

EDDARD

“Pain is a gift from the gods, Lord Eddard,” Grand Maester Pycelle told him. “It means the bone is knitting, the flesh healing itself. Be thankful.”

“I will be thankful when my leg stops throbbing.”

Pycelle set a stoppered flask on the table by the bed. “The milk of the poppy, for when the pain grows too onerous.”

“I sleep too much already.”

“Sleep is the great healer.”

“I had hoped that was you.”

Pycelle smiled wanly. “It is good to see you in such a fierce humor, my lord.” He leaned close and lowered his voice. “There was a raven this morning, a letter for the queen from her lord father. I thought you had best know.”

“Dark wings, dark words,” Ned said grimly. “What of it?”

“Lord Tywin is greatly wroth about the men you sent after Ser Gregor Clegane,” the maester confided. “I feared he would be. You will recall, I said as much in council.”

“Let him be wroth,” Ned said. Every time his leg throbbed, he remembered Jaime Lannister’s smile, and Jory dead in his arms. “Let him write all the letters to the queen he likes. Lord Beric rides beneath the king’s own banner. If Lord Tywin attempts to interfere with the king’s justice, he will have Robert to answer to. The only thing His Grace enjoys more than hunting is making war on lords who defy him.”

Pycelle pulled back, his maester’s chain jangling. “As you say. I shall visit again on the morrow.” The old man hurriedly gathered up his things and took his leave. Ned had little doubt that he was bound straight for the royal apartments, to whisper at the queen. I thought you had best know, indeed... as if Cersei had not instructed him to pass along her father’s threats. He hoped his response rattled those perfect teeth of hers. Ned was not near as confident of Robert as he pretended, but there was no reason Cersei need know that.

When Pycelle was gone, Ned called for a cup of honeyed wine. That clouded the mind as well, yet not as badly. He needed to be able to think. A thousand times, he asked himself what Jon Arryn might have done, had he lived long enough to act on what he’d learned. Or perhaps he had acted, and died for it.

It was queer how sometimes a child’s innocent eyes can see things that grown men are blind to. Someday, when Sansa was grown, he would have to tell her how she had made it all come clear for him. He’s not the least bit like that old drunken king, she had declared, angry and unknowing, and the simple truth of it had twisted inside him, cold as death. This was the sword that killed Jon Anyn, Ned thought then, and it will kill Robert as well, a slower death but full as certain. Shattered legs may heal in time, but some betrayals fester and poison the soul.

Littlefinger came calling an hour after the Grand Maester had left, clad in a plum-colored doublet with a mockingbird embroidered on the breast in black thread, and a striped cloak of black and white. “I cannot visit long, my lord,” he announced. “Lady Tanda expects me to lunch