

CATELYN

“We will make King’s Landing within the hour.”

Catelyn turned away from the rail and forced herself to smile. “Your oarmen have done well by us, Captain. Each one of them shall have a silver stag, as a token of my gratitude.”

Captain Moreo Turnitis favored her with a half bow. “You are far too generous, Lady Stark. The honor of carrying a great lady like yourself is all the reward they need.”

“But they’ll take the silver anyway.”

Moreo smiled. “As you say.” He spoke the Common Tongue fluently, with only the slightest hint of a Tyroshi accent. He’d been plying the narrow sea for thirty years, he’d told her, as oarman, quartermaster, and finally captain of his own trading galleys. The *Storm Dancer* was his fourth ship, and his fastest, a two-masted galley of sixty oars.

She had certainly been the fastest of the ships available in White Harbor when Catelyn and Ser Rodrik Cassel had arrived after their headlong gallop downriver. The Tyroshi were notorious for their avarice, and Ser Rodrik had argued for hiring a fishing sloop out of the Three Sisters, but Catelyn had insisted on the galley. It was good that she had. The winds had been against them much of the voyage, and without the galley’s oars they’d still be beating their way past the Fingers, instead of skimming toward King’s Landing and journey’s end.

So close, she thought. Beneath the linen bandages, her fingers still throbbed where the dagger had bitten. The pain was her scourge, Catelyn felt, lest she forget. She could not bend the last two fingers on her left hand, and the others would never again be dexterous. Yet that was a small enough price to pay for Bran’s life.

Ser Rodrik chose that moment to appear on deck. “My good friend,” said Moreo through his forked green beard. The Tyroshi loved bright colors, even in their facial hair. “It is so fine to see you looking better.”

“Yes,” Ser Rodrik agreed. “I haven’t wanted to die for almost two days now.” He bowed to Catelyn. “My lady.”

He *was* looking better. A shade thinner than he had been when they set out from White Harbor, but almost himself again. The strong winds in the Bite and the roughness of the narrow sea had not agreed with him, and he’d almost gone over the side when the storm seized them unexpectedly off Dragonstone, yet somehow he had clung to a rope until three of Moreo’s men could rescue him and carry him safely below decks.

“The captain was just telling me that our voyage is almost at an end,” she said.

Ser Rodrik managed a wry smile. “So soon?” He looked odd without his great white side whiskers; smaller somehow, less fierce, and ten years older. Yet back on the Bite it had seemed prudent to submit to a crewman’s razor, after his whiskers had become hopelessly befouled for the third time while he leaned over the rail and retched into the swirling winds.

“I will leave you to discuss your business,” Captain Moreo said. He bowed and took his leave of them.

The galley skimmed the water like a dragonfly, her oars rising and falling in perfect time. Ser Rodrik held the rail and looked out over the passing shore. “I have not been the most valiant of protectors.”

Catelyn touched his arm. “We are here, Ser Rodrik, and safely. That is all that truly matters.” Her hand groped beneath her cloak, her fingers stiff and fumbling. The dagger was still at her side. She found she had to touch it now and then, to reassure herself. “Now we must reach the king’s master-at-arms, and pray that he can be trusted.”

“Ser Aron Santagar is a vain man, but an honest one.” Ser Rodrik’s hand went to his face to stroke his whiskers and discovered once again that they were gone. He looked nonplussed. “He may know the blade, yes... but, my lady, the moment we go ashore we are at risk. And there are those at court who will know you on sight.”

Catelyn’s mouth grew tight. “Littlefinger,” she murmured. His face swam up before her; a boy’s face, though he was a boy no longer. His father

had died several years before, so he was Lord Baelish now, yet still they called him Littlefinger. Her brother Edmure had given him that name, long ago at Riverrun. His family's modest holdings were on the smallest of the Fingers, and Petyr had been slight and short for his age.

Ser Rodrik cleared his throat. "Lord Baelish once, ah..." His thought trailed off uncertainly in search of the polite word.

Catelyn was past delicacy. "He was my father's ward. We grew up together in Riverrun. I thought of him as a brother, but his feelings for me were... more than brotherly. When it was announced that I was to wed Brandon Stark, Petyr challenged for the right to my hand. It was madness. Brandon was twenty, Petyr scarcely fifteen. I had to beg Brandon to spare Petyr's life. He let him off with a scar. Afterward my father sent him away. I have not seen him since." She lifted her face to the spray, as if the brisk wind could blow the memories away. "He wrote to me at Riverrun after Brandon was killed, but I burned the letter unread. By then I knew that Ned would marry me in his brother's place."

Ser Rodrik's fingers fumbled once again for nonexistent whiskers. "Littlefinger sits on the small council now."

"I knew he would rise high," Catelyn said. "He was always clever, even as a boy, but it is one thing to be clever and another to be wise. I wonder what the years have done to him."

High overhead, the far-eyes sang out from the rigging. Captain Moreo came scrambling across the deck, giving orders, and all around them the *Storm Dancer* burst into frenetic activity as King's Landing slid into view atop its three high hills.

Three hundred years ago, Catelyn knew, those heights had been covered with forest, and only a handful of fisherfolk had lived on the north shore of the Blackwater Rush where that deep, swift river flowed into the sea. Then Aegon the Conqueror had sailed from Dragonstone. It was here that his army had put ashore, and there on the highest hill that he built his first crude redoubt of wood and earth.

Now the city covered the shore as far as Catelyn could see; manses and arbors and granaries, brick storehouses and timbered inns and merchant's

stalls, taverns and graveyards and brothels, all piled one on another. She could hear the clamor of the fish market even at this distance. Between the buildings were broad roads lined with trees, wandering crookback streets, and alleys so narrow that two men could not walk abreast. Visenya's hill was crowned by the Great Sept of Baelor with its seven crystal towers. Across the city on the hill of Rhaenys stood the blackened walls of the Dragonpit, its huge dome collapsing into ruin, its bronze doors closed now for a century. The Street of the Sisters ran between them, straight as an arrow. The city walls rose in the distance, high and strong.

A hundred quays lined the waterfront, and the harbor was crowded with ships. Deepwater fishing boats and river runners came and went, ferrymen poled back and forth across the Blackwater Rush, trading galleys unloaded goods from Braavos and Pentos and Lys. Catelyn spied the queen's ornate barge, tied up beside a fat-bellied whaler from the Port of Ibben, its hull black with tar, while upriver a dozen lean golden warships rested in their cribs, sails furled and cruel iron rams lapping at the water.

And above it all, frowning down from Aegon's high hill, was the Red Keep; seven huge drum-towers crowned with iron ramparts, an immense grim barbican, vaulted halls and covered bridges, barracks and dungeons and granaries, massive curtain walls studded with archers' nests, all fashioned of pale red stone. Aegon the Conqueror had commanded it built. His son Maegor the Cruel had seen it completed. Afterward he had taken the heads of every stonemason, woodworker, and builder who had labored on it. Only the blood of the dragon would ever know the secrets of the fortress the Dragonlords had built, he vowed.

Yet now the banners that flew from its battlements were golden, not black, and where the three-headed dragon had once breathed fire, now pranced the crowned stag of House Baratheon.

A high-masted swan ship from the Summer Isles was beating out from port, its white sails huge with wind. The *Storm Dancer* moved past it, pulling steadily for shore.

"My lady," Ser Rodrik said, "I have thought on how best to proceed while I lay abed. You must not enter the castle. I will go in your stead and

bring Ser Aron to you in some safe place.”

She studied the old knight as the galley drew near to a pier. Moreo was shouting in the vulgar Valyrian of the Free Cities. “You would be as much at risk as I would.”

Ser Rodrik smiled. “I think not. I looked at my reflection in the water earlier and scarcely recognized myself. My mother was the last person to see me without whiskers, and she is forty years dead. I believe I am safe enough, my lady.”

Moreo bellowed a command. As one, sixty oars lifted from the river, then reversed and backed water. The galley slowed. Another shout. The oars slid back inside the hull. As they thumped against the dock, Tyroshi seamen leapt down to tie up. Moreo came bustling up, all smiles. “King’s Landing, my lady, as you did command, and never has a ship made a swifter or surer passage. Will you be needing assistance to carry your things to the castle?”

“We shall not be going to the castle. Perhaps you can suggest an inn, someplace clean and comfortable and not too far from the river.”

The Tyroshi fingered his forked green beard. “Just so. I know of several establishments that might suit your needs. Yet first, if I may be so bold, there is the matter of the second half of the payment we agreed upon. And of course the extra silver you were so kind as to promise. Sixty stags, I believe it was.”

“For the oarmen,” Catelyn reminded him.

“Oh, of a certainty,” said Moreo. “Though perhaps I should hold it for them until we return to Tyrosh. For the sake of their wives and children. If you give them the silver here, my lady, they will dice it away or spend it all for a night’s pleasure.”

“There are worse things to spend money on,” Ser Rodrik put in. “Winter is coming.”

“A man must make his own choices,” Catelyn said. “They earned the silver. How they spend it is no concern of mine.”

“As you say, my lady,” Moreo replied, bowing and smiling.

Just to be sure, Catelyn paid the oarmen herself, a stag to each man, and a copper to the two men who carried their chests halfway up Visenya's hill to the inn that Moreo had suggested. It was a rambling old place on Eel Alley. The woman who owned it was a sour crone with a wandering eye who looked them over suspiciously and bit the coin that Catelyn offered her to make sure it was real. Her rooms were large and airy, though, and Moreo swore that her fish stew was the most savory in all the Seven Kingdoms. Best of all, she had no interest in their names.

"I think it best if you stay away from the common room," Ser Rodrik said, after they had settled in. "Even in a place like this, one never knows who may be watching." He wore ringmail, dagger, and longsword under a dark cloak with a hood he could pull up over his head. "I will be back before nightfall, with Ser Aron," he promised. "Rest now, my lady."

Catelyn *was* tired. The voyage had been long and fatiguing, and she was no longer as young as she had been. Her windows opened on the alley and rooftops, with a view of the Blackwater beyond. She watched Ser Rodrik set off, striding briskly through the busy streets until he was lost in the crowds, then decided to take his advice. The bedding was stuffed with straw instead of feathers, but she had no trouble falling asleep.

She woke to a pounding on her door.

Catelyn sat up sharply. Outside the window, the rooftops of King's Landing were red in the light of the setting sun. She had slept longer than she intended. A fist hammered at her door again, and a voice called out, "Open, in the name of the king."

"A moment," she called out. She wrapped herself in her cloak. The dagger was on the bedside table. She snatched it up before she unlatched the heavy wooden door.

The men who pushed into the room wore the black ringmail and golden cloaks of the City Watch. Their leader smiled at the dagger in her hand and said, "No need for that, m'lady. We're to escort you to the castle."

"By whose authority?" she said.

He showed her a ribbon. Catelyn felt her breath catch in her throat. The seal was a mockingbird, in grey wax. “Petyr,” she said. So soon. Something must have happened to Ser Rodrik. She looked at the head guardsman. “Do you know who I am?”

“No, m’lady,” he said. “M’lord Littlefinger said only to bring you to him, and see that you were not mistreated.”

Catelyn nodded. “You may wait outside while I dress.”

She bathed her hands in the basin and wrapped them in clean linen. Her fingers were thick and awkward as she struggled to lace up her bodice and knot a drab brown cloak about her neck. How could Littlefinger have known she was here? Ser Rodrik would never have told him. Old he might be, but he was stubborn, and loyal to a fault. Were they too late, had the Lannisters reached King’s Landing before her? No, if that were true, Ned would be here too, and surely he would have come to her. How...?

Then she thought, *Moreo*. The Tyroshi knew who they were and where they were, damn him. She hoped he’d gotten a good price for the information.

They had brought a horse for her. The lamps were being lit along the streets as they set out, and Catelyn felt the eyes of the city on her as she rode, surrounded by the guard in their golden cloaks. When they reached the Red Keep, the portcullis was down and the great gates sealed for the night, but the castle windows were alive with flickering lights. The guardsmen left their mounts outside the walls and escorted her through a narrow postern door, then up endless steps to a tower.

He was alone in the room, seated at a heavy wooden table, an oil lamp beside him as he wrote. When they ushered her inside, he set down his pen and looked at her. “Cat,” he said quietly.

“Why have I been brought here in this fashion?”

He rose and gestured brusquely to the guards. “Leave us.” The men departed. “You were not mistreated, I trust,” he said after they had gone. “I gave firm instructions.” He noticed her bandages. “Your hands...”

Catelyn ignored the implied question. "I am not accustomed to being summoned like a serving wench," she said icily. "As a boy, you still knew the meaning of courtesy."

"I've angered you, my lady. That was never my intent." He looked contrite. The look brought back vivid memories for Catelyn. He had been a sly child, but after his mischiefs he always looked contrite; it was a gift he had. The years had not changed him much. Petyr had been a small boy, and he had grown into a small man, an inch or two shorter than Catelyn, slender and quick, with the sharp features she remembered and the same laughing grey-green eyes. He had a little pointed chin beard now, and threads of silver in his dark hair, though he was still shy of thirty. They went well with the silver mockingbird that fastened his cloak. Even as a child, he had always loved his silver.

"How did you know I was in the city?" she asked him.

"Lord Varys knows all," Petyr said with a sly smile. "He will be joining us shortly, but I wanted to see you alone first. It has been too long, Cat. How many years?"

Catelyn ignored his familiarity. There were more important questions. "So it was the King's Spider who found me."

Littlefinger winced. "You don't want to call him that. He's very sensitive. Comes of being an eunuch, I imagine. Nothing happens in this city without Varys knowing. Oftimes he knows about it *before* it happens. He has informants everywhere. His little birds, he calls them. One of his little birds heard about your visit. Thankfully, Varys came to me first."

"Why you?"

He shrugged. "Why not me? I am master of coin, the king's own councillor. Selmy and Lord Renly rode north to meet Robert, and Lord Stannis is gone to Dragonstone, leaving only Maester Pycelle and me. I was the obvious choice. I was ever a friend to your sister Lysa, Varys knows that."

"Does Varys know about..."

“Lord Varys knows everything... except why you are here.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Why *are* you here?”

“A wife is allowed to yearn for her husband, and if a mother needs her daughters close, who can tell her no?”

Littlefinger laughed. “Oh, very good, my lady, but please don’t expect me to believe that. I know you too well. What were the Tully words again?”

Her throat was dry. “*Family, Duty, Honor,*” she recited stiffly. He did know her too well.

“Family, Duty, Honor,” he echoed. “All of which required you to remain in Winterfell, where our Hand left you. No, my lady, something has happened. This sudden trip of yours bespeaks a certain urgency. I beg of you, let me help. Old sweet friends should never hesitate to rely upon each other.” There was a soft knock on the door. “Enter,” Littlefinger called out.

The man who stepped through the door was plump, perfumed, powdered, and as hairless as an egg. He wore a vest of woven gold thread over a loose gown of purple silk, and on his feet were pointed slippers of soft velvet. “Lady Stark,” he said, taking her hand in both of his, “to see you again after so many years is such a joy.” His flesh was soft and moist, and his breath smelled of lilacs. “Oh, your poor hands. Have you burned yourself, sweet lady? The fingers are so delicate... Our good Maester Pycelle makes a marvelous salve, shall I send for a jar?”

Catelyn slid her fingers from his grasp. “I thank you, my lord, but my own Maester Luwin has already seen to my hurts.”

Varys bobbed his head. “I was grievous sad to hear about your son. And him so young. The gods are cruel.”

“On that we agree, Lord Varys,” she said. The title was but a courtesy due him as a council member; Varys was lord of nothing but the spiderweb, the master of none but his whisperers.

The eunuch spread his soft hands. “On more than that, I hope, sweet lady. I have great esteem for your husband, our new Hand, and I know we do both love King Robert.”

“Yes,” she was forced to say. “For a certainty.”

“Never has a king been so beloved as our Robert,” quipped Littlefinger. He smiled slyly. “At least in Lord Varys’s hearing.”

“Good lady,” Varys said with great solicitude. “There are men in the Free Cities with wondrous healing powers. Say only the word, and I will send for one for your dear Bran.”

“Maester Luwin is doing all that can be done for Bran,” she told him. She would not speak of Bran, not here, not with these men. She trusted Littlefinger only a little, and Varys not at all. She would not let them see her grief. “Lord Baelish tells me that I have you to thank for bringing me here.”

Varys giggled like a little girl. “Oh, yes. I suppose I am guilty. I hope you forgive me, kind lady.” He eased himself down into a seat and put his hands together. “I wonder if we might trouble you to show us the dagger?”

Catelyn Stark stared at the eunuch in stunned disbelief. He *was* a spider, she thought wildly, an enchanter or worse. He knew things no one could possibly know, unless... “What have you done to Ser Rodrik?” she demanded.

Littlefinger was lost. “I feel rather like the knight who arrives at the battle without his lance. What dagger are we talking about? Who is Ser Rodrik?”

“Ser Rodrik Cassel is master-at-arms at Winterfell,” Varys informed him. “I assure you, Lady Stark, nothing at all has been done to the good knight. He did call here early this afternoon. He visited with Ser Aron Santagar in the armory, and they talked of a certain dagger. About sunset, they left the castle together and walked to that dreadful hovel where you were staying. They are still there, drinking in the common room, waiting for your return. Ser Rodrik was very distressed to find you gone.”

“How could you know all that?”

“The whisperings of little birds,” Varys said, smiling. “I know things, sweet lady. That is the nature of my service.” He shrugged. “You *do* have the dagger with you, yes?”

Catelyn pulled it out from beneath her cloak and threw it down on the table in front of him. “Here. Perhaps your little birds will whisper the name

of the man it belongs to.”

Varys lifted the knife with exaggerated delicacy and ran a thumb along its edge. Blood welled, and he let out a squeal and dropped the dagger back on the table.

“Careful,” Catelyn told him, “it’s sharp.”

“Nothing holds an edge like Valyrian steel,” Littlefinger said as Varys sucked at his bleeding thumb and looked at Catelyn with sullen admonition. Littlefinger hefted the knife lightly in his hand, testing the grip. He flipped it in the air, caught it again with his other hand. “Such sweet balance. You want to find the owner, is that the reason for this visit? You have no need of Ser Aron for that, my lady. You should have come to me.”

“And if I had,” she said, “what would you have told me?”

“I would have told you that there was only one knife like this at King’s Landing.” He grasped the blade between thumb and forefinger, drew it back over his shoulder, and threw it across the room with a practiced flick of his wrist. It struck the door and buried itself deep in the oak, quivering. “It’s mine.”

“*Yours?*” It made no sense. Petyr had not been at Winterfell.

“Until the tourney on Prince Joffrey’s name day,” he said, crossing the room to wrench the dagger from the wood. “I backed Ser Jaime in the jousting, along with half the court.” Petyr’s sheepish grin made him look half a boy again. “When Loras Tyrell unhorsed him, many of us became a trifle poorer. Ser Jaime lost a hundred golden dragons, the queen lost an emerald pendant, and I lost my knife. Her Grace got the emerald back, but the winner kept the rest.”

“*Who?*” Catelyn demanded, her mouth dry with fear. Her fingers ached with remembered pain.

“The Imp,” said Littlefinger as Lord Varys watched her face. “Tyrion Lannister.”