

CATELYN

The Great Hall of Riverrun was a lonely place for two to sit to supper. Deep shadows draped the walls. One of the torches had guttered out, leaving only three. Catelyn sat staring into her wine goblet. The vintage tasted thin and sour on her tongue. Brienne was across from her. Between them, her father's high seat was as empty as the rest of the hall. Even the servants were gone. She had given them leave to join the celebration.

The walls of the keep were thick, yet even so, they could hear the muffled sounds of revelry from the yard outside. Ser Desmond had brought twenty casks up from the cellars, and the smallfolk were celebrating Edmure's imminent return and Robb's conquest of the Crag by hoisting horns of nut-brown ale.

I cannot blame them, Catelyn thought. They do not know. And if they did, why should they care? They never knew my sons. Never watched Bran climb with their hearts in their throats, pride and terror so mingled they seemed as one, never heard him laugh, never smiled to see Rickon trying so fiercely to be like his older brothers. She stared at the supper set before her: trout wrapped in bacon, salad of turnip greens and red fennel and sweetgrass, pease and onions and hot bread. Brienne was eating methodically, as if supper were another chore to be accomplished. *I am become a sour woman, Catelyn thought. I take no joy in mead nor meat, and song and laughter have become suspicious strangers to me. I am a creature of grief and dust and bitter longings. There is an empty place within me where my heart was once.*

The sound of the other woman's eating had become intolerable to her. "Brienne, I am no fit company. Go join the revels, if you would. Drink a horn of ale and dance to Rymund's harping."

"I am not made for revels, my lady." Her big hands tore apart a heel of black bread. Brienne stared at the chunks as if she had forgotten what they were. "If you command it, I..."

Catelyn could sense her discomfort. "I only thought you might enjoy happier company than mine."

"I'm well content." The girl used the bread to sop up some of the bacon grease the trout had been fried in.

"There was another bird this morning." Catelyn did not know why she said it. "The maester woke me at once. That was dutiful, but not kind. Not kind at all." She had not meant to tell Brienne. No one knew but her and Maester Vyman, and she had meant to keep it that way until... until...

Until what? Foolish woman, will holding it secret in your heart make it any less true? If you never tell, never speak of it, will it become only a dream, less than a dream, a nightmare half-remembered? Oh, if only the gods would be so good.

"Is it news of King's Landing?" asked Brienne.

"Would that it was. The bird came from Castle Cerwyn, from Ser Rodrik, my castellan." *Dark wings, dark words.* "He has gathered what power he could and is marching on Winterfell, to take the castle back." How unimportant all that sounded now. "But he said... he wrote... he told me, he..."

"My lady, what is it? Is it some news of your sons?"

Such a simple question that was; would that the answer could be as simple. When Catelyn tried to speak, the words caught in her throat. "I have no sons but Robb." She managed those terrible words without a sob, and for that much she was glad.

Brienne looked at her with horror. "My lady?"

"Bran and Rickon tried to escape, but were taken at a mill on the Acorn Water. Theon Greyjoy has mounted their heads on the walls of Winterfell. Theon Greyjoy, who ate at my table since he was a boy of ten." *I have said it, gods forgive me. I have said it and made it true.*

Brienne's face was a watery blur. She reached across the table, but her fingers stopped short of Catelyn's, as if the touch might be unwelcome. "I... there are no words, my lady. My good lady. Your sons, they... they're with the gods now."

“Are they?” Catelyn said sharply. “What god would let this happen? Rickon was only a baby. How could he deserve such a death? And Bran... when I left the north, he had not opened his eyes since his fall. I had to go before he woke. Now I can never return to him, or hear him laugh again.” She showed Brienne her palms, her fingers. “These scars... they sent a man to cut Bran’s throat as he lay sleeping. He would have died then, and me with him, but Bran’s wolf tore out the man’s throat.” That gave her a moment’s pause. “I suppose Theon killed the wolves too. He must have, otherwise... I was certain the boys would be safe so long as the direwolves were with them. Like Robb with his Grey Wind. But my daughters have no wolves now.”

The abrupt shift of topic left Brienne bewildered. “Your daughters...”

“Sansa was a lady at three, always so courteous and eager to please. She loved nothing so well as tales of knightly valor. Men would say she had my look, but she will grow into a woman far more beautiful than I ever was, you can see that. I often sent away her maid so I could brush her hair myself. She had auburn hair, lighter than mine, and so thick and soft... the red in it would catch the light of the torches and shine like copper.

“And Arya, well... Ned’s visitors would oft mistake her for a stableboy if they rode into the yard unannounced. Arya was a trial, it must be said. Half a boy and half a wolf pup. Forbid her anything and it became her heart’s desire. She had Ned’s long face, and brown hair that always looked as though a bird had been nesting in it. I despaired of ever making a lady of her. She collected scabs as other girls collect dolls, and would say anything that came into her head. I think she must be dead too.” When she said that, it felt as though a giant hand were squeezing her chest. “I want them all dead, Brienne. Theon Greyjoy first, then Jaime Lannister and Cersei and the Imp, every one, every one. But my girls... my girls will...”

“The queen... she has a little girl of her own,” Brienne said awkwardly. “And sons too, of an age with yours. When she hears, perhaps she... she may take pity, and...”

“Send my daughters back unharmed?” Catelyn smiled sadly. “There is a sweet innocence about you, child. I could wish... but no. Robb will

avenge his brothers. Ice can kill as dead as fire. *Ice* was Ned's greatsword. Valyrian steel, marked with the ripples of a thousand foldings, so sharp I feared to touch it. Robb's blade is dull as a cudgel compared to Ice. It will not be easy for him to get Theon's head off, I fear. The Starks do not use headsman. Ned always said that the man who passes the sentence should swing the blade, though he never took any joy in the duty. But *I* would, oh, yes." She stared at her scarred hands, opened and closed them, then slowly raised her eyes. "I've sent him wine."

"Wine?" Brienne was lost. "Robb? Or... Theon Greyjoy?"

"The Kingslayer." The ploy had served her well with Cleos Frey. *I hope you're thirsty, Jaime. I hope your throat is dry and tight.* "I would like you to come with me."

"I am yours to command, my lady."

"Good." Catelyn rose abruptly. "Stay, finish your meal in peace. I will send for you later. At midnight."

"So late, my lady?"

"The dungeons are windowless. One hour is much like another down there, and for me, all hours are midnight." Her footsteps rang hollowly when Catelyn left the hall. As she climbed to Lord Hoster's solar, she could hear them outside, shouting, "Tully!" and "A cup! A cup to the brave young lord!" *My father is not dead*, she wanted to shout down at them. *My sons are dead, but my father lives, damn you all, and he is your lord still.*

Lord Hoster was deep in sleep. "He had a cup of dreamwine not so long ago, my lady," Maester Vyman said. "For the pain. He will not know you are here."

"It makes no matter," Catelyn said. *He is more dead than alive, yet more alive than my poor sweet sons.*

"My lady, is there aught I might do for you? A sleeping draught, perhaps?"

"Thank you, Maester, but no. I will not sleep away my grief. Bran and Rickon deserve better from me. Go and join the celebration, I will sit with my father for a time."

“As you will, my lady.” Vyman bowed and left her.

Lord Hoster lay on his back, mouth open, his breath a faint whistling sigh. One hand hung over the edge of the mattress, a pale frail fleshless thing, but warm when she touched it. She slid her fingers through his and closed them. *No matter how tightly I hold him, I cannot keep him here*, she thought sadly. *Let him go*. Yet her fingers would not seem to unbend.

“I have no one to talk with, Father,” she told him. “I pray, but the gods do not answer.” Lightly she kissed his hand. The skin was warm, blue veins branching like rivers beneath his pale translucent skin. Outside the greater rivers flowed, the Red Fork and the Tumblestone, and they would flow forever, but not so the rivers in her father’s hand. Too soon that current would grow still. “Last night I dreamed of that time Lysa and I got lost while riding back from Seagard. Do you remember? That strange fog came up and we fell behind the rest of the party. Everything was grey, and I could not see a foot past the nose of my horse. We lost the road. The branches of the trees were like long skinny arms reaching out to grab us as we passed. Lysa started to cry, and when I shouted the fog seemed to swallow the sound. But Petyr knew where we were, and he rode back and found us...

“But there’s no one to find me now, is there? This time I have to find our own way, and it is hard, so hard.

“I keep remembering the Stark words. Winter has come, Father. For me. For me. Robb must fight the Greyjoys now as well as the Lannisters, and for what? For a gold hat and an iron chair? Surely the land has bled enough. I want my girls back, I want Robb to lay down his sword and pick some homely daughter of Walder Frey to make him happy and give him sons. I want Bran and Rickon back, I want...” Catelyn hung her head. “*I want*,” she said once more, and then her words were gone.

After a time the candle guttered and went out. Moonlight slanted between the slats of the shutters, laying pale silvery bars across her father’s face. She could hear the soft whisper of his labored breathing, the endless rush of waters, the faint chords of some love song drifting up from the yard, so sad and sweet. “*I loved a maid as red as autumn*,” Rymund sang, “*with sunset in her hair*.”

Catelyn never noticed when the singing ended. Hours had passed, yet it seemed only a heartbeat before Brienne was at the door. "My lady," she announced softly. "Midnight has come."

Midnight has come, Father, she thought, and I must do my duty. She let go of his hand.

The gaoler was a furtive little man with broken veins in his nose. They found him bent over a tankard of ale and the remains of a pigeon pie, more than a little drunk. He squinted at them suspiciously. "Begging your forgiveness, m'lady, but Lord Edmure says no one is to see the Kingslayer without a writing from him, with his seal upon it."

"Lord Edmure? Has my father died, and no one told me?"

The gaoler licked his lips. "No, m'lady, not as I knows."

"You will open the cell, or you will come with me to Lord Hoster's solar and tell him why you saw fit to defy me."

His eyes fell. "As m'lady says." The keys were chained to the studded leather belt that girdled his waist. He muttered under his breath as he sorted through them, until he found the one that fit the door to the Kingslayer's cell.

"Go back to your ale and leave us," she commanded. An oil lamp hung from a hook on the low ceiling. Catelyn took it down and turned up the flame. "Brienne, see that I am not disturbed."

Nodding, Brienne took up a position just outside the cell, her hand resting on the pommel of her sword. "My lady will call if she has need of me."

Catelyn shouldered aside the heavy wood-and-iron door and stepped into foul darkness. This was the bowels of Riverrun, and smelled the part. Old straw crackled underfoot. The walls were discolored with patches of nitre. Through the stone, she could hear the faint rush of the Tumblestone. The lamplight revealed a pail overflowing with feces in one corner and a huddled shape in another. The flagon of wine stood beside the door, untouched. *So much for that ploy. I ought to be thankful that the gaoler did not drink it himself, I suppose.*

Jaime raised his hands to cover his face, the chains around his wrists clanking. “Lady Stark,” he said, in a voice hoarse with disuse. “I fear I am in no condition to receive you.”

“Look at me, ser.”

“The light hurts my eyes. A moment, if you would.” Jaime Lannister had been allowed no razor since the night he was taken in the Whispering Wood, and a shaggy beard covered his face, once so like the queen’s. Glinting gold in the lamplight, the whiskers made him look like some great yellow beast, magnificent even in chains. His unwashed hair fell to his shoulders in ropes and tangles, the clothes were rotting on his body, his face was pale and wasted... and even so, the power and the beauty of the man were still apparent.

“I see you had no taste for the wine I sent you.”

“Such sudden generosity seemed somewhat suspect.”

“I can have your head off anytime I want. Why would I need to poison you?”

“Death by poison can seem natural. Harder to claim that my head simply fell off.” He squinted up from the floor, his cat-green eyes slowly becoming accustomed to the light. “I’d invite you to sit, but your brother has neglected to provide me a chair.”

“I can stand well enough.”

“Can you? You look terrible, I must say. Though perhaps it’s just the light in here.” He was fettered at wrist and ankle, each cuff chained to the others, so he could neither stand nor lie comfortably. The ankle chains were bolted to the wall. “Are my bracelets heavy enough for you, or did you come to add a few more? I’ll rattle them prettily if you like.”

“You brought this on yourself,” she reminded him. “We granted you the comfort of a tower cell befitting your birth and station. You repaid us by trying to escape.”

“A cell is a cell. Some under Casterly Rock make this one seem a sunlit garden. One day perhaps I’ll show them to you.”

If he is cowed, he hides it well, Catelyn thought. “A man chained hand and foot should keep a more courteous tongue in his mouth, ser. I did not come here to be threatened.”

“No? Then surely it was to have your pleasure of me? It’s said that widows grow weary of their empty beds. We of the Kingsguard vow never to wed, but I suppose I could still service you if that’s what you need. Pour us some of that wine and slip out of that gown and we’ll see if I’m up to it.”

Catelyn stared down at him in revulsion. *Was there ever a man as beautiful or as vile as this one?* “If you said that in my son’s hearing, he would kill you for it.”

“Only so long as I was wearing these.” Jaime Lannister rattled his chains at her. “We both know the boy is afraid to face me in single combat.”

“My son may be young, but if you take him for a fool, you are sadly mistaken... and it seems to me that you were not so quick to make challenges when you had an army at your back.”

“Did the old Kings of Winter hide behind their mothers’ skirts as well?”

“I grow weary of this, ser. There are things I must know.”

“Why should I tell you anything?”

“To save your life.”

“You think I fear death?” That seemed to amuse him.

“You should. Your crimes will have earned you a place of torment in the deepest of the seven hells, if the gods are just.”

“What gods are those, Lady Catelyn? The trees your husband prayed to? How well did they serve him when my sister took his head off?” Jaime gave a chuckle. “If there are gods, why is the world so full of pain and injustice?”

“Because of men like you.”

“There are no men like me. There’s only me.”

There is nothing here but arrogance and pride, and the empty courage of a madman. I am wasting my breath with this one. If there was ever a

spark of honor in him, it is long dead. “If you will not speak with me, so be it. Drink the wine or piss in it, ser, it makes no matter to me.”

Her hand was at the door pull when he said, “Lady Stark.” She turned, waited. “Things go to rust in this damp,” Jaime went on. “Even a man’s courtesies. Stay, and you shall have your answers... for a price.”

He has no shame. “Captives do not set prices.”

“Oh, you’ll find mine modest enough. Your turnkey tells me nothing but vile lies, and he cannot even keep them straight. One day he says Cersei has been flayed, and the next it’s my father. Answer my questions and I’ll answer yours.”

“Truthfully?”

“Oh, it’s *truth* you want? Be careful, my lady. Tyrion says that people often claim to hunger for truth, but seldom like the taste when it’s served up.”

“I am strong enough to hear anything you care to say.”

“As you will, then. But first, if you’d be so kind... the wine. My throat is raw.”

Catelyn hung the lamp from the door and moved the cup and flagon closer. Jaime sloshed the wine around his mouth before he swallowed. “Sour and vile,” he said, “but it will do.” He put his back to the wall, drew his knees up to his chest, and stared at her. “Your first question, Lady Catelyn?”

Not knowing how long this game might continue, Catelyn wasted no time. “Are you Joffrey’s father?”

“You would never ask unless you knew the answer.”

“I want it from your own lips.”

He shrugged. “Joffrey is mine. As are the rest of Cersei’s brood, I suppose.”

“You admit to being your sister’s lover?”

“I’ve always loved my sister, and you owe me two answers. Do all my kin still live?”

“Ser Stafford Lannister was slain at Oxcross, I am told.”

Jaime was unmoved. “Uncle Dolt, my sister called him. it’s Cersei and Tyrion who concern me. As well as my lord father.”

“They live, all three.” *But not long, if the gods are good.*

Jaime drank some more wine. “Ask your next.”

Catelyn wondered if he would dare answer her next question with anything but a lie. “How did my son Bran come to fall?”

“I flung him from a window.”

The easy way he said it took her voice away for an instant. *If I had a knife, I would kill him now*, she thought, until she remembered the girls. Her throat constricted as she said, “You were a knight, sworn to defend the weak and innocent.”

“He was weak enough, but perhaps not so innocent. He was spying on us.”

“Bran would not spy.”

“Then blame those precious gods of yours, who brought the boy to our window and gave him a glimpse of something he was never meant to see.”

“Blame the *gods*?” she said, incredulous. “Yours was the hand that threw him. You meant for him to die.”

His chains chinked softly. “I seldom fling children from towers to improve their health. Yes, I meant for him to die.”

“And when he did not, you knew your danger was worse than ever, so you gave your catspaw a bag of silver to make certain Bran would never wake.”

“Did I now?” Jaime lifted his cup and took a long swallow. “I won’t deny we talked of it, but you were with the boy day and night, your maester and Lord Eddard attended him frequently, and there were guards, even those damned direwolves... it would have required cutting my way through half of Winterfell. And why bother, when the boy seemed like to die of his own accord?”

“If you lie to me, this session is at an end.” Catelyn held out her hands, to show him her fingers and palms. “The man who came to slit Bran’s throat gave me these scars. You swear you had no part in sending him?”

“On my honor as a Lannister.”

“Your honor as a Lannister is worth less than *this*.” She kicked over the waste pail. Foul-smelling brown ooze crept across the floor of the cell, soaking into the straw.

Jaime Lannister backed away from the spill as far as his chains would allow. “I may indeed have shit for honor, I won’t deny it, but I have never yet hired anyone to do my killing. Believe what you will, Lady Stark, but if I had wanted your Bran dead I would have slain him myself.”

Gods be merciful, he’s telling the truth. “If you did not send the killer, your sister did.”

“If so, I’d know. Cersei keeps no secrets from me.”

“Then it was the Imp.”

“Tyrion is as innocent as your Bran. *He* wasn’t climbing around outside of anyone’s window, spying.”

“Then why did the assassin have his dagger?”

“What dagger was this?”

“It was so long,” she said, holding her hands apart, “plain, but finely made, with a blade of Valyrian steel and a dragonbone hilt. Your brother won it from Lord Baelish at the tourney on Prince Joffrey’s name day.”

Lannister poured, drank, poured, and stared into his wine cup. “This wine seems to be improving as I drink it. Imagine that. I seem to remember that dagger, now that you describe it. Won it, you say? How?”

“Wagering on you when you tilted against the Knight of Flowers.” Yet when she heard her own words Catelyn knew she had gotten it wrong.

“No... was it the other way?”

“Tyrion always backed me in the lists,” Jaime said, “but that day Ser Loras unhorsed me. A mischance, I took the boy too lightly, but no matter. Whatever my brother wagered, he lost... but that dagger *did* change hands,

I recall it now. Robert showed it to me that night at the feast. His Grace loved to salt my wounds, especially when drunk. And when was he not drunk?”

Tyrion Lannister had said much the same thing as they rode through the Mountains of the Moon, Catelyn remembered. She had refused to believe him. Petyr had sworn otherwise, Petyr who had been almost a brother, Petyr who loved her so much he fought a duel for her hand... and yet if Jaime and Tyrion told the same tale, what did that mean? The brothers had not seen each other since departing Winterfell more than a year ago. “Are you trying to deceive me?” Somewhere there was a trap here.

“I’ve admitted to shoving your precious urchin out a window, what would it gain me to lie about this knife?” He tossed down another cup of wine. “Believe what you will, I’m past caring what people say of me. And it’s my turn. Have Robert’s brothers taken the field?”

“They have.”

“Now there’s a niggardly response. Give me more than that, or your next answer will be as poor.”

“Stannis marches against King’s Landing,” she said grudgingly. “Renly is dead, murdered at Bitterbridge by his brother, through some black art I do not understand.”

“A pity,” Jaime said. “I rather liked Renly, though Stannis is quite another tale. What side have the Tyrells taken?”

“Renly, at first. Now, I could not say.”

“Your boy must be feeling lonely.”

“Robb was sixteen a few days past... a man grown, and a king. He’s won every battle he’s fought. The last word we had from him, he had taken the Crag from the Westerlings.”

“He hasn’t faced my father yet, has he?”

“When he does, he’ll defeat him. As he did you.”

“He took me unawares. A craven’s trick.”

“You dare talk of tricks? Your brother Tyrion sent us cutthroats in envoy’s garb, under a peace banner.”

“If it were one of your sons in this cell, wouldn’t his brothers do as much for him?”

My son has no brothers, she thought, but she would not share her pain with a creature such as this.

Jaime drank some more wine. “What’s a brother’s life when honor is at stake, eh?” Another sip. “Tyrion is clever enough to realize that your son will never consent to ransom me.”

Catelyn could not deny it. “Robb’s bannermen would sooner see you dead. Rickard Karstark in particular. You slew two of his sons in the Whispering Wood.”

“The two with the white sunburst, were they?” Jaime gave a shrug. “If truth be told, it was *your* son that I was trying to slay. The others got in my way. I killed them in fair fight, in the heat of battle. Any other knight would have done the same.”

“How can you still count yourself a knight, when you have forsaken every vow you ever swore?”

Jaime reached for the flagon to refill his cup. “So many vows... they make you swear and swear. Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. But obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. Respect the gods. Obey the laws. It’s too much. No matter what you do, you’re forsaking one vow or the other.” He took a healthy swallow of wine and closed his eyes for an instant, leaning his head back against the patch of nitre on the wall. “I was the youngest man ever to wear the white cloak.”

“And the youngest to betray all it stood for, Kingslayer.”

“*Kingslayer*,” he pronounced carefully. “And such a king he was!” He lifted his cup. “To Aerys Targaryen, the Second of His Name, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and *Protector* of the Realm. And to the sword that opened his throat. A *golden* sword, don’t you know. Until his blood ran red down the blade. Those are the Lannister colors, red and gold.”

As he laughed, she realized the wine had done its work; Jaime had drained most of the flagon, and he was drunk. “Only a man like you would be proud of such an act.”

“I told you, there are no men like me. Answer me this, Lady Stark—did your Ned ever tell you the manner of his father’s death? Or his brother’s?”

“They strangled Brandon while his father watched, and then killed Lord Rickard as well.” An ugly tale, and sixteen years old. Why was he asking about it now?

“Killed, yes, but *how*?”

“The cord or the axe, I suppose.”

Jaime took a swallow, wiped his mouth. “No doubt Ned wished to spare you. His sweet young bride, if not quite a maiden. Well, you wanted truth. Ask me. We made a bargain, I can deny you nothing. Ask.”

“Dead is dead.” *I do not want to know this.*

“Brandon was different from his brother, wasn’t he? He had blood in his veins instead of cold water. More like me.”

“Brandon was nothing like you.”

“If you say so. You and he were to wed.”

“He was on his way to Riverrun when...” Strange, how telling it still made her throat grow tight, after all these years. “...when he heard about Lyanna, and went to King’s Landing instead. It was a rash thing to do.” She remembered how her own father had raged when the news had been brought to Riverrun. *The gallant fool*, was what he called Brandon.

Jaime poured the last half cup of wine. “He rode into the Red Keep with a few companions, shouting for Prince Rhaegar to come out and die. But Rhaegar wasn’t there. Aerys sent his guards to arrest them all for plotting his son’s murder. The others were lords’ sons too, it seems to me.”

“Ethan Glover was Brandon’s squire,” Catelyn said. “He was the only one to survive. The others were Jeffory Mallister, Kyle Royce, and Elbert Arryn, Jon Arryn’s nephew and heir.” It was queer how she still remembered the names, after so many years. “Aerys accused them of treason and summoned their fathers to court to answer the charge, with the

sons as hostages. When they came, he had them murdered without trial. Fathers and sons both.”

“There were trials. Of a sort. Lord Rickard demanded trial by combat, and the king granted the request. Stark armored himself as for battle, thinking to duel one of the Kingsguard. Me, perhaps. Instead they took him to the throne room and suspended him from the rafters while two of Aerys’s pyromancers kindled a blaze beneath him. The king told him that *fire* was the champion of House Targaryen. So all Lord Rickard needed to do to prove himself innocent of treason was... well, not burn.

“When the fire was blazing, Brandon was brought in. His hands were chained behind his back, and around his neck was a wet leathern cord attached to a device the king had brought from Tyrosh. His legs were left free, though, and his longsword was set down just beyond his reach.

“The pyromancers roasted Lord Rickard slowly, banking and fanning that fire carefully to get a nice even heat. His cloak caught first, and then his surcoat, and soon he wore nothing but metal and ashes. Next he would start to cook, Aerys promised... unless his son could free him. Brandon tried, but the more he struggled, the tighter the cord constricted around his throat. In the end he strangled himself.

“As for Lord Rickard, the steel of his breastplate turned cherry-red before the end, and his gold melted off his spurs and dripped down into the fire. I stood at the foot of the Iron Throne in my white armor and white cloak, filling my head with thoughts of Cersei. After, Gerold Hightower himself took me aside and said to me, ‘You swore a vow to guard the king, not to judge him.’ That was the White Bull, loyal to the end and a better man than me, all agree.”

“Aerys...” Catelyn could taste bile at the back of her throat. The story was so hideous she suspected it had to be true. “Aerys was mad, the whole realm knew it, but if you would have me believe you slew him to avenge Brandon Stark...”

“I made no such claim. The Starks were nothing to me. I will say, I think it passing odd that I am loved by one for a kindness I never did, and reviled by so many for my finest act. At Robert’s coronation, I was made to

kneel at the royal feet beside Grand Maester Pycelle and Varys the eunuch, so that he might *forgive* us our crimes before he took us into his service. As for your Ned, he should have kissed the hand that slew Aerys, but he preferred to scorn the arse he found sitting on Robert's throne. I think Ned Stark loved Robert better than he ever loved his brother or his father... or even you, my lady. He was never unfaithful to Robert, was he?" Jaime gave a drunken laugh. "Come, Lady Stark, don't you find this all terribly amusing?"

"I find nothing about you amusing, Kingslayer."

"That name again. I don't think I'll fuck you after all, Littlefinger had you first, didn't he? I never eat off another man's trencher. Besides, you're not half so lovely as my sister." His smile cut. "I've never lain with any woman but Cersei. In my own way, I have been truer than your Ned ever was. Poor old dead Ned. So who has shit for honor now, I ask you? What was the name of that bastard he fathered?"

Catelyn took a step backward. "*Brienne*."

"No, that wasn't it." Jaime Lannister upended the flagon. A trickle ran down onto his face, bright as blood. "Snow, that was the one. Such a *white* name... like the pretty cloaks they give us in the Kingsguard when we swear our pretty oaths."

Brienne pushed open the door and stepped inside the cell. "You called, my lady?"

"Give me your sword." Catelyn held out her hand.