



CATELYN

They heard the Green Fork before they saw it, an endless susurrus, like the growl of some great beast. The river was a boiling torrent, half again as wide as it had been last year, when Robb had divided his army here and vowed to take a Frey to bride as the price of his crossing. *He needed Lord Walder and his bridge then, and he needs them even more now.* Catelyn's heart was full of misgivings as she watched the murky green waters swirl past. *There is no way we will ford this, nor swim across, and it could be a moon's turn before these waters fall again.*

As they neared the Twins, Robb donned his crown and summoned Catelyn and Edmure to ride beside him. Ser Raynald Westerling bore his banner, the direwolf of Stark on its ice-white field.

The gatehouse towers emerged from the rain like ghosts, hazy grey apparitions that grew more solid the closer they rode. The Frey stronghold was not one castle but two; mirror images in wet stone standing on opposite sides of the water, linked by a great arched bridge. From the center of its span rose the Water Tower, the river running straight and swift below. Channels had been cut from the banks, to form moats that made each twin an island. The rains had turned the moats to shallow lakes.

Across the turbulent waters, Catelyn could see several thousand men encamped around the eastern castle, their banners hanging like so many drowned cats from the lances outside their tents. The rain made it

impossible to distinguish colors and devices. Most were grey, it seemed to her, though beneath such skies the whole world seemed grey.

“Tread lightly here, Robb,” she cautioned her son. “Lord Walder has a thin skin and a sharp tongue, and some of these sons of his will doubtless take after their father. You must not let yourself be provoked.”

“I know the Freys, Mother. I know how much I wronged them, and how much I *need* them. I shall be as sweet as a septon.”

Catelyn shifted her seat uncomfortably. “If we are offered refreshment when we arrive, on no account refuse. Take what is offered, and eat and drink where all can see. If nothing is offered, ask for bread and cheese and a cup of wine.”

“I’m more wet than hungry . . .”

“Robb, *listen to me*. Once you have eaten of his bread and salt, you have the guest right, and the laws of hospitality protect you beneath his roof.”

Robb looked more amused than afraid. “I have an army to protect me, Mother, I don’t need to trust in bread and salt. But if it pleases Lord Walder to serve me stewed crow smothered in maggots, I’ll eat it and ask for a second bowl.”

Four Freys rode out from the western gatehouse, wrapped in heavy cloaks of thick grey wool. Catelyn recognized Ser Ryman, son of the late Ser Stevron, Lord Walder’s firstborn. With his father dead, Ryman was heir to the Twins. The face she saw beneath his hood was fleshy, broad, and stupid. The other three were likely his own sons, Lord Walder’s great grandsons.

Edmure confirmed as much. “Edwyn is eldest, the pale slender man with the constipated look. The wiry one with the beard is Black Walder, a nasty bit of business. Petyr is on the bay, the lad with the unfortunate face. Petyr Pimple, his brothers call him. Only a year or two older than Robb, but Lord Walder married him off at ten to a woman thrice his age. Gods, I hope Roslin doesn’t take after *him*.”

They halted to let their hosts come to them. Robb’s banner drooped on its staff, and the steady sound of rainfall mingled with the rush of the swollen Green Fork on their right. Grey Wind edged forward, tail stiff, watching

through slitted eyes of dark gold. When the Freys were a half-dozen yards away Catelyn heard him growl, a deep rumble that seemed almost one with rush of the river. Robb looked startled. “Grey Wind, to me. To *me!*”

Instead the direwolf leapt forward, snarling.

Ser Ryman’s palfrey shied off with a whinny of fear, and Petyr Pimple’s reared and threw him. Only Black Walder kept his mount in hand. He reached for the hilt of his sword. “*No!*” Robb was shouting. “Grey Wind, here. *Here.*” Catelyn spurred between the direwolf and the horses. Mud splattered from the hooves of her mare as she cut in front of Grey Wind. The wolf veered away, and only then seemed to hear Robb calling.

“Is this how a Stark makes amends?” Black Walder shouted, with naked steel in hand. “A poor greeting I call it, to set your wolf upon us. Is this why you’ve come?”

Ser Ryman had dismounted to help Petyr Pimple back to his feet. The lad was muddy, but unhurt.

“I’ve come to make my apology for the wrong I did your House, and to see my uncle wed.” Robb swung down from the saddle. “Petyr, take my horse. Yours is almost back to the stable.”

Petyr looked to his father and said, “I can ride behind one of my brothers.”

The Freys made no sign of obeisance. “You come late,” Ser Ryman declared.

“The rains delayed us,” said Robb. “I sent a bird.”

“I do not see the woman.”

By *the woman* Ser Ryman meant Jeyne Westerling, all knew. Lady Catelyn smiled apologetically. “Queen Jeyne was weary after so much travel, sers. No doubt she will be pleased to visit when times are more settled.”

“My grandfather will be displeased.” Though Black Walder had sheathed his sword, his tone was no friendlier. “I’ve told him much of the lady, and he wished to behold her with his own eyes.”

Edwyn cleared his throat. “We have chambers prepared for you in the Water Tower, Your Grace,” he told Robb with careful courtesy, “as well as

for Lord Tully and Lady Stark. Your lords bannermen are also welcome to shelter under our roof and partake of the wedding feast.”

“And my men?” asked Robb.

“My lord grandfather regrets that he cannot feed nor house so large a host. We have been sore pressed to find fodder and provender for our own levies. Nonetheless, your men shall not be neglected. If they will cross and set up their camp beside our own, we will bring out enough casks of wine and ale for all to drink the health of Lord Edmure and his bride. We have thrown up three great feast tents on the far bank, to provide them with some shelter from the rains.”

“Your lord father is most kind. My men will thank him. They have had a long wet ride.”

Edmure Tully edged his horse forward. “When shall I meet my betrothed?”

“She waits for you within,” promised Edwyn Frey. “You will forgive her if she seems shy, I know. She has been awaiting this day most anxiously, poor maid. But perhaps we might continue this out of the rain?”

“Truly.” Ser Ryman mounted up again, pulling Petyr Pimple up behind him. “If you would follow me, my father awaits.” He turned the palfrey’s head back toward the Twins.

Edmure fell in beside Catelyn. “The Late Lord Frey might have seen fit to welcome us in person,” he complained. “I am his liege lord as well as his son-to-be, and Robb’s his king.”

“When you are one-and-ninety, Brother, see how eager *you* are to go riding in the rain.” Yet she wondered if that was the whole truth of it. Lord Walder normally went about in a covered litter, which would have kept the worst of the rain off him. *A deliberate slight?* If so, it might be the first of many yet to come.

There was more trouble at the gatehouse. Grey Wind balked in the middle of the drawbridge, shook the rain off, and howled at the portcullis. Robb whistled impatiently. “Grey Wind. What is it? Grey Wind, with me.” But the direwolf only bared his teeth. *He does not like this place*, Catelyn thought. Robb had to squat and speak softly to the wolf before he would

consent to pass beneath the portcullis. By then Lame Lothar and Walder Rivers had come up. "It's the sound of the water he fears," Rivers said. "Beasts know to avoid the river in flood."

"A dry kennel and a leg of mutton will see him right again," said Lothar cheerfully. "Shall I summon our master of hounds?"

"He's a direwolf, not a dog," said Robb, "and dangerous to men he does not trust. Ser Raynald, stay with him. I won't take him into Lord Walder's hall like this."

Deftly done, Catelyn decided. Robb keeps the Westerling out of Lord Walder's sight as well.

Gout and brittle bones had taken their toll of old Walder Frey. They found him propped up in his high seat with a cushion beneath him and an ermine robe across his lap. His chair was black oak, its back carved into the semblance of two stout towers joined by an arched bridge, so massive that its embrace turned the old man into a grotesque child. There was something of the vulture about Lord Walder, and rather more of the weasel. His bald head, spotted with age, thrust out from his scrawny shoulders on a long pink neck. Loose skin dangled beneath his receding chin, his eyes were runny and clouded, and his toothless mouth moved constantly, sucking at the empty air as a babe sucks at his mother's breast.

The eighth Lady Frey stood beside Lord Walder's high seat. At his feet sat a somewhat younger version of himself, a stooped thin man of fifty whose costly garb of blue wool and grey satin was strangely accented by a crown and collar ornamented with tiny brass bells. The likeness between him and his lord was striking, save for their eyes; Lord Frey's small, dim, and suspicious, the other's large, amiable, and vacant. Catelyn recalled that one of Lord Walder's brood had fathered a halfwit long years ago. During past visits, the Lord of the Crossing had always taken care to hide this one away. *Did he always wear a fool's crown, or is that meant as mockery of Robb?* It was a question she dare not ask.

Frey sons, daughters, children, grandchildren, husbands, wives and servants crowded the rest of the hall. But it was the old man who spoke. "You will forgive me if I do not kneel, I know. My legs no longer work as they did, though that which hangs between 'em serves well enough, *heh*."

His mouth split in a toothless smile as he eyed Robb's crown. "Some would say it's a poor king who crowns himself with bronze, Your Grace."

"Bronze and iron are stronger than gold and silver," Robb answered. "The old Kings of Winter wore such a sword-crown."

"Small good it did them when the dragons came. *Heh*." That *heh* seemed to please the lackwit, who bobbed his head from side to side, jingling crown and collar. "Sire," Lord Walder said, "forgive my Aegon the noise. He has less wits than a crannogman, and he's never met a king before. One of Stevron's boys. We call him Jinglebell."

"Ser Stevron mentioned him, my lord." Robb smiled at the lackwit. "Well met, Aegon. Your father was a brave man."

Jinglebell jingled his bells. A thin line of spit ran from one corner of his mouth when he smiled.

"Save your royal breath. You'd do as well talking to a chamberpot." Lord Walder shifted his gaze to the others. "Well, Lady Catelyn, I see you have returned to us. And young Ser Edmure, the victor of the Stone Mill. Lord Tully now, I'll need to remember that. You're the fifth Lord Tully I've known. I outlived the other four, *heh*. Your bride's about here somewhere. I suppose you want a look at her."

"I would, my lord."

"Then you'll have it. But clothed. She's a modest girl, and a maid. You won't see her naked till the bedding." Lord Walder cackled. "*Heh*. Soon enough, soon enough." He craned his head about. "Benfrey, go fetch your sister. Be quick about it, Lord Tully's come all the way from Riverrun." A young knight in a quartered surcoat bowed and took his leave, and the old man turned back to Robb. "And where's *your* bride, Your Grace? The fair Queen Jeyne. A Westerling of the Crag, I'm told, *heh*."

"I left her at Riverrun, my lord. She was too weary for more travel, as we told Ser Ryman."

"That makes me grievous sad. I wanted to behold her with mine own weak eyes. We all did, *heh*. Isn't that so, my lady?"

Pale wispy Lady Frey seemed startled that she would be called upon to speak. "Y-yes, my lord. We all so wanted to pay homage to Queen Jeyne."

She must be fair to look on.”

“She is most fair, my lady.” There was an icy stillness in Robb’s voice that reminded Catelyn of his father.

The old man either did not hear it or refused to pay it any heed. “Fairer than my own get, *heh*? Elsewise how could her face and form have made the King’s Grace forget his solemn promise.”

Robb suffered the rebuke with dignity. “No words can set that right, I know, but I have come to make my apologies for the wrong I did your House, and to beg for your forgiveness, my lord.”

“Apologies, *heh*. Yes, you vowed to make one, I recall. I’m old, but I don’t forget such things. Not like some kings, it seems. The young remember nothing when they see a pretty face and a nice firm pair of teats, isn’t that so? I was the same. Some might say I still am, *heh heh*. They’d be wrong, though, wrong as you were. But now you’re here to make amends. It was my girls you spurned, though. Mayhaps it’s them should hear you beg for pardon, Your Grace. My maiden girls. Here, have a look at them.” When he waggled his fingers, a flurry of femininity left their places by the walls to line up beneath the dais. Jinglebell started to rise as well, his bells ringing merrily, but Lady Frey grabbed the lackwit’s sleeve and tugged him back down.

Lord Walder named the names. “My daughter Arwyn,” he said of a girl of fourteen. “Shirei, my youngest trueborn daughter. Ami and Marianne are granddaughters. I married Ami to Ser Pate of Sevenstreams, but the Mountain killed the oaf so I got her back. That’s a Cersei, but we call her Little Bee, her mother’s a Beesbury. More granddaughters. One’s a Walda, and the others . . . well, they have names, whatever they are . . .”

“I’m Merry, Lord Grandfather,” one girl said.

“You’re noisy, that’s for certain. Next to Noisy is my daughter Tyta. Then another Walda. Alyx, Marissa . . . are you Marissa? I thought you were. She’s not always bald. The maester shaved her hair off, but he swears it will soon grow back. The twins are Serra and Sarra.” He squinted down at one of the younger girls. “*Heh*, are you another Walda?”

The girl could not have been more than four. “I’m Ser Aemon Rivers’s Walda, lord great grandfather.” She curtsied.

“How long have you been talking? Not that you’re like to have anything sensible to say, your father never did. He’s a bastard’s son besides, *heh*. Go away, I wanted only Freys up here. The King in the North has no interest in base stock.” Lord Walder glanced to Robb, as Jinglebell bobbed his head and chimed. “There they are, all maidens. Well, and one widow, but there’s some who like a woman broken in. You might have had any one of them.”

“It would have been an impossible choice, my lord,” said Robb with careful courtesy. “They’re all too lovely.”

Lord Walder snorted. “And they say *my* eyes are bad. Some will do well enough, I suppose. Others . . . well, it makes no matter. They weren’t good enough for the King in the North, *heh*. Now what is it you have to say?”

“My ladies.” Robb looked desperately uncomfortable, but he had known this moment must come, and he faced it without flinching. “All men should keep their word, kings most of all. I was pledged to marry one of you and I broke that vow. The fault is not in you. What I did was not done to slight you, but because I loved another. No words can set it right, I know, yet I come before you to ask forgiveness, that the Freys of the Crossing and the Starks of Winterfell may once again be friends.”

The smaller girls fidgeted anxiously. Their older sisters waited for Lord Walder on his black oak throne. Jinglebell rocked back and forth, bells chiming on collar and crown.

“Good,” the Lord of the Crossing said. “That was very good, Your Grace. ‘No words can set it right,’ *heh*. Well said, well said. At the wedding feast I hope you will not refuse to dance with my daughters. It would please an old man’s heart, *heh*.” He bobbed his wrinkled pink head up and down, in much the same way his lackwit grandson did, though Lord Walder wore no bells. “And here she is, Lord Edmure. My daughter Roslin, my most precious little blossom, *heh*.”

Ser Benfrey led her into the hall. They looked enough alike to be full siblings. Judging from their age, both were children of the sixth Lady Frey; a Rosby, Catelyn seemed to recall.

Roslin was small for her years, her skin as white as if she had just risen from a milk bath. Her face was comely, with a small chin, delicate nose, and big brown eyes. Thick chestnut hair fell in loose waves to a waist so tiny

that Edmure would be able to put his hands around it. Beneath the lacy bodice of her pale blue gown, her breasts looked small but shapely.

“Your Grace.” The girl went to her knees. “Lord Edmure, I hope I am not a disappointment to you.”

Far from it, thought Catelyn. Her brother’s face had lit up at the sight of her. “You are a delight to me, my lady,” Edmure said. “And ever will be, I know.”

Roslin had a small gap between two of her front teeth that made her shy with her smiles, but the flaw was almost endearing. *Pretty enough*, Catelyn thought, *but so small, and she comes of Rosby stock*. The Rosbys had never been robust. She much preferred the frames of some of the older girls in the hall; daughters or granddaughters, she could not be sure. They had a Crakehall look about them, and Lord Walder’s third wife had been of that House. *Wide hips to bear children, big breasts to nurse them, strong arms to carry them. The Crakehalls have always been a big-boned family, and strong.*

“My lord is kind,” the Lady Roslin said to Edmure.

“My lady is beautiful.” Edmure took her hand and drew her to her feet. “But why are you crying?”

“For joy,” Roslin said. “I weep for joy, my lord.”

“*Enough*,” Lord Walder broke in. “You may weep and whisper after you’re wed, *heh*. Benfrey, see your sister back to her chambers, she has a wedding to prepare for. And a bedding, *heh*, the sweetest part. For all, for all.” His mouth moved in and out. “We’ll have music, such sweet music, and wine, *heh*, the red will run, and we’ll put some wrongs aright. But now you’re weary, and wet as well, dripping on my floor. There’s fires waiting for you, and hot mulled wine, and baths if you want ’em. Lothar, show our guests to their quarters.”

“I need to see my men across the river, my lord,” Robb said.

“They shan’t get lost,” Lord Walder complained. “They’re crossed before, haven’t they? When you came down from the north. You wanted crossing and I gave it to you, and you never said mayhaps, *heh*. But suit yourself. Lead each man across by the hand if you like, it’s naught to me.”

“*My lord!*” Catelyn had almost forgotten. “Some food would be most welcome. We have ridden many leagues in the rain.”

Walder Frey’s mouth moved in and out. “Food, *heh*. A loaf of bread, a bite of cheese, mayhaps a sausage.”

“Some wine to wash it down,” Robb said. “And salt.”

“Bread and salt. *Heh*. Of course, of course.” The old man clapped his hands together, and servants came into the hall, bearing flagons of wine and trays of bread, cheese, and butter. Lord Walder took a cup of red himself, and raised it high with a spotted hand. “My guests,” he said. “My honored guests. Be welcome beneath my roof, and at my table.”

“We thank you for your hospitality, my lord,” Robb replied. Edmure echoed him, along with the Greatjon, Ser Marq Piper, and the others. They drank his wine and ate his bread and butter. Catelyn tasted the wine and nibbled at some bread, and felt much the better for it. *Now we should be safe*, she thought.

Knowing how petty the old man could be, she had expected their rooms to be bleak and cheerless. But the Freys had made more than ample provision for them, it seemed. The bridal chamber was large and richly appointed, dominated by a great featherbed with corner posts carved in the likeness of castle towers. Its draperies were Tully red and blue, a nice courtesy. Sweet-smelling carpets covered a plank floor, and a tall shuttered window opened to the south. Catelyn’s own room was smaller, but handsomely furnished and comfortable, with a fire burning in the hearth. Lame Lothar assured them that Robb would have an entire suite, as befit a king. “If there is anything you require, you need only tell one of the guards.” He bowed and withdrew, limping heavily as he made his way down the curving steps.

“We should post our own guards,” Catelyn told her brother. She would rest easier with Stark and Tully men outside her door. The audience with Lord Walder had not been as painful as she feared, yet all the same she would be glad to be done with this. *A few more days, and Robb will be off to battle, and me to a comfortable captivity at Seagard*. Lord Jason would show her every courtesy, she had no doubt, but the prospect still depressed her.

She could hear the sounds of horses below as the long column of mounted men wound their way across the bridge from castle to castle. The stones rumbled to the passage of heavy-laden wayns. Catelyn went to the window and gazed out, to watch Robb's host emerge from the eastern twin. "The rain seems to be lessening."

"Now that we're inside." Edmure stood before the fire, letting the warmth wash over him. "What did you make of Roslin?"

Too small and delicate. Childbirth will go hard on her. But her brother seemed well pleased with the girl, so all she said was, "Sweet."

"I believe she liked me. Why was she crying?"

"She's a maid on the eve of her wedding. A few tears are to be expected." Lysa had wept lakes the morning of their own wedding, though she had managed to be dry-eyed and radiant when Jon Arryn swept his cream-and-blue cloak about her shoulders.

"She's prettier than I dared hope." Edmure raised a hand before she could speak. "I know there are more important things, spare me the sermon, septa. Even so . . . did you see some of those other maids Frey trotted out? The one with the twitch? Was that the shaking sickness? And those twins had more craters and eruptions on their faces than Petyr Pimple. When I saw that lot, I knew Roslin would be bald and one-eyed, with Jinglebell's wits and Black Walder's temper. But she seems gentle as well as fair." He looked perplexed. "Why would the old weasel refuse to let me choose unless he meant to foist off someone hideous?"

"Your fondness for a pretty face is well known," Catelyn reminded him. "Perhaps Lord Walder actually wants you to be happy with your bride." *Or more like, he did not want you balking over a boil and upsetting all his plans.* "Or it may be that Roslin is the old man's favorite. The Lord of Riverrun is a much better match than most of his daughters can hope for."

"True." Her brother still seemed uncertain, however. "Is it possible the girl is barren?"

"Lord Walder wants his grandson to inherit Riverrun. How would it serve him to give you a barren wife?"

"It rids him of a daughter no one else would take."

“Small good that will do him. Walder Frey is a peevish man, not a stupid one.”

“Still . . . it *is* possible?”

“Yes,” Catelyn conceded, reluctantly. “There are illnesses a girl can have in childhood that leave her unable to conceive. There’s no reason to believe that Lady Roslin was so afflicted, though.” She looked round the room. “The Freys have received us more kindly than I had anticipated, if truth be told.”

Edmure laughed. “A few barbed words and some unseemly gloating. From him that’s courtesy. I expected the old weasel to piss in our wine and make us praise the vintage.”

The jest left Catelyn strangely disquieted. “If you will excuse me, I should change from these wet clothes.”

“As you wish.” Edmure yawned. “I may nap an hour.”

She retreated to her own room. The chest of clothes she’d brought from Riverrun had been carried up and laid at the foot of the bed. After she’d undressed and hung her wet clothing by the fire, she donned a warm wool dress of Tully red and blue, washed and brushed her hair and let it dry, and went in search of Freys.

Lord Walder’s black oak throne was empty when she entered the hall, but some of his sons were drinking by the fire. Lame Lothar rose clumsily when he saw her. “Lady Catelyn, I thought you would be resting. How may I be of service?”

“Are these your brothers?” she asked.

“Brothers, half-brothers, good brothers, and nephews. Raymund and I shared a mother. Lord Lucias Vypren is my half-sister Lythene’s husband, and Ser Damon is their son. My half-brother Ser Hosteen I believe you know. And this is Ser Leslyn Haigh and his sons, Ser Harys and Ser Donnel.”

“Well met, sers. Is Ser Perwyn about? He helped escort me to Storm’s End and back, when Robb sent me to speak with Lord Renly. I was looking forward to seeing him again.”

“Perwyn is away,” Lame Lothar said. “I shall give him your regards. I know he will regret having missed you.”

“Surely he will return in time for Lady Roslin’s wedding?”

“He had hoped to,” said Lame Lothar, “but with this rain . . . you saw how the rivers ran, my lady.”

“I did indeed,” said Catelyn. “I wonder if you would be so good as to direct me to your maester?”

“Are you unwell, my lady?” asked Ser Hosteen, a powerful man with a square strong jaw.

“A woman’s complaint. Nothing to concern you, ser.”

Lothar, ever gracious, escorted her from the hall, up some steps, and across a covered bridge to another stair. “You should find Maester Brenett in the turret on the top, my lady.”

Catelyn half expected that the maester would be yet another son of Walder Frey’s, but Brenett did not have the look. He was a great fat man, bald and double-chinned and none too clean, to judge from the raven droppings that stained the sleeves of his robes, yet he seemed amiable enough. When she told him of Edmure’s concerns about Lady Roslin’s fertility, he chuckled. “Your lord brother need have no fear, Lady Catelyn. She’s small, I’ll grant you, and narrow in the hips, but her mother was the same, and Lady Bethany gave Lord Walder a child every year.”

“How many lived past infancy?” she asked bluntly.

“Five.” He ticked them off on fingers plump as sausages. “Ser Perwyn. Ser Benfrey. Maester Willamen, who took his vows last year and now serves Lord Hunter in the Vale. Olyvar, who squired for your son. And Lady Roslin, the youngest. Four boys to one girl. Lord Edmure will have more sons than he knows what to do with.”

“I am sure that will please him.” So the girl was like to be fertile as well as fair of face. *That should put Edmure’s mind at ease.* Lord Walder had left her brother no cause for complaint, so far as she could see.

Catelyn did not return to her own room after leaving the maester; instead she went to Robb. She found Robin Flint and Ser Wendel Manderly with him, along with the Greatjon and his son, who was still called the Smalljon

though he threatened to overtop his father. They were all damp. Another man, still wetter, stood before the fire in a pale pink cloak trimmed with white fur. "Lord Bolton," she said.

"Lady Catelyn," he replied, his voice faint, "it is a pleasure to look on you again, even in such trying times."

"You are kind to say so." Catelyn could feel gloom in the room. Even the Greatjon seemed somber and subdued. She looked at their grim faces and said, "What's happened?"

"Lannisters on the Trident," said Ser Wendel unhappily. "My brother is taken again."

"And Lord Bolton has brought us further word of Winterfell," Robb added. "Ser Rodrik was not the only good man to die. Cley Cerwyn and Leobald Tallhart were slain as well."

"Cley Cerwyn was only a boy," she said, saddened. "Is this true, then? All dead, and Winterfell gone?"

Bolton's pale eyes met her own. "The ironmen burned both castle and winter town. Some of your people were taken back to the Dreadfort by my son, Ramsay."

"Your bastard was accused of grievous crimes," Catelyn reminded him sharply. "Of murder, rape, and worse."

"Yes," Roose Bolton said. "His blood is tainted, that cannot be denied. Yet he is a good fighter, as cunning as he is fearless. When the ironmen cut down Ser Rodrik, and Leobald Tallhart soon after, it fell to Ramsay to lead the battle, and he did. He swears that he shall not sheathe his sword so long as a single Greyjoy remains in the north. Perhaps such service might atone in some small measure for whatever crimes his bastard blood has led him to commit." He shrugged. "Or not. When the war is done, His Grace must weigh and judge. By then I hope to have a trueborn son by Lady Walda."

This is a cold man, Catelyn realized, not for the first time.

"Did Ramsay mention Theon Greyjoy?" Robb demanded. "Was he slain as well, or did he flee?"

Roose Bolton removed a ragged strip of leather from the pouch at his belt. "My son sent this with his letter."

Ser Wendel turned his fat face away. Robin Flint and Smalljon Umber exchanged a look, and the Greatjon snorted like a bull. “Is that . . . skin?” said Robb.

“The skin from the little finger of Theon Greyjoy’s left hand. My son is cruel, I confess it. And yet . . . what is a little skin, against the lives of two young princes? You were their mother, my lady. May I offer you this . . . small token of revenge?”

Part of Catelyn wanted to clutch the grisly trophy to her heart, but she made herself resist. “Put it away. Please.”

“Flaying Theon will not bring my brothers back,” Robb said. “I want his head, not his skin.”

“He is Balon Greyjoy’s only living son,” Lord Bolton said softly, as if they had forgotten, “and now rightful King of the Iron Islands. A captive king has great value as a hostage.”

“Hostage?” The word raised Catelyn’s hackles. Hostages were oft exchanged. “Lord Bolton, I hope you are not suggesting that we *free* the man who killed my sons.”

“Whoever wins the Seastone Chair will want Theon Greyjoy dead,” Bolton pointed out. “Even in chains, he has a better claim than any of his uncles. Hold him, I say, and demand concessions from the ironborn as the price of his execution.”

Robb considered that reluctantly, but in the end he nodded. “Yes. Very well. Keep him alive, then. For the present. Hold him secure at the Dreadfort till we’ve retaken the north.”

Catelyn turned back to Roose Bolton. “Ser Wendel said something of Lannisters on the Trident?”

“He did, my lady. I blame myself. I delayed too long before leaving Harrenhal. Aenys Frey departed several days before me and crossed the Trident at the ruby ford, though not without difficulty. But by the time we came up the river was a torrent. I had no choice but to ferry my men across in small boats, of which we had too few. Two-thirds of my strength was on the north side when the Lannisters attacked those still waiting to cross. Norrey, Locke, and Burley men chiefly, with Ser Wylis Manderly and his

White Harbor knights as rear guard. I was on the wrong side of the Trident, powerless to help them. Ser Wylis rallied our men as best he could, but Gregor Clegane attacked with heavy horse and drove them into the river. As many drowned as were cut down. More fled, and the rest were taken captive.”

Gregor Clegane was always ill news, Catelyn reflected. Would Robb need to march south again to deal with him? Or was the Mountain coming here? “Is Clegane across the river, then?”

“No.” Bolton’s voice was soft, but certain. “I left six hundred men at the ford. Spearmen from the rills, the mountains, and the White Knife, a hundred Hornwood longbows, some freeriders and hedge knights, and a strong force of Stout and Cerwyn men to stiffen them. Ronnel Stout and Ser Kyle Condon have the command. Ser Kyle was the late Lord Cerwyn’s right hand, as I’m sure you know; my lady. Lions swim no better than wolves. So long as the river runs high, Ser Gregor will not cross.”

“The last thing we need is the Mountain at our backs when we start up the causeway,” said Robb. “You did well, my lord.”

“Your Grace is too kind. I suffered grievous losses on the Green Fork, and Glover and Tallhart worse at Duskendale.”

“*Duskendale*.” Robb made the word a curse. “Robett Glover will answer for that when I see him, I promise you.”

“A folly,” Lord Bolton agreed, “but Glover was heedless after he learned that Deepwood Motte had fallen. Grief and fear will do that to a man.”

Duskendale was done and cold; it was the battles still to come that worried Catelyn. “How many men have you brought my son?” she asked Roose Bolton pointedly.

His queer colorless eyes studied her face a moment before he answered. “Some five hundred horse and three thousand foot, my lady. Dreadfort men, in chief, and some from Karhold. With the loyalty of the Karstarks so doubtful now, I thought it best to keep them close. I regret there are not more.”

“It should be enough,” said Robb. “You will have command of my rear guard, Lord Bolton. I mean to start for the Neck as soon as my uncle has

been wedded and bedded. We're going home."