

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