

The young knight with the green viper embroidered on his surcoat stepped forward and went to one knee. "My lady, I beg the boon of championing your cause."

"The honor should be mine," old Lord Hunter said. "For the love I bore your lord husband, let me avenge his death."

"My father served Lord Jon faithfully as High Steward of the Vale," Ser Albar Royce boomed. "Let me serve his son in this."

"The gods favor the man with the just cause," said Ser Lyn Corbray, "yet often that turns out to be the man with the surest sword. We all know who that is." He smiled modestly.

A dozen other men all spoke at once, clamoring to be heard. Tyrion found it disheartening to realize so many strangers were eager to kill him. Perhaps this had not been such a clever plan after all.

Lady Lysa raised a hand for silence. "I thank you, my lords, as I know my son would thank you if he were among us. No men in the Seven Kingdoms are as bold and true as the knights of the Vale. Would that I could grant you all this honor. Yet I can choose only one." She gestured. "Ser Vardis Egen, you were ever my lord husband's good right hand. You shall be our champion."

Ser Vardis had been singularly silent. "My lady," he said gravely, sinking to one knee, "pray give this burden to another, I have no taste for it. The man is no warrior. Look at him. A dwarf, half my size and lame in the legs. It would be shameful to slaughter such a man and call it justice."

Oh, excellent, Tyrion thought. "I agree."

Lysa glared at him. "You demanded a trial by combat."

"And now I demand a champion, such as you have chosen for yourself. My brother Jaime will gladly take my part, I know."

"Your precious Kingslayer is hundreds of leagues from here," snapped Lysa Arryn.

"Send a bird for him. I will gladly await his arrival."

"You will face Ser Vardis on the morrow."

"Singer," Tyrion said, turning to Marillion, "when you make a ballad of this, be certain you tell them how Lady Arryn denied the dwarf the right to a champion, and sent him forth lame and bruised and hobbling to face her finest knight."

"I deny you nothing!" Lysa Arryn said, her voice peeved and shrill with irritation. "Name your champion, Imp... if you think you can find a man to die for you."

"If it is all the same to you, I'd sooner find one to kill for me." Tyrion looked over the long hall. No one moved. For a long moment he wondered if it had all been a colossal blunder.

Then there was a stirring in the rear of the chamber. "I'll stand for the dwarf," Bronn called out.