

EDDARD

The summons came in the hour before the dawn, when the world was still and grey.

Alyn shook him roughly from his dreams and Ned stumbled into the predawn chill, groggy from sleep, to find his horse saddled and the king already mounted. Robert wore thick brown gloves and a heavy fur cloak with a hood that covered his ears, and looked for all the world like a bear sitting a horse. “Up, Stark!” he roared. “Up, up! We have matters of state to discuss.”

“By all means,” Ned said. “Come inside, Your Grace.” Alyn lifted the flap of the tent.

“No, no, no,” Robert said. His breath steamed with every word. “The camp is full of ears. Besides, I want to ride out and taste this country of yours.” Ser Boros and Ser Meryn waited behind him with a dozen guardsmen, Ned saw. There was nothing to do but rub the sleep from his eyes, dress, and mount up.

Robert set the pace, driving his huge black destrier hard as Ned galloped along beside him, trying to keep up. He called out a question as they rode, but the wind blew his words away, and the king did not hear him. After that Ned rode in silence. They soon left the kingsroad and took off across rolling plains dark with mist. By then the guard had fallen back a small distance, safely out of earshot, but still Robert would not slow.

Dawn broke as they crested a low ridge, and finally the king pulled up. By then they were miles south of the main party. Robert was flushed and exhilarated as Ned reined up beside him. “Gods,” he swore, laughing, “it feels good to get out and ride the way a man was meant to ride! I swear, Ned, this creeping along is enough to drive a man mad.” He had never been a patient man, Robert Baratheon. “That damnable wheelhouse, the way it creaks and groans, climbing every Burnp in the road as if it were a mountain... I promise you, if that wretched thing breaks another axle, I’m going to burn it, and Cersei can walk!”

Ned laughed. “I will gladly light the torch for you.”

“Good man!” The king clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ve half a mind to leave them all behind and just keep going.”

A smile touched Ned’s lips. “I do believe you mean it.”

“I do, I do,” the king said. “What do you say, Ned? Just you and me, two vagabond knights on the kingsroad, our swords at our sides and the gods know what in front of us, and maybe a farmer’s daughter or a tavern wench to warm our beds tonight.”

“Would that we could,” Ned said, “but we have duties now, my liege... to the realm, to our children, I to my lady wife and you to your queen. We are not the boys we were.”

“You were never the boy you were,” Robert grumbled. “More’s the pity. And yet there was that one time... what was her name, that common girl of yours? Becca? No, she was one of mine, gods love her, black hair and these sweet big eyes, you could drown in them. Yours was... Aleena? No. You told me once. Was it Merry! You know the one I mean, your bastard’s mother?”

“Her name was Wylla,” Ned replied with cool courtesy, “and I would sooner not speak of her.”