

must take, and watch for anyone following them, but even so, Ned was uncertain. The shadow of the King's Spider and his little birds had him fretting like a maiden on her wedding night.

The Street of Steel began at the market square beside the River Gate, as it was named on maps, or the Mud Gate, as it was commonly called. A mummer on stilts was striding through the throngs like some great insect, with a horde of barefoot children trailing behind him, hooting. Elsewhere, two ragged boys no older than Bran were dueling with sticks, to the loud encouragement of some and the furious curses of others. An old woman ended the contest by leaning out of her window and emptying a bucket of slops on the heads of the combatants. In the shadow of the wall, farmers stood beside their wagons, bellowing out, "Apples, the best apples, cheap at twice the price," and "Blood melons, sweet as honey," and "Turnips, onions, roots, here you go here, here you go, turnips, onions, roots, here you go here."

The Mud Gate was open, and a squad of City Watchmen stood under the portcullis in their golden cloaks, leaning on spears. When a column of riders appeared from the west, the guardsmen sprang into action, shouting commands and moving the carts and foot traffic aside to let the knight enter with his escort. The first rider through the gate carried a long black banner. The silk rippled in the wind like a living thing; across the fabric was blazoned a night sky slashed with purple lightning. "Make way for Lord Beric!" the rider shouted. "Make way for Lord Beric!" And close behind came the young lord himself, a dashing figure on a black courser, with red-gold hair and a black satin cloak dusted with stars. "Here to fight in the Hand's tourney, my lord?" a guardsman called out to him. "Here to win the Hand's tourney," Lord Beric shouted back as the crowd cheered.

Ned turned off the square where the Street of Steel began and followed its winding path up a long hill, past blacksmiths working at open forges, freeriders haggling over mail shirts, and grizzled ironmongers selling old blades and razors from their wagons. The farther they climbed, the larger the buildings grew. The man they wanted was all the way at the top of the hill, in a huge house of timber and plaster whose upper stories loomed over the narrow street. The double doors showed a hunting scene carved in ebony and weirwood. A pair of stone knights stood sentry at the entrance, armored in fanciful suits of polished red steel that transformed them into griffin and unicorn. Ned left his horse with Jacks and shouldered his way inside.

The slim young serving girl took quick note of Ned's badge and the sigil on his doublet, and the master came hurrying out, all smiles and bows. "Wine for the King's Hand," he told the girl, gesturing Ned to a couch. "I am Tobho Mott, my lord, please, please, put yourself at ease." He wore a black velvet coat with hammers embroidered on the sleeves in silver thread. Around his neck was a heavy silver chain and a sapphire as large as a pigeon's egg. "If you are in need of new arms for the Hand's tourney, you have come to the right shop." Ned did not bother to correct him. "My work is costly, and I make no apologies for that, my lord," he said as he filled two matching silver goblets. "You will not find craftsmanship equal to mine anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms, I promise you. Visit every forge in King's Landing if you like, and compare for yourself. Any village smith can hammer out a shift of mail; my work is art."