

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.