

“I told you to drink, not to argue. You made me king, you could at least have the courtesy to listen when I talk, damn you. Look at me, Ned. Look at what kinging has done to me. Gods, too fat for my armor, how did it ever come to this?”

“Robert...”

“Drink and stay quiet, the king is talking. I swear to you, I was never so alive as when I was winning this throne, or so dead as now that I’ve won it. And Cersei... I have Jon Arryn to thank for her. I had no wish to marry after Lyanna was taken from me, but Jon said the realm needed an heir. Cersei Lannister would be a good match, he told me, she would bind Lord Tywin to me should Viserys Targaryen ever try to win back his father’s throne.” The king shook his head. “I loved that old man, I swear it, but now I think he was a bigger fool than Moon Boy. Oh, Cersei is lovely to look at, truly, but cold... the way she guards her cunt, you’d think she had all the gold of Casterly Rock between her legs. Here, give me that beer if you won’t drink it.” He took the horn, upended it, belched, wiped his mouth. “I am sorry for your girl, Ned. Truly. About the wolf, I mean. My son was lying, I’d stake my soul on it. My son... you love your children, don’t you?”

“With all my heart,” Ned said.

“Let me tell you a secret, Ned. More than once, I have dreamed of giving up the crown. Take ship for the Free Cities with my horse and my hammer, spend my time warring and whoring, that’s what I was made for. The sellsword king, how the singers would love me. You know what stops me? The thought of Joffrey on the throne, with Cersei standing behind him whispering in his ear. My son. How could I have made a son like that, Ned?”

“He’s only a boy,” Ned said awkwardly. He had small liking for Prince Joffrey, but he could hear the pain in Robert’s voice. “Have you forgotten how wild you were at his age?”

“It would not trouble me if the boy was wild, Ned. You don’t know him as I do.” He sighed and shook his head. “Ah, perhaps you are right. Jon despaired of me often enough, yet I grew into a good king.” Robert looked at Ned and scowled at his silence. “You might speak up and agree now, you know.”

“Your Grace...” Ned began, carefully.

Robert slapped Ned on the back. “Ah, say that I’m a better king than Aerys and be done with it. You never could lie for love nor honor, Ned Stark. I’m still young, and now that you’re here with me, things will be different. We’ll make this a reign to sing of, and damn the Lannisters to seven hells. I smell bacon. Who do you think our champion will be today? Have you seen Mace Tyrell’s boy? The Knight of Flowers, they call him. Now there’s a son any man would be proud to own to. Last tourney, he dumped the Kingslayer on his golden rump, you ought to have seen the look on Cersei’s face. I laughed till my sides hurt. Renly says he has this sister, a maid of fourteen, lovely as a dawn...”

They broke their fast on black bread and boiled goose eggs and fish fried up with onions and bacon, at a trestle table by the river’s edge. The king’s melancholy melted away with the morning mist, and before long Robert was eating an orange and waxing fond about a morning at the Eyrie when they had been boys. “... had given Jon a barrel of oranges, remember? Only the