

CATELYN

As she slept amidst the rolling grasslands, Catelyn dreamt that Bran was whole again, that Arya and Sansa held hands, that Rickon was still a babe at her breast. Robb, crownless, played with a wooden sword, and when all were safe asleep, she found Ned in her bed, smiling.

Sweet it was, sweet and gone too soon. Dawn came cruel, a dagger of light. She woke aching and alone and weary; weary of riding, weary of hurting, weary of duty. *I want to weep*, she thought. *I want to be comforted. I'm so tired of being strong. I want to be foolish and frightened for once. Just for a small while, that's all... a day... an hour...*

Outside her tent, men were stirring. She heard the whicker of horses, Shadd complaining of stiffness in his back, Ser Wendel calling for his bow. Catelyn wished they would all go away. They were good men, loyal, yet she was tired of them all. It was her children she yearned after. One day, she promised herself as she lay abed, one day she would allow herself to be less than strong.

But not today. It could not be today.

Her fingers seemed more clumsy than usual as she fumbled on her clothes. She supposed she ought to be grateful that she had any use of her hands at all. The dagger had been Valyrian steel, and Valyrian steel bites deep and sharp. She had only to look at the scars to remember.

Outside, Shadd was stirring oats into a kettle, while Ser Wendel Manderly sat stringing his bow. "My lady," he said when Catelyn emerged. "There are birds in this grass. Would you fancy a roast quail to break your fast this morning?"

"Oats and bread are sufficient... for all of us, I think. We have many leagues yet to ride, Ser Wendel."

"As you will, my lady." The knight's moon face looked crestfallen, the tips of his great walrus mustache twitching with disappointment. "Oats and bread, and what could be better?" He was one of the fattest men Catelyn

had ever known, but however much he loved his food, he loved his honor more.

“Found some nettles and brewed a tea,” Shadd announced. “Will m’lady take a cup?”

“Yes, with thanks.”

She cradled the tea in her scarred hands and blew on it to cool it. Shadd was one of the Winterfell men. Robb had sent twenty of his best to see her safely to Renly. He had sent five lordlings as well, whose names and high birth would add weight and honor to her mission. As they made their way south, staying well clear of towns and holdfasts, they had seen bands of mailed men more than once, and glimpsed smoke on the eastern horizon, but none had dared molest them. They were too weak to be a threat, too many to be easy prey. Once across the Blackwater, the worst was behind. For the past four days, they had seen no signs of war.

Catelyn had never wanted this. She had told Robb as much, back in Riverrun. “When last I saw Renly, he was a boy no older than Bran. I do not know him. Send someone else. My place is here with my father, for whatever time he has left.”

Her son had looked at her unhappily. “There is no one else. I cannot go myself. Your father’s too ill. The Blackfish is my eyes and ears, I dare not lose him. Your brother I need to hold Riverrun when we march—”

“March?” No one had said a word to her of marching.

“I cannot sit at Riverrun waiting for peace. It makes me look as if I were afraid to take the field again. When there are no battles to fight, men start to think of hearth and harvest, Father told me that. Even my northmen grow restless.”

My northmen, she thought. *He is even starting to talk like a king*. “No one has ever died of restlessness, but rashness is another matter. We’ve planted seeds, let them grow.”

Robb shook his head stubbornly. “We’ve tossed some seeds in the wind, that’s all. If your sister Lysa was coming to aid us, we would have heard by now. How many birds have we sent to the Eyrie, four? I want

peace too, but why should the Lannisters give me *anything* if all I do is sit here while my army melts away around me swift as summer snow?”

“So rather than look craven, you will dance to Lord Tywin’s pipes?” she threw back. “He *wants* you to march on Harrenhal, ask your uncle Brynden if—”

“I said nothing of Harrenhal,” Robb said. “Now, will you go to Renly for me, or must I send the Greatjon?”

The memory brought a wan smile to her face. Such an obvious ploy, that, yet deft for a boy of fifteen. Robb knew how ill-suited a man like Greatjon Umber would be to treat with a man like Renly Baratheon, and he knew that she knew it as well. What could she do but accede, praying that her father would live until her return? Had Lord Hoster been well, he would have gone himself, she knew. Still, that leavetaking was hard, hard. He did not even know her when she came to say farewell. “Minisa,” he called her, “where are the children? My little Cat, my sweet Lysa...” Catelyn had kissed him on the brow and told him his babes were well. “Wait for me, my lord,” she said as his eyes closed. “I waited for you, oh, so many times. Now you must wait for me.”

Fate drives me south and south again, Catelyn thought as she sipped the astringent tea, *when it is north I should be going, north to home.* She had written to Bran and Rickon, that last night at Riverrun. *I do not forget you, my sweet ones, you must believe that. It is only that your brother needs me more.*

“We ought to reach the upper Mander today, my lady,” Ser Wendel announced while Shadd spooned out the porridge. “Lord Renly will not be far, if the talk be true.”

And what do I tell him when I find him? That my son holds him no true king? She did not relish this meeting. They needed friends, not more enemies, yet Robb would never bend the knee in homage to a man he felt had no claim to the throne.

Her bowl was empty, though she could scarce remember tasting the porridge. She laid it aside. “It is time we were away.” The sooner she spoke to Renly, the sooner she could turn for home. She was the first one

mounted, and she set the pace for the column. Hal Mollen rode beside her, bearing the banner of House Stark, the grey direwolf on an ice-white field.

They were still a half day's ride from Renly's camp when they were taken. Robin Flint had ranged ahead to scout, and he came galloping back with word of a far-eyes watching from the roof of a distant windmill. By the time Catelyn's party reached the mill, the man was long gone. They pressed on, covering not quite a mile before Renly's outriders came swooping down on them, twenty men mailed and mounted, led by a grizzled greybeard of a knight with bluejays on his surcoat.

When he saw her banners, he trotted up to her alone. "My lady," he called, "I am Ser Colen of Greenpools, as it please you. These are dangerous lands you cross."

"Our business is urgent," she answered him. "I come as envoy from my son, Robb Stark, the King in the North, to treat with Renly Baratheon, the King in the South."

"King Renly is the crowned and anointed lord of all the Seven Kingdoms, my lady," Ser Colen answered, though courteously enough. "His Grace is encamped with his host near Bitterbridge, where the roseroad crosses the Mander. It shall be my great honor to escort you to him." The knight raised a mailed hand, and his men formed a double column flanking Catelyn and her guard. *Escort or captor?* she wondered. There was nothing to be done but trust in Ser Colen's honor, and Lord Renly's.

They saw the smoke of the camp's fires when they were still an hour from the river. Then the sound came drifting across farm and field and rolling plain, indistinct as the murmur of some distant sea, but swelling as they rode closer. By the time they caught sight of the Mander's muddy waters glinting in the sun, they could make out the voices of men, the clatter of steel, the whinny of horses. Yet neither sound nor smoke prepared them for the host itself.

Thousands of cookfires filled the air with a pale smoky haze. The horse lines alone stretched out over leagues. A forest had surely been felled to make the tall staffs that held the banners. Great siege engines lined the grassy verge of the roseroad, mangonels and trebuchets and rolling rams

mounted on wheels taller than a man on horseback. The steel points of pikes flamed red with sunlight, as if already blooded, while the pavilions of the knights and high lords sprouted from the grass like silken mushrooms. She saw men with spears and men with swords, men in steel caps and mail shirts, camp followers strutting their charms, archers fletching arrows, teamsters driving wagons, swineherds driving pigs, pages running messages, squires honing swords, knights riding palfreys, grooms leading ill-tempered destriers. “This is a fearsome lot of men,” Ser Wendel Manderly observed as they crossed the ancient stone span from which Bitterbridge took its name.

“That it is,” Catelyn agreed.

Near all the chivalry of the south had come to Renly’s call, it seemed. The golden rose of Highgarden was seen everywhere: sewn on the right breast of armsmen and servants, flapping and fluttering from the green silk banners that adorned lance and pike, painted upon the shields hung outside the pavilions of the sons and brothers and cousins and uncles of House Tyrell. As well Catelyn spied the fox-and-flowers of House Florent, Fossoway apples red and green, Lord Tarly’s striding huntsman, oak leaves for Oakheart, cranes for Crane, a cloud of black-and-orange butterflies for the Mullendores.

Across the Mander, the storm lords had raised their standards—Renly’s own bannermen, sworn to House Baratheon and Storm’s End. Catelyn recognized Bryce Caron’s nightingales, the Penrose quills, and Lord Estermont’s sea turtle, green on green. Yet for every shield she knew, there were a dozen strange to her, borne by the small lords sworn to the bannermen, and by hedge knights and freeriders, who had come swarming to make Renly Baratheon a king in fact as well as name.

Renly’s own standard flew high over all. From the top of his tallest siege tower, a wheeled oaken immensity covered with rawhides, streamed the largest war banner that Catelyn had ever seen—a cloth big enough to carpet many a hall, shimmering gold, with the crowned stag of Baratheon black upon it, prancing proud and tall.

“My lady, do you hear that noise?” asked Hallis Mollen, trotting close. “What is that?”

She listened. Shouts, and horses screaming, and the clash of steel, and... “Cheering,” she said. They had been riding up a gentle slope toward a line of brightly colored pavilions on the height. As they passed between them, the press of men grew thicker, the sounds louder. And then she saw.

Below, beneath the stone-and-timber battlements of a small castle, a melee was in progress.

A field had been cleared off, fences and galleries and tilting barriers thrown up. Hundreds were gathered to watch, perhaps thousands. From the looks of the grounds, torn and muddy and littered with bits of dented armor and broken lances, they had been at it for a day or more, but now the end was near. Fewer than a score of knights remained ahorse, charging and slashing at each other as watchers and fallen combatants cheered them on. She saw two destriers collide in full armor, going down in a tangle of steel and horseflesh. “A tourney,” Hal Mollen declared. He had a penchant for loudly announcing the obvious.

“Oh, splendid,” Ser Wendel Manderly said as a knight in a rainbow-striped cloak wheeled to deliver a backhand blow with a long-handled axe that shattered the shield of the man pursuing him and sent him reeling in his stirrups.

The press in front of them made further progress difficult. “Lady Stark,” Ser Colen said, “if your men would be so good as to wait here, I’ll present you to the king.”

“As you say.” She gave the command, though she had to raise her voice to be heard above the tourney din. Ser Colen walked his horse slowly through the throngs, with Catelyn riding in his wake. A roar went up from the crowd as a helmetless red-bearded man with a griffin on his shield went down before a big knight in blue armor. His steel was a deep cobalt, even the blunt morningstar he wielded with such deadly effect, his mount barded in the quartered sun-and-moon heraldry of House Tarth.

“Red Ronnet’s down, gods be damned,” a man cursed.

“Loras’ll do for that blue—” a companion answered before a roar drowned out the rest of his words.

Another man was fallen, trapped beneath his injured horse, both of them screaming in pain. Squires rushed out to aid them.

This is madness, Catelyn thought. Real enemies on every side and half the realm in flames, and Renly sits here playing at war like a boy with his first wooden sword.

The lords and ladies in the gallery were as engrossed in the melee as the men on the ground. Catelyn marked them well. Her father had oft treated with the southron lords, and not a few had been guests at Riverrun. She recognized Lord Mathis Rowan, stouter and more florid than ever, the golden tree of his House spread across his white doublet. Below him sat Lady Oakheart, tiny and delicate, and to her left Lord Randyll Tarly of Horn Hill, his greatsword Heartsbane propped up against the back of his seat. Others she knew only by their sigils, and some not at all.

In their midst, watching and laughing with his young queen by his side, sat a ghost in a golden crown.

Small wonder the lords gather around him with such fervor, she thought, he is Robert come again. Renly was handsome as Robert had been handsome; long of limb and broad of shoulder, with the same coal-black hair, fine and straight, the same deep blue eyes, the same easy smile. The slender circlet around his brows seemed to suit him well. It was soft gold, a ring of roses exquisitely wrought; at the front lifted a stag’s head of dark green jade, adorned with golden eyes and golden antlers.

The crowned stag decorated the king’s green velvet tunic as well, worked in gold thread upon his chest; the Baratheon sigil in the colors of Highgarden. The girl who shared the high seat with him was also of Highgarden: his young queen, Margaery, daughter to Lord Mace Tyrell. Their marriage was the mortar that held the great southron alliance together, Catelyn knew. Renly was one-and-twenty, the girl no older than Robb, very pretty, with a doe’s soft eyes and a mane of curling brown hair that fell about her shoulders in lazy ringlets. Her smile was shy and sweet.

Out in the field, another man lost his seat to the knight in the rainbow-striped cloak, and the king shouted approval with the rest. “*Loras!*” she heard him call. “*Loras! Highgarden!*” The queen clapped her hands together in excitement.

Catelyn turned to see the end of it. Only four men were left in the fight now, and there was small doubt whom king and commons favored. She had never met Ser Loras Tyrell, but even in the distant north one heard tales of the prowess of the young Knight of Flowers. Ser Loras rode a tall white stallion in silver mail, and fought with a long-handled axe. A crest of golden roses ran down the center of his helm.

Two of the other survivors had made common cause. They spurred their mounts toward the knight in the cobalt armor. As they closed to either side, the blue knight reined hard, smashing one man full in the face with his splintered shield while his black destrier lashed out with a steel-shod hoof at the other. In a blink, one combatant was unhorsed, the other reeling. The blue knight let his broken shield drop to the ground to free his left arm, and then the Knight of Flowers was on him. The weight of his steel seemed to hardly diminish the grace and quickness with which Ser Loras moved, his rainbow cloak swirling about him.

The white horse and the black one wheeled like lovers at a harvest dance, the riders throwing steel in place of kisses. Longaxe flashed and morningstar whirled. Both weapons were blunted, yet still they raised an awful clangor. Shieldless, the blue knight was getting much the worse of it. Ser Loras rained down blows on his head and shoulders, to shouts of “*Highgarden!*” from the throng. The other gave answer with his morningstar, but whenever the ball came crashing in, Ser Loras interposed his battered green shield, emblazoned with three golden roses. When the longaxe caught the blue knight’s hand on the backswing and sent the morningstar flying from his grasp, the crowd screamed like a rutting beast. The Knight of Flowers raised his axe for the final blow.

The blue knight charged into it. The stallions slammed together, the blunted axehead smashed against the scarred blue breastplate... but somehow the blue knight had the haft locked between steel-gauntleted

fingers. He wrenched it from Ser Loras's hand, and suddenly the two were grappling mount-to-mount, and an instant later they were falling. As their horses pulled apart, they crashed to the ground with bone-jarring force. Loras Tyrell, on the bottom, took the brunt of the impact. The blue knight pulled a long dirk free and flicked open Tyrell's visor. The roar of the crowd was too loud for Catelyn to hear what Ser Loras said, but she saw the word form on his split, bloody lips. *Yield*.

The blue knight climbed unsteady to his feet, and raised his dirk in the direction of Renly Baratheon, the salute of a champion to his king. Squires dashed onto the field to help the vanquished knight to his feet. When they got his helm off, Catelyn was startled to see how young he was. He could not have had more than two years on Robb. The boy might have been as comely as his sister, but the broken lip, unfocused eyes, and blood trickling through his matted hair made it hard to be certain.

"Approach," King Renly called to the champion.

He limped toward the gallery. At close hand, the brilliant blue armor looked rather less splendid; everywhere it showed scars, the dents of mace and warhammer, the long gouges left by swords, chips in the enameled breastplate and helm. His cloak hung in rags. From the way he moved, the man within was no less battered. A few voices hailed him with cries of "*Tarth!*" and, oddly, "*A Beauty! A Beauty!*" but most were silent. The blue knight knelt before the king. "Grace," he said, his voice muffled by his dented greathelm.

"You are all your lord father claimed you were." Renly's voice carried over the field. "I've seen Ser Loras unhorsed once or twice... but never quite in *that* fashion."

"That were no proper unhorsing," complained a drunken archer nearby, a Tyrell rose sewn on his jerkin. "A vile trick, pulling the lad down."

The press had begun to open up. "Ser Colen," Catelyn said to her escort, "who is this man, and why do they dislike him so?"

Ser Colen frowned. "Because he is no man, my lady. That's Brienne of Tarth, daughter to Lord Selwyn the Evenstar."

“*Daughter?*” Catelyn was horrified.

“Brienne the Beauty, they name her... though not to her face, lest they be called upon to defend those words with their bodies.”

She heard King Renly declare the Lady Brienne of Tarth the victor of the great melee at Bitterbridge, last mounted of one hundred sixteen knights. “As champion, you may ask of me any boon that you desire. If it lies in my power, it is yours.”

“Your Grace,” Brienne answered, “I ask the honor of a place among your Rainbow Guard. I would be one of your seven, and pledge my life to yours, to go where you go, ride at your side, and keep you safe from all hurt and harm.”

“Done,” he said. “Rise, and remove your helm.”

She did as he bid her. And when the greathelm was lifted, Catelyn understood Ser Colen’s words.

Beauty, they called her... mocking. The hair beneath the visor was a squirrel’s nest of dirty straw, and her face... Brienne’s eyes were large and very blue, a young girl’s eyes, trusting and guileless, but the rest... her features were broad and coarse, her teeth prominent and crooked, her mouth too wide, her lips so plump they seemed swollen. A thousand freckles speckled her cheeks and brow, and her nose had been broken more than once. Pity filled Catelyn’s heart. *Is there any creature on earth as unfortunate as an ugly woman?*

And yet, when Renly cut away her torn cloak and fastened a rainbow in its place, Brienne of Tarth did not look unfortunate. Her smile lit up her face, and her voice was strong and proud as she said, “My life for yours, Your Grace. From this day on, I am your shield, I swear it by the old gods and the new.” The way she looked at the king—looked *down* at him, she was a good hand higher, though Renly was near as tall as his brother had been—was painful to see.

“Your Grace!” Ser Colen of Greenpools swung down off his horse to approach the gallery. “I beg your leave.” He went to one knee. “I have the

honor to bring you the Lady Catelyn Stark, sent as envoy by her son Robb, Lord of Winterfell.”

“Lord of Winterfell and King in the North, ser,” Catelyn corrected him. She dismounted and moved to Ser Colen’s side.

King Renly looked surprised. “Lady Catelyn? We are most pleased.” He turned to his young queen. “Margaery my sweet, this is the Lady Catelyn Stark of Winterfell.”

“You are most welcome here, Lady Stark,” the girl said, all soft courtesy. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“You are kind,” said Catelyn.

“My lady, I swear to you, I will see that the Lannisters answer for your husband’s murder,” the king declared. “When I take King’s Landing, I’ll send you Cersei’s head.”

And will that bring my Ned back to me? she thought. “It will be enough to know that justice has been done, my lord.”

“*Your Grace*,” Brienne the Blue corrected sharply. “And you should kneel when you approach the king.”

“The distance between a *lord* and a *grace* is a small one, my lady,” Catelyn said. “Lord Renly wears a crown, as does my son. If you wish, we may stand here in the mud and debate what honors and titles are rightly due to each, but it strikes me that we have more pressing matters to consider.”

Some of Renly’s lords bristled at that, but the king only laughed. “Well said, my lady. There will be time enough for *graces* when these wars are done. Tell me, when does your son mean to march against Harrenhal?”

Until she knew whether this king was friend or foe, Catelyn was not about to reveal the least part of Robb’s dispositions. “I do not sit on my son’s war councils, my lord.”

“So long as he leaves a few Lannisters for me, I’ll not complain. What has he done with the Kingslayer?”

“Jaime Lannister is held prisoner at Riverrun.”

“Still alive?” Lord Mathis Rowan seemed dismayed.

Bemused, Renly said, “It would seem the direwolf is gentler than the lion.”

“Gentler than the Lannisters,” murmured Lady Oakheart with a bitter smile, “is drier than the sea.”

“I call it weak.” Lord Randyll Tarly had a short, bristly grey beard and a reputation for blunt speech. “No disrespect to you, Lady Stark, but it would have been more seemly had Lord Robb come to pay homage to the king himself, rather than hiding behind his mother’s skirts.”

“*King* Robb is warring, my lord,” Catelyn replied with icy courtesy, “not playing at tourney.”

Renly grinned. “Go softly, Lord Randyll, I fear you’re overmatched.” He summoned a steward in the livery of Storm’s End. “Find a place for the lady’s companions, and see that they have every comfort. Lady Catelyn shall have my own pavilion. Since Lord Caswell has been so kind as to give me use of his castle, I have no need of it. My lady, when you are rested, I would be honored if you would share our meat and mead at the feast Lord Caswell is giving us tonight. A farewell feast. I fear his lordship is eager to see the heels of my hungry horde.”

“Not true, Your Grace,” protested a wispy young man who must have been Caswell. “What is mine is yours.”

“Whenever someone said that to my brother Robert, he took them at their word,” Renly said. “Do you have daughters?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Two.”

“Then thank the gods that I am not Robert. My sweet queen is all the woman I desire.” Renly held out his hand to help Margaery to her feet. “We’ll talk again when you’ve had a chance to refresh yourself, Lady Catelyn.”

Renly led his bride back toward the castle while his steward conducted Catelyn to the king’s green silk pavilion. “If you have need of anything, you have only to ask, my lady.”

Catelyn could scarcely imagine what she might need that had not already been provided. The pavilion was larger than the common rooms of

many an inn and furnished with every comfort: feather mattress and sleeping furs, a wood-and-copper tub large enough for two, braziers, to keep off the night's chill, slung leather camp chairs, a writing table with quills and inkpot, bowls of peaches, plums, and pears, a flagon of wine with a set of matched silver cups, cedar chests packed full of Renly's clothing, books, maps, game boards, a high harp, a tall bow and a quiver of arrows, a pair of red-tailed hunting hawks, a vertible armory of fine weapons. *He does not stint himself, this Renly*, she thought as she looked about. *Small wonder this host moves so slowly.*

Beside the entrance, the king's armor stood sentry; a suit of forest-green plate, its fittings chased with gold, the helm crowned by a great rack of golden antlers. The steel was polished to such a high sheen that she could see her reflection in the breastplate, gazing back at her as if from the bottom of a deep green pond. *The face of a drowned woman*, Catelyn thought. *Can you drown in grief?* She turned away sharply, angry with her own frailty. She had no time for the luxury of self-pity. She must wash the dust from her hair and change into a gown more fitting for a king's feast.

Ser Wendel Manderly, Lucas Blackwood, Ser Perwyn Frey, and the rest of her highborn companions accompanied her to the castle. The great hall of Lord Caswell's keep was great only by courtesy, yet room was found on the crowded benches for Catelyn's men, amidst Renly's own knights. Catelyn was assigned a place on the dais between red-faced Lord Mathis Rowan and genial Ser Jon Fossoway of the green-apple Fossoways. Ser Jon made jests, while Lord Mathis inquired politely after the health of her father, brother, and children.

Brienne of Tarth had been seated at the far end of the high table. She did not gown herself as a lady, but chose a knight's finery instead, a velvet doublet quartered rose-and-azure, breeches and boots and a fine-tooled swordbelt, her new rainbow cloak flowing down her back. No garb could disguise her plainness, though; the huge freckled hands, the wide flat face, the thrust of her teeth. Out of armor, her body seemed ungainly, broad of hip and thick of limb, with hunched muscular shoulders but no bosom to speak of. And it was clear from her every action that Brienne knew it, and

suffered for it. She spoke only in answer, and seldom lifted her gaze from her food.

Of food there was plenty. The war had not touched the fabled bounty of Highgarden. While singers sang and tumblers tumbled, they began with pears poached in wine, and went on to tiny savory fish rolled in salt and cooked crisp, and capons stuffed with onions and mushrooms. There were great loaves of brown bread, mounds of turnips and sweetcorn and pease, immense hams and roast geese and trenchers dripping full of venison stewed with beer and barley. For the sweet, Lord Caswell's servants brought down trays of pastries from his castle kitchens, cream swans and spun-sugar unicorns, lemon cakes in the shape of roses, spiced honey biscuits and blackberry tarts, apple crisps and wheels of buttery cheese.

The rich foods made Catelyn queasy, but it would never do to show frailty when so much depended on her strength. She ate sparingly, while she watched this man who would be king. Renly sat with his young bride on his left hand and her brother on the right. Apart from the white linen bandage around his brow, Ser Loras seemed none the worse for the day's misadventures. He was indeed as comely as Catelyn had suspected he might be. When not glazed, his eyes were lively and intelligent, his hair an artless tumble of brown locks that many a maid might have envied. He had replaced his tattered tourney cloak with a new one; the same brilliantly striped silk of Renly's Rainbow Guard, clasped with the golden rose of Highgarden.

From time to time, King Renly would feed Margaery some choice morsel off the point of his dagger, or lean over to plant the lightest of kisses on her cheek, but it was Ser Loras who shared most of his jests and confidences. The king enjoyed his food and drink, that was plain to see, yet he seemed neither glutton nor drunkard. He laughed often, and well, and spoke amiably to highborn lords and lowly serving wenches alike.

Some of his guests were less moderate. They drank too much and boasted too loudly, to her mind. Lord Willum's sons Josua and Elyas disputed heatedly about who would be first over the walls of King's Landing. Lord Varner dandled a serving girl on his lap, nuzzling at her neck

while one hand went exploring down her bodice. Guyard the Green, who fancied himself a singer, diddled a harp and gave them a verse about tying lions' tails in knots, parts of which rhymed. Ser Mark Mullendore brought a black-and-white monkey and fed him morsels from his own plate, while Ser Tanton of the red-apple Fossoways climbed on the table and swore to slay Sandor Clegane in single combat. The vow might have been taken more solemnly if Ser Tanton had not had one foot in a gravy boat when he made it.

The height of folly was reached when a plump fool came capering out in gold-painted tin with a cloth lion's head, and chased a dwarf around the tables, whacking him over the head with a bladder. Finally King Renly demanded to know why he was beating his brother. "Why, Your Grace, I'm the Kingslayer," the fool said.

"It's *Kingslayer*, fool of a fool," Renly said, and the hall rang with laughter.

Lord Rowan beside her did not join the merriment. "They are all so young," he said.

It was true. The Knight of Flowers could not have reached his second name day when Robert slew Prince Rhaegar on the Trident. Few of the others were very much older. They had been babes during the Sack of King's Landing, and no more than boys when Balon Greyjoy raised the Iron Islands in rebellion. *They are still unblooded*, Catelyn thought as she watched Lord Bryce goad Ser Robar into juggling a brace of daggers. *It is all a game to them still, a tourney writ large, and all they see is the chance for glory and honor and spoils. They are boys drunk on song and story, and like all boys, they think themselves immortal.*

"War will make them old," Catelyn said, "as it did us." She had been a girl when Robert and Ned and Jon Arryn raised their banners against Aerys Targaryen, a woman by the time the fighting was done. "I pity them."

"Why?" Lord Rowan asked her. "Look at them. They're young and strong, full of life and laughter. And lust, aye, more lust than they know what to do with. There will be many a bastard bred this night, I promise you. Why pity?"

“Because it will not last,” Catelyn answered, sadly. “Because they are the knights of summer, and winter is coming.”

“Lady Catelyn, you are wrong.” Brienne regarded her with eyes as blue as her armor. “Winter will never come for the likes of us. Should we die in battle, they will surely sing of us, and it’s always summer in the songs. In the songs all knights are gallant, all maids are beautiful, and the sun is always shining.”

Winter comes for all of us, Catelyn thought. For me, it came when Ned died. It will come for you too, child, and sooner than you like. She did not have the heart to say it.

The king saved her. “Lady Catelyn,” Renly called down. “I feel the need of some air. Will you walk with me?”

Catelyn stood at once. “I should be honored.”

Brienne was on her feet as well. “Your Grace, give me but a moment to don my mail. You should not be without protection.”

King Renly smiled. “If I am not safe in the heart of Lord Caswell’s castle, with my own host around me, one sword will make no matter... not even your sword, Brienne. Sit and eat. If I have need of you, I’ll send for you.”

His words seemed to strike the girl harder than any blow she had taken that afternoon. “As you will, Your Grace.” Brienne sat, eyes downcast. Renly took Catelyn’s arm and led her from the hall, past a slouching guardsman who straightened so hurriedly that he near dropped his spear. Renly clapped the man on the shoulder and made a jest of it.

“This way, my lady.” The king took her through a low door into a stair tower. As they started up, he said, “Perchance, is Ser Barristan Selmy with your son at Riverrun?”

“No,” she answered, puzzled. “Is he no longer with Joffrey? He was the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

Renly shook his head. “The Lannisters told him he was too old and gave his cloak to the Hound. I’m told he left King’s Landing vowing to take up service with the true king. That cloak Brienne claimed today was the one

I was keeping for Selmy, in hopes that he might offer me his sword. When he did not turn up at Highgarden, I thought perhaps he had gone to Riverrun instead.”

“We have not seen him.”

“He was old, yes, but a good man still. I hope he has not come to harm. The Lannisters are great fools.” They climbed a few more steps. “On the night of Robert’s death, I offered your husband a hundred swords and urged him to take Joffrey into his power. Had he listened, he would be regent today, and there would have been no need for me to claim the throne.”

“Ned refused you.” She did not have to be told.

“He had sworn to protect Robert’s children,” Renly said. “I lacked the strength to act alone, so when Lord Eddard turned me away, I had no choice but to flee. Had I stayed, I knew the queen would see to it that I did not long outlive my brother.”

Had you stayed, and lent your support to Ned, he might still be alive, Catelyn thought bitterly.

“I liked your husband well enough, my lady. He was a loyal friend to Robert, I know... but he would not listen and he would not bend. Here, I wish to show you something.” They had reached the top of the stairwell. Renly pushed open a wooden door, and they stepped out onto the roof.

Lord Caswell’s keep was scarcely tall enough to call a tower, but the country was low and flat and Catelyn could see for leagues in all directions. Wherever she looked, she saw fires. They covered the earth like fallen stars, and like the stars there was no end to them. “Count them if you like, my lady,” Renly said quietly. “You will still be counting when dawn breaks in the east. How many fires burn around Riverrun tonight, I wonder?”

Catelyn could hear faint music drifting from the Great Hall, seeping out into the night. She dare not count the stars.

“I’m told your son crossed the Neck with twenty thousand swords at his back,” Renly went on. “Now that the lords of the Trident are with him, perhaps he commands forty thousand.”

No, she thought, not near so many, we have lost men in battle, and others to the harvest.

“I have twice that number here,” Renly said, “and this is only part of my strength. Mace Tyrell remains at Highgarden with another ten thousand, I have a strong garrison holding Storm’s End, and soon enough the Dornishmen will join me with all their power. And never forget my brother Stannis, who holds Dragonstone and commands the lords of the narrow sea.”

“It would seem that you are the one who has forgotten Stannis,” Catelyn said, more sharply than she’d intended.

“His claim, you mean?” Renly laughed. “Let us be blunt, my lady. Stannis would make an appalling king. Nor is he like to become one. Men respect Stannis, even fear him, but precious few have ever loved him.”

“He is still your elder brother. If either of you can be said to have a right to the Iron Throne, it must be Lord Stannis.”

Renly shrugged. “Tell me, what right did my brother Robert ever have to the Iron Throne?” He did not wait for an answer. “Oh, there was talk of the blood ties between Baratheon and Targaryen, of weddings a hundred years past, of second sons and elder daughters. No one but the maesters care about any of it. Robert won the throne with his warhammer.” He swept a hand across the campfires that burned from horizon to horizon. “Well, there is my claim, as good as Robert’s ever was. If your son supports me as his father supported Robert, he’ll not find me ungenerous. I will gladly confirm him in all his lands, titles, and honors. He can rule in Winterfell as he pleases. He can even go on calling himself King in the North if he likes, so long as he bends the knee and does me homage as his overlord. *King* is only a word, but fealty, loyalty, service... those I must have.”

“And if he will not give them to you, my lord?”

“I mean to be king, my lady, and not of a broken kingdom. I cannot say it plainer than that. Three hundred years ago, a Stark king knelt to Aegon the Dragon, when he saw he could not hope to prevail. That was wisdom. Your son must be wise as well. Once he joins me, this war is good as done. We—” Renly broke off suddenly, distracted. “What’s this now?”

The rattle of chains heralded the raising of the portcullis. Down in the yard below, a rider in a winged helm urged his well-lathered horse under the spikes. “Summon the king!” he called.

Renly vaulted up into a crenel. “I’m here, ser.”

“Your Grace.” The rider spurred his mount closer. “I came swift as I could. From Storm’s End. We are besieged, Your Grace, Ser Cortnay defies them, but...”

“But... that’s not possible. I would have been told if Lord Tywin left Harrenhal.”

“These are no Lannisters, my liege. It’s Lord Stannis at your gates. *King* Stannis, he calls himself now.”