

Adrian Lannister

The world was not made of stone or wood. In the dark place, the world was made of glass.

Adrian stood on a floor that was a mirror, and when he looked down, he didn't see his feet. He saw the deep, black water swirling underneath him. It was hungry water. It wanted to pull him down and turn him into seafoam.

He tried to step carefully. *don't break it*, he told himself. *If you break it, you fall*.

But he wasn't a boy in the dream. He looked at his hands and they were paws. They were see-through, shining paws made of gold glass. He was a lion, but he was hollow. There was nothing inside him. No heart, no stomach, no songs. Just air.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

The noise came from the shadows. The Shadow Man was there. He didn't have a face, just a single blue eye that glowed like a dying star. The Shadow Man wasn't fighting him. He wasn't hitting him or choking him or putting iron chains on his wrists.

He was laughing.

But there was no sound. The Shadow Man's mouth opened wide, wider than a human mouth should go, showing black teeth, and his shoulders shook, but the laughter was silent, Adrian knew he was laughing.

Look, the Shadow Man mouthed.

Adrian looked down. The sword was in his glass paw. *Red Rain*. But the sword wasn't steel anymore. It was made of red meat. It was bleeding. Thick, dark drops fell from the blade—*drip, drip, drip*—and hit the glass floor.

Every drop made a crack.

Cracckkk.

The spiderweb lines shot out from his feet. The glass was breaking. The Shadow Man laughed harder, soundlessly, pointing at Adrian's chest. Adrian looked down. There was a crack in his chest, right where his heart used to be.

"I paid," Adrian tried to say. "I paid the debt."

But his voice was glass too. It shattered in his throat.

The floor gave way. The water reached up. The Shadow Man's blue eye swallowed everything.

Adrian woke up.

He didn't scream. Screaming was for before. Screaming was for the boy who thought his father would come if he yelled loud enough. Adrian knew better now. You didn't scream. You held your breath and you found a weapon.

His eyes snapped open, staring at the wooden beams of the cabin ceiling. They were moving. Rocking. Back and forth. *Creak. Hush. Creak. Hush.*

It was just the ship. *The Golden Lion*. He was safe. He was on Father's ship.

Adrian lay perfectly still under the wool blanket. His skin felt cold and sticky, like he had been swimming in something thick. Sweat. It was just sweat.

His chest hurt. Every breath was a small, sharp pinch where the back of the crossbow had hit him. But that was a dull ache. The real pain was in his left hand.

It felt like someone had shoved a hot poker inside his palm and was twisting it.

Adrian turned his head on the pillow. His left hand was a big white lump. Maester Creylen had wrapped it in so many bandages it looked like a doll's head. It was heavy and useless. He tried to wiggle his fingers, just to see if they were still there.

A sharp, white bolt of lightning shot up his arm to his shoulder.

Adrian bit his lip. He bit it hard, until he tasted copper, but he didn't make a sound.

Jaime, he thought. The name was a warm thing in his mind. *Jaime is right outside. Or in the next cabin. If I call him, he will come.*

He wanted to call him. He wanted Jaime to come in and light a candle and sit on the edge of the bed and tell him about the time he fell in the horse trough. He wanted Jaime to make the dark go away. He felt a tear prick the corner of his eye, hot and stinging.

No, a voice whispered in his head. It sounded like Father. *Weakness is a crack in the glass.*

If he called Jaime, Jaime would look at him with those sad eyes. The eyes that said, *Oh, the poor broken thing*. Adrian didn't want to be the poor broken thing. He was the heir. He was a Lannister.

He squeezed his eyes shut and started The List. It was the only way to make the shaking stop.

"I am Adrian Lannister," he whispered into the darkness. "I am six years old. I live at Casterly Rock. My favorite food is..."

He paused.

What was his favorite food?

Honeycakes, his brain told him. *You like honeycakes.*

He tried to remember the taste of a honeycake. Sweet, sticky, golden. But when he thought about it, his stomach turned over. All he could taste was the salt of the sea and the iron taste of the penny he had sucked on once on a dare.

"My favorite food is honeycakes," he lied to himself. "A Lannister always pays his debts."

He waited for the words to make him feel better. Usually, they were like a shield. *I am a Lannister. I am strong.* But tonight, the words felt thin. Like paper in the rain.

I paid the debt, he thought, looking at the ceiling. *I paid Toad. I paid the bells-man. I paid the squire. I paid Lord Drumm.*

He had paid them in red. But he didn't feel rich. He felt... tired. He felt old. How could you be six and be old? Tyrion was old, but Tyrion laughed. Adrian didn't think he had a laugh left inside him. Maybe he had coughed it up in the cell.

He needed to touch it.

Adrian shifted, wincing as his ribs pulled. He reached out with his good right hand, fumbling in the space between the bed and the wall.

His fingers brushed against cold, hard leather. Then the cool, smooth texture of a ruby. Then the wire-wrapped grip.

Red Rain.

Father said it was worth more than a castle. Jaime said it was sharp enough to cut the wind. But to Adrian, it didn't feel like a treasure. It felt like an anchor.

It was the only thing in the world that was colder than he was.

He wrapped his small fingers around the pommel. It was too big for his hand, but he held on tight. The steel didn't care that he was six. The steel didn't care that he was scared. The steel just was.

The squire tried to scream, Adrian remembered. The memory popped up like a bubble in a swamp. *He tried to say something, but only bubbles came out.*

Adrian pulled the heavy sword a little closer, until the scabbard was resting against his side under the blanket. The chill of it seeped through his nightshirt, against his bruised ribs. It felt good. It froze the fear.

He remembered the wooden dragon Tyrion had made him. Balerion. He used to sleep with it every night. He used to make it fly around the room and breathe invisible fire on his pillow-forts.

Balerion is a toy, Adrian thought. toys are for children.

He gripped the sword harder, until his knuckles turned white. He felt like a knife that had been put back into its sheath without being wiped clean. Wet, sharp, and rusting in the dark.

"I am Adrian Lannister," he whispered again, closing his eyes.

This time, he didn't say the rest. He just listened to the ship creak, and the silence of the Shadow Man laughing in the back of his mind, and he held onto the red sword until the sun came up.

Jaime Lannister

The Great Hall of Hammerhorn was ugly. That was Jaime's prevailing thought as he leaned against a pillar of cold, black stone, swirling the watered-down wine in his goblet. It was a fortress built by people who thought comfort was a sin and aesthetics were a weakness. The Goodbrothers of Old Wyk had dug their castle out of the hard rock.

Fifteen days. It had been fifteen days since they had pulled Adrian out of the dark, and in that time, House Lannister had swept across Old Wyk like a golden fire.

Jaime looked around the commandeered hall. It was a miserable council chamber. There was a single table there, the walls were without color, and the smell was the worst part.

At the head of that table sat his father.

Tywin Lannister looked as though he were sitting in the solar of Casterly Rock, not the ruins of a conquered island fortress. He was writing, the scratch of his quill against parchment the only sound loud enough to compete with the crackling of the hearth. His armor was polished to a mirror sheen, the crimson cloak draped over his shoulders spotless. He was the only clean thing in the room.

To his right sat Kevan, looking tired. His eyes were red-rimmed, his knuckles swollen. He had spent the last two weeks overseeing the sorting of plunder and the questioning of prisoners.

To Tywin's left was Uncle Tygett. Tygett looked furious, which was his natural state, but today there was a restless energy to him, like a dog that had been promised a hunt and only given a bone to gnaw on.

And in the corner, standing in the shadows like a gargoyle hewn from nightmare, was Ser Gregor Clegane. The Mountain That Rides. He didn't move. He didn't seem to breathe.

Jaime felt a familiar itch in his sword hand whenever he looked at Gregor. It was the itch that remembered Elia Martell and Aegon. It was the itch that wondered if a sword through the eye slit would finally be enough to cleanse the Lannister name of the stain this beast had left on it.

"Read it again," Tywin said, not looking up from his letter.

Kevan sighed and adjusted the parchment in his hands. "The main keep of Hammerhorn is secured. Lord Goodbrother has yielded, along with his cousins at Crow Spike Keep and Corpse Lake. The resistance was... sporadic. They fought well at the beaches, but once the heavy horse broke their shield wall, they crumbled."

"Casualties?" Tywin asked.

"Minimal on our side," Kevan said. "Forty-two men lost in the landing. Another dozen in the taking of the keep. The Ironborn losses are... substantial. We stopped counting the bodies at the shoreline. The rest are in chains."

"And the spoils?"

"Meager," Kevan admitted, tossing the parchment onto the table. "Old Wyk is rich in iron and stone, not gold. We found some silver at Dowlund, a few chests of coin here at Hammerhorn. But it's not Lannisport. These people live like rats in a mine."

Uncle Tygett slammed his hand on the table. "Because they spent it all on ships! Ships that are now either burning in the harbor or fleeing back to Pyke. It was a waste of time coming here first. We should have struck Balon directly."

"We came here," Tywin said, finally dipping his quill into the inkwell and looking up, his pale green eyes fixing Tygett with a stare that could freeze water, "to secure our flank. And to find the man responsible for the abduction of my son."

Tywin had been ruthless since Blacktyde. He hadn't just defeated enemies; he had erased them. House Drumm was gone. Old Wyk was broken. Even in a hundred years, when everyone who remembers this day is dead, the children, grandchildren, and children after that will be told stories of the day the Iron Islands were broken by the Lions of Casterly Rock. Tywin wanted to send a clear message, not just to the Iron Islands, but to the rest of Westeros.

"Did you find him? Do you know where he is?" Jaime asked, feeling his heart burning like fire. He wanted to find the man who harmed his brother; he wanted to make him pay, but the man was slipperier than a rat.

Kevan turned to Jaime, shaking his head slowly. "We turned over every rock on this miserable island, Jaime. We questioned Lord Goodbrother until he fainted. We questioned the captains, the thralls, the fishwives. Nothing."

"Someone must have seen him," Jaime insisted, stepping forward. "He had a ship. He had a crew."

"They saw the ship," Kevan corrected. "A few fishermen near Holy Isle spoke of it. *The Silence*. They say it lived up to its name. Black sails, black hull, dark red deck. They say the crew were mutes and mongrels. But they haven't seen it since the day Adrian was taken to Blacktyde."

"And the direction?"

"East," Kevan said. "The fishermen said the black ship sailed East, into the open sea. Away from the Islands. Away from the war."

Jaime felt a surge of hot frustration. "He ran? He goes to the trouble of burning the Lannister fleet, capturing the heir to Casterly Rock, maiming a child... and then he just runs?"

"He is a coward," Tygett spat. "Typical Ironborn. fierce when they're killing women and children, but the moment a real army shows up, they scatter."

"No," Tywin said softly.

"He is not a coward," Tywin murmured, almost to himself. "Or at least, not *only* a coward. He is a pragmatist."

"He abandoned his brother," Jaime said. "He abandoned his people."

"He abandoned a losing cause," Tywin corrected. He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. "Euron Greyjoy's plan relied on leverage. He intended to trade Adrian. Perhaps for gold, perhaps for independence, perhaps for the throne itself. He expected us to be slow. He expected us to be sentimental."

Tywin's eyes flicked to Jaime. "He did not expect the boy to free himself. He did not expect us to be at his throat in a fortnight. The moment Adrian escaped, Euron's leverage vanished. He knows Balon cannot win this war. Staying meant death. So, he took his black ship and he left his family to die."

Tywin picked up his wine cup, took a sip, and set it down. "He is a smart coward. The most dangerous kind."

"I'll hunt him down," Jaime said, stepping closer to the table. "Give me a ship. I'll follow him to Asshai if I have to."

"You will do no such thing," Tywin said sharply. "You are not a bounty hunter. You are a Knight of the Kingsguard and the sworn shield to my heir. Your place is here."

Jaime grit his teeth. "So he gets away with it? He touched a Lannister and he lives?"

"He does not get to live. I will make sure of that, but he is not a priority right now." Tywin said with a final voice. "He is an exile. A fool without a kingdom. Let him run. Our business is with the fool who remains."

Tywin turned back to Kevan. "The Royal Fleet?"

"Stannis Baratheon has smashed the Iron Fleet off Fair Isle," Kevan reported. "Victarion Greyjoy's ships were baited into a trap and crushed. Stannis commands the sea now. The King's ships will be arriving at Pyke within three days."

"Good," Tywin said, standing up. "Robert will want to lead the assault on Pyke himself. He craves the glory of it. We will grant him that. But House Lannister will be there when the walls fall."

Tywin looked at his brother and the Mountain. "Kevan, ready the men. We sail on the morning tide. I want every ship, every sword, every banner perfectly arrayed. Clegane, you will lead the vanguard with Tygett."

"With pleasure," Tygett grinned, a wolfish expression.

Gregor just nodded.

"Leave us," Tywin said.

Kevan gathered his papers immediately. Tygett slapped Jaime on the shoulder as he passed, muttering about finally getting some real killing done. Gregor lumbered out last, the stone floor shaking slightly with each step.

Jaime walked over to the table as the door closed.

"You are restless," Tywin observed.

"I'm bored, Father. We sit on a rock in the middle of the sea, counting rusted swords, while the man who tortured my brother sails into the sunset."

"The brother you are sworn to protect," Tywin reminded him. "Where is Adrian now?"

"Asleep," Jaime said. "Or pretending to be. He spends a lot of time staring at the ceiling."

"He is recovering," Tywin said dismissively. "The Maester says his ribs are knitting well."

"I'm not talking about his ribs," Jaime snapped. "I'm talking about his mind. He wakes up sweating. He carries a Valyrian steel sword to the privy. He's six years old, and he has the eyes of an old soldier who's seen his friends die."

"He has seen death," Tywin said calmly. "He has killed men. That changes a person. It strips away the softness. It reveals the iron underneath."

"He shouldn't have to be iron," Jaime said softly. "He should be a child."

"The world does not care what you *should* be, Jaime. It cares what you *are*. Adrian is learning that lesson earlier than most. It will serve him well."

Tywin turned and walked toward the hearth, staring into the flames. "Balon Greyjoy is finished. Stannis has taken his fleet. We have taken his islands. Robert will break his castle. The war is effectively over."

"Then why do we sail to Pyke?" Jaime asked. "Let Robert have his siege."

"Because Balon has heirs," Tywin said. He turned to face Jaime. "Rodrik is dead, you saw to that. Maron is... occupied... in the cells of Seagard or dead. But Balon has two other children. A boy, Theon. And a girl, Asha. Both young."

"What of them?" Jaime asked. He thought of that day, the day he had failed to protect her. He had saved the daughter, but not the Queen, nor the Prince.

"When the castle falls, Balon will die," Tywin said flatly. "Robert will not allow a traitor to live, if one rebels, they cannot be trusted to live and not do it again. But the question remains... what to do with the spawn?"

Tywin watched Jaime. "If we leave them alive, in ten years, twenty years... we will be back here. Another Greyjoy rebellion. Another burning fleet. Another kidnapped Lannister."

Jaime saw it then. He saw the Red Keep. He saw the throne room. He saw a bundle of crimson cloth at the foot of the Iron Throne. He saw Aegon's head dashed against a wall.

"They are children," Jaime said.

"They are Greyjoys," Tywin countered.

"They are innocent," Jaime insisted. He pushed off the table, his hand trembling slightly. "Theon is what? Ten? The girl is younger. They didn't plan this war. They didn't burn our ships."

"They carry the blood," Tywin said. "Bad blood."

"So do I," Jaime shot back. "So do you. If we judged men by the crimes of their fathers, there wouldn't be a lord left standing in Westeros."

Jaime took a breath, trying to calm himself. He thought of Rhaenys, safe in the Red Keep. He thought of Adrian, curling up with a sword because he was terrified.

"We are not butchers, Father," Jaime said, pleading. "Kill Balon. Kill his brothers. Hang every captain who sailed a ship. But spare the children. Take them as wards. Hostages. Raise them to be better than their father. But do not... do not kill them."

Tywin stared at him. The silence stretched for an eternity. It was a terrifying silence.

Tywin didn't nod. He didn't shake his head. He simply blinked, once, slowly.

"You have become sentimental," Tywin said.

"I have become human," Jaime muttered.

"Do you enjoy him?" Tywin asked suddenly.

Jaime blinked. "What?"

"Adrian," Tywin said. "Do you enjoy his company? You spend every waking hour with him. You read to him. You sit by his bed."

"He is...He's my brother. I missed six years of his life because you kept him hidden away. I'm making up for lost time."

"He is exceptional, is he not?" Tywin asked. Jaime could not remember his father talking with that tone. It was Pride. Jaime had heard that tone only once before. "He is not like other children."

"No," Jaime agreed. "He's brilliant. He asks a lot of questions."

Jaime looked up, meeting his father's eyes. He decided to push. Just a little.

"He reminds me of Tyrion," Jaime said.

Tywin's face tightened imperceptibly. "In intellect, perhaps."

"In spirit," Jaime said. "The curiosity. The hunger to know things." Jaime paused, letting the next words hang in the air. "But sometimes... sometimes he reminds me of someone else."

Tywin's eyes bored into Jaime's. For a second, Jaime thought his father would strike him.

But Tywin did neither. He simply erased the comment from existence. He didn't acknowledge it. He didn't deny it. He just stepped over it as if it were a puddle on the floor.

"He is a Lannister," Tywin said. "And he is the future of our House."

Tywin walked back to his table and sat down, picking up his quill.

"Watch him, Jaime," Tywin said, dipping the quill into the ink. "Watch him closely in the days to come. Especially when we reach Pyke."

"Why?" Jaime asked.

Tywin began to write. "Because the boy is fluid right now. The fire melted him down. Now he is cooling. He is taking his shape."

Tywin looked up one last time, his gaze piercing.

"He will make a choice soon," Tywin said softly.

"What choice?" Jaime asked, knowing his father was planning something. As much as he hated the decision to keep Adrian around, he knew his father did not do it for no reason. No, there was a reason. He simply did not know it yet.

"I want to see if Adrian is like Aenys the Indecisive or Jaehaerys the Conciliator."

Two Weeks Later - The Ten Towers - Adrian Lannister

The Book Tower of Ten Towers was supposed to be a quiet place. Uncle Kevan had said Lord Rodrik Harlaw liked books more than people, which made him the only sensible Ironborn in the world as far as Adrian was concerned. But today, the Great Hall of Ten Towers wasn't quiet. It was louder than a kennel at feeding time.

Adrian sat on a high-backed chair that was too big for him, his feet dangling six inches off the floor. He kept his hands in his lap. His right hand rested on the heavy wool of his breeches. His left hand—the useless white lump of bandages—rested on his thigh like a sleeping pet.

He made sure to sit very still. *Statues don't get knocked over*, he told himself.

The room was full of giants.

They were all there. The men from the stories Tyrion used to read to him. Lord Jon Arryn, the Hand of the King, who looked like a dried-up apple. Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, who had a face as long and grey as a winter morning. Lord Stannis Baratheon, who was grinding his teeth so hard Adrian could hear the *click-click-click* from across the table.

And in the center of them all, taking up enough space for three men, was the King.

King Robert Baratheon didn't look like a king from the songs. He looked like a mountain that had decided to wear velvet. He was huge—six and a half feet tall, Tyrion said—and he was thick with muscle. His beard was black and tangled, burying his chin, and his laugh was like thunder trapped inside a cave.

He was drinking wine from a horn that was as big as Adrian's arm.

"Stop moving the damn rocks, Stannis!" Robert bellowed, slamming the horn down. Wine sloshed over the rim, staining the map of Pyke red. "I don't care about the currents! I care about smashing the walls!"

Lord Stannis didn't flinch. He just looked at the wine stain with eyes that were flat and blue and very, very annoyed.

"The currents matter, Your Grace," Stannis said. Adrian had never heard a healthy man talking like they were in their dying bed. "If we approach the Lordsport tower from the south, the wind favors the defenders. We must sail around the point and strike from the west, using the sun to blind their archers."

"Archers!" Robert waved a hand that was the size of a ham. "I'll give them archers! I'll put a catapult on every deck and rain hell on them until Balon pisses himself!"

The King looked around the table, his eyes bright and feverish. "What do you say, Ned? Do we dance around the edges, or do we kick the door down?"

Lord Stark looked up from the map. He was quiet. Adrian liked him the best so far, because he didn't shout.

"Balon is cornered, Your Grace," Lord Stark said softly. "A cornered animal is dangerous. Stannis's plan minimizes our losses. We should listen."

Robert groaned, throwing his head back. "Gods, you two are dull. Ned, you've been in the snow too long. And Stannis... you were born old."

Adrian watched them. He was cataloging them, just like Father taught him. *The Loud One. The Quiet One. The Angry One.*

Adrian leaned back against the chair, pressing his spine against the wood. He touched the hilt of *Red Rain*, which was propped against the chair leg. He wasn't allowed to wear it—it dragged on the floor—but Father let him bring it.

Father.

Tywin Lannister sat at the King's right hand. He wasn't drinking. He wasn't shouting. He was staring at King Robert with the same look he gave a ledger that didn't balance.

"The fleet is ready, Your Grace," Tywin said, his voice cutting through Robert's bluster like a cold knife. "The Lannister forces will take the right flank. The Northmen the left. You shall have the center."

"Damn right I'll have the center!" Robert grinned. "I want Balon to see me coming. I want him to know who's ending his miserable line."

Robert took another massive gulp of wine, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Then, his blue eyes stopped wandering. They landed on the empty space, and then dropped down.

They landed on Adrian.

Adrian felt his stomach tighten. It was like being looked at by a bear.

"Well now," Robert boomed, leaning forward. The table groaned under his elbows. "Is this him? Is this the famous lost coin?"

The King's face was flushed red from drink and heat. He grinned at Adrian, showing white teeth.

"Come here, lad! Let me get a look at you!"

Adrian slid off the chair. His boots hit the floor with a dull thud. He walked around the corner of the table. He tried not to limp, though his ribs gave a sharp pinch with every step. He stood in front of the King.

He felt very, very small. Robert Baratheon loomed over him like a cliff face.

"You're a small thing, aren't you?" Robert laughed. "Tywin, are you sure this is yours? He looks like a stiff breeze would blow him over!"

Some of the lords chuckled. The Westermen didn't. They knew better than to laugh when Tywin Lannister wasn't smiling.

"He is small," Tywin said coolly. "A dagger is smaller than a sword, Your Grace. But it kills the same."

Robert snorted. "Does it now?" He peered down at Adrian. "They tell me you had a rough time of it, boy. Euron Crow's Eye... nasty piece of work. Did he scare you?"

Adrian looked at the King's beard. There were crumbs in it.

"Yes, Your Grace," Adrian said. His voice was raspy. The strangling marks on his neck were fading to yellow, but his throat still felt like it was lined with gravel.

"Honest!" Robert slapped his thigh. "I like that! Most lads would lie. Tell me they weren't scared." Robert leaned in closer. "I was scared before every battle I ever fought. Pissed myself before the first one!"

Robert roared with laughter again. Lord Arryn looked pained. Lord Stark looked down at the table.

"But you got out," Robert said, sobering up slightly. "Tywin says you slipped your leash."

"He did more than slip it," Tywin interjected. He stood up, placing a hand on Adrian's head.

"The boy was chained in the dark," Tywin announced to the room. "Starved. Beaten."

Adrian stared at the map of Pyke. He didn't like this. He felt like he was back in the market at Lannisport, being inspected.

"He killed the first guard with a fish bone," Tywin said.

The room went quiet. The scratching of Stannis's quill stopped.

"He tricked the second guard into the cell," Tywin continued, his voice ringing off the stone walls. "Ambushed him. Took his dagger."

Adrian felt the eyes of the lords crawling over him. He felt the phantom sticky feeling of blood on his hands.

"He climbed the tower," Tywin said. "He encountered a squire on the upper levels. He shot him through the throat with a crossbow he could barely load."

Lord Jon Arryn put a hand over his mouth. "Seven gods," he whispered. "He is six years old."

"And then," Tywin said, his voice dropping an octave, becoming heavy with pride, "he entered the Great Hall. He found Lord Drumm. A grown man. An ironborn captain in full armor."

Tywin pointed to the sword leaning against Adrian's chair.

"He took *Red Rain* from the wall. And he put it through Drumm's belly."

Tywin looked around the room, challenging anyone to doubt him. "Four men. My son killed four men to return to his family."

Everyone had fallen silent, all the voices, all the shouting, all was gone. Adrian could hear the storm outside, the noise of thunder.

Adrian looked at Lord Stark. The Lord of Winterfell was looking at him with eyes that were grey and sad. It wasn't disgust. It was pity. *He thinks I'm broken*, Adrian thought angrily. *I'm not broken.*

Then, the silence shattered.

"Hah!"

Robert Baratheon slammed his fist onto the table so hard a goblet fell over.

"HAHAHAHA!"

The King threw his head back and howled. Adrian had never heard someone laugh so much; he wondered if the King might choke to death from it.

"By the Gods!" Robert roared, wiping tears from his eyes. "Did you hear that, Ned? Did you hear that?"

Robert looked down at Adrian with new eyes.

"A fish bone!" Robert wheezed. "And Drumm! You killed old Drumm with his own sword?"

Adrian nodded stiffly. "Yes, Your Grace."

"A lion cub no more!" Robert bellowed. He reached out and clapped a heavy hand on Adrian's shoulder. Adrian winced, a pain sharper than any sword shot through his chest, but he dared not let out a single sound. Father would not be happy.

"You're a killer!" Robert declared, as if it were the highest compliment in the world. "A little killer! Gods, if I had a son with half your stones, I'd sleep better at night. Joffrey cries if the nursemaid brushes his hair too hard."

Robert grinned at Tywin. "You bred a wolf in a lion's skin, Tywin! Or maybe a badger! Badgers are vicious little bastards!"

The lords laughed now. It was safe to laugh because the King was laughing.

"Keep it up, lad!" Robert shouted, leaning down until his face was inches from Adrian's. His breath smelled of sour wine and onions. "Keep killing them! You've got the taste for it now, don't you? I can see it in your eyes! Green fire!"

Robert straightened up, gesturing broadly at Jaime.

"Keep it up, and you'll be just like the Kingslayer!" Robert roared. "Maybe we'll call you the Squidslayer, eh? Or the Babyslayer!"

The laughter in the room rippled.

But Adrian didn't laugh.

Kingslayer.

Adrian felt a hot flash of anger in his chest. It was hotter than the pain in his hand. It was hotter than the shame of the cell.

He looked at Jaime. Jaime's face hadn't changed. He was standing perfectly still, his golden armor shining. He was smiling a little, the smile that didn't reach his eyes.

They are laughing at your brother, at a Lannister, Adrian told himself, and remembered his father's words. ***A Lannister should never be laughed at.***

He saved you, Adrian thought. *He held you when you were covered in blood.*

Robert was still laughing, looking around for approval.

Adrian took a step forward.

Adrian looked up at the giant. He was terrified. His heart was hammering against his ribs like a bird in a cage. *This is the King*, his mind screamed. *He can crush you*.

But the anger was stronger.

Adrian lifted his chin. He looked straight into Robert's blue eyes.

"His name is Ser Jaime," Adrian said. His voice was louder. "Not Kingslayer."

The silence that fell over the room this time was different.

Tywin Lannister went very still.

Lord Jon Arryn looked terrified. Lord Stark looked surprised.

Robert Baratheon stared down at the six-year-old boy. The King's face went slack. The red flush of mirth drained away, leaving a confused, heavy expression.

"What did you say to me, boy?" Robert asked quietly. The thunder was gone, replaced by a low rumble.

Adrian's legs were shaking. He wanted to run. He wanted to hide behind his father's cloak. But he remembered his brother's words. The first time the two met. Jaime had come for him.

A Lannister pays his debts.

"He is my brother," Adrian said, his voice trembling just a little. "And he is a knight. His name is Ser Jaime."

Adrian took a breath that hurt his chest. "Please. Your Grace."

Jaime took a step forward, his face pale. "Your Grace, the boy is tired, he doesn't know—"

Robert held up a hand. Jaime stopped.

Robert looked at Adrian. He looked at the bandages. He looked at the defiant tilt of the chin. He looked at the green eyes that were staring back at him without blinking.

Then, Robert's face cracked.

A smile spread across it. Not the cruel grin from before, but something genuinely surprised.

"Hah!" Robert barked.

He shook his head, looking at Tywin.

"Did you hear that, Tywin? Did you hear the little bastard?"

Robert looked back at Adrian, and there was no anger in his face. Only a strange, sloppy admiration.

"Loyalty!" Robert shouted, slamming his hand on the table again. "Gods, I miss loyalty! Everyone in King's Landing would sell their mother for a copper groat, and here's a six-year-old standing up to his King for his brother!"

Robert leaned down, grinning. "Alright, Little Lion. Ser Jaime it is. I won't insult your brother. Not today."

Robert straightened up and waved a hand at the table. "Stannis! Get on with it! How are we smashing the walls?"

The tension in the room snapped like a cut rope. The lords exhaled. Stannis, looking deeply irritated by the entire interruption, cleared his throat and pointed at the map.

"As I was saying, Your Grace..."

Tywin Lannister looked down at Adrian. His face was unreadable, but he rested his hand briefly on Adrian's head again. It felt heavier this time.

Adrian turned around. He walked back to his big chair.

He looked up at Jaime.

Jaime wasn't looking at the King. He wasn't looking at the map. He was looking down at Adrian. His green eyes were shining, glassy, and bright.

"Thank you," Jaime mouthed silently.

Adrian nodded. He climbed back onto the chair, pulled *Red Rain* closer to his leg, and watched the King point at the map with his wine cup, feeling tired, sore, and very, very proud.