

raise the north when the word reached her, and the lords of river and mountain and Vale would join her.

He found himself thinking of Robert more and more. He saw the king as he had been in the flower of his youth, tall and handsome, his great antlered helm on his head, his warhammer in hand, sitting his horse like a horned god. He heard his laughter in the dark, saw his eyes, blue and clear as mountain lakes. "Look at us, Ned," Robert said. "Gods, how did we come to this? You here, and me killed by a pig. We won a throne together..."

I failed you, Robert, Ned thought. He could not say the words. I lied to you, hid the truth. I let them kill you.

The king heard him. "You stiff-necked fool," he muttered, "too proud to listen. Can you eat pride, Stark? Will honor shield your children?" Cracks ran down his face, fissures opening in the flesh, and he reached up and ripped the mask away. It was not Robert at all; it was Littlefinger, grinning, mocking him. When he opened his mouth to speak, his lies turned to pale grey moths and took wing.

Ned was half-asleep when the footsteps came down the hall. At first he thought he dreamt them; it had been so long since he had heard anything but the sound of his own voice. Ned was feverish by then, his leg a dull agony, his lips parched and cracked. When the heavy wooden door creaked open, the sudden light was painful to his eyes.

A gaoler thrust a jug at him. The clay was cool and beaded with moisture. Ned grasped it with both hands and gulped eagerly. Water ran from his mouth and dripped down through his beard. He drank until he thought he would be sick. "How long..?" he asked weakly when he could drink no more.

The gaoler was a scarecrow of a man with a rat's face and frayed beard, clad in a mail shirt and a leather half cape. "No talking," he said as he wrenched the jug from Ned's hands.

"Please," Ned said, "my daughters..." The door crashed shut. He blinked as the light vanished, lowered his head to his chest, and curled up on the straw. It no longer stank of urine and shit. It no longer smelled at all.

He could no longer tell the difference between waking and sleeping. The memory came creeping upon him in the darkness, as vivid as a dream. It was the year of false spring, and he was eighteen again, down from the Eyrie to the tourney at Harrenhal. He could see the deep green of the grass, and smell the pollen on the wind. Warm days and cool nights and the sweet taste of wine. He remembered Brandon's laughter, and Robert's berserk valor in the melee, the way he laughed as he unhorsed men left and right. He remembered Jaime Lannister, a golden youth in scaled white armor, kneeling on the grass in front of the king's pavilion and making his vows to protect and defend King Aerys. Afterward, Ser Oswell Whent helped Jaime to his feet, and the White Bull himself, Lord Commander Ser Gerold Hightower, fastened the snowy cloak of the Kingsguard about his shoulders. All six White Swords were there to welcome their newest brother.

Yet when the jousting began, the day belonged to Rhaegar Targaryen. The crown prince wore the armor he would die in: gleaming black plate with the three-headed dragon of his House