



CATELYN

Robb bid farewell to his young queen thrice. Once in the godswood before the heart tree, in sight of gods and men. The second time beneath the portcullis, where Jeyne sent him forth with a long embrace and a longer kiss. And finally an hour beyond the Tumblestone, when the girl came galloping up on a well-lathered horse to plead with her young king to take her along.

Robb was touched by that, Catelyn saw, but abashed as well. The day was damp and grey, a drizzle had begun to fall, and the last thing he wanted was to call a halt to his march so he could stand in the wet and console a tearful young wife in front of half his army. *He speaks her gently*, she thought as she watched them together, *but there is anger underneath*.

All the time the king and queen were talking, Grey Wind prowled around them, stopping only to shake the water from his coat and bare his teeth at the rain. When at last Robb gave Jeyne one final kiss, dispatched a dozen men to take her back to Riverrun, and mounted his horse once more, the direwolf raced off ahead as swift as an arrow loosed from a longbow.

“Queen Jeyne has a loving heart, I see,” said Lame Lothar Frey to Catelyn. “Not unlike my own sisters. Why, I would wager a guess that even now Roslin in dancing round the Twins chanting ‘Lady *Tully*, Lady *Tully*, Lady *Roslin* Tully.’ By the morrow she’ll be holding swatches of Riverrun red-and-blue to her cheek to picture how she’ll look in her bride’s cloak.”

He turned in the saddle to smile at Edmure. "But you are strangely quiet, Lord Tully. How do *you* feel, I wonder?"

"Much as I did at the Stone Mill just before the warhorns sounded," Edmure said, only half in jest.

Lothar gave a good-natured laugh. "Let us pray your marriage ends as happily, my lord."

And may the gods protect us if it does not. Catelyn pressed her heels into her horse, leaving her brother and Lame Lothar to each other's company.

It had been her who had insisted that Jeyne remain at Riverrun, when Robb would sooner have kept her by his side. Lord Walder might well construe the queen's absence from the wedding as another slight, yet her presence would have been a different sort of insult, salt in the old man's wound. "Walder Frey has a sharp tongue and a long memory," she had warned her son. "I do not doubt that you are strong enough to suffer an old man's rebukes as the price of his allegiance, but you have too much of your father in you to sit there while he insults Jeyne to her face."

Robb could not deny the sense of that. *Yet all the same, he resents me for it,* Catelyn thought wearily. *He misses Jeyne already, and some part of him blames me for her absence, though he knows it was good counsel.*

Of the six Westerlings who had come with her son from the Crag, only one remained by his side; Ser Raynald, Jeyne's brother, the royal banner-bearer. Robb had dispatched Jeyne's uncle Rolph Spicer to deliver young Martyn Lannister to the Golden Tooth the very day he received Lord Tywin's assent to the exchange of captives. It was deftly done. Her son was relieved of his fear for Martyn's safety, Galbart Glover was relieved to hear that his brother Robett had been put on a ship at Duskendale, Ser Rolph had important and honorable employment . . . and Grey Wind was at the king's side once more. *Where he belongs.*

Lady Westerling had remained at Riverrun with her children; Jeyne, her little sister Eleya, and young Rollam, Robb's squire, who complained bitterly about being left. Yet that was wise as well. Olyvar Frey had squired for Robb previously, and would doubtless be present for his sister's wedding; to parade his replacement before him would be as unwise as it was unkind. As for Ser Raynald, he was a cheerful young knight who swore

that no insult of Walder Frey's could possibly provoke him. *And let us pray that insults are all we need to contend with.*

Catelyn had her fears on that score, though. Her lord father had never trusted Walder Frey after the Trident, and she was ever mindful of that. Queen Jeyne would be safest behind the high, strong walls of Riverrun, with the Blackfish to protect her. Robb had even created him a new title, Warden of the Southern Marches. Ser Brynden would hold the Trident if any man could.

All the same, Catelyn would miss her uncle's craggy face, and Robb would miss his counsel. Ser Brynden had played a part in every victory her son had won. Galbart Glover had taken command of the scouts and outriders in his place; a good man, loyal and steady, but without the Blackfish's brilliance.

Behind Glover's screen of scouts, Robb's line of march stretched several miles. The Greatjon led the van. Catelyn traveled in the main column, surrounded by plodding warhorses with steelclad men on their backs. Next came the baggage train, a procession of wayns laden with food, fodder, camp supplies, wedding gifts, and the wounded too weak to walk, under the watchful eye of Ser Wendel Manderly and his White Harbor knights. Herds of sheep and goats and scrawny cattle trailed behind, and then a little trail of footsore camp followers. Even farther back was Robin Flint and the rearguard. There was no enemy in back of them for hundreds of leagues, but Robb would take no chances.

Thirty-five hundred they were, thirty-five hundred who had been blooded in the Whispering Wood, who had reddened their swords at the Battle of the Camps, at Oxcross, Ashemark, and the Crag, and all through the gold-rich hills of the Lannister west. Aside from her brother Edmure's modest retinue of friends, the lords of the Trident had remained to hold the riverlands while the king retook the north. Ahead awaited Edmure's bride and Robb's next battle . . . *and for me, two dead sons, an empty bed, and a castle full of ghosts.* It was a cheerless prospect. *Brienne, where are you? Bring my girls back to me, Brienne. Bring them back safe.*

The drizzle that had sent them off turned into a soft steady rain by midday, and continued well past nightfall. The next day the northmen never

saw the sun at all, but rode beneath leaden skies with their hoods pulled up to keep the water from their eyes. It was a heavy rain, turning roads to mud and fields to quagmires, swelling the rivers and stripping the trees of their leaves. The constant patter made idle chatter more bother than it was worth, so men spoke only when they had something to say, and that was seldom enough.

“We are stronger than we seem, my lady,” Lady Maege Mormont said as they rode. Catelyn had grown fond of Lady Maege and her eldest daughter, Dacey; they were more understanding than most in the matter of Jaime Lannister, she had found. The daughter was tall and lean, the mother short and stout, but they dressed alike in mail and leather, with the black bear of House Mormont on shield and surcoat. By Catelyn’s lights, that was queer garb for a lady, yet Dacey and Lady Maege seemed more comfortable, both as warriors and as women, than ever the girl from Tarth had been.

“I have fought beside the Young Wolf in every battle,” Dacey Mormont said cheerfully. “He has not lost one yet.”

No, but he has lost everything else, Catelyn thought, but it would not do to say it aloud. The northmen did not lack for courage, but they were far from home, with little enough to sustain them but for their faith in their young king. That faith must be protected, at all costs. *I must be stronger,* she told herself. *I must be strong for Robb. If I despair, my grief will consume me.* Everything would turn on this marriage. If Edmure and Roslin were happy in one another, if the Late Lord Frey could be appeased and his power once more wedded to Robb’s . . . *Even then, what chance will we have, caught between Lannister and Greyjoy?* It was a question Catelyn dared not dwell on, though Robb dwelt on little else. She saw how he studied his maps whenever they made camp, searching for some plan that might win back the north.

Her brother Edmure had other cares. “You don’t suppose *all* Lord Walder’s daughters look like him, do you?” he wondered, as he sat in his tall striped pavilion with Catelyn and his friends.

“With so many different mothers, a few of the maids are bound to turn up comely,” said Ser Marq Piper, “but why should the old wretch give you a pretty one?”

“No reason at all,” said Edmure in a glum tone.

It was more than Catelyn could stand. “Cersei Lannister is comely,” she said sharply. “You’d be wiser to pray that Roslin is strong and healthy, with a good head and a loyal heart.” And with that she left them.

Edmure did not take that well. The next day he avoided her entirely on the march, preferring the company of Marq Piper, Lymond Goodbrook, Patrek Mallister, and the young Vances. *They do not scold him, except in jest*, Catelyn told herself when they raced by her that afternoon with nary a word. *I have always been too hard with Edmure, and now grief sharpens my every word*. She regretted her rebuke. There was rain enough falling from the sky without her making more. And was it really such a terrible thing, to want a pretty wife? She remembered her own childish disappointment, the first time she had laid eyes on Eddard Stark. She had pictured him as a younger version of his brother Brandon, but that was wrong. Ned was shorter and plainer of face, and so somber. He spoke courteously enough, but beneath the words she sensed a coolness that was all at odds with Brandon, whose mirths had been as wild as his rages. Even when he took her maidenhood, their love had more of duty to it than of passion. *We made Robb that night, though; we made a king together. And after the war, at Winterfell, I had love enough for any woman, once I found the good sweet heart beneath Ned’s solemn face. There is no reason Edmure should not find the same, with his Roslin*.

As the gods would have it, their route took them through the Whispering Wood where Robb had won his first great victory. They followed the course of the twisting stream on the floor of that pinched narrow valley, much as Jaime Lannister’s men had done that fateful night. *It was warmer then*, Catelyn remembered, *the trees were still green, and the stream did not overflow its banks*. Fallen leaves choked the flow now and lay in sodden snarls among the rocks and roots, and the trees that had once hidden Robb’s army had exchanged their green raiment for leaves of dull gold spotted with brown, and a red that reminded her of rust and dry blood. Only the spruce and the soldier pines still showed green, thrusting up at the belly of the clouds like tall dark spears.

More than the trees have died since then, she reflected. On the night of the Whispering Wood, Ned was still alive in his cell beneath Aegon’s High

Hill, Bran and Rickon were safe behind the walls of Winterfell. *And Theon Greyjoy fought at Robb's side, and boasted of how he had almost crossed swords with the Kingslayer. Would that he had. If Theon had died in place of Lord Karstark's sons, how much ill would have been undone?*

As they passed through the battleground, Catelyn glimpsed signs of the carnage that had been; an overturned helm filling with rain, a splintered lance, the bones of a horse. Stone cairns had been raised over some of the men who had fallen here, but scavengers had already been at them. Amidst the tumbles of rock, she spied brightly colored cloth and bits of shiny metal. Once she saw a face peering out at her, the shape of the skull beginning to emerge from beneath the melting brown flesh.

It made her wonder where Ned had come to rest. The silent sisters had taken his bones north, escorted by Hallis Mollen and a small honor guard. Had Ned ever reached Winterfell, to be interred beside his brother Brandon in the dark crypts beneath the castle? Or did the door slam shut at Moat Cailin before Hal and the sisters could pass?

Thirty-five hundred riders wound their way along the valley floor through the heart of the Whispering Wood, but Catelyn Stark had seldom felt lonelier. Every league she crossed took her farther from Riverrun, and she found herself wondering whether she would ever see the castle again. Or was it lost to her forever, like so much else?

Five days later, their scouts rode back to warn them that the rising waters had washed out the wooden bridge at Fairmarket. Galbart Glover and two of his bolder men had tried swimming their mounts across the turbulent Blue Fork at Ramsford. Two of the horses had been swept under and drowned, and one of the riders; Glover himself managed to cling to a rock until they could pull him in. "The river hasn't run this high since spring," Edmure said. "And if this rain keeps falling, it will go higher yet."

"There's a bridge further upstream, near Oldstones," remembered Catelyn, who had often crossed these lands with her father. "It's older and smaller, but if it still stands—"

"It's gone, my lady," Galbart Glover said. "Washed away even before the one at Fairmarket."

Robb looked to Catelyn. "Is there another bridge?"

“No. And the fords will be impassable.” She tried to remember. “If we cannot cross the Blue Fork, we’ll have to go around it, through Sevenstreams and Hag’s Mire.”

“Bogs and bad roads, or none at all,” warned Edmure. “The going will be slow, but we’ll get there, I suppose.”

“Lord Walder will wait, I’m sure,” said Robb. “Lothar sent him a bird from Riverrun, he knows we are coming.”

“Yes, but the man is prickly, and suspicious by nature,” said Catelyn. “He may take this delay as a deliberate insult.”

“Very well, I’ll beg his pardon for our tardiness as well. A sorry king I’ll be, apologizing with every second breath.” Robb made a wry face. “I hope Bolton got across the Trident before the rains began. The kingsroad runs straight north, he’ll have an easy march. Even afoot, he should reach the Twins before us.”

“And when you’ve joined his men to yours and seen my brother married, what then?” Catelyn asked him.

“North.” Robb scratched Grey Wind behind an ear.

“By the causeway? Against Moat Cailin?”

He gave her an enigmatic smile. “That’s one way to go,” he said, and she knew from his tone that he would say no more. *A wise king keeps his own counsel*, she reminded herself.

They reached Oldstones after eight more days of steady rain, and made their camp upon the hill overlooking the Blue Fork, within a ruined stronghold of the ancient river kings. Its foundations remained amongst the weeds to show where the walls and keeps had stood, but the local smallfolk had long ago made off with most of the stones to raise their barns and septs and holdfasts. Yet in the center of what once would have been the castle’s yard, a great carved sepulcher still rested, half hidden in waist-high brown grass amongst a stand of ash.

The lid of the sepulcher had been carved into a likeness of the man whose bones lay beneath, but the rain and the wind had done their work. The king had worn a beard, they could see, but otherwise his face was smooth and featureless, with only vague suggestions of a mouth, a nose,

eyes, and the crown about the temples. His hands folded over the shaft of a stone warhammer that lay upon his chest. Once the warhammer would have been carved with runes that told its name and history, but all that the centuries had worn away. The stone itself was cracked and crumbling at the corners, discolored here and there by spreading white splotches of lichen, while wild roses crept up over the king's feet almost to his chest.

It was there that Catelyn found Robb, standing somber in the gathering dusk with only Grey Wind beside him. The rain had stopped for once, and he was bareheaded. "Does this castle have a name?" he asked quietly, when she came up to him.

"Oldstones, all the smallfolk called it when I was a girl, but no doubt it had some other name when it was still a hall of kings." She had camped here once with her father, on their way to Seagard. *Petyr was with us too . .*

"There's a song," he remembered. "'Jenny of Oldstones, with the flowers in her hair.'"

"We're all just songs in the end. If we are lucky." She had played at being Jenny that day, had even wound flowers in her hair. And Petyr had pretended to be her Prince of Dragonflies. Catelyn could not have been more than twelve, Petyr just a boy.

Robb studied the sepulcher. "Whose grave is this?"

"Here lies Tristifer, the Fourth of His Name, King of the Rivers and the Hills." Her father had told her his story once. "He ruled from the Trident to the Neck, thousands of years before Jenny and her prince, in the days when the kingdoms of the First Men were falling one after the other before the onslaught of the Andals. The Hammer of Justice, they called him. He fought a hundred battles and won nine-and-ninety, or so the singers say, and when he raised this castle it was the strongest in Westeros." She put a hand on her son's shoulder. "He died in his hundredth battle, when seven Andal kings joined forces against him. The fifth Tristifer was not his equal, and soon the kingdom was lost, and then the castle, and last of all the line. With Tristifer the Fifth died House Mudd, that had ruled the riverlands for a thousand years before the Andals came."

“His heir failed him.” Robb ran a hand over the rough weathered stone. “I had hoped to leave Jeyne with child . . . we tried often enough, but I’m not certain . . .”

“It does not always happen the first time.” *Though it did with you.* “Nor even the hundredth. You are very young.”

“Young, and a king,” he said. “A king must have an heir. If I should die in my next battle, the kingdom must not die with me. By law Sansa is next in line of succession, so Winterfell and the north would pass to her.” His mouth tightened. “To her, and her lord husband. Tyrion Lannister. I cannot allow that. I *will* not allow that. That dwarf must never have the north.”

“No,” Catelyn agreed. “You must name another heir, until such time as Jeyne gives you a son.” She considered a moment. “Your father’s father had no siblings, but his father had a sister who married a younger son of Lord Raymar Royce, of the junior branch. They had three daughters, all of whom wed Vale lordlings. A Waynwood and a Corbray, for certain. The youngest . . . it might have been a Templeton, but . . .”

“Mother.” There was a sharpness in Robb’s tone. “You forget. My father had four sons.”

She had not forgotten; she had not wanted to look at it, yet there it was. “A Snow is not a Stark.”

“Jon’s more a Stark than some lordlings from the Vale who have never so much as set eyes on Winterfell.”

“Jon is a brother of the Night’s Watch, sworn to take no wife and hold no lands. Those who take the black serve for life.”

“So do the knights of the Kingsguard. That did not stop the Lannisters from stripping the white cloaks from Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Boros Blount when they had no more use for them. If I send the Watch a hundred men in Jon’s place, I’ll wager they find some way to release him from his vows.”

He is set on this. Catelyn knew how stubborn her son could be. “A bastard cannot inherit.”

“Not unless he’s legitimized by a royal decree,” said Robb. “There is more precedent for that than for releasing a Sworn Brother from his oath.”

“Precedent,” she said bitterly. “Yes, Aegon the Fourth legitimized all his bastards on his deathbed. And how much pain, grief, war, and murder grew from that? I know you trust Jon. But can you trust his sons? Or *their* sons? The Blackfyre pretenders troubled the Targaryens for five generations, until Barristan the Bold slew the last of them on the Stepstones. If you make Jon legitimate, there is no way to turn him bastard again. Should he wed and breed, any sons you may have by Jeyne will never be safe.”

“Jon would never harm a son of mine.”

“No more than Theon Greyjoy would harm Bran or Rickon?”

Grey Wind leapt up atop King Tristifer’s crypt, his teeth bared. Robb’s own face was cold. “That is as cruel as it is unfair. Jon is no Theon.”

“So you pray. Have you considered your sisters? What of *their* rights? I agree that the north must not be permitted to pass to the Imp, but what of Arya? By law, she comes after Sansa . . . your own sister, trueborn . . .”

“. . . and *dead*. No one has seen or heard of Arya since they cut Father’s head off. Why do you lie to yourself? Arya’s gone, the same as Bran and Rickon, and they’ll kill Sansa too once the dwarf gets a child from her. Jon is the only brother that remains to me. Should I die without issue, I want him to succeed me as King in the North. I had hoped you would support my choice.”

“I cannot,” she said. “In all else, Robb. In everything. But not in this . . . this folly. Do not ask it.”

“I don’t have to. I’m the king.” Robb turned and walked off, Grey Wind bounding down from the tomb and loping after him.

What have I done? Catelyn thought wearily, as she stood alone by Tristifer’s stone sepulcher. *First I anger Edmure, and now Robb, but all I have done is speak the truth. Are men so fragile they cannot bear to hear it?* She might have wept then, had not the sky begun to do it for her. It was all she could do to walk back to her tent, and sit there in the silence.

In the days that followed, Robb was everywhere and anywhere; riding at the head of the van with the Greatjon, scouting with Grey Wind, racing back to Robin Flint and the rearguard. Men said proudly that the Young Wolf was the first to rise each dawn and the last to sleep at night, but

Catelyn wondered whether he was sleeping at all. *He grows as lean and hungry as his direwolf.*

“My lady,” Maege Mormont said to her one morning as they rode through a steady rain, “you seem so somber. Is aught amiss?”

My lord husband is dead, as is my father. Two of my sons have been murdered, my daughter has been given to a faithless dwarf to bear his vile children, my other daughter is vanished and likely dead, and my last son and my only brother are both angry with me. What could possibly be amiss? That was more truth than Lady Maege would wish to hear, however. “This is an evil rain,” she said instead. “We have suffered much, and there is more peril and more grief ahead. We need to face it boldly, with horns blowing and banners flying bravely. But this rain beats us down. The banners hang limp and sodden, and the men huddle under their cloaks and scarcely speak to one another. Only an evil rain would chill our hearts when most we need them to burn hot.”

Dacey Mormont looked up at the sky. “I would sooner have water raining down on me than arrows.”

Catelyn smiled despite herself. “You are braver than I am, I fear. Are all your Bear Island women such warriors?”

“She-bears, aye,” said Lady Maege. “We have needed to be. In olden days the ironmen would come raiding in their longboats, or wildlings from the Frozen Shore. The men would be off fishing, like as not. The wives they left behind had to defend themselves and their children, or else be carried off.”

“There’s a carving on our gate,” said Dacey. “A woman in a bearskin, with a child in one arm suckling at her breast. In the other hand she holds a battleaxe. She’s no proper lady, that one, but I always loved her.”

“My nephew Jorah brought home a proper lady once,” said Lady Maege. “He won her in a tourney. How she hated that carving.”

“Aye, and all the rest,” said Dacey. “She had hair like spun gold, that Lynesse. Skin like cream. But her soft hands were never made for axes.”

“Nor her teats for giving suck,” her mother said bluntly.

Catelyn knew of whom they spoke; Jorah Mormont had brought his second wife to Winterfell for feasts, and once they had guested for a fortnight. She remembered how young the Lady Lynesse had been, how fair, and how unhappy. One night, after several cups of wine, she had confessed to Catelyn that the north was no place for a Hightower of Oldtown. "There was a Tully of Riverrun who felt the same once," she had answered gently, trying to console, "but in time she found much here she could love."

All lost now, she reflected. Winterfell and Ned, Bran and Rickon, Sansa, Arya, all gone. Only Robb remains. Had there been too much of Lynesse Hightower in her after all, and too little of the Starks? Would that I had known how to wield an axe, perhaps I might have been able to protect them better.

Day followed day, and still the rain kept falling. All the way up the Blue Fork they rode, past Sevenstreams where the river unraveled into a confusion of rills and brooks, then through Hag's Mire, where glistening green pools waited to swallow the unwary and the soft ground sucked at the hooves of their horses like a hungry babe at its mother's breast. The going was worse than slow. Half the wayns had to be abandoned to the muck, their loads distributed amongst mules and draft horses.

Lord Jason Mallister caught up with them amidst the bogs of Hag's Mire. There was more than an hour of daylight remaining when he rode up with his column, but Robb called a halt at once, and Ser Raynald Westerling came to escort Catelyn to the king's tent. She found her son seated beside a brazier, a map across his lap. Grey Wind slept at his feet. The Greatjon was with him, along with Galbart Glover, Maege Mormont, Edmure, and a man that Catelyn did not know, a fleshy balding man with a cringing look to him. *No lordling, this one*, she knew the moment she laid eyes on the stranger. *Not even a warrior.*

Jason Mallister rose to offer Catelyn his seat. His hair had almost as much white in it as brown, but the Lord of Seagard was still a handsome man; tall and lean, with a chiseled clean-shaven face, high cheekbones, and fierce blue-grey eyes. "Lady Stark, it is ever a pleasure. I bring good tidings, I hope."

“We are in sore need of some, my lord.” She sat, listening to the rain patter down noisily against the canvas overhead.

Robb waited for Ser Raynald to close the tent flap. “The gods have heard our prayers, my lords. Lord Jason has brought us the captain of the *Myraham*, a merchanter out of Oldtown. Captain, tell them what you told me.”

“Aye, Your Grace.” He licked his thick lips nervously. “My last port of call afore Seagard, that was Lordsport on Pyke. The ironmen kept me there more’n half a year, they did. King Balon’s command. Only, well, the long and the short of it is, he’s dead.”

“Balon Greyjoy?” Catelyn’s heart skipped a beat. “You are telling us that Balon Greyjoy is dead?”

The shabby little captain nodded. “You know how Pyke’s built on a headland, and part on rocks and islands off the shore, with bridges between? The way I heard it in Lordsport, there was a blow coming in from the west, rain and thunder, and old King Balon was crossing one of them bridges when the wind got hold of it and just tore the thing to pieces. He washed up two days later, all bloated and broken. Crabs ate his eyes, I hear.”

The Greatjon laughed. “King crabs, I hope, to sup upon such royal jelly, eh?”

The captain bobbed his head. “Aye, but that’s not all of it, no!” He leaned forward. “The *brother*’s back.”

“Victarion?” asked Galbart Glover, surprised.

“Euron. Crow’s Eye, they call him, as black a pirate as ever raised a sail. He’s been gone for years, but Lord Balon was no sooner cold than there he was, sailing into Lordsport in his *Silence*. Black sails and a red hull, and crewed by mutes. He’d been to Asshai and back, I heard. Wherever he was, though, he’s home now, and he marched right into Pyke and sat his arse in the Seastone Chair, and drowned Lord Botley in a cask of seawater when he objected. That was when I ran back to *Myraham* and slipped anchor, hoping I could get away whilst things were confused. And so I did, and here I am.”

“Captain,” said Robb when the man was done, “you have my thanks, and you will not go unrewarded. Lord Jason will take you back to your ship

when we are done. Pray wait outside.”

“That I will, Your Grace. That I will.”

No sooner had he left the king’s pavilion than the Greatjon began to laugh, but Robb silenced him with a look. “Euron Greyjoy is no man’s notion of a king, if half of what Theon said of him was true. Theon is the rightful heir, unless he’s dead . . . but Victarion commands the Iron Fleet. I can’t believe he would remain at Moat Cailin while Euron Crow’s Eye holds the Seastone Chair. He *has* to go back.”

“There’s a daughter as well,” Galbart Glover reminded him. “The one who holds Deepwood Motte, and Robett’s wife and child.”

“If she stays at Deepwood Motte that’s *all* she can hope to hold,” said Robb. “What’s true for the brothers is even more true for her. She will need to sail home to oust Euron and press her own claim.” Her son turned to Lord Jason Mallister. “You have a fleet at Seagard?”

“A fleet, Your Grace? Half a dozen longships and two war galleys. Enough to defend my own shores against raiders, but I could not hope to meet the Iron Fleet in battle.”

“Nor would I ask it of you. The ironborn will be setting sail toward Pyke, I expect. Theon told me how his people think. Every captain a king on his own deck. They will all want a voice in the succession. My lord, I need two of your longships to sail around the Cape of Eagles and up the Neck to Greywater Watch.”

Lord Jason hesitated. “A dozen streams drain the wetwood, all shallow, silty, and uncharted. I would not even call them rivers. The channels are ever drifting and changing. There are endless sandbars, deadfalls, and tangles of rotting trees. And Greywater Watch *moves*. How are my ships to find it?”

“Go upriver flying my banner. The crannogmen will find you. I want two ships to double the chances of my message reaching Howland Reed. Lady Maege shall go on one, Galbart on the second.” He turned to the two he’d named. “You’ll carry letters for those lords of mine who remain in the north, but all the commands within will be false, in case you have the misfortune to be taken. If that happens, you must tell them that you were sailing for the north. Back to Bear Island, or for the Stony Shore.” He

tapped a finger on the map. “Moat Cailin is the key. Lord Balon knew that, which is why he sent his brother Victarion there with the hard heart of the Greyjoy strength.”

“Succession squabbles or no, the ironborn are not such fools as to abandon Moat Cailin,” said Lady Maege.

“No,” Robb admitted. “Victarion will leave the best part of his garrison, I’d guess. Every man he takes will be one less man we need to fight, however. And he *will* take many of his captains, count on that. The leaders. He will need such men to speak for him if he hopes to sit the Seastone Chair.”

“You cannot mean to attack up the causeway, Your Grace,” said Galbart Glover. “The approaches are too narrow. There is no way to deploy. No one has ever taken the Moat.”

“From the south,” said Robb. “But if we can attack from the north and west simultaneously, and take the ironmen in the rear while they are beating off what they think is my main thrust up the causeway, then we have a chance. Once I link up with Lord Bolton and the Freys, I will have more than twelve thousand men. I mean to divide them into three battles and start up the causeway a half-day apart. If the Greyjoys have eyes south of the Neck, they will see my whole strength rushing headlong at Moat Cailin.

“Roose Bolton will have the rearguard, while I command the center. Greatjon, you shall lead the van against Moat Cailin. Your attack must be so fierce that the ironborn have no leisure to wonder if anyone is creeping down on them from the north.”

The Greatjon chuckled. “Your creepers best come fast, or my men will swarm those walls and win the Moat before you show your face. I’ll make a gift of it to you when you come dawdling up.”

“That’s a gift I should be glad to have,” said Robb.

Edmure was frowning. “You talk of attacking the ironmen in the rear, sire, but how do you mean to get north of them?”

“There are ways through the Neck that are not on any map, Uncle. Ways known only to the crannogmen—narrow trails between the bogs, and wet roads through the reeds that only boats can follow.” He turned to his two

messengers. “Tell Howland Reed that he is to send guides to me, two days after I have started up the causeway. To the *center* battle, where my own standard flies. Three hosts will leave the Twins, but only two will reach Moat Cailin. Mine own battle will melt away into the Neck, to reemerge on the Fever. If we move swiftly once my uncle’s wed, we can all be in position by year’s end. We will fall upon the Moat from three sides on the first day of the new century, as the ironmen are waking with hammers beating at their heads from the mead they’ll quaff the night before.”

“I like this plan,” said the Greatjon. “I like it well.”

Galbart Glover rubbed his mouth. “There are risks. If the crannogmen should fail you . . .”

“We will be no worse than before. But they will not fail. My father knew the worth of Howland Reed.” Robb rolled up the map, and only then looked at Catelyn. “Mother.”

She tensed. “Do you have some part in this for me?”

“Your part is to stay safe. Our journey through the Neck will be dangerous, and naught but battle awaits us in the north. But Lord Mallister has kindly offered to keep you safe at Seagard until the war is done. You will be comfortable there, I know.”

Is this my punishment for opposing him about Jon Snow? Or for being a woman, and worse, a mother? It took her a moment to realize that they were all watching her. They had *known*, she realized. Catelyn should not have been surprised. She had won no friends by freeing the Kingslayer, and more than once she had heard the Greatjon say that women had no place on a battlefield.

Her anger must have blazed across her face, because Galbart Glover spoke up before she said a word. “My lady, His Grace is wise. It’s best you do not come with us.”

“Seagard will be brightened by your presence, Lady Catelyn,” said Lord Jason Mallister.

“You would make me a prisoner,” she said.

“An honored guest,” Lord Jason insisted.

Catelyn turned to her son. "I mean no offense to Lord Jason," she said stiffly, "but if I cannot continue on with you, I would sooner return to Riverrun."

"I left my wife at Riverrun. I want my mother elsewhere. If you keep all your treasures in one purse, you only make it easier for those who would rob you. After the wedding, you shall go to Seagard, that is my royal command." Robb stood, and as quick as that, her fate was settled. He picked up a sheet of parchment. "One more matter. Lord Balon has left chaos in his wake, we hope. I would not do the same. Yet I have no son as yet, my brothers Bran and Rickon are dead, and my sister is wed to a Lannister. I've thought long and hard about who might follow me. I command you now as my true and loyal lords to fix your seals to this document as witnesses to my decision."

A king indeed, Catelyn thought, defeated. She could only hope that the trap he'd planned for Moat Cailin worked as well as the one in which he'd just caught her.