

right... that's why, the girl... the gods sent the boar... sent to punish me..." The king coughed, bringing up blood. "Wrong, it was wrong, I... only a girl... Varys, Littlefinger, even my brother... worthless... no one to tell me no but you, Ned... only you..." He lifted his hand, the gesture pained and feeble. "Paper and ink. There, on the table. Write what I tell you."

Ned smoothed the paper out across his knee and took up the quill. "At your command, Your Grace."

"This is the will and word of Robert of House Baratheon, the First of his Name, King of the Andals and all the rest-put in the damn titles, you know how it goes. I do hereby command Eddard of House Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Hand of the King, to serve as Lord Regent and Protector of the Realm upon my... upon my death... to rule in my... in my stead, until my son Joffrey does come of age..."

"Robert Joffrey is not your son, he wanted to say, but the words would not come. The agony was written too plainly across Robert's face; he could not hurt him more. So Ned bent his head and wrote, but where the king had said "my son Joffrey," he scrawled "my heir" instead. The deceit made him feel soiled. The lies we tell for love, he thought. May the gods forgive me.

"What else would you have me say?"

"Say... whatever you need to. Protect and defend, gods old and new, you have the words. Write. I'll sign it. You give it to the council when I'm dead."

"Robert," Ned said in a voice thick with grief, "you must not do this. Don't die on me. The realm needs you."

Robert took his hand, fingers squeezing hard. "You are... such a bad liar, Ned Stark," he said through his pain. "The realm... the realm knows... what a wretched king I've been. Bad as Aerys, the gods spare me."

"No," Ned told his dying friend, "not so bad as Aerys, Your Grace. Not near so bad as Aerys."

Robert managed a weak red smile. "At the least, they will say... this last thing... this I did right. You won't fail me. You'll rule now. You'll hate it, worse than I did... but you'll do well. Are you done with the scribbling?"

"Yes, Your Grace." Ned offered Robert the paper. The king scrawled his signature blindly, leaving a smear of blood across the letter. "The seal should be witnessed."

"Serve the boar at my funeral feast," Robert rasped. "Apple in its mouth, skin seared crisp. Eat the bastard. Don't care if you choke on him. Promise me, Ned."

"I promise." Promise me, Ned, Lyanna's voice echoed.

"The girl," the king said. "Daenerys. Let her live. If you can, if it... not too late... talk to them... Varys, Littlefinger... don't let them kill her. And help my son, Ned. Make him be... better than me." He winced. "Gods have mercy."

"They will, my friend," Ned said. "They will."

The king closed his eyes and seemed to relax. "Killed by a pig," he muttered. "Ought to laugh, but it hurts too much."

Ned was not laughing. "Shall I call them back?"

Robert gave a weak nod. "As you will. Gods, why is it so cold in here?"