

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.