



CATELYN

Let the kings of winter have their cold crypt under the earth, Catelyn thought. The Tullys drew their strength from the river, and it was to the river they returned when their lives had run their course.

They laid Lord Hoster in a slender wooden boat, clad in shining silver armor, plate-and-mail. His cloak was spread beneath him, rippling blue and red. His surcoat was divided blue-and-red as well. A trout, scaled in silver and bronze, crowned the crest of the greathelm they placed beside his head. On his chest they placed a painted wooden sword, his fingers curled about its hilt. Mail gauntlets hid his wasted hands, and made him look almost strong again. His massive oak-and-iron shield was set by his left side, his hunting horn to his right. The rest of the boat was filled with driftwood and kindling and scraps of parchment, and stones to make it heavy in the water. His banner flew from the prow, the leaping trout of Riverrun.

Seven were chosen to push the funereal boat to the water, in honor of the seven faces of god. Robb was one, Lord Hoster's liege lord. With him were the Lords Bracken, Blackwood, Vance, and Mallister, Ser Marq Piper . . . and Lame Lothar Frey, who had come down from the Twins with the answer they had awaited. Forty soldiers rode in his escort, commanded by Walder Rivers, the eldest of Lord Walder's bastard brood, a stern, grey-haired man with a formidable reputation as a warrior. Their arrival, coming within hours of Lord Hoster's passing, had sent Edmure into a rage.

“Walder Frey should be flayed and quartered!” he’d shouted. “He sends a cripple and a bastard to treat with us, tell me there is no insult meant by that.”

“I have no doubt that Lord Walder chose his envoys with care,” she replied. “It was a peevish thing to do, a petty sort of revenge, but remember who we are dealing with. The Late Lord Frey, Father used to call him. The man is ill-tempered, envious, and above all *prideful*.”

Blessedly, her son had shown better sense than her brother. Robb had greeted the Freys with every courtesy, found barracks space for the escort, and quietly asked Ser Desmond Grell to stand aside so Lothar might have the honor of helping to send Lord Hoster on his last voyage. *He has learned a rough wisdom beyond his years, my son.* House Frey might have abandoned the King in the North, but the Lord of the Crossing remained the most powerful of Riverrun’s bannermen, and Lothar was here in his stead.

The seven launched Lord Hoster from the water stair, wading down the steps as the portcullis was winched upward. Lothar Frey, a soft-bodied portly man, was breathing heavily as they shoved the boat out into the current. Jason Mallister and Tytos Blackwood, at the prow, stood chest deep in the river to guide it on its way.

Catelyn watched from the battlements, waiting and watching as she had waited and watched so many times before. Beneath her, the swift wild Tumblestone plunged like a spear into the side of the broad Red Fork, its blue-white current churning the muddy red-brown flow of the greater river. A morning mist hung over the water, as thin as gossamer and the wisps of memory.

Bran and Rickon will be waiting for him, Catelyn thought sadly, *as once I used to wait.*

The slim boat drifted out from under the red stone arch of the Water Gate, picking up speed as it was caught in the headlong rush of the Tumblestone and pushed out into the tumult where the waters met. As the boat emerged from beneath the high sheltering walls of the castle, its square sail filled with wind, and Catelyn saw sunlight flashing on her father’s helm. Lord Hoster Tully’s rudder held true, and he sailed serenely down the center of the channel, into the rising sun.

“Now,” her uncle urged. Beside him, her brother Edmure—*Lord* Edmure now in truth, and how long would that take to grow used to?—nocked an arrow to his bowstring. His squire held a brand to its point. Edmure waited until the flame caught, then lifted the great bow, drew the string to his ear, and let fly. With a deep *thrum*, the arrow sped upward. Catelyn followed its flight with her eyes and heart, until it plunged into the water with a soft *hiss*, well astern of Lord Hoster’s boat.

Edmure cursed softly. “The wind,” he said, pulling a second arrow. “Again.” The brand kissed the oil-soaked rag behind the arrowhead, the flames went licking up, Edmure lifted, pulled, and released. High and far the arrow flew. Too far. It vanished in the river a dozen yards beyond the boat, its fire winking out in an instant. A flush was creeping up Edmure’s neck, red as his beard. “Once more,” he commanded, taking a third arrow from the quiver. *He is as tight as his bowstring*, Catelyn thought.

Ser Brynden must have seen the same thing. “Let me, my lord,” he offered.

“I can do it,” Edmure insisted. He let them light the arrow, jerked the bow up, took a deep breath, drew back the arrow. For a long moment he seemed to hesitate while the fire crept up the shaft, crackling. Finally he released. The arrow flashed up and up, and finally curved down again, falling, falling . . . and hissing past the billowing sail.

A narrow miss, no more than a handspan, and yet a miss. “The Others take it!” her brother swore. The boat was almost out of range, drifting in and out among the river mists. Wordless, Edmure thrust the bow at his uncle.

“Swiftly,” Ser Brynden said. He nocked an arrow, held it steady for the brand, drew and released before Catelyn was quite sure that the fire had caught . . . but as the shot rose, she saw the flames trailing through the air, a pale orange pennon. The boat had vanished in the mists. Falling, the flaming arrow was swallowed up as well . . . but only for a heartbeat. Then, sudden as hope, they saw the red bloom flower. The sails took fire, and the fog glowed pink and orange. For a moment Catelyn saw the outline of the boat clearly, wreathed in leaping flames.

Watch for me, little cat, she could hear him whisper.

Catelyn reached out blindly, groping for her brother's hand, but Edmure had moved away, to stand alone on the highest point of the battlements. Her uncle Brynden took her hand instead, twining his strong fingers through hers. Together they watched the little fire grow smaller as the burning boat receded in the distance.

And then it was gone . . . drifting downriver still, perhaps, or broken up and sinking. The weight of his armor would carry Lord Hoster down to rest in the soft mud of the riverbed, in the watery halls where the Tullys held eternal court, with schools of fish their last attendants.

No sooner had the burning boat vanished from their sight than Edmure walked off. Catelyn would have liked to embrace him, if only for a moment; to sit for an hour or a night or the turn of a moon to speak of the dead and mourn. Yet she knew as well as he that this was not the time; he was Lord of Riverrun now, and his knights were falling in around him, murmuring condolences and promises of fealty, walling him off from something as small as a sister's grief. Edmure listened, hearing none of the words.

"It is no disgrace to miss your shot," her uncle told her quietly. "Edmure should hear that. The day my own lord father went downriver, Hoster missed as well."

"With his first shaft." Catelyn had been too young to remember, but Lord Hoster had often told the tale. "His second found the sail." She sighed. Edmure was not as strong as he seemed. Their father's death had been a mercy when it came at last, but even so her brother had taken it hard.

Last night in his cups he had broken down and wept, full of regrets for things undone and words unsaid. He ought never to have ridden off to fight his battle on the fords, he told her tearfully; he should have stayed at their father's bedside. "I should have been with him, as you were," he said. "Did he speak of me at the end? Tell me true, Cat. Did he ask for me?"

Lord Hoster's last word had been "*Tansy*," but Catelyn could not bring herself to tell him that. "He whispered your name," she lied, and her brother had nodded gratefully and kissed her hand. *If he had not tried to drown his grief and guilt, he might have been able to bend a bow*, she thought to herself, sighing, but that was something else she dare not say.

The Blackfish escorted her down from the battlements to where Robb stood among his bannermen, his young queen at his side. When he saw her, her son took her silently in his arms.

“Lord Hoster looked as noble as a king, my lady,” murmured Jeyne. “Would that I had been given the chance to know him.”

“And I to know him better,” added Robb.

“He would have wished that too,” said Catelyn. “There were too many leagues between Riverrun and Winterfell.” *And too many mountains and rivers and armies between Riverrun and the Eyrie, it would seem.* Lysa had made no reply to her letter.

And from King’s Landing came only silence as well. By now she had hoped that Brienne and Ser Cleos would have reached the city with their captive. It might even be that Brienne was on her way back, and the girls with her. *Ser Cleos swore he would make the Imp send a raven once the trade was made. He swore it!* Ravens did not always win through. Some bowman could have brought the bird down and roasted him for supper. The letter that would have set her heart at ease might even now be lying by the ashes of some campfire beside a pile of raven bones.

Others were waiting to offer Robb their consolations, so Catelyn stood aside patiently while Lord Jason Mallister, the Greatjon, and Ser Rolph Spicer spoke to him each in turn. But when Lothar Frey approached, she gave his sleeve a tug. Robb turned, and waited to hear what Lothar would say.

“Your Grace.” A plump man in his middle thirties, Lothar Frey had close-set eyes, a pointed beard, and dark hair that fell to his shoulders in ringlets. A leg twisted at birth had earned him the name *Lame Lothar*. He had served as his father’s steward for the past dozen years. “We are loath to intrude upon your grief, but perhaps you might grant us audience tonight?”

“It would be my pleasure,” said Robb. “It was never my wish to sow enmity between us.”

“Nor mine to be the cause of it,” said Queen Jeyne.

Lothar Frey smiled. “I understand, as does my lord father. He instructed me to say that he was young once, and well remembers what it is like to

lose one's heart to beauty."

Catelyn doubted very much that Lord Walder had said any such thing, or that he had ever lost his heart to beauty. The Lord of the Crossing had outlived seven wives and was now wed to his eighth, but he spoke of them only as bedwarmers and brood mares. Still, the words were fairly spoken, and she could scarce object to the compliment. Nor did Robb. "Your father is most gracious," he said. "I shall look forward to our talk."

Lothar bowed, kissed the queen's hand, and withdrew. By then a dozen others had gathered for a word. Robb spoke with them each, giving a thanks here, a smile there, as needed. Only when the last of them was done did he turn back to Catelyn. "There is something we must speak of. Will you walk with me?"

"As you command, Your Grace."

"That wasn't a command, Mother."

"It will be my pleasure, then." Her son had treated her kindly enough since returning to Riverrun, yet he seldom sought her out. If he was more comfortable with his young queen, she could scarcely blame him. *Jeyne makes him smile, and I have nothing to share with him but grief.* He seemed to enjoy the company of his bride's brothers, as well; young Rollam his squire and Ser Raynald his standard-bearer. *They are standing in the boots of those he's lost,* Catelyn realized when she watched them together. *Rollam has taken Bran's place, and Raynald is part Theon and part Jon Snow.* Only with the Westerlings did she see Robb smile, or hear him laugh like the boy he was. To the others he was always the King in the North, head bowed beneath the weight of the crown even when his brows were bare.

Robb kissed his wife gently, promised to see her in their chambers, and went off with his lady mother. His steps led them toward the godswood. "Lothar seemed amiable, that's a hopeful sign. We need the Freys."

"That does not mean we shall have them."

He nodded, and there was glumness to his face and a slope to his shoulders that made her heart go out to him. *The crown is crushing him,* she thought. *He wants so much to be a good king, to be brave and honorable and clever, but the weight is too much for a boy to bear.* Robb was doing all he could, yet still the blows kept falling, one after the other, relentless.

When they brought him word of the battle at Duskendale, where Lord Randyll Tarly had shattered Robett Glover and Ser Helman Tallhart, he might have been expected to rage. Instead he'd stared in dumb disbelief and said, "Duskendale, on the narrow sea? Why would they go to Duskendale?" He'd shook his head, bewildered. "A third of my foot, lost for *Duskendale*?"

"The ironmen have my castle and now the Lannisters hold my brother," Galbart Glover said, in a voice thick with despair. Robett Glover had survived the battle, but had been captured near the kingsroad not long after.

"Not for long," her son promised. "I will offer them Martyn Lannister in exchange. Lord Tywin will have to accept, for his brother's sake." Martyn was Ser Kevan's son, a twin to the Willem that Lord Karstark had butchered. Those murders still haunted her son, Catelyn knew. He had tripled the guard around Martyn, but still feared for his safety.

"I should have traded the Kingslayer for Sansa when you first urged it," Robb said as they walked the gallery. "If I'd offered to wed her to the Knight of Flowers, the Tyrells might be ours instead of Joffrey's. I should have thought of that."

"Your mind was on your battles, and rightly so. Even a king cannot think of everything."

"Battles," muttered Robb as he led her out beneath the trees. "I have won every battle, yet somehow I'm losing the war." He looked up, as if the answer might be written on the sky. "The ironmen hold Winterfell, and Moat Cailin too. Father's dead, and Bran and Rickon, maybe Arya. And now your father too."

She could not let him despair. She knew the taste of that draught too well herself. "My father has been dying for a long time. You could not have changed that. You have made mistakes, Robb, but what king has not? Ned would have been proud of you."

"Mother, there is something you must know."

Catelyn's heart skipped a beat. *This is something he hates. Something he dreads to tell me.* All she could think of was Brienne and her mission. "Is it the Kingslayer?"

“No. It’s Sansa.”

She’s dead, Catelyn thought at once. *Brienne failed, Jaime is dead, and Cersei has killed my sweet girl in retribution.* For a moment she could barely speak. “Is . . . is she gone, Robb?”

“Gone?” He looked startled. “Dead? Oh, Mother, no, not that, they haven’t harmed her, not that way, only . . . a bird came last night, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell you, not until your father was sent to his rest.” Robb took her hand. “They married her to Tyrion Lannister.”

Catelyn’s fingers clutched at his. “The Imp.”

“Yes.”

“He swore to trade her for his brother,” she said numbly. “Sansa and Arya both. We would have them back if we returned his precious Jaime, he swore it before the whole court. How could he marry her, after saying that in sight of gods and men?”

“He’s the Kingslayer’s brother. Oathbreaking runs in their blood.” Robb’s fingers brushed the pommel of his sword. “If I could I’d take his ugly head off. Sansa would be a widow then, and free. There’s no other way that I can see. They made her speak the vows before a septon and don a crimson cloak.”

Catelyn remembered the twisted little man she had seized at the crossroads inn and carried all the way to the Eyrie. “I should have let Lysa push him out her Moon Door. My poor sweet Sansa . . . why would anyone do this to her?”

“For Winterfell,” Robb said at once. “With Bran and Rickon dead, Sansa is my heir. If anything should happen to me . . .”

She clutched tight at his hand. “Nothing will happen to you. *Nothing*. I could not stand it. They took Ned, and your sweet brothers. Sansa is married, Arya is lost, my father’s dead . . . if anything befell you, I would go mad, Robb. You are all I have left. You are all the *north* has left.”

“I am not dead yet, Mother.”

Suddenly Catelyn was full of dread. “Wars need not be fought until the last drop of blood.” Even she could hear the desperation in her voice. “You would not be the first king to bend the knee, nor even the first Stark.”

His mouth tightened. “No. Never.”

“There is no shame in it. Balon Greyjoy bent the knee to Robert when his rebellion failed. Torrhen Stark bent the knee to Aegon the Conqueror rather than see his army face the fires.”

“Did Aegon kill King Torrhen’s father?” He pulled his hand from hers. “Never, I said.”

He is playing the boy now, not the king. “The Lannisters do not need the north. They will require homage and hostages, no more . . . and the Imp will keep Sansa no matter what we do, so they have their hostage. The ironmen will prove a more implacable enemy, I promise you. To have any hope of holding the north, the Greyjoys must leave no single sprig of House Stark alive to dispute their right. Theon’s murdered Bran and Rickon, so now all they need do is kill you . . . *and* Jeyne, yes. Do you think Lord Balon can afford to let her live to bear you heirs?”

Robb’s face was cold. “Is that why you freed the Kingslayer? To make a peace with the Lannisters?”

“I freed Jaime for Sansa’s sake . . . and Arya’s, if she still lives. You know that. But if I nurtured some hope of buying peace as well, was that so ill?”

“Yes,” he said. “The Lannisters killed my father.”

“Do you think I have forgotten that?”

“I don’t know. Have you?”

Catelyn had never struck her children in anger, but she almost struck Robb then. It was an effort to remind herself how frightened and alone he must feel. “You are King in the North, the choice is yours. I only ask that you think on what I’ve said. The singers make much of kings who die valiantly in battle, but your life is worth more than a song. To me at least, who gave it to you.” She lowered her head. “Do I have your leave to go?”

“Yes.” He turned away and drew his sword. What he meant to do with it, she could not say. There was no enemy there, no one to fight. Only her and him, amongst tall trees and fallen leaves. *There are fights no sword can win*, Catelyn wanted to tell him, but she feared the king was deaf to such words.

Hours later, she was sewing in her bedchamber when young Rollam Westerling came running with the summons to supper. *Good*, Catelyn thought, relieved. She had not been certain that her son would want her there, after their quarrel. “A dutiful squire,” she said to Rollam gravely. *Bran would have been the same.*

If Robb seemed cool at table and Edmure surly, Lame Lothar made up for them both. He was the model of courtesy, reminiscing warmly about Lord Hoster, offering Catelyn gentle condolences on the loss of Bran and Rickon, praising Edmure for the victory at Stone Mill, and thanking Robb for the “swift sure justice” he had meted out to Rickard Karstark. Lothar’s bastard brother Walder Rivers was another matter; a harsh sour man with old Lord Walder’s suspicious face, he spoke but seldom and devoted most of his attention to the meat and mead that was set before him.

When all the empty words were said, the queen and the other Westerlings excused themselves, the remains of the meal were cleared away, and Lothar Frey cleared his throat. “Before we turn to the business that brings us here, there is another matter,” he said solemnly. “A grave matter, I fear. I had hoped it would not fall to me to bring you these tidings, but it seems I must. My lord father has had a letter from his grandsons.”

Catelyn had been so lost in grief for her own that she had almost forgotten the two Freys she had agreed to foster. *No more*, she thought. *Mother have mercy, how many more blows can we bear?* Somehow she knew the next words she heard would plunge yet another blade into her heart. “The grandsons at Winterfell?” she made herself ask. “My wards?”

“Walder and Walder, yes. But they are presently at the Dreadfort, my lady. I grieve to tell you this, but there has been a battle. Winterfell is burned.”

“*Burned?*” Robb’s voice was incredulous.

“Your northern lords tried to retake it from the ironmen. When Theon Greyjoy saw that his prize was lost, he put the castle to the torch.”

“We have heard naught of any battle,” said Ser Brynden.

“My nephews are young, I grant you, but they were there. Big Walder wrote the letter, though his cousin signed as well. It was a bloody bit of

business, by their account. Your castellan was slain. Ser Rodrik, was that his name?"

"Ser Rodrik Cassel," said Catelyn numbly. *That dear brave loyal old soul.* She could almost see him, tugging on his fierce white whiskers. "What of our other people?"

"The ironmen put many of them to the sword, I fear."

Wordless with rage, Robb slammed a fist down on the table and turned his face away, so the Freys would not see his tears.

But his mother saw them. *The world grows a little darker every day.* Catelyn's thoughts went to Ser Rodrik's little daughter Beth, to tireless Maester Luwin and cheerful Septon Chayle, Mikken at the forge, Farlen and Palla in the kennels, Old Nan and simple Hodor. Her heart was sick. "Please, not *all*."

"No," said Lame Lothar. "The women and children hid, my nephews Walder and Walder among them. With Winterfell in ruins, the survivors were carried back to the Dreadfort by this son of Lord Bolton's."

"Bolton's *son*?" Robb's voice was strained.

Walder Rivers spoke up. "A bastard son, I believe."

"Not Ramsay Snow? Does Lord Roose have another bastard?" Robb scowled. "This Ramsay was a monster and a murderer, and he died a coward. Or so I was told."

"I cannot speak to that. There is much confusion in any war. Many false reports. All I can tell you is that my nephews claim it was this bastard son of Bolton's who saved the women of Winterfell, and the little ones. They are safe at the Dreadfort now, all those who remain."

"Theon," Robb said suddenly. "What happened to Theon Greyjoy? Was he slain?"

Lame Lothar spread his hands. "That I cannot say, Your Grace. Walder and Walder made no mention of his fate. Perhaps Lord Bolton might know, if he has had word from this son of his."

Ser Brynden said, "We will be certain to ask him."

“You are all distraught, I see. I am sorry to have brought you such fresh grief. Perhaps we should adjourn until the morrow. Our business can wait until you have composed yourselves . . .”

“No,” said Robb, “I want the matter settled.”

Her brother Edmure nodded. “Me as well. Do you have an answer to our offer, my lord?”

“I do.” Lothar smiled. “My lord father bids me tell Your Grace that he will agree to this new marriage alliance between our houses and renew his fealty to the King in the North, upon the condition that the King’s Grace apologize for the insult done to House Frey, in his royal person, face to face.”

An apology was a small enough price to pay, but Catelyn disliked this petty condition of Lord Walder’s at once.

“I am pleased,” Robb said cautiously. “It was never my wish to cause this rift between us, Lothar. The Freys have fought valiantly for my cause. I would have them at my side once more.”

“You are too kind, Your Grace. As you accept these terms, I am then instructed to offer Lord Tully the hand of my sister, the Lady Roslin, a maid of sixteen years. Roslin is my lord father’s youngest daughter by Lady Bethany of House Rosby, his sixth wife. She has a gentle nature and a gift for music.”

Edmure shifted in his seat. “Might not it be better if I first met—”

“You’ll meet when you’re wed,” said Walder Rivers curtly. “Unless Lord Tully feels a need to count her teeth first?”

Edmure kept his temper. “I will take your word so far as her teeth are concerned, but it would be pleasant if I might gaze upon her face before I espoused her.”

“You must accept her now, my lord,” said Walder Rivers. “Else my father’s offer is withdrawn.”

Lame Lothar spread his hands. “My brother has a soldier’s bluntness, but what he says is true. It is my lord father’s wish that this marriage take place at once.”

“*At once?*” Edmure sounded so unhappy that Catelyn had the unworthy thought that perhaps he had been entertaining notions of breaking the betrothal after the fighting was done.

“Has Lord Walder forgotten that we are fighting a war?” Brynden Blackfish asked sharply.

“Scarcely,” said Lothar. “That is why he insists that the marriage take place now, ser. Men die in war, even men who are young and strong. What would become of our alliance should Lord Edmure fall before he took Roslin to bride? And there is my father’s age to consider as well. He is past ninety and not like to see the end of this struggle. It would put his noble heart at peace if he could see his dear Roslin safely wed before the gods take him, so he might die with the knowledge that the girl had a strong husband to cherish and protect her.”

We all want Lord Walder to die happy. Catelyn was growing less and less comfortable with this arrangement. “My brother has just lost his own father. He needs time to mourn.”

“Roslin is a cheerful girl,” said Lothar. “She may be the very thing Lord Edmure needs to help him through his grief.”

“And my grandfather has come to dislike lengthy betrothals,” the bastard Walder Rivers added. “I cannot imagine why.”

Robb gave him a chilly look. “I take your meaning, Rivers. Pray excuse us.”

“As Your Grace commands.” Lame Lothar rose, and his bastard brother helped him hobble from the room.

Edmure was seething. “They’re as much as saying that my promise is worthless. Why should I let that old weasel choose my bride? Lord Walder has other daughters besides this Roslin. Granddaughters as well. I should be offered the same choice you were. I’m his liege lord, he should be overjoyed that I’m willing to wed *any* of them.”

“He is a proud man, and we’ve wounded him,” said Catelyn.

“The Others take his pride! I will not be shamed in my own hall. My answer is no.”

Robb gave him a weary look. "I will not command you. Not in this. But if you refuse, Lord Frey will take it for another slight, and any hope of putting this arights will be gone."

"You cannot know that," Edmure insisted. "Frey has wanted me for one of his daughters since the day I was born. He will not let a chance like this slip between those grasping fingers of his. When Lothar brings him our answer, he'll come wheedling back and accept a betrothal . . . and to a daughter of *my* choosing."

"Perhaps, in time," said Brynden Blackfish. "But can we wait, while Lothar rides back and forth with offers and counters?"

Robb's hands curled into fists. "I *must* get back to the north. My brothers dead, Winterfell burned, my smallfolk put to the sword . . . the gods only know what this bastard of Bolton's is about, or whether Theon is still alive and on the loose. I can't sit here waiting for a wedding that might or might not happen."

"It *must* happen," said Catelyn, though not gladly. "I have no more wish to suffer Walder Frey's insults and complaints than you do, Brother, but I see little choice here. Without this wedding, Robb's cause is lost. Edmure, we must accept."

"*We* must accept?" he echoed peevishly. "I don't see you offering to become the ninth Lady Frey, Cat."

"The eighth Lady Frey is still alive and well, so far as I know," she replied. *Thankfully*. Otherwise it might well have come to that, knowing Lord Walder.

The Blackfish said, "I am the last man in the Seven Kingdoms to tell anyone who they must wed, Nephew. Nonetheless, you *did* say something of making amends for your Battle of the Fords."

"I had in mind a different sort of amends. Single combat with the Kingslayer. Seven years of penance as a begging brother. Swimming the sunset sea with my legs tied." When he saw that no one was smiling, Edmure threw up his hands. "The Others take you all! Very well, I'll wed the wench. As *amends*."