

## EDDARD

“Robert, I beg of you,” Ned pleaded, “hear what you are saying. You are talking of murdering a child.”

“*The whore is pregnant!*” The king’s fist slammed down on the council table loud as a thunderclap. “I warned you this would happen, Ned. Back in the barrowlands, I warned you, but you did not care to hear it. Well, you’ll hear it now. I want them dead, mother and child both, and that fool Viserys as well. Is that plain enough for you? *I want them dead.*”

The other councillors were all doing their best to pretend that they were somewhere else. No doubt they were wiser than he was. Eddard Stark had seldom felt quite so alone. “You will dishonor yourself forever if you do this.”

“Then let it be on my head, so long as it is done. I am not so blind that I cannot see the shadow of the axe when it is hanging over my own neck.”

“There is no axe,” Ned told his king. “Only the shadow of a shadow, twenty years removed... if it exists at all.”

“*If?*” Varys asked softly, wringing powdered hands together. “My lord, you wrong me. Would I bring ties to king and council?”

Ned looked at the eunuch coldly. “You would bring us the whisperings of a traitor half a world away, my lord. Perhaps Mormont is wrong. Perhaps he is lying.”

“Ser Jorah would not dare deceive me,” Varys said with a sly smile. “Rely on it, my lord. The princess is with child.”

“So you say. If you are wrong, we need not fear. If the girl miscarries, we need not fear. If she births a daughter in place of a son, we need not fear. If the babe dies in infancy, we need not fear.”

“But if it *is* a boy?” Robert insisted. “If he lives?”

“The narrow sea would still lie between us. I shall fear the Dothraki the day they teach their horses to run on water.”

The king took a swallow of wine and glowered at Ned across the council table. "So you would counsel me to do nothing until the dragonspawn has landed his army on my shores, is that it?"

"This 'dragonspawn' is in his mother's belly," Ned said. "Even Aegon did no conquering until after he was weaned."

"*Gods!* You are stubborn as an aurochs, Stark." The king looked around the council table. "Have the rest of you mislaid your tongues? Will no one talk sense to this frozen-faced fool?"

Varys gave the king an unctuous smile and laid a soft hand on Ned's sleeve. "I understand your qualms, Lord Eddard, truly I do. It gave me no joy to bring this grievous news to council. It is a terrible thing we contemplate, a *vile* thing. Yet we who presume to rule must do vile things for the good of the realm, howevermuch it pains us."

Lord Renly shrugged. "The matter seems simple enough to me. We ought to have had Viserys and his sister killed years ago, but His Grace my brother made the mistake of listening to Jon Arryn."

"Mercy is never a mistake, Lord Renly," Ned replied. "On the Trident, Ser Barristan here cut down a dozen good men, Robert's friends and mine. When they brought him to us, grievously wounded and near death, Roose Bolton urged us to cut his throat, but your brother said, 'I will not kill a man for loyalty, nor for fighting well,' and sent his own maester to tend Ser Barristan's wounds." He gave the king a long cool look. "Would that man were here today."

Robert had shame enough to blush. "It was not the same," he complained. "Ser Barristan was a knight of the Kingsguard."

"Whereas Daenerys is a fourteen-year-old girl." Ned knew he was pushing this well past the point of wisdom, yet he could not keep silent. "Robert, I ask you, what did we rise against Aerys Targaryen for, if not to put an end to the murder of children?"

"To put an end to *Targaryens!*" the king growled.

"Your Grace, I never knew you to fear Rhaegar." Ned fought to keep the scorn out of his voice, and failed. "Have the years so unmanned you that

you tremble at the shadow of an unborn child?”

Robert purpled. “No more, Ned,” he warned, pointing. “Not another word. Have you forgotten who is king here?”

“No, Your Grace,” Ned replied. “Have you?”

“*Enough!*” the king bellowed. “I am sick of talk. I’ll be done with this, or be damned. What say you all?”

“She must be killed,” Lord Renly declared.

“We have no choice,” murmured Varys. “Sadly, sadly...”

Ser Barristan Selmy raised his pale blue eyes from the table and said, “Your Grace, there is honor in facing an enemy on the battlefield, but none in killing him in his mother’s womb. Forgive me, but I must stand with Lord Eddard.”

Grand Maester Pycelle cleared his throat, a process that seemed to take some minutes. “My order serves the realm, not the ruler. Once I counseled King Aerys as loyally as I counsel King Robert now, so I bear this girl child of his no ill will. Yet I ask you this—should war come again, how many soldiers will die? How many towns will burn? How many children will be ripped from their mothers to perish on the end of a spear?” He stroked his luxuriant white beard, infinitely sad, infinitely weary. “Is it not wiser, even *kinder*, that Daenerys Targaryen should die now so that tens of thousands might live?”

“Kinder,” Varys said. “Oh, well and truly spoken, Grand Maester. It is so true. Should the gods in their caprice grant Daenerys Targaryen a son, the realm must bleed.”

Littlefinger was the last. As Ned looked to him, Lord Petyr stifled a yawn. “When you find yourself in bed with an ugly woman, the best thing to do is close your eyes and get on with it,” he declared. “Waiting won’t make the maid any prettier. Kiss her and be done with it.”

“*Kiss her?*” Ser Barristan repeated, aghast.

“A steel kiss,” said Littlefinger.

Robert turned to face his Hand. “Well, there it is, Ned. You and Selmy stand alone on this matter. The only question that remains is, who can we

find to kill her?”

“Mormont craves a royal pardon,” Lord Renly reminded them.

“Desperately,” Varys said, “yet he craves life even more. By now, the princess nears Vaes Dothrak, where it is death to draw a blade. If I told you what the Dothraki would do to the poor man who used one on a *khaleesi*, none of you would sleep tonight.” He stroked a powdered cheek. “Now, poison... the tears of Lys, let us say. Khal Drogo need never know it was not a natural death.”

Grand Maester Pycelle’s sleepy eyes flicked open. He squinted suspiciously at the eunuch.

“Poison is a coward’s weapon,” the king complained.

Ned had heard enough. “You send hired knives to kill a fourteen-year-old girl and still quibble about honor?” He pushed back his chair and stood. “Do it yourself, Robert. The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. Look her in the eyes before you kill her. See her tears, hear her last words. You owe her that much at least.”

“*Gods*,” the king swore, the word exploding out of him as if he could barely contain his fury. “You mean it, damn you.” He reached for the flagon of wine at his elbow, found it empty, and flung it away to shatter against the wall. “I am out of wine and out of patience. Enough of this. Just have it done.”

“I will not be part of murder, Robert. Do as you will, but do not ask me to fix my seal to it.”

For a moment Robert did not seem to understand what Ned was saying. Defiance was not a dish he tasted often. Slowly his face changed as comprehension came. His eyes narrowed and a flush crept up his neck past the velvet collar. He pointed an angry finger at Ned. “You are the King’s Hand, Lord Stark. You will do as I command you, or I’ll find me a Hand who will.”

“I wish him every success.” Ned unfastened the heavy clasp that clutched at the folds of his cloak, the ornate silver hand that was his badge of office. He laid it on the table in front of the king, saddened by the

memory of the man who had pinned it on him, the friend he had loved. “I thought you a better man than this, Robert. I thought we had made a nobler king.”

Robert’s face was purple. “*Out*,” he croaked, choking on his rage. “Out, damn you, I’m done with you. What are you waiting for? Go, run back to Winterfell. And make certain I never look on your face again, or I swear, I’ll have your head on a spike!”

Ned bowed, and turned on his heel without another word. He could feel Robert’s eyes on his back. As he strode from the council chambers, the discussion resumed with scarcely a pause. “On Braavos there is a society called the Faceless Men,” Grand Maester Pycelle offered.

“Do you have any idea how *costly* they are?” Littlefinger complained. “You could hire an army of common sellswords for half the price, and that’s for a merchant. I don’t dare think what they might ask for a princess.”

The closing of the door behind him silenced the voices. Ser Boros Blount was stationed outside the chamber, wearing the long white cloak and armor of the Kingsguard. He gave Ned a quick, curious glance from the corner of his eye, but asked no questions.

The day felt heavy and oppressive as he crossed the bailey back to the Tower of the Hand. He could feel the threat of rain in the air. Ned would have welcomed it. It might have made him feel a trifle less unclean. When he reached his solar, he summoned Vayon Poole. The steward came at once. “You sent for me, my lord Hand?”

“Hand no longer,” Ned told him. “The king and I have quarreled. We shall be returning to Winterfell.”

“I shall begin making arrangements at once, my lord. We will need a fortnight to ready everything for the journey.”

“We may not have a fortnight. We may not have a day. The king mentioned something about seeing my head on a spike.” Ned frowned. He did not truly believe the king would harm him, not Robert. He was angry now, but once Ned was safely out of sight, his rage would cool as it always did.

*Always?* Suddenly, uncomfortably, he found himself recalling Rhaegar Targaryen. *Fifteen years dead, yet Robert hates him as much as ever.* It was a disturbing notion... and there was the other matter, the business with Catelyn and the dwarf that Yoren had warned him of last night. That would come to light soon, as sure as sunrise, and with the king in such a black fury... Robert might not care a fig for Tyrion Lannister, but it would touch on his pride, and there was no telling what the queen might do.

“It might be safest if I went on ahead,” he told Poole. “I will take my daughters and a few guardsmen. The rest of you can follow when you are ready. Inform Jory, but tell no one else, and do nothing until the girls and I have gone. The castle is full of eyes and ears, and I would rather my plans were not known.”

“As you command, my lord.”

When he had gone, Eddard Stark went to the window and sat brooding. Robert had left him no choice that he could see. He ought to thank him. It would be good to return to Winterfell. He ought never have left. His sons were waiting there. Perhaps he and Catelyn would make a new son together when he returned, they were not so old yet. And of late he had often found himself dreaming of snow, of the deep quiet of the wolfswood at night.

And yet, the thought of leaving angered him as well. So much was still undone. Robert and his council of cravens and flatterers would beggar the realm if left unchecked... or, worse, sell it to the Lannisters in payment of their loans. And the truth of Jon Arryn’s death still eluded him. Oh, he had found a few pieces, enough to convince him that Jon had indeed been murdered, but that was no more than the spoor of an animal on the forest floor. He had not sighted the beast itself yet, though he sensed it was there, lurking, hidden, treacherous.

It struck him suddenly that he might return to Winterfell by sea. Ned was no sailor, and ordinarily would have preferred the kingsroad, but if he took ship he could stop at Dragonstone and speak with Stannis Baratheon. Pycelle had sent a raven off across the water, with a polite letter from Ned requesting Lord Stannis to return to his seat on the small council. As yet, there had been no reply, but the silence only deepened his suspicions. Lord

Stannis shared the secret Jon Arryn had died for, he was certain of it. The truth he sought might very well be waiting for him on the ancient island fortress of House Targaryen.

*And when you have it, what then? Some secrets are safer kept hidden. Some secrets are too dangerous to share, even with those you love and trust.* Ned slid the dagger that Catelyn had brought him out of the sheath on his belt. The Imp's knife. Why would the dwarf want Bran dead? To silence him, surely. Another secret, or only a different strand of the same web?

Could *Robert* be part of it? He would not have thought so, but once he would not have thought Robert could command the murder of women and children either. Catelyn had tried to warn him. *You knew the man*, she had said. *The king is a stranger to you.* The sooner he was quit of King's Landing, the better. If there was a ship sailing north on the morrow, it would be well to be on it.

He summoned Vayon Poole again and sent him to the docks to make inquiries, quietly but quickly. "Find me a fast ship with a skilled captain," he told the steward. "I care nothing for the size of its cabins or the quality of its appointments, so long as it is swift and safe. I wish to leave at once."

Poole had no sooner taken his leave than Tomard announced a visitor. "Lord Baelish to see you, m'lord."

Ned was half-tempted to turn him away, but thought better of it. He was not free yet; until he was, he must play their games. "Show him in, Tom."

Lord Petyr sauntered into the solar as if nothing had gone amiss that morning. He wore a slashed velvet doublet in cream-and-silver, a grey silk cloak trimmed with black fox, and his customary mocking smile.

Ned greeted him coldly. "Might I ask the reason for this visit, Lord Baelish?"

"I won't detain you long, I'm on my way to dine with Lady Tanda. Lamprey pie and roast suckling pig. She has some thought to wed me to her younger daughter, so her table is always astonishing. If truth be told, I'd sooner marry the pig, but don't tell her. I do love lamprey pie."

“Don’t let me keep you from your eels, my lord,” Ned said with icy disdain. “At the moment, I cannot think of anyone whose company I desire less than yours.”

“Oh, I’m certain if you put your mind to it, you could come up with a few names. Varys, say. Cersei. Or Robert. His Grace is most wroth with you. He went on about you at some length after you took your leave of us this morning. The words *insolence* and *ingratitude* came into it frequently, I seem to recall.”

Ned did not honor that with a reply. Nor did he offer his guest a seat, but Littlefinger took one anyway. “After you stormed out, it was left to me to convince them not to hire the Faceless Men,” he continued blithely. “Instead Varys will quietly let it be known that we’ll make a lord of whoever does in the Targaryen girl.”

Ned was disgusted. “So now we grant titles to assassins.”

Littlefinger shrugged. “Titles are cheap. The Faceless Men are expensive. If truth be told, I did the Targaryen girl more good than you with all your talk of honor. *Let* some sellsword drunk on visions of lordship try to kill her. Likely he’ll make a botch of it, and afterward the Dothraki will be on their guard. If we’d sent a Faceless Man after her, she’d be as good as buried.”

Ned frowned. “You sit in council and talk of ugly women and steel kisses, and now you expect me to believe that you tried to protect the girl? How big a fool do you take me for?”

“Well, quite an enormous one, actually,” said Littlefinger, laughing.

“Do you always find murder so amusing, Lord Baelish?”

“It’s not murder I find amusing, Lord Stark, it’s you. You rule like a man dancing on rotten ice. I daresay you will make a noble splash. I believe I heard the first crack this morning.”

“The first and last,” said Ned. “I’ve had my fill.”

“When do you mean to return to Winterfell, my lord?”

“As soon as I can. What concern is that of yours?”



“None... but if perchance you’re still here come evenfall, I’d be pleased to take you to this brothel your man Jory has been searching for so ineffectually.” Littlefinger smiled. “And I won’t even tell the Lady Catelyn.”