

CATELYN

It seemed a thousand years ago that Catelyn Stark had carried her infant son out of Riverrun, crossing the Tumblestone in a small boat to begin their journey north to Winterfell. And it was across the Tumblestone that they came home now, though the boy wore plate and mail in place of swaddling clothes.

Robb sat in the bow with Grey Wind, his hand resting on his direwolf's head as the rowers pulled at their oars. Theon Greyjoy was with him. Her uncle Brynden would come behind in the second boat, with the Greatjon and Lord Karstark.

Catelyn took a place toward the stern. They shot down the Tumblestone, letting the strong current push them past the looming Wheel Tower. The splash and rumble of the great waterwheel within was a sound from her girlhood that brought a sad smile to Catelyn's face. From the sandstone walls of the castle, soldiers and servants shouted down her name, and Robb's, and "Winterfell!" From every rampart waved the banner of House Tully: a leaping trout, silver, against a rippling blue-and-red field. It was a stirring sight, yet it did not lift her heart. She wondered if indeed her heart would ever lift again. Oh, Ned...

Below the Wheel Tower, they made a wide turn and knifed through the churning water. The men put their backs into it. The wide arch of the Water Gate came into view, and she heard the creak of heavy chains as the great iron portcullis was winched upward. It rose slowly as they approached, and Catelyn saw that the lower half of it was red with rust. The bottom foot dripped brown mud on them as they passed underneath, the barbed spikes mere inches above their heads. Catelyn gazed up at the bars and wondered how deep the rust went and how well the portcullis would stand up to a ram and whether it ought to be replaced. Thoughts like that were seldom far from her mind these days.

They passed beneath the arch and under the walls, moving from sunlight to shadow and back into sunlight. Boats large and small were tied up all around them, secured to iron rings set in the stone. Her father's guards waited on the water stair with her brother. Ser Edmure Tully was a stocky young man with a shaggy head of auburn hair and a fiery beard. His breastplate was scratched and dented from battle, his blue-and-red cloak stained by blood and smoke. At his side stood the Lord Hos Blackwood, a hard pike of a man with close-cropped salt-and-pepper whiskers and a hook nose. His bright yellow armor was inlaid with jet in elaborate vine-and-leaf patterns, and a cloak sewn from raven feathers draped his thin shoulders. It had been Lord Hos who led the sortie that plucked her brother from the Lannister camp.

"Bring them in," Ser Edmure commanded. Three men scrambled down the stairs knee-deep in the water and pulled the boat close with long hooks. When Grey Wind bounded out, one of them dropped his pole and lurched back, stumbling and sitting down abruptly in the river. The others laughed, and the man got a sheepish look on his face. Theon Greyjoy vaulted over the side of the boat and lifted Catelyn by the waist, setting her on a dry step above him as water lapped around his boots.