and saw him pulling on his clothes. Without another word, he slipped out of their wedding chambers.

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Harrenhal

The woman in his bed was a problem. Damon looked at the mass of sprawling pale limbs, tangled brown hair, and soft, rounded breasts, rump and thighs. The girl smiled up lazily at him and made no move to go anywhere. In the past, this had never been an issue. Compelled people did whatever he wanted them to do. She wriggled up against him and leaned on his side. "Have I pleased you, m'lord?" she asked.

"Ser," Damon corrected her. "I'm not a lord yet." He hoped that the admission would be enough to chase her away. They'd had fun, it was over, and he didn't want anyone to find her in his bed. Specifically, he didn't want Elena to find that he'd stooped so low as to find a camp follower. Although, he hadn't paid her yet and it didn't count as whoring until money exchanged hands. He was almost ready to capitulate, however. The girl, whose name was Daisy, was a newcomer, wide-eyed and full of dreams of seducing a lord as her hero Queen Katherine had done. She was averagely pretty, which meant she was probably prettier than every other girl in her village and possibly the other villages surrounding it, and a great favourite with the men. Damon could see why. She'd been fun. Her enthusiasm had made up for the lack of skill and she'd been willing to try anything. But now they were over and she had made up her mind that she was going to have him for her own.

She cast a sideways glance at him and pulled the rumpled sheets up to cover her ample breasts with their soft pink nipples and her slightly flabby but slim waist. In the Renaissance, she would have been thought to have had the perfect figure. "It's late," he said.

"So come to bed, m'lord," she said.

"Ser."

"The king should make you a lord."
"Maybe you should tell him that. Well, go on. No? I thought not. The king shouldn't have to do anything he doesn't want to. He's the king. That's the whole point." It wasn't true, but that was what all people thought when they thought of kingship. Except Robb. He was still all duty and responsibility and honour and noblesse and all the things that Ned had taught him to have, do and be.

"But you have done so much for him and for the North," said Daisy. She stroked his leg with her foot. It wasn't the cleanest foot. "Even where I lived, I heard so much about you. I'd always dreamed that I'd meet you one day." She gave a girlish sigh.

"Now you have," said Damon.

"You know what else happens in my dream?"

He could guess but he didn't want to hear it. He'd never been so grateful when someone knocked on his door but his gratitude vanished when that someone opened it without so much as a by-your-leave.

"Damon, we need to talk," said Katherine. She came in with a whirlwind of rustling silk and flying curls, the colour high in her cheeks and looking for all the world like she'd just been chased through a hedge maze by Stefan, with the exception of the serious-looking frown that he took to be a bad sign. She paused at the sight of Daisy.

"Your Grace!" Daisy scrambled to her hands and knees, her bravado vanishing. She scrabbled for something to cover herself with and eventually hid behind Damon.

"Really, Damon?" said Katherine. She regained some of her poise and raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow at him.

"What?" said Damon.

"Out," Katherine said to Daisy. The quivering girl snatched up her clothes and slipped out in star-struck awe, but not without casting a backwards glance at Damon. If she'd been a modern girl, she would have mouthed 'call me' with that expression. Of course he wasn't going to call or even think about her anymore until he grew desperate again.

Damon stretched out lazily on the bed, displaying his nude body to its best advantage. Ordinarily, Katherine would have at least given him a cursory but appreciative look but today she seemed not to notice or care. She produced a flask and unstoppered it before pouring two cups of deep red liquid.

"Blood and liquor?" asked Damon. It was his turn to raise an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound particularly appetizing."

"I need something strong. You'll need it too," said Katherine.

"Why?"

"Because Robb is being his usual, annoying, honourable self and, as much as I'd hate to admit it, I may be encountering an idiotic moral obstacle that I am having some difficulty in overcoming."

"What's this about?" asked Damon. He tentatively took a sip of the blood liquor. It wasn't a bad cocktail, actually, as it combined his two favourite drinks in the world.

"What it's always been about," said Katherine. She drained her cup and clutched it so tightly he
wondered whether she'd leave a hand-shaped dent in the metal. "The Freys."

"I thought he had it all sorted."

"And you think that Walder Frey is going to roll over and let us rub his belly just because we gave him a bone?" asked Katherine.

"Of course not, but I'm sure you have a plan to deal with him."

"I have some idea, but not much time to pull it off," said Katherine. "We ride for the Twins very soon and dear, darling Robb refuses to violate guest rights."

"He wouldn't be Robb if he didn't. Refuse, I mean."

"Why can't he be un-Robb for just this once?"

It wasn't like Katherine to vent. She must be very frustrated. Damon poured her more blood liquor from the flask. How had she gotten it? Then he remembered the prisoners that she kept in the dungeons and wondered no more.

"I will have spies at the Twins," said Katherine, having calmed down a little after her ranting. "But that will not be enough. By the time we find out whether the Freys intend to betray us and how, we will already be there. And I am almost certain that they will because they, unlike my beloved husband, are not stupid."

"Is the wedding that soon?" asked Damon in surprise.

"Robb's making plans to ride for the Twins as soon as he's gathered the bride price. Twenty-thousand gold dragons and fifty bolts of good cloth, not to mention a great many of Catelyn's jewels. At least he had the sense not to ask me for mine."

"And is there no way you can convince him that it might not be the smartest thing?"

"Do you think I haven't tried?"

"Do you want me to talk to him?" It probably wasn't going to work but if she was that desperate, it would be worth a try, wouldn't it?

"No," said Katherine. "If I needed someone else to talk to him, I'd ask Jon but even Jon couldn't persuade him to rethink it. Ten thousand men and the chance to take Casterly Rock were just too big of a carrot on a stick that he can't see."

Damon remained silent. Was Katherine right, or was Robb? No, Ned had trusted in the honour of men and look where that had gotten him. The Starks were only ever right about one thing and that was the climate. "I guess talking is not going to work," he said.

"Good thing I wasn't planning on talking," said Katherine. "But I will need all the help I can get."

There was a gleam in her eye that he recognized. Her pupils dilated and she leaned closer to him, crooking her finger as she did so, almost as if she were getting ready to kiss him or slam his head on a hard surface. He couldn't really tell. He drew so close to her that he could count each individual eyelash. It was so easy to forget everything that she had done and simply fall for all her tricks again. It would certainly be the path of least resistance. No, he wouldn't be so stupid. Never again. The mark of insanity was repeating the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.
Her whispers brushed his ear. "I need you to do something for me, Damon," she said, her voice deliciously husky and low. "I need Robb to see the danger and feel it."

"Can't you fuck with his dreams yourself?" he asked.

"Oh, no, no, no," said Katherine. "It is to be no dream. The Freys plan to harm him. I'm sure of it. But he can't see that."

"The Freys probably aren't going to do something prematurely just so you can warn your hubby," said Damon.

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course they're not going to do that. But we don't need real Freys to do it. We don't even need Freys. What we need is a convincing narrative. Think, Damon Salvatore."

Damon narrowed his eyes. "And your point is…?" he said.

Katherine rolled her eyes and sighed melodramatically as if his apparent stupidity was making her physically ill. "You will arrange an assassination attempt on him," she said.

"You've already done that once."

"It worked once. It'll work again."

"And you think killing him will stop him from killing himself?"

"Well, that's one way of looking at it, but you know, as well as I do, that we don't mean for him to die. It will simply contribute to his reluctance to trust the Freys." Katherine patted his cheek. "You are capable of doing that, aren't you? After all the disappointments, you owe me, Damon."

"I don't owe you shit," said Damon. He pulled on his trousers and his shirt.

"But you'll say yes anyway because you love Robb," said Katherine. Her slanted eyes danced in the candlelight. She threw back her head and let her curls brush the top of the fur covering on his bed. "You do, don't you?"

The words pricked the back of his mind and buzzed like a trapped mosquito, making the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Usually, he would have laughed at them but the notion of loving Robb tugged at something that he didn't understand. "I don't love anyone," said Damon. He tightened his belt and did up the buckle. It was looking a little worse for wear. The 'Hermés' engraved on the brass had almost all worn off after the adventures it had been through. It was a pity. He'd never get another belt like this in Westeros. They didn't have the skill or the knowledge to create a faux crocodile skin effect. "But I'd rather not owe the Starks more than I already do."

"I knew it!" said Katherine. She clapped her hands like a little girl. "It's so adorable."

He fought the urge the throttle her and make her choke on her own enthusiasm, knowing fully well that it wasn't going to work. She was stronger than he was and he had no plans. "They're not going to trust me, your prospective assassins," said Damon. "Why would I want to kill the king?"

"Don't you have people you can use? You've been in Stark service for what, a year? Please don't tell me that the only friends you've made are actual Starks. But that's true, isn't it?" She sighed. "Must I do everything myself?"

"We have Clegane," Damon pointed out.
"We are not involving Sandor Clegane in anything." She drummed her fingers on the table-top, her perfectly trimmed nails clacking against the cracked wooden surface. All the furniture in his quarters had seen better days. In fact, all of Harrenhal had seen better days. "Tell you what, how about you stay out of it, and I'll take care of things. Like I always do."

"You just like being the boss of everyone, Kitty; don't deny it," said Damon.

She threw a pillow at him. He batted it away. "Just find me the Frey weapons," she said. "You can do that, can't you?"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Sansa tries to integrate into Lannister family life. Katherine puts Plan A into action to persuade Robb to see things from her point of view.
Jaime and Joffrey's relationship continues to deteriorate. Robb's suspicions are aroused after an attempt on his life. A raven arrives at The Twins.

**King's Landing**

There was a grim satisfaction in his father's eyes at breakfast the next morning. Jaime glanced at Sansa, who was keeping her eyes downcast and simply pushing her food around on her plate. She looked wan and pale and there were dark circles beneath her eyes. The little thing had thought that he hadn't noticed, but she hadn't slept a wink last night. Her body had been so stiff that she'd had to have been awake. He hadn't broken down the lie. If she wanted to ignore him and lie awake all night instead of have fun with him, then it was her business. Although he had thought that they had enjoyed themselves. She certainly hadn't resisted his advances and his ministrations and he had felt her pleasure. All that whimpering and moaning and crying out; that hadn't all been from the pain of losing her maidenhead.

"Well, how was she?" asked Joffrey, bringing all his higher thoughts crashing back to the ground.

"Joffrey, my love," admonished Cersei gently. "This is not something for the breakfast table. Tommen is here."

"He'll be a man soon. He should know how to treat a woman."

Tommen looked down at his lap and said nothing.

"I'm sure you know how it works, Your Grace," said Jaime. "However, if not, would you like me to draw you a picture?"

"You dare to speak to your king in such a manner?" said Joffrey. He stood up so rapidly that he almost overturned the table, outraged that anyone would dare to tease him. For the king was not to be teased; oh no. If there was anything dear Joff wanted in the world, it was to be taken seriously. Very seriously.

"Or, perhaps, I could take Your Grace to some of the finer establishments in the city, if that would not antagonize your mother too much."

"Jaime!" exclaimed Cersei, outraged at his suggestion.

"Enough," said Tywin quietly. They had almost forgotten that he was there. Jaime smirked and said nothing. He had, after all, won the argument and there was no point in rubbing in his victory. Sansa shrank even further back. Was she embarrassed?

He took her hand under the table and gave it a little squeeze. She was his now and he protected his things. She just needed to learn that. Her fear was her greatest enemy but if she could be free of it, there was no knowing what Sansa Stark – Lannister was capable of.

She looked at him, surprised, but she sat taller again. Slowly, he traced his initials on her palm
whilst he speared a piece of pancake with his fork. To everyone at the table, there was nothing unusual going on, but little Sansa was responding to him. She truly was quite a beauty and she hadn't even truly grown into it yet. Her hair was free of adornments and worn down and straight in the fashion championed by the two lady vampires. Her dress, too, was after that style, with little embroidery but in a brilliant royal blue that brought out the colour of her eyes and made them look like ice on a fine day.

"My dear, have you had enough to eat?" he asked, more sincerely than he had intended.

"I am not feeling particularly hungry this morning," replied Sansa. She did not look up at him but at least she stopped pretending to eat.

"Why don't you go out into the gardens and partake of some fresh air? I shall join you shortly after I am finished." He gave Joffrey a look.

"Some fresh air would do me good," said Sansa.

"I can take her," piped up Tommen, that sweet boy. "I need to look for Ser Pounce anyway, before he eats too many birds. Do you like cats, Lady Sansa?"

Harrenhal

Elena tried her best not to breathe too hard for fear of dislodging the carved wooden markers that Jon had placed on her body to illustrate the situation in Westeros. She watched him move, his skin gleaming in the firelight as if the flames were burning beneath the surface. "And here we are," he said, placing a wolf above her navel. "Harrenhal." He circled her belly button with a finger as he said it, making her gasp and dislodging some Lannister forces from their positions. The wooden figurines fell to the bed and slid into the depression made by her body. Jon didn't move to replace them. Instead, he entwined his fingers with hers. "Robb needs to make a move; a decisive, big move that will show all of Westeros that he is just as much to be feared as Tywin Lannister." He looked down their outstretched arms. "Casterly Rock. And he needs the men."

"But you agree with Katherine that the Freys aren't going to help?" asked Elena.

He kissed the back of her hand. "Katherine may be many things, but she hasn't been wrong yet," he said. "I trust her instincts. She survived for five hundred years. I can't even understand that length of time."

She leaned up to kiss him on the lips, drawing him down to cover her body. He shifted himself above her, crushing Lannisters and Starks alike. "But the king, he doesn't think so?" she asked when they parted for breath.

Jon shook his head. "Robb is good and he believes everyone to be as good as he is."

"How come you don't?"

He gave a wry smile. "I'm not good," he said. "Besides, I think you've corrupted me, my lady."

She giggled and swatted his shoulder. "Speak for yourself, Jon Snow. I was a perfectly sweet and innocent kitchen-hand of the Night's Watch before I met you."

"If I remember correctly, you threatened to cut off someone's balls and serve them to him medium rare."
"Well, maybe I did," said Elena. "But I wouldn't have gone through with it."

"I knew it." He laughed one of his rare laughs that made her feel warm all the way deep inside.

A shout from upstairs made them pull away. "Robb," whispered Jon. His eyes widened until she saw white all around his irises. He leapt up and seized his sword. It never sat further than an arm's length from him. The same could not be said about his clothes. He ran out the door with her close on his heels. The hallways were empty. Even the usual guards were gone. Or, rather, their throats had been slit. She stepped into a puddle of still warm blood. It soaked between her toes and the scent of life and iron rose from it. Hunger and desperation surged through her body. She wanted to feed, to kill. She wanted to defend. She almost wanted to lick the floor. She ignored the blood and ran after Jon.

The two of them burst through into the king's chambers. Eight assassins assailed the king, their long daggers like giant teeth. One of the curtains had been set alight by a knocked over lamp. Katherine was grappling with one of the men. Her silken shift had been torn and there was blood on the sleeve. She swung him around and into the fireplace.

Jon leapt into the fray, sword raised, but in such small quarters, his long blade was a disadvantage to him. One of the assassins lunged for him as he tried to get close to Robb and scored a gash along his arm. He snarled like his wolf. Where were the wolves?

Elena let the thought of Ghost and Grey Wind slip from her mind. She seized one of the men about to stab Jon from behind and threw him into the window. There was no glass to shatter or to break his fall onto the balcony. She didn't wait for him to regain his balance as she drove her foot into his stomach for good measure, sending him tumbling over the stone railings. His voice changed tone as he fell, a wonderful demonstration of the Doppler Effect, before it just stopped.

A hand grabbed her by the hair. She felt the prick of a blade in her back and the sharp pain as it went into her flesh, beneath her ribs, twisting in her abdomen. She cried out. Her assailant let go of her, thinking her done for. As he did so, she snatched the back of his head and gave a vicious yank. His bones and cartilage yielded under the sharp force. He fell against her, limp, his head lolling over her shoulder. She shoved him aside and pulled the dagger out of her. It had gone in so deep that the tip had emerged from her front. The wounds healed before anyone noticed. They were all too preoccupied to notice. Jon had pinned one of the assassins beneath him. He'd dropped his sword on the floor. The man clawed at his face, but Jon's desperate grip was too strong. He slammed the man's head once, twice, thrice against the floor. Blood spilled into the cracks between the man's eyes rolled back white. Before he had even let the corpse go completely, Jon had already thrown himself at his brother's assailants and knocked them aside with the force of his body. The king was bleeding from a shallow cut on his chest, but it had not hit anything vital. His heartbeat was strong. The assassins rushed towards them, intending to finish them quickly. Elena made to make her move. Why wasn't Katherine acting? She'd only killed one man when she could have killed all of them in the space of as many seconds. Did she not care at all? Was she so worried about keeping her secret from Robb that she would let him die?

The door burst open. "Your Grace!" shouted Damon. Something wasn't right about Damon's voice but Elena couldn't tell what it was. He hauled one of the assailants away. A dagger gleamed in his hand. He thrust it upwards and into the man's ribs before the man could even fight back. The remaining three assassins, realizing their predicament, tried to look for a way out, but Damon and his guards were too quick.

"Leave −" Robb began, but it was too late. The last man had already been slain.

"– one alive…" finished the king.
Damon held up his bloody dagger. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Your Grace," he said.

The bodies lay in a neat row, resembling nothing as much as sacks of meat and bone about to be butchered. Which they were not, for Robb was not yet so desperate for supplies that he would have his men eat other men. Actually, he wasn't desperate for supplies at all. But there was a sense of desperation anyway as he paced, looking at the bodies. By all accounts, they looked like northerners but the weapons at their feet told a different story. The steel was finer, lighter, of a southern make rather than a northern one. And the slender blades were forged in a style that he had seen once. At the Twins.

"The Freys are treacherous, Your Grace," said Damon. "They offer the hand of friendship with their right hand and stab you with their left. Usual modus operandi for them, I'll bet." Robb did not respond to him. He remembered how Damon had come in at the last minute when the murderers had been doomed to fail anyway – Jon and Elena had been unnaturally efficient at killing – and killed every last one of them, leaving no witnesses who could tell him who had ordered this or why. He didn't think Damon would kill him. What would be the point? The man had proven himself to be a traitor to the Lannisters. If he betrayed Robb too, then he would have nowhere else to run. The whole world and Katherine would hunt him down and slaughter him.

"You may leave us, Ser Salvatore," said Robb. "I would discuss the matter with the queen alone."

"Robb," said Jon, reluctant to leave him alone.

"You should have your arm tended to, Jon," said Robb.

"I'm fine," said Jon. He didn't look fine. He was pale and sweating even though it wasn't warm. The windows were wide open and the cold wind blew in, negating any effect the crackling fire had. Jon's hands shook.

"Jon?" said Elena. She closed the shutters and hurried to his side, one hand clutching a blanket around her shoulders to preserve what modesty she had left. The Pierce sisters had a habit of fighting naked and being quite good at it. And they had infected Jon too.

Robb suddenly felt dizzy. He groped for support. Katherine led him to a chair and sat him down. He found he was shivering too, burning one moment and freezing the next. His vision grew blurry.

"Poison," he heard Elena shout. Where was she? Where was he? The walls and ceiling collapsed on him. A great weight crushed his chest. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. He struggled, or tried to, as he became less and less able to discern between the real and the imagined. Glowing eyes peered at him from the darkness, red with bloodlust. They whispered with disembodied voices in words that he could not understand even if he could make them out. One of the words jumped out at him.

\textit{Morta}.

"Oh my God, they've been poisoned!" gasped Elena. Katherine glared at Damon, not because he had poisoned the blades without telling her – she'd been able to tell as soon as the symptoms had begun manifesting – but because he had killed all the witnesses. He must have known that, by doing so, he had brought the suspicion all on himself! But, apparently, that had never occurred to his one brain cell.

Elena had already put her bleeding wrist to Jon's lips, rubbing his throat to make him swallow.
Katherine did the same to Robb. His skin was clammy but his heart still beat, although it was weak, now. She wiped away the stray droplet that spilled over his lips. He must not know what was happening or what she was. He wasn't ready yet. She doubted he would ever be ready.

She fed him just enough blood so that he would not die. By now, the whole castle had heard of the attempt on Robb's life. Panicked whispers came from downstairs and upstairs and outside. What would they do if they heard that Robb had been poisoned and was dying from it? Would that lure the real snake out of the lair? Would the Freys show their colours so she wouldn't have to do it for them?

Robb's pulse grew steadier. Jon's eyes fluttered open, Elena's wrist still to his lips. "Robb," he croaked. The wound on his arm healed immediately and left no trace that it had ever been there.

"He's fine," said Katherine. "Elena, get the maester."

"But…"

"Get the maester, Elena," repeated Katherine. Just because Robb was going to be fine eventually didn't mean that he wouldn't need medical attention, if only to explain why he'd survived so serious a poisoning that he had lost consciousness. It had been a careful exercise of monitoring every drop of blood that went down his throat so that the cut on his chest wouldn't heal, but she had had enough experience with that sort of thing. Smoke and mirrors were a vampire's best weapons.

Elena looked down at Jon in her arms, his lips smeared with her blood and there was more blood all over her naked abdomen. They must have had a bad case of coitus interruptus when Jon had rushed in to save Robb.

"I'll go," said Damon and he ran off without waiting for any instructions. Such as how to explain to this newly overly suspicious Robb just how he had absolutely nothing to do with the attempt on his life.

As he ran out, Arya came in, her already large eyes even wider than usual. "Jon? Robb?" she asked. She looked at her two brothers. Jon and Elena burst apart but Arya didn't seem to be surprised that they were completely naked. Nor did she seem to care. Robb's eyelids twitched but he was not yet awake. The girl's gaze flicked to the corpses. Seven of them lay there. Some poor servant would be scraping the eighth off the flagstones below.

"Who did this, Katherine?" she whispered. She didn't cry or scream or become hysterical the way most little girls probably would have done. Behind her sweet face was a spine of steel and the vampire saw more than just a little of herself in that girl; certainly much more than in Elena. Katherine lifted Robb in her arms and put him in bed before covering him up with a blanket. His skin was still cold and clammy and his heart fluttered like a trapped butterfly.

"The Freys, or perhaps the Lannisters," said Katherine. "I'd put my money on the former."

"But they're dressed as northerners," said Jon.

"They carry Riverlands steel and unless Edmure has less than honourable intentions, which I doubt, then there can only be one answer."

Jon looked down at the unconscious Robb and gripped his unresponsive hand. Then he looked up again, back at Katherine, and she felt the full force of those ancient eyes on her. She could almost hear him asking, "Is there?" But neither of them said anything.

"He's going to be all right, isn't he?" asked Arya. "You've fed him?"
"Yes, of course I have," said Katherine.

"But why won't he wake up?"

"Don't you think he'll get suspicious if he almost dies and then is perfectly fine the next moment? By the way, Jon, go back to your room and stay in bed. And put a bandage around your arm."

"Don't you think it's time you told him?" demanded Arya.

"Everything I do has its reasons, Arya Stark," said Katherine. "Robb can't be distracted right now."

He needed to think about how going to the Freys was a Bad Idea™.

"She's right," said Jon. At least somebody had their head screwed on straight. Or at least somewhat straight. Elena followed him out, but not without glancing back at Robb's prone form on the bed.

"You should go too," Katherine said to Arya.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Arya. Her pale face made her freckles stand out more starkly than ever but she was resolute.

"Go and tell your mother that Robb will be all right," said Katherine. "She should know."

"You've never cared about my mother before."

"That's true, but you care about her, don't you?"

"She can find out later. She deserves to worry after what she's done."

"It's not good to hold grudges, Arya. Better to be angry at her stupidity than to think that she has betrayed you. And stupid people deserve to be made aware of their own idiocy, but it's not a punishment. Not in that sense. It's for their own betterment; do you understand?"

Damon came back with the timid young maester who served as the northern army's chief surgeon. Katherine was again struck by the need to establish real physicians who specialized in medicine. Maesters were Jacks of all trades. They knew a little bit about everything and very little about anything. Kind of like journalists, but without the investigative intuitions and self-destructive tendencies to try and bring down much larger prey than themselves, sometimes to great effect. If she had been born in a different time and if the journalism world hadn't suddenly developed ethics, she would have made a wonderful journalist. Being a vampire was not conducive to public roles like that.

The maester bowed to her, his gaze roaming over everything except her. She knew her shift was translucent and that her dark nipples could be seen through it. "Your Grace," he mumbled into his robes.

"Maester Eoin," said Katherine. She stood and indicated that Eoin should come to Robb's bedside. Eoin shuffled over, clutching his medicine box before him like a shield against whatever dangers Katherine posed. The glass vials inside clinked as he moved. He set down the box and put two fingers to Robb's wrist to feel his pulse.

"His Grace's heartbeat is steady, if weak," he said. "What manner of poison was it?"

"That's for you to find out, Maester," said Katherine. She handed him one of the daggers carried by the assassins. He took it gingerly by the handle as if he were afraid it would bite him and poison him too. He sniffed the blade and set it back down before prying open Robb's eyelids to have a
"I recognize this," said Eoin, growing more confident now that he had answers. "It is a red riverweed that grows in still waters. Fresh, it does little, but when fermented, it is quite deadly."

"Do you have an antidote?" asked Katherine.

"I am afraid there is none," said Eoin. "Thankfully, the blade which struck His Grace must not have been covered sufficiently."

"He will live, then?" asked Katherine.

The maester bowed. "Only the gods know that, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Maester Eoin," said Katherine. She dismissed him and wrapped her robe around her body tightly before curling up next to Robb to watch the slow rise and fall of his chest. The sun climbed to its zenith and began its daily descent.

She must have fallen asleep because the next thing she knew, there was a gentle hand stroking her hair. She resisted the need to open her eyes and simply nestled up further against Robb. It had been a tiring couple of days for her. Assassinations sapped up a lot of energy.

"Ouch," said Robb softly.

Finally, she opened her eyes and gazed up at him from beneath her eyelashes. He was smiling down at her, his face pale, but clearly alive and awake. "Hey," she said. "I missed you." Academy Award for Best Actress this year would be going to Katherine Stark. Damon deserved a Razzie.

Walder Frey cackled as he read the raven scroll. The writer had squeezed the words in so tightly that there was barely a space between the tiny lines. "Someone's tried to kill Robb Stark," said Frey. His laugh turned into a cough and Elijah silently lifted a spittoon for him. Frey spat a gob of phlegm into the vessel in a practised move. "There's no shortage of men out there who want him dead. Good thing they failed, though."

"Why is that, Father?" asked Symon Frey.

"Because the deal with the Lannisters won't hold if we're not the ones to kill him," said Frey. "And I want to see the look on his face when he realizes what a fool he's been to choose his whore over a lady of House Frey."

"Katherine was a bard," said Elijah quietly.

Hosteen Frey alternately snorted and honked in laughter. "Don't tell me you believe that shit," he sneered. "She's a whore, all right, and he's just a green boy who's never had a woman other than his mother."

The other Freys joined in the raucous laughter as if Hosteen had said something incredibly witty. Elijah chuckled. After a thousand years, pretending came quite easily to him. If it had been a viable career choice for a vampire, he would have made a very good actor.

"Bard, whore, it's all the same," said Walder Frey. "I'll teach that Stark boy that there's a price to pay for making the wrong choice. He thinks giving us Edmure Tully will appease me. Imagine that."

Walder Frey had wanted Edmure Tully for a long time but now that he had been offered more once
before, he felt entitled to more. Elijah said nothing. It was always best to be silent in situations such as these. Better for them to underestimate him than to even have an inkling of what he was capable of.

"Elijah," barked Walder. "You have the best hand. You'll pen a letter to Robb Stark in my name, accepting the offer of Edmure Tully. Hosteen, you, Symon and Elijah will take the letter. Be friendly, and offer our sincerest concerns about the threats to His Grace's person. You don't want to chase the Starks away."

**Next chapter:** Bonnie escapes from Winterfell. Frey emissaries arrive in Harrenhal.
The S Files – I Want to Believe

Chapter Summary

Bonnie plans her great escape. Meanwhile, Katherine and Elijah work together to manipulate Robb.

Winterfell

Bonnie poked her head out. It was dark enough that no one noticed her among the debris. "He thinks he's gotten away," she heard Ramsay Snow's voice say. "We'll be in for a merry hunt, now, won't we?"

There could only be one person that they were talking about. Theon. Bonnie felt her heart clench at the thought of him. She could never forgive him for what he had done to Winterfell and to those boys, even if they weren't Bran and Rickon.

But even if he did deserve pain for what he had done, he ought to be punished by the right people, not to be used as a plaything by the sadistic monster that was Ramsay Snow. She waited until they had ridden out before clambering out of her hiding place. There was no way she would be able to catch up with Theon before Snow found him. She crept down to the dungeons where they had kept Theon. Now that he wasn't there, no one was guarding the place. The smell of rot and decay and despair hit her like a hammer when she stepped into the narrow corridor, making her eyes water. Saliva filled her mouth as she gagged and tried not to vomit. She covered her nose and mouth with her sleeve and breathed through it as shallowly as she could. There was just enough light to see by. She found where they had been keeping Theon. Removing a small jar from one of the many pockets in her woollen dress, she began scraping the dried blood off the wooden frame and floor. It wasn't as good as fresh blood for a tracking spell, but it would work almost as well when mixed with water.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway. She ducked into the shadows immediately. They soon faded away. Bonnie inched her way out of the cell, trying her best not to make a sound as she crept back out into the night. The castle itself was almost empty. Still, she pulled her hood over her head and pretended to be one of the remaining servants as she stuck to the shadows. Maester Luwin's study was at the top of one of the towers that overlooked the entire city. Books and papers lay scattered where the Boltons had cast them after ransacking the place. They had no need for knowledge and wisdom; not when they had their steel. Bonnie picked up the papers – parchments, really – and put them back on the desk. It was an automatic action. She didn't know why she even bothered. There were a pile of rolled up maps. She picked out the best ones and tucked them under her cloak. For sentimental reasons, she plucked a book off the shelf. The Conquests of Aegon Targaryen. She didn't know why she took it, because a book would only weigh her down, but she stowed it away anyway in a pack she had made from her shawl.

Now she needed other supplies. The kitchens, too, were ransacked, but she knew the larder better than any Bolton. There were some wedges of hard cheese left at the back and some form of hardtack which would need to be softened with water before being eaten. In the bottom of a barrel, she found some apple pieces which she had brushed with oil and toasted to make crisps. She tucked all of this into her pack and secured it to her like a crossbody backpack before making her way out.
of the castle and towards the stables.

The stablemaster had been slaughtered like all the rest of Winterfell and the new stablemaster had come with the Bolton force. The man leaned against a bale of straw. His soft snores were muffled by the dirty woollen cowl he had pulled up over his face to keep it warm. Bonnie's breaths emerged as puffs of white steam. Tack hung from nails on the walls. She crept up to the wooden stalls which contained the stable's more appealing inhabitants. A soft whiskery nose poked over one of the doors as the horse investigated the intruder.

"Shh," she whispered to it. At the same time, she felt like an idiot for believing that a horse could ever understand her. The animal whickered and sniffed, causing its neighbours to poke their noses out to see what this was all about.

Bonnie saddled Butterfly, Bran's horse. The gelding was the calmest animal known to humankind. He tolerated ineptitude like no other and chomped patiently on an apple chip while Bonnie fumbled with the saddle. The cold made her fingers numb and clumsy. She swore under her breath as she tightened the girth, only to find that whenever she thought she had finished, the straps had mysteriously loosened. She gave Butterfly a stare and kneed him in the belly, making him expel the lungful of air he'd been keeping in, before she started tightening the girth again.

All the while, she kept listening to the guard's snores, occasionally interrupted by a snort or two. But, as she climbed onto Butterfly, she became aware that he had been quiet for a couple of minutes.

"Well, well, what have we got here?" asked the man. He grinned. His teeth were crooked and yellowed.

Bonnie bit back a scream as he advanced on her. Butterfly snorted, sensing danger.

The man reached out to grab her. Bonnie reacted. She lifted her hand, feeling the power prickle behind her eyes, like tears. Sparks flew in her vision, although no one else would see anything of that kind. The man's eyes widened. He dropped as if he were a puppet and all his strings had been suddenly cut. He would not awaken again. Unlike a vampire, he would not be able to recover from the bursting of so many micro-arteries in his brain.

Bonnie quickly mounted Butterfly. Her blood was roaring in her ears. She felt lightheaded, as if she were controlling her body remotely and watching what was happening from very far away. None of this felt real. It hadn't felt real for a long time. As the horse clattered through the cobblestone streets, men shouted at her to stop. She rode them down. Arrows were fired. She held her breath, ducked, hoped that they would miss. They flew over her head. Too late she remembered a shielding spell she had seen in Emily Bennett's Grimoire. Would it even work? She'd never used it before. Flying projectiles had never really been an issue in Mystic Falls. She clung to the pommel and fistfuls of Butterfly's mane. Without Ramsay Snow to tell them what to do, the men were aghast and unable to react. Butterfly leapt over a stack of crates full of supplies. The mist swirled about his legs. Bonnie kept looking down at the road only to find that she couldn't really see it. It had blurred into a mass of grey that streamed past her.

The gate was in sight, but it was closed. Great. Why hadn't she thought of that? She wracked her brains for the right spell. For all their similarities, she was not Hermione Granger and "Alohamora" was not going to work on this gate. She conjured the first basic spell she had ever learned; burning water. The damp wood of the gate burst into flames. The magical fire became real as it caught onto the wood which was drying out from the heat. Men panicked. They didn't know what they were seeing. They didn't know what to do. The archers were still shooting but the dark and their fear made their arrows fly wide. She was only one very small target. It wasn't like shooting into a mass...
of charging men where you were bound to hit something.

At the last moment, just a few feet from the gate, Bonnie flung a bout of strong wind at the weakened and charred frame, causing it to burst open before she and Butterfly crashed into it. She was almost thrown when Butterfly came to a stop, but she kept kicking him until he started moving again, although she wasn't sure in which direction.

And then they were free. She could see the hills disappearing in to the mist before her. Something wet ran down her upper lip. She wiped it away. Her hand came away smeared with blood. Her stomach flip-flopped and felt as if it wanted out of her body. It was utterly dark and she could barely see her fingers before her face, or perhaps it was just her. The clouds veiled the moon and all the stars. She urged Butterfly on, knowing that she didn't need to head in the correct direction. She just needed to get away from Winterfell.

The men were shouting and clamouring behind her but she continued. The mist soon muffled their voices and, before long, they faded away altogether.

In all her life, Bonnie had never been alone in the wilderness and especially not as a fugitive. She didn't know what she should do first except for the fact that she needed to find Theon. No, it was not so much a need as a want. She wanted to ask him why he would do this to the family that had loved and sheltered him like one of their own. Lord Stark had been as good as a father to him as his own father; better, even, since his own father had given him up as a hostage and, as far as she knew, Balon Greyjoy had never so much as sent a letter to Theon.

She didn't know how long she had ridden for. As the black sky lightened and turned into grey, she realized that she was in completely alien territory and she had no idea if she was north, south, east or west of Winterfell. She dismounted and tied Butterfly to a sparse and hardy tree that grew at the foot of a hill. The hill would give them some shelter from the wind and if they were lucky, it wouldn't rain.

She spread out one of the maps on the ground and lit the candles she had taken from the kitchen before cutting her hand and muttering the spell as her blood dripped onto the parchment. The blood gathered into one large droplet and settled somewhere west of Winterfell. At least she knew where she was now. She wiped her own blood away and bound her hand. She would rest here a while. Her head felt woozy and her limbs just wouldn't do what she wanted them to. Her stomach growled. She ate some apple crisps before wrapping herself in her cloak.

The cold permeated her very bones. The wind whispered. She ignored it as much as she could. Exhaustion finally caught up with her as she reviewed the events of last night. Would they bother coming after her now? She was no one important. No one even knew who she was. No one cared. Her friends were out there, too busy fighting their own wars to worry about her. Bran and Rickon were out there too and she needed to find them. Hopefully Osha would have persuaded Bran that he needed to go to his brother rather than north of the Wall where there was nothing but ice and wasteland and the only thing he could do there was die of exposure.

She fell into an uneasy sleep. The sun was high in the sky when she woke up but it didn't seem any warmer than it had been. She untied the dozing Butterfly, which woke him up, and mounted him again. She needed water. There had to be some in the North. It wasn't exactly a desert of that sort. Water ought to be downhill. She followed the slopes until she came upon a patch of brush and a few trees growing around a little spring welling up from between the rocks. A heart tree leaned over the spring, its branches like fingers dipping into the surface. The face wept blood, as all heart trees did. She scooped up water with her bare hands. It was so cold that it numbed her to the bone but she didn't care. It washed away the taste of dust and smoke from her throat and refreshed her
more than anything else could have. When she finished, she wiped her hands on her skirt and looked at the tree. She didn't know why, but she pressed her forehead against its smooth trunk, feeling its life. Its leaves rustled. Was it speaking?

"I don't understand you," she whispered. "I don't know what you're trying to tell me." Did it mourn the loss of the old world when southern ways had not yet come north? Did it weep for those days it could never get back? Perhaps it was weeping for the world that had turned into hell. Or was she simply projecting?

Her few meagre supplies were not going to last her for very long. She had a little coin that she could use to buy food. After that, she wasn't sure what she could do unless she intended to barter with Butterfly. But then what? Jon Snow had left the Wall to be with Elena. Even if she did reach the Wall, why would they take her in? Her only option was to go south and try to find the king. Doubtless such a large force would leave a trail somewhere and Katherine had created such a reputation for herself that people would be telling tales about the Stark army and the queen for years to come.

After all this effort in fleeing north, it was a little funny that she would have to do a u-turn. She had always been particularly good at those when she had learned to drive. And what wouldn't she give for a car with a nice heater and a GPS? She patted Butterfly's neck and wished he would be like one of those horses that would allow her to lean against his warm stomach to sleep. But he wasn't.

She travelled off road as much as possible, stopping only at the tiniest of villages to obtain things that she couldn't get by herself. Sometimes she cheated and lured animals into traps with magic, careful not to strain herself just in case she needed it for something more significant than food acquisition. She was too conspicuous. There was no one like her in Westeros. Standing out was not a good thing when one was a fugitive. Would the Boltons be looking for her? Then again, why would they? She'd hidden herself away long before they had come onto the scene. They wouldn't even know about her and wouldn't they have better things to do than chase after one runaway servant girl, even if she had been Theon's…

Mistress. Her disgust at what she had done fully sank in, now. She had been a mistress. To a spineless, backstabbing wannabe who had thrown his only friends to the wolves and murdered two innocent boys. How could she have done such a thing? For survival. It made her want to throw up a little in her mouth. But you did it to live. Surely that counts for something.

Yes, survival did. Survival meant she could help Bran and Rickon. Survival meant she could tell the king what really happened. Survival meant she could see her friends again and find out what happened to them. Survival counted for a lot. And if she had to cheat and lie and kill to do it…it was still worth it.

"Look at you!" she whispered to herself. "You're thinking like…a vampire!" And not the good type like Stefan, but like Damon or Katherine or even Klaus. Ten months ago, the very thought that she and Katherine and Klaus had something in common wouldn't have even crossed her mind. Now she felt like she understood where they were coming from, some of the time, at least. Not that she would kill and murder and cheat and lie just to control people for the sake of controlling them. But when had they done that? There had always been a purpose to their manipulations.

She looked down at her hands. She wasn't sure she liked what she had become.

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Harrenhal

Blood was so difficult to clean out of stones. It seeped into the cracks and stayed there no matter
what the servants did. They had no bleach in Westeros. Katherine would reconsider staging another assassination attempt in her bedroom in the future. She sighed as she looked down at the rust-coloured stains. They were beginning to smell funny. Robb lay in bed, swathed in bandages and looking very much in need of being saved.

"You're not quite well enough to get out of bed yet," she chided gently as she pushed Robb back down as he tried to get up. He was too weak to actually put up much resistance, but he tried anyway and scowled at her.

"I'm fine, Katherine," he said. "I need to do something. I hate staying in bed doing nothing. Someone out there tried to kill me. Don't tell me it's the Freys. It's too easy an answer."

"Sometimes, the most obvious answer is the right one," said Katherine. "The world isn't as complicated as you think."

"You don't believe that, do you?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you're too clever. You know this is what someone would do if they didn't want me to have an alliance with the Freys." He paused. "Did Damon seem odd to you on that night? Why would he silence them all?"

Katherine sighed and, for the umpteenth time, swallowed the urge to throttle Damon Salvatore. Indeed, why had he done such a ridiculous thing and brought all suspicion upon himself? If even Robb suspected something, then it really had been very badly done.

"Why is it so beyond the Freys to do such a thing?" asked Katherine. "Maybe they thought you would never suspect them, especially on the eve of the wedding, so they would try if they were given enough incentive, if you know what I mean. A new title or a fief, for example? They've already betrayed you once. They've tried to coerce you into marrying a girl who was both beneath you and abhorrent to you and now they're forcing your hand again before they will do their duty to help you. Why wouldn't they stoop so low?"

Robb shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. They've wanted Edmure for years and I am giving him to them, gods forgive me," he said. "It brings them no advantage if I'm dead."

"Are you so sure about that?" asked Katherine.

Robb opened his mouth to speak but a knock on his door interrupted him.

"Your Grace," said his squire. "Three emissaries from the Twins have arrived, bearing a letter from Lord Walder Frey."

Elijah scrutinized Robb Stark from the shadows behind Hosteen and Symon Frey as the young king broke the blood red wax seal of Walder Frey's letter.

My dear soon-to-be great-nephew,

I graciously accept your offer of your uncle Lord Edmure Tully's hand in marriage to one of my daughters, despite your former betrayal of your promises to me.

As a sign of my generosity and my willingness to overlook your past transgressions against House Frey, I have sent three portraits of some of my daughters with my sons for Lord Edmure to choose
However, reconciliation would not be complete without a meeting and a celebration of the joining of our two families. It would not be befitting of any of my daughters to have anything less than a traditional wedding. Therefore, I would ask that, to show your sincerity, you would ride to the Twins with all haste for the celebrations in two weeks.

Walder Frey

Lord of the Crossing

Robb Stark's brow furrowed as he read the letter, which had been written with an inappropriate sense of familiarity, Walder having resisted most of Elijah's advice on phrasing. Hosteen leaned back and rested his laced-together hands on his burgeoning stomach, awaiting an outburst that would probably never come.

Katherine raised an eyebrow at Elijah, for she had read the letter over Robb's shoulder and recognized his script. The expression was so minute that none save he noticed it. He kept his face still, his muscles a perfect mask after centuries of practice.

"Two weeks is too soon," said Robb Stark at last. He set down the piece of creased parchment which then started curling up on itself.

"Forgive me, my lord, but do you not want our houses to be joined as soon as possible?" asked Hosteen. He unlaced his fingers and leaned forward, the tendons in his neck raised and ready for a fight. Symon put a hand on his older brother's arm to calm him down.

"You must have heard of the recent events," said Robb. His face was still pale from whatever injuries the assassins had inflicted on him. "I am not yet quite well enough to ride with such haste after my injury."

"My apologies on my brother's behalf, Your Grace," said Symon. "He is a brash man – a soldier, you must understand – who does not know how to speak well. However, in times of war, would you not agree that it is best not to tarry? A new dawn could change everything."

Symon thought himself smooth-tongued, but he wasn't smooth enough and that barely veiled threat would make any Stark raise his defences. Lately, Robb Stark seemed to have learned that the best defence was an offence.

But Robb said nothing. Battle had hardened him and given him armour. He let his hand rest beside the letter but he did not pick it up again. The crackling and murmuring of the flames in the hearth filled the uncomfortable silence.

"I will have time to make my arrangements," said Robb. "You will have your answer tomorrow morning."

"You must be tired after such a long and arduous journey, my lords," Katherine quickly added to divert the direction of the conversation. "Do allow my servants to draw your baths and to bring you some refreshments."

Hosteen snorted at her offer of hospitality. "Whore," he whispered under his breath, thinking that no one would hear. Katherine simply smiled and Elijah had no doubt that she was preparing the very worst of torments for Hosteen Frey. But, for now, she had bigger fish to fry. She waited until the other two had gone. Elijah made to follow, but she stopped him.
"My husband would speak to you, Elijah," said Katherine. In a quieter whisper, she added, in French, just to be safe, "I know Walder Frey means him nothing but harm, Elijah, and you know it too. Please let him know that."

It was his turn to raise an eyebrow but there was no time to ask questions. Still, Katherine did not say 'please' (sincerely, that was) lightly. She must have been at the end of her wits if she would come pleading with him.

He bowed to Robb in acquiescence to his unspoken command.

"Elijah," said Robb. He looked the Original up and down, as if expecting him to have changed in the intervening months between his leaving the Stark camp and his arrival at Harrenhal. Robb indicated the seat recently vacated by Symon and that Elijah should sit down. "How fares your father?" he asked. "I hope he does not hold a grudge against me for my previous actions."

"That depends on whether you regret them or not, Your Grace," said Elijah. "But my feeling is that you probably don't." He smiled and looked at Katherine. She ignored him.

"Does your father seek to pursue this grudge, then?" asked Robb.

"His intent is quite evident within his letter, Your Grace," said Elijah. He didn't want to have to tell Robb. The boy was the type of person who needed to discover things for himself and make up his own mind. He wouldn't listen to anyone if he didn't think it was his own idea in the first place.

"He says he wants my uncle to marry his daughter," said Robb. "That I know. But what do you think he really wants? Katherine and my brother Jon believe that he means us ill. What do you think? Does he mean to harm us?"

"Our dear Elijah may not be a Frey in name, but he is a Frey in blood. It would be … in very poor form of him to speak ill of his father." Elijah inclined his head at Katherine's reminder that he should at least try to pretend to be a good little Frey bastard but he could not help remembering. "Overdo it, Elijah," Katherine whispered so softly in French that no one heard her. But he did. "Sell him the idea."

Snippets of conversation, whispers in the dark, ravens sent in utter secrecy. Bolton. Lannister. Frey. But Katherine was right. It would sound very suspicious of him to speak out against Walder Frey, what with Frey having favoured him so much and raised him so high. Katherine gave him a look. Elijah could see the thoughts running through her mind. She didn't trust him entirely. If she had been in his place, she would have let Robb stumble into a trap. Helping him would bring no advantage. But Elijah was not Katherine. Or were they just the same? "He will do nothing that is not in his best interests, Your Grace," said Elijah slowly. "And, currently, his interests align with yours."

"That soothes my mind," said Robb. Elijah willed him to understand just how hard they were trying not to do that. "Thank you, Elijah. You have been a great comfort to me. The servants will take you to your chambers."

Elijah bowed and turned to go.

"And, Elijah," said Robb suddenly.

"Your Grace?"

"I'm glad you're back."
"See, Katherine?" asked Robb, once they were alone. "You heard Elijah. I do not believe that even Walder Frey would dare to violate guest rights. They are sacred."

"Oh, my love, the greed of men is stronger than any sacred vow. Even your own countrymen would cut down their own gods and sell them to unbelievers to make baubles and furniture," said Katherine. "I would say Walder Frey puts as much stock in religion as the southerners do in the sacred nature of weirwoods."

"It's not about religion," said Robb. "Any man who violates guest rights would never be trusted or be able to hold his head high again. Walder Frey's reputation is already in the sewers —"

"Therefore, he cannot possibly sink lower," interjected Katherine. She knelt at Robb's feet and took his hands in hers. His eyes softened as he lifted her up.

Surely he could not still be determined to go? Robb began pacing on the flagstones. His heavy boots beat an echoing rhythm in the empty hall. She sat still, with her hands in her lap. Elijah had not been as blunt as he possibly could about it, but surely all those hints had been good enough? She supposed she couldn't really expect Elijah to throw away his one and only chance to become the Lord of the Crossing. With Walder Frey's name dragged through the dregs of the metaphorical sewer, all his sons would think that it would be their chance to rise up and take their father's place. It would be a succession war; one which Elijah would be more than capable of winning, despite not being a Frey of any sort.

"Elijah has been raised high by Walder Frey. It would be in his best interests to cling onto the rung he has and climb higher still."

"I do not believe Elijah would do such a thing. He has been a loyal and true friend, Katherine," said Robb. "I trust him."

"But Robb..." began Katherine.

The door opened a crack and Damon poked his head in, uninvited and unwanted. "You trusted Theon Greyjoy too, and you've known him since you were eight. Or was it nine?"

"Out!" roared Robb. He made to slam the door in Damon's face, but Damon moves out of the way quickly enough to not have his face smashed. Now that would have been awkward, not to mention the explanation that would have to be given when Robb saw Damon's smashed face healing itself. As if they didn't have enough problems already.

"He might be inappropriate but he isn't wrong, you know, my love," said Katherine. She stood up. He placed his hands on her shoulders as if to steady her. "You should have a little more faith, my beloved," he said softly, never taking his gaze off her face. She stared into his large blue eyes, so beautiful with the dilated pupils and the wide trusting look. Not for the first time, she feared that she might see them close and never open again. She shook away the jolt of fear. What was wrong with her? "Not all men hide dark intents. I know you've seen things, but surely you have also seen the good in people? Even if you don't trust Elijah, you should trust me. Do you trust me?"

Katherine nodded. He was telling her what he thought to be true. She knew that. He would never lie to her. Whether what he believed to be true was really true was another story altogether. Trusting people never made it far. All her victims had trusted her at one point or another. She had trusted Klaus, to a certain extent. Ned Stark had trusted Petyr Baelish. "Of course I trust you," she said, hiding her doubts behind a veil of sweetness that he lapped up. "I trust you with all my heart, Robb."
"That is good, for I need to do this. I need those ten thousand men." He folded her into his arms. She breathed in his masculine scent of sweat and musk and held him close, as if her embrace could protect him. "With those ten thousand men, we could win this war, and then this whole damn affair would be over and we could go home."

Sometimes, she wondered whether it was better to know or to be ignorant. What would it be like to have so much faith in the goodness of people? Well, one would be dead, for a start, and it wouldn't be like anything.
Katherine goes behind Robb's back to deal with the Freys.

Chapter 113: Get Smart

Harrenhal

The wind howled outside the window. A servant had forgotten to secure the shutters properly and they clapped to and fro, applauding the onslaught of weather, which was laughing at them. Elijah quickly closed them and latched them shut. He didn't mind the cold but, if he could help it, he would rather not have to live in conditions fit for a setting in a sensational Radcliffe novel. The cold draughts had blown out his candles and he was left in relative dimness.

A figure stood in the doorway. "Katherine," he said. "Aren't you supposed to be … elsewhere?"

"It didn't work," she said. She came inside and shut the door behind her. "Elijah, it didn't work. He's still going. I need you to tell me what Frey is planning."

"I am not completely certain."

"Elijah." Warning tinted her voice. She took his hands. "Please, don't make me do something drastic."

"I was under the impression you rather enjoyed drastic things," he said.

"I am not even in the mood to flirt," she responded.

"And I am telling you the truth. I have heard nothing concrete. Walder Frey wouldn't tell me anything certain. He is well aware that, during my time as Robb's squire, we had gotten along."

"But you must have heard something."

"Well, a little more than something, but nothing more than rumours on the street."

"The word on the street more often than not has some truth to it. Tell me everything and I shall decide what to believe."

"He has been liaising with the Lannisters."

"And you did not intercept any of the letters?"

"And risk being discovered? I have not your talent for forging wax seals."

Katherine preened a bit. She might not have been in the mood to flirt, but she did like accepting praise where it was due. It had been her whole life's goal to achieve greatness. Even Katherine needed validation sometimes.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," she said.
"And Boltons," added Elijah.

"As in Roose Bolton?" asked Katherine. She kept her voice neutral, but he had known her long enough to sense her surprise. "Actually, I would expect that. Bolton is not...like the other northerners." She sat down on his bed. "I'm worried, Elijah."

"I know you are," said Elijah. He sat down beside her like he had once done so long ago, before Niklaus' ambitions had driven them apart, before the very first seed of vampirism had ever been planted in his sweet Katerina's mind, before he had become a man he had despised. "But he has you." He folded his hands around her little ones.

"You have too much faith in me."

"Do my ears deceive me, or does my Katerina doubt herself?"

"You know I don't do that, Elijah. I've never done that."

Elijah smiled in the darkness. "You will triumph. I know you will."

"Such certainty would be better warranted if you helped me."

"I will do what is in my power. That I promise you."

She leaned in. He almost leaned back but stopped. Why should he be the one to give way? Her lips brushed his; lightly, softly, searingly. He pulled her closer, his need almost devouring him, consuming all thought. He remembered the feel of her against his body. Then he remembered the sleeping king not so far away from them; the young boy who trusted him so fully that he felt he had to prove that he was worthy of his confidence. He pushed Katherine away.

"Elijah," she whispered.

"No, Katherine. We must not."

"We are vampires, immortals, born and made to rule the world. There is no 'must' in our vocabulary. We do what we want."

He held her by the shoulders at an arm's length. "And Robb Stark?"

She hesitated. "He will come to know me soon enough," she said. "It would not be love if he only loved the illusion of me."

"And what of your feelings for him?"

"Since when did love and sex have anything to do with each other?"

"You have something good here, Katherine. I've seen it change you into something greater than you were. Don't ruin it." He paused. "Do you love him?"

"I suppose I do, but how do you even define love? Maybe I never knew what it was."

"The Katerina I knew would never have been so unsure of love."

"That Katerina almost ended up as Klaus' sacrificial lamb on a slab of stone," scoffed Katherine. "Why would I want to be her again?" She stood and smoothed her skirts, patting her hair to make sure that not a single strand was out of place. She pulled out a little pocket mirror and cleaned up her smeared lipstick. "Fine, be that way if you must, Elijah. But if you put such great importance
on my love for Robb, then you will help me to protect him. I need you to go back to the Twins and report back to me. I no longer have my spies in the Lannister camp, as you must be well aware."

Jon could not stop staring at the man. There was nothing outstanding about him, other than his inhuman calm. "You're the Original Elijah," he said finally. Nothing about him indicated the strength and the strange sense of integrity and protectiveness over Elena that the latter had spoken of. He did, however, possess a sort of grace that would have made him rather out of place amongst the northerners and definitely did so amongst the Freys.

"Yes," said Elijah.

The man might not be very tall, but there was something about him that made him feel sharp, like a long polished blade that had seen many battles. Jon stared at him. The one and only Elijah. The Original. "Does something about my person offend you, my lord?" asked Elijah.

"No," said Jon quickly. He looked away, not aware that he had been staring at all. Then he looked up again. He wasn't afraid of him. Elena had said there was no reason to be. "I just…thought you might be taller."

"Touché, Jon Snow," said Elijah.

"You know who I am?" asked Jon.

"Your legends are legion," said Elijah. "Most of them, I might add, are not complimentary."

"Touché," said Jon, relishing the chance to use this new and very sophisticated word. He looked the man up and down. There was something that he exuded; a confidence beyond other men who looked his age but were actually much younger. He had seen kingdoms rise and fall. He had witnessed the wonders of Elena's world. She hadn't been too clear on what wonders they were exactly but he knew how efficiently her people could kill. Elijah had seen all of that come to pass. He might have even helped it to come to pass. Why was he here? Was he friend or was he foe? Did he support his liege Walder Frey or did he support his friend, Robb?

"I am very glad to be able to rouse your curiosity, Jon Snow. Alas, I cannot tarry," said Elijah, clearly amused by Jon's uncertainty. "Symon and Hosteen are ready to retire back to their quarters and I must join them lest they suspect that I am consorting with the enemy, which I am. We leave tomorrow morning."

"So soon?" blurted Jon. "But you've only just arrived."

"Well, time is of the essence at this juncture," said Elijah. "Lord Frey is eager for the marriage to go ahead." The way he said it made Jon uneasy. It was almost as if Elijah had meant for him to be suspicious. The vampire tilted his head and gave him a pointed sideways glance before bowing and departing, gliding more than walking down the hallway and disappearing around the corner.

"Handsome, isn't he?"

Jon jumped and reached for his sword. Katherine's ringing laugh echoed between stone walls. "It's just me," she said with a smirk. "Stop being so nervous, Jon. You're a lord's brother. It's not becoming of a young lord like yourself to startle at every little thing."

"You surprised me, that was all," said Jon. She knew fully well that he could not hear vampires when they did not intend to be heard, and she had definitely used her vampiric abilities to sneak up on him just then. "Did you hear what he said?"
"Of course," said Katherine.

"What does he mean?"

"Exactly what he said." Katherine waited for him to say something. When he didn't, she added, "Maybe a little bit more. It's less of what he said and more of what he didn't say."

"Do you think Walder Frey means to…"

"I don't think it, Jon. I know it."

"And Robb—"

"Is a Stark and thinks everyone else should be one too."

"We must warn him."

"Don't you think I've tried?"

Jon's heart sank. Of course she would have tried. It would do her no good if Robb got himself killed, unless she was behind it too? Then again, if she were, why would she be telling him all of this. "The murder attempt," he said. "That was you."

"Careful who you lob accusations against, Jon Snow. Besides, I had nothing to do with that debacle."

"Damon, then," said Jon, remembering how the vampire had 'angrily' killed all the murderers before any of them had a chance to speak.

"If I had planned anything of that sort, you can bet that it would not look so suspicious," Katherine assured him with a disdainful sniff at either his intellect or Damon's abilities to execute good plans well.

"So what do we do now?" asked Jon. "We can't just let Robb walk into a trap."

"I don't know what else we can do," said Katherine. "But I'll be there, don't you worry." Her face lost all its flirty mirth as her eyes became distant. Then she shook her head. "I think you'd better go and be ready. Robb intends to depart for the Twins very soon."

Katherine finished writing the order and blew on the ink to dry it. She had begged off dinner, saying that she felt a little ill and could not eat. In truth, she had fed just a day before. Fortunately, Robb seemed not to notice her glowing complexion and her rosy cheeks and bought the lie hook, line and sinker. Now she had about an hour to make everything ready. Her imitation of Edmure's writing, she thought, was very good.

She sealed the letter with the replica she'd made of Edmure's seal, using some plaster and a bar of soap, having first pressed Edmure's stolen seal into some soap to get the impression. Then she'd copied the impression with plaster one night when Robb had been deeply asleep and dreaming of good things. Edmure had only briefly wondered why in the world he had left his ring on his desk, later assuming that he had used it to seal something and then forgotten about it.

Arranging cushions to look like her sleeping form beneath the sheets, she changed into a uniform of a page from Riverrun. It was a little too baggy in places, but it would do. Her hair she put under a cap that was similar to a beret, which was similar to a style of hat favoured by young dandyish
Westerosians.

Edmure's captain took the letter without so much as looking at her. He read the order with a furrowed brow, but accepted it without question. "Tell Lord Edmure I will arrange it," he said to her.

Katherine nodded and kept her face straight. Riverlanders were so honest, barring a certain family of them who, if she had anything to say about it, soon would cease to exist at all. She left the captain and went back to her room, keeping to the shadows. The watch's shift was changing. Sleepy guards stumbled off to bed. Nobody noticed her out there.

"Katerina." The whisper was so soft it might as well have been the murmur of the breeze, but she knew it wasn't. She ducked into the darkness, sandwiched between two high stone battlements. "Elijah," she said. "Damon. Oh, look, you brought the kids. Jon, lovely to see you, as always." She ignored Elena.

"What are you doing?" Jon demanded.

"Scheming, Katherining," said Damon.

"See? You know it already," said Katherine.

"If I was not mistaken, that was the captain of Edmure Tully's guard," remarked Elijah. "What are you doing with Edmure's men?"

"Katherine is not doing anything with Edmure's men," said Katherine. "Edmure, however, needs his own people in the Twins. But if we're going to interrogate each other, let me ask how you lot ended up out here in the middle of the night together?"

"I am practically the captain of Robb's Kingsguard now," said Damon. "You didn't think I'd let anything so suspicious happen without noticing it, did you?"

"And, instead of telling the king, you decide to go and find Elijah?" asked Katherine.

"I knew it was you," said Damon. "I thought I might need backup."

"Yes, indeed, even Damon Salvatore comes to realize that he is not, in fact, invincible. Shocking, I know," said Elijah.

"But what were you doing?" Jon insisted. He had a very one-tracked mind.

"It wasn't going to be another assassination attempt, was it?" said Elena dubiously.

"The very definition of insanity is trying the same thing twice and expecting different results," said Katherine. She did not need to say that she was sane. Although, come to think of it, was she? Why was she going to such lengths to help a boy who clearly did not think he needed or wanted it?

"So," said Damon. He leaned against the stone wall and crossed his arms.

"What could I possibly want with Edmure's men?" asked Katherine. "Now, there's a test for that diabolical little brain of yours, Damon."

Elijah smiled. He had gotten the idea, if not all the details of it.

"You're not going to hurt him, are you?" asked Jon.
"Sometimes I feel like it, but no," said Katherine.

"She's forged orders from him," began Damon slowly. Had they been listening in on her all this time and she hadn't noticed? She was getting slack. Becoming the Queen in the North had dulled her instincts as a vampire. She had used to be so suspicious and so cautious, always listening out for sounds that shouldn't be there. How in the world had she missed Jon's guarded, but still human breathing and heartbeat? She heard it clearly, now; nervous, thumping, strong. She'd been far too pleased with herself for arranging everything; that was why. It would not happen again. Pride in small amounts was healthy. Too much and one became Jaime Lannister.

Four pairs of eyes were trained on her. She sighed. "Do I really need to spell it out for you? No? Yes? We need men inside Frey walls. Not just a man, Elijah. Men. I can't send my own because they look and sound like northerners and there isn't a single accent coach to be found in all of Westeros who can teach them not to sound like northerners in time. Edmure's men were right there for use."

"And what are they going to do inside Frey walls?" asked the ever-suspicious Jon. Why couldn't he just believe and accept that she was doing this for Robb's good, like everyone else seemed to think so? Even Elena hardly questioned her and she was her biggest detractor. Oh, right, the Damon influence. Boys could be so stupid and petty, which was why she preferred men.

"Listen, observe, what all good spies do. And, if it comes down to it, we'll have men we can use inside the Twins," said Katherine.

"Robb will be bringing the entire army," said Jon.

"And they will be unprepared and celebrating. And drunk." She paused. "They cannot be drunk."

"It's a wedding," said Damon. "They're northerners. They've got to be drunk."

"Not this time," said Katherine. "If the Freys are planning anything, and you're saying they are, Elijah, then that's exactly what they want. I wouldn't put it past them to drug the alcohol."

Elijah nodded in agreement.

"I'll handle it," said Katherine. "As for Edmure's men, they will need little nudges in the right direction, Elijah. See to it that they get it."

"You don't have to ask," said Elijah. "I know what to do."

The Freys were getting ready to depart to take the message back to their father (biological and adoptive). Robb would follow in about two weeks to attend the wedding and seal the alliance. There wasn't much time left for Katherine to 'handle it', whatever 'it' was. Jon tried to keep himself calm. After all, hadn't she always handled everything to Robb's advantage? She was less a queen and more the Hand of the King. But prettier. Tyrion Lannister would say she was the first Hand of the King to have tits. For a scion of such a noble family, he could be quite vulgar. Why was he thinking of Tyrion Lannister at this point, anyway? Because he had seemed so different from the rest of his family? Just as Elijah seemed so different from all the Freys who had, judging by all appearances, adopted him? But, outcast though he was, Tyrion Lannister would always be a Lannister to the end of his days and he couldn't be trusted.

Elijah emerged from the stables, carrying a saddlebag of supplies for the journey to the Twins. Jon pulled him aside. It wasn't until after he had seized Elijah's arm that he realized how foolish he was. Elijah wasn't actually a Frey even though there was every possibility he could be as
treacherous as one, no matter what Elena might say. But if Elijah was a traitor and did intend to betray Robb, what could Jon achieve by confronting one of the most powerful beings to have ever stalked the earth alone? Katherine had subdued the Mountain without breaking a sweat. Damon had thwarted all the City Guard and massacred half of the Kingsguard (an exaggeration, but he currently held the record for highest number of Kingsguard killed by one man). Even Elena could have beaten Jon in a fight (not a fair one) if she put her mind to it and she was considered to be a baby by all the others. What could Elijah do with him? Jon wouldn't even be able to make a sound before the vampire killed him, if that was what he wanted.

"Lord Snow," said Elijah. "What is it that requires such urgency? As you can see, my company is about to depart and if you intend to do me harm, they will note my absence." The vampire seemed amused by Jon's cold earnestness even though his face remained perfectly neutral.

"Why are you helping us?" Jon blurted out. He hadn't meant to be that straight with him, but here it was. He was, after all, a Stark by blood if not by name.

"Do you suspect me of having other intentions?"

"Everyone has motives. What's yours?"

"Have you realized how quiet it is here? In fact, I do believe we are all alone. If, hypothetically speaking, a man were to confront me here, it would be very easy for me to do away with him if he meant me harm or vice versa."

Jon didn't say anything. Yes, he had realized that.

"But you need not worry, Jon Snow. I have no intention of exploiting your brother's trust. He might be young and more than a little naïve, but he has courage and potential. I can admire that. You did not know Katerina before she met him. He has taught her to care for someone other than herself. She is better with him."

Jon's brow furrowed. The idea then dawned on him; the secretive looks shared by Elijah and Katherine, the mutual understanding they seemed to have, his willingness to help.

"You love her," Jon whispered, taking a step backwards. This was too much for him to comprehend, again. The lines that linked them all grew with each revelation. They were all connected. "You're in love with Katherine. I understand why you would help her, but why would you want to help Robb?"

Elijah patted his shoulder. "You're young yet, Lord Snow," he said patronizingly. Jon wanted to snap at him but refrained. Compared to Elijah, he was a babe. No, worse. Perhaps Elijah deserved to be patronizing after everything he had done and seen. "The world is not as simple as you think it."

"Then explain it to me. I don't understand. If Elena were with...someone else, I would..." He trailed off. He didn't know how he might be able to bear it if he saw her with another man the way Katherine was with Robb.

"I'm afraid I can't," said Elijah. "Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I hear someone calling my name."

Jon nodded and let him past. After a while, he followed, tracing the vampire's steps out into the courtyard where Robb waited to see off their guests, soon to be family. Symon Frey looked satisfied with what he had achieved. Katherine smiled prettily and hid her face behind a feather fan
that he could swear was brand new. It was made with fluffy white plumes plucked from the tails of pheasants, teased and treated until they no longer looked like their former selves.

He took his place beside Damon who, while not family, was of a higher official rank than him.

"Where were you?" asked the vampire.

Jon shook his head. He didn't think he ought to share his foolishness in confronting Elijah alone. All that mattered was that the Original did not mean to harm Robb. The meeting could be as if it had never happened. Or did Elijah just mean to mislead him? Then again, it would be so much easier just to kill him.

"Come on, Frosty. You know you want to share," said Damon in a falsely enticing voice that made Jon want to smash his nose. They were friends, after all.

"Shut up," hissed the Hound. His presence was so startling to Jon, who hadn't thought any more of him after their arrival in Harrenhal, that he almost jumped.

"When did you start becoming a stickler for the rules?" Damon hissed back, but he did as he was asked and quietened down.

Robb stepped towards Symon before he mounted. "Go with all speed and tell your father that we are looking forward to the union of our two houses," he said.

"We look forward to welcoming you to the Crossing, Your Grace," said Symon. His small dark eyes glinted. Something about him reminded Jon of an eel; slippery, with sharp teeth, hiding in the mud, waiting to strike.

Elijah dipped his head in their general direction. His gaze met Katherine's. Nobody else would have noticed it but Jon, who knew, saw it pass between them. The sort of trust they had between them was...beautiful and touching. Elijah was Katherine's protector, whether she accepted it or not.

"So much unreleased sexual tension between those two," Damon whispered. Ah, so he'd seen as well. "But you knew that already. Mostly on poor Elijah's part, of course. Katherine's got him wrapped around her little finger. Elena has too, I suppose."

"Elena?" asked Jon a little too loudly and sharply. That he had not heard about.

"She didn't tell you?" asked Damon. "Oops. Sorry." He didn't sound sorry. Jon hardly cared.

What did Elena have to do with Elijah?!

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A/N: We're back! Telcontar's been taking some time off to work on her own novel.
The Spy Who Loved Me

Chapter Summary

Elijah chooses his side. Jon is afraid. Robb and Katherine arrive at the Twins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Twins

Dear Katerina, how she always did plan ahead. Elijah dismounted inside the cramped courtyard. Already, he could see suspicious looking Tully men trying to be Freys. It was a wonder they hadn't all been caught before he had arrived. But they would be caught sooner or later. Not all Freys were idiots and Symon, in particular, was sharper eyed than most. Edmure's men were sneaking about as if they were cartoon burglars and they hadn't even seen cartoons before. And they were doing it in a group. Some of them were sweeping the floor and others were pretending to be grooms and stableboys. One came to take Elijah's horse to the stables. Elijah quickly scanned the courtyard. Nobody was paying him much attention, as always. He was just the bastard, after all. Which was what he wanted. There were about twenty men. The groom who had taken his horse looked to be about the oldest so he assumed he would be in a position of command. And since he was a 'groom', Elijah would know where to find him. For now, he followed Symon's lead and obeyed the summons of their phlegm assailed liege and father.

Walder Frey was sitting in his customary chair at the front of the long great hall. Feeble light shone in through the windows which were currently being washed by the servants for the first time in what must have been fifty years. A brazier crackled in front of him. His young wife, Joyeuse, stood meekly by his side with a spittoon at her feet, ready to be of service whenever her husband wanted to hawk and spit.

Elijah bowed.

"So, the Young Wolf is coming?" said Walder.

"He is, Father, in two weeks' time, as planned," said Symon.

"Good," said Walder. "It will be a feast to remember. The Lords of the Crossing will offer the best that they have to the Lords of the North. We must have the finest wine and food and, of course, the best musicians." He got up. Elijah heard his old bones creak a little. The others might not know it but Walder's rheumatism and arthritis must be torturing him every day. The damp didn't help and he was too stingy to light great roaring fires in his hall as Robb Stark had done in his own draughty ones. Of course, Katerina probably wouldn't have let him be stingy. She was never one to scrimp and save, which was why she had become such a good swindler. Walder beckoned to Symon and Elijah with a gnarly hand that resembled nothing so much as a dead branch on an old tree.

His study was a cramped room littered with yellowing parchments and a few mouldering books on the shelves. There was a shoddy copy of the Great Houses of the Riverlands, a history of Aegon's conquest with the title rubbed off the spine, and a songbook that had spider web all over it. It had probably belonged to some lady from long ago and hadn't been opened since she'd died.
"The Lannisters have sent word," said Walder. "They will support us no matter what happens. Robb Stark is ours. The Riverlands are ours." Bit by bit, he outlined the idea of how he planned to have crossbowmen disguised as musicians in the two lofts above the great hall.

"My lord, I have a question," said Elijah.

"Spit it out," said Walder. He hawked. Symon handed him a spittoon. He spat.

"Can our crossbowmen play music?"

"What does that matter?" asked Symon.

"Katherine Stark was a bard. Surely she would suspect something if the music was out of time and out of tune."

Walder frowned. "You have a point," he said.

"Leave this to me, my lord," said Elijah. "And I will ensure that you will have an orchestra worthy of any king's court."

"What's an or-kiss-strah?" asked Walder. That was right. They lived in a time before such a term had been invented.

"That is what they call a large group of musicians in the south where I came from," said Elijah.

"You play music?" asked Symon.

"A little, for my own amusement, but I think my skill would be passable for this purpose."

"You will play for me," said Walder. He turned to Symon. "You may go. Have one of the servants bring a fiddle for Elijah."

Elijah smiled a little to himself as he tweaked the tuning pegs of this fiddle, such a primitive instrument that it was difficult to get a good sound out of it. Already, he was envisioning the counterfeit Stradivarius that he would make. Although music was never the point, of course. He would be up there to direct the musicians, to put a few of Edmure's men into the mix and, once the signal was given for the attack to begin, he would be there to take control of it.

Still, after having suffered bawdy medieval ballads for so long (he hadn't even liked them during the real Middle Ages), he would be glad for a chance to protect his own eardrums from the assault of more Westerosian offerings.

The fiddle was finally in tune. He played a jaunty jig, a bit of the solo part from a Mendelssohn violin concerto, and finally…

"The Rains of Castamere," said Walder Frey with a gleam in his eye. "I like that. I wonder if the bard will know?"

"She might," said Elijah. "But it will be too late."

An idea was beginning to form inside his head. First, a repertoire, replete with hidden meaning that only his peers would understand. Next, he would need to gather Edmure's men. Surely there had to be more than twenty. Elijah returned to the courtyard where he had first seen the incompetent spies. He would turn them into the CIA yet. Given a couple of decades. The groom had gone but a few questions revealed that the new man had gone to the stables to brush down the horses. What
he expected to learn in the stables, Elijah had no idea. It was better to be a kitchen-hand or house servant when one went undercover.

He found the man in the middle of cleaning a horse's hooves. The animals became uneasy when they smelled him. Animals knew better than humans most of the time when it came to the supernatural. Human senses meant that their minds could not accept what they already knew deep down in the most primal part of their brains.

"Did Lord Edmure say you had to make yourself as conspicuous as possible?" asked Elijah. The man jumped up, spilling the bucket of water he had been using. The dirty liquid soaked into the straw which would need to be changed out just in case it gave the horses any foot diseases. The damp wasn't good for them.

The man's eyes were as wild as a stallion cornered by wolves. He pulled out the short dagger at his belt and gripped it so tightly that his knuckles turned white and the blood was forced into the parts of his hand, making it look patchy beneath the reddish brown hairs.

"How many of you are there?" asked Elijah. He stroked one of the nervous horses. The understanding between these animals and vampires had often mystified him. They submitted so easily and while they were wary at first, it was not hard to win their friendship. It would be certainly easier than winning this man's friendship. At his touch, the animal quietened, although it still flicked its ears back and forth uncertainly.

The man charged him without a word. Elijah seized his wrist and twisted it, causing him to flip over onto his back and land on the damp straw. He wheezed and groaned.

"If I had wanted to kill you, it would not be difficult," said Elijah. "I ask again. How many of you are there?" Katerina would have at least sent in a hundred. Any less would not be of any use. When the man did not speak, he bent down to grip his throat, just firmly enough to show that he meant business.

The man tried to pry away his fingers, but it was about as useful as trying to change Katerina's mind when she'd set it on something. In this case, she was determined that Edmure's men would be of some use to her inside the Twins and Elijah was going to see to it that her expectations were not disappointed. He had his work cut out for him. This bunch was as incompetent as any group of hobby criminals that he'd seen.

"I know you work for Edmure Tully," said Elijah. No one else was listening in on them. They could speak quite freely here. "Katherine Stark is a friend."

The man's brow furrowed as he tried to connect the dots.

"You work for the king?" he finally asked.

"Yes," said Elijah. It was simpler than actually explaining the truth of his arrangement.

"Lord Edmure said we were to infiltrate the Twins," said the man.

"I can see that," said Elijah.

"How did you know I was a spy?"

How could anyone not know? But that was too obvious and Elijah was too polite to point it out. "How many of you are there?" Elijah asked again.
"One hundred and twenty," said the man.

"And you just told me?"

"You asked."

"I could have been lying."

The man gaped at him. "You…" he said in a strangled gasp.

"Relax. I wasn't," said Elijah.

"How can I trust you?"

"Now you're learning. But I have you at a disadvantage here. I have everything and you have nothing."

"We're alone here. I could kill you and no one would know."

Elijah gave him an indulgent smile. "I'm sure you could," he said.

The man became mute.

"You will simply have to take my word for it. Write to Katherine if you must."

"Katherine Stark? Why her?"

"Because Edmure has entrusted this to her. They are family, after all."

The man took his word at face value. These Riverlanders were just as honest as their northern cousins. They had no idea that not everyone believed in family, duty or honour. The idea that there could be people who cared naught for any of these things confounded them.

"I find myself in need of musicians. You wouldn't happen to have anyone in your company who knows how to play, would you?"

The man looked at Elijah warily. "Garrett and Kerrin might," he said. Now he had names.

"You will gather your men and meet me at the tavern at midnight," said Elijah. "Act natural, and don't trust anyone. You're not in Riverrun anymore."

My dearest Katerina,

What in the world possessed you to send these men to do the work of real spies? They have little idea of what is expected of them. It is very fortunate that no one spotted them before I did. The Freys are treacherous, not idiots.

I have had further confirmation that the Freys have been working with the Lannisters and, last night, whilst patrolling the castle grounds, I detected an obnoxious smell that I later discovered to be jars of that infamous wildfire, hidden in the cellar; gifts from King's Landing, no doubt, as part of the deal struck. I have every reason to believe that there is a traitor in your midst, Katerina. Be careful. In the meantime, I have found myself in the perfect position to misdirect any attacks during the wedding itself so you need not worry in that regard, even if it would be best if you could convince R it would not be in his best interest to attend or, if he must attend, to be unfashionably punctual. If Frey hadn't already met him before, I would suggest using D as a body double. It
would have been amusing if not a useful safeguard.

ET's men have fallen into line with very little persuasion. You should handpick them the next time and make sure they are of above average intelligence.

If you must send a reply, which I am not certain is necessary for it increases the risk of our plan being revealed, do use a pigeon. I find that Westerosians do not place much stock in what they consider to be fat and useless birds and would not notice one if it flew past their nets.

Forever and always

Yours,

EM

Dear E,

You must be as foolish as ET's men if you write to me at this juncture when the Fs must be on their highest guard. In my defence, these men were the only ones at hand and I had no command over which ones went as I was in disguise and working as ET's proxy. Still, I am gratified to know that you are making progress with them and I appreciate your ingenuity in using a pigeon instead. How unthinkable! The semblance of helplessness has ever been a woman's greatest weapon and it is comforting to know that we are not alone in this position, even if we do share it with the symbol of peace. I almost miss emojis right now because I would have placed an eyeroll.

R still refuses to listen to reason. I have tried every avenue, every argument – every persuasion. I am almost on the brink of telling him the truth about everything. Quel horreur! It's either that or knocking him out and locking him somewhere until this is all over. But I have managed to control myself thus far so he remains in the dark. J is on my side too. Perhaps there might be hope for him yet.

I will write more if there is any change of plan. Please continue to change languages every time you write, but no ancient Aramaic. Anything in Cyrillic would be excellent as no one here has even begun to grasp that alphabet system.

XOXO

K

Harrenhal

How to persuade Robb that it was a terrible idea to go? Katherine had a gut feeling and the last time she had had one of those, she had been human and it had been days before the full moon. And look at how that had turned out. She mused upon that point as she finished the final touches to her newest gown, a frothy, white dessert of silk and lace that used up so much fabric that she could have made three other dresses out of the same amount of material.

But those dresses favoured by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries needed to be big, with narrow bodices that pushed up one's bust and a very roomy bottom that could probably hide a small child or a dwarf and she needed to hide quite a few things beneath this skirt. The skirt itself was detachable for easy removal.

"What is that?" asked Arya. When Katherine had said "dressmaking", she had never seen anyone
flee as fast as Arya had. But now, she had come back, drawn by the allure of vampires, violence and sisterly bonding.

"How do you think it looks?" asked Katherine. She held up the dress to her body. It would need a crinoline to complete the look, of course, and it was the biggest crinoline she had ever worn in her life. Scarlett O'Hara herself would have been impressed with it.

"Like a dandelion puff," said Arya. She wrinkled her nose. "Are you going to fit through the door in that?"

"If the Freys don't have doors that can fit my dress, then it's their problem, not mine," said Katherine. She laid the dress down on the bed, next to a matching fan that had steel blades for ribs, covered with lace and feathers again to make it look like a normal ladies' fan, not that there was such a thing in Westeros.

"You don't want to go, do you?" asked Arya.

"Now, how do you know that?" asked Katherine.

"You keep trying to tell Robb it's a bad idea. He's just not listening. He's never been very good at listening to anyone."

"Some people see the world as they want it be, not how it is," said Katherine.

"You don't think it's safe for him to go?" said Arya.

Katherine fell silent. No, she did not, but what would scaring the girl achieve? She had tried to press her point many times and every time, she had failed. She wasn't going to press it any further; at least, not verbally. Perhaps there could be a way to convince Robb through actions, like another attempted assassination…

But, no. She had already used that trick once. He wouldn't fall for it again or, at best, he would be suspicious and conduct investigations. He wasn't stupid, just naïve.

"The Freys aren't worthy of hosting him, that's what I think. He is a king, not Walder Frey's equal."

"I am a king, but I also need Walder Frey's men," said Robb from the doorway.

"Can't you get them some other way? Uncle Edmure wants to marry a Frey as much as you did," said Arya.

"We have no choice, Arya, I've said this before," said Robb. He lifted her off the bed so he could sit down beside the latest additions to Katherine's wardrobe. Was he also going to tell Arya that he had also promised her to a Frey? Well, they had no reason to worry. It was never going to happen. Katherine wouldn't allow it. If everything went according to plan, the Freys would come to heel without any need for unnatural matrimonial bonding.

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Jon paced as Elena packed the things that they would need; little daggers to put up their sleeves and in their boots, gowns, and cloaks. She had managed to procure a white one for him, along with a gold belt. "Damon got you this," said Elena as she handed it to him. It was quite beautiful, not made entirely of real gold, of course, but it looked well enough that no one would notice. With the white ceremonial cloak, it made him look like a member of the Kingsguard.

Jon wondered whether Damon had stolen the belts from real Kingsguard that he'd killed. With a
sigh, he sat down on the edge of the bed. The belt weighed heavily in his hands as he toyed with it. It was such a great responsibility to protect the king, not only from his enemies but from himself, also. Robb was too good for all of these people. He would be a great king if he ever won the war but he needed to be a terrible person to win the war. And he just couldn't. As his brother, it was Jon's duty to do that for him. But how? The Freys seemed like an insurmountable obstacle. They didn't know what was going to happen. Katherine hadn't shared the details of Elijah's plan.

"What if it doesn't work?" he asked Elena. "What if…" The eventuality of it was just too terrible to even comprehend. This was Robb. He had always seemed so invincible. He'd beaten Jon at everything except hide-and-seek. He couldn't die. Yet that was a boy's fantasy. No one was invincible; not even immortals. Out there somewhere was a tree that could even kill Originals.

"It will work," said Elena stubbornly. "Robb has got Elijah on his side. And Katherine. Nobody's ever had those two working together for them before. And he has you and Damon to boot."

"Katherine doesn't seem to think much of our abilities," said Jon wanly. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to do."

"You will, when the time comes," said Elena.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you love Robb. You'll know what to do."

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**The Twins**

Stone arches leapt over a muddy rushing river. The Twins. Blue and silver flags fluttered in the wind, as if the bridge itself were not the biggest representation of the Frey sigil. Robb pushed away the sense of foreboding he felt upon seeing the fortress and the bridge. It should have been him coming to marry a Frey. Instead, he was riding beside the most beautiful woman in the world who was most definitely not a Frey.

Katherine wore a tan riding habit and matching kid-skin gloves and darker toned brown leather boots that, somehow, looked feminine. They had been designed for narrow little feet. No man or boy would have been able to fit his foot in one of those shoes. She had pinned up her hair and a pretty little hat of straw and ribbons was perched on top of it. Several pink silk roses and a white feather adorned the hat. The wind and exercise had made her cheeks rosy. She had never looked quite so lovely as she did now, sitting sideways on the grey mare he had given to her. Then again, she always looked lovelier than before whenever he looked at her.

"Well, Your Grace, here we are," she said. He reached over to briefly squeeze one of her gloved hands.

"It will be fine, Katherine. Trust me."

He urged his horse on, knowing that the rest of them would follow him. Grey Wind trotted beside him silently. The gates of the Twins opened for him, as it had so many months ago, when he had rushed south in desperation. In the end, he had not been in time. This time, perhaps, it would be better.

Iron-shod hooves clattered on the flagstones. Grey, white and gold banners streamed behind. The sky was overcast, as if the gods themselves were frowning upon him and his broken promises. Walder Frey was not there to greet him personally, but his sons stood there, dressed in what they
probably deemed was their best clothing, but it just looked odd. Sharp-shouldered jackets with large gold buttons stretched across too-broad chests and sometimes even broader bellies, or simply hung upon lanky frames that had never grown out of boyhood.

He saw Elijah among them, standing at the back, in a plain black doublet and because of his plain dress, he stood out. The assorted Freys bowed to Robb. He had the feeling he had met them before but there were so many of them that he could not remember a single name, save for that of his former squire and Symon's. He had only met the latter two weeks ago, after all.

Robb helped Katherine off her horse before turning his attention to the Freys. He nodded and smiled and exchanged small pleasantries with them. "How is your father?" he asked.

"The cold winds from the north have not been good for his health and he regrets that he could not be here to greet you in person," said Symon Frey. His teeth were crooked in a way that made them look like yellowed fangs. When he smiled, his face bore the appearance of a skull that had dried in the sun. Or so that was the feeling that Robb had. "He awaits you eagerly within."

The hall of the Twins was a dark and gloomy place. Faded tapestries, so old and encrusted with dirt that one could not possibly tell what colour they had been in life, kept out the moist chill winds that always swirled above large bodies of water.

Walder Frey sat at the very end. He looked as if he hadn't moved since the last time Robb had seen him.

"Your Grace," he said, slowly and mockingly. "What an honour it is for you to grace my halls with your presence. I would kneel and do you homage but, forgive my old knees, for while the mind is willing, the body is weak." He shakily stood and held out his hand for his young wife to support him down the steps. His pale eyes roamed firstly over Robb, then his mother, before finally falling upon Katherine.

Everyone held their breath, except Katherine. She regarded Frey coolly, neither afraid nor amused. In fact, the expression she gave him was the very same one that she had given to the caged Gregor Clegane. Before she had put him in a cage.

Walder Frey began to laugh. "Now, I understand, Your Grace" he said. "I would have broken any number of vows to stick my sword into that," he said between his cackling.

Robb bristled but swallowed. He needed Frey's help. Insulting him would not get him anywhere.

"Unfortunately for you, my lord, I have standards," said Katherine sweetly, with a smile playing on her lips. Her eyes glittered in the light of the torches set around the hall in sooty sconces. "And if you had placed your sword anywhere near my person, you would have undoubtedly lost it." She curtseyed. "I am very good with swords of all kinds, as you may have heard."

One could have heard the footsteps of an ant in the silence that ensued. Robb stared at his wife. How could she?! She knew how important this was for him! And she was usually so in control of herself!

Frey laughed slowly. "She has fire, this one," he said.

The collective relief was palpable. Salt and bread were partaken of. The salt was harsh and the bread coarse. Robb swallowed it anyway. He would swallow just about anything for those ten thousand men. He tugged at Katherine's sleeve when the Freys weren't looking.

"We need him, Katherine," said Robb in a low voice.
Katherine shrugged and smiled at him, the embodiment of innocence.

"Forgive me for asking what seems like an obvious question, my lord," she said suddenly. "But where is the wedding to take place exactly?" What was she up to now? But he couldn't tell her to be quiet. One did not tell Katherine to do things. One made suggestions. He could not think of a way to suggest to her that she should stop talking. One could almost mistake her for Damon today, with the way she spoke.

"Right here, of course, Your Grace," said Frey.

Katherine turned around slowly where she stood, her gaze roaming over the high empty ceiling, the exposed rafters, the weeping stone walls and the lofts where the musicians would be playing. "Maybe I'm just showing my common roots, but should not a lord's wedding be set in some place less...dingy?"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Elijah conducts wedding rehearsals. Tywin activates Plan B.
"I do not understand why Father is sending us to the Riverlands," said Jaime. "More importantly, I do not understand why he is coming with us. Does he not trust me with leading his armies?" The way Tyrion and Caroline exchanged glances in response to this question did not please him one bit.

"I would point out the obvious, brother, but your pride is bruised enough as it is," said Tyrion. "I shall leave the cruelty to Lady Rebekah."

"She is no lady," said Jaime. "And she isn't here."

"Who says she isn't?" All three of them looked up.

"You made it," said Tyrion.

"Well, since Caroline asked so nicely..." said Rebekah, but she wasn't looking at the baby vampire. Her gaze was for Jaime alone. He smirked at her. He looked good and he knew it. Marriage to Sansa had been kind to him. Why, she even coiffed his hair carefully each morning without complaint and she was good at it.

"Why are you here?" The obvious question had to be asked. "My father has exiled you."

"I thought you'd need her," said Tyrion. "And Caroline had avenues."

"If Father ever finds out..." Jaime warned.

"He won't," said Tyrion. He grinned his lopsided grin. "He has no idea what his favourites are capable of. I just thought that, perhaps, you might need one of her kind with you rather than simply face Katherine Stark alone."

"I don't need a nanny," growled Jaime.

"Good, because I'm not being one," said Rebekah.

"Jaime, be reasonable," said Tyrion. "We don't know what Katherine Stark is capable of. And Damon Salvatore. Rebekah knows them both. I suppose Stefan would too but Father wants him with me and I agree with Father's judgement."

"You're the one who's scared of vampires. Not me."

"You're such an arse," said Rebekah. "Why do I always like the arses?"

"Come, now, Rebekah, you have seen my arse, haven't you?"

"Stop that now," said Tyrion. "I've seen your arse before, Jaime, when Father was belting it."

Jaime felt his face heat up. "That only happened once. Once."

"What did you do?" asked Rebekah. She suppressed a snigger.

"Not important," growled Jaime.
"He jumped off a cliff," Tyrion informed her. "Now is not the most appropriate time to talk about arses of any kind." He gave them a look as if he were the elder brother admonishing his younger and less serious siblings. Why was he so serious? It wasn't as if the Starks could ambush them here. There were no dark woods for them to hide in, no craggy rocks and cliffs, nothing. Robb Stark would have to have found a spell of invisibility if he wanted to ambush them here. Actually... 'No,' he told himself. That just made no sense. Still, one ought to be careful since witches were real. He had never heard of any present in Westeros, however, apart from Stannis’ red witch.

Behind them, his father would march with the rest of the army. They carried most of the supplies and were weighed down by them, making them slower. It looked like they were here for a long campaign or a short and sharp one that required as much force as a year long campaign concentrated into just one or two days. Jaime guessed that it had something to do with the wedding at the Twins which Robb Stark was attending with all of his army. It seemed like a foolish idea to engage them across the river. The Starks and Freys could slaughter them as they crossed the bridge. Four horses abreast was wide for a bridge. It was a narrow pass that a small number of men could easily stopper.

The Twins

This girl was going to die. In fact, she would be the first to die. Walder forced himself to smile. He would like to fuck her first before she died just to hear her scream. But Bolton had said something about making a match for his son.

Fuck the Boltons.

Her gaze swept over his hall and found it lacking, just as it had swept over him and found him wanting. "This place is...how shall I put this politely? A little..." She paused and stared directly into his eyes. "...dingy."

Walder Frey's smile stretched very thinly across his teeth. He wished he could see her cut open, her blood staining the floor, her mouth opened in a scream of utmost terror and agony while she watched her beloved Robb Stark's head cut off and placed on a golden platter for the Lannisters.

"Then what would you suggest, Your Grace?" he said. He had to stop himself from spitting it out.

"Why not have the wedding outside, on the roof, beneath the vaults of the heavens, with the gods gazing down upon us and a million stars to illuminate the joining of our two families?" asked Katherine Stark sweetly. "The open air is pleasant this time of year and the surrounding views are so beautiful."

"I would like that, Lord Frey," butted in Edmure Fucking Tully. "It would be very pleasant indeed to have a wedding beneath the stars." He forgot to say that the dim light would soften the expectedly ugly features of his bride. Walder was almost of a mind to pull Roslin out of the marriage and put Rosmin in the wedding gown instead. There was a one letter difference in their names. The difference in looks, however, could not be bigger. But they would both serve the purpose so long as they were capable of opening their legs for Tully.

Imagine, holding the wedding on the rooftop, where it was harder to hide men, not to mention the vantage points of the bowmen would be all incorrect! He had not arranged everything so perfectly just to let a girl and a limp fish ruin it!

But he had no choice. He had to be gracious to his guests, blind them, make them feel comfortable.
Katherine Stark was said to be a dangerously clever girl, something that made her lose a little of her attractiveness. What use did a woman have for brains? He narrowed his eyes. Katherine's hand was hovering near her stomach. She had pretended to be with child once. What if she hadn't been pretending as much as she had let on? How satisfying it would be to rip that little wolf spawn out of her. Yes, yes…

"Very well," he said. "The wedding shall be held on the rooftop. There will be some delay, I am afraid, Your Graces, for we have not made the preparations for it."

"That is no trouble at all, Lord Walder," said Robb Stark. He sounded polite now, but he looked down upon him just like all the rest. He just let his wife and uncle do the disrespecting in his stead. Well, they would see who would be laughing at the last.

Elijah brushed past Katherine as he went on his way to make the preparations. As he did so, he bumped into her deliberately and their heads came very close. "Forgive me, Your Grace," he said out loud. In a much lower whisper, for her vampire ears only, he said, in Bulgarian, "The chapel, five o'clock. Bring Elena and Damon." What, no Jon? Did Elijah not trust Jon? Although, she supposed it would be too suspicious if they brought Robb Stark's brother. Damon could pass himself off as a guardsman and Elena was her sister. It was reasonable that they should go to the chapel with her. Sept, rather.

She nodded and accepted his apology for his clumsiness. Another of the Freys immediately engaged him in conversation, making lewd jokes about her and none too quietly. Elijah murmured something non-committal, being his usual boring self, about how she wasn't his type. Biggest lie ever!

"What was that, Katherine?" demanded Robb as soon as they were outside and the Freys could no longer hear them. They had a few hours to waste and she needed to find a way to distract Robb so she could sneak off to the mini-sept to see Elijah. It was almost like having a clandestine affair behind her husband's back. Exciting stuff, this. "You know fully well I need the Freys on my side. They are odious people, yes, especially Walder Frey, but we must tolerate them. What happened? You are usually so controlled." He took her hands. He was angry and confused and worried. It was so sweet that it almost gave her a physical toothache. If vampires ever got toothache.

"Forgive me, my love," said Katherine. "I have not been feeling myself lately." She bit her lip, held her hand to her stomach and looked downwards like she had a secret she could not bear to keep to herself but didn't really know how to tell. "I...I have not had my menses recently."

Robb did not comprehend; at least not for a few seconds. He looked at her face, then down at her hand, which was still resting on her perfectly flat stomach. "Katherine..." he whispered. "Oh, Katherine!" He placed his hand over hers. "I love you so much. You know that, right? I love you!"

He brought his mouth down to hers and kissed her deeply, putting into that one kiss all the things he could not say. She felt his emotions coursing through him. Was she being just a little bit cruel to lie to him about this when he wanted a child so much? His paternal instincts were certainly stronger than her maternal ones ever had been, even back when she had them.

As he pulled away, she caught a glimpse of Catelyn's face. She stared at Katherine as if not knowing what to think. She gave the poor human a brief smile. When would they ever learn, these Starks? She wouldn't be at all sorry to disappoint Catelyn. And the last thing Robb needed in his life was a baby to smother his style. Catelyn looked away from Katherine almost as soon as the vampire gazed directly at her. What, hadn't she even the courage to meet her gaze? Elena was frowning in her direction and Damon smirked. They must have overheard. One was amused and
one was disapproving. Did they ever come up with anything new? They'd better not ruin it for her, though.

The servants showed her and Robb to the chambers they would be staying in. They were, she supposed, the best that the Twins had to offer but the best was sorely lacking. She could easily imagine a gothic novel being set here, with the dim light and the smoky torches and the ancient canopy bed. All they needed was a skeleton in the closet which she was sure they had; metaphorically, at least.

She sat down on the bed and gave the mattress a few experimental bounces. It sagged. Robb flopped onto the bed beside her, less king-like than boy-like. "Imagine, Katherine, we are going to have a little prince or a princess."

"I'm afraid," she said.

He sat up. "Why?" he asked.

Instead of answering him directly, Katherine chose to play with a corner of the covers that had seen better days. "I can face armies, battles, that is nothing," she said. "I can use my wits to give me advantages where there were none before. But childbirth...it's so easy for women to die in childbirth. I almost died the last time." Not true. "There is nothing I can do that can help me. I hate being weak, helpless even. If the gods decide that it's my time, how can I fight them?"

Robb took her in his arms. "I'm here," he said. "I will never let anything happen to you. I promise you that."

"You can't promise this," said Katherine. "It's out of our hands. Maybe it's nothing. After all, your mother birthed five children and she is in perfect health. I'm just uneasy." She extracted herself from his arms. "I think...I would like to pray for a little while."

"Will the gods listen after what we have done?" asked Robb.

"They were your gods," said Katherine, "not mine. I have my own god." Just one, actually, and her name was Katherine, but that would not convince Robb at all. "He will listen to me, for His is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, now and forever." All those years of religious upbringing and living in medieval Europe had not been for nought. The Church had ingeniously plagiarized so many aspects of classical Roman religion and with such success that she had taken to copying them.

She had not been wrong to do so.

Robb watched her go, her steps solemn and thoughtful. She knew he wanted to follow her but was exercising as much control as he had to not do it. At the door, she beckoned for Damon to follow her before going off to find Elena, who was in her room with Jon. The two of them looked to be in the middle of a deep conversation. Jon's look was just a few watts short of hostile when she came in. "Elena, dear sister, would you accompany me, please?" she asked.

"Where are you going?" asked Elena.

"I feel a great need of solace from the Divine," said Katherine. There was no need to put on the pregnancy act for Jon because he knew the truth about vampires. It was most inconvenient for now he thought her the cruellest of mistresses when she only meant to be kind. Elena gave Jon's hand a squeeze as if begging him to trust her, even if he didn't trust Katherine. What was there not to trust? Although, it felt more like he was judging her for lying to his brother rather than the fact that he
didn't trust her. If he didn't trust her, he would have told Robb the truth a long time ago. What an odd boy he was, to trust someone that he not-so-secretly judged for being…something. She didn't have the time or patience to study the mores of being a Stark.

It would have been hard to spot the little sept if it were not for the worn away reliefs on the frieze depicting the seven. Their noses had been eroded away and dirt and moss had gathered in the cracks. Coloured glass lamps burned within at the feet of the statues of the seven. Elijah was already kneeling there in front of the Warrior.

Katherine knelt before the Mother and bowed her head over her clasped hands, pretending to pray.

"Speak, Elijah, and quickly," she murmured in French. Elena had studied it in school, hadn't she? She remembered coming across a pile of vocabulary sheets and marvelling over the horribly crafted sentences that no one in France would use, mostly about going to shops on bikes.

"Walder Frey means to kill you first. As a message," said Elijah. "The crossbows will come from the orchestra." Katherine smiled. It must have annoyed Walder Frey immensely to have to rearrange the crossbowmen now that the venue had been shifted. "They plan on playing the Rains of Castamere before the attack, if rehearsal goes well. Edmure's men are in place in the orchestra and on the walls. Some of them will be servers but most of them are guardsmen. Damon, you will remain outside, yes?"

"But of course," said Damon. "I am a guard."

Elena scrunches up her forehead and tried to follow the rapid conversation in a language that she was only rudimentarily familiar with.

"I will give two signals. The first one is for Damon to get into place. There are guards placed outside the doors and around the hall, ready to rush in if all should fail. Damon, you will need to take Edmure's men and finish these before the massacre starts. You will begin at the second signal."

"What are these signals?" asked Damon.

A brief smile flitted across Elijah's face as he marvelled at his own artistic genius. "You will know them," said Elijah. "They are musical bastions in popular culture."

"Not Bieber, please."

Elijah looked insulted that the thought had even crossed Damon's mind.

"Justin Bieber is not music," he said.

"Why are we talking about Justin Bieber?" asked Elena in English. Was she a fan? She probably would be, knowing her taste. Which was zilch.

"No reason," said Katherine, changing to English. "We just felt like it. She switched back to French. "No Beyoncé either, I hope."

"Nothing so garish," Elijah promised. It had better not be.

"So what are we doing?" whispered Elena.

"Just do what I'm doing, dear little sister, and all will be well," said Katherine, condescending to lapse into English just so Elena wouldn't bumble around and mess everything up. She hadn't done it
yet (Petrova blood counted for a lot) but sooner or later, her incompetent nature was bound to rear its ugly and impractical head. She might grow a conscience about murdering Freys. Quel horreur.

Elena didn't look convinced but her lack of language skills was her problem, not anyone else's, and to complain was not only useless; it was a bad look. Besides, she didn't really need to know. Coups and scheming were not really her thing, even if she did ambush Kol and kill him (a fact that Elijah seemed to have forgotten far too easily). She wisely kept her mouth shut and actually resigned herself to Katherine's command. Perhaps there was hope for the little doppelganger yet.

Few people eyed them as they made their way out of the sept, separately, of course. Damon escorted Katherine and Elena out. The latter two had linked arms and were leaning close to each other, pretending to be whispering about secret womanly things while Katherine patted her flat stomach and stuck out her hips a little the way a pregnant woman would. Robb needed to believe the lie as much as anyone else. Elijah would leave via a backdoor. No one would even know he'd been there.

"So what are we going to do?" Elena whispered, all the while pasting on a smile worthy of a Teen Choice award. It would do for these Freys who thought them merely women.

"It's all sorted, like I said," said Katherine. "And if you want to survive in my world, you really need to brush up on your languages. It's useful to know more than one. I would teach you, but I fear I don't have the time. Damon, though, would be more than happy to do it, I'm sure."

She felt Elena's arm tighten about hers in frustration and anger. In fact, she could just about smell it. Dear little descendant. She just didn't know how to lie and to hide her feelings. Such things could get her killed. Not that Katherine would cry, but it could also get Jon killed and that was not tolerable.

"Fine," said Elena. "Let's talk about the baby, then."

"Oh, darling, it's bad luck to talk about the baby in the first trimester when anything can happen," said Katherine with an angelic smile.

"I don't understand why you two need to talk at all, not that I'm not enjoying it," Damon whispered in a barely audible tone. He even managed not to smirk.

"I just hope you know what you're doing, Katherine," said Elena.

"Relax, little sister," said Katherine. She patted Elena's hand. "I have it all in hand."

"No, no, no, no," said Elijah firmly, dropping the baton. He had never heard such a horrifying rendition of Strauss! If a herd of deranged elephants had played the opening theme of Space Odyssey 2001, it couldn't have sounded worse.

"It's too hard!" complained one of the crossbow-trumpeters.

"This is the wedding of a king's uncle," said Elijah. "You can't just play a bawdy ballad and expect Katherine Stark the Bard Queen not to realize that you are not musicians."

"The northerners like the Bear and the Maiden Fair," grumbled the trumpeter.

"What about the Rains of Castamere?" suggested a 'violinist'.

"And give it all away?" said an hautboy. "Clever."
"We're playing it last," said Elijah. He needed something recognizable for Damon and Katherine. The brass fanfare of *Odyssey* was certainly memorable but he had to at least *try* and make them sound like a musical ensemble so Walder Frey wouldn't suspect him of deliberately sabotaging the performance (even though he hadn't even thought of it like that). Being a music director was much harder than he had thought. Half his musicians couldn't read music.

"Let's not play that again, shall we?" said Elijah. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his finger and thumb. They'd tried so many popular pieces already. *William Tell Overture* had been recognizable and sounded like the announcement for blind, deaf and lame mules racing to the glue factory. *Hall of the Mountain King* had also been recognizable but that was the only compliment he could grant that rendition. *Flight of the Bumblebee* had not been much of a flight.

"How about this?" He struck two notes on his new 'Stradivarius'.

The musicians copied him eagerly upon hearing something that they could play. "Lean on the first note and come off lightly on the second one," Elijah instructed them. He played along with them until they memorized the entire piece (which was two minutes long). As the sound filled the room, he realized how fitting this piece was. Much better than massacred Strauss.

The rooftop had been decorated to look like the great hall that the Freys should have had. There were vases of fresh flowers –horribly arranged, of course, but at least there were flowers– long trestle tables covered with embroidered table cloths, candles in copper holders with reliefs at the bases depicting bridges. And more bridges.

Katherine carefully smoothed out her white skirts. She had kept her dress plain, for no one was supposed to outshine the bride. That, and this new frock was plenty wide enough to hide the knives strapped to her thighs. She had convinced Robb, at least, to wear armour. He had given in, possibly because he had not wanted his pregnant wife to fret rather than because he thought the Freys would be up to no good. Even now, poor dear Robb still believed in the noblesse of men. He would soon be dispossessed of that notion.

The women continued to stare at Katherine's dress while the men just stared at her. To go with the white silk and lace overlay which made her look the part of the bride, she wore a simple gold choker and there was delicate gold threading along the cuffs and collar of the dress. The sleeves were sheer lace and one could see hints of honeyed skin beneath. Offering the men a tantalizing glimpse was better than letting them see everything. They always wanted more that way.

Elena followed behind in a much plainer dress, but still white and with a golden girdle that looked suspiciously like one that had been living in Katherine's coffer. She decided to overlook that for now. After all, sisters shared, didn't they?

It was easy to spot Director Elijah Mikaelson as he conducted the musicians. He had somehow procured a white military jacket with gold buttons and gold epaulets. *Epaulets*. All around him, the Freys were dressed in garish pseudo tuxes that would not have looked out of place in the 1970s. She loathed the seventies with the decade's paisley prints, flare jeans and peasant tops. Who wanted to dress like peasants or upholstery?

The music struck up when she and Robb came up the steps, with her hand on his arm to 'steady' herself. Her eyes widened and she swore strings of obscenities inside her head when she heard the first two notes. They were only two notes, lasting two bars, just a semitone apart and played repeatedly, with the second, shorter note higher than the first one. No two other notes had ever been as famous, just as there had never been a more famous shark.
"That sounds…ominous," said her unmusical husband after the first four bars.

Katherine smiled thinly. Elijah was going to get a talk in subtlety after this. He was supposed to give a signal for Damon to quietly begin his covert operations, not to create a soundtrack for the slaughter! Sometimes, she hated boys. One could never trust them fully to do things right.

She exchanged glances with Elena, who seemed as surprised as she was by Elijah's choice of repertoire. She clutched Jon's arm like an affected damsel, looking all around her. Katherine had to give her some credit for her acting abilities. Jon looked even dourer than he usually did although he was lucky that he was just Robb Stark's bastard brother and was beneath anyone's notice.

At least she could not hear any screaming yet. She and Robb sat down at the table closest to the front. Edmure was already there, dressed in his finest. The bride was nowhere to be seen. Edmure craned his neck to try and catch a glimpse of her without any result. She could just about see the thoughts going through his head. Which one was it going to be?

Walder Frey sat back, satisfied, if not perfectly happy, with the arrangements. A servant filled his cup and he downed the wine as if he were still a virile young man. Then he coughed as some of it went down the wrong way. If he dropped dead tonight after choking on a fishbone or something of that sort, she would be terribly disappointed.

The music faded away. The herald came up and slammed his staff three times on the floor. The bride, veiled and dressed in her house colours, was led up by the hand by her various sisters of all ages. The Frey family seemed to have more spinsters than the usual noble house, not that it was a surprise.

A hushed silence fell. Only the footsteps of the women could be heard as the bride made her short journey up to her new husband, past the man who had been meant to be her husband. As she passed their table, the girl turned to glance at Robb and Katherine. Katherine gave her a small nod; not a friendly one, but a triumphant one. Perhaps Katherine would keep her around after the wedding as a reminder to all that if anyone crossed her, they would simply be crossed out. Gregor Clegane was getting stale and the story was too well-known. She needed something new, something to titillate and shock and horrify. Keeping Edmure's bride as a pet would do the trick.

She wondered briefly about Damon and what he was doing now. Could he deal with so many Frey men all at once? Did she trust him to? Even with the help of Edmure's men? Actually, it was worse with Edmure's men involved. They were even more incompetent than Damon. Why hadn't she insisted that Elena stay outside with them to temper their foolishness? Ah, yes, because it would not be appropriate for Queen Katherine's sister to be left out of the massacre. They would have to wing it and pray that her faith in Damon had not been misplaced.

She placed her hands in her lap and stroked the spines of her fan. Elena kept fluttering hers in front of her face nervously. She, too, had been required to wear a crinoline as a repository for weapons. No one had bothered to pat them down. It would have been entirely suspicious to do so. On either side of them, Robb and his bannermen whispered to each other and gave Edmure and the bride lewd and pointed glances.

Edmure lifted the veil of his bride.

"Perhaps I might have made a mistake," declared Robb. The men laughed. Katherine gave his thigh a violent pinch under the table which made him jerk in response. She smiled sweetly at him while the men laughed even harder. Edmure was not listening to any of it. All his attention was on his bride. His stunned expression would have made her laugh except she was a little too on edge to do so. Imagine, her on edge! Only Klaus had ever managed that. Props to Walder Frey for reaching
that level of villainy. But, then again, this was the first time she had worried about anyone other than herself. She really would be very unhappy if anything happened to Robb. That, in itself, was enough to make her uneasy, not to mention the very real prospect of losing him to some stray crossbow bolt.

The septon recited the required words about gods and men. Edmure and his lovely milky-skinned bride (was she really a Frey?) said their part about Mother, Father, Hag, Virgin, Whore, whatever. Edmure never took his eyes off Roslin Frey. She, on the other hand, blushed prettily and looked down at her feet. All that young blood, pulsing just beneath that almost translucent skin. She could smell her nervousness, her fear. The girl would be quite tasty, no doubt. Perhaps she should have a sip as a toast to Edmure's new-found happiness.

Robb raised his cup along with the others as the newlyweds were toasted. One look from her, however, reminded him that he was not supposed to be drinking all that much. He took a sip and put the cup down. His hand crept over onto her side and gently took her hand to give it a squeeze. It was then that she realized she had been clutching her fan very tightly beneath the table. She forced herself to relax and pretend to be enjoying herself. He would become suspicious if she behaved too strangely, even for her pregnant self.

The feasting began. Platters of roasted meats and fish and flagon after flagon of wine was brought out. Robb continued to hold her hand beneath the table as he ate and talked and laughed. Edmure and his bride were already feeding each other food. It was sickening.

Katherine picked at her food and sipped at her wine. What she really wanted was blood, the salty, metallic taste of life flooding her with warmth and vigour like an orgasm in the mouth. Soon. She would get it very soon.

The look of surprise on his uncle's face would have made him laugh except Robb was too nervous about not offending the Freys to do anything except sit stiffly and make the corners of his mouth turn up in a smile. But, as the septon, an old man with shaking hands and lips, declared that the lovely fair-skinned Roslin Frey and Edmure Tully were now joined in the sight of the gods, he became more easy. Now that the wedding was done, they could begin to discuss the deployment of troops westward.

Still, he refrained from drinking too much, upon his wife's advice. Katherine had become very fretful now that she was with child. Not only had she insisted that he refrain from drinking, but that his men were also to be put under a liquor ban. They had not been happy at all, but he was the king and they had to obey his orders. He had ordered them the very best of meats as compensation. Surely that was enough. The wine wasn't that good anyway.

Elijah conducted his musicians to strike up a lively and steady beat. Robb knew nothing about music but, even so, he could see how talented a musician his former squire was. He supposed he had never said anything about it because music was considered to be a woman's amusement in the north. But why did he choose tonight, of all nights, to reveal his secret?

And then, much to the amusement of all below, Elijah took up his strange and beautiful fiddle with the resonant sound. The Freys began clapping in time. Two shorter claps followed by one long clap worth the entire length of the claps that came before it. Was it part of the music? It didn't sound like any applause he knew. Katherine smiled and joined in the clapping and stamping with gentle taps of her fan on her knee. Elijah started playing. Robb's eyes widened. Elijah was very good. He could pull two notes at once out of that instrument and the very sound of the music made him want to stand up and dance. Not a civilized dance like the ones his dancing master had taught him, but something wild and free and aggressive. Elijah's fingers flew over the strings, teasing sounds out of
them known before to no mortal man. He had never seen anything quite like it. Why had he never
played for Robb before? A duet between him and Katherine would sound excellent, even to his
ear. Now that they were family, he might ask Walder Frey for Elijah back. He missed his old squire
and the calmness that always surrounded him.

Everyone applauded when the song was over. Elijah took a bow and set down his instrument with a
fond pat like one would give to a favourite horse, but kept the bow in his hand. It hung loosely.

Walder Frey stood with the help of his young wife. He raised his hand, signalling that he wanted to
speak. "A wedding must have a bedding!" he declared gleefully.

"Oh, lookie, he can rhyme," whispered Katherine.

"Not as well as you can," Robb whispered back. It was vulgar, yes, but he would sit through ten
thousand verses of bad Frey poetry if it was going to get him ten thousand men. The Frey men
hoisted Roslin Frey - Tully, now, he supposed, into the air and began to strip her of her wedding
gown while the women were doing the same to Edmure. He, of course, wore no wedding gown.
The bridal pair protested. Roslin's face was pink and she looked frightened. Her father
(grandfather? Great-grandfather?) glared at her and she fell silent. Edmure protested against such
treatment of his bride but he was grinning. His uncle, hapless as he was, ought to have some
happiness. It was no secret that he had been quite enamoured of Katherine. It must have stung to
see her with Robb every time he saw her.

"We should have a better wedding when this is all over," Robb said to Katherine as the new
husband and wife were carried off to the bedchambers to consummate their union. "You deserved a
better one."

"I don't care about weddings," said Katherine. "I care about the man I'm wedded to."

She pulled him towards her for a kiss.

"My mother is watching," he protested as he tried, in vain, to resist her multitude of attractions.

"Let her watch," said Katherine.

"She does not need yet another reason to not like you."

"Good thing I didn't marry her." She kissed him one final time on the lips and let him go. He
straightened his tunic and stood. Now, to complete the ritual. He put on a smile and tried to remind
himself that he was happy about all of this; the wedding, the army – especially the army. He pulled
Katherine to her feet as well. It would be better for them to do this together, to seem more sincere.

"I must confess, Lord Frey, that this has been a most delightful evening. I had not expected such
welcome hospitality after the insult that I – we – have dealt to you and your house. I made a
promise and I broke it. I assure you, it will not happen again."

"I should hope not," said Frey. He raised his cup. "A toast, and a song!"

The musicians started playing again. At first, it was just one fiddle. The tune was mournful, but
Robb paid it no heed. It was just another song. Robb and Katherine retreated to the side. He felt
relieved, deflated, humiliated, eager to put this all behind him and get on with the real business of
the war. Only the presence of his wife ameliorated the pulsing indignity in his heart. He placed a
hand on her still flat belly and thought of his child instead. His little prince, or princess. It wouldn't
matter. He would love him, or her, all the same. He already loved him. Her. Maybe there could be
one of each.
One of the Frey men – whose name he had forgotten yet again – approached them. "Your Graces," he said with a courtly bow. Robb pasted on his smile. This farce would be over soon and he and Katherine could have some time to themselves. That moment could not come quickly enough, however. There were still several hours of 'merrymaking' to go. "Please, allow me to extend my greatest joy in seeing the joining of our two houses."

Too late he saw the flash of the blade. His mind could not wrap itself around what he was seeing. He barely had time to suck in a breath before it pierced Katherine's belly. She fell backwards into her chair. He opened his mouth. No sound came out. Red blossomed on the front of her bodice. Katherine looked down slowly, seeming unsure as to what had happened. He wanted to go to her, to pull out that fucking knife! He saw his future flash before his eyes. A future without her, without their children.

When she looked up, she smiled, all beatification and no malice, which only made the smile more terrifying. She plucked the knife out of her stomach. It came out with a soft squelch. Blood dribbled out and ceased. She tossed the bloody knife on the table. The boy who had stabbed her began to back away, blood draining from his face. The entire hall had fallen silent, all eyes turning to watch her, Katherine Stark…what…

Katherine grabbed the man's sleeve and yanked him back towards her, tsking as she did so. "Little boys should not play with knives," she admonished him as a mother would a wayward child, with a kind smile and a gentle voice. "They're dangerous." She flipped a fork into her hand, the very one that she'd been using to eat cabbage, and slammed the boy's hand onto the table. Plates jumped. Red wine sloshed out of goblets. She thrust downwards with the fork. The boy screamed as the prongs pierced skin, tendon, and muscle, going all the way through to pin his hand to the wooden surface.

Katherine looked down at her bloodied dress and sighed against the backdrop of the boy's whimpering and begging. Robb could not comprehend. He was glad she wasn't dead but shouldn't she be dead or at least dying? And why had the boy tried to kill her? He looked around. The musicians had stopped playing. They slowly reached down towards something at their feet.

"This dress was new," Katherine complained with a pout. "I'd send you the cleaning bill, Lord Frey, but I'm afraid you won't live to pay it."

"Now!" screeched Frey. Fear had made his voice as high as a boy's. "Now!"

Crossbow bolts flew from the musicians' loft, but instead of being aimed solely at the northerners, they flew in every direction as panic set in. One came straight at Robb. He watched the shining bolt come ever closer towards him, unable to move, unable to avoid it. A dainty hand snatched it out of the air right before his nose. Katherine. He tried to say her name. She pushed him down onto the flagstones and threw the arrow back at the same time. The bolt went through the skull of one of the servers who was not a server at all, but a soldier. The Freys…but they had guest rights!

The musicians' loft dripped with bodies. Headless corpses hung over the bannister, raining blood onto people below. Elijah dropped his broken and bloodied fiddle bow. In his other hand, he held what looked suspiciously like a heart. He let it drop and approached the lone remaining crossbowman. "You're all right," he said. He clapped the man's cheek once, twice… Before the Bowman could pull the trigger, he'd struck the man's face. The head flew off with a spray of blood, flying towards the guests below. It bounced a few times before rolling and coming to a stop at Katherine's feet.

The door burst open.
Robb didn't know what he had been expecting, but it wasn't...this.

Damon sauntered in, covered from head to boots in blood. More men filed in behind him, their faces pale beneath masks of gore, but determined. The last ones closed the door and bolted it. Damon lifted his weapon – no, not a weapon. An arm. Not his arm. A severed arm.

"Sorry I'm late," he said with a grin. "Did I miss it? I heard the music. How does the song go again?" Something was really wrong with him. "Duh-dun, duh-dun, duh-dun-dun-dun, my teeth are long and sharp."

**Teeth.** That was what was wrong! Damon's teeth were indeed very long and very sharp. He grinned to show them off to their full effect. Blood was smeared around his mouth and some more of it dripped down his chin onto his white tunic. No, it couldn't be...

"Damon, you really should know the lyrics by now," said Katherine. She turned slowly, a grim smile on her face, to address the shocked Freys (and Tullys and Starks). "Now, I don't want to mar this festive event with bloodshed. If you surrender, I will show mercy." Her voice echoed and rang out in the night, clear and authoritative, a queen in truth if not fully in name.

"Shoot!" shouted Walder Frey. He stood up more quickly than Robb had ever seen him move and scrambled backwards. Too late he noticed his musicians. Or what was left of them. "Elijah!" He must not have seen what Robb had seen. Robb wasn't sure what he had seen. He looked to his mother, cowering beneath a table with Elena and Jon standing over her, weapons in hand. **Weapons?**

Elijah leapt down from the loft and landed softly on his feet. He slowly approached Walder Frey. That was when Frey noticed the blood on his beautifully cut white jacket with its golden shoulder brushes and the blood on his hands.

"I took you in, Elijah. I gave you a name." said Frey. "Where's your loyalty?!

"Where was yours?" asked Elijah.

"Kill them!" He flung down his cup. It clattered onto the flagstones and spilled dark red wine everywhere.

Soldiers charged through, swords brandished. Chainmail glinted under Bolton's tunic. Katherine's fan flashed and a red grin appeared in man's throat. He fell, clutching his neck. Coldness gripped Robb's heart and his insides, freezing him where he was. Katherine, Damon, Elijah; it seemed as if he had known them for a very long time, but did he truly know anything at all?

'Move, Robb, move;,' he told himself. He scrambled to his feet. His mind was growing numb. The smell of blood was everywhere, hot and metallic. It mingled with the aromas of roasted meats and spilled wine. One could not tell whether the red on the floor was wine or blood.

The women were screaming, the men were screaming. What was Katherine? What was Elijah? What was Damon? Robb might have the answer. He was afraid of it. Monsters were real.

The men who had come in with Damon formed a tight circle around Catelyn and Arya, their shields facing outwards against the randomly flying arrows. Arya ducked under the shields and got out, leaving their mother within the sheltered confines of the shield wall, shouting their names.

"Arya, what are you doing?" demanded Robb.

"Shoot them! Kill them! Kill them!" shouted Walder Frey.
"Robb, down!" shouted Arya. A crossbow bolt flew over his head. He dropped and rolled, only to find himself face to face with a Frey soldier.

Katherine tore off her skirt, hoop frame and all, and rammed it over one of the men, pinning his arms to his side and rendering him useless. Metal glinted on her legs. She unsheathed one of the daggers tied to her thighs and tossed it to Robb. He caught it. It was not a long weapon, but it was better than nothing.

"Katherine, behind you!" Robb shouted as one of the men leapt at her, thinking that she would be an easy target from behind. Katherine whipped around and thrust her hand inside the man's chest. The man stiffened and jerked as her fingers plunged deep inside. She yanked it out. Robb saw the white of broken ribs against the red mess of blood. Katherine gripped his heart in her hand.

She took one of the ripped blood vessels and sucked on it. "Best drink I've had all night."

Pain slammed into him. Katherine dropped the heart then, the veins on her face stark against her pale skin. The veins faded away. The blackness in her eyes became normal again. Only it was growing darker and he couldn't breathe. Fire burned in his chest. His hand wrapped around the crossbow bolt as he sank to one knee. It had pierced even the chainmail he had worn under his tunic.

Katherine caught him before he could fall. He could not see very clearly now. Perhaps he was dreaming it, but was she biting her wrist?

She shoved her wrist against his mouth. He wanted to protest and resist but as he opened his mouth to do so, the smooth velvety liquid slipped down his throat. His first instinct was to spit, but it tasted so good. Like...life. "Drink," she said, nursing him as she would a child, in a very perverted way. As he did, she broke off the shaft of the arrow, causing him to stiffen and convulse with agony. He bit down hard on her skin, forcing more blood into his mouth. She pushed the arrow out the other way. His blood mingled with hers in his mouth but even as that happened, he felt the pain lessening until it went away completely. He stared at her and then down at himself. His tunic was soaked with blood but he felt whole.

He started to open his mouth to speak, but she didn't wait for him. She practically flew away to engage with three men who had been staring at the bizarre scene that they must have made. He could not see her movements as she ripped off their heads and drank from their necks.

Next to him, Damon sank his teeth into a man's neck. Thick red lines appeared and blood sprayed out in time with the heartbeat. The sell-sword ripped off the man's head and let the body drop. "Pardon my manners, your Grace," he said with a little bow, and then he was gone again, off to kill some more.

"You've got dinner all over your front, Damon," Elijah called across the room as he calmly ripped out a Frey spine. He struck another man across the face with it. The sell-sword ripped off the man's head and let the body drop. "Pardon my manners, your Grace," he said with a little bow, and then he was gone again, off to kill some more.

Robb threw all the questions into the back of his mind. They could wait. If he wanted answers, he would have to live first. Another figure dressed in white rushed by him. Elena. There was an air of unpractised savagery as she tore into the Frey man who was trying wildly to stab her. She ripped chunks of flesh out of his neck before letting him drop. Her breathing was harsh and she turned wild black eyes on him. He backed away instinctively.

"Robb!" Jon shouted his name like a battle cry. "Catch!"
Robb forced himself to act as Jon tossed him a sword. He could think about everything later, ask questions later. He wouldn't get any answers if he were dead. He caught the sword by the sheath and immediately drew it. The weapon was plain castle-forged steel but it was sharp and it was well-balanced. He gripped the hilt with both hands and swung, just missing the stomach of the Frey who had thought that he could end the war with a thrust of his dagger.

Robb lunged forward and feinted to one side at the last minute. The man fell for it and charged. It was too late for the man to stop. As he fell, Robb's sword came down, severing head from neck. Around him, his men were fighting and dying, but so were the Freys.

Robb felt like shouting, he felt like screaming. Instead, he pushed his thoughts to one side and let his training take over. He had to protect what he held most dear. Failure was not a notion he could entertain.

A/N: The music:

Richard Strauss' Thus Spake Zarathustra (main theme of Space Odyssey 2001) To see how the Freys played it, check out Portsmouth Sinfonia's version of the piece.

The main theme from Jaws, by John Williams

We Will Rock You by Queen, arranged and performed by David Garrett.
Chapter Summary

The Freys meet vampires. Roose Bolton enacts Plan B.

Chapter 116: We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

How had it all gone so wrong? Roose Bolton was unwilling to believe what he saw even though it was right before his eyes. The queen…the queen! What the fuck was she?! And Damon? Elijah Frey? Little Lady Elena and Jon Fucking Snow? They transformed there, their faces still beautiful, but now filled with a malice he had never seen before. Well, not Jon Snow. He was still just a boy. They were neither men nor women, but monsters; creatures of legend that, until now, had not even penetrated the folklore of Westeros.

It would not work now. He knew it in his bones. Robb Stark had the gods on his side – not the gods of his father nor the Seven of his mother, but other gods, more violent and more real than any other god Westeros had ever had. They were right here and the only prayers they needed were the screams of dying men.

He forced his way through to Robb Stark. "Protect the king!" he shouted. Damon Salvatore whipped around at his call.

"Lol," said Salvatore. What? The creature pointed at his eyes with his bloodstained index and middle fingers before pointing at Roose with those same two digits. Did he know? And if he did, then did Katherine know?

No, she couldn't know. There was no 'if' about it. If she knew, he would be a dead man. He rushed into the fray, cutting down Freys who ought to have been his allies. Where were the fucking Lannisters? If they were here, perhaps…

But even Tywin Lannister couldn't fight the gods. Roose had never been a religious man but now he wondered whether he had made a mistake. Looking at the lot of them with their dark eyes, the white teeth, the marble quality of their beautiful countenances, one could easily become a convert.

All he could do now was join in the frenzy of bloody worship and hope that his offering would be enough to appease Katherine Stark's infamous divine anger.

Elijah yanked out the chain that had been tying the door closed. The weakest links snapped, leaving him with a length of about three metres. He dragged it along behind him as he approached Walder Frey with deliberate and steady steps. The old man was encircled by his sons and guards and daughters and wives. Well, wife. Men parted for him, this nightmare made flesh. People who had once treated him as a brother or something to be sneered at now looked upon him with terror as they realized what he could do. He was the monster that haunted the edges of their psyches. He was the fear that they had not even realized that they had had, until now.

He was Death.
"Elijah," said Symon Frey. The man was terrified but somehow, he could still talk without any shaking in his voice. "I would never have agreed but you know what Father is like. Let us talk about this. Perhaps we can came to an understanding."

"There is nothing to talk about, Symon Frey," said Elijah. The rusted metal of the chain was warming up in his hand.

"The old man is a traitor. He deserves what he gets," Symon persisted. "But you and I, we could do a lot together. You are intelligent, Elijah. Surely you must understand."

"I understand completely," said Elijah. These men were all the same; so predictable. They insulted him by thinking he could be bought with such lies.

"Bring him down! I want him--"

Frey had not finished his sentence before the very bravest of the men charged (not Symon), thinking that, perhaps, their numbers would overwhelm Elijah. The chain swung and wrapped around the neck of the first man. Elijah leapt into the air and, as he did so, looped the chain around a second neck. He weaved his dance, entrapping more and more prey until there was no more chain left. He smiled grimly and yanked. Several heads flew off simultaneously. Fountains of blood spurted into the air and then fell like red rain. The women's screams were so loud that they obscured everything else for a while. He left them. They were no threat.

Robb had somehow armed himself and even Arya had gotten one of the daggers Katherine had strapped to her thigh. And then, of course, Jon Snow had played his part beautifully. It was then that he realized that all of Robb's protectors were dressed in (formerly) white and gold; the colours of the kingsguard.

Elena was fighting back to back with Jon Snow. Her face was messy from feeding and her dress was soaked through. The fabric clung to her legs and body. The little vampire was growing up well. Although he really shouldn't be, Elijah was proud of the part he had played in helping her to become the woman she was now. She had the fire and spirit and passion that had made him fall in love with Katerina in the first place.

The Tully men that Katherine had snuck in were rounding up the last of the terrified Freys. It was almost over…

"The Lannisters! The Lannisters are here!"

Sandor gutted the man. Hot blood splashed onto his hands and face. He could taste it in his mouth, all salty and coppery. He licked his lip. That Frey whelp had actually gotten in a hit. He shoved aside two men who had thought they would take their chance with him. He stomped hard on the throat of the first, crushing his windpipe. The second turned to flee but he was run through by one of those clean-shaven northerners in the special fancy pansy armour. "Praetorians!" shouted the man. "To the tower! To the king!"

The Frey men had attacked suddenly when the Rains of Castamere had started playing. The northerners, taken by surprise, were still too busy fumbling with their swords to figure out what they were going to do about it. Sandor had no idea what was going on or why the Freys had suddenly turned on their allies, but he didn't really care. He hadn't come all this way to join the Starks, only to die at the hands of the fucking Freys.

The queen's guard - the ones with the unsayable name - in the fancy pansy armour were the first to
rally and to stop twiddling their thumbs and actually pull out their swords. Perhaps they were the best out of all the northerners. Sandor joined them. The others were going to be slaughtered. He didn't know what he was doing but anything was better than nothing. If the Starks lost, he would have to find somewhere else to go and Joffrey's men were hunting him down, no doubt. Only the Starks would take him in.

He pounded up the stone steps with the rest of the Pretty Pansies. The stones were already slick with blood. The servants ran and fled at the sight of armoured and armed northmen thirsty for blood. They ran past the great hall, where nothing was going on, and up until they reached the door that led to the rooftop. The screaming was coming from there. The door was locked and bolted from the inside, as if they meant to keep anyone from leaving the rooftop.

The Pretty Pansies undid the latch and burst through.

The sight that greeted him stunned him. Lords and ladies dressed in their best were running everywhere like beheaded chickens who didn't know that they were dead yet. Their terror was so great that he could almost smell it. The ground was wet with blood. It turned into little rivers in the joinings between the individual paving stones. At first, he didn't understand what he was seeing. There were blurs that moved and wherever they moved, men would inevitably die.

The Pretty Pansies undid the latch and burst through.

The blurs grew faces. Or, at least, the one that stopped near him did. Katherine Stark! And Elena what's-her-face. And fucking Salvatore. He didn't know the other man and he didn't care. The only thing that mattered was that he was a good killer and he wasn't trying to kill Sandor. But how could anyone be this good? Bodies draped over tables and lay in puddles of sauce and blood. Heads rolled across the floor as more joined them like a messy game of ball. Gregor would have liked this game. Fucking Gregor was in a fucking cage where he belonged and this one woman had done it. Why hadn't he ever wondered *how* she had done it?

He didn't have time to think about it. The other man whose name he didn't know had looped a length of chain around the necks of a dozen Freys. When he pulled on the chain, all the heads popped off. Katherine kicked one of the heads, sending it flying at an archer. Someone thought that attacking her while she was distracted would be a good idea. It wasn't.

Her face changed immediately. Sandor had thought he was not afraid of anything and certainly not dainty little girls, no matter what their reputations were. However, as she changed, he saw something that would make men piss their pants and Joffrey shit himself in public. He'd probably done that before anyway and in reaction to much smaller things. It was that monster inside her that had made her capable of taking down the largest and most terrifying monster Westeros had seen, up until she had made herself known. Her teeth grew long and sharp. She sank them into the man's neck.

"What are you?" he demanded when she finally lifted her head, blood dripping from her mouth and chin.

"It's none of your business now, is it, little dog?"

He would have growled or attempted to snap her neck but he knew how well *that* would work. He did not want a collar that matched his fucking brother's. Instead, he stopped thinking so much and did what he did best, which was killing. That cocky whelp Damon Salvatore was ripping hearts and spines out of men's chests with nothing more than his bare hands. Elena fought back to back with Ned Stark's bastard (whose name he had never bothered to learn) and Robb Stark. All the rest of the men in the fancy armour were rallying to their king. Despite being outnumbered and ambushed,
it looked as though the Starks could actually **win** this. *Thank you, Little Bird, for your letter.*

The wolves rounded up the Freys like they were sheep in a slaughterhouse. Below, the men were still fighting, but Sandor didn't think they'd keep fighting for long once Robb Stark dangled Walder Frey down the side of the wall by his cock. Or would it be Katherine Stark who did all the dirty work? He was just a little bit curious as to how they were going to deal with what's left of the Freys. Some, surely, would go towards feeding the queen. Wasn't she with child? Pregnant women ate more than they were worth.

He didn't get to find out.

"The Lannisters!" cried one of the northerners. "The Lannisters are here!"

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**Lannisters!** How… Catelyn's mind was reeling. All she could see was red everywhere. Blood, teeth, monsters. She backed away. Everything in her body was telling her to run. The Freys, upon hearing that their new masters had arrived, were reinvigorated. They knew better than to attack Katherine, now, but Robb's mother, *her*, she was a different matter.

The men – the *Tully* men who were somehow dressed in Frey uniforms had dispersed to clean up the rest of the Freys, thinking that the main danger was now over. Catelyn staggered to one side and clutched at the edge of one of the tables to steady herself. Her hands grew sticky with the blood and spilled wine and sauce that had soaked into the wood.

A crossbow bolt whistled. Someone knocked her to the floor, out of the path of the arrow. The air was driven from her lungs. White light flashed before her eyes when her head hit stone. She heard a gasp. When her vision cleared, Arya was standing where she had been a moment ago. And…

"No!" she screamed. The sounds of battle, which had seemed so distant to her shocked mind, now all came back. But her scream was louder than anything else. "No!" she scrambled over to her daughter, to catch her as she fell, to pull out that damned arrow! Men's legs got in the way, blocking her sight. She tried to get to her feet but there was no strength left in her. In her heart, she knew…

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He saw the arrow fly. He saw Arya push their mother out of the way. He saw the arrow strike her. His little sister, not even twelve years old. Arya looked down at her chest, seemingly surprised by the arrow that had sprouted there.

"Arya!" shouted Robb. His desperation lent him speed and strength. He shoved aside the Frey he was fighting. The man was larger but he was slower, and Robb was furious. His bloodied sword cut through the tendons at the back of the man's leg, sending him crashing to his knees. Robb stabbed him through the neck and, without waiting to watch his body fall, ran to Arya, shoving aside men as he did so, regardless of which side they were on. He crashed into someone who was also rushing to Arya's side. The two of them fell onto a heap on the floor and scrambled to get up. Jon.

Robb got there first.

He took his sister in his arms. His poor little sister, all gangly limbs and bones just like a boy. The sprinkling of freckles on her face stood out against her white skin. Blood stained her bloodless lips. Her eyes, wide open, were already beginning to take on a glassy look.

"Arya, no!" shouted Robb. What to do, what to do?
"Move aside!" Damon shoved Robb away and pressed his bleeding wrist against Arya's mouth. "Drink, damn you!" Arya did not move. Blood – both hers and Damon's – ran down her chin.

The three of them, Robb, Jon, and Damon, regarded one another and, at that moment, all three of them knew the terrible truth.

"She's gone," whispered Jon. His voice was hollow and it echoed in Robb's mind. He saw that moment over and over again; Arya pushing his mother aside, the arrow hitting her. He had held her as she had died. It was supposed to be him! He had gotten them into this. It was not Arya's fault!

Damon set Arya gently on the ground and brushed her eyes closed in a surprisingly gentle manner. He said nothing as he straightened himself. His eyes were dark with murderous bloodlust and, now, a thirst for vengeance as well.

Or perhaps it was his own rage and grief that Robb saw mirrored in those eyes, once as blue as his own, now completely black with not even the slightest bit of white showing. Eyes were the windows into a man's soul, they said. All he saw in his friend's eyes was his own darkness reflected in them.

He, too, stood, with one last glance at his sister. She lay there, so peaceful now except for the ugly arrow sticking in her. His mother picked up the poor little body and shook it, but Arya did not wake up. Robb did not stay to watch. He had not the stomach for it nor the patience. She was dead. She could never come back. It was his fault but, not only that…

He turned his gaze upon Walder Frey, still hiding. He could not hide, not from vengeance and not from justice.

Elijah saw the change overcome Robb Stark as he rose from his sister's side. The shock was overwhelming the grief and above all, anger was masking everything. The vampire understood. The young man was doing the equivalent of what vampires did when they switched off their emotions. His pain was too much for him to bear right now and his mind knew it needed to concentrate on what needed to be done if he were to survive this. So it had latched onto the safest emotion and drowned out all others.

Robb let the tip of his sword drag on the ground as he stalked towards Walder Frey. It made a grating ringing noise on the rough stones. Moonlight reflected on the pools of sticky blood. His boots made a wet tacky noise as he walked.

The old man cowered behind his womenfolk, but there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to go. His people were dead. His sons were either prisoners or ripped apart. Elijah had dealt with Symon himself, trussing the man up like a pig, with all his limbs dislocated. "You are a man without honour, Lord Frey," said Robb quietly.

"You need me alive," stammered Frey. "You need my men."

"We do, don't we? But the two are not the same, my lord," said Katerina. She turned to one of the captives. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?" Since when did she say "Sweetheart"? The terrified boy-man nodded. Katerina smiled grimly at Walder Frey. "You seem to have overestimated your men's loyalty."

Walder Frey backed away until there was nowhere else for him to back into. He was stuck between a rock and an angry Robb Stark, which was infinitely worse than a hard place. Young Stark did not say anything. He pushed the Frey women aside. They were too scared to stop him. Besides, none of
them cared about Walder Frey enough to actually try.

What was Robb going to do? Katerina stood so still that it almost seemed as if she had become part of the backdrop. "You might want to get on with it, Your Grace," said Damon quietly, trying very hard to imitate his usual nonchalance but failing badly. If Robb Stark took any more time, Damon Salvatore would take the task into his own hands. Elijah knew emotional attachment when he saw it. Damon had cared a great deal about the young Stark girl.

"Your Grace," said Elijah quietly. The lights on the horizon drew closer. They would be here soon. "The Lannisters approach."

Walder Frey drew his dagger and held it in two gnarled shaking hands, so affected by rheumatism that they could barely grasp anything with strength. Robb knocked it aside. It clattered onto the floor and landed in a puddle of blood next to the severed head of one of his sons.

Robb slowly pushed the tip of his blade into the old man's stomach. Walder Frey's eyes widened and he let out a pathetic mewling sound. Pungent gases and liquid, along with his half-digested meal, dribbled out when Robb removed his blade.

The old man sank to the floor, clutching at his belly to stop his guts and stomach contents from spilling out. Stomach acid and blood ran down his fingers. More, undoubtedly, was running down his insides and melting his organs. He never took his eyes off Robb Stark but whatever scathing words he wished to speak, they were lost to the pain. If they had had time, no doubt they could have devised a more agonizing and deserving manner for him to die but, alas, their enemies were here, ready for round two.

The Lannisters were very close, now. By the time they rallied the men and got out of here, the lions would be upon them and this ragged pack of wolves was not ready for a fight like that.

But, of course, they had never counted on Elijah being there.

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Robb looked over the battlements at the mass of lights that was pouring over the land, obliterating the night. "How?" he asked softly, more to himself than anything. How were they to get out of this alive?

Jon and Elena had managed to pry Arya from Catelyn's arms. Catelyn's low guttural sobs and moans grated against Robb's heartstrings, making his chest ache physically. He wanted to cry himself and weep and scream at the injustice of the world, but what would that do?

Jon picked up Arya and wrapped her in his white cloak. He now cradled her gently to his bosom. He nodded to Robb, his eyes dry with tears that could not be shed. Elena held Catelyn in her arms as if she were her mother.

Robb flinched when Katherine touched him and moved away. Words kept on chasing themselves around in his mind. Monster! Liar! Who is my wife? He didn't know.

She was insistent, however, and he knew why. The sounds of battle roared below him. Damon might have started the killing early, but there were still ten thousand Frey men to contend with. Some of them, no doubt, thought that capturing or killing Robb Stark would gain them considerable favour with the Lannisters. He needed to get to his men and rally them.

"Follow me," he said. Without waiting to see if they would do so, and also knowing that they would, he turned and ran down the stairs. The fighting had not yet reached the inside of the keep yet but it was only a matter of time. Terrified servants stared at him. Blood dripped from the leaks
in the ceiling above. He kept on turning and running down the flights of stairs. "Damon, Elijah… Katherine, you're with me. Elena, take my mother and sister to safety as soon as you're down," said Robb.

"But…" began Elena.

"I will brook no argument," said Robb.

"Yes, Your Grace," said Elena.

"Jon," Robb began.

"I'm not leaving you," said Jon. He had that look in his eyes; one that Robb had not seen until recently. Nothing he did or said would change his brother's mind. Jon quickly kissed Elena on the lips, not caring that they were still covered in the blood of her victims. She clung to him as if she would never let him go. He had known about her and he hadn't cared that she was a monster. Was she really a monster?

"If you die, I'll kill you," Elena said.

"I know," said Jon. "Now, go."


The men, those who were able, had poured onto the southern shore, the nearest one, clueless, frightened and leaderless. Robb clambered onto the shore. All he could see were their black shadows. No one seemed to realize that he was there.

"Sons of the north!" shouted Robb, finding his voice finally for the first time, it seemed, since the horror had begun. "My brothers!" He had to be strong, if not for himself, then for these countrymen who had followed him so far, through victory and defeat and the worst mistake in his life.

"The king," came one murmur. "It's the king!"

"The king!"

Robb raised his blade, red with the blood of his enemies.

"Your Grace!" One of Lord Manderly's sons, the youngest, who had not been important enough to join in the feasting, ran to him. His arm hung uselessly by his side. "They just fell upon us. What are we going to do?" The boy's eyes were wide with fear. Robb could see the white all around his irises.

"I am here," he said. "Rally to me! We'll make for the northern shore!"

"The Lannisters are here!" The lights, from this level, had just begun to creep over the horizon.

"Your Grace, you must go," said Elijah. "I will hold them off."

"On your own?" said Robb. "How?"

"One of Walder Frey's conditions to the Lannisters was that they gave him enough wildfire to destroy a castle," said Elijah. "I need men to help me move the barrels but, after that, there is no need for more men to die unnecessarily."

Robb wanted to say something, to ask him if he had really thought this through. To do this was to…
But Elijah's expression was serene and resolute. Robb only gave him one nod of assent and farewell. He had lost many today. He was about to lose more, still, but if Elijah's sacrifice was going to save the northern force, he could not deny the man this choice. No matter what he was, he had proven himself to be loyal.

The men surged and gathered around him. His banners were ragged, but still flying.

Just as their feet touched the northern shore, there was a tremendous crack and a roll of thunder before the bridge broke into two and the southern tower collapsed in a pillar of green flame.

A/N: It seems we've taken up GRRM's writing habits and publishing strategy.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!