

“The madness of mercy,” Ned admitted.

“Ah,” said Varys. “To be sure. You are an honest and honorable man, Lord Eddard. Ofttimes I forget that. I have met so few of them in my life.” He glanced around the cell. “When I see what honesty and honor have won you, I understand why.”

Ned Stark laid his head back against the damp stone wall and closed his eyes. His leg was throbbing. “The king’s wine... did you question Lancel?”

“Oh, indeed. Cersei gave him the wineskins, and told him it was Robert’s favorite vintage.” The eunuch shrugged. “A hunter lives a perilous life. If the boar had not done for Robert, it would have been a fall from a horse, the bite of a wood adder, an arrow gone astray... the forest is the abbatoir of the gods. It was not wine that killed the king. It was your mercy.”

Ned had feared as much. “Gods forgive me.”

“If there are gods,” Varys said, “I expect they will. The queen would not have waited long in any case. Robert was becoming unruly, and she needed to be rid of him to free her hands to deal with his brothers. They are quite a pair, Stannis and Renly. The iron gauntlet and the silk glove.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You have been foolish, my lord. You ought to have heeded Littlefinger when he urged you to support Joffrey’s succession.”

“How... how could you know of that?”

Varys smiled. “I know, that’s all that need concern you. I also know that on the morrow the queen will pay you a visit.”

Slowly Ned raised his eyes. “Why?”

“Cersei is frightened of you, my lord... but she has other enemies she fears even more. Her beloved Jaime is fighting the river lords even now. Lysa Arryn sits in the Eyrie, ringed in stone and steel, and there is no love lost between her and the queen. In Dorne, the Martells still brood on the murder of Princess Elia and her babes. And now your son marches down the Neck with a northern host at his back.”

“Robb is only a boy,” Ned said, aghast.

“A boy with an army,” Varys said. “Yet only a boy, as you say. The king’s brothers are the ones giving Cersei sleepless nights... Lord Stannis in particular. His claim is the true one, he is known for his prowess as a battle commander, and he is utterly without mercy. There is no creature on earth half so terrifying as a truly just man. No one knows what Stannis has been doing on Dragonstone, but I will wager you that he’s gathered more swords than seashells. So here is Cersei’s nightmare: while her father and brother spend their power battling Starks and Tullys, Lord Stannis will land, proclaim himself king, and lop off her son’s curly blond head... and her own in the bargain, though I truly believe she cares more about the boy.”

“Stannis Baratheon is Robert’s true heir,” Ned said. “The throne is his by rights. I would welcome his ascent.”

Varys tsked. “Cersei will not want to hear that, I promise you. Stannis may win the throne, but only your rotting head will remain to cheer unless you guard that tongue of yours. Sansa begged so sweetly, it would be a shame if you threw it all away. You are being given your life back, if you’ll take it. Cersei is no fool. She knows a tame wolf is of more use than a dead one.”