

EDDARD

“I stood last vigil for him myself,” Ser Barristan Selmy said as they looked down at the body in the back of the cart. “He had no one else. A mother in the Vale, I am told.”

In the pale dawn light, the young knight looked as though he were sleeping. He had not been handsome, but death had smoothed his rough-hewn features and the silent sisters had dressed him in his best velvet tunic, with a high collar to cover the ruin the lance had made of his throat. Eddard Stark looked at his face, and wondered if it had been for his sake that the boy had died. Slain by a Lannister bannerman before Ned could speak to him; could that be mere happenstance? He supposed he would never know.

“Hugh was Jon Arryn’s squire for four years,” Selmy went on. “The king knighted him before he rode north, in Jon’s memory. The lad wanted it desperately, yet I fear he was not ready.”

Ned had slept badly last night and he felt tired beyond his years. “None of us is ever ready,” he said.

“For knighthood?”

“For death.” Gently Ned covered the boy with his cloak, a bloodstained bit of blue bordered in crescent moons. When his mother asked why her son was dead, he reflected bitterly, they would tell her he had fought to honor the King’s Hand, Eddard Stark. “This was needless. War should not be a game.” Ned turned to the woman beside the cart, shrouded in grey, face hidden but for her eyes. The silent sisters prepared men for the grave, and it was ill fortune to look on the face of death. “Send his armor home to the Vale. The mother will want to have it.”

“It is worth a fair piece of silver,” Ser Barristan said. “The boy had it forged special for the tourney. Plain work, but good. I do not know if he had finished paying the smith.”

“He paid yesterday, my lord, and he paid dearly,” Ned replied. And to the silent sister he said, “Send the mother the armor. I will deal with this

smith.” She bowed her head.

Afterward Ser Barristan walked with Ned to the king’s pavilion. The camp was beginning to stir. Fat sausages sizzled and spit over firepits, spicing the air with the scents of garlic and pepper. Young squires hurried about on errands as their masters woke, yawning and stretching, to meet the day. A serving man with a goose under his arm bent his knee when he caught sight of them. “M’lords,” he muttered as the goose honked and pecked at his fingers. The shields displayed outside each tent heralded its occupant: the silver eagle of Seagard, Bryce Caron’s field of nightingales, a cluster of grapes for the Redwynes, brindled boar, red ox, burning tree, white ram, triple spiral, purple unicorn, dancing maiden, blackadder, twin towers, horned owl, and last the pure white blazons of the Kingsguard, shining like the dawn.

“The king means to fight in the melee today,” Ser Barristan said as they were passing Ser Meryn’s shield, its paint sullied by a deep gash where Loras Tyrell’s lance had scarred the wood as he drove him from his saddle.

“Yes,” Ned said grimly. Jory had woken him last night to bring him that news. Small wonder he had slept so badly.

Ser Barristan’s look was troubled. “They say night’s beauties fade at dawn, and the children of wine are oft disowned in the morning light.”

“They say so,” Ned agreed, “but not of Robert.” Other men might reconsider words spoken in drunken bravado, but Robert Baratheon would remember and, remembering, would never back down.

The king’s pavilion was close by the water, and the morning mists off the river had wreathed it in wisps of grey. It was all of golden silk, the largest and grandest structure in the camp. Outside the entrance, Robert’s warhammer was displayed beside an immense iron shield blazoned with the crowned stag of House Baratheon.

Ned had hoped to discover the king still abed in a wine-soaked sleep, but luck was not with him. They found Robert drinking beer from a polished horn and roaring his displeasure at two young squires who were trying to buckle him into his armor. “Your Grace,” one was saying, almost

in tears, “it’s made too small, it won’t go.” He fumbled, and the gorget he was trying to fit around Robert’s thick neck tumbled to the ground.

“*Seven hells!*” Robert swore. “Do I have to do it myself? Piss on the both of you. Pick it up. Don’t just stand there gaping, Lancel, *pick it up!*” The lad jumped, and the king noticed his company. “Look at these oafs, Ned. My wife insisted I take these two to squire for me, and they’re worse than useless. Can’t even put a man’s armor on him properly. Squires, they say. *I say they’re swineherds dressed up in silk.*”

Ned only needed a glance to understand the difficulty. “The boys are not at fault,” he told the king. “You’re too fat for your armor, Robert.”

Robert Baratheon took a long swallow of beer, tossed the empty horn onto his sleeping furs, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said darkly, “Fat? *Fat*, is it? Is that how you speak to your king?” He let go his laughter, sudden as a storm. “Ah, damn you, Ned, why are you always right?”

The squires smiled nervously until the king turned on them. “You. Yes, both of you. You heard the Hand. The king is too fat for his armor. Go find Ser Aron Santagar. Tell him I need the breastplate stretcher. *Now! What are you waiting for?*”

The boys tripped over each other in their haste to be quit of the tent. Robert managed to keep a stern face until they were gone. Then he dropped back into a chair, shaking with laughter.

Ser Barristan Selmy chuckled with him. Even Eddard Stark managed a smile. Always, though, the graver thoughts crept in. He could not help taking note of the two squires: handsome boys, fair and well made. One was Sansa’s age, with long golden curls; the other perhaps fifteen, sandy-haired, with a wisp of a mustache and the emerald-green eyes of the queen.

“Ah, I wish I could be there to see Santagar’s face,” Robert said. “I hope he’ll have the wit to send them to someone else. We ought to keep them running all day!”

“Those boys,” Ned asked him. “Lannisters?”

Robert nodded, wiping tears from his eyes. “Cousins. Sons of Lord Tywin’s brother. One of the dead ones. Or perhaps the live one, now that I come to think on it. I don’t recall. My wife comes from a very large family, Ned.”

A very ambitious family, Ned thought. He had nothing against the squires, but it troubled him to see Robert surrounded by the queen’s kin, waking and sleeping. The Lannister appetite for offices and honors seemed to know no bounds. “The talk is you and the queen had angry words last night.”

The mirth curdled on Robert’s face. “The woman tried to forbid me to fight in the melee. She’s sulking in the castle now, damn her. Your sister would never have shamed me like that.”

“You never knew Lyanna as I did, Robert,” Ned told him. “You saw her beauty, but not the iron underneath. She would have told you that you have no business in the melee.”

“You too?” The king frowned. “You are a sour man, Stark. Too long in the north, all the juices have frozen inside you. Well, *mine* are still running.” He slapped his chest to prove it.

“You are the king,” Ned reminded him.

“I sit on the damn iron seat when I must. Does that mean I don’t have the same hungers as other men? A bit of wine now and again, a girl squealing in bed, the feel of a horse between my legs? Seven hells, Ned, I want to *hit* someone.”

Ser Barristan Selmy spoke up. “Your Grace,” he said, “it is not seemly that the king should ride into the melee. It would not be a fair contest. Who would dare strike you?”

Robert seemed honestly taken aback. “Why, all of them, damn it. If they can. And the last man left standing...”

“...will be you,” Ned finished. He saw at once that Selmy had hit the mark. The dangers of the melee were only a savor to Robert, but this touched on his pride. “Ser Barristan is right. There’s not a man in the Seven Kingdoms who would dare risk your displeasure by hurting you.”

The king rose to his feet, his face flushed. “Are you telling me those prancing cravens will *let me win*?”

“For a certainty,” Ned said, and Ser Barristan Selmy bowed his head in silent accord.

For a moment Robert was so angry he could not speak. He strode across the tent, whirled, strode back, his face dark and angry. He snatched up his breastplate from the ground and threw it at Barristan Selmy in a wordless fury. Selmy dodged. “Get out,” the king said then, coldly. “Get out before I kill you.”

Ser Barristan left quickly. Ned was about to follow when the king called out again. “Not you, Ned.”

Ned turned back. Robert took up his horn again, filled it with beer from a barrel in the corner, and thrust it at Ned. “Drink,” he said brusquely.

“I’ve no thirst—”

“*Drink*. Your king commands it.”

Ned took the horn and drank. The beer was black and thick, so strong it stung the eyes.

Robert sat down again. “Damn you, Ned Stark. You and Jon Arryn, I loved you both. What have you done to me? You were the one should have been king, you or Jon.”

“You had the better claim, Your Grace.”

“I told you to drink, not to argue. You made me king, you could at least have the courtesy to listen when I talk, damn you. Look at me, Ned. Look at what kinging has done to me. Gods, too fat for my armor, how did it ever come to this?”

“Robert...”

“Drink and stay quiet, the king is talking. I swear to you, I was never so alive as when I was winning this throne, or so dead as now that I’ve won it. And Cersei... I have Jon Arryn to thank for her. I had no wish to marry after Lyanna was taken from me, but Jon said the realm needed an heir. Cersei Lannister would be a good match, he told me, she would bind Lord Tywin to me should Viserys Targaryen ever try to win back his father’s

throne.” The king shook his head. “I loved that old man, I swear it, but now I think he was a bigger fool than Moon Boy. Oh, Cersei is lovely to look at, truly, but *cold*... the way she guards her cunt, you’d think she had all the gold of Casterly Rock between her legs. Here, give me that beer if you won’t drink it.” He took the horn, upended it, belched, wiped his mouth. “I am sorry for your girl, Ned. Truly. About the wolf, I mean. My son was lying, I’d stake my soul on it. My son... you love your children, don’t you?”

“With all my heart,” Ned said.

“Let me tell you a secret, Ned. More than once, I have dreamed of giving up the crown. Take ship for the Free Cities with my horse and my hammer, spend my time warring and whoring, that’s what I was made for. The sellsword king, how the singers would love me. You know what stops me? The thought of Joffrey on the throne, with Cersei standing behind him whispering in his ear. My son. How could I have made a son like that, Ned?”

“He’s only a boy,” Ned said awkwardly. He had small liking for Prince Joffrey, but he could hear the pain in Robert’s voice. “Have you forgotten how wild you were at his age?”

“It would not trouble me if the boy was wild, Ned. You don’t know him as I do.” He sighed and shook his head. “Ah, perhaps you are right. Jon despaired of me often enough, yet I grew into a good king.” Robert looked at Ned and scowled at his silence. “You might speak up and agree now, you know.”

“Your Grace...” Ned began, carefully.

Robert slapped Ned on the back. “Ah, say that I’m a better king than Aerys and be done with it. You never could lie for love nor honor, Ned Stark. I’m still young, and now that you’re here with me, things will be different. We’ll make this a reign to sing of, and damn the Lannisters to seven hells. I smell bacon. Who do you think our champion will be today? Have you seen Mace Tyrell’s boy? The Knight of Flowers, they call him. Now there’s a son any man would be proud to own to. Last tourney, he dumped the Kingslayer on his golden rump, you ought to have seen the

look on Cersei's face. I laughed till my sides hurt. Renly says he has this sister, a maid of fourteen, lovely as a dawn..."

They broke their fast on black bread and boiled goose eggs and fish fried up with onions and bacon, at a trestle table by the river's edge. The king's melancholy melted away with the morning mist, and before long Robert was eating an orange and waxing fond about a morning at the Eyrie when they had been boys. "...had given Jon a barrel of oranges, remember? Only the things had gone rotten, so I flung mine across the table and hit Dacks right in the nose. You remember, Redfort's pock-faced squire? He tossed one back at me, and before Jon could so much as fart, there were oranges flying across the High Hall in every direction." He laughed uproariously, and even Ned smiled, remembering.

This was the boy he had grown up with, he thought; this was the Robert Baratheon he'd known and loved. If he could prove that the Lannisters were behind the attack on Bran, prove that they had murdered Jon Arryn, this man would listen. Then Cersei would fall, and the Kingslayer with her, and if Lord Tywin dared to rouse the west, Robert would smash him as he had smashed Rhaegar Targaryen on the Trident. He could see it all so clearly.

That breakfast tasted better than anything Eddard Stark had eaten in a long time, and afterward his smiles came easier and more often, until it was time for the tournament to resume.

Ned walked with the king to the jousting field. He had promised to watch the final tilts with Sansa; Septa Mordane was ill today, and his daughter was determined not to miss the end of the jousting. As he saw Robert to his place, he noted that Cersei Lannister had chosen not to appear; the place beside the king was empty. That too gave Ned cause to hope.

He shouldered his way to where his daughter was seated and found her as the horns blew for the day's first joust. Sansa was so engrossed she scarcely seemed to notice his arrival.

Sandor Clegane was the first rider to appear. He wore an olive-green cloak over his soot-grey armor. That, and his hound's-head helm, were his only concession to ornament.

“A hundred golden dragons on the Kingslayer,” Littlefinger announced loudly as Jaime Lannister entered the lists, riding an elegant blood bay destrier. The horse wore a blanket of gilded ringmail, and Jaime glittered from head to heel. Even his lance was fashioned from the golden wood of the Summer Isles.

“Done,” Lord Renly shouted back. “The Hound has a hungry look about him this morning.”

“Even hungry dogs know better than to bite the hand that feeds them,” Littlefinger called dryly.

Sandor Clegane dropped his visor with an audible *clang* and took up his position. Ser Jaime tossed a kiss to some woman in the commons, gently lowered his visor, and rode to the end of the lists. Both men couched their lances.

Ned Stark would have loved nothing so well as to see them both lose, but Sansa was watching it all moist-eyed and eager. The hastily erected gallery trembled as the horses broke into a gallop. The Hound leaned forward as he rode, his lance rock steady, but Jaime shifted his seat deftly in the instant before impact. Clegane’s point was turned harmlessly against the golden shield with the lion blazon, while his own hit square. Wood shattered, and the Hound reeled, fighting to keep his seat. Sansa gasped. A ragged cheer went up from the commons.

“I wonder how I ought spend your money,” Littlefinger called down to Lord Renly.

The Hound just managed to stay in his saddle. He jerked his mount around hard and rode back to the lists for the second pass. Jaime Lannister tossed down his broken lance and snatched up a fresh one, jesting with his squire. The Hound spurred forward at a hard gallop. Lannister rode to meet him. This time, when Jaime shifted his seat, Sandor Clegane shifted with him. Both lances exploded, and by the time the splinters had settled, a riderless blood bay was trotting off in search of grass while Ser Jaime Lannister rolled in the dirt, golden and dented.

Sansa said, “I knew the Hound would win.”

Littlefinger overheard. “If you know who’s going to win the second match, speak up now before Lord Renly plucks me clean,” he called to her. Ned smiled.

“A pity the Imp is not here with us,” Lord Renly said. “I should have won twice as much.”

Jaime Lannister was back on his feet, but his ornate lion helmet had been twisted around and dented in his fall, and now he could not get it off. The commons were hooting and pointing, the lords and ladies were trying to stifle their chuckles, and failing, and over it all Ned could hear King Robert laughing, louder than anyone. Finally they had to lead the Lion of Lannister off to a blacksmith, blind and stumbling.

By then Ser Gregor Clegane was in position at the head of the lists. He was huge, the biggest man that Eddard Stark had ever seen. Robert Baratheon and his brothers were all big men, as was the Hound, and back at Winterfell there was a simpleminded stableboy named Hodor who dwarfed them all, but the knight they called the Mountain That Rides would have towered over Hodor. He was well over seven feet tall, closer to eight, with massive shoulders and arms thick as the trunks of small trees. His destrier seemed a pony in between his armored legs, and the lance he carried looked as small as a broom handle.

Unlike his brother, Ser Gregor did not live at court. He was a solitary man who seldom left his own lands, but for wars and tourneys. He had been with Lord Tywin when King’s Landing fell, a new-made knight of seventeen years, even then distinguished by his size and his implacable ferocity. Some said it had been Gregor who’d dashed the skull of the infant prince Aegon Targaryen against a wall, and whispered that afterward he had raped the mother, the Dornish princess Elia, before putting her to the sword. These things were not said in Gregor’s hearing.

Ned Stark could not recall ever speaking to the man, though Gregor had ridden with them during Balon Greyjoy’s rebellion, one knight among thousands. He watched him with disquiet. Ned seldom put much stock in gossip, but the things said of Ser Gregor were more than ominous. He was soon to be married for the third time, and one heard dark whisperings about

the deaths of his first two wives. It was said that his keep was a grim place where servants disappeared unaccountably and even the dogs were afraid to enter the hall. And there had been a sister who had died young under queer circumstances, and the fire that had disfigured his brother, and the hunting accident that had killed their father. Gregor had inherited the keep, the gold, and the family estates. His younger brother Sandor had left the same day to take service with the Lannisters as a sworn sword, and it was said that he had never returned, not even to visit.

When the Knight of Flowers made his entrance, a murmur ran through the crowd, and he heard Sansa's fervent whisper, "Oh, he's so *beautiful*." Ser Loras Tyrell was slender as a reed, dressed in a suit of fabulous silver armor polished to a blinding sheen and filigreed with twining black vines and tiny blue forget-me-nots. The commons realized in the same instant as Ned that the blue of the flowers came from sapphires; a gasp went up from a thousand throats. Across the boy's shoulders his cloak hung heavy. It was woven of forget-me-nots, real ones, hundreds of fresh blooms sewn to a heavy woolen cape.

His courser was as slim as her rider, a beautiful grey mare, built for speed. Ser Gregor's huge stallion trumpeted as he caught her scent. The boy from Highgarden did something with his legs, and his horse pranced sideways, nimble as a dancer. Sansa clutched at his arm. "Father, don't let Ser Gregor hurt him," she said. Ned saw she was wearing the rose that Ser Loras had given her yesterday. Jory had told him about that as well.

"These are tourney lances," he told his daughter. "They make them to splinter on impact, so no one is hurt." Yet he remembered the dead boy in the cart with his cloak of crescent moons, and the words were raw in his throat.

Ser Gregor was having trouble controlling his horse. The stallion was screaming and pawing the ground, shaking his head. The Mountain kicked at the animal savagely with an armored boot. The horse reared and almost threw him.

The Knight of Flowers saluted the king, rode to the far end of the list, and couched his lance, ready. Ser Gregor brought his animal to the line,

fighting with the reins. And suddenly it began. The Mountain's stallion broke in a hard gallop, plunging forward wildly, while the mare charged as smooth as a flow of silk. Ser Gregor wrenched his shield into position, juggled with his lance, and all the while fought to hold his unruly mount on a straight line, and suddenly Loras Tyrell was on him, placing the point of his lance just *there*, and in an eye blink the Mountain was failing. He was so huge that he took his horse down with him in a tangle of steel and flesh.

Ned heard applause, cheers, whistles, shocked gasps, excited muttering, and over it all the rasping, raucous laughter of the Hound. The Knight of Flowers reined up at the end of the lists. His lance was not even broken. His sapphires winked in the sun as he raised his visor, smiling. The commons went mad for him.

In the middle of the field, Ser Gregor Clegane disentangled himself and came boiling to his feet. He wrenched off his helm and slammed it down onto the ground. His face was dark with fury and his hair fell down into his eyes. "My sword," he shouted to his squire, and the boy ran it out to him. By then his stallion was back on its feet as well.

Gregor Clegane killed the horse with a single blow of such ferocity that it half severed the animal's neck. Cheers turned to shrieks in a heartbeat. The stallion went to its knees, screaming as it died. By then Gregor was striding down the lists toward Ser Loras Tyrell, his bloody sword clutched in his fist. "*Stop him!*" Ned shouted, but his words were lost in the roar. Everyone else was yelling as well, and Sansa was crying.

It all happened so fast. The Knight of Flowers was shouting for his own sword as Ser Gregor knocked his squire aside and made a grab for the reins of his horse. The mare scented blood and reared. Loras Tyrell kept his seat, but barely. Ser Gregor swung his sword, a savage two-handed blow that took the boy in the chest and knocked him from the saddle. The courser dashed away in panic as Ser Loras lay stunned in the dirt. But as Gregor lifted his sword for the killing blow, a rasping voice warned, "*Leave him be,*" and a steel-clad hand wrenched him away from the boy.

The Mountain pivoted in wordless fury, swinging his longsword in a killing arc with all his massive strength behind it, but the Hound caught the

blow and turned it, and for what seemed an eternity the two brothers stood hammering at each other as a dazed Loras Tyrell was helped to safety. Thrice Ned saw Ser Gregor aim savage blows at the hound's-head helmet, yet not once did Sandor send a cut at his brother's unprotected face.

It was the king's voice that put an end to it... the king's voice and twenty swords. Jon Arryn had told them that a commander needs a good battlefield voice, and Robert had proved the truth of that on the Trident. He used that voice now. "STOP THIS MADNESS," he boomed, "IN THE NAME OF YOUR KING!"

The Hound went to one knee. Ser Gregor's blow cut air, and at last he came to his senses. He dropped his sword and glared at Robert, surrounded by his Kingsguard and a dozen other knights and guardsmen. Wordlessly, he turned and strode off, shoving past Barristan Selmy. "Let him go," Robert said, and as quickly as that, it was over.

"Is the Hound the champion now?" Sansa asked Ned.

"No," he told her. "There will be one final joust, between the Hound and the Knight of Flowers."

But Sansa had the right of it after all. A few moments later Ser Loras Tyrell walked back onto the field in a simple linen doublet and said to Sandor Clegane, "I owe you my life. The day is yours, ser."

"I am no *ser*," the Hound replied, but he took the victory, and the champion's purse, and, for perhaps the first time in his life, the love of the commons. They cheered him as he left the lists to return to his pavilion.

As Ned walked with Sansa to the archery field, Littlefinger and Lord Renly and some of the others fell in with them. "Tyrell had to know the mare was in heat," Littlefinger was saying. "I swear the boy planned the whole thing. Gregor has always favored huge, ill-tempered stallions with more spirit than sense." The notion seemed to amuse him.

It did not amuse Ser Barristan Selmy. "There is small honor in tricks," the old man said stiffly.

"Small honor and twenty thousand golds." Lord Renly smiled.

That afternoon a boy named Anguy, an unheralded commoner from the Dornish Marches, won the archery competition, outshooting Ser Balon Swann and Jalabhar Xho at a hundred paces after all the other bowmen had been eliminated at the shorter distances. Ned sent Alyn to seek him out and offer him a position with the Hand's guard, but the boy was flush with wine and victory and riches undreamed of, and he refused.

The melee went on for three hours. Near forty men took part, freeriders and hedge knights and new-made squires in search of a reputation. They fought with blunted weapons in a chaos of mud and blood, small troops fighting together and then turning on each other as alliances formed and fractured, until only one man was left standing. The victor was the red priest, Thoros of Myr, a madman who shaved his head and fought with a flaming sword. He had won melees before; the fire sword frightened the mounts of the other riders, and nothing frightened Thoros. The final tally was three broken limbs, a shattered collarbone, a dozen smashed fingers, two horses that had to be put down, and more cuts, sprains, and bruises than anyone cared to count. Ned was desperately pleased that Robert had not taken part.

That night at the feast, Eddard Stark was more hopeful than he had been in a great while. Robert was in high good humor, the Lannisters were nowhere to be seen, and even his daughters were behaving. Jory brought Arya down to join them, and Sansa spoke to her sister pleasantly. "The tournament was *magnificent*," she sighed. "You should have come. How was your dancing?"

"I'm sore all over," Arya reported happily, proudly displaying a huge purple bruise on her leg.

"You must be a terrible dancer," Sansa said doubtfully.

Later, while Sansa was off listening to a troupe of singers perform the complex round of interwoven ballads called the "Dance of the Dragons," Ned inspected the bruise himself. "I hope Forel is not being too hard on you," he said.

Arya stood on one leg. She was getting much better at that of late. "Syrio says that every hurt is a lesson, and every lesson makes you better."

Ned frowned. The man Syrio Forel had come with an excellent reputation, and his flamboyant Braavosi style was well suited to Arya's slender blade, yet still... a few days ago, she had been wandering around with a swatch of black silk tied over her eyes. Syrio was teaching her to see with her ears and her nose and her skin, she told him. Before that, he had her doing spins and back flips. "Arya, are you certain you want to persist in this?"

She nodded. "Tomorrow we're going to catch cats."

"Cats." Ned sighed. "Perhaps it was a mistake to hire this Braavosi. If you like, I will ask Jory to take over your lessons. Or I might have a quiet word with Ser Barristan. He was the finest sword in the Seven Kingdoms in his youth."

"I don't want them," Arya said. "I want Syrio."

Ned ran his fingers through his hair. Any decent master-at-arms could give Arya the rudiments of slash-and-parry without this nonsense of blindfolds, cartwheels, and hopping about on one leg, but he knew his youngest daughter well enough to know there was no arguing with that stubborn jut of jaw. "As you wish," he said. Surely she would grow tired of this soon. "Try to be careful."

"I will," she promised solemnly as she hopped smoothly from her right leg to her left.

Much later, after he had taken the girls back through the city and seen them both safe in bed, Sansa with her dreams and Arya with her bruises, Ned ascended to his own chambers atop the Tower of the Hand. The day had been warm and the room was close and stuffy. Ned went to the window and unfastened the heavy shutters to let in the cool night air. Across the Great Yard, he noticed the flickering glow of candlelight from Littlefinger's windows. The hour was well past midnight. Down by the river, the revels were only now beginning to dwindle and die.

He took out the dagger and studied it. Littlefinger's blade, won by Tyrion Lannister in a tourney wager, sent to slay Bran in his sleep. *Why?* Why would the dwarf want Bran dead? Why would *anyone* want Bran dead?

The dagger, Bran's fall, all of it was linked somehow to the murder of Jon Arryn, he could feel it in his gut, but the truth of Jon's death remained as clouded to him as when he had started. Lord Stannis had not returned to King's Landing for the tourney. Lysa Arryn held her silence behind the high walls of the Eyrie. The squire was dead, and Jory was still searching the whorehouses. What did he have but Robert's bastard?

That the armorer's sullen apprentice was the king's son, Ned had no doubt. The Baratheon look was stamped on his face, in his jaw, his eyes, that black hair. Renly was too young to have fathered a boy of that age, Stannis too cold and proud in his honor. Gendry had to be Robert's.

Yet knowing all that, what had he learned? The king had other baseborn children scattered throughout the Seven Kingdoms. He had openly acknowledged one of his bastards, a boy of Bran's age whose mother was highborn. The lad was being fostered by Lord Renly's castellan at Storm's End.

Ned remembered Robert's first child as well, a daughter born in the Vale when Robert was scarcely more than a boy himself. A sweet little girl; the young lord of Storm's End had doted on her. He used to make daily visits to play with the babe, long after he had lost interest in the mother. Ned was often dragged along for company, whether he willed it or not. The girl would be seventeen or eighteen now, he realized; older than Robert had been when he fathered her. A strange thought.

Cersei could not have been pleased by her lord husband's by-blows, yet in the end it mattered little whether the king had one bastard or a hundred. Law and custom gave the baseborn few rights. Gendry, the girl in the Vale, the boy at Storm's End, none of them could threaten Robert's trueborn children...

His musings were ended by a soft rap on his door. "A man to see you, my lord," Harwin called. "He will not give his name."

"Send him in," Ned said, wondering.

The visitor was a stout man in cracked, mud-caked boots and a heavy brown robe of the coarsest roughspun, his features hidden by a cowl, his hands drawn up into voluminous sleeves.

“Who are you?” Ned asked.

“A friend,” the cowed man said in a strange, low voice. “We must speak alone, Lord Stark.”

Curiosity was stronger than caution. “Harwin, leave us,” he commanded. Not until they were alone behind closed doors did his visitor draw back his cowl.

“*Lord Varys?*” Ned said in astonishment.

“Lord Stark,” Varys said politely, seating himself. “I wonder if I might trouble you for a drink?”

Ned filled two cups with summerwine and handed one to Varys. “I might have passed within a foot of you and never recognized you,” he said, incredulous. He had never seen the eunuch dress in anything but silk and velvet and the richest damasks, and this man smelled of sweat instead of lilacs.

“That was my dearest hope,” Varys said. “It would not do if certain people learned that we had spoken in private. The queen watches you closely. This wine is very choice. Thank you.”

“How did you get past my other guards?” Ned asked. Porther and Cayn had been posted outside the tower, and Alyn on the stairs.

“The Red Keep has ways known only to ghosts and spiders.” Varys smiled apologetically. “I will not keep you long, my lord. There are things you must know. You are the King’s Hand, and the king is a fool.” The eunuch’s cloying tones were gone; now his voice was thin and sharp as a whip. “Your friend, I know, yet a fool nonetheless... and doomed, unless you save him. Today was a near thing. They had hoped to kill him during the melee.”

For a moment Ned was speechless with shock. “*Who?*”

Varys sipped his wine. “If I truly need to tell you that, you are a bigger fool than Robert and I am on the wrong side.”

“The Lannisters,” Ned said. “The queen... no, I will not believe that, not even of Cersei. She asked him not to fight!”

“She *forbade* him to fight, in front of his brother, his knights, and half the court. Tell me truly, do you know any surer way to force King Robert into the melee? I ask you.”

Ned had a sick feeling in his gut. The eunuch had hit upon a truth; tell Robert Baratheon he could not, should not, or must not do a thing, and it was as good as done. “Even if he’d fought, who would have dared to strike the king?”

Varys shrugged. “There were forty riders in the melee. The Lannisters have many friends. Amidst all that chaos, with horses screaming and bones breaking and Thoros of Myr waving that absurd firesword of his, who could name it murder if some chance blow felled His Grace?” He went to the flagon and refilled his cup. “After the deed was done, the slayer would be beside himself with grief. I can almost hear him weeping. So sad. Yet no doubt the gracious and compassionate widow would take pity, lift the poor unfortunate to his feet, and bless him with a gentle kiss of forgiveness. Good King Joffrey would have no choice but to pardon him.” The eunuch stroked his cheek. “Or perhaps Cersei would let Ser Ilyn strike off his head. Less risk for the Lannisters that way, though quite an unpleasant surprise for their little friend.”

Ned felt his anger rise. “You knew of this plot, and yet you did nothing.”

“I command whisperers, not warriors.”

“You might have come to me earlier.”

“Oh, yes, I confess it. And you would have rushed straight to the king, yes? And when Robert heard of his peril, what would he have done? I wonder.”

Ned considered that. “He would have damned them all, and fought anyway, to show he did not fear them.”

Varys spread his hands. “I will make another confession, Lord Eddard. I was curious to see what you would do. *Why not come to me?* you ask, and I must answer, *Why, because I did not trust you, my lord.*”

“You did not trust me?” Ned was frankly astonished.

“The Red Keep shelters two sorts of people, Lord Eddard,” Varys said. “Those who are loyal to the realm, and those who are loyal only to themselves. Until this morning, I could not say which you might be... so I waited to see... and now I know, for a certainty.” He smiled a plump tight little smile, and for a moment his private face and public mask were one. “I begin to comprehend why the queen fears you so much. Oh, yes I do.”

“You are the one she ought to fear,” Ned said.

“No. I am what I am. The king makes use of me, but it shames him. A most puissant warrior is our Robert, and such a manly man has little love for sneaks and spies and eunuchs. If a day should come when Cersei whispers, ‘Kill that man,’ Ilyn Payne will snick my head off in a twinkling, and who will mourn poor Varys then? North or south, they sing no songs for spiders.” He reached out and touched Ned with a soft hand. “But you, Lord Stark... I think... no, I *know*... he would not kill you, not even for his queen, and there may lie our salvation.”

It was all too much. For a moment Eddard Stark wanted nothing so much as to return to Winterfell, to the clean simplicity of the north, where the enemies were winter and the wildlings beyond the Wall. “Surely Robert has other loyal friends,” he protested. “His brothers, his—”

“—wife?” Varys finished, with a smile that cut. “His brothers hate the Lannisters, true enough, but hating the queen and loving the king are not quite the same thing, are they? Ser Barristan loves his honor, Grand Maester Pycelle loves his office, and Littlefinger loves Littlefinger.”

“The Kingsguard—”

“A paper shield,” the eunuch said. “*Try* not to look so shocked, Lord Stark. Jaime Lannister is himself a Sworn Brother of the White Swords, and we all know what his oath is worth. The days when men like Ryam Redwyne and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight wore the white cloak are gone to dust and song. Of these seven, only Ser Barristan Selmy is made of the true steel, and Selmy is *old*. Ser Boros and Ser Meryn are the queen’s creatures to the bone, and I have deep suspicions of the others. No, my lord, when the swords come out in earnest, you will be the only true friend Robert Baratheon will have.”

“Robert must be told,” Ned said. “If what you say is true, if even a part of it is true, the king must hear it for himself.”

“And what proof shall we lay before him? My words against theirs? My little birds against the queen and the Kingslayer, against his brothers and his council, against the Wardens of East and West, against all the might of Casterly Rock? Pray, send for Ser Ilyn directly, it will save us all some time. I know where that road ends.”

“Yet if what you say is true, they will only bide their time and make another attempt.”

“Indeed they will,” said Varys, “and sooner rather than later, I do fear. You are making them most anxious, Lord Eddard. But my little birds will be listening, and together we may be able to forestall them, you and I.” He rose and pulled up his cowl so his face was hidden once more. “Thank you for the wine. We will speak again. When you see me next at council, be certain to treat me with your accustomed contempt. You should not find it difficult.”

He was at the door when Ned called, “*Varys*.” The eunuch turned back. “How did Jon Arryn die?”

“I wondered when you would get around to that.”

“Tell me.”

“The tears of Lys, they call it. A rare and costly thing, clear and sweet as water, and it leaves no trace. I begged Lord Arryn to use a taster, in this very room I begged him, but he would not hear of it. Only one who was less than a man would even think of such a thing, he told me.”

Ned had to know the rest. “Who gave him the poison?”

“Some dear sweet friend who often shared meat and mead with him, no doubt. Oh, but which one? There were many such. Lord Arryn was a kindly, trusting man.” The eunuch sighed. “There *was* one boy. All he was, he owed Jon Arryn, but when the widow fled to the Eyrie with her household, he stayed in King’s Landing and prospered. It always gladdens my heart to see the young rise in the world.” The whip was in his voice again, every word a stroke. “He must have cut a gallant figure in the tourney, him in his

bright new armor, with those crescent moons on his cloak. A pity he died so untimely, before you could talk to him...”

Ned felt half-poisoned himself. “The squire,” he said. “Ser Hugh.” Wheels within wheels within wheels. Ned’s head was pounding. “*Why?* Why now? Jon Arryn had been Hand for fourteen years. What was he doing that they had to kill him?”

“Asking questions,” Varys said, slipping out the door.