

CATELYN

“My lady, you should have sent word of your coming,” Ser Donnel Waynwood told her as their horses climbed the pass. “We would have sent an escort. The high road is not as safe as it once was, for a party as small as yours.”

“We learned that to our sorrow, Ser Donnel,” Catelyn said. Sometimes she felt as though her heart had turned to stone; six brave men had died to bring her this far, and she could not even find it in her to weep for them. Even their names were fading. “The clansmen harried us day and night. We lost three men in the first attack, and two more in the second, and Lannister’s serving man died of a fever when his wounds festered. When we heard your men approaching, I thought us doomed for certain.” They had drawn up for a last desperate fight, blades in hand and backs to the rock. The dwarf had been whetting the edge of his axe and making some mordant jest when Bronn spotted the banner the riders carried before them, the moon-and-falcon of House Arryn, sky-blue and white. Catelyn had never seen a more welcome sight.

“The clans have grown bolder since Lord Jon died,” Ser Donnel said. He was a stocky youth of twenty years, earnest and homely, with a wide nose and a shock of thick brown hair. “If it were up to me, I would take a hundred men into the mountains, root them out of their fastnesses, and teach them some sharp lessons, but your sister has forbidden it. She would not even permit her knights to fight in the Hand’s tourney. She wants all our swords kept close to home, to defend the Vale... against what, no one is certain. Shadows, some say.” He looked at her anxiously, as if he had suddenly remembered who she was. “I hope I have not spoken out of turn, my lady. I meant no offense.”

“Frank talk does not offend me, Ser Donnel.” Catelyn knew what her sister feared. *Not shadows, Lannisters*, she thought to herself, glancing back to where the dwarf rode beside Bronn. The two of them had grown thick as thieves since Chiggen had died. The little man was more cunning than she

liked. When they had entered the mountains, he had been her captive, bound and helpless. What was he now? Her captive still, yet he rode along with a dirk through his belt and an axe strapped to his saddle, wearing the shadowskin cloak he'd won dicing with the singer and the chainmail hauberk he'd taken off Chiggen's corpse. Two score men flanked the dwarf and the rest of her ragged band, knights and men-at-arms in service to her sister Lysa and Jon Arryn's young son, and yet Tyrion betrayed no hint of fear. *Could I be wrong?* Catelyn wondered, not for the first time. Could he be innocent after all, of Bran and Jon Arryn and all the rest? And if he was, what did that make her? Six men had died to bring him here.

Resolute, she pushed her doubts away. "When we reach your keep, I would take it kindly if you could send for Maester Colemon at once. Ser Rodrik is feverish from his wounds." More than once she had feared the gallant old knight would not survive the journey. Toward the end he could scarcely sit his horse, and Bronn had urged her to leave him to his fate, but Catelyn would not hear of it. They had tied him in the saddle instead, and she had commanded Marillion the singer to watch over him.

Ser Donnel hesitated before he answered. "The Lady Lysa has commanded the maester to remain at the Eyrie at all times, to care for Lord Robert," he said. "We have a septon at the gate who tends to our wounded. He can see to your man's hurts."

Catelyn had more faith in a maester's learning than a septon's prayers. She was about to say as much when she saw the battlements ahead, long parapets built into the very stone of the mountains on either side of them. Where the pass shrank to a narrow defile scarce wide enough for four men to ride abreast, twin watchtowers clung to the rocky slopes, joined by a covered bridge of weathered grey stone that arched above the road. Silent faces watched from arrow slits in tower, battlements, and bridge. When they had climbed almost to the top, a knight rode out to meet them. His horse and his armor were grey, but his cloak was the rippling blue-and-red of Riverrun, and a shiny black fish, wrought in gold and obsidian, pinned its folds against his shoulder. "Who would pass the Bloody Gate?" he called.

“Ser Donnel Waynwood, with the Lady Catelyn Stark and her companions,” the young knight answered.

The Knight of the Gate lifted his visor. “I thought the lady looked familiar. You are far from home, little Cat.”

“And you, Uncle,” she said, smiling despite all she had been through. Hearing that hoarse, smoky voice again took her back twenty years, to the days of her childhood.

“My home is at my back,” he said gruffly.

“Your home is in my heart,” Catelyn told him. “Take off your helm. I would look on your face again.”

“The years have not improved it, I fear,” Brynden Tully said, but when he lifted off the helm, Catelyn saw that he lied. His features were lined and weathered, and time had stolen the auburn from his hair and left him only grey, but the smile was the same, and the bushy eyebrows fat as caterpillars, and the laughter in his deep blue eyes. “Did Lysa know you were coming?”

“There was no time to send word ahead,” Catelyn told him. The others were coming up behind her. “I fear we ride before the storm, Uncle.”

“May we enter the Vale?” Ser Donnel asked. The Waynwoods were ever ones for ceremony.

“In the name of Robert Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie, Defender of the Vale, True Warden of the East, I bid you enter freely, and charge you to keep his peace,” Ser Brynden replied. “Come.”

And so she rode behind him, beneath the shadow of the Bloody Gate where a dozen armies had dashed themselves to pieces in the Age of Heroes. On the far side of the stoneworks, the mountains opened up suddenly upon a vista of green fields, blue sky, and snowcapped mountains that took her breath away. The Vale of Arryn bathed in the morning light.

It stretched before them to the misty east, a tranquil land of rich black soil, wide slow-moving rivers, and hundreds of small lakes that shone like mirrors in the sun, protected on all sides by its sheltering peaks. Wheat and corn and barley grew high in its fields, and even in Highgarden the pumpkins were no larger nor the fruit any sweeter than here. They stood at

the western end of the valley, where the high road crested the last pass and began its winding descent to the bottomlands two miles below. The Vale was narrow here, no more than a half day's ride across, and the northern mountains seemed so close that Catelyn could almost reach out and touch them. Looming over them all was the jagged peak called the Giant's Lance, a mountain that even mountains looked up to, its head lost in icy mists three and a half miles above the valley floor. Over its massive western shoulder flowed the ghost torrent of Alyssa's Tears. Even from this distance, Catelyn could make out the shining silver thread, bright against the dark stone.

When her uncle saw that she had stopped, he moved his horse closer and pointed. "It's there, beside Alyssa's Tears. All you can see from here is a flash of white every now and then, if you look hard and the sun hits the walls just right."

Seven towers, Ned had told her, *like white daggers thrust into the belly of the sky, so high you can stand on the parapets and look down on the clouds*. "How long a ride?" she asked.

"We can be at the mountain by evenfall," Uncle Brynden said, "but the climb will take another day."

Ser Rodrik Cassel spoke up from behind. "My lady," he said, "I fear I can go no farther today." His face sagged beneath his ragged, newgrown whiskers, and he looked so weary Catelyn feared he might fall off his horse.

"Nor should you," she said. "You have done all I could have asked of you, and a hundred times more. My uncle will see me the rest of the way to the Eyrie. Lannister must come with me, but there is no reason that you and the others should not rest here and recover your strength."

"We should be honored to have them to guest," Ser Donnel said with the grave courtesy of the young. Beside Ser Rodrik, only Bronn, Ser Willis Wode, and Marillion the singer remained of the party that had ridden with her from the inn by the crossroads.

"My lady," Marillion said, riding forward. "I beg you allow me to accompany you to the Eyrie, to see the end of the tale as I saw its beginnings." The boy sounded haggard, yet strangely determined; he had a fevered shine to his eyes.

Catelyn had never asked the singer to ride with them; that choice he had made himself, and how he had come to survive the journey when so many braver men lay dead and unburied behind them, she could never say. Yet here he was, with a scruff of beard that made him look almost a man. Perhaps she owed him something for having come this far. "Very well," she told him.

"I'll come as well," Bronn announced.

She liked that less well. Without Bronn she would never have reached the Vale, she knew; the sellsword was as fierce a fighter as she had ever seen, and his sword had helped cut them through to safety. Yet for all that, Catelyn disliked the man. Courage he had, and strength, but there was no kindness in him, and little loyalty. And she had seen him riding beside Lannister far too often, talking in low voices and laughing at some private joke. She would have preferred to separate him from the dwarf here and now, but having agreed that Marillion might continue to the Eyrie, she could see no gracious way to deny that same right to Bronn. "As you wish," she said, although she noted that he had not actually asked her permission.

Ser Willis Wode remained with Ser Rodrik, a soft-spoken septon fussing over their wounds. Their horses were left behind as well, poor ragged things. Ser Donnel promised to send birds ahead to the Eyrie and the Gates of the Moon with the word of their coming. Fresh mounts were brought forth from the stables, surefooted mountain stock with shaggy coats, and within the hour they set forth once again. Catelyn rode beside her uncle as they began the descent to the valley floor. Behind came Bronn, Tyrion Lannister, Marillion, and six of Brynden's men.

Not until they were a third of the way down the mountain path, well out of earshot of the others, did Brynden Tully turn to her and say, "So, child. Tell me about this storm of yours."

"I have not been a child in many years, Uncle," Catelyn said, but she told him nonetheless. It took longer than she would have believed to tell it all, Lysa's letter and Bran's fall, the assassin's dagger and Littlefinger and her chance meeting with Tyrion Lannister in the crossroads inn.

Her uncle listened silently, heavy brows shadowing his eyes as his frown grew deeper. Brynden Tully had always known how to listen... to anyone but her father. He was Lord Hoster's brother, younger by five years, but the two of them had been at war as far back as Catelyn could remember. During one of their louder quarrels, when Catelyn was eight, Lord Hoster had called Brynden "the black goat of the Tully flock." Laughing, Brynden had pointed out that the sigil of their house was a leaping trout, so he ought to be a black *fish* rather than a black goat, and from that day forward he had taken it as his personal emblem.

The war had not ended until the day she and Lysa had been wed. It was at their wedding feast that Brynden told his brother he was leaving Riverrun to serve Lysa and her new husband, the Lord of the Eyrie. Lord Hoster had not spoken his brother's name since, from what Edmure told her in his infrequent letters.

Nonetheless, during all those years of Catelyn's girlhood, it had been Brynden the Blackfish to whom Lord Hoster's children had run with their tears and their tales, when Father was too busy and Mother too ill. Catelyn, Lysa, Edmure... and yes, even Petyr Baelish, their father's ward... he had listened to them all patiently, as he listened now, laughing at their triumphs and sympathizing with their childish misfortunes.

When she was done, her uncle remained silent for a long time, as his horse negotiated the steep, rocky trail. "Your father must be told," he said at last. "If the Lannisters should march, Winterfell is remote and the Vale walled up behind its mountains, but Riverrun lies right in their path."

"I'd had the same fear," Catelyn admitted. "I shall ask Maester Colemon to send a bird when we reach the Eyrie." She had other messages to send as well; the commands that Ned had given her for his bannermen, to ready the defenses of the north. "What is the mood in the Vale?" she asked.

"Angry," Brynden Tully admitted. "Lord Jon was much loved, and the insult was keenly felt when the king named Jaime Lannister to an office the Arryns had held for near three hundred years. Lysa has commanded us to call her son the *True* Warden of the East, but no one is fooled. Nor is your sister alone in wondering at the manner of the Hand's death. None dare say

Jon was murdered, not openly, but suspicion casts a long shadow.” He gave Catelyn a look, his mouth tight. “And there is the boy.”

“The boy? What of him?” She ducked her head as they passed under a low overhang of rock, and around a sharp turn.

Her uncle’s voice was troubled. “Lord Robert,” he sighed. “Six years old, sickly, and prone to weep if you take his dolls away. Jon Arryn’s trueborn heir, by all the gods, yet there are some who say he is too weak to sit his father’s seat, Nestor Royce has been high steward these past fourteen years, while Lord Jon served in King’s Landing, and many whisper that he should rule until the boy comes of age. Others believe that Lysa must marry again, and soon. Already the suitors gather like crows on a battlefield. The Eyrie is full of them.”

“I might have expected that,” Catelyn said. Small wonder there; Lysa was still young, and the kingdom of Mountain and Vale made a handsome wedding gift. “Will Lysa take another husband?”

“She says yes, provided she finds a man who suits her,” Brynden Tully said, “but she has already rejected Lord Nestor and a dozen other suitable men. She swears that this time *she* will choose her lord husband.”

“You of all people can scarce fault her for that.”

Ser Brynden snorted. “Nor do I, but... it seems to me Lysa is only playing at courtship. She enjoys the sport, but I believe your sister intends to rule herself until her boy is old enough to be Lord of the Eyrie in truth as well as name.”

“A woman can rule as wisely as a man,” Catelyn said.

“The *right* woman can,” her uncle said with a sideways glance. “Make no mistake, Cat. Lysa is not you.” He hesitated a moment. “If truth be told, I fear you may not find your sister as helpful as you would like.”

She was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“The Lysa who came back from King’s Landing is not the same girl who went south when her husband was named Hand. Those years were hard for her. You must know. Lord Arryn was a dutiful husband, but their marriage was made from politics, not passion.”

“As was my own.”

“They began the same, but your ending has been happier than your sister’s. Two babes stillborn, twice as many miscarriages, Lord Arryn’s death... Catelyn, the gods gave Lysa only the one child, and he is all your sister lives for now, poor boy. Small wonder she fled rather than see him handed over to the Lannisters. Your sister is *afraid*, child, and the Lannisters are what she fears most. She ran to the Vale, stealing away from the Red Keep like a thief in the night, and all to snatch her son out of the lion’s mouth... and now you have brought the lion to her door.”

“In chains,” Catelyn said. A crevasse yawned on her right, falling away into darkness. She reined up her horse and picked her way along step by careful step.

“Oh?” Her uncle glanced back, to where Tyrion Lannister was making his slow descent behind them. “I see an axe on his saddle, a dirk at his belt, and a sellsword that trails after him like a hungry shadow. Where are the chains, sweet one?”

Catelyn shifted uneasily in her seat. “The dwarf is here, and not by choice. Chains or no, he is my prisoner. Lysa will want him to answer for his crimes no less than I. It was her own lord husband the Lannisters murdered, and her own letter that first warned us against them.”

Brynden Blackfish gave her a weary smile. “I hope you are right, child,” he sighed, in tones that said she was wrong.

The sun was well to the west by the time the slope began to flatten beneath the hooves of their horses. The road widened and grew straight, and for the first time Catelyn noticed wildflowers and grasses growing. Once they reached the valley floor, the going was faster and they made good time, cantering through verdant greenwoods and sleepy little hamlets, past orchards and golden wheat fields, splashing across a dozen sunlit streams. Her uncle sent a standard-bearer ahead of them, a double banner flying from his staff; the moon-and-falcon of House Arryn on high, and below it his own black fish. Farm wagons and merchants’ carts and riders from lesser houses moved aside to let them pass.

Even so, it was full dark before they reached the stout castle that stood at the foot of the Giant's Lance. Torches flickered atop its ramparts, and the horned moon danced upon the dark waters of its moat. The drawbridge was up and the portcullis down, but Catelyn saw lights burning in the gatehouse and spilling from the windows of the square towers beyond.

"The Gates of the Moon," her uncle said as the party drew rein. His standard-bearer rode to the edge of the moat to hail the men in the gatehouse. "Lord Nestor's seat. He should be expecting us. Look up."

Catelyn raised her eyes, up and up and up. At first all she saw was stone and trees, the looming mass of the great mountain shrouded in night, as black as a starless sky. Then she noticed the glow of distant fires well above them; a tower keep, built upon the steep side of the mountain, its lights like orange eyes staring down from above. Above that was another, higher and more distant, and still higher a third, no more than a flickering spark in the sky. And finally, up where the falcons soared, a flash of white in the moonlight. Vertigo washed over her as she stared upward at the pale towers, so far above.

"The Eyrie," she heard Marillion murmur, awed.

The sharp voice of Tyrion Lannister broke in. "The Arryns must not be overfond of company. If you're planning to make us climb that mountain in the dark, I'd rather you kill me here."

"We'll spend the night here and make the ascent on the morrow," Brynden told him.

"I can scarcely wait," the dwarf replied. "How do we get up there? I've no experience at riding goats."

"Mules," Brynden said, smiling.

"There are steps carved into the mountain," Catelyn said. Ned had told her about them when he talked of his youth here with Robert Baratheon and Jon Arryn.

Her uncle nodded. "It is too dark to see them, but the steps are there. Too steep and narrow for horses, but mules can manage them most of the

way. The path is guarded by three waycastles, Stone and Snow and Sky. The mules will take us as far up as Sky.”

Tyrion Lannister glanced up doubtfully. “And beyond that?”

Brynden smiled. “Beyond that, the path is too steep even for mules. We ascend on foot the rest of the way. Or perchance you’d prefer to ride a basket. The Eyrie clings to the mountain directly above Sky, and in its cellars are six great winches with long iron chains to draw supplies up from below. If you prefer, my lord of Lannister, I can arrange for you to ride up with the bread and beer and apples.”

The dwarf gave a bark of laughter. “Would that I were a pumpkin,” he said. “Alas, my lord father would no doubt be most chagrined if his son of Lannister went to his fate like a load of turnips. If you ascend on foot, I fear I must do the same. We Lannisters do have a certain pride.”

“Pride?” Catelyn snapped. His mocking tone and easy manner made her angry. “Arrogance, some might call it. Arrogance and avarice and lust for power.”

“My brother is undoubtedly arrogant,” Tyrion Lannister replied. “My father is the soul of avarice, and my sweet sister Cersei lusts for power with every waking breath. I, however, am innocent as a little lamb. Shall I bleat for you?” He grinned.

The drawbridge came creaking down before she could reply, and they heard the sound of oiled chains as the portcullis was drawn up. Men-at-arms carried burning brands out to light their way, and her uncle led them across the moat. Lord Nestor Royce, High Steward of the Vale and Keeper of the Gates of the Moon, was waiting in the yard to greet them, surrounded by his knights. “Lady Stark,” he said, bowing. He was a massive, barrel-chested man, and his bow was clumsy.

Catelyn dismounted to stand before him. “Lord Nestor,” she said. She knew the man only by reputation; Bronze Yohn’s cousin, from a lesser branch of House Royce, yet still a formidable lord in his own right. “We have had a long and tiring journey. I would beg the hospitality of your roof tonight, if I might.”

“My roof is yours, my lady,” Lord Nestor returned gruffly, “but your sister the Lady Lysa has sent down word from the Eyrie. She wishes to see you at once. The rest of your party will be housed here and sent up at first light.”

Her uncle swung off his horse. “What madness is this?” he said bluntly. Brynden Tully had never been a man to blunt the edge of his words. “A night ascent, with the moon not even full? Even Lysa should know that’s an invitation to a broken neck.”

“The mules know the way, Ser Brynden.” A wiry girl of seventeen or eighteen years stepped up beside Lord Nestor. Her dark hair was cropped short and straight around her head, and she wore riding leathers and a light shirt of silvered ringmail. She bowed to Catelyn, more gracefully than her lord. “I promise you, my lady, no harm will come to you. It would be my honor to take you up. I’ve made the dark climb a hundred times. Mychel says my father must have been a goat.”

She sounded so cocky that Catelyn had to smile. “Do you have a name, child?”

“Mya Stone, if it please you, my lady,” the girl said.

It did not please her; it was an effort for Catelyn to keep the smile on her face. *Stone* was a bastard’s name in the Vale, as *Snow* was in the north, and *Flowers* in Highgarden; in each of the Seven Kingdoms, custom had fashioned a surname for children born with no names of their own. Catelyn had nothing against this girl, but suddenly she could not help but think of Ned’s bastard on the Wall, and the thought made her angry and guilty, both at once. She struggled to find words for a reply.

Lord Nestor filled the silence. “Mya’s a clever girl, and if she vows she will bring you safely to the Lady Lysa, I believe her. She has not failed me yet.”

“Then I put myself in your hands, Mya Stone,” Catelyn said. “Lord Nestor, I charge you to keep a close guard on my prisoner.”

“And I charge you to bring the prisoner a cup of wine and a nicely crisped capon, before he dies of hunger,” Lannister said. “A girl would be

pleasant as well, but I suppose that's too much to ask of you." The sellsword Bronn laughed aloud.

Lord Nestor ignored the banter. "As you say, my lady, so it will be done." Only then did he look at the dwarf. "See our lord of Lannister to a tower cell, and bring him meat and mead."

Catelyn took her leave of her uncle and the others as Tyrion Lannister was led off, then followed the bastard girl through the castle. Two mules were waiting in the upper bailey, saddled and ready. Mya helped her mount one while a guardsman in a sky-blue cloak opened the narrow postern gate. Beyond was dense forest of pine and spruce, and the mountain like a black wall, but the steps were there, chiseled deep into the rock, ascending into the sky. "Some people find it easier if they close their eyes," Mya said as she led the mules through the gate into the dark wood. "When they get frightened or dizzy, sometimes they hold on to the mule too tight. They don't like that."

"I was born a Tully and wed to a Stark," Catelyn said. "I do not frighten easily. Do you plan to light a torch?" The steps were black as pitch.

The girl made a face. "Torches just blind you. On a clear night like this, the moon and the stars are enough. Mychel says I have the eyes of the owl." She mounted and urged her mule up the first step. Catelyn's animal followed of its own accord.

"You mentioned Mychel before," Catelyn said. The mules set the pace, slow but steady. She was perfectly content with that.

"Mychel's my love," Mya explained. "Mychel Redfort. He's squire to Ser Lyn Corbray. We're to wed as soon as he becomes a knight, next year or the year after."

She sounded so like Sansa, so happy and innocent with her dreams. Catelyn smiled, but the smile was tinged with sadness. The Redforts were an old name in the Vale, she knew, with the blood of the First Men in their veins. His love she might be, but no Redfort would ever wed a bastard. His family would arrange a more suitable match for him, to a Corbray or a Waynwood or a Royce, or perhaps a daughter of some greater house outside

the Vale. If Mychel Redfort laid with this girl at all, it would be on the wrong side of the sheet.

The ascent was easier than Catelyn had dared hope. The trees pressed close, leaning over the path to make a rustling green roof that shut out even the moon, so it seemed as though they were moving up a long black tunnel. But the mules were surefooted and tireless, and Mya Stone did indeed seem blessed with night-eyes. They plodded upward, winding their way back and forth across the face of the mountain as the steps twisted and turned. A thick layer of fallen needles carpeted the path, so the shoes of their mules made only the softest sound on the rock. The quiet soothed her, and the gentle rocking motion set Catelyn to swaying in her saddle. Before long she was fighting sleep.

Perhaps she did doze for a moment, for suddenly a massive ironbound gate was looming before them. “Stone,” Mya announced cheerily, dismounting. Iron spikes were set along the tops of formidable stone walls, and two fat round towers overtopped the keep. The gate swung open at Mya’s shout. Inside, the portly knight who commanded the waycastle greeted Mya by name and offered them skewers of charred meat and onions still hot from the spit. Catelyn had not realized how hungry she was. She ate standing in the yard, as stablehands moved their saddles to fresh mules. The hot juices ran down her chin and dripped onto her cloak, but she was too famished to care.

Then it was up onto a new mule and out again into the starlight. The second part of the ascent seemed more treacherous to Catelyn. The trail was steeper, the steps more worn, and here and there littered with pebbles and broken stone. Mya had to dismount a half-dozen times to move fallen rocks from their path. “You don’t want your mule to break a leg up here,” she said. Catelyn was forced to agree. She could feel the altitude more now. The trees were sparser up here, and the wind blew more vigorously, sharp gusts that tugged at her clothing and pushed her hair into her eyes. From time to time the steps doubled back on themselves, and she could see Stone below them, and the Gates of the Moon farther down, its torches no brighter than candles.

Snow was smaller than Stone, a single fortified tower and a timber keep and stable hidden behind a low wall of unmortared rock. Yet it nestled against the Giant's Lance in such a way as to command the entire stone stair above the lower waycastle. An enemy intent on the Eyrie would have to fight his way from Stone step by step, while rocks and arrows rained down from Snow above. The commander, an anxious young knight with a pockmarked face, offered bread and cheese and the chance to warm themselves before his fire, but Mya declined. "We ought to keep going, my lady," she said. "If it please you." Catelyn nodded.

Again they were given fresh mules. Hers was white. Mya smiled when she saw him. "Whitey's a good one, my lady. Sure of foot, even on ice, but you need to be careful. He'll kick if he doesn't like you."

The white mule seemed to like Catelyn; there was no kicking, thank the gods. There was no ice either, and she was grateful for that as well. "My mother says that hundreds of years ago, this was where the snow began," Mya told her. "It was always white above here, and the ice never melted." She shrugged. "I can't remember ever seeing snow this far down the mountain, but maybe it was that way once, in the olden times."

So young, Catelyn thought, trying to remember if she had ever been like that. The girl had lived half her life in summer, and that was all she knew. *Winter is coming, child*, she wanted to tell her. The words were on her lips; she almost said them. Perhaps she was becoming a Stark at last.

Above Snow, the wind was a living thing, howling around them like a wolf in the waste, then falling off to nothing as if to lure them into complacency. The stars seemed brighter up here, so close that she could almost touch them, and the horned moon was huge in the clear black sky. As they climbed, Catelyn found it was better to look up than down. The steps were cracked and broken from centuries of freeze and thaw and the tread of countless mules, and even in the dark the heights put her heart in her throat. When they came to a high saddle between two spires of rock, Mya dismounted. "It's best to lead the mules over," she said. "The wind can be a little scary here, my lady."

Catelyn climbed stiffly from the shadows and looked at the path ahead; twenty feet long and close to three feet wide, but with a precipitous drop to either side. She could hear the wind shrieking. Mya stepped lightly out, her mule following as calmly as if they were crossing a bailey. It was her turn. Yet no sooner had she taken her first step than fear caught Catelyn in its jaws. She could *feel* the emptiness, the vast black gulfs of air that yawned around her. She stopped, trembling, afraid to move. The wind screamed at her and wrenched at her cloak, trying to pull her over the edge. Catelyn edged her foot backward, the most timid of steps, but the mule was behind her, and she could not retreat. *I am going to die here*, she thought. She could feel cold sweat trickling down her back.

“Lady Stark,” Mya called across the gulf. The girl sounded a thousand leagues away. “Are you well?”

Catelyn Tully Stark swallowed what remained of her pride. “I... I cannot do this, child,” she called out.

“Yes you can,” the bastard girl said. “I know you can. Look how wide the path is.”

“I don’t want to look.” The world seemed to be spinning around her, mountain and sky and mules, whirling like a child’s top. Catelyn closed her eyes to steady her ragged breathing.

“I’ll come back for you,” Mya said. “Don’t move, my lady.”

Moving was about the last thing Catelyn was about to do. She listened to the skirling of the wind and the scuffling sound of leather on stone. Then Mya was there, taking her gently by the arm. “Keep your eyes closed if you like. Let go of the rope now, Whitey will take care of himself. Very good, my lady. I’ll lead you over, it’s easy, you’ll see. Give me a step now. That’s it, move your foot, just slide it forward. See. Now another. Easy. You could run across. Another one, go on. Yes.” And so, foot by foot, step by step, the bastard girl led Catelyn across, blind and trembling, while the white mule followed placidly behind them.

The waycastle called Sky was no more than a high, crescent-shaped wall of unmortared stone raised against the side of the mountain, but even the topless towers of Valyria could not have looked more beautiful to

Catelyn Stark. Here at last the snow crown began; Sky's weathered stones were rimed with frost, and long spears of ice hung from the slopes above.

Dawn was breaking in the east as Mya Stone *hallooed* for the guards, and the gates opened before them. Inside the walls there was only a series of ramps and a great tumble of boulders and stones of all sizes. No doubt it would be the easiest thing in the world to begin an avalanche from here. A mouth yawned in the rock face in front of them. "The stables and barracks are in there," Mya said. "The last part is inside the mountain. It can be a little dark, but at least you're out of the wind. This is as far as the mules can go. Past here, well, it's a sort of chimney, more like a stone ladder than proper steps, but it's not too bad. Another hour and we'll be there."

Catelyn looked up. Directly overhead, pale in the dawn light, she could see the foundations of the Eyrie. It could not be more than six hundred feet above them. From below it looked like a small white honeycomb. She remembered what her uncle had said of baskets and winches. "The Lannisters may have their pride," she told Mya, "but the Tullys are born with better sense. I have ridden all day and the best part of a night. Tell them to lower a basket. I shall ride with the turnips."

The sun was well above the mountains by the time Catelyn Stark finally reached the Eyrie. A stocky, silver-haired man in a sky-blue cloak and hammered moon-and-falcon breastplate helped her from the basket; Ser Vardis Egen, captain of Jon Arryn's household guard. Beside him stood Maester Colemon, thin and nervous, with too little hair and too much neck. "Lady Stark," Ser Vardis said, "the pleasure is as great as it is unanticipated." Maester Colemon bobbed his head in agreement. "Indeed it is, my lady, indeed it is. I have sent word to your sister. She left orders to be awakened the instant you arrived."

"I hope she had a good night's rest," Catelyn said with a certain bite in her tone that seemed to go unnoticed.

The men escorted her from the winch room up a spiral stair. The Eyrie was a small castle by the standards of the great houses; seven slender white towers bunched as tightly as arrows in a quiver on a shoulder of the great mountain. It had no need of stables nor smithys nor kennels, but Ned said

its granary was as large as Winterfell's, and its towers could house five hundred men. Yet it seemed strangely deserted to Catelyn as she passed through it, its pale stone halls echoing and empty.

Lysa was waiting alone in her solar, still clad in her bed robes. Her long auburn hair tumbled unbound across bare white shoulders and down her back. A maid stood behind her, brushing out the night's tangles, but when Catelyn entered, her sister rose to her feet, smiling. "Cat," she said. "Oh, Cat, how good it is to see you. My sweet sister." She ran across the chamber and wrapped her sister in her arms. "How long it has been," Lysa murmured against her. "Oh, how very very long."

It had been five years, in truth; five cruel years, for Lysa. They had taken their toll. Her sister was two years the younger, yet she looked older now. Shorter than Catelyn, Lysa had grown thick of body, pale and puffy of face. She had the blue eyes of the Tullys, but hers were pale and watery, never still. Her small mouth had turned petulant. As Catelyn held her, she remembered the slender, high-breasted girl who'd waited beside her that day in the sept at Riverrun. How lovely and full of hope she had been. All that remained of her sister's beauty was the great fall of thick auburn hair that cascaded to her waist.

"You look well," Catelyn lied, "but... tired."

Her sister broke the embrace. "Tired. Yes. Oh, yes." She seemed to notice the others then; her maid, Maester Colemon, Ser Vardis. "Leave us," she told them. "I wish to speak to my sister alone." She held Catelyn's hand as they withdrew...

... and dropped it the instant the door closed. Catelyn saw her face change. It was as if the sun had gone behind a cloud. "Have you taken leave of your *senses*?" Lysa snapped at her. "To bring him *here*, without a word of permission, without so much as a warning, to drag us into your quarrels with the Lannisters..."

"*My* quarrels?" Catelyn could scarce believe what she was hearing. A great fire burned in the hearth, but there was no trace of warmth in Lysa's voice. "They were your quarrels first, sister. It was you who sent me that

cursed letter, you who wrote that the Lannisters had murdered your husband.”

“To warn you, so you could stay away from them! I never meant to *fight* them! Gods, Cat, do you know what you’ve *done*?”

“Mother?” a small voice said. Lysa whirled, her heavy robe swirling around her. Robert Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie, stood in the doorway, clutching a ragged cloth doll and looking at them with large eyes. He was a painfully thin child, small for his age and sickly all his days, and from time to time he trembled. The shaking sickness, the maesters called it. “I heard voices.”

Small wonder, Catelyn thought; Lysa had almost been shouting. Still, her sister looked daggers at her. “This is your aunt Catelyn, baby. My sister, Lady Stark. Do you remember?”

The boy glanced at her blankly. “I think so,” he said, blinking, though he had been less than a year old the last time Catelyn had seen him.

Lysa seated herself near the fire and said, “Come to Mother, my sweet one.” She straightened his bedclothes and fussed with his fine brown hair. “Isn’t he beautiful? And strong too, don’t you believe the things you hear. Jon knew. *The seed is strong*, he told me. His last words. He kept saying Robert’s name, and he grabbed my arm so hard he left marks. *Tell them, the seed is strong*. His seed. He wanted everyone to know what a good strong boy my baby was going to be.”

“Lysa,” Catelyn said, “if you’re right about the Lannisters, all the more reason we must act quickly. We—”

“Not in front of the *baby*,” Lysa said. “He has a delicate temper, don’t you, sweet one?”

“The boy is Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale,” Catelyn reminded her, “and these are no times for delicacy. Ned thinks it may come to war.”

“*Quiet!*” Lysa snapped at her. “You’re scaring the boy.” Little Robert took a quick peek over his shoulder at Catelyn and began to tremble. His doll fell to the rushes, and he pressed himself against his mother. “Don’t be

afraid, my sweet baby,” Lysa whispered. “Mother’s here, nothing will hurt you.” She opened her robe and drew out a pale, heavy breast, tipped with red. The boy grabbed for it eagerly, buried his face against her chest, and began to suck. Lysa stroked his hair.

Catelyn was at a loss for words. *Jon Arryn’s son*, she thought incredulously. She remembered her own baby, three-year-old Rickon, half the age of this boy and five times as fierce. Small wonder the lords of the Vale were restive. For the first time she understood why the king had tried to take the child away from his mother to foster with the Lannisters...

“We’re safe here,” Lysa was saying. Whether to her or to the boy, Catelyn was not sure.

“Don’t be a fool,” Catelyn said, the anger rising in her. “No one is safe. If you think hiding here will make the Lannisters forget you, you are sadly mistaken.”

Lysa covered her boy’s ear with her hand. “Even if they could bring an army through the mountains and past the Bloody Gate, the Eyrie is impregnable. You saw for yourself. No enemy could ever reach us up here.”

Catelyn wanted to slap her. Uncle Brynden had tried to warn her, she realized. “No castle is impregnable.”

“This one is,” Lysa insisted. “Everyone says so. The only thing is, what am I to do with this Imp you have brought me?”

“Is he a bad man?” the Lord of the Eyrie asked, his mother’s breast popping from his mouth, the nipple wet and red.

“A very bad man,” Lysa told him as she covered herself, “but Mother won’t let him harm my little baby.”

“Make him fly,” Robert said eagerly.

Lysa stroked her son’s hair. “Perhaps we will,” she murmured. “Perhaps that is just what we will do.”