

Ser Barristan's look was troubled. "They say night's beauties fade at dawn, and the children of wine are oft disowned in the morning light."

"They say so," Ned agreed, "but not of Robert." Other men might reconsider words spoken in drunken bravado, but Robert Baratheon would remember and, remembering, would never back down.

The king's pavilion was close by the water, and the morning mists off the river had wreathed it in wisps of grey. It was all of golden silk, the largest and grandest structure in the camp. Outside the entrance, Robert's warhammer was displayed beside an immense iron shield blazoned with the crowned stag of House Baratheon.

Ned had hoped to discover the king still abed in a wine-soaked sleep, but luck was not with him. They found Robert drinking beer from a polished horn and roaring his displeasure at two young squires who were trying to buckle him into his armor. "Your Grace," one was saying, almost in tears, "it's made too small, it won't go." He fumbled, and the gorget he was trying to fit around Robert's thick neck tumbled to the ground.

"Seven hells!" Robert swore. "Do I have to do it myself? Piss on the both of you. Pick it up. Don't just stand there gaping, Lance, pick it up!" The lad jumped, and the king noticed his company. "Look at these oafs, Ned. My wife insisted I take these two to squire for me, and they're worse than useless. Can't even put a man's armor on him properly. Squires, they say. I say they're swineherds dressed up in silk."

Ned only needed a glance to understand the difficulty. "The boys are not at fault," he told the king. "You're too fat for your armor, Robert."

Robert Baratheon took a long swallow of beer, tossed the empty horn onto his sleeping furs, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said darkly, "Fat? Fat, is it? Is that how you speak to your king?" He let go his laughter, sudden as a storm. "Ah, damn you, Ned, why are you always right?"

The squires smiled nervously until the king turned on them. "You. Yes, both of you. You heard the Hand. The king is too fat for his armor. Go find Ser Aron Santagar. Tell him I need the breastplate stretcher. Now! What are you waiting for?"

The boys tripped over each other in their haste to be quit of the tent. Robert managed to keep a stern face until they were gone. Then he dropped back into a chair, shaking with laughter.

Ser Barristan Selmy chuckled with him. Even Eddard Stark managed a smile. Always, though, the graver thoughts crept in. He could not help taking note of the two squires: handsome boys, fair and well made. One was Sansa's age, with long golden curls; the other perhaps fifteen, sandy-haired, with a wisp of a mustache and the emerald-green eyes of the queen.

"Ah, I wish I could be there to see Santagar's face," Robert said. "I hope he'll have the wit to send them to someone else. We ought to keep them running all day!"

"Those boys," Ned asked him. "Lannisters?"

Robert nodded, wiping tears from his eyes. "Cousins. Sons of Lord Tywin's brother. One of the dead ones. Or perhaps the live one, now that I come to think on it. I don't recall. My wife comes from a very large family, Ned."