

The short man gave a sodden shrug. "He was the King's Hand. Doubtless Robert asked him to see that they were provided for."

Ned was soaked through to the bone, and his soul had grown cold. "It had to be more than that, or why kill him?"

Littlefinger shook the rain from his hair and laughed. "Now I see. Lord Arryn learned that His Grace had filled the bellies of some whores and fishwives, and for that he had to be silenced. Small wonder. Allow a man like that to live, and next he's like to blurt out that the sun rises in the east."

There was no answer Ned Stark could give to that but a frown. For the first time in years, he found himself remembering Rhaegar Targaryen. He wondered if Rhaegar had frequented brothels; somehow he thought not.

The rain was falling harder now, stinging the eyes and drumming against the ground. Rivers of black water were running down the hill when Jory called out, "My lord, " his voice hoarse with alarm. And in an instant, the street was full of soldiers.

Ned glimpsed ringmail over leather, gauntlets and greaves, steel helms with golden lions on the crests. Their cloaks clung to their backs, sodden with rain. He had no time to count, but there were ten at least, a line of them, on foot, blocking the street, with longswords and iron-tipped spears. "Behind!" he heard Wyl cry, and when he turned his horse, there were more in back of them, cutting off their retreat. Jory's sword came singing from its scabbard. "Make way or die!"

"The wolves are howling," their leader said. Ned could see rain running down his face. "Such a small pack, though."

Littlefinger walked his horse forward, step by careful step. "What is the meaning of this? This is the Hand of the King."

"He was the Hand of the King." The mud muffled the hooves of the blood bay stallion. The line parted before him. On a golden breastplate, the lion of Lannister roared its defiance. "Now, if truth be told, I'm not sure what he is."

"Lannister, this is madness," Littlefinger said. "Let us pass. We are expected back at the castle. What do you think you're doing?"

"He knows what he's doing," Ned said calmly.

Jaime Lannister smiled. "Quite true. I'm looking for my brother. You remember my brother, don't you, Lord Stark? He was with us at Winterfell. Fair-haired, mismatched eyes, sharp of tongue. A short man."

"I remember him well," Ned replied.

"It would seem he has met some trouble on the road. My lord father is quite vexed. You would not perchance have any notion of who might have wished my brother ill, would you?"

"Your brother has been taken at my command, to answer for his crimes," Ned Stark said.

Littlefinger groaned in dismay. "My lords—"

Ser Jaime ripped his longsword from its sheath and urged his stallion forward. "Show me your steel, Lord Eddard. I'll butcher you like Aerys if I must, but I'd sooner you died with a blade in