

That was when Sansa finally seemed to comprehend. Her eyes were frightened as they went to her father. "He doesn't mean Lady, does he?" She saw the truth on his face. "No," she said. "No, not Lady, Lady didn't bite anybody, she's good..."

"Lady wasn't there," Arya shouted angrily. "You leave her alone!"

"Stop them," Sansa pleaded, "don't let them do it, please, please, it wasn't Lady, it was Nymeria, Arya did it, you can't, it wasn't Lady, don't let them hurt Lady, I'll make her be good, I promise, I promise..." She started to cry.

All Ned could do was take her in his arms and hold her while she wept. He looked across the room at Robert. His old friend, closer than any brother. "Please, Robert. For the love you bear me. For the love you bore my sister. Please."

The king looked at them for a long moment, then turned his eyes on his wife. "Damn you, Cersei," he said with loathing.

Ned stood, gently disengaging himself from Sansa's grasp. All the weariness of the past four days had returned to him. "Do it yourself then, Robert," he said in a voice cold and sharp as steel. "At least have the courage to do it yourself."

Robert looked at Ned with flat, dead eyes and left without a word, his footsteps heavy as lead. Silence filled the hall.

"Where is the direwolf?" Cersei Lannister asked when her husband was gone. Beside her, Prince Joffrey was smiling.

"The beast is chained up outside the gatehouse, Your Grace," Ser Barristan Selmy answered reluctantly.

"Send for Ilyn Payne."

"No," Ned said. "Jory, take the girls back to their rooms and bring me Ice." The words tasted of bile in his throat, but he forced them out. "If it must be done, I will do it."

Cersei Lannister regarded him suspiciously. "You, Stark? Is this some trick? Why would you do such a thing?"

They were all staring at him, but it was Sansa's look that cut. "She is of the north. She deserves better than a butcher."

He left the room with his eyes burning and his daughter's wails echoing in his ears, and found the direwolf pup where they chained her. Ned sat beside her for a while. "Lady," he said, tasting the name. He had never paid much attention to the names the children had picked, but looking at her now, he knew that Sansa had chosen well. She was the smallest of the litter, the prettiest, the most gentle and trusting. She looked at him with bright golden eyes, and he ruffled her thick grey fur.

Shortly, Jory brought him Ice.

When it was over, he said, "Choose four men and have them take the body north. Bury her at Winterfell."

"All that way?" Jory said, astonished.

"All that way," Ned affirmed. "The Lannister woman shall never have this skin."