

CATELYN

Of all the rooms in Winterfell's Great Keep, Catelyn's bedchambers were the hottest. She seldom had to light a fire. The castle had been built over natural hot springs, and the scalding waters rushed through its walls and chambers like blood through a man's body, driving the chill from the stone halls, filling the glass gardens with a moist warmth, keeping the earth from freezing. Open pools smoked day and night in a dozen small courtyards. That was a little thing, in summer; in winter, it was the difference between life and death.

Catelyn's bath was always hot and steaming, and her walls warm to the touch. The warmth reminded her of Riverrun, of days in the sun with Lysa and Edmure, but Ned could never abide the heat. The Starks were made for the cold, he would tell her, and she would laugh and tell him in that case they had certainly built their castle in the wrong place.

So when they had finished, Ned rolled off and climbed from her bed, as he had a thousand times before. He crossed the room, pulled back the heavy tapestries, and threw open the high narrow windows one by one, letting the night air into the chamber.

The wind swirled around him as he stood facing the dark, naked and empty-handed. Catelyn pulled the furs to her chin and watched him. He looked somehow smaller and more vulnerable, like the youth she had wed in the sept at Riverrun, fifteen long years gone. Her loins still ached from the urgency of his lovemaking. It was a good ache. She could feel his seed within her. She prayed that it might quicken there. It had been three years since Rickon. She was not too old. She could give him another son.

"I will refuse him," Ned said as he turned back to her. His eyes were haunted, his voice thick with doubt.

Catelyn sat up in the bed. "You cannot. You *must* not."

"My duties are here in the north. I have no wish to be Robert's Hand."

“He will not understand that. He is a king now, and kings are not like other men. If you refuse to serve him, he will wonder why, and sooner or later he will begin to suspect that you oppose him. Can’t you see the danger that would put us in?”

Ned shook his head, refusing to believe. “Robert would never harm me or any of mine. We were closer than brothers. He loves me. If I refuse him, he will roar and curse and bluster, and in a week we will laugh about it together. I know the man!”

“You knew the man,” she said. “The king is a stranger to you.” Catelyn remembered the direwolf dead in the snow, the broken antler lodged deep in her throat. She had to make him see. “Pride is everything to a king, my lord. Robert came all this way to see you, to bring you these great honors, you cannot throw them back in his face.”

“Honors?” Ned laughed bitterly.

“In his eyes, yes,” she said.

“And in yours?”

“*And* in mine,” she blazed, angry now. Why couldn’t he see? “He offers his own son in marriage to our daughter, what else would you call that? Sansa might someday be queen. Her sons could rule from the Wall to the mountains of Dorne. What is so wrong with that?”

“Gods, Catelyn, Sansa is only *eleven*,” Ned said. “And Joffrey... Joffrey is...”

She finished for him. “...crown prince, and heir to the Iron Throne. And I was only twelve when my father promised me to your brother Brandon.”

That brought a bitter twist to Ned’s mouth. “Brandon. Yes. Brandon would know what to do. He always did. It was all meant for Brandon. You, Winterfell, everything. He was born to be a King’s Hand and a father to queens. I never asked for this cup to pass to me.”

“Perhaps not,” Catelyn said, “but Brandon is dead, and the cup has passed, and you must drink from it, like it or not.”

Ned turned away from her, back to the night. He stood staring out in the darkness, watching the moon and the stars perhaps, or perhaps the sentries on the wall.

Catelyn softened then, to see his pain. Eddard Stark had married her in Brandon's place, as custom decreed, but the shadow of his dead brother still lay between them, as did the other, the shadow of the woman he would not name, the woman who had borne him his bastard son.

She was about to go to him when the knock came at the door, loud and unexpected. Ned turned, frowning. "What is it?"

Desmond's voice came through the door. "My lord, Maester Luwin is without and begs urgent audience."

"You told him I had left orders not to be disturbed?"

"Yes, my lord. He insists."

"Very well. Send him in."

Ned crossed to the wardrobe and slipped on a heavy robe. Catelyn realized suddenly how cold it had become. She sat up in bed and pulled the furs to her chin. "Perhaps we should close the windows," she suggested.

Ned nodded absently. Maester Luwin was shown in.

The maester was a small grey man. His eyes were grey, and quick, and saw much. His hair was grey, what little the years had left him. His robe was grey wool, trimmed with white fur, the Stark colors. Its great floppy sleeves had pockets hidden inside. Luwin was always tucking things into those sleeves and producing other things from them: books, messages, strange artifacts, toys for the children. With all he kept hidden in his sleeves, Catelyn was surprised that Maester Luwin could lift his arms at all.

The maester waited until the door had closed behind him before he spoke. "My lord," he said to Ned, "pardon for disturbing your rest. I have been left a message."

Ned looked irritated. "Been *left*? By whom? Has there been a rider? I was not told."

"There was no rider, my lord. Only a carved wooden box, left on a table in my observatory while I napped. My servants saw no one, but it

must have been brought by someone in the king's party. We have had no other visitors from the south."

"A wooden box, you say?" Catelyn said.

"Inside was a fine new lens for the observatory, from Myr by the look of it. The lenscrafters of Myr are without equal."

Ned frowned. He had little patience for this sort of thing, Catelyn knew. "A lens," he said. "What has that to do with me?"

"I asked the same question," Maester Luwin said. "Clearly there was more to this than the seeming."

Under the heavy weight of her furs, Catelyn shivered. "A lens is an instrument to help us see."

"Indeed it is." He fingered the collar of his order; a heavy chain worn tight around the neck beneath his robe, each link forged from a different metal.

Catelyn could feel dread stirring inside her once again. "What is it that they would have us see more clearly?"

"The very thing I asked myself." Maester Luwin drew a tightly rolled paper out of his sleeve. "I found the true message concealed within a false bottom when I dismantled the box the lens had come in, but it is not for my eyes."

Ned held out his hand. "Let me have it, then."

Luwin did not stir. "Pardons, my lord. The message is not for you either. It is marked for the eyes of the Lady Catelyn, and her alone. May I approach?"

Catelyn nodded, not trusting to speak. The maester placed the paper on the table beside the bed. It was sealed with a small blob of blue wax. Luwin bowed and began to retreat.

"Stay," Ned commanded him. His voice was grave. He looked at Catelyn. "What is it? My lady, you're shaking."

"I'm afraid," she admitted. She reached out and took the letter in trembling hands. The furs dropped away from her nakedness, forgotten. In

the blue wax was the moon-and-falcon seal of House Arryn. “It’s from Lysa.” Catelyn looked at her husband. “It will not make us glad,” she told him. “There is grief in this message, Ned. I can feel it.”

Ned frowned, his face darkening. “Open it.”

Catelyn broke the seal.

Her eyes moved over the words. At first they made no sense to her. Then she remembered. “Lysa took no chances. When we were girls together, we had a private language, she and I.”

“Can you read it?”

“Yes,” Catelyn admitted.

“Then tell us.”

“Perhaps I should withdraw,” Maester Luwin said.

“No,” Catelyn said. “We will need your counsel.” She threw back the furs and climbed from the bed. The night air was as cold as the grave on her bare skin as she padded across the room.

Maester Luwin averted his eyes. Even Ned looked shocked. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Lighting a fire,” Catelyn told him. She found a dressing gown and shrugged into it, then knelt over the cold hearth.

“Maester Luwin—” Ned began.

“Maester Luwin has delivered all my children,” Catelyn said. “This is no time for false modesty.” She slid the paper in among the kindling and placed the heavier logs on top of it.

Ned crossed the room, took her by the arm, and pulled her to her feet. He held her there, his face inches from her. “My lady, tell me! What was this message?”

Catelyn stiffened in his grasp. “A warning,” she said softly. “If we have the wits to hear.”

His eyes searched her face. “Go on.”

“Lysa says Jon Arryn was murdered.”

His fingers tightened on her arm. “By whom?”

“The Lannisters,” she told him. “The queen.”

Ned released his hold on her arm. There were deep red marks on her skin. “Gods,” he whispered. His voice was hoarse. “Your sister is sick with grief. She cannot know what she is saying.”

“She knows,” Catelyn said. “Lysa is impulsive, yes, but this message was carefully planned, cleverly hidden. She knew it meant death if her letter fell into the wrong hands. To risk so much, she must have had more than mere suspicion.” Catelyn looked to her husband. “Now we truly have no choice. You *must* be Robert’s Hand. You must go south with him and learn the truth.”

She saw at once that Ned had reached a very different conclusion. “The only truths I know are here. The south is a nest of adders I would do better to avoid.”

Luwin plucked at his chain collar where it had chafed the soft skin of his throat. “The Hand of the King has great power, my lord. Power to find the truth of Lord Arryn’s death, to bring his killers to the king’s justice. Power to protect Lady Arryn and her son, if the worst be true.”

Ned glanced helplessly around the bedchamber. Catelyn’s heart went out to him, but she knew she could not take him in her arms just then. First the victory must be won, for her children’s sake. “You say you love Robert like a brother. Would you leave your brother surrounded by Lannisters?”

“The Others take both of you,” Ned muttered darkly. He turned away from them and went to the window. She did not speak, nor did the maester. They waited, quiet, while Eddard Stark said a silent farewell to the home he loved. When he turned away from the window at last, his voice was tired and full of melancholy, and moisture glittered faintly in the corners of his eyes. “My father went south once, to answer the summons of a king. He never came home again.”

“A different time,” Maester Luwin said. “A different king.”

“Yes,” Ned said dully. He seated himself in a chair by the hearth. “Catelyn, you shall stay here in Winterfell.”

His words were like an icy draft through her heart. “No,” she said, suddenly afraid. Was this to be her punishment? Never to see his face again, nor to feel his arms around her?

“Yes,” Ned said, in words that would brook no argument. “You must govern the north in my stead, while I run Robert’s errands. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell. Robb is fourteen. Soon enough, he will be a man grown. He must learn to rule, and I will not be here for him. Make him part of your councils. He must be ready when his time comes.”

“Gods will, not for many years,” Maester Luwin murmured.

“Maester Luwin, I trust you as I would my own blood. Give my wife your voice in all things great and small. Teach my son the things he needs to know. Winter is coming.”

Maester Luwin nodded gravely. Then silence fell, until Catelyn found her courage and asked the question whose answer she most dreaded. “What of the other children?”

Ned stood, and took her in his arms, and held her face close to his. “Rickon is very young,” he said gently. “He should stay here with you and Robb. The others I would take with me.”

“I could not bear it,” Catelyn said, trembling.

“You must,” he said. “Sansa must wed Joffrey, that is clear now, we must give them no grounds to suspect our devotion. And it is past time that Arya learned the ways of a southron court. In a few years she will be of an age to marry too.”

Sansa would shine in the south, Catelyn thought to herself, and the gods knew that Arya needed refinement. Reluctantly, she let go of them in her heart. But not Bran. Never Bran. “Yes,” she said, “but please, Ned, for the love you bear me, let Bran remain here at Winterfell. He is only seven.”

“I was eight when my father sent me to foster at the Eyrie,” Ned said. “Ser Rodrik tells me there is bad feeling between Robb and Prince Joffrey. That is not healthy. Bran can bridge that distance. He is a sweet boy, quick to laugh, easy to love. Let him grow up with the young princes, let him

become their friend as Robert became mine. Our House will be the safer for it.”

He was right; Catelyn knew it. It did not make the pain any easier to bear. She would lose all four of them, then: Ned, and both girls, and her sweet, loving Bran. Only Robb and little Rickon would be left to her. She felt lonely already. Winterfell was such a vast place. “Keep him off the walls, then,” she said bravely. “You know how Bran loves to climb.”

Ned kissed the tears from her eyes before they could fall. “Thank you, my lady,” he whispered. “This is hard, I know.”

“What of Jon Snow, my lord?” Maester Luwin asked.

Catelyn tensed at the mention of the name. Ned felt the anger in her, and pulled away.

Many men fathered bastards. Catelyn had grown up with that knowledge. It came as no surprise to her, in the first year of her marriage, to learn that Ned had fathered a child on some girl chance met on campaign. He had a man’s needs, after all, and they had spent that year apart, Ned off at war in the south while she remained safe in her father’s castle at Riverrun. Her thoughts were more of Robb, the infant at her breast, than of the husband she scarcely knew. He was welcome to whatever solace he might find between battles. And if his seed quickened, she expected he would see to the child’s needs.

He did more than that. The Starks were not like other men. Ned brought his bastard home with him, and called him “son” for all the north to see. When the wars were over at last, and Catelyn rode to Winterfell, Jon and his wet nurse had already taken up residence.

That cut deep. Ned would not speak of the mother, not so much as a word, but a castle has no secrets, and Catelyn heard her maids repeating tales they heard from the lips of her husband’s soldiers. They whispered of Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, deadliest of the seven knights of Aerys’s Kingsguard, and of how their young lord had slain him in single combat. And they told how afterward Ned had carried Ser Arthur’s sword back to the beautiful young sister who awaited him in a castle called Starfall on the shores of the Summer Sea. The Lady Ashara Dayne, tall and fair,

with haunting violet eyes. It had taken her a fortnight to marshal her courage, but finally, in bed one night, Catelyn had asked her husband the truth of it, asked him to his face.

That was the only time in all their years that Ned had ever frightened her. “Never ask me about Jon,” he said, cold as ice. “He is my blood, and that is all you need to know. And now I will learn where you heard that name, my lady.” She had pledged to obey; she told him; and from that day on, the whispering had stopped, and Ashara Dayne’s name was never heard in Winterfell again.

Whoever Jon’s mother had been, Ned must have loved her fiercely, for nothing Catelyn said would persuade him to send the boy away. It was the one thing she could never forgive him. She had come to love her husband with all her heart, but she had never found it in her to love Jon. She might have overlooked a dozen bastards for Ned’s sake, so long as they were out of sight. Jon was never out of sight, and as he grew, he looked more like Ned than any of the trueborn sons she bore him. Somehow that made it worse. “Jon must go,” she said now.

“He and Robb are close,” Ned said. “I had hoped...”

“He cannot stay here,” Catelyn said, cutting him off. “He is your son, not mine. I will not have him.” It was hard, she knew, but no less the truth. Ned would do the boy no kindness by leaving him here at Winterfell.

The look Ned gave her was anguished. “You know I cannot take him south. There will be no place for him at court. A boy with a bastard’s name... you know what they will say of him. He will be shunned.”

Catelyn armored her heart against the mute appeal in her husband’s eyes. “They say your friend Robert has fathered a dozen bastards himself.”

“And none of them has ever been seen at court!” Ned blazed. “The Lannister woman has seen to that. How can you be so damnably cruel, Catelyn? He is only a boy. He—”

His fury was on him. He might have said more, and worse, but Maester Luwin cut in. “Another solution presents itself,” he said, his voice quiet.

“Your brother Benjen came to me about Jon a few days ago. It seems the boy aspires to take the black.”

Ned looked shocked. “He asked to join the Night’s Watch?”

Catelyn said nothing. Let Ned work it out in his own mind; her voice would not be welcome now. Yet gladly would she have kissed the maester just then. His was the perfect solution. Benjen Stark was a Sworn Brother. Jon would be a son to him, the child he would never have. And in time the boy would take the oath as well. He would father no sons who might someday contest with Catelyn’s own grandchildren for Winterfell.

Maester Luwin said, “There is great honor in service on the Wall, my lord.”

“And even a bastard may rise high in the Night’s Watch,” Ned reflected. Still, his voice was troubled. “Jon is so young. If he asked this when he was a man grown, that would be one thing, but a boy of fourteen...”

“A hard sacrifice,” Maester Luwin agreed. “Yet these are hard times, my lord. His road is no crueler than yours or your lady’s.”

Catelyn thought of the three children she must lose. It was not easy keeping silent then.

Ned turned away from them to gaze out the window, his long face silent and thoughtful. Finally he sighed, and turned back. “Very well,” he said to Maester Luwin. “I suppose it is for the best. I will speak to Ben.”

“When shall we tell Jon?” the maester asked.

“When I must. Preparations must be made. It will be a fortnight before we are ready to depart. I would sooner let Jon enjoy these last few days. Summer will end soon enough, and childhood as well. When the time comes, I will tell him myself.”