

Catelyn took his arm. "Come, Father," she said. "You'll find that Masha Heddle sets a good table, I think, but try not to praise her. You truly don't want to see her smile."

The common room was long and drafty, with a row of huge wooden kegs at one end and a fireplace at the other. A serving boy ran back and forth with skewers of meat while Masha drew beer from the kegs, chewing her sourleaf all the while.

The benches were crowded, townsfolk and farmers mingling freely with all manner of travelers. The crossroads made for odd companions; dyers with black and purple hands shared a bench with rivermen reeking of fish, an ironsmith thick with muscle squeezed in beside a wizened old septon, hard-bitten sellswords and soft plump merchants swapped news like boon companions.

The company included more swords than Catelyn would have liked. Three by the fire wore the red stallion badge of the Brackens, and there was a large party in blue steel ringmail and capes of a silvery grey. On their shoulder was another familiar sigil, the twin towers of House Frey. She studied their faces, but they were all too young to have known her. The senior among them would have been no older than Bran when she went north.

Ser Rodrik found them an empty place on the bench near the kitchen. Across the table a handsome youth was fingering a woodharp. "Seven blessings to you, goodfolk," he said as they sat. An empty wine cup stood on the table before him.

"And to you, singer," Catelyn returned. Ser Rodrik called for bread and meat and beer in a tone that meant now. The singer, a youth of some eighteen years, eyed them boldly and asked where they were going, and from whence they had come, and what news they had, letting the questions fly as quick as arrows and never pausing for an answer. "We left King's Landing a fortnight ago," Catelyn replied, answering the safest of his questions.

"That's where I'm bound," the youth said. As she had suspected, he was more interested in telling his own story than in hearing theirs. Singers loved nothing half so well as the sound of their own voices. "The Hand's tourney means rich lords with fat purses. The last time I came away with more silver than I could carry... or would have, if I hadn't lost it all betting on the Kingslayer to win the day."

"The gods frown on the gambler," Ser Rodrik said sternly. He was of the north, and shared the Stark views on tournaments.

"They frowned on me, for certain," the singer said. "Your cruel gods and the Knight of Flowers altogether did me in."

"No doubt that was a lesson for you," Ser Rodrik said.

"It was. This time my coin will champion Ser Loras."

Ser Rodrik tried to tug at whiskers that were not there, but before he could frame a rebuke the serving boy came scurrying up. He laid trenchers of bread before them and filled them with chunks of browned meat off a skewer, dripping with hot juice. Another skewer held tiny onions, fire peppers, and fat mushrooms. Ser Rodrik set to lustily as the lad ran back to fetch them beer.

"My name is Marillion," the singer said, plucking a string on his woodharp. "Doubtless you've heard me play somewhere?"