

“Someone’s there,” Sansa said anxiously. She found herself thinking of Lady, wishing the direwolf was with her.

“You’re safe with me.” Joffrey drew his Lion’s Tooth from its sheath. The sound of steel on leather made her tremble. “This way,” he said, riding through a stand of trees.

Beyond, in a clearing overlooking the river, they came upon a boy and a girl playing at knights. Their swords were wooden sticks, broom handles from the look of them, and they were rushing across the grass, swinging at each other lustily. The boy was years older, a head taller, and much stronger, and he was pressing the attack. The girl, a scrawny thing in soiled leathers, was dodging and managing to get her stick in the way of most of the boy’s blows, but not all. When she tried to lunge at him, he caught her stick with his own, swept it aside, and slid his wood down hard on her fingers. She cried out and lost her weapon.

Prince Joffrey laughed. The boy looked around, wide-eyed and startled, and dropped his stick in the grass. The girl glared at them, sucking on her knuckles to take the sting out, and Sansa was horrified. ‘Arya?’ she called out incredulously.

“Go away,” Arya shouted back at them, angry tears in her eyes. “What are you doing here? Leave us alone.”

Joffrey glanced from Arya to Sansa and back again. “Your sister?” She nodded, blushing. Joffrey examined the boy, an ungainly lad with a coarse, freckled face and thick red hair. “And who are you, boy?” he asked in a commanding tone that took no notice of the fact that the other was a year his senior.

“Mycah,” the boy muttered. He recognized the prince and averted his eyes. “M’lord.”

“He’s the butcher’s boy,” Sansa said.

“He’s my friend,” Arya said sharply. “You leave him alone.”

“A butcher’s boy who wants to be a knight, is it?” Joffrey swung down from his mount, sword in hand. “Pick up your sword, butcher’s boy,” he said, his eyes bright with amusement. “Let us see how good you are.”

Mycah stood there, frozen with fear.

Joffrey walked toward him. “Go on, pick it up. Or do you only fight little girls?”

“She ast me to, m’lord,” Mycah said. “She ast me to.”

Sansa had only to glance at Arya and see the flush on her sister’s face to know the boy was telling the truth, but Joffrey was in no mood to listen. The wine had made him wild. “Are you going to pick up your sword?”

Mycah shook his head. “It’s only a stick, m’lord. It’s not no sword, it’s only a stick.”

“And you’re only a butcher’s boy, and no knight.” Joffrey lifted Lion’s Tooth and laid its point on Mycah’s cheek below the eye, as the butcher’s boy stood trembling. “That was my lady’s sister you were hitting, do you know that?” A bright bud of blood blossomed where his sword pressed into Mycah’s flesh, and a slow red line trickled down the boy’s cheek.

“Stop it!” Arya screamed. She grabbed up her fallen stick.

Sansa was afraid. “Arya, you stay out of this.”