

EDDARD

He dreamt an old dream, of three knights in white cloaks, and a tower long fallen, and Lyanna in her bed of blood.

In the dream his friends rode with him, as they had in life. Proud Martyn Cassel, Jory's father; faithful Theo Wull; Ethan Glover, who had been Brandon's squire; Ser Mark Ryswell, soft of speech and gentle of heart; the crannogman, Howland Reed; Lord Dustin on his great red stallion. Ned had known their faces as well as he knew his own once, but the years leech at a man's memories, even those he has vowed never to forget. In the dream they were only shadows, grey wraiths on horses made of mist.

They were seven, facing three. In the dream as it had been in life. Yet these were no ordinary three. They waited before the round tower, the red mountains of Dorne at their backs, their white cloaks blowing in the wind. And these were no shadows; their faces burned clear, even now. Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, had a sad smile on his lips. The hilt of the greatsword Dawn poked up over his right shoulder. Ser Oswell Whent was on one knee, sharpening his blade with a whetstone. Across his white-enameled helm, the black bat of his House spread its wings. Between them stood fierce old Ser Gerold Hightower, the White Bull, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.

"I looked for you on the Trident," Ned said to them.

"We were not there," Ser Gerold answered.

"Woe to the Usurper if we had been," said Ser Oswell.

"When King's Landing fell, Ser Jaime slew your king with a golden sword, and I wondered where you were."

"Far away," Ser Gerold said, "or Aerys would yet sit the Iron Throne, and our false brother would burn in seven hells."

"I came down on Storm's End to lift the siege," Ned told them, "and the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne dipped their banners, and all their knights

bent the knee to pledge us fealty. I was certain you would be among them.”

“Our knees do not bend easily,” said Ser Arthur Dayne.

“Ser Willem Darry is fled to Dragonstone, with your queen and Prince Viserys. I thought you might have sailed with him.”

“Ser Willem is a good man and true,” said Ser Oswell.

“But not of the Kingsguard,” Ser Gerold pointed out. “The Kingsguard does not flee.”

“Then or now,” said Ser Arthur. He donned his helm.

“We swore a vow,” explained old Ser Gerold.

Ned’s wraiths moved up beside him, with shadow swords in hand. They were seven against three.

“And now it begins,” said Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning. He unsheathed Dawn and held it with both hands. The blade was pale as milkglass, alive with light.

“No,” Ned said with sadness in his voice. “Now it ends.” As they came together in a rush of steel and shadow, he could hear Lyanna screaming. “*Eddard!*” she called. A storm of rose petals blew across a blood-streaked sky, as blue as the eyes of death.

“Lord Eddard,” Lyanna called again.

“I promise,” he whispered. “Lya, I promise...”

“Lord Eddard,” a man echoed from the dark.

Groaning, Eddard Stark opened his eyes. Moonlight streamed through the tall windows of the Tower of the Hand.

“Lord Eddard?” A shadow stood over the bed.

“How... how long?” The sheets were tangled, his leg splinted and plastered. A dull throb of pain shot up his side.

“Six days and seven nights.” The voice was Vayon Poole’s. The steward held a cup to Ned’s lips. “Drink, my lord.”

“What...?”

“Only water. Maester Pycelle said you would be thirsty.”

Ned drank. His lips were parched and cracked. The water tasted sweet as honey.

“The king left orders,” Vayon Poole told him when the cup was empty. “He would speak with you, my lord.”

“On the morrow,” Ned said. “When I am stronger.” He could not face Robert now. The dream had left him weak as a kitten.

“My lord,” Poole said, “he commanded us to send you to him the moment you opened your eyes.” The steward busied himself lighting a bedside candle.

Ned cursed softly. Robert was never known for his patience. “Tell him I’m too weak to come to him. If he wishes to speak with me, I should be pleased to receive him here. I hope you wake him from a sound sleep. And summon...” He was about to say *Jory* when he remembered. “Summon the captain of my guard.”

Alyn stepped into the bedchamber a few moments after the steward had taken his leave. “My lord.”

“Poole tells me it has been six days,” Ned said. “I must know how things stand.”

“The Kingslayer is fled the city,” Alyn told him. “The talk is he’s ridden back to Casterly Rock to join his father. The story of how Lady Catelyn took the Imp is on every lip. I have put on extra guards, if it please you.”

“It does,” Ned assured him. “My daughters?”

“They have been with you every day, my lord. Sansa prays quietly, but Arya...” He hesitated. “She has not said a word since they brought you back. She is a fierce little thing, my lord. I have never seen such anger in a girl.”

“Whatever happens,” Ned said, “I want my daughters kept safe. I fear this is only the beginning.”

“No harm will come to them, Lord Eddard,” Alyn said. “I stake my life on that.”

“Jory and the others...”

“I gave them over to the silent sisters, to be sent north to Winterfell. Jory would want to lie beside his grandfather.”

It would have to be his grandfather, for Jory’s father was buried far to the south. Martyn Cassel had perished with the rest. Ned had pulled the tower down afterward, and used its bloody stones to build eight cairns upon the ridge. It was said that Rhaegar had named that place the tower of joy, but for Ned it was a bitter memory. They had been seven against three, yet only two had lived to ride away; Eddard Stark himself and the little crannogman, Howland Reed. He did not think it omened well that he should dream that dream again after so many years.

“You’ve done well, Alyn,” Ned was saying when Vayon Poole returned. The steward bowed low. “His Grace is without, my lord, and the queen with him.”

Ned pushed himself up higher, wincing as his leg trembled with pain. He had not expected Cersei to come. It did not bode well that she had. “Send them in, and leave us. What we have to say should not go beyond these walls.” Poole withdrew quietly.

Robert had taken time to dress. He wore a black velvet doublet with the crowned stag of Baratheon worked upon the breast in golden thread, and a golden mantle with a cloak of black and gold squares. A flagon of wine was in his hand, his face already flushed from drink. Cersei Lannister entered behind him, a jeweled tiara in her hair.

“Your Grace,” Ned said. “Your pardons. I cannot rise.”

“No matter,” the king said gruffly. “Some wine? From the Arbor. A good vintage.”

“A small cup,” Ned said. “My head is still heavy from the milk of the poppy.”

“A man in your place should count himself fortunate that his head is still on his shoulders,” the queen declared.

“Quiet, woman,” Robert snapped. He brought Ned a cup of wine. “Does the leg still pain you?”

“Some,” Ned said. His head was swimming, but it would not do to admit to weakness in front of the queen.

“Pycelle swears it will heal clean.” Robert frowned. “I take it you know what Catelyn has done?”

“I do.” Ned took a small swallow of wine. “My lady wife is blameless, Your Grace. All she did she did at my command.”

“I am *not* pleased, Ned,” Robert grumbled.

“By what right do you dare lay hands on my blood?” Cersei demanded. “Who do you think you are?”

“The Hand of the King,” Ned told her with icy courtesy. “Charged by your own lord husband to keep the king’s peace and enforce the king’s justice.”

“You *were* the Hand,” Cersei began, “but now—”

“*Silence!*” the king roared. “You asked him a question and he answered it.” Cersei subsided, cold with anger, and Robert turned back to Ned. “Keep the king’s peace, you say. Is this how you keep my peace, Ned? Seven men are dead...”

“Eight,” the queen corrected. “Tregar died this morning, of the blow Lord Stark gave him.”

“Abductions on the kingsroad and drunken slaughter in my streets,” the king said. “I will not have it, Ned.”

“Catelyn had good reason for taking the Imp—”

“I said, I will *not* have it! To hell with her reasons. You will command her to release the dwarf at once, and you will make your peace with Jaime.”

“Three of my men were butchered before my eyes, because Jaime Lannister wished to *chasten* me. Am I to forget that?”

“My brother was not the cause of this quarrel,” Cersei told the king. “Lord Stark was returning drunk from a brothel. His men attacked Jaime and his guards, even as his wife attacked Tyrion on the kingsroad.”

“You know me better than that, Robert,” Ned said. “Ask Lord Baelish if you doubt me. He was there.”

“I’ve talked to Littlefinger,” Robert said. “He claims he rode off to bring the gold cloaks before the fighting began, but he admits you were returning from some whorehouse.”

“*Some* whorehouse? Damn your eyes, Robert, I went there to have a look at your daughter! Her mother has named her Barra. She looks like that first girl you fathered, when we were boys together in the Vale.” He watched the queen as he spoke; her face was a mask, still and pale, betraying nothing.

Robert flushed. “Barra,” he grumbled. “Is that supposed to please me? Damn the girl. I thought she had more sense.”

“She cannot be more than fifteen, and a whore, and you thought she had *sense*?” Ned said, incredulous. His leg was beginning to pain him sorely. It was hard to keep his temper. “The fool child is in love with you, Robert.”

The king glanced at Cersei. “This is no fit subject for the queen’s ears.”

“Her Grace will have no liking for anything I have to say,” Ned replied. “I am told the Kingslayer has fled the city. Give me leave to bring him back to justice.”

The king swirled the wine in his cup, brooding. He took a swallow. “No,” he said. “I want no more of this. Jaime slew three of your men, and you five of his. Now it ends.”

“Is that your notion of justice?” Ned flared. “If so, I am pleased that I am no longer your Hand.”

The queen looked to her husband. “If any man had dared speak to a Targaryen as he has spoken to you—”

“Do you take me for Aerys?” Robert interrupted.

“I took you for a *king*. Jaime and Tyrion are your own brothers, by all the laws of marriage and the bonds we share. The Starks have driven off the one and seized the other. This man dishonors you with every breath he takes, and yet you stand there meekly, asking if his leg pains him and would he like some wine.”

Robert's face was dark with anger. "How many times must I tell you to hold your tongue, woman?"

Cersei's face was a study in contempt. "What a jape the gods have made of us two," she said. "By all rights, you ought to be in skirts and me in mail."

Purple with rage, the king lashed out, a vicious backhand blow to the side of the head. She stumbled against the table and fell hard, yet Cersei Lannister did not cry out. Her slender fingers brushed her cheek, where the pale smooth skin was already reddening. On the morrow the bruise would cover half her face. "I shall wear this as a badge of honor," she announced.

"Wear it in silence, or I'll honor you again," Robert vowed. He shouted for a guard. Ser Meryn Trant stepped into the room, tall and somber in his white armor. "The queen is tired. See her to her bedchamber." The knight helped Cersei to her feet and led her out without a word.

Robert reached for the flagon and refilled his cup. "You see what she does to me, Ned." The king seated himself, cradling his wine cup. "My loving wife. The mother of my children." The rage was gone from him now; in his eyes Ned saw something sad and scared. "I should not have hit her. That was not... that was not *kingly*." He stared down at his hands, as if he did not quite know what they were. "I was always strong... no one could stand before me, no one. How do you fight someone if you can't hit them?" Confused, the king shook his head. "Rhaegar... Rhaegar *won*, damn him. I killed him, Ned, I drove the spike right through that black armor into his black heart, and he died at my feet. They made up songs about it. Yet somehow he still won. He has Lyanna now, and I have *her*." The king drained his cup.

"Your Grace," Ned Stark said, "we must talk..."

Robert pressed his fingertips against his temples. "I am sick unto death of talk. On the morrow I'm going to the kingswood to hunt. Whatever you have to say can wait until I return."

"If the gods are good, I shall not be here on your return. You commanded me to return to Winterfell, remember?"

Robert stood up, grasping one of the bedposts to steady himself. “The gods are seldom good, Ned. Here, this is yours.” He pulled the heavy silver hand clasp from a pocket in the lining of his cloak and tossed it on the bed. “Like it or not, you are my Hand, damn you. I forbid you to leave.”

Ned picked up the silver clasp. He was being given no choice, it seemed. His leg throbbed, and he felt as helpless as a child. “The Targaryen girl—”

The king groaned. “Seven hells, don’t start with her again. That’s done, I’ll hear no more of it.”

“Why would you want me as your Hand, if you refuse to listen to my counsel?”

“Why?” Robert laughed. “Why not? Someone has to rule this damnable kingdom. Put on the badge, Ned. It suits you. And if you ever throw it in my face again, I swear to you, I’ll pin the damned thing on Jaime Lannister.”