

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