

## EDDARD

“Pain is a gift from the gods, Lord Eddard,” Grand Maester Pycelle told him. “It means the bone is knitting, the flesh healing itself. Be thankful.”

“I will be thankful when my leg stops throbbing.”

Pycelle set a stoppered flask on the table by the bed. “The milk of the poppy, for when the pain grows too onerous.”

“I sleep too much already.”

“Sleep is the great healer.”

“I had hoped that was you.”

Pycelle smiled wanly. “It is good to see you in such a fierce humor, my lord.” He leaned close and lowered his voice. “There was a raven this morning, a letter for the queen from her lord father. I thought you had best know.”

“Dark wings, dark words,” Ned said grimly. “What of it?”

“Lord Tywin is greatly wroth about the men you sent after Ser Gregor Clegane,” the maester confided. “I feared he would be. You will recall, I said as much in council.”

“Let him be wroth,” Ned said. Every time his leg throbbed, he remembered Jaime Lannister’s smile, and Jory dead in his arms. “Let him write all the letters to the queen he likes. Lord Beric rides beneath the king’s own banner. If Lord Tywin attempts to interfere with the king’s justice, he will have Robert to answer to. The only thing His Grace enjoys more than hunting is making war on lords who defy him.”

Pycelle pulled back, his maester’s chain jangling. “As you say. I shall visit again on the morrow.” The old man hurriedly gathered up his things and took his leave. Ned had little doubt that he was bound straight for the royal apartments, to whisper at the queen. *I thought you had best know*, indeed... as if Cersei had not instructed him to pass along her father’s threats. He hoped his response rattled those perfect teeth of hers. Ned was

not near as confident of Robert as he pretended, but there was no reason Cersei need know that.

When Pycelle was gone, Ned called for a cup of honeyed wine. That clouded the mind as well, yet not as badly. He needed to be able to think. A thousand times, he asked himself what Jon Arryn might have done, had he lived long enough to act on what he'd learned. Or perhaps he *had* acted, and died for it.

It was queer how sometimes a child's innocent eyes can see things that grown men are blind to. Someday, when Sansa was grown, he would have to tell her how she had made it all come clear for him. *He's not the least bit like that old drunken king*, she had declared, angry and unknowing, and the simple truth of it had twisted inside him, cold as death. *This was the sword that killed Jon Arryn*, Ned thought then, *and it will kill Robert as well, a slower death but full as certain*. Shattered legs may heal in time, but some betrayals fester and poison the soul.

Littlefinger came calling an hour after the Grand Maester had left, clad in a plum-colored doublet with a mockingbird embroidered on the breast in black thread, and a striped cloak of black and white. "I cannot visit long, my lord," he announced. "Lady Tanda expects me to lunch with her. No doubt she will roast me a fatted calf. If it's near as fatted as her daughter, I'm like to rupture and die. And how is your leg?"

"Inflamed and painful, with an itch that is driving me mad."

Littlefinger lifted an eyebrow. "In future, try not to let any horses fall on it. I would urge you to heal quickly. The realm grows restive. Varys has heard ominous whispers from the west. Freeriders and sellswords have been flocking to Casterly Rock, and not for the thin pleasure of Lord Tywin's conversation."

"Is there word of the king?" Ned demanded. "Just how long does Robert intend to hunt?"

"Given his preferences, I believe he'd stay in the forest until you and the queen both die of old age," Lord Petyr replied with a faint smile. "Lacking that, I imagine he'll return as soon as he's killed something. They found the white hart, it seems... or rather, what remained of it. Some

wolves found it first, and left His Grace scarcely more than a hoof and a horn. Robert was in a fury, until he heard talk of some monstrous boar deeper in the forest. Then nothing would do but he must have it. Prince Joffrey returned this morning, with the Royces, Ser Balon Swann, and some twenty others of the party. The rest are still with the king.”

“The Hound?” Ned asked, frowning. Of all the Lannister party, Sandor Clegane was the one who concerned him the most, now that Ser Jaime had fled the city to join his father.

“Oh, returned with Joffrey, and went straight to the queen.” Littlefinger smiled. “I would have given a hundred silver stags to have been a roach in the rushes when he learned that Lord Beric was off to behead his brother.”

“Even a blind man could see the Hound loathed his brother.”

“Ah, but Gregor was *his* to loathe, not yours to kill. Once Dondarrion lops the summit off our Mountain, the Clegane lands and incomes will pass to Sandor, but I wouldn’t hold my water waiting for his thanks, not that one. And now you must forgive me. Lady Tanda awaits with her fatted calves.”

On the way to the door, Lord Petyr spied Grand Maester Malleon’s massive tome on the table and paused to idly flip open the cover. “*The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, With Descriptions of Many High Lords and Noble Ladies and Their Children,*” he read. “Now there is tedious reading if ever I saw it. A sleeping potion, my lord?”

For a brief moment Ned considered telling him all of it, but there was something in Littlefinger’s japes that irked him. The man was too clever by half, a mocking smile never far from his lips. “Jon Arryn was studying this volume when he was taken sick,” Ned said in a careful tone, to see how he might respond.

And he responded as he always did: with a quip. “In that case,” he said, “death must have come as a blessed relief.” Lord Petyr Baelish bowed and took his leave.

Eddard Stark allowed himself a curse. Aside from his own retainers, there was scarcely a man in this city he trusted. Littlefinger had concealed

Catelyn and helped Ned in his inquiries, yet his haste to save his own skin when Jaime and his swords had come out of the rain still rankled. Varys was worse. For all his protestations of loyalty, the eunuch knew too much and did too little. Grand Maester Pycelle seemed more Cersei's creature with every passing day, and Ser Barristan was an old man, and rigid. He would tell Ned to do his duty.

Time was perilously short. The king would return from his hunt soon, and honor would require Ned to go to him with all he had learned. Vayon Poole had arranged for Sansa and Arya to sail on the *Wind Witch* out of Braavos, three days hence. They would be back at Winterfell before the harvest. Ned could no longer use his concern for their safety to excuse his delay.

Yet last night he had dreamt of Rhaegar's children. Lord Tywin had laid the bodies beneath the Iron Throne, wrapped in the crimson cloaks of his house guard. That was clever of him; the blood did not show so badly against the red cloth. The little princess had been barefoot, still dressed in her bed gown, and the boy... the boy...

Ned could not let that happen again. The realm could not withstand a second mad king, another dance of blood and vengeance. He must find some way to save the children.

Robert could be merciful. Ser Barristan was scarcely the only man he had pardoned. Grand Maester Pycelle, Varys the Spider, Lord Balon Greyjoy; each had been counted an enemy to Robert once, and each had been welcomed into friendship and allowed to retain honors and office for a pledge of fealty. So long as a man was brave and honest, Robert would treat him with all the honor and respect due a valiant enemy.

This was something else: poison in the dark, a knife thrust to the soul. This he could never forgive, no more than he had forgiven Rhaegar. *He will kill them all*, Ned realized.

And yet, he knew he could not keep silent. He had a duty to Robert, to the realm, to the shade of Jon Arryn... and to Bran, who surely must have stumbled on some part of the truth. Why else would they have tried to slay him?

Late that afternoon he summoned Tomard, the portly guardsman with the ginger-colored whiskers his children called Fat Tom. With Jory dead and Alyn gone, Fat Tom had command of his household guard. The thought filled Ned with vague disquiet. Tomard was a solid man; affable, loyal, tireless, capable in a limited way, but he was near fifty, and even in his youth he had never been energetic. Perhaps Ned should not have been so quick to send off half his guard, and all his best swords among them.

“I shall require your help,” Ned said when Tomard appeared, looking faintly apprehensive, as he always did when called before his lord. “Take me to the godswood.”

“Is that wise, Lord Eddard? With your leg and all?”

“Perhaps not. But necessary.”

Tomard summoned Varly. With one arm around each man’s shoulders, Ned managed to descend the steep tower steps and hobble across the bailey. “I want the guard doubled,” he told Fat Tom. “No one enters or leaves the Tower of the Hand without my leave.”

Tom blinked. “M’lord, with Alyn and the others away, we are hard-pressed already—”

“It will only be a short while. Lengthen the watches.”

“As you say, m’lord,” Tom answered. “Might I ask why—”

“Best not,” Ned answered crisply.

The godswood was empty, as it always was here in this citadel of the southron gods. Ned’s leg was screaming as they lowered him to the grass beside the heart tree. “Thank you.” He drew a paper from his sleeve, sealed with the sigil of his House. “Kindly deliver this at once.”

Tomard looked at the name Ned had written on the paper and licked his lips anxiously. “My lord...”

“Do as I bid you, Tom,” Ned said.

How long he waited in the quiet of the godswood, he could not say. It was peaceful here. The thick walls shut out the clamor of the castle, and he could hear birds singing, the murmur of crickets, leaves rustling in a gentle

wind. The heart tree was an oak, brown and faceless, yet Ned Stark still felt the presence of his gods. His leg did not seem to hurt so much.

She came to him at sunset, as the clouds reddened above the walls and towers. She came alone, as he had bid her. For once she was dressed simply, in leather boots and hunting greens. When she drew back the hood of her brown cloak, he saw the bruise where the king had struck her. The angry plum color had faded to yellow, and the swelling was down, but there was no mistaking it for anything but what it was.

“Why here?” Cersei Lannister asked as she stood over him.

“So the gods can see.”

She sat beside him on the grass. Her every move was graceful. Her curling blond hair moved in the wind, and her eyes were green as the leaves of summer. It had been a long time since Ned Stark had seen her beauty, but he saw it now. “I know the truth Jon Arryn died for,” he told her.

“Do you?” The queen watched his face, wary as a cat. “Is that why you called me here, Lord Stark? To pose me riddles? Or is it your intent to seize me, as your wife seized my brother?”

“If you truly believed that, you would never have come.” Ned touched her cheek gently. “Has he done this before?”

“Once or twice.” She shied away from his hand. “Never on the face before. Jaime would have killed him, even if it meant his own life.” Cersei looked at him defiantly. “My brother is worth a hundred of your friend.”

“Your brother?” Ned said. “Or your lover?”

“Both.” She did not flinch from the truth. “Since we were children together. And why not? The Targaryens wed brother to sister for three hundred years, to keep the bloodlines pure. And Jaime and I are more than brother and sister. We are one person in two bodies. We shared a womb together. He came into this world holding my foot, our old maester said. When he is in me, I feel... whole.” The ghost of a smile flitted over her lips.

“My son Bran...”

To her credit, Cersei did not look away. “He saw us. You love your children, do you not?”

Robert had asked him the very same question, the morning of the melee. He gave her the same answer. "With all my heart."

"No less do I love mine."

Ned thought, *If it came to that, the life of some child I did not know, against Robb and Sansa and Arya and Bran and Rickon, what would I do? Even more so, what would Catelyn do, if it were Jon's life, against the children of her body?* He did not know. He prayed he never would.

"All three are Jaime's," he said. It was not a question.

"Thank the gods."

*The seed is strong*, Jon Arryn had cried on his deathbed, and so it was. All those bastards, all with hair as black as night. Grand Maester Malleon recorded the last mating between stag and lion, some ninety years ago, when Tya Lannister wed Gowen Baratheon, third son of the reigning lord. Their only issue, an unnamed boy described in Malleon's tome as a *large and lusty lad born with a full head of black hair*, died in infancy. Thirty years before that a male Lannister had taken a Baratheon maid to wife. She had given him three daughters and a son, each black-haired. No matter how far back Ned searched in the brittle yellowed pages, always he found the gold yielding before the coal.

"A dozen years," Ned said. "How is it that you have had no children by the king?"

She lifted her head, defiant. "Your Robert got me with child once," she said, her voice thick with contempt. "My brother found a woman to cleanse me. He never knew. If truth be told, I can scarcely bear for him to touch me, and I have not let him inside me for years. I know other ways to pleasure him, when he leaves his whores long enough to stagger up to my bedchamber. Whatever we do, the king is usually so drunk that he's forgotten it all by the next morning."

How could they have all been so blind? The truth was there in front of them all the time, written on the children's faces. Ned felt sick. "I remember Robert as he was the day he took the throne, every inch a king," he said

quietly. “A thousand other women might have loved him with all their hearts. What did he do to make you hate him so?”

Her eyes burned, green fire in the dusk, like the lioness that was her sigil. “The night of our wedding feast, the first time we shared a bed, he called me by your sister’s name. He was on top of me, *in* me, stinking of wine, and he whispered *Lyanna*.”

Ned Stark thought of pale blue roses, and for a moment he wanted to weep. “I do not know which of you I pity most.”

The queen seemed amused by that. “Save your pity for yourself, Lord Stark. I want none of it.”

“You know what I must do.”

“*Must?*” She put her hand on his good leg, just above the knee. “A true man does what he will, not what he must.” Her fingers brushed lightly against his thigh, the gentlest of promises. “The realm needs a strong Hand. Joff will not come of age for years. No one wants war again, least of all me.” Her hand touched his face, his hair. “If friends can turn to enemies, enemies can become friends. Your wife is a thousand leagues away, and my brother has fled. Be kind to me, Ned. I swear to you, you shall never regret it.”

“Did you make the same offer to Jon Arryn?”

She slapped him.

“I shall wear that as a badge of honor,” Ned said dryly.

“*Honor,*” she spat. “How dare you play the noble lord with me! What do you take me for? You’ve a bastard of your own, I’ve seen him. Who was the mother, I wonder? Some Dornish peasant you raped while her holdfast burned? A whore? Or was it the grieving sister, the Lady Ashara? She threw herself into the sea, I’m told. Why was that? For the brother you slew, or the child you stole? Tell me, my *honorable* Lord Eddard, how are you any different from Robert, or me, or Jaime?”

“For a start,” said Ned, “I do not kill children. You would do well to listen, my lady. I shall say this only once. When the king returns from his hunt, I intend to lay the truth before him. You must be gone by then. You



and your children, all three, and not to Casterly Rock. If I were you, I should take ship for the Free Cities, or even farther, to the Summer Isles or the Port of Ibben. As far as the winds blow.”

“Exile,” she said. “A bitter cup to drink from.”

“A sweeter cup than your father served Rhaegar’s children,” Ned said, “and kinder than you deserve. Your father and your brothers would do well to go with you. Lord Tywin’s gold will buy you comfort and hire swords to keep you safe. You shall need them. I promise you, no matter where you flee, Robert’s wrath will follow you, to the back of beyond if need be.”

The queen stood. “And what of my wrath, Lord Stark?” she asked softly. Her eyes searched his face. “You should have taken the realm for yourself. It was there for the taking. Jaime told me how you found him on the Iron Throne the day King’s Landing fell, and made him yield it up. That was your moment. All you needed to do was climb those steps, and sit. Such a sad mistake.”

“I have made more mistakes than you can possibly imagine,” Ned said, “but that was not one of them.”

“Oh, but it was, my lord,” Cersei insisted. “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground.”

She turned up her hood to hide her swollen face and left him there in the dark beneath the oak, amidst the quiet of the godswood, under a blue-black sky. The stars were coming out.