

EDDARD

The grey light of dawn was streaming through his window when the thunder of hoofbeats awoke Eddard Stark from his brief, exhausted sleep. He lifted his head from the table to look down into the yard. Below, men in mail and leather and crimson cloaks were making the morning ring to the sound of swords, and riding down mock warriors stuffed with straw. Ned watched Sandor Clegane gallop across the hard-packed ground to drive an iron-tipped lance through a dummy's head. Canvas ripped and straw exploded as Lannister guardsmen joked and cursed.

Is this brave show for my benefit? he wondered. If so, Cersei was a greater fool than he'd imagined. *Damn her, he thought, why is the woman not fled? I have given her chance after chance...*

The morning was overcast and grim. Ned broke his fast with his daughters and Septa Mordane. Sansa, still disconsolate, stared sullenly at her food and refused to eat, but Arya wolfed down everything that was set in front of her. "Syrio says we have time for one last lesson before we take ship this evening," she said. "Can I, Father? All my things are packed."

"A short lesson, and make certain you leave yourself time to bathe and change. I want you ready to leave by midday, is that understood?"

"By midday," Arya said.

Sansa looked up from her food. "If she can have a dancing lesson, why won't you let me say farewell to Prince Joffrey?"

"I would gladly go with her, Lord Eddard," Septa Mordane offered. "There would be no question of her missing the ship."

"It would not be wise for you to go to Joffrey right now, Sansa. I'm sorry."

Sansa's eyes filled with tears. "But *why*?"

"Sansa, your lord father knows best," Septa Mordane said. "You are not to question his decisions."

“It’s not *fair!*” Sansa pushed back from her table, knocked over her chair, and ran weeping from the solar.

Septa Mordane rose, but Ned gestured her back to her seat. “Let her go, Septa. I will try to make her understand when we are all safely back in Winterfell.” The septa bowed her head and sat down to finish her breakfast.

It was an hour later when Grand Maester Pycelle came to Eddard Stark in his solar. His shoulders slumped, as if the weight of the great maester’s chain around his neck had become too great to bear. “My lord,” he said, “King Robert is gone. The gods give him rest.”

“No,” Ned answered. “He hated rest. The gods give him love and laughter, and the joy of righteous battle.” It was strange how empty he felt. He had been expecting the visit, and yet with those words, something died within him. He would have given all his titles for the freedom to weep... but he was Robert’s Hand, and the hour he dreaded had come. “Be so good as to summon the members of the council here to my solar,” he told Pycelle. The Tower of the Hand was as secure as he and Tomard could make it; he could not say the same for the council chambers.

“My lord?” Pycelle blinked. “Surely the affairs of the kingdom will keep till the morrow, when our grief is not so fresh.”

Ned was quiet but firm. “I fear we must convene at once.”

Pycelle bowed. “As the Hand commands.” He called his servants and sent them running, then gratefully accepted Ned’s offer of a chair and a cup of sweet beer.

Ser Barristan Selmy was the first to answer the summons, immaculate in white cloak and enameled scales. “My lords,” he said, “my place is beside the young king now. Pray give me leave to attend him.”

“Your place is here, Ser Barristan,” Ned told him.

Littlefinger came next, still garbed in the blue velvets and silver mockingbird cape he had worn the night previous, his boots dusty from riding. “My lords,” he said, smiling at nothing in particular before he turned to Ned. “That little task you set me is accomplished, Lord Eddard.”

Varys entered in a wash of lavender, pink from his bath, his plump face scrubbed and freshly powdered, his soft slippers all but soundless. “The little birds sing a grievous song today,” he said as he seated himself. “The realm weeps. Shall we begin?”

“When Lord Renly arrives,” Ned said.

Varys gave him a sorrowful look. “I fear Lord Renly has left the city.”

“Left the *city*?” Ned had counted on Renly’s support.

“He took his leave through a postern gate an hour before dawn, accompanied by Ser Loras Tyrell and some fifty retainers,” Varys told them. “When last seen, they were galloping south in some haste, no doubt bound for Storm’s End or Highgarden.”

So much for Renly and his hundred swords. Ned did not like the smell of that, but there was nothing to be done for it. He drew out Robert’s last letter. “The king called me to his side last night and commanded me to record his final words. Lord Renly and Grand Maester Pycelle stood witness as Robert sealed the letter, to be opened by the council after his death. Ser Barristan, if you would be so kind?”

The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard examined the paper. “King Robert’s seal, and unbroken.” He opened the letter and read. “Lord Eddard Stark is herein named Protector of the Realm, to rule as regent until the heir comes of age.”

And as it happens, he is of age, Ned reflected, but he did not give voice to the thought. He trusted neither Pycelle nor Varys, and Ser Barristan was honor-bound to protect and defend the boy he thought his new king. The old knight would not abandon Joffrey easily. The need for deceit was a bitter taste in his mouth, but Ned knew he must tread softly here, must keep his counsel and play the game until he was firmly established as regent. There would be time enough to deal with the succession when Arya and Sansa were safely back in Winterfell, and Lord Stannis had returned to King’s Landing with all his power.

“I would ask this council to confirm me as Lord Protector, as Robert wished,” Ned said, watching their faces, wondering what thoughts hid

behind Pycelle's half-closed eyes, Littlefinger's lazy half-smile, and the nervous flutter of Varys's fingers.

The door opened. Fat Tom stepped into the solar. "Pardon, my lords, the king's steward insists..."

The royal steward entered and bowed. "Esteemed lords, the king demands the immediate presence of his small council in the throne room."

Ned had expected Cersei to strike quickly; the summons came as no surprise. "The king is dead," he said, "but we shall go with you nonetheless. Tom, assemble an escort, if you would."

Littlefinger gave Ned his arm to help him down the steps. Varys, Pycelle, and Ser Barristan followed close behind. A double column of men-at-arms in chainmail and steel helms was waiting outside the tower, eight strong. Grey cloaks snapped in the wind as the guardsmen marched them across the yard. There was no Lannister crimson to be seen, but Ned was reassured by the number of gold cloaks visible on the ramparts and at the gates.

Janos Slynt met them at the door to the throne room, armored in ornate black-and-gold plate, with a high-crested helm under one arm. The Commander bowed stiffly. His men pushed open the great oaken doors, twenty feet tall and banded with bronze.

The royal steward led them in. "All hail His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, 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," he sang out.

It was a long walk to the far end of the hall, where Joffrey waited atop the Iron Throne. Supported by Littlefinger, Ned Stark slowly limped and hopped toward the boy who called himself king. The others followed. The first time he had come this way, he had been on horseback, sword in hand, and the Targaryen dragons had watched from the walls as he forced Jaime Lannister down from the throne. He wondered if Joffrey would step down quite so easily.

Five knights of the Kingsguard—all but Ser Jaime and Ser Barristan—were arrayed in a crescent around the base of the throne. They were in full armor, enameled steel from helm to heel, long pale cloaks over their shoulders, shining white shields strapped to their left arms. Cersei Lannister and her two younger children stood behind Ser Boros and Ser Meryn. The queen wore a gown of sea-green silk, trimmed with Myrish lace as pale as foam. On her finger was a golden ring with an emerald the size of a pigeon's egg, on her head a matching tiara.

Above them, Prince Joffrey sat amidst the barbs and spikes in a cloth-of-gold doublet and a red satin cape. Sandor Clegane was stationed at the foot of the throne's steep narrow stair. He wore mail and soot-grey plate and his snarling dog's-head helm.

Behind the throne, twenty Lannister guardsmen waited with longswords hanging from their belts. Crimson cloaks draped their shoulders and steel lions crested their helms. But Littlefinger had kept his promise; all along the walls, in front of Robert's tapestries with their scenes of hunt and battle, the gold-cloaked ranks of the City Watch stood stiffly to attention, each man's hand clasped around the haft of an eight-foot-long spear tipped in black iron. They outnumbered the Lannisters five to one.

Ned's leg was a blaze of pain by the time he stopped. He kept a hand on Littlefinger's shoulder to help support his weight.

Joffrey stood. His red satin cape was patterned in gold thread; fifty roaring lions to one side, fifty prancing stags to the other. "I command the council to make all the necessary arrangements for my coronation," the boy proclaimed. "I wish to be crowned within the fortnight. Today I shall accept oaths of fealty from my loyal councillors."

Ned produced Robert's letter. "Lord Varys, be so kind as to show this to my lady of Lannister."

The eunuch carried the letter to Cersei. The queen glanced at the words. "Protector of the Realm," she read. "Is this meant to be your shield, my lord? A piece of paper?" She ripped the letter in half, ripped the halves in quarters, and let the pieces flutter to the floor.

"Those were the king's words," Ser Barristan said, shocked.

“We have a new king now,” Cersei Lannister replied. “Lord Eddard, when last we spoke, you gave me some counsel. Allow me to return the courtesy. Bend the knee, my lord. Bend the knee and swear fealty to my son, and we shall allow you to step down as Hand and live out your days in the grey waste you call home.”

“Would that I could,” Ned said grimly. If she was so determined to force the issue here and now, she left him no choice. “Your son has no claim to the throne he sits. Lord Stannis is Robert’s true heir.”

“*Liar!*” Joffrey screamed, his face reddening.

“Mother, what does he mean?” Princess Myrcella asked the queen plaintively. “Isn’t Joff the king now?”

“You condemn yourself with your own mouth, Lord Stark,” said Cersei Lannister. “Ser Barristan, seize this traitor.”

The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard hesitated. In the blink of an eye he was surrounded by Stark guardsmen, bare steel in their mailed fists.

“And now the treason moves from words to deeds,” Cersei said. “Do you think Ser Barristan stands alone, my lord?” With an ominous rasp of metal on metal, the Hound drew his longsword. The knights of the Kingsguard and twenty Lannister guardsmen in crimson cloaks moved to support him.

“*Kill him!*” the boy king screamed down from the Iron Throne. “*Kill all of them, I command it!*”

“You leave me no choice,” Ned told Cersei Lannister. He called out to Janos Slynt. “Commander, take the queen and her children into custody. Do them no harm, but escort them back to the royal apartments and keep them there, under guard.”

“Men of the Watch!” Janos Slynt shouted, donning his helm. A hundred gold cloaks leveled their spears and closed.

“I want no bloodshed,” Ned told the queen. “Tell your men to lay down their swords, and no one need—”

With a single sharp thrust, the nearest gold cloak drove his spear into Tomard’s back. Fat Tom’s blade dropped from nerveless fingers as the wet

red point burst out through his ribs, piercing leather and mail. He was dead before his sword hit the floor.

Ned's shout came far too late. Janos Slynt himself slashed open Varly's throat. Cayn whirled, steel flashing, drove back the nearest spearman with a flurry of blows; for an instant it looked as though he might cut his way free. Then the Hound was on him. Sandor Clegane's first cut took off Cayn's sword hand at the wrist; his second drove him to his knees and opened him from shoulder to breastbone.

As his men died around him, Littlefinger slid Ned's dagger from its sheath and shoved it up under his chin. His smile was apologetic. "I *did* warn you not to trust me, you know."