

## EDDARD

The straw on the floor stank of urine. There was no window, no bed, not even a slop bucket. He remembered walls of pale red stone festooned with patches of nitre, a grey door of splintered wood, four inches thick and studded with iron. He had seen them, briefly, a quick glimpse as they shoved him inside. Once the door had slammed shut, he had seen no more. The dark was absolute. He had as well been blind.

Or dead. Buried with his king. “Ah, Robert,” he murmured as his groping hand touched a cold stone wall, his leg throbbing with every motion. He remembered the jest the king had shared in the crypts of Winterfell, as the Kings of Winter looked on with cold stone eyes. *The king eats*, Robert had said, *and the Hand takes the shit*. How he had laughed. Yet he had gotten it wrong. *The king dies*, Ned Stark thought, *and the Hand is buried*.

The dungeon was under the Red Keep, deeper than he dared imagine. He remembered the old stories about Maegor the Cruel, who murdered all the masons who labored on his castle, so they might never reveal its secrets.

He damned them all: Littlefinger, Janos Slynt and his gold cloaks, the queen, the Kingslayer, Pycelle and Varys and Ser Barristan, even Lord Renly, Robert’s own blood, who had run when he was needed most. Yet in the end he blamed himself. “*Fool*,” he cried to the darkness, “thrice-damned blind fool.”

Cersei Lannister’s face seemed to float before him in the darkness. Her hair was full of sunlight, but there was mockery in her smile. “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die,” she whispered. Ned had played and lost, and his men had paid the price of his folly with their life’s blood.

When he thought of his daughters, he would have wept gladly, but the tears would not come. Even now, he was a Stark of Winterfell, and his grief and his rage froze hard inside him.

When he kept very still, his leg did not hurt so much, so he did his best to lie unmoving. For how long he could not say. There was no sun and no moon. He could not see to mark the walls. Ned closed his eyes and opened them; it made no difference. He slept and woke and slept again. He did not know which was more painful, the waking or the sleeping. When he slept, he dreamed: dark disturbing dreams of blood and broken promises. When he woke, there was nothing to do but think, and his waking thoughts were worse than nightmares. The thought of Cat was as painful as a bed of nettles. He wondered where she was, what she was doing. He wondered whether he would ever see her again.

Hours turned to days, or so it seemed. He could feel a dull ache in his shattered leg, an itch beneath the plaster. When he touched his thigh, the flesh was hot to his fingers. The only sound was his breathing. After a time, he began to talk aloud, just to hear a voice. He made plans to keep himself sane, built castles of hope in the dark. Robert's brothers were out in the world, raising armies at Dragonstone and Storm's End. Alyn and Harwin would return to King's Landing with the rest of his household guard once they had dealt with Ser Gregor. Catelyn would raise the north when the word reached her, and the lords of river and mountain and Vale would join her.

He found himself thinking of Robert more and more. He saw the king as he had been in the flower of his youth, tall and handsome, his great antlered helm on his head, his warhammer in hand, sitting his horse like a horned god. He heard his laughter in the dark, saw his eyes, blue and clear as mountain lakes. "Look at us, Ned," Robert said. "Gods, how did we come to this? You here, and me killed by a pig. We won a throne together..."

*I failed you, Robert, Ned thought. He could not say the words. I lied to you, hid the truth. I let them kill you.*

The king heard him. "You stiff-necked fool," he muttered, "too proud to listen. Can you eat pride, Stark? Will honor shield your children?" Cracks ran down his face, fissures opening in the flesh, and he reached up and ripped the mask away. It was not Robert at all; it was Littlefinger,

grinning, mocking him. When he opened his mouth to speak, his lies turned to pale grey moths and took wing.

Ned was half-asleep when the footsteps came down the hall. At first he thought he dreamt them; it had been so long since he had heard anything but the sound of his own voice. Ned was feverish by then, his leg a dull agony, his lips parched and cracked. When the heavy wooden door creaked open, the sudden light was painful to his eyes.

A gaoler thrust a jug at him. The clay was cool and beaded with moisture. Ned grasped it with both hands and gulped eagerly. Water ran from his mouth and dripped down through his beard. He drank until he thought he would be sick. "How long...?" he asked weakly when he could drink no more.

The gaoler was a scarecrow of a man with a rat's face and frayed beard, clad in a mail shirt and a leather half cape. "No talking," he said as he wrenched the jug from Ned's hands.

"Please," Ned said, "my daughters..." The door crashed shut. He blinked as the light vanished, lowered his head to his chest, and curled up on the straw. It no longer stank of urine and shit. It no longer smelled at all.

He could no longer tell the difference between waking and sleeping. The memory came creeping upon him in the darkness, as vivid as a dream. It was the year of false spring, and he was eighteen again, down from the Eyrie to the tourney at Harrenhal. He could see the deep green of the grass, and smell the pollen on the wind. Warm days and cool nights and the sweet taste of wine. He remembered Brandon's laughter, and Robert's berserk valor in the melee, the way he laughed as he unhorsed men left and right. He remembered Jaime Lannister, a golden youth in scaled white armor, kneeling on the grass in front of the king's pavilion and making his vows to protect and defend King Aerys. Afterward, Ser Oswell Whent helped Jaime to his feet, and the White Bull himself, Lord Commander Ser Gerold Hightower, fastened the snowy cloak of the Kingsguard about his shoulders. All six White Swords were there to welcome their newest brother.

Yet when the jousting began, the day belonged to Rhaegar Targaryen. The crown prince wore the armor he would die in: gleaming black plate

with the three-headed dragon of his House wrought in rubies on the breast. A plume of scarlet silk streamed behind him when he rode, and it seemed no lance could touch him. Brandon fell to him, and Bronze Yohn Royce, and even the splendid Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning.

Robert had been jesting with Jon and old Lord Hunter as the prince circled the field after unhorsing Ser Barristan in the final tilt to claim the champion's crown. Ned remembered the moment when all the smiles died, when Prince Rhaegar Targaryen urged his horse past his own wife, the Dornish princess Elia Martell, to lay the queen of beauty's laurel in Lyanna's lap. He could see it still: a crown of winter roses, blue as frost.

Ned Stark reached out his hand to grasp the flowery crown, but beneath the pale blue petals the thorns lay hidden. He felt them clawing at his skin, sharp and cruel, saw the slow trickle of blood run down his fingers, and woke, trembling, in the dark.

*Promise me*, Ned, his sister had whispered from her bed of blood. She had loved the scent of winter roses.

"Gods save me," Ned wept. "I am going mad."

The gods did not deign to answer.

Each time the turnkey brought him water, he told himself another day had passed. At first he would beg the man for some word of his daughters and the world beyond his cell. Grunts and kicks were his only replies. Later, when the stomach cramps began, he begged for food instead. It made no matter; he was not fed. Perhaps the Lannisters meant for him to starve to death. "No," he told himself. If Cersei had wanted him dead, he would have been cut down in the throne room with his men. She wanted him alive. Weak, desperate, yet alive. Catelyn held her brother; she dare not kill him or the Imp's life would be forfeit as well.

From outside his cell came the rattle of iron chains. As the door creaked open, Ned put a hand to the damp wall and pushed himself toward the light. The glare of a torch made him squint. "Food," he croaked.

"Wine," a voice answered. It was not the rat-faced man; this gaoler was stouter, shorter, though he wore the same leather half cape and spiked steel

cap. "Drink, Lord Eddard." He thrust a wineskin into Ned's hands.

The voice was strangely familiar, yet it took Ned Stark a moment to place it. "*Varys*?" he said groggily when it came. He touched the man's face. "I'm not... not dreaming this. You're here." The eunuch's plump cheeks were covered with a dark stubble of beard. Ned felt the coarse hair with his fingers. Varys had transformed himself into a grizzled turnkey, reeking of sweat and sour wine. "How did you... what sort of magician are you?"

"A thirsty one," Varys said. "Drink, my lord."

Ned's hands fumbled at the skin. "Is this the same poison they gave Robert?"

"You wrong me," Varys said sadly. "Truly, no one loves a eunuch. Give me the skin." He drank, a trickle of red leaking from the corner of his plump mouth. "Not the equal of the vintage you offered me the night of the tourney, but no more poisonous than most," he concluded, wiping his lips. "Here."

Ned tried a swallow. "Dregs." He felt as though he were about to bring the wine back up.

"All men must swallow the sour with the sweet. High lords and eunuchs alike. Your hour has come, my lord."

"My daughters..."

"The younger girl escaped Ser Meryn and fled," Varys told him. "I have not been able to find her. Nor have the Lannisters. A kindness, there. Our new king loves her not. Your older girl is still betrothed to Joffrey. Cersei keeps her close. She came to court a few days ago to plead that you be spared. A pity you couldn't have been there, you would have been touched." He leaned forward intently. "I trust you realize that you are a dead man, Lord Eddard?"

"The queen will not kill me," Ned said. His head swam; the wine was strong, and it had been too long since he'd eaten. "Cat... Cat holds her brother..."

“The *wrong* brother,” Varys sighed. “And lost to her, in any case. She let the Imp slip through her fingers. I expect he is dead by now, somewhere in the Mountains of the Moon.”

“If that is true, slit my throat and have done with it.” He was dizzy from the wine, tired and heartsick.

“Your blood is the last thing I desire.”

Ned frowned. “When they slaughtered my guard, you stood beside the queen and watched, and said not a word.”

“And would again. I seem to recall that I was unarmed, unarmored, and surrounded by Lannister swords.” The eunuch looked at him curiously, tilting his head. “When I was a young boy, before I was cut, I traveled with a troupe of mummers through the Free Cities. They taught me that each man has a role to play, in life as well as mummary. So it is at court. The King’s Justice must be fearsome, the master of coin must be frugal, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard must be valiant... and the master of whisperers must be sly and obsequious and without scruple. A courageous informer would be as useless as a cowardly knight.” He took the wineskin back and drank.

Ned studied the eunuch’s face, searching for truth beneath the mummer’s scars and false stubble. He tried some more wine. This time it went down easier. “Can you free me from this pit?”

“I could... but *will* I? No. Questions would be asked, and the answers would lead back to me.”

Ned had expected no more. “You are blunt.”

“A eunuch has no honor, and a spider does not enjoy the luxury of scruples, my lord.”

“Would you at least consent to carry a message out for me?”

“That would depend on the message. I will gladly provide you with paper and ink, if you like. And when you have written what you will, I will take the letter and read it, and deliver it or not, as best serves my own ends.”

“Your own ends. What ends are those, Lord Varys?”

“Peace,” Varys replied without hesitation. “If there was one soul in King’s Landing who was truly desperate to keep Robert Baratheon alive, it was me.” He sighed. “For fifteen years I protected him from his enemies, but I could not protect him from his friends. What strange fit of madness led you to tell the queen that you had learned the truth of Joffrey’s birth?”

“The madness of mercy,” Ned admitted.

“Ah,” said Varys. “To be sure. You are an honest and honorable man, Lord Eddard. Ofttimes I forget that. I have met so few of them in my life.” He glanced around the cell. “When I see what honesty and honor have won you, I understand why.”

Ned Stark laid his head back against the damp stone wall and closed his eyes. His leg was throbbing. “The king’s wine... did you question Lancel?”

“Oh, indeed. Cersei gave him the wineskins, and told him it was Robert’s favorite vintage.” The eunuch shrugged. “A hunter lives a perilous life. If the boar had not done for Robert, it would have been a fall from a horse, the bite of a wood adder, an arrow gone astray... the forest is the abbatoir of the gods. It was not wine that killed the king. It was your *mercy*.”

Ned had feared as much. “Gods forgive me.”

“If there are gods,” Varys said, “I expect they will. The queen would not have waited long in any case. Robert was becoming unruly, and she needed to be rid of him to free her hands to deal with his brothers. They are quite a pair, Stannis and Renly. The iron gauntlet and the silk glove.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You have been foolish, my lord. You ought to have heeded Littlefinger when he urged you to support Joffrey’s succession.”

“How... how could you know of that?”

Varys smiled. “I know, that’s all that need concern you. I also know that on the morrow the queen will pay you a visit.”

Slowly Ned raised his eyes. “Why?”

“Cersei is frightened of you, my lord... but she has other enemies she fears even more. Her beloved Jaime is fighting the river lords even now.

Lysa Arryn sits in the Eyrie, ringed in stone and steel, and there is no love lost between her and the queen. In Dorne, the Martells still brood on the murder of Princess Elia and her babes. And now your son marches down the Neck with a northern host at his back.”

“Robb is only a boy,” Ned said, aghast.

“A boy with an army,” Varys said. “Yet only a boy, as you say. The king’s brothers are the ones giving Cersei sleepless nights... Lord Stannis in particular. His claim is the true one, he is known for his prowess as a battle commander, and he is utterly without mercy. There is no creature on earth half so terrifying as a truly just man. No one knows what Stannis has been doing on Dragonstone, but I will wager you that he’s gathered more swords than seashells. So here is Cersei’s nightmare: while her father and brother spend their power battling Starks and Tullys, Lord Stannis will land, proclaim himself king, and lop off her son’s curly blond head... and her own in the bargain, though I truly believe she cares more about the boy.”

“Stannis Baratheon is Robert’s true heir,” Ned said. “The throne is his by rights. I would welcome his ascent.”

Varys *tsked*. “Cersei will not want to hear that, I promise you. Stannis may win the throne, but only your rotting head will remain to cheer unless you guard that tongue of yours. Sansa begged so sweetly, it would be a shame if you threw it all away. You are being given your life back, if you’ll take it. Cersei is no fool. She knows a tame wolf is of more use than a dead one.”

“You want me to *serve* the woman who murdered my king, butchered my men, and crippled my son?” Ned’s voice was thick with disbelief.

“I want you to serve the realm,” Varys said. “Tell the queen that you will confess your vile treason, command your son to lay down his sword, and proclaim Joffrey as the true heir. Offer to denounce Stannis and Renly as faithless usurpers. Our green-eyed lioness knows you are a man of honor. If you will give her the peace she needs and the time to deal with Stannis, and pledge to carry her secret to your grave, I believe she will allow you to take the black and live out the rest of your days on the Wall, with your brother and that baseborn son of yours.”



The thought of Jon filled Ned with a sense of shame, and a sorrow too deep for words. If only he could see the boy again, sit and talk with him... pain shot through his broken leg, beneath the filthy grey plaster of his cast. He winced, his fingers opening and closing helplessly. "Is this your own scheme," he gasped out at Varys, "or are you in league with Littlefinger?"

That seemed to amuse the eunuch. "I would sooner wed the Black Goat of Qohor. Littlefinger is the second most devious man in the Seven Kingdoms. Oh, I feed him choice whispers, sufficient so that he *thinks* I am his... just as I allow Cersei to believe I am hers."

"And just as you let me believe that you were mine. Tell me, Lord Varys, who do you truly serve?"

Varys smiled thinly. "Why, the realm, my good lord, how ever could you doubt that? I swear it by my lost manhood. I serve the realm, and the realm needs peace." He finished the last swallow of wine, and tossed the empty skin aside. "So what is your answer, Lord Eddard? Give me your word that you'll tell the queen what she wants to hear when she comes calling."

"If I did, my word would be as hollow as an empty suit of armor. My life is not so precious to me as that."

"Pity." The eunuch stood. "And your daughter's life, my lord? How precious is that?"

A chill pierced Ned's heart. "My daughter..."

"Surely you did not think I'd forgotten about your sweet innocent, my lord? The queen most certainly has not."

"No," Ned pleaded, his voice cracking. "Varys, gods have mercy, do as you like with me, but leave my daughter out of your schemes. Sansa's no more than a child."

"Rhaenys was a child too. Prince Rhaegar's daughter. A precious little thing, younger than your girls. She had a small black kitten she called Balerion, did you know? I always wondered what happened to him. Rhaenys liked to pretend he was the true Balerion, the Black Dread of old, but I imagine the Lannisters taught her the difference between a kitten and a

dragon quick enough, the day they broke down her door.” Varys gave a long weary sigh, the sigh of a man who carried all the sadness of the world in a sack upon his shoulders. “The High Septon once told me that as we sin, so do we suffer. If that’s true, Lord Eddard, tell me... why is it always the innocents who suffer most, when you high lords play your game of thrones? Ponder it, if you would, while you wait upon the queen. And spare a thought for this as well: The next visitor who calls on you could bring you bread and cheese and the milk of the poppy for your pain... or he could bring you Sansa’s head.

“The choice, my dear lord Hand, is *entirely* yours.”