

“Would that it were, Stark,” Littlefinger said. “Follow me, and try to look a shade more lecherous and a shade less like the King’s Hand. It would not do to have you recognized. Perhaps you could fondle a breast or two, just in passing.”

They went inside, through a crowded common room where a fat woman was singing bawdy songs while pretty young girls in linen shifts and wisps of colored silk pressed themselves against their lovers and dandled on their laps. No one paid Ned the least bit of attention. Ser Rodrik waited below while Littlefinger led him up to the third floor, along a corridor, and through a door.

Inside, Catelyn was waiting. She cried out when she saw him, ran to him, and embraced him fiercely.

“My lady,” Ned whispered in wonderment.

“Oh, very good,” said Littlefinger, closing the door. “You recognized her.”

“I feared you’d never come, my lord,” she whispered against his chest. “Petyr has been bringing me reports. He told me of your troubles with Arya and the young prince. How are my girls?”

“Both in mourning, and full of anger,” he told her. “Cat, I do not understand. What are you doing in King’s Landing? What’s happened?” Ned asked his wife. “Is it Bran? Is he...” Dead was the word that came to his lips, but he could not say it.

“It is Bran, but not as you think,” Catelyn said.

Ned was lost. “Then how? Why are you here, my love? What is this place?”

“Just what it appears,” Littlefinger said, easing himself onto a window seat. “A brothel. Can you think of a less likely place to find a Catelyn Tully?” He smiled. “As it chances, I own this particular establishment, so arrangements were easily made. I am most anxious to keep the Lannisters from learning that Cat is here in King’s Landing.”

“Why?” Ned asked. He saw her hands then, the awkward way she held them, the raw red scars, the stiffness of the last two fingers on her left. “You’ve been hurt.” He took her hands in his own, turned them over. “Gods. Those are deep cuts... a gash from a sword or... how did this happen, my lady?”

Catelyn slid a dagger out from under her cloak and placed it in his hand. “This blade was sent to open Bran’s throat and spill his life’s blood.”

Ned’s head jerked up. “But... who... why would.”

She put a finger to his lips. “Let me tell it all, my love. It will go faster that way. Listen.”

So he listened, and she told it all, from the fire in the library tower to Varys and the guardsmen and Littlefinger. And when she was done, Eddard Stark sat dazed beside the table, the dagger in his hand. Bran’s wolf had saved the boy’s life, he thought dully. What was it that Jon had said when they found the pups in the snow? Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord. And he had killed Sansa’s, and for what? Was it guilt he was feeling? Or fear? If the gods had sent these wolves, what folly had he done?

Painfully, Ned forced his thoughts back to the dagger and what it meant. “The Imp’s dagger,” he repeated. It made no sense. His hand curled around the smooth dragonbone hilt, and he