

EDDARD

“Robert, I beg of you,” Ned pleaded, “hear what you are saying. You are talking of murdering a child.”

“The whore is pregnant!” The king’s fist slammed down on the council table loud as a thunderclap. “I warned you this would happen, Ned. Back in the barrowlands, I warned you, but you did not care to hear it. Well, you’ll hear it now. I want them dead, mother and child both, and that fool Viserys as well. Is that plain enough for you? I want them dead.”

The other councillors were all doing their best to pretend that they were somewhere else. No doubt they were wiser than he was. Eddard Stark had seldom felt quite so alone. “You will dishonor yourself forever if you do this.”

“Then let it be on my head, so long as it is done. I am not so blind that I cannot see the shadow of the axe when it is hanging over my own neck.”

“There is no axe,” Ned told his king. “Only the shadow of a shadow, twenty years removed... if it exists at all.”

“If?” Varys asked softly, wringing powdered hands together. “My lord, you wrong me. Would I bring ties to king and council?”

Ned looked at the eunuch coldly. “You would bring us the whisperings of a traitor half a world away, my lord. Perhaps Mormont is wrong. Perhaps he is lying.”

“Ser Jorah would not dare deceive me,” Varys said with a sly smile. “Rely on it, my lord. The princess is with child.”

“So you say. If you are wrong, we need not fear. If the girl miscarries, we need not fear. If she births a daughter in place of a son, we need not fear. If the babe dies in infancy, we need not fear.”

“But if it is a boy?” Robert insisted. “If he lives?”

“The narrow sea would still lie between us. I shall fear the Dothraki the day they teach their horses to run on water.”

The king took a swallow of wine and glowered at Ned across the council table. “So you would counsel me to do nothing until the dragonspawn has landed his army on my shores, is that it?”

“This ‘dragonspawn’ is in his mother’s belly,” Ned said. “Even Aegon did no conquering until after he was weaned.”

“Gods! You are stubborn as an aurochs, Stark.” The king looked around the council table. “Have the rest of you mislaid your tongues? Will no one talk sense to this frozen-faced fool?”

Varys gave the king an unctuous smile and laid a soft hand on Ned’s sleeve. “I understand your qualms, Lord Eddard, truly I do. It gave me no joy to bring this grievous news to council. It is a terrible thing we contemplate, a vile thing. Yet we who presume to rule must do vile things for the good of the realm, howevermuch it pains us.”

Lord Renly shrugged. “The matter seems simple enough to me. We ought to have had Viserys and his sister killed years ago, but His Grace my brother made the mistake of listening to Jon Arryn.”