

## CATELYN

It was too far to make out the banners clearly, but even through the drifting fog she could see that they were white, with a dark smudge in their center that could only be the direwolf of Stark, grey upon its icy field. When she saw it with her own eyes, Catelyn reined up her horse and bowed her head in thanks. The gods were good. She was not too late.

“They await our coming, my lady,” Ser Wylis Manderly said, “as my lord father swore they would.”

“Let us not keep them waiting any longer, ser.” Ser Brynden Tully put the spurs to his horse and trotted briskly toward the banners. Catelyn rode beside him.

Ser Wylis and his brother Ser Wendel followed, leading their levies, near fifteen hundred men: some twenty-odd knights and as many squires, two hundred mounted lances, swordsmen, and freeriders, and the rest foot, armed with spears, pikes and tridents. Lord Wyman had remained behind to see to the defenses of White Harbor. A man of near sixty years, he had grown too stout to sit a horse. “If I had thought to see war again in my lifetime, I should have eaten a few less eels,” he’d told Catelyn when he met her ship, slapping his massive belly with both hands. His fingers were fat as sausages. “My boys will see you safe to your son, though, have no fear.”

His “boys” were both older than Catelyn, and she might have wished that they did not take after their father quite so closely. Ser Wylis was only a few eels short of not being able to mount his own horse; she pitied the poor animal. Ser Wendel, the younger boy, would have been the fattest man she’d ever known, had she only neglected to meet his father and brother. Wylis was quiet and formal, Wendel loud and boisterous; both had ostentatious walrus mustaches and heads as bare as a baby’s bottom; neither seemed to own a single garment that was not spotted with food stains. Yet she liked them well enough; they had gotten her to Robb, as their father had vowed, and nothing else mattered.

She was pleased to see that her son had sent eyes out, even to the east. The Lannisters would come from the south when they came, but it was good that Robb was being careful. *My son is leading a host to war*, she thought, still only half believing it. She was desperately afraid for him, and for Winterfell, yet she could not deny feeling a certain pride as well. A year ago he had been a boy. What was he now? she wondered.

Outriders spied the Manderly banners—the white merman with trident in hand, rising from a blue-green sea—and hailed them warmly. They were led to a spot of high ground dry enough for a camp. Ser Wylis called a halt there, and remained behind with his men to see the fires laid and the horses tended, while his brother Wendel rode on with Catelyn and her uncle to present their father's respects to their liege lord.

The ground under their horses' hooves was soft and wet. It fell away slowly beneath them as they rode past smoky peat fires, lines of horses, and wagons heavy-laden with hardbread and salt beef. On a stony outcrop of land higher than the surrounding country, they passed a lord's pavilion with walls of heavy sailcloth. Catelyn recognized the banner, the bull moose of the Hornwoods, brown on its dark orange field.

Just beyond, through the mists, she glimpsed the walls and towers of Moat Cailin... or what remained of them. Immense blocks of black basalt, each as large as a crofter's cottage, lay scattered and tumbled like a child's wooden blocks, half-sunk in the soft boggy soil. Nothing else remained of a curtain wall that had once stood as high as Winterfell's. The wooden keep was gone entirely, rotted away a thousand years past, with not so much as a timber to mark where it had stood. All that was left of the great stronghold of the First Men were three towers... three where there had once been twenty, if the tale-tellers could be believed.

The Gatehouse Tower looked sound enough, and even boasted a few feet of standing wall to either side of it. The Drunkard's Tower, off in the bog where the south and west walls had once met, leaned like a man about to spew a bellyful of wine into the gutter. And the tall, slender Children's Tower, where legend said the children of the forest had once called upon their nameless gods to send the hammer of the waters, had lost half its

crown. It looked as if some great beast had taken a bite out of the crenellations along the tower top, and spit the rubble across the bog. All three towers were green with moss. A tree was growing out between the stones on the north side of the Gatehouse Tower, its gnarled limbs festooned with ropy white blankets of ghostskin.

“Gods have mercy,” Ser Brynden exclaimed when he saw what lay before them. “*This* is Moat Cailin? It’s no more than a—”

“—death trap,” Catelyn finished. “I know how it looks, Uncle. I thought the same the first time I saw it, but Ned assured me that this *ruin* is more formidable than it seems. The three surviving towers command the causeway from all sides, and any enemy must pass between them. The bogs here are impenetrable, full of quicksands and suckholes and teeming with snakes. To assault any of the towers, an army would need to wade through waist-deep black muck, cross a moat full of lizard-lions, and scale walls slimy with moss, all the while exposing themselves to fire from archers in the other towers.” She gave her uncle a grim smile. “And when night falls, there are said to be ghosts, cold vengeful spirits of the north who hunger for southron blood.”

Ser Brynden chuckled. “Remind me not to linger here. Last I looked, I was southron myself.”

Standards had been raised atop all three towers. The Karstark sunburst hung from the Drunkard’s Tower, beneath the direwolf; on the Children’s Tower it was the Greatjon’s giant in shattered chains. But on the Gatehouse Tower, the Stark banner flew alone. That was where Robb had made his seat. Catelyn made for it, with Ser Brynden and Ser Wendel behind her, their horses stepping slowly down the log-and-plank road that had been laid across the green-and-black fields of mud.

She found her son surrounded by his father’s lords bannermen, in a drafty hall with a peat fire smoking in a black hearth. He was seated at a massive stone table, a pile of maps and papers in front of him, talking intently with Roose Bolton and the Greatjon. At first he did not notice her... but his wolf did. The great grey beast was lying near the fire, but when Catelyn entered he lifted his head, and his golden eyes met hers. The

lords fell silent one by one, and Robb looked up at the sudden quiet and saw her. “*Mother?*” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Catelyn wanted to run to him, to kiss his sweet brow, to wrap him in her arms and hold him so tightly that he would never come to harm... but here in front of his lords, she dared not. He was playing a man’s part now, and she would not take that away from him. So she held herself at the far end of the basalt slab they were using for a table. The direwolf got to his feet and padded across the room to where she stood. It seemed bigger than a wolf ought to be. “You’ve grown a beard,” she said to Robb, while Grey Wind sniffed her hand.

He rubbed his stubbled jaw, suddenly awkward. “Yes.” His chin hairs were redder than the ones on his head.

“I like it.” Catelyn stroked the wolf’s head, gently. “It makes you look like my brother Edmure.” Grey Wind nipped at her fingers, playful, and trotted back to his place by the fire.

Ser Helman Tallhart was the first to follow the direwolf across the room to pay his respects, kneeling before her and pressing his brow to her hand. “Lady Catelyn,” he said, “you are fair as ever, a welcome sight in troubled times.” The Glovers followed, Galbart and Robett, and Greatjon Umber, and the rest, one by one. Theon Greyjoy was the last. “I had not looked to see you here, my lady,” he said as he knelt.

“I had not thought to be here,” Catelyn said, “until I came ashore at White Harbor, and Lord Wyman told me that Robb had called the banners. You know his son, Ser Wendel.” Wendel Manderly stepped forward and bowed as low as his girth would allow. “And my uncle, Ser Brynden Tully, who has left my sister’s service for mine.”

“The Blackfish,” Robb said. “Thank you for joining us, ser. We need men of your courage. And you, Ser Wendel, I am glad to have you here. Is Ser Rodrik with you as well, Mother? I’ve missed him.”

“Ser Rodrik is on his way north from White Harbor. I have named him castellan and commanded him to hold Winterfell till our return. Maester Luwin is a wise counsellor, but unskilled in the arts of war.”

“Have no fear on that count, Lady Stark,” the Greatjon told her in his bass rumble. “Winterfell is safe. We’ll shove our swords up Tywin Lannister’s bunghole soon enough, begging your pardons, and then it’s on to the Red Keep to free Ned.”

“My lady, a question, as it please you.” Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort, had a small voice, yet when he spoke larger men quieted to listen. His eyes were curiously pale, almost without color, and his look disturbing. “It is said that you hold Lord Tywin’s dwarf son as captive. Have you brought him to us? I vow, we should make good use of such a hostage.”

“I did hold Tyrion Lannister, but no longer,” Catelyn was forced to admit. A chorus of consternation greeted the news. “I was no more pleased than you, my lords. The gods saw fit to free him, with some help from my fool of a sister.” She ought not to be so open in her contempt, she knew, but her parting from the Eyrie had not been pleasant. She had offered to take Lord Robert with her, to foster him at Winterfell for a few years. The company of other boys would do him good, she had dared to suggest. Lysa’s rage had been frightening to behold. “Sister or no,” she had replied, “if you try to steal my son, you will leave by the Moon Door.” After that there was no more to be said.

The lords were anxious to question her further, but Catelyn raised a hand. “No doubt we will have time for all this later, but my journey has fatigued me. I would speak with my son alone. I know you will forgive me, my lords.” She gave them no choice; led by the ever-obliging Lord Hornwood, the bannermen bowed and took their leave. “And you, Theon,” she added when Greyjoy lingered. He smiled and left them.

There was ale and cheese on the table. Catelyn tilled a horn, sat, sipped, and studied her son. He seemed taller than when she’d left, and the wisps of beard did make him look older. “Edmure was sixteen when he grew his first whiskers.”

“I will be sixteen soon enough,” Robb said.

“And you are fifteen now. Fifteen, and leading a host to battle. Can you understand why I might fear, Robb?”

His look grew stubborn. "There was no one else."

"No one?" she said. "Pray, who were those men I saw here a moment ago? Roose Bolton, Rickard Karstark, Galbart and Robett Glover, the Greatjon, Helman Tallhart... you might have given the command to any of them. Gods be good, you might even have sent Theon, though he would not be my choice."

"They are not Starks," he said.

"They are *men*, Robb, seasoned in battle. You were fighting with wooden swords less than a year past."

She saw anger in his eyes at that, but it was gone as quick as it came, and suddenly he was a boy again. "I know," he said, abashed. "Are you... are you sending me back to Winterfell?"

Catelyn sighed. "I should. You ought never have left. Yet I dare not, not now. You have come too far. Someday these lords will look to you as their liege. If I pack you off now, like a child being sent to bed without his supper, they will remember, and laugh about it in their cups. The day will come when you need them to respect you, even fear you a little. Laughter is poison to fear. I will not do that to you, much as I might wish to keep you safe."

"You have my thanks, Mother," he said, his relief obvious beneath the formality.

She reached across his table and touched his hair. "You are my firstborn, Robb. I have only to look at you to remember the day you came into the world, red-faced and squalling."

He rose, clearly uncomfortable with her touch, and walked to the hearth. Grey Wind rubbed his head against his leg. "You know... about Father?"

"Yes." The reports of Robert's sudden death and Ned's fall had frightened Catelyn more than she could say, but she would not let her son see her fear. "Lord Manderly told me when I landed at White Harbor. Have you had any word of your sisters?"

“There was a letter,” Robb said, scratching his direwolf under the jaw. “One for you as well, but it came to Winterfell with mine.” He went to the table, rummaged among some maps and papers, and returned with a crumpled parchment. “This is the one she wrote me, I never thought to bring yours.”

Something in Robb’s tone troubled her. She smoothed out the paper and read. Concern gave way to disbelief, then to anger, and lastly to fear. “This is Cersei’s letter, not your sister’s,” she said when she was done. “The real message is in what Sansa does not say. All this about how kindly and gently the Lannisters are treating her... I know the sound of a threat, even whispered. They have Sansa hostage, and they mean to keep her.”

“There’s no mention of Arya,” Robb pointed out, miserable.

“No.” Catelyn did not want to think what that might mean, not now, not here.

“I had hoped... if you still held the Imp, a trade of hostages...” He took Sansa’s letter and crumpled it in his fist, and she could tell from the way he did it that it was not the first time. “Is there word from the Eyrie? I wrote to Aunt Lysa, asking help. Has she called Lord Arryn’s banners, do you know? Will the knights of the Vale come join us?”

“Only one,” she said, “the best of them, my uncle... but Brynden Blackfish was a Tully first. My sister is not about to stir beyond her Bloody Gate.”

Robb took it hard. “Mother, what are we going to *do*? I brought this whole army together, eighteen thousand men, but I don’t... I’m not certain...” He looked to her, his eyes shining, the proud young lord melted away in an instant, and quick as that he was a child again, a fifteen-year-old boy looking to his mother for answers.

It would not do.

“What are you so afraid of, Robb?” she asked gently.

“I...” He turned his head away, to hide the first tear. “If we march... even if we win... the Lannisters hold Sansa, and Father. They’ll kill them, won’t they?”

“They want us to think so.”

“You mean they’re lying?”

“I do not know, Robb. What I do know is that you have no choice. If you go to King’s Landing and swear fealty, you will never be allowed to leave. If you turn your tail and retreat to Winterfell, your lords will lose all respect for you. Some may even go over to the Lannisters. Then the queen, with that much less to fear, can do as she likes with her prisoners. Our best hope, our *only* true hope, is that you can defeat the foe in the field. If you should chance to take Lord Tywin or the Kingslayer captive, why then a trade might very well be possible, but that is not the heart of it. So long as you have power enough that they must fear you, Ned and your sister should be safe. Cersei is wise enough to know that she may need them to make her peace, should the fighting go against her.”

“What if the fighting *doesn’t* go against her?” Robb asked. “What if it goes against us?”

Catelyn took his hand. “Robb, I will not soften the truth for you. If you lose, there is no hope for any of us. They say there is naught but stone at the heart of Casterly Rock. Remember the fate of Rhaegar’s children.”

She saw the fear in his young eyes then, but there was a strength as well. “Then I will not lose,” he vowed.

“Tell me what you know of the fighting in the riverlands,” she said. She had to learn if he was truly ready.

“Less than a fortnight past, they fought a battle in the hills below the Golden Tooth,” Robb said. “Uncle Edmure had sent Lord Vance and Lord Piper to hold the pass, but the Kingslayer descended on them and put them to flight. Lord Vance was slain. The last word we had was that Lord Piper was falling back to join your brother and his other bannermen at Riverrun, with Jaime Lannister on his heels. That’s not the worst of it, though. All the time they were battling in the pass, Lord Tywin was bringing a second Lannister army around from the south. It’s said to be even larger than Jaime’s host.



“Father must have known that, because he sent out some men to oppose them, under the king’s own banner. He gave the command to some southron lordling, Lord Erik or Derik or something like that, but Ser Raymun Darry rode with him, and the letter said there were other knights as well, and a force of Father’s own guardsmen. Only it was a trap. Lord Derik had no sooner crossed the Red Fork than the Lannisters fell upon him, the king’s banner be damned, and Gregor Clegane took them in the rear as they tried to pull back across the Mummer’s Ford. This Lord Derik and a few others may have escaped, no one is certain, but Ser Raymun was killed, and most of our men from Winterfell. Lord Tywin has closed off the kingsroad, it’s said, and now he’s marching north toward Harrenhal, burning as he goes.”

*Grim and grimmer*, thought Catelyn. It was worse than she’d imagined. “You mean to meet him here?” she asked.

“If he comes so far, but no one thinks he will,” Robb said. “I’ve sent word to Howland Reed, Father’s old friend at Greywater Watch. If the Lannisters come up the Neck, the crannogmen will bleed them every step of the way, but Galbart Glover says Lord Tywin is too smart for that, and Roose Bolton agrees. He’ll stay close to the Trident, they believe, taking the castles of the river lords one by one, until Riverrun stands alone. We need to march south to meet him.”

The very idea of it chilled Catelyn to the bone. What chance would a fifteen-year-old boy have against seasoned battle commanders like Jaime and Tywin Lannister? “Is that wise? You are strongly placed here. It’s said that the old Kings in the North could stand at Moat Cailin and throw back hosts ten times the size of their own.”

“Yes, but our food and supplies are running low, and this is not land we can live off easily. We’ve been waiting for Lord Manderly, but now that his sons have joined us, we need to march.”

She was hearing the lords bannermen speaking with her son’s voice, she realized. Over the years, she had hosted many of them at Winterfell, and been welcomed with Ned to their own hearths and tables. She knew what sorts of men they were, each one. She wondered if Robb did.

And yet there was sense in what they said. This host her son had assembled was not a standing army such as the Free Cities were accustomed to maintain, nor a force of guardsmen paid in coin. Most of them were smallfolk: crofters, fieldhands, fishermen, sheepherders, the sons of innkeepers and traders and tanners, leavened with a smattering of sellswords and freeriders hungry for plunder. When their lords called, they came... but not forever. "Marching is all very well," she said to her son, "but *where*, and to what purpose? What do you mean to do?"

Robb hesitated. "The Greatjon thinks we should take the battle to Lord Tywin and surprise him," he said, "but the Glovers and the Karstarks feel we'd be wiser to go around his army and join up with Uncle Ser Edmure against the Kingslayer." He ran his fingers through his shaggy mane of auburn hair, looking unhappy. "Though by the time we reach Riverrun... I'm not certain..."

"*Be* certain," Catelyn told her son, "or go home and take up that wooden sword again. You cannot afford to seem indecisive in front of men like Roose Bolton and Rickard Karstark. Make no mistake, Robb—these are your bannermen, not your friends. You named yourself battle commander. *Command.*"

Her son looked at her, startled, as if he could not credit what he was hearing. "As you say, Mother."

"I'll ask you again. What do *you* mean to do?"

Robb drew a map across the table, a ragged piece of old leather covered with lines of faded paint. One end curled up from being rolled; he weighed it down with his dagger. "Both plans have virtues, but... look, if we try to swing around Lord Tywin's host, we take the risk of being caught between him and the Kingslayer, and if we attack him... by all reports, he has more men than I do, and a lot more armored horse. The Greatjon says that won't matter if we catch him with his breeches down, but it seems to me that a man who has fought as many battles as Tywin Lannister won't be so easily surprised."

"Good," she said. She could hear echoes of Ned in his voice, as he sat there, puzzling over the map. "Tell me more."

“I’d leave a small force here to hold Moat Cailin, archers mostly, and march the rest down the causeway,” he said, “but once we’re below the Neck, I’d split our host in two. The foot can continue down the kingsroad, while our horsemen cross the Green Fork at the Twins.” He pointed. “When Lord Tywin gets word that we’ve come south, he’ll march north to engage our main host, leaving our riders free to hurry down the west bank to Riverrun.” Robb sat back, not quite daring to smile, but pleased with himself and hungry for her praise.

Catelyn frowned down at the map. “You’d put a river between the two parts of your army.”

“*And* between Jaime and Lord Tywin,” he said eagerly. The smile came at last. “There’s no crossing on the Green Fork above the ruby ford, where Robert won his crown. Not until the Twins, all the way up here, and Lord Frey controls that bridge. He’s your father’s bannerman, isn’t that so?”

*The Late Lord Frey*, Catelyn thought. “He is,” she admitted, “but my father has never trusted him. Nor should you.”

“I won’t,” Robb promised. “What do you think?”

She was impressed despite herself. *He looks like a Tully*, she thought, *yet he’s still his father’s son, and Ned taught him well*. “Which force would you command?”

“The horse,” he answered at once. Again like his father; Ned would always take the more dangerous task himself.

“And the other?”

“The Greatjon is always saying that we should smash Lord Tywin. I thought I’d give him the honor.”

It was his first misstep, but how to make him see it without wounding his fledgling confidence? “Your father once told me that the Greatjon was as fearless as any man he had ever known.”

Robb grinned. “Grey Wind ate two of his fingers, and he *laughed* about it. So you agree, then?”

“Your father is not fearless,” Catelyn pointed out. “He is brave, but that is very different.”

Her son considered that for a moment. “The eastern host will be all that stands between Lord Tywin and Winterfell,” he said thoughtfully. “Well, them and whatever few bowmen I leave here at the Moat. So I don’t want someone fearless, do I?”

“No. You want cold cunning, I should think, not courage.”

“Roose Bolton,” Robb said at once. “That man scares me.”

“Then let us pray he will scare Tywin Lannister as well.”

Robb nodded and rolled up the map. “I’ll give the commands, and assemble an escort to take you home to Winterfell.”

Catelyn had fought to keep herself strong, for Ned’s sake and for this stubborn brave son of theirs. She had put despair and fear aside, as if they were garments she did not choose to wear... but now she saw that she had donned them after all.

“I am not going to Winterfell,” she heard herself say, surprised at the sudden rush of tears that blurred her vision. “My father may be dying behind the walls of Riverrun. My brother is surrounded by foes. I must go to them.”