

Lord Petyr stroked his pointed beard as he considered the matter. "So it would seem. Unless..."

"Unless, my lord? There is no seeming to this. Stannis is the heir. Nothing can change that."

"Stannis cannot take the throne without your help. If you're wise, you'll make certain Joffrey succeeds."

Ned gave him a stony stare. "Have you no shred of honor?"

"Oh, a shred, surely," Littlefinger replied negligently. "Hear me out. Stannis is no friend of yours, nor of mine. Even his brothers can scarcely stomach him. The man is iron, hard and unyielding. He'll give us a new Hand and a new council, for a certainty. No doubt he'll thank you for handing him the crown, but he won't love you for it. And his ascent will mean war. Stannis cannot rest easy on the throne until Cersei and her bastards are dead. Do you think Lord Tywin will sit idly while his daughter's head is measured for a spike? Casterly Rock will rise, and not alone. Robert found it in him to pardon men who served King Aerys, so long as they did him fealty. Stannis is less forgiving. He will not have forgotten the siege of Storm's End, and the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne dare not. Every man who fought beneath the dragon banner or rose with Balon Greyjoy will have good cause to fear. Seat Stannis on the Iron Throne and I promise you, the realm will bleed.

"Now look at the other side of the coin. Joffrey is but twelve, and Robert gave you the regency, my lord. You are the Hand of the King and Protector of the Realm. The power is yours, Lord Stark. All you need do is reach out and take it. Make your peace with the Lannisters. Release the Imp. Wed Joffrey to your Sansa. Wed your younger girl to Prince Tommen, and your heir to Myrcella. It will be four years before Joffrey comes of age. By then he will look to you as a second father, and if not, well... four years is a good long while, my lord. Long enough to dispose of Lord Stannis. Then, should Joffrey prove troublesome, we can reveal his little secret and put Lord Renly on the throne."

"We?" Ned repeated.

Littlefinger gave a shrug. "You'll need someone to share your burdens. I assure you, my price would be modest."

"Your price." Ned's voice was ice. "Lord Baelish, what you suggest is treason."

"Only if we lose."

"You forget," Ned told him. "You forget Jon Arryn. You forget Jory Cassel. And you forget this." He drew the dagger and laid it on the table between them; a length of dragonbone and Valyrian steel, as sharp as the difference between right and wrong, between true and false, between life and death. "They sent a man to cut my son's throat, Lord Baelish."

Littlefinger sighed. "I fear I did forget, my lord. Pray forgive me. For a moment I did not remember that I was talking to a Stark." His mouth quirked. "So it will be Stannis, and war?"

"It is not a choice. Stannis is the heir."

"Far be it from me to dispute the Lord Protector. What would you have of me, then? Not my wisdom, for a certainty."

"I shall do my best to forget your... wisdom," Ned said with distaste. "I called you here to ask for the help you promised Catelyn. This is a perilous hour for all of us. Robert has named me