

“As large as the Mountain That Rides?” Ser Karyl said. “I have never met one.”

“Nor has any man here,” Ser Raymun added hotly. “Even his brother is a pup beside him. My lords, open your eyes. Do you need to see his seal on the corpses? It was Gregor.”

“Why should Ser Gregor turn brigand?” Pycelle asked. “By the grace of his liege lord, he holds a stout keep and lands of his own. The man is an anointed knight.”

“A false knight!” Ser Marq said. “Lord Tywin’s mad dog.”

“My lord Hand,” Pycelle declared in a stiff voice, “I urge you to remind this good knight that Lord Tywin Lannister is the father of our own gracious queen.”

“Thank you, Grand Maester Pycelle,” Ned said. “I fear we might have forgotten that if you had not pointed it out.”

From his vantage point atop the throne, he could see men slipping out the door at the far end of the hall. Hares going to ground, he supposed... or rats off to nibble the queen’s cheese. He caught a glimpse of Septa Mordane in the gallery, with his daughter Sansa beside her. Ned felt a flash of anger; this was no place for a girl. But the septa could not have known that today’s court would be anything but the usual tedious business of hearing petitions, settling disputes between rival holdfasts, and adjudicating the placement of boundary stones.

At the council table below, Petyr Baelish lost interest in his quill and leaned forward. “Ser Marq, Ser Karyl, Ser Raymun—perhaps I might ask you a question? These holdfasts were under your protection. Where were you when all this slaughtering and burning was going on?”

Ser Karyl Vance answered. “I was attending my lord father in the pass below the Golden Tooth, as was Ser Marq. When the word of these outrages reached Ser Edmure Tully, he sent word that we should take a small force of men to find what survivors we could and bring them to the king.”

Ser Raymun Darry spoke up. “Ser Edmure had summoned me to Riverrun with all my strength. I was camped across the river from his walls, awaiting his commands, when the word reached me. By the time I could return to my own lands, Clegane and his vermin were back across the Red Fork, riding for Lannister’s hills.”

Littlefinger stroked the point of his beard thoughtfully. “And if they come again, ser?”

“If they come again, we’ll use their blood to water the fields they burnt,” Ser Marq Piper declared hotly.

“Ser Edmure has sent men to every village and holdfast within a day’s ride of the border,” Ser Karyl explained. “The next raider will not have such an easy time of it.”

And that may be precisely what Lord Tywin wants, Ned thought to himself, to bleed off strength from Riverrun, goad the boy into scattering his swords. His wife’s brother was young, and more gallant than wise. He would try to hold every inch of his soil, to defend every man, woman, and child who named him lord, and Tywin Lannister was shrewd enough to know that. “If your fields and holdfasts are safe from harm,” Lord Petyr was saying, “what then do you ask of the throne?”

“The lords of the Trident keep the king’s peace,” Ser Raymun Darry said. “The Lannisters have broken it. We ask leave to answer them, steel for steel. We ask justice for the smallfolk of Sherrer and Wendish Town and the Mummer’s Ford.”