

rock, wide enough for two wagons to pass abreast; the Water Tower rose from the center of the span, commanding both road and river with its arrow slits, murder holes, and portcullises. It had taken the Freys three generations to complete their bridge; when they were done they'd thrown up stout timber keeps on either bank, so no one might cross without their leave.

The timber had long since given way to stone. The Twins-two squat, ugly, formidable castles, identical in every respect, with the bridge arching between-had guarded the crossing for centuries. High curtain walls, deep moats, and heavy oak-and-iron gates protected the approaches, the bridge footings rose from within stout inner keeps, there was a barbican and portcullis on either bank, and the Water Tower defended the span itself.

One glance was sufficient to tell Catelyn that the castle would not be taken by storm. The battlements bristled with spears and swords and scorpions, there was an archer at every crenel and arrow slit, the drawbridge was up, the portcullis down, the gates closed and barred.

The Greatjon began to curse and swear as soon as he saw what awaited them. Lord Rickard Karstark glowered in silence. "That cannot be assaulted, my lords," Roose Bolton announced.

"Nor can we take it by siege, without an army on the far bank to invest the other castle," Helman Tallhart said gloomily. Across the deep-running green waters, the western twin stood like a reflection of its eastern brother. "Even if we had the time. Which, to be sure, we do not." As the northern lords studied the castle, a sally port opened, a plank bridge slid across the moat, and a dozen knights rode forth to confront them, led by four of Lord Walder's many sons. Their banner bore twin towers, dark blue on a field of pale silver-grey. Ser Stevron Frey, Lord Walder's heir, spoke for them. The Freys all looked like weasels; Ser Stevron, past sixty with grandchildren of his own, looked like an especially old and tired weasel, yet he was polite enough. "My lord father has sent me to greet you, and inquire as to who leads this mighty host."

"I do." Robb spurred his horse forward. He was in his armor, with the direwolf shield of Winterfell strapped to his saddle and Grey Wind padding by his side.

The old knight looked at her son with a faint flicker of amusement in his watery grey eyes, though his gelding whickered uneasily and sidled away from the direwolf. "My lord father would be most honored if you would share meat and mead with him in the castle and explain your purpose here."

His words crashed among the lords bannermen like a great stone from a catapult. Not one of them approved. They cursed, argued, shouted down each other.

"You must not do this, my lord," Galbart Glover pleaded with Robb. "Lord Walder is not to be trusted."

Roose Bolton nodded. "Go in there alone and you're his. He can sell you to the Lannisters, throw you in a dungeon, or slit your throat, as he likes."

"If he wants to talk to us, let him open his gates, and we will all share his meat and mead," declared Ser Wendel Manderly.

"Or let him come out and treat with Robb here, in plain sight of his men and ours," suggested his brother, Ser Wylis.