

EDDARD

“They’ve found her, my lord.”

Ned rose quickly. “Our men or Lannister’s?”

“It was Jory,” his steward Vayon Poole replied. “She’s not been harmed.”

“Thank the gods,” Ned said. His men had been searching for Arya for four days now, but the queen’s men had been out hunting as well. “Where is she? Tell Jory to bring her here at once.”

“I am sorry, my lord,” Poole told him. “The guards on the gate were Lannister men, and they informed the queen when Jory brought her in. She’s being taken directly before the king...”

“Damn that woman!” Ned said, striding to the door. “Find Sansa and bring her to the audience chamber. Her voice may be needed.” He descended the tower steps in a red rage. He had led searches himself for the first three days, and had scarcely slept an hour since Arya had disappeared. This morning he had been so heartsick and weary he could scarcely stand, but now his fury was on him, filling him with strength.

Men called out to him as he crossed the castle yard, but Ned ignored them in his haste. He would have run, but he was still the King’s Hand, and a Hand must keep his dignity. He was aware of the eyes that followed him, of the muttered voices wondering what he would do.

The castle was a modest holding a half day’s ride south of the Trident. The royal party had made themselves the uninvited guests of its lord, Ser Raymun Darry, while the hunt for Arya and the butcher’s boy was conducted on both sides of the river. They were not welcome visitors. Ser Raymun lived under the king’s peace, but his family had fought beneath Rhaegar’s dragon banners at the Trident, and his three older brothers had died there, a truth neither Robert nor Ser Raymun had forgotten. With king’s men, Darry men, Lannister men, and Stark men all crammed into a castle far too small for them, tensions burned hot and heavy.

The king had appropriated Ser Raymun’s audience chamber, and that was where Ned found them. The room was crowded when he burst in. Too crowded, he thought; left alone, he and Robert might have been able to settle the matter amicably.

Robert was slumped in Darry’s high seat at the far end of the room, his face closed and sullen. Cersei Lannister and her son stood beside him. The queen had her hand on Joffrey’s shoulder. Thick silken bandages still covered the boy’s arm.

Arya stood in the center of the room, alone but for Jory Cassel, every eye upon her. “Arya,” Ned called loudly. He went to her, his boots ringing on the stone floor. When she saw him, she cried out and began to sob.

Ned went to one knee and took her in his arms. She was shaking. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“I know,” he said. She felt so tiny in his arms, nothing but a scrawny little girl. It was hard to see how she had caused so much trouble. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Her face was dirty, and her tears left pink tracks down her cheeks. “Hungry some. I ate some berries, but there was nothing else.”