

“Honor, “ she spat. “How dare you play the noble lord with me! What do you take me for? You’ve a bastard of your own, I’ve seen him. Who was the mother, I wonder? Some Dornish peasant you raped while her holdfast burned? A whore? Or was it the grieving sister, the Lady Ashara? She threw herself into the sea, I’m told. Why was that? For the brother you slew, or the child you stole? Tell me, my honorable Lord Eddard, how are you any different from Robert, or me, or Jaime?”

“For a start,” said Ned, “I do not kill children. You would do well to listen, my lady. I shall say this only once. When the king returns from his hunt, I intend to lay the truth before him. You must be gone by then. You and your children, all three, and not to Casterly Rock. If I were you, I should take ship for the Free Cities, or even farther, to the Summer Isles or the Port of Ibben. As far as the winds blow.”

“Exile,” she said. “A bitter cup to drink from.”

“A sweeter cup than your father served Rhaegar’s children,” Ned said, “and kinder than you deserve. Your father and your brothers would do well to go with you. Lord Tywin’s gold will buy you comfort and hire swords to keep you safe. You shall need them. I promise you, no matter where you flee, Robert’s wrath will follow you, to the back of beyond if need be.”

The queen stood. “And what of my wrath, Lord Stark?” she asked softly. Her eyes searched his face. “You should have taken the realm for yourself. It was there for the taking. Jaime told me how you found him on the Iron Throne the day King’s Landing fell, and made him yield it up. That was your moment. All you needed to do was climb those steps, and sit. Such a sad mistake.”

“I have made more mistakes than you can possibly imagine,” Ned said, “but that was not one of them.”

“Oh, but it was, my lord,” Cersei insisted. “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground.”

She turned up her hood to hide her swollen face and left him there in the dark beneath the oak, amidst the quiet of the godswood, under a blue-black sky. The stars were coming out.