

your hand.” He gave Littlefinger a cool, contemptuous glance. “Lord Baelish, I’d leave here in some haste if I did not care to get bloodstains on my costly clothing.”

Littlefinger did not need to be urged. “I will bring the City Watch,” he promised Ned. The Lannister line parted to let him through, and closed behind him. Littlefinger put his heels to his mare and vanished around a corner.

Ned’s men had drawn their swords, but they were three against twenty. Eyes watched from nearby windows and doors, but no one was about to intervene. His party was mounted, the Lannisters on foot save for Jaime himself. A charge might win them free, but it seemed to Eddard Stark that they had a surer, safer tactic. “Kill me,” he warned the Kingslayer, “and Catelyn will most certainly slay Tyrion.”

Jaime Lannister poked at Ned’s chest with the gilded sword that had sipped the blood of the last of the Dragonkings. “Would she? The noble Catelyn Tully of Riverrun murder a hostage? I think... not.” He sighed. “But I am not willing to chance my brother’s life on a woman’s honor.” Jaime slid the golden sword into its sheath. “So I suppose I’ll let you run back to Robert to tell him how I frightened you. I wonder if he’ll care.” Jaime pushed his wet hair back with his fingers and wheeled his horse around. When he was beyond the line of swordsmen, he glanced back at his captain. “Tregar, see that no harm comes to Lord Stark.”

“As you say, m’lord.”

“Still... we wouldn’t want him to leave here entirely unchastened, so”—through the night and the rain, he glimpsed the white of Jaime’s smile—“kill his men.”

“No!” Ned Stark screamed, clawing for his sword. Jaime was already cantering off down the street as he heard Wyl shout. Men closed from both sides. Ned rode one down, cutting at phantoms in red cloaks who gave way before him. Jory Cassel put his heels into his mount and charged. A steel-shod hoof caught a Lannister guardsman in the face with a sickening crunch. A second man reeled away and for an instant Jory was free. Wyl cursed as they pulled him off his dying horse, swords slashing in the rain. Ned galloped to him, bringing his longsword down on Tregar’s helm. The jolt of impact made him grit his teeth. Tregar stumbled to his knees, his lion crest sheared in half, blood running down his face. Heward was hacking at the hands that had seized his bridle when a spear caught him in the belly. Suddenly Jory was back among them, a red rain flying from his sword. “No!” Ned shouted. “Jory, away!” Ned’s horse slipped under him and came crashing down in the mud. There was a moment of blinding pain and the taste of blood in his mouth.

He saw them cut the legs from Jory’s mount and drag him to the earth, swords rising and failing as they closed in around him. When Ned’s horse lurched back to its feet, he tried to rise, only to fall again, choking on his scream. He could see the splintered bone poking through his calf. It was the last thing he saw for a time. The rain came down and down and down.

When he opened his eyes again, Lord Eddard Stark was alone with his dead. His horse moved closer, caught the rank scent of blood, and galloped away. Ned began to drag himself through the mud, gritting his teeth at the agony in his leg. It seemed to take years. Faces watched from candlelit windows, and people began to emerge from alleys and doors, but no one moved to help.