

Many of their sons had clamored for the honor of riding with the Young Wolf, as they had taken to calling him. Torrhen Karstark and his brother Eddard were among his thirty, and Patrek Mallister, Smalljon Umber, Daryn Hornwood, Theon Greyjoy, no less than five of Walder Frey's vast brood, along with older men like Ser Wendel Manderly and Robin Flint. One of his companions was even a woman: Dacey Mormont, Lady Maege's eldest daughter and heir to Bear Island, a lanky sixfooter who had been given a morningstar at an age when most girls were given dolls. Some of the other lords muttered about that, but Catelyn would not listen to their complaints. "This is not about the honor of your houses," she told them. "This is about keeping my son alive and whole."

And if it comes to that, she wondered, will thiny be enough? Will six thousand be enough?

A bird called faintly in the distance, a high sharp trill that felt like an icy hand on Catelyn's neck. Another bird answered; a third, a fourth. She knew their call well enough, from her years at Winterfell. Snow shrikes. Sometimes you saw them in the deep of winter, when the godswood was white and still. They were northern birds.

They are coming, Catelyn thought.

"They're coming, my lady," Hal Mollen whispered. He was always a man for stating the obvious. "Gods be with us."

She nodded as the woods grew still around them. In the quiet she could hear them, far off yet moving closer; the tread of many horses, the rattle of swords and spears and armor, the murmur of human voices, with here a laugh, and there a curse.

Eons seemed to come and go. The sounds grew louder. She heard more laughter, a shouted command, splashing as they crossed and recrossed the little stream. A horse snorted. A man swore. And then at last she saw him... only for an instant, framed between the branches of the trees as she looked down at the valley floor, yet she knew it was him. Even at a distance, Ser Jaime Lannister was unmistakable. The moonlight had silvered his armor and the gold of his hair, and turned his crimson cloak to black. He was not wearing a helm.

He was there and he was gone again, his silvery armor obscured by the trees once more. Others came behind him, long columns of them, knights and sworn swords and freeriders, three quarters of the Lannister horse.

"He is no man for sitting in a tent while his carpenters build siege towers," Ser Brynden had promised. "He has ridden out with his knights thrice already, to chase down raiders or storm a stubborn holdfast."

Nodding, Robb had studied the map her uncle had drawn him. Ned had taught him to read maps. "Raid him here," he said, pointing. "A few hundred men, no more. Tully banners. When he comes after you, we will be waiting"-his finger moved an inch to the left-"here."

Here was a hush in the night, moonlight and shadows, a thick carpet of dead leaves underfoot, densely wooded ridges sloping gently down to the streambed, the underbrush thinning as the ground fell away.

Here was her son on his stallion, glancing back at her one last time and lifting his sword in salute.