

EDDARD

“It’s the hand’s tourney that’s the cause of all the trouble, my lords,” the commander of the city watch complained to the king’s council.

“The king’s tourney,” Ned corrected, wincing. “I assure you, the Hand wants no part of it.”

“Call it what you will, my lord. Knights have been arriving from all over the realm, and for every knight we get two freeriders, three craftsmen, six men-at-arms, a dozen merchants, two dozen whores, and more thieves than I dare guess. This cursed heat had half the city in a fever to start, and now with all these visitors... last night we had a drowning, a tavern riot, three knife fights, a rape, two fires, robberies beyond count, and a drunken horse race down the Street of the Sisters. The night before a woman’s head was found in the Great Sept, floating in the rainbow pool. No one seems to know how it got there or who it belongs to.”

“How dreadful,” Varys said with a shudder.

Lord Renly Baratheon was less sympathetic. “If you cannot keep the king’s peace, Janos, perhaps the City Watch should be commanded by someone who can.”

Stout, jowly Janos Slynt puffed himself up like an angry frog, his bald pate reddening. “Aegon the Dragon himself could not keep the peace, Lord Renly. I need more men.”

“How many?” Ned asked, leaning forward. As ever, Robert had not troubled himself to attend the council session, so it fell to his Hand to speak for him.

“As many as can be gotten, Lord Hand.”

“Hire fifty new men,” Ned told him. “Lord Baelish will see that you get the coin.”

“I will?” Littlefinger said.

“You will. You found forty thousand golden dragons for a champion’s purse, surely you can scrape together a few coppers to keep the king’s peace.” Ned turned back to Janos Slynt. “I will also give you twenty good swords from my own household guard, to serve with the Watch until the crowds have left.”

“All thanks, Lord Hand,” Slynt said, bowing. “I promise you, they shall be put to good use.”

When the Commander had taken his leave, Eddard Stark turned to the rest of the council. “The sooner this folly is done with, the better I shall like it.” As if the expense and trouble were not irksome enough, all and sundry insisted on salting Ned’s wound by calling it “the Hand’s tourney,” as if he were the cause of it. And Robert honestly seemed to think he should feel honored!

“The realm prospers from such events, my lord,” Grand Maester Pycelle said. “They bring the great the chance of glory, and the lowly a respite from their woes.”

“And put coins in many a pocket,” Littlefinger added. “Every inn in the city is full, and the whores are walking bowlegged and jingling with each step.”

Lord Renly laughed. “We’re fortunate my brother Stannis is not with us. Remember the time he proposed to outlaw brothels? The king asked him if perhaps he’d like to outlaw eating, shitting, and breathing while he was at it. If truth be told, I oftentimes wonder how Stannis ever got that ugly daughter of his. He goes to his marriage bed like a man marching to a battlefield, with a grim look in his eyes and a determination to do his duty.”

Ned had not joined the laughter. “I wonder about your brother Stannis as well. I wonder when he intends to end his visit to Dragonstone and resume his seat on this council.”

“No doubt as soon as we’ve scourged all those whores into the sea,” Littlefinger replied, provoking more laughter.

“I have heard quite enough about whores for one day,” Ned said, rising. “Until the morrow.”

Harwin had the door when Ned returned to the Tower of the Hand. “Summon Jory to my chambers and tell your father to saddle my horse,” Ned told him, too brusquely.

“As you say, my lord.”

The Red Keep and the “Hand’s tourney” were chafing him raw, Ned reflected as he climbed. He yearned for the comfort of Catelyn’s arms, for the sounds of Robb and Jon crossing swords in the practice yard, for the cool days and cold nights of the north.

In his chambers he stripped off his council silks and sat for a moment with the book while he waited for Jory to arrive. *The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, With Descriptions of Many High Lords and Noble Ladies and Their Children*, by Grand Maester Malleon. Pycelle had spoken truly; it made for ponderous reading. Yet Jon Arryn had asked for it, and Ned felt certain he had reasons. There was something here, some truth buried in these brittle yellow pages, if only he could see it. But *what?* The tome was over a century old. Scarcely a man now alive had yet been born when Malleon had compiled his dusty lists of weddings, births, and deaths.

He opened to the section on House Lannister once more, and turned the pages slowly, hoping against hope that something would leap out at him. The Lannisters were an old family, tracing their descent back to Lann the Clever, a trickster from the Age of Heroes who was no doubt as legendary as Bran the Builder, though far more beloved of singers and tale-tellers. In the songs, Lann was the fellow who winkled the Casterlys out of Casterly Rock with no weapon but his wits, and stole gold from the sun to brighten his curly hair. Ned wished he were here now, to wrinkle the truth out of this damnable book.

A sharp rap on the door heralded Jory Cassel. Ned closed Malleon’s tome and bid him enter. “I’ve promised the City Watch twenty of my guard until the tourney is done,” he told him. “I rely on you to make the choice. Give Alyn the command, and make certain the men understand that they are needed to stop fights, not start them.” Rising, Ned opened a cedar chest and removed a light linen undertunic. “Did you find the stableboy?”

“The watchman, my lord,” Jory said. “He vows he’ll never touch another horse.”

“What did he have to say?”

“He claims he knew Lord Arryn well. Fast friends, they were.” Jory snorted. “The Hand always gave the lads a copper on their name days, he says. Had a way with horses. Never rode his mounts too hard, and brought them carrots and apples, so they were always pleased to see him.”

“Carrots and apples,” Ned repeated. It sounded as if this boy would be even less use than the others. And he was the last of the four Littlefinger had turned up. Jory had spoken to each of them in turn. Ser Hugh had been brusque and uninformative, and arrogant as only a new-made knight can be. If the Hand wished to talk to him, he should be pleased to receive him, but he would not be questioned by a mere captain of guards... even if said captain was ten years older and a hundred times the swordsman. The serving girl had at least been pleasant. She said Lord Jon had been reading more than was good for him, that he was troubled and melancholy over his young son’s frailty, and gruff with his lady wife. The potboy, now cordwainer, had never exchanged so much as a word with Lord Jon, but he was full of oddments of kitchen gossip: the lord had been quarreling with the king, the lord only picked at his food, the lord was sending his boy to be fostered on Dragonstone, the lord had taken a great interest in the breeding of hunting hounds, the lord had visited a master armorer to commission a new suit of plate, wrought all in pale silver with a blue jasper falcon and a mother-of-pearl moon on the breast. The king’s own brother had gone with him to help choose the design, the potboy said. No, not Lord Renly, the other one, Lord Stannis.

“Did our watchman recall anything else of note?”

“The lad swears Lord Jon was as strong as a man half his age. Often went riding with Lord Stannis, he says.”

Stannis again, Ned thought. He found that curious. Jon Arryn and he had been cordial, but never friendly. And while Robert had been riding north to Winterfell, Stannis had removed himself to Dragonstone, the Targaryen island fastness he had conquered in his brother’s name. He had

given no word as to when he might return. “Where did they go on these rides?” Ned asked.

“The boy says that they visited a brothel.”

“A brothel?” Ned said. “The Lord of the Eyrie and Hand of the King visited a brothel with *Stannis Baratheon*?” He shook his head, incredulous, wondering what Lord Renly would make of this tidbit. Robert’s lusts were the subject of ribald drinking songs throughout the realm, but Stannis was a different sort of man; a bare year younger than the king, yet utterly unlike him, stern, humorless, unforgiving, grim in his sense of duty.

“The boy insists it’s true. The Hand took three guardsmen with him, and the boy says they were joking of it when he took their horses afterward.”

“Which brothel?” Ned asked.

“The boy did not know. The guards would.”

“A pity Lysa carried them off to the Vale,” Ned said dryly. “The gods are doing their best to vex us. Lady Lysa, Maester Colemon, Lord Stannis... everyone who might actually know the truth of what happened to Jon Arryn is a thousand leagues away.”

“Will you summon Lord Stannis back from Dragonstone?”

“Not yet,” Ned said. “Not until I have a better notion of what this is all about and where he stands.” The matter nagged at him. Why did Stannis leave? Had he played some part in Jon Arryn’s murder? Or was he afraid? Ned found it hard to imagine what could frighten Stannis Baratheon, who had once held Storm’s End through a year of siege, surviving on rats and boot leather while the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne sat outside with their hosts, banqueting in sight of his walls.

“Bring me my doublet, if you would. The grey, with the direwolf sigil. I want this armorer to know who I am. It might make him more forthcoming.”

Jory went to the wardrobe. “Lord Renly is brother to Lord Stannis as well as the king.”

“Yet it seems that he was not invited on these rides.” Ned was not sure what to make of Renly, with all his friendly ways and easy smiles. A few days past, he had taken Ned aside to show him an exquisite rose gold locklet. Inside was a miniature painted in the vivid Myrish style, of a lovely young girl with doe’s eyes and a cascade of soft brown hair. Renly had seemed anxious to know if the girl reminded him of anyone, and when Ned had no answer but a shrug, he had seemed disappointed. The maid was Loras Tyrell’s sister Margaery, he’d confessed, but there were those who said she looked like Lyanna. “No,” Ned had told him, bemused. Could it be that Lord Renly, who looked so like a young Robert, had conceived a passion for a girl he fancied to be a young Lyanna? That struck him as more than passing queer.

Jory held out the doublet, and Ned slid his hands through the armholes. “Perhaps Lord Stannis will return for Robert’s tourney,” he said as Jory laced the garment up the back.

“That would be a stroke of fortune, my lord,” Jory said.

Ned buckled on a longsword. “In other words, not bloody likely.” His smile was grim.

Jory draped Ned’s cloak across his shoulders and clasped it at the throat with the Hand’s badge of office. “The armorer lives above his shop, in a large house at the top of the Street of Steel. Alyn knows the way, my lord.”

Ned nodded. “The gods help this potboy if he’s sent me off haring after shadows.” It was a slim enough staff to lean on, but the Jon Arryn that Ned Stark had known was not one to wear jeweled and silvered plate. Steel was steel; it was meant for protection, not ornament. He might have changed his views, to be sure. He would scarcely have been the first man who came to look on things differently after a few years at court... but the change was marked enough to make Ned wonder.

“Is there any other service I might perform?”

“I suppose you’d best begin visiting whorehouses.”

“Hard duty, my lord.” Jory grinned. “The men will be glad to help. Porthor has made a fair start already.”

Ned's favorite horse was saddled and waiting in the yard. Varly and Jacks fell in beside him as he rode through the yard. Their steel caps and shirts of mail must have been sweltering, yet they said no word of complaint. As Lord Eddard passed beneath the King's Gate into the stink of the city, his grey and white cloak streaming from his shoulders, he saw eyes everywhere and kicked his mount into a trot. His guard followed.

He looked behind him frequently as they made their way through the crowded city streets. Tomard and Desmond had left the castle early this morning to take up positions on the route they must take, and watch for anyone following them, but even so, Ned was uncertain. The shadow of the King's Spider and his little birds had him fretting like a maiden on her wedding night.

The Street of Steel began at the market square beside the River Gate, as it was named on maps, or the Mud Gate, as it was commonly called. A mummer on stilts was striding through the throngs like some great insect, with a horde of barefoot children trailing behind him, hooting. Elsewhere, two ragged boys no older than Bran were dueling with sticks, to the loud encouragement of some and the furious curses of others. An old woman ended the contest by leaning out of her window and emptying a bucket of slops on the heads of the combatants. In the shadow of the wall, farmers stood beside their wagons, bellowing out, "Apples, the best apples, cheap at twice the price," and "Blood melons, sweet as honey," and "Turnips, onions, roots, here you go here, here you go, turnips, onions, roots, here you go here."

The Mud Gate was open, and a squad of City Watchmen stood under the portcullis in their golden cloaks, leaning on spears. When a column of riders appeared from the west, the guardsmen sprang into action, shouting commands and moving the carts and foot traffic aside to let the knight enter with his escort. The first rider through the gate carried a long black banner. The silk rippled in the wind like a living thing; across the fabric was blazoned a night sky slashed with purple lightning. "*Make way for Lord Beric!*" the rider shouted. "*Make way for Lord Beric!*" And close behind came the young lord himself, a dashing figure on a black courser, with red-

gold hair and a black satin cloak dusted with stars. “Here to fight in the Hand’s tourney, my lord?” a guardsman called out to him. “Here to *win* the Hand’s tourney,” Lord Beric shouted back as the crowd cheered.

Ned turned off the square where the Street of Steel began and followed its winding path up a long hill, past blacksmiths working at open forges, freeriders haggling over mail shirts, and grizzled ironmongers selling old blades and razors from their wagons. The farther they climbed, the larger the buildings grew. The man they wanted was all the way at the top of the hill, in a huge house of timber and plaster whose upper stories loomed over the narrow street. The double doors showed a hunting scene carved in ebony and weirwood. A pair of stone knights stood sentry at the entrance, armored in fanciful suits of polished red steel that transformed them into griffin and unicorn. Ned left his horse with Jacks and shouldered his way inside.

The slim young serving girl took quick note of Ned’s badge and the sigil on his doublet, and the master came hurrying out, all smiles and bows. “Wine for the King’s Hand,” he told the girl, gesturing Ned to a couch. “I am Tobho Mott, my lord, please, please, put yourself at ease.” He wore a black velvet coat with hammers embroidered on the sleeves in silver thread. Around his neck was a heavy silver chain and a sapphire as large as a pigeon’s egg. “If you are in need of new arms for the Hand’s tourney, you have come to the right shop.” Ned did not bother to correct him. “My work is costly, and I make no apologies for that, my lord,” he said as he filled two matching silver goblets. “You will not find craftsmanship equal to mine anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms, I promise you. Visit every forge in King’s Landing if you like, and compare for yourself. Any village smith can hammer out a shirt of mail; my work is art.”

Ned sipped his wine and let the man go on. The Knight of Flowers bought all his armor here, Tobho boasted, and many high lords, the ones who knew fine steel, and even Lord Renly, the king’s own brother. Perhaps the Hand had seen Lord Renly’s new armor, the green plate with the golden antlers? No other armorer in the city could get that deep a green; he knew the secret of putting color in the steel itself, paint and enamel were the

crutches of a journeyman. Or mayhaps the Hand wanted a blade? Tobho had learned to work Valyrian steel at the forges of Qohor as a boy. Only a man who knew the spells could take old weapons and forge them anew. “The direwolf is the sigil of House Stark, is it not? I could fashion a direwolf helm so real that children will run from you in the street,” he vowed.

Ned smiled. “Did you make a falcon helm for Lord Arryn?”

Tobho Mott paused a long moment and set aside his wine. “The Hand did call upon me, with Lord Stannis, the king’s brother. I regret to say, they did not honor me with their patronage.”

Ned looked at the man evenly, saying nothing, waiting. He had found over the years that silence sometimes yielded more than questions. And so it was this time.

“They asked to see the boy,” the armorer said, “so I took them back to the forge.”

“The boy,” Ned echoed. He had no notion who the boy might be. “I should like to see the boy as well.”

Tobho Mott gave him a cool, careful look. “As you wish, my lord,” he said with no trace of his former friendliness. He led Ned out a rear door and across a narrow yard, back to the cavernous stone barn where the work was done. When the armorer opened the door, the blast of hot air that came through made Ned feel as though he were walking into a dragon’s mouth. Inside, a forge blazed in each corner, and the air stank of smoke and sulfur. Journeymen armorers glanced up from their hammers and tongs just long enough to wipe the sweat from their brows, while bare-chested apprentice boys worked the bellows.

The master called over a tall lad about Robb’s age, his arms and chest corded with muscle. “This is Lord Stark, the new Hand of the King,” he told him as the boy looked at Ned through sullen blue eyes and pushed back sweat-soaked hair with his fingers. Thick hair, shaggy and unkempt and black as ink. The shadow of a new beard darkened his jaw. “This is Gendry. Strong for his age, and he works hard. Show the Hand that helmet you

made, lad.” Almost shyly, the boy led them to his bench, and a steel helm shaped like a bull’s head, with two great curving horns.

Ned turned the helm over in his hands. It was raw steel, unpolished but expertly shaped. “This is fine work. I would be pleased if you would let me buy it.”

The boy snatched it out of his hands. “It’s not for sale.”

Tobho Mott looked horror-struck. “Boy, this is the King’s Hand. If his lordship wants this helm, make him a gift of it. He honors you by asking.”

“I made it for me,” the boy said stubbornly.

“A hundred pardons, my lord,” his master said hurriedly to Ned. “The boy is crude as new steel, and like new steel would profit from some beating. That helm is journeyman’s work at best. Forgive him and I promise I will craft you a helm like none you have ever seen.”

“He’s done nothing that requires my forgiveness. Gendry, when Lord Arryn came to see you, what did you talk about?”

“He asked me questions is all, m’lord.”

“What sort of questions?”

The boy shrugged. “How was I, and was I well treated, and if I liked the work, and stuff about my mother. Who she was and what she looked like and all.”

“What did you tell him?” Ned asked.

The boy shoved a fresh fall of black hair off his forehead. “She died when I was little. She had yellow hair, and sometimes she used to sing to me, I remember. She worked in an alehouse.”

“Did Lord Stannis question you as well?”

“The bald one? No, not him. He never said no word, just glared at me, like I was some raper who done for his daughter.”

“Mind your filthy tongue,” the master said. “This is the King’s own Hand.” The boy lowered his eyes. “A smart boy, but stubborn. That helm... the others call him bullheaded, so he threw it in their teeth.”

Ned touched the boy's head, fingering the thick black hair. "Look at me, Gendry." The apprentice lifted his face. Ned studied the shape of his jaw, the eyes like blue ice. *Yes*, he thought, *I see it*. "Go back to your work, lad. I'm sorry to have bothered you." He walked back to the house with the master. "Who paid the boy's apprentice fee?" he asked lightly.

Mott looked fretful. "You saw the boy. Such a strong boy. Those hands of his, those hands were made for hammers. He had such promise, I took him on without a fee."

"The truth now," Ned urged. "The streets are full of strong boys. The day you take on an apprentice without a fee will be the day the Wall comes down. Who paid for him?"

"A lord," the master said reluctantly. "He gave no name, and wore no sigil on his coat. He paid in gold, twice the customary sum, and said he was paying once for the boy, and once for my silence."

"Describe him."

"He was stout, round of shoulder, not so tall as you. Brown beard, but there was a bit of red in it, I'll swear. He wore a rich cloak, that I do remember, heavy purple velvet worked with silver threads, but the hood shadowed his face and I never did see him clear." He hesitated a moment. "My lord, I want no trouble."

"None of us wants trouble, but I fear these are troubled times, Master Mott," Ned said. "You know who the boy is."

"I am only an armorer, my lord. I know what I'm told."

"You know who the boy is," Ned repeated patiently. "That is not a question."

"The boy is my apprentice," the master said. He looked Ned in the eye, stubborn as old iron. "Who he was before he came to me, that's none of my concern."

Ned nodded. He decided that he liked Tobho Mott, master armorer. "If the day ever comes when Gendry would rather wield a sword than forge one, send him to me. He has the look of a warrior. Until then, you have my

thanks, Master Mott, and my promise. Should I ever want a helm to frighten children, this will be the first place I visit.”

His guard was waiting outside with the horses. “Did you find anything, my lord?” Jacks asked as Ned mounted up.

“I did,” Ned told him, wondering. What had Jon Arryn wanted with a king’s bastard, and why was it worth his life?