

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

— S E M B I A —

BLACK
WOLF

Dave Gross





CHAPTER 1

OLD WOUNDS

**Hammer, 1371 DR
The Year of the Unstrung Harp**

Darrow slapped his arms against the cold and silently cursed his employer. Silently was the only way anyone ever cursed Radu Malveen. The finest swordsman in the city of Selgaunt was not one to suffer insults, especially not from his own carriage driver.

“Been in there a long time,” observed Pons, the master’s bodyguard. Twenty years older than Darrow, the old veteran had a voice full of smoke and pebbles. His breath turned to fog as it passed through his muffler.

Darrow looked up to spot the moon. Selûne was full and bright, a glittering trail of shards forming her wake against the dark winter sky. The black silhouette of House Malveen had only barely touched her silver body.

“Not so long,” said Darrow. “Seems longer ‘cause it’s so damned cold.”

The great black draft horse snorted and clapped its hooves on the cobblestones, as if to agree. Darrow pressed his hands against one of the copper lanterns that flanked the driver's perch. The frost on his mittens sizzled.

"Dark!" cursed Pons. "Seems long 'cause it *is* long."

"You want to go in and tell him to hurry? Here's the key."

Pons shot Darrow a dirty glance. He had been on duty the previous summer, when Souran Keel decided he didn't want to piss in the courtyard and went inside to find a garderobe. Radu Malveen emerged alone soon after and ordered Pons to drive home. No one dared to ask about Souran, and no one ever saw him again.

Darrow looked up at the slumping hulk of House Malveen. Even before it had been abandoned two decades earlier, the manor was the sole residence in an area increasingly overrun by salt houses and shipyards. In its day, it had been one of the premiere social landmarks of Selgaunt. Now, moldering crates and barrels spilled out of its sagging walls to fill the central courtyard. Even the once-fabulous fountain was piled with graying boxes, between which sad nereids and locathah yearned skyward on waves of verdigris.

He wondered only briefly what the interior looked like before thrusting the thoughts away. Radu entrusted his driver with the key to the north wing with strict instructions to enter with a warning only if the city guards approached. The Scepters were notorious for accepting bribes, and Darrow had little doubt they had been well paid to avoid House Malveen. He assumed his stewardship of the key was more a test of loyalty conducted by a man who enjoyed inflicting punishment on the disobedient. Radu Malveen was not intimidating for his swordsmanship alone. To his employers and peers alike, he gave the impression that he could do anything, without concern for the repercussions. Darrow admired that ability to live completely beyond fear of consequences. It seemed like power.

Pons blew into his mittens, then pressed them against the lantern beside Darrow's.

"Ever wonder why they don't just buy it back?" he asked. Behind him, strange gargoyles crouched as if to listen to their gossip. Moonshadows crawled slowly over their crustacean limbs, scaly hides, and blank, piscine eyes.

"Best not to talk about the master's business," said Darrow.

"The 'Skevren were broken for piracy, too," Pons said, oblivious to the warning. "The Old Owl's lord of Stormweather again and practically running the city. Why not the master and Pietro? What about Laskar? He's the eldest."

Darrow glared at Pons. Gossiping about the master's business was almost as stupid as disobeying his orders. Pons should have known better, having worked for the Malveens so long.

"So they do a little black business," said Pons, jerking a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the north wing. "They all do."

"Shut up, Pons."

"Don't you ever wonder what's going on in there?"

"No. Shut up."

"Don't tell me to shut up, boy. I'll—Wait, what's that?"

Darrow listened but heard only the distant shush of the surf crashing on the sea breaks around Selgaunt Bay. Straining his hearing, Darrow imagined he could also hear the hubbub of watermen and their families in the huddled community of their boats. No matter the season, the boaters lived on the water, lashing their rafts and barges together when the day's work was done. The proper folk of Selgaunt would have it no other way, since the alternative was to let the riffraff roam the streets.

Pons and Darrow peered into the courtyard, down the narrow alley formed between the north wing and a wall of crates. All they could see was a thin path of glistening cobblestones where the moon slanted down between the black shadows of crates and casks, the cargo that overflowed

from the warehouse. Sometimes beggars would combine their efforts to push aside a few barrels to create a windbreak, but Darrow couldn't imagine anyone trying that tonight. Without four walls and a fire, any beggar hiding here would have succumbed to the deadly cold long ago.

"I didn't hear anything," said Darrow at last.

"Don't make us come in there after you," Pons warned the unseen intruder. Darrow grimaced at the dark passage and pitied anyone foolish enough to make a shelter so close to the house. Pons didn't know when to hold his tongue, but he was ruthless and efficient when dealing with beggars. No vagrant who'd felt the wrong end of Pons's club came back for more.

Pons drew his short sword and stepped into the alley. Darrow did the same. Despite their caution, both men were caught flat-footed by the attack.

Something swept Darrow's legs from under him, and he hit the street hard. His boiled leather helmet spared his skull from cracking on the stones, but the impact blasted his breath away.

Where Pons had been, Darrow heard a low voice speaking but couldn't make out the words. He heard Pons's reply, "No! I can't!"

The answer was a savage roar and a rough shout, and a hot stream of liquid splashed Darrow's face, filling his open eyes.

For a second, he panicked, trying to scramble away on all fours. Behind him, a painful wheezing filled the alley. Pons needed help, so Darrow found his courage and turned, blinking away the blood. Then he heard a sound of butchery, a ripping and tearing worse than anything he'd experienced slaughtering sheep as a boy. In the darkness, something wet and heavy hit the cobblestones.

He stared, paralyzed with fright as a towering figure rose up from the shadows. It was a man who stood almost a head taller than Darrow. The full moon made a bright halo of his long white hair, and a beaded headband held a

copper medallion of a ragged claw to the man's brow. Short gray whiskers bristled on his cheeks and chest, which was bare but for a thick woolen vest that hung loosely on his lanky, muscular body. The man's left shoulder was a bleeding stump, a few strips of pink flesh testament to an inadequate healing spell. In his right hand, the big man gripped Pons by the hair. The guard's eyes were wide and blank in death.

The stranger moved forward and put his face close to Darrow's. The man's teeth were white in the moonlight, and his canines were inhumanly long and sharp. His breath was hot and smelled of fresh blood.

"Can *you* open the door?" he rumbled.

Darrow thought about the master's displeasure. Then he thought about Pons's guts steaming on the ground nearby. Finally, he weighed his chances of killing or escaping this gigantic stranger who had eviscerated Pons in the time it took to blink.

"Yes," said Darrow, "I can."



Darrow stood in the antechamber, the one-armed man close behind him.

The hall before them was dark but for the tongues of continual flames licking from brass sconces set in the walls. Between them hung sea-colored tapestries. Darrow saw an oak door to his left, another one at the end of the hall, ten feet away. The wood of the far portal gleamed in the magical firelight. The whole room was surprisingly clean for an abandoned edifice.

"Go in," said the stranger.

Darrow complied. As he reached the middle of the hall, a painful spasm gripped his back. His breath caught in his chest, and for a terrifying moment he thought he was strangling. He tried to move, only to discover that he was completely paralyzed, and not by his own fear this time.

“Go,” said the stranger. A moment later, he muttered, “Ah . . .”

Darrow heard the stranger chant a low, rhythmic song. He recognized only one word, the name of a dark god. Malar the Beastlord was no friend to city dwellers, nor to farmers like Darrow’s father. The old man had sacrificed to Chauntea not only for bountiful crops but also for protection against the ravages of Malar and his wild hunts. The Beastlord’s followers believed they were placed above all living creatures, and their favorite prey was the most cunning: humans and their ilk.

The magic that held him vanished, and Darrow slumped to one knee before recovering. He thought of the copper coin he wore on a chain around his neck, a symbol of the goddess Tymora, Lady Luck. He dared not touch it in sight of this cleric of Malar, but he framed a silent prayer in his mind: Lady Luck, please spare me from this monster.

Darrow’s thoughts were interrupted. The cleric of the Beastlord was casting another spell. His fingers first pressed the medallion on his headband, then wiped his eyes, which flared briefly with unholy purple light.

The cleric looked up and down the hall. He chuckled as his eyes rested on the handle of the far door. “Open it,” he said, stepping back.

Seeing the look in the stranger’s eyes, Darrow realized the man saw something dangerous about the door. “It’s trapped, isn’t it?”

“That’s why you are the one opening it,” said the stranger. “Quickly, before you become more vexing than useful.”

Another painful spasm of paralysis was preferable to Pons’s fate. Darrow closed his eyes as he gripped the latch. When he touched the brass handle, a cold thrill coursed through his body, followed by a warm flush. He opened his eyes, expecting a column of fire or lances of ice, but there was nothing—no pain, no paralysis, no harm that he could discern. Slowly, he pushed the door open and entered.

Beyond the door was a vast hall of marble veined in

blue and black. Rippling light rose from a long, winding stream that bisected the room, and the smell of salt water filled the air. The stream ran from a cascading fall in the north wall before winding its way through the grand hall to fill a large round pool in the south. Where the grand stream curved, smaller fountains nestled in its embrace, adding their lesser voices to the rushing flow. Each was ringed with coral seats carved in the likeness of creatures from an alien sea. Green pillars rose from the fountains, and from the stream itself, glistening with clear water that ran perversely up toward the ceiling over the half-visible fragments of crustacean eyes and invertebrate tendrils until it vanished in the darkness beyond the second-floor balconies.

Beyond the grand pool stood a wide pair of shelves and a cabinet of many tiny drawers, clearly out of place in the fabulous hall. They formed the borders of an island in the marble hall, a strange haven of books and papers. Between the shelves, on a richly woven carpet, stood a clerk's desk. The oil lamp on its corner still flickered as if disturbed by a fleeing ghost. Beside the lamp lay a stack of white vellum, an inkpot, and a stylus, still rolling across a page of figures. Even from forty feet away, Darrow spotted the fresh lines glistening wet and black. He crept closer for a better view but halted beside a pillar, afraid of attracting the attention of the room's hidden occupants.

The stranger shoved past Darrow and stamped toward the table.

"Show yourself, Malveen!" he roared. His voice echoed briefly before the sound of moving water devoured it. "I've come for the scrolls."

When no one answered his challenge, the stranger flipped the table over, scattering its contents across the marble floor. The inkpot shattered and sent a black spray across the marble floor beyond the carpet.

The cleric threw back his head and unleashed a terrific howl. The sound filled the vast hall and echoed in distant chambers. Darrow covered his ears and crouched beside

the pillar, more afraid to be noticed than to remain still.

The room's guardians hissed in warning to the challenge. Against the far wall, three figures slunk out of the shadows. They were man-shaped, hairless, with glistening black skin. Their long, clawed fingers were webbed with translucent purple membranes. Long, needle-sharp teeth flashed in their impossibly wide mouths. They crept forward, crouching like ghouls.

Suddenly, one of the creatures turned its head and sucked in the air as if tasting it. Its fellows imitated its gesture. As one, they froze in place, then darted away from the illuminated water to find shelter in the darkness.

The light from the northern wall faded. Darrow saw the waterfall turn black, a great inky stain spreading in the tumult below. As the shadow moved along the stream, the light returned in its wake. The dark cloud flowed with the water, at last to reach the grand pool. The stranger looked down at it, then stepped back as the darkness surged up toward him.

The darkness rose to the surface, taking shape as it emerged from the water. What appeared looked like a muscular, hairless man except for a prominent dorsal ridge running from the top of its skull down its spine. Its skin was smooth and dark as an aubergine, slick and glistening. Golden rings pierced the creature's brow and the flaps where ears should be. From them hung a veil of fine chain links, obscuring the creature's face except for its golden eyes. The veil fell netlike over the creature's thick chest, ending in a thousand tiny hooks. Among them hung dozens of tiny arcane charms.

The creature gazed at the one-armed stranger briefly before turning to Darrow cowering by the pillar. Above its veil, the creature's eyes churned like boiling gold. It had no pupils, only black flecks that rose to the surface and sank away again. As those inhuman eyes turned on him, Darrow felt a surge of awe fill and warm his body. His fear vanished as he realized he was in the presence of a majestic, flawless power. Darrow sank to one knee and lowered his gaze.

The stranger was unimpressed both by the creature and Darrow's worship. He sneered at the kneeling driver and bellowed at the creature, "If you wish to live long enough to squirm back to the sewers, monster, summon your master."

From beneath the shadow creature's veil came a wet, choking sound. "I am master here."

"I want Stannis Malveen," said the stranger. "I want the scrolls he promised me."

Again the creature uttered that halting, coughing sound, and Darrow realized it was laughing. "It looks as though you want an arm, my old friend. Did you leave it with the boy you promised to bring me?"

"Stannis . . . ?"

"It has been a long time, Rusk. The years have been kinder to you than to me, as you can plainly see—except, of course, for the issue of your missing arm. Did you have an accident? No matter: You received my sending and agreed to my terms. Talbot Uskevren in return for the Black Wolf Scrolls."

"He's dead," said Rusk. "I gutted him before he cut me."

"I required him alive," hissed Stannis. "How bothersome of you to bungle it. Very well. Where is the body?"

"In the playhouse," said Rusk. He indicated Darrow with a toss of his head. "Your lackey can fetch it, if the clerics haven't dragged it away."

"Clerics, hmm?" Stannis pressed his rubbery fingers together. "Pray tell, who were these clerics in the playhouse? Do you mean real ones, with spells and halos and the rest? I hope you mean players in tall pointy hats, my dear Huntmaster. That is what you mean, isn't it?"

Rusk scowled.

"You simpleton! You're missing an arm, yet you healed yourself enough to come crawling before me with your petulant demands. What makes you think the boy was not healed as well?"

"I'll bring him to you alive or in pieces," shouted Rusk. "Just give me the damned, bloody scrolls so I can heal this wound!"

"I've seen the scrolls," said Stannis coyly. "In fact, I have read some singularly interesting passages in them. I did not, however, notice an extra arm among the leaves."

"This is your fault!" thundered Rusk, taking a step toward the pool. Blood from his half-healed stump splattered on the floor.

"Have a care, Huntmaster. You are soiling my favorite rug," cautioned Stannis. "Mulhorandi, and quite expensive."

Rusk lunged toward the water's edge.

Before he made it, a dark figure blurred toward him and spun Rusk aside. A long blade pierced his biceps and thrust him against a marble pillar. Rusk roared and thrashed, but he was pinned.

At the sword's other end stood a man with long, dark hair tied loosely at his neck. His pale skin was smooth and unblemished but for a trio of tiny moles beside his left eye. His plum-dark lips were impassively composed. A black silk shirt showed through the slashes of his dark purple doublet. Like the fitted leggings and thigh-length boots, they were precisely fitted to his body. The man's sword arm extended fully above a perfectly bent knee. His large black eyes looked calmly into Rusk's.

"My brother is rather protective of family," said Stannis. "May I suggest you exercise restraint?"

Rusk growled in response, but the sound gradually transformed into a deep chuckle. He glanced at the fresh wound in his remaining arm. Within seconds, the blood stopped trickling, and the flesh rejoined around the blade.

"You can't hurt me with mortal weapons," he said. "Mine is the Black Blood. I am a child of Malar."

"If Radu had intended to visit permanent harm upon you," said Stannis, "I would already be deprived of the novelty of your company."

Darrow never saw the motion, but suddenly Radu was leaning against the bigger man. His right hand held the pinioning sword in place, while the left pressed a slim white dagger against the cleric's throat. Rusk blanched at the weapon's touch.

Stannis clapped his rubbery hands and hooted. "Do you recognize it?"

"A bone blade," gasped Rusk, careful of moving his throat. "I told you about them when we were boys."

"Can you feel its desire?" crooned Stannis. "Does it call to you, my old friend? Does it yearn for your spirit?"

Rusk's jaw barely moved. Darrow could see that it would take Radu only the barest motion to cut Rusk's throat.

"While Radu disdains the use of enchanted weapons," explained Stannis, "he understands the need for the proper tool—a tool for dealing with problems."

Rusk bristled as the dagger shifted slightly.

"You aren't a problem," said Stannis, "are you, Rusk?"

Rusk hesitated only briefly before responding. "No. No problem."

Radu withdrew before Rusk could counterattack. He returned the bone blade to its sheath at the small of his back, then wiped his long sword clean with a white handkerchief before returning the blade to its plain leather scabbard. He dropped the soiled cloth carelessly on the floor.

"You, too, are hurt only by enchanted weapons . . ." Stannis said, considering the vanishing wound on Rusk's arm. He turned to Radu. "Dear brother, did you not once say that Talbot Uskevren shares your affectation for plain steel?"

Radu looked loath to speak. "I did," he said. Darrow saw Radu's eyes narrow slightly as he looked at his inhuman brother. Whatever business Stannis had with Rusk, it was news to Radu.

"He had an enspelled blade in the playhouse," said Rusk. "After I released him from the cage, he dropped through a trapdoor and—"

"He was in a cage when you arrived?"

"He is . . . unusual," said Rusk. "I wished to learn—"

"He put *himself* in the cage? Did you send a messenger ahead with a request that he should bind and gag himself as well?" pressed Stannis.

"It's a common reaction among the reborn," said Rusk. His rough voice was becoming irritable, almost petulant. "He feared the change, so he—"

"Are you telling us," interrupted Stannis, "that you found Talbot Uskevren in a cage, released him, watched him escape through a trapdoor, and let him lop off your arm with a stage prop?"

Rusk glared at both Malveens, and Darrow saw the muscles in the Huntmaster's back tense.

"He *tricked* me," spat Rusk. "Besides, you didn't tell me he was dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Radu fixed his gaze on Stannis. "Talbot Uskevren?"

"You and he do have the same sword master," observed Stannis.

"He is a playhouse buffoon," said Radu.

"Perhaps," said Stannis. "But he's proven formidable in his way. To take off Rusk's arm like that . . . well, perhaps we've underestimated this boy."

"We?" said Radu, raising one eyebrow almost imperceptibly.

Stannis glided toward the center of the pool, his chain veil tinkling where it dragged in the water. "Perhaps the Huntmaster wishes to retire after his ordeal, hmm? Visiting the city can be a daunting experience for rural folk."

"What I want," said Rusk, "is what you promised me."

"We shall discuss it tomorrow evening," said Stannis, keeping his eyes on Radu, who looked back with a steady gaze. "Until then, please avail yourself of our humble accommodations—but not here, in the River Hall. You will find the other buildings are not warded—and I trust you will not continue to test the protections on this one. Not all of them are so forgiving as those you triggered."

Rusk hesitated, considering whether to repeat his demands. One more glance at Radu persuaded him to keep quiet. Reluctantly, he turned and left the way he came.

When Rusk was gone, Darrow expected his own dismissal—or worse—but the Malveen brothers spoke as if they were alone.

“How rude Rusk has become,” said Stannis. “As a younger man he always—”

“What have you done?” said Radu. “Who was that monster?”

“I was *so* hoping to keep it a surprise,” said Stannis with a sigh. “Rusk is an old friend of the family, one I had all but forgotten until Pietro encountered him last month.”

“The hunting accident.”

“Indeed. Our little brother would have been among the devoured had he not mentioned the family name in Rusk’s hearing. Fortunately, the Huntmaster remembered his association with our great-uncle. It was his pack the boys encountered in the Arch Wood. Among the survivors was Talbot Uskevren, grandson of our old business partner, Aldimar.”

“I told you to forget about Aldimar. The Uskevren are no threat to us.”

“They are the very reason for our present state!” Stannis wheezed as he grew more agitated. “Thamalon could have saved mother from her persecutors, but he . . . he turned her away like a common criminal!”

“She *was* a criminal,” said Radu, “and the Uskevren were recovering from their own scandal. They could ill afford to harbor a condemned pirate.”

“They grew rich while she took the greater risks.”

“That was Aldimar. The same people who persecuted our mother killed him.”

“It isn’t enough!” said Stannis. “We suffered far worse for our mother’s crimes, while Thamalon escaped all harm. He has already regained everything the Uskevren lost, while you and I must cower in the shadows, scraping shoulders with the scum of Selgaunt just to keep Laskar and Pietro fed and clothed.”

“It is precisely because of our brothers that we must walk the shadows,” said Radu. “Nothing is more important than restoring them to their rightful place. Never forget that.”

“It isn’t fair,” complained Stannis. The petulant tone

sounded incongruous coming from such a huge, unearthly figure. "I remain a prisoner in the ruin of our family estate."

"You were reborn into darkness," said Radu, "and in darkness you will remain. Do not make the mistake of forcing me to choose between you and our brothers."

"Radu! Have I not been your good and faithful confidant? Have I not shared your own dark secrets with sympathy and fidelity?"

"You are my brother," said Radu, "but I will not permit you to endanger Laskar and Pietro. They have remained innocent of our business, and we must keep it that way."

"Why must the burden fall on us alone?" whined Stannis. "Surely we deserve some indulgence. All I desire is our deserved revenge against those who abandoned our mother."

"You cannot murder the son of Thamalon Uskevren," said Radu. "There's nothing to be gained from it, and far too much to lose."

"What of the men you have slain, dear brother? What's one Uskevren to a few dozen guild members?" Darrow was only slightly surprised at the implication that Radu had slain so many people, but Stannis said it so casually that he wondered whether the brothers even remembered they were not alone. "Besides, I said nothing about murdering the poor boy."

"What else would you do with him?"

"Our friend Rusk is not merely a cleric of the Beastlord," said Stannis. "He is a lycanthrope."

"What?"

"A nightwalker," said Stannis. "A skin-changer. A werewolf."

Radu stared at his inhuman brother. His features remained composed, but Darrow saw the faint line of a vein begin to form on his brow. When he spoke, his voice was cool and quiet. "You planned to turn him into a werewolf?"

"A delicious thought, is it not?" squealed Stannis. "But he is already a werewolf, I'm afraid. We can hardly call such a charming coincidence our own revenge. What we

must do is take advantage of his condition, use Rusk to bend Talbot to our will.”

“You will stop this mad scheme at once,” said Radu. “Send Rusk away, and leave the Uskevren alone.”

“But brother, it is—”

“I will hear no more of this,” said Radu.

“What of your sparring partners?” asked Stannis. “If we are to cower in this hovel like frightened hares, not daring to attract the attention of the hounds, then I suppose I must stop fetching them for you.”

Radu waved a hand dismissively. “Unlike you, I can deny myself if the risk is too great.”

“What a pity,” said Stannis. “Then you shan’t be wanting the new arrivals. After all your talk of bladesingers . . .”

Radu raised an eyebrow, apparently intrigued by his brother’s remarks but unwilling to inquire further. “As long as you acquire them outside the city, the risk is negligible.”

Stannis pressed his fingers together, rising magically from the water to glide slowly toward his brother. Before he could rejoin the argument, however, Radu turned to Darrow as if noticing him for the first time. “Where is the other one?”

It took Darrow a moment to realize Radu was speaking of Pons. He bowed an apology and said, “He’s dead, master.”

“Put the body in the carriage,” Radu said to Darrow.

“I could send my minions—” began Stannis.

“Keep your filthy spawn off the street,” said Radu. “In the bay or within these walls, I do not care, but they are not to be seen outside.”

“As you wish,” said Stannis contritely. “Still, I would be only too glad to dispose of your problem personally. It would save you the trouble—nay, the risk—of taking it to Selgaunt Bay.”

Radu’s eyes narrowed, but he said, “Very well. Bring the body here, then wait for me by the carriage.”

Darrow felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature. He knew he had seen and heard far too much. Radu would kill him rather than risk his gossip.

Salvation came from an unexpected source.

"I presume you intend to terminate this young man's employment, brother?" When Radu did not reply, Stannis said, "I have need of a servant."

"You have your creatures."

"Dull, tedious things," said Stannis. "They are good for fetching, but little else. Besides, they frighten our guests, your sparring partners. No doubt that accounts for their disappointing performances recently."

Whatever Stannis intimated made Radu scowl.

"Besides," persisted Stannis, "it is lonely here, and you visit so very rarely. Don't be so cruel as to deny my craving for . . . conversation."

"He is no courtier," said Radu. "His father was a sheep farmer."

"So long as he can speak in sentences and laugh at my jests, he will be an improvement. What do you say, my dear boy? Would you like to serve another Malveen?"

"I should like that very much, Lord Malveen." Darrow made the best bow he could muster, imitating the noblemen who greeted ladies disembarking from a carriage.

"Did you hear that, brother?" Stannis giggled and clapped. "Did you hear what the precious young man called me?"

"You mentioned new arrivals."

"A matched set," said Stannis. "I hope you will adore them as I do. They require some mending, I'm afraid. In a month, perhaps, they should prove entertaining."

"Very well," said Radu.

Cool relief washed through Darrow's body. A day ago he wouldn't have believed his good fortune. To serve such a one as Stannis was far more than he deserved.

"What are you called, my boy?" asked Stannis.

"Darrow, if it please my lord."

"It pleases him," said Stannis, wheezing with amusement. "It pleases him very much."