

CATELYN

Her son's crown was fresh from the forge, and it seemed to Catelyn Stark that the weight of it pressed heavy on Robb's head.

The ancient crown of the Kings of Winter had been lost three centuries ago, yielded up to Aegon the Conqueror when Torrhen Stark knelt in submission. What Aegon had done with it no man could say. Lord Hoster's smith had done his work well, and Robb's crown looked much as the other was said to have looked in the tales told of the Stark kings of old; an open circlet of hammered bronze incised with the runes of the First Men, surmounted by nine black iron spikes wrought in the shape of longwords. Of gold and silver and gemstones, it had none; bronze and iron were the metals of winter, dark and strong to fight against the cold.

As they waited in Riverrun's Great Hall for the prisoner to be brought before them, she saw Robb push back the crown so it rested upon the thick auburn mop of his hair; moments later, he moved it forward again; later he gave it a quarter turn, as if that might make it sit more easily on his brow. *It is no easy thing to wear a crown*, Catelyn thought, watching, *especially for a boy of fifteen years*.

When the guards brought in the captive, Robb called for his sword. Olyvar Frey offered it up hilt first, and her son drew the blade and laid it bare across his knees, a threat plain for all to see. "Your Grace, here is the man you asked for," announced Ser Robin Ryger, captain of the Tully household guard.

"Kneel before the king, Lannister!" Theon Greyjoy shouted. Ser Robin forced the prisoner to his knees.

He did not look a lion, Catelyn reflected. This Ser Cleos Frey was a son of the Lady Genna who was sister to Lord Tywin Lannister, but he had none of the fabled Lannister beauty, the fair hair and green eyes. Instead he had inherited the stringy brown locks, weak chin, and thin face of his sire, Ser Emmon Frey, old Lord Walder's second son. His eyes were pale and watery

and he could not seem to stop blinking, but perhaps that was only the light. The cells below Riverrun were dark and damp... and these days crowded as well.

“Rise, Ser Cleos.” Her son’s voice was not as icy as his father’s would have been, but he did not sound a boy of fifteen either. War had made a man of him before his time. Morning light glimmered faintly against the edge of the steel across his knees.

Yet it was not the sword that made Ser Cleos Frey anxious; it was the beast. Grey Wind, her son had named him. A direwolf large as any elkhound, lean and smoke-dark, with eyes like molten gold. When the beast padded forward and sniffed at the captive knight, every man in that hall could smell the scent of fear. Ser Cleos had been taken during the battle in the Whispering Wood, where Grey Wind had ripped out the throats of half a dozen men.

The knight scrambled up, edging away with such alacrity that some of the watchers laughed aloud. “Thank you, my lord.”

“*Your Grace,*” barked Lord Umber, the Greatjon, ever the loudest of Robb’s northern bannermen... and the truest and fiercest as well, or so he insisted. He had been the first to proclaim her son King in the North, and he would brook no slight to the honor of his new-made sovereign.

“Your Grace,” Ser Cleos corrected hastily. “Pardons.”

He is not a bold man, this one, Catelyn thought. More of a Frey than a Lannister, in truth. His cousin the Kingslayer would have been a much different matter. They would never have gotten that honorific through Ser Jaime Lannister’s perfect teeth.

“I brought you from your cell to carry my message to your cousin Cersei Lannister in King’s Landing. You’ll travel under a peace banner, with thirty of my best men to escort you.”

Ser Cleos was visibly relieved. “Then I should be most glad to bring His Grace’s message to the queen.”

“Understand,” Robb said, “I am not giving you your freedom. Your grandfather Lord Walder pledged me his support and that of House Frey.

Many of your cousins and uncles rode with us in the Whispering Wood, but you chose to fight beneath the lion banner. That makes you a Lannister, not a Frey. I want your pledge, on your honor as a knight, that after you deliver my message you'll return with the queen's reply, and resume your captivity."

Ser Cleos answered at once. "I do so vow."

"Every man in this hall has heard you," warned Catelyn's brother Ser Edmure Tully, who spoke for Riverrun and the lords of the Trident in the place of their dying father. "If you do not return, the whole realm will know you forsworn."

"I will do as I pledged," Ser Cleos replied stiffly. "What is this message?"

"An offer of peace." Robb stood, longsword in hand. Grey Wind moved to his side. The hall grew hushed. "Tell the Queen Regent that if she meets my terms, I will sheath this sword, and make an end to the war between us."

In the back of the hall, Catelyn glimpsed the tall, gaunt figure of Lord Rickard Karstark shove through a rank of guards and out the door. No one else moved. Robb paid the disruption no mind. "Olyvar, the paper," he commanded. The squire took his longsword and handed up a rolled parchment.

Robb unrolled it. "First, the queen must release my sisters and provide them with transport by sea from King's Landing to White Harbor. It is to be understood that Sansa's betrothal to Joffrey Baratheon is at an end. When I receive word from my castellan that my sisters have returned unharmed to Winterfell, I will release the queen's cousins, the squire Willem Lannister and your brother Tion Frey, and give them safe escort to Casterly Rock or wheresoever she desires them delivered."

Catelyn Stark wished she could read the thoughts that hid behind each face, each furrowed brow and pair of tightened lips.

"Secondly, my lord father's bones will be returned to us, so he may rest beside his brother and sister in the crypts beneath Winterfell, as he would

have wished. The remains of the men of his household guard who died in his service at King's Landing must also be returned."

Living men had gone south, and cold bones would return. *Ned had the truth of it*, she thought. *His place was at Winterfell, he said as much, but would I hear him? No. Go, I told him, you must be Robert's Hand, for the good of our House, for the sake of our children... my doing, mine, no other...*

"Third, my father's greatsword Ice will be delivered to my hand, here at Riverrun."

She watched her brother Ser Edmure Tully as he stood with his thumbs hooked over his swordbelt, his face as still as stone.

"Fourth, the queen will command her father Lord Tywin to release those knights and lords bannermen of mine that he took captive in the battle on the Green Fork of the Trident. Once he does so, I shall release my own captives taken in the Whispering Wood and the Battle of the Camps, save Jaime Lannister alone, who will remain my hostage for his father's good behavior."

She studied Theon Greyjoy's sly smile, wondering what it meant. That young man had a way of looking as though he knew some secret jest that only he was privy to; Catelyn had never liked it.

"Lastly, King Joffrey and the Queen Regent must renounce all claims to dominion over the north. Henceforth we are no part of their realm, but a free and independent kingdom, as of old. Our domain shall include all the Stark lands north of the Neck, and in addition the lands watered by the River Trident and its vassal streams, bounded by the Golden Tooth to the west and the Mountains of the Moon in the east."

"*THE KING IN THE NORTH!*" boomed Greatjon Umber, a ham-sized fist hammering at the air as he shouted. "*Stark! Stark! The King in the North!*"

Robb rolled up the parchment again. "Maester Vyman has drawn a map, showing the borders we claim. You shall have a copy for the queen. Lord Tywin must withdraw beyond these borders, and cease his raiding,

burning, and pillage. The Queen Regent and her son shall make no claims to taxes, incomes, nor service from my people, and shall free my lords and knights from all oaths of fealty, vows, pledges, debts, and obligations owed to the Iron Throne and the Houses Baratheon and Lannister. Additionally, the Lannisters shall deliver ten highborn hostages, to be mutually agreed upon, as a pledge of peace. These I will treat as honored guests, according to their station. So long as the terms of this pact are abided with faithfully, I shall release two hostages every year, and return them safely to their families.” Robb tossed the rolled parchment at the knight’s feet. “There are the terms. If she meets them, I’ll give her peace. if not”—he whistled, and Grey Wind moved forward snarling—“I’ll give her another Whispering Wood.”

“*Stark!*” the Greatjon roared again, and now other voices took up the cry. “*Stark, Stark, King in the North!*” The direwolf threw back his head and howled.

Ser Cleos had gone the color of curdled milk. “The queen shall hear your message, my—Your Grace.”

“Good,” Robb said. “Ser Robin, see that he has a good meal and clean clothing. He’s to ride at first light.”

“As you command, Your Grace,” Ser Robin Ryger replied.

“Then we are done.” The assembled knights and lords bannermen bent their knees as Robb turned to leave, Grey Wind at his heels. Olyvar Frey scrambled ahead to open the door. Catelyn followed them out, her brother at her side.

“You did well,” she told her son in the gallery that led from the rear of the hall, “though that business with the wolf was japery more befitting a boy than a king.”

Robb scratched Grey Wind behind the ear. “Did you see the look on his face, Mother?” he asked, smiling.

“What I saw was Lord Karstark, walking out.”

“As did I.” Robb lifted off his crown with both hands and gave it to Olyvar. “Take this thing back to my bedchamber.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The squire hurried off.

“I’ll wager there were others who felt the same as Lord Karstark,” her brother Edmure declared. “How can we talk of peace while the Lannisters spread like a pestilence over my father’s domains, stealing his crops and slaughtering his people? I say again, we ought to be marching on Harrenhal.”

“We lack the strength,” Robb said, though unhappily.

Edmure persisted. “Do we grow stronger sitting here? Our host dwindles every day.”

“And whose doing is that?” Catelyn snapped at her brother. It had been at Edmure’s insistence that Robb had given the river lords leave to depart after his crowning, each to defend his own lands. Ser Marq Piper and Lord Karyl Vance had been the first to go. Lord Jonos Bracken had followed, vowing to reclaim the burnt shell of his castle and bury his dead, and now Lord Jason Mallister had announced his intent to return to his seat at Seagard, still mercifully untouched by the fighting.

“You cannot ask my river lords to remain idle while their fields are being pillaged and their people put to the sword,” Ser Edmure said, “but Lord Karstark is a northman. It would be an ill thing if he were to leave us.”

“I’ll speak with him,” said Robb. “He lost two sons in the Whispering Wood. Who can blame him if he does not want to make peace with their killers... with my father’s killers...”

“More bloodshed will not bring your father back to us, or Lord Rickard’s sons,” Catelyn said. “An offer had to be made—though a wiser man might have offered sweeter terms.”

“Any sweeter and I would have gagged.” Her son’s beard had grown in redder than his auburn hair. Robb seemed to think it made him look fierce, royal... older. But bearded or no, he was still a youth of fifteen, and wanted vengeance no less than Rickard Karstark. It had been no easy thing to convince him to make even this offer, poor as it was.

“Cersei Lannister will *never* consent to trade your sisters for a pair of cousins. It’s her brother she’ll want, as you know full well.” She had told

him as much before, but Catelyn was finding that kings do not listen half so attentively as sons.

“I can’t release the Kingslayer, not even if I wanted to. My lords would never abide it.”

“Your lords made you their king.”

“And can *unmake* me just as easy.”

“If your crown is the price we must pay to have Arya and Sansa returned safe, we should pay it willingly. Half your lords would like to murder Lannister in his cell. If he should die while he’s your prisoner, men will say—”

“—that he well deserved it,” Robb finished.

“And your sisters?” Catelyn asked sharply. “Will they deserve their deaths as well? I promise you, if any harm comes to her brother, Cersei will pay us back blood for blood—”

“Lannister won’t die,” Robb said. “No one so much as speaks to him without my warrant. He has food, water, clean straw, more comfort than he has any right to. But I won’t free him, not even for Arya and Sansa.”

Her son was looking *down* at her, Catelyn realized. *Was it war that made him grow so fast*, she wondered, *or the crown they had put on his head?* “Are you afraid to have Jaime Lannister in the field again, is that the truth of it?”

Grey Wind growled, as if he sensed Robb’s anger, and Edmure Tully put a brotherly hand on Catelyn’s shoulder. “Cat, don’t. The boy has the right of this.”

“Don’t call me *the boy*,” Robb said, rounding on his uncle, his anger spilling out all at once on poor Edmure, who had only meant to support him. “I’m almost a man grown, and a king—*your* king, ser. And I don’t fear Jaime Lannister. I defeated him once, I’ll defeat him again if I must, only...” He pushed a fall of hair out of his eyes and gave a shake of the head. “I might have been able to trade the Kingslayer for Father, but...”

“...but not for the girls?” Her voice was icy quiet. “Girls are not important enough, are they?”

Robb made no answer, but there was hurt in his eyes. Blue eyes, Tully eyes, eyes she had given him. She had wounded him, but he was too much his father's son to admit it.

That was unworthy of me, she told herself. Gods be good, what is to become of me? He is doing his best, trying so hard, I know it, I see it, and yet... I have lost my Ned, the rock my life was built on, I could not bear to lose the girls as well...

"I'll do all I can for my sisters," Robb said. "If the queen has any sense, she'll accept my terms. If not, I'll make her rue the day she refused me."

Plainly, he'd had enough of the subject. "Mother, are you certain you will not consent to go to the Twins? You would be farther from the fighting, and you could acquaint yourself with Lord Frey's daughters to help me choose my bride when the war is done."

He wants me gone, Catelyn thought wearily. Kings are not supposed to have mothers, it would seem, and I tell him things he does not want to hear. "You're old enough to decide which of Lord Walder's girls you prefer without your mother's help, Robb."

"Then go with Theon. He leaves on the morrow. He'll help the Mallisters escort that lot of captives to Seagard and then take ship for the Iron Islands. You could find a ship as well, and be back at Winterfell with a moon's turn, if the winds are kind. Bran and Rickon need you."

And you do not, is that what you mean to say? "My lord father has little enough time remaining him. So long as your grandfather lives, my place is at Riverrun with him."

"I could command you to go. As king. I could."

Catelyn ignored that. "I'll say again, I would sooner you sent someone else to Pyke, and kept Theon close to you."

"Who better to treat with Balon Greyjoy than his son?"

"Jason Mallister," offered Catelyn. "Tytos Blackwood. Stevron Frey. Anyone... but not Theon."

Her son squatted beside Grey Wind, ruffling the wolf's fur and incidentally avoiding her eyes. "Theon's fought bravely for us. I told you

how he saved Bran from those wildlings in the wolfswood. If the Lannisters won't make peace, I'll have need of Lord Greyjoy's longships."

"You'll have them sooner if you keep his son as hostage."

"He's been a hostage half his life."

"For good reason," Catelyn said. "Balon Greyjoy is not a man to be trusted. He wore a crown himself, remember, if only for a season. He may aspire to wear one again."

Robb stood. "I will not grudge him that. If I'm King in the North, let him be King of the Iron Islands, if that's his desire. I'll give him a crown gladly, so long as he helps us bring down the Lannisters."

"Robb—"

"I'm sending Theon. Good day, Mother. Grey Wind, come." Robb walked off briskly, the direwolf padding beside him.

Catelyn could only watch him go. Her son and now her king. How queer that felt. *Command*, she had told him back in Moat Cailin. And so he did. "I am going to visit Father," she announced abruptly. "Come with me, Edmure."

"I need to have a word with those new bowmen Ser Desmond is training. I'll visit him later."

If he still lives, Catelyn thought, but she said nothing. Her brother would sooner face battle than that sickroom.

The shortest way to the central keep where her father lay dying was through the godswood, with its grass and wildflowers and thick stands of elm and redwood. A wealth of rustling leaves still clung to the branches of the trees, all ignorant of the word the white raven had brought to Riverrun a fortnight past. Autumn had come, the Conclave had declared, but the gods had not seen fit to tell the winds and woods as yet. For that Catelyn was duly grateful. Autumn was always a fearful time, with the specter of winter looming ahead. Even the wisest man never knew whether his next harvest would be the last.

Hoster Tully, Lord of Riverrun, lay abed in his solar, with its commanding view to the east where the rivers Tumblestone and Red Fork

met beyond the walls of his castle. He was sleeping when Catelyn entered, his hair and beard as white as his featherbed, his once portly frame turned small and frail by the death that grew within him.

Beside the bed, still dressed in mail hauberk and travel-stained cloak, sat her father's brother, the Blackfish. His boots were dusty and spattered with dried mud. "Does Robb know you are returned, Uncle?" Ser Brynden Tully was Robb's eyes and ears, the commander of his scouts and outriders.

"No. I came here straight from the stables, when they told me the king was holding court. His Grace will want to hear my tidings in private first I'd think." The Blackfish was a tall, lean man, grey of hair and precise in his movements, his clean-shaven face lined and windburnt. "How is he?" he asked, and she knew he did not mean Robb.

"Much the same. The maester gives him dreamwine and milk of the poppy for his pain, so he sleeps most of the time, and eats too little. He seems weaker with each day that passes."

"Does he speak?"

"Yes... but there is less and less sense to the things he says. He talks of his regrets, of unfinished tasks, of people long dead and times long past. Sometimes he does not know what season it is, or who I am. Once he called me by Mother's name."

"He misses her still," Ser Brynden answered. "You have her face. I can see it in your cheekbones, and your jaw..."

"You remember more of her than I do. It has been a long time." She seated herself on the bed and brushed away a strand of fine white hair that had fallen across her father's face.

"Each time I ride out, I wonder if I shall find him alive or dead on my return." Despite their quarrels, there was a deep bond between her father and the brother he had once disowned.

"At least you made your peace with him."

They sat for a time in silence, until Catelyn raised her head. "You spoke of tidings that Robb needed to hear?" Lord Hoster moaned and rolled onto his side, almost as if he had heard.

Brynden stood. “Come outside. Best if we do not wake him.”

She followed him out onto the stone balcony that jutted three-sided from the solar like the prow of a ship. Her uncle glanced up, frowning. “You can see it by day now. My men call it the Red Messenger... but what is the message?”

Catelyn raised her eyes, to where the faint red line of the comet traced a path across the deep blue sky like a long scratch across the face of god. “The Greatjon told Robb that the old gods have unfurled a red flag of vengeance for Ned. Edmure thinks it’s an omen of victory for Riverrun—he sees a fish with a long tail, in the Tully colors, red against blue.” She sighed. “I wish I had their faith. Crimson is a Lannister color.”

“That thing’s not crimson,” Ser Brynden said. “Nor Tully red, the mud red of the river. That’s blood up there, child, smeared across the sky.”

“Our blood or theirs?”

“Was there ever a war where only one side bled?” Her uncle gave a shake of the head. “The riverlands are awash in blood and flame all around the Gods Eye. The fighting has spread south to the Blackwater and north across the Trident, almost to the Twins. Marq Piper and Karyl Vance have won some small victories, and this southron lordling Beric Dondarrion has been raiding the raiders, falling upon Lord Tywin’s foraging parties and vanishing back into the woods. It’s said that Ser Burton Crakehall was boasting that he’d slain Dondarrion, until he led his column into one of Lord Beric’s traps and got every man of them killed.”

“Some of Ned’s guard from King’s Landing are with this Lord Beric,” Catelyn recalled. “May the gods preserve them.”

“Dondarrion and this red priest who rides with him are clever enough to preserve themselves, if the tales be true,” her uncle said, “but your father’s bannermen make a sadder tale. Robb should never have let them go. They’ve scattered like quail, each man trying to protect his own, and it’s folly, Cat, folly. Jonos Bracken was wounded in the fighting amidst the ruins of his castle, and his nephew Hendry slain. Tytos Blackwood’s swept the Lannisters off his lands, but they took every cow and pig and speck of grain and left him nothing to defend but Raventree Hall and a scorched

desert. Darry men recaptured their lord's keep but held it less than a fortnight before Gregor Clegane descended on them and put the whole garrison to the sword, even their lord."

Catelyn was horrorstruck. "Darry was only a child."

"Aye, and the last of his line as well. The boy would have brought a fine ransom, but what does gold mean to a frothing dog like Gregor Clegane? That beast's head would make a noble gift for all the people of the realm, I vow."

Catelyn knew Ser Gregor's evil reputation, yet still... "Don't speak to me of heads, Uncle. Cersei has mounted Ned's on a spike above the walls of the Red Keep, and left it for the crows and flies." Even now, it was hard for her to believe that he was truly gone. Some nights she would wake in darkness, half-asleep, and for an instant expect to find him there beside her. "Clegane is no more than Lord Tywin's catspaw." For Tywin Lannister—Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, father to Queen Cersei, Ser Jaime the Kingslayer, and Tyrion the Imp, and grandfather to Joffrey Baratheon, the new-crowned boy king—was the true danger, Catelyn believed.

"True enough," Ser Brynden admitted. "And Tywin Lannister is no man's fool. He sits safe behind the walls of Harrenhal, feeding his host on our harvest and burning what he does not take. Gregor is not the only dog he's loosed. Ser Amory Lorch is in the field as well, and some sellsword out of Qohor who'd sooner maim a man than kill him. I've seen what they leave behind them. Whole villages put to the torch, women raped and mutilated, butchered children left unburied to draw wolves and wild dogs... it would sicken even the dead."

"When Edmure hears this, he will rage."

"And that will be just as Lord Tywin desires. Even terror has its purpose, Cat. Lannister wants to provoke us to battle."

"Robb is like to give him that wish," Catelyn said, fretful. "He is restless as a cat sitting here, and Edmure and the Greatjon and the others will urge him on." Her son had won two great victories, smashing Jaime Lannister in the Whispering Wood and routing his leaderless host outside

the walls of Riverrun in the Battle of the Camps, but from the way some of his bannermen spoke of him, he might have been Aegon the Conqueror reborn.

Brynden Blackfish arched a bushy grey eyebrow. “More fool they. My first rule of war, Cat—*never* give the enemy his wish. Lord Tywin would like to fight on a field of his own choosing. He wants us to march on Harrenhal.”

“Harrenhal.” Every child of the Trident knew the tales told of Harrenhal, the vast fortress that King Harren the Black had raised beside the waters of Gods Eye three hundred years past, when the Seven Kingdoms had *been* seven kingdoms, and the riverlands were ruled by the ironmen from the islands. In his pride, Harren had desired the highest hall and tallest towers in all Westeros. Forty years it had taken, rising like a great shadow on the shore of the lake while Harren’s armies plundered his neighbors for stone, lumber, gold, and workers. Thousands of captives died in his quarries, chained to his sledges, or laboring on his five colossal towers. Men froze by winter and sweltered in summer. Weirwoods that had stood three thousand years were cut down for beams and rafters. Harren had beggared the riverlands and the Iron Islands alike to ornament his dream. And when at last Harrenhal stood complete, on the very day King Harren took up residence, Aegon the Conqueror had come ashore at King’s Landing.

Catelyn could remember hearing Old Nan tell the story to her own children, back at Winterfell. “And King Harren learned that thick walls and high towers are small use against dragons,” the tale always ended. “For dragons *fly*.” Harren and all his line had perished in the fires that engulfed his monstrous fortress, and every house that held Harrenhal since had come to misfortune. Strong it might be, but it was a dark place, and cursed.

“I would not have Robb fight a battle in the shadow of that keep,” Catelyn admitted. “Yet we must do *something*, Uncle.”

“And soon,” her uncle agreed. “I have not told you the worst of it, child. The men I sent west have brought back word that a new host is gathering at Casterly Rock.”

Another Lannister army. The thought made her ill. “Robb must be told at once. Who will command?”

“Ser Stafford Lannister, it’s said.” He turned to gaze out over the rivers, his red-and-blue cloak stirring in the breeze.

“Another nephew?” The Lannisters of Casterly Rock were a damnably large and fertile house.

“Cousin,” Ser Brynden corrected. “Brother to Lord Tywin’s late wife, so twice related. An old man and a bit of a dullard, but he has a son, Ser Daven, who is more formidable.”

“Then let us hope it is the father and not the son who takes this army into the field.”

“We have some time yet before we must face them. This lot will be sellswords, freeriders, and green boys from the stews of Lannisport. Ser Stafford must see that they are armed and drilled before he dare risk battle... and make no mistake, Lord Tywin is not the Kingslayer. He will not rush in heedless. He will wait patiently for Ser Stafford to march before he stirs from behind the walls of Harrenhal.”

“Unless...” said Catelyn.

“Yes?” Ser Brynden prompted.

“Unless he *must* leave Harrenhal,” she said, “to face some other threat.”

Her uncle looked at her thoughtfully. “Lord Renly.”

“*King* Renly.” If she would ask help from the man, she would need to grant him the style he had claimed for himself.

“Perhaps.” The Blackfish smiled a dangerous smile. “He’ll want something, though.”

“He’ll want what kings always want,” she said. “Homage.”