

In ones and twos, the holdfast of Sherrer struggled to its feet. One ancient needed to be helped, and a young girl in a bloody dress stayed on her knees, staring blankly at Ser Arys Oakheart, who stood by the foot of the throne in the white armor of the Kingsguard, ready to protect and defend the king... or, Ned supposed, the King's Hand.

"Joss," Ser Raymun Darry said to a plump balding man in a brewer's apron. "Tell the Hand what happened at Sherrer."

Joss nodded. "If it please His Grace--"

"His Grace is hunting across the Blackwater," Ned said, wondering how a man could live his whole life a few days ride from the Red Keep and still have no notion what his king looked like. Ned was clad in a white linen doublet with the direwolf of Stark on the breast; his black wool cloak was fastened at the collar by his silver hand of office. Black and white and grey, all the shades of truth. "I am Lord Eddard Stark, the King's Hand. Tell me who you are and what you know of these raiders."

"I keep... I kept... I kept an alehouse, m'lord, in Sherrer, by the stone bridge. The finest ale south of the Neck, everyone said so, begging your pardons, m'lord. It's gone now like all the rest, m'lord. They come and drank their fill and spilled the rest before they fired my roof, and they would of spilled my blood too, if they'd caught me. M'lord."

"They burnt us out," a farmer beside him said. "Come riding in the dark, up from the south, and fired the fields and the houses alike, killing them as tried to stop them. They weren't no raiders, though, m'lord. They had no mind to steal our stock, not these, they butchered my milk cow where she stood and left her for the flies and the crows."

"They rode down my 'prentice boy," said a squat man with a smith's muscles and a bandage around his head. He had put on his finest clothes to come to court, but his breeches were patched, his cloak travel-stained and dusty. "Chased him back and forth across the fields on their horses, poking at him with their lances like it was a game, them laughing and the boy stumbling and screaming till the big one pierced him clean through."

The girl on her knees craned her head up at Ned, high above her on the throne. "They killed my mother too, Your Grace. And they... they..." Her voice trailed off, as if she had forgotten what she was about to say. She began to sob.

Ser Raymun Darry took up the tale. "At Wendish Town, the people sought shelter in their holdfast, but the walls were timbered. The raiders piled straw against the wood and burnt them all alive. When the Wendish folk opened their gates to flee the fire, they shot them down with arrows as they came running out, even women with suckling babes."

"Oh, dreadful," murmured Varys. "How cruel can men be?"

"They would of done the same for us, but the Sherrer holdfast's made of stone," Joss said. "Some wanted to smoke us out, but the big one said there was riper fruit upriver, and they made for the Mummer's Ford."

Ned could feel cold steel against his fingers as he leaned forward. Between each finger was a blade, the points of twisted swords fanning out like talons from arms of the throne. Even after three centuries, some were still sharp enough to cut. The Iron Throne was full of traps for the