

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. Porther 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