

“He will not cross,” Ned promised. “And if by some mischance he does, we will throw him back into the sea. Once you choose a new Warden of the East-”

The king groaned. “For the last time, I will not name the Arryn boy Warden. I know the boy is your nephew, but with Targaryens climbing in bed with Dothraki, I would be mad to rest one quarter of the realm on the shoulders of a sickly child.”

Ned was ready for that. “Yet we still must have a Warden of the East. If Robert Arryn will not do, name one of your brothers. Stannis proved himself at the siege of Storm’s End, surely.”

He let the name hang there for a moment. The king frowned and said nothing. He looked uncomfortable.

“That is,” Ned finished quietly, watching, “unless you have already promised the honor to another.”

For a moment Robert had the grace to look startled. Just as quickly, the look became annoyance. “What if I have?”

“It’s Jaime Lannister, is it not?”

Robert kicked his horse back into motion and started down the ridge toward the barrows. Ned kept pace with him. The king rode on, eyes straight ahead. “Yes,” he said at last. A single hard word to end the matter.

“Kingslayer,” Ned said. The rumors were true, then. He rode on dangerous ground now, he knew. “An able and courageous man, no doubt,” he said carefully, “but his father is Warden of the West, Robert. In time Ser Jaime will succeed to that honor. No one man should hold both East and West.” He left unsaid his real concern; that the appointment would put half the armies of the realm into the hands of Lannisters.

“I will fight that battle when the enemy appears on the field,” the king said stubbornly. “At the moment, Lord Tywin looms eternal as Casterly Rock, so I doubt that Jaime will be succeeding anytime soon. Don’t vex me about this, Ned, the stone has been set.”

“Your Grace, may I speak frankly?”

“I seem unable to stop you,” Robert grumbled. They rode through tall brown grasses.

“Can you trust Jaime Lannister?”

“He is my wife’s twin, a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard, his life and fortune and honor all bound to mine.”

“As they were bound to Aerys Targaryen’s,” Ned pointed out.

“Why should I mistrust him? He has done everything I have ever asked of him. His sword helped win the throne I sit on.”

His sword helped taint the throne you sit on, Ned thought, but he did not permit the words to pass his lips. “He swore a vow to protect his king’s life with his own. Then he opened that king’s throat with a sword.”

“Seven hells, someone had to kill Aerys!” Robert said, reining his mount to a sudden halt beside an ancient barrow. “If Jaime hadn’t done it, it would have been left for you or me.”

“We were not Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard,” Ned said. The time had come for Robert to hear the whole truth, he decided then and there. “Do you remember the Trident, Your Grace?”