

“Wylla. Yes.” The king grinned. “She must have been a rare wench if she could make Lord Eddard Stark forget his honor, even for an hour. You never told me what she looked like...”

Ned’s mouth tightened in anger. “Nor will I. Leave it be, Robert, for the love you say you bear me. I dishonored myself and I dishonored Catelyn, in the sight of gods and men.”

“Gods have mercy, you scarcely knew Catelyn.”

“I had taken her to wife. She was carrying my child.”

“You are too hard on yourself, Ned. You always were. Damn it, no woman wants Baelor the Blessed in her bed.” He slapped a hand on his knee. “Well, I’ll not press you if you feel so strong about it, though I swear, at times you’re so prickly you ought to take the hedgehog as your sigil.”

The rising sun sent fingers of light through the pale white mists of dawn. A wide plain spread out beneath them, bare and brown, its flatness here and there relieved by long, low hummocks. Ned pointed them out to his king. “The barrows of the First Men.”

Robert frowned. “Have we ridden onto a graveyard?”

“There are barrows everywhere in the north, Your Grace,” Ned told him. “This land is old.”

“And cold,” Robert grumbled, pulling his cloak more tightly around himself. The guard had reined up well behind them, at the bottom of the ridge. “Well, I did not bring you out here to talk of graves or bicker about your bastard. There was a rider in the night, from Lord Varys in King’s Landing. Here.” The king pulled a paper from his belt and handed it to Ned.

Varys the eunuch was the king’s master of whisperers. He served Robert now as he had once served Aerys Targaryen. Ned unrolled the paper with trepidation, thinking of Lysa and her terrible accusation, but the message did not concern Lady Arryn. “What is the source for this information?”

“Do you remember Ser Jorah Mormont?”

“Would that I might forget him,” Ned said bluntly. The Mormonts of Bear Island were an old house, proud and honorable, but their lands were cold and distant and poor. Ser Jorah had tried to swell the family coffers by selling some poachers to a Tyroshi slaver. As the Mormonts were bannermen to the Starks, his crime had dishonored the north. Ned had made the long journey west to Bear Island, only to find when he arrived that Jorah had taken ship beyond the reach of Ice and the king’s justice. Five years had passed since then.

“Ser Jorah is now in Pentos, anxious to earn a royal pardon that would allow him to return from exile,” Robert explained. “Lord Varys makes good use of him.”

“So the slaver has become a spy,” Ned said with distaste. He handed the letter back. “I would rather he become a corpse.”

“Varys tells me that spies are more useful than corpses,” Robert said. “Jorah aside, what do you make of his report?”

“Daenerys Targaryen has wed some Dothraki horselord. What of it? Shall we send her a wedding gift?”

The king frowned. “A knife, perhaps. A good sharp one, and a bold man to wield it.”

Ned did not feign surprise; Robert’s hatred of the Targaryens was a madness in him. He remembered the angry words they had exchanged when Tywin Lannister had presented Robert