

“Lord Stannis took himself to Dragonstone not long after the king went north,” Varys said, “and our gallant Ser Barristan no doubt rides beside the king as he makes his way through the city, as befits the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

“Perhaps we had best wait for Ser Barristan and the king to join us,” Ned suggested.

Renly Baratheon laughed aloud. “If we wait for my brother to grace us with his royal presence, it could be a long sit.”

“Our good King Robert has many cares,” Varys said. “He entrusts some small matters to us, to lighten his load.”

“What Lord Varys means is that all this business of coin and crops and justice bores my royal brother to tears,” Lord Renly said, “so it falls to us to govern the realm. He does send us a command from time to time.” He drew a tightly rolled paper from his sleeve and laid it on the table. “This morning he commanded me to ride ahead with all haste and ask Grand Maester Pycelle to convene this council at once. He has an urgent task for us.”

Littlefinger smiled and handed the paper to Ned. It bore the royal seal. Ned broke the wax with his thumb and flattened the letter to consider the king’s urgent command, reading the words with mounting disbelief. Was there no end to Robert’s folly? And to do this in his name, that was salt in the wound. “Gods be good,” he swore.

“What Lord Eddard means to say,” Lord Renly announced, “is that His Grace instructs us to stage a great tournament in honor of his appointment as the Hand of the King.”

“How much?” asked Littlefinger, mildly.

Ned read the answer off the letter. “Forty thousand golden dragons to the champion. Twenty thousand to the man who comes second, another twenty to the winner of the melee, and ten thousand to the victor of the archery competition.”

“Ninety thousand gold pieces,” Littlefinger sighed. “And we must not neglect the other costs. Robert will want a prodigious feast. That means cooks, carpenters, serving girls, singers, jugglers, fools

“Fools we have in plenty,” Lord Renly said.

Grand Maester Pycelle looked to Littlefinger and asked, “Will the treasury bear the expense?”

“What treasury is that?” Littlefinger replied with a twist of his mouth. “Spare me the foolishness, Maester. You know as well as I that the treasury has been empty for years. I shall have to borrow the money. No doubt the Lannisters will be accommodating. We owe Lord Tywin some three million dragons at present, what matter another hundred thousand?”

Ned was stunned. “Are you claiming that the Crown is three million gold pieces in debt?”

“The Crown is more than six million gold pieces in debt, Lord Stark. The Lannisters are the biggest part of it, but we have also borrowed from Lord Tyrell, the Iron Bank of Braavos, and several Tyroshi trading cartels. Of late I’ve had to turn to the Faith. The High Septon haggles worse than a Dornish fishmonger.”

Ned was aghast. “Aerys Targaryen left a treasury flowing with gold. How could you let this happen?”