

men were filling the room behind me. Lannister's men drew back. I never said a word. I looked at him seated there on the throne, and I waited. At last Jaime laughed and got up. He took off his helm, and he said to me, 'Have no fear, Stark. I was only keeping it warm for our friend Robert. It's not a very comfortable seat, I'm afraid.' "

The king threw back his head and roared. His laughter startled a flight of crows from the tall brown grass. They took to the air in a wild beating of wings. "You think I should mistrust Lannister because he sat on my throne for a few moments?" He shook with laughter again. "Jaime was all of seventeen, Ned. Scarce more than a boy."

"Boy or man, he had no right to that throne."

"Perhaps he was tired," Robert suggested. "Killing kings is weary work. Gods know, there's no place else to rest your ass in that damnable room. And he spoke truly, it is a monstrous uncomfortable chair. In more ways than one." The king shook his head. "Well, now I know Jaime's dark sin, and the matter can be forgotten. I am heartily sick of secrets and squabbles and matters of state, Ned. It's all as tedious as counting coppers. Come, let's ride, you used to know how. I want to feel the wind in my hair again." He kicked his horse back into motion and galloped up over the barrow, raining earth down behind him.

For a moment Ned did not follow. He had run out of words, and he was filled with a vast sense of helplessness. Not for the first time, he wondered what he was doing here and why he had come. He was no Jon Arryn, to curb the wildness of his king and teach him wisdom. Robert would do what he pleased, as he always had, and nothing Ned could say or do would change that. He belonged in Winterfell. He belonged with Catelyn in her grief, and with Bran.

A man could not always be where he belonged, though. Resigned, Eddard Stark put his boots into his horse and set off after the king.