

Catelyn went to him and took his hands in her own. “I will not forget the help you gave me, Petyr. When your men came for me, I did not know whether they were taking me to a friend or an enemy. I have found you more than a friend. I have found a brother I’d thought lost.”

Petyr Baelish smiled. “I am desperately sentimental, sweet lady. Best not tell anyone. I have spent years convincing the court that I am wicked and cruel, and I should hate to see all that hard work go for naught.”

Ned believed not a word of that, but he kept his voice polite as he said, “You have my thanks as well, Lord Baelish.”

“Oh, now there’s a treasure,” Littlefinger said, exiting.

When the door had closed behind him, Ned turned back to his wife. “Once you are home, send word to Helman Tallhart and Galbart Glover under my seal. They are to raise a hundred bowmen each and fortify Moat Cailin. Two hundred determined archers can hold the Neck against an army. Instruct Lord Manderly that he is to strengthen and repair all his defenses at White Harbor, and see that they are well manned. And from this day on, I want a careful watch kept over Theon Greyjoy. If there is war, we shall have sore need of his father’s fleet.”

“War?” The fear was plain on Catelyn’s face.

“It will not come to that,” Ned promised her, praying it was true. He took her in his arms again. “The Lannisters are merciless in the face of weakness, as Aerys Targaryen learned to his sorrow, but they would not dare attack the north without all the power of the realm behind them, and that they shall not have. I must play out this fool’s masquerade as if nothing is amiss. Remember why I came here, my love. If I find proof that the Lannisters murdered Jon Arryn...

He felt Catelyn tremble in his arms. Her scarred hands clung to him. “If,” she said, “what then, my love?”

That was the most dangerous part, Ned knew. “All justice flows from the king,” he told her. “When I know the truth, I must go to Robert.” And pray that he is the man I think he is, he finished silently, and not the man I fear he has become.