

“Desperately,” Varys said, “yet he craves life even more. By now, the princess nears Vaes Dothrak, where it is death to draw a blade. If I told you what the Dothraki would do to the poor man who used one on a khaleesi, none of you would sleep tonight.” He stroked a powdered cheek. “Now, poison... the tears of Lys, let us say. Khal Drogo need never know it was not a natural death.”

Grand Maester Pycelle’s sleepy eyes flicked open. He squinted suspiciously at the eunuch.

“Poison is a coward’s weapon,” the king complained.

Ned had heard enough. “You send hired knives to kill a fourteen year-old girl and still quibble about honor?” He pushed back his chair and stood. “Do it yourself, Robert. The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. Look her in the eyes before you kill her. See her tears, hear her last words. You owe her that much at least.”

“Gods,” the king swore, the word exploding out of him as if he could barely contain his fury. “You mean it, damn you.” He reached for the flagon of wine at his elbow, found it empty, and flung it away to shatter against the wall. “I am out of wine and out of patience. Enough of this. Just have it done.”

“I will not be part of murder, Robert. Do as you will, but do not ask me to fix my seal to it.”

For a moment Robert did not seem to understand what Ned was saying. Defiance was not a dish he tasted often. Slowly his face changed as comprehension came. His eyes narrowed and a flush crept up his neck past the velvet collar. He pointed an angry finger at Ned. “You are the King’s Hand, Lord Stark. You will do as I command you, or I’ll find me a Hand who will.”

“I wish him every success.” Ned unfastened the heavy clasp that clutched at the folds of his cloak, the ornate silver hand that was his badge of office. He laid it on the table in front of the king, saddened by the memory of the man who had pinned it on him, the friend he had loved. “I thought you a better man than this, Robert. I thought we had made a nobler king.”

Robert’s face was purple. “Out,” he croaked, choking on his rage. “Out, damn you, I’m done with you. What are you waiting for? Go, run back to Winterfell. And make certain I never look on your face again, or I swear, I’ll have your head on a spike!”

Ned bowed, and turned on his heel without another word. He could feel Robert’s eyes on his back. As he strode from the council chambers, the discussion resumed with scarcely a pause.

“On Braavos there is a society called the Faceless Men,” Grand Maester Pycelle offered.

“Do you have any idea how costly they are?” Littlefinger complained. “You could hire an army of common sellswords for half the price, and that’s for a merchant. I don’t dare think what they might ask for a princess.”

The closing of the door behind him silenced the voices. Ser Boros Blount was stationed outside the chamber, wearing the long white cloak and armor of the Kingsguard. He gave Ned a quick, curious glance from the corner of his eye, but asked no questions.

The day felt heavy and oppressive as he crossed the bailey back to the Tower of the Hand. He could feel the threat of rain in the air. Ned would have welcomed it. It might have made him feel a trifle less unclean. When he reached his solar, he summoned Vayon Poole. The steward came at once. “You sent for me, my lord Hand?”