

## CATELYN

The meeting place was a grassy sward dotted with pale grey mushrooms and the raw stumps of felled trees.

“We are the first, my lady,” Hallis Mollen said as they reined up amidst the stumps, alone between the armies. The direwolf banner of House Stark flapped and fluttered atop the lance he bore. Catelyn could not see the sea from here, but she could feel how close it was. The smell of salt was heavy on the wind gusting from the east.

Stannis Baratheon’s foragers had cut the trees down for his siege towers and catapults. Catelyn wondered how long the grove had stood, and whether Ned had rested here when he led his host south to lift the last siege of Storm’s End. He had won a great victory that day, all the greater for being bloodless.

*Gods grant that I shall do the same*, Catelyn prayed. Her own liege men thought she was mad even to come. “This is no fight of ours, my lady,” Ser Wendel Manderly had said. “I know the king would not wish his mother to put herself at risk.”

“We are all at risk,” she told him, perhaps too sharply. “Do you think I wish to be here, ser?” *I belong at Riverrun with my dying father, at Winterfell with my sons*. “Robb sent me south to speak for him, and speak for him I shall.” It would be no easy thing to forge a peace between these brothers, Catelyn knew, yet for the good of the realm, it must be tried.

Across rain-sodden fields and stony ridges, she could see the great castle of Storm’s End rearing up against the sky, its back to the unseen sea. Beneath that mass of pale grey stone, the encircling army of Lord Stannis Baratheon looked as small and insignificant as mice with banners.

The songs said that Storm’s End had been raised in ancient days by Durran, the first Storm King, who had won the love of the fair Elenei, daughter of the sea god and the goddess of the wind. On the night of their wedding, Elenei had yielded her maidenhood to a mortal’s love and thus

doomed herself to a mortal's death, and her grieving parents had unleashed their wrath and sent the winds and waters to batter down Durran's hold. His friends and brothers and wedding guests were crushed beneath collapsing walls or blown out to sea, but Elenei sheltered Durran within her arms so he took no harm, and when the dawn came at last he declared war upon the gods and vowed to rebuild.

Five more castles he built, each larger and stronger than the last, only to see them smashed asunder when the gale winds came howling up Shipbreaker Bay, driving great walls of water before them. His lords pleaded with him to build inland; his priests told him he must placate the gods by giving Elenei back to the sea; even his smallfolk begged him to relent. Durran would have none of it. A seventh castle he raised, most massive of all. Some said the children of the forest helped him build it, shaping the stones with magic; others claimed that a small boy told him what he must do, a boy who would grow to be Bran the Builder. No matter how the tale was told, the end was the same. Though the angry gods threw storm after storm against it, the seventh castle stood defiant, and Durran Godsgrief and fair Elenei dwelt there together until the end of their days.

Gods do not forget, and still the gales came raging up the narrow sea. Yet Storm's End endured, through centuries and tens of centuries, a castle like no other. Its great curtain wall was a hundred feet high, unbroken by arrow slit or postern, everywhere rounded, curving, *smooth*, its stones fit so cunningly together that nowhere was crevice nor angle nor gap by which the wind might enter. That wall was said to be forty feet thick at its narrowest, and near eighty on the seaward face, a double course of stones with an inner core of sand and rubble. Within that mighty bulwark, the kitchens and stables and yards sheltered safe from wind and wave. Of towers, there was but one, a colossal drum tower, windowless where it faced the sea, so large that it was granary and barracks and feast hall and lord's dwelling all in one, crowned by massive battlements that made it look from afar like a spiked fist atop an upthrust arm.

"My lady," Hal Mollen called. Two riders had emerged from the tidy little camp beneath the castle, and were coming toward them at a slow walk.

“That will be King Stannis.”

“No doubt.” Catelyn watched them come. *Stannis it must be, yet that is not the Baratheon banner.* It was a bright yellow, not the rich gold of Renly’s standards, and the device it bore was red, though she could not make out its shape.

Renly would be last to arrive. He had told her as much when she set out. He did not propose to mount his horse until he saw his brother well on his way. The first to arrive must wait on the other, and Renly would do no waiting. *It is a sort of game kings play,* she told herself. Well, she was no king, so she need not play it. Catelyn was practiced at waiting.

As he neared, she saw that Stannis wore a crown of red gold with points fashioned in the shape of flames. His belt was studded with garnets and yellow topaz, and a great square-cut ruby was set in the hilt of the sword he wore. Otherwise his dress was plain: studded leather jerkin over quilted doublet, worn boots, breeches of brown roughspun. The device on his sun-yellow banner showed a red heart surrounded by a blaze of orange fire. The crowned stag was there, yes... shrunken and enclosed within the heart. Even more curious was his standard bearer—a woman, garbed all in reds, face shadowed within the deep hood of her scarlet cloak. *A red priestess,* Catelyn thought, wondering. The sect was numerous and powerful in the Free Cities and the distant east, but there were few in the Seven Kingdoms.

“Lady Stark,” Stannis Baratheon said with chill courtesy as he reined up. He inclined his head, balder than she remembered.

“Lord Stannis,” she returned.

Beneath the tight-trimmed beard his heavy jaw clenched hard, yet he did not hector her about titles. For that she was duly grateful. “I had not thought to find you at Storm’s End.”

“I had not thought to be here.”

His deepset eyes regarded her uncomfortably. This was not a man made for easy courtesies. “I am sorry for your lord’s death,” he said, “though Eddard Stark was no friend to me.”

“He was never your enemy, my lord. When the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne held you prisoned in that castle, starving, it was Eddard Stark who broke the siege.”

“At my brother’s command, not for love of me,” Stannis answered. “Lord Eddard did his duty, I will not deny it. Did I ever do less? *I* should have been Robert’s Hand.”

“That was your brother’s will. Ned never wanted it.”

“Yet he took it. That which should have been mine. Still, I give you my word, you shall have justice for his murder.”

*How they loved to promise heads, these men who would be king.* “Your brother promised me the same. But if truth be told, I would sooner have my daughters back, and leave justice to the gods. Cersei still holds my Sansa, and of Arya there has been no word since the day of Robert’s death.”

“If your children are found when I take the city, they shall be sent to you.” *Alive or dead*, his tone implied.

“And when shall that be, Lord Stannis? King’s Landing is close to your Dragonstone, but I find you here instead.”

“You are frank, Lady Stark. Very well, I’ll answer you frankly. To take the city, I need the power of these southron lords I see across the field. My brother has them. I must needs take them from him.”

“Men give their allegiance where they will, my lord. These lords swore fealty to Robert and House Baratheon. If you and your brother were to put aside your quarrel—”

“I have no quarrel with Renly, should he prove dutiful. I am his elder, and his king. I want only what is mine by rights. Renly owes me loyalty and obedience. I mean to have it. From him, and from these other lords.”

Stannis studied her face. “And what cause brings you to this field, my lady? Has House Stark cast its lot with my brother, is that the way of it?”

*This one will never bend*, she thought, yet she must try nonetheless. Too much was at stake. “My son reigns as King in the North, by the will of our lords and people. He bends the knee to no man, but holds out the hand of friendship to all.”

“Kings have no friends,” Stannis said bluntly, “only subjects and enemies.”

“And brothers,” a cheerful voice called out behind her. Catelyn glanced over her shoulder as Lord Renly’s palfrey picked her way through the stumps. The younger Baratheon was splendid in his green velvet doublet and satin cloak trimmed in vair. The crown of golden roses girded his temples, jade stag’s head rising over his forehead, long black hair spilling out beneath. Jagged chunks of black diamond studded his swordbelt, and a chain of gold and emeralds looped around his neck.

Renly had chosen a woman to carry his banner as well, though Brienne hid face and form behind plate armor that gave no hint of her sex. Atop her twelve-foot lance, the crowned stag pranced black-on-gold as the wind off the sea rippled the cloth.

His brother’s greeting was curt. “Lord Renly.”

“*King* Renly. Can that truly be you, Stannis?”

Stannis frowned. “Who else should it be?”

Renly gave an easy shrug. “When I saw that standard, I could not be certain. Whose banner do you bear?”

“Mine own.”

The red-clad priestess spoke up. “The king has taken for his sigil the fiery heart of the Lord of Light.”

Renly seemed amused by that. “All for the good. If we both use the same banner, the battle will be terribly confused.”

Catelyn said, “Let us hope there will be no battle. We three share a common foe who would destroy us all.”

Stannis studied her, unsmiling. “The Iron Throne is mine by rights. All those who deny that are my foes.”

“The whole of the realm denies it, brother,” said Renly. “Old men deny it with their death rattle, and unborn children deny it in their mothers’ wombs. They deny it in Dorne and they deny it on the Wall. No one wants you for their king. Sorry.”

Stannis clenched his jaw, his face taut. “I swore I would never treat with you while you wore your traitor’s crown. Would that I had kept to that vow.”

“This is folly,” Catelyn said sharply. “Lord Tywin sits at Harrenhal with twenty thousand swords. The remnants of the Kingslayer’s army have regrouped at the Golden Tooth, another Lannister host gathers beneath the shadow of Casterly Rock, and Cersei and her son hold King’s Landing and your precious Iron Throne. You each name yourself *king*, yet the kingdom bleeds, and no one lifts a sword to defend it but my son.”

Renly shrugged. “Your son has won a few battles. I shall win the war. The Lannisters can wait my pleasure.”

“If you have proposals to make, make them,” Stannis said brusquely, “or I will be gone.”

“Very well,” said Renly. “I propose that you dismount, bend your knee, and swear me your allegiance.”

Stannis choked back rage. “That you shall never have.”

“You served Robert, why not me?”

“Robert was my elder brother. You are the younger.”

“Younger, bolder, and *far* more comely...”

“...and a thief and a usurper besides.”

Renly shrugged. “The Targaryens called Robert usurper. He seemed to be able to bear the shame. So shall I.”

*This will not do.* “Listen to yourselves! If you were sons of mine, I would bang your heads together and lock you in a bedchamber until you remembered that you were brothers.”

Stannis frowned at her. “You presume too much, Lady Stark. I am the rightful king, and your son no less a traitor than my brother here. His day will come as well.”

The naked threat fanned her fury. “You are very free to name others traitor and usurper, my lord, yet how are you any different? You say you alone are the rightful king, yet it seems to me that Robert had two sons. By

all the laws of the Seven Kingdoms, Prince Joffrey is his rightful heir, and Tormmen after him... and we are *all* traitors, however good our reasons.”

Renly laughed. “You must forgive Lady Catelyn, Stannis. She’s come all the way down from Riverrun, a long way ahorse. I fear she never saw your little letter.”

“Joffrey is not my brother’s seed,” Stannis said bluntly. “Nor is Tommen. They are bastards. The girl as well. All three of them abominations born of incest.”

*Would even Cersei be so mad?* Catelyn was speechless.

“Isn’t that a sweet story, my lady?” Renly asked. “I was camped at Horn Hill when Lord Tarly received his letter, and I must say, it took my breath away.” He smiled at his brother. “I had never suspected you were so clever, Stannis. Were it only true, you would indeed be Robert’s heir.”

“*Were* it true? Do you name me a liar?”

“Can you prove any word of this fable?”

Stannis ground his teeth.

*Robert could never have known, Catelyn thought, or Cersei would have lost her head in an instant.* “Lord Stannis,” she asked, “if you knew the queen to be guilty of such monstrous crimes, why did you keep silent?”

“I did not keep silent,” Stannis declared. “I brought my suspicions to Jon Arryn.”

“Rather than your own brother?”

“My brother’s regard for me was never more than dutiful,” said Stannis. “From me, such accusations would have seemed peevish and self-serving, a means of placing myself first in the line of succession. I believed Robert would be more disposed to listen if the charges came from Lord Arryn, whom he loved.”

“Ah,” said Renly. “So we have the word of a dead man.”

“Do you think he died by happenstance, you purblind fool? Cersei had him poisoned, for fear he would reveal her. Lord Jon had been gathering certain proofs—”

“—which doubtless died with him. How inconvenient.”

Catelyn was remembering, fitting pieces together. “My sister Lysa accused the queen of killing her husband in a letter she sent me at Winterfell,” she admitted. “Later, in the Eyrie, she laid the murder at the feet of the queen’s brother Tyrion.”

Stannis snorted. “If you step in a nest of snakes, does it matter which one bites you first?”

“All this of snakes and incest is droll, but it changes nothing. You may well have the better claim, Stannis, but I still have the larger army.” Renly’s hand slid inside his cloak. Stannis saw, and reached at once for the hilt of his sword, but before he could draw steel his brother produced... a peach. “Would you like one, brother?” Renly asked, smiling. “From Highgarden. You’ve never tasted anything so sweet, I promise you.” He took a bite. juice ran from the corner of his mouth.

“I did not come here to eat fruit.” Stannis was fuming.

“*My lords!*” Catelyn said. “We ought to be hammering out the terms of an alliance, not trading taunts.”

“A man should never refuse to taste a peach,” Renly said as he tossed the stone away. “He may never get the chance again. Life is short, Stannis. Remember what the Starks say. Winter is coming.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I did not come here to be threatened, either.”

“Nor were you,” Renly snapped back. “When I make threats, you’ll know it. If truth be told, I’ve never liked you, Stannis, but you *are* my own blood, and I have no wish to slay you. So if it is Storm’s End you want, take it... as a brother’s gift. As Robert once gave it to me, I give it to you.”

“It is not yours to give. It is mine by rights.”

Sighing, Renly half turned in the saddle. “What am I to do with this brother of mine, Brienne? He refuses my peach, he refuses my castle, he even shunned my wedding...”

“We both know your wedding was a mummer’s farce. A year ago you were scheming to make the girl one of Robert’s whores.”



“A year ago I was scheming to make the girl Robert’s queen,” Renly said, “but what does it matter? The boar got Robert and I got Margaery. You’ll be pleased to know she came to me a maid.”

“In your bed she’s like to die that way.”

“Oh, I expect I’ll get a son on her within the year. Pray, how many sons do you have, Stannis? Oh, yes—none.” Renly smiled innocently. “As to your daughter, I understand. If my wife looked like yours, I’d send my fool to service her as well.”

“*Enough!*” Stannis roared. “I will not be mocked to my face, do you hear me? *I will not!*” He yanked his longsword from its scabbard. The steel gleamed strangely bright in the wan sunlight, now red, now yellow, now blazing white. The air around it seemed to shimmer, as if from heat.

Catelyn’s horse whinnied and backed away a step, but Brienne moved between the brothers, her own blade in hand. “Put up your steel!” she shouted at Stannis.

*Cersei Lannister is laughing herself breathless*, Catelyn thought wearily.

Stannis pointed his shining sword at his brother. “I am not without mercy,” thundered he who was notoriously without mercy. “Nor do I wish to sully Lightbringer with a brother’s blood. For the sake of the mother who bore us both, I will give you this night to rethink your folly, Renly. Strike your banners and come to me before dawn, and I will grant you Storm’s End and your old seat on the council and even name you my heir until a son is born to me. Otherwise, I shall destroy you.”

Renly laughed. “Stannis, that’s a very pretty sword, I’ll grant you, but I think the glow off it has ruined your eyes. Look across the fields, brother. Can you see all those banners?”

“Do you think a few bolts of cloth will make you king?”

“Tyrell swords will make me king. Rowan and Tarly and Caron will make me king, with axe and mace and warhammer. Tarth arrows and Penrose lances, Fossoway, Cuy, Mullendore, Estermont, Selmy, Hightower, Oakheart, Crane, Caswell, Blackbar, Morrigen, Beesbury, Shermer, Dunn,

Footly... even House Florent, your own wife's brothers and uncles, they will make me king. All the chivalry of the south rides with me, and that is the least part of my power. My foot is coming behind, a hundred thousand swords and spears and pikes. And you will *destroy* me? With what, pray? That paltry rabble I see there huddled under the castle walls? I'll call them five thousand and be generous, codfish lords and onion knights and sellswords. Half of them are like to come over to me before the battle starts. You have fewer than four hundred horse, my scouts tell me—freeriders in boiled leather who will not stand an instant against armored lances. I do not care how seasoned a warrior you think you are, Stannis, that host of yours won't survive the first charge of my vanguard."

"We shall see, brother." Some of the light seemed to go out of the world when Stannis slid his sword back into its scabbard. "Come the dawn, we shall see."

"I hope your new god's a merciful one, brother."

Stannis snorted and galloped away, disdainful. The red priestess lingered a moment behind. "Look to your own sins, Lord Renly," she said as she wheeled her horse around.

Catelyn and Lord Renly returned together to the camp where his thousands and her few waited their return. "That was amusing, if not terribly profitable," he commented. "I wonder where I can get a sword like that? Well, doubtless Loras will make me a gift of it after the battle. it grieves me that it must come to this."

"You have a cheerful way of grieving," said Catelyn, whose distress was not feigned.

"Do I?" Renly shrugged. "So be it. Stannis was never the most cherished of brothers, I confess. Do you suppose this tale of his is true? If Joffrey is the Kingslayer's get—"

"—your brother is the lawful heir."

"While he lives," Renly admitted. "Though it's a fool's law, wouldn't you agree? Why the oldest son, and not the best-fitted? The crown will suit me, as it never suited Robert and would not suit Stannis. I have it in me to

be a great king, strong yet generous, clever, just, diligent, loyal to my friends and terrible to my enemies, yet capable of forgiveness, patient—”

“—humble?” Catelyn supplied.

Renly laughed. “You must allow a king *some* flaws, my lady.”

Catelyn felt very tired. It had all been for nothing. The Baratheon brothers would drown each other in blood while her son faced the Lannisters alone, and nothing she could say or do would stop it. *It is past time I went back to Riverrun to close my father’s eyes*, she thought. *That much at least I can do. I may be a poor envoy, but I am a good mourner, gods save me.*

Their camp was well sited atop a low stony ridge that ran from north to south. It was far more orderly than the sprawling encampment on the Mander, though only a quarter as large. When he’d learned of his brother’s assault on Storm’s End, Renly had split his forces, much as Robb had done at the Twins. His great mass of foot he had left behind at Bitterbridge with his young queen, his wagons, carts, draft animals, and all his cumbersome siege machinery, while Renly himself led his knights and freeriders in a swift dash east.

How like his brother Robert he was, even in that... only Robert had always had Eddard Stark to temper his boldness with caution. Ned would surely have prevailed upon Robert to bring up his *whole* force, to encircle Stannis and besiege the besiegers. That choice Renly had denied himself in his headlong rush to come to grips with his brother. He had outdistanced his supply lines, left food and forage days behind with all his wagons and mules and oxen. He *must* come to battle soon, or starve.

Catelyn sent Hal Mollen to tend to their horses while she accompanied Renly back to the royal pavilion at the heart of the encampment. Inside the walls of green silk, his captains and lords bannermen were waiting to hear word of the parley. “My brother has not changed,” their young king told them as Brienne unfastened his cloak and lifted the gold-and-jade crown from his brow. “Castles and courtesies will not appease him, he must have blood. Well, I am of a mind to grant his wish.”

“Your Grace, I see no need for battle here,” Lord Mathis Rowan put in. “The castle is strongly garrisoned and well provisioned, Ser Cortnay Penrose is a seasoned commander, and the trebuchet has not been built that could breach the walls of Storm’s End. Let Lord Stannis have his siege. He will find no joy in it, and whilst he sits cold and hungry and profitless, we will take King’s Landing.”

“And have men say I feared to face Stannis?”

“Only fools will say that,” Lord Mathis argued.

Renly looked to the others. “What say you all?”

“I say that Stannis is a danger to you,” Lord Randyll Tarly declared. “Leave him unblooded and he will only grow stronger, while your own power is diminished by battle. The Lannisters will not be beaten in a day. By the time you are done with them, Lord Stannis may be as strong as you... or stronger.”

Others chorused their agreement. The king looked pleased. “We shall fight, then.”

*I have failed Robb as I failed Ned*, Catelyn thought. “My lord,” she announced. “If you are set on battle, my purpose here is done. I ask your leave to return to Riverrun.”

“You do not have it.” Renly seated himself on a camp chair.

She stiffened. “I had hoped to help you make a peace, my lord. I will not help you make a war.”

Renly gave a shrug. “I daresay we’ll prevail without your five-and-twenty, my lady. I do not mean for you to take part in the battle, only to watch it.”

“I was at the Whispering Wood, my lord. I have seen enough butchery. I came here an envoy—”

“And an envoy you shall leave,” Renly said, “but wiser than you came. You shall see what befalls rebels with your own eyes, so your son can hear it from your own lips. We’ll keep you safe, never fear.” He turned away to make his dispositions. “Lord Mathis, you shall lead the center of my main

battle. Bryce, you'll have the left. The right is mine. Lord Estermont, you shall command the reserve."

"I shall not fail you, Your Grace," Lord Estermont replied.

Lord Mathis Rowan spoke up. "Who shall have the van?"

"Your Grace," said Ser Jon Fossoway, "I beg the honor."

"Beg all you like," said Ser Guyard the Green, "by rights it should be one of the seven who strikes the first blow."

"It takes more than a pretty cloak to charge a shield wall," Randyll Tarly announced. "I was leading Mace Tyrell's van when you were still sucking on your mother's teat, Guyard."

A clamor filled the pavilion, as other men loudly set forth their claims. *The knights of summer*, Catelyn thought. Renly raised a hand. "Enough, my lords. If I had a dozen vans, all of you should have one, but the greatest glory by rights belongs to the greatest knight. Ser Loras shall strike the first blow."

"With a glad heart, Your Grace." The Knight of Flowers knelt before the king. "Grant me your blessing, and a knight to ride beside me with your banner. Let the stag and rose go to battle side by side."

Renly glanced about him. "Brienne."

"Your Grace?" She was still armored in her blue steel, though she had taken off her helm. The crowded tent was hot, and sweat plastered limp yellow hair to her broad, homely face. "My place is at your side. I am your sworn shield..."

"One of seven," the king reminded her. "Never fear, four of your fellows will be with me in the fight."

Brienne dropped to her knees. "If I must part from Your Grace, grant me the honor of arming you for battle."

Catelyn heard someone snigger behind her. *She loves him, poor thing, she thought sadly. She'd play his squire just to touch him, and never care how great a fool they think her.*

“Granted,” Renly said. “Now leave me, all of you. Even kings must rest before a battle.”

“My lord,” Catelyn said, “there was a small sept in the last village we passed. If you will not permit me to depart for Riverrun, grant me leave to go there and pray.”

“As you will. Ser Robar, give Lady Stark safe escort to this sept... but see that she returns to us by dawn.”

“You might do well to pray yourself,” Catelyn added.

“For victory?”

“For wisdom.”

Renly laughed. “Loras, stay and help me pray. It’s been so long I’ve quite forgotten how. As to the rest of you, I want every man in place by first light, armed, armored, and horsed. We shall give Stannis a dawn he will not soon forget.”

Dusk was falling when Catelyn left the pavilion. Ser Robar Royce fell in beside her. She knew him slightly—one of Bronze Yohn’s sons, comely in a rough-hewn way, a tourney warrior of some renown. Renly had gifted him with a rainbow cloak and a suit of blood red armor, and named him one of his seven. “You are a long way from the Vale, ser,” she told him.

“And you far from Winterfell, my lady.”

“I know what brought me here, but why have you come? This is not your battle, no more than it is mine.”

“I made it my battle when I made Renly my king.”

“The Royces are bannermen to House Arryn.”

“My lord father owes Lady Lysa fealty, as does his heir. A second son must find glory where he can.” Ser Robar shrugged. “A man grows weary of tourneys.”

He could not be older than one-and-twenty, Catelyn thought, of an age with his king... but *her* king, her Robb, had more wisdom at fifteen than this youth had ever learned. Or so she prayed.

In Catelyn's small corner of the camp, Shadd was slicing carrots into a kettle, Hal Mollen was dicing with three of his Winterfell men, and Lucas Blackwood sat sharpening his dagger. "Lady Stark," Lucas said when he saw her, "Mollen says it is to be battle at dawn."

"Hal has the truth of it," she answered. *And a loose tongue as well, it would seem.*

"Do we fight or flee?"

"We pray, Lucas," she answered him. "We pray."