



CATELYN

R*obb*, she knew, the moment she heard the kennels erupt.

Her son had returned to Riverrun, and Grey Wind with him. Only the scent of the great grey direwolf could send the hounds into such a frenzy of baying and barking. *He will come to me*, she knew. Edmure had not returned after his first visit, preferring to spend his days with Marq Piper and Patrek Mallister, listening to Rymund the Rhymer's verses about the battle at the Stone Mill. *Robb is not Edmure, though. Robb will see me.*

It had been raining for days now, a cold grey downpour that well suited Catelyn's mood. Her father was growing weaker and more delirious with every passing day, waking only to mutter, "Tansy," and beg forgiveness. Edmure shunned her, and Ser Desmond Grell still denied her freedom of the castle, however unhappy it seemed to make him. Only the return of Ser Robin Ryger and his men, footweary and drenched to the bone, served to lighten her spirits. They had walked back, it seemed. Somehow the Kingslayer had contrived to sink their galley and escape, Maester Vyman confided. Catelyn asked if she might speak with Ser Robin to learn more of what had happened, but that was refused her.

Something else was wrong as well. On the day her brother returned, a few hours after their argument, she had heard angry voices from the yard below. When she climbed to the roof to see, there were knots of men gathered across the castle beside the main gate. Horses were being led from

the stables, saddled and bridled, and there was shouting, though Catelyn was too far away to make out the words. One of Robb's white banners lay on the ground, and one of the knights turned his horse and trampled over the direwolf as he spurred toward the gate. Several others did the same. *Those are men who fought with Edmure on the fords*, she thought. *What could have made them so angry? Has my brother slighted them somehow, given them some insult?* She thought she recognized Ser Perwyn Frey, who had traveled with her to Bitterbridge and Storm's End and back, and his bastard half brother Martyn Rivers as well, but from this vantage it was hard to be certain. Close to forty men poured out through the castle gates, to what end she did not know.

They did not come back. Nor would Maester Vyman tell her who they had been, where they had gone, or what had made them so angry. "I am here to see to your father, and only that, my lady," he said. "Your brother will soon be Lord of Riverrun. What he wishes you to know, he must tell you."

But now Robb was returned from the west, returned in triumph. *He will forgive me*, Catelyn told herself. *He must forgive me, he is my own son, and Arya and Sansa are as much his blood as mine. He will free me from these rooms and then I will know what has happened.*

By the time Ser Desmond came for her, she had bathed and dressed and combed out her auburn hair. "King Robb has returned from the west, my lady," the knight said, "and commands that you attend him in the Great Hall."

It was the moment she had dreamt of and dreaded. *Have I lost two sons, or three?* She would know soon enough.

The hall was crowded when they entered. Every eye was on the dais, but Catelyn knew their backs: Lady Mormont's patched ringmail, the Greatjon and his son looming above every other head in the hall, Lord Jason Mallister white-haired with his winged helm in the crook of his arm, Tytos Blackwood in his magnificent raven-feather cloak . . . *Half of them will want to hang me now. The other half may only turn their eyes away.* She had the uneasy feeling that someone was missing, too.

Robb stood on the dais. *He is a boy no longer*, she realized with a pang. *He is sixteen now, a man grown. Just look at him.* War had melted all the softness from his face and left him hard and lean. He had shaved his beard away, but his auburn hair fell uncut to his shoulders. The recent rains had rusted his mail and left brown stains on the white of his cloak and surcoat. Or perhaps the stains were blood. On his head was the sword crown they had fashioned him of bronze and iron. *He bears it more comfortably now. He bears it like a king.*

Edmure stood below the crowded dais, head bowed modestly as Robb praised his victory. “. . . fell at the Stone Mill shall never be forgotten. Small wonder Lord Tywin ran off to fight Stannis. He’d had his fill of northmen and rivermen both.” That brought laughter and approving shouts, but Robb raised a hand for quiet. “Make no mistake, though. The Lannisters will march again, and there will be other battles to win before the kingdom is secure.”

The Greatjon roared out, “*King in the North!*” and thrust a mailed fist into the air. The river lords answered with a shout of “*King of the Trident!*” The hall grew thunderous with pounding fists and stamping feet.

Only a few noted Catelyn and Ser Desmond amidst the tumult, but they elbowed their fellows, and slowly a hush grew around her. She held her head high and ignored the eyes. *Let them think what they will. It is Robb’s judgment that matters.*

The sight of Ser Brynden Tully’s craggy face on the dais gave her comfort. A boy she did not know seemed to be acting as Robb’s squire. Behind him stood a young knight in a sand-colored surcoat blazoned with seashells, and an older one who wore three black pepperpots on a saffron bend, across a field of green and silver stripes. Between them were a handsome older lady and a pretty maid who looked to be her daughter. There was another girl as well, near Sansa’s age. The seashells were the sigil of some lesser house, Catelyn knew; the older man’s she did not recognize. *Prisoners?* Why would Robb bring captives onto the dais?

Utherydes Wayn banged his staff on the floor as Ser Desmond escorted her forward. *If Robb looks at me as Edmure did, I do not know what I will do.* But it seemed to her that it was not anger she saw in her son’s eyes, but

something else . . . apprehension, perhaps? No, that made no sense. What should *he* fear? He was the Young Wolf, King of the Trident and the North.

Her uncle was the first to greet her. As black a fish as ever, Ser Brynden had no care for what others might think. He leapt off the dais and pulled Catelyn into his arms. When he said, "It is good to see you home, Cat," she had to struggle to keep her composure. "And you," she whispered.

"Mother."

Catelyn looked up at her tall kingly son. "Your Grace, I have prayed for your safe return. I had heard you were wounded."

"I took an arrow through the arm while storming the Crag," he said. "It's healed well, though. I had the best of care."

"The gods are good, then." Catelyn took a deep breath. *Say it. It cannot be avoided.* "They will have told you what I did. Did they tell you my reasons?"

"For the girls."

"I had five children. Now I have three."

"Aye, my lady." Lord Rickard Karstark pushed past the Greatjon, like some grim specter with his black mail and long ragged grey beard, his narrow face pinched and cold. "And I have one son, who once had three. You have robbed me of my vengeance."

Catelyn faced him calmly. "Lord Rickard, the Kingslayer's dying would not have bought life for your children. His living may buy life for mine."

The lord was unappeased. "Jaime Lannister has played you for a fool. You've bought a bag of empty words, no more. My Torrhen and my Eddard deserved better of you."

"Leave off, Karstark," rumbled the Greatjon, crossing his huge arms against his chest. "It was a mother's folly. Women are made that way."

"A mother's folly?" Lord Karstark rounded on Lord Umber. "I name it treason."

"*Enough.*" For just an instant Robb sounded more like Brandon than his father. "No man calls my lady of Winterfell a traitor in my hearing, Lord Rickard." When he turned to Catelyn, his voice softened. "If I could wish

the Kingslayer back in chains I would. You freed him without my knowledge or consent . . . but what you did, I know you did for love. For Arya and Sansa, and out of grief for Bran and Rickon. Love's not always wise, I've learned. It can lead us to great folly, but we follow our hearts . . . wherever they take us. Don't we, Mother?"

Is that what I did? "If my heart led me into folly, I would gladly make whatever amends I can to Lord Karstark and yourself."

Lord Rickard's face was implacable. "Will your *amends* warm Torrhen and Eddard in the cold graves where the Kingslayer laid them?" He shouldered between the Greatjon and Maege Mormont and left the hall.

Robb made no move to detain him. "Forgive him, Mother."

"If you will forgive me."

"I have. I know what it is to love so greatly you can think of nothing else."

Catelyn bowed her head. "Thank you." *I have not lost this child, at least.*

"We must talk," Robb went on. "You and my uncles. Of this and . . . other things. Steward, call an end."

Utherydes Wayn slammed his staff on the floor and shouted the dismissal, and river lords and northerners alike moved toward the doors. It was only then that Catelyn realized what was amiss. *The wolf. The wolf is not here. Where is Grey Wind?* She knew the direwolf had returned with Robb, she had heard the dogs, but he was not in the hall, not at her son's side where he belonged.

Before she could think to question Robb, however, she found herself surrounded by a circle of well-wishers. Lady Mormont took her hand and said, "My lady, if Cersei Lannister held two of my daughters, I would have done the same." The Greatjon, no respecter of proprieties, lifted her off her feet and squeezed her arms with his huge hairy hands. "Your wolf pup mauled the Kingslayer once, he'll do it again if need be." Galbart Glover and Lord Jason Mallister were cooler, and Jonos Bracken almost icy, but their words were courteous enough. Her brother was the last to approach her. "I pray for your girls as well, Cat. I hope you do not doubt that."

"Of course not." She kissed him. "I love you for it."

When all the words were done, the Great Hall of Riverrun was empty save for Robb, the three Tullys, and the six strangers Catelyn could not place. She eyed them curiously. “My lady, sers, are you new to my son’s cause?”

“New,” said the younger knight, him of the seashells, “but fierce in our courage and firm in our loyalties, as I hope to prove to you, my lady.”

Robb looked uncomfortable. “Mother,” he said, “may I present the Lady Sybell, the wife of Lord Gawen Westerling of the Crag.” The older woman came forward with solemn mien. “Her husband was one of those we took captive in the Whispering Wood.”

Westerling, yes, Catelyn thought. Their banner is six seashells, white on sand. A minor house sworn to the Lannisters.

Robb beckoned the other strangers forward, each in turn. “Ser Rolph Spicer, Lady Sybell’s brother. He was castellan at the Crag when we took it.” The pepperpot knight inclined his head. A square-built man with a broken nose and a close-cropped grey beard, he looked doughty enough. “The children of Lord Gawen and Lady Sybell. Ser Raynald Westerling.” The seashell knight smiled beneath a bushy mustache. Young, lean, rough-hewn, he had good teeth and a thick mop of chestnut hair. “Elenya.” The little girl did a quick curtsy. “Rollam Westerling, my squire.” The boy started to kneel, saw no one else was kneeling, and bowed instead.

“The honor is mine,” Catelyn said. *Can Robb have won the Crag’s allegiance?* If so, it was no wonder the Westerlings were with him. Casterly Rock did not suffer such betrayals gently. Not since Tywin Lannister had been old enough to go to war . . .

The maid came forward last, and very shy. Robb took her hand. “Mother,” he said, “I have the great honor to present you the Lady Jeyne Westerling. Lord Gawen’s elder daughter, and my . . . ah . . . my lady wife.”

The first thought that flew across Catelyn’s mind was, *No, that cannot be, you are only a child.*

The second was, *And besides, you have pledged another.*

The third was, *Mother have mercy, Robb, what have you done?*

Only then came her belated remembrance. *Follies done for love? He has bagged me neat as a hare in a snare. I seem to have already forgiven him.* Mixed with her annoyance was a rueful admiration; the scene had been staged with the cunning worthy of a master mummer . . . or a king. Catelyn saw no choice but to take Jeyne Westerling's hands. "I have a new daughter," she said, more stiffly than she'd intended. She kissed the terrified girl on both cheeks. "Be welcome to our hall and hearth."

"Thank you, my lady. I shall be a good and true wife to Robb, I swear. And as wise a queen as I can."

Queen. Yes, this pretty little girl is a queen, I must remember that. She was pretty, undeniably, with her chestnut curls and heart-shaped face, and that shy smile. Slender, but with good hips, Catelyn noted. *She should have no trouble bearing children, at least.*

Lady Sybell took a hand before any more was said. "We are honored to be joined to House Stark, my lady, but we are also very weary. We have come a long way in a short time. Perhaps we might retire to our chambers, so you may visit with your son?"

"That would be best." Robb kissed his Jeyne. "The steward will find you suitable accommodations."

"I'll take you to him," Ser Edmure Tully volunteered.

"You are most kind," said Lady Sybell.

"Must I go too?" asked the boy, Rollam. "I'm your squire."

Robb laughed. "But I'm not in need of squiring just now."

"Oh."

"His Grace has gotten along for sixteen years without you, Rollam," said Ser Raynald of the seashells. "He will survive a few hours more, I think." Taking his little brother firmly by the hand, he walked him from the hall.

"Your wife is lovely," Catelyn said when they were out of earshot, "and the Westerlings seem worthy . . . though Lord Gawen is Tywin Lannister's sworn man, is he not?"

"Yes. Jason Mallister captured him in the Whispering Wood and has been holding him at Seagard for ransom. Of course I'll free him now, though he may not wish to join me. We wed without his consent, I fear, and this

marriage puts him in dire peril. The Crag is not strong. For love of me, Jeyne may lose all.”

“And you,” she said softly, “have lost the Freys.”

His wince told all. She understood the angry voices now, why Perwyn Frey and Martyn Rivers had left in such haste, trampling Robb’s banner into the ground as they went.

“Dare I ask how many swords come with your bride, Robb?”

“Fifty. A dozen knights.” His voice was glum, as well it might be. When the marriage contract had been made at the Twins, old Lord Walder Frey had sent Robb off with a thousand mounted knights and near three thousand foot. “Jeyne is bright as well as beautiful. And kind as well. She has a gentle heart.”

It is swords you need, not gentle hearts. How could you do this, Robb? How could you be so heedless, so stupid? How could you be so . . . so very . . . young. Reproaches would not serve here, however. All she said was, “Tell me how this came to be.”

“I took her castle and she took my heart.” Robb smiled. “The Crag was weakly garrisoned, so we took it by storm one night. Black Walder and the Smalljon led scaling parties over the walls, while I broke the main gate with a ram. I took an arrow in the arm just before Ser Rolph yielded us the castle. It seemed nothing at first, but it festered. Jeyne had me taken to her own bed, and she nursed me until the fever passed. And she was with me when the Greatjon brought me the news of . . . of Winterfell. Bran and Rickon.” He seemed to have trouble saying his brothers’ names. “That night, she . . . she comforted me, Mother.”

Catelyn did not need to be told what sort of comfort Jeyne Westerling had offered her son. “And you wed her the next day.”

He looked her in the eyes, proud and miserable all at once. “It was the only honorable thing to do. She’s gentle and sweet, Mother, she will make me a good wife.”

“Perhaps. That will not appease Lord Frey.”

“I know,” her son said, stricken. “I’ve made a botch of everything but the battles, haven’t I? I thought the battles would be the hard part, but . . . if I

had listened to you and kept Theon as my hostage, I'd still rule the north, and Bran and Rickon would be alive and safe in Winterfell."

"Perhaps. Or not. Lord Balon might still have chanced war. The last time he reached for a crown, it cost him two sons. He might have thought it a bargain to lose only one this time." She touched his arm. "What happened with the Freys, after you wed?"

Robb shook his head. "With Ser Stevron, I might have been able to make amends, but Ser Ryman is dull-witted as a stone, and Black Walder . . . that one was not named for the color of his beard, I promise you. He went so far as to say that his sisters would not be loath to wed a widower. I would have killed him for that if Jeyne had not begged me to be merciful."

"You have done House Frey a grievous insult, Robb."

"I never meant to. Ser Stevron died for me, and Olyvar was as loyal a squire as any king could want. He asked to stay with me, but Ser Ryman took him with the rest. All their strength. The Greatjon urged me to attack them . . ."

"Fighting your own in the midst of your enemies?" she said. "It would have been the end of you."

"Yes. I thought perhaps we could arrange other matches for Lord Walder's daughters. Ser Wendel Manderly has offered to take one, and the Greatjon tells me his uncles wish to wed again. If Lord Walder will be reasonable—"

"He is *not* reasonable," said Catelyn. "He is proud, and prickly to a fault. You know that. He wanted to be grandfather to a king. You will not appease him with the offer of two hoary old brigands and the second son of the fattest man in the Seven Kingdoms. Not only have you broken your oath, but you've slighted the honor of the Twins by choosing a bride from a lesser house."

Robb bristled at that. "The Westerlings are better blood than the Freys. They're an ancient line, descended from the First Men. The Kings of the Rock sometimes wed Westerlings before the Conquest, and there was another Jeyne Westerling who was queen to King Maegor three hundred years ago."

“All of which will only salt Lord Walder’s wounds. It has always rankled him that older houses look down on the Freys as upstarts. This insult is not the first he’s borne, to hear him tell it. Jon Arryn was disinclined to foster his grandsons, and my father refused the offer of one of his daughters for Edmure.” She inclined her head toward her brother as he rejoined them.

“Your Grace,” Brynden Blackfish said, “perhaps we had best continue this in private.”

“Yes.” Robb sounded tired. “I would kill for a cup of wine. The audience chamber, I think.”

As they started up the steps, Catelyn asked the question that had been troubling her since she entered the hall. “Robb, where is Grey Wind?”

“In the yard, with a haunch of mutton. I told the kennelmaster to see that he was fed.”

“You always kept him with you before.”

“A hall is no place for a wolf. He gets restless, you’ve seen. Growling and snapping. I should never have taken him into battle with me. He’s killed too many men to fear them now. Jeyne’s anxious around him, and he terrifies her mother.”

And there’s the heart of it, Catelyn thought. “He is part of you, Robb. To fear him is to fear you.”

“I am not a wolf, no matter what they call me.” Robb sounded cross. “Grey Wind killed a man at the Crag, another at Ashemark, and six or seven at Oxcross. If you had seen—”

“I saw Bran’s wolf tear out a man’s throat at Winterfell,” she said sharply, “and loved him for it.”

“That’s different. The man at the Crag was a knight Jeyne had known all her life. You can’t blame her for being afraid. Grey Wind doesn’t like her uncle either. He bares his teeth every time Ser Rolph comes near him.”

A chill went through her. “Send Ser Rolph away. At once.”

“Where? Back to the Crag, so the Lannisters can mount his head on a spike? Jeyne loves him. He’s her uncle, and a fair knight besides. I need more men like Rolph Spicer, not fewer. I am not going to banish him just because my wolf doesn’t seem to like the way he smells.”

“Robb.” She stopped and held his arm. “I told you once to keep Theon Greyjoy close, and you did not listen. Listen now. *Send this man away*. I am not saying you must banish him. Find some task that requires a man of courage, some honorable duty, what it is matters not . . . but *do not keep him near you*.”

He frowned. “Should I have Grey Wind sniff all my knights? There might be others whose smell he dislikes.”

“Any man Grey Wind dislikes is a man I do not want close to you. These wolves are more than wolves, Robb. You *must* know that. I think perhaps the gods sent them to us. Your father’s gods, the old gods of the north. Five wolf pups, Robb, five for five Stark children.”

“Six,” said Robb. “There was a wolf for Jon as well. I found them, remember? I know how many there were and where they came from. I used to think the same as you, that the wolves were our guardians, our protectors, until . . .”

“Until?” she prompted.

Robb’s mouth tightened. “. . . until they told me that Theon had murdered Bran and Rickon. Small good their wolves did them. I am no longer a boy, Mother. I’m a king, and I can protect myself.” He sighed. “I will find some duty for Ser Rolph, some pretext to send him away. Not because of his smell, but to ease your mind. You have suffered enough.”

Relieved, Catelyn kissed him lightly on the cheek before the others could come around the turn of the stair, and for a moment he was her boy again, and not her king.

Lord Hoster’s private audience chamber was a small room above the Great Hall, better suited to intimate discussions. Robb took the high seat, removed his crown, and set it on the floor beside him as Catelyn rang for wine. Edmure was filling his uncle’s ear with the whole story of the fight at the Stone Mill. It was only after the servants had come and gone that the Blackfish cleared his throat and said, “I think we’ve all heard sufficient of your boasting, Nephew.”

Edmure was taken aback. “Boasting? What do you mean?”

“I *mean*,” said the Blackfish, “that you owe His Grace your thanks for his forbearance. He played out that mummer’s farce in the Great Hall so as not to shame you before your own people. Had it been me I would have flayed you for your stupidity rather than praising this folly of the fords.”

“Good men died to defend those fords, Uncle.” Edmure sounded outraged. “What, is no one to win victories but the Young Wolf? Did I steal some glory meant for you, Robb?”

“*Your Grace*,” Robb corrected, icy. “You took me for your king, Uncle. Or have you forgotten that as well?”

The Blackfish said, “You were commanded to hold Riverrun, Edmure, no more.”

“I held Riverrun, *and* I bloodied Lord Tywin’s nose—”

“So you did,” said Robb. “But a bloody nose won’t win the war, will it? Did you ever think to ask yourself why we remained in the west so long after Oxcross? You knew I did not have enough men to threaten Lannisport or Casterly Rock.”

“Why . . . there were other castles . . . gold, cattle . . .”

“You think we stayed for *plunder*?” Robb was incredulous. “Uncle, I wanted Lord Tywin to come west.”

“We were all horsed,” Ser Brynden said. “The Lannister host was mainly foot. We planned to run Lord Tywin a merry chase up and down the coast, then slip behind him to take up a strong defensive position athwart the gold road, at a place my scouts had found where the ground would have been greatly in our favor. If he had come at us there, he would have paid a grievous price. But if he did not attack, he would have been trapped in the west, a thousand leagues from where he needed to be. All the while we would have lived off his land, instead of him living off ours.”

“Lord Stannis was about to fall upon King’s Landing,” Robb said. “He might have rid us of Joffrey, the queen, and the Imp in one red stroke. Then we might have been able to make a peace.”

Edmure looked from uncle to nephew. “You never told me.”

“I *told* you to hold Riverrun,” said Robb. “What part of that command did you fail to comprehend?”

“When you stopped Lord Tywin on the Red Fork,” said the Blackfish, “you delayed him just long enough for riders out of Bitterbridge to reach him with word of what was happening to the east. Lord Tywin turned his host at once, joined up with Matthis Rowan and Randyll Tarly near the headwaters of the Blackwater, and made a forced march to Tumbler’s Falls, where he found Mace Tyrell and two of his sons waiting with a huge host and a fleet of barges. They floated down the river, disembarked half a day’s ride from the city, and took Stannis in the rear.”

Catelyn remembered King Renly’s court, as she had seen it at Bitterbridge. A thousand golden roses streaming in the wind, Queen Margaery’s shy smile and soft words, her brother the Knight of Flowers with the bloody linen around his temples. *If you had to fall into a woman’s arms, my son, why couldn’t they have been Margaery Tyrell’s?* The wealth and power of Highgarden could have made all the difference in the fighting yet to come. *And perhaps Grey Wind would have liked the smell of her as well.*

Edmure looked ill. “I never meant . . . *never*, Robb, you must let me make amends. I will lead the van in the next battle!”

For amends, Brother? Or for glory? Catelyn wondered.

“The next battle,” Robb said. “Well, that will be soon enough. Once Joffrey is wed, the Lannisters will take the field against me once more, I don’t doubt, and this time the Tyrells will march beside them. And I may need to fight the Freys as well, if Black Walder has his way . . .”

“So long as Theon Greyjoy sits in your father’s seat with your brothers’ blood on his hands, these other foes must wait,” Catelyn told her son. “Your first duty is to defend your own people, win back Winterfell, and hang Theon in a crow’s cage to die slowly. Or else put off that crown for good, Robb, for men will know that you are no true king at all.”

From the way Robb looked at her, she could tell that it had been a long while since anyone had dared speak to him so bluntly. “When they told me Winterfell had fallen, I wanted to go north at once,” he said, with a hint of defensiveness. “I wanted to free Bran and Rickon, but I thought . . . I never dreamed that Theon could harm them, truly. If I had . . .”

“It is too late for *ifs*, and too late for rescues,” Catelyn said. “All that remains is vengeance.”

“The last word we had from the north, Ser Rodrik had defeated a force of ironmen near Torrhen’s Square, and was assembling a host at Castle Cerwyn to retake Winterfell,” said Robb. “By now he may have done it. There has been no news for a long while. And what of the Trident, if I turn north? I can’t ask the river lords to abandon their own people.”

“No,” said Catelyn. “Leave them to guard their own, and win back the north with northmen.”

“How will you get the northmen to the north?” her brother Edmure asked. “The ironmen control the sunset sea. The Greyjoys hold Moat Cailin as well. No army has ever taken Moat Cailin from the south. Even to march against it is madness. We could be trapped on the causeway, with the ironborn before us and angry Freys at our backs.”

“We must win back the Freys,” said Robb. “With them, we still have some chance of success, however small. Without them, I see no hope. I am willing to give Lord Walder whatever he requires . . . apologies, honors, lands, gold . . . there must be *something* that would soothe his pride . . .”

“Not something,” said Catelyn. “*Someone*.”