

The Grand Maester nodded. "I recall now, the widow is sister to your own noble wife. If an old man may be forgiven his blunt speech, let me say that grief can derange even the strongest and most disciplined of minds, and the Lady Lysa was never that. Since her last stillbirth, she has seen enemies in every shadow, and the death of her lord husband left her shattered and lost."

"So you are quite certain that Jon Arryn died of a sudden illness?"

"I am," Pycelle replied gravely. "If not illness, my good lord, what else could it be?"

"Poison," Ned suggested quietly.

Pycelle's sleepy eyes flicked open. The aged maester shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "A disturbing thought. We are not the Free Cities, where such things are common. Grand Maester Aethelmure wrote that all men carry murder in their hearts, yet even so, the poisoner is beneath contempt." He fell silent for a moment, his eyes lost in thought. "What you suggest is possible, my lord, yet I do not think it likely. Every hedge maester knows the common poisons, and Lord Arryn displayed none of the signs. And the Hand was loved by all. What sort of monster in man's flesh would dare to murder such a noble lord?"

"I have heard it said that poison is a woman's weapon."

Pycelle stroked his beard thoughtfully. "It is said. Women, cravens... and eunuchs." He cleared his throat and spat a thick glob of phlegm onto the rushes. Above them, a raven cawed loudly in the rookery. "The Lord Varys was born a slave in Lys, did you know? Put not your trust in spiders, my lord."

That was scarcely anything Ned needed to be told; there was something about Varys that made his flesh crawl. "I will remember that, Maester. And I thank you for your help. I have taken enough of your time." He stood.

Grand Maester Pycelle pushed himself up from his chair slowly and escorted Ned to the door. "I hope I have helped in some small way to put your mind at ease. If there is any other service I might perform, you need only ask."

"One thing," Ned told him. "I should be curious to examine the book that you lent Jon the day before he fell ill."

"I fear you would find it of little interest," Pycelle said. "It was a ponderous tome by Grand Maester Malleon on the lineages of the great houses."

"Still, I should like to see it."

The old man opened the door. "As you wish. I have it here somewhere. When I find it, I shall have it sent to your chambers straightaway..."

"You have been most courteous," Ned told him. Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, "One last question, if you would be so kind. You mentioned that the king was at Lord Arryn's bedside when he died. I wonder, was the queen with him?"

"Why, no," Pycelle said. "She and the children were making the journey to Casterly Rock, in company with her father. Lord Tywin had brought a retinue to the city for the tourney on Prince Joffrey's name day, no doubt hoping to see his son Jaime win the champion's crown. In that he was sadly disappointed. It fell to me to send the queen word of Lord Arryn's sudden death. Never have I sent off a bird with a heavier heart."