

The horn's deep bellow cut through the morning air like a war cry, and twenty warriors exploded into motion across the tournament field. Dust rose in clouds as armored boots pounded against packed earth, the thunder of their charge drowning out the crowd's roar.

Daeron moved directly toward Ser Criston Cole. His violet eyes locked onto the white-cloaked figure across the field, Stormsong's weight familiar and reassuring at his hip. *End this quickly*, he told himself. *One clean strike, and—*

Steel rang against steel as a blade swept toward his head in a vicious arc. Daeron ducked low, pivoting on his left foot as he drew Stormsong in one fluid motion. The Valyrian steel sang as it cleared the scabbard, deflecting his attacker's sword with a shower of sparks.

"Well, well," drawled a voice thick with Westerlands arrogance. "The mystery Northern himself."

Daeron found himself facing a tall man in crimson and gold, a golden lion roaring across his breastplate. The knight's helm was pushed back, revealing a sharp-featured face with the green eyes and golden hair that marked him as Lannister-born. His sword was good castle-forged steel.

"Ser Jason Lannister," the knight announced with a grin, circling slowly to Daeron's left. "And you, mystery man, have something I want." His eyes fixed hungrily on Stormsong's distinctive rippled blade. "That pretty sword will look magnificent hanging in Casterly Rock's great hall."

"You're welcome to try and take it," Daeron replied, shifting his weight to the balls of his feet. Around them, the melee raged—the clash of steel on steel, grunts of effort, and the wet sound of blade meeting flesh. But Daeron's world had narrowed to this single opponent blocking his path to Cole.

Jason attacked without warning, his longsword cutting downward in a brutal overhead strike meant to cleave Daeron from crown to groin. Daeron sidestepped, letting the blade whistle past his ear, and riposted with a thrust toward Jason's exposed ribs. The Lannister twisted desperately, the Valyrian steel point scraping along his armor with a screech of metal.

"Fast," Jason acknowledged, recovering his guard with practiced ease. "But speed won't save you when I take your head."

Across the field, Prince Daemon Targaryen moved like he was dancing. Two Northern knights—one bearing the silver mailed fist of House Glover, the other the standing bear of House Mormont—had converged on him with obvious coordination. They attacked in unison, hoping to overwhelm the legendary Rogue Prince through sheer numbers.

Daemon yawned.

"Really, lads?" he called out, Dark Sister dancing in lazy patterns as he deflected their strikes with contemptuous ease. "Is this the best the North can offer? I've faced harder challenges from my morning shave."

The Glover knight snarled and pressed forward, his sword cutting in a rapid series of strikes—high, low, thrust, sweep. Each blow was met by Dark Sister's blade, Daemon barely seeming to exert himself. His silver-gold hair caught the light as he spun away from a particularly aggressive lunge.

"You fight like you're at a dance," growled Ser Robett Mormont, sweat already beading on his forehead beneath his helm. "This is a melee, princeling!"

"Oh, I'm well aware," Daemon purred, suddenly exploding into motion. Dark Sister swept in a perfect circle, forcing both Northerners to stumble backward. "I'm simply enjoying the music."

The bear knight roared and charged, raising his sword for a crushing overhead blow. Daemon stepped smoothly to his right, letting the blade crash into the earth where he'd been standing, then brought Dark Sister's pommel up in a vicious strike to Mormont's helm. The knight staggered, dazed, as Daemon turned to face his companion with an expression of theatrical disappointment.

"Honestly," he sighed. "I expected better from the sons of the North."

But it was Laenor Velaryon who fought with the fury of the truly desperate. The young lord charged across the battlefield like a man possessed, his sea-green armor gleaming as he carved a path through the chaos. Knights scattered before him—not from fear of his skill, but from the wild, reckless abandon with which he swung his blade.

"Cole!" Laenor's voice cracked with grief and rage as he spotted his target. "Face me, you murdering dog!"

Ser Criston Cole had just finished dismantling a knight of House Frey, his morning star rising and falling. The Frey's shield arm hung useless at his side, the limb clearly broken, and he raised his sword in a desperate guard as Cole's weapon descended like a falling star.

The morning star's flanged head caught the Frey's blade at the crossguard, the impact sending vibrations up the knight's arm that made him cry out in pain. Cole twisted his weapon, trapping the sword, then drove his knee into the man's stomach. As the Frey doubled over, gasping, Cole brought his morning star around in a horizontal arc that took the knight in the temple.

The Frey dropped like a stone.

"Yield!" Cole commanded, standing over the fallen man with his weapon raised for another strike.

"I yield!" the Frey gasped, blood trickling from beneath his dented helm.

Cole nodded curtly and stepped back, already turning to seek his next opponent. That's when he saw Laenor Velaryon bearing down on him like an avenging angel, sword raised high and violet eyes blazing with murderous intent.

"Ah," Cole murmured, shifting his grip on the morning star's leather-wrapped handle. "The grieving lover comes to play."

Jason Lannister pressed his attack with renewed vigor, his blade work flowing in the deadly patterns taught by the finest masters gold could buy. He fought with the confidence of a man who had never truly been tested, who believed wealth and breeding would carry him to victory.

He was wrong.

Daeron gave ground slowly, his movements economical and precise. Each of Jason's strikes was met with just enough force to deflect it, never more than necessary. He was conserving his strength, waiting for the opening that would inevitably come.

"Stand still, you bastard!" Jason snarled, lunging forward with a thrust aimed at Daeron's throat.

Daeron swayed aside like smoke, letting the blade pass harmlessly by, then brought Stormsong's pommel up in a sharp strike to Jason's wrist. The Lannister's grip loosened for just an instant—but an instant was all Daeron needed.

Stormsong's edge found the gap between Jason's gauntlet and vambrace, drawing a thin line of blood. Not deep enough to cripple, but enough to send a message.

"First blood to me," Daeron said quietly. "Yield now, and you can walk away with all your pieces intact."

Jason's green eyes blazed with fury and humiliation. "I'll see you in seven hells first!"

Across the field, Ser Criston Cole rolled his shoulders as Laenor Velaryon approached, the morning star's weight familiar and deadly in his right hand.

"If it isn't Lord Laenor Velaryon. Though I must say, you look rather like a fish out of water here."

Cole's white cloak snapped in the breeze as he began to circle slowly. The morning star hung loose at his side, deceptively casual, while his left hand rested on the pommel of his backup sword.

Laenor's violet eyes blazed with grief-fueled hatred as he raised his sword in a high guard. "I told you last night, Cole," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "You will die soon."

"Oh, the threats again," Cole chuckled, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "You know, your precious Joffrey made similar threats before I smashed the side of his head?" He raised his morning star slightly, letting the light catch the dried blood still staining its flanged head. "You

know, I haven't even cleaned this since yesterday. Some of dear Joffrey's blood is still decorating the steel. I thought it might bring me luck."

Laenor's face went white beneath his helm, then flushed red with an rage so pure it seemed to set the air around him ablaze. A sound escaped his throat—part roar, part sob—as every ounce of restraint he possessed shattered like glass.

"You bastard!" Laenor screamed, charging forward with his sword raised high. "I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!"

His blade descended in a wild overhead strike that carried all his strength behind it. Cole stepped smoothly to his left, letting the sword crash into the earth where he'd been standing, sending up a spray of dirt and grass. Before Laenor could recover, Cole was already moving, the morning star whistling through the air in a controlled arc toward the young lord's exposed ribs.

Laenor threw himself backward, the weapon's flanged head missing his armor by inches. He stumbled, off-balance, and Cole pressed his advantage. No wild swings, no wasted motion—each strike calculated to wear down his opponent while conserving his own strength.

"Is this what passes for swordplay among the Velaryons?" Cole asked conversationally, deflecting a desperate thrust with the haft of his morning star. "I've seen tavern brawlers with better form."

Laenor attacked again, his sword cutting in a horizontal sweep aimed at Cole's neck. The Kingsguard ducked under the blade, then drove the pommel of his morning star up toward Laenor's chin. The young lord jerked his head back, the metal stud missing his jaw by a hair's breadth.

"Too slow," Cole observed, dancing backward as Laenor stumbled forward, overextended. "Joffrey was faster than you, you know. Not fast enough, obviously, but faster than this pathetic display."

In the royal pavilion, the spectacle was met growing unease. Princess Rhaenyra sat rigidly in her chair, her knuckles white as she gripped the armrests. She felt no romantic love for Laenor, but watching him throw his life away in such a futile gesture for nothing filled her with a cold dread that had nothing to do with affection and everything to do with political necessity.

"Seven hells," she whispered under her breath. "He's going to get himself killed."

Laenor's attacks grew increasingly desperate as Cole continued to evade him with maddening ease. The young lord's breathing was already labored, his movements becoming sluggish as exhaustion began to set in. Sweat poured down his face beneath his helm, and his sword arm trembled slightly from the effort of swinging the blade with such wild abandon.

Cole, by contrast, looked as fresh as when the melee began. He moved with the confident grace of a man completely in control of the situation, his morning star weaving defensive patterns that turned aside every attack with minimal effort.

"You know what your problem is, fish?" Cole said, stepping aside as another wild swing went wide. "You're fighting with your heart instead of your head. Joffrey made the same mistake—all passion, no technique."

"Don't you dare speak his name!" Laenor roared, reversing his grip and thrusting toward Cole's stomach. The Kingsguard twisted away, grabbing Laenor's sword arm and using the young lord's momentum to send him stumbling past.

"Joffrey, Joffrey, Joffrey," Cole sang mockingly, his voice carrying clearly across the field. "The Knight of Kisses. Tell me, did he scream your name when I crushed his skull? I was too busy enjoying the sound of breaking bone to pay close attention."

Laenor spun around, tears of rage streaming down his face, and launched himself at Cole with a wordless cry. His sword cut in a series of rapid strikes—high, low, thrust, sweep—each blow telegraphed so clearly that Cole had time to consider his dinner plans while deflecting them.

The morning star's haft caught Laenor's blade at the crossguard, trapping it for a crucial moment. Cole drove his knee up toward the young lord's stomach, but Laenor managed to twist away, taking the blow on his hip instead. The impact still sent him staggering, his guard dropping for just an instant.

Cole's morning star sang through the air in a vicious horizontal arc. Laenor threw himself backward, but not quite far enough—the weapon's flanged head caught the edge of his breastplate with a ringing impact that dented the sea-green steel and sent him sprawling.

"Getting tired already?" Cole asked, standing over Laenor with his weapon raised. "This is disappointing. I expected at least a few minutes of entertainment from Corlys Velaryon's heir."

Laenor rolled away and scrambled to his feet, his chest heaving. A thin trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth where he'd bitten his tongue during the fall. His sword shook in his grip as he raised it again, the weight seeming to have doubled.

"I'm... not... finished," he gasped between breaths.

The Royal Seats

Rhaenyra watched the brutal spectacle below with mounting dread, her fingers digging into the carved armrests of her chair. Laenor was going to die down there—any fool could see it. The political ramifications crashed through her mind like waves against a seawall: a broken betrothal, her father's fury, Alicent's smug satisfaction.

"Lord Corlys," King Viserys's voice cut through the crowd's roar like a blade. His bandaged right hand rested stiffly in his lap as he turned to face the Sea Snake. "Perhaps you can explain to me why your son—my daughter's betrothed—is currently attempting to get himself killed on that field?"

Corlys Velaryon's legendary composure cracked like ice in spring. For the first time in Rhaenyra's memory, the master of tides and politics looked genuinely at a loss for words. His weathered face had gone pale beneath his silver beard, and his knuckles were white where they gripped his chair.

"Your Grace, I..." Corlys began, then stopped, clearly struggling. The silence stretched uncomfortably before he finally spoke again, each word seeming to cost him. "My son wished to participate in the melee. I... gave him my permission."

The lie hung in the air like smoke from a funeral pyre. Everyone in the royal box knew it for what it was—Corlys would never have willingly allowed his heir to risk his life and their alliance in such a reckless manner.

Viserys's violet eyes flashed with fury. "You gave him permission? To throw away his life fighting a member of my Kingsguard? What madness possessed you to—"

"My husband made a difficult decision," Rhaenys Targaryen interrupted, her own violet eyes blazing as she came to Corlys's defense. "Laenor is a man grown, Your Grace. He has the right to make his own choices, even foolish ones."

"How noble," Queen Alicent's voice was honey over steel as she leaned forward with false concern. "Though I confess myself curious about young Lord Laenor's... motivation. He seems quite determined to fight Ser Criston specifically." Her eyes glittered with malicious innocence. "One might wonder why he's so intent on avenging Ser Joffrey Lonmouth's death. They must have been very close friends indeed."

The barb hit its target perfectly. Rhaenyra felt her jaw clench as Alicent's implication hung in the air like a sword over all their heads. *Close friends*. As if anyone with eyes couldn't see what Joffrey had meant to Laenor.

"They were friends since childhood," Lady Laena Velaryon spoke up, her young voice carrying clearly despite the crowd's noise. She looked directly at Alicent as she continued, "Like brothers, really. I imagine you understand such bonds, Your Grace—you have two brothers yourself. Surely you can comprehend what one might do if harm came to Ser Gwayne or Ser Gerold?"

Alicent's smile tightened almost imperceptibly. "Indeed, family bonds can drive us to... passionate responses. Though one hopes wisdom might temper such passion when greater responsibilities are at stake."

"Speaking of your brothers," Rhaenyra said, unable to resist the opening, "it appears Ser Gwayne is about to have another opportunity to distinguish himself." She gestured toward the

field where Gwayne Hightower was indeed approaching Daeron. "How exciting. Though based on his last tournament performance against my uncle Daemon, I do hope he's improved his swordwork."

Alicent's mask slipped for just a moment, genuine concern flickering in her eyes as she followed Rhaenyra's gesture. "Gwayne is a skilled knight," she said, but her voice carried less certainty than her words.

Good, Rhaenyra thought with vicious satisfaction. Let her worry. Let her feel what it's like to watch someone she cares about in danger.

She found herself hoping—quite fervently—that Daeron would give Gwayne Hightower exactly what he deserved. Perhaps a broken nose to match his broken pride from four years ago. Or better yet, something that would leave permanent marks. A scar to remind him of his arrogance, a limp to humble his swagger.

Daenerys Targaryen

In the northern section of the stands, Daenerys found herself the center of increasingly pointed attention as Daeron's fighting prowess became evident on the field below. Lord Rickon Stark leaned forward in his seat, his grey eyes sharp with curiosity as he watched her husband fight like a wild beast.

"Lady Daenerys," Lord Stark said carefully. "Your husband fights remarkably well. Many of his techniques... they're distinctly Northern in origin. Where exactly did he learn such skills?"

Daenerys kept her expression pleasantly neutral, though inwardly she cursed the perceptiveness of Stark eyes. "Daeron spent much of his childhood in the North, my lord. His mother was Northern-born, and he was raised there until he was old enough to seek his fortune elsewhere."

"Strange that we've never heard tell of a Northern lad with such... distinctive features. Those purple eyes of his are rather memorable." Lady Manderly said.

"Aye," rumbled Lord Roderick Dustin, stroking his iron-grey beard. "The North's not so vast that word of a boy with dragon's eyes wouldn't reach the great houses. Which family did you say his mother belonged to?"

These Northerners were no fools—they were probing, testing her story for inconsistencies.

Daenerys felt the weight of their collective scrutiny like a physical thing. These were not southern courtiers content with pretty lies and half-truths—these were Northerners, blunt and direct, who valued honesty above courtesy.

"A village woman," she said smoothly, letting a note of sadness creep into her voice. "Daeron's father... well, according to my husband, the man had Valyrian blood but never acknowledged his

bastard son. Daeron's mother raised him among the common folk, far from the great castles. It's hardly surprising that lords and ladies never encountered him—those born to village life rarely venture beyond their birthplace."

Lady Mormont's dark eyes glittered with something that might have been amusement—or hunger. "A pity," she said, her voice carrying just the faintest hint of suggestion. "A man with such... qualities might have found a warm welcome in the right household. Had I known of him before his marriage, I might have been inclined to... make his acquaintance."

The implication was delicate but unmistakable, and Daenerys felt a familiar surge of possessiveness. *You can look all you want, bear-woman, but he's mine.*

"How fortunate for you both that fate intervened," Daenerys replied with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Indeed," Lady Gilliane Stark interjected with diplomatic smoothness. "Speaking of fate—how did you two meet? It must be quite a tale, given your... exotic origins."

Daenerys's expression softened, and for the first time since the questioning began, her smile was genuinely warm. "He came to me," she said simply, the memory bringing real fondness to her voice. "We met in Essos, when I was... in need of capable protection. Daeron proved himself to be exactly what I required."

Not a lie, she thought. Just not the whole truth. Jon Snow had indeed come to her in Essos, though it had been in a different life, a different time.

"A romantic tale," Lady Manderly observed with approval. "Though I confess myself curious about the details. Essos is vast—where exactly did this meeting occur?"

"Near Meereen," Daenerys replied without hesitation. "During one of the many conflicts that plague that region. Daeron was... freelancing at the time, and I had need of a good sword."

Lord Stark's eyes remained fixed on her face, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that he was seeing more than she intended to reveal.

"A sellsword with purple eyes and Northern training," he mused quietly. "Quite the combination."

"The world is full of wonders, my lord," Daenerys said lightly. "Especially in Essos, where bloodlines from across the known world mingle freely."

Down on the field, Daeron had won against Lord Lannister, and Daenerys was grateful for the distraction as the assembled Northerners turned their attention back to the combat. But she could feel Lord Stark's eyes returning to her face periodically, as if he were working through some complex puzzle in his mind.

Let him wonder, she thought. He can suspect all he likes, but he'll never guess the truth.

Daeron Targaryen

Daeron wiped Jason Lannister's blood from Stormsong's blade as he surveyed the field, the Lannister lord was carried away by his squires to be treated by a Maester, his violet eyes tracking the remaining combatants. Across the churned earth, Laenor Velaryon was still throwing himself at Criston Cole with increasingly desperate attacks, while Cole seemed content to toy with his prey like a cat with a wounded mouse.

Time to end this, Daeron thought, adjusting his grip on his sword's hilt. He took three steps towards when a voice spoke.

"Where do you think you're going, bastard?"

Daeron spun, bringing Stormsong up in a defensive arc just in time to catch a longsword aimed at his neck. The force of the blow sent vibrations up his arm, and he found himself face-to-face with a knight in green and gold—the distinctive colors of House Hightower.

The man's helm was pushed back, revealing sharp features and the characteristic auburn hair of Alicent's line. This had to be Gwayne Hightower, the queen's younger brother, and his green eyes blazed with arrogant fury.

"Ser Gwayne Hightower," the knight announced unnecessarily, pressing forward with his blade locked against Stormsong's edge. "And you, whoever you are, have no business in this court, much less on this field."

Daeron disengaged with a twist of his wrist, stepping back to create distance. "I was invited by His Grace the King," he replied mildly. "Perhaps you should take up your complaints with him."

"Invited?" Gwayne scoffed, beginning a slow circle to Daeron's left. His sword work showed good training—the kind of precise, textbook technique taught by expensive masters-at-arms. "A bastard with stolen Valyrian steel and delusions of grandeur. You don't belong among your betters."

"My betters?" Daeron's voice carried a note of genuine amusement as he mirrored Gwayne's movement. "I was under the impression that worth was measured by deeds, not birth. Perhaps the Reach teaches different lessons?"

Gwayne's face flushed with anger. "I'll teach you about worth, you arrogant—"

He lunged forward in a classical thrust, his blade seeking Daeron's heart. Daeron sidestepped smoothly, letting the steel pass harmlessly by his ribs, then brought Stormsong around in a horizontal cut that would have opened Gwayne from hip to shoulder.

The Hightower knight threw himself backward, the Valyrian steel whistling past his breastplate by inches. He landed hard, rolled, and came up with his sword raised in a high guard.

"Fast," he admitted grudgingly. "But speed won't save you when—"

A war cry interrupted his boast as Ser Glover, bloodied but unbowed from his encounter with Prince Daemon, charged into their duel with his sword raised high. The Northern warrior had apparently decided that any enemy of a mysterious southerner was a friend of his.

"For the North!" Glover roared, his blade cutting toward Gwayne's exposed flank.

Gwayne cursed and spun to meet this new threat, his sword deflecting Glover's strike with a ringing crash of steel. The two knights locked blades, straining against each other with grunts of effort.

Daeron took the opportunity to disengage, stepping back as the two men began their own deadly dance. A quick glance across the field showed him what he'd feared—Laenor was barely moving now, his swings were pathetic.

No time for games.

Daeron sprinted across the intervening space, his armor clanking with each stride. Behind him, he could hear Gwayne and Glover trading curses and steel in equal measure, but his focus was entirely on the scene unfolding ahead.

Criston Cole had stopped toying with his prey. The Kingsguard's face was set in lines of cold determination as he stood over the kneeling Laenor, his morning star raised like an executioner's axe. The young Velaryon's sword lay several feet away, knocked from his grip by Cole's last devastating attack.

"Any last words, fish?" Cole asked mockingly, his weapon casting a shadow across Laenor's upturned face.

Laenor's left shoulder hung at an unnatural angle, clearly dislocated or worse, and blood seeped through the joints of his armor. But his violet eyes still burned with defiant rage as he glared up at his tormentor.

"Go to hell," he gasped through gritted teeth.

Cole chuckled. "After you."

The morning star began its descent, flanged head glinting in the sunlight as it fell toward Laenor's skull. The crowd's roar faded to a whisper, time seeming to slow as thousands of spectators held their breath.

Then Stormsong's blade caught the morning star's haft with a crack like thunder.

"A knight with honor," Daeron said quietly, his voice carrying clearly in the sudden silence, "knows when to stop."

Cole's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with calculation as he took in this new opponent. He stepped back, freeing his weapon from Daeron's blade, and shifted into a combat stance.

"Lord Daeron," he said with mock courtesy. "How kind of you to join us. Though I'm afraid this is a private matter between myself and young Lord Velaryon here."

"The matter appears concluded," Daeron replied, not taking his eyes off Cole's weapon. "The man has yielded. Honor demands you accept his surrender."

"I heard no yield," Cole said with a cold smile. "Did you hear a yield, fish?"

Laenor struggled to speak through his pain, his good arm clutching his injured shoulder. "I... I never..."

"There," Cole spread his hands in a gesture of false reasonableness. "No yield. The combat continues."

Daeron's grip tightened on Stormsong's hilt. "Look at him, Cole. He can barely stand, much less fight. This isn't combat—it's murder."

"Strong words from a bastard playing at nobility," Cole replied, his morning star beginning to move in slow, hypnotic circles. "Perhaps you'd care to take his place? I've been curious about that pretty sword of yours."

Before Daeron could respond, squires came running from the sidelines, their young faces pale with fear but determined to do their duty. They reached Laenor's side and began carefully lifting him, supporting his weight between them.

"My lords," one of them squeaked, his voice cracking with nerves. "The Grand Maester requires Lord Laenor's immediate attention. By order of His Grace the King."

Cole's face darkened with frustration, but even he wouldn't dare interfere with a direct royal command. He stepped back reluctantly, his weapon still ready but no longer threatening.

"Another time, then," he said to Laenor, who was being carefully helped away. Then his cold gaze fixed on Daeron. "And as for you, Northern—I believe we have unfinished business."

Daeron settled into a combat stance, Stormsong held in a perfect middle guard. Around them, the melee continued to rage, but a circle of clear space had formed as other fighters instinctively gave the two skilled warriors room to work.

The morning star and Valyrian steel blade met with a crash that echoed across the tournament field like thunder. Daeron felt the impact travel up his arm as he deflected Cole's opening strike, the force behind it speaking to the Kingsguard's considerable strength.

"I've been waiting for this fight," Cole said conversationally, recovering his weapon and beginning a slow circle. "Ever since you humiliated Ser Harwin Weak yesterday. The man's been moping about like a kicked hound."

"Ser Harwin Strong is a good knight," Daeron replied, matching Cole's movement while keeping his blade in perfect defensive position. "Though I suspect his pride was wounded more than his body."

"Strong?" Cole laughed, the sound sharp and mocking. "The man fights like an ox—all brute force and no finesse. Rather like most of your Northern friends, I imagine."

Daeron's violet eyes glittered with something that might have been amusement. "Speaking of victories over notable opponents, I heard about your triumph over Prince Daemon four years ago. Quite impressive—few men can claim to have bested the Rogue Prince in single combat."

Cole's eyebrows rose in surprise, and his smile widened. "You know about that? I'm flattered. It's always pleasant to meet a... fan of one's work."

"Oh, I wouldn't call myself a fan," Daeron said mildly. "More of a student. I find it instructive to study how different warriors approach combat."

"And what," Cole asked, his morning star beginning to move in slow, hypnotic patterns, "have your studies taught you about my approach?"

"That you're skilled, experienced, and utterly without honor when it suits you," Daeron replied without missing a beat.

"Honor is a luxury for those who can afford it. I prefer victory."

The Kingsguard exploded into movement, his morning star cutting through the air in a vicious diagonal strike aimed at Daeron's ribs.

Daeron swayed backward, the flanged head passing inches from his armor, then stepped forward into Cole's guard. Stormsong swept upward in a rising cut, but Cole was already moving, throwing himself to the side and bringing his weapon around in a horizontal arc.

The morning star's haft caught Stormsong's blade with a ringing impact, steel against steel producing sparks that glittered like fallen stars. Cole used the leverage to drive his knee toward Daeron's stomach, but the younger man twisted away, the blow glancing off his hip armor.

"Fast," Cole acknowledged, dancing back to create distance. "But speed alone won't save you against proper technique."

"No," Daeron agreed, settling into a new guard position. "But it helps."

They circled each other like wolves, each looking for an opening while testing the other's reactions. Cole feinted high then swept low, his morning star seeking Daeron's legs. The Valyrian steel blade dropped to intercept, deflecting the weapon with a shower of sparks.

Daeron riposted immediately, Stormsong cutting in a perfect horizontal line toward Cole's neck. The Kingsguard ducked under the blade, his white cloak billowing, then drove the pommel of his morning star toward Daeron's stomach.

The younger man caught the strike on his crossguard, twisted his blade to trap the weapon, then drove his knee upward. Cole jerked his head back, the knee missing his chin by a hair's breadth, and used his superior leverage to break free of the bind.

"You know," Cole said, breathing slightly harder now, "I'm beginning to understand why Harwin was so upset. You do have a certain... quality to your swordwork."

"Northern training," Daeron replied, his own breathing controlled and even. "We learn early that pretty forms mean nothing if you're dead."

"Practical. I approve." Cole's morning star began to move in figure-eight patterns, the weapon cutting through the air. "Though I wonder how practical you'll feel when I'm wearing your sword on my belt."

"You're welcome to try taking it," Daeron said, then added with a slight smile, "though I should warn you—the last man who made that boast is currently nursing a broken hand, a wounded knee, and a dead pride."

Cole launched himself forward with surprising speed for a man in full armor, his morning star cutting through three different angles in rapid succession. High, low, thrust—each strike designed to overwhelm his opponent through sheer aggression.

Daeron met each attack, his blade work flowing like water around stone. He gave ground slowly, drawing Cole forward while looking for the opening that would inevitably come. The Kingsguard was skilled, but he was also proud—and pride made men take risks they shouldn't.

"You fight well for a bastard," Cole panted, pressing his attack. His morning star crashed against Stormsong's blade again and again, the impacts sending vibrations through both men's arms.

"Birth means less than training," Daeron replied, pivoting on his left foot to avoid a particularly vicious strike. "Something a man who earned his position through merit should understand."

"Merit?" Cole's laugh was bitter. "Merit got me a white cloak and a lifetime of service to spoiled princesses. Tell me, bastard—what has merit gotten you?"

"This conversation, for one thing."

Daeron's blade suddenly came alive, Stormsong moving in a complex pattern that forced Cole to give ground for the first time. The Valyrian steel sang through the air in cuts and thrusts that tested every aspect of the Kingsguard's defense.

Cole's eyes widened as he found himself pressed backward, his morning star working overtime to deflect the relentless assault. The younger man's technique was flawless—each strike flowing into the next.

"Seven hells," Cole muttered, barely getting his weapon up in time to block a thrust aimed at his throat. "Where did you learn to fight like this?"

"Here and there," Daeron replied unhelpfully, his blade continuing its deadly dance. "The North. Essos. Wherever men were willing to teach useful lessons."

Stormsong's edge found a gap in Cole's armor, sliding between breastplate and shoulder guard to draw a thin line of blood. The Kingsguard cursed and spun away, but Daeron followed him step for step, pressing his advantage.

"You know what your problem is?" Cole snarled, his morning star cutting in increasingly desperate patterns. "You think that fancy steel makes you special. But in the end, it's just a sword."

"Perhaps," Daeron agreed, his blade work never slowing. "But it's a very good sword."

As if to prove his point, Stormsong's edge bit deep into Cole's shoulder guard, the Valyrian steel parting the metal like cloth. Cole jerked away with a grunt of pain, blood seeping through the ruined armor.

The crowd had fallen strangely quiet. In the royal pavilion, King Viserys leaned forward in his chair.

Cole's breathing was becoming labored, sweat pouring down his face beneath his helm. The cuts were adding up—not individually dangerous, but collectively weakening. Daeron's superior blade was taking its toll, finding gaps that normal steel could never exploit.

Cole feinted left, then spun right with his morning star extended in a wide arc. Daeron moved to intercept, but Cole had expected this—the Kingsguard suddenly reversed direction, bringing his weapon around in a crushing blow toward Daeron's head.

The morning star's flanged head caught Daeron in the ribs, denting his armor and sending him staggering. But even as he stumbled, his body twisted, turning a potentially fatal blow into a glancing strike.

Cole pressed forward, sensing victory, but Daeron was already recovering. As the Kingsguard raised his weapon for another strike, Stormsong moved with lightning speed.

The Valyrian steel blade swept toward Cole's throat in a perfect killing cut. Cole threw his morning star down desperately, trying to block, but the weapon's haft couldn't cover enough distance. In desperation, he threw himself backward—

—and Stormsong's point plunged deep into his stomach instead.

Blood erupted around the blade as Daeron drove it home, the Valyrian steel sliding between the plates of Cole's armor like it was butter. Cole's eyes went wide with shock and pain, his mouth opening in a silent scream.

Daeron began to pull the blade free, cutting even more of Cole's flesh, preparing to finish what he'd started, when he heard the whisper of steel behind him. Without conscious thought, he spun around, bringing Stormsong up in a perfect defensive arc.

The blade caught an approaching sword just inches from his neck, deflecting it with a ringing crash. In the same motion, Daeron reversed his grip and drove the pommel into his attacker's throat.

The man dropped like a stone, blood fountaining from the crushed ruin of his windpipe. He hit the ground hard, his hands clawing at his throat as crimson spread across the churned earth.

From the royal pavilion came a woman's piercing scream: "GWAYNE!"

Daeron's blood turned to ice as he looked down at the dying man. Auburn hair beneath a dented helm. Green and gold armor. The sharp features of House Hightower.

Seven hells, he thought. I've just killed the Queen's brother.

He spun back toward Cole, ready to finish what he'd started, but squires were already swarming onto the field. They lifted the wounded Kingsguard between them, carrying him toward the medical pavilion with urgent efficiency.

Cole's eyes met Daeron's over the squires' shoulders, and despite his pain, the man managed a bloody smile. He'd won after all—not through superior skill, but through the intervention of political necessity.

Daeron couldn't pursue him now. To attack wounded men being carried from the field would be murder, not combat. This was something the King would never tolerate. Daeron knew he could say that Gwayne Hightower's death was an accident, but if he pursued Criston Cole right now, that would be no accident.

The tournament field was nearly empty, those defeated were carried away by squires, and only one fighter was a corpse now. Only two men remained standing, and the crowd held its collective breath.

Prince Daemon Targaryen stood over the prone form of Ser Desmond Tully, Dark Sister's point resting casually against the knight's throat. The Tully's armor was dented and bloodied, his sword arm hanging useless at his side.

"Yield," Daemon said with theatrical boredom, "before I decide to redecorate this field with what's left of your courage."

"I yield!" Ser Desmond gasped, relief flooding his voice.

Daemon stepped back, cleaning Dark Sister's blade on a piece of torn fabric. He turned to survey the field with the satisfied air of a predator who'd saved the best prey for last.

"Well, well," he called out, his voice carrying clearly across the bloodied ground. "It seems we're the last dancers at this particular feast."

Daeron wiped Gwayne Hightower's blood from Stormsong's blade, his face grim. He knew the Queen will demand blood for her brother's death, but he forced himself to focus on the immediate threat. Daemon Targaryen was no bumbling knight or grief-stricken boy—he was one of the most dangerous men in Westeros, and his suspicions from last night made this confrontation far more perilous than it appeared.

"So it seems, Your Grace," Daeron replied, settling into a defensive stance. "Though I confess, after our conversation last evening, I hadn't expected to face the Rogue Prince himself today."

Daemon's violet eyes lit up with genuine pleasure as he began walking toward Daeron, Dark Sister held in casual readiness. "Do you know how long it's been since I've faced another man with Valyrian steel? Years, literally years. Most knights carry common metal—adequate for cutting through peasants, but hardly sporting."

"I imagine it does become tedious," Daeron said carefully, backing away slightly to maintain distance. He had no intention of harming Daemon if he could avoid it—the prince was too important to the future, and Daeron would much rather not have him as enemy. Daeron knew he and Daemon would never be friends, but being neutral was much better than enemies.

"Tedious?" Daemon laughed. "My dear Northern, tedious doesn't begin to describe it. Do you know what Ser Criston used against me four years ago? Common steel. Good quality, mind you, but still just iron and carbon. But two blades forged in dragonfire, wielded by men with the blood of Old Valyria in their veins? That's a true fight."

Dark Sister swept toward Daeron's left side in a testing cut. Daeron met it with Stormsong's edge, and both men felt the unique sensation of Valyrian steel kissing Valyrian steel—a perfectly balanced meeting that sent no vibrations up their arms.

"Beautiful," Daemon breathed, his eyes bright with excitement. "Like a song, isn't it? The way they ring together?"

"Your Grace has a poet's soul," Daeron observed, disengaging and stepping back.

"Rhaenyra says the same thing," Daemon replied, pressing forward with a series of quick cuts that Daeron deflected with minimal effort. "Though she usually means it as criticism. Tell me, do you know my niece well?"

The question carried hidden weight, and Daeron caught the calculating look behind Daemon's apparent casualness.

"We've spoken," Daeron said carefully.

"Spoken," Daemon repeated with a knowing smirk. "I suspect Princess Rhaenyra would prefer more than conversation from a man like you. Tell me, where exactly did you acquire those remarkable eyes of yours?"

"My father's side, Your Grace. As I mentioned, my parentage is... complicated."

"Indeed it must be," Daemon mused, his blade work becoming more aggressive. "A Northern mother, you claim, and a father with Valyrian blood strong enough to breed true. Such bloodlines are rare outside the great houses."

Their swords met again, both men testing the other's strength. Daemon was smaller than Daeron but wiry and quick.

"You're suspicious of me," Daeron observed, not quite making it a question.

"I'm suspicious of everyone," Daemon replied easily. "It's kept me alive this long. But yes, you and your lovely wife intrigue me greatly. Such remarkable timing, your arrival at court."

"Timing, Your Grace?"

"Just as two dragons vanish from Dragonstone," Daemon said casually, then watched Daeron's face carefully for any reaction. "Vermithor and Silverwing, gone without explanation. Quite the coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

Daeron's expression remained neutral. "I wouldn't know anything about that, Your Grace. My wife and I have been traveling from Essos."

"Have you?" Daemon's smile was sharp. "And yet you fight like you were born in the North, not trained in the fighting pits of the Free Cities. Curious."

"Men can learn from many masters," Daeron replied, deflecting both the verbal probe and a particularly aggressive thrust.

"True enough." Daemon disengaged suddenly, taking several steps back. His expression had shifted from playful to calculating. "You know what I think, Daeron? I think you're not nearly as simple as you pretend to be."

"Your Grace is welcome to think whatever pleases him."

"Oh, I intend to." Daemon's voice turned cold. "I think your wife might be more than just another exile from Essos. That resemblance to Rhaenyra is quite striking—almost as if she shared blood with House Targaryen."

Daeron's grip tightened on Stormsong's hilt. "Many in Essos carry Valyrian features."

"Indeed they do. Particularly the descendants of those who fled Westeros during times of... trouble." Daemon began to circle. "Take Princess Saera, my late aunt. King Jaehaerys's daughter, who fled to Lys decades ago. I wonder what became of her children? Her grandchildren?"

Daemon suspected Daenerys might be Saera's descendant—a theory that was both completely wrong and dangerously close to the truth in its own way.

"You have quite an imagination, Your Grace," Daeron said carefully.

"Exiled Targaryens have a way of... returning when the realm faces upheaval. Sometimes with allies. Sometimes with dragons."

"I assure you, Your Grace, neither my wife nor I have any dragons."

"Don't you?" Daemon's attack came suddenly. "Because someone has been flying Silverwing at dawn, when the light is too dim for most to see clearly. Someone who knows how to approach a dragon that hasn't been ridden in decades."

Daeron gave ground, his defenses hard-pressed by Daemon's renewed assault. "Gossip and speculation."

"Is it?" Daemon pressed forward relentlessly. "I've made inquiries, you know. Quiet ones. And the most interesting thing isn't what people have seen—it's what they haven't seen. No one can account for your movements in the early morning hours. Or your wife's, for that matter."

"We keep early hours," Daeron said, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead as he struggled to match Daemon's pace.

"I'm sure you do." Daemon's smile was predatory. "Tell me something else, Northern. If you're truly just a wandering sellsword with a lucky sword, why do you hold back in this fight?"

The question caught Daeron off guard. "I don't—"

"You do," Daemon interrupted, his blade finding a gap in Daeron's defense to score a line across his forearm. "You fight defensively, conservatively. Like a man who doesn't want to hurt his opponent. Why would that be?"

Daeron cursed silently. Of course Daemon would notice—the man had probably fought more single combats than anyone else alive.

"Perhaps I simply prefer to take my opponent's measure before—"

"Bullshit," Daemon interrupted, his voice turning cold. "You think I'm some green boy who might break if you hit him too hard? Some doddering old man who needs to be handled gently?"

"Your Grace, I meant no—"

"Or perhaps," Daemon's voice turned silky with menace, "you have reasons for wanting to keep me alive and unharmed? Planning to make use of me in whatever scheme brought you to King's Landing?"

Dark Sister began to move faster now, the blade cutting through increasingly complex patterns as Daemon's mood shifted from curious to dangerous.

"Show me what you're really capable of," Daemon snarled, pressing forward with renewed aggression. "Fight me like you mean it, or I'll carve my disappointment into your flesh."

Daeron gave ground, deflecting strikes that came closer and closer to finding their mark. Daemon was magnificent in his fury.

His next attack came with the force of a thunderbolt, Dark Sister moving in a perfect diagonal cut that would have removed Daeron's head if it connected.

Daeron barely got Stormsong up in time, the impact of the blow sending him staggering backward. Daemon pressed his advantage ruthlessly, his blade work becoming a silver blur of death.

"Just a bastard with a bit of Valyrian blood," Daemon hissed as their swords locked again. "Who thinks he can take pity on his betters. Let me teach you the price of condescension."

Daemon suddenly shifted his weight, using a technique Daeron didn't recognize. His knee came up toward Daeron's groin while Dark Sister swept toward his neck in a coordinated attack.

Daeron twisted desperately, taking the knee on his hip armor, but couldn't avoid Dark Sister entirely. The blade scored across his chest, parting the red and black steel like paper and drawing a line of fire across his ribs.

From the stands came a woman's sharp intake of breath—Daenerys, half-rising from her seat in alarm.

Daeron staggered backward, blood seeping through the rent in his armor. The wound wasn't deep, but it burned like dragonfire, and Daemon's triumphant smile made it clear he considered the point made.

"There," Daemon said with satisfaction. "Now we're having a proper conversation."

Daeron straightened, his stance was different. More dangerous. The restraint was gone, replaced by the killing instinct that had seen him through countless battles.

"Very well, Your Grace," Daeron said quietly. "Let's have that conversation."

Daemon's experience met Daeron's raw skill, and for several minutes, neither man could gain a decisive advantage. The crowd fell silent, sensing they were witnessing something extraordinary.

But gradually, inexorably, youth and strength began to tell. Daemon's breathing grew labored, his attacks a fraction slower. When Daeron's pommel strike caught him in the temple, the prince staggered and nearly fell.

Stormsong's point came to rest against Daemon's throat, steady as stone.

"Yield, Your Grace," Daeron said softly. "You've fought magnificently, but this is finished."

Daemon looked up at him for a long moment, blood trickling from a cut on his forehead. Then, impossibly, he smiled.

"Well fought, Northern," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "Well fought indeed."

As the crowd erupted in cheers, both men stood breathing heavily in the afternoon sun.

"This conversation isn't finished," Daemon said quietly as squires approached to tend his wounds.

"I wouldn't expect it to be," Daeron replied.

The melee was over. But Daeron knew that Daemon's suspicions remained, simmering beneath the surface like dragonfire waiting to erupt. The prince might not know the truth, but he was far too clever to stop digging for it.

And that, perhaps, was the most dangerous outcome of all. Daeron knew Daemon saw him as a threat, and Daeron wondered how long before he decided that he was too dangerous to be left alive.

The Royal Chambers

The solar adjoining the royal chambers had been hastily converted into a war room of sorts, with Grand Maester Mellos standing before an assembly of the realm's most powerful figures. King Viserys sat heavily in his chair, his bandaged hand resting on the armrest, while the stress of the day's events etched new lines around his eyes. To his right, Queen Alicent clutched a bloodstained piece of green fabric—all that remained of her brother's surcoat.

Lord Corlys and Lady Rhaenys flanked their wounded son Laenor, whose left arm hung in a silk sling. The young lord's face was pale but set with grim determination, his violet eyes holding a cold fire that spoke of unfinished business.

Princess Rhaenyra stood near her father, a small smile forming on her lips.

"Your Grace," Mellos began, his chain of office clinking softly as he bowed. "I have attended to all the wounded from today's melee. The casualties are... significant."

"Speak plainly, Mellos," Viserys commanded, his voice heavy with exhaustion. "How many dead?"

"Three confirmed deaths, Your Grace. Ser Gwayne Hightower, Ser Willem Frey, and Ser Joffrey Lonmouth from yesterday's fighting. Several others may yet succumb to their wounds."

A sob escaped Queen Alicent's lips at the mention of her brother's name. She pressed the bloodied fabric to her face, her shoulders shaking with grief.

"And what about my son?" Rhaenys asked, her hand resting protectively on Laenor's good shoulder.

"Lord Laenor's shoulder was dislocated and the bone cracked, but it will heal properly with rest," Mellos reported. "He'll need to keep the arm immobilized for several weeks, but there should be no lasting damage."

Corlys nodded grimly. His son was alive, which was more than he'd dared hope after watching that brutal confrontation with Ser Criston.

"What about my brother?" The King asked, though he didn't sound worried.

"Prince Daemon suffered a concussion and several deep cuts, but nothing that won't heal," the maester continued. "He's already demanding to be released from the infirmary, claiming he has 'better things to do than lie about like an invalid.'"

Despite the circumstances, Viserys almost smiled at that. His brother's stubbornness was as legendary as his sword skill.

"What of Ser Criston?" Alicent asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Mellos hesitated, clearly uncomfortable. "Ser Criston Cole's injuries are... severe, Your Grace. The Valyrian steel blade penetrated deep into his abdomen, missing vital organs. He's lost a great deal of blood, and infection is a serious concern."

"Will he live?" Viserys demanded.

"I cannot say with certainty, Your Grace. The next few days will be critical. If fever doesn't take him, he may survive, though he'll never fight at full strength again."

The room fell silent. The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard lay dying from wounds inflicted in what was supposed to be sport.

"And Ser Daeron?" Rhaenyra asked, unable to keep the concern from her voice.

"Ser Daeron will recover fully," Mellos replied. "Prince Daemon's blade left a significant cut across his chest, but it avoided major vessels. He'll bear a scar, but nothing more serious."

"A scar he earned by murdering my brother!" Alicent exploded, rising from her chair with fury blazing in her eyes. "Gwayne was defending himself, and that northern savage cut his throat like a butcher!"

All eyes turned to King Viserys, whose expression had grown dangerously cold.

"I demand justice," Alicent continued, her voice breaking with grief and rage. "I demand that this... this man be arrested and executed for the murder of a knight of the realm!"

"Murder?" Viserys's voice was deceptively quiet, a warning sign that those who knew him recognized. "In a melee? Where the express purpose is armed combat between warriors?"

"It was murder, not combat!" Alicent insisted, tears streaming down her face. "Gwayne was defending himself, and Daeron struck him down like—"

"Like Ser Criston struck down Ser Joffrey?" Laenor interrupted, his voice carrying a bitter edge. "Or was that just sport, Your Grace?"

Alicent's face flushed red, but before she could respond, Viserys spoke.

"Lord Laenor speaks truly," the king said, his voice carrying the weight of absolute authority. "If we are to call Ser Daeron's actions murder, then we must apply the same standard to every death in that melee that ever existed. Ser Criston killed Joffrey Lonmouth. Ser Harwin killed Ser Willem Frey by punching his face with his gloved hand."

Corlys nodded grimly. "Melees are not courtly dances, Your Grace. Men die. It's the nature of the thing."

"This is different!" Alicent protested. "Gwayne was—"

"Was armed, armored, and engaged in single combat with a man who was defending himself," Viserys cut her off. "Whatever your grief, wife, it does not change the facts. Your brother entered that field knowing the risks."

"So we're to do nothing?" Alicent's voice cracked with pain. "My brother lies dead, and his killer walks free?"

"His killer won a melee in front of half the realm," Viserys replied firmly. "If you demand Ser Daeron's head for that, then you must also demand Ser Criston's for what he did to Ser Joffrey. And Ser Harwin's. And every other man who ever drew blood from a Meele."

"I want justice for my brother," Alicent said quietly, deflated by the king's logic but no less grieved.

"Your brother has justice," Viserys replied, his tone gentling slightly. "He died as a knight should—sword in hand, facing a worthy opponent. There is honor in that death, Alicent. Do not cheapen it by crying murder where none exists."

The queen sank back into her chair, clutching the bloodied fabric as tears continued to flow.

"The melee is ended," Viserys declared. "The tournament continues tomorrow with the joust. Tonight, we mourn our dead and tend our wounded. And we remember that the price of glory is often paid in blood."

Alicent remained numb, but in her heart, she knew what it was. The Bastard with purple eyes had killed her brother, and House Hightower never forgave, and would never forgive Daeron until his body was feast for worms.

Criston Cole - Night

Ser Criston Cole drifted in and out of fevered consciousness, the milk of the poppy providing only intermittent relief from the fire that burned in his gut. The wound Daeron's Valyrian steel had carved through his abdomen pulsed with each heartbeat, a constant reminder of his mortality. For a man who had built his identity on physical prowess and martial dominance, lying helpless in a sickbed felt like a foretaste of the seven hells.

So this is how it ends, he thought bitterly, staring at the stone ceiling of the infirmary. *Not in glorious battle against the realm's enemies, but gutted by some northern man in a tournament melee.*

The irony wasn't lost on him. He had killed Joffrey Lonmouth with such ease, such casual brutality, reveling in the young knight's helplessness. Now he lay as vulnerable as his victim had been, dependent on others for his very survival.

His mind wandered through the haze of pain and potions to the choices that had brought him here. Joining the Kingsguard at Rhaenyra's request—the first mistake. Believing her promises of love and devotion—the second. Asking her to flee with him to Essos, to abandon everything for a life together—the greatest folly of all.

I should have known better, he reflected, his breathing shallow and labored. *Princesses don't marry Dornish knights, no matter how skilled with a blade. They use them, discard them, and move on to more suitable matches.*

The sound of soft footsteps in the corridor beyond his door pulled him from his bitter reverie. Probably another maester coming to check his bandages or adjust his dosage. The Red Keep never truly slept, and the infirmary saw a steady stream of visitors throughout the night.

But these footsteps paused outside his door, lingering longer than a casual passerby would. Criston tried to turn his head, but even that small movement sent fresh waves of agony through his torn abdomen.

The door opened with barely a whisper of sound, and a cloaked figure stepped into the chamber. In the dim light of the single candle burning on the bedside table, Criston could make out little detail—someone of medium height wearing a dark hooded cloak that concealed their features entirely.

A maester? No, the robes are wrong. Alarm bells began to ring in Criston's mind, but his body refused to respond. The wound had left him weak as a newborn kitten, barely able to lift his head, much less defend himself and the Milk of the Poppy made his head swim.

The figure approached slowly, their footsteps silent on the stone floor. As they drew closer, candlelight caught the gleam of steel—a knife, held low and ready.

"Who—" Criston tried to speak, but his voice came out as barely a whisper, his throat dry from the fever and pain.

The hooded figure stopped beside his bed, and for a moment, they simply stood there in silence. Then a familiar voice spoke, cold as winter ice.

"I told you that you would die before this week was done."

Laenor Velaryon. Recognition hit Criston. The grieving lover, come to claim his pound of flesh. Criston tried to move, to call out, but his body betrayed him completely.

"Joffrey sends his regards," Laenor said quietly, raising the knife.

In his final moments, Criston's thoughts turned not to prayers or pleas for mercy, but to regret.

I could have been different, he realized with crystal clarity. I could have served with honor, protected the royal family without bitterness, found contentment in duty rather than nursing wounded pride.

But it was too late for such revelations. Ser Criston Cole, the Kingmaker who would never make a king, felt the cold steel part his throat like silk.

The blade bit deep across his throat, parting flesh like a razor through silk. Criston felt the sharp, burning line of steel as it opened his neck from ear to ear—not the crushing impact of a morning star or the thrusting agony of a sword point, but a precise, almost surgical slice that severed everything vital in its path.

Blood flooded his throat immediately, hot and copper-tasting, drowning any attempt to cry out. The sensation was bizarre—not the explosive pain he expected, but a spreading numbness accompanied by the horrible awareness that his life was pouring out onto the pillow beneath his head. Each heartbeat sent fresh gouts of crimson across the white linen, and he could feel his strength ebbing like tide from a broken seawall.

His last thought was of Rhaenyra—not the princess who had rejected him, but the laughing girl who had once convinced her father to grant a young knight's impossible dream. In the end, perhaps that memory was mercy enough.

The candle flickered once, casting dancing shadows on the walls, then burned steadily on as the footsteps retreated into the night, leaving only silence and the debt of blood finally paid.