

Ned loved him for that, for remembering her still after all these years. He called for a lantern. No other words were needed. The queen had begun to protest. They had been riding since dawn, everyone was tired and cold, surely they should refresh themselves first. The dead would wait. She had said no more than that; Robert had looked at her, and her twin brother Jaime had taken her quietly by the arm, and she had said no more.

They went down to the crypt together, Ned and this king he scarcely recognized. The winding stone steps were narrow. Ned went first with the lantern. "I was starting to think we would never reach Winterfell," Robert complained as they descended. "In the south, the way they talk about my Seven Kingdoms, a man forgets that your part is as big as the other six combined."

"I trust you enjoyed the journey, Your Grace?"

Robert snorted. "Bogs and forests and fields, and scarcely a decent inn north of the Neck. I've never seen such a vast emptiness. Where are all your people?"

"Likely they were too shy to come out," Ned jested. He could feel the chill coming up the stairs, a cold breath from deep within the earth. "Kings are a rare sight in the north."

Robert snorted. "More likely they were hiding under the snow. Snow, Ned!" The king put one hand on the wall to steady himself as they descended.

"Late summer snows are common enough," Ned said. "I hope they did not trouble you. They are usually mild."

"The Others take your mild snows," Robert swore. "What will this place be like in winter? I shudder to think."

"The winters are hard," Ned admitted. "But the Starks will endure. We always have."

"You need to come south," Robert told him. "You need a taste of summer before it flees. In Highgarden there are fields of golden roses that stretch away as far as the eye can see. The fruits are so ripe they explode in your mouth-melons, peaches, fireplums, you've never tasted such sweetness. You'll see, I brought you some. Even at Storm's End, with that good wind off the bay, the days are so hot you can barely move. And you ought to see the towns, Ned! Flowers everywhere, the markets bursting with food, the summerwines so cheap and so good that you can get drunk just breathing the air. Everyone is fat and drunk and rich." He laughed and slapped his own ample stomach a thump. "And the girls, Ned!" he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling. "I swear, women lose all modesty in the heat. They swim naked in the river, right beneath the castle. Even in the streets, it's too damn hot for wool or fur, so they go around in these short gowns, silk if they have the silver and cotton if not, but it's all the same when they start sweating and the cloth sticks to their skin, they might as well be naked." The king laughed happily.

Robert Baratheon had always been a man of huge appetites, a man who knew how to take his pleasures. That was not a charge anyone could lay at the door of Eddard Stark. Yet Ned could not help but notice that those pleasures were taking a toll on the king. Robert was breathing heavily by the time they reached the bottom of the stairs, his face red in the lantern light as they stepped out into the darkness of the crypt.

"Your Grace," Ned said respectfully. He swept the lantern in a wide semicircle. Shadows moved and lurched. Flickering light touched the stones underfoot and brushed against a long