

EDDARD

The summons came in the hour before the dawn, when the world was still and grey.

Alyn shook him roughly from his dreams and Ned stumbled into the predawn chill, groggy from sleep, to find his horse saddled and the king already mounted. Robert wore thick brown gloves and a heavy fur cloak with a hood that covered his ears, and looked for all the world like a bear sitting a horse. “Up, Stark!” he roared. “Up, up! We have matters of state to discuss.”

“By all means,” Ned said. “Come inside, Your Grace.” Alyn lifted the flap of the tent.

“No, no, *no*,” Robert said. His breath steamed with every word. “The camp is full of ears. Besides, I want to ride out and taste this country of yours.” Ser Boros and Ser Meryn waited behind him with a dozen guardsmen, Ned saw. There was nothing to do but rub the sleep from his eyes, dress, and mount up.

Robert set the pace, driving his huge black destrier hard as Ned galloped along beside him, trying to keep up. He called out a question as they rode, but the wind blew his words away, and the king did not hear him. After that Ned rode in silence. They soon left the kingsroad and took off across rolling plains dark with mist. By then the guard had fallen back a small distance, safely out of earshot, but still Robert would not slow.

Dawn broke as they crested a low ridge, and finally the king pulled up. By then they were miles south of the main party. Robert was flushed and exhilarated as Ned reined up beside him. “Gods,” he swore, laughing, “it feels good to get out and *ride* the way a man was meant to ride! I swear, Ned, this creeping along is enough to drive a man mad.” He had never been a patient man, Robert Baratheon. “That damnable wheelhouse, the way it creaks and groans, climbing every bump in the road as if it were a

mountain... I promise you, if that wretched thing breaks another axle, I'm going to burn it, and Cersei can walk!"

Ned laughed. "I will gladly light the torch for you."

"Good man!" The king clapped him on the shoulder. "I've half a mind to leave them all behind and just keep going."

A smile touched Ned's lips. "I do believe you mean it."

"I do, I do," the king said. "What do you say, Ned? Just you and me, two vagabond knights on the kingsroad, our swords at our sides and the gods know what in front of us, and maybe a farmer's daughter or a tavern wench to warm our beds tonight."

"Would that we could," Ned said, "but we have duties now, my liege... to the realm, to our children, I to my lady wife and you to your queen. We are not the boys we were."

"You were never the boy you were," Robert grumbled. "More's the pity. And yet there was that one time... what was her name, that common girl of yours? Becca? No, she was one of mine, gods love her, black hair and these sweet big eyes, you could drown in them. Yours was... Aleena? No. You told me once. Was it Merryll? You know the one I mean, your bastard's mother?"

"Her name was Wylla," Ned replied with cool courtesy, "and I would sooner not speak of her."

"Wylla. Yes." The king grinned. "She must have been a rare wench if she could make Lord Eddard Stark forget his honor, even for an hour. You never told me what she looked like..."

Ned's mouth tightened in anger. "Nor will I. Leave it be, Robert, for the love you say you bear me. I dishonored myself and I dishonored Catelyn, in the sight of gods and men."

"Gods have mercy, you scarcely *knew* Catelyn."

"I had taken her to wife. She was carrying my child."

"You are too hard on yourself, Ned. You always were. Damn it, no woman wants Baelor the Blessed in her bed." He slapped a hand on his

knee. “Well, I’ll not press you if you feel so strong about it, though I swear, at times you’re so prickly you ought to take the hedgehog as your sigil.”

The rising sun sent fingers of light through the pale white mists of dawn. A wide plain spread out beneath them, bare and brown, its flatness here and there relieved by long, low hummocks. Ned pointed them out to his king. “The barrows of the First Men.”

Robert frowned. “Have we ridden onto a graveyard?”

“There are barrows everywhere in the north, Your Grace,” Ned told him. “This land is old.”

“And cold,” Robert grumbled, pulling his cloak more tightly around himself. The guard had reined up well behind them, at the bottom of the ridge. “Well, I did not bring you out here to talk of graves or bicker about your bastard. There was a rider in the night, from Lord Varys in King’s Landing. Here.” The king pulled a paper from his belt and handed it to Ned.

Varys the eunuch was the king’s master of whisperers. He served Robert now as he had once served Aerys Targaryen. Ned unrolled the paper with trepidation, thinking of Lysa and her terrible accusation, but the message did not concern Lady Arryn. “What is the source for this information?”

“Do you remember Ser Jorah Mormont?”

“Would that I might forget him,” Ned said bluntly. The Mormonts of Bear Island were an old house, proud and honorable, but their lands were cold and distant and poor. Ser Jorah had tried to swell the family coffers by selling some poachers to a Tyroshi slaver. As the Mormonts were bannermen to the Starks, his crime had dishonored the north. Ned had made the long journey west to Bear Island, only to find when he arrived that Jorah had taken ship beyond the reach of Ice and the king’s justice. Five years had passed since then.

“Ser Jorah is now in Pentos, anxious to earn a royal pardon that would allow him to return from exile,” Robert explained. “Lord Varys makes good use of him.”

“So the slaver has become a spy,” Ned said with distaste. He handed the letter back. “I would rather he become a corpse.”

“Varys tells me that spies are more useful than corpses,” Robert said. “Jorah aside, what do you make of his report?”

“Daenerys Targaryen has wed some Dothraki horselord. What of it? Shall we send her a wedding gift?”

The king frowned. “A knife, perhaps. A good sharp one, and a bold man to wield it.”

Ned did not feign surprise; Robert’s hatred of the Targaryens was a madness in him. He remembered the angry words they had exchanged when Tywin Lannister had presented Robert with the corpses of Rhaegar’s wife and children as a token of fealty. Ned had named that murder; Robert called it war. When he had protested that the young prince and princess were no more than babes, his new-made king had replied, “I see no babes. Only dragonspawn.” Not even Jon Arryn had been able to calm that storm. Eddard Stark had ridden out that very day in a cold rage, to fight the last battles of the war alone in the south. It had taken another death to reconcile them; Lyanna’s death, and the grief they had shared over her passing.

This time, Ned resolved to keep his temper. “Your Grace, the girl is scarcely more than a child. You are no Tywin Lannister, to slaughter innocents.” It was said that Rhaegar’s little girl had cried as they dragged her from beneath her bed to face the swords. The boy had been no more than a babe in arms, yet Lord Tywin’s soldiers had torn him from his mother’s breast and dashed his head against a wall.

“And how long will this one remain an innocent?” Robert’s mouth grew hard. “This *child* will soon enough spread her legs and start breeding more dragonspawn to plague me.”

“Nonetheless,” Ned said, “the murder of children... it would be vile... unspeakable...”

“*Unspeakable?*” the king roared. “What Aerys did to your brother Brandon was unspeakable. The way your lord father died, that was unspeakable. And Rhaegar... how many times do you think he raped your

sister? How many *hundreds* of times?” His voice had grown so loud that his horse whinnied nervously beneath him. The king jerked the reins hard, quieting the animal, and pointed an angry finger at Ned. “I will kill every Targaryen I can get my hands on, until they are as dead as their dragons, and then I will piss on their graves.”

Ned knew better than to defy him when the wrath was on him. If the years had not quenched Robert’s thirst for revenge, no words of his would help. “You can’t get your hands on this one, can you?” he said quietly.

The king’s mouth twisted in a bitter grimace. “No, gods be cursed. Some pox-ridden Pentoshi cheesemonger had her brother and her walled up on his estate with pointy-hatted eunuchs all around them, and now he’s handed them over to the Dothraki. I should have had them both killed years ago, when it was easy to get at them, but Jon was as bad as you. More fool I, I listened to him.”

“Jon Arryn was a wise man and a good Hand.”

Robert snorted. The anger was leaving him as suddenly as it had come. “This Khal Drogo is said to have a hundred thousand men in his horde. What would Jon say to that?”

“He would say that even a million Dothraki are no threat to the realm, so long as they remain on the other side of the narrow sea,” Ned replied calmly. “The barbarians have no *ships*. They hate and fear the open sea.”

The king shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. “Perhaps. There are ships to be had in the Free Cities, though. I tell you, Ned, I do not like this marriage. There are still those in the Seven Kingdoms who call me Usurper. Do you forget how many houses fought for Targaryen in the war? They bide their time for now, but give them half a chance, they will murder me in my bed, and my sons with me. If the beggar king crosses with a Dothraki horde at his back, the traitors will join him.”

“He will not cross,” Ned promised. “And if by some mischance he does, we will throw him back into the sea. Once you choose a new Warden of the East—”

The king groaned. “For the last time, I will not name the Arryn boy Warden. I know the boy is your nephew, but with Targaryens climbing in bed with Dothraki, I would be mad to rest one quarter of the realm on the shoulders of a sickly child.”

Ned was ready for that. “Yet we still must have a Warden of the East. If Robert Arryn will not do, name one of your brothers. Stannis proved himself at the siege of Storm’s End, surely.”

He let the name hang there for a moment. The king frowned and said nothing. He looked uncomfortable.

“That is,” Ned finished quietly, watching, “unless you have already promised the honor to another.”

For a moment Robert had the grace to look startled. Just as quickly, the look became annoyance. “What if I have?”

“It’s Jaime Lannister, is it not?”

Robert kicked his horse back into motion and started down the ridge toward the barrows. Ned kept pace with him. The king rode on, eyes straight ahead. “Yes,” he said at last. A single hard word to end the matter.

“Kingslayer,” Ned said. The rumors were true, then. He rode on dangerous ground now, he knew. “An able and courageous man, no doubt,” he said carefully, “but his father is Warden of the West, Robert. In time Ser Jaime will succeed to that honor. No one man should hold both East and West.” He left unsaid his real concern; that the appointment would put half the armies of the realm into the hands of Lannisters.

“I will fight that battle when the enemy appears on the field,” the king said stubbornly. “At the moment, Lord Tywin looms eternal as Casterly Rock, so I doubt that Jaime will be succeeding anytime soon. Don’t vex me about this, Ned, the stone has been set.”

“Your Grace, may I speak frankly?”

“I seem unable to stop you,” Robert grumbled. They rode through tall brown grasses.

“Can you trust Jaime Lannister?”

“He is my wife’s twin, a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard, his life and fortune and honor all bound to mine.”

“As they were bound to Aerys Targaryen’s,” Ned pointed out.

“Why should I mistrust him? He has done everything I have ever asked of him. His sword helped win the throne I sit on.”

His sword helped taint the throne you sit on, Ned thought, but he did not permit the words to pass his lips. “He swore a vow to protect his king’s life with his own. Then he opened that king’s throat with a sword.”

“Seven hells, *someone* had to kill Aerys!” Robert said, reining his mount to a sudden halt beside an ancient barrow. “If Jaime hadn’t done it, it would have been left for you or me.”

“We were not Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard,” Ned said. The time had come for Robert to hear the whole truth, he decided then and there. “Do you remember the Trident, Your Grace?”

“I won my crown there. How should I forget it?”

“You took a wound from Rhaegar,” Ned reminded him. “So when the Targaryen host broke and ran, you gave the pursuit into my hands. The remnants of Rhaegar’s army fled back to King’s Landing. We followed. Aerys was in the Red Keep with several thousand loyalists. I expected to find the gates closed to us.”

Robert gave an impatient shake of his head. “Instead you found that our men had already taken the city. What of it?”

“Not our men,” Ned said patiently. “Lannister men. The lion of Lannister flew over the ramparts, not the crowned stag. And they had taken the city by treachery.”

The war had raged for close to a year. Lords great and small had flocked to Robert’s banners; others had remained loyal to Targaryen. The mighty Lannisters of Casterly Rock, the Wardens of the West, had remained aloof from the struggle, ignoring calls to arms from both rebels and royalists. Aerys Targaryen must have thought that his gods had answered his prayers when Lord Tywin Lannister appeared before the gates of King’s Landing with an army twelve thousand strong, professing loyalty. So the

mad king had ordered his last mad act. He had opened his city to the lions at the gate.

“Treachery was a coin the Targaryens knew well,” Robert said. The anger was building in him again. “Lannister paid them back in kind. It was no less than they deserved. I shall not trouble my sleep over it.”

“You were not there,” Ned said, bitterness in his voice. Troubled sleep was no stranger to him. He had lived his lies for fourteen years, yet they still haunted him at night. “There was no honor in that conquest.”

“The Others take your honor!” Robert swore. “What did any Targaryen ever know of honor? Go down into your crypt and ask Lyanna about the dragon’s honor!”

“You avenged Lyanna at the Trident,” Ned said, halting beside the king. *Promise me, Ned*, she had whispered.

“That did not bring her back.” Robert looked away, off into the grey distance. “The gods be damned. It was a hollow victory they gave me. A crown... it was the *girl* I prayed them for. Your sister, safe... and mine again, as she was meant to be. I ask you, Ned, what good is it to wear a crown? The gods mock the prayers of kings and cowherds alike.”

“I cannot answer for the gods, Your Grace... only for what I found when I rode into the throne room that day,” Ned said. “Aerys was dead on the floor, drowned in his own blood. His dragon skulls stared down from the walls. Lannister’s men were everywhere. Jaime wore the white cloak of the Kingsguard over his golden armor. I can see him still. Even his sword was gilded. He was seated on the Iron Throne, high above his knights, wearing a helm fashioned in the shape of a lion’s head. How he glittered!”

“This is well known,” the king complained.

“I was still mounted. I rode the length of the hall in silence, between the long rows of dragon skulls. It felt as though they were watching me, somehow. I stopped in front of the throne, looking up at him. His golden sword was across his legs, its edge red with a king’s blood. My men were filling the room behind me. Lannister’s men drew back. I never said a word. I looked at him seated there on the throne, and I waited. At last Jaime

laughed and got up. He took off his helm, and he said to me, ‘Have no fear, Stark. I was only keeping it warm for our friend Robert. It’s not a very comfortable seat, I’m afraid.’”

The king threw back his head and roared. His laughter startled a flight of crows from the tall brown grass. They took to the air in a wild beating of wings. “You think I should mistrust Lannister because he sat on my throne for a few moments?” He shook with laughter again. “Jaime was all of seventeen, Ned. Scarce more than a boy.”

“Boy or man, he had no right to that throne.”

“Perhaps he was tired,” Robert suggested. “Killing kings is weary work. Gods know, there’s no place else to rest your ass in that damnable room. And he spoke truly, it *is* a monstrous uncomfortable chair. In more ways than one.” The king shook his head. “Well, now I know Jaime’s dark sin, and the matter can be forgotten. I am heartily sick of secrets and squabbles and matters of state, Ned. It’s all as tedious as counting coppers. Come, let’s ride, you used to know how. I want to feel the wind in my hair again.” He kicked his horse back into motion and galloped up over the barrow, raining earth down behind him.

For a moment Ned did not follow. He had run out of words, and he was filled with a vast sense of helplessness. Not for the first time, he wondered what he was doing here and why he had come. He was no Jon Arryn, to curb the wildness of his king and teach him wisdom. Robert would do what he pleased, as he always had, and nothing Ned could say or do would change that. He belonged in Winterfell. He belonged with Catelyn in her grief, and with Bran.

A man could not always be where he belonged, though. Resigned, Eddard Stark put his boots into his horse and set off after the king.