

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 cast, 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,