

“You are kind to say so, Lord Eddard.”

“The king himself said as much. He blamed the wine.”

The white-haired knight gave a weary nod. “His Grace was reeling in his saddle by the time we flushed the boar from his lair, yet he commanded us all to stand aside.”

“I wonder, Ser Barristan,” asked Varys, so quietly, “who gave the king this wine?”

Ned had not heard the eunuch approach, but when he looked around, there he stood. He wore a black velvet robe that brushed the floor, and his face was freshly powdered.

“The wine was from the king’s own skin,” Ser Barristan said.

“Only one skin? Hunting is such thirsty work.”

“I did not keep count. More than one, for a certainty. His squire would fetch him a fresh skin whenever he required it.”

“Such a dutiful boy,” said Varys, “to make certain His Grace did not lack for refreshment.”

Ned had a bitter taste in his mouth. He recalled the two fair-haired boys Robert had sent chasing after a breastplate stretcher. The king had told everyone the tale that night at the feast, laughing until he shook. “Which squire?”

“The elder,” said Ser Barristan. “Lancel.”

“I know the lad well,” said Varys. “A stalwart boy, Ser Kevan Lannister’s son, nephew to Lord Tywin and cousin to the queen. I hope the dear sweet lad does not blame himself. Children are so vulnerable in the innocence of their youth, how well do I remember.”

Certainly Varys had once been young. Ned doubted that he had ever been innocent. “You mention children. Robert had a change of heart concerning Daenerys Targaryen. Whatever arrangements you made, I want undone. At once.”

“Alas,” said Varys. “At once may be too late. I fear those birds have flown. But I shall do what I can, my lord. With your leave.” He bowed and vanished down the steps, his soft-soled slippers whispering against the stone as he made his descent.

Cayn and Tomard were helping Ned across the bridge when Lord Renly emerged from Maegor’s Holdfast. “Lord Eddard,” he called after Ned, “a moment, if you would be so kind.”

Ned stopped. “As you wish.”

Renly walked to his side. “Send your men away.” They met in the center of the bridge, the dry moat beneath them. Moonlight silvered the cruel edges of the spikes that lined its bed.

Ned gestured. Tomard and Cayn bowed their heads and backed away respectfully. Lord Renly glanced warily at Ser Boros on the far end of the span, at Ser Preston in the doorway behind them. “That letter.” He leaned close. “Was it the regency? Has my brother named you Protector?” He did not wait for a reply. “My lord, I have thirty men in my personal guard, and other friends beside, knights and lords. Give me an hour, and I can put a hundred swords in your hand.”

“And what should I do with a hundred swords, my lord?”

“Strike! Now, while the castle sleeps.” Renly looked back at Ser Boros again and dropped his voice to an urgent whisper. “We must get Joffrey away from his mother and take him in hand. Protector or no, the man who holds the king holds the kingdom. We should seize Myrcella and