

“You,” Ned said, kissing her lightly on the brow, “will marry a king and rule his castle, and your sons will be knights and princes and lords and, yes, perhaps even a High Septon.”

Arya screwed up her face. “No,” she said, “that’s Sansa.” She folded up her right leg and resumed her balancing. Ned sighed and left her there.

Inside his chambers, he stripped off his sweat-stained silks and sluiced cold water over his head from the basin beside the bed. Alyn entered as he was drying his face. “My lord,” he said, “Lord Baelish is without and begs audience.”

“Escort him to my solar,” Ned said, reaching for a fresh tunic, the lightest linen he could find. “I’ll see him at once.”

Littlefinger was perched on the window seat when Ned entered, watching the knights of the Kingsguard practice at swords in the yard below. “If only old Selmy’s mind were as nimble as his blade,” he said wistfully, “our council meetings would be a good deal livelier.”

“Ser Barristan is as valiant and honorable as any man in King’s Landing.” Ned had come to have a deep respect for the aged, whitehaired Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.

“And as tiresome,” Littlefinger added, “though I daresay he should do well in the tourney. Last year he unhorsed the Hound, and it was only four years ago that he was champion.”

The question of who might win the tourney interested Eddard Stark not in the least. “Is there a reason for this visit, Lord Petyr, or are you here simply to enjoy the view from my window?”

Littlefinger smiled. “I promised Cat I would help you in your inquiries, and so I have.”

That took Ned aback. Promise or no promise, he could not find it in him to trust Lord Petyr Baelish, who struck him as too clever by half. “You have something for me?”

“Someone,” Littlefinger corrected. “Four someones, if truth be told. Had you thought to question the Hand’s servants?”

Ned frowned. “Would that I could. Lady Arryn took her household back to the Eyrie.” Lysa had done him no favor in that regard. All those who had stood closest to her husband had gone with her when she fled: Jon’s maester, his steward, the captain of his guard, his knights and retainers.

“Most of her household,” Littlefinger said, “not all. A few remain. A pregnant kitchen girl hastily wed to one of Lord Renly’s grooms, a stablehand who joined the City Watch, a potboy discharged from service for theft, and Lord Arryn’s squire.”

“His squire?” Ned was pleasantly surprised. A man’s squire often knew a great deal of his comings and goings.

“Ser Hugh of the Vale,” Littlefinger named him. “The king knighted the boy after Lord Arryn’s death.”

“I shall send for him,” Ned said. “And the others.”

Littlefinger winced. “My lord, step over here to the window, if you would be so kind.”

“Why?”

“Come, and I’ll show you, my lord.”

Frowning, Ned crossed to the window. Petyr Baelish made a casual gesture. “There, across the yard, at the door of the armory, do you see the boy squatting by the steps honing a sword with an oilstone?”