

## CATELYN

It was full dark before they found the village. Catelyn found herself wondering if the place had a name. If so, its people had taken that knowledge with them when they fled, along with all they owned, down to the candles in the sept. Ser Wendel lit a torch and led her through the low door.

Within, the seven walls were cracked and crooked. *God is one*, Septon Osmynd had taught her when she was a girl, *with seven aspects, as the sept is a single building, with seven walls*. The wealthy septs of the cities had statues of the Seven and an altar to each. In Winterfell, Septon Chayle hung carved masks from each wall. Here Catelyn found only rough charcoal drawings. Ser Wendel set the torch in a sconce near the door, and left to wait outside with Robar Royce.

Catelyn studied the faces. The Father was bearded, as ever. The Mother smiled, loving and protective. The Warrior had his sword sketched in beneath his face, the Smith his hammer. The Maid was beautiful, the Crone wizened and wise.

And the seventh face... the Stranger was neither male nor female, yet both, ever the outcast, the wanderer from far places, less and more than human, unknown and unknowable. Here the face was a black oval, a shadow with stars for eyes. It made Catelyn uneasy. She would get scant comfort there.

She knelt before the Mother. "My lady, look down on this battle with a mother's eyes. They are all sons, every one. Spare them if you can, and spare my own sons as well. Watch over Robb and Bran and Rickon. Would that I were with them."

A crack ran down through the Mother's left eye. It made her look as if she were crying. Catelyn could hear Ser Wendel's booming voice, and now and again Ser Robar's quiet answers, as they talked of the coming battle. Otherwise the night was still. Not even a cricket could be heard, and the

gods kept their silence. *Did your old gods ever answer you, Ned?* she wondered. *When you knelt before your heart tree, did they hear you?*

Flickering torchlight danced across the walls, making the faces seem half alive, twisting them, changing them. The statues in the great septs of the cities wore the faces the stonemasons had given them, but these charcoal scratchings were so crude they might be anyone. The Father's face made her think of her own father, dying in his bed at Riverrun. The Warrior was Renly and Stannis, Robb and Robert, Jaime Lannister and Jon Snow. She even glimpsed Arya in those lines, just for an instant. Then a gust of wind through the door made the torch sputter, and the semblance was gone, washed away in orange glare.

The smoke was making her eyes burn. She rubbed at them with the heels of her scarred hands. When she looked up at the Mother again, it was her own mother she saw. Lady Minisa Tully had died in childbed, trying to give Lord Hoster a second son. The baby had perished with her, and afterward some of the life had gone out of Father. *She was always so calm*, Catelyn thought, remembering her mother's soft hands, her warm smile. *If she had lived, how different our lives might have been.* She wondered what Lady Minisa would make of her eldest daughter, kneeling here before her. *I have come so many thousands of leagues, and for what? Who have I served? I have lost my daughters, Robb does not want me, and Bran and Rickon must surely think me a cold and unnatural mother. I was not even with Ned when he died...*

Her head swam, and the sept seemed to move around her. The shadows swayed and shifted, furtive animals racing across the cracked white walls. Catelyn had not eaten today. Perhaps that had been unwise. She told herself that there had been no time, but the truth was that food had lost its savor in a world without Ned. *When they took his head off, they killed me too.*

Behind her the torch spit, and suddenly it seemed to her that it was her sister's face on the wall, though the eyes were harder than she recalled, not Lysa's eyes but Cersei's. *Cersei is a mother too. No matter who fathered those children, she felt them kick inside her, brought them forth with her pain and blood, nursed them at her breast. If they are truly Jaime's...*

“Does Cersei pray to you too, my lady?” Catelyn asked the Mother. She could see the proud, cold, lovely features of the Lannister queen etched upon the wall. The crack was still there; even Cersei could weep for her children. “Each of the Seven embodies all of the Seven,” Septon Osmynd had told her once. There was as much beauty in the Crone as in the Maiden, and the Mother could be fiercer than the Warrior when her children were in danger. *Yes...*

She had seen enough of Robert Baratheon at Winterfell to know that the king did not regard Joffrey with any great warmth. If the boy was truly Jaime’s seed, Robert would have put him to death along with his mother, and few would have condemned him. Bastards were common enough, but incest was a monstrous sin to both old gods and new, and the children of such wickedness were named abominations in sept and godswood alike. The dragon kings had wed brother to sister, but they were the blood of old Valyria where such practices had been common, and like their dragons the Targaryens answered to neither gods nor men.

Ned must have known, and Lord Arryn before him. Small wonder that the queen had killed them both. *Would I do any less for my own?* Catelyn clenched her hands, feeling the tightness in her scarred fingers where the assassin’s steel had cut to the bone as she fought to save her son. “Bran knows too,” she whispered, lowering her head. *Gods be good, he must have seen something, heard something, that was why they tried to kill him in his bed.*

Lost and weary, Catelyn Stark gave herself over to her gods. She knelt before the Smith, who fixed things that were broken, and asked that he give her sweet Bran his protection. She went to the Maid and beseeched her to lend her courage to Arya and Sansa, to guard them in their innocence. To the Father, she prayed for justice, the strength to seek it and the wisdom to know it, and she asked the Warrior to keep Robb strong and shield him in his battles. Lastly she turned to the Crone, whose statues often showed her with a lamp in one hand. “Guide me, wise lady,” she prayed. “Show me the path I must walk, and do not let me stumble in the dark places that lie ahead.”

Finally there were footsteps behind her, and a noise at the door. “My lady,” Ser Robar said gently, “pardon, but our time is at an end. We must be back before the dawn breaks.”

Catelyn rose stiffly. Her knees ached, and she would have given much for a featherbed and a pillow just then. “Thank you, ser. I am ready.”

They rode in silence through sparse woodland where the trees leaned drunkenly away from the sea. The nervous whinny of horses and the clank of steel guided them back to Renly’s camp. The long ranks of man and horse were armored in darkness, as black as if the Smith had hammered night itself into steel. There were banners to her right, banners to her left, and rank on rank of banners before her, but in the predawn gloom, neither colors nor sigils could be discerned. *A grey army*, Catelyn thought. *Grey men on grey horses beneath grey banners*. As they sat their horses waiting, Renly’s shadow knights pointed their lances upward, so she rode through a forest of tall naked trees, bereft of leaves and life. Where Storm’s End stood was only a deeper darkness, a wall of black through which no stars could shine, but she could see torches moving across the fields where Lord Stannis had made his camp.

The candles within Renly’s pavilion made the shimmering silken walls seem to glow, transforming the great tent into a magical castle alive with emerald light. Two of the Rainbow Guard stood sentry at the door to the royal pavilion. The green light shone strangely against the purple plums of Ser Parmen’s surcoat, and gave a sickly hue to the sunflowers that covered every inch of Ser Emmon’s enameled yellow plate. Long silken plumes flew from their helms, and rainbow cloaks draped their shoulders.

Within, Catelyn found Brienne armoring the king for battle while the Lords Tarly and Rowan spoke of dispositions and tactics. It was pleasantly warm inside, the heat shimmering off the coals in a dozen small iron braziers. “I must speak with you, Your Grace,” she said, granting him a king’s style for once, anything to make him heed her.

“In a moment, Lady Catelyn,” Renly replied. Brienne fit backplate to breastplate over his quilted tunic. The king’s armor was a deep green, the green of leaves in a summer wood, so dark it drank the candlelight. Gold

highlights gleamed from inlay and fastenings like distant fires in that wood, winking every time he moved. “Pray continue, Lord Mathis.”

“Your Grace,” Mathis Rowan said with a sideways glance at Catelyn. “As I was saying, our battles are well drawn up. Why wait for daybreak? Sound the advance.”

“And have it said that I won by treachery, with an unchivalrous attack? Dawn was the chosen hour.”

“Chosen by Stannis,” Randyll Tarly pointed out. “He’d have us charge into the teeth of the rising sun. We’ll be half-blind.”

“Only until first shock,” Renly said confidently. “Ser Loras will break them, and after that it will be chaos.” Brienne tightened green leather straps and buckled golden buckles. “When my brother falls, see that no insult is done to his corpse. He is my own blood, I will not have his head paraded about on a spear.”

“And if he yields?” Lord Tarly asked.

“Yields?” Lord Rowan laughed. “When Mace Tyrell laid siege to Storm’s End, Stannis ate rats rather than open his gates.”

“Well I remember.” Renly lifted his chin to allow Brienne to fasten his gorget in place. “Near the end, Ser Gawen Wylde and three of his knights tried to steal out a postern gate to surrender. Stannis caught them and ordered them flung from the walls with catapults. I can still see Gawen’s face as they strapped him down. He had been our master-at-arms.”

Lord Rowan appeared puzzled. “No men were hurled from the walls. I would surely remember that.”

“Maester Cressen told Stannis that we might be forced to eat our dead, and there was no gain in flinging away good meat.” Renly pushed back his hair. Brienne bound it with a velvet tie and pulled a padded cap down over his ears, to cushion the weight of his helm. “Thanks to the Onion Knight we were never reduced to dining on corpses, but it was a close thing. Too close for Ser Gawen, who died in his cell.”

“Your Grace.” Catelyn had waited patiently, but time grew short. “You promised me a word.”

Renly nodded. "See to your battles, my lords... oh, and if Barristan Selmy is at my brother's side, I want him spared."

"There's been no word of Ser Barristan since Joffrey cast him out," Lord Rowan objected.

"I know that old man. He needs a king to guard, or who is he? Yet he never came to me, and Lady Catelyn says he is not with Robb Stark at Riverrun. Where else but with Stannis?"

"As you say, Your Grace. No harm will come to him." The lords bowed deeply and departed.

"Say your say, Lady Stark," Renly said. Brienne swept his cloak over his broad shoulders. It was cloth-of-gold, heavy, with the crowned stag of Baratheon picked out in flakes of jet.

"The Lannisters tried to kill my son Bran. A thousand times I have asked myself why. Your brother gave me my answer. There was a hunt the day he fell. Robert and Ned and most of the other men rode out after boar, but Jaime Lannister remained at Winterfell, as did the queen."

Renly was not slow to take the implication. "So you believe the boy caught them at their incest..."

"I beg you, my lord, grant me leave to go to your brother Stannis and tell him what I suspect."

"To what end?"

"Robb will set aside his crown if you and your brother will do the same," she said, hoping it was true. She would *make* it true if she must; Robb would listen to her, even if his lords would not. "Let the three of you call for a Great Council, such as the realm has not seen for a hundred years. We will send to Winterfell, so Bran may tell his tale and all men may know the Lannisters for the true usurpers. Let the assembled lords of the Seven Kingdoms choose who shall rule them."

Renly laughed. "Tell me, my lady, do direwolves vote on who should lead the pack?" Brienne brought the king's gauntlets and greathelm, crowned with golden antlers that would add a foot and a half to his height. "The time for talk is done. Now we see who is stronger." Renly pulled a

lobstered green-and-gold gauntlet over his left hand, while Brienne knelt to buckle on his belt, heavy with the weight of longsword and dagger.

“I beg you in the name of the Mother,” Catelyn began when a sudden gust of wind flung open the door of the tent. She thought she glimpsed movement, but when she turned her head, it was only the king’s shadow shifting against the silken walls. She heard Renly begin a jest, his shadow moving, lifting its sword, black on green, candles guttering, shivering, something was queer, wrong, and then she saw Renly’s sword still in its scabbard, sheathed still, but the shadow sword...

“Cold,” said Renly in a small puzzled voice, a heartbeat before the steel of his gorget parted like cheesecloth beneath the shadow of a blade that was not there. He had time to make a small thick gasp before the blood came gushing out of his throat.

“Your Gr—*no!*” cried Brienne the Blue when she saw that evil flow, sounding as scared as any little girl. The king stumbled into her arms, a sheet of blood creeping down the front of his armor, a dark red tide that drowned his green and gold. More candles guttered out. Renly tried to speak, but he was choking on his own blood. His legs collapsed, and only Brienne’s strength held him up. She threw back her head and screamed, wordless in her anguish.

*The shadow.* Something dark and evil had happened here, she knew, something that she could not begin to understand. *Renly never cast that shadow. Death came in that door and blew the life out of him as swift as the wind snuffed out his candles.*

Only a few instants passed before Robar Royce and Emmon Cuy came bursting in, though it felt like half the night. A pair of men-at-arms crowded in behind with torches. When they saw Renly in Brienne’s arms, and her drenched with the king’s blood, Ser Robar gave a cry of horror. “Wicked woman!” screamed Ser Emmon, he of the sunflowered steel. “Away from him, you vile creature!”

“Gods be good, Brienne, *why?*” asked Ser Robar.

Brienne looked up from her king’s body. The rainbow cloak that hung from her shoulders had turned red where the king’s blood had soaked into

the cloth. "I... I..."

"You'll die for this." Ser Emmon snatched up a long-handled battleaxe from the weapons piled near the door. "You'll pay for the king's life with your own!"

"*NO!*" Catelyn Stark screamed, finding her voice at last, but it was too late, the blood madness was on them, and they rushed forward with shouts that drowned her softer words.

Brienne moved faster than Catelyn would have believed. Her own sword was not to hand, so she snatched Renly's from its scabbard and raised it to catch Emmon's axe on the downswing. A spark flashed blue-white as steel met steel with a rending crash, and Brienne sprang to her feet, the body of the dead king thrust rudely aside. Ser Emmon stumbled over it as he tried to close, and Brienne's blade sheared through the wooden haft to send his axehead spinning. Another man thrust a flaming torch at her back, but the rainbow cloak was too sodden with blood to burn. Brienne spun and cut, and torch and hand went flying. Flames crept across the carpet. The maimed man began to scream. Ser Emmon dropped the axe and fumbled for his sword. The second man-at-arms lunged, Brienne parried, and their swords danced and clanged against each other. When Emmon Cuy came wading back in, Brienne was forced to retreat, yet somehow she held them both at bay. On the ground, Renly's head rolled sickeningly to one side, and a second mouth yawned wide, the blood coming from him now in slow pulses.

Ser Robar had hung back, uncertain, but now he was reaching for his hilt. "Robar, no, listen." Catelyn seized his arm. "You do her wrong, it was not her. *Help her!* Hear me, it was Stannis." The name was on her lips before she could think how it got there, but as she said it, she knew that it was true. "I swear it, you know me, it was *Stannis* killed him."

The young rainbow knight stared at this madwoman with pale and frightened eyes. "Stannis? How?"

"I do not know. Sorcery, some dark magic, there was a shadow, a *shadow*." Her own voice sounded wild and crazed to her, but the words poured out in a rush as the blades continued to clash behind her. "A shadow



with a sword, I swear it, I saw. Are you blind, the girl *loved* him! *Help her!*” She glanced back, saw the second guardsman fall, his blade dropping from limp fingers. Outside there was shouting. More angry men would be bursting in on them any instant, she knew. “She is innocent, Robar. You have my word, on my husband’s grave and my honor as a Stark!”

That resolved him. “I will hold them,” Ser Robar said. “Get her away.” He turned and went out.

The fire had reached the wall and was creeping up the side of the tent. Ser Emmon was pressing Brienne hard, him in his enameled yellow steel and her in wool. He had forgotten Catelyn, until the iron brazier came crashing into the back of his head. Helmed as he was, the blow did no lasting harm, but it sent him to his knees. “Brienne, with me,” Catelyn commanded. The girl was not slow to see the chance. A slash, and the green silk parted. They stepped out into darkness and the chill of dawn. Loud voices came from the other side of the pavilion. “This way,” Catelyn urged, “and slowly. We must not run, or they will ask why. Walk easy, as if nothing were amiss.”

Brienne thrust her sword blade through her belt and fell in beside Catelyn. The night air smelled of rain. Behind them, the king’s pavilion was well ablaze, flames rising high against the dark. No one made any move to stop them. Men rushed past them, shouting of fire and murder and sorcery. Others stood in small groups and spoke in low voices. A few were praying, and one young squire was on his knees, sobbing openly.

Renly’s battles were already coming apart as the rumors spread from mouth to mouth. The nightfires had burned low, and as the east began to lighten the immense mass of Storm’s End emerged like a dream of stone while wisps of pale mist raced across the field, flying from the sun on wings of wind. *Morning ghosts*, she had heard Old Nan call them once, spirits returning to their graves. And Renly one of them now, gone like his brother Robert, like her own dear Ned.

“I never held him but as he died,” Brienne said quietly as they walked through the spreading chaos. Her voice sounded as if she might break at any

instant. “He was laughing one moment, and suddenly the blood was everywhere... my lady, I do not understand. Did you see, did you...?”

“I saw a shadow. I thought it was Renly’s shadow at the first, but it was his brother’s.”

“Lord Stannis?”

“I *felt* him. It makes no sense, I know...”

It made sense enough for Brienne. “I will kill him,” the tall homely girl declared. “With my lord’s own sword, I will kill him. I swear it. I swear it. I swear it.”

Hal Mollen and the rest of her escort were waiting with the horses. Ser Wendel Manderly was all in a lather to know what was happening. “My lady, the camp has gone mad,” he blurted when he saw them. “Lord Renly, is he—” He stopped suddenly, staring at Brienne and the blood that drenched her.

“Dead, but not by our hands.”

“The battle—” Hal Mollen began.

“There will be no battle.” Catelyn mounted, and her escort formed up about her, with Ser Wendel to her left and Ser Perwyn Frey on her right. “Brienne, we brought mounts enough for twice our number. Choose one, and come with us.”

“I have my own horse, my lady. And my armor—”

“Leave them. We must be well away before they think to look for us. We were both with the king when he was killed. That will not be forgotten.” Wordless, Brienne turned and did as she was bid. “Ride,” Catelyn commanded her escort when they were all ahorse. “If any man tries to stop us, cut him down.”

As the long fingers of dawn fanned across the fields, color was returning to the world. Where grey men had sat grey horses armed with shadow spears, the points of ten thousand lances now glinted silverly cold, and on the myriad flapping banners Catelyn saw the blush of red and pink and orange, the richness of blues and browns, the blaze of gold and yellow. All the power of Storm’s End and Highgarden, the power that had been

Renly's an hour ago. *They belong to Stannis now, she realized, even if they do not know it themselves yet. Where else are they to turn, if not to the last Baratheon? Stannis has won all with a single evil stroke.*

*I am the rightful king, he had declared, his jaw clenched hard as iron, and your son no less a traitor than my brother here. His day will come as well.*

A chill went through her.