

## EDDARD

“They’ve found her, my lord.”

Ned rose quickly. “Our men or Lannister’s?”

“It was Jory,” his steward Vayon Poole replied. “She’s not been harmed.”

“Thank the gods,” Ned said. His men had been searching for Arya for four days now, but the queen’s men had been out hunting as well. “Where is she? Tell Jory to bring her here at once.”

“I am sorry, my lord,” Poole told him. “The guards on the gate were Lannister men, and they informed the queen when Jory brought her in. She’s being taken directly before the king...”

“*Damn* that woman!” Ned said, striding to the door. “Find Sansa and bring her to the audience chamber. Her voice may be needed.” He descended the tower steps in a red rage. He had led searches himself for the first three days, and had scarcely slept an hour since Arya had disappeared. This morning he had been so heartsick and weary he could scarcely stand, but now his fury was on him, filling him with strength.

Men called out to him as he crossed the castle yard, but Ned ignored them in his haste. He would have run, but he was still the King’s Hand, and a Hand must keep his dignity. He was aware of the eyes that followed him, of the muttered voices wondering what he would do.

The castle was a modest holding a half day’s ride south of the Trident. The royal party had made themselves the uninvited guests of its lord, Ser Raymun Darry, while the hunt for Arya and the butcher’s boy was conducted on both sides of the river. They were not welcome visitors. Ser Raymun lived under the king’s peace, but his family had fought beneath Rhaegar’s dragon banners at the Trident, and his three older brothers had died there, a truth neither Robert nor Ser Raymun had forgotten. With king’s men, Darry men, Lannister men, and Stark men all crammed into a castle far too small for them, tensions burned hot and heavy.

The king had appropriated Ser Raymun's audience chamber, and that was where Ned found them. The room was crowded when he burst in. Too crowded, he thought; left alone, he and Robert might have been able to settle the matter amicably.

Robert was slumped in Darry's high seat at the far end of the room, his face closed and sullen. Cersei Lannister and her son stood beside him. The queen had her hand on Joffrey's shoulder. Thick silken bandages still covered the boy's arm.

Arya stood in the center of the room, alone but for Jory Cassel, every eye upon her. "Arya," Ned called loudly. He went to her, his boots ringing on the stone floor. When she saw him, she cried out and began to sob.

Ned went to one knee and took her in his arms. She was shaking. "I'm sorry," she sobbed, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"I know," he said. She felt so tiny in his arms, nothing but a scrawny little girl. It was hard to see how she had caused so much trouble. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Her face was dirty, and her tears left pink tracks down her cheeks. "Hungry some. I ate some berries, but there was nothing else."

"We'll feed you soon enough," Ned promised. He rose to face the king. "What is the meaning of this?" His eyes swept the room, searching for friendly faces. But for his own men, they were few enough. Ser Raymun Darry guarded his look well. Lord Renly wore a half smile that might mean anything, and old Ser Barristan was grave; the rest were Lannister men, and hostile. Their only good fortune was that both Jaime Lannister and Sandor Clegane were missing, leading searches north of the Trident. "Why was I not told that my daughter had been found?" Ned demanded, his voice ringing. "Why was she not brought to me at once?"

He spoke to Robert, but it was Cersei Lannister who answered. "How *dare* you speak to your king in that manner!"

At that, the king stirred. "Quiet, woman," he snapped. He straightened in his seat. "I am sorry, Ned. I never meant to frighten the girl. It seemed best to bring her here and get the business done with quickly."

“And what business is that?” Ned put ice in his voice.

The queen stepped forward. “You know full well, Stark. This girl of yours attacked my son. Her and her butcher’s boy. That animal of hers tried to tear his arm off.”

“That’s not true,” Arya said loudly. “She just bit him a little. He was hurting Mycah.”

“Joff told us what happened,” the queen said. “You and the butcher boy beat him with clubs while you set your wolf on him.”

“That’s not how it was,” Arya said, close to tears again. Ned put a hand on her shoulder.

“Yes it is!” Prince Joffrey insisted. “They all attacked me, and she threw Lion’s Tooth in the river!” Ned noticed that he did not so much as glance at Arya as he spoke.

“Liar!” Arya yelled.

“Shut up!” the prince yelled back.

“*Enough!*” the king roared, rising from his seat, his voice thick with irritation. Silence fell. He glowered at Arya through his thick beard. “Now, child, you will tell me what happened. Tell it all, and tell it true. It is a great crime to lie to a king.” Then he looked over at his son. “When she is done, you will have your turn. Until then, hold your tongue.”

As Arya began her story, Ned heard the door open behind him. He glanced back and saw Vayon Poole enter with Sansa. They stood quietly at the back of the hall as Arya spoke. When she got to the part where she threw Joffrey’s sword into the middle of the Trident, Renly Baratheon began to laugh. The king bristled. “Ser Barristan, escort my brother from the hall before he chokes.”

Lord Renly stifled his laughter. “My brother is too kind. I can find the door myself.” He bowed to Joffrey. “Perchance later you’ll tell me how a nine-year-old girl the size of a wet rat managed to disarm you with a broom handle and throw your sword in the river.” As the door swung shut behind him, Ned heard him say, “Lion’s Tooth,” and guffaw once more.

Prince Joffrey was pale as he began his very different version of events. When his son was done talking, the king rose heavily from his seat, looking like a man who wanted to be anywhere but here. "What in all the seven hells am I supposed to make of this? He says one thing, she says another."

"They were not the only ones present," Ned said. "Sansa, come here." Ned had heard her version of the story the night Arya had vanished. He knew the truth. "Tell us what happened."

His eldest daughter stepped forward hesitantly. She was dressed in blue velvets trimmed with white, a silver chain around her neck. Her thick auburn hair had been brushed until it shone. She blinked at her sister, then at the young prince. "I don't know," she said tearfully, looking as though she wanted to bolt. "I don't remember. Everything happened so fast, I didn't see..."

"*You rotten!*" Arya shrieked. She flew at her sister like an arrow, knocking Sansa down to the ground, pummeling her. "Liar, liar, liar, liar."

"Arya, *stop it!*" Ned shouted. Jory pulled her off her sister, kicking. Sansa was pale and shaking as Ned lifted her back to her feet. "Are you hurt?" he asked, but she was staring at Arya, and she did not seem to hear.

"The girl is as wild as that filthy animal of hers," Cersei Lannister said. "Robert, I want her punished."

"Seven hells," Robert swore. "Cersei, look at her. She's a child. What would you have me do, whip her through the streets? Damn it, children fight. It's over. No lasting harm was done."

The queen was furious. "Joff will carry those scars for the rest of his life."

Robert Baratheon looked at his eldest son. "So he will. Perhaps they will teach him a lesson. Ned, see that your daughter is disciplined. I will do the same with my son."

"Gladly, Your Grace," Ned said with vast relief.

Robert started to walk away, but the queen was not done. "And what of the direwolf?" she called after him. "What of the beast that savaged your son?"

The king stopped, turned back, frowned. "I'd forgotten about the damned wolf."

Ned could see Arya tense in Jory's arms. Jory spoke up quickly. "We found no trace of the direwolf, Your Grace."

Robert did not look unhappy. "No? So be it."

The queen raised her voice. "A hundred golden dragons to the man who brings me its skin!"

"A costly pelt," Robert grumbled. "I want no part of this, woman. You can damn well buy your furs with Lannister gold."

The queen regarded him coolly. "I had not thought you so niggardly. The king I'd thought to wed would have laid a wolfskin across my bed before the sun went down."

Robert's face darkened with anger. "That would be a fine trick, without a wolf."

"We have a wolf," Cersei Lannister said. Her voice was very quiet, but her green eyes shone with triumph.

It took them all a moment to comprehend her words, but when they did, the king shrugged irritably. "As you will. Have Ser Ilyn see to it."

"Robert, you cannot mean this," Ned protested.

The king was in no mood for more argument. "Enough, Ned, I will hear no more. A direwolf is a savage beast. Sooner or later it would have turned on your girl the same way the other did on my son. Get her a dog, she'll be happier for it."

That was when Sansa finally seemed to comprehend. Her eyes were frightened as they went to her father. "He doesn't mean Lady, does he?" She saw the truth on his face. "No," she said. "No, not Lady, Lady didn't bite anybody, she's good..."

"Lady wasn't there," Arya shouted angrily. "You leave her alone!"

"Stop them," Sansa pleaded, "don't let them do it, please, please, it wasn't Lady, it was Nymeria, Arya did it, you can't, it wasn't Lady, don't

let them hurt Lady, I'll make her be good, I promise, I promise..." She started to cry.

All Ned could do was take her in his arms and hold her while she wept. He looked across the room at Robert. His old friend, closer than any brother. "Please, Robert. For the love you bear me. For the love you bore my sister. Please."

The king looked at them for a long moment, then turned his eyes on his wife. "Damn you, Cersei," he said with loathing.

Ned stood, gently disengaging himself from Sansa's grasp. All the weariness of the past four days had returned to him. "Do it yourself then, Robert," he said in a voice cold and sharp as steel. "At least have the courage to do it yourself."

Robert looked at Ned with flat, dead eyes and left without a word, his footsteps heavy as lead. Silence filled the hall.

"Where is the direwolf?" Cersei Lannister asked when her husband was gone. Beside her, Prince Joffrey was smiling.

"The beast is chained up outside the gatehouse, Your Grace," Ser Barristan Selmy answered reluctantly.

"Send for Ilyn Payne."

"No," Ned said. "Jory, take the girls back to their rooms and bring me Ice." The words tasted of bile in his throat, but he forced them out. "If it must be done, I will do it."

Cersei Lannister regarded him suspiciously. "You, Stark? Is this some trick? Why would you do such a thing?"

They were all staring at him, but it was Sansa's look that cut. "She is of the north. She deserves better than a butcher."

He left the room with his eyes burning and his daughter's wails echoing in his ears, and found the direwolf pup where they chained her. Ned sat beside her for a while. "Lady," he said, tasting the name. He had never paid much attention to the names the children had picked, but looking at her now, he knew that Sansa had chosen well. She was the smallest of the litter,

the prettiest, the most gentle and trusting. She looked at him with bright golden eyes, and he ruffled her thick grey fur.

Shortly, Jory brought him Ice.

When it was over, he said, "Choose four men and have them take the body north. Bury her at Winterfell."

"All that way?" Jory said, astonished.

"All that way," Ned affirmed. "The Lannister woman shall never have *this* skin."

He was walking back to the tower to give himself up to sleep at last when Sandor Clegane and his riders came pounding through the castle gate, back from their hunt.

There was something slung over the back of his destrier, a heavy shape wrapped in a bloody cloak. "No sign of your daughter, Hand," the Hound rasped down, "but the day was not wholly wasted. We got her little pet." He reached back and shoved the burden off, and it fell with a thump in front of Ned.

Bending, Ned pulled back the cloak, dreading the words he would have to find for Arya, but it was not Nymeria after all. It was the butcher's boy, Mycah, his body covered in dried blood. He had been cut almost in half from shoulder to waist by some terrible blow struck from above.

"You rode him down," Ned said.

The Hound's eyes seemed to glitter through the steel of that hideous dog's-head helm. "He ran." He looked at Ned's face and laughed. "But not very fast."