

“All men must swallow the sour with the sweet. High lords and eunuchs alike. Your hour has come, my lord.”

“My daughters...”

“The younger girl escaped Ser Meryn and fled,” Varys told him. “I have not been able to find her. Nor have the Lannisters. A kindness, there. Our new king loves her not. Your older girl is still betrothed to Joffrey. Cersei keeps her close. She came to court a few days ago to plead that you be spared. A pity you couldn’t have been there, you would have been touched.” He leaned forward intently. “I trust you realize that you are a dead man, Lord Eddard?”

“The queen will not kill me,” Ned said. His head swam; the wine was strong, and it had been too long since he’d eaten. “Cat... Cat holds her brother...”

“The wrong brother,” Varys sighed. “And lost to her, in any case. She let the Imp slip through her fingers. I expect he is dead by now, somewhere in the Mountains of the Moon.”

“If that is true, slit my throat and have done with it.” He was dizzy from the wine, tired and heartsick.

“Your blood is the last thing I desire.”

Ned frowned. “When they slaughtered my guard, you stood beside the queen and watched, and said not a word.”

“And would again. I seem to recall that I was unarmed, unarmored, and surrounded by Lannister swords.” The eunuch looked at him curiously, tilting his head. “When I was a young boy, before I was cut, I traveled with a troupe of mummers through the Free Cities. They taught me that each man has a role to play, in life as well as mummery. So it is at court. The King’s Justice must be fearsome, the master of coin must be frugal, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard must be valiant... and the master of whisperers must be sly and obsequious and without scruple. A courageous informer would be as useless as a cowardly knight.” He took the wineskin back and drank.

Ned studied the eunuch’s face, searching for truth beneath the mummer’s scars and false stubble. He tried some more wine. This time it went down easier. “Can you free me from this pit?”

“I could... but will I? No. Questions would be asked, and the answers would lead back to me.”

Ned had expected no more. “You are blunt.”

“A eunuch has no honor, and a spider does not enjoy the luxury of scruples, my lord.”

“Would you at least consent to carry a message out for me?”

“That would depend on the message. I will gladly provide you with paper and ink, if you like. And when you have written what you will, I will take the letter and read it, and deliver it or not, as best serves my own ends.”

“Your own ends. What ends are those, Lord Varys?”

“Peace,” Varys replied without hesitation. “If there was one soul in King’s Landing who was truly desperate to keep Robert Baratheon alive, it was me.” He sighed. “For fifteen years I protected him from his enemies, but I could not protect him from his friends. What strange fit of madness led you to tell the queen that you had learned the truth of Joffrey’s birth?”