

CATELYN

“Tell Father I have gone to make him proud.” Her brother swung up into his saddle, every inch the lord in his bright mail and flowing mud-and-water cloak. A silver trout ornamented the crest of his greathelm, twin to the one painted on his shield.

“He was always proud of you, Edmure. And he loves you fiercely. Believe that.”

“I mean to give him better reason than mere birth.” He wheeled his warhorse about and raised a hand. Trumpets sounded, a drum began to boom, the drawbridge descended in fits and starts, and Ser Edmure Tully led his men out from Riverrun with lances raised and banners streaming.

I have a greater host than yours, brother, Catelyn thought as she watched them go. *A host of doubts and fears.*

Beside her, Brienne’s misery was almost palpable. Catelyn had ordered garments sewn to her measure, handsome gowns to suit her birth and sex, yet still she preferred to dress in oddments of mail and boiled leather, a swordbelt cinched around her waist. She would have been happier riding to war with Edmure, no doubt, but even walls as strong as Riverrun’s required swords to hold them. Her brother had taken every able-bodied man for the fords, leaving Ser Desmond Grell to command a garrison made up of the wounded, the old, and the sick, along with a few squires and some untrained peasant boys still shy of manhood. This, to defend a castle crammed full of women and children.

When the last of Edmure’s foot had shuffled under the portcullis, Brienne asked, “What shall we do now, my lady?”

“Our duty.” Catelyn’s face was drawn as she started across the yard. *I have always done my duty*, she thought. Perhaps that was why her lord father had always cherished her best of all his children. Her two older brothers had both died in infancy, so she had been son as well as daughter to Lord Hoster until Edmure was born. Then her mother had died and her

father had told her that she must be the lady of Riverrun now, and she had done that too. And when Lord Hoster promised her to Brandon Stark, she had thanked him for making her such a splendid match.

I gave Brandon my favor to wear, and never comforted Petyr once after he was wounded, nor bid him farewell when Father sent him off. And when Brandon was murdered and Father told me I must wed his brother, I did so gladly, though I never saw Ned's face until our wedding day. I gave my maidenhood to this solemn stranger and sent him off to his war and his king and the woman who bore him his bastard, because I always did my duty.

Her steps took her to the sept, a seven-sided sandstone temple set amidst her mother's gardens and filled with rainbow light. It was crowded when they entered; Catelyn was not alone in her need for prayer. She knelt before the painted marble image of the Warrior and lit a scented candle for Edmure and another for Robb off beyond the hills. *Keep them safe and help them to victory, she prayed, and bring peace to the souls of the slain and comfort to those they leave behind.*

The septon entered with his censer and crystal while she was at her prayers, so Catelyn lingered for the celebration. She did not know this septon, an earnest young man close to Edmure's age. He performed his office well enough, and his voice was rich and pleasant when he sang the praises to the Seven, but Catelyn found herself yearning for the thin quavering tones of Septon Osmynd, long dead. Osmynd would have listened patiently to the tale of what she had seen and felt in Renly's pavilion, and he might have known what it meant as well, and what she must do to lay to rest the shadows that stalked her dreams. *Osmynd, my father, Uncle Brynden, old Maester Kym, they always seemed to know everything, but now there is only me, and it seems I know nothing, not even my duty. How can I do my duty if I do not know where it lies?*

Catelyn's knees were stiff by the time she rose, though she felt no wiser. Perhaps she would go to the godswood tonight, and pray to Ned's gods as well. They were older than the Seven.

Outside, she found song of a very different sort. Rymund the Rhymer sat by the brewhouse amidst a circle of listeners, his deep voice ringing as

he sang of Lord Deremond at the Bloody Meadow.

*And there he stood with sword in hand,
the last of Darry's ten...*

Brienne paused to listen for a moment, broad shoulders hunched and thick arms crossed against her chest. A mob of ragged boys raced by, screeching and flailing at each other with sticks. *Why do boys so love to play at war?* Catelyn wondered if Rymund was the answer. The singer's voice swelled as he neared the end of his song.

*And red the grass beneath his feet,
and red his banners bright,
and red the glow of setting sun
that bathed him in its light.
"Come on, come on," the great lord called,
"my sword is hungry still."
And with a cry of savage rage,
They swarmed across the rill...*

"Fighting is better than this waiting," Brienne said. "You don't feel so helpless when you fight. You have a sword and a horse, sometimes an axe. When you're armored it's hard for anyone to hurt you."

"Knights die in battle," Catelyn reminded her.

Brienne looked at her with those blue and beautiful eyes. "As ladies die in childbed. No one sings songs about *them*."

"Children are a battle of a different sort." Catelyn started across the yard. "A battle without banners or warhorns, but no less fierce. Carrying a child, bringing it into the world... your mother will have told you of the pain..."

"I never knew my mother," Brienne said. "My father had ladies... a different lady every year, but..."

"Those were no ladies," Catelyn said. "As hard as birth can be, Brienne, what comes after is even harder. At times I feel as though I am being torn apart. Would that there were five of me, one for each child, so I might keep them all safe."

“And who would keep *you* safe, my lady?”

Her smile was wan and tired. “Why, the men of my House. Or so my lady mother taught me. My lord father, my brother, my uncle, my husband, they will keep me safe... but while they are away from me, I suppose you must fill their place, Brienne.”

Brienne bowed her head. “I shall try, my lady.”

Later that day, Maester Vyman brought a letter. She saw him at once, hoping for some word from Robb, or from Ser Rodrik in Winterfell, but the message proved to be from one Lord Meadows, who named himself castellan of Storm’s End. It was addressed to her father, her brother, her son, “or whoever now holds Riverrun.” Ser Cortnay Penrose was dead, the man wrote, and Storm’s End had opened its gate to Stannis Baratheon, the trueborn and rightful heir. The castle garrison had sworn their swords to his cause, one and all, and no man of them had suffered harm.

“Save Cortnay Penrose,” Catelyn murmured. She had never met the man, yet she grieved to hear of his passing. “Robb should know of this at once,” she said. “Do we know where he is?”

“At last word he was marching toward the Crag, the seat of House Westerling,” said Maester Vyman. “If I dispatched a raven to Ashemark, it may be that they could send a rider after him.”

“Do so.”

Catelyn read the letter again after the maester was gone. “Lord Meadows says nothing of Robert’s bastard,” she confided to Brienne. “I suppose he yielded the boy with the rest, though I confess, I do not understand why Stannis wanted him so badly.”

“Perhaps he fears the boy’s claim.”

“A bastard’s claim? No, it’s something else... what does this child look like?”

“He is seven or eight, comely, with black hair and bright blue eyes. Visitors oft thought him Lord Renly’s own son.”

“And Renly favored Robert.” Catelyn had a glimmer of understanding. “Stannis means to parade his brother’s bastard before the realm, so men

might see Robert in his face and wonder why there is no such likeness in Joffrey.”

“Would that mean so much?”

“Those who favor Stannis will call it proof. Those who support Joffrey will say it means nothing.” Her own children had more Tully about them than Stark. Arya was the only one to show much of Ned in her features. *And Jon Snow, but he was never mine.* She found herself thinking of Jon’s mother, that shadowy secret love her husband would never speak of. *Does she grieve for Ned as I do? Or did she hate him for leaving her bed for mine? Does she pray for her son as I have prayed for mine?*

They were uncomfortable thoughts, and futile. If Jon had been born of Ashara Dayne of Starfall, as some whispered, the lady was long dead; if not, Catelyn had no clue who or where his mother might be. And it made no matter. Ned was gone now, and his loves and his secrets had all died with him.

Still, she was struck again by how strangely men behaved when it came to their bastards. Ned had always been fiercely protective of Jon, and Ser Cortnay Penrose had given up his life for this Edric Storm, yet Roose Bolton’s bastard had meant less to him than one of his dogs, to judge from the tone of the queer cold letter Edmure had gotten from him not three days past. He had crossed the Trident and was marching on Harrenhal as commanded, he wrote. “A strong castle, and well garrisoned, but His Grace shall have it, if I must kill every living soul within to make it so.” He hoped His Grace would weigh that against the crimes of his bastard son, whom Ser Rodrik Cassel had put to death. “A fate he no doubt earned,” Bolton had written. “Tainted blood is ever treacherous, and Ramsay’s nature was sly, greedy, and cruel. I count myself well rid of him. The trueborn sons my young wife has promised me would never have been safe while he lived.”

The sound of hurrying footsteps drove the morbid thoughts from her head. Ser Desmond’s squire dashed panting into the room and knelt. “My lady... Lannisters... across the river.”

“Take a long breath, lad, and tell it slowly.”

He did as she bid him. “A column of armored men,” he reported. “Across the Red Fork. They are flying a purple unicorn below the lion of Lannister.”

Some son of Lord Brax. Brax had come to Riverrun once when she was a girl, to propose wedding one of his sons to her or Lysa. She wondered whether it was this same son out there now, leading the attack.

The Lannisters had ridden out of the southeast beneath a blaze of banners, Ser Desmond told her when she ascended to the battlements to join him. “A few outriders, no more,” he assured her. “The main strength of Lord Tywin’s host is well to the south. We are in no danger here.”

South of the Red Fork the land stretched away open and flat. From the watchtower Catelyn could see for miles. Even so, only the nearest ford was visible. Edmure had entrusted Lord Jason Mallister with its defense, as well as that of three others farther upriver. The Lannister riders were milling about uncertainly near the water, crimson and silver banners flapping in the wind. “No more than fifty, my lady,” Ser Desmond estimated.

Catelyn watched the riders spread out in a long line. Lord Jason’s men waited to receive them behind rocks and grass and hillocks. A trumpet blast sent the horsemen forward at a ponderous walk, splashing down into the current. For a moment they made a brave show, all bright armor and streaming banners, the sun flashing off the points of their lances.

“*Now,*” she heard Brienne mutter.

It was hard to make out what was happening, but the screams of the horses seemed loud even at this remove, and beneath them Catelyn heard the fainter clash of steel on steel. A banner vanished suddenly as its bearer was swept under, and soon after the first dead man drifted past their walls, borne along by the current. By then the Lannisters had pulled back in confusion. She watched as they re-formed, conferred briefly, and galloped back the way they had come. The men on the walls shouted taunts after them, though they were already too far off to hear.

Ser Desmond slapped his belly. “Would that Lord Hoster could have seen that. It would have made him dance.”

“My father’s dancing days are past, I fear,” Catelyn said, “and this fight is just begun. The Lannisters will come again. Lord Tywin has twice my brother’s numbers.”

“He could have ten times and it would not matter,” Ser Desmond said. “The west bank of the Red Fork is higher than the east, my lady, and well wooded. Our bowmen have good cover, and a clear field for their shafts... and should any breach occur, Edmure will have his best knights in reserve, ready to ride wherever they are most sorely needed. The river will hold them.”

“I pray that you are right,” Catelyn said gravely.

That night they came again. She had commanded them to wake her at once if the enemy returned, and well after midnight a serving girl touched her gently by the shoulder. Catelyn sat up at once. “What is it?”

“The ford again, my lady.”

Wrapped in a bedrobe, Catelyn climbed to the roof of the keep. From there she could see over the walls and the moonlit river to where the battle raged. The defenders had built watchfires along the bank, and perhaps the Lannisters thought to find them night-blind or unwary. If so, it was folly. Darkness was a chancy ally at best. As they waded in to breast their way across, men stepped in hidden pools and went down splashing, while others stumbled over stones or gashed their feet on the hidden caltrops. The Mallister bowmen sent a storm of fire arrows hissing across the river, strangely beautiful from afar. One man, pierced through a dozen times, his clothes afire, danced and whirled in the knee-deep water until at last he fell and was swept downstream. By the time his body came bobbing past Riverrun, the fires and his life had both been extinguished.

A small victory, Catelyn thought when the fighting had ended and the surviving foemen had melted back into the night, *yet a victory nonetheless*. As they descended the winding turret steps, Catelyn asked Brienne for her thoughts. “That was the brush of Lord Tywin’s fingertip, my lady,” the girl said. “He is probing, feeling for a weak point, an undefended crossing. If he does not find one, he will curl all his fingers into a fist and try and make one.” Brienne hunched her shoulders. “That’s what I’d do. Were I him.” Her

hand went to the hilt of her sword and gave it a little pat, as if to make certain it was still there.

And may the gods help us then, Catelyn thought. Yet there was nothing she could do for it. That was Edmure's battle out there on the river; hers was here inside the castle.

The next morning as she broke her fast, she sent for her father's aged steward, Utherydes Wayn. "Have Ser Cleos Frey brought a flagon of wine. I mean to question him soon, and I want his tongue well loosened."

"As you command, my lady."

Not long after, a rider with the Mallister eagle sewn on his breast arrived with a message from Lord Jason, telling of another skirmish and another victory. Ser Flement Brax had tried to force a crossing at a different ford six leagues to the south. This time the Lannisters shortened their lances and advanced across the river behind on foot, but the Mallister bowmen had rained high arcing shots down over their shields, while the scorpions Edmure had mounted on the riverbank sent heavy stones crashing through to break up the formation. "They left a dozen dead in the water, only two reaching the shallows, where we dealt with them briskly," the rider reported. He also told of fighting farther upstream, where Lord Karyl Vance held the fords. "Those thrusts too were turned aside, at grievous cost to our foes."

Perhaps Edmure was wiser than I knew, Catelyn thought. *His lords all saw the sense in his battle plans, why was I so blind? My brother is not the little boy I remember, no more than Robb is.*

She waited until evening before going to pay her call upon Ser Cleos Frey, reasoning that the longer she delayed, the drunker he was likely to be. As she entered the tower cell, Ser Cleos stumbled to his knees. "My lady, I knew naught of any escape. The Imp said a Lannister must needs have a Lannister escort, on my oath as a knight—"

"Arise, ser." Catelyn seated herself. "I know no grandson of Walder Frey would be an oathbreaker." *Unless it served his purpose.* "You brought peace terms, my brother said."

“I did.” Ser Cleos lurched to his feet. She was pleased to see how unsteady he was.

“Tell me,” she commanded, and he did.

When he was done, Catelyn sat frowning. Edmure had been right, these were no terms at all, except... “Lannister will exchange Arya and Sansa for his brother?”

“Yes. He sat on the Iron Throne and swore it.”

“Before witnesses?”

“Before all the court, my lady. And the gods as well. I said as much to Ser Edmure, but he told me it was not possible, that His Grace Robb would never consent.”

“He told you true.” She could not even say that Robb was wrong. Arya and Sansa were children. The Kingslayer, alive and free, was as dangerous as any man in the realm. That road led nowhere. “Did you see my girls? Are they treated well?”

Ser Cleos hesitated. “I... yes, they seemed...”

He is fumbling for a lie, Catelyn realized, *but the wine has fuddled his wits*. “Ser Cleos,” she said coolly, “you forfeited the protection of your peace banner when your men played us false. Lie to me, and you’ll hang from the walls beside them. Believe that. I shall ask you once more—*did you see my daughters?*”

His brow was damp with sweat. “I saw Sansa at the court, the day Tyrion told me his terms. She looked most beautiful, my lady. Perhaps a, a bit wan. Drawn, as it were.”

Sansa, but not Arya. That might mean anything. Arya had always been harder to tame. Perhaps Cersei was reluctant to parade her in open court for fear of what she might say or do. They might have her locked safely out of sight. *Or they might have killed her*. Catelyn shoved the thought away. “His terms, you said... yet Cersei is Queen Regent.”

“Tyrion spoke for both of them. The queen was not there. She was indisposed that day, I was told.”

“Curious.” Catelyn thought back to that terrible trek through the Mountains of the Moon, and the way Tyrion Lannister had somehow seduced that sellsword from her service to his own. *The dwarf is too clever by half.* She could not imagine how he had survived the high road after Lysa had sent him from the Vale, yet it did not surprise her. *He had no part in Ned’s murder, at the least. And he came to my defense when the clansmen attacked us. If I could trust his word...*

She opened her hands to look down at the scars across her fingers. *His dagger’s marks*, she reminded herself. *His dagger, in the hand of the killer he paid to open Bran’s throat.* Though the dwarf denied it, to be sure. Even after Lysa locked him in one of her sky cells and threatened him with her moon door, he had still denied it. “He lied,” she said, rising abruptly. “The Lannisters are liars every one, and the dwarf is the worst of them. The killer was armed with his own knife.”

Ser Cleos stared. “I know nothing of any—”

“You know nothing,” she agreed, sweeping from the cell. Brienne fell in beside her, silent. *It is simpler for her*, Catelyn thought with a pang of envy. She was like a man in that. For men the answer was always the same, and never farther away than the nearest sword. For a woman, a mother, the way was stonier and harder to know.

She took a late supper in the Great Hall with her garrison, to give them what encouragement she could. Rymund the Rhymer sang through all the courses, sparing her the need to talk. He closed with the song he had written about Robb’s victory at Oxcross. *“And the stars in the night were the eyes of his wolves, and the wind itself was their song.”* Between the verses, Rymund threw back his head and howled, and by the end, half of the hall was howling along with him, even Desmond Grell, who was well in his cups. Their voices rang off the rafters.

Let them have their songs, if it makes them brave, Catelyn thought, toying with her silver goblet.

“There was always a singer at Evenfall Hall when I was a girl,” Brienne said quietly. “I learned all the songs by heart.”

“Sansa did the same, though few singers ever cared to make the long journey north to Winterfell.” *I told her there would be singers at the king’s court, though. I told her she would hear music of all sorts, that her father could find some master to help her learn the high harp. Oh, gods forgive me...*

Brienne said, “I remember a woman... she came from some place across the narrow sea. I could not even say what language she sang in, but her voice was as lovely as she was. She had eyes the color of plums and her waist was so tiny my father could put his hands around it. His hands were almost as big as mine.” She closed her long, thick fingers, as if to hide them.

“Did you sing for your father?” Catelyn asked.

Brienne shook her head, staring down at her trencher as if to find some answer in the gravy.

“For Lord Renly?”

The girl reddened. “Never, I... his fool, he made cruel japes sometimes, and I...”

“Someday you must sing for me.”

“I... please, I have no gift.” Brienne pushed back from the table. “Forgive me, my lady. Do I have your leave to go?”

Catelyn nodded. The tall, ungainly girl left the hall with long strides, almost unnoticed amidst the revelry. *May the gods go with her*, she thought as she returned listlessly to her supper.

It was three days later when the hammer blow that Brienne had foretold fell, and five days before they heard of it. Catelyn was sitting with her father when Edmure’s messenger arrived. The man’s armor was dented, his boots dusty, and he had a ragged hole in his surcoat, but the look on his face as he knelt was enough to tell her that the news was good. “Victory, my lady.” He handed her Edmure’s letter. Her hand trembled as she broke the seal.

Lord Tywin had tried to force a crossing at a dozen different fords, her brother wrote, but every thrust had been thrown back. Lord Lefford had

been drowned, the Crakehall knight called Strongboar taken captive, Ser Addam Marbrand thrice forced to retreat... but the fiercest battle had been fought at Stone Mill, where Ser Gregor Clegane had led the assault. So many of his men had fallen that their dead horses threatened to dam the flow. In the end the Mountain and a handful of his best had gained the west bank, but Edmure had thrown his reserve at them, and they had shattered and reeled away bloody and beaten. Ser Gregor himself had lost his horse and staggered back across the Red Fork bleeding from a dozen wounds while a rain of arrows and stones fell all around him. "They shall not cross, Cat," Edmure scrawled, "Lord Tywin is marching to the southeast. A feint perhaps, or full retreat, it matters not. *They shall not cross.*"

Ser Desmond Grell had been elated. "Oh, if only I might have been with him," the old knight said when she read him the letter. "Where is that fool Rymund? There's a song in this, by the gods, and one that even Edmure will want to hear. The mill that ground the Mountain down, I could almost make the words myself, had I the singer's gift."

"I'll hear no songs until the fighting's done," Catelyn said, perhaps too sharply. Yet she allowed Ser Desmond to spread the word, and agreed when he suggested breaking open some casks in honor of Stone Mill. The mood within Riverrun had been strained and somber; they would all be better for a little drink and hope.

That night the castle rang to the sounds of celebration. "*Riverrun!*" the smallfolk shouted, and "Tully! Tully!" They'd come frightened and helpless, and her brother had taken them in when most lords would have closed their gates. Their voices floated in through the high windows, and seeped under the heavy redwood doors. Rymund played his harp, accompanied by a pair of drummers and a youth with a set of reed pipes. Catelyn listened to girlish laughter, and the excited chatter of the green boys her brother had left her for a garrison. Good sounds... and yet they did not touch her. She could not share their happiness.

In her father's solar she found a heavy leatherbound book of maps and opened it to the riverlands. Her eyes found the path of the Red Fork and traced it by flickering candlelight. *Marching to the southeast*, she thought.

By now they had likely reached the headwaters of the Blackwater Rush, she decided.

She closed the book even more uneasy than before. The gods had granted them victory after victory. At Stone Mill, at Oxcross, in the Battle of the Camps, at the Whispering Wood...

But if we are winning, why am I so afraid?