

on the floor, slashed open and discarded, the cloth crusted with red-brown stains. The room smelled of smoke and blood and death.

“Ned,” the king whispered when he saw him. His face was pale as milk. “Come... closer.”

His men brought him close. Ned steadied himself with a hand on the bedpost. He had only to look down at Robert to know how bad it was. “What... ?” he began, his throat clenched.

“A boar,” Lord Renly was still in his hunting greens, his cloak spattered with blood.

“A devil,” the king husked. “My own fault. Too much wine, damn me to hell. Missed my thrust.”

“And where were the rest of you?” Ned demanded of Lord Renly. “Where was Ser Barristan and the Kingsguard?”

Renly’s mouth twitched. “My brother commanded us to stand aside and let him take the boar alone.”

Eddard Stark lifted the blanket.

They had done what they could to close him up, but it was nowhere near enough. The boar must have been a fearsome thing. It had ripped the king from groin to nipple with its tusks. The wine-soaked bandages that Grand Maester Pycelle had applied were already black with blood, and the smell off the wound was hideous. Ned’s stomach turned. He let the blanket fall.

“Stinks,” Robert said. “The stink of death, don’t think I can’t smell it. Bastard did me good, eh? But I... I paid him back in kind, Ned.” The king’s smile was as terrible as his wound, his teeth red. “Drove a knife right through his eye. Ask them if I didn’t. Ask them.”

“Truly,” Lord Renly murmured. “We brought the carcass back with us, at my brother’s command.”

“For the feast,” Robert whispered. “Now leave us. The lot of you. I need to speak with Ned.”

“Robert, my sweet lord Cersei began.

“I said leave,” Robert insisted with a hint of his old fierceness. “What part of that don’t you understand, woman?”

Cersei gathered up her skirts and her dignity and led the way to the door. Lord Renly and the others followed. Grand Maester Pycelle lingered, his hands shaking as he offered the king a cup of thick white liquid. “The milk of the poppy, Your Grace,” he said. “Drink. For your pain.”

Robert knocked the cup away with the back of his hand. “Away with you. I’ll sleep soon enough, old fool. Get out.”

Grand Maester Pycelle gave Ned a stricken look as he shuffled from the room.

“Damn you, Robert,” Ned said when they were alone. His leg was throbbing so badly he was almost blind with pain. Or perhaps it was grief that fogged his eyes. He lowered himself to the bed, beside his friend. “Why do you always have to be so headstrong?”

“Ah, fuck you, Ned,” the king said hoarsely. “I killed the bastard, didn’t I?” A lock of matted black hair fell across his eyes as he glared up at Ned. “Ought to do the same for you. Can’t leave a man to hunt in peace. Ser Robar found me. Gregor’s head. Ugly thought. Never told the Hound. Let Cersei surprise him.” His laugh turned into a grunt as a spasm of pain hit him. “Gods have mercy,” he muttered, swallowing his agony. “The girl. Daenerys. Only a child, you were