

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 Stonn 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,