

EDDARD

Through the high narrow windows of the Red Keep's cavernous throne room, the light of sunset spilled across the floor, laying dark red stripes upon the walls where the heads of dragons had once hung. Now the stone was covered with hunting tapestries, vivid with greens and browns and blues, and yet still it seemed to Ned Stark that the only color in the hall was the red of blood.

He sat high upon the immense ancient seat of Aegon the Conqueror, an ironwork monstrosity of spikes and jagged edges and grotesquely twisted metal. It was, as Robert had warned him, a hellishly uncomfortable chair, and never more so than now, with his shattered leg throbbing more sharply every minute. The metal beneath him had grown harder by the hour, and the fanged steel behind made it impossible to lean back. *A king should never sit easy*, Aegon the Conqueror had said, when he commanded his armorers to forge a great seat from the swords laid down by his enemies. *Damn Aegon for his arrogance*, Ned thought sullenly, *and damn Robert and his hunting as well*.

"You are quite certain these were more than brigands?" Varys asked softly from the council table beneath the throne. Grand Maester Pycelle stirred uneasily beside him, while Littlefinger toyed with a pen. They were the only councillors in attendance. A white hart had been sighted in the kingswood, and Lord Renly and Ser Barristan had joined the king to hunt it, along with Prince Joffrey, Sandor Clegane, Balon Swann, and half the court. So Ned must needs sit the Iron Throne in his absence.

At least he *could* sit. Save the council, the rest must stand respectfully, or kneel. The petitioners clustered near the tall doors, the knights and high lords and ladies beneath the tapestries, the smallfolk in the gallery, the mailed guards in their cloaks, gold or grey: all stood.

The villagers were kneeling: men, women, and children, alike tattered and bloody, their faces drawn by fear. The three knights who had brought them here to bear witness stood behind them.

“*Brigands*, Lord Varys?” Ser Raymun Darry’s voice dripped scorn. “Oh, they were brigands, beyond a doubt. Lannister brigands.”

Ned could feel the unease in the hall, as high lords and servants alike strained to listen. He could not pretend to surprise. The west had been a tinderbox since Catelyn had seized Tyrion Lannister. Both Riverrun and Casterly Rock had called their banners, and armies were massing in the pass below the Golden Tooth. It had only been a matter of time until the blood began to flow. The sole question that remained was how best to stanch the wound.

Sad-eyed Ser Karyl Vance, who would have been handsome but for the winestain birthmark that discolored his face, gestured at the kneeling villagers. “This is all the remains of the holdfast of Sherrer, Lord Eddard. The rest are dead, along with the people of Wendish Town and the Mummer’s Ford.”

“Rise,” Ned commanded the villagers. He never trusted what a man told him from his knees. “All of you, up.”

In ones and twos, the holdfast of Sherrer struggled to its feet. One ancient needed to be helped, and a young girl in a bloody dress stayed on her knees, staring blankly at Ser Arys Oakheart, who stood by the foot of the throne in the white armor of the Kingsguard, ready to protect and defend the king... or, Ned supposed, the King’s Hand.

“Joss,” Ser Raymun Darry said to a plump balding man in a brewer’s apron. “Tell the Hand what happened at Sherrer.”

Joss nodded. “If it please His Grace—”

“His Grace is hunting across the Blackwater,” Ned said, wondering how a man could live his whole life a few days ride from the Red Keep and still have no notion what his king looked like. Ned was clad in a white linen doublet with the direwolf of Stark on the breast; his black wool cloak was fastened at the collar by his silver hand of office. Black and white and grey, all the shades of truth. “I am Lord Eddard Stark, the King’s Hand. Tell me who you are and what you know of these raiders.”

“I keep... I *kept*... I kept an alehouse, m’lord, in Sherrer, by the stone bridge. The finest ale south of the Neck, everyone said so, begging your pardons, m’lord. It’s gone now like all the rest, m’lord. They come and drank their fill and spilled the rest before they fired my roof, and they would of spilled my blood too, if they’d caught me. M’lord.”

“They burnt us out,” a farmer beside him said. “Come riding in the dark, up from the south, and fired the fields and the houses alike, killing them as tried to stop them. They weren’t no raiders, though, m’lord. They had no mind to steal our stock, not these, they butchered my milk cow where she stood and left her for the flies and the crows.”

“They rode down my ’prentice boy,” said a squat man with a smith’s muscles and a bandage around his head. He had put on his finest clothes to come to court, but his breeches were patched, his cloak travel-stained and dusty. “Chased him back and forth across the fields on their horses, poking at him with their lances like it was a game, them laughing and the boy stumbling and screaming till the big one pierced him clean through.”

The girl on her knees craned her head up at Ned, high above her on the throne. “They killed my mother too, Your Grace. And they... they...” Her voice trailed off, as if she had forgotten what she was about to say. She began to sob.

Ser Raymun Darry took up the tale. “At Wendish Town, the people sought shelter in their holdfast, but the walls were timbered. The raiders piled straw against the wood and burnt them all alive. When the Wendish folk opened their gates to flee the fire, they shot them down with arrows as they came running out, even women with suckling babes.”

“Oh, dreadful,” murmured Varys. “How cruel can men be?”

“They would of done the same for us, but the Sherrer holdfast’s made of stone,” Joss said. “Some wanted to smoke us out, but the big one said there was riper fruit upriver, and they made for the Mummer’s Ford.”

Ned could feel cold steel against his fingers as he leaned forward. Between each finger was a blade, the points of twisted swords fanning out like talons from arms of the throne. Even after three centuries, some were still sharp enough to cut. The Iron Throne was full of traps for the unwary.

The songs said it had taken a thousand blades to make it, heated white-hot in the furnace breath of Balerion the Black Dread. The hammering had taken fifty-nine days. The end of it was this hunched black beast made of razor edges and barbs and ribbons of sharp metal; a chair that could kill a man, and had, if the stories could be believed.

What Eddard Stark was doing sitting there he would never comprehend, yet there he sat, and these people looked to him for justice. “What proof do you have that these were Lannisters?” he asked, trying to keep his fury under control. “Did they wear crimson cloaks or fly a lion banner?”

“Even Lannisters are not so blind stupid as that,” Ser Marq Piper snapped. He was a swaggering bantam rooster of a youth, too young and too hot-blooded for Ned’s taste, though a fast friend of Catelyn’s brother, Edmure Tully.

“Every man among them was mounted and mailed, my lord,” Ser Karyl answered calmly. “They were armed with steel-tipped lances and longswords, with battle-axes for the butchering.” He gestured toward one of the ragged survivors. “You. Yes, you, no one’s going to hurt you. Tell the Hand what you told me.”

The old man bobbed his head. “Concerning their horses,” he said, “it were warhorses they rode. Many a year I worked in old Ser Willum’s stables, so I knows the difference. Not a one of these ever pulled a plow, gods bear witness if I’m wrong.”

“Well-mounted brigands,” observed Littlefinger. “Perhaps they stole the horses from the last place they raided.”

“How many men were there in this raiding party?” Ned asked.

“A hundred, at the least,” Joss answered, in the same instant as the bandaged smith said, “Fifty,” and the grandmother behind him, “Hunnerds and hunnerds, m’lord, an army they was.”

“You are more right than you know, goodwoman,” Lord Eddard told her. “You say they flew no banners. What of the armor they wore? Did any of you note ornaments or decorations, devices on shield or helm?”

The brewer, Joss, shook his head. "It grieves me, m'lord, but no, the armor they showed us was plain, only... the one who led them, he was armored like the rest, but there was no mistaking him all the same. It was the size of him, m'lord. Those as say the giants are all dead never saw this one, I swear. Big as an ox he was, and a voice like stone breaking."

"*The Mountain!*" Ser Marq said loudly. "Can any man doubt it? This was Gregor Clegane's work."

Ned heard muttering from beneath the windows and the far end of the hall. Even in the galley, nervous whispers were exchanged. High lords and smallfolk alike knew what it could mean if Ser Marq was proved right. Ser Gregor Clegane stood bannerman to Lord Tywin Lannister.

He studied the frightened faces of the villagers. Small wonder they had been so fearful; they had thought they were being dragged here to name Lord Tywin a red-handed butcher before a king who was his son by marriage. He wondered if the knights had given them a choice.

Grand Maester Pycelle rose ponderously from the council table, his chain of office clinking. "Ser Marq, with respect, you cannot know that this outlaw was Ser Gregor. There are many large men in the realm."

"As large as the Mountain That Rides?" Ser Karyl said. "I have never met one."

"Nor has any man here," Ser Raymun added hotly. "Even his brother is a pup beside him. My lords, open your eyes. Do you need to see his seal on the corpses? It was Gregor."

"Why should Ser Gregor turn brigand?" Pycelle asked. "By the grace of his liege lord, he holds a stout keep and lands of his own. The man is an anointed knight."

"A false knight!" Ser Marq said. "Lord Tywin's mad dog."

"My lord Hand," Pycelle declared in a stiff voice, "I urge you to remind this *good* knight that Lord Tywin Lannister is the father of our own gracious queen."

"Thank you, Grand Maester Pycelle," Ned said. "I fear we might have forgotten that if you had not pointed it out."

From his vantage point atop the throne, he could see men slipping out the door at the far end of the hall. Hares going to ground, he supposed... or rats off to nibble the queen's cheese. He caught a glimpse of Septa Mordane in the gallery, with his daughter Sansa beside her. Ned felt a flash of anger; this was no place for a girl. But the septa could not have known that today's court would be anything but the usual tedious business of hearing petitions, settling disputes between rival holdfasts, and adjudicating the placement of boundary stones.

At the council table below, Petyr Baelish lost interest in his quill and leaned forward. "Ser Marq, Ser Karyl, Ser Raymun—perhaps I might ask you a question? These holdfasts were under your protection. Where were you when all this slaughtering and burning was going on?"

Ser Karyl Vance answered. "I was attending my lord father in the pass below the Golden Tooth, as was Ser Marq. When the word of these outrages reached Ser Edmure Tully, he sent word that we should take a small force of men to find what survivors we could and bring them to the king."

Ser Raymun Darry spoke up. "Ser Edmure had summoned me to Riverrun with all my strength. I was camped across the river from his walls, awaiting his commands, when the word reached me. By the time I could return to my own lands, Clegane and his vermin were back across the Red Fork, riding for Lannister's hills."

Littlefinger stroked the point of his beard thoughtfully. "And if they come again, ser?"

"If they come again, we'll use their blood to water the fields they burnt," Ser Marq Piper declared hotly.

"Ser Edmure has sent men to every village and holdfast within a day's ride of the border," Ser Karyl explained. "The next raider will not have such an easy time of it."

And that may be precisely what Lord Tywin wants, Ned thought to himself, to bleed off strength from Riverrun, goad the boy into scattering his swords. His wife's brother was young, and more gallant than wise. He would try to hold every inch of his soil, to defend every man, woman, and

child who named him lord, and Tywin Lannister was shrewd enough to know that.

“If your fields and holdfasts are safe from harm,” Lord Petyr was saying, “what then do you ask of the throne?”

“The lords of the Trident keep the king’s peace,” Ser Raymun Darry said. “The Lannisters have broken it. We ask leave to answer them, steel for steel. We ask justice for the smallfolk of Sherrer and Wendish Town and the Mummer’s Ford.”

“Edmure agrees, we must pay Gregor Clegane back his bloody coin,” Ser Marq declared, “but old Lord Hoster commanded us to come here and beg the king’s leave before we strike.”

Thank the gods for old Lord Hoster, then. Tywin Lannister was as much fox as lion. If indeed he’d sent Ser Gregor to burn and pillage—and Ned did not doubt that he had—he’d taken care to see that he rode under cover of night, without banners, in the guise of a common brigand. Should Riverrun strike back, Cersei and her father would insist that it had been the Tullys who broke the king’s peace, not the Lannisters. The gods only knew what Robert would believe.

Grand Maester Pycelle was on his feet again. “My lord Hand, if these good folk believe that Ser Gregor has forsaken his holy vows for plunder and rape, let them go to his liege lord and make their complaint. These crimes are no concern of the throne. Let them seek Lord Tywin’s justice.”

“It is all the king’s justice,” Ned told him. “North, south, east, or west, all we do we do in Robert’s name.”

“The *king’s* justice,” Grand Maester Pycelle said. “So it is, and so we should defer this matter until the king—”

“The king is hunting across the river and may not return for days,” Lord Eddard said. “Robert bid me to sit here in his place, to listen with his ears, and to speak with his voice. I mean to do just that... though I agree that he must be told.” He saw a familiar face beneath the tapestries. “Ser Robar.”

Ser Robar Royce stepped forward and bowed. “My lord.”

“Your father is hunting with the king,” Ned said. “Will you bring them word of what was said and done here today?”

“At once, my lord.”

“Do we have your leave to take our vengeance against Ser Gregor, then?” Marq Piper asked the throne.

“Vengeance?” Ned said. “I thought we were speaking of justice. Burning Clegane’s fields and slaughtering his people will not restore the king’s peace, only your injured pride.” He glanced away before the young knight could voice his outraged protest, and addressed the villagers. “People of Sherrer, I cannot give you back your homes or your crops, nor can I restore your dead to life. But perhaps I can give you some small measure of justice, in the name of our king, Robert.”

Every eye in the hall was fixed on him, waiting. Slowly Ned struggled to his feet, pushing himself up from the throne with the strength of his arms, his shattered leg screaming inside its cast. He did his best to ignore the pain; it was no moment to let them see his weakness. “The First Men believed that the judge who called for death should wield the sword, and in the north we hold to that still. I mislike sending another to do my killing... yet it seems I have no choice.” He gestured at his broken leg.

“*Lord Eddard!*” The shout came from the west side of the hall as a handsome stripling of a boy strode forth boldly. Out of his armor, Ser Loras Tyrell looked even younger than his sixteen years. He wore pale blue silk, his belt a linked chain of golden roses, the sigil of his House. “I beg you the honor of acting in your place. Give this task to me, my lord, and I swear I shall not fail you.”

Littlefinger chuckled. “Ser Loras, if we send you off alone, Ser Gregor will send us back your head with a plum stuffed in that pretty mouth of yours. The Mountain is not the sort to bend his neck to any man’s justice.”

“I do not fear Gregor Clegane,” Ser Loras said haughtily.

Ned eased himself slowly back onto the hard iron seat of Aegon’s misshapen throne. His eyes searched the faces along the wall. “Lord Beric,” he called out. “Thoros of Myr. Ser Gladden. Lord Lothar.” The men named

stepped forward one by one. “Each of you is to assemble twenty men, to bring my word to Gregor’s keep. Twenty of my own guards shall go with you. Lord Beric Dondarrion, you shall have the command, as befits your rank.”

The young lord with the red-gold hair bowed. “As you command, Lord Eddard.”

Ned raised his voice, so it carried to the far end of the throne room. “In the name of Robert of the House Baratheon, the First of his Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, by the word of Eddard of the House Stark, his Hand, I charge you to ride to the westlands with all haste, to cross the Red Fork of the Trident under the king’s flag, and there bring the king’s justice to the false knight Gregor Clegane, and to all those who shared in his crimes. I denounce him, and attaint him, and strip him of all rank and titles, of all lands and incomes and holdings, and do sentence him to death. May the gods take pity on his soul.”

When the echo of his words had died away, the Knight of Flowers seemed perplexed. “Lord Eddard, what of me?”

Ned looked down on him. From on high, Loras Tyrell seemed almost as young as Robb. “No one doubts your valor, Ser Loras, but we are about justice here, and what you seek is vengeance.” He looked back to Lord Beric. “Ride at first light. These things are best done quickly.” He held up a hand. “The throne will hear no more petitions today.”

Alyn and Porther climbed the steep iron steps to help him back down. As they made their descent, he could feel Loras Tyrell’s sullen stare, but the boy had stalked away before Ned reached the floor of the throne room.

At the base of the Iron Throne, Varys was gathering papers from the council table. Littlefinger and Grand Maester Pycelle had already taken their leave. “You are a bolder man than I, my lord,” the eunuch said softly.

“How so, Lord Varys?” Ned asked brusquely. His leg was throbbing, and he was in no mood for word games.

“Had it been me up there, I should have sent Ser Loras. He *so* wanted to go... and a man who has the Lannisters for his enemies would do well to make the Tyrells his friends.”

“Ser Loras is young,” said Ned. “I daresay he will outgrow the disappointment.”

“And Ser Ilyn?” The eunuch stroked a plump, powdered cheek. “He *is* the King’s Justice, after all. Sending other men to do his office... some might construe that as a grave insult.”

“No slight was intended.” In truth, Ned did not trust the mute knight, though perhaps that was only because he disliked executioners. “I remind you, the Paynes are bannermen to House Lannister. I thought it best to choose men who owed Lord Tywin no fealty.”

“Very prudent, no doubt,” Varys said. “Still, I chanced to see Ser Ilyn in the back of the hall, staring at us with those pale eyes of his, and I must say, he did not look pleased, though to be sure it is hard to tell with our silent knight. I hope he outgrows his disappointment as well. He does so *love* his work...”