

“Six, and sickly, and Lord of the Eyrie, gods have mercy,” the king swore. “Lord Tywin had never taken a ward before. Lysa ought to have been honored. The Lannisters are a great and noble House. She refused to even hear of it. Then she left in the dead of night, without so much as a by-your-leave. Cersei was furious.” He sighed deeply. “The boy is my namesake, did you know that? Robert Arryn. I am sworn to protect him. How can I do that if his mother steals him away?”

“I will take him as ward, if you wish,” Ned said. “Lysa should consent to that. She and Catelyn were close as girls, and she would be welcome here as well.”

“A generous offer, my friend,” the king said, “but too late. Lord Tywin has already given his consent. Fostering the boy elsewhere would be a grievous affront to him.”

“I have more concern for my nephew’s welfare than I do for Lannister pride,” Ned declared.

“That is because you do not sleep with a Lannister.” Robert laughed, the sound rattling among the tombs and bouncing from the vaulted ceiling. His smile was a flash of white teeth in the thicket of the huge black beard. “Ah, Ned,” he said, “you are still too serious.” He put a massive arm around Ned’s shoulders. “I had planned to wait a few days to speak to you, but I see now there’s no need for it. Come, walk with me.”

They started back down between the pillars. Blind stone eyes seemed to follow them as they passed. The king kept his arm around Ned’s shoulder. “You must have wondered why I finally came north to Winterfell, after so long.”

Ned had his suspicions, but he did not give them voice. “For the joy of my company, surely,” he said lightly. “And there is the Wall. You need to see it, Your Grace, to walk along its battlements and talk to those who man it. The Night’s Watch is a shadow of what it once was. Benjen says-”

“No doubt I will hear what your brother says soon enough,” Robert said. “The Wall has stood for what, eight thousand years? It can keep a few days more. I have more pressing concerns. These are difficult times. I need good men about me. Men like Jon Arryn. He served as Lord of the Eyrie, as Warden of the East, as the Hand of the King. He will not be easy to replace.”

“His son...” Ned began.

“His son will succeed to the Eyrie and all its incomes,” Robert said brusquely. “No more.”

That took Ned by surprise. He stopped, startled, and turned to look at his king. The words came unbidden. “The Arryns have always been Wardens of the East. The title goes with the domain.”

“Perhaps when he comes of age, the honor can be restored to him,” Robert said. “I have this year to think of, and next. A six-year-old boy is no war leader, Ned.”

“In peace, the title is only an honor. Let the boy keep it. For his father’s sake if not his own. Surely you owe, Jon that much for his service.”

The king was not pleased. He took his arm from around Ned’s shoulders. “Jon’s service was the duty he owed his liege lord. I am not ungrateful, Ned. You of all men ought to know that. But the son is not the father. A mere boy cannot hold the east.” Then his tone softened. “Enough of this. There is a more important office to discuss, and I would not argue with you.” Robert grasped Ned by the elbow. “I have need of you, Ned.”