

CATELYN

The woods were full of whispers.

Moonlight winked on the tumbling waters of the stream below as it wound its rocky way along the floor of the valley. Beneath the trees, warhorses whickered softly and pawed at the moist, leafy ground, while men made nervous jests in hushed voices. Now and again, she heard the chink of spears, the faint metallic slither of chain mail, but even those sounds were muffled.

“It should not be long now, my lady,” Hallis Mollen said. He had asked for the honor of protecting her in the battle to come; it was his right, as Winterfell’s captain of guards, and Robb had not refused it to him. She had thirty men around her, charged to keep her unharmed and see her safely home to Winterfell if the fighting went against them. Robb had wanted fifty; Catelyn had insisted that ten would be enough, that he would need every sword for the fight. They made their peace at thirty, neither happy with it.

“It will come when it comes,” Catelyn told him. When it came, she knew it would mean death. Hal’s death perhaps... or hers, or Robb’s. No one was safe. No life was certain. Catelyn was content to wait, to listen to the whispers in the woods and the faint music of the brook, to feel the warm wind in her hair.

She was no stranger to waiting, after all. Her men had always made her wait. “Watch for me, little cat,” her father would always tell her, when he rode off to court or fair or battle. And she would, standing patiently on the battlements of Riverrun as the waters of the Red Fork and the Tumblestone flowed by. He did not always come when he said he would, and days would oftentimes pass as Catelyn stood her vigil, peering out between crenels and through arrow loops until she caught a glimpse of Lord Hoster on his old brown gelding, trotting along the rivershore toward the landing. “Did you watch for me?” he’d ask when he bent to bug her. “Did you, little cat?”

Brandon Stark had bid her wait as well. “I shall not be long, my lady,” he had vowed. “We will be wed on my return.” Yet when the day came at last, it was his brother Eddard who stood beside her in the sept.

Ned had lingered scarcely a fortnight with his new bride before he too had ridden off to war with promises on his lips. At least he had left her with more than words; he had given her a son. Nine moons had waxed and waned, and Robb had been born in Riverrun while his father still warred in the south. She had brought him forth in blood and pain, not knowing whether Ned would ever see him. Her son. He had been so small...

And now it was for Robb that she waited... for Robb, and for Jaime Lannister, the gilded knight who men said had never learned to wait at all. “The Kingslayer is restless, and quick to anger,” her uncle Brynden had told Robb. And he had wagered their lives and their best hope of victory on the truth of what he said.

If Robb was frightened, he gave no sign of it. Catelyn watched her son as he moved among the men, touching one on the shoulder, sharing a jest with another, helping a third to gentle an anxious horse. His armor clinked softly when he moved. Only his head was bare. Catelyn