

“Though much better dressed,” Littlefinger quipped. “Lord Renly spends more on clothing than half the ladies of the court.”

It was true enough. Lord Renly was in dark green velvet, with a dozen golden stags embroidered on his doublet. A cloth-of-gold half cape was draped casually across one shoulder, fastened with an emerald brooch. “There are worse crimes,” Renly said with a laugh. “The way you dress, for one.”

Littlefinger ignored the jibe. He eyed Ned with a smile on his lips that bordered on insolence. “I have hoped to meet you for some years, Lord Stark. No doubt Lady Catelyn has mentioned me to you.”

“She has,” Ned replied with a chill in his voice. The sly arrogance of the comment rankled him. “I understand you knew my brother Brandon as well.”

Renly Baratheon laughed. Varys shuffled over to listen.

“Rather too well,” Littlefinger said. “I still carry a token of his esteem. Did Brandon speak of me too?”

“Often, and with some heat,” Ned said, hoping that would end it. He had no patience with this game they played, this dueling with words.

“I should have thought that heat ill suits you Starks,” Littlefinger said. “Here in the south, they say you are all made of ice, and melt when you ride below the Neck.”

“I do not plan on melting soon, Lord Baelish. You may count on it.” Ned moved to the council table and said, “Maester Pycelle, I trust you are well.”

The Grand Maester smiled gently from his tall chair at the foot of the table. “Well enough for a man of my years, my lord,” he replied, “yet I do tire easily, I fear.” Wispy strands of white hair fringed the broad bald dome of his forehead above a kindly face. His maester’s collar was no simple metal choker such as Luwin wore, but two dozen heavy chains wound together into a ponderous metal necklace that covered him from throat to breast. The links were forged of every metal known to man: black iron and red gold, bright copper and dull lead, steel and tin and pale silver, brass and bronze and platinum. Garnets and amethysts and black pearls adorned the metalwork, and here and there an emerald or ruby. “Perhaps we might begin soon,” the Grand Maester said, hands knitting together atop his broad stomach. “I fear I shall fall asleep if we wait much longer.”

“As you will.” The king’s seat sat empty at the head of the table, the crowned stag of Baratheon embroidered in gold thread on its pillows. Ned took the chair beside it, as the right hand of his king. “My lords,” he said formally, “I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“You are the King’s Hand,” Varys said. “We serve at your pleasure, Lord Stark.”

As the others took their accustomed seats, it struck Eddard Stark forcefully that he did not belong here, in this room, with these men. He remembered what Robert had told him in the crypts below Winterfell. I am surrounded by flatterers and fools, the king had insisted. Ned looked down the council table and wondered which were the flatterers and which the fools. He thought he knew already. “We are but five,” he pointed out.