

Protector, true enough, but in the eyes of the world, Joffrey is still his son and heir. The queen has a dozen knights and a hundred men-at-arms who will do whatever she commands... enough to overwhelm what remains of my own household guard. And for all I know, her brother Jaime may be riding for King's Landing even as we speak, with a Lannister host at his back."

"And you without an army." Littlefinger toyed with the dagger on the table, turning it slowly with a finger. "There is small love lost between Lord Renly and the Lannisters. Bronze Yohn Royce, Ser Balon Swann, Ser Loras, Lady Tanda, the Redwyne twins... each of them has a retinue of knights and sworn swords here at court."

"Renly has thirty men in his personal guard, the rest even fewer. It is not enough, even if I could be certain that all of them will choose to give me their allegiance. I must have the gold cloaks. The City Watch is two thousand strong, sworn to defend the castle, the city, and the king's peace."

"Ah, but when the queen proclaims one king and the Hand another, whose peace do they protect?" Lord Petyr flicked at the dagger with his finger, setting it spinning in place. Round and round it went, wobbling as it turned. When at last it slowed to a stop, the blade pointed at Littlefinger. "Why, there's your answer," he said, smiling. "They follow the man who pays them." He leaned back and looked Ned full in the face, his grey-green eyes bright with mockery. "You wear your honor like a suit of armor, Stark. You think it keeps you safe, but all it does is weigh you down and make it hard for you to move. Look at you now. You know why you summoned me here. You know what you want to ask me to do. You know it has to be done... but it's not honorable, so the words stick in your throat."

Ned's neck was rigid with tension. For a moment he was so angry that he did not trust himself to speak.

Littlefinger laughed. "I ought to make you say it, but that would be cruel... so have no fear, my good lord. For the sake of the love I bear for Catelyn, I will go to Janos Slynt this very hour and make certain that the City Watch is yours. Six thousand gold pieces should do it. A third for the Commander, a third for the officers, a third for the men. We might be able to buy them for half that much, but I prefer not to take chances." Smiling, he plucked up the dagger and offered it to Ned, hilt first.