

Brynden smiled. "Beyond that, the path is too steep even for mules. We ascend on foot the rest of the way. Or perchance you'd prefer to ride a basket. The Eyrie clings to the mountain directly above Sky, and in its cellars are six great winches with long iron chains to draw supplies up from below. If you prefer, my lord of Lannister, I can arrange for you to ride up with the bread and beer and apples."

The dwarf gave a bark of laughter. "Would that I were a pumpkin," he said. "Alas, my lord father would no doubt be most chagrined if his son of Lannister went to his fate like a load of turnips. If you ascend on foot, I fear I must do the same. We Lannisters do have a certain pride."

"Pride?" Catelyn snapped. His mocking tone and easy manner made her angry. "Arrogance, some might call it. Arrogance and avarice and lust for power."

"My brother is undoubtedly arrogant," Tyrion Lannister replied. "My father is the soul of avarice, and my sweet sister Cersei lusts for power with every waking breath. I, however, am innocent as a little lamb. Shall I bleat for you?" He grinned.

The drawbridge came creaking down before she could reply, and they heard the sound of oiled chains as the portcullis was drawn up. Men-at-arms carried burning brands out to light their way, and her uncle led them across the moat. Lord Nestor Royce, High Steward of the Vale and Keeper of the Gates of the Moon, was waiting in the yard to greet them, surrounded by his knights. "Lady Stark," he said, bowing. He was a massive, barrel-chested man, and his bow was clumsy.

Catelyn dismounted to stand before him. "Lord Nestor," she said. She knew the man only by reputation; Bronze Yohn's cousin, from a lesser branch of House Royce, yet still a formidable lord in his own right. "We have had a long and tiring journey. I would beg the hospitality of your roof tonight, if I might."

"My roof is yours, my lady," Lord Nestor returned gruffly, "but your sister the Lady Lysa has sent down word from the Eyrie. She wishes to see you at once. The rest of your party will be housed here and sent up at first light."

Her uncle swung off his horse. "What madness is this?" he said bluntly. Brynden Tully had never been a man to blunt the edge of his words. "A night ascent, with the moon not even full? Even Lysa should know that's an invitation to a broken neck."

"The mules know the way, Ser Brynden." A wiry girl of seventeen or eighteen years stepped up beside Lord Nestor. Her dark hair was cropped short and straight around her head, and she wore riding leathers and a light shirt of silvered ringmail. She bowed to Catelyn, more gracefully than her lord. "I promise you, my lady, no harm will come to you. It would be my honor to take you up. I've made the dark climb a hundred times. Mychel says my father must have been a goat."

She sounded so cocky that Catelyn had to smile. "Do you have a name, child?"

"Mya Stone, if it please you, my lady," the girl said.

It did not please her; it was an effort for Catelyn to keep the smile on her face. Stone was a bastard's name in the Vale, as Snow was in the north, and Flowers in Highgarden; in each of the Seven Kingdoms, custom had fashioned a surname for children born with no names of their own. Catelyn had nothing against this girl, but suddenly she could not help but think of Ned's bastard