

“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.