

EDDARD

He was walking through the crypts beneath Winterfell, as he he had walked a thousand times before. The Kings of Winter watched him pass with eyes of ice, and the direwolves at their feet turned their great stone heads and snarled. Last of all, he came to the tomb where his father slept, with Brandon and Lyanna beside him. “*Promise me, Ned,*” Lyanna’s statue whispered. She wore a garland of pale blue roses, and her eyes wept blood.

Eddard Stark jerked upright, his heart racing, the blankets tangled around him. The room was black as pitch, and someone was hammering on the door. “Lord Eddard,” a voice called loudly.

“A moment.” Groggy and naked, he stumbled his way across the darkened chamber. When he opened the door, he found Tomard with an upraised fist, and Cayn with a taper in hand. Between them stood the king’s own steward.

The man’s face might have been carved of stone, so little did it show. “My lord Hand,” he intoned. “His Grace the King commands your presence. At once.”

So Robert had returned from his hunt. It was long past time. “I shall need a few moments to dress.” Ned left the man waiting without. Cayn helped him with his clothes; white linen tunic and grey cloak, trousers cut open down his plaster-sheathed leg, his badge of office, and last of all a belt of heavy silver links. He sheathed the Valyrian dagger at his waist.

The Red Keep was dark and still as Cayn and Tomard escorted him across the inner bailey. The moon hung low over the walls, ripening toward full. On the ramparts, a guardsman in a gold cloak walked his rounds.

The royal apartments were in Maegor’s Holdfast, a massive square fortress that nestled in the heart of the Red Keep behind walls twelve feet thick and a dry moat lined with iron spikes, a castle-within-a-castle. Ser Boros Blount guarded the far end of the bridge, white steel armor ghostly in the moonlight. Within, Ned passed two other knights of the Kingsguard; Ser

Preston Greenfield stood at the bottom of the steps, and Ser Barristan Selmy waited at the door of the king's bedchamber. *Three men in white cloaks*, he thought, remembering, and a strange chill went through him. Ser Barristan's face was as pale as his armor. Ned had only to look at him to know that something was dreadfully wrong. The royal steward opened the door. "Lord Eddard Stark, the Hand of the King," he announced.

"Bring him here," Robert's voice called, strangely thick.

Fires blazed in the twin hearths at either end of the bedchamber, filling the room with a sullen red glare. The heat within was suffocating. Robert lay across the canopied bed. At the bedside hovered Grand Maester Pycelle, while Lord Renly paced restlessly before the shuttered windows. Servants moved back and forth, feeding logs to the fire and boiling wine. Cersei Lannister sat on the edge of the bed beside her husband. Her hair was tousled, as if from sleep, but there was nothing sleepy in her eyes. They followed Ned as Tomard and Cayn helped him cross the room. He seemed to move very slowly, as if he were still dreaming.

The king still wore his boots. Ned could see dried mud and blades of grass clinging to the leather where Robert's feet stuck out beneath the blanket that covered him. A green doublet lay on the floor, slashed open and discarded, the cloth crusted with red-brown stains. The room smelled of smoke and blood and death.

"Ned," the king whispered when he saw him. His face was pale as milk. "Come... closer."

His men brought him close. Ned steadied himself with a hand on the bedpost. He had only to look down at Robert to know how bad it was. "What...?" he began, his throat clenched.

"A boar." Lord Renly was still in his hunting greens, his cloak spattered with blood.

"A devil," the king husked. "My own fault. Too much wine, damn me to hell. Missed my thrust."

"And where were the rest of you?" Ned demanded of Lord Renly. "Where was Ser Barristan and the Kingsguard?"

Renly's mouth twitched. "My brother commanded us to stand aside and let him take the boar alone."

Eddard Stark lifted the blanket.

They had done what they could to close him up, but it was nowhere near enough. The boar must have been a fearsome thing. It had ripped the king from groin to nipple with its tusks. The wine-soaked bandages that Grand Maester Pycelle had applied were already black with blood, and the smell off the wound was hideous. Ned's stomach turned. He let the blanket fall.

"Stinks," Robert said. "The stink of death, don't think I can't smell it. Bastard did me good, eh? But I... I paid him back in kind, Ned." The king's smile was as terrible as his wound, his teeth red. "Drove a knife right through his eye. Ask them if I didn't. Ask them."

"Truly," Lord Renly murmured. "We brought the carcass back with us, at my brother's command."

"For the feast," Robert whispered. "Now leave us. The lot of you. I need to speak with Ned."

"Robert, my sweet lord..." Cersei began.

"I said *leave*," Robert insisted with a hint of his old fierceness. "What part of that don't you understand, woman?"

Cersei gathered up her skirts and her dignity and led the way to the door. Lord Renly and the others followed. Grand Maester Pycelle lingered, his hands shaking as he offered the king a cup of thick white liquid. "The milk of the poppy, Your Grace," he said. "Drink. For your pain."

Robert knocked the cup away with the back of his hand. "Away with you. I'll sleep soon enough, old fool. Get out."

Grand Maester Pycelle gave Ned a stricken look as he shuffled from the room.

"Damn you, Robert," Ned said when they were alone. His leg was throbbing so badly he was almost blind with pain. Or perhaps it was grief that fogged his eyes. He lowered himself to the bed, beside his friend. "Why do you always have to be so headstrong?"

“Ah, fuck you, Ned,” the king said hoarsely. “I killed the bastard, didn’t I?” A lock of matted black hair fell across his eyes as he glared up at Ned. “Ought to do the same for you. Can’t leave a man to hunt in peace. Ser Robar found me. Gregor’s head. Ugly thought. Never told the Hound. Let Cersei surprise him.” His laugh turned into a grunt as a spasm of pain hit him. “Gods have mercy,” he muttered, swallowing his agony. “The girl. Daenerys. Only a child, you were right... that’s why, the girl... the gods sent the boar... sent to punish me...” The king coughed, bringing up blood. “Wrong, it was wrong, I... only a girl... Varys, Littlefinger, even my brother... worthless... no one to tell me no but you, Ned... only you...” He lifted his hand, the gesture pained and feeble. “Paper and ink. There, on the table. Write what I tell you.”

Ned smoothed the paper out across his knee and took up the quill. “At your command, Your Grace.”

“This is the will and word of Robert of House Baratheon, the First of his Name, King of the Andals and all the rest—put in the damn titles, you know how it goes. I do hereby command Eddard of House Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Hand of the King, to serve as Lord Regent and Protector of the Realm upon my... upon my death... to rule in my... in my stead, until my son Joffrey does come of age...”

“Robert...” *Joffrey is not your son*, he wanted to say, but the words would not come. The agony was written too plainly across Robert’s face; he could not hurt him more. So Ned bent his head and wrote, but where the king had said “my son Joffrey,” he scrawled “my heir” instead. The deceit made him feel soiled. *The lies we tell for love*, he thought. *May the gods forgive me*. “What else would you have me say?”

“Say... whatever you need to. Protect and defend, gods old and new, you have the words. Write. I’ll sign it. You give it to the council when I’m dead.”

“Robert,” Ned said in a voice thick with grief, “you must not do this. Don’t die on me. The realm needs you.”

Robert took his hand, fingers squeezing hard. “You are... such a bad liar, Ned Stark,” he said through his pain. “The realm... the realm knows...”

what a wretched king I've been. Bad as Aerys, the gods spare me."

"No," Ned told his dying friend, "not so bad as Aerys, Your Grace. Not near so bad as Aerys."

Robert managed a weak red smile. "At the least, they will say... this last thing... this I did right. You won't fail me. You'll rule now. You'll hate it, worse than I did... but you'll do well. Are you done with the scribbling?"

"Yes, Your Grace." Ned offered Robert the paper. The king scrawled his signature blindly, leaving a smear of blood across the letter. "The seal should be witnessed."

"Serve the boar at my funeral feast," Robert rasped. "Apple in its mouth, skin seared crisp. Eat the bastard. Don't care if you choke on him. Promise me, Ned."

"I promise." *Promise me, Ned*, Lyanna's voice echoed.

"The girl," the king said. "Daenerys. Let her live. If you can, if it... not too late... talk to them... Varys, Littlefinger... don't let them kill her. And help my son, Ned. Make him be... better than me." He winced. "Gods have mercy."

"They will, my friend," Ned said. "They will."

The king closed his eyes and seemed to relax. "Killed by a pig," he muttered. "Ought to laugh, but it hurts too much."

Ned was not laughing. "Shall I call them back?"

Robert gave a weak nod. "As you will. Gods, why is it so *cold* in here?"

The servants rushed back in and hurried to feed the fires. The queen had gone; that was some small relief, at least. If she had any sense, Cersei would take her children and fly before the break of day, Ned thought. She had lingered too long already.

King Robert did not seem to miss her. He bid his brother Renly and Grand Maester Pycelle to stand in witness as he pressed his seal into the hot yellow wax that Ned had dripped upon his letter. "Now give me something for the pain and let me die."

Hurriedly Grand Maester Pycelle mixed him another draught of the milk of the poppy. This time the king drank deeply. His black beard was beaded with thick white droplets when he threw the empty cup aside. “Will I dream?”

Ned gave him his answer. “You will, my lord.”

“Good,” he said, smiling. “I will give Lyanna your love, Ned. Take care of my children for me.”

The words twisted in Ned’s belly like a knife. For a moment he was at a loss. He could not bring himself to lie. Then he remembered the bastards: little Barra at her mother’s breast, Mya in the Vale, Gendry at his forge, and all the others. “I shall... guard your children as if they were my own,” he said slowly.

Robert nodded and closed his eyes. Ned watched his old friend sag softly into the pillows as the milk of the poppy washed the pain from his face. Sleep took him.

Heavy chains jangled softly as Grand Maester Pycelle came up to Ned. “I will do all in my power, my lord, but the wound has mortified. It took them two days to get him back. By the time I saw him, it was too late. I can lessen His Grace’s suffering, but only the gods can heal him now.”

“How long?” Ned asked.

“By rights, he should be dead already. I have never seen a man cling to life so fiercely.”

“My brother was always strong,” Lord Renly said. “Not wise, perhaps, but strong.” In the sweltering heat of the bedchamber, his brow was slick with sweat. He might have been Robert’s ghost as he stood there, young and dark and handsome. “He slew the boar. His entrails were sliding from his belly, yet somehow he slew the boar.” His voice was full of wonder.

“Robert was never a man to leave the battleground so long as a foe remained standing,” Ned told him.

Outside the door, Ser Barristan Selmy still guarded the tower stairs. “Maester Pycelle has given Robert the milk of the poppy,” Ned told him. “See that no one disturbs his rest without leave from me.”

“It shall be as you command, my lord.” Ser Barristan seemed old beyond his years. “I have failed my sacred trust.”

“Even the truest knight cannot protect a king against himself,” Ned said. “Robert loved to hunt boar. I have seen him take a thousand of them.” He would stand his ground without flinching, his legs braced, the great spear in his hands, and as often as not he would curse the boar as it charged, and wait until the last possible second, until it was almost on him, before he killed it with a single sure and savage thrust. “No one could know this one would be his death.”

“You are kind to say so, Lord Eddard.”

“The king himself said as much. He blamed the wine.”

The white-haired knight gave a weary nod. “His Grace was reeling in his saddle by the time we flushed the boar from his lair, yet he commanded us all to stand aside.”

“I wonder, Ser Barristan,” asked Varys, so quietly, “who gave the king this wine?”

Ned had not heard the eunuch approach, but when he looked around, there he stood. He wore a black velvet robe that brushed the floor, and his face was freshly powdered.

“The wine was from the king’s own skin,” Ser Barristan said.

“Only one skin? Hunting is such thirsty work.”

“I did not keep count. More than one, for a certainty. His squire would fetch him a fresh skin whenever he required it.”

“Such a dutiful boy,” said Varys, “to make certain His Grace did not lack for refreshment.”

Ned had a bitter taste in his mouth. He recalled the two fair-haired boys Robert had sent chasing after a breastplate stretcher. The king had told everyone the tale that night at the feast, laughing until he shook. “Which squire?”

“The elder,” said Ser Barristan. “Lancel.”

“I know the lad well,” said Varys. “A stalwart boy, Ser Kevan Lannister’s son, nephew to Lord Tywin and cousin to the queen. I hope the dear sweet lad does not blame himself. Children are so vulnerable in the innocence of their youth, how well do I remember.”

Certainly Varys had once been young. Ned doubted that he had ever been innocent. “You mention children. Robert had a change of heart concerning Daenerys Targaryen. Whatever arrangements you made, I want unmade. At once.”

“Alas,” said Varys. “At once may be too late. I fear those birds have flown. But I shall do what I can, my lord. With your leave.” He bowed and vanished down the steps, his soft-soled slippers whispering against the stone as he made his descent.

Cayn and Tomard were helping Ned across the bridge when Lord Renly emerged from Maegor’s Holdfast. “Lord Eddard,” he called after Ned, “a moment, if you would be so kind.”

Ned stopped. “As you wish.”

Renly walked to his side. “Send your men away.” They met in the center of the bridge, the dry moat beneath them. Moonlight silvered the cruel edges of the spikes that lined its bed.

Ned gestured. Tomard and Cayn bowed their heads and backed away respectfully. Lord Renly glanced warily at Ser Boros on the far end of the span, at Ser Preston in the doorway behind them. “That letter.” He leaned close. “Was it the regency? Has my brother named you Protector?” He did not wait for a reply. “My lord, I have thirty men in my personal guard, and other friends beside, knights and lords. Give me an hour, and I can put a hundred swords in your hand.”

“And what should I do with a hundred swords, my lord?”

“*Strike!* Now, while the castle sleeps.” Renly looked back at Ser Boros again and dropped his voice to an urgent whisper. “We must get Joffrey away from his mother and take him in hand. Protector or no, the man who holds the king holds the kingdom. We should seize Myrcella and Tommen

as well. Once we have her children, Cersei will not dare oppose us. The council will confirm you as Lord Protector and make Joffrey your ward.”

Ned regarded him coldly. “Robert is not dead yet. The gods may spare him. If not, I shall convene the council to hear his final words and consider the matter of the succession, but I will not dishonor his last hours on earth by shedding blood in his halls and dragging frightened children from their beds.”

Lord Renly took a step back, taut as a bowstring. “Every moment you delay gives Cersei another moment to prepare. By the time Robert dies, it may be too late... for both of us.”

“Then we should pray that Robert does not die.”

“Small chance of that,” said Renly.

“Sometimes the gods are merciful.”

“The Lannisters are not.” Lord Renly turned away and went back across the moat, to the tower where his brother lay dying.

By the time Ned returned to his chambers, he felt weary and heartsick, yet there was no question of his going back to sleep, not now. *When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die*, Cersei Lannister had told him in the godswood. He found himself wondering if he had done the right thing by refusing Lord Renly’s offer. He had no taste for these intrigues, and there was no honor in threatening children, and yet... if Cersei elected to fight rather than flee, he might well have need of Renly’s hundred swords, and more besides.

“I want Littlefinger,” he told Cayn. “If he’s not in his chambers, take as many men as you need and search every winesink and whorehouse in King’s Landing until you find him. Bring him to me before break of day.” Cayn bowed and took his leave, and Ned turned to Tomard. “The *Wind Witch* sails on the evening tide. Have you chosen the escort?”

“Ten men, with Porther in command.”

“Twenty, and you will command,” Ned said. Porther was a brave man, but headstrong. He wanted someone more solid and sensible to keep watch over his daughters.

“As you wish, m’lord,” Tom said. “Can’t say I’ll be sad to see the back of this place. I miss the wife.”

“You will pass near Dragonstone when you turn north. I need you to deliver a letter for me.”

Tom looked apprehensive. “To Dragonstone, m’lord?” The island fortress of House Targaryen had a sinister repute.

“Tell Captain Qos to hoist my banner as soon as he comes in sight of the island. They may be wary of unexpected visitors. If he is reluctant, offer him whatever it takes. I will give you a letter to place into the hand of Lord Stannis Baratheon. No one else. Not his steward, nor the captain of his guard, nor his lady wife, but only Lord Stannis himself.”

“As you command, m’lord.”

When Tomard had left him, Lord Eddard Stark sat staring at the flame of the candle that burned beside him on the table. For a moment his grief overwhelmed him. He wanted nothing so much as to seek out the godswood, to kneel before the heart tree and pray for the life of Robert Baratheon, who had been more than a brother to him. Men would whisper afterward that Eddard Stark had betrayed his king’s friendship and disinherited his sons; he could only hope that the gods would know better, and that Robert would learn the truth of it in the land beyond the grave.

Ned took out the king’s last letter. A roll of crisp white parchment sealed with golden wax, a few short words and a smear of blood. How small the difference between victory and defeat, between life and death.

He drew out a fresh sheet of paper and dipped his quill in the inkpot. *To His Grace, Stannis of the House Baratheon*, he wrote. *By the time you receive this letter, your brother Robert, our King these past fifteen years, will be dead. He was savaged by a boar whilst hunting in the kingswood...*

The letters seemed to writhe and twist on the paper as his hand trailed to a stop. Lord Tywin and Ser Jaime were not men to suffer disgrace meekly; they would fight rather than flee. No doubt Lord Stannis was wary, after the murder of Jon Arryn, but it was imperative that he sail for King’s Landing at once with all his power, before the Lannisters could march.

Ned chose each word with care. When he was done, he signed the letter *Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, Hand of the King, and Protector of the Realm*, blotted the paper, folded it twice, and melted the sealing wax over the candle flame.

His regency would be a short one, he reflected as the wax softened. The new king would choose his own Hand. Ned would be free to go home. The thought of Winterfell brought a wan smile to his face. He wanted to hear Bran's laughter once more, to go hawking with Robb, to watch Rickon at play. He wanted to drift off to a dreamless sleep in his own bed with his arms wrapped tight around his lady, Catelyn.

Cayn returned as he was pressing the direwolf seal down into the soft white wax. Desmond was with him, and between them Littlefinger. Ned thanked his guards and sent them away.

Lord Petyr was clad in a blue velvet tunic with puffed sleeves, his silvery cape patterned with mockingbirds. "I suppose congratulations are in order," he said as he seated himself.

Ned scowled. "The king lies wounded and near to death."

"I know," Littlefinger said. "I also know that Robert has named you Protector of the Realm."

Ned's eyes flicked to the king's letter on the table beside him, its seal unbroken. "And how is it you know that, my lord?"

"Varys hinted as much," Littlefinger said, "and you have just confirmed it."

Ned's mouth twisted in anger. "Damn Varys and his little birds. Catelyn spoke truly, the man has some black art. I do not trust him."

"Excellent. You're learning." Littlefinger leaned forward. "Yet I'll wager you did not drag me here in the black of night to discuss the eunuch."

"No," Ned admitted. "I know the secret Jon Arryn was murdered to protect. Robert will leave no trueborn son behind him. Joffrey and Tommen are Jaime Lannister's bastards, born of his incestuous union with the queen."

Littlefinger lifted an eyebrow. “Shocking,” he said in a tone that suggested he was not shocked at all. “The girl as well? No doubt. So when the king dies...”

“The throne by rights passes to Lord Stannis, the elder of Robert’s two brothers.”

Lord Petyr stroked his pointed beard as he considered the matter. “So it would seem. Unless...”

“*Unless*, my lord? There is no *seeming* to this. Stannis is the heir. Nothing can change that.”

“Stannis cannot take the throne without your help. If you’re wise, you’ll make certain Joffrey succeeds.”

Ned gave him a stony stare. “Have you no shred of honor?”

“Oh, a *shred*, surely,” Littlefinger replied negligently. “Hear me out. Stannis is no friend of yours, nor of mine. Even his brothers can scarcely stomach him. The man is iron, hard and unyielding. He’ll give us a new Hand and a new council, for a certainty. No doubt he’ll thank you for handing him the crown, but he won’t love you for it. And his ascent will mean war. Stannis cannot rest easy on the throne until Cersei and her bastards are dead. Do you think Lord Tywin will sit idly while his daughter’s head is measured for a spike? Casterly Rock will rise, and not alone. Robert found it in him to pardon men who served King Aerys, so long as they did him fealty. Stannis is less forgiving. He will not have forgotten the siege of Storm’s End, and the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne dare not. Every man who fought beneath the dragon banner or rose with Balon Greyjoy will have good cause to fear. Seat Stannis on the Iron Throne and I promise you, the realm will bleed.

“Now look at the other side of the coin. Joffrey is but twelve, and Robert gave *you* the regency, my lord. You are the Hand of the King and Protector of the Realm. The power is yours, Lord Stark. All you need do is reach out and take it. Make your peace with the Lannisters. Release the Imp. Wed Joffrey to your Sansa. Wed your younger girl to Prince Tommen, and your heir to Myrcella. It will be four years before Joffrey comes of age. By then he will look to you as a second father, and if not, well... four years

is a good long while, my lord. Long enough to dispose of Lord Stannis. Then, should Joffrey prove troublesome, we can reveal his little secret and put Lord Renly on the throne.”

“*We?*” Ned repeated.

Littlefinger gave a shrug. “You’ll need someone to share your burdens. I assure you, my price would be modest.”

“Your price.” Ned’s voice was ice. “Lord Baelish, what you suggest is treason.”

“Only if we lose.”

“You forget,” Ned told him. “You forget Jon Arryn. You forget Jory Cassel. And you forget this.” He drew the dagger and laid it on the table between them; a length of dragonbone and Valyrian steel, as sharp as the difference between right and wrong, between true and false, between life and death. “They sent a man to *cut my son’s throat*, Lord Baelish.”

Littlefinger sighed. “I fear I did forget, my lord. Pray forgive me. For a moment I did not remember that I was talking to a Stark.” His mouth quirked. “So it will be Stannis, and war?”

“It is not a choice. Stannis is the heir.”

“Far be it from me to dispute the Lord Protector. What would you have of me, then? Not my wisdom, for a certainty.”

“I shall do my best to forget your... wisdom,” Ned said with distaste. “I called you here to ask for the help you promised Catelyn. This is a perilous hour for all of us. Robert has named me Protector, true enough, but in the eyes of the world, Joffrey is still his son and heir. The queen has a dozen knights and a hundred men-at-arms who will do whatever she commands... enough to overwhelm what remains of my own household guard. And for all I know, her brother Jaime may be riding for King’s Landing even as we speak, with a Lannister host at his back.”

“And you without an army.” Littlefinger toyed with the dagger on the table, turning it slowly with a finger. “There is small love lost between Lord Renly and the Lannisters. Bronze Yohn Royce, Ser Balon Swann, Ser

Loras, Lady Tanda, the Redwyne twins... each of them has a retinue of knights and sworn swords here at court.”

“Renly has thirty men in his personal guard, the rest even fewer. It is not enough, even if I could be certain that all of them will choose to give me their allegiance. I must have the gold cloaks. The City Watch is two thousand strong, sworn to defend the castle, the city, and the king’s peace.”

“Ah, but when the queen proclaims one king and the Hand another, whose peace do they protect?” Lord Petyr flicked at the dagger with his finger, setting it spinning in place. Round and round it went, wobbling as it turned. When at last it slowed to a stop, the blade pointed at Littlefinger. “Why, there’s your answer,” he said, smiling. “They follow the man who pays them.” He leaned back and looked Ned full in the face, his grey-green eyes bright with mockery. “You wear your honor like a suit of armor, Stark. You think it keeps you safe, but all it does is weigh you down and make it hard for you to move. Look at you now. You know why you summoned me here. You know what you want to ask me to do. You know it has to be done... but it’s not *honorable*, so the words stick in your throat.”

Ned’s neck was rigid with tension. For a moment he was so angry that he did not trust himself to speak.

Littlefinger laughed. “I ought to make you say it, but that would be cruel... so have no fear, my good lord. For the sake of the love I bear for Catelyn, I will go to Janos Slynt this very hour and make certain that the City Watch is yours. Six thousand gold pieces should do it. A third for the Commander, a third for the officers, a third for the men. We might be able to buy them for half that much, but I prefer not to take chances.” Smiling, he plucked up the dagger and offered it to Ned, hilt first.