



CATELYN

They carried the corpses in upon their shoulders and laid them beneath the dais. A silence fell across the torchlit hall, and in the quiet Catelyn could hear Grey Wind howling half a castle away. *He smells the blood*, she thought, *through stone walls and wooden doors, through night and rain, he still knows the scent of death and ruin.*

She stood at Robb's left hand beside the high seat, and for a moment felt almost as if she were looking down at her own dead, at Bran and Rickon. These boys had been much older, but death had shrunken them. Naked and wet, they seemed such little things, so still it was hard to remember them living.

The blond boy had been trying to grow a beard. Pale yellow peach fuzz covered his cheeks and jaw above the red ruin the knife had made of his throat. His long golden hair was still wet, as if he had been pulled from a bath. By the look of him, he had died peacefully, perhaps in sleep, but his brown-haired cousin had fought for life. His arms bore slashes where he'd tried to block the blades, and red still trickled slowly from the stab wounds that covered his chest and belly and back like so many tongueless mouths, though the rain had washed him almost clean.

Robb had donned his crown before coming to the hall, and the bronze shone darkly in the torchlight. Shadows hid his eyes as he looked upon the dead. *Does he see Bran and Rickon as well?* She might have wept, but there

were no tears left in her. The dead boys were pale from long imprisonment, and both had been fair; against their smooth white skin, the blood was shockingly red, unbearable to look upon. *Will they lay Sansa down naked beneath the Iron Throne after they have killed her? Will her skin seem as white, her blood as red?* From outside came the steady wash of rain and the restless howling of a wolf.

Her brother Edmure stood to Robb's right, one hand upon the back of his father's seat, his face still puffy from sleep. They had woken him as they had her, pounding on his door in the black of night to yank him rudely from his dreams. *Were they good dreams, brother? Do you dream of sunlight and laughter and a maiden's kisses? I pray you do.* Her own dreams were dark and laced with terrors.

Robb's captains and lords bannermen stood about the hall, some mailed and armed, others in various states of dishevelment and undress. Ser Raynald and his uncle Ser Rolph were among them, but Robb had seen fit to spare his queen this ugliness. *The Crag is not far from Casterly Rock, Catelyn recalled. Jeyne may well have played with these boys when all of them were children.*

She looked down again upon the corpses of the squires Tion Frey and Willem Lannister, and waited for her son to speak.

It seemed a very long time before Robb lifted his eyes from the bloody dead. "Smalljon," he said, "tell your father to bring them in." Wordless, Smalljon Umber turned to obey, his steps echoing in the great stone hall.

As the Greatjon marched his prisoners through the doors, Catelyn made note of how some other men stepped back to give them room, as if treason could somehow be passed by a touch, a glance, a cough. The captors and the captives looked much alike; big men, every one, with thick beards and long hair. Two of the Greatjon's men were wounded, and three of their prisoners. Only the fact that some had spears and others empty scabbards served to set them apart. All were clad in mail hauberks or shirts of sewn rings, with heavy boots and thick cloaks, some of wool and some of fur. *The north is hard and cold, and has no mercy,* Ned had told her when she first came to Winterfell a thousand years ago.

“Five,” said Robb when the prisoners stood before him, wet and silent. “Is that all of them?”

“There were eight,” rumbled the Greatjon. “We killed two taking them, and a third is dying now.”

Robb studied the faces of the captives. “It required eight of you to kill two unarmed squires.”

Edmure Tully spoke up. “They murdered two of my men as well, to get into the tower. Delp and Elwood.”

“It was no murder, ser,” said Lord Rickard Karstark, no more discomfited by the ropes about his wrists than by the blood that trickled down his face. “Any man who steps between a father and his vengeance asks for death.”

His words rang against Catelyn’s ears, harsh and cruel as the pounding of a war drum. Her throat was dry as bone. *I did this. These two boys died so my daughters might live.*

“I saw your sons die, that night in the Whispering Wood,” Robb told Lord Karstark. “Tion Frey did not kill Torrhen. Willem Lannister did not slay Eddard. How then can you call this vengeance? This was folly, and bloody murder. Your sons died honorably on a battlefield, with swords in their hands.”

“They *died*,” said Rickard Karstark, yielding no inch of ground. “The Kingslayer cut them down. These two were of his ilk. Only blood can pay for blood.”

“The blood of children?” Robb pointed at the corpses. “How old were they? Twelve, thirteen? *Squires*.”

“Squires die in every battle.”

“Die fighting, yes. Tion Frey and Willem Lannister gave up their swords in the Whispering Wood. They were captives, locked in a cell, asleep, unarmed . . . boys. *Look at them!*”

Lord Karstark looked instead at Catelyn. “Tell your mother to look at them,” he said. “She slew them, as much as I.”

Catelyn put a hand on the back of Robb’s seat. The hall seemed to spin about her. She felt as though she might retch.

“My mother had naught to do with this,” Robb said angrily. “This was your work. Your murder. Your *treason*.”

“How can it be treason to kill Lannisters, when it is not treason to free them?” asked Karstark harshly. “Has Your Grace forgotten that we are at war with Casterly Rock? In war you kill your enemies. Didn’t your father teach you that, boy?”

“*Boy?*” The Greatjon dealt Rickard Karstark a buffet with a mailed fist that sent the other lord to his knees.

“Leave him!” Robb’s voice rang with command. Umber stepped back away from the captive.

Lord Karstark spit out a broken tooth. “Yes, Lord Umber, leave me to the king. He means to give me a scolding before he forgives me. That’s how he deals with treason, our King in the North.” He smiled a wet red smile. “Or should I call you the King Who Lost the North, Your Grace?”

The Greatjon snatched a spear from the man beside him and jerked it to his shoulder. “Let me spit him, sire. Let me open his belly so we can see the color of his guts.”

The doors of the hall crashed open, and the Blackfish entered with water running from his cloak and helm. Tully men-at-arms followed him in, while outside lightning cracked across the sky and a hard black rain pounded against the stones of Riverrun. Ser Brynden removed his helm and went to one knee. “Your Grace,” was all he said, but the grimness of his tone spoke volumes.

“I will hear Ser Brynden privily, in the audience chamber.” Robb rose to his feet. “Greatjon, keep Lord Karstark here till I return, and hang the other seven.”

The Greatjon lowered the spear. “Even the dead ones?”

“Yes. I will not have such fouling my lord uncle’s rivers. Let them feed the crows.”

One of the captives dropped to his knees. “Mercy, sire. I killed no one, I only stood at the door to watch for guards.”

Robb considered that a moment. “Did you know what Lord Rickard intended? Did you see the knives drawn? Did you hear the shouts, the

screams, the cries for mercy?”

“Aye, I did, but I took no part. I was only the watcher, I swear it . . .”

“Lord Umber,” said Robb, “this one was only the watcher. Hang him last, so he may watch the others die. Mother, Uncle, with me, if you please.” He turned away as the Greatjon’s men closed upon the prisoners and drove them from the hall at spearpoint. Outside the thunder crashed and boomed, so loud it sounded as if the castle were coming down about their ears. *Is this the sound of a kingdom falling?* Catelyn wondered.

It was dark within the audience chamber, but at least the sound of the thunder was muffled by another thickness of wall. A servant entered with an oil lamp to light the fire, but Robb sent him away and kept the lamp. There were tables and chairs, but only Edmure sat, and he rose again when he realized that the others had remained standing. Robb took off his crown and placed it on the table before him.

The Blackfish shut the door. “The Karstarks are gone.”

“All?” Was it anger or despair that thickened Robb’s voice like that? Even Catelyn was not certain.

“All the fighting men,” Ser Brynden replied. “A few camp followers and serving men were left with their wounded. We questioned as many as we needed, to be certain of the truth. They started leaving at nightfall, stealing off in ones and twos at first, and then in larger groups. The wounded men and servants were told to keep the campfires lit so no one would know they’d gone, but once the rains began it didn’t matter.”

“Will they re-form, away from Riverrun?” asked Robb.

“No. They’ve scattered, hunting. Lord Karstark has sworn to give the hand of his maiden daughter to any man highborn or low who brings him the head of the Kingslayer.”

Gods be good. Catelyn felt ill again.

“Near three hundred riders and twice as many mounts, melted away in the night.” Robb rubbed his temples, where the crown had left its mark in the soft skin above his ears. “All the mounted strength of Karhold, lost.”

Lost by me. By me, may the gods forgive me. Catelyn did not need to be a soldier to grasp the trap Robb was in. For the moment he held the

riverlands, but his kingdom was surrounded by enemies to every side but east, where Lysa sat aloof on her mountaintop. Even the Trident was scarce secure so long as the Lord of the Crossing withheld his allegiance. *And now to lose the Karstarks as well . . .*

“No word of this must leave Riverrun,” her brother Edmure said. “Lord Tywin would . . . the Lannisters pay their debts, they are always saying that. Mother have mercy, when he hears.”

Sansa. Catelyn’s nails dug into the soft flesh of her palms, so hard did she close her hand.

Robb gave Edmure a look that chilled. “Would you make me a liar as well as a murderer, Uncle?”

“We need speak no falsehood. Only say nothing. Bury the boys and hold our tongues till the war’s done. Willem was son to Ser Kevan Lannister, and Lord Tywin’s nephew. Tion was Lady Genna’s, *and* a Frey. We must keep the news from the Twins as well, until . . .”

“Until we can bring the murdered dead back to life?” said Brynden Blackfish sharply. “The truth escaped with the Karstarks, Edmure. It is too late for such games.”

“I owe their fathers truth,” said Robb. “And justice. I owe them that as well.” He gazed at his crown, the dark gleam of bronze, the circle of iron swords. “Lord Rickard defied me. Betrayed me. I have no choice but to condemn him. Gods know what the Karstark foot with Roose Bolton will do when they hear I’ve executed their liege for a traitor. Bolton must be warned.”

“Lord Karstark’s heir was at Harrenhal as well,” Ser Brynden reminded him. “The eldest son, the one the Lannisters took captive on the Green Fork.”

“Harrion. His name is Harrion.” Robb laughed bitterly. “A king had best know the names of his enemies, don’t you think?”

The Blackfish looked at him shrewdly. “You know that for a certainty? That this will make young Karstark your enemy?”

“What else would he be? I am about to kill his father, he’s not like to thank me.”

“He might. There are sons who hate their fathers, and in a stroke you will make him Lord of Karhold.”

Robb shook his head. “Even if Harrion were that sort, he could never openly forgive his father’s killer. His own men would turn on him. These are *northmen*, Uncle. The north remembers.”

“Pardon him, then,” urged Edmure Tully.

Robb stared at him in frank disbelief.

Under that gaze, Edmure’s face reddened. “Spare his life, I mean. I don’t like the taste of it any more than you, sire. He slew my men as well. Poor Delp had only just recovered from the wound Ser Jaime gave him. Karstark must be punished, certainly. Keep him in chains, I say.”

“A hostage?” said Catelyn. *It might be best . . .*

“Yes, a hostage!” Her brother seized on her musing as agreement. “Tell the son that so long as he remains loyal, his father will not be harmed. Otherwise . . . we have no hope of the Freys now, not if I offered to marry *all* Lord Walder’s daughters and carry his litter besides. If we should lose the Karstarks as well, what hope is there?”

“What hope . . .” Robb let out a breath, pushed his hair back from his eyes, and said, “We’ve had naught from Ser Rodrik in the north, no response from Walder Frey to our new offer, only silence from the Eyrie.” He appealed to his mother. “Will your sister never answer us? How many times must I write her? I will not believe that *none* of the birds have reached her.”

Her son wanted comfort, Catelyn realized; he wanted to hear that it would be all right. But her king needed truth. “The birds have reached her. Though she may tell you they did not, if it ever comes to that. Expect no help from that quarter, Robb.

“Lysa was never brave. When we were girls together, she would run and hide whenever she’d done something wrong. Perhaps she thought our lord father would forget to be wroth with her if he could not find her. It is no different now. She ran from King’s Landing for fear, to the safest place she knows, and she sits on her mountain hoping everyone will forget her.”

“The knights of the Vale could make all the difference in this war,” said Robb, “but if she will not fight, so be it. I’ve asked only that she open the Bloody Gate for us, and provide ships at Gulltown to take us north. The high road would be hard, but not so hard as fighting our way up the Neck. If I could land at White Harbor I could flank Moat Cailin and drive the ironmen from the north in half a year.”

“It will not happen, sire,” said the Blackfish. “Cat is right. Lady Lysa is too fearful to admit an army to the Vale. *Any* army. The Bloody Gate will remain closed.”

“The Others can take her, then,” Robb cursed, in a fury of despair. “Bloody Rickard Karstark as well. And Theon Greyjoy, Walder Frey, Tywin Lannister, and all the rest of them. Gods be good, why would any man ever want to be king? When everyone was shouting *King in the North, King in the North*, I told myself . . . *swore* to myself . . . that I would be a good king, as honorable as Father, strong, just, loyal to my friends and brave when I faced my enemies . . . now I can’t even tell one from the other. How did it all get so *confused*? Lord Rickard’s fought at my side in half a dozen battles. His sons died for me in the Whispering Wood. Tion Frey and Willem Lannister were my *enemies*. Yet now I have to kill my dead friends’ father for their sakes.” He looked at them all. “Will the Lannisters thank me for Lord Rickard’s head? Will the Freys?”

“No,” said Brynden Blackfish, blunt as ever.

“All the more reason to spare Lord Rickard’s life and keep him hostage,” Edmure urged.

Robb reached down with both hands, lifted the heavy bronze-and-iron crown, and set it back atop his head, and suddenly he was a king again. “Lord Rickard dies.”

“But *why*?” said Edmure. “You said yourself—”

“I know what I said, Uncle. It does not change what I must do.” The swords in his crown stood stark and black against his brow. “In battle I might have slain Tion and Willem myself, but this was no battle. They were asleep in their beds, naked and unarmed, in a cell where I put them. Rickard Karstark killed more than a Frey and a Lannister. *He killed my honor*. I shall deal with him at dawn.”

When day broke, grey and chilly, the storm had diminished to a steady, soaking rain, yet even so the godswood was crowded. River lords and northmen, highborn and low, knights and sellswords and stableboys, they stood amongst the trees to see the end of the night's dark dance. Edmure had given commands, and a headsman's block had been set up before the heart tree. Rain and leaves fell all around them as the Greatjon's men led Lord Rickard Karstark through the press, hands still bound. His men already hung from Riverrun's high walls, slumping at the end of long ropes as the rain washed down their darkening faces.

Long Lew waited beside the block, but Robb took the poleaxe from his hand and ordered him to step aside. "This is my work," he said. "He dies at my word. He must die by my hand."

Lord Rickard Karstark dipped his head stiffly. "For that much, I thank you. But for naught else." He had dressed for death in a long black wool surcoat emblazoned with the white sunburst of his House. "The blood of the First Men flows in my veins as much as yours, boy. You would do well to remember that. I was named for your grandfather. I raised my banners against King Aerys for your father, and against King Joffrey for you. At Oxcross and the Whispering Wood and in the Battle of the Camps, I rode beside you, and I stood with Lord Eddard on the Trident. We are kin, Stark and Karstark."

"This kinship did not stop you from betraying me," Robb said. "And it will not save you now. Kneel, my lord."

Lord Rickard had spoken truly, Catelyn knew. The Karstarks traced their descent to Karlon Stark, a younger son of Winterfell who had put down a rebel lord a thousand years ago, and been granted lands for his valor. The castle he built had been named Karl's Hold, but that soon became Karhold, and over the centuries the Karhold Starks had become Karstarks.

"Old gods or new, it makes no matter," Lord Rickard told her son, "no man is so accursed as the kinslayer."

"Kneel, traitor," Robb said again. "Or must I have them force your head onto the block?"

Lord Karstark knelt. "The gods shall judge you, as you have judged me." He laid his head upon the block.

“Rickard Karstark, Lord of Karhold.” Robb lifted the heavy axe with both hands. “Here in sight of gods and men, I judge you guilty of murder and high treason. In mine own name I condemn you. With mine own hand I take your life. Would you speak a final word?”

“Kill me, and be cursed. You are no king of mine.”

The axe crashed down. Heavy and well-honed, it killed at a single blow, but it took three to sever the man’s head from his body, and by the time it was done both living and dead were drenched in blood. Robb flung the poleaxe down in disgust, and turned wordless to the heart tree. He stood shaking with his hands half-clenched and the rain running down his cheeks. *Gods forgive him*, Catelyn prayed in silence. *He is only a boy, and he had no other choice.*

That was the last she saw of her son that day. The rain continued all through the morning, lashing the surface of the rivers and turning the godswood grass into mud and puddles. The Blackfish assembled a hundred men and rode out after Karstarks, but no one expected he would bring back many. “I only pray I do not need to hang them,” he said as he departed. When he was gone, Catelyn retreated to her father’s solar, to sit once more beside Lord Hoster’s bed.

“It will not be much longer,” Maester Vyman warned her, when he came that afternoon. “His last strength is going, though still he tries to fight.”

“He was ever a fighter,” she said. “A sweet stubborn man.”

“Yes,” the maester said, “but this battle he cannot win. It is time he lay down his sword and shield. Time to yield.”

To yield, she thought, *to make a peace*. Was it her father the maester was speaking of, or her son?

At evenfall, Jeyne Westerling came to see her. The young queen entered the solar timidly. “Lady Catelyn, I do not mean to disturb you . . .”

“You are most welcome here, Your Grace.” Catelyn had been sewing, but she put the needle aside now.

“Please. Call me Jeyne. I don’t feel like a Grace.”

“You are one, nonetheless. Please, come sit, Your Grace.”

“Jeyne.” She sat by the hearth and smoothed her skirt out anxiously.

“As you wish. How might I serve you, Jeyne?”

“It’s Robb,” the girl said. “He’s so miserable, so . . . so angry and disconsolate. I don’t know what to do.”

“It is a hard thing to take a man’s life.”

“I know. I told him, he should use a headsman. When Lord Tywin sends a man to die, all he does is give the command. It’s easier that way, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” said Catelyn, “but my lord husband taught his sons that killing should never be easy.”

“Oh.” Queen Jeyne wet her lips. “Robb has not eaten all day. I had Rollam bring him a nice supper, boar’s ribs and stewed onions and ale, but he never touched a bite of it. He spent all morning writing a letter and told me not to disturb him, but when the letter was done he burned it. Now he is sitting and looking at maps. I asked him what he was looking for, but he never answered. I don’t think he ever heard me. He wouldn’t even change out of his clothes. They were damp all day, and bloody. I want to be a good wife to him, I do, but I don’t know how to help. To cheer him, or comfort him. I don’t know what he *needs*. Please, my lady, you’re his mother, tell me what I should do.”

Tell me what I should do. Catelyn might have asked the same, if her father had been well enough to ask. But Lord Hoster was gone, or near enough. Her Ned as well. *Bran and Rickon too, and Mother, and Brandon so long ago.* Only Robb remained to her, Robb and the fading hope of her daughters.

“Sometimes,” Catelyn said slowly, “the best thing you can do is nothing. When I first came to Winterfell, I was hurt whenever Ned went to the godswood to sit beneath his heart tree. Part of his soul was in that tree, I knew, a part I would never share. Yet without that part, I soon realized, he would not have been Ned. Jeyne, child, you have wed the north, as I did . . . and in the north, the winters will come.” She tried to smile. “Be patient. Be understanding. He loves you and he needs you, and he will come back to you soon enough. This very night, perhaps. Be there when he does. That is all I can tell you.”

The young queen listened raptly. "I will," she said when Catelyn was done. "I'll be there." She got to her feet. "I should go back. He might have missed me. I'll see. But if he's still at his maps, I'll be patient."

"Do," said Catelyn, but when the girl was at the door, she thought of something else. "Jeyne," she called after, "there's one more thing Robb needs from you, though he may not know it yet himself. A king must have an heir."

The girl smiled at that. "My mother says the same. She makes a posset for me, herbs and milk and ale, to help make me fertile. I drink it every morning. I told Robb I'm sure to give him twins. An Eddard and a Brandon. He liked that, I think. We . . . we try most every day, my lady. Sometimes twice or more." The girl blushed very prettily. "I'll be with child soon, I promise. I pray to our Mother Above, every night."

"Very good. I will add my prayers as well. To the old gods *and* the new."

When the girl had gone, Catelyn turned back to her father and smoothed the thin white hair across his brow. "An Eddard and a Brandon," she sighed softly. "And perhaps in time a Hoster. Would you like that?" He did not answer, but she had never expected that he would. As the sound of the rain on the roof mingled with her father's breathing, she thought about Jeyne. The girl did seem to have a good heart, just as Robb had said. *And good hips, which might be more important.*