

brought him out of the sheath on his belt. The Imp's knife. Why would the dwarf want Bran dead? To silence him, surely. Another secret, or only a different strand of the same web?

Could Robert be part of it? He would not have thought so, but once he would not have thought Robert could command the murder of women and children either. Catelyn had tried to warn him. You knew the man, she had said. The king is a stranger to you. The sooner he was quit of King's Landing, the better. If there was a ship sailing north on the morrow, it would be well to be on it. He summoned Vayon Poole again and sent him to the docks to make inquiries, quietly but quickly. "Find me a fast ship with a skilled captain," he told the steward. "I care nothing for the size of its cabins or the quality of its appointments, so long as it is swift and safe. I wish to leave at once."

Poole had no sooner taken his leave than Tomard announced a visitor. "Lord Baelish to see you, m'lord."

Ned was half-tempted to turn him away, but thought better of it. He was not free yet; until he was, he must play their games. "Show him in, Tom."

Lord Petyr sauntered into the solar as if nothing had gone amiss that morning. He wore a slashed velvet doublet in cream-and-silver, a grey silk cloak trimmed with black fox, and his customary mocking smile.

Ned greeted him coldly. "Might I ask the reason for this visit, Lord Baelish?"

"I won't detain you long, I'm on my way to dine with Lady Tanda. Lamprey pie and roast suckling pig. She has some thought to wed me to her younger daughter, so her table is always astonishing. If truth be told, I'd sooner marry the pig, but don't tell her. I do love lamprey pie."

"Don't let me keep you from your eels, my lord," Ned said with icy disdain. "At the moment, I cannot think of anyone whose company I desire less than yours."

"Oh, I'm certain if you put your mind to it, you could come up with a few names. Varys, say. Cersei. Or Robert. His Grace is most wroth with you. He went on about you at some length after you took your leave of us this morning. The words insolence and ingratitude came into it frequently, I seem to recall."

Ned did not honor that with a reply. Nor did he offer his guest a seat, but Littlefinger took one anyway. "After you stormed out, it was left to me to convince them not to hire the Faceless Men," he continued blithely. "Instead Varys will quietly let it be known that we'll make a lord of whoever does in the Targaryen girl."

Ned was disgusted. "So now we grant titles to assassins."

Littlefinger shrugged. "Titles are cheap. The Faceless Men are expensive. If truth be told, I did the Targaryen girl more good than you with all your talk of honor. Let some sellsword drunk on visions of lordship try to kill her. Likely he'll make a botch of it, and afterward the Dothraki will be on their guard. If we'd sent a Faceless Man after her, she'd be as good as buried."

Ned frowned. "You sit in council and talk of ugly women and steel kisses, and now you expect me to believe that you tried to protect the girl? How big a fool do you take me for?"

"Well, quite an enormous one, actually," said Littlefinger, laughing.

"Do you always find murder so amusing, Lord Baelish?"