

“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 wolfwood 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