

Littlefinger gave a shrug. “The master of coin finds the money. The king and the Hand spend it.”

“I will not believe that Jon Arryn allowed Robert to beggar the realm,” Ned said hotly.

Grand Maester Pycelle shook his great bald head, his chains clinking softly. “Lord Arryn was a prudent man, but I fear that His Grace does not always listen to wise counsel.”

“My royal brother loves tournaments and feasts,” Renly Baratheon said, “and he loathes what he calls ‘counting coppers.’”

“I will speak with His Grace,” Ned said. “This tourney is an extravagance the realm cannot afford.”

“Speak to him as you will,” Lord Renly said, “we had still best make our plans.”

“Another day,” Ned said. Perhaps too sharply, from the looks they gave him. He would have to remember that he was no longer in Winterfell, where only the king stood higher; here, he was but first among equals. “Forgive me, my lords,” he said in a softer tone. “I am tired. Let us call a halt for today and resume when we are fresher.” He did not ask for their consent, but stood abruptly, nodded at them all, and made for the door.

Outside, wagons and riders were still pouring through the castle gates, and the yard was a chaos of mud and horseflesh and shouting men. The king had not yet arrived, he was told. Since the ugliness on the Trident, the Starks and their household had ridden well ahead of the main column, the better to separate themselves from the Lannisters and the growing tension. Robert had hardly been seen; the talk was he was traveling in the huge wheelhouse, drunk as often as not. If so, he might be hours behind, but he would still be here too soon for Ned’s liking. He had only to look at Sansa’s face to feel the rage twisting inside him once again. The last fortnight of their journey had been a misery. Sansa blamed Arya and told her that it should have been Nymeria who died. And Arya was lost after she heard what had happened to her butcher’s boy. Sansa cried herself to sleep, Arya brooded silently all day long, and Eddard Stark dreamed of a frozen hell reserved for the Starks of Winterfell.

He crossed the outer yard, passed under a portcullis into the inner bailey, and was walking toward what he thought was the Tower of the Hand when Littlefinger appeared in front of him. “You’re going the wrong way, Stark. Come with me.”

Hesitantly, Ned followed. Littlefinger led him into a tower, down a stair, across a small sunken courtyard, and along a deserted corridor where empty suits of armor stood sentinel along the walls. They were relics of the Targaryens, black steel with dragon scales cresting their helms, now dusty and forgotten. “This is not the way to my chambers,” Ned said.

“Did I say it was? I’m leading you to the dungeons to slit your throat and seal your corpse up behind a wall,” Littlefinger replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “We have no time for this, Stark. Your wife awaits.”

“What game are you playing, Littlefinger? Catelyn is at Winterfell, hundreds of leagues from here.”