

slammed the blade into the table, felt it bite into the wood. It stood mocking him. "Why should Tyrion Lannister want Bran dead? The boy has never done him harm."

"Do you Starks have nought but snow between your ears?" Littlefinger asked. "The Imp would never have acted alone."

Ned rose and paced the length of the room. "If the queen had a role in this or, gods forbid, the king himself... no, I will not believe that." Yet even as he said the words, he remembered that chill morning on the barrowlands, and Robert's talk of sending hired knives after the Targaryen princess. He remembered Rhaegar's infant son, the red ruin of his skull, and the way the king had turned away, as he had turned away in Darry's audience hall not so long ago. He could still hear Sansa pleading, as Lyanna had pleaded once.

"Most likely the king did not know," Littlefinger said. "It would not be the first time. Our good Robert is practiced at closing his eyes to things he would rather not see."

Ned had no reply for that. The face of the butcher's boy swam up before his eyes, cloven almost in two, and afterward the king had said not a word. His head was pounding.

Littlefinger sauntered over to the table, wrenched the knife from the wood. "The accusation is treason either way. Accuse the king and you will dance with Ilyn Payne before the words are out of your mouth. The queen... if you can find proof, and if you can make Robert listen, then perhaps...

"We have proof," Ned said. "We have the dagger."

"This?" Littlefinger flipped the knife casually end over end. "A sweet piece of steel, but it cuts two ways, my lord. The Imp will no doubt swear the blade was lost or stolen while he was at Winterfell, and with his hireling dead, who is there to give him the lie?" He tossed the knife lightly to Ned. "My counsel is to drop that in the river and forget that it was ever forged."

Ned regarded him coldly. "Lord Baelish, I am a Stark of Winterfell. My son lies crippled, perhaps dying. He would be dead, and Catelyn with him, but for a wolf pup we found in the snow. If you truly believe I could forget that, you are as big a fool now as when you took up sword against my brother."

"A fool I may be, Stark... yet I'm still here, while your brother has been moldering in his frozen grave for some fourteen years now. If you are so eager to molder beside him, far be it from me to dissuade you, but I would rather not be included in the party, thank you very much."

"You would be the last man I would willingly include in any party, Lord Baelish."

"You wound me deeply." Littlefinger placed a hand over his heart. "For my part, I always found you Starks a tiresome lot, but Cat seems to have become attached to you, for reasons I cannot comprehend. I shall try to keep you alive for her sake. A fool's task, admittedly, but I could never refuse your wife anything."

Littlefinger. "I should warn you, Stark, we usually charge for that sort of thing around here."

"A moment alone, that's all I ask," Catelyn said.

"Very well." Littlefinger strolled to the door. "Don't be too long. It is past time the Hand and I returned to the castle, before our absence is noted."