

CATELYN

“My lady, you ought cover your head,” Ser Rodrik told her as their horses plodded north. “You will take a chill.”

“It is only water, Ser Rodrik,” Catelyn replied. Her hair hung wet and heavy, a loose strand stuck to her forehead, and she could imagine how ragged and wild she must look, but for once she did not care. The southern rain was soft and warm. Catelyn liked the feel of it on her face, gentle as a mother’s kisses. It took her back to her childhood, to long grey days at Riverrun. She remembered the godswood, drooping branches heavy with moisture, and the sound of her brother’s laughter as he chased her through piles of damp leaves. She remembered making mud pies with Lysa, the weight of them, the mud slick and brown between her fingers. They had served them to Littlefinger, giggling, and he’d eaten so much mud he was sick for a week. How young they all had been.

Catelyn had almost forgotten. In the north, the rain fell cold and hard, and sometimes at night it turned to ice. It was as likely to kill a crop as nurture it, and it sent grown men running for the nearest shelter. That was no rain for little girls to play in.

“I am soaked through,” Ser Rodrik complained. “Even my bones are wet.” The woods pressed close around them, and the steady pattering of rain on leaves was accompanied by the small sucking sounds their horses made as their hooves pulled free of the mud. “We will want a fire tonight, my lady, and a hot meal would serve us both.”

“There is an inn at the crossroads up ahead,” Catelyn told him. She had slept many a night there in her youth, traveling with her father. Lord Hoster Tully had been a restless man in his prime, always riding somewhere. She still remembered the innkeep, a fat woman named Masha Heddle who chewed sourleaf night and day and seemed to have an endless supply of smiles and sweet cakes for the children. The sweet cakes had been soaked with honey, rich and heavy on the tongue, but how Catelyn had dreaded

those smiles. The sourleaf had stained Masha's teeth a dark red, and made her smile a bloody horror.

"An inn," Ser Rodrik repeated wistfully. "If only... but we dare not risk it. If we wish to remain unknown, I think it best we seek out some small holdfast..." He broke off as they heard sounds up the road; splashing water, the clink of mail, a horse's whinny. "Riders," he warned, his hand dropping to the hilt of his sword. Even on the kingsroad, it never hurt to be wary.

They followed the sounds around a lazy bend of the road and saw them; a column of armed men noisily fording a swollen stream. Catelyn reined up to let them pass. The banner in the hand of the foremost rider hung sodden and limp, but the guardsmen wore indigo cloaks and on their shoulders flew the silver eagle of Seagard. "Mallisters," Ser Rodrik whispered to her, as if she had not known. "My lady, best pull up your hood."

Catelyn made no move. Lord Jason Mallister himself rode with them, surrounded by his knights, his son Patrek by his side and their squires close behind. They were riding for King's Landing and the Hand's tourney, she knew. For the past week, the travelers had been thick as flies upon the kingsroad; knights and freeriders, singers with their harps and drums, heavy wagons laden with hops or corn or casks of honey, traders and craftsmen and whores, and all of them moving south.

She studied Lord Jason boldly. The last time she had seen him he had been jesting with her uncle at her wedding feast; the Mallisters stood bannermen to the Tullys, and his gifts had been lavish. His brown hair was salted with white now, his face chiseled gaunt by time, yet the years had not touched his pride. He rode like a man who feared nothing. Catelyn envied him that; she had come to fear so much. As the riders passed, Lord Jason nodded a curt greeting, but it was only a high lord's courtesy to strangers chance met on the road. There was no recognition in those fierce eyes, and his son did not even waste a look.

"He did not know you," Ser Rodrik said after, wondering.

"He saw a pair of mud-spattered travelers by the side of the road, wet and tired. It would never occur to him to suspect that one of them was the

daughter of his liege lord. I think we shall be safe enough at the inn, Ser Rodrik.”

It was near dark when they reached it, at the crossroads north of the great confluence of the Trident. Masha Heddle was fatter and greyer than Catelyn remembered, still chewing her sourleaf, but she gave them only the most cursory of looks, with nary a hint of her ghastly red smile. “Two rooms at the top of the stair, that’s all there is,” she said, chewing all the while. “They’re under the bell tower, you won’t be missing meals, though there’s some thinks it too noisy. Can’t be helped. We’re full up, or near as makes no matter. It’s those rooms or the road.”

It was those rooms, low, dusty garrets at the top of a cramped narrow staircase. “Leave your boots down here,” Masha told them after she’d taken their coin. “The boy will clean them. I won’t have you tracking mud up my stairs. Mind the bell. Those who come late to meals don’t eat.” There were no smiles, and no mention of sweet cakes.

When the supper bell rang, the sound was deafening. Catelyn had changed into dry clothes. She sat by the window, watching rain run down the pane. The glass was milky and full of bubbles, and a wet dusk was falling outside. Catelyn could just make out the muddy crossing where the two great roads met.

The crossroads gave her pause. If they turned west from here, it was an easy ride down to Riverrun. Her father had always given her wise counsel when she needed it most, and she yearned to talk to him, to warn him of the gathering storm. If Winterfell needed to brace for war, how much more so Riverrun, so much closer to King’s Landing, with the power of Casterly Rock looming to the west like a shadow. If only her father had been stronger, she might have chanced it, but Hoster Tully had been bedridden these past two years, and Catelyn was loath to tax him now.

The eastern road was wilder and more dangerous, climbing through rocky foothills and thick forests into the Mountains of the Moon, past high passes and deep chasms to the Vale of Arryn and the stony Fingers beyond. Above the Vale, the Eyrie stood high and impregnable, its towers reaching for the sky. There she would find her sister... and, perhaps, some of the

answers Ned sought. Surely Lysa knew more than she had dared to put in her letter. She might have the very proof that Ned needed to bring the Lannisters to ruin, and if it came to war, they would need the Arryns and the eastern lords who owed them service.

Yet the mountain road was perilous. Shadowcats prowled those passes, rock slides were common, and the mountain clans were lawless brigands, descending from the heights to rob and kill and melting away like snow whenever the knights rode out from the Vale in search of them. Even Jon Arryn, as great a lord as any the Eyrie had ever known, had always traveled in strength when he crossed the mountains. Catelyn's only strength was one elderly knight, armored in loyalty.

No, she thought, Riverrun and the Eyrie would have to wait. Her path ran north to Winterfell, where her sons and her duty were waiting for her. As soon as they were safely past the Neck, she could declare herself to one of Ned's bannermen, and send riders racing ahead with orders to mount a watch on the kingsroad.

The rain obscured the fields beyond the crossroads, but Catelyn saw the land clear enough in her memory. The marketplace was just across the way, and the village a mile farther on, half a hundred white cottages surrounding a small stone sept. There would be more now; the summer had been long and peaceful. North of here the kingsroad ran along the Green Fork of the Trident, through fertile valleys and green woodlands, past thriving towns and stout holdfasts and the castles of the river lords.

Catelyn knew them all: the Blackwoods and the Brackens, ever enemies, whose quarrels her father was obliged to settle; Lady Whent, last of her line, who dwelt with her ghosts in the cavernous vaults of Harrenhal; irascible Lord Frey, who had outlived seven wives and filled his twin castles with children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and bastards and grandbastards as well. All of them were bannermen to the Tullys, their swords sworn to the service of Riverrun. Catelyn wondered if that would be enough, if it came to war. Her father was the staunchest man who'd ever lived, and she had no doubt that he would call his banners... but would the banners come? The Darrys and Rygers and Mootons had sworn oaths to

Riverrun as well, yet they had fought with Rhaegar Targaryen on the Trident, while Lord Frey had arrived with his levies well after the battle was over, leaving some doubt as to which army he had planned to join (theirs, he had assured the victors solemnly in the aftermath, but ever after her father had called him the Late Lord Frey). It must *not* come to war, Catelyn thought fervently. They must not let it.

Ser Rodrik came for her just as the bell ceased its clangor. “We had best make haste if we hope to eat tonight, my lady.”

“It might be safer if we were not knight and lady until we pass the Neck,” she told him. “Common travelers attract less notice. A father and daughter taken to the road on some family business, say.”

“As you say, my lady,” Ser Rodrik agreed. It was only when she laughed that he realized what he’d done. “The old courtesies die hard, my—my daughter.” He tried to tug on his missing whiskers, and sighed with exasperation.

Catelyn took his arm. “Come, Father,” she said. “You’ll find that Masha Heddle sets a good table, I think, but try not to praise her. You truly don’t want to see her smile.”

The common room was long and drafty, with a row of huge wooden kegs at one end and a fireplace at the other. A serving boy ran back and forth with skewers of meat while Masha drew beer from the kegs, chewing her sourleaf all the while.

The benches were crowded, townsfolk and farmers mingling freely with all manner of travelers. The crossroads made for odd companions; dyers with black and purple hands shared a bench with rivermen reeking of fish, an ironsmith thick with muscle squeezed in beside a wizened old septon, hard-bitten sellswords and soft plump merchants swapped news like boon companions.

The company included more swords than Catelyn would have liked. Three by the fire wore the red stallion badge of the Brackens, and there was a large party in blue steel ringmail and capes of a silvery grey. On their shoulder was another familiar sigil, the twin towers of House Frey. She studied their faces, but they were all too young to have known her. The

senior among them would have been no older than Bran when she went north.

Ser Rodrik found them an empty place on the bench near the kitchen. Across the table a handsome youth was fingering a woodharp. “Seven blessings to you, goodfolk,” he said as they sat. An empty wine cup stood on the table before him.

“And to you, singer,” Catelyn returned. Ser Rodrik called for bread and meat and beer in a tone that meant *now*. The singer, a youth of some eighteen years, eyed them boldly and asked where they were going, and from whence they had come, and what news they had, letting the questions fly as quick as arrows and never pausing for an answer. “We left King’s Landing a fortnight ago,” Catelyn replied, answering the safest of his questions.

“That’s where I’m bound,” the youth said. As she had suspected, he was more interested in telling his own story than in hearing theirs. Singers loved nothing half so well as the sound of their own voices. “The Hand’s tourney means rich lords with fat purses. The last time I came away with more silver than I could carry... or would have, if I hadn’t lost it all betting on the Kingslayer to win the day.”

“The gods frown on the gambler,” Ser Rodrik said sternly. He was of the north, and shared the Stark views on tournaments.

“They frowned on me, for certain,” the singer said. “Your cruel gods and the Knight of Flowers altogether did me in.”

“No doubt that was a lesson for you,” Ser Rodrik said.

“It was. This time my coin will champion Ser Loras.”

Ser Rodrik tried to tug at whiskers that were not there, but before he could frame a rebuke the serving boy came scurrying up. He laid trenchers of bread before them and filled them with chunks of browned meat off a skewer, dripping with hot juice. Another skewer held tiny onions, fire peppers, and fat mushrooms. Ser Rodrik set to lustily as the lad ran back to fetch them beer.

“My name is Marillion,” the singer said, plucking a string on his woodharp. “Doubtless you’ve heard me play somewhere?”

His manner made Catelyn smile. Few wandering singers ever ventured as far north as Winterfell, but she knew his like from her girlhood in Riverrun. “I fear not,” she told him.

He drew a plaintive chord from the woodharp. “That is your loss,” he said. “Who was the finest singer you’ve ever heard?”

“Alia of Braavos,” Ser Rodrik answered at once.

“Oh, I’m *much* better than that old stick,” Marillion said. “If you have the silver for a song, I’ll gladly show you.”

“I might have a copper or two, but I’d sooner toss it down a well than pay for your howling,” Ser Rodrik groused. His opinion of singers was well known; music was a lovely thing for girls, but he could not comprehend why any healthy boy would fill his hand with a harp when he might have had a sword.

“Your grandfather has a sour nature,” Marillion said to Catelyn. “I meant to do you honor. An homage to your beauty. In truth, I was made to sing for kings and high lords.”

“Oh, I can see that,” Catelyn said. “Lord Tully is fond of song, I hear. No doubt you’ve been to Riverrun.”

“A hundred times,” the singer said airily. “They keep a chamber for me, and the young lord is like a brother.”

Catelyn smiled, wondering what Edmure would think of that. Another singer had once bedded a girl her brother fancied; he had hated the breed ever since. “And Winterfell?” she asked him. “Have you traveled north?”

“Why would I?” Marillion asked. “It’s all blizzards and bearskins up there, and the Starks know no music but the howling of wolves.” Distantly, she was aware of the door banging open at the far end of the room.

“Innkeep,” a servant’s voice called out behind her, “we have horses that want stabling, and my lord of Lannister requires a room and a hot bath.”

“Oh, gods,” Ser Rodrik said before Catelyn reached out to silence him, her fingers tightening hard around his forearm.

Masha Heddle was bowing and smiling her hideous red smile. “I’m sorry, m’lord, truly, we’re full up, every room.”

There were four of them, Catelyn saw. An old man in the black of the Night’s Watch, two servants... and him, standing there small and bold as life. “My men will steep in your stable, and as for myself, well, I do not require a *large* room, as you can plainly see.” He flashed a mocking grin. “So long as the fire’s warm and the straw reasonably free of fleas, I am a happy man.”

Masha Heddle was beside herself. “M’lord, there’s nothing, it’s the tourney, there’s no help for it, oh...”

Tyrion Lannister pulled a coin from his purse and flicked it up over his head, caught it, tossed it again. Even across the room, where Catelyn sat, the wink of gold was unmistakable.

A freerider in a faded blue cloak lurched to his feet. “You’re welcome to my room, m’lord.”

“Now there’s a clever man,” Lannister said as he sent the coin spinning across the room. The freerider snatched it from the air. “And a nimble one to boot.” The dwarf turned back to Masha Heddle. “You will be able to manage food, I trust?”

“Anything you like, m’lord, anything at all,” the innkeep promised. *And may he choke on it*, Catelyn thought, but it was Bran she saw choking, drowning on his own blood.

Lannister glanced at the nearest tables. “My men will have whatever you’re serving these people. Double portions, we’ve had a long hard ride. I’ll take a roast fowl—chicken, duck, pigeon, it makes no matter. And send up a flagon of your best wine. Yoren, will you sup with me?”

“Aye, m’lord, I will,” the black brother replied.

The dwarf had not so much as glanced toward the far end of the room, and Catelyn was thinking how grateful she was for the crowded benches between them when suddenly Marillion bounded to his feet. “*My lord of Lannister!*” he called out. “I would be pleased to entertain you while you

eat. Let me sing you the lay of your father's great victory at King's Landing!"

"Nothing would be more likely to ruin my supper," the dwarf said dryly. His mismatched eyes considered the singer briefly, started to move away... and found Catelyn. He looked at her for a moment, puzzled. She turned her face away, but too late. The dwarf was smiling. "Lady Stark, what an unexpected pleasure," he said. "I was sorry to miss you at Winterfell."

Marillion gaped at her, confusion giving way to chagrin as Catelyn rose slowly to her feet. She heard Ser Rodrik curse. If only the man had lingered at the Wall, she thought, if only...

"Lady... Stark?" Masha Heddle said thickly.

"I was still Catelyn Tully the last time I bedded here," she told the innkeep. She could hear the muttering, feel the eyes upon her. Catelyn glanced around the room, at the faces of the knights and sworn swords, and took a deep breath to slow the frantic beating of her heart. Did she dare take the risk? There was no time to think it through, only the moment and the sound of her own voice ringing in her ears. "You in the corner," she said to an older man she had not noticed until now. "Is that the black bat of Harrenhal I see embroidered on your surcoat, ser?"

The man got to his feet. "It is, my lady."

"And is Lady Whent a true and honest friend to my father, Lord Hoster Tully of Riverrun?"

"She is," the man replied stoutly.

Ser Rodrik rose quietly and loosened his sword in its scabbard. The dwarf was blinking at them, blank-faced, with puzzlement in his mismatched eyes.

"The red stallion was ever a welcome sight in Riverrun," she said to the trio by the fire. "My father counts Jonos Bracken among his oldest and most loyal bannermen."

The three men-at-arms exchanged uncertain looks. "Our lord is honored by his trust," one of them said hesitantly.

“I envy your father all these fine friends,” Lannister quipped, “but I do not quite see the purpose of this, Lady Stark.”

She ignored him, turning to the large party in blue and grey. They were the heart of the matter; there were more than twenty of them. “I know your sigil as well: the twin towers of Frey. How fares your good lord, sers?”

Their captain rose. “Lord Walder is well, my lady. He plans to take a new wife on his ninetieth name day, and has asked your lord father to honor the wedding with his presence.”

Tyrion Lannister sniggered. That was when Catelyn knew he was hers. “This man came a guest into my house, and there conspired to murder my son, a boy of seven,” she proclaimed to the room at large, pointing. Ser Rodrik moved to her side, his sword in hand. “In the name of King Robert and the good lords you serve, I call upon you to seize him and help me return him to Winterfell to await the king’s justice.”

She did not know what was more satisfying: the sound of a dozen swords drawn as one or the look on Tyrion Lannister’s face.